Ad Astra per Aspera

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Ad Astra per Aspera

by MonstrousRegiment, Pangea

Summary

It’s safe to say most people get off on the wrong foot with Tony Stark, but it’s also safe to say Steve Rogers makes a conscious effort to get along with everyone, and people might think one tendency compensates the other one and equilibrium is achieved. A neutral ground.

That’s not what happens.

Or, the story of how Tony Stark and Steve Rogers met and fell in love. A space opera with a lot of cursing, a lot of drinking, and a little bit of singing.

Notes

I would like to state for the record that we started writing this waaay before Cap 2 came out and all feeling and passionate emotions which might link to it are otherwise coincidental.

This was supposed to be short, but that just doesn't happen to us.

I want to publicly thank Pangea for her unbelievable patience with my horrid fucking tense management, and for all the encouragement and faith.
Correct the Course

There hasn’t been a moment in time in which Steve Rogers did not know what he wanted, or what he had to do to get it, or, failing that, what was the right thing to do, regardless of his wishes. He strives to always do right by everyone, to always be fair, to never be selfish.

It makes this day all the more wretched, because he knows how this is going to end. In heartbreak. And there is only one thing he can do about it. Let it happen.

Tony’s eyes are flinty when he storms out of the room. There is no slamming doors in this brave new world with automated doorlocks, but the attitude suggests if it were at all possible, a door would be slammed.

Steve sits in the silence and thinks nothing dramatic. His world is not caving in. His vision doesn’t blur, because he’s not crying, will not cry. His life is not ending; the world will keep on turning, one day will turn into a night will turn into the next day, a season will follow the next, and the years will pass and Steve will live.

It’s the silence that upsets him the most. When Tony’s around, the world is never quiet. Tony’s always speaking, humming, muttering, tapping his fingers against something. He’s restless and loud and obnoxious and he came into Steve’s quiet life and filled the silences and now Steve is in silence and it’s not his good old friend, not his familiar companion, but an alien and cold thing he can’t remember how to enjoy.

If he gets up and turns on the vidscreen it will fill in the silence, he thinks. But he doesn’t get up to turn it on, because he knows it won’t help.

X

They get off on the wrong foot.

It’s safe to say most people get off on the wrong foot with Tony Stark, but it’s also safe to say Steve Rogers makes a conscious effort to get along with everyone, and people might think one tendency compensates the other one and equilibrium is achieved. A neutral ground.

That’s not what happens.

Within ten minutes of meeting each other in the small gymnasium at the Academy where Steve is teaching a beginner’s class in self defense for First Years, Tony Stark manages to rub Steve the wrong way to such an extent that the only thing that keeps him from being tossed around the mats like a rag doll is the fact that Steve has too noble a heart to abuse his obviously superior battle skills.

Steve loathes bullies, and he will not, he will not, become one. He’s not going to use his strength and body mass and skill to intimidate a smaller man, no matter how much he goddamn bloody fucking deserves it.

Stark displays so cavalier an attitude towards his own safety that having him on the mats with anyone
not well-trained is a serious hazard. He’s gotten hurt, often due to his own carelessness in his defense of his own person. Steve can tell he would not have taken this class if he had the chance to choose, and is all at once grateful and resentful that self-defense is mandatory Academy knowledge. Stark is a small guy, well formed and with a lithe frame well designed for single combat, but his discipline is nonexistent and his impulse control appears by all means to be something regrettable and awful that happens to other people.

Steve knows at once that he can’t allow Stark to practice any of the moves with anyone inexperienced. The second instructor would have been an option—Steve trusted him and his skills—but this is Steve’s class and Stark is Steve’s student. And he will graduate this class knowing how to protect himself if Steve has to take hours off his own schedule to devote to him exclusively.

For one, it is obvious Stark needs the attention. Whatever mess of a childhood he’s coming out of, and it had to be quite a mess if his current behavior is any indication, it is painfully clear no one has ever bothered to expend the effort to communicate to Stark the necessity of caring for himself. Carelessness is one thing; Steve knows how to deal with careless students. What Stark does with himself is downright masochist.

He doesn’t jump without looking; he puts on a blindfold and run straight towards walls at full goddamn speed.

“What,” says Stark when Steve informs him of the fact he will be adding extra tutoring classes for him exclusively. “What, no, are you fucking out of your mind? I hate your class.”

“Thank you for the confirmation,” says Steve calmly, unfazed. “But I’m still your professor and it’s still my duty to teach you this and you’re not learning it.”

Stark looks at him like he’s growing a second head out of his neck. “So fucking fail me like a normal person.”

“I don’t want to fail you, Stark.”

“Look, Rogers, I don’t know what birth malfunction leads a guy to volunteer to teach a bunch of hopeless scrawny kids self-defense, but if you’re worried about your grade average—”

“I’m not,” says Steve firmly. “I don’t care about the average, this isn’t about the class. This is about you, and my responsibilities towards you. This is also not up to discussion. You tested out of eight of twelve first-year courses, so I know for a fact you have the spare time.”

“I’m taking second-year courses to fill up my schedule.”

“I looked at your schedule,” replies Steve, and at Stark’s frankly inexplicable squawk of indignation he adds, “Just like you looked at all my records starting at primary school.”

Stark doesn’t even attempt to look sheepish or apologetic, for which Steve is somewhat grateful—he’d not have believed any such expression on that face.

“You’re teaching me shit, of course I checked your background.”

“I’m not teaching you anything because you’re not learning.”

Stark opens his mouth again, looking mutinous, but Steve shakes his head and makes a sharp gesture with his hand.

“Friday at fifteen hundred hours, small gymnasium C. I’ll see you there, Stark.”
Stark does not show.

Steve waits an hour, running himself through warm-up drills just to occupy himself. He’s not angry, because he’s not surprised. When the hour has passed he dries himself off with a towel and leaves the gymnasium.

Stark shows up to the next scheduled class like nothing happened. Steve teaches the class paying him no special attention, watching Stark’s typically careless falls and sloppy attacks.

When class ends and everyone is picking up their gear to go to the dressing rooms, Steve makes a point of finding Stark and telling him he’ll see him, like the previous week, at fifteen hundred hours in the gymnasium.

Unsurprisingly, Stark fails to show up.

This pattern could have kept going for several weeks, but within the first month Steve’s patience, not insignificant by any measure of the word, is beginning to wear thin. It becomes evident to him that Stark doesn’t actually expect him to enforce his own orders; more than likely, Stark expects Steve to simply fail him, and then expects to re-take the class with some other instructor.

If this were a simple case of violent dislike of his own person, Steve could deal with that. He’s a big boy; he knows he rubs some people the wrong way. He’s been called a lot of things throughout his lifetime that suggests he’s not the kind of guy people just automatically love.

But Stark’s attitude doesn’t suggest a personal abhorrence. It feels to Steve more like a natural extension of the devil-may-care attitude he enforces onto everything else in his life. Steve keeps an eye on him and he knows Stark’s grades are holding steadily in the top in all his classes, in a way that suggests Stark has very little need for actual effort to achieve any goals of importance. But because he doesn’t need to work at it, Stark doesn’t, and although Stark is a man of many talents, his lessons in things that are not to his liking and therefore immediate talent suffer.

It’s not that Stark doesn’t care, though. Steve has the uneasy feeling Stark cares very deeply. His negligence in the classes that aren’t within his immediate sphere of brilliance is at first astonishing, but Steve quickly realizes, with a dawning sense of horror, that he’s the only one noticing.

“How is he passing your class?” he asks the Valerion professor once, having studied with too much attention and too little shyness all of Stark’s test scores.

“He is acceptable at Valerion dialects.”

Steve inhales deeply. “He’s barely passing the tests. You’re rubber-stamping him.”

The Valerion shrugs. “The dialects do not interest him. He does sufficiently well to pass.”

Steve grits his teeth and says nothing else—it’s not his business to tell a fellow professor how to grade his students or run his class, let alone one of a much higher hierarchy than his own. Steve is actually still not a graduate. He’s teaching a class because his schedule is sufficiently clear and he has the skills and will to offer them up. But he doesn’t have the standing to complain or fight about this, so he keeps his mouth shut around his opinions like biting down on broken glass.
He doesn’t stop to think about why this bothers him so much, because he doesn’t need to. Steve used to be a small kid, helpless and sickly. He grew up in the shadow of a bigger boy, his friend Bucky, who slid through life with the slick ease of the beautiful and charismatic. The upside of being ignored is that people don’t think to shield their uglier angles from you, because they forget you’re there.

The downside of being beautiful and charming is that people assume you know what you’re doing and leave you to it like you have all the answers. But nobody has all the answers. And sometimes those who look the most like they would bulldoze over the world are in fact drowning.

Steve is well versed in reading the body language of a man who expects to be given a wide berth and all at once too much and too little attention. No one expects Stark to need help, so no one offers it.

Stark is brilliant; a genius. Capable, smart, clever, arrogant and independent. People tend to think he can handle himself, so they give him all the space they think he needs. They pay too much attention to things that are, in the grand scheme, irrelevant, and too little to the ones that matter.

Steve isn’t going to do that. He’s not going to be the instructor that lets Stark pass with barely-there effort. He saw what that did to Bucky.

He’s going to be the one that pays attention. Even if Stark spits him in his face—which is likely, because hurt people tend to hurt those who try to help, like a drowning man tries to sink a rescuer—Steve is going to do what his conscience demands he does. He’s going to look and see Tony Stark.

Two and a half months into the first semester, a month and a half of waiting for Stark to show up at the gymnasium and always ending up alone, he finds Stark lying stretched out on his back in the grass in front of the Academy, reading from a touchpad.

“You’re in my light,” he has the gall to complain when Steve stands over him, casting a long shadow across his body.

Steve stares down at him for a long moment. “Get up, Stark.”

“Ooh,” says Stark, smirking. “Is this a proposal or the indecent kind?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. It’s bad for your health.”

“Look,” Stark sits up and looks at him, allowing the pad screen to go dark. “If you’re here to drag me to a gym to have your violent way with me, you really need to let that go. You win some, you lose some, you know? Pick your battles.”

“I know that better than you do,” points out Steve, the star strategist of the Academy. He reaches out and offers Stark a hand up. “Just indulge me, alright? I don’t need a lot of your time.”

Stark looks put upon, but he takes Steve’s hand and lets him drag him up to his feet with ease.

“I’ll make you a deal,” he offers, sliding the pad into his bag. “I’ll go along with you this once, and if you fail at whatever Jedi jazz-fingers bullshit mind-trick you’re going to try to play on me, you stop insisting on this crap and give up.”


Stark sighs. “What do you want, then?”
“Come and see.”

Neither of them attempts to make any conversation as they walk. Steve leads Stark across the campus to the Engineering building, a place Stark knows very well. Then, to Stark’s surprise, he turns to the left to the wing that’s restricted to anyone below third year, and shocks Stark even further by going over to the main elevators to the underground bunkers. He’s secretly somewhat relieved that his access card works; he’s risked something important on Fury’s blanket offer of widespread access, an offer Steve had been all too quickly to refuse. But Fury is stubborn; Steve has been ready to reap benefits from the Paladin’s desire to have him as a lapdog even despite his vehement refusal.

“How do you even have access to these?” demands Stark, impressed. “I don’t have access to these, I keep getting blocked.”

“You mean you keep trying to hack in,” asks Steve, arching a brow. Stark doesn’t even try to look apologetic. Steve really thinks he might just not know how to arrange his features accordingly. “I pulled some strings.”


“I’m Strategy and Tactics,” corrects Steve.

The other man turns to look at him, eyes strangely sharp. “You’re one of Fury’s?” he asks quietly, oddly intense.

Steve sighs quietly. “Not if I can help it.”

Stark keeps looking at him like he’s picked up on the undercurrent of Steve’s feeling regarding the matter. Steve is afraid that Fury knows how to get what he wants. For the moment, as an Academy student, he’s shielded by protocols and hierarchies that block Fury’s brute force, but once he graduates, he’ll be fair game for recruiting, and he very much doubts that Fury will play it fair.

For a moment Steve fears Stark will dig further into that answer, but then the doors of the elevator open to the third sub-level, and they exit out into the vast vaults of the Warp Core Mechanics department. Strings of laser security lines throw pop-up windows with their names, ranks, and security clearances as they advance through the hallway.

Stark has no eyes for Steve; he looks around in naked, child-like wonder, darting from one station to the next, studying specs, flicking his fingers to fan out blueprints. He goes down on his knees and then throws himself to the floor to study what hides behind opaque covers. Steve makes another gamble; he flicks his fingers against a screen and requests the aluminum to clear like glass. When it does, the relief is short lived, its heels chased by anxiety and concern. He shouldn’t have this much access.

This little stunt isn’t going to be cheap.

He lets Stark see his fill, following him more slowly through the twisting, labyrinthine corridors. It’s impossible to not feel some sort of fondness for the man when he’s like this; he’s like a bright child, all delighted wonder and open curiosity.

Steve sighs. “Come here, Stark.”

He swipes his access card across a reader and watches the screen to green with a sinking sort of sensation. Not cheap at all.

The steel sliding doors unlock, and they are allowed into the tripe-aluminum-wall sealed chamber of
a working warp core. It’s built into the building, or rather the building was built around it, and it powers most of the engine room sims and classrooms in the building, simulating the working entrails of a starship. A gigantic particle collider with the ability to store massive amounts of antimatter to power a ship through the far-flung reaches of space. It seems a shame to have it sitting here instead of out there in the black for its intended purpose, but the engineers of the Fleet need to be well acquainted with this complex machinery, and nothing beats first-hand experience.

Stark is speechless. Access to actual working warp cores outside a starship is a near-impossible task, so this must be the first time Stark is seeing one directly.

Steve crosses his arms and comes to stand next to him, ignores the wet sheen of Stark’s bright and fascinated eyes. Stark isn’t ashamed of his wonder, but Steve doesn’t want to make him uncomfortable, encourage him to retreat back into his shell.

“This is what you want, isn’t it?” he asks quietly. “Chief Engineer aboard a space vessel.”

Stark swallows, nods mutely.

Steve tries to be gentle. “That isn’t where you’re going.”

Stark’s face transforms into cold rage. “Don’t tell me what I can’t do.”

“You can do it,” agrees Steve. “You’re just not doing it. Your test averages on the classes you’re interested in are off the charts. But in the other ones, the ones you’re not interested in, you’re falling behind. It’s not just my class. You have no discipline. You don’t respect authority. You don’t listen to guidance counselors, tutors and instructors. You don’t follow the rules.”

“Life isn’t all about rules, Rogers.”

Steve thinks for a moment. He glances at the warp core, and gestures at it. “You know how improvements can be made on engines like this?” Stark nods, arching his brows. “But before you can design an improvement, you have to know exactly how the current version works, right? Think of rules like the current version, and your own judgment as an improvement. You have to know the rules before you can make a leap of reasoning, like you need to know the blueprints before you can redesign.”

Stark gives him an odd look, half appreciate, curious. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a rule bender.”

“I’m a strategist,” Steve reminds him. “The rules don’t cover every possibility. Outside the lines is where creativity exists, and creativity is the key to a successful strategy.”

Stark’s eyes are drawn back to the warp core, to the eerie blue glow of the particle collider. “Where am I going?” he asks lowly, without looking at Steve.

Steve’s mouth twists downwards. “In your present course? To a high-tech research and development facility. You’re brilliant and valuable, but you’re not leader material. As a Chief Engineer, you would need to do a lot of things you won’t be thrilled about. That isn’t a skill you’re displaying at the moment.”

The look Stark gives him then is disarming—vulnerable and open, honest.

“So I, what, correct my course?”

Steve nods. He takes in a long breath and dives in.
“If you do, and prove to me you can be responsible, I’ll back you up as Chief Engineer off the rack.”

Stark stares at him. “You don’t have that authority,” he says, but he sounds dubious, like he doesn’t really know whether Steve does. The fact is Steve isn’t very sure he does, either, but if he doesn’t, he can maneuver himself into a position that will give it to him. Steve isn’t ambitious. But he doesn’t mind manipulating the circumstances for someone else, if he thinks the goal is worth the trouble.

When he doesn’t answer, Stark scoffs, but his eyes are still wide and wet.

“Why would you?”

“Why would I?” replies Steve pointedly. “Maybe I won’t. You’ll have to convince me.”

Stark narrows his eyes at him. He turns back to the warp core, his hands gripping tightly the rail between them and the last clear aluminum plating. Steve can see him arrive at a decision in the way his shoulders shift and his chin lifts. Stark turns to him with an expression in his face that Steve has never seen—defiance, pride with arrogance. Confidence.

“I never needed anyone to pave my fucking way,” he says. “And by the way, this is totally one of your little Jedi mindfucks where you’re trying to wake up my competitive streak so I’ll do better in the boring classes.”

Steve arches his brow and lifts his hands to wave his fingers quickly. “Is it working?”

Stark huffs out a laugh. “I’ll make you a deal. If I get on top of all the stupid classes I’m neglecting and graduate top of my class, you’ll push for me to your Chief Engineer.”

Steve blinks, startled. “What makes you think I’ll be given a command right out of the Academy?”

“There’s no one else they’d give the Triskelion to,” Stark says bluntly. “They’re practically building it for you. You should see the specs for the Strategy and Tactics room on that thing. It’s a massive war station. It’s got your name tattooed on its forehead. And it’s got two warp cores, a twin system. I want it.”

Steve feels like the ground is yawning open beneath his feet. Slightly dizzy, he turns away and leans against the railing, head dipping forward.

There were rumors. He knew the Triskelion was innovative, first of its kind and state of the art, a massive mobile war station. The mothership to vessels like the Ionstar, the Galactica, Apollo King, Red Felix. Colossal warships designed specifically to be the first and last line of defense of Third Earth. Steve knew whomever was given command of the Triskelion would be the master and commander of any war effort the Fleet went into, and it would be a lie to say he hadn’t been fascinated by the idea that he might be assigned to it to serve—as a lieutenant!

The prospect of command of it is exhilarating, but the excitement hits and dissipates as quickly as lightning.

He might have a chance to get that command, but only if Fury doesn’t want him badly enough, and Fury—he wants Steve under his wing a lot.

He shrugs, throat dry. “I can’t make that promise,” he says honestly, because it’s one thing to dangle a carrot, and it’s another one entirely to outright lie.

“I’ll tell you what,” says Stark. “You get the Triskelion, and I’ll be the best fucking engineer this Academy has ever seen since Montgomery Scott.”
Steve feels something cold and helpless coil at the pit of his stomach. What to do? This is his chance to give Stark the encouragement to do better, to do best. Is that worth eventually making himself a liar?

The sad thing is he knows the answer before he finishes asking himself the question. Steve pulled the trigger when he swiped his card across the reader in the main elevators up top, and the mechanics of the gun are already in motion.

He straightens and reaches out a hand. “Deal.”

They shake on it. Stark’s hand is warm and dry and firm. Steve wonders how long it will take for this vague attraction he feels for Stark to turn into something deeper and serious. He reckons not long.

“Stay as long as you like, just don’t blow anything up. See you on Friday.”

Steve is sitting in a bench in the park three blocks from the Academy, the following day, when Fury finds him.

“You two have a nice little date?”

Steve looks at him calmly. “I’m doing the Academy a favor.”

Fury presses his hand over his heart and dips his shoulders forward in a small bow. “In the name of the Academy, my eternal fucking thanks.”

He gathers the tails of his long leather coat in his hands and fans it out when he sits in the bench next to Steve, close like an old friend. The leather falls across Steve’s closest thigh. Steve knows flicking it away will be conceding to his discomfort, so he lets it rest, though he knows hiding his distaste is a losing battle.

It’s not that he doesn’t like Fury—he respects the man, respects his mission, understands the necessity of his methods. He just disagrees with the ways through which he arrives at his goals. He has no interest in being any part of any of it. It makes him unhappy and worried that he might not be able to leverage himself out of it.

“He’s a loose cannon.”

Steve inhales, exhales. He takes account of the contrast of black leather against the grey wool of his uniform slacks.

“He’s in first year. He has a lot of time to work it out,” he muses, and then glances at Fury. “You knew his father. How was he?”

Paladin Nicholas Fury exhales a long, pensive breath. “A great man. Not a good one, mind.”

“And as a father?” Steve asks, trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle that is Tony Stark, a hieroglyph man all at once arrogant and self-hating.

Fury thinks for a moment. “I don’t think he ever was a father. I think he was a creator. Tony was
just another one of his clever little machines.”

Shaking his head, he stands and slides his hands into his pockets. He looks at Steve for a long moment, face speculative.

“Frankly, I think you’re trying to set fire to water. But everyone needs their own little pet projects.”

Steve stands as well, because he doesn’t like how Fury is looking down at him, or the wry and amused curl of his mouth. He’s taller than Fury, broader at the shoulders, and just as stubborn.

“I’ll be seeing you around, Rogers.”

“Good day, sir,” answers Steve automatically. He watches Fury walk out of the park with an uneasy feeling that he’s playing into the Paladin’s hands, no matter how hard he tries to swim in the other direction.

A year and a half from graduation.

He knows he needs to prove himself invaluable somewhere else than in secret services if he wants to escape from Fury’s clutches.

He just doesn’t know how.

X

Stark’s attention is like a focused laser.

When he really puts his mind to it, he can pick up just about anything as quickly as he breathes. It becomes evident to Steve within a month of their extra classes that the extra classes are not necessary. Stark climbs steadily and swiftly from the bottom percentile of his class to the top, gaining skill with a readiness that impresses Steve. Soon enough, Steve stops holding back and starts really sparring with Stark. He still always comes away victorious, but Stark learns quickly, and his physical state improves almost at once.

By the time the semester draws to an end, Steve knows the attraction he felt towards Stark has grown into something he needs to control. Steve knows control and he has no problem holding back and keeping it professional, or barely friendly, but it becomes increasingly difficult to not react to Stark’s surprisingly tactile nature, to the way he flings an arm across Steve’s shoulders or squeezes his arm or wrist, the way he wraps a hand around the back of Steve’s neck or pats him on the small of the back. They feel like touches that go a bit further than Steve is comfortable with while he’s still Stark’s instructor.

He sees the end of their last Friday lesson approach with both sadness and a considerable measure of relief. Seeing Stark twice a week for months has been challenging, especially since Stark has taken to messaging him the grades of his latest exams to prove he’s doing better in all his classes. Even though Steve never actually gave him his comm number. Steve replies to them with cheerful congratulations just barely out of polite formality, but that doesn’t stop Stark from sending him long messages in which he digresses from his Advances Jeffries Systems tests score to why having sex in cramped ventilation systems is a bad idea unless you’re fond of frostbite, which is something Steve never really wanted to know, thanks.
The thing is Stark has no knowledge or at least certainly very little respect for personal boundaries. And no matter how much Steve insist on enforcing them, Stark continues to vault over his limits in a way that Steve can only be fondly exasperated at, because he’s a goddamn goner.

He knows he needs the space, so he’s relieved when they finish their last Friday lesson, and he is possibly a little too eager to gather up his things and get ready to shower. Stark might notice, because he stops him at the door to the dressing room and grins, open and honest, and he says,

“See you next Friday?”

There’s nothing in his face, body language, or tone that would imply hesitance of uncertainty, but Steve can tell Stark is uneasy.

He takes a moment to swipe a towel slowly across his face and neck, rearranging his own idea of what the holidays and coming semester are going to be like. It’s only Fridays; he’s sure he can handle this once a week.

He smiles at Stark and says, “Don’t be late.”

X

It’s three am the next Thursday and he startles awake with the ease of the practiced soldier-in-training. He rises out of bed in a shirt and boxers and doesn’t think to even check his hair before he presses the button and the door slides open.

Then he stares.

“Y’gonna let me in?”

“Stark,” starts Steve, not budging from his doorway even when Stark makes an attempt to squeeze in, an attempt that fails because despite his lately improved health, he’s still inferior in strength, size and speed. Not to mention currently impaired.

“Why d’you keep calling me that, Rogers?” wonders a probably very drunk Tony Stark, squinting at Steve in the darkness of the hallway. “You’re not my instructor ’nymore, you can call me Tony.”

“Tony,” concedes Steve, because he knows how to pick his battles. “What are you doing here?”

“Yours is closer to the bar,” says Tony, like this explains everything. “Mine is like… far.”

“You live in the next building.”

“Far,” says Tony emphatically. “I’m hot,” he complains, shrugging clumsily out of his uniform jacket and tangling his hands on the sleeves. Steve reaches automatically out to help him out of them, and then turns the jacket right-side out and folds it.

“You’re very drunk,” he points out, returning the folded garment. “You need to go home.”

“Can I crash on your couch?”
“You live in the next building,” repeats Steve, because he feels like this needs repeating.

Tony pouts. “I don’t have a couch.”

“But I bet you have a bed. Beds are better than couches, Tony. Go to bed.”

Tony looks appalled. “I can’t take your bed.”

Steve inhales deeply. “No,” he agrees, and moves out of the doorway so Tony can come into his quarters. He takes the jacket from Tony’s slack hands and catches his arm just in time to control the fall onto the hard couch, face-first. Tony nuzzles the cushion his face lands on. Steve sighs, drapes the folded jacket on the back of his desk chair, and takes off Tony’s shoes.

He gets an ibuprofen pill and a long glass of cold water from his kitchen, but by the time he comes back to the main room Tony is already curled on his side and deeply asleep. Steve sighs, leaves pill and glass water on the end table, throws a blanket over Tony’s form, and goes back to bed.

Personal boundaries are something esoteric and vague that happen to other people.

X

Tony knives into his life with the subtlety of a flying brick. Like he’s always belonged in it, like his rightful place is at Steve’s side at lunch hour. And so it becomes; Steve’s classmates from third year start leaving the seat to his right free for whenever Tony saunters up to them and sits in it with all the authority of a commander at a command chair.

He learns Steve’s door code and lets himself into Steve’s quarters whenever he feels like it, whether Steve is present or not. The blanket stays out permanently, thrown over the back of the couch because Steve can’t get Tony to fold it even under threat of severe injury. A bottle of scotch appears on Steve’s kitchen cupboard, along with three glasses. It gradually empties itself, then eventually disappears and is replaced by a full one.

Fighting against these developments would be pointless, so Steve doesn’t bother to try. He takes it all in stride, allowing Tony to drape himself over his life with the easiness of the unquestioning. Tony knows how to take in the way those who are often denied learn to take things they want; quickly, quietly, but violently. Always ready for the punishment. Like if only he does it abruptly enough, Steve won’t realize he’s slotted himself into his life until it’s too late, until it’s pointless to grow angry about it.

It’s fine. Steve isn’t angry. He doesn’t mind. When he comes into his quarters after a long day of classes and tutoring and sims and finds Tony sprawled asleep on his couch, at least he knows Tony is sleeping, and not out there getting drunk and losing himself in someone’s bed like he’s not worth the trouble of an actual relationship. Tony hurts himself with the abandon of the people who’ve learned not to value themselves through long and harsh experience. But when he’s in Steve’s quarters, he eats, he drinks water, and he sleeps.

So it’s fine. Because Steve can’t say the word to himself just yet, but he knows he’s in something with Tony, and it’s enough for now that Tony trusts him to be the safe haven he so desperately needs. And if he can at least keep Tony from hurting himself, isn’t that enough? It should be. It is.
Charles Xavier is a small, deceptively delicate-boned creature of too-blue eyes and too-pale skin with lips too red for his youthful face. He’s sitting on the edge of Steve’s couch one afternoon when he comes back from class, eating Chinese out of a delivery cardboard box, covered in Tony’s blanket.

This is remarkable because Steve has never before seen him in his life.

“Hi,” he blinks, balancing on the knife’s edge between curiosity and alarm.

“Oh, hello,” says Xavier, rising immediately from the couch to shake Steve’s hand with cheerful good will. Steve hadn’t thought it possible until now for someone to actually be shorter than Tony Stark. “Charles Xavier. Tony said it was alright for me to stay for the afternoon?”

Well, if Tony said, thinks Steve wryly.

“And where is Tony?”

“Sleeping in the bedroom. We had a long night—Xenolinguistics exam this morning, you see. But now I’ve been awake for so many hours I find I can’t quite fall asleep.”

Steve shrugs his bag from his shoulder and wonders at the way Xavier says that Tony is sleeping in the bedroom like Steve shouldn’t be surprised at this new audacity. It sounds like this ought to be something Steve is well familiar with. It sounds like Xavier thinks Steve and Tony share a bed regularly.

It’s been a long day for Steve too. Explaining that this is not the case seems daunting.

“Well, you’re going to crash hard, and soon,” he says instead, because going along and taking things in stride is the best way to go about anything involving Tony Stark. “There’s ibuprofen in the kitchen cupboard.”

Xavier smiles radiantly, the fever-bright smile of the unhinged by lack of sleep and intellectual overstimulation. It’s the dangerous type of smile that is contagious, and Steve finds himself smiling back. He pats him companionably on the shoulder and moves on to his bedroom.

Tony is sprawled on his stomach on the bed, face turned towards the wall, one arm under the pillow. The sheets pool in cool folds against the bare dip of his long spine, and Steve can see the defined and strong muscles of his back, the muscles he helped hone and harden.

Shaking his head, he strips to his undershirt and boxers and slips into bed. He’s not going to be kicked out of his own bed by Tony Stark, and besides, the bed is big enough for both of them. Prudent, cautious, he turns his back and curls on his side away from Tony, and almost at once is lulled into sleep by his new bedmate’s even, deep breathing.

When he feels Tony turn his head instinctively to nuzzle his nose against the nape of his neck, he sighs and does nothing.

He wakes up an indeterminable amount of time later by the sound of this name being called quietly, cautiously. He opens his eyes to a wild tangle of silken black hair and the scent of engine oil. Oh.

A glance upwards reveals Xavier, hovering at the bedside looking equal parts apologetic and concerned. Carefully, carefully, Steve extricates his arm from under Tony’s neck, removes his other
arm from around Tony’s waist, and leverages himself away from where he’s plastered himself to Tony’s back.

The small, vulnerable sound of dismay Tony sleepily makes breaks his heart. He smooths a hand gently through Tony’s hair, shushing him, almost without thinking. Tony seems to settle back into sleep, so Steve finishes extricating himself and gets up, following Xavier out of the bedroom and closing the door.

“Did you get any sleep?” he asks quietly.

Xavier does look better, and the lucidity that comes with appropriate rest has brought on concern for his friend’s wellbeing.

“Will he be alright, then?”

Steve doesn’t know how to explain to Xavier, who’s just found him in bed wrapped around Tony, that he’s not actually Tony’s anything. Despite the fact he’s clearly in something with Tony.

He settles for, “Yeah, sure. He gets like this, you know. He’ll be fine after about twelve hours of sleep.”

“He hasn’t eaten,” frets Xavier.

“Of course he hasn’t,” sighs Steve. “Have you? Since earlier? I think I have some leftovers steamed vegetables in the fridge. I make a wicked omelet, too.”

“Oh no, no, I wouldn’t want to impose.”

Steve, well-trained in spotting those accustomed to unkindness, smiles, doesn’t push.

“I’m making one for myself,” he says. “So it’s no trouble. Really.”

X

Tony’s back hits the mat with a dull thud, breath escaping his chapped lips damply.

“Ow,” he manages, sprawling limply on the floor.

Steve laughs breathlessly and snatches up his water bottle, wiping sweat from his face. He executes a graceful controlled fall to Tony’s side and sits, bracing his elbows on his knees, as he pulls water from the bottle greedily.

“Gimme,” says Tony, making grabby hands at Steve’s face, though he could just get up and get his own damn bottle. Steve relinquishes it, exhaling.

“You’re feisty today,” Tony says.

“Fifth year,” says Steve, relishing the prospect. “Think of all the sims.”

Tony laughs. “Only someone with a very deep psychological trauma is excited about hellish simulations everyone else loathes.”
“But sims are challenges, Tony,” says Steve brightly, childishly thrilled, and doesn’t mind when Tony looks amused and fond as he nods. “I love challenges! All the sims this year have been so easy, but senior year S&T sims—those are going to be amazing. Battle, rescue-under-fire, recon, search-and-destroy, exploratory, discovery, med-evac—the really nasty worst-case scenario simulations they don’t want to scare the kids with.”

Tony leans back on his hands and stretches out his legs. “You’re going to be too busy to tutor us lowly third years, huh?”

He says it calmly, like it doesn’t matter, but Steve has grown to be well-versed in his body language, in the small nuances of his tone and the shadows that swirl in his eyes. He swallows some more water and pushes back his hair. Tony doesn’t know how to ask for the things he needs, not the ones that really matter.

“I’m giving up a lot of classes,” he admits. “But this isn’t tutoring,” he ads, bumping his shoulder into Tony’s. Tony grins at him, lazy and pleased.

Steve is, as Charles likes to say, arse over teakettle over Tony.

“Good,” the engineer says, patting Steve’s thigh.

Overall Steve is an affable, friendly guy but where most people tend to expect him to run in vast social circles, with hundreds of friends and never a free moment, it’s actually the opposite that’s true. He hasn’t ever been good at making actual friends, not since Bucky and Peggy. He has classmates, people who he’s taken several classes in a row with and who he doesn’t mind getting together with and studying for exams, and beyond that he has Tony, who by now has firmly inserted himself as the central object that Steve orbits around.

Steve honestly can’t bring himself to mind.

With Tony, however, comes the added benefit of a few extra people here and there that Steve comes to know, most of who are brief and fleeting because after awhile they just can’t keep up with Tony’s constant whirlwind of barely-controlled chaos. Charles is the most constant, popping in and out of Steve’s life often enough that he comes to think of Charles as a friend too by extension, since he alone out of all the various and random friends Tony seems to make on a daily if not hourly basis seems, like Steve, to be in it for the long haul.

Which is why, when he happens to see Charles while crossing the quad one day on his way to meet Tony for lunch and lifts his hand in a wave, he feels more than a little awkward and out of place when Charles doesn’t acknowledge him at all. He’s making a beeline across the quad in the opposite direction Steve’s going, slipping nimbly through groups of people as if he’s on a mission.

“Don’t worry,” Tony says, popping up at Steve’s side having evidently seen the whole thing, “it’s not you. It’s just—well.”

As they watch Charles reaches the far end of the quad where several benches are scattered, most of them packed with three or four people at once due to the busy hour. Someone, however, has managed to stake claim of an entire bench to himself, and it doesn’t take Steve long to place a name to the face—Erik Lehnsherr, perhaps the most ruthless fourth year enrolled in the Academy. Steve’s
taken a couple classes with him before, but he’s not sure Lehnsherr would even recognize him now, so focused and driven with only one goal in mind. It’s no secret he’s being groomed for captaincy upon his graduation, but Steve thinks the man could use a little more humanity in him before being given charge of a pressurized tin can in a vacuum packed full of human life. No wonder no one has dared to approach his bench.

He also knows that like himself, Lehnsherr is a First Earth survivor. It’s why Steve understands.

Charles slots himself neatly into place at Lehnsherr’s side and when Lehnsherr shifts Steve expects a sharp rebuff or a quick exit, because god knows the man isn’t known for being warm or welcoming. But instead when Lehnsherr shifts it’s to make room for Charles, the movement practiced and easy and all done without even looking up, simply absorbing Charles into his usually impenetrable personal space radius like he belongs there.

“Huh,” Steve says. They’re both bent over Lehnsherr’s datapad now, Charles pointing at something on the screen and gesturing wildly in the air with his other hand while he talks, and Lehnsherr listens with that same honed-in, total focus that Steve remembers from their shared classes.

“Amazing, isn’t it,” Tony agrees, sounding a little nonplussed, like he’s found a new variable that he hasn’t be able to define within the first ten seconds of looking at it. “He’s totally in love with him.”

“You think so?” Steve asks, a little skeptically. Then again, Lehnsherr’s looking back down at the pad and scrolling through something and Charles is still watching his face, with a smile so soft and private that Steve almost feels like he’s intruding.

“I know so,” Tony replies matter-of-factly, cat-ate-the-canary satisfaction radiating out of his very pores. “He’s always running off to go eat lunch with Erik, study with Erik, have dinner with Erik—” he does a surprisingly accurate imitation of Charles’ polite British accent, before dropping back into his regular voice. “—so I had my suspicions, but oh yeah, he totally is.”

“Tony,” Steve says cautiously, thinking about all the times he and Tony have done those exact same things, plus their sparring, plus their whole often-sharing-a-bed situation, “just because two people eat meals together and study together doesn’t mean they’re in love.”

Even to his own ears, it sounds like he’s more trying to convince himself.

“No, a few weeks ago I got him completely smashed,” Tony says dismissively, clearly not thinking along the same lines as Steve and Steve isn’t sure whether to be grateful or just…something else. “Which you should really appreciate my effort on because holy shit that little shrimp can drink. Anyway, he confessed. It was messy. And also glorious. I’ve sworn not to tell a soul.”

“You just told me,” Steve points out for lack of anything better to say. Kind, friendly Charles Xavier is in love with caustic, borderline-emotionless Erik Lehnsherr. It’s humbling to know that there are still mysteries out there in the universe.

“Well,” Tony says, suddenly flustered and shrugging to play it off, “it’s you.” Like it explains everything.

Steve smiles a little despite himself, looking back over at Charles and Erik. They’re standing up now, Erik slipping his datapad back into his bag and unfolding his long legs from the bench while Charles hops up beside him, already articulating some new point or another, talking with both his hands this time as he trots alongside Erik to keep up with the taller man’s long, even strides.

“It’s a little sad, though,” Tony says thoughtfully as they watch the pair head out of the quad, Erik’s
presence alone cutting a wide swathe through the crowd that Charles still fits into easily beside him, “I don’t think Erik really *sees* him, you know?”

Steve’s eyes are sharp. He doesn’t have to strain to catch the small, barely-there smile curling at the corner of Erik’s mouth when he turns his head slightly to look down at Charles just before they round one of the buildings and disappear from view.

“I don’t know,” he says lightly, “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“Yeah?” Tony says, and he sounds a little too hopeful for this to be about Charles Xavier’s love life anymore.

“Yeah,” Steve says, because no, it’s not about Charles Xavier’s love life anymore at all.

X

“You don’t write, you don’t call,” says Fury, waving a hand to disperse the holograms spread out over his desk. “I’m starting to think you don’t like me very much.”

“We all have our insecurities,” replies Steve flatly. “What I don’t understand is why I need to come see you about releasing two prisoners from the brig, Paladin Fury. One would think you’d have better, shadier things to do than supervise disciplinary actions.”

“One would be right,” nods Fury, rising from his desk. “But for the fact these particular two little shits thought it would be, I don’t know, amusing, I guess is the word—I don’t really know how their tiny little rock-brains work—to steal my own personal vehicle and then fucking ruin it.”

“The prank—”

“Is *that* what we’re calling it.”

“—got a bit out of hand,” concedes Steve, unfazed.

“They fucking totaled my car,” drawls Fury. “My vintage convertible car.”

Faithful reproduction, thinks Steve, and says, “They dented a door.” The you leather-encased one-eyed drama queen goes unsaid. Wisely. “I will personally see to it your car is left in pristine conditions, sir.”

“Since we’re on the business of asking what the fuck drove us to the present situation, I would like to know how it is you ended up serving me your ass for some pair of frankly appalling psychopaths the likes of which the world has never before seen.” He pauses. “This is Stark’s fault, isn’t it.”

“Logan and Scott are friends,” Steve says faithfully, although he’s never even met them and couldn’t pick them out of a lineup, because yes, this is Tony’s fault, or at least partially his responsibility for his obvious poor judgment in his choice of company, Steve excluded. And Charles, who had also offered to accompany Steve to help beg Fury for Logan and Scott’s release, but something about exposing bright-eyed Charles to Fury’s jaded cynicism had given Steve something close to hives.

Steve should be locked in the library studying for his final Complex Orbital Tactics exam, but instead he’s here trying to get two drunken imbeciles out of their second week in the brig because he’s in
something with Tony Stark, and these are Tony’s friends, whatever other evident faults they might otherwise display.

“I just hope there’s some redeeming quality to that asshole that makes up for all the shit he puts you through, Rogers. You can have your twin sociopaths, but for the record, this isn’t a favor, and it’s not going to be for free.”

Steve gives him a level look. “Nothing with you ever is, sir. Thank you.”

Fury says nothing else. Steve knows that despite the things Fury has done for him throughout the years, he doesn’t have enough leverage to force him into his secret service, and Steve has carefully maneuvered himself front and center into the attention of many other Paladins, just as influential and no less canny than Fury. Steve still has options.

He’s pulled the trigger, but the hammer hasn’t yet reached the butt of the bullet.

He finds Tony waiting for him outside the Command building, looking anxious.

“He’s releasing them,” says Steve, “into my custody.”

“Oh thank fuck,” breathes Tony. “Scott has an Advanced Navigation III exam in like half an hour.”

The first thing Logan Howlett tells Steve Rogers after Steve gets him out of the brig, where he’s been for a week and was due to be for another whole one, is:

“Thanks, goldilocks, nice to know you’re not just a pretty face and a good ass.”

Steve turns right around and leaves without a single word.

“Look, Logan’s a dick,” says Tony that evening, as he slides into Steve’s bed like he belongs there, like it never occurred to him that Steve might need his bed for himself, to huddle under the covers and mourn. Mourn not that he is in something, because Steve will never mourn feeling, not feelings like these, pure and true feelings that make him better the way something can only ever do, but mourn that Tony isn’t looking for the thing that Steve could give him, and Steve can’t give him what he’s looking for.

Steve thinks he’d be good for Tony, but if Tony’s looking for what Steve could give him, he doesn’t know it yet. And it’s not Steve’s place to tell him what he needs, not on this. This isn’t like telling him to eat or taking a scotch bottle away from him, this isn’t scooting to the side on his own bed so Tony can curl on his side and press his face to the nape of Steve’s neck and breathe him in like Steve’s scent is comforting. This isn’t letting Tony exhaust himself like a thundering tide against him in a sparring session, crashing against the unmovable rock that is Steve’s resolve to do whatever it takes to help Tony be the man Steve knows he himself can’t be.

“It’s fine, Tony,” he says to the wall.

“No, come on, sit up, talk to me for a minute,” Tony wraps a hand around Steve’s arm and tugs, and Steve sits up, because that’s what Steve does, for Tony.

“Look,” Tony starts, looking very uncomfortable but stubborn enough to push through whatever he thinks he needs to tell Steve. “Pepper tells me I need to be more honest about what I feel so I’m just going to, um, spit this out, and you can tell me if I’m hitting the mark, okay?”

“Okay,” agrees Steve warily.
“You have trust issues.”

Steve waits it out, but this seems to be the only thing Tony has to say. He blinks, surprised.

“Tony, you sleep in my bed.”

“Yeah, me,” replies Tony. “And you have Charles, but Charles doesn’t really count because he could probably befriend a Sarlacc and it would love him enough to actually leave its nest and go out for tea with him. But no one else even comes close to being in your personal space. I mean, it’s all good, you have trust issues, it’s fine, I’m just bringing this up because you’re a really nice guy and you don’t have any friends, and I think you need them.”

“No, I don’t have,” Steve starts, and feels more tired than he’s been in years, wearied down by grief and loss. “It’s not trust issues. I just, it’s not easy for me. To make friends.”

Tony leans to the side to flick on the bedside lamp, warm golden light spilling over them. “Because you…have trust issues?”

Steve looks down at his hands, spread open palm-up on his lap. He thinks of Peggy’s warm, open smile and her chaste cherry-chapstick-scented kisses, and Bucky’s firm grip on the back of his neck and his back to Steve, always his back to Steve, protecting, shielding.

There isn’t anyone who will ever be like Bucky and Peggy. They were just Bucky and Peggy. And they aren’t here anymore. Steve doesn’t know how to feel like that again about someone. He’s not like Tony; he sees the good in people but it’s not easy for him to feel something deeper for them. He likes people, sure. But they’re like wisps of smoke, vague and grey and unimpressive, against the vividly multicolor impressions of Bucky and Peggy in the back of Steve’s eyelids, seared there with fire and heartache.

Tony says, haltingly, like it’s difficult for him to put the feeling into words, “I’m worried that you’re alone too much. So!”

He jumps out of bed, abruptly, and crouches down next to the bag he’d left on the floor earlier. Steve had grown so used to Tony dumping stuff in his quarters that he hasn’t even questioned the presence of the big canvas bag, but now that he thinks about it, it’s pretty big.

Tony drags it closer to the bed and unzips it, glancing at Steve with a bright smile filled with childish excitement. Arching his brows, Steve moves closer to the edge of the bed.

“I made you a bodyguard!” says Tony proudly, throwing the bag open to reveal a small, compact cube of machinery. Tony snaps his fingers and Steve watches in awe as the cube unfolds in a flurry of tiny clicks and a long jointed arm tipped with a rotating claw rises like a snake from water, led lights snapping on like eyes.

“Well, I modified an old friend of mine,” admits Tony. “This is You. You’s the smartest home robot I’ve built, though I will freely admit to some, um, hiccups.”

“Hiccups?” asks Steve, frowning.

You’s claw snaps in his direction and Steve darts back just in time to avoid a laser shot to the eye. It leaves a scorch mark on the wall above the bed. Horrified, Steve turns back to Tony, who’s already tinkering about with You with a screwdriver.

“He makes mean scrambled eggs,” he says absently, and You’s claw rotates cheerfully, bobbing to the rhythm of some obscure mechanic music only the robot seems to hear.
“I don’t need a bodyguard robot, Tony!”

“He’s a keeper,” says Tony fondly, patting You on what might conceivably be considered its forehead.

Steve opens his mouth to keep arguing, but You comes closer to the bed and chirps happily, resting its claw on Steve’s shoulder in an attitude that suggests that, had it the soulful eyes of a cunning puppy, it would be using them on Steve full-blast right about now.

Steve’s shoulders slump.

“Hi, You,” he mutters, patting the robot on the claw. You chirps delightedly. Tony’s already curling on the bed, back against the wall, forehead pressed to Steve’s thigh.

X

“I wanna be there, can you get me in there?”

“What?” asks Steve breathlessly, dodging a kick aimed at his chin, catching the ankle and flipping Tony on his back on the mats, where he pins him with a knee to the chest and catches his wrists.

“At the Kobayashi,” says Tony, like it’s the most obvious thing. He wiggles his hands to convey that he yields, arching his brows, and Steve lets go and slides to the side to sit next to him, panting.

“You’re halfway through third year. You don’t have the clearance.”

“I didn’t have the clearance to go to the warp core in first year either.”

Steve hums, wiping sweat from his face.

“I wanna see you beat the unbeatable test, come on!”

“It’s not unbeatable,” laughs Steve. “Just really hard.”

“No, it’s unbeatable,” Tony says emphatically. “But if anyone can beat it, it’s you. So come on, pull some strings, get me in there, I’ll be the best Chief Engineer a sim has ever seen.”

Steve sighs, thinking of owing Fury any more favors. He wants Tony to be there—of course he wants Tony there—but it’s just a test, nevermind the fact it’s the hardest test in the Academy.

“I’ve no doubt,” he smiles, patting Tony’s chest lightly in consolation. “But you’re just a third year. And really, Tony. It’s just a test. Nothing special.”

X

In the years to come, so many of them spiraling away from him like sand through his fingers, so many conflicts, so much loss, he never forgets the first time he stood in the simulated bridge of the October and realized with horror that there was no way he could save his fake ship and his fake crew
from death.

The sinking feeling in his guts, his lungs locked like they’ve turned to lead instead of healthy tissue. Ice and fire all at once through his veins, and the only thing in his ears his own blood and the many alarms that beep and blare and the implosion in the screen, like a horrible action movie, as the *Kobayashi Maru* rents apart and is no more.

He evacuates the ship. When the crew leaves the sim bridge he stands in front of the captain’s chair, watching the systems fail one after the other, holding firm against the tremors and tilts and fits and starts and the starburst of light that preludes the shutdown and the end of the simulation.

He sits down and stays in the dark for a long time, breathing, shaking.

*I failed again.*

---

Thursday morning and the sun streams in through the tall library windows like molten gold, spilling across the hardwood floors. Dust spots dance in the shafts of sunlight that break against Steve’s table, and he stares at them thoughtfully, thinking of the chemical composition of air. Nitrogen, oxygen, argon, carbon dioxide, others in smaller measures.

This planet they call Third Earth has been terraformed. Its original air composition would not have sustained human life. Too much carbon dioxide. Too dry.

Steve thinks back to the endless oceans of Earth-That-Was, the First Earth, the place where humans originated. A small little planet in the Solar System, third rock from a star that no longer glows a healthy yellow. He thinks of the vast expanse of wild rainforests of Second Earth, the magnetic hovering mountains, the furious rivers frothing with rapids and falls.

He thinks of Bucky and the face he made when Steve said, *Go! I’ll find Peggy!*

He thinks of the sensation of Peggy’s hand slipping from his in the chaos that was the mass evacuation of New York, the desperation, the horror, the dismay, the feeling of arms around his middle and a guard dragging him into the ship, he thinks of watching New York turn into USA turn into a continent turn into a planet, and then no more planet, only the blank whiteness of hyperspace. He thinks of starships exploding under fire.

*I’ll find Peggy!*

Is that what it felt like, Bucky? Your starship exploding? Did the systems go offline one by one, was there a flash of light before the end?

*I failed.*

---

He can’t sleep.
“Steve,” Tony says helplessly, eyes wide and sadder than Steve has ever seen them, hand shaking slightly as he strokes down Steve hair.

“I’m alright,” Steve smiles. “Just disappointed.”

You chirps sadly, claw resting on the bed next to Steve’s knee, like he’s sitting vigil, like he won’t go offline until Steve sleeps.

Tony shakes his head mutely and lies down again, pressing his forehead to Steve’s temple and wrapping his arms around him like it can shield Steve from all his failures.

It can’t.

X

Sometime the next week he wakes up furious and takes the *Kobayashi Maru* test again, and stands in the fake bridge as his ship breaks apart under Klingon fire and, absolutely livid.

The minute he’s out of the sim he schedules another try for the next day, and stalks right across campus to Command. He moves with such stormy certainty that even admirals dodge out of his way, and the secretary for Fury’s office actually shrinks away from him.

“Rogers,” says Fury carefully when he sees him, rising from his desk.

“Get Tony into the *Kobayashi Maru* for me,” Steve snarls.

Fury looks like he’s seriously questioning Steve’s sanity but is too concerned about the possible violent outcomes of pointing that out to actually point it out. “He’s in third year.”

“Get him in!” snaps Steve, and then turns around and leaves without another word.

X

Fury gets Tony in.

Steve still fails the test.

“I don’t get it,” muses Tony blankly as they sit in a bar that evening nursing pity beers. “The warp core blew up. A torpedo hit the warp—I don’t understand how that even happened.”

Steve breathes. It’s the only thing he can do.

“I’m taking it again,” he manages to say eventually. “Be there.”

Tony looks sad, but nods.

X
Steve starts to see a pattern.

“One in a hundred million,” snarls Tony, storming down the hallways on Steve’s heels. “That’s what the chances are! One in a hundred fucking million!”

“They blow it up because they can’t make it malfunction,” says Steve coldly, wrenching open the door to the gymnasium changing rooms and stalking to his locker. “Because you fix the malfunctions, so the only way they can make us fail is blow up the core.”

Tony chews on that as Steve changes into gym clothes, then follows him like a rabid dog to the athletics course and watches him run and run and run until Steve’s legs give out and he has to stop.

“You can’t let it go,” Tony says inscrutably when he brings him a water bottle.

“It’s not right,” says Steve furiously, glaring up at Tony through his sweat-soaked hair. “They programmed that test to be unbeatable. It’s not right.”

“It’s just a test,” Tony says, but it sounds practiced, like this is something he thinks he should say but can’t bother to accompany with honesty. He doesn’t believe the words.

“It’s wrong.”

“Yeah,” agrees Tony. “Yeah it is.”

Charles pours him tea in a teahouse the afternoon after the fifth time he takes it and fails it, velvet-soft eyes heavy with sorrow.

“Erik will be keeping you company soon,” he says, shaking his head slowly. “He’ll hate failing it.”

Steve’s breath stutters, catching high and thin in his throat. Charles looks at him askance, hand darting out to grasp his wrist, probably mostly to keep him from accidentally crushing the delicate little cup.

“What is it?”

Steve blinks and swallows. His stomach roils. He doesn’t know what’s wrong, but something is wrong.

It takes him three days to realize why the idea of Erik Lehnsherr taking the *Kobayashi Maru* makes his stomach turn.

It’s four am on a Thursday but he jumps out of bed, dresses and runs across campus to Charles’ door
and knocks and knocks until Charles throws the door open, alarmed and sleep-rumpled.


Charles stares at him like he’s losing his mind. “It’s in his curriculum, Steve. It’s a mandatory sim.”

“Tell him to delay it.”

“Delay it for—”

“Charles,” Steve interrupts, something he never does, and grasps Charles by the arm to convey the seriousness of the matter. “Delay it.”

Charles pales. He nods, two short, brief nods. Steve lets go and leaves and within minutes he’s knocking on Tony’s door. Ironically this is one of the few occasions in which Tony went to his own quarters for the night, but Steve isn’t in the mood to be amused.

“Whoa,” says Tony when he sees him, eyes widening in alarm. He slides right out of the way, and Steve storms inside, so agitated he thinks he’s going to break out of his skin, fracture his own bones with the force of his own blood.

“Can you install a subroutine in a closed program that is being constantly monitored and get it to subvert the main programming?”

Tony gapes at him.

“Are you,” he asks incredulously, gesturing vaguely at Steve’s heaving chest. “Are you asking me to help you cheat the Kobayashi Maru?”

“The test is a cheat,” snarls Steve. “It’s designed to be unwinnable.”

“Supposedly it teaches you to accept the inevitable,” Tony says tentatively, like he fears Steve will achieve liftoff if he builds up any more rage.

“You think the survivors of the fall of First Earth need to be taught how it fucking feels to die?” demands Steve, breath faltering so the words shatter out of his lips like broken glass, cutting up his insides, razor-sharp.

Tony goes ash-white, eyes wide and glassy.

“Holy shit,” he mumbles, falling on the edge of his bed as his knees give out. He stares at Steve like he’s some kind of new and alien creature, like the pieces of a puzzle he couldn’t quite figure out suddenly begin to fit together. Nausea rolls in Steve’s stomach, something hot and acidic climbing up his throat.

“Don’t,” he manages. “Don’t ask.”

Don’t do this to me, he can’t say. Don’t make me do this, because I will, but I won’t make it back out.

Tony’s face breaks and then, abruptly, reshapes into a firm and determined expression.

“Fuck that,” he says fiercely, eyes like molten honey, ablaze, furious.

Steve feels pressure at his back, and then finds himself sitting on the floor of Tony’s room, against the wall, staring at his knees and breathing.
Thank you, he thinks brokenly when Tony says nothing and gets his tablet and starts working, at four am on a Thursday, on hacking the Academy’s most airtight computer simulation.

Thank you, thank you. I love you.

X

“I’m not actually a good hacker,” says Tony sometime later, when the sun is breaking through the windows and spearing Steve in the eye. He should move. He will, eventually, he thinks. “But I know a guy.”

“You know a guy,” Steve repeats dully, warily, eyeing Tony.

“He’s a dick,” Tony says fondly. “I can sort of respect his dedication to dickishness. He puts, you know, real effort into the venture.”

“Of being a dick,” clarifies Steve.

“Especially to his brother,” nods Tony. “And whoo, boy. Talk about daddy issues.”

Steve stares at Tony and thinks, I don’t think I will.

X

“Cadet Steven Rogers, step forward.”

Tony squeezes Steve’s thigh. Steve breathes in and stands, pulls down his uniform jacket so it sits perfectly on his squared shoulders, and slides out onto the stairs, down the steps to the front of the room to stand in front of the disciplinary tribunal.

“Cadet Rogers, you stand accused of installing a subroutine into the programming of the Kobayashi Maru command test. To say it in vulgar vernacular, you cheated.”

Murmurs run through the room like lit gunpowder, like the whispery susurrus of sand on rocks. There is a pause as Admiral Kantek stares intently at Steve and Steve stares stonily back, face inscrutable. If he’s expected to break down and humble himself, they will be waiting a long time.

“You have nothing to say for yourself?”

“I believe I have a right to defend myself,” he says, tone clipped and cold.

Kantek looks like this is already tilting into terrain he hoped to avoid, but he nods.

“Would you like to address your accuser?”

“No,” says Steve, startling the Admirals. “The programmer is irrelevant. Whether they came up with the program or created it on commission is not important. The fact that the program was allowed and introduced into the curriculum is what I object to. The Board of Directors’ decision to do so,
Admiral Kantek looks appalled and livid and like he has a lot to say, but Steve steamrolls right over him, shielded from fear of consequences by a hard and solid shell of ice-cold, burning, murderous fury.

“I can devise the purpose of the test,” he says firmly, because he knows what direction the attacks will come from. They will accuse him of being dull and incompetent and stubborn and childish. “The test is designed to show us what it feels like to fail at a routine rescue-stranded-crew mission that should by all means be the stupidest thing to do in deep space. You want us to know that anything can go wrong and end in death. You want to know your command officers can deal with the stress of failing nobly.”

There’s a beat of silence. Then Steve feels his breath catch before he says, loudly, “It’s bullshit.”

Now the silence is stunned, shocked.

“It’s bullshit!” he repeats, louder. His heart is beating harshly enough to break out of his chest. He feels dizzy with the intensity of his rage, with the heartick of Bucky and Peggy’s loss and the visions of exploding starships in the vacuum of space. I failed. “You’re talking about teaching death and failure to a whole generation of survivors of a planet you failed to protect!”

His rage escalates to suffocating levels. He has to lean over the podium he’s standing on front of to breathe harshly. His knuckles turn white against the edge when he grips the wood.

“Every one of us,” he says bitterly, raising his eyes again. “Every one of us here lost something on First Earth, to the Nyrulians. I lost my mother, my brother and my sister. They were all I had and they’re gone. And you think—you think you need to teach me to accept defeat and death?”

He laughs, and it’s an ugly and broken sound.

“I know what that looks like up close. I don’t need you to show me what it feels like to go down with the fucking ship. That’s not what I came here for. I came here so you could teach me to stop that! I came to learn to protect the people I love, I came to learn to protect the planet they live on and the ships they travel in, I came to learn how to keep them safe!”

He has to stop to breathe and in the pause he realizes his voice has escalated to such a volume that the silence rings in its absence.

“But if you think that’s what I came here for, what I came to learn, is how to stay stoic and stand tall in the face of death, then you might as well expel me because I want no part of your Fleet. Because I will not stop, I will not stand stoic, I will always look for a way out! There is no glory in death, no pride, there is nothing in death! It’s just an end. And I—we—owe it to those we lost to fight back.”

He looks up and stares the three Admirals in the eye by turn, notes their stunned and speechless faces, the paleness of their skins. Admiral Richard Robausen’s eyes are wet and awash with an expression that Steve is sickeningly pleased to note is shame.

There is much more he could say. He wants to say it. Being a good person is a choice Steve has to make often, something that rises from the wreckage of what used to be innocence, what used to be the soft-hearted and delicate boy that Bucky used to protect. But that boy and that innocence died with First Earth and exploding starships in space, and the good parts of himself don’t come to him as easily as they used to anymore. But it’s a choice, a choice he often makes, and he can make it now.

He pushes back the barbed words on the tip of his tongue, crushes them like hard candy between his
teeth and swallows them. No. Be *better.*

He shakes his head slowly.

“I’ll accept whatever disciplinary action the committee sees fit to sentence,” he says calmly. “Until then, I assume academic suspension and domiciliary imprisonment as according to protocol are in effect. I have nothing else to say and no interest in debating my views or actions. Admirals, professors, cadets, good afternoon.”

No one stops him from leaving.
“You’re a coward,” he tells the mirror, with a mild sense of surprise, because he thought he was not this man.

Well, there are a great many cowards in this universe. One more will hardly hurt.

It’s hours later, dark in his quarters, when the door slides open and Tony comes in. Steve has showered and is sitting at the edge of his bed, in sweats and a t-shirt, almost debating taking a nap, because he hasn’t slept properly in weeks. You is cleaning the kitchen tiles, because You likes cleaning the already spotless kitchen tiles. You is a weird little creature.

Tony comes into the bedroom and doesn’t turn on the light.

“It’s pandemonium out there,” he says into the silence. “You sure gave them a piece of your mind.”

“I think I ended my career,” Steve says, surprisingly calmly.

“If they kick you out of telling the truth, it’s a shitty career.”

Steve sighs, bracing his elbows on his thighs. Tony comes closer, startles Steve by cupping his jaw and tilting his head up, nudging close enough that he stands between Steve’s spread thighs. Steve’s heart makes an odd thrilling motion, like a wash of quicksilver down his veins.

“You told Starfleet Academy Command to go fuck themselves,” he says quietly, seriously. “I’ve loved you for a long time, but I’ve never loved you more than now, or been more impressed.”

Steve’s breath catches unevenly in his throat. Tony lets go of his jaw to reach for his uniform jacket and slide it off his shoulders, lets it drop to pool on the floor at his feet.

“Do you want me to stop?” he murmurs, working on the sleeves of his shirt. His eyes are as dark as his carefully trimmed beard, cast into shadows by the angle of the dying daylight that falls through the blinders in Steve’s window.

Steve catches him by the hips and drags him forward against him. Tony shifts his weight to brace himself against Steve’s chest and then puts his knees on the bed and straddles Steve as he sheds his shirt. He fists his hands on the back of Steve’s t-shirt and starts pulling up, up, but Steve’s nose bumps against his and then they’re kissing.

Steve knows of nothing that tastes so sweet as Tony’s lips parting for him, as the wet slow glide of
Tony’s tongue against his, the scratch of his stubble against Steve’s cleanly-shaven face. Tony’s hand fists in his hair and Steve’s hands slip and slide across the naked expanse of his back, the supple muscles of shoulders and waist, the firmness of thigh and buttocks.

Tony hums and rises up on his knees, bare chest dragging against Steve’s front, erection pressing against Steve’s sternum. He grabs the fabric of Steve’s shirt and tugs it up and throws it away. Steve arches up and catches his mouth again, snaking an arm around the small of his back to press him closer. He braces his other hand on the mattress but then changes his mind and lets himself fall back, dragging Tony with him. Tony curses breathlessly, bracing himself on the bed just in time to not collapse entirely on top of Steve, but it’s fine.

“Shit,” Tony breathes when Steve unfastens his uniform pants and pushes them down over his hips and ass to free his cock. “Are you serious? I didn’t think you’d be into this, I thought I would have to convince you—”

He cuts off with a broken moan when Steve swallows him, tugs on his bare hips to encourage him to relax on top of him. Tony’s hand threads through the hair at the back of his head and he’s panting wetly, murmuring filthy things into the dark. The only sounds are their pants and the wets slide of Tony’s cock into Steve’s mouth, the shifts of fabric as Tony thrusts down, his knees slipping on the bedding at the sides of Steve’s body.

“Fuck,” pants Tony. Steve looks up at him, nose bumping against Tony’s pelvis, and inhales the heady and rich scent nestled at the curls above Tony’s cock.

“Look at you,” Tony breathes, combing his fingers tenderly through Steve’s blond hair. “You’re a fucking sex dream.”

He pulls away, the drag of the delicate skin of his cock against Steve’s swollen lips erotic, and gets off the bed. He grasps the waistband of Steve’s sweats and strips them quickly down his thighs and calves to throw them on the floor.

“Get up for me,” he says, voice like gravel. Steve stands, a long drop of sweat rolling down the groove of his spine. Tony kisses him again, deep and slow and sinful. He grabs Steve’s cock and jerks him off slowly, too lightly. Steve grasps his arms, but though he squeezes, there’s no rushing Tony.

“Come here,” Tony mumbles against his lips, and Steve goes, until he’s standing at the foot of the bed and Tony clasps the back of his neck and encourages him to his hands and knees, sock and balls dangling heavily between his spread thighs. His hand slides slowly up between Steve’s shoulder blades and Steve collapses wordlessly onto his elbows, fisting the bedspread and struggling to breathe.

“I didn’t think I’d get to do this tonight,” Tony muses. “It’s what you want, right? You want me to fuck you?”

Steve tangles his own fingers in his sweat-damp hair, nodding quickly. “Yeah,” he gasps. “Tony, come on.”

But Tony takes his time, uses a lot more lube than Steve thinks he needs, and by the time he’s seating himself inside in one long thrust, confident and firm, hands gripping Steve’s hips hard enough to bruise, Steve aches.

It’s a blur of overwhelming sensations after that. It’s a hard fuck, nothing like gentle or slow, and Tony has no issue bracing his weight against Steve, pressing him down into the bed and biting his
shoulders and neck, grasping his wrists and arms to pin him to the mattress. It’s startling and heady and just what Steve needs, what he wants. Tony’s body grounds him, keeps him in the present, in his body, so that his mind doesn’t get lost in the phantom pain of people he’ll never see again.

Orgasm creep up on him slowly and then break over him all at once like a flash of blinding light and adrenalin burning him from the inside out. It’s been a long time and it’s never been this intense. He’s still trembling, breathing shakily against the wet bedspread, when Tony braces his weight on his hands at either sides of his head and comes with several long, rich moans.

He lets himself collapse half on top of Steve afterwards, sated and limp and sweat-soaked, and mouths at Steve’s shoulder where he bit earlier.

“Who’d have thought it’d be me that said it first?” he muses eventually, drawing Steve out of a light doze.

Steve’s stomach constricts, anxiety blooming across his chest.

“It’s okay,” Tony smiles, stroking the backs of his fingers down Steve’s temple and cheek. “Take your time.”

They don’t kick him out of the Academy, which all at once does and does not surprise Steve.

“You’re too pretty,” Tony chooses to say as explanation as Steve bears him down onto the bed and unfastens his jeans. “Who’d replace your fine ass walking down these halls?”

“I’m so glad to be appreciated for my true value,” jokes Steve, and licks a stripe up Tony’s chest, across a nipple.

They don’t talk for a while after that.

Tony goes out with Logan and Scott sometimes and comes back drunk and stinking of the awful cigars Logan insists on smoking, presumably because they help his chest hair grow thicker. Sometimes, Logan and Scott crash on Steve’s couch, which despite being famously comfortable is not in fact big enough for two grown—well, calling them ‘men’ might be overambitious. Two grown bipedal mammals.

Steve usually just accommodates Tony’s clumsy climb into bed and falls back asleep, but sometimes Tony mumbles truths into the skin of his neck, things he can’t say to Steve unless he’s had a drink, like the honesty burns him unless he fuels it with alcohol.

“I want this to be our life together,” he mumbles tonight.

Steve kisses his temple tenderly. “It will be, Tony.”
“Don’t leave, okay?”

“I won’t,” Steve promises. “I’ll be here as long as you want me.”

Tony sighs contentedly and nuzzles closer to his neck, so his breath is warm and damp right under Steve’s ear.

On the break between the first and second semester of Steve’s senior year, he’s offered an internship aboard the Red Felix. The warship’s state-of-the-art star-charting sensors make it an enviable offer, and Steve is childishly thrilled about it, despite the fact Tony’s not offered a chance to tag along.

“It’s just three months,” says Tony, sitting on the bed with his back against the wall and his legs thrown over Steve’s waist, where he’s lying naked on his back. “I could take the chance to actually, you know, go visit my company and play nice with all my many investors.”


Tony smirks. “You want me to pull something of yours instead?”

“Oh wow,” Steve widens his eyes dramatically. “Oh my god, that is actually the worst come-on to date. That’s worse than Charles’ pick up lines, wow. Tony.”

“Charles’ pickup lines can afford to be horrible since he hits on every single last breathing organism except the one he actually wants to, but see if I suck your dick tonight,” Tony sniffs petulantly, driving the heel of a foot down on Steve’s stomach. Steve laughs and catches his ankle, and the situation evolves quickly into other activities in a way that ends up in exactly what Tony threatened not to do.

Steve leaves a week after that, with assurances from Charles and the psycho duo that are apparently now an actual couple, lord help the galaxy, of Logan and Scott, that they will make sure Tony feeds himself, remembers to sleep, and keeps drinking contained to one glass of scotch per day as absolute maximum.

He boards a shuttle from Third Earth to the deep-space speedship Nairobi Blue. It takes the speedship, one of the fastest ships in existence in human hands, a week to reach the far-off location of the massive warship.

The Red Felix is a colossal, glossy black heavy-duty war cruiser meant for deep space combat without support or backup. Independent, powerful, self-sufficient and highly maneuverable, the warship housed a crew of one thousand two hundred and seventy-three highly trained men and women, three hundred lethal Raptor-class battleships, one hundred Goliath-class heavy-duty laser bombers, and five Keflar-manufactured Dendarion-model autonomous space two-pilot battle suits.

It is a strategist’s wet dream, and Steve is absolutely fascinated.

The demands are many and the work is harsh and Steve pays the right of admission in all the ways that is necessary of a cadet in a season warship. He cleans space goo from the Dendarion’s armor plates, performs out-of-ship tasks like changing lead light bulbs from hull housings, though the robots in the rails along the hull are specifically meant to do that. He doesn’t mind being run to the ground
in menial tasks so long as they teach him valuable things at the end of the day, and there isn’t a single day Steve doesn’t learn something enthralling.

From star-charting and black-hole beacon-guarding to basic lessons on Dendarion piloting and Raptor coordination, to war games in asteroid fields and rescue simulations in stranded ships hidden in the toxic, gas-choked atmosphere of planets the size of stars. Suddenly the love Steve has for the stars is real, it’s here at the tips of his fingers, he can feel it. It’s not just a far-away and vague dream anymore. He’s living it.

He misses Tony like a lung has been taken from him, but they talk regularly, three or four times a week. Tony has, in a surprising move, actually taken his own advice and gone to the Stark Industries R&D space station to make nice with investors and directors, and more importantly, Pepper Potts. He even talks about going on a trip with some of his fellow engineering track friends, and mockingly promises to send Steve a postcard.

Everything goes perfectly fine for the first two months.

And then something goes wrong.

Steve can tell from the shift in Tony’s attitude, by the way he seems nervous and anxious, by how restless he gets and how quickly he loses weight.

“Tony, talk to me,” he keeps begging through the comms, concern and anxiety rising in him like a tide, twisting his lungs and stomach into knots. “Let me help.”

But Tony deflects, dodges, demurs. He says ‘I can handle it’ and ‘It’s nothing’ and ‘It’ll be fine’ but it doesn’t see like he can handle it and it certainly is not nothing and the by the time Steve boards the Nairobi Blue back to the space dock and Third Earth, it’s also painfully clear that Tony has in fact not ‘handled it.’

Whatever it is.

X

“What?” he asks, cold with shock, dizzy with horror.

“Come on, come with me, please, say you will, you promised,” whispers Tony, face slack with a terror that runs bone-deep.

“Tony,” Steve’s voice breaks. “You resigned?”

“Yeah, I did, keep up, Steve, we don’t have time!”

“Why would you do that?”

“I have to go, Steve! You said you’d be with me as long as I wanted you, you said. Come with me. Please. Let’s go.”

Steve sits down on the couch, and feels like he’s breaking out into shards and splinters. He loves Tony, he loves Tony so much, he loves him desperately, but—but he thinks of the Red Felix and everything he lived and learned in the last three months and he can’t—just throw it away—
“Why?” he asks again, because he needs to know.

Tony’s face shutters. “Because I have to go!”

“Tony, I need to know why. Let me help you. Tell me what’s happened, we can work it out, we can find a way out of it together, if only you—”

“No,” snarls Tony, nearly throwing himself on the couch next to Steve and gripping his shirt in a tight fist, eyes fever-bright in his pale face. “There’s no fixing it, I have to disappear!”

“Tony, please, I can’t just go. I have duties, responsibilities—I’m a semester away from graduation —”

“None of that matters!”

*It matters to me,* thinks Steve, heartsick.

“You have to give me something,” he manages aloud. “Please. Talk to me.”

Tony shoves away from him and paces, then turns around to face him with bitterness written plainly across the lines of this face.

“So you’re not coming,” he says lowly. “It was all lies. All those things you said about never leaving me.”

“Tony,” starts Steve, and his voice dies in his throat. He can’t. He *can’t.* Not without a reason, a good one.

Tony’s eyes are flinty when he storms out of the room.

X

Six years pass before he sees Tony in person again.

X

Steve is a strategist by nature. He has eye for methodical processes and tactical decisions.

He watches the way Tony dismembers Stark Industries, selling each division like a severed limb hacked away from the main body, until nothing remains of the empire Howard Stark so painstakingly built.

Then Tony fades into anonymity and drops off the map completely.

X
They don’t give Steve the Triskelion off the bat, which is simultaneously a disappointment and a relief. Steve doesn’t feel ready for it.

Fury doesn’t recruit him right out of the Academy, though he does show up to offer a position in his secret police, for once an actual offer without any menace behind it.

“Kid,” he sighs when Steve declines him again. “Stark was a gamble. Some you win, some you lose. You can’t save everyone; you know that, soldier.”

I failed, thinks Steve.

“Do you know where I’m going to be assigned?”

“The Red Felix wanted you back, but you’ve been assigned to the Vulpina, stationed at the age of the Andromeda Galaxy.”

“Why not the Red Felix?” asks Steve, already mourning the swift death of a hope he hadn’t realized he harbored—that he would be sent back to the Felix, to the crew he’d grown to like so much in those three months.

Fury shakes his head slowly. “The Vulpina is a relay station in a high-traffic spot. You’re a born strategist, but you need to polish up on politics.”

“I hate politics.” Steve frowns. “You know I hate politics.”

“Some things aren’t up to what you love or hate,” replies Fury, not unkindly. “The Fleet needs you, Rogers.”

“You mean the Fleet needs someone that can do what I can, and some things I can’t do, regardless of my feelings about any of it.”

“The Third Earth Fleet is clockwork machinery, Rogers, and we’re all just little parts of it.”

Steve says nothing, eyes narrowed in thought. He glances at Fury, eyes sharp and cold as any glacier.

“Tell me the truth,” he says quietly.

Fury inhales deeply and exhales in a long, drawn-out sigh, like he regrets Steve’s inability to let things lie, not only because it annoys him, but because it would make Steve’s life that much easier.

“The term volatile has been going around, attached to your name, with a nice little Kobayashi Maru ribbon around it.”

Steve exhales. “Ah.”

“That’s what I call shooting yourself in the foot,” nods Fury. “But I’m not complaining. What you did was good. That test was shit and don’t I know it. But you could have done it on the quiet.”

Steve frowns at him. “If they wanted quiet, they shouldn’t have called a public discipline board and hoped I’d be ashamed.”

“Yeah,” agrees Fury pensively. “People are fucking stupid. And one more thing, Rogers.”
He stops and looks at Steve straight on, allowing the usually stern lines of his scarred face to soften slightly.

“You’re fucked up, Rogers,” he says quietly. “And the thing about fucked up people like you is that you survive.”

Steve isn’t sure whether he’s supposed to be relieved by this, or find some sort of comfort in it. Steve does know how to survive; he knows Tony’s absence isn’t going to kill him.

He just wishes it did.

X

Vulpina is exactly as advertised.

But Steve tries to do his best, because there is nothing he can do but his best, even when his best is not enough.

His best is, however, still good enough to get him quickly climbing ranks and making both friends and enemies. Such is, he reckons, the intrinsic nature of politics; and although Steve always has and always will hate politics, he recognizes the benefit of throwing himself into a challenge.

Because Steve Rogers knows himself, knows his mind, and he knows when his mind is splintering into fractals and the shards are all pointing inwards and sinking in fast. He has to stop this downwards slide before it starts and the only way he can do that is to betray himself and Tony. Because he can’t pull forward if he keeps as he is, lingering on his mistakes, telling himself every day that he failed to do something that was required of him, something that was important to the man he loves.

So he stands in front of the mirror in his bathroom and stares himself in the eye and shuts that down, survives the only way he knows how—he locks all of it down tight in ice and leaves it there. So Tony and everything Tony is and everything Tony means are tied to weigh and sunk down to the bottom of a frozen ocean, and he won’t be lonely there. He’ll have good company; Bucky, Peggy, and Steve’s mother are there, frozen, conserved in time in the shape of the last image Steve saw of them.

“You’re a coward,” he tells the mirror, with a mild sense of surprise, because he thought he was not this man.

Well, there are a great many cowards in this universe. One more will hardly hurt.

X

He sighs and lowers the tablet in his hands, staring at the data scrolling down the front shielding in the prison cell.

Behind the force-field shielding, an athletic and solid-looking man is executing an impressively
accurate rendition of a Taldeonian mating ritual. He’s a human and on his own, that’s why it’s impressive.

Steve rubs the bridge of his nose tiredly.

“Why ‘Deadpool’?” he asks.

“He’s deranged,” answers the guard emphatically. “Why he does anything at all is up for grabs. Sir.”

“What about her?” Steve wonders, glancing sidelong to the side cell where Deadpool’s companion is staring at him with an intensity that, where Steve a lesser man, would shrivel up his skin.

“Also deranged.”

Steve turns his head slowly to stare at the guard.

“She goes by Black Widow,” the man offers, sheepishly.

Steve shakes his head slightly. Of course she does.

“You want to talk to him?”

Steve looks back at Codename: Deadpool, who is currently executing an admirably flexible position that involves the back of his knee around the vicinity of the back of his head—it really is admirable —while at the same time singing an old First Earth tune that goes something along the lines of you’ve got blood on your face, you big disgrace and appears to need to be sung at the top of his lungs, conceivably to be done justice.

Steve is impressed.

“Deranged,” insists the guard ardently.

“He seems otherwise occupied,” he says flatly, and turns away to walk to Black Widow’s cell instead.

“Miss Romanov,” he greets, steeling himself.

“And you must be Steve Rogers,” she answers, face as mobile as any statue’s.

“I… must be,” says Steve doubtfully, growing swiftly warier.

“I’ve heard about you.”

“From who?” demands the guard, inexplicably outraged.


“Are you dismissing me for my poor grammar?” he asks suspiciously.

Steve turns around to stare at him properly. Blond, average height, broad shoulders, trim hips. The insignia on his shoulder bears the silver bulls-eye of the master marksman. “What’s your name, Legionnaire?”

“Clint Barton.”

“Thank you, Legionnaire Barton. Dismissed.”
“He’s got character,” comments Natasha Romanov as the guard leaves. “I like him.”

You can keep him, thinks Steve, eyeing Romanov like one eyes a poisonous and hostile snake.

“I didn’t do it,” she says flatly.

Steve clarifies, “You mean you didn’t do it this time.”

“That’s irrelevant.”

Steve doesn’t need to glance down at the tablet in his hands. “You’re wanted for no less than sixteen known murder charges. I think it’s quite relevant.”

“All alleged murder charges.”

“They couldn’t prove it,” admits Steve, tilting his head. “That doesn’t mean you didn’t do it.”

“In a court of law, not proving it absolutely means I didn’t do it.” She studies him for a long moment, blue eyes narrowed, head canted slightly to the side. “I wouldn’t have expected that argument from you.”

Steve lowers the tablet and resigns himself to a conversation that will most likely lead to a predictable yet regrettable attempt at manipulation. He really has no patience for smart criminals. “I don’t know why you should be expecting anything in particular from me.”

“You have a reputation.”

He stares at the ceiling. “Of course I do.”

But Romanov says nothing else, and Steve glances back at her as Deadpool switches tunes to I threw a wish in the well, don’t ask me I’ll never tell, I looked at you as it fell, and now you’re in my way at which point Steve tunes him out, for the sakes of his own sanity. Something must show on his face, though, because Romanov’s eyes flicker with something. Steve wouldn’t dare call it humor; it’s more like the embers of it, banked and glowing red.

“He’s deranged,” she says.

“Your choice,” replies Steve.

“You don’t choose Deadpool. He happens to you.”

Steve turns slightly to look over his shoulder at where Deadpool is singing at the top of his voice while at the same time performing a perfectly balanced handstand while splitting his legs in the air. He’s really flexible.

“I didn’t do it,” says Romanov quietly. Steve refocuses on her, turning all of his attention into studying her gestures, her expression, the way in which she moves. Natasha Romanov is a dangerous creature, even contained; and although the force field that acts as cell door is powerful and in a closed circuit, Steve would hardly be surprised to be hailed within the hour and informed that she’s broken out and escaped.

And, very likely, left Deadpool behind for them to deal with, because she looks like the kind of person who wouldn’t hesitate to inflict pain on others.

Steve is forced to accept that, reviewing the case being built against her, it reeks of set up. It’s a hard lump to swallow, something viscous and slimy that all the same does not easily go down his throat.
Still—sixteen alleged accounts of murder, known, and god only knows how many more have fallen into the cracks and slipped the system. Natasha Romanov is a well-known bounty hunter now, but once upon a time, in a not so distant past, she was a mercenary, an assassin, dangerous and wanted and deft at escaping.

The problem is, she’s an assassin—a killer, certainly, but not a murderer. Everything they know about her indicates she kills for a living, for hire. Not for her own gain, and not out of some twisted whim or uncontrollable impulse. She’s not a serial killer.

So the idea that she’s suddenly had some sort of psychotic break and murdered and skinned twelve people seems like a stretch. Steve isn’t going to argue that she’s mentally stable—she certainly doesn’t look sane and any drugstore psych eval would check her down for psychopath in all boxes—but he can’t say he believes she’s a violent sociopath, either. Well, violent, yes, obviously.

Still. If they can get her off space and into a locked cell, isn’t that for the betterment of the world? Except…framing her for murders she didn’t commit—

“I can see your brain working,” she says suddenly. “You know the conclusion you’re going to arrive at. Why don’t you save yourself the conflict?”

He knows what she’s implying.

“You’re a known mercenary,” he says calmly. “I’m not about to let you go.”

Romanov’s lips purse. She moves closer to the force field, eyes intense and bright. “I didn’t do this.”

Steve wants to argue that she didn’t do this, but that’s the whole point. That the spot in which it all pivots, because yes, she is a killer, and yes, she should be stopped—but she should be stopped the right way, through proper and due process, following the laws she so cavalierly breaks.

‘I’m not about you let you go.’ What a joke.

Something must show on his face, because Romanov’s eyes flicker with something that might have been, once upon a time, soft and gentle.

“Men like you are bound to make these sort of decisions,” she says softly.

Steve chuckles. “I already made it twice. Every time I do it, it costs me something.”

Romanov shrugs slightly. “You’ll keep making it regardless. That’s what you do. And it’ll cost you something else. And then you’ll make it again.”

Steve arches his brows. “You’re a barrel of sunshine.”

“I wasn’t aware you preferred lies.”

“Oh, let me guess,” Steve rears back and turns his head, frowning slightly, to give her a mock speculative look. “It’s not part of my reputation.”

Romanov stares at him. Steve straightens. He feels tired, weighed down by the sensation that nothing he ever does makes any difference. Not where it matters.

But he can save this life, at least. Not an innocent life, not by any stretch, but a life not rightfully at its end.

He considers that for a moment, and then is jerked out of his thoughts by a surprisingly accurate
rendition of Amazing Grace, when played with bagpipes.

“I’ve done a great deal of bad things,” mutters Romanov, “but as punishments go this one is cruel and unusual.”

Steve pulls a face and turns away. As he passes by Deadpool’s cell, the man drops back to his feet and comes up against the force field, pressing his palms to the shield.

“Hey Cap,” he says, beckoning like he wants Steve to come in close enough to whisper. Steve stares at him from exactly where he’s standing, a meter away. “What’s the tango in these here dungeons, man? Where can I get me some chocolate pudding?”

“I’m not a captain, and is that a euphemism for drugs?”


Incredulous and speechless, Steve looks back over his shoulder at Romanov. She stands exactly where she was before, arms crossed, face completely expressionless, as she mouths at him, “Cruel and unusual.” Steve shakes his head and moves to the door, motioning for Legionnaire Barton to back in on his way out.

Behind him, Deadpool reiterates that he wants chocolate pudding, and Barton shouts back, “I’ll get right on that, psycho!”

X

“Explain to me exactly how this happened,” says Paladin Nicholas Fury.

“Incompetence seems to be the word of the day,” Steve says flatly. “Although I’ve also heard negligence and, in one memorable case, and at a frankly impressive volume, aiding and abetting, obstruction of justice, and accomplice—actually, that last one was in a written email. It was harshly written. A lot of caps lock.”

Fury stares at him.

“Where did this attitude come from, soldier?”

Steve twitches his head to the side, amused despite himself. This is not the worst case scenario but it’s also not the ideal situation. Steve had known the Fleet wanted Romanov off space. He hadn’t known Fury was after her personally and had spent valuable time interrogating Deadpool.

He feels sorry for the poor man. No wonder he’s on a warpath.

“Turns out,” says Steve, who knows better than to paint a target on his own forehead but the knowing rarely stops him, “there is no Legionnaire Clint Barton, which might not be surprising to you, who might never have heard of him previous to this conversation, but came as quite a surprise to me, considering I met him and left him guarding the two prisoners.”

“You’re telling me some man just swaggered into this high-security space station, pretended to be a Legionnaire, put himself in the guard duty roster, and then swanned right the fuck out with two prisoners?”
Yes, thinks Steve, and I let them. A heavy knot of guilt twists his stomach when he thinks about the injured guards, but they are only injured and will recover; Romanov would have been sentenced to death, most likely, had she remained in custody.

“I wouldn’t say swagger,” clarifies Steve, all in the name of honesty. “And I didn’t see him walk out, but he didn’t seem the swanning kind. I don’t think that’s a verb, by the way.”

If Fury’s face could accomplish the expression, Steve thinks he would be gaping.

“What is wrong with you, Rogers?”

“A great many things,” admits Steve.

“Do you have any idea of the amount of property damage she made on her way out? She knocked out a dozen guards, three of which have broken bones, she stole a battle speedship worth millions of credits, destroyed a hangar, incapacitated half of the cannons on this station, released two dozen prisoners—is any of this getting through to you at all?”

Steve, standing at ease with his hands behind his back, shrugs slightly. “I’m just thinking that if only three of the guards have broken bones, the rest got off easy.”

Fury stands from his chair and rounds the desk, his face thoughtful and speculative. He leans back against the desk, crosses his ankles, crosses his arms, and stares at Steve for a good long while, perfectly silent. Steve waits him out. If Fury is waiting him out, they’re going to be here a long time.

“You’re a smart guy, Rogers,” he says at length, and it feels more like a threat than praise. “You wouldn’t let Romanov walk just to sabotage your career so I can’t get my hands on you, would you?”

Steve starts, frankly startled. The idea hadn’t even occurred to him. Although unwisely twisted, it has merit. But Steve shakes his head.

“I’m not sabotaging my career,” he answers honestly. “And I thought you said I had turned out to be too volatile.”

“I don’t mind volatile if it comes with the perks of a big brain,” points out Fury. “What I do mind is a man who’s willing to bend, break and disregard the rules and laws, just because he feels they’re incorrect. This is the second time.”

“There should be no other reason to bend, disregard and break rules and laws than because they are incorrect, Paladin Fury. When I signed up for the Fleet, I didn’t sign away my conscience.”

Fury gives him a long look. “So you admit that you let her get away.”

“I didn’t stop her,” admits Steve, because Fury knows, and there will be no convincing him otherwise and only consequences will come from lying to him. He looks at Fury straight on, evenly, and says: “And I know you wouldn’t have, either, sir.”

“You’re a good man, Rogers,” Fury says quietly. “But if you keep at it like this, you’ll never be a great one.”

“I’d rather be what I am now, sir.”
Unsurprisingly, and to be fair rather justly, Fury pins it on Steve.

Steve is quite certain that, although allegedly allowing a wanted assassin to walk right out of the space station he is supposed to be supervising is bad enough, half of the demotion he receives that bumps him right back down to Legionnaire comes from the fact Fury wasted four hours in Deadpool’s interrogation and apparently learned nothing new.

Frankly, if anyone had asked Steve whether interrogating Deadpool would yield any dividends after he got a look at him through a cell force field, he could have saved Fury the time. If Wade Wilson knew anything of interest to anyone, it is buried so deep in tangled insanity and random outbursts of wholly inconsequential wisdom that asking him anything of any importance is a waste of brain activity.

Steve doesn’t mind the demotion, not really. It irritates him that people seem to act like he’s a fragile porcelain statue for a while, after—like they think he might fall apart for having been punished for something he did. That’s not a problem for Steve; although he thinks he did the right thing, he did still go against orders, against the law, so he does deserve the punishment, and he doesn’t resent his actions for their consequences.

Besides, being a Legionnaire again affords him a lot of manual, inconsequential work, and while Steve’s real brilliance is high-stake strategizing, he understand and appreciates the importance of these comparatively small tasks. Any work is work, after all, and Steve doesn’t think himself above cleaning gutters, let alone charting basic star paths.

There’s only one thing that makes his stomach tighten with worry. Fury’s obvious and transparent manipulation of the whole thing. Well, transparent to Steve, anyway. When he brings it up with Scott, Logan, and Charles about a month later, in a rare visit back on Third Earth, he gets one mildly puzzled but concerned look and two identical blank stares. Go ahead and guess.

“But why?” asks Charles, frowning and expertly manipulating noodles around with his chopsticks.

“What does he stand to gain?”

“I imagine the more people think I’m a volatile imbecile, the less prospects I’ll have for the future.”

“So what does he want a loser for?” mumbles Logan, stabbing his fork into a sushi roll.

“Use your hands, dipshit,” snaps Scott.

“Suck my dick, princess.”

“If I don’t have any offers,” says Steve, ignoring both of them and addressing Charles. “Then I can’t exactly refuse when he offers me a place aboard the Ionstar.”

“You could always prostitute yourself,” suggests Logan.

“Of course you could refuse,” Charles says earnestly. “You’ll always have a spot aboard the Heartsteel, I’m sure.”

“You don’t have a spot aboard the Heartsteel yet,” Steve points out, even though everyone at the table, at the entire Academy, knows it’s a moot point. There’s only one Deputy Commander that War-Prince Erik Lehnsherr will ever tolerate stepping onto his newly commissioned ship. “You
shouldn’t be offering spots in Lehnsherr’s name.”

“I’m certain Erik would absolutely agree. I needn’t even ask him, a look at your charts would more than convince him.”

“Besides, he kind of fell in love with you over the *Kobayashi Maru,*” adds Scott. “Don’t even look at me like that, Charles, Erik’s emotion chip totally sparked up in the disciplinary hearing.”


Steve shakes his head. “Fury won’t let Lehnsherr take on a strategist, not with his own test scores. He wouldn’t need me.”

Charles coughs, but shakes his head when Scott lifts a hand to pound him on the back. “We’ll figure it out,” he says gently when he’s recovered, laying a hand on Steve’s arm in support.

Steve nods like he believes him, because Charles is sweet and kind, but he knows Lehnsherr won’t try, even if Charles suggests it. Lehnsherr is a smart man, too smart to get in Fury’s way, and there is no reason for him to be concerned about Steve’s prospects. He’s already doing enough for Logan and Scott, making sure they stay in the Academy, maneuvering everything so he can get them aboard the Heartsteel. To the casual observer his interest in them may be casual, but Steve knows better. There is such a thing as staking a claim, and Lehnsherr’s claims are hard to miss.

He sighs. He supposes he’ll follow Tony’s advice.

*Burn that bridge when you get to it.*

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Legionnaire to Prince to War-Prince in the record time of three years.

By the time he’s five years out of the Academy, they don’t have any choice but to make him a Paladin or stall him, so Steve Rogers becomes Paladin Steve Rogers and is given command of the distant Space Base Americium.

The Americium is out of the way enough that something exciting rarely happens. It is a form of stalling him, and Steve sees Fury’s heavy hand on it as easy as he sees his own eyes in the reflection of the mirror every morning.

The possibilities of achieving any sort of glory in a far off, out-of-the-way battle outpost are as abundant as Logan and Scott’s innate elegance, so Steve settles in for a quiet, uneventful five-year command in the ass-end of the galaxy.

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One year in, Charles is accused of treason.

Steve will never forget the way the Prince’s face drains of all color, blue eyes wide with shock and
incomprehension as he’s betrayed by the very organization he’s sworn to uphold and serve.

In a few months Steve will find himself comparing this Charles to the sleep-deprived but chipper Charles nestled on his couch on the very first day Steve met him, optimistic and hopeful about a promising Fleet career spread out before him with all the potential in the galaxy, and wonder to himself how things can all go so terribly, terribly wrong.

X

“Tony’s got a lock on where they’ve taken Charles,” Steve tells Erik Lehnsherr over the transmission, watching the way the rogue War-Prince’s expression goes blank like the flick of a switch, utterly expressionless yet all the more telling for it.

“They’re going to execute him,” Erik says with a calm so false that Steve wonders how the man hasn’t flown completely apart at the seams.

“No,” Steve answers, thinking of the grainy drone-taken images Loki had sent over at Tony’s request, “they’re going to slaughter him.”

Erik’s expression doesn’t break.

It shatters.

X

The Heartsteel explodes in the dead of space, right in front of Steve’s eyes, exactly where Bucky and Peggy died.

Tony storms out of the Ionstar’s bridge to deal with sorrow in the way Tony always deals with sorrow—impenetrable anger and the dwindling contents of a bottle.

Steve stays on the bridge because he doesn’t know how to deal with sorrow at all. He watches the single remaining Nyrulian ship of the five that hunted the Heartsteel down like hounds slide into warp and out of sight.

When it’s done, and the space around them is nothing but a field of debris strewn among the broken pieces of what used to be the Moon, Steve still can’t breathe.

X

_Bucky. Peggy. Erik. Charles._
He envies people who experience the passing of days of mourning like a distant, buzzing blur, where people become faceless shadows and voices are murmurs, everything muted by a smoky screen of grief.

That isn’t how he experiences sorrow, although he admits there is a rather big chance he doesn’t deal with it at all. He hasn’t forgiven himself for losing Bucky and Peggy and he doesn’t know how to forgive himself for losing Charles and Erik, and although a rational and quiet part of his mind suggests the fault lies elsewhere—in a long and unfortunate string of actions, none of which were taken by him—he mostly blames himself.

Common knowledge sustains people go through stages of grief, five of them: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The old adage of every man is different has never held truer; Steve feels like he skips right to acceptance, dropping to the bottom of the ladder like a lead cube in water. Tony goes from denial to anger and stalls there indefinitely.

The rage consumes Tony like everything else that he feels deeply tends to do; he spends days in the Engineering subbasements, slithering unseen onto passages barely the size of his body to examine panels that no one remembers putting there, let alone what they’re for. He forgets to eat and replaces sustenance with alcohol, and god only knows how he even gets ahold of the stuff while trapped on a Fleet ship. He doesn’t sleep, or does so in restless snatches of time caught between one unnecessary task and the next. He unravels into a violent rampage of activity that Steve is helpless to stop, running himself to the ground.

Steve tries to control it, but Tony feeds off his own guilt and latches onto him like a target. That would be fine, for Steve—he wouldn’t mind, if it were only him. If what Tony needed was someone to stand still like a rock in the barrage of his anger and take the hits, Steve could do that for him no questions asked. But Tony isn’t so far gone in his grief that he can’t see what he does to Steve, and for whatever relief the rage affords him, the guilt of his crueltysinks him even lower.

Steve knows how this goes, now. Tony doesn’t know what he wants or how to get it, and eventually he’s going to come up against the worst idea and cling to it like salvation, and it’s not going to be the right one. It’s going to be Tony, purposefully failing self-defense, missing classes, forgetting to take exams. Walking away from the Academy.

Steve can’t stop it. He knows how, but he won’t. If Tony thinks he needs to walk away again—how could Steve stop him? How much more damage would it make to confront him?

No. Steve won’t stop it.

“You have to stop it,” says Logan decisively one afternoon, as he and Scott saunter into Steve’s temporary office granted to him by Fury like they own the place and then shutting and locking the door with Steve’s security override. The likelihood of them guessing a combination of seven numbers and letters with capitalization is so remote that Steve is already trying to figure out how Scott hacked into his accounts when Logan drops gracelessly into the chair across from him.
“Stop what?” he asks, somewhat belatedly.

“You know what,” snaps Logan.

This conversation is going to happen now, then, Steve thinks with some resignation, and wipes the holograms and projections away from the air around him to sit back in his chair and settle in for what will certainly amount to a foul-worded diatribe on his emotional immaturity and inability to corral and contain wayward engineering geniuses.

He’s already gotten this talk from Fury. He was hoping his friends would spare him, but alright.

“You can’t go through this again,” says Scott, startling Steve. “If Tony wants to fuck off to dick around playing at being the smartest delinquent in the known universe, whatever. He can go burn himself on his own cross, watch me give a shit. But your doormat act is getting old.”

Ah. “I’m sorry I irritate you with my emotions, Scott,” Steve says calmly. “I’ll make sure to indulge them away from you in future.”

“Thank you so much,” Scott says fervently, and turns right back around to go out the door before Logan’s hand shoots out and catches his wrist, dragging him back. Steve is witness to some sort of exchange between them that might pass off as communication so long as one accounts for eyebrow wiggles, the widening of eyes, the down-turning of mouths into hostile scowls, one memorable snarl from Logan, and one rude gesture from Scott that requires both of his hands to be correctly executed.

The synchronicity with which they then turn to him is more than a little creepy.

Logan stares at him with a slight frown like Steve is a mild inconvenience he can’t quite figure out how to get rid of. Should he shoot it? Should he ignore it?

“Tell him to either go away or fucking put his money where his dick’s been.”

“That’s not how that expression goes,” Steve points out warily.

“Whatever!” explodes Scott, throwing up his hands. “Fucking grow a spine, Paladin Rogers! What are you going to do, follow him around like a puppy until his balls drop? Talk to him about his bullshit! Become a real fucking boy, you robot!”

The sheer lunacy of Scott and Logan going to his office to advice him to actually use his words with Tony hits Steve all at once, mirth rising to the surface like a bloom opening in the sun. The amusement cuts across what he only now realizes has been a steady thrum of grey-shaded dismay.

He sighs. “You guys know Tony.”

“You said you were working it out,” accuses Scott with unveiled hostility, like he resents that Steve hasn’t been able to fix all of Tony’s emotional traumas and arranges for a happy ending for them already. He’s had two weeks! What is Steve doing with his time, huh?

“I’m trying,” starts Steve, settling down for this conversation.

“Just tell him you love him already!” barks Logan, sitting up abruptly to slap both hands down on the desk screen. Holograms of half-thought strategic plans and start charts snap up around Steve in silver-blue light, spinning slowly.

“Just like that,” he says tiredly. “Exactly like that.”
“Yes!”

“I think there seems to be a communication barrier here,” suggests Steve. “Or maybe a misunderstanding. Have you guys met Tony? Are you maybe talking about another Tony? Because I understand given current events a lot of people might be in need of psychological help and I’d be glad to offer, but I hardly think me involving myself in the therapy of every crewmember will—”

“Tony’s an immature dick,” interrupts Logan shrewdly, “but you’re fucking scared of your own feelings, and we’ve waited for you, Steve, we really have. We’ve given you six years to work your shit out, but you haven’t. So yeah, you get to have a fucking intervention, and you can fucking choke on it. Cards on the table time, bub.”

Steve opens his mouth to argue, but Scott blindsides him with a curt: “You’ve gotta let Bucky and Peggy go.”

There’s a beat of silence in which white noise rises to Steve’s ears. A swell of something hot and ugly blooms in his chest, and he squashes it ruthlessly before he even knows he’s done it. Cold washes over him like a breath of mint in his veins.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says flatly.

“No, because you don’t fucking tell us about it,” rages Scott.

“It’s none of your business,” Steve says distantly, examining Logan and Scott with eyes as clear and cold as chips off a glacier.

“We spent a lot of time in a ship with two commanders who wanted to fuck each other’s brains out and one of them didn’t even fucking know it,” hisses Scott. It’s the closest either of them has come to mentioning Erik or Charles since—since. “At least both you guys are fucking aware of it, so explain to me why the fuck you’re not at it already?”

Steve laughs quietly, and even to him the sound is bitter and alien, like someone else is laughing in his voice.

“You two of all people want to give me advice on how to express my feelings,” he says incredulously.

“Look around, Steve,” Logan says lowly. “Scott and I have our issues but we’ve been together for years, and as much as it pains me to say, we’re good together.”

“Bucky and Peggy are dead,” Scott spits scathingly, stalking forward until he’s standing next to Logan. “They’ve been dead for years.” Get over it. Move on.

Frost begins to climb up Steve’s lungs. He feels as cold as though he were made of ice and twice as brittle. But something else is solidifying in his chest, something cold and dark and hideous, and his breath is catching thin on the exhale, pained on his dry throat.

“Get out,” he manages to say, voice like a blade.

“They’re dead!” roars Scott, coming around the table to grab Steve by the shoulder and shake him—

Steve surges out of his chair, deadly grace like a snake and his hand around Scott’s throat. Rage whites out his vision. Strategic thought remains. He curves his body around Scott’s and throws his weight upon the table with all his strength, sinking an elbow into his solar plexus with deliberate brutality. The touch screen fractures beneath Scott’s back with a loud snap. The holograms around
them cascade down and disappear in a shortcut of backup systems firing up along several alarms.

“Shut up,” he hisses into Scott’s panicked face, glaring down at him through narrowed eyes, breath perfectly even.

The hairs at the back of his hair rise. His left elbow flies back and collides against Logan’s chin just as the Legionnaire angles his face upwards to salvage his nose. Before the loud click of teeth snapping together fades in his ears Steve is slamming his back against the wall, punishingly harsh, a forearm shoved against his clavicle.

“Coming up on my six,” he muses in a voice he doesn’t recognize. “I taught you better.”

He gives him one last rattling shake and then throws him to the side to crumple on the floor. Scott slides off the table, a muffled sound of pain escaping him.

“Get out,” Steve says quietly, reeling back the instinct to continue. Scott and Logan are still mobile; by all rights he should subdue them, but it’s fine. They’re done.

Suddenly Logan is laughing, a low and rattling chuckle tinted heavy with bitterness as he climbs staggeringly to his feet. He grunts as he stands, shaking his shoulders free of tension and pain. Something wraps tight like a vice around Steve’s chest and compresses, so his next drawn breath is short and loud through his nostrils.

“Look at him,” Logan tells Scott conversationally, running his tongue across the inside of his mouth like he might be checking for damage. “Little toy soldier’s got feelings after all. Wouldn’t know it to look at him, would you?”

Steve sees through Logan to the core of him. He’s furious and tired and spoiling for a fight, but he’s hurt and worried too, and a considerable amount of that concern is for Steve. They’re taunting him, trying to draw him out, probing at his weaknesses to get a reaction out of him. They want him to react, and the only correct response to such intensions is always to back down and cool off, to think.

Steve draws a long breath, striving for calm.

Scott spits at him.

Steve checks out of his head for the first time in his life. Without a single rational command, his body surges forward and punches Scott so harshly in the jaw that he topples backwards like a puppet with its strings cut, silent and graceless. Logan moves in to engage. Steve blocks his punch to the solar plexus and leans back to kick him brutally in the chest, sending him flying backwards.

His back hits the doors and the sensors slide them open. Scott falls back on the floor of the Ionstar’s fourth strategic bridge, grunting. Steve moves in on him slowly, mind shooting forward to devise the best way to subdue Scott swiftly and efficiently. He’s vaguely aware of the people around them reeling back, shocked and confused. Steve’s eyes slide along the room, cataloguing threats; none make themselves evident, so he focuses back on Scott.

He’s managed to get on his hands and knees, struggling for breath.

“You couldn’t save them,” he wheezes, stumbling Shakily to his feet, perverse to the bitter end. “You were just a weak kid and you couldn’t save them. And they’re dead. And it’s not your fucking fault, but they’re dead. They’re dead!”

“Stop talking,” Steve says curtly, advancing on him.
But Scott shoots his hands out and shoves at Steve’s chest—a pointless and strategically weak attack that does nothing to halt Steve’s forward motion at all, he barely registers it.

“But we’re alive, you dick!” he roars at Steve, and it surprises Steve enough that he hesitates, rage clearing for a heartbeat.

Scott takes the chance to twist and shove the jut of his shoulder against Steve’s sternum, but he’s too close and the attack, while clever, lacks momentum. Steve absorbs it with a step backwards, absently catching Scott’s elbow and shoving the shoulder out of the socket in one swift, economic motion. Scott howls and falls to the floor, curving protectively over the limb.

Steve glances up. He realizes suddenly that the people in the bridge are evacuating, an orderly and quiet operation overseen by Hank McCoy, who’s standing next to the bridge door with a full med kit at his shoulder. This speaks of strategic planning.

Steve’s been ambushed.

The shock of it clears enough of his rage that he’s perfectly aware when Logan comes up from behind him and attempts to put him in a chokehold. He sidesteps out of range nimbly, circling around Scott, and realizes suddenly that his breath is short and painful, like the muscles in his chest have forgotten how to expand around his lungs and allow air in.

“Steve, we need you,” Logan says evenly, gently, like Steve hasn’t just kicked him across a room, like he didn’t just hurt them, deliberately, on purpose.

Oh God, he thinks, watching a drop of blood roll down Logan’s chin from a cut lip. He feels sick.

“We need you, but you need to—come out the other side of this,” Logan continues. “You can’t keep going like this, like you’re just absorbing shockwaves. You need to get through this.”

“I have,” rasps Steve.

“Like shit,” groans Scott, lifting his head to glare at him. “My dislocated fucking shoulder says you haven’t gotten through shit, Steve.”

Steve’s eyes drag up to McCoy, standing immobile by the door.

“Help him.”

“Not until you’re done,” answers the medic, shaking his head. “This conversation isn’t over, and if you’re going to fly off the handle again, I’m not going to be in the way.”

“I would never—”

“Wouldn’t you?” challenges the CMO, and distantly, on some other quiet track of thought that Steve won’t examine until much later, he thinks he’s beginning to realize why no one wants to mess with the Heartsteel’s crew.

Steve reels back, staggering. His eyes slide back to Scott and then to Logan, who’s actually lighting a cigar with shaking hands streaked with his own blood. Logan inhales, a long drag of acrid smoke that makes the point of the cigar flare bright and hot.

“Steve,” he starts, but then the doors slide open, signaling the security code being overridden, and Tony storms in, looking somewhere in the territory between furious and horrified. His hazel eyes skip from Scott to Logan and finally find Steve, shocked.
Steve can’t breathe. His muscles lock tight around his chest, constricting on the exhale.

“Tony,” he gasps, helpless.

Tony’s face breaks into something painfully close to compassion, before he turns to the wall panel by the door.

“I’m making you a lap,” he says over his shoulder, fingers typing quickly. McCoy glances at Steve for a fraction of a second, eyes glittering hard and cold, and then swiftly crosses the room to assist Scott.

Steve heaves in a breath tight with gratitude and stumbles wordlessly to the door, already yanking off his tight uniform jacket, uncaring of the way the fabric stretches under his hands. By the time he’s staggering out into the hallway, colliding mindlessly against the wall opposite the door, his heart rate is already high enough that heat is rising under his skin.

He runs.

Tony’s blocked off all accesses to the main deck corridor, locked all doors with an emergency override.

Steve runs mindlessly, allowing the exercise to wipe his mind completely of anything but the necessary motions of his body. He focuses on the burn of muscles long unused, on the way his breath comes short long before it used to, on the warmth of his skin under his shirt, soaked with sweat. He can’t tell how long it goes on until he stumbles and falls and finds he can’t get up again. He can barely drag air into his lungs; his heart feels like it’s going to beat out of his chest.

And then, when he manages to drag in a full lungful of air, he screams, surprising himself by the action and by how good it feels. It feels so goddamn good that he does it again, and again, and the fourth time he tries what comes out of his throat is nothing but a choked sob, so he curls on his knees and presses his forehead to the floor.

Tony finds him eventually, lowering himself to the floor against a nearby wall and sighing.

“Logan and Scott are fine. They’re like cockroaches.”

Steve swallows and wraps his arms around his stomach, closing his eyes. The floor is cool against his heated forehead. It hums very, very lightly with the motion of the engines and systems keeping the Ionstar alive.

“You can’t go on like this, Steve,” Tony says quietly.

Steve rocks his head slowly and with a monumental effort manages to get up to his knees and crawl closer to Tony. He crumples against him, dropping his forehead to Tony’s shoulder. Tony makes a noise, startled, and presses his hands to Steve’s back.

“If you go,” he mumbles in a voice that feels like it’s been dragged through miles of broken glass. “Please take me with you.”

Tony exhales roughly against his ear, pressing his nose and lips to Steve’s temple. “Fuck, Steve.”

They stay on the floor in the main corridor until Steve stops shaking and can stand. For the first time in his life, Steve experiences the passage of time like a blank blur. Time passes and actions are taken between the floor of the corridor and when he becomes once more aware of himself in his own bed in his temporary quarters. His hair is damp but his clothes are dry and soft and he smells like exactly
He’s taken a sonic shower and gotten dressed and into bed. Or rather, Tony showered and dressed. The engineer is just now sitting at the edge of his bed, stroking the hair away from Steve’s forehead.

“Hi, buddy,” he says gently, folding a leg under himself. Steve is lying on his side, curled up under the covers.

“Tony,” Steve rasps, voice breaking unevenly. He clears his throat, but it still aches like it’s raw when he starts talking again. “I love you. Take me with you.”

Tony sighs. “Logan and Scott keep saying they need you for something, which I think is just nefarious, and knowing them will end poorly at best, you know. They’re shit at keeping secrets though, so I guess we’ll know what they’re planning soon enough.”

Steve frowns vaguely. He feels exhausted, wrung out.

“I couldn’t save them,” he muses blankly, wondering what someone who fails at the more basic of duties could be needed for at all. Bucky. Peggy. Erik. Charles.

“No, we couldn’t,” agrees Tony softly. “But we can damn well avenge them.”

Steve’s eyes dart to him.

“You’re staying?”

“I can’t leave you alone with Scott and Logan,” Tony pulls a face. “Even I am not that much of a dick.”

Steve pulls a hand out from under the covers to wrap it around the back of Tony’s neck and drag him down to a kiss, long and languid. His relief could fill in all the spaces in between the stars.

Tony hums into his mouth and curls in over him, pulling his legs up to lie over the covers.

“Yeah,” he sighs eventually, pressing a chaste kiss to Steve’s left eyelid. “We don’t have any time to be stupid to each other, Steve. We’ve got shit to avenge. I’m not walking out on you again.”

Steve makes a small noise in agreement, and falls asleep with his face hidden against Tony’s throat.

“...”

“This too shall pass,” Charles tells him gently, their empty teacups perched on their saucers on the table between them and Steve’s bitterness at failing the test for the fifth time still hangs heavy in the air, “and one day eventually we’ll all be graduates, shipping out into the galaxy and seeing it firsthand because in the long run, sims can’t compare.” He smiles, soft but hopeful, Steve unable to help but smile a little in return. “And just think of all the things that we’ll accomplish.”
Paladin to the First Degree Steven Grant Rogers, Graduate with the Highest Honors of the Imperial Academy, genius tactician and strategist, solar-system-champion of the Intergalactic Olympics in speed running and hammer throwing, and Captain Commander of the TEF Ad Astra Per Aspera—because Fury thinks he’s funny—steps onto the bridge.

“All systems go, Cap,” Scott reports as Steve walks over to the captain’s chair, and of course he’s picked up on the nickname that’s spread like wildfire. “Tony sent up an all-clear from the Engineering deck too. And also something obscene that I refuse to read out loud, keep your goddamn bedroom life in the bedroom. Sir.”

“We’ve got the green light,” Logan adds, one hand resting on the warp drive in anticipation, “on your command, sir. And don’t forget—”

“Yes, I know,” Steve interrupts him, faintly amused, “you and Scott need to talk to me and Tony as soon as we’re, as you put earlier, five jillion light years away from the Ionstar. Let’s focus on making our first jump to warp as smooth as possible, shall we?”

“I said five fucking jillion light years,” Scott mutters, “get it right.”

Steve resists the urge to sigh. The Aspera’s name is more appropriate than Fury could have ever imagined—or maybe he did, and that’s the entire point. Think of all the things they’re going to accomplish, he muses, together as a team.

“For our friends,” he says, because while their ghosts may hover at his shoulders as a constant reminder of why he can’t stop and won’t stop, he doesn’t have to bear the burden alone, “punch it.”