Leaving Promises Against Your Skin
by nostalgicatsea

Summary

“Someday, someone will choose you, Tony,” his mother had said, her hands back to cupping his. “And no one, not your father, not anyone, can ever take that from you.”

Notes

Fanart by hellogarbagetime in chapter two.

中文 translation by CLI_evaney available here.

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This is the sequel to "Multitude of One." You don't need to read it to understand this story (all you need to know is that Steve's words are "So was I" and that other than the soulmate aspect to the story, "Multitude of One" is canon-compliant through CA:CW).

This fic would have never been finished—or, for that matter, even started—had it not been for asparrowsfall's generous donation for the Stony Trumps Hate auction. I knew where Steve and Tony would end up while writing the ending to "Multitude of One," but I refused to tell anyone what the true ending was because I wanted it to be up to the reader and to leave myself some room if I ever wanted to continue the story. I didn't think I would, though, because I knew that I wanted to write it in Tony's POV and that I would need to devote many words to do his side justice—and I have never written in Tony's POV before because I
find it daunting and have never written a fic longer than 4.2k; my average is 1–2k...imagine my excitement and horror as this monster of a fic kept growing. My first long fic ever!

I wanted to give up on this fic many times. It was extremely difficult to write, and I didn't think I was capable of writing it. Had I been writing this for myself, I would have given up early on, but I was writing it for STH so I couldn't. It ended up being incredibly rewarding. It's not perfect, but I'm proud of it and proud of pushing myself to do something I didn't think I could do, POV– and word count–wise!

So thank you for giving me the opportunity to write this and to grow as a writer and thank you for being so patient as I took forever writing it, sparrow.

I also want to give special thanks to aslightstep and erde, who have not only had to put up with me incessantly whining about this fic in their DMs but have also been so encouraging and helpful every step of the way, as well as laireshi who came in later to cheer me on and help me brainstorm when I got stuck for ages once I reached the home stretch. Thank you, thank you, thank you. And thank you to everyone else who listened patiently as I yelled in frustration and despair during the writing process and everyone who showed "Multitude of One" so much love. This story would not have been made without you all.

And to end this, I'll leave you with the quote that pushed me while writing this fic:

"We had the stars, you and I. And this is given once only." – André Aciman, Call Me By Your Name
"You don’t deserve it," he said because for a second he thought that Steve was going to kill him with the shield that his father had made, the one that he had chosen out of all the ones that Howard had offered him.

"You don’t deserve it," he said because he wanted to hurt Steve enough to push him away.

He wanted to throw himself at Steve. Get one last shot in, push him as hard and as far away as he could. Leave as permanent of a scar on him as Steve had left on his wrist.

Grab hold of him and not let go.

He wanted to hurt Steve enough for him to stop. To stay.

His hands curled into tight fists, and he stayed immobilized on the ground.

"You don’t deserve it," he said because he wanted to ask what he did to deserve him instead, but he didn’t know how.

He had never deserved Steve.

He deserved better than this.

He didn’t know what he deserved.

Steve paused, bowing his head, and Tony knew his blow had landed, four sharp hooks gouged into Steve’s skin, ready to slice his back open the moment he took a step away from him.

Please, he thought desperately, though he didn’t know what he was asking for.

He had always been able to get under Steve’s skin from the very beginning.

And Steve had always responded.

Tony watched as Steve dropped the shield and walked on, not looking back once.

It shouldn’t have hurt this badly.

It was old hat by now, this cycle of betrayal and abandonment. Let someone in. Let someone go. Rinse and repeat.

He had a lifetime of preparation, learning to carve out the parts of himself that hurt with more precision after every round. Amputate and the wounds wouldn’t fester; amputate and he wouldn’t get soft with decay and collapse. He had become empty by the time he was in his twenties, and while he had clawed out of that void after becoming Iron Man, old habits died hard and Obie had reminded him that there was wisdom in distance.

So when Natalie had become Natasha, when Fury had told him he failed his boy band audition,
when Steve had been disappointed in him because of Ultron, it was easy to roll with the punches. Tony knew how to step away so that the glancing stab, always surprisingly sharper than he expected, wouldn’t run through him even if it landed, knew how to staunch the wound and smother the pain so that it wouldn’t spread through him like poison.

So that it wouldn’t leave him like this, flayed open, every bit of him raw and exposed, bleeding everywhere. He felt like crying and he could if he wanted to—there was no one with him here, miles above the ocean where Steve had spent the better part of sixty years, where he bitterly wished Steve had stayed except he didn’t, not really, because he knew what that was like, dying alone in the darkness—but his chest hurt too much to even breathe and the tears didn’t come as if he had forgotten how to shed them. They welled up inside him, rising past chest level up to his throat, up past his mouth, his nose, and he wanted to tear out of his skin, to pry open his rib cage and flee his body so that he wouldn’t suffocate on them.

He couldn’t breathe. Steve’s betrayal sat heavily on his chest, lodged there in the shield’s stead, keeping air from his lungs. He was cracked open, naked. He was shut in, trapped.

The lands shifted below him, tens of thousands of feet away, but this high up where the movement was imperceptible, he was fixed in limbo, white space stretching infinitely in every direction, his thoughts on a numbing loop.

*How could he* pounded dully in his head over and over again.

And then *how could he, how could he, how could he turned into how could I have been so stupid, how could I let this happen, how could I have not prevented this*, and if Steve had never said his word, Tony thought furiously and hopelessly, if he hadn’t realized it had been his word, then he wouldn’t have let—

Yes, he would.

Because this was the terrible, inescapable truth: he loved Steve, had fallen in love with Steve long before Steve had said his word—and in doing so, placed his faith in a man who may have never existed.

Tony wondered if his mother had felt that way in the end. Dying because of her soulmate’s obsession. Because of *his* soulmate’s…

His soulmate’s…

Barnes’s hand had been around his mother’s neck. He had reached in with his real hand—why had he done that with his real hand, his metal one would have been safer, more impersonal and anonymous—and he had killed her, knowing exactly how her pulse felt under his fingers as he squeezed, how her windpipe felt as he crushed it in a vise, how her fingernails felt against his skin as she scratched him, her hands scrabbling—

Her hands. Her hands that held his when she had seen his word, that had been warm and gentle and reassuring even as she spoke with a ferocity that Tony had never heard from her before. He almost felt them on him now, a phantom imprint from years past that time had never managed to fully wash away.

“*Never mind your father. You’re enough. You were always enough, but now you won’t forget.*”
He didn’t want to remember this. He dug the heels of his palms into his eyes as though that would push the memory back into the recesses of his mind, but he always had a knack for recalling things that he would rather forget. He remembered the way she had tipped his chin up as he leaned away, embarrassed by her words and his reaction to his father’s disapproval.

“Someday, someone will choose you, Tony,” she had said, her hands back to cupping his. “And no one, not your father, not anyone, can ever take that from you.”

“Here’s your indisputable proof,” she seemed to say as she had brushed her thumb over his word, but his mother had never been a scientist. Indisputable proof meant it was tried and tested, and it never had been, until now.

Tony laughed, a rusty, jarring sound that scraped his insides bloody. Darkness bled across his vision and he tumbled into it headfirst, falling and falling, in a dizzying descent with no end.

Rogers always did love proving everyone wrong.

By the time he landed back at the compound in the middle of the night, Tony felt nothing. Fury, which had raged untamed, had been mostly extinguished in the wake of Steve’s departure, and the flight over the Atlantic was long and solitary enough to extinguish the last embers that remained. He was a forest razed to the ground by wildfire. Barren. Inhospitable.

He was fine with that. Not caring meant not hurting which meant no distractions, and he needed to be as focused as possible. There were things to take care of. Laws to amend, teenage spiderlings to mentor, inventions to be made. He needed to fix Rhodey’s legs, he needed to fight off Ross, he needed to do something about the Raft, he needed to improve BARF. He needed to make his suit more impenetrable. He needed to prepare the world for intergalactic threats.

The numbness didn’t last long. Steve was everywhere in his absence. The “World’s Best Dad” mug that Natasha had gotten for him, and Tony, in the sink. The knit throw that was originally Wanda’s and then the team’s and then his, neatly folded with militaristic precision on the couch. A mission report open on the coffee table, a note stopped mid-scrawl in the margin, a pen resting on top of it and holding his place on the page as though he had simply gone out for a run and would come back to read it over lunch. That was Steve’s personal copy; there were tiny doodles all over it: Sam cooing over Redwing, Vision cooking with a chef’s hat, Tony snoozing at his lab table with a blanket draped over him.

Tony looked away, his throat constricting painfully.

A solid hand on his shoulder. The susurration of rain against the tower window.

“Your work will be there in the morning. Get some sleep.”

He spun in his chair, the blanket that DUM-E had dropped on him half-falling to the floor, to say something, I’ll sleep when I’m dead, something, except Steve’s hand stayed on his shoulder and this close, he was able to feel warmth radiate off of Steve. Steve always ran a little hot, and Tony secretly savored that heat because the rare touches he gave lingered on his skin long after he moved away.

“Okay,” he said because he had no room in his brain for anything else and because if he stood up and Steve kept his hand there, Steve would be holding him, one step away from a loose embrace.
His brain short-circuited at the thought.

And Steve, Steve gave him a small smile because he was dopily, uncharacteristically pliant, and it was enough. He wanted to make Steve smile like that all the time. He should run tests. See how many times he could make Steve smile. See what made him smile. Do those things over and over again until Steve smiled like that all the time, and Tony never caught him staring out into space with dead eyes or losing himself in his workouts while the world was asleep, furious and sad and weary.

He had to reel himself in before he made a fool out of himself.

“Only because you’re a mother hen and you won’t rest until I say yes,” he groused.

Steve laughed. He wanted to wrap himself up in that laugh and fall asleep in it. “C’mon. You’re dead on your feet.”

He squeezed Tony’s shoulder, and Tony was careful not to arch into the touch as he got up, not to say or do anything that would give him away. He pretended it didn’t bother him to step away from Steve, to maintain a safe distance as they walked to the elevator.

Did Steve ever really care? Maybe. But not in the way he wanted him to and more out of obligation and guilt than anything. He understood that now. He just didn’t see it because he wanted to read into things that weren’t there, and that had blinded him so that he missed what was.

Fuck.

He couldn’t be so fucking maudlin. He couldn’t wallow in self-pity. Rhodey needed him. Vision needed him. He had to pull himself together before Rhodey got discharged from the hospital. He could fool Vision. That was easy; there wasn’t any precedent for his behavior in Vision’s memory. But he could never fool Rhodey as much as he wanted to, and Rhodey didn’t need this right now. Rhodey’s pain was real. It existed outside of his head unlike his. Tony couldn’t make him worry by moping over a broken heart like some stupid teenager on top of everything too.

He could leave everything untouched. Avoid the common area. Keep the doors to all the rooms closed. But that was like gingerly picking his way across a minefield; it didn’t change the fact that those bombs were still there, liable to explode in his face at the slightest provocation unless he defused them all by the time he saw Steve again.

Tony washed the mug, dried it, and shoved it to the back of a cabinet. Tossed the throw into Steve’s room and didn’t pay attention to the colored pencils Steve had laid out on the desk, the sketchbook he had always been so curious about but never brought up, the first edition copy of The Fellowship of the Ring he had bought for him on his nightstand, an Iron Man bookmark sticking out of it like a bright red tongue. Flung the file into a desk drawer in Steve’s office and resisted the urge to hurl the monkey sketch that he had found and framed for Steve at the wall.

If he could remove Steve’s existence piece by piece, pluck the shrapnel out of his heart one by one, he would be whole again, or as much as he could be whole again, and it would be as if Steve had never been there at all.

Stupid, he thought, watching himself in Afghanistan, shaking, sweating, delirious from cold and fear and agony, pretending his soulmate was lying with him on the cot, holding him, reassuring him.
Stupid, he thought, watching himself at his parents’ funeral, crossing his hands in front of him, decorous in his bereavement but for how he gripped his wrist like an anchor, so that he wouldn’t collapse in front of hundreds of people, so that he wouldn’t surrender to the nausea churning inside him.

Stupid, he thought, watching himself in his bathroom, reading a new blood toxicity report, heaving over the toilet, scared of dying alone even as he isolated himself, pleading even when he had lost all hope that he would last long enough to see his soulmate just once.

Please.

Please.

Just once so he would be able to give them everything.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He had read once that old injuries never fully go away, that under certain circumstances, the lack of collagen to sew together the wounds forced those that had faded, those that had long since healed and been forgotten, to suddenly reappear, each one painfully fresh.

His word had always been his cure and now that it was ripped away, all his scars, all the marks that life had left on him, split open again. Every memory was now a gaping wound, countless cuts, countless contusions and burns and broken bones slicing him, mottling him, distorting him, as he sifted through his memories, losing more of himself as he swam through time into the deeper currents of his mind.

He went back to the beginning.

It wasn’t the same, but somehow it felt like déjà vu, the way that he was propped up on one elbow, head pounding, the whole world sliding off its axis.

It had been winter then, just as bitterly cold, the ground just as unrelentingly hard under him.

He opened his eyes despite his vertigo, and for a second the powdery snow became the muted concrete of the bunker.

Don’t, he forced out. Don’t think about that.

It was 1985.

He was in Massachusetts, not Siberia.

That was a pool of vomit next to him, not splatters of blood.

He was by himself out here but not alone.

There was a party raging on inside the house behind him, the deep bass thrum of music muffled by the distance but pounding the walls, in time with the throbbing in his head.
He didn’t know what he was doing. Why he had even chosen to go back to this instead of Siberia. Instead of that fateful day in the lab.

“Together,” Steve replied simply, like that was the answer to every problem in the world.

“We’ll lose.”

An assured fate unless they found a solution.

Give me a solution. Show me something that I didn’t think of before. A different angle. You’re always good at that, he thought.

I can’t have you die on me.

Panic flooded his veins, ice-cold like space. His voice had nearly trembled with it.

They didn’t understand Ultron’s original purpose. They didn’t understand that he would do anything to keep this entire world safe. Keep them safe.

Steve had been cold and gray under his fingers, his pulse gone, his unfocused stare glassy, confused, betrayed.

Steve wouldn’t be okay with losing either. He never surrendered, and he fought to save every life despite the odds. Tony loved him for it. But—

“Yes, we’ll do that together too,” Steve said.

He should have said something, exploded and argued with him, because he knew that that wasn’t enough, that losing wasn’t an option. He had never been afraid of going toe-to-toe with Steve, but Steve had said it so earnestly like there was nothing he believed in more than what he had just said, like he needed to believe in what he was saying, in this team that finally gave him a place to belong to and a purpose.

He couldn’t take that away from Steve. Not when he had given it to him. Not when...not when Steve had said his word.

He realized as soon as the thought struck him that it was true, like it was something that he had known all along, one of the fundamental, irrefutable truths that made up the universe. Steve Rogers was his soulmate, and that was Steve’s word on his skin, written in Steve’s hand.

Together.

The writing had always been tantalizingly familiar.

Oh God.

The rest of the room fell away, his vision tunneling until only Steve existed in front of him. It was Steve. It had always been Steve. He should have known.

He wanted to say something. Something he would have said if it had just been the two of them in the room.
“You’re my soulmate.”

Or “You’re finally here.”

“I waited for you all my life.”

Or maybe even “I thought I’d die before I got to have you.”

Long-harbored secrets, long-harbored wishes and fears.

They were going to die. They were going to die if he wasn’t able to figure things out.

He turned wordlessly, unable to catch his breath. Each breath stacked up inside him, and he was choking on them, lightheaded, his vision swimming from the lack of oxygen. He gripped the edge of the table, sure that he would pass out.

Was it supposed to be like this? He should have been happy, happier than he had ever been in his entire life because this was acceptance, this was fate fulfilled, this was one becoming two becoming one, and he was happy—but he had never been more scared too.

There were distortions in the fabric of the memory, the indistinct outlines of the lab bench bleeding through, the murmurs of the Avengers rustling behind him in the snow three decades before they had been voiced.

He hadn’t gone back to that moment because it would have been a useless exercise. It had happened, and he could play with memory through BARF, but he couldn’t alter history. He couldn’t go back in time and prevent Steve from saying his word.

But he could change the meaning of his word, make it hurt less. He could make it mean nothing like it did for Steve, if he even had Tony’s words on his wrist.

Tony wrenched himself from that memory and let himself sink into this one, taking a backseat to his past self. It was like dipping his toes into a cold bath and then fully submerging himself, all the sensations lighting up here and there along his body, his feet transforming into blocks of ice, his soggy, tight jeans clinging to his thighs, before he felt everything, all at once. He was suddenly aware of a dull ache in his arm; it radiated out from his wrist as though a blunt object had slammed down on it.

He resisted the urge to rub his chest.

The feeling was intimately familiar now, but at the time he had assumed that he fell on his arm the wrong way when he had passed out, until he turned over his arm like he did now and—

And for the briefest of moments, as he traced the round, loopy letters printed on his skin with shaking fingers red and numb with cold, he was cradled in joy. It blossomed inside of his chest and wrapped around him, a protective cocoon against the cold, as bright as the Christmas lights running along the deck railing far behind him. It was quivery and silver-delicate before growing stronger and brighter, as though all the stars in the December sky had been switched on at once, as though the sun had come out, dazzling him and consuming his entire vision until he went blind with happiness.

A sob surged through Tony, tremulous but powerful like a wave at its peak, ready to crash onto
shore. Something about that wholeness when he was now incomplete and unbalanced made him want to claw the word off as much as he had wanted to back in the bunker, run ragged, deep scores through the word until it was illegible. He wanted to feel it mangle up underneath his fingernails, feel every single neat, round letter rip, the chunks of flesh sloughing right off.

He could do it, feel every bit of it, with none of the pain that came along with destroying himself.

Tony sank his nails in, making them bite down hard so that they grew pale, long enough to puncture his skin. Blood welled around the crescents. There should have been an accompanying sting as the skin rolled up under his nails, but he hadn’t developed BARF enough to feel physical pain that didn’t happen. Hadn’t developed it because that wasn’t its purpose, because that was the opposite of its purpose. The disconnect between his senses left a sour tang in his mouth, curdling the feral desperation that had pumped through him only a moment ago. Malaise trickled down his spine like the runnels of beer-sweat and melted snow that soaked his T-shirt.

He sat up stiffly and switched BARF off, staring down at his clean, unbloodied hands.

His wrist was smooth and untouched, his mark just as dark and crisp as it had been the night he had gotten it.

There was no mention of soulmates in Steve’s letter.

He supposed he shouldn’t have fixated on that when there was so much else Steve was and wasn’t saying, but if he were Steve’s soulmate, Steve would mention it, wouldn’t he? He had the right to know. Especially now, after everything.

Yeah, because he’s so good at telling you things, he snapped at himself, but the twinge of annoyance evaporated almost as soon as it formed, turning into a fine mist that spread out from and around him, vague and directionless, more simmering, nebulous unhappiness than boiling ire.

He should be angrier at Steve. He had a right to be, and anger was acceptable, useful unlike moping around like this. But he was never capable of holding onto anger for too long and the times he did, the times he let it take over him, he always regretted it. He thought of Barnes trying to escape, of Barnes lying dazed on the floor, his arm a jagged stump. Of Steve struggling to defend himself.

No, far better to shift that anger inward. That he knew how to sustain. That was always productive.

“What did he do?”

Rhodey was at the door.

Briefly, Tony considered lying, of veering the conversation away from Steve, but there wasn’t any point of doing so. He was at Steve’s desk, the phone in plain sight and the letter open on his lap.

“Told me he had the best time ever at camp and to keep in touch, xoxo,” he said as he quelled the urge to throw them into a drawer and bang it shut. “We’re going to talk over the phone for hours, gossiping about boys, I know it.”

Rhodey frowned at the phone as he wheeled himself over.
“I know. It makes me want to cry too, but I guess His Royal Pantherness didn’t find him worthy of super top-secret Wakandan tech. Shame.”

“He wants you to stay in contact with him?”

“In case of emergencies,” Tony said, and it came out more caustic than he had assumed it would. “He said if I ever need him, he’d be there. No matter what,” he added flatly at Rhodey’s sharp expression.

“Like he was there when you needed him at your back,” Rhodey scoffed.

“Well, if it’s the end of the world…”

Steve might not be there when he needed him, but if the world was in danger, that was a different story. Not that he had the power to do much, on the lam halfway across the world. Tony guessed it was the thought that counted, but he couldn’t bring himself to believe it; he had learned his lesson—words didn’t mean anything unless they were backed up by action.

Used to be that he thought Steve believed that too.

“He should be there for you too,” Rhodey said, his voice quiet but hard. He hesitated before clasping a hand around Tony’s forearm, inches from his bracelet. The touch grounded Tony, the way it always did. “You deserve better than him.”

The words were carefully chosen to give him an out, but Tony knew what Rhodey meant. He should have been surprised, but mostly he was tired. There was an odd relief in being able to talk about a secret he had been concealing for over a year, one that had once been so precious to him that he was afraid of letting anyone find out about it.

“How long have you known?” he asked wearily.

“Since he said it.”

Of course. Rhodey had known his word since MIT.

“Must have thought it was stupid to keep trying, huh?”

With Pepper. With Steve.

“No. You were only trying to find some happiness of your own.”

Tony’s throat constricted. It took a long while for the tightness to fade before he was able to speak.

“The whole time, I kept…I kept thinking that he’d always mean it,” he said hoarsely. “That if it was on my wrist, it had to mean something.” To Steve. To himself. “Even at the airport when he wouldn’t stop.” He had gone to Siberia believing in it. He wondered when Steve had stopped or if his conviction had always been conditional. Together until or together except when.

He ran a shaky hand down his face before dropping it in his lap, barely registering the letter crinkling even though it felt permanently seared into his thigh. It didn’t matter. One more scar was nothing when every bit of him was already branded. Steve had left burn marks all over him, leaving no skin untouched.
“You can’t blame yourself for seeing the best in your soulmate, Tones.”

“I should have known better than to treat a random word as gospel,” he shot back, his voice dangerously close to breaking. He took a deep breath. “I just… I wanted to buy into something like that for once, you know? To really believe that it could be the one good thing in my life. Even when I was alone. Even when I was a piece of shit. God.” He laughed humorlessly. “I know it’s stupid. But I really did believe it.”

“You’re not stupid for expecting your word to mean what it says. It’s on him for not living up to it.”

“He doesn’t know about it.”

“You know as much as I do that it’s not about knowing what words the other person has,” Rhodey said pointedly. “Even if your word was something completely different, what it comes down to is the work and meeting your soulmate halfway. You kept your end of the bargain. He hasn’t.” He nodded at the letter. “Although maybe he’s trying. Too late and in some obtuse way, knowing him, but it’s up to you to decide whether it’s enough.”

“And what if it isn’t? My whole life, I depended on him to get through everything. To see me through to the next day.” Because he wanted to live long enough to meet his soulmate. Because he wanted his soulmate to be proud of him. “I don’t know if I can do it without him,” he confessed. He couldn’t bring himself to see the pity on Rhodey’s face. Shame coated his tongue, rancid and fermented like stale alcohol.

Pathetic, his father scoffed in his head, and Tony thought of how Howard had reacted when he had come home and found out that his son’s words had come in.

Howard hadn’t said anything then, just thinned his lips in sour distaste as he saw Tony’s wrist, but he didn’t need to; his disdain had been palpable, thick and overbearing like the stench of whiskey that remained long after he had left the room. And then he had spit it out later, when he could let loose because Tony’s mother wasn’t there to intervene, to shame him into behaving.

“You never knew how to stand up on your own two feet.”

“Yes, you do.”

“What?” Tony asked, disoriented.

“You were able to do those things yourself.”

“Because—”

Rhodey cut him off with a wave of his hand.

“No. Listen. You might’ve drawn strength from your word, I’m not saying you didn’t, I’m not saying that it didn’t help in some way, but in the end that was all you,” he said, so firm in his resolve that he almost sounded impatient. “He wasn’t actually there. You made it this far on your own. That has nothing to do with him.”

Tony batted his eyelashes and adopted an overly humble tone that he knew would erase the worry
lines from Rhodey’s face. “Such a flatterer. But I did have some help along the way.”

Rhodey cracked a smile. “Oh, you’re right about that. You can’t take all the credit.”

He knocked his shoulder against Rhodey’s.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do when I see him again,” he admitted once he sobered.

Rhodey snorted.

“I know what I’m gonna do. Gonna kick Captain Asshole’s ass to Wakanda and back when I see him again. But whatever you gotta do, Tones, I have your back. You know I always do.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, leaning against him again. “I do.”

Later, when he had gotten out of the shower and put on his band without glancing at his wrist once, Tony went over his conversation with Rhodey again.

The thing was, he didn’t agree with Rhodey, but maybe it wasn’t about agreeing. And maybe it wasn’t about trying to change what had already happened. No matter how far back he went, there were some things that were outside of his control as much as he hated to admit it.

He couldn’t go back and change the fact that he had held onto his word for so long, for one thing.

He had been going about it wrong. It was the future that always held the answers and there, he had some semblance of control. There, in the promising world that didn’t exist yet, he could figure things out on his own.

It didn’t matter if he didn’t think he could even if Rhodey told him otherwise. When it came down to it, he had to. Because a conditional “together” wasn’t reliable. Because he couldn’t let people in the way he had before and try to make them what he wanted them to be again. Because if his worst nightmares all came true and no one was there, no one was left, if it was down to only him, he would have to be enough on his own.

Tony could hear everyone talking indistinctly from the hallway. He had brought them together, had coordinated everything within an inch of its life so that their response to the invasion would be swift and efficient. Steve knew that he would. He had called Tony when the first Outriders dropped onto Earth to warn him and then, once they realized the onslaught was happening simultaneously around the world, to work together to fight off what Tony had predicted from the very beginning would only be the first wave.

Bloodthirsty aliens, scattered Avengers, limited resources and time—everything that had to do with war, he had accounted for. What he hadn’t planned for was the dread keeping his feet locked in place, preventing him from entering a room in the compound that was more his home than it had been most of the group’s in the past two years or, in some cases, ever.

It wasn’t even about Steve. Once he entered the room, all eyes would be on him.

Including Steve’s.
Okay, he could admit that it had a lot to do with Steve.

He should get this over with. He couldn’t avoid him the entire night, but after some warm-up with the worst of the bunch, the people he missed the most and the people who missed him the least, he would have enough practice in being cordial and keeping his emotions in check. And it could well be that Steve was talking to someone else or that he would be too far away to catch his eye.

He wasn’t so lucky.

Steve was chatting with Rhodey and Natasha at the other end of the room, but as soon as Tony entered, he broke off and glanced at the door as though he were psychically attuned to Tony’s whereabouts.

All his preparation for this exact moment flew out the window. He had spent the past years alternating between thinking Steve never cared about him and thinking that he did but not enough or not as much as he had wanted him to (“So was I.” But had he been?). He wasn’t sure what was worse.

This was. The proof that Steve cared hurt worse than anything.

Tony’s careworn heart skipped a beat and lurched into overdrive, each overtaxed pulse piercing his chest like leftover shrapnel. Everything was too bright, too sharp, and the light cleaved his head in half, jabbing his overly sensitive eyes. Someone said something that resembled his name from close by, but it was muffled as though he were underwater, and he couldn’t tell where it came from.

He had lost all sense of orientation, couldn’t tell what was left or right, up or down; the only direction he knew was straight ahead, the shivering needle in him calling Steve his true north.

Even as he pretended to survey something beyond the trio, his clammy hands tucked in his pockets, he saw how Steve looked at him from the corner of his eye. There was a tenderness to his expression, and he hated that he recognized it, that it wasn’t something exotic, peculiar, and never-seen-before but something familiar.

By the time he looked at Steve full on, the soft light had dimmed though it wasn’t snuffed out completely, tinged with a wistfulness that was foreign to him and that he brusquely forced himself to ignore.

It meant nothing. He had to get a grip. Christ.

“Romanoff. Rogers,” he said once he reached them, and he was proud of how steady his voice was. He made no move to shake their hands or touch them in any way.

Or take his hands out of his pockets.

Rhodey’s mouth was set in a grim line.

Tony ignored him. He managed all this without Steve. A five-minute conversation wouldn’t kill him. Less if he had any say.

“You look good,” Natasha said. “Relatively speaking.” It would almost be funny the way that she and Steve scrutinized every change, every injury in sync like an unsettling pair of overly observant blond twins, if it weren’t for how it made his skin crawl.
“They’re not your enemies. They’re not trying to spot weaknesses, he reminded himself.

“Relatively speaking? And here I was, thinking I aged like fine wine.”

“I’m glad you’re not hurt,” Steve said, and Tony was stuck between replying in kind and wanting to punch him.

“He put together a good team around him,” Rhodey said coolly.

An awkward pause ensued where no one was quite sure where to look. Tony had to nip this in the bud before they started talking about things he would rather not deal with. At least not tonight.

“You seem to have held together okay.” He waved a hand at them carelessly as though he hadn’t thoroughly scanned them for injuries too. “No big injuries, new looks. You know better than bleached eyebrows, Romanoff, but that beard isn’t half bad, Rogers. I guess with all that downtime between illegal missions, you had plenty of time for maintenance and buying beard oil.”

It was a joke, a petty one, but nothing that either of them couldn’t handle except while Natasha rolled her eyes, a tiny smile betraying her, Steve’s face crumpled before he caught himself and smoothed it out into a stoic mask.

Huh. Maybe the beard was some depressing show of solidarity for his cyborg BFF.

Speaking of cyborg BFFs, he should get to T’Challa and his impressive wunderkind sister. Shuri was only feet away from him, torn between being not as enamored with his tech as he would have assumed she would be—and he wasn’t sure whether he was more delighted or affronted by that—and excited by all the superheroes gathered in the room like any kid. Barnes was, thankfully, nowhere near them; what bafflingly seemed to be an irascible talking raccoon was accosting him near the bar.

“Well, it was nice catching up and all that, but I have King Kitty and Princess Leia calling my name and as the gracious host, I gotta make the rounds. You coming with, honey bear?”

Steve tensed as though he were readying himself to say something or keep Tony from going, as though he had expected Tony to stay longer, but in the end he stayed still but for a subtle, aborted jerk forward that Tony ignored.

“Yeah,” Rhodey said, “you know the princess got that crazy ‘I can fix this’ look in her eyes when she told me to talk to her earlier? It reminded me of you. Except she’s younger and smarter and probably less annoying.”

Tony twined his arm around Rhodey’s as they made to leave.

“You’re killing me. She’s the baby of the wealthiest royal family in the world and a teen. She has to be a little annoying. I say so as your resident expert on spoiled rich kids. Not to mention, I saw her troll her poor, unsuspecting brother in front of the Dora. She and Peter are going to get on like—ouch!” Rhodey had dug his elbow into his ribs and given him a look. “Okay, sorry. Sorry. No joking about princesses, got it. She’s not annoying.”

Rhodey rolled his eyes and nodded, almost imperceptibly, to the side.
Tony swallowed a sigh. “Team meeting in here at 9 A.M.” He gestured towards the general vicinity of the living quarters, stopping in his tracks but not bothering to turn around. “Your room is as you left it.”

“And us?” Steve asked him from behind, so faintly Tony almost didn’t hear him.

The question landed between Tony’s shoulder blades, a fragile whisper of gossamer silk connecting him to Steve. One sudden move, he knew, and it would rip. It would slide down his back like water and float to the ground, leaving Steve unmoored.

If he just turned around slowly, if he was careful, he could pull Steve to shore like he always did.

He used to know how to be gentle, he thought, but he walked on, not looking back once.

He told himself that he wasn’t avoiding Steve. He had made no pretenses at friendship; he spoke to him when it was necessary and that was it. That should have been fine. They were teammates. They didn’t need to be anything more than that. He had forgotten all the workplace rules—keep your work life separate from your personal life, don’t shit where you eat—but Siberia and the Accords, Steve’s goddamn letter, were a reminder he wouldn’t forget.

It wasn’t like they were at each other’s throats either. No one could complain about their behavior. He made sure to be civil. There wasn’t any room for fighting when Thanos loomed on the horizon, threatening to rain down punishment any day now. More Outriders had popped up, higher-ranked ones. It was only a matter of time.

He ignored the fact that Steve stayed until it was only the two of them at the end of each team meeting, that he straightened up every time Tony accidentally entered the same room as him alone, that his face twisted into something awful whenever Tony left as quickly as possible. That he stared and stared and stared like Tony was something just out of reach when he assumed Tony wasn’t looking, something precious, something loved, something lost.

“I’m right here,” he wanted to shout. But more often than not, to himself: “He never loved you.”

So maybe he hadn’t gotten over Steve entirely, but he was working on it.

He should have known that Steve would catch him at some point.

Jerking away or excusing himself would have been pathetic so he stayed where he was as Steve leaned against the railing next to him, observing several Avengers jog outside on the grounds below, Peter outstripping them all, running too fast. Someone should tell him to take it easy before he ran out of steam, Tony thought, but then Peter skidded to a stop and gestured enthusiastically at Shuri, who sat under a tree with a tablet in hand, as if asking how he did.

“You’re good with kids,” Steve said after a while.

“Yeah well, I don’t have to babysit too much. Peter’s great. Smart too. He’ll leave me in the dust one day.”
“He’s so young. He should be having fun with his friends, not—” Steve ran a hand down his face, exhaustion and worry in every line. “I’m just worried he’ll get hurt.”

“Preaching to the choir here, Cap.”

“I know he wants to help and we need as many people as we can get, but this isn’t some back-alley fight. This is war. We shouldn’t have called him up.”

There it was. The judgment.

“I didn’t. He showed up and refused to leave. You might be familiar with that particular strategy, 4F.”

Steve at least had the tact to look chagrined.

“I’m not trying to pick a fight. I… I don’t want to see him get hurt or worse, that’s all. Maybe we can have him on rescue or evac, keep him far from the front lines.”

“You think I haven’t tried?” For the first time in days, Tony faced Steve full on, refusing to look away. It was easier and harder than he expected. “I did that before, told him to stick to old ladies crossing the street and playground fights, and Teenage Rebellion decided not to listen.”

“But if we—”

“He’ll find a way to sneak in. I took his suit away before, when he put himself and other people in danger because he got too in his head, and he…” He faltered, the regret still stinging. “I almost got him killed because he tried doing the right thing anyway, suit or no suit. He won’t stay away if people need help even if I try to baby-proof everything, Steve. I’ve tried. All I can do is protect him the best I can.”

His muscles were tensed as though he anticipated a fight, his breathing erratic. He hated the way that Steve always got under his skin and made him act like this, much as he tried not to show Steve how much he got to him. He wondered if this was what Steve came for, if that was the only way Steve remembered how to act around him. He didn’t want to deal with this.

But Steve didn’t look angry. There was no fight in him, only Tony. “Okay,” he said agreeably, and Tony didn’t know what to do with the energy pent up inside him with nowhere to go.

“Okay,” he repeated stiffly.

“Reminds me a lot of someone I know,” Steve said with a trace of fondness.

“Funny, I was about to say the same thing.” Tony sighed. He felt wobbly and deflated. “He’s a good kid. Better than the both of us,” he added after a beat.

“Sounds like he had a good mentor looking out for him.”

Tony gave a noncommittal hum, electing to observe the scene below again. Outside, Lang doubled over, his hands on his knees, refusing to go on. They were too far up to hear what Sam was shouting at him. Redwing, newly upgraded, swooped around Lang, pecking at his head every other second, deftly avoiding his sluggish swats.
It was so easy to pretend it was a normal lazy Saturday afternoon from bygone days. There were no clouds in the sky and back then, they would have taken advantage of the balmy weather to cook outdoors, content to sit back and relax for once. No world to save, their biggest worry Vision burning patties on the grill.

He really needed to stop romanticizing things. He hadn’t even been around the compound all that much back then.

“We need to talk,” Steve said after they had watched the squabble on the grounds peter out. The way he was so apologetic, so tentative as though Tony would cave in at the slightest push, grated on Tony’s nerves.

*Why? Is there something else you hoped I’d understand?* he thought venomously, but he stopped himself before he lashed out. The ugly, vindictive creature he had been nursing inside of him would have taken enormous pleasure in hurting Steve, but punching him in the gut would leave him exposed, give Steve an in. He didn’t want to give Steve any more of him than he already had, not even his anger. He swallowed the poison, too accustomed to its corrosiveness to care about how much of him it eroded away.

He was better than this. He spent two long years rebuilding the team and himself.

“What do you want from me?” He watched Steve’s throat work as if his words were all trapped inside.

“I want you to know that I didn’t want any of it to happen the way it did. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Every line of him was hard and unforgivingly rigid as though he thought that if he held himself together as tightly as possible he wouldn’t shatter. He had been like that in Siberia too, in his explosiveness, each punch unyielding and precise. But he had shattered then.

Tony remembered his face contorted beyond recognition, the silver edge of the shield swinging down like a guillotine. A tremor ran far underground, through his heart and his words.

“I don’t think it matters, what you meant,” he said unsteadily.

There it was. The fracture. Barely noticeable unless you were looking for it.

“No,” Steve agreed, subdued. “I still hurt you. I made that choice.” His knuckles were striated white as he clenched the railing, the bleached bone pronounced. He was stripped bare. “I can’t take it back, but I am sorry,” he whispered. “More than you’ll ever know.”

“I know,” he said because he did and because he could give Steve that. Enough time had passed that most of him understood why Steve had made the mistakes he did.

Steve let out a short miserable laugh. There was a cruel, unfamiliar edge to it, but Tony was intimately acquainted with the sound to know that the dagger was aimed inward. “No, you don’t.” He bowed his head, his neck bent with a burden of his own making. The late afternoon sun limned him in gold but didn’t penetrate his skin; he was beautiful and cold as a statue, as immobile. “There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about,” he said after a while, so quietly it was as though he were talking to himself. “This isn’t how I wanted to tell you, but it doesn’t really matter what I want anymore.”
He let go of the railing and turned. There was a distant sadness in his eyes, faint and veiled; he was far away, a dying solitary star outside of Tony’s galaxy. Whatever he was going to say, it was a message that had traveled for years and miles, one that Tony wasn’t sure he had the power to change, so removed by time and distance from its genesis. He wanted to tell him to stop, but his lips were too numb for the protest to slip through.

“You’re my soulmate,” Steve said softly, and something deep inside that Tony now realized he hadn’t properly buried fell apart at the confession. He had waited so long to hear someone say that, for Steve to say that. Had imagined what it would be like for it to happen.

But he had known this was a possibility. He had spent days—weeks—after Siberia turning the idea in his head like a pebble in his hand over and over, wearing it down, enough that even as part of him caved in with devastation, a bigger part was tired. Angry.

Something dangerous brewed inside him.

“So?” he asked dully. “What does it matter?”

Steve flinched, his hand automatically going to his wrist before he was able to fully stop himself, and he knew what Steve’s answer was whether he said it or not. Everything.

An everything that amounted to nothing, Tony thought, numbers multiplied by zero.

“How dare you?” he wanted to snarl. How dare you except he didn’t know what he wanted to accuse Steve of doing. How dare you take this from me, how dare you keep this from me, how dare you act like this means anything after all that happened. He didn’t understand what the point was, saying this now. If Steve had known before he found out about the murder, if Steve had known before Siberia, he hadn’t mattered enough. If it had been after Siberia, he only mattered because some random twist of fate put his words on Steve’s wrist.

“Why are you telling me this?” He tried to keep his voice even, but the words came out coarse and tight.

Steve’s expression was severe in its intensity, and Tony could have mistaken it for dogged determination had it not been for the cracks he had made. Misery broke through, lacquering every line, a twisted kintsugi. In his mind flashed a fleeting memory: Steve raining blows on him, Steve with his shield held high, harshly disfigured by a grimace of fury—and grief.

No.

He closed the lid on that memory, watching Steve speak, rigid as though one false move would shatter him.

“I’m done keeping secrets from you.”

“It doesn’t change anything,” he replied. He had agonized over what would be worse, not being Steve’s soulmate or being it, until he realized that it didn’t matter. Steve had chosen Barnes in the end. Would always choose him.

Weariness settled over Steve, softening his features, as though he had, despite his initial reaction, long since resigned himself to this outcome. “It doesn’t. But that doesn’t change the fact that you’re my soulmate either.”
“They’re just words, Steve,” he said, and his reply came out gentler than he had meant it to. Kinder. More than hurting Steve, he needed him to understand that for a reason he couldn’t fathom.

They had to be because his had meant nothing in the end. Had never meant anything, to Steve. To the universe.

He couldn’t say the same for Steve’s words; whatever they were, he had meant everything he had said. But even so, Steve would be holding onto something that he wasn’t sure he could give Steve anymore.

And soulmates or not, Tony loved him even as he had hated and then mourned him, even as he missed him, and in spite of all the anger, all the raw pain that he carried, he didn’t want that for Steve.

He wasn’t going to let himself be the reason why Steve let the world pass him by again. He had seen what came of that with Peggy Carter and with Barnes. He was the result of it.

Steve swallowed, hard. “No, they’re not.” He spoke slowly as though every word brought him pain. “Even if they weren’t mine, they wouldn’t be.” Tony wanted to ask what he meant, but the question sat on his tongue, leaden and unwanted; he settled for watching Steve gather himself. “I know this is a lot,” he added softly. “But I’m not saying it because I expect something from you. I just wanted you to know.”

He faced the window, and Tony followed his gaze. The others were gone. The sun was low in the sky, the grounds tranquil and undisturbed. Years ago, when the original team had been together, he had caught Steve doing the same thing at the tower. His fingers had traced a pattern across the glass as if he were superimposing his city over the one in front of him, trying to excavate familiar lines from under the sweeping sprawl that had grown over his home. Tony wondered if he was doing that now, pulling forth a memory, sliding a transparency over the window.

Before and after.

Before Siberia, after Siberia.

“I should go,” Tony said after a beat. “Got a meeting in a few minutes.”

Steve gave a short nod. He put his hands in his pockets as though he didn’t know what to do with them. “I won’t keep you.”

*Of course you won’t,* he thought. *You never once tried.* Two years. Two years of silence. Two years during which Steve could have told him. He had the letter, the phone.

“Why won’t you fight for me?” he wanted to shout, and he was furious at the thought. He didn’t want this, he reminded himself viciously. It shouldn’t matter. He should be relieved that Steve wasn’t expecting anything. *It shouldn’t matter.* He didn’t want this.

He walked away, his shadow stretching long in front of him as he made his way towards the empty hallway, doing his best to stay loose even as he wanted nothing more than to ball his hands into fists and…and…

“Tony,” Steve called out.
His name sounded intimate on Steve’s tongue. Private. There was a weight to it, a carefulness to the way it was spoken, as though it were a secret Steve had been protecting for these past years, holding it inside him until finally, he decided it was safe to let it go.

He squeezed his eyes shut and sucked in a sharp breath before he turned around, taking care to appear collected.

The distance between them was vast, greater than the space that lay between them. Somewhere along the way, they had passed each other unaware, two ships skimming each other’s hulls, noticing only when their paths had already diverged.

“I know you might not want to hear this, but I meant what I said in the letter. You’ll always have me. Even if you want to go separate paths after all this is over, that won’t ever change.”

He could see Steve’s neat handwriting as if he had the letter in front of him, as if he were looking at his bare arm, the shape of the letters on the page exactly the same as the ones on his wrist.

“If you need me, I’ll be there.”

But Steve had never been there. And he had gotten this far without him.

“I don’t need you,” he wanted to say, but he smiled and said nothing, and maybe that was answer enough.

True to his word, Steve didn’t act as if he expected something from him over the next few days. They remained friendly, less tense than before but keeping their distance. There was a line drawn in the sand. Here and no farther. Steve stopped being so keyed up, so vigilant about Tony’s every move, now that they had finally talked. He gave Tony space.

He could be angry about what happened. It would have been well within his rights. Steve dropped a bombshell and walked away—except it was more a ball in his court and Steve waiting for his next move. Do what you want with it. I’m leaving it up to you.

He could do nothing. He owed Steve nothing. Steve knew that.

He thought about how he could break Steve open. He had never seen Steve fall apart until he had, when Steve had slammed his shield into him, when Steve had told him that he was his soulmate, and Tony understood, better than he had ever before, that he held an immense, terrible power over Steve. He could rip Steve apart if he wanted to, over and over again. And there would be some callous satisfaction in that, in making someone who never let anyone know he was suffering, who took immense measures not to, break open and bleed. In making him feel a fraction of the pain he felt.

He wanted Steve to understand how he felt and hurt like he did—but there was no point in yelling something that Steve already knew, no point in driving home something that had clearly already been hammered in. All of Steve’s pain was reserved for Tony; he hurt for Tony with no regard to his own suffering, and it left Tony aimless and lost in his anger and pain.

He hated it.
Steve hurt him. Steve hurt him. He didn’t have the right to be hurt. But Steve had acknowledged that he had and the truth was, he had hurt Steve too.

He could do nothing, but it wasn’t because he owed Steve nothing; it was because Steve believed that he didn’t.

No noise came from Steve’s room, but Tony had seen his mug on the drying rack in the kitchen. It had appeared in the half-hour he had left and returned to the kitchen for a bite to tide him over through the night. It was late, but Steve was awake.

He knocked on the door. Steve opened it, face wrinkling in confusion as he took Tony in. He was in a white T-shirt and loose sweatpants that hung low on his hips, his hair mussed. Tony forced himself not to look down.

“I hope I wasn’t interrupting your beauty sleep.”

“You didn’t. Is everything all right?”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.” Steve closed the door behind him as he entered.

The throw was still in the room, though neatly folded and hanging off the back of the desk chair. He had flung it onto Steve’s bed and left as quickly as possible when he had tried to wipe all traces of Steve out in the open. For the first time since the fugitive Avengers returned with new people in tow, Tony realized that Steve had done his best to keep his presence contained to his room, mindful of Tony’s space as if he were a guest. Other than the mug, he always made sure to put everything away and out of sight. This was no longer home.

Steve could leave tomorrow, and it would be like he never came back.

“You haven’t answered my question, Tony.”

He tore his gaze away from the throw. “Yeah, everything’s okay. Other than some space titan trying to wipe out half the universe, but you know.”

Steve bit his lip. “I never asked you how you were holding up.”

“I’ve been planning for this for years. I’m fine,” he said. “I came to talk about something else.” He had no idea how to go about this. A long silence stretched between them as Steve waited patiently for him to continue. “What you said…” His voice sounded strained to his ears. He cleared his throat. “What you said about not wanting any of it to turn out this way. That’s not all on you. I should haven’t backed you into a corner, and I made mistakes because I rushed things. And I’m sorry for that. And for—for what happened in Siberia too. With Barnes. I almost killed him.”

“You wouldn’t have,” Steve said firmly.

“You don’t know what I would’ve done.”

A white-hot concentrated repulsor blast. Barnes slumped on concrete, his arm a serrated stump, dazed and helpless.
Maybe he had confirmed Steve’s worst fears. Maybe Steve was right not to trust him.

“You wouldn’t. That’s not why I didn’t tell you about Bucky and your parents if that’s what you’re thinking.” Steve sank onto his bed, resting his arms against his knees. “I thought about telling you more times than I could count, but every time, I’d imagine how you’d look like when I did, and I couldn’t…I couldn’t bring myself to hurt you. I didn’t want to reopen an old wound, not when I didn’t have to.” He studied the floor, then his palms as though there were hidden answers there. “I thought that maybe if I got there in time and fixed things on my own, no one would have to know,” he said after a moment.

“That wasn’t your call to make. You can’t decide things like that for me,” Tony replied tightly.

“I know. I’m sorry. And I know that it wasn’t my secret to keep and that there’s no excuse, but I did it because I was afraid I’d lose you, Tony. And I didn’t want that.” He smiled thinly, his mouth crooked in a bitter, jagged line. “Like I said, I did it for me.”

_I can see now I was really sparing myself._

Tony’s throat closed up, sealed by a drum of unshed tears too large for such a small space. It hurt when he swallowed around it. He wasn’t sure that he would be able to speak even if he knew what to say.

This must be what it was like then, to be loved and to be made aware of that love. Yearning roped itself around Tony’s heart, tugging at it. He could take a step forward. He could slot a leg between Steve’s, lean in and run his hands through Steve’s long hair down to the nape of his neck, hold him there where he was vulnerable, where he would be at his mercy. He could choose to heal instead of hurt, pull Steve to him and hold him to his chest.

He dropped into the chair by Steve’s desk, dragging in a deep breath that sounded wet to his ears. “You ever consider that you might not have? I wasn’t mad at you for what happened; it wasn’t your fault or Barnes’s. I was mad at you for keeping me in the dark. If you had just told me, I would have had the time and space to process it and helped you. Tell me you know that I wouldn’t have held that against you.”

“They were your parents, Tony,” he whispered.

“All the more reason I should have known. It was my fight. I would have worked with you to make sure the right people paid for what they did and every single person that Hydra has ever hurt saw justice. Fuck, we’re _Avengers_. That’s what we do, Steve.” He watched as self-recrimination and regret warred on Steve’s face before summoning his courage to forge on. “You said ‘Together,’” he said shakily. He forced himself not to reach for his left wrist, to play with the band around it. “You always said that win or lose, whatever the circumstances, that we’d face it together. Did you ever mean it?”

Steve looked him full in the eye, his gaze never once wavering even as he clenched his jaw, eyes wet.

“Yes,” he said, his voice quietly breaking. “Every time.”

And it was true. He had said it then with such conviction that Tony had no choice but to relent. It should have changed things, the fact that his word did have meaning, that it was something that Steve believed in with all his heart.
But it wasn’t about belief. It wasn’t about how much Steve meant it. What it came down to was the work that was put in and Steve hadn’t delivered.

His reluctance to accept Steve’s answer must have shown.

“You believe that as much as I do. You brought us together after SHIELD fell and wanted us to be on the same page for the Accords. And you put that belief into the plan you’ve been working on for years, even after everything that happened.”

“Even I’m not arrogant enough to lone wolf this whole thing.”

Steve gave a crooked smile. “I don’t think you ever were.”

“You meant it until you stopped,” Tony said, and it was a statement and question all at once.

“I did consider signing the Accords,” Steve reminded him. “I wasn’t convinced by them and I don’t agree with how you treated Wanda even if I understand why you did it. But I thought that we’d have time to work on it together after we dealt with everything in Siberia and came back, to address the issues in it and make it better like you said.” Steve picked at a thread that had come off his sweatpants at his knees, twirling it absentmindedly, lost in thought. “And even with Zemo, I knew you’d help if you could and you proved me right. You have no idea how happy I was to see you.”

He did. He had rushed to Siberia without hesitation because he fell for Zemo’s plot and because Steve needed him, and even though he pushed the possible legal ramifications of what he was doing out of his mind, it was only when he walked into the Hydra base and saw Steve smile with relief that he finally felt at ease. It was nice after butting heads for so long to have Steve’s back and know that Steve had his as they tackled a problem together, the way they were supposed to.

“It would have made things a whole lot easier if you had just told me,” he said.

“I made a mistake, but it was never because I didn’t trust you. You always kept your end of the bargain. I haven’t been so great at that,” Steve said quietly. “But I’d like to do better, to try and show you that I was serious about what I said, if you’d let me.”

He was asking Tony to take a leap of faith.

Tony’s answer was in the gray, conflicted area between yes and no. He didn’t want to be hurt by Steve again. He wanted to give him a second chance. He didn’t want to let his walls down. He wanted to believe in Steve.

“Then go over the battle plan with me. I want your input,” he decided on saying. He tapped his watch, flicking his fingers out so that all the information scattered across the room, bathing it in blue. It was a familiar scene, one that they had repeated countless times before on sleepless nights at the tower.

Everyone contributed to the plan he had outlined, but it was Steve’s opinion he sought. Steve alone knew what it was like to command an army into battle, lead the Avengers, and fight against the impossible, and no one possessed the strategic mind and war experience that he did. And they were at their best when they pushed each other to come up with methods the other hadn’t considered. When they challenged each other by talking things through.
Tony wasn’t sure if they could ever be friends again or whether he even wanted them to be. Too much mistrust had led to misunderstandings and mistakes, and there were too many times they had wounded each other. It wasn’t clear if this was a continuation of the path they had been on or if it was possible for them to start over. All that was definite was that if there was just one thing he could rely on Steve for without hesitation, it was saving the world, no matter the disagreements and no matter their personal problems.

On this, he could trust Steve.

It was all going to shit.

Tony had been prepared for the situation and knew that despite the measures they put into place, there would be huge casualties, destruction on a scale that he had never seen before. Still, it was daunting and left him scrambling, feeling like everything was spinning out of control.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, he thought as Thor talked on, every new detail worse by the minute.

“The Nova Corps lost ten of its ships already keeping Thanos and the Black Order from landing on Xandar. There are troops on the ground and in the air and more coming to their aid, but it’s only a matter of time before they reach the Power Stone. He’s come well-prepared,” Thor reported grimly.

“And you? Anyone on your tail?”

“For now, no. The Guardians and I are trying to gain as much distance as we can from both Xandar and Earth. But we have to act quickly.”

“Don’t I know it.” Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, though it did little to alleviate his headache. “Thanks, big guy. Keep us posted and stay safe.”

“You too.”

The video blinked out, a black screen replacing Thor and his colorful team. Thor’s news didn’t come as a surprise as they had long suspected that the Power Stone would be one of Thanos’s first targets due to its proximity and known whereabouts, but it was the speed that was shocking. Thor was right. They had to act quickly and, as plans mutated with every battle, make decisions on the fly with precision, a hard thing to do due to the scope of the war and number of players involved and made all the more difficult when any wrong move could have catastrophic consequences.

No pressure. Just another day at the office, Tony thought a bit hysterically.

The dull ache in his head was going to flare up into a full-blown migraine. He pressed his knuckles into his eyes, trying to focus on that pain instead of the one inside his skull.

They were supposed to have more time.

He should get some Advil. And coffee. There was a stained circle near the bottom of the mug, and the small amount of coffee below the dark ring had gone stale a while ago. Food would be good too. He hadn’t eaten since the morning, having nibbled on some fruit before getting thoroughly sidelined throughout the afternoon. They had been sitting out on the table for hours, and the thought of biting into a warm strawberry was unappetizing.
A steaming plate piled high with chicken biryani appeared on his desk. The fragrance hit him immediately, making him realize how hungry he was.

“Saved some for you from dinner.” Steve stared at the screen. “Was that Thor?”

Tony poked at the dish listlessly, his stomach clenching. “Yeah. He just told me that Thanos is about to get his hands on the Power Stone if he hasn’t already. I need to get everyone up to speed.”

“You need to eat.”

“I can do both at the same time.”

“You’re running yourself to the ground. You need to get some rest even if it’s for a few minutes.”

“There’s no time,” he snapped, but it came out more despairing than acerbic. “There’s no time,” he repeated. His hand was trembling, though whether it was out of fatigue or anxiety, he didn’t know. He put down his fork. “I knew it was going to happen quickly, but not this fast. What if I—” He couldn’t bring himself to finish.

“You didn’t miscalculate anything, and you aren’t going to. You’re the smartest man I know, Tony,” Steve said steadily. “And you’ve been working on this for years. We’re prepared as we can be. We have a good system set in place.”

“And what if that’s not enough?”

They were retreading old territory. The familiar ice-cold fear trickled through his veins. He drummed his fingers against the desk, trying to keep it at bay before it punctured his heart.

“Then we’ll do that together too.”

The answer hadn’t been enough then, and it wouldn’t be now. They were being picked off with ease.

Ten ships down. Ten huge ships manned by some of the best pilots in the intergalactic military.

They were nothing to Thanos.

“Then we’ll recalibrate. We’ve always been good at switching up plans on the fly, you most of all.” Steve gave him a fond lopsided smile.

He had always done that, Tony realized. Always looked at him that way, and he had never really noticed or had dismissed it because Steve caring about him that way was inconceivable and entertaining that idea was dangerous. He had forgotten how much he loved it even so. He had wanted to make Steve smile like that forever, once.

He hadn’t done a good job of it.

Steve hesitated before gripping his arm reassuringly. Tony resisted the urge to pull away, but Steve must have felt the way his muscles had instantly seized up before he could stop them from doing so because he froze.
It was stupid. He knew that Steve wouldn’t hurt him, not like that. Not now, at least, and even back then, Steve had done it to stop him. Because the only clear thought in all the muddled confusion and heartache, the relentless rush of rage howling through his mind, had been to hurt Steve, to pummel him into the ground, to take Barnes away from him so that he would know what it was like to watch his family, watch someone he loved, being hurt in front of him like Tony did.

And yet his body responded not to logic but to the primitive part of his brain—the part that had only enough disk space to collect sensations and register pain, to store muscle memory.


Steve was stricken, but he managed to smooth out his expression, swallowing hard as he did so.

_Look at us. Too afraid to do anything but pretend we’re fine even when we’re caught with our pants down_, Tony thought.

Steve squeezed Tony’s shoulder again before letting it go. He picked up the plate, pushing it to Tony’s chest so that Tony instinctively grabbed it before his mind could catch up. “Get some rest,” he told Tony firmly.

“We have to hold a team meeting and update everyone on Thor’s report.”

“Then tell me what he said. I’ll relay it to everyone here, and we’ll make calls to the others. We got this.”

Panic made him want to refuse Steve’s offer; he was still afraid that they had overseen something or they would be caught off-guard, that if he took one moment to breathe now that everything started and was on the verge of snowballing, he would miss out on what happened and it would be too late for him to respond. FOMO on something that wasn’t even fun.

But Steve was right that he was running himself into the ground, and if he pushed himself too far, he would negatively affect their efforts. They couldn’t afford that.

And he had the team. Even if something happened, there was someone who would be on shift, someone to respond. He trusted them to act and the others him because at the end of the day, they were united by a common enemy and a common goal. The Avengers had always been good at coming together when they needed to protect the world, and this time they had seen the threat ahead of time and had prepared extensively to stop it.

“Oh,” he relented, and despite all the worry gnawing at him, it was a relief to not do this alone like he had for so long. To be a part of something bigger than himself.

Not a family but a machine, engineered to deal with threats that were getting more frequent and more complex.

Back to the basics, back to what Fury had said all those years ago except that they were bigger now, with more and more powered individuals stepping up everyday to give help where it was needed. A world of Avengers, Tony thought, and it had to be enough to save an entire universe.

The end came like a cascading failure, one catastrophe rapidly leading to the next.
Thanos obtained the Power Stone and destroyed Xandar.

Loki betrayed them all.

“As a bargain for my life,” Thor had explained brokenly, turned away from the screen, bitterness and grief wearing lines into his face.

Tony thought of the Chitauri Invasion and the deal that they had learned Loki had brokered with Thanos all those years ago and said nothing.

“I know how he operates,” Loki had said among other things, and Tony had no choice but to hope that despite his misgivings, with Loki and Thanos’s daughters, Gamora and Nebula, protecting one of the most dangerous of the Stones, they could have some control over the timeline of events. Thanos could destroy with ease, obliterate planets with a blasé flick of his hand, but he was still bound by the restrictions of space travel.

And now, whether Loki had indeed surrendered the Space Stone to save his brother or whether he had weighed his choices and concluded that it would be in his self-interest to shift loyalties, Thanos had the Stone in his possession and was heading their way.

Ships fell from the sky, as they had in the first wave, and swarms of alien troops had them all busy. They needed as many reinforcements they could, and Strange and Wong had teleported Thor, Bruce, and what remained of the Guardians to join the fray. The Avengers at the compound were getting ready to head out, the headquarters devolving into organized chaos. Everyone—the Avengers, their allies, and an assortment of military personnel—scurried this way and that, preoccupied with their own preparations and the latest updates pouring in from around the world.

Morbidly, it struck Tony that this could and most likely would be the last time he would see some of them ever again. No one was naive enough to believe that they would all miraculously survive; they knew what was at stake when they answered the call and that there was a high possibility that they were marching straight to death’s doors. It had been there in the back of his mind too, only he had refused to dwell on it and there had been more pressing matters to attend to than to think about it. But with Thanos finally coming, there was no avoiding the thought.

Tony stopped in the middle of the storm to watch Steve from a distance. With no one paying him any attention and Steve deep in concentration as he conversed with Wilson and Natasha, he allowed himself the luxury to scan every inch of Steve, to memorize his face and preserve him exactly the way he was in his mind. This was how he wanted to remember Steve—in his element, seeming to thrum with more energy than he had had in days now that he could actively try to stop Thanos, alert, focused, and unhurt.

Except for the wounds Tony had inflicted.

There were matching scars on them both.

What would their lives have been like if they had trusted each other, Tony mused, if they had been upfront about everything—about Ultron, about Barnes, about their soul marks? What would the present be like? He hadn’t wanted to spare any thought to it, too weary and hurt to wallow in “what if”’s, and it was too late to do that now. There was no time to dwell on that different present when the one they had was in jeopardy.
Regret echoed inside his chest with nowhere to go, the force behind every reverberation growing with every rebound. Regret for what, he didn’t know. For everything that happened, he supposed, and everything that didn’t and maybe never would.

“All the checks have been run. You’re good to go,” he heard a SHIELD officer inform Steve.

This was it. No turning back.

Steve nodded at his group, hanging back as they climbed into the Quinjet. He was waiting for something.

For him, Tony realized.

He had turned around to take in the compound one last time, and his gaze had caught Tony’s as Tony made his way towards him.

Tony didn’t know what to say, years’ worth of words that had gone unsaid crammed in his throat, dying before they reached his lips. All he knew was that he couldn’t let Steve go without saying anything.

Tell him he’s your soulmate, a voice whispered in his head.

But he didn’t.

At first it had been because there hadn’t been a point, because it wouldn’t change anything, but then the reason had morphed into something else.

Steve hadn’t told him his secret because he wasn’t sure how Tony would respond, but Tony couldn’t because he wasn’t sure what his response would be to Steve’s. It would be unfair to bring it up, pointless in a different way. Steve wanted him, maybe even thought he loved him because Tony was his soulmate. All telling him would accomplish would be to give him false hope when he wasn’t sure he would be able to give Steve what he wanted.

He didn’t have an answer for Steve. He didn’t know how long it would take for him to figure it out or if he would ever have an answer. And it would be cruel to give Steve hope when that was the case.

Hope was dangerous. It was hard to kill even in the bleakest and most dire of situations. He should know.

He couldn’t do that to Steve.

He went with what he could say, what mattered the most. The only thing that he cared about in the end. He breathed it into existence, hoping it would serve as a ward, a blessing spell.

“Be safe, Steve,” he said. “Win.”

“You too, Tony,” Steve said softly, and this time, when Steve reached for him, slowly, carefully, when he wrapped a hand firmly around the crook of Tony’s arm and held onto him as though he could leave some form of protection on his skin, Tony let him.

His touch lingered long after he had to let go, long after Tony watched his Quinjet soar out of sight.
and readied to go into battle himself.

So long as what he said happened, so long as Steve survived and they won, he could deal with the rest.

Clint flew past Tony, smashing into the ruined shell of a building behind him. He remained motionless where he fell and at that speed and angle, if the initial hit hadn’t killed him, the collision would have. Tony had to stop himself from thinking about Laura and the kids, about his and Clint’s clumsily patched-up relationship that no longer had a chance of being salvaged.

They were losing badly.

Vision was gone, the Mind Stone plucked from his head. Wanda had died shortly after, taking out hundreds in her grief, before Thanos had crushed her. Countless others, the last line of defense, had fallen.

Natasha lay in an unnatural position not too far from him, eerily similar to how she looked in his nightmares. Tony couldn’t bring himself to check whether she was alive or simply unconscious and knew that she wouldn’t want him to, not when Mantis was pulling her to a more sheltered spot and all of their efforts had to go to stopping Thanos as soon as possible.

If they could stop him.

With every new Stone in his possession, he grew more powerful, the playing field growing more uneven and unpredictable. The Time Stone had landed in Thanos’s hands despite their best attempts, with Strange barely escaping, and now he was near unstoppable with five out of the six Stones.

Except…

He observed Thanos raising the Gauntlet to the sky before swinging it down to take out a fleet of massive tanks in one go.

There was an opening. It could be a long shot, a risky one especially as the margin for error was slim, but if they could get in right as soon as Thanos powered up the Gauntlet, if there was an all-out effort to distract him and hold him off at that exact moment, then maybe, just maybe, for the briefest of seconds the Gauntlet would be vulnerable and there for the taking.

The window they had was infinitesimally small, and many would die in the attempt. But hope sparked to life in Tony for the first time in a long while, kindling him with renewed purpose.

He watched as everyone around him refused to stay down, as they did what they always did, no matter if there didn’t seem to be any way out, no matter if it seemed that all hope was lost. They kept fighting.

The idea he had was a rash one, a suicide mission with a low probability of success, but it was something. And something was better than nothing.

They could work with something.

Tony opened up the comms.
“Listen up, everyone,” he said grimly. “I’ve got a plan.”

Hulk wrenched the Gauntlet off of Thanos’s arm as Gamora and Nebula tore into him, knives carving thick, punishing grooves into Thanos’s face from top to bottom, down his eyes to his chin. The blinding rays emitting from the Gauntlet winked out immediately as the Gauntlet dropped, Thanos roaring with anger and pain as several on their side joined Hulk and the sisters.

Tony locked his boots together, the massive repulsor at his heels blasting him towards the fight in a blink of an eye. He snatched the Gauntlet before anyone could react and swept upwards on a narrow angle. The suit registered Steve’s grip tightening on him as they sped away, Tony putting in another burst of speed, pushing for maximum acceleration.

They weren’t out of the woods yet. They had to gain as much distance as possible from Thanos and the Order, and a few foreboding signs were already flashing on his HUD.

“Boss, you’re running low on juice. You have to land soon,” FRIDAY warned him.

The suit was starting to strain from both the heavy hits it sustained over the course of battle and the unwise number of times he used the thruster he had recently built into his boots.

There. Ten clicks away. An outcrop of rubble. It was exposed, and there was a horde of Chitauri too close for his liking, but it was a smaller group than the ones they had passed and he couldn’t push the suit any farther.

“Best I could do,” Tony grunted as they landed roughly; one of his boot thrusters had given out, throwing him off balance as they went to ground.

Several of the Chitauri had noticed their noisy arrival and had started to descend on them. Steve held out his shield and Tony blasted it with a repulsor, the beam taking out the closest lines. A few remaining soldiers skittered back, but the majority swarmed in, stepping over the fallen without hesitation.

There were too many for his liking. He couldn’t leave Steve alone to deal with them. He shifted his stance, digging his feet into the ground, his back against Steve’s until Steve turned around.

“Tony, you have to go,” he said urgently. “Contact Strange and get the last Stone. I’ll hold them off as long as I can.”

“I’m not leaving you to—”

A massive bellow reached them, and Tony turned his head just in time to see Hulk flung backwards in the far distance, small as a speck, Thanos’s blow making him skid several miles once he hit the ground before coming to a stop, slumped over and unmoving.

“Go!” Steve shouted. He had already turned back, smashing his shield under the jaw of the alien closest to him, concentrating on giving Tony enough time to escape.

There was a large pillar lying on its side nearby, blocking most of a caved-in mouth to a fallen building. Tony squeezed past it, into a darkness more complete than the night outside.
He switched on the comms, sitting on the floor with the Gauntlet to his side. “We’re ready,” he said tightly.

There was no response.

Come on.

Come on.

“Hurry,” he wanted to shout, but almost as soon as he had thought it, an amber circle glowed, dropping the container holding the Soul Stone onto the dirt in front of his knees, before blinking out of existence.

Tony glanced over his shoulder. Through the entrance, he could see Steve taking out four opponents, five. Six. Steve was fine. Whereas he had been starting to flag before they had seized the Gauntlet, he was a man made anew by hope and fury.

He ripped his gaze from Steve down to the rectangular case. He had to get the Stone out quickly, but they hadn’t planned to use it; all they had wanted to do was hide and protect it, and that meant layers upon layers of safeguards. He knew how to bypass each one, how to disable every trap that they had put in—he was one of the few who did—but it required careful movements and patience.

He focused on unlocking each layer with surgical precision. The fight outside had diminished to white noise as time stretched, infinite in the darkness, broken only by the light of the arc reactor; only he and the box existed in this pocket universe he had fallen into and nothing else. Three down, two to go.

A loud cry rent the air, and Tony’s pulse quickened.

Steve.

His fingers slipped on the clasps. He paused, his palms sticky and clammy with sweat, until he heard the unmistakable clang of vibranium hitting metal and the dying gurgle of a Chitauri soldier. He was hyperaware of his surroundings, staying as motionless as possible to pick up on the most minute of sounds coming from outside. More scuffling, more blows traded. But he could hear screeches and nothing else, no shout of pain from Steve, and that meant that Steve was holding down the fort as well as he could. The noise had died down significantly; there were fewer Chitauri out there.

Two layers to go.

Tony unlocked the first, and then minutes—hours, weeks, months—later, the second. The Soul Stone sat, cushioned in the center of the box, innocuous and unassuming in appearance. It was hard to imagine that something so tiny could hold such enormous, terrible power, but he was reminded of Quill’s warning, his account of the Power Stone and how it had nearly destroyed him, even with his father’s blood. He couldn’t touch it directly.

But he didn’t have to. As though it yearned for nothing more than to join its siblings, the Stone shot into the air, speeding towards the Gauntlet and slotting into the last spot. The Stones glowed, splashing colorful lights against the walls, before fading again.

A flood of exhilarated relief washed over Tony, nearly bowling him over.
“Got it!” he couldn’t help but shout.

Hope flared in him, as bright and colorful as the light of the Stones. They could win this. They were going to win this.

“I got it,” he choked out. “Steve—”

But at some point, an oppressive hush had fallen outside the shelter, blanketing the world in a terrible, too-still silence.

There was no answer.

Tony scrambled out of the building, tripping over the pillar in his haste. Concrete rushed to meet him and he shot his hand out to break his fall.

“Steve!” he yelled.

He got up again, scanning his surroundings wildly. Dozens of Chitauri were strewn across the ground, and Tony would have been impressed by the body count had it not been for the pressing matter at hand.

Where was he?

Where was—

Tony’s stomach swooped unpleasantly, leaving him woozy and nauseous.

Steve had propped himself up against rubble, only a few feet to his right. His eyes were shut, and he was too pale, almost waxy, as if all of his blood had drained out of him.

It had.

The ground around Steve glistened with dark red pools, and a large, wicked slash cut diagonally across his abdomen, threads of the shredded uniform sticking to it. Blood poured out of the laceration steadily and profusely.

How long had Steve been there? Had he dragged himself to the rubble before Tony had opened the box, had he died waiting because Tony had been too slow, too stupid, too scared to finish his job in time?

“No,” Tony croaked as he stumbled forward. His legs were clumsy and uncoordinated under him. “No.”

The one thing that had mattered most was Steve staying safe. He could deal with everything that came his way just as long as that was the case, just as long as they won, except Steve had gotten hurt defending him.

Tony was floating, drifting out of his own body as though his mind couldn’t handle the terror, the grief, the onslaught of fathomless, virulent self-hatred.
He didn’t think it was possible to hate himself as much as he did now. The loathing ate at him, violent and all-consuming; he was cannibalizing himself.

He should have refused Steve’s help, but Steve had insisted that someone cover him, saying that he was going to be open to attacks while he worked on the Gauntlet.

So what? So what if he would have been? He would have gladly offered himself to be ripped to pieces while he did, to die wielding the Gauntlet, if it meant that Steve would be far away, alive and whole.

“Steve,” he whispered. He placed his hand on Steve’s shoulder. It was cold and stiff under his hand; at some point, he had taken off his gauntlet, hoping against hope that he would still register warmth, still register Steve breathing under him except he was trembling too much to notice if Steve was even if he tried.

He almost cried with relief when Steve’s eyes flickered open.

“Tony,” he exhaled. “You did it.”

He struggled to stay awake, his lids heavy. His breathing was too shallow, the opposite of Tony’s, his smile weak.

“Hey. Stay with me,” Tony pleaded. “You have to stay with me, okay?” He cupped Steve’s face in his hands, stroking the curve of his cheek.

Steve hummed in assent, leaning into the touch. “I’m here,” he mumbled.

“I know. I know you are, but don’t close your eyes. Focus on me.” A ragged gasp tore his lungs open. He couldn’t catch his breath. He was suffocating. “You’re going to be fine. We’re going to… we’re going to get you help. It’ll be okay.”

He wasn’t sure if Steve would be okay. He didn’t know the first thing about stomach wounds, didn’t know the extent of Steve’s, not without peeling back the uniform and hurting Steve even more. He didn’t know whether it was fatal or not, but there was a lot of blood. Too much blood. He was kneeling in it, the legs of his armor coated with it.

Oh God.

His hands were trembling uncontrollably, creating tiny seismic waves that rippled through his body. The Gauntlet lay to the side, forgotten.

Steve put his hands over Tony’s, stilling them. “I’m here. I promise.” It was the first sign of fire that Tony saw in him since he had found him slumped against the rubble. His eyes were clear even as he struggled to breathe, intense in their focus. “Put on the Gauntlet. You can end this.”

“No. No, I can’t,” he choked out.

What had Thor said? The wielder had to have resolve. The pure, unshakable kind. The resolve of a titan, formidable and unmoving, untainted by doubt and distractions.

Steve, Tony thought as he had caught the Gauntlet in the air. Steve, he thought as he assembled it. If
there ever was a physical embodiment of that sort of resolve, it was Steve.

“Yes,” Steve rebutted firmly. “You have everything it takes. You always did. And you got something else that Thanos doesn’t.” His face was pinched, his breathing labored; he paid a high cost for every word, and Tony wanted to scream at him to stop talking. “Your belief in a better future. Your hope. Y’never give up ’cause of that, Iron Man. S’why I love you.” His smile was crooked, sloppy as his words which came out slurred, vowels and consonants melting into one another, dribbling out of his mouth like another kind of blood.

His hands slipped off of Tony’s. Tony lunged for them, clutched them desperately in his.

No.

No.

“Steve,” he said, his voice tight with panic.

“Not going anywhere. Not leaving you,” Steve breathed out. He turned his hand over so that he was holding Tony’s and squeezed, but his gaze grew dull, his eyes losing focus. After one last heavy blink, they remained closed.

What had people said? Tony flicked through his memories, throwing boxes down from shelves, rifling through each one and flinging them away until he found something, anything that could possibly help. Steve was his soulmate, surely he could do something for him, something normal people couldn’t because what was the point of being someone’s soulmate if he couldn’t do anything? What was the point of soul marks—

Soul marks.

Touching wrists, soul mark against soul mark, holding their wrist against your chest. A tried-and-true method of calming your soulmate.

People always said that it did. And he had read a study done on vets after they came home from war. Something about that physical connection helped to put them at ease, to take away some of the pain.

That. He could do that for Steve. It wasn’t much, but he would take all of Steve’s pain if he could, every inch of it if it meant Steve stayed alive.

He folded his chestplate back, waiting as it retreated into his undersuit fast and slick like liquid metal, and grabbed his band, throwing it to the side, not caring where it landed as he pulled off Steve’s glove and then his band.

Steve tensed, the cords of muscle at his wrist jumping as Tony curled his hand around it, and when Tony looked down, he understood why. There were his words in his own writing, etched into Steve’s skin, a wound inflicted by his own hand.

So was I.


A permanent reminder branded on Steve so that he could never forget, a mark of punishment and shame that would never fade even as time marched on, as new as the day he had gotten it.
Tony screwed his eyes shut. He was undone, the only anchor grounding him Steve’s touch. There was something crescendoing in him, a monster of a whirlwind that beat at the walls, straining to burst out of him, at the horror of Steve’s words.

“Together, huh?” Steve said huskily.

Steve hadn’t known. Tony knew that—he had never said anything about it to Steve, after all—but put through a new experiment he hadn’t realized he had been running until it was over, the fact that he had assumed he had known every detail of, the fact that had held little significance to him until now, suddenly revealed hidden layers that upended his entire world.

Steve hadn’t known whether Tony had his words—but he had shown him that it didn’t matter anyway. Had shown him that he didn’t need something in return, that he would be there for Tony, that he would try to atone for the past and do better in the present, regardless of whether or not he belonged to Tony and before he had found out that he did.

It was an unconditional promise.

Hot tears spilled down Tony’s cheeks as a sob wrenched free from his lungs.

Winter thawed. He was a frozen river finally shattered, everything pouring out of him through the cracks of the icy surface, overflowing.

“Yeah,” he choked out, his body shuddering with every sob, “so stay with me. I can’t…I can’t lose you. Not again.”

Tears dropped, one after another, landing on their intertwined hands. Tony didn’t know whose they were, his or Steve’s.

“’M with you,” Steve said faintly. “We’ll do it together, every step of the way.” He smoothed his thumb across the back of Tony’s hand with an aching, fragile tenderness, fading, dwindling, but still holding on.

There were people who would die for him. Tony knew that because he would do the same for them, because their hearts were the same when it came down to that. But Steve, Steve would live for him if he asked. He would do his best to do that, to stay at his side, to come back if he couldn’t.

What had he said? You get killed, walk it off.

Because the world needed them to. Because they needed to keep the world safe.

But this, he knew, this was beyond that. The answer to their prayers rested inches away from their hands.

Steve’s role in the war was over.

This was Steve staying for him. This was Steve choosing him.

Regardless of soul marks, regardless of what their words were.

This was Steve choosing him.
And for the first time, Tony understood the depths to that truth, the profound, limitless eternity of it.

He bent forward so that their foreheads touched, bringing Steve’s wrist to his heart with his left hand and putting the Gauntlet on his right, never once letting go.

Time stopped. Reality stopped. He was on the battlefield and somewhere else altogether. Somewhere no one else existed but him. There and everywhere. Everywhere and nowhere.

A veil he hadn’t known was there lifted, and beyond it he could see all the infinite possibilities, each one a jewel glimmering with potential. There was no way he could pick one. It was like choosing a star out of the sky except that he could see to the ends of the universe, to the ends of time, every single star that had ever existed, that existed, that would exist. He could go back. Save his parents. Save Barnes.

He could cure cancer.

He could stop death.

He could raise the deceased, eradicate diseases, prevent wars.

He could shape the universe to his vision, a utopia free from strife and suffering.

Peace in our time.

Imagine that.

He could see it too, that universe. It was one where no one made mistakes, where everyone was alive, happy, and whole.

One where no one had free will.

He was losing himself. Someone was screaming and vaguely, as though from miles away, isolated from his own body and mind, he was aware that it was him. Information overload. He was taking too long to choose, and the Gauntlet was wrestling control from him, preying on his indecision. It would break.

Maybe he had to go smaller. Rearrange things and erase his and Steve’s words. Rearrange things so that he didn’t love Steve.

He could feel more of his control slipping away, the Gauntlet tugging him closer to the edge.

He could feel Steve’s heartbeat as though it were his, could understand just how hard Steve was fighting to stay with him.

Steve.

Steve.

Simple. Straightforward. Something that fixed the problem at heart even if it didn’t fix everything.
He didn’t have to fix everything. That was what Steve would tell him. The Avengers would figure it out somehow; they always did when they had one another.

_Not much of a plan_, a distant part of his mind said, and if he could feel anything at all or rather, stop from feeling too much, maybe he would be a bit hysterical, the way he was all those years ago, when they had been in the lab and he shouted about the real game up there and Steve had said, with a resoluteness that was infuriating, that they would do it together.

Together, he thought, and maybe that word was his to make his own, to be whatever he wanted to make of it. Raw material that he had at his disposal to create something new.


Simple and straightforward, he thought, but forward-thinking.

He settled on his wish after a moment, committing every atom of himself to the seed of that idea, believing in it, hoping for it.

“Stop,” he said, and he felt everyone freeze on the field. He felt everyone’s wounds stitch together, the bleeding staunched. He felt everyone pulled from the brink of death.

“Scatter,” he said, and he felt Thanos’s atoms disperse until he dissolved into nothing. He felt Thanos’s allies lose purpose and fly home. He felt the Stones shove back as he tried to destroy them.

He pushed just as hard, his mind bursting into flames, breaking apart with the effort until he and the Stones pushed against each other so hard that they both slipped to the side, to a third option, to the Stones disseminating to the farthest, most inhospitable and unreachable places of the universe, away from one another and away from everyone else in time and in space.

His head split into two, splintering into more pieces than he could count, and darkness fell over him until he felt nothing more.

There was no sight more beautiful than the one in front of him. Midtown was in shambles, and Tony was in love.

They had done it. By fighting side by side, by preparing, by listening. By never giving up. And this was the result. Broken and in pieces but still there.

It was an early morning in Manhattan, and everyone was back to their daily routines, going to work, cursing the MTA, lining up at food carts. Cranes filled the sky and clean-up crews shifted detritus away, a constant drilling, banging, and beeping polluting the air.

Steve walked up to him, circumventing broken bits of Chitauri ships and balancing on the uneven, ruined surface of the Park Avenue Viaduct. He surveyed the roads below and then Grand Central to his right, squinting into the sun. “This feels familiar,” he said drily.

Tony laughed brightly. “Sure does.”

A second chance, he thought.
They hadn’t had much time to talk after it was over, too busy being treated in medical and then heading out to help with recovery and reconstruction plans all over the country and the world once they got the green light.

There was so much damage. It would take years to fix everything, but Tony had no doubt in his mind that they would eventually be able to do so, with the systems set in place and all the teams involved.

It was different from last time, from the beginning. They had come a long way.

Tony was content simply standing next to Steve, watching in comfortable silence as the city they both loved came alive. He could wait for Steve. He always would.

Steve spoke after a long stretch. “What I said…I meant it, Tony. I don’t need you to say it back.”

“They don’t mean you love me, y’know. Your words.”

*You don’t need to love me just because I’m your soulmate,* he didn’t say.

He hadn’t forgotten what Steve had said, but he had chalked it up to a combination of heightened emotions during battle and Steve’s unassailable belief in the concept of soulmates.

To his surprise, Steve smiled warmly at him. “I didn’t fall in love with you because I found out you were my soulmate. That only made me realize what was already there.” He stared straight ahead again, contemplative. “I think…I think I was always drawn to you from the start. But I didn’t even want to think about it because I was so fixated on my soulmate that I refused to even consider anyone else, even you. Only took losing you to realize how stupid I was being.”

“Probably because I wasn’t what you were expecting.”

“No,” Steve answered thoughtfully. “But I wouldn’t want you to be any different either. If soulmates didn’t exist, I would’ve fallen in love with you anyway.”

Tony was fiercely glad that Steve was still looking straight ahead. Happiness surged through him like electricity and strangely fear as well.

“Why?” he rasped out.

“Because all those years, I was lost and you gave me everything. And even when I held myself back, I was happy. I was home.”

A part of Tony, the part that was still healing, warned against letting Steve in, against letting his guard down so that he could never get hurt again, because it had never been a matter of whether he loved Steve or not. He always did, and he always would. It was a matter of whether he could let Steve in.

The past two years had taught him this: he didn’t need Steve. And the safer choice would most likely be to keep Steve at a distance.

But he was never keen on being safe, and neither was Steve.
And Tony had never stopped wanting him, and that would never change regardless of what he decided to do.

There were so many words that had been unsaid between them, that had died unborn in his mouth because he had been too afraid. He didn’t want to regret not saying them anymore.

He wanted to see what a future with Steve would be like. He hoped it would be a bright, happy one. He knew that they both would work towards making that happen. All that had happened to lead up to this point had taught him that.

He reached out, slipping his hand into Steve’s. Steve turned to him in surprise. He had been wrong earlier. There was no sight more beautiful than the one in front of him right now, right at this very moment. A fragile hope was starting to blossom on Steve’s face, his eyes wide with it.

Tony focused on that as he spoke, committing every part of himself to each word he was about to say.

“So was I,” he said, watching as Steve broke out into a wide smile full of wonder. “So am I.”

There were going to be bad days for a while, ones that would take them by surprise, would saddle him with doubt and anger, with grief and pain. There would be days when Steve would reach out and hold him in his arms, and he wouldn’t be able to answer back. He wasn’t sure when they would stop, when that day would come. But he had to believe it would and that there would be good days in between and ever after too. Days when they would be in bed together, kissing promises against each other’s skin, leaving marks of love to accompany their scars. Days when they would be so intertwined with each other that they wouldn’t know where one of them ended and the other began. Days when they would just lie there, holding hands, making new meanings for the words on their wrists.

Their home had cracks. Parts of it had crumbled and caved in. But they had rebuilt it once before, and Tony knew they could do it again.

That was what they were good at. And they had always done it together.
Thank you so much, hellogarbagetime, for this breathtaking commission! I’m stunned at how you captured the emotions of this moment so perfectly that I’m a little verklempt (also a little verklempt seeing “So was I” in Tony’s handwriting on Steve’s wrist after thinking about it for so long; thank you for putting up with all the details I threw your way and for all the research you put in to make this. It’s incredible). I had this scene in my head for months while working on LPAYS, and this is exactly how I imagined it. Thank you, thank you, thank you.<3

You can also see this art on Tumblr [here](https://example.com).

Chapter Notes

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