Under Arizona Skies

by Muccamukk

Summary

A recently unfrozen Steve Rogers becomes a man out of time once more as he accidentally crosses universes and finds himself in 1872... where a different Tony Stark seems very conflicted about his presence!

This 2019 Cap-IM RBB entry is inspired by the fantastic art Under Arizona Skies by Lets_call_me_Lily.

Notes

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This is set in 1872 about six months after the story ends, and in Captain America: Man out of Time immediately after the ending. For those who haven’t read Man out of Time, it's a 2011 retelling of Steve waking up in the 21st century, having adventures and trying to come to terms with his situation. It concludes with him going on a camping trip to the Grand Canyon and deciding to throw himself into living in the future. I've kept most of the details from Man out of Time, but mixed in a bit of straight up 616.

The American Civil War AU described in this fic is neither confirmed nor denied in 1872 canon. There is some period-typical language.
The portal shimmered, its image flickering between a thousand different deserts, from noon to sunset to starlight and back. Steve grunted as he yanked his shield out of the console and kept moving. He'd hoped hitting the machinery would shut the whole thing down, but Zemo was still running towards the tear in spacetime, firing wildly back at Steve as he went. Steve didn't have a clear shot at him, so he put his head down and followed. He aimed his body to check Zemo away from the other world.

He might not know much about the new time he'd woken up into, but if Baron Zemo was doing something, Steve should be trying to stop it.

Steve surged forward, angling his shield up to protect his face, and at the same time keep Zemo away from his creation. The thing sizzled and buzzed by his ear. His shield connected with Zemo's chest, shoving him back from the portal, at the same time as the noontide sun shone into Steve's eyes, and Zemo brought the gun up.

He raised it under the edge of the shield, and Steve couldn't move fast enough to drive it down, not with his momentum pushing them both away from the portal. Instead, he tried to twist to one side and bring his freehand up to catch Zemo's wrist. It was enough to throw him off balance him, and that left him open for Zemo to brace against another console and kangaroo kick Steve in the stomach.

Steve fell backwards as the gun went off. He felt no pain, only the world turning briefly to static, as if his body were an out of tune radio. Every nerve tingled and buzzed. He hit the sand ass first, and rolled into a crouch, frantically assessing whether or not he was hit. He didn't think so. His heart was pounding, but nothing hurt, and he felt like himself again.

Keeping his body low, Steve looked around him. It wasn't noon any more but night time, with a full moon high overhead. He couldn't see Zemo anywhere or any tracks on the sand.

Steve turned completely around, but could see no sign of the portal he'd come through. He tried pitching a stone through the space behind him, but it didn't cause so much as a ripple. He tried jumping through the space he thought he'd fallen out of, but that didn't work either.

His Avengers card said it was out of signal range when he tried to hail the mansion, even though it'd worked half an hour ago when Iron Man had asked him to check out some odd energy readings. Steve turned again, trying to tell if the valley he was in was the same one as he'd found Zemo's lab, or just a similar patch of desert. It looked the same. There was the same mesa in the distance; in the opposite direction, moonlight glittered on distant snowy peaks. He was standing in a random patch of Arizona desert without his bike, his uniform, or even his enemy.

It would just be Steve's luck if he'd travelled back in time again, and this time he didn't have the least clue where he was. Worst of all, whatever Zemo's plan on the other side of the portal was doubtless proceeding without Steve there to shut it down. Steve hadn't even been able to drag Zemo along with him.

Steve had worn a little dell in the sand with all his turning and pacing, but he hadn't gotten anywhere on what to do. He figured his options were to stay here and hope the portal reappeared, or to try to find the highway or some other sign of civilisation backtracking his remembered route.
Throwing another half dozen rocks through the former portal did Steve no good at all, and he didn't imagine that the old wilderness advice about if you're lost, stay where you are would either.

Steve slung his shield on his back and started to lope across the sand. It occurred to him that he probably should have called Iron Man with an update before he'd gone into the lab. Hopefully Shellhead would figure it out.

later

Steve can't breathe. He can't tell where the pain ends and his chest starts. He knows that he has minutes to live, less if he's lucky. Rough hands grab his belt and his collar, and all he can think is, No, no, no, no, not like this. Please, God. Not like this.

The loss of blood takes him down before his body hits the ground again.

When he wakes up, Tony's there. Tony's hand's in his hair, and his lips are moving, but Steve can't make out the words. He tries to smile but blood bubbles in his throat, and he passes out.

now

A thin line of dawn, the colour of bluing tablets had begun to spread to Steve's right. The moon was sinking red behind the mesa that now crowded in on Steve, and the ground was harder under his feet. He'd left a single line of tracks behind him, but even those were fading under wind-blown sand. For the first time, it occurred to him that finding the portal again was going to be a challenge. He hoped he remembered the exact shape of the hills.

In any case, there was only one way to go here. He still wasn't sure where he was relative to the highway, or if there even was a highway. This would be a lot faster if he had his motorcycle, which he profoundly hoped no one had stolen. He'd just gotten it, a present to himself paid out of his army back pay.

Well, Steve had come out west to think, and a four hour jog across the desert had given him that. Trouble was, he wasn't any closer to a conclusion here than he'd been riding down Route 66 with the wind in his hair, or staring at the majesty of the Grand Canyon. He still didn't know where he fit save when he saw a fight coming his way.

Usually, Steve didn't run away from fights at quite this speed. Or maybe he did. Maybe that was his problem. He'd been throwing himself from one side of the country to the other—following his team, following what he'd promised Bucky he'd do—and he'd never had a chance to just try to be. Maybe Steve hadn't stopped running since he'd realised where and when he was.

The trail that Steve had fallen onto narrowed onto a well-worn path of packed dirt, travelled by many feet. It looped around the bottom of the mesa and towards the gathering dawn. Past that, the land dropped away into rolling hills, and in the distance the razor-line of a railway cut across it all. No highway, no glimmer of lights anywhere. Wherever, or whenever this was, it wasn't Arizona in 2011.

The rising sun was shining in Steve's eyes before he saw the town, three streets of buildings along the rail line, with a handful of shacks on the near side. As he got closer, his impression of backwardness grew. Smoke came out of a few chimneys, but Steve couldn't see any electric wires or signs of motor vehicles. The more he saw, the more the town looked like the set of a cowboy movie of his childhood, give or take some wear and tear, and without any of those giant cacti that seemed to be everywhere in the movies. A few people were moving about this early, and they were all dressed like movie extras, too, except the colours were too muddy and real for the pictures. Besides, Steve
didn't think even twenty-first century Hollywood would shell out for a mule that ugly.

It just about figured that he'd travelled back in time, and even further than the last go around.

He dropped to a swift walk before he entered the town. He didn't know if it was good or bad that he was wearing the same jeans and leather jacket that he'd had on the bike. He'd stand out, especially with the shield slung across his back, but at least he wasn't in his uniform. With his luck, he'd walk into the middle of a rebel town during the civil war, all wrapped up in the flag.

Though the railway hadn't been all the way out to the west by then, had it? Steve wished he hadn't gotten most of his history of the wild west from the nickelodeons. Bucky would have loved this. He'd probably have been demanding a six shooter and a horse.

Whatever Steve was wearing, it was the wrong thing. As soon as he got to the first building, a bare-footed, mop-headed toddler saw him, screamed, and ran into her clapboard cabin. Before Steve could figure out what to do about that, a broad-shouldered black man came out and levelled a shotgun at Steve's chest.

Steve held up his hands and tried a smile. "I come in peace?" he said. This couldn't be that much harder than getting a Polish resistance cell to trust him when the password had gotten lost in the shuffle. Then again, he'd had Bucky with him that time.

"Sweet Christ... mas," the man muttered, but he didn't lower the gun. He didn't look away as he yelled, "Honey, go find Mayor Danvers. Now."

In the five minutes it took to fetch the local authorities, a crowd formed up around Steve, many of them armed, all of them with the same stunned expression as the man with the gun wore. Steve could feel an edge line of hostility in the crowd, but couldn't say exactly why. It seemed more personal than just xenophobic reaction of a small town to a stranger. He couldn't place why some of the faces seemed familiar to him either. Steve shifted uneasily and kept his hands in the air. The number of guns levelled at him wasn't decreasing, and he wanted his shield on his arm, but he didn't want a fight either. He just wanted to know where he was. That would have to wait. There'd be time to ask about getting back to 2011 later, when he'd figured out what they were putting in the water around these parts.

Mayor Danvers turned out to be a tall blonde, conservatively dressed save for the splash of primary colours on her scarf. She didn't even look at the increasing number of guns levelled at Steve, just shoudered through the crowd, stopped with her face inches from Steve's and snapped, "Whatever's going on, it won't work. We all saw the real Steve Rogers shot down in the street. We saw him—" Her voice choked off, and her eyes narrowed in fury. "So you better tell me who the fuck you really are. Right now."

Steve still had his hands in the air, even though most of the guns had lowered in order to stay clear of the mayor.

"My name is Steve Rogers," Steve said, keeping his tone mild even as his skin crawled, "but I've never been here before, and I've never met you or any of your people."

A commotion at the edge of the crowd cut off Danvers' reply. She didn't turn away, but Steve couldn't help looking past her shoulder to where a tall Indian was trying to hold back...

"Mr. Stark?" Steve gasped.

"Steve!" Tony Stark—dressed in a dusty suit and untied cravat, like half the men there—ducked and
twisted through the crowd, side stepped Danvers, and throw his arms around Steve's shoulders, burying his face in Steve's neck.

"Um," Steve said. His arms were trapped above Stark's head, and it didn't seem right to return the embrace of a man he hardly knew. Or, he supposed, the doppelgänger of a man he hardly knew.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Danvers' glare heat. "Don't know anyone here?"

"Um," Steve said again. He let his arms drape lightly over Stark's shoulders, which shook under his touch. "I don't know what's going on either?"

Stark lifted his head and asked, "Is it really you, Steve?"

Steve looked down into Stark's wet pleading eyes and blinked. They were brown. Steve clearly remembered that the Stark he knew had blue eyes, the same kind of deep clear blue that usually got Steve into some kind of trouble.

"It's not Steve," Danvers said at the same time as Steve was rapidly coming to the conclusion that she was correct. Between Danvers tugging at Stark's jacket and Steve gently pushing his shoulders and stepping back they got Stark disentangled from Steve's neck.

"I think I might be a different Steve," Steve said cautiously. "You're a different Tony Stark." He didn't know where he was, but he was wondering if his initial assessment of time travel had been incorrect. What actually had happened, he didn't know.

"We'd better go to my office," Danvers said. "You too, Red Wolf." She looked at Stark, sighed, shook her head, then jerked her chin to say that he should follow.

later

Steve keeps hearing Tony's voice, talking nonsense like he always does.

It's too bright, so he keeps his eyes closed, and breathing hurts so he doesn't do that much either. It doesn't smell like Tony's workshop here. It smells like rot-gut whisky and soap. Something strange Steve doesn't recognise.

Steve needs to wake up. He needs to tell Tony, that...

now

"So you're from New York, but in 2011?" Danvers asked, not looking like she believed that in the least. She was sitting straight-backed behind her desk, with Red Wolf looming behind her, arms folded.

"That's about it." For the sake of all of their sanity, Steve had left out the whole frozen in ice for sixty five years part, as well as time travel involving Kang the Conqueror.

"And you just fell down the rabbit hole and here you are in Wonderland?"

"Yup," Steve agreed. He'd tried saying like the looking glass, but hadn't gotten anywhere with that one. Apparently it wasn't out yet in this 1872, if it ever would be. Asking what year it was still didn't make anyone treat a guy like he had his head on straight, no matter what the time or the world.

"You have a Tony Stark in your world, one with blue eyes." That wasn't a question. Red Wolf just sounded like he was tired of hearing about this over and over again.
"Yes," Steve said, shooting a sideways glance at Stark, who was sitting in the darkest corner of the mayor's office, his hands clasped tightly in his lap, glaring at Steve from under lowered brows. "Mr. Stark funds my team. The Avengers." He'd been helping Steve get used to this new world. He'd tried to give Steve a home and to show him everything he loved, even if he'd elided some key details. He'd slung his arm around Steve's shoulders and smiled at Steve like he meant the world. What had they been to each other in this world, to earn Steve an embrace like that?

"Steve Rogers has been dead for six months here," Danvers said, not for the first time.

"We didn't see..." Stark started to say, but Danvers held up a hand.

"Steve's dead, Tony," she said, and not for the first time Steve wondered who'd told his friends that back in '45, the Invaders or Agent 13, the Howlies.

Steve gave up. There was no point going around this again. "Look, I didn't mean to come here. I was fighting the man who built the passage here, and I need to get back to that. Maybe you've seen him? Would have worn a purple mask, had a German accent."

Danvers and Red Wolf exchanged a look and the sheriff shrugged minutely. They either hadn't, or weren't going to tell Steve they had.

"He's dangerous," Steve persisted. "I don't know why he was building the... the rabbit hole, but I can promise you, ma'am, that if Baron Zemo's involved, it's not going to be good for anyone. I need to get back."

"That so?" Danvers asked. She stood and leaned across the desk to look down at Steve. "We supposed to take your word on that?"

This was where Bucky would step in. He'd always been better at talking fast and making friends. Steve would stand and look untouchable and heroic, and Bucky would charm. Steve didn't have that any more. He'd never have that again, so he had to shift for himself. He was on an adventure, he figured, visiting a time long gone that he'd only ever seen in the movies.

"Well," he said. "You can take my word for it and see if you can help me to go back, or you can not believe me and end up stuck with me."

Another look between Red Wolf and Danvers, but Steve found himself looking past them to Stark, who was studying his nails and pretending not to listen. He kept pulling Steve's attention, and Steve couldn't tell if it was because Stark was the only familiar thing in a sea of wonderland, or if the strength of Stark's reaction had stuck with him.

Stark caught him looking and met his eyes. "I've been thinking on how exactly you're planning to get back up that rabbit hole," he said to Steve. It was the first thing he'd said since he'd realised Steve wasn't the man he'd known.

Steve shrugged slightly. "Was going to see the lay of the land first, and work things out from there. Usually works out okay."

"You got a soul who'll worry for you?"

"My team knows where I was. I checked in before I went after the lab." That they would look for Steve hadn't especially occurred to Steve, but he supposed they would. "Iron Man and Giant-Man will be able to figure out the device."

Red Wolf grunted at that but he and Danvers seemed more interested in what Stark would say than
in real answers to their questions

"'Iron Man' you say?" Stark asked, raising an ironic eyebrow. "Is that the name his mama gave him?"

Steve shrugged. "We all use code names. It's safer."

"Sounds like banditry," Danvers said. "You wear masks too?" She was still standing over Steve, and when his silence stretched, she shook her head and jerked her chin for him to rise as well. "Well that settles it. The sooner you're out of Timely, the better."

Holding out his hand to shake on it, Steve managed to keep most of the amusement out of his voice when he said he appreciated it, but she was suppressing a smile when she answered him.

"Why don't you and Stark ride out to that portal, see if you can't find out a way to get it open again."

Stark pushed himself up with his elbows, sitting a little straighter, and gave Steve an uneasy look before telling Danvers, "It's nearly noon. I shan't be riding anywhere in heat like this, and Mr. Rogers here is hardly equipped for horseback. Least of all because he doesn't have a horse."

"I can walk," Steve said stiffly, oddly hurt that Stark didn't seem to want the least to do with him, even though from Stark's perspective it made sense. Who wanted to spend a long day with the image of a dead friend? It seemed like there would be no help in this place, at any rate. Steve should have stuck with initial thought to just stay where he was and hope the portal opened again on its own, or that Iron Man and the team found him.

"You are planning to sit in the sun until you die?" Red Wolf asked, sounding more curious than concerned.

Steve opened his mouth but didn't have an answer to that.

"Fine," Danvers said. "Go to Stark's ironworks and see if you can work out a better plan. I'll get someone to take you out this evening when the heat settles." Dismissing both of them with a glance, she turned to Red Wolf, "We still need to discuss what's going on at the mine."

That was it then. "If I must," Stark muttered and led Steve out into the street. The crowd had mostly dispersed, save for a few rowdies gathered in front of the casino, and a woman in black at the corner.

"I'm sorry," Steve said to Stark. "This must be strange for you."

"I can't put even the half of it in words," Stark replied.

later

Steve isn't sure how long it's been. His chest and back still hurt like blazes, but whatever drugs they've been giving him are fading. When he comes to this time he's able to blink until he can make out a white-painted ceiling and sunlight through a window. What's past that besides blue sky he can't tell, but he's never been in this room before.

Turning the other way, Steve sees that Tony's slumped in the chair at his side. He looks pale and worn through, and is just in his shirt sleeves like he's been working, but for once he doesn't reek of whiskey.

Steve's throat is so dry he has to cough before he can talk, which is enough to bring Tony out of it.
"You're awake!" Tony cries. "I didn't think... Steve, you've been out for weeks. What the hell happened to you?"

His voice is too loud, too much all at once for Steve. He has no idea how he got here, or even where here is, and Tony's asking too much of him. Steve wets his lips with his tongue and whispers, "Shot."

"Yeah, that I did know," Tony says. He reaches across to pat Steve's shoulder, and his hands are warm and familiar. How many times by now have they found comfort in each other?

Steve wants to ask Tony what's happened, not answer questions, but the words don't come. "Tony?" he asks instead, hoping the that conveys all his questions. They've long more or less known what each other were thinking, even if Steve hasn't always wanted to.

"You're in the hospital," Tony tells him. "The docs think you're going to be okay, but you're healing slower than you should. We don't know what's wrong with you."

Steve wonders what hospital and where, and how fast he should recover from a bullet to the chest, but he's fading out again. He gropes until he finds Tony's hand and squeezes it as hard as he can, than his hand goes slack.

now

Steve came face to face with Iron Man the second he stepped into Stark's smithy. He stopped short, staring. It wasn't the same as Shell-Head's suit back in 2011, but the design had an unmistakable origin. He glanced over at Stark and again found himself watched pensively.

"Looks like some things are the same between our worlds," Steve said, looking over the rough lines of the suit. This actually did look as though it were made of iron, not whatever impossible alloy his own Stark used. "Who uses it?"

"Why I do, of course," Stark drawled. "You think I'd let anyone else drive a beauty like that?"

Steve shrugged and stepped deeper into the shadows of the workshop. The shade was a relief after the late morning sun. "My Stark does."

"Sounds like a fool, then," Stark replied. "Who knows what damage an amateur might do."

"In my world, Mr. Stark's suit can fly," Steve said, though he didn't know why he was suddenly trying to defend Tony Stark in a game of one-upmanship against himself. It had roller skates too, but Steve didn't feel like explaining those to someone from a hundred and fifty years in another past.

Stark braced on hip on his anvil and folded his arms, in a lean that was so purely Stark that Steve almost saw double. "'Mr. Stark' is it?" he asked. "How terribly formal."

Steve's own Stark had kept telling Steve to call him Tony, but that didn't feel right to Steve. "I take it you are—you were closer here."

"Indeed," Stark said. "My Steve dropped the 'Mister' after a mere six months."

"I haven't known Mr. Stark for half that," Steve said before he could think better of it. He hadn't known anyone alive for half that, except Agent 13, and she'd lived a whole other life while he was frozen. If they were going to keep comparing worlds, eventually Steve was going to have to admit that the truth was that he didn't know the names and faces of anyone in 2011 besides Stark, Edwin Jarvis and Rick Jones. He got enough pity in his own time. He'd been half hoping that this break
would bring a little adventure, if not hiking along the Grand Canyon, then maybe here in the wild west of old.

Instead of saying any more, Steve looked around the shadows of the smithy, seeing bits and pieces of armour, as well a dozen horseshoes and a variety of half-finished projects he couldn't identify. He pulled out his Avengers card to check for a signal again, but still got nothing.

Steve half expected that to have pulled a comment from Stark, but he just watched Steve and didn't say anything. Steve couldn't imagine how someone from this time, no matter how clever, could understand micro electronics that boggled Steve's mind, when Steve had grown up with electricity and had had a robot friend during the war.

This wasn't really Stark, Steve reminded himself, no matter how similar they looked or sounded.

"Mayor Danvers is right," Steve said. "Best I go back and wait by where I came through. My team will be looking for me." He hoped. If they'd realised he was missing. If they'd defeated Zemo. If the lab had any clue where Steve had gone.

For the first time, it occurred to Steve to wonder what he'd do if he were stuck here. It was all well and good to thrill to Buck Jones and John Wayne on the silver screen, or to play Cowboys and Indians through the the alleyways between tenements, but living in the 1870s?

Hell, maybe it made as much sense as living in 2011, which wasn't a heck of a lot, as far as Steve was concerned.

Steve turned away from Stark and his iron armour, and moved towards the door, but Stark caught his wrist. His work-calloused hand felt the same in this world too.

"You're madder than I thought to go out in that heat, especially walking," Stark said, pulling him back. "Wait here a while, and we'll borrow horses."

"You don't have your own?" Steve asked, curious despite himself.

"I'm a man of the railway," Stark answered, "but I can ride if I must. Meanwhile, why don't I fix you a drink?"

later

A woman who says she's a doctor is there next time Steve wakes, though she's hardly dressed like one. Tony would probably laugh at Steve for being so judgemental, but he can't help it. At least Tony comes back not long after. (He thinks it's not long after; the world still fades in and out a lot.)

He's happy that Steve's more lucid, but there's also something in his body language that speaks of a secret, or of guilt. Instead of sitting by the bed as before, Tony stands by the window with his back to Steve, his hands jammed in his pockets, his shoulder up around his ears. Steve expects him to take a swing from his flask instead of saying something, but he just stares at the sky outside the glass.

Whatever this hospital is, it isn't anything Steve's used to. The more he sees of it, the stranger it seems. He can't seem to put is finger on why. Something about the lights.

Finally, unable to stand the tension filling the room, Steve pushes himself up a little, and asks, "Something wrong, Stark?"

He doesn't know what he said wrong, but his words make Tony flinch like a switch strike across his shoulders. "I'm sorry," Tony blurs out.
"What the hell for?" Steve demands. He doesn't know exactly what happened after he was shot, but he does know he owes being in the hospital—and therefore his life—to Tony Stark.

There's a long pause before Tony says, "I'm sorry it took so long to find you. I'm sorry I couldn't stop him before"—he shakes his head—"this is my fault. I shouldn't have let you go in alone."

"That's not how I remember it going down," Steve tells him. He remembers Tony by his side, doing the best he could, for all that he had no weapons and no plan.

Tony laughs hollowly, and won't look Steve in the eye.

now

Stark ended up pouring them both glasses of sun tea, after Steve turned down the whiskey. This Stark no longer partook, apparently. He looked at Steve when he said that, as if expecting a reaction, but Steve didn't have anything to say to that.

Instead, Steve kept playing with his Avengers card, as though looking at it the tenth time would make it connect to the Mansion any more than the eighth or ninth times had. Stark watched him fiddle with it for a while before asking, "So any notion of how your rabbit hole works?"

Steve shrugged. "I'm just a soldier," he said. He tried to think back to the energy readings that had tipped Iron Man off to its location. "The lab was emitting some kind of particle," he said. "Tetrions?"

He had never heard of them before, but Iron Man had picked them up on the Avengers' satellite system and asked if Steve could take a detour on his road trip. He'd been apologetic about bothering Steve, enough so that it'd had come through his metallic, filtered voice.

"And this Zemo?" Stark asked, "What was he aiming to do with this machine of his? I don't suppose he had little old Timely in mind."

"Didn't get a chance to ask him," Steve said. Well, he had asked, but Zemo had answered with his usual hail of bullets. Times might change, but Baron Zemo sure didn't. "Trouble, I'd guess."

Stark smiled into his glass. "I suppose you two have that much in common," he said.

"I'm nothing like Zemo," Steve snapped, setting his glass down and turning to look outside. The shadows were beginning to lengthen down the main street, but the afternoon sun still shimmered through the air. It reminded Steve more of North Africa than anywhere he'd been in the States, though the air smelled different.

"Easy, soldier." Stark came to stand beside him, not quite close enough to bump shoulders, but Steve could still smell sweat, tobacco and burnt metal. "I was thinking of Sheriff Rogers. He was always finding trouble. Right up until the end. I warned him that it'd be the end of him someday. He wasn't so good at listening either. Gave a good speech though."

"Oh," Steve said. "Sorry." He hesitated, then asked, "You were close?"

"What do you reckon?" Stark asked. Steve remembered that hug and felt stupid. It'd been a long time since anyone had touched him like that, Brian after an Invaders mission, maybe—years ago now, or six weeks, or in the future on another world.

"I might go take a look around town," Steve said to break the building silence. "Get the lay of the place."

"I think most folks will find that unsettling," Stark commented. "Even if word's gotten around that
"Oh." Steve sighed. Danvers wasn't so much giving him and Stark a chance to find a way back to 2011 as hiding them from sight. Steve was lucky she hadn't had Red Wolf throw him in the clink for safe keeping.

"I think we'd all just gotten used to looking for Rogers and not seeing him there." Stark's voice was so soft that it pulled Steve's attention in. "Or everyone else did. Not sure that'll ever—" He broke off and stepped away from Steve.

Steve checked his Avengers card. If Iron Man came through, he'd be able to signal and find Steve. Maybe he'd even be able to send a message through the portal without risking himself. Convincing Iron Man not to risk himself had always been a problem. *I don't know which of you is worse,* the Wasp had said a few missions ago.

"What's that little doohicky for, anyway?" Stark asked, so Steve tried to explain it.

Later

When Steve is finally lucid enough to ask the lady doctor where he is, she tells him the name of a hospital he doesn't know, and then tells him it's in New York City.

"New York!" Steve says, but she's already moving on to the next patient. "Dammit, Stark," he mutters. He really had been out for weeks, but that explained why things were so strange.

When Stark showed up again, Steve said, "I hope this little camp out isn't breaking the bank."

Tony flashes him a smile and says, "Nah, I've still got a few shillings to rub together." He's still not meeting Steve's eyes, even though Steve has said he doesn't even understand why Tony is sorry. He's clearly saved Steve's life, and at no small cost.

"What happened in Timely?" Steve asks. He hasn't been able to bring himself to do it before now, as whatever it was must be long over now.

"What?" Tony looks blank for a second, and then shrugs. "I don't know. I grabbed you and got the hell out."

Steve doesn't know if he's well enough to stand, let alone fight, but one thing is clear. "I need to go back. I need to help them."

Now

By a few hours before sunset, Stark had rigged up a couple contraptions straight out of a Rube Goldberg cartoon, stripped them back down, and packed them into saddlebags. Red Wolf showed up with a couple of horses and that ugly mule for Tony's gear.

"Know how to ride?" he asked Steve, looking him up and down, and then turning away dismissively when Steve hesitated.

"I have ridden," Steve admitted cautiously. That winter in the Caucuses wasn't overburdened with fond memories.

"I'll give you Rogers' old mare then," Red Wolf said. "She wouldn't throw you if you put a burr under her saddle."
Stark was fussing with the saddlebags, and looked up to narrow his eyes at Red Wolf. "You know Bucky's nag would scare the piss out of any sane man, don't you?"

"That's why I'm lending her to you," Red Wolf said, deadpan ruined by the smile tugging at his lips and the crinkles around the corners of his eyes.

"Bucky?" Steve asked. He had a sudden flash of what people in Timely must feel when they saw him. How would it feel to see his best friend in the world, but know it wasn't really him? "Is he alive here?"

"Died about a year ago," Stark said, then glanced at Red Wolf, who shrugged slightly. "His widow gunned down the man who did it."

"Oh," Steve said, not sure if he was disappointed or relieved. "He was a soldier too, where I'm from. I should have looked after him better." He couldn't think of the right words to describe it, but from Stark's expression, he didn't have to say anything else.

"You better get going," Red Wolf said, but after Stark had swung into the saddle, he took the mare's bridle and moved in close. Stark leaned down to let Red Wolf speak into his ear. If not for Steve's enhanced hearing, he wouldn't be able to make out a word. He made a point of fussing with his reins and not obviously listening.

"A little bird overheard your meeting with Danvers," Red Wolf said, and if Steve hadn't been eavesdropping before, his tone alone would have alarmed Steve. "What he"—a slight head tilt in Steve's direction—"said about Zemo is all over town."

"Any reaction?" Stark asked.

"Not yet." Red Wolf said. "He knows I watch him."

"I suppose it's better we're out of town," Stark said, but he was frowning.

"I watch you too," Red Wolf told him.

"You're a man of many eyes."

Red Wolf responded by stepping back and swatting the mare's flank, which made the horse jump and turn a quick, high-stepping circle around him. Stark muttered curses and tried to bring the animal back under control. Steve watched the easy rise and fall of Stark's body as he moved with his horse. For all his protests, he was clearly an experienced rider.

"Here goes," Steve muttered, and swung up onto the back of what had been his alternate self's horse. He had to wonder what the animal thought of all this, but she didn't object. Steve leaned down to pat her neck, and she turned to look at him. They both sat still for a short, tense moment, before she flicked her ears and dropped her head in acceptance.

When Red Wolf finished tying the mule's lead rope to the back of Stark's saddle, he came over to recheck Steve's tack. "You'd better take this," he said, and held up a gun belt, complete with colt pistol and a double row of extra bullets. "Watch his back." Red Wolf rapped his knuckles on the shield slung across Steve's shoulders. "You have this. He doesn't." There was an implied "or else" following that request.

"I will," Steve told him, and rose in his stirrups so that he could fasten the belt. He didn't always use a gun, but he was probably better with a six shooter than with a horse. He gingerly kicked the mare's side and was pleased when she responded by walking forward.
"You better take the lead," Stark said. "You said it was up around the mesa? Where the sand starts?"

"That's right." The sun was on the opposite side of the valley, coming around to where the moon had set on Steve's jog into town. It softened the hills outside of town, and made the distant cliffs stand out with long shadows. "Do you ever get those cactus things here?" Steve asked, thinking of how it looked very much but not quite like a shot in the pictures.

Stark laughed. "Saguaro? Not this far north. You never been out west before?"

"Not really," Steve said. "I grew up in New York, then I spent the last four years... overseas. I've been to California, some. This was my first trip west. I wanted to see the Grand Canyon." Rather, Bucky had wanted to see it, and this was the closest he'd ever get.

"Hell of a trip out for a big hole in the ground," Stark said.

"I liked it. It was good to see the land I've been fighting for, meet civilians, clear my head some." Steve shifted in his saddle and tried to get the hang of moving with the horse. They'd gotten out past the edge of the town now, and Steve nudged his mare onto the rough trail he'd followed in.

When Stark didn't say anything for a time, Steve turned to look at him. He was staring off at the mesas in the distance, but Steve didn't think he was really seeing them, or at least not as they were now. He saw Steve looking and grimaced.

"My Steve never took to soldiering," Stark said. "He was in the recent unpleasantness with the southern states, but he didn't care for the slaughter. Can't say as I blame him. Surprised he looked me in the eye, after all that, but he did."

"I don't care for the slaughter either," Steve said, trying not to sound defensive. "I fight because I have to to protect my people, and to..." He broke off. He remembered the President's words about not risking the past with knowledge of the future, but surely this wasn't the past, and nothing Steve said could damage his own timeline. "The people we were fighting needed to be stopped," he said finally. "We were fighting for freedom, like Lincoln was to end slavery."

"What?" Stark looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Putting down the rebellion didn't end slavery," he said. "Leastways not outside of the territories."

"Oh," Steve said, again feeling out of place. For all this world had in common with the images of the West he'd grown up with, it clearly wasn't his own world. "It did in my world."

"At least your world got something out of it, then," Stark snapped. "Here, it was nothing save brothers murdering each other with armaments of my devising." He patted his hip pocket, but coming up empty there took a long pull from his water canteen and grimaced at the taste.

Steve didn't know what to say to that. He at least could know that all the friends he'd lost had died doing something worth it, that he had done something people remembered and were grateful for, something right. Mr. Stark in his world still made weapons, but Steve didn't know how he felt about that. He didn't even, yet, understand the wars his own country had been fighting for almost ten years, though he'd sure as hell been puzzling over it for the month he'd been awake. The more he learned of them... "You stay in Timely and shoe horses?" Steve asked.

"And mend wagon wheels, and tinker with automata," Stark said, his voice lighter. "Build the odd bit of mechanical armour, if the mood strikes me."

"You like it here?" Steve asked. He tried to picture his own Mr. Stark—with his supersonic jets and rock & roll bands and access to the President—being content in a small town in Arizona Territory. It
wasn't coming to him.

"Beats most other places I've been," Stark said noncommittally. After a pensive moment, he added, "I can't say as recent changes have improved it to my liking, that charming new mayor aside."

"Ever think of moving on?" Steve asked.

"No," Stark answered shortly, then under his breath, "I couldn't do that to him."

Steve let silence fall between them after that. His inner thighs were starting to ache from the stretch, and he still hadn't gotten the hang of moving with the horse. This was wearing him out faster than the jog across the same ground had six hours before. Ahead, the sun was vanishing against the rising bulk of the mesa, and Steve knew that he was going to need to focus on retracing his steps anyway. Though what he could hope to find when he got there, he didn't know.

later

"I guess you got pretty attached to the place, huh?" Tony says. For once, he goes back to the chair beside the bed rather than staring out the window. Steve wants to grab him by the collar and shake him, but settles for curling his hands into fists on top of the blankets. They don't clench as tight as they should. He's still so weak.

"I reckon I did," he says shortly. He's too tired and in too much pain for Tony's games. "Funny thing is, I thought you had too, though you didn't show it half the time."

Tony's shaking his head, not really listening to Steve. "I know you were there for a while, and I'm sorry for that, but you have to move on, Steve. Your life's here now, with the Avengers. We didn't want to overwhelm you with visitors, not until we know what's wrong, but they've all been asking how you're doing."

Maybe Steve is fading out again, because Tony's words keep edging up to making sense, and then not quite making it there. "You're a cold hearted son of a bitch," Steve spits. "You lived there near as long as I did, and now you just want to leave them there at the mercy of a man like Fisk?"

Tony opens his mouth to explain that away, and then he turns to Steve, leans in close, and says, "I'm sorry, I lived where now?"

Steve blinks hard and squints up into Tony's face, trying to figure out if it's the drugs or if something else is wrong with him. In the end, no matter how hard he looks, the fact of the matter doesn't change: Tony's eyes just aren't supposed to be blue.

"Who the hell are you?" Steve snaps.

now

Luckily, the wind hadn't entirely blown Steve's tracks away, and in any case, he easily found the rocks he'd pitched to test the portal.

Stark slid off the horse before it even stopped walking. "Can you mind these while I set up my equipment?"

Steve shrugged. He had no idea what to do with a horse, let alone two horses and a mule, but he hoped it'd be obvious. He braced himself against the mare's shoulder after he slid off, stiff from the ride. "You know, Stark, with that break we took to water these things, it took me less time to run into
"Pfft, if you say so," Stark said, already digging through the mule's saddlebags.

After a few minutes, Steve figured out lead ropes and knotted all of them together, which Stark's horse responded to by trying to bite first Steve and then Steve's mare. Sighing, Steve tied two to a rock about the size of a bread box, and the mare to a scrubby bush. He poured water for them like Stark had done before, and wondered what to do about the fodder in the mule's saddlebags. Horses hardly ever seemed to need water or looking after in the pictures. He felt vaguely like he should be looking at their feet somehow, but that seemed like a good way to get kicked in the face.

"What, you were serious?" Stark asked, when ten minutes had gone by and Steve hadn't said anything.

Steve shrugged. He guessed it made sense that this world's Steve Rogers wasn't enhanced, but he couldn't work out how to say that without sounding like he was blowing his own horn. Instead of answering, he watched Stark fuss with his machines. He was setting one up on one side of the supposed portal, and one on the other, and something was meant to happen between them. His attention on the intricacies of the devices reminded Steve of his own Stark, and how he focused in on repairs to Iron Man's armour or pulling apart the Avengers' comms system. He thought of Stark lying on his back on the floor—half under some piece of equipment, stripped to his undershirt but utterly ruining his suit pants—and found himself smiling. Regrets or no, in city or in the desert, it didn't seem like Tony Stark changed that much.

"What does that do again?" Steve asked.

"I haven't the least idea," Stark answered. "I suppose we're about to find out." The sun had set by then, but Stark worked confidently in the growing twilight. When he had the apparatuses set up on either side of Steve's best memory of the portal's location, he cleared the rest of the equipment about ten paces back. "Well, here goes."

At the push of a plunger on the end of a wire, the machines cranked to life, buzzing and sparking in a way that reminded Steve of the sounds the portal had made. He wondered if sympathetic magic was real. Then the first devices sent an arc of electricity to the second, turning the air blue as it flashed between them. Steve smelled ozone, burning metal and a sharp tang in the back of his throat that he realised was battery acid boiling off. The horses huffed and backed away nervously, and the mule laid back its ears.

Out of curiosity, Steve chucked a rock through the space between the devices, but it didn't so much as ripple. "Well," he said.

Stark sighed and depressed the trigger again. The machines stopped arcing, and fell into gentle sparking, bright in the gathering night. "I'll have to think on that one," Stark said. "You want to settle in for the night?"

Tony asks what the hell Steve's talking about, but Steve already knows he's an imposter. He should have figured it out as soon as he woke up, only the drugs are making his mind fuzzy.

"Where am I?" he demands. "Why have you brought me here? You work for Fisk? Roxxon?"

Tony's standing now, his hands out placatingly, and, oh, whoever 's in Steve's best friend's place knows them both well enough to have his body language down—well enough that Steve can feel
himself wanting to just accept whatever apology Tony offers him. "Are you flashing back to world war two again?" Tony asks.

Steve doesn't understand what that's supposed to mean, which makes it seem even more like his Tony, but he ignores it and starts to push himself out of bed. "I'm realising the truth," he says. "That this isn't New York, and I've been kidnapped." His legs are unsteady under him, but he gets as far as the window, noting that Tony is keeping himself between Steve and the door. When Steve looks out, he gasps.

The blue sky wasn't because they were at the edge of the city, maybe up towards Harlem Village, but it's because he's high in the sky, more stories up than he's ever imagined a man can build. The papers had said something about all kinds of newfangled devices President McClellan was building in New York, but this is beyond that. Steve's hundreds of feet in the air. He looks down, and sees Central Park as a crow would see it, and he knows this isn't his New York. When he left after he enlisted in the Union Army, the trees had still been saplings, their true forms only living in the planner's imagination. Now, like Rip Van Winkle's carob tree, they're full grown. More than full grown. Steve would wager that some of the green canopy below him is a hundred years old.

His knees feel weak, and he braces himself on the window sill. It's made of metal, not wood, and is cold under his hands. He looks behind him, and he would swear Tony is his Tony, save that his wide-eyed stare is too light, and now that Steve really looks, he's not waxing his moustache into points, and his cravat is a strange fashion that Steve has never seen before.

The air buzzes, and a metal bird the size of a pony express flies over.

Steve wants to drop to the floor and cover his head with his arms, and not come out until he's back in Timely and if not safe than at least on ground that's not spinning away from under him.

"Stark," he whispers, even though he knows now that it's not Tony, but what else can he hold onto in this strange world? "Where in the name of heaven have you brought me?"

now

Stark, knowing what he was doing, had brought both firewood and a pot to boil soup in. Steve watched him set it up and wondered how often this Stark slept in the rough. It wasn't something he could imagine his version doing, not with all his thousand-dollar suits and smart remarks about needing to be a billionaire just to survive.

Too bad: sitting cross legged across from Stark, their faces lit in the warm glow of the small fire felt oddly homey to Steve. It made him think of the hundred times he'd bivouacked with Bucky, somewhere up in the mountains, waiting for a dawn raid on an enemy position. It made him think of that Roy Rogers picture he'd caught with Bucky when they'd laid over in London. Steve wondered if one of them shouldn't start singing.

Instead, they sat quietly and drank soup out of tin cups. Steve watched the play of the firelight across Stark's handsome face and wondered what drove him, what drove any version of him. He'd asked Iron Man once, figuring he knew Stark best, and gotten something dismissive in return that made Steve wonder if his teammate even liked his employer.

The fire popped, sending a shower of sparks up to blend with the stars. Steve set down his cup.

"You going to try get that thing going again in the morning?" he asked.

"Might as well. I've got some ideas about connecting it to that card of yours, maybe use it to send a
"signal." He watched Steve with narrowed eyes. "Your people are looking for you, are they not?"

"They should be," Steve said, but he knew the lack of confidence was starting to creep through. He'd been here almost a day now. Where were they? "They're my team."

"Ah, yes. 'Giant-Man' and 'Iron Man.' Doubtless they will fly to your aid."

"It's safer," Steve said again, though he'd always known the real names of all the Invaders save for Namor. Steve fell back on his elbows and looked up at the stars, not wanting to face Stark's knowing look. How was it that this stranger could see right through him in a way that no one from his own world seemed to be able to do? "Truth is," he said, "I haven't known them all that long. I only got back from the war a month ago."

"You didn't even get a furlough?" Stark leaned forward on his knees, closing the space between them as Steve backed away.

"Didn't want one," Steve said shortly. "Didn't see the point. Where would I go when everyone I knew was dead? Seemed better to just keep fighting." He sighed and thought of that drawing of Bucky that he'd done on his hike, as if he would have been able to summon him to the place he'd always wanted to visit. It was in his pack on the motorcycle, he hoped. Had his team found it yet? "When I take time off, seems like it's just me and my memories, and that's worse."

Stark was silent for so long that Steve felt foolish for opening himself up in front of him. What did this man care about a soldier's woes, especially when his own soldier was dead? Somehow, the idea that Stark was familiar but distant made it easier to talk to him than to his own version. This man couldn't take Steve off the team if he decided that he was having a combat stress reaction, or whatever they called it now.

Or maybe Stark would be able to do something to Steve. If Steve didn't get back, and he was thrown into yet another strange new world, and Stark clearly had sway with the mayor. Or he could head east and see what New York looked like in 1872. Would it be stranger to him than 2011's New York had been? "The thing is," he said, wanting to fill the silence, but more still wanting someone to understand, even if he couldn't do more than speak the words to the night sky as he'd tried to do in the canyon. "The thing is, I spent over four years at war, and when I came back, everything was different, and I couldn't even tell if I'd changed, felt like I had, but everything I'd used to measure myself against was gone. It's like"—he hesitated, trying to sum up the dizziness of waking up after more than a lifetime had slipped away—"when you're on the deck of a ship, and it's pitching back and forth, and you can't see the horizon to get your bearings, only everything feels like that, all the time."

"Never was much of a sailor," Stark commented. His voice sounded so much like Steve's Tony Stark, and if Steve closed his eyes, he could just about picture that it was his Stark across the fire, not this new one. Maybe he'd decided to come along on Steve's camping trip; maybe he was listening sympathetically.


"I invented a submarine once," Stark said, tone almost idle, but Steve could hear an edge under it.

"Did it work?" Steve asked, offering the opening Stark clearly wanted.

"Too well." Stark paused, then said, "but the war freed the slaves in your world?"

Steve dredged back through his memory for stories of the Civil War. "Yes," he said. "Then the
slaves fought for the Union, and Lincoln passed an amendment banning slavery and another letting them vote." Or had that second one been Grant? "But the war lasted four years, and Lincoln was assassinated."

Stark pulled in a sharp breath, as if Steve had hit him in the solar plexus. Steve sat up and looked at him. Stark's hands had balled up until his knuckles stood out like white river stones, and his moustache quivered as he held his lower lip between his teeth.

"Stark?" Steve asked, and Stark let out his breath in a rush.

"You sound like him, when you say that," Stark said. He stared into the flames for a moment before he added, "Well, I told him this, so I may as well tell you. With my weapons, the war ended in two years, and none of the rest of that happened. I truly am damned, it seems."

"I'm sorry." Suddenly, Steve felt a lot less like singing around the fire. He didn't know what to say to Stark's confession, so he changed tacks. "But your Steve fought for the Union."

"Yes." Stark looked across the fire, meeting Steve's eye, then seemed to look through him, as if he were imagining another Steve sitting by another fire, on some night long ago. "Yes, he and that drummer boy of his fought from the Maryland to Virginia, mud and blood and gun smoke every inch of the way. Said he couldn't settle when the cannons stopped, so they drifted out here when Timely was still at the end of the line. Now, I was here already—had come out before there was a line, only a scatter of prospector shacks and another shack they called a saloon, before they struck silver. First time I saw Steve, I thought"—for a moment, Stark seemed to see the flesh and blood Steve sitting across from him again, and sighed faintly—"Well, I thought that until about the first few nights I caught him pacing up and down every street and alleyway we had back then. Being of a nocturnal persuasion myself, I caught up with him one fine witching hour and asked him, and not in these words, as I was still in my clove-chewing years, anyway, I asked him what in tarnation he was doing skulking around like a coyote looking for a bullet."

"Was he?" Steve couldn't help asking. "Looking for a bullet?"

"He said no," Stark told him, but he didn't sound convinced. "We hadn't shared more than a dozen words before that, and most of them less than friendly. He wasn't sheriff then, mind, just another lost soul in a lost town that wasn't on no map save the railroad's and whatever Red Wolf's people have for that kind of thing. Maybe it was meeting by moonlight, or maybe he just thought telling the town drunk was like whispering a secret into a well. Whatever the cause, he told me he was haunted. He said some nights he heard the voices of the dead and that sleeping only made 'em louder. He'd somehow decided that if he could make sure this town was safe, maybe it'd quiet his ghosts a trifle. I don't know if it ever did, and in the end, he couldn't keep the town safe, either, not even with that star on his chest."

Instinctively, Steve reached back and put his hand on his shield. It still held the sun's warmth a little. "It was probably a relief," Steve said, "for him to have someone to tell. Someone he didn't think of as a kid brother." Though the Lord knew Steve had laid any number of miserable secrets on Bucky's shoulders over the years, even when he'd been trying to be strong for both of them. "So you were friends after that?"

"After a fashion." From the way Stark's eyes crinkled, Steve could tell the answer. "We kept running in to each other, likeways. In the saloon, in the streets at night, in the middle of a dust up, other places too, sometimes. Lord, I sure do miss him."

Steve tried to tell from Stark's half mocking tone if he meant anything by that last comment, but he couldn't. He wondered if they'd been if not lovers than the sort of buddies who found comfort in
each other's touch when there was nothing else to be had. "I had a girl in the war," Steve offered. "Never knew her name, either, but she sure knew her way around a rifle."

Stark snorted. "That what they call it in 2011?"

Grinning, Steve rubbed the back of his neck and hoped the colour didn't show on his cheeks. He hadn't meant it like that, but now that Stark mentioned it. It didn't make him wonder any less about what Stark and his alter ego had been up to. It didn't make him wish that he had that with someone any less. He looked across the fire and let his eyes slide out of focus like Stark's had earlier. If he tried, he could almost imagine that it was his Tony sitting cross-legged in the sand, his jacket gone, all flashing teeth and enthusiasm for the bright new feature he'd helped create. Had this Stark been like that before the war? He was older and certainly more care worn than the man Steve knew. Stark saw him looking, but wouldn't hold his gaze.

"I believe I'll turn in," Stark said. He'd brought bedrolls, and laid one out near the embers of the fire.

"I can sit first watch," Steve said.

He took Stark's lack of protest as a sign that they were both taking Red Wolf's warning seriously.

Tony, the other Tony, explains. The other Tony tells Steve that he's in a looking glass world, and then looks at the tiny machine in his hand, and says like Alice in Wonderland, only here there are other versions of people.

There's another Tony, clearly, but there's also another Steve.

"I was looking for him," Tony says. "I... we, I mean, the team, sent him on a mission, and he flat out vanished. We've been looking for you, him for weeks."

There's another Zemo here, too, it seems, and he transported the other Steve to a new world, to Steve's world. Steve decides that sitting down is a good idea, he gropes for the bed and sinks down on the edge of the tiny mattress. He sees the room as though for the first time, all the lights, the metal, all the strangeness that he assumed was pure Tony.

"Guess you thought you'd found him, huh?" Steve says.

Tony slumps in the chair next to the bed. "Yeah, we did." He sighs and rubs his hands over his face and back through his hair. He has some kind of pomade in that makes it stand on end. "Finally caught up with Zemo—he kept talking about Los Alamos, I think he was trying to travel in time—and pried his logs out of him, but recreating the trip wasn't working, the timing was off, so I ended up..."

Steve can picture the energy all too well, the way Tony's eyes had lit up when he was working on the Vision of the Future—not entirely with enthusiasm or joy, but with a frightening sort of mania driven by too much coffee and not enough sleep. "Finding me," Steve concludes.

Tony says they have a record of what Steve is like, on some kind of electric level, and that he'd been able to douse for it, like looking for water. "I finally found you," he says, "but you looked like you'd been there a while. Your hair and clothes, and so on. I'd got the time a little too far forward, and you kept not being there, so I went back, and back, and when you popped up you were fighting for your life. I just... panicked and opened a portal under you. Got half a pig, too, and you with a bullet through your back."
The pigs. Steve shudders. That was the last thing he'd thought before he woke up here: not like this.

"We really don't have much record of how your body, the other you's, body handled major thoracic trauma." Tony is still talking, and Steve struggles to listen. His fingers tighten on the mattress, and he stares at the pale green wall. "Really thought I'd grabbed the right guy."

"Can I go home, now?" Steve asks, and doesn't like how small his voice sounds. He didn't sound any better before, either, but it was Tony, then, so it was all right. "Can you do that?"

"I am pretty sure I can do that," Tony says, and the flash of a smile is far too much like when Tony tries to assure Steve he's sober when you could light up Timely with just the whiskey on his breath.

"You better give me a gun before I go," Steve says. He's not quite sure he can stand for long, but from how he remembers Timely, he's thinks he's going to need to.

now

Steve didn't bother waking Stark for a watch. Stark needed the sleep more than Steve, and Steve liked sitting by the embers of the fire and watching the stars. He wrapped himself in blankets and thought of nights in the Alps in the late autumn, sitting up waiting for troops to ambush, and wondering at the vastness of the world.

Here he was: a poor, scrawny kid from a slum, and he was not only seeing every part of his own world, but travelling to new ones. Maybe he should just keep moving. He'd enjoyed meeting this other Stark, and talking to him. Strangers were easier. He could travel, see new places, right wrongs like one of those wandering gunmen in the pictures, even if there wasn't singing around the fire.

Steve wouldn't be alone, not really, not any more than he would be if he got back to New York in 2011 and stayed with the team. It wasn't like he knew their names.

In a way, he envied the dead Steve of this world. He'd lost everything and drifted, but had been able to form a community here. Even an iron tail like Danvers had genuinely seemed to care for the other Steve. Stark certainly had. Steve glanced at Stark's still form, curled up with his back to the embers, and wondered again if this world's Steve would have been under that blanket with him. Steve could still feel the ghost of that first embrace, hear the tears in Stark's voice when he'd said Steve's name.

Even if Steve and Bucky had made it home from the war, there wouldn't have been anyone waiting for Steve, not like that. Steve wondered if Agent 13 or the Invaders had wept when they'd heard he and Bucky were missing/presumed dead.

As the sky turned above Steve and he heard first one then a chorus of coyotes howling in the distance, it occurred to Steve that maybe what he envied about this world's Steve was that he was dead. This Steve didn't have to do it any more. He'd fought for something he believed in, was admired by everyone for having done it, but now he was resting in whatever place he'd managed to end up. This Steve was free.

He'd written in his journal that there would always be something to fight for, but what happened when he didn't want to fight?

He wondered if his team was fighting for him just then, fighting to get him back, or if he'd be forever trapped in this new world, a world where his country was more broken than he could imagine.

As the sun started to lighten the horizon, Steve shed the blanket and began to stretch. His muscles had stiffened in the night. Stark was stirring already, and Steve fed twigs to the buried coals, watching as they glowed and smouldered before snapping into sudden flame. If this Stark was
anything like Steve's own, coffee was going to be a priority.

"You didn't wake me for a watch," Stark said muzzily.

Steve shrugged. "No. I don't really sleep much." The sun would be up in another ten minutes or so, and Steve wanted to catch the lay of the land. "I'm going to run up to that hilltop, stretch my legs."

"Lunacy," Stark muttered, and poked at the fire hopefully, even though he must know it'd be twenty minutes before it'd be hot enough to boil water.

The jog up to the nearest hilltop only took ten minutes, and revealed the whole spread of the valley. The escarpments of mesa cut across the lightening sky with the rolling hills spreading behind them until they smudged into desert, and to the west the mountains were turning pink. Timely lay down somewhere in the hills to the south, where the highway would lie if Steve were on his Earth.

The spot where the portal had been was a relatively open flat with not much happening past sand, rocks, and the odd sagebrush. Plus three animals, Stark huddling near the fire, and the stacks of equipment on either side of the portal. The fire alone would be visible for miles, and Steve thought uneasily of Red Wolf's warning. It had been a quiet night, and Steve didn't see another living thing save the birds circling high overhead.

Steve waited until the sun crested the horizon then jogged back just in time for Stark to pour him a cup of coffee.

"See anything?" Stark asked, and Steve shrugged. "We'll see them coming a ways off, anyway," Stark added, and Steve blinked. That wasn't the kind of thing he'd imagined Stark thinking of.

"Maybe. Who's Zemo here?" Steve asked.

"Heard that, did you?" Stark didn't sound surprised. "He's a man of business for the governor, runs the casino, mostly keeps to himself. He's shown no sign that he's a dangerous man, yet it seems like everyone knows to not turn their backs on him for longer than they have to."

"Sounds familiar," Steve commented. Again, he cast his eyes along the horizon, but saw nothing.

"You wanted to try tying in my communicator, today?" he asked.

"Sure," Stark said. He knocked back the rest of his coffee and stood. "Give me that old thing, and I'll see what I can do."

Steve sat back and watched Stark fuss with his equipment, setting the communicator in the middle of a parabolic dish, and attaching so many wires that Steve had no idea how Stark kept track. He was sceptical of even Tony Stark's ability to get nanotechnology from 2011 to tie into something that was half a step up from being steam powered. However, if Stark showed any such qualms, Steve didn't see any sign of them, and he liked watching Stark work. He had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and the way concentration played across his features made Stark's nose wrinkle. Steve wondered if his alter ego had used to idle in the blacksmith shop just to enjoy the show.

After half an hour, Stark straightened, arched his back and rolled his shoulders and neck. "If I were you," he called back to Steve, "I'd stand back a pace or two."

Staying where he was, Steve flipped his shield off his shoulders and let Stark come to him. "Get behind me if it explodes," Steve told Stark, who shook his head.

The machine didn't explode when Stark depressed the plunger, but it didn't do much else either. The device hummed, and again the air filled with the acrid smell of battery acid, but unlike the night
"Is it working?" Steve asked.

"Hell if I know." Stark leaned forward slightly and glared at him. "Guess we'll find out if your people pop up out of nowhere."

Would they, though? Steve still wasn't sure they were even looking for him, and if they were, would sending out a signal be enough to tell them which of the thousand flickering deserts Steve had landed in. He leaned forward, matching Stark's posture, and peered at the machines, which had scaled up in pitch and were now vibrating slightly, sending up a puff of sand around their bases.

"Well, may be a while," Stark said. "Do you want to—"

Pain exploded across Steve's shoulder. He was falling, but twisted as he went down, kicking Stark's legs out from under him. He heard the crack of the rifle a second before he hit the ground. He gritted his teeth against the twisting agony in his left shoulder, but couldn't help the whimper slipping out between his lips.

It didn't matter. Steve pushed back the pain and rolled to one knee, getting the shield up between himself and the distant mesa top. No one should have been able to make a shot like that, not in 1870.

Stark tried to get to his feet, swearing, but Steve shoved into him with his good shoulder, pushing him back to the sand. "Stay down," he hissed, and studied the clifftops for the gleam of a gun barrel.

He needed to find it soon. He was already losing a lot of blood.

later

Steve decides that the less he sees of this brave new world, the happier he'll be. When Tony escorts him down to a clanking, smoking machine that is to move him through the city, Steve's perfectly happy not to look out the windows. He'd thought that his own New York with its open sewers and garbage piles had reeked, and it had, but not of burning metal and sulphur. The whole world was concrete and grey, and Steve has no idea how anyone can live here. He can hardly see the sky for the towering buildings. He picks at the seam of the denim work pants Tony gave him, and hopes that Tony's promise will hold. He doesn't know if he can live in a place like this.

Tony tells him that the city has grown to eight million, which Steve can't imagine how that's possible. It was an over-crowded hell hole with a tenth that many people. As far as he knows, there are about forty million in the whole country.

The machine arrives in an underground room without windows, and Tony holds out his hand to help Steve out. He can walk, but only just. Leaning on Tony feels better than it should when he knows this isn't his Tony, but it's so hard to remember there's a difference. They sound the same, even smell the same. As Tony wraps his arm around Steve's waist and walks with him, Steve tries not to let himself think back to other nights when he and Tony were close like this. He knows too well how Tony's touch feels to be entirely unaffected by it now.

Like the hospital, this building has a box that pulls up and down on cables. They step in from one room, and walk out into another that's a cleaner, less-organised version of Tony's workshop. He doesn't see a furnace, a heck of a lot more things are wire-covered and gleaming, but Tony's organisation via chaos has a distinct feel to it.

"Cap!"
Steve tries to turn, regrets the way it pulls at his stitches. "Janet?" It is her, though dressed in a skin-tight costume like a circus performer, complete with an elfin hat. "How..."

Janet has her arms stretched out to throw herself around Steve's neck but stops when Tony holds up a hand palm out.

"Remember what I told you," Tony says, and Janet pouts but stays an arm's length away.

Peering up at Steve's face, she wrinkles her nose and says, "This is weird."

Steve can't agree more. He wants to take Janet up on that hug, demand to know where she and Hank have been all these years, why they left Timely, but this isn't the his Janet, and even if it were, this wouldn't be the time for it.

"How about we work on getting the right Cap on the right planet," Tony says. He eases Steve into a chair and goes to work on a metal box that stretches most of the way to the ceiling.

Hank appears from another piece of equipment, also in a costume that shows off too much, but that doesn't keep Steve from being so damn glad to see him that he almost doesn't catch it when Janet shrinks to the size of a shot glass, sprouts wings, and flutters up to the top of the room.

No one else even looks, except to ask Janet to adjust something on a high box covered in switches. Steve keeps his mouth shut and watches. Tony and Hank are tossing words Steve can't begin to understand back and forth, referring to someone called Iron Man who isn't there, pressing switches that make machines hum or fall silent. Tony calls, Hank Giant-Man and Janet Wasp, but they talk like friends, like Steve's own Tony and Hank used to talk.

"Okay, here we go," Tony says, glancing back at Steve. "We were too early the first time, so let's try..." he pushes a final switch and part of the wall disappears. It's replaced by an image of the mesa a few miles outside of Timely, in the hour before dawn.

"You going to base out of the contact point and move the portal once you find him?" Hank asks, and then he and Tony are off again.

Steve felt a breeze in his hair and realised that Janet had was hovering by his ear. She settled on his shoulder, weighing no more than a mouse.

"How are you doing?" Janet asked.

Steve shook his head, made himself not shrug so that he wouldn't dislodge her. "I just want to go home," he said. "My people need me."

Janet sighed, a high thin sound. "You sure sound like our Cap," she said, then bumped her head against his jaw. "But I have to know, am I in your world? You knew my name. Tell me all about your Jan. Oh don't look at me like that, we have the time."

"Do you see him?"

"You don't need to whisper, Stark," Steve snapped. He was still scanning the cliffs. From the sound of the gun, it'd been a ways off, but he didn't imagine anyone would have that kind of accuracy when rifled muskets were a shiny new invention. Seemed like Stark's weapons had changed more than the course of the war. "And no, I don't see him."
"You're bleeding something fierce."

"Yeah, I know. I—" A bullet pinged off his shield, and this time he caught the muzzle flash from the edge of rock on the nearest cliiftop.

"Here," Stark patted Steve's shoulder then pressed his hand to the wound. Steve flinched but kept his shield high. "If he's got a Stark Reaper with a modified sight, it'll take him about thirty seconds to reload."

"Right," Steve grunted. If it were just him, he could shield himself and sprint over into pistol range of the sniper, but that would leave Stark exposed. He glanced behind him, looking for a dell. If Stark could lie flat out of sight, that would free Steve up. Though he was starting to feel a little giddy from blood loss.

The next bullet hit one of Stark's machines, which at least had the grace not to explode, though its partner fell silent. Behind them, Stark's horse whinnied and jerked its head to free itself. Steve pictured riding low on his horse, hanging off the side so the animal's body was between him and the bullets. It would be a short ride, and a waste of a good horse. If he got Tony back that far, he could make that run, and Tony could shelter behind the animals, dead or alive.

"Fall back to the horses," Steve said, and started to move backwards the shield between himself and the mesa, his body protecting Stark. Stark crawled back with him, trying to keep pressure on Steve's shoulder.

"I can make a smoke screen, if you reckon that'd do any good," Stark said, "don't have anything with that kind of range though. Or any kind of range. Damn." His voice choked on the last word, and Steve could imagine another gunshot, another Steve falling to the sand in front of Stark's eyes.

"We're not cooked yet," Steve said. "I'll take that smoke screen."

"I'll take that pistol, then."

later

The image of the desert flickers again, then settles into a fiery sunset. They've been at this for an hour, and Steve's run out of things to tell Janet about Timely. The image will flicker; Tony and Hank will talk about bio-somethings and searches and lack of results; one of them will poke at the boxes; the image will flicker and settle again, showing a new vista. Several times they saw figures crossing the sand; once it snowed, and once Steve saw a dinosaur, which caused Tony to curse Zemo's ancestry.

This time, Tony says, "Wait, wait, go back, High Pockets."

"You get something?" Hank asks.

"Sort of?" Tony's leaning over the panel, as though moving his face closer to it will make the flashing lights make more sense. Hell, maybe it will. Steve's seen a dozen stranger things already this morning. "I thought I got a signal, not Cap himself, but his Avengers card."

"Okay." He's grown taller so that he can fuss with something at the top of the wall. "I can celebrate to focus on that. Send me what you saw."

"Sounds like they're getting somewhere," Jan says from Steve's shoulder. She's sat down with her elbows resting on her knees and her chin in her hands. It's unladylike, just like Steve saw her sit on the steps of Hank's hardware store any of a hundred times over the years.
The double exposed image of what things should be and what he was seeing now is starting to give Steve a headache, or maybe that's the medicine the docs keep giving him, or that they won't let him have any coffee. He doesn't want to leave and risk missing a chance to go home, but he's also starting think of breakfast. He misses Bruce's bedside manner. He misses the way his Tony looks at him. He misses his six shooter.

"It'll be unstable," Tony says. He turns to Steve in the first time in an hour. "You ready to go?"

"I want my gun," Steve tells him, but he stands and tries to figure how much fight he has in him. Not enough to take down all of Fisk's men, he doesn't think. Better if he dies there than here.

Janet hops off Steve's shoulder, growing back to her full size as she falls and saying that she'll get it. The wall is flickering again, the image unclear, and Steve watches it avidly.

"I don't know if this will work twice. It'll be safer just to make a straight swap, you for him," Hank tells him. "It's reasonably close to when we pulled you out."

"How close?" Steve asks. He's buckling on his gun belt, and the weight across his hips makes him feel better.

"Uh..." Hank glances at Tony, who shrugs. "It's hard to pin down. Less than a year?"

Steve doesn't have time to think that through before the image settles again, and all he can see is a wall of smoke. A figure moves through the yellow haze, and Steve realises it's himself, or rather another him with shorter hair, holding something round in front of him. He catches a glimpse of Tony's hair.

"Typical," Janet mutters. "I think I better go too."

That starts a short argument with the men, but Steve is already striding forward.

Setting off a reaction in the batteries sent up enough smoke to give them cover and to choke them. Stark had done his best to bind up Steve's shoulder before they kicked off, but the bullet was still in there, and he had to push back the pain. He wouldn't be able to use his left arm for much, but he didn't think he'd need to. All he had to do was get to the bottom of the mesa enough out of the line of sight that he could climb the damn thing, track around and come at Zemo from behind. He'd be exposed across that long stretch of sand, but Stark wouldn't, and that was what mattered.

"Are you sure you're up to this?" Stark asked. He looked like a bandit with his face covered in a handkerchief, and even so his eyes were watering from the swirling smoke.

"Yes," Steve said, like he had the last three times. "Just stay down. If anything happens to me, keep out of sight as best you can, and wait for Red Wolf."

"I'll be honest and say I'm more worried about you than me," Stark muttered, but gripped Steve's good arm and said, "Good hunting."

Steve took three deep breaths through his handkerchief, lifted his shield in front of him, and prepared for the mad run towards the mesa.

The air buzzed like a radio sliding out of tune, and a man in blue jeans and a Stark-logo t-shirt fell through the air. He hit the ground hard but rolled to his feet and had a six shooter in his hand. A second later, the Wasp flickered into view over his head and coughed violently.
Steve froze, staring wide-eyed at his shaggy-haired doppelgänger. Stark was faster on his feet. As the other Steve wavered and had to take a wider stance to steady himself, Stark ran forward and wedged himself under Steve's shoulder.

"My god," Stark said, but Steve was already turning back to the fight.

"Wasp: Sniper, two o'clock on the cliff top. Fast as you can." In a blur of red and black she was gone. Steve crossed to his counterpart, and looked him up and down. The edge of a bandage showed under the collar of his white shirt, and he looked paler than Steve would like, but also breathtakingly familiar.

"Sheriff Rogers," Steve said.

"Cap," the other Steve replied.

There didn't seem to be much to say past that, at least not that Steve could think of.

"How's the shoulder?" Other Steve asked, looking him over.

"You were shot!" Stark got out. He looked between the two Steves as if he couldn't believe either one of them were there, let alone both.

"I'm better now," Other Steve said. He was holding Stark tightly around the shoulders, and Steve didn't think it was entirely to hold himself up. Steve also didn't think his counterpart would be much good in a fight. "That Fisk?"

Stark shook his head. He was blinking up at his Steve and it looked like more than smoke was making the tears run now. "You've"—he had to swallow and clear his throat—"you've missed a few things, Rogers."

Stark shook his head. He was blinking up at his Steve and it looked like more than smoke was making the tears run now. "You've"—he had to swallow and clear his throat—"you've missed a few things, Rogers."

The other Steve pulled Stark close to his side and dropped his head so that his forehead rested against Stark's hair. "I'm sure you'll catch me up."

Wasp buzzed back into view. "Cap," she said. "I got Zemo sorted out, but we have to go now."

Steve nodded. "Right, good work." Unbuckling his gunbelt, he handed it off to Stark and nodded at both men. "Been a pleasure," he said.

"Likewise," Stark answered, "Now get the hell back to your own people, while you still can."

With one last look at his other self, Steve followed Wasp through the portal. One second he was surrounded by swirling smoke, sand shifting under his boots. The next, his body hummed and blurred, and he was in the lab at the mansion, surrounded by the blare of fire alarms.

"All right, shut it down," Giant Man said, at the same time as Stark—his own Stark, with blue eyes—said, "Cap! You've been shot."

"Here we go again," Wasp said under her breath. She popped back up to her full size so that she could help Steve onto a bench. "You gotta stop making a habit of this, Cap."

"Sorry." Steve didn't feel sorry. He mostly felt exhausted and giddily glad to be back on familiar ground. Though that could have been the blood loss too. Stark was bending over the lab bench, telling him to hang in until the paramedics arrived.

"They're going to be confused about the migrating bullet wound," Wasp said, and Steve smiled at
"How are you doing, hon?"

"Good to be back," Steve said. His opinion on events settled on relief at being fussed over, at not having to be the only one between a gunman and a friend. "Wasn't sure you'd find me."

Stark laughed. "Cap," he said, "we looked so hard we found you twice."

It was good to see Stark laughing. For a flash, Steve saw the other Tony sitting in the firelight, making fun of Steve's awkwardness. He was beautiful when he laughed, Steve thought, they both were.

"Lost a lot of blood," Steve mumbled. "Sorry."

"You sure did," Jan told him, patting his cheek. "And you're going into shock."

Hank was putting a blanket over Steve, and someone else—Tony, Steve realised—was holding his hand.

It was nice.

Tony was smiling at him—all bright and tight around the eyes—saying that he was going to be okay, that Steve had been shot up a lot worse last time. Tony was saying that he'd missed Steve, that the place hadn't been the same without him.

"Nice to be missed," Steve said, or he thought he had. He decided he'd sleep for a bit. His team would be there when he woke up.

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The ride into Timely takes three times as long as it should, even counting in Red Wolf wanting to ask a thousand questions and the trouble of getting a hog tied assassin off a cliff top. (Tony said there was an easy way to do that, but Red Wolf said that wasn't how Mayor Danvers liked to do things unless she had to.) Steve still can't quite get a hold on how much he's missed.

Tony holds onto his arm, as they sit together in the shade under the cliffs, his fingers digging into Steve's upper arm. He hasn't really let go since Steve stepped back into his own world.

Truth is, Steve doesn't want him to.

"What was I like there?" Tony asks.

"Oh, still a mighty big pain in the behind," Steve tells him, then blushes, thinking of the way that could be taken.

"Was he really?" Tony's raised eyebrows tell Steve that he's not going to let that one slip by. "You're going to have to tell me more about that later."

"Sure," Steve says, and leans back against the cliff. Tony does the same, then rests his head on Steve's shoulder.

Steve closes his eyes and lets the warmth of the afternoon soak into his bones.