almeno tu nell'universo

by silkspectred

Summary

Tony drives off.

Well, he wants to.

But he can’t.
Because.

Steve Rogers is in front of his car.

Steve fucking Rogers. Is in front of Tony’s fucking car.

Notes

*arrives two years late with a post-caew fic*

So, this is the thing I've been whining about on twitter for the past six months. It started as a way to cope with how hot it was in Italy in August, but it was really hard to stay in the mood while I finished this in February. Oh, well.

Anyway. This is my way of dealing with / healing from Captain America: Civil War, and my way of locking Steve and Tony somewhere (in this case, Tuscany during summer) and let them deal with their stupid feelings, since canon won't let them do it.

Speaking of canon, I pick and choose from it A LOT. This fic isn't very Spider-Man Homecoming compliant, and it's zero Black Panther compliant. Hell, it's not even fully Captain America: Civil War compliant. It's a lot compliant with all the posts on tumblr about Tony's shaky left arm, though. If that's a thing you guys are into. (I am).

It's set a few months after the events of the movie. Also, regarding the Accords: I'm team Iron Man, personally, but the fic doesn't deal a lot with that, to be honest. I mean, it's definitely a case of ymmv, but The Problem™ Steve and Tony are dealing with here is not their disagreement over the Accords, but the fact that Steve didn't tell Tony about how his parents really died for a number of years. Just wanted to make this clear because I know lots of people have had their fill with the discourse about the Accords (myself included). There is maybe one scene where Tony voices some bitterness, but it's just a couple of lines of dialogue, and there's no actual character bashing of any kind here. But as I said, ymmv, so you can judge for yourself if you want to keep reading.

Besides Steve and Tony, there are a few other relationships addressed in the fic, but I didn't tag them because they're not prominent enough and didn't want to clog other people's tags. All the characters listed feature in at least one scene, though.

There are a few instances of Italian being spoken in the fic, and there will be linked footnotes with the translation (I wanted to do the hovering text thing, but it wouldn't work from mobile or a tablet or if you save the fic in any format, so I let that idea go). In case you're wondering, none of the Italian in the fic is google-translate Italian. It's all actual Italian written by an Italian person (me lol). For that same reason, is the English that's maybe kinda MEH, although my betas have done the absolute impossible to fix that as much as they could.

There's no way to thank them enough for how much they've helped with this, but just let me say that I'm super grateful for these wonderful people in my life that were like "yeah no problem!" when i dumped more than 100k words in their laps. So, thank you again to cptxrogers, erdesque, and tones.

EDIT September 19th 2018
Amazing (spoilery!!) fanart by krusca and by cookiestome

Also msermesth made an amazing map with all the places mentioned in the fic! Check it out once you're done reading <3

See the end of the work for more notes.
Day 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony steps out of his plane in Milan and is immediately hit by the smell. A smell that is distinctively, unapologetically, not America. It takes the shade of a greenish yellow in his mind. A dull light gray.

He doesn’t want anyone to know he’s here, so he had the Stark Industries logo on the plane painted over. He let his stubble blur the edges of his goatee, his hair grow longer. He’s wearing a gray t-shirt, blue linen pants, canvas shoes. He has a duffle bag slumped over his shoulder.

He squints in the sun, the light too bright even through his sunglasses.

The harsh smell of the airport leaves a foul taste in his mouth. It makes him want to spit.

He walks to the car. Pepper arranged it for him, as a personal favor he shouldn’t have asked for in the first place.

He smiles at the young woman greeting him. Chiara is her name. She tells him that the car keys are in the glove compartment of the car, as per his instructions. She gives him a card with a number to call in case of trouble and Tony can think of seven scenarios in which that could be useful.

She is professional, polite. Her cat has left scratches over the back of her right hand. Her red lipstick is perfect even in this sweltering heat, even in this concrete desert. She is at least five inches taller than Tony and she’s wearing flats.

He tosses his bag onto the backseat, closes the door with more force than is necessary. He thanks the woman, says goodbye. He looks at her walk away without really seeing her. He gets in the car and closes the door.

Tony puts his hands on the steering wheel. A normal people car. More or less. Not what he’s used to, anyway. But it’s okay; he doesn’t need fancy right now. The X1 is more than adequate. It’s anonymous and normal and tons of people have it, so he doesn’t stand out.

It smells new.

In the few minutes he’s been outside, sweat has gathered between the thin metal bracelets and the skin of his wrists.

He checks his phone, texts Pepper to let her know he’s arrived. He texts Rhodey, *i’ll send you your precious prosciutto di cinta asap*. He adjusts the seat and puts the safety-belt on. He drives off.

Well, he wants to.

But he can’t.

Because.

Steve Rogers is in front of his car.
Steve fucking Rogers. Is in front of Tony’s fucking car.

*I’m gonna run him over*, is the first thing Tony thinks.

*I won’t let him hurt me again*, is the second.

There’s a third one, but Tony catches himself before all the words can form in his mind. What he can’t stop, though, is feeling the way he feels, and the bout of self-hate that follows immediately after.

He feels like he can’t breathe and no, it’s not the heat.

He looks at his wrists. A thought. A single thought is enough.

Tony’s phone buzzes. *If you forget the pecorino I’ll never speak to you again.*

Yeah, sure.

*love you too.*

Okay, no need to panic. Tony releases the clutch, puts the shifting gear in neutral, presses on the brake with his foot. He looks at Steve.

He looks tired, like he hasn’t slept well in a while.

*Good,* Tony thinks, but feels bad about it.

He has a beard. His hair is longer, like when he first got out of the ice, but now it’s combed towards the back. He’s wearing a black t-shirt and a black hoodie, black jeans, black boots. He has a black duffle bag to match Tony’s.

Always so fucking dramatic.

Steve is staring at the hood of the car. A frown forms on his forehead.

Before Tony realizes someone is even approaching the car, T’Challa is sitting in the passenger seat.

The scent of orchids. Dark purple. The taste of oranges.

“I brought him back to you,” T’Challa says, with a calm voice that Tony would probably never get tired of listening to. It exudes nobility, as cliché as that sounds.

“You know he can hear us,” Tony says, meaning Steve.

“No, he can’t,” T’Challa replies, and shows Tony a bracelet on his wrist, which is all the explanation Tony is going to get.

“I didn’t ask you to bring him back. I don’t want him.”

If he repeats it enough times Tony’s confident it will eventually become true.

“You must know the political situation has changed. You must know they’re allowed to go back to the United States,” T’Challa says, uselessly, because Tony knows. Of course he knows.

“You did this?”

“Wakanda was involved, but not me personally,” he says simply, like it’s obvious.
Does he consider this beneath him, Tony wonders, and he finds himself thinking that yes, T’Challa probably does. It makes Tony smile. Tony considered it beneath himself too, so he spent the last few months holed up in his workshop, letting the world go on on its own.

Well, there were a few other reasons. Minor ones.

“Why is he here? Why’d you bring him here?”

“We knew you were coming here—no one else knows, don’t worry—and he asked to see you. He asked if I could arrange this.”

Steve asked.

“I don’t know what to do with him. I’m here for a very personal matter, I... I don’t want him here. I don’t want him.”

“That’s something you must discuss with him. I can’t keep him and his friends in Wakanda any longer. I don’t want them there. My people don’t want them there.”

“Where are the others?” Tony wishes he could have stopped himself from asking.

“Where they want to be,” T’Challa says, which, okay, fair enough.

“And Barnes?” Tony’s voice doesn’t shake. It doesn’t.

“In Wakanda. I’ll keep him safe. I owe him that.” T’Challa doesn’t look at Tony while he says this, but Tony understands. He figures Wakandans do, too.

It wasn’t Barnes’ fault.

“I know he hurt you.” T’Challa’s words are scrupulously chosen, and this kindness makes Tony feel respected. “But I hope you can find in yourself the strength to allow him to make amends. To try, at least. I won’t say what he did to you was right, because I don’t believe it was. But he regrets it. Listen to him. Spend some time together. It might be worth it. For the Avengers, at least, if not for yourself.”

Tony nods. He doesn’t want to nod, but he nods.

“You can take him back to the States with you once you’re done here.”

“I really, really, wanted to do this alone, though.”

“We don’t always get what we want, Tony Stark.”

“This may sound unlikely to you, but I do know that, Damisa-Sarki.”

A brief, minuscule intake of breath from T’Challa. He’s surprised Tony knows the words, or maybe he’s just appalled at Tony’s pronunciation.

“Said the billionaire to the king.” T’Challa gets out of the car. “Good luck, my friend,” he says while holding the door open, and Tony looks at him. He doesn’t know if they’re friends, but the word makes the corner of his mouth tug upwards.

“You’re gonna pay for this. I’ll have my revenge,” Tony says, careful to keep his tone light, joking.

T’Challa smirks. “Make sure you’re ready for another diplomatic incident, then.”
T’Challa shuts the door. He walks back to Steve, they shake hands. Tony looks at Steve’s lips while he says, “Thank you for everything you’ve done for us.”

*Us.*

Steve walks to the car, places his bag on the backseat next to Tony’s. Then, he sits in the same place T’Challa was occupying just a minute ago.

Roses. It’s always been roses with Steve. They’re blue in Tony’s mind. Something that doesn’t exist in nature, something that had to be manipulated by man and science to be made. Something that wasn’t any less beautiful in its original form.

He had three blue roses delivered to the compound once. He just wanted to stare at them for a while, because Tony’s never been good at not hurting himself when he could. Pepper saw them.

“You know,” she said, kind and a little sad, “blue roses represent the desire for the unattainable.”

“They’re perfect,” replied Tony, and Pepper, who was about to leave, came back and sat next to him, took off her heels, and stole Tony’s curly fries.

Like most things that pass through Tony’s sensitive nose, Steve’s scent becomes a color, and the color becomes a taste. Sweet, like cherries.

“Hello, Tony,” he says.

Tony starts the car.

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Steve knows it’s hot, he can smell it in the air, but he doesn’t feel it. His hoodie isn’t enough. He doesn’t know why he feels like this.

He never feels warm anymore.

There’s symbology there, something psychosomatic, as Sam would say. He doesn’t want to acknowledge it.

He looks at Tony while he talks to T’Challa.

He’s different, but he looks good. He’s lost a few pounds, maybe, but he seems healthy. His facial hair is unkempt, his hair longer and styled differently—curls falling over his forehead instead of neatly combed to the side like it used to be. There’s a lot of gray in his beard and at his temples, too. Steve didn’t know Tony dyed his hair. He seems to have stopped, anyway. He’s sure Tony did it on purpose.

He inhales deeply when he enters the car. It already smells like Tony. Soap, metal. Coconut. Sweat, too, but faint.

He’s missed it. So much. As though he wasn’t really breathing unless it was Tony’s scent.

The muscles in Steve’s shoulders relax. Tony hasn’t attacked him, isn’t screaming at him. His jaw is set, he’s obviously angry and displeased, but he’s in control.

Maybe they can talk.

Twenty minutes pass in absolute silence. Tony drives; Steve breathes.
It’s fine. It’ll take time. He can’t give Tony anything but time.

He’s taken so much from him already.

Steve is holding his phone and charger in his hand. The phone is running out of battery. He wanted to plug it into the USB slot in the dash, but he hasn’t been able to do it so far.

He looks at the glossy-black Stark logo on the back of the phone, brushes his thumb over it, watches it change color with the natural grease on his fingertip. He upgraded recently, but it’s not one of the latest models. He doesn’t like the see-through screen in his office at the compound, and he doesn’t want one as a phone.

His old office. Right.

Tony sighs. Steve moves, finally, the charger in his fingers.

Tony’s whole body jerks to the left, away from Steve. The steering wheel follows his hands, the car sways to the wrong side of the road.

Someone honks at them.

Tony regains control of the car. He’s breathing hard. He swallows, keeping his eyes fixed in front of him.

Steve wants to cry, or scream, or throw himself off a tall building and see if that, at least, will hurt more than this.

Tony pulls over and gets out of the car. He rubs at his chest with the palm of his hand. He takes off his sunglasses, pinches the bridge of his nose.

Steve finally lets himself acknowledge the two identical circles of gray metal around Tony’s wrists. The sun catches onto their surface, makes them shine.

Tony must have his armor in one of his satellites, and the suit can latch onto the bracelets’ location to reach him. But it’s hard to think Tony will need to be Iron Man here. Would Steve have brought his shield, if he still had it? He doesn’t know. The idea of being Captain America ever again has felt unreal since Siberia. It feels impossible here, now.

Steve takes a deep breath, steps out of the car as slowly as possible. Tony looks at him for the first time.

*His eyes have always been so beautiful,* Steve can’t help but think. Bright, clever, traveling at the speed of light to places Steve could never hope to reach. But sometimes—*now*—also colorless, incredulous, the pain too sharp to keep hidden.

Steve’s not strong enough to sustain that gaze, so he looks away, around himself.

They’re in the middle of nowhere. There’s the road, a few cars passing by. There’s the endless countryside, the Po valley all around them for miles and miles. The Alps are barely visible behind them; the heat in the air smudges their shape in the horizon.

They must be still close to Milan, since the airport is north-west of the city. But there’s almost no traffic here. Tony is taking side roads, avoiding the highway.

The afternoon sun is merciless, yet Steve shivers. He closes his eyes, letting the ache spread through
him. He can’t do anything for Tony. He wishes he could.

He hears the car door shut. Tony is in the driver’s seat again.

He hasn’t said a single word this whole time.

Okay. That’s okay. Tony has every right to be angry with Steve, has every right not to want to speak to him.

He needs time.

Steve follows Tony back into the car. Very carefully, he attaches his phone to the USB slot. The vibration is as loud as a scream, but Tony doesn’t move.

Steve looks at him.

His hands are tight on the steering wheel, knuckles whitening with the force of his grip. Sweat darkens the armpits of his t-shirt and drips down his temple. There’s a very thin metal chain at his neck, elegant, clearly a piece of jewelry. There’s something attached to it, Steve can see it beneath Tony’s t-shirt, but he can’t make out what it is. Something round, with an uneven surface.

He has never seen it before. Tony didn’t have it in Berlin, when his silk shirt was unbuttoned, his red tie loosened, and his vest hugged his hips in the most enticing way. The arch of his shoulders. His hands in his pockets, stretching the fabric of his pants over his... while he walked away...

Warmer than jail.

Steve shakes his head.

Tony is here for something personal. The necklace is probably connected to that. This whole thing, Steve is quite sure, is about Maria. Because she was Italian, he knows that much. It was in the files.

God. Steve is an insensitive, arrogant asshole. Imposing on Tony like this, forcing his own presence on Tony while he’s trying to process his grief. After what he kept from him, Steve is here, robbing him again of peace and quiet. Preventing him from doing his healing on his own terms.

He should leave Tony alone, but he just can’t. He’s completely incapable of it, and it makes him so mad. At himself.

It’s like a wound you can’t stop scratching; you pick at the scab until you get the satisfaction of it starting to bleed all over again. And then you feel stupid because you knew, you fucking knew this was going to happen.

You just keep digging your own grave.

Tony presses his lips together, takes his phone out of his pocket, taps at it with his fingers. Quick, like kids do.

They drive off.

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Maria Carbonelli was born on August 10th, 1937, in a big farmhouse in the Chianti hills. After the war, her father Antonio, the only one of the five Carbonelli brothers who didn’t work in the fields, had moved with his wife and daughter to the nearest city, Siena, where he made some money as a high-end tailor for ladies. Soon, he had shops in Florence, Milan, and Rome.
When Maria was sixteen years old, her father decided to expand his successful business to New York, one of the most influential cities in the world with regard to fashion. His family would move there with him.

Two years later, in 1955, Antonio opened his atelier in Manhattan. Before putting up the sign on the entrance door, though, he changed the family name to Carbonell, which proved to be a wise marketing move.

In 1958 Maria Carbonell was twenty-one years old. She was smart, she loved science and music, she was beautiful.

At a party, she met Howard Stark, who was twenty years older than her, but had a brilliant mind and a clever mouth, and Maria liked both. Her father wanted them to get married.

Maria asked if she could think about it for one day, and Antonio allowed it with a calm nod of his head.

She spent that day in her room, in the big house the Carbonells owned in Southampton, and no one disturbed her at all.

She came downstairs for dinner a few minutes late, sat down at the table, looked her father in the eye and said, “Va bene, babbo, lo sposo.”[1] Then, she began to eat the food in her plate.

She became Maria Stark in 1959.

On May 29th, 1970, after many years of failed attempts, Maria gave birth to a child, Anthony Edward Stark.

She died with her husband, killed in a car accident on December 16th, 1991.

This is what Tony knows, what he has always known. Except that last part wasn’t entirely true. Maria didn’t die in a car accident. She was killed.

Someone wanted to steal Howard’s super soldier serum, and Maria, if left alive, would have been an inconvenient witness. So that someone decided to take Tony’s mom away from him. She wasn’t allowed to keep existing.

Tony hears Steve sigh next to him. He hasn’t said anything else after Hello, Tony. Tony hasn’t said anything at all.

And, well. Tony can hardly be blamed for not feeling safe around Steve.

Rage and shame flood his chest, scalding hot.

*I almost killed his best friend, though, Tony thinks. It was the blind fury of the moment, but it was wrong.*

At some point, Tony will need to say it.

They’re close to Parma now, and Tony feels like tortellini in brodo for dinner, screw the summer heat. They just need to drive past Reggio Emilia, and then head for Scandiano. He knows just the place.

They’ll have to find somewhere to sleep before that, though. Tony feels exhausted, jetlagged. He wants a drink—
No, no, he doesn’t. Right.

Steve looks sad and defeated. Tired, even though Wakanda has only one hour on Italy.

Tony stops at a gas station, fills up the tank. Steve stays in the car, still as his own statue in Brooklyn.

Tony walks a few feet away, and presses a button on his sunglasses to summon the little energy shield that muffles his voice. It comes in handy when you’re the kind of person who really needs to keep his calls private, and not only because you hang around people with enhanced senses.

He calls Rhodey.

God, he misses him already. It’s never been such an issue, staying apart, but in the past few months they’ve spent some time together almost every day. It feels weird that Rhodey isn’t here with him. That he’s not going to see him for a few weeks.

Rhodey answers, and Tony can feel his smile through the line.

“So.”

“So.”

They talk about Tony’s new idea for a while, the one Tony texted him about earlier. He has questions, and Tony answers them all.

“Everything alright with… You-Know-Who?”

“I dunno. So far, he’s just… kinda there. And you can say his name, I won’t flip. Promise.”

“And T’Challa just dumped him in your car?”

“Yeah, but he was nice about it.”

“He said anything? Steve.”

“Not really. I haven’t talked to him at all, which might’ve been discouraging.”

“Sounds healthy.”

“It isn’t.”

“Tones, I know you’re angry. With reason. I’m just saying: be careful.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I know you, Tony. I don’t want this thing to hurt you more than it hurts him.”

“It’s hurting him plenty, believe me.”

“But you? I care about you. Don’t make me worry.”

“You don’t make me worry. Get better. I need you to get better.”

“I will.”

“I’ll need you by my—fuck. I won’t ask you to fight, but…”
“I’ll always fight if it’s by your side.”

What the fuck did Tony do to deserve Rhodey?

“Have I ever told you that I love you, like, a lot?”

“Jesus, it’s always like this with you—”

“Just say it, just one time—”

“I say it all the time—”

“You don’t, I’m telling you—”

“I’ll call you when everything’s ready, okay?”

“Changing the subject, typical—”

“Goodbye, Tony.”

“Bye, Honey Bear.”

“Oh, and another thing: I love you too.”

“I don’t anymore. That’s it, I’m done with you.”

Rhodey laughs and hangs up.

God. And to think that he almost lost him.

Fuck. Alright. Tony can’t think about that right now. His eyes burn.

He texts him, *by the way, did you just basically admit you’re my sidekick?* to which Rhodey replies, *You wish.*

When Tony turns, Steve is looking at him. His jaw is set tight.

Tony gets back into the car. Steve must have moved in the meantime, since he’s clutching a sketchbook with a brown leather cover and a ballpoint pen in his hand. He’s holding them like they’re the only things keeping him anchored here, keeping him from shattering into pieces.

Steve closes his eyes and breathes, slow and deep, trying to calm himself.

He opens the sketchbook and takes a loose piece of paper from it. He holds it out for Tony to take it.

But Tony doesn’t take it.

It’s not that he couldn’t. Actually, he’s pretty sure he could. He just doesn’t want to.

He knows it’s cruel, and by the time he starts to reconsider, Steve places the scrap of paper on Tony’s thigh, careful not to touch him.

He turns to look out of the window, shudders.

Tony looks down. Uh. It looks like part of a paper placemat, the ones they use in cafés and diners. It’s a drawing of Stark tower.
“I drew this before I met you,” Steve says, quietly, without looking at Tony. “I told you I didn’t like the tower, but—”

But? *But?*

Tony stares at the drawing.

“You can keep it. I’d like you to keep it.”

Steve is... he’s *trying*. Every word is an effort.

Tony lowers the visor attached to the roof of the car and slides Steve’s drawing into the pocket there.

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A couple of hours later they arrive in a little town called Scandiano, in front of a place that looks like a regular house, but it’s actually a bed and breakfast. There’s an old man at the door; he greets them in English.

“Salve, avremmo bisogno di due stanze per stanotte.”[2]

It takes Steve a few seconds to realize that is Tony speaking.

Steve had no idea Tony could speak Italian. No, wait. It was in Tony’s file. Right. His mother must have taught him. He knows it quite well, if the fluent conversation he’s having with the owner of the bed and breakfast is anything to go by.

It sucks, though.

Those are the first words he’s heard Tony say the whole day, and they aren’t for Steve, and Steve can’t even understand them.

He probably deserves that, actually.

But he gets a word here and there. He hasn’t forgotten everything from his time in Italy, during the war.

But there’s no time to think about that, because Tony turns to look at him, and says, “There’s only one room.”

Steve tries to catch up with the events. “Oh. We, we can, we could... we could look around for another place, I guess, but it’s already... If you want to eat something somewhere, I don’t know, if... We could... If it’s alright with you... I can sleep on the fl—”

“Prendiamo la camera,”[3] Tony says to the man.

They take their bags and go inside. The man shows them their room—it’s not big, but it’s clean and looks cared for. There are two twin beds, so Steve won’t need to sleep on the floor, after all. Tony speaks with the man for a couple of minutes, asks him to please leave the key in the lock, takes it from there when the man leaves, and closes the door.

Tony takes the first shower. He’s quick, and comes out of the bathroom already dressed in fresh clothes, his dirty ones wrapped up in a bundle he puts in a plastic bag.

He stares at Steve, expectant, and lifts his hands as if to ask him what the hell is he waiting for.
Steve showers and dresses in barely three minutes.

Dinner is at a restaurant—an osteria—too close to the bed and breakfast to justify the use of the car to get there. They walk side by side. Tony orders for them both, something called cappelletti in brodo di capponne, and water.

Steve wonders why Tony doesn’t order wine. It’d go well with this food and it looks like this place has all the best ones.

They eat in silence. The broth is warm down Steve’s throat, a small comfort. It’s delicious, too.

“These are handmade, you know.” Tony says, suddenly. He’s clutching his unused fork in his hand, looking down at it like nothing in the world could possibly be more interesting.

Steve doesn’t understand for a moment—he needs to pay more attention, he’s starting to look stupid—then realizes Tony is talking about their food.

“Oh. Oh, that’s impressive. They’re... they’re very good.”

“There’s... there’s meat inside... inside the pasta. The, uh, the pasta is made with eggs, it’s not... it’s not regular pasta.”

It’s strange, Tony talking like this. So unsure of himself.

“Oh.” Steve wishes he knew what to say. This is a disaster.

He takes a deep breath. Time. They need time.

“Thank you for ordering this for me. I really like it,” Steve says, because it’s true and because he needs to say something nice. Tony nods.

Later, while Tony is brushing his teeth and changing into sleep clothes, Steve searches for a blanket in the closet. The one he finds is thick and smells clean, so he spreads it on his bed and sits on it, facing Tony’s bed. He props his elbows on his knees, holds his head between his hands. He feels cold.

When Tony comes out of the bathroom he stops abruptly, takes Steve in: his sweatpants, his henley, his socks, the blanket. Tony looks like he’s about to say something, but he hesitates and looks away.

He lifts the sheet from his bed and lies down without covering himself. He’s wearing only a t-shirt and shorts. Summer pajamas. High-quality cotton. Dark blue.

Tony turns off the light.

Steve looks at Tony’s lean feet in the darkness, at the elegant architecture of his ankles, the soft hairs covering his skin.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and feels like a coward, waiting for the night to swallow his words, make them less real.

Tony doesn’t answer.

“I’m sorry. What I did... I’m so sorry, Tony.”

Tony doesn’t answer, and Steve wants to cry.
He crawls into bed, under the blanket. He hopes it will keep him warm, as much as possible.

“Thank you for giving me your drawing,” Tony whispers after a while, then falls asleep.

[2] Hello, we need two rooms for tonight.
[3] We’ll take the room.

Chapter End Notes

on Twitter
on Tumblr
Tony dreams.

He doesn’t know where he is. He can’t see anything except the light of the reactor in his chest.

He’s in the suit, but FRIDAY is silent. The data feed isn’t providing any information. That worries him.

He opens the helmet manually and looks around himself once his eyes adjust to the darkness.

He’s in a cave, deep in the guts of the earth. The air is damp on his skin.

He’s scared of moving. He should find a way to get back to Steve.

Where is Steve? Why did they separate? Why did they come here?

He begins walking, but before he can even finish the first step, he wakes up.

Tony stares at the ceiling and thinks, *You said you didn’t like the tower, but that’s not true because you drew it. Before you met me.*

And then, *So you were lying, back then.*

And after that, *And now you’re telling me the truth.*

T’Challa’s voice saying that Steve is trying to make amends echoes in Tony’s mind.

Tony looks at Steve’s bed. He’s buried under the covers so much that only his hair is visible. And just, why? Why is Steve cold? It’s 100 degrees outside. There’s no air conditioning in here.

It’s 9:30. They still have time for breakfast.

Tony dresses in the bathroom, and when he comes back Steve is up, he changed into jeans but hasn’t put on a shirt yet.

God.

He’s just... he’s just perfect, isn’t he. There’s no other word. Nothing else can describe Steve’s body. He’s perfect.

*Don’t bullshit me, Rogers.*

Their eyes meet for a moment. Steve looks so all-encompassingly sad, it’s in his bones and coming out from every pore of his skin. He finishes dressing quickly, shivers while putting on a sweater.

A sweater. Christ.

They’re alone in the breakfast room, the other guests have already left. The owner makes them coffee with a moka pot. The croissants aren’t warm anymore, but they’re fresh and taste magnificent.

Steve looks a bit perplexed, but copies everything Tony does, and shoots him a half-smile when
Tony sits back down on his chair. “It’s not that I don’t believe you. It’s just not… what I need.”

Steve closes his eyes to take the blow. He nods.

Tony pays the owner for the night and they’re back on the street in ten minutes.

“J, buddy, you there?”

“Always, sir.”

“How’s the road today?”

“Perfectly fine, sir. The route we traced is free of traffic, as you predicted. Avoiding the motorway is indeed a wise choice.”

“Thank you, J.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

It’s back to silence. Tony wonders if Steve will ask.

“I thought JARVIS was—”

“Yeah. I’m rewriting him. He’s just on my phone for now.”

“Oh. That’s, that’s great, Tony.”

He really sounds glad.

“I’m gonna reach back into my bag and take my sketchbook, is that alright?” Steve asks quietly, every word enunciated clearly and slowly.

Why is Steve telling him…?

Oh. Right.

It’s a warning. So it won’t be like yesterday.

Tony replies with a curt nod.

Steve draws. It can’t be easy while the car is moving, but he doesn’t say anything.

They stop along the main road of a small town in the Appennini, right before entering Tuscany.

Before Tony can step out of the car, Steve says, “Wait,” rips a page from his sketchbook and holds it out for Tony.

Tony is still for a few moments. Then he takes the drawing, touching only the paper.

The sketch—done with a blue pen—shows Tony in his workshop, holographic screens dancing all
around him. He has a big smile on his face, the skin at the sides of his eyes crinkled with joy. He’s looking up, at the ceiling, and there’s a little bubble next to his mouth that says, “J?”

Tony remembers the joke, how he mocked Steve about the fact that he looked up to talk to JARVIS, even if he didn’t need to. It had happened three or four times at least, when Steve was around. After everyone had told Tony that no, they weren’t going to move in the tower with him after all, but they’ll be there for Avengers business.

But this one time, right before the mission to retrieve Loki’s scepter from the HYDRA base in Sokovia, Steve came down to the workshop to ask Tony something about their equipment, and he caught Tony talking to JARVIS while looking up at the ceiling. They laughed about it for half an hour, and it wasn’t even that funny.

Well. All that was before Ultron. Obviously.

Before—

Tony stares at the drawing in his hand, while his throat constricts, while his chest burns with all his worst memories, with all the things he wishes he had done differently.

Amends.

He regrets it, T’Challa said.

Tony looks at Steve, who isn’t breathing. He’s waiting for Tony’s reaction, expecting it to be terrible, maybe, but hoping it won’t be.

Something inside Tony cedes for a moment.

Tony’s mouth twists into something that isn’t quite a smile, that possibly doesn’t look as friendly as he’d like it to be, or as reassuring as he’d want. But still, Steve smiles back, tentative, while he looks at Tony with his big, sad eyes, full to the brim of all their kindest memories. The ones where they laughed, and spent time together willingly, and fought side by side instead of each other.

And just for a second Tony feels as if this, this thing between them, is still broken, yes, but they can fix it.

Tony is a mechanic, after all.

***

Steve doesn’t know where they’re going. He hasn’t asked, and Tony hasn’t said.

That’s fine. Tony has a right to his secrets.

Privacy. Tony has a right to his privacy.

Steve is sitting on a bench. He looks at the people passing on the sidewalk. Tony comes out of an alimentari across the street holding a plastic bag. He sits down next to Steve, rummages in the bag for a moment, then hands Steve a bundle of paper tissues.

“Got you a sandwich,” he says. “Prosciutto crudo and fontina—a type of cheese. It’s good.”

Steve takes a bite. He looks at Tony. He’s chewing. A bit of flour from the bread has fallen on Tony’s beard, and Steve reaches up with his hand to stroke it away.
Tony flinches back before Steve can touch him.

Steve freezes.

He lets his head hang down, defeated, and whispers, “I’m sorry.”

They eat in silence after that, and drink the water Tony bought. The trees shield them from the sun, but the air is hot and still.

Steve shivers.

One step forward and ten backwards. And it’s all Steve’s fault.

Tony’s phone rings.

He answers, and an excited voice from the other end of the line says, “Mr. Stark!” and then a billion other things, too fast and weird for Steve to understand.

Tony walks away from Steve to talk in private. He sees him laugh a few times, explain something that looks complicated from the way he’s gesticulating. He comes back to sit next to Steve while he says, “Alright, kid. Be careful out there.”

Kid. Probably the boy that was in Germany with him.

Silence stretches between them. Tony looks into the distance, focuses on nothing in particular. The mountains take up the landscape.

“I never meant to hurt you,” Steve confesses in a murmur, scared of his own courage.

“I shouldn’t have hurt your friend,” Tony sighs. “That was... wrong. I’m sorry. It wasn’t his fault.”

“No. It was mine.”

Tony looks at him, shakes his head. “It was HYDRA. Zemo. Ross. Lots of players in that game. But... you should’ve told me. You should have.”

“When I found out, I didn’t really have... I didn’t know how to... I mean, these were your parents and... I was afraid you’d go after B—”

“I wouldn’t have if you’d told me. If you’d explained it to me, I would’ve understood.”

Tony keeps his voice low and his tone calm, but he’s angry. He’s so angry.

“But it was too dangerous! After SHIELD—”

“No, no, this doesn’t cut it, alright? You should’ve told me. You should’ve trusted me. We were friends!”

“Were we, Tony?”

No, no, goddammit.

Tony looks like he’s about to be sick, all the words he wanted to say stuck in his throat all of a sudden. He also looks like he’s about to cry, or scream, or call down the suit right this second and punch Steve in the face.
Instead he looks down, rubs his left arm with his right hand for a bit, then gets up and walks to the car.

Steve tosses the remains of their lunch in the plastic bag and throws the whole thing in a trashcan.

Tony drives in silence.

In the late afternoon, they arrive at a place called Relais Carbonelli, which, if Steve’s sense of direction is correct—and it is—is between Florence and Siena.

Steve would love to visit the cities, but it’s unlikely Tony will want to go. Or that he will go for Steve’s sake.

The Relais looks lovely from the outside. It’s immersed in the hills, it seems like it used to be a farmhouse or something of the sort. There are trees, vines of ivy climbing the old walls, roses everywhere. The grass is well-cared for, a white gravel trail the only thing breaking the wide expanse of green. The view is breathtaking: fields and vineyards and olive groves and woods as far as the eye can see. Then, just the sky.

If Steve could describe peace, it would look like here, now.

Tony gets out of the car, gestures to Steve to stay put. Steve follows him with his gaze.

Tony walks towards the main building, but a woman comes out of the entrance before he can go in. She is wearing a blue dress with pink sandals; her earrings are pink too. She smiles, and Tony smiles too, and then she puts her hands on Tony’s arms. Tony’s hands go to her waist—barely touching—and they lean in at the same time.

For an absurd moment, Steve thinks they’re gonna kiss.

And they do. On the cheek; one, and then the other.

And Steve is ashamed of himself, because he knew this was a thing here, of course he did, but he just—

It’s been such a long day.

***

Manuela is charming and polite as always, friendly, professional. Tony exchanges a few words with her, asks about her family, about the Relais. She glances at Tony’s car.

“Hai portato un amico? Possiamo aggiungere un letto nella dépendance—”[2]

Un amico. A friend.

Nope. Not a friend.

“Non ti preoccupare, non sarà un problema.”[3]

“Come vuoi.”[4]

They head inside. Manuela puts the key to Tony’s guest house on the reception desk, and Tony takes it. He is reasonably sure he would take it from her hand, too.

Manuela has to get back to work, but he remembers to tell her that they will have dinner at the
The restaurant tonight. She knows who Steve is but doesn’t comment on it, and Tony is silently grateful for it.

Tony goes back outside and parks the car behind the hotel, in the spot reserved for him.

Steve takes both their bags from the backseat and follows Tony to the little building separated from the rest of the Relais by a high fence covered in ivy. It used to be a barn where Tony’s great-grandfather kept the crops after the harvest and hung cold meats to let them age. Now, it’s where Tony stays when he comes here, so he can maintain his privacy. The perks of being the owner.

Inside, there’s a couch with a coffee table and television set in a corner, a small kitchen with a table on the other. There are books on the shelves built into a recess in the wall, next to Tony’s great-grandmother’s credenza. An arch leads to a tiny hallway, with two doors: the laundry and the bedroom. The bed is huge, and the door that leads to the ensuite bathroom is engraved with flowers. There’s a French window too, to access the backyard. Tony can see the oak tree outside casting an inviting shade on the grass.

Everything inside the little house is white, except the floor, the oldest pieces of furniture, the few spots where the ancient stones that make up the little building have been left visible, and the turquoise tiles in the bathroom. Nothing is modern in style, despite Tony’s usual preference. For this place, he wanted something that wouldn’t clash with the rest of the landscape. He wanted something that would fit right in, as if it had always been there.

The house is not big, but it is spacious and full of light, thanks to the big windows Tony had wanted. The glass blocks the view from the outside. The thick walls and the cotto tiles on the floor keep the temperature down, an ancient equilibrium Tony was careful not to disrupt in his renovations.

As soon as they get in, Tony breathes in the familiar smell of old stones, of lavender and lemons, of terracotta and wood, of grass and sun like the hills all around.

It smells like Mom, like home. Like red and gold sparks behind his eyes.

It’s silly, it’s impossible. It’s sentimental.

And yet.

Tony sits on the bed, notices that Steve is eyeing it with an odd expression on his face, probably resigning himself to the fact that he will have to sleep on the floor, in the end.

Which is just. So stupid.

“We’re gonna stay here for a few days,” Tony says. “We can visit a couple of places, if you want.” He has thought about it. They have to spend the days in some way. Steve will enjoy it.

“Are we... gonna be tourists?”

“We, uh. Guess we are.”

“Oh. Alright.”

Steve smiles.

“My mother was born here, you know. She inherited the house and decided to turn it into a hotel.”

Tony smiles to himself. “She was such a practical person. She always saw the potential of things.”
“She saw the future,” Steve says gently, looking at Tony straight in the eye.

With precise movements, Steve sits on the bed next to Tony, leaving plenty of space between them.

“Before I met you, everyone told me that you were just like your father. And you were, in some ways—all affectations. But the way you think... I’ve seen your father think. You’re different. His science wasn’t as sound as yours. He’d often have to rethink things because they malfunctioned, or didn’t work as he expected. I’m not saying he wasn’t a genius, ’cause he was; or that you don’t make mistakes, ’cause you do. But the way you see things... you can see miles ahead. Into the future. He couldn’t, not like you. He could see how the world would be the next day. You can see it in a hundred years.” He smirks. “So I figure you must’ve taken after someone else.”

Tony can’t think of a single thing worth saying right now.

“I don’t mean to sound disrespectful, Tony, but after I met you, and got to know you a bit, what really struck me wasn’t how much you were like your father, but how much you weren’t.”

Tony swallows. He doesn’t like to think this much about Howard or talk about him, especially with Steve, who remembers a very different man from the one Tony knew.

He doesn’t know if he likes Steve talking—albeit indirectly—about his mom, but Jarvis (the human one) used to tell him the same thing. That he moved like his mother. Had her smile. The same quality to the glint in his eyes. The same modo di fare[5], as she would have said.

Steve smiles again, then unpacks a few things and takes a shower. He dresses like it’s winter again.

Tony is gonna ask. Eventually.

When Tony is ready, they go to the restaurant. They barely talk. Tony looks at all the wine exposed on the oak shelves, and tells himself that water is just fine with pappardelle al ragù di cinghiale.

It’s a weird thing, probably, but Tony likes the way Steve eats. He’s been educated well, but he can’t always hide his excitement. Despite the trauma of the war, Steve seems to have found a way to enjoy food. He always eats everything in his plate, even stuff he doesn’t like much, because it’s food, and you eat all the food you can get whenever you can get it. But Tony can tell when Steve really loves how something tastes. Tonight, for example.

The fork looks tiny in his big fingers. When he opens his mouth Tony can see his tongue, his teeth.

A drop of sauce on Steve’s bottom lip. Tony could just—

No. He couldn’t.

They walk outside when they’re finished eating. Tony shows Steve the pool in the courtyard, points at the terrace accessible from the bar on the second floor of the main building, at the old stable that’s been turned into a gym and spa for the guests.

“Pepper loves the face masks, in case you’re interested.”

“I’ll think about it. You’ve been here with Pepper?”

“Of course I have. Last time, it was right after New York. Our last attempt at making it work. It didn’t work. As you know.”

Steve nods, but doesn’t say more.
They watch together as the last bit of light disappears behind the hills.

That night, while he’s in bed, Tony looks down at Steve, wrapped up in a sleeping bag on the floor. He had it in his duffle; Tony watched him take it out and spread it on the rug without a word.

“You got the shape of my lips just right,” Tony says, almost inaudible, and hopes Steve understands what he’s talking about.

***

Steve can’t sleep. His stomach is rumbling. He’s hungry.

He can’t keep eating the same amount of food Tony eats. It’s not enough.

Steve eats a lot. Except during missions, because the serum kicks his metabolism into a weird survival mode that grants him enough energy from regular rations. Steve’s always been grateful for it: he doesn’t have to fight while hungry, and during the war he didn’t have to feel guilty about getting more food than the Commandos.

But here, now. His body knows he can get all the food he wants and there’s no war to fight, so his stomach keeps making angry noises of protest. And everything tastes so good. He doesn’t know if it’s the air, the countryside, the sun, Tony’s presence, his voice saying all those names in Italian…

Still, Steve hasn’t asked for anything more so far.

Tony is paying for everything, and Steve doesn’t know what to do. He has money, his credit card works again thanks to T’Challa. On the other hand, Steve doubts Tony is paying to stay at a place he owns.

But no, that’s not why he hasn’t asked. It’s something else.

It’s the cold.

The cold that has been chilling his bones for months, that hasn’t left him since that terrible day in Siberia.

It’s the way he feels: undeserving, unworthy, ungrateful.

He left Tony alone in the cold, so he’s gonna be cold, too.

He has taken so much from Tony already that he won’t ask for anything else than what Tony is willing to give.

But his stomach grumbles again, and it feels as loud as an explosion in the quiet of the bedroom.

He gets up, searches in his bag for a minute. He goes to the kitchen as quietly as possible, fills a glass with water from the tap and drinks some. He opens the fridge, more for something to do than any real intention of eating anything without Tony’s permission, and sees that it’s full. Tony must have sent someone from the Relais to get groceries before they arrived.

Steve opens the front door, steps outside in the little porch. He places the half-empty glass on the table, but doesn’t sit down on either of the chairs.

The moon is huge and white, hanging above the countryside. There are so many stars in the sky.

He breaks the filter off the cigarette and places it between his lips. He stops with the matchstick
already lit in his hand.

He knows he shouldn’t. Everyone says it’s bad for you now; it’s not like during the war. You can get cancer from this stuff. Maybe not Steve specifically, but still.

He had stopped. Sort of. Since coming out of the ice he’s smoked, what, maybe ten cigarettes. But while he was in Wakanda...

The tip of the cigarette lights up with the first drag, and the smoke filling his lungs deceives him, makes him feel like his stomach is filling too.

Everything goes quiet inside Steve’s head. There’s only him and the comfort of a repetitive gesture, of a familiar taste.

“Are you... are you smoking?”

Tony. Not angry, but a bit shocked.

“Nope,” Steve says, lamely, and drops the cigarette in the glass, watches as it stops burning the moment it touches the water. He drags a hand on his face, scratches his beard. “Didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“It’s alright.”

Steve waves a hand in the air, to disperse the last puffs of smoke wafting between him and Tony. “Don’t breathe it in,” he says, “it’s bad for your heart.”

So many things I do are bad for his heart.

“You can’t sleep either?” Steve asks, and that’s when his stomach grumbles again. Tony looks at it. Steve looks down at it, betrayed.

“Are you hungry?”

Steve sighs. No more denial. “Yeah.”

“Come on.”

Steve follows Tony back inside, to the kitchen.

“Sit down,” Tony says, and Steve obeys.

He takes a pot from one of the cabinets, fills it with water, and puts it on the stove. From another cabinet he takes a box of spaghetti.

Steve keeps looking at him while he places a pan with some oil on the stove. A clove of garlic is next, and Tony takes it out and throws it away after a while.

“The garlic burns if you leave it in the oil for too long,” Tony explains.

Next, there are spices and herbs. Tony takes them from the vases on the porch, rinses them in the sink, chops them up on a wooden cutting board.

“I didn’t know you could cook.” Did Steve ever know anything about Tony?

“Yeah, I don’t do it often. Don’t have the time. Or the reason.”
Steve would ask how he learned, but he knows the answer.

When the pasta is ready, Tony strains it and mixes it with the herbs in the pan.

“You come back here often?” Steve asks to break the silence.

“No, really. Every couple of years, for a few days. Sometimes a week.”

“Wish you could stay more?”

“It gets boring after a while. But I like it. It reminds me of her.”

Tony fakes a cough to put an end to the conversation, and places a plate of spaghetti in front of Steve. It smells amazing.

Tony puts a fork on the table, then rests a hand on the wooden surface, makes Steve look up. Tony’s gaze is stern.

“You can ask for more food, if you need it.” Tony’s words are very slow, as if he’s explaining this to a small child who can’t yet grasp complex concepts.

“I know, I just—”

“Shut up.” Tony has to close his eyes for a moment to gather his patience. “You can ask for more food, if you need it.” There’s more force to the words this time.

Steve stares at him, awed, wide-eyed, mouth hanging open. “Okay,” he whispers, and has to look down.

When Steve’s stomach is full and the plate empty, they go back to bed, but sleep seems to have left them both. He hears Tony toss and turn in bed and sigh impatiently, annoyed. Steve tries to stay as still as possible in his sleeping bag to avoid disturbing Tony even more than he already has, tonight.

He wishes he could climb into bed next to him, hug him tight against his chest. Protect him from whatever it is that doesn’t make him sleep. Protect him from Steve himself.

“Why are we really here, Tony?” Steve finds the courage to ask some time later, when Tony’s breathing is still uneven and he’s moving too often to be asleep.

“You, because you were becoming too much of a hot potato for the King of Wakanda.”

“And you?”

Tony kicks the sheet away from himself, swings his legs over the side of the bed and sits up.

“I could never bring myself to go through my mother’s personal belongings. But after I….” Tony pauses, looking suddenly very sad, “discovered how she died, I forced myself to. I found some old letters she received from this woman, an Italian woman named Stella Boccherini, who lives close to Siena. This woman knew my mom before she came to the States, and they kept in touch, after.”

He doesn’t look at Steve while he says all this, but the simple fact that he says it at all is more than Steve expected.

“So you want to go meet this woman?”

“She agreed to let us stay at her house for a couple of days, to tell me about my mom.”
“We won’t bother her?”

“She’s got a big house. A villa, in the countryside.”

“Seems like everyone owns a villa in the countryside here.”

“Plenty of people don’t own a villa in the countryside here.”

Steve smiles a little at that. Tony considers him carefully.

“Why are you sleeping on the floor?”

“I don’t want to…” Ah. Shit. “I understand why you’re scared of me. If you need me to stay away, I will.” Steve swallows all the misery and shame he feels thinking about what happened yesterday in the car.

“It makes me feel like a rich asshole. And I don’t wanna feel like a rich asshole. I wanna feel like a rich good person.”

“You’re a good person, Tony.”

“There’s plenty of space—”

“No, what if you—”

“Please.” Tony modulates his voice to be louder than Steve’s, than anything else they’ve said so far. He grimaces, lets his frustration leave him through his nose. “Please,” he says, softer.

“Alright.”

Tony takes a blanket from the closet and spreads it over the unused side of the bed. Steve waits for Tony to slide back into bed, then follows him.

After a while, Steve can’t resist the curiosity to ask, “Anyway, how’d this woman know your mom?”

“They were in love,” Tony says, simply, without really explaining anything.

They fall asleep facing each other.

[1] Local shop that sells food and makes sandwiches.

[2] You brought a friend? We could add a bed in the guest house—

[3] Don't worry, it won't be a problem.


Chapter End Notes

on Twitter

on Tumblr
Tony wakes up and rubs at his eyes, yawns. Steve is there, sitting on the bed next to him, his pillow trapped between his back and the headboard, his socked feet still under the blanket. He’s drawing.

He has a pencil case next to his thigh, full of pens, pastels, charcoal, of all colors and kinds. There’s an eraser and a pencil sharpener too. All practical stuff that can be used while traveling, but that would still allow Steve some variety in his art.

It’s strange, sometimes, to think about Steve as an artist. It’s easier to just see him as a soldier, as a living legend, as the Captain America of the old comics Tony so avidly read as a kid and treasures so possessively as an adult. As the Avenger he followed into battle those few times.

But Steve doesn’t have his shield anymore, doesn’t have his uniform. He only has a sketchbook, a pencil case, a bunch of dark winter clothes, a sad smile for Tony.

Steve notices that Tony is awake and studying him. He averts his gaze, fixes it back to his drawing while a small blush rises to his cheeks. Then, he says, “Good morning, Tony,” in such a soft, gentle tone that Tony wishes his entire life had gone in a completely different way.

But it hadn’t.

_He lied to me. He almost killed me._

“Did you really want to kill me?” Tony asks, and he tries to be as gentle as Steve in his cruelty, but he can’t pull it off.

The words hit Steve with visible violence. He winces, frowns. He’s horrified, stunned. “N—no, oh god, no, Tony, I... I only wanted to stop you from... I did not... you have to believe me, please, I—”

Steve chokes on the words, his voice cracks, he squeezes his eyes shut and grits his teeth but it’s too late, it’s too damn late—a tear rolls down his face, gets lost in his beard. A couple more follow.

He wipes his face with his hand, movements quick and jerky. He sniffs, his chest heaving with how hard he’s breathing.

“I did not want to kill you,” he says, placing a hand over his heart. “I knew the reactor wasn’t in your chest anymore. You know I knew.”

_Yeah. You knew._

Tony sits up on the bed. “For what it’s worth, I did not want to kill him. Or you.”

“I know that, Tony. I know.”

“How is... how is he?” Tony stares at the wall.

“He... he felt like it was too dangerous for him to keep being around so he... he went back into cryo. He’s in Wakanda.” Steve’s voice is full of guilt as he confirms what Tony already knows.

“I’m really sorry about that.”
“Thank you.”

Steve gets back to his drawing, Tony hides in the bathroom to get dressed.

They have breakfast in the kitchen. Tony makes espresso with an old moka pot, fills two small cups with it. There’s a torta della nonna in the credenza, and he cuts two slices, making Steve’s bigger.

Tony insists Steve tells him if he wants something else. At first Steve says he’s okay like this, but after a while he asks, somewhat sheepishly, for two or three raw eggs in a glass.

“Are you sure this is enough?” Tony asks after throwing away the third egg shell.

Steve looks like he’s doing his best not to say what he says next, but his stomach must take over his brain. “A couple more? Maybe. Sorry.”

Fucking super soldiers and their ridiculous protein intake.

Tony adds two more eggs and shoots Manuela a quick text, so their fridge will always be stocked.

While Tony fills the dishwasher, Steve asks if he can go for a run.

“Of course you can. You can do whatever you want.”

“We’re not going anywhere today?”

“Not today. Tomorrow, in the afternoon. If you want.”

Steve changes into running clothes in the bedroom. Tony cuddles up on the couch. He looks at Steve before he walks out of the door and feels too warm just from looking at him, with his sweatpants and sweatshirt.

Steve seems to suddenly remember something, walks back inside and takes something out of his pocket. He places the drawing on the coffee table in front of Tony.

It’s made with a simple pencil this time. It’s Tony, again, wearing a chef hat and holding a wooden spoon. There’s a kitchen in the background, just outlined, and the words thank you are written at the bottom, in Steve’s elegant and old-fashioned handwriting.

One corner of Tony’s mouth tugs upwards without his permission, but he quickly wrestles his face into a neutral expression, and nods at Steve in acknowledgment.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” Steve says, and leaves.

Tony takes his StarkPad and opens the Kindle app to read the same thing for possibly the tenth time.

The Other Stars

By Stella Boccherini

Translated into English by the author

Chapter One: Childhood During the War

Tony skims through the first chapter, about the war and its horrors, about Stella’s family, her father’s expectations of her, how since she was very young she realized she was completely uninterested in boys. While everyone told her she would find a nice man and have children, she dreamed of
graduating university, of being a doctor or a pianist or an engineer.

Tony reaches Chapter Two: Maria.

When I was a little girl I had a favourite uncle. His name was Leonardo, and I just loved him. He always spoke to me with respect and a soft tone, never raising his voice like my father did all the time. He treated me like a person, even when I was a child. He lived, alone, in a villa near Siena, relatively close to where my family resided.

He taught history and philosophy in high school; he spoke French and English very well. He played piano beautifully. He never married, and I didn’t know why at the time. I guess I never even dwelled on the thought that much. Now, I have a pretty good idea of why that was the case, but it’s not my story to tell. Zio Leonardo, as I would call him, can’t recount it himself, so it will just go untold. It will be forgotten, maybe, and maybe that’s wrong. But I knew my uncle, I know what kind of man he was. Letting that story get lost between the waterfalls of time will be a mercy to him. He never wanted attention, he never wished to disturb anyone. He wanted to go through life as though he was never really there, without leaving any sign.

He wasn’t lonely, but during the summer, when he didn’t have his work to fill the days, he would grow sad and quiet. I tried to visit him as much as possible, but I was still a child and didn’t have any means of transportation except an old, rusty bicycle and the stubbornness to beg my father to take me with his car.

In the end, Dad was so fed up with me and all the time I would make him waste, that he agreed to let me stay with Zio Leonardo during the summer. In that way I could keep him company, he would have someone to talk to. He would teach me to play piano. He successfully taught me English, and never really gave up on French, even though I did. (Yes, I regret it now).

Those summers are still the best memories I have of my childhood and early teenage years. Zio Leonardo and I shared many interests, but what I really loved about spending time with him is that he never shut me down. He never dismissed me as a silly little girl, as my father often did, and my mother too, sometimes.

Zio Leonardo always had a kind word for everyone; he was patient and calm. When I first asked him to tell me about the stars (which later would become my job and my entire career) he told me he didn’t know much about them, but we could go in the city and buy a book, learn about them together. That was how he was.

He didn’t really have friends, just acquaintances, and he would meet with them rarely. His oldest friend was Antonio, who had sat next to him for five years in elementary school, and who now had a daughter of my age, Maria. Antonio had decided to move to the United States in a couple of years, and asked Zio Leonardo if he could teach Maria some English, so she wouldn’t have to start from the beginning once they got to their new country. My uncle, of course, accepted.

Maria moved in with us during the summers of 1953 and 1954. It would have been considered inappropriate for her to stay in my uncle’s house with him alone, but since I, a relative, was also there, social norms were respected.

As these things go, Maria and I became friends immediately.

We would run away from the house sometimes, to the woods, play in the river. We would sing, and laugh, and talk, and watch the stars. Sometimes, we would stay up all night talking about everything, about what we hoped from the future, what we remembered from the past, what we saw in the present.
Maria was one of the most intelligent people I have ever met, and I have met Nobel prize winners. The way she interpreted the world around her was so unique and peculiar that I still wonder if she didn’t have some magical ability. It wouldn’t be so far-fetched, in this strange world we live in.

She always surprised me. When I was sure she was going to say a certain thing, she would say something else. It was like very good comedy: when you could bet the gag would play out in a way, you can almost predict the punchline, but it ends up being something you hadn’t thought about at all.

As I have said, I was pretty young when I first discovered that I liked girls. Maria, though, was the first one I fell in love with.

I realized that I loved her while we were playing the piano. She had asked me if I could teach her, and I felt that I was good enough at it that I could. My uncle was tending to his beloved flowers in the garden, so we were alone in the house.

I remember the white dress she wore, the way the hem of the skirt would fall over her calves. I remember her fingers on the keys of the piano, trying to repeat my previous movements. I remember her sweet scent of lavender, like the soap she used and brought with her to my uncle’s house, enclosed in a little tin box. I remember her fine hair, light brown, soft, tied in a loose braid that fell beautifully over the nape of her neck, on her shoulders.

And just watching her, I remember thinking, I am in love with her. It was as simple as that, as many things are when you are sixteen.

She had an uncommon sort of nobility. Her father may have not been a farmer, but that was the life she was born into, and for the first few years of her life she did live in a farmhouse. But now, she was already a city girl, through and through.

She had a lipstick she had bought without her mother knowing, but had never tried on yet. It was bright red, and we would put it on each other at night, before bed. We would pretend to be rich, to be important ladies, to be free. The sparks those games would put into Maria’s eyes, while she stared at herself in the mirror…

I was never good with rules, I was never the kind of person who just accepts their own destiny. I did not want to marry a boy, and I didn’t. I wanted to study, and I did. I wanted to have a career, and I had one.

But Maria… for Maria, it was different.

She had a sort of craving that ate up at her from the inside and would never let her go. Her desire to be free wasn’t just a distant wish for the future. It was a raw need, an unquenchable thirst, a hunger that she could not satisfy and that would make her weep at night, from time to time.

She couldn’t wait to get to the States. She learned English so fast it was uncanny. She couldn’t wait for her new life—her real life—to start.

I kissed her, that day, while sitting at the piano. And she kissed back, happy and carefree, resting her hand on my arm.

From that day on, we would try to be alone as much as possible. It wasn’t difficult, since the only person we ever really saw was my uncle. But we knew we couldn’t kiss by the river, for example, for fear that someone would see us—the kids that sometimes we met there, or a fisherman, or young boys and girls with their families’ pigs, or goats, or sheep. We spent a lot of time in our room.
I won’t go into detail, I’m fairly sure anyone can imagine how two sixteen-year-old girls who were very much in love would spend their time. It was like a dream.

And we had to wake up pretty soon.

The first winter passed quickly. Maria and I wrote letters to each other, but we managed to annoy our respective relatives enough that we could meet a couple of times. We didn’t go to the same school or frequent the same places, so it was unlikely we would meet by chance. We didn’t have much freedom.

The letters helped. We were just waiting for the next summer, and thankfully it arrived sooner than we imagined.

We had three whole months ahead of us, but we knew that after that there wouldn’t be anything else. Maria would start her amazing, exciting new life in the United States, and I would remain here, with my uncle and my family and my first astronomy books.

That first acceptance of the inevitable end of our love started to disappear as time went by, as the date for Maria’s first and one-way plane ride loomed closer. That acceptance went sour in my mouth, made me livid.

And I couldn’t even blame Maria’s father, or destiny, or circumstances, because Maria wanted to go, she wanted to live in New York more than anything else. She saw that life in magazines and movies and couldn’t wait for her chance to be a part of it.

I confronted her about it, accused her of not loving me. But I knew that wasn’t true. Maria did love me, very much, just as I loved her. I apologized, and she kissed me in front of the window, the last rays of sunshine casting long shadows into the room, my uncle calling for us to get downstairs because dinner was ready.

I cried when she left, of course I did. And she did too, as proof that leaving me was hard on her too. She was never unfeeling; she was never uncaring. Her heart broke that day just like mine.

What was it then?

We knew she couldn’t do anything about moving to the States, even if she wanted to. She had no decisional power at all on the matter, her father had decided. So they would go, and that was the end of it. There was no question about it, no doubt whatsoever.

But before leaving, she broke up with me. Officially, and somewhat awkwardly.

I was angry at her because of it for a few days. I couldn’t believe that she didn’t want to stay in touch, that she didn’t want to wait until maybe I, too, could go to the States.

After six months, I received her first letter. She described her new life, the obstacles, how her father’s money would overcome them each and every time, how bright and amazing everything was in New York.

I replied, and I wasn’t lying when I wrote that I was happy for her, but I was still very angry too.

But time… I guess it’s true what they say, it cures everything, or at least gives you some perspective. And I understood, eventually, what I had always suspected, which was that Maria was more mature than me, and had already worked out what she wanted from life, and she was ready to go get it.

While I had vague dreams and desires about my future, Maria had clear goals in mind.
She had been poor, during the war. She had been hungry, and dirty, and cold, and saw family die while trying to fight an enemy that seemed impossible to defeat, that was the ultimate incarnation of evil. Remembering still makes me shiver in terror, but living it was like staring into the devil’s eyes.

Maria wanted to run away from all that, from anything that could remind her of those terrible years. Maybe it was silly and childish, but I understand now that a clean cut was the only way she could begin to imagine a life free of those memories. Moving, to her, was somehow a guarantee that she would never live those things again. And sure, she didn’t.

But for as much as I hated that she had left—left me—I couldn’t really blame her.

She was an ambitious person, just like her father. They both didn’t want to be poor and hungry ever again, so they made sure they wouldn’t be. They took steps to ensure it. Made sacrifices.

And I was one of those sacrifices, I suppose. Maybe she didn’t see it that way, though.

Antonio was already well-off when he left Italy, but in America he became rich, and Maria married someone even richer. When she met him, I think she saw in him the same things her own father had ensured for her: a safe life, a privileged life. A life where she would have money and power, forever. A payback, maybe, for the hardships of the war.

She did like him though, or so she said in her letters, despite how old he was compared to her. So, she married him.

That was Maria. She was practical. She wasn’t heartless or mean, but she wasn’t sentimental. That’s probably what allowed her to make the decisions she made, the sacrifices she made.

We kept in touch. For many years we wrote letters, just like we did during that first winter. I would keep her up to date with Italian pop music, which we both loved, and I would send her a record or two from time to time, mixtapes I made. She enjoyed them, told me she listened to them with her son.

We developed a friendship, I suppose. It was good. It helped me move on.

We never saw each other again. We were both too wrapped up in our own lives, me with my studies and her with her philanthropic work. When I went to New York she was in Los Angeles; when I went to Los Angeles she was in Japan. She traveled a lot; I did too.

We had different lives, and maybe we both knew that meeting again wouldn’t accomplish anything. Worst case scenario, old feelings would be unburied, and neither of us wanted to deal with that possibility. Best case scenario, there would be no feelings to rekindle, and neither of us wanted to deal with that disappointment.

After I met Laura, I never doubted that what I had in my letters for Maria was friendship, and the same was true for her. Laura always knew about Maria and about the letters, she would even read some of them (with my permission and Maria’s, of course). She never tried to take that nostalgia away from me, and I’m grateful for that. She always gave me space to idly and innocently daydream about what if things had gone in a different way? without trying to reclaim it for herself.

In the end, Maria and I wanted different things. Maybe we were too different. Maybe we wouldn’t have lasted anyway. I will never know. But I did love her, and she did love me. We transformed that love into something else, because we were never ready to leave each other’s life for good.

And it was made of paper and music, but it was a beautiful friendship.
his face.

***

Steve runs.

He jogs down the white trail that leads to the Relais, and when he reaches the main road he comes to a halt, looking around himself to decide which way to go. They came from the right, yesterday. He goes left.

He doesn’t know how many miles he covers, but he tries to check his watch every so often, so he can get back in two hours like he told Tony he would. He doesn’t want to be late or too early. He wants to do exactly what he said. No surprises. No mistakes. No unexpected change of plans.

He looks around himself while he runs, at the seemingly endless expanse of the countryside. He wonders if the landscape will change at one point or another, but no, it’s more of the same for miles and miles. The sun beats down on him relentlessly, on the cypresses lining the way to a farmhouse, on the small lakes he sees at the base of this or that hill, on the precise geometry that decorates the gentle slopes of the landscape, created by the irregular transitions from one crop to another—sunflowers, wheat, olive trees, vineyards, orchards.

He ends up in a patch of trees. They press around the road as if they’re trying to swallow it, and Steve can’t see the hills anymore. He can hear animals running around the woods, squirrels, birds, wild boars. He sees a fox crossing the road, its red fur harsh against the gray asphalt. It looks at him, uncharacteristically bold. Maybe the curiosity of studying this strange new creature beats any survival instinct. A super soldier seen through the eyes of a fox.

An hour. Steve turns on his heels and runs back to Tony.

He finds Tony on the couch, sleeping. He’s lying on his side, knees drawn to his belly, arms crossed over his chest, hands resting on his biceps. There’s a scowl on his face. The television is on; he must have fallen asleep while watching it. Maybe it’s the jet lag, maybe it’s the fact that Steve woke him up last night.

Steve sits next to him on the couch, quietly, allows himself the small pleasure of watching Tony exist. He looks tiny, all huddled up like this. His mouth is slightly open. His feet are naked, and Steve almost can’t resist the urge to touch them. He rubs his fingers together to keep the need at bay.

Steve shakes his head suddenly. He shouldn’t be staring at Tony like this, especially while he’s asleep. He tries to avert his eyes, thinks of getting up to take a book from the shelf or take his sketchbook from the bedroom, but all he can think about is Tony.

Tony’s hands making food for Steve in the dead of night.

Tony’s curls, the wind messing with them.

Tony’s simple clothes, that make him look younger, and somehow smaller than usual, shorter.

The smell of Tony’s skin, his sweat, his callused hands beautifully framed by the silver bracelets at his wrists. His thick fingers, the dark hair on his arms and on the underside of his hands, his veiny muscles—strong in a different way than Steve’s, strong from hard work with machines and tools, from the daily contact with the materialization of his science, with the practicality of invention.

The television. The program Tony was watching ends.
There is… there’s a song.

A song Steve knows.

*Parlami d’amore Mariù*

*Tutta la mia vita sei tu!*

*Gli occhi tuoi belli brillano*

*Fiamme di sogno scintillano***[1]***

It was during the war, Steve remembers.

A night they spent in Italy, near the front. There was a small town, close to Campobasso, with a dance house. They went for a drink, Steve and the Commandos. And this song… this song was playing and there was… there was a woman, singing it, a beautiful woman with red lipstick and black hair and a red dress and an other-worldly voice singing a song for a girl named Mariù who was all her life.

And Steve remembers that for some reason he was struck by this thing, the thing about a woman being in love with another woman. And maybe it wasn’t even true, maybe it was just that she was a good singer and that was a good song and they didn’t change the names or the pronouns, sure, it was way more likely, but Steve—

Steve.

In that moment, in that moment that looked so normal from the outside, while no one was noticing him, while all his friends were busy drinking, laughing, dancing, Steve thought—

Steve thought, *I like men too.*

And it wasn’t a huge revelation in itself, Steve knew already, had always known, but had ignored it up to that moment, and then a minute later he wasn’t ignoring it anymore, and he was thinking it, he was thinking it with words, saying it with the voice of his mind.

He was accepting it.

And it was fine, Steve was fine with it. It was never going to be a problem anyway because he was going to marry Peggy after the war and they would be happy, they would be so, so happy. They would stay together forever, love each other forever, and it would be the most beautiful life Steve could have ever dreamed.

So Steve was okay with it. With accepting it.

And now, now he knows that it’s called bisexuality, Tony and Natasha explained it to him. And it felt good, it felt huge that there were other people like him, that they were allowed to talk about it, that they could.

But here, now. The song.

It’s a commercial,[2] for a perfume. Steve doesn’t know if it airs in the States, he never watches television, except the news sometimes. And movies, yes, a couple of TV shows, but the DVDs have no commercials.

But this one. This commercial. There’s a man and a woman, and they are both beautiful,
unimaginably so, but the man...

The man.

The man is, without question, the most attractive human being Steve has ever seen in his life. His face, his strong jaw, the shape of his nose and his forehead, his hair, his lips. His body, oh god, his body looks better than Steve’s own, and his eyes are so blue.

And Steve thinks, Holy shit, and then he thinks, But he’s not Tony, and as soon as he thinks that his mind fills with images where Tony takes the man’s place, and Steve is with him on the white dinghy, the sea stacks all around them, the water clear and calm, the air still. And Tony is wearing a white speedo, like the man is, and his skin is tan and wet and tastes like sea salt and Steve knows because Tony is kissing him, Tony lowers himself on top of Steve and kisses him, water dripping on Steve’s heated skin, and it’s refreshing because Steve was so warm, too warm, and Tony, Tony’s kissing him, Tony’s tongue is cool and wet, and his skin and the sea and the sun and the salt—

The commercial ends, and another one starts, and then another.

The thick fog of images clears out from Steve’s mind, and he gasps, too loud, and he hopes he doesn’t wake Tony up again.

He tries to breathe, but he can’t; his lungs are burning, his throat, his eyes, that stretch of skin between his legs. He gets up slowly, chances a last glance at Tony’s body—a silent apology, a quiet confession, as if saying I’m sorry a million times could erase all the small and big acts of violence Steve has committed (and still commits, and will commit) against him.

Steve walks quickly to the bedroom and then locks the bathroom door behind himself, undresses, almost trips on his sweatpants in his haste to get out of them. He ignores his cock, red and throbbing against his lower abdomen, and gets in the shower, turning the faucet all the way to the coldest setting.

He can breathe now—it hurts and it scares him for a moment, the cold water, but he can breathe.

He dries off when he’s calmed down. He dresses quickly once he’s back in the bedroom. He sits on his side of the bed and shivers and cries.

Tony is there a moment later, calls from the hallway, “Uhm—” because he’s not saying Steve’s name, he has never said Steve’s name this whole time, and Steve can’t even remember the last time he heard Tony’s voice say his name—Tony’s tongue catching a bit behind his teeth, making the S awkward, a fraction of a second longer than it should be. A flaw.

How nice to find a flaw.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me—”

The air leaves Steve’s lungs again.

“What are you talking about?”

And of course, of course. Tony rubs his eyes and his forehead, presses a couple of fingers to his temple. He doesn’t know what happened; he was asleep.

Tony walks in front of Steve, keeps his distance but he’s only a few feet away. His t-shirt is rumpled.

“Listen, just... just try to breathe, alright?”
Steve nods, tries to take big gulps of air, and he almost manages to succeed thanks to Tony’s soothing presence, his kind voice, before remembering that Tony hates him now.

That causes another sob to shake Steve’s chest, and more tears spill from his eyes, roll down onto his beard. He covers his mouth with his hand to keep himself from making too much noise.

“Please, just... just breathe.”

Steve lifts his eyes to look at Tony, but thinks better of it before he can reach his face. He just stares in front of himself, and his gaze lines up with Tony’s belly.

Steve’s mind screams at him, and he wants to grab Tony’s hip, see exactly how small it looks in his big hand, he wants to press his face into Tony’s stomach and breathe him in, deep, keep him in his lungs for as long as possible.

But he doesn’t do any of that.

Instead, he nods, gets up, washes his face, and follows Tony out of the room.

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Tony takes the blue blanket from the back of the couch and goes outside, walks around the building to the oak tree on the back. He spreads the blanket on the grass, sits down on it.

Steve looks at him curiously, his eyes widen a bit when Tony gestures for him to sit, too.

Steve falls heavily on the blanket, ungraceful; he looks tense and sad, and Tony wishes he could… that he could just…

Nothing. He doesn’t wish anything.

He distracts himself with his tablet, replies to Pepper’s email from a couple of hours ago when the Tokyo Stock Exchange closed. He posts a few tweets to make everyone believe he’s vacationing in Polynesia, adds the pictures Happy sent him from there. He wants to text Peter, ask if Karen took care of the issue with the binder in the suit, but he’s probably (hopefully) asleep right now. He’ll do it later.

His tablet vibrates, I’m with Nat, Rhodey says, and adds the spider emoji at the end. Nerd.

say hi from me.

She says she’s sorry.

i am, too.

She also says ‘thank you.’

no problem.

His sunglasses blink at him with a notification for an incoming call. It’s T’Challa. Right on time.

“Sorry, gotta take this in private,” he mutters to Steve, who looks confused for the second it takes him to remember that where Tony is concerned glasses can be phones.

Tony walks away from Steve, activates the energy field that muffles his voice, so a certain super soldier can’t eavesdrop.
“Your highness,” Tony says as soon as T’Challa’s face appears before his eyes.

“Hello, Mr. Stark. How are you?”

“I’m alright. We haven’t killed each other yet, I’m sure you’d count that as a win.”

“In fact, I do. I really hope you two can work things out. I have spent some time talking with Captain Rogers and… He made a mistake, but I don’t believe there was malice behind his actions. I understand you struggle to see it that way—”

“What is this, couples therapy with the king? It’d make a great reality show.”

“Tony, I don’t mean to overstep your boundaries—”

“Then don’t.”

T’Challa’s nostrils flare for a moment, and it’s a deliberate warning. He has too much self-control for it to be anything else.

“I was hoping I could do this as your friend.”

“Why? We don’t need to be besties for this.”

“No, we don’t need to. But I’d like to.” There’s a long pause, T’Challa weighs his next words carefully. “During that week, we all did things we wouldn’t have done under any other circumstances. But if what Colonel Rhodes explained to me is true, we’ll need to get past our differences, learn how to truly work together, and trust each other.”

“I know. I know, I’m just… I need time.”

“You have some. Make the most of it.”

They talk for about twenty minutes, and when they hang up there’s a hopeful smirk on T’Challa lips that makes Tony feel almost optimistic.

He gets back to the blanket on the grass, to Steve. He’s drawing, he must’ve gone back into the guest house to retrieve his sketchbook and pencils. He’s taken off his shoes.

Tony stretches out on his back, looks up at the big branches of the oak tree, the leaves moving with the soft breeze, creating unpredictable patterns of sunshine and shadows with their slow oscillations. He closes his eyes and splays a hand over his chest. He can almost feel his heart beating. Steve’s pencil stopped scratching the paper a while ago.

“Would you quit staring,” Tony demands, not as forceful as he would’ve liked.

“I didn’t know you had curls,” Steve replies, with the tone of someone who didn’t want those words to get past their lips at all.

“I didn’t know the serum could do nothing against receding hairlines,” Tony deadpans, and the words have so little venom in them that Steve actually laughs.

After a few minutes of complete silence, Steve says, “I signed the Accords, you know. The new version.”

“You wouldn’t be allowed on Italian soil otherwise, so yes, I know.”
“I still don’t—”

Tony sits up, and Steve follows him. This is not a conversation they can have lying down.

“It’s not about the Accords. I don’t give a fuck about the damn Accords. You know that.”

His actions implied it, at least. And maybe it’s not entirely true, because part of him honestly believes they need supervision and a system of accountability. But he cared about Steve more than he ever cared about the Accords.

Look where that got him.

“I’m sorry. It’s not an excuse, but so many things happened in those few days… I was… I don’t know, confused. Scared. I didn’t want to lose anything, anyone. And then I lost everything…”

Softer, then, in a whisper, “I lost... I lost you.”

 Fucking hell.

“You know what really pisses me off about the Accords? That none of you believed I could handle Ross when necessary. I’ve been dealing with those kinds of people, with these kinds of messes my whole life, and none of you could stop and think for a minute that maybe I could see a way out. Because how can former Merchant of Death, Ultron-creating, irresponsible man-child, and narcissist extraordinaire Tony Stark possibly know what to do, right?”

Tony’s words bite, but his voice is calm. He huffs a laugh, because that’s what his brain usually comes up with in these situations.

“I tried to listen. I wanted to, Tony, I just couldn’t—”

“I only wanted you to give me the benefit of the doubt. To trust me. But you couldn’t, and it ended like it did. But it’s not... right now, all of this… it’s not about the Accords.”

“I know. I’m sorry. The more I think about it, the more I see things I could’ve done differently. It’s all, what if, what if, in my head. It’s driving me crazy.”

He sounds genuinely regretful, and Tony is happy to see Steve’s jaw set in displeasure and frustration for a moment. But that makes him feel disgusted with himself. It’s a bad thought. A really bad thought.

“I never wanted to make you afraid of me, Tony. I swear.”

Steve looks down, at his socked feet, plays with a bit of lint on the blanket. His fingers are very long. His nails are perfect, and Tony bets they’re not even manicured. His skin is so fair that his knuckles are red. His right sleeve rides up a bit on his wrist, exposing his fine blond hair. There’s dirt from the pencil on the side of his hand.

Steve takes a deep breath, and looks at Tony. Tony doesn’t look back, and he feels like a coward.

“I know my word isn’t worth shit to you at this point, but I promise—Tony I promise—no matter what happens, no matter the circumstances, I will never, ever, hurt you again. I’ll never do that again, I swear.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“The hell I can’t, I’m doing it.”
“What if someone manipulates us again, makes us fight each other again, huh?”

“That won’t happen.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because maybe I learned something from this mess, what d’you think? I’d talk to you. I’d trust you. I can’t... I could never do that to you again, Tony, I could never do it to myself either. If we ever end up in a situation like that again... I’d do it right.”

_I’d trust you._

As if that is something Steve is going to do no matter what, whether Tony forgives him or not. As long as they’re both taking care of the alien threat, they’ll have to see each other, have a relationship, however distant. And Steve just said, _I’d trust you._

Tony wonders if the promise will hold, when put to the test.

He doesn’t want to think about his own trust for Steve, buried under Siberian ice, with so many other pieces of his life.

He doesn’t want to think about how his heart broke that day, with that single word that he knew would come out of Steve’s mouth even before he asked the question, with Barnes standing in a corner and looking at the floor and waiting, just _there_, waiting for Tony to react, because he, too, knew.

But it wasn’t Barnes’ fault. It was Steve that kept the secret.

“I don’t know if you could ever forgive me. I don’t know if I would, if I were you. You’re stronger than me, though.”

_What._

“There are things I’d like to tell you, Tony, explain. I just hope you’ll give me the chance.”

“Alright,” Tony hears himself say, and Steve seems surprised, but he doesn’t speak anymore.

***

After lunch at the restaurant, they return to the blanket on the grass, and Tony falls asleep again. He’s resting on his side, an arm under his head, facing Steve.

He must be very tired. It makes Steve worry, though, because the Tony he knew was always impossibly active, slept the bare minimum, constantly driven by a strange sort of nervous energy. Now he seems okay physically, to Steve’s inexpert eye at least... but who knows.

Tony wakes up suddenly, a gasp on his lips. His breathing is ragged, he tries to get it under control but to no avail.

“Are you okay?” Steve asks, because he simply can’t not do it.

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony says, with a dismissive tone. Not okay, then.

“If I can help in any—”

“You can’t, so _shut up._” Tony’s words are harsh now, and he sits up while he spits them out; closes
his eyes, breathes in deep. He takes his left wrist into his right fist, rubs it firmly, keeping it close to his chest. The metal of his bracelet digs into the skin at the base of his hand.

Steve sits up too, looks at Tony’s small frame, his curls moving with the wind, and wishes he could do something, anything, to wash away the weariness from Tony’s face forever, make the lines of anguish disappear from around his eyes, heal the furrow that misery dug on his forehead.

*That’s what’s going on, Cap. It’s just pain.*

“Goddammit,” Tony says under his breath, then swallows. He releases his wrist, but it’s still shaking a bit. He rubs his chest.

That’s not good. It’s also very probably Steve’s fault.

The new rush of guilt spreads suddenly into Steve from the nape of his neck. It makes his shoulders prickle with shame and regret. He did this. He did this to Tony.

There’s no way to apologize for this, to make up for it. It’s done, and it’s forever.

“I’m so sorry, Tony,” he says, again, because he doesn’t know what else to do.

Tony meets his eyes briefly, then looks down at the blanket and says, “Sorry I snapped.”

Steve doesn’t know how to respond. He wishes he could touch Tony, show him how he feels in a way that doesn’t require Steve to say things, that doesn’t force him to make sense of his scattered thoughts and adapt them to the constricting limits of human language. He wishes he could paint for Tony, that he could translate his confession into colors, and be understood.

“It’s alright. You were upset.”

“I’m having, uh… trouble with conflict, I… when I get angry, my arm… my chest— ”

Tony’s breathing is becoming irregular and shallow again.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to talk. You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

“I—”

Tony’s about to cry.

“I need to call him.”

*Who?*

Tony puts his glasses on and presses the little button on the hinge. “Call Peter,” he says, and Steve hears the line connect. “Come on, come on,” Tony mutters softly while he waits for an answer.

“Mr. Stark?”

Steve hears the young voice from the other end of the line, curious and surprised.

“Are you alright?” Tony’s voice is urgent with worry.

“What—”

“Are you alright?” Tony asks again, louder, and then closes his eyes and swallows, chastising
himself.

“Yes! Yes, I’m alright. I’m at school, I’m with Ned. History.”

“You’re bad at history.”

“You too, Mr. Stark.”

Tony scoffs, “Yeah, yeah.”

There’s a moment where no one speaks. Tony just breathes, relief settling into him.

“I’m okay, Mr. Stark. Everything’s okay. No one’s hurt.”

Tony rubs his forehead. “Okay. Be careful after school, alright? Text me when you get home.”

“Will do. Gotta go.”

“Right. Bye.”

“Bye, Mr. Stark.”

Tony takes off his glasses, throws them on the blanket, and presses the heels of his hands into his eyes.

“Tony,” Steve says, voice gentle, “It was just a bad dream. He’s alright.”

“He’s a good kid. But he... he’s a kid, and I... It’s dangerous.”

“Yeah. But he’d go out there anyway. Keeping an eye on him, it’s all you can do. You’ll be there to help if he needs it, right?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“Come lie down. For a bit, alright?”

Tony lies back down on the blanket, and Steve does the same. After about half an hour, Tony is almost falling back asleep. It’s good that he’s calmed down enough for sleep to creep in again, but it’s still the third time today that Tony needs a nap. It’s too much, even accounting for the lost sleep of last night.

Asking for an explanation doesn’t seem like a good idea to Steve right now, but he will at some point. He’s worried.

He’s about to say something to keep Tony awake, even if he feels like an asshole for doing it, when Tony sits up suddenly, yawns, and presses his hands to his face.

“Ugh... damn.”

“You okay?”

“Just tired.” It’s not the truth, and they both know it.

“Tony, you don’t have to tell me. Really. But I mean it... If you need help, I’m here. It’s just that without knowing what’s wrong... But you know best, I’m sure.”

“I need more time. I’ll explain. I just—”
“I know. Hey.” Steve lowers his head to catch Tony’s gaze with his own. He uses his softest voice, his nicest smile. He takes the first step, because Tony can’t. “Hey. We’ve got time.”

Tony nods, and gives him a quick, lopsided smile, which is unexpected, perhaps, but not at all unwelcome.

“Wanna come with me? Take a walk? I’d like to show you something,” Tony says suddenly, in a friendly tone he’s never used in the past few days.

“Sure,” Steve replies, intrigued.

They set off down the hill, in the opposite direction Steve took that morning to reach the main road. The landscape is pretty much the same as Steve appreciated during his run. The sun makes Tony sweat, his skin shines with it.

Steve zips up his hoodie.

“Aren’t you really cold?” Tony asks.

Steve nods.

“Why?”

Steve sighs, pushes his hair back with one hand, then lets his arm fall heavily to his side, defeated. “I don’t know, Tony.”

Another thing that’s not true.

“What about the serum?”

“Works alright for the rest. I’m just cold.”

“Can I ask... since when...?”

“Since Siberia. Since I left you there. In the cold. Alone. With a broken suit.”

And a broken heart.

“I was... it was fine. I have emergency protocols. I was there for barely an hour. I was at the, uh... I was home in no time.”

Steve’s not reassured.

“I’m sorry I left you. I’m so sorry, Tony.”

“You’ve said.”

“I know I keep repeating it. I don’t know what else to say.”

A beat. Then, “Why are you here? What do you want from this? For real.”

“Forgetfulness. Yours.”

“Why?”

“Because I hope we can fix this. Us. I regret what I did to you. I might’ve had my reasons, but it was wrong.”
“See, I don’t think that’s completely true.”

“Tony—”

“I think you’re very sorry, yes. I think you wish things played out differently. But I think that in the end you still believe it was worth it. Because Barnes is safe, and that’s... that’s all that matters to you.”

It isn’t.

“Here,” Tony says when they’ve reached a big tree with a little stone wall close by, white roses climbing all over it. They sit on it, in the shade provided by the foliage. Steve maintains a safe distance from Tony, looks at him while he wipes sweat from his hairline.

“Maybe you’re right. Part of me thinks that if it ended with Bucky safe, then... But he’s not safe. I didn’t really help him.”

“Barnes is your priority, I get that.” He sighs. “I thought we were friends. You said we weren’t. My mistake. Sorry if I ever... made you uncomfortable. Wasn’t my intention.”

Goosebumps form on Tony’s arms. Steve sees Tony close his eyes and shudder, his whole body taken over by an uncontrollable spasm that lasts only a moment, but it’s awful to witness.

Shame.

“We were friends, Tony. Of course we were. It wasn’t always perfect but... I cared about you. I still do. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

Tony looks at him, uncertain, frowning, he shakes his head just once.

“And yet, lying to me—for years—it was easy, right? Easier than telling me the truth.”

“No. Fuck, no.” Steve takes a deep breath, gathering his patience as much as his thoughts. “I did it. And I knew it’d hurt you and I kept doing it. But don’t assume, Tony, not even for a second, that it was easy. I betrayed you. I knew what I was doing. But it was the hardest thing I’ve done in my life. The hardest thing.”

Tony grits his teeth, seems to think Steve’s little speech over, and in the end he nods, which is more than Steve expected.

“What I did... in the end, it kept Bucky alive, and I’m glad for that. But thinking about it now, with my head clear, seeing how many other choices I could’ve made... and seeing you like this, what I did to you... maybe... maybe it wasn’t worth it, Tony.”

Steve feels tears gather in his eyes; they blur his vision until they start rolling down his face.

Tony sniffs, loudly, and Steve realizes that he’s crying too. He drags a hand over his face, Steve wipes his own cheeks with the sleeve of his hoodie.

Tony looks at him, lips still pursed with sadness, but he nods, resigned in the way he accepts Steve’s words.

“Come on,” Tony says, and he gets up to start climbing the tree.

Steve waits near the trunk, stupidly worried that Tony is gonna slip and fall. It’s unlikely, Tony is fit and agile, has quick reflexes, is a grown man who doesn’t need Steve to look after him. But Tony
also sleeps too much and has bad dreams and his arm and chest hurt when he’s angry.

Steve watches Tony sit on the thickest branch of the tree, legs wrapped around it. His thighs flex with the effort, the muscles contract under the soft linen of his pants. He reaches up with his arms, arching his back, and the pose is so peculiar that Steve wishes he had brought his sketchbook with him.

“Here, take these,” Tony calls as he leans down to drop a few cherries in Steve’s cupped hands. When Steve’s hands are full Tony climbs down the tree, jumping to cover the last few feet.

While he’s in the air, Tony’s t-shirt rides up an inch or two, and Steve thinks he sees something underneath. It looks like one of the shirts Tony usually wears under the armor. He doesn’t comment on it.

They sit on the stone wall and Steve passes Tony a few cherries.

Their fingers brush against each other.

Tony shivers again. Steve shifts his hands away, the air leaving his lungs all of a sudden.

*I’m sorry* I’m sorry I’m sorry.

Tony keeps his gaze down, on the cherries, and whispers, “I’m fine,” so quietly that Steve is sure he can hear it only because he has enhanced senses.

They eat the cherries in silence, basking in the afternoon sun, in the pleasant shade of the tree.

“Just so I know, is this tree yours?” Steve asks. Tony squints at him, a puzzled look on his face. Steve continues, “It’s just that, you know, it’d be crazy if we got arrested by the Italian police for stealing someone else’s cherries.”

There’s a long moment of silence. Steve holds his breath, waits for Tony’s reaction. Maybe it was a mistake. God, Steve is so stupid and—

Tony snorts. He huffs a laugh, too, and Steve starts breathing again.

Tony chuckles. Only a little, but... yeah.

“Who... who’s gonna arrest us here?” Tony asks, incredulous at how ridiculous the joke is, but also amused by it.

And while he speaks Tony does the thing, that thing Italians do when they push all their fingertips together and drag their hand to their chest and it’s so absurd and so, so funny and Steve has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep himself from bursting out laughing.

“Hey, you never know,” he says, grinning.

Tony smiles too, and Steve takes a moment to congratulate himself, because he did it. He made Tony laugh.

“Don’t worry, the tree is mine.”

Steve draws a deep, fake sigh of relief, and Tony smiles again, his teeth impossibly white against his tan skin.

In the silence that follows, Steve says, “I miss you.”
Tony’s shoulders tense up for a moment, and he shakes his head, slowly.

“I’m right here.”

“I miss how we used to be. How we could be, sometimes. We were friends, Tony. I don’t know why I said we weren’t. Maybe it’s because we aren’t right now, and I keep mixing up past and present.”

“Remember when you... when you came to the workshop, and sat there drawing while I worked. I liked that. It’s happened, what, four or five times, maybe, but I liked it. Made me feel less alone.”

Steve smiles, but grows somber again when he thinks about what to say next.

“I hate to ask, Tony, but... I need to know if this is something you want. I know I didn’t leave you much of a choice at the airport, but I need to know if you want to do this.”

“You want me to tell you that I’ll forgive you?”

“No. But I’d like you to tell me if you’re already sure that you won’t.”

Tony looks into Steve’s eyes for a very long time, until Steve feels a blush creep up from his chest to his neck.

Tony shakes his head, serious. He takes the last cherry between his forefinger and thumb, holds it up to Steve’s face. “Open your mouth,” he says, and it almost gets lost in the wind.

Steve parts his lips, allows Tony to drop the cherry in his mouth. He licks one of Tony’s fingertips, not entirely by mistake. He manages to not avert his eyes from Tony’s transfixed stare the whole time.

Tony shakes his head again. “I’m not sure,” he says.

***

They walk back to the guest house while the sun is beginning to set, and the sky is striped with soft orange and pink. There are still a few hours of light.

Tony walks beside Steve; they cast two long shadows over the white gravel trail. It’s like they’re trying to walk over those dark shapes on the ground, but can never really reach them.

Tony thinks about Steve, his little joke about being arrested for the cherries, his sad but hopeful smile, his kind eyes, his offers to help. He thinks about what he, himself, wants from this. Spend time with Steve, see if together they can stumble back into some form of friendship that won’t end in tragedy again.

He thinks about their fingers brushing, Steve’s fear of having messed this up even more. His apologetic, terrified face. Tony’s whispered reassurance.

Steve’s tongue licking Tony’s finger. His eyes darkening with something that sent a shiver to the base of Tony’s spine.

They reach the oak tree, and Steve gathers the things they left there, shakes out the blanket and folds it. They head inside the guest house, and Tony sits at the kitchen table while he stares at his aspirin as it dissolves into a half empty glass of water.

“Headache,” he replies to Steve’s worried look.
God, he’s so tired.

They take turns using the shower, and Tony puts on a blue silk shirt for dinner, buttons it all the way up to the collar. He wishes he could feel it on his skin.

Steve wears jeans and a sweater.

Tony orders salmon for them both, since there’s a fresh batch that came from Livorno just this morning, as Federico, the young man that waits on them, says.

Tony asks if Steve wants wine, and he replies, “If you don’t want it, I don’t want it,” so they stick to water, but Tony doesn’t offer any further explanation, and Steve doesn’t ask for one.

After dinner, they go back to the guest house. Steve changes out of his jeans and into the sweatpants he sleeps in. Tony, instead, locks himself in the bathroom to put on his pajamas.

Steve finds a movie he wants to watch, and Tony fiddles with the remote to change the language for him, but he doesn’t really pay attention himself besides noticing that it’s *A Few Good Men*. He has three new emails from Pepper; one of them is personal. He replies to all of them.

He texts Rhodey, but doesn’t get an answer for half an hour or so. Anxiety starts creeping back into his mind. Is he okay, did everything go alright, is something wrong, did Tony miss anything? But his phone buzzes in his hand.

*Sorry, airport was very busy. Everything okay. Love you.*

*glad to hear it,* Tony shoots back, and then, *love you too.*

Tony feels that he can’t keep his eyes open anymore—goddammit—and tells Steve that he’s going to bed.

“Alright,” Steve says. “Movie’s almost over. I’ll be there in a bit.”

*You can do whatever you want,* Tony wants to say, but doesn’t. Instead, he says, “I’m gonna make the Iron Man helmet in the shape of a chef hat,” and waits for understanding to blossom on Steve’s face.

“Can’t wait to see that,” Steve says, grinning.

Tony settles into bed; the sheets feel nice and cool on his skin. The French window is open, but the screen door is closed to keep the mosquitoes out. A soft breeze blows into the room, a relief after so many hours of relentless sun. The bedroom door, which Tony has left ajar on purpose, lets a slice of light creep into the room. He stares at it slashing through the shadows.

A moment later, Tony is in Siberia.

There’s concrete under him, snow and ice all around him for miles and miles and miles and Steve is gone and Rhodey is hurt and he’s alone and there’s no one to call for help, there’s no one, no one.

The suit is broken, the suit... the suit is digging into his chest, cutting his skin, slashing through his flesh, it hurts so much, it pierces his lungs and his heart and his soul and the pain is unbearable and he—

He screams.

Maybe FRIDAY will hear him, Rhodey will come and save him... But no, no, that’s impossible
because FRIDAY isn’t there and Rhodey is hurt and hurt bad and it’s all Tony’s fault because Tony always hurts the people he loves, always, always, that’s why they leave him—

He can’t breathe. He keeps trying, but there’s no air, it’s so cold and there’s no air, and the pain in his chest is so sharp and just please, please, he just wants the pain to end—

He’s going to die, he’s going to die here, alone, in Siberia, with Steve’s shield—Steve’s shield—just a few feet away from him, and there are so many things he wishes he could do and feel and say before everything stops, but he can’t and he knows he can’t and he wishes he could just... that he could just feel warm for one last time, that he could feel... that he could look into Steve’s eyes one last time and have the chance to tell him, to say it to him, to say—

For what it’s worth, even if you could never love me back—I do, I did, I do.

But there’s no more time, he can’t breathe, he can’t think, the ice is filling his lungs, the pain is—

He screams again, one last time, one last useless attempt at calling for help, and suddenly—

Suddenly, Steve is here, again, but not to help, no, Steve’s on top of him again and he’s grunting and hurting him with everything he has, with all his hate for Tony, with all his love for someone else, and he’s gonna kill Tony, he’s gonna kill him, Tony is gonna die and Tony needs to do something, he can do something, because the suit... the suit is not broken—

Tony thinks.

He doesn’t say the words with his mind’s voice, no, he visualizes them, witnesses them appear fully formed into his head, like an intuition, an epiphany, the unexpected breakthrough that makes you figure out the solution to the problem.

Activate: Knight in Shining Armor—

Tony feels his eyes open and it’s strange because he doesn’t remember closing them or not being able to see, he only remembers Steve’s face, unrecognizable with disgust and hatred, for Tony, because Tony hurt—

And now Steve is on top of him but his face is worried and he has no cowl and he looks different, and maybe he still wants to kill Tony, but no, maybe he only wants to wake Tony up; he’s smashing his shield into Tony’s chest, but no, no, he’s just touching him to wake him up—

“Wake up, Tony, please... Wake up.”

—19370810MC

The bracelets around Tony’s wrists hiss, and the armor forms all around him in less than six seconds (he needs to get it down to less than five, than four, than three), all the pieces slotting into place with perfect precision, and Tony isn’t lying under Steve anymore, no, he’s standing next to the bed but why there would be a bed in a HYDRA base in Siberia—

But before he can think or realize where he is and what he’s doing, Tony fires a heat blast from his gauntlet, and Steve crashes against the wall on the other side of the bedroom, emitting an inhuman sound when the air leaves his lungs with the violence of the impact.

He scrambles to his knees and groans, grits his teeth to bear the pain.

He’s wheezing, hoarse and disoriented.
“Tony—”

“Stay away! Stay away from me!”

Tony keeps his repulsors aimed at Steve even though Steve raises one hand in a placating gesture of surrender, keeps the other one pressed to his shoulder where he was hit, blood soaking through his henley.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing!”

“You were... you were having a nightmare. I’m sorry I touched you, I tried to call you but... I just wanted to wake you up, I promise... I didn’t wanna hurt you, I wasn’t tryin’ to hurt you, I swear I swear I swear—”

“Why were you on top of me!”

Tony knows he shouldn’t yell, but he—

“I wasn’t! I was sitting on the bed! I’m sorry. I’m so sorry… Ah, fuck—” Steve squeezes his eyes shut and visibly tries to breathe through the pain, swallows his panic down.

Okay, okay. Tony lowers his hands.

Tony thinks.

_Deactivate: MRCRBL19700529AES_

The armor retreats to the bracelets. Tony takes a breath, but the smell of burnt flesh hits his nostrils immediately and makes him want to be sick. It’s dark green in his mind, rotting, disgusting.

Steve takes off his shirt, wipes the tears on his face with it.

Tony looks at Steve, at the wound he caused, and for a moment he thinks that the bright red of Steve’s blood contrasts beautifully against his pale skin, his blue eyes. But Steve groans, and Tony’s senses shift, making space for the horror of this new cruelty he inflicted, to the contrast between his intentions and all his mistakes.

Tony takes several deep breaths, forces himself to calm down. He rubs at his chest, gauges if the pain is real or only the ghost of that terrible nightmare. His heartbeat goes back to normal after a couple of minutes.

He’s okay. Rhodey is okay, Peter and Pepper too. FRIDAY is there, J is in his phone and soon he’ll be back for real, at his side like always.

Steve is not okay, though. Tony hurt him.

“You need—”

“The serum’ll take care of it. Don’t worry about it,” Steve says grimacing, and can’t quite control the way he shivers.

All of a sudden, Tony notices that his face is wet. He touches his cheek, stares at his own tears on the pads of his fingers.

This was bad. This was so bad.
“I didn’t want to kill you. I never wanted to kill you.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

And no, shit, that’s not what Tony meant to say.

Steve sighs, shakes his head. Tony sees him thinking for a minute, reach a decision that causes a strangled noise to escape from his throat. “I’ll call... I’ll have someone take me to the airport tomorrow. I’ll... We’ll see each other back in New York. We’ll try again then, or... I’ll—god—I’ll leave the team if you want. I’ll do anything you want.”

“There’s no team anymore.”

“Of course there’s a team.”

“Yes, and I can’t wait to see how thrilled Wanda or Clint are gonna be when you step down so I can stay. Did you forget? You took all the children after the divorce!”

There’s a long moment of silence.

Then, Steve makes a sound, and another, and Tony realizes that he’s laughing. Tony smiles too, bitter, and sad. There’s no real joy here, there’s no real joy on Steve’s face either.

“There’s a first aid kit under the sink. Come on.”

“Don’t waste it on me.”

“Oh, wow. I’ll call the Pope in the morning. Ask if he can canonize you while you’re still alive.” He pauses. “Actually, no, the Pope’s awful, I don’t wanna talk to him.”

“He might not be my biggest fan either.”

“You wouldn’t be the first Saint of the Catholic Church to like dick, don’t flatter yourself.”

Steve shoots him a final skeptical look and follows Tony in the bathroom, closes the lid of the toilet to sit on it. Tony begins cleaning the burn on Steve’s collarbone, but the serum has already kicked in, the bleeding has stopped. Steve is trembling; there are goosebumps on his skin. Tony can’t fathom how he can be cold right now.

But maybe it’s not just the cold.

“I don’t want you to go back to New York tomorrow. I don’t want you to leave the team.” Tony’s voice is as firm as he can get it to be.

“I don’t, either. But I will if you need me to.”

“No, just, just stop. We’re doing this, okay? We’re trying. You can’t give up after the first obstacle. Where’s the guy who lied on his enlistment form five times so he could go punch Nazis? I want that guy.”

Steve stares at him. “I’m here,” he says, breathless.

Tony tapes the gauze to Steve’s skin. His eyes are so bright like this, just after he has cried, but Tony likes them better when they’re dry. Tony resists the urge to comb his fingers through Steve’s hair, caress his cheek.
“I never hated you,” Steve says softly.

“What?”

“You were talking in your sleep. You said, *Cap*, and then, *I know you hate me*. I can imagine what you were dreaming about, I just wanna say... I don’t hate you. Never did.”

“Not even that day?”

*Not even when I almost killed Barnes?*

“Not even then. I talked about this with a therapist in Wakanda and she said... Bucky’s my friend, we’ve been friends since we were seven. He’s the last thing I got left from my past, Tony. I couldn’t risk losing him too, on top of everything else.”

“I don’t—”

“But. I can’t lose you either. You’re the first thing I had in the future.”

*Holy shit,* Tony doesn’t say.

“And if you decide that you can’t... forgive what I did, I’ll understand. I’ll accept it and leave you alone. But until then, I’ll fight tooth and nail for you.”

Tony stares into Steve’s eyes for longer than he probably should. He’s never seen him more determined.

“Alright,” Tony says, the word catching in his throat.

Tony puts the first aid kit back under the sink and washes his hands.

“He has a weird thing with Natasha, by the way.”

“Who, Barnes?” Tony tries to sound genuinely curious.

“Yeah... wait, you knew this already?” Steve squints at him.

“Yeah. Nat told me a couple of months after SHIELD fell. I offered to help looking for him, but she said you guys had it covered.”

“Why’d she tell you?”

“Well. I like to think it was because she saw me as a friend, but—”

“I didn’t mean it—”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t know. Thinking back on it now, maybe she was trying to tell me about my parents. Maybe she hoped you’d tell me soon, and wanted me to know something about Barnes, before. I don’t... I really don’t know.”

“And you know how they met? She didn’t tell me.”

“Then I probably shouldn’t either.”

“Oh, come on,” Steve says, looking at Tony with wide, pleading eyes.

*Alright, fuck you.*
“I don’t know much, actually. It was during a mission. 2009, I think? Maybe before. Some doctor, no idea who exactly... Barnes was sent to kill him. Nat was sent to protect him. From what I got, Barnes’ brainwashing faltered at some point, and Nat... she helped him how she could, I suppose. He was scared, confused. They hid in a safe house for three days, guess that’s when they bonded, I don’t know. Anyway HYDRA found them. Nat ran, but they took him. And I guess they gave him a nice mindwipe and a new and improved brainwash to put him back to work.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. That’s for sure a relationship based on shared life experiences.”

“You can say that again.”

Steve smiles, eyes huge. He drags a hand on his face.

“Come on. Let’s get some sleep.”

Steve takes his ruined henley and throws it in the trash after a minute of silent debate with himself, then puts on another one. He tucks it into his waistband so it doesn’t ride up while he sleeps. Tony thinks he looks kinda silly like that, but also cozy, comfortable. A bit old-fashioned.

Steve lies down on his side of the bed, settles under his blanket while Tony can barely bear the weight of the cotton sheets on his skin.

“The new armor is... impressive. Love the design, too.”

“Thanks. I developed this nanotechnology... the bracelets are connected to my neural synapses, so I can activate the suit by thinking specific code words. I can access different models too.”

“Wow.” Steve sounds like a child at Disneyland.

“Yeah, I was, I was thinking that I could store it inside me, like, in my bones, you know? So I would always have it with me, but... There is a way and I’m reasonably sure that I can do it but, uh... it kinda creeped Rhodey out... I don’t know.”

“I volunteered as a test subject for a high-risk experimental procedure to enhance my body, so who am I to judge? I mean, sure, it’s a bit creepy, but if you actually manage to do it, it’d be—”

“Crazy and irresponsible and possibly cause me five thousands different health issues and turn me into a murder cyborg given my track record?”

“I was gonna say Nobel prize worthy and mind-blowingly genius and utterly amazing, but that works too, yeah.”

A beat.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” Tony says in his smallest voice.

“I’m gonna be fine,” Steve reassures him, softly, gently.

Tony nods, and curls up on the bed, drawing his knees to his chest. Steve’s hand is resting on the mattress, his palm facing up. Tony reaches out slowly, and brushes his fingertips over Steve’s, just enough to feel the heat of his body, just to feel him close, like when—

“Oh, Tony...” It’s only a whisper, but Steve sounds like he’s trying to stifle a sob, joy and relief so overwhelming that they gush out of him like this.
Steve stares at their fingers and suddenly laughs. “Do you know you did that Italian thing with your hand today?”

*Oh god.*

“What?”

“You did this—” Steve shows him with his other hand.

“Oh my god, shut up.”

“Is it, like, in the air, or...”

“Shut up or I’ll make you sleep outside.”

“You can try.”

Tony turns off the light with a grin on his face.

“Good night.”

“Good night, Tony.”

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[1] Talk to me about love Mariù
You are my whole life!
Your beautiful eyes are shining
They twinkle like flames in a dream.

[2] This commercial.

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Chapter End Notes

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Day 4

They wake up late.

Steve doesn’t need much sleep, but he likes to indulge in it when he can, especially now that he’s got Tony breathing quietly next to him, snoring softly from time to time. Tony wakes up a bit abruptly, and seems disoriented for a minute. He looks at Steve, and that seems to ground him—he sighs with relief.

Steve first instinct when he meets Tony’s eyes is to reach out and touch him, caress his face or his neck. To hug him close, make him press his face to Steve’s chest and shield him from whatever’s on his mind.

“Another bad dream?” he asks instead.

“No, just... I was... I don’t remember it very well, I was…” Tony frowns with the effort of thinking about it. “It was all dark... I don’t know.”

While he changes into running clothes, Steve checks his wound in the bathroom. The bruise around it is already green and yellow. The scab itches, but it’ll be gone by tomorrow morning. He removes the bandage, so it can breathe a little. He tells Tony, shows him the wound tugging his t-shirt away from his neck. Tony just nods, guilt still clouding his eyes.

Breakfast makes Tony slip into a better mood. There’s an unexpectedly high degree of experience in his movements. Tony cuts pie and unscrews the moka pot like he solders pieces of armor together, like he writes code: sure of himself, precisely and perfectly, seemingly effortlessly.

Steve realizes he’s staring at him from his chair, at Tony’s shoulders shifting under his t-shirt, at the veins in his arms. The small of his back. His bare feet.

While they eat, Tony smiles at Steve more, more openly, even if there’s still a bit of uncertainty underneath the surface of his expression, and his little grin sometimes doesn’t quite reach his eyes. Still, Steve beams at him in response, encouraging, welcoming. It’s the only thing he can do.

While Tony sets up the blanket outside to get some work done before lunch, Steve sets off down the hill, away from the main road. The sun makes him sweat pretty soon, but he doesn’t really feel warm.

He looks far away, deep into the horizon, at the point where the hills meet the cloudless sky.

Maybe they can heal, as Doctor Ndaba suggested. With enough time to talk things out, to explain, with the peace of mind to understand. To forgive.

And here, this place. The quiet of the countryside, the stillness of nature, this slower life...

This place, in some way, is already healing them.

It’s different from New York.

Of course, Steve loves New York. The traffic, the noise, the terrible smell, the people. It makes him
feel part of a big system, an indispensable gear in a complicated machine, like there’s always someone else to reach out to. It used to, anyway. Before.

But him and Tony, maybe they don’t need New York right now. Maybe they need this peace, this silence, this otherworldly expanse of wheat fields and vineyards. They need a cherry tree, a blanket on the grass.

Each other.

And yes, under any other circumstances, at any other time of his life, Steve would probably get bored in a few days, would want to go back to the chaos and the noise and the smell and the people, but right now this is the only place he wants to be in the entire world.

Here, with Tony.

And as hard as trying to work things out is, Steve can’t help but find a little bit of hope in their smiles, in Tony keeping Steve’s drawings, in Tony cooking for him. In the easy way Tony still takes care of him.

That’s what Tony does, isn’t it? He takes care of people. He wants to take care of virtually everyone, and he’s crumbling under the weight of that responsibility, which he can’t possibly keep carrying alone.

Steve wanted to help him bear this duty, more than anything, but he betrayed Tony’s trust, and now he barely knows where to start to fix this mess that never would’ve happened in the first place if they only had time to sit down and talk, for real, and be kind and open, and tell each other the truth.

He meant well. He tried to do the best he could. But that week, that fucking week was so fucking awful and there was no time and no calm and no quiet—and he turned to look at Tony, he turned while Ross was talking so he could look into Tony’s eyes, and he was sure, he was so sure that this time, this time they wouldn’t be caught unprepared, that of course this time they’d be on the same side, but…

They weren’t.

Running through a patch of sunflowers now, Steve thinks about how here, despite Tony’s initial reticence, talking is still possible, with no pressure, no violence. Here, Steve can apologize, draw for Tony and make him laugh.

He thinks about Tony’s smile in the sun, his clever eyes, the faint wooden scent of his expensive soap, his sweat—coconut. His hair, his beard, his hands. His hips.

Here, they can find the courage to ask the hard questions and be ready to bear the weight of the answer; they can stay calm, keep the anger and the hurt at bay; they can say, I’m sorry, and mean it.

There are no Accords here, no Ross, no ultimatums. Everything seems so far away. So inconsequential. Where they really fighting about that?

No.

They weren’t.

Did you know?

Yes.
Steve keeps asking himself, *Why didn’t I just tell Tony?*

And all he can give himself is a bunch of excuses: that at first their relationship wasn’t the best, that he was scared he’d ruin it later, because how can you show up to someone and tell them something life-changing like, *Hey, I know how your parents really died?*

And all the rest—the nature of the information, what he and Sam were trying to do with it—also feels like trying to justify the unjustifiable, because the hard truth is that Steve should’ve told Tony, but couldn’t bring himself to do it.

And then he reached a point where he couldn’t put it off anymore, he *had* to tell Tony, he’d try to make him understand, but...

And after... after *that*, he really had no more excuses.

So, if Steve couldn’t do it before the mission in Lagos, then he’d do it after. He’d tell Tony the truth the moment they saw each other again.

*Captain Rogers wished to know when Mr. Stark was arriving,* Vision said in Wanda’s room.

And in that second before answering, Steve thought, *We’re gonna get through this, we’re gonna solve this together.*

But then Vision said, *He’s brought a guest,* and Steve knew, right then and there. He knew the moment had passed them by. And when he turned to look at Tony in the conference room, Steve had hoped, how he had hoped, to find on Tony’s face a doubtful frown to match Steve’s, to see him give Steve a little nod, as in, *We’re going to talk about this later, alone, don’t worry, I’m with you,* but—

Tony looked down.

That was the point of no return—everything that happened later was too much, too fast, too awful. The discussion about the Accords, Peggy, Vienna, Berlin, that damn airport, fucking Siberia, fucking Zemo with that fucking tape and Tony’s small voice saying *I know that road*—

*Don’t bullshit me, Rogers, did you know?*

*Yes.*

Steve drops to his knees on the gravel trail, tears streaming down his face, the hot air filling his lungs transforming into ice there—it seeps into his bones more acutely than ever, freezes him over.

He holds his head in his hands and tries to ground himself, to tell himself he is trying to make it better, make amends, earn Tony’s forgiveness even though he’s not sure he deserves it.

He opens his eyes, tries to see the hills, the trees, the fields—through the tears. He tries to feel the sun on his skin.

*There’s no ice here. There’s no ice here.*

He tries to remember Tony’s scent, the aroma of the other night’s spaghetti, the sound of Tony’s laugh under the cherry tree, the timbre of his voice.

He tries to remember the night before he left for Lagos. How quiet the compound was. How empty, except for the two of them.

Tony’s smirk, almost devilish in its unadulterated sensuality. Tony’s hands, his rough fingers flying
over the keyboard, fast, so fast Steve’s eyes almost couldn’t keep up. A glass of whiskey next to the screen, almost empty.

Steve’s hand on Tony’s shoulder, a dirty joke, a smile, and—

Tony’s body pressing into Steve’s, his hands gripping Steve’s hair in fistfuls, guiding his head into place.

Tony’s tongue caressing Steve’s, his teeth sinking just enough into Steve’s skin, the callused pads of his fingers rubbing against Steve’s nipple until it hurt.

The sound of Tony’s tank top ripping under Steve’s clumsy hands.

Tony—

Come on, Cap, just... just this once.

I... yeah, yeah. Okay. C’mere, c’mere.

The scent of him filling Steve’s nostrils, the taste of his come flooding Steve’s mouth, Tony’s shout echoing through the empty workshop.

Tony letting Steve manhandle him, roughly, turn him around against the desk to open him up and press into him inch by inch. Tony guiding Steve to sit on the couch, his wiry thighs straddling Steve’s hips, the weight of his body—small, yes, but solid, strong, virile in such a beautiful way—on top of Steve’s.

The way he clenched around Steve, the way he cradled Steve’s head in his hands and kissed him and kissed him and kissed him, and didn’t stop even when Steve’s mouth went slack and he couldn’t do anything except feel like he had just cut a piece of his own soul so that Tony could keep it safe inside himself.

And here, in the middle of nowhere, a million miles away from everything that happened, with only the sun and the countryside as his witnesses, Steve remembers the most important thing of all, the only thing that matters, the only thing that can save them from all the shit of the past few months.

He’s in love with Tony.

***

Tony always tries not to remember that night, but being so close to Steve all the time, sharing everything with him—a car, a bed, a table, a blanket on the grass—makes it impossible.

He watches Steve run while he stretches out on the blanket under the oak tree, follows Steve with his eyes until he disappears behind the trees, and hopes the run will clear Steve’s mind.

Tony has tried, really, to push that night as far away as possible from himself, distance himself from it, put it in a tiny box and lock it inside a dusty and abandoned room deep in his mind, one of those places where he never looks.

The same place where he keeps his father, and Obie. Where he keeps Afghanistan. Where he keeps the worst of his guilt, the part of it that’s so sharp and evil that it wouldn’t let him right his own wrongs; it would only crush him with its weight. He keeps it bottled there, lets himself feel only the superficial spikes of it, so he can never forget what needs to be done (change, be better, do better) and why (for the people he loves, for everyone else, for those who can’t fight for themselves), but
also so that he doesn’t wallow in despair.

Mistakes. They can destroy you.

But Steve.

Tony thought himself past this kind of mistakes. He thought he was too old for them, too experienced, too strong-willed at this point of his life.

But Steve.

God, how he hated Steve when he was young. Well, not Steve-Steve. Well, not hate-hate. He hated the Captain America that took so much space in his father’s heart that there was nothing left for Tony. He hated the certainty that he’d never be as good as Captain America, that he’d never be even half the man he was.

(But he loved how brave he was. Fearless, honest, righteous, honorable, daring.)

And then he actually met Steve, and he was so happy and excited, and Steve said, he said, Mr. Stark, so Tony replied, Captain.

And Tony tried to be Mr. Stark, the only Mr. Stark he could ever be, the one he knew Steve already liked and respected.

He tried to be Howard.

And he fucked it up and just—

Of course Steve saw right through him. Of course Captain America didn’t like Tony.

And when Tony almost died to save New York, he gained Steve’s respect, maybe, but not really his friendship—they were teammates. Avengers.

Even though Steve had smiled.

We won.

Even though Tony was in love with him.

I will miss you, Tony.

And in the blink of an eye it was a year or so later, and they spent three days together in the deserted compound, right before Steve had to leave for Lagos—the other Avengers already there for recon, Vision out to explore New York on his own, Steve staying back for a couple more days so he could attend the VA charity gala.

Three days during which they got to talk, and smile, and know each other more than in all the years since that day in Germany fighting Loki put together. Steve laughed at Tony’s crazy stories; Tony cracked up at Steve’s weird sense of humor.

And that last night, Tony was polishing some details of his BARF tech before his speech at MIT. Steve came down to the workshop after showering instead of going to bed to catch his flight early in the morning.

The night, the silence, the empty building.
They were alone. And they talked, and smiled. And flirted.

Steve blushed. Tony smirked.

Or was it the other way around?

That last whiskey Tony had...

He wasn’t drunk. god no—Steve wouldn’t have done anything if Tony had been drunk—but it was enough to make his tongue looser and his heart braver.

*Just this once.*

*C’mere, c’mere.*

And then it was happening, right there against the table, on the couch.

Tony closes his eyes against the sun, lets the memory wash over him. There’s no point in trying to stop it now.

Steve’s tongue, hot and wet, sweeping against Tony’s, his teeth catching on Tony’s bottom lip. The taste of roses, the scent of blue—all of Tony’s senses warping around all of Steve.

His hand, so big and warm and soft, caressing the circular scar on Tony’s chest—the sensation of being touched there by someone else, unfamiliar—Steve’s other hand clutching Tony’s hip, hard, leaving bruises that would last for weeks, purple with a dull, heavy ache.

His mouth, so tight around Tony’s erection. His eagerness making up for the lack of finesse in his technique, making Tony forget all his own insecurities.

*Come in my mouth, Tony, c’mon.*

The way Steve wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, eyes a little lost with too much wonder, but there was no shame in his gesture, no incredulity in his gaze.

His slick fingers, clumsy and indelicate and harsh (perfect. So, so perfect), making their way inside Tony, pressing into him from behind. The cold desktop under Tony’s hands, the hem of the table digging into Tony’s lower abdomen while Steve pushed him against it.

*Fuck me harder, Cap, don’t be shy.*

‘*M not shy.*

Steve, following Tony’s lead.

*Wanna ride you.*

*Yeah—*

Steve sitting on the couch, his back against the backrest, Tony slowly sinking down on his cock, feeling it so deep, feeling it in the pit of his stomach, against the back of his throat.

Tony’s thighs, hurting.

Steve’s bottom lip, trembling.
Roses.

Oh god, Tony, I—

A couple of weeks later, and everything went to shit.

He hears steps on the gravel, opens his eyes and sees Steve. He’s sweaty, but shivering; there’s a deep furrow on his forehead and his eyes are red and puffy.

Steve falls to his knees on the blanket. Tony stares at him.

There’s something terrifying darkening Steve’s face. He looks hopeless, miserable, bone-deep tired.

“Hey, are you... Steve, are you okay?”

Steve’s eyes go wide, and something escapes his mouth, something between a whimper and a laugh. His shoulders shake, his entire face brightens up.

“You said my name. You said my name.”

Steve is crying, and Tony is pretty sure it’s out of joy, which is not at all what he was expecting.

“Uh, I, I guess I did.”

“Can you say it again? Please.”

Steve closes his eyes. The light breeze ruffles his hair, it turns into gold under the blazing sun. He looks beautiful, like an angel, like a dream come true.

Tony whispers, “Steve,” and Steve smiles.

***

For lunch Tony makes pasta with fresh zucchini and pine nuts, and it’s so good Steve almost starts crying again, right there at the small kitchen table. After, they settle together on the couch in the little living room, the sunshine streaming inside from the wide windows. Tony says they’ll leave in a couple of hours. There’s no rush, the days are long, they have time to see all the places Tony plans on taking Steve to. Soon after explaining this to Steve, Tony falls asleep.

Steve doesn’t get it. Maybe it’s the summer, the general lack of air conditioning. Or rather, Steve hopes so. He hopes that whatever it is it has nothing to do with the way Tony’s arm shakes and his chest hurts every time he gets angry.

It’s not good, because whenever Steve imagines tackling an issue with Tony, talking about something with him, he can already see Tony’s face hardening out of rage, until pain takes over.

He doesn’t want to hurt Tony, but he feels like it’s inevitable. Necessary, even.

Steve draws to try to stop thinking about it, and tucks one of his sketches under a corner of Tony’s phone resting on the coffee table.

Tony wakes up with some difficulty, but he smiles at Steve before going to the bathroom. When he comes back he looks less sleepy, and his hair is damp—he must have washed his face.

He notices the drawing when he goes to take his phone from the coffee table, and he stares at it in disbelief, has to sit back down on the couch.
The sketch is made with charcoal. It’s the cherry tree, but seen from a distance. Under it, two
unrecognizable figures—one very tall, the other quite short—stand close, face to face. Maybe they’re
kissing. Maybe they’re just pressing their foreheads together. Maybe one of them is whispering
something into the other’s ear.

Tony doesn’t react for several long moments, and Steve feels panic rush through his veins.

“How is this... is this us?” Tony asks in the end, his voice neutral in tone but a bit unsteady, hoarse with
sleep.

Isn’t it obvious?

“It’s... no. I don’t know. Doesn’t have to be. You can see it however you want.”

Tony nods. He lifts his hand, but then hesitates, leaves it there hovering in mid-air, his fingers closing
into a loose fist. He finally places it on Steve’s knee. “Let’s go,” he says.

They drive for about five minutes, and arrive in a place called Abbadia a Isola, where there are
maybe fifteen buildings in total, and no one in sight. There’s a bar, a gas station, a few houses, and
then, there’s a church.

The sign with tourist information next to the entrance says the church was built during the 12th
century, but the abbey was founded in the year 1001. More than one thousand years ago. One
thousand.

It’s possibly the oldest place Steve has ever set foot in. At least, while there wasn’t a war raging on
and he could pay attention to it. For sure, since coming out of the ice.

When he steps inside, Steve can’t see anything for a few seconds; even his eyes have to adjust to the
darkness, to the contrast with the blinding light that dominates outside. He watches Tony perch his
sunglasses on his head, a few feet ahead of him.

The church itself is very simple. Bare, light gray stones for the walls and colonnade. A simple
terracotta floor. Wooden roof, not original for sure. There are some frescos on the walls, ruined by
time and all the more breathtaking for it. There’s a big flight of stairs at the end of the central nave,
with the altar at the top. The altarpiece represents the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus, with a few saints
next to them, probably the ones the church is dedicated to. The gold sparkles in such a way,
especially against the deep red of the stylized angels.

Red and gold.

Steve inhales, deep, holds the air in his lungs until he can almost taste the dust, the time, the history
of this place. He closes his eyes and can almost hear every word that was ever said with these stones
as witnesses, can feel the presence of anyone that has ever stood here at any point in history, exactly
here where he is standing right now.

He can see humanity happening while this church exists, here.

This church was here when his father died, when he was born, when his mom died, when Bucky
went to war. It was here when Steve met Peggy, when he got his new body, while he was fighting
Nazis. It was here when Bucky died, it was here when Steve felt his lungs fill with ice-cold water.
During all the time he slept, this church was here: while Bucky was brainwashed, while Peggy went
on with her life, while Tony was born and grew up and Sharon and Sam did the same, while Bucky
and Natasha shared whatever it is they had and that Steve hopes they can have again, if they want.
When Steve woke up, the church was here. When he met Tony, too. That night, when Steve came
inside Tony for the first and only time, the taste of Tony’s orgasm still acidic down Steve’s throat, this church was here.

Plenty of places are older than Steve. Plenty of places are far older than this church. The ancient ruins in Rome, the pyramids in Egypt, Knossos in Greece. The Ziggurat of Ur in Iraq, Cuicuilco in Mexico. Qin Shi Huang’s mausoleum in China. But Steve has never been to any of those places. Steve is here, now.

And this church, it touches eternity. Like all those other old places Steve has never been to, it’s connected to them, linked to them by a bond between all things created by humans, across time and across space.

It’s not just about Steve’s life. Before the world had anything at all to do with Steve, before Steve or his parents and grandparents and great-great-grandparents even existed; this place was already here, like this, had already been here for centuries, unchanged and seemingly unchangeable.

And for the first time in his life Steve feels like there’s something underneath the earth, a thread, a fabric of the universe that holds all life together, that makes it all make sense, that fights against entropy tooth and nail.

For the first time in his life, he feels other humans reach out to him from the stream of time and tell him, You’re not alone. We are all here with you.

For the first time since that day when that SHIELD agent wanted to trick him into thinking it was still the 40s, Steve feels like he hasn’t been misplaced, like he’s not clinging to his past out of sheer stubbornness and sadness, like he doesn’t need to desperately try to go back home or force someone else to be the carefree boy he used to be before unspeakable trauma, like he isn’t here just waiting for his life to suddenly snap back to normal.

He feels like this is normal.

He feels like he belongs.

Here, now.

In this world, in this year, Steve belongs.

Steve is home.

Here, now.

He turns. Tony is studying a part of the building with his engineer eyes, sunglasses in hand, his nose comically close to the wall. He looks at Tony until the power of his stare makes Tony look back.

Tony’s smile falters when he sees that Steve is crying.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Tony asks, gently, and he reaches out for Steve’s hand, then hesitates and retracts his arm, then reaches out again.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m happy to be here. With you,” Steve says, and twines his fingers with Tony’s.

***

They drive to Monteriggioni soon after, and the castle is as fascinating as Tony remembers it.

Steve doesn’t exactly look happy, but he seems to be serene, more than earlier. He stares at the walls,
the stones, the old well in the middle of the piazza, the little baptismal font inside the tiny church, the inscription with the verses of Dante’s *Comedy* that mention the castle, with avid and raw interest—like he can’t get enough, like he wants to see everything *right now*, and Tony doesn’t know how much of it is Steve’s typical impatience and how much is due to how fast his mind processes information.

And there’s something else too, a tender grin on Steve’s face, as if he’s finally remembering something he had forgotten a long time ago.

Tony wonders what made Steve cry earlier. He wonders what his last drawing meant. He wonders why Steve sometimes still lies when Tony asks him something, despite his best intentions of making amends.

While he watches Steve pay for tickets to access the walkway along the top of the castle wall, Tony dares to think about the future of his relationship with Steve.

He can’t let himself imagine anything romantic, and he’s more than sure that’s not what Steve wants either. After that one night, Steve never called, never even texted after Lagos. The first time they saw each other again was when Tony took Ross to the compound with the Sokovia Accords. And yeah, it’s not like Tony called either, but…

Fuck, whatever.

He tries to imagine a friendship, based on trust and mutual respect. Despite their history, that’s easier to do. But his chest constricts when he tries to remember the few times Steve has looked at him with the same kindness, with the same intimacy and tenderness he has for Sam, for Natasha. The looks he sends Tony here, they may not be hostile, but they’re tinged with a sadness, a melancholy, a grief that’s hard to miss. Too much regret between them, too many missed opportunities. Too many *what if*’s.

Tony is suddenly reminded of a paper he’s read recently, a theory about the possible existence of a multiverse written by Riri Williams, a fifteen year old student at MIT. It’s genius work, and he needs to talk to this girl when he gets back home because, *wow*. But now, Tony thinks about it and wonders if between all the possible universes, in some of those alternative Earths… if there was ever one where him and Steve somehow could make it work.

Maybe in some of them it was worse. Maybe somewhere in the multiverse all this Accords shit ended up with someone dead. Tony hopes it was him. He couldn’t imagine himself surviving the guilt of hurting Steve in the most irreparable way. For Steve, it’d be different. He could move on. Many would probably even thank him.

But maybe…

Maybe there are places where it was better. Where Tony said the right thing at the right time and Steve’s heartbeat slowed down, and the rage ebbed away. Where Steve didn’t keep making that disgusted face every time Tony tried to explain his position to him. Where they could sit down and talk, without being pulled in a thousands different directions.

Maybe there’s a place where Steve never kept that secret from Tony. Where there wasn’t even any secret to keep, because Steve never knew it before Tony, or Barnes wasn’t chosen to kill Tony’s parents, or he never even became the Winter Soldier, because Steve was stronger and faster and could catch him before he fell off the train.

And even if all of that had to happen, even if Steve had to keep that terrible truth from Tony, maybe
there was still a place, in the entirety of the damn multiverse, where Steve didn’t smash his shield on Tony’s arc reactor, on Tony’s heart, where he didn’t walk all over it. Where he didn’t walk away. Where he didn’t leave. Where they could love each other, where it wouldn’t destroy them.

Tony stops following Steve on the walkway around the castle, closes his eyes, listens to the wind whistle between the tree leaves a few feet below him, concentrates on his heartbeat, on all the wounds he has taken and healed from; thinks about all the times someone has told him to give up, to surrender, to submit and succumb, and about all the times he has said, No, fuck you, no.

He thinks about everything he has survived.

He thinks about all the people who hate him, all the people he has let down, everyone he has disappointed and hurt. He thinks about his misguided attempts at redeeming himself, about how he only made it worse, only caused more death, more pain, more suffering to innocent lives that did not deserve the incommensurable misfortune of Tony Stark crossing the path of their peaceful existences.

He thinks about how he always comes across as too eager, too enthusiastic, it’s too much, and why do you care so much about this, Tony? No one else does. What, you feel so alone that you need to fund an entire team of superheroes so you can pretend you have friends? As if any of these people would actually like you, as if someone like Captain America could ever glance twice in your direction with anything but mild annoyance, like you look at a cockroach you just killed with your shoe.

You’re supposed to be an adult, Tony, and just, just stop being so damn pathetic, boy, you’re a waste of time—

Dad.

Is this how you spend your weekend at home? I don’t need to deal with this nonsense, do you understand me?

Tony runs away from him, runs down the corridors of Stark Mansion and breathes, and cries and breathes.

Time heals all wounds.

He thinks about Steve.

Steve, here (today, here), right in front of Tony, worried, because Tony has suddenly stopped walking and closed his eyes and they’re in the middle of the walkway.

“Can you promise me again,” Tony asks.

Please.

“Yes, what, what do you want me to promise?” Steve’s voice is concerned, and he sounds scared, too, but he’s trying to control himself.

“Promise me you won’t hurt me again. Not like that, not like—”

Even if you don’t love me.

“Yes! Yes, I promise, never again, Tony, I swear—”
Maybe circumstances will make it impossible, but Tony wanted to hear it again.

“I promise, too. I promise.”

“Alright. Okay. Hey—”

Silence has fallen all around them, everything and everyone has disappeared into the distance.

“I’m tired, Steve. I’m so tired of feeling like this all the time...” Tony’s eyes burn, and he doesn’t have any power to stop the tears from falling down his cheeks.

“I know. I’m so sorry. I’ll... we’re trying to fix it, though, remember? Please,” Steve isn’t touching him, but he’s very close, and Tony thinks the top of his hair is brushing against Steve’s beard, against Steve’s lips, maybe. “Please, don’t cry.”

He sounds like he’s about to join Tony, if Tony doesn’t stop.

“I’m sorry about Ultron. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“Oh, that’s... don’t think about that, Tony. Your heart was in the right place, it wasn’t your fault.”

_Heart’s broken._

“You said—”

“Yeah, and I was a giant hypocrite.”

Tony thinks about that night at Clint’s farm, about Steve sleeping next to him, about how careful they were not to touch at all.

“But I should’ve told you. I should’ve. I was scared, but I should’ve told you.”

“Yeah, it... what Ultron did wasn’t your fault. Sokovia is not on you. But, yeah. You should’ve said something. I just... I blame myself for... I wish we were closer, back then, I wish, I wish we felt safe telling such things to each other.”

“I’m trying to understand. Why you didn’t say anything about my parents. It makes me... so angry. Its makes me—”

Tony feels his chest give a jolt of pain that takes his breath away for a moment. He feels his left arm tremble, and tries to mask it by using it to massage the spot over his heart.

“Be angry. Be angry as long as you need. I just hope you allow me to... I don’t know. I don’t know where this is taking us, Tony, I just... I just hope you let me hold your hand on the way there.”

Tony opens his eyes. He reaches up with one hand and cups Steve’s big face. Steve closes his eyes and leans into the touch, turns his head to press a kiss on Tony’s palm, so very soft.

His beard scratches Tony’s skin.

Tony’s mind is filled with blue, with the scent of roses, with the taste of cherries.


“Okay,” Steve echoes.
“Time heals all wounds,” Tony says, imagining someone else’s voice, a British accent.

“I hope so,” Steve replies in a whisper.

Later, while Steve is browsing the souvenir shop, Tony’s phone buzzes.

*Has he told you yet?*

*This is Sam, btw.*

Yes, Tony replies. Yes?

Wait, no.

Wait, what?

*Okay, I’ll email you some files.*

***

It’s still early in the afternoon, so they drive to San Gimignano. It takes about forty minutes, and they start to see the towers of the little town since they approach the hill it’s built on.

Steve manages to snatch a tourist information booklet in English and reads about the towers. There were seventy-two of them in the 12th and 13th century, but now only sixteen have survived the passing of time, and they earned the city the nickname of Manhattan of the Middle Ages, which makes Steve laugh more than he probably should. Apparently, building towers was a way for the most powerful families to show how rich and influential they were. It got so out of hand that a law was made to prohibit private citizens from building towers that were taller than the Torre Rognosa, so they started building two or three at once, to prove they could afford it.

Jesus. No chill, as Sam would say.

Steve can’t feel Tony’s presence next to him anymore, and turns to look for him. He stopped walking (again) in the middle of the street, and he’s reading something on his phone, eyes wide behind his glasses and a worried frown on his forehead.

“Everything alright?”

Tony doesn’t reply, it looks like he didn’t even hear Steve.

“What, no interest in people building huge towers to prove how cool they are?”

Nothing.

“Hey,” Steve tries again, stepping closer.

“Uh? Oh, hey. Yeah. I’m alright,” Tony says, startled at first, then lying.

“Something happen?” Steve asks, squinting.

“Nope.”

“You sure?”

“Can we—”
“Signore, tu sei Iron Man vero?”[1]

It’s a kid. No more than eight, Steve would guess, but he’s no expert. He has huge red glasses that cover most of his face, and a Wonder Woman t-shirt. He’s patting Tony’s thigh to get his attention. Tony crouches down to talk to him.

“Sì. Ma è un segreto che sono qui. Segretissimo. Non possiamo dirlo a nessuno.”[2]

“Oh! Mamma dice che hai salvato il mondo una volta.”[3]

“Uhm,” Tony looks up at Steve, but Steve understands a word every five, so. Yeah. “C’erano i miei amici con me, lo abbiamo salvato insieme. Ascolta, come ti chiami? Dov’è la tua mamma?”[4]

“Là!”[5] The kid turns and points to a woman sitting at a table outside a coffee shop. She raises her hand, and Tony waves back. “Mi chiamo Luca.”[6]

“Ok, Luca, torna da lei, va bene? Se fai il bravo tra qualche giorno ti spedisco un regalo a casa, mh?”[7]

“Come quando babbo compra le cose su Amazon?”[8]


“What just happened?”

“Kids like me more than you.”

“Ouch. That hurts.”

Tony presses a button on the hinges of his glasses, keeps looking in the direction of the kid’s mother as discreetly as possible. “FRIDAY, can we get a home address for that kid and his family? Get them… I don’t know, StarkPads and… whatever they need. Check the medical records for those glasses, let’s keep tabs on any changes. We pay for everything the SSN[12] doesn’t cover.”

“Yes, Boss.”

That’s just Tony. He just does stuff like that.

“So. Wanna stand in the longest line in the world to try the best ice cream in the world?”

“What?”

Tony leads Steve to the centre of the town, in front of a small ice cream shop with a ridiculous queue outside.

“It’s gonna be worth it, believe me. It’s the best.”

“Alright.”

After about twenty minutes, they finally get their cones, and Steve thought Tony was exaggerating but… nope. This is the best—the best—ice cream he’s ever had.
They walk around the town while they eat, and Tony seems to be in a better mood than before, but he also kind of looks distracted, like there’s something else occupying his mind.

They reach a small park, and Tony sits down on one of the benches. He takes a very deep breath.

“So. I got this email from a certain Sam Wilson. Pretty sure you know the guy. He sent me some very interesting stuff.”

“Tony—”

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?” Tony’s jaw clenches; his tone is cold and furious.

Shit.

Steve’s heart hammers in his chest, fear taking him over. He swallows, a hot flush creeping up along his neck.

Dammit, Sam.

“I wasn’t sure about telling you. Didn’t know if I should, what’d be the right time… I didn’t want you to think I was making it up so I’d look less awful. I still did it, Tony. There may be some redeeming factors, but what I did was wrong and I wanted you to make your decision without me trying to, you know… I sort of wished I could tell you after, one way or another… I don’t know.”

“This is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard in my life. And I’ve been in Justin Hammer’s presence. Multiple times.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You said Sokovia was not on me because I was trying to do the right thing and it got out of control. So I got my redeeming factors, as you call them, but you refuse to share yours?”

“I didn’t think you’d care for them.”

Alright, for future reference: you tell me this kind of shit.”

Alright.”

“Come on, now. I wanna hear it from you.”

Despite his prompting, Tony is tense, Steve can see it in the lines around his mouth, in the way his lips part slightly.

“After we... When we... Okay, no,” Steve takes a steadying breath, rubs his hands up and down his face, and wishes this came easier to him.

“I got the information about your parents right before SHIELD fell. It was incomplete, with no definite or credible source. I didn’t know how to tell you. I thought, you know, it’s too personal, we’re not that close. But I knew it’d be important to you as it was to me. So, first of all, I needed to verify the information. I put Sam on it for the most part, but I worked on it too. And we got proof. The tape Zemo showed us... after the SHIELD data dump, someone got their hands on a file with a description of the video, and bragged about it on the internet, enough to reach Sam. That night, before I went to Lagos... I wanted to tell you. ‘Cause by then I was reasonably sure it was true and also... during those three days at the compound, we, we talked, remember? Remember how much we talked?”
A smile surges up to Steve’s face. A lot has happened since, but those three days are still a fond memory.

“I couldn’t keep it to myself anymore. It wasn’t right. Sam thought we should wait, maybe get our hands on the video. But I said we’d been keeping it from you for too long already, and he agreed… I was scared, I was terrified that you’d… but I had to tell you. So I came down to the workshop, but you—”

“But I had a couple of whiskeys in me, and an itch I wanted you to scratch,” Tony says, grimacing.

It’s like a slap to the face, Tony describing in such crude terms the most wonderful night of Steve’s life. Was it really just that to him? An itch.

_Come on, Cap._

_Just this once._

_Damn, you’re huge, Cap._

_Fuck me, Cap._

Steve strains to focus and say the last part.

“Yeah. And then Lagos happened, and then all the rest, and I still hadn’t told you, and Zemo showed you the tape, and it was… it was over.”

“Goddammit,” Tony sounds exhausted. It’s Steve that does that to him. That drains all his energy away, that consumes his soul piece by piece.

“It went like this. I was scared you’d go after Bucky, but I waited because I wanted to be sure, and I came to you as soon as I felt that I was. I should’ve told you before. But I wanted to tell you. I was about to tell you.”

Tony is silent for a very long time, until Steve just wants him to say something, anything, but not leave him like this.

“I wouldn’t have gone after him,” he says in the end, quietly, but with no doubt at all.

“I know that now. I don’t know why I ever thought you would,” Steve confesses. He really has no idea. The only thing he remember is the fear. For Bucky, for Tony. For himself, too, because he was a coward and didn’t want to be the one to tell Tony about this. He didn’t want to see the light behind Tony’s eyes shatter, didn’t want to be associated with this terrible memory in Tony’s mind.

“I wish,” Tony pauses, takes off his glasses and hangs them at the collar of his t-shirt, then he mimics Steve’s gesture from before, swipes his hands across his face and presses his fingers into his eyes. He squints in the sunset light until his vision goes back to normal. “I wish everything was different. I wish we could… talk and… that there was no rush and that we… worked. I wish it wasn’t so hard.”

Tony keeps interrupting himself, sniffs, his voice cracks—he’s trying not to cry again and that alone makes Steve’s eyes sting.

“I’m not stronger than you, Steve,” Tony continues, proving the exact opposite of what he’s saying, because Steve couldn’t speak at all right now. Tony looks up to stifle his tears, sniffs again, rubs his forehead.
Steve’s phone buzzes.

*Sorry, man. That was my secret to tell, too.*

***

The moment they enter the guest house, Tony feels the weight of the day crash onto his shoulders. He flops on the couch, and takes deep, slow breaths, just like his doctors told him. Damn reduced lung capacity.

Steve showers while Tony shuffles into the kitchen to check the oven. The turkey is in there. He texted Manuela earlier so she’d have someone bring it here already cooked. It needs to be warmed up though, so Tony turns the oven on.

He sits on the bed while he waits for Steve to be done in the bathroom, and thinks about the day, about Steve’s recounting of what happened.

He’s never been more sure of how he would’ve reacted if Steve had told him the truth right away, while they were sitting together somewhere safe, with a cup of coffee maybe, with Steve’s calm voice explaining it all to him.

But it went how it went.

How’s it going? he texts Rhodey.

He just woke up. He says thank you. And he says to tell Steve he’s an asshole.

Sounds about right.

I’ll keep you posted. Nat’s a bit weird but shit like this would shake anyone.

Guess so, yeah. Love you.

Love you too, Tones. Good night.

Night.

Tony takes off his mother’s necklace and places it inside the drawer of his bedside table, on top of Steve’s sketches. Steve opens the bathroom door in that moment, and steps into the bedroom like a rom-com cliché, with a too-small towel wrapped way too low around his hips, skin still flushed from the hot shower, muscles glistening with drops of water.

Steve blushes even more when he sees Tony, and quickly stumbles to his side of the room to get dressed.

After dinner, they settle on the porch chairs watching the last few rays of sunshine disappear beyond the hills, leaving the countryside immersed in a peaceful darkness only sometimes interrupted by fireflies.

Tony glances at Steve and wonders if he should tell him, after all, but he really wants it to be a surprise. That’s different than keeping a secret. He hopes Steve will see it like that, at least.

Tony works on his tablet for a while, but Steve seems to be content just staring into the distance, with nothing to occupy his mind except his own thoughts.

“What you did today for that kid,” he says at some point, “it was good. You really are a good person,
“Tony.”

“Is nothing.”

“No. It’s everything.”

“Mom used to say, If we can, then we must.”

“A moral imperative.”

“Yes. And I went about it all wrong for many years. I’m still trying to make up for that, I guess.”

“You did. You do.”

“I can... I know I can do more. I have to—”

Anxiety rolls down Tony’s spine in a cold shiver. There’s a sudden weight on his chest, and talking becomes harder than a moment ago. “I’ll, I’ll do more, I promise,” his voice comes out small and whiny, it’s all wrong, it’s all completely wrong, “I’ll do better, I’ll be better, I’m sorry—”

“Tony... shit. Tony, hey, hey. Can I touch you?” Steve’s crouching in front of Tony, one knee on the floor. He’s close and he smells like roses, he smells like blue.

“Yes—”

Steve surges forward and wraps Tony up in his arms, and doesn’t let him go even if the first contact makes Tony jump, like touching a live wire. It’s too much, it’s too much. Steve is stroking Tony’s back with his warm hand and it’s just too much.

Steve.

“We always try to do our best, Tony. But we can’t save everyone. I know you know that.”

“But we should. We should.”

“Tony. No one’s perfect. No one’s asking you to be perfect.”

_They do, though._ He did.

“Well, I’m not,” Steve replies, and Tony realizes he said that last thing out loudush. “Tony. I’m not asking you to be perfect. I just want you to be you.”

Tony breathes as deep as he can, but his nose is pressed into Steve’s chest and everything he is just... Roses.

“I’m not enough.”

Steve leans backwards, takes Tony’s face into his hands and tips it up. Tony closes his eyes, he can’t look at him right now. Steve strokes Tony’s cheekbone with his thumb.

“You are. You’re more than enough. I’m here with you. I’m not leaving.”

Steve pushes Tony’s hair away with his fingers, and presses a long kiss on Tony’s forehead, a soft brush of kind, wet lips, coupled with the rough scratch of his beard.

Slowly, Tony regains control over his own breathing, his chest stops hurting, the pounding in his
head eases up.

“I’m tired, Steve. I’m—”

“Let’s get you to bed, ‘kay?”

Tony nods, and Steve lets him get up and walk inside, following him close. There’s an awkward moment in the bedroom, but before Steve can do anything Tony takes his pajamas and hides in the bathroom to change.

He crawls into bed next to Steve, who has already turned off the light.

He searches for Steve’s hand and when he tangles their fingers together he feels like crying again.

“Steve.”

God, why does his voice keep doing this thing, why does he sounds like a child who lost his mommy—

Howard!

Right. Because he is.

He killed my mom.

Tony sighs and opens his eyes to chase away the memories.

“Yes?”

“It was... it was us, in your drawing, right? It was... it was us.”

Steve places a hand on the dip of Tony’s neck, caresses his jaw.

“Oh, sweetheart. Of course it was us.”

Heart’s not sweet. Heart’s just broken.

“It wasn’t just... an itch. That night, I mean. I don’t know why I said that.” Tony can feel Steve’s sigh of relief shake his chest through the mattress, deep and unbridled. “It was important. For me.”

“Oh, that’s—oh god—it was... Tony, it was important for me too, I... it meant, to me, it was...” Steve stammers, happiness makes him trip on his words.

Uh.

“Steve.”

“Mh?”

“That night—”

“Yeah...”

“You weren’t shy.”

“Ah... no.”
“It was—”

It’s not shame that colors Steve’s voice, no, but he’s a bit bashful throughout the admission. “The first time I had sex, yeah.”

“Ever?”

“Ever.”

“I am… so sorry, I had no idea.”

“Don’t… don’t be sorry.” Steve voice has become very sweet, and he starts brushing Tony’s hair away from his forehead, but the repetition of the gesture doesn’t seem to have any real purpose except showing some degree of affection. “Of all the things I regret, especially where you’re concerned, that… I’d never regret that. Even if you don’t...” Steve trails off, unable to continue.

Tony grabs Steve’s wrist, brings his hand up to his own mouth, and plants a kiss—the most delicate touch of his lips—on Steve’s fingers.

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[1] Sir, you are Iron Man, right?
[2] Yes. But it's a secret that I'm here. Super secret. We can't tell anyone.
[4] My friends were with me, we saved it together. Listen, what's your name? Where's your mom?
[5] There!
[7] Ok, Luca, go back to her, alright? If you are a good kid I'll send a present to your house in a few days, mh?
[8] Like when Dad buys stuff off of Amazon?
[10] Bye, Iron Man!
Day 5

Chapter Notes

Warning: there’s some graphic violence/blood and major character death towards the end of this chapter BUT all in the context of a dream. None of it actually happens, but it’s still pretty vivid so be careful <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Like on most days, Steve slides from complete darkness to full consciousness in the span of a second. By the intensity of the light entering the room from the French window he can tell that it’s early.

Tony is asleep, but he’s frowning, sweating, his whole body trembles as he tries to speak but what comes out is only gibberish. Steve shifts on the bed to wake him up without scaring him, but before he can touch him Tony awakens on his own with a shout that sounds an awful lot like Rhodey. He pants, closes his eyes as he’s flooded with relief. He sits up and looks around the room to ground himself in reality, but it takes a few minutes, his mind fights against it.

He takes his phone from the bedside table, and says, “J, call Rhodey.”

Steve wonders if he should leave or not. Tony hasn’t acknowledged him, but this thing looks like is gonna play out pretty much like the other day, with the only difference being the person Tony is worried about.

“Tony. Hi.” It’s a video call, but Tony doesn’t open the holoscreen.

“Are you... is everything okay? Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, yes,” then, in a gentler voice, “hey, it was just a dream. I’m here. You ain’t getting rid of me this easy.” He smiles.

Tony smiles too. “Damn, and here I thought…” he jokes.

Looks like these conversations happen pretty often. Tony needs reassurance that the people he loves are safe.

Someone outside the screen calls Rhodey. “Hey, I gotta go. It’s been crazy here.”

“You still haven’t slept?”

“No, but maybe in a couple of hours I can take a nap. I just wanted to check... well, whatever, I’ll tell you another time. You gonna be alright?”

“Yeah. Alright. Love you.”


Steve is pretty sure they didn’t end their phone calls like that, before.
Tony falls back on the mattress, rubs the last remains of sleep away from his eyes. He sighs and turns to look at Steve.

“Sorry about that.”

Steve lies back down too. “No need to be.” A pause. “You have a lot of bad dreams.”

“Yeah. Makes me miss insomnia.”

“You had insomnia?”

“Yeah. After New York. Anxiety, too.”

“But now you fall asleep all the time. You always look tired.”

“Thank you, I appreciate the compliment.”

“Tony, I’m serious. I’m... Listen, you want to keep it to yourself, fine. I’m just worried, that’s all.”

Tony stares at the ceiling, clenches his jaw and presses his lips together, lets the air come out of his nose.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“I quit drinking.”

“—nag you... oh. Oh, that’s. That’s good, Tony. I thought you had but... I didn’t know you had a drinking problem.”

“I... don’t know if I did. I wasn’t an alcoholic, per se, but, uh, I was starting to feel like I was on the way there. Like it wasn’t just recreational anymore. So I made a decision before it could get worse, you know.”

“That takes a lot of strength.”

“It makes me sleepy, though. Not drinking... it can happen. It’ll pass, it’s just a temporary side effect. It’s only been a few weeks.”

“Either way, I’m... I’m proud of you.”

Tony sucks in a breath. “You... you are?”

“Yeah. It takes guts, Tony. But if anyone can do it, it’s you. You’ve always been brave.”

“Ah. Thank you. For saying it.”

Steve turns his head on the pillow to smile at him. “You have a sponsor?”

“No, not really. Mostly, I go to meetings, and Rhodey checks on me. Maybe I should get one.”

There’s a long pause.

“I was thinking we could go to Siena.”

“I’d like that. If you feel like it, that is.”

“Think so,” Tony says, and he splay a hand over his chest. He grows thoughtful; his face darkens
with sadness. “I'm sorry about last night. You probably didn’t think you’d be stuck with someone like... like I am now.”

Steve touches Tony’s arm with his fingers, beckons him to twist on the bed so they can be face to face. He stares into Tony’s eyes for a long time, and he tries to pour into it all his love, all his acceptance, but can’t quite get rid of the regret and nostalgia he feels creeping at the edge of his gaze.

“You’ve been taking care of me for a long time. The least I can do is take care of you when you need it. Especially after—”

“It’s not... you don’t have to—”

“I want to. I want to, if you let me. Please, just... just let me help you.”

Tony swallows, and hooks his forefinger with Steve's. “Alright,” he whispers.

They get up, and Tony asks Steve if he has any clothes he’d like to wash. Steve gathers some, and Tony throws them into the washing machine with his own.

“Wait, but aren’t we leaving soon?”

“I'll text Manuela. The staff will take care of it.”

“Right. I'll go get dressed, then.”

After breakfast, they drive to Siena, and they're there in barely twenty minutes.

The city is hot, crowded with tourists, and Steve finds it as beautiful as he imagined it'd be. He read about it on the internet while in the car, but actually being here is another thing entirely.

The Piazza del Campo is an architectural masterpiece that takes Steve’s breath away. It’s accessible through little alleys, so you can’t see it at all until you’re right in the middle of it. It’s theatrical, in a way, like a curtain being suddenly lifted to reveal an elaborate scenery. The Piazza is shell-shaped, and divided into nine triangular slices representing the nine men who used to hold the power during the Middle Ages. It was a sort of declaration of liberty, Steve understands, a way for the people to say they wouldn’t be ruled by just one person who could decide for everyone, like it happened in many other Italian cities at the time. The Piazza isn’t flat, but built on a gentle slope, so the rainwater can drain away through a grating placed right where the nine slices meet. In the lower end of the Piazza, along the straight line of the semi-circle, stands the Palazzo Pubblico, with the Torre del Mangia.

Steve takes a ridiculous amount of pictures with his phone, of everything he finds even mildly interesting, and he catches Tony rolling his eyes a couple of times, but his expression is fond, not annoyed.

Tony explains some things about the city that aren’t on the internet, things you only know when you have a special attachment to the place. Steve listens avidly, asks questions, makes a few jokes.

Tony talks about the Palio, a horse race held in the edges of the Piazza del Campo twice a year since the Middle Ages with very small changes over the course of the centuries. Each horse represents a contrada, a neighborhood of the city, and Tony says that there’s probably no greater sense of belonging than that of a senese to their contrada. Steve is fascinated by this, by humans doing the same thing over and over and over and loving it still, because it’s part of who they are, of their identity; it’s an intimate aspect of what it means to be born here.
When they visit the Duomo, Steve loses himself while staring at the floor, at the complex images created with white, dark green, brown marbles. The columns are made of marble too, stripes of dark and light, and it looks like an optical illusion. It’s so bold and unapologetically aggressive that Steve’s head spins. It’s exhilarating.

“You know what I don’t get about this stuff?” Tony says, nudging Steve’s elbow, and Steve stops staring at the little golden stars that decorate the ceiling to look down at him.

“What?”

“Why did they put all those statues up there? All those details. Seems like a waste of time and energy, you know. No one can see them.”

“Well,” Steve says, blinking, “God can.”

“See them, you mean?”

“Yeah. These aren’t places of worship. I mean, that’s their use, but it’s not why they were built. They were built to honor God. And God sees all the details. Even when people can’t.”

“Do you, uh... do you believe in God?”

“Of course I do. Yes.”

Tony nods, slowly, and looks at the floor. His shoulders sag in something very similar to defeat.

“It’s fine if you don’t,” Steve says, quietly, “I don’t think any less of you.”

Tony gives him a quick glance, like he’s ashamed of needing the reassurance at all, but he gifts Steve with his small lopsided smile, and then walks away, towards the apse.

Eventually, they step outside, and sit down on the marble stairs for a while. Steve reads in a booklet that at some point they wanted to make the Duomo bigger, transforming the existent cathedral into the transept of a much larger one. They started working on it, but then the Black Death hit the city, and they had to stop.

Steve asks Tony if he knew about this, and he answers saying that their ticket includes a visit to the unfinished structure that would have been the façade of the new Duomo, but never was. To get to the top of it, they have to climb up an ancient, narrow spiral staircase, and instinct tells Steve to walk behind Tony.

The view from the top is great, but it’s the attitude that fascinates Steve the most, the fact that people decided to keep this thing, even if it wasn’t complete, even if it didn’t serve any purpose at all like this. They had built it, so they left it there, so Steve could stand on it now, centuries later. With Tony, who tries to pretend he isn’t out of breath with the effort of climbing up the stairs. Steve, for his part, pretends not to be worried sick by this, and walks in front of Tony when they go down.

They have lunch at a little restaurant tucked in a small alley. Tony orders pici cacio e pepe for them both, which Steve thinks are just thick spaghetti, but they taste different. They’re cheesy and there’s a lot of pepper in them. It kinda goes up Steve’s nose at some point, which makes Steve sneeze and Tony laugh.

“I hope you’re having a good time,” he says, earnest.

“I am. I really am, I... thank you, for this.” Tony’s hand is resting on the table, and Steve covers it...
Tony emits a small sound of discomfort, and takes his hand away from underneath Steve’s, fast and twitching. He closes it into a loose fist and coughs into it, embarrassed.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I should apologize. I should’ve asked.”

Tony shakes his head, but doesn’t say anything else, and the awkwardness vanishes on its own in a few minutes.

After lunch, they go back to the Piazza and inside the Palazzo Pubblico, where Steve spends more time than Tony probably has the patience for staring at the frescos and taking notes, but Tony doesn’t complain. He simply waits for Steve to be done.

They decide to climb the clock tower, see the view from the top. There are more than three hundred steps, though, and this time it takes Tony a while to recuperate, for his chest to stop heaving. He sits in a corner and breathes, and keeps telling Steve that he’s fine, that nothing’s wrong. He looks so small.

The day is sunny and clear, and when he feels better Tony points at things in the distance to tell Steve what they are. He stands in the crenel between two merlons, and Steve positions himself just behind him. He can smell Tony’s expensive shampoo.

“You see that castle there? With the four towers?”

“No… where?” Steve lowers himself to level his gaze with Tony’s, and suddenly his head is just above Tony’s shoulder.

“There’s that red building, you see that?”

“Yeah.”

“Just above—”

“Oh! Oh, yeah! Damn, that looks beautiful.”

Tony turns his head. He’s so close Steve would kiss him, if he could.

“Um—” Tony says, and suddenly Steve realizes where his hands are: on Tony’s hips.

He removes them quickly.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I didn’t even, I’m—”

Tony nods, and presses a hand over his heart.

They climb down the tower soon after, and sit on the ground in the Piazza, and even though Tony grumbles that only tourists do that, he’s clearly glad to rest for a bit. He’s sweating a lot, short of breath again.

“I’ll go get you some water, okay?”

“If you don’t mind.”
Tony rubs his chest.

Steve thinks about the sign saying not to go up the tower in case of heart problems. But Tony is… he’s fine. Right? He said so.

“You sure you’re gonna be okay on your own?”

“Yeah, of course. Stop worrying so much.”

Steve leaves, and wishes the café wasn’t so crowded, that he could get back to Tony faster than this.

When he exits the café, two plastic bottles tightly clutched in his hand, Steve sees it.

Tony is standing, talking to a very tall man dressed in a suit despite the heat, with short gray hair and very thick eyebrows. Tony touches his shoulder, smiles, laughs—bares his teeth, his throat. The man rests a hand on Tony’s arm to draw him close, and they hug, friendly and warm, for longer than Steve expects. The man hunches down, slides his hand down to the small of Tony’s back; Tony goes on his tiptoes, strokes the man’s shoulder blades. Steve watches Tony close his eyes, his chin nestled into the crook of the man’s neck.

Steve feels it creep up on him from behind, starting from a point just below the nape of his neck. It spreads to his shoulders in hot waves, down his spine, takes over his chest and throat as quick as a fire. It rises to his cheeks, to his eyes, blazes through him in an instant, leaving only shame and self-loathing in its wake.

A single sentence hammers in his brain, *stoptouchinghim stoptouchinghim stoptouchinghim, as if he has any right to think something like that.*

Steve isn’t far enough from Tony and the man for his enhanced hearing not to pick up their conversation, and he really wishes he had some way to stop himself, but super self-control wasn’t included in the serum.

“—heard about Colonel Rhodes, I hope he’s okay now.”

“Yeah, yeah, he’s doing fine. Actually I should thank you, I built him a pair of exoskeletal leg braces and based half the work on your research, I—”

“Oh come on, you expect me to believe that? Like you need help from any of us mere mortals!”

Tony laughs, “It was invaluable, and you know how much I love your work, Roberto, I—”

“Will you stop if I just take the compliment? You’re making me blush.”

“As if you aren’t used to them... But tell me, how’s the Robotics Department going?”

“It’s going great, it keeps me so busy, the students are brilliant and… I’m really proud of how far we’ve come, especially with how difficult… you know, they’ve cut funds again, and…”

“Oh, I’m sorry—”

“Yeah, I mean, when you see all those people, so young, bright, full of potential, you wish you could give them the world, you know? But all these idiotic politics keeps them limited… it’s sad, really—”

“Listen, I’ll see what I can do, I—”

“No, oh Tony, I didn’t mean it like—”
“Hey, you didn’t ask. I offered.”

“Well, I know how stubborn you are, I won’t try to stop you.”

“That’s a smart choice,” Tony says, smirking.

“Whatever you do, though… thank you.” The man looks at his wristwatch. “Ugh, it’s late, I’m so sorry I have to go.”

“No problem, listen, let’s keep in touch. For real. Next time you’re in New York, just call me.”

“I will. There’s a conference in December, I’ll stay at least a week. I’ll call you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. It was so nice to see you again, Tony.” He puts his hand on Tony’s shoulder.

“Yeah...”

“I’m glad you’re okay. I watched the news and... sometimes, I worry.” He clutches Tony’s hand, and Tony squeezes back. Steve’s heart does something awful in his chest.

“You don’t need to worry. I’m a tough one.”

“That’s true. But really—I’m happy you’re all in one piece.”

They say goodbye after that, affectionately, and with more promises to call each other, text, meet. Steve watches the man—Roberto—walk away, out of the Piazza. He watches Tony sit back on the ground, wait for Steve to come back with the water.

Steve has no right to be jealous. And yet, he keeps seeing it in his mind, playing in a cruel loop: Tony and the man hugging, Tony closing his eyes, the way they smiled and—

They’re obviously just friends, and yet Steve envies that familiarity, the affection, the reciprocal respect and esteem—professional and personal—even despite the lack of regular contact.

Steve looks down at his hands, the water bottles, his jeans, his boots.

It’s okay, he thinks, while he feels like he’s breathing cold water that solidifies into ice inside his lungs, around his heart. It’s okay. I’m glad he’s got people who love him. I’m glad he has friends. Friends who don’t throw him to the floor and hit him with vibranium over and over. I’m glad he has friends.

And then Steve thinks about himself, about how he’s received one single text from Sam since he got to Italy, while Tony instead keeps in touch with so many people, he has Rhodey and Peter and Pepper and Happy and T’Challa and meets Roberto in the middle of the street, and he’s friends with Manuela who works at the Relais, and that kid in San Gimignano who told him he was a hero—the only bit Steve understood of that whole conversation.

While Bucky is in cryo, and Sam is... where is Sam, exactly? And he hasn’t heard from Natasha in weeks, or from Sharon, or Clint, or Wanda, or even Scott.

Steve’s heart breaks, his eyes burn.

He’s never felt more alone in his life, and this time he’s not okay with it.
It all coalesces into a jolt of pain right under his breastbone. It reminds him of Tony.

_What if we were friends, what if I were allowed to touch him where I want when I want for as long as I want, what if I could love him, what if—_

_What if he loved me back._

He wants to run away, he wants to... he wants to stop existing for a few minutes, just a few minutes, until he can breathe again.

“What if he loved me back.”

Tony. Tony’s here, he’s walked over to Steve and Steve didn’t even notice.

Tony.

Steve tries to look at him, to see him.

Tony.

His hands, his silver bracelets, his dark curls framing his handsome face in such an elegant way, the gray at his temples. His bright eyes, brown and deep, alive with a million ideas. His beard, peppered with white, his beautifully tan skin. The faint smell of coconut. And then his sweaty armpits, his scuffed canvas shoes. He’s so tiny compared to Steve—Steve is really noticing it only now. The way he’s shaped: muscled shoulders, curvy hips; his belly stretches the front of his t-shirt just a bit. He’s short and small and the exact opposite of weak and helpless; Steve wants to wrap him up in his arms and kiss him, keep him forever in his bed, whisper, _You’re mine (and no one else’s, no one else can touch you)_ in his ear every night while Tony moans and—

But Steve—

_Did you know?_

Yes.

Steve missed the only chance he had.

He has only that one night, he can only remember it. Or try to forget it.

Steve sighs.

“Okay. I’m okay, don’t worry,” he tells Tony, and prays his eyes don’t look as desperate as he feels.

***

Steve doesn’t seem okay.

He went quiet after coming back from getting the water, he’s retreated into some place in his head Tony doesn’t have access to.

He seem angry. Frustrated. Not specifically with Tony, which is the silver lining of this whole thing, but it’s still weird.

It’s fine. Maybe he just needs time to deal with some thoughts on his own.

“I saw you talking to that man,” he says, and there’s something strange in the way he says _that_
man—almost antagonistic.

“Oh, yeah. Roberto. He’s a fellow engineer. A genius on his own right, really, his work with prosthetic limbs is—”

“Didn’t look like he was just a colleague.”

Uhm. What the fuck.

“I don’t really think I owe you an explanation, but for the record, he’s just a friend. A dear friend. Which I was still allowed to have without your permission last time I checked.”

“I just didn’t think you’d be that comfortable with people touching you—”

“Well, for your information, I am more than comfortable with being touched by people who never beat me half to death!”

Tony’s anger is met with a tense silence. Steve turns his head away, and Tony is almost grateful to be spared the sight of Steve’s face.

“What do you mean, half to death?” Steve’s tone is icy with hostile curiosity.

Shit. Shit, shit.

Tony grips his left arm tight. “I—”

“You said you were fine. You said you weren’t hurt.”

“I just meant that I thought—”

“No, that’s not what you meant.”

Tony doesn’t reply. He tries to stifle a pained moan, and he’s not all that successful. Steve sighs and finally looks at Tony again. He sounds defeated when he says, “Okay. I’m sorry. You want to keep it to yourself—fine.”

“You don’t get to act like this after what you did. I know it seems fucking impossible to you and the others, but I actually have friends. I’m appreciated by a decent number of people, as a scientist and as a person, sometimes even as a hero. And you don’t get to take that away from me. You don’t get to do that, Cap.”

Steve closes his eyes, quickly, and clenches his jaw. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I don’t know... I’m sorry.”

“I need to use the bathroom. Wait here,” Tony says, and leaves.

He enters one of the cafés on the edge of the Piazza and waits for his turn. He orders a glass of sparkling water, drinks it quickly. While he pays, he asks if he can use the toilet, and the girl at the register holds out the key for him. He asks her to please put it on the counter, and she does without comment—she’s seen weirder. He takes the key and enters the small bathroom at the end of the corridor, closes the door behind himself with a sigh of relief.

Tony pees and washes his hands. He takes off one t-shirt and then the other, stares at his bare chest in the stained mirror. He tastes coconut in his saliva.

He rinses his mouth, washes his face, splashes some water in his hair. He lets it drip on his neck, on
his shoulders, on his chest.

He breathes, slowly and regularly, like he’s done many nights after a nightmare, sometimes alone, sometimes with Rhodey holding his hand and telling him his weird War Machine stories. Sometimes he’s been the one holding Rhodey’s hand.

He wrestles a wave of nausea away with relative ease, and the pounding in his ears stops after a minute or two.

He rubs his left arm until it doesn’t feel numb anymore.

He’s okay. He’s fine.

When he doesn’t feel his heart in his throat anymore, he puts his shirts back on and leaves the café.

He finds Steve still sitting on the ground, texting someone on his phone.

“Sam is back home, in D.C."

“I know.”

Steve pockets his phone. “I’m sorry. I’m an idiot. I’m sorry.”

Tony nods. “You can think and say whatever you want. I just ask that we don’t turn it into a fight. I told you, I don’t handle conflict well since…” Tony presses his lips together. “We can talk about anything. Just, please—don’t get angry and don’t make me angry.”

“Alright. Alright. Of course.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

“Where’re we going?”

“I’m gonna show you my grandfather’s shop. He was a tailor.”

“The shop’s still there?”

“Yes. It’s also still technically mine, believe it or not. Ever heard of Carbonell? Women’s clothes.”

“I think I saw Sharon wear something with that name on the label once.”

Sharon. Right.

“Pepper likes it too.”

They walk in silence for a while, and Tony starts feeling better. It’s still too hot for his liking, and he wishes he didn’t have to wear two layers and sweat so much, but he doesn’t smell bad (thanks, Tom Ford) and he remembers a couple of shortcuts to avoid a few uphill alleys. At least there are no more stairs.

“Here it is.”

There’s not much to look at, actually. It’s just a clothes shop. There are a few people inside, three shop assistants and a bunch of clients. One exits the door with her purchase while Steve and Tony are standing there, kinda awkwardly. She gives them a look and walks away.
“So—”

“Yeah, I mean, there’s nothing to see, really.”

Steve snorts. “Let’s go, before the girls call the police on the two weirdos standing outside their shop.”

“Well, technically, as I said—”

“You’re always putting me in trouble with the law, first the cherries—”

“Oh yeah, sure, that’s totally my fault, it’s not the fact that you’re a stubborn dumbass—”

“Am not—”

“It’s like we’re perpetually caught in this absurd situation where I’m the sensible one—”

“Sensible? Are you kidding?”

“—while you go off and do your silly ‘hold my beer and watch this’ schtick, which frankly—”

“Are you implying that I’m immature?”

“—is getting really stale and—I’m not implying anything, I’m outright saying it.”

“Well excuse me if we can’t all be a billion years old like someone—”

“First of all this is clearly not a matter of age at all, and secondly if I remember correctly, which I do, you are the resident dinosaur of the Avengers—”

“A dinosaur? A dinosaur? I’m not even the green one.”

“No, we already established you’re the immature one, please keep up—”

“I swear to god—”

“Come on, just admit it, just say, ‘Tony, you win this round, I’m a dumbass who makes dumbass life choices’—”

“Right, remember that time I gave Ross the middle finger and fucked off to help my dumbass friend and if discovered I would’ve had to, and I quote, ‘arrest myself’? Oh, wait! That was actually you!”

“You did the exact same thing before me, and you just admitted to being a dumbass!”

There’s a moment of silence where they just look at each other, and then they burst into laughter.

“I walked right into that one, didn’t I?” Steve asks while he’s still red in the face.

It’s fun, the banter, playing like this with each other, with what happened, make it less terrible together. Knowing when to stop before it becomes too much.

“See, this is what I meant,” Steve says then, very quietly, looking into the distance, “This is what I miss. You. And how I am when I’m with you.”

Ah. Fuck.

“Steve—”
“I really am sorry about before. I guess I have an image of you in my head and it doesn’t always align with reality. I’ve got no right to be jealous or act like I did. I wouldn’t have that right in any case. I’m sorry.”

Tony stops walking and turns to face Steve. “No, I think... Listen, we should... confront our feelings, all of them, regardless of how uncomfortable they make us. I’m willing to work on that. I just need it to be civil, I just need... I can’t do it if we start screaming at each other. I don’t want to do that.”

Tony can hear his voice crack, so he stops talking. God, if he could just stop crying.

“Hey,” Steve whispers, and Tony had no idea his voice could sound so kind.

Steve lifts his hands, as if to hug Tony, but he stops himself as soon as he realizes what he’s doing. Tony’s first instinct is to step back, and he does, but then he looks at Steve’s face, at his hesitant smile, and slowly slides between his arms, presses his chest (slightly to the side, so Steve doesn’t feel —) to Steve’s.

Steve wraps his arms around Tony, hugs him close but not too tight, he’s so very careful. Tony feels Steve’s warm hands on his back, how big they are. How tall Steve is. Tony reaches up, hooks his fingers in the collar of Steve’s sweater.

Steve slides a hand up to cup the back of Tony’s head, leaves a kiss in his hair, near his temple.

Tony sucks in a sharp breath.

Steve’s arms used to be the safest place he could think of. He used to long for something like this, for one single real hug from him. He used to think, Just once. Just once, it’d be enough. I’d be happy for the rest of my life.

The night before Lagos was... hell, Tony doesn’t even have words to describe it, how it felt to have Steve inside himself, how warm his mouth was. But everything that’s happened since, it’s enough to sour the memory in his mind. He doesn’t regret it, and he’s thankful Steve doesn’t as well, but—

He just wishes circumstances were different.

And just like that, Tony can’t stand Steve’s touch anymore.

He forces himself to get out of Steve’s embrace in a natural way, but a shiver of loss and regret runs down his spine a moment later. Tony closes his eyes and waits for it to pass.

Steve smiles at him, still sad around the edges.

They resume their walk, and Tony stops in front of his favorite tie shop in the world, the Cravattificio Senese behind the Duomo. He scrutinizes all the ties carefully exposed in the window.

“I love this place,” he tells Steve. “Almost all my ties, I get them from here. Handmade, one by one. This is top quality artisanal craftsmanship, Cap.”

“Don’t...” Steve touches Tony’s elbow. “Don’t call me Cap. Please?”

Tony looks into his pleading eyes, and for a moment he thinks he doesn’t get it, why is it such a big deal? But then he remembers how much he hates it when everyone calls him Stark, and—

“Alright.”

“So, you were saying? About the ties?”
“Yes! The ties! They’re beautiful and I want to get married to all of them!” His eyes dance from one shelf to the other, all those incredible colors... “Oh my god, I love that one!” he says, and Steve comes closer to see which tie Tony is pointing at. “The blue one with the little kitties! I want it!”

He hears Steve chuckle.

“What?”

“Nothing, really, I just... I love this side of you. How eccentric you are, sometimes. I didn’t understand it at first, I thought you were just rich and spoiled, but... I like the way you dress and, I don’t know. I think you can totally pull off a tie with kitties.”

Oh.

“There’s a red one with little puppies too. We could get matching ties for the next Avengers press conference. ‘Hey, United Nations, we’re reassembling the Avengers and our ties totally make us look like serious, trustworthy individuals who can protect the planet from evil aliens’, how’s that sound?”

Steve laughs. “Perfect. It sounds perfect.”

They end up actually getting the ties, the blue one with the kitties for Tony, the red one with the puppies for Steve, and a bottle green one for Rhodey, because he adores green. Steve insists on carrying the little paper bag.

They stop by a couple more shops. Steve buys a decorated ceramic plate for Sam and a print of the city skyline painted by a local artist for Natasha. Tony, instead, sends a package of local food products to the compound. The staff will store it properly until Rhodey gets back home.

“I didn’t know you were the jealous type,” Tony says quietly while they reach the car.

“I am, actually. I was of Peggy too. Thought Howard was sweet on her... turns out she was even worse than me. She shot me once because a girl kissed me. Well, she shot the shield.” Steve smiles at the memory.

Howard.

Howard!

“Mmh—” Tony groans. He feels his heart speed up in his chest, and he’s suddenly drenched in a cold sweat that wasn’t there a minute ago.

Not again, he thinks. Please.

A part of his mind idly wonders why this is setting him off now. They have talked about Howard already. It’s not the first time, it’s not—

It’s the first time Steve has said Howard’s name.

Howard!

There’s a loud ringing in Tony’s ears, it swallows up all the noises of the city.

Did you know?

I didn’t know it was him.
His left arm feels heavy at his side, like a dead thing. Like it’s made of metal and weighs a ton.

A white, blinding pain bursts in his chest. It doesn’t come in spikes or waves, no, its intensity is constant and cruel, there’s no respite, no relief, no mercy. It’s a war without a truce.

_Don’t bullshit me, Rogers, did you know?_

Yes.

“Tony! Hey, hey, hey!”

Steve’s voice.

Yes.

“Tony, can you hear me? Oh, god.”

It’s hot, it’s so hot, but it’s also cold, there’s ice everywhere, Tony shivers and is covered in sweat and he can’t breathe.

He clutches at his heart, feels his mother’s necklace under his fingers, trapped between his skin and the technical fabric of his undershirt. He feels all the ridges of the little sun-shaped pendant, remembers how it looked against the fair skin of her neck.

He can’t breathe. He just wants his mother back, he just wants to feel her soft hand caressing his cheek, her lips on his nose, the way her lipstick would leave a trace on Tony’s face every time. Her voice, singing for him at night.

_Howard!

Tony gasps, but no air makes it to his lungs, and his heart is a moment away from exploding in his chest.

He’s never believed in the afterlife, but now he thinks that he could give up and stop fighting if that means he’ll see his mother again.

“St—”

“I’m here, Tony.”

_Did you know?

Yes.

Tony slumps over, and Steve’s body is there, ready to catch him. Steve’s arms appear around Tony, holding him up. One hand caresses the nape of Tony’s neck.

Tony presses his face into Steve’s body, his heart hammering with fear, and the world goes quiet for several long moments, because—

There are roses. They taste blue.

“Tony, hey, listen to me. That thing, it happened, but it’s not happening right now. Listen, you’re safe. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“Steve, I... I wanna go home.”
“Of course. I’ll take you home.”

***

Steve takes the car keys from Tony’s pocket and helps him in the passenger seat, fastens his seatbelt. Tony can barely keep his eyes open.

“Hey. You can sleep if you want. I’ll take care of everything.”

*Of you.*

He caresses Tony’s face one last time, then gets in the car himself and starts driving, sure of the direction he’s taking because sometimes the serum is actually useful.

He drives in a daze, though. He’s terrified, shoots worried glances at Tony as often as he can, to check how he’s doing, but Tony’s sleeping, and this time that’s for the best.

He carries Tony inside the guest house once he’s parked the car, settles him on the couch.

“Steve—” he murmurs, struggling to open his eyes.

“Hi. Hey. How do you feel?”

“M tired.”

“You can rest.”

Tony shakes his head. “Wanna shower.”

“You can barely sit. Wait for a little while, okay? You wanna eat something? I can fix us a couple sandwiches.”

Tony considers this. “Yeah. Okay.”

Steve gets to work. There’s fresh bread in the pantry, prosciutto crudo in the fridge. It’ll give Tony energy.

When Steve’s almost done, Tony stumbles into the kitchen, sitting heavily at the table. Steve sets the plate in front of him, and they eat in silence. Tony’s movements are very slow at first, but the more he eats the more he seems to wake up.

“Thank you,” he says in the end. He gets up, puts the plates in the sink. He drinks a glass of water, then another.

“What did I do wrong, Tony?” Steve hates the way his voice sounds with every single fiber of his being.

“Nothing, it’s—”

“I don’t want to do it again. Was it something I said?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Please. Please, tell me. I can’t... I’m sorry.”

Tony clutches at Steve’s shoulder and leaves without another word. Steve hears him start the shower.
He stares at his hands splayed out on the table.

Suddenly, there’s a sequence of loud, scary noises.

Steve runs into the bedroom, and he’s about to push the bathroom door open no matter what, but then gets a hold of himself just enough to knock. Tony doesn’t reply.

“Tony, please answer me,” Steve says, his voice trembling with urgency, “If you don’t, I’ll have to come in.”

Steve lets a few seconds pass. Silence.

He opens the door. It wasn’t even locked.

Tony doesn’t seem to be hurt. Not physically.

He’s naked, sitting on the shower floor, away from the spray of the water. The bottle of Steve’s shower gel has been knocked over, and now it’s on the floor too, next to Tony’s thigh. There’s also Tony’s soap there, his black soap bar with Tom Ford carved on it, the incision fading the more Tony uses it.

He’s crying, silently. His tears could almost be mistaken for droplets of water.

Almost.

Steve looks at him for a long moment.

He’s not entirely surprised to see the bright light of the arc reactor slotted in Tony’s chest, no.

What really fills Steve with horror is the big, red, angry scar that goes from Tony’s right nipple—which just doesn’t exist anymore—to his left ribs.

Without a word, Steve takes off all his clothes, and enters the shower. He sits across from Tony. The shower is so big. One of Tony’s legs is bent at the knee, he’s resting his left arm on it. The hand is shaking.

He looks beautiful in the warm light that pours into the bathroom from the window, against the turquoise tiles. The late-afternoon sunshine sparkles in his eyes, its yellow hue blending with the cold, white-blue beam of the reactor.

His chest. The scar. His chest, his chest, his chest—Steve stares at Tony’s chest and he really needs to stop staring at Tony’s chest right the fuck now.

Tony looks at him then, and it’s devastating.

His eyes are unbearably sad. He smiles a smile that’s all pain and sorrow and hate for himself, and Steve’s eyes fill with tears. He tries to hold them in by clenching his jaw, hard, to the point of pain, but to no avail. They fall down his cheeks, as hot as his shame.

He did that. He is responsible for that. There’s no other explanation.

When he hit Tony with the shield, it must’ve bent the suit out of shape, it—the suit, the shield, both—must’ve cut into Tony’s skin, doing enough damage that he needs the reactor again for his heart to beat right.

“Please don’t say anything,” Tony says, his voice low and yet still cracking around the words.
“Okay. Just one thing. For future reference, you tell me this kind of shit.”

Tony laughs, and there’s an edge of desperation to it, of hysteria.

Steve turns the shower off. He exits the stall, walks over to the other side of the bathroom, to the big bathtub, and starts the water, not too hot.

He helps Tony up, then into the tub. He settles behind Tony, welcomes him between his legs. Tony’s resistance is minimal, and when Tony’s back is against his chest, for a moment Steve thinks that everything is right in the world. Everything has slotted back into its proper place.

But it’s not like that.

He takes Tony’s hand in his own and holds it for a while. It’s so much smaller than Steve’s. Rougher, darker.

“I’m so tired.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Tell me how to help.”

“This,” Tony says, circling Steve’s forefinger with his hand, “Thank you.”

Not a minute later Tony is asleep, his cheek resting over Steve’s heart.

***

Tony wakes up to Steve caressing his stomach with his thumb, breaking the surface of the water over and over.

“Mmh,” Tony groans, and sits up in the tub, leaving Steve’s warmth.

“Hey. How’re you feeling?”

Tony thinks about it. He feels mostly okay. Weak and sleepy, but not in pain.

“Allright. Still need to wash though.”

“We’ve been in the tub for over an hour.”

“’S not washing.”

Steve huffs a little laugh, and helps Tony out of the bathtub, follows him back into the shower. Tony doesn’t feel very steady on his legs, but he grabs his washcloth and lathers it up. He starts scrubbing himself meticulously, like he does every day, his arms first, his neck—

He wobbles on his feet, and Steve is there in a second, guiding him to sit on the stone bench at the other end of the shower stall.

“Let me,” Steve says, taking the washcloth from Tony’s hands, in a tone that is as gentle as it is firm.

“I can—”

“Please. Let me help.” Steve says, and looks into Tony’s eyes until Tony nods.

Tony instructs Steve on what to do every time Steve looks unsure. He rinses the cloth multiple times, then gets it soapy again, scrubs it over Tony’s skin, across his back, under his armpits, over his chest
(attentive and slow, searching Tony’s face for any sign of discomfort), on his thighs and legs, takes particular care of each foot.

Then, the inevitable.

“I—”

“Pass me the soap.”

Tony gets on his feet and lathers up his hands, then washes between his legs, front and back, while Steve averts his eyes.

While Steve cleans himself up (accurately, precisely, but not at all leisurely), Tony washes his hair, but he feels a bit silly for no reason, and keeps finding excuses—he has to rinse his hands, he has to wet his head, he has to take his shampoo—to get into Steve’s space and bother him on purpose, until Steve rolls his eyes, smiles at him and says, “You’re such a child,” and it’s the sweetest thing Steve’s ever told him.

Tony stands under the spray of the water until it’s clear.

He shuts the water off, and turns towards Steve.

“Your wound’s healed,” he says, and Steve looks down at his chest.

“Yeah. It has,” Steve says, pressing his lips together in a discontentment Tony can’t explain at first.

Steve wraps him up in a towel and leaves him in the bathroom, where Tony combs his hair and rubs his face cream into his skin. He hangs the towel on its hook.

In the bedroom, Tony finds Steve already dressed in his sleep clothes. He opens a drawer in his bedside table and takes out a pair of his silk boxers, puts them on quickly, then sits down on the bed.

“All our clothes have been folded.”

“Yeah. Told you. Uh, Steve… there should be a burgundy robe over there in the closet, could you —”

The silk feels so nice on Tony’s clean skin, cool and soft and soothing.

Steve crouches down in front of him, touches his face.

“See what I mean? Dainty, and yet so manly.”

Tony smiles. What an incredibly old-fashioned thing to say.

“No drawing today?” Tony asks.

“You wish,” Steve replies in a playful tone, getting up to take his sketchbook.

“Okay, I’m cheating, because this is an old one. It’s about... it’s about New York, though, if that’s okay.”

“It’s alright.”

Steve sits on the bed next to Tony. He leafs through the book, rips out a page.
It’s made with a black marker pen. It’s New York, the dark portal gaping wide over it. Tony—well, Iron Man—is a small figure, flying in a straight line into that terrible hole, holding the nuke over his back. The drawing catches Tony just a moment away from entering that upside-down abyss.

On the bottom right corner of the drawing there’s a date (two days after the Battle) and then it says, a hero, in Steve’s handwriting.

“Just wanted to say, Tony… I admire you. Really. As a person, and as an Avenger. Even when we disagree. I’m sorry if I ever made you think I had no respect for you. I’m clumsy with my feelings, with words, and I... sometimes, it feels like betraying her.”

What.

“You said my father’s name.”

“Come again?”

“Before. You said my father’s name. Don’t… don’t say it. Please.”

There’s a deep frown on Steve’s forehead for a few seconds, then it’s smoothed out by dreadful understanding. His eyes widen.

“You said he was distant.”

“It’s not about that. It’s Mom, in that, in that tape. Screaming his name, I—” Tony covers his mouth with his hand, swallows, sighs. “But yeah, he was distant, and when he wasn’t… Oh, don’t make that face, come on. It wasn’t as awful as you think. Many children have it way worse than I ever did.”

“That doesn’t erase—”

“Stark men are made of iron.”

“What?”

“Stark men are made of iron. He used to tell me that.”

“Tony—”

“Stop being such a coward, boy. You don’t want to be a sissy, now do you? I was a sensitive child, Mom used to say. She meant it as a compliment, but he... He needs discipline, he said, He needs to learn how to be tough, how to be a man. There was no serum to make me strong and brave like Captain America, so he tried single-malt bourbon. It’ll put hair on your chest. I was... seven, I think.”

Steve’s face. God.

“I’m sorry. I’m sure he was different when you knew him. At six, I was a better engineer than he ever was. Better at coding, too. It made him bitter. He grew frustrated over the years, he drank a lot. And the more he drank the more his ideas suffered, and... I don’t want to tarnish your memory of him, Steve, I just need—”

“I don’t give a shit about my memory of him. I care about you. Tony. You don’t need to be as strong and brave as Captain America. Most of the time, not even Captain America is as strong and brave as Captain America, believe me... I know the armor is a metaphor for you in many ways. But that’s yours, and yours alone. Iron Man is yours. It’s you. You don’t have to prove anything. Not to me. I
know who you are.”

“I—”

“But I do think you’re brave. I think you’re tough, and resilient, and you’re a formidable enemy to have, Tony. You’re invincible. But you’re also an amazing friend, kind, compassionate, and the most generous person I know. You own up to your mistakes, try to make them right. And as I said this morning, I’m proud of you.”

Tony feels Steve rest his head on his shoulder. It’s a bit heavy, but it feels nice, Steve’s weight against him, like this. Tony bends his head to touch Steve’s.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

***

It’s cold.

Steve feels it into his bones, deep inside him, in his blood, in his brain. His muscles spasm and ache with it, his throat burns when he breathes.

It’s also hot.

Blind fury, anger, fear. They boil in his veins and his stomach gurgles with nausea.

Tony, lying on the floor under Steve, still tries to fight him.

But there’s no reason to fight. It’s almost over.

Steve slams his shield on the Iron Man helmet, over and over again, until it shatters to reveal Tony’s face, distorted in a mask of blood and terror.

Steve is exhausted.

One last time, one last blow with his shield. Right into Tony’s neck.

Blood seeps out of him quickly, stains the concrete floor under them in a dark pool that becomes wider and wider while life oozes out of Tony’s eyes.

Steve discards his shield to the side, it hits the concrete floor with a loud *clang* that echoes through the empty HYDRA base. He takes off his cowl and his gloves, cradles Tony’s head. He feels Tony’s blood, warm and wet between his fingers.

“It’s over. Let go.”

Tony chokes on his own blood.

“Don’t try to speak. It’s okay, don’t be scared. I’ll be with you soon.”

Steve strokes over Tony’s cheekbone with his thumb.

A last gasp, and Tony closes his eyes for the last time.

“I’ll be with you soon.”

Steve opens his eyes and hears himself shout, as if from a great distance.
He sits up on the bed. His heart pounds in his chest. He looks to the side, and Tony is there, waking up, confused and sleepy, the light of the reactor shining through his t-shirt.

“Steve?”

Steve gets up, trips on the blanket, and finds himself hitting the floor with a dull *thud*. He pushes himself up, stumble into the bathroom and turns on the unforgiving light over the sink. He drinks some water from the tap, washes his face.

He looks at himself in the mirror and sees his face clean-shaved, the cowl clasped tight under his chin, his lips almost purple with the cold, blood trickling down his chin. It’s just a second, though. Then, there’s only long hair, beard, sad eyes.

“Steve?”

It’s Tony, of course, stepping over the threshold, rubbing his eyes and squinting in the light.

“What happened? You okay?”

Steve wants to say, ‘*Course I am. Don’t worry, I'm fine*, but he can’t. It’s too big of a lie. Even for him.

Steve twists around to look at Tony, resting his weight against the sink.

He wants to ask, *Help me.*

He wants to ask, *Forgive me.*

He wants to ask, *Love me.*

But he can’t.

“It was just a bad dream,” Tony says, his voice still low and rough with sleep.

Steve lowers his head and looks at the floor, at Tony’s bare feet, his elegant legs. *Dainty and manly.*

Tony takes a few steps closer, lifts one arm towards Steve.

It startles a gasp out of Steve, Tony’s touch, his calloused hand on Steve’s neck, the way his thumb strokes Steve’s jaw, over his beard.

Steve stares at him, and for an absurd moment he thinks, *Has Tony always been this short?*

But then he doesn’t think anything else, because Tony—Tony who flinched away from Steve’s arms just that afternoon, Tony who didn’t want Steve to touch him at all until a few days ago, Tony who couldn’t even speak to Steve a week ago, Tony who Steve has hurt beyond the forgivable—Tony hugs Steve.

He reaches up with his arms to encircle Steve’s shoulders, balances himself on his tiptoes and guides Steve’s head into the crook of his neck.

There’s no blood, Steve notices. The skin there is whole and beautiful and smells like coconut and wood.

“It was just a bad dream,” Tony murmurs, raking a hand through Steve’s hair. “Come back to bed.”
Under the covers, Steve feels safe enough to cry. He shifts to get closer to Tony, hides his face against the reactor. He can see its light through his closed eyelids, hear its subdued hum. The scent of coconut. He can trace the ridged shape of the scar from over Tony’s t-shirt.

Tony gasps, softly, and takes Steve’s wrist in his hand, moves Steve’s fingers away from his chest.

“You want to tell me what your dream was about?”

Steve shakes his head. “‘S too awful.”

“Okay.”

“I killed you. And then I was gonna die, too.”

“Was it a good death?”

“Were you scared, Tony? When you flew into the portal, were you afraid of dying?”

“‘Course I was. I was terrified.”

“I was, too. When I crashed the plane—I was afraid, I was so afraid.”

“Shh. Hey. Don’t cry. I think we’ll all be scared when our time comes. And people like us—maybe we can’t make our deaths peaceful, but we can make them mean something.”

“I hope I’m with you, at the end. That you’re the last thing I see.”

Steve falls asleep the moment the words leave his lips, so he doesn’t feel Tony’s tears on his forehead, and he doesn’t hear Tony whispering, “I thought you were going to be, for me. That day.”

He thinks he dreams it.

Chapter End Notes

on Twitter

on Tumblr
Day 6

Chapter Notes

Warnings: discussion of various medical issues and procedures / mild self-harm / preparing a fish for cooking (the description is not too gory, but it's detailed enough that some people could find it upsetting, so be careful).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony wakes up peacefully, Steve’s face still pressed against the reactor. Maybe it was Tony that woke Steve up, maybe he was already awake, but Steve lifts his head, eyes open.

“Hello,” he says, in a slightly embarrassed tone. His cheeks are very pink.

“Good morning. How do you feel?”

“Better. Sorry about—”

“It’s fine.”

“I don’t want to hurt you. I swear.”

“You’re not responsible for your nightmares.”

Tentatively, as if scared Tony is going to push him away any minute now, Steve reaches around Tony’s body with his arm, strokes Tony’s spine with his thumb. Tony stiffens, but just for a moment.

“I’m sorry I hid the reactor and the scar from you.”

“You had all the right in the world to do that, Tony. It’s your body. I’m... I know it’s all my fault and I, I—”

A violent whimper shakes Steve’s shoulders, he squeezes his eyes shut, bends his head down to his chest so Tony can’t see his face. “If you d—”

“Shhh. Don’t think about that, please, it’s... I’m fine.”

“But what if—”

“I know. Please. It’s just a bad scar. It’s just the arc reactor.”

Steve sniffs, nods, and lowers his head to Tony’s chest. Tony slides his arm across Steve’s shoulders.

Steve’s moves his hand to Tony’s ribs. Tony hears, more than feels, the soft kiss Steve places over the scar, through the t-shirt. Tony presses his nose in Steve’s hair.

“Now that I know, I can hear the reactor. How could I not... How did you hide it, Tony? With the undershirts? I think I saw one once.”

“Yeah. They’re the same ones I made right after Afghanistan. I brought them here to wear in public, but then you were here too, and... I didn’t want to tell you at first, I wasn’t even talking to you, and
then I just… went on hiding it. It’s been kind of a nightmare though, ‘cause the shirts are kinda thick for this muggy weather. And with another t-shirt over…”

“Is that why you’re always tired and short of breath? The real reason?”

“I don’t know—”

“If you don’t wanna say it’s alright, you don’t need to lie.”

“No, it’s just a bunch of things. I think not drinking is what really makes me sleepy, right now. But being too warm all the time doesn’t help. Some of it is the reactor’s fault—can’t run any marathons. But the rest is… the chest pains, the dizziness, the weakness, the sweat, the nausea, the palpitations —”

“Jesus, Tony—”

“Right after Siberia, I didn’t go home. I went to a hospital—the same one where I got the shrapnel taken out. Spent ten days there. The shield, it… the chestplate… That’s why I have this scar. But the edge of the shield actually dug into me. Right over my heart.”

Steve squeezes his eyes shut, burrows his face into Tony’s collarbone. He’s crying.

“That’s why the doctors said it was safer if I had the reactor again. Too much damaged tissue. They sent me back to the compound, with Rhodey. One night, all of a sudden I was feeling really bad, chest hurting, left arm numb. I thought I was having a heart attack. FRIDAY said I wasn’t, but I did the sensible thing and went back to the hospital.”

“What did they say?”

“It’s called stress cardiomyopathy, or broken heart syndrome. Happens after traumatic events. Bad news, it felt like a fucking heart attack. Good news, it wasn’t.”

“I did that to you, didn’t I? I broke your heart in every possible way.”

Yeah. You did.

“It’s nothing serious, it’s supposed to pass in a couple weeks. But for some reason, it’s sticking with me. I keep having the illusion…” Tony shakes his head. “Conflict and memories usually trigger attacks. They’re exhausting, I pass out right after, you saw it.” He sighs. “So. It’s a bunch of things.”

“Tony—”

“One night, I got wasted. I was tired, I was thinking about everything that happened, about you, and… So I decided. To quit.”

They don’t say anything for a while.

“But what about the suit? The other night, I could see the reactor.”

“The suit has its own arc reactor. The one in my chest just makes sure my heart does its job—can function as backup, though, in an emergency. That’s better, you know. Safer.”

“Tony, I—”

“Oh, come on. Don’t look at me like that. I’m not on my deathbed. I’m still me.”
“Yeah, but—”

“Listen, I’m a big boy. Actually, I’m a grown ass man. I’ve sold weapons to backstabbing human garbage for a good portion of my life, much to my regret. I’ve got thick skin. I’m fine.”

Steve pulls back from Tony then, lies down staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m so scared of losing you. And I don’t even have you.”

Tony wishes he didn’t know how that feels.

His phone buzzes with a text.

*Call when you want. We’re ready. He’s a bit nervous, but really wants to talk to you.*

“What do you say we get some rest today? Spend the day in the garden?”

“Yes. Definitely interested in that.”

“Steve, I want you to... I need you to read something. That woman, the woman who knew my mother—”

“Stella. You didn’t tell me she’s an astrophysicist.”

“She’s retired now. You google her or something?”

“I did.”

“Anyway, she wrote a book. Well, she wrote a bunch of books, about astrophysics, but then she wrote this other one. An autobiography. She talks about my mother there, and I’d like you to read that chapter.”

“Okay. I will.”

“Also, I, uh. I don’t want to throw you out, but I need to make an important phone call. In private.”

“I’ll go running. No problem. After breakfast, alright?”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

Breakfast is slow and quiet. Steve swallows his usual preposterous amount of raw eggs, and three croissants, while Tony nips idly at his own and lazily taps on his tablet.

He keeps feeling sudden little jabs of panic when he realizes he isn’t wearing the undershirt, then remembers that it’s fine, Steve knows now. He can still feel Steve’s fingers tracing the scar over his t-shirt.

“The book is on your phone. You should find it—”

“I know where I’m gonna find it, Tony,” Steve interrupts him with a smile. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours, that enough? I can stay out more if you want.”

“No, it’s enough. Thank you.”

Steve nods, and leaves.

Tony pads back to the bedroom, sets his phone down on the mattress.
“J, call Rhodey.”

“Hey, Tones. How are you?”

“Steve knows about the reactor. And the scar.”

“It had to happen sooner or later.”

“I know. It’s just—”

“He was weird about it?”

“No. He just feels guilty.”

“I’m sure you expected that.”

“Yeah, he just... I don’t know. I think he wasn’t that surprised by the reactor. The scar, yes.”

“Well, not even your outrageously expensive soap can hide how much you smell of coconut.”

“Could’ve been rotting fish, I count myself lucky.”

“Well, it’s not almonds, but it’s not bad.”

“You need to quit it with the almonds—”

“Never.”

“It’s been years—”

“Shut up.”

“Can we get to work? Steve’s gonna be back in a couple of hours.”

“Yeah. Barnes? Yeah, you can come in.”

James Barnes enters the screen. He looks okay. His hair is short and clean; he shaved. He looks younger, healthier. Whole, even if he’s wearing a tank top that doesn’t hide the bad scarring where his metal arm used to be.

“Uh. Hi,” he says, sheepish, opening his hand in front of himself, without waving it.

“Hi. How do you feel?”

“I’m okay, Mr. Stark. I wanted to thank you for... everything you’re doing. I... I really didn’t expect it.”

“No problem. If anything, you’ll help with testing BARF. And don’t call me Mr. Stark, Mr. Stark was my... it was... ah, hell. Just call me Tony.”

“Alright. How’s, how’s Steve?”

“Alright, in general. Takes a billionaire to feed him.”

“That’s half the reason he likes you.”

“And here I thought it was my charming personality.”
They talk for a while. There are long apologies, careful explanations, a few jokes and a couple more missteps, but in the end there’s even understanding, and maybe—who knows—forgiveness.

***

Steve locks his phone after he’s finished reading.

He’s sitting under a tree in the middle of the woods, one of the roots digging sort of painfully into his butt, a ladybug crawling over the back of his hand.

“Hey, little one,” Steve says to it while he twists to press his hand against the trunk, waiting for the ladybug to crawl past his fingers and on the tree.

He looks at the time, but he hasn’t been gone for long. He doesn’t really feel like running, so he fishes out his sketchbook and his black marker from his pocket, and draws for a while.

He likes the marker, the way it feels on the paper. It’s good practice, he figures, to get into his thick skull that fixing mistakes is hard as hell, and sometimes straight up impossible.

He closes his eyes for a few minutes to think about Tony’s face, recall—with exact precision, the only one he’s capable of—the regular shape of his nose, the wrinkles under his eyes, his dark eyebrows, his thin lips. His neck, then, his shoulders, his arms—sinewy, full. His chest.

For Steve, guilt takes the physical form of a very cold shiver that runs through him from head to toe. It makes the hair on the nape of his neck rise, and he zips up his hoodie, uselessly.

What floods his heart next, though, is a hot wave of shame that cuts the air in his throat in the ugliest way.

*I did all of that,* Steve thinks. *I hurt him and I can’t erase the signs.*

What if the universe, in all its inhumanity, has granted them only those three days at the compound, only that single night of peace? What if that’s everything they’re ever gonna get? What if Steve wouldn’t deserve anything more even if he could get it?

But it leads nowhere, thinking about this.

The sweep of the felt tip of his marker on the paper is smooth and soothing. Steve draws over a line that didn’t come out quite right, and, there, now it looks better, but still not perfect.

His phone buzzes.

It’s Sharon.

“Hello.”

“Hey. So you do know how to use a phone! I was starting to have doubts.”

“Ha ha, very funny. I’m sorry. It’s been such a mess.”

“How’s Italy?”

“How do you know—”

“Hey. Give me some credit, big guy.”
“It’s nice. Very warm. The country is great, you’d love it.”
“I’d go crazy in two days, Steve. But I’m glad you like it.”
“There’s art too. We’ve been to a couple of places.”
“I’m in a nice place too, right now.”
“Where?”
“Guess.”
“You’re in D.C.?”
“Nope.”
“Brubaker’s Bakery.”
“Got it in one. You’re not just pretty to look at, then.”
“I can tie my own shoes too.”
“Now you’re just trying to impress me.”
“Why are you at Brubaker’s right now? Isn’t it like, 5 am over there?”
“Almost 6. I was out running. Got hungry on the way home. Mmm, muffins.”
“Glad it’s not burgers, for once.”
“Hey! I will find it, Steve. I will find the best burger in the world.”
“If anyone can, that’s you.”
Sharon laughs. There’s a little moment of silence.
“How is he?”
“He’s... I can’t say he’s okay, but... being here is good for him.”
“He can use the rest. And the quiet.”
“He’s hurt, Shar. I hurt him real bad.”
“I think—”
“Sharon, listen—”
“I have a date with Maria Hill tonight.”
“Oh. Oh, alright.”
“It’s not the first one. She asked me out a couple weeks ago, we’ve been working together a lot and... I haven’t heard from you in months, Steve. Not even a text.”
“I know. With everything that happened... it’s not an excuse, but...”
“I understand. I’m not blaming you, I moved on too. I didn’t call to say that.”

“What did you want to say?”

“That I hope you and Tony can fix things. That I hope you’re happy, or will be soon. That I hope we can stay friends.”

“We’ll always be friends, Sharon.”

“You’re a good person, Steve. Aunt Peggy always said you were, she’d tell me all kinds of stories about you, but... it’s not about Captain America, you know. It’s about you.”

“Thank you. Really. And for the record, you’re a good person too.”

“Of course I am. I’m a delight, thank you very much. Ugh, wait... Yikes, I have to go.”

“An emergency?”

“Of sorts.”

“That’s alright. Thank you for calling.”

“Call me when you get back. Maybe we can set up a double date or something.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you. He’s still pissed.”

“I have faith in you. I already have a place in mind. Tony’ll love it.”

Steve chuckles. “Bye, Shar.”

“Bye, Steve.”

He hangs up while a huge smile plays on his face. It’s great to have heard from her, to have a friend he can talk with about Tony that wasn’t too directly involved in… in all that mess.

And it’s good, to have settled things with her. Steve basically disappeared, it’s only natural that she moved on.

His mind wanders back to Tony, to Stella’s book, to Maria Stark. He wonders how Tony feels about it, because no matter how little he actually knows about Tony and his mom, he’s pretty sure Tony had a different image of her in his mind, as was bound to happen.

He closes his eyes, lets his head rest against the tree trunk, and with the eyes of his mind he sees her: her blond hair—just like Steve’s—gathered in a tidy chignon, her clever eyes—the same as Steve’s—checking the pot on the stove, so it wouldn’t boil over. Her apron, tightly clasped against the small of her back. Her tiny hands, her small frame. The way she kept the few things she had left of Joseph, how sometimes she’d take out his picture from her drawer and cry, whispering things Steve couldn’t hear, hidden behind the door.

The way she always looked Steve over before he went out, making sure he was dressed all proper, that his hair looked good and his shoes were clean, so people wouldn’t think badly of her, letting her son go around the city like this or that.

The way her chapped lips touched the glass Steve would hold for her, in the last days. How she always felt sorry for the way she had made Steve, but never said it, and Steve never ever thought it was her fault that she had made him like that, small and frail and weak and sick.
Steve wipes the tears from his face. What would she say if she could see him now, strong and big and healthy, but sad and hopeless and consumed by guilt and so desperately in love with someone that maybe will never want him back.

She’d tell him to never give up. To keep hoping.

Steve gets up, and starts walking back to the Relais. Slowly, though; there’s no rush. There never seems to be any rush here, and for someone like him it’s hard to believe that people can live like this, and not with the perpetual and frantic urgency of everything and everyone in New York.

But here, Steve’s whole life consists of a few, fundamental things.

His art. A cherry tree. A bed. A blanket on the grass.

And Tony, with his reluctant smiles and his simple clothes and the inconsistency of his silk robe and all his scars—the ones on the outside of him, that he wears in spite of shame and self-loathing, and those inside him, that he bears with courage and patience.

That’s it. That’s the whole world.

The alarm Steve set on his phone chimes. Two hours. He speeds up his pace.

When he reaches the guest house, he knocks on the door, then calls, loudly, for Tony.

“Tony, I’m back! Hope that’s okay!”

Tony comes out of the bedroom, his face a bit flushed.

“I can go back out if you’re not—”

“No, no, you’re right on time.” Tony shuffles in front of him, slowly takes one of Steve’s hands. His touch always feels electric, makes Steve hyper-aware of himself, of Tony, of their skin.

“Come to the bedroom?” Tony asks with a sweet smile, tilting his head to the side, and Steve’s knees do a weird thing while the air gets stuck in his throat.

“Yeah. Of course,” he croaks out.

Tony opens the bedroom door carefully, steps inside before Steve. He sits on the bed, in front of the holographic screen. He gestures for Steve to come in as well, sit beside him, but Steve legs refuse to move.

He watches the screen, and even if distorted by the angle, he already knows who’s there.

Steve can see four people, connected from the same room.

There’s T’Challa. There’s Colonel Rhodes. There’s Natasha. And then, there’s Bucky.

“Tony, I—”

“Please. Come here,” Tony says. “This is a bit of a surprise, I guess.”

Steve walks to the bed, sits next to Tony, keeps staring at him as if an explanation could be written in his eyes.

“You can say that, yeah,” Steve says, very slowly.
Tony nods towards the screen, shifts his eyes meaningfully, as if to say, *Go on, say hi to your friend.*

Steve looks at Bucky. He seems fine. Healthy, even. He’s wearing new clothes and he got a haircut. The left sleeve of his hoodie is empty. Natasha sends furtive glances his way, the corner of her lips tugging minutely upwards, as if she’s still laughing about something silly he just said. She reaches up to take a bit of lint out of his hair, and the touch makes Bucky turn towards her, smile a smile Steve has never seen on his face. He looks like all his demons have gone quiet. Like he found something he’d lost.

Nat’s eyes are so bright while she looks into Bucky’s, and Steve captures the moment with his memory, promising himself he’ll try to commit it to paper soon.

Bucky tears his gaze away from Natasha, and smirks at Steve. Jerk.

“Hi,” Steve says, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“If you don’t close your mouth you’ll end up eating a mosquito,” Bucky says, and Tony snorts. “Listen to me,” Bucky continues, “don’t make a big fuss out of this, okay? I know how you can get. I’m fine. Tons of people are looking after me. I’m gonna be okay.”

“We could come—”

“No, you can’t. I don’t want you here. You’re so annoying when you’re worried.” He rolls his eyes. “I want you to stay there, with Tony, you guys talk, and fix things. Or try, at least. Honestly, Steve, the shit you pulled…”

“Sorry for trying to protect you,” Steve says, in a tone that sounds offended, but isn’t really.

“I appreciate it, but I’m not a baby, dunno if you noticed. I don’t need to be protected. Especially if you’re gonna fuck other people over while you do it.”

“Did you two form some weird coalition against me?” Steve asks, squinting, shifting his gaze in feigned suspicion from Bucky to Tony.

“Maybe,” Tony whispers.

“Oh sweet baby Jesus,” Rhodey says at the same time.

Bucky tries not to laugh. “I need to do this on my own terms right now, and you gotta promise me you’ll let me.”

“There’s not much you can do about it actually, Captain,” T’Challa intervenes, his voice suave and mildly amused. “I won’t allow you to set foot on Wakandan soil.” He smirks. Of course he smirks.

Rhodey taps at a screen Steve can’t see, then turns to look at him. “Steve, you seem confused about this thing but… we’ve got a pretty busy schedule. So, long story short: Barnes here is gonna get a new arm made at Stark Industries, and then he’s gonna start working on his traumatic memories with the help of technology Tony developed. Hopefully that’ll help eliminate HYDRA’s programming from his brain. That’s it. Barnes wants to do it. And Doctor Sonani is gonna kill us if we don’t get to their lab in five minutes.”

“Wow, honey bear, you really are in a productive mode,” Tony says with a big grin on his face.

“Who here looks like they’ve been doing pretty much nothing for the past week except sleep under the Tuscan sun and maybe visit some churches? Not us.”
“Careful, or I won’t give you the tie I got you.”

Rhodey blinks. “A tie.”

“Mh-mh.”

“You got me a tie.”

“Yes.”

“You got me a tie from the *Cravattificio Senese*, didn’t you?” Rhodey swallows.

“I did.”

Bucky mutters, “What the fuck is happening,” while Nat shakes her head as if to say, *Just wait it out, pretend they’re not even there.*

“It’s green,” Tony says, an evil glint in his eyes.


“James Rupert Rhodes.”

“I think you broke your friend, Tony,” Bucky says, worriedly looking at Rhodey.

“Try turning him off and on again, it usually works.”

Natasha snorts, while Bucky frowns in confusion.

Rhodey puts a hand over his heart. “Okay, what if I never call you *Tony Stank* again?”

“Never again?”

“Never ever.”

“Deal. Tie’s yours.”

Rhodey draws a huge sigh of relief.

T’Challa steps in. “Not that this isn’t entertaining, but we really have to go.”

“Of course,” Rhodey says, sobering up.

“Wait—” Steve starts, but Nat interrupts him.

“Seriously, Steve, we’ve got this.” She uses her reassuring voice, and it actually works, because Steve relaxes his shoulders.

“Okay. But promise you’ll call us? Keep us updated on what’s going on?”

“We will.”

They say goodbye.

There’s a long silence after the projection disappears. Thousands of thoughts race through Steve’s mind, and he doesn’t know which ones to voice.
He takes a deep breath.

“Okay, can I ask a couple of questions?”

“Shoot.”

“Why’d you send Rhodey there? Nothing against it, just why him?”

“Because I’d trust him with my life, and more. And because he’s allowed on Wakandan soil. He brought the arm there, he’ll provide technical help—he is an MIT graduate, everyone always forgets that—but he also has experience with prosthetics and how they work, so he can offer suggestions based on his own experience.”

“And the thing with Bucky’s memories?”

“He’ll start having sessions with the BARF tech I invented; remember that thing I told you about before you left for Lagos? It basically helps relive bad memories, so you can change them. It makes you re-experience that event, but allows you to act differently than you actually did. I tried it myself, with multiple memories and... I didn’t always get the same results, but I always found it beneficial in some way, so I figured—”

“Yeah.”

“And he’ll be monitored by doctors, psychologists... his experience could be incredibly useful in getting this technology out, in every hospital eventually, and help veterans, abuse victims, people with PTSD, children... children—”

Tony’s voice verges on frantic, in a way that is becoming unsettlingly familiar to Steve. It’s Tony’s fear of not doing enough, of not being able to help everyone who needs it, because if he can then he must, and there’s no possible excuse for not doing it.

“Tony, Tony... slow down. It’s okay.” Steve rests his hand on Tony’s knee, draws circles over the bones with his thumb, and Tony goes quiet and nods, and gets it all under control.

“And Nat?” Steve asks, changing the subject.

“She, uh. She texted me, a couple of weeks after I got home from the hospital. She said, If you do something about him, I’d like to help.”

“She really knows you, huh?”

“Well. Yeah. Took me a while, but I found a way. Figured it couldn’t hurt, for him to have a friend there. Since you couldn’t be.”

That last thing makes Steve chuckle. “You think they’re just friends?”

“No, actually, I think they’ve already fucked at least twice, which is honestly impressive and possibly unwise since Barnes got out of cryo, like, the day before yesterday, but what the fuck do I know.”

Steve dips his head to his chest, his shoulders shaking with laughter. He can feel Tony’s eyes on him, gauging his reactions.

Steve takes Tony’s hand in his own, stares at their fingers.

Tony’s generous; he always has been. He’s a hero willing to sacrifice his own life to save the world.
He admits when he’s wrong, owns it when he fucks up, tries to make things better despite shame and
guilt.

But this. This goes beyond being a hero, beyond being generous.

This is Tony taking a leap of faith (in others, in himself) and doing something that is so
incommensurably good that Steve’s eyes well up at the thought.

Tony understood everything about Bucky and his situation as soon as he had time to think about it,
just like he said he would have if only Steve had gone to him first, if only Steve had trusted him.

Bucky’s flesh hand closed around the neck of Tony’s mother and squeezed the life out of her, and
Tony is here, spending his time and money to help that same man get his life back together with an
air of inevitable necessity behind his eyes. As if this is what anyone would do if they were in Tony’s
place, as if this is not only completely normal, but also the only possible course of action for someone
in his position.

It’s an indestructible moral imperative. It’s an unwavering devotion to a precise code of honor.

Tony Stark, the man of second chances.

Took me a while, he had said, as if he should apologize for that.

It didn’t take you any time at all, Steve thinks.

Tony’s heart has been weak, unsteady, untrustworthy for a few years now, and yet Steve sees it
shine as if it was made of diamonds.

Steve lifts Tony’s hand to his mouth, places a kiss on the back of it.

“Thank you,” he whispers, and hugs Tony close.

***

Tony realizes immediately that he’s letting Steve hug him without flinching back as his first instinct.
The thought makes him pause for a moment, leaves him with his arms still in his lap.

After hugging Steve first to help him deal with his nightmare, this was to be expected, he supposes.

“Thank you,” Steve says again in his ear, after placing a kiss on Tony’s cheek. His lips are soft, his
beard scratches Tony’s skin in a way that makes him want more.

Steve.

Tony lifts his arms to circle Steve’s back, Steve’s ribs under his fingers. He starts shaking, and Tony
caresses his back up and down, while Steve’s tears wet Tony’s t-shirt and the crook of his neck.

“It wasn’t his fault, I know that now,” Tony whispers against Steve’s skin. “But what they made him
do, it’s not your fault either. You can... you can let this go, Steve.”

Steve sobs, and Tony feels as though a current unravels into him, cruel in how vulnerable it leaves
him. He squeezes his eyes shut, keeps the air immobile in his lungs. His pain is so deep and thick that
he can’t even breathe through it, and while his tears seem to bring him some form of relief, it’s still a
slow process.

Letting go can be as hard as holding on, sometimes.
Steve grabs Tony’s t-shirt in his fist, and Tony is reminded of a child who hasn’t developed fine motor skills yet: each movement rough, unrefined, abrupt. He’s not scared, but he wishes Steve would release him.

“Steve, hey…”

“I, I don’t—”

“He’s okay. Steve. He’s gonna be okay.”

“I thought... I thought I had to. Make him, make him okay. But I didn’t know... how. Where, where to start. I—”

“No, no... Steve. Listen to me. This isn’t on you anymore. You don’t have to fix him, not alone.”

“Not, not alone.” Steve tries out the words, how they feel on his lips. It’s a new concept for him, not being alone.

“There are so many people helping him. Helping you. There’s, there’s me.”

“Tony—”

Steve lifts his face, and it’s a mask of tears. He brushes his fingers over Tony’s cheek, stroking; then he sweeps his thumb over Tony’s parted lips.

He takes a deep breath, so long that Tony thinks maybe it will never end.

“I don’t deserve this.”

“I don’t know, Steve. Maybe you don’t. But him... If there’s one thing he didn’t deserve, it’s what’s been done to him.”

Steve lets out another sob, and he looks down, at Tony’s lap, then nods.

“You know, Peter told me once, that when you can do the things we can do, but you choose not to do them—if something bad happens, it’s on you. Power is useless without responsibility.”

“Yes. It’s, it’s a choice. A choice we make.”

“Yes. And it defines us, doesn’t it? And it may not be the same thing, but how can someone like me, in good conscience, how can I look at him and decide that no, he doesn’t get another chance? What makes me worthy of mine, if he isn’t worthy of his? The possibility needs to be there. What people do with it, what they choose to do, defines them. But the possibility. It needs to be there.”

Steve nods again. “Yeah. Yeah.”

Tony’s t-shirt is about to rip, Steve is clutching at it so hard. If only Steve would let him go. Please, Steve. Let me go.

“Steve. Why don’t you... Let’s lie down for a while, alright?”

Steve shakes his head. “Need to shower.”

“Oh, alright, then I—”

“Go outside. On the blanket, I’ll, I’ll clean up and join you. Okay?”
“Alright. Sure.”

Steve lets his t-shirt go. “Sorry,” he says, and tries to smooth it out. He rests his hands on Tony’s shoulders and looks at him for an endless moment. “Alright,” he says in the end, and closes the bathroom door behind himself.

Tony closes his eyes against the empty room, touches the wrinkled part of his t-shirt. It’s warmer than the rest.

He changes into day clothes, takes his phone and his tablet, picks up the blanket from the back of the couch on his way out. He spreads it a bit closer to the oak tree, where the shade is deeper. It’s very warm today, and he’s glad he doesn’t have to wear the undershirt.

He thinks about Steve’s tears, his voice, his hands on him, his lips on his cheek. Remembers the taste of his sweat. The way he cracks and cracks and tries to keep all the pieces of himself together, alone.

As promised, Steve joins him a few minutes later. He’s wearing a dark sweater and jeans, and he has a book in his hand. He lies down next to Tony and reads for a while, but Tony can feel his quick, tentative glances.

“What is it?” Tony tries, keeping his tone curious but not confrontational.

“Does... does it hurt? The reactor, does it, does it hurt.”

“It’s not pain, exactly. It’s more a soreness and... you’re aware there’s something in you that doesn’t quite fit with the rest. And it’s there all the time.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Sometimes. A bit. You get used to it. I’m glad for the light though. The first few months after they got the old one out, I would... It’s stupid, but I’d wake up at night and panic ‘cause I couldn’t see the light.”

Steve looks up at the sky that peeks from beyond the thick foliage of the oak, and sucks in a shuddering breath.

“Stop thinking what you’re thinking.”

“But... the light—”

“Yeah. Wasn’t my best experience either. Just, just don’t think about it, alright?”

Steve twists on his side. “Can I touch you?”

Tony sighs. “Steve,” he says, stern.

“Okay, sorry.”

Great, now Steve’s miserable. Perfect, that’s just perfect.

“I know you like to... I know you’re a tactile person. That’s okay. But I still don’t feel... I can’t do it all the time.”

“Not with me, anyway,” Steve says, and Tony is thankful that Steve sounds more sad than bitter, because he can’t have another fight about this. But the guilt still hits him, because he’s more than willing to let Steve touch him when he’s the one who needs to be held. It’s the other way around
that’s harder on Tony.

“Oh,” Steve says softly, with a resigned sigh. “I always ask too much of you. And I have no right. I have no right. I just wanted to say. Thank you.”

“You said that already.”

“I wanted to say it again.”

“Alright.”

“Alright.”

Tony discards his tablet to the side, listens to the birds tweeting, the crickets chirping, the wind rustling through the leaves above them, through the rose bushes a few feet from them.

All of a sudden, he finds himself in a strange place. It’s a cave. He’s very familiar with one specific set of caves, in the Afghan mountains, but he’s never seen this one. Not that he can remember, anyway. Maybe he’s been here before, though. It’s a bit weird, the way he remembers it, but doesn’t really.

He’s standing in a shallow pool of water. His feet aren’t wet though—he’s wearing his armor.

There’s a staircase in front of him; the rock has been carved into the shape of the steps. *Wait a minute*, Tony thinks, *that’s not true.* Obviously the staircase had always been there. It was just hidden inside the stone. Someone only needed to coax it out. Convince it.

It’s very dark inside the cave.

Tony prepares to climb up the stairs, but then he hears a voice. He doesn’t understand what it’s saying, but it sounds like it could be Steve.

Where’s Steve? He needs to find him. Did someone take him? If they hurt him—

Tony walks away from the staircase, deep inside the mountain, across different caves connected by tunnels. The ground is dry now.

He needs to find Steve, but he can’t see anything. FRIDAY isn’t helping him.

He’s worried. He hopes Steve isn’t hurt.

Tony walks and walks for hours, until he has to confess to himself the terrible truth: he’s lost. He can’t even get back to the first cave, the one with the staircase that led outside.

And he’s lost Steve.

The situation is dire, but he can’t give up hope. He takes a few rocks from the ground, and rearranges them into a T. That way he’ll know if he walks past the same place twice.

Tony walks, and makes T’s with rocks, but nothing changes. He’s not walking in circles, it doesn’t seem so, but he can’t find his way out.

He can’t find his way back to Steve.

Tony gasps and wakes up. The day is incredibly bright, and he doesn’t know if his eyes sting because he was sleeping, or because the cave was so dark.
“Mmh. Hello.”

“Hi. Another bad dream?”

“No. Just strange. What time is it?”

“Almost 1 p.m.”

“Ugh. You let me sleep for over an hour?”

“Didn’t want to disturb you... Hey. I got something to tell you.”

“If it’s thank you again I’m gonna smother you with a pillow.”

“There are no pillows here. It’s important.”

“Okay, shoot.”

Steve sits up. “Sharon kissed me.”

Tony raises his eyebrows.

“No, that’s not right. I kissed her. We, we both kissed, uh, we kissed each—We kissed.”

Tony sits up too, rests his elbows on his knees. He picks out a bit of brome grass from his pants.

“It was before the fight at the airport. So, after we—”

“Okay.”

“Okay?

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” He shrugs, and lets out a little laugh.

“Aren’t you angry? Jealous?”

“I... No.”

“I—”

“I don’t know, I’m not jealous. You can do whatever you want. We aren’t together now, we weren’t together back then, I just... I don’t have any say in the matter. You can kiss whoever you want.”

Steve doesn’t reply, and looks away, past the hills, in the distance.

“But, are you guys together now? ‘Cause I feel like I should know this.”

“She’s dating Maria Hill.”

“Oh. Oh, alright. That sounds cool.”

“I’d never—”

“I know, I just...” Tony shakes his head. Of course Steve wouldn’t.

“Yeah.”
God, those were some pretty awful thirty seconds right there. He doesn’t need something else to feel guilty about.

And of course it’s not like that between Steve and him, not anymore. That ship has sailed and sunk more spectacularly than the Titanic. But still, the stuff they’ve been doing… Tony would feel uncomfortable, if he were to discover just now that Steve was in a relationship with someone else this entire time.

So that’s… that’s a relief.

He tries to steer the conversation to lighter topics. He smirks.

“Hey, didn’t you also kiss Nat when you were running from SHIELD? In that mall?”

Steve’s whole body goes rigid.

“Oh my god.”

“Yep! Condolences.”

“Bucky’s gonna murder me.”

“I’ll call Pepper, we’ll give you a nice funeral.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll cry, too.”

“I’m flattered.”

“You should be.”

“I am, I just said.”

Tony chuckles and falls back onto the blanket, his arms behind his head, and closes his eyes.

“So, since you’re about to kick the bucket and all, I thought we could live a little and go see a place, later. It’s not far, it’s a small town… peculiar, let’s say.”

“If you feel up to it.”

“Yeah, I think so. Speaking of, I’d better get started on lunch.”

“You need a hand?”

“Not really. But you can keep me company.”

They head inside, and while Tony works on the cream sauce, Steve sets the table.

“I knew Sharon when she was a kid, you know.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Peggy would bring her along when she came to visit Dad. Or me and Jarvis, after Dad...”

“You knew Peggy?”
“I can’t fucking believe no one told me she died. That week, what a mess. How did I miss that? Un-fucking-believable.” His voice isn’t as steady as he’d like, and he drops the knife in the sink with a clatter that sounds deafening in the quiet of the room. Steve, who was sitting in his chair, gets up and steps closer. He lifts a hand as if to touch Tony, but then thinks better of it, and sets it down on the countertop.

“I didn’t know—”

“I went to visit her grave, after. Wish I went to her funeral, though. I can’t... I didn’t go to her funeral. I didn’t go to Peggy Carter’s funeral. Fucking bullshit.”

“Tony—”

“People who didn’t even know her were there. And I wasn’t. Because I was too busy dealing with Ross and covering up your shit to go to Peggy’s funeral, or to even realize that it was happening at all!” He has to hold his left arm in place with the right one so it doesn’t shake too badly.

“I’m sorry.”

Tony steadies his breath.

Okay. It’s okay.

“It’s not your fault. You know, she used to... she used to tell me stories about you. The time Dad flew you two to that HYDRA base to save Barnes. And then the Commandos… so many stories. She always had one. She always called you Steve.”

Steve’s mouth shifts into a nostalgic half-smile. “She did,” he says, very quietly.

“She’d tell me about you before Project Rebirth. How clever you were, how much you read. What you did with that dummy grenade, how ready you were to sacrifice yourself. You were... you were brave long before you were Captain America, Steve. She made me admire that in you.”

Steve’s breath hitches, but Tony continues, “I hope I’m not overstepping here, but, uh... she really loved you. Losing you, it fucked her up. She learned to deal with it, she worked, she had a family… she found closure in the end, because she had to. She had no other choice. But sometimes she cried when she told me her stories—your stories.”

Tony turns to look at Steve, just in time to see a tear slip from the inner corner of his eye, down across his nose. Steve lowers his head to his chest.

“I miss her so much, Tony.”

“Just as much as she missed you, I guess.”

He reaches up to clasp Steve’s arm, in a gesture that it’s meant to bring him comfort, but it’s probably more awkward than anything else.

“But I don’t… It’s not like it used to be. Right after the ice, I would’ve given anything, anything at all, to go back. To my time, to her… But the last few days... I don’t know, something happened in that church we visited, remember? Before we went to Monteriggioni.”

“Yeah. You were crying. What happened?”

“I thought… I had this thought, that I was in this place that was so old, that had been there for
centuries, you know? And it made me feel... I don’t know how to explain it with words, but it made me feel like maybe I wasn’t lost, or drifting away. I belonged here, now. I could find a home, and it wouldn’t be ripped away from me again. I felt like... like there was something in my life that wouldn’t change again all of a sudden, and leave me behind.”

“Steve—”

“And I still miss Peggy, you know, and Bucky, the way he used to be, and my friends and my time and my world but I… I also think that if I went back now I’d miss this. I’d miss the Avengers, Sam and Natasha, and Bucky the way he is now, and Fury, and the internet and all the progress humans have made... and you. I don’t want to lose you.”

Steve sits back down in his chair. Tony looks at him for a long moment.

“After Ultron, you told me you felt at home at the compound. Then you wrote me that letter and you said that the Avengers weren’t your family. I don’t... I don’t understand—”

“It’s just... I’m so confused, Tony. It’s so hard. Everyone tells me, Hey this is your new life now! Isn’t it cool? And I’m just... I never had the time to even really think about what I lost, to process it; there was always some crisis or some mission... But here, Tony, here is different. Everything is so quiet. I feel like I can think, finally, and, and I want to be an Avenger, I want... It’s important to me. I don’t know why I wrote that thing to you, it’s not how I feel.”

The water boils, and Tony adds a teaspoon of salt to it, and then the tortellini.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, no matter the state of our personal relationship, we’ll need to work together. As Avengers.”

“Tony, I... the part at the end of the letter was true, if you need me, I’ll be there for you. I’ll always be there for you.”

“And I’ll need you. You all have been pretending I was delirious, or traumatized, or whatever the fuck else, but there’s something coming. Someone coming. For Earth. And I saw it. I saw the alien spaceships. I saw where the Chitauri came from. More is coming, Steve. Worse is coming.”

“Those stones—”

“Yeah, the stones. Someone wants them, because together those stones can summon an unimaginable power. We need to be prepared. We need to work together. We can’t afford to leave this planet without defenses. I couldn’t bear the thought... that I knew... and didn’t do... didn’t do enough.”

He sits down on his chair, and places a hand over the reactor. You’re fine, he tells himself. You’re doing enough. Anything you can.

“I’m sorry we made you feel like that. That I made you feel like that. But we’ll find a way, Tony. This threat is bigger than us, than our personal issues. We’ll stand together against it no matter what, I’m sure of it.”

“The others—”

“Will trust you. They’ll believe you. You’re a hero. You were a hero long before you were Iron Man.”

A grimace makes its way up to Tony’s lips. “Don’t really know about that.”
“You did what you thought was right. You changed when you felt you should. With the whole world watching, judging. That takes guts, Tony.”

Steve gets up to strain the tortellini. Tony holds out the pan with the cooking cream, and they transfer the tortellini in it. He mixes them carefully, then adds the chopped Bronte pistachios.

“Uhm. Are you sure about this?” Steve asks, staring dubiously at the pan.

“Do you trust me?” Tony asks, amused, without really thinking about what the question implies.

Steve looks at him, earnest and open. He caresses Tony’s cheek with the tip of his fingers. “I do,” he says. His hand cups Tony’s face. “I do.”

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Steve doesn’t know what’s happening. He’s distantly aware he’s doing things, but he feels as if someone else is moving, and he’s only watching this whole thing play out from somewhere else, unable to stop it.

Stop himself.

Tony’s cheek is warm and coarse under his palm. His beard is gray in places. He’s staring at Steve, wide-eyed, confused.

Steve’s heart hammers in his chest. Blood rushes through him, pounding in his ears, and he can’t see anything but Tony’s lips.

Steve leans in.

The next second, Steve thinks, is what made people invent the word *awful*.

Tony circles Steve’s wrist with his fingers, gasps, flinches back.

His eyes widen even more, in a moment of pure fear.

“St—Steve.”

“I—”

Tony frowns, deeply perturbed.

Steve feels as if someone cut up his stomach and took all his guts out piece by piece.

“Steve. No,” Tony says, and the word, that *no*, said like that, with so much certainty and decision and finality, it’s like a death sentence for Steve.

“I’m... I’m so sorry,” Steve rasps out, he can barely get the sentence past his lips. There’s something clenching in his chest, a cold hand clenching at his heart, and squeezing it, merciless and insidious.

Just like he’s been to Tony.

Steve wishes he could say something else, explain, find an excuse or a reason, but the only thing that sounds true is that he doesn’t know anything anymore, that he’ll always hurt Tony no matter what, that he’s stupid and in love and desperate because his affection is so hopelessly unrequited that he needs a new word for it.
But words are what Steve doesn’t have right now.

He tries anyway.

“I don’t know what the hell I was thinking, I, I’m sorry, I, I’m, I’m gonna, I’ll—”

“Shut up,” Tony says. “Let’s sit down and eat.”

And that… that makes no sense. Tony should scream at him, punch him in the face (Steve would let him), summon his suit and kick Steve’s ass back to New York.

Tony fills up two plates with tortellini and he sets them down on the table.

He looks at Steve.

“If you don’t sit down and eat right the fuck now, I swear to god, Steve—”

Steve sits and takes his fork and forces food into his mouth. It tastes amazing, of course, but he can’t appreciate it right now. He eats in silence, quickly, he’d be sick if he didn’t have the body he has.

Tony sits too, and eats as well, but slowly, normally.

The silence is deafening, Steve wants to scream and cry and scream some more and beg for clemency he doesn’t deserve.

When he’s finished he clears his part of the table, puts everything he’s used in the dishwasher.

“Excuse me,” he says, and heads to the bedroom, leaving Tony there, halfway through his lunch.

He sits on the floor in a corner of the room, crosses his legs and lets his head hit the wall over and over, not enough to damage Tony’s property. He’s done enough of that already, to last a lifetime or more.

He cries, and cries, and cries so much that the air gets stuck in his throat in such a way that he thinks it’s impossible he was ever able to draw a single breath in his entire life, that he’ll ever be able to do it again. His chest gives him another jolt of pain, acute and inescapable—it’s ice-cold water in his lungs.

He shivers, but no blanket would make him warm right now.

He thinks about Tony’s smile, about that gravitational ache inside him that draws him to Tony’s orbit, inescapable like any law of physics. He thinks about how it felt to be inside him that night, to have him in his mouth. To have him.

The universe, in all its cruelty, in all its brutality, has allowed him only that one moment of unadulterated happiness.

He was the better version of himself in that moment, when he spent himself in Tony’s body and was on the receiving end of his beautiful, beautiful kisses.

“Steve.”

Steve sobs and whines and weeps and whimpers and wishes he had some way to make it all stop. To make this stop.

He hears Tony sigh and walk across the room. With a gentleness Steve doesn’t deserve, Tony takes
his wrists, makes him turn around and spread his legs. He curls up in Steve’s lap.

He fits there perfectly.

“Hey, hey,” he whispers, taking Steve’s face in his hands and forcing him to look into his eyes. “Hey. This wasn’t bad. This wasn’t bad.”

“No. It was. Bad.” Steve’s voice is thick with tears, and he sniffs, loudly. He can’t stop himself from leaning into Tony’s touch, and that’s another way to apologize in his heart.

“No. It was... Steve. I wasn’t scared. You didn’t scare me. I was surprised, I didn’t expect you to do that. But it wasn’t a bad thing.”

Steve shakes his head, “Was bad. ‘M bad. To you.”

“You’re not, you’re... I swear, Steve, I didn’t feel threatened in any way. It just caught me off guard.”

“I shouldn’t have... I keep fuckin’ this up, goddammit,” Steve says, and he hits himself in the head with his fist. Once, then twice. And again, until it hurts.

“No, no, no, oh god, no,” he hears Tony whisper.

Tony grabs Steve’s arm, but they both know there’s exactly fuck all he can do to stop Steve if he wants to do this, except calling for the suit.

_Call the suit, Tony. I won’t fight back this time._

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Steve, okay? It’s okay. Listen. I was surprised. I didn’t think that was something you wanted.”

“R—really?”

“Yes. I just thought you wanted to fix things so we could be friends. Only friends.”

_I’m in love with you_, Steve thinks.

“I thought you knew I... that I... Tony,” Steve buries his face in Tony’s neck, and he’s surprised that Tony lets him.

“I didn’t know. But it’s okay, I know now,” Tony says, circling Steve’s shoulders with his arms. “Please don’t hurt yourself. Please,” Tony whispers, and strokes Steve’s back.

“You know what I keep thinking about?”

“What?”

“When you came to that HYDRA base. And it was just me, you, and Bucky for a bit. And I could almost pretend… that everything was okay. That we’d be okay, and Bucky too. I said, I said, _It’s good to see you_, and it was. It made me so happy—seeing you, having you there, and we could... I thought we could talk. That we’d solve... but then…”

“I know, hey, I know,” Tony says, trying to hug Steve even tighter, but Steve shifts away from him, and looks down at his hands in his lap.

“I’m sorry if I made you feel like—” Steve starts crying again, his words garbled with tears, “Like I
was choosing between you two… I wasn’t... I didn’t know what to do and I was scared and I just wanted you to stop, I didn’t want to hurt you, I didn’t, not hurt you, never, never, never again…”

Steve hits himself in the head again, but Tony catches his wrist before he can do it more than once.

Fuck.

“Please, Steve, just don’t hurt yourself. Please.”

“’M sorry,” Steve slurs, he shuts his eyes, opens them again, clutches at his chest. “But I wasn’t... I never stopped, I, I know it’s wrong and—because I hurt you and—I know I shouldn’t, but I still want you. Will always... will always want you.”

“That’s what you were trying to say with your sketch, the other day? The one with us under the cherry tree? I thought we were just… I don’t know. Hugging, maybe.”

“Kissing... kissing you. It was us, happy and kissing. The cherry tree is... is how much I—”

“Steve.”

He can’t stop crying and talking is so hard. Thinking is so hard.

“’S never gonna happen again. Kissing. I know that. But I... sometimes I think about it. If I could. I wouldn’t fuck up again. If you... if you’d... I’d be worthy of it. Of you.”

“You’re asking that I—”

“Not asking. I know you won’t. I’m not even earning it because I keep... I’m just saying. I dream about it. Can I, can I dream about it? Can I imagine it? Just, just sometimes.”

Tony’s crying too now, and Steve doesn’t understand why. Tony should never cry, he should always be happy and safe and loved.

“Of course you can, Steve. You can imagine anything you want.”

“I’m sorry we fought. That I didn’t tell you and we fought.”

“I know you are,” Tony says, pushing Steve’s hair away from his forehead. “I know you are.”

Steve sags forward against Tony. Tony’s there, sitting between Steve’s legs. He holds Steve close while Steve cries and mumbles “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” over and over again into Tony’s neck, as if that could change anything.

As if that could make Tony forgive him.

As if that could make Steve deserve it.

***

Tony wakes up between Steve’s arms, with his face nestled into Steve’s chest. His skin is matted with dried tears, his mouth parched, his tongue heavy. Tastes gray.

He looks up into Steve’s face, and he’s still sleeping, but Tony’s movements make him open his eyes.

“Hey,” Tony says, and smiles.
“We fell asleep?” Steve rubs his eyes, and despite his long beard, the gesture makes him look painfully young.

“Yes. You alright?”

Steve blinks. “Think so.”

“You were very upset.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No,” Tony lets out a deep sigh. “You don’t need to apologize for that.”

“I don’t want to hurt you again, but I—”


“Just surprised.” Steve repeats, slowly, as if he needs to do that to really understand what Tony means.

Tony had been scared, actually. But not by Steve trying to kiss him.

He’d been scared by Steve’s deep-rooted self-loathing, by the way he kept tripping over his words, his speech patterns reduced to the simplest sentences by a guilt so intense it became pain. The anguish on his face, the degrading violence he inflicted upon himself, how the only things he sounded sure of were that Tony would never forgive him, would never want him.

That frightened Tony. Not Steve wanting to kiss him, not Steve almost confessing something too huge and unbelievable to even think about, not Steve asking if he had Tony’s permission to sometimes, in the privacy of his own mind, imagine them kissing and Tony forgiving him.

But Steve, hating himself so much for what he’d done. Even more than Tony ever has, or ever could.

“Tell you what, why don’t you give me one of your sketches, huh? You got anything new?”

“I got one I did this morning,” Steve says, his voice unsteady. “But I don’t know if you’re gonna like it.”

“Let me be the judge of that, okay?”

Steve nods and gets up. Tony sits on the edge of the bed, tries to ignore the ache in his butt. He’s too old to fall asleep on the floor.

Steve sits next to him after a minute, holding a page from his sketchbook to his heart.

“It’s a bit gory, I think. Sorry about that.” He passes the piece of paper to Tony.

It’s Tony, of course. He’s naked, but the drawing stops right below the jut of his hips, barely shows the initial tuft of his pubic hair. There’s a serious and resolute expression on his face, a tear on his cheek. His hair is long, but combed back, and his goatee is precisely trimmed. Tony holds his own heart in his hand, blood trickling down his forearm and dripping to the ground. His fingers dig into the heart with the effort of offering it up to someone outside the picture. In his chest, there’s a hole. It’s round, and dark with the shadows he hides insides himself. There’s a hole. It’s empty, because he has nothing left to fill it with.

“Steve, I—”
“I’m sorry, I know it’s... I was just thinking about you and all the things you do for everyone, and... now that I know what you did for Bucky, it’s even more... I just—”

“It’s beautiful, Steve. It’s...”

It is. It’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I... I really don’t know what to say.” He can’t tear his eyes away from the drawing. He can’t believe someone would see him like that. That Steve would see him like that.

He knows it’s not really the case, but sometimes Tony still sees Steve as someone who thinks that Tony only fights for himself, only wants to look cool while he picks the easy way out to every problem.

It’s strange to have proof that Steve sees him as altruistic, heroic.

“I hope you don’t think too badly of me, for drawing you naked,” Steve says in an ashamed murmur.

Sometimes he really says things that makes you think he left the ‘40s just yesterday. And maybe sometimes he feels like he has.

“Not at all. This is so… god, I don’t even know. It’s flattering, and respectful. Poetic. I love it.”

Tony turns, shifts closer to his bedside table to put the sketch in the drawer with the others, but Steve touches his elbow and says, “Wait.” He takes a marker and scribbles something at the bottom of the drawing. “There,” he says, “now it’s perfect.”

Tony looks at what Steve added: resilience, followed by today’s date and Steve’s initials.

Tony looks up from the drawing and outside the French window for a while, then turns towards Steve, and smiles at him as soothingly as possible, in the hope of smoothing away that awful frown from his brow.

He sways to the side, and nudges Steve’s shoulder, playful.

“Come on,” he says, “give me a smile. Even a small one.”

Steve reaches out and brushes the back of his forefinger to Tony’s knuckles.

Then he smiles, as bright as the sun.

Steve rests his forehead against Tony’s shoulder.

Tony turns his head towards him, and it’s more a press of lips against Steve’s hair than an actual kiss, but he breathes Steve’s scent in, and almost wishes, uselessly, that it didn’t feel like home and peace this much.

He waits for the memory to play out in his head (Did you know? Yes.) but it doesn’t happen this time. Instead, he thinks about his dream. The cave, the need to find Steve. The fact that he kept on looking, no matter how hopeless the task.

Resilience.

Tony pats Steve’s thigh. “We could go to that place I told you about, if you still want. It’s okay if
you changed your mind.”

“No, I want to go. Let’s go.”

“Alright.”

“Tony?”

“Yes?”

“When are we going to Stella’s house?”

“You’re excited to meet her.”

“I am. She seems like an interesting person.”

“She is. I was thinking we could go to Florence tomorrow. Then the day after, in the afternoon, we could leave.”

“Florence tomorrow sounds great,” Steve says, still smiling.

The drive to Bagno Vignoni isn’t long, and they’re both quiet in the car. They leave it in a small parking lot hidden between the trees when they arrive, and walk side by side towards the centre of the small town.

The place hasn’t changed much since the last time Tony was here. It was… thirteen years ago, yes. Before Iron Man, before everything. He came for the thermal baths. Pepper said he needed to relax. By the second day, he thought he’d die out of sheer boredom, but he had to admit that the town was nice.

Steve is taking pictures of a little patch of grass that’s covered with daisies. He lifts his gaze, points his finger and turns to Tony to say, “Hey, look!”

Tony looks, but he already knows what’s there.

Dozens of small, shallow, little rivulets of water have carved their way on the white rocky hill over the course of the centuries. None of them are deeper or wider than a few inches. The little river beds are orange with limestone and they coalesce into a small waterfall down the hill. The sound of the rushing water is soothing, and it gives the place an otherworldly atmosphere.

Steve is looking in the distance, at the woods covering the hill in front of the one they’re standing on.

He sits down on the rocky ground, and Tony follows him. He sees Steve look curiously at the little stream right in front of them and hesitate for a moment. Then, Steve shifts and reaches out with his hand, dips his fingers into the water.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s warm.”

“It’s thermal water. ‘Course it’s warm.”

“You said that. I didn’t realize… I don’t know why I didn’t make the connection. Didn’t expect it to be warm.”
“Feels nice, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah...”

Steve immerses his entire hand in the water, stretches out his fingers as much as the narrow limestone walls allow him. He looks at the water streaming past his hand, between his fingers, wetting the fine hair at his wrist.

He doesn’t say anything for a few minutes, and Tony gets distracted looking around, at the hill in front of them, at a couple of children playing a few feet away from where they’re sitting, at their grandfather promising ice cream for *merenda* if they behave.

When Tony’s gaze lands back on Steve, he sees the way his chest is heaving, how his arm is shaking while his hand is still under the water.

“Steve—”

Steve’s head snaps up, he looks at Tony, surprised, and a bit lost, eyes red.

“Tony, I—”

“Hey, hey, I’m sorry,” Tony hurries to say, “listen, we can just go—”

“No, I’m... that’s not... I’m not scared.”

“Steve—”

“It’s warm,” Steve says, like he really needs Tony to listen, to understand this. “It’s warm. It’s fine. It’s warm.”

“Steve, I don’t—”

“Not scared. Just surprised,” Steve says, taking his hand out of the water and cupping Tony’s face with it. Tony takes Steve’s wrist, just like that morning, and this time he doesn’t flinch back, he does the opposite, in fact: he leans in, and presses his forehead to Steve’s while he keeps caressing Tony’s face with his big, wet hand.

Tony doesn’t know what to do next but suddenly something breaks in the middle of his chest and he lets out a pained sob, because this, they could’ve had *this*. If it was kissing that Steve wanted, they could’ve had it.

“Steve—” Tony whispers, and god, his lips are so close. If he concentrates enough, he could recall the taste of Steve’s saliva perfectly, could almost feel it again on his tongue, the memory clear and exact.

“I’m here, hey, I’m here.”

“Do you remember when... do you remember the first day on the helicarrier when we... the engine was busted, and we—”

“I do, Tony, I do. You took out that guy that was shooting at me, remember?”

“Yes, and then the Chitauri, the way we did... I aimed the repulsors at your shield and you directed the beam against the Chitauri. Do you remember that? That was, it was, it was great, I thought it was great.”
“It was, Tony.”

“My point is. We can work together. And do... do things together. We can be... be like that.”

“Yeah. We can. Is that something you want?”

“Are we still talking about the team?”

“I don’t know. But we can. We could.”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

Tony lowers his head to Steve’s chest.

“Your heart is beating really fast.”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m—”

“It’s a strange day.”

Steve hugs him tight, and Tony can feel him brush a kiss to his forehead.

“You know... after you flew the nuke into the portal, and the Hulk woke you up... I think that was when I realized how awful it would’ve been if you were dead. That I didn’t want that. That I cared about you.”

“You never said anything.”

“You were with Pepper back then, I didn’t—”

There’s a long pause, filled only by the rustling of the wind, by the rushing of the water, by the distant voices of children playing in the sunlight.

“Steve, can I ask you something?”

“’Course you can.”

“Do you think... do you think we make each other better?”

“I don’t know, Tony. I just hope you will allow me the chance to earn your friendship back. That one day you’ll look at me and see past what I kept from you, what I did to you. But to answer your question, I only know how I feel. And I know that I’m not half as good at... at anything as I am when I’m doing it next to you.”

“Steve—”

“Wait, let me say this. I don’t know if I make you better. So I don’t know if we make each other better. But I know that you—you, Tony, you make me better.”

“How?”

“You’re not afraid of me, of calling me out on my bullshit. The whole Captain America thing, you respect it, but you don’t let it stop you from telling me what you really think. I think we’re both stubborn, but about different things. I think that in many ways we’re opposites, but I also think that at our core we’re not that different. We fight for the same things. We believe in the same things. And maybe we have different methods, maybe we see the world in different ways, but if we trust each
other... then we can turn these differences into our strengths, instead of our weaknesses. And if we do, no alien threat stands a chance against us.”

“Wow. You’ve thought about this a lot.”

“I’m not just here to provide eye candy, you know.”

“You’re really full of surprises.”

“I count that as a compliment, futurist.”

Tony laughs, cups his hands in the water stream and washes his face. It’s not refreshing, but it’s clean water, and it takes away the sweat and the fatigue of having his emotions always so close to the surface.

He gets up, extends his hand towards Steve.

“Let’s go see Piazza delle Sorgenti.”

“What does that mean?”

“Square of Sources. As in, of water.”

“Is it like a big square with lots of fountains?”

“Not at all. You’ll see.”

Steve takes Tony’s hand and gets up. He keeps holding it the whole time they walk.

***

Piazza delle Sorgenti turns out to be really a peculiar place, as Tony had said.

The first thing Steve sees turning the corner of the street that leads into the square is a big, rectangular space, delimited by old buildings on all sides. There are pots of flowers at the windows and trees visible from behind a courtyard wall. There’s a little church in a corner, and a portico on the opposite side of the square.

But what really impresses Steve is what’s in the middle of the square, because it’s not a fountain, it’s not many fountains, or a well, or anything of the sort.

It’s a big, rectangular tank full of very limpid water.

Sort of like a pool, but at the same time absolutely nothing like a pool.

The closest thing Steve can think of is the Lincoln Memorial Pool in D.C. but this is… completely different in so many ways.

The sun reflects on the water and makes it shine so brightly that Steve has to squint a bit, while Tony slides his sunglasses back on.

“Cool, huh? 16th century,” Tony says, “this is the source of the thermal water. There’s a subterranean aquifer here. Volcanic, in origin.”

“This is so… evocative.”
“It’s very pretty, yeah.”

“Do you mind if I draw for a while?”

“Not at all.”

They sit on the little stone wall that delimits the tank, and while Steve works on his sketches, Tony taps at his phone, probably getting some work done.

“Barnes is out of surgery,” Tony says, quietly, after a few minutes. “Sedating him to attach the arm proved to be quite the challenge. Predictably. They wanted to call it off, but he said he could take it. He’s in a lot of pain right now.”

“Oh.”

“So if you want to, I don’t know, think about him, or send him some, uh, good thoughts, or even a, a prayer, I guess… I don’t know. I don’t know what, but if you want, that could be—”

Steve leans forward and twines his fingers with Tony’s.

“Thank you,” he says, softly.

So he does what Tony said, and he thinks about Bucky, about all the stupid shit they did together when they were kids, and all the pain and the loss too, and he hopes more than anything that this is the last time Bucky will be hurt like this, that after this last effort things will look up for him, that after this last wound he will have peace and a chance to heal, and Natasha’s arms to welcome him and keep him safe every night.

He hopes that God listens to him, and grants Steve Rogers this one wish, the only thing he can pray for without feeling selfish and arrogant.

He tilts his head towards Tony, and Tony looks up at his face, then rests his cheek against Steve’s bicep. “He’s gonna be fine. He’s gonna be fine,” he says.

Steve squeezes Tony’s hand just a bit harder than before.

“How’d you feel... how’d you feel when Rhodey... when he—”

“When he fell?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t remember how I felt while he was falling. I was scared, I think, but I thought I’d catch him. I tried to. So that wasn’t the worst part. The worst part was when he hit the ground. The sound he made... I have nightmares about the sound he made.”

Tony closes his eyes, and Steve studies his face, because he doesn’t want the memory to take over Tony’s mind.

“The worst part were those seconds between the moment he hit the ground and when I ripped his faceplate away. The worst part was seeing him unconscious. Thinking he was... That was the worst part.”

Tony opens his eyes. “That was the worst part,” he repeats, out of breath.

Steve wonders if Rhodey has heard from Sam at all.
He wonders if that’s the one thing Sam, as brave as he is, can’t quite bring himself to do just yet.

Steve decides that he’s bold enough to ask, and he does.

“Not yet,” Tony replies, “but if you talk to Sam, tell him... tell him that Rhodey’s number’s still the same. And he’d be glad to hear from him.”

“I will,” Steve says.

They walk around the little town for another hour or so, stop at a café to get iced tea.

“So,” Steve starts, “I read the chapter from Stella’s book.”

“Oh, right. I almost forgot. What do you think?”

“I think that it’s a very beautiful story.”

“But?”

“But?”

“I’m sensing a but.”

“Alright. But, I don’t think it’s the whole story.”

“How do you mean? Why?”

“Because I’ve seen you.”

“Seen me?”

“You keep something in the drawer of your bedside table, under all my drawings. I don’t know what it is, but it’s in an envelope, so I’m guessing it’s a letter. It’s blue, but it smells like dust, so it’s old. I’ve seen you put it back in the drawer as soon as I came into the room a couple of times.”

“Steve—”

“And the necklace. You never had it before. You put it on when we go out, every time; even now you have it on, but as soon as we get home it disappears.”

“Steve—”

“You don’t have to tell me. I’m just saying. I’m not stupid.”

“You’re one of the most intelligent people I’ve ever met.”

What.

“Tony, I—”

“She always wore lipstick. She never left the house without, and even when she stayed home she’d wear it often. She’d kiss my cheek and leave a trace. Sometimes I’d be annoyed by that. Now I’d give anything for...” Tony looks down and presses his lips together in a thin line, sets his jaw. “I don’t know why I’m fixating on such a stupid detail, but the book mentions the first time my mom wore lipstick in her life and I... I can’t—”

“My mom would wear hers only on Sunday. It was peach. The color, I mean. The only one she
“Mom had different colors, but all the same brand. Dior.”

Silence stretches between them for a while. Tony looks immersed in thought, and Steve lets him be. Then he turns, and looks at Steve to get his attention.

“The letter is from my mom. The last she wrote to Stella. Two days before her death. I guess she didn’t have time to mail it, maybe Jarvis forgot to do it, with the funeral and everything.” He pauses, touches his chest. “The necklace was my mom’s. It was one of her favourites; she’d wear it all the time. She had tons of jewels, infinitely more pricey, and yet she always... So I thought maybe it was something personal for her. Something that has to do with Stella, maybe, and their relationship.”

“But the book doesn’t mention a necklace.”

“There’s an Italian version of the book. It’s old and out of print, and I didn’t have the time to track down a copy, but I know that it’s different from the one published in the States. Maybe it’s about this, maybe not. I’m here to find out.”

“And she said she’d tell you?”

“Yes. She seems very eager, too.”

“Why?”

“I think there’s something that didn’t make it to the books, regardless of the version. I think she kept it to herself for years, and maybe only shared it with her wife. But Laura died in 2013, and Stella is eighty years old. I think she wants to leave someone who knows this story in the world.”

“Guess that someone is gonna be you.”

“Us. It’s gonna be us.”

“Are you sure, Tony? It seems like it’s none of my business.”

“I want you to be there.”

“Why?”

“To see what you do.”

“Like a test?”

“No. More like an experiment. See what happens.”

“Alright,” Steve says, after thinking about it for a little while. “If you’re sure… alright.”

“You know,” Tony says, “you’ve said I admit to my mistakes. Sam... when I went to the Raft, I told him I’d been wrong about this whole thing, and he said, ‘That’s a first’. But you don’t think that.”

“I don’t—”

“I know why he said that. He doesn’t know me very well, maybe he just wanted to lash out against me, but... I keep thinking about it.”

“You really do, though, Tony. People always talk about your ego, but they don’t know you. They
don’t know anything about you.”

“And you? Do you know me?”

“It’s been a process, that’s for sure. But even back when we first met, I knew you weren’t the Tony Stark of the newspapers.”

“It’s fucked up, that I have to keep up this fake image but… I can’t think of ever going out there without this particular armor. Feed my real self to those sharks, I can’t do it.”

“If you ask me, it’s fucked up that they won’t leave you be, but it’s good that you have a way to protect yourself. As tiring as it may be.”

Tony smiles.

“So, what do you wanna do now? We go back home?”

“Why do you call it home?”

“You said it first.”

Tony gives him a confused look.

“Yesterday, in Siena, when we were walking back to the car. When you weren’t, uh… feeling well. You said that. You asked me to take you home.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go, then, shall we?”

***

Tony drives, and Steve is quiet in his seat. The sun is still up; the countryside appears still and silent, a desert full of hidden life. The wheat glimmers under the scorching light of the sun; the asphalt too. The trees are so motionless they seem painted against the empty sky.

They enter the guest house, and Tony closes the door and leans back against it, his hands behind his back. Steve turns once he realizes Tony isn’t following him to the bedroom, and walks back a few steps. He’s very tall, but Tony doesn’t feel intimidated. He doesn’t feel scared.

Steve is really tall. And large. His arms are… huge.

He distractedly thinks that he’d like for Steve to come closer. Maybe brace one hand against the door, next to Tony’s head. Steve would smirk, and then blush a little. Tony would lift his face towards him, slowly, and—

“Something wrong?”

“No, I just... I was just thinking... you’re a good person too, Steve. I don’t... I’m still angry and—”

Tony sighs, because this is unexpectedly hard to get out. “I’m still mad at you. But I don’t think that keeping that thing from me makes you a bad person. I don’t think you’re bad, and I don’t think you’re bad to me.”

“I hurt you, though.”
“Yeah. Very much. That’s true. But the reason why you did it—did you do it to hurt me? I don’t think so, right?”

“No, of course, I wanted to… I don’t know. I wanted to tell you, but I was dreading it. I was selfish, in a way, because I didn’t want to be the one who told you. But hurting you was never my intention.”

Tony nods.

“But beating you up… that was… I don’t wanna say worse, ‘cause you’re the judge of that, but… I just left you there. I left you there.”

Tony sighs, and thinks of something to say in response, but the seconds stretch between them until the silence becomes too long. “Let’s go clean up,” he says instead.

It is a bit awkward, in the bedroom. Steve looks at him with anticipation, openly, as if waiting for Tony to say something, decide something, give him a clue.

Tony thinks about yesterday, the way he felt while Steve guided him into the bathtub with him. The warm water lulling them both like the most affectionate nanny. Steve’s hand, so big against his own. Steve’s skin never got wrinkled, not even after an hour in the water.

He thinks about Steve’s legs circling him, about Steve’s—

He thinks about Steve’s hands on him, in the shower, washing him so delicately, almost reverently. The way he shined, maybe only in Tony’s mind.

“You can take the first shower, if you want,” Tony says, abruptly, quickly, before his brain can pull some stupid shit on him and give him ideas he definitely cannot entertain.

Steve isn’t a good actor. As painfully ironic as it sounds Steve really isn’t a good liar. But he manages to keep his face very neutral after Tony speaks, the clench in his jaw is almost unnoticeable, the sigh he lets out only a fraction louder than usual.

It’s an implosion.

Steve looks at him; his eyes wander from Tony’s face down to his chest, his stomach. “Alright,” he says. He picks up some clothes and shuts the bathroom door softly, but it feels like repressed anger, squashed hope, a need left unsatisfied.

Tony opens the drawer of his bedside table. The movement makes Steve’s sketches slide one over the other. He can see just a corner of the envelope, yellowed out by time despite the blue of the paper.

He closes the drawer.

Suddenly he regrets letting Steve wash up first. His skin feels clammy and sticky with sweat, his t-shirt clings to his undershirt, and he can feel the sweat under it, too uncomfortable to be bearable anymore.

He strips down to his boxers, kicks the rug away and sits down on the floor, the cold cotton tiles refreshing against the back of his thighs. He puts his mother’s necklace back in the drawer.

He calls Rhodey.
“Hey.”

“Hey. How tired are you on a scale from zero to the day I told everyone that I was Iron Man?”

“Tired enough that I can’t even joke about it. He stopped screaming five minutes ago. Nat was about to lose it.”

“How are they now?”

“He passed out, and she’s—wait—yep, she fell asleep on the chair. It’s been awful, Tony. He white-knuckled it, maybe even had it worse once or twice in his messed-up life, but it’s been a fucking nightmare.”

“I’m so sorry. I wish there was another way. If Bruce were here, maybe we could’ve found a way to sedate him… I don’t know.”

“For what it’s worth, he doesn’t blame you. No one does. So don’t start all on your own.”

“Right. And the BARF?”

“All set up. He’ll start the first session when he’s ready. There’s an entire team of trauma experts ready to follow him step by step.”

“Alright. Alright. Listen… you could maybe hear from Sam in the next couple of days. Maybe.”

“Oh. Right.”

“You don’t have to talk to him if you don’t want to.”

“No, no. ‘Course I want. Of course.”

Tony can almost hear him frown through the phone.

Steve steps out of the bathroom, already dressed. He looks at Tony sitting on the floor.

“Gotta go shower and make dinner. This super soldier isn’t gonna feed himself.”

“Alright. I’ll keep you posted on the situation here.”

“You do that, honey bear. Bye.”

“Bye, Tones.”

Tony locks his phone, the click loud in the room. Steve gives him a hand up, and Tony makes a point not to linger with his fingers tangled with Steve’s. It’s stupid and pointless, but it gives him an impression of control over his feelings. He still treasures the moments when he’s able to keep his distance from Steve, to deny himself to him.

“Barnes is sleeping it off. It’s over.”

“It’s only just started, more like it.”

Tony grimaces and nods.

Steve looks at him, and his eyes wander from Tony’s face and down to his chest again, hesitate over the arc reactor and the scar, dip as low as Tony’s stomach; then reality seems to slam back into Steve,
and he jerks his gaze away and up, fixing it back to Tony’s face, although nowhere near his eyes.

A very pink blush spreads over Steve’s cheeks, his neck, his ears.

Tony fakes a cough. “I better go—” he says, pointing distractedly to the bathroom.

“Yeah. Yeah of course,” Steve replies, and moves out of Tony’s personal space.

A minute later, Tony steps under the spray of the shower, letting the hot water soothe his muscles and wash away the unpleasant sweat still clinging to him. He always hates the feeling of the skin sticking together at the back of his knees, in the inside of his elbows. The cleaner he is, the calmer he becomes, until he feels a strange warmth curling low in his belly, a pull at the base of his spine.

It takes him an embarrassingly long time to realize it has nothing to do with his shower, and a lot to do with the way Steve’s cheeks tinged with pink just now.

He looks down at himself, and sure enough, his cock is slowly filling out with blood. He touches it dubiously, tugs at it lazily, but despite the nice spark of pleasure it gives him for a moment, it soon goes back to hanging limply between his thighs.

“Shit,” he murmurs, and hopes the water swallows his voice enough so that Steve doesn’t burst into the bathroom with a worried face.

This has been happening for months, and not even that often. He’d think about someone, even someone who doesn’t exist, just a warm body on top of his—and there it is, his cock getting mildly interested, and then, as soon as Tony tries to do something about it...

Nothing. It leaves him as quick as it started. It’s so fast that he doesn’t even really have the time to be truly disappointed about it, or lament the loss of his barely-there erection.

But it’s okay. It happens. It’ll come back when he feels better.

And it’s not like he’d masturbate, even if he were able to. Keeping quiet would be quite the feat for Tony, but Steve would hear him in any case. The slap of skin against skin, the bracelet scraping over his right wrist. Steve could smell it, no matter how quickly Tony cleaned up the tiles.

So it’s not a problem. At all. Why is Tony even thinking about this? There’s no point.

He shuts the water off and stands there for a while, until the droplets running down his skin make him ticklish and uncomfortable. He dries off quickly; it’s too hot to keep the towel on more than necessary, and he gets dressed, even though he’d prefer not to have to.

The arc reactor shines through the fabric. He taps at it, and heads for the kitchen. Steve is on the couch, typing something on his phone. Talking to Sam, maybe.

Tony gets to work. He takes the fish (four gilt-head breams) out of the fridge, cuts off the heads and cleans the entrails out. It grosses him out a bit; it always does. Mom used to be grossed out too, and maybe he is only because she was. As if she didn’t teach him just the recipe, but the attitude behind the actions as well.

He adjusts the fish on the oven tray, over a sheet of greaseproof paper. He cuts even, round slices of lemon. He walks out on the porch with the scissors and gets a few herbs. He wants to mince them as fine as possible with the garlic, so he opens a couple of cupboards in search for the little mixer he knows must be somewhere. It pokes out from the top shelf. He tries to reach it, unsuccessfully. He tries again, goes on his tiptoes, strains and stretches as much as he can. Fuck it.
A big hand appears, seemingly out of nowhere. It grabs the offending little thing and gently places it on the counter.

Steve’s warmth radiates off of his chest and onto Tony’s back. He’s not touching Tony, he’s very careful about not touching Tony.

Tony thinks that maybe he should feel trapped. Steve’s body behind him, Steve’s arm, with his hand on the counter, still blocking one of Tony’s sides.

But he doesn’t feel trapped. It’s a different feeling. Not protected, exactly, not really safe, but…

He turns, and Steve is closer than Tony thought. He’s looking down at him in a curious way. A smile dances on his face.

Tony splays a hand over Steve’s stomach, but he doesn’t push him away, and Steve doesn’t move.

“Thank you,” Tony says, breathless.

“You’re very welcome,” Steve replies, charmingly, while a shy grin blossoms on his lips.

Tony tries to take a step back, but the kitchen blocks him.

The oven. He needs to preheat the oven.

“I—”

Tony has no idea what he wants to say. Steve keeps looking at him. Then, he squints, and tilts his head to the side, as though some weird thought has occurred to him, and he’s trying to reason his way out of it.

Tony licks his lips. God, how he wishes he could have some wine right now, take the edge off of whatever this day has been.

“The oven—” he says, and Steve face unclouds in such a noticeable way that it’s almost funny.

“Of course,” he says, and steps back.

Tony twists on his feet and turns the oven on. He pushes the herbs in the mixer and presses down on the button, lets the loud noise it makes cancel reality for a few seconds.

With a spoon, he adjusts the herbs inside the fish, then places the slices of lemon over their sides.

He swallows, because he can still feel Steve’s presence behind him, the even rhythm of his breathing, his searching gaze. Curious, but not invasive.

“If you peel the potatoes, I’ll cut them up. So we can roast them,” Tony says, without looking at Steve.

Silently, Steve appears next to Tony. “Yeah. Tell me what to do.”

Dinner proceeds smoothly from there, and Tony lets himself be proud of his cooking when Steve wolfs down everything Tony puts on his plate.

They move to the couch after loading the dishwasher, and Steve zaps through the channels before settling on The Sound of Music. Tony doesn’t really pay attention to it, but after he stops working on his tablet, the movie picks up some of his attention. Not really out of a conscious decision, he
stretches on the couch and places his head on Steve’s lap.

“Is this okay?” he asks, twisting to look at Steve during the commercial break.

“Yes,” Steve answers immediately.

Tony takes one of Steve’s hands, and brings it in front of himself, guides it over the arc reactor. He rests his own hand on top of Steve’s.

The light pressure feels nice. Sometimes, when he lies on his side, he becomes uncomfortably hyper-aware of this thing in his chest, and pressing a hand over it takes the edge off of this specific flavor of anxiety. Steve’s hand is so big.

Tony must fall asleep at some point, because he wakes up in bed some time later, still dressed. His clothes are clinging to him again; it’s so hot in the bedroom. Steve forgot to open the French window.

He picks up his phone, and there’s a two-hour-old text from Peter saying he’s home from patrol and totally alright, Mr. Stark.

Steve moans softly, caught, for just a moment, in that weird place between still being asleep and waking up. Dormiveglia.

Tony gets up from the bed to take off his pants and t-shirt, drapes them over a chair. He opens the French window and stands there for a few minutes, letting the breeze cool his skin, dry away the thin layer of sweat covering him. It’s a slow process, because the air is stifling even in the middle of the night. He should install air conditioning, but every time he thinks about it he feels queasy, like he’s thinking about disrupting the natural order of things.

“Oh.”

Steve.

Tony turns and sees him sitting up on the bed, squinting in the darkness, the blanket bunching up in his lap. His mouth is slightly open, and his breath gets caught in his chest with a horrible sound.

“Oh, Tony,” he says, and it’s torn off of him with a violence of which Tony can’t see the origin, or understand the reason.

Steve extends a shaky arm towards him, and there’s a split second of indecision before Tony goes to it. He kneels on the bed, walks on his knees across the mattress until he can take Steve’s hand in his own.

Steve touches him with a hard caress, his fingers pressing into Tony’s skin, the place where his right nipple used to be, his collarbone, his neck. Steve’s hand settles on Tony’s throat with the thumb on one side and the rest of his fingers on the other, and Tony disturbingly wonders how much more pressure Steve would need to apply to squeeze the life out of him, to break his neck and finish him. He knows the physics of it, but would it even register for Steve?

His grip isn’t tight, but it’s by no means loose, either. Tony, again, doesn’t feel trapped or threatened; he’s not really safe, maybe, but he’s being... held.

He sits on his heels and Steve presses his forehead to his.

“What’s bothering you? Hey. Talk to me?” Tony whispers, swallowing, and feeling it against
Steve’s hand; Steve closes his eyes and gulps the air in, but it gets stuck in his throat every time.

“I almost had you. Almost. I tasted you just once,” Steve chokes out, and Tony doesn’t know how much of it is a metaphor and how much of it is unrestrained, carnal desire, the simplest pornography.

Tony raises his hands to Steve’s face—he’s not crying. Tony brushes his fingers over Steve’s lips, and he gasps, startled by the touch, by how much he craves this contact. Tony feels minuscule kisses being pressed against his fingertips.

“I’m sorry I wouldn’t hug you today.”

Steve shakes his head. “You already know, right? You already know how this is gonna end.”

Tony does. But it shifts away from him from time to time, doubt kicks him in the face and forces him to reconsider all the variables, go over all the fluctuating pieces of data again and again until he’s nauseated by it. How much of it is a well-pondered decision, how much of it is his own unrestrained, carnal desire for Steve’s skin on his, Steve’s lips, Steve’s raw attraction for him. How much of it is the ineluctability of being so desperately, masochistically in love.

Steve releases Tony’s throat and buries his face into Tony’s collarbone, inhaling as deeply as he can, and Tony spares a thought to marvel at Steve’s lung capacity. Tony couldn’t breathe even half as long.

“I don’t want to be just a stain on your life,” he says, leaning back, holding Tony’s face between his gigantic hands. Tony looks at him, because this is the most important thing Steve has ever told him. “I don’t want to be only a bad memory, I want to be real, don’t... Please. Don’t let me just fade away.”

Tony wants to answer, but every word dies in his throat. He can’t promise that, *Steve, Steve, I can’t promise you that.*

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Steve says urgently, and Tony wonders if he has inadvertently said something out loud. “Listen. Despite all our back and forth... and all the things we’ve said and done to each other, I want you to know... I—”

“Steve.” Tony wants him to consider this carefully. He can’t take this back.

“I’m sure about this. If there’s one thing I’m sure of, is this. Let me say it. Let me.”

Tony searches his face for any sign of wavering resolve, but finds none.

“I want you to know,” Steve starts again, “That despite my actions, I’ve loved you more than anything else in this life, and that I love you now, and that I always will.”

Tony feels his eyes water and his heart skip a beat. He shakes his head between Steve’s hands.

“I know, don’t say anything, there’s no need. I just wanted to say it,” Steve clarifies in a calm voice that seemed impossible just a moment ago. “I just wanted you to know,” he says in the end, and the last thing Tony thinks before falling back asleep in Steve’s warm embrace, is that this is selfish in the most altruistic way, and altruistic in the most selfish way.

Which is very, deeply *Steve.*

***
Steve can’t sleep, so he holds Tony close to his chest and protects him from invisible monsters, trying not to wonder if he’s one of them.

Images flash across his mind, and not for the first time (nor, he believes, for the last) Steve wishes he could forget something he’s seen.

Tony’s disappointed face, his rage, his hatred for Steve, for the way he manipulated him and hid the truth from him. But also Tony’s soft gaze after the Hulk revived him in New York, the way he asked Steve, Wanna see something cool? before trying to make him sign the Accords with an old, beautiful pen.

The shape of Tony’s body against the moonlight coming in through the French window destroys something inside Steve; it’s heartbreaking and exquisite, terrifying and wonderful. An explosion, the controlled demolition of an abandoned building. It collapses on itself and brings an uncanny satisfaction with it.

Tony’s silk boxers make him look almost more exposed than he’d be if he were naked, to Steve’s eyes—still prim in some ways. How sharp and taut all his muscles seem under the perennial light of the reactor. How much Steve wishes Tony would let him slide a hand under the soft silk to free him of all his worries, of that awful tension lodged between his shoulder blades. He’d press a hand over Tony’s mouth to keep his screams from being too loud, and he’d use his knee to stroke Tony’s balls through his orgasm. And Tony would look at him afterwards, and let out a sated sigh through his smiling lips, and Steve would kiss him, and Tony would love him back.

He feels a spike of guilt for what he said to Tony, but it’s true that his love for Tony knows no comparison.

He comes to terms with it in an unplanned moment of mercy for himself: he’s spent more time with Tony than he ever spent with Peggy, he knows him more intimately than he ever had the chance to know her. He wanted to be inside her just as much as he wants to be inside Tony now; he dreamed about doing to her the same things he wants to do to Tony now, even though back then he’d blush at these thoughts, because it was unbecoming of a nice fella like him to think such things about his girl. He wouldn’t have those qualms now, he sure doesn’t have them for Tony. He knows Peggy wanted him just as bad, he knows Tony would too, if not for Steve’s betrayal. He knows Tony did want him, that night.

But the love, the love is different, and he understands it only now. Because his love for Peggy stays there, unchanged, unchangeable, a bullet that didn’t kill him but it’s lodged into his heart forever, a cut that has stopped bleeding at some point, and won’t bleed again. A perfect blossom that will never grow into anything else, that will never be touched, that will never wilt and die. Crystallized in time. Frozen.

His love for Tony is nothing like that. His love for Tony keeps changing and growing and taking different shapes in his mind; it’s been coming and going in waves, perfectly timed with Steve first realizing that he was falling for someone else, with his faltering acceptance that he wasn’t betraying Peggy, that it was okay to love a man, that he wouldn’t need to keep it secret if he ever had a relationship with him.

His love for Tony changes every day; every day it becomes different and amazing; it’s an endless puzzle to which Steve adds a piece every day, to make it bigger and stronger and more complex and articulated.

And what’s missing, the only thing that’s missing, is Tony adding his own pieces, contributing to the growth with the same passion Steve has. And maybe someday Tony’s lack of help will become too
much for Steve, and he won’t be able to do it all alone any longer. If Tony rejects him, maybe one
day Steve will stop loving him too, and move on. It hasn’t happened yet.

But the difference itself, the discrepancy in the way Steve loves, that’s not Peggy’s fault, or Tony’s,
or even Steve’s. It’s just the facts, the way things went. If a cruel destiny hadn’t separated them, he
knows his love for Peggy would have grown into this, too.

But it’s Tony, instead.

It’s Tony that eats at his soul in the dead of night; it’s Tony he thinks about when he’s restless and
the heat between his thighs just won’t go away. It’s thoughts of Tony that erode him, consume him
bit by bit like millennia of rain have done to the mountains.

He looks at Tony’s face while he sleeps and focuses his hearing on Tony’s regular breathing, on the
steady beat of his heart. Steve’s eyelids are suddenly too heavy, and soon he can’t keep his eyes
open any longer.


Chapter End Notes

on Twitter

on Tumblr
Day 7

Chapter Notes

Warnings: description of food made from animals / mild self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony struggles to wake up.

The darkness of the cave feels much more comforting and pleasant than the other side, where the sun is already invading the room with its blinding brightness and making it too hot for Tony’s liking.

Inside the cave, instead, the temperature is just right. Maybe it’s a bit too humid, but Tony has his suit on, so it doesn’t bother him all that much.

He arrives in a part of the cave he’s not been to yet. It’s huge, and Tony wonders how deep inside the Earth he’s gone. He looks up, but can’t tell how far the ceiling is, exactly. It could be miles.

Steve is still nowhere to be seen. Tony misses him. He wants him close, wants to hold his hand and make sure he’s alright. He hopes Steve’s alright.

Someone shouts.

*Steve!* Tony screams. *Steve, where are you?*

There’s no answer.

*Hold on!* he says. *I’ll find you!*

Tony wakes up.

*It’s been a week,* Tony thinks while he lies in bed watching Steve sleep. They separated during the night; maybe Tony felt too hot so close to Steve. Even right now, Steve’s warmth seeps through the mattress, it radiates off of him. It’s strange. Steve is completely dressed and covered with his blanket, and watching him Tony expects him to be cold to the touch, but he isn’t. He only feels cold.

Tony rubs his eyes, and looks at Steve, fast asleep, his blond hair spread over the white linen of the sheets, his thin top lip hidden by his mustache. His beard looks tidy and clean, but Tony has never seen him take care of it at all. Lucky bastard.

Steve’s words from last night reverberate inside Tony’s rib cage, behind his heart.

*More than anything else in this life,* and Tony knows Steve means this earthly life, not just after waking up from the ice. He means his entire life.

Tony muses over getting up and maybe bringing breakfast in bed for Steve, but when he starts debating with himself if it would look too romantic as a gesture, and if Steve could mistake it for an acceptance of his feelings or a declaration of Tony’s own, Steve sucks in a breath, and wakes up immediately and completely, as he often does.
He stares at the ceiling.

“Good morning,” Steve says, with a clipped tone that Tony isn’t particularly thrilled about. His body is kind of rigid, and he pulls away from Tony, just enough to be noticeable.

“Hi. You alright?”

“Yeah, just, just a weird dream,” Steve says around a forced smile.

Then, it happens.

Tony shifts on the bed, closer to Steve; he twists around so he’s stomach down on the mattress and pushes himself up on his hands, near Steve’s shoulder. He stares down at Steve, who seems to have his head glued to the pillow. Steve stares back, eyes wide. He parts his lips.

There’s a bizarre perplexity on Steve’s face, like he’s never seen Tony before. Like Tony is something that astonishes and terrifies him at the same time, and Tony wants to... he wants to...

He doesn’t know why he’s this close to Steve right now, there’s no reason for him to be this close, it’s just—

“It’s early. We can go to Florence if you still want to,” Tony hears himself say, but Steve doesn’t reply. Steve doesn’t do anything at all.

Everything is very still for a moment, a heartbeat that never happens.

Then Tony asks, “You sure you’re alright?”

And while he asks that, he moves one hand from the mattress to place it over Steve’s chest.

Just a reassuring touch, you know.

Friendly, even. Just, normal.

But Tony, for some unknown reason—maybe he’s still sleepy, maybe it’s the blanket covering Steve, maybe it’s the fact that he’s drowning in the blue of Steve’s eyes, maybe it’s whatever the fuck else—miscalculates their bodies’ reciprocal positions, and his hand lands more on Steve’s lower belly than his chest, or even his stomach.

Steve jolts.

No, actually, it’s more like... more like a brutal convulsion that goes through him once, twice.

Tony draws his hand back, as if he’s been burned.

Steve squeezes his eyes shut, grits his teeth, clenches his jaw, hard.

All his muscles are pulled taut, and he’s not breathing at all for what seems like a very long time.

His hips stutter, and all the tension is released at once, in an ugly groan that he tries to stifle with all his might.

He’s red in the face now, and he presses the heels of his hands over his eyes.

Wha—
Oh.

Oh.

“St—”

“I am. So sorry. I’m, I’m sorry, I’m, I’m mortified, I… Shit.”

Tony wants to say something reassuring, but the only thing he can think of is wildly inappropriate and rampantly vulgar, so it comes straight out of his mouth.

Obviously.

“You came in my ass once, it’s not a big deal.”

Silence stretches on between them, and Tony is panicking and scrambling to find something else to say, but Steve snorts, huffs a small laugh and—

It’s just a second, really, just a quick flash on his face, but Steve looks happy, really happy, like he doesn’t have a single care in the world.

He laughs, more and more, and Tony chuckles too, and feels his face warm up with it.

Steve kicks the blanket away, swings his legs over the side of the bed, and Tony is hit by the smell of it and his mind is suddenly filled with images of himself kneeling in front of Steve, hooking his fingers on Steve’s waistband and dragging the sweatpants down around his ankles, licking at Steve’s groin and tasting a deep white heaven on his tongue.

“Mind if I take a shower?” Steve asks, low and kind of breathy.

“Go ahead, of course. So, about Florence…?”

“Yes. Yes to Florence.”

Steve seems to be about to get up, but then he hesitates and turns to face Tony. He’s not laughing at all now.

“I’m really sorry. I was having a stupid dream.” There’s bitterness in his voice now, just a hint, but Tony can hear it.

Tony shrugs, and gives Steve what he sincerely hopes is an encouraging smile. “That’s not your fault, Steve. Don’t worry. These things happen, right?”

“Right,” Steve agrees, and his nostrils flare with the breath he lets out.

“Go wash up. I’ll make you breakfast.”

“Alright,” he says. Then, of course, “Thank you.”

He gets up after that, and shuts the bathroom door softly behind his back.

Tony heads to the kitchen to break five eggs in a glass and start the coffee.

***

Alright. So. That happened.
Steve’s first instinct, while the water washes over him, is to bang his head against the tiles as hard as he can. Then he remembers that would probably mean breaking the tiles themselves, and it doesn’t seem like a good idea anymore.

Hebreathes in deep, while what Tony said echoes through his head.

The words were spoken in such a straightforward way, he didn’t make a big deal out of what Steve did at all. He just laughed it off, but didn’t dismiss it with easy camaraderie. He referenced to their night together casually, but not regretfully or mockingly. He just mentioned it, described it simply but precisely, straight to the point.

It made Steve feel strangely accepted.

Tony didn’t seem disgusted or embarrassed or... anything, really. He was just surprised and maybe mildly amused.

Which is good.

But still, Steve… Steve came in his pants. And that was awkward.

Steve’s attempt at steadying his own breathing under the spray of the shower fails miserably, just like his effort not to think about the dream.

He closes his eyes and lets himself lose this battle against his own mind. The images come back to him in a smooth flow, it’s almost scary how precisely he can recall them, like dreaming them all over again. Like living them.

It’s the middle of the day, and he’s with Tony under the cherry tree. They’ve brought their blanket here, and they’re lying on it now, Tony under Steve, facing him.

Steve watches him, transfixed; kisses him, slow and languid, feels Tony’s tongue, warm and wet against his own. The vague taste of coffee and coconut.

Steve holds himself up with one arm, his free hand slides around to cup the back of Tony’s head, then travels down to caress his neck, his throat, his chest—the scar, the arc reactor.

The day is hot and the countryside all for them. No one is going to bother them here, the whole world is just for them.

Steve looks down at himself and he discovers that he’s naked, red and hard with want. Tony instead is still wearing his boxers, and Steve presses his hips against Tony’s, makes him groan in anticipation, feels his own heated skin slide over the silk in an obscene, perfect way. He leaves a stain on the fabric, and he moans at the sight.

He grabs Tony’s hips, hard, and Tony moans again. Steve lifts him up just a bit, lines himself up and then guides Tony down on his cock, steady, smooth, all in one go. When he bottoms out, Tony
draws a circle with his hips to make sure there’s nowhere further to go.

“Steve—” Tony breathes out in a lascivious little gasp.

He never calls him Cap here. Always Steve, only Steve.

Tony looks down at him, lovingly, his eyes flutter closed because the pleasure of having Steve inside him is too much. Tony drags a hand up from his stomach to his chest, caresses his own skin in such a sensual way that just watching him rips a groan out of Steve’s chest.

Tony has a ring on his finger. Steve knows his own name is carved inside it.

Steve notices, just then, that he’s wearing a ring too. He knows Tony’s name is carved inside it.

Tony starts moving, fucking himself so deliciously on Steve’s cock, with little teasing thrusts that drive Steve out of his mind. Steve’s balls draw in; his thighs shake.

Tony slows down and then stops. He rests one hand on Steve’s lower belly and bends over to kiss Steve. Then he rolls his hips, so slow and sweet that Steve—

Steve woke up and came in his pants.

He was almost sure he could avoid it, he just needed to find an excuse to run to the bathroom without making Tony suspicious or letting him see…

But then Tony touched him, on his abdomen, and for an absurd, annihilating second he thought—

And then it was all over. So. Yeah.

Steve forces himself to think about something else, because a cold shower doesn’t seem particularly appealing right now, and because he’s not sure he has the strength to bear the guilt of doing this again, of using images of Tony for his own pleasure without Tony’s consent or knowledge, because Tony is still angry with him and Steve feels sick at the thought of taking certain liberties. He probably wouldn’t, if their circumstances were different. But that doesn’t matter.

In his mind, he goes over the places he wants to see in Florence, wonders if they’ll manage to see the Uffizi Gallery or if Tony will be well and truly done with art after all the churches Steve wishes to visit. But if his behaviour up to this point is any indication of the future, Tony will probably just suffer in silence, retire to a corner of whatever room Steve is inspecting, and work on his phone when he thinks Steve can’t see him.

It’s not a problem for Steve. He wouldn’t force his own interests on someone else.

Tony appreciates art, but his regard is more theoretical, not passionate like Steve’s. Tony gets that with science, with technology, with the future he so clearly envisions in his mind and fights so strenuously to build.

They care about different things. Sometimes, they have different priorities. They see the world through different eyes, tinted in different ways.

But that doesn’t mean understanding isn’t possible.

Put yourself in the other person’s shoes. See the world the way they see it for a moment.

*Compromise where you can.*
Steve took the part of Sharon’s—or should he say Peggy’s?—speech that was most reassuring to him at that time and ran with it, but now he realizes he skipped over the most important bit: when you fight with someone or for something you love and care about, you compromise.

That’s why Tony sighs and fishes his phone out of his pocket while Steve stares at medieval frescos. That’s why Steve draws while Tony works on his tablet, or welds pieces of armor in his workshop.

That’s what Tony wanted him to do in Berlin; that was what FDR’s pen was meant to accomplish: compromise.

But Steve wouldn’t compromise, Steve refused to trust Tony’s advice and judgement, and it only led to that look, that look of unconditional and infinite betrayal, hurt, disgust, rage all mixed together on Tony’s face, all distilled into the vicious force of Tony’s first blow to Steve’s cheek.

Steve exits the shower stall, dries off, walks back to the bedroom to dress while the scent of coffee wafts through the room. He throws his dirty sleep clothes in the washing machine and starts the program.

He straightens his sweater while he enters the kitchen, but Tony looks at him and giggles.

“Your hair is a mess.”

Tony reaches up with his hands, and Steve hunches down to let Tony comb his fingers through the strands. Tony is concentrated on his task, and Steve tries not to stare at his lips while he can’t notice. Or close his eyes and bask in the sensation of Tony touching him so intimately. Maybe this is as intimate as they’re ever going to be.

“Thank you,” he says when Tony’s finished, and they sit at the kitchen table. “Can you tell someone to take care of my clothes later in the morning? They’re in the washing machine.”

“Of course,” Tony says, quickly tapping at his phone. “So, we’re going to visit Stella tomorrow. Is it still okay if we leave in the afternoon?” Tony asks, sipping his coffee.

“Yes. How do you feel about that? Meeting her, talking about your mother?”

“I spoke to her on the phone a few times. She seems… really nice.”

“Not what I asked.” Steve is careful about not pushing the subject too much if Tony doesn’t want to talk about it. He twirls his fork in his hand and attacks the piece of pie Tony put in front of him.

“I know, I know, I… I don’t know. I’m nervous, I guess. A bit scared. Mostly, just nostalgic. I miss her. Do you ever miss your mom?”

“All the time,” Steve says, covering Tony’s hand with his own. Tony turns his palm up, and stares at their fingers laced together, eyes wistful and unfocused.

Steve squeezes Tony’s hand. “We better get going, uh?”

“Yeah.”

Coming to visit Florence in late August probably wasn’t the best idea, Steve muses an hour and a half later while he and Tony make their way from the parking lot to the city center on foot. The city is crowded, hot, and confusing. Steve keeps an eye on Tony; he doesn’t want him to overheat again because of the undershirt he’s wearing.
They visit Piazza della Signoria and Palazzo Vecchio, and... Oh, everything is breathtaking.

The Duomo is amazing, and Giotto’s campanile is really impressive, but they decide not to go up because Tony looks a bit terrified at the suggestion. Steve spends way too much time staring at the mosaics inside the Baptistery—their shimmering gold almost seems like the only source of light—and at the sculpted panels of the doors, in such a vivid low relief that Steve can barely believe his own eyes. The interiors of the cathedral are rather simple compared to Siena’s, but Vasari’s fresco inside Brunelleschi’s Dome is so powerful that Steve squints at it with his enhanced sight until even his neck has enough of it. The Cupola itself is a work of genius; even Tony is fascinated, and Steve wonders how it must look to his eyes.

The only thing Steve doesn’t particularly love is how small the space around the Duomo is: the piazza suffers from it, the city presses in from all sides, doesn’t allow the building to breathe like it should.

By the time Steve is done staring at everything with his mouth hanging open, Tony looks like he’s about to bang his head on the first available wall that won’t get him in trouble with UNESCO. And Steve’s stomach grumbles.

“I wanna eat fiorentina,” Steve says while Tony is walking a couple of steps ahead of him, clearly with a destination in mind.

“We are not gonna eat fiorentina.” Steve can hear Tony’s eyes roll.

“Why not?”

“It’s not good in this part of the city, it’s way overpriced. For the tourists.”

“‘It’s way overpriced,’ said the billionaire who could literally buy all the restaurants in the city with the spare change in his pocket.”

“I don’t have change in my pocket, but I’ll give you ten grand if you shut up now.”

“Tempting offer, but the alternative is more entertaining. So, what are we gonna eat?”

“We’re going to eat something called panino col lampredotto. Lampredotto is the final part of the stomach of a cow. It’s chopped up and boiled and served in a sandwich dipped in broth, then it’s seasoned with lots of salt and pepper. You can top it with a spicy sauce or salsa verde, or both. It’s super good and I haven’t eaten it since, like, 1999, so we are going to eat it now.”

“Honestly, that sounds disgusting, and I grew up dirt poor in the 1920s.”

“It’s amazing. It only sounds disgusting. It’s spongy.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I... I don’t.”

Tony stops walking abruptly and turns to look at Steve, his mouth open as if he’d been about to say something else. Steve’s eyes go wide, and his words from last night now resonate inside him, a silent reminder that works more as cruel mockery.

Tony closes his eyes for a moment, and behind his red sunglasses Steve can see him fight against a
deep sadness, something that creases the corner of his eyes and makes his mouth go slack. He slowly
shakes his head, just once, as if to drive away a bad thought.

“Shit. I don’t hate you, Tony. I never have and never could.”

“You… you said that. I know that, but—”

“It was a stupid joke.”

“I know, I feel like... I’m such an idiot—”

“You’re not.”

“It comes and goes. Sometimes it’s fine, and then—”

“You don’t have to explain. It just wasn’t funny. What I told you last night, that’s the truth.”

Tony bows his head, nodding over and over. Steve can practically feel him turning the words into his
head, acquiring new confidence with them, with their tangibility, with the new reality they shape.

A reality where Steve loves him.

“Alright,” he says in the end, softly, and Steve has never wanted to kiss him more than right now,
here, in the middle of the most crowded street in Florence, while the sun shines inclement above
them and makes Tony sweat.

Steve lifts a hand to Tony’s face to cup his cheek, but then thinks better of it. He smiles and waits for
Tony to do the same.

“Come on,” he says then, “you promised me food.”

They walk through a market full of street vendors and people, until they reach a food cart. Tony
orders for them both when it’s their turn; he exchanges a few friendly words with the women at the
counter, and Steve has the distinct impression that they’re talking about him, who’s never eaten this
lampredotto thing and his whole life is about to change forever. Tony asks for seven panini, two for
Tony and five for Steve, which is definitely too much.

“Tony, isn’t that—” Steve starts, but Tony looks at him with an expression that doesn’t admit any
kind of protest, and Steve decides that he’s gonna trust Tony’s judgement.

As it turns out, lampredotto is fucking delicious.

The bread is crunchy outside and fluffy inside; the meat is spongy, but not in an unpleasant way. The
spices complement the other flavors in a perfect equilibrium.

They eat sitting across each other on a stone bench in a semi-desert public park, with the trees
shielding them from the sun and the noise of the city. The birds chirp above them and the breeze
makes Tony’s curls flutter. A stray ray of sunshine catches on the necklace half-hidden under Tony’s
shirt. He slips back into a good mood, and he shifts closer to Steve, but with the movement Tony’s
knee touches Steve’s. The pressure sends a spark to the base of Steve’s spine.

It could be the dream that morning, or what happened after he woke up, or Tony’s hand in his during
breakfast, or the way Tony’s tongue and lips curled around the softness of the sounds when he was
talking to the vendors—how smooth and seamless the words felt to Steve, who didn’t really
understand them. It could be how serene Tony looks right now, eating this theoretically disgusting
but actually awesome panino in big bites that make his cheeks bulge, as if being a bit gross is the only way to enjoy this kind of food; it could be any number of things, but Steve feels something heavy settle behind his navel and something warm tugging at the skin between his legs, and—

Oh no.

Not now, not again.

Shit.

Okay, okay. Steve tries to remain calm and be confident that he can contain the second disaster of the day. Possibly—ideally—without Tony noticing. Pretending to straighten his sweater, Steve covers his crotch with it, even though his jeans already hide most of his, uh, problem.

That’s when Tony speaks.

“I can’t believe you’re hard again.”

So much for everything Nat taught him about being stealthy.

“Please don’t say anything.”

“No, seriously, what did even set you off, there’s just those two older men playing cards besides us here, and I really hope—”

“Tony, please…”

“I should sell this story to some cheap tabloid with no compunction about defacing the reputation of a national icon.”

“Did enough defacing on my own, I think.”

“Nah. People still love you. I mean, some are calling you a war criminal, but… you know, in general.”

“What happened in Leipzig wasn’t bad PR enough?”

“Yeah, but… well. I guess people are divided on the issue. Some blame me, some blame you… but to a lot of folks you’re still Captain America, you know. It’s not something you can shake easily, that level of respect.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation… it’s gone.”

“The respect?”

“The, uhm, the erection.”

“Oh my god, Captain America said a sex word.”

“There, reputation ruined. Told you I could do it.”

“Nah, I just said, some people’s hearts still sing Who’s strong and brave, Here to save the American way?”

“Oh man, you know the words?”
“Dad had all the reels. If I was really really quiet I could sneak in his office when he watched them. I used to hide behind the ficus pot.”

“You’re not even a bad singer.”

“You think it’s too late for a career change?”

“Might be the final straw for Pepper, but you sure can try.”

***

They rest in the park for a while after lunch, while Steve draws and Tony talks about everything and anything that crosses his mind: new projects, old and half-forgotten ideas he could implement in a different way, this paper he read recently, how he figured out that one issue with the armor that he mentioned to Steve before everything went to absolute shit. Steve seems to barely listen to him, but then he asks a couple of pointed questions, proving he’s actually paying close attention to Tony’s chatter.

They visit more churches in the afternoon, but they can’t go inside one because restoration is underway. They go to Galleria degli Uffizi, where Steve spends way too much time looking at paintings, and then they go to Galleria dell’Accademia, where Steve spends way too much time looking at sculptures.

But he seems really happy, so Tony is… well. It’s good. It’s good to see Steve having a good time. It’s good to watch him be excited about things. Be himself.

And to be really honest, what happened at lunch was… kinda cute. In a weird way.

Steve’s panicked expression always puts Tony into a sort of damage control mode, so he’s glad he could minimize the issue. Steve’s body runs on a different wavelength than basically everyone else’s; he was made to be strong and durable, and his sexual prowess comes with the serum package. But the point is that Tony doesn’t want Steve to feel embarrassed about it, about who he is. Tony isn’t, so there’s no reason for Steve to be.

The whole truth, though, is that Tony is a bit envious. It’d be nice to get hard again, after so many months of almost nothing. He’d been worried at first, when it kept happening even when he was fully recovered from surgery. Then he talked about it with Rhodey, who said that it often happened to soldiers too, that it didn’t only occur as a result of sexual trauma or for medical reasons. He said maybe it was happening to Tony because of how he felt about Steve.

“How do I feel about Steve?” Tony had asked.

“Now you’re just insulting my intelligence,” Rhodey had replied, and Tony had to concede the point and let himself be hugged. He squeezed his eyes and pretended he wasn’t tearing up.

The memory makes Tony think of Rhodey for a moment, of the physical sensations he associates with him. If he closes his eyes, he can almost feel Rhodey’s familiar scent of almonds, like the bodywash he’s been using since before they met, at MIT, a billion years ago. He can feel Rhodey’s solidity, the consistency of his presence in Tony’s life. His unwavering love. His loyalty to Tony, his independence.

He just really fucking misses him. He got so used to having Rhodey close at the compound, to seeing him all the time, that being so far away now is just straight up painful. Over the phone, it’s just not the same, sometimes.
Tony makes a turn so they can walk through Ponte Vecchio to get back to the car, and if his surprised gasp is anything to go by, Steve didn’t know the bridge is full of jewelry shops.

He ends up buying a little jasper falcon for Sam. In the car, he looks at it with melancholic eyes, and Tony realizes that Steve must miss Sam, badly, probably as much as Tony misses Rhodey.

Sam is one of the very few people Steve has genuinely bonded with after coming out of the ice, and being separated now must be awful. Steve doesn’t love easily, but when he does, he loves hard and viscerally.

Tony could send Sam a text. Have him come pick Steve up at the airport. Take him back to D.C. or… wherever Steve will want to go. A little surprise.

They stop at a gas station, and Steve gives Tony the day’s drawing in the car. It’s made with charcoal, and Tony immediately thinks that it looks really nice. He seems to always think that of Steve’s art, it’s always pleasing to his eye.

The subject of the drawing is, again, Tony, in what looks like a museum, leaning with his back against a wall and fiddling with his phone. He looks annoyed and bored, caught while he puffs some air out of his mouth, the gesture ruffling the hair on his forehead.

“I hope you liked what you could visit. I know one day probably isn’t enough—”

“No… I mean, to see everything you’d need to stay in the city two or three days at least but… I saw enough. It was enough. I’m happy with what we did.”

“Good thing I booked the museum tickets online so we could skip the queue.”

“Yeah, that was smart.”

“Still. I’m sorry we couldn’t see that other church you were interested in.”

“Wasn’t a priority. I told you, I’m happy with what I saw. And, you know… maybe next time.”

It’s an offer. Tony recognizes it as such as soon as it comes out of Steve’s mouth. It’s a hand, extended towards him.

Steve is trying to playing it cool, and he’s doing a decent job of it, all things considered, except he isn’t really breathing while he waits for an answer.

Tony quickly glances at him while he starts the car and drives off, and Steve nods. It’s a silent dialogue, something that sometimes they’re oddly capable of doing.

*Let me think about this.*

*Yes.*

So Tony thinks.

*Next time* doesn’t just mean *next time*. *Next time* means a whole lot of shit. It means that Steve loves him, that Steve wants to be with him in a way Tony hasn’t been with anyone since Pepper, and everyone knows what a big disaster that ended up being. It means that maybe, in some corner of all of what’s possible and, given an infinite amount of time, bound to happen in the universe, there’s also Steve and Tony hurting each other even more than they already have.

But why does it have to end badly? Tony’s track record. Steve and Tony’s track record. Previous
experiences. Tony’s no good at relationships; Steve’s never been in one.

*Do we make each other better?*

Does Steve actually want a relationship, though? Unlikely. Maybe for Steve *next time* is just a way to ask if they’ll be friends in the future.

But Steve tried to kiss him. And he said that he… But no, come on. Loving someone doesn’t mean wanting to be with them. Especially when that *them* is Tony.

Tony thinks in probabilities, separates scenarios, predicts outcomes. There are thousands of ways this could go wrong. The ways this could go well are more than he would’ve initially guessed, but he struggles to let himself think them, envision them fully.


He thinks about the caves he keeps dreaming about, how alone he feels there without Steve, how strong the need to find him is.

And the illumination comes when Tony envisions the futures where Steve isn’t part of his life. Those are dark and cold, the worst possible worlds. Tony, too, becomes dark and cold over the years, solitude shaping his heart into the opposite of the light nestled in the middle of his chest—it’s a black hole of nothing. He sees the world being put at stake because of his stubbornness, Rhodey eventually leaving him with a regretful grimace on his face. Pepper left years ago.

Tony pulls over and stops the car abruptly.

Steve is baffled, still waiting for Tony to answer his veiled question in any way, but he’s starting to look frayed along the edges; his smile is faltering, and his eyes are slipping into the excruciating heartbeat of rejection.

Tony gets out of the car, and Steve follows, silently.

He’s about to speak, but Tony puts his extended forefinger on his pursed lips, says, “Shhh,” and Steve doesn’t talk.

Tony points in the distance.

They are on a secondary road, cutting in the middle of the countryside. Trees are lined up on the edge of the road, a sunflower field separates them from the woods far up on the hill. The sun is almost gone, but the sky is still blue and pink and orange; there’s still enough light to see.

Steve follows Tony’s finger with his eyes, and Tony can pinpoint the moment wonder blossoms on Steve’s face, the moment surprise pins his breath to the back of his mouth.

There is a roe doe staring at them, with its little fawn close by.

“Oh,” Steve whispers.

Tony takes two of Steve’s fingers in his hand. It’s so weird how big his hands are now. They’re shaped differently than Tony’s—Tony’s fingers are thick and rough, full of calluses and scars; Steve’s are lean and elegant, the skin fair and unblemished—but their relative dimension is… it’s almost comical.
Steve lowers his head to look at Tony.

Tony keeps his voice low. “I saw you die.”

“Wha—Die? When? Me?”

“Yes. Wanda... made me see you die. All the other Avengers too, but you... you said something.”

“Was this before Ultron?”

“Yes. We were in that HYDRA base in Sokovia. Your shield was broken, and you were dying, and I touched you to check your pulse, and, and you said... you said—”

“Tony…”

“You said, You could have saved us. And then, Why didn’t you do more? And I—”

“And you... Ultron.”

Tony nods, almost imperceptibly, as if that would make it less of an admission. “I knew I had to do something since the moment I flew into that damn portal, but that... that was pretty convincing.”

“I saw Peggy. Wanda, I mean, she made me see Peggy. The war was over, there was a party. We can go home, she said. And then you said—”

“At Clint’s—”

“You said, Isn’t that the ‘why we fight’. So we can end the fight, so we—”

“—get to go home.”

“Yeah.”

“I should’ve talked to you about it. What I saw. It’s all my fault.”

“It isn’t, Tony—”

“I just—”

“Please, stop blaming yourself, please. I’m begging you.” Steve takes Tony’s shoulders between his hands—his huge, huge hands—and Tony feels his guilt crushing him, and it’s hard to breathe, and his eyes are burning and he doesn’t want to cry, he really doesn’t want to, he needs to get his shit together and stop crying, goddammit, boy! but what if what he’s doing is not enough to protect the world, what if everyone will just keep blaming him and hating him because he just screws up over and over, what if Steve... Steve will hate him forever.

What if Steve isn’t here at all, what if the last week is all a figment of Tony’s pathetic imagination. It makes no sense that Steve would want his forgiveness. Steve doesn’t give a shit about him. Steve already hates him.

“I’m sorry, Steve, I’m... That kid died... it’s all my fault.”

That’s my voice, Tony thinks.

“Tony, hey. Look at me, sweetheart.” Steve, caressing his face. He sounds strange, lost and devastated, but also tangible, like he woke up to find out his worst nightmare is real, like he’s crying
too. Tony always makes him cry.

Tony jerks back, but Steve doesn’t let him go, so he grabs Steve’s t-shirt in his fists. Steve clutches his hip in response, hard, to keep him from running away, to keep him from falling over; but he’s squeezing too hard, so hard it’s gonna bruise—and maybe if there’s a sign that any of this happened, if it’s written on Tony’s body in dark spots of displaced blood, if Tony can look at himself later and have proof, then perhaps…

Then perhaps Steve is real.

“I didn’t want... I didn’t want to kill him, I swear, I didn’t want to kill that kid, I didn’t want Ultron to do what it did, I, I just wanted, just wanted to... I wanted you—”

“Tony, I forgive you.”

“No, no—” That’s impossible.

“I forgive you for Ultron. I forgive you. Please.”

Tony squeezes his eyes shut, forces himself to regain control. He opens his eyes again, blinks a few times, blinks the tears away. Steve dabs at his face with one of his sleeves.

“I forgive you. I love you,” he says.

Tony feels like he’s about to cry again, but he presses his lips together until the feeling goes away, and then looks into Steve’s eyes, nods, and Steve hugs him close, cradling the back of his head with one hand, and maybe it’s only Steve’s incredible strength, but Tony feels weightless for the first time in his life.

***

Steve lets Tony drive for the rest of way back to the guest house. He tried to protest, but in the end trusting Tony seemed like the best thing to do. Driving calms him down.

Steve watches as he sits heavily on the bed, takes off his t-shirt and undershirt and throws them on the floor. He unclasps his mother’s necklace and places it in the bedside drawer. He kicks his shoes off.

Steve gets down on one knee in front of him, between Tony’s open thighs. He touches Tony’s hair, pushes it back from his forehead, and when Steve removes his hand Tony hunches down to press his brow to Steve’s.

“I should’ve told you about your parents.”

There’s a long silence. Tony shakes his head. “I’m not there yet.”

“I know. I’m not asking anything. Just—”

“What is it?”

“What I said earlier. I don’t want you to think I’m so arrogant that I... that I feel entitled to dispense —”

“I don’t think that.”

“It seemed like you needed to hear it. So I said it. And it’s true.”
Tony nods.
“You alright?”
“I will be when I’m clean.”
“Can I help with dinner in the meantime?”
“Put a pot of water on the stove. Then go to the restaurant, they have clams ready for us. I can do it later if you don’t—”
“I’ll go, don’t worry.”
Steve has to hide his reluctance before breaking contact with Tony, but in the end he gets up and exits the room.

He hears Tony start the shower while he turns on the stove, and as soon as he enters the restaurant kitchen from the back door, a young girl greets him with a quick, “Captain Rogers,” and pushes a glass jar in his hand. There’s a label on it that says Tony. He brings it back to the guest house, and sets the table while he waits for Tony. Maybe he should put the clams in a pan or something, but he’s not really sure what Tony wants to do with them, and he doesn’t want to risk ruining dinner.

Tony enters the kitchen a few minutes later, his hair combed but still wet, already curling at the sides. He takes some parsley from the porch, and minces it with garlic and hot pepper. It all ends up in a pan with some olive oil and the clams.

“You don’t wanna shower before dinner?”
“Right. Yes. I just... I like watching you cook.”
Tony scoffs, but it’s fond. “Come on. Water’s almost boiling.”

By the time Steve’s done, there’s a gigantic plate of spaghetti with clams waiting for him. “Wow,” he says, and Tony smiles at him, gestures for him to sit.

They eat slowly, and the sun is completely gone when they start the dishwasher. It’s late, and Tony has yawned a couple of times.

“You don’t wanna shower before dinner?”
“Less than I thought I’d be this morning. Just a bit of a headache.”
“If you want to go to bed early—”
“We could sit outside for a bit. Maybe?”
“‘Course.”

The night is quiet, it smells like summer and grass. The moon colors everything in a soft white-blue hue, and it reminds Steve of Tony’s arc reactor.

“We came to Italy in the hottest part of the year, and I can’t even complain to you about it,” Tony says with a little grin on his face.

“What’s stopping you?”
“Seems mean. Has it changed at all?”

“Since I got here? Not really."

“It sucks that you’d… feel like this,” Tony says, measuring each word, “given how much you don’t like the cold. In general, I mean.”

“It’ll pass. Eventually. But thank you for saying that. It’s very considerate of you.”
Silence falls on them for long minutes, until Tony yawns again and decides to get ready for bed.

“You go ahead,” Steve says, “I’ll lock up.”
He stares at the darkness swallowing the hills. He calls Sam.

“Hey. How’d it go?”

“Not as bad as I feared.”

“Yeah? What’d he say?”

“He… I don’t know. He listened to my apology, then told me it wasn’t really my fault but yours, so I got mad at him and he hung up on me. Then he called back and... I don’t know. It’s weird.”

“I’m sorry, Sam.”

“I know you are, man. But it’s not on you. I fucked up, I’m paying the price. And he’s paying the most of us all.”

“Yeah.”

“If I think that he could’ve… that I could’ve…”

“Oh, Sam…”

“We were—Rhodey and me—before—”

“Sam. I know that.”

“It was all so new, we barely... and then—”

“I know, Sam. You know how much I understand that.”
Sam sighs. He sounds so tired. “We screwed this up so bad, Steve.”

“Yeah. And the fact that the Accords are actually the easiest part says it all.”
Sam snorts. “Damn, it really does.”

“So, what did you guys decide in the end? You said it didn’t go that bad.”

“He said he needs time to think about it. Which is fair. He also said that he’s gonna be busy with Bucky for the next few weeks, so... It looks like your bestie is hell-bent on ruining my life.”

“Sounds like him.”

“He said I should call whenever I want. And text. That he’ll reply as much as possible.”
“And isn’t that good?”

“It is, but... I’m scared, Steve. I just feel... the guilt, it’s too much. And I don’t know how I can make it up to him. Like, how can I even begin—”

“It was an accident, Sam. Rhodey knows that. He’s a good person, I’ve never seen him be unfair about anything.”

“I know. I feel like such an asshole, sometimes. And maybe it’s selfish but I don’t wanna lose him, I don’t want that.”

“Yeah. Same here.”

“How is it going there? You still cold all the time?”

“Yeah. It’s... I don’t know. We’re working on it. There are rough patches. This whole thing... it messed him up, Sam. I messed him up. But now and then, it’s good.”

“You hang in there, you hear me? He’ll come around.”

“Same to you.”

“I hope, man. I really hope.”

“It’s irresistible, isn’t it? Hope.”

“It is. But if we don’t even think there’s a chance, then what are we fighting for, right?”

“Right... Hey, I got you a couple of gifts. Nothing fancy or useful, but I thought you’d like them.”

“Nice! Thanks! How’s Italy?”

“Hot, I’m told. Beautiful.”

“Enjoy it as much as you can, alright?”

“Will do.”

“Alright, gotta go. Good night, Steve.”

“Take care, Sam. Bye.”

Steve ends the call and goes inside. He finds Tony sitting on the bed, wearing only underwear.

The sight of Tony’s chest triggers a spike of guilt in Steve’s stomach, and he lowers his gaze to the floor. But he never finds revulsion in himself, none at all.

Tony’s eyes are unfocused; he’s thinking about something. Steve changes for bed and sits quietly next to Tony. The moon casts a weak light in the dark room, but Tony’s face is illuminated only by the glow of the arc reactor. Sharp edges, sharp shadows.

He looks small like this, but not weak. Quite the contrary, in fact. His arms and shoulders are muscled, he is visibly strong. His chest is garbled with scars, but toned. His abs are defined; there’s just a thin layer of fat around his navel, which Steve finds so beautiful it’s disarming, honestly, just thinking about it makes him—
Tony drags in a breath.

“You talked to Sam?”

“Yeah.”

“Rhodey texted me.”

“What’d he say?”

“I’m guessing the same stuff Sam told you.”

“Yeah.”

“He wants to. Rhodey. He needs time, but he wants to. Forgive.”

“And you?” Steve asks it as if his entire life doesn’t depend on the answer.

“And I wish I were someone else. I wish you were someone else.”

“How do you mean?”

“I can’t... I can’t talk about this now, Steve, I—”

“Hey, hey… okay. We’re not talking about this. It’s fine.”

It’s not fine, though, not really. The wait, the doubt, they’re starting to consume Steve. He feels tired of the erosion—he can’t replace himself as fast as he could the first days.

Tony sighs. He gets up, walks around the bed to settle down on his side. Steve hesitates for a moment, then lies next to him.

“I liked visiting the cities with you. I know sometimes I get bored, I can’t help it... but I’m glad you were having fun.”

“Compromise.”

“It’s a good look on us.”

“Better than Berlin for sure. Or Leipzig.”

“That’s a low bar, Rogers.”

“Don’t... don’t call me Rogers. Please.”

“Right, sorry. Thought it was just Cap you didn’t like.”

“I just want you to use my name. So I don’t think about all the years we kept each other at arm’s length.”

“You really think it makes a difference?”

“Don’t pretend it’s not the same for you. You hate being called Stark, or even Mr. Stark.”

“True. Okay, then.”

Tony stretches out on the bed, then curls up against Steve’s side. Steve strokes his back, revels in
how warm his skin is.

The light of the reactor attracts Steve like a moth to a flame. He reaches out with his other hand, circles the edges of the glass case with his fingertip, the place where it becomes Tony’s skin. He traces Tony’s scar then, rubs his nipple—the only one he has left—but Tony gasps and shifts away from him.

Steve lets him go.

“I’m sorry. Why on earth you’d let me do this, after—”

“Steve—”

“I swear I didn’t want to do this to you. I had no idea. I only wanted to shut down the suit, make you stop... I don’t know why I didn’t think—”

“Steve, you couldn’t have known—”

“I should have!” That’s too loud, shit. “Sorry. I should’ve known. I should’ve checked on you afterwards. But I shouldn’t have hurt you in the first place because... because...”

Because I’m in love with you.

Steve fists his own hair, pulls at it until it hurts. Until Tony takes his wrists and forces him to lower his arms. Steve lets him.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” he says, calmly.

“But I hurt you. What right do I have not to hurt just the same?”

“You’re hurting enough. If you won’t do it for yourself, then do it for me. I can’t see you like this.”

Oh, Tony.

“Alright. I just want—”

Atonement, redemption, forgiveness. You. Love.

“I know what you want, Steve.”

Steve shakes his head. “You have no idea how much I—” Fuck, fuck. “Please, Tony. Please.”

“No. Not now. Sleep now. Just... just sleep.”

Tony kisses his forehead, then hooks one leg around Steve’s, splays a hand on his chest.

They fall asleep like that.

***

Tony wakes up in the middle of the night, suddenly and totally.

He’s covered in a thin layer of cold sweat that makes him shiver. He’s panting, his heart is pounding in his chest, he feels scared but doesn’t remember why. His throat is dry and coarse; his tongue feels like it’s made of cardboard. He tastes blood; he probably bit the inside of his cheek.

The weirdest sensation, though, is between his legs, where his cock is tenting his underwear, so
much so that the tip is poking out of the waistband. He pushes his hips forward, but stops as soon as he remembers that the warm body next to him is Steve.

He’s breathing regularly, slowly, still asleep.

Tony stumbles into the bathroom, closing the door behind himself. He doesn’t lock it. If he wakes up, Steve will hear what he’s doing no matter what, and he won’t disturb him.

He only hopes Steve won’t judge him too harshly for indulging in this.

He switches the light on and looks at himself, but forces his eyes to avoid lingering on his chest.

He drags his underwear down just enough for his cock to spring free, but he can still feel the elastic constricting him, pressing down on his balls, around his ass.

There’s a bruise on his hip, he notices. Just like months ago. The shape of Steve’s hand.

Tony opens the faucet to drink some water, then spits in his hand—his saliva is streaked with red—and starts stroking himself.

He braces with his free hand on the sink. He tightens his grip on himself, flicks his wrist. The bracelet scrapes against his abdomen. It doesn’t matter.

He moans, as quietly as possible, and for the fear of losing his erection he squeezes his cock so much that his knuckles whiten with the effort.

Tony closes his eyes, and Steve takes over his mind. Blue eyes, strong arms, the low rumble of his voice. Was it that deep even when he was sick and skinny?

Tony wishes he could stop himself, that he could stop his brain from forming this fantasy, but he’s too weak, and has a bad track record in denying himself certain small pleasures. He just wants to feel good for a moment. It’s been months. Just tonight, just...

Just this once.

In Tony’s imagination, Steve enters the bathroom and shuts the door quietly. He drags in a deep breath, his shoulders rising and falling with it, before taking off his shirt and hanging it on the towel rack. His nipples would be hard and dark, and Tony imagines himself wondering how they would feel between his teeth.

Steve, the Steve inside Tony’s mind, presses his chest against Tony’s back, engulfing him in a beautiful warmth. It would be like yesterday, while Tony was cooking the fish, but more. So much more.

Steve would be taller than him, like he really is. The top of Tony’s head would barely reach Steve’s chin, but Tony wouldn’t feel lacking for it. Steve wouldn’t make him feel like he needs to be any different from who he already is.

Steve would lock his gaze with Tony’s in the mirror and Tony would stare back with no shame. It wouldn’t be difficult, it wouldn’t make Tony feel self-conscious and exposed. In Tony’s mind, holding Steve’s gaze would be the easiest thing.

Then, Steve would brush his fingers over Tony’s hip, scrape at the red bruise with his nails. Tony would hiss in response, and fist his erection even tighter. Maybe he actually does.
He imagines Steve press his other hand against Tony’s mouth, push two fingers past his lips. He’d let him. Tony would feel their weight on his tongue, their taste, the scent of Steve’s skin.

Steve’s hand would slowly travel from Tony’s hip to his neck, and he would place it against Tony’s throat just like he did yesterday night, in bed. The thumb on one side, the rest of his fingers on the other. He would apply some pressure, more than Tony expects, but not enough to cut off his air.

He would whisper something in Tony’s ear then, something about how beautiful Tony is, or about how much he loves him. And maybe Tony would be able to believe it.

After that, Steve would remove his fingers from Tony’s mouth, turn his head delicately, and kiss him. It would be sweet but demanding, and Tony would get lost in it, in the sensation of Steve’s beard brushing against his, in the taste of blue roses on his tongue. He’d come all over the mirror.

Tony lets out a groan, and feels his erection pulse in his hand.

For a moment, everything inside him shines so bright that it feels otherworldly. A nuclear explosion in the viscera of the universe.

For a moment, Tony is made pure and perfect. He becomes sheer intention, disconnected from the vagaries of execution.

He opens his eyes to see the mirror streaked with white, his fingers wet with it. His thighs tremble, but he holds himself up. He breathes through it, waits for his heart rate to return to normal.

He cleans himself up, then the mirror, the sink. Washes it all carefully, sprays detergent and disinfectant all over, rinses the lather off. He tries to delay the moment he goes back to bed as much as possible, hopes Steve will fall asleep again in the meantime.

But he has no such luck. Steve follows his every movement while he slips back into bed. The white around his eyes glimmers in the moonlight. Tony smells like bleach.

“I’m sorry,” Tony whispers, in an unanticipated bout of sadness and self-loathing. Something baleful clenches inside his ribcage.

Steve smiles, bittersweet and nostalgic, and laces their fingers together. “No need to be,” he says with that timid smirk that takes over his face when he wants to be charming. As if he ever isn’t. “But I wish you would’ve let me help,” he adds, more as a joke to defuse Tony’s tension than a real proposition.

“Maybe next time,” Tony says.

And Steve’s smile, then, Steve’s smile is so luminous and disarming that Tony would give away his entire fortune, on the spot, without a second thought, for the promise of being ever again on its receiving end.

Chapter End Notes

on Twitter
on Tumblr
Day 8

Chapter Notes

Warnings: description of physical and emotional abuse (from Howard, Maria and Tony are the victims). There's also a moment close to the end of the chapter where Steve and Tony are physically rough with each other (ymmv but please be careful if you're easily upset by this stuff).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve wakes up to an empty bed. The soft light streaming into the room tells him that it’s very early in the morning. He tries to focus his hearing, but Tony doesn’t seem to be anywhere in the guest house. He stretches his arm to touch Tony’s side of the mattress, and it’s cold.

Steve rinses his face in the bathroom, pees, washes his hands and drinks some water from the tap.

He wants to go looking for Tony, but doesn’t want to seem clingy. In a while, if Tony isn’t back, he’ll call him or try to find him.

To keep his mind and hands occupied, Steve starts packing and straightening up the bedroom, so they won’t have to do it in a rush later. He doesn’t have many things, and he’s been his usual tidy self during their stay here, so his stuff isn’t scattered all around like Tony’s. Still, he separates his things from Tony’s, folds some of Tony’s clothes that still look and smell clean, lines up his canvas shoes against the wall.

He has two pairs of these shoes, same style, except one is light gray, and the other bright red. They’re both size 7, which is weird. Steve thought Tony wore size 9. Must be the brand messing up.

Tony’s clothes are different from what Steve has always seen him in back in the States. Here, he wears linen pants, simple t-shirts, all in subtle colors—dark greens and blues, gray, black, white.

Steve gathers what’s in the clothes hamper with everything around the room that doesn’t meet his standards of cleanliness, and starts a washing machine cycle. With how warm it is outside it’s unlikely that anything they hang to the clotheslines in the backyard won’t be dry by the time they have to leave.

He hears footsteps, in a familiar rhythm, and a minute later Tony enters the main door.

“Hey, you’re awake. I stole pastries from the kitchen.”

“Bad boss.”

“That I am. Come on, they’re still warm.”

Tony makes espresso, and they eat together, while Tony reads something on his phone and Steve tries not to think about the way Tony sounds when he reaches his orgasm.

“You didn’t sleep much,” Steve tries after a while, a blush rising to his cheeks.

“Yeah, I... Maybe I’m feeling better.”
Maybe he is. A bit. He’s not falling asleep all the time anymore and he doesn’t look tired when he has no reason to be. Maybe they’re not screwing this up. Maybe Steve’s doing something right.

“Listen, I—”

As usual, Tony doesn’t spare himself anything.

“Tony you don’t have—”

“I just wanted to apologize and thank you for not making a big deal out of… what I did last night.”

“You did the same when it happened to me.”

“Yours was an accident. Mine wasn’t.”

“Tony, I didn’t mind. I don’t know how to say this without making it sound like I’m a creep, but hardly anyone has ever retained their privacy if I was in the building. I got used to it after a while. Actually, it’s other people that should mind, not me.”

Tony nods and is silent for a long time. Then, he looks at Steve.

“I don’t know if I should tell you this, but... that was the first time I could do... anything... since that night—that night at the compound when we... So that’s why I went along with it and couldn’t, uh, control myself. It’s not enough, I know, but it’s the only, uh... redeeming factor I’ve got.”

“But you don’t need one. You don’t need to apologize,” Steve protests before what Tony said actually sinks in. Then, “The, the first time, though, is that, is that normal, or...?”

“Is it normal that I went months without being able to have an orgasm? I may not be twenty years old or a super soldier, Steve, but no, that’s not normal.”

“It’s your heart that...?”

“No. It’s not my heart,” Tony says with a tone of finality, and Steve decides not to press the matter further when Tony speaks again. “It’s psychological. PTSD-related.”

Steve is familiar with the concept, more than he’d like to be. He’s always wondered why his healing factor doesn’t take care of stuff like that, of the chemical imbalance in his brain. Or maybe it does as much as possible to keep him functional. Maybe without the serum the guilt wouldn’t even let him get up from bed in the morning.

“Then maybe you’re really feeling better,” Steve says, hopeful, “even your arm and your chest—”

Tony looks at him sharply, as if that hadn’t occurred to him yet. Maybe it hadn’t.

“I do feel better,” he admits.

Silence fills the space between them, and Steve realizes he should be hearing a noise that’s not present. “Machine’s done. Wanna help me hang the clothes out?” he asks, and Tony replies with a timid smile and a little nod of his head.

It’s nice out. It’s not too hot yet, but it will be soon. Steve sets the basket with the clothes on the grass, while Tony carries the clothespins from the laundry room. Tony passes the clothes and the pins to Steve, and he hangs them. It’s quiet and monotonous and normal and Steve could do it for the rest of his life if he got to keep Tony.
After, Tony spreads the blue blanket under the oak tree, and Steve draws while Tony works on his tablet. Hours fly like this, until Tony shifts on his flank, and his t-shirt rides up on his side, exposing his hip. The skin there is red and swollen.

Steve’s blood freezes in his veins.

He promised. Promised.

“Steve?”

He sucks in a breath, startled by Tony’s voice. Guilt seeps into him, insidious and virulent as an illness. His heart thunders in his chest. He tries to look at Tony’s face, but it’s even worse than looking at his hip.

“I hurt you.”

Tony follows the direction of Steve’s gaze, and his eyes widen in understanding. He pulls his shirt down to cover himself, and the gesture wrenches a whimper out of Steve.

“No, Steve, hey, look at me. I’m okay.”

Steve sits up abruptly, and Tony does as well. Tony takes Steve’s face into his hands, keeps their eyes locked, but Steve can’t look at him, can he? How can Steve look at him?

“But I promised—”

“And you’re keeping your promise. Remember I was about to fall over? We were both being clumsy. Listen. It doesn’t even hurt, it’s not your fault.”

“But—”

“Stop. I’m not hurt. You’re a strong guy, but I’m not made of butter. It’s just a bruise.”

“Just... just a bruise.”


Just breathe. Just listen to Tony’s voice. Not hurt. The promise is kept.

Steve inhales and exhales. He does it again a few times, until he feels like he’s in control of himself. He lies back down on the blanket, next to Tony. He feels heavy and defeated, tired all of a sudden, and also kind of stupid.

“I’m fine,” Tony whispers, “we’re fine, we’re okay. We’re both okay.”

Steve twists on his side and curls up against Tony, burrows his face in his chest. Tony caresses his back in long, reassuring strokes. Steve breathes in his scent, wood and coconut, and a light undertone of bleach and garlic, both stubbornly clinging to Tony’s fingers from last night.

He laughs, and decides to mention only one. “You smell like garlic.”

“Like a walking Italian stereotype.”

“Maybe you hunt vampires at night and haven’t told anyone.”

“Iron Man is actually my cover story.”
Steve looks up at Tony and laughs again. Tony brushes his hair away from his forehead.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. It caught me by surprise.”

“It’s alright. It’s alright.”

After a few minutes, Steve goes back to his drawing.

“How long does it take to get to Stella’s house?” he asks while fixing the shading of the nose he’s working on.

“About half an hour. I told her we’d be there around 4.”

“I read that she’s famous here, is that right?”

“Yeah. There’s this popular science programme that’s been airing for years here in Italy, and she was often their guest. Whenever they needed an astrophysicist they’d call her.”

“Did they ever call you?”

“Oh god, no. My science’s always been too closely linked to my company. Having me would be like saying ‘Hey, everyone, go buy the stuff this guy makes!’ and they can’t have that. Not on national television.”

“Makes sense.”

“They call Roberto for robotics and engineering. Remember, he’s—”

“I remember.”

“Well, he’s a way better choice. He’s Italian, works in Italy, is a genius. He never made weapons for the US Military. His science is super partes. Or at least, he sticks his name only on the research papers. I stick it on everything.”

“You have a company to run, Tony. He doesn’t.”

“Yeah. I have a responsibility towards the people who work for me. I know that. I still wish I could just give away most stuff for free.”

“You still do that. With the philanthropy. The charities.”

“I try. But I’m still the billionaire. While people starve.”

“Might sound like a case of pot and kettle, me saying this, but the world’s problems are not on you. They’re not your direct responsibility.”

“I know that. In theory.”

“You do a lot. More than most.”

“And it takes a minute of stupidity to undo it all.”

“Sometimes things don’t play out the way we want them to. But I’ve never seen you give up. Point is, the world may not be perfect, but you use the power you have to try and make it better. That
matters.”

Tony sighs and shakes his head in silent disagreement. “Can we talk about something else? Please?”

“Sure. Here, look.”

Steve places his drawing in front of Tony and taps a finger on it.

It’s Tony, kissing Rhodey’s cheek while Rhodey takes a selfie. It’s something that has actually happened, a few months after Ultron. Tony has that selfie framed; he keeps it on his desk at the compound.

“Steve…”

“I’d color it, but I didn’t bring any—”

“It’s beautiful. Rhodey’s smile is perfect. He smiles just like this.”

“Glad you like it.”

“I never dislike your drawings. I’m not an expert, but they work for me, you know? Maybe it’s naive, the way I look at them. Sorry.”

“I make them for you. Whatever way you choose to enjoy them, it’s the right one. Here, let me…”

Steve reaches over with his pen and adds the date and his initials to the drawing. Then, a title: *family*. Tony’s eyes become a bit brighter than usual, and Steve nudges his shoulder. Tony’s mouth crooks with a smile.

“I’m getting sentimental in my old age.”

“It’s normal that you’d miss him.”

The rest of the morning passes in comfortable silence. After lunch, they bring the dry clothes inside and finish packing, and soon it’s time to leave.

As Tony promised, the drive isn’t long. Stella’s villa is outside Siena, at the top of a hill which has only one access from the main road, a long white trail with cypresses on both sides. It ends in an open space covered in gravel, where they leave the car, next to Stella’s.

To reach the house they make their way through a beautiful front yard where Steve spots various fruit trees, a vegetable garden, dozens of different kinds of flowers, lemon trees in big terracotta pots. It looks messy, but in a rational way. It’s the irregularity of nature, of leaving things to their growth with only minimal influence. They grow with no plan, no foresight, maybe, but not without logic.

They don’t ring the bell, the main door is wide open. Tony knocks on it, calls, “Stella! It’s Tony! Ciao!”

She comes into the doorway from a room on the right, and the first thing Steve notices is her eyes: blue, but different from Steve’s—lighter, brighter, bluer. The spark of intelligence behind them is not unlike Tony’s: it’s the brilliance of genius, a vivacity so intense it becomes pure light. It’s the sign of a mind that has never stopped creating, not ever, not for a second, since its inception.

Her skin is fair and wrinkled, stained with age, but healthy. She’s wearing a coral lipstick, and has a bit of mascara on her eyelashes. Her long, white hair is tied up at the base of her neck in a bun, but a few strands have escaped the knot and frame her face in a way that looks like a portrait.
She is short and very thin. She is wearing a simple white dress with beige sandals. Her glasses hang on a pink lanyard draped around her neck. She has an apron on, and she’s wiping her hands on it.

Her grin is huge and friendly as she extends her arms towards Tony, beckoning him into a hug. Tony has to bend down to hug her back, she’s so tiny.

“Ciao!” she shouts, ecstatic. She closes her eyes and pats Tony on the back. “It’s so nice to meet you, my boy,” she says, with a cute Italian accent.

When she releases Tony, she turns her gaze to Steve. “You must be Steve,” she says, amicably. For a moment, Steve is surprised by the familiarity. Usually people revert to formality around him, especially those who lived through the war. But he’s not offended by Stella’s attitude. It’s actually refreshing.

“That’s me. Nice to meet you,” he says, shaking her hand and kissing her cheeks. She hugs him too, but not as tight or as long as Tony. She really is short.

“Come on in. Sorry for the mess, I was making pie… I just put it in the oven.”

They move deeper into the house.

The kitchen is on the right, spacious and bright, and the smell of apples coming from the oven makes Steve’s mouth water. On the opposite side of the corridor, past a big arch, there’s a living room—it looks cozy and lived-in, and Tony spares a few moments to pet the three cats sleeping on the couch. “My little girls,” Stella says fondly while one of them walks over to Steve and brushes her body against his legs. He bends down to caress her head, and she lifts her paw to touch Steve’s hand, as if to welcome him in her home. He looks at Tony, and finds him nuzzling the neck of the black cat. She purrs at him.

There’s a huge bookcase at the back of the room, and a piano next to it. Tony’s eyes linger on it, then he lowers his head back to the cat, who touches her nose to his.

Past the living room, they walk through a hallway with a staircase beyond which there are Stella’s bedroom and a bathroom. She explains that she prefers to sleep downstairs, so she doesn’t have to climb the stairs as often as she used to.

There’s a French window at the end of the corridor. It opens into a backyard populated by more plants and trees, and a wooden table with chairs, for dining outside.

Stella leads them upstairs.

The room she prepared for Steve and Tony is at the end of the corridor. It’s tiny but luminous, with an ensuite bathroom and a small terrace. The furniture must be at least a century old. The bed is made, and there are fresh flowers on the dresser.

“You boys take a shower, freshen up. There are towels in the bathroom. I’ll be downstairs. Take your time; there’s no rush.”

“Thank you,” Tony says.

When Stella leaves, Steve sits on the bed. “She seems very nice,” he says.

“Yeah,” Tony replies with a clouded smile.

Tony washes his face and hands, Steve looks at him from the open door. He does the same after a
few minutes, and comes out of the bathroom to see Tony on the terrace, looking into the distance, thoughtful.

Steve walks over to him, stands behind him. God, he’s short.

“I’m nervous,” Tony says, in a whisper. He’s ashamed of it.

“Because of what she could tell you?”

“Yes and no,” Tony says, voice all pain. “It’s because I don’t know what it is, and I can’t predict how I’ll react to it, and I’m scared... I’m so fucking scared.”

It’s always scary when Tony can’t see the future.

“You still want me there?”

Tony nods.

“Then I’ll be with you.”

Tony nods again. “I think it’s going to rain tonight,” he says, looking at the dark clouds pinned on the horizon, far away above the valley.

“Yeah,” Steve says, following Tony’s gaze, “it is.”

***

Tony takes off his undershirt before going back downstairs. Stella isn’t surprised by the reactor, but she seems rather curious about it, despite trying to be subtle.

She offers them coffee and a slice of pie, still hot from the oven.

“So,” she says while they’re all sitting at the table, “what do you want to know?”

“Everything you’re willing to tell,” Tony says, and hopes his voice doesn’t waver like his heart.

“That’s a lot of stuff. Some of it, you may not like.”

“I know,” he says, turning to look at Steve. He looks back, sure of himself like he has never been this whole time. “I’ll deal with it. I want to know the stuff that didn’t make it to the books.”

“You only read the English version, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you read it too, Steve?”

“Yes. I did.”

“Tony… When was your mother’s birthday?”

The question seems disconnected from the rest, but Tony can see Stella has a destination in mind, and wants to lead him there slowly. Alright, he’ll play.

“August 10th.”

“And what’s August 10th?”
“San Lorenzo. The night of the falling stars.”

“Did she ever take you to see the stars on her birthday?”

“Yes. Every year, after the party with the Foundation. We always spent the summer in Los Angeles, Jarvis would drive us to the hills to see the stars. I used to make fun of her because she’d never change except for her shoes. So she was always wearing some beautiful gown and flip-flops.”

She never wanted to waste time. “Who cares,” she used to say, “no one’s gonna see us. It’s just going to be you and me,” and Tony felt so special, like he was being trusted with some unprecedented secret. Jarvis would come back to take them home at dawn. When Tony got older he’d drive the car. Mom always preferred to avoid it.

“The day I kissed her for the first time,” Stella says, ripping Tony away from his memory, “it was her birthday. That night, we had permission from Zio Leonardo to go watch the stars in the woods. The following year, we did it again. It became something… important for us.”

“How so?” Tony asks, trying not to look at Steve now.

“You know what my name means, right?”

“It means star.”

“She would say I was her star,” Stella says, getting up from her chair and taking something from a drawer, “she said I burned so bright for her that I was her sun.”

She places a necklace on the table in front of Tony. He reaches inside his shirt, unclasps his own and places it next to Stella’s.

They are identical. Two suns.

“She gave one to me before leaving. She kept the other. So we wouldn’t forget each other.”

“You kept this out of the book.”

“Your mother used to wear hers all the time. She had it on in almost all the pictures I’d see in magazines. I already used her real name in the book, your grandfather’s too. I was trying to make it not too easy to guess who she was.”

“I... thank you, for that.”

“I have some old pictures. You want to see them?”

“I’d be very happy to.”

Stella leaves the room. Tony can hear her rummage around in her bedroom.

Immediately, Steve appears next to him. He kneels with one knee on the floor, and for a crazy moment Tony is reminded of a marriage proposal. Nothing further from their current situation.

He takes Tony’s hand in his own. “Hey,” he says, soft, “how’s it going?”

“I’m okay,” Tony lies.

He’s never been good with things of the past.
“Okay, I’m sure they’re somewhere in here,” Stella says while carrying a big box that she drops heavily on the table. Steve sits back on his chair.

They search through the pictures in the box, and the conversation turns inevitably to Laura. The way Stella talks about her, you wouldn’t say she’s dead. It’s like she was here just yesterday, like she’ll be here again tomorrow.

Laura was taller than Stella, bigger and thicker. She was an archaeologist, and her skin is tanned and rough in most of the pictures, with marks on her knees, little scars here and there. She had long, black hair, and green eyes. She had a big tattoo covering most of her left arm. Her clothes and makeup tended to be bolder than Stella’s, in colors and style.

The pictures have been taken pretty much everywhere around the world. There’s them doing silly tourusty things, taking selfies before the word existed in front of this or that monument, wearing NASA t-shirts outside the Kennedy Space Center. There are pictures of them at home; sometimes just one of them, but most of the times they’re together or with someone else, relatives or friends.

They get older and happier while time passes. They settle into each other, become comfortable with who they are, alone and together.

It’s two lives, shared. Made into one.

Tony chances a look at Steve, and the longing in his eyes hurts more than it should.

“Ah, here they are!” Stella cheers, taking a small box from inside the bigger one. She opens it to take out old pictures, in black and white, little in dimension. Tony sees Steve perk up at the sight.

Stella searches for a while, and then extracts a specific picture from the bundle she’s holding in her thin hand. She places it on the table in front of Tony, taps on it with her finger a couple of times.

“This is when Zio Leonardo took us to the beach. We had so much fun that day…”

Tony looks at the picture.

It’s Stella, when she was a teenager. She’s wearing a white, old-fashioned bathing suit, smiling while she eats ice cream on a beach chair. Next to her there’s Mom, wearing a similar bathing suit, only in a darker color. She’s laughing so much that her eyes are closed with it.

She looks so different from how Tony remembers her. She looks like she’s been lit up from the inside.

Her hair is dark, she wasn’t dyeing it yet, and it’s a far cry from her elegant chignons: here, her hair is half-wet with seawater, messy and tangled. She has no makeup on, obviously, but it seems strange to Tony for a moment: the face is clearly Mom’s, even though much younger, and for a second he wonders where’s the veil of red Dior Rouge on her lips, where’s the thin eyeliner on her eyelid.

But this Maria, the one in the picture, wouldn’t wear that mask (that armor) for another few years. Not too many, though.

Tony feels a tear fall on his thumb, and realizes his vision has gone blurry. He lifts his gaze to find Steve and Stella staring at him.

“Oh, Tony—” Stella starts.

Tony sniffs. “It’s, it’s nothing, I’m, it’s stupid, I just... she looks very happy here. I don’t think I’ve
ever seen her so happy.”

Stella’s face turns very serious. “No, I guess she wasn’t. She thought moving to the States would ensure she’d never live the horrors of the war again, and she didn’t. But that wasn’t enough to make her happy. Maria was very ambitious, just like her father. They made sacrifices to get what they wanted.”

“Were you… one of those sacrifices?” Steve’s voice is kind and unobtrusive.

“In a way, yes. But maybe she didn’t see it like that. I think... you see, I knew I’d have to face people’s judgement sooner or later, because I never liked men. But Maria did. I’ve written this in the book, but… When she met Tony’s father, Maria saw in him a privileged life, with money and power. She liked him well enough, so she married him. She was practical that way. She wasn’t an opportunist, but she saw an occasion and seized it.”

Tony stares at the picture.

“I used to feel like her. Like Maria,” Steve says quietly, almost timidly. “I knew I liked men too, but I happened to fall for a girl, and I thought I’d marry her and spend my life with her, so my attraction to men would never be a problem.”

“Yes, that was pretty common. Makes sense, doesn’t it? Wanting to be safe, there’s no shame in that. For many people, that’s how it still works.”

“So why do you think Maria wasn’t happy? She had what she wanted.”

“Well, life turned out to be more complicated than she expected, Steve. Tony’s father resented the fact that they didn’t seem to be able to have children. Of course, he blamed Maria, not the fact that he was old and spent his days drinking and smoking. He’d made her feel guilty about it. As if she’d been… a bad investment.”

Tony stares at the picture until he can’t see it anymore.

He sees a hand close around her neck.

Howard!

“After Tony was born… Maria would say in her letters that he didn’t care about the boy. Tony was a bright kid, but he was also sensitive and kind, and those weren’t qualities his father appreciated.”

“He said I was his greatest creation. Like I was a thing he had invented,” Tony says.

“Maria said he avoided spending time with you. That he criticized you all the time, that you antagonized him when you were older, which made him mad.”

“It... it did.”

There’s a long silence. Tony can feel Steve’s eyes on him, like a laser tearing at his flesh. He swallows and carefully places the picture of his mother on the table. There’s another one next to it, of Stella and Maria sitting on the piano stool together.

“You taught Mom to play the piano, right?” Tony asks, desperate to change the subject, as little as he’s allowed to.

“Yes. Maria and I would beg my uncle to get us scores of the latest pop songs when he went into the
city, it was more fun than practicing with classical pieces.”

“Was it really you who sent Mom the tapes? We used to listen to them together, and play the songs in turn.”

“Yeah, I sent her the tapes. I’m glad you enjoyed them too.”

“I really liked De André. He was my favorite. And Guccini. Oh, and Mina.”

Stella smiles. “I’ll show you something.”

She goes into the living room, and searches the bookcase for a while. When she comes back, she’s holding a physical copy of her book. In Italian, the version Tony has never seen.

L’altre stelle, is the title. The Other Stars. Now that he reads it in Italian, it reminds Tony of something he can’t place.

“My editor suggested I took them out from the English edition, because no one would understand them unless we added a translation. I did it reluctantly, I’ll be honest; they’re a relevant part of the story. Look.”

She shows him and Steve the beginning of a few chapters, and there are quotes there. Of songs.

“I chose a song for each part of my life, for each person that was part of it.”

“What did you pick for Maria?” Steve asks, beating Tony to it. He sounds very curious.

“A song we never talked about. It first came out only a couple of years before she died. The lyrics are beautiful, and the music too, but the original singer’s voice is just amazing. Was, she’s dead now. She died quite young, poor her.”

Tony reads the words.

Tu, tu che sei diverso, almeno tu nell’universo

Un punto sei che non ruota mai intorno a me

Un sole, che splende per me soltanto

Come un diamante in mezzo al cuore [11]

Tony mouths the words softly. He knows them. He knows them.

“I know that song.”[2]

I know that road.

“You do?”

“Mom and I... we… Can I…” Tony gestures towards the living room.

“Yes, of course.”

They all move to the living room, and Tony sits at the piano, Stella standing close to him while Steve stays back.

Mom has touched this piano too passes through Tony’s mind the moment his skin makes contact
with the polished wood.

The first notes are hard to remember, and even harder to play.[3] The muscle memory is there, and his fingers are nimble enough over the keys, but the melody takes him straight back to that day Mom came into his room, excited for this beautiful song she had just discovered and wanted to share with him.

God, Mom was so much better than him. Her fingers weren’t as thick as Tony’s, or as rough. She played in such a refined way. She moved her whole body with the music.

Tony doesn’t remember the words at the beginning of the song, but Stella starts singing at the right point, and from then on Tony remembers all the lyrics.

He doesn’t sing much, prefers to concentrate on the melody and on Stella’s voice instead of the words, but he does join in now and then, and his voice is steadier than the way he feels. Mom’s voice overlaps with Stella’s in his mind. If he closes his eyes, he can see his mother’s bottom lip trembling, the tight control she kept over her singing.

When the song finishes, Tony breathes in and out as if to calm himself, and then turns to look at Steve. He’s already staring, eyes rapt, lips parted in wonder. He sweeps a hand over his mouth.

Stella cheers and claps her hands. Tony shifts on the stool to look at her and smile.

“That was amazing, Tony! You’re so good!”

“Nah, I should practice more…”

“I’m no expert,” Steve says, his voice low and scratchy, “but that really was beautiful.” He looks directly into Tony’s eyes now, intense, hard as only Steve can be. Tony is ashamed that he can’t hold the power of that gaze. Not right now, not like this. He looks at the carpet.

“It’s an amazing coincidence, isn’t it,” he says, “that Mom would love this song and that you’d choose it for her without even knowing.”

Stella looks at him, eyes bright. “Is it really, though?”

She lowers her head, the memories clouding her mind. “I don’t know how to describe it to someone else, but Maria and I… we just clicked. We were different in many aspects, but where it mattered we were actually very similar. We understood each other.”

“It must be amazing, to connect with someone like that,” Steve says, and it leaves Tony in a strange sort of bafflement. Steve has something like that, he knows what that’s like. It may not be romantic but that doesn’t change the facts. Right?

“It was. But I don’t know if we would’ve worked well as a couple, if we could’ve… Sometimes, we were too much in sync. Only when I met Laura did I realize how much I liked to have my vision challenged by someone who had a completely different point of view on most things. Kept me quick-witted, kept me from making huge mistakes. I did the same for her. And Laura and I, we worked hard not to let our differences become incompatibilities.”

Stella’s words are as heavy as stones that settle inside Tony’s stomach and weigh him down. She doesn’t realize it, of course. Tony feels Steve’s eyes on his skin, but there’s really no way he can possibly look at him right now.

“Oh, damn,” Stella says, “I better start making some food or we’ll just stare at each other for dinner.”
Tony huffs a small laugh, “Not a smart choice, with a famished super soldier in the house.”

“You think he’d revert to cannibalism?”

“Wouldn’t put it past him,” he says smiling, while Steve chuckles and shakes his head.

“You want help with dinner?” Steve asks when he sobers up.

“Absolutely not! You’re my guests! And I don’t want people in my kitchen messing up with my system! You two go upstairs, take a shower or whatever. Come back around 8, alright?”

***

Back in their room, Tony becomes silent, immersed in his own thoughts. He sits on the bed, stares absently at his own hands, open in his lap with the palms up. He studies them as if he’s seeing them for the first time.

It worries Steve, to see him like this. Still as a statue, numb. It’s the way Tony copes with the worst things, when everything else fails him. He becomes a pillar of salt, unreachable, rage thundering furious inside him and inside him only.

Steve is about to speak when Tony jumps to his feet, grabs some clothes from his bag, and locks himself in the bathroom without saying a word, without even looking at Steve.

Okay, then.

Steve hears him twist the shower on. He flops on the bed with a sigh.

He fishes his phone out of his pocket, and googles the words from the song Stella picked to introduce Maria in her book. He looks up the translation, and reads it over a couple of times, memorizes it. It takes him a few more tries to remember the whole thing in Italian, but it’s not that much of an effort. Sometimes the serum is useful for something.

Tu, tu che sei diverso, almeno tu nell’universo
Non cambierai, dimmi che per sempre sarai sincero
E che mi amerai davvero [4]

Steve closes his eyes to keep himself from crying.

He’s so tired of crying, of not knowing what’s going to happen, of the continuous sting of guilt at the bottom of his stomach. He might have to live with it for the rest of his life, and the sheer possibility fills him with a dread that no bravery can ease.

He almost wants Tony to put an end to this, one way or the other. Forgiveness would be the ideal outcome, but at this point he’d even take the rejection, if it meant stopping this agony.

He wonders how Tony feels about the song, which seems to have been written for him. But that could be just Steve, so stupid with love that every song is about Tony to him. A diamond in the middle of the heart.

It’s not like Steve can think that it’s about him, anyway. Sincere… right. It almost feels like mockery.

A sun that shines for me only. God, if that were true. If he could at least stop feeling so goddamn cold, like he has had Siberia in his heart since that fucking day when it all went down. If only he
could stop shivering, if only crawling under the covers was all it took to find warmth…

If he wasn’t so unworthy of it.

He rubs a hand across his face, pushes his hair back from his forehead. He catches his own reflection in the mirror and averts his eyes as fast as possible.

Tony must be almost done in the bathroom; the water isn’t running anymore.

He hears him gasp. He scrambles to his feet, walks to the door. But after that, he doesn’t know what to do.

He rests a hand on the wood.

“Tony.”

There’s no answer, only the muffled sounds Tony makes while crying, that no one but Steve could pick up from behind a closed door.

He gasps again.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he tries, and goddammit, he needs to stop slipping like this, “Tony. Why don’t you open the door, uh? Let me—” in? Hold you? Love you? “—help you.”

“Let me do this alone,” Tony says, in a whisper only Steve can hear.

He tries to imagine him, in the bathroom, sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, half-dressed, hair still wet. Shoulders hunched low, the arc reactor shining in his chest (like a diamond in the middle—)

and tears streaming down his face for someone he misses so much it hurts, for someone that will never come back to him.

Steve thinks about his mother, her sad smile, her steadfast dignity. He thinks about Bucky’s hand killing Tony’s mother. He thinks about his own hand on Tony’s throat, and the bruise on his hip. About the cold. About his shield cutting Tony’s flesh, about being filled only with rage and fear.

A few minutes pass in silence, then Steve hears Tony sniff, blow his nose, wash his face. He comes out of the bathroom, eyes red and puffy, face bent down so Steve can’t see it too well.

“If you want to—” he starts.

“Tony—” Steve tries to interrupt him, to get him to talk, to put an obstacle between Tony and his isolation, but he doesn’t know how to do it except by force and frustration. He doesn’t know how to be gentle about this.

“If you want,” Tony repeats, louder; then, quietly, “to take a shower…” he trails off, presses his lips together while his jaw twitches.

Then, he clutches his left arm with his right hand, and it terrifies Steve so, so much.

Tony pads barefoot to the other side of the room, and he stares out of the closed French window. The clouds are dark and close, but it’s not raining yet.

Steve walks behind him, slowly. He smells of his soap and his shampoo, enticing wooden scents that complement the perpetual sweetness of coconut underneath. The shirt Tony is wearing, not too elegant but different from his usual t-shirts, is so white it almost shines against his tanned skin. The sleeves are rolled up to uncover his hairy forearms, and the silver bracelets framing his wrists give
him an air of strange nobility—their usefulness perfectly hidden by their sleek aesthetic.

“Tony, hey,” he whispers, but Tony doesn’t react at all, he just looks far away, at the hills, at the impending storm.

Steve reaches up and rests his hand between Tony’s shoulder blades. Tony moans softly, and doesn’t fight the touch, his torso slumping over under the weight of Steve’s hand.

He turns to look at Steve, and Steve moves to face him while his hand slides over Tony’s shoulder, up against his neck. He caresses Tony’s jaw with his thumb.

“I don’t know what—”

“You don’t have to. You don’t have to. Just, just don’t do this to yourself, alright? Don’t go to that place in your mind I can’t reach.”

Tony shakes his head. “I didn’t expect… I had no idea…”

“It’s alright. I promised I’d be with you, and I am. Just stay with me, too. Please?”

Tony looks at Steve’s lips for long seconds, and then nods, timid and unsure, barely noticeable.

“What time is it? We have to go downstairs.”

“Still early. We have more than an hour.”

“Oh,” Tony says, and he looks disappointed about it.

“Tell you what,” Steve tries, “you sit here and wait for me, okay? I’ll be just a minute.”

Tony sits automatically, looks at his hands again. He looks like a child who has lost his mom, and in many ways he is.

Steve wishes he knew what to do.

He wishes he knew how to coax Tony out of this mild stupor, how to make his anxiety better, how to guide him back in control of his environment instead of simply doing it for him. In the end, having reached no useful conclusion, Steve opts for taking one of the fastest showers of his life, so he doesn’t leave Tony alone for too long.

He finds him curled up on the bed, facing the other way from Steve.

He dresses quickly, and slides on the bed next to Tony, stares at the curve of his shoulders like it’s a closed door.

Tony reaches behind himself, takes one of Steve’s hands into his. He brings it around his body, like he did that night on the couch while Steve was watching *The Sound of Music*. And just like that night, Tony presses Steve’s open palm over the reactor.

Tony must’ve undone a few buttons of his shirt, because there’s only warm glass under Steve’s skin. He covers it entirely, and with his middle finger he can graze the hollow of Tony’s throat.

Steve shifts on the bed, stretches closer to Tony, and allows himself to imagine how this would feel if they were together, happy, maybe even naked.

Steve is ashamed of how weak he is. The serum has never helped him with this.
Tony nestles with his back against Steve’s chest, and sighs. “I’m tired.”

“You can sleep for a bit. I’ll wake you up in time for dinner.”

“Thank you.”

Steve waits.

He listens to Tony’s breathing, the muffled beat of Tony’s heart under his hand, his own heart matching every thump-thump of Tony’s, the low hum of the reactor. Tony twitches in his sleep—it’s not peaceful at all, and Steve wonders how much rest he’s really getting. The wind howls outside, the leaves rustle. Stella sings while she cooks, the cats meowing at her.

He starts caressing Tony’s arm delicately when it’s almost time to go. Up and down, up and down again, from wrist to elbow. Tony stirs against Steve’s chest, a jolt goes through him, and he gives out a tired moan. He twists on the bed, stays on his back while he yawns, then turns towards Steve, burrows between his arms.

Steve strokes his back, but Tony feels to him like he’s not really here.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asks, but Tony doesn’t reply. “Tony?” Steve tries again.

“Mh?” Tony says, distracted, after too many seconds, “did you say something?”

“I… no. No, I didn’t. Come on. Don’t wanna be late.”

That seems to infuse Tony with renewed energy. He gets up and buttons up his shirt, tucks it into his jeans. He puts his shoes on and goes to the bathroom. He washes his face, and then he just… stops.

He stands there, staring at his hands, the water sloshing over them from the open faucet.

Steve pushes the lever down, and the water stops. Tony shakes his head and blinks at him, slowly, surprised to see him there. Steve grabs a towel and dries Tony’s hands off, massages his knuckles through the fabric while he ignores all the thoughts wrestling for space in his mind.

Tony’s fingers in Steve’s mouth. Tony’s fingers inside his—

“You ready?” he asks, and Tony nods. Good enough.

In the kitchen, Stella is cutting twine off of a piece of beef with a long knife. Tony smiles at her.

“Smells good,” he says.

“Yeah? We need to wait a few more minutes before slicing it up or the meat will become too hard.”

“And that’s something we don’t want. Clearly,” Tony says, without missing a beat, and he sounds almost like his usual self.

“Well, I sure don’t want that,” Stella deadpans, pointing at herself, “never wanted that in my life. You, on the other hand…”

“Oh my god, Tony…” Steve pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Uh-oh, Captain America disapproves of us, Stella.”
“He’s just going to have to deal with our dirty jokes…”

“I do not disapprove—”

“Then why is your face so red?”

“Stop trying to make me look like some puritan, Tony!”

“Honestly, see? This is what I have to put up with. He’s no fun.”

“Well, he is the older person in the room, guess he’s trying to act like it.”

“Oh my god, you two are terrible.”

“Alright, enough with this nonsense!” Stella says, laughing. She points to a plastic bowl on the table.

“Tony, be a dear and go out in the orchard, pick out some fruit.”

“Any preferences?”

“The peaches should be ripe.”

“Got it,” Tony says, and leaves.

Stella looks at Steve seriously for a few moments. She swallows, and starts wiping down the counter.

“Steve. Can I ask… what did you do to him?”

Steve sighs. “Guess you saw it on the news. The Accords, the fight at that airport in Germany.”

“Yes.”

“Your face tells me you don’t agree with my position.”

“I don’t. But I’m sure you have your reasons.”

“It’s complicated.”

“I don’t doubt it is. But you and the other Avengers, you have an unimaginable power. Without consciousness…” she sighs. “You can’t be judge and jury, Steve. There are laws. International ones, too. If you disregard them, what makes you different from the criminals?”

“Tony said something like that. And look, under any other circumstance, I’d probably agree. We make mistakes, and our mistakes are big and public and hurt people. And people shouldn’t pay for them.”

“Then I don’t—”

“We were manipulated. An old friend of mine was in the middle of it.”

“That boy with the metal arm? He’s your friend from the war, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And what’s up with that, anyway? Was he frozen too?”

“Sort of. He’s been brainwashed, used, forced to do… I probably shouldn’t tell you this…”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”
“No, it’s... it’s fine.” He pauses, thinks about what to say next. “I was trying to protect him, and Tony, too. I knew something. About Maria’s death. And instead of telling Tony, I kept it secret. He found out in the worst way, and it hurt him. It hurt him a lot. I’m trying to earn his forgiveness, but...”

“I’m so sorry, sweetie,” Stella says with a small voice, placing a warm hand over Steve’s.

“I regret what I did every day. I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.”

“You were very close, before?”

Steve scoffs. “I wish I knew how to answer that. We were friends, I guess, but then we got to spend some time alone and... we made love once and I’m still not sure it wasn’t casual sex for him.”

“Was it for you?”

“No. It really wasn’t.”

“Steve, from what I can see… Tony loves you. Truly. He can forgive you if he wants, but he’s still in a lot of pain.”

“I’m trying to help him, but... I don’t wannna rush him, of course, but I’m starting to feel like I’ve been hanged by the neck and I just won’t die.”

Steve closes his eyes for a moment against the blinding, bitter rage inside him, and wonders how something so powerful and intense can’t reverse the flux of time and allow him to fix this mess before it ever happened.

Stella’s kind touch grounds him back into reality.

“You know, emotions… a lot of them, can’t be helped. We feel how we feel and that’s it. Nothing to do about it. But we don’t always act according to our emotions, do we? Sure, most of the time we do, and that’s normal. But sometimes… sometimes we go against everything our heart wants, and we follow the brain. We make choices out of logic, not feelings.”

“I’m not sure I understand—”

“What I’m trying to say is that maybe in his heart Tony has already forgiven you. But he doesn’t want it to be something that just happens to him. He wants to choose it. Maybe he’s just waiting to see if his brain can catch up or not. If he can look at you again without thinking about the betrayal first.”

“That… actually makes a lot of sense.”

“Eh, I’m old and wise.”

“And humble.”

“Oh, very.”

“Ugh, someone save me from you two bonding over the good ol’ days,” Tony says, carrying fruit in the bowl, his shirt wet here and there.

“The teenager’s back, Steve.”

“You’re a superhero, you can save yourself,” he says looking at Tony with a little smirk. Then, “Is it
raining?"

“Yep, just started.”

Tony smiles at him, and Steve can’t do anything but smile back, glad that he seems to have slipped back into a good mood. Maybe it’s Stella’s company that makes him feel better now, or maybe it was Steve’s presence that brought him down so much earlier.

Even as they’re alone, washing their hands in the downstairs bathroom, Steve doesn’t ask him anything. He wants that smile to play on Tony’s face for as long as possible.

Steve is selfish that way.

***

They clear the table after dinner, and Steve cuts even slices from the peaches and passes them along to Tony and Stella, only now and then taking one for himself.

Tony stares at the fair skin of Steve’s hands. It looks pearly white under the harsh neon light of the kitchen, the blond hair covering his wrists gleaming with it.

They move to the living room, Stella taking the couch with the cats, and Steve and Tony occupying one armchair each.

“I don’t get the title,” Steve asks pointing at Stella’s book on the coffee table, “The Other Stars, what does that mean?”

“It’s from the last verse of Dante’s Comedy. It’s l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle. It means, the love which moves the sun and other stars. It means God, in its own context.”

Right. That’s why it felt familiar to Tony. Mom used to quote Dante sometimes. She knew many parts of the Comedy by heart.

“And what does it mean to you?” Steve asks.

Stella takes a deep breath. “Something more literal, I guess. You know how my name means star, right? I guess the other stars are sort of... the other people. Other women who shaped me and changed me by being my friends and lovers. The songs are about that too.”

“How so?”

Stella thinks about it for a minute before answering.

“You know when you listen to a song, and feel like it talks to you, that it’s about you in some way?”

“Yeah.”

“I’d listen to these songs, all my life, and they’d remind me of someone I met, something that happened to me, a moment of my life. But they weren’t written for me. Someone wrote them in response to someone or something in their lives. And yet, we’re all meant to feel that connection, when we listen to songs. We’re meant to say, I understand this feeling, I’ve lived it too. Songs are proof that someone else has lived what you lived, and they know what that’s like. It made me feel less alone.”

“It makes you feel like you belong somewhere,” Steve says, in a dreamy tone. He makes a face as if he didn’t mean to say it out loud, draws in a sharp breath. He licks his lips and swallows. “It makes
you feel like you’re part of a system. Like a planet.”

“Like a planet,” Stella repeats.

“Guess that’s why Mom loved the tapes you’d send her so much. She’d listen to them all the time. Maybe they made her feel close to you, since you never saw each other again.”

There’s a long silence.

Tony picks up the picture of Stella and Maria on the beach that’s been resting on the coffee table the whole time.

“Tony,” Stella says, “do you really not remember me at all?”

It’s like time stops.

Air gets stuck inside Tony’s lungs. He feels his heart speed up; it pounds in his ears while blood rushes through him. He feels hot all over, then suddenly very cold.

Is this how Steve feels?

Then, he remembers.

They were in the New York Mansion. Tony was five years old.

Mom cried that day, Tony remembers because he had never seen Mom cry before, and he didn’t want to see it again. It scared him.

There was a woman with a green dress. She said hello to Tony, and talked with Mom while Tony was playing on the carpet.

She made Mom cry. She left, and then Mom went to sit with Tony on the floor and she was crying, and she hugged him tight. Tony hugged her back, because Mom had taught him to hug people when they are hurt. Tony had hugged Ana the day she cut herself with the gardening scissors, and had hugged Jarvis when he burned his finger on the stove.

One day he had been allowed to stay with Dad while he was working, and he had handed Tony a soldering tip at some point. It had been too hot for Tony—he didn’t have thick calluses on his hands like Dad, back then—so he had dropped it. He showed the reddened skin to Dad, but he didn’t hug Tony. He yelled at him for dropping the tip, and Tony ran away.

“Tony—”

“I remember you.” Tony feels the air become hot in his lungs, his eyes stinging, his skin prickling with betrayal. “You lied to me.”

“No. I lied in the book. I never lied to you. I’m just telling you for the first time. Did you really want me to tell you this over the phone, or in an email?”

She sounds apologetic and heartbroken. But her words are logical, and they feel like a caress, smoothing over Tony’s rage. She didn’t lie.

“Sorry, I’m—”

“I didn’t mean to shock you, Tony, I’m sorry.”
“What... what happened that day? Mom cried.”

“It was the only other time we saw each other. I was in New York for work. For a couple of years, Maria had started to write in her letters that having you had made her look back at her life, her decisions… she said she had regrets.”

Tony presses a hand over the reactor, rubs at the skin around it. “She regretted having... having me,” he murmurs, and wishes he could make it sound more like the question he intended it to be.

“Oh no, Tony, of course she didn’t regret having you! You were everything to her, everything! But your father was... he wasn’t good to you. And he wasn’t good to her.”

“No,” Tony says, shaking his head, as if he could deny it by sheer force of will. “Dad was... I was a terrible child, always making trouble and he... he didn’t like me, but Mom... he loved Mom, right? He was a complicated man but... Mom always made it work. Right? Mom always—”

“Tony—”

“He didn’t touch Mom, right? I was... he could... with me, it was, it was different, right? But he never hurt Mom, he never... I never—”

Tony feels the tears stream down his face. There’s a lump in his throat, he can’t talk anymore, he can’t breathe, his arm is numb and his heart—

There are hands on his face, big warm hands, and a body kneeled in front of him and the scent of roses that floods his mouth with blue.

“Hey, Tony, hey, hey, look at me, look at me, sweetheart, it's fine, you’re safe, just breathe, okay, just—”

Breathe.

“I never knew, I—”

There’s a hand on his shoulder, small and thin.

“You were a child, Tony. You were away for school most of the time.”

Steve leaves, and Tony doesn’t want him to leave, he promised he’d stay, he promised he wouldn’t leave Tony, where did he—

Steve is back with a glass of water in his hand and he makes Tony drink it, and Tony tries to protest and not drink the whole thing but Steve looks at him and says, “Finish the water, Tony, please,” so Tony finishes the water because Steve said his name, and he said please, and looks at him with his big sad eyes and his voice is small and kind and Tony doesn’t want Steve to be sad, and he doesn’t want to disappoint Steve.

“Maybe we should continue tomorrow,” Stella says, and Tony sees Steve nodding.

“No,” he says, trying to muster his most confident voice, “no, we... I want to finish now. Please. Please.” Tony wipes his face with the palm of his hand, sniffs, rubs his eyes. “Okay. I’m okay,” he lies.

Stella sits back on the couch, while Steve drags his armchair closer to Tony’s before sitting down as well.
“In her letters,” Stella starts again with a deep sigh, “she mentioned it happening three times in total. First two times he shoved her during an argument. Once, she hit the wall, got a bump on the back of her head for a week. Third time, he slapped her. She said she was happy you were at school so you wouldn’t see the bruise.”

Tony weeps again, silent, sadder than ever in his life.

“He had always been drunk when it happened, and your mother used that to… not justify, but rationalize it in a way.”

“But why did she stay?” Tony chokes out, “She had money to her name, she could’ve—”

“He had made a couple of, how can I say, worrying comments… about taking you away from her. I guess at some point he realized he had a son he could use as leverage. Maria had money, sure, but your father was powerful, and had political connections. As vague as his threats were, they scared Maria enough to stay.” Stella pauses, seems to carefully consider her next words. “She stayed for you, and she never regretted that.”

Tony nods, but he doesn’t know if it’s because he believes what Stella said, or because the rocking motion is the only small comfort he can find in this moment.

“That day, when I came to the Mansion,” Stella goes on, “it was shortly after the first time he shoved her. She was unharmed, but scared, and called me over the phone. I told her I’d visit her in a couple of months, when I’d be in New York. And I did.”

Tony feels Steve lace their fingers together in the space between the armchairs. Steve’s hand is strong and warm, and Tony feels his limp and lifeless.

“I hadn’t met Laura yet, back then. I had had a few relationships, I wasn’t… I had let Maria go. I loved her as a friend. But seeing her that day, seeing how scared she was, seeing you, how much she loved you… I asked her to leave with me, begged her. We didn’t have to get back together, I just wanted to keep her, and you, safe.”

“But she said no.”

“She said no. I insisted, and she kept saying no. I called her the next day. I told her when my plane would leave, that I had booked tickets for the both of you. I said I’d be at the airport, waiting for her. But she never came. She never came… So I left, and I didn’t do anything except offer her a shoulder to cry on from an ocean away. Two years later, I met Laura, and fell in love with her. We lived happily ever after for almost forty years. And Maria didn’t.”

She’s crying too, now, and Steve releases Tony’s hand and sits next to her on the couch, hesitates for a moment, then wraps her up in his big arms. Tony follows, sits on Stella’s other side, and hugs her too, and what he can reach of Steve, because you hug people when they’re hurt; his Mom taught him that.

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Later, in their room, Tony becomes silent again, numb again, but the anger underneath the surface is worse than before—it’s a vengeful fury that makes his hands shake while he unbuttons his shirt.

He looks more tired than Steve has ever seen him, even after his long stretches in the workshop, pushing his body and mind to the limits of sleep deprivation.

His eyes are bloodshot; their brightness seems to have subsided in favor of a disturbing dullness. He
seems to be a million miles away from Steve, impassive and distant.

The wind howls outside; the incessant patter of the rain drowns away all other sounds around them. Tony stares outside, holding himself up with a shoulder against the recess in the wall where the French window is slotted in.

He just stands there, wearing only his pajamas—arms crossed, feet bare, eyes lost in thought, mouth slightly open. He keeps very still, except for his breathing, soft but irregular.

Steve gets ready for sleep, then carefully sits on the edge of the bed, on Tony’s side, closer to the French window.

He’s afraid.

There are thousands of things Steve wishes he could say, but none of them seem to really matter, and none of them sound helpful. Tony knows them, anyway. He’s got to know, by now. If he doesn’t, then...

Half an hour passes in complete silence.

Steve turns off the light, and pads to Tony, his movements muffled by his socked feet. He stands next to him, looks out of the window for a while. The rain is violent and merciless, like Steve’s blows that day in the HYDRA base, like the ice around them, like all their mistakes.

Like the past.

“I had no idea,” Tony says, quietly, but with a despondent edge to his voice. It scares Steve, the shame it implies. “How could I…” he trails off and sighs, his shoulders trembling under the weight of his own guilt. “She ran away from one war only to walk into another.”

“It wasn’t your fault. She wanted to protect you.”

“And I never returned the favor, did I? I never protected her. From him.”

“You were just a boy.”

“Nice excuse,” Tony retorts around an awful smile.

Steve breathes through his frustration. “That’s someone else talking, and you know that,” he says, trying not to sound accusatory, but as if he’s just stating a fact. Which he is.

“I become like him more and more every day. I feel myself… become him.”

Tony lifts his hands, palms up, and looks at them, as though he could find there confirmation of what he just said. He clenches his hands into fists.

“That’s the opposite of the truth. If anything, you become less and less like him,” Steve says, and when Tony scoffs, he raises his voice from the whisper it’s been so far. “You forget that I knew him. And I know you. And you’re nothing—listen to me—” he takes Tony’s shoulders between his hands and looks at him as if to drive the idea into Tony’s beautiful mind by the naked force of his stare. “You’re nothing like him.”

Tony looks at him, defiant despite still being trapped between Steve’s hands, the lightning that lacerates the sky dancing on his face and casting a sickly shade on his skin.

Steve forces himself not to rise to the bait of Tony’s unspoken provocation, because as sure as he is
of his words, he doesn’t know if he has the strength to fight Tony about this.

He’s scared of making it worse.

“You may look like him,” Steve says, “but you’re nothing like him.”

“It doesn’t change the facts,” Tony replies, relentless, “she always tried to keep him away from me. Tried to get between our fights, tried to…” Tony dips his chin to his chest and moans, unable to describe it further. “When I had the chance to get out of there, go to school, I took it. I didn’t think that it meant leaving her alone with him.”

He laughs, then, like Tony always does in the wake of revelations too terrible to accept. He laughs, and the edge in his voice transforms into something ugly and mean—it’s deranged and dangerous, it’s an unruly, unrestrained bitterness; a shame too deep and too familial not to become disgrace and dishonor.

“And look how I’m repaying her. Taking care of the man who killed her. Like she doesn’t mean anything to me anymore. Like she never… like she never meant anything.” His grimace cuts his face in two halves and Steve’s stomach lurches at the sight.

He doesn’t mean it. Steve knows he doesn’t mean it.

“Come to bed, Tony,” Steve tries, “please.” And it makes Tony laugh even harder, because to him the mere idea is so absurd that it doesn’t even deserve to be considered at all.

Scrambling, desperately, for a way to quiet Tony’s mind, Steve hugs him. Tony remains still in his arms at first, but then he tries to struggle out of Steve’s grip. Steve resists, wanting to keep him from getting away, but the effect is, predictably, the worst imaginable: Tony’s punch lands on Steve’s ribs, cutting his air off for a moment. It surprises him more than doing any real damage, and it hurts, yes, but only Steve’s soul, not his body.

“Let me go,” Tony hisses, low and menacing, but also hollow, somehow. Empty.

Steve lets him jerk away.

He’s about to attempt an apology, but Tony straightens his shoulders, and his demeanor changes into something fake and constructed.

He seems taller, like this. He seems immense.

Tony opens the French window. He stands outside, on the terrace, the rain breaking its fall over the balustrade and spattering onto his bare feet.

Steve has felt this powerless only once in his life, when he couldn’t cover those couple of feet between his hand and Bucky’s on that damn train.

Tony turns to look at him, a wild flicker in his eyes, worse than any dullness.

He opens his arms, crucified into place by the armor forming around him from the metal bands at his wrists. It seems to appear from thin air, in little scales of red and gold that become instantly seamless against his skin.

It’s outlandish. It’s fantastic.

“Sleep well, Cap,” Tony says, just before the faceplate snaps into place.
He flies into the storm.

***

Tony walks into a bar in Barcelona a couple of hours later. He’s barefoot, and still in his pajamas.

“I’ll PayPal you five thousands Euros, right now, if you give me that bottle of scotch,” he says to the barista, pointing at the shelf behind him.

“Sure thing, hon,” he replies with a wink.

[1] You, you who are different, at least you in the universe / You are a point that never revolves around me / A sun that shines only for me / Like a diamond in the middle of the heart.

[2] You can listen to the song [here](#).

[3] You can listen to a piano version of this song [here](#).

[4] You, you who are different, at least you in the universe / You won’t change, tell me you will always be sincere / And that you will really love me.

Chapter End Notes

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Day 9

Chapter Notes

Warnings: very graphic depiction of violence and blood, gore and disturbing imagery, major character death, dead bodies/corpses. ALL of these happen in the context of two dreams (so none of it actually happens), one at the beginning and one towards the end of the chapter. Also warning for something that I can only call a bruise kink (not in dreams).

Steve lies on the bed and indulges in his own misery.

He lets it all out, sobs and cries and struggles to breathe. His pillow is wet.

He wonders where Tony is, if he’ll come back, what he’s doing right now, what Steve will tell Stella in the morning. He worries and worries about Tony, until his throat is raw, his eyes burn, and he’s too tired and heartbroken to even think—because Tony left, and Steve is lost without him by his side.

It’s weird, to lie on a bed at night and not hear Tony’s even breathing, his steady heartbeat, the hum of the reactor in the background of everything. There’s no scent of coconut, no warmth. No white-blue light beyond Steve’s closed eyes.

He doesn’t want to sleep, but he must pass out at some point into the night, because he dreams.

He dreams of cutting Tony’s throat open with the shield, of watching the dark pool of blood expand beneath their bodies, of not caring that Tony is dead only because Steve is about to die, too.

He dreams of considering the room, the position of the concrete columns, the wind gusting in from outside, of calculating the angles. He dreams of picking up the shield, of kneeling in the middle of the room, over Tony’s blood—he doesn’t deserve to die standing.

He dreams of throwing the shield, of closing his eyes, of his head being severed—swiftly, precisely, neatly. This, he won’t heal from.

He dreams of his body falling next to Tony’s, his own head a few feet away. Their blood mixing on the floor as an extreme, final act of love-making.

As an indissoluble vow. A violent promise of eternity.

He dreams of Bucky and Sam and Rhodey being there, all of them whole, serene in their loss.

He dreams of them digging a shallow grave outside, in the cold. They adjust Steve and Tony inside it—Steve still wearing his uniform, Tony still in the armor. Bucky rips a piece of cloth from his shirt and secures Steve’s head to the rest of his body while Rhodey holds it in place. Then, they place the shield, spattered with blood, over their lifeless faces, like a blanket. They’re careful and sweet as they cover their corpses with dirt and snow.

He dreams of no one but their closest friends knowing that Steve and Tony are buried together in the ice.
As if they were lovers. As if they were married in blood and death.

As if life had been kinder to them, and had granted them this.

He wakes up just before dawn, and his cheek sticks to the pillow with his dried tears.

It’s not raining anymore, and the birds are chirping loudly between the front yard trees.

The house is completely silent. Stella is still asleep.

Steve gets up and puts on his boots and a hoodie. He heads downstairs, and then outside. He pauses for a moment between the trees.

He finds Tony sitting on a stone bench under the holm oak tree. He’s soaking wet.

There’s a bottle of Scotch next to him, which has been opened, and a half-empty glass from Stella’s kitchen.

Nothing, in their entire relationship, has mattered more than what Steve is going to say next, and he knows this like he knows his own name.

He covers the rest of the distance from Tony with slow steps, the wet grass and the mud squelching under his boots. He sits on the other side of the bench, leaving the liquor in the middle. The rain seeps into his sweatpants and boxers from the wet surface of the seat.

The sky is still gray. The sun seems to struggle to come out from behind the clouds. Steve wouldn’t blame it if it didn’t want to rise at all, today.

Tony’s face is still painted with a perturbing anguish Steve wishes he was able to cure with a snap of his fingers, with a kind word, with a kiss.

Tony doesn’t say anything. It’s up to Steve to say something, and he knows what Tony must expect from him right now, while he feels like this.

So Steve has to say the exact opposite. Something Tony can’t see coming.

He rests a hand on his own thigh. He turns his fist upwards, opens his palm.

The cherries are so red that they almost look black in the dim light of the orchard. They look like a wound against the white of Steve’s skin. Like blood splattered on the snow.

He leans to the side, and offers his palm to Tony.

He looks at him, at his face and his eyes, for impossibly long seconds, and Steve pretends he can still breathe, that his life doesn’t hang on the next few minutes, that he’s okay with the possibility of Tony refusing him, in the end, because at least he’d know.

He takes all the faith he has in Tony, and takes the last leap.

“I love you,” he says, and Tony gives him a hesitant, abortive smile, defeat still evident in his eyes, now full of tears.

He lets them fall, mingle with the raindrops streaming down his skin.

He takes the cherries from Steve’s palm.
He separates them, breaking the stalk with beautifully precise movements. He eats one then, chews it slowly, spits the pit onto his hand and throws it on the ground, lets nature swallow its own fruits.

Then, he turns to Steve and lifts his hand, the other cherry softly held between his thumb and middle finger, a gesture so graceful that it surprises Steve in its simple elegance.

“Open your mouth,” Tony says.

And Steve does.

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“I didn’t drink any of it,” Tony says while he pours the scotch into the sink of Stella’s kitchen. He throws the bottle in the garbage.

“I know,” replies Steve, while he rinses the glass and adjusts it on the dish rack to dry.

“I didn’t mean what I said about Bucky,” Tony says while Steve undresses him in the bathroom, waiting for the tub to fill with hot water. Tony shivers while he lowers himself into it, feels his skin prickle with the change in temperature.

“I know,” replies Steve while he towels off Tony’s hair. He rests his forehead against Tony’s, closes his eyes, and Tony sees him smile. Steve breathes in, deep, and his nose brushes Tony’s. He smells of roses. He’d taste of them, too.

“I’m sorry I punched you. And that I called you Cap.” Tony says while he crawls into bed next to Steve. He buries his face into the hollow of Steve’s throat, and he feels Steve’s reply pressed against his cheek, besides hearing it.

“I know.”

 Did you know?

Yes.

“I’m very tired.”

“Sleep,” Steve says, caressing his hair.

Tony sleeps.

He’s back in the cave.

He’s still walking in the big space he reached the last time. He moves around in the darkness and the place changes, transforms before his eyes to become the first cave, the one he was in at the beginning of this strange adventure.

He can see the staircase carved into the stone. The ground is dry now, but the air is still damp.

He thinks of climbing the stairs. But he can’t, because Steve isn’t with him.

He can’t leave without Steve.

 Oh, Steve, where are you? Tony thinks.

A loud *clang* startles Tony, and he wakes up.
It’s still very early; Steve is still asleep. Tony exits the room as quiet as he can.

Downstairs, he finds Stella in the kitchen, making coffee. She kisses his cheek.

“Buongiorno,”[1] she says.


“Devo. Speravo di evitare di andare in città stamattina, ma…” she sighs, “ne approfitterò per prendere il pollo al mercato per pranzo, che ne dici? Due, okay? Uno per Steve. Basterà?”[3]

“Dovremmo essere salvi, sì.”[4]

“Caffè?”[5]

“Please,” he says, making Stella huff a little laugh. She cuts him a piece of pie.

After a few minutes of silence, Tony finds the courage to speak again.

“I haven’t been… God, I’ve been such a hypocrite. I accused you of lying but… I haven’t been entirely sincere either. I’m sorry.”

“What is it?” Stella asks, careful.

“I have something. For you. From Mom. I don’t know why I didn’t tell you straight away, it’s… it’s her last letter. To you. I think it was meant to be mailed, but then with everything that happened… I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Tony, it’s okay. This is hard on everyone, but on you, I can’t even imagine…” she sighs, rubs a hand across her forehead. “Listen, you’ll give it to me later, okay?”

“Alright,” Tony says, voice rough. Maybe she doesn’t want to read it now and spend the morning thinking about it. A few hours won’t change anything, after so many years.

Stella leaves soon after.

He sits at the piano. One of the cats jumps on his lap. He nuzzles her neck from behind; she twists to look at him, sniffs him, meows.

“Alright, alright, I’m playing,” he says, and starts stroking the keys in that way that is both familiar and completely novel to him. Like something you used to do ages ago, but haven’t done in a very long time. *Exactly* like that.

He tries to shake her off once or twice, but the cat keeps resting her paw on the back of his hand. In the end, he just lets her.

He hears Steve come down the stairs before he sees him appear from behind the wall. His hair is tousled up, and the creases from the pillows are just disappearing from his cheeks. He’s still wearing the clothes he slept in.

Despite the beard, despite his serious expression, despite the sadness that still colors his eyes, despite how much Tony still relies on him—what he looks like, most of all, is young.

He takes the vintage chair in the corridor and places it next to Tony, with the back against the piano. He sits, and the old wood creaks under his weight.
Tony keeps playing.

He glances at Steve now and then, gives him a lopsided smile, to which Steve doesn’t respond. He just watches Tony play, watches his profile and his hands, and thinks about who knows what.

The song ends.

“The way you play it… it’s beautiful,” he says.

“It’s a beautiful song.”

Tony’s execution hardly ever makes anything better.

“I looked up the lyrics. Made me think about you.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know,” Steve blushes, “guess all songs make me think about you.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t give me that.”

Steve laughs, and sighs. “The part about the diamond in the middle of the heart… reminded me of you, of the shape of the reactor. And the hope that, you know, between all the people… there’s someone that’s different. That’s just for you. Not like a soulmate or anything, but like… someone that accepts you. That’s kind to you.”

“Steve—”

“I can dream about it, right? You told me I could. If I end up hurt, then I hurt.”

“But doesn’t this hurt even more? Dreaming?”

“It’s the only thing that makes waiting bearable,” Steve says, smiling the saddest smile.

Tony strokes the keys softly.

*Dimmi che per sempre sarai sincero*

*e che mi amerai davvero...*

“Did you eat something?” Steve asks after the silence resumes, ultimately proving that he cares about Tony in the Italian way too. “Drink some water?”

“Yeah.”

“Without coffee in it?”

“That, too.”

“How long did you sleep?”

“Not long. Little over an hour. Had a weird dream and got up.”

Steve leans forward on the chair, rests his elbows on his thighs. Tony looks at the endless expanse of his back and knows exactly how warm it would be to the touch.

“Why did you stop shaving?” he asks, abruptly.
“Got sick of looking at my own face every day.”

Armors. They come in all shapes and sizes.

“Did I wake you? Playing?”

“I think you did, yeah. But I don’t mind.”

“Wanna rest some more?”

Steve nods, “But not upstairs.”

They sit on the couch, and the cats snuggle up to them, then move out of the way, annoyed, when Steve, heavy, rests his head on Tony’s thighs. Tony trails his fingers through his hair and keeps them there, his hand still against Steve’s scalp, warmth radiating off of him.

Steve’s chest rises and falls with the rhythm of his breathing. He looks up, at Tony’s face, lifts an arm to press his hand to Tony’s neck, in that position that has become almost a comfort for Tony at this point.

His grip isn’t tighter than usual, but he strokes Tony’s throat up and down, and Tony swallows against the constriction, lifts his head to expose more of himself to Steve’s touch.

“You were worried?” he asks, voice low and scratchy.

“Sick with it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

Steve’s breath hitches, his chest shaken by a horrible convulsion. He covers his face with his hands, and Tony spares a moment to mourn the loss of Steve’s skin on his.

He’s crying.

“Oh, Steve…”

He shakes his head, as much as the position allows him, and turns to hide his face into Tony’s belly, against the excess of fat there. Tony’s ashamed of it, so he tries to suck it in, make his abdomen seem toned, pretend he sometimes remembered to work out during those months he spent holed up in the workshop trying to fit his armor into two strips of metal.

Steve places a hand over his stomach.

“Stop that,” he says, with the same tone he uses to give orders over the team comms, only this time it’s also thick with tears.

Tony forces himself to obey.

Steve cries.

“Shh, there’s no need,” he tries, with a soft voice, “there’s no need. It wasn’t your fault, and I’m okay. I was an ass, I’m sorry.”

“I keep dreaming…” he says, between a sob and the other, “I keep dreaming that the only way we
can solve this is if we… if we… if I…"

He doesn’t say what, and it’s a long time before he calms down enough to stop crying and fall asleep.

Tony’s t-shirt is wet.

He listens to Steve breathe, now quiet and slow, in the heat of summer, sitting in a room that feels like home.

It’s nothing like Steve’s ragged, hard gulps of gelid air, in the perennial winter of a HYDRA base that was as far from home as they could possibly be.

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Steve feels the hand in his hair move, scratching softly at his scalp.

“Hey,” Tony says, “Steve?”

The room smells like roasted chicken. And potatoes. And Tony.

Steve opens his eyes and smiles.

“Hi.”

“Come on, sleepyhead, lunch’s ready.”

Steve’s heart flutters at the term of endearment, despite his best judgement.

“Did you get any sleep?” he asks, even though he already knows the answer. He can see it in Tony’s eyes.

“No. I watched you. Come on. Lunch.”

“Alright,” he says, and heads upstairs to wash his face and change into proper clothes. He doesn’t look at himself in the mirror while the water takes away the dried tears from his skin.

He greets Stella when he enters the kitchen, and she kisses his cheek.

They watch the news during lunch, and Stella mutters something to herself now and then, harsh words meant for this or that politician.

“Can’t believe this headass is making a comeback, of all people.”

Tony lifts his head to look at the TV. “Oh, Jesus Christ,” he snaps, surprised and annoyed, while an old, short, sharp-dressed man speaks. He doesn’t have a lot of hair on his head, and the little he has, he dyes. His face is a mask of makeup; his skin tone looks fake, all kinds of wrong. All of him looks fake.

“Makes me wish I could hire a sniper and just get rid of him,” Stella says, and Steve blinks at her.

“He’s that bad?” he asks.

“Worse,” Stella says, and Tony changes the channel to a cooking show.

After coffee, they clear the table.
“Gotta go upstairs…” Tony leaves the room without finishing the sentence. When he comes back, the atmosphere in the room changes. In his hand there’s Maria’s letter.

It’s blue. The envelope, and probably the sheets of paper inside too. Very elegant, clearly expensive. Might have been scented, too, back then.

It’s still sealed.

Stella takes it from Tony’s hand with trembling fingers. She falls back on her chair heavily, gracelessly, like when you cut the strings of a puppet, lifeless—but just for a moment.

She brings a hand up to cover her mouth, and sobs, unashamed of her grief, as if she were alone in the room.

When she composes herself, she says, “I haven’t seen a new one of these in a very long time.”

Tony squeezes her shoulder, pushes a stray lock of hair away from her face. He rests the back of his fingers against Stella’s cheek, brushes away a tear or two. His hand looks big next to her frail frame, his skin tan and rough when confronted with Stella’s, fair and wrinkled and soft.

“We’ll leave you to it, alright?” he whispers, and she nods.

They step outside, walk into the orchard. The day is sunny and hot, but the ground beneath their feet is still wet and muddy in places, where the trees are too thick for the sunshine to reach.

Despite how warm it is, Steve zips up his hoodie. It’s not even strange anymore. It’s just the shape of his guilt, the weight of it. He shoulders it like all the other consequences of his actions—not knowing when, if at all, he’ll be free of it.

“You didn’t read it.”

“ Took a lot of self-restraint.”

“I can imagine. But it was the right thing to do.”

Tony hesitates. “It was.”

Silence fills the space between them for a while, then Tony says, “We should pick some fruit. Stella told me most of it goes to waste these days. Laura used to take care of it. I’m thinking of sending someone to do it for her.”

“I’m sure she’d appreciate that.”

“She told me this morning that she has a friend who’d take it. To sell it at the market. We could fill a couple of crates for her.”

“Sure.”

Steve stays on the ground, keeps the ladder steady for Tony, distributes the fruit in the baskets, passes him the scissors when he needs them.

It’s fun, doing this together, and it’s fascinating to watch Tony exist in this environment. His legs wrapped around the branch of a tree, his teeth sinking into the juicy pulp of a peach, his lips shining with it while he chews, unashamed, without any need to perform for anyone.

Watching him be himself.
Tony stops moving at some point, his gaze lost into nothing. He’s thinking. It’s not the first time this happens. Steve waits.

“Steve.”

“Yeah?”

“You got anything for me to write with? Left all my toys in the house.”

“Sure,” Steve says, and passes him a pencil and his sketchbook. Tony opens it, and scribbles something on the first blank page. When he’s done, he looks at the sketch on the other page, a doodle of Bucky and Natasha resting on a couch. He has his head in her lap, she’s stroking his hair. Tony brushes his fingers over it, over the place where Steve wrote Natalia and James in his old-fashioned handwriting.

“I like to imagine that they can have some… quiet. That they can rest. Talk. Find some peace, maybe.”

Tony swallows, nods. “Remind me to take a pic of that later, and send it to T’Challa,” he says, pointing at the page with his equations.

“Of course.”

Tony looks at him for an infinite moment, frowning.

Steve would give anything to know what Tony wants. What he wants Steve to do. How to end this, one way or the other.

“Ross wanted to kill you.”

Steve sighs.

“Kill me?”

“He gave me and Nat an ultimatum. He wanted to bring you and Barnes in, said he’d put Special Ops on it. Threatened to… So I said I’d take you in. I tried to tell you, at the airport. He wanted to kill you and I… I almost had a heart attack when he said that.” He laughs, caustic. “He said I couldn’t, uh, be objective about it. You couldn’t either.” He sighs. “You wanted to protect him. I wanted to protect you.”

Tony looks up, between the branches of the tree. He picks up a peach and gives it to Steve. It’s deliberate, how he lets his fingers brush Steve’s. Tony looks at their hands. He grimaces.

“The only good thing that came out of this mess, maybe, is self-awareness regarding the state of the Avengers. The way we let the team be torn apart over and over… it shouldn’t be like that,” Steve says.

“I put everything on this thing, on the Avengers… and I didn’t even want to be part of it at first, when Fury told me. Then Natasha’s report said that I shouldn’t be on any team, so…” He scoffs. “In my defense, I was dying at the time.”

“You were dying?”

“Yeah. Palladium poisoning, from the reactor. Don’t make that face, it’s fine now, it runs on vibranium,”
“On vibranium?”

“I synthesize it in my lab, don’t worry. I’m not stealing it from Wakanda.”

“I didn’t think that, Tony. It’s just... vibranium.”

“Don’t get all metaphorical on me. It’s just an element.”

“Could’ve been any other element.”

“It doesn’t mean—”

“I know, I’m just saying. I like it.”

“You’re the most possessive person—”

“I just appreciate the image—”

“You appreciate that this feels like destiny or some shit, because you’re romantic like that. What’s next, you’re gonna write *Mr. Tony Stark-Rogers* all over your diary?”

It’s meant to be a joke, and that’s the worst part. Steve lets his arms fall to his sides, and doesn’t reply. He blinks back tears.

Is it really so disgusting, so laughable and ludicrous, for Tony, the idea of ever being Steve’s?

“Steve—”

“Don’t,” Steve snaps, lifting a hand to stop Tony from saying more. He breathes then, deep, closes his eyes and drops his hand. He softens his voice. “At least don’t mock me for it. Please.”

Tony quickly climbs down the tree. He lifts his hands in defeat.

“I’m an asshole. That’s old news. I’m sorry. I’m not mocking you. I swear. It’s the bullshit that comes out of my mouth.”

Steve keeps his gaze on the ground and nods.

“Have I really gained no ground at all, all this time?” he asks, and he’s not entirely sure he meant for Tony to hear.

“I... fuck, Steve... you, you have, you have, of course, it’s just, I can’t—”

“You can’t talk about it right now. I know.”

*When will we talk about it? When will you get me off this hook, Tony?*

“I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“It’s okay. Let’s not... let’s not do this now.”

There’s a brief silence, and then Steve finds the courage to look Tony in the face. He gives him a small smile, and Tony’s eyes brighten in response.

“See,” Tony says, “you don’t have the exclusive on fucking things up.” And it makes Steve laugh, the bitterness slowly giving space to amusement. “No, seriously,” Tony continues, “ask Pepper, I’m a pro. If there were Olympic games, I’d win all the gold medals.”
Steve slides an arm across Tony’s shoulders, playful, but tired. “Shut up,” he says.

“Never.”

***

They put the crates in the trunk of Stella’s car, so she can take them to her friend tomorrow. Tony spots her on the steps outside the front door.

“That was a nice display of non-toxic masculinity,” she jokes when Steve and Tony near the house.

“Were you spying on us? Grandmas really don’t know how to pass the time,” Tony replies without missing a beat, rolling his eyes for the sake of the game.

“Good grief, Mr. Stark! Being so rude to an old lady! Shame on you!”

Tony kisses her cheek.


“I’ll think about it.”

“Have your lawyers call my lawyers,” Tony says, and then, serious, “How are you?”

Stella takes some time answering. They sit in the living room.

“Not fine? It’s weird, I don’t know. I feel like it’s 1991 again. Like I’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’m sorry if this has shaken you up. But it wouldn’t have been right not to give it to you.”

“No. Of course. You did the right thing, it’s just… hard.”

“What did she say?” Steve asks, and immediately looks ashamed of his curiosity. He blushes. “If you don’t mind sharing,” he adds.

“She said… ugh. Half this stuff, I had entirely forgotten,” Stella says, taking the pages from the pocket of her dress. She pushes her glasses back on her nose, skims over Mom’s compact and tiny handwriting.

“She talks about music, she gives me advice on a job I was about to accept, but in the end didn’t. She hints about your father’s work on the super soldier serum, but doesn’t go into detail for obvious reasons. She asks me about Laura. Tells me she read one of Laura’s papers and has some questions for her. She… she talks about you too, Tony. And about your father.”

“What did she say?” Tony asks, echoing Steve’s question.

“She’s worried about you. She says…”

“Tony è tornato dall’università un paio di giorni fa, e già ha litigato più volte con suo padre. Howard è stato sobrio fino ad ora, ma temo che non sarà così ancora per molto. Aveva parlato di andare alle Bahamas per qualche giorno, dovrei dirgli che ho cambiato idea. Così, io e lui saremo lontani, e anche se passerò ancora un altro Natale lontana da mio figlio, potrò regalare a lui un Natale senza suo padre.

“Howard è molto nervoso ultimamente, il suo lavoro per il Pentagono mette la sua pazienza a dura prova. Non che ne abbia mai avuta molta.”
“Tony non perde occasione per punzecchiarlo con le sue battute, con la sua finta noncuranza, con le ovvie dimostrazioni della sua intelligenza superiore. Finge di essere la versione più scapestrata, irriverente, irresponsabile di Howard, ma non finge mai di essere meno intelligente. Tony indossa molte maschere, ma mai quella dello stupido.

“Nonostante questi maldestri tentativi, Tony non potrebbe essere più diverso da Howard.


“Si placa solo quando Howard non c’è. Quando siamo soli, è come se il mondo sparisse e tornassimo ad essere solo una mamma e un bambino. Suono il piano per lui e faccio finta di non accorgermi che mi guarda dal divanetto, e pensa a qualche battutaccia con cui farmi ridere o scandalizzare, o a quale pazza marachella raccontarmi. You know, Mom, one night, me and Rhodey…


“Ti ricordi di quella volta (sono certa di avertela raccontata più volte) in cui mi chiese, Mamma, papà non mi vuole molto bene, vero? e io che mi sarei strappata il cuore dal petto pur di sapere cosa rispondere. Ricordo che alla fine riuscii a dire solo che non importava, perché tanto io gli volevo bene per tutti e due.

“Ripenso spesso al passato, Stella, e vedo strade che non ho preso, occasioni che non ho colto, cose che non ho fatto. Come sarebbe Tony oggi se sua madre non fosse stata una vigliacca? Se fossimo venuti all’aeroporto quel giorno di tanti anni fa?

“Lo amo più di me stessa, eppure a volte mi chiedo se restando qui io non gli abbia fatto più male che bene. Speravo che sarei riuscita a proteggerlo da Howard più di quanto ho potuto. L’unico mio vero successo è che non mi ha mai più vista piangere, da quel giorno in cui venisti a trovarci qua. Che orribile ironia, che tutte le altre mie lacrime siano state causate da qualcuno di cui Tony non sospetta.

“Ho sbagliato tutto, Stella? Vedò il sole che brucia dentro il mio bambino spegnersi ogni giorno di più, per colpa di Howard, ma forse anche per colpa mia.

“Non voglio che Tony sia infelice. Non voglio che viva neanche un giorno come i tanti che Howard ha regalato a me. Io sono stata sempre infelice, Stella, salvo che per quelle due estati bellissime che passammo insieme, salvo che per i momenti in cui stringo il mio bambino fra le braccia e mi illudo di poterlo tenere al sicuro dal resto del mondo.

“Sono stata sempre infelice. E non voglio che lui lo sia. Voglio che sia amato in tutti i modi in cui Howard non ha mai amato me. In tutti i modi in cui tu mi hai sempre amata.”[6]

Stella’s—Mom’s—words fall into silence. Steve looks confused but concentrated, as if he was trying to understand as much as possible but failed.

Tony drags a hand across his face, over his mouth. At this point, he doesn’t even notice the tears. Crying is just something that happens and can’t be helped, like sweating.
“Fuck,” he says, because there’s absolutely nothing else he can say, nothing that makes as much sense.

His mother’s pain, served in black ink, on blue paper. He was never meant to listen to those words, but now that he has, he feels his life split in two: before these words, and after them. And he’s so tired of words cutting his life into chunks. Of feeling the knowledge work inside him and change him, twisting around his guts like food gone bad that he ate anyway.

He stands up.

“I’m sorry. I need… I need some fresh air, sorry,” he mutters, and runs out of the front door.

He feels sick, gags on it, holds himself up with a hand against a tree, but nothing comes out. He coughs and coughs and coughs until his chest burns with it, his throat hurts.

There’s nothing he can do about this.

It hits him suddenly, unexpectedly—until a moment ago he absurdly thought that he could somehow solve this. He can’t. Worse: there’s nothing to solve. Mom wrote those words ages ago. Mom is dead. Nothing can be done to make her life better. Nothing can be done to make her happy.

Sono stata sempre infelice. She’s always been unhappy, except for her time with Stella and her time with Tony.

He can be proud of this, at least: he brought what little joy could be brought into her life.

But she deserved better than this. She deserved to be free of Howard, she deserved to let go of the weight of protecting Tony from the truth. She deserved a son who could handle her pain, who didn’t get scared by her tears, who didn’t force her to hide them.

Someone stronger. Someone better.

Tony feels his heart in his throat and the tears just won’t stop and there’s a pounding in his head and every sound is so far away and so close all at once and the world is spinning under his feet and his knees tremble and—

Steve catches him before he falls, makes him sit on the stone bench. He crouches down in front of Tony, between his thighs—familiar, now.

“Steady, there,” he says, and his voice, albeit reassuring, betrays his concern.

“Hearing it like this, Steve, from her, how do I… how do I deal with this?”

“I don’t know, Tony. I’m so sorry.”

“I had an idea of her in my mind, I thought I knew her… Unhappy, her whole life. Steve. Her whole life.”

Steve sighs and strokes his cheek. “Not when she was with you.”

“If only I saw through her pretense, back then, if I paid more attention... I can’t believe I missed it.”

“This wasn’t your fault.”

“She shouldn’t have done this. Hide it from me. She should’ve told me.”
“Don’t be unfair, Tony. You know why she did it.”

“Because she knew. Deep down, she knew how weak I was. That he was right.”

“Nothing could be further from the truth. Don’t try to spin it like this. This isn’t how it went. You know that.”

“I just can’t accept—”

“What, that she loved you this much? She was your mother.”

“Howard was my father, and he didn’t give a sh—”

“Yes, but the last time I checked that’s not how fathers are supposed to act.”

Frustration seems to shut Tony up for a while.

He lowers his head, rests his forehead against Steve’s like they’ve done many times in the past few days.

“I wish I could do something about this. That there was anything that could be done,” Tony whispers.

“You’re a genius,” Steve says, “you’ll think of something.”

“Appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“Anytime.”

They stay like that for a while, without saying anything. Steve being this close is a comfort and a source of tension at the same time, but Tony doesn’t feel inclined to give it up either way.

He leans into Steve’s hand, still on his cheek, and reaches out to hug him, resting his face in the crook of Steve’s neck. He feels shaken, upset, wrong.

He wants his mother back. He wants a drink.

“I can’t give you either. I’m sorry,” Steve says, because of course Tony voiced his thoughts without realizing. He sucks in a breath, and his left hand trembles against Steve’s back. “There’s very little I can give you,” Steve adds, and Tony hugs him tighter, because that’s not true at all, but he can’t tell him.

Not yet.

“Let’s get back,” he says instead, but before they reach the house, Stella comes out.

“Are you alright?” she asks, and Tony nods, even though they both know it’s not true. “I want to show you a place. It’s close,” she says, and starts walking to the side of the house, down the hill, into the woods.

They walk for maybe five minutes, but it seems like they’ve been dropped into a parallel universe. The trees are so thick that it feels impossible they could ever thin out and leave space to other things, and the ground is still wet from the rain. The birds chirp loudly, perched on the branches, industriously at work for survival.

They stop walking when they reach a river.
“This was your mother’s favorite place, Tony. We’d come here during the day, with the excuse that it was less warm than in the house, and we’d… well…”

“Too much information,” Tony says, tender, his heart in his throat again.

“Nothing like that. Too many people passing by, back then. But we had our fun.”

It’s a very little river, shallow, and only a few feet in width. Tony can’t see any fish in it, even though the water is so clear he could count each of the black pebbles at the bottom of the riverbed. Some of the bigger stones, gray and white, create a little waterfall, and listening to the rush of the water, lazy and eternal, fills Tony with a peculiar sort of peace.

“We used to play here all the time. Maria always sprayed me,” says Stella, with a private laugh.

Tony glances at Steve. He seems to be thinking about something, but Tony’s gaze shifts his attention. He smiles at Tony.

Tony crouches down next to the river and brushes his fingertips to the surface of the water, watches as the ripples shatter the sunshine reflecting on it.

He knows that nothing he touches here, now, can connect him to Mom. He knows this is not the same water, he knows the rocks have been scrubbed clean of any trace of Maria over the years.

And yet.

He closes his eyes, and he can see her: the color of her eyes, the scent of her skin, her hair on Tony’s face when she hugged him tight. The sound of her voice, that day she cried, the last time Tony saw her. Her smile in the picture with Stella.

All of it, every memory, every sensation, every gesture, coalesces deep in the middle of Tony’s chest, in that place between the arc reactor and his heart. All of it catches fire inside him, a person made into a blazing sun.

In this river, in the caress of the water between his fingers, in Steve and Stella talking about feelings of belonging to a system of humans who hurt and laugh and cry and die and live and love, Tony finds his mother again.

Her sense of responsibility, her ambition, her stubbornness, her eccentricism. Her love for food and music, for science, for the future that she could see just around the corner. Her pragmatism, her love, her need to always strive to do better and be better, because the world deserved to see the best version of Maria Stark, because she deserved to be the best version of herself, and all that unhappiness couldn’t swallow her whole, even though it tried.

In all of this, Tony is what he always wanted to be: he is legacy.

Not his father’s, no. He is his mother’s.

If there’s a side he has to choose, it’s his mother’s. If there’s a thread he has to pick up to continue what others before him have done, he wants it to lead back to his mother. If there’s someone he wants to be compared to, he wants to measure up with, he wants to make proud, it’s his mother.

And fuck Howard Stark, and everything he was and wasn’t, and everything he did and didn’t do for Tony and Mom, to Tony and Mom.

Fuck you, Howard, Tony thinks again, and just like that he knows what he has to do.
It won’t bring her back, nothing will, but both Tony and Maria will sleep better that way.

He cups his hands into the river and washes the tears away from his face.

***

Stella insists they stay for dinner. Tony tries to resist, but she says she’s going to make insalata di riso, and Steve never had it, and apparently there’s no way Steve can go around telling people he went to Italy during summer if he never had insalata di riso. So they stay.

They go pack while Stella cooks, because yet again she refuses to accept any help.

Tony flops on the bed as soon as they enter the room, while Steve gets to work and listens to him breathe. He packs Tony’s stuff too; it’s just a couple of things. Tony didn’t even sleep here last night. Steve was alone with his bad dreams.

When he finally looks at Tony, he finds him already staring, a strange, warm expression on his face, hooded eyes tired and puffy with lack of sleep. But there’s something else in them too, something that Steve almost wants to call joy. It’s serene, Tony’s gaze, and charming, bordering on seductive. Maybe that’s just Steve’s wishful thinking.

“Hey,” he says, and oh-oh. Tony’s doing that thing with his voice, that thing with his smile and his eyes and his throat. He’s resting a hand in the crook of his thigh in a way that is studied to seem casual, but it’s meant to draw Steve’s attention to that part of his body, and Steve—

He clears his throat, and it’s almost worse, it’s Steve confessing that whatever Tony’s doing right now is working like a charm. Which is true, yeah, but Steve wants to pretend not to be this easy to undo.

What’s got into Tony anyway, why is he doing this?

“Yeah?” Steve says, averting his eyes and trying to sound casual, rearranging his sweaters in his duffle bag for the third time and why did he even bring so many sweaters for two days? Fuck.

“Steve.”

It’s sugar, Tony’s voice. A caress, a dream. A night, months ago, except back then Tony never called Steve by his name.

*Come on, Cap, just... just this once.*

Steve squares his shoulders and takes a deep breath to chase the memory away. This is not the time, but he feels it pushing back at him, resisting.

“Yeah?” he repeats, more to the wall in front of him than to Tony.

“Come here for a moment?” Tony asks, and Steve drops Tony’s t-shirt and gives up folding it altogether. Five tries are enough even for his tenacity.

Steve likes to think of himself as a brave man. Not always, maybe; he can’t be at the top of his game all the time, but in general, and despite recent mistakes, he likes to think of himself as someone who faces problems, instead of avoiding them.

But he’d be lying if he said his knees don’t almost give up on him while he turns and walks to the bed. He takes off his shoes and sits on his heels on the mattress, next to Tony, who’s lying on his
side, an arm bent at the elbow to prop his head up with his hand. His t-shirt has ridden up to show a
strip of bruised skin.

_I have a plan_, Steve thinks, _Attack_, and he covers Tony’s bruised hip with his hand, squeezes just
enough to test how tender it is (very), how soon Tony hisses (pretty much immediately), if he opens
his mouth around a moan after (yes), if he pushes his hip up into Steve’s hand to demand more (of
course he does).

“Ahh… oh—” Tony murmurs while Steve massages the muscle with his fingers, feels how slightly
swollen it still is, still red in places despite being mostly already blue. Tony doesn’t shy away from
his touch, not even when he has to clench his teeth to bear it; he powers through it because maybe
there’s some pleasure to be found in this pain, and he’s not willing to give it up, how little it may be.

He promised he wouldn’t do this again, hurt Tony. But like this, it’s different.

Tony’s breath doesn’t come in icy puffs of air here, it’s hot and ragged, interspersed with soft moans
—he’s panting, but not out of fear. Steve’s hand doesn’t mean to bring pain to Tony, but comfort,
and the hurt is an unavoidable side effect that is tolerated because the solace, the indulgence, are
much more important. They’re not lying on the hard concrete floor of a HYDRA base where people
got their souls stolen and broken and burnt into ashes, no, they’re on a bed; the sheets still smell of
lavender fabric softener, there are flowers on the desk and trees outside, and the walls here have seen
love and heartbreak, and only life’s cruelty, never man’s.

Tony opens his eyes—he closed them at some point, squeezed them shut to better focus on every
sensation, because Tony never avoids feeling it all to the end, whatever it is.

He looks tired, worn out, used up, and somehow still himself, somehow more similar than ever to
that night when he climbed on Steve’s lap and kissed him and fucked him and made Steve think
about being in love for the first time in ages.

Steve looks back at him, intense and suddenly scared, because the carefully constructed wall that’s
been separating them so far is crumbling down, and Steve doesn’t know what’s beyond it, and his
bravery fails him right now, when he’s about to find out.

Tony shifts, kneels on the bed too, while Steve’s hand falls away, while the moment blends into
something somber. Tony’s flirty, playful look from before has vanished.

“It reminds me,” he says, and he rests his palm on his opposite side, on the bruise. “Reminds me of
our night.” _Our night, our night, our n_— “You left me a bruise just like this one, maybe bigger. It
ached for weeks.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispers, realizing that he’s been hurting Tony for longer than he thought.

“No, no, it was… it reminded me it hadn’t been a dream. That we’d really… that you…”

A dream. _Our night._

“I’d look at it in the mirror, touch it, and make it hurt again so I knew…” Tony sighs. “It was almost
faded all the way when we saw each other again. I’d try to spot any yellow patches left and wonder
if anything between us hadn’t already faded with the bruise.”

“Tony—”

Anything between us.
“Then… it happened, you know, the, the thing, and… the new bruises covered all trace of the old ones. Deleted them. Deleted all the proof of our night...”

*Our night.*

“And those, the new bruises, the way they hurt... it wasn’t the same, it wasn’t… it was too much, I couldn’t, I couldn’t breathe…” Tony’s chest heaves with a shuddering sigh. “But this one I have now, it’s… it feels good. It feels like the one from that night again.”

“Tony,” Steve says, careful, “what are you trying to say?”

“I don’t know, I don’t… it’s been such a hard day, I don’t know…” he trails off, and his exasperation takes the form of a groan, and he looks like he’s already regretting what he’s going to say next.

Steve touches him again, circles Tony’s wrists with his fingers, avoiding the bracelets. Tony jolts, the words wrenched away from him, a confession extorted through a torture invisible to anyone but himself. “I missed you too. You left, and I, I was... I am angry, and… but I missed you.”

Getting the words out takes everything out of Tony, he sways forward, unable to hold himself up any further. He ends up straight between Steve’s arms.

And Steve is back in Wakanda for a few moments—on a bed too big and empty, with his heart too big and empty, crying all the way through dawn every night, waiting next to a phone that still, to this day, has never been used. He’s back to missing Tony like a piece of himself, back to so many days without sleep that Sam would comment on the dark circles around his eyes, because no, the serum doesn’t have the cure for heartbreak. He’s back to running through the forest outside Birnin Zana until his feet were bleeding inside his shoes.

“I won’t leave you again unless you want me to,” Steve says, and he hopes he doesn’t imagine Tony shaking his head against his collarbone. “As long as you’ll have me, I’ll never leave you again.”

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Dinner comes and goes, and they postpone the time for goodbyes a bit more, taking coffee in the living room.

“I’m sad you have to go so soon,” Stella says, “I’ll miss having you boys around. I didn’t even get a chance to make you try my ragù.”

“Oh, that’s—”

“Wait!” she interrupts Tony, “I think I have some frozen. I’ll give it to you guys; you can make pasta tomorrow.”

Tony accepts it, because there’d be no point in trying to refuse, and because he really wants to try it, see if it tastes anything like Mom’s.

He places the little plastic bag with the Tupperware container next to their bags in the hall.

“Tony, I wanted to show you something,” Stella says when Tony sits back on the chair, fishing Mom’s letter out of the pocket of her dress. “Here, read this part,” she adds, pointing to a paragraph towards the end of a page she’s passed him over the table. Tony reads it.

*Ho scoperto una canzone bellissima l’altro giorno, già vecchia di un paio d’anni almeno, e non so*
come mai non ne abbiamo mai parlato. Di Mia Martini, si intitola Almeno tu nell’universo. L’hai mai sentita? Presumo di sì, era a Sanremo. La melodia è piena e forte, la voce della Martini di una potenza unica, ma le parole sono forse la parte più bella. Ti prego, se non l’hai già fatto ascoltala. Mi ricorda tanto le nostre estati, quando guardavamo le stelle. [7]

“See, this is what I meant. We were just… in sync.”

Tony is quiet for a minute. “Do you think she was still in love with you?” he asks, with a courage he didn’t know he had.

“I don’t think so. But I think she was very alone. It does something to a person, Tony, that kind of loneliness. You start clinging to everything. Every scrap of memory becomes huge.”

Tony wonders if Stella isn’t speaking from her own experience. These past few years, suddenly alone after Laura’s death… it must’ve been hard.

“You tell me something, now,” Stella says, serious. “She was killed, right? It wasn’t an accident.”

“It wasn’t,” Tony replies. “They wanted to kill Howard, but she was with him in the car, and…”

Stella clutches his hand, and Tony doesn’t need to continue.

Soon after, it’s really time to go. Steve takes their bags to the car.

“He told me,” Stella says, even though Steve will be back in a minute, even though Steve can hear everything not matter how quietly she speaks. “He didn’t go into detail, but I asked, and he said.”

“It’s been tough.”

“I don’t doubt it. It shows. Tony, listen—”

“Stella, I don’t—”

“I know how hard this is. Or maybe I don’t, but… Perhaps pretend I’m… not your mom, but maybe… We haven’t known each other long, I know, but—”

“Don’t say that, I… meeting you has meant so much to me. And with all that’s going on, the things we’ll have to face… The, the aliens—”

“They’re back?”

“Not yet. But maybe soon, I don’t know if we’ll see each other again, Stella. It’s going to be very dangerous. For us. The fight, I mean. And I’m just a man in a tin can. And what if we can’t stop them, they’re gonna destroy…” Tony breathes through his own panic. “But meeting you, talking about Mom… it’s meant the world to me. And I want to say thank you.”

“Oh, bambino mio,” [8] she says, taking Tony’s hands in her own. “Listen to this old lady: he loves you, and you love him. You’ve hurt each other, and you shouldn’t ignore that. I know it’s hard, Tony, but if you can find it in yourself to forgive him and move past this, I don’t think you’d regret it. No matter how little time you think you have left, it would be worth it.”

“I’m trying, I’m—”

“You mom was right, Tony,” Stella says, placing one of her frail hands over the arc reactor, and Tony doesn’t flinch away, because Stella may not be his mom, but her touch is a mother’s touch. She reaches into Tony’s t-shirt, and takes out the sun-shaped pendant. “A tiny sun burns brightly in you.
Don’t let it fade away.” *Don’t let me just fade away.* “This thing is taking its toll on you both. I’m not urging you to forgive to just quiet your mind—if you can’t do it, then you’re allowed not to. But do something about this, Tony. You need to let this go, one way or the other, before it blows up in your faces and hurts you even more. Especially if you’ll need to fight side by side in any case.”

Tony blinks away the tears, while he nods and stares at his shoes. Stella hugs him tight, kisses his cheek so many times, and whispers in his ear “Ti voglio tanto bene, piccino mio.”

“Anch’io,” he murmurs back.

Steve is back in the house the moment Tony and Stella stop embracing. He’s polite like that.

Stella hugs Steve too, kisses his cheek just like she did with Tony, and whispers something in his ear too, but Tony can’t hear what it is. That’s alright, though.

He looks at Steve, his fair skin, his blue eyes, the gold of his hair, the way it all shines against his dark clothes. His stare makes Steve stop in his tracks, look back, eyes wide.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Ready to go?”

“Mh. Not yet,” Tony says, and he walks over to the couch, crouches down in front of it, and pushes his face in the neck of one of cats. She lets him as if he was one of them. Steve comes over, pets them goodbye too.

“Give me one,” Tony jokes, addressing Stella.

“Not even if you paid me a million dollars, Mr. Stark. But you’re welcome back to pet them any time you like.”

“I’ll take it.”

Stella apologizes for not walking them to the car, but she watches them from the door until they drive off. Steve insists on driving, and Tony lets him without a fight. He’s starting to feel really tired. Fraying at the seams, exhausted.

Back in the dépendance, Steve puts Stella’s ragù in the fridge, and then drinks an entire bottle of water. Tony watches him while he does it: his head thrown back, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, his lips gleaming with water when he finishes the bottle, but his breathing isn’t labored. Of course it isn’t.

Tony feels strange. Drawn to Steve, tired. In need of some form of comfort he’s too afraid to ask for. He feels on edge, too. His hands don’t feel steady.

“You still haven’t seen today’s drawing,” Steve says.

“Any reason I can’t have the one with Bucky and Natasha?”

“I didn’t think you’d want it.”

“I do. Want it. Very much.”

“Then it’s yours.”
Tony’s phone buzzes. It’s Rhodey’s number.

*First BARF session tomorrow.*

*The name sucks. Can’t believe they let you name it like that.*

*This is Bucky, by the way.*

*how hard is it, texting with the new arm? hope your geriatric brain can keep up with the upgrade.*

*I do just fine, I can even do capital letters. Unlike some asshole.*

*no one cool uses capital letters these days. which proves my point.*

*I’m scared shitless.*

*i know.*

*that’s all i’ve got. it’s gonna be hell.*

*but. if it can help you, even a little bit, then it’ll be worth it. this isn’t pain you’ll be wasting.*

*That’s actually kind of comforting.*

*is nat with you?*

*Yeah.*

*and you’re texting ME?*

*I’m dumb like that. How’s my even dumber best friend doing?*

*still dumb.*

*I figured. He’s still eating away all your money?*

*maybe. i’d rather he ate me, period.*

*if you know what i mean.*

*Ew.*

*ok, sorry. too much information.*

*Gross.*

*didn’t mean to hurt your antiquated morals.*

*What? Are you serious?*

*i didn’t think this bothered you.*

*Because it doesn’t! Tony. I’m queer too.*

*??*

*Yeah. Steve didn’t tell you? God, he’s dumb.*
maybe he didn’t want to out you.

To you? You know I’ve killed hundreds of people, you can know that I like dick.

that’s probably something you should discuss with steve.

boundaries and all that, you know.

Maybe, yeah.

So, anyway.

We were like, 17, 18, I don’t remember. We got into this club in some way, nothing fancy, and with a bit of a reputation, you know? Steve is trying to talk to a girl, which is hilarious because he can’t talk to girls. So this fella comes over to me, handsome, dressed all nice, hair slicked back, asks if he can buy me a drink. Then he says so and so, and I say yes, and I blow him in one of the bathroom stalls. He reciprocates, which was nice, and he slips me a couple dollars too, which was also nice, I gotta say. And then I come out of the stall first, so we won’t raise suspicions, except Steve’s there, washing his hands.

oh my god.

Yeah. And he looked at me so weird, I thought, that’s it, I’m done. But he never said anything about it, ever, so I figured that even if he disapproved, he didn’t want to be a snitch. Then we fought together, with the Commandos.

and?

And I noticed the way Steve looked at Gabe Jones.

oh, man.

Feel free to tease him about it.

will do.

Fuck. I needed that.

Just talking.

yeah. get some sleep now, alright? you’ll need it. i’m sure they’ve told you, but you’ll get headaches, so nap between sessions. it helps.

Alright.

exercise too. i’m sure nat can help you there...

Oh yeah. She’s great. At helping. With that.

i... believe that.

but. are you okay with that?

What? Sex?

yeah.
I can give consent to painful medical procedures and invasive psychological treatments but not to sex?

no, of course you can. i’m just wondering if a relationship is appropriate for you at this time.

you know what, forget i said anything. it’s none of my business.

No, it’s fine. I don’t know. Maybe it’s not wise, but… it’s the first time I feel something nice in decades. That I feel... warm, you know. I don’t want to give it up.

Don’t wanna give her up.

and you shouldn’t.

When I met her, the brainwashing was wearing off, but she… I don’t know, Tony. She keeps me grounded. Makes it easier to tell what’s real and what isn’t. And when I’m with her, the ghosts in my head go quiet. Something about her touches what’s left of my humanity.

that’s good. that’s a really good thing.

You were serious, though? About Steve. Promise I won’t tell him.

i don’t know. it’s complicated.

it’s hard.

it’s not that i don’t want to.

but. you know.

Yeah. He’ll wait though. He’ll wait for you.

I don’t want to, you know, take his side or anything. But he loves you.

yeah, he told me.

For real? With words?

yeah.

Wow.

yeah.

I’m very impressed.

and i’m very confused.

You’ll figure it out.

appreciate the vote of confidence.

What can I say? I’m an optimist.

get some sleep.

Okay. I’m gonna go.
you can do this. you will do this.

Thank you.

Really.

no problem.

really.

“Talking to Rhodey?”

“No. Bucky.”

“Oh?”

“He’s gonna try BARF for the first time tomorrow.”

“Oh.”

“If you want to text him—”

“No, it’s okay. He wants his space, I’ll respect that. He’s scared?”

“Like crazy. But I think talking did him good.”

“Yeah. He likes to talk. Even about whatever. Takes his mind off things.”

“I can relate,” Tony says, then takes a good look at Steve. “You already showered?”

“Yeah. You mind?”

Tony doesn’t know why he says what he says next. Whatever has been stopping him from saying things like this to Steve in the past few days, has disappeared.

“Well, now you’ll never know what would’ve happened if you waited, huh?”

The smirk comes to his lips without him even knowing.

Steve opens and closes his mouth, then opens and closes it again. He blushes, and looks down at the floor, confused.

“I—” Steve starts, but then he seems not to have a clue what to say, and he coughs into his fist, awkward.

“Um. Sorry. I’ll… I’ll go wash up.”

“Tony—”

“Sorry, alright? Don’t… Pretend I didn’t say that. I’m very tired.”

He practically runs into the bathroom, shutting the door with too much force, discouraging Steve from any kind of reply.

He suddenly feels hot all over, his clothes clinging to him, and he takes them all off in a hurry. He stands under the cold spray of the shower, and he feels the weight of his cock ease up. He hadn’t even realized he was half-hard already.
He can’t do this. He doesn’t have a clear idea of what this is, but he knows he can’t do it.

He rests his hands up against the wall, pushes against it, lowering his head. The water sloshes over his shoulders, and he starts shivering.

He doesn’t cry, though. He’s doesn’t want to cry anymore.

He allows himself a few more moments of self-commiseration, then he finishes showering and towels off. In the bedroom, he sits on the bed, naked, and he means to get a pair of underwear from the drawer any minute now, but he stops when he sees that Steve has left his drawing on Tony’s pillow.

He traces the shape of Nat’s leg with his fingertip, the lines that make up Bucky’s smile. The figures feel so alive that Tony expects them to actually start moving, but they never do. Natalia and James.

Something uncurls and stings under Tony’s breastbone, and it takes him way more time than it should to recognize it as envy. He wants that too. He wants that too, so much. He’s sick of being alone.

“Oh, uhm… sorry,” Steve says from the door.

“Where were you?”

“Outside. Needed some fresh air.”

“Nothing fresh in this air.”

“Why are you naked?”

“It’s my new armor. It’s see-through.”

“Jokes? Really?”

“It’s very high-tech.”

Tony slips his boxers on, and looks at Steve while he draws in a sigh that could be relief just as well as disappointment. His eyes dart to Tony’s bruised hip, but then he catches himself and quickly looks up, at Tony’s face, but not his eyes.

Once in bed—Tony half-naked lying on top of the sheets, Steve with sweatpants and a henley under his blanket—Tony turns his head to look at Steve.

“I wanted to say thank you.”

“For?”

“What you did for me these last couple of days. Thank you.”

“So I passed your test?”

“Wasn’t a test.”

“Right, experiment, is that what you called it?”
“Yeah. And yes, I guess we could call it successful.”

“Glad you think so. I still have no idea what the hell it was all about. Just did what felt right.”

“And it was good.”

“You know, if you sometimes explained things, maybe—”

“Don’t be snippy. We’re having kind of a bonding moment.”

“Are we.”

“Mh-mh.”

Steve places a hand over Tony’s cheek. He caresses the bag under his eye with his thumb. “Sleep now, alright?”

Tony kisses his hand, and nods into it.

Soon, he’s back in the cave. By now it should feel almost familiar, but there’s something about it this time that makes it seem like a completely different place. It’s always been dark and damp, but it never felt this unwelcoming. The place is rejecting Tony’s presence.

He struggles to walk, to see around himself. To see anything at all. Tony looks down at his chest, where the reactor should shine, and his heart skips a beat.

The light is gone.

There’s no trace of it. Nothing. As though it had never been there.

And Steve… where’s Steve?

Tony panics. He tries to understand if he’s about to die or if there’s simply something wrong with his eyes, but he can’t.

The light is gone.

You’re too late, a voice says, booming against the stones, echoing through the cave in waves of sound that rattle Tony’s bones. It’s all wrong, low and mean, it takes the shade of an ugly purple in Tony’s mind.

You lost your chance, the voice says. You’re too late. You wasted it. Your life, you wasted it all.

A terrible laugh raises up from the floor and fills the entire cave, shakes the walls with its contempt for Tony, with the power of its sickening mockery. Rocks fall from the ceiling, and Tony’s chest bursts with pain.

He jolts awake, sits up on the bed to wrench his shoulder free from the hand touching it, but it’s only Steve. He tries to breathe, but all he can manage are shallow and irregular gulps of air.

“You were having a nightmare. I was trying to wake you up,” Steve says, sitting up too. Then, when Tony doesn’t reply, he adds, “Please don’t shoot me?”

Tony lets out a shaky laugh. “I won’t,” he says, holding a hand over the reactor.

He’d really like a fucking drink right now.
With his heart still in his throat, Tony notices that he’s hard. The tip of his cock, fat and wet, tents the waistband of his underwear away from his belly. There’s a dark spot on the silk.

Moving as fast as he can, Tony twists on the bed, tears the blanket away from Steve, and straddles his lap.

The sound Steve makes, like someone pinched his heart with a knife through his ribs—strangled, wheezing, an endless agony crammed into a second—goes right through Tony like a bullet.

Steve’s hands close around Tony’s waist in a vise, seemingly out of Steve’s own volition. He sweeps his palms up, caressing Tony’s back, pushes his face to Tony’s chest and inhales for minutes, years, centuries.

“Want you to fuck me,” Tony says, his words harsh against silence and darkness. “Want you to spread me open and take what’s yours.” Tony circles his hips to press his ass down against Steve’s cock. He’s not hard yet, but he’ll be soon. “I’m tired of being angry. I’m tired of being dead.” He sucks down on the skin of Steve’s throat. “We’re gonna die pretty soon anyway.” He laughs, hollow, bitter. “Might as well try to fuck the fear away. The stench of death…”

“Tony—” Steve whispers, his voice trembling.

He’s completely still. His hands have gone limp. Tony takes one, cups his own ass with it. “You want this too, right? You did, the other day. Just think about it. Just like that night. You’re gonna come deep inside me. Nice and hot. I’m gonna let you.”

“I—”

“You wanna suck me off first? You like that, don’t you? Do it. I missed your mouth…” Tony brushes his thumb over Steve’s mouth, hooks it on his bottom lip. “Your mouth…”

He leans in.

“Please,” Steve says, begging, and Tony doesn’t get it, he doesn’t need to beg. He’s gonna have him. “Please don’t do it,” he continues, and something shatters behind his eyes, but his voice is surprisingly steady now. “If you care about me at all, don’t do it, Tony. I’ll do anything you want, you’ll never see me again if that’s your wish, but please. Don’t destroy me like this.” He squeezes his eyes shut. “Don’t do this to me.”

“What about how you destroyed me, though? That’s alright, huh? I don’t get anything for that.” Tony says. His voice tastes like poison, like purple, and his left arm starts prickling with the phantom pinch of a thousand needles. “I’m not even worth a pity fuck.”

“That’s not what this is about. At all. You know this.”

“Fuck you, Steve!” Tony shouts in his face, and scrambles to get up from the bed. He grabs his pillow.

Steve covers his eyes with his hands, frustrated, annoyed, impatient. “Please Tony don’t do this. Please please please, I can’t take another night like this, please.”

Tony leaves. He throws his pillow on the couch, then lies down on it, face turned against the backrest. He’s not hard anymore and he feels like crying again.

Steve enters the room a minute later, because he can’t even give Tony some fucking peace to lick his own wounds with some dignity.
“Leave me alone.”

“Tony—”

“Leave. Me. Alone.”

Steve leaves.

***

Steve leaves the door open.

He focuses his hearing on Tony’s breathing coming from the living room, the conscious effort not to cry taking away all the energy he has left. Even in circumstances as awful as these, the knowledge that Tony is close and unharmed (even though hurt in different ways) lulls him to sleep. Or maybe he’s so utterly exhausted that not even anger or heartbreak or the serum pumping in his veins can keep him awake.

He feels himself gasp, and he opens his eyes.

At first, he can’t see anything, all is dark around him. He smells dirt and ice. Metal. Rotting flesh, above all.

His eyes adjust. And he understands where he is, and what the shape in front of him is.

Steve is familiar with corpses. Less so with ones in an advanced state of putrefaction. Even less so, with coming back from being one himself. With coming back from peace, from nothingness, to find that his carefully constructed plan to put a stop to it all has blown up in his face in the most horrible way.

The shield covers them. The stench of death fills all his senses.

Tony is no more. He’ll never be again.

Steve had hoped it’d be the same for him. But this is a mercy no god will grant him. He should’ve known.

He doesn’t deserve to die.

He deserves to feel the weight of his crimes forever. He deserves to witness and envy. He deserves the torment of a thousand lifetimes without Tony, the only thing that ever made any of them bearable.

He deserves this.

*I’ll be with you soon*, he had told Tony, while life trickled out of him with every drop of blood. The last lie. The most unforgivable. He’s left Tony alone after promising he wouldn’t.

Steve reaches for his own neck. If his friends hadn’t bandaged his severed head to his body, maybe his healing factor couldn’t have brought Steve back.

If he could get out of here, maybe he could do it right. But then Tony would be alone in their grave, and that feels wrong too.

Steve notices he stopped breathing a while back. The little bubble of air provided by the shield is not enough, and it’s filled with the fumes of the decomposition of Tony’s body.
Steve closes his eyes. Maybe he can sleep some more. Hopefully, he won’t be back again.

“Steve.”

Someone’s calling him. He can’t hear, he’s passing out for lack of air.

“Steve… Steve!”

He tries to push the shield away from him, putting his shoulder into it. There’s a loud thud and something clattering to the ground, which Steve didn’t expect.

“Fuck.”

With that, Steve is awake.

Tony’s on the floor, near the desk. The vase that was on it fell down, but it didn’t break. Tony’s trying to get up, holding his left arm close to his chest.

“Fuck,” he says again.

Shit, Steve thinks. Shit.

Steve pushes the blanket away, walks the distance that separates him from Tony and crouches down next to him.

He looks at Tony, and horror fills him up to the bone. He feels like he’s moving through something thick—like honey, like tar—that forces him to fight every inch of the way. Every step is a conquest. Every breath is a war.

He doesn’t know what to say.

He already reached the unforgivable, but he didn’t know he could sink even lower.

Tony looks at him and smiles, sad and self-deprecating.

“It was about time I got some real pain in this arm. Now I’ll feel miserable with a reason,” he says. It makes Steve grimace, and he covers his mouth with his hand while his eyes fill with tears.

“Come on, none of that. Help me up, instead,” Tony says, and Steve does. Tony sits on the bed, on Steve’s side.

“I think it’s dislocated. Can you…”

“Yeah. ‘Course.”

The bone cracks back into the shoulder socket easily, and the pain cuts off Tony’s air for a moment. He moans, fisting his other hand, gritting his teeth.

It’s a cruel joke of the universe, the fact that he has to hurt Tony again to make him feel better.

“Thanks.”

“Just cleaning up my own messes.”

Tony looks at him, shakes his head. “Shut up.”

“I’m—”
“It wasn’t your fault. Besides, now we’re even.”

Steve sets his jaw and looks down. “I’ll get you some ice.”

The ice makes Tony hiss at first, but soon it starts giving him relief. Steve brings him an aspirin, and gets the sling from Tony’s duffle bag, as per Tony’s instructions.

“Why’d you even bring this?” Steve asks.

“I’m a futurist,” Tony replies, laughing, his eyes shining in the darkness when Steve laughs too.

“Really, though, Tony. You shouldn’t try to wake me up when I’m having a nightmare. Or at least don’t come too close. It’s dangerous. Maybe it’s safer if we don’t sleep together. I’ll take the couch —”

“I can’t sleep at all without you.”

“I… What?”

“Oh the couch. I couldn’t sleep. That’s why I heard you as soon as you started mumbling things.”

Without saying anything, Tony retrieves his pillow from the living room. He walks around the bed, places the pillow on the empty spot. “I’m sorry about before. I was… I don’t know. I’m sorry.” The more he talks, the more his voice becomes small. “I thought you wanted that. But you don’t. Clearly. Which is fine. My bad.”

“Damn,” Steve says, tone full of disbelief. “I don’t know if you have memory issues, or if you don’t even listen to the things I say, or if you suddenly become stupid when we talk about this.”

“Excuse me?” Tony asks, offended.

“It’s incredible. You get it wrong every fucking time. It’s like a special talent. A super power.”

“Can you stop being so bitchy about it and explain?”

“I don’t even know how to tell you anymore,” Steve says, lifting his arms, helpless.

“Try using very simple words?”

“I love you. I am in love with you. In love. I want to be with you. In a relationship. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“I—”

“Of course I wanna have sex with you. I can barely think about anything else. I dream about fucking you while you wear a wedding ring with my stupid fucking name on it.”

“Wha—”

“I want you. More than I’ve ever wanted anything else in my life. But not like this. Not while we are like this.”

Tony closes his eyes for a moment, defeated. He licks his lips then, shakes his head. “Steve—” he starts.

“I know. You don’t want to talk about it. That’s fine.” Steve puts his hands on his hips, then drops
them. He bows his head in thought. “I’m not… I’m not a patient person, Tony. I’ve never been. I
don’t wanna pressure you into making a decision. You need time, I’m gonna suck it up and give it to
you. But don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about when I tell you that no, I don’t just
daydream about kissing you under a tree. I’m not 15. I know what I want. And I’ll wait for you to
tell me if you can give it to me or not. I owe you that.”

“Fuck,” Tony says, swiping his hand across his face.

“But… I’m not gonna pretend the wait isn’t fucking me up, either. I don’t know what goes on in
your head, I don’t know what you want, I don’t know what you think. I have no idea how this will
end, while you obviously already do. And I don’t know what to do with that, because I need to
know, too, but you won’t fucking tell me. And I’m scared.”

Tony walks around the bed again, stops when he’s in front of Steve. He stands there like that, short,
almost naked, hurt, tired. Bruised—hip and shoulder and pride and heart.

He balances himself on his tiptoes, cradles Steve’s face in his free hand, and kisses him on the cheek.
Steve keeps his eyes closed the whole time Tony’s lips are on his skin.

“I’m sorry it’s taking me so long. I keep turning this in my head… I care about you, Steve. I don’t
want to get this wrong. I swear I’m not being cruel on purpose.”

“Never thought that.”

“Okay. I have a question. The relationship… is it non-negotiable? Like, if I forgive you, we have to
get together then?”

“I’m… I’m not gonna force you, Tony. I… I don’t know why you think I’m the one who gets to
decide these things. That’s you.”

“So I could—hypothetically—forgive you and decide to stay friends? You’d be okay with that?”

“Well. Okay is a strong word. But I’d cope with it. And being friends again, I’d love that.”

“I almost believe you.”

“I love you, Tony. I just told you I dream of us being married. You don’t have to reciprocate, but I’m
not gonna stand here and lie to you saying I wouldn’t be heartbroken if this ends with us being only
friends. But if that’s all I’m ever gonna get, then I’ll take it over nothing every single time.”

Tony lowers his gaze to Steve’s chest.

“Let’s try and get some sleep, okay?” Steve says, and Tony looks into his eyes again, caresses his
face, and nods.

In bed, Tony rolls over to curl up against Steve’s chest. Steve hugs him closer, but every movement
is tentative, almost scared, almost like the first days, and Tony must notice, because he grabs one of
Steve’s hands and places it on his hip—the bruised one—like that’s its proper place.


“Yes,” Tony replies, and Steve tucks Tony’s head under his chin.

“One day I’ll get it—why you have such a hard time believing that I love you,” Steve says, almost
playful, but Tony’s voice is very serious when he replies, and Steve feels his warm breath against his
own neck.

“You're you. And I'm... I'm me.”

That doesn't make any sense, Steve thinks. He's just a kid from Brooklyn.


[3] I have to. I was hoping I could avoid going into town this morning but... I'll get us some chicken at the market for lunch, what do you say? Two, okay? One for Steve. Will that be enough?

[4] We should be safe, yeah.

[5] Coffee?

[6] Tony came back from college a couple of days ago, and he already fought with his father more than once. Howard has been sober so far, but I fear that won't be the case for much longer. He was talking about going to the Bahamas for a few days, I should tell him I've changed my mind. This way, we'll be far away, and even though I'll spend another Christmas away from my son, I will give him a Christmas away from his father.

Howard has been very nervous lately, his work for the Pentagon is hard on his patience. Not that he's ever had much of it.

Tony seizes every occasion to tease him with his jokes, with his feigned carelessness, with the obvious proof of his superior intellect. He pretends to be the more reckless, irreverent, irresponsible version of Howard, but he never pretends to be less intelligent. Tony wears many masks, but never the one of the stupid.

Despite these clumsy attempts, he couldn't be more different from Howard.

I'm happy about it, naturally. But I'm also worried, Stella, because I see something uncontrollable in Tony's eyes when he talks to his father. He wants to fight, humiliate him even, and yet he also desperately tries to please him.

He calms down only when Howard is away. When we are alone, it's a thought the world disappears, and we are just a mom and a child. I play piano for him and I pretend I don't see him looking at me from the sofa, making up some joke to make me laugh or shock me, or choosing some crazy prank to tell me about. You know, Mom; one night, me and Rhodey...

Sometimes I wonder how Howard's genes could create someone like Tony. I imagine mine took over. There's so little of his father in him, except the artificial. Sometimes I observe him and he reminds me of you, Stella, and I wonder if I didn't pass him something of you. If in some way he's yours too. In his name there's something of yours, after all.

Remember that time (I'm sure I've told you more than once) when he asked me, Mom, Dad doesn't love me very much, does he? and I would've ripped away my own heart to know what to say. I remember that in the end I managed to reply that it didn't matter, but I loved him for the both of us.
I often think about the past, Stella, and I see roads I didn't travel, occasions I didn't seize, things I didn't do. How would Tony be today if his mother hadn't been a coward? If we had come to the airport with you, that day of so many years ago?

I love him more than myself, and yet sometimes I wonder if staying here didn't hurt him more than doing him good. I had hoped I'd protect him from Howard more than I could. My only real success is that he's never seen me cry again, after the day you came visit. What a terrible irony, that all my other tears have been caused by someone Tony doesn't suspect.

Did I do it all wrong, Stella? I see the sun burning inside my baby fade away more and more every day, and it's Howard's fault, but maybe it's also mine.

I don't want Tony to be unhappy. I don't want him to live even a single day like the many Howard gave me. I've always been unhappy, Stella, except for those two beautiful summers we spent together, except the moments when I take my child in my arms and I delude myself that I can keep him safe from the rest of the world.

I've always been unhappy. And I don't want him to be. I want him to be loved in all the ways Howard never loved me. In all the ways you always did.

[7] I discovered a beautiful song the other day, it's already a couple of years old and I don't know how we never talked about it. It's by Mia Martini, the title is Almeno tu nell'universo. Have you ever listened to it? I assume you have, it was at Sanremo. The melody is full and strong, Martini's voice has an unique power, but the lyrics are maybe the most beautiful part. Please, listen to it if you haven't already. It reminds me so much of our summers, when he watched the stars.


[9] I love you so much, (my) little one.

Day 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony wakes up way before dawn.

He hoped he’d sleep longer, but his shoulder is aching, bad. He should get up and put more ice on it, but right now, pain aside, he’s comfortable: it’s the only time of day when the temperature is acceptable to humans. The bed is soft and cool; Steve is asleep next to him and if he presses his ear to his chest he can hear his heart beating, steady and regular and strong and so unlike Tony’s own.

Tony shifts, and regrets it immediately. He grits his teeth to stifle a groan, and waits for the burn in his shoulder to ebb away.

Fuck.

The first thing that comes to his mind in order to deal with the pain, is to drink. Drink away all the hurt, physical and of any other kind, swallow as much alcohol as possible in one sitting and wait for the entire world to fade away, become a muffled memory, something Tony can observe through the thick bottom of a glass without being touched by it.

He can’t drink, though.

He could take another aspirin. But he knows he shouldn’t take more than one every 24 hours, and it’s definitely not been even half as long from the last one. He could look for an open pharmacy and buy ibuprofen, and screw his heart. He could probably even get his hands on some morphine, if he applies himself, but that’s a really, really bad idea.

No drugs.

He could get up. He could go into the kitchen, drink some water, get the ice. Then sit on the couch, without putting weight on his shoulder. He could get some work done, catch up with his emails, reply to Pepper. He could take a walk. He could jack off. He could make Steve breakfast. Yeah.

He gets up carefully, and it’s a miracle he doesn’t wake Steve up with how hard he’s breathing. In the bathroom, the pain eases up again, and stabilizes on something manageable. Lying down for too long? Not good.

Tony pees. He wonders if he could really masturbate, but the more he thinks about it, the less the idea seems appealing. Steve would wake up for sure, and Tony feels ashamed of himself enough as it is. He’d rather avoid another awkward talk with Steve about how even Tony’s dick has PTSD.

He washes his hands, which is no small feat in his current condition, and goes in the kitchen.

The ice feels so good on his shoulder. Finally, some real relief.

He sits on the couch, and loses himself in his work for a while, like he told himself he’d do. He replies to Peter’s daily text, wonders when he should start annoying Rhodey for updates on Bucky.

His phone buzzes, and it’s Pepper.

Tony. Are you awake?
Yes. hi. did you get my email for r&d?

Yes. Thank you.

Why are you awake? Isn’t it 5 am in Italy?

yeah. couldn’t sleep.

Because of Steve?

yes and no.

Do you want to talk about it?

If you don’t, that’s fine.

you don’t mind listening?

You listen to me talking about Helen.

yes. right.

okay, promise you won’t get mad.

at him.

If you say it like that...

no, it wasn’t his fault. honestly.

What happened?

he was having a nightmare. i was trying to wake him up. he pushed me.

by mistake. he wasn’t even awake.

i dislocated my shoulder.

Jesus, Tony.

it’s fine now! it’s fine! he helped me.

Did you take anything?

aspirin. promise i won’t take another until it’s safe.

Okay.

how’s helen?


How are things on your end? Shoulder aside.

better. tiring, confusing, but better.

That’s good, Tony.
Oh, I almost forgot! Riri Williams wrote me back. She’s in. She also says she’s halfway through reverse-engineering the Iron Man armor, and I assume you’ll want to do something about that when you get back.

she is? amazing, this kid is amazing, pep.

You’re not mad?

why would i be?

Because of how well something like that ended last time?

she’s different, pep. she’s the future.

but i’ll go see her as soon as i’m back.

And when will that be? There’s a board meeting coming up and I’d like you to be present.

couple of days more. three, maybe.

Alright.

then you can take the plane, go to seoul. surprise her. take her to dinner or something. i don’t know.

That’s actually a good idea.

i do get those sometimes.

speaking of which: i need you to do something for me. it’s very important.

What is it?

it’s about my mother. can’t say more over texts. i’ll get on it when i’m back home, but i need you to know about it and promise me you’ll do it for me in case i won’t be able to.

Tony. Of course I will.

thank you.

Will that be all, Mr. Stark?

that’ll be all, miss potts.

good night, pep.

Good night. Or early morning. In any case, get some sleep.

can’t make any promises.

I know.

pep?

Yes?

i love you.
Tony replies with a smiling emoji, and he imagines Pepper shaking her head, fond, her beautiful hair falling over her cheek.

He goes outside, sits on the porch. He looks at the sky, and the familiar spike of anxiety makes its way up his throat. He thinks about all the protocols FRIDAY is ready to implement if—when—if he dies in the fight for the Infinity Stones.

He thinks about what Stella said, about forgiving.

He thinks about what Yinsen said, about not wasting one’s life.

He thinks about what Steve said, about being in love and the future he dreams of.

But most of all, Tony thinks about his mother.

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The first thing Steve sees when he wakes up is a breakfast tray on his bedside table. He smiles.

He throws his legs over the edge of the bed. He drinks his eggs, swallows the slice of pie in two gigantic bites, washes it all down with the coffee. It’s on the cold side of lukewarm, so Tony must’ve been up for a while.

He uses the bathroom quickly, then ventures in the living room, where he finds Tony sitting on the couch, still in his underwear, ice pack covering his shoulder, hooded eyes absently watching a cooking show on the TV.

There seem to be a lot of cooking shows on Italian television.

“Hey,” Tony mumbles, his voice soft and sleepy. He gives Steve a lazy smile.

“Good morning,” Steve replies, touching Tony’s hand resting on the couch. “Thanks for breakfast.”

“Yeah. No problem.”

“You’ve been up long?”

“Since about 4.”

“Oh, Tony, you barely slept.”

“I’m okay.”

“How’s the shoulder?”

“Sore.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve says, moving his hand to Tony’s face, caressing his curls away from his face.

Tony lifts his arm, brushes his fingers, playful, over Steve’s face, makes him close his eyes for a second. “Wasn’t your fault.”

Steve isn’t so sure.

“Hey, question: if—still hypothetically—we got together someday, wouldn’t you be bothered by the
age difference? The fact that I’m forty-six and you’re—”

“Ninety-eight.”

“—thirty-one.”

Tony starts laughing first, of course, loud and almost wheezing with it, but Steve follows suit pretty much immediately. Then, Tony starts coughing, and clutches at his shoulder.

“Don’t make me laugh,” he says, still with a smile on his face, but he can’t quite hide the strain in his eyes. “I’m too old to handle it.”

“Right. Sure,” Steve says, rolling his eyes and making Tony laugh again.

“So,” Tony starts again when he’s calmed down, “I’m assuming your answer to my question is no.”

“The answer to your question is no. It doesn’t bother me. Does it bother you?”

“I don’t know. It’s easier for me. I’d be the middle-aged sleazebag who gets to fuck the peak of human perfection.”

“Fair enough. But you’re not a sleazebag.”

“You didn’t know me before 2008.”

“No, my peak-of-human-perfection ass was frozen in 2008. And I’m still sure you weren’t a sleazebag.”

“I have pictures to prove it. And multiple leaked sex tapes.”

“I’ll believe it when I see them, then.”

“No, wait. This backfired horribly. I’m deleting any trace of them. From everything.”

“You haven’t already?”

“You know what? You kinda have a point.”

“Kinda?”

“I’ve been busy. Priorities.”

“Right.”

“Hey. Do you really think you’re ninety-eight?”

“No. It’s a joke. Some days I feel like I am, though.”

“If it’s any consolation, you don’t look a day older than ninety. Eighty-five normally, but the beard adds a few years, I gotta say.”

“Thank you. Your opinion means a lot.”

“Course it does. I’m a fashion icon.”

“First and foremost.”
Tony sighs.

“Steve.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m very tired.”

“I know, sweet—” Dammit. “Sorry.”

“I like it. When you call me—”

“I don’t mean to. I shouldn’t…” Steve shakes his head. “Did you eat anything?”

“No.”

“Since last night?”

Tony nods.

“Water?”

“Had a glass when I woke up.”

“That was five hours ago.”

“I can’t sleep. I don’t know why,” Tony looks at him, eyes bloodshot and shining with tears, dark circles around them. There’s a desperation in them that Steve doesn’t know how to cure. They plead to him, beg him, but he’s powerless. Tony’s voice shakes. “Why, Steve?”

“I don’t know, Tony. I’m sorry. Could be insomnia?”

“It doesn’t feel the same. I fall asleep, but I wake up too soon. Something pushes me awake.”

“I wish I knew how to help you.”

“I haven’t really slept since we went to Stella. Only a few hours, but I always have these strange dreams, and… and with all that’s happened, I just… I just want to sleep for, like, five hours straight. I’d settle for four. But I, I can’t… Steve.”

Tony’s sob is loud in the silence of the living room, and watching him like this, succumbing to his exhaustion, without knowing how to help, makes something clench around Steve’s heart.

“Hey, don’t… don’t cry,” he tries, and Tony takes a deep breath and falls silent, but the tears still roll down his face to wet his beard.

“I couldn’t keep my eyes open until a few days ago,” Tony says, bitter, “and now look at me. Be careful what you wish for,” he finishes, sardonic, giving Steve a long, meaningful look, because maybe Tony isn’t just talking about his sleep here.

That’s when it dawns on Steve.

“I got an idea,” he says. “Maybe it won’t make you sleep, but you’ll relax. Better than nothing, right?”

“Better than nothing,” Tony agrees.
Steve leads him into the bathroom, and shuts the door. Tony keeps his arm close to his chest, holds the ice pack to his shoulder. Steve moves towards the bathtub, starts to fill it with water, so that Tony knows what he has in mind, and can say something if he doesn’t want to do this.

But Tony doesn’t say anything. He just looks at Steve, eyes a little wide, lips apart in mild surprise.

While the level of water in the tub rises slowly, Steve walks up in front of Tony. He feels a smile play on his own face; he’s excited to do this, happy even, and yet it’s not sexual at all, no matter what it looks like. It’s going to feel good, the hot water, Tony between his arms, no need to talk about anything. Just the two of them, as close as they can be while they still… while Tony still hasn’t…

Steve takes off his clothes. He stands there, naked in front of Tony, and tries not to shiver by thinking that soon he’ll sit in the tub.

Tony looks into his eyes, looks and looks and looks. He’s not moving.

Steve lifts an eyebrow, as if to say, You’re making me do this?, and Tony smirks, as if to say, Yep.

Steve takes the ice pack from Tony’s shoulder. He’s careful while he does it, searching Tony’s face for signs of discomfort.

He hooks his thumbs into the waistband of Tony’s boxers, brings them down while he crouches in front of Tony, urges him to step out of his underwear. He can’t resist placing a kiss on Tony’s thigh. Just above the knee.

He enters the tub first, then holds Tony’s hand while he steps over the edge. His legs are a little unsteady, and maybe it’s the lack of sleep, maybe it’s the pain in his shoulder throwing him off his balance.

But it’s okay. Steve’s got him.

The moment they settle into the water, the moment Steve feels Tony’s legs touch his own, the moment he can wrap himself around Tony like a blanket, hold him against his chest like the most precious thing in the world—that’s the moment Steve almost feels warm again.

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Tony opens his eyes and can’t tell from the light how much time has passed, but he doesn’t feel as rested as he’d like, so he assumes not too much. The water is warm. Steve, behind him, is hot and solid and soft all at once. His skin is incredibly smooth, Tony muses while caressing Steve’s arm.


“I’ll take what I can get,” Tony says, but he feels Steve tense up behind him. He turns his head to find a displeased expression on Steve’s face, the one he makes when something doesn’t go like he planned it to, and okay, he’s gonna strategize a different way to go about it, fine, but that doesn’t mean he’s happy.

Steve’s worried about him. Which means Steve will do anything in his power to make Tony’s life easier—he’ll take upon himself every task, smooth over any hardship, anticipate all of Tony’s needs.

“You’re shoulder’s bruised,” he says, without even trying to mask the guilt in his voice.

“Yeah. I feel it.”
Steve reaches for Tony’s soap. He lathers up his hands. He starts massaging Tony’s back, slowly making his way up toward the injury, towards the swollen, red-blue skin of his shoulder. He goes above it, over Tony’s collarbone, and below it, reaching as far as Tony’s elbow, coming back up again on the underside of his arm. When Steve’s hands move over the nape of Tony’s neck, pressing his thumbs deep into the skin at the base of Tony’s head, that’s when Tony lets go of the sob he’s been holding in his chest this whole time.

It’s like he can feel Steve’s emotions rushing into him from the pads of his fingers. How delicate and careful every movement is, how much Steve wants to make things better for him, how much he cares about him. How much he loves him. How Steve still can’t believe he’s allowed this, and how his hands sometimes still tremble with surprise. All of it, Tony feels it through his skin; it passes from Steve to him with touches that are kind and warm, instead of awful punches in the cold.

Tony sobs and Steve removes his hands.

“Sorry, I—”

“No, it’s fine—”

“Didn’t mean to do anything inappropriate—”

“Steve.”

“I just wanted you to feel nice—”

“Steve.”

“Should’ve asked—”

“Steve. Please.”

“Yeah.”

“It did feel nice. I haven’t been touched like this since… It felt nice. Thank you.”

Steve doesn’t reply.

“Can we get out of here?” Tony asks when he feels the tears coming again, and he doesn’t even know why he’s crying right now, god, he’s such a mess, how can he hope to work with Steve, defeat the aliens, protect the world, if he starts crying when someone touches him and it feels nice? And maybe that’s not even a problem, maybe Tony won’t have anything to feel nice about in the future, so he won’t cry for that, maybe he’ll spend his last days scared and miserable and alone, like he deserves, like he’s made so many people feel for years, and then it’ll be all over, it’ll be—

“Here,” Steve says, helping Tony out of the tub and into a towel that smells like lavender fabric softener and sunshine. He lowers his head to catch Tony’s gaze. He’s still naked. “What’s wrong?” he asks, quietly.

“Nothing,” Tony says, but it makes him feel ridiculous, lying to Steve’s face like this, so obviously. “Everything,” he tries, and it seems unnecessarily, overly dramatic, even for him. He settles for, “I don’t know.”

“Your heart is beating fast.”

“Yeah.”
Steve dresses in record time, then hands Tony clean boxers and a t-shirt that Tony is pretty sure is actually Steve’s. He wears it anyway.

“Now the sling,” Steve says, passing it to him once they’re in the bedroom.

“It’s better now, I don’t—”

“Knock it off, Tony,” Steve interrupts him, his tone kind despite the words. “Wear the damn thing.”

“Bossy. I like it,” Tony teases while he does as Steve says. “Spoken like the true leader of the Avengers.”

“I’m not the leader of anything.”

“Of course you are. You signed the Accords. T’Challa fixed it.”

“Pretty sure it was a special team of Wakanda’s best experts in international law and cooperation, but sure, let’s say T’Challa.”

“Whatever. You’re the leader.”

“I’m not.”

“You said you want to be an Avenger!”

“I do. I wanna be an Avenger. Not the leader.”

“No one else can do it.”

“You can.”

“Half the team despises me.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Steve, this isn’t high school. You can’t make them like your asshole nerd friend because you’re the captain of the lacrosse team and can get away with anything, even lame hobbies, like, I don’t know, Charleston!”

“That’s weirdly specific.”

“You know what I mean!”

“Don’t raise your voice, it’s bad for you. And yes, I know what you mean. And we better find a solution fast because I’m not gonna lead the team.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m very serious.”

“Steve.”

“Tony.”

Tony sits on the bed and sighs. “You really want me to do it?”

“Yes. I trust you. Besides, no one is more qualified. Anyone else is either too inexperienced, too
young, not of this planet, not human, a king, retired, recovering, not mentally adjusted, and so on. You know the threat better than anyone. You've got this."

“So that’s why you’re dumping the responsibility on me? As if I don’t have enough on my plate already! Do I look like I’m mentally adjusted to you, Steve?”

“Do I? This isn’t a contest. You’re the best fit for the role. You lead, I’ll follow.”

“I can’t believe this. I can’t do it!”

Steve looks at him. “You should’ve been the leader since the beginning. I wasn’t ready. I needed time to recover and instead SHIELD…”

“I’m sorry that happened, okay? But this isn’t gonna end any better!”

Tony’s chest clenches with the familiar sting of anxiety. He brings his hand to it, swallows his frustration and tries to keep the trembling at bay. He doesn’t quite manage.

Steve sits next to him, rests his hand on the nape of Tony’s neck. He squeezes for a moment, and Tony’s mouth goes slack because of it, a shaky groan escapes him. He wants more, and knows he shouldn’t.

But he wants. He wants so much more.

Steve guides him into a hug. Tony feels him kiss his hair.

The relief Steve’s touch brings him is instantaneous. Like sitting in front of a fire after a walk in the snow—warmth seeps into Tony, and his sense of safety knits itself back together every time he draws in a breath and smells blue roses, with every beat of Steve’s heart that he can hear so clearly now that his ear is pressed to Steve’s chest.

“I’m sorry. Let’s… let’s cool down for a minute, alright?”

He wishes he could quantify it, this power Steve has over him. A word, a brush of fingers, a chaste kiss—and Tony breathes again, feels again, thinks again.

“It’s gonna be alright. We’ll find a way.”

Steve speaks and Tony feels, somewhat, healed.

“We could do it together,” he says.

***

“How do you mean, together?” Steve asks, doubtful, but with a hint of excitement in his tone.

“Co-lead the team. Me and you,” Tony answers, and it’s what Steve was expecting.

“I don’t know if that’s…”

“Yeah. You’re right. It’s a dumb idea. Sorry.”

Tony tries to get away from him, but Steve keeps him in place with his hand at the nape of Tony’s neck. Tony gives up easily, rests his cheek over Steve’s heart again. Steve feels him breathe through his hand; his skin registers every rise and fall of Tony’s shoulders. It’s like counting every beat of his heart; it’s like having proof that Tony is alive every second. Every moment is accounted for.
Tony, existing, here, now.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t need to.”

Tony shifts just enough to look into Steve’s eyes for a moment. He smiles, bitter, and almost looks like he’s going to be sick. Steve wonders if Tony will look at him like this forever. If Steve will, too. With only what if’s in their eyes.

Steve asks himself, not for the first time, what if they weren’t like this.

What if they could understand each other. What if it wasn’t hard at all.

What if their entire relationship was about love and truth, instead of this strange hostility neither of them really feel, but for some reason always revert to. Instead of lies by omission, with the excuse of protecting the other, with the excuse of believing they can handle it all alone.

What if we were in love.

Or better: What if you loved me, Steve thinks. Because Steve doesn’t need to fall in love. He’s already fallen.

And it’s that love, as unrequited and painful as it sometimes is (but also good. Also happy, also pure, also bright and warm and Tony, it’s all for him and him only; it’s the best part of Steve, the part that loves Tony), that helps him.

“Are you trying to prove we can’t co-lead the team right now? Acting like this?” Steve says, making an effort to speak as quietly as possible, almost whispering, so Tony doesn’t feel antagonized by the words, so they don’t start screaming at each other, so things don’t go to shit in one minute.

“Steve…”

“We could. I think… I think we really could.”

“We don’t agree on anything,” Tony murmurs, and Steve rejoices in this small success. If they both keep their voices low, maybe they’ll talk and find a solution without burning everything on their way there.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

“That’s not true. But we can learn how to figure things out when it happens. We’ve done it a few times already this past week. You won’t make me believe that doesn’t mean anything to you.”

“I don’t know…”

“It was your idea.”

“And two minutes ago you didn’t want to lead the team at all.”

Well. That’s fair.

“We’ve talked about this already, but I think what Stella said made me really figure it out. What she said about her relationship with Laura, remember? They worked hard not to let their differences become incompatibilities. She said she liked having her vision challenged. I think I like it too.”
“Why?”

“Having one leader can be dangerous, Tony. We are who we are. We tend to take too much responsibility upon ourselves, we want to protect people, each other… But together…”

“It’d be twice as bad.”

“You really think so? I don’t. I think we’d keep each other on our toes. I’d tell you when you isolate yourself and stop accepting people’s help, you’d tell me when I start making decisions based on anger and impatience. We wouldn’t be as self-destructive if we could rely on each other. We’d consider more variables, more point of views. We’d lead better. We’d fight better.”

“Fight each other, you mean. Which we already do,” Tony says, and he’s not whispering anymore. He lifts his head, too, and Steve doesn’t push him back down. His hand falls to his own lap, still warm from the contact with Tony’s skin.

“We wouldn’t.”

“Every discussion we have ends in a fight.”

“Every discussion we have wouldn’t end in a fight if we lov—”

Steve interrupts himself, shuts his own mouth as fast as he can, but the damage is done. It’s like every time he’s called Tony sweetheart without meaning to, without even realizing he meant to speak the word before it was too late. His head a step behind his lips.

He closes his eyes and waits for Tony to throw his anger at him, because he shouldn’t assume, and he definitely shouldn’t pressure, much less demand.

But it doesn’t happen.

“That’s the trick, isn’t it?” Tony says instead, voice unsteady, again on the verge of tears. He doesn’t cry, though. “That’s the fucking trick,” he repeats, tone harsh, letting his throat work over the K’s so that they explode in the silence of the bedroom.

Steve looks at Tony’s knee, almost touching his while they sit side by side on the edge of the bed, and he notices, all of a sudden and inconsequentially, that he doesn’t have gray hair there, and on his arms too. It’s only in his beard and hair. He wonders how Tony’s chest hair would be, if his skin there wasn’t covered in scars. He wonders if Tony dyes his pubic hair.

“I don’t mean like a couple. Not necessarily,” Steve says, and he tries again to talk as quietly as he can. “If we were friends, if we cared about each other and respected each other, we could discuss things and even disagree without ending up in a fight. And when I say fight, I mean strictly verbal. Other kinds are off the table on principle.”

“But you do. Care about me.”

“Yeah. I do.”

“So the only question is… do I care about you?”

Steve breath catches in his throat. He swallows, nods—he can’t speak.

Tony said he cares about him. He said it yesterday. But did he mean it the way Steve does?

He looks at his hands, limp in his lap, and so different from Tony’s. Tony’s hands are real—used,
callused, large, the fingers thick, the skin ridged with scars and old burns, the knuckles darkened like a worn-out pair of leather gloves, fingertips rough, palms hard and firm to the pressure, with grease under the nails sometimes. They’re hands that tell a story. They’re real hands.

Steve’s instead, Steve’s hands are nothing like Tony’s. They’re the opposite—long and soft, skin smooth and perfect, fair and delicate, with no signs that they’ve ever been used. Steve’s hands are new. Steve’s hands aren’t real, because nothing stays on them. Nothing proves that Steve ever did something with them, made something with them. Colors and inks wash off easily; nothing sticks to skin that rejuvenates four times faster than it should. No calluses form, no cut leaves a scar, there’s not a wrinkle on them. They tell no story.

Steve looks at them and feels like there’s no proof he exists. Like he has nothing to show for himself. Like he isn’t real, too—he’s fading away.

He closes his hands into fists and shuts his eyes so he doesn’t look at himself anymore, he doesn’t witness himself disappear.

Like this, looking into himself, inside himself, it’s easier to feel. It’s easier to follow the warmth that grounds him in reality, that sensation that tells him he’s not alone, he’s not a ghost, he has somewhere (someone) he belongs to.

He reaches for that place inside him where he keeps the hope that Tony will forgive him, taps at it to try and remind himself why he’s here, why he’s doing this, what he wants—and that he is here, he’s doing this, that there’s something he wants.

I know what I want.

Tony asks his question and Steve feels, somewhat, wounded.

“Is it worth all this effort?”

***

Later, they have lunch. Steve makes pasta with Stella’s ragù, asking Tony for instructions only at the trickiest points of the process.

It tastes exactly like Mom’s.

Tony isn’t hungry, but he forces himself to eat what Steve makes, because he knows Steve would do the same in his place. He drinks his water when Steve looks at him sideways after he tries to get up from the table leaving his glass full.

Steve’s mother-henning is annoying, but only to an extent. It makes him feel protected, more than anything. Safe. Held, like when Steve puts his hand around Tony’s throat and keeps him there.

He has no idea if the others felt the same when he played mommy for them. What did Clint think when he brought him kale smoothies when he was hurt? And Bruce, when Tony sat a cup of herbal tea on his desk at night? Or Nat, what did Natasha think of Tony pretending he didn’t know where all his little bags of blueberries went? He always had the best beers for Thor, protein shakes for Steve. Upgrades for their equipment and weapons. A state-of-the-art gym. Empty floors in the Avengers tower that became empty rooms in the Avengers compound.

He did it all so they would stay. But they didn’t.

(Except Rhodey. Rhodey never left.)
“Tony?”

“Mh?”

“Remember,” Steve says, then shyness stops him. He hesitates, comes to sit on the couch next to Tony, tucking a leg under himself. He’s wearing a dark, thick cardigan that clashes with the rest of his wardrobe. He has a white t-shirt underneath, gray sweatpants. He looks good and cozy, but different.

Steve licks his lips, his eyes lowered to look at Tony’s lap, but he’s not really seeing it. “Remember the night we made love and…” he trails off, shakes his head. “Sorry. Had sex, the night we had sex…” Steve looks like he doesn’t want to say it anymore, whatever it was he wanted to say.

“You can say made love. If that’s how you think about it. I won’t take that away from you.”

“How do you think about it?”

“I’m not telling you. Not now.”

“Soon?”

“Nice try. So, that night? What about it?”

“Yes. That night. Remember when we were on the couch, and you were… you were, uh, on top of me. And you kissed me.” The way Steve asks this makes Tony pause—like Steve really thinks Tony could ever forget even a single gesture, a single word, from that night. Like he really has no idea that those moments are seared in Tony’s mind forever.

“Yeah. I remember,” he replies. You didn’t like that? Tony almost asks, but stops himself in time. It’s not the moment to discuss his own fears.

“I almost told you. While you were…” Steve gestures between them, lets the back and forth motion of his fingers say fucking yourself on my dick for him, because he can’t say it, not right now and not like this. “And then I… inside of you. And it felt, it felt, it… The way it felt…” He touches his forehead with his fingers, lost. “And I almost said it. That I love you.”

Oh.

“Why… why didn’t you?”

“You kissed me again and then it was over and I… I guess I missed the moment, I don’t know. But I almost told you and I keep thinking, what if… I keep wondering…”

“If things would’ve been different if you’d told me?”

“Yeah.”

Tony thinks about it. “I don’t know, Steve. Maybe it would’ve hurt more, in the end. Maybe not, maybe I wouldn’t have punched you. Maybe you would’ve told me about my parents and we would’ve laughed in Zemo’s face. I don’t know.”

Steve nods, slow and thoughtful. He lets the silence fill the room for a while, and Tony doesn’t say anything.

“Sometimes, I feel like we’ve been here for months,” he says then, quietly, almost to himself instead of Tony. “But it’s only been days.”
“Lots of things have happened. Lots of things have changed.”

“Think about the day we went to Siena. It feels like it was weeks ago.”

“Speaking of which. I wanna take you somewhere,” Tony tries.

“Absolutely not. We’re staying here.”

There it is again. The mother-henning. Annoying.

“It’s a really cool place.”

“You’re hurt.”

“You’ll love it.”

“Tony.”

“I’ll let you drive.”

“You’re in pain.”

“Yes. And I’ll be in pain no matter what,” Tony says, tone clipped. “Please,” he adds then, softly, “it’ll take my mind off of it.”

That seems to hit Steve harder than Tony meant to. He clenches his jaw. “How’re you feeling?” he asks, pushing Tony’s hair away from his forehead, then sliding his hand down, resting it on Tony’s cheek.

“I’ve had worse,” Tony says.

“Not as reassuring as you think it is.”

“Mh, fair. It’s not bad. Just constant.”

“You sure you wanna go out?”

“I’m gonna lose my mind if we stay here all day. Come on. Please.”

Steve looks down at him, and a wicked grin makes its way on his face. “You know that means you’ll have to wear pants. And the undershirt.”


“I’ll help you.”

They head back into the bedroom. There’s not much light in the room; Steve closed the shutters to keep out the mugginess of the day, but it’s enough for what they have to do.

It should be quick, efficient. But it’s the opposite.

Steve keeps his eyes fixed on Tony’s the whole time, and it should be awkward, staring at each other, but that, too, is the opposite. It’s not weird; it doesn’t make Tony feel ashamed, or exposed. He feels pinned in place, in a good way. He feels like he knows what’s around him; there are no surprises, nothing he wasn’t fast enough or clever enough to avoid and fix. He feels held.

Steve unclasps the sling, and something warm blossoms inside Tony, just below the arc reactor. It
uncurls into him, wafts of blue light that share Steve’s scent. It spreads, up towards his shoulder blades, and down, prickling at the base of his spine. He looks into Steve’s eyes and he finds it there, too, the same thing he’s feeling.

Steve removes the sling with careful movements, and sets it on the corner of the bed. He doesn’t says anything, and Tony doesn’t want him to. He keeps his mouth slightly open, and Tony loves watching his bottom lip, full and pink, the little creases on it. He remembers swiping his tongue over it. It tasted blue.

The only thing that’s different, now, is Steve’s beard.

Steve brushes his fingers over Tony’s wrist, past the bracelet, under the sleeve, up and up to his aching shoulder. He rests his hand there for a moment, cool against the warmth of the bruise, and his eyes widen in question.

_Ready?_

_Yes_, Tony replies without words.

Steve reaches behind Tony, grabbing the t-shirt from the collar at the back of his neck. Tony bends down, and it’s only now that he’s not looking into Steve’s eyes anymore—that Steve isn’t looking into his—that he realizes how much he needs that.

Steve pulls the t-shirt over Tony’s head, and in a whirl of fabric he’s free from it, free to straighten up and lock his gaze back with Steve’s.

Steve touches his arm at the elbow.

_Did it hurt?_

_No._

Steve helps him step into his pants. Buttoning them up the other way around isn’t as tricky for Steve as it’d be for anyone else, but for a few seconds his body is flushed against Tony’s, the skin of his forearms pressing into Tony’s belly. Steve is still wearing that strange cardigan of his, open at the front, sleeves rolled up, so thick that it makes his shoulders seem even larger. Tony stares up at him and feels small, what with the way Steve is towering over him, but the sensation isn’t accompanied by envy and inadequacy and discomfort. It’s just how it is.

Steve opens a drawer in the dresser to take out a clean undershirt. He looks at Tony with an apology already written in his eyes: Tony will have to lift his arm; there’s no way around it.

But it’s fine. The secret is to move slowly, work around the shape of the shirt, crawl inside it, take advantage of how stretchy the fabric is. In no time, Steve is pulling it down over Tony’s hips.

The t-shirt is easier to put back on. It’s Steve’s, so it’s a bit big on Tony, and it would be even bigger if Steve didn’t have a preference for incredibly tight t-shirts. Not that Tony would ever complain about that.

Steve picks up the sling and Tony lets him put it on. He plays with it, sliding his fingers up and down the strap a few times while he stares into Tony’s eyes.

_Did it hurt?_

_Only a little._
Steve makes Tony sit on the bed. He slips Tony’s socks on his feet, then ties up his shoes. When he’s done, while he’s still kneeling on the ground, he rests a hand on Tony’s knee and smiles. He kisses it, where it becomes Tony’s thigh. Tony feels it through his pants.

“All done,” Steve says, smiling again, closing his eyes when Tony brushes his fingers through Steve’s hair. It’s so soft.

“Thank you,” Tony says, and there’s more to it than that, but he can’t say it.

Not quite yet.

***

Steve drives.

It’s quiet in the car; Tony’s sitting next to him comfortably, which is all Steve can hope for. Tony looks out of the window a lot, at the trees along the edge of the road, the wheat fields, the vineyards. He checks his phone from time to time, tells Steve where to go.

Steve tries to keep his eyes on the road.

He turns left, into a white trail lined up by cypresses. He parks the car in a clearing at the end. He gets out of the car to open the door for Tony, but he’s already stepping out on his own.

He looks in the distance.

About a couple of yards in front of them, on a little hill, there’s a monastery. On the right, not much further away, there are the ruins of a medieval church. A side trail starting out from the one they came from leads straight to it. It really looks beautiful against the blue sky. There’s not a cloud in sight.

“You said we wouldn’t have to walk much.”

“Yeah. I lied,” Tony says, shrugging, laughing at his own joke. “Stop ruining all the fun. Besides, you’re itching to go there. I know you.”

“Okay, yes.”

They set off on foot, following the trail that leads to the church. The meadow surrounding it is green and yellow; the soft breeze plays with the grass and makes it move in waves, like the sea. Steve wishes he could touch it, let it tickle the palm of his hand.

He stops to look at a bird flying low and then perching itself on one of the cypresses. He takes a picture of it with his phone. Tony doesn’t realize he stopped, or maybe he does but he’s leaving him to his own interests. Steve watches him walk away.

The white trail, the dust, the countryside, a beautiful church so close to them. In ruins, and prettier than ever because of it. The way Steve feels about it is peculiar; it’s the same way he feels when he looks at Tony, more or less naked, and finds bruises in the shape of his own hand on his hip. When he thinks about how Tony said it, that he liked the way it felt the first time, after their night together. The night they made love.

It’s the same way he feels about Tony’s hands, lived and real; while his own, unblemished and artificial, feel like the hands of a statue. Lifeless.
It’s like being stuck in limbo, the way Steve feels.

Tony doesn’t want to talk about what Steve needs to talk about, doesn’t want to say the words that would release Steve from these clutches. It’s an agony, the wait, the doubt, the not knowing. But there’s also some comfort in it: until Tony decides, Steve gets to do things that he wouldn’t be allowed when—if—Tony rejects him. Even if they stay friends, which is already assuming a lot, Steve won’t be able to do anymore a lot of things that he can do, now.

Kissing Tony’s knee, touching his face and his hair. Sleeping with him curled up against his side, face pressed into Steve’s ribs. Feeling Tony’s hand around his own waist. Eating the food he makes, waiting for him to be done in the shower. Filling the tub with hot water and staying there with him for hours, until the skin of his hands is wrinkled and Steve’s skin still resists being changed by time and circumstance. Kissing his jaw, holding his hand, caressing his hip. Stroking his back, massaging his bruises. Shoving his own clothes in the washing machine together with Tony’s. Hanging them out to dry.

Those things will disappear.

Sure, maybe Tony won’t reject him, but it’s been ten days, and Steve’s confidence is ripping at the seams. Maybe now he gets what Tony meant when he asked if it wasn’t worse, thinking about being with Tony without knowing if it would ever happen.

So Steve imagines the future. Without Tony.

And it’s terrifying.

He picks up the pace to catch up with Tony, and maybe it’s the noise Steve makes hitting the gravel, but Tony stops, and starts turning his head to look back, over his shoulder. It’s the split of a second, but Steve manages to take a picture.

It’s not exactly in focus; Tony is moving, but it’s beautiful in its own way. His profile barely visible against the bluest sky Steve has ever seen, his skin glowing in the blistering sun of the early afternoon, his sunglasses masking him just enough.

Steve rests his hand on the small of Tony’s back, because he still can. Tony smiles.

“So,” he says, “tell me about the church. What’s the deal with the roof? Or lack thereof?”

“What do you think? Come on, guess.”

“The first thing that comes to mind is that it was made of wood and burned down. Not uncommon, back then.”

“Yeah, most people think that. But no. During the 14th and 15th centuries the abbey was left in severe poverty due to famine, epidemics, a few raids. At some point a particularly stupid abbot thought, Hey, what if we remove the roof of the church and fucking sell it, because it was made of lead, or copper, something like that, highly marketable at the time. Soon the crisis became complete decline, and the church was abandoned, even used as a foundry for a short time, then left in ruins until the 19th century, when the sensibility towards preservation changed. And that’s the story.”

“It’s a pretty interesting story.”

“They even sold the bell. It’s kinda sad.”

“I’ll give you that.”
They enter the church. There’s no door. Steve feels the grass underneath his boots. It’s so counterintuitive.

He watches Tony throw his head back and stare at the sky with his lips parted. He takes a moment to savor the anticipation, and to memorize the shape of Tony’s throat now that it’s stretched and exposed like this.

Steve lifts his head, and sees the sky.

“Maybe it wouldn’t be as beautiful, if it hadn’t gone through all that,” Steve says. “It wouldn’t be so unique.”

“I don’t know,” Tony replies, “I’m sure she could’ve done with a bit more care.”

Steve isn’t sure they’re still talking about the church, or only about the church, but he doesn’t know exactly what else they’re talking about, either.

“People care about it now, but it’s in ruins. The damage is done,” Tony adds.

“People care because it got ruined. It’s a reminder of what could’ve been lost forever.”

“Sometimes I…” Tony starts, wistful, interrupting himself immediately. “Nothing, nevermind,” he finishes, lowering his gaze to the ground and breathing through his open lips.

Steve reaches out to lace his fingers with Tony’s, who’s surprised by the gesture, almost startled.

“Me too,” Steve says, and he feels Tony squeeze his hand tight.

***

They walk up to the Eremo. The climb is worse than Tony remembered, or maybe it’s just the past few years catching up with him.

They enter the chapel, and Tony hears Steve mutter, “It’s cylindrical! I’ll be damned,” his tone a mix between awed and excited.

It’s cute, Steve’s enthusiasm. It’s always been.

“Is that a…” Steve says.

*Here it comes,* Tony thinks.

“Is that a sword in a stone?” He walks closer to it. “That’s a sword in a stone! Ha!”

Tony laughs to himself while Steve reads the tourist information out loud. He remembers the story: Galgano Guidotti converted to Christianism after a ruthless youth, and decided to become a hermit. To prove his faith, he planted his sword into the ground, so he could use it as a cross, for prayer. Legend says that since that moment, no one has ever been able to remove the sword from the ground, which became as hard as a stone. Galgano was canonized shortly after his death.

“Do you think they made the chapel cylindrical as a callback to the Round Table?” Steve suddenly asks.

“I… I have no idea, Steve. Maybe. Do some research if you want. Dig in some archives. Write a paper on it.”
“No one would read it.”

“Everyone would read it; you’re Captain America. And seriously, that’s your issue here?”

“What other issue should I have?”

“That you’re not a historian, maybe? That you have no idea how to do academic research?”

“I can totally…” Steve stops, frowns, squints at Tony. “You’re daring me, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“You’re daring me, insisting that I can’t do it so I do it just to show you that I can.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re totally doing it. I won’t fall for it.”

“Fine. Don’t complain when I say you’re no fun, though. Because you’re no fun.”

Steve looks down at him for a moment. “I’m still taller than you; that’s all that matters.”

“Low blow.”

“Not as low as you.”

“That’s a terrible joke.”

“That’s an awesome joke. Because it’s true.”

“You weren’t a big fan of truth when I told you you’re not an academic! Or when you—” didn’t tell me what you knew about my parent’s death, goes unsaid, but barely, and it’s bad enough that Tony thinks it.

Tony doesn’t say it, but he might as well have, for the face Steve makes. He feels nausea rising to his throat.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” Tony says, because he can’t stay inside the chapel a minute more.

“Wait, Tony—” Steve says, grabbing his hand.

“Finish your visit. I need a moment alone,” he says, but the look on Steve’s face tells him he’s not going to give up so easily. “Please, Steve,” he tries, and Steve relaxes his shoulders and lets his hand go. Reluctantly, but he does it.

Outside, Tony leans against the wall of the chapel and looks into the distance, cursing the inescapable heat and the storm inside his mind.

He just can’t help himself, and it’s true in so many ways, most of them opposites.

How are they supposed to accomplish anything if Tony throws jabs at Steve any occasion he gets? It’s not even a conscious effort, but it’s still something that’s happening inside him. It’s exhausting. He wants to stop, but he doesn’t know how.

He’s been telling himself that he hates Steve for so long that maybe he doesn’t even know who he is if he doesn’t. But he’s loved Steve for so long that the idea of ever stopping seems foolish, even by
Tony’s standards.

A bird lands on the ground in front of him, searching for food. Tony observes it peck in the dirt, then take off as soon as it realizes that there’s nothing there. Its nature screams at it to keep looking and looking, and it doesn’t fight it.

Tony, instead, fights his own with everything he’s got. Pretends to be someone else.

Someone who doesn’t love Steve.

But denying himself his own nature is, weirdly, something necessary. Tony owes it to himself. It’s important, this thing he’s doing, so he keeps at it.

Steve comes out of the chapel a few minutes later, hands tucked in the pockets of the jeans he changed into before leaving home.

(The guest house. Home.)

He’s still wearing that cardigan of his, and now that Tony sees it under the harsh light of the sun, with Steve’s hair catching it and shining with gold, he recognizes it.

“Is that… is that Thor’s?” he asks, his brow knitting together in bewilderment.

“Uh…” Steve says, and looks at himself. He touches the cardigan. “Yeah?”

“I asked you,” Tony says, harsh and rude, and he wants to kick his own ass as soon as the sentence leaves his mouth. Steve takes the blow like a champ and walks towards the little wall at the edge of the hilltop. There are trees there, providing cover from the sun. Tony follows him.

“Yeah, it’s Thor’s,” Steve replies in the end, sitting on the wall. “He left a bunch of clothes when he went back to Asgard. Told me it’d be a great honor if I used them.” He seems to weight his next words, but he doesn’t look sure of his choice. He whispers. “I only have this with me. The rest is at the compound. In my, my, my room. My old room.”

Tony sighs, and lowers his voice to imitate Steve. “It’s still your room, Steve. No one’s touched it. Except for me.”

“Oh?”

“Went in there once. To leave your shield. It’s there. Against the edge of your bed.”

“Thank you.” Tony hears Steve swallow.

“It’s your shield. Of course it is. I don’t know why… I was angry and I just wanted… I’m sorry, I…”

“Tony, no, you don’t have to…”

“I said it only to hurt you.”

“I know. Please. It’s alright.”

Tony looks at the ground for a moment. “Do you miss him?”

‘He’s my friend.’

‘So was I.’

Tony nods. ‘He’ll be back soon.’

‘You think so?’

‘I… I know so.’

They sit there for a while, absently watching other visitors enter and leave the chapel, and then walk back down the hill. There aren’t many people, the first days of September already have an effect on the influx of tourists, and Tony idly wishes that it also meant some respite from the stifling weather, but he knows it’s going to take at least the middle of October for that.

He looks back at Steve, who’s—of course, of course—already looking at him.

There’s a frown on his face.

‘I’m scared, Tony. You know?’

‘Of what?’

‘Everything. This thing with the stones… it terrifies me. Because it terrifies you, I think, and it makes me… anxious. Because if you don’t know what to do, then who does?’

‘We’ll… Come on, Steve, don’t say that. We’ll figure it out.’

‘I can’t lose you. Either way, I can’t lose you.’

‘You won’t. I promise, I…’ Tony sighs, his voice unsteady. ‘No, I can’t promise that.’

‘I know.”

‘This is the one thing I can’t predict. I only have fail-safes in place in case something happens. But the scenarios, there are so many.’

Tony gets up from the wall to place himself in front of Steve, standing between his knees. Steve places a hand on Tony’s ribs and looks at his chest, where he knows the reactor is.

‘Speaking of which,’ Tony continues, and Steve lifts his gaze. ‘I need you to do something for me.’

‘Anything you want,’ Steve murmurs.

‘I already asked Pepper. I’ll tell her exactly what it is when I’m back home, and I’ll tell you, too. It’s something about my mother. In case I die, I need you to help her do it.”

Steve inhales sharply when Tony says this. Maybe he can’t stand the fact that Tony thinks about his imminent death as something highly possible, something he needs to start planning ahead for, because it could very well happen. Maybe Steve wants to think about it as something improbable, or far away in the future anyway. Maybe Steve doesn’t want to think about it at all.

‘I will, Tony. If it’s the last thing I do. Whatever it is.”

‘And I need you to check up on Stella. Regularly. Take my plane, anything. Come visit her often, Steve; don’t leave her alone.”
“Alright. Alright,” Steve says, and rests his forehead against Tony’s chest. The light pressure on the reactor feels good, even through two layers of clothing. Tony brushes his lips to Steve’s hair.

Tony hears Steve forcing himself to breathe regularly. He knows he’s blinking back tears; he could hear them in his voice just now. He feels the need to lighten the mood, reassure him.

“So,” he says, “you share clothes with Thor, huh?”

A beat, and Steve squints at him. He smiles, the vestiges of his anguish leaving his face, even though they linger in his eyes, outstay their welcome there. “You’re literally wearing my t-shirt. At this exact moment.”

“You gave it to me.”

“You didn’t protest.”

“I’m sleep deprived.”

“Yeah, and trying to take me for a fool. You think I don’t know that half of Nat’s hoodies are actually yours?”

“She likes to work out in them.”

“I know.” Steve is thoughtful for a moment. “She really respects you, you know.”

“I don’t… I was very…”

“She did what she did for me and Bucky, but… she likes you, Tony,” Steve says, and his tone is somber again. “Think whatever you want of me, but don’t think she’s not your friend. Or that you can’t trust her.”

“I told her some… bad things after she let you and Bucky go, and—”

“She doesn’t hold it against you. And she said some stuff too, right?”

“Maybe. But I didn’t help Bucky so Nat would forgive me. I can’t pretend the thought never crossed my mind, though.”

“She was never mad at you. She’s learned to understand you.”

“And have you?”

“I think so. I think that not assuming the worst of you is the first step, and I need to get the others to do it, too. But yeah, I think I get you now. The way your mind works. The way your heart works.”

Tony smiles at that.

“Unsteadily and unreliably?”

“Against all odds.”

And that’s the last straw, somehow. Somehow, that tips the scale, on top of all the I love you’s, I miss you’s, I want you’s that Steve has said with words or acts in the last ten days.

It happens like most things happen in Tony’s mind: all at once, abruptly, but not exactly unexpectedly. There’s an anticipation to it, a vibration inside him, something that tells him, Here, it’s
happening, and then, a second later, it’s happened already.

It comes and goes in the brief span of a moment, and suddenly Tony knows.

He knows, and he’s going to tell Steve. He’s going to make his confession and hope he, too, will be forgiven for what he’s done. He’ll do it tomorrow, though, because he needs to stay alone with the thought for a while. Because it’s a beautiful thought, it’s what Tony wanted to be able to feel again all along, but couldn’t. Wouldn’t.

He had almost given up hope. But now it’s here, rushing into him like a current, making his skin prickle with the sheer joy it brings him.

He feels his heart thump in his chest, and as it’s often the case, a sound becomes a word and a word becomes a color. And the color is a scent, and the scent, a taste.

But still, his heart beats.

Against all odds, for Steve.

***

They don’t go straight back home. Tony insists Steve just drives around the countryside for a while, and Steve humors him.

About half an hour later, Tony asks him to make a U-turn.

“You wanna go back? Why?”

“Just do it.”

“Oh, come on…”

“I thought of a place we could go see. I saw it once, in a picture. I’ve never been there.”

“You want to go somewhere you’ve never been to?”

“Yeah. Why are you saying that like it’s weird?”

“It’s not weird. I thought you’d been pretty much anywhere around here.”

“Well, I haven’t.”

“But you’ve been to a lot of places.”

“Yes, but not this one. Obviously.”

“And you wanna go there with me?”

Tony turns to look at him, and softens his voice. “I do,” he says.

He follows Tony’s directions. They park the car outside an agriturismo. Behind it, Steve sees a river, large and blue and dry in places because of the summer heat. Woods press along both riverbanks, and then it’s more of the same landscape Steve’s used to by now: hills, fields, vineyards, more woods.

It’s a sea of green and yellow, a sea of sunshine and sky, and silence permeates it all.
After getting out of the car, they walk along the river, until they reach an old bridge, in ruins now. It is, possibly, the most beautiful thing Steve has seen in all his time in Italy.

It’s made of red bricks, but the underside of the arch is white and black with mold. The river passes quietly below it, a bright and clear turquoise, that catches every drop of sunshine.

It reminds Steve of the paintings of ancient ruins that were so popular in the first half of the 1800s. John Constable and Cole Thomas. Richter, Schiffer, Friedrich. Maybe even something older, like Verboom and Canaletto.

He tells Tony, who makes the same face Steve pulls when Tony talks about equations, forces, engines, particles, reactors.

“Payback’s a bitch,” Steve says, smug.

“It is,” Tony replies with a laugh.

He takes Steve’s hand, but after a few steps Tony only grabs Steve’s first two fingers instead of all of them. It’s happened before in the last few days, but Steve finds it suddenly strange. It’s not the first time he notices this, but has Tony always been this small compared to him? He tells himself again maybe it’s just that he’s not wearing lifts all the time, but how can his hands be affected by that?

It’s weird.

“Where are we going?”

“Not far. Just… here,” he says, while they walk past the bridge and the bushes on the shore. They can’t see the agriturismo from here, and Steve assumes they can’t be seen as well. The woods protect them from the road.

“Wha—”

There’s a light in Tony’s eyes. Something that Steve has seen only a few times. After they defeated the Chitauri and saved New York. When Steve told him, I’m gonna miss you, Tony, after they beat Ultron. When Steve was about to sign the Accords in Berlin.

But most of all, he saw this glint in Tony’s eyes during those three days they spent together, alone, at the Avengers compound. He saw it that night that Tony kissed him. That night when Tony pushed Steve to sit on the couch in his workshop and took what was his.

Steve was his.

It was there, that light, right there in Tony’s eyes, while he was in Steve’s lap, while he moaned his orgasm into Steve’s mouth, while Steve pressed his love into Tony’s skin.

“Tony—”

Tony is stripping. He took off the sling and now he’s carefully using both arms to undress, in front of Steve, on the river shore, leaving his clothes on a rock, setting his shoes on another.

“Come on,” he says, and his voice isn’t urging or encouraging, it’s soft and quiet and kind like a caress, like a kiss, almost like a prayer.

“Tony, I—” Steve tries, but oh, oh, Tony’s taking off his underwear, Tony’s smiling at him and cupping his face, and Tony’s naked and beautiful and he smells so good and Steve wants to
disappear inside him, explode like the spark in his eyes—he wants to become one of Tony’s smiles, he wants to become his voice, his scent, his skin.

He looks at Tony’s body, and it’s a map of all the ways Steve has hurt him. A testament to Steve’s failures, proof of Tony’s fragility, yes, but also and most importantly of his resilience, because he may be scarred and bruised and hurt, but he’s still here.

Here, now, with Steve. Smiling.

“We’re going skinny-dipping!” Tony says, as if he’s a kid, excited and serene and without a single care in the whole world. “Come on,” he says again, tugging at Steve’s cardigan.

“Tony, I… Wait, wait, Tony, I, wait, I can’t,” Steve says.

Tony’s face falls. “Why not?” he asks.

“I’m… I’m cold, Tony,” Steve says, lamely—all the more heartbroken that Tony forgot which form Steve’s heartbreak takes.

“It’ll be just a moment,” Tony says, again with the gentlest voice Steve’s ever heard him use. “Just to get in the water.”

“But… Tony, the water’s cold. I can’t—”

“The water isn’t cold,” Tony says, smiling again. “There’s a thermal source that merges with the river a couple of yards that way. The water’s warm here,” he explains.

Steve feels incredibly stupid for thinking Tony forgot about him, and then absurdly relieved that he actually didn’t.

“Come on,” Tony says again, and Steve starts unlacing his boots.

“Are you sure about this, Tony? I don’t want you to strain your—”

“I’m fine,” Tony says, with the tone he always uses when he says that he’s fine without really being fine, a tone meant to convince himself as much as the person he’s talking to.

Steve decides not to push it. Tony can decide what’s best for himself. Besides, he won’t swim if his shoulder hurts too much.

Naked, his clothes neatly folded and placed on a rock, Steve walks to the shore, and Tony takes his hand again, guiding him into the river.

The water, as Tony promised, is warm. Not exactly hot, but it’s enough not to make Steve’s situation worse. And Tony, all skin and smiles and eyes and so, so close to him, makes him feel almost warmer, just like that morning in the bathtub.

He dives into the water, pushes himself further and further with his arms and legs, keeping his belly close to the bottom of the river. It doesn’t remind him of the arctic sea at all: there are countless plants growing underwater, rocks, the occasional fish. No ice. The water’s warm.

He comes up to break the surface of the river, and sees Tony in the distance. He hears him mutter a soft What the fuck to himself, so he swims back to him.

“That’s crazy,” he says when Steve reaches him. “How much time can you hold your breath underwater, exactly?”
“Uh…sixty-seven years. At least,” Steve deadpans.

Tony’s face crumbles again. “Shit. Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“I know, Tony, I know what you meant. I was joking, don’t worry.”

“Oh.”

“And the real answer is around an hour. Probably. I think. I’ve never really tried to measure it.”

“Wow. You must give amazing head.”

“I’ve done it exactly once and to you, so you should tell me.”

“Right. Well. It, uh, it was good. Yeah. I mean, technique could be improved, but that’s true of basically anything when you ask me. Anything can be improved. So it was… yeah. It was really, really… really good. Yeah… I don’t last an hour anyway.”

“Me neither.”

“But you have a ridiculously short refractory period, right?”

“Yes, but I can control it. Easily, too. I can do it, but I don’t need to do it.”

“That’s… practical.”

“The serum generally is. It makes most things easier. Like giving head, as you say.”

Tony snorts. “Well, not having to breathe is a big help, I imagine. You don’t… choke on it… Can we talk about something else?”

“Please, yes.”

They take a moment to laugh about it and diffuse the weird tension that talking about sex always creates between them.

“You like this place?”

“Very much.”

“I hope it’ll inspire some of your drawings.”

“Oh, I believe it will,” Steve says, and feels himself blush at his own innuendo.

“Mh-mh.”

“Tony.”

“Yeah.”

“You can swim, right?”

“I… I can.”

“Your hair’s still dry—”

“I’m not, you know. A big fan of putting my head underwater. So. That’s… that’s a thing.”
“Oh… oh,” Steve says when he understand what Tony means. “I’m sorry. We can get out if—”

“No, no, it’s fine, I… kinda didn’t think this through as much as I should’ve, I suppose, but…”

“You don’t need to prove anything—”

“Maybe not to you.”

“Tony—”

“Hold my hand, would you?”

“Course. Here,” Steve says, grabbing Tony’s hand tight. His fingertips brush the silver band at Tony’s wrist.

Tony looks at him one last time, holds his nose with his free hand, closes his eyes, and dives into the water. Steve squeezes his hand.

It lasts only a second. Tony comes back to the surface immediately, wiping the water away from his face, opening his eyes and looking around himself, breathing through his mouth.

“You did it!” Steve cheers, smiling to encourage Tony to be proud of himself.

“Yeah.” He sounds breathless.

“Hey. Hey.”

Tony is touching Steve’s arm. Clutching it, really. Steve reaches for him under the water, circles his waist with his arm and pulls him close. Tony hoists himself up, wraps his legs around Steve’s hips and touches his face, his thumbs stroking the skin just below Steve’s eyes. Steve holds him up with a hand on his back, but the water is doing most of the work.

Tony closes his eyes again, presses his forehead to Steve’s and breathes, lips parted, skin wet and tanned and smelling like coconut and metal, and Steve feels it on his lips, the warm air that comes out of Tony’s mouth and he can almost taste it; he remembers it so well from that night, their night, the night they spent together and made love and Steve just wants to give in to this, because maybe he doesn’t deserve it but he would like to have a kiss, a last kiss, as a goodbye, something to remember Tony by, something to think about when he’s alone at night with fire between his thighs and only Tony’s name hammering in his head, something to use to chase away the knowledge of how badly he screwed this up, in the decades of guaranteed loneliness that he’s got ahead of himself, but he…

“Would you have said it back,” he asks, and he didn’t mean to, it doesn’t even sound like a question because he didn’t mean to ask, he doesn’t really want to know, he…

“Yes. I would’ve,” Tony replies at once, sure of himself like he’s saying his own name. “Never doubt that I would’ve, Steve.”

And that makes all of this so much worse.

A sob makes its way up Steve’s throat, and tears slip down his face and onto Tony’s fingers, hot and bitter and poisoned with Steve’s shame. He squeezes his eyes shut and grits his teeth to bear the sting of guilt spreading through him from his chest.

“I can’t do this, I can’t—” he says, pushing Tony away, starting to walk back to the shore. “I can’t, I’m sorry, I—”
He falls to his knees on the gravel, water still lapping at his feet, and Tony scrambles to kneel in front of him, still touching his face, and Steve feels so cold, so cold, he’s never been so cold…

“Steve, hey, it’s alright, it’s—”

“I can’t do this. I can’t stay this close to you and not have you—”

“Shh—”

“But I can’t stay away either. I don’t know how… I tell myself it’s fine, but… I can’t, I can’t, I can’t even think about it.”

“Steve,” Tony says, firm, to bring him back from that place in his mind where there’s no hope and no escape. He cradles Steve’s head in his hands, lifts it up. “Look at me for a moment. Please,” he says, voice calm and warm, like a blanket on Steve’s unquiet thoughts. Steve opens his eyes and holds Tony’s gaze, and it’s hard to look at him, the tears blurring his vision and his guilt blurring his heart.

“Tomorrow I’ll tell you. We’re going home. Tomorrow.”

“You,” Steve tries, but speaking is hard and his heart is going to burst any minute now. “You’ve decided?” he asks.

“Yes. I have. I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

“Tell me now,” Steve says, begs, because he can’t wait a second more, he’s going to die if he has to wait a second more.

“No,” Tony says, and Steve closes his eyes so he doesn’t hear it, but that’s not how it works. “No. I’ll tell you tomorrow. I need to be sure. It’s important.”

Steve is shivering, badly, and it’s not just the cold in his heart. He remembers his promise, and he can’t fail Tony now. He can’t fail Tony again.

He swallows around the lump in his throat, sobs again, wipes at his face with the palm of his hands. He nods. Breathes.


“Tomorrow,” Tony repeats, and he holds Steve’s throat like Steve’s done to him a few times—a thumb on one side, his other fingers on the other, pressure tight but not enough to choke.

And hope, so far away until just now, so distant if not for mere dreams and scattered images, so unreachable except for the bare minimum needed to get out of bed in the morning and face the day—but it took such an effort to get to it, every time it drained all energy from him—slams back into Steve.

Tony tightens his hold just a fraction, adjusts Steve’s head, places a kiss on his jaw. “Tomorrow,” he says again, and this time it’s a promise.

Steve closes his eyes, and he can almost smell the cherry blossoms, can almost taste the cherries, and Tony’s tongue against his own.

And he almost, almost feels warm.

***
Tony stumbles into the guest house while he’s still laughing at Steve’s last joke.

His mood brightened in the car—Tony could, slowly, bring him back from his desperation.

Tony feels like he’s never felt before. Like everything is louder, brighter, warmer, more defined. As though he just put on glasses and suddenly he can see the leaves on the trees again, instead of a confusing smudge of green.

It’s as if everything is real again, after months of being a mockery of itself.

Steve is not there yet, though, and Tony wants it like that for now. A few hours more. A few hours more of him, alone with this, turning it over and over in his head as though he hasn’t done it already ad nauseam. But he needs this. He needs to do it just for a little bit more, and then he’ll tell Steve, and then, maybe, maybe, this whole thing will end with something that isn’t screams against concrete walls, ice drying the blood on their skin; rage, rage, rage and hate and grief and sorrow and betrayal and wounds too deep to be borne, much less cured.

Maybe. Maybe there’s a cure for heartbreak, after all.

They strip in the bathroom, clothes still half-wet and clinging to them, and enter the shower together, without even feeling the need to discuss it beforehand. There would be no point in it. Not anymore.

Steve passes him his washcloth and soap, and soon Tony is scrubbing his skin clean while Steve massages shampoo on Tony’s scalp. After, Steve quickly rubs body wash all over himself, then Tony makes him sit on the bench and washes his hair. His shoulder aches at some point, but he ignores it. He must do a poor job of hiding the discomfort from his face though, because when they dry off and are dressing in the bedroom, Steve goes back into the bathroom for a moment to retrieve Tony’s body lotion.

“Steve—”

“Yes, I’m sure you’d make very compelling arguments. Except I don’t wanna hear them. Come on, turn around,” he says, and Tony does.

Steve kneads at the bruise on Tony’s shoulder, pushes his fingers into it, forces the muscles to relax with the warmth of his hands.

Tony closes his eyes in the dim light on the room. The sun is setting, and the shutters are half-closed. The curtains are billowing out with the breeze softly blowing from outside.

He moans.

“Am I hurting you?” Steve asks.

Tony can’t say what he’s feeling. There’s pain, sure, but it also feels good, Steve touching him like this, so kind and careful. Loving.

Tony shakes his head. “Don’t stop,” he says, clenching his jaw, and Steve’s hands are on him again. It’s like that morning in the tub, but better, because now Steve’s touch doesn’t have that grain of uncertainty to it anymore. Now it’s only love, it’s only hope.

It’s devotion.

And it overwhelms Tony, the power of it.
Tony grabs one of Steve’s hands, tugs at Steve’s arm until he can press Steve’s palm to the arc reactor, until he feels Steve’s body sway forward following the arm and touch his chest to Tony’s back.

Tony’s nostrils are full of the wooden scent of the lotion; he can’t smell the roses at all, but he knows Steve is here with him, sitting just behind him on the edge of the bed, touching him.

“Fuck,” he says, and the tears that stream down his face now are so utterly different from all the others he’s spilled these past few days—this isn’t pain, this isn’t shame, this isn’t emptiness or frustration or heartbreak, no.

This is relief.

Because he can still feel this way, because he can still find himself in Steve, because he can still find Steve in himself, because not all their promises were wasted, because this thing between them was broken, yes, but Tony is a mechanic, and Tony fixed it.

“What’s wrong?” Steve whispers into his ear.

“Tell me again,” Tony says, “please. Can you—”

“I love you,” Steve says, and kisses the spot between Tony’s shoulders. “I love you, I love you, I love you,” he chants against Tony’s neck, and removes his hand from Tony’s heart to place it on his throat, grip sure and tight.

Steve takes a deep breath, and releases it against Tony’s skin.

“I know I don’t deserve it. Not after what I did. My apologies aren’t enough, they’ll never be. But this is all I’ve got. I love you. I’m sorry. I love you. It’s all I’ve got.”

Tony twists around to hug him; he hides his face in the crook of Steve’s neck and breathes him in. He’s got sweatpants on, but he’s still shirtless, and Tony strokes his shoulders while Steve hugs him back and shakes against him.

“It’s going to be alright,” Tony murmurs, “everything’s gonna be alright.”

Tony’s phone rings.

It’s Nat. He sets the phone on the bed and activates the holoscreen.

There’s Bucky in the frame. His hair is a mess, he’s wearing a tank top and boxers, and has a very visible hickey under his ear. And, most importantly, a big, tired smile on his face.

“Hello,” he sing-songs, his bloodshot eyes stark against the dark circles around them. His gaze lands on Tony’s naked chest.

Shit.

Tony hastens to find a t-shirt. With the corner of his eye he sees Bucky look at Steve, and mouth something at him. Steve nods.

It all happens in a second, so it’s not too late when Bucky covers his eyes with his metal hand, scrunches up his face, and says, “Ew, I don’t wanna know why you guys are shirtless right now.”

“Natasha’s bra is on the floor,” Tony deadpans, “we can see it.”
Bucky turns to look at the floor, only mildly interested. “She’s in the shower,” he says, shrugging.

“How are you? How was BARF?” Steve asks.

“Terrible. You know Tony, maybe the name is apt. God, the nausea.”

“Did you throw up?”

“No, but barely.”

“Log it in with T’Challa.”

“Already done.”

“Good. Headache?”

“Less than I thought. For now.”

“And afterwards? Everything okay?”

“Could get it up just fine.”

“I can confirm!” Natasha shouts from the bathroom. She appears in the frame shortly after, wearing a red bathrobe. She pushes her hand into Bucky’s hair, and kisses him. He kisses her back.

They look at each other for several long seconds after they stop kissing, and Tony feels like he’s intruding in a very private moment, but at the same time he sort of can’t stop watching.

Nat turns towards the holoscreen. “Hi, losers.”

“Hi, Nat,” they say together, and she rolls her eyes, fond.

She disappears again. A few minutes later, she’s dressed and ready to leave. She puts a bottle of Gatorade on the desk in front of Bucky. “Don’t forget that,” she tells him. “Would love to stay and chat, but Rhodes is waiting for me,” she says to Steve and Tony. Then, she turns to Bucky. “You’re gonna be fine?”

“I’m gonna be fine.”

She kisses him again, and leaves.

_Damn, Tony thinks. I want that too._

Tomorrow, he tells himself.

He leaves Bucky and Steve alone, because he has a hunch that Steve needs a friend that isn’t Tony right now. He starts making dinner, and he hears them laugh from the kitchen. He expects the spike of jealousy to poke him, but it never comes.

It never comes. He’s free of it.

He’s free.

When Steve joins him in the kitchen, his eyes are red. He must’ve cried again, and Tony feels guilty about that. But it’s gonna be fine; it’s gonna be over soon.

Steve gives him a drawing. It’s made with pencil.
It’s Tony, or rather, a part of him. Of his body. From his stomach, all the way up to his mouth. It’s a close-up of all his scars, of the arc reactor, the upside-down rectangle inside the round glass case.

It looks like it’s on fire. Like a sun burning into the sky.

There’s something written in the corner of the page, and Tony, characteristically, knows what it says before he even reads it. It’s in Italian.

*Un sole che splende per me soltanto*

*Come un diamante in mezzo al cuore*

“You know,” he says, “it’s hard to think that you see me like this. As something that can be immortalized with art. I always try not to look at my chest for too long, but you…”

“It makes me feel guilty. But it's part of you. And I love all of you. Even the parts of yourself you love the least.”

Tony finishes setting up the table to hide the sting in his eyes.

“Bucky was worried about it? He sort of made a face when he—”

“Yeah. I explained, hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t.”

“I’m glad for him and Nat. It’s a good thing.”

“It is.”

They’re quiet during dinner. It’s not like they don’t have anything to say, it’s that there’s no need to say anything right now. Steve smiles, timid and hopeful, with his mouth full of the food Tony made for him, his eyes crinkling up at the sides, and that’s all that matters for now.

“You think you’ll be able to sleep?” Steve asks later, when they’re settling into bed for the night. It’s still early, but maybe Steve wants this day to be over as soon as possible, so the next can start. He’s not a patient person, after all.

“Dunno,” Tony says, “I hope so.”

“But you don’t think so.”

“No. I don’t.”

“You want me to stay awake with you? I can do it.”

“No, no. You get your rest. I’ll watch you sleep in a non-creepy way.”

“Allright. Wake me up if you need me, okay? Anything at all.”

“Will do.”

Steve turns off the light, and darkness takes over the room, except for the reactor, shining through Tony’s t-shirt. The temperature has dropped a few degrees. Tony wonders if it’s going to rain later.

He rolls over to face Steve. He’s still awake. He has a frown on his face; he looks like someone who
is rethinking the entire last day and trying to make his peace with it.

“How did it feel, Steve?” Tony asks, abruptly, breaking the silence.

“What?”

“Earlier today, you were saying… How did it feel, making love? To me.”

Steve thinks about it for a long time, and they feel like days when they meet Tony’s impatient curiosity.

“Like finding your way back home,” he says in the end, simply, as though giving an obvious reply to a rhetorical question. He doesn’t comment on the words Tony used to describe that night, making love, but he must know Tony wasn’t just parroting Steve’s.

He must know.

[1] Farm house adapted to host guests who wish to spend time in the countryside doing a variety of activities like riding horses, tending to animals, and generally experiencing life on a farm. They also can have pools and restaurants attached and get pretty fancy in some cases.

Chapter End Notes

The bridge over the river where Steve and Tony go swimming is called Ponte a Macereto (you can see some pictures here). This is the only case where I play a little with reality regarding a place Steve and Tony go visit. There is an agriturismo close to the bridge, but it's closer than what implied in the fic, and there are less woods and rocks on the riverbanks, but i had to give those two idiots some privacy. Also, the river isn't warm, but I needed Steve to get into the damn water in some way, didn't I? :D

I thought I'd clarify this because I know from the comments that a lot of you are interested in the places I mention here (I was thinking of making a little list? If you guys are interested? Let me know!) so it was only fair to say that the description of the bridge + river isn't exactly accurate.
The crack of the thunder wakes him up. It’s so violent Steve almost fears the sky is going to split open and fall onto him.

The other side of the bed—Tony’s side—is empty. Cold to the touch.

It’s about to start raining, and Steve is alone.

He checks the time on his phone. It’s 4 in the morning.

It’s tomorrow.

He searches the guest house for signs of Tony, but finds none. One pair of his shoes is gone. His pants from yesterday too.

Steve shrugs a hoodie on and goes outside. The wind has picked up, and lightning strikes the sky again. He walks around the guest house, but Tony isn’t there.

He’s about to go back inside and try to reach him on his phone, but he’s struck with an idea. More like an epiphany, really.

He sets off down the hill, hurrying through on that same trail he walked with Tony a few days ago, even though it really seems like a lifetime has passed since that day under the cherry tree.

That day when Steve touched Tony for the first time after their only night together, and it was by mistake, but Tony allowed him. That day when Tony told him that there was a possibility he could forgive Steve.

And now, a billion years later, Steve is approaching the cherry tree again, and sure enough, Tony is there.

He’s facing the other way from Steve, staring far away into the valley, at the hills, at the dark clouds already above them.

His arm is in the sling. It makes his shoulders look narrow, his frame appear tiny. He is, though. He is small. Smaller than Steve.

“Tony?” Steve asks, tentative, keeping some distance. He’s scared of what’s about to happen; he’s never been more scared than this.

All his courage, praised and vaunted all around the world, for this: his legs trembling under his own weight, and the tree suddenly seems like something he’ll be hanged on, because he’s been tried and judged, and he’s been sentenced to death.
Death by unrequited love.

“You know,” Tony says, suddenly, “before… I used to think the world of you.”

He doesn’t turn around. Steve stares at the nape of Tony’s neck and wonders if he’s touched it for the last time.

“I was also jealous, because of my father, but that aside, I really did.” Tony continues. “You were perfect to me, in my mind. Captain America, pure and amazing. Spotless. Then we met, and, well... It wasn’t that perfect, was it? But still. The way I admired you, the way I grew to love you after things ended with Pepper—it took so little, from you. A whispered word, a simple thought you wanted to share with me, and I was undone. Gone. I couldn’t think straight anymore. It used to be like, I can’t do anything today, because Cap smiled to me in the kitchen and my mind’s fried. That was all it took. And then at night, I’d come down from the rush and think, He’d live perfectly well without me. He doesn’t need me. I loved you, and you didn’t.

“Or so I thought at the time, of course. Now I know that wasn’t the case; you’ve said as much. But to think how little it took. A snap of your fingers, Steve, and I would’ve been yours. I was. I was yours, that night.

“And then, after everything went down, I felt so stupid. I felt dirty, because I still wanted you, I still, you know, underneath it all, I knew I still loved you, and I wanted to stop loving you, I wanted it so much, more than anything. I wanted to be free of your spell. Of you.

“And then I saw you. At the airport in Milan. And at first, I have to admit, at first I was terrified. Of seeing you. My fear, those first days, that was real. I almost died, and… I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m apologizing for right now, just… I’m sorry. I almost died and I was scared of you.

“But I looked at you. And I felt it. Right there, while you were standing in front of the car, I felt it. Forgiveness. Love.

“By nature, Steve, I don’t hold grudges. I’m the man of second chances, and I firmly believe everyone deserves one. That’s how I work. That’s me. But that day, Steve, that day when I looked at you from inside the car and I felt what I felt, I hated myself like I’ve never hated anything or anyone else in my entire stupid life. I couldn’t believe that not even betraying me like you did could do anything against the way I felt about you. I couldn’t accept it. I couldn’t let you have it that easy.

“So I thought about it, while you were sitting all quiet in the passenger seat. I thought and thought and thought about it.

“And I saw the future, as you like to say. I calculated probabilities based on existing data, constructed scenarios, predicted risk and estimated damage.

“And I decided what to do.

“I held myself back. Kept myself from loving you, forced myself not to, because I was supposed to hate you. Because I needed to hate you, just for a little while, just to prove to myself that I was able to, that you didn’t really have that scary amount of power over me. That some of this was still up to me and me only.

“I was still angry. Bitter. I clinged to those feelings as hard as I could, because they were the only things that helped me. Helped me hold back. I needed to hold back.

“And then I needed to let it all go.
“And I’ve done it. And I’ve watched you, these last few days, I’ve watched you, and listened to you, and talked with you, and shared everything with you—even my mother’s past, even the closest thing to a parent I have left on this earth.

“And I’ve come to my conclusion. I’ve made my decision.”

Steve can’t move. Can’t breathe, can’t think, can’t do anything at all.

Tony turns, incredibly slowly, and walks over to stand in front of him.

“I love you too. I never stopped. I needed not to forgive you right away. I needed to see if I could hold the point. And I could, but… it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life. And I withstood actual torture at some point.”

Tony smiles at his own joke.

“And I hope you don’t, uh… take advantage of this, in the future, because… that’d be…”

Steve shakes his head to say that no, of course he won’t take advantage of this in the future, he’d never do that, but Steve only feels his heart hammering in his chest, blood pounding in his ears. Everything seems so far away for a moment. Only Tony is there, close, in front of him, short and beautiful and so happy, and Steve wants to… he wants, he wants.

“So, now I’m gonna do something. Gonna try. Stop me if you don’t want it, okay? ‘Kay.”

Tony kisses him.

Steve feels his heart beating faster than ever in his chest, and Tony’s too.

He feels Tony’s lips on his own, thin and soft, the scent of his skin.

All these sensations, all these inputs, pile up into Steve’s mind, and it feels as though their weight presses the play button of reality again. It’s been on pause for so long that at first Steve doesn’t understand what it is, this thing he’s feeling.

He’s warm.

Not just on the surface, like when he bathes with Tony. No, he’s warm deep inside, to the bone. His arms and legs are all pins and needles with it, and he feels the urge to take off his thick sweatpants, his socks, even the hoodie.

Steve takes Tony by the arms and pushes him away delicately. The loss of Tony’s mouth on his makes him regret this immediately, but he needs to look Tony in the eye and understand what’s happening.

Tony looks at him with a confused expression on his face, a deep frown bringing his eyebrows together. He shakes his head and Tony looks worried.

Steve dips his head to his chest. He’s still holding onto Tony, and Tony—

“Steve—”

He squeezes his eyes shut as hard as he can, clenches his jaw with so much force his teeth grit together painfully. He tries to hold it back, but he can’t, and it explodes in his chest like he has a reactor of his own on top of his heart.
He cries. He clutches Tony’s arms and avoids looking at his face. He cries and cries, gasping for air, his shoulders shaking, his whole body taken by a convulsion when this, all of this, rushes out of him.

But this is not pain. This is relief.

It’s over.

And something new only just started.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” he hears Tony saying, Tony, who is his now. He’s Steve’s, he loves him back. “I’m sorry, in the end I did something just as bad, I guess. I lied and I shouldn’t have. God, I’m an asshole.”

That makes no sense. And at the same time, coming from Tony, it makes all the sense in the world.

“No, Tony, I… I’ve never been happier than right now. You… you needed your time. I get why you did it. You needed to be sure. I appreciate that. You didn’t want to rush into things, and that means this was important to you. I’m glad.”

“Really?” Tony asks, and how much hope can be put in a single word?

“Yes, really,” he says. Then, because he hasn’t said it yet, “I love you.”

The way Tony smiles at him then, all teeth and crinkles and pure joy, that smile is better than anything, even better than the most beautiful night of Steve’s life, that now is maybe going to become the first of many.

“Tony,” he says, and he feels dizzy, touching Tony’s face like he’s done countless times, but this time it feels like the first, like the only real one, the one that truly counts.

“Yeah,” Tony says, circling Steve’s wrist with his hand, and he’s still smiling, he can’t stop smiling and Steve can’t either, he never wants to stop smiling, never wants Tony to stop smiling.

But there’s still something he needs.

“I… Can you… I need…”

“What is it? What do you need?”

“Can you say it? I’m sorry, I need… I need to hear you say it.”

Tony looks into his eyes, and he understands what he means without him having to spell it out. Of course he does.

“I forgive you. Steve. I forgive you.”

Steve moans out of relief, relaxes his shoulders, and lets happiness wash over him, make him new.

“I…”

“Yes. Please.”

He draws Tony close to himself with a hand on his back. He feels a slight twinge in Tony’s legs and he seizes the moment before he can think himself out of it: he slides his hand down, over Tony’s butt, and he hoists him up until his thighs are wrapped around Steve’s hips, his ankles crossed against the small of Steve’s back, like yesterday in the river. Tony holds himself up by putting his free arm
around Steve’s neck, and then Steve does the only thing he could possibly do right now.

He presses Tony’s back up the trunk of the cherry tree, braces himself against it with his hand, brushes his nose with Tony’s for a moment.

And kisses him.

***

While the storm rages in the sky above the guest house, Tony sleeps, and Tony dreams.

He’s in the cave. He’s at the bottom of the staircase. He can see an opening at the top of it, sunlight outside.

The reactor works again. FRIDAY is back online.

“Tony!”

Steve. Steve is here.

He turns, and Steve appears from one of the tunnels. He’s dirty and his uniform is torn in places, but he’s not injured.

“Steve! I kept looking for you, but I couldn’t find you!”

“Me too, sweetheart. I’ve missed you.”

Steve takes his hand, and Tony can feel it even through the armor, somehow.

“Come on,” he says, “let’s get out of here.”

They start climbing the stairs, towards the light.

When Tony opens his eyes it’s not raining anymore. Sunshine is streaming into the room, and it’s warm again, but not too much—it’s still early enough in the morning, and there’s a lot of humidity left in the air.

“Mmh,” he moans, and closes his eyes again. He hears Steve laugh to himself.

“Good morning,” he says, sweet.

“Morning,” he mumbles. “How long did I sleep?”

“Four hours and…” Steve checks the time on his phone, “forty-eight minutes. Congrats.”

He opens his eyes to look at Steve. “Thanks.”

“When do we have to leave?”

“When we want. It’s my plane, it leaves when I want it to leave. What would be the point in having a plane if it doesn’t wait for you to get there?”

“Okay, Tony.”

“Wouldn’t it kind of defeat the whole purpose of having a plane if it departed before you arrived? That’d be useless.”
“Alright, alright. But we have to go all the way back to Milan.”

“No, I made arrangements. We depart from Pisa. It’s only a couple of hours away.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

“We’ll leave later, in the afternoon.”

“Okay. You want some breakfast?”

“Nope. I wanna do something else.”

“Wha—” Steve’s eyes go wide while Tony slides a hand up his stomach. “Oh. Oh.”

“Yeah, but I mean, if you want to have breakf—”

“Nope. No breakfast,” Steve says, staring at him while he straddles his hips on the bed.

“Fuck,” Tony says, grinding down on Steve and feeling him half-hard already. He braces himself on Steve’s stomach to rub against him more, but he’s just lying there, hands to his sides, and very, very still.

“Steve?” Tony tries. “Uh. If you don’t wanna do this or are not in the mood, or, I don’t know—”

“I do. I do, sorry. I just...”

“What’s wrong, just tell me—”

“Can we… can we start slow? I, I feel like my heart is going to explode.”

“That’s usually my issue.”

“I can’t—”

He sits up on the bed, and Tony rearranges his limbs to straddle Steve’s thighs. He hasn’t pushed him away yet, but he feels like he’s going to any minute now.

Steve clenches and unclenches his hands multiple times. Fist, no fist, fist, no fist, fist, no fist. He presses his nails in the center of his palms, hard, leaving red marks.

Tony takes Steve’s hands in his own.

“What’s the matter?”

“Can I, can I, can I touch you?”

“Course you can.”

“Really, right? I mean. This is real. You want this.”

“I do. Steve, why the doubt now?”

Steve whispers. “I don’t know, this is just... overwhelming, and I, I don’t, it’s so... it’s so strange to think that I can touch you like this, and, and kiss you, and…”

“Oh. Okay, it’s fine. Right? Let me just...”
Tony starts caressing his face, then places little kisses all over it. He travels down Steve’s neck, kisses behind his ear, licks at the hollow of his throat. He makes Steve touch him, too, guiding his big hands to take off his t-shirt, and he slowly gains confidence, stroking Tony’s back and his stomach, kissing the scarred skin around the reactor, rubbing the pads of his fingers over Tony’s nipple.

He kisses Steve’s mouth, then. It tastes like roses and blue, just like he knew it would. Just like all of Steve.

Steve kisses back, still a bit unsure of himself, still careful, maybe fearing that Tony is going to shatter into a billion pieces between his arms if he presses too hard against his lips or licks too deep inside his mouth.

Tony is patient. Steve has earned it.

He takes Steve’s henley off and kisses all over his chest, biting his nipples and making him gasp. Steve throws his head back to give Tony better access, holds himself up with his arms propped up on the mattress behind his back.

Tony makes his way down Steve’s body, shifts between his legs and takes off his pants. His white Calvin Klein boxers don’t leave anything to the imagination: Steve is hard and huge, heavy and red in his underwear. Tony touches it through the cotton after getting silent permission from Steve, and it’s hot and wonderful just like he remembered.

He drags the boxers down Steve’s legs and tosses them on the chair, then gets naked himself, but before he can get back to the bed Steve is standing close to him, kissing him again, taking both his and Tony’s cock in his big hand and stroking them together, slowly, so the lack of lubrication doesn’t hurt either of them.

But the comparison is merciless.

Tony has to stand on his tiptoes, while Steve is keeping his knees slightly bent, and still their body parts don’t align. As if that wasn’t enough, Tony’s dick so close to Steve’s looks positively small, and for a moment he wonders if he’s not actually part of an entirely different species because honestly, honestly, that’s just not fair. The fact that Steve probably is the one out of scale does register, but it’s easy to discard after decades of perfecting the fine art of self-loathing.

“Steve—”

Steve drops to his knees, looks up at Tony with something that can only be described as adoration, and asks, “Can I suck you off? I need the practice, right?” and there’s no way in hell Tony could ever say no to a question like that. So he nods, instead, and Steve swallows him slowly, making sure that every inch of the way is appropriately wet.

“Fuck, fuck!” Tony shouts when Steve has swallowed him to the hilt, biting his hand so he doesn’t come the second Steve starts bobbing his head just so, and Tony’s vision goes blurry at the edges.

But then Steve stops.

He gets back to his feet slowly, sits on the bed silently. He frowns, touches his own lips with the pads of his fingers, and he looks as though he’s trying to understand something very, very difficult.

“Uh… Steve?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, okay?”
“Okay?”

“Maybe it’s just my muscle memory, you know.”

Tony sighs and sits next to Steve. Here it comes.

“It’s just… I’m gonna say it the way it is because there’s no other... I think your dick was bigger the last time I sucked it,” he says, very fast. “Which is just weird, right? It’s, it’s impossible, it makes no sense. Right?”

“Uh…”

“And it’s not just that, you know. Like, what’s the deal with your shoes? Why are they size 7? And your hands? And I feel like you weren’t this short before, even accounting for the lifts. You can’t reach the top shelf in the kitchen, even though it’s custom made, and I feel kinda stupid that I’m putting all these pieces together only now, and… What…”

“Nothing made you suspicious enough all this time, but my dick is what gives me away. Unbelievable.”

“I…”

“There was sort of… a lab accident—”

“A lab accident?”

“Let me… yes, a lab accident, when I was experimenting to fit the armor into these tiny strips of metal there was…. an accident.”

“Please, explain.”

“I was testing different miniaturizing technologies. To perfect my own. And I was using a laser.”

“A laser.”

“Yes.”

“You shrank yourself with the laser? Like that movie Clint made us watch?”

“No,” he says, pinching the bridge of his nose, “I did not shrink myself with the laser like that movie Clint made us watch. Obviously.”

“Then—”

“The objects I shrank during my experiments kept giving off a radiation I hadn’t accounted for. FRIDAY didn’t warn me immediately because it didn’t register as life-threatening for the first couple of days. But then my clothes weren’t fitting anymore so…”

“How much?”

“Telling you my exact volume before and after would be pointless I suppose, but I lost three inches in height and the rest of my body adjusted consequently.”

“Jesus.”

“I got rid of the whole thing as soon as I realized what was happening, safely, of course, but the
damage was done. I think I can reverse the process but I didn’t exactly have time for it and I was working on my armor and it wasn’t really… a priority.”

“It wasn’t a priority.’ Are you fucking kidding me, ‘it wasn’t a priority’?”

“Well, it wasn’t! I’m alive, I’m fine!”

Steve doesn’t look convinced. “I just don’t want you to take this kind of stuff lightly, because—”

“Because we don’t want another murderous artificial intelligence deciding it wants to wipe away humanity, yes—”

“Because. I want you to be safe.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“I wasn’t kidding when I said I love you, you know.”

“No. Yeah. I know.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

“By the way. For future reference? You tell me this kind of shit.”

Tony laughs. “Alright.”

“Alright.”

“My erection’s gone.”

“We can fix that.”

Steve kneels on the floor and surges forward to put Tony’s cock back in his mouth, and in no time Tony is again on the brink of his orgasm.

Steve learns fast. Steve has probably googled this while Tony was sleeping.

He doesn’t need to breathe, and that really is good. It means that the back of his throat stays open no matter how deep Tony fucks into his mouth. He doesn’t choke on Tony’s dick, at all. It’s like not having a gag reflex.

He keeps his teeth covered with his lips, and keeps his mouth tight around Tony, open just enough. He doesn’t care about saliva dripping down his chin; he keeps Tony as wet as possible, the slide smooth and easy, and he uses his tongue to caress the underside of Tony’s cock and support the movement.

It’s so fucking good. It’s the best blowjob of Tony’s life.

Steve’s beard tickles him in all the right ways, scrapes over his thighs and brushes his balls. It’s lovely. Just lovely.
He fucks up into Steve’s mouth, bracing himself on the bed with his uninjured arm, and tugs at Steve’s hair with the other. He moans, eyes rolling to the back of his head, and Tony feels the vibration of Steve’s throat with the tip of his dick.

“Steve, I’m—”

Steve squeezes the muscle on the side of Tony’s thigh, burrows his nose into Tony’s pubic hair, and Tony comes.

It’s beautiful.

Tony closes his eyes, and everything inside him is illuminated by a white-blue light that explodes into hundreds of brilliant sparks. He feels them like feathers on his skin.

In that moment, in that single moment of perfection, all his sins are atoned, and he’s free of guilt and burden.

He screams his release and spills it into Steve’s mouth, who swallows it all, turning a bit of Tony into himself. He licks him clean, until Tony shudders, oversensitive, and pushes Steve’s face away from his lap.

He slides to the floor and lets himself be kissed, the taste of his pleasure (it’s white, it tastes white) on Steve’s tongue. He sucks on it and can’t get enough of it; he’s sure he could die for the sheer lack of Steve’s lips on his, but Steve kisses him back, hugs him tight, picks him up to lay him back down on the bed.

He waits, Steve, waits for him to recover, open his eyes, focus on something.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he says.

“Hey,” he replies.

“Do we have anything for, uh…”

“The side pocket of my duffle.”

When Steve has retrieved the bottle, he looks at it curiously and asks, “Why’d you even bring this?”

“I’m a futurist,” Tony jokes, not for the first time, but Steve laughs anyway.

He loves it, when Steve laughs.

***

Steve slides his slick finger into Tony and the heat of him overwhelms him. It’s all there, the warmth he has missed all these months. It’s inside Tony.

He’s careful while he opens him up. Steve’s finger struggles to push past the initial resistance of Tony’s muscles, and he feels so tight around Steve’s first knuckle. So impossibly tight.

Now that he knows that Tony is in fact smaller than the last time they’ve done this, it’s easy to notice how. Just one of Steve’s fingers seems so big. He doesn’t know how he’ll manage to fuck him.

Make love to him.

But Steve isn’t one to give up easily on seemingly impossible feats. They have time, after all; no
He needs to rush things.

He spreads Tony’s legs more, and his finger sinks further into him with the motion. Tony’s got his eyes half-closed and his lips parted, and he looks like everything Steve has ever wanted.

He circles his forefinger inside Tony, feels around his inside walls. The skin there is so delicate, so tender.

When he nudges Tony’s hole with his middle finger, Tony arches his back and moans, but there are no signs of discomfort on his face, so Steve keeps pressing in, fighting for every inch, and after a while his fingers are pressed together inside Tony, so Steve moves them. In and out at first, just a fraction, just to see how Tony handles it. Then he scissors them, more and more, to get Tony used to the sensation.

He covers Tony’s abdomen with his free hand.

“I need you to relax, Tony.”

“Sorry,” Tony slurs, and lets go of the tension; Steve can feel it with his fingers. He resumes moving them inside Tony, and reaches up to kiss him, distracting him a bit, splitting his focus on something else, but Tony is great at multitasking, and he kisses Steve like his life depends on it—just how Steve likes it.

Soon, Steve tries for a third finger. It doesn’t work at the beginning, so he adds lube. It eases the way in, but it’s a long time before Steve can start fucking in and out of him again.

It’s so warm. He’s so warm.

“Steve—”

“Yes?”

“Want you inside me.”

“I am,” Steve jokes, and Tony smiles, lazy, and a bit out of it. Sweat beads his hairline and he doesn’t seem all that capable of keeping his eyes open.

“How does it feel?” Steve asks.

“Good. Thick. Want more.”

“You sure?”

Tony nods. “Hurry up.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

He doesn’t hurry up. He can’t risk hurting Tony, who is possibly not really thinking with his brain right now. But he doesn’t stop, either, and soon Tony is as open as he’s gonna get.

They’ll need to get used to this, Steve thinks, almost distractedly. The long preparation, the careful attention. Steve can’t be rough, not anymore. Unless Tony finds a way to go back to his original size. But now that Steve stops to consider the possibility, he’s not that sure he wants Tony to do it.

He likes it, Tony like this. He liked him before too, no question about it, but this change is… interesting. Even though Steve will have to restrain himself around him. He’ll do it. He promised.
Steve pulls his fingers out, dragging a whine out of Tony. Steve wipes his hand on his t-shirt, then uncaps the bottle of lube to slick himself up.

His hands are shaking while he holds the base of his cock and pushes into Tony.

He groans, but it’s nothing compared to the sound that comes out of Tony when the head of Steve’s dick makes its way past the first ring of muscle. It’s a whimper, coming from the deepest recess of his body, and it screams at Steve not to stop, so he keeps going.

But, god, Tony’s so tight.

When he bottoms out, Tony is rigid under him. Stretching out on top of him, he brings his mouth to Tony’s ear and whispers, “Breathe. Breathe.”

Tony breathes, doesn’t speak, doesn’t make a sound—but his eyes, now, are wide open, huge and shiny.

“I need to know how you’re feeling,” Steve says, nuzzling Tony’s neck. He smells so good there.

Tony opens and closes his mouth a few times, but nothing comes out. Steve gives him time to adjust. It’s beautiful, watching his face while he conquers this.

“I…” he says, but can’t continue for a moment. “I feel like… myself,” he finishes. Steve is about to ask for clarification, but Tony speaks again. “I’m me. Whole,” he says, and Steve understands.

He kisses Tony again, long and deep.

Tony clenches around him, and Steve trembles and laughs. “Alright,” he says, and starts moving, slow at first, then picking up the pace a bit. He keeps a close control on every thrust, though, because he promised he won’t hurt Tony ever again, and he won’t. He won’t.

Tony stares at him the whole time, through every moan and groan and hiss and shudder. He lifts a hand to caress Steve’s cheek.

“You’re not being yourself, though,” he says, struggling to talk.

“I can’t.”

“I want you to be yourself.”

“Tony—”

“Steve.”

Steve doesn’t stop, he can’t stop. He’d die if he stops, but it’s not enough, it’s like having only half of Tony. It’s like being only half of himself.


“I can’t. I—” Steve feels like crying again and he doesn’t want to cry, he’s not supposed to cry anymore, Tony has forgiven him, he loves him, everything is—

Tony holds a hand in the middle of Steve’s chest, and Steve stops thrusting into him. He shifts, until Steve’s dick slides out of him. No, Steve thinks. Please. I love you.

“I love you too,” Tony says. “Here—”
He makes Steve sit on the bed, back propped up against the headboard, and he adjusts a pillow in between. He takes Steve’s face between his hands, straddles his thighs again.

“Comfortable?”

“Yeah—”

Tony looks around the bed for the lube, and squeezes some on Steve’s cock. Then he sinks down on it, just like that night; he rolls his hips and Steve feels like he’s being pinned down, crucified, Tony is so tight around him that it almost hurts, and it’s so, so good.

Tony moves on top of him, fast and the exact opposite of careful. He takes it too deep, squeezes his eyes shut, but his mouth is slack with pleasure and his breath hot on Steve’s face.

He kisses Steve, and without slowing down at all he says, “I want you to forgive yourself.”

“Tony—”

“I love you. I forgive you. I want to be with you.”

“I’m—”

“Forget yourself, Steve.”

“I—”

“You need to do it. Let this go.”

“I can’t, I don’t want to, I can’t… I’m not supposed to—”

Steve sobs, stops holding back his tears.

“That’s it,” Tony says, kissing them away from his face, “that’s it. Let it go.”

“I love you—”

“I love you too. That’s why—fuck, ahh, fuck—that’s why you need to do it. Because you love me and because I love you.”

“I—”

“You can do it. You can do anything. Come on.”

“Tony—”

“Yeah, yeah. Let it go.”

“Tony—”

“Forget yourself, Steve. It’s over. It’s really over.”

That does it.

Steve feels as though a door is being opened inside him. On the other side of it, there’s the part of himself he was trying to hide, thinking that was what was needed of him.

It’s not.
Tony wants him whole. Tony loves him whole.

“Say it. Say it.”

“I do, I... I do. I forgive myself. I love you, I love you, I love you.”

“I love you too. Now fuck me like you mean it.”

Steve lets out a sound between a sob and a laugh.

He kisses Tony, circles his waist with one arm and adjusts his position on the bed so he can thrust up into him. Once, twice, countless times, fast and hard and harder and harder still, until Tony goes limp in his lap and rests his forehead on Steve’s shoulder.

He notices his thrusts becoming erratic, the rhythm faltering, his thighs shake. He feels something rip behind his navel, something flare up in the small of his back and he comes, deep inside Tony, biting the bruise on his shoulder, digging into his back with his nails, smiling when he hears Tony mutter, “Holy shit, yeah,” to himself.

They stay close and still for a long time, until Steve’s cock softens and slips out of Tony allowing Steve’s come to trickle out.

Tony straightens himself up, and checks the red mark in the shape of Steve’s teeth on his shoulder. It’s not very visible against the dark red of the bruise, but he touches it with a finger and smiles.

He looks at Steve then, asks, “How do you feel now?”

And there’s only one thing Steve can say, so he says it.

“Whole.”

***

Steve takes a quick shower, then cleans Tony up with a wet towel. Tony doesn’t feel like getting up right now: he’s lying comfortably in bed, stomach down—he’s side slightly lifted so he doesn’t crush the reactor with his weight—a hand under the pillow, completely naked. He feels sore, tender, still open, but he’ll be fine soon. And it was worth it, anyway. God, it was so worth it.

Steve brings him coffee from the kitchen, and he drinks it quickly.

Steve kneels on the bed next to him, and strokes his back, the scratches he put there—they sting a bit, in the best way. He bends down to lick them, and Tony doesn’t know which is better, the sweep of Steve’s tongue or the scrape of his beard on his skin.

Afterwards, Steve sits up against the headboard, taking out his sketchbook. Tony looks up at him, just for the pleasure of observing him do things. The way he holds his pencil, the way his eyes seem unfocused while he visualizes his drawing in his mind, the way he sets his jaw while he concentrates, the way the muscles of his arm and his chest ripple while he moves—his skin is fair and perfect, he looks like a Greek god, naked except for his white Calvin Klein boxers which for sure weren’t a thing back in ancient Greece but...

Wait.

He’s naked.

Except for the Calvin Klein boxers.
Tony pushes himself up and stares at him.

“What?”

“Steve.”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“You’re naked.”

“Well, no.”

“Whatever. Almost.”

“Yep.”

“Is it—”

“Gone. Yeah.”

“Wow.”

“Mh-mh.”

“Symbolism really does it for you, huh?”

“Symbolism?”

“Don’t play dumb. All this thing with the stars and the sun and you were cold before and now you are not and you drew the reactor as a sun and the song—”

“Okay, okay. I admit it. I like it,” he says, shrugging, “so what?”

“Nothing. It’s cute, actually.”

“Is it.”

“Really fits with your artistic personality.”

Steve covers Tony’s face with his hand and ruffles his hair. “Shut up,” he says, laughing. Tony kisses Steve’s thigh and falls asleep.

He wakes up a couple of hours later to a text from Rhodey.

Heard the good news.

what the fuck.

Steve told Sam. Sam told Bucky. Bucky told me.

i hate all of you.

Suuuuure.

whatever.

How are you? For real.
sore.

Oh, come on!

I don’t know. I think I’m happy? I’m happy.

That’s good, Tones.

Also tired. Emotional healing is exhausting.

Tell me about it.

You heard from Sam again?

Yeah.

And?

I think it’s going to be okay.

Yes!

We still haven’t seen each other so we’ll see how that goes when I’m done here, but, you know.

Yes!!

You know.

What.

I kind of miss you.

Aww, don’t get soft on me now.

I’ve always been soft on you.

Shut up.

No.

It’s just a couple of weeks. Just to be sure Bucky’s used to the arm.

Can’t wait.

Me neither.

“Hey. Everything alright? What are you doing?”

“Flirting with Rhodey.”

“Mh-mh,” Steve hums while he nips his way up from Tony’s collarbone to the back of his ear, dragging a gasp out of him. He nudges Tony to lie on his side, brushes his fingers over his stomach, just below the scars covering Tony’s chest, then travels down, below Tony’s navel, rubbing his hand into Tony’s pubic hair.

“That’s—” Tony says, but doesn’t finish, can’t, really, because Steve moves his hand again, aligning his fingers with the bruise already on Tony’s hip, and he presses down on it, hard. “Fuck—” Tony
shouts around a moan, breath short and ragged, lost in this heady mixture of pleasure and pain—the one soothing the sting of the other, the other making the one all the sweeter.

Steve lets his hand slide over Tony’s hip, and he presses his middle finger down the cleft of his ass. Tony feels Steve rubbing against his hole, which has leaked some of Steve’s come while Tony was asleep. Steve’s first knuckle slips in almost on his own.

“Shit,” Tony groans, while Steve fucks him with his finger. He feels his cock twinge with interest, but he doubts he’ll be able to get it up again so soon.

Tony’s eyes are closed, so he doesn’t notice what Steve is doing with his other hand until he starts tracing Tony’s bottom lip with a finger, making him open his mouth. Steve kisses him, slow and languid but demanding, shoving his tongue into Tony’s mouth, reaching so deep that Tony feels trapped by it for a moment, feels… held.

The kiss ends, and Steve uses two of his fingers to force his way into Tony’s mouth—even though Tony isn’t really putting up any serious resistance, Steve isn’t at all kind about it. Tony closes his lips around Steve’s fingers, tight, as if they were his dick, lets saliva pool on his tongue and coats them with it.

Suddenly, Steve’s fingers disappear from Tony’s mouth, even though the one in his ass is still there. He feels Steve shift on the bed, so Tony opens his eyes, curious.

The image he sees then, Tony hopes it’ll be the last thing crossing his mind before he dies.

Steve is naked, underwear discarded god knows where faster than light; he’s kneeling on his heels, knees spread apart, thighs even thicker than normal because of the position. His cock is hard and red, arched in a perfect curve, and it makes Tony’s mouth water for a taste. The muscles of his abs and chest are taut and sinuous, his shoulders sculpted, his throat exposed. He draws a circle with his neck, relaxes his head down, and a tuft of hair shift over his forehead with the movement, catching the sunlight invading the room.

His eyes are closed, his mouth open, gasping.

His hand, the hand that was inside Tony’s mouth just a minute ago, makes its way between Steve’s thighs, past his balls, and Tony watches him slide a finger into himself, just the tip.

It’s mesmerizing.

“You should use lube,” Tony has the presence of mind of saying.

“I want to use you,” Steve says, barely able to push the words out.

“You’ve got me,” Tony says, and he knows he’s going to get more than he bargained for.

“Fuck me, Tony,” Steve says, and Tony is speechless for a long time. “You wanna try? I do,” reinforcing every word with a thrust of his fingers—the one in himself, the one inside Tony.

Tony blinks, swallows, taking advantage of the fact that Steve isn’t looking at him to let his excitement play freely on his face.

“Sit on my face first,” he hears himself say, and fuck yes he wants that.

“What—” Steve says, finally looking at him.
“Sit on my face, Steve. Right the fuck now.”

“Alright,” Steve says, and moves. He removes his finger from Tony’s ass, lets Tony twist to lie on his back, and places his knees to the sides of Tony’s head.

Tony takes a moment to simply look.

The skin, there, is like Steve’s skin is all over the rest of his body: smooth and fair, it doesn’t darken at all along the rim, and the hair is fine and blonde, the opposite of Tony’s, dark and coarse.

There’s a perverse satisfaction in spitting on it, right at the center. It’s supposed to feel like ruining something perfect, but it actually looks all the better like this—stained, marred, blemished. Marked. Tony’s.

He looks at the translucent shine of his own saliva and imagines it being his come dribbling out of Steve, and he can’t wait to be inside him. He can’t fucking wait.

He buries his face between Steve’s cheeks, mouths at his hole, nibbles at it lightly, before he gets onto making Steve’s entrance loose, tongue making its way past the initial resistance with decision and purpose.

It takes more than Tony was expecting, but he forgets all about it when he fucks Steve with his tongue and listens to him scream his name, tugging on Tony’s hair and shuddering as he comes.

“That was messy,” Tony says, admiring the stripes of come on Steve’s chest. Some of it even hit his beard, and he must feel it because he cleans it away with the back of his hand. “I like it.”

Steve flops back on the bed, boneless, tired, his mouth splitting in a huge grin.

“You still want to—”

“Yes! Yes, please.”

Steve looks like he’s about to stretch out on his back, but Tony stops him.

“It’s the first time you do it like this, right? With someone else.”

“Yeah.”

“Then it’s better if you—”

Tony pushes him to lie on his side, almost on his stomach, a bent knee to prop him up from the bed. Steve follows Tony’s instructions to the letter, limbs pliant, trust in his eyes, and Tony wonders if this is just a taste of what would happen in the field if they led the team together. If Steve would entrust himself and the Avengers and the protection of the entire planet to Tony, if circumstances made it clear Tony really was the best man for the task.

He doesn’t want to think about it now, though, so he coats his fingers with lube and begins rubbing it between Steve’s cheeks, pushing just the tip of his thumb inside to test things out.

It’s tight.

Tony has done this same thing many times to many people in his life, and no one’s ever been this tight, not even at first, not even the first time.

“Keep breathing.”
“Sorry.”

It gets better, which prompts Tony to move his thumb, slowly, in and out of Steve. He tries switching his thumb with his forefinger, which isn’t as thick, and Steve muscles close around it like a vise.

It’s a bit weird, Tony has to admit. It feels different, but maybe he was the silly one, expecting Steve body to work as everyone else’s.

“How’re you doing?”

“Fine, I… Fuck.”

“Something more specific?”

“‘S good. Feels... Can you touch—”

“Yeah.”

Tony flicks his wrist just so, crooks his finger up, and barks out a laugh when Steve jerks around him and lets out a string of impressively creative curses.

“Oh, Captain America said bad words.”

Steve doesn’t reply. He’s struggling to keep the rhythm of his breath even.

It takes a while, and Tony’s erection comes and goes a couple of times. But in the end, Tony wins this strange battle against Steve’s muscles: he finds himself on top of Steve, carefully pushing into him while Steve lies on his back, stares at the ceiling, and possibly puts dents in the headboard with the way he’s clutching at it.

“Relax,” Tony reminds him again.

“To—Tony,” Steve says, stuttering over the word, keeping his knees close to his chest.

“I’m here,” Tony reassures him, offering him one hand to hold, but Steve waves it away.

“I could break it,” he says.

Tony stretches out on top of him, bottoms out, and kisses him.

It feels like a prison, Steve’s body—he’s so tight. But the slide, once Tony starts moving, it’s so sweet. Steve is warm and soft, he feels like sunshine on Tony’s skin.

He fucks into him, over and over, rolling his hips instead of just pushing, face hidden in the crook of Steve’s neck, a hand caressing his scalp.

After a few minutes, Tony feels like something’s not right.

He lifts himself up to look at Steve.

His eyes are shut. He’s clenching his jaw so hard he’s stopped breathing, and he’s starting to get red in the face with it. His mouth is closed as if to keep something in. His arms are now relaxed, thrown to the back of his head, hands in loose fists.

Well. They tried, right?
Sure, Steve could’ve said something right away and not just lie there straining to keep himself from laughing in Tony’s face, but, well, this is ridiculous, after all. It’s not Steve’s fault.

Tony pulls out slowly.

He sits on the edge of the bed, looks out of the window for a moment. He reaches down to pick up a t-shirt from the floor, cleans himself up with it. He looks at himself, and he indulges in a minute of defeated commiseration—he even thinks, Sorry, buddy, at his dick, which is a nice new low—before he’s engulfed in anger and shame, both directed at his own stupid self.

It kicks his brain into motion, and he’s already starting to devise ways to go back to how he was, which wasn’t much bigger than this but it was still better, right, when he feels Steve tentatively touching his shoulder.

“Something wrong?” he asks, voice small.

“You tell me,” he replies, and the words come out harsher than he wanted.

Steve hesitates for a long time. He sits next to Tony, takes his hand in his own, plays with his fingers.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “I should’ve told you. God, I’m so stupid.”

Which. What?

“You didn’t hurt me, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Steve continues, and Tony’s confusion gets deeper and deeper with every word.

“Oh, I’m sure I haven’t,” Tony says, and he can’t help how bitter he sounds. “Could’ve been in another room for all it was doing for you.”

“Uh… What?”

Tony forces himself to ignore how hurt he feels by this. “I would’ve appreciated it if you’d told me. That’s all I’m saying.”

There’s a long silence. “Yeah. That’s my point. I’m sorry.”

“And honestly I feel like laughing was a bit over the top—”

“Laughing? Who was laughing?”

“You!”

“What? When?”

“Just… Just now!”

“I wasn’t laughing.”

“Fine, almost laughing—”

“Nope. But I might start now.”

“Fuck you, Steve.”

“Yeah, I wish you would.”
That leaves Tony speechless for a minute. “Okay. What just happened?”

“What do you think just happened?”

“I… have no idea. I thought you weren’t enjoying it, that I’m, you know… not enough for you. Which I get, I promise I’ll figure this out as soon as we get home, I—”

“Tony, slow down. That’s not what happened. If anything, you’re too much.”

“Too much?”

“I should’ve told you.”

What the hell is he talking about?

“It’s the serum. I think. I haven’t asked anyone because it’s not exactly… something I like to discuss.”

“You don’t have to,” Tony says, even though he still can’t follow what Steve is saying.

“No, Tony, I meant… I meant with some SHIELD doctor, not you.”

“Right.”

“So, uh… this is embarrassing, but…” he takes a deep breath. “My muscles, there, aren’t very, uh, flexible?”

Tony frowns. “What?”

“Since the serum, stretching myself out is harder. It takes so long... I’m sure you noticed.”

Tony did notice, didn’t he? But…

“Before, I could do it just fine. Sure, my hand got tired in two minutes, but I could do it.”

“And now you can’t anymore?”

“I can. It’s not that I can’t. It’s just not as easy. Or as fast. I kinda stay very tight. I felt so full while you were inside me, I couldn’t even…”

Tony laughs, because he doesn’t know how else to react to this.

“It’s weird, I know. We don’t have to do it, but I thought with you being, you know…”

“Are you saying that my dick is small?” Tony jokes.

Steve smiles, tipping his body to the side and resting his forehead on Tony’s shoulder, playful.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Okay,” Tony says stroking the nape of his neck, “we’re gonna figure something out. You sure I wasn’t hurting you?”

“No. I mean there was an edge to it, but mostly I was... overwhelmed.”

“See, thing is, no offense, but your judgement on stuff like this isn’t all that reliable, Mister ‘I throw myself off buildings once a week.’”
“I promise. Let’s just try.”

“Why do you want this so much, anyway?”

“I don’t know, I just... Please. I want you inside me. Need you inside me.”

Tony can’t say no to that. “Okay, but if it doesn’t work, we stop. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“And for future reference—”

“—I tell you this kind of shit. Yes.”

Steve kisses him, sweet and sensual, pushes him down on the bed and strokes Tony back to a full erection. Tony’s about to slick himself up, roll over on top of Steve again, but then he thinks of something.

“What about changing position?” he asks, voice hoarse and low.

“God, if you don’t fuck me—”

“Steve, I’m serious,” he says, sitting up again.

“Is there a position that’d make it easier?”

“Guess you could get on all fours. Or you could get on top of me. You’d have more control that way, if you’re the one moving.”

“And I could seriously hurt you if I lose it for a second. No, all fours it is.”

“You just had my head between your thighs.”

“But I was keeping still. All fours is safer.”

“Are you still... Steve, you don’t need to hold back—”

“Tony, listen. There’s a line between liking it rough and being self-destructive. I know you can handle rough. I’m not holding myself back, not like before, I swear. But I’m not too keen on breaking your hips. Alright?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I didn’t think... Alright.” Tony grimaces, and looks down.

“Tony—” Steve says, coming close to him, cheek to cheek. When he starts speaking again, he’s whispering in Tony’s ear. “I love you. I trust you. I know you know your limits. If you get off on a little pain, that’s fine, and I’m willing to give it to you. I like it too, no point in trying to deny it now. But I know myself. I’m not walking on eggshells around you because I fear you’d up and leave if I give you another bruise during sex. I’m only trying not to put you in serious physical danger. Okay?”

“Okay. Okay. It’s just that, you know, I don’t want to be treated like—”

“I know that. I’m not doing it. I swear.”

Tony brushes his cheek to Steve’s. “Okay. Back to business, soldier,” he says, and there’s a grin on Steve’s face when he adjusts on his hands and knees. Tony’s heart skips a beat at the sight of him, offering himself like a gift.
Without wasting any more time, Tony rubs lube all over his dick and then makes sure Steve is still properly stretched. He pushes his forefinger into Steve, and—god—he’s already so tight again. He works the muscles loose with patience, tugs at his own cock with his free hand once in a while. He scissors two fingers into Steve, adds more lube.

“Okay, I’m ready. Please fuck me.”

And that. That does it.

Tony slides into Steve again, fighting against the serum every inch of the way. He fucks into Steve, slow and quiet, and it does feel less tight.

“Wanna hear you. How is it?”

Steve doesn’t reply, only breathes, harsh and shallow, and Tony moves his hand from Steve’s ass to his lower back, caresses his spine, lowers his head to press kisses there.

“Tony,” Steve breathes out, “oh my god, Tony.”

“Yeah. I’m here, what is it?”

“Move. Please, move.”

Tony does as he’s asked. “Relax,” he says, and finds a rhythm to his thrusts, but still keeps them careful and precise. He places his hand on Steve’s hip, and he feels the tension seep out of him.

“Steve, hey.”

“Mmh?”

“Why don’t you, uh… bend—”

He doesn’t even get to finish. Steve lowers the upper part of his body on the bed, arms to his sides, a cheek pressed against the mattress, ass in the air. Tony feels himself slip even further into him with the new position.

“God—” Steve says, and it’s a whine, a growl, a whimper, all wrenched out of him by Tony pushing into him again, in and out, in and out, in and out.

It’s so hot, inside Steve. He’s so beautiful like this.

“I’d like to hear an opinion,” Tony says after a while, keeping his tone light to encourage a response.

Steve groans, and it’s unmistakably out of pleasure. A smile breaks on Tony’s face.

“Pain?”

“None. Please don’t stop. Don’t stop, don’t stop.”

Tony doesn’t.

***

Later, during lunch, Tony asks him about the team again.

“You really think that’s a good idea?”
“I don’t know. What’s going to happen… We still know so little about it, we don’t even really know what we’re up against. But if we’re not even together, then we don’t stand a chance for sure.”

“I’m scared, though.”

“Me too.”

“What if we end up really not agreeing on anything? What if the whispering thing stops working?”

“I hope it doesn’t, but we could think of something else. If we don’t lie to each other and assume the worst—”

“I need you by my side, Steve. I can’t pretend that’s not true anymore. I need you in every possible way. Even as an Avenger.”

“And you think I don’t need you? I could barely function in Wakanda.”

“But if we disagree—”

“Tony, I think the point is disagreeing. We don’t need to see eye to eye on every issue, it’s actually best if we don’t. What we need to do is not fight about it. It’s using the disagreement to predict more outcomes, to figure out better solutions.”

“But we might not always have the time to discuss things in full. In that case I want you to trust me and my judgement.”

“If I don’t think you’re doing something reckless and self-sacrificing to protect everyone else while endangering yourself and brushing it off over the team comms with your performative braggadocio, yes.”

“Okay, first of all, I can’t believe you just actually used that word in a sentence.”

“We’re in Italy.”

“It’s not Italian.”

“I know.”

“Secondly, fair point, and okay, I’ll try.”

“It’s important.”

“Yes. I promise.”

“And no grand romantic gestures where you drop everything else to come save me.”

“That’s you, mister,” Tony says, rolling his eyes.

Tony is silent for a long time. He finishes his food, checks his phone, tidies up a few things around the kitchen. Steve has learned to leave him to think things on his own when he’s like this. He’ll say something if he needs to.

As if on cue, Tony turns, leans back against the counter, and crosses his arms. He looks to the floor.

“You know,” he says, “maybe your theory isn’t so far-fetched. Maybe there’s a reason we could never be just friends. Maybe there’s a reason you have to be on the other side of every argument.”
He smiles, amused. “My rudder,” he says, seemingly solemn but actually joking, “steering me when others can’t…”

“And you are for me,” Steve says, more serious, stepping in front of Tony, taking his shoulders between his hands. “You are for me.”

Tony kisses him. He caresses his face, his beard, and it gives Steve an idea.

“I wanna shave.”

“I knew you were gonna say that. You got a razor or something?”

“Got my straight razor.”

“Of course you have a straight razor.”

Steve shrugs. “It was my dad’s.”

He rummages into his duffle to retrieve his grooming kit, and goes into the bathroom with Tony. The case is bulging with the shape of the soap he bought months ago, the box left unopened because he stopped shaving altogether. He opens it, puts the soap in its metal cup.

Tony watches him take out the rest of the items. He’s sitting on the toilet lid, excited that he gets to watch this.

“You use an electric razor?”

“You really need to ask?”

“I suppose I don’t. I tried it once. Didn’t like it.”

“I figured.”

“It’s not as good, is all I’m saying.”

He hangs the strop on one of the robe hooks. He takes his time making sure the blade is sharp, because the razor hasn’t been used in a long time, and he wants to do a good job.

He washes his face with warm water, then wets the brush and rubs it on the soap, lathering it up properly. He covers his beard with it.

He rinses his hands, places a towel on his shoulder, grabs the razor. He waits a second for his muscle memory to kick in, to remember how it’s best for him to hold the blade. He likes how it feels in his hand. Its weight is the same as it has ever been.

He takes a moment to anticipate the scrape of the metal on his skin, and begins shaving, painstakingly meticulous.

He glances in Tony’s direction, and he’s surprised to see he isn’t as cheerful as a few minutes ago. He’s looking at him intently, staring, wonder in his eyes. Steve smiles to himself, and resumes his work. Knowing that Tony now looks at him like that makes him feel warm. Wanted.

It’s a bit of a mess, shaving a beard this long, but Steve is patient and thorough. When he’s done, he lathers up his face again, and passes the razor on his skin in the opposite direction.

He washes his face with cold water, puts on the aloe cream Sam gave him for Christmas. He doesn’t
need it, the serum takes care of any irritation in minutes, but it has a nice scent. It reminds him of Sam, who uses the same brand for himself.

Steve remembers when he was tiny and sickly, and shaving left his skin red and angry if he didn’t soothe it with Vaseline. Sometimes, Ma would do it for him. She’d remove the excess with a towel, pat his cheek and kiss his forehead, and tell him he looked like a proper gentleman. She had the ability to not make it sound like a lie.

“What are you thinking about?”

“I’m that obvious, uh?”

“Yes.”

“I was thinking about my mother.”

“Oh. You want to—”

“I don’t know. Can I shave you?” Steve asks, and the non sequitur makes Tony blink.

“Sure,” he says.

Steve cleans the razor carefully and rinses the shaving brush. He starts the whole process on Tony, from the top, making him wash his face with hot water first.

“You remember the shape of my—”

“I remember. Shut up,” he says, and kisses Tony’s nose right before he starts lathering up his face.

It’s easy to do. Tony’s beard isn’t as long as Steve’s was, and the edges of his goatee are still visible.

“Remember the letter your mom sent to Stella?” he asks after a few minutes of silence.

“Course I do,” Tony struggles to reply while the razor is on his skin.

“She said she had been unhappy. You were very upset about that.”

Tony simply looks at him.

“It made me think about my mother. That she wasn’t happy either, I think.” He pauses to work attentively under Tony’s jaw. “My dad died before I was born. She had to do it all alone. We were poor, I was sick all the time. Then she got sick and died, and that was it. That was her whole life.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I wish I could’ve given her more, back then. If she’d lived to see me get the serum, I would’ve sent her money, I don’t know… She hated wars.”

Tony nods, thoughtful, but doesn’t say anything else. Steve finishes shaving him quietly, then makes him rinse his face again, but Tony insists on using his own aftershave. Steve is more than happy to let him; he loves Tony’s aftershave.

He puts the strop back in the leather case of his grooming kit. He towels the razor dry and puts it back in too, but leaves the brush and the soap out to dry on the windowsill. It’s so hot that it won’t take much time.
He rolls the leather of the kit over on itself and wraps the strap around it but doesn’t clasp it, since he’ll have to open it again later. He looks at the embroidered letters there, traces the J and the R with his finger. The only thing he’s got left of his dad. A man who died two months before he was born. He’s glad Peggy and SHIELD kept this for so long. He’s glad they gave it back to him when he asked.

“It’s the only thing I’ve got left of him, you know.”

“What was he like? I mean, what’d your mom tell you?”

“She used to say she liked him at first because he was always clean. Said other boys weren’t. She said he was good. Excited about having a baby. Wanted a daughter.” He smiles a little at the thought. “But she never said much. Always cried when she talked about him, so I tried not to ask. He loved her very much, I think. She did, too.”

“I’m glad they had each other,” Tony says. “Even if it was for a short while,” he adds, and it sounds like an afterthought, but also as if Tony isn’t only speaking about Steve’s parents anymore.

“Me too,” Steve says.

He wets his hair then, parts it on the side. He combs it down with his fingers. It’s not as long as he thought it’d be.

He looks at himself in the mirror. He hasn’t seen this face in a while.

Hello, Steve.

***

Leaving the guest house is surprisingly difficult. He’s always felt attached to it, but now more than ever. It’s become home to him and Steve, in many ways. Maybe it even helped them heal together, offering them a place to return to every night.

They’ll be back, though. Or so Tony hopes. He doesn’t know for sure; he can’t actually predict the future.

When they step out of the plane, hours later, it’s still sunny in New York.

Steve is by his side, waiting for Tony to climb down the stairs. He hasn’t seen Sam waiting for them on the tarmac, leaning against Pepper’s car while he talks with her about who knows what.

Tony takes Steve’s hand in his own.

“You know what I really, really want right now?”

“What?”

“An American cheeseburger.”

Steve laughs.

***

Two years later

The gravel creaks under their car. The day is crisp, chilly, but the sky is blue and cloudless.
Stella’s orchard is grey and humid; the timid winter sun doesn’t reach past the branches, even though the foliage is sparse.

The door is closed so Steve rings the bell. She greets them, cheerful and sincere, and Tony hugs her tight, glad that after all he does get to see her again.

It’s been a tough couple of years, but they’ve made it to the other side. To the other side of the war, the other side of the destruction, the damage, the death, the two months Steve spent in the hospital that felt like twenty years to Tony.

But they’re here now. Whole, safe, happy. Rebuilding.

“We can’t stay long,” Steve is telling Stella, “We have a fundraiser for my charity next week in New York.”

The grand opening of the charity’s activities. The Sarah Rogers Foundation for Widows and Orphans. It will operate worldwide; Steve insisted he didn’t want it to be a US-only thing.

They don’t waste time in pleasantries. Tony suggests they get this done, so Stella can offer them all the tea and pie she wants.

They walk through the woods slowly; Stella is careful not to slip in a puddle. She’s doing good, Tony thinks, observing her. She looks healthy, but still lonely. She’ll have to put up with the two of them for a few days, though, and for sure their visit will do her good. Tony has lots of things to tell her about space.

They reach the little river, and it’s not frozen over. Tony thinks that maybe they could follow the stream for a few yards, reach a place where the riverbed is wider and the water deeper, but he thinks better of it. This was the exact place, so it has to be here.

The urn feels incredibly small in his hands, but also surprisingly heavy all of a sudden.

He lifts the lid, passes it to Steve. He holds it carefully.

Stella smiles at him, reassuring and kind, and nods her encouragement.

The wind picks up the ashes and spreads them along the stream, into the water, and all around the woods, the bushes, the thick undergrowth. He watches them disappear, seemingly into thin air, dissolve and melt into the endless cycle of nature.

The rushing of the water sounds like music for a moment.

“Be happy, Mom,” he whispers in the cold wind.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, as promised and as requested, [here](#) is a list of all the places Steve and Tony visit during their stay in Italy. If anything isn't clear or you need any kind of explanation, don't hesitate to ask (even on tumblr or twitter!). [This](#) is a list of all the foods they eat, complete with some recipes!
Second thing: you probably have noticed that the story is now part of a series. I have two codas to post, set in the same universe, but the focus of those stories won't be stevetony. You can read them or not, it's up to you! I'll post them before the 27th.

Third thing: THANK YOU to everyone that has read the story and commented on it, and to everyone that has listened to me complaining about writing it for six months. You're all the best. And THANK YOU to everyone that patiently waited for the story to be completed to read it! I hope you will enjoy it and I would love to hear your thoughts.

A final note: the title of the story is, of course, from Mia Martini's wonderful song, Almeno tu nell'universo. Maybe only the Italians between you know this, but Mia Martini had an incredibly tough life, and there was a lot of unhappiness in it. Maybe some of that reality leaked in the way I wrote Maria's story here. I hope Mia is happy too, now, wherever she is.

<3

End Notes

on Twitter

on Tumblr

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