Paved With Good Intentions (I'm on the road to hell)

by itsallAvengers

Summary

When the mysterious group of vigilante assassins known only as 'The Avengers' are tipped off about the dirty secrets that lie within Stark Industries, Steve Rogers has his heart set on taking out Tony Stark for good in order to protect the rest of the world from his evil. He's seen the footage, after all- Stark is a man who fights only for himself. And of course, when a job arises as chief bodyguard for Stark, to protect him from the growing threat of an ominously infatuated stalker, the opportunity is way too good for him to miss out on. It's the perfect placement, and the perfect way to find out whether or not their tipoff is genuine.

But as Steve falls into rank as the new bodyguard for Mr. Stark and he spends time getting to know and protect him, his initial hatred begins to falter and merge into something different, something far more terrifying than the prospect of killing the face of Stark Industries.

Steve Rogers may just be falling in love with him instead.

Notes

HOLY SHIT YOU GUYS I'M FINALLY POSTING IT!!!
Yep, this is in fact for the Stony Trumps Hate auction that was had back in, uh... 2017 last year. I know. It's been a long time. But it's here now! I apologize to Bria, my wonderful auctioneer who had to wait more than a year to receive her gift. I know I said I would go over the word count... I did not plan on going... quite so far.

Secondly, I want to say a HUGE AWESOME MASSIVE THANK YOU TO MY BETA, HANNAH AKA @inshadowsoflove on tumblr!!! She was an absolute wonder for me, and really helped me get to grips with the fic, plus her encouragement helped massively!! WHAT A STAR U ARE MY DEAR, THANK YOU SO MUCH!

I'd also like to say- Ella, if you're reading this, I'm sorry. You should probably be studying right now.

ANYWAY. I hope you enjoy this! I will be updating regularly, so stay tuned! :D
Chapter 1

“You’re clear. Cameras are frozen. Thirty seconds, Cap, make it quick.”

Steve wasted no time. Handing the driver a few bills, he slipped out of his taxi and then took to the streets, hood up and hiding his face from the rain and any potential witnesses as they passed him by on the slippery sidewalk. It was cold—nearly freezing—which made it all the more difficult for Steve to complete his task. Layers always meant a longer needle shaft, which ultimately meant a higher chance of being noticed by onlookers.

Of course, it wasn’t as if Steve was actually going to get caught; he’d been doing this shit far too long and was far too good to do something as stupid as that. It was just an extra hassle to maneuver the damn thing around, that was all.

“Okay, 10 seconds ‘til contact- 8, 7, 6-” Natasha spoke quietly through his comm, and Steve glanced up to the corner, stepping in time with Natasha’s countdown and moving at a pace that would put him directly at the corner by the time the numbers ran to zero.

“Hawkeye, left or right,” Steve muttered, as Natasha called, “three, two-”

“He’s on the left side of the road,” Hawke told him, and Steve immediately took a step to the right in reply, just as he rounded the corner and Natasha’s count ran out.

At that moment, another man- 5’11 and about 200 pounds, according to their file- stepped directly in front of him, and he and Steve collided messily. Stumbling forward a little, Steve turned his body and swung with the momentum, putting a steadying, gloved hand against the other man’s back before muttering a quick ‘sorry’ and pushing away, hands sliding effortlessly back into their pockets as he turned back around and drifted off into the crowds again. It happened in little over two seconds, and Steve was gone before the target had even moved his head.

They’d played this game many times before. They ran like a well-oiled machine, now.

“Direct hit, I assume?” Natasha asked, and Steve took a moment to glance up at the CCTV cameras his friends were currently watching him through with a dry raise of his eyebrow.

“Yes, I got a hit. What do you take me for?”

“Hey,” she huffed down the line, “don’t blame me; I can never see the damn thing when you stab the poor guys with it- even when we’ve hacked CCTV you always shield it from eyesight. Do you not trust my computing skills?” Natasha asked him, mock hurt in her voice.

Steve rolled his eyes, sliding effortlessly into the yellow taxi that had pulled up beside the road. “I have total and utter faith in your computing skills, Widow, but old habits die hard, that’s all. Hi Bucky.”

“Hey stranger. Where you wanna go?” Bucky grinned at him from the mirror and turned out onto the road again, switching his sign off and joining the busy New York traffic.

“Does that joke ever get old?” Steve asked wearily, pulling down his hood and sitting back in his seat, careful to not accidentally stab himself with the poisonous needle still fitted snugly in his
“When you let me pick you up in a fancier getaway car, then yeah. ‘Til then, I’m just your cab driver, pal.”

"Cabs are inconspicuous,” Steve reeled off on autopilot, shutting his eyes. He’d been up all night double checking their sources, making sure the target would be where they thought he would. It was always difficult to predict the movement of men like him- the ones with money and power tended to be more eccentric in their routines.

"But a Lamborghini is definitely cooler,” Bucky grumbled, signalling left and winding his window down as the lights turned red in front of him.

“Don’t smoke in the damn cab,” Steve said, before Bucky had even pulled one out. Bucky glanced at him from the mirror again, offended.

“Maybe I just wanted a bit of fresh air, huh?”

“Anything out of the ordinary draws attention to us, Bucky, come on, you know-”

“Alright, alright, fine. No smoking. Killjoy,” Bucky grumbled, hands rising back to the wheel as the lights turned again. He glanced around his surroundings lazily, a habit that had been ingrained into all of them. Cameras were in the most unexpected of places, and you could never truly be too careful. Steve had learned that the harder way a few times before.

“Long day, Cap?” Hawkeye asked, sensing the brittleness of Steve’s temper.

“Just the usual. I hate using poison. It’s so tasteless,” Steve muttered, scowling to himself as he looked out of the window.

Over the comm, Natasha scoffed. She was a big fan of poisons, and always felt personally attacked when Steve complained. “Cap, that was 0.5 milligrams of Carfentanil we just injected into his system. He’s gonna be dead within the hour. And even in the autopsy, the guy’ll be so pumped full of all the other Class-A drugs he’s been sniffing, they’ll just assume he got a dirty line of coke. We’re fine.”

“I know we’re fine,” Steve snapped, “I just… feel like I’m playing dirty when we poison ‘em.”

“Yeah- much fairer to just point a gun at their faces, right?” Bucky said, rolling his eyes fondly. “Stevie, the guy made a living off child exploitation, I think you can keep your conscience clean on this one.”

Steve grunted non-committedly, waiting until they’d turned into a road that he knew didn’t have any street cameras facing their direction before shedding his jacket and pulling out the now empty syringe. Bucky wordlessly handed him a plastic container, and Steve threw the evidence inside, snapping the lid closed and then slipping it back in his pocket. He’d put it in the furnace later.

“At least that’s another $10,000 we get to hand off to Natasha’s charity,” Clint said cheerfully, and Steve frowned in confusion.

“What? I thought we went in a rota? Isn’t it Peggy’s turn to pick? You can’t just leave her out because she’s not here to hit you herself-”

“No, we agreed it’d be a project manager thing, remember? The one who arranges it is the one
who gets to pick where the money goes- we changed it to that after the fourth argument between you and Nat that month over who’s turn it was,” Clint told him, and Natasha huffed over the line.

“I think you need to get a bit more sleep, pal,” Bucky chuckled.

“I think we need to get a bit more goddamn pay,” Steve grumbled mutinously, because really? $10,000? They may be picky, but they were good. And they did it for all the right reasons. They killed the bad guys, and then gave the money they made back to the community. Like a… a modern Robin Hood. Except more murder-y.

Not that he told any of his friends that- he’d never hear the end of it.

Honestly- this hadn’t been the route he’d expected to take when he’d been growing up. He thought he’d just join the army and protect people that way. And for a while, he had. It had been fine.

Except four months into active duty, and he’d caught two men of his own fucking unit trying to smuggle a local woman away into some dark alley to do god only knows what, and despite the fact he’d caught both the pieces of shit red-handed, they’d still walked. Free of charge, and Steve knew they’d bought off the Jury- one of them had even had the fucking nerve to brag about it a few weeks later. The army hadn’t even batted an eye, either- just popped them back into active duty as soon as they were properly ‘fixed’. Because that’s what the military needed, right? An abundance of soldiers, no matter how fucking depraved they might have been.

Steve had learned the hard way that the world he had lived in was festering in corruption and dishonesty. He’d always been naive, always assumed the best of people, but seeing what had happened to those two men- how they’d used and abused their power so easily, and then worked the system to their advantage so that they missed out on ever facing the consequences of their actions… it had changed him. He’d been shown the harsh realities of the world around him, and there was no going back from an epiphany like that.

He’d come back home pretty swiftly, after being given an Other Than Honorable discharge with Bucky, who had been serving with him at the time. Apparently, taking those two fuckheads by the collars and throwing them into the nearest wall before launching himself into a brawl with them wasn’t considered appropriate conduct in the military.

He and Bucky had come out of that fight with a black eye and a split lip between them; the other guys left with two broken legs, a broken nose and one fractured collarbone. In all honesty, Steve just wished he’d done a bit more. You could heal from wounds like that. Steve wished he’d left a reminder of what happened when you pulled that shit. It might’ve made them think twice before doing it again.

But anyway- after all the bitterness and the resentment and the worrying amount of debts that had seemed to be waiting for them when they’d gotten back home, the whole Assassin thing had just sort of… happened. What had begun as just him and Bucky, working for a few bucks that would pay for bills whilst keeping the depraved and the perverted off the streets, had slowly grown into a business and a team- people they’d met along the way who had similar views and specialized skills. People who didn’t enjoy killing, particularly, but realized that some people were just bad enough that they were really better off dead in the long run. And hey, it made for a good headline, that was for sure; Steve had seen his team’s kills being mentioned in the news more than once before. The popular opinion was that what they were doing was for the good of the people. Hell, it was probably one of the reasons they’d been getting away with it for as long as they had- the police knew just as well as they did that those people were untouchable from the ‘right’ side of the law. And so as long as they kept taking out the criminals that the government couldn’t, Steve knew everyone would turn a blind eye.
It was all Corrupt. Every damned part of it. But at least this particular part worked to his advantage. And Steve couldn’t say he had never really thought he’d be working with a Carnie, an ex-Russian mobster, a British runaway, and his best friend in order to assassinate people, but here they were.

“-Steve? You even listening?” Bucky asked him, and Steve zoned back in, frowning as he tried to recall the words Bucky had said less than a second ago.

“Uh… something about the right time?” He made a face, shrugging.

Bucky rolled his eyes again. “I was saying that we just have to wait. Build up our rep a bit more, put ourselves out there without attractin’ the wrong crowd. We’re in a pretty fuckin’ niche market here- not many people want assassins with principles. But once we get the right client, who knows? We just gotta wait,” Bucky nodded his head solemnly.

Steve grimaced. Waiting for clients wasn’t going to pay their increasingly rising rent, or help their old orphanage that was in desperate need of renovations down on the outskirts of Brooklyn. It seemed like the costs never stopped getting higher, these days, and it was a constant anxiety in the back of his mind.

“I come on the comm line for three seconds and I can already hear the moody bastard brooding. What’ve you pricks said now?” perked up a new voice, and Steve smiled involuntarily.

“Good morning to you too, Peggs.”

“No, it is most certainly not a ‘good morning’. I just had to tail some shithead for ten minutes and see he got to his flat without keeling over and dying, and it was bloody freezing. Next time that’s Barton’s job- my hair is absolutely ruined,” she said mournfully, before adding, “oh, and he’s dead, by the way. Climbed up to the roof of the opposite building and saw him through the window. Fucking idiot was trying to snort another line of crack, despite the fact his bloody insides were shutting down. Which is lucky for us, I guess. We’re all clear.”

“Good,” Steve said, nodding in satisfaction. That was another scummy human taken care of. Only about a billion more to go. “Anything else on the agenda?”

“Nope. Checked the schedule- we’re all clear for a few weeks,” Peggy replied crisply. “Which means we’re going to have to actually get back to … God forbid … our normal lives,” she said in mock horror.

Clint groaned theatrically, and Steve heard the scuffle as he undoubtedly fell to the ground from wherever he was standing in their apartment. “Ugh- do you know how exhausting it is, just serving coffee all day, without the thought that I get to play assassin on my time off? It’s grim. I’ve nowhere to vent all my customer frustration out, and I think people would talk if I pulled out my sniper rifle and took aim on them.”

“You could let me test some new chemicals I’ve been working on with Bruce down at the labs, if that would perk things up over there. I’m in need of some human test subjects,” Natasha said casually, whilst Steve just sighed again.

“Clint, please do not fire your sniper rifle at random civilians, nor feed them dubiously tested and most probably poisonous substances created by Natasha and Bruce. We have a reputation to uphold.”
“Reputation schmeputation,” Clint probably waved a hand on the other end of the comm, “we’re assassins. I’m pretty sure we’re allowed to do what we want.”

“You do know the last people who used the phrase ‘we’re allowed to do what we want’ whilst trying to justify their actions to Steve were thrown across a restaurant and then stamped on, right?” Peggy piped up.

Steve frowned. “They were assholes and they wouldn’t leave those girls alone.”

It seemed his whole team sighed fondly at the same time. “You’re right, Stevie. A regular superhero, ain’t ya?” Bucky teased lightly, whilst Steve snorted.

“Don’t know about a superhero. I’m just a damn assassin.”

The shop was fairly quiet as he trundled in, shaking out the rain from his hair. He felt a little fatigued, and rubbed his eyes wearily as he pulled off his coat and placed it on the rack to his left. He smiled brightly at one of the young regulars as they walked past him and headed out, undoubtedly to the college they studied at for class, but it flickered and dropped as soon as she had walked away.

It had been a long day.

After the successful mission, Peggy, Natasha and Clint had gone out to the bar to celebrate it as they usually did. Bucky and Steve had decided to stay in and man the cafe whilst they were gone. Steve had taken a brief detour to the store in order to buy some more milk, and as he spotted Bucky wiping down the counters, he smiled and waved the bag in the air. “Brought supplies,” he declared.

Bucky grinned, and then held out his hand. “Gimme gimme gimme,” he said excitedly- because yes, Bucky Barnes was exactly the type of man who got excited about milk and whipping cream.

Steve chuckled. The bag slid across the counter and into Bucky’s waiting hands. “I bought you another treat as well.” He nodded to the grocery bag and then watched Bucky’s eyes glint in delight, hands rustling inside the bag like an excited child.

The face fell when he pulled out the box. “Nicoderm? Seriously?” He held up the smoking patches with disdain, and then dropped them back into the bag. “You actually got me excited, all for some stupid quittin’ stickers.”

Steve just shrugged, pulling them back out the bag again and fingerling open the flap, tugging one out. “You made the New Year’s Resolution to quit, and I’m holding you to it,” he stated mildly, before slapping one of them onto Bucky’s forehead. “It’s a disgusting habit.”
“Oh, like you can talk,” Bucky scoffed, pulling the patch off his forehead in annoyance. He made as if to scrunch it up and throw it somewhere, but when Steve shot him a slightly pleading look, the man just grumbled and then moved it to his arm, pressing it into his bicep. “This stuff is bullshit anyway.”

Steve smiled, triumphant. “Don’t care,” he sing-songed, “you’re gonna wear it, ‘kay? At least make some sort of effort to stick to your vow to have stopped by the end of the year.”

Bucky muttered something unintelligible and then turned around to sort out the coffee machine as Steve tugged on his apron and grabbed the cloth Bucky had left behind, heading over to the tables. He cleaned them carefully, making sure not a speck of dirt remained. Whatever he said about this place, none of them could deny that they loved this little cafe. It was one of the only things Steve was actually proud of.

“Has Dorothy been in yet?” Steve called out behind him.

Bucky turned on the sink and then put a few glasses into the tub before turning around. “Not yet. She’ll probably be here- oh, look, speak of the devil-” Bucky turned his head and grinned cheekily as the doorbell tinkered, and Steve watched as their favourite customer shuffled in, her hair neatly covered by a bright yellow headscarf and eyes obscured by a pair of outlandish sunglasses.

Bucky wolf-whistled. “Lookin’ fine today, Mrs. D.”

She shot him a pink-lipped smile and wandered over. “Oh, shush you-”

“No, I mean it!”

She smacked him lightly on the shoulder, looking around. “Where’s Steven and the others today? They left you all alone again?”

With a fond grin, he patted Dorothy on the shoulder and then ducked to the other side, watching her turn one way before spotting him on the other side. “Oh!” She said in delight, “hello dear!”

Stood next to her, Steve pretty much towered over her, but that didn’t stop her from punching him in the arm. “I haven’t seen you in weeks, boy,” she tutted and shook her head, “thought you’d forgotten about little old me.”

“How could I ever?” Steve placed a hand on his heart and looked at his soulfully, “you are the only woman for me, Mrs. D.”

She laughed again. “You better believe it. Now- what’s on the special’s board today? I had to forgo my reading spectacles in favour of these snazzy ones, so I can barely read that sprawling writing of yours, James.”

Steve snorted at Bucky’s look of offense and wandered off, preparing her favourite table in the corner of the room. Dorothy-Anne had been a regular in their tiny cafe ever since its opening—every Sunday afternoon, without fail, she would totter in wearing something extravagant, and order from the specials board before spending a few hours reading one of her hilariously erotic novels in the corner of the room. Bucky had searched up the title of one of the books, once, and not even he had been able to get through it without choking and going a little red. But dear old Mrs. D seemed happy to sit and flick through them every week, not a single fuck given. She also loved to chatter, and over time the whole team had heard a myriad of wild and wonderful stories from her youth—from running away from riot police as she and her friends had marched at civil rights protests back in the sixties to taking crystal meth with Elton John at a rave in the eighties. It seemed her life had
been very eventful.

Yeah. Everyone loved Mrs. D.

As he cleaned away the cups from the coffee table, he felt her hand pat him fondly on the shoulder. She sat slowly, sinking into the worn leather cushions, and smiled at him. “Do anything good today, Steven?” She asked him warmly.

Steve looked down for a second as he wiped at the table. ‘*I killed a man by poisoning him today, and then vanished into New York without a trace.*’

“Oh, nothing much,” he shrugged vaguely, before glancing down at the book she was pulling from her bright red handbag and grinning cheekily. “Fifty shades? What, are you mellowing out in your old age?”

She chuckled, slapping him on the arm. “Oh God, don’t you start. My husband said exactly the same thing when he saw it. I am simply reading it to see if it is worth all the hype. Everyone loves it in my book group.” She raised her eyebrows and scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Probably because all those old sods have never even *heard* the word ‘kink’ before, let alone experimented with one.”

Steve snorted. “Well, you have fun with that,” he told her warmly, “I’ll have your iced coffee over to you in a minute. Let me know whether the book lives up to your low expectations.”

He wandered off, shaking his head and then bumping shoulders with Bucky as he passed the other man. He stifled a yawn against his hand as he got to work on the dishes. God, he needed to sleep more. But it never seemed to come easy to him these days; although, that being said, he didn’t exactly remember a time when it ever had. He’d grown used to the feeling of exhaustion - wasn’t quite sure what it was like to live without it, really. It was fine. He could deal with it. It had probably just built up a little too much over the past few days, that was all.

He let the minutes drift by him as he lost himself in the rhythm of washing up, and by the time he had finished, half an hour had passed. He blinked up in surprise at the clock, and then pulled off the gloves. Bucky was out at the front, serving a group of customers, so Steve went and did the rounds again, clearing away the trays and mugs from all the tables.

“You should get an early night, Steven,” Dorothy told him as he passed her. She was smiling, but her eyes were a little concerned. “You seem tired.”

Steve looked over to her, and chuckled fondly. “Oh, don’t worry about me, Mrs. D,” he shook his head and then took her now-empty glass from the table. “I am, unfortunately, used to it.”

“Well then you should sleep better,” she said firmly, as if that would magically fix everything. Although knowing her, it probably would.

"Afraid sleeping won’t pay the bills,” Steve told her wryly, moving back over to the counter. He heard her scoff behind him.

“Well then, when I snuff it, I’ll put you boys in my will. I hate my grandkids anyway.” She told him bluntly, making him snort once more. It was twenty minutes later when he saw her finally pack up, putting all her little bits and bobs back into the bright crimson bag and then getting slowly to her feet. She waved to them as she tottered toward the exit, and then paused, turning back to the counter. With a small puff, she pulled out the book she’d been reading and slid it across the counter.

“Please put that in the trash where it belongs, boys,” she said lightly, tapping a nail over the cover.
Bucky took it curiously, flicking onto one of the middle pages before pulling a face and shutting it pretty rapidly. “I cannot believe this passes for cortica these days. Honestly-- it gives a bad rep to fanfiction, which is actually a higher standard than this garbage ever could be.” She rolled her eyes and then sighed, shooting both of them a despairing look whilst they both attempted to hide their own smiles. “Honestly, you kids these days have no idea.”

Bucky gulped and agreed wholeheartedly. She turned away and wandered off again, waving to them as she went. “Until next time, boys!” She said, throwing open the door extravagantly and then whipping her shades back on, before walking out the door.

Bucky and Steve watched her go, both of them in slight awe. Eventually, Bucky held out his pinkie finger.

“Promise me that if we ever make it to that age, that is exactly how we are gonna be.”

—— Tony ——

“Can we maybe not do this right now? Or ever. I’m liking the sound of ‘ever’ actually, I definitely think we should stick with that one.”

For what was quite possibly the hundredth time, Pepper sighed and followed behind him, her heels clacking incessantly against the tiles. She had always had a distinct talent for letting herself be known, no matter where she was. Tony usually admired that. Usually. “I disagree. I think we should actually do this, right now, this very minute, because I’ve been asking and asking for you to sort a new detail out for days now and you’ve ignored me the entire time-”

“Because I don’t fucking need it, Pep,” Tony argued, standing on his tiptoes and pulling out his favourite mug from the top shelf of his kitchen cupboards, “I am a fit, healthy male in the prime of my life, and I do not need a security detail to follow me about wherever I go!”

As he spoke, he shot a very mutinous look in JARVIS’ security cameras. That rat bastard had told him that this had been a top priority visit. This is what he'd been dragged out of his workshop for. He’d thought his goddamn company might be descending into anarchy, or the board members had all simultaneously dropped dead of their own accord or- or something that had seemed slightly more relevant to the 'top priority' notification that he’d set JARVIS up with. But no, apparently not. Hence why he was stood here, at 11 a.m. in the goddamned morning, arguing with his secretary about this stupid fuss over nothing at all. He got stalkers all the time. He was hot and he was rich and he drew attention to himself; what was really to be expected there? It wasn't a big deal. He (and by he, he meant Pepper) just sicced them with a restraining order if they got too overzealous with their affections.
And yeah, perhaps this one was a little bit creepier- Tony had yet to get their name, or who they were, or what they looked like- but apparently they seemed to like Tony very very much. The first few notes had been... well, not innocent, really, but not threatening either. They'd said things along the lines of 'you and I are meant to be, Tony Stark' and 'soon we will be together, I promise'. All that creepy romantic shit. He'd heard worse being yelled at him from the sides of the street, for God's sake.

But now it seemed that Pepper had decided to take it seriously. Just because they'd managed to get their notes through security a couple of measly times. God, it was embarrassing. Like Tony had said- he was a fit healthy male, and he most certainly did not need a bodyguard-

Pepper sighed loudly, and then slammed the pile of paperwork down on the tabletop, making Tony nearly drop his favorite mug in the process (rude). “Yes, Tony, you do!” She pulled out a letter from the pile, waving it accusingly in the air and holding it with two of her fingers like it was contaminated. The look that was on her face only emphasized that- her lip was curled in distaste and her eyebrows furrowed like it gave off some sort of bad smell. “We’ve just got another one in the mail this morning. Tony, this isn’t a joke anymore- there have been seven in the past month alone, and they’re getting more and more threatening each time! You have to be sensible about this!”

Tony rolled his eyes, snatching it out of her hands and reading it hurriedly. It was written with neat, swirly letters on good quality card, like all the others had been, which was nice of them. Tony liked someone who put in a bit of effort. Not that he was gonna, y’know, ever touch this psycho with a ten-foot pole, but whatever. Tony could appreciate the sentiment behind said-psycho's actions.

If it had been possible to do whilst going through it, he would have continued with the eye-rolling. Same old, same old ‘I want to have your babies but also want to suck your blood because I’m crazy as fuck’ fanmail that he’d been getting all his life. Tony had seen it before, he really had no idea why Pepper was getting so het up about this one in particular, it really was just like all the rest, except maybe the-

“Wait,” Tony peered a little closer, “did they... fuck, did they sign this in blood?”

“We had it tested at the labs,” Pepper said, lips pursed, “but apparently it wasn’t human blood. Cats, they said. Probably a stray.”

“Ookayyy,” Tony gingerly put the letter down, suddenly understanding why Pepper hadn’t been too keen on touching it. It’d suck to get HIV this far down the line, after all.

“Tony,” and Pepper looked pleading now, he hated when she looked pleading, it always meant something serious was happening. “Please. Just put out an ad. Let’s see the potential candidates, at least. I’m worried. This isn’t just some crazy fan anymore- they’re being insistent and it’s getting worse, what if something awful happens-”

“Fine!” Tony burst out in frustration, throwing his hands up in the air and trying his best not to pout his bottom lip. Pepper and Rhodey always said it made him look like a petulant child, and he was definitely not a petulant child. He was a fully grown, mature, if slightly pissed off, adult man, “I’ll get a damn bodyguard! And they can trail me all the way to the fucking bathroom and wait outside ready with a little fucking towel to dry my hands with and a gun to shoot the next poor person who looks at me a second too long. Just completely strip me of my right to privacy. Take away any and all of my freedom. Have me monitored like some sort of outcasted leper. That’s fine. Will that be all, Miss. Potts?”

“That will indeed be all, Mr. Stark,” Pepper said happily, the sad, scared little look dropping off
her face as soon as he’d caved, giving him a peck on the cheek as she passed him. “I’ll have a full list of potential candidates by the end of the week. Just try not to die until then,” she told him, before sweeping out of the room- the last thing to leave being that goddamn clacking noise.

“I’ll do my very fucking best,” Tony grumbled, pouring the coffee into his mug and taking a long, hard sip.

_____Steve_____

It was 11 o’clock on the following evening that they got the call.

“Who’s turn is it?” Peggy asked, eyes still closed against Bucky’s stomach as they both sprawled out on the couch.

“Not me,” Clint replied immediately, touching his finger to his nose. Steve followed the action immediately, and Natasha just scraped in milliseconds before Bucky. He glared at her, but she just shrugged and nudged him off onto the floor with a well-placed foot. “Sucks to be you. Now go answer.”

“Someone turn the TV down a little,” Steve told them- they at least had to withhold some level of professionalism, after all.

Clint grunted and rolled, letting his hand rest against the remote as Bucky crawled to his feet and made his way over to the tabletop, tilting his head down and picking the phone up, shooting one last mutinous glare over at his lazy friends before answering.

“Good evening, this is the Howling Commandos barbershop, how can we help?” Bucky asked sweetly, as they always did when they got a call.

That was the way it went. If the person on the other end of the line was serious, then they’d have to have asked around about them, and if they’d asked around about them, then they knew what the answer to that question was. Their business operated on word of mouth alone- advertising on the deep web just brought too many psychos to their doorstep, which wasn’t actually what they were going for. So they’d had to set up a network that ran on the contacts of a friend’s friend and good old fashioned secret passwords. It meant they were never exactly clamored after, but they got some steady business. It was enough.

There were a few seconds where Bucky paused, and then he gave a thumbs up to the rest of the team, which meant the person on the other end must have answered correctly and they actually had a potential client, rather than just a misdial.

Steve watched Bucky from across the room as he asked the person on the other end of the phone a few questions. There was a 70% chance he’d decline up front on morality grounds, but if they managed to get through the initial questioning process, then it meant another weight off Steve’s shoulders. The rent in their whole neighborhood had just shot up, and both the orphanage and his
friends were struggling to keep up with it. They needed all the business they could get.

“Turn the telly back up a bit,” Peggy told Clint, poking him in the butt with her foot.

Clint yelped in surprise and cursed at Peggy, but ultimately reached for the remote once more. His hand was millimeters away from the button when suddenly, from seemingly out of nowhere, an apple hit his hand square-on. Once more, Clint yelled, shooting an accusatory glare over to Peggy before realizing that its trajectory had come from a completely different direction.

Immediately, all eyes turned on Bucky.

Steve had sat up as soon as he’d taken a look at his friend’s face, instantly alert. The other man was signaling for them to come forward urgently, eyes blown wide as he nodded and hummed in agreement to the caller.

Everyone jumped silently to their feet, looking anxiously at one another as they made their way to the kitchen. Steve was in front, vaulting the couch swiftly and mouthing, ‘what’s going on?’ at Bucky, whilst his fingers subconsciously drew closer to the gun he kept holstered at his hip.

Bucky’s mouth was hanging open, and he frantically reached over for the shopping list they kept at the kitchen table, turning it over and then gesturing for a pen as his eyebrows continued to rise steadily higher on his forehead.

Natasha procured one from the drawer and threw it at Bucky, who plucked it from the air and then began to write, fast and messy against the paper. “Right. Okay. You understand that this is a huge job, and we’ll be needing a fixed fee-”

Bucky’s hand paused half-way through the second word he’d written. In fact, his whole body seemed to just freeze up completely as Steve heard the muffled reply on the other end of the line. His face was fixed in a look of pure disbelief, and Steve had to slap him on the shoulder in order to get the other man to reply to their potential client.

“Uhnh. Right. Okay. I’ll have to talk to my colleagues about it, and we’ll consider the figure-what? Oh, well- that makes things easier. Yeah, so if you wouldn’t mind calling back in an hour, and we’ll have come to decision as to whether we accept the claim or not. Okay. We’ll talk later.”

The phone went dead, and Bucky slowly let it fall back to his side, staring at his friends with the same open-mouthed stare he’d been wearing since the phone call began.

“What the hell, Bucky?” Natasha asked, frown deep and stance wary as she looked at him.

“Yeah- care to explain that?” Steve added warily, a hand on Bucky’s shoulder.

Bucky turned, looking at him and shaking his head softly.

“He wants us to take out Tony Stark. And he’s going to pay us 10 million to do it.”

*****
It had been 58 minutes and they were all still arguing.

“Listen,” Peggy rubbed a hand across her forehead and winced, “this is…this is big. This is not something we can just go into all guns blazing and then wait to work out the consequences later- we’re talking about one of the richest and most famous men in the world here!”

“-who’s rich and famous because of war profiteering, if what the client is telling us is true,” Clint spoke up.

“And what do we have to go off on that information? Absolutely nothing. Just his word, and his word alone. What if he’s just out for revenge, or a rival business partner?” Bucky countered, rolling another apple anxiously between his hands and flicking his gaze back to the mobile on the countertop every three seconds.

“If he were, why would he come to us? Why not just go to a bunch of mercs who’ll do it whether he’s innocent or not?” Steve argued.

There was a brief silence, and he took the opportunity formulate his next words carefully before pushing on. “Look. We just got a call from someone who obviously works close with Stark, telling us that he’s discovered the guy’s been dealing his weapons out to terrorists under the table. And he’s paying us more money than we could even fathom in order to stop it. He obviously knows us, knows our business and how we work, because otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to get hold of us. Which means he knows we’re going to have to do an evaluation of Stark before we can come to decision. What’s the problem here? We find out whether he’s innocent or not, then once we’ve got the evidence we need, we take him out.”

“You’re talking like he’s guilty until proven innocent, not the other way around,” Peggy raised an eyebrow at him, but Steve just shrugged.

“Guilty until proven innocent gives us more motivation. And we’re gonna need all the advantages we can get if we’re seriously considering this.” A pause. Then, “we are seriously considering this, right? Because we have about a minute left to decide.”

Silence again. Then Natasha nodded a little, and both Peggy and Clint followed. Bucky looked around at them all before sighing and shrugging his shoulders. “Fine. Let’s do it. But if this goes wrong, I’m gonna gloat at you all so fuckin’ hard.”

Steve nodded, grabbing the phone and throwing it into Bucky’s waiting hand. “It won’t go wrong. I’ve got a feeling about this.”

*****
A few minutes later, Bucky put the phone down once again, and took a deep, shuddery breath. “Right. Let’s kill Tony fucking Stark.”

“Let’s ‘maybe’ kill Tony fucking Stark!” Peggy called out from the other side of the room.

Bucky huffed in annoyance. “I was being dramatic, asshole!”

*****

Steve stared at the tab he had opened, face a mixture of anger and disgust.

The initial internet search he’d made on Tony Stark had brought up some less than savoury results—drugs, sex, girls, parties, general antisocial behaviour, sex tapes. Everything was laid bare for Steve to see.

It wasn’t good.

From what he could tell; Tony Stark was exactly the same type of person Steve had been kicked out of the army for fighting with all those years ago. Rich, with enough power to get people to bend over backwards and obey their every whim- to be able to walk out of a court without facing justice, because they threw money at the fucking jury and held enough sway to make them fear for what would happen if they didn’t listen

There were articles upon articles, all documenting various scandals surrounding him. Images of a younger version of himself, pushed up against a wall as a pair of cops clapped handcuffs around his wrists. Stories about people who had been betrayed, let down, or generally fucked over by Tony Stark.

Steve was quite frankly horrified.

This seemed like the type of person who didn’t care about where his weapons went. This seemed like the type of person who’d be up for pretty much anything as long as it made him more money.

This seemed like the type of person Steve and his team would take out.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Bucky said from behind him, and Steve jerked up, snapping the computer shut swiftly and turning to stare at his friend. “You’re wondering if you should just get your sniper and find the nearest roof, ain’t ya?” he asked, dropping to the couch next to Steve and looking over at him fondly, shaking his head.

Steve scowled. “You know I wouldn’t Buck, come on-”

“I didn’t say you were gonna,” Bucky waved him off, then reached into his back pocket, taking out his packet of cigarettes, “I was just sayin’ you were thinkin’ it.”
Steve hit the back of his hand, sending the cigarettes flying into the air and then catching them swiftly. “Smoke on the balcony or don’t smoke at all.”

Bucky rolled his eyes, but snatched them back and tucked them into his pocket once again, muttering about spoilsports and boring house rules as he did.

“You know,” he spoke to Steve eventually, “Natasha’s not gonna be able to just hack her way through this one. Any evidence is gonna be hidden in ways that she just ain’t good enough to find. But don’t tell her I said that- I fancy keeping my dick attached to my body,” he added, eyes flicking worriedly into the corners of the room as afraid she was lurking there.

Steve huffed, but unfortunately had to agree. Natasha was good, there was no doubt about that- but this was Tony Stark. He had literally designed the computer she used. His security was unparallelled; his intellect apparently one of the highest in the world. If they wanted to find this information, they were going to have to be good.

Really, really fucking good.

“Got any suggestions, then?” Steve asked him, letting his head rest back against the pillows and then turning to look up at Bucky.

“Aside from just killing him and taking the money whether he’s innocent or not, you mean?” Bucky asked, shaking his head and sighing. “Not a clue, pal.”

“Bucky, Bucky, Bucky,” a new voice—Clint—joined the conversation, and both of them tilted their heads in his direction, watching as the man sauntered into the living room, a smug grin on his face “You see, this is where you fall down. You have so much to learn in the ways of a little thing we like to call ‘infiltration’.”

Steve paused, and then sat up a little. “Wait- you're saying we get into Stark Industries as, what, an IT guy or something? That… could work,” he admitted slowly, the little nod turning bigger as he looked to Bucky.

Clint scoffed. “No, no, Stevie, an IT guy would take too long to work up the ranks and into his circle. He trusts very few people, and even with access to the mainframe, it would still take too long to get around all the firewalls and booby traps Stark has set up inside them. Natasha had a quick scan a few minutes ago; the place is like a virtual landmine. So no, I’m not talking about an IT guy.”

At this point, Bucky rolled his eyes and poked him in the side. “Okay, okay, we get the drama- just get to the point, birdie.”

Clint batted his hand away, standing proudly with his hands on his hips, apparently not finished with the show. “Well- you want an in? I’ve got an in. In fact, I’ve got the innermost in you could possibly dream of. The miracle. The one in a million chance. The-”

“Get on with it, Clint!” Steve interrupted, throwing a pillow in his face.

Clint looked at him, betrayed, before flopping on the floor. “Fine, fine! Stark’s hiring- he’s looking for a bodyguard. Like, an up close and personal, will-be-there-every-step-of-the-way bodyguard.”

Steve’s mouth parted in surprise, and by his side, Bucky bolted upright. “You’re joking,” he said blankly.
Clint smirked. “Yeah, you’re right. That was a lie.”

Instantly, any of the hope that had been mounting in Steve’s heart was crushed, and he sank back onto the pillow. “Clint, you’re a fucking asshole-”

“I meant,” Clint interrupted, holding up a hand, “that he isn’t looking to hire any more. Because we arranged a meeting between you and Miss. Potts, his secretary, and you’re gonna blow every other potential candidate out of the water.”


“Well, Pegs and Nat were with me when I discovered it, and we all dibbsed against going. And Bucky was the one who picked up the phone, so…” Clint shrugged, patting him on the calf comfortingly, “looks like you’re the one who’s gonna go for the interview.”

“But I wasn’t even there when you dibbsed! I was not present for the dibbsing! That’s undemocratic!” Steve argued, looking scandalised.

“Really? I’ve just found a way to get into the closest of ranks with Tony Goddamn Stark, and you’re complaining that we didn’t include you in the dibbsing process?”

“I don’t want to be a bodyguard for however goddamn long-”

“-Six month contract,”

“Six months? I don’t want to be a bodyguard for six months! I don’t even know how to be a bodyguard!”

“It’s not that hard,” and this time it was Natasha who had silently entered the room and was now sitting next to Clint, making herself comfortable on the pillow Steve had hauled at Clint’s face. “When I worked for the Bratva I was assigned as a security detail for a little while. All you have to do is basically everything you do now, as an assassin. Check your surroundings, analyse threats, and then neutralize.” There was a short pause. “Okay, well maybe not ‘neutralizing’ in the way we know it. I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to kill as many people as I did.”

Steve looked rather incredulous. “If you’ve got experience, wouldn’t you be better off doing it?”

“I stand less chance of getting in because I’m a woman,” Natasha said bluntly, “but you? You’re a 6’1 monster of a man, and could probably bench-press Stark with one arm. I’m sure they’ll love you.”

Steve sputtered. “You can’t be serious. I’m… anyway, there’s not a hundred percent chance I’ll even get through the process!”

“Why not?” Peggy this time, standing by the door. “Your record’s squeaky clean- we scrubbed your dishonourable discharge years back and keep all our business under aliases that can’t be traced back to us, and also, Natasha did a little bit of friendly snooping into Ms. Potts emails and wrote back to any of the other candidates who may have posed a threat to you, telling them the place was no longer available. You’re going to be in competition with seven other people, all of whom wouldn’t qualify. You’ll get the spot, don’t you worry,” she smiled, patting him gently on the cheek and then moving to sit at Bucky’s side. When he continued to stare at her in mild horror, she sighed. “Look, Steve, it was either you or a call to Norway to try and convince Thor to come back from whatever family crisis he’s going through and help us out- and you know he said he didn’t want in on this anymore, so it wasn’t exactly as if we had any other choices, okay?”
Steve turned, shooting them all a look of contempt before falling back on the pillows with a groan. “Ugh- fine. I’ll … I’ll take some time to prepare, and then we’ll see-”

“Interview’s tomorrow,” Clint interrupted, the stupid smirk still on his face as he feigned a yawn. “You know what, folks? I’m pooped. I think I’m gonna call it a night, and Steve, you should too. Big day tomorrow, right?”

He stood up, exiting the room quickly and leaving a dumbstruck Steve in his wake. Natasha followed shortly after, offering a reassuring squeeze of the shoulder before she left.

“What just happened?” Steve asked weakly, turning to Bucky.

“I… uh- I think you just became a bodyguard,” his friend answered, a little dumbstruck himself. “Man, am I glad I answered that phone.”

*****

Steve sat in the comfortable chairs of the reception room and wished, for what was quite possibly the 89th time that day, that he had been present for the dibbsing.

This was just unfair. Everything was so … grand. And modern. The whole place reeked of money and power— it put Steve on edge. They’d never had a target this powerful before. It was a whole new ballgame, with a whole new set of dangers.

What if Steve’s cover wasn’t tight enough? What if they worked out his real intention here? What if they realised he had no fucking experience in how to bodyguard at all-

“Mr. Rogers?” A voice called, and Steve’s head jerked up, eyes focusing in on the short woman who was sandexing to the right of him. She had long hair, dyed silver and swept into a braid down her back, and Steve knew immediately that this was not Pepper Potts. He couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief at that; from what he’d researched, Pepper Potts was someone you didn’t want to be messing with. Which was, incidentally, exactly the thing Steve was about to go and do.

Which made meeting her a very, very scary prospect.

“Hello ma’am,” he said, nodding his head and extending a hand. He toned down his normal friendly smile of greeting a little- bodyguards didn’t tend to look that animated- well, ever.
The woman nodded back, her returning smile about as enthusiastic as his own. “If you would like to follow me, I’ll take you up to Ms. Potts’ office.”

“Thank you,” Steve replied gruffly, getting to his feet. God, those chairs had been tiny; was this place designed for dwarfs? Goddamn.

They walked in silence up to the elevator, Steve standing at parade rest once they’d begun making their way up. Everything he saw, he stored away. The number of buttons on the elevator, the emergency exits, the type of people milling around. All of it was important.

After the two long and awkward minutes of riding the elevator, the woman stepped out and then gestured to the right, before beginning to walk again. Steve fell into step next to her, noting the ventilation shafts that seemed to run all the way through the building as he did so. They were in one of the highest floors; there were 93 altogether, with Potts’ being on the 87th. There were less offices here, the rooms far emptier, and obviously this was where the more important employees worked. Again, important information that Steve tucked away.

“Her room is at the end of the corridor, just turn the corner and look straight ahead. You won’t miss it,” the woman spoke up suddenly, grinding to a halt and then gesturing for Steve to continue without her.

Steve nodded, and then watched her turn and walk back in the other direction. He stayed behind the corner for quite a while, trying to quell the nervousness in his hands. He wasn’t even sure why he was nervous- perhaps because it was his first interview with a big corporate company like this in … well, ever.

It’s not even real. You can get through a damn interview. You’ve snapped people’s necks with your bare hands, you idiot, this is nothing, he told himself, taking a breath and straightening his tie before turning and marching around the corner.

This sure was going to be fun.

Tony

Knee-deep in engine grease and listening to Metallica on the highest volume JARVIS would safely allow him, Tony was happy.

This was his work. He loved his work- upgrading his car, adding awesome new features, changing the world a little bit in the process. It was great.

...He was going to ban Pepper from his workshop. Because she brought all the not-so-great stuff in whenever she came.
“I’ve found you a choice of three bodyguards,” she announced, silencing his music with a wave of her hand.

Tony scowled, stubbornly refusing to turn away from the tires he was refitting. “Fantastic. Put them on roll, tell them to stay away from me, we’ll be all good here-”

“I don’t think you’ve fully grasped what a bodyguard actually does,” Pepper said blandly, walking forward a few more steps and then hopping onto the hood of his car, carefully manicured fingernails tugging on her hair and releasing it from the ponytail, “God, I’ve had a long day.”

Tony grinned. “If it helps, I think I’ve worked out the bug we’ve been having on our surveillance system- it was just a few lines of coding down in the foundations of the programme, actually- no hassle to fix.”

Pepper sighed in relief, shucking off her jacket and then folding it carefully on the hood of the car, trying to avoid any patches of grease. “That does help, actually. But you know what would help more?”

“Do tell.”

“Wine. You keep any in this dungeon of yours?”

Tony raised an eyebrow, chuckling as he directed Pepper to the wine-rack he kept at the back of the shop. “Damn, Miss. Potts- must really have been a shitty day. Drinking on the job? For shame.”

“Listen, I can’t even rely on you to wear clothes whilst you’re on the job, so don’t come at me with that,” Pepper countered, as she steered herself in the direction of the alcohol and took one of her heels off in the process. She was leaving a trail of clothing and accessories in her wake.

“Fair point,” Tony shrugged, “get two glasses.”

“You think I was intending on drinking alone?” She asked, pulling out a bottle of red and then making her way around the various objects that littered her path back to Tony.

“So, Potts,” he began, getting to his feet and jumping on the hood, patting the space next to him. “Tell me what ails you.”

She sighed, handing him a glass and then joining him on the car, his feet tucked underneath her. “Aliann in IT nearly crashed the whole system today because she was watching illegally streamed movies on her computer and accidentally downloaded a goddamn virus. And then I got called out to yell at two idiots who had tried cooking pizza on the bunsen burners and nearly set the whole lab on fire. Oh, and Obadiah called in- he’s nagging me to get you to finish the schematics on the Jericho already, even though I have been trying to get you to do that for months,” she shot him a mutinous look, poking him in the stomach and taking a long sip from her glass.

“I’ll get to it when I get to it,” Tony waved it away, “anyway- you were saying you’ve found me some muscle? Do I get to see them, or can I not be trusted with any part of the selection process at all?”

“Well- I say three, but only one of them really qualifies,” Pepper shrugged wearily, “and even he isn’t as experienced as I would’ve liked. But he’s very well-trained by the looks of it, and the only option we really have at such short notice. I was surprised at the lack of turnout, actually. Thought we would’ve been able to get something a little more high profile than what we did.”

Tony rolled his eyes. Did it matter, anyway? He wasn’t in any real danger at the end of the day, no
mattered what Pepper tried to tell him. The bodyguard could be a ten year old kid and they’d still do an adequate job of protecting him. “Let me see him, then.”

Pepper pulled out her phone, pulling up the guy’s resume from her files. She handed it over, and Tony quickly skimmed through the pages, until he stopped at the photo.

Damn.

Damn.

“Don’t even think about it,” Pepper said suddenly, snatching the phone back and keeping it firmly away when Tony made grabby hands, “you are not going to sleep with your security detail. No. Anyway- the guy seems pretty stoic. The real professional type. You won’t get anything from him.”

“So we’re definitely going with this guy, then?” Tony asked, somewhat excitedly.

Pepper gave him a long, hard look. “Don’t sleep with him.”

“What makes you think I’d sleep with him?”

“Because he is attractive and human and that’s pretty much all you need? Actually, scratch that, I’m pretty sure you could make do without the human part. I’m pretty sure you’d be excited to make do without the human part-”

“Pepper,” Tony gasped, placing a hand over his heart, “are you… are you calling me a slut?”

“Would I ever say something that unprofessional to my boss?” Pepper exclaimed, copying his tone exactly.

Tony held his position for all of two seconds before flopping, sprawling out of the hood on the car theatrically. “Ugh- fine! I’ll try my very hardest not to sleep with him.”

By his side, Pepper just sighed. “That’s all I can hope for, really, isn’t it?” She asked. “Right. I’ll call him back. He starts with you on Monday, and he’ll be with you on your business trip to Rome that evening.”

Tony pouted, but ultimately didn’t argue. Maybe a security detail wouldn’t be so bad- not when he looked like that, anyway.

*****

He was late.

Fuck. It had not been the plan- really, it hadn’t. But he’d just been so close to finishing the project
that JARVIS’s seven reminders had sort of been drowned in the engineering haze- and now he was running 20 minutes late to his first meeting with the hot bodyguard, and he wasn’t wearing shoes.

Yeah. Pepper had a point about the whole ‘not wearing clothes on the job’ thing.

Skidding through the corridors and trying desperately to rub a smear of dirt off his arm, he took a quick glance to the mirrored wall on his left.

Yep. Garbage. He looked like garbage.

He couldn’t quite remember the last time he’d slept, and the clothes were probably about fourteen years old. Not exactly the best first impression to make when meeting a new employee. Especially a hot one. But whatever- he was getting paid, so it didn’t matter what Tony looked like.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he slid through the main reception doors and looked around for Pepper, who would undoubtedly be making small-talk with Rogers whilst she cursed Tony’s name in her head and thought about ways she could get him back for this.

It didn’t take long to spot them- the two hottest people in the room always tended to draw his eye, after all.

“I’M HERE!” He yelled, stumbling forward and waving. “I’m here! It’s fine, sorry I’m late- caught up in a thing. It’s sorted now though. All good,” he rambled, bumping into Pepper’s shoulder as he tried to steady himself. He was a little out of breath from the run down the stairs, but that was the least of his worries, really.

Rogers was looking at him, and he appeared very confused. He kept blinking a lot. “Uh. Mr. Stark. Hello. My name’s St-”

“Steve Rogers, my brand spanking new bodyguard, yes, hello, hi, I’m Tony,” he jumped in, wincing internally as he did so. That sounded dismissive. He hadn’t intended to sound dismissive. Dismissive was not what he had been going for.

Eh. Whatever. It wasn't like that wasn't the impression he gave out to everyone anyway.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Stark,” Steve said, lips pursed as he held out a hand.

Oh God. He really was stoic. There was barely an emotion on his face at all.

Tony grabbed his hand, shaking firmly and following it up with a smile, which Rogers returned thinly.

“I apologise for Mr. Stark’s lack of footwear. Or personal hygiene. I’m afraid he isn’t so great at acting like a normal human being when he’s down in his workshop,” Pepper explained, shooting Steve a smile and then stepping on Tony’s exposed toes with her sole as she moved. Tony barely bit back a yelp- Pepper was heavy. “I’ll leave you two to it. I’ve already given him the tour, Tony, so you don’t need to bother with that. Just acquaint yourselves- you’re going to be spending a few days together and so you're going to need to be able to get along,” Pepper spoke the last bit quietly to Tony, and he looked at her, offended. Why did she just assume he would need to work on trying to get on with him? He was a natural at getting on with people. He could get on with people he didn’t even know—in both meanings of the phrase—

Pepper bid her goodbyes to both of them, and then Tony was left alone with his new bodyguard, still stood to attention by his side. Tony gave him the once over, eyebrow raised. “Ex-army?” He asked.
Rogers jerked a little, looking at him with slightly widened eyes. “Uh. Yes.”

Right. Good conversation. Tony shuffled on his bare feet a few seconds, before blurting, “my best friend’s in the air force. Best pilot you’ll ever see, honest to God. That’s how I knew… you, uh… you stand like him.”

“Oh. Right,” Rogers looked down at his posture for a second, before visibly making the effort to relax a little. There was silence once more, and Tony looked hopelessly at his surroundings. God, he hadn’t had someone this uncooperative since the fateful charity Gala of ’02-

“So I think I need some time to plan our route-”

“Let’s go get food,” Tony blurted, again, because he seemed to be set on interrupting everything Rogers said. “Please. I think it’s probably for the best- I feel like you would actively endanger me if I had to be around this awkward silence for three days. I’m well known for jumping out of windows to escape bad conversations.”

At Rogers’ sudden wide eyes, Tony hasted to correct himself. “A joke. That was a joke.”

“You make jokes like that a lot- sir?” Rogers asked him, his body tense once again.

Tony rubbed a hand across his forehead. “Oh God, okay, yes, that was in bad taste, I apologize, I am usually better at this? Listen, let’s just… go get some food, and get to know each other? Please? Because Pepper will have my head if I manage to irritate my own bodyguard into beating me up, that will just be embarrassing for everyone-”

“I’m not going to beat you up, sir,” Rogers said, with a tiny huff that could almost be considered a half-laugh, which was good! Tony clapped his hands, rolling with the tiny show of emotion and hoping it was enough to get Rogers to agree to go out with him.

For food. Food only.

“Okay, as your new boss, I’m going to initiate rule number one,” Tony said, raising a finger. “No ‘sir’. You make me feel like my old man. Tony is fine. Or hot stuff, if you feel like it,” he added with a grin.

Rogers, looking utterly unimpressed, just nodded. Tony had the feeling he was holding back an eye-roll.

“Rule number 2,” Tony soldiered on, raising a second finger, “you have to accompany me to get food. Who knows? I might get ambushed along the way. It would be bad form for me to get murdered on the first day of your job.”

Rogers smiled, but it was empty. Tony was hit with a sudden flare of irritation- he was trying, okay, he didn’t exactly like this situation either, but he didn’t really have much fucking choice, and Rogers was acting like a stand-offish dick, Tony could just fire him on the spot if he wanted to-

“I’ll come with you,” Rogers said, nodding once and then looking at Tony with a slightly raised eyebrow, “although can I suggest you put on some shoes first? For your own personal safety, of course.”

Tony let out a little noise of surprise as he remembered the state of himself, and nodded jerkily. “Ah. Yes. Good idea, you’ll do well here, Rogers. Right. Stay here,” Tony said, backing away in the direction of the elevator. “I’ll be back in like, two minutes.”
Rogers nodded curtly, and once the elevator doors had closed, Tony pulled a face and leant back against the wall with a sigh.

Well. Steve Rogers sure seemed like the most un-fun person in history. He hadn’t even smiled once- and Tony had been told many times that his smiles were contagious (“but only because we’re laughing at you, not with you.”) Rhodey confirmed solemnly, whilst Pepper nodded in the background. What the hell was with him? Yeah, Tony got the whole ‘professionalism’ thing- but surely he could at least look like he was vaguely interested in Tony.

“Ugh,” he muttered, looking at his ragged reflection in the reflective surface of the wall, “this is gonna be fun.”

Tony Stark was an asshole.

Steve had known it before they’d met, and he was only more convinced now. If the lateness hadn’t sealed the deal, then the way Stark had been constantly interrupting anything Steve had to say certainly was. It was exactly like everyone had said it would be- Tony Stark was a cocky bastard, with no regard for others.

Helpful characteristics for someone selling weapons to terrorists, Steve’s mind supplied ominously.

God- he couldn’t wait to find the evidence he needed and just get out of there. The suit he was wearing was already beginning to scratch uncomfortably.

“So you don’t like me, do you,” Stark stated, as he bit down into his sandwich.

If Steve had actually been eating his, he probably would’ve choked on it. Instead, he jerked his head up to meet Stark’s eye.

Shit.

They were, what- three hours into this- and Stark was already on to him. Fuck. He was terrible at this, see, he couldn’t control his emotions, that’s why they should’ve sent Natasha or Clint in for this, not him-

“Don’t worry,” Stark said, waving him off and shrugging, “it’s a normal reaction. I’m not gonna hold it to you. What was it that did it for you?”

“Sir,” Steve started, flustered, but Stark gave him a dirty look at that, and he quickly corrected himself, despite how odd it felt to call someone he disliked by their first name. “sorry, I mean, Tony-”
“No, no, seriously,” Stark leaned forward a little, shoving his plate to the side as he observed Steve, his eyes piercing as they roved across him. His lips were parted, hair still a complete mess, and every line of his body was sharp. “What was it? The overabundance of money? The slutty reputation? Or just bad reputation in general?”

“Sir- Tony, please, I haven’t got any problems with you, and I’d prefer it if you didn’t bring this up,” Steve said, a little snappily, “I’m your security detail, and I’m here to do my job. I have no feelings, negative or otherwise, toward you.”

Stark looked at him, that same piercing gaze, until eventually he shrugged and leaned back, the sharpness gone, leaving only an empty smile and tired composure. He looked exhausted; Steve doubted he had slept for a while, if the depth of his under-eye circles were anything to go by.

“I should just fire you,” he said casually, picking up his sandwich and continuing to eat, oblivious to Steve’s wide eyes.

Oh God. He’d fucked up within the first day. This couldn’t be happening- usually he was so much better at this, goddamnit-

“Listen, Steve,” Stark said wearily, rubbing his eyes, “if you have a problem with me, then this just isn’t going to work. You’re going to be around me a lot, and I can’t be bothered dealing with someone giving me the damn stink-eye every step of the way-”

“I don’t dislike you,” Steve lied, desperate. He bit his lip, thinking of what he could say. “I just… I’ll be honest with you- this is my first time working for someone as famous as you. The clients I’ve worked with before, they were mostly just paranoid CEO’s with nothing to worry about. You? From what Miss Potts was telling me, you’re facing a genuine threat. And I’m just… trying to act as professional as I can, because I quite frankly have no idea what the fuck I’m doing,” he babbled, mixing what he could of the truth in with the lies and hoping Stark would take the bait.

It was a gamble. But Steve was a good judge of character, and he was relying on Stark’s unpredictability and impulsiveness to see him through.

Which it did. Luckily. Because Stark huffed a little and smiled, nodding serenely. “So you don’t have a secret passionate hatred for me? Comforting. But if it’s all the same, please feel free to act as unprofessionally as you please around me. I don’t know what Pep’s been telling you, but the threats really aren’t that serious, and so I wouldn’t worry too much about it.”

Steve smiled, nodding his head. “Unprofessional it is, then,” he said lightly, picking up his sandwich and taking a bite.

Great. Right. Pretending to like Tony Stark. He could do that. It was dangerous territory, Steve knew that, but it seemed like the only option he had if he wanted to keep the job at all. He could do it. He was good at his job.

He could do it.
He had no idea how he was going to do it.

Watching Stark as he stood up on podiums, flashed his shark-toothed smile to benefactors, splurged his wealth, and stuck his middle finger up at reporters just made everything in Steve want to goddamn shoot him. Get it over with and leave to help someone who actually needed it.

He’s not ashamed, Steve thought, watching from the wings as Stark described the latest weapon he’d designed in avid detail, something similar to a look of outright adoration on his face as he looked at the schematics. The plans for a weapon of destruction. He’s proud of the blood on his hands.

He shook his head, keeping his eyes fixed on the crowd. Whatever his thoughts were, he still had a job to do- although in all honesty, at that point in the night he probably would have been happy to just let the man’s stalker have it out with him and see where it went. Pepper had warned him they were unstable and appeared to be following him wherever he went, but unfortunately, as Stark stepped down with a bow and walked off the stage toward Steve, it seemed they had yet to reveal themselves.

“Catch anything funny whilst you were glaring at the audience from the wings?” Stark asked, moving into step with Steve as he ushered them out through the exit.

Steve shook his head. “No one out of the ordinary. Best just head up to your room for the night though, just in case. I don’t want to take any chances when I’m in a place I don’t know.”

Steve expected a fight. A roll of the eyes and an argument, with Stark demanding to go to wherever the party was loudest and most dangerous. Instead, the man just nodded, stifling a yawn with his spare hand as the other yanked on his tie.

Steve looked at him in confusion. “Tired?” He asked, trying to get a read on the sudden lack of interest in continuing his socializing.

Stark just smiled, a little wearily. “Oh, perpetually so, Rogers. Trying to appeal to the masses 24/7 is hard work.”

Steve just nodded like he understood, and they were silent for the rest of the way up. When Steve opened the door to Stark’s room and did a brief sweep, it took less than three seconds for the man to fall face-first into the bed and curl up into a little ball amongst the pillows.

Steve watched him with a frown. The way he looked, the way he held himself now, was very different to what he had been like mere minutes ago. Whereas before, Stark’s presence had been big and bold and commandeering, now he just seemed ... small. Tired.

Shaking his head, he straightened up and made his way back out of the room. “Goodnight, Tony,” he said, not waiting for Stark’s reply before shutting the door.
Twenty-four hours later, and Tony’s persona had taken a complete 180 yet again- no longer quiet or meek in the slightest, and instead at the bar, alcohol flowing and tempers running high as they usually tended to do whenever Tony Stark stepped into a room.

Steve watched, trying so damn hard to keep the look of disgust off his face as Tony deliberately picked a fight with one of the guests, which ended in them storming off angrily, drink forgotten by the bar.

“Why do you do that?” He blurted, before even realising what he was saying.

Tony paused, and then turned to Steve, flashing the same shark grin he’d had plastered to his face the entire trip. He was swaying gently on his feet, drunk, and although his eyes glittered, it was not with the spark of life. It was something else- something man-made and cold. “Makes me feel alive, Rogers,” he said, raising his eyebrows and then turning back to the bar to order another drink and add to the growing pile of empty glasses at his side.

Steve wasn’t sure whether he was joking or not.

The three day excursion to Rome passed relatively quickly and uneventfully. Stark had presented all his weapons, accepted an award with his usual grace, swanned around with models on his arms and generally acted crassly the entire time. Steve had simply trailed behind and thought mutinous thoughts.

The third night had been … better, though. Steve wouldn’t have called it good, exactly- he’d been forced into spending time with Stark, so it could never be good. It was just … less shitty, really.

It had involved Steve getting locked out of his room, of course. Typical, really; he was tired, he was grumpy, and he was hungry, but which was the day when his keycard chose to malfunction? That one, of course.

With a frustrated sigh, he’d knocked his head against the frame a few times before turning to head down to reception and complain; except he’d only made it a few steps before Stark stuck his head out of the opposite door.
“I heard groaning and my interests were immediately aroused,” Stark said with the same old leery grin, and Steve barely held back a roll of his eyes. “You having problems with your door?”

“Yeah,” Steve said gruffly, “I’m just going to head down to reception and—”

“No need,” Stark interrupted (again), “I’ll just call them from my phone. Saves you the walk down.”

Steve didn’t even have a chance to answer before Stark had ducked back in again. He frowned, leaning back against the wall to wait until a few seconds later, when Stark stuck his head back around the door.

“You can come in, y’know;” he said, looking a little amused as he pushed the door open a bit further.

Steve stopped the immediate dismissal, just barely. People who got along wouldn’t say no to a simple offer like that, would they? And Steve was supposed to get along with Stark.

“Uh- sure,” he answered, smiling as he stepped forward and ducked under Stark’s outstretched arm.

He shut the door and made his way to the phone on the dressing table, whilst Steve sat on the couch and looked around him. Here, all of Stark’s items and gadgets were laid bare for Steve to see. He tried to figure out if any of it was worth anything to Natasha’s hacking efforts. Whilst Steve was away working in close quarters with him, Natasha was back home, focusing on the virtual aspects of it, attempting to break through Stark’s vigilant firewalls and find something of use. But anything Steve could offer her may be endlessly helpful.

Unfortunately, he knew it was ultimately fruitless. Anything he was going to find whilst acting as Stark’s bodyguard would be hard evidence- the chances of Natasha managing to get through were slim to none.

Essentially, it was up to Steve, and Steve alone.

He looked toward Stark, who was busy talking down the line. There was something about him… Steve knew that there was more than met the eye. And it unnerved him like crazy. Because Steve was good at this, okay, he said it a lot, but it was true. He could read people. Body language. Tells. That sort of thing. It was what he did, and it had saved his life on many an occasion before.

But with Stark…nothing. Steve just could not get a solid read on him. And it bred distrust in Steve’s gut.

Unfortunately, when Stark put the phone down, he explained that hotel services wouldn’t be able to get to his room for quite a while due to the same problem occurring in a few different parts of the hotel. Steve would have to wait at least an hour and a half before someone could come and sort it out.

Which meant, of course, that he had to spend some quality time with Stark.

And at first, it’d been difficult. Very difficult. Trying to talk to a man that could well be a mass-murderer was … hard. Mostly because Steve just wanted to strangle him after every word he said, even if they weren’t offensive.

However, after a while, he’d somehow managed to relax a little- which was a pleasant surprise, in all honesty. Stark was talking, asking him how he’d enjoyed Rome, what he thought of the food,
cracking jokes and making snarky comments that had Steve rolling his eyes— but he’d found himself answering back with equally dry remarks and comments. Yeah, it had mostly been simply to humor him, but…

“Would you rather put robot parts in your own body or have your consciousness uploaded into an entirely robot body?” Tony asked from the bed, and Steve looked over to him incredulously, fingers dipping into the bag of nuts and popping a few into his mouth.

“No offense, Mr. Stark, but why the fuck did that question even occur to you?”

“Why wouldn’t it occur to me?”

“We were just talking about the best places you’ve visited. It had literally nothing to do with robot bodies, Mr. Stark.”

Tony waved a hand. “That conversation was boring, I’ve just decided, let’s talk about Robot bodies.”

And so they had. Robot bodies and science projects and everything in-between. A little tentative, wary, but... conversation.

Steve supposed it was a good thing. In order to get close, he had to actually be nice to the guy. It made sense. And it wasn’t like Steve’s thoughts had changed; all it took was a trip back a few hours into the past, watching him act like an asshole in front of all the cameras or gush over the weapons he was probably selling to the other side in order to get Steve’s blood boiling all over again.

But despite everything— despite the bitterness he felt in his mouth and the distrust that was harboured within— when the rooms had finally opened up again an hour or so later and he was able to leave, he’d walked out of Stark’s room in a better mood, and as Stark had smiled goodnight at him, he’d found himself smiling back. Properly.

Which was weird.

But that had been a day ago. Steve was back in the US now, and Stark had told him he’d be holed up in his workshop for the next day or two, so he was free for a while.

Wasting no time, he’d bid Stark farewell and caught the first cab he could find. It was sappy, but it had been four days and Steve had missed his friends. He also had to report back to them about Stark’s initial personality profile.

“Asshole,” he said immediately, and Natasha raised an eyebrow.

“In what sense?” She asked dryly.

Steve shrugged, slumping further down in his chair. “I don’t trust him. That’s what my gut’s telling me. He’s a slippery one— I don’t know what his angle is. All I know is that he sure as hell doesn’t seem like he cares much about… well, anything.”

Clint looked grim, folding his arms and leaning against the table. “It would be so much easier if we didn’t have morals,” he muttered, and Steve nodded sourly in agreement.
Damn them and their good natures. It made assassinating people an absolute nightmare.
Chapter 2

A week into Steve’s job, Stark somehow managed to give Steve the slip.

At first, when he’d gone down to check on Stark in the workshop (which was, according to Ms. Potts, a part of his damn job) and found it empty, he’d been more surprised than anything. The room only had three exits that Steve knew of, and he’d been told to monitor them on his tablet whilst he passed the time sorting out and checking routes for Stark’s next journey. He would have seen if Stark had left. He was sure of it. And yet, here they were- neither hide nor hair of the man to be seen.

Of course, once the initial surprise had died down, Steve realized there were two options left.

One- Stark’s stalker had performed a daring and outrageous kidnapping from within Stark’s own fortress.

Or two- Stark had shaken Steve off with the intent of doing something Steve wasn’t supposed to see.

Like shady business deals.

He knew it was unlikely. But Steve couldn’t help the thoughts: it was dark, it was night, and that was, in Steve’s own criminal opinion, usually when most of the illegal business dealers tended to worm their way out of the floorboards. It was a psychological thing more than anything- in reality, there were more cops patrolling at night than there were during the day, but that didn’t seem to stop anyone.

If he’d been professional, he would have called the rest of the security team immediately. Security at the tower and surrounding Stark was insanely high—although not through Stark’s choice, apparently—and any disappearances were having to be treated as suspicious.

He wasn’t professional, though. And honestly, he knew the chances of kidnappings were slim.

“Uh- excuse me, JARVIS?” he asked tentatively, unsure as to whether the weird robot that Stark had designed would even acknowledge him at all.

“Can I help, Mr. Rogers?” came the smooth reply.

Steve took a breath, trying not to be too creeped out by the fact he was talking to a robot. “Where did Tony go?”

There was silence for a second, before another, more curt reply this time. “I’m afraid I am not allowed to divulge that information, Mr. Rogers.”

“Why?” Steve asked instantly, his suspicion rising a notch as he got to his feet and grabbed the tablet on the desk. “I’m his bodyguard, I need to know where he is.”

“Believe me, I have told Sir this myself,” JARVIS said, in what could almost have been an exasperated voice, “however he was adamant that he be alone, and I am forbidden to mention his whereabouts to anyone.”

Steve’s eyes narrowed. “Okay then. Thank you, JARVIS,” he finished, because he was still polite,
even if the robot was owned by a psychopathic war-monger who was apparently slipping off into the night without telling a soul and ordering his personal butler to be silent about it.

Looking down at the tablet, he flicked off the cameras positioned outside Stark’s workshop and switched them to the outside view of the tower. Reeling the footage back, he watched intently for a few minutes until he saw the man himself- in a black Audi that was pulling out of the garage and speeding into the night, down Park Avenue.

Jumping to his feet, he lurched toward the main elevator and waited for a painful one and a half minutes inside before he burst out and jogged out of the main entrance, running into the darkness.

Wasting no time, he took out his phone and dialed.

“nnnn’yello,” Clint replied lazily down the line. He sounded drowsy- no doubt Steve had interrupted the lazy ass whilst he was in the middle of binge-watching the Star Wars marathon they were showing on tv that night.

“I need you inside the cameras, right now,” Steve ordered, making his way quickly toward his bike and then hopping on swiftly, starting up the engine and pulling out into the road, following Stark’s path.

There was a second of pause, and then Steve heard Clint spring to action down the line. “On it,” he replied, sleepiness replaced with the blunt efficiency of Hawkeye on the job. “Where do you want me looking?”

“Start at Park Avenue, about-” Steve glanced down at the tablet he was still clutching in his right hand, “-seven and a half minutes ago. A black Audi pulled out of the garage in Stark Towers- I want to follow it,” he explained shortly.

There was silence for a moment, and Steve heard Clint clicking and typing furiously in the background, before a quick, “Got it. You need to turn right. Right now.”

Cursing, Steve swerved through the traffic, eliciting several angry beeps from the short-tempered New Yorkers as he cut through the traffic in a very illegal fashion.

“Okay, he’s headed down 42nd- no, wait, scratch that, he’s pulling up- outside the library- he’s… uh, he’s going to the library, Steve, are you sure this is-”

“He diverted the cameras and gave me slip, and then programmed his robot butler not to tell me where he was going,” Steve interrupted harshly, “there’s something he’s hiding, and I’m going to find out what.”

“At a public library?” Clint asked skeptically.

“At a public library that’s supposed to be closed after 6pm,” Steve answered, as he pulled up to the curb and climbed off, eyeing the dark building and smoothly pulling a gun from his jacket pocket.

If Stark was up to something, Steve was getting rid of him, right then and there.

Ending the call with Clint, he hurried up the steps of the library and looked for an entry point. Surprisingly, he found the doors unlocked, and although the sign read “Closed”, there was a dim
set of lights that lit up the corridor. Hastily, he slid through, carefully looking for alarms or traps as he did so, before taking off up the corridor, gun still in hand.

He had no idea where Stark was, so he followed the lights and hoped for the best. It led him deep into the middle of the library, and Steve’s instincts bristled nervously.

This felt like a trap. This felt like a set-up.

There was a sudden high-pitched noise from a few rooms down, and Steve froze, blending into the shadows immediately and tucking the gun away from view.

Once he focused, he realised that there was more than one source of noise. In fact, there appeared to be many different ones- the room two down from him was positively brimming with people. If this was some sort of secret meeting, then Steve was going to need backup.

Not before he went and checked it out himself first, though.

Creeping forward silently, he stuck to the walls and listened closer. Amongst the general chatter, Stark’s voice was prominent amongst them, ordering them which colours to use, telling someone off as they spilled the orange everywhere, clapping his hands and saying they weren’t covered in enough paint for this to be considered a success just yet-

Wait.

Blinking in surprise a few times, Steve squinted in the half-light and poked his head around the door, thoroughly confused. The sight he saw really didn’t make things any clearer.

Kids. There were kids… everywhere. Little ones, bigger ones, moody ones, ones that were standing up and singing on the chairs. The place was brimming with them. And in the center of the room, cross-legged on the floor and completely covered in paint, was Tony Stark.

He stared for a long, long time. That… did not make sense. At all. Why the fuck was Tony Stark at a public library with a dozen excited kids- appearing to be... fingerpainting on a massive canvas laid out at all their feet? What the hell was going on?

“Benny, no- oh lord, you absolute donut, there’s pink everywhere!” Stark yelled suddenly, as a kid that couldn’t have been over the age of twelve stumbled with a jam-jar full of neon pink paint and sent it splashing across the linoleum floor.

The boy yelped in dismay, and he looked to Stark with wide eyes- but Stark simply sighed and dipped a hand in the puddle of it, before smearing it across the boy’s cheek. “Karma,” he declared to the room, “make sure to clean that up, buddy, I don’t want anyone slipping in it and staining their butt bright pink.”

The boy nodded and pattered away toward the store cupboard, his cheek still glowing with dripping wet paint. He paused briefly to bend down and look at another child’s work, pointing a finger and saying something which had his little friend nodding along excitedly, before taking off again,
hands working on the doorknob and then pulling out a thoroughly paint-stained mop.

Steve watched the events unfold around him, feeling as if this were something similar to a dream sequence. Or an acid trip.

Stark’s suit- his agonizingly expensive Armani hand tailored suit- was covered in yellow smears. A teenage girl sat two places down from him was doodling absently on a pair of his sunglasses that probably costs more than Steve’s rent. He was looking after children.

Steve suddenly felt a little stupid for bringing his gun into a public library.

“Mr. Tony?” He heard a voice- a little girl, by the sound of it- ask, her high pitched voice prominent above the general hubbub of the room, “there’s a man standing at the door. I think he wants to come in.”

Shit.

Stark’s head turned, and then his eyes locked on with Steve’s- observed the tense expression on his face, the fighting stance, the arm hidden around the other side of the door.

Shit shit shit shit.

“Steve?” He asked, somewhere between incredulous and apprehensive, “what the fu- heck are you doing here?”

He huffed, mind racing. “Jesus, Tony- the whole tower’s on high alert, preparing for you to get kidnapped at any moment, and you just disappear off the face of the earth? And then your robot refuses to tell me where you are? I thought someone had goddamn taken you!” Steve lied effortlessly, stepping cautiously into the room and carefully tucking his gun out for sight as he did so.

Stark winced. “Ah. Right. Okay- point taken. Sorry, I just- uh- do this every week, see, and I didn’t particularly want some big burly bodyguard standing by the door the whole time. Kinda ruins the atmosphere,” he replied, getting to his feet and brushing down his suit before hopping over various projects and making his way over to Steve. He was actually goddamn blushing , eyes flitting everywhere as he tugged Steve by the sleeve of his jacket and pulled them out of the room, shutting the door behind them. “Listen, please, don’t tell anyone about this- I- I don’t even want to do it, really, it’s just a PR thing, but the kids like it, and so you’d be kind of an asshole if you were to take this to the press or something-”

“Why the hell would I… why would I tell the press about something as mundane as this?” Steve asked, genuinely confused.

Stark rolled his eyes, shrugging. “Isn’t that the damn question? Just… keep it shut, alright? And I’d prefer it if you just left me alone, the kids will get freaked out if you stand over me the whole damn time-”

“I’m not leaving you out in the open like this, Tony,” Steve answered stubbornly, shaking his head, “it’s my job to tail you and make sure you’re safe-”

“What are the chances I’m gonna get attacked right now, huh? Think Benny’s gonna come and try impale me with the mop?” Stark snapped irritably.

“And what if someone comes for you from the outside whilst you’re around Benny, and all the other kids that are currently in your care?” Steve ground out, and yeah, see, this was the Stark he
knew- only ever thought about himself, even when there was a room full of tiny boys and girls as well.

Although, to be fair, out of the two of you, which one murders for a living?

He stopped, shaking the thought from his head. This was about Stark’s sins, not his own. He had plenty of time for introspection later.

Stark seemed to pause at that, and his face fell a little. “I… no one’s gonna come for me. It’s not even that big of a thr-”

“You willing to risk it? Fine,” Steve said, beginning to turn on his heel and walk back down the corridor.

Stark was almost certainly going to let him go- all that pride and arrogance meant he would be so sure he was correct. But, despite his misgivings toward Stark, there was no way Steve was going to risk those kids over him.

He would just wait outside, secure the perimeter and make sure the place was protected-

“Stay,” Stark called out jerkily, looking petulant as he folded his arms and refused to look in Steve’s direction.

Steve stopped. Twisted around with movements almost as jerky as Stark’s speech. “What?”

Stark rolled his eyes. “Stay. Only because I don't have a gun of my own.”

Steve opened his mouth, lips parted slightly in shock. He… hadn’t expected that. “Right. Uh. Okay then.”

“But you have to paint with us,” Stark said, fast and garbled as he started to blush once more, “I don’t want you standing there all grim and intimidating them, they get enough shit as it is, okay, and I know it’s boring and annoying but just humor them-”

“Sure, Tony,” Steve cut in, because despite how little time he’d known Stark, he already knew that given the opportunity, that man could ramble.

Stark paused, and then made a gesture for Steve to follow him as he re-opened the door.

Steve, with no other option but a hell of a lot of questions, followed.

_____Tony_____
“Damn- that’s...good? How the heck do you make fingerpainting look good?” Tony asked, wandering over to where Steve had sat himself in a ring of about six other kids and was thoroughly concentrated on the work in front of him.

Steve’s head jerked up as Tony sat next to him on the floor, and he looked slightly surprised at the interruption. “Oh. I... um, I’m an artist,” he blurted, and then his eyes widened a little, as if surprised he’d let that much slip.

To be honest, so was Tony. The man was about as open as Tony himself was- which was, to say, not at all.

“Really? What, you go to art school or something?” he asked, dipping a finger in the jar of green paint to his left and continuing on with the work he’d brought along with him.

Steve was silent for a moment, as if debating whether or not to divulge. Eventually, it seemed he caved, because he answered quietly “yeah. For a few years. Never really worked out though. Didn’t pay enough to see me through.”

Tony nodded, biting back the immediate urge to ask to see some of his work sometime. According to Pepper, he could be pushy (God, the cheek of her, could you imagine? Him? Pushy? Ridiculous), and he didn’t want to freak Steve out. He was like a stray dog- you had to proceed with caution wherever you went with him, or he’d go all weird and... cold.

Honestly, for a bodyguard who was getting paid by him, he was remarkably blatant about his disapproval of things. It should piss Tony off. He really should just find someone new, to be honest.

He didn’t. And he probably wouldn’t any time soon, either. Because... hell, it was kind of refreshing. Having someone who didn’t actually give a shit about what Tony thought of him; who wasn’t swayed by his money or charmed by his fame.

Bit of an idiot, considering Tony had power over whether or not he remained employed. But still. Refreshing.

“So why do you do this?” Steve asked suddenly, turning to face him and doing the thing he tended to do pretty often: staring deep into Tony’s eyes, careful and observant, as if trying to analyze his very soul.

Tony shrugged, the immediate answer on his lips. “Pepper told me to. Said it was good PR, whatever-”

“That’s a lie, isn’t it?” Steve interrupted, and Tony opened his mouth to argue, but Steve was...smiling? Just a little, but his eyes were sort of crinkled, and yeah, that was definitely a smile, “Tony Stark, I think you just enjoy these kids’ company.”

Steve had said it loudly enough to draw the attention of a few of the children around them, and Tony couldn’t exactly deny it in front of them, could he, damn it-

“I guess they’re... tolerable,” he answered with an exaggerated roll of his eyes.

“Yeah, Tony, we’re ‘tolerable’. I’m pretty sure you’ve told us all how amazing we are in detail on multiple separate occasions, but sure, ‘tolerable’ is the word you can use,” Ari, the 12-year-old menace to his right piped up, raising an eyebrow and then looking smug as Tony glared at her.

Steve, though- Steve just chuckled a little, whilst Tony stared down at the mess of colors on his
hands for a few seconds as he waited for the kids to become distracted once more.

“This is actually an engineering course, surprisingly,” he said quietly, and Steve didn’t look up from his work exactly, but his eyes flickered away from it for a moment- proof that he was listening before moving downward once more.

“The, uh, the kids- they’re kinda… they’re the ones that the system would deem ‘educationally challenged’,” he explained, keeping his voice low as he rolled his eyes and made a pair of quotation marks with his fingers. “Not got the best grades, find it difficult to focus, that sort of stuff. In my opinion, it’s a load of crap- these kids aren’t stupid, that’s for sure- but you know what standardized tests are like.”

Steve looked at him a little curiously, but nodded for Tony to continue after a moment. “So anyway, yeah- these kids, they were all sent in from various places across Manhattan, to take a sort of starter course in basic engineering, y’know, to ‘inspire them’ and that sorta stuff. I wasn’t even considered to help them out, I… uh, well, I just saw the flyer posted on a lamppost a few months back and- I don’t know, I guess it just appealed to the ‘philanthropic’ part of my title,” he shrugged, keeping his eyes fixed on his hands and willing himself not to blush.

Steve was quiet for a moment, fingers working against the canvas beneath him. There was something like a frown playing on his face; a look vaguely similar to one of confusion. Tony couldn’t blame him. His public image was less than stellar, and to someone like Steve, who undoubtedly only knew of him from the gossip rags and news reports (which, in all fairness, weren’t entirely untrue), it would make this whole situation a little fucking weird.

Which, y’know, it probably was. Even Tony wasn’t quite sure how he’d ended up here.

“So what happened to the actual teacher?” Steve asked, a tiny little smile on his face once again as he raised an eyebrow.

Tony grinned. “I’m a billionaire, Rogers- I just paid them off,” he said, and then immediately regretted it when the tentative smile on Steve’s face slid away, replaced once again with that same old cold indifference.

God, he could never get it fucking right with that man, could he?

“I- uh, I mean-” Tony stumbled, trying to right himself because, fuck, they’d been getting somewhere, and if he couldn’t showboat the better sides of his nature now, then when the fuck could he? “I asked the library how much they were paying for the teacher to come in, and then told them to pay the fee to them but just tell them not to come. That I’d do it.”

Steve stopped. “But that means you… you’re not getting anything from this?”

Tony scoffed and tapered down the little flare of hurt that had risen. Of course Steve would think that- after all, taking was what he did best. Selfishness ran in the blood. “I’m not, no. Again- I’m a billionaire. What the heck would I do with a teacher’s wage? This way means I get to just hide from Pepper a couple of hours a week and avoid paperwork, whilst these kids get the break they really fricking need. Like I said- they’re doing an engineering course, but right now I’m just waiting for some new materials to come in, so we’re having a painting lesson instead, as chosen by popular demand.”

Steve watched him the entire time he spoke, his brow a constantly moving mass of features- surprise, curiosity, apprehension- you name it, at some point, Steve showed it on his face. By the end of it, a small frown was firmly embedded there, but it wasn’t one of disapproval. He just
looked like he was trying to figure something out.

“Right,” he cleared his throat eventually, turning back to his painting rather jerkily, frown still fixed firmly in place. “Right. Okay. That’s...interesting.”

Tony wanted to ask him what his apparent confusion was over, but he sensed that he wouldn’t get a straight answer anyway, so he kept his mouth shut and looked back down at his work. “I kind of feel like I should have put more effort into my flower now. You’ve completely shown me up,” he muttered, running a paint-stained hand through his hair.

Steve looked up, smiling slightly as he glanced at Tony’s painting. “Hey, that’s a pretty solid flower.” He leaned to the left a little, nudging someone Tony couldn’t see, “Kaz, what do you think of Tony’s work?”

The young boy sat next to Steve shot his head up at the mention of his name, and obediently peered across at Tony’s work, before shrugging and shaking his hand a little. “Meh. Solid B.”

“B?” Tony replied incredulously, nose wrinkling in disdain, “I’ve never gotten a B in my life. This is wrong. The system is rigged.”

Kaz rolled his eyes at Steve, and Tony felt rather betrayed at how fast most of the kids seemed to have taken to him. “Whatever, Tony. If that’ll help you sleep at night.”

Steve laughed as Tony huffed indignantly and shook his head. The sound was nice, actually- it felt like the most genuine thing Tony had heard coming out of his mouth so far.

Absently, he did a quick glance around the room, making sure all the kids were doing okay. For the first few sessions there had been slight teething problems, what with settling down and mingling with new kids, but they seemed to have settled down remarkably well. Everyone was working happily, paint spilling the floors with abandon- Tony was going to have to clean all of it up later, which was always a pain in the ass-

Then again. The kids did love it. Tony could deal with a bit of cleaning. Hell, he sorted out Dum-E’s shit all the time, this was really no different.

His eyes narrowed a little as he spotted Kayaa in the far corner. She was the only one not painting- her little pudgy hands folded around her knees as she stared across the room and kept her gaze fixed on Steve’s back. Whilst everyone laughed and talked around her, she remained silent.

Tony sighed, wincing a little as he remembered what her social worker had warned him the first time she’d come along, hiding behind the legs of the person talking to Tony and looking about ready to burst into tears whenever Tony glanced her way. *Adverse to strangers.* Right. He’d forgotten how many weeks it had taken him to just get her to talk to him properly- and Steve was definitely a lot bigger and scarier than Tony.

“Hey Steve, just stay here a sec, I need to talk to someone,” he said, giving him a pat on the back before jumping to his feet and carefully maneuvering himself around various small children and projects. It was a difficult task- the room was covered in either one or the other, but Tony managed, and soon enough he was crouched down next to Kayaa as she stared up at him with wide eyes.
“Hello, Mr. Tony.”

“Hey, kid,” he said, sliding on to the floor and looking down at her empty paper, “You not feeling the painting?”

Kayaa shrugged, flitting her eyes back to Steve for a second before they returned to the colorful pots of paint, untouched in front of her. “It’s okay. I’m just not very good at it.”

Tony pulled a face, grabbing a jar and dipping his fingers into it before making a smiley face on Kayaa’s paper. “Neither am I, kiddo. It’s not about being good at it, though. It about having fun with it. Fun always comes first.”

Kayaa was silent for a moment, before frowning a little. “What’s the point in doing something if you’re no good at it though?”

“Two reasons,” Tony replied without hesitation, “one- you enjoy it. Two- you’re never going to be good at something the first time you try it out. Unless you’re Steve,” Tony gestured in the direction of the hunched blonde head as he hunkered down over his paper and put everyone else in the room to shame as he worked. “Apparently he’s never fingerpainted anything before, and yet he’s still crazy good.”

Kayaa, as planned, looked over at him again. “Better than you?”

At that, Tony pulled a face, crossing his arms huffily. “Perhaps. Slightly. You wanna see what he’s done? It’s pretty cool.”

Instantly, Kayaa shook her head vigorously, eyes going wide in fear. Tony raised his hands quickly, “Okay, okay- don’t worry, he can stay right over there if you’d prefer. He’s really nice though. His whole job is to keep me safe, so he’s not even allowed to be mean.”

There was a long silence, where Tony just sat next to her and watched the room carefully as the little girl rested her chin on her hands and stared down at the sheet in front of her. Eventually, Tony felt a little tug on the sleeve of his shirt, and he looked down to see Kayaa staring up at him, her wide eyes staring nervously. “D’you… do you think you could draw me a sun, please?”

“I- Uh- sure, I could give it a go,” Tony agreed, smiling as brightly and reassuringly as he could. Kayaa answered with a pleased little grin of her own, and Tony gave himself a mental high-five. “Where do you want it, Picasso?”

_____Steve_____

They stayed there for an hour.

A full hour. Stark flitted around the room, overseeing projects, talking to everyone and occasionally stopping by to see how Steve was getting on before tottering off again. By the end of it, the man was pretty much covered from head to toe in different colored paint, as were most of the surfaces and children. Steve had attempted, for the first half of the session, to avoid the paint-
splattered hands that tugged him and the rainbow-colored splodges on the floor, but had ultimately given up after realizing he was still covered in nearly as much paint as the rest of them anyway.

He was still reeling a little bit from the fact that he was here at all. With Tony Stark. And a bunch of kids.

“Hey, you wanna head off home, Steve- I’ve gotta clean up, keep management off my ass, you know- but your shift’s over, so you’re free to leave,” Stark called out to him from across the room as the last kid trundled out of the door, their work of art clutched tightly between stained hands.

Steve nodded, getting to his feet. He really really needed to talk to Bucky right now. Or Peggs. Or pretty much anyone who would help him get through the fucking mess that was his thought process right now.

Tony Stark could still be a bad person. This didn’t change anything. Bad people were still capable of acts of kindness. Hell, Steve was a bad person, and he did his own equivalent of this down at his old orphanage every week.

This didn’t change anything.

Stark glanced over at him and smiled as Steve began to walk out of the door. It looked like Stark would be here for while cleaning everything up, and Steve had noticed the dark lines under his eyes even before the night had fallen.

Help him.

He didn’t need to. It was Stark’s thing. Steve didn’t owe him anything. He was nice to those who deserved it.

Help him.

He was fucking tired- he just wanted to go home. The paint was beginning to clump uncomfortably on his skin; halfway between wet and dry.

Help him.

“Steve? You okay there?” Stark asked, and Steve spun back around, only then realizing that he’d been stood at the threshold of the door for a good few seconds now. Which probably looked pretty weird.

Fuck it. He might as well, now.

“I got some spare time,” Steve answered with a shrug, walking slowly back into the room, “I’ll stay and clean up for a bit.”

Stark opened his mouth, but after a moment he just sighed in relief and rubbed his eyes. “Ugh, thank God. This is pretty much the first time I’ve had to clean up on my own in my fucking life, I have absolutely no idea where to start.”

Steve had to concentrate very hard on biting back a snide remark as he picked up an empty jam jar and walked over to the sink. Stark seemed to sense it, because he stumbled a little bit, rubbing the back of his neck. “I mean- I have cleaned before, obviously- that was just a joke. You know what one of those are, right? They’re meant to amuse-”

“I know what a joke is, Tony,” Steve cut in, rolling his eyes at the sink and pushing down the
immediate urge to snap back something passive-aggressive. Instead, he just focused on washing the various pieces of equipment, rubbing gently at the brush heads with the tips of his fingers and concentrating on the familiar feel of them against his skin.

It had been too long since he’d picked up a brush. He missed it.

Stark was silent after that, and Steve got the feeling he’d annoyed the other man. It was understandable- he was still acting like an asshole, despite earlier promises to both himself and Stark that he’d relax. It just seemed they were always rubbing each other up the wrong way. Steve knew he was looking for reasons to hate the man, and he knew it was probably an unprofessional, asshole way to behave, but he couldn’t help it. Stark just made it so easy.

“It’s kind of a surprise,” Steve blurted, after another stretch of awkward silence, “to see you here. I didn’t… I certainly wasn’t expecting this when I came here in the first place.” It was the truth, at least.

It sat very uncomfortably in his stomach, thinking about the fact that he’d been going into that room with intention of murdering Stark- especially after seeing him with the kids who quite obviously adored him.

Stark didn’t say anything, but Steve heard him moving about behind him. It was only when Stark walked up to his side, leaning across Steve’s chest in order to put the dirty jam jars and bowls into the sink, that he finally muttered “people rarely do.”

Steve watched him moving, graceful and soft. It was different to what he usually saw, and it was an indicator of quite how tired Stark was. It seemed as if his whole energy had finally been spent on the kids, and now he was down to the barest bones, the backup supply. He looked smaller; dropping the thick masks, all the loudness and brash attitude in favor of something…quiet. Mellow.

“When did you last get a decent night’s rest, Mr. Stark?” Steve asked, looking down at him as he brushed a dishcloth over the jars absently.

“Uh…” Stark paused, shrugging his shoulders a little, “Not sure. Been working on the specs for something for a while now.”

Steve shook his head, wondering how long ‘a while’ exactly was to Stark. “You should probably sleep more, you know.”

“That is correct.”

“You gonna take my advice?”

“Oh, definitely not,” Stark smiled wearily, “too busy for that. I got a company to run and an image to keep, Rogers. No rest for the wicked, after all.”

Steve didn’t respond, too lost in his own head to think of a decent enough reply. He felt off balance, uncertain in a way he hadn’t felt since he’d first started out- the whole night had messed with his head and he no longer knew what to think.

There was a seed of doubt beginning to form in his mind, and he wasn’t sure whether he was glad or terrified.
“He was painting,” Steve declared, the moment he threw open the door of his apartment. “He was painting with a class of kids.”

The group looked over at him in confusion, before Clint finally clicked his fingers. “He’s talking about Stark again,” he told them, and they all ‘ahhhhed’ in agreement before slumping back down on the various furniture they’d previously been lying on.

Steve pouted a little. “I don’t… I don’t talk about him that much,” he muttered, before shutting the door and making his way into the living room where they were all sat, “but this one is definitely weird, okay.”

“Then go on, Steve,” Peggy poked him in the ankle, “let us know all about what Stark did to horrify you to your very core this time-”

“But that’s the thing!” Steve said. “He’s...he gave me the slip, right- and I thought it was because he was going to do something shady, so I followed him. But he ended up at the library, and when I went in and found him, he was with a bunch of kids! Painting!”

Natasha looked over at him, frowning. “Kids? I thought Stark hated them.”

Steve raised his hands up in silent question, nodding vigorously. “I know, so did I. But then, bam! I walk in, and it’s like a damn creche. I don’t know… you don’t think it’s some sort of cover, do you?” Steve asked suddenly, hands tucking themselves around a pillow as he leaned forward conspiratorially.

Clint huffed. “Steve, you’re forgetting the most basic of rules. Bad people can still do good things. There are horrible people in the world who still give their money to homeless people or run charities- either because it helps their image or they just want to do it. But that doesn’t make the bad shit go away. Not that he’s 100% bad, just… theoretically,” Clint added hurriedly as Bucky shot him a look.

“Are we talking about your latest target?” Someone behind Steve asked- an unknown voice that had Steve reaching for his gun automatically. It was only Natasha’s hand on his shoulder and shake of her head that stopped him from whipping around to face this threat with a loaded automatic.

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“Friendly,” She muttered, just as a scruffy-looking man who Steve immediately identified as Bruce Banner shifted back a little, looking awkward.

“Oh, yeah,” he mumbled to himself, rubbing his neck, “assassins, right. I’ll remember not to creep up. I was… uh, Nat invited me… it was just to go through the job- I, uh- sorry.”

Steve watched the man shuffle backward and forth on his feet, clearly unused to that much attention. Bruce Banner certainly didn’t seem like much- but Nat assured him he was one of the best in his field, and his genius more than made up for his lack of physical threat. According to her, they’d met whilst she had been assigned to take out one of the agents tasked to bring Bruce in for various cyber-crimes and whistle-blowing surrounding the US military, and he’d been an
invaluable help to her whilst they’d been escaping the FBI and other assortments of spy organizations.

“Kept us totally invisible,” she’d said, “evaded capture like he was born for it. And by God, can he work a computer.”

She’d kept contact with him after that; a mutual agreement to aid one another if the situation called for it. And Bruce was just as aware as the rest of them about what kind of criminal tended to hang around in the depths of New York, so he helped them whenever he could. Although this was the first time Steve had met him personally, however.

“Banner,” he said with a smile, loosening his shoulders and then extending a hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

A warm, gentle hand grasped his own and shook. The man seemed so serene- it was difficult to believe that he belonged in a world like theirs. “The pleasure is all mine. I have to thank you. Your team saved my life back in Hong Kong. And, well, you keep the bad guys off the streets.”

Steve blinked, shooting a quick look off to Natasha, who only shrugged and then waved a hand, as if just saying ‘that’s Bruce’. “I… uh, thank you. We try our best.”

Bruce smiled again, and then propped his glasses further up his nose. “Anyway- I just left to go to the bathroom, but now we’re all here, you mind telling me what this is for?”

Natasha leaned in and poked Bruce in the back of the leg with a toe. “Mostly just a social call,” she told him with a grin, “you need more friends, Brucie.”

Steve was mildly surprised at the manner she spoke to him. He hadn’t been aware that they were this… close. It was rare that he saw Natasha Romanov act comfortable around anyone who wasn’t in their immediate group of friends.

“I have a perfect amount of friends, actually,” Bruce informed her, pinkie finger going to his glasses and pushing them up again, “scientific studies have shown that a healthy amount of friends to keep is no more than three consecutively. And I already have one who isn’t in this room, so I’m already going over my limit.”

“Oh, he’s one of those guys,” Clint said playfully, shaking the man’s hand. Steve chuckled, sitting down alongside Bruce on the couch.

“I feel like you’d probably get on well with my target,” Steve told him, raising an eyebrow, “he’s into trying to work out the human race via science too.”

Bruce pulled a face. “Well, from what you’re telling me about him, I probably wouldn’t. You got a name for me?”

They all looked at each other, before Steve shook his head. “Sorry- need to know basis, it’s safer that way. Right now, we don’t have much to offer you about him anyway. I’m tailing him right now- assigned as his bodyguard, which should get me in close quarters. But until I can give you a solid foundation to work on, you’re pretty much just going to be hit-and-missing for a bit. We can’t even get you into the servers at this moment in time- the guy’s security is absolutely watertight.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows, whistling. “Wow. That must be one important gentleman you’re thinking of taking out.”

Steve nodded once, jaw clenching. “This is a big job, Banner. I’m warning you now- if the tipoff is
confirmed and he is playing in the sort of terrorism that we think he is, it’s going to put a big ol’
target on our heads once this is done. You can walk away if you want. We know this is a lot to
ask.”

He expected the gentle man to at least ponder the depth of his pledge for a second, but the shake of
his head was resolute and immediate. “I promised I was going to help people in whatever way I
could. I’ve been to some of the war-torn parts of the world. I know just what corruption in the US
does to lives in the middle east, and I’d do anything to stop it. I’m down for whatever.”

His opinion on Bruce Banner grew double the size in the time it took for him to finish that
sentence, and Steve smiled, nodding his head. “Well I can’t say I’m not glad, Doctor. We’re gonna
need all the help we can get, if the target’s initial impression anything to by.”

The rest of the team raised a few eyebrows and shot off a few looks. Clint leaned back in his spot
and poked Steve in the leg. “What *is* your initial assessment of him, then?”

“I...he frustrates me,” Steve grumbled, leaning back. “I can’t read him. I don’t know what to
think.”

“That’s why you’re there, Steve,” Bucky looked at him in a sort of exasperated fondness, metal
finger poking him in the side of the head, “you got six whole months to work it out. It’s been your
first week. Just give it time.”

Steve looked ahead grumpily, pursing his lips as the rest of his team got back to watching the
reruns on TV.

Give it time. Hah. He’d probably end up throttling the guy from sheer frustration before he
discovered anything.

*****

“Hey, Steve, you nearly ready to go?” Stark asked, adjusting his cufflinks and shooting himself
one last glance in the mirror before turning around and wandering over to Steve, who was standing
at ease in the kitchen of his penthouse.

Stark certainly looked...dashing. Dressed to the nines and ready to head out to the annual Maria
Stark Charity Ball, he gave off an aura of appeal that even Steve struggled to ignore. He could see
how it was so easy for the man to retain his playboy persona. Stark just oozed charisma and
seduction in the sort of way which was impossible to look past.

“Yeah,” Steve nodded, and then held out his hand, giving Stark the bundle of letters he’d collected
from reception, “got these for you, too. Miss Potts told me I had to visually confirm you opened
them, because apparently they’re very important. So if you don’t mind,” Steve gestured down at
them, giving Stark a smile as the man shot the small pile a dirty look.

“We have a very tight schedule, here, Steven, do I really have to-”

“I don’t make the rules, sir,” Steve answered, trying to keep the amusement off his face as Stark took them with a huff, pulling each one open quickly and doing nothing more than glance at what was written before throwing them to the side, where they would undoubtedly be ignored for the next several months-

“Sonofabitch!” Stark cursed suddenly, and Steve’s head shot up, watching in confusion as the man seemed to jerk, dropping the letter with a yell as his other hand rose up to his chest.

Steve suddenly noticed, shocked, as a little trail of deep crimson began to trickle down Stark’s hand; seeping out through the cracks between his fingers, down his wrist, over the crisp white of his cuffs.

Steve moved immediately, stepping forward and tapping the discarded envelope further away from them both as he stretched out his arm, instinctively reaching for the injury.

There was far too much blood for that to have just been a papercut.

“Fuck,” Stark hissed, looking down at the little finger his entire hand was clutched around and wincing, “that crazy son of a bitch put a fucking razorblade in the flap!”

Steve grabbed his forearm. “Sink,” he ordered quickly, steering them both over to the tap and then setting it running, leaning over to grab at the box of tissues Stark kept on the counter as he did so.

Stark was muttering various curses under his breath as he ran his finger tentatively in the stream. Immediately, the water turned a light shade of pink, blood mixing with the liquid before falling down the drain. “God, my poor suit,” he moaned, looking dismally at the newly stained cuffs.

“I really don’t think that’s your main priority right now,” Steve gritted, as he lifted Stark’s hand out of the water and then wrapped a few layers of tissue around his finger. Taking Stark’s other hand, he pressed it around the cut with steady fingers. “Hold it,” he muttered, turning away and moving over to the envelope that was now lying on the floor.

“Don’t touch it!” Stark called, hurrying over, “it might be poisoned.” He stopped, then, eyes going a little wide. “You don’t think I’ve been poisoned, do you?”

“That’s what I’m gonna check,” Steve replied shortly, crouching down and then lifting the envelope off the floor by the corner of the paper. Grabbing a knife from the cutlery drawer to his right, he took it in hand and then pried the flap open once more.

Four thin razor edges glistened up at him, stuck to the underside. One of them was coated with a thin layer of red.

“How the fuck did that get past the security checks?” Stark gasped incredulously, leaning down to look at it with a shocked expression on his face.

“Tony,” Steve snapped, turning and placing the man’s hand back around his wound as it began snaking forward, trying to pick up the paper, “you need to staunch the flow. And you need to let me have a look. I know about this stuff.”

Tony raised an eyebrow and made a tutting sound with his tongue, but his hand went back around the already-reddening tissue. Steve nodded to himself, and then used the knife to gently peel the
razor which had cut Stark off the paper.

It came away with a little tear, and Steve delicately picked it up with the edge of the knife, moving it closer to his face, squinting in the light. He had a basic knowledge of how to test for poisons, but Natasha was really the one he needed here.

Putting the blade down, he moved back to the envelope, prying the blade on the other corner up. He traced the flat surface lightly with a pinkie; searching for the telltale moisture which would imply they had been dipped in something. When his finger came up dry, he moved it to his nose, giving a strong sniff. A lot of the stronger toxins tended to carry a smell with them.

“I doubt it was poisoned,” Steve said eventually, putting it down and turning back to Stark, who was looking at him with a curious expression on his face, “it would’ve had to be a very strong substance if it were going to do that much damage from a cut finger, and so you would already have started showing symptoms. You feel drowsy? Ill? Light-headed?” Steve asked, leaning forward, narrowing his eyes and staring into Stark’s deep brown ones, checking for pupil dilation or an unfocused gaze.

Stark stopped, opening his mouth and looking a little like a rabbit caught in the headlights as Steve leaned down and glared at him. “I...uh, no. No, I’m fine,” he stuttered, Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as he swallowed.

Steve’s gaze flickered down for a moment as he watched it. Stark’s breath hitched, just a tiny little thing, and suddenly Steve was acutely aware of how close they were.

“You need to see a doctor,” Steve told him, backing away and moving over to his cupboards. “You keep a first-aid kit around here somewhere? That cut should really be bandaged properly.”

“I don’t have time for a doctor,” Stark said from behind him, “I have to get to the Foundation’s evening, remember? I’ll just change my shirt and bandage myself up, and then we’ll get going-”

“Tony,” Steve stopped, turning back to face him, “you’re not going out now. Not after this, come on.”

Stark stopped, and then his face seemed to do a little spasm. “I’m sorry- did you just tell me I can’t go?”

“I’m your personal bodyguard, Tony,” Steve said, with a roll of his eyes as he crouched low and looked through the drawers. Stark may never have been told what to do before in his life, but maybe it was time he learned. “I have to keep you safe- someone has somehow managed to slip this in with your regular mail, and that is not something we can afford to take lightly-”

“Neither is the Foundation Ball,” Stark interrupted harshly. Everything about him had turned defensive; from posture to tone. “This is one of the most important events of the year for the Maria Stark Foundation, okay, and I’m not missing it. I can rack up millions in donations tonight. It’s huge.”

“It’s an unnecessary risk,” Steve countered, “you’re putting yourself in harm’s way for something you can do at any other point in the year.”

“Rogers, I’m not sure you’re very well-versed in the ways of the rich socialite, but let me tell you- the opportunity to get so many of them, all in one place, all with loose wallets, is an incredibly rare one. We plan this months in advance so everyone can put a space in their schedules. It’s a huge moneymaker, and I will not miss it because I got a cut on my finger,” Stark hissed, stepping
forward and shaking his head “This was my mother’s charity, and she invested her life and soul into it. There are thousands of people relying on it. You’re delusional if you think I’m just gonna sit here and let them down.”

Steve stopped searching, just for a second, mouth shutting and words dying on his lips. The response had thrown him- was Stark saying he was going to risk his life? All for some goddamn charity gala?

“I’m going, Steve. And the kit’s over in the top right shelf,” Stark told him, and although Steve’s back was turned, he goddamn knew the guy was rolling his eyes.

Probably.

Steve took another second to compose himself, before he stood up and reached over to the shelf, feeling around until he grabbed the small pack in between palm and fingers. Pulling it down, he let himself hold the frown on his face for an extra second, before schooling it back into neutrality once more as he turned on his heel and walked back over to Stark. “Sit,” he ordered, pointing the chair down to his right.

Stark- because apparently he felt like pissing Steve off seven ways to Sunday- just hopped up onto the counter, a cheeky smirk on his face. Steve rolled his eyes and shot Stark a look that was probably deemed unprofessional, but he stepped forward again, moving to Stark’s left and grabbing his hand. “Hold still.”

He did as he was told, pulling off the tissue and revealing a finger which was soaked in red from where the bloody tissue had rubbed. Steve grabbed a clean one and then purposely moved toward the sink rather than lean over Stark. He could feel the other man’s gaze burning into the side of his face, and he didn’t know what to make of it.

He didn’t know what to make of pretty much anything anymore, and he was about ready to start screaming in frustration.

Stark remained silent as Steve soaked the tissue and then moved back, cleaning his finger delicately before unzipping the first-aid kit and pulling out the roll of bandages. “You’re lucky this doesn’t need stitches,” he muttered, beginning to wrap it around Stark’s injury.

He heard the tiny intake of breath and the sound of his lips opening as he made to talk, but the words never came out of Stark’s mouth. Steve chose to just continue with his work; adamantly fixing his gaze to the bandage rather than anywhere else where he might risk catching Stark’s eyes. The air felt tense, and Steve wasn’t sure why.

“There was a letter,” Stark said suddenly, and Steve almost jumped from the noise, “in the envelope. There was a letter.”

Steve stopped, turning to look at the offending object as it sat on the table. Wordlessly, he tied the bandage off and then moved over, picking it up and then carrying it over to Stark. “You got a pair of tweezers or something?” Steve asked, unwilling to simply expose the world to whatever might be inside.

“Better than that,” Stark told him, “JARVIS?”

“Scanning now, sir.”

Steve’s eyebrows hitched a little higher, and Stark just grinned in response. “He’s a handy little fellow, isn’t he?”
“Scan complete. The package is clean, sir.”

Immediately, Stark reached for the letter in Steve's hand, but he pulled away before the fingers could curl around and grab it, holding it behind him and stopping Stark with his other hand over the man’s chest. “Let me,” he told him, pursing his lips as he glanced down at it.

“Oh, come on, JARVIS already said it's completely cl-”

“*Let me, Tony,*” Steve interrupted the insufferable man, “*it’s my job.*”

Stark glared, but ultimately fell back with an exasperated huff and allowed Steve to pull his hand back, using it to delicately slide his finger under the area where he'd pulled away the razor. Fingers found the edge of the paper, and he tugged gently, half expecting another danger to arise as he did so.

But there was nothing. Just a small slip of paper, the top edge slightly slanted from where the sender had obviously cut off the overhanging edge.

“*Your blood is my blood,*” Stark read out a little incredulously, his face a picture of disdain, “what the fuck does that even mean?”

“Something less than savory, I'm guessing,” Steve replied absently, looking close at the words in front of him. “Looks like a man’s writing. Left handed. The paper’s expensive stuff; they were obviously wanting to put effort into the presentation.”

“Wait,” Stark said suddenly, grabbing Steve's wrist and narrowing his eyes, “there’s something on the back.”

He leaned forward a little, holding Steve's hand in place as he squinted at the smaller print in front of him. “*More to come,*” he spoke slowly.

There was a silence, and then their eyes met. Stark’s face looked apprehensive- not scared, exactly, but...foreboding, almost. “That doesn’t sound sinister at all,” the man said cheerily, shrugging his shoulders and then plucking it from Steve’s grasp. “I’ll send it down to the labs- test it for prints and all that.”

“Tony,” Steve began, “*I strongly* suggest you take the night off and lay low, just for a few days, as a precaution—”

He may as well have been talking to a brick wall. Stark was already undoing his tie and pulling away the first buttons of his shirt, walking back to his room. “I’ll be two minutes. I need to pick out a new shirt and clean away the blood- but after that, we can get going,” he called out, entirely ignoring Steve’s previous words of warning.

Steve watched him move across the room; shucking off his shirt entirely to reveal tanned skin and toned muscle- just for a second- before he ducked around the corner and went off in the direction of his room.

Steve felt his cheeks heat up at the sight, and forcefully fought off the mental image that stuck in his mind. Now was most definitely, certainly, unequivocally not the time for that. At all.

Ever.
As soon as Steve laid eyes on the place, his guard was up.

It was like Tony was just *trying* to make it easy for his stalker. A huge, open-plan building, with stairs that lead to an overhanging balcony circling the entire room. Anyone dancing on the bottom floors were sitting ducks for those on top.

“Four seconds after getting out of the car and you’re already reaching for your gun?” Tony tutted as Steve fell into step beside him, “come on, Rogers- relax. They won’t try anything here, it would cause too much of a scene.”

Steve shot him a look. “They said your blood was theirs, Tony- you really think they care much for social norms?”

Tony rolled his eyes, twirling around and plucking a glass of champagne from a tray with ease before bringing it to his lips, winking up at Steve. The smug look was short-lived, however, as Steve quickly removed the flute from his grasp and tipped the contents swiftly into a nearby plant-pot, despite the billionaire’s yelp of distress. “Hey, uh, Steve- you know most people don’t use expensive champagne as plant feeder?”

“We’re keeping you clean tonight, if that’s all the same with you,” Steve told him curtly, “I need to do my job to the best of my ability, and you being drunk will not make things easier for anyone.”

Tony winced, and looked around a little apprehensively. “How the fuck am I supposed to deal with everyone here while I’m sober?”

Steve shrugged. “How do you deal with everyone else while you’re sober?”

Another wince. “These people are not ‘everyone else’. These people are like... me.”

Steve looked over at him, ready to hide a sneer of disapproval at Tony’s brash arrogance. But the look on the man’s face failed to make Steve think he was proud of that fact. If anything, he just looked vaguely disgusted.

Steve thought about how most people didn’t seem to require copious amounts of alcohol in order to deal with people they thought of as similar to themselves.

“I wouldn’t say any of these folk would be caught dead finger painting in a public library with a bunch of misfit kids,” Steve said, without even thinking about it.

Both Steve and Tony stopped in surprise. Steve’s eyes widened, and he guessed he probably looked like a rabbit caught in the headlights. Although to be fair, Tony did, in fact, look much the same.

It seemed they were both equally as surprised as one another at Steve’s impromptu comment.

“I mean,” Steve hastened to correct himself, before realizing with a sudden jolt that there wasn’t really anything to correct, “I...uh- yeah. It’s true,” he said a little weakly, whilst frowning to
himself. “Although to be honest, I wouldn’t have thought you’d be the sort of person to do that either. So…”

He should probably stop talking. That whole speech had been something akin to a trainwreck.

Tony made a vaguely confused sort of noise in the back of his throat, and there was an awkward silence as the both of them attempted to come to terms with the sudden compliment. Steve honestly had no idea where that had come from, and that was the part that unnerved him the most.

“Right,” Tony said eventually, nodding a little erratically before taking a few steps further into the room, “I am going to mingle. I take it you won’t listen to me if I tell you to just relax and watch me from a distance, so I’ll settle with asking you not to hover ominously over my shoulder the entire time. Like I said; I need to persuade these people to donate, and they’ll be a lot less willing if they’re fearing for their lives the entire time.”

Steve nodded shortly, choosing not to respond as Tony took another few steps forward and then slipped effortlessly into the crowds of people. He hurried to follow, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible despite how out of his element this all was for him, whilst searching the room casually with sharp eyes.

There were a few hundred people altogether; all of them wearing exquisite clothes and sipping from expensive alcohol. A brief flame of disgust rose in Steve’s stomach- the immediate response to seeing this much wealth, centered in one single room. He knew it was unfair, especially considering the fact that they were all only here to raise money for a charity, but still. The fact that what was possibly a good half of New York’s entire wealth rested in one single venue just felt inherently wrong to him.

He caught up with Tony, just managing to slip in beside him and close the circle of people before anyone else did. Smiling as genuinely as he could around the group, he allowed Tony to do the introductions whilst he simply stood and tried to mask how uncomfortable he was feeling.

Tony truly was a natural at what he did. Steve watched as he spoke; effortlessly initiating himself into the conversation and subtly directing it toward the subjects he wanted them to talk about, like the charity. Steve just observed, somewhat awestruck as Tony somehow managed to accumulate a ten thousand dollar donation within the first five minutes of discussion.

Seeing Tony work was a weird experience for Steve. When he was like this; all wide, fake smiles and loud voices and domineering presence, Steve saw the person he’d gone into this thinking that Tony Stark was. It was everything Steve disliked about the man.

And yet, Steve only saw it at things like these. At press conferences or social events or places in which Tony needed to be Tony Stark, the genius, the playboy, the man with the money and the answer to all of your problems. And then when he got home, it was like… like being that person had drained him. He’d go straight to bed, flashing Steve a smile that he couldn’t quite read- and sometimes if Steve caught Tony glancing at himself in the reflection of a mirror, the look on his face was a little too close to self-hatred for him to be able to understand.

Of course, he’d only been in the man’s company for two and half weeks. It wasn’t exactly as if he knew the man inside-out yet. There was still so much more recon to be done.

Tony bid the first group of people goodbye, and tugged innocuously at the back of Steve’s suit to get him to follow as he wandered away. “So- you seen any potential serial killers yet?” He asked
quietly.

Steve shook his head, but steered Tony out of the way of the main ballroom, just as a precaution. The open-plan area still sent the assassin part of him shivering in distrust.

And, he supposed now, the bodyguard part too.

“Hey, hey, what are you doing?” Tony objected, frowning as Steve moved them away, “I want to dance.”

“You have no idea what their plan is.”

“And so I would like a harmless dance with one of the patrons. Look, if I get shot, you can gloat for as long as you want.”

Tony pouted, and pushed back at Steve, “Oh, come on- we’ve established that I’m not going to get murdered tonight-”

“You should know- you’ve done it before.”

Steve held back a groan of despair. The man was impossible. Stupid. Reckless. “I can’t stay close by when you’re out there. This is really not a situation I’m comfortable with.”

Tony huffed, and then turned around to face Steve, eyebrows raised. “Then dance with me.”

Steve froze, looking down at Tony incredulously. The man appeared entirely unfazed; just staring up at him expectantly, a small little smile on his face.

“That’s… unprofessional,” Steve said eventually, shaking his head. Tony opened his mouth to argue, but Steve held up a hand, firmer this time. “No, Tony- please, can you just-”

“Steve, you may be my bodyguard, but you do not control me,” Tony told him lightly, before patting his cheek and stepping back, falling into the throng of people while Steve seethed in irritation at the edges.


Steve watched mutinously as Tony fell into step with a beautiful woman, chatting easily to her as they swayed across the room. It made him even more annoyed, watching them, so he turned away with a shake of his head and did another scout of the room.

He watched the waiters in particular; sharp eyes following their paths, watching out in case they offered anything to Tony. From experience, he knew a relatively easy way to get into social events like this was to pose as staff- and waiters in particular were granted easy access to particular individuals. All it took was a poisoned beverage, and then it was game over.

But the waiters remained at the edges, and didn’t go near Tony. Steve, with nothing else to do, simply lingered a little awkwardly on the sidelines and tried to watch Tony without actually watching Tony. The sight of him with that stranger; holding her close and smiling seductively at them- it made Steve uncomfortable.

He knew that Tony was attractive. On a completely objective level, of course. It didn’t mean
anything.

It sure was annoying, though. Although- it was to be expected. A lot of things about Tony Stark were annoying.

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“Okay- I’m calling it,” Tony spoke in his ear, making Steve jump. He looked down, seeing Tony as he stared glassy-eyed into the swaths of people in front of him, “let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

Steve, who had been zoned out for the past 5 minutes as Tony talked about the growing need for more advanced search and rescue technology to a bunch of generals, nodded his head vigorously. “I agree. Let’s go.”

Tony laughed, and it sounded tired as Steve pressed a hand to the small of his back and led them both out. “You had fun tonight, Mr. Bodyguard?” He asked wearily, stepping around a slightly-too-tipsy woman who was dancing with abandon.

Steve felt his face scrunch up a little. “I have no idea how you do that so often,” he answered. Tony raised his eyebrows and then turned, grabbing his coat from the coat check attendant and then sliding back to Steve’s side. “Ah, that would be a lifetime’s worth of practice and, in most cases, alcohol,” he informed him, shooting Steve an unimpressed look as he spoke the last part, before shrugging and continuing out the door, “but I mean, tonight wasn’t so bad. It was mostly just charity talk, and...yeah. It went well. I feel like we did a great job- Pepper will have the donation numbers by the end of the week, so then we’ll find out.” Tony paused, smiling to himself for a second before turning back to Steve and turning it into something drier, less real. “Great for my image, all this charity stuff, you know?”

Steve didn’t answer, but he got the feeling Tony was talking out of his ass. He simply sighed, and stepped in front of Tony to push the doors open.

They stepped out into the cold night air, and Steve winced as the sharp gust of wind blew in his face. He’d never enjoyed the cold. Tony didn’t seem to notice too much, however- he simply yawned and rubbed his eyes. “You know what I want? I want a burger. Let’s go and get burgers, Steve. There’s a McDonald's a few blocks down from here and I am starving.”

Steve wanted to object- Tony seemed exhausted, and it looked like they probably wouldn’t even make it to the car without him keeling over. But at the end of the day, it wasn’t his place. Who even cared how Stark treated himself, anyway? He was just the bodyguard.

“Whatever you want, Tony,” Steve said with a slight shrug, opening the door of the cab they’d hailed and then trying not to act pissed when Tony slipped in before he could.

Right. Sometimes he forgot he was on Stark’s payroll, which apparently included opening doors for the man now, too.
He didn’t take it to heart, though. The other man was clearly pretty out of it at this point. It was funny— the change was almost immediate—from lively and vibrant and the life and soul of the party, to… this.

“Nearest McDonald’s, please,” Steve told the taxi driver as he slid in next to Tony and belted himself up.

Tony stretched like a cat and made a happy little noise in the back of his throat as his eyes fluttered shut and he leaned back against the headrest. “Steve, you are wonderful. Pepper would never have agreed to that.”

Steve ducked his head and hid a smile behind his hand, looking out of the window. “Unless it actively endangers your life, Mr. Stark, I don’t care what you do.”

There was silence, and Steve looked back over. Tony had his mouth half-open, and his relaxed posture seemed to have disappeared, just for a second. He looked a little like the rug had been swept out from underneath him— but he quickly relaxed again, looking down at the floor and smiling softly. “Good. The more I pay you, the less you care, right? As it should be,” he muttered, before shifting his body and leaning against the side of the door.

Steve frowned, and opened his mouth, but he didn’t know quite what to say about that. He supposed his previous statement had probably been quite… well, cruel, but he hadn’t meant it like that. He just—

*Did* he mean it?

Yes.

...No?
Walking into the Commando Coffeehouse and seeing Clint still working the counters at 11 in the evening was both amusing and sad at the same time.

“Still not got any other clients?” Steve asked, shutting the door against the cold breeze and wandering into the warmth of the room.

Clint shook his head, looking grim as he wiped a cloth over the surface. “We almost got another today, but it turns out the target was just a prick who cheated- not really someone we could consider,” he said, and then sighed, “so unless we want to go hungry for the next few weeks, we’ll just have to see what we can earn from the shop.”

Steve grimaced, sitting down heavily on one of the chairs. They all ran the shop on shifts—something to do when they weren’t out assassinating people—and it helped pay the bills when they went through dry spells. Like the one right now.

It wasn’t just them relying on their services, after all.

Each one of them had come from different backgrounds, and each one of them felt like they owed something to everyone who was going through the same thing as they had. Steve and Bucky both helped run the local children’s home and keep them out of trouble, especially seeing as it was in the rougher part of the neighborhood. Natasha used the money to help pay for a service which helped young kids become aware of gang-culture and aided their rehabilitation process. Clint worked with a local-run organization that prevented child smuggling and trafficking. Pegs helped out in the homeless shelters she’d spent a good few years in after running from England.

They all had a duty. They all felt responsible. And when they couldn’t help pay for the shelters, or the orphanages or the charities, they all knew that it was someone vulnerable who would suffer because of it. Of course, the salary Steve was now getting from Stark Industries helped ease their way a damn lot— but tactical gear cost a fortune, and ever since the scuffle in Oklahoma last month, they’d been running low on equipment. So there went any spare money they’d been saving up.

It was difficult. Steve knew he could have it worse, and he knew that he was able to just about make ends meet, which was more than he could say about a lot of families, but… it was just difficult. That was all.

“Has Bucky been goddamn smoking in here again?” Steve said suddenly, sniffing the air and wrinkling his nose, “Goddamn it, can someone else aside from me please try and curb his horrible fucking habit whilst he’s indoors?”

“Don’t worry, Natasha stepped up to the plate. Told him he’d have to be the one who paid for the couches if he stained them,” Clint said, ghost of a fond smile on his face before it was pulled a little tauter, dimmed a little further, “—which, y’know, he can’t do, because none of us have any money to spare. So he stopped. Ha.”

“We’ll be rolling in it soon, Clint,” Steve assured him, turning around and facing the other man as he began wandering over to the door to turn the sign over to ‘closed’, “and then we’ll be able to keep everything going for the rest of our lives.”

Clint looked over to him, and he made to say something; undoubtedly along the lines of ‘we don’t
know if he’s guilty’ - but they never made it out of his mouth, and instead he just sighed, before wandering over and flopping down next to him. “How was Stark today, anyway?”

Steve shrugged. He wasn’t entirely sure how to word ‘I went into this thinking he’s evil and I still think he’s evil but he keeps doing nice things and he’s also really hot which is just distracting on various different levels’ to Clint without just sounding weird. “Same as ever,” he went with in the end, “We got mail from his stalker, though- nearly cut off his damn finger. Whoever it is, they’re not fucking around. Looks like I might actually have to start doing my job soon,” Steve said, as Clint laughed beside him.

“Maybe we should just leave him to the creep, then,” Clint said, “have them deal with it and then just take the credit. Keep our hands clean.”

Steve knew he was joking- but the unhappy little flutter in his heart at the thought of that was entirely new.

_____Tony_____

When he stumbled out of his workshop at 7 in the morning, the last thing he’d expected to see was Steve Rogers making breakfast in his kitchen.

“What the shit?” Tony blurted, rubbing his eyes and then going back to staring at Steve’s impossibly broad shoulders hunching over the stove.

Steve didn’t even bother looking up. “I was told by Miss Potts last night that you were giving a speech in Boston this morning and I had to arrive early.”

Tony paused, frowning. “I.... am I?”

“Yes.”

The room was still goddamn dark. That was how early it was. Why the hell had Tony agreed to do something at such an ungodly hour anyway?

Turning around, Steve leaned over the table and pushed a mug of coffee across it, so that it landed perfectly in front of Tony. “Drink,” he said, “I feel like I’m talking to a zombie right now.”

He only just managed to bite back on the ‘Sir yes sir!’ as he pulled the coffee into his chest and continued to stare at Steve’s back as he turned away again. There was something very authoritarian
about how Steve spoke to him sometimes, and Tony was still debating on whether it pissed him off or turned him on.

"Mmmmnunhhhh," he groaned in pleasure as the liquid touched his lips, blissed out from the feeling of the scalding hot drink as it went down his throat and infused desperately needed caffeine into his bloodstream. “That’s the good shit.”

Steve huffed out a quick laugh, and flicked the stove off once more, spinning around and shoving a plate of pancakes into a bewildered Tony’s chest. “I’m sorry- since when did you make me breakfast? Isn’t this a little above your paygrade?”

“Juuust try’na get you outta the door as fast as I can,” Steve mumbled, wandering past Tony and adjusting his tie in the hazy reflection of the windows, “I don’t want to know what will happen to either of us turn up late. Miss Potts seemed quite…”

“Crazy? Stressed? Was she shrieking? She does that sometimes,” Tony told him, nodding into his coffee before his eyes narrowed and he looked back up. “Wait. Did you just… was that Brooklyn I heard just then?” he asked incredulously.

Steve, for what was probably the first time since they’d met, visibly blushed, and turned away again. “Uh- yeah. Sorry, I’m just… ‘s’early for me too, ya know?” he said, a little sulkily as he folded his arms in front of him.

Tony briefly considered prayer. Because that… that was just unfair. Seriously? An accent? Not only the shoulders and the eyes and the smile, but the accent? Hiring this man had obviously been a mistake. Tony was having to fight the urge to jump him at any available opportunity as it was, never mind with a goddamn fucking Brooklyn drawl to add on to everything-

He shook his head, rolling up a pancake and stuffing it into his mouth in one go. If he didn’t think about it, it would go away.

God, Pepper really would kill him if he slept with his bodyguard after three weeks of employing him. Not that Steve would ever be up for that kind of ‘unprofessional’ behavior. The guy could barely crack a smile around Tony, never mind doing things that Tony was definitely not thinking about-

“Are you even listening?” Steve asked, and Tony snapped his head back up, taking an almost violent sip of coffee before his treacherous mouth could reveal something that needed not to be revealed.

“Uhm- no,” Tony admitted with a shrug of his shoulders.

Steve bristled a little, but didn’t react any further. “I said we’ve got a tight schedule. I’ve arranged all the transport, and security around the building is already pretty tight, but just in case, we’re gonna need to stick to the perimeter-”

“Yes, yes, fine, I agree, whatever,” Tony said with an exasperated sigh. Honestly, this whole bodyguard thing was wearing a little thin- how long was he going to have to go being told where he could and couldn’t go? It was irritating, that’s what it was.

Steve looked at him funny, and he undoubtedly knew that Tony wasn’t really listening, but again, he didn’t say anything. Just held back a sigh and then gestured to the door. “Car’s waiting, come on, get dressed.”

“You’re prickly in the mornings, aren’t you,” Tony muttered as Steve herded him in the direction
of his room and then plucked the plate out of his hands.

“I’m prickly all the time,” Steve answered blankly, and Tony chuckled in amusement as Steve turned to him, looking somewhat as if he was attempting to mask a smile. “Go on- you’ve got five minutes, or I’m calling Ms. Potts.”

“She’s not my mom, you know.”

“Well she’s still the only one who stands a chance of getting through to you.”

“Hey, I’m following all your damn orders, aren’t I?” Tony called out moodily, before ducking into his room and shutting the door behind him. He yawned, pulling out his phone and searching through his contacts with bleary eyes. When he found the person he was looking for, he grinned automatically and then pulled the phone up to his ear.

“Mmmgh,” came a sleepy voice down the line, and Tony grinned as he pulled out a clean shirt from his wardrobe and tucked the phone in between his shoulder and neck.

“Brucie Brucie Bruce, you sound a little less than perky this morning-”

“Is there a reason for you calling at 7 in the morning, Tony?” Bruce asked him wearily.

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “Uhm, yes? The MIT talk? The one that you literally begged me to go to so you would have a buddy nearby whilst you gave your talk on gamma radiation and the potential it stored for modern man? The one you made me plan out an entire hour-long lecture for at the very last minute? That one ring any bells?”

There was silence down the phone for a second, and then a nervous sounding noise. “Ah. Yes. About that…”

“Bruce,” Tony said dangerously, “You better not say what I think you’re about to say.”

“It wasn’t my fault I got ill!” Bruce said defensively, “I got given badly prepared seafood- yell at the restaurant owners!”

“No no, you see, it would take some time to get through to the restaurant owners, whereas you are right here,” Tony growled, “What the fuck? You’re just abandoning me like this? When I only agreed to participate in this early-morning nightmare for your sorry ass?”

“If I come, then I might end up vomiting on you. Is that really what you want?” Bruce asked him meekly, before he broke off to yawn. “Look, I really am sorry, but-”

“Bruce Banner, you are a mean little slut and I hope you get fed all the contaminated seafood for the rest of your life,” Tony said loudly, before ending the call and groaning.

He had to travel all the way down to Boston to give a fucking lecture, and he wouldn’t even get to see his partner-in-science at the end of it. What a waste.

He quickly pulled out his phone again, sending a text over to Bruce before throwing it back on the bed and pulling on his shirt with a sulky tug. Get better soon, asshole.

He got a reply just as he walked back into the living room where Steve was curled up and waiting. Thanks. I’ll send you an apology card when I can walk ;)

“You ready?” Steve asked, and Tony nodded in response, pocketing his phone and then trailing
moodily behind Steve as he pulled open the door and led them both into the elevator.

He contented himself with staring at Steve’s ass as they made their way down to the garage. Silver linings, he supposed.

*****

“I cannot believe I was woken up this early for nothing,” Tony hissed, turning away from the receptionist and storming back to the couch, where he flopped down angrily.

“Listen, it’s only been pushed back an hour, I’m sure you can wait it out for that long,” Steve told him, although he too seemed a little put-out at the news. There were faint purple bruises beginning to circle the bottom of his eyes, and Tony guessed he hadn’t got much sleep that night.

“You can nap if you want,” Tony told him, throwing a too-hard pillow at the man’s chest from his side of the couch, “it’s college- no one gives a fuck. They’ll just think you’re stuck up because you didn’t fall asleep directly on the floor.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “You know- I’m pretty sure that wouldn’t be good conduct for a bodyguard.”

Tony groaned. “Ugh, bodyguard schmodygaurd- you take your job far too seriously-”

“And you take your safety far too lightly- I’m trying to look out for you here,” Steve countered sharply, and then his eyes widened, just a fraction.

He did that a lot. Said things that he didn’t necessarily think about, and then seemed intensely surprised when he actually heard himself speak them. It was quite amusing, actually.

He sat back, staring moodily at the high ceiling and stubbornly trying to ignore the warmth of Steve’s thigh against his own as they sat on the couch. Steve, bless his heart, did actually stay awake, shuffling every few seconds as he sat in order to keep himself alert and moving.

Tony got bored within the first minute.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” he declared, standing up and making his way briskly across the empty reception.

Steve’s head moved to follow his path, and he made as if to stand and follow, but Tony put up a hand. “Stay there, Steve- you really don’t need to accompany me to go piss. That’s just
uncomfortable for everyone.”

Steve sat down again, blushing just a little. “Just don’t disappear on me,” he called after Tony as he slipped out of the doors and made his way down the corridor.

****

Okay, so he may have disappeared on him. Just a little.

In all fairness, he hadn’t intended to. But as he’d been making his way back, he’d passed a lecture hall that had the door slightly ajar, letting Tony hear snippets of what appeared to be a talk on astrophysics. Lovely, complex, mind-boggling astrophysics that seemed to be stumping the majority of the class inside.

How was he supposed to resist?

“Tony!”

He turned and spotted Steve, walking angrily over to him as he stood at the back of the auditorium and listened avidly to the lecturer.

“Steve!” Tony whispered right back, excitedly grabbing his arm and pulling him further in, “Listen to this guy, it’s fascinating. I’ve heard of Doctor Richards, and I’ve read a few of his papers, but honestly, actually listening to him talk about it is something else. Have you heard his theories on wormholes? It’s crazy, but-”

“You said you wouldn’t just go off, Tony!” Steve interrupted him in frustration, holding his hands up in exasperation. “Do you ever just listen?”

Tony felt the smile on his face drop, just a little, and he shook Steve’s arm again in another attempt to try and make him see. “But… science, Steve!” He ended up saying, which was a little pathetic, really.

Steve looked at him for a moment, seemingly somewhat perplexed. Maybe it was the stupid expression Tony tended to wear when discovering something new, but slowly, it seemed something made Steve’s face soften a fraction. “You…you really like this stuff, huh?”

Tony’s gaze flickered back to the stage, the smile returning to his face. “I mean… how can anyone not? Isn’t it just fascinating? Like- he’s talking about the possibility of being able to create rips in spacetime using nothing more than pure energy. It’s crazy and defies like…a dozen laws of physics,
“and yet-” Tony waved a hand, shrugging his shoulders and gesturing vaguely into the crowds, “here everyone is. Willing to learn the impossible. Everything we know is basically just our imagination trying to fill in the blanks. And facts that we used to live by are disproved every day. We’re always learning.”

Okay, so he was starting to sound pretty sad now. “I mean- yeah. I just think it’s cool,” he finished lamely, cringing. He tended to get a little over enthusiastic when it came to this sort of stuff, and it was something he tried particularly hard to avoid doing. People didn’t find it quirky; they just found it annoying.

But Steve was just looking at him with something that felt a little bit like exasperated fondness on his face. “You’re a bodyguard’s worst nightmare, you know that right?” he whispered, shaking his head and doing the thing he did where he tried to hide his smile by pursing his lips together and looking away.

Tony grinned a little sheepishly, and checked his watch. “We have time. I’m gonna stay and listen to this for a little while lon-”

He never got around to finishing what he’d been about to say. Because- perfect fucking timing as always- Tony’s words were drowned out by the sudden sound of screaming from down the corridor, and all at once he found himself being pulled in, nose bumping into Steve’s back as the man turned toward the door and swiftly pulled the gun from his hip in about the same amount of time it would have taken Tony to blink.

Fuck. What the damn hell was that about?

His internal thoughts were, unfortunately, answered less than a second later when the horrifyingly real sound of a gunshot cracked through the air. Tony flinched at it- all too familiar with the implications of what those noises were. A thousand thoughts exploded in his mind as soon as the shot fired; escape routes and countermeasures and school lockdown protocols- but all were drowned out by the panicked yells that began to start up inside the auditorium, kids all ducking down, standing up, trying to get back from the door and out onto the stage where the emergency exit was.

“Shit,” Tony cursed, “you don’t think-”

“I don’t know- but we’re leaving,” Steve said grimly, taking Tony by the forearm and moving them back.

“Wait- Steve, we have to help!” Tony argued, stopping their descent down the stairs. “You have a weapon. I’m guessing most people on campus don’t. We can-”

“My job is to keep you safe, and right now there is someone running around with a gun, coincidentally at the same time you showed up. We are leaving,” Steve said bluntly.

“No,” Tony shook his head, “if you don’t want to, then give me the gun and I will- “

Another crack, and Steve pushed Tony down by the head, instinctively covering him. The sound was louder- whoever it was, they were getting further down the corridor.

Steve yanked, and Tony followed hurriedly, bounding down the stairs and keeping his eyes fixed on the door at the top of the room. The entire place was heaving; people were yelling in panic, scrabbling onto the stage and then sprinting into the wings. As Steve reached the stage, he spun and grabbed Tony by the waist, hauling him up before he’d even had time to blink.
In any other circumstance, it would have taken a good long time for Tony recover from such a show of strength. As it was, he was a little too busy fearing for his life.

Steve quickly pulled himself up, rolling back to his feet and then turning around, holding out a hand to help some of the last stragglers up too. Tony did the same, hurrying back and getting to his knees as he pulled up a terrified young girl whose head barely even came to the floor of the stage. Steve looked over to him and opened his mouth, undoubtedly to tell him to keep going, but eventually he just clamped shut again, hands going out to the last man and then pulling him up.

As soon as the last one was accounted for, Steve stood, taking Tony by the forearm once again. His eyes were fixed at the back of the room, gun pointed toward the door as they backed away and followed the crowd. There hadn’t been gunfire for at least ten seconds now, and Tony wondered if security had caught them.

“Keep going,” Steve barked as Tony slowed up a little, “don’t stop until you get to the car.”

Tony nodded, gripping Steve tighter as the crowd converged into the single exit so as not to lose him in the swarm of people. Steve didn’t look like he was letting go, though- his hand was probably going to leave bruises on Tony’s arm.

Tony finally squeezed his way out- one of the final few to do so- and Steve followed, stopping them both and pushing the last remaining few through the exit. Once they’d gone through, he ducked his head back in, just for a moment, checking to see if there was anyone remaining.

There wasn’t, so Steve slammed the door shut with an air of finality. “Right. Let’s get you outta here,” he said briskly. “Stay with the crowd- you’ll be harder to spot.”

It was true; there were so many people milling around from where they’d evacuated that it was almost impossible to escape. Steve seemed to manage okay though, pushing through the crowds with brisk efficiency and making his way toward the parking lot where Tony’s car was kept. The staff were milling around trying to order the kids, and the few security guards which littered the place all had their guns out in readiness, but it seemed that whoever had been firing off in the corridors had yet to make an appearance outdoors.

“That was for me, wasn’t it?” Tony said grimly, as they both hopped over the fence that separated the grounds from the parking lot.

“If I were to hazard a guess, yes, I’d say it was,” Steve answered dryly, “but hey- at least they’ve been caught now. And hopefully no one got h-“

Steve had been so close to finishing that sentence. So damn close. But as he got to the last word, his eyes narrowed, just a fraction as he focused on something behind Tony.

And then immediately after, Tony found himself being tackled violently into the car.

He yelled in surprise, hearing the sound of a bullet embed itself in the metal of the car, (although, not the sound of the gunshot itself- they must have used a silencer) and he jerked upward to move his hands to his head before finding them pinned by Steve. Who was also pinning the rest of his body. With his own.

Again, it was one of those moments which would have been far more appreciated under different circumstances.

Unfortunately, it didn’t last long. Rolling off him quickly, Steve ended up haphazardly in the driver’s seat, feet pressed against the side window as he pulled out the keys from his pocket and
slammed them into ignition. “Shut the goddamn door,” he called to Tony, who turned on his side and used his foot to slam the door back into place.

Steve kept low in the seat, but his eyes searched the crowd. “It came from right in front of us. Right there, I know it did. I saw the bastard moving, if I can just—”

“Steve, maybe you should, oh, I don’t know, fucking drive?” Tony yelled, trying to get into a position that was slightly more comfortable. His back was crying out in pain from where it had slammed into the gear stick.

Steve’s mouth clamped shut and he quickly reversed, clipping a few cars as they drove out. Tony finally got into a sitting position, only to have Steve’s hand tug his head back down again. “Stay low,” he gritted out, pulling sharply on the wheel and sending them into a seemingly effortless 180 spin.

There was a sudden cracking noise again, and he felt Steve jerk down. Looking over, he noticed another circular hole which had appeared in the window right above Steve’s head. “Son of a fucking whore,” Tony cursed, feeling his heart beating in his chest as they sped down the road,

Steve spun the wheel again, prompting a fair few angry honks from other drivers as they swerved around the corner at the end of the drive, but once they’d made it back onto the main road, Tony let himself sigh in relief. Steve didn’t make a noise; he just sat up straight again and looked grim as he searched for the next available turn.

Tony fumbled for his phone, but Steve laid a hand over the screen. “They’re already here,” he nodded forward, and Tony peeked over the dashboard, watching as at least 7 different cop cars rushed toward them on the other side of the road and turned into the driveway.

Tony breathed out, feeling as if he were in some sort of dream. Or action movie. “That did not just happen,” he said shakily, running a hand over his face.

“Are you hurt?” Steve asked, flicking his eyes off the road for a second to look Tony over.

He shook his head, blinking a few times as he tried to clear his thoughts. “No. But… that’s actually the first time I’ve been shot at on purpose,” he laughed shakily, and then frowned. “I, uh- I think I’m going into shock.”

Steve looked at him worriedly, head moving between the road and Tony. “Just take a few deep breaths. You’re fine. And if it helps, they weren’t actually gunning for you. They were trying to get me,” he explained, shuffling a little in his seat.

Tony’s eyes widened, and he was about to ask why before realizing that the stalker was after Tony, not Steve. Well- in the long run, anyway. And that meant they probably viewed Steve as something that needed to be removed from the equation entirely. An obstacle that had to be neutralized.

Tony felt something tight clench in his heart at the thought, and he swallowed nervously. “Christ, Steve, I—”

“If you try to say anything about me leaving before I get hurt, I’m gonna thwack ya,” Steve told him, fingers tapping irritably against the wheel. “He’s pissed me off now- I’m not leaving until I get him back for ruining my best goddamn suit.”

Tony smiled nervously, sucking in a shaky breath and shutting his eyes. He felt a little sick.

“Hey,” Steve said, softer this time, “I got your back. You’re good, okay? Anyway- once the initial
shock has died down, you’ll be relatively okay with something like this if it ever happens again. Be more alert, more ready to fight.”

Tony nodded a little, before freezing. “God- what if someone was shot?” He asked quietly.

Steve didn’t reply immediately- just looked over to Tony and shrugged sadly. “I don’t know. But the cops are there. They’ll catch him. And if anyone was hurt- he’ll be brought to justice.”

“New reports say the young student who wreaked havoc at the prestigious MIT college today has told officers that the apparent shoot-out she staged with a gun full of blanks was ‘just a joke’, and ‘all in good-humour’. The event which spurred mass panic amongst students and forced the school to evacuate left the city of Boston in a state of terror-”

Steve slammed his hand against the radio, turning it off in irritation. “I cannot believe they did not catch them,” he growled angrily. “Cops are shit. Anyone can see she was coerced into doing that. She’s got no history of criminal activity or even misconduct at school, and yet they think she’d just randomly go off with a gun as a joke?”

“In all fairness, no-one else saw the second two shots from the real guy,” Tony told him, unbuckling his belt as they pulled back into his garage, “I’m just fucking shocked he put that much effort into it, to be honest. He didn’t just go in there and find us in front of everyone- he sent someone else in first, flushed us out, and then tried to take you out quietly. He’s… whatever his plan is, he’s not fucking around anymore.”

Tony was looking hard at the dash in front of him, worrying his lip between his two front teeth. Steve felt a pang of protectiveness rush over him at the sight. “We need to go over your security,” he declared as he shut off the engine. “He has your schedule, he knew where you were gonna be, and that can’t happen again.”

Steve paused, brow wrinkling as he thought back. “I think your email servers are a weak spot. Miss Potts sends you invitations and arrangements through the servers, and if it’s not watertight, then it means that people can get in and see that.”

*It’s how I did it, after all.*

Tony nodded silently, opening the door and slipping out. “At least no one got hurt,” he said eventually.

Steve was about to agree, but as he stepped out of the car, Tony suddenly cursed loudly, drowning out anything he might’ve said.

“What?” Steve asked quickly, hand automatically reaching back for his gun as he took a step closer.
Tony’s eyes shot up to meet his, and he cursed again, hand going out as he walked forward the last few steps and then got within touching distance. “You are a goddamn moron, Rogers,” he hissed, before his hands clamped around Steve’s shoulders and twisted, spinning him so his back was facing Tony. “Are you fucking serious? You got shot?”

Ah. Right. The blood on the back of the seat. Steve had forgotten about that.

“Just a fleshwound, don’t worry,” he mumbled, trying to turn back, but Tony wasn’t having any of that- his hands held firm, moving up, reaching for the collar of his black jacket and tugging down. “No, don’t, it’ll look worse than it-”

“What the fuck?” Tony said loudly, as he stared at what was pretty much a sheet of red, starting from an almost straight line just below Steve’s shoulder blades.

“It didn’t go through,” Steve said hurriedly, pulling Tony’s hands off and turning back, flicking his jacket upward to cover him once more, “and it won’t even need stitches. I don’t think, anyway-”

“You got shot! You got shot and you just... drove me home! Like you hadn’t been shot!” Tony said, his voice rather high-pitched as he leaned forward again, trying to look at the wound once more.

“Believe me, that isn’t a big deal to me,” Steve said. “You tend to get used to being shot at when you’re an- a bodyguard.”

Tony spluttered for a moment, before tugging at his arm. “We’re going to the hospital,” he said firmly.

“Uhm, no,” Steve dug his heels in, and his strength was no match against Tony’s, so he kept them stationary with ease, “it’s not even bleeding any more. I just need a bandage or something. It’s fine. I can do it up in five minutes.”

Tony stared blankly at him, and then his head did a little spasm; chin ducking into his neck as he shut his eyes and shook his head. “You are one crazy motherfucker, aren’t you?” He asked.

Steve just shrugged non-committedly. “It’s been said before, yes.”

Tony just shook his head despairingly, a tiny little smile of amusement playing on his lips as he let his head drop into his hands. “Oh, God, this day has been the literal worst,” he groaned. “I want to go to bed. I want to go to fucking bed and not deal with any of this.”

“I’m not stopping you,” Steve said, pulling Tony forward by the sleeve of his jacket when the man seemed as if he wasn’t intending to move. “Come on- you’ll feel better when you’re back in the comfort of your own home again.”

Tony grunted irritably as Steve led them both back to the elevator they’d used that morning and tried not to wince from the sudden spike of pain that radiated off his back. His shoulders were actually stinging quite a lot, and after the adrenaline had worn off, he was more tired than ever. The past week had been a bad one in regards to the pretty regular nightmares and bouts of insomnia which Steve suffered from- not to mention the fact that he’d barely gotten any sleep at all last night, what with spending so long trying to plan out the trip.

It wasn’t exactly like he’d done a stellar job, considering what had happened anyway.

He tried not to think about it too deeply. The whole event had rattled him; he’d underestimated the man out for Tony, and nearly paid for it with his life. Or Tony’s. Which was something that upset
him more than he cared to admit.

He felt like he was in a perpetual state of confusion when it came to his feelings about Tony Stark.

It was… being around Tony, being with him- it was all consuming. Steve forgot, a lot of the time, why he was really there. He forgot he was an assassin, he forgot Tony was supposedly responsible for selling weapons to terrorists.

He’d just be the man’s bodyguard, there to do his job. There to look after Tony, because God only knew the man seemed incapable of doing it himself.

And then, what was possibly even worse was the fact that sometimes when Tony talked- when he smiled or laughed or did something impossibly nice for no reason- Steve was just hit with the overwhelming sense of fondness that quite honestly bamboozled him every time he felt it. It felt out of place, like something he would save for a friend, for a- someone else who wasn’t…well, Tony Stark.

And yet-

“Please, if you don’t do something about that bullet-wound on your back soon I may well start crying,” Tony burst out after less than five seconds of silence, grabbing Steve’s arm gently, “and you really don’t want to see that. It’s gross, honestly; snot everywhere, really loud, super weird- so you’d be doing yourself a favor if you didn’t bring that upon yourself,” he babbled, waving his hand in the air and looking worriedly at Steve’s back every few seconds.

Steve groaned. “Come on, Tony, I really am f-”

“Please,” Tony asked, looking at him seriously; those huge hazel eyes just staring into his fucking soul. Part of Steve tried to remember that Tony was just like that- an actor, an effortless charmer who knew how to get under your skin- but it wasn’t a big enough piece of him which honestly believed that.

He rolled his eyes, and then raised his hands in surrender. “Fine. Do what you want- but no hospital.”

Tony gave him a grateful smile and then pushed them both out of the elevator. “Good. Sit down, I’ll get the first aid kit. Again.”

He turned away and walked off into the kitchen, and Steve looked around at the living room he was left in, wondering where best to sit. The couch looked particularly inviting; it was just about long enough to fit his body if he lay down on it, and the pillows were exceptionally soft.

He’d shut his eyes and buried himself into the warmth of the material before he could summon the willpower to stop, and sighed in pleasure as the heaviness of his eyelids was let up once he shut them. “Mmmmf,” he breathed happily.

He wasn’t sure how long it took for Tony to come back, but he was vaguely aware of shoes padding down the steps and landing on carpeted floor somewhere to his left. It didn’t register as a threat to him, so he continued to nap.

It was only when Tony patted him lightly on his shoulder that Steve let his eyes open blearily once more. He glanced up at Tony, who was kneeling next to him as he sprawled on the couch, bandages and wipes in hand. “It’s my turn to fix you up now,” Tony told him with a smile. “That bastard is gonna clean out my first aid supplies by the time we’re through.”
Steve exhaled with a smile, and then shut his eyes again. “Can we just...wait a few minutes...le’mmme have a bit of shut-eye-”

“Believe me, as someone who has done that with various injuries over the span of his life, I can tell you it is not a good idea,” Tony said, his voice soft and quiet. Steve guessed he was doing that for Steve’s benefit. “All sorts of nasty shit happens- and I’d rather your arms didn’t fall off whilst in my employ, it would give a bad impression.”

Steve laughed again. “You remind me of Peggs,” he confessed, speaking mostly to himself as he shuffled a little on the couch and then began to slowly remove his jacket, wincing in pain as the movement jarred his shoulders.

Tony watched him, frowning a little as Steve grit his teeth through the pain. “I’m gonna assume Peggs is a person, and not the instrument you use to hang your laundry.” His hand hovered nervously over Steve’s back as he worked off his jacket, finally pulling it off his arms and then letting it drop to the floor, revealing what had once been a crisp white shirt- although they couldn’t really be the adjectives used to describe it now.

Steve sat up a little straighter, working off the buttons. “Yeah- she’s a person. Most sarcastic asshole you’ll ever meet. Everyone who doesn’t know her is instinctively afraid of her- but she’s a softie inside,” he told Tony, small smile on his face as he thought of his friend.

Tony looked away, hand reaching for the collar of Steve’s shirt, shuffling forward a little so he could help pull it off. “Girlfriend?” he asked tentatively, eyes fixed on a point just above Steve’s shoulder.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Nah. We tried, a long while back, when I first met her- but we’re better off as friends.”

Tony made a noise of acknowledgment in the back of his throat, and his fingers brushed lightly against the back of Steve’s neck as he tugged lightly at his shirt. Steve felt the warmth on his skin, and quite suddenly found himself having to hold back a shiver. “Okay, I’m gonna clean it up first- your back is kinda messed up,” Tony murmured, pressing against Steve’s shoulder and lightly tugging him to the side. “It’ll be easier if you lie on your stomach.”

Steve allowed Tony to push him, and he pressed his cheek back against the pillow, sighing in relief as the pressure was taken off his shoulder. He really was exhausted at this point; barely even to keep his eyes open as he watched Tony lean over him.

As soon as his hand pressed against Steve’s back with the damp cloth, he shut his eyes and firmly pushed back against the desire to shudder again. He didn’t know what was making him react like that- maybe just the contrast from the coolness of the cloth against Steve’s warm back.

For some reason, Steve felt a little as if he was lying to himself for thinking that.

Silently, Tony swept across the planes of his back and shoulders, cleaning the dried blood off and then working ever so lightly over the long cut across Steve’s back. “You really are lucky,” Tony mused as he worked, “it just grazed right across your back. Any deeper and it might have hit your spine.”

“’M known for my good luck,” Steve mumbled, “Buck’ says it’s the only thing that kept my ass alive in the army.”

Tony laughed quietly, and Steve opened his eyes briefly to watch it. His smile was...something
else. The real one, anyway. The one where the right side of his mouth moved a little higher than his left, and his dimple showed up underneath soft, crinkled eyes. It was only something Steve had seen after the second week of being in the man’s employ. Steve had been making pancakes in Tony’s kitchen for himself in order to wake up a little from the early start, and upon seeing Tony wander in looking his usual weary self, Steve had gone and made Tony one.

It had been a tiny thing; he’d poked some holes in it to make a smiley face before handing it over, but Tony had stared at it for a good long time before looking up at Steve again, and smiling the very smile he doing at that moment. Soft and genuine in a way that Steve had never seen before that point.

Beautiful.

He shut his eyes again, trying desperately not to think of Tony like that. Tony was a target. A mission. Emotional Compromisation was the last thing Steve wanted to be dealing with right now.

He wondered, somewhere in the back of his mind, at what point he’d started referring to the man as Tony in his head, rather than Stark.

“Okay, so this part’s gonna sting,” Tony told him, tearing open a packet and pulling out an antiseptic wipe.

Steve hissed and clutched his hands around the pillow as the bite of the wipe met the deep gash that ran from shoulder blade to shoulder blade, and Tony muttered quiet apologies as he pressed lightly across the wound. Luckily, it was over in less than a minute, and when Tony let up again, Steve cursed lightly in relief. “Okay- I’m good,” he muttered, batting Tony away and letting his head flop back down on the pillow. He’d relaxed, now, and all he wanted to do was take a goddamn nap-

“Nope, not yet,” Tony said, shaking his head and grinning as he held up the roll of bandages. “You bandaged my finger, now I bandage your back. Consider it payback.”

“Payback for what?” Steve asked, pulling a face, “I never did anything wrong.”

Tony shrugged. “You made me late with your mother-henning,” he said, and then pointed a finger. “You’re gonna have to sit up for this part. I can’t reach around you if half of you is pressed up against my couch.”

Steve swallowed, suddenly realising that Tony bandaging him up would also mean him running his hands around Steve’s chest, sitting so they were pretty much face to face as he did so- which might not be a good idea. At all. Steve was already feeling a little stir-crazy just from the sensation of Tony’s fingers across his back.

Goddamn it, what the fuck was he doing?

“Listen, I really think it’d be better I did it on my own,” Steve began, putting his hands out and sitting up a little, looking for his shirt. He needed to get out. He needed to... to re-evaluate the situation, to talk to one of his team about this shitshow, and if Tony wasn’t intending on going out for the rest of the day then it wasn’t as if Steve had any reason to stay-

“Steve,” Tony said, rolling his eyes and then shuffling forward, slotting himself easily between
Steve’s legs as he sat straight- which prompted a whole new wave of things to jump into Steve’s mind, oh, *God* - “don’t be a baby. If you can deal with being shot, you can deal with being wrapped. Just sit still.”

Steve kind of wanted to scream. Tony was looking down at his chest with a sort of intensity he saved only for...for the things he cared about, and *Steve didn’t know what to do*, this whole situation had managed to derail itself so goddamn fast, and he felt like he was having some sort of crisis whilst Tony just sat there, no idea what was going on.

Oh, fuck.

Did he *like* Tony Stark?

*Did he have a crush on Tony Stark?*

Tony stretched his arms, leaning forward just a fraction and placing the first wrap over Steve’s cut. He winced a little, and then decided to keep his eyes closed after that, if only to avoid seeing Tony that close.

Every trail of the other man’s fingers against his skin felt electric. It was like a switch had been flicked- now Tony was here, up close, it was as if everything Steve had been adamantly refusing to think about was being brought to the forefront of his mind. Like how his eyes changed colour slightly in the light, or how there were faint freckles on the bridge of his nose, or the scar just behind his ear-

Whoops. His eyes were open again.

He looked down at Tony as the man worked, completely oblivious to Steve’s internal crisis. His hair was falling into his eyes, and he jerked his head a little to flip it out of the way, catching Steve’s eye as he did so.

What was possibly the worst part about the whole ordeal, though, was the fact that this wasn’t just lust. Steve felt lust low in his gut; a burning desire, a sharp need that demanded attention. But he felt...he felt something deeper up high in his heart. It was softer, more fluttery- not so much a demand as it was a plea; to be near, to keep. To protect.

Listening to Tony talk that morning, after he’d disappeared without notice only to be found at some random lecture- hearing him gush about all the fancy science, with a face like an enthralled child as his hands flew all over the place-

That feeling had been up in his heart.

Fuck.

“All done,” Tony declared, and Steve didn’t know how long he’d been out of it, thinking about Tony, but he guessed it was quite possibly a good minute, because Tony had managed to finish up in that time. “see- now my conscience is clean. If you die now, at least I’ll know I did my best,” Tony said with a grin, patting the front of his chest before sliding his hands down on to his knees and pushing off-
Steve grabbed his wrist before he even knew what he was doing, and Tony stopped, turning back to him with a raised eyebrow.

His face was close, closer than it had probably ever been. If Steve wanted to, he could-

“I...thank you,” Steve told him, nodding his head jerkily.

Tony looked a little surprised, and his throat worked slightly nervously as he stared up at Steve. His tongue ran across his bottom lip for a fraction of a second, and Steve found himself unable to stop from following the movement with his eyes. “Uhh- you’re welcome. Least I could do, seeing as you saved my ass,” he said eventually, smiling again before backing off. “You should probably have a rest. I’m just gonna be in my shop for the rest of the day going through CCTV and informing the cops of what’s really going on, so you won’t have anything to do. Want me to get you a cab home?”

Steve had briefly forgotten his exhaustion in favor of the rather overwhelming surge of adrenaline and arousal which had hit him over the last few minutes, but he nodded anyway. “I. I’d rather stay here if that’s all the same with you. Just in case.”

Tony nodded, wandering back into the kitchen for a minute and then coming out with a glass of water and some painkillers. “Just in case,” he said, placing them on the coffee table in front of Steve.

And then he was gone, leaving Steve with nothing but his own thoughts for company.

“Oh, hell,” Steve breathed out to the empty room, before groaning loudly and falling sideways, face landing in the pillows.

This was not good.

_____

Steve found the next letter tucked into his jacket pocket.

“JARVIS,” he began calmly, sitting a little straighter on the table in Tony’s kitchen and putting down his tablet gently, “do a scan of the letter in my pocket, please.”

JARVIS was silent for half a second, before replying, “It appears clean, Mr. Rogers.”
Steve nodded, swallowing. “Can you call Tony up from the shop, please. Tell him I found another one.”

Opening his jacket tentatively once more, he glanced down at the rectangular envelope someone had managed to slip in. Obviously not whilst he’d been wearing it; he would have noticed and crushed their hand before they’d had a chance to blink.

He’d only got it back from the dry cleaners that morning, and he’d been in a rush to get over to the tower before his shift started, so he hadn’t concentrated all that much as he’d thrown it on.

He should have.

“You sure it’s clean, JARVIS?” He asked, as his fingers grasped around the top and began to pull it out slowly.

“Scans show the contents being one sheet of carbonless CF paper and black ink. Unless you have allergies toward either of them, I assure you, it is safe,” the AI replied dryly. Steve raised his eyebrows, wondering how a bunch of ones and zeroes could manage to sass him, and then placed the envelope gingerly on the table.

“JARVIS tends to get prickly if you doubt his abilities, just ignore him,” Tony called out from behind him, and Steve turned, watching the man wander forward and look over Steve’s shoulder curiously. “Where did you find this one? I’ve got JARVIS scanning all the mail Pepper leaves for me.”

“In my jacket,” Steve said grimly, and Tony’s eyes widened. “I don’t know how, but they knew I was getting it washed at the dry cleaners, and they knew exactly where I was going to do it.”

Tony’s jaw dropped, and his eyes were hard. “This is fucking ridiculous, where the hell is he getting all this goddamn information from? How on Earth-”

“You must have a security leak somewhere,” Steve told him, fingers slipping into the crease and opening it up. He heard Tony breath in sharply and spotted a hand jerk forward in the corner of his vision, but nothing happened. Steve’s finger didn’t fall off, nor was it poisoned or otherwise maimed. It was just a letter, after all. “That’s the only way they could be doing all this. It’s someone in the tower.”

He pulled the sheet out, and Tony leaned over his chair to see the words.

Did you like the show on Sunday?

I didn’t want to do that, Tony, you know that, right? I didn’t want to scare anyone. But you gave me no choice. I had to get Rogers out. You see that, don’t you? I’m not being unreasonable here. He’s trying to keep us apart. He needs to go. We need to be together. When we’re together, my blood will be your blood. It will be lovely.

Please, make him go away. Or I will have to do it myself.

Rogers, if you’re reading this, which I think you are- I put it in your pocket, after all- listen to me. I know all about you. I know exactly where to find you. You’d be better off leaving me and Tony in peace.

Yours, always.
There was a heavy silence as they both read the words, and then Steve breathed out loudly, putting it back on the table. “Well he sounds lovely.”

*I know all about you.*

The words resonated inside him. He knew it was impossible- the man was only talking about the material aspects; like the dry cleaner he’d sent his jacket off to and his name- but it felt like more. His paranoia made him feel like it was more.

“Steve-” Tony began, face a little pale. He made a noise which sounded like the beginning of the rest of his sentence, before he cut himself off and froze again.

Steve turned, watching Tony as tensed up, then leaned back again, effortlessly relaxing his face and then shrugging. “Put it in the trash with the others,” was all he said, before turning away again.

Steve watched him with a frown. “Aren’t you gonna…”

“What? What can we do? He’s a creep, he’ll get bored soon.”

“Tony, he tried to shoot me,” Steve said a little incredulously, turning in his chair and watching as Tony continued to wander back toward the elevator.

Tony just looked over to him, face blank. “That’s your problem, not mine. I’m safe,” he told him, shrugging again. “Scrap it,” was the last thing Steve heard him call out, before the elevator doors shut around him.

Steve stared at the doors, shocked. He felt like someone had just slapped him. The casual dismissal of the threat on Steve’s life was…

Entirely what he should have expected of a man like Stark.

God, he was being stupid. He shouldn’t be- he shouldn’t be feeling so hurt by that. That was exactly the kind of behaviour Steve had been looking out for- the kind of behaviour that reminded Steve exactly why he was here in the first place. Not to be a bodyguard- to find information on him.

Grinding his teeth, he jerked back to his feet and took his jacket off, throwing it on the table where Tony’s phone was resting.

It wouldn’t do any good for him to outright take it, not when JARVIS watched everything through the cameras. He could just pick his jacket up later, and take the phone with him.

He made sure to ignore the stupid heavy feeling in his chest. Fuck that.
Walking down to the workshop, Steve knocked curtly and waited for Tony to come out.

And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

“I don’t think he’s in, sir,” one of the cleaning staff told him as they walked down the halls, “he told us to come in and tidy around, and he only does that if he’s going out so he won’t get in our way.”

Steve pursed his lips angrily, but thanked them all the same, turning on his heel and storming back through the corridor. He knew where Tony was- at his weekly session with the kids down in the library- and it sent his blood pressure rising just that little bit higher.

They’d goddamn agreed he would go with Tony. Tony had agreed to tell him when he was leaving the house. And yet here he was, wandering off and putting not only himself, but a bunch of kids in danger too.

The Starkphone nestled safely in his pocket from where he’d swiped it felt like a satisfying weight; almost like revenge. Although it was something Steve really shouldn’t have put off for so long- it seemed he was only now getting his head in the game.

Revving up his engine, he sped down the street on his motorcycle and thought badly of Tony the entire damn time.

The rec room which Tony used every week was busy as usual, and when Steve stepped through the doors, he was met with a gaggle of kids, all happy to see him. Steve had only been four times as Tony’s bodyguard, but the kids seemed to have taken a shine to him.

He smiled and knelt down, looking at all their projects earnestly for a few minutes before leaving them to it and walking over to Tony, who was in the center of a group of kids, all making what looked to be an engine out of lego pieces.

“Hi, Tony,” he said flatly, “can I talk to you for a second?”

Tony didn’t even look up at him. “I’m kind of in the middle of something here St-”

“It’s very important, Tony,” Steve said slowly, trying to keep his temper in check in front of all the
Tony clenched his jaw and looked off to the other side for a second, before finally meeting Steve’s eyes and smiling tightly. “Sure.”

Steve turned on his heel, making his way out of the room with Tony trailing a few steps behind. Once the sound of the kids had dimmed and the door closed, Steve wasted no time in stepping forward, face like thunder. “What the hell? Tony— you agreed to let me know when you left! You seriously decided here, now, with all these children present, would be the good time to ignore that?” He hissed, eyes flashing.

Tony just stared at him expressionlessly. “I can’t really say I give that much of a damn, Steve—”

“Even when it endangers other people? God— they said you were selfish, but this— this takes the fucking prize,” Steve spat, struggling to keep his voice quiet as he watched Tony roll his eyes, flash a grin which was entirely false and then sigh amusedly.

“Steve, I don’t think this is working out,” was all Tony responded with.

That sure stopped Steve in his tracks. He looked down at Tony, jerking his head forward and making an incredulous face. “I’m sorry— what?”

Tony shrugged. “You’re fired.”

Whilst Steve was busy choking on his tongue, Tony continued. “I can’t stomach the whole tailing thing— I need my space. It’s just easier for me if you weren’t around.”

Steve reeled back, feeling the panic rise in his throat. He didn’t understand why Tony was… it was stupid! They were both very much aware that his stalker was only becoming more and more violent, and if anything, Tony needed more protection—

Oh. And also the whole Mission thing. That would be bad, too.

“You can’t do that,” Steve told him eventually.

Tony scoffed. “I can and I just did. So—”

“No, I mean, you legally can’t,” Steve interrupted harshly, “I signed my contract with Miss Potts. It was her name on the document, not yours, and only she holds the power to fire me.”

When Tony looked surprised, Steve added, “It was because she knew you’d pull something stupid like this, or get bored of it, or whatever it is you do that apparently drives so many people away.”

Tony paused, and then groaned, turning away and cursing as he patted his pockets, undoubtedly checking for his phone. “I am going to kill her, I am going to kill her, I am going to—”

“Tony, what are you doing with yourself?” Steve asked bluntly, prompting a little jerk from the other man, who was now solidly avoiding his eyes again. “What the hell is this? Why? You’re… you’re the richest man in America! You’re the type of guy who lives every moment to the full, who parties and drinks and does whatever the fuck he wants— why the fuck would you risk your life by not using me? Why are you so desperate to get rid of me all of a sudden, when you know that you’re only gonna be in more danger without me—”

“Because I don’t fucking matter,” Tony hissed, rushing forward, hands clenched by his sides like he was furious all of a sudden.
Steve opened his mouth again, before-

Oh.

Oh.

“You’re trying to keep me safe,” Steve said dumbly, feeling as if he were suddenly a hundred foot deep under crushing water, surrounded from all sides by that revelation- by goddamn everything; the whole fucking shitshow that this had managed to become in the month Steve had known Tony Stark.

Tony looked at him, and his mouth said, “Don’t try and make this about you, Rogers,” whilst his eyes just screamed something vulnerable, something scared.

He was brought back to what he’d said earlier. About how Tony managed to drive everyone away. He wondered how much of it involved Tony trying to keep them safe, too. Safe from himself.

“I’m not leaving, Tony,” Steve said stubbornly, crossing his arms in front of him, “Pepper won’t let you fire me, and I’m not going to quit until I know you’re safe. Like you said; the fact that he’s after me is my problem.”

“He’s already shot you, Steve,” Tony whispered, shutting his eyes for a moment and then gritting his teeth, “he’s gunning for you, and I can’t l… it’d be bad for my reputation if you got killed on the job-”

“Stop it,” Steve interrupted, angry once more as he took a step forward and pointed a finger at Tony’s chest, “stop trying to goddamn downplay your kindness with everything you do. I can’t understand why you stop yourself from saying nice things and change them into things that make you look...less, but I can see it, okay, I can see when you do it and you’re not fooling me.”

Tony looked up at Steve, every line of him hard and defiant. “You think I c-”

“Not. Fooling. Me,” Steve interrupted, talking through his teeth, angry and desperate for reasons he couldn’t even understand why.

When Tony refused to yield, Steve just shook his head and flicked his eyes down toward the leather jacket Tony was wearing. “You tell me you ‘don’t really give much of a damn’ when you come here alone, but you take a loaded Magnum ‘45 along with you anyway. Talk all the bullshit you want, Tony, but you care. Whether you like it or not.”

Tony’s mouth dropped a fraction, and he glanced down at his pocket in surprise. “You noticed?”

“I have an eye for that sort of thing- don’t worry, none of the kids will see it,” Steve told him, continuing to watch him even as Tony began to let his gaze wander elsewhere.

There was silence for a long while, which Steve let happen, waiting for Tony to say something. Whether he agreed or not, it didn’t matter. Steve was staying.

“I…” Tony began, and his stance said that he was about to try and argue, but whilst Steve waited, the fight seemed to leave him, leaving only guilt-ridden eyes and teeth that slid worriedly over chapped lips. “Please don’t die,” He said quietly, once more glancing up at him, so much smaller
than he was usually, “I really- I’d really rather that didn’t happen, okay?”

Steve grinned, sticking out his hand for Tony to shake. “Only if you promise not to get abducted by your creepy stalker,” he said.

Tony smiled, and it was tinted with an uneasiness which still lingered underneath, but there wasn’t much Steve could do about that. “Then we have a deal.”

“What are you two guys doing out there?” One of the little girls suddenly flung open the door, looking at them suspiciously from behind a set of bangs which were steadily growing past her eyes.

“Alya, come on, don’t interrupt them, they might be k-” another girl joined the first one, beginning to tug on her friend’s arm before she actually looked up at the both of them, eyes widening a little. “Oh. You’re not...okay then, but still, Alya, it’s rude to interrupt people like that, come on, let’s go,” she said, before yanking her friend back around the door and shutting it quickly with her foot.

Tony huffed out a laugh and then turned away, pushing open the door. “Hey hey hey, you little squirt, what did you think we were doing out there-”

The door swung shut again and Steve took a second; shutting his eyes and sighing in relief over the fact that he’d somehow managed not to blow it, before following Tony’s footsteps and making his way back into the loud room.

It took him ten extra minutes to realize he should have been happy over the fact that he hadn’t ruined the mission, not that he’d managed to keep himself by Tony’s side.

*****

Steve only remembered he still had Tony’s phone as he rode home on his bike and felt the thing tap against his waist from inside his pocket. His eyes widened in surprise, and he was hit with the sudden need to turn back and hand it over. It felt…

Well. It just felt horrible to do this after everything Steve said earlier at the library.

But he knew he had to. He knew he had to stop listening to his goddamn dick for a second and start thinking with his brain. He had Tony’s phone. They had to see if they could get anything from it.

So he ignored the guilt. He had no reason to feel guilt. This was his job. This was what he’d come to do.

Waiting until he got to the traffic lights, he pulled out his own phone and dialed.
“Natasha?” he asked.

“Updates?” she replied instantly, getting straight to the point in her usual way.

“I swiped his phone,” he answered, ignoring the stupid fucking twisting feeling his heart made at the words that came out of his own mouth. “I’m bringing it over, but we have to be careful. It’s undoubtedly booby trapped 7 ways to Sunday, and I’ll bet he’s got a tracker on it too, which we’re gonna have to disable before we do anything.”

“Great, I got some cool new stuff from Bruce, so it shouldn’t be too hard. I sent him over some of the other bits and pieces you managed to get, and he’s working with me to try and build up a better picture of Stark’s mainframe.”

Steve huffed. “You should invite him over again sometime. I’m sure he’d like to know who he’s working for a little better. We only got to meet him for like an hour before he had to rush off the last time.”

“Trust me, Bruce has like, two friends other than me, and he’s just fine with that. He’s cool where he is,” Natasha told him, “get here quickly. I’ll set everything up.”

“Five minutes,” Steve told her, before cutting the call and speeding off down the road.

Tony’s phone felt like a heavy weight against his side, mirroring the sudden weight he felt in his heart, too. He pushed it away with an irritated sigh and a grit of his teeth- it wasn’t important. They almost certainly wouldn’t be able to get anything from it anyway- they’d established a while back that it would only be through incredible good luck that they would manage to crack through Tony’s firewalls from the outside.

Steve was just going to borrow it for a night. And then give it back. It was his goddamn job, damn it, he didn’t need to justify this to himself. This was what he’d been sent in for, and this was what he was going to fucking do. Whether he liked it or not.

He was caught, suddenly and out of nowhere, by the memory of the dimple in Tony’s left cheek when he laughed.

He didn’t know quite what to make of that. All he knew was that Tony’s open, honest face haunted him for the rest of the journey home, and no amount of self-control could persuade it to leave.

*****

Steve slammed the phone on the table and then left the room, letting Natasha do her thing. She’d be able to block the GPS with a fair amount of ease- everything else was just fruitless tinkering. Tony’s work was watertight and his security unparalleled. Natasha didn’t stand a chance- not that Steve would ever tell her that, of course.
“Have fun,” Steve told her lightly, as he made his way out of the room once more.

Natasha eyed him curiously, a delicate brow arched as she observed him- but she said nothing. She was good like that. Just took the thing and got to work, like she always did. Because she was efficient. She didn't let emotion get involved in her work.

He didn't feel bad.

He didn't.

*****

Bucky found him on the balcony, staring into the shitty view that was the next block of equally dull apartments and looking what Steve liked to call ‘pensive’.

“You look like you just had a stick shoved up your ass,” Bucky began, sitting down in the chair next to him and hooking his feet around the bars of the fence.

Steve glanced over, rolling his eyes. “I’m being pensive, asshole.”

Bucky pulled up his top lip and looked over at Steve through unimpressed eyes. He puffed his chest and cracked open his mouth, but the words didn't surface and instead he just turned, facing the shitty view and pulling out a cigarette from the back of his pocket. “Can't tell me off- we're outdoors, it's allowed.”

Steve looked over, long and hard before sighing and holding out a hand.

Bucky looked down. “Hell no! I'm outside!”

“No, you idiot,” Steve sighed, “gimme one.”

Bucky's eyebrows shot up to his head. “Thought you quit?”

“Yeah, and now I'm un-quit. Gimme.”

Bucky gave him a knowing look, before handing over the one in his hand and tugging another out of his back pocket along with another lighter. He lit up, puffing out the first breath with shut eyes until all the smoke was exhaled, and then handed the lighter over. “I’d like to say, I don’t condone this. And after tonight, you're not getting any more.”

“What makes tonight so special, then?” Steve asked, a hand curling around the cigarette as he sparked the lighter.

Bucky shrugged, taking another drag. “You seemed on edge. You always calmed down a little after a smoke, way back when. Thought it might help.”
Steve nodded silently, sucking in and feeling all that horrible, beautiful smoke fill his lungs. It felt good- but it didn't hold the same appeal it used to when he'd been a kid. He just knew all the shit it did to your insides, now. Kinda took the fun out of it. Although, he had to admit he’d missed the damn stuff.

They were silent for a long time; both of them were watching the peeling paint on the opposing wall and telling themselves they weren't cold as the bitter breeze hit their faces. They'd known each other long enough for Bucky to know that Steve would tell him the reason for his 3am brooding session on their balcony in his own time. He just had to wait it out.

“Tony,” was all Steve said in the end, plucking the cigarette out from between his lips in order to speak the name. Just the word on his tongue felt easy, nice. Like it belonged in his mouth (no, he didn't mean it like that, shut up).

Bucky, the good friend he was, didn’t even bat an eyelid- just sighed. “You’ve gotten attached to the mark, haven’t you?”

“I don’t get it!” Steve exclaimed in frustration. “This has never happened before. Before, I could distinguish between work and reality. I could keep my emotions in check, and get rid of the guy that needed getting rid of.”

He ground his teeth, taking another drag and expelling it angrily with a shake of his head. He’d been thinking of that goddamn dimpled smile for near on 2 hours now. “Tony… when I’m with him, he makes me feel so goddamn unsure of myself. Makes me question every decision I make. He can run rings around anyone with nothing more than a sentence- how the hell am I supposed to keep up? Everything he does is just sending me a little deeper into…”

He trailed off, flashes of hazel eyes and olive skin flickering almost tantalisingly in his periphery. “I dunno,” he finished with a shake of his head, “I just don’t know.”

He expected Bucky to tell him he had to pull out, let someone else take over. To shake his head and look at him without judgement, but maybe disappointment.

“You know, maybe the reason you feel this way is because we were wrong about him,” was what Steve heard.

He turned, frowning. “What do you mean?” He asked.

Bucky didn’t turn back to him until he’d gotten rid of all the stray wisps of smoke in his mouth. “Maybe,” he began, looking somewhere between thoughtful and amused, “the reason you keep thinking he’s good is because…he’s good.”

Steve stopped, jerking back a little as he stared at Bucky. “I...no. That’s…”

“Steve,” Bucky rolled his eyes, shooting his hopeless friend at bemused smile, “the entire reason we sent you in there was to try and get a feel for his personality, and gather info. I know that you have hangups, and you have bad history with people like him- but you can’t deny what your heart’s telling ya.”

“But-” Steve looked over to him, a little helpless, “if I’m right, then it means we lose the money-”

“Steve, you are a lot of things, but willing to murder an innocent man for money is not one of them,” Bucky told him sharply.

“I’m not saying I would,” Steve snapped back, offended. “I just… there’s more than just us riding
on that money, Buck. We haven’t been able to give the children’s home anything worthwhile in months now- they’re not saying anything to me because they don’t want me to worry, but Janet’s had to lay off some of the staff there, and they still haven’t fixed the hole up on the roof. You remember how much it costs for upkeep on a building that big in New York. And it’s not just you and me, either. Everyone else has responsibilities, people who we need to look after, because damn if anyone else is gonna.”

Bucky pursed his lips, grimaced at the thought of their hazy future. They all knew that what they were doing had to end somewhere- all wanted it to end somewhere- but they just weren’t sure where that point was. They all appeared to have come to some sort of unspoken agreement that they would do this until they got caught. Or killed.

And if sometimes Steve looked down at his hands and wondered how much blood had been spilled by them, then so be it. Someone had to stop them, and it sure as hell wasn’t going to be the cops.

“At the end of the day, Steve, do you think that the man you know would ever deal weapons over to terrorists?” Bucky asked him quietly, raising his eyebrows over to Steve.

And that was the question, wasn’t it? The one Steve had adamantly not been thinking about for weeks now, in fear of the answer.

But here he was. Right now. Thinking about it.

“No,” Steve said, barely above a whisper as his eyes opened wide, shocked at his own revelation. “I... don’t. Not even for a second.”

Oh God.

Really?

...Fuck. No. Tony would never do it. Steve- shit, now he was thinking about it, it was so obvious. Tony could be a complete asshole. He could be too loud when he got grumpy and too abrasive when he got angry- he was arrogant and cocky and had the attention span of a goldfish when it came to things that didn't interest him.

But there wasn’t a chance on heaven or Earth that he’d ever do that.

“Holy shit,” Steve hissed, jaw dropping, “How did it take me that long to realise?”

Bucky laughed, shrugging his shoulders, “It’s because you're a stubborn bastard, that’s why.”

“Holy shit,” Steve said again, face breaking into a smile, “I'm not crazy! I’m not losing my touch! I'm not a horrible person for liking him! Holy shit—”

And he was laughing. Bright, stupid grin on his face as he clutched Bucky’s shoulder happily and let the weight he hadn’t even been aware he’d been holding suddenly lift away.

God. Tony was good. Of course Tony was good. Tony was amazing, he was brilliant, he was funny and kind and-

“You know this doesn’t mean you can drop out though, right?” Bucky said, frowning a little, “I hate to break your good mood, but- we still have a job to do. And even if we have reason to believe that he’s innocent, it still wouldn’t hurt to stick around, just in case.”
Steve nodded, “I wouldn’t want to leave anyway. There’s someone out for him, Buck- I need to keep him safe. It is my job, after all,” he said with a wry smile, and Bucky clapped him on the back, but he looked a little worried.

“You still gotta keep your guard up, Stevie,” he warned, “you’re still technically on the job. Which means you have to look out for evidence and get it back to us. You can’t just stop now that you think-”

“I won’t,” Steve told him hurriedly. He knew if Bucky really thought he’d lose his focus, he’d be taken off the case. And it was selfish and wrong of him, but-

But he couldn’t leave. Not now. Not when Tony needed him.

“I won’t,” he said, more firmly this time, when Bucky looked at him doubtfully. “I’m still capable of doing my job, Buck.”

“Are you?” was all Bucky replied with, voice quiet and full of question.

“You said to me, when you first threw me in there,” Steve began, voice low as he turned to face Bucky properly. “that the only way we were gonna get any solid evidence was through extreme good fortune. The rest would be through personality analysis and tailing him until we found visual proof. You know that I’m the only one who can do that properly. If I were to pull out, there’d be no way we could get someone in that close again.”

Bucky opened his mouth, but Steve got in first, “And no- we can’t just do the same thing again- security’s been tightened everywhere. The email servers have been upgraded, we can’t hack in through them anymore.”

Steve shrugged, leaning back. “I’m the only option you got, pal.”

There were a few moments where Bucky just grimaced at the wall, before he turned back around to Steve. “I...I yeah. I know. I just- this whole op has me kinda edgy. It’s not somethin’ we can afford to mess up on. You know that, Steve.”

Steve pursed his lips and nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

He knew alright. He just needed to remember it.
“Tony, you have to get out of there and take a breather, it’s been 34 hours,” Steve sighed into the comm outside the glass doors which separated him from Tony. The man in question paused his work, head flicking to the side like a dog would if it heard the clinking of a leash, and then his eyes snapped up to meet with Steve’s through the clear glass. Steve was waiting patiently on the other side of it, a plate of sandwiches in one hand and an unimpressed look on his face, but when Tony broke out into a beam upon seeing Steve, he found himself unable to hold the frown up properly. That damn smile just did things to his poor heart.

“Steve!” Tony said happily, scrambling out of the guts of whatever engine he had thrown himself into and hurrying toward the door, throwing it open. “You’re just the man I wanted to see, come in, come in.”

A hand reached out and curled around his wrist, pulling him forward and staining his skin with the dark smudges of engine grease. Steve just sighed, allowing Tony to lead him across the enormous room until they ended up next to his equally enormous desk, which was almost entirely hidden by huge metal slats and various other pieces of machinery Tony had slung there.

It was easy to see Tony was exhausted. Steve could garner that much from the pulse in his wrist alone, and the deep circles under his eyes didn’t help. He didn’t seem to mind all that much, however, and as untidy as the room looked to an untrained eye, it was clear to see that Tony had been busy during his time spent awake.

“Look, right, so I was working on my stupid missiles for Obie because he was getting all up on my ass about it again, and then I thought, ‘Hey, Steve could probably use a missile in his arsenal, right?’ But then I realized that it would probably be ethically wrong for me to just like, gift you an entire missile, plus you actually wouldn’t be able to use it anyway-”

“Tony,” Steve stopped him, trying to hide his smile of amusement as he slid the plate onto the desk and then placed his hands onto his hips, “is there a point in there, somewhere?”

Tony paused for a minute, seemingly getting lost in his own thoughts for a moment before he pulled himself back and grinned. “Stay there,” he said hurriedly, patting Steve’s chest and then dashing off.

Steve sighed again, but did as he was told whilst Tony hurried around him. There were a few crashes and something sounded like it got broken along the way, but then Tony was there again, standing in front of him, completely ignoring the concept of personal boundaries as usual. He held a gun in his hand, but it didn’t stay there long, instead being transferred into Steve’s firm grip by Tony’s fingers pulling at his wrists and bringing it up.

Tony’s eyes flashed with enjoyment as he pulled Steve’s fingers tight around the barrel and then gestured somewhere toward the back of the room. “Try it,” he said.

Steve frowned. “I can’t just fire a gun in the middle of this room, Tony, it might ricochet-”

He was cut off as Tony rolled his eyes and then pointed more directly, finger stopping at what looked like a thoroughly beaten up dummy figure. “There’s your target, Mr. Bodyguard. Now let’s
see how much my money’s worth.”

Steve cocked an eyebrow at the dig, before glancing up briefly at the figure, then turning back to Tony and lifting his arm, firing off two shots blindly.

“I’d say you got a pretty good deal, yeah,” he said through a grin as he turned and looked to see the two fresh holes, one placed between the eyes and one in the center of the chest.

Tony looked over, impressed for a second, before catching himself and pulling a face instead. “Anyone can do that. You’re not special, Rogers.”

“Oh, anyone?” Steve said challengingly, before lifting the gun and putting it back in Tony’s hands. “Go on then, Mr. Stark. Show me just how easy it is.”

Tony froze, but tentatively took the gun all the same. “I...Do I look like ‘anyone’ to you, Rogers?”

Steve shrugged. “As long as you’re not an alien, you classify as ‘anyone’, yeah. So give me a show,” he opened his hands and gestured back to the dummy Tony had his back to, a smug grin on his face, “just don’t accidentally hit me. It’ll make everything a lot less funny.”

Tony pulled another face, offended, but then his jaw clenched and his eyes flashed again, that spark of mischief, defiance that you usually found on a misbehaving child. It was rather enthralling.

He cocked his head up at Steve, and then, without even turning once, lifted his arm. Steve’s eyebrows went to his hairline, preparing his laughter for when it inevitably hit the roof.

There were three bangs, as opposed to Steve’s two, and when Steve looked over, his mouth fell open. Tony smiled innocently up at him like he hadn’t just perfectly hit a dummy’s head, heart and-

“Well, that’s just tasteless,” Steve said a little weakly, “you don’t shoot a man in the dick, Mr. Stark. It’s considered impolite.”

“I was visualizing you,” Tony explained with a shrug, “after that, it was just a simple case of remembering its position in the room and then working out the angle at which I’d have to lift my arm in order to hit it correctly. See, Rogers, everything comes back to math and science in the end. Anyway, back to the point I brought you in here for, what did you think of it?”

“Think of what?”

“The gun, what did you think of the gun?”

Steve stopped and thought about it. “It was...surprisingly good,” Steve said. “I barely felt any recoil on that at all, actually- nicely weighted, too. How many can you get in the mag?”

Tony looked proud as he lifted an eyebrow and said, “Twenty.”

Steve whistled. “Aren’t you trading power over quantity with that many?”

Tony shook his head again, hands flitting over the surface of the barrel with an almost loving caress. “What do you take me for, Rogers? Of course not. It’s a bigger model, which probably wouldn’t work as well for other people, but this isn’t designed with other people in mind, so,” Tony trailed off, shrugging and then thrusting the gun back into Steve’s hands.
Steve frowned. “Are you- is this… did you make this for me?”

“Not just that!” Tony said excitedly, clapping his hands, “I made that in like, the first ten hours, and then I thought why stop there? You use blades much?” he asked, tugging open his drawer.

*More Bucky’s area,* Steve thought, but then remembered the switchblade he kept in his sock and shrugged. “There’s usually one about my person, yeah.”

Tony didn’t look up as he enquired, “Shoe?”

Steve paused, and Tony took the opportunity to pull out an innocuous-looking sheath from the back end of the drawer. “Don’t worry, it’s not obvious, I’m just observant and I know what to look for.” He walked forward again, flipping the knife in his hands so that he was holding out the hilt to Steve.

Curious, Steve grabbed it, feeling the rubber mould easily to his grip, almost as if it stuck itself into the creases and folds of his skin. Flipping it between his hands and then doing a few gestures with it, he marveled the ease at which it slid between his hands, the perfect balance that allowed him to maneuver it to his will. “Is there anything you can’t do?” he asked Tony without thinking about it, a smile on his face as he spun the blade a few more times.

Tony was quiet, but when Steve looked up, he was smiling sheepishly, and there was the tiniest hint of pink on his cheeks.

Steve just grinned, patting Tony’s shoulder. “Thank you,” he said seriously, “this is… these will be very useful. But I still think you need to get some sleep. I’ve been ordered by Ms. Potts to use force, if necessary.”

Tony shook his head immediately, waving him off. “Can’t. Gotta at least get the skeleton of it finished, shouldn’t take more than a few hours-”

“Tony,” Steve said exasperatedly, “you don’t have a few more hours left in you. What if you injure yourself? I’m-”

“Supposed to be protecting me from stalkers, not myself,” Tony dismissed with a roll of his eyes, and Steve sighed irritably, hip resting against the edge of the desk as he folded his arms and looked over to Tony, who was now firmly avoiding his eyes.

“No, I’m supposed to be protecting you, period. That’s what it said in the contract. And right now, my sense of judgement is telling me that you working heavy machinery when you haven’t slept properly in over 30 hours isn’t a good-”

“I fired that gun okay, didn’t I?” Tony challenged, looking over to him from the desk he was leaning over, and Steve was drawn to the way his shoulders bunched, the strands of hair that fell into his beautiful eyes, the eyebrow raised in confrontation, all of it was… it certainly was something, that was for sure.

He pulled himself back before he could get lost in the thoughts, and threw his hands into the air. “That’s not the point, Tony-”

“Look,” Tony cut in, fully facing him then, mirroring Steve’s posture, “basically, I’ve been putting off these plans for too long now, and I really have to get started. I know you’re trying to help, and I know what Pepper says, but I’ve got to work. You’re just gonna have to tamp down on your mother hen instincts for a few more hours, and then you can hustle me right out of here if you want.”
Tony looked serious, and his body language spoke to Steve that there was going to be no room for argument here. Unwilling to escalate it into another confrontation, Steve just sighed for what was probably the millionth time, and then threw up his hands. “Fine. You do that. But I’m staying down here with you.”

With that, Steve turned and looked for a space to sit. He spotted a beat-up couch tucked away in the corner of the room and marched over to it, propping up his feet on the coffee table and then linking his fingers together, getting comfortable before shooting a smile up toward Tony.

Hey, Stark wasn’t the only one who could do stubborn.

Tony just glared for a moment, before turning back around. “Fine. Have fun with your sitting.”

“I will.”

“Good.”

“I know it is.”

“Great to hear.”

“Know that too.”

Tony visibly ground his jaw, and then jerked his head over to Steve, who continued to smile. “Just…you…. Shut up and sit. I’m working,” he said gruffly, shaking his head and then running a hand over his mouth, obviously doing his best to shield the little smile that was working its way up his face.

Steve chuckled, happy to just watch Tony as he slowly immersed himself back into whatever he was working on. His fingers fiddled expertly with wires and switches, and Steve realized with amusement that he stuck his tongue out when he was concentrating. It was rather endearing. Steve wished he had paper and a pencil in hand- it had been so long since he’d found inspiration to draw, and yet here it appeared to be, staring him right in the face.

There was, however, a napkin strewn over the coffee table, and a marker pen balancing precariously on the armrest of the couch, and so Steve made do. It was messy and his fingers were rusty from disuse, but it passed the time effectively, and soon he had a half-decent sketch of the man in front of him as he worked with the machines.

He looked down at it, thumb brushing over the lines with a frown. He wished he was able to draw more often. But these days he was so caught up in all the mayhem of his life that he just… hadn’t had the time. It had made a big difference on the quality of his work.

With a sigh, he placed the sketch on the table and then glanced upward again. Tony was leaning over the- no, wait- Tony had…

Yeah. Tony had fallen asleep on the desk.

Tutting in exasperation, Steve stood up, checking his watch. 11:45. Pretty good, all things considered- Steve had been half expecting to be staying until the early hours of the morning. “JARVIS?” he called out tentatively to the empty room, beginning to make his way over to the sleeping man, “has he, uh, saved all of this stuff? Or whatever he usually does with it?”

“Yes, Mr. Rogers, all work has been logged.”
“Then can we shut it all down?” Steve asked, hand going to Tony’s shoulder, “I don’t want him to wake up to the temptation.”

“I think you are on the right lines, Mr Rogers,” JARVIS said, something almost like amusement in his robotic voice, and Steve smiled as his hand nudged Tony’s shoulder, waking the man up.

Tony made a little grunting nose as his eyes fluttered open blearily and focused in on Steve. “Huh?” He mumbled.

“I think it’s time you got to sleep,” Steve told him firmly, “in an actual bed. Not just the desk. Come on, let’s go.”

He poked Tony’s cheek and the other man winced irritably, pushing himself away from the desk with a sigh. “I think if I just stay down here a little bit longer I could-”

“Tony,” Steve said, folding his arms again, “just humour me. Please. Go to sleep.”

He didn’t want to admit it, but a part of him worried about Tony, sometimes. He didn’t sleep enough, he worked far too hard, and sometimes he looked… a little empty. Like he couldn’t quite understand how he’d gotten to where he was.

Steve knew the feeling well.

It was easy to see the person Tony wanted everyone to see. It was even easier to believe it and not bother looking any further. Steve knew he was guilty of doing that himself, at first. But Tony was… so much more than what he’d originally thought. So much gentler. Kinder.

Sadder.

With a sigh, Tony rubbed his eye and stretched a little, nodding mutely. Steve looked at the screens curiously for a few seconds, eyeing up the blueprints, the level of destruction that Tony was creating.

He thought about the guy he’d seen lying down on a sheet of paper and letting a bunch of kids draw around him with markers that stained his skin all the colors of the rainbow just last week. Somehow, they were the same person.

Although to be fair, Steve wasn’t exactly one to talk. Just look what he did for a living.

“I wanted to be an astronaut, when I was a kid,” Tony declared suddenly, and Steve jumped, turning back away from the screens and facing the other man, who was looking at the designs for the missile and apparently thinking along the same lines as him.

Steve said nothing, and Tony just shrugged. That empty look was back in his eyes again. “I… yeah. I always wanted to be up in the air. But hey,” he gestured around him, smiling with teeth and eyes that didn’t play along with the lie, “I got all this instead- more money than I could even fathom and pretty much the whole world falling at my feet, so…”

Steve wanted to ask him if that was what he wanted, but he already knew the answer.

“‘Least you had ambition- I just wanted to be a shopkeeper,” Steve said, jostling their shoulders and grinning when Tony turned to him in surprise. “Figured, you know, don’t aim too high, right? I’m no fool, back then I was just a skinny little nothing, didn’t want to get my hopes up too high, and I thought, you know, it’d be pretty cool for me to just spend my day talking to folks. Plus I had instant access to all the food I could ever want, so,” this time it was Steve who shrugged bashfully,
blushing a little when Tony let out a very sudden and shockingly real laugh- a loud snorting noise that he quickly tamped down with a hand over his mouth and a sort of mortified look on his face.

Steve couldn’t help but laugh back, pushing Tony’s hand away from his mouth and shaking his head. “Don’t stop. That’s a nice laugh.”

Tony looked at him for a second, and then huffed out quietly, looking down to the floor. “Oh, god, no, it really isn’t, sorry, I keep being told to cut it out, it’s-”

“Well I like it.” Steve said softly, and they were still halfway to the door, never having actually done what they’d set out to do and leave the room, because Tony had started laughing at his stupid story and Steve had suddenly stopped wanting to leave, instead wishing he could have just stayed there and watched the lopsided smile and hear Tony’s weird little giggle-

“Well, your life goal was to be a shopkeeper, so you have a funny view of the world, don’t you?” Tony replied, and he was smiling from ear to ear, “anyway- what were you saying about being skinny? I can’t really say I believe that, looking at you.”

Steve raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth.

_____Tony_____

He talked with Steve on the couch of his workshop, about anything and everything, until the sun came up.

It was almost certainly incredibly unprofessional of the both of them, but fuck it, Tony had never been good at that stuff anyway. And Steve was… well, Steve. It was impossible to not be enraptured by the man.

Apparently he’d been small. Like, really small. And weak. It was almost impossible to think of, seeing him now, but he’d had pictures. Photographic evidence of a teenage Steve, who only just came to his friend’s shoulder and was thin as a rake. It was insane. Tony had stared at those pictures for a long time.

“Childhood was kinda rough for me, healthwise,” Steve had admitted quietly, curled up on the couch by Tony’s side and looking down at his nails, but there was a smile on his face as he’d said “but it was… it was good. I miss it- the simplicity, you know? Everything’s so complicated now.”

Tony huffed, kicking his feet up on the table. “Can’t relate. Childhood sucked- far too many paparazzi and not nearly enough hugs- although you’re right with the whole ‘complicated’ thing. Adulthood isn’t much better.”

He’d said it as a joke, but realised too late that his voice had failed to inflect it that way, and instead it just sounded rather bitter. Steve had looked at him; something on his face that Tony couldn’t quite read, but that he felt was remarkably close to sadness. It had thrown Tony a little- Steve was such a difficult one to read, after all, and it was rare Tony got something so… real, from him.
They’d moved on, after that, back to less dangerous territory, but Steve had nudged himself closer and stayed there for the rest of the night, and it was nice. It was- yeah.

It was just nice.

What was less nice, however, was being awoken by a sudden jerking to his left and then the sound of a loud ‘fuck’ permeating his eardrums.

Tony wriggled upright, unsticking his eyes from his bottom lashes and looking over to Steve, who was staring around the room with a sort of twitchy look in his eyes. “Hey, hey, buddy, calm it, you’re just in the workshop- we must’ve fallen asleep, stand down soldier, not a threat.”

Tony yawned as Steve turned his head over to him and then relaxed back into the cushions, looking rather sheepish. “Oh. Sorry.”

“No worries,” he yawned again, waving it away and then sliding his bare feet back to the floor. He felt like shit. “Fuck, sleeping on couches is never good. I feel like my ass has gone numb.”

Steve huffed, and he shuffled a little awkwardly, seemingly becoming aware of the fact that he had sort of just spent the night with his boss. “I can’t believe I fell asleep at all, to be honest. I don’t usually… do that.”

“What, fall asleep?” Tony asked, raising an eyebrow and standing up with a stretch, “of course not, you’re Steve Rogers, best bodyguard in America. Sleep is surely beneath you.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Yeah, funny. I meant- I meant like, sleeping in places that I’m not used to. Sorry, by the way. That was unprofessional of me.”

Tony just snorted and made a face, turning off and heading in the direction of the coffee machine he kept tucked away in the corner of the room. “Do I look like the kind of guy who cares about being professional? Sleep on my damn floor if you want, mi casa es su casa and all that. Anyway- we had fun. Like a proper little slumber party. We should’ve done each other's nails.”

Steve laughed, all lovely and low, and Tony couldn’t stop the pleased little smile that curled around his own mouth. He took a weird kind of pleasure in making Steve laugh like that.

“Shit, where’s my phone?” the man muttered, patting the pockets of his rumpled suit and jerking his head, “I should probably call my friends. They’re gonna think I’m lying in a ditch somewhere.”

Tony left him to it, wandering back to his desk and yawning again. The clock read at 8 in the morning, and sunlight was beginning to peek through the window panes. He felt weirdly well-rested, though, despite the early hour and less than comfortable couch he’d fallen asleep on.

It was the first time he’d talked properly to someone in months. And, more surprisingly, Steve had listened.

When Tony was alone in the workshop again- Steve having stumbled off home whilst placating one of his anxious sounding friends over the phone- he called out to JARVIS.

“Yes, sir?”

“Did that…” Tony looked over to the couch; at the blankets and pillows strewn over it, “did that
really happen, or did I just have a very vivid dream?”

JARVIS sounded almost amused as he said, “All records show Mr. Rogers did indeed spend the night here. You spoke for approximately 4 hours and 17 minutes until falling asleep over the armrest. Mr. Rogers placed a blanket over you before he too fell asleep.”

Tony looked at the empty room. He felt the napkin he’d slipped into his pocket that had his face sketched on it.

“Huh,” he said.

*****

After that, Steve’s visits to Tony’s workshop became more regular.

Maybe it was because the threat had climbed higher over the past few weeks. Maybe Steve was gunning for something; a favour, a deal.

Or maybe Tony was overthinking it. Maybe Steve was just… there.

He always seemed to draw, when he came down. There’d always be an excuse, at first- ‘Eat, Tony’, ‘Sign this, Tony’, ‘Just checking up, Tony’ - but after those requests inevitably fell through, Steve would just sigh and then head over to the couch, where he’d started to keep a little sketchbook on the coffee table. It was like his excuse- technically, he was still doing his job, except he got to draw, too. Tony got the sense he deeply enjoyed it, if the way he always sighed and smiled down at the paper was anything to go by. And he was always the first to jump in and offer the idea of more finger-painting sessions with the kids if ever Tony was out of things for them to do. In another life, maybe, Steve would have been a fantastic artist. But he always told Tony he just never had the time anymore, nor the money to pay for any of the supplies.

Honestly, when Steve said things like that, Tony really couldn’t be blamed for the impulsive decisions he made in answer to them.

He shuffled a little nervously, wringing his hands together and then tapping them along the back of his palm as he waited for Steve to inevitably walk through the door. He tried to focus in on the blueprints in front of him, but his eyes kept flashing over to the camera which showed Steve parking up his bike and beginning to make his way over to the elevator.

He groaned, rubbing his eye with the heel of his palm and looking over to the couch, which he’d littered with various art supplies.

It was too much. Steve would be creeped out, for certain. Or offended, or something that inevitably wasn’t good. See, Tony was shit at this stuff, he didn’t know boundaries, he never knew when he was being over the top, and now it was too fucking late-

Jumping to his feet, he rushed over to the set of oil paints he’d placed over the expensive paper of the new sketchbook and shoved them into his arms. He turned, grabbing the easel with a muttered
curse and then picking up the tin of pencils, charcoal, all the dumb shit he’d bought, until all of it was piled up in his arms.

“Fuck fuck… fucking shit,” he turned on his heel, looking in panic for a place to put it all without Steve noticing, maybe the back of the couch or a cupboard or-

“Tony?”

Instinctively, Tony dropped all of it behind him instantly and spun back around, turning to look at Steve, who was stood in confusion at the doorway, hands still doing up the cufflinks around his wrist.

Tony froze. Debated what to say for a few seconds. Opened his mouth. Rethought it and shut it once more.

Steve just raised his eyebrows and leaned a little, peering around Tony’s body. “That's… why do you have a pile of art supplies on the floor?”

Tony pondered the questions for a while. It was a good question. Solid. Why did he have a pile of art supplies on the floor? Hm.

“Tony…” Steve said slowly, beginning to walk forward, “did you- is this for me?”

“Jesus, I'm so sorry,” Tony blurted, holding his head in his hands and trying to hide the blush that had inevitably enveloped his face, “I just sort of… get sidetracked with things I think are good ideas, and then I realize they’re not good ideas and panic and yeah, I’m sorry, I know this is really weird, it’s just that you just said you…” Tony trailed off, wincing. “ignore it. I’ll get rid of it. Pepper's warned me of my tendency to go overboard-

“Hey,” and suddenly Steve was there, grabbing his flailing wrist, holding firm and looking down at Tony with something curious on his face, “you really… you don’t need to be sorry. I- I can’t believe… is this really- did you- I mean, is this really for...me?”

It seemed Steve was struggling almost as much as Tony was, and his eyes kept flicking longingly over to the pile of scattered supplies behind Tony’s feet.

“Well, yeah,” Tony said, rubbing the back of his neck, “it’s not like I’m gonna use it, am I?"

Steve paused, eyes finally fixing on the stuff behind Tony’s feet, taking inventory. “Tony, they’re… they look really expensive-

“Well I mean, to me, it’s really not,” Tony started, before realizing how bad that would probably have sounded to Steve, who always seemed kind of iffy about money, “but not like- not like in… I’m not trying to…”

Okay. Well. That had all gone terribly. Steve was still staring at him kind of like he’d grown a second head, which was never a good sign.

Unsure of what else to say or how to say it, Tony just extracted himself from Steve’s hand and turned around, heading to his work-table. “Right. I’m going to work very loudly and obnoxiously for possibly seventeen hours, so.”
Perhaps just launching himself from the window was a viable option. He couldn’t say he’d ever felt the urge to before, but then again, he’d never met anyone who made him as much of a fucking mess as Steve Rogers apparently did. God, it was ridiculous how unsure that guy made Tony of himself- he’d never usually care this much about trying to impress people. What was he, a teenager?

Steve was just his fucking bodyguard. Jesus fucking Christ.

There was silence as Tony clattered down on to his chair and turned his music up to full volume- or maybe Steve said something, but Tony just didn’t register it. Either way, he was soon firmly investing himself in the specs in front of him rather than a certain bodyguard who, for all he knew, was still stood behind him with that stupid look of surprise on his face.

He wasn’t sure how long he worked for. Possibly a few hours, maybe more. But when he finally came up for air in search of a caffeine fix, he noticed a few things:

For one, there was already a steaming cup by his left hand, which made no sense, because he didn’t have any recollection of going to get one.

The second thing was that Steve was still there. By the couch. Using Tony’s… painting something on the easel that Tony had bought for him. Which quite frankly made even less sense than the coffee.

“What the fuck,” Tony blurted, and Steve’s head jerked up, eyes going a little wide like he’d been caught red-handed doing something awful. There was paint smudged all up his arms; the sleeves were rolled up to the elbows to reveal pale skin now spattered with color, and his hair wasn’t as perfect as he usually kept it. He looked kind of a mess, actually, and it seemed he was just as surprised to be in the shape he was as Tony was to be looking at him.

“I-,” Steve began, running a nervous hand through his hair and down his neck, streaking the path with a deep red, “I didn’t… it was only supposed to be a sketch?” he said weakly, staring at whatever was in front of him like he’d only just realized where he was. “God, I’ve made a mess, I’m sorry, I don’t make a habit of this, honestly-”

“Maybe you should,” Tony said, turning in his chair and facing Steve properly, who had started looking for something, inevitably a cloth or rag to wipe down the surfaces. “You seemed like you were enjoying yourself just then. Sorry for the outburst, by the way, I just thought- I thought you didn’t like them.”

“Like them?” Steve asked incredulously, one slightly purple eyebrow raised. “Tony- I adore them. They’re… they’re beautiful. All of them. This is some of the finest quality shit I’ve ever laid my hands on. They don’t belong in my hands, I won’t use them right, but-” he broke off, looking guiltily at the hands that were very much in possession of the things he vowed he was, for whatever reason, unworthy of, “I’m sorry, I couldn’t resist, it’s just been so long-”

“Hey, hey,” Tony waved him off, standing from his chair and finding the mug on his desk so that his fingers had something to tap on, “please don’t feel guilty for using a gift that was bought for you.”

“I shouldn’t let myself, though.” Steve looked away, clenching his jaw a little and standing straighter. “It gets me too distracted. Not something I can afford, doing what I do.”
Tony sighed, gesturing around the room. “You can when you’re here. Believe me, this is the most fortified place in the world. Absolutely no-one gets in here unless I want them there. You’re allowed to relax.”

Steve looked at him funny again. It always frustrated him, that stupid look. It was the one Tony could never quite pin down. “I… thank you, then,” he said a little quietly, almost sadly.

Tony’s brow creased. “For what?”

“For wanting me here, I guess.”

“I- oh,” Tony’s original sentence died in his throat, too caught up by Steve’s words. “Well, I mean, you’re… you’re you. Of course I’d let you.”

Bodyguard. Tony had been meaning to say ‘you’re my bodyguard’, for fuck’s sake, why was he suddenly so incapable of talking-

In front of him, Steve did a little jerk of surprise, and wasn’t this just fun- both of them, stood there like fools, holding what was possibly the most awkward conversation in the history of the world- Tony was having an absolute blast, honestly. He’d get JARVIS to play it back later when he was wasted, that’d make it even more amusing than this first rendition he was living through right now.

“Right,” Steve nodded rapidly, blinking, “good. I’m glad. I’ve… I should probably—” he jerked a thumb over to the exit, “yeah. Thank you, Tony. Really. Thank you, they’re gorgeous. I hope you don’t mind me keeping them here, it’s just that—”

“Sure, sure,” Tony answered, blank. Steve was obviously desperate to escape the awkward situation, and who was Tony to stop him? He was probably going to get a letter of resignation in the mail tomorrow after that complete cockup-

“Hey, Tony?”

He turned, watching Steve as he lingered by the door, wringing his hands together nervously and rubbing at the smudges of paint running along his arms. Tony just frowned for half a second, wondering what Steve was hanging around for. If it were Tony, he’d have run far away a long time ago.

He waved a hand in question, and Steve opened his mouth, taking a breath. The words failed to actually leave his throat for a few seconds, leaving him looking a little like a goldfish in a suit, but eventually he plucked the courage from somewhere, because his jaw did The Clenching Thing and his back straightened out.

“I was wondering if you wanted to come and visit some kids at the children’s home with me.”

Hm. Well. As far as requests went, it certainly was original.

“They’re… I know that probably sounded weird,” Steve winced, but marched on, “and I know you have a hundred other things you need to do, but- I don’t know, it’s just- you love kids, and the little fellas down at the place I help out at are desperate for something exciting to happen. It’s tough, being a kid in care. I should know, I went there for most of my childhood.”

Steve started picking at his nails, but then, apparently realising he was doing it, he made an obvious point of looking straight at Tony, into his eyes. “Just for an hour or two, sometime this week? They’d love it, really. And there’s a kid who goes there, he’s only a little thing, but he’s real smart, and he adores you- watches every interview and tries his damndest to read some of your
papers- he’d be over the moon if he got a chance-”

“I’d love to,” Tony said softly, clutching the coffee tightly between his fingers and making a mental note to try and pre-order those special edition Louboutins for Pepper when he inevitably cancelled whatever meeting he had told her he’d attend that week, “I haven’t got anything particularly pressing going on anyway.”

Steve beamed, and Tony would happily have canceled every last one of his meetings for the rest of eternity if it made Steve look like that. “Oh, wow, Tony, that’s real great of you. They’re all gonna be so excited, and I’ll make sure they’re on their best behavior for you, don’t worry-”

“What, do you run it or something?” Tony asked, surprised. He’d never even heard about this orphanage of Steve’s since thirty seconds ago. It was something he’d have thought JARVIS might have picked up on.

Steve shook his head. “Nah, just volunteer when I can. Like I said, I used to live there. And… I owe them something, you know? Money’s real tight right now, so I’m just doing what I can.” He let himself smile a little softly as he said, “They’re good kids. They deserve so much more than what they’ve been given.”

Tony nodded mutely, taking a sip of coffee in his mouth and swallowing before speaking again. “When do you want me there?”

“Day after tomorrow? Is that too short notice? That’s why I’m taking my day off, but I know that’s probably more difficult for you-”

“No no, don’t worry about it. Got nothing on, it’s fine.” Only two board meetings and brunch with Obie. Sucker.

Steve looked impossibly happy about the whole thing, and he smiled over to Tony, nodding his head absently and then rubbing his hands together. “Great! That’s… that’s so great of you, Tony, thank you. Seriously. They’re gonna be over the moon.”

Tony couldn’t help but smile back. Steve’s happiness was contagious. “Well, I aim to please.” He gestured to the door and turned back to his work. “Anyway, Mr Bodyguard, by my watch, it is officially your break. Go home for a bit, I’m not planning on going out for a good few hours, you got some time. Relax.”

Steve nodded, hand once more reaching out for the handle of the door. “Thank you, Tony.”

He smiled again, looking back to the holoscreens a little awkwardly. “Welcome, Steve.”

When Steve had left, the first thing he did was reach for his phone.

“Tony? What’s the matter?” Pepper asked down the line, sounding confused as she shuffled something, inevitably papers, between her hands.

“You know that thing you told me about how I wasn’t allowed to sleep with my bodyguard under any circumstances?”

“...Oh, for Christ’s sake, Tony, am I gonna have to file another-”

“Well, I think I’ve done something worse.”
There was dead silence down the other end, and Tony sighed, kneading his forehead.

“I think I’ve fallen in love with him.”

*****

Tony tried his very hardest not to stare when he saw Steve waiting for him in the kitchen with a hastily-made sandwich in one hand and a phone in the other, texting idly.

It was the first time Tony had ever seen the guy out of a black and white suit. And as good as those things looked on him—damn, could the boy work skinny jeans. Well-fitted, high waisted, and with a dark green shirt tucked in messily, he looked like sex on legs. Long, long, gorgeous legs.

He was also rocking suspenders with a fucking holster attached to it, and Tony was… Tony wasn’t exactly sure what to focus on there, it was so many kinds of attractive he wasn’t quite aware of how to react to it. Although his body certainly knew well enough.

Barely holding back a little whine, Tony stumbled back around the corner again and prayed Steve hadn’t noticed him. He was definitely going to need a minute before being able to go in and face the weird mix of hipster and forties boy that Steve was currently sporting at that moment in time.

_God. God god god god god god god god god._ His bodyguard was going to kill him. How ironic.

It was just poor timing, really, considering Tony had only had the realization that he was probably most definitely in love with the guy a few days ago. That was just… cruel.

And now they were going to go to a fucking orphanage, where Steve would undoubtedly play with lots of little kids and wear a huge smile on his face the whole time as his perfectly styled and a little too long hair got caught up in his eyes and made him sweep it back with those beautifully big hands of his-

Okay. No. Not going there, not when he was already half fucking hard just glancing at the guy.

It was the damn suspenders that were doing it for him. He knew it. They barely even reached around the span of his enormous shoulders.

Fuck, he was so screwed.

_Deep breath_, he said to himself, repeating the mantra a few times before straightening out his shirt and then stepping back around the corner properly this time. He could do this. It was just a hot
person. He’d dealt with plenty of them before. Hell, he was one of them. This was fine. Easy as-

“Tony!” Steve said brightly, like seeing him was the best thing that had happened all morning, and yeah, no, he was 100% gone, gone, gone.

“Hey, Steve,” Tony said a little weakly, swallowing and looking somewhere over Steve’s shoulder, “you ready to go?”

“Yep. Was just grabbing some breakfast along the way, I was running late,” Steve waved the sandwich through the air then grinned a little, stuffing the rest of it into his mouth before grabbing his hoodie from the side. He made a humming noise and gestured to the door, taking point naturally as they made their way down to the garage.

Tony really tried not to watch his ass in those jeans. He really, really did.

He failed anyway.


****

The building was run-down and very, very old.

That was the first thing Tony noticed when they pulled up into the drive. The second thing was how Steve’s face slowly changed as his eyes roved over the area- from a look of mild concentration and blank indifference to something… soft. Happy. There was a small frown on his face as he traced over the peeling paint that ran across the front of the building, but it was fond and tinted with familiarity. The place obviously meant an awful lot to him.

“Here we are,” Steve said, cutting the engine and peering through the windshield to give the place a once-over, “I know it’s not much- pretty tiny, as far as children's homes go, but-” he shrugged, looking down and swallowing, “it was home for me, for a very long time.”

“Did you grow up here?” Tony asked quietly, peering over at the building in curiosity. It was weird, thinking about how Steve must have lived as a child. Tony might have had shitty parents, but at least he’d had a place he knew was his. At least he’d had stability.

Steve nodded his head. “Pretty much. Lived with my mom ’til I was 8. Then she died, and I had no other family. Nowhere else to go. So I came here. Tiny little place that was mainly run off public donation, even back then.” He shrugged, tapping against the side of the car as a faint little smile crossed his face. “It’s where I met Bucky. We shared a room. And the people who ran the place- mainly just a group of old women, back then- they were lovely. New owners- Janet and Alistair- they are, too. Always welcomed me, always gave me whatever they could. They treated me like their own, gave me opportunities to take back my life in ways most kids in care would never be able to even hope for. I owe them everything.”

Tony let Steve have a moment, and then opened the car door. “Well, then,” he said cheerfully, “I’m looking forward to introducing myself.”
Steve smiled and stepped out with him, slamming the car door behind him. “Be warned- they’re very excitable,” he said with a raised eyebrow, cracking his neck and then putting a hand on the door.

Before he even fully managed to push the thing open, someone opened it from the other side. The wall of noise that hit Tony at that point was intense- most of it being made by small people clamoring for Steve, Stevie, or in some cases, “Uncle Stebe!”.

Tony couldn’t help but laugh as he watched Steve, with his stupid skinny jeans and floppy hair and baggy hoodie that hid the weapons underneath, as he was pulled to his knees by a tidal wave of jabbering kids attempting to hug whichever part of him they could reach. They hadn’t even noticed Tony loitering around behind the other man- too caught up in welcoming Steve back.

Tony shoved his hands in his pockets and waited a little awkwardly, unsure of where to step. Just as he made the decision to look up and walk inside, he noticed that there were a bunch of older kids barring his entrance- all of them staring right at him in obvious shock.

“Hey,” Tony said with an awkward little wave, “uh- surprise?”

The kids did nothing but stare in shock. And then one of them nudged the other, pushing them backward. “Get Peter,” they whispered, “he’s gonna wanna fuckin’ see this.”

Tony bit back a little snort as he watched the girl, who can’t have been more than ten years old, stumble backward and then turn on her heel. “PETER!” She yelled as she sprinted up the stairs two at a time.

At that point, Steve finally returned to his side, looking a hell of a lot more roughed up than he had ten seconds ago. He was grinning sheepishly as that hand ran through his bangs and pushed them off his face. “Wanna go inside?” He asked.

Tony nodded. “Lead the way, Rogers.”

*****

It was one of the best days of the year.

Of course, any of the days he spent down at the engineering class in the library were on that list, too- but this one had the added bonus of Steve being….

Okay, he didn’t want to say it was like a date, because it wasn’t, obviously- but Steve had just been happier, more relaxed. It was strange, how much his attitude had changed in little over two weeks. Ever since their argument at the library, he seemed like he’d almost… let go of whatever was holding him back. He was softer, now. Less brittle and not as easy to piss off.

But at the little place tucked away on a street in Brooklyn, he just seemed to come alive. It was obvious to see how much the orphanage meant to him on a personal level, and he knew each and every one of the kids that lived there. Most of them were tiny little things, a bit too thin and small
for their ages, but full of life. And they loved Steve like he was family to them— which Tony guessed he was. If he’d been coming to visit for years, then he must have known them all from a young age.

“I help out with the running of the place, if I can and when I get the money to,” Steve had said quietly, nursing a cup of coffee in the messy kitchen, “they always struggle, being such a small orphanage, and it’s not run by the government so they have to rely on public kindness. If they don’t, it’ll get shut down, and the kids will all have to go to the next one over.”

He shuddered a little, shaking his head. “Bucky used to go there,” he said in almost a whisper, “it was… horrible. And it’s still run by the same people. I went and had a look at the place, few years back. The kids, they’re all— they’re all miserable. So quiet and uncooperative. I’m pretty sure the guy in charge still beats them.”

Tony felt the anger rise in his blood just at Steve’s words, and he clenched his jaw. Steve seemed to notice, because he smiled a little sadly. “I’m never going to let them end up there, though. I’d lose my own home before that happened.”

“Worst comes to worst, they can just come to live up in Stark Tower with me,” Tony said, and it sounded like a joke, but it really, really wasn’t.

Steve grinned. “I’m pretty sure Peter would have a heart attack.”

Peter had, incidentally, been one of the best things about the whole day. He’d been the little kid everyone had been yelling for when Tony had first arrived on the scene. Again, just a tiny boy, with huge brown eyes and a mop of messy curls that were even more unruly than Tony’s own, and podgy cheeks which gave away his young age. The other kids hadn’t found him in his room when they’d tried to fetch him, and Steve had sighed, rolling his eyes fondly and then touching Tony’s arm for a second as he’d said “I’m just gonna go get him. He’ll be in the attic room— says it’s a good place to work, though God knows why.”

When Steve had come back with a tiny child clinging to his leg, Tony could admit, he’d been a little smitten with the whole scene.

Steve with kids was just… ugh. Honestly, it was seriously unfair how Steve managed to make Tony fall harder for him with everything he did. Even stuff that probably would have sent him running if it had been anyone else.

He’d grinned and got down to Peter’s level quickly. “Hey buddy,” he said, “are you Peter Parker? I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Peter’s eyes went impossibly wide, and his knuckles gripped so tightly to the fabric of Steve’s jeans that they went white. Tony was about to step away, scared of spooking him, when suddenly the boy did a full-bodied jerk and lurched forward, hand outstretched as if to check Tony was actually corporeal.

“Say hi, buddy,” Steve encouraged gently, patting Peter’s shoulder, “he doesn’t bite, honestly.”

Peter opened his mouth, hand prodding ever so gently into Tony’s chest. “Are you…” he asked quietly, “is this a joke?” He looked to Steve at that, and when Steve shook his head, Peter gave a little gasp.

Tony stuck out his hand. “My name’s Tony,” he said with a smile, “and it is an honor to meet you. They tell me you’re quite the little inventor yourself, actually. Care to show me? I’d love to see
Peter had looked a little like he was going to faint, but he nodded solemnly and then turned away, tugging Steve along with him as he led them both up the stairs. His room was right at the end of the corridor- one of the smallest ones in the building. All three of them could barely fit in together.

And it was absolutely packed with various bits of scrap and meshed-together contraptions.

“How old are you?” Tony had asked in awe as Peter had gained a little momentum and shoved a different mechanism into his hands whilst he described it avidly.

“7 years, two months and thirteen days old,” Peter said absently, before launching back into his explanation, fingers pointing at different mechanisms in the design Tony was holding in his hands.

Tony sat and listened, highly impressed as Peter jumped around the room and picked up bits and pieces as he went, shoving them into Tony’s hands until he struggled to hold them all. The boy had seemed shy at first, but Tony encouraged him with questions and soon he was talking a mile a minute, body positively vibrating with enjoyment as Tony threw in helpful ideas for Peter’s design on what was actually a half-decent prototype for a renewable energy farm.

“You learn all this yourself, Peter?” Tony asked curiously, spinning the little windmill in his hands and smiling absently.

The boy nodded solemnly. “I’m very clever. Steve says that my mommy and daddy were too, and they gave it to me as my first ever birthday present.”

Tony looked over, and Steve smiled, ruffling Peter’s hair. “That’s right, Peter.”

The kid shrugged in response, fiddling with his hands, “They died before they could teach me anything, though. So I learned all this from science books! And I’ve tried to read some of your papers, although most of them are hard to follow. But I liked the one about bioengineering and transferring lines of code onto bacteria- that’s really interesting.”

Tony froze, eyebrows at his hairline. “You- you understood that? No way.”

Peter nodded happily, and Tony turned to Steve incredulously as the man simply looked over like a proud parent. “Told you you’d like him.”

“That’s...insane,” Tony said, lost for words. He wanted to flail his hands a little, but he didn’t dare break one of Peter’s designs, “these are amazing, buddy, truly- you sound like you have a real talent.”

Peter stopped, and his face broke out into one of the happiest little smiles in the world. “I still can’t believe that Tony Stark is actually in my room. I think I’m gonna wake up and be in bed all alone and then I’ll be sad because it was all just a dream.”

Tony gave Peter a little pinch on the arm and the boy looked down expectantly. “Well- I haven’t disappeared. Looks like you’re awake, buddy.”

“That’s not even an accurate way of checking to see if you’re awake anyway,” Peter said, frowning, “why can’t you just pinch yourself in a dream?”

Tony stopped, and then shrugged. “Fair point,” he said, “okay- I’ll just have to give you some solid evidence, then.”
Tony leaned in, digging about his pockets for the slip of paper he was looking for and then handing it over to Peter. “This is my number, ‘kay? I want you to call me if you have any questions, or need any help at all. Any. Honestly- I’m gonna make an inventor out of you, kiddo, just you wait. And, as an added bonus- I can guarantee that it will still be there when you wake up tomorrow morning.”

Peter stared at it for a few seconds, and then drew it closer to his face as if he’d read it wrong. “This is really your- your number?”

“Let me have a look,” Steve said, taking the card when Peter put it in his hands and reading carefully, before nodding, “yep, Petey, that’s the real deal.”

He handed it back, and when Peter took it he held it in his hands like it was made of gold. His little fingers were shaking. “I can’t believe this,” he said in a whisper, “I can’t… this can’t be happening.”

“Hey, thank Steve over here,” Tony said cheerfully, patting Steve’s shoulder, “he’s the one who got hired to protect me.”

Peter’s eyes shone as he looked at the both of them before giggling nervously. “This has been the best day ever.”

“I’m rather inclined to agree, actually,” Tony said lightly, “and hey- I mean it about the call. You have huge potential, kid, and I won’t see it wasted. You could work for me one day, if you wanted.”

“How about we save the hiring-talk for when Pete’s 16, huh?” Steve said quickly, before Peter could start yelling. He bent down and picked Peter up, slotting the skinny little kid on his shoulders. “For now, I think we just need to focus on keeping you in school full-stop.”

Tony gasped. “Peter Parker, do you bunk off school already? At this tender age?”

“It’s booorringgg,” Peter sing-songed, yelping happily as Steve spun them around and then ducked back under the doorway, taking them both into the long corridor, “I already know everything they teach me!”

Tony opened his mouth, but then he just sighed, looking at Steve in defeat. “I can’t even argue with that- I was bunking off half my lessons before I’d even graduated into highsc-”

“Tony!” Steve hissed, clapping his hands over Peter’s ears. “We’re supposed to be convincing him to stay in school, not leave it. He’s seven!”

Tony made a face and then bounded forward, facing Peter, who was now a good few feet above him as he perched on Steve’s shoulders. “Yes! Steve’s right, squirt- stay in school, drink your milk, eat your greens, etcetera etcetera- be a good kid!”

“Excellent advice, Tony,” Steve said dryly, flipping his hair out of his face with his left hand whilst his right was still attached to one of Peter’s bony knees. “You hear that, Peter? Tony Stark wants you to stay in school.”

Tony nodded solemnly, and even managed to hold back his grin when Peter looked sort of offended by it. The kid was amazing- only seven too, it was crazy.
“How the hell has he not been adopted yet?” Tony asked later, hopping on to the counter in the kitchen and shaking his head. “He’s brilliant. All these kids are brilliant.”

Steve laughed. “Unfortunately, not many people want kids in care. Prefer making their own, I guess.”

Tony huffed. “Sounds exhausting.”

They both smiled at one another, and then stood in comfortable silence for a few moments—Tony pointedly looking at the dining table in front of him rather than Steve, who was currently leaning against the counter in all his six-foot glory, staring down the corridor and listening into the distant sound of all the kids as they squabbled in the other room.

He really was beautiful. Truly, honestly perfect in a way that Tony rarely got to see anymore. It was in the way he smiled— the way he held himself. His gentle hands. The bow of his lips.

Just.... beautiful. Impossibly, wonderfully beautiful.

It was only when Steve looked over to him questioningly that he realized he’d failed his endeavor, and was currently flat-out gawping at the unsuspecting man. There wasn’t even an excuse— he didn’t have crumbs on his face or paint in his hair. It was just him being... him.

Fuck.

Pepper really was going to kill him when she got her hands on him.

Chapter End Notes

I have a weakness for the Big Bad Characters being soft around kids don't @ me lmao
The first thought that ran through his head as he cut off the engine and looked over to Tony, who was curled around the side of the car and napping peacefully was, *I think I’m in love with you.*

Which was certainly new. And terrifying.

They’d spent the whole day with the kids down at Steve’s old orphanage and left just as night was beginning to fall over the city. By that time, Tony was pretty much dead on his feet. Steve knew that he’d skipped on sleep the day before (and the day before that, and the one before that). The bags under his eyes were proof enough. He’d driven two extra times around the block in his reluctance to wake Tony from the sleep he was actually getting, for once.

It was kind of crazy (definitely crazy) how fast he’d managed to fall for the man. No more than three months had passed in his company and yet Steve knew. He knew the feeling he got when Tony smiled at him. Knew what that fluttering feeling in his stomach was when Tony laughed at one of his jokes. Knew the hot burn of want and desire when Tony’s hands brushed his body and sent electricity through his veins.

He loved Tony.

And God, now would be the time for him to step down. Let one of the others take over for the last half of the scout, someone who was more neutral, because even if he didn’t believe- couldn’t ever believe- Tony would do what their client had accused, it didn’t mean he could stop being professional.

This? This was the opposite of professional.

This was letting his emotions completely, truly take the wheel. And he knew it. Of course he knew it, he was trained to know how people worked, and this was the oldest trick in the fucking book. This was the reason Natasha was the most likely one to yield results after a short period of time, and the reason she was so effective at her job. She turned on the charm and batted her eyelashes and that was it, they were done for. Because as soon as emotional attachment formed, their guard came all the way down. They were as good as dead. In the job Steve worked, emotion was not an option.

But he couldn’t let go.

It was wrong. Unprofessional. Stupid. But the fact was that Tony was in danger- Tony was in serious danger, and it was from more than one enemy. At first, Steve had only been concerned about the stalker- which, you know, was fucking bad enough- but he’d been thinking about it more recently, and had come to the realisation that there was someone out there who had hired Steve to
kill Tony. To take him out. Someone had been gunning for Tony before the stalker had even become a threat.

And it scared the shit out of Steve.

The stalker, he could control to some extent, at least, because he knew what he was fucking looking for. He knew how they operated, he understood their motivations and their end goal. But the anonymous call? The man who Steve was currently working for? Not a clue. Didn’t know who he was, didn’t know anything except the tinny tones of a modulated voice which gave absolutely nothing away.

Steve had, at first, assumed he must be working closely with Tony, for him to be able to get all that information. But Tony… he didn’t work with people. He operated alone, in his workshop, and from what Steve had gathered, he most certainly didn’t take part in any of the shady weapons deals which Steve had at first assumed, which meant that Steve didn’t even have a base to start with. Just the knowledge that someone, somewhere, wanted Tony dead.

The thought that he probably would have shared a few months back now made him feel weak and nauseous and scared, so fucking scared it was ridiculous.

So no. He couldn’t leave. He had a job to do- not the one where he assassinated people, no- the one where he kept Tony safe. The one he’d forgotten was a cover. The one he wanted to do, more than anything else lately.

“You’re staring.”

Steve jumped a little, catching Tony’s eye sheepishly as the man’s lashes fluttered and he shifted, turning to face Steve with a small smile. His hair was sticking up all funny and his eyes were red-rimmed with sleepiness.

Steve clenched his hand a little tighter to the wheel so that he wouldn’t reach out and touch.

“Debating whether not I should risk getting my head torn off if I woke you.”

Tony huffed, stretching in the car and scrunching up his nose. “Ugh, I think Ryan broke my back, why is that kid so unnaturally heavy and violent for his age? He’s four- he should be playing with dolls or whatever, not tackling me to the ground.”

“Maybe you’re just weak,” Steve shrugged, grinning and dodging a stray hand Tony sent his way. “Hey, not my fault- some people just aren’t cut out for dealing with rowdy kids.”

“You haven’t seen the engineering group toward the end of term,” Tony said gruffly, his hand going to the handle of the door, “then you’d know what rowdy was.”

Steve just hummed in agreement and stepped out at the same time as Tony, zipping up his jacket a little further against the sharp chill of the evening air. They’d pulled up at the bottom of the tower in the garage, and Steve’s bike was parked up beside the car, waiting patiently.

Tony stared at him for a few seconds over the hood of the car, and Steve momentarily forgot everything else. It was just...him.

“Thank you,” he blurted, for lack of anything better to say, “for what you did today. With the kids. And Peter especially- he’s gonna be talking about that for months, and it was… it was real good of you.”

Tony just waved him off. “My pleasure. They’re good kids. Deserve better,” he mumbled, rubbing
the back of his neck and then looking up at Steve awkwardly.

They stood there, faced off on opposite ends of the car, and Steve felt like a fumbling teenage boy all over again, with no idea how to act around his crush. “I… I’ll be off, then,” he said weakly, jerking a thumb over to his bike and then walking around the car.

“Hey- Steve?”

He felt the pressure around his wrist as Tony’s slender fingers hooked around it, and he looked down, surprised by the contact. When he snapped his head up to meet Tony’s eyes, the man was looking a little like a rabbit caught in the headlights- as if he’d only thought through to the part where he grabbed for Steve and then didn’t quite know where to go from there.

They were close, again. It was stupid, how often Steve only became aware of their proximity when they were nothing more than centimeters away from one another. It was like they gravitated together without even thinking about it, until he ended up looking right down at Tony and watching the man stare back through the ridiculously long lashes that framed his eyes.

God, he wanted to kiss him. He wanted to do all sorts of things, but first and foremost was kiss him. Feeling Tony’s mouth against his own, how he moved, how his beard felt scraping against his jaw. Tony’s hands would go crazy, Steve was sure of it- flustered and buzzing all over the place at first, but then settling, maybe at Steve’s shoulders, maybe around his neck. He’d get up on his tiptoes; push his body against Steve’s because like he said, neither of them did personal boundaries very well and Tony liked contact, and Steve would be able to run his hands over every perfect inch of his body, feel the warm skin rolling beautifully against him-

He blinked a few times and snapped the thoughts out of his head. He couldn’t afford to be thinking like that- not when Tony was so close. He didn’t know what he would do.

Tony was still looking at him, his mouth opening and closing a few times like he was trying to push out words that wouldn’t come. Steve watched his mouth move and tried to keep his thoughts clean.

“I-” Tony began, before breaking off and shaking his head. And then just like that, his hold was gone and he’d stepped away, smiling ruefully over to Steve. “Never mind. Sorry, just- yeah. Goodnight, Steve,” he said said quietly, shooting off one last smile before turning hurriedly and making his way over to the elevator, hands stuffed in his pockets.

Steve watched him until he disappeared, and then instantly shut his eyes and sighed loudly.

Ironic, really- he’d survived a war, he was a man who made his living out of making enemies, and yet the only person who was going to manage to kill him was his own fucking charge.

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Clint, Natasha and Peggy were all still working the counter in the shop when Steve finally got back home. Well. He said ‘working’, but in reality there were only a handful of customers left sipping at their drinks, and the three of them were sitting in the corner where their comfiest couch was, talking quietly with one another.

Upon seeing Steve, Peggy waved him over. “Welcome back, stranger,” she said with a fond grin, whilst Steve just rolled his eyes and wandered over.

“Bucky?” he asked, as Clint shuffled up to make room for him.

“Bed,” Natasha replied, putting her feet on his lap, a little frown on her face. “Don’t think he’s been sleeping well this past week.”

Steve nodded silently, pursing his lips. It was rare any of them got out of the regular bouts of nightmares that seemed to haunt them wherever they stepped. At this point, they were just used to them. “He had any ops?” He asked, because they were usually the things that spurred these sleepless nights on.

Natasha’s eyes hardened as she nodded. “Someone wasn’t quite aware of our rep. Asked him to kill a kid. It set him off, I think.”

Steve sighed, and the rest of them were silent, each of them caught up in their own thoughts for a second.

“Makes you wonder if what we’re doing is worth it, don’t you think?” Clint asked quietly, hands fiddling with a napkin in his lap.

“Makes me wonder if what we’re doing is right, more like,” Peggy said bluntly, jaw set as she shook her head and looked out of the windows. “The line between good and evil is a fairly thin one, don’t you think?”

They all did a collective sigh, and Steve shook his head, staring out into space. He remembered a time when he’d been so convinced there was kindness in everyone, and life was precious.

And then he went to war. Then he killed people who had never needed to die because they had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, saw the depravity of people he’d shared his life with and the corruption within a system he’d relied upon for so long, and before he’d known it his perspective had shifted. Life had worn him down and pushed him over to the morally gray area in which he now operated.

He’d changed.

“We made this choice,” Natasha said softly. “We all knew what we were going into.” She turned her face down, bit her lip and didn’t catch any of their eyes. Steve knew she was trying to convince herself more than anyone.

They did this a lot. The bouts of introspection, the self-hatred, it was like routine. It made Steve wonder, sometimes—wonder what the point was. What the point in anything was.

His phone beeped and he jumped a little, shuffling so that he could pull out the thing from his pocket. Swiping up, he spotted Tony’s face in the icon box and huffed out a laugh as he read the
message.

Peter just called me and asked if I could buy him some plutonium. Can’t decide whether giving him my number was a grave mistake or an excellent one.

A few seconds later, then was another buzz. Yeah, no, it’s the latter. I’m totally turning him into a mad scientist.

Steve laughed at the imagery- he couldn’t help it. All his friends looked over curiously, and Steve turned the phone away from them instinctively, but they’d already seen it.

“Oh, and you text Tony Stark now?” Peggy asked, raising her eyebrows in amusement, “that’s certainly progress from the ‘I hate every aspect of his being’ phase you went through last month.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Believe it or not, I’m capable of changing my mind.”

“News to me,” Clint said, and earned him a shove from Steve.

As long as he doesn’t blow anything up, that’s absolutely fine.

...well...

Tony.

Hey, this is your fault. You were the one who introduced us. Big mistake, I’m unreliable and irresponsible on a good day. Just ask Pepper.

Believe me, don’t need to ask Ms. Potts to know that.

Ha ha ha- I’ll have you know that I haven’t actually been half as bad as I usually am since you’ve turned up.

Because I’m like, in mortal danger every time I step out of the house. Takes the fun out of parties, really.

You know, if you do want to go out, then I can just escort you. It’s my job, after all.

Nah, it’s fine. Not really been feeling it so much lately anyway.

“But, Nat, just look at that smile. Doesn’t he just look adorable?” Clint said, grabbing Steve’s cheeks and pinching them. He got another shove, but Clint knew he’d won by the blush that crept up Steve’s face.

“Shut your face, Clint,” he said grudgingly, and the other man cackled, punching him softly in the arm, “he’s just… outgoing.”

Clint snorted derisively, and Steve didn’t even blame him. That sounded weak even to him. Natasha shot him a look- the kind of one that made Steve know he was being analysed by her, and he shuffled nervously. He knew exactly what she’d think if he told her the extent of his feelings, and wasn’t willing to have that conversation with her just then.

When he pulled out his phone a few minutes later, he realised he’d missed the last message Tony sent him.
He smiled, and didn’t even try to hide it.

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He woke up to the sound of someone slamming open his door, and the gun he kept under his pillow was in his hands and pointed at the intruder before he’d even had the chance to blink.

“Stevie, holy shit, you need to listen to this,” was all Bucky said as he marched in and pushed the barrel of the gun away from his face. “You need to, come on, get the fuck up, get the fuck up-”

“Bucky?” Steve said in bewilderment, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as Bucky just tugged on his arm and yanked him from the bed. “What the fuck are you doing, it’s 8 in the morning-”

“Get up, Steve, this is important!” Bucky said, and Steve yelped as he was hauled bodily off the bed, landing on the floor with a thump.

Mumbling a few choice words in Bucky’s direction, Steve clambered to his feet, following his friend out of the room as they both made their way down the hall and into the kitchen. Bucky rounded on the house-phone, pushing a finger into the machine until the answering voice informed them that they had one new message.

“Hi guys- I don’t which one of you is answering this right now, but it’s- uh- it’s Stacey, from the children’s home? You might not know me, I just joined the team a few weeks ago, but I help run finances with Janet.”

Steve looked up, confused, but Bucky just held a finger up and waited.

“You… you’re not going to believe this. But I logged on to the system this morning and- and I’m not joking when I say this, honestly- but I saw an anonymous donation had been made.”

On the other end, Stacey paused, obviously composing herself. “Someone just gave us 5 million dollars, guys. 5 million. It’s… it’s all here, and it’s real, I’ve checked and I’ve double checked and this is legit, there’s…. It’s all here.”

Steve froze up, eyes going impossibly wide as Bucky just nodded in agreement and Stacey continued. “We’re… God, we can pay off all the bills with that and still have money left. Still have so much money left, we could… oh, God, I’m not even sure what to do, I was just told to tell you guys and so here I am, but I don’t- wow, just w-”

Steve stopped listening after that, the words still trying to process in his head.

5 million. 5 whole million dollars, left at his old orphanage that had struggled to stay afloat for such a long time, that Steve and Bucky had both been working tooth and nail to help.

They wouldn’t even need to anymore. 5 million would keep them going comfortably for years. It was… it was unbelievable. It didn’t make sense.
He turned to Bucky, as he always did in times when he didn’t know where to step, but Bucky seemed as confused as him, looking bewilderedly between the phone and Steve. “Do you think someone’s playing a prank on us?” He asked quietly.

No. Steve didn’t. But he thought he had a good idea who was behind it.

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, he knew it was the only explanation. Knew it was exactly the kind of rash, stupid, amazing thing that he would do.

“I have to go,” Steve said suddenly, jerking away and turning to the door in order to yank it open. He didn’t say another word to Bucky as he ran through the corridor and out onto the street- he could explain later, but for now-

He had someone he needed to find.

*****

“Did you donate that money?” Were the first words out of Steve’s mouth, and he watched Tony jump about a mile in the air as he spun in the kitchen and knocked his head against the door of the cupboard he’d had open.

“What the- ow, god, okay, doors are a thing, fuck- Steve, what are you-”

“Did you donate that money, Tony?” Steve asked, hearing his own voice sounding high-pitched and reedy in the large, echoey kitchen. He’d pretty much sprinted all the way up the penthouse, and his breathing was heavy with both exhaustion and the lingering shock of discovery.

Tony looked slightly panicked; taking in Steve’s shambled appearance, his wide eyes and loud voice and backing away a little. “I- I mean, yeah. The orphanage, right? I… you said it struggled financially, and I- well- I don’t, so I was like, why not? Are you- please don’t kill me, you look like you’re going to-”

Steve had crossed the room before Tony could even finish, scooping him up into an almost painfully tight embrace and clutching him desperately. Tony sputtered for a few moments, stumbling back from the force of Steve’s hug, but ultimately lifted his hands and patted them tentatively against Steve’s back in response.

He couldn’t believe it. Tony had… and Steve… God. It didn’t seem real.

“You paid it all off,” Steve choked into Tony’s shoulder, the disbelief evident in his voice, “you actually… 5 million. God. I don’t… I can’t believe.”

He’d never have to stay up and worry. Never have to calculate the next cost, debate how many meals he would be able to go without so that they could fix a leak in one of the kids’ ceilings. He’d never have to do any of that again, because Tony had just… for all of it. For every last… and he hadn’t even- he hadn’t even thought twice about it.
“Thank you,” Steve whispered, and he could feel the hot sting of tears at the back of his eyes, could feel them and didn’t even care, “thank so you… God- thank you, thank you-”

“Hey,” Tony said quietly, squeezing a little tighter against Steve’s back, “hey, it’s okay. I’m Tony Stark- it’s not like I’m lacking in the funds. It was… they’re good kids. Like I said- deserve better. And now hopefully they can get better! It’s fine, Steve- it’ll give me some good community rep, too, so I mean-” he shrugged as best he could with Steve still gripping him; pretending as if that was anything at all to do with what he’d just done.

Steve rolled his eyes, but didn’t call him out on it. Tony always did that- made it all seem like a PR stunt, a show for the media. Like somehow an anonymous donation to some tiny orphanage in Brooklyn that no one cared about could be traced back to Tony Stark.

He clutched Tony’s shoulder a little tighter for a second before releasing, wiping his eyes and turning away, red in the face. “I- sorry- that was unprofessional of me, I shouldn’t have… God, I shouldn’t have even taken you there in the first place, I was never trying to- I wasn’t gunning for this to happen, I promise, I wouldn’t-”

“Steve,” Tony placed a delicate hand to his forearm, looking up at him, serious now, “it was my pleasure. It really- it’s not that much to me, and I know you wouldn’t do something like that. I’m pretty sure there’s not a dishonest bone in your body.” He smiled, and Steve felt his stomach drop instantly at his words, the guilt just as fast and just as heavy as it always was when Tony said something like that.

If anything, though, it only made him even more desperate to change that. To do right by Tony, who had already done so much for him in such a short space of time. Steve- well- he was morally gray on his better days, and something he’d rather not discuss on his worse. He was a mess, he was a murderer, and his moral compass was so skewed at that point that it was easier just to toss the thing aside completely.

But if there was one thing he knew, now, it was that he wanted to do right by Tony. Wanted it so fiercely now that it hurt him like a physical wound whenever he remembered how badly he was betraying Tony, simply by being around him. Protecting him or not, the fact was that he was there to get information, and if Tony ever found out, he would be crushed beyond anything Steve could even dare to comprehend.

He could never, ever let that happen.

For the first time in so, so long, Steve suddenly found himself wanting to change. He wanted to do better, be better, for Tony. He wanted no part in the job against him- he knew in his heart, his soul, his very bones, that it wasn’t true anyway. Tony wouldn’t ever do the things their client accused him of. Not ever.

In that moment; staring down at Tony in the kitchen whilst the man grinned a little sheepishly up at him- Steve made a choice.

“I’m sorry,” he said, placing a hand quickly on Tony’s shoulder as he began to back away, “I’ve got to- I kind of left everything as soon as I found out, but I’ve gotta get back- I’ll see you when my
shift starts, alright, I- thank you, Tony, thank you so much-”

“Don’t worry about it.” Tony looked down to the counter, trying to hide his smile against the cup of coffee he picked up, “you get back to your thing- sorry for surprising you with that. Uh- I’ll see you in a few, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Steve beamed, backing away until his ass hit the door. Finding the handle, he turned it and slipped out, still facing Tony and beaming until the door shut in his face once more. “Yeah,” he breathed out into the empty corridor. The door was an inch from his nose, and Steve looked intently at the panelling for a moment; taking a moment to wonder if what he was about to do was the right choice, or a terribly rash one.

Probably both.

*****

He slipped into the coffeehouse quietly, ghosting past various people carrying drinks until he reached the counter where Clint was working. The man was in conversation with an old lady, and he laughed loudly as she spoke, making the drink underneath him without even looking. Peering into the kitchen, Steve spotted Bucky and Natasha quietly washing up together, their shoulders brushing occasionally as they made space for Peggy, who was weaving between them in order to serve drinks around the shop.

It was peaceful. Happy. They might complain about their boring day jobs, but Steve knew that their little coffee shop was like their baby. They’d put a hell of a lot of work into it, after all.

Through the kitchen, Bucky spotted Steve wander in, and his eyes widened as he muttered something to Nat and then put down his towel. He quickly hurried over, an arm reaching for Steve’s immediately. “Where the hell did you go, Stevie?”

“Tony’s place,” he answered, the smile already forming on his mouth. “It was him, Buck. He donated the money.”

Bucky stopped, his eyes widening. “You sure?”

“Positive. Admitted it himself.”

Bucky was silent for a moment, and then he whistled, low and surprised. “That’s…wow. That’s- I mean- wow.”

He laughed, and it was probably edging on the hysterical side as he said “I know, Bucky, I know.”

“How did he even- what made him-”

“I-” Steve blushed, looking down for a moment and shrugging, “I asked him to meet the kids. Peter- you know how much he loves Tony’s inventions and stuff, and so I just thought… and Tony agreed, so we went, and-” he shrugged, feeling warm all over, “Tony just wanted to give the kids a

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better quality of life, I guess. That sort of thing... it’s just what he does.”

Bucky looked at him for a few more seconds, and then nodded a little. “He’s… Jesus- Stark’s innocent, isn’t he?” His mouth was pursed, and he looked up at Steve seriously.

Steve paused, and then nodded. “Without a doubt. Bucky- I... I don’t want to do this.”

“Yeah, I get it, Steve,” Bucky waved him off, shaking his head, “I trust your judgement, and if you really are sure he hasn’t got nothin’ hidden, we’ll drop the case. It’s only money, r-”

“No-” Steve held out a hand, stopping Bucky’s words quickly. He bit his lip, trying to work out how he was going to say it. “It’s…”

Bucky was looking at him with a slightly raised eyebrow, arms folded and waiting patiently.

“I don’t want to do...this,” Steve said slowly, gesturing around him, “I don’t want to be in this business any more.”

God. Okay. It was out there. He’d really said it.

Bucky’s eyebrows shot up. “What- you mean- the ‘business’ business or just… the business,” he said quietly, taking Steve’s arm and then pushing them over to the stock cupboard, shoving him in and shutting the door.

“Killing people, Bucky,” Steve rolled his eyes and swallowed, looking at the floor, “I don’t want it any more. We- we can’t keep doing this, we’ve always known that, from the moment we got our first hit two years ago. It was just a way to pay the bills and keep the streets clean, but now it’s- we don’t need that any more! We have stable jobs, we bought a cafe, it’s… things are good! We can help people in other ways, better ways!” He spoke almost desperately, his voice a constant hiss of air as he willed Bucky to understand him.

His friend’s brow was furrowed deep, and he looked to Steve thoughtfully.

“This is because of him, isn’t it,” he said in the end- not a question, but a simple statement of facts.

“Of wh-”

“Tony.”

He stopped, then. Bucky was looking at him intently, and Steve had never been able to lie to him properly, not really. The guy just knew him too well.

So he nodded, and looked at the floor again. “I... yeah. He just… made me see. That this isn’t what I want to do with my life, not really. I want bad people off the streets. I want people to pay for their crimes. I’ve spent so long seeing the worst in the world; every murderer and rapist and conman who has made another poor person suffer, and I hate it, Buck. I fucking hate it, you know I do. But- but I don’t want to die at 29 as nothing more than an assassin who got in a scuffle he couldn’t control. I want…”

“Him. Is that what this is, then? You’re ditching us because Stark batted his eyelashes and you fell for it, hook line an’ sinker?” Bucky asked, a little rough, eyes flashing.

“Bucky, come on,” Steve held out his hands, “you know that’s bullshit. I’m not going to abandon
you, ‘cause I know that you don’t want this either. I know that you…”

“You think I’m gonna put down my weapons with you?” Bucky finished, staring hard. His fists were clenched, and he seemed completely on the offensive- but a moment later, he just sort of sagged against the wall and put his head into his hand. “Steve- it’s not as easy as that and you know it-”

“We don’t have to just drop everything,” Steve hurried to assure him, “we just… start tying everything up. Tell the rest of the team once we’ve slept on it for a few nights, maybe, and if they want out with us, they can help, and if not… then we’ll just sort out our own business. It doesn’t have to be instant. But- but I want it to happen.”

Bucky was still staring at him. Steve wasn’t sure if he’d even blinked since the conversation had begun. He wondered, for about the millionth time, if Bucky was right- if he was being too rash; making judgements too early and putting all his eggs in one rather volatile basket.

But he knew this was what he wanted. Morally gray he might be, sure- but he’d never wanted to live off killing. He wanted to help. And he still could- just… in different ways. Volunteering or charity work or just something a little less extreme than what they did at the moment.

“And what if no one else wants to follow us?” Bucky asked quietly, “do we just leave them? Now that our problem’s sorted and we don’t need to raise money for the orphanage any more, we’re just packing our shit and stopping?”

“Isn’t that what this was always about?” Steve responded instantly, “working until we didn’t have to? Until we could go home, until the problem had been sorted and we didn’t have to worry? That’s why we started, Buck. This was always what was going to happen. We just… assumed we’d never actually be able to stop.”

Bucky was silent again, and he let his eyes shut, head leaning against the wall. Steve could do nothing but wait in the semi darkness of the store cupboard, hoping against all hope that Bucky would be able to understand him, see where he was coming from. He knew that everyone thought about it- knew that they all wanted to stop, to turn back and change the road they’d gone down. He just needed to make them understand; try and convince them there was a better way to help than this-

“Are you really, really sure this is what you wanna do?” Bucky asked eventually, his voice sounding almost deafeningly loud in the small room, despite the fact it was barely over a whisper.

Steve clenched his jaw.

“Yes.”

Another silence.

“Alright.”

Steve’s head jerked up to meet Bucky’s eyes. Bucky was staring at him intently, but his head went up and down in affirmation, and he looked thoughtful. “You know I’d follow you just about
anywhere, Stevie. You think this is the right thing to do?” He paused, just for a second, and then raised an eyebrow. “Then that’s what we do.”

The sudden and intense sensation of a weight off his shoulders was palpable almost instantly, and Steve felt a huge breath of air escape him as he shut his eyes and fell back against the wall. “You serious?” He asked hoarsely, running a hand through his hair.

“Serious as you are, pal.”

Steve took a sharp breath, nodding. “I...alright,” he muttered, “alright then. So- we’re really doing this then.” He said quietly.

Bucky looked a little shell-shocked himself, but he nodded with a shrug. “Looks like it.”

There was another break, both of them just looking at one another in the darkness of the tiny little store-room, and then Bucky raised a hand to pat him on the shoulder, taking steps toward the door again. “I hope you know what you’re doing here, Steve.”

The look on his face made Steve know that Bucky was talking about more than just his sudden retirement plans.

*****

“So what’s this about?” Clint asked, landing down on the cushions of the couch with a thump and folding his arms.

Peggy followed him, altogether much more gracefully, and raised her eyebrows. “Yeah, I’d like to know why you both look so serious all of a sudden. It just looks wrong on Bucky’s face, to be quite honest.”

Natasha just walked in silently, her eyes sharp. Steve guessed she was already working through scenarios in her head- that’s what she was good at, after all.

Bucky wasted no time. Grabbing Steve by the shoulder, he looked down at all of them and took a breath. “Guys- I know this is going to come as a surprise to you, and I know… I know that it’s come sort of out of the blue, but-”

“We were thinking of opting out,” Steve blurted, holding all their gazes as confidently as he could, “we… we don’t want to be running an underground business any more. Enough assassinations, enough interrogations and shady dealings. We want to go clean.”

There was a heavy, deep silence. Steve held his friend’s gazes unwaveringly- he wanted them to know he meant this.

Eventually, Peggy just sighed, digging around in her pocket before wordlessly handing over ten dollars to Natasha, who took it without looking. “Couldn’t have just waited it out ‘til the end of the year, could you?” she muttered, annoyed.
Steve watched, brow creasing a little. “I...what?”

“They had a bet going on,” Clint waved a hand, letting his head sag into the pillows behind him, “Tash said you’d be out before the year was done, Peggs said it would take longer.”

“You-” Steve coughed a little, “You knew? But- but I only came to the decision myself-”

“You think we weren’t all aware what you’d been feeling before this?” Natasha asked, looking at her nails, “you’re not exactly difficult to read when it comes to these things, Steve, and anyway- you never really wanted this in the first place. None of us did.”

Steve paused, taken aback. “Wait- are you… what do you mean?”

There was another silence. Natasha sighed, clenching her jaw. Clint fiddled with his hands. Peggy just stared right up at Steve. “You’re not the only one who thinks about stopping, Steve,” she said with a sad little smile, “it’s just... we’ve always sort of assumed it was what we had to do. What we’d been given. A responsibility that no-one else wanted to take. And it’s true. We can’t stop. We do, and other people suffer-”

Steve opened his mouth, but Peggy got in first. “You’re okay, Steve- the orphanage isn’t in danger any more. Your duty is done. We still have debts to pay.”

The quiet was depressing. Peggy was still smiling, but it just looked sad.

“The fate of everyone in the world doesn’t rest solely on our shoulders, Peggy,” Bucky told her quietly. His hand was still clutching Steve’s shoulder.

“And the donation isn’t the reason I want out, either,” Steve added. “I would’ve left soon anyway. I... this is what I’ve wanted for a while now I think. And it’s what I know all of you want too.”

“And how do you expect us to get by?” Natasha asked. “How are we supposed to pay the bills? We struggle as it is, and without the extra income-”

“We have a cafe, and six of us share one flat’s worth of rent,” Steve said instantly, “If we just- if we just put a little more into the shop, try and get in some new customers, we could make a good business out of this. We could. I know it. And we could expand- the apartment next door is for sale, and with a bit of work we could make something out of it- make a name for ourselves-”

“We already have a name for ourselves, buddy,” Clint said, wry smile on his face, “have you not seen the papers? They call us ‘the Mysterious Avengers’- keeping the streets clean by dirtying our own hands. Antiheroes. They actually seem to like us, which is surprising, considering we’re like...”

“Murderers?” Peggy supplied helpfully, and Clint clicked his fingers over to her in approval.

“Guys, look,” Steve sighed, rubbing his face, “I know, okay- I know it’s not gonna be easy. And if you really don’t want to follow me… I accept that. But I just- I want a change. I want to try.”

“Why?” Natasha asked suddenly, cocking her head a little. “Why now? You’ve always been skating the line between right and wrong, you’ve always wondered about it- but what pushed you? You never used to be this...optimistic about the world.”

Steve wasn’t sure how to describe it to her. Because in truth, he didn’t really know himself. He still knew everything was very, very wrong with the world. He still knew all too well about the depravity of other human beings. But... he felt like there was more, now. More than just killing,
more than the bitterness he’d carried with him for so long. He… he had things that made him want to be a better man, a good man. For once. Just once.

He wanted to be the kind of person Tony thought he was.

“I never used to kill people for a living, either,” Steve said quietly, smiling a little, “people’s moral compasses change all the time, Tash.”

She just stared at him with her head still cocked and a small smile on her face. Like she knew. Hell- she probably did. She’d seen men do far more drastic things in order to try and impress someone else.

Was that all this was? Was Steve just trying to impress Tony?

No- no, he meant this. He really did. He wanted to change, had wanted to for a while now. He just had…motivation, now.

He turned to look back at his friends, daring to be hopeful, just for a moment- but their faces spelt something else entirely. Peggy’s smile was beginning to slip off her face, and leaving something harder in its wake as she shook her head. Clint was shuffling awkwardly, and Natasha was just glaring at him, her face somewhat cold.

“I can’t,” Peggy said firmly in the end, and Steve felt his heart sink rapidly. “Steve, you know I can’t. None of us can. We’ve all still got responsibilities-”

“But they- we can find another way! Come on, we have t-”

“No, Steve, we can’t!” She said sharply. “There are no other ways as effective as how we do it. I will not abandon all the innocent young girls who need my help, simply because you no longer want to be a part of it any more. I can’t.”

“She’s right,” Natasha said, her voice even and blunt. Steve turned to her, and saw the way her face was fixed. He knew she had made up her mind. “We made this choice. These people aren’t just going to stop needing us, and anyway, I’m not finished atoning yet. I’m not sure I ever will be.”

At his side, Bucky sighed, and Steve watched as he stepped forward. “Nat, come on, please-”

“If you hadn’t noticed, Bucky,” she said, sharper now, her head jerking over to him, “this sort of thing has been my entire life. It is all I know. I’m not quite sure I want to throw it all away thanks to the whim of a man with a crush.”

She didn’t speak another word. Just sat up and walked out, shutting the door quietly behind her. Steve and everyone else watched her go, eyebrows raised.

Fuck. This wasn’t going as he’d planned. Turning to Clint, he shot him a pleading look, and saw the man flinch uncomfortably under the gaze. He pulled at his ear a bit, shooting Peggy a glance and then looking back to his lap.

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“Steve,” he said quietly, “I promised… I said I’d go wherever Nat goes, in the end. Not that I don’t- I love you, man, but I promised. I just… I think you might need a bit of time to think this through, y’know? Really properly think. I- yeah.” He shrugged helplessly, standing up from the couch. “Sorry. I should… I’ll go find Nat.”
With that, he sighed and then turned away, jogging off toward the door and slipping out quickly. That left just Steve, Bucky and Peggy in the room. Or at least— it did for all of three seconds. With nothing more than a small exhale, Peggy slipped off the arm of the couch and then turned away, looking to Steve sadly.

“I do wish it was that easy, darling,” she said gently, “but it’s just not. At least, not for us it isn’t.”

She reached her room and shut the door behind her quietly, leaving Steve and Bucky still stood in the front of the room. Steve felt rather as if all the wind had been taken out of his sails. He’d really been hoping.

Next to him, Bucky sighed, and patted him on the back. His face looked tired and sad. “Steve, I love you buddy,” he began, “but I knew this wasn’t gonna work. You know I’d follow you anywhere— but those guys? They not quite as willing to take risks as me— and they got a lot more to lose.”

Steve looked away, clenching his jaw. He supposed, deep down, even he’d known that. He just…

Well. Like Peggy had said: he wished it was that easy. That he could just ask, and they would. He knew they wanted to. He saw the wistful way they’d look at happy families, or how they’d always seemed to gravitate toward conversations about what they’d all do if and when they got out of the job. Steve just wanted to finally make a move toward the next step. Seemed the rest of the team just couldn’t afford to do that, though.

He got that. He did. It had been naive of him to assume that they would drop everything for him, but he’d held out hope anyway. For a little while he’d managed to convince himself they might actually follow through. Unfortunately not.

With a deep sigh, he slumped into the couch. His previously good mood seemed to have evaporated into thin air, and he stared at the door Clint and Natasha had walked out of with an empty gaze, teeth worrying at his lip. Bucky watched him for a moment, before patting him on the back comfortingly and then heading off into the direction of the kitchen, saying he was going to make some food for them both. Steve just grunted.

He really wished that at least one thing in his life could just be simple.

*****

It was 2 in the morning when Natasha finally slipped back in again. Everyone else had gone to bed by then, but Steve had been restless all night— thinking of his plans, his options, his frustrations as he stared at the peeling paint on his ceiling, until eventually just giving up and heading into the living room. It was only when he heard the little snicking of the lock that he realised Natasha hadn’t actually gotten back yet, and sat up a little straighter on the couch as he watched the door click.

She spotted him as soon as she opened the door, and her face cracked into a small smile, tired and
worn. Silently joining him on the couch, her knee brushed against his and she looked over, raising her eyebrow a little.

“This is a very dangerous game you’re playing,” she said quietly, after Steve had almost begun to fidget under the length of her silence. She didn’t look at him at him, but turned instead to the TV that was playing god only knew what, “I hope you know that.”

Steve nodded. “My feelings toward Tony don’t change the fact that I think it’s the right thing to do.”

“But your motivation is all messed up, and that will undoubtedly cloud your judgement- it already has for this mission- you want to drop it months before the time’s up, simply because you don’t want to lie to him any more. Does it not bother you that he managed to make you feel this way in such a short space of time?” Natasha turned to him then, eyes sharp. “You were a professional, Steve, and somehow he’s managed to pull you to pieces-”

“Have you ever considered the fact that maybe it’s just because sometimes people fall in love?” Steve asked her bluntly, “sometimes it’s not something we can control.”

Natasha just sighed. “But in this line of business, it is something we should walk away from, not cling to.”

Steve looked at her. She was the most level-headed of all of them. He knew how she worked- that really, she wanted a shot at being on the side of good, just like the rest of them obviously did- but at the same time, she was analytical. Maybe not as good as Steve when it came to heat of the moment decisions, but rather the choices that could be decided on over longer periods of time. She chose to think, rather than storm ahead blindly. He could admire that in her.

“I’m tired of running, Tash,” he clenched his jaw and looked down, “and- hell- I know it might not last. Even if we did all leave, we might get bored of it. We’re not exactly built for staying in one place and twiddling our thumbs. But.. I just believe it’s time we stopped trying to bear the responsibility of everyone we feel we owe. It’s time we learnt when to let things go, or change our angle a bit. And we don’t have to just… stop. We could tie things up. Clean off loose ends. You can talk to your tech guy, tell him he can drop the case. It’ll all sort itself out,” he pleaded in a last-ditch attempt, hoping against hope that she might just understand.

By the look on her face, he knew that she did. But he also knew that her mind wasn’t changing on her decision, either.

“I just don’t trust it, Steve,” she bit her lip, hands fluttering in discomfort by her side, “I wish I did, but I don’t trust Stark. This is... this is too similar to what I do to my targets. I- I want to trust your judgement, I do, but...”

“But it’s hard, when all you know is how not to trust someone,” Steve finished morosely, and Natasha just gave him a wry look, one eyebrow raised. “Look- Natasha, I understand. I wish that we could just drop everything, and I still believe that we could, but...” he shrugged, palming a hand over his face. “I’ll keep working the job. Keep up the scouting until the six month contract is done- but I don’t want it to be paid. I don’t want to work for anyone. If... if there’s even a chance that I- I find anything, then I want the hit to be for justice. Not money. I can’t work against Tony like that, I’m sorry, I just... can’t.”

Natasha nodded once. “And you can assure me that you won’t let your emotional compromisation get in the way of the job?”
“I can assure you I will ignore it if it does,” Steve answered, rubbing his forehead. “Believe me, Natasha- if I see something incriminating, I will flag it. Don’t doubt me on that. I know how important this is.”

She raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Together, they sat in the half-light, both staring blankly at the screen in front of them. Steve knew Natasha had something at the tip of her tongue, but waited for her to come out and say it herself. She wasn’t ever to be pushed.

“Are you really in love with him?”

Well. There it was. Steve jerked a little, suddenly feeling ten times more exposed than he had before. Natasha was looking at him again; blunt and as to-the-point as ever, and Steve both admired and hated it.

In the end, he simply shrugged. “He makes me want to be a good person. I’m not sure what that means.”

There was a moment of nothing, and then Natasha lay back, letting her eyes flutter shut. Her shoulder leaned into Steve’s, just a bit, and Steve returned it. “We’re not good people, Steve,” she said quietly.

Steve looked at her, and he smiled.

“We can learn to be.”

*****

When Steve slipped through the elevator and stepped out into the penthouse the next day, Tony was already at the kitchen in a finely pressed Armani suit and looking, as usual, a million bucks. Steve swallowed, his eyes flitting to the floor for a second as he mentally composed himself. He was a professional. He could deal with Tony in a suit, for Christ’s sake. It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen it a dozen times, by this point.

He sighed. Apparently, it seemed the effect Tony had on him had not yet worn off. Damn him.

“You don’t happen to have some sort of bagel about your person do you, Rogers?” Tony asked without turning, eyes focused intently on the coffee machine in front of him.

Steve huffed, watching Tony flit undecidedly between the fridge and the coffee that was seconds from completion. “Unfortunately I don’t carry breakfast items about my person on a normal day,
Mr. Stark,” he answered, wandering further in.

Tony grinned in response, turning up to look at him. Steve was, of course, in his own suit, complete with the dark shades and enough weaponry stored about his person to take out a small army. He raised an eyebrow to Tony when he rolled his eyes. “Problem?”

“You are aware I’m walking into a restaurant, not a battlefield, yeah?” Tony asked, turning his body and resting his hip against the counter as he folded his arms and looked Steve up and down, amused, “how many guns did you bring?”

“Only two,” Steve shoved his jacket back and flashed the holsters up at Tony, “better safe than sorry.”

“Right- and the three knives you got stuffed up various sleeves are just for securing the deal right?” Tony asked, and then when Steve looked vaguely surprised, Tony just waved at him, “you walk differently when you’re carrying.”

Ah. Genius. Steve forgot that sometimes.

“If you hadn’t noticed, you are currently being stalked by a psycho killer,” Steve rolled his eyes. “Excuse me for taking precautions.”

“Oh, it’s been like a month since he showed his face, and I’ve been going out tons,” Tony poured the coffee into his mug while he spoke, and then when he broke off it was to chug the thing, boiling hot, right down his throat, “bet seeing your face scared him right off. Plus, now we got the cops involved. He won’t be coming out of his hidey hole any time soon.”

Steve just grimaced. “Like I said- better safe than sorry.” He gave Tony a once over- raising an eyebrow when he reached Tony’s face again. “How long ago was it that you realised you actually have an appointment?”

Tony looked offended for a moment, but then he just shrugged in defeat. “Ten minutes ago. Although in all fairness, I was in the middle of something very important. These things tend to slip one’s mind.”

Steve didn’t even bother asking how many times JARVIS must have nagged him. It was better off not knowing. “I’ve got the route sorted. We’ll head off in ten, should arrive by 11:30-”

“Hey Steve?” Tony turned to him, sliding the mug over to the sink once it was empty, “listen- this meeting with the new investors? It’s pretty sensitive, so I’m gonna need you to just...back off while we’re there, alright? I don’t want them thinking that I’m bringing security to meet with them- it’ll make a bad first impression.”

Steve frowned. “What do you mean, back off?”

“I mean,” Tony made a fluttery gesture with his hand, beginning to walk toward the elevator, “you’re not exactly the most...approachable guy when you’re on the job- and I don’t want to spook them on the first meeting. So maybe just tail me on your bike rather than come in with me- sit by the bar, keep your distance a bit.”

Steve’s frown deepened, but he nodded briskly. He knew how finicky some of Tony’s people were- it was probably a good idea. “I go in before you though,” he said in the end.

Tony nodded his agreement and then straightened his suit. “How do I look?” he asked with a wink.
Steve pursed his lips and levelled Tony what he really hoped was a passive stare. “Battle ready, Mr. Stark.”

Tony hummed, and then ran a hand through his hair. Steve kept his eyes fixed on Tony’s. “Right-let’s be gone then, bodyguard- I have a brunch date with a lovely couple of billionaires.”

*****

Okay- so Steve was pissed.

He wasn’t even sure as to exactly why he was pissed. Or- well, okay, so maybe he had a little bit of an idea, and it involved the man and woman both playing footsie with Tony under a table full of smoked ham and pancakes- but that wasn’t the point.

He knew he shouldn’t be pissed- and that was what was making him pissed.

It was confusing.

He scowled into his eggs and rubbed a hand over his face, trying not to stare. It was just business. Tony did it all the time. Seal a deal & cop a feel, that was the industry motto. He had no rhyme nor reason to be…to be...

One of them brushed a strand of hair out of Tony’s eyes and tucked it behind his ear, and Steve all but cracked the plate his fingers were drumming against.

Fucking assholes. They looked shifty. Steve was only glaring because it was his goddamn job, alright- and he definitely sensed shiftiness about them. It was in the eyes. They were very shifty looking eyes.

God. If Natasha saw him now, she’d have smacked him around the back of the head. Or shot him. He shut his eyes and tried not to think too hard about it. Tony- well, he seemed to be enjoying himself, that was for damn sure. He was smiling and leaning in and kept licking his goddamn bottom lip, completely oblivious to how crazy it was driving Steve from across the room. It was probably doing exactly the same thing to the two people opposite Tony, too. Because- well- it was Tony. It was impossible not to want the man in some way. And that was exactly what he wanted. Obviously that was just what he did to everyone. Did to Steve.

Whatever.

He’d done a survey of the room, of the couple, of everything- it all looked clean. They weren’t in any immediate danger, and so they would finish the meal that probably cost more than Steve’s yearly salary, flirt a bit more just for good measure, and then go home. And Steve would sit there and sulk like a teenage boy throughout all of it.
Jesus. Tony wasn’t even...wasn’t even *his*. It was so goddamn stupid to feel this way.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out wearily. It was probably Peggy- she usually texted him something foul when he ate the last donut on the counter, and today had been one of those days-

It was an unknown number.

He frowned, but opened it anyway. His phone had about a billion different antivirus measures, courtesy of Natasha and Banner, so there wasn’t a chance it was spam. The number looked pretty normal- coming from the US, the right amount of digits to make it the same as any average number.

It was a photo. Steve squinted- the camera quality was shitty at best- and tilted the screen a little, trying to focus in on the blurry building it was-

The temperature of the room dropped ten degrees, and Steve felt his stomach drop right along with it as his brain caught up with his eyes.

That was the children’s home. *His* children’s home.

His breathing had ceased entirely as his eyes flicked down and read the message underneath it, keeping his hands steady so he could read the small letters:

*Tick*

*Tick*

*Tick*

*Tick*

*Boom.*

The world stopped for Steve. The next second passed by like it was a year, like it was an eternity.

The kids.

It was Tony’s stalker. Steve knew it. There was no way this was a coincidence. And now he was- what- trying to get Tony’s attention? Setting a trap? Blowing up a house full of….oh, *God*—
Steve was across the room before he’d even realised it. His first thought had been to run— to get on his bike and drive until he hit the outskirts of Brooklyn and could get all the kids out of that place, as fast as physically possible.

The second thought had been Tony. For all Steve knew, this was nothing more than a trap. A plot, to get Steve away. He had no idea. There were so many possibilities, and every second was wasting time.

He couldn’t leave Tony. But he sure as hell wasn’t going to stay.

Turning direction suddenly, he sprinted over to Tony’s table and grabbed his shoulder, hauling him out of his seat messily. Tony yelped at the suddenness of it; hands automatically going out to defend, but upon realising it was only Steve, he relaxed just a little. “What the hell?” He cried out instead.

“Security breach,” Steve bit, and then he was pulling Tony away, leaving him to yap apologies over to the stunned couple on the table he’d just spilt drinks all over.

He couldn’t think. For the first time in his entire career, he felt pure, unadulterated terror— making his heart beat wildly in his chest and his breathing ragged, uneven. The only thing that was stopping his hands from shaking was years of training.

“Steve, stop, let me fucking go and tell me what the fuck is going on,” Tony hissed, trying to pull away, but Steve just ignored him, ignored everyone looking at them as he kicked open the door and stormed out.

Tony was resisting him. That was bad. It would hinder his progress. He needed Tony to comply.

He wasted half a second pulling out his phone and shoving the message into Tony’s hands, but the result was almost immediate. Tony’s face drained of colour, and his mouth opened, horrified. “That’s—”

“We do not have time,” Steve growled, beginning to yank again, and this time Tony followed. “Get on the back of the bike.”

He threw his legs over the seat and kicked off the brake. He felt Tony press against him a second later, shaking hands wrapping tightly around his waist and chest pressing against his back. Steve only had one helmet, so he thrust it to Tony and then revved the engine without another word.

About three different cars blared their horns at him as he veered sharply into the road, but he didn’t care. He didn’t fucking care. He had one goal, and one goal only. Keep those kids safe.

And then when he was done, he’d hunt down the bastard that was doing this and rip him limb from limb.

*****
There was fucking traffic.

In a race for more than just his life, and Steve was about to be thwarted by some fucking traffic. He growled at the sight of the pileup, hands tightening so hard around the handlebars that he worried he’d dent them— but a moment later, he felt something press against his stomach, and realised it was Tony trying to get his attention.

“Turn right, down here,” he yelled into Steve ear, pointing over to a tiny little turnoff a couple of yards away. Steve followed the order instinctively. Tony knew this area better than he did, after all.

They ended up riding down a precariously small alley, but Steve was good on a bike and kept them true. When Tony signalled to the right as they reached the end, Steve swung them around the corner dangerously fast, but again, they stayed on, and that was all that mattered. Driving down a sidewalk and beeping his horn continuously, Steve weaved through people, lamp posts and benches, crossing over bridges and breaking at least twenty different laws until Tony pointed left at another alley and Steve ended up back on clearer, more legal roads again.

“I’ll pay the fines, just go, straight through, break a few mirrors if you have to,” Tony smacked his stomach again and Steve nodded, moving into the middle of the lane and speeding as fast as he could on the road. As predicted, he heard the shatters of a few mirrors as he brushed them, but the sounds of them and their angry owners went largely unnoticed. Steve was in a deeper focus than he was pretty sure he’d ever been in— those things were the least of his worries.

“JARVIS?” Tony called out, and Steve guessed he was on the phone to his AI, “JARVIS, I need the police, right now. Call the orphanage, tell them to evacuate the building. And get us the fastest route there. While you’re at it- hack into CCTV. I want a face on this fucker and I want it yesterday.”

There was silence for a few moments; and then a deep groan of despair. “What?” He yelled over the sound of the wind.

“Whoever’s at the desk is, apparently, not answering the fucking phone,” Tony gritted, “or our guy blocked their reception so we wouldn’t be able to warn them. Right- just get the police, JARVIS, tell them what’s happening.”

Steve hissed. His heart was hammering; he felt like he was walking into the biggest trap of his life, and he couldn’t even stop. He had to… the kids were in danger. There was nothing he wouldn’t do at that point, if it meant keeping them out of harm’s way. Keeping them out of this stupid dangerous fucking mess.

He slammed his hand on the horn again as he ran the red light and turned, weaving through oncoming traffic. There were various yells and another wave of beeping, but it didn’t do anything to stop Steve. Tony was clutching his waist tightly, but seemed just as determined as him, because he wasn’t saying a word. Just directing Steve to the fastest routes JARVIS was giving him.

Heart racing as fast as his mind, Steve hurtled through New York and in the direction of his childhood home.
He yanked the bike to a stop just outside the doors and was dismounting immediately after, stumbling a little as he regained his balance and pulled out both guns from behind his back. He heard Tony’s shoes scuffing against the gravel behind him, and blindly threw the gun back, listening to Tony’s hand snap around it a second later. “You see anyone suspicious, you shoot on sight, understand?” Steve bit out, before pulling open the door and storming through.

Automatically, his hand slammed down on the fire alarm by the wall- but nothing sounded. As he glanced over, the splayed wires visible just under the lever stared right back at him, and he snarled as he punched straight at the thing in fury.

That sadistic fuck had been in the orphanage. With the kids. God, Steve was going to eviscerate him. Slowly and painfully and with extreme fucking prejudice.

“JARVIS, you know the drill.” Steve turned, watching Tony speak into the phone at his mouth. His face was grey and his hands shaking, but there was nothing other than determination in his eyes as he gripped tight to the phone. “Scan the building- energy fluctuations, chemical traces- I want every scan you can make set on this building and I want that bomb found.”

Whilst Tony talked, Steve sprinted off in the direction of the common room he knew a lot of the kids hung out in during the lazy afternoons. He could hear the chatter of at least three people as he hurried through- quickly cut off once he’d thrown open the door and made his presence known.

“Everyone OUT,” he yelled at them, gesturing to the door wildly, “you’re in danger guys, I need you out of this building as fast as possible. Don’t stop, just go. Wait outside for me, ‘kay, I need to go tell the others.”

For kids that everyone assumed were pretty useless, they were remarkably quick to catch on. Didn’t ask questions, didn’t even make a noise- just nodded solemnly and then ran out, clutching one another. Had it been any other circumstance, Steve might have smiled. He’d taught them well.

Once the room was empty, he ran back out into the corridor and turned again, bumping into Tony along the way. “Got anything?” he asked as he kicked open the next door and repeated the process, watching Kadesh and Amir, the five year old twins, as they shot wide eyes over to him and hurried away with their hands clutched tight to one another.

“Working on it,” Tony gritted, “I’ll get top floor out, You go to the staffroom, tell them to turn on the fire alarm. Failing that, the sprinkler system.”

Steve nodded, turning back around. By that point, some of the kids on the remaining bottom floor had begun to hear the commotion and were peering out behind various rooms with wide, curious eyes. Steve knew he probably looked pretty intimidating at that moment, and he made an effort to soften his face as he hurried over to Ryan and his older brother.
“Jace, take Ryan and the rest of the kids in there and run,” Steve grabbed the boy’s shoulders, looking at him seriously, “you’re the oldest, so I need you to keep everyone calm outside, okay? That’s your job. Make sure they all stay away from the building.”

“What the hell’s going on, Steve?” Jason asked, brow furrowed deeply as his hand automatically clutched around Ryan’s shoulder. Steve didn’t know a lot about the kid- he was a newcomer, and seemed to like to keep to himself- but he knew he was a good kid, and that he was fiercely protective of his little brother.

Steve paused, beginning to hurry him through the doors, “there’s something dangerous in the building. Just- just keep everyone calm outside until I can find Janet and the others, then they’ll go out and look after you whilst I sort this out.”

Looking confused and more than a little afraid, Jason picked Ryan up and took him off, whilst another handful of kids followed in his wake. Steve didn’t stop to watch him- just slammed through into the staffroom at the end of the corridor and did a headcount of all the adults present in the room. Janet and Al were both there, with a couple of other staff members littered on various sofas, and all looking thoroughly surprised by Steve’s sudden presence.

“You need to evacuate the building,” Steve told them, “get up, go, the kids are waiting for you outside right now, and I’ll go get the rest on the second floor. Al, turn the fire drill on, or the sprinklers, or anything that will get the rest of the kids out of the building.”

“Steve?” Janet asked incredulously, putting down her cup of tea and staring up at him, “what on Earth-”

“I need you to trust me,” Steve said desperately, starting to back out again, “we think there’s a bomb somewhere in the building. You have got to look after the kids outside- me and Tony are going to the top floors, just...hurry, okay, and keep them safe.”

He didn’t have to time to waste. He swivelled around again, heading toward the stairwell and to the top floor he already guessed Tony was working through, if the stream of kids jumping down the stairs in a panicked hurry was anything to go by.

“Steve, Steve!” He turned, spotting Stacey, the new accounting girl who’d been on the phone to him a few days back, leaping toward him. Her eyes were blown wide and hands shaking. “Steve-God-“

“Stacey, I don’t have time,” Steve pushed away, beginning to jump up the stairs, “just get out of the building as fast as y-”

“Steve, someone set a timer on my computer,” she cut in, swallowed, and that definitely made Steve stop in his tracks, “I didn’t even realise- I hadn’t turned it on all morning, but-”

“How long?” Steve said quickly.

“Two minutes,” she whispered. “I put it on my phone, look-“ she threw the phone up the stairs, and it was a terrible fucking shot, but Steve managed to get his hand around it anyway, “God, Steve, get everyone out, please, don’t let them-”

“We’ll be fine,” Steve called after her, starting up on the stairs again, “just get outside.”

He threw himself onto the second floor, spotting Tony on the right hand side of the hall, banging on doors and yelling for everyone to get out. His head turned as he watched Steve lurch into view, and then held up his phone for a second.
“JARVIS says it’s in the attic. I can’t get a measure on how powerful it is, but the whole room’s gonna go at the very least.”

Steve nodded, holding up Stacey’s phone. “We have one and a half minutes,” he responded, before slamming a hand against the nearest door.

Both he and Tony hurried everyone out- most coming on their own once they heard the commotion being made out in the corridor, and once every room had been emptied, he met with Tony in the middle of the room, checking the timer. Thirty seconds.

“Go,” he pushed Tony, a hand grasping at his collar and throwing him forward. His heart was still racing, and he just wanted to get the damn hell out of the house before it started blowing up.

Wanted Tony out of the house, now that the kids were accounted for.

“I can turn it off,” Tony pushed him away, ducking back under his arm until he was a few steps above Steve, “maybe. We can’t just let it-

“We can and we will,” Steve growled, reaching for Tony again, “I do not care if you think you can disarm it- we need to get out of the blast radius right now.”

“But the building-”

“IS NOT WORTH YOUR LIFE, TONY!” Steve roared. His hand yanked at Tony’s wrist and pulled him down the stairs again, but there was a sudden jerk from the other man that had Steve pausing just for a second. Beneath him, Tony’s eyes were suddenly widening, and then a sharp hiss of breath was drawn from his mouth, face paling even further.

“Wait,” he said quietly, looking up at Steve. “...Did you see Peter?”

“What? Tony-”

“Did you see Peter go, Steve?” Tony yelled that time, hands clutching tightly to Steve’s biceps, shaking a little in panic, and Steve’s brow furrowed in confusion, because he hadn’t, no, but he’d just assumed he must have been downstairs and-

Steve’s heart stopped.

Oh God. Peter’s workshop.

In the attic.

He lurched forward immediately, falling into the empty space Tony had just vacated as he sprinted down the hall in the direction of the attic ladder. Steve was aware he was screaming Peter’s name
as Tony took a running leap and managed to get his fingers around the hook dangling down from
the attic entrance, but of course, there was no answer. It was unlikely Peter could hear anything up
there at all.

The ladder slowly fell down as Tony yanked, and Steve screamed for Peter again, but the kid was
playing his fucking music, and playing it loudly, he wasn’t going to be able to hear him-

“Fuck!” Steve yelled, jumping straight up and then holding onto the rungs three quarters of the
way up, “PETER!”

He lifted himself into the room, inwardly counting down the seconds in his head.

Twelve. There were twelve seconds left. Even if he grabbed Peter, there would not be enough to
time to go back and get down to safety.

He kept going anyway.

“PETER!” He yelled again, and this time the music was cut off and there was a worried little
“Steve?” in response.

His head turned wildly, following the noise. Peter was on the other end of the room, looking at him
curiously, buried in between all the spare mattresses and rolls of wallpaper they kept up there. He
had a pile of books surrounding him, including one sitting firmly on his lap.

Nine seconds.

He noticed to his right that Tony had joined him, and his head was turning fast, undoubtedly
searching for the bomb. But Steve just grabbed his hand and yanked forward, keeping him close.
There was no time to disable it, and Steve wasn’t going to leave him behind.

Eight seconds.

Sprinting forward with Tony behind him, he did the first thing that he could think of, and thanked
his lucky fucking stars that he was as strong as he was, as both his hands grabbed each end of one
of the thick mattresses and yanked it upright, so it was pressed firmly up against Steve’s body.

“Grab Pete,” he gritted out to Tony, before turning his head to the right and focusing in on the little
balcony window that Peter had thankfully thrown open to reduce the stifling heat of the uppermost
floor. It led out to a tiny balcony, surrounded by peeling black railings, and was Steve’s last
fleeting hope.

Seven seconds.

There was a fraction of a moment’s silence behind him, and then “get on my back Peter, now, and
do not let go until I tell you, understood?”

Ah. So Tony had caught on to the plan, then.

Taking a short, sharp breath, Steve braced. “Follow close. When I jump, grab hold of me.”

And then he ran.
Sprinting as fast as he could with a giant mattress digging into his knees and pretty much entirely obscuring his view, Steve ran sideways, heading through to the window. Behind him, he heard Peter starting to cry in panic, but couldn’t stop. There were five seconds, and then Steve was probably going to be put through a hell of a lot of pain.

The building backed onto a slope, and Steve had to hope that was enough. He had to hope that, and the thick mattress, would break their fall enough to keep them alive. Or at least- Tony and Peter. He was the one who stood the smallest chance of survival from this idiotic plan.

But hell. It was the only chance they had.

He felt the fresh air as he stepped foot on the balcony- heard the cracking of the paint as his foot leaped high and scuffed against the railing.

And then he was leaping into nothingness.

There was a second where it was just him, alone as the air pushed against the mattress and threw his hair back from his eyes- and then he felt two hands clasp around his shoulders, holding on in a steel grip that would have put Peggy Carter to shame.

Tony. And Peter, from the sounds of the screams.

Behind them, there was a sudden and all-consuming noise, and Steve barely managed to keep from flinching in shock as the explosion ripped through the air. He shut his eyes, slackened his jaw and just held onto the corners of the mattress as they all fell through the air for what felt like eternity.

It was too high. Too long. Steve had killed them all.

But then, out of nowhere, the sensation of falling cut off suddenly, overtaken by a bursting pain spasming up his ribcage, accompanied with a sickening crack from somewhere in his chest that signalled they must have hit solid ground. They landed heavily, and Steve heard a yell of pain ripped from his own throat- the mattress barely managing to keep him from breaking all the bones in his body. It didn’t help with the added weight of Tony and Peter pressing against his back, crushing pressure from all sides. Steve knew his ribs were fractured at best. It was just a question of whether they’d burst a lung and make it fatal or not.

At least I’m still conscious, he thought, as the mattress bounced messily down the slope and sent fresh waves of agony washing over Steve’s middle. Thankfully, he could still feel Tony’s fingers
digging in, terrified, against his shoulders, and the screams of Peter above him meant that they were both still alive as well.

That was good. He hadn’t failed them.

He must have passed out for a moment, because when he opened his eyes the next time, they’d stopped slipping down the hill. There was something covering his head, and as he attempted to look at it, he realised it was Tony’s arms, braced over him. Peter was tucked under them too- Steve could hear his panicked crying- and Steve guessed Tony was shielding them both from the rubble and falling debris coming from the top of Steve’s old home.

“We’re okay,” Tony hissed, and Steve felt the faint sensation of a hand cupping his face softly, “we’re okay, we made it, Peter’s fine, just...don’t move, Steve, I think you’ve broken something-”

Steve looked up, wincing at the brightness as Tony moved his arm and looked down at him. His nose was bleeding pretty heavily, and he was holding his wrist a little funny, but he seemed to have fared better than Steve, who was actually feeling kinda drowsy after that ordeal-

“No no, Steve, stay awake, come on, come on, don’t-

The last thing he felt was Tony’s hands tapping his cheek a little frantically, before darkness clouded over him and the pain, thankfully, subsided.

*****

“There three broken ribs, two broken fingers, one sprained ankle and a severe concussion, all from deciding to jump out of the top story window? Impressive.”

Steve’s eyes fluttered open, and seeing Bucky sat by his bedside, smiled automatically. “H’llo t’you too,” he slurred.

“You’re goddamn lucky you’re alive,” Bucky told him, shaking his head. He was smiling, but his eyes were worried. No doubt he’d been told about what was happening. “That probably would have killed anyone who wasn’t as goddamn stubborn as you.”

Steve almost laughed, before remembering two very important questions. “Tony?” He jerked, hearing the heart monitor freak a little to his left, “Peter? Are they- are they o-”

“Hey, hey,” a hand settled on his, thumb soothing over the skin, and Steve jerked in surprise at the contact that definitely hadn’t come from Bucky- his arms were folded in on each other. “I’m all good, and so is Peter. Look- we’re right here, see?”

Steve turned, watching Tony smile down at him tiredly. The blood had been cleaned from his face and his hand put in a cast, which Peter was clutching to very tightly, staring at Steve with wide eyes.
“Are you okay?” Steve asked them both hoarsely, his gaze flicking worriedly between them.

Tony nodded, and so did Peter. “Landed funny on my wrist and dislocated it. Peter banged his head a bit on my shoulder, but you were really brave, weren’t you buddy? We both came out okay. Thanks to you,” Tony said the last bit softly, thumb stroking feather-light against the back of Steve’s palm.

Steve just smiled up at him. He felt light-headed and woozy, and guessed he must have been put on something to ease the pain. Tony’s face seemed almost as if it was glowing. “‘S’my job t’ keep ya Okay,” he mumbled, “would be a shit bodyguard if you stopped bein’ Okay in my charge.”

“Well- you’d have thought Stark over there was the goddamn bodyguard, by the way he treated me when I tried to get over to your bedside,” Bucky muttered to his side, and Steve raised an eyebrow in question whilst Tony pulled a face and said something undoubtedly unsavory under his breath, “guy wouldn’t even let me in- told me he’d shoot me if I took another damn step-”

“How the hell was I supposed to know you were his friend?” Tony cut in, flailing his arms, “if you didn’t notice, someone had just tried to blow us all up, so excuse me for the safety precautions-”

“It was only Peter spottin’ me and running into my arms that made him finally back down and let me in,” Bucky finished like Tony hadn’t spoken at all, shaking his head, “thought I was gonna have to clock Tony Stark in the face in order to see my own goddamn friend.”

By his other side, Tony snorted and folded his arms. “Would’ve just shot you, buddy.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow to Steve, but said nothing. It was Peter who broke the silence, one of his hands tapping apprehensively against his wrist as he tried to climb up the bed. With a little assistance from Tony, Peter ended up crossing his legs and sitting next to Steve, watching the rise and fall of his chest with a deep frown on his face. Steve felt another wave of fury overcome him; a little muted from the drugs, but present all the same.

Someone had nearly killed Peter. Someone had blown up his home. Peter was seven - he wasn’t supposed to be leaping out of windows and escaping explosions. The fact that he was still there at all was a miracle- the fact he was not only there, but also not a complete and utter wreck, just showed how tough the kid actually was. All children in care were warriors, that was for sure.

“I thought you were dead,” Peter said, lip trembling a little bit, “I thought- your eyes went closed and Tony was shaking you but you wouldn’t wake up and-”

“Shhh, shh, buddy,” Steve tried to maneuver a hand to hold Peter’s, but ended up weakly clutching at a knee instead. “I’m okay. Been through worse. Just a coupl’a broken ribs, buddy. You did amazing today though- so brave for us, so so brave- jumpin’ outta windows, huh? Bet not a lot of other kids can say they did that an’ survived.”

Peter dropped his head and bit his lip, pulling a watery smile. “Tony said it was a bad man who was trying to get his attention.” He looked up, and when he glanced down at Steve, a tear fell from the corner of his eye, “are they going to do it again?”

“No,” and this time it was neither Steve nor Bucky who spoke, but Tony, looking over at him fiercely, fist clenched at his side, “we’re not gonna let that happen, Peter. I got a team working on fixing up your home right now- and I’ll put a bunch of security, the best I can get, around the perimeter. We’ll find him. I won’t- it won’t happen again.”

Tony’s jaw was clenched and his eyes determined. Steve wondered what he was thinking.
“The others are waiting out back,” Bucky told him, jerking his head to the door, “you wanna see ‘em?”

Steve shut his eyes and smiled weakly. “Guess I can let ‘em have a minute of my time.”

Tony shuffled a little, clearing his throat. Steve knew what he was going to say, so he curled his hand a little tighter around Tony’s and turned his head.

“Stay,” he told him softly. “Please.”

Tony’s lips parted and he swallowed. It looked as if he was about to argue, but instead he just slumped back into the chair, nodding. His fingers squeezed. “Sure. I… sure.”

He looked far away, mind moving onto things that Steve was far too drowsy to keep up with. The frown on his face and the paleness to his cheeks was worrying- but what was perhaps even more concerning was that Steve got the overwhelming sensation that Tony was sitting on something important. Or at the very least, planning something. He just had that look in his eyes. That fierce defiance, the harsh determination in his glare.

He wanted to ask what it was- but the beginning of his words were drowned by the sudden bursting of three people into his room, all hurrying over to ask about him, and he had to push Tony for aside for a moment in order to tend to his worried friends.

He kept his hand wrapped around Tony’s, though.

Chapter End Notes

Dum dum DUMMMMMM!
“You’re not telling me something.”

Tony raised his eyebrows and jumped a little. Not even a second since he’d walked through the door of the medical room, and Steve was already onto him. Dammit.

The man in question was sat up on the bed, tablet disregarded by his side. His arms were folded firmly, barely even able to wrap themselves around the stupidly big muscles on each arm. He had his serious face on.

Tony slipped fluidly into an assuring smile, holding up his hands. “I’m not telling you what I had for breakfast today. Not telling you what the stocks in SI are like this morning. Not telling you a lot of things, Steve, that’s just-”

“It’s been four days since I was put in the hospital,” Steve began, holding Tony’s stare unwaveringly, “since then, you’ve told about 50% less jokes than you usually would. You’ve looked at your phone 280 times.”

“If you haven’t noticed, Steve, I’m running a company-”

“You jump whenever it buzzes,” Steve told him calmly, and okay, that one was on Tony, he should really know how to control his tics by now, that was just stupid.

There was silence; Tony stood rigid by the door as Steve looked across to him. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“No.”

“What?”

“Because it’s not your business.”

Steve face finally cracked at that; moving from carefully structured neutrality to anger as fast as it would’ve taken Tony to click his fingers. “You know what I think, Tony? I think this has something to do with the stalker. And if I’m right, which I usually am, then it most certainly is my business, because I’m the one who got put in hospital for it and Peter and his friends are the ones who nearly died because of it. They are the children that I have a responsibility toward- so don’t push me out of this, Tony, don’t even try, this is now my business just as fucking much as it is yours.”

Tony felt the breath catch in his throat; the words hitting him in the face even harder than they did when he thought them himself. Hearing Steve say it brought a whole new wave of guilt rolling
through him, the *this is your fault, this is your fault, this is your fault* ringing even louder in his head.

He looked away, over to the bedside table where piles of thankyou cards were lined up, all hand-drawn by the kids. He’d read a few of them- most running along the same lines, talking about how grateful they were to ‘Uncle Steve’ for being a hero and saving them. Saving them from Tony’s mess.

This was all on him.

“I know that,” Tony snapped, shoving his hands in his pockets and winding his fingers around the phone once again, “but this bit really doesn’t concern you. This is me sorting this shit out, once and for all.”

“Tony,” Steve said waringly, “I am your bodyguard-”

“That doesn’t mean you have the right to control my decisions-”

“I am your friend,” Steve interrupted, and his voice went quiet at that, sounded almost as if he was pleading. Tony was still staring stubbornly at the table, but then he saw Steve’s legs swing into view and his eyes snapped up, watching the idiot as he pushed himself upright on his shaky ankle, “and I care about you, Tony, damn it, please- just tell me what happened.”

“Sit down, Steve.”

“No.”

“Steve-”

“I’m not going to leave you alone until you let me know, and if that means I have to follow you on this damn leg then I will, okay, I’m an asshole like th-”

“He sent me a fucking message, alright?” Tony spat, pulling out his phone and opening it up before throwing it into Steve’s waiting hands angrily, “sent it a couple hours after the explosion. Do not have a fucking clue how he got my number, and it doesn’t have a trace- sent it on a burner phone and chucked it in a trashcan after, so there’s no lead there.”

He watched Steve’s eyes move fractionally, scouring the letters and burning them into his mind in the same way Tony had.

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Hello.

*I’m sorry about the big explosion. Really, I am. I hadn’t known the child would be in there, and I trusted you to get all the rest of them out to safety. When I heard you’d been taken to the hospital I was almost sick with worry. You were never meant to be caught up in that explosion, and if Rogers had been a better bodyguard, he would have kept you out of harm’s way. But there you go, I suppose.*

*Tony, please. Maybe it is twisted, maybe I’m sick, but I want you to play the game. I need you to play the game with me, don’t you get it? Don’t you see? We are having fun! I want to know how close I can get before they catch me. I want to be able to feel you. We would be so good together. My blood is yours, yours is mine. I love you, Tony.*
Rogers was hurt. I know that much— one cannot fall from a building of that height without sustaining pretty severe injuries— so it’s just you and me. How it should be. I want to be able to finally meet you. I want to be able to touch. Smell.

In three days, I’m going to send you a location. Come to it. Alone. I will know if you’re not. I will know if you call the police. I know everything. And if I find out you’re not playing the game properly, there will be consequences, both for those you involved and those who were unlucky enough to be picked out for my game.

Please do this for me, Tony. I don’t want to have to hurt people again, but if you don’t do exactly as I ask, I’m afraid that there is something else planned. Call it an insurance policy. And I know you wouldn’t want that to happen. So just… let me have this. No one will get hurt if you let me have this. The kids, they’ll be safe, I promise. Just leave the police out of it, and listen to me, and they will be absolutely fine. I would never hurt them unless absolutely necessary.

Yours, always.

“Tomorrow,” Tony said, when Steve remained silent, “he wants to meet me tomorrow, alone, and I’m going.”

Silence. Steve stopped reading, entire body tensing up. A second later, he looked up and stared incredulously. “You cannot be serious.”

“Oh, believe me, this is very fucking serious,” Tony shook his head and turned away again, jaw clenched, “you said it yourself, Steve, he nearly fucking killed a bunch of innocent fucking kids to try and get my attention, and he will do it again if I don’t start fucking acting rather than just cowering behind y-“

“All this time, and it’s only the people around me that he’s targeted,” Tony told him quietly, face turning to the floor, “he won’t kill me. He hasn’t so far. This is the only chance I have of stopping him.”

“No,” Steve shook his head frantically out of the corner of Tony’s vision, “no, Tony, believe me, I know how this works, you think you can stop him but it won’t, you won’t have the upper hand in this situation and he will take you, okay? Bad plan. We need to think of something else.”

“There’s not enough time to think of something else, Steve!” Tony hissed, spinning around and stepping forward, getting in Steve’s space, “you read the message! ‘Please do what I say, Tony, or I’ll have to resort to extreme measures again, Tony, and you wouldn’t fucking want that, Tony!’ He yelled, hands snapping out to the sides hysterically.

He jerked as Steve caught his wrists fluidly, broken fingers be damned, and tugged him closer, until they were practically chest to chest. He looked horrified. “Tony. Trust me- you go there, backup or no, and he will win. He has access to explosives that can decimate a building. He knows our schedules. He is coming for you, and people will get hurt along the way whether you like it or not. Listen- let me talk to some friends, we can set this up the right way, okay, we will sort this out once and for all-”
“I’m not dragging your fucking friends into my mess, Steve, Jesus!” Tony hissed.

“I promise, Tony, they know what they’re doing,” Steve said quietly, and there was something in his eyes that Tony couldn’t read- Steve had so many parts of him that he hid away, and Tony felt like screaming when he saw it. He didn’t want to think about all the things Steve didn’t tell him right now.

“I don’t care if they’re the finest trained killers in the damn world, Steve!” Tony yelled, and Steve jerked back, dropping Tony’s hand like it was burning, “I don’t care, I don’t…”

He felt dizzy. The stress, that’s what it fucking was. Turning his hair gray and messing with his head. He curled inward a little, gripping his hair between tight fingers as he clenched his eyes shut and tried to quiet his ever-moving brain for one single fucking second.

“I will not let anyone else get hurt because of this,” he said quietly, “not your friends, not the kids… no one. This is my problem. I- I have to fix it.”

Steve was a quiet presence by his side. He hadn’t moved an inch- stuck to the space he’d leaped into like there was glue on his shoes, and Tony guessed if he looked up at that moment, it would be to Steve’s eyes on the side of his face.

“If you go there, God knows what will happen to you. You will be completely at his mercy,” he heard Steve’s voice, wavering a little toward the end, “Tony- please listen. I will never be able to forgive myself if something happens to you. You can’t- please don’t do this to me.”

Tony jumped a little, feeling the words hit him hard. He’d turned toward Steve before he could help himself; noting the greyness in the other man’s cheeks, the horror evident on his face. It was consuming. It made him want to get on his knees and beg forgiveness, do anything until he could wipe it away.

“I don’t owe you anything,” Tony lied instead, “and this is happening, whether you want it or not.”

Steve paused. Tony glared at him for a few more seconds, before his gaze fell away again. He couldn’t bear to see Steve looking at him like that.

“Then we’d better start thinking of a plan, hadn’t we?”

Tony didn’t even bother to look surprised. Of course Steve would want to help. Steve always wanted to help. “No-”

“Yes, Tony,” Steve bit, angry and hard and desperate as he pushed himself forward and took Tony’s shoulder, swinging him around, “if you think I’m letting you go in there alone, you’re delusional. I will crawl if I have to. But I refuse to let you risk your life without some sort of backup. I don’t care what you say, either- you can shout and you can scream all you fucking want, but I’m not listening. I’m coming with you.”

“Steve, did you not listen to what he said?” Tony told him, feeling as if he was going around in circles. Both of them caught in a loop that neither of them intended to back down from, “he will kill you! I can stop him on my own-”

“Stop lying to yourself! You’re just throwing yourself forward for no reason other than to die for everyone else! Don’t think I can’t see that Tony, I’m not blind. This is a suicide mission if I ever saw one. You know that. I know that. So just… stop. Calm down. Let’s work this out together.”

Tony stared at him helplessly. Steve wasn’t going to fucking listen to him. Steve was going to
forge ahead and do exactly what Tony had pretty much begged him not to, all because he was stubborn enough to believe he could do it. But he fucking couldn’t. Whatever he thought, at the end of the day, he was just a bodyguard. Not even one with a hell of a lot of experience with anything like this, at that. He’d go in and try and help Tony and then the sick bastard would kill him like he was nothing, like he was just another worthless life and not the brightest person in Tony’s whole fucking life-

He couldn’t let it happen. Not Steve. Not ever… not Steve.

He let his eyes shut and took a breath.


There was a slight break, and then “seriously?” Spoken quietly into the room.

Tony swallowed.

“Seriously,” he lied.

****

The plan was relatively simple.

Tony would get the location. He’d show Steve. Steve would call his buddies, and they’d go sort out the problem. Apparently.

Steve was asking Tony to trust him that they could get the job done. Said they had experience in this sort of thing, whatever that meant. They couldn’t contact the police- it was too fucking risky; the guy was obviously volatile and wildly sporadic in his actions, and Tony downright refused to get any more people caught up in this shit than absolutely necessary- so Steve had just promised that he would sort it out without all the red tape instead.

“Are you planning on killing him?” Tony asked quietly, as Steve poured out a coffee on the counter.

Steve paused and then sighed, setting down the carafe slowly. “That was the idea, yes,” he admitted, turning around, “is that a problem?”

“That’s murder,” Tony told him, “how do you intend to get away with that? We have no solid evidence that even says it’s him. You’ll go down for homicide.”
“No, I promise we won’t.”

Tony laughed humorlessly. Steve was running around thinking he was invincible- so caught up in trying to do his job that he was willing to kill a man and blindly assume he’d get away with it. Tony didn’t have a problem with the killing part- the fucker could burn in hell after what he’d tried to do and was prepared to do in future- it was the stupid brashness of Steve’s actions that got to him. Pretending he knew what he was doing.

“Tony,” Steve’s voice came close, and Tony looked up just as Steve placed his hands against Tony’s shoulders and stared down at him seriously, “you have to trust me. I know how this looks. I know.” He bit his lip and shut his eyes for a second, before sucking in a breath and then looking back downward to Tony once more, “but I will do this. Trust me. Please.”

Tony stared up at him. They were both so tired- working through the night to create a plan that Tony wasn’t even going to follow. Lying to Steve was a hell of a lot harder than he’d ever thought it would be. It felt like betrayal.

But he couldn’t sit there and let Steve work out how he was best going to die for Tony. He just couldn’t.

“I do trust you,” Tony told him. At least that one was the truth.

*****

Half way through the SI conference that morning, Tony slipped out of the room and started making his way down the corridor.

He’d got the text. He knew where to go.

Steve was still on patrol, and if Tony’s internal clock was right, he’d be coming up to the south side of the building by that point. Opposite end of the exit.

Perfect. He wasn’t going to get in the way.

Hands gripping at the railings, he jumped down the stairs quickly and made his way to the garage. JARVIS was a silent presence in his earpiece and the gun he’d tucked into the holster rested comfortingly against his hip. It was going to be fine. He wasn’t thinking too hard about it. He just... just wanted the sick fuck to stop, that was all- whatever it took to make him stop. And maybe he was being rash and panicking, but it was still a better option than letting Steve and a group of his friends take hits they didn’t need to.

Tony trusted Steve, he did. With his life. Which was why he couldn’t let him do this. Tony just
wasn’t worth that.

He’d do it himself. And if it all went to shit- well- at least it wasn’t Steve who would get hurt.

He arrived in the garage a few minutes later. “JARVIS, pop the location in- and warm up the seats, my ass is freezing,” Tony said lightly, walking forward.

“Sir, please, I implore you to think about your actions. You are scared, and it’s prohibiting you from thinking cl-”

“If you haven’t got anything beneficial to say, JARVIS, please mute,” Tony told him sharply, yanking open the door and sitting down. He shut his eyes and pursed his lips, trying not to think about the vast proportion of ways this could all go horribly wrong and just focus on getting his ass over there before the psycho decided to bomb another building. He knew it was a terrible plan- but it was all he had. The GPS tracker he’d fitted into the lining of his jacket was going to turn on in 1 hour, and he’d swallowed a radioisotope tracer on the day he’d received the message. It’d probably scrape a few years off his life, yeah, but it meant he wasn’t going to go anywhere without JARVIS being able to find him, so he’d take it. If he wasn’t back in the time it took for the GPS to turn itself on, JARVIS would tell Steve and the police the location and get him the fuck out. Hopefully they wouldn’t get that far, and Tony could just pile the threats on him until he caved and ran away with his tail between his legs. If not… well- that was what the contingency plan was for, wasn’t it?

He flicked his eyes over to the rear-view mirror and glanced at himself. In the relative darkness of the garage, it was difficult to see quite how exhausted he was. He hadn’t slept properly since Steve had been put in hospital, and every moment onward had just become more and more stressful.

He just wanted it all to stop. He wanted…

Blonde hair and blue eyes and a laugh that sounded like music and hands that were so soft and a body that could kill with ease but let Tony feel safer than he was pretty sure he ever had in his life-

“Fuck,” he shut his eyes and cursed softly, letting his forehead thump against the wheel held between his hands.

It was a mess. It was all such a mess- he was in love with his own bodyguard, how ridiculous was that? Steve was… so far out of his league it was stupid. Steve cared. Steve was good. Steve was nothing like him, and he would never in a million years want anything to do with Tony outside of doing his job. And doing his job was only proving to become more and more dangerous for him- Tony was putting him in danger, just from exposure. Tony brought destruction wherever he stepped- everyone knew that. It was why he only had Pepper and Rhodey- they were the only ones mad enough to stay.

He knew he had to let Steve go eventually. Get him away before he got hurt. Because he was going to get hurt; it was inevitable. And if it wasn’t Tony doing the hurting, then it would be the man with a weird obsession and supply of explosives on hand. And Tony was absolutely happy to go it alone if it meant he could get Steve as far away from that as possible.

God, it was almost funny. Steve was the one supposed to be protecting Tony- but Tony wasn’t going to let him do that at the expense of his own safety, and so they were just cancelling one another out.
And who even knew how Steve was going to react to this. Maybe he’d give up and quit. Tony both wished deeply for it and desperately hoped he’d stay all the same, because he was fucking selfish and Steve was- Steve was Steve. Tony felt like he was addicted to everything about him; desperate for a hit whenever he was gone, needing to get as much of him as possible when he was there. Steve’s smile alone did more to him than any drug ever had.

God. He was so fucked.

“Unmute,” he mumbled, pushing himself up and blinking a few times, “JARVIS, just tell me where the coordinates take us.”

There was a short silence, and Tony knew that was JARVIS’s version of a sullen silence. He never liked being put on mute. “A parking garage twenty four minutes away from here, sir. Calculating route now.”

“Good,” Tony shoved the keys in the car and revved the engine in the empty garage, “then let’s get this show on the road.”

****

The parking garage was barely even a parking garage- it had been abandoned for years, and Tony couldn’t actually get his car in through the entrance thanks to the fenced-off gates that had been hitched up over it. He gritted his teeth, but parked up on the side of the road and slid out fluidly all the same. He knew the guy was in there somewhere- there was probably a side entrance or fire escape that he could-

His eyes picked up on the inconspicuous doorway on the side of the building, and he felt his heart speed up a few paces. He was acting like an idiot, yes, but that didn’t mean he was one- he knew once he went in there, there wasn’t any going back. No doubt there was all sorts of shit set up to make sure he didn’t try anything funny- sort of nulling his idea that he had a hope in hell of gaining the upper hand here. The prospect of actually having to spend more than an hour with the guy was fast becoming more and more likely, and it made his skin crawl in trepidation, but he knew that he couldn’t just turn away. People’s lives depended on it.

Swallowing hard, he steeled his nerves and pushed at the doorway with a hand. It didn’t budge when he turned the handle, but after a second, he heard the sound of a mechanism releasing and realised the guy must be electronically operating it. Sharp eyes caught sight of a tiny camera placed in the corner of the doorway, and inconspicuous wiring fitted all around the door. Tony knew what a trigger looked like when he saw one.

But it wasn’t designed for him. The man had let him in- he had entry. Tony figured this lovely welcome gift was for any extras who tried to follow him in. So, with a tentative breath and a brief moment to question what the fuck he was doing, he stepped inside.
God, he hoped this plan didn’t fall apart.

The parking garage was dingy and dark- hadn’t been used in years. If Tony hadn’t been kind of terrified already, then he probably would have been thoroughly creeped out by it. Paint peeled off the walls- a large, utterly empty floor spanned out in front of him, complete with all the trimmings like spiderwebs and chilling drafts. The windows had been boarded up, but some light fell through the cracks where it had rotted away or just been missed completely.

It smelt like death and decay.

Tony huffed in ironic amusement, eyes scanning the immediate area for signs of danger. His hand was aching for the feel of the gun- but he didn’t want to expose himself just yet, so he kept it tucked away and concentrated on just observing. As far as he could tell, there were no visible tripwires or threats nearby. He figured he just had to trust his judgement on this one.

Ha. Great choice that had been so far.

His footsteps echoed through the building as he made his way over to the staircase that led to the second floor. Everything felt too loud in his ears. He’d been in a few fucked up situations in his time, but this- this took the fucking biscuit. What did he think he was doing here? What was he hoping to fucking achieve? So goddamn desperate to sort his problems out as fast as he could, here he was, rushing into a situation he couldn’t even hope to control.

But then again…there were kids he had to think about. He couldn’t afford to put them in danger. He wouldn’t, he absolutely fucking refused.

So confronting the creepy Stalker Dude was really the only other option, wasn’t it?

Taking a breath, his hand curled around the rusty banister, and he peered up the sharp staircase. “Hello?” He said loudly, keeping his voice hard and steady. His eyes scanned the steps up cautiously, looking for the usual traps, wires, that sort of thing. It seemed empty though, so he took another step in and then began walking slowly upward. A few seconds later, there was a dull thudding sound, like a car door slamming shut, and Tony jumped a little.

Okay. Okay, so there was definitely someone up there, then. Right. That was fine. That was the plan, wasn’t it?

Straightening his back, he stuck close to the wall and slowly made his way to the second floor. His hand twitched for the feel of a barrel underneath his fingers, but again, he refrained. Better to try some other method first. The guy wasn’t exactly known for being stable, so pointing a gun at his face might not necessarily be the best option here.

He came up to the entrance a couple of seconds later, and without hesitating, he stepped through. It was the same as the first floor- completely empty, except for one car.

Standing a few steps away from it, Tony saw the man who’d been responsible for all the mayhem over the past few months.

The rage and anger he felt was almost too much to resist- the urge to just pull out the gun and shoot was one he’d never thought he’d have to struggle so hard to fight against, but here he was. The man was just stood there. It looked so easy. Just to take the shot, end it once and for all.

He was wearing a skin-coloured mask over the top half of his face. The mouth was left visible, but
aside from that, Tony couldn’t see any recognizable features. Tall. Kind of wiry, but certainly not weak. Plain black hair, falling into his eyes a little bit. Long jacket- Tony felt his breath stuttering when he realized there was a good possibility that a suicide vest was lying underneath.

Whatever. The place was abandoned. As long as he didn’t hurt the kids. Tony could- well, he could live with dying as long as it meant people stopped getting hurt for him.

“Hello Tony,” the man said happily, “It’s so nice to see you.”

Tony paused at the entrance, keeping himself a good distance away. His heart was beating so fast, he could hear it in his ears. He made sure to keep himself as calm as possible though, eyes flicking to the side and scouring the car, the man, the area surrounding him like Steve always did. ‘There’s always something you’ll miss,’ he said when Tony had asked.

God, he wished Steve was here now. It was entirely selfish, of course, but Steve had looked out for him this long. Would’ve been nice to have a bit of backup, that was all.

“Hi,” Tony answered slowly, trying to keep his tone light. He even smiled, which was fucking saying something about what a magnificent actor he was, really. “It’s… nice to finally be able to talk to you. Do you have a name I could use, maybe?”

Across from him, the man nodded. “Just call me Daniel,” he said, smiling, “it’s so… Wow, I think this is the longest conversation I’ve ever had with you.”

‘He’s spoken to me before,’ Tony thought quickly, narrowing down the list of suspects in his head by a good half. “Oh, that’s cool, right? I’m- I’m sorry for not speaking to you much before- just remind me when that was again? I’m pretty sure I’d remember you if you told m-”

He was cut off by the amused laughter Daniel made- and yeah, okay, he could admit that had been a longshot, but he had to at least try.

“Tony, come on,” he said softly, making a gesture with his hand, “stop trying to fight this. You know that we’re meant to be together, really.”

“I think,” Tony responded, desperate to try and keep the anger out of his voice, “that you’ve gotten carried away. You don’t have to stay this way though. I can find you help, if you want, I could g-”

“I don’t NEED HELP!” Daniel screamed suddenly, such a swift change in mood that Tony took an instinctive step backward from it. He waved a hand in the air, fast and angry, before looking at Tony and then taking a deep breath, seemingly trying to compose himself again. “Sorry, sorry, it’s just…” he shrugged, running a hand through his hair, “that’s what my friends used to say. It’s kind of annoying.”

Tony glared at him, debating his options for a moment before saying “so if I asked you to turn away and leave me alone, right now- if I said that it would make me the happiest man in the world- what would you say?”

Daniel smiled. “I can’t do that, Tony.”

“Right,” Tony bit, voice finally hardening, “thought so. Gonna have to give you a bit of incentive then.” He reached into his pocket and in under a second, there was a loaded gun pointed right his way, just begging to be fired.

“Leave me alone,” he said bluntly, “unless you want more lead in your brain than any doctor would deem healthy.”
Daniel stared at him for a moment, his smile slowly fading. After a second, he just sighed heavily. “I wish we didn’t have to do this,” he said softly, “why can’t you just make things easy for us, Tony-”

“You’re fucking insane and you need to be put in either a prison or a coffin,” Tony spat, chin high, “you can make the choice as to what you want it to be, buddy, but I’m telling you, you’re not going to get away with this any longer. You think I’m just gonna sit around and let you terrorize me and the people I care about? No- this ends here. Walk away, right now, and it might give you a few extra days headstart before we find you and make you pay for what you did to that children’s home in Brooklyn.”

The other man cocked his head and looked at the gun. “And if I don’t?” He asked, intrigued.

Tony flexed the gun in his hand. “You know exactly what’ll happen,” he answered.

He wished Daniel didn’t keep laughing at his threats. He was getting pretty fucking annoyed by it. “Come on, Tony, you really think I hadn’t planned for that?” He asked softly, “admittedly, it was something I wish I didn’t have to do, but you can never be too careful. Turns out, unfortunately, I was right.”

Oh. Well that certainly didn’t sound good.

Daniel took another step forward and held out his hand. “Come here, Tony.”

Tony snorted. “Go fuck yourself.”

There was a small sigh, and Tony tensed when his hand slipped into the pocket of his jacket. Undoubtedly, what he pulled out was not going to be fun.

Of course, he was proved right a second later, when he noted the thin pad grasped between two fingers. He almost wanted to groan in annoyance- why the fuck was this psychotic asshole so obsessed with bombs?

“I take it you know what this is, Tony?” He asked slowly, as if explaining to some child and not the leading expert in all things that went Boom, “it’s a-”

“It’s a fucking trigger, yes, thank you, I am aware,” Tony hissed, hand tightening another fraction around the barrel, “but you know what, buddy, if you wanna blow yourself and take me with you, you goddamn go for it, if it means you’ll just back the fuck off I don’t-”

“Oh no no no no no,” Daniel shook his head, a weirdly pained look on his face as he took another pace forward, “whyever would I want to do that? I’d never let you come to harm like that, Tony. This is… it’s for other people.”

Oh, fuck. “Who?” He asked slowly, feeling his heart drop a little further with each passing second of silence. Daniel swept a finger lightly across the surface of what was in his hand, and it made Tony flinch wildly. He’d known something like this would happen. He’d goddamn known- but what other options would he have had either way? If he hadn’t shown up, he didn’t doubt the psycho would have just pressed the trigger and killed whoever was unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end of it.

Daniel frowned a little, looking down at the device for a moment. “I feel a little bad,” he admitted with a shrug, “but you have to understand how important this is, okay-”

“Where the FUCK did you put it?” Tony shouted, finger so close to pressing down on the trigger
and just shooting him that it was almost unbearable to resist the urge.

To Daniel, all it was was a funny joke. Tony could hear his laughter tinkle lightly across the floor. “Don’t be mad, okay? But I figured, hey, I need to get Rogers out of the way- and I need to make the effect big enough that you’ll listen to me, right? So I put a few little bits and pieces around the SI building, you know-”

“Oh, no, no, you’ve gotta be fucking kidding me,” Tony sagged in horror, swallowing back the sudden nausea that overwhelmed him. He thought of everyone in that building. His employees. Pepper. Steve, Jesus Christ, he’d gone here to try and protect Steve, but it seemed everywhere he turned he was just going wrong. Steve was in danger. Again. Hundreds and hundreds of…

If they died, that would be all on him.

“So Tony, put the gun down,” Daniel put out a placating hand, and Tony realized he’d taken a step forward, lifting the gun so it was directed right between his eyes, “that won’t help anything-”

“Really?” Tony grit through clenched teeth, “because you’re making it very difficult for me to see why not.”

The response he got was a slow arm reaching up, unbuttoning his jacket. Tony watched tensely, until spotting wires and immediately feeling his resolve plummet a few more notches. They were barely visible; just the one sticking up awkwardly over the buttons of his shirt- it was attached to his chest, apparently.

“See,” Daniel pointed to it proudly, “I had to think really hard about this, because I know you, Tony. You’re difficult on a good day. I didn’t want you to think you’d be able to get around this by hurting me- so I set up a sort of failsafe. It’s quite basic, actually, but still rather ingenious. Basically, as well as being activated manually, my designs in the SI building are tuned in to a specific series of electrical pulses.” He made a casual gesture to his chest. “In this instance, I’ve connected the transmitter up to the electrical pulses in my heartbeat. Obviously given it a bit of breathing room, considering the heart-rate fluctuates rather rapidly over parts of the day, and there’d be no need to kill all those people just for the sake of it, right?”

Tony’s mind raced as he realized the implications of that within a second of him explaining. “If the pulses stop, the bomb detonates,” he said flatly.

It really was clever. Daniel must have been planning that for a while. Simple, but brutally effective. Granted him a safer passage than literally anything else could have done. If he hadn’t been absolutely fucking insane and deplorable as a human being, Tony might have hired him.

“And if it rises above a certain threshold,” Daniel hastened to correct him, “before you get any silly ideas about shooting me in the hand or something.”

Tony was deadly silent for a few seconds. He’d known, going in, that what he was about to do was the best and only option, really- there was no other way to assure that the man’s guard was down other than thinking he’d won. Tony might have pretended like he’d planned for other alternatives, but in reality, he knew the moment he’d swallowed that radioactive tracer that he was going to be going wherever his stalker took him. It was the option most likely to succeed with minimal casualties when it came down to it.

Didn’t stop him from feeling fucking terrified all the same, mind.

“You know you can’t win, right?” Daniel asked him gently, a consolidating smile on his face as he
stared at Tony, “I know you don’t want these people to get hurt. I don’t want these people to get hurt either. So just… come with me, yeah? It’ll be fun. We belong together, you know that, right?”

“You’re fucking insane,” Tony snarled, “you’re- you’re crazy.”

He just got a shrug in response. “Some people say that about you too, you know. Now drop the gun and come here, Tony.”

Tony didn’t move, paralysed to the spot as he stared. Daniel’s face grew harder and his voice rose a few decibels as he repeated “come here, Tony.”

He had to. He knew he had to, if only to placate the stupid bastard and stop him from blowing his company headquarters sky-high.

He was scared.

He had to.

Jesus fucking Christ, this was not how he’d imagined he’d be spending his Tuesday morning.

With a small gulp and a short intake of breath, he let the gun fall out of his hand and took a step forward.

_____Steve_____
when you were on a red-alert like this. Two of his fingers were still in splints as well, which was definitely a liability.

He didn’t like thinking about anyone having the upper hand over him. Not when it came to Tony’s safety.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he quickly made his way up to the second floor in order to stop for two coffees. One black, pretty much nothing more than concentrated bitterness in a foam cup, and then one latte. He had no idea why Tony liked latte’s, though. Far too milky for his preference.

He smiled at the cleaner as she passed, then pressed the button for the 86th floor. He was technically off-shift for an hour or so now that all the checks had been done, leaving him plenty of time to sit and relax in Tony’s office, maybe go over the plan once more- but he was still going to meet Tony at the doors of the conference room anyway. Just to be sure.

Paranoid, yes. But paranoid was good, in his line of work.

He let his mind wander as he turned corners and worked his way through the building- going back to his friends at home, wondering what they were doing whilst he played his part by Tony’s side. He felt like a complete tool about the whole thing- first of all asking them to drop their weapons and leave it all behind, then going to them and begging them to help him take out another target not even a week later.

But hell- they’d been game. They’d seen what had nearly happened to the kid’s home, after all. None of them felt particularly merciful about him anymore, Steve and Bucky in particular. When Steve had gone to them that night and asked for them to help out on the mission, they’d responded with sharp and efficient enthusiasm.

Good. It was about time someone took the sick fuck out.

Thinking about what had happened still made him shake with anger. Peter’s face blossomed in his mind- seven years old, he should never have been involved in something like that. The deep, primal sort of desire to make the culprit pay for what he’d done was a constant sharpness in his gut, and he knew it wouldn’t go away until the man was dead.

Steve figured if there was any time in which his assassination abilities were to come in useful, it was now.

So yes. He’d gone home and started planning out with his team about how best to trace and find the guy before he could do more damage. He could feel the unease in his gut at lying to Tony even more; pushing him into trusting a bunch of Steve’s buddies to save his life and get the job done. Because to Tony, that’s all they were. Not the famous group of assassins that had been responsible for taking out major players in the underworld and doing it well enough to not get caught- just a bodyguard and a bunch of fucking baristas.

He was tired of lying. And worst of all, he was starting to realize Tony was tired of it too.

Because Steve knew Tony, and Tony knew him. He wasn’t stupid, either- it was obvious enough that there was more to Steve than what met the eye. He’d never asked, but Steve could tell Tony knew there was something Steve never talked about, always skirted around or deflected from.

He knew, logically, that he couldn’t hide it forever. If he wanted to even think about long-term with Tony, he’d have to come clean. There was no way he’d be able to lie like that. And he knew- he knew without a doubt that when he finally did, everything would go to shit. Tony wasn’t the
type of person who would take something like that easily- and hell, who would? Finding out that
the man assigned to protect you was actually out for your head for half of the contract was not
exactly something you ever wanted to hear. Steve knew there was a large chance that Tony
wouldn’t ever want anything to do with him, after that. Hell, there was a chance Tony would get
him put in prison, if he wanted.

But he couldn’t lie. And if he explained properly- if he told Tony what was really happening, what
sort of things he’d been told, and that once he’d started getting to know Tony he’d realized they
were nothing close to the truth- there might be a way for Tony to forgive him. Because the way he
felt was real. It was real and he needed Tony to know that- he’d make sure of it.

He just wanted to stay. More than anything, really. He wanted to stay and be there when Tony
needed him, pure and simple. So yeah- the thought of coming clean did terrify him. There was a
hell of a lot riding on it, including his freedom. But he knew he had to. For Tony. For-

Wait.

Why was there no-one in the conference room?

He paused at the beginning of the corridor, blinking once before the information sunk in properly.
Okay- so the meeting must have finished a few minutes early, then. That was fine. Well- not
entirely fine, the paranoid part of Steve was annoyed that Tony had probably managed to get into
his office before Steve was able to do a sweep of it, but hey, he could nag Tony about safety later.

With a sigh, he turned on his heel and made his way back to the elevator behind him. Quickly
pressing the button for a floor up, he downed half of his coffee in one fell swoop and then sighed.
Tony after conferences meant a particularly high amount of caffeine needed to be consumed before
it became safe to operate around him- wise words given to him by Miss Potts on the first week of
employment.

The floor to Tony’s office was quiet as he walked down, and he savoured it for a moment before
coming up to Tony’s door and pushing it up. “Before you ask, yes, I brought you coffee, and no,
I’m not letting you have brunch at Mcdonald’s again, we’ve been over this multiple times, it’s not-

He stopped still when his eyes found the room empty. Oddly silent. It was untouched; Steve could
tell Tony hadn’t been in and messed anything up since the cleaners had been in the night before.

Tony had said he’d meet Steve here.

“JARVIS,” he called into the empty room slowly, putting down the cups of coffee on the nearest
surface, “where’s Tony?”

There was an uncharacteristic silence. Steve felt his heartbeat speed up a few notches. “Mr. Rogers,
I’m afraid I have been forbidden to tell y-”

“JARVIS,” Steve said softly, eyes working their way methodically around the room. Like the
feeling of being watched, Steve felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to stand on end as the
pressure grew.

“Is Tony in danger?” He finished finally, voice soft and a hand slowly reaching around for the gun
in its holster as he looked up. When there was another pause, Steve felt his breathing hitch.
“JARVIS, is Tony in danger-”
“I have been sworn to not answer any questions about Tony’s wellbeing or positioning, but he assures you he will be back in approximately one hour, or you can retrieve him from his destination when-”

“Shit, he’s gone to find him hasn’t he?” Steve stumbled backward, a hand slapping over his mouth in horror, “shit, he’s gone… oh God, no, JARVIS, you have to tell m-”

“I cannot tell you where he is and the state of his wellbeing,” JARVIS cut in urgently, and Steve despaired inwardly before he heard the rest of the sentence: “-but, I can tell you where he is not. Please walk over to the desk, Mr. Rogers, quickly.”

Without another second of hesitation, Steve lurched forward. “Show me,” he said through gritted teeth. His heart was hammering. He felt ill. Tony was… God, what had he been thinking?

He watched as the holographic screen was lifted into the air and switched into a map of New York. Steve stared at it, intense and battle-ready as a line of red began to sweep across the plane, until the entirety of the map was covered in crimson except for one-

One patch, down near the bottom of Manhattan. A single area, just one building. Ten minute drive. “JARVIS, I need you in my ear-”

“Bottom left drawer, Sir keeps a spare earpiece.”

Steve lunged, pulling out the whole thing and then rummaging until he located the slick black piece. Without another second wasted, Steve had turned, sprinting out of the room at full-force and then making his way over to the elevator, fingers working the earpiece into his ear. “JARVIS-”

“Elevator safety protocols have been temporarily disabled and commuters have been evacuated, it will be with you in just a moment, Mr Rogers,” JARVIS told him crisply, and Steve nodded once before turning the corner, narrowly missing an employee as he did so. He got a muttered insult for his trouble, but duly ignored it. There were far, far more important things to think about in that moment.

Jesus Christ, Tony- Tony was in so much trouble. Steve couldn’t even… there was barely anything in his mind but terror. This was like a recurring nightmare- the people he loved, in danger at the hands of that scum of a man-

He had to save him. He couldn’t… he had to.

God, this was like the orphanage all over again. Except this time he had a set of still-healing ribs and fingers on his dominant hand that were still bound together. He was disadvantaged, and walking blindly into a what could well be a trap.

The elevator doors whizzed open, and Steve stepped through them without wavering; turning out and digging around in his pocket to load up with a full magazine.

Trap or no trap, he had a job to do. Save one man, kill the other. There was no debate about this.

Steve had promised himself that he would keep Tony Stark safe. He intended to stick to that- whatever the cost.
The inconspicuous car he’d taken from Tony’s garage came to a quick halt one block down from the building JARVIS had inadvertently led him toward, and Steve stepped out onto the sidewalk quickly. His shades hid his scanning eyes from view, but he knew that he was still recognizable from his suit alone. Luckily, he was good at avoiding cameras. Natasha had taught him well in that particular forte.

He checked his watch. Bucky and Nat were about 10 minutes behind him, and packing enough weaponry to mow down a cavalry.

But by the time they got there, it might already be too late.

“JARVIS, I need a scan of life-signs in the building up ahead,” Steve bit out, running down the sidewalk and pissing off a few pedestrians as he shoulder-charged his way through. He’d worked out that asking explicit questions about Tony would get him the same negative response, seeing as JARVIS was unwilling to disobey direct orders his creator- but if he directed them more vaguely, JARVIS was able to justify his answer.

“Two, Mr. Rogers,” JARVIS informed quickly, “although I will warn you, seeing as I am only uploaded to the sunglasses, my scans are relatively limited-”

“Sign of life is enough, thank you,” Steve assured him. Life meant there was still time. Tony hadn’t left yet. Steve could still get to him, and then get them both out (hopefully) unscathed.

He ran up to the perimeter, noting Tony’s sleek car parked outside and feeling his heart hammer painfully against his ribcage. He’d known, obviously, that Tony was here- and yet it still felt like an extra stab of panic to see the evidence for himself. But he couldn’t afford to lose track of himself right now- he had to first find a way in. Save Tony, freak out later.

The front door obviously wasn’t an option. Not only was it obvious, but it was also inaccessible. There had to be a way in though, otherwise Tony would still be out there with him. And a second later, Steve found it: the emergency exit tucked away around the corner of the building.

Bingo.

Quick footsteps, checking for cameras as he went. He had to assume there weren’t any landmines underfoot, considering the guy responsible had wanted Tony alive, and they’d be rather counterproductive to that particular endeavour. But he didn’t let his guard down- not even a little. No doubt there were a myriad of booby-traps and countermeasures in place to stop anyone other than Tony getting into that building. The guy was insane, yes, but he was a genius too. It was the only way he’d managed to stay hidden for so long, and Steve wasn’t going to go underestimating him now.

He came up to the door and whipped the gun from its holster. He was having to use his left hand,
but his aim was still true to some extent. Get him close enough, and he could take the target out just as easily as he could with his dominant hand.

His fingers almost rose to touch the handle of the door. Almost.

Luckily, Steve had been looking- he saw the wiring around the base, saw the camera tucked away in the corner. Quickly as he’d stepped up to the door, he’d ducked out of the line of sight and backed off, back against the wall.

Fuck. Okay. Rigged to blow from manual release, he figured. That made things… trickier. No doubt the rest of the doors were wired the same way too. When he turned to the windows, he saw the same thin wires running along the underside of them, too.

He gritted his teeth and looked up. Three floors. The fire exit he’d been trying to get through jutted out a little bit from the wall, and although the windows were boarded up, if he could just get a bit of purchase-

It’d be tricky if he’d been at full strength. It was going to be even more difficult with two broken fingers and bruised ribs.

Difficult, but possible.

Mentally steeling himself, Steve pocketed the gun back in its holster and took a breath, stepping back to get a full view of the building. Slowly, he worked out a route up to the next floor. There was no way they’d be rigged too- for starters, Steve couldn’t see any visible cables or evidence of explosives. Secondly- well, no one was stupid enough to scramble up the side of a wall with one hand not working and a midsection that made it almost impossible to take in a full breath, right?

Fuck. He had to hurry.

A hand found purchase on the frame of the fire escape, and his foot hoisted itself up onto the windowsill. Taking an extra half-second to center himself, Steve shut his eyes and focused. Okay. He could do this. For Tony. He could do this.

He lifted himself up, and began climbing.

_____ Tony _____

The gun clattered sharply when it fell to the concrete, and it made Tony jump despite the fact he’d known the sound was coming.
He felt like he was in some C-class horror movie, dammit, this was all a mess.

Daniel beamed when he heard the noise, and his hand extended further, inviting Tony close. “We’ll go back to my place, yeah? I’ve got a little lab down in the basement- not much, but we can build off it! It’s gonna be wonderful, Tony. We’ll change the world. We’re one and the same, really.”

“You’re blood is my blood, yeah, I fucking got the message,” Tony hissed, still not moving more than a step forward. He knew he had to, but... the thought terrified him, he wasn’t going to lie. “You know, people who don’t have malicious intent toward another person don’t usually tend to talk about blood that much. Or use blood to write. Or put razors in the letters they send.”

Daniel sighed, rolling his eyes like Tony was just being stupid. “You don’t get it yet, that’s why you’re confused. You will, though. I’ll make you see. But I don’t want to waste any more time, so I’m going to have to explain later. Just get in the car, Tony.”

His fingers were still hovering dangerously close to the trigger. He looked relatively calm in that moment, but Tony had just seen how quickly his mood could change.

He had no other options. He had to listen.

It wouldn’t be for long. He’d already wasted about twenty minutes, so the furthest away he could get was forty minutes out until the tracer activated and someone went after him. It was going to be okay. He just had to hold out for forty minutes and hope nothing too terrible happened in that period of time.

Forty minutes. Steve would be able to come after him in forty minutes, and then they’d finally catch the guy off-guard, and take him down for good.

He could do that, right? He was a grown-ass man, of course he could.

He just had to walk.

Shutting his eyes for a moment, he took a steadying breath and then put one foot forward. When he opened his eyes again, Daniel was smiling. It made him shudder in apprehension.

Forty minutes. Forty minutes. That was all.

“That’s it,” Daniel said soothingly as Tony marched over, head held high. He didn’t answer—refused to do anything other than stare blankly and keep his eyes somewhere above Daniel’s shoulder. He didn’t want the man to see the fear there.

He was about seven feet away when he heard a sudden slamming noise, and then the sound of running footsteps.

His head whipped around, and he watched Daniel do the same from the corner of his eye. At that point, he was so on edge he thought just the simple movement would give him a heart attack— but if he’d been shocked by the sudden noise, it was nothing on the way his heart almost stopped entirely upon seeing Steve round the corner, gun raised and face like thunder.

It took Tony far too long to react.

Lurching forward, he flung himself in front of Steve’s line of fire and shielded Daniel’s body from danger, eyes wide. He almost felt the tension Steve put on the trigger as he attempted to pull himself back and stop from shooting Tony between the eyes.
It was really, really lucky Steve was using his non-dominant hand. Tony estimated his reaction time would have just that bit faster on his right, and the bullet would already have been fired the moment he’d stepped around the corner. Which either would have resulted in a very dead Tony, or a bomb detonation.

“Don’t shoot, Steve!” He yelled, hands raising and head shaking wildly. Behind him, he could hear Daniel start to giggle, and swallowed the urge to gag. He was too close, far too close.

Steve’s aim didn’t waver- and God only knows how he’d even managed to get up here without detection, but he’d gone and done it, and it didn’t seem as if he was exactly going to back down and let Tony follow through with his plan now. Instead, his brow just furrowed slightly. “Get out of the way, Tony.”

“I can’t, Steve,” Tony shook his head again, swallowing down the panic, “if his heart-rate goes above or below a certain threshold, it’s gonna detonate a bomb. I can’t let that happen.”

Steve’s gaze snapped quickly over to Tony, hands flexing against the barrel of his gun. His eyes only revealed a second’s worth of fear, before narrowing and zoning in on the figure behind Tony once again. “What?” He asked, voice low and dangerous.

“Clever, isn’t it?” Daniel piped up behind him, and Tony jumped nervously, but didn’t move- not even when he felt something tug sharply at the collar of his suit jacket. There was a quick tearing noise, and Tony realized that Daniel had just pulled out the GPS tracker from his suit. “I needed to make sure I had a failsafe, you know? I’ve planned this for a long time. You were never supposed to show up, though. You’ve messed everything up, Rogers. Again.”

“That’s my job,” Steve answered sharply, his stare intense as he looked over Tony’s shoulder at Daniel, “I’m here to keep Mr Stark safe, and so I’m going to ask you t-”

“You think I’m not safe for him?” Daniel asked, seemingly appalled. Tony stood, rooted to the spot as a firm hand settled around his arm and he felt the man’s breath ghost over his ear. “I would never hurt him. I’d do a better job of keeping him safe than you ever could. You think I don’t know the type of man you are, Rogers- you’re no good for him-”

“You haven’t got a damn clue about the sort of person I am,” Steve hissed, taking a step forward as the comment seemingly angered him. It only made Daniel step back though, and took Tony with him as he moved closer to the car. Steve froze, blinking once and then shaking his head, visibly composing himself. “You really, really need to let him go. You’re not going to like the consequences if you don’t.”

“See, Tony, he’s so stupid!” Daniel told him, voice teetering close to desperate, which was definitely territory Tony didn’t dare enter, not with the trigger still in his hand, “he doesn’t get it, doesn’t understand any of it! Me, I’m clever. I know how to build things, create things, just like you! We’d work so well together, a shared mind, you have to see that! You HAVE to!”

Okay okay okay, I understand,” Tony said quickly, shutting his eyes and trying not to wince as Daniel’s hand clutched painfully tight around Tony’s arm and yanked backward, sending Tony stumbling into his chest. He couldn’t quite hold back the flinch as Daniel leaned down, licking up the side of his face, though. Across the room, Steve visibly snarled, but Tony flung out a placating hand, warning him not to move forward again. “I understand, Daniel, just… just drop the trigger, alright, and I’ll do whatever you want-”

“Tony-”
“Not now, Steve,” Tony hissed wildly, because now was literally the most ridiculous moment to worry about Tony’s personal comfort, fuck it all to hell, there were so many people in that SI building-

“If you take him, you’re never going to stop running,” Steve told him loudly, and Tony could see the stark whiteness of his knuckles from across the room as they curled around the barrel, “you can hold that trigger for as long as you want, but we’ll still find you. I’ve got people heading to the scene right this minute, and whether you detonate or not, it’s not gonna stop them comin’ over here and making you pay. Your goal is never going to be achieved. You’ve already lost. Although I can definitely assure you that if you cause any harm to innocents, then when we do catch you, we’re gonna make you regret it one hell of a lot more than if you just come quietly and with no more explosions. I’m good at that sorta thing- I can make shit happen, I can make it hurt, and believe me when I say I’ll make you regret ever being born if you don’t drop Tony and walk off right now, you sick son of a bitch.”

Tony’s jaw dropped, and he stared in horror at Steve, convinced that a second later he was going to hear the click of a button going down on Daniel’s hand. But a second passed- and another and another and another, and nothing happened. They remained in their standoff at opposite ends of the parking lot; Steve with his gun, Daniel with- well, with Tony.

“Interesting,” Daniel muttered, head cocking a little to the side. Tony felt his hand slide upward casually, curling from one shoulder to the other, essentially trapping Tony in a gentle headlock. Tony tried not to squirm, but it was difficult when he could feel his own skin crawl at the contact. “You know, that’s not actually a stupid plan. And I am incredibly angry right now, at the fact that I think you’re right.”

It was… it was fucking surreal. He felt like he was having a conversation with something that wasn’t even human. He was too volatile, too unpredictable. Here this guy was, talking about the fact he was apparently furious without even changing tone of voice. And yet when Tony told him he could get him help, suddenly he was screaming in rage. Tony couldn’t pin him down, and that was the most dangerous part about all this.

Tony looked over to Steve, who glanced back at him for a millisecond before returning his gaze to Daniel. He looked… terrifying. Tony had never seen his face so threatening before.

“I’m going to give you one last chance,” Steve grit out, “let Tony go. Surrender. You’ll get a fair trial and the help you need-”

Oops. Wrong move. Tony shut his eyes and sighed, feeling Daniel tense up behind him at the words.

“I DO NOT NEED HELP!” He screamed, arm tightening around Tony’s throat and stopping the flow of air briefly, “I am a FULLY FUNCTIONING, NORMAL MEMBER OF SOCIETY! SHUT THE FUCK UP! I am smarter than EVERYONE! I am STABLE, and I just want TONY! Why is that so hard for everyone to understand?”

Tony choked, hands gripping at the forearm cutting off his air and tugging sharply. A second later, Daniel turned to him and blinked in surprise, like he hadn’t even been aware he was strangling him.

“Oh, sorry,” he muttered, slackening his grip. Tony refused to let his knees buckle, instead straightening his back and just sucking in quiet breaths of air. He wasn’t going to let himself look weak.
When he turned back to Steve, the man was finally looking at him properly. His face was white, eyes wide- he was watching Tony struggle to breathe in front of him and looked as if he was visibly having to hold himself back from just launching forward in response to it. Tony appreciated the sentiment, really, but he hoped to God that Steve didn’t do anything. Hoped he hadn’t already secured the fate of all those people, just from his angry words earlier.

“Okay,” Daniel said loudly, making Tony flinch again, “okay, so I can admit defeat. I can. I know what you think about me, but I’m not actually trying to get people killed here. All I want is Tony, but if I have to play the long game get that, I will. I can.” He turned his head, and Tony shied away but he couldn’t really get far enough to not feel the closeness; the way Daniel’s nose brushed across his cheek. “I will have you, soon,” he murmured quickly, “I promise. But for now… I can only apologise.”

Jerking suddenly, Tony yelped as he was yanked back and then grabbed by the hair, pulling his head sideways and exposing his neck. Across the room he heard Steve shout something, but it was blocked out by the terrifying realization that Daniel was pulling something from his coat- a vial, a vial in the place of where a barrel would usually go in a gun- fuck, he was about to get injected-

He fought wildly, but the hold was too strong and it happened too fast- before he knew it, the gun was pressed into the side of his neck and Daniel had fired. Tony felt the sharp pain of the needle going in, then the almost instant sense of pain that spread quickly through his neck, down his chest, along his arms, oh, fuck, no, what the *fuck* had Daniel *done* to him-

“That dose is going to become lethal in thirty seconds unless you inject an antidote,” Daniel said, presumably to Steve, although Tony couldn’t really tell any more, he felt like his head had just clouded up with mist, “luckily, I’ve got the antidote right here-”

“What the *fuck* are you playing at-”

“Save him, or come after me,” was the response Daniel gave to Steve, before gently lowering Tony’s fast-weakening body to the ground. He spotted the man’s face loom over him, blurry and distorted, and then there was a coolness in the palm of his hand- a cylinder. Another vial. “Do your job properly this time, Rogers- I’m counting on you.”

Tony’s eyes rolled and he spasmed wildly, feeling a clammy hand press into his cheek for a second before leaving with a gust of wind on his face. He couldn’t… fuck, he felt like he was *burning*, God, whatever Daniel had dosed him with, it was strong shit, he was going to be dead before the minute was up at this rate, everything hurt, everything hurt and he was screaming, he could feel the tension in his throat-

Then there was the sound of an engine, bullets firing. Sharp bangs- ricochets, maybe. Running footsteps. Yelling.

Hands, warm hands, familiar… on his face, neck. More shouting- his name? Fuck, he was going to die. He was going to die.

“-hold on, Tony, Tony, hold on, I’ve got you, hold-”

Sharp pain in the back of his neck, again. His mouth hurt. His eyes couldn’t…
And then they could.

Blinking, he felt himself slump, tension slowly draining from his body as he gasped in huge gulps of air. As quickly as it had come over him, the pain began to recede back to where it had come from, leaving him lying uselessly in- somewhere warm-

His hearing zoned back in then, and there was no way he’d ever be able to forget Steve, and the way Tony’s name was rolling off his tongue again and again, laced with terror as Steve’s hands clutched tight, one under his jaw, one around his shoulder.

He groaned, a weak hand scrabbling to find Steve’s. His eyesight was clearing up, and he could see Steve in full clarity, looking down at him with wide, panicked eyes. His face was white, almost ashen.

“St’ve,” he slurred, fingers curling around Steve’s comfortably, “Steve, fuck… where’s-”

“Are you okay?” Steve asked, voice choked and quick. When Tony just blinked, Steve shook him a little. “Tony, are you okay, goddamn it, answer-”

“M’Fine, I’m fine,” Tony assured him, pushing down on the way his body wanted to just curl into the warmth of Steve’s chest and shut down for a bit. It was clear they were in no position to do anything of the sort. “Daniel?” He asked hoarsely, trying to sit up.

Steve just pushed him back down again. “Tony, you just got poisoned. You need to… fuck, God, we need to get you to hospital right now-”

“Call SI,” Tony interrupted, eyes widening as he remembered, “God, Steve, call the police, call Pepper, tell her to start evac ASAP, you gotta get them all outta there, oh my g-”

“JARVIS handled it,” Steve shook his head and pushed him back once more, before looking up, “he’s contacted Pepper- bomb squad’s on the way as we speak. Are you… God, Tony, what the fuck were you thinking?” He hissed, two fingers going under Tony’s jaw to feel his pulse. It was thready, but steady and present, and so he dropped back a second later, letting Tony drop gently to the floor, gun raised once more as he looked to the windows. Of course, there was nothing- Tony knew that Daniel wasn’t likely to be caught that easily.

He clenched his eyes shut sucked in a quick breath, before slowly sitting upright. His whole body ached- the residue of the poison in his system, no doubt. It had felt like some sort of sensory amplifier, set to attack his muscles. Fast-acting, incredibly so. Tony was filled with the morbid desire to pick the psychopath’s brains, just to see how exactly he’d concocted that without homeland security turning up at his door.

He jumped as he heard a sharp crash- then watched one of his guns as it smashed against the wall. Of course, it didn’t break- it was a Stark Auto, after all- but it was still a little surprising to see it bounce along the floor. He turned his head to Steve, watching him breathe heavily and then pull out another gun from the holster on his back easily, not looking to Tony once as he kicked out the boarded up window and then jumped to the window ledge, looking out for any signs of their friend escaping that he may previously have missed.

“He got away,” Tony said dumbly, slowly making it back to his feet. Everything wavered for a moment, but he kept himself steady through sheer force of will alone.

Steve spun around on the ledge, and Tony almost reached out a hand in fear that the man might
lose his balance, but of course he didn’t. It was Steve. “No fucking shit, Tony,” he growled, jumping down from the ledge and then marching forward. His face was carved with anger. “Now I want to know what the fuck you were thinking, pulling this bullshit.”

Tony barely had the chance to open his mouth before Steve had grabbed him by the collar, pushing him backward and backward until he hit the wall with a sharp thud. His face was furious, but his eyes scanned Tony’s face, neck, body, checking for injuries.

Tony felt the defensiveness rise instantly- all that leftover adrenaline had to go somewhere, after all- and he pushed back against Steve’s hands, or at least tried to- Steve seemed not to notice as he went through his methodic scan of Tony’s body. “Hey, Steve, let up, I had a plan-”

“You’re an absolute fucking idiot,” Steve hissed furiously, looking back to Tony finally and then fisting his hands against Tony’s shoulders, “you could’ve been… God knows what he would have done to you if I hadn’t shown up-”

“I just told you, I had a plan!” Tony snarled, grabbing Steve’s forearms and trying to push him off. When that didn’t work, he chose to just glare viciously. “If you hadn’t stormed in here and ruined everything, we might’ve been able to catch him-”

“I was trying to protect you!” Steve screamed, shaking him almost hysterically, “Do you have any idea what he might have… Oh God, Tony, why couldn’t you just have trusted me-followed the instructions like I begged you to do,” and his voice had petered out into a quiet whisper as he looked down at Tony, helpless and- and scared.

Tony stared up at him, trying to think of something to say, but no words would come. Steve kept ahold of him for a second longer, before his face finally blanked and he released, visibly swallowing down the emotion as he straightened and turned away. Tony slumped back against the wall, watching as Steve checked his gun swiftly and then looked out into the distance. “Police and ambulance are on the way, JARVIS is telling me ETA is about five minutes. JARVIS, note down that the vehicle that the target escaped in was a black BMW M3, modified. I left a few bullets lodged in the tire, although they didn’t burst, which suggests they’ll have been purchased from a specific maker. I want a list of all engineers and tire companies selling those sorts of reinforced tire and I want to get in contact with-”

“Why do you even care?” Tony yelled after him suddenly, before Steve could drone on any further, “why do you care so fucking much? I’m your boss, and you wanted to put all your little barista buddies in danger for me? Really? What did you think I was gonna do, Steve, just let that happen? No, fuck that, this was my problem, you didn’t need to get so fucking involved-”

“It is my fucking job to get involved!” Steve spun back around for a second, teeth clenched as he raised his hands incredulously.

“Not that involved! I don’t fucking get you, Steve, my god, what’d you do to find me, climb up a fucking wall? Your fingers are broken, why didn’t you just give up!” Tony looked at him in bewilderment, stepping forward and following Steve’s footsteps until he was barely a foot from the man. He watched Steve hiss through his teeth and throw his hands in the air angrily, but pushed on all the same. “You… God, Steve, I’m not worth that much shit, for God’s sake, if you’d have just stopped giving such a crap we could have caught him by now-”
He almost said something else. Almost. His mouth opened and the words were on the tip of his tongue and everything, but he never got around to it.

His mouth found itself occupied.

With Steve’s.

His eyes widened for a second as Steve clutched him, pushing forward, taking all the space he could fight for, and for a brief moment Tony considered asking what the fuck he thought he was doing. But he couldn’t focus on it for long; all his attention drawn back to the mouth that was pressed into his, the body that was towering over him, the arms braced against the wall.

Steve was kissing him.

Steve was fucking kissing him.

And good God, Tony was kissing back.

Hands curling around Steve’s neck instinctively, he breathed in sharply and then let his eyes fall shut as Steve’s arms, which had previously been caging Tony against the wall, dropped lower until they were curled around his waist instead, holding him close and gripping tight, desperate. Tony barely had a clue what was going on- so caught up in the leftover panic and anger and fear that he could hardly process this new wave of emotion- but there was no denying that this was Steve, and Steve’s mouth and Steve’s hands and Steve, and fuck if Tony was ever going to miss out on an opportunity like that.

“You’re so fucking reckless,” Steve cursed into his mouth, biting down on his lip and tugging sharply, “you don’t think about things, you just… God, you’re a fucking asshole-” his hands moved from Tony’s hips to his chest, flattening out over his heart as he took a shuddering breath- except it wasn’t one of arousal, even though Tony knew that was there. No, it was… it was fear.

Steve was scared.

Tony’s eyes opened, and he looked at Steve carefully. Saw the pale face hidden by flushed cheeks, the tiny tremor in his hands against Tony’s messed-up shirt.

“Steve,” Tony said seriously, breaking away for a second, just barely, so they were nose to nose, “I was fine. I am fine. Stop worrying-”

“You can’t just tell me to stop fucking worrying when-” Steve broke off, his voice cracking horribly at the end, eyes wide as he gripped Tony’s hips tight enough to bruise. He looked haunted. “Tony, JARVIS said that you’d gone, and I knew you’d fucking left to find him- I thought you were dead. I thought he was doing something horrible to you, I thought it was my fault, I thought I’d let you die-”

Tony looked on in horror as Steve blinked hard, and looked away from Tony stubbornly. “Oh, Steve, whoah, no- I didn’t mean-”
“But you still did it,” Steve whispered, his voice horror-stricken, “you still fucking did it and I’m so angry, Tony, holy fuck, I thought I’d lost you-”

He was cut off as Tony wrapped his hands tightly around Steve’s shoulders and pulled him in, hugging him tight and holding Steve firmly against his neck. There was a brief moment where Steve stood rigid against him- but after a few seconds he just...gave up. With nothing more than a sad little noise, Steve stumbled into him, shaky hands clutching around Tony’s waist painfully tight and burying his head into the crook of Tony’s neck.

“I’m sorry, Steve, I… you’re right, I didn’t think,” Tony said softly; fingers running through Steve’s mussed up hair and forehead resting softly against the crown of his head. Steve remained stoically silent, face buried in Tony’s skin, and he looked so goddamn innocent like this, so helpless, even though Tony knew the guy could probably stop cars with his bare hands if he put his mind to it. “I didn’t think and I’m sorry- I just wanted to try and stop him, I wanted him to stop hurting people.”

“Yeah, and I want him to stop trying to hurt you. You make it a little fucking difficult for me sometimes, though, I swear to God,” Steve mumbled, and Tony felt a little smile against his neck, which was nice- he hated seeing Steve upset like this.

Tony pursed his lips and kept stroking Steve’s hair, trying to get his head around… everything. The past hour had felt more than a little surreal- he’d just been poisoned, Jesus Christ, and he had no idea what ‘antidote’ Steve must have injected him with, and whether or not it was even safe. He was probably going to slip nicely into shock any moment.

But for now, he had other things to think about.

“Tony, please,” Steve looked up at him, his eyes wide and lips pressed tightly together. His hand cupped around the side of Tony’s jaw so softly and his thumb stroked over his cheekbone. “Please promise me you won’t ever do something like that again. Stop thinking that your life isn’t worth anything to anyone, okay, because you’re wrong. You’re… it does. It matters to me.”

And honestly, how on Earth was Tony expected to respond to that? It didn’t… it didn’t even make sense. Not in Tony’s mind, anyway. The words didn’t really match up to their meaning- Steve couldn’t want him like that, could barely even want him at all. He wasn’t a good enough for that. Not nearly enough to be wanted by someone like Steve.

And yet Steve was still looking down at him; his fingers still curling softly through Tony’s hair, nose brushing across Tony’s with every small exhale of breath. Everything about him looked like…

Like he meant it. Somehow. For some reason.

Tony’s mouth moved, words forming without sound as he made the silent promise. He could still see Steve’s face from earlier; the one that had looked down at him in terror, Tony’s own name spoken like a broken record in his mouth as he’d tried to pull Tony back into consciousness. He knew without a doubt that he never wanted to see that face again. He’d do anything.

Steve just looked at him for a few more seconds. His fingers stilled, and Tony felt his own breath cut off in anticipation, looking up at him without blinking. He didn’t know what he expected. Didn’t care. He just… wanted. So simply and deeply and fully. Whatever he could have, anything at all.

There was a soft huff of air, and then Steve leaned in, just a fraction, pressing his mouth so softly
to Tony’s own, like he was made of something delicate. It barely even lasted a second before he pulled away again. “We need to get you to hospital,” he murmured, eyes half-closed as he looked down at Tony, “and we need to check SI. And call the police. And try and track that psycho.”

Tony blinked, before his mind stumbled back to earth, back to reality Steve was right. They couldn’t be distracted right now, no matter how badly he wanted to be. “I… yeah. Yeah, you’re… we should probably… yeah.”

Steve almost smiled; it was a near thing. When he leaned back, he kept one hand against Tony’s jaw. “We’ll talk about this later,” he informed him, nodding once. It seemed to take him a moment, but eventually he managed to let go of Tony completely, stepping back and composing himself a little.

“Hey,” Tony blurted, lifting a hand to his own face and then pointing, “there’s one good thing that’s come out of this, you know.”

“What is?”

Tony grinned a little, circling his finger around the side of his cheek. “We finally got a DNA sample.”

The next few hours were hell.

Tony tried to get to SI first, but Steve assured him it was already being handled by Pepper and then herded him to hospital instead. About five hundred people tried to call him, and Steve ended up on the phone to one of his friends for about forty minutes, talking in a low voice outside the room about something or another that Tony couldn’t quite catch. Of course, he was forced to sit down in some stupid hospital bed for about seven hours, waiting for test results to come back despite knowing that he was going to be absolutely fine.

Like Daniel had said- he didn’t want to hurt Tony. Just… keep him. Fucking weirdo.

Then there were the musty forensics guys who came in and swabbed his cheek about five thousand times in order to get the DNA from where Daniel had licked him. He’d tried calling Bruce and getting him to just come over and do it for him, because if there was anyone he trusted with that sort of thing, it was him- but the asshole hadn’t even answered his damn phone, and so Tony had had to make do with the stupid NYPD guys in their stupid coats and hats. At one point, there had even been some guys in suits and shades that had attempted to step through the door; calling themselves the Strategic Homeland something-or-another and saying they wanted to talk- but Steve had stood swiftly and ushered them away with brisk effectiveness, not even letting them stop at the door before slamming it in their faces.
Yeah. Tony had the feeling Steve was still a little on edge.

Of course, saying that, Tony hadn’t even been able to get more than a word in edgeways to the guy ever since he’d driven him back to the hospital. Too busy fielding calls or growling at strangers, and then Tony had been bugged by stupid tests, and then Pepper had come in with her report. And God, that one had been a fucking blow:

“They searched everywhere,” she’d said quietly, whilst Steve had stood with his arms folded by the door, watching the back of her head intently. He remembered the face she’d made when she told him “there’s no bombs in the building, Tony. There weren’t any traces of one either. I promise.”

Of course, he hadn’t believed it at first. But JARVIS confirmed, after running his own deep-scans, that there were no traces at all, and in the end Tony and Steve were both forced to come to the realization that they had simply been duped.

There had never been a bomb. It had all just been a lightshow. Genius, really- playing on their fear and knowledge of what he’d done previously, and hope they’d fall for it a second time. Sort of like The Boy Who Cried Wolf but reversed. He’d been telling the truth the first time at the children’s home, what proof did either of them have to know he wouldn’t do it again?

Steve hadn’t said a word as Pepper had explained. But he’d slipped out of the doors before she’d even left, and didn’t come back after that. Tony figured he needed a minute to process it all, which was understandable. He knew what self-blame looked like when he saw it. Although it really was laughable- as if somehow Steve had been supposed to just know that Daniel had been lying, and shoot the fucker anyway. It was absurd- he’d fooled all of them.

But it was over. It was done. Because they’d finally, finally fucking found him.

“Daniel Arlington-Jones,” the Chief of Police handed Tony a file that must have only just been thrown together, and Tony peered at it curiously, eyes flicking over to Steve, who had since re-entered the room, although was standing inconspicuously in the corner, shooting the police officer the occasional wary glance now and then. Probably still on the alert. “39 years old, born in Queens. He has a history of attachment- his ex filed a restraining order on him 3 years back. Incidentally, she was a co-worker at a pharmaceuticals company based in Manhattan. His IQ rates him at almost genius levels. We’re thinking he became obsessed with your work and wanted to work with you in the beginning, before it progressed into something a little more nefarious.”

Tony flicked through the file, before stopping at the picture they’d clipped to the side. His eyes narrowed and he cocked his head. “That face is familiar,” he muttered, and then felt Steve shift from the corner and wander forward, hand going out. Automatically, Tony handed it over, letting Steve stand over him on the hospital bed and stare at the picture.

Of course, the officer answered the question just as he felt Steve stiffen against his side. “That’s because he’s part of your cleaning staff, Mr. Stark.”

“I saw him,” Steve said numbly, looking down at the photo with wide eyes, “he was… he was in your tower. When I was looking for you, he… told me where you were. He cleaned your fucking rooms, oh my God, Tony.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Tony looked up in bewilderment, “he wanted… there would have been so many opportunities for him. Why would he… why not just-”

“Because he wanted it to be a game,” Steve told him before anyone else could speak up, voice
suddenly hard as he blinked and then clenched his jaw, “I’ve met people like that before. Two lives. They want to see how close they can get to you without being caught. I once knew a girl, few years back- spent her daytime as a nanny for this rich family, and then at night she’d follow the parents everywhere whenever they went out, stalk them- she was obsessed with their money, and even though she had perfect access to it when she was with the kids, it didn’t feel like… enough for her, I don’t think. They like the danger of it.”

Tony looked at him in a mixture of shock and horror. “JARVIS?” He asked, the question evident in his quiet voice.

“Sir, we hired a James Arlington-Jones 6 months and seven days ago,” the AI confirmed solemnly, and Tony couldn’t help it, the breath caught in his throat, fear constricting his windpipe as he thought about every mindless action he must have done with that man in his home, in his kitchen and his shower and his fucking bedroom, holy shit, how could he have let this-

There was a warm, solid pressure against his shoulder, and he looked up just as Steve smiled down reassuringly at him. It was a tight thing, a little bit strained, but Tony appreciated the effort and understood the sentiment of it. ‘I’m here,’ it said, ‘you’re safe now. I won’t let him hurt you’.

Tony breathed.

“It’s the perfect disguise, I suppose,” the Officer whistled through his teeth and rocked back on his heels, whilst Tony just stared back down at the file and concentrated on Steve’s thumb, rubbing lightly across his neck, “allowed him to get all the information he could need without arousing suspicion.”

“My jacket from the drycleaners,” Steve said quietly.

“The children’s home- I left a note for you about it on the kitchen table one morning,” Tony added, swallowing down the guilt that threatened to spill over in that moment.

He’d been blind. A fucking idiot- he’d tightened security everywhere else except the cleaning staff- it was the barely-there ones that always posed the worst threats, because everyone always fucking missed them, passed over them like they were unimportant.

He’d been living with his stalker for six months and he hadn’t even noticed.

“We’re raiding his house as we speak,” the officer continued briskly, “and although we haven’t caught him as of yet, we’re confident that he’s not going to be posing many threats to you from now on. Not now we’ve rooted him out. Hasn’t got the resources anymore.”

“Or the balls,” Tony muttered, shooting Steve a sideways glance, “I think my bodyguard over there put the fear of God in the bastard when he stared him down and pointed a gun to his head.”

Above him, Steve huffed in sharp amusement, nodding once. He leaned over Tony for a moment, hand brushing over some of the papers in the file. Tony saw the small eyebrow-raise that the Officer threw their way upon seeing how close they were to each other, but wisely chose not to comment on it. “We’ll contact you if there’s any updates, and if you feel it appropriate we can assign some officers to escort you to public functions for the next-”

“That won’t be necessary,” Tony waved him off quickly and shook his head, “I’m sure I’ll be fine as I am now.”

On his shoulder, Steve’s hand flexed. A promise.
The officer nodded, and left just before the nurse came in with Tony’s results, telling him he was clean and that he was safe to leave hospital. Which, y’know, was exactly what Tony had known within like, the first hour, but whatever.

“Where to, Mr. Stark?” Steve asked quietly as he slipped into the driver’s seat, hands curled tight around the wheel and head tilted in Tony’s direction. His face looked tired.

Tony sighed, his head hitting the rest and eyes falling shut. “Home,” he replied, “let’s just go home, Steve.”

So they did. The journey back was quiet; Tony was pretty sure he drifted off at some point, and Steve didn’t seem to mind- content to just drive in silence and let his mind wander. It was only when Tony heard the crack of a door opening that he looked up and realized they’d arrived back in his garage, right under Stark Tower. Steve had already opened his door for him, and when Tony blinked up, the man was smiling gently back at him.

Home, indeed.

Steve guided him up into his penthouse and sat him on one of the stools in his kitchen as he shuffled around and prepared something behind Tony’s back. By that point, he felt as if all the energy had suddenly left him: the night was late, the adrenaline had gone, and his muscles hurt. The doctors said that was a result of the poison, which sucked, but when Steve squeezed his shoulder as he passed, the pain lessened a little bit.

Eventually, Tony felt a mug get pushed into his hands, and drunk without thinking. A second later, he pulled a judgemental face and looked for Steve so he could direct it at the man. “This is decaf coffee, you fucking heathen.”

“It’s 2am.”

When Tony continued to glare at him, Steve sighed. “Please just drink it, Tony.”

He glanced back down, lip curling. “Only ’cuz you asked nicely,” he muttered, pulling it up to his lips. He really did hate the taste of decaf, and not even for dramatic effect either- but Steve had made it specially. He felt bad.

The man in question was watching him drink with folded arms; his gaze steady but far-away as he looked at Tony’s hands. He tried not to squirm under the stare, but ultimately lasted about four more seconds before it became too much and he turned to stare back, an eyebrow raised.

Steve didn’t even try and look away. “I’m still really pissed at you, you know,” he said in the end, voice strangely loud in the silence of the kitchen.

“I know you are,” Tony sighed, rubbing the back of his hand over his eye and wincing, “so am I. Look- if you’d rather go home and cool off, it’s fine, I totally get it. You’re technically off-duty now anyway, and I get… I know some things were probably said and done in heat of the moment, if you- I mean- I understand if you just want to forget-”

But then Steve was there, frown growing deeper as he slid easily onto the stool next to Tony and found his hand on the kitchen table. “That’s not what I meant, Tony,” he said with so much conviction it was almost baffling. Seriously; Tony had been sort of expecting a rejection sometime soon- he knew what adrenaline and fear did to people, and God only knows Steve had the perfect opportunity to say as much and get out of… whatever this was, before it was too late.

But he was still there. Holding Tony’s hand.
He looked up, trying to think of the words to say. “It really should be,” was what he eventually ended up with, which was really far too truthful and full of pathetic self-pity than what he’d been going for, but he couldn’t help it.

Steve stared at him for a moment, and then sighed. His head bowed; the front of his hair falling down in arced tufts that Tony wanted to run his hands through so badly it hurt like a physical ache in his fingertips. He heard his name muttered through those perfect lips- and it wasn’t a particularly amazing name, okay, he could admit that; there were a lot of people called Tony, it was two syllables and they weren’t even interesting ones- but the way Steve said it made Tony want to hear it again and again and again. Maybe it was the inflections at just the right pitch, or how Steve managed to force such massive amounts of emotion into that single name, his single name- but whatever it was, it made tension roil in his stomach whenever he heard it. He knew the happy ‘Tony’ from the angry ‘Tony!’ and the sad ‘Tony’.

He also knew it probably spoke volumes that he was aware of all of this, but he chose not to pull himself up on that too much. He was already perfectly aware of the situation he was in, thank you very much.

“Tony,” and there it was again, so… so much in that single name, “you have no idea, okay- I am not what you think I am. If anyone should be walking away, it’s you. I should… if I were a better man, I would make you.” Steve didn’t look up, head stubbornly facing the floor as he muttered those words, which really made no sense at all if Tony was being honest, because how could he ever-

“I don’t think I could leave if I tried,” he moved his hands to Steve’s face, lifted his head up slowly until he was staring at Tony once more. His face still held on to the paleness of earlier; a painful scratch had formed just under his jaw and his hair was a mess. There was a depth in his eyes, too; Tony knew something was on the tip of his tongue, as there often was with Steve. Tony got the feeling there was far more to him than he let on- and sometimes the desire to just know exactly what it was on Steve’s mind was strong enough to drive him half mad.

But Steve never spoke of it, and Tony hadn’t asked. If Steve didn’t want to say, then Tony wasn’t going to push. He could live with not knowing if it meant Steve was happy.

God, he was so in love.

Steve himself continued to look at him for a second, before his eyes fluttered shut and he leaned forward, knocking his forehead gently into Tony’s. He sighed a little; lips pursed as his hand rose and then cupped the back of Tony’s neck, squeezing softly. Tony swallowed, his own hands curling tentatively around the wrist that rested on his shoulder and then taking in a shuddery breath as he too shut his eyes and leaned into the touch.

And there they sat; the two of them, drinks forgotten to the side of them, hands entwined on the table and eyes closed, just breathing each other in. Letting the actions speak for themselves. It felt strangely powerful- Tony had been in situations with half as many clothes and double the amount of contact that had been far, far less meaningful than what he was doing just then with Steve. It was almost as if in that moment, he could see into Steve’s very soul. Feel the fear that still lingered, the anger, the vicious streak of protectiveness that was still radiating from within the man like a physical heat.

“I think,” Steve said very, very quietly, “that I may be slightly compromised.”

Tony’s face broke out into a tired smile, and he laughed. “Oh, really? Who’d’ve thought, huh?”
“I don’t think it’s ethically correct to continue being your bodyguard after this.”

“Hey, so, you’re fired,” Tony told him, before tilting his head and kissing Steve quickly, nervously, “now stay. Please.”

Tony licked his lips and leaned back a little, looking up into the fierce blue of Steve’s eyes. The other man stared back without blinking, his face a myriad of brief but warring emotions.

And then he leaned in, kissed back. Twice as gentle but double as long as what Tony’s had been. He broke away after a few seconds, only a fraction, just breathing in Tony’s air- but the momentary pause was just that- momentary. Whatever restraint Steve had been enforcing until then seemed to disappear, and the next time Tony felt his lips, it was hard and hot and desperate. Steve leaned in, brought his other hand up and placed it on the side of Tony’s neck, kissed him like there was no tomorrow. His tongue traced Tony’s bottom lip curiously and he shifted on his seat, pulling Tony in closer.

“For as long as you’ll let me,” he breathed his reply against Tony’s mouth, slowing down just as Tony began to get into it and making him frown. Steve saw it and smiled, kissing the corner of his mouth lightly, then his cheek, keeping his face close. “But for now, I really think you should go get some rest. It’s very late, and you’ve been through a lot today.”

Tony opened his mouth to argue, but Steve kissed him quiet and then stood, taking Tony’s hands and pulling him up easily. It was only when he tried to stand again that he realized how exhausted he actually was, because he wavered on his feet and blinked at the sudden dizziness that overtook his senses.

“I’ve got you,” Steve muttered in assurance, wrapping a firm hand around Tony’s waist and then beginning to lead them over to the elevator around the corner. He guided them both easily and with a gentle grip, and the next time Tony zoned back in he was in his room, leaning against the door as Steve did a sweep of the bed, the windows, the wardrobes-

“‘S’fine, Steve,” he murmured tiredly, blinking a few times, “he’s gone.”

Steve paused, but then shook his head and continued. “I’m not gonna risk it. Not when he’s been… here. I- I just- I want to make sure.”

Tony nodded, letting Steve get on with it. If it made him sleep easier, then Tony could take having his room searched for bombs. Although no doubt JARVIS had done a thorough sweep of the place as soon as the information had been passed to him, so there really wasn’t much to worry about on that front.

A minute later, Steve straightened up and wandered back over to Tony, hands empty. “It’s clean,” he admitted, nodding his head around the room and then turning back, “seems our guy didn’t leave any presents behind.”

Tony just made an affirmative sound in the back of his throat, stumbling forward and reaching out for Steve once more. Now he knew what it was like, it was pretty much impossible to keep away, and the added exhaustion wasn’t exactly helping him keep his cool. Right now, all he could think about were the base instincts: sleep and warmth and safety. All three could be easily achieved with Steve nearby.

He latched on, curling his hands around Steve’s massive biceps and then slumping into the equally massive chest. “Stay here,” he asked into Steve’s shirt, eyes already beginning to fall shut against the warmth.
He felt Steve’s breath hitch a tiny bit, and his own arms wrapped softly around Tony’s shoulders; an embrace that covered him almost entirely. It felt like nothing could hurt him- not when he had Steve there. “Tony… Tony, you’re really tired, I don’t think that’s a good idea—”

“No,” Tony blurted, before jumping and then shaking his head, “I mean, yes, obviously, but… just for tonight, we can- we can just sleep? Here. I mean- if you… you don’t, if you- it was just a suggestion, I’m not—”

But Steve had smiled half-way through the sentence, and was gently guiding Tony back toward the bed before he’d even finished, his big hands gentle against Tony’s shoulders. He felt the back of his knees hit the side of the bed and turned, collapsing onto it fluidly and burying his head into the mattress. He was pretty sure this was another after-effect of the toxin, because usually it took a good three days of sleeplessness to get him to this level of exhaustion. This would be embarrassing, were he not so fucking sleepy.

He heard Steve chuckle quietly off to the side, and then there was a dip in the other side of the bed as he sat. “Sit up for me, Tony.”

“Mmf, whyyyyy—”

“You can’t fall asleep in a tight leather jacket, that’s why.”

Tony pouted, curling up further. He’d slept in far worse. Which, incidentally, was what he mumbled to Steve a second later. But then Steve said his name again- an exasperated ‘Tony’ this time, paired with a fond sigh and shake of his head- and Tony remembered that Steve taking off any of his clothes was probably going to be fun. So he sat up, if a little grumpily, and then gave Steve the driest look he could concoct.

Steve just laughed again, and his hands reached out to pull the sleeves off his arms whilst Tony took the opportunity and slumped forward once more, using Steve’s shoulder as his pillow. It was nice. He could definitely get used to a Steve-Pillow.

Steve’s fingers brushed his arms and bolted pure electricity up and down Tony’s skin as he slipped the piece of clothing off, and Tony heard him huff out a small laugh. “Well, I guess that’s one perk of me sticking around- a decent pillow.”

Oh. So he must be talking aloud, then. “Lotta perks of you sticking ‘round,” Tony mumbled, moving his mouth and pressing it sleepily into Steve’s collar bone. Steve made an approving humming sound and then shuffled around a bit, so that his back was pressed against the headboard. He didn’t exactly look as sleep-ready as Tony did.

But his hand went to Tony’s jaw and his thumb traced over the contours of his face, and Tony suddenly forgot everything else except the way it felt to be touched by Steve’s hands- to look at Steve’s face and think ‘I kissed you. Maybe I even get to continue kissing you.’

God, that was… a lot.

“Sleep, Tony,” Steve whispered, leaning forward and pressing a gentle kiss up against his forehead, “you’re exhausted.”

“Mm,” was all Tony managed to respond with, before following Steve’s orders and sinking back into the mattress once more; his head resting uncaringly in Steve’s lap. It was a nice lap- as good a pillow as his shoulder was, and warm too. When he heard Steve laughing again, he figured his brain-to-mouth filter must have failed him once more, and the best thing was he was too tired to
even care, because Steve’s fingers ran gently through his hair and everything else cut off in Tony’s brain except ‘oh my god that’s so good I love being petted I love Steve I love everything about this’.

He gave a sleepy half-moan and rolled his head upward to look at Steve. “You should… lie down too. That’d be a great idea.”

When Steve looked down at him, his face was soft but his eyes troubled. He looked away briefly, over to the door, and then shook his head almost imperceptibly. “Think I’ll just keep watch for a little while,” he said softly, hand pausing its strokes just under Tony’s ear. Tony didn’t fail to notice how it landed just above his pulse.

Okay, so Steve was still worried. He supposed it was in his nature- bodyguard and all that. Paranoia was probably a requirement.

Tony hummed, too tired to try and argue with him on that. Instead, he just curled further into a ball and placed his hand against Steve’s knee, rubbing softly. He wasn’t entirely sure whether that would do much in the Comforting aspect of things, but whatever, it was good enough for now. “He’s not coming back, Steve. Not tonight. Anyway- you’re here. ‘M not gonna get hurt when you’re here. You’d never… let that happen,” with every second, he felt himself drifting further and further into sleep, head becoming a deadweight against Steve’s thigh as he sighed and sunk deeper. The only things he was saying now were the first things coming to his mind- the truth, as it turned out.

Steve didn’t say anything for a while, and he sat utterly still for a moment. But then impossibly gentle fingers curled over his face; swept the strands of his hair back off his forehead and then circled around to caress his jaw. It was so stupidly good, to feel Steve’s hand there, on his face. Better than some of the sex he’d received in his time, that was for sure.


Tony didn’t need telling twice. He knew Steve. Trusted him with his life.

He fell asleep to words that sounded a lot like ‘I love you’ being spoken into his hair by Steve’s mouth, and then the promise being sealed with a soft kiss to his temple.

Chapter End Notes

its like 4:40 and im still lowkey drunk so. If there are any spelling errors, i am sorry. BUT HEY! THEY KISSED! IT ONLY TOOK LIKE,,,, 70K
Chapter 7

______Steve______

He felt the impact reverberate up his arm as he slammed his fist into the man’s ugly face, but all it brought to him was a grim sense of satisfaction rather than pain. He was used to this- it was familiar, if a little unpleasant.

“I’m gonna ask again,” Steve shook his wrist out casually and then bent to his haunches, so that he was crouched in front of the man tied to the chair, “what did Jones buy from you, and how much did he purchase-”

“I already told ya!” The man said hysterically, shaking his head, “I was just the runner, I swear, I swear I was, I didn’t know nothin’ about th-”

“That who gave you the materials to take to him?”

Silence. The man was shaking heavily; blood running from a cut on his temple, and jaw quickly purpling from Steve’s punch, but he was still keeping his mouth shut. Obviously it was going to be a bit longer until he cracked. He was one of the lower-down members of some sort of breakaway mafia gang, if the brand on his shoulder was anything to go by- and Peggy had remembered his face when they’d brought him in, which was never good news. She said he’d been involved in a human trafficking job a couple of years back- not really something Steve had wanted to hear at 3 in the afternoon, but there you go. Sometimes there was no way to avoid the scum of humanity, no matter how hard you tried.

Steve sighed, shutting his eyes and then pressing his fingers into his forehead. He was tired. Goddamn it- he wanted to go back to the tower, back to Tony. Undoubtedly the man was still going to be tucked away in his lab, working on the project that had been consuming him for the past two weeks; Steve needed to go drag him out sooner rather than later, or he’d forget their dinner plans entirely. It was their fourth date since the day Steve had first kissed him- they were still working out all the foundations of their relationship, but so far it was going amazingly.

And the very last thing Steve wanted to be doing at that moment was spending his time in this dingy room, punching a guy’s brains out trying to get information. Yet here he fucking was.

God, he hoped this could be over soon. He was getting too old to beat criminals up in skeevy back-rooms.

“Tell me,” he said in his most dangerous voice, “or I’m going to make this really hurt.”

There was another long silence, and then the man just shook his head. “No ya won’t,” he said hurriedly, “I know who you are. You’re the Captain. You… you’re one ‘a them Avengers they talk about in the papers. You don’t hurt people like this. It ain’t how you op’rate, s’what I been told.”

Steve looked at him for a moment, before shrugging. “You’re right,” he said passively, eyes drifting to the door for a moment as he thought about freedom in the form of a nice warm couch.
and a nicer, warmer Tony, “we don’t normally. But something of mine has been put in danger, and I
don’t like that. I don’t like it one bit. So I’m going to find out who was behind this, and who
helped in it, and anyone who had anything to do with it at all, because I really don’t take these
things lightly. You know us. You know what we do. Don’t try and tell me what I am and am not
capable of, because it might not end all that well for you if I decide I want to prove a point.”

He leaned forward then, face hard and hands clenched at his sides. He knew how to intimidate, he
knew how to hold a room. Wasn’t usually his forte, but Natasha had taught him everything she’d
known from back when she’d used to work with the KGB- and anyway, this? This was personal. It
needed to be him. He wanted it to be him. So maybe the guy was right- they didn’t usually strut
around like cocksure mob-bosses, interrogating people in dark rooms, but sometimes needs must.
And if Steve wanted to try and cut ties with this world, he needed to do it… in a permanent sort of
fashion. No one could know about who he’d been- his covers had to remain watertight.

He was working on being a better person, but - well, that wasn’t easy when you’d spent most of
your career being known for exactly the opposite. And sometimes you just had to get your hands
dirty. Bucky and the team had certainly seemed to find it amusing- barely a week ago, he’d been
asking all of them to quit with him, and now he was leaping headfirst back into everything again,
with more voraciousness than ever before. It hadn’t taken much thought either- as much as he
wanted to leave one day, he, like the others, couldn’t afford to leave right now. He had made that
decision the moment he’d seen Jones with his arm around Tony’s throat; he knew without a single
shadow of doubt that he had to find him, and kill the fucker dead. Once that was done- then he’d
put down his gun. He would.

It would be worth it, too.

The man in the chair below watched him for a few moments, his eyes apprehensive. Steve had
been in the game long enough to know a fragile character when he saw one. This was a man who
primarily looked out for number one, which meant they shouldn’t have too much trouble with
getting what they wanted from him. They’d picked this guy up after two weeks of trying to find
leads on Daniel. He had been scurrying around dealing out some very undesirable goods to a buyer
in a fancy restaurant on the richer side of Manhattan. God only knew what a rich investor wanted
to do with enough dimethylmercury to take out an entire business (or maybe that was exactly it) but
what could he say- it was usually the rich ones who caused the most damage. Steve’d stepped in
before the deal could go through anyway, and taken in the dealer whilst Bucky and Clint had
handled the buyers. And now here they were- the first lead they’d had since the confrontation a
few weeks ago, and he was saying he didn’t know fuck-all.

Steve stood up, and then without warning he backhanded the man across the cheek, sharp and
brutal and in just the right place to make it sting like a fucker. “Tell me what I want to know,” he
ordered quietly.

The guy spat on his shoes, so he hit him again, in the exact same spot, even harder. “Tell me, or I
will make it hurt a hell of a fucking lot worse than this.”

He shook his head and then slid a hand into his pocket, pulling out a knife from inside. Calmly, he
twisted it through his fingers and then brought it down, hard, into the man’s shoulder, thinking
about every innocent person who’d been hurt by that human garbage as he did so. It made it almost
pleasurable, in a twisted sort of way, when he heard the scream of pain from him. “You know this
is only the beginning, right? I can put a scar on you for every person’s life you ruined, huh? How
many d’ya think that’d be? One hundred? Five? Peggy says you used to get around a lot, before
you moved to drug-running. I could ask her for an estimate, what about it-”
The man groaned in pain, and Steve just shook his head in disgust. He’d always been shit at interrogations- got too emotionally involved, and then they just ended up dead too soon. But just as he was about to pull the blade out and put it in the other shoulder, he was interrupted by the door behind him opening and then Bucky peering in, shooting Steve a raised eyebrow as he held up his phone.

“Loverboy’s on the line,” he said with a grin, “and he sounds impatient.”

Steve opened his mouth, jerking suddenly back into the real world- the normal world. He blinked a few times and composed himself- shooting one last look to the guy strapped to the chair before shrugging and making a gesture for Bucky to continue his work whilst he took the phone. Wandering forward, he grabbed it in one hand and then pulled it to his ear, subconsciously wiping the blood from his hands onto his trousers. “Hey baby,” he said lightly, the smile already starting on his mouth simply at the prospect of conversation with the man.

“Listen,” and from just the way Tony spoke the word, Steve knew he was about to be on the receiving end of some form of rant, “so there’s like, 8 million things I need to do in the space of thirty-six hours, and Obie is getting on my ass for about 7 million of them so I’m probably gonna get a visit from him sometime soon, and Pep’s stolen from my wine rack again, because I know I didn’t drink the Merlot last night and yet it’s magically gone- oh, and the stocks dropped like, a bunch for no reason as well, not to mention stupid Officer Guy keeps constantly coming to my house to give me updates on how safe I am whilst Daniel runs off to the UK or wherever the fuck they said he was headed, and basically I am stressed and you need to be here, immediately, or I may scream.” He finished with a gasping breath of air, and Steve chuckled, turning around to Bucky and then pressing a quick finger to his lips, asking the man to be quiet whilst he worked. His best friend just rolled his eyes and nodded, before turning back around. Wiping his hand again and then switching the phone to his other ear, he grinned at the wall. “You can always just re-hire me as your bodyguard, then I’ll be allowed to remove whoever you require from the premises if I feel it necessary, no questions asked.”

“I give you complete permission to do that anyway- boyfriend rights trump bodyguard rights, and I’m pretty sure Officer Afferson is not simply stopping by to give me status updates, if you know what I mean.”

Steve felt a small frown crease his brow, “I’m sure Officer Afferson means well. And even if he doesn’t, I’m almost certain Officer Afferson would not dare try it. He’s seen my face. I’m safe.”

Tony sighed fondly, before Steve heard him perk up. “Oh! What if he is secretly Daniel Jones in disguise, creating a cunning ruse that lures me into a false sense of security before spiriting me away to his laboratory-”

“Tony,” Steve cut in disapprovingly- he’d learned it really did not take long for Tony to make jokes out of serious matters that concerned himself, “don’t say shit like that. I’ll start worrying.”

“You always worry.”

“Part of my resume, unfortunately, you’re stuck with this.”

Down the line, he knew Tony was smiling. And it was nice, on some level, to think that Tony was able to joke about it all comfortably now. They’d known since just after the first night spent- well*- together, he supposed- that Daniel’s credit history had shown him buying a one-way ticket to the United Kingdom, obviously in an attempt to evade capture. And that seemed like enough for Tony- he was under the firm assumption that his stalker was no longer a problem any more. Steve,
though: he didn’t let things go that easily. It bothered him, that he’d still not been caught. And that he’d seemingly given up so easily, after he’d been so desperate.

Steve knew that he wasn’t going to be able to rest easy until he had the guy within shooting range. He wasn’t Tony’s bodyguard- couldn’t be any more, not now they were dating- but that didn’t mean he was going to stop acting like it. He’d made a promise to Tony- a promise to himself- that he wouldn’t let anyone hurt him, and by God he intended to stick to that. He owed Tony more than he could ever give- but he was going to move Heaven and Earth to try anyway. Tony deserved that from him.

“Come home soon,” Tony said softly, and Steve blinked as he came out of his own thoughts, “Coffee houses can’t be that busy, surely. And even if they are, I dislike the fact that they are monopolizing your attention. That’s my job.”

The pang of guilt zinged through him, a familiar friend. “Sorry, sorry, sometimes it just gets like this over here- I promise I’ll be with you for 5. Don’t forget dinner.”

“Hey, I’m a genius, I don’t forget things,” Tony informed him primly, and Steve was about to open his mouth and say something scathing in response when he heard a stifled cry behind him, and turned to watch Bucky quickly cover the man’s mouth with a blunt hand.

“What was that?” Tony asked then, slightly concerned.

Steve shot Bucky a glare, and his best friend just turned his face apologetically, hand clenched hard around the other man’s jaw with a fierce grip that left absolutely no room for any other sounds. “Someone just spilt an espresso all over themselves- fuck, sorry, I should probably sort that out. I’ll talk to you later, okay? Stay safe, Tony,”

He imagined the fond roll of Tony’s eyes down the phone- an automatic response whenever Steve told him that. Didn’t mean he was going to stop, though- sometimes Tony genuinely needed to be reminded that… well, that people cared.

Tony bid him goodbye and then ended the call, leaving Steve to turn back around to the other two people in the room. Bucky was still holding the man’s face brutally, and Steve noted that the other hand was curled tight around the hilt of the knife in his shoulder, twisting just a fraction. He raised an eyebrow at Steve when their gazes met. “Risky to say you’re at the cafe right now, buddy. What if he decides to surprise you?”

“I’ve got Clint to call me if he comes in, and he’ll tell him I’ve just run to the store to get some stuff,” Steve shrugged, looking down at his hands and then pocketing the phone. He could see the way Bucky was looking at him- could see it and hated it, because he knew it was true. This was all kinds of fucked up and he damn well knew it.

But soon it would be done. Once they’d got through all the finicky business of hunting down Daniel once and for all, he could finally stop. And he wouldn’t have to lie to Tony ever again. He didn’t think he’d even be able to- this secret was big enough, and it took all of his power to keep it anyway.

Bucky just sighed, stepping back from the man in the chair and wiping his hands. “Well, you’ve certainly planned your two lives well, I’ll give you that.”

“Don’t say it like that, Buck-”

“Why, you already know exactly what I think about this-”
Steve opened his mouth to respond, but stopped himself when he heard a hoarse chuckle from in
between them. Their perp lifted his head a little, rolling it to the side and shooting Steve a look that
had his hackles rising instantly. “Bold move, Captain,” he muttered, maybe because he was
concussed and not thinking straight, maybe just because he had the ridiculous notion that he might
be able to get away with it, “trying to play House with a civilian? You must think you’re
invincible.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean,” Steve asked, cold and full of warning.

The man just raised an eyebrow, looking away. “You’ll understand when someone finds out.
Whilst you’re out doin all your shit on the streets of New York, they’ll be a little guy jus’ creepin’
in through the balcony window, and one day you’ll get back home to find your precious fella’s
blood all over th-”

A bang fractured through the air, silencing the rest of whatever he had been going to say. Steve
looked over the barrel of the gun that had found its way into his hand, watching blankly as the
guy’s head rolled back, dead before he’d even finished his final word. Every muscle felt coiled,
tensed to breaking point. He hadn’t even blinked as the bullet had fired.

Bucky sighed loudly. “Oh, good one, bright spark. Now where are we gonna get our fuckin’
information?”

“He didn’t know anything anyway,” Steve said tersely, dropping the gun but not taking his eyes
off the now-dead body, “he was just a runner. Anyone selling that sorta stuff wouldn’t have given
away their identities to him. Anyway, we already got that list of locations from the notes in his
phone. We just need to intercept.”

Bucky didn’t say anything; just stepped away from the body and then made a face at the flecks of
blood that had splattered over his grey shirt. A second later, though, he looked back up to Steve.
“You gonna shoot me too if I say he might have a point?”

“Shut up, Bucky,” Steve snapped, tucking the gun back into his holster and then shaking his head,
“I’d never let that happen.”

There was another long silence; both of them standing off with one another in the bare room,
the only thing in between them being the rather gory evidence of Steve’s burst of anger. Eventually
however, Bucky backed down with a shrug, looking away. He scraped a hand over his beard. “I
hope you’re not in over your head here, Steve,” he said softly, walking forward and passing Steve
with a small clap on the shoulder. Steve didn’t respond, just left Bucky to walk out of the door
silently, until he was alone in the room once more.

He looked briefly to the body and watched the rhythmic drip-drop of blood as it fell from his
temple and onto the stone floor. He felt no regret.
He wondered if he was a monster.

A minute later, he turned and followed Bucky out of the room, closing the door softly as he went.
When he finally returned home at the end of the day, there was a sense of tiredness in his bones he hadn’t felt in quite a while. It had been a few months since he’d last killed someone, he realized- he hadn’t noticed quite how heavy that weight felt until it started being lifted, and now he was back at square one again. He’d had to wash his hands three separate times, just in case there was blood he’d missed. The thought of trying to explain that to Tony was not one he wanted to entertain.

JARVIS welcomed him in his usual quiet manner as he stepped out into the penthouse, and he smiled up to the ceiling and answered back. It had taken a while for him to fully warm to the AI; the paranoia that still surrounded him even now meant he struggled to ever relax entirely in the tower. He trusted the machine, though- he was, to Steve, more human than many other people he had encountered in his time. And his main directive was to keep Tony safe. Though he could admit that had been a rather large hinderance at first, Steve had quickly discovered that was now a priceless benefit. JARVIS had shown Steve where Tony was, had let him find him. He would never stop being grateful for that.

“Is Tony in?” He asked, running a hand through his hair and then looking absently around the empty kitchen. He resisted the urge to do his usual security checks. Now that they’d discovered how Jones had been getting into the tower, there was no need to worry. Mostly.

“He is currently in the living room, Mr. Rogers,” JARVIS responded fluidly, and Steve nodded once as he dropped his bag on the counter and wandered further in, through the large kitchen area and around the corner. He spotted Tony a moment later, curled up on the couch like a small kitten. His eyes were open, but only just. He certainly didn’t seem prepared for their date in half an hour.

“What are you still doing here?” Steve asked Peggy quietly, wandering further into the room with a small frown as he noted her splayed out next to him, not touching, but almost. That was the equivalent of a hug for that woman. She had only been supposed to drop by and check on him whilst Steve was out- an arrangement they had all come to, not only to keep him safe, but also actually get to know him, considering he and Steve were now dating. It was important to him that his friends… well, that they didn’t only see him as the guy they’d been trying to kill for four months.

God, that sounded so fucking bad.

She glanced over at him, and then sighed, holding up a hand that looked to be perfectly manicured. “He said my fingernails were atrocious and I wasn’t leaving until he fixed them. He is... surprisingly persuasive when he puts his mind to it.”

Steve huffed, nodding along with her and then looking at his own hands absently. It had been a while since Tony had decided they needed fixing up again. Of course, right at that moment Tony snagged his fingers quickly and effectively, yanking him down onto the couch with him. “H’lo,” he muttered tiredly, rubbing at his eye and smiling up to Steve as if he were the most delightful thing that had happened all day.

Steve shuffled around, until Tony was sprawled out over his lap rather than the couch. Their fingers tangled together in the air. “So, you ready for our date in-” he glanced at his watch, “fifteen
minutes?”

Tony paused, before swearing and then trying to sit up. “Oh, fuck, fifteen minutes? I thought there
was a whole hour left, Goddamnit Carter, why didn’t you tell m-”

“He’s not going out today, Steve,” Peggy said absently, turning back to the TV, “look at him, he’s
dead on his feet. He actually started snoring in the middle of our conversation a few minutes ago.”

Steve opened his mouth, looking down at the man admonishingly. “Tony, you told me you’d been
sleeping in between work on that stupid project-”

“I am, I am!” Tony hurried to tell him, hands going up defensively as he rolled his eyes, “But Obie
called and he’s nagging, Steve, nagging, which means that this deal is obviously very important. I
gotta speed up the work on the missile or we’re gonna miss the deadline and then-”

“That doesn’t mean you can just spend 40 hours straight without sleep, Tony, Jesus,” Steve
thwacked him over the back of the head lightly, and then watched in fond exasperation as Tony just
pouted and curled further into Steve’s stomach.

“Shut up, you’re not my bodyguard anymore.”

“No, I’m your boyfriend, which means I actually give even more of a fuck than I did as your
bodyguard, actually.”

Tony retaliated by tugging Steve’s shirt up and biting his stomach, making Steve yelp and jerk in
surprise. He looked down at Tony, trying not to laugh as he watched the other man’s eyes crinkle
and mouth turn upward in a lovely genuine smile. “And aren’t I glad of it- allows me to take
liberties like these,” he said, stretching like a cat on Steve’s lap.

“This is disgusting, Steve,” he heard Peggy declare, looking at them both from the corner of her
eye. She was staring at him in a mixture of amusement and slight disbelief, “who the fuck are you
and what have you done with the grumpy arsehole I know?”

“Ha ha,” Steve stuck out his tongue and then gave her the middle finger, “he’s currently just
waiting to get home and beat your ass next time we play Call of Duty, actually.”

“Hey, well why wait?” Tony raised his eyebrows and then made a vague gesture over to the TV, “I
have like, a million different games. Play one of ‘em. That is, if you don’t have anywhere to be,
Peggy.”

She glanced quickly to Steve, who just sighed and then nodded his head. He supposed dinner plans
could wait. “Alright, if you wanna watch Carter get severely embarrassed, I suppose I could
indulge you.”

“He likes to pretend he’s God’s gift to man when he gets a controller in his hand,” Peggy leaned
over and whispered to Tony, smug look on her face, “just watch- he’ll lose by a mile, but find a
way to blame it on something out of his control. Or just cheat.”

“Steve?” Tony asked in disbelief, “Cheating? No way.”

“Totally.”

“Uhm, have you watched Clint play Mario Kart?” Steve countered sulkily, “that’s what cheating
is. I just get... fidgety, when things get heated.”
“Yeah, and your elbows just magically fly out and knock the controllers out of our hands,” Peggy rolled her eyes and then shared a look with Tony, which Steve certainly did not appreciate- he really didn’t fancy having to deal with the both of them at once. Perhaps trying to get them to bond had been a bad idea after all.

“You know what I think?” Tony declared, sitting up and then leaning into Steve’s shoulder, “I think that we should invite all your buddies over, and see who exactly is the best gamer in this little group of yours. I just can’t believe that Steve Rogers is a dirty cheat until I see it with my own two eyes.” He looked to Steve questioningly, shrugging one shoulder. “What do you say? Wanna invite all them over? You’ve done them all one by one, might as well just send them all over and let them vet me as a group.”

Steve opened his mouth, then blinked, turning to Peggy sharply. “Have you been giving him shovel talks?” He asked incredulously. “Him? For me?” He couldn’t help it- his friends were really… Steve was a goddamned assassin, Jesus Christ, he could look after himself-

“Not shovel talking, necessarily,” she hurried to assure, shooting Tony a wry look, which he just huffed at, “simply… confirming a few things. He didn’t seem to mind.”

“I didn’t” Tony shrugged, looking up at Steve and then letting his fingers trail down absently over the buttons of his shirt, “believe me, when Rhodey gets home, you’re gonna be getting one for yourself, undoubtedly. I can only apologise in advance.” He shut his eyes and leaned back, cheek pressing further into Steve’s shoulder. “Anyway. Game night? Yes or no?”

Steve laughed, pressing his chin into the crown of Tony’s head. “Why not- I’ll make sure to keep them in check, don’t worry. But they’ll be free now, right Peggs?”

“Yeah, I’ll give Bucky a call, he’ll tell the rest of them,” she said, sitting up with a yawn and then wandering off to make the call.

Steve didn’t miss the way she flicked a look back to him for a moment though- half smug, half pleased as she raised an eyebrow to the both of them and then swivelled around in a whizz of perfectly curled hair.

Steve smiled, leaning his head back into the cushions and feeling Tony sigh happily next to him. It lifted the heaviness in his chest- sometimes when he was with Tony, he could pretend he never lived his life at all. Here, he was just… Tony’s. And that was all he ever wanted to be, really.

“How was your day?” He asked quietly, hearing Peggy’s playful voice filter down the hall, talking to Bucky.

Tony huffed, and his eyes rolled. “Like I said, Obie’s been nagging. It’s just… tiring.” He palmed at his eye with the back of his hand and then laughed. “Maybe I should just quit the weapons industry altogether. Pack it all up and open some garage instead. I’d probably enjoy that more.”

Steve watched him, hand stroking absently through his hair. Sometimes Tony looked so tired, when he talked about his job. It was veiled, mostly, and Steve didn’t deny that Tony looked most alive when he was designing something, but he had to also agree- he would find just as much enjoyment from opening up a garage as he would from his multi billion dollar company. “Maybe you should do it,” he suggested, only half jokingly.

But Tony simply laughed, hand finding the back of Steve’s own and locking their fingers together. Steve found himself frowning, but he didn’t respond to it, because a second later Peggy returned, phone in hand and a small smile on her face. She dropped onto the couch next to them, knees up to her chest and arms just brushing with Steve’s. “Okay, so they’re all coming over in like, ten
minutes. Do you have snacks? I want snacks.” She turned her head off in the direction of the kitchen and then looked back to Tony in question.

Steve pushed her off the couch. “Yeah, there’s popcorn in the top left shelf and icecream in the freezer. Go fetch.”

Tony shot him a look of surprise at that. “How the fuck do you even remember that? I don’t remember that, and it’s my house.”

“Well, I have been pretty much living here for four months now,” Steve informed with a shrug, “and I’m very observant.”

Whilst Peggy went off once more to make the food, Steve happily sat back into the soft couch, Tony resting contentedly on his lap and appearing to drift in and out of sleep every few minutes. He let the sounds of the TV and the popping corn in the other room to wash over him, helping lift the weight that had settled inside him from earlier. It was weird, how used to Normal he’d become.

Well- if you could really count living in a tower with a billionaire and an AI normal, that was.

He loved it more than he dared even admit.

It didn’t take long for the others to arrive. Turning up, they were huddled together in the elevator, their slight unease barely hidden by the smiles on their faces. Steve understood. They were all broken in different ways- trusting wasn’t easy. But it didn’t take them long to settle in- they had game nights back at their place regularly, and this was just the same thing in a different place. With way better graphics.

“I cannot believe it,” Tony said numbly from the floor, after Steve had pushed him off his lap in order to make better room for the controller, “I would never have pegged Steve to be a dirty cheater. What the fuck just happened- did I fall through into a different universe or s-”

Steve shushed him by pressing his socked foot into Tony’s mouth, and then growling as Clint took the opportunity to shoot him dead. “Thanks for the distraction, Tony.” he said happily. Steve huffed in annoyance, and then shot Tony a betrayed look, as if he’d personally grabbed the controller and killed Steve himself.

“Oh, believe me, this is very real,” Natasha confirmed with a grin, “Steve just can’t let things go, can you buddy?”

“Shut it, Romanov.”

She raised an eyebrow toward Tony and huffed, leaning back on the couch. Tony sat up, leaning back into Steve’s legs and watching with a small frown, head cocked. “Turn out into the main building,” he said, looking up at Steve briefly.

“Huh?”

“Turn, now. Clint’s scoping you out from the quad, he’s gonna hit you with his sniper otherwise.”

Steve spared a short glance at him in surprise, but followed his orders as Clint cursed and shot Tony a withering stare from the loveseat. He felt Tony’s back sink a little further into the gap in Steve’s legs; Tony’s attempt to avoid the glare. “Sorry Barton- had to even out the score a little. And I do have a bias, I will admit.”

“You’re lucky you’re not playing right now,” Clint muttered sulkily, “or I’d be blowing your ass
Tony lifted a single eyebrow, and Steve felt him straighten a little against his legs.

Three games of Tony with a controller in his hands and many, many respawns from every other player in the game later, everyone realized that Tony probably knew what he was doing a little better than he had previously let on. Although to be fair, they really should have seen that one coming.

“I’m telling you, he was totally cheating!” Bucky swore later that night, hands splaying out adamantly against the kitchen counter in their apartment. To his left, Clint was nodding his agreement, eyes narrowed in disbelief.

“Definitely suspicious,” he added, “that bastard killed me 23 times! 23!”

Steve just laughed, rolling his eyes and bumping shoulders with both of them. He was tired, more so than he’d previously thought- although it was 2am by that point and he’d been staring at a giant TV screen for most of his night, so he couldn’t say it was much of a surprise. Despite his exhaustion, however, a part of him still wanted to just go all the way back to Manhattan and spend the rest of his night back at the tower with Tony. A lot of the stuff he wanted to do nowadays tended to center around Tony. And that was okay- he could totally live with that. It was better than some of the other things he tended to spend his time doing.

So maybe he was more than a little bit crazy for the guy. So sue him, he hadn’t had a proper relationship in years. This was… it was fucking good, okay? It was really, really fucking good.

And if the smug grins and raised eyebrows he got sent his way whenever he was with Tony in front of them were anything to go by, his friends seemed to be able to tell just as well as Steve did. They knew him better than he knew himself, most days, and so of course, as soon as he started falling for someone, they were catching onto it. He should probably have been annoyed by the constant teasing that he got from it, but he just couldn’t find it in himself to care. He was too happy.

Being in love, being able to let himself have this… It was just a breath of fresh air. The first breath of fresh air he’d had in a long, long time.

Peggy caught his eye from across the kitchen, and Steve beamed back at her. She laughed, wandering over to press their shoulders together. Her familiar smell drifted through Steve’s nose, and he instinctively leaned into her touch. “You seem jolly, Captain,” she noted, her voice soft and laced with fondness.

He looked down, smiling at his hands. “I am jolly, Miss Carter,” he responded.

When he looked back up, her head was cocked, and she was observing him with a twinkle in her eyes. She’d rubbed off her makeup, leaving a fresh face and slightly reddened lips, and her hair was scraped back into a messy ponytail- the picture of casualness as she rested her elbows on the counter. Steve knew that the hands curling around his forearm had probably killed countless amounts of people, but in that moment, all he could see was the friend with a heart of a gold. It had started to become harder and harder to remember who he really was, these days. Who they all were.

That was probably a good thing.

“He’s good for you,” she told him quietly, squeezing his arm, “I was worried, I have to admit.
About all of it—about whether or not he was genuine. But seeing you two together… there’s no way to fake that. You’re one crazy motherfucker, Steve, but I actually think you might be able to make this work.”

He bit down on another smile and put a hand over hers, squeezing back firmly. The words had sent an explosion of butterflies hurtling through his stomach—just the thought of something long term with Tony was enough to make his heart start beating that little faster, his breath catch in his throat.

He wanted this. Good God, he wanted this so fucking badly.

“I know,” he said, voice a touch too choked to be casual, “I really hope so.”

She smiled again, head nudging his shoulder. “Well, you’ve already got Bucky being the killjoy. Figured you probably needed some assurance, you know?”

“Well, good job it’s you, then. I’d hate to know what Clint’s positive words would be.”

She raised an eyebrow. “‘Tony’s a great lay, and we can all sense it on you, so you should hold onto that’,” she mimicked his voice perfectly, inflections and all, and Steve cackled loudly, feeling the blush spread across his cheeks.

“Well,” he shrugged nonchalantly, spinning on his heel, “Clint’s not wrong.” He shot her a smug look over his shoulder whilst she just stifled a snigger into her hand, and then waved to them all as he practically skipped out of the kitchen and headed back to his room. “I’m gonna crash. Night, guys.”

Everyone mumbled their own goodnights back at him, and he caught Bucky rolling his eyes fondly at him through the reflection of the microwave as he wandered past it. He felt almost drunk on it; on the feeling of happiness curled inside him, warming the soul he’d previously wondered if he’d even possessed.

He lay down, face up on his bed, looking at the ceiling and promising himself that he was going to hold onto this. Whatever it took— he wanted to hold onto this with whatever he had left in him.

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“Answer your goddamn phone, STEVE, answer your GODDAMN PHONE OR I’M GONNA COME IN THERE AND KILL YOU!”

Steve blinked, wincing at the sunlight that peered in through the crack in his blinds. That was Bucky’s voice, coming from the room next to him and paired with a banging fist against the
plasterboard wall. His head lifted from the pillow, confused right up until the moment his ears registered the ringing of his phone on the desk.

With a tired groan, he leaned over and picked it up, checking the time as he did so. 8 a.m, good God- and that was Tony’s contact too, what the fuck was he even doing awake at that time? “Yeah?” He asked in a mumble, palming a hand to his forehead and shutting his eyes.

“Okay, so this is going to seem weird,” Tony began, and his voice sounded muffled and a little staticky, like he was driving with the top down, “but I’m about ten seconds away from your apartment in my car, and I want you to come and run away with me.”

Steve paused, before sitting up suddenly. “What?” He asked incredulously, eyes narrowing.

“Just for a day,” Tony hurried to correct himself. “Two, tops. I just… I need to get away from it all for a bit. I want to drive. Come with me.”

Another long pause, and then “I’m like, right outside your window right now.”

Jjerking forward, Steve peeked out of his curtains. Down below on the street, Tony and his bright orange Lamborghini looked back up at him; Tony decked out in a pair of tight jeans and a white T-shirt, matched with his favourite leather jacket. Jet-black shades perched atop windswept hair, and his feet were rested cheekily on the dashboard, clad in some clunky designer trainers that Steve thought were mighty impractical.

His mouth ran dry anyway.

Tony spotted him, and waved cheerily with his spare hand. “Come with me,” he said again, and Steve could see the whiteness of his teeth as he smiled.

He gaped, trying to pull his morning-brain away from the simpler facts of ‘Tony’ and ‘Tony Hot’. “I- I don’t… what? Tony, where would we even-”

“Who knows? Who cares?” Tony threw up his hand and then shrugged. “Can we just… God, I just want to fuck off for a bit with you, Steve. If I get another call from Obie about this stupid Jericho or Pepper about board meetings or whatever the fuck, I think I’m going to explode. Let’s get out. I’m bored.”

Steve couldn’t help it- he laughed incredulously, looking down at his boyfriend in fond bafflement. “Are you serious?” He asked.

“Super duper. Pack a bag, we might be gone a night or two.”

“What if I say no?”

“You won’t,” Tony replied easily- and fuck it all to hell, he was right. Steve was going to follow that bastard anywhere.

He spared another moment to just look down at the other man, before laughing again and spinning quickly on his heel. “I’ll meet you in two minutes,” he said hurriedly, ending the call. A moment later, he fell hastily to his knees, reaching under the bed for his duffel.

It was stupid and impractical, and no doubt both of them were going to get reamed out for this later, but Steve was grinning from ear to ear as he stuffed some spare clothes and a toothbrush into his
bag, so maybe that was worth it. There was just something about Tony that made him want to be stupid. And impulsive. And anyway- someone had to look out for the idiot whilst he was away. Steve had taken up that role for five months before this, there was no reason for him to stop now. Or ever.

Whatever.

Scribbling a hurried note on the kitchen counter with a dry-eraser as he brushed his teeth, he pulled a handgun from under the table and then tucked it into his jeans. He stuffed a few magazines into the duffel as well, just for good measure.

And then he was out the door, hurrying down the stairs with unbrushed hair and a duffel on his back, completely ready to follow Tony blindly. A few months ago, that would’ve terrified him. Now, all he felt was excited. And happy.

He was 29, dammit. Maybe it was about time he started living his life the way it should be led.

Shutting the door behind him and turning around, he grinned wryly at the man sat in the car in front of him before tossing his bag in the back seat and then vaulting over the door. He landed on the leather with an almost silent thump, and then turned to Tony, who was looking at him with eyes that shone in the morning sun. “Where to?” He asked breathlessly.

In answer, Tony leaned forward and kissed him soundly, hand curling around his neck. He pulled away a second later, leaving Steve trailing after him in his wake. “That way.” He pointed somewhere off in the West and then laughed, pushing down on the accelerate a second later. His hands pushed through his hair and found the stem of his glasses, taking them off and then placing them not on his nose, but on Steve’s. “World’s our oyster, baby, Just for the day.”

Steve leaned his head back on the rest, tilted to face Tony’s direction. He knew his own smile was probably worryingly soft, but he couldn’t help it. “Then put your foot on the gas, Stark, we don’t have long.”

With a short grin and a bark of laughter, Tony did just that.

There were a lot of things Steve Rogers had never been able to appreciate in his life.

He’d grown up dirt poor. Everything had been a struggle, and then he’d been ill on top of it all,
meaning he’d spent most of his childhood bedridden or at a hospital. Things most kids had taken for granted- games of tag and ice cream and grass-stained knees- they were things he’d never been able to experience. And it had sucked, at the time, but obviously he’d gotten over it a while back. He was bigger now, stronger. He could do anything- although sadly, the childhood he’d missed out on wasn’t going to come back around for him, no matter how hard he wished it.

Anyway. Back to the point at hand- Steve was trying to say that he had a lot of gaps in his life. A lot of missed opportunities and failed endeavours, you know, all that morose stuff.

But for some reason, he’d managed to find himself lying on the hood of Tony’s car, looking up at the absolutely perfect starry sky somewhere in the Middle of Fucking Nowhere, Pennsylvania- and he felt more like a dumb teenager than he had when he’d actually been that age.

“I have no idea what you’re pointing at,” Steve whispered, even though he didn’t need to whisper, there was literally no sign of life anywhere about. He turned his head to Tony in the darkness, raising an eyebrow and then smiling as the other man shot him an unimpressed stare.

“Look, it’s literally like, the easiest thing to spot in the whole fucking night sky,” Tony whispered right back, leaning in closer to Steve so their lines of sight matched up, and then pointing a finger to a patch of stars that quite frankly looked exactly the same as every single other one in the night sky. Steve spared another sneaky glance at him from the corner of his eye, and then bit down on a smile, turning back to whatever Tony was gesturing toward. “See those three stars in a straight line? That’s Orion’s belt. It’s an asterism- like a constellation inside a constellation, sort of. Hey, do you know how to find the North Star? Polaris? Tell me you do, that’s like, basic knowledge”

Steve cast his mind back to an op in Russia a couple of years back- him and Bucky and Peggs all dropped off by a smuggler in the middle of some deserted wasteland, with only the direction ‘head North to find him’ being given to them in order to take out one of the KGB agents who’d been trying to rat out Natasha. They’d been looking up at the stars a lot that night. Steve would’ve been able to point to it with his eyes closed.

“No,” he shook his head softly, watching Tony with a small grin, “show me.”

Tony made a distressed noise, but it was fond, and soon enough he was rambling away, his hands flying all across their vision as he pointed to Ursa Major, and then lifted in a straight line from the two stars he said were called ‘Dubhe’ and ‘Merak’. Steve tried to focus on what he was saying, he really did- but when Tony got like that; all excited and fast-talking and passionate about something, Steve always found it an impossible feat to take his eyes off him for more than two seconds. It was just the way he came to life- how his hands flew everywhere and his eyes sparked and his bangs ended up in his eyes because he was jigging around too much- it was Steve’s favourite thing to see in the whole world.

“You’re not looking,” Tony said, and Steve blinked, coming back to himself. He opened his mouth and then shot another glance briefly up to the sky, where Tony’s finger pointed stubbornly upward.

He smiled, shaking his head. “No, I’m not,” he admitted, just so that he could watch the way Tony’s ears went a slight shade of pink in the moonlight.

Tony spluttered a second before managing to compose himself, reigning it back into nothing more than a casual roll of his eyes. He poked Steve’s forehead with the finger that had previously been pointed at Polaris. “Sap,” he muttered, looking down at his feet as they tapped against the hood, probably scratching up the paint-job horribly.
Steve leaned over and kissed him in response; just quick at first, and laced with soft laughter, but growing into something deeper when he found himself somewhat unwilling to leave Tony’s space. His hands braced against either side of Tony’s legs as he pushed forward and felt Tony give way under him, his own hands clutching at his neck. It was stupidly hot and strangely intimate— Steve just wished that he could sit himself down in that moment forever, because there really, honestly wasn’t anywhere else he’d rather be.

He wasn’t sure there was a time he’d ever been happier before in his life.

“Thank you,” he blurted suddenly, shutting his eyes tight and moving away just a little in order to knock his forehead against Tony’s own. He had no idea how to ever make Tony understand quite how he had managed to save Steve, but he just knew that he had to convey it somehow. In whatever way he could. “Thank you, for being here. For letting me in. For… for everything. You're never going to understand how much that— how much I....” he broke off, shaking his head a fraction as he looked up at Tony through his lashes and smiled. His hand rose from its position on the car, cupping instead over his jaw and letting his thumb brush gently over the jut of Tony’s cheek.

“I Love you,” he said, unafraid. His lips brushed Tony’s again, more a promise than anything else. “I really, really fucking do.”

Tony was silent for a moment, just looking at him. There was a sense of disbelief on his face— in the tiny flicker of his eyes and the small lines that creased his forehead. The notion seemed absurd to a man like Tony, who was loved for his money or his fame or anything other than himself.

Steve was just going to have to prove it, then.

He leaned in again, kiss messy from his own smile. “Love your smile,” he murmured, teeth biting down softly on Tony’s mouth. “Love your eyes. Way they crinkle up an’ shine.” He pushed himself up onto his knees, so that he was looking down at Tony as he reached for the man’s hands and then pulled them up against his lips. “Love your hands, too. So beautiful. They can do everything.”

Steve watched Tony’s throat bob up and down as he swallowed, eyes blinking rapidly. He breathed out what may have been the start of a sentence, but never ended up as anything other than air. Eventually though, Steve felt his fingers twitch against his mouth; moving gently to trace along the seam of his lips, his cheek, the socket of his eye. Like Tony was trying to memorize him.

Steve just let him; let Tony move further inward, press himself up against Steve’s chest and look up in reverence, as if he couldn’t even believe Steve was there. The feeling was reciprocated— there was no way Steve had ever done anything good enough in his sorry life to deserve something as pure as this, and yet here he was. This didn’t belong to him— but no one else could have it either.

Tony was Steve’s— and somewhere along the way, Steve had managed to become wholly and unequivocally Tony’s, too.

“I love you too, you know,” Tony whispered, before leaning up and sealing their mouths together once more.

They didn’t talk much, after that.
Tony was curled into his side, drooling on his shoulder and scratching his beard along Steve’s skin as he snored gently, and Steve just made sure to lay very still, staring up at the ceiling of their shitty motel and trying not to breathe too heavily and wake the man snuggled up against him.

They’d been gone two days, by that point, and Steve wasn’t even sure what state he was in anymore. He hadn’t been this careless and spontaneous in literal decades- it was giving him a kick he hadn’t even realized he could ever get out of something that wasn’t a life-or-death situation.

Part of him wondered what it would be like to just stay like this forever. To run away with Tony and leave everything behind- Tony’s business and Steve’s past- and just be free. It was utterly ridiculous, planning a whole other life with a man you’d met five months ago, obviously- but Steve had realized a long time ago that the normal approach was utterly useless with Tony. All of his training, all his skill, just straight out of the window the moment he saw that smile. It was a hopeless case. And Steve would do anything for it. He’d never felt as connected to anyone as he did to Tony- not just on an emotional level, but a spiritual one. And fuck, Steve barely even believed in souls, let alone soulmates. The notion of him ever even having either was pretty much unfeasible, what with his track record.

But when he looked at Tony- when he heard his laugh or touched his skin, it was just like that was where he belonged. Something had brought them together- and yes, the circumstances were fucked up, they were terrible and awful and Steve lay awake thinking about them every damned night- but either way, they’d brought him to this point. And God, he knew Tony could do better. That he deserved better. But a smaller part of him was just glad. Glad that he’d managed to find him, and glad that he’d been around to stop him from getting hurt. Steve had kept him safe- he’d saved him. And he wasn’t an idiot- he knew that didn’t make up for what he’d been doing before, but he’d work for the rest of his damn life if he had to, as long as it meant that he would one day be worthy of laying at Tony’s side.

There were a lot of things that Steve regretted. But finding Tony- it wasn’t one of them. Someone had to look out for that stubborn self-sacrificial bastard, and no one was going to do it as well as Steve could.

Against his chest, Tony’s head moved a little, snuggling down further into the warmth of Steve’s skin as he slept. Steve looked down with a smile, and his fingers stroked ever so softly through the strands of Tony’s bangs. It seemed absolutely absurd, now, to think about Tony ever selling weapons to terrorists. Not in a million years. Yeah, Tony could be loud and abrasive and a complete asshole to people who pissed him off- but his heart was made of gold. He genuinely did want to help people, and keep them safe. It was obvious. Steve had been blind, not to see past the masks for the first few weeks. Now he knew what to look for, it was clear as day.
It still begged the question as to who had sent him in the first place, though.

It was a thought that nagged at him, day and night. That stopped him from ever letting his guard down fully, even now that Daniel appeared to have dropped off the face of the Earth and Tony had unofficially released Steve of his bodyguarding duties. The threat - that mystery caller from all those months ago, was still out there. And if he’d been willing to pay Steve that much to do it, then it meant that he wasn’t just going to quit when Steve and his team backed out.

Which meant that someone out there wanted Tony dead. Someone who worked close enough to Tony to be able to give them the personal information that they’d needed to establish the deal in the first place.

Which, quite frankly, scared the shit out of Steve.

He needed to find out who had made that call. Ever since his realization that Tony was innocent, he’d been attempting to work out the person behind all this. Staying in contact and pretending that the deal was still on just so that he could wheedle any information he could from the man behind the phone. The only thing he’d learned, however, was that he was definitely an American, from somewhere in the East judging from his accent and language, and that he only ever rang or answered at very late in the night, suggesting a busy schedule of some sort. This didn’t really narrow anything down.

There was danger back in New York. A danger he had been fine with living through before he’d met Tony, but now…

The words of the man they’d interrogated earlier that week ran through his mind again. In the same way they had yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. It terrified him, to think of the things people would do if the underworld somehow found out about Steve’s real identity. It scared him even more to think of what would happen to Tony if the guy on the phone decided to take another hit, make another quicker attempt.

He wished they could stay. Just… leave New York behind them. No one was going to find Tony here. Steve’s sordid past couldn’t reach this far. It was just… them, on a shitty mattress that would give them both cramps in the morning and a pair of curtains that barely even blocked out the rays of moonlight. Here, Steve was at peace. And he knew Tony was too- away from the stress and pressure from that Stane guy, from the business. Making weapons that made his brain flourish but his soul wither.

They couldn’t run forever, though. This was a short escape- Tony’s phone was already going crazy with missed calls, and soon Tony would have to answer, and then that would be that. Driving home, back into New York, back into two lives they’d built for themselves that they found no joy in, back to danger and threat. Tony had always asked him why he looked so menacing all the time, and when he thought about it, Steve kind of understood why: because the threat of danger was always hanging over him. His own personal noose - every step he took was walking him higher up the ramp, and he knew it was only a matter of time before someone pushed him off the ledge and let him hang.

Not Tony, though, Never Tony. He’d die before he let that happen, and that was a promise.

“You’re so tense, baby,” Tony mumbled, and he probably wasn’t even awake- he tended to talk in his sleep a lot- but his hand stroked soothingly over Steve’s chest and he tilted his head further into Steve’s skin. “Stop thinking.”

Steve laughed softly. “Easier said than done.”
Tony said nothing, but he shifted a little closer, hand curling clumsily around Steve’s bicep. “Could help you stop, if y’want,” he whispered.

Tony was adorable like that. He still hadn’t even opened his eyes, and his cheek was smushed into Steve’s side, making his words slurred. Steve just smiled, kissing the crown of his head softly. He was certain that Tony was not even conscious.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” he murmured, as his thumb ran along the top of Tony’s shoulder, “just go back to sleep.”

Tony huffed, nose twitching like a rabbit. “Not ‘ven tired,” he breathed, a subconscious response more than anything, because a second later Steve heard him snoring gently once more, curled just that little bit tighter around Steve’s frame. He bit back on another laugh at the sight of that, and a second afterward he closed his own eyes, leaning his head into Tony’s.

He couldn’t make their problems go away. He couldn’t change the past. But he could damn well do his best to make their future as bright as possible. And failing that, just Tony’s would do. His own didn’t much matter.

He fell asleep with that promise running through his mind, and Tony’s breath ghosting just above his heart.

The next time Steve woke up, Tony was drawing patterns on his chest with the tips of his fingers, each trace of skin making the hairs at the back of Steve’s neck stand on end. The early morning light of dawn was just beginning to creep up over the horizon, bathing the room with a soft blue-coloured haze. It made Tony’s skin glow.

Steve tilted his head and looked down at Tony, who glanced up at him for a second before smiling, a tiny little thing. His eyes dragged themselves slowly back to Steve’s chest, where he continued to draw his patterns; designs and lines that probably meant something in Tony’s mind, but were simply nonsensical shapes to Steve. He loved watching it anyway- to see the way Tony’s brain worked, how his thoughts and ideas came to life through his fingers, traced patterns onto Steve’s own skin. It felt like an honour to be there, to be Tony’s canvas, even if it turned out that they meant nothing and were simply mindless doodles.

“We have to go back,” Tony whispered into his shoulder, and Steve leaned back, tilting his head to the ceiling once more as he shut his eyes. He could hear birdsong out of the window, and the lack of traffic felt alien to his ears.

“No one ever has to do anything.” Steve turned his head to the window, watching the light of dawn ripple through the thin curtains. He moved his own hand and then rested it over Tony’s as it
ghosted over Steve’s chest. Their fingers tangled into one another with a slow ease, and Steve exhaled softly, pulling them both up and then bringing the tips of Tony’s fingers to his lips. He could still feel the scar on his ring finger from where the blade under the envelope had sliced through his skin.

Against his side, he felt Tony smile, pushing his forehead into the crook of Steve’s neck. Steve spared a glance down; looked at Tony’s body, laid out beautifully atop the cheap mattress. One day, he’d spread Tony out on a canvas and map every inch of him. He wanted to be able to draw each muscle and curve of his spine, be able to pinpoint where every dark strand of hair fell. Here, in the half-light, Steve could watch the contrast of light and shadow play over his perfect skin; the usual tan turned pale from the blue hues of the room. There was no part of Tony that was not so intricately perfect- he was light and shadow and life and death, and Steve loved him.

God, did he love him.

“I wish that were true,” Tony breathed, looking up and watching his own fingers brush across Steve’s mouth. “It would be so much easier if it were true.”

Steve could’ve argued and said that there was nothing that was forcing Tony stay, nothing stopping him from just packing it all up and running with Steve until they left everything else behind. But it would make him a hypocrite. Tony wasn’t the only one trapped by circumstance, by responsibility. Although Steve didn’t have nearly as many ties to the world as Tony did, he still couldn’t leave his friends behind, and he never would either. He had to go back. So did Tony.

This was just the way the world worked.

They didn’t speak after that. Their hands remained entangled and their eyes on the window, where the sun rose higher and higher with each minute. Once it had risen fully, Tony sat upright and then swung his legs off the bed. Steve turned and watched- watched the way his back muscles flexed, how his hand came up to his neck and then brushed over the dark bruise Steve had put there last night. Tony stretched, before padding across the wooden floors and then making his way over to the bathroom, grabbing for his clothes as he went. He shot Steve a smug little grin over his shoulder as he went, as if to say ‘yes, I totally know you’re staring’, and then shut the door before Steve could get up and follow.

He laughed to himself, and the smile remained on his face even as he sat up and reached for his duffel, pulling out the clothes he was going to have to return home in. It was somewhat difficult to feel morose when he could still taste Tony on his tongue, after all.

He pulled on a pair of boxers and then yawned, running a hand through his hair. His phone rested haphazardly on the windowsill and he stood up, pulling it into his hands and checking his messages whilst he heard the sound of a shower switching on. There were the usual messages from Bucky, asking him to check in, and Steve quickly sent off a text to confirm he was still alive. Then there were various spams from Clint, a few updates from his bank, and then a-

He narrowed his eyes, looking at Natasha’s curt words. ‘Found the guy who’d doled out the chemical weapons to Jones. He didn’t know the guy. Our lead’s run cold.’

Right. That wasn’t at all annoying.

He sighed irritably, chucking his phone on the bed and then staring sullenly out of the window. The sun was now bright and high in the sky, the day clear and cloudless.
And somewhere, Daniel Arlington-Jones was hiding.

Steve would find him, though. And then once Steve had made him pay, he’d set his sights on the man who had brought him and Tony together in the first place. Maybe he’d even thank him before putting a bullet between his eyes.

_____Tony_____

It was funny, how normal things became not even a month after the whole confrontation with Daniel.

There were no more sightings or reports. After going on the run, an international search was out for him on the grounds of domestic terrorism, and Tony knew it wouldn’t be long before they caught him. He hadn’t shown his face near Tony again. Unlikely he ever would, at that point.

Steve had, for all intents and purposes, moved into the tower with him. He still went to run his the cafe with his friends every day, but he came back to Tony almost every night afterward, and his things had migrated into Tony’s room. Steve and his friends came as somewhat of a package deal however, as Tony had found out once he’d started spotting various other people loitering around his tower as well. Not that he minded- Steve’s friends were fun people, and whatever reason they had for deciding to spend time with Tony, he was just glad he finally had a bit of company. They didn’t come down into his workshop, but they tended to wait around in Tony’s penthouse a few hours before Steve got back from his shift, and so Tony saw them quite a bit. And as much as Natasha scared him and Clint pissed him off, he had to admit, it was nice to have them around.

All of it was nice. Considering the circumstances by which he’d been thrown in with them all, the outcome was actually… good. Really good.

He just had to get used to Barton and Barnes cleaning out his fucking fridge every time they stopped by. “Hey, birdbrain, did you take the last bagel again?”

From the couch, Clint glanced up and then made a guilty face. “I missed breakfast!”

Tony sighed, scrunching up the empty wrapping and then walking over to the living room in order to shove it down his hoodie. Clint yelped, tumbling off the couch, and Tony quickly took his place on the cushions. When the other man glared at him from the floor, Tony just smiled. “What are you doing here anyway?”

Clint shrugged, rolling onto his back and dislodging the ball of paper. “Steve told me to wait for him here. We’re seeing the game this afternoon. Where is he anyway?”

“Showering, last time I checked,” Tony propped his feet onto Clint’s back and then stretched. “I still have no idea what you see in that stupid sport.”
Clint jabbed him in the instep of his foot and made Tony yell in surprise. “Don’t blaspheme in this household, please.”

“It’s my fucking house, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“No, I hadn’t actually. Looks exactly like my shitty apartment in Brooklyn.”

Tony made a face and then tried to poke him in the stomach, but was stopped by Clint’s weirdly fast instincts. A quick tug sent Tony tumbling off the couch as well, landing awkwardly and completely at the mercy of Barton’s stupid hands, which wasted no time in digging into his ribs and tickling him. He gasped and tried to wriggle away, but the man’s grip was strong. “Fucking hell, what are you, five?” He choked in between yells, trying to bat him off.

Clint let go suddenly, and Tony looked up to see Steve casually pulling him off by the ear, shooting both of them a despairing look. “Why is this the first thing I come downstairs to?” He asked wearily, sending Clint rolling across the floor and then extending a hand out to Tony, who took it sulkily.

“He attacked me in my own home for no reason.”

“He insulted baseball!”

Steve rolled his eyes, kissing Tony absently on the temple as he moved back into the kitchen. “I’m gonna stay out of this one. Too early to deal with both of you at once. Although as a general rule, I’m on Tony’s side.”

Tony pressed a hand to his heart and looked on smugly whilst Clint gave him the middle finger. “How many years have you known me, Steve?”

“Too many.”

“Great. Geat- can’t believe I’ve been replaced by some airhead billionaire,” Clint muttered, sticking out his tongue at Tony until Steve turned around and shot him an unimpressed look. He quickly raised his hands, a sulky pout on his mouth. “Joking, joking- you can drop the bodyguard act Stevie, I’m not gonna be mean to your boyfriend.”

“Damn right you’re not,” Steve muttered quietly, turning his back again, and Tony bit down on a pleased little smile of his own, ignoring the roll of his eyes Clint sent the both of them.

The two of them left about twenty minutes later- fifteen of those having been spent with Steve getting pleasantly distracted by Tony, who was more than happy to piss Clint off further by monopolizing Steve’s attention through kisses and well-placed hands. Unfortunately, however, Clint managed to drag him away and out of the door, and Tony ended up being left to his own devices before midday had even rolled around.

He looked around the empty penthouse with a small frown. It had actually started feeling weird, being alone. What with having Steve basically shadow him for four months as his bodyguard, he’d rarely had a moment to himself. And yeah, at first, it had been annoying, but now… well, he figured he’d just gotten more used to it. Plus he hated silence- so yeah, the penthouse being empty was freaky.

He shook his head. “JARVIS?” His voice rang out in the large kitchen, and he braced his hands against the counter.
“Yes, sir?”

“What’s my schedule for today?”

“You currently owe Miss Potts a video call, and she is also requesting you email the itinerary for the Moscow trip next month to her so she can plan accordingly. Aside from that, you have no other plans.”

He sighed in relief, pumping a small fist against his side. “Right then. Set the call up, let’s get that over with first. And then line up a few blueprints on my tablet- I’ll have a look at them whilst watching some TV or something.”

“Very well sir.” Tony grinned up at the ceiling (a habit he’d picked up from Steve) and then turned on his heel, making his way over to his room in order to find a decent shirt to wear that wouldn’t result in a disapproving stare from Pepper. He’d already had enough of those over the last few months to last him a goddamned lifetime.

The call was, as predicted, mind-numbingly dull and full of things Tony truly did not give a single rat’s ass about. Some issues that needed to be sorted out down in marketing, a PR event that Tony Really Needed To Attend But Almost Certainly Wouldn’t, and then a quick argument over the stock prices. He’d ended the call an hour later though, which, speaking from past experiences, wasn’t actually so bad.

And then, of course, just as he folded himself into the couch and got ready to relax, his phone rang again.

He groaned, rolling over and checking the caller ID. When Obadiah’s toothy face grinned back at him, Tony sighed, but picked up the phone. He’d been owing the guy a call for a while- best get it over with. “Hey, Obie-”

“Tony, Tony, Tony,” Obadiah cut him off with his usual booming voice, “I’m gonna cut to the chase here. We need to talk about what’s been happening these past few months, and I don’t want you putting it off any more. No more avoiding my calls or not answering my questions, you hear? I wanna hear about what’s been going on;”

Tony sat up, palming a hand over his eyes. “I’m fine, Obie,” he said quickly, “really I am. There was this thing with some psycho for a while, but it’s been handled-”

“Yeah yeah, I’m glad you’re safe,” Obie cut in hurriedly once more, “but I meant about the design plans. The Jericho. You said it’d be ready months ago, Tony- you said a lot of the missiles would be ready months ago, but I haven’t gotten a single thing from you recently.”

Tony stopped, biting his lip. Okay, so Obie had a point there. “Yeah, I know, everything’s just been really busy, you know, and-”

“I’m coming over in a little while, okay?” He said, voice gentle, “I want to check up on you. Make sure you’re doing alright. My car’s gonna be there in ten. We’ll have a proper talk about this when I see you.”

“I-”

“Later, Tony,” Obadiah hung up briskly, and Tony dropped the phone from his ear slowly, looking at the TV with a woeful glance.

Seemed like relaxing was going to have to wait, then.
He supposed that was fair. He’d been kind of brushing Obie off ever since… well, ever since Steve had come onto the scene, probably. And in all fairness, there had been other things on his mind. Like the imminent threat of kidnap and the fact that he wanted to climb his bodyguard like a tree at literally all hours of the day. It was understandable that he’d put the missile building to the side for a few weeks.

But now that everything had gone back to normal, he guessed that it was probably time that he did too. This was what he was good at. The whole Missile thing was his entire forte.

Which was, incidentally, exactly what Obie told him when he walked through the door.

“"I know how it can get sometimes,” Obie declared, patting him firmly on the shoulder as he puffed on a cigar and leaned back into the couch. “You get your head outta the game, and suddenly you don’t wanna put it back in again. I get it. I feel it myself, Tony. We’re pretty similar, you and I, y’know.”

Obie liked to say that. Tony supposed he had a point- they were both ambitious, both workaholics, and they both knew exactly how to work a crowd. They had a lot of similarities.

The older man smiled at him, squeezing his shoulder and then leaning forward, hand curling around the bottle of the whiskey Tony had brought out for him. He poured a few fingers for himself and then made to add to Tony’s, but Tony shook his head. “I’m good, Obie.”

Obadiah raised an eyebrow. “Really? You’ve barely even started, m’boy, come on.”

That was true. It wouldn’t exactly hurt him. He shrugged, and then nodded his head with a smile. Obie returned it and then knocked his glass against Tony’s, leaning back into the couch with his arm around Tony’s shoulders. “Ah, it’s good to be back on solid ground. I’ve been all over the place these past few weeks, trying to stop stocks from taking a nosedive. All this work’s gonna kill me, one day.” He huffed, popping the cigar back into his mouth and then shooting Tony a wry look.

He felt the pang of guilt curl in his chest. It really wasn’t fair that he’d left the business to sit on Obie’s shoulders this long- the guy gave up so much for Tony. “Yeah, well if you need me to handle any of the investors, just let me know.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do for three months,” Obie replied, sighing heavily. Tony swallowed, and then drained the rest of his glass nervously. He fucking hated it when Obie got pissy- he liked to make things difficult, and he never let things go. No doubt Tony would be hearing of this for the next eight fucking years.

“Listen,” Tony waved a hand whilst Obie picked up the whiskey once more, refilling Tony’s glass, “I’m just been hectic lately, okay? But I’m gonna get on it- the skeleton’s already done, and now I just have to work on the heart of it, get all the parts in, and it’ll be ready before the deadline. I swear.”

There was a small huff, but then Obie smiled. His hand squeezed Tony’s shoulder. “I believe you. Always have, Tony- you know I’m on your side. This is just me being concerned about you, that’s all. I want to know you’re okay.”

Tony dropped his head, grinning back. He was glad he had Obadiah- a little pushy though his actions may be, he knew that the man had his best interests at heart. He was pretty much a father to him, after all.
The hours drifted by; Tony and Obie making conversation whilst Tony worked on his tablet and Obadiah read the newspaper. The level of whiskey in the bottle slowly went down as the time passed, and Tony realized with a pleasant buzz that this was the first time he’d been drunk in ages. Obie always liked a drink, so it was an easy excuse, really.

“Have you heard from the Moscow lot recently, Tones?” Obie called out from the kitchen as he rummaged through the drawers in the hunt for a takeout menu. “I was told by Pepper a few days ago that you were having trouble getting them on side.”

Tony waved a hand lazily, checking his watch as he did so. He wondered when Steve was going to get back. “We’ve arranged a meeting with them for a month from now. I’ll bring them round, don’t worry. Pep just likes to fret.”

Obadiah chuckled. “Of course you will. Never seen a group of people open their wallets as fast as you can make ‘em, boy. I’ll let Pepper know.”

“No, it’s okay, I called her and sorted it this morning.”

“Oh, so you are answering your phone for some people, then?” Obie raised an eyebrow, but then he laughed and clapped Tony on the shoulder before he could apologize again. “I’m just kidding, don’t worry about it. I’d answer the phone if it was Miss Potts on the other end of it too.” He grinned, moving to sit down on the couch opposite Tony. Tony frowned, opening his mouth to ask what exactly he meant by that, but in the end he just left it. He was probably only talking about how Pep could instill the fear of God into anyone with a single raised eyebrow. Tony would absolutely answer the phone to avoid that.

He turned back to the tablet, looking over the exoskeleton in front of him with a small frown. It seemed too bulky- he could probably shave a bit of the weight off it if he decreased the density of the metal, maybe even replaced it with something more light and malleable-

He was fully engrossed in less than a minute; fingers tapping quickly at the screen and brow furrowed whilst he worked. He had to admit, there was something deeply satisfying with watching everything come together right in front of his eyes, under his hands. “JARVIS, rotate screen by three percent,” he muttered quietly, trying to get a better angle to see that finicky piece of wiring that didn’t seem to be fitting in with the rest of the design.

At some point, he felt Obadiah lean in over his shoulder, peer down at what he was doing. Tony mostly just ignored him, and a second later and with a small nod of satisfaction that he was indeed working, the man wandered off again, undoubtedly to refill his empty glass. Glancing down at the coffee table, he realized Obie had gone to refill Tony’s too. That was nice of him.

It was some time later when he heard JARVIS quietly inform him that Steve had returned, and Tony snapped out of his work haze with an excited jerk. It was a bit stupid, yeah, but the pleasant buzz of alcohol in his system mixed with the ridiculous amounts of affection he already felt only helped to make him care even less about what anyone thought of it. He was smitten, and the whole damn world should know about it in his opinion. “Steve!” He called loudly, turning his head to the elevator just as the doors opened.

Steve’s eyes latched onto his immediately, and he smiled softly across the room. “Hey, you,” he said quietly.

Tony sat up abruptly, tossing the tablet to the side and extending his hands as he stood up unsteadily on the couch. “Welcome home! I missed you.”
Steve looked a little confused as he watched Tony wobble on the edge of the couch, but he walked forward anyway, hands outstretched and ready to catch him if he fell. “I’ve only been gone four hours.”

Tony shrugged, waiting until Steve’s hands were around his thighs and then leaning forward. Steve yelped, but of course, he caught Tony before he could go tumbling to the floor. “So? I still missed you.”

Steve rolled his eyes fondly, spinning Tony around a few times before throwing him effortlessly back onto the couch. It was still a trip, remembering how fucking strong Steve was. Something Tony took particular advantage of when the occasion called for it. And really, absolutely no one could blame him for that. Steve was hot as fuck - especially when he was holding Tony up against the wall with one hand-

“-Y? Are you even listening?” Steve asked, bracing his hands against the back of the couch and looking down at him in amusement. Tony stared back, knowing he was probably smiling like a lunatic. But whatever. He was happy, it wasn’t illegal to smile.

He shook his head slowly, just looking up at Steve, who cocked his head in slight confusion, before his eyes flicked over to the coffee table, where the empty bottle of whiskey was still left out. “Oh- you’re drunk,” he said in understanding, before a small frown reached his face. “Wait- you’re drunk?”

Tony giggled, sitting up and kissing him quickly. “Not drunk, just sort of buzzed, don’t worry- I’m not going to be vomiting on your shoes any time soon, believe me, it takes a lot to get me there. Hey- on a totally unrelated note, we should go to Paris,” he said suddenly, the idea coming to his mind in an instant, “just you and me. For like, a week. I could buy out the Louvre. I could put one of your designs in the Louvre. That would be totally… totally fucking awesome, you absolutely need to have one of your paintings up in the Louvre-”

“Hm, I think that might upset the local Parisians;” Steve told him, sweeping Tony’s hair back from his face and then looking up. It took a second, but his eyes narrowed and he stood straight very suddenly once he’d spotted it. It was Steve, after all- the man was observant as fuck. “Tony, has someone else been here?”

“Only Obie, don’t worry, stand down,” Tony waved another hand and then wrapped it around Steve’s, tugging him forward. With a short sigh, Steve quickly vaulted over the couch, landing perfectly at Tony’s side. He was like a fucking cat, sometimes- certainly had the reflexes of one, that was for sure.

Of course, speak of the devil- at that moment, Obie appeared from the kitchen, carrying two plates and a pile of what looked to be Chinese food. He must’ve ordered whilst Tony had been distracted. “Right, so I got your favourite, you’re gonna have t- oh. Hello?” Obadiah stopped in his tracks, looking at Steve and blinking a few times in confusion. He seemed completely thrown by the sight of Steve, and even took a small step backward.

Something flashed, very briefly, over Steve’s features for a moment, but then he was standing fluidly, meeting Obie in the middle and extending a hand. “You must be Obadiah Stane. Heard a lot about you. I’m Steve.”

Slowly, Obie shook it, his grip firm. Tony watched them, frowning slightly. He wasn’t sure why, but he could sense some sort of tension in the room. Obie was looking at Steve with a blank face that Tony knew was him analyzing Steve, and he wanted to tell him to cut it out. Steve wasn’t a business partner or- or an investor or whatever, he didn’t need to be observed like that.
But then he smiled— a thin smile, layered with a sort of glee that Tony didn’t really follow. Obie didn’t know him— but the strange sort of delight on his face made it look as if he did. “Oh- you’re Tony’s bodyguard! Yes, yes, I heard from Miss Potts that you’d hired someone for the job. It’s… it’s nice to meet you, Steve.”

Across from him, Steve smiled tightly, waiting for Obie to drop his hand. When he did, Steve looked back to Tony for a moment, face softening as he did so. “I’m not actually his bodyguard any more. I prefer the title ‘boyfriend’.”

Tony grinned and blew him a kiss across the room. Obie’s face flickered for a second, and he stared deeply at Steve, before a very small smile crept onto his face. “That’s… very interesting. I wasn’t aware of the fact that Tony had found a partner. Thought you were more a love ‘em and leave ‘em type. That’s… sweet,” he declared softly, and Tony couldn’t work out what it was in his voice, but there was something there that Tony couldn’t quite place his finger on. This wasn’t like Obie- he was acting all freaky.

Steve was picking up on it too, because Tony saw him shoot Obadiah a wary look, before stepping back and wrapping his hand gently around the back of Tony’s neck. “Thanks for the stamp of approval,” Steve said, his voice perfectly polite, but Tony could sense the dryness behind it, and couldn’t help the small snort of laughter that escaped his mouth. Steve glanced down at him and raised an amused eyebrow, whilst Obie looked a little put-out in front of them both.

“How many times have I told you not to laugh like that, Tony?” He said in the end, finally looking away and then placing the food on the table in front of him. He tossed a few boxes of Chinese into Tony’s lap, and then shrugged at Steve. “Sorry. I wasn’t aware there’d be guests- I only bought for two.”

“S’fine, s’fine, he can share mine.” Tony waved it off and then tugged Steve by the hand, pulling him onto the couch next to him. Steve was still frowning a little, and he felt tense under Tony’s grip- but he went willingly, and his hand settled almost protectively around Tony’s waist.

Tony sighed, leaning his head into Steve’s shoulder and then picking up his tablet again. On the loveseat, Obie was tucking into his noodles, the weirdly triumphant aura still radiating off him. Tony was slightly confused— but then again, he was kind of drunk. He was probably just imagining things.

They passed the next hour or so with some light conversation, Obie and Steve acting perfectly pleasant toward each other the entire time. Obie was actually surprisingly friendly, considering the weird start of earlier. The only slight issue of the night was when Obie tried to pour Tony another glass, and Tony said no. Obie poured it anyway- or at least, he tried to. Steve pulled it away before it could spill out, a severe frown on his face.

“He said no.” Steve bit out the words sharply, staring at Obie with that look on his face that Tony knew spelt only trouble. He sat up a little, hand going placatingly to Steve’s chest.

“It’s fine Steve, I don’t mind,” Tony said with a smile, whilst Obie raised an eyebrow and then held his hands up in the air.

“I don’t mean anything by it, buddy,” he said, a hint of amusement lacing his voice as he shot a look over at Tony. “Looks like he’s got you on a nice respectable little leash, hasn’t he?”

Steve tensed up underneath Tony’s fingers. “I don’t own him- he made the decision himself, I’m just making sure you don’t ignore it.”
“Well, son, you got an issue with a friend offering another friend a damn drink?”

“I’ve got an issue with people who can’t take no for an answer,” Steve said coldly, hand flexing minutely against Tony’s waist.

Sensing that this had the danger of escalating rapidly, Tony quickly cut in before either of them had the chance to say anything else. “Okay, okay, just chill, both of you. It’s no biggie. I don’t really feel like any more right now Obie- maybe later, alright? And Steve, you can stand down. He’s not coming after my virtue or anything, believe me, that left a long time ago.” Tony grinned nervously at the both of them and shuffled a bit, curling his fingers through Steve’s assuringly. Steve was still staring at Obie with narrowed eyes, but Obie didn’t seem fazed at all.

He looked back at Steve for another moment or two, and then chuckled lightly. “I’m afraid there isn’t gonna be a Later, Tony- I gotta head off. Duty calls, and all that.” Obie stood slowly, grabbing his jacket from the arm of the loveseat and then swinging it around his shoulders. He stopped by Tony’s side and clapped him fondly on the shoulder. “I’ll be seeing you soon, Tony. Don’t forget my missiles, okay? And Steve-” he paused for a moment, and then smiled a little. “It was nice meeting you. Sorry if I offended you- wasn’t my intention.”

Steve’s jaw clenched, and for a second it looked as if he wasn’t going to accept it- but he glanced briefly at Tony and then forced himself to relax, smiling tightly back. “Don’t worry about it. Nice meeting you too.”

With one last toothy smile, Obie swept out of the room, whistling a casual tune as he went. Tony watched Steve watch Obie, and then once the elevator doors closed behind him, Tony wasted no time in poking Steve in the cheek. The man blinked, turning to Tony’s finger and raising an eyebrow.

“What was that about?” Tony asked him with a frown.

Steve huffed, shaking his head. “You said no,” he repeated firmly, brow furrowed in dismay. “People like that need to learn that they can’t just ignore that-”

“And what do you mean by ’people like that?’” Tony asked defensively, sitting up straighter, “Obie’s a good guy, Steve. He’s known me a long time, he just assumed-”

“Well he shouldn’t,” Steve snapped, before licking his lips and then sighing. “Okay. Yeah. Sorry. Probably got a little overzealous there. I just…” he paused, and then turned to Tony. His hand moved up from Tony’s waist to his mouth, thumb brushing softly across his bottom lip. “He told you not to laugh,” Steve whispered softly, deep concern in his voice. “No one should ever tell you not to laugh. I guess it just gave me a bad first impression.”

Against his will, Tony’s treacherous cheeks heated up, undoubtedly aided by the booze. He looked down, shaking his head in embarrassment. “Steve, for God’s sake, he has a point-”

Steve replied by digging him in the ribs, startling a yelp from Tony’s mouth. “What the fuck was that for?”

In response, Steve did it again. Tony squeaked once more, jumping back on the couch- but Steve just followed, hands outstretched and searching for Tony’s midsection. “No- no you asshole, don’t you dare start tickling me, I am drunk, I will cry-”

Steve ignored him, instead choosing to tug him back across the couch by his ankle. He slotted himself between Tony’s legs and then pinned him effortlessly against the couch, hands digging
into Tony’s ribs mercilessly. Tony wriggled and cried out, unable to hold back the loud bursts of laughter that pretty much exploded from his mouth as Steve worked up to his armpits and tickled. Above him, Steve was grinning devilishly, and he laughed along with Tony until his hands finally stopped, tickles being traded for light kisses up and down Tony’s neck, collar and face.

Steve was a fucking sap when he wanted to be.

“Are you happy now, you menace?” Tony smacked him lightly on the back, fingers scraping lightly over his spine as he tipped his head back onto the cushion and let Steve kiss his neck. “I laughed like an idiot for at least two minutes.”

“Good,” Steve mumbled, breaking away and looking down at Tony seriously. Only for a second though- a moment later, he dipped forward and licked Tony’s nose, which made him yelp once more, goddamn it.

“Are you drunk?” Tony asked, unable to stop the stupid smile rolling over his mouth as he stared up at the idiot. “Because really, you’re acting more inebriated than I am.”

Steve shook his head slowly and kissed him quick. “Nope. I just love you, idiot. And don’t ever let anyone tell you not to laugh. Ever.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but he looked up at Steve and felt his face soften. It was just the way Steve looked at him- like he was so important. Like he really meant the things he said. It was just…

It was a lot. In the best kind of way, though.

He stretched out underneath Steve, just to watch the way those blue eyes darkened ever so slightly above him; the way Steve followed the lift of his shirt with his hands that no longer tickled, but instead caressed gently. It still felt electric every time Steve touched him. Tony didn’t think it was ever going to get old.

“Think we should go to bed,” Tony declared, wrapping his arms around Steve’s neck and tugging him down to kiss him again.

“It’s 6 o’clock, Tony.”

“Oh baby, trust me, we’re not going to be sleeping for a while.”

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from what seemed to be a bullet wound.

Steve was silent for a moment. Tony looked down again, and there was a small frown on his face. “An altercation with a British spy on international waters,” he said in the end, and Tony laughed at the cryptic nature of his words, pressing his mouth against the scar lightly.

“And this one?” He asked, tracing a thin, raised stripe of skin just under Steve’s rib.

“Politicians often make enemies.”

“What about these?” Tony kissed Steve’s jaw, where a scattering of tiny and almost indistinguishable pinprick scars lingered. At that one, Steve paused, and Tony glanced over to him curiously. He seemed to be trying to remember.

“I think,” he said eventually, his own hand rising and running along the marks, “that was from the first fight I ever got into. I was, what- thirteen? Twelve, maybe. Three guys at school. They’d been shoving this other kid around. I tried to stop ‘em. They kicked me straight into the gravel, cut up the whole of my face.”

Tony traced the litter of marks with fingers that were barely even there at all. Then he leaned forward and kissed them, gentle and soft. “Absolutely no idea how I managed to get a person as good as you into my bed, but I’m goddamn glad of it,” he said simply, because he was still ever so slightly tipsy, and it helped loosen his tongue. And anyway- Steve deserved to hear it.

But when he looked over, Steve’s face looked almost… sad. His hand reached for Tony’s as it played along his jaw, and he tilted his head to kiss the center of his palm.

“I am not the man you think I am, Tony,” he said, voice worryingly quiet. “You… there are about a million things I deserve, and you do not even come close to being one of them.”

Tony knew that Steve had a past. He’d worked it out long ago- from the way Steve talked to the way he acted- his scars and his dreams, they were all very suggestive of a life that wasn’t just bodyguarding for low-level targets. Tony knew this.

Tony didn’t care. Whatever he had been- whether it had been whilst he was in the army, or something else entirely- it wasn’t the person he was now. When he was with Tony. And it was… well, it was incredibly self-centered, yes, but that was really all that mattered. Tony knew Steve, and he knew exactly how good he was, because he saw it every day.

“You are entirely, completely, utterly the man I think you are,” Tony whispered, kissing the side of his face. “I know you’re fiercely loyal. That you’re kind and that you’d do anything for those kids you single-handedly decided to protect, for no other reason than the fact that you could. I know you love me. I know that you always give your change to the homeless and you- God, you took the time out to bake Pepper brownies when I told you she’d been having a stressful week. You know what kind of people do that, Steve?” Tony laughed softly as Steve rolled his eyes and buried his face in his hands. “Good people. That’s what good people do, Steve. And you know what, maybe, you have done bad things in your past. But fuck, baby. Look at me- I’ve done bad shit in my past, present and undoubtedly my future. I make and sell bombs for a living.” He laughed again, but this one carried less humour- he was brought back to the designs waiting in the workshop, the ones he really fucking needed to get back to, probably some time later tonight-

Steve’s big hand wrapped around his own; a comforting weight pressing down against his heart. Tony tilted his head sideways to look at him, and Steve smiled. His eyes seemed a little wet.
“I really hope you’re right,” he whispered, “I want to be someone who’s good enough for you. I really do. And I promise, Tony, I will be. One day. I swear. One day I’ll make up for… everything I did.”

Tony could argue—say that it really should be him saying these things to Steve, as opposed to the other way around, but he knew it would be useless. Steve believed what Steve believed, and Tony could only hope that one day he’d be able to change his mind. He figured that tonight probably wasn’t that night though, so he contented himself with falling into Steve’s chest, pressing his hands into the man’s heart and then feeling as strong arms wrapped protectively around him, shielding him from the rest of the world.

It was perfect.

“I love you, okay?” Steve whispered into his hair, kissing the crown of his head. “Never forget that. Please.”

He could feel the way Steve’s heart beat. He could sense the breath on the top of his hair as Steve pressed his mouth there. Fingers flexed and stroked so softly against his hip, the hands slotting there like that’s where they’d been designed to go. Tony was entirely surrounded by everything that made up Steve Rogers, and there wasn’t a damn thing he’d change.

“I won’t,” he whispered, kissing Steve’s heartbeat. “I promise.”
There were about a hundred wires curled around his legs as he sat in the middle of the workshop, and he really hoped none of them were live. In all honesty, he couldn’t exactly remember how long he’d even been down here. It looked like daytime from what he was getting from the light in the windows, but as to what day exactly, he couldn’t say.

Sometimes he got like that. It was no biggie.

“JARVIS?” He asked in question, yanking at a set of wires tied around his feet “these things aren’t gonna kill me if I put them in my mouth, are they?”

“No, sir, although I would suggest-”

“Cool,” he said quickly, popping the tip into his teeth and then shifting around trying to find the damn motherboard it was supposed to attach to. He’d had it earlier, he could swear by that. It was probably hidden underneath all these goddamned wires, which, again, he was confused as to how had got to where they were.

The missile was coming along beautifully, if he dared say so himself. Innovative and sleek, it was going to blow all the other competitors out of the water. Literally. Tony could already feel the pride surging up in him- he loved this part. And this was going to save lives. The boys out on the front lines could sit pretty, knowing this was gonna deal with the bad guys before they even came out of their caves.

Hey. That was a good line. He should put it in the speech.

Grinning to himself and tugging at another set of wires, he unearthed the board he’d been looking for and then untangled it from the mess at his feet. He was positively vibrating with energy; he kind of wanted to get back to the actual melding of the exo-skeleton, just so that he could hit something. He felt like that would be good right now. “How’s the synthesis coming along, J?”

“84%, sir.”

Tony t’sked and frowned. That was long and boring. He’d have to wait at least another two hours before he could do anything with that. “Ugh, annoying, terrible, awful, disgusting. Your fault, JARV.”

“Terribly sorry for the failure, sir,” the AI replied dryly, and Tony figured if he had eyebrows, he probably would’ve raised them in bemusement. Which was fair. Tony didn’t really know what he was saying, either.

With a small puff of air, he rubbed a hand over his face and then blinked down at the board of wires. He wondered how long he’d been awake for. It didn’t feel like long, but then again, he’d kind of lost all sense of time. He wondered where Steve was. He definitely remembered seeing him at some point- he’d come in with the cup of coffee that was now abandoned on the desk- but Tony couldn’t quite pinpoint when that had been.

Just as he was about to move to the soldering iron, he heard a sharp knock on the doors of the shop and looked up in surprise. When Romanov’s clear gaze stared back at him, he blinked a few times
in confusion. Natasha didn’t… come down to the lab. She didn’t particularly engage in conversation at all, actually- which Tony didn’t mind- but it made this slightly odd. She wasn’t known for seeking out conversation. Probably because she didn’t seem to like him all that much, but he supposed that was understandable. He was a bit of an asshole.

With a small jerk, he got to his feet and then padded over to the lock, opening the door and stepping out to join her in the corridor. Not that he thought Natasha was untrustworthy or anything, but like he’d said- people didn’t come into his lab unless he absolutely knew they were safe to do so. And he barely even knew this chick, so… “Uh- hi?” He asked, looking down at her in question.

Natasha did nothing but observe him for a few moments, head cocked in mild curiosity. Tony felt rather as if he was being analyzed by the woman, which was, admittedly, rather unnerving. There was something about the way she stared- Tony knew she was only a barista, but he also didn’t doubt that she could kill a man from thirty paces away. Which was both hot and terrifying.

“Do you have a gym in this tower?” She asked eventually.

Tony nodded. “I… yeah. Uh, no offence, but like… why are you here? Steve’s… I don’t know where Steve is, but I don’t think he’s-”

“I came to see you,” she shrugged simply, looking briefly into the workshop from over his shoulder. “I think you should learn how to fight.”

He wondered whether he’d heard her correctly. Natasha had spoken about ten words to him in total since they’d met, and not one of them had been anything other than polite small talk. And now she… she was asking him to fight? With her? “Excuse me?”

“You, me, a quick lesson in self defense,” she said, smiling easily. “Listen, I know it’s a bit out of the blue, but A) you should probably know how to defend from attacks in case something like Daniel Jones happens again, and B) I’m trying to do some icebreaking here, because Steve wants me to make more of an effort with you, but fighting is basically the only thing I’m comfortable doing with men I barely know, so…” she trailed off, shrugging again before looking at him with a raised eyebrow. “Come on, Stark. I wanna see what you’re made of.”

“Uh, currently about half a pint of coffee and crippling self esteem issues?”

When she looked blankly at him, he laughed nervously. “That was a joke. That was… sorry. Uh. Sure.”

“Sure what?”

“Sure, I’ll fight you. With you. Not… I mean, I’m not gonna fight you, obviously, I don’t wanna hurt you, but we can-”

He was cut off when, faster than lighting, Natasha swung around behind him and reached for his arm, twisting it into a lock effortlessly and before he could even finish his sentence. He yelped in surprise and mild pain, looking behind him and at her slightly smug face. “Believe me, Stark, you’re not going to be the one hurting me.”

“Oh,” he squeaked, “okay, that’s… that’s fine too, uh, I’m kind of terrified. Please don’t strangle me with your hair.”

At that, she grinned. A second later, the pressure on his arm was released, and he felt her brush past him again, jumping up the stairs lightly. “I’ll try not to. Get something gym-appropriate on, I’ll meet you there in five minutes.”
Tony watched her go, mouth slack and eyes wide in bewilderment. After she’d left, he blinked and looked down at his arm. It was fine. Of course it was fine- she hadn’t done anything other than twist it, he was just a big baby. “JARVIS, did that just happen?”

“It seems so- although I am as confused as you. That was certainly outside Miss Romanov’s normal socialization boundaries. I shall have to re-evaluate her personality profile.”

“To what, slightly murderous?” Tony muttered, rubbing his arm tenderly and then making his own way up the stairs. “God, I shouldn’t have implied I could hurt her. Ingrained misogyny is gonna be the death of me in approximately five minutes, J, jot that down. That’ll sure teach me to be nice,” he trailed off, aware that he was probably only talking to himself at that point. Not enough coffee in his system, that’s what it was. He was being stupid. He could totally put up a fight. He’d been trained for a bit. He knew some moves. And he had strong arms. He’d be fine.

He absolutely, totally and utterly could not put up a fight against Natasha, as it turned out.

“Okay, are you a fucking ninja or something? What the fuck? Who the Goddamn hell taught you this?” His chest heaved as he sucked in a breath and stumbled away from a swinging fist, and he looked at her in complete bewilderment. He was out of breath and sweating through his shirt, hair plastered to his skull whilst she just stood there with that smug half-smile on her face. There was barely even a hair out of place, and she had yet to gain more than a slight sheen of sweat on her brow.

“The KGB,” she said blankly, before ducking and taking a jab at his ribs. “You’re expending too much energy in the movement. That’s why you’re so tired already. You don’t need to leap out of the way. A simple dodge will suffice.”

“Yeah, and if I get the timing wrong, my head’s getting knocked off by your feet, so I’d rather be safe than sorry and get as far away as I can!” Tony argued, before huffing out another breath and wiping his forehead. “Also, I can’t even tell whether or not you’re joking about the whole KGB thing, you know.”

She paused then, raising an eyebrow and rolling her eyes. “Yes, Stark, I totally used to work for the communist secret society that dissolved back in 1991. Caught me out.” She swiped forward with a leg before she’d even finished the sentence, using his distraction to take his legs out from under him and send him crashing onto the mat.

His back hit the ground with a slam and the air forcibly knocked itself from his lungs. He wheezed, hands raised in defeat as he looked up at her. She panted for a single second, before regaining her composure immediately after. “Don’t let the enemy distract you with conversation,” she told him, extending a hand to him on the floor. “It’s a common tactic. People will use it against you especially, seeing as you’re very approachable.”

“Why are you even teaching me all this?” He asked breathlessly, taking her hand and then hauling himself back up. He felt like he had bruises on his bruises. “I don’t even need it any more. The threat’s fucked off to London or wherever. I’m good.”

She glanced at him blankly, but then pursed her lips and looked away. “There’s always a threat,” she told him. “You never know who’s real and who’s not. For all you know, Jones could’ve paid for an assassin to take you out, now that he knows he can’t have you for himself.”
Well, that wasn’t a scary thought at all. “He wouldn’t. I don’t… I’m pretty sure he doesn’t actually want to hurt me.”

Another eyebrow raise. “What happened to ‘your blood is my blood’?”

Tony pulled a face but said nothing. He supposed she had a point there, after all. It was dangerous to be naive. Instead of answering though, he just leaped forward and wrapped an arm around her neck, trying to tackle her to the floor. She moved out of the lock like it wasn’t even there, and before he knew it he was on the mat again, having been flipped over her hip with a truly brutal speed.

She looked down at him. He just wheezed a little, and then gave her the middle finger. “Okay. Consider me embarrassed. I’m done, I’m done.”

Her mouth turned up, and she leaned down to extend a hand again. “You need to work on your stamina, Stark.”

“Tony.”

She hauled him up, and then looked at him for a moment. Almost as if she was analysing him. Her gaze was always like that- Tony couldn’t help but feel a little exposed around her. Like she knew all his secrets without even needing to ask. But when she smiled- that was real. At least, he hoped it was. “Tony,” she agreed quietly, nodding her head once before turning away, grabbing a water bottle and throwing it to him. “You should probably have a lot to drink, considering how much you just sweated out.”

Begrudgingly, he caught it and unscrewed the cap, chugging it down. He was halfway through it when he heard the doors on the other side of the room, and then the sounds of Steve and Bucky’s voices both filtered into his ears. Tony knew that Steve used the gym a lot to train, and had recently taken to coming down and joining him. Not to train next to him, obviously- but it did make some delicious eye candy.

He turned with Nat, both of them watching Steve and Bucky saunter in from their position in the boxing ring. Steve noticed their presence first; stopping in his tracks and then looking toward Tony; hair plastered to his skull and skin pretty much dripping with sweat. He raised his eyebrows, smiling in amusement. “Oh. Looks like the ring’s taken,” he told Bucky, not taking his eyes off Tony.

“Nope,” Tony hurried to correct him, shooting a glance over to Natasha, “no, we are definitely finished. I need to go put some ice on… everything.”

“Don’t be whiny,” Natasha clapped him on the back, sending him stumbling forward, “I’m sure you’ll be right as rain in a month, tops.”

“Nat, did you just spend an hour beating up my boyfriend?” Steve sighed, ducking under the ropes and then giving Tony a customary once-over, checking he wasn’t too hurt.

She snorted, moving to Bucky and slipping her hand around his waist as she leaned into him. “Ambitious of you to assume he lasted an hour.”

“Don’t take it to heart,” Bucky told him with a grin, “only reason she’s got her hand on my waist is because she’s about t-”

He broke off as Natasha threw him over her hip as well, landing on top of him before pecking him on the nose and smiling sweetly. Bucky huffed, and then looked to Tony. “-Do that,” he finished
with a sigh. “There’s no love in this woman’s touch.”

Natasha looked over at Tony and shrugged. “I honestly think you’d be even more scared if I tried to offer you a ‘loving touch’.”

“Oh absolutely, please never ever do that, I don’t care how hot you are,” Tony lowered his hands defensively toward his crotch and then stepped behind Steve. “Bucky is a far, far braver man than I am.”

Bucky chuckled, sitting up and then wrapping his hands around Natasha’s hips. “Well Steve ain’t no picnic, buddy.” He winked, and Tony snorted when Steve threw his friend a dirty look.

Bucky and Natasha grappled playfully on the floor for a few more minutes whilst Tony sympathetically list off every limb that was now hurting, but then Natasha got bored, and once she’d jumped to her feet she grabbed Tony’s hand, tugging him toward the ropes. He raised his eyebrows and looked back to Steve in fear. “She’s not going to eat me or something, is she?” He asked in worry.

“I think it’s time we let Steve and Bucky play,” Natasha answered, ducking under the ropes and taking Tony with her. Tony watched Steve exchange a dry look with her, before rolling his eyes and turning around. She leaned into Tony’s ear, a grin on her face. “Have you ever watched Steve fight with another person?” She asked quietly.

Tony shook his head slowly, and her smile widened. “Oh, you’re gonna love this, then.” She moved them over to the benches at the side of the ring and sat herself down, leaning against the wall. Tony followed suit curiously, turning to face Steve and Bucky as they circled each other in the ring.

Then Steve threw a punch that would most certainly have given Bucky a severe concussion had he not dodged, and Tony’s eyes widened in surprise. Natasha just chuckled.

He sat forward, entranced as Bucky and Steve danced around each other, fast and sharp and so incredibly brutal, it was almost impossible to believe this was Steve in front of him. He’d seen Steve go at a punching bag, seen him firing a gun, but this… it didn’t look as if he was holding back at all. Tony watched his muscles tense as they swung around, missing Bucky by mere inches, he watched Steve dodge and grapple and leap around the ring. This wasn’t just boxing, this was street fighting. It was intense and merciless, and he was realizing just what Steve was actually capable of.

Tony was… so turned on right now.

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“Okay, I am seeing your point,” he croaked to Natasha as she sat back, sharp eyes tracking Bucky intently. The man was holding his own effectively, which was a feat to say itself, but he seemed to be just a hint slower than Steve, and not as quick to counter. Although it (really, really) didn’t look like it, Steve was obviously holding back from actually giving him a severe injury. Tony could barely even look away for a second- they were moving too fast for him to actually keep track of without dedicating his entire focus toward it. “This is the hottest thing I think I have ever seen. And I was invited to a Victoria’s Secret after-party. More than once.”

Her light laughter filtered through his ears. “Bet you’re grateful you came down here now, aren’t you?”

“Well, I could’ve done without the ass-beating, but I think I can let it slide in favour of this. I owe you one, Romanov.” He raised a fist before he could even think twice- but it was okay. He felt
Natasha’s knuckles bump his a second later, and grinned to himself.

Progress.

Half an hour later, Steve and Bucky finally called it quits. Both of them laughed, and Steve patted him on the back good-naturedly, sweat dripping off his nose as he moved. When he glanced over to Tony, that was it. Without another second wasted, Tony jumped to his feet and then speedwalked over to the ring, ducking underneath in order to take Steve’s hand and pull him out toward the exit. “I think you should take a shower,” he declared quickly, turning up to Steve and then looking him over. “You definitely need a shower. I should probably help you. You’re tired. You definitely… yes. Let’s go.”

Steve laughed, low and deep and beautiful, and let Tony drag him off. Behind him, he figured Natasha was probably going to be doing the same thing- or maybe they wouldn’t even make it out of the gym, but honestly, Tony couldn’t even blame her. That had been… stupidly hot. And yes, it probably said some things about him that he found Steve’s ability to knock a man’s head off attractive, but he never said he was perfect. Everyone had their thing. Turned out Tony’s was just extreme violence.

As soon as he’d got Steve into the elevator, he went in for a messy kiss, impatient hands tugging at the wifebeater hanging off Steve’s shoulders and pulling it over his head. Steve was still laughing, but he went willingly, lifting his arms and then cupping them around Tony’s neck and kissing back once he’d got the material off. Steve’s skin was hot under Tony’s hands, and yeah, he hadn’t been joking about the shower. To be fair, though, Tony actually needed one too. So they might as well save some water.

“You liked that, huh?” Steve muttered, leaning forward and then dropping his hands, trailing them down Tony’s back, over his ass, and then gripping under his thighs. One swift spin later, and Tony was pushed roughly against the elevator.

He could admit, he may have moaned a little.

“Who the fuck wouldn’t?” Tony asked him incredulously, hearing his breathing speed up again. “God, I didn’t even know you could fight like that- you’re wasted as a bodyguard, you should join the damn Delta Force. Or model for Calvin Klein. Actually wait, no, I don’t want anyone else to look at you like that, forget that one, you can stay right here-”

Steve cut him off with a laugh-laced kiss, before dropping him back to the ground a second later. “I intend to,” he said, turning around walking out into the Penthouse which Tony hadn’t even realized they’d arrived at. He threw a smile over his shoulder as he wandered off, shirtless, in the direction of the bathroom. “You coming, or do you need a moment?” He asked sweetly.

Fucking asshole.

“Oh believe me, by the time we’re done, I’m not going to be the only one coming,” Tony muttered, pushing himself off the wall and following the sound of Steve’s laughter through the room.

Later that night, he told JARVIS to note down that sharing showers does not, in fact, save water—especially not if you spend as much time in there as they did.
Tony was pretty sure, at this point in his life, that’s he’d developed a Pavlovian Response to the sound of those six-inch heels clacking through the corridors. He immediately cast his eyes around the room, despite the fact it was the kitchen and therefore not where he kept important documents anyway, and wondered what he must have forgotten to sign, or not sent over, or who he’d pissed off this time. He could tell from the weight of her steps that this was Not a Happy Walk. This was a March. She was marching, and that march was heading toward him.

Hiding would a be a childish, silly thing to do.

“Tony, get out from under the table,” Pepper’s red shoes came into view and stopped just in front of his face, and he heard the massive sigh that escaped her before he managed to see the face that came with it.

Peeking out from under the chair, he smiled up at her nervously. “Pepper Pott, whoever I did, I would like to formally apologise, I will totally sign and-or waive and-or donate some money to whoever I pissed off, I promise it wasn’t-”

“You’re fucking the bodyguard and you didn’t even tell me?” Pepper cut in sharply, as Tony crawled slowly from underneath the table. “God, you said you were in love with the guy, but I never thought he’d ever reciprocate, the stick up his ass was way too wedged up there for that to happen, but somehow you’ve yet again managed to fuck the unfuckable! And you failed to actually notify me of this, so I had to draft up an entire non-disclosure agreement at two in the damn morning-”

“Oh, A, can I let it be known that I was totally planning on telling you,” Tony raised a finger to cut off her tirade, getting to his feet and taking her by the shoulders. “And B, how did you find out anyway? Not that I don’t want you to know, because I was absolutely going to inform you, but-”

“I asked JARVIS where you were last night, and he told me you were on a date with Steve.” Pepper stared at him, unimpressed, folding her arms in front of her. “Tony, you can’t just hide that sort of stuff from me.”

“I didn’t want you to be mad!” Tony said defensively, “you’d told me that rule one was not to sleep with him, and then- well, I kind of did multiple times, and I just felt bad!”

“Tony, I’m not mad, I’m happy!” She threw her hands in the air and rolled her eyes, before tapping him lightly over the back of the head. “First stable relationship you have had in literal years, and you think I’d be pissed about it? God, I might nag, but I’m not some evil witch, you know.”

“Of course I- Pep, don’t be stupid,” Tony squeezed her shoulder and gave her his best apologetic smile. “I just know you stress about everything on a good day, and I didn’t want to… add onto your plate, that’s all. Plus- well, I wasn’t sure whether he’d even stick around once he got up close and personal. I didn’t want to just… jump right in and assume anything.” He shrugged, looking down and then smiling weakly. “Plus, I can freely admit I may have been slightly distracted these past few months.”

She looked at him for a moment before sighing- although this time it was tinted with fondness, and she seemed to relax under his arms. “Oh, Tony. One day you’re going to realize that when
someone says they’re staying, they usually mean it. But okay- I suppose I can let this one go.” She paused, and then her mouth turned up a little as she added, “He does have a tremendous ass. Distraction was inevitable.”

Tony nodded sagely, before pulling her in with an arm around her neck and then tucking her into his shoulder, despite the (unfair) height difference. “That’s my girl. See, now I have a ready-made excuse for whenever I don’t answer your calls. Too busy appreciating my tremendously hot boyfriend.”

“You have three strikes,” Pepper lifted three perfect, red fingernails, the same shade as her shoes, “and that’s it.”

She patted him on the cheek and then turned, heels clacking as she made her way over to the freezer and yanked out a tub of ice cream she knew he always kept in there. Tossing it over to him, she then moved to the cabinets, where she found the chocolate and caramel sauce. “Now, I want you to tell me literally everything. I’m your PA- I have to know the facts, after all.”

God, he loved Pepper.

Two hours and a few glasses of Port later, they both sat hunched on the couch, legs tangled and ice cream dripping down their spoons. Pepper’s hair was down, flowing messily over her face as she giggled, and her toes poked Tony’s butt from where she’d tucked them.

He’d missed this. Pepper was so busy so often, but when they had some downtime, Tony loved every second of it.

They’d been watching movies ever since they’d gotten through the first tub, and Pepper was staring at the screen idly as she twirled a strand of ginger hair around her finger. Tony remembered having the most ridiculous schoolboy crush on her when she’d first started. He’d done everything to try and get her attention— annoyed and pestered and been the most terrible boss in the whole world- and she’d fallen for absolutely none of it. That had been around about the same time he’d realized how invaluable she was: there weren’t many who could put up with Tony Stark at his most irritating and still be sane at the end of it.

“What’s it like?” She asked suddenly, turning her head to him. He frowned, wondering what she was talking about until she clarified, “Being in love. What’s it like? I’ve never… I’m just curious.”

Tony stopped, thinking over the question for a moment. Then he smiled. “Weird,” was what he told her, tilting his head to the side and laughing at her. “Super, super fucking weird. I don’t know-every time I see him, my heart just goes nuts. And I… I know I’d do anything for him. It’s scary. I was freaked the fuck out when I first realized. Because I mean,” he gestured to himself vaguely, shaking his head. “I’m me. I don’t… do that. But then he’s just, he’s there, and he’s so… God, I don’t even know. He’s just Steve. And he can be an asshole— was an asshole when I first met him, as you know. But then he’ll smile, and he doesn’t even think twice about helping people, and he laughs even when my jokes aren’t funny and he scaled a wall with two broken ribs to keep me safe and I just—”

He stopped, picking at the seam of his shirt and feeling his cheeks heat up. But Pepper wasn’t judging him- she just looked soft, happy. She was smiling, showing the gap in her teeth that she’d never had fixed- the only slight imperfection on her whole body. Tony adored that little gap. It made her seem so much more human.

“Falling in love with him was inevitable,” he murmured, “you know I don’t believe in all that destiny crap, love in scientific terms is just the release of oxytocin and vasopressin and serotonin
and all that crap in reaction to prolonged human contact, designed to keep the species alive- but there are… there are just some things that feel like they were bound to happen, you know? If you’d have told me a year ago that I’d feel this way now, I would’ve laughed in your fucking face. But now that it’s here it just- it’s so simple. Loving him is really easy. Everything else might be difficult, but the love itself is just the easiest thing in the world.”

He shrugged, realizing that Pepper was staring at him with something that looked like surprise on her face. “Yeah- that’s what love is. I think. I don’t know, fuck, I mean I sure as hell am not an expert. But I just… I know how I feel about him. It’s not what I’ve ever felt for anyone else before. Ever.”

“Never ever?”

“Nope.” He turned to face her, and saw how serious her own expression was. He knew he was baring his soul to her here, which was something he rarely ever did. Last time he’d had a Feelings talk with her, he’d been drunk. And possibly high. It was a little difficult to remember, quite honestly.

“I really, really like him, Pep,” he said softly. “It’s stupid and ridiculous and I’d- I’d do anything for him.”

She didn’t say anything, but her face was remarkably soft, and her hand curled around his ankle supportively. Tony smiled bashfully back at her, and turned back to the TV before he could blurt anything even more personal.

Her grip didn’t waver on his ankle until a few hours later, after both of them ended up falling asleep on the couch half-way through WALL-E. When he did wake up, it was to Steve shaking him gently, a hand on his shoulder whilst the other stroked through his hair. Tony smiled, and as Pepper raised an eyebrow and made a rude gesture with her hand, all he could think about was how he genuinely couldn’t remember a time in his life when he’d been happier.

Okay, look, so he may have said that he wasn’t going to kill anyone anymore, and for the most part he really did intend to stick to that, but sometimes the urge was just… so hard to resist.

“Tell me who your fuckin’ boss is,” Steve gripped the man by the collar and pushed him up against the wall, gun pressed under his jaw, more of a threat than anything. “That’s all I wanna know. I already know you’re a spy- checked your records and they fell through, okay, so don’t try and hide it. Just tell me, and I’ll let you go.”

“It’s corporate! It’s corporate, I’m a corporate fucking spy for Justin Hammer holy fucking shit, please don’t kill me, I was just doing my job, I fucking swear, I didn’t mean anyone any harm-” the
man gasped, hands scrabbling at Steve’s as they pushed him into the wall. His eyes were terrified. “I will tell you anything you want, okay, listen, it’s just a low-level job, alright, literally every business does it, I’m not… I don’t have any nefarious purposes, I’m not even threatening anyone, I’ve worked here for a year now, you can even check! You can check, I swear, I—”

Steve growled, letting him go and watching as he fell to the concrete with a thud. The man looked surprised for just a moment, before his eyes darted over to the exit of the alley. “Can I- am I allowed… are you—”

“I let you go, didn’t I?” Steve snapped, waving the gun in the air irritably. With a small yelp, the man stumbled to his feet and then sprinted off without another word, almost crashing into the corner in his haste to get away.

Another dead end. Steve had been searching for weeks now, trying to get to the bottom of who had hired him to take Tony out, but so far all he’d found that was dirty in the company were corporate spies and some illegal gambling rings. No secret plots to take over by getting Tony out of the plan, no secret meetings or held grudges- at most, people found Tony to be a jerk, but there was no one he’d met yet who genuinely had it in for him like that.

It was driving him insane.

“No luck?” Clint asked when Steve came back later that night.

He harrumphed, shutting the door heavily and then leaning against it for a moment. He dropped the kitbag, scowling as his ski-mask poked out of the zip and stared at him judgmentally. “Another one of Hammer’s spies. Doesn’t know anything.”

Clint said nothing, and Steve stewed in the silence, still pressed up against the door. His skin felt hot, too hot. There was a heaviness in his stomach that only seemed to be getting more and more pronounced with each failed attempt to get to the bottom of who Steve was working for, and he knew exactly what that feeling was.

Guilt. Pure, visceral guilt that was eating up at him, bit by bit, every fucking day.

He’d tried to do this on his own. He was trying to work it out so Tony didn’t have to, so he never had to worry. But he was getting nowhere. And Tony continued to live in ignorance of the fact that someone was still out for his life. Steve’s inability to tell him the truth was putting him in danger, but god, fuck, damn it all to hell, how was Steve ever supposed to tell Tony the truth? He couldn’t. It would destroy him. Steve could never let him know the real reason they’d met. Ever.

But every day he didn’t, the person who had hired Steve became more and more impatient.

And Steve had promised himself he’d do anything to keep Tony safe. Protect him with his life, if he had to. But what if the next hit struck when Steve was gone? He couldn’t be there all the time. And all it took was a single second.

Steve wanted to throw up just thinking about it.

Steve had to tell him.

But he couldn’t.

God, he was a monster. He was selfish and he was evil and fuck, he couldn’t bear the thought of
Tony leaving him when he found out. Because he would. Of course he would, anyone in their right minds would. Steve absolutely, completely deserved that. Hell, the likelihood was that he’d be arrested. Tony might even kill him out of self defense.

He probably deserved that, too.

He didn’t know what to do. Telling Tony the truth would kill him- not telling him the truth would kill him too.

All of this was Steve’s stupid fucking fault.

“Buddy?”

Steve jerked, eyes flying open as he looked into Bucky’s concerned icy gaze. Clint was stood behind him anxiously, obviously having gone to fetch Bucky after noticing Steve hadn’t moved in over four minutes, according to his watch.

Goddamn it.

“I’m fine,” he said bluntly, rubbing his eyes and pushing away from them. “I’m fine,” he said again, just for good measure.

He wasn’t fine. He wasn’t fine. He was falling apart from the inside out.

“Steve,” Bucky said softly, the look in his eyes telling Steve that he knew exactly what was going on in Steve’s head. Of course he did. He’d warned Steve this would happen from the very beginning. But of course, Steve hadn’t listened. Too selfish, too cowardly, willing to jump headfirst into Tony’s world, uncaring of the fucking consequences because he was a self-centred fucking bastard.

God, he couldn’t fucking do this. He could barely live with himself on a good day, but today… today was not a good day.

“I need to get some air,” he said shortly, tugging at the door handle viciously and then shrugging off the hands that reached out for him.

“Steve, dammit, stay here and talk-”

“Fuck off it, Bucky,” he growled, shaking off the hand as it curled around his shoulder once more. He heard Clint muttering for Bucky to just leave it, which was good, he definitely did not want to talk to them right now. He just wanted to…

God, he didn’t even know what he wanted. A drink, mostly.

Yeah. A drink sounded good right now.
After what was decidedly more than ‘a drink’, Steve stumbled out of the bar he’d found and looked around him dazedly.

New York, New York- city of dreams, right? ‘Cept all Steve had been given was a bunch of truly shit luck. Trust him to find his soulmate whilst on the job.

He laughed bitterly, and shook his head. His whole life, he’d been just that bit out of sync with everything else. Missing on the opportunities, the good times, the people. Family was supposed to be your anchor, but his dad had been a piece of shit and his mom had gone and died before he’d even hit teenage years. Army was s’posed to give you a second family, but all he’d found was a reason to lose faith in humanity, which had then been reinforced by the corruption that surrounded him every day. There was so much blood on his hands. He was barely even sure whether he was human any more. He just went through the motions. He did what he had to do, because someone had to, and he hated himself for it every day, but there wasn’t going to be anything better coming along, right?

Except then he found Tony. And suddenly, there was a stupid fucking light in his world; a reason to want to change, hope, live. He didn’t have to make a living from killing. He could make one from protecting instead. Because Tony was worth it, Tony was absolutely worth changing for. He’d managed to make Steve start believing in humanity again.

And he’d gone and fucked that up, too.

Everything he touched just burnt.

It was only when he started pressing in the elevator code in with clumsy fingers that he realized he’d actually made it to Tony’s penthouse at all. It hadn’t been his intention- although to be honest, he wasn’t entirely sure where else he’d been planning on going. He guessed he’d just followed his train of thought.

If he were a better man, he’d break up with Tony. He’d end it, and then he’d let Tony know the threat that was facing him. He wouldn’t get either of them any further involved in this relationship than they already were.

But he wasn’t a good man. He was a fucking awful one, and he just couldn’t. He couldn’t bear the thought of Tony fending for himself, alone, without Steve to protect him. The idea of never hearing Tony laugh again was bad enough, but putting him in danger by leaving him unguarded?

He just couldn’t.

“Steve?”

That was Tony’s voice. Shit. What time was it? He glanced at his watch. 3:15 a.m. Fuck. Tony was stood across the room, just around the bend that led down into his bedroom. His eyes were on the elevator, or, more likely, Steve, who was leaning heavily against the doors of it, having just made
his way up.

“Steve?” He asked again, starting to move forward, worry beginning to radiate off him. Tony was so expressive when he let himself be. “Steve, baby, are you okay?”

He didn’t say anything. He wasn’t even sure he could. He just watched, silent, as Tony started to jog forward, clad only in a pair of sweatpants and what was one of Steve’s own hoodies. He’d obviously been asleep before Steve had gone and woken him up.

He stopped when he was four or five paces in front of Steve. His eyes were anxious. “Do you want me to touch you?” He whispered.

Steve watched his mouth move; those perfect lips forming around his name so beautifully. His voice was just… perfect. Steve would listen to it all day, if he could.

Slowly, he reached out a hand. It was shaking, even he could see that, and it didn’t quite reach Tony. But after a second, Tony took a step forward, and then another, until Steve’s hand could cup, feather-light, against his jaw. He remained still, watching Steve as he stroked slowly down Tony’s face, and then brought another hand up, curling that around his waist in order to pull him forward.

Tony was in his arms before he knew it. Where he belonged. Safe.

‘I’m sorry’ he wanted to say. ‘You deserve so much more than this,’ he wished he could tell him.

“I love you,” he said in the end, and hated himself so much more for it. “And I am… very very drunk right now.”

“Yeah, I gathered as much, you smell like you’ve been marinating in rum,” Tony spoke into his chest from where Steve had pulled him in. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

Oh, where would he even begin with that? “I love you,” he said again, knowing it was repetitive, but unable to stop or care, even for a moment. “I love you an’ it’s all I know some days, an’ I can’t… I can’t lose you, I can’t. You- you’re everythin’ t’me. How you even managed… such a short space of time, I never get attached, but then, you, and…an’ I can’t, an’ I don’t know who I am, I’m jus’… I’m broken, but when you’re here ’s’like I forget an I just-” Steve hiccupped, clenching his eyes shut. He wasn’t going to cry. Tony didn’t need that right now.

Tony was stroking his back, not saying anything, just letting Steve touch him. His mouth was pressing delicate kisses into Steve’s collar, warm lips on cold skin. Steve didn’t deserve any of it.

He brought Tony’s head up gently, fingers stroking the hair on the back of his neck. Tony looked up at him, worry evident in every part of his face. “Steve, you are not going to lose me,” he said firmly, shaking his head with such conviction it almost made Steve want to laugh. He said something else, but it was drowned out in the haze, the warring voices that screamed in his head.

Some nights were worse than others. This was one felt unbearable.

There were firm hands on his arms, curling around his biceps, shaking him gently. “Steve?” Tony asked softly, “I think we should go to bed, okay? You’re gonna need to sleep this off. We can talk about it in the morning, but you’re not in the right state of mind to be walking and talking right now. What do you say, huh?” Tony leaned in, cupping his cheek and smiling anxiously.

Steve looked down at him. Then he nodded, once. Tony wasted no time- he led him back into the master bedroom, methodically undressed him, and then got him into bed before Steve could even second guess himself. He felt ill. That was probably the booze. Or the guilt.
“Go to sleep, baby,” Tony whispered, curling into his side.

Steve was selfish and he was cruel and he was fucking scummy- and he fell asleep next to Tony as soon as he said the words.

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He woke up slowly, and with extreme difficulty.

His head was throbbing. He felt weak and lethargic. He could barely even open his eyes for the first few minutes.

Fuck, last night had not been good.

He was on his stomach, limbs splayed out everywhere like a hungover starfish. His mouth felt vile- he wished he’d brushed his teeth the night before. With a tremendous amount of effort, he eventually managed to pry his eyes open, immensely thankful of the darkened room as he did so. The muttered “Fuck,” fell out of his mouth before he could even help it, thankfully muffled by the pillow his lips were pressed up against.

“Wakey wakey, sunshine.”

Steve paused his movement, Tony’s voice registering dimly in his ears. All at once, the memories of last night came flooding back like a tidal wave- the stupid dead end, the drinking, stumbling over to Tony’s tower at 3 in the Goddamn morning- “Oh… shit.”

Tony huffed dryly. It was then that Steve recognized the sensation of his fingertips brushing up and down his back. Tony was sat up in bed, one hand resting on Steve’s skin whilst the other played on the screen of his phone. Or at least, it was, until a second later when he leaned over to the nightstand and picked up a glass of water. “Drink,” he said, wafting it under Steve’s nose, “and then take these pills. It’ll help.” He tossed a couple of tablets down onto the pillow next to Steve’s nose, and he curled his fingers around them gratefully.

“Thanks,” he croaked, taking the glass and then chugging it down hastily, pills mixing themselves up in between swallows.

When he next looked up, Tony’s eyes were still on him. The concern was back. Steve knew why. He had stumbled into Tony’s penthouse nearly blackout drunk on a Wednesday night, after all. “So- you gonna tell me what happened last night, then?”

And just like that, the pain came back.

The indecision. The should-he-shouldn’t-he. It was an impossible choice- one that Steve was in no way objective enough to make.
Tony needed to know. Steve wasn’t getting anywhere, and the only person who would be able to
give a decent estimation as to who would want him dead was Tony himself. But if Steve did tell
him, then Tony would… he would leave. And then he would be exposed, alone, against an
unknown enemy. Steve was the best bet he had at survival, but at the same time, he was the worst.

What the hell was he supposed to pick?

“Steve.” The hand on his back stilled, and Steve sighed, turning his head into the pillow like a
child.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said gruffly.

“Well I do. You can’t just… this isn’t fair, okay, I know you’ve got shit, Steve, okay, I know, and I
don’t ever push. I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable, but- but this isn’t good, and if we’re
going to do this, then you at least have to tell me-”

“Tony please,” he jerked his head up, looking toward the other man and knowing that he probably
looked a complete mess- bloodshot eyes that were glassy and wet, hair going in every direction, a
grey face. “I can’t… not now. Please. I will, one day. I promise. I just- I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Tony watched him, hands flexing in his lap. Steve knew he was being a dick- he knew he was
being unreasonable. Tony was trying so hard, and Steve just kept pushing him out.

He sighed, and looked up to at the headboard. “I have nightmares a lot,” he whispered, which
wasn’t even a lie, it just… wasn’t the right truth. He knew that Tony needed to hear something,
though, and God, he deserved to know how fucked up Steve’s subconscious was. “Sometimes I
dream about you dying.”

Tony’s body stilled, but his hand remained a firm weight against Steve’s back.

“It’s always something I could stop,” he continued, voice hoarse and thin as he remembered the
last nightmare he’d had in which he’d watched the man next to him die. Can’t have been more than
a week ago, thinking about it. Fuck- he felt so ill. “It’s something that I could prevent, if I was
concentrating. If I was better. But I don’t. And then you die. And I watch it, and sometimes-
sometimes they just repeat, over and over. Maybe different people, like Bucky and Clint and Peggs,
but sometimes it’s just you. Sometimes it’s just… yeah.”

Steve didn’t look in Tony’s direction. He wasn’t sure what he’d see in those eyes if he did.

He wondered if one day his soul was going to burst open with all the things he didn’t say.

Tony didn’t say anything for what seemed like an eternity. But then his hand moved from Steve’s
back- he sunk into the bed, rested his head on the same pillow as Steve’s. Tony’s breathing was
purposely quiet, his pupils were dilated, but his gaze firm. Steve noticed everything. He’d been
conditioned for so long that he did it automatically.

Then Tony’s fingers curled, soft and slow and gentle, around Steve’s. His breathing hitched a little
as he pulled, taking Steve’s hand and resting it around his neck, under his jaw. He still said
nothing- but Steve knew what he was doing.

Underneath the pads of his fingers, he felt Tony’s heartbeat. He let it wash over him.
In a world that was kinder, it might have been enough.

Time passed.

Steve moved on. Clamped down on the guilt, because there was nothing else he could do with it. He knew Tony was happy with him. He knew he could and would protect Tony with everything he had. He didn’t want to destroy the both of them by telling him.

He knew that he had to, though. One day. Steve wasn’t the type of man to want to build a relationship on a lie. Tony deserved the truth.

Except days turned to weeks, and Steve said nothing. Sometimes, he could just forget. Sometimes he could pretend as if it just… wasn’t true. He worked at the coffee house full time now, and him and Bucky were both working on cutting ties and backing off, so it was easy to just imagine this had always been his life. That there was nothing he even needed to tell Tony, because it wasn’t important.

Then he’d remember that someone still wanted Tony dead, and everything would come rushing back in a wave of guilt and self loathing, so painful and huge that it was enough to make him feel as if he was drowning.

For the most part, he got on with life as normal. He went out for dates, split his time between work, friends and Tony, and then tried to hunt down Tony’s would-be killer in his spare time. He was no longer officially Tony’s bodyguard, but he still acted as one when they were out and about. It made it easier to excuse the reason why he was seen with Tony all the time, without anyone caring about who was behind the shades and suit. Tony completely understood and actively encouraged keeping their relationship under wraps for the press too, which worked well for both of them.

“They’ve watched me my whole life,” Tony had said when Steve had broached the subject in the beginning. “They don’t get to see this. This is just mine.”

And so that was what they did. Kept it private, kept it between them. Steve was more content than he’d ever been, and Tony seemed happier than when he’d first met him, too. There were no more threats- although they had yet to catch Jones, it was only going to be a matter of time before he attempted to get through border security and got caught out. And when he did, Steve would pay him a nice little visit, and that would be that. His last kill.

Or maybe second to last. Depending on whether or not he managed to find the guy who’d hired Steve in the first place.

Or… maybe third to last. Tony had an ex, and not that Steve was inclined to murder anyone who had ever hurt Tony, but… well, Stone really did sound like a manipulative bastard. He probably wouldn’t be missed.
Okay, no, he was getting ahead of himself. No more killing. Only the ones who really deserved it. And as much as he might think anyone who made Tony cry in the past deserves to die, that was probably not the correct way to determine the worth of a man’s life.

Probably.

There comes a point when Steve is sat on the couch, Tony in his arms and flicking idly through his tablet, that he can barely even remember the reason why he wanted Tony dead in the first place. It seems like such a distant memory now. Completely, utterly unthinkable.

(He wonders- looking back- whether that was Tony’s plan all along)

Chapter End Notes

find out more next Saturday ;)
Looking at Tony as he stood in front of the full-length mirror, fiddling with his cufflinks and peering at his hair, all Steve could think about was how badly he wanted to just take all those fancy clothes right off again.

This had been a recurring problem over the past few hours.

“Don’t even think about it,” Tony snapped his eyes up into the reflection of Steve as he lay on the bed, watching him. “I am already running late. You… look somewhere else.”

“How?”

“Because-” Tony waved a hand, “you’re distracting me.”

Steve laughed, tapping his fingers against his stomach. “I’m just lookin’ at ya,” he murmured, raising his eyebrows. He wasn’t below using underhand methods to get what he wanted.

Tony shut his eyes and threw his middle finger over his shoulder. “And don’t speak either. Just sit there, and close your eyes, and be silent.”

He pulled a face, shuffling on the bed and frowning when the scratchy material of his dress shirt scraped across his chest. It didn’t help that he had his holsters tucked under his jacket as well. All in all, he was in for a very uncomfortable night. He already disliked the galas Tony had to attend-they were tiresome and boring, in his opinion, but he knew Tony had to go to them. Stark Industries business and all that.

It was only a night, and he knew Tony appreciated the company. So Steve could grin and bear it for that long.

“You look gorgeous,” he said, when Tony started messing with his hair again. “Absolutely fucking gorgeous, you know that right?”

Tony opened and shut his mouth a few times, and Steve watched the back of his neck turn a delicious red. It was funny- Tony was the dirtiest talker Steve knew and had literally zero shame, but say something like that to him, and he went firetruck red. It was almost as bad as Steve’s. He’d made it his personal mission to try and bring out that blush as much as possible.

“You brush up pretty nice yourself,” Tony said eventually, giving Steve a once-over in the reflection of the mirror. He turned, then, and faced Steve properly, tugging at his bow-tie one last time before dropping his hands to his sides. That only lasted a second, though- Steve was up and on him moments later, and Tony’s hands found a new spot on Steve’s ass.

“How important is this gala, anyway?” Steve muttered as he crowded Tony against the wall and kissed his neck.

“Need it to strengthen international relationships and make some new weapons deals,” Tony said on autopilot, his head knocking back against the mirror as he gave Steve more space to work with. “Why?”
“Because I’ve wanted to strip that off you and fuck you senseless all night, and I was just wondering whether or not I’d get away with it,” he whispered, before leaning back and smiling at Tony’s pained expression. “Guess not, though. We’ll just have to save it for later, sweetheart.”

“Oh, you fucking-” Tony broke off, leaning up to kiss him, but Steve ducked out of the way and pressed a finger to his lips, pushing him back.

“Ah ah ah, no, you said we have to go,” he told Tony apologetically, grinning right up until the moment Tony tilted his head and then took Steve’s finger into his mouth, sucking gently. It distracted him for one (two, three, maybe four, possibly five- most likely seven) seconds, before he pulled away and then smacked Tony gently over the head. “Behave.”

“Make me.”

“Weren’t you telling me not to distract you like, two minutes ago?”

Tony shrugged. “A man can change his mind, can’t he?”

Steve laughed, before taking Tony’s shoulders and turning him around in order to guide him toward the door. “Later,” he promised into Tony’s ear. “For now, you’re gonna wine and dine the pants off all of New York’s richest. Although not literally, I hope.”

Tony looked up at him from over his shoulder. “No promises,” he said cheekily, and Steve rolled his eyes, squeezing tighter at his shoulders and then leaning down, biting lightly at Tony’s neck. Had they had more time, he would have spent a little longer giving Tony a mark that no one would be able to miss. As it was, he had to make do with fantasizing about what he would do later, when they had more time and privacy.

The limo ride was mostly uneventful, with Steve taking an occasional liberty every now and then (Tony looked damn good in a suit, so sue him), and before they knew it, they were at the entrance; crowds of onlookers and paparazzi gathering to see Tony arrive. He shot a slightly apologetic look to Steve, but he just smiled back.

“You ready Mr. Stark?”

“Absolutely not.”

Steve rolled his eyes, and then got out of the car, keeping his head down as he made his way around to the other side of the car and opened the door for Tony. People swarmed in their usual manner, but Steve was used to this by now, and created a barrier with his body between them and Tony, right up into they got to the front doors. He saw the grateful smile Tony shot his way, and returned it with ease.

Only six more hours to go.

Steve spent most of the time tailing Tony awkwardly, trying not to engage himself in conversation, but sometimes having to in order not to stick out like a sore thumb. He watched the faces of the room, noting a few familiar ones: Miss Potts and Obadiah Stane being among them. A lot of the folk were wearing their military regalia- Steve knew they were most likely good people, but the desire to stay away from them was very prevalent anyway. He didn’t trust the ones who wore the uniform any more, and he never would.

Keeping his eyes on the waiters as usual, Steve slowly surveyed the room for the hundredth time. He had to admit, he really hated these damn venues. So exposed and open, it was truly a bodyguard’s worst nightmare. Steve could think of a dozen places in which to take a man’s life and
get away with it from here. And this wasn’t even one of the worse ones- Tony had once taken
Steve to a venue in which there had been 41 different spots in which a killer could have been
hidden. It was a damn nightmare.

“You’re tense, darling,” Tony murmured as he sidled up to Steve, who was nursing his drink as he
leaned against the wall on the far left of the room. Steve looked over to him, smiling when Tony
bumped their shoulders together. “Relax. This is a party.”

Steve huffed. “Mm. I guess it’s not so bad. Just makes me paranoid, seeing all these people
shifting around.”

“Well, if you’re gonna be hanging around with me, you may need to get used to that,” Tony told
him wryly, taking a sip of his champagne and then turning his head as he watched Stane approach
them, a jovial smile on his face. He was holding a tumbler of whiskey in hand, which was already
nearly drained to the bottom.

“Tony!” He smacked the man on the shoulder heavily, and Steve held back the immediate scowl
that tried to form on his face. Tony and Stane were old friends. They were old friends. It wasn’t
Steve’s place to throw him through a table. He didn’t even have any reason to, apart from a strange
sense of distrust in his gut. He just needed to warm up to the guy.

Tony grinned back at him, and then Obie turned to Steve, extending a hand and shaking firmly
when Steve took it. “Nice to see you again, Rogers,” he said, sounding genuine. Steve let himself
smile, parroting the sentiment back to him. They smalltalked for a while, all three of them,
although Steve could see that Stane angling for a different conversation topic- made obvious when
the man threw back his drink and then turned to Steve, another shark-like grin on his face. “Steve,
buddy, I know this is gonna seem a bit rude, but I really have to talk to Tony about some important
business, just for a moment. Would you mind go and getting a new round of drinks for us all?
Here-” he shuffled around, pulling out his wallet and stuffing a few bills into Steve’s hand. “Order
whatever you like. I’ll take another whiskey neat, if you don’t mind.”

Steve raised his eyebrows, almost imperceptibly, and Tony shuffled. “Obie, do we really need to
talk right now, I’m sure we can discuss it over br-”

“No, Tony, this is pretty important,” he said, face going serious for a moment. Steve wondered idly
what it was on Stane’s mind, and had half a mind to ask. But there was no real reason to start a
fight. Steve knew that. Stane just needed to have quick word with Tony. His intention wasn’t
malicious.

So he nodded his head and smiled tightly. “Alright. I’ll be a minute,” he said, squeezing Tony’s
shoulder once before making himself turn around and head to the bar. He glanced over his shoulder
as he walked, and Tony gave him an apologetic look as he turned around and started talking to
Stane, their heads bowed together.

He glanced down, sulkily checking his watch. Halfway through. That wasn’t too bad- he’d
survived through worse. He’d once had to stand completely still for thirteen hours, waiting for
Peggy to come rescue him (Don’t ask)- he was sure he could deal with the discomfort of this.

And to temporarily satisfy himself, he’d buy the most expensive drink on the menu and then use
Stane’s money to order it.

Leaning against the bar and looking down at the menu, he allowed himself a few minutes to stew
over it, so that it gave Stane and Tony a good amount of time to talk. However, just as he was
finally about to order, none other than Stane himself ended up at his shoulder again, that same
shark-toothed smile leering across at him. He always wore a strangely smug look on his face- as if he knew something Steve didn’t. It unnerved him.

“Hey, sorry for that, pal,” he leaned forward on the bar, placing his empty tumbler down. “Turns out I’ve gotta rush off now anyway. Don’t bother with the drink- buy one for you and Tony though, it’s fine.”

Steve nodded, bidding him a short farewell as he slipped off into the crowds, heading for the exit. Steve watched him go with a small frown on his face. This frown only deepened as he watched Stane pause mid-step, then turn back to Steve again, his face annoyed.

“Oh, crap,” he muttered, shoving a hand in his pocket. “Steve, buddy, would you do me a favour. I forgot to give Tony this-” he pulled out his hand and then stepped forward, briefly flashing what looked to be a flash drive in his palm before closing it into his fist again, like he was trying to be discreet with it. He looked to Steve, paused, and then shrugged, taking another step closer. “I wouldn’t usually just entrust this stuff to any of Tony’s friends, but you seem close. I’m sure you won’t do something stupid with it.”

Steve felt his eyebrows draw together minutely. “What do you mean?”

Obadiah sighed, and then his eyes darted around the room almost imperceptibly. Warning One. Steve felt his back straighten without even consciously meaning to- Stane was shifty. “Listen, just give this to Tony, okay? He’s gone to the bathroom, and I really need to go, or I’d stay and give it to him myself, but- but just make sure he gets it, and don’t let it out of your sight ‘til he does. We’d be in some deep shit with the ol’ boys on the front lines if they caught wind of what was on it, eh?” He grinned, almost whispering the last bit into Steve’s ear as he clapped him on the back and then slipped the drive surprisingly subtly into Steve’s hand. He took it instinctually, leaning away from the man as he did so.

There was a strange feeling in his gut, and it was currently telling him that something was very, very wrong here.

“Well, I’ll see you ‘round then, Rogers,” Stane grinned again, oblivious to Steve’s discomfort as he gave him another pat on the shoulder and then buttoned up his coat. With one last wink, the man turned on his heel and swept through the crowds again, making his way out of the huge building. Steve stared after him by the bar, fist still curled around the small stick.

What the fuck had that been about?

It didn’t make sense. Why had Stane looked so shifty? This was a room full of American donors to Stark Industries, it wasn’t exactly as he needed to hide anything from them. They all knew what Stark Industries did, and actively supported it.

Steve looked down at the thing in his hand.

‘We’d be in some shit with the boys in the front lines if they caught wind of what was on it’.

Suddenly, his hands felt a little sweaty. He looked up, searching for Tony across the room, but the man was nowhere to be found.

What had Stane meant?

He could feel it in his gut. The answer. The niggling thought in the back of his mind- that there was something suspicious on that drive. But… it couldn’t be. It wouldn’t. Steve was probably just overthinking it. Sensitive information was sensitive no matter which side it was being shown to,
the good or the bad. Stane just didn’t want it falling into any hands other than Tony’s. And Steve should honour that. He was just being stupid. Tony had an entire company to run; there were bound to be things that would upset various higher-ups. It was just business.

He slid it into his pocket and tried not to think about it. He’d wait until the next saw Tony and then give it to him. He was done second-guessing everything the man said or did, and he’d been done with it months ago. They trusted each other.

They did.

So why could he not get that bitter, biting feeling from under his collar? Why was that voice in his head that he hadn’t heard since the first few weeks of meeting Tony starting up all over again? *What if, what if, what if.*

God, he was being stupid. Tony wouldn’t. Ever. It was just Stane being a freak. Nothing out of the ordinary.

He needed to stop worrying. Relationships were built on trust. Tony had nothing to hide.

...Even if Stane sure seemed to.

“Hey- you seen Obie? I just went to the bathroom and he appears to have bailed on me.”

Steve jerked, whipping around to face Tony, who was now stood to his left and leaning against the bar, the picture of normalcy. He smiled at Steve, although it turned a little concerned when he took a proper look. “Steve? Are you… you look a little-”

“I’m fine,” Steve said hurriedly, smiling at him. He was. And now was the time he should hand over the disk, just like Stane had asked him to.

Tony cocked his head and observed him slightly suspiciously. “You sure? You seem, if humanly possible, even more tense than when I last saw you. If I touch you right now, I feel like you’re gonna jump like a jack-in-the-box.”

Steve smiled, and told himself to relax. To hand over the flashdrive, now, Steve. That’s what you were told to do.

Hand it over.

“I think… I actually feel kinda ill,” he muttered, rubbing a few fingers over his forehead. “I… *hand it over, give it to him, don’t do this, don’t let your paranoia win-* “I think I’m gonna just head home early for the night. I- yeah.”

Tony paused, and then blinked once, before nodding. Steve felt sick- deep down, in his stomach, because this felt like a betrayal. But… he had to know. He’d promised Natasha that he’d keep looking. He’d promised he’d flag anything suspicious. He just… he had to.

‘*We’d be in some shit with the boys in the front lines if they caught wind of what was on it’.*

“Okay,” Tony said, a dip between his brows from where he’d begun to frown. “You want me to come with you? I’m sure I could-“
“No, no,” Steve shook his head rapidly, “no, it’s fine, I just… I need to go. I’ll- you’ll be okay, right?”

Tony was looking at him worriedly, but he nodded. “Of course, Steve. Are you really sure you’re gonna be-”

“I’m fine,” he said quickly, “I’m fine. I just need… air.” He nodded, and then shot Tony one last smile before turning away, making his way through the crowds without looking back.

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

What was he doing? He needed to turn around. Give Tony the flash drive and trust him.

What if, what if, what if.

He kept walking. He hated himself for it, but he kept walking, and didn’t stop until he’d found himself a cab. Slipping in quickly, he muttered the name of his street to the driver and then leaned heavily against the headrest, heart hammering under his ribcage.

This was wrong. Everything about this felt wrong. Not trusting Tony, running away with the flashdrive, ‘We’d be in some shit with the boys in the front lines if they caught wind of what was on it’.

Tony wouldn’t. He couldn’t. But…

Steve had to be sure. That was all.

He’d plug in the drive and see what was there. That was it. Just a precaution more than anything. And then as soon as he pulled his head out of his own paranoid ass and realized no, of course there was nothing incriminating there, he’d hand it back to Tony and say he forgot to give it to him in his haste to leave earlier. Kiss him softly and apologise for just walking out with barely any explanation other than ‘I’m feeling ill’.

He’d do that. He wasn’t going to find anything. It would all be okay.

The cab pulled up on his street, and he slid out without a word, walking up to his apartment in somewhat of a daze. He could feel the thing in his pocket- sitting there like a tangible weight, when really it was as light as a feather. This felt like a betrayal. It felt wrong.

But he couldn’t shake the suspicion, and he knew it wouldn’t leave him until he managed to put his thoughts to rest and see it for himself. That was all he was going to do. Double check.

His laptop took a while to boot up, old and slow as it was, and in every moment it took, Steve felt himself grow more and more agitated. What was he even expecting to be on here? Honestly, he didn’t know. All he knew was that Obadiah Stane’s words had struck an instinctual nerve inside him, and there were alarm bells in the back of his mind. And much as he loathed to admit it, those bells had saved his ass on a good few occasions. This was better safe than sorry. Had he been less well trained, less hardened to this world, then he might have just let it slip. Trusted his better judgement and done the right thing.

But here’s the snag: when you learn to look over your shoulder for all your life, it’s a hard habit to break.
Which is what led him here, on the couch, with Tony’s private information getting plugged into his laptop.

Fuck. This was wrong. Tony was his *boyfriend*, Tony *trusted* him, Steve was violating his pr-

The screen loaded.

He froze.

No.

There was no way he was seeing what he was seeing.

No way.

No.

He stayed on that couch for a long, long time.

The evidence stared back at him proudly; documents and documents, reams of data, all showing in glaringly obvious detail exactly the sort of trades Tony had been making, all this time. Iraq. Yemen. Exports to Al- Qaeda insurgents and dealings with a group of anarchists Steve had been hearing about in the news, The Ten Rings.

All of it.

Steve couldn’t believe his eyes. This had to be wrong. There was no way… not Tony. Not ever Tony. He was… he was so sure.

There was a transaction made two months ago- 100 million from the Afghan terrorist cell Steve had been looking at earlier, in return for some truly terrifying Stark Industries weapons. They were machines that would be used on innocents. Civilians. Tony was selling to terrorists.

Tony had lied.
Well, Steve thought, somewhat dazed- had he lied? Or had Steve just fallen for the act, exactly like Tony had planned him to? Hook line and sinker. Tony hadn’t lied- Tony had just played him. Brilliantly well, really. It was… outstanding, how well he’d managed to portray his own innocence.

Tony sold weapons to terrorists. The man who had hired Steve had been right all along.

Steve was in love with a mass-murderer.

*No,* a part of him screamed. *No, this isn’t right. This can’t be right.* Steve wouldn’t… he wouldn’t have fallen for that. Tony wasn’t a bad person, he *wasn’t,* he… he…

He could see his own reflection in the shiny screen of the mirror. Ash white. Glassy eyes. Tear-tracks down his face.

Fuck, he didn’t even know when he’d started crying.

He slammed the laptop shut with such a sudden bang it ripped through the deathly silence of the room like a knife. He couldn’t look at it any more.

He’d been wrong. Tony had played him like a violin. Tony had smiled, and manipulated, and made Steve believe that he was good, and they’d *gone to bed together every night for the past-*

Oh God. This couldn’t be happening.

Steve felt violated. Pure and simple and *so* deep, it felt like it had just smashed straight through his soul. He could barely believe he’d been this stupid. It was unfathomable- him, a trained assassin, duped by a businessman. Natasha had been right. Oh, God, Tony had just… just batted his eyes and played up to his vulnerability just like Natasha had warned Steve he would, and Steve had just… fallen for it. Like an idiot.

He wondered, vaguely, how many people Tony had killed. Whether he cared about any of them. Whether he even cared about Steve, or that was just an act, too.

He sat on that couch for a long, long time.
Everyone was out. Date nights or meetings or whatever, Steve didn’t know. All he knew was that he was alone.

There was a gun in his jacket. He intended to use it tonight.

The kitchen cabinets were bland, he thought idly, as he leaned against the counter and stared at it blankly. That was the only thought he let himself have. Any others were dangerous. Thinking about… other things, would only make him try and reason his way out of said things, excuse them. Love was the most deadly tool of manipulation, and everyone knew it, because once it had started, you did all the work yourself. The enemy stopped even having to try.

Steve wasn’t thinking about it.

There was no money. No deal. He’d get nothing out of this kill except justice. For all the lives Tony had taken, for money, for personal gain.

For holding Steve as he slept and making him believe in the wonderful part Tony had played.

He felt sick. Like he was seconds away from unravelling entirely.

God, and to think Steve had been so goddamned concerned about tainting Tony with his own sordid career. To think he’d felt guilty. Steve had honestly, seriously been pathetic enough to actually fall for Tony’s act, to the extent where he’d started to believe that maybe there was goodness in the world. Maybe there was hope.

Hah. Funny. That’d teach him to fall for the lies in life again.

He didn’t cry. Didn’t waver. Just stared at the wall, and wondered when Tony Stark was going to arrive in his apartment for the last time.

Two hours, thirteen minutes.

That’s how long Steve stared at the kitchen wall until he heard the spare key Tony used slide into the lock. He didn’t flinch. Didn’t falter. He stayed with his hands braced on the counter, eyes forward. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if he looked at Tony’s face.

Every time he blinked, those transactions came to life behind his eyes, bursting into colour to fill the darkness.

“Steve? Ugh, I swear, as soon as you left I knew I was screwed, they started talking to me about
wind farms, Steven, wind farms. How is a man supposed to converse about that? God, I’m not…” He heard Tony trail off as he rounded the corner and entered the kitchen. “Uh- Steve? Baby, are y-”

“Are you a sociopath?” Steve asked suddenly, his voice loud, cutting through anything Tony tried to say, “did you genuinely not give a fuck? Or did you feel at least a little guilty?”

He was glad to note there was no waver in his voice. He was good at pushing it all down, after all.

Behind him, there was silence. Then Steve heard his name again, spoken on Tony’s mouth just as beautifully as it always was- except this time it just felt laced with poison; a drug that sedated him, kept him happy, unassuming-

“I gotta say,” Steve continued, mouth stretching into a twisted smile, “I really am impressed. That’s a class act you got goin’ on there. The whole shebam- looks and brains and personality, once you get down deep enough, right? Right? You sure fooled me. Fooled the whole damn lotta us. It’s really quite something.”

A sharp intake of breath. “Steve, what the hell are y-”

“But it’s not real, is it?” Steve spun around then, unable to look away. He saw Tony across the room, looking slightly dishevelled with his tousled hair and shirt that was now unbuttoned from the collar. He was staring at Steve with wide, panicked eyes- looked as if he hadn’t moved a muscle since Steve started talking. “None of that is real. It’s a mask. A nice little game you play, huh? With everyone? Make ‘em think you give a damn, make ‘em believe you’re a good person. Really, you’re just as scummy as the rest of ‘em. Selfish and cruel and so self-obsessed that you’d stand on everyone else’s necks just to get what you want, right? You walk among the Gods, Tony Stark, but you sure as hell ain’t one of ‘em.” Steve stepped forward, watching as Tony stumbled back. Steve didn’t blame him. He figured the look on his face was pretty damn terrifying.

He felt the overwhelming grief well up inside him, turn into anger which he directed solely at the man responsible. “You’re nothing more than a fucking monster, really-”

“Please, Steve, stop-”

“- and you know it. Now I know it. Everyone’s gonna discover, one day. They’ll see you for what you really are. I always wondered why people left you. Why they’d be so stupid. Now I just see that they were smarter than I ever could be. But I guess I’m just learning late about the type of person you really are.”

A greedy murderer. A soulless killer.

Steve had his shot. Tony wasn’t doing anything, he was just stood there. Shock, most likely. Steve could pull out the gun and kill him like he’d supposed to have done months ago, and he wouldn’t do anything other than exhale before his head hit the damn floor.

It would be so easy.

But his hand wouldn’t move.

Thousands of people needed justice. Thousands of people were owed Tony Stark’s life. Steve’s
duty was to kill him. It would stop the deaths. If there was no weapons designer, there were no weapons. Tony was the front of the business. Steve could topple it all to the ground with a single flex of his trigger finger.

And that, at the end of the day, was how Tony managed to win it all along, he thought. Because he knew- Steve knew, as soon as he’d turned to face Tony, that he was never going to shoot him. He could, yeah. But he would never, ever do it. Not even now. Not even after everything he had just found out.

Because he hated him- good God did he fucking hate him- but Steve still loved Tony, too. Like he’d said- the world’s most powerful tool of manipulation.

Steve had already been defeated, and Tony hadn’t even fired a weapon.

“Get out,” Steve said quietly, looking at the wall once more. He thought he was going to throw up. He wanted to scratch off his own skin, tear his own hair out in penance for letting Tony go, but hell, who was he kidding? He was a terrible person anyway- it wasn’t like he could go to hell any more than he already was.

He’d been played a fool, used and worked by Tony, and the worst part? The fucking worst part of all of it, was that Steve still loved him. Immensely. He couldn’t even look at the man, for fear of what he might do.

“Steve,” Tony was whispering, now. His voice sounded beyond broken. It sounded wrecked, raw and wavering, as if he had been screaming for hours. Steve guessed he probably did care, after all. Maybe he had even loved Steve.

Did it matter? Did any of it fucking matter any more?

“Get OUT!” Steve screamed at him then, hand flying toward the door. Tony stumbled back again, and he looked like he might be crying, Steve couldn’t tell, his own eyesight was blurred too; but he could see the man’s figure as he hit the wall and then quietly slid around the corner. He sounded like he was running out.

The door shut with a soft click. Tony didn’t even slam it.

Steve screamed. At nothing. At everything. He grabbed the nearest thing he could find and threw it at the wall, making the ceramic of what looked like Bucky’s favourite mug shatter into a thousand pieces. That didn’t help, though, so he followed it with his fist. It went straight through, and he felt the plaster tear through his skin. He did it again. And again. He wanted to tear through his own heart, because that’s what it felt like he was doing anyway.

Steve had been wrong.

His hand stopped hitting, and he dropped it to his side. Then he sunk into the wall, slid down to the floor amongst the chunks of rubble and ruin.

He’d been shot at, stabbed, tortured, hurt.

And yet it was Tony Stark’s love that managed to destroy him completely.
They found him later, still pressed against the wall, staring at the floor with his hands curled around his knees.

Of course, being as highly trained as they were, they saw the evidence of an altercation and both Natasha and Bucky, the two who had returned, pulled out weapons from inside their jackets. Bucky went to Steve immediately whilst Natasha vaulted the counter and prowled into the other rooms, looking for an intruder.

Steve didn’t have it in him to speak just then. Bucky took his face into a hand and looked into his eyes, deeply concerned. He was saying something- sounded frantic, and Steve’s shoulder was shaking from Bucky jolting it.

“I was wrong,” Steve said suddenly, quietly. Bucky stopped shaking him, and then Natasha came back into his line of vision, shaking her head negatively.


He didn’t know how to say it. How to express the deep sense of shame, of guilt- humiliation and exposure and everything horrible in the world that he was feeling in that moment.

Tony hadn’t even betrayed him. That was the worst thing- this was all on Steve. He’d simply believed what he’d wanted to believe. And Tony had been too good of an actor to ever give Steve reason to change his mind, or see things for how they truly were.

He’d been so fucking stupid.

Wordlessly, he handed Bucky the laptop.

Afterwards, there were hands on his shoulders again. Mutters. Curses. He felt Bucky sweep away the rubble on the floor next to Steve and then quietly sit by his side. On his left, Natasha did the same. He wasn’t sure whether they’d gone through all of it, or just seen the surface info and gone from Steve’s reaction. It didn’t matter. They knew, now.

“How did you find this, Steve?” Natasha asked, her voice softer than Steve had ever heard it. She didn’t sound angry, which was unusual. He had expected her to be more along the lines of ‘I told you so’.

“Tony’s colleague handed it to me tonight, at the gala,” Steve said numbly, not looking at either of them. “He sounded shifty. I decided to check it out, just to be safe. I’d never… I never expected anything to come out of it.” His breath hitched, and he swallowed heavily. His brain wasn’t even sure how to react to this. He couldn’t even find it in himself to cry. Crying was for loss- and this was a good thing. The truth, at least, had finally come out. Steve should be grateful.
Steve was not grateful. There were a thousand different feelings inside him in that moment, but not one of them was relief.

“Steve,” Bucky said, his voice so very delicate as his hand settled on Steve’s knee. “Did you… did you finish the job?”

He felt the way Natasha’s hand tightened fractionally against his knee, but shook his head. The shame curled tight in his gut, almost hard enough to choke. “I couldn’t,” he whispered, “I- he was right there and I knew, and I just… I couldn’t. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry-”

“Oh, Steve,” Bucky tugged an arm around him and drew him in tight, whilst Natasha’s hands snaked around to the back of his neck and squeezed.

“He fooled all of us,” she said gently, but Steve could feel the hardness underlying her voice. “Even me. I believed… but he was just an incredible actor. I would take a guess at sociopath, but psychosis seems just as likely. This isn’t your fault.”

Steve said nothing. His throat hurt. So did his hand. Natasha was currently inspecting it with gentle fingers, muttering for Bucky to go grab the med kit from under the sink. She was saying other stuff as well, but he disconnected from it. What did it matter. He knew what they thought. He knew they were wondering how the hell he managed to let this happen, even if they weren’t voicing it. They were pitying him- poor little Steve, falling blindly in love with the sort of man they’d vowed to hunt down and wipe off the face of the Earth. Letting Tony bat his eyelashes and put up a vulnerable front, and then falling for it like some sort of fucking idiot-

“Steve, we all thought he was good too, you know,” Bucky told him, because he knew Steve better than anyone; Steve didn’t have to speak in order to let his thoughts be heard. “I’m so sorry. I can’t believe- I never thought it would turn out to be true. Not after I met him. And you seemed so….”

“What?” Steve asked, turning to him with a bitter smile on his face. “I what, Bucky? Seemed so sure? Happy? In love?” He snorted, getting to his feet, spinning around and facing Bucky. “Well it was a fucking lie. It was all a fucking lie-”

Bucky tackled him backward and threw him onto the couch before he could put his bandaged hand through the wall again. Steve growled, jumping to his feet again, just needing to move, to hit something, to break-

“No, Buddy, don’t hurt yourself over him,” Bucky hissed in his ear as he gripped Steve in a bear hug and wrestled him back. “That piece of shit is not worth it, Steve. He’s never going to be worth your pain.”

“Well he’s got it anyway,” Steve laughed; laughed and laughed, and then slumped in Bucky’s arms, falling to his knees with a sigh. His hands rose to his head, and he rested his face into his fingers, clenching his eyes shut. He wanted to go back- back to when he’d been lying on Tony’s bed, deepest thought being which part of the other man’s suit he’d take off first.

Not this. Not ever this.

Part of him just couldn’t believe it. Wouldn’t believe. Not Tony. Ever. His Tony would shut his company down entirely before he’d ever let weapons go out to terrorists.
And yet here they were. The evidence was right under Steve’s nose. *His* Tony didn’t even exist— it was just a construction. A lie.

God, he wanted to be sick. He wished they’d just missed the call, all those months ago. Never gotten involved in this mess, never met Tony, never fallen in love.

He couldn’t. He couldn’t turn back time or change history. He’d done this. People had probably died because of his failures.

Tony Stark was a filthy liar, and there was no one to blame for this except Steve himself.

“**So what are we gonna do?**” Peggy asked later, after returning home upon Bucky’s call.

They were all sat in the living room again. Steve was flanked by Bucky and Nat, who hadn’t left his side all night. They all sat close, all shot him comforting looks whenever he caught their eyes. He’d taken to staring firmly at the wall instead. He couldn’t bear their pity. It wasn’t as if he deserved it.

Around him, he felt the heavy silence. In truth, no one knew even remotely how to deal with this, and Steve could sense it. How the hell were you supposed to comfort someone who’d been living a lie for over half a year? Steve almost wanted to laugh. How fucking pathetic must he look right now: ashen and gaunt, curled tight into the couch, staring at the wall as if someone had just ripped out his heart and left him for dead.

Well. Was that so far from the truth, really?

“*Steve…*” Bucky began slowly, his fingers curling gently around Steve’s wrist as he made a pained face. “You know that now we know- we have to take him out. We have to do what’s right.”

Steve said nothing. He nodded once. He despised himself for the fact that a dark part of him— a small, terrible part— wanted to say no anyway. To protect him, even now, after everything. Tony had cut deep, and it didn’t matter that now Steve knew he was laced with poison. The damage had been done. He was compromised— possibly permanently.

All because of one man.

“I’ll do it,” Clint said, voice hard. “I probably had the least interaction with him. It’ll be… easier, for me.”

Steve thought about how he’d do it. Sniper, probably. Follow his daily routine until he ended up
somewhere secluded, and then quietly put a bullet in the back of his head. Fast. Effective. And knowing Clint, completely untraceable.

The thought made his stomach convulse in horror. No matter how hard he tried to force it down, the instinctive desire to keep Tony safe still lingered.

He fucking hated himself.

“I think you should get away for a few days, Steve,” Peggy told him, her red lips breaking into a sad smile. “How about coming with me somewhere for a bit? Until we’ve cleared everything up. You… I don’t think you should be here for this, darling-”

“No,” Steve shook his head. His voice was hoarse. “I need to be here. You might need intel. I have it. I can handle this.”

“No-”

“No,” he cut in loudly, and the whole room fell to silence immediately. And was this how it was going to be for the foreseeable future, then? Walking on eggshells whenever he was around? Those stupid sympathetic smiles. ‘It's not your fault, Steve’.

He felt like he couldn’t breathe. This just felt like a nightmare.

But it wasn’t. His friends were talking in quiet voices about how they were going to put a bullet in Tony’s incredible brain, because Tony sold weapons to terrorists. And Steve had found that out. Steve had sentenced him to this fate- and for good reason. A man like that deserved to die. It didn’t matter that Steve loved him fiercely. Didn’t matter that less than 12 hours ago, Steve would have happily died to protect Tony’s life.

This was no nightmare. This… this was just the way Steve’s life went. He should have known going in that it would not end happily.

Things in his world never did.

24 hours later, and Clint was in the kitchen, planning his route with Peggy and Natasha. They bent their heads low and pointed to areas in the map, all solemn faces and tight mouths.

Bucky made sure to keep Steve away from them, no matter how much Steve tried to argue otherwise.

“You’re not necessary to the mission,” was what he got told, the blow attempting to be softened by a hand on his arm. “You do not need to do this.”
Steve felt his hackles raise, the desire to just prove them wrong and show them that he could treat this professionally, he could do whatever needed to be done without letting his emotions get in the way of everything- but even before the words had left his mouth, Bucky was shooting him a dry glare that showed Steve exactly what his friend thought of that.

*You can’t.*

“Please, buddy,” Bucky said softly, squeezing his arm, “just trust us. Let yourself grieve. Having to distance yourself from the situation doesn’t make you weak, or less of a person.”

Steve scowled and jerked his arm out of Bucky’s hold, standing up roughly. He debated walking out for a few moments, but he knew it would only do more harm than good. Much as he was annoyed at them all right now, he didn’t want to worry his friends any more than they already were.

“I already *am* less of a person, just for the fact that-” Steve waved an angry hand, staring bitterly out of the window and away from Bucky’s soft gaze. He paused for a moment, and then shook his head. “I let him in, Buck. I let him get away with it all.”

“That’s not true-”

“I still love him,” Steve said quietly, knocking his forehead into the cool glass and shutting his eyes. “That’s as true as anything. And what does that make me, Bucky?”

His friend said nothing, and Steve just grinned bitterly, pushing off the window and walking off toward his room. He didn’t feel like talking just then. He didn’t feel like doing anything, really. Maybe he’d take a shower. Do some running. Try and… forget.

Ha. Funny. As if he’d be forgetting this anytime soon.

Before he even knew it, water was sliding off his shoulders from the shower head. He must have gotten in without even registering it. It seemed everything he’d been doing over the past day had just been nothing more than autopilot.

One day soon, this was really going to hit home. The true repercussions of his actions, the real grief, the pain. Steve knew that right now, he was just compartmentalising it all. Trying to see through to the next day, and the next, until Tony was handled and no longer a danger to everyone. That’s when Steve would break. He knew that fact better than he knew anything else, in that moment.

Tony’s betrayal had crushed him. Tony’s death would ruin him entirely.

He let the water wash over his face, and shut his eyes against the spray. Maybe this is what he deserved.

_____Tony_____
The world felt hazy.

He stumbled, and fell into someone's chest. He muttered an apology. He moved on.

He was very, very drunk. That much, he knew.

Everything else... like he said, it was hazy.

The club was vibrant, and Tony blinked when one of the LED's flashed in his face. He was pretty sure there was glitter all over his face for some reason. When he took another step, he ended up chest-to-chest with another woman. She grinned up at him and then turned around, pushing herself up against him. She was very pretty, and had a great ass, so he stood around for a few seconds before wandering off again. There was no direction to his path. In all honesty, he had no idea where he even was.

He couldn't care less, either.

A few minutes later (or maybe more: maybe an hour, maybe two- who knew? You could never tell the time in places like these. People just danced and drank and fucked and danced. It was how Tony liked it. Had liked it. Before.), he found himself in a booth in the corner of the room. There were other people in it, but they didn't seem to mind him joining. They even smiled.

He looked at his phone with clumsy fingers. He'd kept it in his hand for the three days since he'd seen Steve. Just in case. He might call back. He might... explain. And Tony couldn't risk missing it.

There were no messages.

His hands shook harder.

But it was okay. It was okay. He just... needed to try again. Steve wouldn't ignore him forever, He wasn't like that. Once he'd calmed down, he'd give Tony a chance. Or at least he'd tell Tony why.

He dialled Steve's number and put it up to his ear.

Steve didn't answer.

But that was okay too. Tony could still leave a message.That's what he'd done a few times previously. Maybe more than a few. He wasn't sure he could remember all of them. He was... really, really drunk.

"Steve," Tony said quietly, pressing a hand over his spare ear to try and drown out everything else. "Steve, 's'me. Tony. I- I know you don' w'na talk right now an'... tha's ok. But can you jus'... can you jus' call me when you- you- you calmed down, maybe? I don't... I jus' wanna talk. You don' have to do... I jus' need to talk. Please. Please, Steve."
He sucked in a sharp breath, suddenly feeling the nausea roll in his stomach. There was still a part of him that just wanted to believe this hadn’t happened. That he hadn’t managed to destroy something so good in such a short space of time, just by being himself. “Jus’... give me another chance. Whatever I did, I swear, I swear... I’d do anything for you Steve. I know I’m not- not a good person. I know you’re right. But I promise, ok, I do love you. Whatever you saw, or heard, or... jus’ know I do. I do. I’d do anythin’ for you. Promise. Please. Jus’... call me. When you can. ‘F’you wanna. Please. Okay. Uh. Bye.”

The phone dropped back onto the table and Tony stared at it, numb. He’d probably left a dozen messages on Steve’s phone over the past 72 hours. Because he was pathetic like that.

On his left, one of the women sat at the table murmured something in his ear about him seeming sad. She said she wanted to take his mind off it, and then started sucking on his neck. He let her for a while. If he closed his eyes, it was just another warm body. The contact was nice, at least. But when she tried to shove her hand down his pants, he decided to leave. What would happen if Steve came back and found him getting jacked off by a fucking stranger? He couldn’t risk that. Not if he even had the vaguest of chances.

He didn’t. Steve’s words had been clear.


Monster.

He found more alcohol, and he poured it down his throat.

Steve was right. Steve was always right, and he sure as hell knew what he’d been saying when he told Tony those things. They were all things that had been said before. All things Tony himself knew were true.

It just felt so much more soul-crushing when he heard the words coming out of Steve’s mouth.

He drank it all away. Truth sure stung like a bitch.
“Steve, please….. Just tell me what I did wrong….just tell me….please, please, Steve, I don’t know-”

He ended the call when he stopped being able to speak through the hitching of his breath.

One good thing in his worthless, shitty life, and he’d driven that away too.

He wasn’t even sure what he’d done.
He didn’t know why he was doing it, but the laptop was sat at his desk again, and Steve was looking at all the weapons deals staring him in the face.

It made him feel just as sick to the stomach as it had the first time. He’d sure seen some deplorable and disgusting things in his life, but this was one of the worst. This was humanity at its lowest; an arms race that used innocent lives as currency, and thrived off suffering. This was who Tony was. This was who Steve had shared a bed with, who he had risked his life for on multiple occasions.

It was… a difficult pill to swallow, to put it lightly.

Steve rubbed a hand across his stubbled jaw and looked away. He felt exhausted. He hadn’t eaten since the night of the gala, two days ago now. Sleep had been fitful and short-lived. Seemed Tony wasn’t done fucking him over just yet.

He needed to stop looking at it. This wasn’t helping.

The disk drive was yanked from the port roughly, and Steve slammed the lid of his computer shut and then threw it across the bed. He squeezed the USB in his hand, and imagined crushing it. Destroying it for good. There was no use for it now anyway- Steve had found what he’d been looking for. This was just unwanted evidence.

It didn’t make sense, that Stane had given it to him.

That’s what he’d been thinking, last night as he’d sat in bed and stared at the darkened ceiling. Surely Stane shouldn’t have been foolish enough to just hand over company secrets to a man he did not know, and whose only interaction had been confrontational. Stane may have been a dick, but he wasn’t a fool. It was just idiotic, really.

And yet here they were.

But... why? A secret that must have been kept under such strict wraps that almost no one aside from a small handful were even aware of it at all, and Stane had gone and given the key to Steve. On a whim. Because he couldn’t be bothered to find Tony himself. It was a ridiculous decision.

Something felt… wrong.

Fuck. No. He was not going there. This wasn’t a trick. The evidence was here, clear as day. Trying to reason his way out of it would help absolutely no one.

Tony Stark was a guilty man. That was the end of the story.

He threw the USB stick angrily across the room, and watched it hit the wall. From the floor, it glared at him smugly. Evidence of his idiocy.

This is where blind faith got you, huh? Fucking typical.

A few hours later, he had barely moved from his position on the bed at all. What was the point- his friends weren’t going to let him help in the planning of the mission, and he didn’t exactly feel like
doing much else. How had he passed time… before? There was a void where everything else had used to be, and Steve wasn’t sure how to fill it.

He lay down. Tried to sleep for a bit. Failed. Sat back up again. Wandered into the bathroom and then looked at himself in the mirror. He needed to shave. He didn’t. He went back into his room. Lay back down on his bed. Tried to sleep for a bit. Failed.

Rinse, repeat, rinse, repeat.

“How had he passed time… before? There was a void where everything else had used to be, and Steve wasn’t sure how to fill it.

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Rinse, repeat, rinse, repeat.

“Steve.”

And there was Natasha, leaning against his doorframe and staring at him with a blank face. Her arms were folded, and her nails tapping against skin. She was worried. “Steve, get out of your room. When was the last time you ate something? Clint’s finished for the night, so the kitchen’s fr-”

“Not hungry.”

“Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t eat.”

He bit back on a snappy retort, instead turning his head and looking at her. “Natasha, I just don’t-”

“Is this how it’s gonna be, then? You just gonna let him take everything away from you? Easy as that? Come on, Steve, you’re a fighter. He fucked you over, but that doesn’t have to mean you should stay that way.” Her face softened, and she looked down. Away. Her jaw clenched. “He tricked all of us, Steve. I thought… I thought he was good too, y’know.”

He remembered that much. Her and Tony, they’d been- they’d been strangely close, after the initial lack of trust on Natasha’s side had dissipated. She’d seemed to have sort of a soft spot for him.

He realised he wasn’t the only one blaming himself.

“I’m sorry,” he told her quietly, looking out to the window again. There were a lot of things he wished he could say- that he was an idiot, that he let them all down, that he didn’t deserve their pity- but he knew even if he did, they would try and make him believe otherwise. And that wasn’t what he deserved right now. All this pain, all his suffering… he had it coming.

“So am I,” Natasha answered, and Steve sensed her moving closer, but didn’t bother to watch. He didn’t want to see the look in her eyes.

Her hand squeezed against his shoulder for a moment. “I’ll make some dinner for you, and you can come grab it from the side if you feel like eating, yeah? I’ll make sure Clint doesn’t touch it either.”

He smiled. “Thanks, Tash.”

There was a pause, and he heard her breathe in, as if to speak. But she didn’t. Her hand remained on his shoulder for another moment, and then slid off. He knew there were things on the tip of her tongue. Questions, maybe. Meaningless platitudes that they both knew were useless anyway. She, at least, understood the fruitlessness of attempting to console him in that moment. She had never been great at comfort; it was a thing that had been absent during most of her life, and was only just learning to grasp now. He was grateful she didn’t try. He would only have ended up yelling, and it
wasn’t fair to her.

A few seconds later, he heard her shut the door quietly. Then it was just him, and the laptop, and the USB on the other side of the room.

He woke up slowly, and for a moment, he was at peace.

It had been a nice dream. A soft one. No guns or blood or explosions. Just him and Tony, sat out in the garden at Steve’s old orphanage. Peter was building something on the ground next to them. No one was saying anything. But Steve had just felt… happy. Tony was smiling, and really, he should always be smiling like that. It truly was beautiful.

Then it all came back to him. And suddenly the softness shrivelled and died, leaving only the ugly truth in its wake.

All a lie. All fake.

He clenched his eyes shut and took a breath, sitting up and glancing at the clock. 2am. Barely even three hours of sleep. A deep sigh escaped his mouth, and he palmed a hand across his face, swinging his legs off the bed. He knew he wasn’t going to be going back to sleep after that. He didn’t even want to. Those sorts of dreams were worse than the nightmares.

His hand brushed over the surface of the laptop, and he turned to look at it. It was hard to believe that this time last week, he would have been sleeping with Tony in his arms. They just seemed like entirely different people- the Tony that Steve knew and the Tony that Stane had showed him just weren’t the same guy at all.

It was a stupid notion. They were obviously the same- that was why the man Steve had been working for had asked him to take Tony out in the first place. He was being ridiculous; letting his emotions take the wheel again, had he not learned from the first disaster that that was never a good idea? Damn it.

… There wouldn’t be any harm in going through the files a bit more in-depth, though, surely? For peace of mind more than anything. And what if there was more evidence that needed to be found? More things that Steve and the team needed to try and fix?

He had to go through them again. Just to check.

Standing up out of his bed suddenly, he blinked and reached for the light switch, flicking it on. His room was a mess, but after some shuffling around under piles of clothes, he found what he was looking for. The USB stick felt light in his palm, and he curled his hand around it, taking a small breath and wondering, just for a second, what exactly he was going to achieve from this.
Closure, maybe.

The laptop booted up slowly, and he stared at the screen the entire time, unblinking. This was stupid. This was pathetic and- and weak.

He didn’t stop, though.

The files stared back at him once it had loaded. All there, in their gruesome glory. Steve spared a moment to twitch in disgust, and shut his eyes. It took two minutes before he felt brave enough to open them again. He had no idea what he was even doing here. Again and again, the rational part of his brain told him to just shut it down, stop and accept the facts he’d been given.

The smaller, weaker part in him wouldn’t stop repeating, ‘what if you’ve gotten something wrong?’

He pulled up a file and looked at it closely. An invoice and confirmation of arrival; two shipments of Stark weaponry to a location in the middle east that Steve had never heard of before. Another one, a shipping manifest with the Stark Industries logo plastered over the top left corner and the signature of the Ten Rings stamped across the middle. He swallowed heavily and looked away, trying not to think about the damage those terrorists could inflict with weaponry like that.

Over and over and over, he went down the list of files, scouring through each one. He didn’t know why. Couldn’t rationally explain it. He just… he knew he had to. If he wanted to be able to sleep at night, he knew he fucking had to, or it was going to eat him from the inside out.

Hours passed. Daylight came. Steve continued.

There were sign-offs with Stark Industries’ name in the signature box. The further down he went, it seemed the person who had put together the data had gotten bored, because there was more information piled into the files, the work was less careful. Printing dates and receipts and other mildly incriminating evidence. It didn’t make sense- the information they’d been trying to hide before were simply the smaller details, and would in no way stop the company from going under if they were caught at this.

None of it made any sense. All the information on the drive were just receipts and confirmations, some of them dating back months, even years. Why the hell would Stane have wanted Tony to have this? What use would it have been?

He shut his eyes and leaned his head against the wall. He was getting too deep again. He was trying to see things that weren’t there. There were dozens of reasons Stane would want Tony to have it. It didn’t mean a thing. This was… ridiculous.

He huffed, and then shook his head minutely. He hadn’t left his room in over 24 hours. He needed to pull his head out of his ass and get back into the real world. Clint had undoubtedly already gone looking for Tony, and he’d have him in his sights by the end of the day. This was pointless in so many different ways.

‘What if you’ve gotten something wrong?’

The lingering, tiny sense of doubt still clung. Like a stubborn smudge of grease, it just wouldn’t leave, no matter how hard he scrubbed. There was just… something about it that felt off. He’d been stewing on it for days now. It was just absurd that someone like Stane would entrust a drive of such mighty importance to Steve on a whim. It had been obvious that he hadn’t trusted Steve when they’d first met, and something as sensitive as this subject matter would undoubtedly only be
kept between a handful of the most high-up people who worked closest to Tony-

In his head, something clicked.

The man. The man on the phone, who’d known so much. Who knew about the weapons dealing.

Who wanted Tony dead.

Who they all had assumed must work up close and personal with Tony, in order to be able to gather that much information.

Stane hadn’t given him the chip on a whim, Steve thought, a little dazedly; he’d handed it over because he knew Steve had been looking for it.

Oh God.

No.

Surely not.

...But what if… what if it was. What if that was it?

It made sense. In his head, it made sense. If Stane had worked out their identities- and with a man of his power and influence, it wasn’t all that unlikely- and he’d known that Steve was going in and evaluating Tony, then he’d also know that Steve needed solid evidence before doing anything. Something as solid as a disk drive, with all of the evidence on there, clear as day.

Except he’d gotten lazy. The files were traced back to a Stark Industries server, but Steve knew the number for Tony’s office and his cell, and neither of those was what was written on the invoicing address marked from two weeks back, the 3rd of July. And Tony hadn’t been answering any calls that day anyway- Steve was certain of it, because he’d been with him the entire time, engaging in what Tony had called ‘pre-birthday activities’. He could almost guarantee that he hadn’t even picked up his phone that day. They’d been… very occupied.

So that meant that someone else had called and made that deal.

Someone else had fucking called.

“Natasha,” he burst into the living room and stared at the redhead as she lay over the couch, “I need you to spoof a call for me. Right now.”

“I, what, St-”

“Right now, Natasha,” he repeated the words through clenched teeth and curled his mouth in a snarl, marching further into the room and then throwing down the laptop. “Go through the Stark Industries server. I want them thinking I’m coming from in there.”

She looked at him for a moment, eyes narrowing. “Steve, what are you d-”

“I don’t think it’s Tony,” Steve whipped and looked at her, knowing that he sounded desperate, insane, even, but ultimately unwilling to let that stop him. “And this isn’t just some delusional…. I know what I’m saying. Please. I just need to know. We have to be sure. I- I have to.”
They were the only two in the room—Bucky and Peggy would be manning the cafe right about now, and Clint… Clint was probably already out there. Waiting.

Her eyes roved over his face, and she looked troubled for a moment. Steve held his ground, however. Didn’t waver even for a second. He knew what he was doing, and was suddenly filled with a morbid sense of confidence in his convictions. He just had to hope that would be enough for Natasha.

“Okay,” there was a note of disbelief in her voice when she finally spoke, “but Steve, I don’t want you to get your hopes up, okay? Love… it blinds you.”

“There’s an invoice sent from Kabul with a phone number scribbled on it that dates back two weeks, on the third of July,” Steve said slowly, trying to keep his breathing in check as he paced the room. “It’s an American number. So it would have been from the seller, not the buyer, most likely written down by someone so that they could remember it. And I know, okay, I know for a fact that Tony did not use his phone that day. At all.” Steve swiped his hands through the air and shook his head, feeling wild and manic as he sorted it through in his head.

Natasha didn’t look convinced, but Steve had more. It was unraveling in his mind, now, there was no way to stop the deluge of information, of enlightenment that was seeping through every crack. “There’s a shipping manifest I found, too, from further back, maybe just around the time I started working. It’s got information on it, specifically a company address on the form. But when I looked it up? Doesn’t exist. I spoke to a contact in a place just outside Kabul, who managed to put me through to some other guy who’d sold off the building that the address went to, and he said he’d been forced into selling it a few years back to a group of insurgents, who I’m gonna take a stab at and say are probably the guys that Stark Industries have been selling to. And Stane left another number, scribbled over the top of a note that he’d printed. It’s Afghan, and it shows up more than once on various contact information.”

He took a deep, shuddering breath, and then leaned over the table and braced his arms against the surface, looking at Natasha.

“So spoof my fucking call, and put me through to the Ten Rings, right now. Please.”

She stared at him for another moment, and for a short while it looked as if Steve might have to start shouting— but quickly after, she sat up on the couch and then moved swiftly, heading for the kitchen where her computer and phone were strewn around.

Steve could feel his heart hammering, a thousand miles a minute under his ribs.

“Oh, I’ve put you through the SI servers,” Natasha informed him a few minutes later, and Steve wasted no time in pressing the phone to his ear, swallowing the lump in his throat and composing himself. He needed to play the part, here.

“Good. Ping the call while I’m at it.”

She frowned, but nodded her head and looked back to the computer, hands moving fast across the keyboard. When she gave a thumbs-up a moment later, he pressed dial and waited patiently.

The phone dialled through, once, twice. Then there was a crackle of static. Steve barely moved. “Yes?” The voice said, heavily accented. Steve wondered if they knew much English. He knew a few bits of Dari, but… no. If he was going to play his role as a businessman from the States, then it was unlikely he’d extend the courtesy of attempting to make it easier on his buyer.
“I’m speaking on behalf of Obadiah Stane,” Steve took the gamble without hesitating, and he heard Natasha inhale minutely behind him. “He was wondering whether the shipments have arrived in good condition yet.”

Another set of static, and then some muttering voices in a language Steve didn’t register. “Well you can tell Mr Stane that due to his persistent desire to take the longest and most ridiculously paranoid trading routes known to man, we have yet to receive any orders. And whilst you are at it, inform him we are also still expecting the plans for the Jericho missile, which have yet to be delivered. Our people are unhappy- expect consequences if this standard of business is to continue.”

Natasha gasped. Steve didn’t react. “Very well. Has Stane signed off on the next order yet, or will Mr Stark himself be seeing to that?”

“Mr Stark? Anthony Stark? Of course not, idiot, why would we do something as stupid as th-... wait, who are you? What are you calling for? There aren’t even any more orders due for the next four months! Are y-”

“My apologies, I read the form wrong,” Steve corrected himself hastily, feeling his hands begin to shake against the casing of his phone. “Stark Industries thanks you for your business with us, and you should be expecting to hear a call from Mr Stane soon.” He pulled the phone from his ear and ended the call before the man on the other end could even respond, and then looked at Natasha blankly for a second.

She stared right back, her eyes impossibly wide.

“Spoof the call again,” Steve said, oh-so-softly, “did you get the location of where it had been coming from?”

Natasha nodded. “To the closest city, anyway- although the call came from quite a few miles off there.”

“Put me there. I need you to answer this one. He’s already heard my voice.”

A few more types later, and she raised her thumb. Steve dialled the American number this time, and then promptly passed the phone to Natasha. She’d know what to say.

Her face was composed as Steve heard the dial tone, and then a second later, the unmistakable sounds of Obadiah’s deep voice asking, “what is it?”

Natasha paused only for the briefest of moments. “A contact just informed the Ten Rings of something very interesting a few minutes ago. I will say this, once and only once: are we sure Stark is not onto us?” she asked, letting her heaviest Russian accent fall from her mouth and almost mask the real way she spoke entirely.

Down the line, there was a surprised splutter. “Excuse me? Why would you- of course he’s not, you idiots- you think I don’t know what I’m doing? What makes you say that? Where the hell has this come from?”

“We heard rumours. Some are saying he has been showing…. Interest, in the exports.”

“Well your rumours are wrong. He’s too caught up in his own personal shit to be giving a damn about what his company does. He doesn’t know, and soon he won’t be around to care anyway. Don’t call again unless it’s to buy more of my damn weapons, okay, this was what we agreed. And next time, you get Raza on the line, or you don’t contact me at all. I won’t speak to some Russian
grunt when I need to speak to the boss, you understand?” And with that, the call cut swiftly and brutally, leaving Steve’s tiny kitchen in total, utter silence.

Steve felt like he couldn’t breathe. At all. The air had just… left the room. By his side, Natasha was still as death, totally unmoving in her seat. He could see the look of horror on her face. They had both come to the same conclusion, then.

“Where’s Clint,” Steve managed to get the words out after a second, swallowing heavily and keeping his voice quiet. Any louder would become a yell, a scream.

Natasha opened her mouth, and then blinked. For the first time in what must have been years, she seemed completely overwhelmed. “I- I don’t”

“WHERE THE FUCK IS CLINT?” His fist banged into the wooden table so hard he felt it splinter, and Natasha jumped, suddenly snapping out of her trance. She jumped to her feet swiftly, grabbing her phone as Steve just clenched his eyes shut and attempted to take a solid breath, hands covering his face. He was going to panic. He was going to fucking panic and he couldn’t, there was no way Tony could afford that right now- oh God, oh God, what had they done-

“Not answering,” Natasha said, “he’ll have switched everything off if he’s in position.” He turned to her in horror, and her face was pale, eyes blown wide. “Steve-”

“There’s a few places he could be,” Steve talked over her pointedly, throwing himself forward and toward the door. “It’s- it’s a Tuesday, okay, and it’s… what time is it?”

“Twelve thirty.”

“Okay, so he’s either in his workshop or, or at a meeting somewhere, or he’s getting lunch. He likes Italian, that might be where he’s gone. Or the burger joint down at the bottom of Park Avenue. Or- or he might be in his office. Where did Clint say he was going to be?”

She shrugged helplessly. “He told us he was going to start off in position near Stark tower yesterday morning, and then tail him until he could find an inconspicuous spot.” Her eyes locked onto his, firm and sorrowful as she spoke, “Steve… Steve, it’s been nearly a day since Clint left. If Tony’s already gone out since then, there’s a good chance-”

“Don’t you dare,” he cut her off with a hiss, slashing his hand through the air and turning to her. Whatever he tried to do, the breath just wasn’t coming properly. He was dizzy. He felt like he was going to throw up. This couldn’t be happening. “No, don’t you… we’ll find him. Tony is… he’s sporadic on a good day, chances are he’s still just in his workshop. Or sleeping. We’ll find him. You go down to the restaurants, I’ll look in Stark Tower. We’ll find him. We will. And call the others- tell them to try and contact Clint as well. We’ll find him.” He repeated it, over and over in his head, until he made himself believe it. Because they were going to. Obviously. Before it was too late, in the nick of time like they always did. And then Steve would… he would try and put this right, try and just make it better, make something better out of everything he’d just gone and destroyed-

“Steve,” Natasha grabbed his shoulders and shook him hard. He gulped and turned to her, feeling the pressure of sharp nails against his biceps as she dug in. “Steve, breathe. Calm. Fous. You have a mission, and an innocent life hangs in the balance. We cannot fail Tony by panicking. Take a breath, pull yourself together, and get the fuck out of here before it’s too late, do you understand?” Her words were sharp, like icicles that drilled into his heart and woke him up. She was right, of course she was. Tony needed him. Tony needed him to fix this, and right now Steve was useless. He had to control himself.
So he sucked in a sharp breath, and shut his eyes. Calmed his heart-rate. Steadied his hands. “Okay. Okay. Let’s go.”

Without another second to spare, both of them turned and ran for the door.

_____Tony_____ 

He didn’t know where he was again.

Another club, by the looks of it. It was so loud. He could barely even see straight. God, he wanted to go home- it had been ages since he’d changed his clothes.

He wanted Steve.

But Steve wasn’t here. Steve hadn’t been for days, not since that outburst after the gala. He’d finally seen sense. Someone must have informed him of some of Tony’s shit, or maybe there had just been a moment of realization whilst he’d been there, that he would literally be better off anywhere other than with him. Because Tony was… a fucking mess

Case in fucking point, he thought, as he stumbled into the wall and tried to regain his balance.

He knew that he was somewhere on the rougher side of New York, that was for sure. He remembered getting the cab there, after avoiding Pepper’s fifth call. There had been lots of people. People seemed to like Tony as long as they didn’t know him- or at the very least, they thought he was interesting. Something to stare at and admire. Tony had been fine with that at the time; all he’d wanted was distraction. And making scenes had always been something he was good at. Now, though, he was tired of it. The drinks were catching up to him. He felt sick and exhausted, like he’d been on his feet for too long. He wished that there was someone who wanted more than just a picture or a fuck, in that moment. But what else had he been expecting, swanning up to some club in the middle of New York wearing three-day-old clothes and throwing money around like it was nothing? That was just asking for trouble. He’d brought all this on himself, anyway

It had been stupid. The whole… the whole thing, with Steve. Tony knew it wasn’t ever going to last long. People like Steve Rogers didn’t stay with people like Tony Stark, and everyone knew it. Too good. Too good to be true, that’s what it had been. He should just be grateful it was over sooner rather than later. Stopped him getting too attached, too hurt.

He laughed at the ridiculous thought. Yeah. Yeah fucking right.

The room felt too small all of a sudden, and Tony blinked slowly, taking a sharp breath. It had been building up for a while, but suddenly the need to go home was almost overwhelming. It was funny, how used he’d gotten to just skipping out on all this bullshit. It didn’t hold the same appeal any more, and no matter how hard he tried to forget and how many drinks he threw back, nothing was working. He didn’t feel better, and he didn’t feel nothing, either. He just felt like shit. At least
before, the parties and the shots and the strangers had emptied him of everything.

It seemed even that had been taken from him now.

God, he needed to tell Pepper he was okay. She was probably worried. Fuck- if she got upset over this, that’d be another person he’d hurt, even if he hadn’t meant to. It was just what he was good at: fucking and fucking people over. Right.

“Tony Stark! Oh my god, hi Tony!”

His heart, if physically possible at that point, sunk lower into his shoes at the familiar calling, and he dropped his head and raised his hand on instinct as he saw a blinding camera flash from a cell phone. It hurt his eyes. He winced. There were too many lights here. He could barely fucking walk. He needed…. He needed to get out.

His foot stepped forward, but his chest went back as it bumped into three different people, all crowding to take a picture.

Fuck.

Okay, just stay calm. He found a grin somewhere inside him and plastered it on, making sure they got what they’d come for. After that, maybe they’d just leave him alone. The screen was too bright and it made him blink, and he figured when they looked at that picture in the morning, every single face in the photo would look like shit, but they didn’t seem to mind as of now. Too drunk.

Unfortunately, it started off a chain reaction. Once they’d noticed him and taken a photo, everyone else followed suit. Mostly harmless people just wanting photos, but there were at least ten all crowding around him, and some were just close, they were too fucking close, fuck, God, Tony was too drunk for this shit, he needed to find a cab-

“Hey! Alright, that’s enough, back off now. Back off, I said!”

Tony paused, looking up from the floor he was staring intently at as he watched another body join the fray and push at the crowds. The gestures used were familiar, and he realized it was because it was the same technique Steve used in order to stop the crushing flow of people. Arms out and pushing forward, forcing everyone to take a step back. For one tiny, stupid second, he wondered whether Steve had come back. But it didn’t last long- Tony would know Steve Rogers anywhere, and this person was different. Stood differently and moved differently and wasn’t… he wasn’t Steve. Of course he wasn’t, Steve was gone. He’d left. Tony tried not to let that thought consume him again as he ducked his head and let this stranger push everyone back. They were still taking pictures, mind you, but Tony covered his face with a clumsy hand and then turned, trying to use the distraction as a way to make his swift exit.

Fuck, his head hurt. This music was so loud.

As he took a few hurried steps, he felt rather than saw the hand that came around his arm, tugging gently. He jerked his head in shock, but the touch was soft. “Follow me. We’ll get you out of here, don’t worry,” the person said- man, by the looks of it. Tony was too out of it to do much else other than follow his lead, letting himself be pulled swiftly through the crowds. He kept his head down and tried not to fall over, just glad that there was someone who seemed not to have it out for him in that moment.

He just wanted to turn back the clock. More than anything in the world. He wanted to make everything just… unhappen. Go back to how they’d been before. It had been so good, for a while.
The best, even. Tony had been happy. He could’ve sworn Steve had too. He’s certainly seemed it. And try as he might to make sense of it all, to try and get to the bottom of the sudden change in mood, nothing came up as an answer. He still had no idea why Steve had changed his mind so very suddenly. It just… it was nonsensical. Steve hadn’t even looked remotely angry earlier that night, and yet by the time the new day had come around, he was just gone. Completely. Out of Tony’s life with the promise of never coming back.

And God, it hurt like a hundred knives in his heart, digging through his soul.

He swore softly under his breath, and thought about the soft blue bruise that still lay on his hip from where Steve’s fingers had been just days previously. That sort of thing was gone, now. Steve would probably never even see him again, never mind touch him. Tony had ruined it. Worst of all, he didn’t even know how he’d fucking done it.

Typical.

“It’s okay,” someone- the person who’d apparently saved him- said, and Tony felt the hand on his arm slip away, move up and squeeze his shoulder. He just blinked, remembering the fact that he wasn’t alone, and the man was still leading him around. “It’s alright, Tony, I’ve got you. You’re safe now.”

There was something about that voice that felt inherently unsafe, however. Tony found himself repressing a shudder, and he finally looked up in the darkness of the street (how the fuck had they even got onto the street, Tony barely remembers leaving-) to put a face on his saviour.

Daniel Arlington-Jones stared back at him, a soft and reverent smile on his face.

“FUCK!” Tony jerked back, tried to shake off the hand, but he was just too drunk to be able to anything other than stumble clumsily, and Daniel caught him with relative ease before he hit the side of the car they were stood beside. The air suddenly felt cold around him, and he gasped in fear, clumsy hands grabbing at the other man’s arms weakly and pushing away. He knew though, even if he screamed and kicked and did everything his power, there was no way he’d be able to get away. He could barely even see straight, let alone fight. Jones had him exactly where he wanted him: Helpless and alone.

Daniel grabbed his flailing hands and pulled him away from the curb, so that he wouldn’t fall into the car. “Hey, no, don’t hurt yourself, here, here, it’s alright, just calm down, here-”

Tony felt the fabric of a handkerchief get pressed softly up against his nose as Jones’ arm snaked around his neck and held him in place. There was something potent on the material- an inhalant of some sort, Tony knew that much- but he was helpless to defend against it as Jones’ pushed Tony into his chest and then clutched the handkerchief across his face, stifling his nose and mouth. He struggled weakly, trying to scream, begging internally for someone to walk down the street and help- but no one came. He was alone. There wasn’t any knight in shining armor- no Steve to walk through and save the day now. Tony was absolutely fucked.

He felt Daniel kiss the top of his head before his knees buckled and his eyes rolled, plunging him into darkness.
Chapter End Notes

Told you it was gonna go to hell in a handbasket, didn't I?
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter is pretty violent. If any of you are squicky about that sort of stuff, just be careful!!!

_____Steve_____

He searched everywhere.

The tower. Tony’s office. The Italian place. The bakery on fourth where Tony liked to buy fresh bagels. Everywhere he could think of that Tony, and therefore Clint, might be.

He came up blank. So did the rest of the team. No one could find either of them anywhere.

He’d called Pepper. Nothing. Engineering division of SI. Nothing. Colonel Rhodes. Nothing. None of them knew, and the sun had gone down but Steve was still riding around New York, looking anywhere. Everywhere.

In the back of his mind, he knew he was probably too late. If Clint had found him by now, he was...

Steve would be responsible for his death. Steve would have signed the goddamn warrant on it.

But no. That wasn’t happening. It wouldn’t have happened. If Clint had been successful, he would’ve come home, and the others would have called him and told him he was back. So Clint had to still be looking, still be waiting. He had to be. And even if the others had gone home to just sit and wait for the news, there was no way in hell Steve was doing that. He didn’t care if he had to walk around New York all fucking night- he’d do it. He’d find Tony, and then he’d... he’d explain. Everything. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but. It wouldn’t be enough. It wouldn’t make any of it okay, or earn even a scrap of his forgiveness, but- but Tony needed to know. He deserved it, after everything Steve had put him through.

This was all Steve had. He needed to cling on to the hope that he’d be able to do that, or he was going to go insane.

He swerved the corner dangerously on his bike and then pulled up on Park Avenue again, preparing to loop the Tower once more and check for the third time. Tony might be walking back from wherever he’d been. Or maybe Clint was waiting for him there, who knew? Yes, Steve was clutching at straws here, but he needed to try. If he stopped now, if he got off his bike and gave up, there was going to be nothing to get back up for. He’d have to accept what he’d done, and he couldn’t. Not even him. For all his bravery and talk of morality, he knew without a doubt that he would not be able to live with knowing that he’d murdered the only person he’d ever truly loved.
because of nothing more than his own blind mistake.

He couldn’t stop. He was afraid of what he’d do if he did.

In his pocket, he heard his phone ring, and immediately fished it out and pressed it to his ear. “What-”

“Clint’s back.”

The bike braked sharply, and he veered off the road into the parking bay, stopping the bike an inch away from the car in front of him. He could feel his heartbeat drumming in his throat, his hands were shaking, he couldn’t breathe again. “Is he- did he… what-”

“He couldn’t find Tony.”

The relief was almost tangible enough to taste on his tongue. He slumped over his bike, eyes falling shut as he silently thanked whichever God was currently looking down at him right now. Tony wasn’t dead. Clint hadn’t done it. There was still… hope. “Oh thank God. Oh… oh thank fucking God-”

“Steve, you need to come home,” and it was only then that he registered the fact that it was Bucky speaking to him, his voice low and grave and putting Steve on edge all over again. “There’s… you need to hear what Clint’s saying. We think Tony’s missing.”

...And there went that relief. “I’m sorry, what?”

Bucky made a frustrated noise down the line. “Just get home, Steve. I don’t wanna talk about this over the phone. He’s not dead yet. That’s all we know for now.”

Steve swallowed, and then said a quiet goodbye before cutting the call and swerving back onto the road. He’d been happy for about three seconds, which was nice. But now it seemed there was just another problem.

Where the fuck was Tony?

He knew that he’d hurt Tony. He knew because it’s what he’d wanted to do at the time- he’d wanted to cut deep and ruin him in the way Tony had ruined Steve. So he’d said some awful, horrible things, and then kicked him out to stew in it. At the time, Steve had thought he’d been sparing him, been gentle on him.

At the time, at the time, at the time. Hindsight was 20/20, huh? All Steve had been was lying. Tony was… he was none of those things. Except now he was wandering New York thinking Steve thought that he was. And he’d always trusted Steve’s word.

God, what if something terrible had happened? What if…

What if he’d done something terrible to himself?

No.

No, he hadn’t. Tony was… he would be fine. He had problems, but he wasn’t suicidal. Steve wouldn’t have been able to drive him to that. The thought of it felt worse than the initial terror that Clint had just killed him. He hadn’t realized he could feel any more self-hatred than he had five minutes ago, and yet he was constantly breaking records here, wasn’t he?
He felt sickened to his very core. No doubt there was a special place in hell for people like him.

The streets were relatively clear as he sped through them, and Steve got back to his apartment from Manhattan in record time. He parked up in Miss Aber’s spot, which would earn him dirty looks for the next three months or so, but he couldn’t exactly find it in himself to care as he dismounted hurriedly and jammed his keys into the door, speeding up the stairs four at a time.

He reached his apartment twenty seconds later and pushed through the door clumsily, eyes searching for his team. They were all sat around in the living room, tense and still, but when they turned to him, they each shot him weary smiles. Clint was sat on the coffee table. His face was rather pale, and he was fiddling nervously with his hands.

Steve studied them all for a moment. “Tell me everything you know,” he ordered bluntly, shutting the door behind him.

Clint sat a little straighter. You could’ve cut all the tension in the room with a knife; each one of them were full of sharp lines and hard, guilt-ridden eyes. Natasha was sat rigid by Bucky’s side. Peggy was leaning forward, hands clasped in prayer and propping up her chin. Bucky’s fists kept clenching and unclenching. Each of them knew the exact gravity of the situation they’d managed to get themselves into here- made a thousand times worse by the fact that over the course of the past few months, they’d all actually become close with Tony. All of them felt like they’d brutally betrayed a friend, here. Steve had been preoccupied with his own grief, and he’d barely even noticed how his friends were faring throughout the ordeal. It was clear now, however, that they cared. They cared a damn lot.

“I went out to find him early yesterday morning at 8,” Clint began to fill the silence, swallowing and palming a hand over his face. “I’d been planning to trail him all day until I found an opening. We knew Tuesdays were the day when he was out of the tower most doing errands, and we knew for certain that he had to attend a conference down in Queens, because you’d told us that yourself. So I waited.” He shrugged, and then raised his hands in confusion. “But he never showed up. He didn’t leave all day, so I figured he must still be in his tower or office or something, right? I waited up all night in case he was just gonna do all his shit in the evening, but… I dunno, something in my gut was telling me something else was up. I learned to trust my instincts, you know me- and I pulled out my phone to do a check. He’s famous, y’know, so I figured he might have shown up on there or made a scene somewhere, right?”

Clint pulled out his phone and threw it to Steve, who caught it instinctively. He looked down, and immediately spotted the screenshots- the snapshots of Tony, some blurred, some in perfect clarity. At a club, grinning lazily up at a camera of some fan, and then others- him putting his hands in front of his face to avoid the flash of the cameras in the darkened room. The timestamp marked out the fact it was five hours ago, but Steve had no idea at what point Clint had screenshotted them all. “When were these taken?”

“2am last night. At the time, they’d only just been posted, and one of them had location turned on, so I got in the car and drove down.” Clint looked down, ashamed. “Figured it’d be an easy target, if he was drunk off his ass like that. Was gonna just slip in there and pour something into his next shot or something. But when I got in there and asked where he was, someone told me that they’d seen Tony getting led outside by some guy who had looked like his bodyguard, and that was the last they’d seen of him.”

Steve paused, feeling the tightening in his chest at the words. “I… Clint, he might have just- he might have just gone home with them.”

“Okay, I can see that, but according to what they said, the guy literally just came in and then
walked out with Tony thirty seconds later. No introduction, no nothing. Of course, at the time I thought that too though, so I just drove home and decided to wait for him to get back at the tower the next morning. You’d told me his schedule, so I knew he had another meeting at midday, and—"

“Wait.” Steve silenced him with a quick hand and brought the phone closer to his face. He’d been looking absently through all the pictures since Clint had begun talking, but most were just blurry candids of Tony’s hand over his face. However, in one of the last ones, the angle was a little less sharp, and although still blurry, he could just about make out the features of both men in the photograph. Only half his face, mind you, and taken with a really shitty camera, but… but it was hauntingly familiar.

He swallowed, and looked closer as all his friends cut off their murmuring and fell into silence around him. Upon further inspection of the photo, he made out a lanky figure next to Tony, with dark hair and black clothes. It sparked a flicker of recognition within Steve, and something in his gut began to sink in warning. He swiped to the next picture; saw another blurred shot of both of them walking out of the bar with the man’s hand clutching at Tony’s arm. Then he swiped to the last picture, the one he had yet to look at. It was a clearer image; one of the strange man as he held out his arms and pushed back the crowd.

Steve looked at it for a long, long time.

Then he hurled Clint’s poor phone at the wall as hard as he could, and shattered it into a hundred separate pieces.

Everyone around him jumped to their feet, running for him in preparation to restrain his movement and prevent him from destroying anything else. But he didn’t move from his position; just raised his hands to his face and then dropped his head, sheer disbelief clouding his mind. Because it couldn’t be happening. He couldn’t have done this. He couldn’t have let this happen. No. No no no no no no-

“Steve!” Someone shook his shoulders sharply, and he registered Peggy’s firm voice filtering through his ears. “Steve, what is it? Tell us, now.”

He shook his head. It was impossible. He had gone, he’d left- he was running from the whole world, there was no way he’d have just been able to-

But there he was. In that photo, clear as day. There was no way Steve would be able to forget that face for the rest of his life, after all. He wasn’t mistaken.

“That’s Daniel Arlington-Jones,” he said, numb.

They all knew the name. He’d told them. Around him, he felt the entire room stop moving, their nervous fluttering limbs and anxious fingers just freezing up in horror. At his side, Bucky’s horrified cursing was audible even to Steve’s ringing ears. His friend said something, but Steve didn’t manage to catch that part. He felt like a grenade had just gone off right next to him. It had happened, once, back when he’d been in the army. Nearly deafened him in his left ear, the doctors had said later on. He remembered the feeling of being blown back, of his head hitting the asphalt. He’d gone into shock. His head had been spinning, and he hadn’t been able to focus on anything other than the intense ringing in his ears and the vague, blurred image of Bucky at his side, trying to haul him back up.

This felt much the same. There was just a distant crashing noise in his ears, and the sound of his own heartbeat thrumming under his tongue.
Tony had been taken.

It was Steve’s fault.

He lurched forward, stumbling over to the sink and then retching, emptying the sparse contents of his stomach. His mouth burned and he sunk low, eyes clenched shut in despair, in horror. He couldn’t do this. This couldn’t be happening. It had to be some- some fucked up nightmare or dream or something, anything other than the truth.

“Steve,” and there was Natasha’s voice, lifting the fog in his mind as she squeezed down hard on his shoulder and hauled him up, before slapping him sharply across the cheek. He flinched back, blinking a few times as the pain spiked across the his face, woke him up from the haze. “Steve, snap out of it. Snap the fuck out of it and help us fix this, okay? He needs us to help him. You have to hold out, okay, just for now. The guilt can come later. You shove that down you ignore it and you do your damn job and protect him, understand? He needs us. He needs you.”

Steve stared blankly at her for a second, before the meaning behind her words sunk in and he realized she was right. This wasn’t going to get them anywhere. Steve had fucked up, and now Steve needed to fix it, before it was too late.

He wasn’t going to think about the state Tony might be in when they actually found him. He wasn’t. He just needed to focus on getting to him, and then making Jones pay for everything he’d done.

“Alright,” he said, nodding once and then straightening his back. “I… alright. We find him. Now. I need- Natasha, get on surveillance. Clint, you know the club he was at- there’ll be CCTV. Peggy, Buck, go grab our stuff. We’re going all-in, there aren’t gonna be any prisoners here. If someone tries to stop us, shoot to kill.”

He looked at them all with a steely glare, wondering if someone would say anything. But his friends just nodded in silent agreement and then slid off quickly, wasting no more precious time. They were all acutely aware of the importance of this. There would be no pause, no break to the fluid preparation involved here- they were far too professional for that. Like a well-oiled machine, when Steve’s team wanted to work, they worked. Steve himself was no exception. Natasha was right, after all, the grief and the guilt could (and would) come later- but for now, Steve couldn’t afford that weakness. It would only slow him down.

Don’t think about it, don’t think about it, don’t think about it.

Again and again, a mantra in his head. The next task. That’s what you have to focus on, Steve, that’s all there is. The next mission. And then the next. And then the next. Thinking of anything else will ruin you.

Don’t think. Just do.

He took a small breath and then turned, making his way over to the panel on the other side of the room where he kept his collection of weapons. Not nearly as extensive as Natasha’s or Bucky’s, and with far simpler contents, but still just as deadly. He pulled out the drawer and looked down, picking up the blade Tony had made for him and flipping it once in his hand. He imagined what it would feel like to slit Jones’ throat with it, and for the first time in years, the thought didn’t even make him feel guilty. He wanted to.

And if he’d hurt Tony, then he would.
“So what’s your plan?” Peggy’s voice spoke up on his right without warning, and he jumped in shock, whipping around to look at her. She was slipping a knuckle duster into her pocket whilst tying her hair into a messy ponytail, and she wasn’t facing him head-on, but he could see her gaze through the reflection of the chrome surface.

“You know the plan,” he responded easily, slotting a fresh magazine into place. “Find Jones, kill him, get Tony safe.”

“I’m talking about after.”

He paused, turning to look toward her. She didn’t turn and do the same, instead leaning forward and grabbing her own pistol from the drawer next to his. “What do you mean, ‘after’?” He asked, although he felt like he already knew the answer to it.

And from the look on her face when she turned to him, she knew he knew as well. “If- when you find Tony. When he sees everything you’ve done. Are you intending on explaining yourself? You gonna come clean?”

He didn’t say anything. But he nodded.

“And where is that going to leave us, Steve? If he decided to go to the police with that?” Peggy asked, her voice wavering toward something sharp. “Steve, darling, I know that this is… it’s a mess, okay, but you have to think-”

“I’m not going to let you go down,” Steve said softly, looking at his hands. “There’ll be no evidence against your name. When we go in there, I won’t let him see any of your faces. There’ll be no reason to believe you had anything to do with this..” He took a small breath, and then turned to her. His hands clenched and unclenched as he tried to keep himself from shaking. “Once we get him to hospital, go home. Clean out any evidence aside from my own. Get yourself some alibis- you know people, it won’t be hard-”

“You’re really going to do this?” She asked, and for a moment her eyes were so horribly sorrowful. “You’re going to run the risk of life imprisonment, all for a man you met less than a year ago? Just so that he doesn’t suffer a bad breakup? Steve, I know you hurt him, but he will get over it. But you won’t ever be able to take back the truth, you won’t be able to get yourself out of a jail sentence if Tony goes to the cops with it.”

Steve swallowed, and his jaw clenched as he looked down and swiped a thumb over the barrel of his gun. The one that Tony had made him, just because he’d wanted to. He knew what Peggy was saying- knew and wondered himself whether it was worth it all.

“Tony needs to know about what Stane is doing,” he replied eventually. “This is bigger than me, or any of us. This is… thousands and thousands of lives that are depending on us to sort this out. Tony won’t let this continue. But if I tell him, then I have to get all of it out.” His lips pursed and he looked down, swallowing hard. Peggy just waited until he managed to compose himself a little, and then turned back to face her.

“I won’t be able to live with myself if I don’t tell him the truth, Peggy,” he whispered. “I… I just can’t. It’d drive me mad. Whatever happens to me, it’s my choice. I got myself into this. I hurt the both of us. And now I deal with the consequences of this. If it means life, well, it was always something that we knew was probably gonna happen anyway.” And maybe this is my retribution, he thought miserably.

She sighed quietly, and Steve could see the stress on her bare face as she leaned a shoulder lightly
against his. They both stared at one another through the chrome reflection of the wall, and Steve felt for a moment as if the tightness in his chest was going to strangle him completely.

“You really love him that much?” She asked.

Unwaveringly, he nodded. “Yes. I do.”

She didn’t respond, after that. They stood in silence for a few more seconds, and then Peggy turned, rising to her tiptoes in order to press a soft kiss to his cheek. He shut his eyes and leaned into her touch instinctively- warm and safe and home. After this, he may not get that again. He couldn’t say what the future held, any more.

“Right. Let’s go kill a fucking psychopath,” she whispered with a small grin, and then raised her gun up into the air.

He cracked a tiny sliver of a smile, and knocked his gun against hers. “Let’s go kill a fucking psychopath,” he agreed.

_____Tony_____

His head hurt.

Like nothing you would believe. A jackhammer under his skull, pounding behind his eyes. He felt himself groan, a tiny pathetic thing that was forced out of a numb mouth, and it hurt to just make noise, God, what had he done last night? Crashed a damn car? Dived headfirst into an empty pool? Fuck.

He whined, rolling over on the bed he was in and then halting when it hurt his arms. He was lying in a funny position, but when he tried to move around, he noticed in concern that he wasn’t actually able to get far. His hands were.... Chained.

Jesus Christ, was he drunk enough to have fallen into bed with a sadist or something? He blinked his eyes open with extreme effort, and then tried to tug away from the metal around his wrists. But this wasn’t just some cheap sex-shop crap with fluffy lining- these were… they were heavy, army-grade clamps. Wound through a gap in the bedpost and allowing him free movement of his hands, but keeping him chained to the immediate vicinity of the bed. How the hell had he even got here? Shit. Shit shit shit, he couldn’t even remember-

“It’s alright, just take a deep breath. You’re safe, okay? It’s alright. Just relax- I don’t want you to hurt or anything.”

Tony froze in place, eyes widening as the voice registered. He didn’t want to look up. He didn’t
want to see what he knew he was going to see. His head was still throbbing, he felt woozy and
disorientated and helpless, and fuck, no, this seriously couldn’t be happening. This had to be some
sick joke.

Slowly, he turned his head and saw Daniel, sat on a chair next to the bed, looking the picture of
contentment and happiness as he observed Tony.

With a wild jerk, he flung himself backward, hitting his head on the wall as he did so. He
scrambled away to the bottom of the bed, but was held in place by the bonds around his wrists,
which refused to yield no matter how hard he tugged. Terror and panic were rising in his throat like
bile, and he swore viciously, not taking his eyes off the other man. “You stay the fuck away from
me, you understand? Don’t fucking touch me.”

Daniel raised his hands in peace. “It’s alright, Tony. I saved you! You were… those people
wouldn’t leave you alone. You were upset. I helped you, and brought you here. It’s okay—”

“Then let me the fuck go!”

“I can’t do that.” Tony yanked at the chains again, desperate and futile, and the metal dug into his
wrists sharply. He felt horribly dizzy all of a sudden, and it forced him back onto his side,
slumping into the soft bed with a dull groan. “Tony, please relax. Don’t hurt yourself. It’s fine, it’s
okay.”

He was going to vomit. Fuck, fuck, he was going to-

Something pulled at his shoulder and tugged his head, and then he was throwing up into some sort
of container held aloft by Daniel. He could taste the remains of alcohol in his throat, and it burned,
oh God did it burn. He didn’t stop retching until twenty or-so seconds later, when he slumped,
exhausted onto the bed.

He couldn’t fight. Not like this. Hungover and drugged and chained, there was no way in hell.

“It’s alright, it’s okay,” he felt a hand rub across his shoulder and flinched wildly, curling into
himself like a stupid child. “You’re just really hungover. I gave you a few tablets to help, but I
think you might just need to go to sleep again. I’ll go get you something.”

“No, don’t—”

“Don’t argue, Tony,” Daniel said sharply, his hand tightening painfully against Tony’s shoulder
for a second before releasing. “Just hold still, okay? I’m gonna look after you.” A second later,
there was a shuffling sound and then a sudden spiking pain in his neck. Tony gasped, feeling the
familiar needle push into his skin, but didn’t have time to dwell on it. He felt the heaviness on his
eyelids almost immediately, and although he tried to fight against it, there was nothing he could do.

Unconsciousness was almost a relief.

_____
Of course, the memory of where he was and who he was with just sent the panic slamming right back into his chest, and he jerked in his chair, trying to move. Surprise surprise, he didn’t succeed—this time it felt like zip-ties that were pinning his hands behind the chair, and then another set to keep his feet in place. The chair itself appeared to be nailed to the ground, because there was absolutely no give underneath him, and every time he moved too sharply or turned too fast, he was hit with a spell of light-headedness that could only come from some sort of drug in his system.

Which was absolutely fucking great, of course.

“Hey, Tony.”

There was the sound of a door closing quietly behind him, and he flinched wildly again, trying to look behind him. Short of spinning his head a full 180 degrees, however, he couldn’t catch sight of Daniel as he padded forward, feet soft and seemingly unthreatening against the stone floor. When Daniel finally came into a view a few seconds later, it was the hand that reached out for Tony’s face that he saw first. Long fingers curled lightly around his cheek, and Tony reeled back from the touch as far he could, which drew an irritated sigh from his captor.

“You do like to make things difficult, don’t you?” He said, almost fond as he drew his hand back and instead rested it on Tony’s shoulder, thumb stroking across the exposed skin of his neck.

In response, Tony spat on him.

There was a long silence, marred only by Tony’s heavy breathing as he glared unwaveringly at Daniel. Because he might be tied and useless right now, but damn if he was going to just sit here and let it all happen without a fight.

In a detached sort of way, he heard more than felt the resounding slap across the face as the force of it cracked like a whip through the room. He felt his head snap to the left and blinked disjointedly, the pain suddenly blooming over his cheekbone. Something warm pooled in the area and then slipped downward, and he noted the heavy studded ring on Daniel’s hand must have cut straight through skin.

“Please don’t make me do that again,” Daniel said firmly, wiping his face with an air of calm that only unnerved Tony further. “I don’t like seeing you hurt.”

Tony snarled, pushing against the ties and trying to see if he could break free. It was useless, of course, but he wanted to at least give it a go. “What the fuck do you want?” He asked through gritted teeth.

Daniel smiled, and then crouched onto his haunches, looking up at Tony softly. He stared back, trying to hide his fear—years and years of practise made him good at that. Inwardly, however, he could feel his heart up in his throat, and wondered how long he was going to manage to drag this out before Daniel got bored and did… something awful.

“I just want you, Tony,” was the response he got, and it was honestly soft enough to sound loving. “That’s all. I want you, and me, together. Happy. It might take you some time to see that, but I can wait.”

“Well you’re gonna die waiting, buddy.” Tony spat, cutting and vicious. “When my people find me, they’re going to fucking ruin you. That’s a promise.”

“You have no more ‘people’, Tony!” Daniel said, anger clouding his voice for a second. “I know, I saw! I never left the country, I just made you think I did so that I could watch in damn peace! I was
waiting… waiting for the right moment, because I knew your bodyguard, your precious Steve would leave you one day. I barely even had to wait a few months before that happened. So who do you have left now, hm? There is no-one but me. I am your everything, whether you like it or not.”

Tony gaped at him, blinking rapidly and trying to breathe through the pain of Daniel’s words. No matter how insane he might be, what he’d said, in essence, was true. Tony was talking out of his ass. There wasn’t going to be anyone looking for him. Pepper probably just thought he was running away again, and Rhodey was still overseas. That… that was essentially it. All he had. All his options.

No one was coming to save him, this time.

“I’m going to explain a few things to you, now,” Daniel explained, his hand resting lightly on Tony’s knee. “Rules, if you like. You’re in my house, now, so I figure you should have the courtesy of following them-”

“You have got to be fucking joking-”

His words were cut off by another backhand to the same spot as before, and Tony stifled a gasp of pain as the cut already present on his cheek deepened, fiery pain shooting across his face. “Rule number one. Do not interrupt me when I’m talking,” Daniel told him lightly, as Tony looked down at his lap. “Rule number two: speak to me politely, and in the way you would expect to be spoken to.”

“You’re not my fucking mother, you kn-”

Two more slaps, in a brutal and quick concession. Tony groaned, feeling his head begin to throb again. Blood was dripping down his neck, staining his white shirt with drops of red. “What did I just say?” Daniel hissed, and when Tony refused to answer or look upward, he felt a hand curl around his neck tightly, choking off his air supply as he yanked Tony’s head upward. “I asked you a question, Tony.”

He coughed and spluttered. “Speak politely, alright, I got it, I fucking g-got it, Jesus.”

The hand slackened and Tony wheezed, but didn’t feel the pressure release entirely. The hand was still resting on his neck, and when he looked up, Daniel was staring at him, smile back on his face. “I want us to change the world together, Tony,” he whispered. “You and me. We will be so good for each other. You’re amazing, and smart, and beautiful, and in time you will fall in love with me in the same way I love you.”

“What, you think Stockholm syndrome’s gonna save your sorry ass?” Tony asked. “I’m never going to love you, asshole. And I swear… I swear if you touch me, if you try- if you try anything at all, I will never speak another word to you again. I swear. I swear, you will ruin your only chance at having me comply if you do-”

“Whoah whoah whoah,” Daniel raised his hands again, eyes concerned. “Tony, I would never force myself on you. What kind of a person do you think I am? No no no, see, everything in here is your choice. I’m not hurting you when I hit you, you’re the one making me hit you. And I won’t ever… I’m not going to sleep with you until you’re ready for that, either. We can take it slow. I want to work with you, more than anything. Pick that brain of yours, you know? We can change the world. Our collective genius will be invaluable.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you,” Tony shook his head, desperate to get the point across. “Ever. I’m not going to work with you, or be in any kind of relationship with you, ever, do you
understand? This is getting you nowhere. I am not going to-"

For the third time, he was silenced by Daniel’s raised hand. Except this time it wasn’t a slap across
the face he got. From nowhere, it seemed he’d pulled out a small knife, and before Tony could
even blink, the hilt of it was sticking out of his shoulder, almost where his neck began.

He stared at it dumbly. He had barely even had time to process the thing going in.

“I don’t like it when you shake your head at me,” Daniel told him softly, finger brushing across the
place where knife met skin, and that was what made Tony scream. “I’m guessing it’s going to hurt
a lot more when you do that, now.”

Tony bit his lip so hard he tasted coppery blood under his tongue, and his eyes clenched shut. It
hurt like a bitch. Never been stabbed before, although he had had his fair share of lab accidents in
the past. He wasn’t going to give Daniel the satisfaction of reacting to it. Sweat pooled on his top
lip and forehead as he forced himself not to cry out or move, and instead just levelled Daniel with
his most unimpressed glare.

“I’m not going to sleep with you,” He repeated through gritted teeth, “ever. I’m not going to work
with you, or be in any kind of relationship with y-”

“Okay, I feel like we’re going around in circles here,” Daniel sighed and stood up, palming a hand
over his face. “You will, Tony. Because I know you. I know that you will do anything to survive,
because you are strong and you are brave. You’re going to give in, eventually. You’ll see that I’m
right.”

Tony refused to let himself look scared. He’d lost everything else, but he still had his pride,
dammit. “What is it you intend to do to convince me, then?”

Daniel shrugged. “Still working on that. For now, though, I think you need something to relax.
Don’t worry, it’s not going to kill you or anything- just make you a little bit… easier to handle.
More willing to listen, you know? I designed it myself. I promise it’s safe. I wouldn’t hurt you”

Tony made an incredulous face, and if he could’ve without his shoulder bursting into hot flames of
agony, he would’ve given the knife sticking into his skin a dry look. When Daniel just turned his
back and wandered over to the other side of the room, he took the opportunity to take in as much of
his surroundings as he could. It was what looked like a mostly empty basement- huge, too huge to
belong to a house. Maybe they were in a warehouse or something. Whatever it was, though, there
were no windows, and the only things in the room were the bed Tony had been resting on
previously, the chair he was sat in now, and then a toilet and a shower. Oh, and the desk that
Daniel was currently walking toward.

There was a set of double doors in the far left corner, with what looked like a keypad attached to
the side. Hackable. It was Tony, after all. He just needed a chance, and he could escape. He knew
he could.

He had to.

“Okay, just relax,” Daniel soothed, and Tony blinked groggily as the man came back into focus in
front of him, yet another syringe in his hand. Tony wondered how many drugs were currently
running through his system in that moment- enough that he could barely put one thought in front of
the next without getting lost halfway through, that was for sure.

The needle went in, and it hurt, but everything hurt, so he barely noticed. Just watched Daniel
through heavy eyelids and breathed through his nose as calmly as he could, despite the terror that
was still gripping his heart like a vice. He could barely believe everything had managed to go so
wrong in the space of less than a damn week. He’d woken up seven days ago with Steve’s arms
wrapped around him, and the belief that Jones was halfway across the world, and today he had
discovered that he was very, painfully wrong, and the only thing that was wrapped around him
were zipties.

Fucking hell.

He gasped a little, clenching his eyes shut as he felt his head begin to throb again. So much for
painless; it felt like there were a hundred little needles digging in right behind his eyes. He felt hot
all over, and shuffled uncomfortably in his chair, only to wheeze in distress when it jostled the
blade that was still buried in his shoulder.

Everything hurt.

Later, when he finally managed to open his eyes again, Daniel wasn’t even in the room. He had no
idea how much time had passed since he’d left. He was sweaty and tired, and he wanted to go
home. Wanted it to just… stop.

He wanted Steve.

Distantly, he knew that this was probably the work of whatever Daniel had dosed him with. A
chemical that enhanced emotional responses to a high level, so that it’d be easier to get him to
comply. No doubt if someone said a single nice word now, his drugged up hypothalamus would
respond with a shit-ton of oxytocin and other good stuff. Pretty clever, really. Positive
reinforcement and all that.

For now, though, all he felt like was shit. And it was hard to be analytical, when every thought just
made the headache worse.

Steve would’ve helped, if he’d been here. If he didn’t hate Tony. Steve was always good at
helping. He’d be quiet and he’d press his thumbs into Tony’s temples really gently, like he always
did when Tony got migraines, and then he’d kiss his eyelids and tell him ‘go to bed, Tony, you
need to sleep more’ because he was always so goddamn concerned.

He wanted Steve. He wanted Steve not to hate him.

Time passed. He wasn’t sure how much, or how he knew, but he felt it. He was hungry. His
shoulder was burning. His mouth was dry and every breath came as a wheeze. He thought Daniel
might have pressed too hard on his throat. There was blood all over his clothes from the cut on his
face.

“What do you say, Tony?” And he blinked awake again, realizing Daniel had made it into the
room. His voice was soft and his hands were gentle and he was wiping at the cut along Tony’s
cheek as if he cared. “Come on. Work with me. Say yes. We’ll be so good together. I already have
a few design plans, but I need your input. I know you’re hurting, but I can help.”

His voice was kind, and he found himself standing up. When had Daniel undone the ties? How was
he even managing to stand at all- his legs felt like jello. His head hurt. He wanted to go home.

Daniel was being nice, at least. He wasn’t hurting him.

“Say yes, Tony,” the man said, and Tony could feel his breath, could feel the warm hands on each
side of his jaw. “Just say yes. I’ll make it better. I promise. I promise it won’t all be as horrible as
Tony was tired. He was really, really tired, and Daniel was being nice. It would… it would be easy. Easier, anyway, than what he was doing now. What was he even achieving from holding out, anyway? What was the point? No one was going to come and get him. He was waiting for a miracle that wasn’t going to happen.

He wanted to say yes.

Daniel wanted him to say yes.

But it was wrong. It was… in his mind, he knew it was wrong. He couldn’t let that happen. He wasn’t… he wasn’t Daniel’s property, he wasn’t supposed to just listen. He was… He was high, for God’s sake, it was- it was just stupid, he needed to… he needed to. Not. To not say yes. To be strong.

“No.”

There was a pause, and then suddenly a wrenching agony in his shoulder as Daniel yanked out the knife and shoved him angrily across the floor. Tony felt the air rush over his face, and then the dull thump of his own head hitting the floor.

Ow.

“What are you doing?” Daniel hissed, marching forward and pulling him up by the back of his jacket. He tried to focus in on the face in front of him, but he was pretty sure he’d been concussed, because his eyes didn’t quite listen to what his brain was asking him to do. “Tony, please, I’m trying to so hard not to make this difficult. Please. I love you, Tony, I want us to be happy. My blood is your blood, your blood is mine, remember? Remember?” He yelled, shaking Tony’s shoulders.

He tried to speak, but no words came. There was nothing to say. Daniel was angry with him, now, and was probably going to kill him, or hurt him, or- or-

-He-

-He was back on the chair again. This time there was tape over his mouth. He had no idea how long it had been. His shirt had turned very red, though. Daniel was still there; he was bandaging Tony’s wound, by the looks of it. The calm expression was back on his face. Like nothing had ever happened.

“I’m going to take such good care of you, Tony,” he said with a gentle smile. “I’m sorry about this. It’s okay though; nothing serious. I’ve staunched the flow, and once the bandages go on, it’ll be right as rain. Then we can get back to work, yes?”

No.

His head hurt. It hurt so fucking badly, and he wanted someone to help him, he wanted Pepper’s glinting eyes or Rhodey’s warm smile or Steve, Steve’s touch, Steve’s gentle fingers against him, telling him it was going to be okay. Daniel had shot him with another dose of… of whatever it was, so he was even more unstable than he had been earlier, and fuck, he felt like was going to cry if he kept this shit up, fuck, fuck shit fuck, what was wrong with him, he needed to get out!

He needed to- he had to...
“What’s your favourite kind of music, Tony?” Daniel was sat cross-legged on the floor next to him, and he’d changed his shirt from red to dark green. His hands were tracing the seam of Tony’s jacket.

Tony wanted to tell him to fuck off, tell him to go rot in hell, but the louder part of his mind demanded he just do what Daniel asked. It was easier. “Like classical,” he slurred, and it made his mouth hurt to speak, but Daniel smiled and patted his leg fondly, and Tony was just glad he wasn’t getting slapped for that one.

The man stood and trotted off, and a few minutes later the soft tones of Mozart filtered through the speakers. Tony shut his eyes and leaned back against the chair. He liked Mozart. Rock music helped him focus, but Classical helped him sleep. He pretended that his fingers could move, that there was a piano in front of him, and imagined following the rhythm through the ivory keys. It helped, a little.

Then he heard the crashing start.

Quiet, at first. He blinked and turned his gaze to Daniel, who was glancing upward at the ceiling. There was a frown on his face, but he shook his head and continued the work he was doing at his desk. Tony figured it must be someone pissing around on the floor above. Maybe they were underneath a workplace or something. Or maybe Daniel had hired guards. Whatever. Did it matter? They were just sounds.

He shut his eyes again, and tried not to think about how hungry he was. Focused instead on twisting his hands around, trying to find purchase from the zipties, or enough leeway to break free. But it was impossible. He knew it was impossible. He wasn’t sure why he even kept trying. What exactly did he have to go home to?

‘Build this missile, Tony’, ‘sign these forms, Tony’, ‘come to this party with me, Tony’. He didn’t want that. What he wanted was long gone. What he wanted was-

Bursting through the double doors so forcefully that they dented the walls when the handle wedged into the framework.

Tony could admit, he’d done some pretty fucked up stuff in his time. He’d tried all the highest quality shit. Ecstasy and LSD, Ket and a bit of cocaine in his wilder youth- but none of them had ever made him trip as hard or as vividly as this. This was a full-blown, HD hallucination of Steve, in all his terrifying glory, holding Tony’s gun in his white-knuckled hands. He looked scruffy-there were the beginnings of a beard on his face, and his hair was a mess, partially covering red-ringed, sunken eyes. But Tony would never be able to forget what Steve looked like in startling, vibrant clarity. This was still him.

Or at least, the version his mind had seemingly procured in wild desperation.

Steve looked over to him, and then to Daniel, who had stumbled away from his desk in shock and was going for a gun at his side. The crack of a bullet was loud enough to almost seem real, and Tony winced at the loudness against his ears. He watched Daniel stagger again, hand going to his knee as he screamed. “What? What the fuck? What are you doing-”

But then Steve was on him. Faster than Tony had even been able to keep up with his tired eyes, suddenly he was just… there. Hands flexing against Daniel’s throat as he hurled him up against the
wall so hard that Tony could hear the cracking of his skull against stone.

One punch. Two punches. Three. Daniel’s knees buckled, and he fell to the floor. There was blood on the walls, but Steve didn’t stop.

Four. Five. Six. Steve was straddling him, one fist in a death-grip around the collar of Daniel’s green shirt, the other one smashing into his face. Daniel tried to grab his wrist and stop him, but Steve snarled and then twisted, and Tony heard the sickening snap of bone, and then the scream of pain a moment later.

Still, Steve continued.

Tony watched in morbid fascination as Steve turned Daniel’s face into a smudged mess of red, until barely any of his features were visible. It wasn’t a professional job, there was no control in his actions, it was... absolute, unadulterated rage. It was fury and vengeance, and only when Daniel’s hand stopped twitching at his side did Steve finally relinquish his grip, sitting back and breathing heavily as his eyes bore holes into the man’s lifeless body.

He’d just killed Daniel Jones with his bare hands.

Tony really wished it were true. Grim though it was to see, Tony wished, more than anything, that Steve was really there. That he was coming to find Tony, and help him. But he knew, really, that this… it wasn’t real. It couldn’t be.

Steve had gone, and he wasn’t coming back. He’d pretty much promised as much.

“-Y, Tony, sweetheart, can you hear me? Tony- Tony! Please, please, are you... “ and then Steve was there, he was- he was right in Tony’s face, crouched down in front of him on the chair as his hands reached clumsily into his jacket and pulled out a knife. He made quick work of the ties around Tony’s ankles and wrists, which was good, but also meant there was nothing else to hold him upright. With a small exhale of breath, he slumped sideways, feeling the whoosh of air and then the surprisingly soft landing that followed.

Above him, someone was cursing. There were hands around his shoulders, and he realised he’d fallen somewhere warm. Dark. It smelt… like home. He curled into it a little, because even if it wasn’t real it was as close as he was going to get, and that was... it was better than nothing.

“Tony, Tony, Tony… come on, you’re gonna be okay, I’ve got you, I’m sorry, I’m so so so so sorry, I’ve got you-” It got bright again, and Tony felt warmth on his cheek as Steve cradled his head and brought it upright, so that he was looking right up into Steve’s beautiful blue eyes. It was more painful than he’d thought it would be- the memory of everything he lost just hurt.

“M’sorry,” he murmured into Steve’s hand, because he was never really going to be able to say it to the real thing, so this would have to do. “M’so… ’tever I did… I never meant-”

“No, hey, shh, okay, don’t- that’s not important right now,” Steve gave him a watery smile, and he looked so sad, so so unhappy, his breath kept hitching up and down like he was- he was panicked, or crying, or something ridiculous- but his thumb stroked over Tony’s good cheekbone, and he felt something warm linger there and knew it must be Daniel’s blood, the blood that covered Steve’s hands. But then there was a small frown on his face, and he wiped his fingers quickly onto the legs of his trousers and then brushed off the droplets of red on Tony’s cheek with the sleeve of his shirt. After a moment of hesitation, quickly shucked off the heavy dark jacket that he was wearing
completely, and Tony simply blinked slowly as Steve draped the material across Tony’s shoulders. He hadn’t even realised how cold he had been until he felt the fabric settle against him.

It felt nice. Like home.

“-Oh God, okay, it’s okay. You’re okay. I’ve got you. Come on, we’re gonna get outta here now, alright? Can you walk? No, no, of course you… never mind, it’s alright, I’ve got you, I’ve got-” he kept repeating the same things, over and over, and it was strange. Tony had never seen Steve like this before. He was usually so controlled. So calm and collected and cool.

There was another soft whoosh of air, and then Tony was moving. He was in Steve’s arms and he was moving through the building, and it all felt so real, he was so… so confused. “‘S’going on?” he whispered, half-scared of the answer as he curled a weak hand around the collar of Steve’s bloody shirt.

Steve kept moving, the rhythmic bounce of his footsteps making Tony’s head hurt. “I’m getting you safe,” Steve said into his hair, voice soft and strangely broken toward the end. “I’m going to fix all this.” The words were a promise, and it was one that reminded Tony of just how delirious he must be, to truly try and create this fantasy in his head where everything was resolved and they all lived happily ever fucking after. In reality, he’d probably just lost consciousness again, and was existing in a state of drug-fuelled dreaming where everything felt strangely real, but could never be.

There were voices behind him, and Steve responded to them. They sounded familiar, but Tony didn’t want to lift his head and see. He was so tired. His shoulder was really hurting, and so was his head. Fuck.

They went up some stairs, and Steve pushed the door open with his back and then carried him through into a corridor. Tony looked through it blearily, and then blinked when he saw the various bodies that scattered the floors. There was… so much blood. Shit, fuck, what the fuck had happened here?

Then, slowly, he felt a soft darkness cover his eyes. It was Steve’s hand. “Don’t look, sweetheart,” he murmured gently, and his lips brushed Tony’s head as he spoke, which was nice. Comforting in its familiarity.

He thought he would be okay, living in this world he’d created. At least Steve was here.

“Sorry,” he said again, and his voice cracked on the edge of the word because his throat was so dry from thirst. “So sorry, for everything, for whatever… I did, I never… didn’t know, I… stupid, selfish, ‘m’sorry-”

“Please stop, Tony,” Steve halted, and his voice was pleading, it was a tender beg that held so much guilt that Tony turned his head and wriggled away from the darkness of Steve’s hand in order to look at him in confusion. His face made nothing clearer, however- it was gaunt and washed out and he actually looked ill, a messy stubble covering his cheeks that just looked so foreign on Steve’s usually-pristine appearance. His eyes were wet. “Please, please, none of this was your fault. You are… perfect, okay? I was a liar, an idiot, a horrible sonofabitch for ever… I didn’t mean it, okay? None of it. I was angry and hurt and I thought you…” he shook his head softly and bit his lip, eyes clenching shut for a minute before he once more began to walk forward. “I know you can’t, but please- please try and forget it. Forget what I said. Just for now. Let me help you. I know I don’t deserve to be listened to, but you’re hurt, Tony, and I have to get you out.”

Tony just sighed, dropping his head into Steve’s shoulder again. The smell and feel of his jacket, clumped around Tony’s hunched shoulders, enveloped him entirely. “You’re not even real,” he
mumbled quietly.

Steve didn’t respond to that, but he made a soft choking noise that Tony felt in his throat, and shook his head about a dozen times. They continued to walk, and Tony’s vision became more and more distorted, until the moment he gave in and closed his eyes against the moving terrain. When he next opened them, however, he had moved positions. He found himself lying down, on something relatively soft. It was darker here, and warmer. Definitely more comfortable.

Steve was sat, kneeling in front of him again. His hand was probing delicately through Tony’s hair, and he thought it was just an affectionate thing before he realised that Steve was probably looking for signs of trauma. Around him, there were other people moving, but Tony couldn’t see their faces. They were wearing ski masks and dark clothes, but Tony could still see the blood that marred the fabric. It appeared Steve had washed his hands since Tony had last seen them, though, because they were now clean and fresh. No red.

“Where’m I?” Tony slurred, looking at Steve and letting his hand trail across whatever it was he was lying on. It seemed like a bench, and when he looked down he saw that it had been covered with sweaters and other soft fabrics. It was nice.

Steve’s hand stopped moving, and he smiled weakly at Tony. “You’re in my van, about to set off to the hospital. You’re not there anymore. I promise.”

Liar. Of course he was still there. “Since when d’you have a… a van?”

“It’s my emergency van.”

“What kind’a ‘mergencies require a van?”

Steve laughed, a small, fragile thing. He ducked his head. “Emergencies like this one, maybe? And, y’know, sometimes we need a lot of space to… work.”

Tony hummed, feeling his eyes fall shut again. But then Steve put his hand on Tony’s face and brushed ever so lightly across the cut along his cheekbone, and the pain was enough to make him wince in distress.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Steve soothed gently, “I’m gonna start cleaning that up, okay? Hospital’s forty minutes out. I don’t want to leave this a second longer than I have to.”

He stood slowly, leaving his hand against Tony’s cheek for the longest time possible before slipping off, stumbling over to the other side of the van. One of the people in the masks handed him a green first-aid kit, and Steve took it gratefully.

“Who’re they?” Tony asked when Steve came back.

He watched the man pause, for a fraction of a second. “Good people,” he assured, “friends. I swear. The masks are just… precautions.”

When Tony looked at one of them again, they raised a hand and gave him a thumbs-up. Through the gap in the mouth, he could see a tight smile. Even that looked tinged with sadness, and Tony couldn’t really understand why.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, looking up at Steve. “I really- I love you, Steve, I swear, ‘tever I did, I never-”

“I know,” Steve shook his head and pressed a gentle finger against Tony’s lips. “I love you too.
You don’t believe me, maybe you’ll never believe me again, but I do. I do. I do.” He pressed an antiseptic wipe against Tony’s cheek and looked at it intensely, jaw clenched so hard that Tony wondered whether his teeth were going to shatter. Tony could feel his fingers shaking.

“Did he touch you,” Steve whispered, voice almost too quiet to hear. “Did he... did he sleep with you, Tony, can you remember?”

Tony tried to think back and remember, and then felt himself shake his head a little. “No,” he mumbled quietly. “No, he... he just asked me to. I said no.”

“And he listened?”

“...Think so.”

Steve bit his lip, but he smiled through his bitten lips and stroked his hand over Tony’s face with gentle, shivering fingers. “Okay,” he swiped a thumb over the fresh droplet of blood that had started falling down Tony’s cheek. “Okay, that’s fine, that’s... okay.”

Tony watched Steve work, feeling somewhat numbed to the pain as those delicate fingers pressed a cloth to his face and cleaned up the crusted blood. He didn’t know what to think of it. It felt so real. But it just... it couldn’t be. This was just the product of all those drugs he’d been dosed with. He couldn’t go around believing that-

“You really killed him.”

Steve paused, and Tony saw the rage return into his eyes, a tiny flash. “Yes. I did,” he said, nodding his head slowly.

Tony thought of everything Daniel had done. To the kids. To Tony. And then he thought about Steve, punching and punching and punching until there was barely anything recognizable left of Daniel Arlington-Jones.

“Thank you,” he whispered, lifting a hand and clutching weakly at Steve’s shirt. He opened his mouth and tried to say something else, but the words caught in his throat and remained there. There wasn’t much point anyway. It wasn’t real. None of it was real. He’d wake up and... and he’d be right back where he started, back in that chair, just waiting for Daniel to make a move or kill him or whatever, and that would be it. No Steve. No saved-in-the-nick-of-time. Just... that.

He should’ve said goodbye to Pepper before he’d left that day. Should’ve called Rhodny. Tony missed him a lot, these days. They were both so busy, but times with him were some of the only occasions he ever felt whole.

He probably wouldn’t ever see him again.

“Come on, Tony,” the pleading note to Steve’s voice was back, and he felt the pressure of a hand on his forehead, pushing his dirty hair away from his face. “Come on, just stick around for a bit longer, yeah? 35 minute drive and we’ll be at the hospital. I don’t want you clockin’ out on me just yet, ok? Please? Can you do that for me?”

Again, the urge to obey was overwhelming, and it hurt, oh God did it hurt, but he nodded anyway. “Yeah,” he responded, voice feeling too small in his mouth. He needed to listen to Steve. It stopped his head pounding a little bit when he listened to what he was being told to do.

Steve smiled up at him, and he wiped a hand over his face before settling it on the edge of the bench. “Good. Thank you.” He turned his head and made a signal to one of the other people sat
behind them, and they knocked once on the partitioning glass that separated them from the driver’s seat. Tony felt the tug in his stomach as the car sped up, engine vibrating underneath him.

He swallowed, and searched for Steve’s hand on the bench with weak fingers that shook with every movement.

Steve spotted him doing it, but he waited for what seemed like an eternity before finally, he turned his palm upward and closed his hand so, so softly around Tony’s searching digits. They were tentative and loose for a moment, as if he was waiting for Tony to pull away, but when he didn’t, Steve simply squeezed tightly and screwed his eyes shut. His head fell forward, and Tony expected the familiar touch of forehead to forehead, but was greeted only with air as Steve hovered an inch above him, unwilling to close the gap.

“I’m so sorry,” he breathed it out, barely even a whisper. “This would never have happened if I had been better. I’m so so so sorry. I love you. I do. I promise. I love you. I’m sorry.”

It seemed there were only a set amount of phrases Steve could say before running out and having to repeat himself like a broken record. He got stuck on a word and relayed it, over and over, like Tony would believe it more if he drilled it into his brain.

Tony didn’t.

(It was good anyway.)

He smiled weakly, and shuffled around a little in order to try and close the gap between them, but suddenly pain from his shoulder flared like a hot flame, and he gasped as the air seemed to just fly out of his lungs-

He was out before he could take another breath.


There was a beep on his left.

Then another.

Then another.

Then another.

His brain supplied a few woozy ideas: music, bomb, figment of his imagination. Whatever it was, though, it sure as hell was annoying. And it wasn’t stopping, either. If anything, it was only speeding up.

His head didn’t hurt any more, which was definitely a positive. But it felt… thick. Slow. A bit like before, but less harsh, more- more gentle. Floaty.

Morphine.

He blinked slowly, and looked around the room as best he could. Everything was blurred and distorted, but it looked clean. White. Unlike the grey expanse of the basement he’d been in earlier. And it felt like he was under a blanket, too- the crisp softness of the sheets brushed against his skin.
when he twitched. He could move his hands, too.

Where was he?

A small exhale of breath had him turning his head, and he focused in as best he could on the figure that was hunched over the bed Tony was lying on, head rested on his forearms. He saw blonde hair, streaked with dirt and falling in messy clumps over those huge arms. Saw the beginnings of a beard running up a strong jawline. A crisp white shirt that seemed so out of place in its neatness, and looked almost as if it had been thrown on in an attempt to clean himself up, but had never gotten around to finishing the job.

It was Steve.

The beeping increased to his left, becoming more and more frantic as he took in a gasping breath and widened his eyes. He didn’t understand. Why was… what was Steve doing here? He’d- he was gone. There was no coming back from that, and yet, he was- he was-

Unless he wasn’t. Unless Tony was just dreaming.

He shut his eyes and whimpered in distress, feeling his head start to spin as it tried to process the deluge of information all at once. The noise apparently woke Steve, though, because a moment later the head was out of his arms, it was looking right at him, and Steve’s mouth was moving as he said things Tony couldn’t hear. His hands hovered anxiously an inch away from Tony’s body, and his eyes were blown wide in panic as his mouth made the words that looked like ‘calm down’ on his lips.

“Why,” Tony slurred, clenching his eyes tightly shut. “Why’re you… what, Steve, what did I… I’m sorry, I don’t-”

He wasn’t even sure what he was saying. The beeping was getting faster, and there were more people in the room now, all in white coats and scrubs and they were pushing Steve back, pushing him away and Tony didn’t want him to go, but he couldn’t understand why he was staying either and everything hurt and-

Then it all went quiet.

He drifted in and out of consciousness.

People spoke in quiet voices over his head. Doctors and nurses came and went. A voice that sounded warm and familiar- Pepper- came in and whispered to him for a little while, but the next time he zoned in, she wasn’t there any more.

He heard extracts of conversations. Steve. Steve was still there. Phrases got thrown around: ‘severe emotional distress’ and ‘adverse reaction to seeing you, Mr. Rogers-‘ but it didn’t make sense to him. He wasn’t in distress. And he certainly wouldn’t have an adverse reaction to seeing Steve. God, he wanted to see Steve more than anything.

“Please, Doctor, you have to let me stay-”
“Mr. Rogers, I really don’t think that would be a good idea. Mr Stark may react negatively to your presence again, and it’s not something we can-”

“You heard the Doc, Rogers,” and that was a voice he knew as well, it was crisp and cold and sharp, yes, but it was still… home. “You’re only going to make him worse. Get out, before I make you.”

Rhodey.

He wanted to smile, and his brain asked his mouth to complete the action, but it seemed not to agree, and instead he remained silent.

There was a moment in which no one in the room spoke, but then there was a small shuffling.

“Okay,” Steve said, voice soft, “okay, I understand. I’ll… please keep me updated. I know I don’t deserve it. But please-”

“I will,” Rhodey said gruffly, and Tony felt the pressure of his touch against his arm as the man’s grip settled around him. “Guess I owe you that much, considering you found him.”

“I… yeah. Thank you, Colonel Rhodes.”

Rhodey grunted, and his hand tightened a fraction. “You should probably get gone soon. In case he wakes up.”

No, Tony wanted to say. Please stay. Please don’t leave again.

But Steve didn’t hear, because Tony only said the words in his head. All Steve heard was the small exhale of breath from Tony’s lips, seeing as that’s all he could do. Aside from that he just lay there, listening to Steve as he left once again.

Steve’s fingers traced over his forehead and pushed the hair from his face, sweeping a few of the strands behind his ear. His touch was light, delicate, and familiar. Tony wanted him to stay there so badly it was a tangible ache under his ribcage.

“Try stay out of trouble ‘til I next see you, yeah?” Steve asked softly, as his two fingers brushed across the stubble over his jaw. Tony managed to tilt his head slightly and lean into the touch, and Steve’s fingers stilled, before pressing down more firmly, just for a moment.

And then they left in a tiny breath of wind, and Tony’s face was cold again.”Okay. I’ll… call me when he’s feeling better, Colonel. I guess I’ll… I’ll see you ‘round.”

“Take care, Rogers,” Rhodey said, a small note of underlying sulkiness still in his voice. “And thank you. Again. For… for coming back to get him.”

Tony heard Steve’s quiet, sad laugh. “If I’d have had any sense at all, I never would’ve left in the first place.”

Then don’t go now, Tony wanted to tell him, stay here, Rhodey doesn’t know what he-

The door shut with a click, and Tony knew that Steve was gone.
“Wakey wakey, Sunshine.”

Tony grumbled sleepily and felt his face bunch up as he frowned. “Go ‘way, Rhodey.”

The other man laughed, and it was gentle and lovely in his ears. “No chance, pal. Look what happens when I do? You end up in this place.”

Tony paused, then, his mind trying to work around some of the information that was beginning to form. He realized that Rhodey being present when he woke wasn’t a common occurrence, and that this place smelt far too sterile to be his own room. He didn’t like this smell at all.

This was a hospital smell.

Tony opened his eyes quickly, finding Rhodey sat in the visitor’s chair to his left and looking down at him with a worried fondness on his face. All at once, the events of the past week came flooding back, and Tony was hit with a wave of emotion so forceful it knocked the air out of his lungs.

Steve, gone. Daniel. Fuck, he’d been-

“Tony, calm down,” Rhodey spoke to him firmly, in the voice Tony had heard him use on frightened civilians. “You’re safe. You’re in hospital.”

“I don’t- what- how, there was no… what-”

“Steve came back,” Rhodey said quickly, jaw clenched, smile gone from his face as he curled a hand gently over Tony’s chest, the weight soothing him. “He came back from whatever stupid trip he decided to take, and he must’ve seen you had gone and then rushed off after you. I don’t know. I only came in yesterday, JARVIS gave me the lowdown.”

Tony looked up at him in disbelief, and Rhodey’s hand tightened a fraction in promise. “It’s the truth, Tony. This isn’t a dream. Drugs have worked their way from your system by now, you’re clean. They were… it was heavy stuff, but you’ll be okay. I swear. You’re safe now, buddy. You’re safe.”

“What…” Tony’s lips moved silently, a million questions on the tip of his tongue. “What did he do to me?”

Rhodey’s face stiffened, and he blinked a few times before looking away. “Nothing serious, according to Doctors,” he told him gently, “you didn’t… he didn’t rape you. But he threw you ‘round a bit- got a pretty severe concussion, and there’s some damage to your wrists from the bonds. Stitches on your cheek, shoulder and forehead. There was… apparently you were subjected to some emotion-stimulating drug things? Made you more perceptible to suggestion- chemical hypnosis, I guess. You still didn’t do what he wanted though, you stubborn bastard.” Rhodey barked out a short laugh, and for a moment the lines on his forehead lifted, but that was all it was. A moment. “You should have told me this was happening, Tones,” he finished sadly. “I could’ve helped find the bastard.”

Tony looked away, flashing back to the mental image of Steve, punching the life from Daniel’s beaten body. “Guess there’s no need any more,” he muttered. “Steve took care of it.”

Rhodey looked at him for a second, before cocking his head. “No he didn’t. He couldn’t find anyone in the warehouse when he got there. There’s still an international search going on for him.”

This time it was Tony’s turn to look confused. “But- no, I saw him…” Steve had killed Daniel. Tony had watched Steve kill Daniel with his own bare hands. “Daniel’s dead. I promise.”
“Tony, we searched the whole warehouse,” Rhodey said softly, “there were no signs of a struggle, or a fight of any kind. I think… you weren’t in a good state when Steve got to you, it’s possible you just imagined that happening. I could imagine it was a pretty comforting thought to think of.”

Tony blinked up at him, biting his lip. His head still hurt. It was… possible, that he’d just imagined that. But it had felt so real. Steve had confirmed it in the van, before Tony had conked out.

How much was real, and how much was imagination?

“I need to see him,” Tony said, looking to Rhodey pleadingly, “I need- where is he? Steve? Can I-”

“He’s gone,” and Tony had no idea how strongly those words would be able to affect them until he felt the two syllables lodge somewhere inside his throat, choking off the air supply. “He’s not at the hospital anyway- back in his apartment, I think. We told him to leave. You… you kept getting pretty distressed, when you saw him. We didn’t want to make you worse.”

Tony blinked, and then frowned up at Rhodey. “You told him to leave?”

He watched Rhodey sigh, then nod once. “Tony, you just… you’d see him, and then you’d go into a panic, apologising and shaking and stuff, it wasn’t healthy for you to be around him. Not in this state. What did he do to you, that made you so upset?” Rhodey looked grim, and his fingers squeezed slightly around Tony’s own. “Because I don’t care that he saved you, not if he managed to hurt you to that extent in the first place.”

Tony shrugged, looking away. “He realized, I guess.”

“What did he realize, Tony?”

“Who I really am.”

Rhodey stared at him, and then he shook his head somewhat incredulously, a small smile on his face. “If who you really are is so damn awful, then why’d he try so hard to save you?”

Tony didn’t know. Tony didn’t understand any of it, not really. It was all still too blurred. He’d thought that Steve really had killed him… it had been so clear.

But Rhodey had said there was no body. No evidence. No nothing. Tony couldn’t remember what was real and what was fake any more. He needed to see Steve. As soon as he could.

If Steve even wanted to see him, that was.

“Pepper’s inbound,” Rhodey cut into his thoughts, and Tony huffed, “and she’s probably going to be very annoyed at you. Just a warning. There may be tears. And light punching.”

“I’m already fucking crippled.”

“Tough shit. Should’ve through it through before you scared Pepper like that, huh?” Rhodey laughed again, and it sounded a little brittle in his mouth, but Tony was just damned happy to hear his voice. It had been too long. He hadn’t even thought he’d ever see Rhodey again, period. And wasn’t that a terrifying thought?

“It’s gonna be okay, Tony,” Rhodey’s voice went soft at the edges, and Tony realised the anxiety must have shown on his face. “Whatever… whatever happened here, it’s gonna get fixed. We’ll find Daniel, for real this time. Rogers- well, Rogers is going to work out his own shit, and I’ve told him to come back when you’re better. He doesn’t have to if you don’t want him th-”
“I do,” Tony said, nodding profusely, even though it hurt, “I- I- yeah. Do you think… do you think he will?” His voice was pathetically quiet, and he was still too headspun on drugs to care about it.

Rhodey was silent for a moment, but then he shut his eyes and palmed a hand across his face, before smiling weakly.

“By the look on his face when he brought you in? Buddy, I don’t think he’s ever going to leave you again.”

Over the next two weeks, he managed to work through three therapists, four nurses, two doctors and on one rather high-strung situation, a surgeon (there’d been a slight altercation at a vending machine).

So sue him, but he fucking hated hospitals. They made him antsy and confrontational, and after the first week of being there, he was pretty much bouncing off the walls to get out. It was boring. It was depressing. And it left him with far, far too much time with his own thoughts to be even remotely comfortable about.

‘How are you feeling, Mr Stark?’ The therapists would ask him in their weird gentle voices, ‘would you like to talk about anything?’

They all thought he was damaged or something. Like a few stabwounds and a concussion was the worst shit he’d ever gone through in his pretty little life. He’d been in fucking boarding school for christ’s sake, and after that his whole damn life had just been a series of messy accidents and lucky escapes.

This was nothing.

This was just some freak, like any other freak, who had gone and taken it too far. What had he been expecting, to just pass through life untouched? Come on, this had practically been written in the stars. This was probably what he deserved.

He could still feel the cold press of metal around his wrists if he thought too hard, and the sensation of his skin crawling lingered a little too viscerally if he didn’t shut it down fast, but it was fine. It was over. It was done.

He needed to get out of this fucking hospital, ASAP.

The days passed so slowly it was painful. Rhodey and Pep came in and entertained him when they could, but after a while Rhodey was called back, and after some back-and-forth bickering between them, Tony managed to persuade the idiot to just go back and do his job. He knew Rhodey was missing out on some important stuff in order to waste time babying Tony, and as much as he missed the guy, that was the last thing he wanted Rhodey to have to do. He ushered his best friend out with promises that he’d be fine, that he’d look after himself, and he would keep himself rested, and eventually it managed to do the trick.

Of course, two days afterward, and he was arguing with the doctors about his release date.

They kept telling him stupid things like ‘no’, as if that would actually stop him, and honestly, it
was beginning to grate on his nerves. No matter how many times Pepper glared at him from the visitor’s chair, there was absolutely nothing on heaven or Earth that was going to stop him from leaving that damn building by the end of the week. He had shit to do. He had a life to live.

And Steve had said…

Well. Tony no longer what exactly it was that had been said. Rhodey had told him one thing. Steve another, and his own brain had said something else altogether. Basically, it was all a big mess in his head, and the sooner he could find a bottle of something strong and then try cut out all the warring voices inside his mind, the better. He was sick of this shit already. He could barely even remember Steve being there at all, now. For all he knew, it could well have been some stupid hallucination. He had definitely been convinced of that at the start.

With a small grunt, he looked over to the corner of the room, where the dark jacket they’d brought him in in lay, waiting on the windowsill. Tony hadn’t let them take it out of the room for cleaning or anything. That… that had been his only anchor. The only real, conclusive proof that Steve had even been there at all.

He needed to get out of the hospital. Rhodey had said that Steve would call him when he did.

Two (tremendously long, disgusting, boring) days later, and his wish came true. Mostly through stubborn force and sheer assholery toward the poor medical staff, granted, but still. Never say Tony Stark didn’t get what he wanted in the end. And he couldn’t really say the doctors put up a huge fight in the end- they were happy to see the back of him, in all honesty.

Yeah. Not exactly a model patient, whatever.

With a small bag of his things packed away, he shuffled out of the hospital through the back doors and called a cab. After everything, he couldn’t help but feel as if all of this was sort of anticlimactic. Get kidnapped, nearly die, hospitalized, and then- catch a cab back to your tower, all alone, like nothing had ever happened? God, not even Pepper was here- too caught up her work. Not that it was her fault; he hadn’t exactly let anyone know he’d be leaving so prematurely, after all- she would probably have stabbed him with the back of her earring or something if she’d found out.

But yeah. It just… felt weird. That was all.

He wondered whether Jones really was still out there. Whether Tony had really just imagined it, whether the slimy bastard had slipped through the cracks again. But something in his mind just instinctively denied it. He didn’t know why, and he didn’t know whether his prediction held any weight at all, but he just knew, with an intense confidence, that Daniel Arlington-Jones was dead. Steve had made sure of that.

The phone in his hand had been silent for the past twenty minutes since he’d gotten out, and right now he was on the cab-ride home, just waiting. For what, he wasn’t sure. Rhodey had said Steve would call. That he’d talk to Tony, once he was out. And really, it was… it was stupid, for Tony to wait like this, phone in hand, as if he was some sort of desperate teenager.

Steve had left him, and he hadn’t even said why. Tony shouldn’t still- he shouldn’t still need him in the way that he did.

But screw it, he fucking did. Yeah, it was pathetic, it was ridiculous, but God, Tony was fucking
scared, alright? He was scared and he was overthinking and hurt by what Steve had told him, and he just wanted an explanation. If Steve didn’t want him, then Tony … well, it was going to hurt like nothing he had ever experienced before, but he would deal with it. Probably. He would just like a goddamned reason, other than ‘you suck and you’re a monster’, you know? It really was the bare minimum you’d expect in a fucking br-

The phone rang.

It turned out he wasn’t as prepared as he thought he was, because he ended up just staring at it for a moment, face blank. Of course, it didn’t last long- he was a genius, after all.

“Hello?” He pressed the phone up to his ear hurriedly and shut his eyes, noticing the slight waver in his own voice.

All he could hear was the sound of quiet breathing down the line for a few seconds, but then there was a staticky sigh as Steve let out a breath. “Tony,” he huffed, the word tinted with relief, “you’re… you’re out, then.”

Tony didn’t ask how he knew- no doubt Rhodey had passed it on when Tony had let him know last night or something. God- just hearing his voice, even after the short amount of time he’d been gone, was like a song in his ears. Steve’s voice was so lovely- even though now it sounded slightly too hoarse, too scratchy.

“Yeah,” was all he replied with, suddenly unsure of what to say.

There was a long silence, as both of them struggled to find words. Tony had a hundred things he wanted to discuss, all of them vying for top spot in his head, and it seemed Steve was finding himself in much the same position.

“I need to see you,” Steve blurted in the end, and he sounded somewhat desperate on the other end of the line. “Please. I know… I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve anything from you, I know, but I haven’t seen you since the first night and I just- I need to explain. Everything. I promise, Tony, you need to hear this.”

Steve’s breathing was coming in short, and he seemed panicked. Tony wasn’t sure how to deal with that. In all the time he’d known the man, Steve had never sounded like that. Well- discounting the appearance he’d made on his Rescuing-Tony Mission, which he wasn’t entirely sure was even real or just a figment of his imagination.

“Can I come by the tower?” Steve asked again, when Tony’s silence grew too long. “Please, Tony. Just… five minutes. That’s all. I promise I won’t bother you after-”

“I’m gonna be back there in two minutes,” Tony cut in, swallowing down the urge to start asking his questions right then and there. Not over the phone. “Door will be open for you.” He paused for a minute, before he forced the instinctive apology back down his throat and then just shut his mouth with a clack. Steve didn’t want to hear that- not if he still felt the way he had the last time they’d properly spoken.

Steve breathed in sharply, and Tony had the feeling he was nodding down the line. “Thank you,” he said, his voice so honest it hurt.

Tony pressed the phone up against his ear so tightly it stung, and his teeth clacked as the muscles in his jaw clenched. ‘Why did you say it’ he wanted to ask, ‘why did you leave, and then why did you come back so quickly.’
Steve cut the call.

Tony closed his eyes against the silence, and watched his Tower loom up ahead of him.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

was feeling kinda low today, so i thought I'd post the next chapter early and bask in
the - uh- feedback, from it to try cheer me up. Enjoy! ;)

The wait was excruciating.

He sat in the living room. The workshop. The floor. The rooftop. He fiddled with his tablet so it
looked like he wasn’t just counting down every second of time as it passed him by.

He hadn’t asked when Steve would come. Just that the door was open for him when he did.

God, he felt pathetic. Waiting around for Steve like some needy puppy, desperate for praise, for
confirmation. This wasn’t what he did usually- when people hurt him, that was it. He cut them off,
cut them out, snip snip snip, gone. He didn’t wait around. He certainly didn’t beg.

But he had the awful feeling that he probably would, as soon as Steve walked through that door.

Maybe Steve didn’t deserve that from him, and maybe it was fucked up, but… but Steve Rogers
was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Period. And hell, Steve was right about Tony-
he was a monster, he was something horrible, but he was trying so hard not to be. He was trying
for Steve. That had to be worth something.

His hands fiddled anxiously across the screen of his tablet, and he saw nothing of the contents it
displayed for him. Not even numbers were calming him down.

He couldn’t ruin this, he couldn’t, he couldn’t-

“Sir, may I suggest taking a few deep breaths,” JARVIS informed him gently, and Tony palmed a
hand across his face and smiled weakly. “Your heart rate is increasing, and I feel that we should
probably at least attempt to keep you stable until you have healed further .”

Tony followed the orders and sucked in a few calming breaths. “You’re not allowed to butt in until
I give you explicit permission, alright J?” He asked, raising an eyebrow.

If JARVIS could’ve huffed, he would’ve. “Very well, Sir. Although I truly cannot be to blame if
the elevator brakes suddenly stop working halfway down his ride.”

Tony just rolled his eyes. For a string of ones and zeroes, JARVIS sure could hold a grudge. “Long
as you don’t kill him, I could probably live with that,” he answered, before standing up. “Alright, I
am going to go make some coffee.”

“I feel like that may be counterproductive to our endeavour of decreasing your heart rate, sir-”

“Nonsense, Caffeine works opposite on me, you know this, J.”

“I do not think that is scientifically accurate.”
“Uhh, who’s the scientist out of us two?”

“Who, if I dare ask, is the one with every medical research paper and document on the effects of caffeine upon a human body at their metaphorical fingertips?”

Tony pouted, and then stuck his finger up at one of the cameras. JARVIS made a staticky noise that signified his sigh, but Tony just laughed, some of the tension dissipating from his shoulders. He knew JARVIS wouldn’t ever let him down.

Making the coffee helped to ground him a little. He breathed in the soothing smell of caffeine as it filtered through his nose, felt the cool edges of his mug underneath his fingers as he slid it from the highest shelf (Steve had put it there to be funny, but Tony didn’t think about that). Fuck whatever JARVIS told him, he certainly felt calmer now.

They were going to work through this. Whatever it was. Him and Steve, they were going to sort it out.

Leaning back against the counter and pulling the cup to his lips, he shut his eyes and tried to ignore the aching in his shoulder. He should really take his meds. He wasn’t going to, mind you, but he should. Everything still hurt if he moved too fast, and the doctors said he wasn’t allowed to operate heavy machinery for at least another two weeks, but that was absolutely not happening. He was a busy man. Obie was already getting back on him about the stupid fucking Jericho, and at the time he’d called up, Tony had barely even been able to fucking stand. Talk about a slave driver.

“Sir, Mr. Rogers has just pulled up outside Stark Tower,” JARVIS informed him quietly, and Tony’s hands paused their trip to is mouth, the nerves wracking up immediately.

“Fuck,” he said, just as he felt his phone begin to ring in his pocket. Thinking it was Steve, he pulled it out hurriedly— but noted with a small frown that it wasn’t his contact that showed up on the screen.

“Bruce?” he asked curiously. “I’m kind of busy right now buddy-”

“Are you okay?” His friend cut into Tony’s words hurriedly, his voice panicked and deeply concerned, “Tony, I heard about the kidnapping. Are you… God, what the hell happened? How come I never even knew about this? Christ, Tony, if you’d have told me then I would’ve been able to to call some people, help search for the guy, look after you! Was he hanging around whilst I was making you go off to MIT?” There was a gasp of horror, and then “is that the reason someone fired those shots that day? Oh my God-”

Sensing an imminent anxiety attack from his friend, Tony shot a quick look to the elevator and then turned back, making sounds of affirmation down the line. “I’m okay, Bruce, I promise. I was… in a bit of a tight situation, yeah, but Steve found me. I’m good.”

“Steve?” Bruce asked, slightly breathlessly, “who the fuck is Steve?”

Tony frowned. “Did I not tell you about him? He’s my new Bodyguard. Well, I say new- I hired him about six months ago now, but, yeah. He got me out.”

Tony expected more words. A barrage of them, knowing Bruce and the levels his anxiety usually got to. Instead, there was nothing. Down the line, it didn’t even sound as if Bruce was breathing at all.

“Bruce?” Tony asked, blinking a few times. “Bruce, are y-”
“Tell me his name,” Bruce asked, voice quiet.

Thoroughly confused by this point, Tony pulled a face. “Whose name? Bruce, look, I really… Steve’s coming up like, imminently, and I promise, I’m fine, I just need to call you back-”

“What’s his last name?”

The quiet, numb way in which Bruce said it threw Tony for a loop, and he paused for a second. “Rogers? Steve Rogers.”

There was a dull thudding down the line, and Tony stood straighter, half inclined to get JARVIS to call an ambulance. What the hell was going on? “Bruce? Bruce, what the fuck-”

“Get out,” Bruce said quickly, fear in his words as he stumbled over them. “Tony, oh my god, get out of there, right now.”

“What?”

“Steve Rogers is not the man you think he is, I promise you,” Bruce was sounding almost hysterical now, and there was wind rushing through the speaker as if he was running. “Tony, Tony listen to me. Listen to me, please, he is not your bodyguard, he is not your friend, he has been sent in there to kill you. Stop him from coming in, get a gun, do not let him near y-”

“Bruce, I do not know what the hell is going on here, but you need to calm down, okay? You’re-you’re having some sort of breakdown, I know you’ve been stressed lately but this isn’t-”

“I’M NOT HAVING A BREAKDOWN TONY, STEVE ROGERS IS THE CAPTAIN, CAPTAIN OF THE AVENGERS!” Bruce yelled, something crashing down his end of the line. “Tony…. Tony, I am begging you. Think about it. About him. He was sent in six months ago after a call that you were dealing under the table to terrorists. He thinks you’re a murderer, Tony, and he’s just waiting for the right time to-”

“You’re out of your goddamn mind,” Tony said dumbly, shaking his head. “Absolutely out of your fucking-”

“There’s a scar, just under his jaw, isn’t there?” Bruce rushed out rapidly, his breath coming in short and sharp and terrified. “He’s got blonde hair, blue eyes-”

“-Anyone could know that-”

“-A friend called Natasha and another called Bucky, and they both help run some children’s home down in Brooklyn? Tony, I am not making this up. I swear to you. I swear it, right now, go get a fucking gun and do not let him near you!”

Tony stared blankly at the wall. He wasn’t sure whether or not he was breathing any more.

It wasn’t possible.

Bruce was just… he was wrong.

Come on? Really?

He was still talking down the line, into Tony’s ear. Things that Bruce shouldn’t know. Where Steve lived. How he took his coffee. How he could take out a man without even moving anything more than one hand.
Tony remembered the trail of bodies that had littered the corridor as Steve had pulled him out of that warehouse.

No.

He couldn’t breathe. His airways had just closed off. His brain was going at a million miles an hour, rushing and rushing, putting together pieces that just hadn’t made any sense before.

No.

It just wasn’t possible. Not Steve. Steve would never…. He wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t just lie, all this time. Steve wasn’t capable of that.

“-of there, Tony, get out! Are you listening to me? Please, I am begging you, if he is coming for you and he decides that today is the fucking day, you do not stand a chance! Tony I am begging you-”

He cut the call, and the phone fell out of his hands at the same time as the mug of coffee did.

This wasn’t possible. It just wasn’t. There had to be some other explanation, a trick, a hoax; maybe he was still drugged up and unconscious- and wasn’t it a fucking joke, that he’d genuinely rather take that option than… than whatever this was.

A lie. It was a lie, Steve obviously wasn’t-

‘I’m not the man you think I am, Tony’

He gasped for air like a man drowning in a room with no water. His hands were shaking in front of him. He wondered, absently, whether he might actually throw up. It sure felt like he was going to.

And of course, just at that moment, he heard the elevator doors sliding open behind him. Perfect timing, as always.

Steve was here, now, and could well have come for Tony’s life.
He walked in and saw Tony was already waiting for him in the kitchen.

A smile came halfway to forming on his face, before he saw the remnants of spilt coffee and a phone lying at Tony’s feet, and Steve realized immediately that something was wrong. The look on Tony’s face was nothing like Steve had ever seen before.

“Tony?” He asked, stepping forward with his hands out, “are you okay? What h-”

“Stay away from me,” Tony said quietly, so quietly Steve barely even heard- but his feet stopped as soon as Tony said the words, and he snapped his mouth shut. His gut was telling him that there was something very wrong here. Tony’s face was deathly pale, his eyes were wide, terrified. He was…

Scared.

In that moment, Steve knew.

Their time was up.

His hands went up, gentle and slow as his heart shattered into a million separate pieces. “Tony,” he whispered gently, “Tony, what’s wrong-”

He jumped in surprise as Tony suddenly lurched forward, hand going under the coffee-table and scrabbling around for a moment before pulling out one of the guns Tony kept strapped to various points in the house. Steve had always used to think he was just paranoid for that- but now he understood why. Steve would’ve done the same.

“Is it true?” Tony pointed the gun at him, his hand shaking wildly. “Are you… were you sent to kill me?”

It felt like the floor dropped out of the room.

He wasn’t sure how Tony had found out. He couldn’t really say he gave a damn, either. All he knew was that he’d been going up to the tower with the data chip in his hand that Stane had given to him, with the full intention of trying to tell Tony in the most calm and balanced atmosphere possible, what had truly happened- but now Tony knew before he could set everything up, before he could even begin to explain, and he was pointing a gun at Steve and he had absolutely no idea what to do-

“WERE YOU SENT TO KILL ME, STEVE?” Tony screamed, shaking the gun wildly and backing up until his back hit the wall. He was starting to cry. Steve could see it in his eyes, and he was paralysed, absolutely frozen; there was nothing he could say or do, no way he could possibly try
and keep Tony calm now, the secret was out, and it had come out at the worst possible time.

He could not do a single thing, other than nod his head, just once.

Tony took a moment of pause, and then he choked on a noise in his throat, a hand going up to cover his mouth in horror. He looked at Steve, his eyes so expressive, so betrayed and hurt and terrified, and the look alone is what brought Steve to his knees, hands up over his head as he tried to think of something, anything to say.

“I’m sorry,” was the only pathetic, useless thing he managed to come out with. His eyes felt hot, and his heart heavier than it had ever been before in his life. Tony was looking at him as if he was going to just go ahead and kill him, right then and there. Steve wanted to be sick. He thought he might physically vomit. “Tony, I’m—”

“How…” Tony said hoarsely, “all this time? It was just... a lie?” His voice was tiny, weak, and Steve gaped in horror, shaking his head wildly.

“No,” he swore viciously, “no, Tony, I promise you. I promise, the way I felt was not a lie, the way I feel is nothing even close to a—”

“I don’t believe you,” Tony shook his head, tears dripping off his cheeks- he could barely even speak, and Steve could see he was holding together by a thread. It was like a blunt instrument, pulling straight through his heart. Steve could feel it tearing him apart from the inside out, and he wanted to scream. Cry. He wondered if he should beg. He would. It was funny, to think about what he’d been reduced to. The man who never quit, the Captain, the man who would break his damn neck to keep it held up high- he’d beg for Tony. Without question.

“I love you,” Steve told him, and he couldn’t see through his own silent tears now- different to Tony’s barely contained sobs; deeper and heavier. This was no hot pain that brought shortened breaths and panicked wailing, because Steve had seen it coming. This was just pure, unadulterated guilt and grief. Loss and pain. It was not hot. It was freezing cold, and it pulled his heart down into his shoes. “I have loved you for so long. Tony, you have to believe me. I came in because I thought I was doing the world a favour.” He shook his head wildly, wanting to wipe the tears from his eyes but unwilling to move his hands from behind his head in case Tony got scared. “Tony, I was wrong. I was so, so wrong. It wasn’t you who was dealing the weapons- I worked that out from a few months in. No one with a heart like yours would ever do something like that. I believed that. I really did. But then at the charity gala, when I got angry and I told you to leave- it was because I got given some new information.”

Tony was breathing so heavily Steve thought he might faint. He desperately wished to comfort him, but he knew that was impossible. A single movement might trigger a complete meltdown- and Jesus, the thought that it was Steve who had made that happen to him- he couldn’t bear to think about it.

“Just take a few deep breaths, Tony—”

“Don’t fucking tell me what to do!” Tony screamed at him in fury, and Steve shut his mouth and put his head down instantly. He swallowed, and it caught in his throat. Everything just felt ruined inside of him.

He’d taken something good in this world, and he’d systematically destroyed it. He’d torn Tony apart.

“All this time,” Tony whispered, “all this time, while I was putting my life in your hands, while I
was lying next to you, while you fucked me and you told me you loved me-"

“It wasn’t a lie, Tony, please-”

“You fucking bastard,” Tony shook his head slowly, “you fucking...” he slumped against the wall, utterly despondent. “You tricked me. All this time, you just wanted to get close. Suppose it’d strengthen the fuck out of your alibi, huh?”

“Tony, no, I swear-”

“SHUT UP!” Tony screamed again, one hand fisting so hard into his hair that Steve worried Tony might rip it out entirely. “I believed in you! I trusted you! You were the only one… I thought you were different-” Tony sobbed, curling into himself and pressing his hands into his face.

Steve wished Tony would just shoot him. It’d be less painful than seeing Tony like this.

But then again- death was too easy, really. Steve deserved this pain. He had caused this- now he had to deal with the consequences.

His hands were wet, and he realised that he was fisting them behind his head so hard that his nails were drawing blood. He didn’t stop. “I know that you will never be able to forgive me,” he said, misery and shame and soul-destroying guilt swarming under his chest like a burning-hot blade. “I understand. But Tony… I am begging you, listen to me when I say that I came because there are bad people in your company, and they are doing terrible things with your weapons. At the charity gala, Obadiah Stane, he gave me a USB stick, it had all the data that I thought meant it was you behind it, and I- I freaked out because I was so fucking heartbroken that the person I loved more than anyone was the same person I’d stopped believing in months ago. Please, Tony, you have to-”

“I should just fucking shoot you,” Tony said bitterly, fingers flexing on the gun. “You’re a fucking criminal. You kill people for money. You- you were going to kill me.”

Seve didn’t even bother arguing any more. It was true. That was the most disgusting part about all of it- Tony wasn’t even wrong. In the beginning, that’s exactly what Steve had been going to do.

He bent his head. “I understand if you do,” he said softly, feeling another tear roll off his cheek and onto the floor. “I won’t blame you. None of this… none of it was your fault, Tony.”

Tony didn’t say anything- all Steve heard was the rapid breathing and quiet crying. Steve knew that Tony wouldn’t actually shoot him. Hurt though he was, angry and in pain and grieving, he didn’t have the heart for murder. Especially not someone he cared for. Or- Steve supposed- used to care for.

“Why did you come back for me?” Tony asked quietly after a while. “Why didn’t you just leave me with him?”

God, just the words brought a shiver out of Steve. He bit down on a spasm of revulsion, and just looked up at Tony through his watery eyes. “It was my own foolishness that led you into his path. I promised you I’d protect you, and I failed. When I found out the truth and realised the mistake I’d made, I swore to myself that I would fix it, no matter what the cost was.”

“You killed him, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“And then you covered up the body. They found the whole place empty. You killed the guards
outside the corridor too.”

“I did.”

“What are they? Where’s Daniel gonna show up?”

Steve shrugged dully. “Some river in the middle of nowhere in a few weeks.”

Tony didn’t say anything. Steve watched him try to breathe properly, and ultimately fail. The aching, desperate desire to comfort him was almost overwhelming. But he was the source of the pain. He would only make things worse.

Tony watched him, eyes so very hurt for a moment, before he suddenly closed himself off. Straightening up, he wiped the tears from his face and sniffed, swallowing back the rest of the pain. Steve watched him slowly build back up every wall that he had ever let down around him, and with each movement another piece of Steve was irreparably destroyed.

This was his fault. Tony had been happy, and Steve had ruined him. Steve had ruined himself along the way, too.

“Get out,” Tony said in the end, and Steve was thrown back to the last time he’d heard those words, spoken from his own mouth. Is this how Tony had felt? “Get out, and never, ever come near me again, do you understand? I will call the police on you so fucking fast. So fucking fast. Whatever… whatever this is, it’s done. It never really was, I suppose,” Tony chuckled humorlessly, and Steve couldn’t take his eyes off him as he watched the face that had been so expressive, so open, begin to close off into nothing once more. “If I see your face again, Rogers, I will land you in a prison cell faster than it takes to fire a bullet.”

Steve bit his lip and shut his eyes against the desire to just plead, to try and get Tony to understand. There was no use in it now. It had been a far-fetched hope to begin with, but this result was worse, because Steve hadn’t even been the one to tell Tony himself. He’d found out through some other means.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again, because what else would he ever be able to say? “I’m sorry for not telling you sooner. I’m sorry for hurting you. I’m… for everything. You never deserved this.”

Tony wasn’t looking at him any more. He was staring at a spot above Steve’s head, his eyes glassy as he shrugged in blank indifference. “My own fault, I guess,” he said, voice robotic. “Should’ve remembered: No one ever just wants me for me, do they? Not even when they say otherwise. Always an ulterior motive. Always.”

Steve shook his head hopelessly as Tony waved the gun at him and gestured to the elevator. “Go, Rogers,” he said quietly, “and do not come back. Ever.”

He didn’t have a choice. There was nothing he could hope to do, now.

With a gentle nod, he slowly got to his feet. Tony watched him like a hawk through every step, like Steve might suddenly decide to make some sort of last-ditch attempt to hurt him. He slowly put his hands down from his head; the USB stick still nestled in his fist. Despite everything that told him not to, Steve looked into Tony’s eyes, chin raised. “Please look at it, Tony,” he said gently, shaking fingers placing it onto the counter. “You will save a lot of lives.”

“Go.” Was all Tony repeated, not even glancing down to it. Steve prayed that Tony wouldn’t just destroy it in his anger. He had to hope that at least a tiny, miniscule part of him still would listen to Steve’s words.
He took a step backward, even though his heart screamed for him to stay, to try and fix what he’d just broken. It wasn’t what Tony wanted. There were a hundred thousand things he wanted to tell him. That he loved him, no matter what Tony might think. That this was hurting him more than anything else he’d ever gone through in his life. That he had never set out to have this happen. He’d never wanted to fall for his target- but loving Tony was just inevitable. Impossible not to do, really.

“Goodbye,” is what he said instead.

Tony didn’t respond.

Steve left.

A week passed.

Then two.

Then three.

Four.

Five.

_____Steve_____
He mostly just stayed in his room. Sometimes he worked the cafe, but back in the kitchens where no one could talk to him. Mrs. D asked about him a few times. He got Bucky to tell her he was ill.

Wake up, eat breakfast, try not to think about it, fail- rinse and repeat.

That was how things went, now.

He kept updated on the news. Tony had had Obadiah arrested two weeks after Steve had been kicked out, and for that, he was grateful. It may have utterly ruined both him and Tony in the process, but hey- at least the objective had been achieved. Those innocent people were no longer going to be subjected to Tony’s weapons, and there were whispers going around that Tony was planning on completely shutting down the weapons division of his company.

Steve hoped he did. Tony needed some good in his life, after everything that he had just lost.

Rhodey was back, apparently. Offering Tony support. Steve was grateful for him too; God knows what Tony might be doing if he’d been alone. Steve didn’t even want to think about it. He’d been the one to call Colonel Rhodes in the first place- telling him that he had to come back as soon as he could, because Tony was going to need him. And Rhodes was a good friend. He’d shouted obscenities at Steve and then hung up, and the next day he’d been at Tony’s tower.

Now, most of the news was just being recycled. He turned off the TV and looked at the blank screen for a few seconds before standing and turning to the window. New York’s grimy walls stared back at him, silhouetted by his own reflection. He gazed at himself for a few moments. At the beard he hadn’t bothered to shave off. The hair that needed cutting. The pallor of his face and the way his cheekbones stuck out a little too much.

He felt like an echo.

Tony had hired a new bodyguard. Hogan, that’s what he was called. He wasn’t competent enough, not for Tony. Not in the way that Steve had been. He wouldn’t do a good enough job at protecting him sufficiently. But that just made him chuckle a little to himself, because Steve had been the old bodyguard, and look at how badly he’d hurt Tony.

Anyone would have been better than him.

With the smallest exhale, he turned on his heel and wandered to the door, pulling it open and stepping out. Miss Aber glared at him from across the corridor, but he ignored it in the same way he had been for the past month or so. Instead, he turned his collar up against the wind and shoved
his hands inside his pockets, stepping into the streets with his head down. The days were beginning to carry a bite of Autumn with them. The skies were cloudier, and it had been raining frequently over the past two weeks. Steve felt the sprinkle of it in his hair as he walked.

The store was only two minutes away, and he got there quickly, pulling out enough money to buy what he wanted and then leave as fast as he’d come. He took the detour through the park though, and leaned against the wall whilst he lit up. Bucky had the weirdest sixth sense when it came to Steve smoking, and he knew he’d get it in the ass if he got caught by his friend.

The smoke curled around his mouth, and it didn’t help, but nothing did, so what did it matter? It was a bad habit, and he’d fallen back on it. So fucking what. And anyway, the nicotine rush felt good for half a second, which was more than what he usually got. He’d take it over nothing.

His friends told him to not let it consume him. To allow himself to grieve, but also let himself move on. Keep going. Tony didn’t die, they told him, like that made everything okay. It hurt him, but he will heal.

Steve didn’t think so. Tony had lost almost everything. He’d lost his friends, he’d lost a father-figure, he’d had his trust shattered. It was all because of Steve. And even if the outcome with the weapons was good…

It didn’t feel like it. Steve didn’t feel glad, or happy, or anything. He just felt numb.

In his pocket, he held onto his phone, debating with himself for a few seconds before caving in the way he always did and pulling it out. He rarely used it any more, except for this. Probably a little self destructive, but he’d made his peace with that a long time ago. This was his life. These were the choices he’d made.

Now, he lived with them.

“Steve, ’s’me. Tony. I- I know you don’ w’na talk right now an’… tha’s ok. But can you jus’… can you jus’ call me when you- you- you calmed down, maybe? I don’t… I jus’ wanna talk. You don’ have to do… I jus’ need to talk. Please. Please, Steve.”

“Steve, please….. Just tell me what I did wrong….just tell me….please, please, Steve, I don’t know-”

“I love you, I love you, I’m sorry… please, please don’t leave me, everyone leaves, please, not you too-”

One by one, he replayed the voicemails Tony had left on his phone all those weeks ago. He needed the pain- in a twisted sort of way, he felt addicted to it. It was the only thing that kept him close to Tony any more, even in the most awful of ways. Every time, it clawed a deeper mark into his heart- the way Tony’s voice shook, the way he begged- it never got easier with time. But he still did it. He wasn’t sure why. Maybe because he felt as if he deserved it.

The cigarette in between his fingers had burned out, so he stepped on it hastily and pulled out another one with shaking hands. He went through them quickly, too quick to really savor them, but whatever.
“Thought I’d find you here.”

Steve didn’t turn, but he shut his eyes. Clint’s voice carried from behind him, and Steve took a moment to curse himself for not checking whether or not he was being tailed when he’d set off. Stupid stupid stupid.

Clint looked at the phone in Steve’s hand. His eyes were deeply sad. “You know that listening to that shit is pretty much the same as cutting, right? It’s a form of self harm. You’re doing that to hurt yourself.”

“No I’m not,” Steve responded on autopilot, his voice dull. They’d told him something along those lines multiple times. He was tired of hearing it.

“If we didn’t think you’d do something stupid, we’d have destroyed that phone weeks ago-”

“Don’t you dare-”

Clint raised his hands. “Like I said, we’re not gonna. We just…” He sighed, leaning against the same wall as Steve. He had a purple beanie on, and it looked ridiculous, and only Clint would ever have been able to pull it off. “Look, Steve-”

“Please don’t,” he cut in before Clint could say anything that was the same as what Bucky, Peggy, Natasha, everyone had already told him. “Please don’t try and tell me that it was the right thing to do, or that he is going to heal. It doesn’t matter. It matters that for however long it takes for him to do that, the reason he is hurting- the reason he will hurt for more time to come - is because of me. I did that to him. No one else. I can’t shift blame or say it wasn’t my fault.”

“Steve, you were doing your job,” Clint told him quietly, head bowed, “you were doing what you thought would save everyone. And it did. Stane’s locked up. The weapons division is under strict monitoring from Tony himself- he’s only got one single weapons demo and that’s some missile test in the middle east that’s more for show than anything. Steve, you did what you set out to do, and you did it without killing anyone who didn’t deserve it.” Clint swallowed and shook his head, before resting it against the brick wall.

Steve didn’t say anything. He took a long drag, and felt the burn of smoke down his throat. “Has Bruce gotten back in touch with Nat yet?” He asked instead of going back to what they had been discussing.

Clint shook his head and rubbed absently at his jaw, where the remains of the scar Bruce had given him still remained. “Nope. But Natasha thinks he will. She explained to him in a very long-winded voicemail everything that had happened. He’ll calm down soon.”

As it turned out, it had been Bruce who’d let it all slip in the end. Steve didn’t blame him- but he’d had no idea that he was one of Tony’s closest friends, either. What were the chances, right? It was almost like this had been destined to burn from the very beginning. But yeah- it had just so happened that Tony had been on the phone, seconds before Steve himself had walked in, and bruce had worked it all out. Just a few minutes faster, Steve thought to himself miserably, and I could have prevented it.

Bruce had come around to their apartment pretty swiftly after that, and given them all... A piece of his mind, shall we say. The man had stormed in, barely even twenty minutes after Steve had stumbled home, desolate and lost and fresh out of Stark Tower. He’d hammered on the door with fists so violent the hinges had groaned, and his voice yelled out Steve’s name like a spit-out curse. Bucky and the others hadn’t wanted to let him in. Steve had opened up anyway.
Before he’d even pulled the door back an inch, Bruce had hurled his shoulder into the panelling and sent Steve stumbling back. He’d landed on the floor, and Bruce had followed like a tank of pure rage, eyes glittering a deadly darkness within them as he’d lifted his fists and advanced in wordless fury. “You fucking MONSTER-”

Clint had got in the way before Bruce could land his hit on Steve, but had taken the brunt of the impact himself. Hence the scar. It had taken all five other people in the room to pull him away from Steve, who hadn’t moved to get up from the floor. “You LIED TO HIM! YOU WERE… HE TRUSTED YOU!”

Bucky had shouted something at him, and Natasha shoved him into the wall, her face pinched as she attempted to explain what had happened. Steve had barely even heard what was being said, apart from the vague sensations of yelling and tensions bubbling over the room. It had been like a drawn-out nightmare to him. He didn’t even know how long it had lasted- just knew that some point later, there had been hands pulling him gently back up, and the screaming had stopped. When he looked around, Bruce had left- a mark in the wall where his fist had punched through being the only that remained of his presence. They hadn’t heard of him since.

He looked over to Clint and shrugged, standing on the end of his finished cigarette. Clint watched him do it, a small eyebrow raised, but he didn’t say anything. Barton was good at picking his battles- all part of his survival instinct. “I don’t think Bruce will be talking to me any time soon, either way,” he said.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right,” Clint chuckled humorlessly, “God, we all made a real fuckup of this, didn’t we?”

Steve closed his eyes and fought back the urge to just scream. He was so short in patience, these days. And when they said things like that- when they tried to imply that this mess was some sort of team effort or something, he just felt the need to punch something stupidly hard.

But instead of doing any of that, he looked out into the park, where the ducks sat on the pond and the children played amongst the grass, excited smiles on their careless faces. They looked so happy and at rest. The world was easy for them. It was beautiful parks and blue skies and cold rain and everything that still felt fresh and vibrant in life. Steve was so, so worn in contrast.

He just wished he could go back.

Without another word, he pushed himself off the wall and walked away from it all.

Clint didn’t follow him, that time.

He washed the dishes rhythmically, letting the action take over his thoughts. Peggy was out in the front, serving up all the coffees, but everyone else had gone out on a job, so Steve was the only one manning the kitchens. It was okay though- he liked to be here. Cooking and cleaning helped keep him centred. And anyway, the cafe was quiet today, so it wasn’t exactly stressing him out.

He nodded his head absently to the sounds of the radio, wiping suds off his shirt and then moving to check the next order. He noted that the fridge was getting low on milk, too, which probably required stocking up-

“Steve,” Peggy burst through the swinging doors, looking a little harried as she held her phone in her hands. “Steve, apparently there’s a situation.”

His blood turned cold immediately, and he straightened his back, hand flexing toward the gun he strapped under his jacket. “What,” he asked, “is everyone-”

“They’re fine, and they can probably handle it on their own, but I’m gonna go out anyway, just in case they need some backup,” she informed him, pocketing the phone and then beginning to tie up her hair into a messy ponytail. She gave him a short pause, and then raised a questioning eyebrow. “You going to join, or do you want to stay and man the cafe?” She asked him, her voice going gentler.

He blinked once, heart sinking. “How... how badly do they need me?” He asked.

Peggy smiled. “They’ll undoubtedly survive without your presence. Just thought that you might want to get some fresh air, take your mind off things. Bit of catharsis, taking out the ringleader of a narcotics gang, you know?”

She was grinning at him in hope, but he just shook his head and turned away, jaw clenched. “I don’t do that any more, Peggy,” he said coldly, “you know that.” He could barely even look at a gun any more without feeling it all come flooding right back. He didn’t want to, either. This is what had brought him into this mess in the first place.

After Tony, he didn’t… he no longer wanted anything to do with that life. At all. Not again.

Her face fell, but she nodded. “Okay, that’s fine, darling. I understand. You just... watch the customers whilst I’m gone, alright?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, “I will. Stay safe, Peggy.”

“Of course I will, dummy,” she winked at him before pulling off her apron and turning away, slipping out of the door, a hand waving behind her. He watched her go with a heavy chest, before turning back to the fridge and frowning at it. They really should get some milk soon.
He’d go later. It would probably do him good to go on an outing. Bucky kept telling him to get out a bit more.

Picking up the sandwich he’d made, he pushed through the doors and then looked to the table number before wandering over there, trying to mold his face into something more approachable. Natasha had told him the beard and dark under-eye circles made him like like a homeless serial killer, and he did kind of have to agree there. But homeless serial killers weren’t great for business, so he smoothed out his brow and gave the customer his biggest smile as he set down the-

“Fucking hell, Steven, have you been in a crack den for the last month?”

His head jerked up and he looked at Mrs. D as she stared up at him with barely contained horror on her face. He’d forgotten today was the day she came in— to be honest, he wasn’t really sure what day it was at all. “Uh-”

“Sit down boy, now,” she told him sternly, a hand going around his bicep and tugging him down. There was no room for argument in her voice, even though he tried.

“Dorothy, I really have to work-”

“The only other person in here is that old sod in the corner, and I’m pretty sure he’s either napping or dead, so either way he’s not a problem for you.” She stabbed a finger into his chest and kept him in place, before leaning forward and grabbing her plate. Her nails were bright green today, and she handed him the ceramic with an air of finality. “Eat.”

He looked down at the sandwich in confusion. “That’s your job,” he told her weakly.

“No, my job was to pay for it, which I have, and I decide what I do with it. Now put something in those gaunt beardy cheeks of yours, or I’m going to do something you will regret.” She eyed him dangerously, and he just sighed, shaking his head.

“Dorothy, seriously-”

With an irritated huff, she snatched up her book from the table and then shoved her glasses up her nose. “‘The woman screamed for him; for her dominant, sexy master as his mighty, swollen length almost tore her frail body in h-”

“Jesus fucking christ, alright, okay, stop, I’ll eat!” He spasmed in embarrassment and then clamped one hand over his ear as the other quickly picked up the sandwich. Anything to get that to stop. There was something inherently wrong with hearing that come out of a 4-foot old lady’s mouth. “See?” He said through a mouthful of bread, “see, no need for any more!”

Narrowing her eyes, she slowly put down the book and then sat back, pressing her fingertips together as she watched him. He chewed slowly, looking away from her in discomfort. He felt like she was analysing him, and he couldn’t really say he enjoyed it.

“So which bastard broke your heart, then?” She said in the end, making him choke on the piece of sandwich that had been working its way down his throat. “Which son of a bitch did this to you, Steven?”

He froze, and then looked down. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he said gruffly.

“Yeah, well just because you don’t want to talk about it doesn’t mean you don’t need to. And darling, do you really think I’m going to judge? I once went through a phase where I wore socks with sandals. Unironically.” She raised an eyebrow and patted him on the shoulder gently. “Who
do I need to cut, darling?”

That made him laugh, at least, and he bowed his head sadly. For a moment, the weight almost crushed him. “If you’re looking for the bad guy in all this, it isn’t him,” he told her softly, shaking his head in tragic amusement.

She didn’t say anything for a moment, but then she sighed, leaning forward. “Oh. Well that explains why you look like such shit then, I suppose.”

He shot her a wry smile. “Yeah?”

“You’re far more upset by the fact that you hurt him than you would have been if he’d hurt you. I know what you’re like, Steven. I feel like you don’t handle guilt very well.”

He looked at her, and then nodded with a small laugh. “I suppose not,” he told her simply. He wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Are you sorry about what you did?” She asked slowly, looking at him with her piercing green eyes.

He looked back, and nodded. “More than I could ever explain.”

“Is it fixable?”

The answer was a punch in the face, a knife in the gut. “No. I don’t- I don’t think so.”

She nodded once, lips pursed. “Then all you can do is work on being a better person than you were, can’t you?” She told him simply. “Staying stagnant and grieving like this isn’t going to change what happened. It isn’t going to right your wrong. But you can try in other ways. You can change how you were and become better. Grow from your mistakes. Believe me, Steven, I’ve made plenty of them myself. No human will ever be perfect. No one will always do the right thing.” She eyed him over the rim of her asymmetrical glasses. “Did you mean well by what you did? Or was it a selfish act?”

He thought about it. He… he had wanted to do the right thing. That had been what this had all been about. He really had just wanted to help. “I meant well,” he said quietly.

She nodded. “Then you’re not as far from the light as you thought. Look- if you say you fucked up, then I believe you.Going from the fact I haven’t seen hide nor hair of you in a month, and when I do, you show up looking like some broken-hearted heroin junkie, I’m gonna take a shot in the dark and say that it’s really affected you.” Her hand curled lightly around his wrist, her frail fingers tight. “But darling, just because you hit rock bottom doesn’t mean you have to stay there.”

He looked over to her, swallowing down the grief for a moment as he shrugged helplessly. “What am I supposed to do about it, though?” He asked. “I can’t go back. I can’t make him hurt less.”

“You can try. And if that fails, you can focus on trying to better yourself for others, you know? It feels like it now, but it’s not the end of the world. There will come a point in your life where you’ll be able to make it right. Where the scales will balance. Try finding it, Steve. I do hate to see you miserable like this.”

He smiled weakly over to her and nodded slightly, wiping a hand over his face. God, he felt tired. A bone-deep weariness that had been hanging with him ever since he’d first pushed Tony away. Mrs. D was right in that sense- it was eating away at him, slowly, systematically. He worried whether he’d wake up one day and just be a completely different person to who he’d used to be.
“Yeah. Yeah… I know.”

She patted him on the shoulder. “And if worst comes to worst, I can hook you up with a guy who does the most fabulously relaxing pot.”

— Tony —

The kids were restless.

They hadn’t been as focused all night, and barely any of them were even listening when Tony tried to get them to do what he asked. He’d already had to send Avri into timeout, and he felt as if soon he’d end up putting half the class there. Across the room, Kayaa was staring at her half-finished drawing woefully, snuggled up into the corner with her knees hitched high into her chest and her tiny little hands clasped around them. She had barely spoken the entire time.

With a small moment of trepidation, he sighed, putting down the little bits he’d been fiddling with and jumping onto a chair, clapping his hands loudly. “Alright kids, be quiet! Come here and sit down, I wanna talk.”

They looked over to him dubiously, muttering in low voices to one another as they put down whatever they were working on and wandering over. He balled up a piece of paper and threw it at Avri’s head. The girl turned sullenly, and he ushered her over. “You too, trouble.”

They looked over to him dubiously, muttering in low voices to one another as they put down whatever they were working on and wandering over. He balled up a piece of paper and threw it at Avri’s head. The girl turned sullenly, and he ushered her over. “You too, trouble.”

When they’d all assembled around him, some sitting on the floor whilst others chose to stand, arms folded, eyes downcast, as if they were expecting to get yelled out. Luckily for them, Tony wasn’t that sort of guy, and instead he jumped back off the chair and then slumped in it, staring at them all for a few seconds. “Okay- spill,” he said in the end, gesturing around the room, “what’s wrong with you guys? Have I offended you accidentally or something? Come on, no one is having fun when we’re all just getting annoyed. Tell me what the problem is.”

They were all silent, a few shuffling nervously on their feet. Tony waited a few seconds, before encouraging: “Well? Come on guys, work with me here.”

Amazingly, the voice he heard in the end didn’t come from the sullen Avri or loudmouthed Alya, but the back of the room, with a voice that was quiet and wobbly and a body that could barely even be seen among the crowds, save for the very top of her head.

“Where’d Mr. Steve go?” Kayaa asked quietly, as the crowds parted and allowed her to look Tony straight in the face with those huge, soulful eyes.

And Tony suddenly felt the room shrink down a hundred times smaller than what it just had been.
He froze, acutely aware of the dozens of impressionable kids around him as he tried to compose himself. Blinking a few times and clearing the haze from his mind, he sucked in a sharp breath and felt his face harden. *Don’t think about him. Don’t think about him. Don’t think about him.* He’d been repeating that over and over in his head like a mantra for over a month, between bottles of whiskey and late-night drives around the edges of the Eastern coast. He’d promised himself to follow his own instruction as he’d gripped his phone between his hands, cleaned out his room of anything that belonged to *him*, wiped the tears off his face in the early hours of some morning where it had all just gotten too much.

He was handling it. Barely. Not really. But either way, he was not about to have all his hard work and carefully constructed emotional walls destroyed by a group of kids.

“He moved away,” Tony lied bluntly, whilst some of the kids gasped and looked at each other in dismay. He hated their sadness. Steve had only been a danger to them. *(He didn’t believe that. No matter how hard he tried, he never quite managed to convince himself of it.)*

Across the room, little Kayaa looked heartbroken. “He didn’t- he didn’t even come to say goodbye?” She asked quietly, her voice wobbling. “But we’d… he hadn’t finished helping me with my-”

“It doesn’t matter, Kayaa!” He snapped, knowing that Kayaa of all people didn’t deserve the sharpness there, but unable to help himself, “whatever he had been doing before, he’s gone now. It’s not… he’s not coming back. That’s the only thing I want to hear on the matter, okay?”

“But-”

“**NO, Kayaa!**” He slashed a hand through the air rapidly, but even across the room he did not fail to miss the way the little girl flinched back. Immediately, he felt hot guilt pool in his gut, and his face fell as he tried to calm down. Fuck, he should have just kept his goddamn mouth shut. “Hey. Hey, okay, I’m sorry, I know he…I know that he was special to you guys, and I’m really sorry, but he had- business stuff, elsewhere. I told you he was… he was my bodyguard, right?” Fuck, just tasting the lie on his tongue felt like he was getting punched in the face. “Well he- uh, he found a new person to look after. So he had to go, really quick. He, uh… he told me to tell you that he’s really sorry he’s got to go, and he loves all you guys, but he just- he’s really far away now, and it’s not-”

He watched as Kayaa’s face crumbled, and she turned away from them all quickly, running for the door. Tony stood up automatically, and then upon realizing that he probably wouldn’t be the most welcome of people to talk with her just then, he looked to one of the older kids. He felt so fucking tired. “Can one of you-”

“Yeah, sure, I’ve got it,” Lennon said, nodding his head slowly and then walking after her. Tony watched them go, knowing he was probably going to get shit from security about just letting the kids wander through the fucking library, but whatever. Lennon would bring her back, Tony trusted the kid.

He rubbed his face and shut his eyes, trying to hold back the sudden hotness behind them. He hated having to lie to the kids. He hated every single fucking part of this. It hurt. More than anything else in the whole world, and Tony didn’t want to have to explain it. But it was what the kids deserved. Adults rarely told these guys anything they wanted to know, and Tony had promised he would be different.
Jesus Christ, though, it had to be Steve they had all got upset about.

He steeled himself and then took a breath. “Steve cared about you very much,” he told them, whilst the rest of his treacherous mind supplied ‘it was just me he didn’t care for’. “And he was really sad to leave you all behind. I’m sorry guys. Looks like it’s just me from now on.”

He watched all for a moment, before smiling weakly and then waving them all away. “Okay, get back to work, and please, try focus. I’m really… I’m not feeling so great today guys, so I’d appreciate if you could just- y’know, just keep focused, alright?” It was weak and he knew it; the kids wouldn’t listen to that, not if they were already feeling rowdy.

But when they broke away, their voices were quieter. They weren’t messing around once they’d settled down. Tony appreciated it.

There was a poke against his shoulder and he looked down, spotting Benny at his side. His face was frowning, and he had his arms folded. Tony raised an eyebrow and prepared for a fight- Benny was known for being pretty argumentative, and Tony had had to stop him from getting into a few scuffles before.

“I don’t like Steve,” was what the kids said in the end, and Tony raised his eyebrows in surprise. “He’s a jerk.”

That was a total lie. Benny had adored Steve when he’d been around; Steve was big and strong and able to defend himself, and it had been everything a kid with a family like Benny’s had dreamed of being. “What makes you say that?” Tony asked in curiosity.

Benny shot him a dry look, and then huffed. “That story might’ve been able to convince some of the younger kids, but I’m not an idiot. Steve was a jerk to you, and so Steve is a jerk and I don’t like him any more. Simple.”

“Yeah, me neither,” and Tony spun around, spotting Alya on his other side, staring up at him steadily through her overgrown bangs. “I think that Steve is a fuckhead.”

Tony gasped, trying to hold back a surprised little laugh. “Alya, you’re too young to say words like that! Steve is not a…” he paused, beforeshruggingand then leaning down a little, “okay- maybe he is a fuckhead, but we don’t say it out loud, okay? You have a few years before you get to start using language like that, miss.”

She giggled mischievously and looked at Benny, who was also grinning- and it hurt, of course it hurt, just thinking about any of it still made him feel sick to the stomach- but hey, at least he had a bunch of twelve-year-olds on his side, right? Better than nothing, he guessed.

They were too young to develop ulterior motives, anyway. For now, they just liked him because he was funny.

Shaking his head, he guided them back to their workstations. “Get to work, squirts,” he told them fondly, “you’ve only got thirty more minutes until you’re collected, and I want these finished, alright?”

They rolled their eyes, scurrying away. “Yes Tony,” they said in unison, before hurrying off and whispering to one another. Tony smiled tiredly at them, before moving his gaze across the room, trying to spot the little girl he was looking for. It only took a moment: Kayaa was sat in her usual corner, away from everyone else, staring at the opposite wall. Her little painting was untouched. Lennon caught Tony’s eye across the room and shrugged helplessly, but Tony waved him off in
assurance. It wasn’t his job to try and comfort her— that was supposed to be Tony’s role.

He sat, cross-legged, next to her, and looked down at her drawing. She glanced at him, but then looked back down. “So,” he said softly, “how’s young Picasso doing?”

She shrugged. “I dunno how to finish my drawing,” she said sadly, “Mr. Steve had been helping me. I can’t do it on my own.”

Tony frowned. “Nonsense. He was just the lackey, the muscle— the real brains behind the plan was you, Kay.”

All he heard was a little sigh, and his heart sunk. She’d been doing so well lately, coming out of her shell and talking to everyone, interacting more. Tony hated seeing her like this now.

“I’m gonna miss him,” she said, sniffing a little. “I thought he was really good.”

Tony wanted to try and tell her that she’d be okay— that Steve wasn’t all that great, and there were way better things to think about than him. But he wouldn’t have been able to force enough enthusiasm into his words. They were just lies.

So instead, he leaned his head against the wall and pursed his lips, feeling the familiar sense of loneliness as it enveloped him. An old friend.

“Yeah,” he said softly, “me too.”

Objectively, Tony knew that Steve had been trying to do the right thing.

It had taken him weeks to even touch the USB that he’d left behind on the counter that day. He could barely even look at it, or anything that reminded him of Steve, for that matter. Which had basically been the whole tower. Steve’s presence lingered in his life, even after the man himself had long since gone.

Rhodey had been happy to help with that matter, however. Tony hadn’t… he hadn’t told him what Steve really was. Who he really was. But Rhodey could see, just from the way at which Tony had looked at him, that whatever Steve had done had warranted his full and wholesome anger, and so he’d set to work with immediately clearing away all evidence of Steve ever living in the tower. Still consumed with fury and hard-edged grief at the time, Tony had told him to destroy it all— burn it or bin it or whatever— but later that night, when all of it had been gathered into a pile, Tony just… couldn’t. Steve’s art— his clothes, his comb— Tony wasn’t strong enough to destroy it.

“Put it in the spare room,” he’d said to Rhodey softly, staring at the mound with dead eyes. Rhodey
had argued, but Tony didn’t listen to any of it, and eventually his best friend had complied.

Tony had left the USB though. Kept it on his countertop, until two weeks later, when that tiny, treacherous voice in his head had whispered ‘what if’.

Thank God for that, or he’d never have worked out what sort of scum Obadiah had been doing behind his back.

It was almost funny, how many times he’d managed to get stabbed in the back in the space of a few months. Steve. Obadiah. Bruce, as he’d realized later, had been in on it too. Almost all the ones he’d trusted in one fell swoop, he’d thought a little hysterically.

He’d drank a lot that night. Too much. But the hospital had signed a non-disclosure agreement, and no one else knew but him and Pepper.

She told him to try therapy. She thought it had been about Obadiah betraying him, and Steve leaving in such a quick concession that had hurt him. Tony didn’t tell her the truth- he didn’t say that as it turned out, Steve had walked into Tony’s life with a bullet that had Tony’s name carved into it. And that he’d been paid by Obadiah himself. God, that was so many levels of fucked up, it was almost impossible to even believe.

But it worked out. It made sense.

Anyway- yeah. Tony knew, deep down, that Steve… he hadn’t just done it for the money. He hadn’t done it because he was heartless. It had taken him a while to see that; at the time immediately after, he had been far too stricken with grief to even humour a thought like that. But if Steve had really not cared, he would have just killed Tony. He would never have let Tony walk away with the knowledge of Steve’s true identity. Tony… he could ruin Steve’s life, right here and now. Steve had put the fate of his entire life in Tony’s hands and walked away, knowing exactly what Tony could and should do with it.

He’d been close. In the aftermath, he’d been close to just calling the cops. It had felt like a good revenge. Karma, for every way in which Steve had destroyed him.

He couldn’t decide how much of it was real, and how much was fake, and that was what he couldn’t deal with. Had Steve loved him as he’d said, or had it all been a part of the plan? He promised he did, back when he’d admitted to everything, but how much of that was just trying to appease Tony?

What was the truth, and what was the lie? Tony didn’t know any more. He supposed he’d never known- too busy getting played the fool.

It hurt. It hurt like nothing else he’d ever felt before.

God, he’d loved Steve. So much. And it had all just been… it had been a setup. A trick. He’d been playing into Steve’s hands the whole damned time. That’s what Obie had told him, too, when Tony had had him arrested.

“God, you were so smitten with him,” Obie had spat, struggling from the grip of the FBI Agent as they’d dragged him from Stark Tower and pulled him into a van down on the street. “There he was, wrapping you around his little fucking finger, getting everything he wanted from you, and you just sat there and stared at him adoringly like his personal little bitch-”

That had been all Obadiah was able to say before they’d bundled him into the back and slammed the doors. Tony had stared, impassive, as they’d driven off with the man he’d considered the
closest thing he had to family. The one who had raised him, brought him into the industry and led him through his difficult times, all whilst meticulously setting up for his downfall.

He drank a lot that night, too.

Press loved it, of course. Tony Stark, back to his old ways- drinking and fucking and partying all night, fallen completely off the wagon, and where was that bodyguard he’d been spending so much time with, huh? They asked- of course they asked, and so Tony had hired a new one. He called himself Happy. He was nice. He’d do the job.

He wasn’t Steve. He wouldn’t ever be Steve. But then again, no one could.

Steve Rogers hadn’t even been real.

“Tony, man, come on, you gotta get outta the workshop.”

He didn’t bother looking up. He knew Rhodey’s unimpressed tones when he heard them. Instead, he just tried to concentrate a little deeper on the palladium core of the damn missile, because really, if it turned a second out of sync with the rest of the engine then the whole thing was going to go bang way before it was supposed t-

Someone thwacked him over the back of the head, and he blinked in confusion. “Uh, intruder alert,” he called out to JARVIS, who merely apologised wholly unhelpfully.

Rhodey stared down at him, arms folded. He was still wearing his military uniform. “I told you to leave the pit two days ago,” he said.

Tony raised a finger. “A) We do not call it the pit. It is my shop, not some cesspool. And B) I actually did. I went and got coffee like, thirteen hours ago. I’m good.”

“No, Tony, that is not what normal humans would ever define as ‘good-’”

“Do I look like a normal human to you?” He gestured vaguely to himself and his surroundings and then shot Rhodey an insolent glare. “I’m Tony Stark. I’m building a missile in my basement. None of this is ‘normal human’ behaviour-”

“You’re damn right it’s not,” Rhodey growled, before tugging Tony’s swivelly chair away from the desk and pushing him into the centre of the room. “Tony, when was the last time you slept in a proper bed?”
‘Two months, three days ago’ Tony didn’t say. “Uhh, sleeping on the couch is still sleeping.”

Rhodey stared at him for a moment, and then shut his eyes. Tony knew what was coming. Of course he did, it’s what Pepper had told him four days ago, it’s what Bruce kept calling him and leaving voicemails to him about, it’s what Tony himself knew but had no hope of controlling.

“Well, you can’t… you can’t keep letting him affect your life like this.”

He froze up and turned away, jaw clenched. He hated when Rhodey got serious with him. That was no fun for anyone. “I’m not,” he snapped firmly, “look at me- I’m building the damn Jericho, I’m almost finished, I’ve got everything set for the demo- after that, I’m making big changes. You know I am, Rhodey. I have in no way stopped or changed the way I’ve been living just because he’s...” he cleared his throat, strengthening his voice before finishing, “he’s gone.”

Rhodey shot him a look that was both disbelieving and sympathetic. “Tony, he managed to drive you of your own room and he’s not even here-”

“He didn’t” Tony growled, standing up suddenly and turning away, marching over to where he kept his toolbox. Wrench, that’s what he’d been looking for. A wrench. “I just... I’ve been busy. Didn’t have time.”

There was a hand on his shoulder, and it squeezed gently as Tony shuffled around and gave his toolbox his unwavering attention. He didn’t look at Rhodey. He refused.

“Tony,” Rhodey said his name gently, and God, he’d known Tony for so long by this point, of course Tony wasn’t going to be able to bullshit him. “It’s okay, y’know. You’re allowed to grieve. You’re allowed to... well, to not be okay.”

Tony froze up, blinking rapidly a few times. He almost shrugged Rhodey off. He almost disregarded it.

But he didn’t quite make it that far. Instead, he just breathed in sharply and looked up, to his best friend who’d stayed, despite everything. Despite everyone else leaving. “It still smells like him, Rhodey,” he whispered softly, feeling the sharp pain under his ribcage, “it still... I don’t know how to make it go away.”

He got pulled in to Rhodey’s chest faster than it could have taken him to blink, and Tony clutched at him weakly, burying his head into the familiar neck. Fuck, how many times had they done this for one another over the years? He’d lost count. Rhodey... Rhodey was his constant. He was so, so glad that hadn’t changed.

“We could set fire to the whole room and start again, if you wanna,” Rhodey offered, and Tony laughed wetly, rubbing at his eyes.

“I feel like that might be a safety hazard, platypus.”

“I once caught you soldering naked.”

Tony opened his mouth, ready to defend himself, but unfortunately there was not much he could say to deny it. The man had a point. “Still gonna veto the idea though, buddy. I do quite like my room.”

Rhodey waited for him to break away, before raising an eyebrow. “Yeah, well, your taste is remarkably shitty if you ask me.”
Tony chuckled. “If I told you to go find Steve and bust a cap in his ass, right now-”

“Without a moment’s hesitation,” Rhoey answered immediately, face blank and serious as Tony just smiled at him and then grabbed him once more, swaying them both around the room.

“Oh, Honeybear,” He swooned dramatically, “I don’t even need anyone else in my life. You are the only man for me.”

Rhodey spun them both effortlessly in the direction of the exit, and Tony knew exactly what he was doing, but unfortunately he knew that when James Rhodes set his mind on something, that task got completed. “Damn right I am,” he said firmly, “and the only man in your life is telling you to go to bed, now, please.”

Tony stilled. “Rhodey-”

“Please,” his best friend told him imploringly, a flash of anger on Tony’s behalf clouding his face, “don’t let that bastard ruin you any more than he already has. Just… just sleep there. It’s your room. Not his.”

Tony stared at Rhodey for a moment, before huffing. “All he did was break up with me,” he said, because that was all he’d ever told Rhodey, so seriously, the amount of rage he seemed to be harbouring seemed unjustified.

But Rhodey just glared at him. “Tony, you think I don’t know when you’re hiding shit from me? He didn’t just break up with you. He hurt you, badly. I don’t know why, and if you don’t wanna tell me then that’s fine too, but please, let me be furious. Let me hate him, ’cause I’m gonna anyway, but I’d rather do it with your blessing.”

Tony looked down, smiling softly, “You have my unwavering support, sweetpea,” he said mock-seriously, before sighing and breaking away. “I suppose I’ll get to bed, then.”

Rhodey smiled and ruffled his hair. Together, they wandered back up the stairs and onto the main floor, until Tony was in the corridor that led off to the master bedroom and Rhodey was by his side, his support obvious even in the silence.

They looked to one another, and then Tony just smiled, a little wobbly around the edges. “Night, Rhodey,” he said quietly, giving his friend a gentle jostle with their shoulders before stuffing his hands into his pockets and then wandering down the hall.

Rhodey smiled back. “Get a good night’s sleep, and then tomorrow we’re taking you out and finding you a hot rebound, okay?”

That, at least, made Tony laugh. Never thought he’d have heard the day when Rhodey would be encouraging his slutty behaviour, but here they were. “Oh, I’ve already done that ten times over, Rhodey, you know me,” he said with a salacious wink that held no real depth to it, and Rhodey just rolled his eyes, completely aware of that fact.

Tony really loved Rhodey.

“Sleep well,” was the last thing his best friend said, before quietly stepping into the elevator and then watching Tony whilst the doors closed behind him. After that, Tony was on his own again, three feet away from the door of what had used to be his and Steve’s shared room.

He really hated how much it still hurt to think about that.
Shutting his eyes, he leaned his head briefly against the cool wood of the door before pushing it open and marching inside, looking nowhere but his bed. Not that there was any evidence of Steve’s presence on any of the surfaces; Rhodey had made sure of that- but the last time Tony had looked, there had, and the emptiness might just hurt more.

He undressed quickly, didn’t bother showering, and fell into the sheets. He turned his back to the left side of the bed. He curled up and didn’t think about any of it.

He slept.

Then he woke, and it was still dark, and he was curled firmly into the left side, his head buried into Steve’s old pillow, and he thought about all of it.

He shut his eyes, fingers tracing the lines of the pillow in front of him, inches from where Steve’s face should have been, had been, back when everything had been fine. When it had all been perfect and untainted.

“Why did you do it,” Tony whispered, just a single breath of painful air into an empty room.

He could still smell Steve on the pillow. On the sheets. Could still see him in the mugs that were put on shelves too high and the scratch of paint on the wall from where Tony’s belt had scuffed as Steve had pressed him against it-

He sat up jerkily and pretty much ran from the room, checking the clock as he left.

Two hours. Better than nothing, he figured.
He got nominated for an award for something or another—probably another attempt to soft him up and get him to stop talking about shutting down weapons manufacturing, as if that bit of fancy glass was gonna sway him or something.

He went to the casino instead, and he put on his best shirt, and a reporter implied he was okay with murder and he brushed it off the way he alway did, because he was tired of arguing, tired of saying that he was already done, he was going to stop, he just needed to arrange everything as professionally as he could without thousands of people losing their fucking jobs. Then she went home with him and they fucked, and it was the first time anyone else had been in his bed since Steve. He wondered whether she might get the smell of him off her bed.

She didn’t.

He left her in his bed and went down to work again.

God, some days Tony just missed him so much.

Something was wrong.

What made him say that, you wonder?

Well. Maybe it was the fact that the car in the front of the convoy had just been blown sky high, and Tony couldn’t see anything through the windshield but smoke.
For a second, he just stared, the glass of whiskey sploshing around the tumbler that was still in his hand as everyone began to yell and shout around him. What the fuck? What had… what the hell was going on? Everything had been fine a moment ago, he’d secured the deal on the Jericho, and they were supposed to be heading home. There was no reason for this, it didn’t make-

Something behind him blew, then, and the young soldier next to him pushed his head down, screaming something in his ear that he couldn’t even hear through the buzzing.

Oh, fuck.

He watched the soldiers mobilize immediately, picking up their guns and then storming out of the car. Through his head, a million thoughts were whirring- mostly ‘Rhodey, where’s Rhodey, what happened to Rhodey, is he okay-’

Two of the soldiers died a second after leaving the vehicle. Tony grabbed for the third, desperate, panicked, way over his head, but the young man just told him to stay down and then scrambled out of the door, gun gripped between shaking fingers, and Tony watched him run for a few seconds before there was a smattering of gunfire, and then what remained of the window turned red.

Tony stared, numb as the buzzing in his ears got progressively louder. He was beyond panic, now. Survival instinct was the only thing that remained intact- his heart was going nuts under his ribcage, and he could feel the adrenaline pump through his system.

The scared part of him wanted to stay in the car, curl up and hide from it all. The fighter told him that if he did that, he was almost certainly going to die.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck- ‘You have to breathe, when you face danger’ Steve spoke quietly into his ear, an echo of words he’d said months ago when they’d been in the gym, practising for Daniel’s next attack. ‘Fill your lungs once, then twice, then three times, and compose yourself. You can’t fight when you’re too busy trying not to black out’.

Tony rasped heavily, and shut his eyes. Calm. Calm. Calm. ‘Get out, run for cover as fast as you can,’ Steve told him firmly, ‘you saw everything out of the window. There are some boulders on the right side of the road. That’s your best bet, sweetheart, come on.’

He blinked his way through the dust that had filled the car, and looked over through the window where the rocks were scattered. Never mind that it was Steve coming to him in his imagination during his moment of complete panic, it didn’t stop him from being right.

Without another second, he pushed against the door and then fell from the car, ducking immediately under the spray of gunfire. He looked up before moving, trying desperately to get a view on Rhodey somewhere, proof that he was okay-

‘GO, TONY!’ Steve screamed at him, and if Tony squinted, it almost looked as if he was there, standing over him, eyes panicked as he tried to hurry Tony along. Almost like Tony’s brain was trying to make it seem as if Steve cared. At least in Tony’s imagination he did, anyway.

But that really was the last of his fucking worries right then, wasn’t it?

He dived forward, stumbled toward the rocks and then threw himself behind one of them until his back was pressed against the scratching surface. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. He couldn’t see any
gunners in front of him, which meant he had at least a few seconds of cover. Pulling out his phone rapidly, he looked for a number that he could feasibly call. 911 wouldn’t fucking work in the Afghan desert, God, what was he thinking-

There was a sudden thump somewhere to his right, and he looked up.

Saw his name stamped over the face of a missile.

*Oh God*, he thought dumbly, and then everything exploded around him.

...Fuck, what the-

Fuck had just… where…

Shit, there was- there was blood- his chest-

He ripped open his shirt, and it was red, and there were shards of metal sticking out where his heart was, and Steve was crouched over him but not really, and, and, and-

Nothing.

——

It hurt.

It hurt so badly, worse than anything he’d ever experienced. Worse than waking up with Daniel, worse than that time when he’d been ten and he’d broken his collarbone when a piece of metal in Howard’s office had fallen into him.

He opened his eyes blurrily and looked down, and there were… oh, God, there were someone’s hands in his chest-

He screamed and he screamed and he screamed.
He woke up in a cave, and there was a car battery hooked up to an electromagnet stuffed into his chest where his sternum had used to be, and a man called Yinsen said they were now in the hands of a terrorist cell that called themselves The Ten Rings, and Tony realized with a terribly heavy feeling in the bottom of his gut that he was a long, long way from home.
He heard the news whilst he was in the children’s home.

Peter was sitting on his lap, playing absently with his latest design whilst Steve had watched and tried to participate when he could. Around him, the rest of the kids were milling around, some of them scrolling aimlessly through their phones, other older ones keeping half an eye on the news that was being played on the TV screen. It was like any other evening Steve spent there. Bucky was sat at his side, carefully braiding Rhea’s hair with an intense concentration Steve rarely saw off the field.

“Your beard is weird,” Peter decided to say out of nowhere, and Steve laughed a little, looking down at the kid with a small frown. “You’ve never had a beard before. It looks odd on your face.”

He rubbed a hand over his own face. “It doesn’t look that bad,” he told the little boy, “I’m just…” depressed, “-trying some new things out. Bucky thinks it’s cool.”

“Bucky does not think it’s cool,” his friend piped up next to him, and Steve shot out a hand to punch him sharply in the arm. Bucky growled, gesturing angrily to Rhea’s hair. “Hey, dude, watch the artwork!”

Steve’s mouth turned up and opened, ready to respond, but Peter’s voice beat him to it. “Hey, look, it’s Tony! He’s on the news!”

In automatic response to the other man’s name, Steve whipped his head around, turning to the TV and looking at what was in front of him. The banner running along the bottom was red and flashing, and there were grainy images of explosions in the frames as a woman spoke over, talking about ‘kidnapping’ and ‘Terrorists known as the Ten Rings-’

He had to admit, it took a moment for the words to actually sink in.

Peter said something. So did Bucky. Both of them sounded bad- panicked and concerned, and Peter
kept tugging at his hand, but Steve couldn’t tear his eyes away.

Last seen at his most recent weapons demonstration on the outskirts of the Afghan desert.

Missing, presumed dead.

“Steve, get out, now,” Bucky was in his face, yanking Peter out of his grip as the boy began to sniffle in fear, and then he got in the way of Steve’s view of the TV so he shoved him out of the way and stood up violently, but Bucky got right back again and gripped his shoulder tight enough to bruise. “Kids, Steve, there are kids. Do not freak out on them here, whatever you do. Come on, let’s go, right now.”

And without further ado, Bucky yanked him away, out of the door, and Steve kept his eyes on the screen until the last moment, Peter’s scared crying almost drowning out the noise entirely by that point. Steve stared at what was now the closed door, trying to make sense of the words he’d just heard.

“No,” he said softly, looking to Bucky, “no, that’s not-

“No,” Steve said more viciously, shaking his head sharply and then jerking forward, a hand reaching for the door. He wanted to watch more. He needed more evidence.

Bucky grabbed him around the torso and yanked him back sharply. “No, Steve, not there, not in front of Peter and the kids.”

Steve struggled for a few moments before realising that Bucky had a point. He couldn't do that to them. He had to… they shouldn’t have to see that. So instead, he sagged, boneless, against Bucky’s back, head bowed in disbelief as he muttered the same two words over and over:

“No, Tony, no, no, Tony, no-

Bucky pulled him back, guided him down the corridor, and before he knew it he was out in open air, blinking through the sunset as Bucky yanked the door of his car open and then pushed Steve into it. He went without a fight, staring through the windshield as Bucky slid quickly over the hood and then jumped into the driver’s seat, jamming the keys into ignition. There was a phone in his hand, and he was talking to someone. Probably Natasha, or whoever else might be home.

Tony. Tony was…gone. They were saying he was probably dead.

Ten Rings. Steve had heard of them. They’d been the ones Tony- or Stane- had been selling to. If their main supply had been cut off, no doubt they’d be looking for revenge. They’d be looking for Tony Stark’s life.

“You have to listen to me, Steve, okay, you have to focus up! We don’t know everything yet. That was just a preliminary report, the news has just broken. We’ll find out more. We will. We got contacts over there, right? We’ll use them, call ‘em up, see what they know. Steve, it’s gonna-” Bucky broke off, because he’d never been able to lie to Steve, not really. Instead, he just ran an anxious hand through his hair and bit his lip. “We’ll get to the bottom of this. We’ll find out what happened.”

He nodded, once, and then wordlessly pulled out his phone.
Bucky didn’t even try and stop him from listening to Tony’s voicemails that time.

“Hey, so I’m... at some bar. Not sure- not really sure which bar, but I wanted to... you know. ‘M’not too sure, actually. Jus’ wanted to check in, I guess. Can you, can you maybe call me? When you feel- when you’ve calmed down, maybe? I just, I want to... know. Even if you hate me, I think-I mean, I’d hope... I’d like to know why. Tha’s all. You know. Just. Just call me, Steve, please. I love you. Uh. Bye.”

He stared out of the window as all his friends spoke in heated tones around him. They’d looked through all the news reports. Natasha had gotten into the military databanks and was currently scouring for more info. Apparently there had been five convoys. Thirty men in total. Only eleven of them had made it out. They’d been taken by surprise, massacred with weapons they never should even have had access to. Tony’s weapons.

Most sources agreed: Tony Stark was missing, presumed dead.

It had been two and a half months, since Steve had last seen his face. Well- properly, at least. He still had pictures on his phone, still saw the news when Tony made it on there as he had been doing more frequently since Steve had gone. But still; it wasn’t the same as having Tony’s face contort and move in front of him, lit up in a smile or a scowl, always so expressive, a twitch of an eyebrow or a curl of a lip. Steve still remembered everything about him. They said the specific features were the first to go, when you lost someone, but Steve could see it all, still clear as day. The freckles that smattered across the bridge of his nose. The ridiculously long eyelashes. The small scar, just above his lip.

Steve wondered, absently, whether any of that was even left, or whether one of the bombs had just- God. No. He didn’t even dare think about it. He’d throw up again.

A hundred thoughts ran through his mind, rapid and disjointed and every last one of them skirting around the large, dark thought that maybe Tony just wasn’t coming back. Because that’s all it was, at that moment in time: A thought. No one knew for sure what had happened. Tony hadn’t been seen, and they hadn’t found a body. And until they had, Steve refused to believe it.

Tony was a fighter. He was going to be okay. He was.

It was with a vague sense of surprise that he realized he was no longer in the kitchen of their apartment, but instead marching through the sidewalk, shoving past people as he walked to an unknown destination. It was getting dark now; the last vestiges of sunlight dripping through the cracks in the buildings, and Steve had always found sunsets in Brooklyn to be something of a beauty, but now he didn’t even register it. His brain refused to listen to anything other than the memory of gunfire, of bombs, of Tony screaming. Steve knew the battlefield well. He’d been in the army. He’d served in Afghanistan for a time. The sweltering heat that blistered your skin and
the dryness of the air made it one of the most hostile environments Steve had ever been in. If Tony was there, alive, it wouldn’t be for long. Not without supplies. Not without defenses.

Someone yelled at him when he shouldered them into the wall, but he ignored them and kept walking, kept going wherever his feet had decided to take him. Did it matter? Did anything fucking matter?

Tony was… Tony was gone, and he was half a world away, and it was Steve’s fault and-

He lost momentum as suddenly as it had come, and sagged into the wall, hands over his face. Grief swallowed him whole, and he sunk to his knees with a desolate thud. It had been a quiet thing, before. Steve hadn’t thought he’d deserved the right to sob, not when it had been his fault in the first place, and so he’d limited himself to silent tears that were wiped hastily away in the shower and before he fell asleep.

But that had been when Tony had been gone, but still- still living. Still there; out of reach, but visible if he tried.

Now Steve had no idea. No idea whether Tony was even alive any more.

His face crumbled, and like a wave breaking inside of him, he cried and he cried and he cried.

_____Tony_____
the older man who was gathering the dice into his hands.

Yinsen looked down, smiling fondly. “I live in a small town called Gulmira,” he explained, voice tinted with affection, “it is actually a beautiful place- or it was. Before they came.”

*Before they came with my weapons and blew it all to bits,* Tony tagged on the end part in his head, but didn’t say it out loud. Too cowardly for that. Instead, he just swallowed it down and asked “you got a family?”

Again, Yinsen smiled, that soft little thing. “Yes,” he answered, nodding, “and I will see them when I leave here.” He paused, before lifting his head curiously. “And what about you, Stark? Do you have a family?”

The question was easy, but the answer hurt more than he’d expected. With a huff of air and a small twitch of his lip, he shook his head. “Nah,” he said casually, not thinking about the time, barely even a few months ago, when the answer may have been different.

Yinsen watched him, his face analytical. “So you’re a man who has everything, and nothing,” he spoke quietly.

*Everything that mattered left me anyway,* Tony wanted to argue, but what was the point? That was what everyone saw anyway. They thought he had everything he could want- money and power and fame and influence. That wasn’t everything to Tony, though- in fact, it was barely anything at all.

But the things he cared about didn’t stay. Not as a general rule.

He wasn’t built for families, anyway. It would be stupid. He couldn’t ask someone to try and settle down with him, not forever. And God, he’d undoubtedly be a terrible father. He had no idea what a good dad even looked like, so how the hell would he be able to do it? He wouldn’t put that on a kid, ever. He knew exactly what it felt like, and he might be an asshole, but he wasn’t evil.

There wasn’t much point in even humouring the idea anyway. Not any more. He wasn’t going to make it out of here.

_____

They wanted him to build the Jericho.

That’s what Yinsen had told him anyway, in translation from the men who were responsible for taking them.

Tony had said no, he refused, and then they'd drowned him until he was barely conscious before asking again.

He said no, and they did it again, and again, and again.

By the end of it, he wasn’t strong enough to stand on his own, his hands could barely even keep the car battery steady and he was pretty sure he was hallucinating again. He kept seeing Steve in
the corner of his eye. The guards threw him back in the room and said they’d come for him again tomorrow. Tony was just glad he wasn’t being drowned any more, even if they were only going to do it again the next day, and the next day, and the next. Yinsen towelled him off and checked the battery, and then guided him into bed, and for the rest of the night Tony coughed and hacked up the phantom drops of water from his lungs. The following morning was much the same, but ‘Tony wouldn’t. He wouldn’t say yes, he wasn’t going to give in— they’d stripped him of his dignity and his freedom and his safety, but there wouldn’t strip him of his free-will, no matter how hard they—

Someone hit him, and he slumped sideways, head knocking against the side of the trough they’d been waterboarding him in. He felt the blood mingle with the water on his forehead, and then his eyes rolled. Next time he came round, they were dragging him back out and asking again. The man had promised that Tony would be set free when the task was complete. Tony knew they were talking out their asses— the moment he became expendable, they’d kill him dead. He already knew too much. But Yinsen was there, and he was looking at Tony with something in his eyes that told him to just say yes, for both their sakes, so Tony held out a shaky hand and felt the other man shake firmly.

He wasn’t going to, not really. He wouldn’t ever. But he couldn’t keep going through… that, every day. He wasn’t strong enough.

Maybe in a week, they’d just kill him. Or maybe they really would set him free. But after seeing what he had— after truly setting eyes upon the amount of destruction he’d unwittingly caused, he knew he wouldn’t survive anyway.

That’s what he told Yinsen, later that night. There was no waver in his words, no hope. Just conviction. Tony knew, without question, that this was it. This was what his entire life had been leading up to. His life’s work, as Yinsen had said. For decades, he’d built weapons under the impression that he was protecting his people. That he was keeping US soldiers safe. But no— this was what it was really doing. Furthering the wars by creating the supply. It was basic. But he’d ignored it for twenty years, because it had been easier. Even when he’d found out, months ago now, he hadn’t done everything he could. He’d tried to appease the board. He’d tried to find middle ground with them. He should have just fucking cut the bullshit, should have put his foot down, but no, he’d still been so fucking desperate to keep them happy, to further his own fucking cause, Goddamn it, this was his fault, he had earned this, there wasn’t a single doubt in his mind—

“Then this is a very important week for you, isn’t it?” Yinsen told him firmly, as if he knew everything that was running through his head. Every self-hating and pitying thought.

Tony looked at him blankly for a moment. What was he expected to do? He was held captive in the heart of a terrorist base, he wasn’t some fucking spy, he wasn’t a hero, he couldn’t—

Yinsen shot him another look, and then turned to the pile of missiles, of tech equipment and machines that the Ten Rings had piled up for him in the corner of the room. Then he looked back, and sighed. “Get some rest, Stark,” he said gently, “you have been through a lot today. Just remember, that there is no one coming to save you any more. There is no knight in shining armour, no amount of money you can throw at this problem to make it go away. The solution must come from you.” he flicked Tony lightly on the temple as he stood and wandered away, over to his own bunk where he settled down for the night.

Tony watched him for a few moments, before bowing his head. He was past crying about it— it wasn’t going to get him anywhere and he knew it. It had been… God, it had been almost a whole month since they’d taken him, by that point. It felt like a fucking eternity. He hardly even even saw
the sunlight any more, and it was hit and miss as to whether he’d even be aware of the day or time. He’d taken to using Yinsen’s sleeping patterns to try and work out when it was night, but even then, it was iffy at best.

Nothing existed down in this fucking pit, except gunpowder and pain. And water. Seemed they couldn’t get enough of that fucking stuff.

He lay back on his bed, staring at the soldering iron from across the room. His chest hurt. He was sick of this shit. Yinsen was right- this was it, now. This was his last stand. He was going to die down here, and he could either die at the hands of a bunch of terrorist scum, or he could go out by his standards, through his choices. Maybe take out a few of these bastards while he was at it. It might put a little bit more meaning into his pathetic fucking life.

He had to get up and fight, now. He was done waiting around for death.

The bed creaked as he sat up, the battery rested heavy in his arms, but Tony Stark got to work.

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The reactor glowed up at him, bright and radiant. It was the first beautiful thing Tony had seen since arriving here.

He wasn’t done yet, though. This was only the beginning.

“How much can this generate?” Yinsen asked, and Tony shot off the numbers easily, because they’d been in his head ever since he’d gotten the idea, and he knew they were right. He turned to Yinsen, feeling the burn of resolve as it ignited in his chest, and then gestured the older man over to the desk where he’d been working through the past week. Designs and plans, only visible to the eyes of those who knew where to look.

Yinsen grasped the sheets in his hand, confused until Tony flattened them down. “This is our ticket outta here,” he said softly, turning to look at Yinsen’s impressed face. That was good. It meant it didn’t look totally crazy. It was hard for Tony to tell- being trapped in a cave for that long drove a guy kind of nuts, and yeah, okay, a suit of armour was a little medieval, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t going to work.

Plus, Tony had a lot more guns.

“When do we start?” Yinsen asked, and Tony took a moment to flick his gaze over to the security camera in the corner of the room, before looking back down to the plans.

Do or die, he figured. “Now.”

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He wasn’t working fast enough, they said as they shoved his head back under the water, and he hated it, he hated it *so much*, it was stagnant and rancid and so, so cold, and when they pulled him back up by his hair he gasped and spluttered but it only made them laugh harder. He got shoved to the floor, and they kicked him, they pulled him back up by the shirt and they were close enough that he could smell their breath, so he punched them in the nose.

That earned him another round of waterboarding.

Those who could speak English called him all the names they knew: a whore, a bastard, a bitch, pathetic, weak, scum - and with every word he shut his eyes and vowed ‘you’re going to die for that, I’m going to kill you, I will, I’m going to make you pay’.

He snarled at them, water dripping into his mouth. “Get… fucked,” he rasped angrily as they yanked him against the wall.

‘Stop it, Tony’, Steve told him desperately, which just made him growl harder, because *fuck* his brain, fuck his stupid mind, Steve didn’t belong there just because he was being hurt, that wasn’t his job any more and it never really had been. ‘Fighting with them isn’t going to make any of this easier.’

He was hauled back to his feet roughly, and he felt his shirt tear as they dragged him back toward the water. He struggled; of course he fucking struggled, but it was useless. There were too many of them, and they barely even let him eat. It wasn’t like he was at his strongest just then. But instead of just forcing him to his knees and ducking his head under like they usually did, this time they just shoved him. Hard.

His knees hit the side violently and he gasped from the pain, doubling over. When they pushed again, this time, he went in fully. Face, body, legs. There was a moment of utter terror when he remembered the battery, the electromagnet, no, no, he was going to get electrocuted, he’d spent so long trying to keep the thing above the water when they’d been doing it before, he couldn’t have lost now-

‘It’s okay,’ Steve said in his head as Tony splashed and choked on the water that had forced its way up his nose, ‘you have the reactor now, remember?’

He broke the surface, wiping the water from his face. It was absolutely fucking freezing, made worse by the cool temperature of the caves. He shot the guards a glare as hard as death, but they simply jeered at him, pulling at his shirt as it clung to him and tearing it further. A few seconds later, one of them spoke up in a language Tony couldn’t understand, and then they all nodded, falling back rapidly. Tony blinked, surprised. He’d never been left unattended before.

They all filed out quickly, and Tony heard the slamming of the iron lock against the door. This room was completely empty and small, just a tiny little cavern away from the rest of the cave system, really, and it was only when Tony dragged himself out of the knee-deep trough of water that he realised their intentions.

That being, he was now soaking wet, and the temperature was dropping rapidly.

They wanted him to fucking freeze.

Snarling angrily, he kicked and hammered at the door, saying all the curses he could in all the
languages he knew. They didn’t open the door- not that Tony had expected them to, unfortunately. It was punishment for his loud mouth and he knew it- they’d keep him there just until he was on the brink of fucking hypothermia, no doubt, and then push him back to work.

That, at least, made him smile wickedly. Because he was definitely building something, but it wasn’t fucking missiles.

With one last kick to the door, he pulled off his soaking wet shirt and then curled against the rough wall, hitching his knees up to his chest and then trying to wring out the drops of water from his hair. His hands were already beginning to shake, but he was only filled with anger, and a resolute desire to get the fuck out of there, whatever the cost.

And he would. He’d get himself home, or he’d damn well die trying, he thought stubbornly, whilst he settled down to wait.

_____Steve_____

He sat down across the table from his contact, hands linked together with one another as he stared the man down and tried to keep his cool.

He was a reedy thing. Small and thin, with a patchy stubble and greasy hair that he slicked back onto his skull. Scars littered various areas of his face and hands, and Steve noted the slight angle at which he held himself. An injury to his left side, most likely long-term and a result of the business he dealt in. Steve didn’t know him very well- it was through a friend of a friend, as many of these sorts of things were, but he knew that he disliked the man. He had no morals. All he was after was a paycheck.

However, Steve was desperate. And if money is what he wanted- well, Steve could get hold of that.

He knew, upon sitting down with the man for a single second, that this was risky business now. These were the deeper, darker sides of the world Steve worked in, where people would do anything for a buck, including selling out their brothers. Every man for himself, and no amount of comraderie would spare you if someone paid a higher price. Steve knew him through Natasha, who knew him through a series of favours that had been exchanged a few years ago involving a botched deal and a rather large FBI investigation she’d managed to get him out of. A debt had been due, and now Natasha was calling it in on Steve’s behalf. He was immensely grateful for that- he knew how valuable she considered her contacts, and once this one had been used, there would be no more favours. She was spending it on him.

The man observed him for a moment, before leaning back on the chair, hands going up behind his head. He smiled, a smug little thing, and cocked an eyebrow. “Captain,” he said slowly, “I’ve heard a lot about you.”
“I don’t doubt it,” Steve responded, no warmth in his voice, “we are quite the hit with the newspapers.”

“That’s not exactly what we would call a good thing, in this business,” was the response he got, “although you aren’t exactly normal in that sense, are you?”

Steve bit back the urge to sigh, instead keeping his face impassive. “What do I call you,” he asked, ignoring the question thrown his way.

“Jacknife.”

The urge to sigh got ten times stronger. He repeated the word sarcastically in his head, but didn’t respond out loud. He couldn’t afford to offend him, not when he might have what Steve needed. Instead, he mentally corrected the name to just ‘Jack’ in his head. “Okay. Do you know why Natasha called you?”

Jack clicked his tongue and rubbed a small scar over his elbow absently. A memory, Steve assumed. “She said she was calling in her favour. I have info you need, apparently?”

Steve nodded, despite the fact it made his skin crawl to admit he was asking for help off a man who only had the information they wanted due to his extensive knowledge in weapons trading. Selling to anyone and everyone who offered- usually small-scale deals for terror cells and areas of countries ravaged in civil wars, where he could supply to both sides. Easy money, Steve thought ominously.

“When was the last time you visited Afghanistan?” He asked, leaning forward a little.

Jack paused, and then cocked his head, thinking back. “Bout half a year ago,” he responded with a shrug, “just a business trip. There and back in two weeks.”

“Who were you selling to?”

Jack laughed. “Oh, I don’t see how that’s any concern of yours. I’m not leaking. Anyway, it’s my business- don’t want you stealin’ my clientele.”

“Do you think I’d want anything to do with your clientele?” Steve growled, “you know exactly what kind of people we are. We don’t do arms dealing.”

Jack just shrugged, the smug grin back on his face and making his piggy little eyes glint in the half-light. “Well that’s your loss, ain’t it?” He told Steve.

For a brief moment, he considered just leaning forward and slamming Jack’s head into the table. He’d been like this ever since… ever since he’d lost Tony the first time around. Brittle and sharp. Constantly near the brink of total meltdown. He thought it would be easy- to just force the information right out of him. Take it through any means he could. It would be simple- a weasel like Jack would undoubtedly cave in under an hour. But that wasn’t what Steve was going for. Those tactics would only give him and his team a bad rep, and in this world, your reputation was everything. He didn’t want people to stop trusting them.

So instead, he smiled tightly. “Maybe so,” he responded, voice smooth, “but that’s how we operate. And you owe Natasha a favour. I’d hate for it to get out that you were a two-timing cheat who can’t stick to his word. I doubt that would be good for your business.”

Jack’s smile wavered, but he managed to claw it back a second or so later. “Buddy, no one in this industry sticks to their word.”
Again, Steve resisted the urge to sigh and punch the bastard square in his stupid nose. Instead, he smiled, and nodded serenely. “I thought you’d say that,” he said with a huff, “so I brought a little more incentive.”

He leaned into his pocket, pulling out a small tube of what looked, to the unseeing eye, to be a simple chapstick container. When Steve opened it up and set it on the desk, however, both of them watched as what seemed to be glittering dust crumbled out onto the surface, white and pearly in its beauty.

Steve emptied it all, until a neat little line of diamonds were set along the table.

Jack gasped, leaning forward, outstretching a hand. “How the fuck did you manage to get yourselves a bunch of these-”

Steve snapped out, stopping those curious fingers from lifting what wasn’t his. Yet. “It took quite a lot of effort, I will admit.” Yeah. Quite a lot of effort and a group of young smugglers who were going to be very disappointed when they woke up tomorrow morning and found that their pile of goodies was mysteriously lacking in half a million dollars’ worth of diamonds. “And I’m not willing to part with them until I get what I want.”

Jack’s eyes were positively glowing with greed at that point, and he sat his face so near to them that his nose was pretty much buried in glittery jewels. “What do you want to know?” He asked.

Steve leaned forward. “Who were you selling to?”

“A man who called himself Arain. Don’t know him. Never met him personally. But he wanted munitions, and I’m always willing to supply.”

“He work for the Ten Rings?”

Jack looked up, cocking an apprehensive eyebrow. “No. But I know a guy who does. Or used to, anyway.”

Steve looked down at the line of diamonds, fiddling with them absently. “How would I be able to get ahold of them?”

“You can’t just ‘get ahold of him’, Captain,” Jack shook his head, amused. “That’s not how he works. This ain’t some New York street gang we’re talkin’ bout h-”

Steve stood, slowly, until he was leaning over Jack at his full 6’2 height. Jack shuffled back a little. “I don’t care whether or not he wants to talk to me,” he informed the other man softly “I won’t be arranging a meeting. I just need to know a location. I would like it from you, now, please.”

“Hey now, listen, I can’t just go ‘round revealing shit like that, okay,” Jack shook his head and swallowed, more than just a tad nervous by that point, “it’s a strict policy.”

Steve looked down at him, and then laughed, grabbing him by the collar and lifting him off the chair. Jack squealed, a hand scratching across Steve’s, but he didn’t acknowledge it. “Do you really think I gave a single fuck about your policies?” He whispered, “do you honestly believe that’s at the top of my priorities right now? Tell me where your contact is. Or I will show you, in detail, just how little I care.”

Jack spluttered, and then nodded frantically. “Alright, alright, his name’s Jevhais, he’s stationed somewhere in Khannesin, last time I heard! It was months and months ago though, and they move
frequently- he doesn’t even work with them any more, dammit! I’ll give you his fucking details if you want, just let me the fuck down.”

Steve paused for a moment, looking into his eyes and trying to see whether or not he was bluffing, before dropping him back onto his chair with a thud. The air wheezed from his lungs in shock, and he pushed it back, away from Steve, until he was pressed against the wall.

“You’re crazy if you think you’re gonna find them,” Jack said, face twisting, “they hide in the desert. The mountains. Afghanistan is huge. And the man you’re looking for is never going to tell you where they are.”

Steve didn’t look at him. He just stared off at the wall above his head. “If he doesn’t, I’ll find someone who will.”

Jack said nothing, but then he sniggered. It was an ugly thing. “Well good luck, buddy. But those guys… they don’t take prisoners. They catch you at this, and you’re done for. Believe me, I know people who’ve got on the wrong side of them. It doesn’t work out well. And hey, if the rumours are true, then they’ve got Stark working as their own private bitch, which only means they’ll have even more-”

He stopped talking when Steve grabbed him by the neck and then slammed him into the wall behind him hard enough that the plaster cracked a little. Jack’s eyes bulged, and his words petered out into a choked-off whimper.

“You say another word about that, and I’ll make sure you never speak again, do you understand?” Steve whispered, fingers flexing around Jack’s skinny little throat. The man wheezed, face slowly going darker and darker as the tips of his toes scuffed the ground. In reality, the only thing that was keeping Steve from crushing his windpipe entirely was the fact that Natasha would get pissed. Jack could live, if only for her sake.

The man nodded desperately, and after another moment, Steve dropped him. He fell to his ass, back pressed up against the wall and hands clutching weakly around his own throat in pain. “Natasha will come in and you can tell her everything we need to know. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Jack fell sideways, landing face-first onto the stone as Steve turned on his heel. He reached for the door, and heard Jack muttering behind him. “You’re… you’re crazy… fuckin’ crazy-”

That, at the very least, made him smile. “Probably,” he admitted, “but only a little bit.”

Over the course of the next few months, Steve pushed his body to the very limits.

He gathered intel where he could. Re-engaged with older, shadier contacts who were more familiar with the underground extremist groups. He trained in the gym, on the bags, he ran for miles and trained his body to the peak of physical strength. He spent days without sleeping- not only because
he had work to do, people to hunt down and a man to find in the middle of the desert, but also because whatever he did, it seemed sleep never even seemed to come to him any more. That was a luxury he had foregone long ago. Now, nights were spent at the local shooting range, getting in target practise.

He wanted to be able to shoot a bastard with his eyes closed. And when the time came (and the time would come), he’d be prepared enough that no one who stood against him had a hope in hell.

It had been two months, since Tony had been taken. Everyone was saying he was dead. The rescue mission that Colonel Rhodes was going on was so they could bring back his body, more than anything else. But Steve didn’t agree with that. He didn’t agree with any of them.

Tony was alive. And Steve was going to find him.

Natasha had taken all the information of the location where the convoys had been struck from the US Military databanks. They knew the routes that Colonel Rhodes and his team were going over, and according to Steve’s intel, it was way off-mark. They were miles and miles away from where all his sources had been saying the latests camps had sprung up- at the rate they were going, it would be another two months until they stumbled upon the general vicinity of the base where the whispers had pointed Steve to.

Tony didn’t have that much time.

“We need to go, now,” Steve argued with Peggy and Bucky one night, his hands fisted into the sides of the counter as he stared unwaveringly toward the two of them.

“Steve, we’d be travelling aimlessly through the Afghan desert and you know it,” Peggy snapped, pushing her hair out of her face exasperatedly, “we have an idea, yes, but Afghanistan is huge. We need to wait. We need to narrow down our area—”

“We don’t have time to narrow down our area,” he growled adamantly, curling his hand into a fist, “Tony is out there, and we know that the Ten Rings have been operating in the East, moving supplies up into the Northern sector of the desert. Last week, that guy swore on his life that they had a supply line running in from Kasheen. If we could intercept—”

He paused when he spotted the look that both of them threw one another, back stiffening immediately. He glared. “What.”

Bucky shook his head, and then flicked his gaze to Clint as he walked in. “Nothing,” he said, dropping his head.

Steve knew Bucky’s bullshit when he saw it, and folded his arms stubbornly. “What, Bucky,” he said in the end, his voice brittle, “spit it out.”

Natasha, who he hadn’t even realized had wandered in, suddenly spoke up then, her voice sharp as she drifted over to Bucky’s side and shot him a hard look. “Don’t talk to him like that Steve.”

He turned around and grimaced at her, but she stared back unwaveringly. Eventually, he sighed. She was right. “Sorry, Buck- I just—”

“I know,” he felt the hand as it fell onto his shoulder, Bucky patting him comfortingly. Steve leaned into it, because it was Bucky- he was allowed to be a little weaker in front of Bucky. “It’s alright, Steve. It’s been a rough few months for you, huh? I think I can stand a little bit of snappy talk. I’m a tough guy, don’t worry about it.”
He heard rustling as Clint hopped up onto the counter and grabbed a box of cereal. He looked at
the suddenly-full room, and then crossed his legs expectantly. “So, we got any more plans on the
‘save Tony’ mission?”

Again, almost as if they couldn’t help it, Bucky and Peggy glanced to one another. This time, Steve
just sighed. “You’ve been discussing this, haven’t you,” he said wearily.

Peggy shut her eyes briefly, and then turned back to him. “A little,” she said, her voice suspiciously
soft. When she looked over to him next, her eyes were sorrowful, and her hands fiddling nervously
with the hem of her shirt. It was a rare sight, seeing Peggy Carter nervous.

“Steve,” her voice petered off, and she grabbed his hand slowly, winding their fingers together as
he watched her, “Steve, we just… we feel like you’re putting a lot of faith into the idea that
Tony…”

“That he’s still alive,” Bucky finished when Peggy couldn’t. His hand was squeezing against
Steve’s shoulder tightly, and he looked away, out into the window. “Pal, you know- you know
how these sorts of things go. He’s… Tony was a civilian. And they blew the entire convoy he was
placed in sky high. It’s–”

“He’s alive,” Steve said quietly, and Bucky just sighed harder, but he didn’t fucking care- he
wasn’t backing down, not this time. “He is, Buck. I know it.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed trying to go after a man who we’re not even sure is still alive,
is what Bucky’s trying to say,” Peggy told him, a note of desperation in her voice. “Steve, darling, I
know you miss him, I know you feel guilty and I understand, but–”

“Peggy, I’m not going to stop until I’ve brought him home,” Steve told her, and his voice was calm
but his mind was raging- it was a storm of emotion and grief, of pure, single-minded focus. To get
Tony back, to find him. Whatever the cost. It was the only thing that kept him going, these days.

He looked over to his friend, pursing his lips and then smiling. “This is all I have left,” he
whispered. “I let him down once before. I refuse to do the same thing again. I won’t. I… can’t. I’m
not asking you to join me- in fact, I’d rather you didn’t- but whatever you chose, I’m going ahead.
Standing around, doing nothing… it’d drive me insane. You know it would.” He smiled at them
both weakly and then shrugged. “I just have to do this. I have to try and put it right.”

“Tony wouldn’t want you to die for him,” Peggy spoke, words soft on her bright red lips, and a part
of Steve wanted to laugh, but the other part knew that she was right. Tony wasn’t like that. Tony
would hold out a hand to even his worst enemy if they needed it. He was unwaveringly kind like
that.

“There were a lot of things Tony didn’t want me to do,” Steve said with a shrug, stepping forward
and looking at the map on the table again, “guess this is just another on a long list.”

Silence filled the kitchen, and he knew that there were four pairs of eyes on his back as he studied
the maps in front of him, but he didn’t care. He’d lost that ability as soon as he’d watched that
news, two months and four days ago.

Nothing else mattered but bringing Tony home.

“Well, I believe you,” Clint blurted suddenly, and Steve turned in mild surprise, watching his
friend as he shoved lucky charms into his mouth and looked curiously at the map. “If he was dead,
they’d have found a body by now. And if they haven’t, it means he’s still of value to whoever has
him. Tony’s a tough bastard. He’s not going down without a fight.” Clint’s gaze turned on Steve, and then he nodded, just once. “I think we’ve done enough to fuck him over, don’t you?” He asked. “Maybe it’s time we did him a favour.”

“I agree,” Natasha said, which was… definitely a surprise. Steve had thought that, out of all of them, Natasha had been the least enthusiastic about the whole arrangement. But when he looked over to her, he realized that there was a sense of guilt in her eyes, too. Natasha Romanov was good at what she did, but when she missed things, she always blamed herself for them. And this… this had been a big thing for all of them to miss.

Beside him, Peggy tightened her grip on his hand. “I will stand by your side and do everything I can for you,” she said, turning to him and then leaning their shoulders together. “But please. Please, don’t put all your hopes into finding him safe and alive. These are terrible, terrible people we are dealing with. You are only going to set yourself up for a fall.”

He nodded, and then turned to Bucky. Because yes, he could do it alone- but God almighty, that didn’t mean he wanted to. It was okay though, because Bucky was smiling- somewhat hopelessly, maybe- but a smile all the same. “Like I said before: I’d follow you anywhere, Steve,” his best friend told him fondly. “And Clint’s right. Stark’s a wily one. If anyone can make it, it’s him.”

Slowly, Steve nodded, relief coursing through him. He knew that his friends were dubious- knew and understood them. But he’d meant what he’d said as well. He wasn’t going to stop. Not now. Over the course of Tony’s disappearance, Steve’s only saving grace had been the idea that he was going to get him back. He had to cling on to that, now. There was nothing else left but this. This mission, this task.

Bring Tony home. Or die trying.

_____
He sat on the balcony with the cigarette between his fingers, watching the sunset as Bucky wandered up to his side, holding out a hand. Wordlessly, Steve pulled a lighter from his pocket, dropping into Bucky’s waiting palm. “For the record, I still don’t condone you smoking, but I figure now I don’t have quite as much room to talk.”

“Damn right you don’t,” Bucky muttered, lighting up quickly and then leaning on the railings next to Steve, staring into the Brooklyn sunset with the same squint that Steve was doing. “You’re quitting after all this is done, you hear? I’m not having you dyin’ before me, that’s not allowed.”

Steve laughed. “How was the cafe?”

“Busy. The little baby twins came in today. I thought they were gonna give me a damn aneurysm, they were that cute. Natasha even smiled at them, which basically means she’s in love and planning to steal them away.”

He grinned, and tried to ignore the weight on his heart as he looked over to his best friend. “You gonna do that, one day?” He asked, as if they hadn’t already had the exact conversation a dozen times over. Usually they were a little drunker than this, though.

Bucky glanced at him, and then sighed loudly, bracing his hands across the balcony railing and staring at the crumbling paint opposite. His long hair blew into his face, and he shook it away. After taking a long drag, he just shrugged. “In a perfect world,” he said through words tinted with cigarette ash. “In a world where I’d be able to give them a good life. I’d love it. More than anything else.”

Steve smiled. In a perfect world, he echoed in his mind. In a perfect world, we would all be happy. “Yeah. Yeah, me too.”

Bucky’s eyes rose in surprise. “You never told me that before,” he said, shock tinting his words.

Steve shrugged, and looked back to the sunset. On the other side of the world, that sun would be just beginning to rise over Tony. “Never considered it before,” he replied easily.

Bucky didn’t respond to that. Steve didn’t blame him. There wasn’t much to say, really. It was ridiculous, utterly completely ridiculous, to change your whole life plans because of a person you’d known for six months. Laughable, even. But… Tony had just completely flipped his ideals, his view on the world. He’d gone into the job thinking he didn’t know how to love people properly. He’d left it knowing that he absolutely, painfully could. And it had been so easy to get carried away, to imagine more. Permanence.

Funny, thinking about it now.

He did want Bucky and Natasha to have that chance, though. He supposed they’d get married, first—although then again, who knew with those two. They rarely followed conventional behaviours. And maybe they would, one day. Maybe they’d pack it in and start a family like Bucky had wanted to do since he’d been 12 years old. Or maybe they’d never stop—maybe this would be the only life they ever knew. Steve couldn’t say. He hoped for the former though. His friends, at the very least, deserved happiness. Their lives had been too hard on them so far.

Plus, Natasha and Bucky would have adorable (if terribly violent) children. And Steve had always wanted to be an uncle.
“What *are* you gonna do?” Bucky asked, and Steve realised it had been a few minutes since either of them had spoken. “After, I mean. If you find him.”

Steve thought it over for a moment. He looked down at the streets below; to the father walking his son across the street, and the old lady with her wiener dog as they went on their evening jog. It had been so long now, since he’d felt in touch with the rest of the world. He missed the vibrance of it.

“Try and fix what I broke, I guess,” he murmured, thinking of those soft lips and the fluffy curls and the most beautiful brown eyes he had ever seen.

——

Clint rushed into him on a Thursday evening at 7:15 with the news.

2 months, 25 days. Tony had been missing for two months and twenty-five days, the US Air Force was no closer to finding any evidence, and everyone had mostly just agreed that Tony Stark was gone for good. That was, except for Steve and his team.

It had been another day of research, training, and trying not to think about anything too far under surface emotions. Steve was tired. Bucky had managed to persuade him to sit down and watch Bridezilla reruns, and Steve wasn’t too sure about how exactly that had happened, but his body had thanked him for the rest on his legs and he’d settled somewhat comfortably in order to let the TV take over his mind for a short while.

For an hour, he’d had peace.

And then Clint had come bursting through the doors at a hundred miles an hour, making such a racket as the handle crashed into the wall that both Steve and Bucky had trained their guns to him before they’d even turned around properly.

He just stared at them for a moment, breathless and shocked. His eyes went to Steve, and didn’t waver.

“Tony’s alive.”

Steve found himself frozen to the spot, whereas Bucky moved forward, gun dropping back to his side as he advanced on Clint. “Source?” He asked, sharp and to the point.

“Peggy’s girl in Pakistan,” Clint responded, turning to Bucky as Steve just continued to stare. “She’s been hearing talk of a shipment of goods into the Afghan desert for the ‘Merchant of Death’. They have a last known location, too.”
Bucky swore. Steve just tried to breathe.

“He’s alive,” he repeated, softer than a feather.

Clint looked to him and then nodded. Bucky turned too, staring at Steve as if he might detonate any moment. In all honesty, it was entirely possible. The hope, the pain and the fear he had been letting build for months now… it was all bubbling to the surface. A fierce, overwhelming burn under his ribcage. For months, he’d been looking. He’d been working, searching, desperate. Peggy’s small talks that told him not to get his hopes up too high had become more and more frequent. He had been beginning to think she may have had a point.

But Tony was out there. There was a chance.

And that was all he needed.

“Call the Air Force,” Steve said, heart beating so loudly in his ears that he wondered whether the others could hear it from across the room, “and get us on a flight to Afghanistan.”

Tony

The armour was ready.

He looked over to Yinsen, who was staring up at it, half mesmerized, half afraid. They were making the break in the morning. In 24 hours, they’d either be free men or dead men. Either way though, there wasn’t a chance in hell that Tony was backing out now. He would see this through until the bitter end.

He didn’t want this to be his legacy. And if he made it out, he was going to make sure it never would be.

Tony had seen the date on a computer a week or two ago, and had been doing his best to count the hours ever since. Altogether, it had been almost three months, give or take. Time had stopped meaning much, down in the caves, but it still felt like an eternity to Tony. It was three months of capture. Three months of being a slave, of being a pawn in someone else’s plan. He had sat in the darkness for so many hours, sunlight had become nothing more than a memory. They hadn’t let him outside in weeks.

He wasn’t sure why, but for some reason, that thought brought him back to Steve- how his face had glowed in the morning beams, the way his hair had sat like a halo around the pillow. He had long since stopped trying to push away those thoughts, now. The memory of him- of who he had
been, even if it was lie- was all Tony had to cling on to. And anyway- huddled in that cave, where there was no light, or sound, or anything other than death and engine grease, hindsight had become somewhat easier. He probably wasn’t going to be alive for much longer anyway, so he could say it:

Steve Rogers had been in love with him. Whatever he had done, whatever choices he had made- Tony knew that Steve loved him. Maybe he hadn’t meant to. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to. But he had, wholly and deeply, and not even Tony could deny that; not when the evidence was staring him right in the face.

And maybe what was worse than that, was the fact that Tony loved him too. Even though he didn’t want to. Even though he pretended not to.

He did. He really, truly did.

If only the world had been kinder, then they may even have been able to have that.

“Do you fear death, Mr. Stark?” Yinsen asked, and his voice was hoarse- the guards had taken him that afternoon and done something to his throat. Tony didn’t know what, because the doctor refused to say. He just got on. He was so much more resilient than Tony ever could be.

He looked at the faceplate; into the black corners of its eyes, the grim line of its face. It would be bulletproof, and it would be enough. It had to be. He had put his life into this, because that is what hung in the balance. His, Yinsen’s, and thousands of other innocents who had fallen victim to his ignorance. He’d make it right. Looking over to Yinsen, he shook his head once. “No,” he murmured, and his fingers stroked around the edges of his reactor. It hurt to breathe, every single second. The scars were still healing. He had to wash his hands dozens of times every day to try and stave off infection, and they’d taken to cleaning everything they could before Tony got his hands on it. Bacteria would be deadly, with a wound like that.

Yinsen’s eyebrows lifted, as if surprised by the answer. “Really?” He asked. “Why not?”

Tony pondered the question. He thought of his situation; of the fear that gripped him, every single day, the knowledge that each second could possibly be his last. He thought about his past- about the bombs he’d built and sent off, the wars he’d probably ended up encouraging, for no other reason than the echoes of a desire to please a father that had left him a long, long time before he’d even been killed. He thought of the seventeen year old version of himself who’d sat with a bottle of whiskey and a line of his mother’s strongest codeine tablets, wondering whether he should just swallow it all down until he could no longer feel a single thing.

“I’m not afraid of death,” he spoke, eyes flicking to the Stark missiles that lined the walls, the stain of his own blood on the bench, the photographic evidence of the destruction his creations had caused in Gulmira.

He looked to Yinsen, and he smiled with his teeth and blood-crusted lips. “I am death.”
He’d known that the Afghan desert was big.
He’d forgotten quite how big, though.

They’d been scouring through the dunes and mountain ranges with their chopper for days. Steve had called in a favour with a pilot down in Kabul, and he’d given them the helicopter and three days’ worth of fuel. They were on their second day already, and aside from a rather severe sunburn on his neck, they hadn’t gotten anything at all.

Clint and Natasha were in the cockpit, Bucky and Peggy manned the guns, and Steve had been given strict instructions to sit down, be quiet and not interfere. They all knew that he needed to let the team do their jobs, because that was what they were there for. Of course, that didn’t make things any easier. He wanted to do everything he physically could.

Bucky gave him a stress ball after the third hour. Steve appreciated the sentiment behind it, at the very least. He preferred fiddling with his gun though. More comforting, he supposed.

He wondered what Tony was even going to do if Steve managed to get to him. Whether his reaction might doom them anyway. What if he refused to go with Steve? What if he screamed? God, what if he thought Steve was going to kill him too-

He shook his head and cleared the thoughts, biting down hard on his own teeth and then looking out into the vast desert. He’d cross those bridges when he got to them. It was all going to work itself out. Steve knew it would. He’d got this far, after all.

“How much longer have we got?” Steve called out down into the cockpit, and Clint turned his head, glancing to the display.

“‘Bout three more hours, before we gotta head back and refuel.”

Steve sighed, shutting his eyes. The whirring of the blades was giving him a fucking migraine—although to be fair, that could very well be the stress. He knocked his head lightly against the side of the helicopter and then ducked back to his station, pulling out a stick of gum from his pocket and throwing it into his mouth. He really wanted a fucking cigarette.

_God, pull yourself together_, he cursed to himself as he looked down at his hands and saw the way they were shaking, just a little. Had been ever since they’d got on the plane to Kabul, basically. _You’re not going to be able to help him if you’re compromised._

That thought, at least, made him laugh. Because really? Compromised? He’d been compromised ever since he’d looked at Tony and thought ‘I want you’. Everything had pretty much just been a downward spiral after that.

The sands stretched out below him like a bleak carpet, and he blinked when the wind turned and whipped grains up into his face. He remembered how it had been, out here. It turned out that the sand was one of the most irritating and dangerous parts of the whole tour. It got into your machinery and wounds, it was uncomfortable and it offered no protection. Out here, you were as
exposed as a sore thumb. Back then, though, he’d just been fresh off from recruitment—still positive, still ready to do his duty. That seemed like such a far-off version of himself. He missed that guy sometimes, he really did. At least that one knew how to have a fuckin’ laugh, unlike Steve nowadays.

A sigh escaped his throat, and again, he tamped down on the thoughts, instead looking out over to the horizon. Everything about this was risky. Not only were they heading into an active zone occupied by terrorists, but they were also flying in the same airspace as US Air Force, led by a man who hated his very existence. Steve didn’t doubt that he’d get arrested by Colonel Rhodes if he even so much as caught a whiff of him in the air. And to be fair, Steve didn’t blame him—how suspicious would it be to run into your best friend’s ex, flying around in a chopper out in Afghanistan where Tony was supposed to be? They’d sent Rhodes their best estimated coordinates, but they’d done it anonymously. And so the Colonel would have no idea what to make of Steve and his merry band of misfits, gallivanting around some Afghan desert.

God, he sometimes wished his life was more normal than this.

“Cap?” Natasha said from the front, and the tone in her voice was questioning, and a tiny bit curious, “any marked villages in this area of mountain?”

He stood abruptly, checking the map. “No. Uninhabited.”

“Well, you’re wrong on that front,” Natasha told him, jerking her head down to the right. “Look.”

He walked to the other side of the helicopter, wrapping his hand around the grab rail and staring out into the craggy grey mountains. He couldn’t see anything at first, but after a moment or two, his eyes focused up on one of the overhangs, and he noticed there was a tent. Multiple tents followed it, and there were tiny, ant-like forms moving around on the surface. Human activity.

He swallowed, and turned back to them. “Get closer,” he said, “we need to take a better look.”

Natasha nodded, and surged forward. Steve kept his eyes fixed on the point in the mountains, and as they turned the corner, it expanded into what looked almost like an entire makeshift village. Located in the middle of nowhere, and with no visible roads leading to and from it.

Steve had a feeling in his gut. This was the place. This was the spot they’d been looking for.

“Is there a way to get down th-”

“Shit!” Clint called, and Natasha immediately stopped their flight path in the air, sending Steve stumbling on his feet. He turned sharply to the two in the cockpit, watching as Clint leaned forward. “Shit, I think something’s spotted us. Look. Fuck, Tash, someone’s locked on.”

Natasha cursed, reversing the chopper backward, around the corner again. “How do they even have the firepower for—” she cut herself off, shooting Steve a small look, “okay, never mind how, we should probably focus on—”

There was suddenly the sound of distant clattering, and Steve ducked on instinct as the gunfire shots rang out through the desert. Seconds later, there were a handful of screeching noises as bullet crunched into metal, and Steve knew that one of the gunners had managed to get a hit. Nothing serious, but if they had anything bigger than that in their arsenal, it wouldn’t be good. This wasn’t an attack helicopter— it was just surveillance. They’d be sitting ducks.
“I’m pulling back,” Natasha called, turning further into the safety of the mountain with her mouth in a thin line, “this is too risky.”

“No!” Steve cried, holding out a hand, “no, Natasha come on, we’re so close, Tony could be-”

“Steve, we stick around there and we will die,” Natasha snapped at him from the cockpit, “and I promise, we will be absolutely no help to Tony then. We come back tomorrow-”

“HE COULD BE DEAD TOMORROW!” Steve’s throat hurt, it was too hot and he was so far past desperation, he was heading right into hysteria. “Nat, we can’t- just drop me, please-”

“No,” her voice was firm, and then she jerked the joystick sharply when another round of gunfire rang off, this time from a different direction. “Fuck, they’re well guarded- Steve, I’m retreating. Bucky, make sure he doesn’t stop me.”

The guns were going off, distant from the mountains, and Steve watched helplessly as Natasha pulled back, trying to stay out of the firing range as she did so. Steve knew that the next time they came back, the Ten Rings would be ready for them. This was their one moment of surprise. Steve couldn’t just waste it like this.

He looked wildly to the other side of the chopper, ducking once more as this time, bullets ended up lodging themselves into a point a few inches above Peggy’s head. “Faster, Nat!” Clint urged, and Natasha answered by tipping the helicopter sharply to the side, avoiding another dose of gunfire.

The fact that Steve fell into the parachute at that point was mostly just fate, than anything else.

He looked at it for a single moment. Thought about what a terrifically, hugely, monumentally bad idea this was.

Then he grabbed it, and he strung it onto his back. In the panic, no one else noticed him do it, and he was buckled up in under three seconds. Turning to Bucky, he grabbed his shoulder and twisted the man around, looking steadily into his eyes. Bucky stared back, not seeing the chute on Steve’s shoulders, only seeing his best friend’s wild eyes.

“Get out, and don’t look back, understand?” Steve urged, before adding in a guilty voice. “I’m sorry.”

*I’m sorry, but I can’t fail him again.*

Then he turned away and took a running leap, out of the helicopter and into the middle of the Afghan desert.
The landing was rough. He managed to steer himself into a patch of sand, but it scraped across his already burnt skin, and he was lucky not to break a leg from it. It had been a while since he’d used a parachute— he was probably too rusty than what was technically safe.

Then again, he was also walking toward an active terror cell in the middle of an Afghan desert with nothing to defend himself with except the guns in his holster and a knife he’d stashed in his belt. He couldn’t really deem anything he was doing to be ‘safe’.

The midday sun scorched his skin, but he gritted his teeth against it and kept to the rocky outcrop. He’d fallen a mile or so out, and so he should be coming up to the base any moment now. Once there, however, he was out of ideas. Mostly his thoughts had run along the lines of ‘get to Tony in whatever way possible.’ Everything else had seemed secondary.

He was realizing, now, that perhaps he should have thought this through a little more.

He flexed his hands against the gun, dropping under an overhang and then scrambling up onto a ledge nearby. He needed a vantage point, but not one too obvious. Seeing as he was coming up to the peak of the mountain he’d been climbing, it would be the perfect place to observe everything.

The camp was at the bottom of the mountain, tucked away from most prying eyes. It had mostly just been luck that had let Natasha spot them— any other angle, and they would’ve been hidden from view. It was very clever. And he could see, from here, that there were gunning stations dotted all around the mountain. That’s how they had seen the chopper. And no doubt that if they were using Stark designs, their target would be true. It was almost impossible not to be, with those things.

His feet moved forward slowly, sticking to the darker areas and shadowy rock in order to conceal himself as best he could. It would be terrible for him to be caught out now— everything depended on stealth, with something like this. He wasn’t a powerful enough force to go in all guns blazing, but if he could just manage to quietly infiltrate, seek out and then escape with Tony, then it might stand the tiniest chance of working.

A droplet of sweat trickled down his temple, and he shut his eyes. He really wasn’t cut out for this fucking weather.

Tomorrow, his team would come and find them. He felt the guilt at what he had done pool under his chest, but the feeling was familiar at that point, and he tucked it away. For later. It had to wait until later. Natasha will have stuck to her word and flown them off— maybe Bucky would have argued, but even he knew that it would be pointless to endanger the rest of his team for sake of one man’s suicide mission. He was going to have a lot of apologizing to do, when he got back.

And he would. He would get back.

_Yeah, keep telling yourself that buddy_, said the sarcastic voice in his head, and for some reason it sounded a hell of a lot like Tony.

Sitting down slowly against the shaded rock, he observed their patterns for as much as he could see. A couple of hundred yards away, two guards were stationed below him. Steve could take them out easily— just from the way they were slouched, talking amicably, he could tell they weren’t properly trained. He wouldn’t even need to make a sound. A neck-snap and a knife through the eye; they’d be sorted in under two seconds, undoubtedly. He could take the jacket and hat from the guard who’d be getting a knife through his head, and then the shades from the other man. The rest of his gear— his boots, his gun and his combat trousers, were the same as what every other soldier seemed to be wearing. He had to hope that it would be enough to blend him in. That was the
as long as you acted like you belonged there, then nine times out of ten they assumed you did. Natasha told him it was a matter of body posture- you had to aim it just right, or everything would collapse. Too nervous, and they’d spot you instantly. Too confident, and they’d stare. You had to be enough, but you could never be too much.

Steve swallowed, and then spat out the grains of dust he felt were building on his tongue. He knew it was mostly in his head, but part of him just took comfort from spitting on this part of the Earth.

Tony was in there somewhere. Steve could feel it, in whatever remained of his soul. Tony was there, and Steve would get him out.

He straightened his back and then jumped to his feet. He’d marked out the route he’d take down the mountain, and once he’d rechecked his ammo for the millionth time, he set off walking. He didn’t have a lot of time to spare, and he knew it. No doubt news would be spreading that they’d just taken potshots off at a chopper that’d been prowling through the area, and after that, they’d be put on higher alert. Luckily, these guys hadn’t got the message just yet. Unluckily for them, it was going to mean they died first.

Steve couldn’t exactly say he cared much.

Killing them was even easier than he’d imagined. One quick twist, and then spinning around and burying the blade into the other man’s skull was remarkably simple. They didn’t even notice until it was too late. He looked down at them for a moment, and then calmly bent down and yanked the hilt of his knife out of the man’s face, wiping it on his leg before stashing it back into his belt. Next, he stripped the first one of his jacket and threw it on. It was too small for him, but he doubted anyone would pay much attention.

It took two minutes to get himself redressed, and after that, he dragged the two bodies into a nearby ditch and then spread the sand over where the blood had run. They wouldn’t be found for a few days.

Moving further in, the place got busier. Steve kept his head down and breathed steadily, gloved hands purposefully lax by his side. There were men of all nationalities and races here- Russian and German from what he’d heard, and then other languages that he couldn’t decipher. He didn’t stand out though, which was what he had been aiming for.

The shades were shit quality, but they hid his eyes as they searched openly for a point of entry. It seemed the majority of the crowds stemmed from somewhere further in, and he followed the two men in front of him as they walked through, chatting in a language Steve could not understand. Everywhere he looked, there were firearms. Munitions. Bombs and missiles. So many of them had Tony’s name on them, it made his skin crawl. Tony had been dragged through this hell and shown exactly what his life’s work had gone toward.

Steve knew just how much Tony would have loathed that.

Steve kept on walking, until he came to what appeared to be some sort of makeshift plaza in the centre of the camp. This was where the majority of all the stores seemed to be kept- there were crates and crates, piled high up into one another. Stark Stark Stark Stark, the name called out to him.

He glanced around, and then noticed the massive cave entrance that was located a hundred yards or so away from him. Buried deep into the mountain, it looked like the entrance of an entire system.

That was Steve’s best bet. Right in the mouth of the lion.
He walked in without hesitation. Men passed him with little acknowledgement, and he stuck close to the walls, not making eye contact with any of them. He wished he had a bigger gun. His own felt rather puny compared to all their machine guns and vast ammo supplies attached to their belts. He wondered in mild disgust, how much money Stane must have made from this. How much suffering he must have caused, by kitting out all these terrorists.

His boots crunched against pebbles and rock, and he felt the temperature drop the further in he got through the cave system. Lit up by flickering lights and lacking in any ventilation or heating, Steve couldn’t imagine what it would be like to spend as much time in here as Tony must have done. His steps quickened unconsciously, although he still had absolutely no idea where he was headed.

He turned a corner and found himself in a narrow passage, lit by a single lamp. It led out into what appeared to be a large corridor, but as he took a step through, someone else came out of the other end. Steve dropped his head immediately, unwilling to make eye contact, but he could see from the corner of his eye that the man was looking at him unabashedly.

He continued to walk at the same pace, eyes travelling casually around the passage.

“Āpanāra nāma ki?” The man said again, harder this time, and Steve just blinked, swallowing down the urge to speak English. It would be suspicious.

Instead, he switched to French and shrugged in confusion. “Je ne sais pas ce que tu dis!” He said helplessly, stepping forward. Push came to shove, then he’d just kill him. It was no weight on his shoulders.

“Je vous disais, je ne sais pas ce que tu dis!”

Suddenly, they both braced on instinct as a tremendous noise filled the corridors, and the walls shook from an explosion down another corridor. They both ducked, and Steve’s mind raced as he thought of the explanations. Gas leak. Accidental detonation. There were hundreds of possibilities in a place as unsafe as this- but Steve had learned from six months of practise, that wherever an explosion was, Tony Stark would undoubtedly be nearby.

He glanced up at the man next to him once the walls had stopped shuddering, and then a moment later he lunged forward, breaking the soldier’s neck in one swift and violent twist, before grabbing the machine gun from his lifeless fingers and scrambling down the passage and towards the source of the noise. It had been close by, Steve was certain of it.

He turned left and then sprinted forward, hearing shouts and calls to mobilise from behind him. The lights had blown out in these corridors, meaning that it was mostly just darkness, but he could see just enough to guide him through the winding passages, and he ran on unsure feet toward the
danger. He felt like he was almost unbearably close now- once he got to Tony, they could just work from there. It was all going to be fine. It was all going to be absolutely fine.

He heard, distantly, a shouting voice, and then the sound of wild and continuous gunfire from down the corridor. Stopping in his tracks, he had a single second to throw himself into a crevice in the wall and hide himself as a tall, thin man who looked more like a civilian than any sort of soldier hurtled through the cavern, a machine gun in his hands and firing manically at the ceiling. Steve stared, thoroughly confused as the man passed him by with a battlecry shouted from his hoarse lungs. He ducked his head back out, watching until the guy turned the corner before stepping out again.

Well. That part wasn’t his problem. But he figured that there had to be something going on here, and Steve knew that it would be something that would lead him to Tony.

He kept running. The corridor was larger here, and more straight. When Steve met with another small group of soldiers as they sprinted in the same direction as him, he gunned them down effortlessly and continued moving. Eventually, he finished up at the end of the passage, with only a dimly lit room to show for it.

But the doors had been completely blown off, and there were dead soldiers lying scattered in the blast zone.

Steve lifted his gun and walked forward, slow and steady.

Glass crushed underfoot, and he noticed that the light above his head was blown to smithereens. He checked the rest of the door for traps before stepping over the threshold, but whatever had been set had obviously detonated, and there was no backup here. He looked up, into the room, and searched for the person he’d not stopped looking for for three months.

“Tony?” He whispered quietly, voice shaking far more than he’d been expecting it to.

There was silence in the large room. Steve noted that, although much more rudimentary and dirty in its location, the style and format of the place was very similar to Tony’s own workshop. He took another step forward, and that was when he heard the muttered, whispered curses that filled the air, coming from behind a screen that had been rigged up.

Steve froze, the tone and inflections in those foul litany of words so very hauntingly familiar. Spoken through a hiss of air, not even a voice at all- but Steve still knew. He knew without hesitation.

“Tony!” He hissed again, hurrying forward. His feet stumbled over rubble and his hip crashed into the side of the desk, but as he rounded the corner and looked behind the screen with wild eyes, he stopped dead in his tracks. The gun fell back to his side and his jaw dropped open.

Tony’s head jerked to him, his own eyes just as wide and terrified as Steve’s. They stared at one another for a second.

“What the fuck?” They both said at exactly the same time.

“Tony, what in God’s name-” Steve looked down, at the huge metal… thing, Tony had covering his body, like a- like some sort of suit of armour.

Tony just stared at him, and then groaned, long and despairing. Steve straightened up immediately, rushing forward, because it had been three months of fucking captivity and Tony could be hurt-
“I’m fucking dead,” Tony whispered to himself, looking to the ceiling. Tears were pooling in his eyes. “After everything, after… and I’m fucking dead-”

Steve blinked, and then shook his head, hands going for the place where Tony’s shoulders (probably, hopefully) were. “Tony, you’re not dead,” he said firmly, “you’re very much alive, and we’ve gotta get outta here. Come on- I need you to follow me, just this once. Just one more time, Tony.”

Tony looked at him, shaking his head. “Why won’t you just leave?” He whispered desolately, tears slipping down his cheeks. “Even when I’m dead, you won’t-”

“Tony, Tony, you are not dead.” Steve tried to shake him out of his stupor, but the metal around him wouldn’t budge. So he looked for a release or a catch of some sort, to get him out of whatever the fuck the thing was. “Come on, we have to hurry, do you have any idea how I can get you free? We have to get you away-”

“What?” Tony blinked down at him, seeming to come back to himself a little as he suddenly lifted his hand and batted Steve away. It hurt, which was surprising. “No, it doesn’t come off. This is my ticket out of here. Has it finished calibrating yet?” Tony asked mostly to himself, craning his neck over Steve’s shoulder. Steve turned as well, spotting the ancient laptop sat on the desk, a loading bar in the center. It was on 100%.

Distantly, Steve heard the sound of shouting voices. They were out of time.

There was only one exit, and it was through the main doors. If he could hear the voices, then they were undoubtedly too close to escape from. Steve sighed wearily, lifting his gun back up. He’d tried. And he’d been close. He had seen Tony again, at least he’d gotten that much. “Tony? I want you to just… stay there, okay? Don’t move. I’ll hold them off for as long as I-”

He broke off suddenly as a large metal hand clamped around his shoulder and hauled him backward with such force that he slammed into the wall. Tony barely even noticed him, but he stepped in front anyway and leaned down, picking up some sort of facial visor from the desk and then slotting it into place.

He turned back to Steve, still pressed against the wall. Through the gaps, Steve saw the beautiful warm chocolate of Tony’s eyes. “Not your job to protect me any more, Captain,” he declared, before slamming a fist into a section of panelling and then tugging sharply, plunging the room into total darkness, save for the bright blue glow in the center of the suit.

Steve stared up at him, and Tony stared back. “You,” Tony pointed to him, “do not make a sound. Whether you’re in my head or not, you stay fucking quiet and don’t die in front of me. Do you understand me?”

Steve opened his mouth to ask one of the billion questions on his tongue, but Tony snarled and then clamped a leather-coated hand over his mouth, pressing him further into the wall at the same moment that Steve heard the familiar noise of a foot cracking through shards of broken glass, just as his had done before he’d entered the room. Tony stayed very still, and Steve did the same. He could see Tony’s eyes glowing under the blue glare. He was taller than Steve in the suit he was wearing. It was… disconcerting.

It was funny, that these were the sorts of things that he was thinking about in his last moments. Height difference and the startling intensity of Tony’s gaze.

He watched as the hand around his mouth slowly lifted away, curling into a fist. Tony turned at the
same moment that the first soldier rounded the corner, and before Steve could even lift his own weapon, Tony had grabbed him by the collar and-

Hauled him across the full length of the room.

The man fired a wild spray of bullets and Steve ducked, but the ones that hit Tony simply bounced away. Once his head hit the rough cave wall, there was an ominous crunching sound, and the body fell lifelessly to the floor.

Out around the corner, there was a smattering of panicked yells, and suddenly the room was lit up by the spray of machine gun fire. Steve once more ducked and covered his head, but this time he felt something push up against him, and glanced up just as Tony curled his arms around Steve and shielded him with whatever he was wearing that seemed to repel bullets so effectively.

Steve blinked incredulously, ears ringing from the constant assault of gunfire upon them. He honestly had no idea what the fuck was even happening any more. Tony was… well, Steve had gone in there assuming Tony would be half dead and on the very last ounces of his strength, but instead- instead Tony seemed to be in the middle of his own escape plan. Which Steve actually felt he was intruding on, rather than assisting with.

Eventually, the firing ceased, and Tony wasted no time. Surprisingly quietly for a suit so bulky, he crept through the room with a hand covering the light source in his chest. Steve, with no other choice, followed him, his gun raised defensively. He wondered whether he’d hit his head at some point, and this was simply some elaborate hallucination.

He caught sight of four guards ahead of him, and he drew the gun to his eyeline and fired at the first one with deadly accuracy, hitting him squarely in between the eyes. In the meantime, Tony put two through various walls surrounding them, and then punched the last man standing from one end of the corridor to another.

“What the hell is that thing?” Steve asked breathlessly, dropping his gun once more, but Tony ignored him, turning around and then marching down the corridor with a single-minded focus that Steve could almost feel in the air.

Another group of men rounded the corridor, and Steve wisely chose to take cover behind Tony’s apparently bulletproof suit as they rained yet more gunfire down upon them. Steve shot off a few rounds of his own, which seemed to cut down the firing by a little- but Tony just ploughed through them all as if they were nothing more than tissue paper, punching them hard enough that Steve heard bones break and spines twist irreparably. He couldn’t even believe this was happening. “The exit’s that w-”

“I know what I’m fucking doing,” Tony growled, spinning the entire contraption so that it was facing Steve. “Shut up. You understand me? Shut up. I don’t need you now. I don’t need you at all any more. I have this. I’m getting out on my own.”

The words felt worse than the gunfire had in his ears, but he swallowed it down. He shouldn’t have expected anything else. Instead, he simply nodded and looked down. “Sorry.”

Tony paused for a moment, and Steve heard the small noise of frustration fall from his mouth. He moved jerkily forward, as if to stretch out a hand, check if Steve was actually there or not- but then there were more shouts down the passage, and Tony turned his head with a swift and angry shake. “God, I don’t have time for this. You just-”

Steve turned before Tony could finish as his ears picked up on running feet behind them both, and
he hauled himself into a small dip in the walls as four men rounded on the passage that Steve and Tony had just come from. “Tony, go,” Steve told him, lifting his gun once again and waving a hand. “I’ve got your six.”

“I- Rogers-”

“GO!”

Steve watched as Tony stuttered for all of two seconds before turning away, beginning to march through the caves once more. He clenched his jaw and then turned around, readying for the next wave of men as he heard their yells echo through the air. He propped the gun onto his shoulder and shot off, each hit finding its target with instant success. The caves were dank and dirty, and it was difficult to see in such a low light setting, but Steve had been training tirelessly, and the dark barely affected him at all.

Once the passage had been cleared of all threats, Steve backed up, following the path Tony had taken. He stepped carefully over a set of doors that looked as if they’d been ripped straight off their hinges, and took only a moment to process the sheer power that Tony appeared to be wielding. It was insane- Steve had never seen anything like it. Except, of course, for the fairytales his mother had told him when he’d been a child, about those knights in the stories who had always seemed to save the day in time. Tony’s suit of armour was similar to those, in a way.

Except his seemed to have a lot more guns.

A man came charging out of nowhere, no gun in hand, but a baseball bat instead. He screamed and brought it down on Steve’s head, and Steve only just managed to throw himself out of the way in time. His gun slipped from his fingers as he impacted with the wall, and he had to leave it in favour of ducking out of the way of the next swing. The man was barely controlled, obviously untrained- Steve rolled to the side and unsheathed his knife, going in quickly and brutally to the exposed area of the soldier’s neck. He fell immediately, and Steve wiped the smattering of blood off his face before collecting his gun and moving on, ducking down toward a group of downed soldiers and stealing some more ammo from their utility belts as he went.

There was another explosion that went off ahead of him, and Steve jerked his head up, starting off running toward it. That suit was strong, but Steve had no idea exactly how much it could withstand. When he heard another explosion in retaliation barely even five seconds later, his feet sped up further. Jesus, he couldn’t afford to lose Tony now, not when they were both so close-

Gun up, he sprinted into the large, open area of the cave, where the light shone in through the entrance. He spotted Tony immediately, crouched down over a figure Steve couldn’t properly see. Near the mouth of the cave, there was a pile of smoking rubble and another man, half buried underneath it.

Tony was muttering something to the body piled on the sandbags as Steve prowled slowly into the room, watching the other exits and making sure no one came through without him knowing about it. When Steve glanced their way, he noticed that the man was the same person who Steve had seen earlier, running through the corridors waving his gun around like a madman.

It clicked, then. The guy had been trying to stall. And by the way Tony was looking at him, he had been a friend. Steve felt his heart begin to sink- it was just another on the long list that people Tony would have lost. Because it was clear, from the amount of blood that surrounded him, that this man was not going to be getting out alive.

He waited until the man’s eyes closed and his body went limp before he walked forward, gently
placing a hand on Tony’s shoulder. Tony tensed, lifting a hand halfway before registering Steve and then slumping again. His eyes were glassy.

“We have to go,” Steve said quietly, wishing he could do more to comfort him in that moment, but knowing that he simply didn’t have the time to. “We have to make sure he didn’t die for nothing.”

Tony glanced over to the mouth of the cave, and the look on his face was so full of rage that it took Steve aback. “He hasn’t,” he declared, before straightening up to his full height and then turning to the entrance where the light shone through. A hand came down onto the faceplate, and it snapped shut with a clang of finality.

Steve wiped the sweat off his brow and turned. “What’s the plan?” He asked in the end.

Tony paused, before turning to him. His eyes were blank. “You get out of my head, and you don’t come back,” he said grimly.

And then before Steve could even respond, Tony began to march to the mouth of the cave.

Steve blinked, and then jerked forward. “Tony- Tony, God, they’ll all be waiting for you out there, this is suicide-”

Tony snapped around, snarling, and then he shot out a hand to Steve’s chest, sending him stumbling backward. He tumbled over a pile of sandbags and landing on his side, his gun smacking into his ribs and making him wheeze. As he looked up, Tony turned away again, and then stepped into the light.

Steve reached out a hand, but it was too late. The bullets began to fire incessantly, and Steve just curled under the pile of bags, unable to even watch and see whether or not Tony fell under the onslaught or not. The downpour lasted for a good ten seconds, and Steve heard bullets clang off metal and bury themselves into walls all around him. Eventually, the gunfire ceased, and Steve jerked his head up rapidly, wild eyes searching for a body.

He found one. Still standing in exactly the same place in the mouth of the cave, as if nothing had happened at all.

“My turn,” Tony growled, and with a flick of his arms, he set the world alight.

Steve gasped, awestruck as the blazing inferno burst from Tony’s hands. He couldn’t see what exactly he was hitting, but from the yells and screams outside, he figured it was reaching its mark. Scrambling shakily to his feet, he pulled his gun into his chest and then crept forward, sticking to the edge of the cave walls so as to avoid detection whilst Tony went in all-guns-blazing. Quite literally.

Tony pushed through relentlessly, and Steve watched in half horror, half amazement as he wandered through the camps Steve had passed through, setting every crate and bomb alight with the flame-throwers. Steve knew that it was horribly dangerous: Tony was going to turn the entire mountain into a crater at the rate he was going, but it didn’t seem to bother him. He just kept going and going and going.

Steve spotted a gunner scramble over the lip of the mountain and reach his post, aiming for Tony’s head. Immediately, Steve threw himself forward and out into the open, raising his own weapon and firing up at the spot until the soldier slumped to the floor. After that- well, he’d already given away his position. He might as well go all in.

Scrambling down the hill and bracing himself against the scorching heat of burning wood and
Afghan sun, Steve followed Tony’s path. He shot at whatever he could, taking down the men who were surrounding them on the mountain. They dropped like flies, unaware of the second threat facing them on the mountain, and Steve watched Tony’s head jerk over to him for a fraction of a second as he acknowledged Steve’s presence. The pause meant that he became exposed on his right flank, however, and Steve screamed for him to duck as the rounds of gunfire started up again, but it wasn’t in time- Tony stumbled at the onslaught, falling to his knees when one of the bullets seemed to lodge in the mechanism of his suit.

It was stupid- stupid and completely ridiculous, for Steve to try and reach him through the blazing fires and airspace that was saturated with bullets- but Steve did it anyway. Hacking up smoke from out of his lungs, he scrunched up his face and stumbled forward, fingers outstretched as they searched for Tony. The man’s name fell from his mouth, and then turned into a strangled yell of pain as he felt the slashing pain of a bullet graze over his shoulder. Tony hadn’t moved from his position on the floor, simply staring seemingly impassively at Steve as he fought his way over to Tony’s side.

Then, in a single second, Tony seemed to make a decision. Lurching forward, he reached Steve in three huge strides, wrapping a thick metal forearm around his waist. Steve heard bullets clang off his suit, and he gasped at the heat that was growing steadily. They had seconds until the whole thing blew.

He grasped weakly at Tony’s arm, trying to push out words. But Tony got in first.

“Hold on,” he ordered, and then without any other warning, Steve felt a sickening lurch in his stomach, and suddenly they were…

-Flying.

They were flying.

He opened his mouth in a silent shout, eyes on the ground as it disappeared faster than he could ever have thought possible. The heat was temporarily negated by the sharp breeze that assaulted his already sensitive skin, and Steve sucked in a sharp breath, hands curling so tightly around the framework of Tony’s armour that he wondered whether his fingers would make dents.

He felt like he was dreaming. He had to be. There was no way this was really happening. No way at all.

Arcing through the sky like a rocket, Steve saw the mountain-range explode underneath them both. He stared at it, feeling nothing but a twisted sense of joy. They’d earned that. And he wasn’t even sure whether it was real, or whether he had just hit his head really, really hard, but he’d take it either way. It was a nice thing to think about.

Then the jets in Tony’s boots cut out whilst they were still flying through the air, and the nice thoughts dried up pretty rapidly.

Steve felt Tony’s grip around his waist tighten, and he looked down at the now rapidly approaching sand dune below them. He yelled, and heard Tony do the same, both of them hurtling through the air at a speed that was surely going to kill them once they landed-

“BRACE!” Tony screamed, suddenly twisting them in the air so that his back was facing the impact and Steve was resting above him, encased in the protection of Tony’s armour. Steve shut his eyes and tucked his head into his chin, praying to a God that he’d abandoned years ago and just begging him to let them have this, please, don’t let them die now.
They hit ground, and Steve gasped, sand and heat and pain and-
He came around slowly, groggily.

Sunlight glared down at him; an overbearing presence that attacked his hazy view on everything and made him blink away tears that dried immediately on his face. He felt thick and heavy- buried waist deep into piles of hot sand.

He was alive.

Lifting an arm and looking at the now-wrecked armour he’d worn, he couldn’t help but laugh a little hysterically, head falling back into the sand in exhaustion. He couldn’t believe it. The design had actually worked. He’d flown. He was free, and in the sunlight, and-

-And stranded in the middle of the Afghan desert.

With a small groan, he lifted himself slowly out of the debris, feeling five different points of absolutely burning-hot pain as they spiked up through his body. The worst of it was coming from his arm- broken or sprained, probably- and the rest were either cuts, fleshwounds or just exhaustion from the three months of torture and near-starvation.

You know how it is.

He rolled upright and blinked out the dust and sand from his eyes. There were three things he was having horrible withdrawal symptoms from right about now: coffee, alcohol, and showers. God, he missed fucking showers. He felt as if he was covered in dirt and sweat- which, you know, was probably true, what with the whole ‘captured and tortured’ thing.

“Fuck,” he cursed through a hoarse throat, looking around him.

When he spotted the body lying next to him, he stopped. Rubbed his eyes a few times. Poked it to check it wasn’t just oddly-fallen debris or a hallucination.

“Fuck,” he said, louder that time, and the noise seemed to prompt something in Steve, because a moment later he shifted, before rolling over entirely, a loud groan falling out of his mouth.

Steve.

Jesus. Tony had been so sure he wasn’t real. Just a hallucination, like all the other times, except a little more… real. It had been too stupid to assume that Steve had somehow ended up in the same place as Tony, seemingly in order to launch a daring escape plan with him. Not even Tony was deluded enough to think anyone cared that much about him. Just taking the time to go grab him at the very end had been ridiculous- Tony had wasted precious seconds on that, on what he had been positive was just a figment of his imagination.
That being said, the figment of his imagination had killed about twenty men. That should’ve been the first clue.

His mind reeled as he stared down at Steve, his eyes slowly blinking open in the same way that Tony’s had done a minute previously. He looked… terrible. And that was coming from someone who had been tortured for three months. Steve was pale and washed-out, which contrasted badly against the redness of his sunburn. His hair was longer, too, and falling in strands over his forehead. He’d grown a beard, and although he seemed as if he’d actually buffed up more, he gave off an impression of illness that Tony just couldn’t seem to pinpoint. Maybe it was the lines in his face that had appeared since Tony had seen him last. Maybe the heavy bags under his eyes.

Whatever it was, Tony took one look at him and knew that Steve was not a well man.

His hands were on his chest before he’d even known what he was doing, and Tony shook him awake gently. “Rogers? Rogers, wake up, come on. I didn’t go through all of that shit just so I could drag your comatose body through a fucking desert.”

Steve focused on him, glassy-eyed and vacant for a moment before he broke into the tiniest smile. “Tony,” he murmured, “you’re alive.”

“Yep,” Tony ground out in reply, moving his hands away from Steve’s chest as soon as Steve began to come a little more into himself. “Seems I just won’t die, no matter how hard everyone tries, huh?”

Steve’s face fell like concrete from a top-story window. Tony barely even felt remorse- just sat up suddenly on his shaky legs and then backed away. Steve watched him, slowly sitting up with a wince and a wheeze that came from deep within his chest. He stared, eyes sorrowful. “Tony-”

“No,” Tony slashed a hand violently through the air, glaring. Now he had seen Steve’s face again, every angry thought just came rushing back, stronger than an earthquake, more encompassing than a tidal wave- it was a damn meteor-strike of pain, of hurt, and it slammed into his chest with the weight of something almost too heavy for him to hold. “No, don’t- don’t say my name like that, like you fucking care. You shouldn’t even… I have no idea what the fuck you’re doing here, or how this happened, but-”

“I came to find you,” Steve began, eyes flicking down to his hands. His shoulders were hunched, face having entirely lost the smile and turning right back to harsh misery. “…I heard the news, and I was going insane from all of it, Tony, I had to find you, I couldn’t just abandon y-”

“What? This was driving you insane?” Tony sneered, throwing his good hand up in the air. “It’s fine when you want to kill me, but no one else gets the pleasure, is that it? Well tough shit, Rogers, because it turns out I’m someone that more than just one person wants dead, and you lost your fucking shot at it.”

“Tony-”

“NO, no, fuck off. I’m… I’m leaving. Don’t follow me.” Tony shook his head and turned around, preparing to march off. Of course, it didn’t take long for him to remember one rather important fact:

They were in the middle of the fucking desert.

Walking off was going to be difficult. He stared at the vast and endless sand that stretched out in front of him for a good long time, before whipping back around again, facing Steve. He still looked
fairly miserable, but there was the tiniest little flicker of amusement in his eyes as he watched Tony point a finger at Steve threateningly.

“Fine,” he gritted, “okay, so it looks like we are… stuck together. For now. But I swear to God, Steve, I just shot my way out of a terrorist camp- if you think I won’t do the same to you if you come near me, then you’re fucking crazy.”

The humour died from Steve’s eyes, but he nodded. “Noted,” he said dully. His gaze flicked over Tony’s body, and then Tony watched the small and horribly familiar ‘V’ of concern start creasing into his brow. Tony knew what was coming before Steve even said it. “Tony, how badly injured are y-”

“Not your concern,” Tony gritted, turning away. “Get up. We need to start walking.”

Steve made a noise in the back of his throat that sounded suspiciously like the beginning of a complaint, but Tony glared at him with such intensity that it dried up the words on Steve’s lips, and he shut his mouth with a small clack. Instead, he just got unsteadily to his feet, wincing again and bringing a hand up to his midsection.

Tony glanced at him. No obvious bleeding, as far as he could see. There wasn’t anything he could do about any of the injuries he received anyway- it wasn’t like there were any hospitals nearby. They were both just going to have to grin and bear it.

“Nearest village is that way,” Steve pointed Northward and then looked to Tony.

“How long’s the walk?”

Steve looked to him, and then shrugged. “Three days, maybe?”

Tony gritted his teeth. He already felt unsteady on his feet, and he’d been stood up for two minutes. “Great,” he muttered. “Absolutely fucking brilliant.”

Steve just sighed.

They walked in silence.

Steve tried to open up the conversation a few times. Tony didn’t listen, and shut him off with growls and various curses to his name. He walked ten steps ahead and didn’t look back as long as he could help it.

He could still hardly believe Steve was even there.

It just… it didn’t make sense. And Tony had about a billion questions he wanted to ask, all of them tumbling over one another in their haste to make it out first- but his pride and his anger held them all under his tongue firmly, and he refused to speak.
The sun beat down on his shoulders, burning at the wounds, but he barely even registered the pain of it. He was still too busy rejoicing the fact that he was out in the open at all. Free space, not surrounded by memories of his bloodstained legacy. His arm ached though, and there was something wrong with his knee.

He let his mind wander to plans for the future. For if he ever got out of this damned country, and made it home. Shutting down weapons, for one thing, and for good. Never again. And then, after that, he’d try and focus more of his efforts on to green energy. As it turned out, repulsor tech was viable, and Tony could be powering his whole tower off it for in under a month if he put his mind to it.

“Tony?”

“Shut up-”

“Tony, no, please, can we just-”

“I don’t want to talk, how many fucking times-”

“I need a fucking rest, Jesus!” Steve snapped, and that, at least, made Tony stop in his tracks. He’d never once heard Steve complain about anything seriously before, ever. But there was pain laced into the annoyance of his tone, and when Tony turned to look at him, Steve was looking off to the side, one hand curled into his midsection.

It made him draw in a sharp breath, and he swallowed. “Are you- are you okay?” He asked warily.

Steve shut his eyes, trying to sigh but ending up simply wheezing instead. “Think a few of my ribs are gone. But I’ve got tape in my pockets, and I can probably wrap ‘em. That should hopefully ease it a little.”

Tony nodded, watching as Steve pushed a hand into his belt and then removed some bandages and tape from inside. Tony hung around awkwardly on the sidelines, trying not to watch as Steve gently tried to remove his shirt and get the bandages around himself whilst operating with broken ribs. Of course, he lasted about three seconds- Steve’s determination had always been an admirable trait to Tony, but it also meant that he just would not back down until he either completed the task or straight up died trying, and Tony couldn’t help but be drawn to the way Steve’s breath hitched in pain and his face scrunched up as he tried to remove his jacket.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Tony muttered after ten seconds of Steve just attempting to work off his clothes. He hadn’t even started on the wrapping yet. “Just... just fucking come here, Rogers.” He gestured rapidly toward himself and then marched forward to meet him halfway, eyes firmly on the ground and not anywhere near Steve’s own gaze.

“No, it’s fine, Tony-”

“Shut the fuck up and just let me help. I’m not gonna stand here and wait for a God Damn hour just for you to get your shirt off,” Tony snapped, and as soon as he reached within touching distance he was pushing Steve’s hands away, looking adamantly at a point over Steve’s shoulder as he tugged the jacket off and then worked on the shirt, unbuttoning it with brisk efficiency. Steve didn’t move, in fact, he was almost unnaturally still as Tony bunched the material and then tugged it over his arms, exposing his chest and stomach.

He bit back a gasp when he saw the state Steve was in. Mottled, dark bruises covered almost the entirety of his torso, and Tony knew without hesitation that there were at least two ribs broken
there. He had to clamp down on the ridiculous urge to press his fingers against the marks. “Shit,”
Tony breathed out, “why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Because you kept telling me to shut up?” Steve responded, but it wasn’t sharp. He just sounded
tired.

Tony had to admit he had a point there. He gritted his teeth and grabbed the tape from Steve’s
hands. “You don’t talk to me unless you’re injured then,” he corrected, “that’s the new rule.”

Steve sighed. “Okay.”

Tony had to admit, he was taken aback by the… submissiveness of it all. He’d expected Steve to at
least put up a fight. Maybe try and argue just a little bit. Tony knew how cutting he could be, but it
was only when he knew he’d get retaliation. This just felt worse- like Steve had given up entirely.

He ignored the part of himself that was sad Steve wasn’t fighting it. Wasn’t battling against Tony’s
sharpness, demanding to be let in. That part of him was weak, and if there was anything he’d
learned these past few months, it was that he could not afford to be weak. He could not afford to let
people get close when they couldn’t be trusted.

God, just look what had happened when he did. Stane had built an industry of suffering off it. And
Steve-

Well. They both knew what Steve had done.

He fixed up Steve’s ribs as fast as he could without causing harm, and then stood back and put his
hands firmly behind his back, not looking anywhere near the body in front of him.

God, he was so tired. His leg was killing him. His mouth felt dry and his throat hurt. Unlike Steve,
Tony wasn’t exactly at peak fitness right now. He knew, without a doubt, that there was no way
he’d last three days. He would barely even make it through one, at the rate he was going.

Looking up to the sun, he noticed it was getting closer to the horizon. Tony swallowed, looking
around them. Nightfall in the desert was horribly cold- and Tony actually preferred the stifling heat
to the familiar feeling of numb fingers and chattering teeth. It had been so, so cold in those caves at
night.

“You don’t happen to have any matches and firewood stored up in that belt of yours, do you?”
Tony ended up asking twenty minutes after they’d begun walking again. Steve jumped at the
noise, but Tony kept his face impassive. It was just a question. A matter of survival.

Steve turned to him. “No,” he said, shaking his head, “but I have food. You should eat. And there’s
a small flask of water. And whilst we’re at it, please, please can you just let me look at your arm, I
can tell it’s-”

“No no, this isn’t some excuse to start talking,” Tony waved a hand, “I was just asking-”

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“Tony,” Steve stepped forward, and there was something desperate in his face as his hands
hovered nervously, like he didn’t want to touch, but could hardly bear to stop himself. “Tony
please. I know, okay, I understand everything you’re feeling and I know I deserve it, but I am
fucking begging you to just… just let me help. Just for three days, let me help you, and then I will
never come near you again if you don’t want me to.”

Tony stared at him, mouth pursed into a thin line. Steve’s eyes bore down deep into his own, as if
they dived into his very soul. He hated how Steve made him feel. Even after everything.
“You’re hurt,” Steve said softly. “You’ve been through hell. Please, let me try and make it just a little bit better.”

Tony wished he was strong enough to say no immediately. To push away and keep walking, not stop, not turn around even once. He wished that it hadn’t been Steve he’d seen, for three months in his mind, whispering platitudes into his ear as they’d beat him, drowned him, spat at him on the floor.

But he wasn’t. And Steve had been there, whether he liked it or not. His presence had still been a comfort, and it was even now, even when it was real and the genuine, lying version of Steve was stood right in front of him.

He was so tired. Too tired to do anything but nod, once, slowly, and look down at the sand in self-loathing.

*I'm a little bit of a bitch,* Obie’s words echoed in his mind, *wrapped around his little finger-*

“Can I touch?” Steve asked, and Tony looked up to notice that Steve had moved, and his hand was now inches from Tony’s shoulder, tentative and nervous and gentle. Tony nodded again, and Steve immediately settled it, light and soft upon his shoulder. His other hand scrabbled in his utility belt and then pulled out a bar of something or another from the depth of his pocket, placing it into Tony’s hand. “Let’s sit,” he said, “we could probably do with the rest.”

His legs thoroughly agreed, and together they lowered themselves onto the sandy carpet, Tony’s hand curled around the energy bar tightly. Force of habit. If the soldiers had been hungry and they’d seen him with food, they’d taken it.

Steve’s fingers probed lightly across his arm, his wrist, and Tony winced when it hit a certain mark. He’d been holding it upright since they’d started walking, but it ached like a bitch and he needed a sling, preferably.

Seemingly able to sense this, Steve’s little ‘V’ of concern creased back onto his forehead, and he stared at Tony’s arm for another moment before sitting back and pulling out a knife from its sheath. Tony reared back immediately, and Steve looked at him in surprise, then guilt. “Hey,” he said, dropping the knife instantly and then opening up his palms in surrender. “I just want to use it to tear a bit off my pants and make a sling. Not going anywhere near you. I promise.”

Right. Yeah. Stupid stupid- at the very least, Steve wouldn’t kill him because Tony was his best chance at rescue. Tactically it would just be a ridiculously blind manoeuvre. Tony was fine.

“So sorry,” he coughed awkwardly, looking away. “Go nuts, Rogers.” His hand waved back to the knife and he sat back, taking a purposeful breath. Steve looked at him for a second longer, before slowly bending down and picking up the knife again. This time, he kept the blade facing his way, and quickly tore up a section of his combat trousers. The material was rough and thick, but Tony knew that it would work well enough. Either way, they didn’t really have a lot of options.

Steve held the piece of fabric in his hands, and then looked back to Tony, putting the knife on the ground some distance away. Tony eyed it up suspiciously. Steve was good with blades, he knew that from seeing him work with them. It wouldn’t be difficult at all- if he wanted to, Tony was a sitting duck out there-

He shook his head and swallowed that down. God, he couldn’t decide whether this was the three months of captivity or just lack of trust that was making him think like that, but he needed to stop it. He knew Steve wouldn’t. Of all the chances he’d have had in the world- when they’d slept in
the same goddamn bed, Steve hadn’t touched him. And Tony knew, despite all his sharp words, that Steve never would.

Steve loved him. Not even the loudest voice in his head that told him otherwise was able to drown out the evidence that Tony had seen, when they’d been together.

“Tony?” Steve asked, pulling him back. Tony blinked a few times, and then looked over to him. “Can I fix this on?”

God, Tony hated this. He wanted to hold his ground. He wanted to be stubborn and just tell Steve to go to hell, because it didn’t matter that he’d loved Tony, it didn’t matter that he’d cared, he’d still fucking done it and that was the point— he’d ripped out Tony’s heart and he’d barely even cared and Tony just wanted to be allowed his anger. He deserved that much. Why couldn’t the universe just let him have that?

“This fucking sucks,” Tony muttered, but nodded his head. “Yeah, go ahead.”

Steve sighed again, and then shuffled forward slowly. Now Tony had noticed it, the sun was setting rapidly, turning the desert a burnt orange colour. For now, the temperature was down to pleasantly warm, but Tony knew that soon the chills would set in. He looked to Steve, decked out only in combat trousers, a thin shirt and a jacket that would hardly offer any insulation at all.

“You’re gonna freeze out here, you know,” he declared quietly as Steve got into his space and gently began to wrap the band of material around his forearm.

Steve just shrugged. “I’ll cope.”

He wouldn’t. Steve fucking hated the cold—just like Tony did now, for that matter. Tony had brought his thick leather jacket along with him for the ride, luckily, and it might just keep in some of the heat. Steve? Steve was going to suffer in the night.

He didn’t say anything, though. Steve worked slowly and delicately, and Tony only felt the slightest twinges as his arm shifted. He didn’t say anything, but… God, the feeling of another person’s touch was nice. He hadn’t been handled with care in three months. It was something he’d missed more than he’d ever thought he would.

When Steve had finished, he sat back slowly and then put a hand back into his pocket, pulling out a small flask. He shook it, and Tony heard water slosh around inside. “It’ll be warm,” Steve told him sheepishly, “you wouldn’t take it from me any earlier, so… anyway.” He put it in front of Tony and then nodded, shuffling away again.

Tony eyed it, and then looked to him. “I drank a lot this morning in preparation,” Tony told him, “how much have you had today?”

Steve paused, and then shook his head. “No, I’m fine Tony, this is for you.”

“You’ve been held hostage by terrorists for three months, Tony, I’m pretty sure you need it more than me,” Steve told him with a note of finality. “Please drink,” he added, gentler and soft.

Tony glared, and then snatched the bottle up. “Thanks,” he muttered gruffly.

They sat in silence; Tony taking a small amount of the horrible tepid water and chewing on the disgusting calorie bar, and Steve sat in front of him saying nothing. He was looking around
absently, hair whipping around in his face from the slight breeze in the air. Tony didn’t watch him. He made sure of it. It would be a bad idea- he didn’t want to think about the way Steve looked, or the emptiness in his eyes.

Instead, he finished up the bar and stuffed the wrapper into his pocket, before coughing awkwardly. “Let’s get moving again,” he said hoarsely, beginning to stand. Good God, his legs hurt-

“Hey, no, wait,” Steve looked over to him and then jumped to his feet, hand pressing against Tony’s shoulder on instinct. Tony shoved it off, even though it hurt, and Steve reeled away again, guilt hot in his eyes. “Sorry. Sorry. I just… Tony, you’re not in a good enough state to keep walking.”

“I’m fine,” Tony growled. So maybe he wasn’t some Navy SEAL, but he wasn’t weak- “I can keep going.”

“No, Tony, come on, let’s just rest up for the night. You’re already limping.”

“I said I can keep going!”

“But Tony, you’re just going to hurt yourself more-”

“Oh, and you care now, do you?” Tony shot back viciously, “if I fall asleep, you gonna finish the job that Obie was trying to do? Did you come here because he raised the price on my head and you thought you’d take another fucking shot?”

Steve froze, and his face, if even possible, got a little more grey. Tony knew there was no depth in his own words- he knew, but that didn’t make the hurt go away. Didn’t make the truth any less unpleasant.

“You know I wouldn’t, Tony,” Steve answered. “You know.”

Tony stared off at him, and the desert wind blew in his face and his skin was burned red and his hair was a mess and his beard was too shaggy and his eyes were too fucking sad and he was beautiful.

“I trusted you,” Tony whispered, “more than anyone else in the world.”

Steve looked down. His hand clenched and unclenched by his side. “I know,” he responded, dull, quiet, empty. “If you think I’m ever going to forgive myself for doing that to you, then you’re wrong.”

Tony said nothing for a moment, then he just shook his head. There were so many things he wanted to say. So many. He felt like they were going to consume him entirely. Emotions were warring in his head- a vicious combination of I hate what you did to me and then, on the total opposite side of the spectrum: I’m still in love with you.

Steve had always managed to make him feel unsteady on his feet.

Slowly, he sat back down.

Steve’s face shifted, the ghost of a smile. “Thank you,” he murmured, like Tony was doing him a favour by prolonging this trekking-through-the-desert bullshit. It barely even made a difference whether Tony got his rest or not. He would be dead before they got to civilization anyway. Steve might as well just set off himself. But instead, he just got back down to his knees as well, keeping a
safe distance from Tony and then shuffling around on the fast-cooling sand, looking up to the sky. Tony watched as he shut his eyes for a few moments and breathed in - a deep, wheezy huff of air that wouldn’t have been satisfying anyway. Tony had seen him do it a few times before. He was centering himself, focusing up.

Then he shuffled around on the sand and began to dig with his hands.

Tony just observed for a few moments, before making a small confused noise in the back of his throat. Steve turned him, and then gestured at the sky. “It’s going to get cold soon,” he said bluntly, “there’s absolutely no shelter anywhere. I figured if I made a pit or something for us to lie in, it might conserve a little bit of the body heat.”

Tony blinked, and then hummed quietly. A solid plan. A good idea. “And when the sand blows and buries us alive, what are we gonna do?”

Steve paused. Then he just shrugged, looking back down and chucking a load of sand over his shoulder. “You can sleep. I won’t. I don’t need it.”

That made Tony roll his eyes and huff incredulously. “Uh, if I recall, you really do, Steve. I’ve seen you on no sleep, and it’s not pleasant. You’ll only get tired in the aftern-”

“I’ve had practise, since you saw me last,” Steve informed him, not looking over. “I don’t… I don’t sleep much, these days.”

Tony stopped talking. Oh. That was… it was odd, to think of Steve like that. He’d always been the one to try and make Tony get a solid seven hours, at the very least. He’d ended up making Tony a healthier human being just through exposure- Steve had been the peak of fitness and good habits, and it had rubbed off a little on Tony. “Huh,” he said in the end, nodding blankly. “Uh. Alright. But still- we can take shifts. I don’t mind not sleeping either.”

Steve shot him a look. “But you need it, Tony.”

“I probably won’t be able to sleep anyway,” Tony shrugged, “circadian rhythm got all messed up back there. Anyway-” he knocked a finger to his temple, “I don’t sleep much either.”

Steve said nothing, but Tony heard a small sigh fall from his lips as he looked back down. His shoulders were tight, his jaw clenched- every inch of him looked so tightly wound Tony thought he may just explode any moment.

He sat back and zipped the leather jacket a little further up. “You’re desperate to ask, aren’t you?” He said, dry amusement in his voice. “Go on. Ask what it is in my chest. You’ve been staring at it all damn day.”

Steve blinked, purposefully looking away. He brushed sandy hands through his hair, sweeping the bangs from his out of his eyes. “I- it’s not my place-”

“But you want to,” Tony told him, and then he almost smiled when Steve turned to him and nodded. Tony still knew how to read that man’s face like a book.

He ran a hand absently over the blue light that shone from his sternum. “I got this particular memento because of shrapnel from a missile. One of my own, actually. The pieces are still in my body, and they would’ve slowly inched into my heart and killed me if Yinsen hadn’t jammed an electromagnet in there and kept it in place. I made a few adjustments, after that-” he curled his hand around the casing and then looked up inquiringly. “You remember when I talked a bit about the arc reactor? Repulsor technology?”
Again, Steve nodded, and then his eyes widened. He stepped forward, almost subconsciously. “Are you saying… is that… but you said it wasn’t possible-”

“Well, turns out being in a life or death situation gives you a little motivation,” Tony said with a shrug. Steve was staring at his chest in half awe, half horror. His hand clenched and unclenched at his side, as if he wanted to reach out. Tony watched, waiting to see if he would.

He didn’t. Instead, he just said, very quiet, “does it hurt? The- the shrapnel?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Of course it fucking hurts, Rogers, there’s bits of metal an inch from my heart and half of my sternum had to be removed to fit in the magnet that would stop it- luckily I’m a big boy, and I can handle mys-”

“Wait, are you saying that thing goes into you?” Steve gasped in horror, eyes widening, and this time his hand actually got half-way up before curling into a fist and then dropping. Tony was starting to wish he’d just balls up and reach out for the damn thing. Not that he wanted Steve to, that is- he was just getting sick of waiting for it to happen, that was all. “Oh my God, Tony, that… how did they get that into you in that cave?”

Tony just looked at him, and Steve came to the conclusion on his own. He swallowed, and then raised a hand to his mouth. “Were you- you were awake,” he said dumbly, like he couldn’t quite believe it.

Tony didn’t want to talk about it. It brought back all the memories he didn’t ever think about- the hazy feeling of agony, the smell of strong antiseptic mingled with the coppery tang of his own blood, all over Yinsen’s hands-

“My turn to ask you a question,” he declared loudly, not looking at the way Steve’s face was twisted up as if the very thought of it was hurting him. Tony was probably just projecting- even if Steve had cared before, it had been months ago now. Those feelings had probably dissipated. It was easy to get swept up in Tony Stark, but he had learned from experience that people got bored of it fairly quickly anyway. Steve’s presence in this desert was primarily driven by guilt, and nothing else.

“Go ahead,” Steve waved a hand slowly and smiled, but it was too tight to be real.

Tony thought. Of all the things he wanted to know- all the endless questions that he’d seen thinking of since he’d seen Steve, which one of them burned him the most? Which one was driving him mad with being unanswered?

He licked his lips and swallowed on a dry throat before looking up to Steve. “Did you pretend to fall in love with me?” He asked, which was fucking sad- he could’ve asked something that at least sounded a little less pathetic than that. “At the start, is that what it… was it not real for you?”

Steve shook his head wildly. “No, Tony. That was real. All our relationship, it was all real. I’ve been in love with you for months and months. I promise.”

“If I’d have shown interest before that- if it had been when you’d still been trying to find evidence against my name, would you have gone along with it?” Tony asked, morbidly curious.

Steve paused, opening and closing his mouth a couple of times. Then he shut his eyes, and nodded, just once. “Probably, yes,” he admitted with shame. “Tony, you have to understand… I thought you were- you were someone you quite obviously aren’t, I wanted to do whatever I could to help the people who I thought were suffering-”
“Yeah yeah, whatever,” Tony said dully, because it was the answer he’d been goddamn expecting, so why did it hurt so fucking much? This is what people did. This is how they treated him. It was what he deserved, to be fair, so he shouldn’t really but complaining, but still-

It hurt.

When Steve said nothing else, Tony laughed. “‘Least you didn’t fucking lie this time, I guess,” he said, his voice caustic and sharp. He curled his hand into the soft sand and clenched down. God, this was a mess. It had to be Steve who’d come looking for him- had to be Steve he ended up stranded with. He wanted to yell and scream and fall back into him because he was weak, because he was still in love, despite everything.

Steve nodded in response to Tony’s bitterness. He just looked miserable, now. “You can ask me anything,” he said softly, “I’ll tell you whatever you want.”

“Were you ever going to tell me in the first place?” Tony snapped, the floodgates opening with a sudden and deep fury within him as he turned his head to Steve, face carved with anger and grief, “or were you just going to lead me on, make me think that it was real?”

“It was r-”

“Just tell me, Steve. You waited for months. You lied for months. Were you ever planning on revealing the big mystery?” He waved a hand at Steve’s general vicinity and then shook his head. “All the times you were busy at the cafe, all the late nights when you told me that you’d been busy with work- were you actually out there, killing people? Was there a cutoff point for you? A time when you would’ve ended it, because I got too close to knowing and you couldn’t let that happen? Every time you laid next to me and told me that you were going to do right by me, look out for me- and all that time you were keeping that from me? What the fuck was going on through your head, Steve? I want to know! I want to know why you seemed to love me so fucking much, but you were happy to just… to just break me like that, use me, I can’t-”

He cut himself off, gasping for breath and biting his lip. His hands were shaking. “That’s not what you do to people you love, Steve.”

He finally looked up, then, staring at Steve and then noticing that the other man’s head was bowed. He had his hands fisted in his lap and wasn’t moving, but after a second Tony saw a thin tear pool under his cheek and drop into the sand underneath him. Steve was crying.

Jesus Christ.

“All that time,” Steve said, voice wavering on the end of each note, “every moment I spent with you, I wanted you to know. You have to believe me. I tried to think of ways to tell you without it hurting you, I tried to wait until there was a good moment, but there just… wasn’t one. Instead, there was Daniel, and then Stane gave me the stupid chip with all the evidence on it, and I thought- I thought you had just been playing me all that time, so I got angry and I hurt you and- and everything that happened after that, it’s on me. I know it is. I ruined you, Tony, and please, believe me when I say that I ruined myself along the way.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, real fucking comforting, Steve.”

“That’s not what I-” Steve ran a hand over his face, brushing off the tears and breathing in sharply, “that’s not what I meant. You… Tony, God, you became my entire world in less than a year, do you know that? I gave it up for you.” He laughed, and it was a bitter, bitter thing, “I stopped. For years, I’d been protecting the streets in the only way I knew I could- killing all the bad guys where
the law wasn’t able to touch them. I never enjoyed it. I didn’t want to. But I thought that was all I had. That was the only way I could possibly make a difference in life. So I’d get up every day, and I’d shoot some domestic terrorist or child smuggler, and I’d be reminded of how shit the world was, and then I’d go home. That was it. That was my life.”

He bowed his head for a moment, and then looked up at Tony with wet eyes. “And then I meet you, and at first I hate you- I think you’re everything I despise in the world, and that you’re profiting off the suffering of others, and that you don’t care for anyone but yourself. I say I’m going to take you out, because no-one else will. Because there are so many people relying on me to protect them, and I can’t let them down.”

Steve’s face softened, then; the ghost of memories as they trailed through his mind. He glanced down, a hand reaching into the the pocket of his trousers and pulling out his wallet. Tony watched him as he tugged out a square photograph, rough around the edges, and then held it carefully between two fingers. He couldn’t see what was on it until Steve turned it around- it was a blurry snapshot of both of them, surrounded by wrinkled bedsheets and white pillows. Tony’s face was stretched out in a laugh that he hadn’t seen in a long time, and his hand was a blur, on the way to try and cover his sleepy face from the lens of the camera. Only half of Steve’s face was visible, and it was tilted in Tony’s direction, looking down at him with… with such a look of adoration on his face that it took Tony’s breath away for a moment. His eyes were soft, his hair messy, and his hand curled around Tony’s back, gripping his shoulder.

They looked so happy.

“But you just walk in there, and you not only change my mind about the type of person you are-” Steve smoothed a thumb across where Tony’s face lay, “but you change the way I see the entire world. You turn my whole life upside down. And suddenly I find myself hopelessly, completely in love with you. And way in over my head.”

Steve shut his eyes again, and he curled his hand back in, put the photo inside his pocket once more. “I wanted you to be happy,” he said, “more than anything, I just wanted… and I thought I could do that. There was the selfish side of it all as well- I wanted my own shot at happiness too. But it just… I destroyed both of us instead. And that is something I will never forgive myself for. Because I- maybe I deserve it. Maybe that was my penance. But you, you never deserved something like me to happen to you.”

Steve said it with such conviction, such a strong self-hatred in his voice that it took Tony back a little. He shut down briefly, simply staring as Steve just clenched his jaw and glared out into the horizon. They sat there in silence for a while- too long to be comfortable, until Tony coughed and shuffled a little, blinking rapidly and trying to formulate something to respond to that.

“You hurt me, so much,” he admitted in the end, and then watched Steve flinch and open his mouth, ready to undoubtedly apologize, but Tony just shook his head and then caught his eye.

“But you made me happier than anyone else ever did, too. And you loved me more than anyone else ever has as well.”

Tony managed to keep eye contact with Steve for all of two seconds before it became too stifling, and he flitted his gaze away with a vague shrug. “I’m not sure what that says about me, honestly, you were trying to kill me and I fell in love? God- good way to spot the kid who had abandonment issues, huh?” He laughed weakly and shook his head. His arm was aching and his shoulders hurt from sunburn, his hair was a goddamn mess and he hadn’t showered in over a week. But if he looked up, he knew how Steve would be looking at him. Like he was the brightest thing in the universe. Like he was fucking special, for some stupid reason.
“I decided to give it up,” Steve said after another pause. “The contract killings. Even before- before you left. I’d been going to stop, and focus on the cafe- settle down into normalcy, see how far I could make it with you before you realised how much of a Goddamn mess I was and kicked me out. You made me want to try, Tony.”

God, he was tired.

His heart felt so heavy, and there were too many things in his brain. The weight of the world on his shoulders. The blood of… God, of thousands on his hands. He’d been put through more in this year than he probably had in his entire life, and more than anything he just wanted to fucking rest, to ignore all of it until he woke up one day and it went away. This hurt. All of it just fucking hurt.

But it wasn’t going to. He’d spent all of his life ignoring it, and look where it had got him. He had to stand up one day. He had to wake up.

“I tried so hard to not to love you,” Tony told him, half of his brain screaming at him to just shut up, stop giving things away to someone who probably didn’t even care and certainly couldn’t be trusted, “in the beginning- when you first came. I tried not to fall for you. I knew it wouldn’t work out. I knew it wouldn’t work out. I knew that you weren’t stupid enough to stick around for long. I did it anyway.”

Got you wrapped around his little finger, his personal little bitch-

“And then after,” Tony drove on, refusing to be listen to the sharp little voice in his head that told him Steve didn’t care, Steve never cared, why are you saying all this- “after, when I found out who you were, I drank and I drank and I drank so much, and I told myself that it would flush you out of my system, that I would stop loving you. I promised myself I’d get over you. I would fall out of love in the same way I’d managed to fall so fast into it.”

Tony shook his head and looked up again. “Didn’t work out either,” he said.

Steve froze.

“You made me feel like a goddamn fool,” Tony told him, “you lied and you betrayed me, and for so long I believed that you had only been there for the same reason that everyone else who’d ‘loved’ me had- an ulterior motive. In your case, actually fucking ending my life, which, you know, sucked to think about.” He shrugged, fingers trailing through the now-cool sand. The sun would set soon. He already felt exhausted, and knew that despite his earlier promises, it was going to be difficult to stay awake. “And then you are the one that’s in my head when they torture me, telling me to just hold on. You’re the one that… fuck, Steve, you seriously traveled across the world and tracked me down and then went on some ridiculous solo suicide mission to try save me, like what the fuck was that about? What if I hadn’t had the suit, huh? What the fuck would you have done?”

Steve paused, and then huffed in amusement. “Honestly, I, uhh… didn’t really give it much thought. Jumping out of the chopper was a rather spontaneous choice, and then everything else was just made up as I went, I guess.”

Tony felt his eyebrows lift. “Jumped out of a…” he blinked, and then ran a hand through his hair, laughing a little hysterically, “God, you know what Steve, I don’t even want to know. Fuck-” He started laughing earnest, then, and heard Steve’s own chuckles from across him. “Fuck, Steve, we’re in a fucking desert, we’re stranded in a fucking… and we both just made a daring escape out of a terrorist cave, and God, fuck, everything is so fucked up, it’s cold and I hate the cold now, and Yinsen’s… Oh, God-”
And suddenly his laughter wasn’t laughter any more.

Steve’s own quiet laughter petered out quickly as he realised Tony was no longer joining him—instead, his own hands curled into his face and he bent low, feeling the tears spring into his eyes. Shock. It was the shock, that’s what this was, it was the fucking shock, everything was finally catching up to him, fuck, fuck, fuck—

“Hey, hey—” he felt warm hands press against his own, not pulling them away from his face, but pressing them into the cracks, linking them together, “hey, just breathe, just breathe. Focus. You’re alive. You’ve made it out. Everything else can be worked on, but you’re here now. You’re out. I’ve… I’ve got you.”

Tony wheezed— an ugly, throaty sob ripping from his throat as he rocked forward, falling into the source of the warmth. He really did hate the cold, and the sun was sinking, Tony couldn’t bear it. And Steve… he smelt like sweat and dirt and yet, still, there was that little bit of home that he carried around with him.

Steve barely even waited a second to react, wrapping his arms gently around Tony’s shoulders and dropping his cheek into Tony’s hair. He rocked them slowly, his whole body like a shield to the rest of the world. Just for a moment, Tony could forget. He could pretend that nothing had happened, that nothing was fractured— it was just him and Steve, together, in the way Tony had always wanted them to be. It was simple. It was just love.

“You’re gonna get home,” Steve whispered, “I promise. You’re going to make it back, you’re going to make all the wrongs right again, and you’re going to be okay.”

*I’m not even going to make it another 24 hours*, Tony thought miserably, but did not voice. Steve would only tell him he was wrong, that they’d beat the odds, that he’d make sure that didn’t happen. Like Steve had some control over the fucking universe or something.

Instead, he just clung on. Let Steve hold him, and let himself be held.

At some point, he felt Steve move them; guide them into the stupid fucking pit he’d made like that would make the tiniest amount of difference at all, and then slowly pull Tony down into a lying position, arms still curled into him. Tony buried into his chest like he’d done when they’d shared a bed, what felt like so long ago now.

His cries quietened after a little while, subsiding as Steve ran his fingertips softly over the skin of Tony’s arms, his back, the base of his neck. He’d used to do that a lot, too— he knew that it soothed Tony, and so had taken the time to indulge him with it whenever possible.

They traced each wound— the scars from where they’d beat him on his back, the electric burns and the days-old blood that he hadn’t been able to wash off yet. Slowly, Tony felt him inch his way closer to his heart, to the reactor. Each touch closer was a request, waiting for Tony to stop him. Tony did not. He wasn’t sure why— maybe he just wanted the feeling of Steve’s warmth over it. The metal was a terrible insulator, and it lost heat faster than any other part of him.

“God,” Steve murmured, breath ghosting over Tony’s forehead. “What the hell did they do to you in there?”

Tony shook his head, thinking of the water and the freezing cold and the jeers, the humiliation, the beatings.

*What I deserved to have done to me.*
Tony opened his eyes to stars, and he glanced up at them. They were really beautiful- a clear, undiluted sky full of glittering white dots. He wondered how long he’d been drifting in Steve’s arms- long enough that the last vestiges of light had disappeared, taking the heat with it. In fact, he could feel Steve shivering around him; vibrating silently and without complaint as Tony lay snuggled within his embrace, thick leather jacket keeping his body insulated.

He sighed, and then sat up a little, not looking at Steve as he hurriedly shucked off the coat and then spread it wide, before lying back down and covering them both in it. Steve made his Concerned Face again, and it looked like he was ready to argue until Tony clamped a hand around his mouth, just looking at him, unimpressed.

“I’m still mad at you,” he declared in the short silence the followed, “understood?”

Steve said nothing, but nodded slowly. Tony looked up at him; they were pressed close to one another in order to stay warm, and so it meant that Tony’s forehead was almost touching Steve’s nose. “This is just to keep warm.”

Again, Steve nodded once.

“I’m going to yell at you again in the morning.”

Another nod.

Tony sighed, finally dropping his hand. Steve ran his tongue over his lips almost subconsciously, and Tony tried not to feel the age-old burn of want run through his spine. This was literally the worst time and place for that. And he meant what he said about still being mad. He was fucking furious. This wasn’t going to be fixed easily.

But if they got out…

Well. They had the rest of their lives to maybe try and work something out.

“Wake me when it’s my turn to take the shift,” Tony murmured, sinking down into Steve’s chest and curling his hands into the warmth that pooled there.

Steve’s thumb stroked across the back of Tony’s neck. “I won’t,” he responded, and when Tony shot him another unimpressed stare, Steve just shrugged. “I promised I wasn’t going to lie any more, didn’t I?”

Well. Tony couldn’t argue with that.

“Still mad, remember,” he breathed out, and then shut his eyes. “Gonna kill you when we get home.”

“Okay.”

“ ‘mean it.”

“I don’t doubt you. Focus on getting home first though, yeah?”

Tony sighed in irritation. “Shut up,” he said grudgingly, for no other reason than the fact that he was still angry. He was allowed. Steve didn’t say anything to that, but Tony felt him nod once, just above his head.
He fell asleep laughing.

Dammit.

_____Steve_____

During the night, Tony woke a few times.

Well. Not really ‘woke’, but… his sleep was disturbed by dreams. Steve heard him beg a few times, soft little ‘no’s, small shudders. Each one of them broke his heart to hear, and he contented himself with simply running soothing fingers across Tony’s cool skin and whispering affirmations into his hair.

“It’s okay, shhh,” he murmured when Tony whimpered for the fourth time in fives minutes. The night was bitterly cold, and Steve was doing his best to cover Tony’s body as completely as he could to try and conserve some of his heat, but he felt as if it wasn’t doing all that much good.

He focused on what he was going to do when he got his hands on Obadiah Stane, instead, and let his hands run across Tony’s back until the whimpering stopped and he fell back into deep sleep once more.

The following morning, after the cold had finally begun to let up and the first trickles of light had started creeping over the horizon, Steve sat up. He got quietly out of the small gap in which he and Tony had both been lying in and then went to check on the moisture trap he’d rigged up last night. There was a pitiful supply of dew that had gathered, but Steve figured it was better than nothing and filtered it into the flask he’d propped underneath his little system. He was still cold- his entire body felt stiff and frozen, in fact- but the sun was beginning to rise, and he knew that soon the heat would return in full force.

His head turned to Tony, still curled up on the ground, the leather jacket pressed tightly around him. He was so thin. And… small. He’d been a giant in that suit of his, but now, with only the barren vastness of the desert to compare him against, he seemed so fragile. And he knew that Tony would yell at him if he ever heard those words come out of Steve’s mouth, but that didn’t mean they weren’t true.

They needed to get out of there. Fast.

Getting back to his knees, he gently shook Tony awake, whispering his name softly and making sure not to jostle his injured shoulder. It turned out to be futile anyway- as soon as Tony sensed he was being moved, he jerked upright wildly, hands going out to his face. Steve snatched his own fingers away rapidly, heart burning. The flinching was… horrible to watch. Tony had never done that before, but now- now he had tics. He looked over his shoulder every three seconds. He jumped when Steve moved too fast. And Jesus, what Steve would do for a one-on-one with the fucks that had laid their hands on him, that had scared and hurt and broken him like that.

But he couldn’t. He was pretty sure no one had survived that explosion.
“Hey, it’s okay, it’s just me,” Steve assured him, his own hands going up in a show of peace, “it’s just me, Tony, you’re alright.”

Brown eyes locked onto his own for a moment, tense and terrified, before they blinked slowly and then dropped. Tony sighed. “Right. Yeah. You.”

Steve ignored the apparent disdain in Tony’s voice. Obviously the anger hadn’t quite worn off yet, which was understandable. Steve had been trying to kill him six months ago.

Ha. Talk about dysfunctional.

“Drink,” Steve told him, placing the flask under Tony’s chin, “we should set off quick, get some walking in before the sun rises fully.”

Tony flicked his gaze over to the horizon and grimaced, swallowing down and then looking to the container. Dirty, shaking hands grabbed it, and he took a quick sip before gasping in satisfaction and then handing it over. “Your turn.”

Steve shook his head. “You need it more.”

“You’re no use to me if you’re dead, Rogers,” Tony rolled his eyes and then pushed the flask into Steve’s chest. “Drink up.”

Steve frowned, but Tony did have a point there, so he took it from Tony’s grip. Their fingers brushed as he did so, and it was nothing, but it still managed to make him shiver. Just like old times.

After taking a valuable sip, he pocketed it and then stood up. His shoulder was aching, and when he got back, he’d undoubtedly be getting nice and familiar with a hospital room once again, which sucked. Although, that being said- Tony looked far worse off. Clearly exhausted, he was already sagging a little where he sat, and he seemed grey in the face. His fingers were still trembling, which suggested something other than just the aftermath of a nightmare, and there were so many lacerations and burns running along his shoulders and arms that Steve wondered whether there was even a patch of skin on him that hadn’t been hurt in some way. He was going to suffer agonizingly in the heat.

His heart lurched, but he pushed down the warning voice in his head that told him that maybe Tony wasn’t even going to get to the nearest village. The voice was a liar. They’d beaten worse odds before- hell, Tony had flown himself out of a cave with a modernized suit of armour. If anyone could do this, it was that man right in front of him.

“How do you feel about walking?” Steve asked him, hating the fact that he was going to have to make Tony move around when he was in this state. Steve had no idea about the extent of his injuries- how deep they ran, or how much they hurt, and Tony was keeping a lid on it as well, so he couldn’t even find out. But he despised the thought of letting Tony hurt like this, and he knew that however minor the injuries may seem on the surface, there could be one ten times worse underneath.

Tony bit his lip and then shrugged. “Same way I feel about most things- mildly irritated and very unenthusiastic. But I can, if that’s what you’re asking. I’m fine.” He got to his feet swiftly as if to prove a point, and Steve pretended he didn’t see the obvious way in which Tony’s whole body
tensed, holding back a wince of pain.

“When you need to stop, we stop,” Steve said seriously. “I mean it, Tony. We have to conserve your energy.”

Tony just waved him off. “Whatever,” he muttered, before taking the first steps and then hurrying Steve along. “Come on then. Sun’s getting higher every minute.”

Tony’s pace was steady and his speed fairly good for a man on his last legs, and they trailed through the sands together this time, as opposed to yesterday when Tony had been walking ten steps ahead the entire journey. Steve was glad that he’d stayed this time. Maybe it was because they both knew that Tony might be needing the help at some point. Maybe Tony had just… calmed down a little. Steve knew it was a lot to hope for- but their heart to heart last night had felt as if it had meant something, and Steve wasn’t willing to let that go just yet. It was something.

It was a few hours later when Steve felt the first itch at the back of his throat again, and without thinking about it, he pulled one of his last cigarettes from out of his back pocket and then grabbed his lighter, sparking up quickly to soothe the craving. It was only when Tony audibly swore in disbelief that he turned, realizing the other man was staring at him incredulously.

“Since when the fuck did you smoke?” Tony blurted, eyes on Steve’s mouth. “You hate when Bucky does it. You always go off on those stupid ‘smoking kills’ shpiels.”

Steve froze, eyes widening a fraction, He awkwardly pulled the thing out of his mouth and then released the smoke almost guiltily, before turning back to Tony with a sheepish expression on his face. “I’ve, uh- I’ve been smoking most of my life, Tony,” he admitted. “Well. I mean, I stopped a few years back because I knew it was bad for me. But then…” he shrugged, waving in Tony’s general vicinity, “shit went down, and I went down with the shit. Old habits die hard, I guess.”

Tony said nothing for a few moments, and they continued to walk in heavy silence until Steve saw Tony’s head turn to him out of the corner of his eye.

“It really messed you up, didn’t it?” He asked, and his voice was… soft. For the first time since Steve had seen him again, his voice was soft. “I thought you were just exaggerating.”

Steve laughed. That was funny, it really was. “I listened to the voicemails you sent me every day,” he replied instead, shooting Tony a wry smile. “Each one. Without fail.”

Tony stopped walking for a moment, looking at him with wide eyes. He was staring at Steve in mild horror. “The… the ones when I was- when you’d-”

“When I’d kicked you out and pretty much gift-wrapped you for Daniel Jones, yeah,” Steve said bitterly. It was hot now, getting hotter still. Soon they’d be in the midday sun, and even Steve was starting to flag. God only knew how Tony was faring. “You were very drunk. You kept telling me you loved me. After, when you’d found out everything… it was fucking pathetic, but I just missed you saying it to me. I missed your voice. So I’d listen to them and just for a minute, I’d be near you again.” He looked down, shrugging. “Like I said. Kind of pathetic.”

Tony didn’t say anything, and Steve took a long drag before exhaling off to the side. It did very little to soothe him though- not that it ever really did, mind you.

“I never got to say,” Tony spoke up after a while, making Steve jump a little, “thank you for that.”

Steve blinked. “Uh- what exactly is ‘that’?”
He saw a flash of a hand as it waved through the air, a typical Tony gesture. “Well, I mean, you fucked up and then kicked me out, yeah. But I chose to go and do stupid shit. I chose to put myself in that situation.”

“Tony, no-”

“And then when he came and swept me away, quite fucking literally,” Tony pushed forward as if he hadn’t heard Steve’s interruption at all, “I thought it was game over. I thought… Jheeze, Steve, I thought some horrible shit was about to go down. But of course, he never got the chance. Because you… you came striding in and you just ripped him apart with your bare fucking hands. It was impressive. And you saved my life. So. Thanks.” He coughed awkwardly and then shot Steve a small smile. “I’d be in some deep shit if I hadn’t had you around, looking out for me.”

Steve said nothing, but in his head, he was disagreeing. He wasn’t too sure why Tony was even arguing Steve’s case for him anyway- he was still supposed to be angry. Which Steve figured he probably was. There was definitely still anger there, if only from the way he could see Tony glaring at him.

After a short silence that lasted a few minutes or so, Tony finally spoke up again. “How many of them you got in those pockets of yours?” He asked, as a hand rubbed lightly across the raw marks on his shoulder. They were starting to burn, Steve could see it- they must have been agonizingly painful.

He blinked, then felt around in the pocket. “Uh, just the one,” he responded, a little confused. Tony looked back into the stretch of desert and then held out a hand to Steve. “Gimme gimme.”

“What? No, Tony, you don’t smoke-”

“Neither do you,” Tony told him wryly, which, you know, was a fair point, “but I might not make it to the end of the fucking day, so you know what, I feel like I might just indulge mys-”

His heart lurched at the words, and he spun on his heel automatically. “Don’t,” Steve said, turning to him and stopping in his tracks. Tony stopped too, turning around to look at him with a sigh. “Don’t say that, Tony. We’re going to get you out, okay?”

Steve glared, and Tony glared back, his thoughts obvious in the framing of his face. Steve knew, in the back of his mind somewhere, that Tony wasn’t just saying that for dramatic effect- Steve could tell that Tony was on his very last vestiges of strength now. But it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter that Tony had mentioned that he was starting to not be able to see straight, and he limped heavily with every step he took. They could still do this.

But what happened when walking became impossible? Then where would they be?

Oh, right, yeah- two days out from the nearest village, and up shit creek without a fucking paddle. That’s where.

He shook the dark thoughts from his own head and audibly growled. “Tony, look at me,” Steve marched up to him and then lifted his hands, about to place them against Tony’s neck before once again stopping himself, and instead just letting them hover uncertainly near Tony’s shoulders. “You are going to make it. I promise you. I am not going to let you die out here.”

Tony glared up at him. “Don’t make promises you can’t fucking keep,” he snapped, “you’ve done
that before. Didn’t work out so well that time—”

“I promised I would keep you safe, didn’t I?” Steve asked him, “well that’s what I’m doing now.”

Tony huffed irritably, before rolling his eyes. Steve figured he was probably being cursed out an awful lot in the other man’s head. “Fine, damn, live in your pit of denial. Whatever. Just let me have a cigarette.”

“No.”

“No? I don’t think you’re in much of a place to deny me of this right now.”

“I’m trying to keep you alive.”

“Uh, you tried to fucking assassinate me a few months ago, dipshit,” Tony raised a finger and then poked Steve hard in the chest, “I think I’m owed a fucking cigarette from you, don’t you think?”

Steve paused, and then felt his face do a little spasm, caught between wanting to look guilty and slightly amused, despite everything. “That’s... not fair,” he said weakly, “you can’t use that as leverage for every little thing—”

“Uhh,” Tony snorted, “watch me.” He held his hand out in front of Steve’s chest and stared unmovingly until Steve eventually sighed and gave in, rummaging around in his back pocket until he pulled it out. Tony snatched the cigarette from his grip and then slipped it between his lips before Steve could even try and stop him, gesturing for a lighter. “Light me up, will you,” he asked, shooting a glance down at his crippled arm, “I’m a little tied up right now.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but stepped forward. He cupped a hand around the end and then sparked the light underneath whilst Tony looked up and watched him, his good set of fingers pinching the cigarette steady. It felt oddly intimate, for some reason, and Steve found himself unable to look away from Tony’s steady gaze as the smaller man looked up at him. Tony sucked in a quick breath and Steve watched the end of the cigarette burn orange, somewhat transfixed by the action.

He’d never found smoking particularly attractive before. But then again, Tony managed to make even the most mundane of actions seem unbearably hot.

Tony continued to look at him for a few moments, before smoothly turning his head away from Steve’s face and then blowing out a cloud of smoke. “Still mad, remember,” he said gruffly, and suddenly Steve came back to himself and remembered that Tony probably wanted a bit of personal space, so he stumbled away awkwardly, muttering an apology under his breath. Tony just rolled his eyes. “Let’s keep moving,” he declared, starting forward on unsteady legs once more. After a second, Steve composed himself and followed, keeping close to Tony’s side.

They made conversation as they traveled, in an attempt to distract from the steadily worsening conditions. After a short while however, it became mostly just Steve talking at Tony whilst the other man simply attempted to stay upright and keep moving. He talked about home- about safe matters that wouldn’t accidentally trigger anything. They couldn’t afford for Tony to have a panic attack or anything- not when he was already so weak. When Steve mentioned the fact that Rhodey was out looking for him, Tony stopped in his tracks and then burst out into happy laughter, looking up into the skies with a huge beam on his face as if Rhodey would be able to see it himself.

“I didn’t know whether he’d even made it out,” Tony informed Steve quietly, “I thought he might have... you know.”

“He’s fine,” Steve hurried to assure him, nodding, “and he’s close by. He might be able to pick us
up if he spots us. I told him the nearest known coordinates, and no doubt it was impossible for anyone to miss the size of that explosion. They’ll be nearby.”

God only knew what the Colonel might do once he set his eyes on Steve, but again, he could cross that bridge when he got to it. “And there’s Natasha and Bucky and Peggs and Clint in another chopper, and they’ll be looking too. They dropped me off.”

Steve had explained to Tony earlier about the rest of the team’s involvement. Tony had obviously worked it out himself a few weeks back, because he’d taken the news that three of Steve’s barista buddies were out there patrolling an active warzone with machine guns remarkably well, and with only a small nod of his head. Steve knew that, in the worst case scenario, his team was still safe. Their alibis were watertight, and on the off-chance that Tony did change his mind and go tattling to the feds, the only one they would be able to bring down was Steve.

In the time that followed, Steve told Tony a little bit about his past, carefully erasing all his friends from the stories as he went along. He described how he’d ended up where he had; told him about the army, about what he’d seen, about the way he couldn’t stand to see bad people get away with terrible things simply because they’d worked their way around the system. Tony listened quietly throughout it all, and when Steve looked over when he was finally done, his face was pensive.

“So you killed people to pay for the safety of other, more vulnerable people,” Tony stated in the end, voice hoarse. “Like a modern-day Robin Hood.”

Steve paused, and then burst out laughing. “Yes, Tony,” he said, “exactly like that. But don’t tell Bucky, he’ll never stop making fun of that analogy.”

Tony smiled, but it was thin. “You must really have hated me,” he said once Steve’s chuckles had subsided. Steve looked over, and Tony’s eyes were on the ground again. By that point, he’d pushed the jacket up to the top of his head, covering his skull and neck from the worst of the heat. It meant that his shoulders were beginning to blister, though, and Steve winced at the sight of them. He hated seeing Tony like this.

“I hated what I thought you were, yes,” Steve admitted, stepping further into his side. “But you proved me wrong pretty fucking quickly.”

Tony said nothing, and Steve wondered what was going through his head. Whether he believed Steve, or whether the doubt still lingered. Whatever the answer was, though, Steve didn’t get it, because a few seconds later Tony stumbled where they were stood, falling to his knee with a small gasp.

Steve swooped down immediately, catching him before he could fall any further. His heart sank to his shoes. “Tony? Tony, shit—what’s wrong?”

Tony eyes shut, and he moaned quietly, head sagging forward. “Can’t,” he muttered, “I can’t… walk any more. Too much. Too far. Steve, just… just go.”

“What?” Steve blinked, and then shook his head wildly. “Tony, don’t be fucking stupid, I’m not leaving. Come on, look, you can just… just stand up and lean on me, alright? I’ll support you. We can make this.”

“Steve, stop it,” Tony snapped through a small wheeze, “this is fucking hopeless and you know it. I’m not gonna survive another two days in this shit desert. I’m just not. If you walk, you might be able to get help in time and find me—”
Steve growled, actually audibly growled, and his hand curled behind Tony’s back, lifting him up by the waist. “Nope,” he said firmly, “not happening.”

“Steve-”

“Tony,” he turned his head sharply, looking down at him and feeling his heart beat rapidly under his chest. “You can say whatever you want, you can yell or curse me however much you please, but there is not a hope in hell that it is going to make me leave. Not now. You might hate everything about me, but that’s just tough shit, because I love you, I love you more than anything, and we leave here together, alright? This is not up for discussion.”

Tony stared at him for a few seconds as Steve clenched his jaw and looked down, cursing the sand, cursing the whole fucking desert. His skin was burning, there was sand everywhere, and he ached like a bitch. This was not a good time for anyone- and yeah, Steve really would love to just keep going as fast as he could until he reached civilization again, but that would require leaving Tony’s side. He’d done that once before. Not a fan.

“Okay,” Tony whispered, and Steve turned to him just as Tony glanced at the hand Steve had on his hip. “I… alright. Let’s walk.”

With a nod, Steve did just that, proceeding forward with Tony leaning into his side as they trailed down the next massive sand dune. With each step, it hurt. Tony was panting, despite the fact Steve was holding a lot of his weight, and Steve himself was struggling to take in full breaths as his ribs complained loudly about the new weight he was carrying. But Steve didn’t stop. He had trained for this, and he was stubborn enough to ignore the jolts of pain, the constant achings that told him he should rest. He couldn’t listen to them. Not when Tony was in such a state.

“Hey,” Tony whispered, and Steve wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand and then turned to face him. He was smiling softly. “I figured something out.”

“What?” Steve asked.

“You either have to be insane or just really, really in love to jump into an active warzone for one person,” Tony stated simply glancing up at him. “And I’m pretty sure you’re not insane.”

Steve just smiled exhaustedly, his hand flexing against Tony’s waist. “Took you that long to realize that, huh? And they call you a genius.”

“Shut up,” Tony laughed, resting his head against Steve’s shoulder. “I’m still mad, by the way. Furious, even.”

“Understandable.”

“Like I mean, really, really pissed. I might throw some plates later.”

“I’ll refund you.”

Tony smiled against Steve’s shoulder. “Sounds like a plan,” he murmured, and just for a moment, Steve could pretend that this was just normal, that they were together on the couch at home, and Steve had left the empty milk carton in the fridge and Tony had gotten pissed again.

But then Tony buckled, and this time Steve just didn’t have the energy to carry his entire weight. All he could do was slow their fall and make sure Tony didn’t land on his injured knee.

Tony swore, and Steve winced as his ribs flared up, but he ignored it in favour of steadying Tony.
“Hey, it’s alright. We can rest for a bit. You’re probably exhausted, and look, the dune is covering a bit of the sun here. We’ll just relax. It’s fine.”

He pushed Tony’s hair out of his face and then dug his fingers into his utility belt, pulling out the last drops of water and bites of the energy bar. Grabbing Tony’s hand, he curled the other man’s fingers around them. “Get some energy in you,” he murmured through a soft smile, and Tony just nodded mutely. He looked close to passing out.

Tony was right. They weren’t going to make it to the village.

Steve stood up, flicking a glance back to Tony before pulling out his pistol from its holster. There were three bullets left, and he had no other magazines.

It was stupidly risky. A fifty-fifty chance as to whether the Ten Rings or the Air Force would arrive first. But there weren’t any other options, and if Steve left it any later, then Tony was going to die.

He lifted the gun to the air and fired off two shots, hearing the loud bangs echo through the otherwise silent desert.

Tony yelped behind him, and Steve turned around. “That was for Rhodey,” he said with a tight smile, hurrying back to him and crouching down. “Hey, let’s see if we can make it to the top of that dune up there. We’ll have a better vantage point, and we could wave anyone who heard it. They’ll be monitoring the whole airspace around here. Someone will have picked that up.”

He didn’t mention which ‘someone’ it might be. Tony undoubtedly had already figured it out for himself. Steve took the now empty wrapper and flask from Tony’s hands gently, and then dropped them back into his pocket. The last bullet in his gun felt heavier than any of the others.

“Come on,” he told Tony, thumb wiping at a smudge of dirt over the man’s cheekbone. “Just a little further. We can make that hill in a few hours, I bet.”

Tony looked ready to say something else, but then he sagged and just nodded. “Okay,” he said, “better get moving then.”

Steve pulled them both upright, and together they began to traverse through the sands once more. It was thick under their feet, and every step felt like double the effort that it usually did on solid ground. It couldn’t have been a god damn forest they’d gotten stranded in, could it? That would have made things a hell of a lot easier. They’d have had food sources, water, shelter, fire, the whole damn lot. But no, instead they were here, in this barren wasteland, full of nothing but fucking sand.

They really had some shit luck.

An hour passed before they even made it half-way up the dune. They were walking slower than usual, in order to try and conserve energy and stop another collapse, but Tony could barely even keep his legs under him at that point. Steve was on the verge of panic- they were running out of time and options, and although the midday sun had passed, if they made it to nightfall, then the extreme change in conditions would only make everything worse. Steve didn’t know what to do. He was so close… so close to making things better, to fixing what he’d thought he’d never be able to fix, and now he was being beaten by the final hurdle. Steve was going to have to watch Tony die, right in front of him, and know that it was his fault-

“Steve,” Tony said suddenly, stopping them in their tracks. “Can you… can you hear that?”

He paused, listening out. There was nothing at first, but after a few seconds he began to hear a low whirring sound, a revving of some sort.
“That’s an engine,” Tony said, looking around wildly, “fuck, that’s a-”

Steve spotted it as it bounced over the peak of the dune, right up ahead of them. A single open-topped truck, with three men stood in it, sub-machine guns strapped to their backs. Steve knew immediately that they weren’t Air Force, and he felt the last trickles of hope burn out under his chest, leaving only a deep despair in his wake.

After everything. All they’d done, and the Ten Rings had been the ones who’d caught up to them first.

Tony seemed to realize that as well, because his eyes widened and he stumbled backward. “Oh fuck, fuck, no-”

The soldiers spotted them both at the same time he and Tony spotted the soldiers, and Steve heard the yells start up in the distance as they pulled their weapons from behind their backs. Steve saw who they were aiming for, and it wasn’t him.

He lifted his own gun lightning-fast, aiming as best he could with his last bullet and then shooting the driver in the head. It hit its mark, if only with an inch to spare, and he watched as the driver slumped against the wheel. He heard a smattering of shots get fired off, and pushed himself into Tony, curling around his body defensively whilst Tony himself just yelped and then shoved them both to the floor to avoid the spray of fire.

There were more distant yells, and then a crashing sound. The driver had died with his foot on the pedal, and sent it spinning out of control. A perfect shot, in Steve’s humble opinion. He heard screams, and revelled in them. A little sadistic, perhaps, but hell- they’d been aiming for Tony. They’d earned it.

Underneath him, Tony was gasping. “Fuck, Steve, more of them will be coming, we gotta… you have to go, do you have any more ammo? Come on-” Steve rolled over slowly, letting Tony up as he himself just slumped into the sand. Tony was looking out, down the mountain where the truck had rolled over and over. He pushed at Steve’s shoulder again, not looking down at him. “Steve, get up, come on, we don’t have a lot of time.”

Steve smiled gently. His hand curled around Tony’s on his shoulder, and he sighed. “I think I’m out of time now, Tony.”

He felt as Tony stilled completely, before jerking back to Steve, his eyes wide. “What?”

In response, Steve looked down.

His chest was slowly spilling red, blooming from one point and then trickling through the dirty white of his shirt. He looked back up to Tony, cocking a weary eyebrow. “Still mad?” He asked breathlessly, before his elbow got too tired to hold him up and he fell back into a lying position.

He knew what he could see. That was a fatal wound.

“No,” Tony said dumbly, before lurching forward, pulling the buttons of Steve’s shirt open and exposing the wound. “No, no, no, Steve, come on, no-”

“Hey,” Steve grabbed one of Tony’s shaky hands as it pressed against the bullet hole, “hey, it’s okay. It’s alright. You need to- need to get to the crash site, see if you can find any more weaponry, yeah? There are going to be more-”

“Steve, shut up,” Tony whispered, shaking his hand as he tugged Steve’s shirt off entirely and then
scrunched it up, pushing it down onto the blood. “Shut… you still owe me, asshole, remember? Fuck, fuck, Steve, you owe me you fucking bastard, you can bet your ass I’m still mad, just stay with me, stay… come on-”

Steve shook his head slowly, winding their fingers together over his chest and then gasping when he felt a sudden surge of pain. God, bullet-wounds hurt. “Figure maybe this makes up for it a little, yeah?” He said breathlessly.

“You dying most certainly does not make it up to me, idiot!” Tony shouted hoarsely, his hands shaking wildly as they pressed into Steve’s jaw. His focus blurred for a moment, and he struggled to keep his eyes open. “Steve, Steve please, please, I can’t lose you, not again, no, Steve please, I love you, come on-”

Tony was leaning over him, face screwed up as tears slipped down his cheeks and landed in the sand. He was even beautiful when he cried, Steve thought vacantly, as he squeezed their fingers together. The corners of his vision were going dark. “I love you too,” he whispered, “I promise I do. Never stopped. Tony, I… I made so many mistakes,” he choked, and then felt blood as it dripped from the corner of his mouth. “But this- being with you, loving you, going after you… it was never one of them. It was the only good decision I think I’ve made in years.” He laughed softly even though it hurt and then raised his hand, pressing it into the side of Tony’s face.

Tony leaned forward, head still shaking. “Please,” he choked, “please don’t leave. I can’t do this without you.”

Steve opened his mouth, but suddenly felt overcome with a wave of light-headedness that sent his eyes rolling into the back of his head. Tony whimpered, and Steve heard the sound of wind fill his ears, the sound of another engine- but he couldn’t quite discern whether it was real or just in his head.

He closed his eyes, and Tony’s sobs rolled over his senses, wretched and utterly desolate. Something warm pressed into his neck. “No, Steve, please, I forgive you, I do, please don’t go,-”

He squeezed his fingers against Tony’s weakly, thought about just how much he loved that disastrous whirlwind of a man, heard the sound of yelling in some distant part of his brain-

And then finally, finally, he felt the pain slide away into nothing.

Chapter End Notes

;)
There was blood everywhere.

Steve’s blood.

On his hands.

His face.

In his hair.

He could smell it when he breathed in, taste it on the back of his tongue.

It mingled with Yinsen’s, with his own, with the deep red rivers that flowed from Gulmira because of his own creations, everyone, there was so so so much blood-

“-calm down Tony, it’s okay, it’s okay, you’re safe, I’ve got you!” Hands grabbed at the material on his shoulder and stopped the arms that he hadn’t even realised he’d been thrashing around. For a moment, Tony bucked away from them wildly, trying to dislodge their hands before they broke a bone or shoved him under- but then something in his brain clicked, and he matched up the voice and smell with safety, with warmth.

Rhodey looked down at him, deep concern lining his eyes as he pressed his hands into Tony’s shoulders. They were somewhere dark, and it was rattling around with a low-pitched and constant hum.

Tony remembered. The… the helicopter, the military had found them. Rhodey. Rhodey had picked them both up, they were on the way to a medical base-

“Steve,” Tony gasped, turning his head and then biting back a scream when his arm spiked with agonizing pain. He was on a hospital bed, but that wasn’t where he’d been the last time he remembered being awake. “Where’s… Steve, where is he-”

“He’s on the operating table, Tony, you have to calm down, it’s okay, we-”

Tony shoved him away weakly, rolling off the bed. At his side, Rhodey yelled in surprise when Tony landed at his feet with a groan. “Stop it, Tony, you need to stay where you are-”

Tony grabbed desperately at Rhodey’s shoulder, eyes wide, terrified. “Please,” he begged, “I have to see him. I have to know he’s…”

Thank God that Rhodey was as good a friend he was, and knew Tony well enough to know that
this was what he needed, more than the rest or the hospital bed. Despite everything— despite the undoubted confusion he must have been feeling, the questions he wanted answers to, Rhodey simply clenched his jaw tightly shut and then nodded once, slipping a hand under Tony’s waist and then pulling him in, beginning to guide him out of the small medical room.

Tony felt pain as it exploded behind his eyes, but he clamped down on his lip and didn’t show it. His head was banging like a jackhammer under his skull, and the pressure on his leg was almost unbearable, but it was only secondary to the wild, delirious need to find Steve, to be with him.

Steve had jumped in front of a bullet to save Tony. Steve had bled out in his arms and told him that he loved Tony.

He might be dead now, for all Tony knew.

Rhodey guided them around a bend, where people in various states of dress were scurrying around. Tony saw scrubs through blurry eyes, and then perked his head up, realising they were near. His hand squeezed down on Rhodey’s shoulder, watching as they came up to a small room with a clear glass partition-

Tony’s breath knocked itself forcibly from his lungs, and he suddenly felt nausea overwhelm him, forcing him to double over and gag, horrified.

“He’s alive,” Rhodey assured in his ear, pulling him back up and then guiding his hands to one of the railings. “Tony, he’s alive. Just focus on that for now, okay? There are some of the best medical staff in the military on board this aircraft. They’ll do everything they can for him.”

Tony pressed his hand into the glass, watching as surgeons scurried around Steve’s unnaturally still frame, holding shiny equipment and pressing a breathing mask into Steve’s mouth. He couldn’t look away—stuck to the spot, seeing all the red and pink that smeared the hospital blues. “I can’t let him die,” he whispered, hysterical, “I can’t… that bullet wasn’t meant for him, it wasn’t— he didn’t— he shouldn’t even be there, this should never have happened—”

Rhodey pulled him into a tight hug as Tony wheezed, words failing him entirely at that point. His hands shook against his best friend’s shoulders.

Everything had just gone so, so wrong.

“Rhodey,” he whispered, “what am I going to do?”

The man said nothing, but squeezed tighter, burying his head into Tony’s hair. “Keep going,” he said softly, stroking up and down Tony’s back.

Tony tried to breathe as best he could as he watched them work. Rhodey stood by his side the whole time, holding him upright. At one point, he almost blacked out- but even then, he refused to let the staff take him back. He wasn’t leaving.

Steve hadn’t, after all.

It took what felt like forever, but in reality was probably under two hours, until one of the surgeons finally slipped out of the room, eyes going immediately to Tony and Rhodey as they stood outside. Tony lurched forward automatically, and it was only Rhodey’s fast reflexes that caught him from plummeting straight to the floor.

“Is he going to-” Tony broke off with a sudden cough, wheezing throatily and then looking back to the surgeon with watery eyes. “Is he okay?” He breathed, feeling as if he was balancing on a
razor’s edge by a single finger, ready to fall one way or another.

The surgeon nodded, and smiled tiredly. “He’s stabilized,” he said, and Tony audibly gasped in relief, sagging back into Rhodey’s arms. “Just about. It’s incredibly lucky we got to him when we did. A minute later, and he would’ve died of blood loss. But the bullet didn’t hit the heart itself, and we were able to remove it without too many complications. He is expected to make a full recovery.”

Tony’s face screwed up again, the relief pouring out of him like waves. “Oh thank God,” he blurted weakly, taking a few deep breaths, “oh thank… thank fucking god.”

Rhodey once more kept him upright as Tony finally allowed his limbs to take back the wheel. Slumping in clear exhaustion. He felt like if he took another step, he was going to just fall apart. Of course, that didn’t stop him- as soon as the surgeon stopped saying things that were relevant to Steve and his recovery, Tony turned on his heel and then reached out for the glass to try and steady himself. It was further away than he had originally predicted, however, and this time when he stumbled under weak legs, there was no Rhodey to catch him.

His hands hit the cold metal and he wheezed, but kept a grip on the railing by the wall. Rhodey yelled at him from above, but Tony’s head was spinning too fast for him to hear it properly. He noticed when the man lifted him up and started leading him away though. “No,” he shook his head weakly, pushing away. “No, gotta stay-”

“Not a fucking chance,” Rhodey’s voice was firm and blunt now, and his arms strong as he pulled Tony further from Steve’s side. “You are going to black out on the damned floor if you stay here. You need to rest.”

“Fuck off!” Tony hissed, bucking away again and then stumbling on his feet. “Fuck off, let me stay, please, I need to… can’t leave him, I have to-” He lurched away again, aware that he was acting hysterically at that point, but unable to stop himself. Steve had been all he’d had. He had no idea whether any of this rescue was real or just some delirious fever dream, but Steve… he’d clung on to that image of him for months now, and he couldn’t let go now, he just couldn’t.

More hands grabbed for him before he hit the floor again- different hands. Unknown hands. He screamed, jerking wildly away from them, but they wouldn’t let up. In front of him, Rhodey had his hands hovering near Tony’s face, saying things that Tony couldn’t hear, and then there was a cold stab against his neck and-

He was becoming woefully used to waking up in hospital beds, by that point in the year.

He knew he was there before he’d even opened his eyes. The smell gave it away- the horrible antiseptic stench that clung to everything and everyone who worked there. Then there was the sound of his own heartbeat showing up on the monitor somewhere over to his right, steady and at what sounded like a healthy rate.

That was nice. At least he hadn’t had a heart attack yet.
With a small sigh, he pulled his eyelids open. The constant thrum of vibrations all around him had ceased, and he realised they must have landed on solid ground sometime after Tony had lost consciousness. Although he doubted it was the US they were in- looking out of the window, it definitely didn’t seem to be a typically American landscape.

“He wakes!” Someone declared to his right, and he moved his gaze over to Rhodey, sat slumped over his bed. The man was smiling tiredly down at him, deep bags lining the underside of his eyes, and his hands were curled around Tony’s previously unresponsive ones.

Tony smiled back, squeezing against Rhodey’s grip. “Unfortunately,” he replied croakily.

Rhodey shook his head fondly, giving Tony a cursory once-over. “You look like garbage, man,” he declared.

“Well, you don’t look so hot yourself,” Tony tried to sit up a little, but then decided against it when his entire body seemed to spasm into shocks of pain. Guess he was still a little fragile, then. “When was the last time you had a proper sleep, huh?”

“2005,” Rhodey responded simply, before sitting back and shuffling in his chair. Tony laughed, slipping back into the routine easily. Talking to Rhodey was easier than anything else in the world, and Tony had missed it so much. Rhodey always made things better.

He looked over to his best friend, who looked right back at him. The smile melted slowly off his face, revealing the true concern that was hidden beneath, and Tony felt his hand as it tightened around Tony’s own.

“I got all the doctor’s who saw it to sign an NDA,” Rhodey said quietly, and he didn’t specify, but Tony knew exactly what he was talking about, “and I only let one surgeon see it anyway. I did the rest myself.”

Tony nodded slowly, glancing down. “Thank you,” he said slowly, shutting his eyes. Most of it still didn’t feel properly real- like he might wake up and just be back at home, and nothing would be stuck out of his chest, nothing would be burned or bruised or broken, he’d just be… okay.

“How’s Steve doing?” He asked suddenly, pushing himself up on the bed despite the pain, “is he okay? Nothing happened whilst I was out, right?”

Rhodey smiled wryly, and then jerked his head off to the other side of Tony. “Have a look yourself,” he told him.

Tony only paused in surprise for a moment, before he shifted around on the bed and then saw the cot that was lying a few feet away from his own. On it, and breathing steadily, was Steve. He wasn’t wearing his oxygen mask any more, and although he seemed to be hooked up to about double the machinery that Tony was, he certainly didn’t look to be on the brink of death.

Rhodey stopped him before he could swing his legs off the bed. “Nope,” he said firmly, “I’m afraid I’m putting my foot down. You have to stay in bed, or you’ll damage your knee further and we’ll be having to carry you off in a wheelchair. You want that?”

Tony didn’t take his eyes off the slowly rising and falling chest of Steve’s. “I guess not,” he admitted in the end, before looking down at his cot and then leaning over the sides a little. “Can you move me closer?” He asked.

Rhodey made a face. “Tony-”
“Please,” he said, shooting Rhodey his most pained eyes, “please, I just... can you just do this? For me? One teeny tiny thing?”

That made Rhodey snort. “‘One teeny tiny’... buddy, I’ve been out in a desert for three months looking for your sorry ass—”

Tony rolled his eyes and groaned. “Rhodey!”

“God, fine!” Rhodey sighed deeply and then stood up, bending down to release the brakes that were on the bottom of the bed. “Jesus, I see why Pepper tells me I’m too soft on you now.”

Tony just smiled sweetly, and then turned back around to Steve as Rhodey slowly pushed him further, until their beds were pushed up together. Tony reached out with his good hand, hovering just an inch above Steve’s chest and then settling, light as feather, against the bandages that were wrapped around him. He traced the edges of them slowly, keeping focused on the rise and fall, the rise and fall.

Steve was alive. Tony was alive.

They’d both made it out. In some miracle of events, they’d actually both survived.

“I have a lot of questions,” Rhodey said quietly, the humour draining from his voice as fast as it had come, which told Tony that it had probably never really been there in the first place. Just a show of normalcy for Tony’s sake. “A lot of questions, especially regarding him,” he watched a vicious finger jerk in Steve’s direction. Then he just sighed, and the hand went to Tony’s shoulder, squeezing down on the good part. “But they can wait. You... you can both explain to me, when he wakes up, alright? Because I- I am very confused.”

Tony snorted. “Understandable,” he admitted, “believe me, I was confused as well. And I can assure you, it was way weirder for me at the time.”

He heard a gentle laugh from Rhodey. “I can imagine, yeah.”

Steve’s face was slack and almost peaceful on the bed. He still looked too grey, too ill to be normal, but... Jesus, at least he was still breathing. At least he was there. Tony sighed, and then his hand slipped away from Steve’s chest, trailed down his arm and then landed on top of Steve’s downturned palm. He curled his fingers into the Steve’s and shut his eyes.

So. They’d survived the horror.

Now they had to get through the aftermath of it all.

It seemed the movement against Steve’s hand stirred something in him, though. Tony felt as something tiny shifted under his fingers, and then, amazingly, begin to squeeze back. Just the tiniest bit. Fragile and weak.

“Steve?” He whispered softly.

It took a moment. But Tony watched as slowly, a pair of blurry blue eyes peeked out behind half-open eyelids, and Steve looked up at him, barely even awake at all. That didn’t stop Tony’s name from falling out of his lips on autopilot, though. To the side of them, the heart-monitor spiked, and Tony giggled wetly as he leaned in further, despite the pain it caused him.

Behind him, Rhodey patted him on the shoulder and then stood up, walking away and telling Tony that he’d make sure they got some space for a little while. Tony kept his eyes fixed on Steve,
however, and the way his mouth was slowly but surely curving into a weak smile, and his hand turned around on the bed in order to curl around Tony’s.

“Hi,” Steve said croakily.

Tony laughed, shaking his head. Everything was such a goddamn mess- his whole life was falling apart, he’d been captured for three months, and now his ex-boyfriend slash assassin was lying there saying ‘hi’ to him after having taken a goddamn bullet in the chest for him.

He was sure his life had used to be more normal than this.

“This would be a lot more badass if we weren’t half-dead right now,” Tony blurted, at a loss for anything to say as he wiped a hand over his damp face. “Jesus Steve, If you thought I was mad earlier, then you’ve got a big fucking storm coming, you asshole.”

Steve sighed, huffing out what could almost have been perceived as a laugh as his eyes fluttered shut again. “Sorry ‘bout that,” he murmured, “am I dead?”

Tony shook his head, squeezing tighter around Steve’s hand. “Amazingly, no,” he informed Steve, and for a second he smelt the blood in the air, mingled with the sand on the floor- but he pushed it back. Time and place, after all. “It seems the Air Force and the Ten Rings got to us at almost exactly the same time. Pretty much as soon as you lost consciousness, the chopper landed. They pulled us both on board. Saved your life.”

Steve said nothing for a second, and then he hummed in surprise. “Oh.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too,” Tony said dryly, shaking his head, “do you know what the probability was that both of us would make it out of there? Do you know how abysmally, insanely tiny they were? I saw Rhodey run up to me in the middle of the desert I’d been stranded in, whilst you bled out in my fucking arms, and all I could fucking think was ‘oh’.”

He laughed, and then rested his head in his hands, resisting the urge to groan. This felt surreal. He was going to wake up any moment now and be back in the cave.

“We made it,” Steve whispered, and Tony looked up slowly as Steve stared at him, a tired but genuine smile on his face. “It’s real. I promise.”

“How do you know?” Tony asked, voice quiet and scared. He could feel his hands shaking.

Steve just shrugged. “I don’ have happy dreams. And if I were dead, then I’d be in hell. You wouldn’ be with me. Ergo… this has to be real.”

Tony stuttered to a halt, mouth clicking shut. He wasn’t too sure how to respond to that. Steve just continued to look at him with those soft eyes and the small smile on his face, and Tony realised that he may well not even be coherent enough to know what was actually going on at all. He had no idea how much medication Steve was right now, after all.

“I am so, so glad you’re okay,” Tony breathed, bowing his head and looking at their entwined fingers. “I thought…”

Slowly, he felt Steve’s hand tighten against his own and then pull, lifting them both. Steve’s lips pressed against the back of his palm slowly, and he shut his eyes. “I’m glad too,” he murmured into Tony’s skin. “Now I get to spend more time- more time makin’ it up to you.”

Tony laughed. “You know what, I think after you jumped into an Afghan desert and voluntarily
entered a terrorist village on your own in order to try and break me out, and then took a bullet for me, I can let you off the hook now.” He breathed in slowly and then looked at Steve’s wonderful blue eyes. Tony thought he’d probably fallen in love with those first. They were the shade of the early midday sky, except in the right light, when they’d turn deeper, when Tony thought he could see the smatters of stars glittering around his irises. “You love me, Steve. I… I know that now. And maybe we do have some shit to work through, maybe it won’t be easy. But good things in life… they aren’t. They’re hard as fuck.” He sighed, and then bit his lip, looking out of the window. In the distance, he could see hazy mountains rise up and surround whichever city they were in. “Seeing you lying there,” he turned back around, glancing once at Steve before looking down into his lap. “Seeing you jump in front of that bullet so easily for me… put some things into perspective. There aren’t many people in the world who would do that for me.” He raised his head eyed Steve with a small grin. “Figure I should probably hold on to the few that would.”

Steve held his gaze, eyes wide and disbelieving. Across the room, Tony heard his heart monitor speed up a few notches. “What… what’re you sayin-”

“Your stuff’s still in the tower,” Tony blurted before he could finish, “come home, Steve.”

It was probably stupid. Rhodey and Pepper were going to kill him dead- Steve probably had a hell of a lot of explaining to do before they’d even talk to him without giving him evil eyes. And JARVIS- JARVIS was not going to be amused either. Then there would be the whole publicity thing- now that Tony had hired a new bodyguard, Steve couldn’t come back and say that the reason they spent so much time together was simply because he was still protecting Tony. And Tony actually kinda liked the Happy guy, so he wasn’t just going to fire him for the sake of Steve’s alibi.

“I mean, if you want to,” he added on when Steve still hadn’t said anything. “I- we could just start from afresh if you- or we don’t have to… I just thought-”

Steve shook his head, and Tony snapped his mouth shut immediately, feeling as if his own heart was beating hard enough to press against the reactor casing. But when Steve smiled, warm and happy and a little disbelieving, Tony just knew.

They were going to be okay.

“I’ll go wherever you do,” Steve said quietly, truthfully. “I… I don’t d’serve you, but- but I prom’se I won’t let you down again, I swear, Tony, I love you. I do.”

Tony leaned forward, shuffling over the rails with a lot of difficulty until he was sat on the same bed as Steve. He winced in pain when it jolted his arm, but it was secondary to the desire to just… be as close as possible. He’d almost lost Steve, today. It was an image in his head that he was certain wasn’t going to leave him for a long, long time. He’d thought, before, that he couldn’t have hurt any worse than he had when Steve had left. But when he’d been there, when he’d watched as Steve’s eyes closed, knowing they were stranded in the desert and there was nothing he could do… it was worse. It was so, so much worse.

Shutting his eyes, he eased himself back onto the same pillow that Steve’s head was resting on, resting his head the crook of Steve’s neck. He was so fucking tired. There was so much to do, so much to fix.

But he had Steve. And right now, that was all he needed.

“Rhodey’s gonna punch you in the face when you get better,” he mumbled, feeling Steve’s head tilt toward his own.
“I won’t even stop him,” Steve responded simply. “I figured I earned that.”

Tony shook his head, sighing loudly. “This is gonna be messy, you know,” he warned, “I’m not… I’m not the same person you knew before I was taken.”

Steve said nothing, but pressed a soft kiss against his forehead, and then knocked his own against the spot where his lips had just been. “If you can deal with my baggage, I’m sure I’ll be able to manage yours,” he promised. “Just go to sleep for now, Tony. We’ll fix the world tomorrow, okay? You’re still healin’, for now.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but had to agree there. He was fucking exhausted- seemed he could only manage to stay conscious for short intervals before it became too much for his battered body. So instead of saying anything else, he simply snuggled a little deeper into Steve’s side, trying not to irritate the broken bones and fresh stitches as he did so.

“Fix the world tomorrow,” he agreed slowly, nodding his head.

He meant that. There was already the beginnings of an idea in his head- plans on how to take back his company, his weapons, his life. He was going to start helping people. He was going to make this right again.

But for now, Steve was right. They should sleep.

So he pressed a kiss to Steve’s neck, and he did just that.

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Coming home was strange.

Well. Strange was a bit of an understatement. It was ridiculous, but he felt kind of as if he was walking into a trap. Like it wasn’t real, and he was going to just find himself in a worse situation because he’d let himself be lured into a false sense of security.

He knew it was stupid. But, you know, those thoughts were difficult to control.

The first step on US soil had been almost overwhelming. Everything Tony had missed so achingly about the place had hit him, so forcefully it had felt like a solid brick wall assaulting his senses. The smell of hot concrete. The humid air. The sound of an American accent, the waft of a cool Atlantic breeze, everything, everything was there around him. He remembered it all like it had been yesterday since he’d last seen it, but missed it in the way you missed something that had left you decades ago. It certainly felt like decades, in Tony’s eyes. So much had changed since he’d last been here.

The smell of trash and corn dogs that seemed to linger on the streets was still the same though, at least. He was glad of that much.

His hand pressed against the casing of the arc reactor for the whole journey to the press conference, and for a moment, he viscerally missed the ability to just be able to take in a proper, fulfilling breath. It was something he’d become used to in the months he’d had it, and he barely
even noticed the difference these days, but sometimes he just took a deep breath and then realised that it wasn’t actually deep at all. He couldn’t even do that any more.

The ten rings had taken a lot from him. Go fucking figure.

As soon as he’d touched down, he’d asked for word on Stane. Apparently he’d been put on bail before his trial, but had disappeared barely even days after release. They hadn’t seen him since, and Tony knew the guy was a slimy bastard- he had unregistered holiday homes and offshore accounts and the whole skeevy lot- the cops were never gonna find him.

Tony, on the other hand? Tony would get to him if it was the last thing he ever did.

The conference was difficult to get through, but he stood through it with his chin held high as he declared Stark Industries was officially shutting down the weapons division, effective immediately. The crowd, unsurprisingly, went nuts- jumping to their feet and flashing the cameras in his face, asking if he was serious, asking if he would reconsider, this and that and all the questions, bombarding him at once. Luckily, he was used to it. He waved it off and tried not to think about the fact that the loud voices had induced a new sense of sudden panic over him, and sent him frantically wondering what he’d gotten wrong this time.

He was still on edge after what had happened, that was all. It would pass.

As he stood there in front of the crowds and the cameras, heart beating rapidly in his chest and hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, he was reminded of every occasion when he’d thought about this before- every time Obie had patted him on the shoulder and quietly shut him down before he was even able to finish his sentence, guiding Tony down the path he’d seen best fit.

But it had been Tony’s fault for following blindly. He wasn’t innocent here, not by a long shot. And even though he did intend to right things, he knew it wasn’t going to be easy. The road to redemption wasn’t going to be a straight and simple one, and Tony didn’t really think he’d ever be able to make up for the naivety he’d succumbed to before everything about his company had come to light. Maybe it was better that he didn’t, though. He hadn’t earned forgiveness from anyone, not yet.

Although he did have a few ideas on where to start, though.

‘You did amazing up there’, Steve texted him later, putting a smiley face at the end of his message like he’d always used to do- and God, just seeing it sent his heart racing, because it had been months since he’d got a text from Steve, and he was sad enough for that to mean something to him.

‘Tell that to the board please’ he responded, glancing up and spotting the car that was waiting for him down the road. He grinned when Steve replied almost immediately- seemed he was sticking to his promises, this time.

‘I have been told I’m very persuasive when I want to be’

‘That’s because you threaten them with guns and sharp objects, Steve.’
‘...Not always. Sometimes I just look mean.’

Tony laughed, wondering what it said about him that it had barely even been a week since he’d hated Steve for who he was, and was now cracking jokes about the subject matter that had hurt him so deeply before. Then again; no one had ever told him he dealt with his issues in an emotionally healthy way.

His phone buzzed again, and he glanced down at it. ‘Seriously though, just keep pushing through. You’ve got this. I love you & I’ll be back as soon as I can. I promise’

He blinked for a moment, the words still hard to believe even as he read them. Despite everything—despite what Steve had said and done to prove otherwise, it was still... it was hard, that was all. To believe it. He knew without a doubt that it was true—people who loved you never gave you that much power to destroy them, Tony knew from experience—but the memory of the hurt wasn’t going to leave too soon either. It had been a difficult few months.

But they’d work it out. He knew they would.

‘I love you too. Bring bagels when you get home’ he sent off with a small smile, before hurrying off and slipping back into the slick grey car that had pulled up for him. Barely even three seconds after, Pepper slid in too, shaking strands of perfectly smoothed hair out of her face and then sighing heavily as she got comfortable on the soft leather seats.

She turned to him with a look that showed exactly how amused she was by that stunt. “Thank you for the warning,” she snapped irritably, sitting back and then grabbing his hand, linking their fingers together tightly. “You’re a jerk. Do you know how many fires I’m going to have to put out here? Do you know how many board members are going to flip their shit? Do you even comprehend the level of—”

“Oh, it’s good to be back,” Tony said with a small sigh, leaning his head against the upholstery and shutting his eyes. He’d had three days of rest at the hospital in Kabul before they’d flown back, but he still felt bone-tired. He figured three months of torture did that to a guy. But even worse than that was the fact that he’d had to leave Steve behind there. He hadn’t been well enough to travel back, but Tony had needed to go and do press officially before it had leaked from somewhere else, so once more they’d been separated. This time though, Steve promised to answer his phone, and Tony was goddamn holding him to that.

Anyway. Steve had all his barista-slash-assassin buddies with him. And after they’d torn Steve a new one for jumping out of a helicopter on them, Tony knew that Steve would be in safe hands.

Pepper looked at him for a long moment, before just sighing and lifting a hand, pulling out her hair from its ponytail in one swift movement. Her other hand still held on to Tony’s. “You’re a nightmare, Tony Stark,” she said, but her voice had softened, and now she was simply smiling at him, slightly weary, but mostly just relieved.

He grinned back. “Believe me, it’s going to get worse,” he told her cheekily. “Last chance to bail before things start blowing up.”

“Mr. Stark, things have been blowing up around here since day one,” She swung her hair out of her face and shot him a look, “quite literally. I haven’t forgotten the car engine, you know.”

“Hey, come on, that was barely even a pop, there was like... the tiniest amount of smoke, don’t exaggerate-”
“Missing the point, Tony,” Pepper interjected before Tony could go off on a tangent. She looked down, and then shook her head fondly before leaning in and kissing his cheek. “I didn’t spend three months keeping your business running just to bail on you now. Unfortunately, I am in this disaster for the long haul.”

“Aww, sweetheart,” Tony laughed, “you say the nicest things.”

“Well, if what Rhodey told me is even vaguely close to the truth, then I really am sugarcoating my words,” she told him with a raised eyebrow. “If I see Rogers within ten feet of the tower I’m sticking a Louboutin in his eye.”

“Please don’t, I actually quite like his eyes.”

“Tony,” she said, serious now as she turned her whole body to face him. Her ginger hair shone like bright copper in the sun, and even her smatters of freckles seemed more pronounced. Tony had missed that face so, so much. “Are you really sure you know what you’re doing here? With him? With… God, with everything?”

He watched her face as it analysed his; flitting from his eyes to the cut on his cheek to the carefully hidden glow in his chest. She knew what was under there, no doubt. Her and Rhodey were awful gossips when they got on the phone.

He sighed, and then smiled. For once- for the first time in so many goddamn years, he actually knew the answer to that. Wholly and truthfully. And yeah, okay, a little fucked up that it took three months of captivity and torture and a few days of wandering aimlessly around a boiling desert in order to go about with finding that epiphany of his, but he’d made it in the end.

He’d meant what he’d said to Steve. He wasn’t the same person he’d been when he had first entered those caves. He was broken and he was bruised and he was better.

“Yes,” he said firmly, watching the cars on the other side of the road as they swept by, “I have never been surer of anything in my life, Miss Potts.”

*****

Waiting in the kitchen for Steve to arrive, Tony got an uncomfortable feeling of Deja vu.

It had been two days since he’d last seen him, back in the hospital in Kabul. Tony knew, even now, that Steve was pushing it by coming back so early. He was still healing, still frail from a goddamn bullet to the chest, and he really needed to stay for more monitoring. But, of course, Steve hadn’t listened to any of the doctor’s advice. He’d gotten on the first flight back to New York and had been travelling for eighteen hours on some shitty economy flight in order to come home. For Tony.

He looked around the sleek chrome surfaces, the perfectly neat chopping boards and pristine bowl of fruit. He hadn’t been in this place in months. JARVIS must have hired cleaners to upkeep the place whilst Tony had been gone.
Last time Steve had stepped foot in here, Tony had pointed a gun at him and told him never to come back.

He shut his eyes and turned to the window, breathing out heavily. The weariness was catching up to him- he’d stepped foot back on American soil and had been working ever since. It was hard work for a body that was still fairly fragile. Now, more than anything, he just wanted to rest. Let his mind relax, free of the doubt and the fear and the anxiety. He wanted Steve to come back.

Glancing down and looking at his watch, he checked the time. 7:09 pm. Steve should have been back nine minutes ago, that’s what he’d said. 7pm. And Steve was usually so punctual. Although, that being said, he may have just changed his mind- realized how big of a bullet he’d dodged by getting away when he had, and decided that it would better for everyone if he just stayed far away from Tony-

Stop it, he admonished, shaking his head. It wasn’t true. God, Tony knew better than anyone that the traffic in New York was a nightmare on a good day. Steve was just caught up, that was all. And Tony very much doubted that Steve would have fought so goddamn hard to get home at the earliest possible time just for someone that he’d been going to abandon again anyway. His friends were all with him and returning on the same flight as him, so it wasn’t like he was desperate to see them. Which logically only left Tony as the person Steve was rushing back for.

See? It was fine. It was fine it was fine it was fine.

“Sir,” JARVIS piped up, his voice softer than usual. Even his own goddamn robot was treating him like he was going to shatter at any moment. “Your heart-rate is slightly elevated. May I suggest taking a few deep breaths and perhaps distracting yourself with something? There are a few projects I have lined up-”

“No, JARVIS,” Tony waved a hand and shook his head, “no projects. Don’t wanna think about that stuff right now, okay? Oh- and I want you on mute when he arrives, okay? Please? Just… give us a moment, alright?”

JARVIS was silent, and Tony knew that if he’d had a human form, he would be shooting Tony a very disapproving look right about then. For a long string of ones and zeroes, the guy was remarkably protective when he wanted to be. “Very well, Sir,” he said in the end, voice just teetering on to the verge of petulance. “But please may I warn you, if he shows any threatening behaviour, I will be forced to react with extreme prejudice.”

Tony laughed softly. “I promise if he tries to kill me, I’ll give you full permission to kill him first.”

“Thank you sir.”

JARVIS didn’t say anything after that, and Tony allowed himself to fall back into his own head, thoughts and ideas and plans all flitting around in there like a kaleidoscope of noise. It seemed he could never truly shut it off, no matter how exhausted he was- he supposed that was just his own personal little curse. It wasn’t all bad, of course- made planning things for the future a hell of a lot easier, but still. It’d be nice for things to be a little quieter sometimes.

He thought of his workshop, downstairs, where the Mark 1 was waiting on the private server in all its bulky glory. Tony had big plans for that suit. It was slow and flawed now, in its first form, but Tony knew he could improve on it. And he had arc reactor tech now, handily built into his own chest. He could make that suit into something amazing, and he could help people with it. Starting with the village Yinsen had come from, where the Ten Rings were still operating in. Tony had to destroy his weapons that still remained around the globe. He wasn’t going to stop until every last
missile and bomb had been taken care of, and that was a promise-

He heard the sound of the elevator doors sliding open smoothly, and his head jerked up. When his eyes caught against the blue of Steve’s own, the air left his lungs as easily as it had come.

Steve was staring at him, a small, tired smile on his face. He was empty handed and wearing simply jeans and a plain white T-shirt. His hair was still longer and his beard still present, but despite the fact that he had taken a bullet to the goddamn chest, he actually looked healthier than when Tony had seen him last.

They looked at one another for a few moments, facing off in the large kitchen. Steve’s eyes flitted away, very briefly, to the countertop in front of him. Tony knew that he was remembering their last time spent here together in exactly the same way that Tony had.

“Hi,” Steve said, slightly tentatively.

“Hey,” Tony responded, equally nervous.

They continued to shuffle awkwardly on their feet for a few moments, as Tony waited for Steve to say something. He seemed more nervous than Tony had ever even seen him before, and it took three rounds of Steve just opening and shutting his mouth before he eventually blurted “So how’s things b-”

He didn’t finish it. He got an armful of Tony Stark before the words could even leave, as Tony crossed the room in five quick steps and then only managed to slow himself down when he was an inch away from Steve’s healing chest. Leaning up onto his tiptoes, he curled his arms around Steve’s shoulders and then pulled him in gently, burying his head into the warmth of Steve’s skin and breathing in sharply. Steve stood there for a second, before murmuring “oh,” in between a small exhale- and then his own hands wrapped tightly around Tony’s waist, pressing flat against his back. The nerves seemed to just melt straight off him, and Tony felt Steve sink into the embrace, pushing his face into Tony’s hair and breathing in the scent of him. Steve pulled him closer, uncaring of his wound, and Tony- God, Tony was too weak to argue with him about it, he was just so glad, so so glad.

He was home. He was finally fucking home.

They said nothing for a moment, simply breathing in and out against one another. Steve’s hands traced the juts of his spine, and Tony curled his fingers into the longer strands of hair that flicked around the back of his neck. Even standing there, Tony could sense the heaviness, the exhaustion that just radiated off him in waves. But Steve held Tony with a single-minded focus that didn’t falter; so much relief and warmth and love in the embrace that Tony just wished he could stand there like that forever.

“I missed you,” Steve whispered, so softly into his hair as he wrapped his arms tighter still around Tony’s slim waist. “I missed you so, so much, I thought I was going to go insane-”

“Me too,” Tony told him, murmuring his words against the skin of Steve’s neck, “I… I tried so hard to forget, but I couldn’t- no matter what I did, I- I just couldn’t-”

“I’m glad,” Steve said, and Tony could feel the tiniest smile against his hair “it’s selfish, it’s fucking terrible of me, but… I don’t know what I would’ve done if I’d come back and you
wouldn’t let me near you. It would’ve been torture—"

“Then don’t think about it,” Tony told him, kissing lightly against his neck. “I’m here. You’re here. Neither of us are leaving any time soon, I don’t think.”

Steve shook his head vigorously. “Not unless you want me to,” he said, before breathing out heavily. “Tony… Tony, I’m so, so, so sorry. For everything. I will do anything to try and make this right, anything, I just- I never- I wanted—”

“Shhh,” Tony told him, “not now, okay? We can… we’ll do all that later. Please? I just- I just want you to… just be with me. Here.” He sighed heavily, pulling back just a little, so that he and Steve were nose to nose. “I’m so tired of thinking about everything.”

Steve’s eyes bore into his own, before they fluttered shut and he pushed his forehead into Tony’s. “Let me look after you,” he said gently, “for tonight. For tomorrow. For however long you want me to, just let me… I want to make this better for you.”

Tony swallowed heavily, and then nodded. He was too tired to try and be stubborn or prideful, now. It was just him and Steve. “Okay,” he said through a whisper.

Steve smiled, and then his hands stroked their way up Tony’s waist, over his shoulders until the curled softly around his jaw. He opened his eyes and then looked at Tony, thumbs brushing lightly over his cheek. “Can I kiss you?” He asked, because it was Steve—of course he’d fucking ask that.

Tony rolled his eyes, pushing forward on his toes.

When their lips met, Tony remembered quite how much he’d missed it, only from the pure and visceral sense of relief he felt when he was finally able to do it again.

Steve’s kiss was gentle and sweet, and he kept it like that even when Tony pressed forward and pushed himself more firmly into Steve’s space. He felt hands traverse along his neck, around his shoulders, before centering themselves softly against the middle of Tony’s chest where the metal implant lay. Tony paused, glancing down and then back to Steve. “It’s not pretty,” he warned quietly. “I… the scars didn’t heal very well, it’s still sensitive, I-”

“There is nothing about you that isn’t beautiful,” Steve murmured, leaning down and then kissing the hard glass surface that was hidden beneath Tony’s shirt. “I promise.” There was a pause, and then Steve laughed quietly, looking up. “I was going to pick you up and put you on the counter but then I realised I’d probably burst my stitches. Which wouldn’t be very romantic at all, really.”

Tony smiled. “Yeah, no strenuous activity until there’s no threat of major blood loss, hm?” He suggested, his hand stroking along Steve’s jaw. “Your beard feels really weird, by the way.”

“In a good way?”

Tony frowned, and then shrugged. “It’s hot, but I think you look more like you without it.”

Steve nodded, standing straight and taking Tony’s hand. “I’ll shave it tomorrow,” he said, as he began to pull Tony off in the direction of the living room. “Have you eaten?”

Tony nodded his head, leaning into Steve’s side. This felt so good. This felt so… natural. Steve smelt good, even though the antiseptic hospital tang lingered on his skin, it was still just him. Warm and smooth and Steve.

God, he’d missed this.
Steve led him to the sofa and then Tony slumped into it, the warm leather cushions acting as a good headrest. He felt Steve slide his hand through Tony’s hair, and then slowly lower himself down next to him. Tony didn’t wait to be asked- he slumped sideways, falling into the other man’s embrace. Steve sighed contentedly, and his arm wrapped around Tony’s shoulders whilst the other pulled on his legs, lifting them over Steve’s lap. Tony let his eyes flutter shut, and he kissed the top of Steve’s shoulder absently. “I’m gotta do some things, to fix everything that Stane did,” he explained, as absent-minded fingers traced over the bruise on Steve’s arm. “I’ve gotta make it right. And I will. I have ideas.”

Steve was silent, but then he shifted, turning to look down at Tony. “Are they dangerous?” He asked, because he knew Tony so well.

“Yeah,” he admitted, “They’re dangerous. Possibly teetering on the edge of illegal. But I have to find Obie. And I have to get my weapons back. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Steve’s fingers flexed around his shoulder. Tony expected a counter-argument, a gentle reprimand. You’re not thinking straight, Tony, or putting yourself in danger isn’t going to help anything, Tony. Instead, Steve just kissed Tony’s temple and then kept his face pressed close, nodding slightly. “I understand,” he said. “I’m not letting you do it alone, though.”

Tony paused, before looking up. “Steve, I can’t ask you t-”

“You’re not asking, I’m offering,” Steve said with a small smile. “I want to hunt that bastard down almost as much as you do. And I know my way around this kind of thing. The rest of my team would be more than happy to help, too. We could… put our services to good use, you know?” He grinned, leaning back into the cushion and then looking up at Tony with soft eyes. “Might be nice to operate on the slightly more legal side of the law for once.”

Tony watched Steve’s fingers as they found their way to Tony’s own hand and then stroked up and down the joints, feeling them delicately, as if he was checking each one. Tony was hit with a surge of warmth and relief, and it was so fucking ironic- everything was going wrong, his whole life had fallen apart, but sat here, with Steve, he still managed to feel happier than he had in months.

“I love you,” Tony told him through a smile, “and if you want to join me as I burn everything that Obadiah built to a cinder, then feel free.”

Steve laughed, leaning up and kissing Tony’s mouth softly. “It would be my pleasure,” he muttered against Tony’s lips. “We could be the ‘The Avengers 2.0’”

That made Tony roll his eyes. God, how many times had he seen that nickname in the papers? That had been Steve, all that time- and each one of those occasions in which Tony had seen it, he’d said the same thing: “That’s a shit name.”

“Yeah, well tough, because that’s what we’re known by now. We can’t really declare a new one in case we, y’know, get arrested for multiple homicides.”

“Fair,” Tony shrugged, before lying down against Steve’s good shoulder and shuffling until he was comfortable. Steve’s hand was still wrapped in his own. Tight enough to tell Tony that he didn’t intend on letting go any time soon, and you know what? Tony was just fine with that.

“I’m glad you came back for me,” he murmured, feeling his eyes start to grow heavier with each passing second. The mixture of warmth and comfort and home and Steve was enough to make any man tired.
Above him, Steve smiled, and Tony felt a kiss get pressed into his forehead. “What else was I gonna do?” He responded, like there genuinely was no other answer to that situation. Like the only option had been to travel into Afghanistan and hunt Tony down himself.

He sighed, feeling the now-familiar twinge of pain that ricocheted through his chest from the heavy breath he took. So many things were going to change, after this. His future had never felt more uncertain before, and it scared him more than he dared admit.

But he had Steve. And he had his life back. Yinsen’s last wish had been asking him not to waste it, and Tony tended to see that wish through. If only for the man who had saved his life in those caves three months ago. Tony owed him that much.

“We’re going to be okay,” he promised.

Steve curled into him, until they were heartbeat to heartbeat.

“I know.”

*****

Around the room, seven rather sheepish people stood awkwardly, looking at Tony with nervous, flitting eyes and shuffling back and forth on their feet. So much for hardened assassins- the whole bunch looked like kids who’d been caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

Tony folded his arms and looked at them all. Even Steve seemed to be looking a little uncomfortable, and Tony had already talked to him about this at length, multiple times.

“So,” he began, because it was the first time all of them had seen him since he’d got back from Afghanistan, and even Tony wasn’t quite sure what to say, “if any of you want to hug me, we better get it over with now.”

He paused for a moment, watching as they all glanced at him in mild confusion. But then a moment later, Tony was almost bowled over by Bruce as he came hurtling in from the side, wrapping Tony in the tightest bear-hug he’d ever received. He spluttered, stumbling backward into the kitchen counter and then putting out a hand to steady himself. “Wow, okay, someone’s happy t-”

“I’m so sorry,” Bruce whispered frantically, “for everything. I had no idea, I really… and I can’t make that up to you, that doesn’t excuse anything, but I just, Jesus, Tony, I’m so fucking glad you’re okay-”

“Hey, hey,” Tony shook his head and rolled his eyes fondly as he squeezed Bruce’s shoulders. “You’re not the first person who’s tried to kill me. You’re sure as hell not gonna be the last. But I’m slightly dysfunctional, so I think I can find it in my heart to forgive you.” His voice softened as he added, “I listened to your voicemails. I know. I know… everything is very fucked up, and
everything that possibly could’ve gone wrong probably did, but—” he shrugged, looking to Bruce with a tight smile, “‘least I know your morality is in check. You were willing to risk jail to take out a guy you thought was selling weapons to terrorists. I don’t blame you.” He looked up, then, swallowing a little before his eyes hardened. “In fact, I’m planning on doing the same.”

The room fell into stillness, flickers of confusion and surprise on all their faces. All except Steve, who was gazing at Tony with something very intense in his eyes. His hands were clenched tight against his own biceps, and his whole body was tense.

“What do you mean?” Peggy said in order to finally break the silence, cocking her head.

Tony breathed in and shut his eyes. “Stane’s still out there,” he told them in the end, feeling the shake in his voice. It still hurt, just to say his name. “I’m not going to stop until I’ve brought him in. I’ll do whatever it takes to get there. I don’t fucking care. He… he used me, for years. He killed thousands of people in my name. I’m not going to just let him walk.”

Around him, the room was dead silent. Tony watched their stances all shifting minutely, from civilian to combat. Tony could see it, now he was watching properly. Natasha’s eyes lay into him piercingly, trying to work out his next words before he said them. Bucky was running his fingertips over one another- a nervous habit Tony’d noticed he had.

Steve just looked straight at him with a tight smile and a small nod of affirmation for him to keep going.

Tony blinked once, and then plunged back into it. “I’ve got SHIELD jurisdiction, which means I’ll be working on the right side of the law- mostly. The areas are kinda gray with those guys,” he shrugged uncaringly, before looking around the room once more. His friends- his fucked up, dysfunctional group of friends- all looked back, curious and slightly concerned. “But I’m gonna need some help.”

There wasn’t a word around the room. All of them were gaping at him in blank confusion, aside from Steve, obviously, who had been informed of the request beforehand. He continued to give his tweak of a smile in warm affirmation, and Tony caught his eye and cracked a small grin in return.

They were both still a few shades too pale to be deemed healthy, and Steve’s bandages had yet to even be removed- war was still fresh in both of their hearts.

It made Tony even more determined, if anything, to go through with this. He’d spent too much of his life letting other people decide what was best for him. He had to take responsibility into his own hands. And the hands of those he trusted.

And despite everything- despite literally every reason in the world that a rational, sane person would have for doing the opposite- Tony trusted these people around him. He trusted that they would do anything to get the right thing done. It was how they’d been operating for years, after all. Risking their lives, their freedom, their everything, so that they could keep others safe. It was admirable. It was what Tony wished he had been doing, instead of making himself the type of person that The Avengers would want to take out instead.

He had a lot to make up for. And it was about time he started.

“I’m going to track down my weapons,” he declared with a note of finality, “and I’m going to help the countries I ruined. If you want, you can come with me. I’m trying to put together a team of sorts- doesn’t have to be you if you don’t want to, but I think it would appeal to your interests. Legally, you’d be part of a government counter-terrorism task force. Less legally, you’d be helping me stop some bad guys and try get back my weapons from the hands of those murderers.” He
paused, looking to Bruce as he gaped, rather incredulously, back at Tony. “I know it’s a lot to take in,” he spoke softly, “I know… it’s far-fetched and stupid and reckless, but—”

“You really trust us?” Natasha asked, something akin to outright awe in her voice as she stared at him, “to do that? With you?”

Tony nodded, and then watched when Natasha’s mouth opened and closed incredulously, quite literally shocked into complete silence for the first time since Tony had met her.

“Why?” Bucky whispered, icy grey eyes looking haunted as he curled his fist at his side. “Tony, you know what we… we don’t deserve that from you. It’s not your job to- to look out for us. We betrayed your trust irreparably, and if this is some… some guilt thing, to try and make up to Steve—” Bucky shot an ominous glare in Steve’s direction before continuing, “then we don’t want it. Steve… well, I don’t know what is going through Steve’s head, but I’m not going to just take that much from you without—”

“This isn’t a guilt thing,” Tony told him hurriedly, frustration seeping into his voice, “it’s an ‘I need to fix this’ thing. It doesn’t matter what happened before. It was a miscommunication of massive proportions, but the point behind your actions was true and good. I- fuck, I deserved that—”

“Hey,” the echoes of dissent and sharp disagreement filled the room, running from person to person, but Tony just waved them off with an angry puff of breath and a sharp slice of his hand.

“No, just listen,” Tony shut his eyes, “I let this happen. This- this was blindness and naivety on a gigantic scale, and people paid for it with their lives. I didn’t look, because I didn’t want to see outside of my own perfect world. You have a right to think what you did of me. And now? Now, I have to work to try and make that better. You wanna help me, do me a favour, even the scales if you wanna look at it that way, then please, I would seriously appreciate that. You don’t wanna? That’s okay too. I’m just giving you the option. That’s all. I want you on my team. You’re the best of the best- if you can get past me and all my defenses, then I know that for a fact.”

He breathed out and then finally looked at them all again. Seven pairs of eyes stared back at him, and on each one of them Tony saw something different. Disbelief and apprehension and fear and everything in between.

Then Steve stepped forward, and his hand stretched outward.

Tony reached out automatically, and their fingers wrapped around each other, tight and promising. Steve pulled gently and Tony let himself go, into the warmth of Steve’s chest, and then felt the brush of lips against his temple as Steve leaned down. “I’m going with him,” he told the rest of his friends. “I guess you already worked that out, but…”

“Me too,” Bruce piped up, swallowing and then placing his hand on Tony’s shoulder. The guilt still lingered in his eyes, and Tony pursed his lips, about to assure the anxious man that he would never hold it to him if he didn’t- but Bruce knew what he was going to say, and so he just shook his head softly. “No, Tony. I mean it. I joined these guys to take down the exact type of person you’re going to go after now. And you could use another brain on the team,” he grinned cheekily, a small thing, but when Tony smiled back it grew three sizes, and the hand on his shoulder squeezed tightly.

One by one, each of them stepped forward, all of them nodding their heads and slowly drawing forward. It was, surprisingly, Clint who actually embraced Tony first—jumping forward and throwing his arms around Tony’s free side, pulling him in. “I’m sorry for trying to shoot you,” he whispered, “no hard feelings?”
Tony chuckled, nodding his head. “Sure, birdbrain.”

Before Clint could pull away, Bucky was there too, swooping around them and then closing Tony into the middle of the hug, ruffling his hair gently. “You sure scared the shit out of us, Stark,” he muttered, and before Tony could even respond to that one, suddenly the rest of the team were surrounding him, arms and faces everywhere he looked. Peggy and Natasha, Bruce and Steve, Bucky and Clint- Tony looked around a little disbelievingly at each one of them as they all laughed and called one another lame, but didn’t break away from the group embrace.

It should’ve been weird. It should have been ridiculous.

All Tony could think was that he was home.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! No one died!!!!

One more chapter left guys- I’m gonna be sad when this is all wrapped up, but I’m glad y'all have come with me this far :) You're the best
“You’re clear. Tony’s shorted out the cameras. You’ve got about fifteen seconds to get in there and grab that USB before the guards come in and corner you, Cap, be sharp about it.”

He nodded shortly, glancing up at the ceiling when he heard a dull thud that was undoubtedly Tony getting to work on the floors above. It made him smile fondly as he cocked his gun. “Sharp, I can do,” he said, before rolling into the room and then immediately barrelling into the first guard. He took them out swiftly with a punch to the temple, and the other went down when he got a bullet between his eyes. He heard heavy breathing down the comm, and knew that both Peggy and Natasha were working smoothly on the floor below. There were three USB’s in total, and you needed access to all of them before you were able to crack the contents hidden in them, but once they did, then they’d be led directly to the biggest stash of Tony’s weapons that they’d found to date. This was a huge operation.

Looking around the small room, he quickly located the USB and grabbed it, before taking off back around the corner and falling back into the shadows. He watched the guards round the corner and then pile into the room he’d just been in.

Stupid amateurs, he thought, as he ducked around the corner and then winced when he heard the sound of the explosion rip through the hallways. Those idiot guards really should’ve checked for bombs before entering.

“Data package secure,” Natasha said a second later, slightly out of breath.

“Me too,” Steve confirmed, before glancing up once more. “Tony?”

There was nothing for a second, and then a small grunt. “Yeah, I got it. I’m just…” He cut off, sighing shortly and then making more heavy sounds down the comm. “The blueprints we’ve used are off. There are rooms here that weren’t on the map, and they’re new. Freshly built.”

“What are you saying?” Peggy perked up, as Steve frowned into the corridor and then turned off in the direction of the stairs, intending to meet Tony on the top floor.

“I think they’re hiding something else here,” Tony said ominously, “might be more weapons, or money, or whatever. I want to have a closer look, just in case.”

“Well we’ve got company on this floor, so we might be a while,” Natasha said, “we can get Bucky to swing ‘round in the helicopter and give you a hand though-”

“Nah, it should only take a few minutes- he’s better at long range anyway. You two just finish up and then get out, this won’t take long” Tony said, before adding, “Steve, you interested?”

“Always, Shellhead,” Steve responded with a sharp grin, jumping up the stairs two at a time, his gun raised pointedly. “Where shall I meet you?”
“Third room on the left as you come up the stairs.”

Steve nodded, and then slowly turned the corner, heading into the top floor slowly. It was stiflingly hot around here- they’d tracked the place down to a spot in Qatar, off the grid and what had seemed, to the untrained eye, to be completely abandoned. Of course, once you stepped inside, you were met by armed guards and literal lasers at the door, so that had been the first clue that not everything was as it had seemed. Steve wiped the sweat off his brow and stepped further in, brow creased with concentration. When he turned into the third room down, however, he grinned on instinct.

Tony turned to him, the faceplate of the Iron Man suit snapping up and revealing a sharp smile. “Heard you got a present for me,” he said cheekily, one eyebrow wiggling as he held out a hand.

Instead of placing the USB into it, Steve just inserted his own hand and then stepped into Tony’s space, kissing him soundly. In that armour of his, Tony was actually taller than him, meaning Steve had to lean up on his tiptoes to do it, but that was fine by him. And red and gold truly went marvelously against Tony’s skin.

Tony curled a metal-plated hand around Steve’s neck, tugging him in and kissing him hard before pulling away again. “Much as I do love receiving those kinds of gifts,” he began, glancing down, “I actually had something else in mind.”

Steve grinned, and then tossed him the USB, which was caught easily. Tony leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. “Much appreciated,” he mumbled, before turning back to the computers, frown coming back to his face as soon as he laid his eyes on the screen.

Steve leaned down next to him. “What are we looking at?”

In answer, Tony stabbed a finger against the monitor. “Blind spots,” he said, “all over the building. They’re not on the blueprints, and JARVIS can’t get a read on them.”

Steve stared at them, cocking his head. “Huh,” he said, “that seems ominous.”

Tony glanced sideways at him. “Yeah, you’re telling me.” He continued to frown down at the screen, before his faceplate snapped shut again. Steve would never get over how smooth Tony’s armour was. Truly like magic. Seeing him for the first time when he’d been wearing it had made Steve think he was in a dream. No one could create something like that- it was a design of the future, one of the things you read in sci-fi novels.

But of course, not to Tony. Because Tony Stark was the future, and he’d brought it to life.

“I’m gonna check the first room,” Tony stated through the comm, “but it does look lived-in, which is odd.”

Steve nodded, standing straight and then turning around. “Check in when you get in,” he said, before beginning to jog out of the room and into the corridor again, his gun raised protectively. He heard Tony clang out after him, but focused on the task up ahead. Who knew what they’d find here- but there was a feeling in Steve’s gut, and it wasn’t a good one.

“Ohay, room doesn’t look like it’s boobytrapped,” Tony stated through the comm, “but it does look lived-in, which is odd.”

Steve’s brow creased. “What do you mean, ‘lived-in’?”

“‘There’s a bed,” Tony said in confusion, before a short silence and then, “and- shit, yep, there’s an
actual secret corridor here. I feel like I’m in a Nancy Drew novel.”

“Stay alert,” Steve warned, head peering slowly around the next turn, “we don’t know what might be hiding in there.”

“Yeah yeah,” Tony sighed, “I know. God, you’re as bad as Coulson with the ‘safety first’ stuff, seriously. I thought you were a hardy assassin?”

“I prefer to think of myself as a public vigilante and concerned boyfriend, these days,” Steve corrected, opening his mouth to add on with a sly jab- but he never got the words out, because a second later he heard the hissing of a door, and backed himself into the corner he’d just turned out of in order to hide himself.

He watched with sharp eyes as the metal entrance swung back from the room Steve had been heading to, and then a second later-

Steve froze, eyes widening.

Obadiah Stane hurried out of the door, a pistol in his gloved hand. He looked down the corridor, then the other way, before turning and beginning a light jog, heading straight toward Steve, unaware of his presence around the bend. Pure, utter rage curled like a vice in Steve’s gut, and his hand clenched around the barrel of the gun before slowly pocketing it.

He wasn’t going to use a bullet for this. This was going to be personal. Only the best for Obadiah Stane, after all.

He waited, face as cold as ice, until he heard Stane’s footsteps get close enough, and then he lunged. Out from the corner, out of the shadows, one hand going for the gun and the other reaching out, curling around his throat. Stane yelled in shock, kicking out wildly, but he was untrained and unprofessional, made desperate by his attempt to flee, and Steve had gained the upper hand before the fight had even begun.

A shot fired off, but it went nowhere near him; just the delirious clenching of Stane’s fist in an attempt to have it reach its mark. Steve twisted his grip brutally, and then felt the snap of bone under his hands.

The gun clattered to the floor, and Stane screamed.

“Hello,” Steve said, throwing the man over his hip and then sending him hurtling into the floor. “We’ve spoken before. I’m Tony’s boyfriend, Steve. You tried to kill him. Now I’m going to kill you.”

Stane rolled away, scrambling back to his feet in panic, but Steve simply grabbed him by the collar and threw him down the corridor again, walking after him slowly, purposefully. Stane… Stane laughed, then, and spat out blood from one of his dislodged teeth, looking up to Steve.

“Hello, Captain,” he said breathlessly, “you know, I always wondered what you’d been doing, rolling around with Stark when you should’ve just been doing your fucking job and getting rid of him. At the time, I figured he was just a good enough fuck for you to have a bit of fun with him and then kill him after, you know? What I probably would have d-”

Steve kicked him in the face, and he heard bone snap easily under his boot. Stane groaned.

Getting down on his haunches, he lifted Stane up by the back of his jacket, looking down at him. He wanted to tear him apart, limb from limb. But he had questions to ask before that.
“Why me,” he said softly. The question that had been plaguing him for months- the thing he just couldn’t work out. Why go to all that effort trying to get Steve to believe Tony was someone he wasn’t, when Stane could have just paid off someone with less morals to do the job half as fast?

“Why did you choose us in the first place?”

Obie groaned softly, but Steve just let him hang there, half-suspended in the air, until he spoke. His eyes were shut, and blood dribbled from his mouth. “You wanna know why I picked you?” He repeated the question back to Steve, before smiling with blood-stained teeth. “Because you were… you were the good guys. You were the ones who only killed those who deserved to die. If you'd have actually- actually done your fuckin’ job, then you would’a finished him off, and then I could've outing you as the ones responsible. Called you vigilantes... just trying to reset the course of justice. Defended you in court. The public would’ve loved me for it. I would have been their champion, and the fact that you were the ones who killed him would have just made my story all the more believable.” He rolled his eyes in mild annoyance, wiping the blood off his cheek with the hand that wasn’t mangled. “Of course, you just had to fall in love. Gotta say… didn’t expect that one. He’s fucking impossible for anyone to love, and I thought his reputation of New York’s finest manwhore might put you off a little, but apparently n-”

Steve growled, standing up and taking Stane with him, his feet scuffing the concrete as Steve lifted him bodily away from it. The bastard spluttered uselessly, clawing at Steve’s shirt with his good hand, and Steve had half a mind to break that too. Instead, though, he just shoved Stane into the concrete wall with one hand, whilst the other lifted to deal out the finishing blows. He was going to enjoy th-

“Put him down, Steve.”

He froze, tuning into Tony’s voice as it spoke up down the corridor. Underneath him, Stane froze, before beginning to laugh again. It seemed he was past caring, now.

Steve turned, looking at Tony on the other end of the corridor. He was stood, tense and alert, and Steve knew that underneath the faceplate, his eyes were fixed to Stane.

God, Steve really didn’t want to put him down. He wanted to beat him to death, quite frankly. It’s what he deserved.

“Steve,” Tony said again, voice sharper- and without wasting another second, but growling audibly as he did so, Steve released his grip and then sent Obadiah stumbling to the ground. He knew, really, that this was Tony’s responsibility. Steve had just worked for him- Tony had lived under him for years. Tony was owed this more than him.

Stane’s head turned slowly, sizing Tony up and down. “So that was your great escape plan,” he murmured softly, “that was your pièce de résistance. I’m impressed. Looks better than the model the Ten Rings showed me.”

Tony did and said nothing for a second- but then Steve watched as he lifted his hands and yanked his helmet off, throwing it down onto the floor with a violent clang. His eyes were alight with fury.

“And this is what remains of the great Obadiah Stane, huh?” He said harshly, gesturing around him, “hiding out in a shitty abandoned complex, sneaking around in hidden rooms and never seeing sunlight? Wow. Hope it was worth it, Obie. Is this a better life than what you had?”

“The life I had was only good because of the things I did to make it so,” Stan spat, blood flecks staining his chin. “I held you up, boy, when you were too busy destroying yourself, too busy stuck in that ridiculous shop of yours or fucking your way through half of New York, I kept the business
afloat!"

“YOU KILLED THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE!”

That just made Stane laugh, and God, Steve wanted to choke the life out of his miserable shell. It was hard to believe they’d even found him- he and Tony had been searching for months, to no avail. And now here he was, scurrying around like a sewer rat with the last of his weapons supplies. He was far from the well-kept businessman Steve had last seen. He was scruffy and dirty, his beard was untamed and his fingernails dirty. He must have been in hiding ever since he’d escaped.

“God, boy, I wish you’d have just died when I wanted you to,” Stane looked away and rolled his eyes, and Steve watched Tony flinch sharply. Steve had no idea how painful it must be, to hear those words come from a man you’d spent your whole life trusting.

He snarled, raising his leg and then stamping down upon Stane’s ankle, not stopping until he heard the man scream. His blood was boiling. He could barely even control himself, he just wanted to destroy every inch of this man, the person who had hurt Tony so fucking much-

A hand settled on his arm, and he realised Tony had moved closer, and was now stood right next to Steve, his face hard and staring down at the body in front of them.

Stane, seemingly far past caring even slightly at that point, just sighed. “You’re always messing all of my plans up,” he hissed, “first with Rogers- though God knows how that happened- then with the fucking Ten Rings, I thought at least they might have been able to finish you off. And now- even now I’m trying to build myself back up, fix myself after you ruined my entire reputation, and you still just can’t stop, can you? You’re not a creator, boy, you’re a destroyer.”

Tony’s hand on Steve’s arm was firm, stopping him from taking another swing. “I don’t want him dead,” he told Steve quietly, and then when Steve opened his mouth to argue, Tony just silenced him with a short shake of his head. “He doesn’t deserve the pleasure of death. Let him live out the rest of his life in solitary. Let him be hopeless for the rest of his miserable existence.”

Steve paused, and then clenched his jaw. He thought Stane was better off dead, personally. But again- not his call to make. So instead, he just nodded once, and then glared at his shoes, where Stane was lying. “What do we do with him?” He asked shortly.

Tony stared blankly for a moment, before jerking his head. “You go on, tell the others to wait for us round the front. Say we have another passenger. I’ll drop him at SHIELD’s front door when they arrive- sure they’ll appreciate it.”

Steve sighed, but nodded. “You sure you gonna be okay on your own?” He asked, beginning to turn away. Tony nodded tightly, looking to Steve with a weary smile and then glancing back down to Obadiah, who was slowly lifting a hand out from his pocket and-

It happened so fast, Steve almost missed it.

A gunshot rang out, and Steve had seen where the barrel had been pointed- it was aiming right for Steve’s head, but he felt no impact. When he twisted around, he saw that Tony had rammed his metal hand over the muzzle, trapping the bullet in his fist. Without a single word spoken, Tony yanked the small pistol from Stane’s grip, twisting it rapidly until it was held fast in his hand and then-
Steve actually jumped, when the shot rang out. He hadn’t been expecting that at all.

He looked down in surprise at the body on the floor. Blood trickled gently from between Stane’s still-open eyes. He would’ve been dead before he even hit the floor. There were smatterings of red all of the corridor, partly from where Steve had had his fun, and partly from the bullet that had just been inserted into Obadiah Stane’s brain.

Tony’s hand was still raised in firing position. It didn’t shake. Tony’s face didn’t waver. He stared down at the lifeless body, cold and impassive.

“You killed him,” Steve said dumbly, because he still couldn’t believe that. A few seconds ago, Tony had been adamant that Stane shouldn’t die, and now he was looking at the body that Tony himself had put there.

Tony only turned to Steve a few seconds later. “He’s taken so much from me,” Tony said softly, “and then he aimed that gun for you. I wasn’t going to let him take you too. Not ever again.”

Steve blinked when Tony let the gun drop out of his hand and then stumbled away, swallowing sharply. He turned to Steve, face finally crumbling into something that looked a little bit like grief-and so Steve pulled Tony back into his arms quickly, letting the man bury his head into Steve’s shoulder.

Together, they breathed.

“Let’s go home,” Steve said a few moments afterward, stroking the sweaty hair on Tony’s head, “S H I E L D will clean this up, right? You’ve got that Coulson guy on speed dial these days.”

Tony chuckled against his neck. It was a little too shaky for Steve’s liking- but then again, Tony had just killed a man. “Only because he’s almost as efficient as Pepper when it comes to fixing the messes I leave behind. I swear you’re the only one for me, baby.”

Steve rolled his eyes, walking them slowly away from the scene in front of them. He felt Tony lean his (admittedly rather considerable) weight into Steve’s side, and he took a moment to simply revel in it. It had been months and months since the whole fiasco in the desert, but sometimes Steve still thought about the way that Tony trusted him incomparably these days, and it still shook him up in just the same way as it had in the beginning. The fact that Tony still found it in his heart to forgive, to trust, even after everything. It was more than Steve could have possibly wished for. And he thanked his lucky stars for it, every single day. It was that trust that allowed him to wake up, curled around Tony’s back with one hand around his waist and the other resting protectively over the arc reactor. It was that trust that gave him the opportunity to kiss Tony good morning, to surprise him with flowers at work and cook for them both during date night. Steve still couldn’t believe he had that all back, and he was highly doubtful as to whether he deserved it either.

But when Tony would curl into his lap, loose-tongued with exhaustion as he pressed his face into Steve's neck and told him that this is the happiest I think I've ever been, Steve knew that he could never, ever walk away from that.

For whatever unimaginably unlikely reason, Tony loved him. Despite everything. And Steve… Steve was selfish and broken and everything that Tony shouldn't want, but for some reason still did. And- well, Steve was going to take what he could get. He'd kill and he'd die for the man he
loved, and from what Steve had just seen, Tony would do the same for him.

Perhaps slightly dysfunctional, but hey, they made it work.

“Believe me,” Steve said, continuing the conversation as he looked to the side and smiled, “if you ran off with the man who makes me question whether or not he’s even entirely human, I’d just feel sorry for you.”

That made Tony laugh, and he leaned up to kiss Steve’s cheek. “I love you,” he said quietly, mouth pressed into Steve’s ear. “What do we do now that Stane’s been dealt with, and most of the weapons have been taken care of?”

Steve shrugged, leaning back and then swooping down, picking up the helmet Tony had chucked on the floor. He jammed it on to his own head, and then laughed at Tony’s look of amusement.

God, he loved that man more than anything.

“I don’t know,” he said, twining their fingers together softly and feeling Tony’s heartbeat flutter underneath, “you got any other ideas on how to save the world?”

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Turns out Tony did, actually.

Chapter End Notes

We're done!

Jesus, this was a long time in the making. I can't believe there's no more now, I'm gonna miss the experience of this. By far, this is one of the most difficult stories I've ever written, but it's 100% had the best payout. You have all been so amazing, and everyone who's followed this and hyped me up and commented and given me so much love... ugh, you're just amazing. I couldn't have asked for a better audience!! !

Once more, a huge thankyou to my beta, Hannah, for her amazing work which helped me get through this story when I was pretty sure I was never going to finish it. Without her, we probably wouldn't have had any of this, so yah, YOU'RE A LIFESAVER!

Also a thank you to my bidder, who waited over a year for the final result. Hope it was worth it ;).

And of course, a massive thank you to you guys for reading! This story has been such
an ego boost for me hahaha, I'm just so glad that you all enjoyed it as much as you did!

ANYWAY- the boys are happy, they're together, and we have an Avengers-esque situation going on in which they save the world and kick ass together as one big happy family. They also adopt a stray kitten whilst on an operation in Russia and call her Parsley, because I literally just thought of it and so now It Is Law.

Works inspired by this one
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