Where Our Restless Monsters Sleep

by Mizzy

Summary

Years after Tony Stark saved the universe, the Avengers realize there’s a major problem: his body has gone missing. And he isn’t the only one. Fallen heroes all over the galaxy have had their graves pillaged.

An old foe is stealing the bodies of fallen warriors, but for what nefarious reason? There’s only one solution. To find out why it’s happening, Steve’s gotta die.

He probably shouldn’t be so eager to do that.

Notes

This fic is a post-Endgame fix-it based on Fantastic Four #600, using the mechanic
(WORMS) that brought Johnny Storm back to life. I used *choose not to warn for this fic* because major character death doesn’t really apply (as the deaths are not permanent.) If you need more information about the tags I’ve used, please find more information here, but there are *major spoilers*, so please only click if you need them [here](#) :)

This is a Big Bang fic (Cap/Iron Man 2019!) so there is art. I have embedded a lot of it in the fic itself, but please go to their AO3 posts for more sketches and information and to send them love!
- [Ha-ko’s art post](#)
- [Kakushimiko’s art post](#)

Thank you both for an excellent experience!
Further thank vous and acknowledgements follow the fic. <33

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)
PREFACE

Nor dread nor hope attend
A dying animal;
A man awaits his end
Dreading and hoping all.

W.B. Yeats—Death

Steve had assumed, by this point in his life, that he had a good shot at old age being the cause of his death. He was wrong, of course. That was the thing about assumptions. They were the mother of all fuck-ups.
The crowd was screaming and the sand was hot underneath his feet. There was a riot of sensations; heat, light, sound. The blood gushing down his side was warm and too plentiful. How could Steve have ever guessed that this was how he would die? In an alien gladiatorial arena, thousands screaming for his death as Iron Man bore down on him?

Tony’s face was cold as he stepped forward. His armor was gold like the sun and red like Steve’s blood. It was Tony and he was alive. Just the sight of him made all the pain Steve had experienced to get here completely worth it.

“Good night, Captain,” Tony said, and his spear flashed in the light of the double suns as he raised it high in a killing motion.

~ SEVEN DAYS EARLIER ~

Part I: DEPARTURE

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep
W.B. Yeats—When You Are Old

Steve was dreaming.

Or maybe it was a memory? He could hear fragmenting sounds, children laughing, Peggy humming under her breath while she tried and failed to cook something, and chuckling when Steve took over. It could be a memory, because he could see familiar flashes of their beautiful home, the clock on the mantelpiece, the upright piano, the long line of shoes queued up by the door in descending size.

Then everything shattered with a screech, and a thump, and the sound of something soft hitting concrete, and that’s when Steve knew it had to be a dream. It couldn’t be a memory, because Steve had never heard those noises on that actual day. His attention had been pulled from the kitchen by a scream. A terrible scream that he would never forget. A scream that started again now, swelling, breaking, rolling across Steve's mind like a siren. Death was coming, that scream said. Death was coming soon. Death was coming now.
Steve startled awake and didn't believe it for a second, because the ground wasn't solid beneath him. He felt off-balance, uncertain. He took a deep breath and when he looked up, he saw he wasn't alone.

"You know, if you really want everyone to stop treating you like an old man, you probably shouldn't fall asleep in your rocking chair," Bucky said, smirking.

Steve resisted the urge to scowl. Bucky was perched on his usual seat near the window. He liked that he could see the white walls of the Avengers compound rising in the distance from that vantage point.

"I wasn't asleep," Steve lied. He was still clutching the book he'd meant to start reading after lunch. He shifted in the seat and surreptitiously tried to put the book to one side, like his thumb wasn't wedged in awkwardly enough to bend some of the pages. "You been here long?"

"Long enough to know you snore now," Bucky said, still smirking.

"Laugh it up, Barnes," Steve said. "You're not getting any younger either."

"You've still got, what, a century on me now? I don't think I'm ever catching you up, old man Rogers."

Steve smiled and then belatedly remembered his manners. "Can I get you something to drink?"

Bucky arched an eyebrow. "I'd have one already if I wanted one," he said, which was fair; Steve encouraged everyone to use his small home as their own if they ever needed to. "Nah, I was just on my way up to the compound, thought I'd stop by before the meeting starts."

Steve tensed. A meeting? And he hadn't been invited?

"Relax, it's probably nothing," Bucky said. "If it was urgent, would I have been given an actual appointment time?"

Steve tried to relax. "I didn't even know you were back in the states yet," he said.

"Oh boy, it was a surprise to me too," Bucky said, and immediately started launching in about his latest adventures with some Canadian superheroes, and apparently Sam had egged Bucky into challenging Justin Trudeau to a boxing match. "I'm only showing you this because Sam's looking forward to your face and I need to deprive him of that joy." Steve did laugh at the photo; Bucky grumpily holding up a sign admitting his loss to the retired politician.

"How about you?" Bucky said. "Kids driving you wild yet?"

Steve pulled a face. Every weekend he helped coach some of the rookie wannabe Avengers and they were teenagers, their judgment wasn't always… amazing. Steve told Bucky how last weekend he'd had to confiscate the stunning device that Obadiah Stane had once used to nearly kill Tony.

The little idiots had been stunning each other during class. For fun.

"The punks," Bucky said. "We'd have never done anything like that." Bucky winked and Steve laughed, because maybe there was that ill-advised game of Pocket Knife Baseball one summer; Steve was lucky the cut he'd ended up with was shallow. His mom had chastised him softly for days about it. Worse, Steve had been banned from seeing Bucky for a whole week. In those fractious New York summers, a week had felt like an entire lifetime.
Bucky might have been about to say something else, but he was interrupted when the walls of
Steve's small house shook as the front door slammed shut.

Bucky jolted, but Steve didn't even turn his head. It was five o'clock on a Friday. Meetings often
ran late on Fridays at Stark Industries and Steve was an easy on-site babysitter. Besides, Friday
meant art and history class, so if she was this early it meant Morgan probably had homework she
needed help with.

It was almost a miracle that Steve's house held together, considering how hard Morgan slammed
the door to announce her arrival.

Morgan poked her head around the doorway, a bright expression on her face. Her cheeks were
flushed and there was a smear of blue paint on her forehead. Nebula blue, Steve thought wryly;
Morgan made no secret that Nebula was her favorite aunt.

Natasha would have easily been her favorite, if she was still alive. Steve swallowed the thought
back; it wouldn't do for Morgan to see an old man cry.

"Oh hey," Morgan stayed in the doorway, hanging onto the frame. Her eyes darted to Bucky. "I
didn't see your bike outside."

"Left it at the compound," Bucky said, surreptitiously sliding his metal hand into his pocket and
turning away from Morgan slightly. Steve wasn't even sure if Bucky consciously knew he was
doing that. Bucky nodded at Steve. "I've gotta get to my meeting. I'll see you tomorrow, probably."

"Probably," Steve echoed. "I'll be teaching all morning. You know where to find me."

"You don't have to leave on my account," Morgan said.

"I was leaving anyway," Bucky said. He smiled at her politely. The tension between them was
mild, but it never went away. Morgan only had a couple of grudges, but she was tenacious about
holding onto them.

"Let me know if it's anything important," Steve said.

"Sure will," Bucky said, but he didn't quite meet Steve's eye as he waved with his non-metal arm
and left. Morgan's smile was tight as Bucky nodded again and left Steve's small house. Her face
only relaxed once he'd gone.

Steve's heart ached a little. Morgan hadn't existed when that particular tension occurred, but she'd
learned the story a long time ago, because everyone shared their Tony stories with her, and that one
had been inevitable. Morgan had forgiven Steve for his part in it, after a grumpy couple of weeks.
She would forgive Bucky too, Steve was sure of it, if she just gave him a chance. You couldn't
force something like that, though. Steve knew that. All he could do was be there, a reliable
presence, and wait for the time to be right. Sometimes it felt like time was all he had.

"I'm gonna raid your fridge," Morgan announced, her voice sing-song and confident now Bucky
was gone.

"Go ahead," Steve said, unable to help his automatic smile. "You know where everything is."

It was almost reassuring, hearing Morgan clattering around his kitchen. He heard a thump,
probably her dropping her bag of schoolbooks on his coffee table. She liked to spread out her books
and work near his fire when it was cold. He remembered surreptitiously remaking the coffee table
every summer to compensate for her growth spurts; Morgan inherited her height from her mother,
thank goodness, although Tony would have bristled if anyone had said that to his face. Morgan's face when she found the old coffee tables in the shed and realized that the coffee table didn't miraculously grow on its own had been a picture.

Steve's chest ached and he stared dully at his book, not reading a word of it. Tony didn't get the chance to react to anything Morgan did. It was enough to drive him mad if he thought about it too long.

When Pepper had first insisted Steve stay close at hand, he had figured it was guilt or nostalgia, but he'd indulged her. It was hard to say no to Tony's widow without Steve's own survivor's guilt choking him, so he built the small wooden home out of that sense of duty, never expecting to stay there permanently.

He built the house on the outskirts of the land that Tony and Pepper had owned, close enough that he could see the Stark house from his living room window, but far enough away that he didn't feel that he was encroaching too much on the building that was supposed to be Tony and Pepper's happy ending. Steve was old in appearance, but the serum still made him strong, so he built it by hand. The Stark property was remote enough that no one had to question the old man hefting impossibly large pieces of wood on his own.

Steve thought about leaving, once the house was finished. He nearly did. There were plenty of places for an old man to become a hermit and live out his days. But then Fridays started to happen. Pepper needed a babysitter, because Friday was the only night Morgan didn't have an extra-curricular at school, and Steve was the only one available. After that one time, Morgan showed up nearly every Friday after school, and Steve stayed. Steve became Uncle Steve, but that wasn't too strange, because all the Avengers—except Bucky and Strange—gained Aunt or Uncle before their name. Still, despite her widespread use of the terms, he liked the sound of it. Uncle Steve. It made him feel like even now he still had a purpose, a role to fulfil.

Once Morgan turned nine, it wasn't uncommon for her to drop by every day, even if only for a few minutes. Sometimes she cajoled him into joining family dinners, especially if Pepper or her new husband Hugh were away on business. In return, Steve told her as many stories of her father as he could, or he would convince another Avenger to come by and share one of their stories. He liked to think he was helping to keep Tony alive for his daughter, in the only way he could.

The noises from the sitting room had subsided, so Morgan must be comfortable now. Steve reached out for a paper tissue to slide into his book to mark his page, because it was easy to accumulate bad habits when you lived over one hundred years, and rose up from his chair. The serum still gave him additional strength, but sometimes his joints liked to remind him of his real age.

Tony and Natasha used to be pretty handy with an age joke. Steve's students often said things were funnier when they were true; would Tony and Natasha agree with that? Then again, if they were around to tell jokes, would Steve have made the same decision to travel back to the forties? Would he have gone to those same lengths to find that life that Tony had told him to get?

Steve took a deep breath. It was dangerous to let his brain travel down that sort of path, because he didn't regret the life he'd had, and he knew better than anyone how unpredictable even one turn in the road could be. Thinking about the past too much was painful; it wasn't a healthy can of worms for him to open.

It was a daily battle for him, because it was hard to make it through any chunk of time without thinking about Tony or Natasha. Steve had to accept that as part of life now. He hadn't realized how important they had both been to him until it was too late, but wasn't that too often the way of
Morgan, as expected, was sitting at the coffee table, a bottle of water from his fridge on the table and a half-eaten sandwich next to it. Pepper didn't allow Morgan to have white bread at home, but Steve was fairly sure she knew Morgan cheated on that when at Steve's house.

There were several books spread over the table already. Steve didn't acknowledge her; she was busy scribbling something in a notebook, and he knew not to interrupt her train of thought. Friday was art day, so Steve picked up his sketchbook and tin of pencils and sat in his usual armchair. Near the fire, it was angled so he could see both the room and the main window, the Stark house reassuringly part of this easy view.

Steve settled in with his sketchbook. If Morgan needed help, she would ask.

It didn't take long. Morgan was naturally inquisitive.

"I'm supposed to be doing hand studies for Ms. Gray, but I've drawn mine like, four hundred times." Morgan pursed her lips. "We're allowed to get other people to model for us. Do you think Uncle Bruce would let me borrow his hand at some point?"

"Probably if you agreed to leave it attached to his arm," Steve said.

"Can I borrow yours?"

Steve pretended to think about it, long enough that Morgan squinted at him in exaggerated confusion. "Do you promise to leave it where it is? I'm quite attached to it."

Morgan's squint shifted quickly to a scowl.

Steve laughed. "Left or right?"

"You're right-handed, so...left," Morgan decided. "So you can still sketch as I draw."

"Very thoughtful of you," Steve said. "Should I draw your hand while you draw mine?"

"I've already told you, it's boring," Morgan said, dismissively. Steve nodded. She was always good with saying yes or no. Unless she enthusiastically gave permission, he wouldn't do it. It must have been one of Tony's earliest lessons for her, Steve thought, because she was always very firm about her personal boundaries. It helped if she said no, and someone tried to proceed anyway, that she had more than a handful of superpowered individuals close and ready to raise hell if Morgan even made the slightest sign of discomfort.

Maybe they spoiled her a little too much, Steve thought. It was a miracle she remained grounded. Probably Pepper's influence in her, both nature and nurture. Although Morgan spent most of her weekends and a lot of her vacations at the Avengers compound, surrounded by superheroes and gods and mutants and Eternals and whatever else turned up that week in that general mayhem, on weekdays she was a regular teenage girl. She had homework, and cheerleading, and school excursions, and play dates, if you were allowed to call them play dates when they reached double figures.

Morgan swiped something on her phone and music filtered into the room through the bar speakers Morgan had installed a few years ago for Steve's birthday. She'd snuck in with her Uncle Rhodey and installed them herself. While it turned out to be a gift that had been mostly for her (she'd regularly been appalled by his old-school music system), Steve had still been touched by how she'd...
managed to engineer it happening while Steve was at the compound.

She pulled up her favorite beanbag and perched on it, staring intently at Steve's left hand as he sketched with his right. The music she listened to wasn't the worst Steve had heard, and it was low enough that the crackle of the fire and scratching of their pencils could be heard over the top.

Steve's chest ached. He'd had eighty years to try and get over the fact that Tony was gone, but Tony should be the one experiencing this. Tony should be the one here, watching his daughter's intent, curious face as she focused on her art. Steve supposed it had been long enough that he probably should give up the notion that he would ever be okay with what had happened.

Morgan paused, squinting at her sketch. "Is it bad to say I actually think I've done a good job?" She pulled a face. "Uncle Clint keeps telling me I'll get a big head like my dad if I keep saying I like my own things."

"Uncle Clint says a lot of dumb things," Steve said, because to be honest the alternative was going to get his bike so he could go punch Clint in the face. "I don't suggest you listen to him." He paused. "Unless it's safety regulations at the shooting range."

Morgan pulled a face. "I'd rather be down at the dojo with Uncle Danny and Uncle Shang-Chi. I think I like the defensive stuff best of all."

Steve smiled. "As a fan of shields, I can't help but approve."

Morgan squinted at him. "I've seen old footage of you fighting, Uncle Steve. I don't think you can really argue you didn't use that frisbee as a lethal weapon."

"A frisbee, how bold, that's a national symbol," Steve teased. Morgan rolled her eyes. "You have done a good job. I like the wrinkles."

Morgan beamed. "Mom says she doesn't know where I get my artistic talent. She can't draw. And she said Dad wasn't good at art and that's why he just kept telling her to buy a lot of it."

"I can't speak for your mom's talent," Steve said slowly. "But...I always thought your dad's engineering was a kind of art all on its own."

The look Morgan gave him was a rare one, that appeared whenever something reminded her of her dad. The number three thousand randomly appearing somewhere, or the smell of cheeseburgers, or a new Iron Man book or movie appearing on the scene. Steve empathized. It had been hard to explain to Peggy why he broke down during their vacation to Miami; Peggy wanted to try the very first Burger King. Steve was a mess from his first bite. Peggy didn't say anything, but she also never ordered him a cheeseburger ever again.

That was the thing about grief. Even when you thought you were ready for it, sometimes it punched you as hard as it had the first time. Before Steve lost his mom, no one had warned him that when a loved one died, you lost them over and over again. He hadn't realized Tony had somehow quietly crossed into that category until it was much too late.

Even now, years later, some days Steve woke up and found it too hard to get out of bed into a world without his mom, Tony or Natasha in it. Morgan had been a big part in forcing him up and about every day, just in case she dropped by. Steve wondered sometimes if that was Pepper's motivation behind arranging the Friday babysitting that first time. He wouldn't put it beyond her. She had copious experience micromanaging one stubborn superhero, after all.

"I'm nowhere near your talent yet," Morgan sighed, glancing moodily at Steve's sketchbook page.
Steve had taken to drawing from his memories; he hadn't been able to photograph the earliest chunks or the most dangerous parts of his stolen lifetime, so he was reduced to his mind and a pencil and a blank page for a lot of it.

"I have had a tiny number of extra years to practice," Steve said. "And I was a pro. You can whine at me in eighty years if you still think I'm better by then."

Morgan raised one eyebrow in such a perfect Stark manner that Steve almost flinched. "Bold of you to assume that I won't overtake you in a tenth of that time."

Steve laughed. "I'm sure you will."

Morgan's attention span was limited. It was one of Steve's favorite things about her. No danger of losing her into a seventy-hour invention bender like her father. Once she'd had enough of sketching, she rolled back over to the table, opened her favorite planning app on her phone, and groaned out loud.

Steve kept silent. She would elaborate if she needed to. Apparently she needed to.

"I scheduled time to work on the project that's due next," Morgan said, "but I can't."

Steve kept his gaze on his sketchbook, because Morgan was too much like her father; sometimes when it came to approaching emotional things face-on, you had to approach her from the side. Sneak attack. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Morgan made a non-committal noise in the back of her throat. "It's not that big a deal," she said, continuing to tap her pen; her notebook, the desk, and her leg were all equal targets. Then she sighed. "Mr. Dell assigned us group work and my team is made up of morons."

Steve winced. "Did you tell them that they were morons?"

Morgan's eyes flashed in his direction. "I'm not a moron. I already learned not to tell anyone to their face that they were stupid. Even if they are."

"Most people are stupid compared to you," Steve said, hesitantly.

Morgan rolled her eyes but smiled at the same time. "These people tank that comparison more than most," she said, conceding to his compliment. She sighed and then put her pen down, crossing her legs and facing Steve directly. This meant she was ready to vent, so Steve could put his pencil down and engage her directly with less chance of her spooking. Emotions were difficult for everyone, he supposed, and Morgan was dealing with some hefty Stark genes on top of that.

"We're supposed to be doing a themed book report for General Studies," Morgan started, and Steve immediately understood some of her anguish, because Morgan hated General Studies with a passion. It was some sort of class that gave the school extra funding from one particularly rich donor, meaning every child was forcibly signed up to it, and it was supposed to encourage key skills that might otherwise be missed by a regular curriculum: communication, interpersonal skills, teamwork. There had been a lot of weird initiatives instituted across the globe in response to the Blip. Everyone knew the world needed a little help to restructure, but nobody could quite agree what that meant.

Steve stayed out of it. He was a relic of the past. The future had been Tony's domain.

"What theme has your group decided on?" Steve asked.
Morgan made a complicated gesture with her hands. "Red."

"Red?"

"As in red the color. The color of the cover. We're supposed to be producing a display that would encourage other kids to read more and pick ten to twelve books as a group that fits a specific theme, and they picked books that have red on the cover."

"Well, could you go to the teacher and—"

"I already tried that." Morgan thumped her head forward so it rested on the coffee table. "Mr. Dell approved it. He thinks it's an acceptable theme."

"Ah."

"And even though I argued my case—de nada. And it's not like I can say, hey, I'm Tony Stark's kid, maybe I have a couple of brain cells that might be going in the right direction. Because if I did that, then mom would yank me out of the Tomorrow Academy."

Steve nodded solemnly. They made Morgan use a fake name at school during the week, even though he was aware Pepper had a rotation of bodyguards stashed through the school anyway (three of the teachers, four of the janitorial staff, two administrators, one of the cafeteria workers, and a taco van nearby.) Morgan was too clever for her own good. Steve had a private pool going on with Bucky and Rhodey as to how many of them Morgan had already figured out weren't entirely on the level.

"And apart from those morons," Morgan continued with a sigh, "I really like the Academy."

"So why can't you work on it?"

"Because they wouldn't let me pick two books and work independently on those books, we have to pick ten or twelve books together, that we all agree on. And we're not meeting up again until next week, so I can't start on it."

Steve winced in commiseration. Morgan inherited Pepper's Type-A personality. Getting an early start on her homework was something she always loved to do.

Morgan eyeballed him. "You've worked in a few teams in your time. Any tips?"

Steve sighed and thought about the best way to answer. "Unfortunately, what you need is time. You've got a bunch of different personalities in a small space, you need time to adjust, to learn how to be in each other's space, to learn how to balance your strengths and weaknesses. It's an adjustment period for all of you. Sometimes time, communication and experience is all you need for a team to come together." He frowned apologetically. "I know it's not exactly what you want to hear."

Morgan wrinkled her nose in agreement. "I was hoping for some tips and tricks."

"Donuts," Steve said. "Take donuts to the team meeting. If nothing else, it'll shut them up for a couple of minutes."

"If mom ever let us have sugar in the house, that might have been helpful advice."

Steve snorted. "If you haven't learned how to wrap Happy Hogan around your little finger by now, I don't know what to say."
"You know, one thing I have learned over the years, though…" Steve templed his fingers together and looked away. "No team lasts forever, even when you want it to. That's a tragic truth, but at least here maybe it's a comfort."

When he looked back, Morgan had a soft smile on her face that she quickly swapped for a grimace. "It would still be easier with a plan."

"I'll cheer you on from afar and hope everything goes well for you."

Morgan narrowed her eyes. "Hope is not a plan."

"No," Steve said, faintly. He felt like there was something he should say, something that would help, but he couldn't find the words. He settled for validation, because it was better than nothing. "I suppose it's not."

Steve tried not to show he was worried, but he was. Pepper was rarely this late. He kept his expression plain as Morgan continued to type frantically; he didn't know whether she was working on homework or chatting with friends, but he hoped it was the latter.

He got up and wandered across the room with feigned casualness, pretending he needed to stretch after sitting too long, but he glanced out of the window in worry. There was still no light on at the Stark home.

Steve's gaze drifted to his phone, or what was supposedly a phone; it looked like a computer and a phone had a misshapen child together. There was no alert on it, even though Steve had it set to display even voicemails as text on the small screen.

Pepper was probably just running late. If something major had happened, Morgan would know about it—she was tied into so many of the Avengers computer systems that she wasn't supposed to be, but who would reasonably be able to consistently keep Tony Stark's kid out of his own computer systems, anyway? Steve's phone-computer-hybrid thing (it had a name? StarkHub? StarkHome? Steve couldn't remember, but it was more because he was disinterested rather than his memory failing him; his memory never failed him) wouldn't be blank, either.

But then, Bucky had been called into a meeting. And he was back early from Canada, without real explanation. Maybe something big had happened. Something they were being terribly secretive about. Steve wouldn't put it past Bucky to be lying to him. His friendship with Bucky was still strong, but it wasn't the same as it used to be; sometimes they kept secrets from each other. That was what they both needed, but it left them a little more distant than Steve liked to admit sometimes.

Steve was so absorbed in his thoughts he hadn't noticed that Morgan was wandering around too until he heard the thud; he turned to see Morgan picking up his sketchbook from the floor.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to knock it off," Morgan said, "I was just—" Her explanation faded as she glanced down at the page the book had opened to, and her expression switched to open curiosity.

Steve's heart lurched as he saw what page it had fallen onto. A woman with her arms around two boys and a girl. For a moment, he felt dizzy.

"This is amazing," Morgan breathed. Her face was alight when she looked up at him. "Who are they?"
Steve forced himself to smile and tried not to look too desperate as he held out his hand for her to give his book back. "Faces from a dream I once had," he said, letting her look a little longer like that might hide how fast his heart was suddenly racing, how exposed he suddenly felt.

Thankfully Morgan seemed to buy into the act and she nodded. "I read that every face we dream about is someone we once saw, because the brain can't invent faces. That's cool, right?"

Steve, his heart aching, nodded. "Yeah." He was proud that his voice held together. "Yeah, that's cool." He inhaled and exhaled as quietly as he could. "Look, I guess your mom and Hugh are running a bit late. How about I gatecrash your mom's kitchen and we get started on some dinner, so they have some hot food to come home to? We can make it together, give you some extra experience on that concept of teamwork you're so worried about."

"That's a nice idea," Morgan said. "As long as you're aware I'm not allowed near knives."

Steve winced, remembering the Great and Terrible Knife Incident of 2028. Sam still had a very tiny scar on his right arm from it. "I'm aware," he said, heavily.

Morgan chattered the whole very short way to the Stark house, only stopping talking once she opened the front door (retinal scan, because of course Tony had loaded his house with Stark tech) in favor of hanging her schoolbag up on its designated hook and heading over to the mantelpiece to smile up at the photograph there. It was a beautiful photograph—Tony in a suit at some benefit to raise money for families affected by the Decimation. He was holding a young Morgan who was dressed in a bright red beautiful ballgown. She looked like a princess and Tony looked so happy.

"I'm home, dad," Morgan whispered to the photo. "I love you five thousand, nine hundred and fifty eight."

Steve headed over to check Pepper's fridge and tried to pretend his heart didn't break a little bit every time he heard that part of her daily ritual.

Pepper Potts was even more Type-A than her daughter; a menu displayed on the fridge door as soon as he stepped close to it. Friday night: Harissa Roasted Vegetables and Chickpeas with Tahini Yogurt. Steve had seen Pepper work in her kitchen enough to know there would be a laminated recipe in her recipe folder, which she kept in a drawer in the kitchen island.

As expected the file was there, already open on the right page, so Steve dutifully started pulling out all the right ingredients.

"If I promise to chop the vegetables, do you want to handle the tahini yogurt sauce?" Steve asked, putting the oven on to the right temperature.

Morgan shut one eye and glanced at him over the top of the sofa. "Not really, but I want to eat, so I guess so," she said, and joined him over on the counter to squint at the recipe.

It was an easy recipe; the most time-intensive part of it was roasting the vegetables for forty-five minutes. Steve hadn't been much of a cook until his sojourn to the other timeline; he'd ended up taking some cooking classes when it turned out Peggy was even worse in the kitchen department than he was, and he ended up finding a kind of peace in the monotony of preparing food. He was fast at it too, adeptly cutting up the cauliflower and sweet potatoes before stirring in the rest of the ingredients.

"Do you want salmon or chicken with this?" Steve asked.
Morgan pulled a face, already finished with her careful stirring. "Chicken," she decided, as she put the bowl of sauce into the fridge and rooted out a pack of four boneless chicken breasts. "Can I put some seasoning on mine?" Pepper was notoriously stingy with salt.

"Only if you put some on mine too," Steve said; they shared a conspiratorial smile over the counter-top.

This was Steve's life now. Small. Domestic. This was how a life should end. Not in fire and pain. Right now, Steve was standing where Tony should be and he hated that. He already knew his own life with Peggy was a stolen one, but apparently that was Steve's lot now. Life thief. Human cuckoo.

Finished with preparing their chicken, Morgan flopped backward onto the sofa, idly doing something with her StarkPhone—it rarely ever left her hand. "Tell me a dad story," she said.

Steve huffed an amused breath as he started to heat up the grill. "I'm trying to think of one you haven't heard yet." He cocked his head. "Did I tell you about the time your dad took on a skyscraper?"

Morgan squinted. "You mean with the Hulkbuster?"

"No, this was in—what's that country near Latveria?" Steve's memory might hold onto everything, but with over a century of input, sometimes pulling out the right fact now took longer than a second. "Used to be annexed to it. Got in the news last year for its Molynite exports."

"Rotruvia."

"It was back in 2013 when we were looking for Loki's scepter." Hydra had taken it, of course, walked it right out of the front door of the Avenger's tower with their own damn permission, but hindsight was only helpful when they were doing a time heist. "We kept hearing reports from all over the place, possible Hydra bases with unusual power signatures, and of course we chased all of them."

"Of course."

"And where there's smoke there's fire. So while we didn't find the scepter, we found a lot of Hydra bases."

"I thought SHIELD was Hydra."

"Hydra had infiltrated many of SHIELD's operations," Steve explained, "but Hydra still had its own bases around the world. Squirreled away in remote locations where they could hide from law and order."

"But not from my dad and the Avengers."

"Not from your dad at all." Steve smiled, settling into the story. It was a pretty fun adventure, one of the first missions they'd nearly been fighting together long enough to work as a team without too many hiccups.

There were hiccups, though. By the time Steve was most of the way through the story, Morgan was hiccuping herself with laughter, especially about Bruce hulking out in a phone booth and then getting wedged, at the exact same moment they discovered the signal coming from Rotruvia's highest skyscraper.
"Oh my gosh, what did you do?" Morgan had abandoned lying down; she was propped up against the back of the sofa, elbows leaning on the back, her eyes shining as Steve continued the story. Even her StarkPhone was somewhat abandoned, lying on the arm of the sofa, although it was still technically close to her.

"Well, Hulk got his legs out from the phone booth he was stuck in, but not his body. He panicked and started running. Which wasn't exactly great because we were supposed to be approaching the facility covertly."

"Yeah, I'd think the phone booth running around screaming with giant green legs sticking out of it doesn't exactly scream covert."

Steve shot her a quick grin. "Your Uncle Clint and I tried to stop him, but it was too late."

"Did Dad have to blast him free?"

"No, Hulk smashed himself free a few minutes too late. And your Dad didn't exactly stick around to help."

"Let me guess: he went off alone."

"Of course. While we were trying to extract Hulk from the booth, and fight off the Hydra agents who came out to investigate all the fuss, your father scanned the skyscraper and found the missile launcher Hydra had hidden inside it. They'd literally built the skyscraper around it. Seeing us there, though, they panicked, and launched all their missiles at once. However, there was a problem."

"The missile launcher wasn't finished?" Morgan guessed.

"The launcher itself was finished, but in their panic, Hydra had forgotten that the skyscraper itself wasn't finished. They'd meant the roof to open to let the missiles out. The roof did not open." Steve grimaced. "Your father realized that it was about to explode and take out the entire mountainside, which would have killed thousands of innocent civilians. So first he had to get in and take out the roof so they could get through, and then he tried to stop the missile launch from happening at all. But in destroying the roof, several chunks of it had gotten lodged into the launcher, so after your dad disabled three of the missiles, two of them went off early."

"Obviously he stopped them, because Latveria still exists."

"Well, yeah, I suppose the fact all my stories aren't fiction can ruin a story twist or two."

"What happened next?"

"Well, your dad managed to stick the remaining missiles into the walls of the skyscraper somehow, I don't know, I was still smashing Bruce out of the phone booth at this point—your Uncle Thor might have more information, so ask him next time he's on Earth—and then the whole building took off. With him still inside it, of course. So we turn around, and there's this entire skyscraper flying through the air, and it ripped out the floor, so there's an exposed room full of Hydra goons screaming at the top of their lungs—and then there were fireworks, as your dad blew the skyscraper up high enough in the air so it couldn't hurt anyone."

"I wish I'd seen that."

"We had our hands a little too full to take video, sadly," Steve shook his head. "And we took it for granted. It was only on the flight back home that he collapsed. Turned out that there'd only been a ten percent chance of success; there was a ninety percent chance it would fail and the strain of
redirecting the missiles and the amount of power that he had to expend would stop his heart."

"Oh, wow. He knew the odds before doing it?"

"Yeah." Steve smiled, shaking his head fondly at the memory. "He said when it was 10% chance of success, if the alternative didn't bear thinking about, it was basically 100%. And retroactively, even 1% chance is 100%, so we couldn't shout at him for knowing it was bad odds and going in regardless when he had proof there was 100% of it succeeding, because he succeeded."

"That's amazing." Morgan clapped her hands together appreciatively. "Why have I never heard this story before?"

Steve realized the reason too late to take the story back; he scratched the back of his neck and winced. "Probably because it sets you a terrible example. No one should go into anything with such a low chance of succeeding, not if there's other options." He paused. "And if you have a team with you, you have other options. We simply weren't at the point yet when we were all comfortable enough as a team to discuss things before acting."

"You don't have to stress, Uncle Steve. I inherited my mom's sensibilities." Morgan smiled ruefully. "Risks aren't exactly my scene." She glanced over at the photo of her dad. "I didn't inherit dad's bravery."

Steve frowned at her. "Uh, is it me, or do you not get up on stage regularly in front of hundreds of people?"

"That's different," Morgan said dismissively, her gaze flickering over to where the upright piano nestled behind the stairs.

"Are you scared before you perform?"

"Well, yes."

"Well, yes—but that's not exactly, like, facing *Hydra.*"

"Bravery is bravery," Steve said. "And you're plenty brave, Morgan Stark."

"Hmm. Perhaps you've charmed me enough into playing for you," Morgan decided, gracefully rolling over the top of the sofa, snagging her phone as she headed for the piano stool.

Steve started to grill the chicken as Morgan opened her book and started playing. Sometimes, if she wasn't directly stared at, she would forget anyone else was there and would start singing too. It took a few minutes but then Morgan was singing beautifully, gently coaxing the listener to follow her if they remembered September; it was a song Tony's mother used to sing to him. Steve stared at the cooking chicken, pretending it was the referred heat of the grill causing his eyes to sting a little. Tony should be here. He never would be. It wasn't fair.

It was as he was pulling the chicken out, debating whether he should cover it in foil and let it rest, or make Morgan eat hers now while it was warm, that the door opened. Steve looked up as a weary-looking Pepper and Hugh walked in. Hugh had his hand hovering near the small of Pepper's back; he was obviously worried about her. Steve tried not to show how tense he was about that, because Morgan was still in the room.

Pepper gave Steve a small, relieved smile before calling out, "There's my little bundle of sunshine,"
as Morgan finished her song.

The piano stool scraped noisily on the wooden floor as Morgan ran to hug her mother. Even though she hadn't said it out loud, she must have been as worried as Steve about her lateness. "Mom! Uncle Steve and I cooked you dinner."

"I can smell that," Pepper said. She smiled brightly at Steve. "Please say you're staying to eat with us."

"I don't want to intrude," Steve immediately said; he always felt especially intrusive when it was the three of them.

Pepper leveled him with an exhausted stare over the top of Morgan's head. "I insist," she said, looking serious. Behind her, Hugh nodded once, tersely.

There was something going on, then. Steve swallowed. "You two get settled. I'll start dishing up."

"Thanks, Steve," Pepper's voice was soft, but there was a definite tension around her eyes.

The conversation during the meal was light and entirely free of substance, with Hugh spending an impressive fifteen minutes talking about the distribution problem they'd been having at Stark Industries. Steve could feel the tension bristling below the conversation, but he kept up the pretense, even knowing Morgan had figured out that they would try to exclude her from whatever was obviously going on.

Morgan's eyes narrowed as soon as the meal finished and Pepper immediately tried to order her upstairs. "I'm old enough to hear whatever you and Uncle Steve are going to talk about," Morgan said, folding her arms.

"Mom and Uncle Steve are going to be drinking," Pepper said, flatly. "I've had a day and a half, and I need some adult company."

"Well, guess that rules me out," Hugh said equably. "How about you and me go out front and shoot some hoops before bed, eh?"

There was a small basketball court Hugh and Morgan dug out a few summers ago when Morgan had a Space Jam phase; it was rigged up with floodlights especially for dark nights like this one.

"Fine," Morgan snapped. "But you're gonna have to stop underestimating me one of these days."

Pepper suppressed the sigh as Morgan stalked past her to grab the ball and head for the door. Hugh shrugged at them and hurried to follow her.

Morgan paused as she reached the door. "I'll see you later, Uncle Steve," she said, rolling her eyes at him as she opened it wide, letting in a cold draft.

Steve held up his right palm, folded down his fingers and opened his palm again. Morgan echoed the gesture and added the gesture for see you later; most of them had learned to sign after Clint blew out his eardrums during one of the many tussles with the mutants, but Morgan had learned to sign as a toddler after Tony had ruined his own hearing for a few months when one of his inventions blew up in his garage.

Morgan had barely left and Pepper was already trying to open a bottle of wine. It was bad, then. Steve crossed the room and took the bottle from her; his hand was much steadier than hers was, so
he poured her a glass and handed it to her with a solemn expression. She downed it in one go and held it out again for a top-up. Steve felt queasy. How bad was it?

"You're gonna want to sit down," Pepper said. "But I know once I say something like that, you won't."

Steve quirked an apologetic expression at her. She knew him too well. "What's wrong, Pepper?"

Her eyes were wet when she met his gaze. "Tony's body," she said. "It's gone."

Steve stared at her, the words making sense individually, but not as a whole. It wasn't common knowledge that Tony's body wasn't cremated, rather cryogenically frozen and stored in a deep basement at Stark Industries headquarters. Even many of the Avengers hadn't known, assuming that he had been cremated and his ashes scattered privately by his family sometime after the funeral, where only the wreath had been pushed onto Tony's favorite lake in memorial.

"How is that possible?" Steve's throat was dry; he poured himself a glass of wine mostly to give his mouth something to do that wasn't screaming. Bucky cutting his mission short for something of this magnitude made a lot more sense now.

Pepper shrugged. "We've checked the footage, combed through it, but—honestly, it could have happened at any time. Any time. Carol's been investigating the chamber, and—it seems like for a long time it hasn't been his body in there, it's been some sort of—" She shrugged tightly, staring into space. "Some sort of Life Model Decoy, I guess. A-Force has been looking into it surreptitiously, but it seems a lot like the fake LMDs that the cosmic branch dealt with last year, with that thing on Arima, where the Atlantean delegation disappeared, but there's been a trace of some unusual radiation on the remnants too. Queen Shuri has promised she'll analyze it as soon as possible; the samples are on their way to Wakanda right now."

Steve frowned. "And there's nothing on the footage?"

"FRIDAY scanned it all immediately. No anomalies so far." Pepper stared. "If it was a LMD, I should have known. Steve—" She looked up at him miserably. "He counted on me and I couldn't even tell that his real body was gone?"

Pepper's hair got up his nose when he tugged her in for a reassuring hug.

"If A-Force are on the case, Carol won't rest until we get some answers," Steve said, trying to sound calm and reassuring, even though his brain was somewhat screaming at him.

"We always knew his body would be a draw," Pepper said, when she pulled away from the hug. She picked up her glass again and leaned against the kitchen island, shaking her head dolefully. "He did a lot to his body over the years to handle the Iron Man upgrades. The nanotech injections alone were enough, but he had a limited working form of Extremis in him at the end. I should have protected him better." Her voice hitched a little.

Steve stared. He hadn't known about the Extremis. But that made sense, he supposed. The last suit—Tony's coffin, Steve's brain interjected painfully—had obviously been designed to absorb a lot of the blowback from the Infinity Stones, but knowing now that Tony had used a form of Extremis... And even that had only kept Tony alive for mere moments after the end...

This wasn't going to help anyone. Pepper was the one who needed calming down. The man she loved had died, and now his body had gone missing. She was his widow. That trumped any pain Steve was feeling.
"C'mon," Steve said, "a pretty smart woman I know suggested sitting down."

Pepper looked at him wryly. "She also suggests bringing at least two more bottles of wine with us so we don't have to keep getting up to get more."

Steve smiled wryly. "I did say she was smart."

Alcohol didn't affect Steve, but Pepper wasn't cursed by the same inadequacy; she was much looser after her third glass and kicked her shoes off, tucking her legs under her and talking through everything that had been covered in the meeting, obviously needing to get it off her mind.

"I still feel like I should have done more," Pepper sighed, rubbing her forehead. "We owe him so much, I owe him so much. And I couldn't even protect his body?"

"You couldn't have predicted this," Steve said, firmly. "And the Avengers are as fiercely protective of him as any of us. If no one noticed, it was because someone's gone out of their way to be sure we don't notice. Until now." He wrinkled his mouth. "How was it even discovered now?"

"I've been erring over whether to open investigations into Extremis ever since—Tony left." Pepper sighed. "I finally agreed that Reed Richards could have a simple skin scraping, and as soon as the chamber opened...the fake dissolved."

"You were there," Steve surmised.

Pepper's face was taut with distress. "I thought seeing him like that on the battlefield was the worst I'd ever have to see him look. Seeing that copy melt...I'm gonna have some nightmares." She huffed. "Thank goodness Tony insisted on having a switch so I can soundproof my bedroom."

"He did like to think of all contingencies," Steve said, keeping his voice soft. Trying not to let too much of his regret sink into his tone. Those regrets were his cross to bear.

Pepper took a deep breath and let it out noisily. She shot him a sad look. "I'm sorry, I've been just thinking of my own pain over this, not yours. Are you okay hearing this? I can cut the rambling short—"

Steve frowned. "I'm—this isn't about me."

Pepper arched an eyebrow. "If you're going to pretend your feelings for Tony were neutral, you're trying to kid the wrong woman, Steven. He was dead and you immediately threw yourself into another timeline. Pretty big statement there."

Steve looked at her guiltily. He had nothing to really feel bad about, because he'd never acted on his feelings—hell, he hadn't even realized he had feelings until it was much too late to act on them—but it still felt wrong, that Pepper knew he had harbored feelings for her dead husband. He swallowed awkwardly, but maintained the eye contact. It had been a decidedly unspoken undercurrent to their friendship for the last eight years. Now, Steve supposed, it was heading into the category of things they did talk about.

"Couldn't handle a world without him in it," he admitted. It wasn't the full truth, but it didn't have to be.

Sympathy washed over Pepper's face and her face creased into a sad smile. "It's nice to get to spend time with someone else who loved him too at a time like this."
Steve could feel his cheeks get a little warmer and tried to blame it on the wine. "What are you going to tell Morgan?"

Pepper raised her eyebrows. "Changing the subject. How…unsurprising." The corner of her mouth twitched. "I'll tell her the truth. When she comes back in." Her gaze flitted out to the light of the basketball court. "I'd rather wait until morning, but I know she'll stay awake thinking the worst otherwise." Pepper stared at the contents of her half-filled wine glass like she'd never seen anything like it before. "Some of the things she inherited from her father are not as pleasant as others."

"It could be worse, she could have inherited his height."

Pepper's mouth twitched. It wasn't quite a laugh, but Steve would take it. "What was Tony like? In your other timeline?"

Steve frowned. It had been eight years and she'd never asked. Pepper flinched at the frown, obviously imagining the worse; Steve sighed at the realization he'd have to tell her, if he wanted her to even be remotely calm. It wasn't a great topic, especially for the moment, but Tony wasn't the only one who would lie awake worrying; Morgan was kind of doomed on parental inheritance when it came to that character flaw. Both sides of her genetics could worry like a champion.

"The problem with time travel is it causes ripples," Steve said, slowly. He looked across at Pepper, but he couldn't actually see her; her face was a blur as he sank into the memory of it all, and the regret that was deeply knotted up in it all. "You change one single thing, you change others. And as careful as I was to change what I could beneath the surface—all it takes is one day here or there, even a minute for one person to be delayed—"

His vision focused enough to see Pepper slowly looking horrified. "Tony didn't exist, where you went to? How—"

Steve blinked. "He did. Sort of. As much as I tried my best to keep an eye on things developing as they should, the changes that happened just by me being there—I guess I nudged Howard's trajectory—" He shook his head slowly. "Maybe by minutes, who knows. Long enough."

"What happened?" Pepper's voice was quiet. "You don't have to tell me."

"Maria Stark gave birth on May 29th, 1970, at 2.32pm."

"Tony was born at 8.39am."

"And Natasha Stark was born at 2.32pm."

Pepper put her glass down so she could put both her hands to her mouth. When she lowered them, her eyebrows were raised. "Tony was born a girl in that timeline?"

"Loud-mouthed, insanely intelligent, amorously libertine, whisky-drinking, egotistical—" Steve pressed his mouth into a line and shrugged, acquiescing to her conclusion. "Yeah, Tony was a woman in that timeline." He exhaled slowly, hoping he didn't sound too wistful about it.

Pepper had obviously imbibed too much wine to be rational because she leaned forward. "Was she hot?"

Steve wanted to deny it, but he couldn't. "Smoking hot. Tony would have been all over her."

"I bet he would." Pepper let out a low chuckle, shaking her head. She froze. "Was I a guy in your timeline?" Her nose scrunched up a little. "Did I exist?"
"You existed," Steve laughed. "Married Hugh in that timeline too."

"No way," Pepper breathed. "Wow." She did smile, finally, looking a little pleased at that. "That's kind of romantic." She sank back deeper into the sofa and closed her eyes briefly, her smile hovering. "I'm glad your timeline had a Stark there to kick ass." Pepper opened her eyes and trained them on Steve way too astutely. "Did you and she—"

"Oh god, no," Steve interrupted, immediately. It wasn't exactly the truth, but he could at least hand on his heart honestly say he personally had never gone near Natasha Stark, save for a few meetings where they barely interacted. Just enough for Steve to realize how similar Natasha Stark was to Tony. Heartbreakingly similar. "I barely said ten words to her. Besides, by then—" He pulled a face. "I was already ancient."

"And she didn't die," Pepper realized. "Oh. I'm glad. Even if it means it doesn't give us any more clues to our current dilemma, I don't know. I'm kind of reassured that out there is a universe that has Iron Man still protecting it." She squinted. "Iron Woman?"

"Iron Woman," Steve confirmed. "Although there was a good couple of years when Natasha's bodyguard Iron Man protected her."

Pepper stared at him. "A version of Tony where that cover story flew successfully? Wow."

"I'll tell you the tale sometime," Steve promised. "I think it's probably too late tonight."

"Probably." Pepper looked thoroughly exhausted as she started to straighten herself up. Her gaze returned to the small basketball court. "This is going to upset her so much."

"We'll find him," Steve promised. "Or at least we'll find out what happened and avenge him. That's what we do."

Pepper exhaled. "I'm not an Avenger."

"You were for a day, and I'm pretty sure that's the saying we go with now. Once an Avenger, always an Avenger. And as Avengers—" Steve nodded to himself. "We take care of our own."

Steve didn't hang around to find out how the discussion with Morgan went. It must have gone somewhat well, because all the lights in the Stark house went out by 2am. Which Steve knew, because he sat in his armchair and stared obsessively until they did.

He wanted to reach out to the others to find out if they knew anything, only to get brushed off by Sam and Bucky both writing back quick "still no updates" messages, so Steve stopped while he was behind. He stared a while longer at the Stark house, but eventually had to tell himself firmly that he didn't have to. The safety protocols that Tony had installed in his little house were decades ahead of their time and had only been improved upon since, Queen Shuri stopping by personally a few years ago to install a Wakandan-style force-field around the entire Avengers property line.

Everyone knew how much they owed Tony Stark for their lives. And apparently making sure Morgan was safe and happy was the way most of them actively chose to express that.

Steve had a class to teach the next day. Except it was technically today, so Steve heaved himself out of his sad chair and up the stairs to his bed, sinking into the too-soft mattress and staring up at the ceiling. The idea of someone taking Tony's body was turning his stomach, making his mind do somersaults. If it was for the Extremis, or for research into what Infinity Stones did to a body, or for any of the numerous things Tony did to his body in the name of science and Iron Man...it must
be for selfish reasons, and Steve would never be able to forgive that.

Tony was a hero who had given up everything for everyone. If death was his poor reward, then he deserved to rest in peace.

Needless to say, by the time Steve's morning alarm went off, he wasn't exactly sure he'd had any sleep at all, although he supposed he must have.

Thankfully his Saturday junior superhero classes (not the official name—there was a formal title for it, the Stark Industries Personal and Social Education Youth Program—but Steve couldn't help but pick up the terms his students used) had been rigorously planned months in advance, so at least the lessons were already laid out, and although it had been decades since Steve's last all-nighter, he was pretty sure he could hold it together for a few hours. Even if some of the youths were...enthusiastic.

The Stark house was closed up by the time Steve had finished his morning ablutions, gotten dressed and left his own small house. That was fine. The weather was crisp and cool, exactly what he needed to prepare for the day ahead. He left his bike behind and walked. He had the time and he was of a mind. He needed to calm down about the Tony situation if he was going to stand up in front of multiple teenagers for any length of time.

Morgan was unexpectedly still in the lobby of the Avengers compound, sitting on one of the visitor's chairs, sitting with her legs folded underneath her as she tapped on her ubiquitous StarkPhone, chewing her lower lip as she did so. When Steve walked through the front doors, tapping his wrist against the security sensor, she looked up and smiled briefly, but the smile faded moments later. Her pale skin seemed almost translucently white in the unforgiving compound lights.

"Uncle Steve," she sighed, as he came up and sat next to her.

Steve smiled sadly. "How you holding up, kiddo?"

"Eh," Morgan puffed out her cheeks. "It's not like there's anything I can do, I know that. But it's in my head. Like an itch. Like—I should be able to find him."

Steve looked at her sympathetically. "The best people in the world are on this. They're going to find out what happened."

"Yeah, the best people," Morgan said. Her gaze inexplicably darkened. "And some of the not-so-best people."

Steve frowned and then followed her gaze to the doors, where Doctor Strange was sweeping through, his cape billowing behind him, even though the air was recycled and filtered in Avengers compound and there should be no breeze to move it.

Strange paused near them and nodded at them politely. "Good morning, Mr. Rogers, Ms. Stark."

"Good morning, Cut-Price Dumbledore," Morgan greeted, her tone bright and sardonic. "How's it going today? Got any more parents you're planning to knowingly send off to their death?"

Steve winced and opened his mouth to step in, try to dissuade Morgan or reprimand her for the unkind tone in her voice, but Strange subtly shook his head at Steve to stop him.

Morgan glared at him. "Tell me, Mr. Fourteen Million Possible Outcomes, did you really look at all options, or did you just stop at the first solution that meant your sorry ass got to survive?"
Strange made a soft noise as he exhaled. "Always a pleasure to see you, Ms. Stark."

"I'm gonna go inside," Morgan said. "I'll see you in the lab, Uncle Steve."

She shot Strange another dirty look and stalked off toward the main hallway, her chin held high as she stomped off.

"I'm so sorry," Steve said, "I know Pepper's tried to talk her into speaking to you more kindly—"

Strange quirked an eyebrow at him. "It's not your job to apologize for another," Strange said, in that infuriatingly superior tone of his. "Besides...I deserve it." Strange's gaze drifted to the space where Morgan no longer was, his expression becoming pensive. "There are some things you cannot change. And much like as in my own history—" Strange looked at Steve then, his expression suddenly sharp. "There's more than one stain in Tony's past. We make amends for things however we can."

Strange smiled quirkily before striding away toward the main offices, his cloak still dramatically billowing. Steve frowned to himself. That was weird. He blinked a few times and shook it away. He needed to stop by the cafeteria before class was due to start. While his serum still rendered alcohol impotent, caffeine thankfully still worked, if he drank enough of it.

By about an hour into class, Steve was ready to thump his head through the nearest window. The only reason he managed to resist the urge was because it would accomplish exactly nothing.

Well, it might get him out of this classroom. He considered that for a moment. That would be cutting off his nose (perhaps literally) to spite his face. Normally he really enjoyed his weekend work at the compound. He was just having an off day because of the news about Tony's body.

Teaching was perhaps the most helpful that the Avengers actively let him be. Steve did most of his useful work directly with Pepper these days, still working diligently on behind-the-scenes on reparations after the Blip. He often still prepared tactical plans and consultations for the newer Avengers, but they didn't let him out in the field.

Once an Avenger, always an Avenger, but Steve's decades of experience and his appearance got him constantly relegated to a supervisory role. It was probably right. There were always new Avengers, strong ones, young ones, who deserved their time in the spotlight, who deserved the opportunity to prove their worth and protect their planet. And on Saturday, that supervisory role was allocated to the teenagers who'd gotten involved in that planetary protection gig.

Steve's current group of youngsters fluctuated, but there was a program for him to follow, which was probably good because Steve would have been too distracted to come up with his own lesson plan today; they were currently doing a pop-quiz on supervillains, seeing how much information they could remember about the foes all the Avengers had faced, whether cosmic- or planet-based, whether as a team or on their own. Too many of them had started to recur, escaping the prisons, or escaping before they could be imprisoned, before restarting their angry campaigns against whichever Avenger they believed wronged them.

Today was a decent attendance, Steve thought, which was probably because he hadn't advertised today's topic. Morgan didn't officially have to take part in the course packet, because she wasn't fifteen yet, but she was tapping away at her table, frowning at an image of Stilt-Man and murmuring under her breath. Teddy was trying to sneak glances at Karolina's table, but she flicked a hand and a light-screen appeared, blocking his gaze, and Nico high-fived Karolina without even looking. Noh-Varr looked like he was ten seconds away from punching his table, which is why
he'd been given the equipment that Jennifer had cleared as Hulk-proof. If it could survive a Jennifer punch, it could survive Noh-Varr's Kree-enhanced strength and durability. RiRi wasn't paying attention, but Steve wasn't worried about that. Rayshaun seemed to be the only one taking it seriously, which meant Sam was probably somewhere on the compound. Cindy and Lana thought they were being sneaky by tapping hints in morse code to each other; Steve had already used his console and amended their score so it would show up as zero by the time they hit submit.

Steve could see the dojo through the windows of the classroom, where some of the actual Young Avengers were training. Peter Parker was leading the class along with Lila Barton; currently Toni Ho and Kate were demonstrating a throw. Harley Keener was shuffling with a desperate expression, probably wondering why he was having to do something so active when he had signed up as Avengers tech support.

Steve knew how Harley felt. He'd rather be doing something else too, if he was honest. But Steve had lived his life. He'd lived two lives, really. Both of them exciting enough in their own ways. It was more than fair for him to step away from the active roles and work behind the scenes to support others. The super serum wasn't formulated to cause immortality and Steve knew his time left was limited. It was an honor to be able to shape some of the future he would be living behind soon.

He hoped he would at least be able to learn what had happened to Tony's body before he died. Steve didn't think that was too much to hope for.

Carol was waiting at the doorway to the classroom as Steve's session ended. She leaned against the door and high-fived Cindy and Lana who were the last to leave; both of them were red-faced and embarrassed that Steve had so easily caught them trying to cheat.

Steve shut down his console and looked up at her.

"We've got some intel on the situation," Carol said softly.

Steve was surprised he was being brought into the loop, to be honest; he'd been left out of several major events recently. He understood why he was when he followed Carol to the main boardroom and Pepper was there. She must have asked for him, because there was a spare chair to his right. Peter gave Steve a wobbly smile over the table. Steve wasn't the last to file in, but it wasn't long until Carol closed the door and activated the code 3 protocol: the strictest safety protocol they had on file.

This was proof that they were taking this incident seriously, along with the roll call. Alongside Steve, Carol, Pepper and Peter Parker, Sam, Rhodey, Bucky, Clint and Shang-Chi were there too. Carol pressed something on the console and several of the holographic long-distance comm panels set up behind the main table lit up with holograms of some others: Wanda, Bruce, Shuri, Valkyrie, Rocket, and Marc Spector.

Strange wasn't here, meaning he must have already been and gone. Probably off exploring the mystical angle of events.

"I think we all know now why we're here," Carol said. She was never one for starting with small talk. "We've had a development, so that's why I wanted to gather you all together so I can let everyone know at the same time."

"You found Stark's body yet?" Rocket asked, because even cutting out the small talk still meant most announcements took too long for him.
Carol ignored him, knowing Rocket would stick around and listen anyway. "About a year ago, A-Force and I picked up a signal in deep space. It was in the memos but we didn't really pay as much attention to it as we should, because we thought it was just noise. But Queen Shuri took a second look at it recently because of recent developments, and she realized something."

Carol pressed something on her console and a digitized waveform appeared on the main screen.

"This was the message we got," Carol said, and played a sample of it. It almost sounded like a random piece of music; certainly the pitches of the notes were all over the place. Until Steve realized it was the same rhythm. She smiled at him briefly; Steve was obviously the first to pick up on it.

"It's morse code," Steve realized. He got a few surprised glances, which soothed his ego probably more than it should; he couldn't tamper down the small flash of resentment that because he looked like an old man now, most of them forgot he could still be useful. He frowned. "L-A-X-E," he translated. He cocked his head. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing, or so we thought, which was why we hadn't looked into it," Carol shrugged. "Until Queen Shuri picked up on the fact the pattern repeats twenty times."

"Just Shuri is fine," Shuri murmured, still distinctly uncomfortable at the fact she'd had to remove her brother from the throne. Atlantis had insisted on it as a stipulation to not going to war with Wakanda and T'Challa had been enthusiastic, especially considering he was able to finally convince Nakia to marry him. Shuri was mostly just smarting over the fact she couldn't spend all her time in her lab anymore. "It's a simple code, really. The number of repetitions is a signifier that it's a regular Caesar cipher, on a rotation of 20."

"Fury," Peter breathed, having already figured it out.

"Yeah," Carol said. "That was what made me think it might be a message for me." She pulled a regretful face at Pepper. "I swear, I had no idea it was related to Tony somehow or I would have been pushing to solve the mystery much sooner."

Pepper stared at Carol, wide-eyed. "But it is related to Tony. How?"

"Well. I followed the signal." Carol sat down on the front table, leaning forward to look at them all intently. "What I found—" She exhaled and shook her head. "It took some chasing, but there have been rumors for the last few years of some sort of a gladiator arena in the N-Zone." She leaned back, pressed the console again, and brought up an information slide on the N-Zone. "It's a pocket universe, colloquially known as the Negative Zone. I've been chasing ghosts of this rumor for years, hearing fragments here and there. Anything that comes up about it disappears moments later. Anytime I've gotten close it's disappeared like smoke. Until now."

The display changed again into what looked like a creased flyer, covered in alien typography. A sword and a trident were crossed over the center.

"Shuri's realization prompted me to chase the signal to where it bounced off a small moon outside of Ceres, Port-in-a-Storm. It's got a dive of a city on it, lots of shady business, more casinos than living residences. It's the kind of place where you go when you want something very off-menu. I chased the signal to a building there which emptied out the instant we got someone close; this flyer was all they found."

"I ran it through my translation algorithms, but nothing happened. Until last night. When Tony's body went missing, my mind was in overdrive. Something was pinging in my head, like a word on
the tip of your tongue that you can't remember. So I fed the name Stark into my algorithm and that's when it worked." Shuri said and pressed something near her.

The flyer onscreen shifted, now showing the alien text translated into English, and Steve felt his heart sink immediately.

"WATCH THE UNIVERSE'S STRONGEST WARRIORS BATTLE TO THE DEATH!


Steve could feel his own breathing increase. He wasn't the only one. He reached across and took Pepper's hand; she blindly grabbed at it, her fingers squeezing his, her eyes trained on the words.

"That's impossible," Pepper breathed. "When did you find this flyer?"

Carol sighed. "About a month ago."

Pepper's voice went up into the stratosphere. "A month ago? But—"

"I told you, I didn't think at first it had anything to do with Tony," Carol said, holding her hands up. "So as soon as you let us know about his body going missing, I put all my available resources into it. But I didn't want to get your hopes up, even when we hit the translation last night. It could be someone using his name, or look-a-likes, or—I didn't know. So we've been pushing harder than ever. The instant you told me his body was gone, I pushed on some contacts I've had in reserve, because using them burns them, but—it was worth it. Literally just an hour ago, I swear on my life, one of them came in with this."

Carol's hand trembled a little when she reached again for the console and pressed a function. A video filled the screen and Steve suddenly understood the trembling.

It was shakily filmed footage, like many of the videos that populated the internet where a civilian tried to grab footage of a villain attack while running for their lives at the same time.

Steve stared at the footage. He didn't think he could breathe. He couldn't remember how.

It was Iron Man. It was blurry, but the red and gold armor was unmistakable, even if it wasn't that clear. Steve knew how Iron Man flew, how Iron Man fought, and it was Iron Man on the screen in front of them, fighting what looked like a massive dragon. This was impossible. This should be impossible. Pepper's hand was so tight on him that her fingernails drew blood from Steve, but the small pang of pain somehow helped Steve keep watching, when what he wanted to do was start screaming.

On screen, Iron Man lowered his faceplate and Pepper let out a small, helpless whine. It looked like Tony, as he stood in a victory pose, but as the video zoomed in awkwardly, the brief clear glance they had of Tony's face, his expression was blank.

The video blinked and then there was footage of other battles. The clips were cut short, like the person filming was frightened of being caught. Steve saw a glimpse of Heimdall fighting with branches wrapped around him; he saw a blue-skinned man with a red crest; he saw a blue hooded figure take out a man with smoky eyes wearing yellow robes; he saw a black-clad man wielding a
sword against someone who looked almost like T'Challa. All the footage was shaky, blurry and cut out occasionally.

The final piece of footage showed Iron Man standing victorious over a blur of bodies. His faceplate rose and again his face looked blank, but his right hand—Steve couldn't help but focus on that rather than the smoking, bloodied body at Iron Man's feet. It was a sly movement, but Iron Man's right gauntlet was spread into three wide fingers, before he balled his hand into a fist and tapped it four times against his thigh, surreptitiously.

Three thousand. Three thousand.

Steve's hand was almost numb with how hard with Pepper was gripping it. She'd seen it too.

Carol had no idea Steve and Pepper were freaking out. "Now we still don't know yet if it's some sort of copy, or if somehow—"

"It's him," Pepper said, in a strained voice.

Carol's face creased with sympathy. "Until we find out more—"

"Three thousand," Steve said, when Pepper's voice had failed him. "That was—that was something meaningful to Tony."

He heard Clint and Rhodey both inhale sharply, the only other ones present who had been in that room when Tony's finally message played, as the three thousand realization suddenly made sense to them too.

"Could they have—revived him somehow?" Pepper's voice was thin, understandably hysterical. "Like a zombie." She stared up at the frozen image on Tony in horrified shock. "Did someone turn my husband into a zombie?"

"The flyer said they had Pietro Maximoff," Wanda said, her voice and face hard. "Permission to go and see if my brother's body is still in his grave." Her voice shook.

"Of course," Carol said. "Report back ASAP."

Wanda nodded and immediately disappeared from her hologram screen.

"I saw an old friend on there too," Valkyrie said. She looked angry. "I'd like to check if his body has been disturbed. If someone's stealing bodies and reviving them, or re-animating them somehow, or copying them—"

"Go," Carol said, and Valkyrie's hologram blinked out. She looked around the room. "Any of the other figures seem familiar to you?"

"When it came in I thought I recognized N'Jadaka," Shuri said, softly. "I didn't say anything sooner in case I was wrong, but I've already sent Okoye to check his tomb."

It didn't take long until the calls started coming in. Carol wasn't kidding when she said that every resource had been redirected to this. Valkyrie came back saying that Thor had confirmed that Heimdall's cairn was empty, no sign he'd ever been in there. Shuri called back saying Killmonger's tomb was also empty. Rocket returned to say Quill had flipped out at the hint that Yondu's body might have been disgraced somehow, and they'd immediately gone back to Vormir and scoured that deadly hell planet again for any trace of anybody, but there was nothing. Not even bones. Marc disappeared briefly and came back with the good news that Bushman's body was still where it
should be, which no one had asked him to check, but it was good to have confirmation that it wasn't just corpses in general that were vanishing, Steve supposed.

Wanda returned last. Her face was tear-stained as she showed the video footage she'd thought to take of the excavation. Pepper gasped as the coffin lid slid open and the same thing happened to what looked like Pietro Maximoff's body as what had apparently happened to the fake body in Tony's cryo chamber. It melted into nothingness. The footage shook, Wanda barely holding it together.

Steve stared up at Carol in horror and she had the same lost expression on her face that he imagined he was wearing too. It spoke pretty clearly the same damn question: what the hell was going on?

Steve called Hugh and he canceled all his meetings with SWORD immediately, showing up to escort Pepper and Morgan home. From the boardroom window, Steve watched the three of them leave, huddled together in a freaked-out mess, and he empathized sharply.

Most of the others had left in a flurry of panic. Steve was left in the room alone with his thoughts. He didn't trust his legs to carry him home quite yet. He kept replaying the footage in his mind and the flyer. Tony? Natasha? Pietro? Vision? How was it possible? Was it some nefarious system of copies? Was it actually them, revived somehow? How long had this been going on?

Someone cleared their throat. When Steve looked up, it was Carol in the doorway of the room, wearing the space-ready version of her uniform.

"Still here, huh?" Carol's throaty voice was warm with concern. "We'll figure this out, Steve."

"I know," Steve turned back to stare out the window. "It's just a lot to wrap my head around." That was an understatement.

Carol came to join him at the window, staring out at the sky. "I never got to spend much time with Tony Stark, beyond finding him stranded in space trying to starve to death. But the space he left behind for all of you—it's tangible. I almost feel like I did know him." Her smile was brief, regretful, and she looked at Steve firmly. "We'll get to the bottom of this, Steve. I know how important he was to all of you."

Steve nodded tersely. "You send out the full rally call?"

"Yep. Called in all the supporting members, everyone who's retired. All hands are onboard." Carol squinted. "I did, of course, try to message the Eternals with a request for help." She dug in her pocket and pulled out a phone, tilting the screen at him.

Steve leaned in to look at the single message from Ikaris: "LOL, NO." He laughed, although he was aware that the sound wasn't exactly ringing with amusement. "Well, I suppose that was to be expected."

Carol stared at him until he met her gaze. "I'll find out what's going on. I promise."

Steve’s eyes searched her confident face. "And you'll let me know?"

Carol smiled brightly. "Of course."

Steve didn't always turn up to the compound on a Sunday because he didn't have any active classes
—it was usually a lot more practical exercises, honing powers, making sure everyone could fully control their skills before they went out into the field.

He did this Sunday. According to the front desk Carol hadn't yet returned from space.

Carol hadn't misspoken when she said everyone would be focused on solving this problem. The dojo, gym, and shooting gallery were all empty, when normally they'd be full of people fighting and falling and generally shouting, because puberty and superpowers was not a relaxing combination. When Steve checked the roster, all of the adults who had mentoring scheduled for the day were active elsewhere.

Steve frowned and checked the sign-ins for the day. There were several of the youngsters on base. He headed for the cafeteria first—the vending machines were always stocked well and it was never too much of a surprise to find the kids congregated on a table eating. Superpowers played havoc on the appetite, Steve knew that fact intimately. The cafeteria was empty, beyond a couple of the kitchen staff moving behind the hatches.

They must be in the common room, Steve figured, heading for the stairs. He felt useless. Carol hadn't given him an active role yet in this investigation and it wasn't like he had many contacts in this world, and Sam and Bucky were still both being stubbornly quiet on the messaging front.

The teenagers had been given an attic room to hang out in. Steve rarely went up there unless he was chasing someone down specifically for missing homework, but he still knew the way. He knew something was going on the instant he peered around the corner—and the screen that the inhabitants of the room were crowded around suddenly went black.

Steve frowned at the row of faces that blinked at him, all of them assuming expressions of faked innocence that no one would buy, let alone someone like Steve who knew them so well. Harley Keener was there, as was Morgan, Nico, Karolina, and Rayshaun.

"Uh, hi, Mr. Rogers," Karolina breathed, smiling wide and twirling a lock of blonde hair in one finger, trying to look as innocent as possible. "We were gonna—"

"We hacked into the main boardroom," Morgan cut over her. Karolina shot her a hard look, but Morgan shook her hair and reached out, flicking the main screen on. "He should know, Glow Stick. They've left him out of the loop too."

Steve walked forward immediately, baffled by Morgan's words. "Who's left me out of what loop?"

"They have. This one." Morgan turned back to the screen, staring at it. Steve followed her gaze and his hands clenched into fists almost automatically.

It looked like Morgan had hacked into the boardroom footage, and from the clock visible from the camera she'd gotten into, this was happening right now.

Steve tensed at the sight of who was in the boardroom. Carol. Rhodey. Sam. Bucky. Shang-Chi. Clint. Bruce. Shuri. They were all there, right now? Why the hell hadn't he been invited? Steve had literally just checked the sign-in log five minutes ago. There was no evidence that they were even on base. Why would they keep it a secret?

"Can you turn up the volume?" Steve asked. As a responsible adult he probably shouldn't be condoning any of this. Morgan had never really abused her backdoor access into the Avengers security systems, but this thing with her dad had understandably rattled her—the lights on the Stark house last night had been on the entire time—and Steve couldn't find it in him to reprimand her in
Of course," Harley said, typing something briefly on a keyboard. Harley was older than the others and should know better than to be helping facilitate this spying, but Steve shouldn't judge that; he was older than everyone currently in the building, and if he was in his right mind, he should have stopped this immediately.

His brain was too full of this betrayal. They should have told him.

"This is real," Carol said, on-screen. "We brought the Controller in last night and asked him, politely, about why we could see Control Discs on some of the footage."

On the boardroom monitor, the footage from the night before played again, and then paused on an image of Heimdall raising up his massive sword; there was a silver disc clearly implanted in the back of his neck. Steve recognized it too. Definitely a Control Disc. Sandhurst was a horror to deal with at the best of times, and he'd been involved in this business somehow?

"It's definitely some sort of gladiator arena," Carol said.

"Like the one on Sakaar?" Bruce asked, his expression haunted.

"As far as we can tell, yes." Carol shook her head. "According to Sandhurst, he's been supplying Control Discs to a mysterious entity for the last two decades. He delivers them to somewhere he describes as a pocket universe quantum-locked to our timeline, but he's 'pretty sure'—" Carol made air quotes, "—that it couldn't be too bad, because only a small margin of the requested discs were the 'real deal'."

"Could it be the Grandmaster behind it?" Bruce looked unhappy.

"I contacted the Xandarian high council—" Carol's mouth wrinkled. "What's left of it. Their records say after his capture, he was exiled to the mines of Dyofor for a century of hard labor, and forbidden from ever trafficking live souls for his arenas again."

"And how much do we trust the Xandarian prison system?" Rhodey asked.

"I'll send an emissary to Dyofor," Carol nodded. She sagged against the table. "Honestly, as far as we can tell, this is real. I've still got people investigating missing bodies and I've made some discreet inquiries, but there's been a few more high-profile bodies that have gone missing. And not only heroes. I have a contact in Russia who tells me that Ivan Vanko's gravesite sank into itself. It happened when they excavated it; same residue, same trace of cosmic-radiation."

"We've taken as many stills from the footage as we can," Sam said, and pressed something on the main table's console, making a line of faces appear on the main screen. "We haven't yet been able to identity them all—"

"Oh, that's Aldrich Killian," Shang-Chi said, nodding at one of the faces. "For sure. That asshole white guy who stole the Mandarin's origin story, tried to pass it off as his own to cover up his own sins." Shang-Chi was still peeved about Killian; a lot of people didn't believe him the Mandarin was really the one behind everything, because Aldrich Killian had turned him into a fairytale and the real Mandarin leaned into that, used it to his advantage to hide his dastardly meddling. Considering Shang-Chi nearly got killed because of that lack of support, he had every right to be annoyed.

"There's been no one identified who died earlier than 2010, but everyone identified we know to be dead," Carol said.
"The Negative Zone is an unusual pocket of time-space," Shuri said, slowly like she was translating it. She would be, from the complex science she spoke as naturally as English or Wakandan. "Normally—it exists at every time at once. But for someone to be using it like this, it must have been...tethered to a particular moment in time. Which means it must be running parallel to our flow of time now."

"So someone started stealing dead bodies for over twenty years, and we've only just noticed now?" Bucky exhaled roughly.

"Whoever it is, they're experienced at hiding their tracks," Sam said. "We've combed back through all the footage of Stark's cryochamber. Took several passes, but there was a missing thirty second segment the day after his death; someone had perfectly spliced some of the loop footage to cover it. To open the chamber and swap it for a perfect LMD clone? In thirty seconds? While infiltrating Stark's security systems and covering up for themselves?" He shook his head. "I don't think we should be hard on ourselves for not noticing this was going on. It's not an amateur Wrecking Crew smash-and-grab operation. We're dealing with an expert."

Clint drummed idly on the table. He looked angry. Steve didn't blame him. The idea that Natasha's body might have been stolen was traumatizing enough, let alone the idea of someone...doing something with it. "Have we got eyes on Annihilus? This stinks of something that he would come up with."

"We're looking for him," Carol promised. "But I'm hitting walls, everything we try. We need to make our own leads."

"That sounds like you have a plan," Peter said, leaning forward in his chair.

"Our best guess... for some reason, someone is stealing dead bodies, re-animating them somehow, and forcing them to fight in arenas. I can't get anything solid but the one thing that has been verified is that someone's making a lot of money from this." Carol exhaled roughly. "We've traced the LAXE signal, but its origin keeps moving."

Shuri put something else onscreen, a scientific diagram of some sort, along with a map showing planets and locations where the signal had been picked up. "We know if the Negative Zone has been quantum-locked to our flow of time, there must be a concrete connection point. A Gate of some sort, which is how the LAXE signal is getting through. But it must be a portable gate because the signal keeps moving."

"Even if we find the Gate, it can only be opened by both sides at once, so even if we find it, forcing it open will be impossible solely from our side. And we can't even find the Gate. Even when I've had my best people pretend to be customers for this rumored arena—they're not getting anywhere." Carol shrugged. "We need to get someone on the inside."

"Oh, no, I'm starting to figure out what you're suggesting it and I'm not sure I like it," Rhodey said, his eyes warily tracking Carol's face like he's desperate to find a comforting denial in it. He obviously didn't find what he was looking for. "You've got to be kidding me. That's the plan?"

"What is it?" Bucky asked.

"It's kind of risky. Because we have no idea if it will work. But..." Carol pressed her mouth into a line. "If they're stealing dead bodies of high-profile heroes and villains, then we give them one."

There was instant uproar, both in the boardroom and the common room.
"Woah, that's dark," Nico muttered.

"Oh, I can go after any of our top ten most wanted," Shang-Chi said, straightening in his seat. "Just give me the nod."

"I don't think she means for a villain to die," Peter said.

Shang-Chi's eyes widened as he caught up with the rest of the room. "One of us?"

"Bruce and Shuri have been developing something," Carol said. "You want to take it away?"

Shuri raised an eyebrow at Bruce. Bruce pulled out a box from under the table.

"Shuri and I have been developing this," Bruce said, heavily. "It's a nanotech injection, designed to do several key things. First, it puts someone into a coma that heavily emulates death. Second, it's designed to disrupt the Control Disc technology. And third, it'll send out a subtle signal to piggyback on that LAXE signal, to give us more of a chance to locate where this Gate might be."

"It's a risk," Shuri said. "We don't want any of you to think this is a good idea. It's probably not. It's not one hundred percent positive that we can bring you out of the coma. It could kill you permanently. And if whoever is behind this realizes it's a trap, they might kill you permanently. It's risks everywhere you look."

"And we're still heavily speculating," Carol said. "We could still be dealing with a race we've never met before. We've met parasites, shapeshifters—it could be Skrulls in that arena for all we know, ones more like Veranke. But both Pepper Potts and Steve Rogers confirmed that the Iron Man in the footage had at least one of Tony Stark's most intimate memories, something that Pepper said she couldn't believe Tony would ever have shared, even under torture. Which leads us to believe that this is our people. Revived somehow. There's always new technology being discovered every day. It's possible."

"Nat could be alive," Clint said quietly, his voice roughened with emotion. "Even if it is Skrulls, we know they keep the original alive."

"We need to talk this through logically," Carol sat on the edge of the table, looking at them all seriously. "This isn't something we rush into. This is big."

"We've calculated the odds," Shuri said. "Best estimate, this has maybe a ten percent chance of not outright leaving you permanently dead, let alone the chance of actually getting revived by this possible thief. The injection could go wrong. And if you're not re-awoken in time, or if the person behind it wants to send a message—dangerous doesn't cover it."

"I want to do it," Clint said, staring at her hard like the lack of blinking was a persuasive technique, rather than making him just look overtired. "I volunteer as tribute. Whatever. Seeing her again… I have hope. Again. And it—It should have been me on Vormir, and it should be me now. I owe her."

"We all owe Natasha and Tony everything," Bucky said. "I'm the oldest here. I've lived more life than any one person should. This has a risk to it and I'm the logical choice to take that risk. I ain't got anyone waiting on me."

"I want to, believe me. I was big in an arena before, but—I have to take myself out of the running. Last time I went in, I couldn't remember who I was," Bruce looked down at the ground, toeing at it with one bare foot. "I didn't even want to remember who I was."
"That's a fair decision and we all support you with that fully," Rhodey said. "Besides, do we even know if you can die, I mean. Considering everything you've been through in the last few years?" Bruce looked at him, a haunted expression on his face. "And after traumatizing Bruce, I want to throw my hat in the ring."

"Rhodey—" Carol started, softly.

Rhodey glared at her, mouth downturned. "Don't tell me you're not putting your name forward. It's no different. I loved Tony, more than anyone else here, he was my best friend. And Nat was just as necessary to me. I have as much right to help get them back, if it's possible, and I have as much right as anyone here to get the opportunity to take that risk, if I want to. And I want to."

"No offense, Colonel Rhodes, but I think we need someone really well known," Peter said. "They're taking big name heroes. I don't deserve the infamy I have, but I'd be honored to finally use it to do something worthwhile, like saving Tony."

"People know War Machine," Rhodey frowned.

"They know Captain America more," Sam held up one hand. "This is me volunteering too."

"If anyone's the most famous here, it's me," Carol said. She folded her arms. "I'm known galaxy-wide, more than any of you. I don't think they'd be able to resist taking me."

"We're all well known, we're all Avengers," Shang-Chi muttered. "Why shouldn't I get to do it, just because I can't blow up a spaceship with my bare hands? You might be too big a risk. The fighters on the video looked like mostly physical guys, maybe I'd be more what they were after."

"You didn't even know Tony or Natasha," Bucky said.

"No, but I'm one of the people who live on the planet they saved, maybe I'm grateful about that," Shang-Chi said, pushing into Bucky's personal space with a challenging glare. Bucky clenched his jaw, clearly about three seconds away from punching Shang-Chi in the face.

Steve stared. None of them had suggested him? He was clearly the best option. Maybe someone would finally get around to it. He leaned it, frowning as he focused on the chaos happening on-screen.

"Jack texted me, he wants to throw his hat in the ring," Peter said, his phone in one hand.

"How does he even know about it?" Clint muttered.

Peter gestured at the cameras. "Guy watches every security feed at once. What would you do if you were stuck in a room for twenty hours a day?"

Clint pulled a face that said he thought it was a fair answer.

Sam scoffed. "Of course Hart wants to do it, he would volunteer for anything that gets him out of that basement. Can I veto the idea? I don't dig the idea of getting our people back and immediately blowing them up."

"You think we can get them back?" Rhodey's eyes were shining as he looked at Sam.

Sam reached over and gripped his shoulder tightly. "We're either getting them back or ruining the lives of people who dared to use their bodies and faces for their ill-means."
Rhodey nodded fervently. "I'm definitely up for that."

"I'm a solid choice for this," Shang-Chi insisted.

"You're just desperate to prove yourself. And I don't trust anyone who hates *Lord of the Rings,*" Bucky sniped.

Shang-Chi narrowed his eyes. "Excuse me for having a valid reason not to like something about a powerful dude with *magic rings.*"

"I have red in my ledger, I'd like to get a chance to pay it back," Clint said.

"You're not the only one indebted to them," Peter said, stepping closer to him. "And let me reason you this, if you're the one to go, how would you stop me from trying to date your daughter?"

Clint actually growled and then paused and stared at him. "Even if Lila was that dumb, Laura's *lethal* with a knife, kid."

Peter glared. "I'm not a kid anymore."

Clint used his extra height to try and loom over Peter. "Yeah, well, you sound like one to me right now."

"Kate would also shoot you if you went after Clint's kid," Sam pointed out.

"Wait," Shuri said to Bruce, "are they all *eagerly* trying to volunteer who should be the one to die?"

Bruce wrinkled his nose at her. "You're surprised?"

"Well, I'm not throwing my hat in the ring. I have a country to run."

"And an actual self-preservation streak."

"I was wondering why Steve wasn't here," Bucky said, looking up at Carol.

Carol pulled a face. "Yeah, I—I really do not want to be the person who went down as killing the original Captain America, y'know? And there's no way he wouldn't think he was the best candidate."

"I am the best candidate," Steve said, only remembering belatedly that he had an audience of kids when four faces looked at him, all wincing at different levels of intensity.

"And they say *we're* the nihilistic generation," Nico said, arching an eyebrow.

Steve had the grace to look embarrassed. But he refused to take it back. Who would be a better candidate than him? He'd lived for over a hundred years and he was the best shot of getting the attention of whatever mysterious force was stealing dead bodies, because he was the *first* Avenger, what could be a bigger lure than that?

As the other Avengers continued to argue on the screen, Steve ran through the past minute, because something was bothering him, and he couldn't figure it out at first. Steve had delighted in the serum’s effect on his memory at first; being able to glance at a map and recall it all perfectly later had come in useful so many times. But when you remembered everything, it came at a price, and that was the speed of his recall. He had over ninety years of perfect memories in his head, and sometimes that slowed things down.

When he did put the pieces together, he nearly swore out loud. *Four faces stared at him. There had*
been five of them huddled around the screen to start with.

Morgan's StarkPhone was on the desk. But Morgan wasn't there.

She never let that thing go.

Horror clenched in his gut as he replayed Shuri's "Best estimate, this has maybe a ten percent chance of not leaving you permanently dead" in his mind. He tied it into that last story he told Morgan and nearly convulsed with the sudden wave of self-loathing.

He was an idiot. There was a reason he held back some of the stories of Tony, because Tony hadn't always been the best example (Steve respected him and admired him, but wasn't blind to the fact that Tony—like Steve himself—absolutely wasn't perfect.) But he'd been so sure she was smarter than this.

"Morgan," Steve said. One benefit of the past few years was that his Saturday teaching position had given him a bonafide teaching voice, guaranteed to get the attention of young people around him, even if it made them uncomfortable. "Where is she?"

"She's right...here," Karolina's voice faltered and her eyes widened. "Is that her phone? She never leaves her phone."

"Checking the systems now," Harley said, making the image of the bickering Avengers go smaller in favor of bringing up a coding window and a map. "Tracking her based on her last scans. She's down on the second floor? But—" A camera showed the cafeteria floor, where the red dot he was tracking should be, considering its place on the map. "—she's not there."

"The vents," Steve realized; he knew the layout of this version of the Compound well, having helped supervise the rebuilding. He went into action mode. "Karolina, go out the window—get to the boardroom, get their attention. Morgan will be going for that injection. Harley, keep tracking her, let me know via the intercom if she deviates. Nico, with me."

"What do I do?" Rayshaun demanded.

"Keep an eye on that footage on the screen so Harley can keep focusing on his code," Steve yelled back, starting to run, Nico close on his heels.

"You're fast for an old man," Nico breathed as they helter-skelter down the stairs.

Steve frowned. "Not fast enough," he said, skidding to a halt on the landing. "I hate to ask, but—"

"It's you asking and for Morgan, I don't think there's a more convincing combo," Nico muttered, not even hesitating to use part of her jewelry to slash open a small cut on her hand; she drew forth her staff in its usual flamboyant flash of power. "I can't get you to the boardroom, Doctor Strange warded it too deeply, even for me." She winced. "I deny any implication in that statement that I've tried to get into the boardroom with my magic."

"I didn't hear anything," Steve said, grimly.

"Brace yourself, I'll try and get you as close as I can," Nico said and pointed her staff at him, her dark hair lifting into the air before she shouted, "Drop spot!"

Steve landed in his classroom, hard, in a spark of purple energy. He blinked, shook his head, and headed for the door, but something made him hesitate for a second.
Doctor Strange warded the boardroom. There was no reason for the ward to bounce him this far back from the boardroom, unless it was deliberate. And Strange had said those odd words to him. *More than one stain in Tony's past.*

A thousand things clashed together in Steve's head, all at once. This classroom. He'd been thinking about the incident just the day before with Morgan, where he'd had to confiscate a device from his students that they were using to stun each other.

The device Obadiah Stane had once used to stun Tony Stark. Tony had nearly died then.

But Steve had an idea, and it was a deeply ironic one—that maybe he could use the same device that had nearly killed Tony and use it to save Tony's daughter. He grabbed the device from the drawer in the main desk and started to run again.

When he got to the boardroom the door was locked. Steve glared up at the nearest camera.

"Harley, get me in, I know you can do it," Steve yelled. The boardroom was sound-proofed and locked down, but only from the outside. He wasn't sure if the field extended across the ceiling like it should.

The door buzzed and Steve pushed open into the chaos beyond. The Avengers were still arguing, but stopped at the sight of him.

"Steve," Carol started, immediately realizing he must have known what was going on.

It looked like Karolina had smashed in the window to fully get their attention and was getting unfortunately chastised for it. She had a level head; Steve knew she was going to be a terrific Avenger someday soon. There was glass all over the floor and she was panting.

"Morgan," Steve said, desperately, eyes wide. "Where is she?"

"See, that's what I was saying!" Karolina yelled, looking distressed that no one had been listening to her.

"She isn't here," Carol said, "she—"

Which was when one of the tiles from the ceiling came down sharply, Morgan moving rapidly, too rapidly. Steve got a brief glance of some technology on her feet of some sort, making her speed insanely fast, but Steve's reflexes were better.

"Shuri," Steve yelled, and threw the paralyzing device to her.

Shuri was quick too, and smart, and leapt forward, managing to stab and activate it in one smooth motion, sending Morgan crashing to the tabletop, thwarted.

Steve felt like he was going to have a heart attack, seeing how close her hand was to the nanobot injector.

Morgan's eyes slid toward Steve in open hatred for him stopping her.

"I'm not sorry," Steve said.

There was a burst of noise then that Steve barely heard in his sheer relief that Morgan was alive. This was all his fault.

"I had to try," Morgan whispered. "Ten percent. Basically a hundred."
Steve shook his head at her. "You're not an Avenger yet, kiddo. That's not the kind of odds game you can play yet."

"I'm old enough to help," Morgan said, because she'd inherited her father's stubborn streak. Steve's heart lurched in empathy; it had been one of the things he'd had most in common with Tony.

"I'm really sorry, we should have locked down better, or paid more attention—" Carol was shaking her head. "It's not exactly like there's a guidebook for a situation like this one."

Steve sighed; she couldn't meet his gaze because she knew she was wrong. He was the right choice for it. Well, at least he had the chance to argue his case, he supposed.

"Don't even try," Sam said, eyeballing Steve. "We all know what you're about to suggest, Rogers. You've done enough. Time to step back and let the next generation save the Earth, huh?"

Steve pressed his mouth into a line. He wanted to respond, but the impulse was moot. Because they were out of time.

When it all went wrong, it was almost like Steve saw it all happen in slow motion. The way Morgan's jaw tensed stubbornly, and then her foot twitched and the jet boot she was wearing lit up, and she started to move toward the injector, still lying on the table—why was it still lying on the table?—her hand still outstretched and Steve realized even in the room of the heroes they had, no one was going to be able to stop her in time.

There was one way. Steve's brain lit up hard with the passionate truth that there was nothing he wouldn't do to ensure the main reason for Tony's terrible sacrifice would be okay.

He couldn't reach Morgan in time. He couldn't knock in the injector from her hand. But he could give her a reason not to use it. He could give her a choice impossible for her to refuse.

Even as around him, all the Avengers there tried to move to stop her—Carol's fist glowing up uselessly, because she was realizing too slowly that she couldn't exactly photon blast Tony Stark's kid; Bruce lurching to stop her; Shang-Chi jumping forward; Clint reaching for something to throw to knock the injector away; Karolina blazing up to fly forward; Sam standing up; Shuri reaching for her wristband that probably had a thousand technical innovations that might help; Rhodey reaching for the table to tip it up and maybe knock her trajectory—they were all going to be too late.

Steve would not be.

All around him on the floor were glass shards from where Karolina had busted through the window to get their attention. It was the work of seconds. It probably shouldn't have been so easy.

He didn't even pause to take a deep breath before grabbing the nearest shard and slitting his own throat in one quick movement.

Everything went into a hazy, blurred mess. Steve was aware he'd dropped the shard and had automatically tried to grab his own wound. His blood was warm and copious because his aim was true and he'd dug the glass shard in deep enough to slice past the muscle to the artery and vein below.

Steve forced himself to focus long enough to see Morgan sobbing and letting the injector go. Bucky was the first to reach Steve, his hands pressing down on Steve's neck, but Steve knew it was too late. He had forced their hands by doing this, Steve thought. Good.

Steve stared back at him, knowing Bucky knew him well enough by now to read the *you would have done it too* on his face. He couldn't say it himself; when he tried, Bucky pushed down harder, and Steve's body spasmed on its own.

"No," Morgan whispered, still mostly frozen from the paralyzing device, tears starting to well up in her eyes. "I had to try. I could have saved him too."

"Give me the injector," Bucky barked, his voice rough. "We can't waste this opportunity."

Steve stared up at him, trying to communicate his gratitude. He managed to twitch his right hand to sign two words. *Best choice.* He was the best choice. And now he would actually *be* dead, it removed some of the risk. The body thief would find an actual corpse. That had to increase the odds of success. Higher than ten percent.

This was good. It didn't matter if it didn't work for the purpose of the investigation. If Steve didn't wake up from this, that was fine. He wasn't even angry at the idea that whoever was stealing bodies might not even go after his. He'd had a good life. And saving Morgan… this was a good death. Steve was okay going out like this. He'd saved Morgan, just like Tony would have wanted him to.

Steve died, still thinking about Tony Stark.
Part II: INITIATION

My soul looked down from a vague height with Death,
As unremembering how I rose or why,
And saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,
Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,
And fitted with great pocks and scabs of plaques.

Wilfred Owen—The Show

Steve awoke to indescribable agony.

Living nightmare might be the closest he could come to words that might fit what was happening to him, but even that phrase fell short. Even trying to breathe felt like a mistake, like a thousand burning knives were digging into the inside of his lungs at once with every small attempt at moving. All this was before he’d even attempted to open his eyes.

At first, opening his eyes didn’t accomplish much. There were three large shapes looming over him, shapes that didn’t make sense until something bulged behind his eyes. He couldn’t parse what was happening to him, so his imagination ran wild. He imagined something large burrowing behind his eye sockets, digging in deep, scooping, drilling. Steve thought his eye was going to explode, but a warm wet pressure enveloped his whole head, and his vision slowly resolved itself to clarity.

Steve rarely screamed. His transformation all those decades ago in the Project: Rebirth chamber had been one of the last times that he’d given in to the urge to yell in pain. That experience had been a helpful lesson for his missions with the Howling Commandos; he’d learned a leader had to bear pain silently, in order not to damage team morale. That lesson had been one he’d carried with him through his adult life.

So when his first reaction on opening his eyes was to scream, it illustrated far greater horror than anyone hearing his horrified yell could know.

"Ssshhh," a voice said. It sounded like a slimy car horn traveling over gravel and crushed glass. "Too much ssscreaming... Can't work, no ussse my mindsss."

The words didn't make sense to Steve. Nothing much did.

Of the three human-sized figures looming over him, two looked like giant bugs. Not the large ants Cassie Lang sometimes left noodling around corners of the Compound, but bugs that had evolved into something bigger, something more complex. Something alien.

The bug nearest to Steve was gray, bulbous sacs bulging under its head, three pairs of bright green eyes staring down at him. Standing down at his feet was a red one, multiple pairs of wickedly sharp and independently moving mandibles wriggling around a toothy mouth, its body a crimson mess of knotted spaghetti flesh. The other figure was a cyborg of some sort, silver and shining, its
construction modular, like a bug inventor had fashioned it based on the gray bug leaning over Steve's chest.

Steve's chest… That was where he ran out of words. His body felt like it was a river of lava and fire; it hadn't hurt like this to die, it hadn't even hurt this much when he became Captain America. This was endless pain. This was a nightmare made real. This was impossible.

He yelled again. He couldn't help himself. Every second was a fresh wave of pain and now he could see, Steve could understand why. Where he once had a body, a whole body, only the edges of it remained. He could catch a glimpse of his feet, his hands, and everything else…

Everything else was worms.

Worms, Steve repeated in his mind giddily, the pain a sharp screaming edge in his mind, even if he wasn't screaming anymore. He was covered in worms. Squirming, squelching, writhing, gross alien worms. There was a heap of them, covered in slime, rolling together, biting, chewing at parts of him; he could feel some of them choking out warm and wet things in the split-open cavity that compromised his body.

He tried to move and the gray bug immediately protested, clamping one heavy clawed hand down on what remained on Steve's left shoulder.

"Ssstop ssstruggling," Gray Bug said. It must have been the one who spoke before. "The thingsss in your blood keep killing the wormsss, ssstop, don't make it worssse."

Steve made another noise he couldn't help. Gray Bug rolled all three pairs of its eyes at once and clamped something down on Steve's mouth. An oxygen mask, Steve realized, as he tried to gulp in a breath and everything burned again. His eyes rolled back in his head as more pain washed over him and then he froze.

Far above him, where metal walls rose up in every direction, was a vent of some sort. Steve might not have noticed it, except for the flash of color that caught his eye. Red hair. A beautiful face like someone he'd dreamed, once upon a time. Wasn't there a woman like this in his dreams? Was it one of the fairy tales his mom used to tell him while he fell asleep, a princess in a tower, who ate a dragon whole—Steve's thoughts were fragmenting, distracted. The woman at the vent was important somehow, oxygen, peanut butter, home—

He cried out when she disappeared. Maybe she was a figment of his imagination. Maybe this whole thing was. He remembered dying. There was blood, spilling over his fingers, a warm river cascading over him, tugging him to an eternal sleep. There were hands reaching for him, laying him sweetly down on the ground. He died surrounded by people he loved, didn't he? Was this hell? What did he do that was so bad that he deserved this painful afterlife? But then if it was hell, how could the redheaded angel be there? She had a name. Steve knew her name.

"Ssstay ssstill," Gray Bug commanded. Steve's gaze snapped back to it. "Humansss sstrong here at the dying... the wormsss reconnect. They bringsss you back."

He supposed that made some sense, if sense could be made of this situation. Steve did remember dying now. He killed himself. He died at his own hand. Maybe it was hell. Suicide was a mortal sin.

"Am I dead?" Steve croaked, his voice muffled by the oxygen mask. "Am I—"

"Sssshh," Gray Bug hissed. "Ssstay ssstill. Heal. You were dead, but I fixed you." One of Gray
Bug's grossly malformed arms twitched to the corner and Steve followed the gaze to see a tank in the corner, filled with more of the worms that were still writhing in and around Steve's bones.

Except, *the worms reconnect*, that was what Gray Bug said, and Steve thought he could almost feel that. His muscles, reforming, tugging together. His bones, strengthening. His inner organs, rebuilding. His body being remade. Reborn. *Rebirthed.*

His eyes leaked, another impulse Steve couldn't stop.

"Humanssss ssso sssad," Gray Bug sighed. "It won't be long now. Ssstay. Ressst."

Steve blinked back his tears. When he nodded, it already didn't hurt so bad as moving had before.

The worms slowly rebuilt him, piece by piece. It was almost like watching a 3D printer at work, if 3D printers made you feel like you were the object being made and every level meant you were slowly drowned in acid. At some point, Steve's body was mostly complete, so Gray Bug encouraged him to sit up slowly.

Steve did so, carefully, because there were a couple of larger worms still on his chest that he didn't want to fall off. His skin wasn't fully back and there was a ripple of smaller worms that stretched right down his chest which looked almost like they were knitting a final layer of skin over his muscles, a matrix of interlocked flesh. The movement of the worms tugged at him, burned. He itched everywhere. His hands reached out involuntarily to scratch and Gray Bug slapped at his wrist. Gray Bug's skin was rough, like sandpaper; the slap stung.

"Leave it," Gray Bug hissed. "Don't undo my fine worksss."

Steve forced himself to keep his hands on the slab he'd awoken on, focusing on the coolness of the metal instead of the fire crawling under his skin and through his veins. The cyborg bug whirred past, mechanisms that touched the floor twisting and turning, scooping up worms that had fallen, squirming and making tiny noises of distress. In the metal reflection of the cyborg, Steve caught a brief glimpse of his own reflection and nearly cried out again.

He was young again. Like he was when he came out of the ice. He hadn't looked like this for a long time. That fact served to make his reflection seem even more alien and strange. As the cyborg trundled past, Steve caught a glimpse of something at his hairline, behind his ear.

A Control Disc. Now his body was mostly reformed, Steve could remember. If there was a Control Disc embedded in his skull, the nanotech from the injection must be blocking it, because his memory seemed okay. He would still need to act compliant, like he was already brainwashed, because that's what they would be expecting from him.

Steve was sure his memories were intact now, especially because he could put a name to the face he saw at the vent, and his heart was pounding. Natasha. *Natasha.* His heart has been aching to see her again, for so long, and it was almost ironic that the first time he did see her in person, he hadn't even recognized her.

*This is your brain on magical body-re-building, bring-you-back-from-the-dead worms,* Steve thought, and laughed wryly.

"Restsss," Gray Bug insisted. "Healsss. Eat thissss, I will sssend for a guide for you when you are ready to meet our masster."

Steve straightened automatically at that, earning a fresh wash of pain for his trouble, and Gray Bug
pushed a container into his hand. It was a metal dish of some sort. Steve wanted to throw it at his captors but he swallowed back the urge. He was still healing. It was better to wait and watch, find out what was going on.

This wasn't his first time being remade. Project: Rebirth had rebuilt him from the ground up. He knew exactly how it felt; closing his eyes in a broken form, opening them to physical perfection. That part, at least, was something he'd been through before. He was glad he had something familiar to latch onto, because everything else was making him feel unstable, like everything was some unbalanced fever dream.

It could be a dream. It wouldn't be the first time he'd dreamed of Natasha. But he'd seen her. He knew that now. He'd seen her. It was hard not to cry. Not out of sorrow or even relief, just some held-back emotions. Some remnant of how it felt to land on that platform, so keyed up by their successful impromptu trip to 1970, only to see an empty space where Natasha should have been. It had been a punch to Steve’s gut that never healed, one that just hollowed out more at the end of the battle.

Steve had been such a chump, back then. When he saw Thanos's forces distintegration into dust, he'd had the audacity to be happy for a moment. He thought they'd come through the other side unscathed, Natasha the only casualty, and even that too big a cost—he'd been buoyant with the joy of their success.

Until he'd turned around and seen Tony and it felt like the Earth had dropped away beneath Steve's feet.

Tony had been struggling to breathe when Steve caught sight of him. Tony’s eyes were locked helplessly on Pepper, his body burned and broken, wrecked by the immense, impossible pressure of the Infinity Stones. All six. Tony had wielded all six stones. By himself.

Steve's eyes burned and he put it down to the worms. It had all happened decades ago for him. It wasn't fair that it still hurt like a fresh wound.

There were no worms anywhere that could heal the way his heart had fractured apart that day. Oh, he'd found a quiet happiness in the past, a life he could live. And in his twilight years back in the main timeline, he found a quiescent purpose, a path to occupy his days, a simple life; it was the best he could do to honor Tony's sacrifice. To live the life Tony never got the chance to.

But maybe that was reversible now. Seeing Natasha had renewed his faith in this mission. Tony was out there, Steve was certain. He had to be. These worms were the method. The idea that Tony and Natasha must both have been through this process was horrifying, but the thought was not as terrible as living in a world without either of them had felt.

Steve could survive this moment. Steve had a chance to make amends, to get Tony back home. To give Tony back what he deserved.

"Eatsss," Gray Bug urged again, its voice sounding harsher, and Steve startled; his gaze dropped down to the container he was still holding. His ass and thighs were cold where they touched against the metal slab he was perched on. Steve supposed it was a good sign that he had healed enough to be able to recognize temperature.

Steve looked down into the container at the lumps of unidentified meat. At least it looked cooked. Gray Bug stared intently at him, none of his six eyes blinking, and Steve slowly picked up a piece between his fingers, ignoring the wriggling lumps at the heel of his hand that indicated worms might still be beneath the skin there. The meat might be poisoned, Steve's brain reasoned, but they
had gone to all this trouble to fix his body and make him younger, why would they have gone to all that effort to poison him now?

He put one lump of meat in his mouth and Gray Bug made a sound like it was pleased. Steve chewed slowly, flavor bursting across his tongue. It tasted a lot like pork.

"Eatsss it all," Gray Bug said. "Good human. A guide will be along ssssoon to take you to the Massster. Heal quick, yesss. Eatsss all itsss meat. I grew SSæhrímnir big and ssstrong for thiss.

Steve nodded, which seemed to please Gray Bug, and continued to eat. He was hungrier than he expected. A paranoid thought crossed his mind, that maybe it was people, but Steve had just been rebirthed by worms, there were bigger things to be grossed out by right now. His eyes flickered to the tank of writhing, spooling worms, and he tried not to gag at the thought of how many that had been in him.

Worms continued to drop from his body as he ate. Steve was relieved that they weren't staying inside him. At least, he hoped this was what that meant.

It wasn't long after Steve had finished eating that there was a knocking sound. Steve presumed it was someone knocking on the door, even though he couldn't see where a door would be in the smooth walls of the chamber he was in.

A door opened somehow. It was another bug like the Red Bug that entered, but this one was orange. Orange Bug announced that he was there to escort Steve to meet the master, whoever that was. It brought with him a bundle of clothing and Steve realized with a dry, painful swallow that it was the uniform he'd been buried in. He would have liked his shield, too. He often felt naked without it.


Gray Bug made a low-pitched clicking noise. "The procedure took time, Mmurgh. Thiss human is ssstrong. Good. He will be a good Einherjar for the Massster."

Steve's ears pricked up at Einherjar. The word seemed familiar. He tried not to look too alert as he quickly shoved his uniform back on, pushing aside the last of the few worms that were dribbling out of his chest as he did. He itched terribly, everywhere.

As he dressed, Steve caught another glimpse of his own reflection in the shiny surface of the cyborg bug. He looked confused, like he had for most of the first few days after Project: Rebirth. He supposed it was appropriate.

"Takesss him," Gray Bug said.

Steve allowed Orange Bug to manhandle him toward the door.

Steve meant to mentally track where he was being taken, but he barely had time to register the direction he was being pushed. They emerged from the worming room (Steve needed to think up a better term for that) into a long silver hallway, turned right after fourteen strides, then left after seven, but then Steve was pushed in through another door into darkness.

He struggled on instinct, but he was overwhelmed immediately; by what he couldn't say. He felt something sharp digging into him, pressing him down into something, and then something tight wrapped around his waist and his arms and his ankles. It was pitch black. Steve could only
imagine it was more of the giant bugs manhandling him, because he could hear the same mandible clicking noises that Red Bug had made, but then even those noises faded and he was left alone in the dark.

Steve strained against whatever was holding him down. Whatever he was sat on was something solid that seemed to support his back too. The darkness and sudden silence was terribly disorienting and only added to his general feeling of confusion. He was overwhelmed already and this adventure had barely begun.

If it was an adventure. Steve hadn't ruled out hell yet, although the brief glimpse of Natasha was pretty convincing that it wasn't hell. Unless she was a phantom, a tease; maybe he was Tantalus and she was his receding water, fated only to see her ghost, never to meet.

The silence made his own head echo and then there was a sound, a single click, and then there was light.

Steve blinked several times, blinded by it. If his eyes weren't going to be helpful, then he needed his other senses to kick in. He could feel coolness against his skin, but it smelled a little stale, like it was recycled air. So he was still inside the building rather than outside, Steve deduced. He flexed his muscles, trying to gauge the strength of the restraints, but he felt weak too. There was a stinging feeling in the back of his neck which might be the Control Disc. He took a deep breath and sniffed, but the only scent he could pick out was a hint of acetone in the dry air, nothing overly helpful.

Steve blinked again and his vision swam more into focus as a crunching noise rippled through whatever it was he was seated on—and then the seat began to move. He looked around desperately as his vision finished focusing. He was in some sort of very large tunnel, a wall doming over the top of him, and he could see tracks on the dark floor that seemed to be part of the mechanism drawing him forward. His arms were restrained on metallic armrests. It was some sort of traveling chair, stuck on a weird roller coaster track?

The dome of walls lit up and started displaying images. As the seat's movements became smoother, a voice started to fill the air.

"Fear not, for you were lost, but now you are found." The voice was weirdly soothing, Steve thought. A woman's voice. Kind. "You were dead, but you have been given the bountiful gift of life eternal. Praise be your eternal salvation, warrior. You are finally home."

The walls flickered and Steve recoiled at the images suddenly rippling over them. Corpses. A lot of human-shaped corpses but monsters too. There were bones and guts and blood as far as Steve could see. The walls depicted flashing scenes of violence, blades piercing into skin, organs dripping out to the ground, over and over.

"This has been all the life you have known. Death. Blood. Violence. You have lived a life of misery and pain. You are a soldier with war in your heart and you will never know peace, so we have made you a refuge. Somewhere you can be your inner self. Here you will live both eternal war and eternal peace."

The bodies and violence on the walls disappeared, shifting into a montage of beautiful forests and waterfalls, a comet shooting across a sparkling star nursery, a tropical island, a neon-bright casino. The sound of laughter and singing burst in the background, a whisper of joy among the confusion and lights.

"But what is this place? The answer is Valhalla. The warrior's paradise. You, who were slain in
battle, you have been chosen to join the Einherjar." There was that word again. "We are located beyond death, after life, outside of space, outside of time. You are finally home. There is no going back. No one leaves this place."

The walls flickered again and this time they started to display things that Steve could barely parse before the images disappeared. A round outside building with sand covering the floor. A large dragon with armor strapped onto it and deadly spiked ball chained to the end of its tail; the dragon spit out fire and set three figures alight that tumbled to the ground in a pile of ash and smoke.

"You died and were forgotten, but here, you will be remembered forever. You will live and see the glory of all the fallen warriors like you. Here in Valhalla you are significant. You are valuable. Here, you will be loved for eternity."

The round building was surrounded by benches suddenly populated by cheering people. Their outfits were myriad and diverse, a rainbow of styles and colors.

"And no one loves you more than the Grandmaster," the soothing voice continued, and a thousand pieces fell into place as a larger-than-life silhouette of a man appeared, striding across the sand, his arms opened wide. The figure must be the Grandmaster, Steve realized. He was wearing golden robes and there was a blue stripe on his chin; his smile was beatific and there was something lively lurking behind his eyes.

The narration continued smoothly. "First lost in the shadows and disgraced for his use of live warriors… His urge to entertain the universe was flawed. Misunderstood. He was chastised and had to start again from the bottom. But he has risen again, a champion of adversity, and now he picks his chosen warriors from the cream of the crop, and he has given you the gift of life!"

Bruce had referenced the Grandmaster. Carol's intel as it was, had stated that he'd been to the mines of Dyofor for a century of hard labor, and forbidden from ever trafficking live souls for his arenas again. Steve huffed. The Grandmaster—or someone operating under his name for some reason—could easily claim that trafficking in dead souls was certainly a decent loophole.

"The Grandmaster personally chose you and rescued you from the brutal teeth of death and oblivion," the narrator continued, while on the walls the Grandmaster swiped at large shadowy silhouettes with gnashing teeth, pulling out handfuls of tiny figures with each gesture. "He chose you so you could join him in the quest to bring joy and hope to all! Bless his thoughtfulness, hard work and grace for giving you this miraculous gift."

If this was the same Grandmaster that had stolen Bruce for years and Thor for a spell too, then Steve had to stop by Carol's office after all this was over to discuss Xandarian security procedures in their prison systems.

"Welcome to the Ultimate Contest of Champions. Where once you belonged to Death, now you are the joyous guests of the Grandmaster. Hail his wonder!" The walls flickered back into blackness. "Congratulations! You will meet the Grandmaster in five seconds."

The walls shimmered again and started displaying a storm of images. A blaze of blades flying, blood falling, bodies hitting the sand. The Grandmaster's face smiling over the chaos. Figures in armor. Pointed teeth, stained and jagged. And for a moment, Steve thought he saw Iron Man swooping at the dragon from before, repulsors blazing, and Steve's heart thudded painfully against his chest at the idea of it, because could this all be true? Could Tony somehow be alive again? Natasha was. Tony had to be alive. When would Steve get to see him?

"Prepare yourself, prepare yourself," the narrator repeated. "You are now meeting the
Steve was probably supposed to be impressed by the way the chair suddenly stopped and the walls dropped away to reveal he was in a large ornate chamber. The room was voluminous, filled with natural light, and there was a massive golden throne sitting on a towering dais. The figure sitting on that throne was no doubt the Grandmaster.

"Welcome to Valhalla, great warrior," the Grandmaster said, spreading his arms grandly.

Steve couldn't move from his seat. He couldn't do much but move his face. He raised one eyebrow; it was the best he could come with under those limitations to show that he was deeply unimpressed. A bully was a bully, no matter if they were a noisy movie-goer who had no respect for anyone else, or a purple Titan with gross delusions of grandeur, or an alien trussed up in golden robes and sitting on a throne.

The Grandmaster frowned, which Steve counted as a success, and rose from his throne, his robes sweeping out elegantly. He skipped down the steps with less pomp and ceremony than Steve expected. A stern-looking woman with brown hair and muscles on her muscles hovered close by, her entire demeanor radiating displeasure. Behind him, two slender women dressed from head to toe in gauzy strips of a golden silk-type fabric swayed to a rhythm only they could hear. Their hair fanned out behind their heads, shaped like candle flames.

Several more giant bugs in a rainbow of colors stood around the hall, bearing various weapons. Guards. Too many for Steve to handle even if he managed to escape the restraints.

Steve's eyes followed the Grandmaster as he slowed to a stop in front of him. The Grandmaster's face wobbled as he leaned forward to peer at Steve more closely. "Most of my warriors scream at my grand reveal. Overwhelmed by my sheer beauty and generosity."

Steve glared at him.

The Grandmaster nodded at Steve as he looked over at his assistant. "Does he speak? Because I'd be okay if he didn't. Chatty warriors are so—last season. Except my Champion, he can speak as much as he likes. He has one of those voices, y'know?"

"Like acid running down your spine," the assistant said, her eyes scanning briefly over Steve and her expression showing almost instant disdain. "Or when you eat meat and you don't know it's turned foul, until it hits your taste buds and you can't do anything but choke."

"I was thinking more mellifluous," the Grandmaster made a vague gesture in the air. "Never mind. I'm just giddy at the idea of expanding my collection of Avengers. Isn't that a delightful name for them? Avengers. What a cute name for a tiny petty team from a backward planet. So cute."

Steve glared. "That tiny petty team saved the universe from the mad Titan Thanos." He stopped talking. Was he supposed to remember that much? He watched the Grandmaster carefully for a reaction.

"Ah, he does speak," the Grandmaster clapped his hands together. "Shame. Well. A few more rounds with the worms and he'll be buff enough that even the whiniest attendee won't be able to complain." He turned to his assistant. "Topaz, get him to the Costumer. We want to make a grand reveal, something colorful. We have the designs from the mouthy one, don't we?"

"Yeah," the assistant—Topaz—said. "We have his infamous serving tray, apparently that's this guy's warrior motif or something; the troll is fixing it up so it'll stay within the sand during a bout.
We know from the Black Dwarf already that Vibranium is nasty stuff; if the force-field fails I wouldn't want to pay the compensation due if he decapitated a couple of audience members."

Steve's ears pricked at that. Vibranium. Did she mean his shield? How did that end up here? Maybe it had been buried with him. Sam was stupid. This whole procedure could have failed; burying the shield with Steve's body was a stupid risk.

"But imagine the thrill of potentially being killed during a match," the Grandmaster enthused. "Make a note of that if ticket sales falter."

"Not sure I want to clean up the mess that would make," Topaz sniffed.

The Grandmaster paced in front of Steve, looking down at him contemplatively. "Make his costume match the motif. They said he was called Captain America. Is that a name? A place? No one here's heard of anywhere called America."

"There was a song that keeps coming over the broadcasts from their planet about a horse with no name that's also called America," Topaz offered. "Doesn't make any sense to me."

"Perhaps I'll simply call him the Captain," the Grandmaster decided. "Commander? No, Captain, Commander is too close to Controller, he'd throw a fit. The Captain it is." He glanced at Steve. "Unless you have another name?"

Steve merely glared at him, unable to do anything more than struggle against the restraints.

The Grandmaster sighed and pinched his nose. "One of those, then."

Topaz cleared her throat to get his attention. "The Watcher was the same, sir."

"Of course. May the cosmos save us from all that is silent and deadly." The Grandmaster smirked at his own joke, and then lifted his left arm, letting his golden robes drop back to reveal something on his wrist that Steve couldn't see clearly. "I hate having to do this to you, Captain. I'm so fond of you already, alas, we do what we need to."

The Grandmaster's words didn't make any sense, until his fingers dipped to whatever was on that left wrist, and Steve instantly understood. It felt like he was being electrocuted. As the pain washed over him, Steve gritted his teeth in agony, and tried to focus on figuring out where the attack was coming from. It felt like it was radiating out from the base of his skull. His head had been aching there before this moment. Steve rode the wave of pain, glaring at the Grandmaster as his body jerked helplessly as far as the tight restraints would allow. Steve hadn't personally experienced a Control Disc before, but he knew electrocution was one of the least of its functions.

"You see there are already consequences for not being amenable to this gracious life I have granted you," the Grandmaster said, his voice dropping coolly. "Pray you do not have to discover any more of them." He clapped his hands together dramatically. "Topaz, assign the Captain his first grand battle."

Topaz tilted her chin upward and stepped forward, pulling an envelope out of her sleeve and dropping it in Steve's lap. Steve looked at the brown envelope and then up at Topaz and then across at the Grandmaster.

The Grandmaster's face did something complicated. Topaz looked pleased with herself, until she noticed the Grandmaster's face. She realized what was going on and coughed awkwardly, stepping back over to Steve and opening the envelope for him, quickly laying the strip of paper she pulled from it across his legs.
Steve stared down at the paper.

"Match: HIGH SUNS. THE CAPTAIN versus THE IRON MAN. Battle to the DEATH."

The Iron Man. Tony. Battle to the Death. Steve felt his throat close up. He wondered if the meat had been poisoned after all, or if a worm had gotten lodged in there during the rebuilding process, but they were idle thoughts and he knew the truth even as he thought them. It was anxiety. Panic. The phrase battle to the death warred horribly in his brain with Iron Man. Flashbacks of Siberia involuntarily floated to the forefront of his mind.

"I know your memories are fuzzy, but you remember your red-and-gold teammate, right?" The Grandmaster smiled at him widely. "He's a delight. Those boot jets of his, ah, I want a pair myself. I'll send you to a guide to help get you ready for your first battle. I wouldn't hesitate, Captain. You don't have long to prepare for your next death."

"He might survive," Topaz said, but she didn't look too sure.

Steve's fingers strained toward the strip of paper in his lap, wanting to touch it. Like maybe touching the words Iron Man might make this whole experience seem more real, somehow. As it was, Steve felt like he was asleep and trapped in a vivid nightmare.

At the Grandmaster's next gesture, one of the giant bugs scuttled up; this one looked like a green version of Gray Bug, but he held a wicked-looking trident in one of his six claws, and where Gray Bug had melted lumps of flesh, Green Bug had sharp ridges.

"Take him to the speedy one," the Grandmaster said dismissively. Steve's chair lurched away at speed before he could open his mouth to ask what it all meant.

Steve was glad his first impulse when it came to shock was silence.

He had hoped, if this all worked, that he would see Natasha and Tony again. He had known from the bootleg arena footage that there may be other familiar faces, especially among the villains. He even knew Pietro had been on the flyer.

It still hadn't prepared him for the experience of seeing Pietro Maximoff there. Solid and in front of him. Alive.

Steve's vision blurred, but it wasn't because of light or worms. This was a definite emotional reaction. Steve hadn't known Pietro much himself, but his two years on the run with Wanda had transferred to him a certain amount of feelings regardless. From her stories, Steve had a picture of Pietro built up in his mind, a very favorable one. Wanda's strongest supporter, her stalwart companion through life. His death had felt like Ultron had ripped her heart out and it was a wound that never healed.

Steve hadn't understood Wanda's loss until he was standing on a broken battlefield, the life fading from Tony's eyes.

Wanda had withdrawn after the battle. He knew she was working with Stephen Strange to learn to control her strange powers. He knew the Mutants had claimed ownership of her in some manner, but she shied away from the topic any time Steve saw her. She didn't like to be in the same room as him nowadays. Steve thought it was because she saw his trip to the past as an abandonment, as a slight against her rather than a lack in Steve.

He wished he could have explained to her that he couldn't stay in a future that didn't have Tony in
it. He didn't know how to tell her that there was no place for Steve in a time where Tony and
Natasha weren't.

Steve still tried to make a space for himself in a different time, and he thought he had, but maybe
he'd been kidding himself.

His thoughts were spinning off into the past because of the trouble he had understanding the sight
in front of him.

Pietro Maximoff. Alive. Here. Right now. Wanda said he liked to be called Quicksilver; it had
been a name she gave to him when they were both still children. Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch,
off on their adventures to save the world and get their revenge against the insidious Stark
Industries. Wanda had grown in her years as an Avenger, learned to let go of that childish knee-
jerk reaction to focus her rage on the wrong target, because it was simpler when good and evil
were effortless to delineate. It was easier when evil had a face.

Wanda had the time to realize Tony was the wrong target of her wrath. Did Pietro know? Did he
remember anything of his past? Steve blinked up at him uncertainly.

Pietro didn't look much older than the day he died. His shock of platinum blond hair was the same.
He looked stronger, bulkier in one way but still slender with it. He was wearing a brown tunic that
showed off well-developed arm muscles, brown canvas pants, brown leather sandals. His eyes
were focused on Steve, alight with a hint of mischief.

"Captain America," Pietro greeted, his mouth stretched wide in a smile that might be welcoming or
might be gently mocking.

"Pietro?" Steve murmured.

Pietro's smile widened impossibly. "You remember me. That's good. I wondered. I wasn't an
Avenger for long, after all."

Steve flinched, unable to help himself, and Pietro's eyes narrowed, a brief hint of calculation
crossing his face. There was so much of Wanda in his cheekbones, in his slight off-center smile.

"So that's how it is," Pietro murmured. "Good, good."

Steve frowned. What was good? "How—" Steve started, but then he couldn't keep talking, because
there was a firm hand on his face. He hadn't even seen Pietro move, but seeing as superspeed was
his thing, Steve shouldn't be surprised by it.

"I know this is confusing for you, Captain," Pietro said. His eyes held Steve's and locked. "Your
head is filled with just basic memories and thoughts of the wonderful Grandmaster. You'll get to
make him happy, very soon." Pietro's eyes flickered to Steve's lap, where the paper sat. It might be
Steve's imagination, but it seemed to him like the light in Pietro's eyes died a little at the sight of
the text on the paper.

Pietro lurched backward then, leaning back against the wall, pretending like he hadn't had his hand
blocking Steve's mouth a second ago, and Steve was confused at the sudden change until he saw
Green Bug hurrying to catch up to them, its trident waving.

"You make the chairsss go too fassst, Quicksssilver," Green Bug huffed, waggling the sharp points
of its weapon in Pietro's face.

"It's slow to me, Bhrehm," Pietro grinned. "Sorry. I'll do better next time."
Green Bug—was Bhrehm his name?—made a clicking noise with its mandibles. "See that you do."

"You ready for us to show you around, Captain?" Pietro asked.

Steve pressed his mouth into a line. Pietro's words before Bhrehm's arrival were confusing. Was it some sort of code? Steve knew what a Control Disc could do to you; it made sense the Grandmaster would want his warriors to have restricted memories and a disposition to worship him.

"Anything to make the Grandmaster happy," Steve said, slowly.

That seemed to be the right thing to say because Pietro grinned. "Let's get you out of that chair."

Steve stayed still as Bhrehm leaned closer. He moved too quickly for Steve to see, but whatever Bhrehm did unlocked the restraints holding Steve in place. Every instinct in him was screaming to punch Bhrehm in the face, to take Pietro and run, but that was a bad impulse. There was more to uncover here. Steve had to be patient. And if it all went badly, at least he was here, in the right place, and the nanobot injection should have done its job.

The Avengers would have a clue now on how to find this place. Steve hadn't been an active Avenger for a very long time. He had to trust them. His job was to find out more while he was here.

Steve picked up the paper that Topaz had given him, meaning to read it, but it was suddenly —gone.

"Your battle is at High Suns, huh?" Pietro looked down at the paper that was now in his hand. "That's in less than two turns of the glass. We need to get you to the Costumer, the Stylist, and the Armory. No time to train or give you the full tour, alas. If we don't get you into the arena in time, we'll all suffer." His quick, clever eyes locked on Steve's. "We don't want to make the Grandmaster have to do that to us, do we?"

"No," Steve said. "So my opponent—"

"Our very own Iron Man, of course," Pietro threw an arm around Steve's shoulder. "Avenger versus Avenger, won't it be delightful?"

Okay, so Steve was allowed to remember he was an Avenger. But he was...to act as if he only existed to please the Grandmaster. Steve nodded dully, working hard to keep his face still. It was difficult. Even hearing Pietro say Iron Man out loud made Steve's heart quicken.

Two turns of the glass sounded... soon, whatever time measurement they used here. Could the footage have been right? Could this actually be Tony that Steve was about to see? He hadn't felt this anticipatory about seeing him since that call came in from Carol, that she'd found the ship, still near Titan. That she'd found Tony, alive.

That had been such a wild time. Steve had experienced low times in life, like anyone else, and he'd experienced death (his mom, Bucky) and burned with his grief in all the regular ways, but he'd never really experienced what it felt like to really lose until the Decimation. And for that short margin of time, when they thought they'd lost Tony too, Steve had thought he'd finally learned what loss really felt like.

For the first time in his life, at some point between the Decimation and Carol's announcement that Tony was still alive and safe, Steve had lost all hope.
He never wanted to feel like that again.

Tony's death—it hadn't felt like he'd lost hope again. It felt like he'd lost something. A limb, or a major organ, or one of his main senses. Something important that he'd grown accustomed to having, and now he had to learn how to live without it. It took years for Steve to stop looking to Tony for his opinion on a tough situation. It took decades for Steve to finally accept that the phone he still faithfully carried would never ring again.

It had taken a stolen lifetime in an alternate timeline for Steve to realize the full extent of what Tony Stark had meant to him. As was often a recurring theme for Steve's life, he'd been too late to do anything meaningful with that information. Steve was always destined to be both the Man Out of Time and the Man Never in Time.

Maybe this could be his second chance. A chance to make things right. A chance to finally be there when he was needed. A chance for him to not be the man always so out of time that being too late was the perennial cliché of his life story.

Steve's internal monologue seemed to be acceptable behavior; Pietro didn't give him any hint that his silence was wrong, he just started guiding Steve down a hallway. Bhrehm and his trident trotted behind them, claws clicking on the hard tiled floors.

"This is where the Costumer works," Pietro introduced, startling Steve out of his somber musing. Steve glanced up at a round arched doorway. Pietro gestured for Steve to go through.

There was only one inhabitant of the large room Steve stepped into, so Steve presumed it must be the Costumer. The Costumer turned out to be a twelve-eyed, eight-armed yellow bug that Pietro called Hrhumhuhr. The Costumer was easier to say and remember.

The Costumer was working on what looked like six complex sewing machines at the same time, but each visible limb seemed to be moving independently. The Gray Bug had murmured something about not being able to use its minds; perhaps what looked like one lifeform to Steve was actually several consciousnesses in one body. Or maybe Steve was constrained by his understanding of the world. For a world where the main sentient life evolved from bugs and not apes, a lot of things could be different.

The Costumer's wildly moving limbs all did stop when Steve stepped into the room; all twelve of the bug's eyes swiveled up and down Steve in a judgmental manner. Steve couldn't say he was an expert at alien bug body language, but he was still left with the impression that the Costumer wasn't that impressed with his appearance.

"When will I get someone to dress who isn't bipedal?" the Costumer sniffed. "I'd hoped Ghrengrh was kidding when he sent along your dimensions. You'll have to stick with what you're wearing today. And maybe tomorrow. Try not to get too sliced and diced."

The Costumer's arms all started moving again, rapidly twirling. Not a single of its twelve eyes spared Steve another glance.

"That's you told, Captain," Pietro tapped Steve on the shoulder. "The Stylist won't ignore you so much, more's the pity."

Steve was expecting another bug when Pietro and Bhrehm escorted him along another hallway to another room, but although there were two bugs standing guard outside the room that Bhrehm hung back to click at ominously, the only inhabitant of this room looked like an old man. He was wearing a red tabard over golden robes, a horned contraption was on his back, and a thick pair of
red glasses were perched on his nose. The lenses in the glasses were too thick, making the man’s eyes appear comically large.

"Be nice to him, Stylist," Pietro called out, hanging back. "This is our Captain."

"Ah, the Captain," the man—the Stylist—said brightly. He had a warm, somehow familiar voice. "Yes, I will treat him kindly."

Steve wondered why Pietro was keeping his distance, until the word kindly was spoken, because that was then the Stylist brought out a terrifying spinning contraption that looked like some sort of Frankenstein-mishmash of equipment jury-rigged together into a nightmare device.

"Hold still," the Stylist chirped.

Steve kept resisting the urge to swipe his hand over his hair. Not because the Stylist had done anything outrageous. He’d shaved the back of Steve’s head closer than he was used to, and then the Stylist tutted at the length of his hair and the lack of facial hair, but he let Steve go pretty sharply.

Pietro seemed surprised that Steve was released so soon.

"I'm glad there's no blood," Pietro said, which was a charming way for any conversation to start. "This is good. It gives us plenty of time to find you a weapon."

"A weapon," Steve repeated, glancing briefly at Bhrehm’s sharp trident as the green bug trotted alongside them.

Pietro quirked an eyebrow that stated very clearly that maybe Steve was playing too dumb. "You don't want to step into the Grandmaster's beautiful arena without a weapon, Captain."

"An arena…like gladiators," Steve said, slowly.

"Einherjar," Pietro said, and there was that word again. "We're specially selected Einherjar and this is Valhalla. We are warriors who died in glorious battle, selected personally by the Grandmaster to be given the gift of life, to battle in his name, for his glory."

"And I'm going to battle Iron Man." Steve knew his words were coming out stiffly, but he couldn't help it. He was used to being proactive; being reactive and trying to just absorb this whole situation was uncomfortable.

"You're getting it." Pietro clapped his hands together and looked up; Steve followed his gaze to an hourglass suspended up high above a closed door. "One turn left until high suns. We gotta get a move on."

Steve nodded.

He focused on making a mental map of the turns Pietro was taking. Most of these hallways looked alike, but Steve always had a visual mind, even before the serum did something to his thought processes, making them quicker, faster, sharper. He drew the map in his head as they walked. There seemed to be patrolling bugs walking in pairs down every hallway, but there were occasional gaps, some hallways clear. Perhaps he could add those patrols to his internal map at some point. It was always good to be aware of the timings of guard patrols, especially when escape was the primary plan.

The room Pietro led them to this time, the Armory, was visibly different to the blank hallways and
the Grandmaster's opulent throne room. The floor was covered with sand. The whole room had a brown theme to it, from the walls and floors to the sconces holding flaming torches that almost looked like real fire, except every single flame around the room flickered in unison; Pietro's casual outfit made him look like he belonged in a room like this one.

"Hey, Pip," Pietro called, and over in the corner a small figure raised its head. Steve got a glimpse of red hair and pointed ears before the figure ducked down. "Oh come on, Pip, this is Steve, he's safe." Pietro leaned closer to Steve. "Don't mind Pip, he's shy."

"He's an Avenger," a muffled voice that Steve assumed was Pip rang out. It was funny, but Pip's voice reminded him of Brooklyn. It was strange to hear a familiar accent in such an unfamiliar place. "Two of you are scary. The odds are not in Pip's favor."

"Steve's cool," Pietro said.

Steve had never been called cool before. The closest he'd ever come to that was when SHIELD had first found him. Did cool apply when you were literally frozen solid?

"You promise?" Pip made a snuffling noise.

"He's our Captain," Pietro said. "He's a champion for all the little guys, that's literally his thing."

Steve glanced around the room as Pietro talked with the mysterious Pip. The walls were covered in multiple racks of weapons, each rack secured by a line of pulsating light. Steve figured it must be some sort of security system. The weapons were diverse and looked like they would thematically fit very well with a sword-and-sandals Roman Gladiator aesthetic; plenty of swords of different lengths, flails, nets, and tridents.

Lots of armor, too: oblong shields, helmets with narrow eye slots, greaves to protect the fighter's calves, leather manicae to cover an elbow or wrist. Shin guards, shoulder pieces, small crescent-shaped breastplates. It was only as Steve stepped further into the room that he saw the wall of more modern weapons: crossbows, bolas, nunchaku, throwing stars. No guns, but Steve thought there were a couple of flamethrowers in the far corner.

Steve's distracted mental inventory of the weapons seemed to calm Pip down enough, because he stepped out from behind the table in the corner, shyly looking across at Steve. He was only four feet tall, half of his face obscured by a brown-paper wrapped package gripped in both hands. Pip's eyes were bright and locked on Steve.

"Pip got told to fix this for you," Pip said, holding out the package. Steve thought back to the throne room, where Topaz mentioned his infamous serving tray, and Steve wondered if she meant his shield. The package looked the right shape for it. Steve couldn't believe how much he wanted it to be true. He didn't know whether to get his hopes up. "You'll need another weapon too, Pip thinks."

Steve stepped closer and Pip flinched, but Pietro made a shushing noise, so maybe Pip was anxious and shy in general, it wasn't Steve frightening him. Pip was bare to the waist, wearing a ragged pair of shorts and a cuff of orange fur around each ankle. There was a Control Disc glinting under his mess of red hair, and he had thick fluffy sideburns that looked really soft. His ears raised to high peaks and there was a blue pendant hanging around his neck that looked a little like the design on the side of Thor's hammer.

Topaz had mentioned a troll, but was this what trolls looked like? Steve had been picturing something bigger, hulking. Up close, Pip smelled like nicotine; that had been one of the weirder
moments for Steve when he chose to take his chance at a normal life back in the 40s. He hadn't appreciated enough how clean the air had been, smoke-wise, in the 21st century.

There was so much he hadn't appreciated enough while he had it.

"Take it," Pip urged and Steve took the package from him and something in Steve sighed in pleasure, because it was his shield, he knew it now. He undid the paper wrapping and almost wanted to cry as the red, white and blue appeared in the muted light of this room. Steve's fingers grazed over the familiar surface.

It wasn't technically speaking his shield: it belonged to the Steve from the timeline he'd co-opted as his retirement destination, but it was close enough that Steve felt anchored by it. Steve slid it onto his arm and felt immediately more balanced.

"You need another weapon," Pip said.

"I'm fine with just this—" Steve started, but even Pietro shook his head. He supposed even if he carried another weapon to the arena, he could always drop it. He squared his shoulders and started his sentence again. "What do you recommend?"

"You're asking Pip's opinion?" Pip's voice lurched upward into a squeak. He put two stubby hands up to his cheeks. "Pip never gets asked."

"It's true," Pietro offered. "You might regret this."

Pip sidled up to Pietro's side and leaned up onto his toes to whisper. "Pip shouldn't give the Captain another shield, should Pip?"

Pietro mouthed no.

Steve ended up with a weapon that resembled a very large, very heavy ice pick. It looked dramatic and he liked the balance. Pip made him swing it around a few times and produced a wooden dummy for Steve to test it on; Pip squeaked when Steve shattered it with his second hit.

"How many times has he been wormed?" Pip yelled from behind his table.

"Once," Pietro said.

Pip peered over the edge, eyes warily tracking Steve as he swung the pick a few more times. "Pip suddenly regrets that Pip is not allowed to lay bets on the fighters."

"He's fighting Iron Man, Pip," Pietro said and Steve might never forget the way Pip's face suddenly flooded with sadness. Pip's eyes went wide and didn't move from Steve, and Steve hated it. He'd seen that sort of expression too many times before. Back when he was a teenager with his laundry list of physical defects and no one expected him to last out the winter. People would look at his mother the same way Pip was looking at Steve now.

"Good luck from Pip, Captain," Pip squeaked before disappearing completely out of sight.

Steve swung the ice pick a few more times, trying to get used to the balance of it.

"Time to go. Remember: if you don't fight, we'll all be punished," Pietro leaned in and put his hands around Steve's neck, leaning in to stare at him intently. "But you will want to fight anyway, yes?" Pietro looked over to see Bhrehm staring at one of Pip's rows of tridents, and his finger stretched out; he tapped twice on Steve's Control Disc, meaningfully.
"Of course," Steve said, as Bhrehm turned back to look at them.

"We need to takesss him to the Cold Room," Bhrehm hissed.

"Of course," Pietro echoed Steve. He straightened into a more formal prose. "This way, Captain. This way lies glory and honor for the Grandmaster."

Brehm and Pietro lead Steve through eight more metallic hallways before they emerged into a much different aesthetic. It was impossible to ignore the change in environment. These hallways were so much brighter, windows high above them streaming in sunlight that reflected off tall whitewashed walls. There were more bugs around, patrolling in pairs; Brehm nodded at each group of them as they passed. The sound of their claws hitting the tiles reminded Steve uncomfortably of the ticking of a clock.

Several hallways branched off from the bright white walkways and Steve caught sight of several large rooms too. One looked like a dining room, with oblong wooden tables bracketed by low wooden benches. Another looked like an unoccupied training room with various wooden dummies and equipment in there, ropes hanging from the ceiling, climbing frames against the wall. One looked empty apart from a thick coating of sand, and another room was entirely tiled in white, with pipes that looked a little like shower heads embedded periodically into the wall; maybe it was a communal shower?

Steve stored them carefully in the little mind map he was still drawing of the layout.

It turned out that the 'Cold Room' Bhrehm referred to was a small room that opened directly on to the arena. It was a round room, guarded by two more of the giant bugs with weapons. The floor was covered in sand. The walls were blank, white-washed brightly in a way that implied that maybe they got covered frequently in something unpleasant, because otherwise the sand would have scratched more of it off and the paint looked fresh.

Probably blood, Steve thought, the implication of what was happening settling into his spine. He looked down at the slip of paper that Pietro had returned to him, his eyes burning path across IRON MAN and DEATH one last time before he slipped the paper into a hidden pocket on his uniform.

The back of Steve's shield was shiny enough so that when Steve glanced at it before adjusting his straps, his own face stared back. His helmet hadn't been part of the uniform returned to him; perhaps the Avengers had decided not to bury him in it. He looked much too serious for a scenario where he might be scant moments away from seeing Tony again.

He swallowed hard and focused on his breathing for a moment. He needed to get his head in the game. It had been so long since his last formal mission that he'd almost forgotten the nerves that inevitably came with it. Steve glanced to the part of the room that opened to the arena itself. At the moment it was blocked off with thick iron bars and a shimmering blue light; it looked like that served as both a way to keep Steve penned into the room as well as muffling the noise from outside.

Muffled, but didn't eliminate, because Steve could hear yelling.

He thought he could make out Iron Man! Iron Man! Iron Man! in the pulsating rhythm of the noise.

When Steve looked back, Pietro and Bhrehm were backing away. A blue forcefield shimmered in front of them, leaving Steve alone with the two armed giant bugs in the Cold Room. Steve
swallowed and deliberately turned his back on them, moving to stand in front of the bars instead.

He couldn't see much. A large stretch of sand. A faint curve of far-off walls. Those walls were painted red. Whitewashing them was probably a bad idea, considering what seemed to happen in this arena on the videos Steve had seen.

Steve had watched several sword-and-sandal epic movies: a lot of Italian silent movies in his retirement timeline, and a handful of the classics with the Avengers when they'd first tried their best to acclimatize him to "modern times": Ben-Hur, Spartacus, Gladiator. Steve would probably never want to watch another one for the rest of his life.

The slip of paper had said battle to the DEATH. Maybe the rest of Steve's life wasn't going to be that long.

Except Steve remembered the worms and shivered, like it was happening again.

"Getssss ready, Einherjar," one of the bugs behind Steve said, its voice reminding him of burning coals and flowing lava. Steve swallowed. Maybe he could fall back and fight these two, try and fight his way back through the building he's been mapping in his head. The bugs had teeth and claws and menacing tridents, but they would be a known threat.

Out there, in the arena, Steve would be stepping mostly into the unknown.

This was what he was here for. He'd known that if the 10% chance of this being real was the 100% result he'd been hoping for that this would be a likely scenario. That his corpse would be stolen and that he would somehow be revived or copied to fight in a gladiatorial arena.

Steve had known this was a possibility. He was prepared. He needed answers. Even if he died, and wasn't revived with those terrible worms afterward, maybe he could die knowing something more about what happened to Tony. Where his body had gone. If it was really him fighting in this place.

"It'sss time," the bug snarled and the bars suddenly shot up into the bricks above them with a large clanging noise.

For a stunned second Steve stood there as a wall of sound rushed over him. That second was all he was allowed; both of the bugs had advanced, tridents pointed at him as they started to nudge him forward. One of the points made contact with him and pain blossomed out sharply. Steve thought he was probably bleeding and he stumbled forward to get away from them and as soon as he moved out of the Cold Room, the bars clanged shut behind him again, stranding him out there.

Steve spared the smirking bugs one last glance before resolutely turning his back on them again. He took a deep breath, tried not to think about the mess of writhing worms he'd seen crawling over his exposed lungs, and tried to take in the sight in front of him as best he could.

Like so many things Steve had experienced since he'd stepped into that damn capsule and taken Erskine's serum into his body, it was almost beyond comprehension. He looked up into the sky and nearly wanted to cry because it was so beautiful.

There were two suns in the sky, right up high, but the sky wasn't blue. It was a riot of colors, pinks and purples swirling together, streaked through with what looked almost like chem-trails of greens criss-crossing across the sky. The sky itself seemed like a giant dome that closed down around them, giving Steve the distinct impression that he was standing in a very hot, very weird, very detailed snow-globe.

Well, a sand-globe, perhaps, because the floor was covered in sand. Good for blood and viscera, a
terrifying voice said in the back of Steve's mind and he felt sick.

There were thousands of spectators in seats up above him, a blur of color, a storm of noise that was too confusing for Steve to pick out any single sound. He saw a block of red-and-gold in one corner, but that was all the detail he could extract before his gaze returned to the far end of the sand—where bars shot upward, leaving an open doorway staring at him, dark and terrifying. Anything could come out of that looming darkness.

Steve could hear his heart pounding above the roar of the crowd. The twin suns high in the colorful sky beat down on him, relentless heat that was already making him sweat a little. If Steve was going to die here, at least he wasn't going to die cold. That meant something to him, even now.

He was under very little illusions about what would happen if Tony really was going to come out and face him in this arena.

There was no scenario where Steve would be willing to watch Tony die again if there was any other possible outcome.

Steve discovered he was holding his breath in anticipation. He let it go and took another few steps forward into the sand. The noise of the crowd swelled with each pace ahead that he took. When he moved the ice pick again, swinging it to make sure he still had the right balance for it, the roar increased in volume.

Steve could make out some faces in the crowd here and there, no one familiar, but that made him feel even queasier. Everyone was here to watch people battle to the death? This was their idea of entertainment?

There was a flash of light and Steve looked up automatically to see a giant hologram of the Grandmaster suddenly fill the sky, improbably large. Steve saw some small drones flying up high that must be the source of its projection. He briefly contemplated smashing them with his shield.

"Welcome, welcome, my friends," the Grandmaster's voice boomed out. It felt like his voice was somehow being beamed directly into Steve's skull. "You've all traveled far and paid dearly for today's battles, and I know it's going to be worth every single credit. And do we have a splendid little warm-up match for you today! Yes, I managed to find us one more Avenger! We know you love the rest of that motley crew, and the Captain here—was their leader!"

A hologram of Steve briefly replaced the Grandmaster's image and the crowd cheered.

"So to get him used to our friendly little battle home, we thought it would be fun to pit him against the one—the only—the Invincible Iron Man!"

The hologram of Steve flickered and became a massive representation of Iron Man's distinctive mask—and then it scattered apart in a shower of fragmented light shards, punched through by a flying figure.

Steve's mouth was dry as the crowd roared. Iron Man. It was Iron Man. It was the version of the armor that had been in the second video—mostly golden with red highlights, metal fanning up from either side of the helmet, elaborately carved designs bracketing the classic Iron Man face mask. Elegantly sculpted vambraces covered the arms and the chest plate was layered, the flanks curving into circles. In another nod to the gladiatorial aesthetic, the armor had what looked like a chainmail skirt connected to the hips by crimson rondels with a radial pattern on them; something that looked like fabric rippled over the groin glinted suspiciously under the light of the double suns, which made Steve think that it was probably not made from any material found on Earth.
But that was kind of the theme of this adventure: Steve wasn't in Kansas anymore.

Iron Man hovered up in the sky, arms spread wide, boot jets flaring as the crowd roared dramatically. Then the faceplate lifted up and Steve had to suppress the cry he wanted to make.

Tony. It was Tony. It was really Tony. Steve forgot the worms, forgot the oppressive heat, forgot the ground was below him and the sky was above him. He forgot how to breathe.

Tony looked angry but that wasn't an expression from him that Steve was unfamiliar with. He still that same dumb facial hair that shouldn't look good on anyone but Tony pulled it off with aplomb and those same eyes that had haunted Steve's waking and sleeping dreams for decades.

Tony.

Alive.

Steve felt giddy. He'd hoped but he hadn't really let himself believe this was possible. Miracles rarely happened, but miracle was the only word that described this.

Tony Stark was alive. Everything else faded away in significance to that. The crowd melted away to a blur.

Steve's skull reverberated as the Grandmaster spoke again. "Fight well, my champions! Fight...to the death!"

Steve found his voice then and even though it shook, he was proud he was making actual, whole words when he called out, "Tony, how—?"

But that was all he did manage to get out, because a brief look of absolute fury washed across Tony's anger, deepening it to a loathing that Steve felt but couldn't understand, and then the Iron Man faceplate slid down. That expression disappeared and Steve barely had time to lift up his shield when Iron Man immediately dived at him, sending a repulsor blast directly at Steve's chest.

Steve stared in disbelief as sparks from the blast spluttered across the sand. "Tony—" he tried again.

"Fight," Iron Man said. Steve couldn't say it was Tony's voice, because it was filtered through the usual modulator, but boosted louder, probably for the benefit of the crowd. Unfortunately that volume boost meant the voice sounded more computerized. More Iron Man, not enough Tony Stark. "Fight or die!"

"I'm not going to fight you," Steve said, throwing aside the ice pick where it landed in the sand a hundred feet away from him. The crowd booed widely. Even though Steve didn't have a modulator boosting his voice, he could hear his words echoing around the arena anyway, some sort of technology doing it for him.

Steve adjusted his weight from foot to foot, his boots digging into the sand as he stared up at Iron Man intently, waiting to see what Tony would do with that verbal gauntlet. Iron Man hovered up high, not attacking. gauging the situation. The suns were hot on Steve's exposed face.

"Fine," Iron Man barked as his faceplate slid up. Tony's face being visible made Steve's heart sing with joy, even though Tony's expression looked carefully blank. "Is that your final decision?" Tony asked, his own voice ringing out harshly.

Steve glanced around briefly. He could see several of the giant bugs lining the arena walls, looking...
down at him, vicious weapons in their grips. He saw a likely door where the audience might have come into the arena. His brain calculated an escape route and a strategy that might work, might get both of them out of there.

"It is," Steve said, firmly. He lowered his shield and relaxed his shoulders and the crowd booed even more loudly.

"You heard the Captain," Tony shrugged. His armor rippled, some of the chestplate retracting up. The plates covering his thighs collapsed downwards into the boots. The shoulder plates lifted, the vambraces collapsing into them, and Tony hovered down to the sand, landing heavily. He twisted one hand and a blade extended out from his right gauntlet. "If you won't try your hardest, then you don't deserve my best."

"Tony—" Steve frowned. Tony was fifty feet away from him, striding at him with determination, his eyes burning coldly into him. "Tony, it's me," Steve hissed, frowning when those words got picked up and amplified too, but what else was he supposed to do? He couldn't actually fight Tony, that was ridiculous.

As Tony moved closer, Steve could barely stand to look away. The retracted armor left Tony's arms, stomach, and thighs exposed. Tony was always stronger than most people noticed. Steve always did notice. For all Tony's flash and swagger, Tony always chose clothes that masked his real strength. Still, for all those hidden muscles, Tony had never had this bulk before. His skin was almost invitingly golden, like Tony had spent a lot of time bathing under these twin suns.

"Protect yourself," Tony said, striding even closer. "Last warning."

"I'm not going to fight you," Steve repeated, firmly. He couldn't. He wouldn't. The last time they fought, Steve had nearly killed him. Steve still regretted walking away and leaving Tony bleeding in Siberia. It wasn't his biggest regret anymore—that still revolved around that last terrible battle against Thanos—but it still ranked high.

"I see," Tony said, raising the spear-like weapon which had come out of his armor when he collapsed it into the current version. "You know you'll lose against me, so you're not even going to try. Pathetic."

"That's not it at all," Steve defended, before having to make an evasive maneuver to tumble out of the way when Tony came closer and swiped the spear at him; he had to raise the shield despite his resolve to stay still and do nothing because Tony raised his left hand and started blasting the repulsor at him, non-stop.

"You're barely worth my time," Tony said coldly, advancing toward Steve with a slow, measured pace.

"I don't want to have to fight back," Steve yelled, trying to get his boots to dig into the sand, but gaining little traction; as the repulsor blasts hit his shield, Steve got knocked back, kicking up sand with each jab of resistance.

Tony's expression was as cold as it had been in the first video Carol had found and Steve's stomach chilled with worry, because maybe this wasn't Tony, or maybe he was brainwashed, or maybe it was a copy—whatever the answer, Tony was reacting as if…

As if he didn't know who Steve was at all.

Steve's face fell, twisted by the anguish of it. He'd taken a risk to come here; he was naive to think
it would be sunshine and rainbows. He couldn't give up now, but he couldn't fight this Tony, because brainwashing was never out of consideration when the Controller was involved. Steve couldn't see a Control Disc on Tony because the helmet still covered most of his head, but Steve would lay a hefty bet there was one.

He couldn't risk fighting Tony, because they'd fought before, and Steve had won that time, if you could call it winning, and the paper had said this would be a battle to the death.

*Sine missione: a gladiator battle with no chance of mercy*, Steve's brain chimed in unhelpfully, because the serum had boosted his memory so nothing was ever forgotten; at the beginning of his adventures as Captain America, Steve had thought that kind of cool, but that trait had turned out to be more of a curse than a charm to Steve's utter misery.

He'd wished more than once that the serum *would* fail, just so that he could be granted the mercy of forgetting Tony's death, but it never faltered even for a second; even when Steve's body grew older, he didn't grow weaker, and he never forgot a single thing. Some memories were slow to recall, but nothing went away forever.

The moment Tony stopped talking. The silence from the man who rarely knew how to shut up, who was only quiet when things were bad. How could his death be anything *but* bad?

"Don't make me fight back," Steve warned, ducking down further behind his shield. Tony's attacks had pushed him closer to the ice pick he'd discarded. It was a good weapon. If Steve could knock Tony down to the ground, he could use the edge to pry off the armor, make Tony easier to carry. Steve didn't know what the odds of success were for escaping the arena; he'd been mentally calculating them as if he would have Tony alive and fighting at his side and come up with a respectable 15% chance. With Tony unconscious and slung over his shoulder, maybe it wouldn't even be 10% possible. Maybe it would be 1% possible. But it wasn't 100% impossible. Steve squinted and made the decision to lunge for the weapon. Tony seemed to anticipate that, sending a row of shots along the sand to compensate for Steve's sudden change of direction.

Steve couldn't go into this battle at full force. There was no way he could stomach risking killing him, even if those miracle worms existed. What if the worms only worked once? What if he killed Tony and this time it was permanent? Steve knew his own strength against Iron Man all too well. He couldn't risk it. He would have to move in defensively and hope to get an opening for a sharp hit to the head.

With a diving motion, Steve managed to do a lurching forward somersault, grabbing the handle of the ice pick as he landed back on his feet, and he turned in Tony's direction, and Tony grinned, but there was no humor to it. Tony maybe didn't recognize him, but that was fine. Alive but memory-impaired was something Steve could work with.

"That's more like it," Tony said.

Steve calculated the likely battle in his head, raised his shield, and grit his teeth. Okay. He needed to go on the offensive and just be observant. No panic this time. No letting his emotions cloud his judgment. He would defeat Tony as fast as he could, efficiently, and deal with escape as the step to take afterward. He briefly regretted that Pietro might have to be temporarily left behind, and Natasha, and his heart ached at that, but he knew Natasha at least would understand.

Once one of them was out, getting the rest out would be infinitely more possible, Steve reassured himself.

Steve let out a yell and charged straight at Tony, telegraphing his first set of moves so he could
switch up his strategy after a few predictable hits.

"Much more like it," Tony snarled and spun the spear in his hand with the confidence of a pro. It spun in an elegant, dizzying arc, and as Steve smashed his shield at it, Tony made this almost balletic twisting move that took him out of the reach of Steve's shield—and put Steve's flank in reach of Tony's spear.

The spear flashed in the double suns as it dug into Steve's side, the fluid movement embedding it deep in Steve's side.

Steve's ears were roaring. He couldn't really understand what was going on for a moment; adrenaline briefly masked the shock of the pain. Tony yanked the spear back and out of him in one triumphant, dramatic tug; Steve's legs collapsed under himself automatically and Steve stared up at Tony uncomprehendingly.

Kneeling in the sand, Steve gasped, blood flooding his mouth, bitter and warm and choking. He continued to look up as Tony stepped over him, a silhouette against the rainbow, kaleidoscope sky, the suns bathing him in an eerie golden glow. Had Tony ever looked more beautiful than he did right now? No, Steve thought giddily. He could feel blood gushing down his side. Tony raised the spear again as the crowd yelled in feverish excitement.

"Good night, Captain," Tony said, and with that cold-expression, he drove the spear down hard, forcefully shoving it into him, missing Steve's shield to neatly impale it through Steve's chest.
As Steve lay on the sand, bleeding out, his emotions were a storm. Tony's blank face as he stared
down at him was fading into shadows, Steve's vision failing as his life seeped away. Steve was
horrified that it all might end like this, in blood and failure on the sand in an alien arena, but there
was something else in there too.

Gladness. That was it. Gladness. He got to see Tony one more time. Steve's last thought was that
might actually be something worth dying for.
I hear someone following me, sobbing out my name
in a wounded voice putrefied by time.

You are standing over the earth,
full of teeth and lightning.

Pablo Neruda—Ode with a Lament

The Captain awoke to indescribable agony.

Was that his name? Maybe. He was sure of it for the first second he woke up, but then that
certainty drifted away, like trying to catch smoke in his hands. He was—something else. The
Captain felt right, but wrong too. What was he the Captain of?

It was hard to think when everything hurt so badly. Every breath stabbed like a tiny knife, like acid
being poured into a wound. There was something cold and hard beneath him and his body felt like
it was being ripped open from the inside out. Things tore at him and bit, swelled within him and
destroyed. Every second was scream-worthy agony, but when he opened his mouth, no sound
escaped, only more pain.

"Ssstop trying to ssstrip," a voice said. The Captain felt like he should obey that voice so he
stilled, even though his entire existence seemed to boil down to pain and hurt. He thought he
existed as a body, but that certainty was lost too, shattered into the piecemeal motions and agonies
that seemed to make up his every conscious moment.

The darkness of the world started to melt away and reform into something more coherent. The
Grandmaster's gift was bountiful, the Captain thought, even as his vision coalesced into a
nightmarish view. He had been forced to greet Death somehow—he couldn't remember how. There
was shame in it, and glass, and a blade, and a disapproving face—none of it made sense.

He tried to take a deep breath, but that burned too, and the Captain moved his healed gaze to the
ceiling. The Grandmaster deserved stoic, strong warriors and the Captain would internalize that.
He would not scream through this magical gift of healing. He startled involuntarily, though,
because there was a face at the grate, up high in the ceiling.

"Sssttop moving," the voice said, impatiently, and the Captain's gaze dropped to the creature
tending to him, a large gray bug that almost blended in with the gray of the walls. Moving his gaze
down meant he was looking again at the Grandmaster's blessing. The worms rippled over him, an
orgy of agony, putting his body back together piece by slow painful piece. The Captain gritted his
teeth. This was all for the honor and glory of the Grandmaster.

He waited as the worms rebuilt him, the sensation sharply embracing the edge of unbearable. The
Captain shamefully thought dying might be the better option, the quiet of death alluring; death was
a place free from this agony, death was maybe a preferable destination. The shame quickly
followed in a flood, because the Grandmaster loved him so much he had given the Captain back this gift of life. It would be disrespectful to the Grandmaster to try and return this gift, the most bountiful thing anyone could bestow on another living person. Life after death was a miracle and the Grandmaster was the miracle-maker.

The gray bug encouraged him to sit up after a while and the Captain did so carefully, watching in almost muted fascination as his flesh knitted back together. The Grandmaster's worms fell from him to the floor. Every part of his body burned and he itched everywhere.

"Don't ssscratch," Gray Bug hissed. "Don't undo my hard workssss."

The Captain forced himself to stay still. As his skin finished knitting back together, he ate the meat the Gray Bug handed him, grateful for the gift.

"Eatsss it all," Grey Bug said. "Good human. A guide will be along sssoon to take you to get some ressst. Heal quick, yesss, once you eat SSSæhrímnir. My greatestsst joy, enjoyssss it."

A door slid open and an orange bug walked in, thrusting forward a pile of material in the Captain's direction. "Dresss," Orange Bug hisses.

"Mmurgh," Gray Bug greeted, "perhapsss you should be nicer to themssss."


The Captain nodded and slipped off the metal slab. His body still itched but the pain was gone now, the Grandmaster be praised. The material was clothing, a brown tunic, brown pants and brown sandals. The Captain dressed as quickly as he could; Mmurgh looked impatient.

"Show him to where he can ressst," Gray Bug said.

Mmurgh nodded and gestured at the door. The Captain followed.

"Thanks," the Captain said to Gray Bug as he left.

Gray Bug startled and made a chirping noise that sounded like he was pleased. "Jussst don't ssscratch," he said, as Mmurgh pushed the Captain out of the door.

Mmurgh showed the Captain to a large room covered in sand. There were other people in the room looking his way in curiosity, but the Captain barely glanced at them. He was tired. Mmurgh gestured at a patch of sand in a rough manner and the Captain sat down. Mmurgh nodded.

"Try not to caussse missschief while you heal," Mmurgh said, before turning and clacking their way out of the room. The Captain watched Mmurgh nod at two bugs who were standing at attention either side of the doorway before Mmurgh disappeared around the corner.

When the Captain turned back around, several people were watching him curiously; a slender, angular man with shoulder length black hair was openly staring at him; a large man with deep brown skin and glowing gold eyes glanced his way and smiled briefly; a woman in a brown cloak that covered her from head to toe seemed to be unimpressed, from what he could see of her face peeking out of her hood.

A young man suddenly sat in front of the Captain. He was wearing clothes like the Captain was and he had a bright mess of platinum-blond hair that drew the eye.
"Ah, honestly, you did better than I thought you would," Platinum-Blond said.

The Captain blinked. "I did?" He felt like he could smile a little. Maybe the Grandmaster wouldn't be so horribly disappointed in his performance after all.

"It makes sense you'd be reluctant." Platinum-Blond leaned in closer. "You looked like you'd seen a ghost, it was pretty funny, not gonna lie."

The Captain stared at him. "I suppose," he allowed.

The Captain's brain felt heavy, like he was swimming through fog. Every time he tried to think about why he was there, he thought about the Grandmaster smiling at him and he felt better. The Grandmaster saved them from death. The Grandmaster brought them back to life, just for the glory and honor of serving him. The Grandmaster loved him.

"Captain," Platinum-Blond said, very slowly, "what's my name?"

Platinum-Blond tilted his head. He looked familiar, but when the Captain thought that, an image of the Grandmaster filtered into his mind.

"It's—" The Captain started and frowned.

"Oh, man, they really did a number on you, didn't they?" Platinum-Blond leaned back, pulling a face. "I'm Pietro. Pietro Maximoff. They call me Quicksilver."

Pietro. Well, that sounded familiar. "Avenger," the Captain said, the word slotting into his mind quickly.

"There you go," Pietro smiled and clapped his hands. "I should give you the tour. C'mon."

The Captain opened his mouth to protest that he was tired, but a second later, honestly, he could barely explain what had happened. A rough force under his elbows, a sickening lurch of movement, and the Captain was suddenly standing upright at the doorway of the room, Pietro at his side.

One of the bugs blocked their way with a large trident.

"Exxxxplain," the bug hissed.

Pietro threw an arm around the Captain's shoulders. "Bhrehm wanted me to give him the grand tour yesterday, but his match was at two turns. You know how much time a visit to Hrhumhuhr takes."

The bug grunted. "And I sssuppossse you'll be ending the tour at Ssstark'ssss disssgusssting hovel."

"One man's hovel is another man's fantasy palace," Pietro said, patting the bug on its carapace, earning himself three pairs of eyes swiveling at the same time in annoyance.

"I'm gladsss I'm no man," the bug sniffed, but let them past.

"Come on, Captain, it's the Grandmaster's wish you get the grand tour," Pietro said. "Welcome to Valhalla."

"Valhalla," the Captain repeated.

"Yup." Pietro started walking fast and the Captain sped up to match his pace, not wanting to be left behind. If the Grandmaster's wish was that this Pietro guide him around, then the Captain would
"So how much did you get to keep when you were wiped?"

"Uh," the Captain said, the question not making much sense.

"Oh boy," Pietro sighed. "Right, so, the Grandmaster found our dead bodies and revived us for the glory and honor of his mighty arena, but he didn't just look for heroes, he found villains too, evil monsters for us to battle so we can prove our worth. We're the Einjerhar, overseen by the mighty King Odin. The bad guys, the Tenebrae, their leader is Queen Hela. She's a freak, she can turn anything into a weapon, honestly, when she kills you, ugh, it's the worst." Pietro rubbed at his chest, frowning off into the distance for a moment.

The Captain frowned. "So the Iron Man is one of the Tenebrae?"

"Oh, hell no, he's one of us," Pietro said. "Occasionally we get Einherjar in-fighting as warm-ups for the crowds, that's all. It can be pretty fun, knowing you can go full-force against a colleague without much consequence. But usually, we get assignments to fight the Tenebrae, you'll get an envelope in the morning if you've been selected. Sometimes we fight monsters, too, there's a pretty fun dragon in the dungeons under the arena, she's a real monster to fight. Took me three deaths to get my hair back, that was not a good month."

The Captain wondered if he should tell Pietro that he was making little sense with his rambling, rapid words. "A dragon," he repeated, slowly. "Anything else?"

"More giant animals. And—"

"And?"

"There's the one we don't talk about," Pietro stared straight ahead. "The Champion of Death. We just hope like hell he doesn't show up in our morning envelopes."

"The Champion of Death," the Captain echoed.

"Man, they really did a number on you," Pietro said. "Wait here a moment, would you? I've got a quick errand to run."

The Captain opened his mouth to protest, because he had questions, so many questions, and he was pretty sure the Grandmaster's bugs wouldn't be happy with Pietro leaving him in a random blank hallway, but—there was no one to protest to, because Pietro was gone. The Captain was alone.

He blinked several times, turned around slowly to check he wasn't imagining anything, and turned back to where Pietro had been one second earlier. Nothing. Huh.

And then someone yanked his arm, hard, and the Captain stumbled, not expecting it. That wasn't right. He had excellent reaction speeds. There was no way someone should get the drop on him. Perhaps he was saving that speed for the arena. That seemed like a good idea, to save all his strength and flexibility for the area, to showcase the glory of the Grandmaster.

The Captain let himself fall forward, buoyed by that thought, and found himself face-to-face with a very angry-looking man. There was a thump as a door was kicked shut behind him. The Captain turned to stare blankly at the angry man who was pushing him up against the wall. He wanted to fight back, but then, fighting back was against the rules, wasn't it? The Captain wanted to please the Grandmaster, so he didn't fight back.

"What the fuck, Steve?" the angry man yelled.
"Tony," another voice said, and the Captain glanced over to see a woman standing in the middle of the room. She had hair the color of fire and her muscular arms were folded over a bare midriff. She wore a revealing outfit, brown fabric wrapped around her like a bandage, covering her chest, and tight pants that clung to every muscle of her body. Her fire-color hair was pulled back in elaborate braids and on her pale white skin there was a red tattoo of an hourglass under her right shoulder blade. She was the face from the vent in the Worming room, the Captain realized. "He's been wiped."

"Dammit, he wasn't last night," the angry man sniped. The Captain figured he must be Tony. The angry man was very handsome, the Captain thought idly. He was muscular like everyone here was, but unlike the pale woman his skin was a golden color. He had windswept brown hair, a mustache and beard that looked soft to the Captain's gaze, and brown eyes that somehow looked delicate as much as they looked powerful. His eyebrows were knotted together hard, like the Captain was a perplexing mystery, which didn't make sense.

The Captain was straightforward. The Captain was here to please the Grandmaster. The Captain was here to fight and entertain the masses, as an Einherjar of Valhalla. It was an honor.

"Here," the woman said, tossing the man something. The man caught it, and the Captain thought oh I could slip away now he's not holding me with both hands, and the Captain moved to do that—

and the man jabbed something hard into the back of the Captain's neck.

It was pain like the Captain couldn't describe. Worse than the serum and the Vita-Rays and holy shit, Steve's memory thunked back into place like he'd been thumped by the Hulk.

Tony and Natasha were staring at him in consternation, obviously waiting for—probably for Steve to get his memories back, and Natasha smiled as Steve's eyes widened, obviously realizing it had worked.

"Welcome back, Cap," Natasha beamed.

Steve couldn't speak. He was at a loss for words. He'd dreamed of this as a possibility for so long, but he'd never let himself imagine it. Hope could be dangerous, it could wither you, and Steve hadn't wanted to hope that this was possible. But Natasha was there, alive, and next to her was Tony, and Steve could barely breathe.

Steve felt like he must be missing something, though, because Tony thumped forward again, slamming his palms into Steve's shoulders, smashing him back into a force which Tony had never had before outside of the Iron Man armor.

"How long has it been?" Tony snarled, his breath hot on Steve's face. "We knew time worked differently here, but Nat and I counted eight years since we got here, and that's been more than enough, but then you turn up like an actual old man, and—"

"It has been eight years," Steve interrupted. "I came from 2031. I promise." He managed to hold up his hands enough under Tony's grip to show his palms, a visible signal of his surrender and honesty. "Please stop screaming at me?"

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Then how the fuck did you—Nat watches all the new intake," he looked over at her, still pushing his hands into Steve's shoulders, "you said he was—"

"Definitely old," Natasha said, her gaze fixed curiously on Steve's face. "So many wrinkles. Steve, you did not age well."
"Thanks," Steve muttered, and then shook his head. "You're alive," he blurted, because that was the overriding thought, even among the hundred other questions he had. His vision blurred a little, because he was wondering if he was hallucinating, or maybe he was still on the floor in the Avengers complex, the injection still winding its way through his veins, and this was what dying really felt like.

"Good observation skills, Rogers," Natasha said. She looked fond for a second and then instantly switched to pissed off. "How the fuck did you die?"

"Ooh, wait for me, I want to hear this story," Pietro said, sitting on a low wooden trunk nearby. Steve blinked. When did he get there? Speedster, Steve remembered, belatedly. Of course.

"Nat was sure Clint would be here first," Tony said, finally slowing letting go and stepping back. He looked wary and Steve didn't blame him.

"Clint Barton is a dumb-ass," Natasha defended, and her eyes ran over Steve acutely. "You were supposed to be less dumb. I had faith in you.'

"Well, uh." Steve squinted at her. "I mean, to get here, I—well. But."

"Time has made him even more coherent," Tony said. "Please, say what you mean."

"It's a long story," Steve started.

Tony walked away a little to lean against a worktop covered in tools. "Eight years, how long could it be?"

"Well, I was sort of in an alternate reality for eighty years," Steve offered, awkwardly.

Tony had been reaching for something on the worktop, always needing to do something with his hands, but Steve's words made him freeze, hand half outstretched. "What?"

Steve squared his shoulders and looked at Tony as patiently as he could manage. "You told me to get a life. So I...went and got one."

"In...an alternate reality," Tony repeated, and then groaned in realization, because he was always too smart for Steve's calm. "They picked you to return the stones, didn't they? You? Mister I'm-still-obsessed-with-the-past, let's send him off unsupervised into the quantum realm with the power to go any-fucking-where? Dumbasses, I gave my life up for actual dumbasses."

Steve's stomach hurt. "I would have stayed but—" That wasn't the point. Steve swallowed back the neither of you were there comment he was going to make. "Never mind that. Anyway, we got your signal."

"I mean, duh," Tony said. "We started sending that out years ago. So what, did you all sit back and see who died first, or something?"

"Carol only recently discovered the signal a couple of weeks ago," Steve explained.

"Captain Marvel," Natasha explained, when Pietro looked confused. It didn't seem to clear up any of Pietro's confusion, which was fair enough.

"And—" Tony sounded impatient, gesturing at Steve to continue.

"Then we found a flyer advertizing the arena, advertizing you all as champions, and Rocket found
some bootleg footage of the arena fights, and—we couldn't get anyone into the arena. The only way was—"

"To fake someone's death so the Grandmaster would pick you up," Tony said. "Obviously."

"Obviously," Steve echoed.

"So you volunteered as tribute," Natasha rolled her eyes.

"Well. I'd lived a long time," Steve said, awkwardly. "It seemed fair." He didn't think there was much point in explaining the truth, that the Avengers hadn't wanted to let him do it. He was also pretty sure I helped to temporarily paralyze your daughter and then slit my throat in front of her to stop her sacrificing herself to save you wouldn't exactly sit well with this crowd.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Well, now you're here, I suppose."

"Now I'm here," Steve repeated. He blinked. "Uh. There was an injection. Nanotech. A locator signal so the Avengers could find where I ended up—"

"The Avengers are still going?" Natasha's eyes lit up. Her surprise was entirely reasonable; Natasha had been the sole force holding them together for a long time during the aftermath of the Decimation. "I'm glad."

"But I think they wiped the tech out of me," Steve said, frowning. "The tech was supposed to work against the Control Disc—we knew the Controller was involved in this stuff somehow—"

"The Controller?" Natasha interrupted, sharing a look of confusion with Tony. Tony shrugged back, a clear don't look at me response.

"Yeah," Steve frowned in annoyance, mostly at himself; the Controller's shenanigans against the Avengers had all been post-Blip. The Controller had also gotten his villainous start by stealing and manipulating a stolen Iron Man suit to rejig into a formidable exoskeleton of his own; he was lucky Steve had been sidelined by the Avengers, because Steve was pretty sure he wouldn't have been able to resist roughing the Controller up for daring to desecrate Tony's memory like that. Steve wasn't sure if he should mention any of that. "Lawyer turned supervillain," he settled on.

"Ah, well, I'm sure he won't be the first or last of that profession to go that route," Natasha joked.

"The nanotech was supposed to keep my memories intact as well as provide a signal," Steve started, but faltered when Tony held up a hand to get him to stop.

"Don't stress about that, we've all had nanotech wiped out our systems here," Tony shared a heavy look with Natasha that says there's a story there, but before Steve can push for details, Tony continued. "There's a process they use to extract it, but as far as we can tell, it's resource-expensive, so they only do it if they think your disc has been compromised. The worms can't destroy tech that small, as far as we can tell they swallow them. So if you had some sort of nanotech locator put in you, even though they obviously took it out after your appalling performance last night—it'll still be somewhere in this complex." Tony glared at Steve. "Unless it was being powered externally."

"Internally," Steve affirmed. "Bruce—"

"Say no more." Tony held his hands out wide. "Now all we have to do is sit still and wait to be rescued."

Steve perked up. "That's it?"
Tony looked immediately appalled. "No, of course that's not it, fuck, what the hell did you do in your eighty year time-vacation that turned your brain into slush?"

"Tony," Natasha warned in a low tone.

"I forgot that the wings on his uniform denoted how featherheaded he is." Tony grabbed something on his bench and a hammer, a clear visual of what he was feeling, and Steve was miserable, which was giving him emotional whiplash, because he also felt ridiculously happy. He never thought he'd ever hear Tony snarking at him again. As unhealthy a mindset as it was, Steve would probably still happily take any shit Tony wanted to shovel at him, simply for the joy of getting to actually hear it.

"He's a little on edge after having to kill you," Natasha said. Her tone was matter-of-fact, like it was a regular happening for them. Steve's heart hurt for them. How many times had they died and had to go through that process with the worms? It wasn't fair. It wasn't anywhere near the region of fair.

Tony hammered noisily at a panel. "No, Steve, we cannot sit here and be rescued. If escape was so easy, believe me, we would have done it. Do you think I'd sit and let a little thing like a tiny puzzle stop me from getting back to my daughter? Hm?"

Although Steve wanted to bask in the sound of his voice, there was something he'd forgotten, and that was how nobody in the universe, in any reality, could wind him up as quickly and as furiously as Tony Stark.

"We didn't know you were alive," Steve gritted out. "Until a couple of weeks ago, there was a replacement body in your cryochamber that dissolved. We came as soon as we knew. And the chance that this was real and not some—multiverse leaking, or hoax, or actors—we didn't know—" He stared at Tony intently, trying his best to communicate we would have come sooner if we knew just through his glare, because words felt impossible right now. Tony was the only person who could undo him like this; Steve had lived an entire life and no one else had come close. Steve swallowed hard and looked away. "Is it even safe to talk in here?"

"Now he asks," Tony huffed.

Steve's jaw tightened and he tried to relax it immediately. All these decades without Tony had been awful, and now he was here, and alive, and every word out of his mouth sounded like anger and loathing, and wasn't that reasonable? Steve had been off having a life, a good life, a full life, and he and Natasha and Pietro had been stuck here, with worms, and battles, and who knew what other horrors? Tony deserved to be angry. He deserved to be furious.

"So why did they take out the nanotech from me this time and not the first time?" Steve asked, trying to stay calm, even though sometimes that used to wind Tony up more than Steve getting angry. Maybe that was Steve's subconscious intent; an angry Tony was still an alive Tony.

"They only do the full nanosweep if they think the control disc is failing," Tony sounded deeply impatient. "You were careless in our battle."

"He was understandably rattled," Natasha interrupted. "It's not every day you find out your dead friends are alive again. Even if…it's kind of more of a regular event for us nowadays."

Tony sighed and looked up from his hammer to stare at Steve intently. "Do you remember how much you knew when waking up after the worms just now?"
"Yes," Steve said, cautiously.

"That's your guide. Public areas, act like that. When we're in here and it's only us, or we're in a public area and I have a suppression field active—it's invisible, I'll tell you when it is—then you're free to talk. Any other situation, you're a mindwiped toadlicker for El Grando Master. You get your disc wiped of my nanotech again, I might decide to leave you blank." Tony's expression was carefully ambiguous. "For the greater good, of course."

"He won't leave you blank," Pietro assured him.

"Don't be so sure," Tony snorted, starting to hammer loudly again.

Steve stared at him. "Morgan's thirteen now. She plays piano; Pepper got your mother's out of storage for her ninth birthday. She can speak seven languages fluently and swears in at least five more because the Avengers are terrible influences, you're going to want to yell at a few people for that when we get back. And god, you should hear her sing—like a dream."

"Steve," Natasha warned, her voice low. Steve could see Tony's hands trembling a little.

"I came the instant that we knew," Steve said, firmly. "And I'm not going to rest until we find some way to get you back to her."

"Does she—" Tony started; he froze, hammer paused mid-swing, and his mouth folded into a complicated shape. "Does she remember me?"

Tony wasn't looking at Steve, couldn't look at Steve; he started hammering again, and Steve could understand that, could understand how it was hard to be vulnerable when the answer mattered that much.

"She talks about you every single day," Steve said, staring at Tony until Tony looked up at him, his eyes shining.

"Every day," Tony repeated. "How about that." He blinked and then resumed hammering, loudly. "Of course she does. Every day. Absolutely the minimum decent behavior."

When Steve glanced away, he noticed Natasha had sidled up closer to him. She had a soft smile on her face that Steve resonated with; he might never feel anything but happiness again after this moment, because Natasha and Tony were alive.

"And how many times," Natasha murmured, her voice low, "was that you bringing him up in conversation?"

Steve looked at her as blankly as he could; lying to her was always impossible though. "Once or twice," he admitted.

"That's what I thought," Natasha said, just as quietly, and then she clapped her hands together. "Oh my god, Stark, he wouldn't know."

Steve's happiness did fade for a moment, because he wouldn't know didn't sound good at all, but then Tony looked up with a smirk and made a sound of amusement, so Steve's happiness quietly flared back up to full again.

"I nearly forgot myself," Tony said, in his quipping voice, and put aside his hammer to crouch down. "We have to keep him hidden away sometimes, because security measures aside, sometimes we get random inspections—bugs, or the Grandmaster himself—having our own room has its
perks, even if it's on a curfew —"

"Who's hidden away?" Steve asked. He hadn't had time to really take in the surroundings; now he did, briefly. Tony's large worktop took up a large section of the room and it was covered in tools, wires, an old beat-up laptop, and some other stuff which looked wildly jury-rigged and electrical; Steve had been able to experience the rapid growth of technology and electricity, in his alternate timeline home, and as a result he was even more impressed by Tony's skills. Now he was more aware of the complexity, he understood more deeply how amazing Tony's brain was.

"Oh, this is gonna be pretty great," Natasha murmured. "I can't wait to see your face when you see what's coming." She was lingering near Steve's shoulder, even though there was no reason to be so close; Steve appreciated it, even though it made him feel like he was in some surreal, beautiful dream. He didn't even mind the terrible, horrible parts of it, now he was here, in this scenario.

Tony emerged with a metal box and he rounded the worktop. Steve's eyes caught on the bed in the corner that seemed vaguely as if it wasn't slept in; it was covered in an elaborately stitched red-and-gold comforter which was too neatly tucked into the mattress. He moved his gaze back to the more imminent view: the box cradled in Tony's hands.

Tony picked up a chair too, a simple wooden one with an open slatted back, and he moved it so it was facing Steve before placing the box on the seat. Natasha moved a little, still staying close to Steve, but moving to a point where she could see his face. She was smirking, mouth skewed to one side.

"What's in the box?" Steve said.

"You know, that's a great cultural reference for the truth and you won't get it at all," Tony said, stepping back and folding his arms, leaning against the closest side of his worktop. Steve could see lots of pieces of gold-colored metal; of course Tony would be working on the Iron Man armor. The new design of it was incredible.

"I lived in an alternate timeline that didn't diverge from ours...too much," Steve said. He'd remembered every item of pop culture that he'd been recommended to catch up on, and in his divergent timeline had made an effort to catch as many movies as soon as they were released as possible. His colleagues at work thought he had good taste in movies, not a cheat sheet from the future. "So if there's a severed head in that box, I think it means I get that reference."

Tony tilted his head.

"What?" Steve prompted.

"I'm finding it hard to wrap my head around the idea of you abandoning the Avengers, that's all," Tony said. His tone seemed deceptively level.

Steve tried not to flinch, but it was a close thing. "You're the one who told me I'd be ready for the simple life some day. I guess I found that day." Tony's eyes narrowed. Steve shrugged. "You can't be mad that I took your advice."

"I can if you only took my advice once I was dead," Tony snarked. Steve looked away sheepishly, because, well, Tony had a point. "Go on then. Open the box, old man."

Steve glanced at Natasha, automatically seeking her approval to continue, settling back into that comfortable routine with a speed that surprised him.

"You look at me like I'm a ghost," Natasha whispered. That was unusual for their old routine; if she
said anything, it was uselessly vaguely sarcastic if not outright suggestive of something Steve didn't want to think about. "When was the last time you saw me?"

"Eighty-six years ago," Steve said, holding her gaze as calmly as he could. "Guess the old man quips are finally funny."

"Things are funnier when they're true," Tony said, drawing Steve's attention back to him as he nodded at the box.

Right. The head in the box. Steve stepped forward, not knowing what to expect, and he flipped open the box and almost laughed out loud.

"Vision," Steve gasped, his involuntary smile wider than he meant.

That was what—who—was in the box. Except it wasn't as gory as *Se7en* implied in their "what's in the box?" scene; despite the jagged cut across Vision's neck and the sharp metal jutting out, Vision had wires trailing into the back of the box from that opening and his eyes were open and watching Steve with a genuine alertness.

"Hello, Captain Rogers," Vision said, beaming widely. "I do apologize for my current appearance. I wasn't expecting any visitors today."

Steve was speechless. "Vision? But—" He blinked rapidly. "Where's your body?"

Tony pulled a face and wandered away to his worktop again. Steve instantly regretted the question, if it made Tony react like that. Steve found it hard to tear his gaze away from him. Just the familiar deft movements of his hands and those familiar dark eyes, so full of life that Steve resonated with it. He felt invincible. Maybe some of that feeling was coming back from the dead, twice, in such a short amount of time.

When Steve looked back, Natasha's face had a very knowing expression on it.

"It was a bad time," Natasha said, her voice low. "The Grandmaster doesn't like it if we don't fight."

"So this is what he did to you when you refused?" Steve asked Vision. Vision's face creased sadly.

Tony sighed, performatively loud. "I'm out of solder. Gonna go visit the troll for some more."

"Ooh, I wanna go too," Pietro said, jumping up from the trunk he was sitting on.

"Curfew's in a quarter turn," Natasha said, sing-song.

"I'll meet you in the hall," Tony said, dismissively.

"I'm afraid you'll have to go on ahead without me," Vision said, winking at Steve. Vision might have lost his body, but he'd gained a much better sense of humor since Steve had seen him last.

Tony glanced at Steve with a hesitant expression, like there was something he was going to say, and then he swallowed it back before starting to head to the doorway. Finally he did pause again, turning to look at Steve, and Steve was caught in that, as intent as their locked gazes ever were before. He frowned and then said, simply, "Every day?"

It took Steve a moment to relate those words to everything that had been said, but it came quickly, because it made sense that Tony would be thinking of Morgan.
"Five thousand, nine hundred and fifty nine," Steve said. At Tony's confusion, Steve smiled sadly. "That was the number she was up to, the day I left."

Tony's face did something complicated as he realized what it meant. Tony didn't say anything, just nodded jerkily before rapidly fleeing the room, but that was understandable. Steve understood more than Tony might ever realize he did. Pietro winced as he followed Tony out.

"Five thousand, nine hundred and fifty nine?" Natasha questioned softly.

Steve shifted his sad smile to her. "Three thousand plus one for every day since he died."

"Three thousand?"

Steve wondered if this was what grief had to be, a heart break every time. The decades of his life experience seemed to think so. "The last thing he ever said to her," he explained.

Natasha's face, for a second before she reeled it back in, looked like her experience of grief was somewhat similar to Steve's.

"So this—is what happens when you refuse to fight?" Steve asked, jerking his head

"Sadly, I was very willing," Vision said. "I don't regret what happened, although I do miss having legs."

"Vision is what happened when Tony refused to fight," Natasha said, and Steve's gut tightened sympathetically. "Pain means something different here. They find ways to punish us outside the realms of the usual."

"Which is pretty much this whole situation," Steve admits. "I have to confess, I'm so lost. And half sure I'm asleep and dreaming."

Natasha pinched him hard on his upper arm, which honestly Steve should have suspected, but then she grinned and tugged him into a hug. "You're such an idiot, Steven Rogers. Over seven decades in an alternate timeline?" She pulled back, but still remained carefully in the circle of his arms as she tilted her head. "Was she worth staying for?"

Steve narrowed his eyes. "Who said there was a woman?"

Natasha raised one eyebrow. "I'm a spy, Steve. If you think I didn't know everything about Peggy Carter within the first five minutes that we met, you're seriously underestimating me."

Steve stared at her and then shrugged. "Honestly, it wasn't half bad, the getting a life thing."

"I can't imagine you settling down."

"There wasn't much settling," Steve said and both of Natasha's eyebrows lurched up. "Don't sully the memory of my wife, Romanov. We know how time travel works now, you think I sat on my ass with everything I knew that was about to happen?"

"Maybe," Natasha said. "It is a fine ass." She slapped the ass in question as she stepped back, grinning at him mischievously. "You missed me."

"Every single day." Steve stared at her, sadly, the light atmosphere suddenly heavy because of how much he obviously meant it. After a too-long moment, Steve glanced down at Vision. "I missed you too, Vizh."
"It's okay if you missed me a little less than you missed Natasha," Vision said, graciously. "I'd understand. I miss Wanda more than I missed you."

"Understandable," Steve said. "She's fine, by the way. Couple of rough spots, of course, but—she's alive."

"I know," Vision said. "Otherwise she'd be here."

"I check the intake every day," Natasha explained. Steve remembered seeing her in the vent and nodded. "We had a pool going on for which Avenger might show up next. We were pretty pleased it took so long, to be honest."

"You seem like you have a certain amount of freedom to move around this facility," Steve said, cautiously. "And we haven't been disturbed in here."

"There are certain parts of Valhalla we're free to walk around, within reason," Natasha said. "The Armory, the mess hall, our main hall, the training room, the outside gymnasium, the Costumers, the Stylist—there's a viewing room, too, which we can watch matches from if we're not performing ourselves. This room is...somewhat different. We're not often disturbed here. But if you see the bar above the door light up orange, it means someone's coming close and we need to...hide anything we shouldn't have."

Steve had moved his gaze to check out the color of the bar above the door; his head lurched back to her in curiosity.

"Like me," Vision supplied, helpfully. "It's also close to curfew, you should put me away."

"You want to go to sleep?" Natasha asked, bending down with her hands over the doors.

"Please," Vision sighed. "I've got some calculations running on slow, but they should just compile on their own." He looked up at Steve and smiled softly. "I'm glad to see you again, Captain."

"You too," Steve said.

Natasha cupped Vision's cheek with one hand and then her wrist twisted and Vision's eyes snapped shut. She sighed and closed the box up, picking it up and carrying it over to push it under Tony's worktop.

"We don't have too long," Natasha said.

"Then talk fast," Steve suggested.

Natasha narrowed her eyes. "I can't believe I missed you."

Steve smiled helplessly at that and Natasha couldn't help but mirror him, the corner of her eyes crinkling. He really had missed her, so much. He'd dropped in on the Natasha Romanov in his timeline more than once after eliminating the Red Room there; saved from her upbringing from hell, she had ended up becoming a veterinarian and adopting seven kids.

It would probably be too weird to talk about it to his Natasha, but Steve still held that image of that Natasha's happiness in his head, and often let his mind return to it when he needed cheering up. The multiverse definitely holding at least one happy and alive Natasha Romanov had been a major comfort on his darkest days.

"You said this room is different?" Steve prompted.
"Right," Natasha said. "Tony used to have to work on his armor in the corner of Pip's armory. But obviously we couldn't work on an escape planning with constant supervision. Pip's harmless, but he's soft; he spills secrets too quickly."

"We have an escape plan?" Steve asked.

"No, we sat and stuck our thumbs up our asses for eight years," Natasha rolled her eyes.

Steve grimaced. Fair enough. His brain still felt a little sluggish. He hoped that was reasonable, considering what had maybe slithered through his skull. So much of this felt like a waking nightmare, but it couldn't be; Tony and Natasha and Pietro and Vision were here. This situation was vivid, and uncomfortably surreal, but if it was anything more abstract than reality it had to be a dream, not a nightmare.

"We have half an escape plan," Natasha admitted. "Maybe a little more, now you're here. As far as we can tell, there's one way into this place, and one way out. Tony calls it Quantum-locked, which I'm sure means something to him. Anyway, this room was a reward. Tony's quite the draw, out here in the Negative Zone."

"The Negative Zone?"

"Yep. Some sort of antimatter-based pocket universe—"

"More of Tony's words for things."

Natasha smirked. "This room was a gift so Tony could work on his armor and also it's because we convinced the bugs that humans...have certain disgusting bodily urges that they never like to see."

"What do they—" Steve started, but followed her pointed gaze to the bed. His eyebrows were the one to rise this time.

"The reason we're not disturbed here is because they don't hear what we're actually doing in here."

"What do they hear?"

Natasha crossed to the door; right beside it was a panel that Steve hadn't noticed before that she carefully opened and touched a switch beneath it—and oh. Well those noises were. Uh. Those noises were certainly...vigorous. At Steve's wince, she turned the noises off.

"They play at a noise that anyone coming near this door can hear them. It generally dissuades visitors. Tony and I recorded them in our first month here. Don't worry your little judgmental face, it's all fake." Natasha beamed. "My standards have never been as low as yours."

Steve opened his mouth to protest, but shuffled awkwardly instead; Natasha could read people the same way Steve could read a battle or Tony could read an engine.

Natasha had always known how he felt about Tony. She'd known before he did, gently coaxing it out of him during their time on the run, holding him until the sun came up on the one night it had been too much to bear; that once again, he'd fallen for someone, and realized it much too late.

Steve wondered if she would think it pathetic that he still carried that torch, warm and hidden and still somehow so vibrant. He'd carried it with him to his simple life, pushed it down far enough so he could honor Tony's advice with as much of his heart as he could spare, but those feelings had never died.
"Anyway," Natasha walked back to Steve and put a warm arm around his shoulders, "the bugs are too grossed out to come in. And if the Grandmaster does come, we jump on the bed and even he runs away without looking too closely."

"Public displays of affection make people uncomfortable. Even works on aliens, huh?"

"We'll imply that like all Avengers you're impossibly horny at all times and you'll be able to hang out with us in here too any time. You did learn what sex was in that alternate reality life, right?"

"Sex wasn't invented in the 21st century."

Natasha smirked. "Well, now a lot of people will think you're our little sex toy. That's gotta be a new experience. It's gonna be weird for me too, I don't think I've ever been accused of sleeping with a centenarian before."

"Technically I'm a supercentenarian. I didn't know the term before."

"I could have told you."

"You were too busy being dead." Steve meant it to be a joke, but it snapped out of him, sharper than he wanted it to be. He winced. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize." Natasha turned him around and put her hands on his shoulders, staring at him. "I know this is a lot. It's all right to be overwhelmed. This is overwhelming. It's been eight years for Tony and me and that's been weird enough. I can't imagine how much an extra seven decades on top of that would feel."

"Well, it's not like I was being forced to battle in an arena where one of the consequences is to be rebuilt by alien worms." Steve wrinkled his nose. "How many times—?"

"Enough," Natasha said. "It's been enough times." She glanced up at the wall, at one of those hourglasses that Steve had seen elsewhere in the facility, and reluctantly lowered her hands. "C'mon, we have to get to the main hall before curfew."

Steve nodded and swallowed back a thousand things he wanted to say in favor of just following her.

She paused by the panel, obviously readying to turn the horrendous noises off, and she didn't look backward at him when she asked, quietly, "Clint?"

Steve swallowed and looked at the familiar line of her back as she tensed up, terrified of what she was about to hear, but brave enough to ask it anyway. "He's fine. The Bartons are all fine."

The tension in her back relaxed a little. "The remnants of the cartels he took out during the Decimation—when they came back, they came after him. So we changed his name, hid his family—but they're fine. Living near the Avengers compound now, actually. Clint's been mentoring a replacement, Kate. She's amazing. A better archer than him, really."

"I don't find that difficult to believe," Natasha said, quickly pressing a switch and sliding the panel back into place. "Come on, Captain. Let's go get some sleep." She paused as she opened the door and turned to him. There were unshed tears prominently in her eyes that Steve refused to even think of calling her on, even if he had been willing to break the guidelines of talking outside of the safe spaces Tony had told him about.

Natasha and Tony both mentioned that she checked the new intake. Steve couldn't comprehend how it must have felt, watching every day, wondering who might turn up on that slab being put
back together by those worms. She was sure Clint would be here first, Tony said. Steve could imagine how that felt, checking every day, worried that your worst fear had been realized, that your best friend was dead— Pain means something different here, Natasha said. Steve had the dawning suspicion he was going to learn what she meant.

Natasha watched him carefully, almost scared. Maybe she was frightened that Steve had forgotten the need to act mindwashed. Or maybe she was nervous of what might be in Steve's head, that there may be other terrible news in there too.

"Yeah, let's go get some sleep," Steve echoed and Natasha let out a small breath and nodded. Steve felt like he'd passed some silent test. That was often the feeling he'd gotten from her at the beginning of their friendship. Maybe it would take some time to regain the equilibrium they'd had for so long, but Steve would never resent that. He was damn lucky to have the opportunity to even see her again. Every moment with her was going to feel like a gift.

Steve made sure to count the turns as Natasha led him through the hallways, reaffirming to himself that he hadn't lost his mental map in the mindwiping process. He hadn't. That was reassuring; as much as the Control Disc hid from you, it couldn't erase anything from you. And however the worming worked, a process Steve knew he might never understand, it somehow managed to keep your memories intact, something Steve hadn't worried about excessively. It wasn't like he'd had a lot of time to think his actions through, but he probably would have chosen to do it even if he hadn't been maniacally racing to stop Morgan from doing it first.

Natasha did show him a few of the more practical things that Pietro has missed out in his rapid-stop tour: she showed him how to recognize the symbol for where human-friendly toilets were if he needed to relieve himself; she pointed out a closet of clothes that was there for any of the Einherjar to use; she also showed him the marks on the wall which indicated there was a water fountain behind it if you pushed your hand against the indent. Steve understood Pietro's desire to rush Steve ahead, but he was glad she was there to fill in the more practical gaps. He was so glad and relieved that she'd had someone like Pietro here for her; that was the best part of having a team, having someone there at your back who made up for your flaws.

Natasha was always so good at being exactly what anyone needed. She was so effortlessly good at it that her death had been a constant aching absence. Steve couldn't count the number of times he'd turned to one side, expecting to see her knowing smirk. Every time his gaze had fallen on empty space, he'd remembered that empty space on the time platform all over again.

When they got to their main destination, the lights were already low; it took Steve a moment for his eyes to adjust. It looked like there were a lot more people in the room than before, all lying in separate heaps across the floor, although there was a dark figure leaning against the wall that Steve thought might have been the woman in the hood he saw earlier.

Natasha seemed to know where she was going, so he followed her carefully. There was a mild hum in the background that suddenly disappeared and Natasha turned to smile at him; he could just about see the faint curve of it in the low light.

"This is our spot," Natasha said. "Welcome to our glamorous bed-sand."

Steve looked down to see a faint Pietro-shaped lump lying down in the sand. Steve's vision was having trouble in the darkness, but he didn't need much detail at all to recognize Tony, standing near Pietro's feet, doing something complicated at his wrist. Steve wouldn't be surprised if it was tech of some sort.
"I've put up a sound suppression field," Tony said, confirming Steve's suspicions. "Feel free to talk for the moment."

"If you hear the hum of the main generator, then be quiet," Natasha advised. "It's the best sign we have that Tony's tech's had a hiccup." She bent down to undo her sandals. Steve quickly copied her, toeing his off and putting them aside.

"Excuse me, my tech doesn't hiccup," Tony's voice was indignant. "Sometimes it might suffer...performance issues due to unforeseen external incidents, but that's sabotage, not a hiccup."

"Yeah like your bootjets running out of power three minutes into a scavenger hunt against the Four Stooges," Natasha muttered.

"I thought setting it up for the whole night would be best, considering," Tony continued, like Natasha hadn't spoken at all. "It's not like your subconscious is going to remember you're supposed to be a mindless drone, and the Vishanti know we all, uh. Well. Night-talking is a thing, that's all."

"Vishanti? Isn't that—" Steve pulled a face, "—a Doctor Strange sort of thing?"

"Well that's sweet news, Cut-Price Dumbledore is still alive," Tony grumbled. "Ain't that a kick in the pants." Steve couldn't help his muted chuckle. "What's so funny, Cap?"

Steve tried to stop laughing. "That's what Morgan called him last week."

"That's my girl," Tony said, smugly.

"There's a lot of people here," Steve said, quietly.

"We'll try and introduce you to them over breakfast, or during training," Natasha said. "Best time, but for now—c'mon."

Steve wasn't quite sure what she was saying, so she sighed and did something complicated that he wasn't expecting, one of her patented wicked-fast take-downs. He hit the sand with a thump. He yelped and Pietro sniggered.

"We dogpile, big guy," Natasha bodily yanked Steve down and immediately curled her body around him, her arm dropping around his waist. "You're just gonna have to deal with it." That edict was spoken directly into Steve's neck, her voice soft and warm against his skin. "Stark, get across here too, or do I have to kick you in the ankle again?"

"Oh no, not the ankle," Tony said, and Steve saw movement in the dark, and then was surprised when a warm body lowered down close to him; behind him, Natasha huffed, and prodded at Steve's arm until he moved it tentatively over Tony's waist. Tony froze, for a moment, before grabbing onto Steve's arm and shifting in closer. Steve felt a weird ripple of emotion that he couldn't quite describe, but felt a little like happiness nonetheless. It wasn't pure joy, though; it was wrapped through with something else deeper, elegiac and mournful. Regret that he hadn't been able to do more, so none of them would even have to be in this position at all.

"It gets cold sometimes," Tony muttered quietly.

"I hate the cold," Steve said, trying to find something to say that sounded like a peace offering.

"Shocking revelation from the guy who lost seventy years sleeping in an iceberg," Natasha said. Steve felt a rush of something bubble up inside him. Was it glee? He hadn't been genuinely giddy about anything in so long he almost thought he'd forgotten how to feel it.
"Didn't you leave to get some solder, Tony?" Steve asked and instantly regretted it, hoping that the gleeful rush of emotion he felt at getting to casually say Tony's name again, and not feel immediately like he'd been doused in ice cold water, wasn't horribly obvious.

"I did. I put an order in. Surprisingly they don't keep a lot of stuff like that around here. There's a weekly delivery of materials. I'll get it then." Tony's voice was threaded with frustration. Steve understood. He'd gotten used to the pace of 21st century living; going back to the forties had almost been as bad a culture shock as it had in the reverse direction, even if Steve had a headstart on the earlier era. "You should have fought me harder in the arena."

Tony's tone was low, rapid; he was genuinely angry about it.

"I was... scared I would hurt you," Steve admitted.

"It's too dark for you to see me but my expression is deeply skeptical right now."

"Well, I—it's not like it's the first time we've fought against each other," Steve said, awkwardly.

"Yeah, but I was holding back—" Tony started and then froze. He continued in a lower whisper. "Please do not tell me you thought I was fighting you and your pal at full force all the way back then."

"Well. No. But at the end, maybe—"

Tony was almost vibrating in Steve's arms, a tense ball of sudden rage. "I was pissed off, I wouldn't have—oh god, this is precisely why I was so—You're a fucking menace, Rogers. I'm the one who was supposed to think too much of myself—Earth's number one nuclear deterrent, hello? If I'd wanted to kill either of you, believe me, you'd still be there. Paste on the fucking floor of that place. Honestly."

"Boys, can you...not do this right now," Natasha said. "Steve, Tony's right. I could have told you he was fighting you in Siberia at half-power, maximum. Tony, Steve had no way to know you'd have been fine if he killed you, so cut him some slack. Both of you, go the fuck to sleep."

"Yes, ma'am," Tony muttered.

Actually falling asleep took a while, because every time Steve drifted close to the edge, Natasha or Tony would make a small inhale, or a tiny shift in movement, and he was lost again in a spin of emotions. This honestly felt like a dream.

He must have fallen asleep at some point, though, because he was woken up by Natasha roughly shaking him by the shoulder.

"Up and at 'em, Captain," Natasha said.

Steve blinked and tried to copy everyone around him as all the people in the room also got to their feet, sleepily pulling footwear back on. There were some familiar faces that Steve almost got hooked on, so many he realized he knew. The woman in the hood was still a mystery, but Loki was there, and was the old man he was helping up Odin? Pietro had mentioned the Einherjar were led by their King Odin. Steve's heart ached. He wished Thor could be here to see that, but then, the idea of Thor dying too made him feel nauseated.

Thor had been a rare sight on Earth of late, dealing primarily with the Cosmic branch of the Avengers. Steve had escaped into an alternate past, but he wasn't the only original Avenger who
found a Tony and Natasha-free world unbearable. As much as he missed Thor's warm and welcoming nature, and his bright humor, Steve didn't blame Thor for not coming back to the Compound more frequently.

There were more people that he recognized, too. Four of the other five men gathered around Odin looked familiar: three of them had photos in the SHIELD dossier covering Thor's first adventure on Earth—Volstagg, Hogun and Fandral, if Steve's memory is correct; one of them was unfamiliar, a dark-haired man who looked a little shifty; but the fifth one Steve was more than familiar with, even if this version of Heimdall might not be—the Watchman had been the first person Steve had encountered on his mission to return the Reality Stone. Heimdall had been very physically intimidating, until his golden eyes caught on Mjolnir in Steve's grip, and he let Steve continue with his mission. Being worthy of the power of Thor was apparently very convincing in Asgard.

Other figures were present who weren't familiar—a blue-skinned man with a rectangular opening in his head, who seemed to have a small entourage of people of his own; a green-skinned woman who looked deceptively strong who lingered alone, arms crossed over her midriff. It wasn't only humanoid people in the room, either—Steve was positive that he'd met the creature that looked like a tree in the very corner of the room before. Or at least, maybe a younger relative.

Steve pressed his mouth into a line. Tony leaned in close as he straightened up and Steve nearly flinched, but managed to hold it in.

"Stay looking as blank as you can," Tony muttered, unaware that he was doing the most damage to Steve's calm. Tony kept his face ducked; behind them, several armed bugs were hovering in the doorway, weapons clenched in their claws. There was silence, meaning Tony's suppression field was still working, but obviously it would look suspicious if the bugs saw their mouths moving too much and heard nothing.

"And copy what the others do," Natasha added. Her gaze looked a little worried but her mouth quirked a tiny bit. "You can do this, Captain. Try not to react to anything. No matter what you see."

"Game faces, Avengers. Turning the field off now," Tony whispered.

Steve bit his tongue, needing the sharp tang to anchor him, and immediately the faint hum he'd heard last night filled the air again. Generator, Natasha had said. That made sense. As rustic and low-tech as some parts of this place seemed, there had to be a lot of technology behind it, otherwise Tony and Natasha would have broken out before now.

"Time for showersssss," one of the bugs announced.

"What about breakfast?" Pietro hollered.

The bug eyeballed him with four pairs of eyes at once. "Mild problemsss with ovensss. Back to normal tomorrow. Breakfasst after shower. It won't kill you." The bug’s tone made it clear that it was personally disappointed by this fact.

Steve glanced at Tony, whose face was blank, so Steve copied that, and carefully followed Tony out of the room. Steve recalled a room that looked like a communal bathroom and they seemed to be headed that way, until the group paused and one of the bugs stepped to one side, waving three of its arms to get their attention.

"Peoplesss who keepsss their genitalsss sssafely inssside themsssselvesss, with me," that bug said. Natasha slipped past Steve, sparing him a small shrug as she moved off with the green-skinned woman, the figure in the cloak, and two of the blue-skinned man's entourage in tow; the giant
skulking tree tried to also follow them, joining the back of the queue.

"Not you, tree," one of the bugs said, swiping its trident at the tree's arm. "I've sssseen you with your pollenssss, you're a ssssprayer."

"I am Groot," the tree sniped, and sadly loped back to stand near Loki, who didn't look too impressed at having to stand so close to him.

Steve's stomach tightened sadly. That's what the tree on the battlefield at Wakanda called itself. Steve guessed it must be the same tree after all. Keeping his head down, Steve followed the others into the room which he'd seen earlier and guessed as a communal shower.

Pietro blurred through the room ahead of everyone and suddenly all the showers turned on at once. He leaned against the wall and beamed at the bugs. "Too slow."


Right, so privacy really wasn't a thing here. Awesome. He supposed it could be worse. There could be cameras, broadcasting this to the world. Then he grimaced internally, because what if there were? Now Steve had experienced more than a few forced hours of reality television, he could picture it, and it wasn't a cheerful thought. Steve dutifully pushed that aside and did his best to keep his head down and copy everyone else. He was grateful when everyone else turned their heads away when the blue-skinned guy started openly masturbating under the spray.

Over in the corner, Odin's entourage formed a barrier around him while their king showered. It was somewhat sweet. Or maybe, as Steve glimpsed an accidental eyeful of what Odin was packing, maybe it was in consideration for the self-esteem of everyone else in the showers; goodness knew a big dick could accidentally cause weird egotistical conflict in a small group of men. The Howling Commandos had not been impressed by what the serum had done to Steve's dick; he hadn't the heart to admit to them it wasn't entirely the serum to blame. Odin's dick was in a league of its own, though, it really did look big enough to put someone's eye out. Steve suppressed a smirk; suddenly Odin's eye patch was a lot funnier to contemplate. And would he ever be able to look Fury in the eye again without laughing?

After realizing where his thoughts were headed, Steve tried to focus on what he was doing, especially because, well, Tony was really close. Steve could see him out of the corner of his eye, a blur of movement, and if Steve wasn't careful, he'd get more than that blurred glimpse, and this was a communal area. He wasn't as brazen as the blue-skinned guy who was—was that one of the other guys, down on their knees in front of him?

Steve tried not to make the noise his brain wanted him to make—of deep, deep unimpressed agony. The guy was an alien. Clearly they had a different idea of societal boundaries. But weren't the bugs supposed to be dismayed by the mere concept of sex? Steve risked a look at the doorway. Well, the bugs had all resolutely turned their backs. Hm. That was a strategically good thing to know, actually. He smirked, thinking of having to give the command to someone to have sex during battle as a distraction tool. Drop your socks and grab your cocks, we have alien bugs to make aggressively look in the other direction.

He was hungry; that was probably half the problem. Steve was glad when the water shut off, probably some automatic timer, and he could join everyone else shuffling for towels and clothes. Steve kept his eyes as averted as he could, although when he slid on a pair of undergarments, he did get the briefest glance of Tony's naked ass and, honestly, it was almost worth the instant flash of shame Steve felt for enjoying the view.
Steve tried to be instantly indignant, because it wasn't like Tony hadn't ever openly checked out Steve's rear, so really, an accidental look was only fair. Except Tony was obviously joking when he mentioned it to Steve during their time heist, the same manner of comedic banter he used around Rhodey, it hadn't actually had any real measure of actual flirting in it. Rhodey. Steve's heartbeat sped up a little in anticipation. Rhodey was going to be so thrilled Tony was alive. He imagined being able to be the one to tell him Tony was alive and it was such a nice daydream that Steve was dry, dressed and following the others out into the hallway before he realized how easily he'd slipped into mindlessly copying the flow.

That was probably a good thing. Steve was thinking too many steps ahead. It was hard not to picture incredible things when it felt like the impossible had already happened. Steve's entire life had felt like a series of increasingly improbable events.

"This is the dining hall," Pietro said. Steve still wasn't quite used to the way Pietro just suddenly appeared. The others didn't seem perturbed by it either; Pietro was allowed to zoom around, they hadn't shackled him even though there was obviously some advanced technology around with the holograms and the forcefields and the Control Discs. It meant either they trusted Pietro, or the security here was so good even a speedster couldn't easily escape it. Steve hoped for the former, although it was more than likely the latter.

Steve shook himself out of his thoughts and nearly wished he hadn't, because the dining hall wasn't what he expected. Well, it was the room he'd passed before with long trestle tables and benches, but today he could see there was a shimmering translucent blue forcefield bisecting the room. Natasha was already sitting at one of the tables, with some of the other "internal genital" Einherjar (well, there were worse ways to categorize people, surely?) scattered around the tables on this side of the forcefield, but over on the other side, their matching tables were already full.

Steve's mouth felt a little dry and he let Pietro prod him to the table Natasha was sitting at. People seemed to know where their seats were, even though Steve couldn't see anything to imply assigned seating. Steve sat down next to Natasha and she smiled at him as Pietro sat alongside her. Tony casually slid down opposite Steve, but he didn't look in Steve's direction; instead, Tony's gaze moved down their table to where Odin was sitting at the head. Something unspoken seemed to pass between them.

"There's a lot of, uh, Einherjar here," Steve said, slowly.

"Don't worry, we'll introduce you to the ones that matter, Captain," Pietro said. "Yeah, that doesn't include you, Loki."

It might have been Steve's imagination but Loki, sat on a different table, did seem to flinch a little at that. Noticing the direction of his gaze, Natasha gripped Steve's wrist tightly, probably as a reminder not to blurt out anything weird in public areas; Steve's memory probably shouldn't be clear enough to remember Loki. Steve couldn't fault him, really; this whole experience was weird and uncomfortable. But also amazing, because people who were dead were alive here. Steve would take weird and uncomfortable as a price for that any day of the week.

"Seeing as it's your first day, I'll get us some food," Natasha said, leaning in and pecking Steve on the cheek. He nearly startled at the touch but remained still. Her words from the previous day floated back and his cheeks heated. She had told him people would assume Steve was their little sex toy; he hadn't anticipated that she would start laying the groundwork for it so soon and he felt dumb for that. Natasha was excellent at everything she did. Despite the horrors of their situation, he was almost looking forward to seeing her fight again.

His eyes lingered over to the other side of the hall. There were definitely some familiar faces.
When he recognized one face in particular, he nearly swore out loud. Brock Rumlow. Brock Fucking Rumlow? Maybe Steve wasn't dead. Maybe he was drooling in the cushioned padded corner of a secure facility somewhere. This felt like Steve thought true insanity might.

Tony cleared his throat loudly and Steve reluctantly looked back at him. "Careful, Captain. Some of Hela's people don't like to be stared at."

"Hela?" Steve questioned. The name was familiar, but the details took him a moment to recall. "Odin's daughter?"

"She leads the Tenebrae, over in Fólkvangr," Pietro said.

"Also known as the boring half of this place," Tony smirked. "We're the fun half, obviously." His dark eyes glanced at something over Steve's shoulders and his smirk widened as he twisted something casually at his wrist. Immediately the hum of the room seemed to fade away. "Okay, the bugs aren't paying much attention. We're good to talk."

"My thanks, Stark," Odin called down the table, smiling ambiguously before leaning his head closer to Heimdall and starting to whisper furiously.

"Everyone on this table has their memories," Tony explained. He tried to look casual, like he was discussing the weather. Steve had already figured out that was how this suppression field worked; it masked the sound but not what they all looked like.

"This isn't exactly what I was expecting," Steve said, trying not to make it too obvious he was still staring through the forcefield at the so-called Tenebrae.

"As far as we can tell, most of us were brought from dates post-2010. I suppose most of your foes died a little before then; some of us had enemies that didn't hit their zenith in the Dark Ages." Tony tried to smirk, but as he twisted back to cast an eye over the Tenebrae's side of the hall, his worried glance hit a couple of figures Steve recognized from Avengers files.

Steve could easily recognize a couple of the foes already that Tony was referring to, people who had been a thorn in Iron Man's superhero career. Down at the far end of the biggest table was Ivan Vanko, a man who had battled Tony with electronic whips, who blamed Tony's father for his own sad life. Beside him was Aldrich Killian, the guy who founded AIM and who stole the Mandarin's image and name for his own nefarious purposes. The real Mandarin had been even more of a pain in the butt than Killian had been; Shang-Chi had insisted he'd defeated him, but the fact that Steve couldn't see him was worrying. If the Grandmaster was collecting strong enemies, why weren't they all here?

"You were expecting the Red Skull to be here, huh?" Natasha asked, sitting next to him and putting down four plates. All of them looked like they were heaped high with the same meat Steve had eaten after waking from his worm experiences.

"He's still on Vormir as far as I can tell," Steve said, and then he frowned, because what was the etiquette in a situation like this one? How soon after death could you talk to someone about the location of their demise? Natasha didn't look upset, so he carried on. "But that was a while ago, he was there when I went to drop off the Soul Stone and find your body, but...that wasn't there."

"Well," Natasha winked at him and passed him one of the plates of meat, "I am busy using it."

Steve wanted to grin but didn't know if it would fit in with the blank mindwashed persona he was supposed to using in sight of the bug guards. He settled for a small quirk of his lips, because
Natasha was observant enough to see that and understand.

He settled on changing the subject, lest the threatening grin break through regardless. "What is this meat, or do I not want to know?"

"You probably don't want to know," Pietro said.

"Long or short version," Natasha said.

Steve picked up a piece of the meat and stared at it. "Both."

"Short story, it's pork," Natasha said. "Long horrid story, it's an absolutely massive boar named Sæhrímnir that as far as I can tell gets killed every night, butchered so we can eat it, and then wormed so it can go through it all again every morning."

"I'm sorry I asked," Steve said. "And it's—"

"It's pretty much the only thing there is to eat around here," Tony said, already chewing on a large chunk of it.

"There's also a weird berry drink at the evening meal, kind of tastes like strawberries, anyway," Pietro offered. "But any other missing nutrients, well—you probably won't live long enough to die of a lack of 'em, believe me."

Steve pulled a face but ate the meat, because honestly, he'd probably eaten worse. "Well," he said, "it's better than Pepper's meatloaf, I guess."

"Ugh, she still makes that?" Tony pulled a face. "Escaping that was the only benefit of dying, I'm pretty sure."

"There's been a few things you missed that in hindsight you could consider a blessing," Steve said, because if he didn't think of something else, he was going to fixate on the idea of a boar being revived only to be slaughtered each and every day, and he was going to be sick, and he needed to eat so he could be ready for anything this place could throw at him. "If you think reality television was bad before. And the thirteenth Sharknado movie—wow."

"Thirteenth?" Natasha asked in an appalled voice.

"Sharknado?" Pietro asked at the same time.

"It would take too long to explain, unfortunately," Steve said. "Maybe another time."

"Perhaps never," Tony suggested; when Steve glanced at him, Tony was suppressing a smile of his own.

"When we get out of this place, maybe you can tell us a better long story," Natasha suggested. "Like the full story of returning the stones. I bet you had a few adventures there."

"Thor's mom was an experience all on her own," Steve said. "But yeah, when we get out of here, definitely."

"Which won't be today. Head's up, incoming," Tony sighed. "Field's going down," he added, in a louder voice, and the conversations going on between the others sharing their table didn't stop, it just suddenly went whispery quiet; Tony fidgeted at his waist and noise flooded in from outside.

"We get envelopes in the morning, if we're going to get them, Captain," Pietro muttered.
Steve nodded at him and tried to eat some more of the meat; he regretted asking about the food's origin.

A moment later Steve saw heads turn to the doorway. Steve schooled his face as blank as possible before turning to look too. He was glad he'd made the extra effort because it was the Grandmaster's muscly unimpressed assistant. She had a pile of envelopes in her hands and she strode forward.

She stopped by a table where the cloaked woman sat. "Guillotine, you're warm-up today."

The cloaked woman—Guillotine?—nodded and took the envelope offered to her. Steve watched as Topaz strode past their table and threw an envelope down in Loki's plate of half-eaten food.

"Devil hydrasaur for you, Frosty," Topaz sniffed, without even looking at him. Steve had to clench his jaw to hide his smile, because there was something definitely amusing about the fact that Loki was universally annoying to everyone.

"Anything for me, sweetheart?" The blue-skinned man drawled as she passed him.

Topaz eyeballed him disinterestedly, but then handed him four envelopes. "You can pick whichever of your goons you want with you, Yondu. Or you can have Gamora, your choice."

The blue-skinned man—Yondu—leered over at the green-skinned woman who looked especially angry. "How about it, Princess?"

"How about you fall on my sword asshole first next time I'm anywhere near you and I have my blade?" The green-skinned woman—presumably Gamora—suggested.

"I'll take three of my buddies," Yondu grinned up at Topaz.

"Whatever," Topaz rolled her eyes. "Here, these are for you." She turned and dropped four envelopes in Tony's outstretched hands; Steve didn't know how Tony anticipated they would be getting a match, but it wasn't weird to see him anticipating what was coming before it happened. "Silver, stylist wants to see you when you're done eating." Pietro nodded. Topaz hesitated and glared at Tony. "Try not to let this one die so quickly this time," she said brusquely, pointing at Steve before striding off.

"Always warms my cockles to see that lady," Yondu said.

"No one wants to think about your cockles," Gamora called over.

"We always get forced to, regardless," Pietro said and got to his feet.

"She said when you were done eating," Natasha said.

Pietro grimaced, blurred, and then grinned widely at her; his plate was suddenly empty and his mouth was crammed with meat. "See ya," he said and left.

Steve looked up at Tony who had already opened one of the envelopes; at his glance, Tony sighed and passed two of them over. Steve took them, passed Natasha one, and opened his own.

"Match: SPLIT SUNS. AVENGERS (THE IRON MAN; THE CAPTAIN; THE BLACK WIDOW; QUICKSILVER) versus RONAN THE ACCUSER; YON-ROGG; ELLEN BRANDT; CROSSBONES. 4X4 Battle to the DEATH; VICTORIOUS TEAM WILL BE SPARED."

It was difficult to read the block letters at first, which might have been panic at seeing *Death* again
on a piece of paper that also included the words *Iron Man*. When Steve managed to read it, his gaze almost automatically went to the force-field and the figures moving around beyond it.

Crossbones. Was that Brock Rumlow? He moved his gaze back down to the envelope, before carefully placing it on the table and putting his focus back on the food. Gross origin or not, if he was fighting, he needed to eat.

Steve thought they would go straight to the room, but Natasha took him on a quick detour to show him where the outside gymnasium is and the main training room, while Tony went ahead muttering about needing to work on his armor.

It meant without Tony there, Steve couldn't talk to her the way he wants to, but maybe that was part of the design. He wasn't the only person overwhelmed by the whole situation. It must be somewhat disconcerting to have Steve there after years without him.

Steve wondered what would have happened if he hadn't returned to the prime timeline. If he'd died where he was, never knowing Tony and Natasha were alive. Would the Avengers have been able to stop Morgan from reaching the nanotech injection? Would it be Bucky or Rhodey here instead?

Both the training room and outside gymnasium had plenty of reinforced obstacles and space to run and spar; the outside gymnasium was surrounded by very high walls and a shimmering dome which was probably another forcefield. Steve couldn't imagine that Tony and Natasha had ignored finding any weaknesses in any of the shared places, so he tried not to let his gaze linger on the forcefield or the bright colorful sky above, the two suns split far apart for the moment. Natasha tagged him into a race, speeding off around a track that looped around a large outside track, and Steve gave chase.

"This is so much better than sprinting with Quicksilver," Natasha said, slowing after ten circuits. Steve slowed with her, putting his hands on his knees, pretending to pant a little so that he could look around.

Odin wasn't out here, but the Warriors Three were—Fandral, Hogun, and Volstagg.

"Ho, Widow," Fandral called out, on spotting them. "Care to spar for a round or three?"

Natasha straightened and pursed her lips. "Sure. Want me to tie one hand behind my back?" She winked at Steve, patted him on the shoulder and strode over to one of three circles laid down in the sand which seemed to be made of some bouncy white surface material that Steve couldn't identify by sight; she and Fandral both kicked off their sandals, stepped into the circle, bowed, and immediately started fighting.

This looked like a practised routine. After Natasha promptly put Fandral on his back three times in a minute, Fandral gestured and Hogun jumped into the circle to fight with him, which made Natasha grin. Apparently that made it a fairer fight; a fierce pride warmed Steve's chest as he watched her fight. He'd missed the way Natasha fought. She was a violent ballet, turning frightening competence and speed into an art form that made it hard to look away from.

"So you're the Captain," a voice boomed out and Steve managed to tear his gaze away from where Natasha had somehow made Fandral and Hogun slap each other in the face; she bounced away from them with a small laugh. At his side was the stockier of the three Warriors. "I'm Volstagg."

"Hello," Steve said, cautiously. Tony had said all at their breakfast table had their memories, but there were several bugs standing watchfully at the archway of the outside space, and there was no
"Your Avenger friend battles well," Volstagg said. "I almost wish I'd had a smaller breakfast. Alas, that boar is compelling."

"You have no match today," Steve said, his gaze sliding back to Natasha. He jolted when she got kicked in the abdomen but Natasha bounced back immediately to her feet. Years ago she would have yelled at him for trying to come to her aid when she didn't need it. He couldn't imagine she'd changed that much in their time apart.

"Exactly why I ate more, my friend," Volstagg thumped Steve on the back companionably.

Steve side-eyed him. "Friend?"

"Of course! You battled with my prince Thor. He spoke often of you, before my death. I'm glad to get the chance to fight alongside you." Volstagg beamed, his thick braided beard and large mustache twitching into a smile Steve had to fight hard not to copy. It was easier to pretend to be mindwashed if he pretended his emotions were muted too.

"We'll get to fight together?"

"Why of course," Volstagg slapped Steve again. "We get random team-ups all the time. Then there's the Battle Royales, I suppose we usually fight alongside each other for most of them. And, ah, I'd count the Melee too, I suppose, for as long as that lasts, anyway."

Battle Royale didn't sound all that fun, but Steve was more intrigued by the expression on Volstagg's face when he said Melee. "What do you mean by that?" Steve asked.

Volstagg looked at Steve. His warm infectious smile was gone. "That's when the Einherjar and Tenebrae join as warriors-in-arms against the Champion of Death."

It was warm outside, the forcefield doming over them doing nothing to quell the heat of the double suns; still, something in Volstagg's face and tone made Steve feel cold, a chill running down his spine.

_Champion of Death._ Pietro had mentioned him before. The Grandmaster had also mentioned a Champion too, with a mellifluous voice. Pietro's description had been less pleasing to hear. _We don't talk about him. We just hope like hell he doesn't show up in our morning envelopes._

"Who is the Champion of Death?" Steve asked.

Volstagg glanced over Steve's shoulder and beamed again, although this time it was not as inviting. "Well, one of us, hopefully. The one to topple the current holder gets the title! Hello, young Quicksilver!"

Steve started to see Pietro standing there, hands folded over his chest, his foot tapping impatiently. Volstagg quailed. Steve frowned as much as he dared, suspicion making him feel slightly nauseated again.

"The Stylist sent me to let you know he wants to see you again," Pietro said, nodding at Steve. "You need me to remind you of the way, Captain?"

Steve pulled a face. The worms had made the back of his hair grow out again, he should have expected it. Pietro's hair looked shorter and brighter. Hopefully hair was the only thing the Stylist touched after all. "I think I can find my way back there."
"I'll meet you in Iron Man's workshop after," Pietro said.

"Yeah," Steve said, trying to put weight on the single syllable. There was a mystery here regarding this Champion and Steve was determined to find out what was going on, no matter how long it took. He got the feeling it might take a while.

"Steve's back," Natasha said in a sing-song, as Steve came into the workshop. Only Tony and Natasha were in there. Pietro must be elsewhere. Steve was glad. Maybe he'd have a good opening to ask about the Champion of Death Pietro was clearly too nervous to talk about. "I was wrong, his hair isn't blue."

"How'd it go, Cap?" Tony asked, barely sparing Steve a glance as he returned to doing something to a detached red-and-gold Iron Man gauntlet with his equipment. "Please tell me he tripped and landed on that rusty chainsaw of his."

Natasha leaned forward and Steve ambled closer to her, awkwardly. "Tony hates the Stylist."

Tony huffed as he hit something with a hammer. "Hate is a strong word for ol' Heff."

"He also thinks the Stylist looks like Hugh Heffner," Natasha said. "He was a—"

"I know who Hugh Heffner was," Steve interrupted. He even got to visit the Playboy mansion in the 60s in his timeline, before it was purchased by Playboy (some events seemed to be universal no matter how many changes you made to the timeline), but he didn't think it was the right time or place to mention that. He also got to meet that timeline's Hugh Heffner a couple of times and Tony had a point.

"Tell me Heff at least cut himself on your jawline or something," Tony said.

Steve glared at him and rubbed ruefully at the back of his head; the shave there wasn't the closest one he'd had, but it was more the manner of delivery that had been disturbing. "He didn't do much, but, he, uh, said I needed to stay alive long enough to grow a beard?"

"I feel like that proves my point," Tony rubbed his own beard with a thumb.

"Actually, Steve looked pretty good with a beard," Natasha had an almost wicked smirk on her face as she hopped off the table she was sitting on. She walked up to Steve, looking at him like she was pretending to appraise his appearance.

"Facial hair? On him? As a good look?" Tony looked deeply skeptical.

"We called it his depression beard," Natasha circled Steve, resting her hands lightly on his shoulders. "Back when you were busy getting a moon dropped on your head and trying to starve to death in space. He shaved it off the second he heard you were alive, too." Natasha leaned in and briefly pecked Steve on his cheek, before grinning mischievously and darting off.

"That was a coincidence," Steve protested half-heartedly. When he glanced back at Tony to share a oh Natasha and her wacky wackiness glance of commiseration with him, Tony was looking speculatively in his direction. Tony's gaze rapidly flickered back down to the gauntlet in his hands and Steve shuffled, suddenly feeling awkward. His cheeks felt warmer than they should too.

"Listen, there was something I wanted to ask, something Volstagg asked about this morning."

"Oh, you met one of Thor's cheery pals, huh?" Tony smirked. "You should watch your food around that one."
"He doesn't steal it from you," Natasha explained, sitting on the edge of the bed and swinging her legs. "He just looks at you with those sad eyes until you share yours with him."

"I'll keep it in mind," Steve said. "He, uh. He mentioned something about a Champion of Death, and—"

"Nothing to worry about yet," Tony said, smashing down suddenly at the gauntlet he was working on. "Better to focus on the battle we've got today."

"If there's something going on I need to be aware of—" Steve started, but Tony cut over the top.

"Ah, Gonzalez, tell me you bring good news," Tony interrupted, still staring down at the gauntlet.

Steve frowned, until he realized Pietro was suddenly now in the room, leaning against the door jamb, his long legs crossed idly.

"It's a reference, Captain. Old cartoon. Speedy Gonzalez," Pietro explained the reference a second later from right next to Steve, even though he'd been standing a good twenty-foot away. Steve had not had enough time to adjust to his speed all those years ago, too busy focusing on Ultron's chaotic plans; it would take him a while to get used to it now. If they weren't rescued quickly, that was. "He was a cartoon mouse. You were busy being an ice cube in the fifties, right?"

"The first time around, yeah," Steve said. He probably shouldn't be so pleased that Pietro looked so confused.

"We'll talk later," Natasha said, creasing an expression at him that looked regretful; she did glance over to Pietro like maybe it was a bad conversation topic for the speedster.

"Alas, I do not bring good tidings," Pietro thumbed at Steve. "Costumer wants to see him too. Something about some asshole in gold and red ripping his stitching."

"Whoops," Tony lifted up the gauntlet he was working on in Pietro's direction, the red rear of the glove facing outward; he flipped down four of the gold fingers in one easy gesture so only the middle finger remained. "Loose joints. I should work on that."

Pietro rolled his eyes but looked amused. "It's two turns before battle, so you can go alone if you like. Or do you need a guide, Cap?"

"I think I remember the way," Steve said. He spared Natasha a we are definitely talking about this later glance as he turned and left the room. Her wince was probably louder than she intended it to be.

The Costumer sniffed as soon as Steve stepped through the doorway; Steve barely caught it in time and looked down at the red and white stripes in confusion for a moment before he realized he was holding his uniform. "I didn't have time to finish your new gear yet, but I was able to patch your last one up. Try not to get it so beat up this time."

"Sorry, I was too busy dying," Steve said, frowning at the twelve-eyed, eight-armed bug furiously working at multiple sewing machines at once.

Four of the Costumer's eyes swiveled his way. Steve fidgeted. Maybe someone under control of the weird metal disc wouldn't say something like that. "Yes, well, I suppose you'll probably do that again today, so I'll give you a little extra in the seams. I'll send for you for a final fitting."
Steve nodded. Pretending to be docile was tough when his brain was already calculating how to fight a creature as big as the Costumer. He could see how fast it was cutting items with its lower arms. He wondered how much brainpower it took to move four sets of arms at once, especially all working on different complicated pieces of clothing.

"That was shoo, begone in case you didn't understand," the Costumer sighed. "I know how slow you pink ones can be."

"Uh, of course," Steve said.

"For the Vishanti's sake, change in here before you go out into the main hallways," the Costumer sniped. "I can't have the Grandmaster seeing you wandering around a turn before gates-up in your skivvies."

Steve wondered what about the brown tunic and pants he was given to wear counted as skivvies, but even after years of reading the reports from the cosmic branch of the Avengers as they dealt with wackier and wilder foes, aliens were still kind of new to him. He could only hope not all of the Costumer's twelve eyes were watching him as he quickly pulled his uniform on.

He stopped by the Armory where Pip gave him his shield again; when Steve asked Pip for a recommendation for a second weapon, Pip nearly cried before he gave Steve a short sword that slipped quite neatly into Steve's shield harness.

Partway through Steve expressing his gratitude, Pip yelped; Steve turned to see Tony standing in the doorway, wearing the Iron Man armor that Steve was rapidly becoming familiar with. He was wearing it like he had at the end of their short battle; retracted so that he was showing plenty of skin. Steve's eyes drifted involuntarily to the expanse of golden thigh on display and he forced himself to look up and look blank.

If Tony saw that brief lapse in Steve's judgment, he didn't call him on it, merely pointed one golden thumb behind him. "C'mon, Captain. Chop chop. We have a battle to get to."

Tony was silent as they trooped along the hallways. Steve wanted to say something, but there was an increased number of bug guards around patrolling, so Steve kept quiet. Tony was the expert in this arena. Steve laughed to himself at his mental choice of phrasing, though it might have been funnier if it was less true.

There was so much he wanted to say to Tony. There was so much he couldn't say, both because the public areas of this place were out of bounds, but also there was so much Steve couldn't find the words for. And Tony should have been easy to talk to. When Natasha had first tried to entreat Steve to date someone, he'd fended her off with a dismissal about how it was kind of hard to find someone with shared life experience. Steve hadn't realized he already had found someone until it was too late, but was that true now?

Steve found himself almost quietly glad they were headed to a fight. A good physical workout could be exactly what he needed.

The hallways of this place were starting to become familiar and Steve remained stony-faced as Tony led him to the end of this trail.

"Got him," Tony announced loudly as he led Steve past the two bugs into the Cold Room. Steve still wasn't sure why it was called that.

"Aw, I thought he was going to the Costumer," Natasha complained, catching sight of Steve in his
usual red, white and blue uniform.

Steve shrugged at her, mostly stunned speechless by what she was wearing. It was the first time Steve had seen Natasha's arena outfit in detail. The brief glimpse he'd seen on the monitor of the arena footage hadn't done it justice. It was frankly terrible if it was designed to keep her alive, but that wasn't exactly the vibe Steve got from this place. Why try and keep your fighters alive if you could revive them at will?

Natasha still wore all-black, which he knew was her preferred color, at least. A black leather low-cut crop top was joined to a black skirt, if you could call it a skirt; it was closer to two flaps joined together with a thin connecting strip of leather at the top of her thighs. There was an hourglass cut out of the top at her midriff, an entirely impractical hole that basically begged _stab here._ The top was connected to the skirt by eight thin twists of tightly braided leather to make the top half of her body resemble a spider. Large amounts of her skin were visible because of the extreme lack of actual outfit. She was bulkier than she had been and her skin was more tanned than he remembered. Her hair was all red again, scraped back into a tight French braid that looped around her scalp, no hair loose that could be grabbed. Steve couldn't believe the outfit had been her choice, but at least her hairstyle gave the impression that she'd had her say a little.

Around her wrist were two black bands stamped with red hourglasses; Steve could make out _Romanov_ printed on the bottom of one of them in neat gold capital letters. He thought back with a pang to the navy version of his uniform that Tony made him for him when he was on stealth missions for SHIELD. It was comfortable and Tony had also neatly stitched a tab saying _Rogers_ onto each shoulder, which had been such a nice touch; Steve hadn't been sure Tony had seen past _Captain America_ to the man beneath until he'd noticed that small detail. Tony always made everything for the Avengers with such care; Steve hadn't shown his appreciation for it as much as he should have, always wrapped up in his own thoughts than he should have been. He had the chance to make amends for that now. Steve refused to waste this opportunity. Later, after the battle. He'd make it up to Tony. If they survived.

Tony's Iron Man armor was the same one he was wearing when he killed Steve, the same he'd been wearing in the last video of the footage Carol had found. More gold than red, probably at the Grandmaster's urging; he seemed to like gold. Now Steve could look in peace without scrambling for his life he could admire the detail and artistry in Tony's armor. This armor was designed to be as showy as it was practical. Tony glanced out at the forcefield and collapsed the armor back into its more minimal form and Steve tried not to openly stare at his thighs. Natasha shot him a knowing glance and Steve rolled his eyes at her.

Tony's arena armor was bulkier than the last armor Steve had seen him in on that last awful battlefield, and that was good, Steve didn't want to be reminded of that day any more than necessary. Sometimes Steve still woke up in horror when he remembered that Tony had built that specific set of armor to die in. He'd manufactured it knowing it could be his coffin. Steve felt queasy and had to forcibly push that thought aside.

The fourth figure in the room was a blur over in the corner that resolved on slowing down into Pietro. When Pietro stilled and looked over in his direction, Steve was at least pleasantly surprised to note that Natasha's uniform wasn't the only one favoring aesthetics over reasonable protection. He wore black leather shorts that were possibly even more revealing than Natasha's, and his upper body was bare but for a painted silver lightning bolt. His feet were clad in a simple pair of mid-calf-length black boots. Steve briefly wondered what animal the leather was made out of and then decided he didn't want to know. He also wondered what he would be made to wear once the Costumer was finished. It was probably going to be something both impractical and humiliating.
Steve pulled out the sword, trying to figure out its balance, swinging it a little; when he raised it up to try a two-handed swing down, Natasha was instantly there, blocking it with her wristbands.

"Nice," she complimented. Steve nodded at her. The two bugs at the doorway didn't seem that interested in them, which seemed to be what Tony was waiting for too.

"Avengers, let's check out the field," Tony said. The bugs didn't even visibly react and Steve joined the others in standing near the bars that led out into the arena.

To Steve's surprise, the arena looked almost iced over, covered in snow rather than sand. He frowned and tilted his head, trying to figure out what was going on.

"Loki," Natasha said, nodding at the blur of movement that was only slightly visible from the narrow segment of arena they could see. "His more annoying powers have been limited somehow, but it turns out Thor wasn't kidding about him being adopted; if you thought he was irritating before, you should see his Frost Giant powers in action. Try not to let him hit you with them face-on if we fight him any time soon, unless you enjoyed your last time as a giant ice cube."

"Will that happen often? Fighting another Einherjar?" Steve asked, recoiling a little as he saw what Loki was fighting, some sort of dinosaur? Maybe it was an alien? Ka-Zar had a lot of dinosaurs in his hidden Savage Lands, maybe it was one of them? He also vaguely remembered Peter Parker writing something about a scientist turning people into dinosaurs in one of his reports.

"Now and again," Tony said. "Okay, field's active. Plan fast; battle looks like it's going south for Barney." At Steve's confused glance, Tony shrugged. "I had a kid. Some of my cultural references got a little less high-brow while you were gone."

Steve swallowed back his impulse to say something to that, because what he wanted to say...well. Maybe it wasn't the time or place. An old ache crawled into his heart, threaded through his bones. His hands ached to reach out and touch people who were all long gone. Who couldn't come back, no matter how much Steve wished it could happen.

"What's the plan?" Natasha asked, looking worried at Steve. He tried to relax his tensed jaw. He probably looked angry. Maybe he was.

"We have to keep testing the outer forcefield," Tony glanced across at Steve. "We've been systematically sweeping it for years, but subtly. Nat, Pietro, you remember where you were up to?"

"Sure," Natasha said as Pietro nodded.

"Cap, your vibranium's a new player to the game; I need you to remember where you've managed to hit it with the shield," Tony's gaze returned out toward the arena. "We can map it out later, but do not make it look obvious. We're playing the long game here."

Steve internalized those instructions as best as he could. "Any tips on the...opponents?"

"Rumlow's Rumlow," Natasha sighed, confirming Steve's sad suspicion that Crossbones meant their Crossbones. "If we can get his gauntlets off, he's less of a tough nut to crack. We don't know what weapons he'll have at his disposal today."

"If he's got anything to shoot us with, I'll target the weapon first," Pietro said. He was stretching carefully, his quick eyes darting across their limited view of the arena. "Ugh, Loki's down and the floor's shifting already. Looks like we're having pasta for dinner, kids."

Steve frowned. "What?"
"We came up with codewords for each of the arena's set-ups. He means we're in for a spaghetti Western." Natasha spared Steve a brief smile before backing away from the forcefield and starting to limber up herself; Steve carefully copied her, which earned him a brief smile. "Two alleys of large blocks, with one main avenue down the middle. Plenty of space to climb up high or hide behind."

"Plenty of space for us to get separated," Tony said. The lights in his armor were blank; at Steve's gaze, Tony shrugged. "There's energy blocking in this sector of the arena. It's good, though. If my scanners are down, Ronan's should be too."

"Ronan the Accuser," Pietro explained. "Kree guy, likes to dress in purple. Yon-Rogg and Ronan are both Kree. Means they're got extreme durability, enhanced strength, resistant to toxins. Ronan's armor is a hot zone, though. Got more toys and gizmos than Shellhead here."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Sure, if you think invisibility is a useful skill in an arena with sand constantly blowing everywhere."

"He hasn't figured out how Ronan's exoskeleton creates those fields," Pietro said, in a loud stage-whisper. "It makes him cranky."

"Watch out for Ronan's hammer," Natasha offered.

"You mean his universal weapon," Pietro used air-quotes, smirking.

Steve tilted his head. "Is it anything like another hammer we all know pretty well?"

"It's not as powerful," Natasha conceded. "But he can manipulate matter with it, generate force-fields, control gravity, and he can fly. Sometimes he rants about the powers they've disabled in it, but the ones he has are bad enough."

Steve nodded, trying to retain all the information as best as he could. "Captain Marvel got her initial hand-to-hand training from Yon-Rogg, so I think I've seen her spar enough to be familiar with what he might be able to do. How about the woman that was listed on the paper?"

"Ellen Brandt. Strong, agile, trained in close combat," Tony listed. "But on top of that, Extremis."

Steve's face wrinkled. It rang a bell. "Isn't that what you used on yourself?"

"A fixed advanced reduced version," Tony waved a gauntleted hand dismissively. "Hers she got from the first batch."

Steve twitched. "Didn't that make people explode?"

Pietro mimicked a sound of an explosion while waving his hands in the approximation of one. "She goes up like a firecracker. Honestly, we tend to leave her alone and let her blow herself up."

"That takes a while," Tony corrected. "So if you can take her out, do. But watch for the fire." He wrinkled his nose. "It was never that bad when I first faced her, but the worms have done something to her." He looked at the wall that Steve thought was in the direction of the worming chamber (there had to be a better name for it).

"If she had the first batch of Extremis, then…" Steve thought about it. "I guess you were the one to kill her then? I mean. Originally."

"Hey, it was self defense," Tony defended.
Steve frowned. He seemed to have an innate talent when it came to upsetting Tony Stark. "But you have insight about how she can be stopped."

"That incident involved a microwave," Tony said, and his mouth twitched, like he was trying hard not to smile. "Not exactly an excess of those out here." His mouth fully flattened and he shot Steve a look of pure warning. "We got a couple of bugs incoming. I'm taking down the suppression field."

Steve nodded and focused on making sure his shield was ready, turning his gaze to the gate and the sand beyond. Loki's snow had already disappeared from the arena floor. He could hear the soft murmur of the crowd now that Tony's suppression field wasn't muffling it. He hated each and every one of them who would think this sort of thing was acceptable entertainment. Bullies. His grip tightened on his shield. Every single one of them were bullies.

"Relax, Captain," Tony said loudly, clapping him on the back. "Let's give our bountiful Grandmaster a wonderful show."

Steve had to shield his eyes with his left hand as they walked out into the arena. It was brighter outside than his eyes could adjust to quickly. The crowd were cheering, an incoherent noise that sounded like a braying call for blood. Steve's jaw tightened. Their blood. They would be happy to see the four of them bleeding in the sand. The memory of Tony's lifeless face flashed into Steve's mind like a sledgehammer to the gut.

"You look like you're going to be sick," Pietro told him, sounding weirdly cheerful. Steve glared at him sourly, which resulted in Pietro’s grin widening. "The crowd loves a good vomit. Try and aim it into the lower stands. It looks beautiful when it spatters against the force-field."

"Not everyone vomits like you, Quicksilver," Natasha said, punching her wristguards briefly together, sending a shower of sparks into the sand. She got a cheer.

None of her cheers were as loud as Tony was receiving for his waving. Tony waved widely to the left and right before flipping down his faceplate, which got a larger roar of appreciation than his waving; clearly Iron Man was a favorite among this crowd. The roar seemed to get louder when Tony gestured with both wrists and the full armor covered his body and his face.

It was easier to make out the crowd this time. Maybe because Steve wasn't panicking so much about maybe seeing Tony, or maybe the worms making him stronger had somehow improved his eyesight. Steve saw a few red-hourglass banners here and there, and there was a large crowd of blue-colored aliens all wearing tunics of some sort emblazoned with Pietro's silver lightning-bolt. Steve could see a lot of red and gold in the crowd, and at least fourteen different banners with the Iron Man mask painted on. Tony apparently had a lot of fans here. At least something in this place made sense.

"Einherjar, you have two minutes to get into position, and then your opposition's gate will open," the Grandmaster's hologram boomed. "Bring us a great fight! Fight for glory! Fight for, well, me! And this beautiful crowd."

The bright light of the double suns came with their matching obscene heat again; Steve was already sweating and the fight hadn't begun, although to be fair it could perhaps be fear. He wasn't used to that. Was it because his last fight had been the stuff of nightmares? Or was it because this time he was walking alongside three team members who had already died under his supposed leadership?
His throat was tight. He couldn't do this. But there was nowhere to run to. There was nothing he
could do but fight and try to prevent the most terrible of circumstances.

"Their gate is at two o' clock," Natasha murmured under her breath. She waved at the crowd as
they walked, but her smile showed too much teeth; Steve knew her well enough to know it was one
of her performative smiles. "Stark?"

"We should—" Tony started, but they would never find out what Tony's suggestion would have
been, because there was a sudden interruption.

"Whoops, I meant thirty seconds," the Grandmaster's voice boomed out again over the speakers. "I
was using Earth time for the sake of my Avengers, but I do always get Earth time mixed up. Tut
tut, what a shame."

That was all the warning they got, and it turned out the other side weren't all that into appeasing the
crowd, because it was a fireball that came sailing out of the enemy's gate first. Steve barely had
time to raise up his shield as it came hurtling their way and he was able to deflect it.

"Ronan's gone airborne with Crossbones," Natasha yelled. "Or maybe he should be called
Crossbow today."

"On it," Tony said, powering up into the air. "Pietro, evasive maneuvers. Nat, you think you can
distract Yon-Rogg?"

Natasha beamed. "I think I can do more than distract him."

Pietro's response was to become a blur.

"Captain, with me," Tony said and blazed up alone into the air. Steve stared up at him, nonplussed,
because how was he supposed to follow that? He sighed and started running, matching Tony's
flight path but keeping low to the ground. There wasn't any time to argue. Steve could see from
Tony's shadow where to go, at least, so he did his best to give chase, even if his instinct was to go
for the structures, pick the best of the buildings to park himself near, because having a slight bit of
cover at his back was better than fighting in a more exposed part of the arena where attacks could
come from all angles.

Tony seemed to be going straight at Ronan the Accuser, right on an intercept route. It was a decent
idea from their enemies; there was no good high spot to leave a long-range fighter, and Rumlow
was always lethal with a crossbow. Ronan was making himself the high location for Rumlow to
shoot from.

"Crossbones is yours," Tony yelled. "Get ready for incoming."

Steve scowled up at the sky, where Tony's speed kicked up as he headed for Ronan, and tried to
gauge what Tony was about to do. Probably knock Crossbones down, but where would he land?
Where would a good position for Steve be?

As Steve considered it, a panel opened on Iron Man's shoulders, and two missiled slipped loose,
streaking towards Ronan. Ronan managed to deflect one with his hammer, smashing it down near
to where Natasha had engaged Yon-Rogg; she barely managed to leap out of the way of the
explosion. If Tony had communicated to him somehow his intention, Steve could have used his
shield as the distraction, because clearly that's why two missiles had been involved in this moment,
because the second one slipped past the hammer and glanced off Ronan's shoulder. It didn't seem
to do him much damage, but damage wasn't Tony's intention—it was a surprise hit, knocking him
off-balance enough to loosen his grip on his cargo. All it took was a follow-up repulsor blast for Rumlow to come loose, dropping to the sand in a crouch.

Even though Rumlow was wearing a mask, a pimped-up version of his old black mask with a skull painted on it, Steve could tell he didn't look too ruffled by the incident. His body language was positive, his shoulders bunched up menacingly, his stride confident as he moved toward Steve, like this had been the plan the entire time. It couldn't have been, because Rumlow was discarding his crossbow as he moved toward Steve, pulling out two long batons as he walked. The end of the right one sparked ominously. Great. Cattle prods. That seemed to suit Brock Rumlow's personality perfectly in Steve's opinion.

A silver Control Disc glinted at Rumlow's hairline. He was probably operating under the same memory restrictions as most of the gladiators here, although Steve cursed under his breath, because he hadn't asked enough questions about it yet. Tony said all those at their breakfast table had their memories, and Tony had injected something into Steve that woke up his memories, so Tony clearly had a cure, and Steve doubted Tony was distributing that cure among the Tenebrae. Still, even under his own mild brainwashing episode, Steve remembered he was an Avenger. He knew Tony, Natasha and Pietro were his teammates. He remembered vague things about them. How much did Rumlow remember about him? Maybe Steve's fighting style was one of his blanks, so Steve would have an advantage taking him on one-on-one?

"You," Rumlow's batons sparked as he thumped them together, getting closer to Steve. "I remember you. I'm going to enjoy killing you."

Steve pursed his lips, because that didn't mean anything; maybe Rumlow remembered him in an abstract fashion. His grip tightened on his shield and he took a neutral stance that could easily be turned into one of several opening offensive moves, in case Rumlow remembered everything about their fights in the past.

"You can enjoy thinking about it as much as you like," Steve said, and apparently there was something irritating enough in Steve's tone or in those words to make Rumlow lose the deliberate strut he was cultivating in favor of launching himself at Steve, digging his heels into the sand to launch an attack from high.

Steve brought up his shield, the force of the hit smashing him back a couple of paces into the sand, and that was just one of the batons; Steve then had to jump abruptly to one side as the second one came swiping at him at Steve's unprotected side, because his shield was still locked in battle with the first baton.

The baton pushing down on him glinted menacingly against the dome of Steve's shield, sending a shower of hot sparks down on him, a small flicker of pain for the few of them that hit the exposed skin of Steve's face. Steve lowered his weight, bending more at the hip so he could re-direct some of Rumlow's strength in a different direction. He jumped back again, carefully checking his surroundings before kicking backwards a second time in a bigger leap, so that he could kick off one of the structures standing in the arena.

Rumlow wasn't expecting Steve to get any purchase on a forward attack and he fell back, immediately trying to compensate with a wider strike of the second baton as he re-adjusted his stance and Steve capitalized on this brief hesitation, dropping down low and sweeping out with his right leg so he could viciously kick Rumlow in the right knee. Using the shield as a pivot, Steve spun as quickly as he could, managing to get his leg out of the way of Rumlow's retaliatory strikes.

He had to fall onto his back in order to flip his shield back up to a defensive position, but that was a temporary measure; Steve kicked at the incoming batons with his boots, the leather dulling the
vague spark of electricity from their tips, before he kipped up to a standing position. He ducked a high swing at his face, and then shoved his shield at Rumlow's right elbow, so he could push both batons in one direction, leaving the side of Rumlow's face unprotected. Steve balled up his fist and enjoyed punching him in the side of the head as hard as he could.

Rumlow stumbled, but barely. He was stronger than Steve remembered. The worms were supposed to make you stronger, each and every time you died. How many times had Rumlow died in this arena? How much stronger than Steve was he now? Anyone else might have been fazed, Steve thought. But he wasn't anyone else. He had the super serum on his side, decades of fighting experience, and Avengers at his back.

There was also the problem that he was too far from the forcefield and he hadn't managed to test it with the shield yet. Well, that was fixable. Probably. Maybe. Fending off Rumlow was making him angrier than he expected, which lowered his control, and Steve had to get a grip of himself. There was no way he was going to be killed in this place by Brock Rumlow. Steve gritted his teeth and went on the offensive, hauling the shield at Brock directly, throwing himself forward to pick it up and jam the edge down hard on one of Rumlow's hands. This gave Rumlow the opening to hit him with one of the cattle prods, but Steve had sparred for hours with Thor, back when they were hunting down the scepter across the globe. He was used to a little electrocution here and there. Every single one of Steve's muscles clenched hard at once; it felt like every atom of his body was being violently shaken, and his whole body was being drowned in heat. He fell forward hard, but recovered fast, dropping into a forward roll before landing back on his feet and running away.

Rumlow chuckled, thinking Steve was scared, not expecting Steve had a plan in mind; Steve grinned when Rumlow cursed, realizing Steve's plan when Steve's escape path took him straight by Rumlow's discarded crossbow. Steve grabbed it and sped up toward one of the buildings. Rumlow pelted after him, but Steve had enough of a headstart, one that widened when Steve turned and hurled the shield at him again; Rumlow was forced to cross the cattle prods to block the hit, because it was going too fast to avoid it, and Steve managed to catch it on the rebound, hauling it up onto the roof of one of the lower buildings and chasing it up.

He didn't stop—he couldn't afford to—so he flipped the shield back up into his grip, ran along the roof of the building, threw himself across the gap to the next one, and took a chance, turning, lifting up the crossbow and hoping Rumlow had primed it before discarding it. Clint had spent some of the last eight years teaching Steve how to shoot, saying that if Steve wanted to stay off-field and teach others, it would be helpful to give him a wider range of weapons knowledge. So when Steve raised up the crossbow with its single loaded bolt, he was able to aim and fire it with ease, and he was rewarded by being able to pinion the bolt right through Rumlow's right shoulder, just as Rumlow was readying to jump across to the building that Steve was standing on.

Rumlow let out a yell and fell painfully to the ground, but Steve didn't have long at all to follow through, because someone hit him hard in the back; Steve responded automatically, using the crossbow as a projectile on its own before following it up by bringing up his shield. Yon-Rogg. Steve realized, and he had to suppress the urge to look around for Natasha, focusing instead on the present risk, which seemed to be that Yon-Rogg was attacking him, and surely Rumlow would be recovering soon.

Steve had to get into a position where he could take on both. He brought up the shield hard as Yon-Rogg lashed out with his weapon, a short spear that made Steve's jaw grit involuntarily, because that was what Tony used to kill him so quickly the other day, and remembering that made Steve feel like he was going abruptly and completely insane. There would be time after this clash to calculate a battle strategy; this was the point in a fight where the aim was to survive each moment, and figure it out in detail later.
Using the shield to block Yon-Rogg's next hard thrust gave Steve time to pull the short sword out of its harness, and that at least put Steve onto more even footing—it hadn't only been projectile weapons that Steve had spent the last eight years perfecting. Yon-Rogg wasn't expecting Steve to be able to use the sword so well; that was obvious by the way his footwork shifted from offensive to defensive at first. And Steve was glad he was keeping an eye on Yon-Rogg's footwork, because it changed again during their fourth exchange of parries; subtly bracing wider, readying for assistance. Steve sighed and flipped backwards in anticipation, neatly missing Rumlow's attempt at a sneak attack.

Two against one wasn't exactly a position Steve wanted to be in.

Of course, it was sort of satisfying to be able to mimic the exact move he'd seen Natasha use merely an hour before on Hogun and Fandral to get Yon-Rogg and Rumlow to hit each other, but it wasn't the full-on distraction he was hoping for. After their hits landed on each other, they both turned to him in unison, snarling loudly.

"They're one down already," Yon-Rogg said, raising one eyebrow cockily. "Let's team up and add to that tally, huh?"

Steve gritted his teeth. He could see a red blur pass overhead behind them, meaning Tony was still fighting Ronan, so Yon-Rogg's taunt meant either Natasha or Pietro were out of action, and there was no way that Natasha would have let Yon-Rogg out of her grasp if she had the choice, so it meant that out there somewhere in the sand, she might be dead, and Steve hated that thought, he hated it.

Dealing with two at once wasn't going to be easy. Steve needed to take one of them out of the equation and he still hadn't managed to test his shield against the forcefield. There were two likely options: the forcefield would react like a solid surface, meaning Steve's shield would rebound from it; or the forcefield would absorb the force from Steve's throw and the shield would drop from it. The forcefield glimmered over the sand like a dome. Steve blocked Rumlow with his sword and Yon-Rogg with his shield for a sequence of blows. He managed to flip over both of them and re-orient himself into facing in their direction so that he didn't run out of roof space to move on, but they were back on him instantly, incessantly raining blows down on him. Steve needed to move and fast.

Calculating the angles, Steve took a risk and hurled his shield as far as he could in the right direction; Yon-Rogg had to leap back and to the left to avoid it, but Yon-Rogg smiled, smirking as he landed.

"You missed me, Captain," Yon-Rogg purred, as Steve had to drop low and spin his legs to knock Rumlow back again, kicking him hard in his right knee, capitalizing on his previous hit there. Rumlow crumpled a little, wavering, and Steve blocked both of Rumlow's cattle prods with his blade, re-adjusting his stance to manage that, and Yon-Rogg stepped toward him to take advantage of Steve's unprotected flank—and Steve's shield ricocheted off the forcefield in exactly the way Steve had been hoping, managing to crash right into Yon-Rogg's neck.

Yon-Rogg crumpled to the ground but Steve couldn't focus on him quickly enough to be sure if the collapse was temporary or permanent; he flipped backward out of Rumlow's reach and managed to both kick Yon-Rogg's spear away from his hand and re-acquire his shield in the same graceful movement. Now he could focus back on Rumlow, Steve pressed ahead with the offensive, using his shield to block the dual cattle prods so he could flash the sword against Rumlow's armor, trying to find a weakness. There was certainly a lot less skin showing for Rumlow's arena costume, especially compared to what Natasha and Pietro had been forced to wear.
Maybe it was a handicap, Steve thought. Maybe the better you were, the less you were allowed to wear in protection. Or maybe the Grandmaster was just a sick son-of-a-bitch who ran gladiator arena fights to the death for fun.

Steve was pissed off all over again at the kind of people who would enjoy something like this. It made him want to defeat Rumlow quickly, without spectacle, to ruin their fun, but the mistake of letting himself want this, even for a moment, was that it split his focus too far: Rumlow smacked him harder than he anticipated, and worse, something else hit him hard, and it took Steve a moment to identify what this new pain was.

Yon-Rogg's spear, pinioned through Steve's right shoulder.

He must have retrieved it without Steve noticing. Steve leaned hard into the pain and surprise to dig at a reserve of strength and speed he didn't know he had left; the point of the spear had gone all the way through Steve, in a clear-and-through stab, and Steve grabbed at it, pulling it further through, making it harder for Yon-Rogg to retrieve it a second time. He spun on one heel, managing to smash his shield hard into a now-unarmed Yon-Rogg, and that Kree strength was tough but nothing to the combination of an enraged super-solider wielding vibranium; Yon-Rogg tumbled violently, falling off the roof hard.

Steve had to discard his sword, his fingers refusing to hold onto it, so he threw it aside, as far away from them as he could, and he leaned back hard into the battle, using only his shield. He also managed to yank out the spear, but Steve's openly gushing shoulder injury served to embolden Rumlow. Rumlow furiously came at Steve, taking advantage of the weakness; he knocked aside Yon-Rogg's spear and applied one sparking cattle prod almost directly to Steve's wound. Steve dropped his shield as he crumpled to the ground, screaming with the agony of it, unable to move as electricity coursed through him, and Rumlow bent down, sheathing one cattle prod and picking up picking up the shield, and Rumlow raised up, ready to bring Steve's shield down on him—

Except Rumlow suddenly flew sideways off the roof in a streak of color and the force shaking Steve to pieces inside out halted; Steve hauled in a burning breath as he realized Tony had managed to save him, diverting a uni-beam from half the arena away. Steve winced as Tony received a full smash in the face from Ronan's hammer, but Tony seemed to rally just fine; Steve couldn't afford to keep worriedly watching Tony. Tony could handle himself and Steve had to trust that. Especially when his own position was much more precarious. Steve struggled to his feet and limped over to the edge of the roof. There was his shield, lying near Rumlow's smoking still body. And a short distance away stood Yon-Rogg, a thin line of blue liquid running from his mouth, his spear back in his hand.

Steve looked over and caught a glimpse of Natasha's body slumped in the sand; he furiously turned his gaze back to Yon-Rogg who beamed, idly spinning the spear in a move designed to show off his command of the weapon. It was a move designed to state yeah, I'm the one who killed her and Steve braced himself, because it was a move also designed to intimidate him, but all it served to do was make Steve more determined to be the one to kill him.

Hate wasn't the best fuel for a fight. Whenever Steve had let his emotions take over in the past, it made him sloppy; it made him abandon his rational brain, made him rely more on his strength than his strategy. It had been the kind of dangerous impulse that nearly led him to the greatest mistake he ever could have made, nearly killing Tony in Siberia—and Steve had labeled it that before knowing Tony was the key to saving the entire universe from Thanos' madness. Sometimes Steve woke up, over eight decades later, panting hard from a nightmare where he was still kneeling over Tony's body, the shield smashing down into his chest, only in his nightmare Steve didn't stop. In his nightmare, Steve hit him, that last time. In his nightmare, Tony bled out beneath him.
Steve often wondered what he would have done if he'd made that last, terrible hit. If he hadn't realized his rage had overtaken his reason. Erskine told Steve the serum amplified everything that was inside a person. So, good became great. Bad became worse. It didn't discriminate. Every trait was amplified the same; Steve hadn't realized it would apply to every single personality trait and every single natural skill he had before the serum.

Of course, Steve hadn't thought much about the serum beyond the glee of *I'm finally going to be able to get to help.* Would he have still done it if he knew what it would eventually entail? Steve's answer to that had always been *yes, I probably would.* The only time it had wavered was when he stood on the ruins of a battlefield, the dust of Thanos' army still drifting lazily through the air, and Steve realized his whole entire heart was lying right there on the damn ground, silent and stilling.

Steve couldn't let the hate overrun him right now. He couldn't. Even doing so briefly had injured him badly in this fight alone. Although he'd been through the strange worming process twice now, and he could feel he was stronger than before just from those two times, there was no way to know how many times Yon-Rogg had been through it. And he was Kree, which meant Steve couldn't know how his baseline strength would compare to him even *without* wormings in the equation.

Steve had to assume brute strength and ignorance wasn't the way to go with this Yon-Rogg. He had to be smart. The serum had amplified his strategical capabilities, but he also had to be sure of his own limitations. He was fighting alone right now, but Steve wasn't alone, and that was still important. First things first—he needed his shield.

Yon-Rogg started running, even as Steve leaped down from the roof, but Steve was determined and got to his shield first. Steve parried Yon-Rogg's flurry of attacks, taking a defensive stance which seemed to make Yon-Rogg seem happy. That was good. A cocky opponent was an easier opponent to surprise. The defensive approach let Steve take stock of what was happening around him. Iron Man was still locked in a complicated battle with Ronan and in an ideal world, Steve would be able to help him. This wasn't an ideal world. This was a strange world and Steve just had to be content with doing what he could.

It wasn't that Steve wanted to get a reputation for making a sacrifice play. Okay, so the dummy grenade pre-serum, or putting the Valkyrie down in the ice, or—well, okay, Steve had a habit of taking every decision right to the necessary end of any line and not stopping when some people would, but—those situations were different. Those scenarios had been last-ditch, no-option-left, his-life-versus-multiple-others, no-actual-choice-really-when-it-came-down-to-it events. In this arena, the stakes weren't the same. Death didn't come with the same penalties here, apparently. And even if they did, because Steve knew the number of Einherjar and Tenebrae combined didn't add up to all the names of the fallen warriors with missing bodies that Carol had discovered, hadn't Steve already made peace with death now?

Kamikaze was a new option, one that made Steve's strategic brain unfold with branches of ideas that he'd never had access before. Steve could see Pietro and Ellen Brandt tangling behind Yon-Rogg and an idea settled into his brain, one that would increase his team's chance of success. Steve could take the risk that he might have enough energy to take out Yon-Rogg alone or he could go for a play that might take two of the foes out at once and honestly, it was tempting enough, and he thought that even before circumstances tipped the play dramatically in his favor.

Pietro moved in a rapid circuit around Brandt, moving faster, faster, and she dropped to her knees, hands clutching at her throat, forming some sort of dramatic sandy vortex with his superspeed; except Brandt managed to lash out, knocking Pietro a decent distance. He spun over the sand repeatedly, smacking hard into one of the buildings. Brandt grinned triumphantly, breathing hard, stuck in a crouch. There were cracks on her face like she was a porcelain doll that had taken a
tumble off a mantle, but her cracks were lit up, pulsing with a bright energy that rippled over her whole body.

The flawed Extremis, Steve recalled. He spit out blood and parried a few more of Yon-Rogg's hits, but Rumlow and Yon-Rogg has already severely injured and weakened him, more than he'd wanted to admit to himself before, but he was aware of it now. As Yon-Rogg continued to swipe at him, the spear drawing blood from two flashed hits that Steve couldn't parry away, Steve could feel his strength fading. Adrenaline was masking his pain but he couldn't rely on that forever; he could see the edges of his vision blurring and his chest felt tighter than it should.

Brandt advanced on Pietro who was struggling to get back onto his feet and Steve made his decision. Steve turned and hurled his shield directly at Brandt. He turned and started running to catch the rebound and Brandt turned her attention to him. The shield hit had increased the light flaring out of her skin cracks and Steve grinned as he caught his shield. Yeah, this was going to work.

Steve turned and threw the shield again at Brandt, and in the same movement he twisted to grab the spear that Yon-Rogg was trying to stab him with again; Steve gripped the sharp end of it, the blade digging into his hand, but he didn't concern himself with that. All he needed to do was hold on. He caught his shield's next rebound with his weakened left arm, but it was enough, and Steve tugged at Yon-Rogg's spear, even as Brandt was running directly at them, her skin shattering and fracturing.

Brandt hurled herself at Steve. Steve turned and let her grab him from behind him, her hands burning him where she touched him, her hot breath leaking fire across the nape of his neck. Her hands closed around his chest, burning fingers pressing deep. Steve did not yell. He used her grasp to his advantage, pushing back against her to kick his legs up so he could wrap his thighs around Yon-Rogg's hips. Yon-Rogg was still tugging at his spear; Steve resisted the pull for a couple more beats before letting go of the sharp blade with no visible warning. The whiplash of that resulted in all three of them falling to the ground in a heap. Steve kept his legs wrapped around Yon-Rogg, pushing back so he was snugly pressed up against Brandt's burning, pulsing flesh.

Steve turned his head and bit at the nearest part of Brandt he could reach and that seemed to be the last straw for her; pain and blood flooded Steve's mouth but that was the last thing he felt before there was a wall of fire. Unbelievable heat rushed over the three of them, and then all Steve felt was pain, too much pain, as the world permanently splintered away.
Part IV: INTERLUDE

Dear, though the night is gone,
   Its dream still haunts to-day,
   That brought us to a room
       Cavernous, lofty as
       A railway terminus

W.H. Auden—The Dream

Steve awoke in describable agony, but only because he had his memories and could attribute the overwhelming pain to the worms.

He didn't even try to open his eyes, focusing on trying to stay as still as possible because movement of any kind made it worse. Steve didn't often admit to anything being above a 7 on the pain scale but the worming process was a definite 10. If Steve could bring himself to break the scale, he might label it a million. Even getting himself blown up hadn't hurt this much.

"Goodsss," the voice said, which Steve was starting to recognize as belonging to the Gray Bug. "Ssstay ssstill. I will be backsss."

Steve frowned and regretted it immediately as a fresh wave of pain flooded over his face. He felt like his whole head was swelling and swelling without relief, like it might implode. That feeling increased right up to the point where Steve was almost desperate to move, because maybe pushing off the slab he was lying on to dash into pieces on the floor was preferable to this agony, and then the pain lessened a little and Steve almost cried in relief.

Blinking, he carefully opened his eyes and then did almost fall off the slab accidentally. Not at the sight of the bugs writhing down his chest, a sight he would never adjust to, but at the room he was in. This wasn't the same dull room as before. This was a smaller one, with black and white tiles and no vent up high. Steve tried to twist to see what else was in the room and let out a small cry instead, a sound which came out of his mouth as a wet sort of noise. A larger worm flicked its tail as if it was angry and buried deeper into Steve's neck and he had to swallow back the scream. Okay, talking was a really bad idea at this point.

There was a noise of the door opening and closing and then Gray Bug appeared in Steve's sightline, carrying something carefully in its claws. Steve watched as Gray Bug lifted up what appeared to be a metal canister and tipped the contents over Steve's chest cavity.

"You upsssset the Tenebrae, Captain," Gray Bug said; its many eyes flickered over Steve's body, clicking in what Steve hoped was approval. "Kicked you right off the ssslab when they sssaw you."

Steve stared up at Gray Bug blankly.
"Ah, funny but annoyingssss," Gray Bug sighed. "The woman was in bitssss."

"Did you heal her first?" Steve said, forgetting he wasn't supposed to speak. The worms must have done their job, though, because while talking burned, his voice came out somewhat whole, if a little rough.

Gray Bug made a trilling noise which might be discontent that Steve had spoken when he was supposed to be staying still. "She hasss been through the wormsss many more timesss than you. It goesss fassster every time. You're ssstill a baby to the processs, Captain."

"Is that why I'm here?" Steve asked.

"Nooo," Gray Bug said, making a melodic trill of clicks which Steve thought might be a sigh. "Had to worm you ssseparately. Only have one tank, have to carry them here. But here you won't be kicked off the table. Unlessss you're bad and annoy me too."

Gray Bug made a hiccuping noise which sounded like it could be a laugh.

"Thank you for healing me," Steve said.

Gray Bug clicked and tilted its head. "You're welcomesss, Captain." It righted its head and clicked again. "No meatsss for you today. Breakfasssst in a turn. You're already healing quicker, even after being blownsss up. Good. Good. Ssstay and ressst. I'll come getsss you when it'sss time."

Steve tried to nod to let Gray Bug know he'd heard and whimpered in regret.

"Sssilly humansss," Gray Bug muttered as it left the room.

Steve tried to keep his breathing slow and even as the door closed with a thunk that he thought sounded like a lock. He let himself sigh and was rewarded with it only hurting as much as a breath did. He ended up turning his gaze back to the ceiling, because if he lowered it, he could see the worms squelching around, twisting turning, gnawing and spitting and fixing and mending. It was enough to make him feel sick, especially if he wondered whether he had all the right organs in place right now to vomit. He felt hungry, so maybe that meant his stomach was back.

He wondered how badly he'd exploded. Whether the bugs had to scrape up all the parts somehow to put him back together. However they did it, it must have worked, even though he almost wanted to laugh when he imagined being put back together wrong. He could picture how it might look, one of his legs, one of Brandt's. A patchwork doll of wrong parts that could probably still move and fight.

The worms were a miracle, whatever they were, and however they worked. The pain was beyond imagining, but maybe that was a price worth paying to avoid death. Maybe combined with the quantum tunnel, it was the final piece to creating immortality. Steve definitely felt sick again, remembering the price the Eternals paid for their immortality. Human minds in immortal bodies, but human minds weren't built to live forever. If the Eternals didn't band together into their annual invasive Uni-Mind, the Mahd Wy-ry would literally drive them insane. Humanity didn't have an outlet valve like that one. Humans weren't ready for immortality, even if the capability for it might now be within their grasp.

There was only one tank of worms, though; that was very interesting. Steve tried to remember what it looked like, to push it into his memory, because if they could escape with it—or at least with some of the worms—they'd need to know how to recreate the tank, to keep those worms alive. It was nice to have something to focus on. Steve drew the diagram in his mind, adding in all the
details he could remember; the next time he was wormed, as long as no Tenebrae was there to push him from the slab, he would try and see more of the tank.

When Gray Bug came back to finally release Steve, Steve had progressed to sitting on the slab, brushing off the last couple of bugs and being proud of himself for not scratching, even though it seemed itchier this time. Probably because he'd gotten himself blown up. He had always morbidly wondered how it might have felt, if that grenade at Camp Lehigh during his training hadn't been a dud. This experience had been the painful proof that some questions were better left unanswered.

Unfortunately, the Gray Bug had forgotten to bring him any clothes, so by the time Gray Bug had trundled off, returned with them, and shown him to the dining hall, breakfast was nearly over.

"Andhrímnir, pleassee ssay you left sssome for the Captain," Gray Bug entreated the blue-colored bug standing near a cauldron at the far end of the hall. Steve stood awkwardly by him, glancing surreptitiously around; when he saw Natasha, Pietro, and Tony at the end of their usual table, he felt like he could breathe again. It was weird watching them, knowing that Tony's suppression field was probably active, and he wished he was closer so he could hear what they were saying. When Tony caught sight of Steve, his expression darkened and he looked away. Steve had to fight hard not to visibly spasm or recoil, because it looked like Tony was angry with him, and the last time Tony had been angry with him... Well. Considering Steve did sometimes still openly flinch when someone accused him of lying, it probably spoke a lot toward how much he'd gotten over it.

The blue bug, Andhrímnir, scraped at the cauldron and heaped a pile of meat onto a dish. Andhrímnir made a chattering noise. "Lucky. You are lucky." Andhrímnir then eyeballed Steve, four pairs of eyes all looking directly at him. "I liked how you exploded yesssterday."

"Uh," Steve said. "You're welcome?"

Andhrímnir made a loud hissing noise which apparently turned out to be laughter. "Did you hear that, Ghrengrh? He sssaid you're welcome! Ah, that'sss the bessst thing I have heard in daysss. And you said humansss weren't funny."

"Normally I jussst have them ssspewing up over my tarsssal padsss rather than making jokessss,"
Gray Bug said sourly. Ghrengrh. Steve had heard that before. It must be Gray Bug's name.

"You're hilariously," Andhrímnir said, passing Steve the pile of meat. "Enjoyssss."

"I'll sssee you sssoon I'm sssure, Captain," Ghrengrh said to Steve before turning and stomping away. Steve watched him go and then turned back to look at Andhrímnir.

"Thank you for the food," Steve said.

Andhrímnir said, "You're welcome!" loudly before bending over and emitting a louder hissing noise. "Haha, sssso funny."

Steve smiled politely and headed over to join the others at the table. Tony barely looked at him but Natasha managed a sheepish smile. The sound at the table had the quality of Tony's suppression field being active, but Steve focused on eating; he'd learned early on in the army that you ate what you could, when you could, because you never knew how long you had, or if it was going to be taken away.

That seemed to be the right decision, because it was only a couple of minutes later when Natasha stilled his arm by putting a hand down gently on his elbow; Steve glanced at her and Natasha looked at the door pointedly.

"Incoming, suppression field going down," Tony muttered, still not meeting Steve's eyes. Steve tried not to frown. After all these years, did he even have the right to think he could decipher Tony Stark from his attitude? Tony used to be conspicuously louder to Steve in his silences than with any of his words, but that didn't mean that was still the case now.

Steve found himself holding his breath when everyone around him started to shift to face the doorway. Topaz entered the room with the same swagger as the day before and Steve hated that he was relieved when she walked straight past them.

"Just you four today," Topaz sniffed, passing envelopes to the Warriors Three and then one to Heimdall. "May fortune favor the boring."

"That's fortune favor the bold, witch," Loki said, folding his arms petulantly.

"No one asked you, Snowball," Topaz said, before sweeping out of the room.

"Suppression field up," Tony said, quietly.

"By the black tooth he-goat mother of a potlicker," Volstagg yelped, immediately. "These four? Again?"

"Language, Volstagg," Odin said, somewhat calmly.

"It's not so bad," Hogun said, like he didn't believe it.

"You got the Four Stooges, huh?" Pietro asked, his face creasing in genuine sympathy.

Steve glanced at Natasha, the question clearly on his face, but she shook her head a little and mouthed later.

"So this means we have no battle today?" Steve asked instead, hoping that was safer territory.

"They like to give us time to heal in-between bouts," Natasha said, leaning closer and stealing a chunk of Steve's food. "If you're up to it, we can do some training later."
Steve nodded carefully. He felt like he had a million questions he wanted to ask.

"We could go watch the Warriors battle," Pietro suggested, but then he flinched, like someone had kicked him under the table. "Or not. It's boring. Volstagg keeps dying really quickly."

"Vicious lies and slander!" Volstagg's voice boomed out loudly as both Fandral and Hogun had to hold him down from getting up to lurch at Pietro. Pietro held up both his hands in apology.

"Calm yourself," Odin said. He had a soothing voice, very resonant. "We have come so far, it would do Asgard an unkindness for her people to set our progress back. If Stark has to restore all our memories again, it would take months. Do you want that?"

"I'm tired of waiting," the dark-haired man with them said, scowling thoroughly. "All we're managing is tiny incremental steps that add up to nothing. We should rise up, smash our way out of here."

"Quiet your tongue, Skurge," Fandral said. "Odin is your King, you should speak respectfully—"

"King? King? Of what realm? Of a dozen rooms and a dozen subjects? Yes, that's a mighty kingdom indeed."

Volstagg's hand tightened into fists. "He is still our King. Asgard is in our hearts, fool. Once we've gotten out of here—"

Skurge clenched a fist and bunched his eyebrows into a menacing expression. "And when's that gonna be, huh? You've been saying the same cursed thing for the last two thousand cycles. How many more times are we going to die? Who else are we going to lose in another damn Melee?"

Steve tensed. None of this sounded any good. Natasha grabbed his hand and clenched hard, keeping him still. Steve focused on keeping his face neutral. The bugs at the doorway were looking in their direction now, heads tilted curiously.

"I'm gonna have to take the field down," Tony warned.

"Awesome," Skurge spat. "Trapped by the whims of a Midgardian."

"Sucks to be you," Tony agreed and touched whatever it was under his sleeve that activated and deactivated the suppression field. Steve had so many questions that he barely knew where he wanted to start with them all.

"Time for showersssss," a bug announced and Steve's face fell. In all the chaos he hadn't finished his meat. As he rose from the table, Volstagg leaned in toward him.

"Let me clear that up for you, Captain," Volstagg chirped and, beaming at Steve, picked up his remaining meat in one fist.

"Volstagg," Fandral moaned, looking apologetic. "I do apologize for his behavior."

"What, we have a battle today," Volstagg muttered. "He doesn't mind, do you, Captain?"

Volstagg looked up at Steve and, well, apparently those were the sad eyes Natasha warned him about.

"Of course not," Steve said.

Steve startled—since when was Pietro right beside him?—and Natasha laughed at him. Steve sagged. "I'm never going to get used to him doing that, am I?"

"Nope," Pietro agreed.

"Probably not," Natasha said, squeezing him on the shoulder before wandering ahead to catch up with the women he now remembered as Gamora. Steve watched Gamora carefully. She didn't sit on their main table. Did she have her memories back too? How many people here were pretending to be mindwashed and how many were? And for how long? What was the plan for escape? Steve also still didn't know if Tony and Pietro had won their match and avoided the worms, or had they both died too?

Steve felt like at this point he was only made up of questions. His gaze drifted to Tony, who was still avoiding his gaze, and Steve had the sinking suspicion answers to his questions might be harder to get than he would like.

Tony hurried away muttering about solder after they were finished in the showers. Steve swallowed back his sigh and followed Pietro to the workshop. Natasha was already there, head bent over something she was diligently scratching into.

She looked up and beamed on seeing Steve and Pietro.

"You updating the map, huh?" Pietro said, immediately standing by Natasha's side. She side-eyed him and the tools on the worktop that were rocking from Pietro's speeding. He managed to do the simultaneous wince-and-sheepish-grin expression that Wanda was infamous for and Natasha's displeasure immediately and visibly melted from her face.

"Map?" Steve repeated, so comprised of questions that even a single word automatically came out as one.

Natasha made a distracted beckoning motion and Steve ambled over to see what she was working on. It looked like a flat square of wood with very faint scratches. Steve stared at it thoughtfully as she made another mark and then handed the nail she was scratching it with to Pietro.

"That was risky," Natasha murmured as Pietro's hands blurred and four small faint triangles appeared on the wood.

"One was a mistake," Pietro admitted. "Brandt's explosion knocked Cap's shield into me, threw me into the barrier harder than I was expecting."

"Sorry," Steve said, awkwardly.

"Ah, it's fine, I wasn't paying enough attention to where you were." Pietro pulled a face. "I'm used to it being just the three of us."

"I'm glad it's not," Natasha said, "even if I'm still pissed off that it's you."

"Way to make a guy feel wanted," Steve folded his arms across his chest. "Yon-Rogg took you out of the game pretty fast, wanna talk about it?"

Natasha shrugged. "Not really."

"She got distracted when you were busy getting yourself electrocuted," Pietro said.
"You should have been there to help him," Natasha sniped, ignoring Steve's gaze.

"I was a little busy, Ronan's hammer had Iron Man in frozen suspension," Pietro said.

Natasha blinked. "He did?"

"See," Pietro said with a flourish. "Distracted."

Steve inhaled and exhaled slowly, trying to regain his calm. "I'm sure we'll get the hang of fighting together, if we need to. We need time to learn how to be in each other's space, to learn how to communicate and experience and learn how to balance this new combination of strengths and weaknesses." His conversation with Morgan a few days ago settled into his gut with an echo of rueful irony. Time, communication, and experience. "It'll be an adjustment period for all of us, I'm sure."

"We usually get a group assignment every week-ish," Natasha said. "It's not always us, but it tends to be. Apparently we're quite a draw, Tony made us famous across the universe."

"He's even more famous back home than he used to be," Steve laughed ruefully. "It's kind of weird. He'll probably like it. You can't go a day without seeing his face painted somewhere."

"Painted?" Natasha asked.

"Remembrance murals everywhere," Steve said. "Candles, soft toys, flowers—even so many years later, still going strong."

"Please don't tell him that." Natasha paused for a moment before adding, "Any for me?" with a waggle of her eyebrows that stated she was kidding.

"One in Moscow, actually," Steve said. Natasha's mouth flattened, a sign she was genuinely surprised. "Clint said there was a statue in Budapest, but I wasn't sure if he was kidding or not."

"Definitely kidding," Natasha assured him. Beside her, Pietro was quietly vibrating. "You might as well ask him, kid."

"I'm not a kid," Pietro yelped and then calmed as he tried to look Steve seriously in the eye. "How's my sister?"

Steve considered his answer as carefully as he could. "She misses you greatly, but she's doing well. There was a rocky patch with her powers—" and wasn't that a kind way to phrase it, but he didn't want to bum Pietro out, or scare him, "—but she's being mentored by some magicians in New York. Honestly, she's probably saved the world on her own a handful of times."

Pietro nodded. "Nice. Nice." He rubbed his hands together, looking almost giddily happy. Steve didn't blame him. It was one thing to suspect your loved one was alive (there was no way the Grandmaster could resist someone with Wanda's powers, surely?), but another to learn it for sure. Well. Unless Wanda had done something really dumb over the last few days, that is.

"So what else do we do around here on days without the matches?" Steve asked.

Natasha smirked. "Apart from hang out in here and pretend to have noisy sex with each other?"

"Yes," Steve said, "apart from that."

"We train," Tony said, from the doorway. He was carrying something in his hands and he frowned
over at the three of them. "Nice observational skills going on here. It's great that I'm the only one keeping it together here."

Natasha rolled her eyes and moved out from behind the worktop and the “map” that Steve hadn't had the opportunity to ask for an explanation for yet. "The sensor doesn't light up when it's you approaching on your own. You coded it to do that."

"Don't use logic on me," Tony said. He strode over to join them, briefly meeting Steve's eyes and then glancing away, and Steve tried not to bristle. Tony clearly was annoyed by something Steve had done, or said, or thought, or might do, or probably would do—there were problems when you were teammates with someone who was a self-professed futurist.

Except Tony had been right. He'd been so, so right and Steve hadn't listened. Hadn't insisted that they try again, just because the first attempt had gone admittedly apocalyptic. Steve wondered whether he would ever have anything other than a laundry list of regrets when it came to Tony Stark.

Steve would listen this time. God, he hoped Tony would let him listen this time, wouldn't permanently shut him out. He couldn't blame Tony if he wanted to.

"We have a training routine," Pietro said. "Natasha's a very strict teacher."

"My students are dangerously cute," Natasha said, "I have to be strict to compensate for the puppy dog eyes they throw my way when they don't want to warm-up before sparring."

"Stretching is important," Steve said.

"Oh no, there's another one of them," Pietro whined, dramatically posing in a lean against the table, the back of his hand pressed to his forehead. "Stark, this is a tragedy."

"Tell me about it," Tony muttered. He put down the object in his hands—it looked like a roll of solder—and he started to unwind a small length before pulling out something from under the table that looked like a jury-rigged soldering iron. He then bent down to do something down near the ground. Steve averted his gaze, aware he probably looked like he was staring. It was still hard to accept that Tony was alive and here.

Natasha leaned against the other side of the worktop, closer to Steve, and she looked at him. "How you feeling after, what is it, worm-time three?"

"A little sore," Steve said. "I presume the itchy feeling is normal too?"

"Alas that never goes away," Pietro sighed.

"You weren't on the top of your game," Natasha said, slowly, even though she hadn't been fighting at her best either, if a mere distraction had gotten her knocked out. Steve didn't want to think the word killed, not in relation to Natasha, not if he could help it. Knocked out would have to be a worthy enough metaphor.

Steve shrugged. "Haven't had a fight like that in maybe...forty years? I think being a bit rusty is understandable in those circumstances."

"Ha," Natasha half-laughed, and then frowned. "Wait, when did you actually end up stopping at, when you were returning the stones?"

Steve squirmed a little under the attention, all three of them looking at him for his answer. "1945."
"1945," Natasha repeated, in an appalled sounding tone.

"He did say it was eighty years and I distinctly remember the term simple life," Tony muttered as he rose from what he was doing, dropping a handful of what looked like circuit boards onto the worktop. He hooked out a stool from under the worktop to perch on and started examining the boards.

"Yeah, but—really?" Natasha pulled a disappointed face. "I didn't have the time to process it then. I'm surprised, that's all, after we worked so hard to convince you of the joys of the future and you went to the land of...polio, and—"

"No Google," Pietro offered.

"Or Starkle," Tony said.

"No Google!" Natasha said, loudly, smirking at Tony's immediate quiet muttering about how the world had no sense and his search engine was clearly superior.

"No Pornhub," Pietro said.

"Exactly!" Natasha jabbed a finger into Steve's arm and then she froze and squinted at Pietro. "Were't you still a kid when you left Sokovia and were caught up by those Hydra goons?"

"I was a teenager," Pietro said. "But it was Hydra. Do you think they had time to stop and think about the moral ethics of giving porn to a minor." He paused. "Maybe they wanted my sperm." He tilted his head. "Do you think I have any secret Hydra kids running around out there?"

For a moment, Tony did look up at Steve; he, Steve, and Natasha shared a matching look of awkward horror.

"Let's explore that when we get home," Steve suggested. Maybe it was safer to get the conversation back on topic, because Steve would much rather talk about his own decisions than Pietro's sperm. "Besides, it's not like there wasn't porn in the forties."

"There's no porn here," Pietro said. "Unless you count Yondu's daily free show."

"That does not count as porn, that constitutionally counts as torture." Tony pulled a face. "You know what, I can't believe this." He slammed the soldering tool he was using down and he glared at Steve, eyes burning. "We did work hard to convince you the future was great. And all that work, for nothing? You skip off and abandon everyone the instant you could?"

Steve stared back, holding Tony's gaze, feeling it burn into him. "I didn't abandon anyone. From their perspective I was gone for less than a minute."

"And then what, you ambled up to them like a ready-made pensioner?" Tony huffed. "I really thought you'd made a home in our time. Guess I was wrong."

"I had a home with the Avengers, yes," Steve said, aware that his words were coming out tighter than he wanted them to be. "But after the battle… You have no idea—"

Steve had to swallow back the end of that sentence. His eyes were burning, almost as badly as they had with the worms. He couldn't handle this; couldn't handle Tony looking at him angrily, unaware of how much it had hurt, how much every second in a world without Tony or Natasha had felt like fucking sandpaper, scraping every wound in his body. Steve had spent the week following the battle in absolute agony, and not from the multiple fractures and bloody wounds he'd received.
Bruce gave him hourly updates on the progress of the new time platform, probably to stop Steve whining at him about it. Steve had basically been completely unbearable.

The whole five years of the Decimation, Steve had felt like he didn't belong in that time anymore. And with Tony and Natasha gone, dead, he hadn't felt it—he'd known it.

Steve hadn't felt like he'd belonged in 1945 either. That was probably why he'd ignored the Ancient One's whispering plea as he returned the Time Stone to be gentle with his new life; he'd aggressively helped re-shape that reality into something new, turning that world into a place he didn't recognize, in an attempt to forcibly turn somewhere that could never really be home into somewhere he could at least live.

Steve lifted his chin and glared at Tony. "The future lost its appeal," he said, stiffly. Steve could feel his chest tightening, burning with pressure, as he looked at Tony and Natasha. "Neither of you were there."

Natasha flinched and oh god, he really couldn't be there any longer.

Steve turned to Pietro. "There's an inside training room as well as the outside gym, right? Would you mind showing me where it is from here so I punch something softer than a wall?"

"Sure," Pietro said, too quickly, and sounding much too relieved. "I can do that."

Steve liked the training room better than the outside gym. It seemed quieter. Pietro didn't seem in a rush to leave him. They were mostly alone in the training room, apart from Guillotine who was quietly doing some effortlessly beautiful moves with a wooden sword against a training dummy in one corner; Steve hated that he was already mentally cataloging how to defend against them. They said Einherjar versus Einherjar battles were infrequent, but Steve wanted to be prepared. Dying might not be impermanent here, but it didn't mean he was keen to do it again any time soon.

There were several good punching bags and pairs of boxing gloves available for Steve to borrow. Beating out some of his frustrations on an inanimate object sounded like a good outlet; Pietro was game to hold the punching bag still too, which made it even sturdier, although all the equipment in the room seemed to be built to withstand force. The worms were supposed to make you stronger every time and Steve could feel that in him after only three times. He wondered if there was a limit or if people just got stronger and stronger.

Each punch served to make another question blossom, as if Steve wasn't already bursting with them. If he had been rebuilt by the worms enough, would any of his original parts remain? Reed Richards would have a kick over that morality dilemma, he liked to opine about ethics—usually right before completely ignoring them—but at least the lively discussions with him beforehand were interesting enough. Steve had been blown apart; the worms must be able to reconstitute a person from their parts. How big did the parts of the dead person have to be in order to be brought back? If each part was replaced, and none of the original body remained, was he Steve Rogers or was he just three thousand alien worms in a trench coat that thought they were Steve Rogers? It was the Ship of Theseus debate, now with added worms.

Steve knew the instant that Tony had come to find him, because heaven forbid Tony Stark let someone else get the last word in a tense situation. The sound around the punching bag area changed subtly and Steve deliberately didn't turn to look, mostly because he was still feeling a quiet thrum of annoyance that Tony could barely look at him.

Tony cleared his throat. Steve glanced up, holding the bag, and stared at him. He wasn't going to
make the first move here. If Tony wanted to talk, he could start the damn conversation.

Pietro beamed awkwardly, looking between Steve and Tony, and then seemed to realize the atmosphere was loaded, because he grinned faux-charmingly and started to back up.

"I'll see you back in the workshop," Pietro finger-gunned them both and blurred off before Steve could half-heartedly try to convince him to stay. It was a weak impulse to want to have a witness to this scene, an innocent person to hide behind.

Steve flattened his mouth. Tony raised an eyebrow. Steve turned back to the punching bag, clenching his jaw, and resumed punching it, although he tempered his blows for the moment, uncertain of how strongly it was tethered to the ceiling.

There was silence for a short while, Tony either testing Steve's obstinacy or waiting to see if Steve was mustering up the right words.

Tony huffed impatiently. Steve kept punching.

"Y'know, I don't know if I buy it," Tony said, his voice pitching into a confrontational tone.

Steve paused briefly and looked at him. "Excuse me?"

"The whole—" Tony made a complicated gesture in the air with both hands, "—you only went back to the past because Nat and I were dead thing."

"I didn't say only," Steve punched at the bag again. "I said it was a factor."

"Actually, no you didn't." Tony walked around the bag so he was in Steve's eyeline, folding his eyes and leaning against the wall to stare at him. "Not in those exact words. In fact, from your phrasing, one might assume it was your whole foundation for that frankly insane idea."

Steve adjusted his stance and kept punching. "Do you get sponsored for pedantry or is that a personal flaw?"

"Flaw, that's harsh. Are you always so mean to the dead?"

"As we can both agree on right now, dead doesn't mean what it's supposed to mean here."

"True. But I'd still like to point out that the word flaw is inaccurate. I like to think of my pedantry as a quirk. Gives my otherwise perfect personality a charming realism."

"It was a factor, Tony. Not the whole reason."

"Yeah, well, I still don't buy it." Tony leaned against the wall, looking at Steve in that challenging way he did, when he was spoiling for a fight and thought he had someone on the ropes. "You had five years where you could have seen me any damn time you wanted. You only came to see me once."

Steve focused his focus onto the bag so that Tony became a blur of color in the background and began punching the bag faster, throwing his weight into each hit. "I didn't think you wanted to see me."

Tony made a humming noise in the back of his throat. "Maybe you have a point. Definitely at the beginning, anyway. But you were there, you know how fast I forgave you. And you forgave me quickly too. I mean. Relatively. So. I don't buy you'd hate a future without me in it so much. Nat,
"It is what it is," Steve interrupted tersely, his punches quickening. "I regret those five years. I regret more than those five years." He stopped abruptly, held the bag still and stared at Tony. "And I have to live with the fact that when I did come see you, I brought you to your death. So yeah, a future where I got you killed, it wasn't very appealing."

The challenging light in Tony's eyes muted and he unfolded his arms, shoving one hand in a pocket. Tony's other hand fiddled for glasses he wasn't wearing for a moment, before he lowered that arm and looked at Steve with a less hostile expression.

"I knew what I was doing," Tony said. His voice was quiet, but it was firm. Resolute.

"I know," Steve said, his voice cracking, because he did. At least, he knew now, even if he hadn't at the time. Tony planned meticulously for as many outcomes as possible, that was what he did. That was who he was. Tony had knowingly built that damn suit as his own coffin. And he hadn't said anything. He'd just quietly done it, knowing the likely outcome, and Steve hadn't a clue that had even been a thought in that big brain of his. He should have known. But then why would Tony have told him? Tony hadn't trusted him for a long time, and wasn't it for a good reason?

Together. He'd promised Tony together. And even at the end of that terrible battle, Tony was left to stand up against Thanos alone.

Steve had never broken a promise so thoroughly, either before or since. He wanted to choke every time he thought about it.

"It wasn't about you," Tony stepped forward. "And it wasn't your fault. It was my choice. And you came here, and let me know my daughter is okay, so I damn well know it was worth it."

Steve's eyes felt unbearably hot and dry. He'd heard words a lot like that before, once upon another lifetime, from the woman who would eventually become his wife. To hear them from Tony made Steve feel like the past was haunting him.

"First few weeks here, I thought I was hallucinating," Tony said.

Steve felt like his throat had knotted up, like maybe there was a worm in there again, choking him. He looked at Tony instead, with his hot, aching eyes. Tony's intent expression softened a little.

"I remembered dying. And I figured, y'know, brain damage can cause hallucinations in your final moments, and time is relative, so yeah." Tony gestured around them. "I thought this was my burning brain trying to make sense of what was going on."

Steve stared. Maybe that was the actual truth for him. Maybe he was still lying on the floor of the boardroom, still bleeding out, Bucky's hands pressing down on the wound.

Tony stepped forward, rounding the bag to come stand closer to Steve, his eyes tracking across Steve's face like he was a readout on one of his hologram screens. He reached out and took Steve's hands before methodically pulling off the gloves he'd borrowed and tossing them aside. Steve wordlessly watched them fall and looked back at Tony. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the stare. Tony's eyes seemed so close, so unfathomably deep. Steve kept silent and watched as Tony gently took one of Steve's hands in his own, guiding his hand to Tony's neck; Steve understood and let him press two fingers against the pulse there.

"I'm real," Tony said. Steve swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment, letting Tony's heartbeat resonate against his fingertips. Steve opened his eyes again and Tony stepped back. Tony's eyes...
were kind as they scraped Steve's face this time. "Honestly, I couldn't stop staring at Natasha for at least a month. You're doing pretty well, relatively."

Steve frowned. He swallowed past the uncomfortable knot in his throat. "How did she stop you?"

"Conned me into collapsing my armor mid-fight and she pretty much bisected me with a broadsword."

Steve pulled a face. "Really?"

"No, that's bloodthirsty and weird, what's wrong with you?" Tony rolled his eyes. "We talked and used our words. I know, it's a shocking concept."

"You and words? Yeah. I'm stunned." Steve kept his voice light, but he was pleased Tony was mocking him. That felt like familiar territory and that was what he needed.

Tony backed away, stepping off the mat to prod at a bowl on a pedestal holding hand chalk, inspecting a little of it on one fingertip. "A century later and you still have that smart mouth. I don't know why I'm surprised."

"Are you?"

Tony halted in his examination and looked up at Steve. "Am I what?"


Tony put his palms into the chalk, before dusting his hands together, sending a spill of chalk dust into the air. "Well, she didn't think my signal would get through. I mean. It's been going a while."

Steve nodded. Natasha held out hope for a miracle for longer than most, post-Decimation, but even her faith had its limits. "So she was waiting to see which one of us idiots first bit the dust."

Tony looked up at the remnants of chalk dust still lazily floating in the air and he smiled, one of those tiny smiles where he was trying not to be amused. "I was more positive."

"Yeah?"

"I hear the positive? you? in a scandalized tone that you're not actually saying, but yeah, it's my tech sending out the signal, of course I'm confident in it working."

Well, that seemed closer to what Steve was expecting, he supposed.

"There was a fight," Steve said, carefully.

"Oh?" Tony's voice was that cautious kind of casual, which meant he was interested in what Steve was about to say, even if he didn't want to sound like he was. Tony dug around in the chalk dust, found a small piece of chalk that wasn't broken up, and palmed it with a quiet noise of pleasure.

"Everyone wanted the pleasure of going first." Steve bent down and scooped up the gloves, carefully undoing the fastenings; it wasn't quite velcro, but it seemed to work like it.

"And old man Rogers, who hadn't had a fight in forty years, won?" Tony's expression was suddenly dark, almost angry. "What did you do?"

Steve hooked the gloves around his neck and joined Tony by the chalk, picking up another small unbroken part and looking at it like it was endlessly fascinating. "Morgan hacked into the security
"Of course she did." Tony sounded almost proud, but then the full implications hit home. "Did she —"

"I stopped her before she could get to the syringe," Steve assured him, but then he wrinkled his mouth and looked up at Tony apologetically. "I may have traumatized her a little in the process."

"Well. Take it from me. Trauma's something you can only get over if you're alive enough to do it." Tony looked away, staring at Guillotine like he was interested in her training, instead of just avoiding eye contact with Steve because the subject of their conversation was painful.

Steve stared at Tony's profile. He wouldn't have had to protect Morgan if he'd gotten to Thanos faster, somehow, or better, or even listened to Tony in the first place about that suit of armor around the world—He swallowed back that flood of rage. Regret didn't help things now.

"There's a map that Natasha mentioned," Steve said, cautiously, palming the piece of chalk he'd found to Tony's quiet smirk of approval.

"Yeah, I can show you how it works," Tony said. "You'll be having to add to it yourself now, after all."

"Sure."

"We can go now. Unless you have more feelings you want to sublimate into angry punching. I know how much you like conforming to terribly one-dimensional stereotypes."

"I don't know why I missed you," Steve said, unhooking the gloves from around his neck and starting to head toward where they were stored. He could tell Tony was following him because the strange quiet moved with him; however it worked, it slightly muffled the sound from the surrounding area, which was a boon, because Guillotine—still spinning and smacking the training doll in the corner—was a noisy fighter.

"You missed me?" Tony sounded smug. "How about that."

Steve sighed as he hung the gloves up and he glanced at Tony ruefully. "How much am I going to regret saying that?"

Tony slung a companionable arm around his shoulder and started to lead him out of the room. "So much, my man. So much."

"Great," Steve said, working hard to pretend he sounded disgruntled about it.

The map was clever, which was to be expected of something created by Tony Stark. It was an intricate system of marks where each of them had tried to hit the force-field surrounding the arena and with what manner of impact. Steve dutifully helped scratch in little asterisks where he hit it with his shield.

"This is mostly what we're working on as our priorities," Tony explained, showing Steve where they were amassing their tiny stock of chalk pieces. Steve dutifully added his piece to the drawer. "How to destroy the force-field, how to get out, and how to destroy the worm tank."

"Is destroying it a priority?" Steve frowned. The worms were painful, but they were kind of a miracle, too.
"Well. Not until we know we can get out and won't need it again, obviously." Tony tapped his fingers on the map, his eyes quickly disappearing to stare at a horizon none of them were privy to. "But think about the people we've faced in the past. There's some of those we really don't want coming back. Or do you think your Red Skull would use them for fun and giggles?"

Steve shrugged. "I'm sold." If Tony thought it was a good idea, at least Steve had learned his lesson by now to realize it was probably backed up by solid reasoning. He was about to ask another of his thousand questions, but a more urgent one slid up his list. "What does it mean when the light above the door is flashing an ugly orange color?"

"Aw, crap," Tony picked the map up and flipped it over before placing his gauntlet on it. "Code Orange, Avengers, let's go."

"Shit," Natasha said, and immediately pulled off her tunic. Steve blinked, especially as she started kicking her shoes off and unhooking her bra.

Steve looked to one side, to see if anyone else was disturbed, only to see Tony pulling his pants down. "Um," Steve said, turning to see Pietro completely buck naked and climbing into the bed.

"That means the Grandmaster's on his way," Natasha pointed at the obnoxious orange color pulsing above the main door; she glanced over at Pietro as she hurried over to the bed and oh, yep, there was more of Natasha that he'd even seen in those two years on the run when they were sharing slightly-dubious motel rooms with dodgy bathrooms and very little space. "Pietro, give Steve a hand."

"Not in the dirty way," Tony added, shoving something into a box before hurrying to bed, quickly shucking his tunic.

Pietro's face suddenly loomed large in Steve's vision. Yep, Steve was never going to get used to that super speed.

"This might hurt, but don't worry, I'll be gentle afterward," Pietro said and Steve opened his mouth to ask one of the million new questions this whole situation was prompting and found himself instead naked on the bed and gasping for air.

"Oh, that's a good look," Tony said, patting Steve on the cheek with an open palm before hauling up the sheet and tugging it over all of them. Steve struggled to understand what was going on, something made even worse when Tony cuddled up to his side, and Tony was definitely naked too. Steve might have had a dream or five thousand like this one, but he was pretty sure dream Steve wasn't so confused. And dream Steve didn't also have Natasha and Pietro naked alongside him.

Dream Tony might have had a starring role, though, more than once; Steve was glad that confusion effectively killed any hope of an erection, because otherwise this awkward situation might suddenly be unbearable.

Tony would probably be kind about it, if it happened, Steve thought. He'd probably justify it as it being a normal human reaction and say he was flattered, and then he noticed Natasha straddling Pietro next to him and his brain blanked out, oh god.

"C'mon, Steve, figure it out," Natasha beamed at Steve encouragingly.

"I guess if this was really happening, none of us would have as much blood going to the brain," Pietro said, obviously doing his best not to look at Natasha, which was sweet and respectful in a weird sort of way. Steve had never had this much naked flesh pressed up against him, well, ever.
"Oh, my god," Steve said, faintly, "Of course." They were only allowed this room because the bugs didn't like what they thought was happening inside, so if someone actually did come inside the room, they couldn't exactly be hanging around fully clothed while those noises echoed outside the door.

The door opened noisily.

"Oh, oh, right there, right there," Natasha dramatically sighed.

"Yeah, baby, that's it," Pietro crooned. There was a little light under the sheet, not too much, but enough for Steve to see Pietro's mouth spread wide, like this was the funniest thing ever.

Steve tried to move his gaze somewhere more polite and landed on Natasha's shoulder. He noticed the red hourglass tattoo that had been visible there under her arena costume was gone. That was an interesting fact.

"A little to the left," Tony said, his breath warm on Steve's neck. Steve twisted to look at him automatically and Tony was grinning too and honestly, yeah, this was pretty funny. Steve found himself shaking with repressed laughter. "That's it, baby."

"Oh, that's why they call you Iron Man," Steve said and Natasha burst out laughing, burying her head in Pietro's neck.

"Avengers," a voice from outside the bed said, slightly high-pitched and reedy.

Tony cleared his throat and lifted the sheet down far enough that only their heads were visible; when Natasha turned her head to look at the Grandmaster, the sheet fell away from her, leaving her more exposed, but she didn't seem to be too bothered by it. If this sort of scenario had been happening for years, Steve supposed it mustn't seem too weird for them.

It was weird for him. By goodness, it was weird for Steve. Natasha's hand was on his chest right now for balance, and her leg was against his, and Tony was actually curled up against him in a way that was almost unfair in a way Steve didn't want to examine too closely right now, because he felt like he might break apart more thoroughly than he did when getting himself blown up. He kept his feelings for Tony quiet, pragmatically keeping them as a simple flame that burned in a corner of his heart, ever flickering and never dying. Just another simple truth that made up the whole of who Steve Rogers was. But even a small flame if left untended could cause a conflagration.

The Grandmaster stood at the end of the bed, a surly Topaz at his side who seemed at least to be appreciating Natasha's appearance; he was flanked by two bugs who were clearly having trouble keeping all their multiple pairs of eyes anywhere but at the bed. Their aversion to human sexuality was at least a little amusing. Steve wondered if their naked bodies was as repulsive to them as the giant bugs would seem to most humans.

Steve didn't mind the bugs. He used to like drawing them, labeling the parts, figuring out how they moved; when you grew up as the kid who couldn't keep up with the rest, your hobby options were limited and often strange because of it.

"Good day, my Avengers," the Grandmaster said. "Congratulations on your latest explosive win."

Steve tried not to wince. He focused on staring at the Grandmaster, guessing he should probably be enamored of his presence if he was still supposed to be mindwashed by the Control Disc. Mostly it helped because it stopped his brain from focusing on how it felt to have Tony's weight pressed against his side, warm skin and firm muscles, a faint tickle on his shoulder from where Tony was...
resting his head, and god, Steve could get used to it.

It was irresponsible and rude to even think like that.

"To what do we owe the honor of your presence, Grandmaster?" Natasha asked, her voice a throaty purr.

"Do I need an excuse to stop by and see my favorite Einherjar?" The Grandmaster arched an eyebrow and then wiggled his hands dramatically. "But as it so happens, coincidentally, I do need to borrow the fair Captain for a moment."

Steve's eyes flew briefly to Tony. Tony's mustache twitched a little, even as Tony fought to keep his face straight. Steve glanced over at the Grandmaster. "Right now?"

"He's shy," Tony offered.

"I can wait," the Grandmaster said, and folded his arms, leaning against the wall.

Right. So he wasn't going to go anywhere. Steve stretched his mouth into a rueful smile, resented everything, and nudged Tony to move with his knee before climbing over him, trying to blank out how it felt for their bodies to drag against each other, and left the bed.

Tony tugged the sheet back so it covered him and Steve shot him a brief look; Tony just unhelpfully waggled his eyebrows and Steve turned back to the Grandmaster, trying not to audibly sigh.

Steve attempted to pretend he wasn't bothered about standing there naked but he was. He tried to remember that he'd been naked on the worming table. Even his insides had been visible then. There was literally nothing he had that hadn't already been seen by more people than he was comfortable with. He didn't in general enjoy being looked at, outside of an intimate one-on-one scenario, so this many eyes on him made him nervous.

The way the Grandmaster looked him up and down didn't help.

"Hoary hosts of Hoggoth, that's an intimidating physique," the Grandmaster said, shielding his eyes when he looked Steve over again. "I rarely feel inadequate, yowzers, but I do right now. I don't suppose I could convince you to fight completely naked, Captain?"

"He's shy," Tony repeated from the bed, saving Steve from formulating a response.

"Shame," the Grandmaster said. "And I suppose with your human fragile bodies, you're opposed to having bits visible that could so easily be cut off."

"We're so unreasonable like that," Natasha said.

"Shame." The Grandmaster sighed melodically. "Come on, then, Captain, let's go get you some clothes to fight for my honor, huh?"

Steve pressed his mouth into a line but nodded jerkily. He'd done worse than walk a few hallways in the nude, even if it wasn't his first choice.

He had a savior in an unexpected place, though; the two bugs guarding the Grandmaster looked at each other in panic. One made a small clicking noise and the other rolled two pairs of eyes to the ceiling and then quickly said, "Pleassssssssss, Grandmasssssssstter, can the human wear clothessss? Jussst looking at him makesss usss queassssy."
The Grandmaster eyed the bug, who shrank back nervously, but after a tormenting few seconds he nodded. "Probably for the best."

"I think I threw them on the table," Pietro offered, before Steve could panic about that. Steve still felt bruised from how fast Pietro had divested him of his clothes.

Steve turned and found his clothes strewn over the worktop. As he carefully pulled the tunic over his head and carefully untangled his sandals from his underpants, the Grandmaster turned his attention to the three on the bed.

"You three are doing fabulous work," the Grandmaster said. "Really. I love it. You're my biggest draw."

"We want nothing but to please you, Grandmaster," Tony said.

"I know," the Grandmaster said. "I see that and I appreciate that." He lowered his voice. "The ratings aren't really going your friend's way and I know how much you all personally rate him, so if you could make him a little more interesting—"

"We will," Natasha interrupted. She sounded weirdly urgent about it. Steve frowned as he quickly put his pants on and starting to quickly lace the sandals back on. There was an undercurrent to this conversation he didn't like.

"I'm going to help, purely because I'm such a nice person," the Grandmaster said. "The Costumer's tried to make him an outfit and I think it needs...adjusting. We're going to go help the Captain look his most glorious best, I promise you that."

"We thank you for your thoughtfulness," Pietro said. It had the note of words that had been said so often that they lost all meaning and all verisimilitude of intent, but at least the Grandmaster didn't seem to notice there was no authenticity to what he said.

"I know you do," the Grandmaster said condescendingly. "Chop chop, Captain, let's get that remarkably pert ass somewhat covered up."

Steve nodded and tried not to look dismayed at the use of the word *somewhat*.

"I hate everything," Steve said, as soon as got back to their room and the door closed behind him.

Natasha burst out laughing. Steve glared at her sourly. The three of them were all dressed in their nice brown clothing again. Steve had his change of clothes in his arms, but the Costumer made him walk back wearing his new arena outfit to "stretch it in".

Pietro and Natasha were looking at Steve like it was the funniest thing they'd seen in years. Maybe he was. Steve certainly felt like a clown. Steve glanced at Tony, who also seemed to be suppressing a smirk.

"Don't say a word," Steve warned and started to try and figure out how to take off the ridiculous outfit. He carefully put his pile of clothes to change back into onto the end of the bed, trying not to think about what they'd done in it, before he looked down at what he was wearing, trying to figure out how to even undo the monstrosity he'd been forced into. He supposed he needed to be comfortable with how to get it off and on, if he was going to be fighting in it. He puffed his cheeks out as he tried to figure out the best order to take it all off.

"We absolutely need a picture of this," Pietro said.
"We absolutely do," Natasha agreed. "Tony?"

Steve looked to gauge Tony's reaction in time to see Tony duck under the worktop to rummage in the boxes below. Steve was glad they were in private because he was entirely unable to hide his dismay.

"If you've built a camera, I'll break it before letting you take a picture with it," Steve warned.

"While I do enjoy watching you break things with your bare hands," Tony said, "I don't think you'll want to break our camera."

Tony bounced up with Vision's head held tightly in his hands and Vision beamed at him. "Hello, Captain."

Steve sagged. "Please tell me you're shitting me."

"Unfortunately one of my eyes did not quite survive my decapitation," Vision said. "My right eye has been replaced by a lens that can indeed be used as a camera."

Steve sighed and spread his hands wide. "Go on, then. Complete my misery."

Vision blinked. "Done. You can put me back in my box now, Tony."

"Of course," Tony said, bending down to stash Vision's head away again.

"It's not all that bad," Pietro said, looking Steve up and down. "I mean, except for your butt showing every time you move."

Steve's wince drooped into a grimace. The outfit was ridiculous. He should have expected it after seeing Natasha and Pietro in their fighting gear. Except Steve's costume was a combination of unhelpful and clownish.

For his lower half, all he had was some knee-high red leather boots which had a metal plate over the knee. There was also a skirt, if it could be called that. Steve wouldn't mind it, if it had been more substantial, but it was comprised of a leather belt that had blue strips of leather sewn to it. There was a pair of white underpants that Steve didn't have to insist on, because the Costumer insisted on them too; the bugs really didn't seem to like seeing humans naked.

For his top half, it was almost as bad: a red and white vertically striped cropped tank top; blue leather braces on each arm; a blue leather harness that went around his arms so he could put his shield on his back; and to finish it off two spaulders, one on each shoulder, blue bands of metals painted with a single white star each that attached to his upper arm but left his armpit wide open.

He was going to be allowed to keep fighting with his shield, which Steve was almost worried about for a moment, but Pip was summoned to find a big ax for Steve to wield, which would apparently complete the look.

Steve hadn't felt he looked like a clown in a very long time. And it included an emergency birthday party where he had actually had to dress up as the clown. But, oh, that thought wasn't one he wanted to linger on. Not here. His past didn't belong here.

"Honestly, it's not half bad," Natasha moved closer, looking at him at arm's length. "It's doing wonders for your thighs. Hardly anyone will be looking at your face."

Now standing again and leaning on his worktop, Tony smirked across at Steve. "Yeah, because
"From what I remember," Steve said, carefully looking Tony in the eye, "when it comes to me, you're more of an ass guy anyway."

Steve casually turned around to pick up his tunic after he'd finished speaking, unfolding it carefully so he could put it on quickly once he'd figured out how to get out of the costume. When he glanced back over his shoulder, Tony was staring exasperatedly at the ceiling while Natasha and Pietro grinned at him with matching judgmental expressions.

Tony resignedly looked down and fixed Natasha with a glare. "What can I say," Tony gestured in Steve's direction. "It's America's ass."

When he caught Steve watching, Tony shot Steve an annoyed look and Steve beamed innocently before turning back to his task.

"To be fair, it is a pretty great ass," Pietro said. "I do feel a little inadequate."

"Aw, your ass is just fine, Maximoff," Natasha consoled. "You're compact. Built for speed."

"That's a kind way of calling me skinny," Pietro sighed. "You can say it. Compared to any of the other guys here, I'm a weed."

"You're a weed who can run at 1700mph," Tony said. "Is no one going to compliment my ass? It's great too."

Steve was glad he could put down any heat in his cheeks to embarrassment about the outfit and was also glad he could focus on unbuckling the spaulders and harness so he didn't have to look over, because he knew he wouldn't be able to resist looking at Tony's ass, and that direction would only lead to more feelings of regret that Steve could do without right now.

Sometimes he remembered the slither of time they had, where Tony was single, where Steve had a chance, and he'd been too blind to realize his own feelings. When he finally did realize, he'd already salted and burned all the ground between them. These were minor regrets, nothing compared to the bigger ones that woke him up even decades later, Tony's name on his lips, Thanos' low voice in his ears, and Steve's body ice cold in pure fear.

Steve didn't realize that Natasha had wandered over nearer to him unless she said, "Do you need some help with that?"

He blinked and looked at her, his hands automatically tightenning on the buckle he was trying to open as he realized she'd caught him staring into space.

"Please," Steve said, his voice soft. She nodded and helped undo the spaulder nearer to her, while Steve copied her on the mirroring one. He was probably staring at her a little too much, but it was hard to look away. "This is literally the weirdest thing I think I've ever worn," he admitted, unraveling the skirt, wondering if he could deliberately get it damaged so much that he'd have to go back to his original uniform. Then again, he'd probably irreparably got it blown up in the arena.

"Then I think," Natasha said, untying the right arm brace, "that it means you've lived your century very well, actually."

Steve smiled at her. "I tried. I think a lot of my safety was due to knowing I had to be careful because you weren't there to pick up after me."
Natasha punched him in the shoulder, the blow heavier than one she might have given him in the past. "Me being here isn't an excuse for you to get lazy."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Natasha's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, you would, Rogers." Her gaze dipped down, deliberately, then back up to his face. "America's ass?"

"He can tell you later," Tony said, rounding the worktop. "We'd better get to the dining hall." He paused to look at Steve. "You'll probably want to put your pants on for that."

Steve hurried into his clothes because he really did.

Steve's first dinner passed without much incident. The meat had been exactly the same and the berry drink Pietro had referenced taste more like pineapple than berries. There were more bugs around, so Tony didn't deploy the suppression field, and it was probably a good thing; Steve didn't really want to hear more digs about his ass.

There were led to the bathroom after the meal. Showers seemed to be optional, so Steve skipped it in favor of following Tony and Pietro to a low, sloping surface that was covered in perpetually running water, and Pietro showed Steve how to use the tooth powder. Steve let Pietro explain how to use it, even though Steve was familiar with tooth powders; toothpaste hadn't really been popular until the forties. It was a familiar product but not a familiar taste; when Steve awkwardly asked how effective it was, Pietro shrugged and explained none of them really ever lived long enough to get tooth decay anyway, which was a cheerful thought.

Walking to the room they slept in felt to Steve like he was walking through treacle. The lights had been lowered and his brain felt a bit heavy. Maybe there was something in the drink that made them sleep more easily, or maybe it was in the tooth cleaning powder. Or maybe Steve had experienced too many overwhelming moments, one after another, and this was normal fatigue, catching up to him.

Whatever the reason, it felt easy to take off his sandals and lie down in the sand, easy to just automatically loop an arm around Tony, pulling him closer. The sound around them dulled again, Tony's suppression field active, and Steve was glad, because it meant if he couldn't sleep, maybe they could talk a little. Except Natasha leaned her entire weight against him, her back against his, and it was such a solid and warm reminder that she was alive that Steve felt sleep rush over him like a warm wave of water.

His waking was less gentle.

There was a nightmare. The details were broken, distended, stretched into shadows and gilded with blood; Steve was reaching out, reaching, and getting there too late, and there was a body in his arm that was too small, so small, was he always so small? And again, it happened again, it always happened again. The girl was standing on the grass, her eyes wide, and a smaller figure dashed, knocked her down, and a blur, and then the figure was in his arms again, so small, too small, bleeding out—

Steve awoke to Natasha and Tony holding him down, Pietro's hand over his mouth, and James' name ringing in his ears. Steve screamed into his hand one more time, uselessly, his chest tight. He almost couldn't breathe, and he knew he was panicking, hyperventilating.
A warm voice was close in his ear, shushing him, telling him he was okay, that everything was okay. It was Tony's voice and that's what broke through to Steve, finally woke him up, tugged him away from that horror. He looked at Natasha in frozen terror, his mouth working uselessly, and Natasha's hand slid into his hair, smoothing through it, reassuring and soft.

"This happened to us too," Natasha said. "Don't let it rattle you. It's normal to be terrified right out of your skull. It doesn't make you weak. Holding it in makes you weak. You're here with us, you're safe, you're alive."

Steve nodded. "I—" he started, but his throat was dry, like he'd spent hours talking, and he didn't remember doing that.

"Pietro, get him some water," Tony said, his voice rumbling against the skin of Steve's shoulder. "Don't talk. You were shouting, you need to rest your voice for now."

Steve had been shouting? But he was supposed to be pretending to be calm in public spaces and the lights were so low, but maybe the bugs had heard them, and they're all going to be ripped apart, all their memories stolen, and—

"The suppression field is still active and no one is looking at us," Natasha said.

Steve swallowed hard. Of course Natasha wouldn't need him to ask. Even though he'd lived a whole other life, he was still as clear as a book to her. Maybe it was just her formidable skills, but Steve liked to think she'd never forgotten how to read him.

His chest still felt a little tight, which meant he needed to get his breathing under control. He closed his eyes and tried to focus. It was difficult when he was being held so tightly by people who his brain was still half-convinced couldn't actually be there.

"Here," Tony said softly, and Steve snapped open his eyes to see Tony lifting a cup of water to his mouth, like Steve couldn't do it himself, but then when Steve tried to lift his own hand, he realized it was trembling. He let Tony tip up the water into his mouth and he drank it greedily, feeling infinitely fragile, like Natasha and Tony's arms were the only things anchoring him to the ground, the only reason he was still mostly in one piece.

There was another warm weight back against his back, Pietro curling up against him, and when Tony pulled the cup away, Steve closed his eyes again. He was so tired. God, had he ever been so tired before? Maybe, in another life, when grief was too much to ignore, and Peggy couldn't look him in the eye, and everything Steve touched turned to ash.

He didn't remember falling asleep again but he must have. He woke up this next time tangled in a knot with the other Avengers. Steve was still slumped mostly upright, Pietro curled up against his back still. Natasha was lying with her head in his lap, one of her arms wrapped around Tony's leg, and Tony was slumped against Steve's shoulder, Steve's skin damp where Tony had drooled in his sleep.

Steve didn't move, holding his breath so he could look at Tony and Natasha in the dim light of the room without either of them catching him staring. They both looked so innocent in sleep. Younger, too. The gray that had crept into Tony's hair was gone, which Steve thought was almost a shame, because it had suited him. Now Tony looked more like they had when they first met. Steve's first impression of someone had never been so thoroughly wrong before, then or since. It turned out Tony could self-sacrifice like a champ given even half a reason. It also seemed like Morgan had inherited that deadly trait. Steve's heart ached. They needed to get back home, as soon as possible. He hoped he would be able to convince them of the urgency.
Tony woke first, which meant that Steve was able to passably pretend he’d also only just woken up. Natasha never bought any of Steve's acts. He was apparently still transparent to her, which was a bridge he was going to have to come to terms with later, because there were things he didn't want to talk about, things she could probably pull out of him without pausing to take a breath.

Unlike Natasha, Tony was more of the "if I pretend feelings don't exist then I don't have to feel them" variety and didn't even mention it; by the time Natasha was awake, Steve was already pulling on his sandals, and a bug summoned them for breakfast before she could ask.

The Warriors Three weren't at breakfast. Odin was alone with Skurge, who looked like he was slowly coaxing Odin to eat. Even when Tony put up the suppression field, Odin didn't say anything. Steve empathized.

Pietro took pity on the tense atmosphere and started regaling Steve with a story about fighting the dragon that apparently lived under the arena. According to Pietro he managed to run slow enough to tempt the dragon into following him and he coaxed it into a giant knot, whereupon he burrowed into the middle of the knot and got to work with a small dagger that he'd convinced Pip to hide in his boots.

Steve appreciated the tale; as Wanda had always told him, Pietro was a born storyteller. Like Steve, Wanda erred to quiet, if she wasn't prodded to talk. Pietro must have filled in most of her silences while they were growing up and she never learned how to take up that space herself once he was gone.

Steve took a deep breath in and out. He'd gotten into the arena. The Avengers must have realized that by now. There had to be a way to get everyone out. There had to be.

Natasha got up mid-meal to lean in and quietly talk to Skurge and when she came back, her mouth was downturned. Steve presumed that the match went so badly that the Warriors Three must still be stuck in the worming process. He glanced over to the force-field bisecting the dining hall and felt uneasy at the couple of faces turned their way.

"Suppression field down," Tony said, jolting Steve's attention back to the table. Steve nearly dropped the piece of meat he was holding as he remembered that it meant Topaz would be coming soon with the envelopes.

"Just two of you today," Topaz bellowed as she came into the room. "Take advantage, the rest of you, you're gonna need the time."

Topaz walked over to them and Steve realized he was holding his breath.

"Here, you'll be able to take your fancy new duds out for a spin," Topaz said and dropped an envelope on Steve's plate, sneering at him. "Have fun with this one, Captain."

Steve stared impassively back at her; he'd discovered during his costume fitting that she was discomfited by his lack of expression.

"One for you too, Widow," Topaz threw an envelope carelessly at her; Natasha caught it effortlessly and dimpled a smile. Topaz made a sound of disgust.

"That's it for now," Topaz snarled, marching out of the room with loud, distinct sniffs of disdain.

Unlike Steve who was ignoring his envelope, Natasha opened hers quickly. She made a small huffing noise and then looked up at the forcefield, like she was deliberately looking for someone. As far as Steve could tell, Topaz always visited the Einherjar first with their assignments, so
whoever Natasha was looking for wouldn't know they were about to face her. She seemed to find her target and she hummed under her breath, not sounding too upset.

"Who did you get?" Pietro asked.

"Suppression field back up," Tony said, "a moment too late, maybe."

Pietro made a dismissive huffing noise. "Please, that's a perfectly reasonable question. I'm interested to know who's honoring our glorious Grandmaster today."

"Killmonger," Natasha said, primly.

Pietro's face did something complicated. "Isn't he the guy that literally ripped my heart out last month?"

"That's the dude," Natasha said.

Pietro looked her in the eyes solemnly. "Avenge me, Natasha. Avenge me good."

Natasha laughed. "I plan on it." She didn't turn to Steve when she added, "The text isn't going to change the longer you leave it unopened."

"It might," Steve said, amicably. "How would you know? You wouldn't be able to see it happen."

He reached for the envelope anyway, picking off a piece of his breakfast meat that had gotten stuck to it, carefully putting that in his mouth to chew on as he opened the envelope and peered in.

"Match: ONE SUN. THE CAPTAIN versus KAECILIUS. Battle to the DEATH."

Steve frowned. Kaecilius. That name sounded familiar, somewhere in the back of his mind. A conversation with…Wong. That was it. The guy who helped Strange protect the Sanctum Sanctorum. Steve liked him. Wong, that is. Strange put his teeth on edge, but Steve knew he wasn't alone in that feeling.

Kaecilius, yeah, that was definitely the guy. A former mystical arts practitioner who grew disillusioned with the Ancient One when she forbade him from delving into an art that he believed could bring back his dead wife and child. Steve's heart hurt. His head was pounding. He could understand rage being conceived from such an unfulfilled desire. He could understand how it might start to shift from desire to need, and people who needed things were more likely to cross dangerous lines to achieve their aims.

Wong had explained that Kaecilius hadn't died, he had merely become an immortal part of the Dark Dimension. Clearly Kaecilius had found some way to sever that immortality if he was here.

Killmonger sounded familiar too. Shuri mentioned him, Steve thought, as someone who had challenged T'Challa for the throne and lost. His heart ached for Shuri, too; her look of pain when she told them about having to honestly challenge her brother for the throne… It was a decision that still haunted her, for as much as it had been necessary at the time.

Dwelling in the past was something Steve wasn't supposed to do anymore, but he supposed it was probably preferable than screaming, which seemed to be the only other option his body was offering up as an alternative.

Steve tried to empty his mind as they formed their usual queue to the showers. Worrying did nothing good to a person. He needed to calm and ready himself to prepare for the fight. He wasn't sure how time worked here yet, but it seemed like "High Suns" was the earliest match designation,
and "Split Suns" happened after that, so maybe "One Sun" was after that? It made some sort of sense, if Steve imagined the two suns drifting apart over the course of the afternoon. Did this place even have afternoons? He was assigning human terms to an alien location, but what else was he supposed to do? Give up and go mad?

Showering and dressing was at least something he could do without thinking, although Pietro had to nudge him so that he didn't drown under the shower head. That was the thought that finally bucked him into motion, because if Steve passed out in the showers, the Grandmaster might consider that as him refusing to fight, and he didn't want to think what the cost would be for that. Vision had lost his head when Tony had refused to battle and that was bad enough. Steve didn't want to think what his price would be for refusal, because his brain instantly supplied a hundred options when he tried, each of them more terrible than the last.

Natasha was outside the bathroom when they came out, already dressed and her hair impeccably braided. She looked at Tony. "Outside gym, do you think?"

"Yeah," Tony said. "We need lots of space."

"Space?" Steve looked between them. "Space for what?"

Natasha started walking and Steve followed her; behind them, the other Einherjar were dispersing, a couple of them coming the same way. "Kaecilius is difficult to describe. But we figured out a few years ago that Pietro can come pretty close to the sensation of fighting him."

"Oh yeah, with his powers, trust me, you don't want to go in cold," Pietro said and was standing at the far end of the hall a second later. "C'mon, hurry up," he called, disappearing in another blur.

"We can give you some of the tips we've figured out, for facing him," Tony said.

"Right, of course," Steve said. He couldn't hold back the bitterness in his tone. "Because you have to make me interesting, don't you?"

Tony's shoulders tensed and he stalked ahead, throwing Steve an inexplicable angry look.

Natasha leaned in and squeezed Steve's arm. "You have to trust us, Captain. We've been here a long time. If we do things a certain way, you're going to have to trust that we have our reasons."

Steve swallowed and nodded.

According to Tony, Natasha, and Pietro, Kaecilius' powers were trickier in a one-on-one situation because he didn't have to hold back from hitting his allies.

"The thing we can't help you with is his magic," Pietro said, limbering up opposite Steve in one of the training circles. "We don't know how his powers are limited, because even he can't get out of the arena forcefield during a match, but within the forcefield, he's—I don't know how to explain it."

"Can he do that gravity-defying thing Strange can do?" Steve asked, pulling a face; he'd only been caught up with that once, when it turned out there were still some Zealots out there unhappy that Strange was the new Sorcerer Supreme and they came after the Compound. Strange had somehow turned half of the Compound up at ninety degrees. Steve had been teaching at that moment and spent a hair-raising forty minutes calming his students down, and an irritating further fifty minutes convincing them to stay in the classroom and not get in the way. Of course, Cassie hadn't listened, but losing track of only one of his students was actually pretty good for a Code Red scenario.
Pietro stopped mid-stretch, surprised. "Ah, you've experienced that, good."

"He's a martial arts master," Natasha said. "And his preferred weapon is a pair of curved daggers."

"So don't get close to him," Steve nodded, trying to take in all the information.

"It's not that simple," Tony said, his arms folded over his chest. His expression was almost smug when he looked over at Steve; he did always enjoy knowing more than someone else. "I suppose you remember Strange's sling ring, too?"

The portals. Shit. Steve's look of dismay must have spoken volumes enough that he followed up Tony's question with another one. "I suppose it's limited to the arena itself? Like his other magic?"

"Yep," Pietro said.

"Plus he can use his magic to throw his daggers, so you can't always assume he's gonna hit you close range," Natasha added.

"What kind of environment am I expecting?" Steve frowned. "I presume with his magic, it's something closer to the—" He gestured vaguely. "Spaghetti stage?"

"Whenever they've put me up against him, they use the cityscape," Natasha said.

"That's because you're ground-bound," Tony said.

"Which Steve is."

"But if they know anything about Cap—" Tony's mouth turned down.

Natasha's face wobbled. "You think they'd bring out the Tundra?"

Tony pulled a face that was supposed to look indecisive, but Steve knew it meant this is the most likely scenario. "Loki's not in the match," he said.

"Tundra?" Steve sagged. "Oh. Ice. They can do that here?"

"You haven't seen half of what they can do yet," Natasha's mouth flattened. "You'll be fine," she added, belatedly.

Steve straightened, squaring his shoulders. "Well, I can't do anything about the environment they give me. I can train now. What's the play?"

Pietro bounced his weight from foot to foot, smiling faintly at Steve. "He uses the portals in exactly the way you'd imagine. Sneak attacks, rapid changes, appearing out of nowhere and tagging you. Death of a thousand cuts. He's not afraid to drag the match out."

"And your superspeed allows you to replicate the portals," Steve realized.

"Yep," Pietro said, appearing behind him and slapping Steve's ass before reappearing where he'd just been standing.

Steve glowered at Pietro. "You get that one for free," he said.

Steve wanted to keep going, but Natasha reminded him that he did want to save his strength for his fight. One Sun was late enough in the day that Steve had time to rest and he should take that time.
Natasha's match was apparently "one turn" before his, which meant about an hour. Pietro zoomed off yelling about going to go watch the Tenebrae fight. Tony murmured about wanting to try and tune up his HUD, so Steve and Natasha followed him back to the workshop.

Steve wasn't sure he was going to be able to relax, because his brain kept running over the hour spent training with Pietro, continually picking at his mistakes, but there was something soothing about sitting on the floor and listening to the familiar noises of Tony working on his armor. It was amazing to see him do so much with so little; the beat-up laptop he seemed to be using looked old to Steve's eyes, although then Natasha murmured that sometimes Vision had to be used to boost the processing speed enough for Tony to do the actual intricate programming work.

Natasha changed into the brief pieces of fabric that constituted her ridiculous arena outfit, and followed that up by doing some stretches in the corner of the room. Steve leaned his head against the foot of the bed, listening to Tony's noisy typing and the soft exhales that sometimes came from Natasha's corner. His hearing hadn't been amazing before the serum, but afterward, it became sharp, almost overwhelming, one of the many things about his new body that had taken him a while to adjust to. Sometimes, even though he'd had so many decades now inhabiting it, he still woke up and was surprised that his body wasn't still small and fragile. When he was a kid, Steve had sometimes been scared to fall asleep, just in case he sneezed in his sleep and dislocated a rib. The worst nights, when he was coughing or feverish or even so damn hungry his stomach had stopped growling hours before, he hadn't want to fall asleep in case he didn't wake up at all. Death was a phantom figure in his childhood that loomed constantly.

His mom had voiced a different fear, that one day the police would call her down to the hospital to identify his body, because surely one day Steve would stand up to the wrong person. It still hadn't stopped him, but it had made him more careful; she had to have known that was the best she could hope for.

Natasha's random exhales had stopped. Steve hid the smile he wanted to make.

"I can feel you staring at me," Steve said.

Natasha made a surprised noise, right near his ear. "You've leveled up."

Steve opened his eyes and beamed at her. "I'm actually old now, I think I'm allowed to have improved in one or two areas."

"You've slowed down in a few areas too. You leave your right side open too often, and your kick variation has gone way down."

"I'll keep that in mind if you'll keep in mind not to let what's happening to me distract you next time we fight together."

Natasha narrowed her eyes. "Fine."

"You're gonna win today, right?"

"Planning on it."

Steve beamed at her, pleased. Since Natasha had come to sit next to him, Tony had looked over in their direction four times, looking a little agitated. "You know, if you and Tony had a burning question, you should just ask it."

"Who said I had a question?" Natasha quirked an eyebrow. Steve mirrored her expression right back and she sighed. "Fine. Tony and I were wondering—"
"If Bucky and Rhodey were okay," Steve finished. At her slight look of surprise, he smiled ruefully and looked away. "Because I was shouting their shared first name last night."

"I didn't really think anything had happened to Bucky," Natasha said. "But Tony was convinced no one could help but love James Rhodes enough to give a person nightmares on losing him."

"Hey," Tony sniped.

Natasha eyeballed him. "Are you in this conversation, Stark?"

"I heard my name in it," Tony muttered.

"I can't help what you hear," Natasha returned. Tony flipped her his middle finger and bent back down over what he was focusing on.

"Well. Rhodey is pretty great," Steve said, because cutting through banter was a skill he'd learned both as an Avenger and a teacher, "but he's also definitely alive. Or he was last week. I dunno. Air Force, those guys are pretty crazy; a lot can happen in a week."

"That's good to know," Natasha said.

Steve sighed. James wasn't a topic he was interested in sharing at all. His simple life didn't belong here, in the mayhem of this place. He wanted to keep it locked away forever, but he knew Natasha well enough to know he'd have to talk about it someday. Today wasn't that day, not when he had to focus on trying to fight an actual sorcerer later. "I'm not going to talk about it, so you can stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

Steve side-squinted at her. "I've known you too long for you to get away with playing innocent, Romanov."

Natasha wrinkled her mouth, acknowledging it. "I was hoping I could stretch out the yay you're alive goodwill out a little longer."

"I am very yay you're alive," Steve tried to sound as deadpan as he could, just to make her laugh, before turning to look at her more directly. "I will talk about it, when I'm ready."

There was a moment of sadness in her eyes, which told Steve he was as transparent as he feared, but she respected his words and nodded. "Whenever you're ready, I'm here."

"Thank you."

Natasha beamed. "Right, I'm gonna go annoy the Stylist until he agrees to re-do my tattoo before my fight." She got to her feet and looked down at him. "You want to come along, get a cute tat of your own?"

"You know, I've always wanted Property of Natasha Romanov tattooed on my ass."

Natasha laughed, open-mouthed. "Oh, baby, everyone knows you boys belong to me, I don't need marks to prove it."

"Wait, am I included in that?" Tony asked, looking up from the chest plate he was working on and pulling a face.

"Of course," Natasha said. She moved as if to go and said. "You should probably get changed into
your arena outfit. Your match isn't long away now." Steve pulled a face. "And whenever you're ready to talk, I'm here."

"I know," he said, and she smiled and left the room.

Steve sighed, stretched, and made his way to the corner of the room with the trunk in, where he'd stored his costume. He squinted at the pile of fabric. At least there was slightly more to it than Pietro's booty shorts, he supposed.

At least figuring out how to put the monstrosity back on worked almost as well as meditating might have, to clear his mind completely. By the time he'd figured out how to put the braces on, Tony called over and told him it was time to go get his weapons from Pip, unless he wanted to be late.

Tony came with him to see Pip, which Steve was surprised by; Tony looked like he had been in the middle of doing something complicated with a circuit board while Steve had finished getting dressed. Pip beamed when he saw Steve and hurried forward with the shield and the promised ax, which was heavier than Steve expected, but he figured at least he could drop it if it got too unwieldy. He swung the ax around experimentally, Pip hiding back behind his desk, and Steve turned to see Tony leaning against one of the weapon racks, legs crossed, eyes dark and unreadable.

"What?" Steve asked as he holstered the ax on his back harness, because they might have been apart for years, but Steve was pretty sure Tony hadn't changed that much at all, and that expression clearly said Tony had something on his mind.

"I didn't say anything," Tony said.

Steve narrowed his eyes but then straightened and stilled when two other figures came into the room. Two of the bugs, one green, one cream-ish, both carrying tridents.

"I'm here to fetch the Captain," the green bug said sourly, hovering in the doorway.

"Don't worry, I'll take him to the Cold Room, Jhrugir," Tony said.

The green bug—Jhrugir—blinked at Tony, like he was surprised to see Tony there. "You will? Thanksss, Iron Man." Jhrugir clicked and turned, hurrying away.

"You can tell them apart?" Steve asked, a moment after the bugs had gone.

Tony huffed. "You can't?"

Steve opened his mouth to protest.

"I'm messing with you," Tony straightened up from where he was leaning. "They have a serial number printed on their upper arms."

"They do?"

"It's not in our language," Pip piped up and then flushed immediately when Steve looked in his direction.

"You're from Earth?" Steve asked.

"Laxidazia," Pip sighed, leaning his elbows on his large desk and looking at Steve with bright, interested eyes. "But when Pip's home was destroyed, Pip lived in New York for a while."
The accent was familiar. "Brooklyn?" Steve asked.

Pip's eyes widened. "You know Brooklyn?"

Steve froze, suddenly realizing he didn't know if he was supposed to know that much or not.

"Maybe we can talk about it sometime," Pip said, shyly. "But Pip supposes you two had better get a move on. One Sun's very soon."

Steve nodded. "Thanks for the ax, Pip," he said, even if he was happier at having his shield back on his arm again than for the unwieldy weapon on his back.

"Pip hopes you don't die too painfully this time," Pip said, and ducted down under his table again.

Steve inhaled and exhaled instead of saying anything.

Tony inclined his head and Steve followed, his stomach churning in realization of what was about to happen. Another battle. Another possible death. Would he ever become cavalier about the prospect of dying? He hated how easily it had settled into his toolbox of fighting strategies.

Today wasn't a group fight, though. This was one-on-one. That sort of fight meant there was no point to a kamikaze run, unless you had one last blow in you and it was your last resort. It was different when you had other people around to care about, who relied on you not letting them down.

"Listen," Tony said, dragging Steve out of his thoughts of self-sacrifice, "I know it's awkward and I know it feels weird as hell, but you have to make your match look good. Perform for the crowd. Primp for them. You've seen me in front of a camera enough times to know what to do. Peacock. And make your battle last as long as you can."

Steve stared straight ahead. "Is this what the Grandmaster meant when he said I should be interesting?"

"Yeah. Win or lose, you gotta turn in a performance. But especially if you can't win, drag it out. You need to entertain your audience. I know they don't deserve it, but—you have to."

"I'll try," Steve said, dubiously.

Tony stopped suddenly, and Steve copied him while Tony looked around the hallway they were in nervously.

Deciding it was safe enough, Tony pinned Steve with an intense stare. "You need to do more than try. Once upon a time, you said you trusted me. And you need to right now. Do you still trust me?"

Steve met his stare and for a moment, it was like the whole universe had melted away, and it was only the two of them that existed. No one else made him feel like that. It made him feel important, somehow. Like maybe he was necessary to Tony in the same way Tony was necessary to him. Like maybe they could do anything, if they did it together.

"I do," Steve said and Tony's eyes were resplendent when Steve said that, like it was the best thing he'd ever heard, there was no other word Steve could use to describe Tony's eyes when he looked at him like that.

"Woah," Pietro said. "Did you two just get married?"
The intimate stare broke cleanly and Steve turned away, feeling acutely like they'd been caught doing something embarrassing, even though it was anything but.

Tony's mouth immediately downturned for a second before flattening out as he turned to their new guest. "Pietro."

"Different sort of question," Steve said.

"What are you doing here?" Tony said.

"I came down from the viewing room, Natasha's reaming the guy; honestly, it was getting pretty gross so I thought I'd come out here so I can welcome her back." Pietro eyed Steve. "You ready to die again?"

"Your faith in people continues to astound me, Maximoff," Tony drawled. He flickered a glance at Steve. "You might have a chance to take him out."

Tony sounded dubious too. Steve sighed.

"Guess we'll find out," Steve said, heavily.

Tony and Pietro both escorted him the rest of the way to the Cold Room, but the two bugs guarding it wouldn't let them follow him in. Pietro gave him a reluctant wave and Steve kept his back straight and nodded tersely. It was better if he tried to think of "the Captain" as a separate personality; it made it easier to try and maintain the stoic persona when the bugs were around to watch.

Steve made sure his shield was firmly buckled to his arm again and then walked carefully up to the forcefield-covered bars so he could look out into the arena. He had to swallow back the sudden curse of surprise. Tony and Natasha's brief casual mentions that the arena had different versions—including some sort of ice field—hadn't prepared him for the sight. He'd just assumed the sand was a constant, somehow.

Natasha was fighting on some sort of high platform, a white disc raised far above the ground. The ground itself was covered in large stalagmites of various shapes and sizes; most of them towered up to a sharp point.

From this angle, Steve couldn't really see much. He could hear the faint murmur of the crowd. He found himself staring up at the disc anyway, his heart thumping, which didn't bode well for his own match. He forced himself to inhale and exhale, two-in, three-hold, four-out, until his heartbeat slowly returned to normal.

Then his heart nearly rocketed again as he saw a figure in black falling from the disc and Steve could taste bile in the back of his throat, because Natasha was wearing black. He blinked away his suddenly blurry vision and refocused and let out the quietest sigh he could manage when he realized the body was wearing pants. It must be Killmonger. Natasha must have managed to throw him over the edge.

Her aim as always was true, because Killmonger's body was impaled on one of the sharpest stalagmites, blood cascading down the sides of it. It was a difficult sight and Steve found it hard not to mentally replace his own body in Killmonger's place.

"Ssstand back, Captain," one of the bugs snarled. Steve startled but did as he was told, stepping back and away from the forcefield and bars.
He wondered why, until he saw Natasha do a beautiful somersault from the edge of the disc to land on a non-dangerous part of the ground. She straightened and saluted the crowd in every direction, taking elaborate bows, and smiling up at the people watching her, before she straightened and walked toward where Steve was.

As she approached the bars, they lifted for her briefly so she could come in, and she smiled at him.

"Captain," Natasha greeted, her voice almost breezy, but Steve could see the weariness in her shoulders. There was a cut on her leg. "I hope you give the Grandmaster a mighty show," she said, leaning in and pressing something into his hand. Steve realized what it was when she put her face into his neck and whispered, "Put it in your boot."

"I will try my best to honor the Grandmaster," Steve said, as she pulled away.

Natasha nodded and headed over to the bugs, who parted to let her through. Steve watched her disappear and turned back to face the forcefield and bars. He got down on one knee and pretended to be securing his boots as he slipped the knife Natasha passed to him in the right one. The weight of it was oddly reassuring.

"Not long now," one of the bugs said. Steve nodded idly as he stood up again and stared at the forcefield to the arena beyond. The disc was getting smaller and two bugs were pulling down Killmonger's body from the stalagmite Natasha had impaled him on.

For a moment, Steve wondered whether the stalagmites were going to collapse down into the floor, but something else was happening to them. He remembered Natasha saying a cityscape was a possible fighting scenario, so maybe the stalagmites would change into something resembling multiple city buildings, but then he realized the stalagmites were changing color.

_Tundra_, Steve's memory supplied.

Dry mouthed, Steve watched as the disc, smaller now, turned sideways and disappeared down into the floor, and the whole arena slowly froze over.

For a moment, the worry that this wasn't real flooded over him. He was dead, this was some manifestation of the afterlife, and Steve had landed in hell. But one thing Steve knew was that his hell wouldn't have Tony and Natasha in it.

This was real. Somehow, once again, the seemingly-impossible was real. All the stories Steve had inhaled as a kid about space and time travel and magic were faint smudges in his memory compared to reality. Tony told him he needed to be interesting and Steve had to trust there was a reason for that.

Steve couldn't control the situation. He could only control his own reactions to this situation. He had to trust that if there was an easy way out of this place that Tony and Natasha had been here long enough that they would have found it already. Granted there was always that worry in the back of his mind, especially after he'd met several Skrulls and not all of them as nice as Talos (Steve did not want to meet Veranke again any time soon), that what if Tony and Natasha weren't as themselves as Steve was assuming. What if they were still somehow mindwashed and didn't know it? They seemed like themselves, but how sure could Steve be?

He couldn't. There was no way that Steve could know anything for sure. All he had was this constant gut impulse that had been coursing through him even before this had all started. The way this all felt like something or someone had been incrementally nudging him toward this whole scenario. It was a nagging, whisper of a suggestion, but one Steve couldn't fully ignore.
Right now, he had the choice between refusing to fight, and facing who knew what consequence, or going out into that arena once the forcefield went down. And that choice was a much easier one, because Steve knew exactly who they'd target to hurt him. He was too transparent on that count.

"Getssss ready, Einherjar," one of the bugs behind Steve said with its fire and lava voice.

Steve nodded and stepped closer to the bars. This part was starting to become uncomfortably familiar and it was only Steve's third time preparing to step into the arena.

"It'sss time," the bug snarled and the bars suddenly shot up into the bricks above them with that terrible clanging noise.

A wall of sound and cold rushed over Steve, but he didn't allow the bugs behind him to prod him with their tridents this time. He stepped forward before they could, and as soon as he moved out of the Cold Room, the bars clanged shut behind him again, stranding him out there.

Cold Room had nothing as a name compared to the temperature of the arena. As the term One Sun had implied, there was only one sun visible, hanging low and full in the green and pink kaleidoscope sky, and the way that light reflected off the snow and ice was almost blinding. Steve squinted as he moved forward.

There was a forcefield bisecting the arena. Steve could see the opposite gate open at the same time as his, so Steve and Kaecilius were being expected to make their entrances at the same time. He made a quick decision change and unholstered the giant ax before stepping out into the snow.

The ground was slicker beneath his feet than he’d expected and icier than he’d hoped. There was enough soft snow that the first step had better grip to it. Steve's own grip shifted on the shaft of the heavy ax as he adjusted the weight of it. The weapon was well balanced, even if he was less familiar with axes than he would like; he’d used Thor's for a little while, of course, but that was different, because Stormbreaker was a force of nature, not a simple weapon.

He could see Kaecilius in the distance, a figure wrapped in yellow robes, fully dressed. Steve didn't have to look down at himself to know how poorly he was covered in contrast. He could feel it. His thighs had barely any cover at all. He would have to move fast if he didn't want to freeze.

Tony's advice filtered through his brain. Perform for the crowd. Primp for them. You've seen me in front of a camera enough times to know what to do. Peacock.

As much as Steve was usually loathe to do what he was told, but he had to trust Tony. Steve stopped walking to look up at the crowd and he raised his shield high, to one side and then the other. The bright light reflecting from the snow made it hard to make out the reactions, but the cheering increased in volume a little.

Opposite him Kaecilius did the same, a small bow to his left and right, and the cheering skyrocketed. Kaecilius was popular.

Steve felt a bristle of almost jealousy rush through him. Maybe it was part of the adrenaline of knowing he had an audience. Steve might have done his circuits to raise money and felt like a monkey, but there was a thrill to the performance, when he could compartmentalize away his embarrassment.

If the crowd wanted a performance, Steve could provide that.

It wasn't like Steve hadn't shown off his skills during a battle in an attempt to intimidate his opponent. It was a good strategy. He'd never done it purely as theater, but what did intent matter
when the outcome was the same? Besides, it wasn't like it was mutually exclusive; perhaps Kaecilius would be a little intimidated too.

Steve slid the shield onto his back harness and started speeding up his strides, dropped his grip a little closer to the head of the ax than he'd been previously holding it, and then he spun it as he moved, trying to make it look casual, even though the weapon was heavy. He spun it faster, turning it in a figure of eight, then threw it up in the air as high and far as he could, before launching forward into as powerful a handspring as he could manage. The snow was cold on his hands, but it was a worthy sacrifice; with the momentum he had built up Steve did a dramatic mid-jump double twist, landing in the snow with a dramatic crouch just in time to snatch the ax out of mid-air.

Steve spun the ax casually, even though his wrist was a little sore from that impact, and he pulled off his shield again, securing it back to his left arm, keeping his mouth flat so he didn't grin at the absolute roar of the crowd. There was something heady about the attention, as much as Steve hated the whole situation. Steve straightened and stared right at Kaecilius as he kept advancing forward, toward the forcefield currently separating them.

Kaecilius hesitated on seeing Steve's burning expression, but then he bowed, a sardonic twist to his mouth that said he saw what Steve was doing and he understood. He followed up Steve's display with a neat little sequence of moves: a couple of swallow kicks that left his torso horizontal to the ground while both of his legs lifted high and swung around; a crescent kick that took him almost on a full double rotation; and a side aerial cartwheel that smoothly took him almost directly up to the forcefield.

The Grandmaster's image filled the sky between them. Steve looked up, tracking the patterns of the drones, committing them to memory.

"And here we are, my friends, at the final match of the day," the Grandmaster said, his voice projected so that it echoed all around the arena. Steve took the time to look surreptitiously around himself, marking the positions of the sharp stalagmites; he'd need to use them as cover, and to stop his fall if Kaecilius started messing with gravity. "We have a one-on-one match to death between our splendid resident sorcerer and our newest Avenger. Here on the tundra, we're pitching magic against muscles; the supernatural versus brute strength."

Steve lowered his gaze to find Kaecilius was staring at him and already making a pose, ready to launch into one of his spells. He noted now he could see Kaecilius more closely that he hadn't yet unsheathed the curved daggers that Natasha mentioned; they were still nestled in sheaths at his waist, glinting ominously in the reflected sunlight. Steve's feet were cold and he shifted his weight as much as he could without giving Kaecilius too much of a clue to his first move.

Snow fell from some of the stalagmite tips as the Grandmaster spoke his final words. " Fight well, my champions! Fight...to the death!"

The forcefield dropped immediately and Steve dropped low on instinct, turtling down with his shield overhead, and his instincts paid off as Kaecilius immediately dropped out of a portal directly behind him.

Steve lashed out with the shield once Kaecilius' blow bounced harmlessly off the domed surface; he clipped Kaecilius with his heel, but then immediately had to fend off another blow from the opposite side. One thing that Steve had to get used to when being around teenager wannabe superheroes was the way they communicated; that included learning to understand memes. No one told Steve that memes would actually give him an advantage on the battlefield, but having suffered through three different presentations from his students using the *thinking with portals* meme actually gave Steve a mental frame to this fight that he might not have had otherwise.
The portals were a shortcut. A range of space to delete in his head. Additionally, after Kaecilius had opened a few portals in rapid succession, forcing Steve to swivel on his heel, swiping the ax at space that became empty a second later, Steve realized something; Kaecilius' portals weren't impossible to predict. There was the faintest shimmer in the air before they opened up. If the arena hadn't been frozen over, Steve might have attributed them to heat mirages and not noticed the phenomena so quickly.

It didn't give him much of an advantage, but it might be enough.

It was too cold and slippery to stay still, so Steve knew he needed to move, even if Kaecilius was leaping through mid-air for most of his moves, barely landing; Kaecilius kept opening a portal further away and kicking off another stalagmite before opening the portal near Steve and using that rebound force without needing a run-up to achieve it.

Steve was able to defend against most of the blows with his shield. He nearly missed Kaecilius flinging one of his deadly curved blades at him between portal jumps, though; Steve managed to barely deflect it in time with the ax, but Kaecilius took that moment to finish his portal leap and slice at Steve with the other one.

Steve grimaced and took off at a run, using the evasive pattern he'd already mentally mapped out. He changed his direction at random, pressing against stalagmites so his back was protected and he could focus on defending any of Kaecilius' blows and maybe figure out how to get in a hit of his own.

Training with Pietro had helped a lot more than Steve had hoped, unless Kaecilius was playing with him. Maybe he was toying with Steve. The Grandmaster said something about ratings, so maybe this was just like television, somehow. Maybe they were all rated, somehow? Graded on their fights? And somehow the grades were important?

Steve hated how his head was starting to get jammed with more questions, when he needed to be focused on the fight at hand. He grit his teeth and made a leaping roll for the next stalagmite.

The ground lurched beneath Steve in a faintly familiar way. Hindsight was in his favor; Kaecilius must be folding up this part of space, changing the direction of gravity. Steve didn't even falter, even as the floor seemed to lift up, turning into a slope. He skidded for a short distance but leaped to the nearest stalagmite, finding purchase at the right side of it so that he had something to stand on as gravity shifted direction for him.

Anticipating that the ground was moving, even if it baffled his brain to see the arena floor fold up like a pop-up book, Steve made his move. He'd been expecting it, and in preparation had been mapping the flat layout of the stalagmites so that he could re-map them to a 3D layout in his head if necessary, so it was easier than it might have been for Steve to leap and grab at the higher part of the rock he was nearest, using it as if it was a pole stuck in a wall to swing off. He landed neatly on a nearby stalagmite; it was horizontal to his perspective and Steve perched on the side of it. He could see a shimmer of a portal before it opened and he swung the ax in anticipation.

It caught Kaecilius in his upper arm and the sorcerer let out a yell; it turned out that maybe he had been toying with Steve, because his efforts redoubled. It was like he hadn't expected Steve to be able to even slightly hurt him, and now Steve had drawn blood, he could now be considered a serious threat.

What followed next was a frantic tumble as the entire arena started folding upward and downward. The only respite Steve had was that as a surface was changing orientation, it meant he didn't have to worry so much about the portals. Kaecilius could affect gravity to his whims and it only took
one misstep for Steve to miss a stalagmite and fall hard. The floor adjusted direction as he hit it and
the momentum sent him tumbling hard, rolling over and over until he smacked hard into a
stalagmite. The ax fell out of his grip and Steve dug his heels against the stalagmite, trying hard to
get to his feet again, but Kaecilius gestured and changed the direction of the ground again.

It was only years of experience that helped Steve avoid the curved dagger that was thrown at him;
he managed to get it to glance off his shield. He fell into a corner of the folded-up arena and was
immediately kicked in the back by Kaecilius, back on his portal shit. Steve stumbled, but managed
to grab Kaecilius' own dagger; he sliced out at the next portal shimmer he saw, and was rewarded
by an arc of blood, the crimson bright on the snow.

The floor started to drop again, Kaecilius trying to turn the floor Steve was standing on to a wall,
but Steve could see his ax a hundred feet or so away, on the current patch of flat-but-raising arena,
so he grit his teeth and started to run for it. As the floor inclined higher into a slope, Steve nearly
slipped, until he dug Kaecilius' dagger into the ground and used it to lever himself up higher to
balance on the side of a stalagmite. The floor tilted up so much that Steve was able to reach out
and grab his ax again as it tumbled down toward him. Steve got onto his feet, using the stalagmite
as a protruding platform again, and he cast around, looking for the glimmer; seeing it, he flung his
whole body forward, ax outreached.

Jumping at the emerging portal at full force had the benefit of making him collide directly with
Kaecilius, and they both went tumbling together down a faint slope. Steve kicked up to his feet and
brought the ax down hard; Kaecilius blocked it with the dagger and kicked out efficiently with his
right leg at the same time. He was flexible enough to hit Steve solidly in the abdomen and Steve
staggered back, dropping the ax again.

Steve whirled with his shield, Kaecilius focusing more on portals again; Steve could predict a lot
of them, but not all of them, and it was wearing him down. Surviving as long as possible was the
aim. A little of his old stubbornness came back; he thought I could do this all day and laughed out
loud at his own brain. Kaecilius wasn't psychic, though, and seemed to take Steve's laugh as an
insult.

It wasn't Steve's intention, but it made Kaecilius angrier and a little sloppier. Steve lashed out with
his shield, parrying every strike Kaecilius made. When he saw Kaecilius' eyebrows furrow, Steve
knew he'd struck a nerve, and decided to use that as an opening; when Kaecilius brought a swift
kick through the portal, Steve let it partially connect and he overplayed his reaction, as if the blow
had massively hurt him. Kaecilius grinned, fully stepped through his next portal, and started to tilt
the floor again, but Steve was ready for it; he dropped low and sliced the edge of his shield at
Kaecilius' ankles.

The floor immediately stopped tilting and Steve pressed his advantage, beating him with the shield,
following it up with a couple of firm kicks. Kaecilius kicked up to a standing position again and
abandoned his magic for a moment, engaging with Steve physically instead, and maybe he should
have been doing that all along, because he was strong and fast and had spent part of this battle
solely opening portals and twisting the gravity, letting Steve do all the physical work. Kaecilius
was physically fresher, so this could be bad.

It changed quickly from could to was, faster than Steve was hoping; Kaecilius only had one of his
wicked curved daggers left, but he knew how to use it. After a few hits, Steve was the one bleeding
onto the snow. Breathing hard, Steve took a more defensive stance to regain his breath, and
Kaecilius increased his attacks; his legs spun faster than Steve's eyes could follow and even though
Steve blocked each kick with his shield, the kicks were hard, and Steve's wrists ached with the
effort of pushing against them.
Steve's vision blurred. He was losing too much blood. He grit his teeth and tried to mentally picture the map, but there weren't enough of the pointed stalagmites nearby to use. He had to find something else sharp, something Kaecilius wouldn't anticipate.

The plan came fast. Steve let Kaecilius advance against him, still in the defensive posture, before he switched, leaning his weight forward; Steve hit back at Kaecilius and kneed him firmly. Kaecilius dodged that easily, smirking that Steve would even try and use his knee, when all of Kaecilius' best blows were coming from those safely extended and precise kicks from those long legs of his. No close blow had a chance of hitting.

But Steve wasn't seriously trying to hit Kaecilius with a close-range blow. He needed to lift his knee to pull out the short knife Natasha slipped him at the beginning of the fight. Steve kept it concealed behind his shield and bided his time, even though he could feel his strength slipping away. The snow turned into a crimson slush under their feet; Kaecilius' precise, deadly kicks sent up a spray of red liquid now with every sharp move, and Steve was covered with it.

It was inevitable that Steve would slip and he was nearly taken surprise when it did happen; he fell heavily into the snow. Kaecilius didn't hesitate, launching forward to take advantage of it, but Steve was waiting for it; instead of blocking with his shield, he threw it to one side and grabbed at Kaecilius' incoming arm. He'd known exactly where the blow would come from, because that's how Steve learned to fight. No one had ever taught him, back at the beginning, he'd just had to pick it up from the bullies that tried to fight him; whether they'd been guys who picked fights in movie theaters, or Hydra goons during World War II. His whole fighting style was designed on watching his opponent and slowly finding their weaknesses.

The tip of Kaecilius' curved dagger dug into the part of Steve's shoulder that went unprotected by the spaulders, biting deep into Steve's armpit, but Kaecilius couldn't compensate in time for how hard Steve was pulling him down, and that was all Steve needed: he thrust upward fast and precise with the small dagger. Kaecilius' eyes widened as he saw the blow coming and he moved his right arm to block, but it was too little too late; Steve's dagger had hit him directly in the heart, the hit deep and true.

Blood cascaded out of Kaecilius' mouth and the arena around them slowly flattened out again as the light faded from Kaecilius' eyes.

The curved dagger stayed with its tip embedded in Steve's armpit as he clambered wearily to his feet. He almost thought Kaecilius' magic was still somehow active, because the floor felt unsteady beneath him, but it was his own perception. Steve had lost too much blood and he was dizzy.

Steve was determined to walk off the arena. The last thing he wanted to do was fall down in the bloodied snow. So he grit his teeth and yanked out the dagger, throwing that to one side as he stumbled toward the direction he thought the Cold Room was. He made sure to pick up his shield, even though the arena seemed to twitch and wave again. His vision blurred.

He thought he heard the Grandmaster announce his victory; he raised his right arm in the best wave he could manage before he made his way toward the bars.

The bars shot up and let him in; Steve got as far as the bugs with tridents guarding the room before he fell to the floor. He couldn't breathe and his vision swam; when he coughed and tried to cover his mouth, his whole body spasmed, and when he pulled his hand away it was covered in blood.

He thought he heard Tony's voice. Wasn't that funny? Steve supposed it wasn't odd. He thought about Tony every single day. He'd re-run every memory he'd ever shared with him, over and over, rewriting his own words, changing the script, imagining how Tony might have looked at him
differently. Steve wondered what Tony's expression would have been if Steve had signed the accords. Or told him about his parents' death. Hindsight helped, because now Steve was sure that Tony would have been angry, for a while, but he'd have gotten over it, and maybe he'd have helped Bucky, because Clint knew what it was like to be brainwashed, he'd have helped convince Tony—Steve had so many regrets.

Tony's face blurred in front of him, a pretty hallucination come to join Steve as he bled out on the cold tiles.

"I'm so sorry, Tony," Steve told him. That's usually what he ended up saying, in those rewritten memories, where Steve could pretend he'd made so many better decisions than he had. "I never wanted to hurt you."

"I know, buddy."

That was nice. Steve's hallucination of Tony even sounded like him. "Tell Tony I was interesting. I tried—to be interesting. For him. Tell him."

"You were interesting. I'll tell him."

The hallucination was so nice. "Thank you."

"Help me get him to the worming chamber," Tony's voice said, and someone was lifting him up, two people trying to get him to his feet. "C'mon, Steve, play with me here, keep your eyes open."
"I want to see my family." Steve sighed. Where were they? They were going somewhere, but then—no, that wasn't right. Steve's brain wasn't working.

There was a pause. "Lean on me, buddy. We'll take you to them. Play with us here, yeah? Move those legs of yours."

Something about that didn't make sense. "I need to sleep," Steve said.

"Hey, no sleeping," Tony's voice said, but it was too late. "Sleeping bad."
It occurred to Steve he was dying. He didn't like the sensation. He wondered where his family was. Somewhere—somewhere else. Darkness beckoned him, creeping in on the edges of his vision.

He couldn't remember why he shouldn't close his eyes.
It was terrible, but Steve almost thought he was getting used to the worms.

This time when he awoke, half in agony, half of him itching *terribly*, Steve was surprised to see that he wasn't completely drowning in the worms as usual. There were still worms on him, but not as many as usual.

Well, he wasn't physically old, completely gutted *or* blown apart this time, he supposed. But he'd still apparently died again anyway. That wasn't a nice thought.

Steve opened his eyes, expecting pain and getting that, but less than usual, only to find that there weren't any of the big bugs in the room yet, only the bug-shaped cyborg. When Steve slowly looked to the left, expecting to only see the big tank of worms, he was unprepared to see he wasn't alone.

There were five other metal slabs in the room, all occupied.

Steve tried to push himself up, but he made the mistake of using his shoulder to do that, and he remembered too late that his arm had been injured; a wave of pain rocked over him and he lay back down, dizzy. He could still move his eyes. He glanced up at where the vent was, but Natasha wasn't there, so he carefully slid his gaze to the left, to see how much he could see.

Right on the slab next to him was Kaecilius. Steve tensed up; was Kaecilius going to push him on the floor like the other Tenebrae apparently had? Then he managed to move his gaze lower; Kaecilius was a veritable *riot* of worms.

Oh. Steve's memory slowly came back. He won his fight. He'd killed Kaecilius. Kaecilius had killed him in return, to be fair; just not as immediately. Steve remembered bleeding out inside, and maybe he'd hallucinated something? He couldn't remember. Maybe there was a worm still in his head, oh god, this whole thing was so gross.

Kaecilius' eyes snapped open, and like he could feel Steve's eyes on him, Kaecilius' gaze turned
painfully in Steve's direction.

"Oh," Kaecilius managed to say, his voice gravelly. "You."

He sounded remarkably calm, for someone talking to the person that had just killed them. Steve's gut twinged, and not solely from the worms tumbling and wrecking and mending that part of his anatomy; who knew how long Kaecilius had been here? How many times had the sorcerer experienced death already?

"Me," Steve said, warily.

That seemed to amuse Kaecilius; he grunted a laugh and then his face creased in a wince.

"You shout in your sleep, Captain," Kaecilius said. "I didn't realize we had so much in common."

Steve frowned across at him, but Kaecilius turned his pale gaze back up to the ceiling. And then the door opened, and Steve swallowed back the demand for an explanation that he wanted to make.

"You're awake already?"

Steve recognized Ghrengrh's voice before he even saw the bug's distinctive gray skin, so he wasn't startled when Ghrengrh suddenly loomed over him.

"Good," Ghrengrh said, the bug's mandibles clicking happily. "You barely died at all, shouldn't takeoss long at all. You can maybe even sssleep in your sssand tonightssss." Ghrengrh looked over at the other slabs. "The others weren't ssso lucky. Shame. Tomorrow is going to be ssso fun and they'll probably misss it."

Steve stared at Ghrengrh, wondering what the bug thought was fun.

"I've brought you sssome meat, Captain," Ghrengrh said. "Do you think you can sssit up?"

Steve tried sitting up again and this time was successful. He tried not to look at the worms that slithered off him at the movement and dropped onto the floor; he tried not to think about the worms that were knitting his armpit and legs back together. Kaecilius had taken copious advantage of the amount of skin Steve's outfit exposed.

As usual, Steve was naked on the slab. He wondered if his outfit was undamaged; Hrhumhuhr would be displeased if it had been damaged too much. After eating the pot of meat Ghrengrh gave him, Ghrengrh passed him a pile of fresh brown clothes and clicked at Steve until he got up and started to get dressed.

Then Steve remembered how much the other bugs had hated his nudity before. Humans must be completely disgusting to them. Humans must be completely disgusting to them. Maybe it was because their outer shells seemed so solid, that for a creature to be soft nearly everywhere must make it appear to them like humans were constantly walking around with their innards on display?

Ghrengrh made a happy noise on seeing Steve was fully covered. "It'sss ssssleep time, Captain. Go find your friendssss, ressst. You'll need it."

It was weird getting to walk out of the worming room first, with Kaecilius and the four other individuals still being wormed back to life. Steve assumed they were all Tenebrae, considering he and Natasha were the only Einherjar called to battle today. It meant that the worming room was probably a connection point to the part of the facility that housed the Tenebrae. That was interesting. He also wanted to know how Natasha got into the vent system and where that led and
how she got into the vent system daily without him noticing her going yet. Maybe it was via the other shower room.

Steve reached the hallway to the communal sleeping room before he'd even realized he was making his way there. It was so easy to sink into the routine. Maybe he should have "accidentally" gone the wrong way and gotten lost, but maybe someone under full influence of the Control Disc wouldn't do that. Another time, perhaps.

The bugs standing outside the sleeping room clicked at him in an irritated manner, but ushered him in anyway. Steve squinted at them, because he hadn't exactly _planned_ on dying to inconvenience them.

Even though the light was low, it was easier this time for Steve to step around the sleeping bodies to get to the heap of limbs that he was aiming for. He kicked off his sandals and stepped into the sphere of quiet, kneeling down as softly as he could because he thought they looked like they were asleep, but he wasn't even all the way down when someone's hand grabbed him and yanked him into a hug.

Natasha, from the amount of hair that was suddenly up his nose. Steve made a soft noise of surprise but let her clamp her limbs around him. She pushed her nose into his neck and made a snuffling noise. "You nearly did okay," she said.

Steve laughed. He couldn't help it. It was a whole-body laugh, making her shake too, but there wasn't as much humor in it as desperation. This whole situation was dumb.

"You're fresh out of the worms, huh?" Natasha's voice was a little hoarse; she pulled her head back and Steve could faintly make out the whites of her eyes. "You're still running hot."

"Does it ever stop itching so bad?" Steve asked.

"I wish I could say it did," Natasha said. "Stark, hey, swap places with me, you're freezing."

Steve stared at her, trying to look judgmental, because was she really going to do something like this to him? He thought he could see enough in the dark to see a smirk on her face.

"I'm asleep," Tony said, but sighed and in a jumble of limbs, Steve was suddenly cuddling with Tony instead, and oh, Steve actually thought for a second that he could get used to this. The previous nights, Tony had spooned up against him; now, he was nestled against Steve's chest, his head tucked under Steve's chin, one arm tucked between them, one sneaking around Steve's waist. "Ugh, you are warmer than Maximoff, it was almost worth moving."

"That's a shining review," Steve said. "I'll put it on my next development report."

Tony snorted. "Rogers comma Steven, five out of five in the human furniture department, zero out of five in the trying-not-to-die category." His words rumbled through Steve's body.

"At least narrow the suppression field to the two of you if you're going to flirt," Natasha muttered.

"This isn't flirting, it's an impromptu co-worker evaluation." Tony made an amused almost musical noise. "Loved the ax flip. Less crazy about you bleeding on me in the hallway."

"Tony," Natasha said. It was amazing how much meaning Natasha could pack into two syllables.

"Yes, mom," Tony sniffed and then jostled against Steve; Steve hid a smirk in Tony's hair, because Natasha must have kicked him. "Ugh, shift over, Romanov can cuddle her toyboy in peace."
"Pietro is my platonic pillow for life," Natasha mumbled.

"Pietro will resign from that position if Pietro is woken up again," Pietro muttered back at her.

Steve obligingly shifted over a little way in the sand while Tony tapped something at his wrist, presumably narrowing the silence field to the two of them.

"Flat." Tony said, shoving at him, and Steve squinted, judgmentally because Tony couldn't really see him, because what was flat? Apparently Tony wanted Steve to lie flat, from the way he pushed at him. Steve was way too compliant, he realized belatedly; he was probably going to be overly indulgent when it came to whatever Tony, Natasha, and Pietro wanted for a long time. Coming back from the dead was too much of a gift for anything but that.

After Steve was arranged to Tony's satisfaction, Tony curled up at his side, putting his head on Steve's chest, a little like how they'd been lying in the bed in front of the Grandmaster earlier. Steve couldn't help but tangle his hand briefly in Tony's hair and then he froze, guiltily, because wasn't that going too far?

"Who said you could stop doing that?" Tony mumbled. "Keep petting my hair. That's an order."

"Since when do I take orders from you?" Steve asked, but settled his fingers back in Tony's hair. It was soft and so much more reassuring than it should be, to have Tony's skull nestled so close to his fingers.

"I'm the boss here, sorry." Tony's voice was sleep-rough. "You'll learn to love it."

"Yeah, that sounds like me. Submissive and compliant. If that doesn't say Steve Rogers in a nutshell, what else does?"

Tony smothered a snort. "Apart from stubborn, pig-headed, recalcitrant..."

"They're all the same word."

"You're really stubborn."

"And you're not."

"This isn't about me," Tony said. "I know you said once that everything was about me—"

"I accused you of believing that," Steve corrected. He paused, then pushed on, because this was an opening to apologize for one of the things on the long list of his regrets. Tony was involved in too many of those items. "I was wrong about a lot of things that day."

"Just that day? Wait, no, that was mean."

"But accurate," Steve said, stiffly, glad he wasn't actually looking at Tony for this conversation. "Only sometimes, though. I'm right a lot of the time."

"Even a stopped clock is right twice a day, I suppose."

"You were mean too," Steve said, automatically, and god, why wouldn't his brain let him be nice?

"Alas, true," Tony sighed. There was a long, awkward pause. Steve was hyper-aware of his hand still in Tony's hair; when he faltered a little, Tony pushed up into the touch, a subtle way of encouraging him to keep going. Physical comfort must be scarce around here. Especially so far away from home.
Steve's heart hurt when he thought the word *home*. Some homes you could never go back to again, even when you tried. Growing up he'd never had a particular place be a home, moving often through his childhood; his mom had been his home. When she died, he was anchor-less, ungrounded. The only thing that he had left was his desire to get into the army, to actually *help* the war effort.

Tony didn't have as much of a home to go back to as he should. Tony must be desperate for news, and there was terrible news waiting for him. Steve didn't know whether to tell Tony or not that his wife, assuming rather reasonably that she was a widow, had married someone else.

"I can *feel* you angsting," Tony muttered. "Seriously, you hold your angst tension in very specific places and I can literally feel it, it's kind of buming me out. Spill it. If you've got bad news, just tell me. Is something wrong with my kid?"

"No," Steve said, promptly, because that's something he knows is important to confirm as soon as possible. "Nothing's wrong with Morgan at all."

"Nebula? The one we have here is the one who still thinks her father was awesome."

"Nebula's great. Morgan loves her."

"Rhodey? I mean, you did—"

"Rhodey's fine," Steve interrupted, because otherwise Tony might say *James* again and Steve's not sure he's ready to hear it.

"Pepper, then," Tony surmised, and Steve's guilty silence confirmed it. "Well. I always thought if she died she'd end up here, but—"

"She's not dead."

"Good. I'm glad you confirmed that, because you were panicking me for a while, and I've got enough restless monsters of my own to add one more to the pile."

"Sorry for making you panic," Steve mumbled his apology. "What do you mean by restless monsters?"

Tony made an annoyed noise that rumbled through his chest and reverberated into Steve. "It was something my mom used to say. Those pesky thoughts that keep you up late at night and won't let you get back to sleep. I'd forgotten about the idea myself until I had my own kid, and god, so many of those monsters have her name on them." His voice dropped when he added, "Less, now you're here."

That was probably a thank you, Steve supposed. They were never very good before with any emotions that weren't anger, but maybe he was right about what you needed for a team to come together: time, experience, and communication. They'd experienced a lot together already. Time was the gift they'd been given by the disgusting worms. And communication, well. They could work on that. They were working on it now, sort of.

"Pepper got married," Steve blurted and then winced. He was still stroking Tony's hair, almost automatic by now; it was hypnotic, in a way. It meant he could feel the way Tony didn't even tense at that news, not at all.

"Good for her. Hugh, was it?"
Steve blinked. Tony Stark had a history of surprising him, dammit, and it seemed like that wasn't going to change any time soon. He tried to think about how Tony could have known something like that and came up blank. "I know you've described yourself as a Futurist before, but that's—" Steve shook his head. "Have you been messing with me this whole time? Do you have some sort of communication with Earth?"

"Absolutely zero secret line to home, Cap."

"Then—" Steve's brain was the human equivalent of a Blue Screen of Death, a reference he got now after getting to live through the computer age this time around instead of skipping over it. He gave up trying to figure it out. "How did you know?"

Tony hummed. "A good magician doesn't give away his tricks."

"Most of the magicians I've met recently have been dicks." Steve thought about it. "Wong was maybe okay. But the rest…"

"I am on the same page as you there." Tony shuddered. "I can't believe I ever wanted to be Merlin as a kid. Magic is the worst."

"You wanted to be Merlin?"

"Uh, yeah, he was the real power of Camelot. Saw everything that was coming before it happened, and—any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, so that worked for me—"

"Clarke's third law," Steve recognized.

"Precisely," Tony said. "Wait, you read Arthur C. Clarke? I didn't think that was your thing."

Steve frowned. "Wait. What is my thing supposed to be?"

Tony paused. "Rip van Winkle?"

"Nice."

"I don't know. I didn't even know you could read."

"Hadn't we agreed to stop being mean to each other?"

"Pretty sure that conversation only happened in your head, van Winkle." Tony laughed, the sound smothered by Steve's chest, but Steve could feel it ripple right through him anyway. "But okay, yeah, less mean. I can try that."

"You could start by taking mercy on my melted brain," Steve muttered.

"That could be a lost cause—"

"You lasted about five seconds with that be less mean to Steve resolution."

"It bodes badly for me that you're not impressed with a good solid five seconds."

"Tony—"

"You remember what it was like after the Decimation," Tony said. Steve glanced down; Tony was staring off into the distance, but his hands tightened in Steve's tunic. Steve understood. Tony
barely got to even celebrate the other half of the universe returning to life. All he had were the memories of the trauma and that brief lightning-sharp relief that everyone was back—before everything went so quickly to shit.

"I remember," Steve said, softly.

Something in Steve's tone made Tony's fingers grip less tightly.

"People needed something good. Something to latch onto." Tony looked up then, his eyes sharp and intent on Steve's face. "Did Pepper not even tell you how we ended up engaged?"

"I saw the press conference," Steve said, pleased that he managed to make that come out levelly, because saw doesn't really cover it. He watched it obsessively, on days when he needed to remind himself what happened when he gave into his own cowardice. When he had to remind himself he wasn't solely the world's leading expert on being too late, but he was also an expert in getting in his own damned way.

Tony nodded and looked away again. "Well. It was supposed to be a press conference announcing Spider-Man as an Avenger. But Parker's smarter than all of us and decided to stay being a kid for a little longer, which I think is an asset, too many kids are in a hurry to grow up, and—"

"Tony," Steve said, hoping Tony would decipher it as an entreaty to stop rambling, and not because it was starting to touch on sensitive territory for Steve.

"Right. Well. I panicked and proposed to Pepper on stage because I had nothing else to say. Kind of startled her into saying yes."

"But you two—"

"Oh, don't get me wrong, we were in love. We've always loved each other. That's never been in doubt for a second."

"But—"

"Do you always interrupt people during storytime?"

"Probably," Steve admitted.

"Hm. Well. The stock market responded really well to it, and we got really excited too. It felt like everything we'd been leading up to together. Pepper was—she felt necessary, like part of my foundations, and I was just as important to her. But then—"

"The Decimation."

"You can't help yourself, can you? Eh. It's not the worst flaw someone can have, but I hope one day you get to enjoy how much better a story is when it's not interrupted."

"I wouldn't interrupt you if you got to the good parts of the story quicker."

"I forgot how demanding you can be," Tony snarked. "Fine. I'll zoom ahead. So blah blah blah, half the universe was busy clogging up air filters, and we helped join the rebuilding effort, like every other big corporation that was left did, and—I guess that process just magnified our relationship. We loved each other fiercely, that never changed. We never even talked about not getting married. The world needed good news."
Steve remembered that period. The news latched on to every small good thing like it was the best thing ever.

"But it was when we were patching up the world that we realized our relationship had those same fundamental gaps. The same ones that ripped us apart, after the Battle of New York, after our brief post-Ultron reconciliation—" Tony shrugged. "Turns out, putting a wedding band-aid on a relationship that has fundamental holes in doesn't work out like you think it should. Sometimes there are people you desperately need and love, people that are as necessary to you as oxygen, people who fit in your life so well—sometimes marriage isn't what those people...need."

Steve opened his mouth to say something but snapped it shut. Maybe Tony had a point about stories being better when they weren't interrupted.

"Go ahead, you can interrupt me," Tony sighed.

"It's not as fun to interrupt if you give me permission," Steve said, primly. Then, "But you two seemed to be happily married when we, uh—"

"Turned up to ask me to do the impossible and invent time travel?" Tony prompted.

That wasn't how Steve would have phrased it. When we turned up and unknowingly invited you to your death, was how Steve would put it, but then he remembered how Natasha had been subdued and tear-eyed that day. Maybe she knew. Steve felt sick. Maybe he should have known the real magnitude of what they were asking, but he'd...he'd felt so confident. They'd lost once, but that was only because they weren't all together at the time, the way they should have been. The way they could have been, if Steve hadn't been such a fucking coward.


"By that point, we'd figured it out," Tony said, shrugging. "And I couldn't regret it for a single second, because we had a beautiful daughter together, so screw conventions at that point. Pepper and I work well together as partners, that's not a lie and that's as real as any marriage could be. It turns out we're good at everything but romantic partners. So after a couple of years of trying to make it work, we realized we were using the marriage as a band-aid, and decided to stay together to co-parent our child. With the world as it was, and the shares staying steady enough considering what was happening to a lot of our companies, we kept our separation quiet. The world had been disappointed enough."

"And Hugh?"

"She started dating him surreptitiously when Morgan was two."

Steve was quiet for a moment. "From our perspective, she only openly started dating Hugh a couple of years after you were—"

"You can say dead. I was very dead. I had a corpse and everything. And a funeral. Tell me I had a good funeral."

"Fury cried," Steve offered. "And I wasn't going to say dead."

"You were going to use a cutesy metaphor? For me? Ouch, I think that stings worse than dying did."

Steve narrowed his eyes. Tony might have had a while now to get used to the dying and repetitive deaths thing, but it was still too raw and new for him to grasp.
"Maybe the bucket you kicked deserved to be kicked," Steve said.

Tony snorted. "I hope you avenged me and nerfed the bucket in my name."

"Pepper had it gold-plated and put it on her mantelpiece," Steve lied.

"That's almost sweet," Tony said, and Steve was confused, because the bucket joke was sort of horrendous, until Tony continued, "Four years of sneaking around for her? That's good. I'm glad she has someone who would love her that much to do that."

Oh. Tony had just gone back to the part of the conversation about Hugh. Fair enough, he supposed.

"Does he treat her well?" Tony asked.

"Like a queen," Steve said, promptly.

"Good. All I ever wanted was for her to be happy. It was a shame it took me so long to notice that it was when we were friends that our relationship was the strongest. She deserves the world."

"I was scared to tell you," Steve admitted. "She's always been so polite about your relationship to me, I had no idea."

"It's nice she's kept the charade up," Tony said. "I mean. We did have a couple of hairy months before we figured out the real problem with our marriage, so I wouldn't have blamed her for dragging me through the mud without me around to sue her for slander. And I guess I don't know how much she would have liked to really admit to you, considering—"

Tony trailed off then, with a sharp inhalation that sounded almost like a high-pitched whistle.

"Considering what?" Steve prompted, curiously.

"I lost my train of thought," Tony said, unconvincingly. "It's late. We should probably sleep."

"Yeah," Steve said.

"You can keep petting my hair if you like, I won't stop you," Tony added. "Absolutely selfless, not one of my favorite activities in life at all, nope."

Steve hadn't even noticed that he hadn't stopped. "Uh, okay. Good night, I guess?"

Tony nodded, the motion rocking Steve. Then he paused and muttered into Steve's chest, "Before you died this last time, you said you wanted to see your family."

Steve inhaled sharply, more obvious with the noise than he meant to be. "I guess I meant you. You and Nat and Pietro. You're my family here."

"Hm." Tony didn't sound convinced. "That's a nice sentiment."

Steve's chest felt tight, his eyes hot and hard. He focused on breathing through his nose, staring up into the darkness. Apart from Bucky, no one had really pushed too hard about what he'd been through, off in his alternate branched life. Morgan finding his sketchbook had been a jolt. He should have told her about them, but then the moment passed, and he hadn't. Sometimes that life did feel like it was a dream, one that happened to someone else.

"I—" Steve started, and then changed the topic. "The gray bug from the worming chamber. Ghrenggrh. He told me to rest, because tomorrow would be fun. What does that mean?"
"Shit. Sorry. Nothing good." Tony made a huffing noise. "Hold on a moment—" Tony wriggled on his chest, doing something on his wrist. He must be expanding the silence field again, because his next words were, "Hey, Pietro, you awake?"

"I nearly was," Pietro snarled. "This better be good, Stark."

"You watched the Stooges play today, right? How did they do?"

"Slaughtered," Pietro said, promptly. "Queen Hela turned them into skewers. Why?"

"BR tomorrow," Tony said.

"Shit," Natasha muttered. "You sure?"

"There are only two things that Ghrengrh thinks are fun, and you think we'd have a Melee with the Stooges still in the Chamber?"

"Ugh," Natasha said.

"BR?" Steve prompted.

"Less questions, more sleep," Tony said.

"If you'd wanted us to sleep you could have saved the BR revelation until the morning," Pietro muttered.

"It's times like this when I *do* regret not having magic," Tony said. "It would be nice to click your fingers and forget some things completely."

"Like how we *do not like it when people click fingers and do magic,*" Natasha hissed.

"You'd think Natasha would get tired of being right all the time," Tony sighed.

Pietro's voice was an ill-concealed laugh. "Like you do?"

Tony made a grumbling noise and Steve was glad it was too dark for everyone to see that he was grinning, because it probably wasn't appropriate. The whole situation was terrible. They all died, continuously. But Steve had Tony, Natasha, *and* Pietro by his side here. Alive. Healthy and hale enough to be able to joke with each other. If this was magic, Steve would count himself a fan.

Steve managed to get to sleep, even if that last conversation gave him a couple of Tony's so-called restless monsters of his own. BR was code for something, probably something *terrible,* and Steve wasn't sure what. Best Regards? Bromine? Bug Room?

The puzzle at least gave him something to think about, a nice distraction from Yondu's daily shower show. There wasn't any answer, until Topaz came by and handed out an envelope to every table at the end of a very quiet breakfast. Steve didn't hesitate to open his this time and he got his answer:

"Match: LOW SUNS. BATTLE ROYALE. Fight and die for the glory of the Grandmaster."

Steve's breath quickened briefly.

"This is for everyone currently here," Topaz droned, like it was the most boring thing she'd ever had to announce. "Five of the Tenebrae are currently still being wormed, so they're exempt. Usual
rules apply. Dressed and in the Cold Room by sun-up or there'll be a lottery."

"The Captain just had a match too," Natasha said.

Topaz eyeballed her and then quickly glanced over at Steve dismissively. "Still standing, isn't he? Make sure he picks up his costume from Hrhumhuhr."

Steve watched her go, his stomach jumbling.

"Save your questions for the workshop," Tony muttered, his eyes lingering on the forcefield. Steve followed his gaze to see Topaz walk through the opposite door, delivering the message to the Tenebrae. Unlike the subdued reactions on their side of the forcefield, the Tenebrae mostly looked excited.

Steve didn't exactly feel great about doing anything which made a room full of villains look happy. Let alone anything that was implied by the name *Battle Royale*. Steve couldn't think of a single meaning of that phrase that boiled down to anything but awful.

A normal *battle royal* would consist of a fight with multiple combatants where the last person standing was the winner. More recently, picking up an *e* on the end of *royal*, the phrase "*Battle Royale*" had emerged in popular culture to mean something similar, except combatants were instructed to kill each other until there was a sole triumphant survivor.

Steve knew which of the likely ends of the definition that this Battle Royale would take. In a world where worms could bring you back from the dead, death became a throwaway stake. Steve waited until the four of them were safely back in the workshop before he reached for confirmation of his fear.

"So I'm presuming everyone battles to the death until there's a single survivor," Steve said.

Natasha smiled at him weakly. "Ghrengrh's idea of fun doesn't gibe well with mine."

Steve could fall silent and go mad thinking about it, or he could distract this particular monster by trying to put more of a face on it.

"So how does *this* Battle Royale actually work?" Steve asked.

"Hngh," Pietro said, helpfully.

Steve glanced at him, hoping that might prompt more of an explanation.

"Honestly, *hngh* is pretty close," Natasha said. She tipped her head from side to side, wobbling it a little before letting out a noisy exhale. "It's different to most of the usual fights in that it's very immersive. They knock us out and when we wake up, we're usually separated, and—you'll think you're somewhere else. But you're not. You'll still be in the arena. Think of it like an elaborate film set. Usually it's some sort of building with outside areas. Last time we had a kind of medieval castle, that was actually kind of fun for a while." She paused. "Until someone found the burning oil and then it was *not* fun."

Steve squinted at her. He kind of wanted the full story but Natasha had the dangerous glint in her eyes which meant if he pressed for more information, the details would be graphic and gory. "So how do the audience watch?"

"There's screens around the viewing area for anything that happens inside a closed room," Pietro said. "And there's always cameras on the wall. Doesn't matter how many you *accidentally* smash
"Pietro used finger quotes around the word accidentally, "—more come out."

"And there's even higher cameras that in layman's terms can see right through the walls," Tony said. "But if Vision's done his calculations right, we can block that view, if we ever need to."

"Why you ever doubt me," Vision interrupted with a sigh, "is beyond me. I lost my body but I kept my brain in my head, where it's supposed to be."

"Imagine if it had been in your ass," Pietro said.

Vision hummed like he was considering it. "Then I'd certainly have been in trouble for our first fight in the arena when you thought stabbing me in the buttocks was a good plan."

"You're not entirely human," Pietro protested, "how was I supposed to know if your organs were in the same place mine are? Do you remember how many matches it took for me to figure out that Brother Royal's heart was where his stomach should be? Seventeen. Seventeen."

"Brother Royal?" Steve hadn't heard that name before. Was that another BR meaning? Was that another BR meaning?

Pietro looked to Natasha; something silent passed between them.

"An old nightmare," Natasha said.

"Last one standing gets to avoid the worms," Pietro said. "So there's your motivation right there."

"And the lottery Topaz mentioned?"

"It's what happens if we refuse to fight," Tony said. Steve startled a look over in his direction, but Tony was staring determinedly down at what was in his hands. When he did look up at Steve, his expression was fierce. "All our names go into a draw and one person is chosen to never come back."

Steve could feel his own expression folding into a form to mirror Tony's. "No worms?"

"No more worms for them," Tony confirmed. "We're here at the mercy of the Grandmaster, after all." His voice was twisted up in loathing at that statement. "So we fight. We fight our best. No matter what."

"Also, if Wanda ever turns up here, we don't want to be the assholes who got any more of her family killed," Natasha said.

Steve winced. "Considering how powerful she really is, we really don't. I can't wait to get out of here and you to see what she can do now, wow."

Pietro smiled brightly at that.

"Well, one thing at a time," Tony said. "This first. Low Sun is soon. You'd better go get your costume back, Captain."

"C'mon, I'll go with you," Pietro said, looping his arm around Steve's shoulder. Steve was proud that he didn't flinch, even though Pietro had been the other side of the room a second before. "I want to see if Hrhumhuhr would consider swapping my booty shorts for a jockstrap."

"I would pay not to see that," Natasha said.

"Sucks we don't have any currency as death slaves," Pietro quipped back, leading Steve out of the
Hrhumhuhr wasn't too upset with Steve. Only one part of Steve's skirt got destroyed in his last match and some blood had to be cleaned from it, and apparently that level of mild destruction was enough to make the Costumer be less cold to him.

Steve wondered if the bugs were as trapped as they were, or whether it was just some sort of job to them. He didn't ask, staying silent so he could listen as Pietro rambled quietly about the Tenebrae they were about to face.

Some of the names seemed familiar. Yon-Rogg, Crossbones, Ellen Brandt, and Ronan they'd all faced the other day. Natasha had fought Killmonger yesterday, so he was a known quantity too, of a sort. Hela was the Tenebrae's Queen, lethal to the extreme by all accounts. Aldrich Killian was still hopped up on Extremis, like Ellen, but dialed up to eleven. Ivan Vanko was one of Tony's earliest foes, wielding electric whips. Taserface was a Ravager, like Yondu's people, but apparently he was nothing much to worry about. Malekith the Accursed was the malevolent leader of the dark elves; super-strong and durable, he also had a regenerative power, which made putting him down difficult. Steve knew who Nebula was, of course, but this was apparently the version who'd come with Thanos from 2014, who'd been killed by the Nebula from their timestream.

Except, Pietro didn't stop with the Tenebrae, and why would he? Odin was their King, and he would be supported by Skurge, Heimdall, Fandral, Volstagg, and Hogun. Loki may also join their number, but that wasn't always the case. Groot, the living tree, who could only say three words and could regrow his limbs nearly at will, although it took time. Gamora, the green-skinned woman, was someone Steve had heard about before; Nebula's sister and widely known as the most dangerous woman in the galaxy. Guillotine was mostly unknown; the most deadly thing about her was her mystical sword with dark supernatural powers that she called "La Fleur du Mal." Yondu had three of his Ravager pals; they weren't anything to worry too much about, but Yondu's whistle-controlled arrow could—and had—made him the winner of more than one Battle Royale.

"Tony wins a lot of them," Pietro said, proudly.

Steve beamed at him and then his smile faltered. "But that means you and Nat—"

Pietro looked away and stared at the wall. "It is what it is, Captain." He turned back to Steve with a sad smile. "We're lucky it's not the end it should be. The best we can do is to not go out easily. We fight for the glory of the Grandmaster."

"We die for the glory of the Grandmaster," Steve said, remembering the words on the assignment paper.

Pietro nodded and put a hand on his shoulder. "As long as you remember that, Captain. And remember what's important." His voice dropped lower. "Who's important."

Steve inhaled and exhaled slowly, locking his gaze with Pietro's intense one, and he nodded. Steve pitched his voice as quietly as possible. "Iron Man wins. Whatever the cost."

Pietro beamed. "We're on the same page, then."

"Stop muttering battle strategies, get into your clothes and get out of my workshop," Hrhumhuhr called over.

Steve startled and quickly finished getting dressed in his repaired costume. When he looked up from lacing his boots, Pietro was leaning against the doorjamb, wearing his full battle costume and
yawning outlandishly. His silver lightning bolt glinted under the warm light.

"I'm never getting used to that," Steve muttered.

When Steve woke up, his head was pounding so hard that his last few memories were inaccessible for a long moment. His mouth was dry and he was dizzy. Blinking rapidly, Steve got to his feet and regretted it, because the pounding in his head increased.

His vision was blurry and he blinked rapidly, trying to get it back in focus. His shield came into focus first so he grabbed that, immediately feeling a lot better. Memories flooded back ahead of his vision. He went to see Pip with Pietro, but was only allowed his shield, and then they went to the Cold Room, and all the other Einherjar were there in costume, and Tony could barely look at him, and Steve hadn't been too surprised, because it was awkward, and then there was some sort of gas piped into the room—

Oh. Right. Natasha said they would be knocked out and when they woke up, they'd be separated. Well. It wasn't like Steve hadn't grasped the concept, but the knockout gas that the Grandmaster had used on them was a bit of a brain-melting one.

There was a wall near Steve made of a black smooth material so he kept his back to it and held up his shield, slowly trying to assess where he was. He was standing in the middle of some sort of hallway that looked exactly the same in both opposing directions. The walls were a smooth solid black, the ceiling was gray with white spotlights embedded every few feet, and he was standing on gray floor tiles. At either end of the hallway was a single dark doorway. And periodically in the wall was set round dark half-spheres which Steve would bet good money, if he had any, were cameras.

Steve frowned, hefted his shield experimentally, and eyeballed each doorway speculatively. There was no visual clue which direction to choose. He tried to listen but there was no audible clues either. Nothing he could smell.

It was up to luck, really, Steve supposed. He couldn't stay in a hallway that was completely indefensible. He flipped a coin mentally in his head and turned left when it landed. Each of his footsteps was too loud to Steve's ears, the metal in his costume clanging at a volume he was unhappy with. He almost wanted to take off the spaulders and poleyns making the most of the noise, but he probably needed more protection, not less.

When he got to the doorway, Steve blinked at it. It looked like pure darkness. When he tentatively extended his shield, it passed into the darkness easily; when he pulled it back his shield was whole. So was it some sort of curtain? Or was the room or hallway that followed through the door a space of dark black? Maybe Steve could step through and plummet to his death.

Steve frowned and tentatively put his foot forward, dipping his toes into the darkness experimentally. He thought he could feel something below his foot so he took a deep breath and took a full step forward. The moment of darkness was brief and then Steve was in a big, bright room that made his breath half catch in his throat, because it was beautiful.

The room he was now standing in was full of plinths holding brightly colored metallic spheres that seemed to hover effortlessly above the surface of the plinths with no obvious mechanism. The light reflected from them, spilling rainbows across the ground, giving the same serene, cool feeling as standing below an intricate stained glass window. When Steve tentatively touched the nearest sphere, a deep and glimmering crimson color that turned his reflection into a thin smear, his palm stung immediately. Steve withdrew his hand and regretted it; the stinging sensation lingered for a
The plinths were joined together by short spans of thin black walls that came up to Steve's elbows. It took Steve a while to map out why the walls were arranged like they were, seemingly at random, until he realized it was some sort of a maze, with a full circuit around the outside so you could skip the maze entirely. He frowned, mapping out the pattern in his head, noting where all the cameras were in this room as he did.

It was a dark room, the walls and ceiling painted black, and the floor covered in square dark gray tiles that were so shiny they reflected the plinths and spheres perfectly, making Steve feel like he was walking suspended in mid-air. There was some sort of lighting above that bounced off all the reflective spheres and tiles, giving the place a psychedelic feel with a very sixties vibe.

Steve knew his presence in the timeline he'd lived in had changed some things, but it had been very sobering to realize many of his ripples were only things close to him. The wider world ended up being very much the same, as if so many terrible things were unavoidable. The accords causing a Civil War. Ragnarok and the fall of Asgard. Even Ultron had happened in Steve's new lifetime, which Steve had thought impossible, considering, but Hank Pym filled the void. Ultron was apparently inevitable in every universe. Steve wondered what Tony would think about that before realizing he could find out and the giddiness of that idea made him smile involuntarily.

Smiling. In the middle of a death game.

Steve couldn't scratch insanity from his list of potential explanations for this whole place. Hallucinating Natasha and Tony back to life was very plausible. The rest probably couldn't have come from his own imagination, though. Steve had never seen anything like this room before.

The room was full of the spheres and the only thing that differed was the color; there were six distinct colors that Steve could see. He was frowning and reaching out to touch a purple one, wondering whether it would sting him like the red one had, when a slight motion caught the corner of his eye and Steve reacted immediately, throwing himself down so he was crouched low behind a maze wall.

He gripped his shield and looked up, trying to catch what was happening in the reflection of the spheres, which gave a distorted view of a large part of the room, if he squinted. And for the briefest of moments, Steve saw a face in one of the spheres. Yon-Rogg. He took a deep breath as he ran through Yon-Rogg's strengths again in his head. Pink-skinned Kree warrior. Enhanced strength and durability. Steve would need to catch him by surprise to have a shot at taking him out.

"You can't hide from me," Yon-Rogg called out, his voice taunting. Smug. No wonder Carol still muttered about wanting to find him and punch him in the face. Yon-Rogg had a very punchable face.

Steve kept quiet. His voice would give away his position. He needed a plan. The memory of the crimson sphere came back to him and he looked up thoughtfully at the nearest sphere to him. He reached up and carefully touched the blue sphere with his pinky finger. It took all of Steve's strength to stay quiet while his finger immediately swelled up with ice. He yanked his finger back and held it in his armpit to warm it up quickly. Again, it seemed to take a minute for the effect to dissipate.

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Yon-Rogg's footsteps echoed forward. He was moving, but slowly, obviously just as cautious of giving his own position away to Steve: a surprise attack was a shared first impulse then. Good, Steve thought. Steve could see fragments of where Yon-Rogg was, in the reflective surfaces of the spheres. He needed to move before Yon-Rogg saw him and knew exactly where Steve was too.
Steve cursed his dumb stupid arena outfit, because the metal spaulders would make sound if he moved and so would the metal poleyns covering his knees that were attached firmly to the top of his boots. Well. He could probably do something about that. As quietly as possible, he unlaced the boots entirely and stepped out of them. He was about to leave them behind and reconsidered when a fragment of a plan came to mind; he picked them up and carefully held them in one hand as he checked the reflections of the sphere to gauge Yon-Rogg's approach.

Steve took a deep breath and hauled his shield in one direction and threw his boots in the other.

The action provided the distraction Steve was hoping for and Yon-Rogg turned in the wrong direction. That was all Steve needed. He caught the shield rebound in a smooth motion as he leaped at Yon-Rogg over one of the maze walls, kicking out at the nearest crimson sphere, yelling as pain instantly blistered up his leg, because he didn't even have his boots to protect him.

Yon-Rogg obviously wasn't expecting Steve to deliberately touch one of the spheres, let alone the one that caused pain; Steve hadn't even really been sure a kick would be enough to dislodge it, but it was, and the sphere careened right at Yon-Rogg's face. Yon-Rogg put up an arm to deflect the blow, but staggered back with a yell when it impacted against him.

Steve dropped down to avoid the retaliatory kick Yon-Rogg aimed at his head and hurled his shield again, this time at one of the green spheres; Steve hadn't been able to test what it did, but the angle was perfect to propel the sphere at Yon-Rogg's side. Yon-Rogg immediately projectile vomited and Steve was able to use that distraction to pick up his shield as it bounced back and he threw himself behind one of the plinths again.

Yon-Rogg let out something that was presumably a Kree curse word; Carol wasn't around for further clarification. Steve used the moment to hide again, creeping down low enough so that Yon-Rogg couldn't see him easily, over the walls or in the reflection of the spheres.

"Your games don't impress me, Captain," Yon-Rogg said. "You've been lucky so far. One of these sphere colors does nothing. It's an old Kree game, see; this whole building is a mimicry of a museum for young Kree. But which of the colors will be your savior? And which will kill you before it can ever touch me?"

Steve squinted. Carol said the guy was full of himself. People who still called Tony Stark egotistical in the memorials and retrospectives that regularly popped up on television scheduling had no idea what the word actually meant. They'd definitely never met Yon-Rogg, that was for sure. Maybe Yon-Rogg had a point, if he thought Steve was going to play the game by those rules. Steve only planned on using the spheres one more time and the sphere he was planning to use, he knew how it worked.

Steve edged along another maze well, using the reflections some more to gauge Yon-Rogg's position, and—after carefully detaching one of his spaulders—once Yon-Rogg was in the right position, Steve moved.

He hurled the spaulder at a blue sphere as hard as he could, dislodging it from the plinth.

"Missed me," Yon-Rogg said, advancing toward Steve.

"Didn't mean to hit you," Steve said, leaping up onto one of the now-empty plinths. The sphere behaved in the way Steve suspected it would; it iced over the floor near Yon-Rogg. Yon-Rogg adjusted his trajectory to compensate for Steve changing his direction and vector so quickly, but didn't adjust for the floor becoming slicker. Yon-Rogg stumbled and that's all Steve needed; Yon-Rogg had nothing to block Steve's shield. Which Steve hurled at him full-strength, edge first.
At this range, and off-balance from an iced-over floor, Yon-Rogg couldn't defend himself; it split right into Yon-Rogg's face with a disgusting crunching noise. Steve followed it up by leaping at him, slamming the shield in more firmly; Yon-Rogg windmilled his arms, trying to regain some sort of balance, but his palm connected into one of the yellow spheres and it was only Steve's quick lurch backward that stopped Steve from getting electrocuted by the sphere too.

Huh. It must have been the yellow sphere that was the dangerous one all along.

Yon-Rogg's body twitched for a minute, the skin smoking on the arm that had connected with the yellow sphere. Steve was glad he'd randomly touched only the crimson and blue spheres. It would probably have been terribly embarrassing to be taken out in a Battle Royale by one of the items in a room, not even another contestant. Well, maybe the Grandmaster's bloodthirsty audiences would have enjoyed it.

Assured now that Yon-Rogg was dead, Steve gathered up his possessions quickly, staying very clear of the dislodged spheres now he knew what four of the six did. He put his boots and spaulder back on, trying not to look at Yon-Rogg's body. Even knowing it wasn't permanent...it was never easy killing someone. At least Steve could try and hold onto that feeling, because it would be the moment something like that became easy that he would know he'd lost sight of who he was.

They could kill him. They could bring him back to life over and over in the most painful manner and they could force him to kill others, but as long as Steve held true to who he was, they would never be able to break him.

After a moment of hesitation, Steve did look at Yon-Rogg's body, and noticed a dagger still clutched in his hand; he carefully extracted it from Yon-Rogg's palm, trying not to step in the blue blood that pooled out of the dead Kree's body. It was a nicely balanced weapon. Steve kept it in his left hand, feeling better about proceeding now he had more than his shield.

Steve gave his shield an apologetic side-glance. He needed all the help he could get at the moment, if he wanted to survive to find and protect Tony for as long as he could. That was the aim. Surviving wasn't the plan; Tony surviving was the plan.

Giving the next doorway a wary glance, and hearing nothing that intimated someone moving in the room beyond, Steve raised his shield high and stepped through the blackness. The next room he emerged into was bright. White walls, white floor tiles, white high ceilings. The white walls made the distinctive semi-sphere cameras stand out like sores. The room was massive. Around the edges of the room were racks of weapons, almost like in Pip's room, but these ones were displayed with small tags tied to them, and each rack had a small screen above them, displaying the weapons in action. Each rack held a different type of weapon, and each screen showed a couple of Kree warriors showing how each of the weapons worked.

Yon-Rogg said the whole building was a mimicry of a museum for young Kree to attend. Steve supposed that a history of weapons would make sense for a people who shaped their entire existence around war. It was all a pretty lie, as museums often were, because their whole war was a lie. Steve caught sight of a display showing a Kree warrior plunging a large broadsword into the stomach of a Skrull and he bristled. The Kree were bullies. He felt a little better about taking out Yon-Rogg.

This was war, too, and Steve didn't have a choice, if he wanted to get to Tony's side. It was him or them. The worms made everything a little easier, too, although they didn't erase the guilt as easily as they erased death.

Steve tentatively reached out for the nearest weapon, a tall spear with a gleaming four-pronged
blade, seeing if he could tug it loose from the display, but it was stuck firm. The blade was sharp, though. There went his idea of taking a couple of weapons with him; some of the axes looked better than the one he'd been given to fight Kaecilius.

"Careful you don't cut yourself there, Captain," a deep voice said, snapping Steve out of his assessment of the rack of weapons. "I've heard those spear things can be sharp."

Steve reacted quickly enough, considering he'd been blindsided by the arrival of the other person. He swore silently at himself for getting distracted; he's lucky it wasn't someone like Rumlow who would have hit him first before speaking. Raising his shield carefully, Steve took in the appearance of the speaker, realizing who it was quickly, even though he'd never actually personally faced Killmonger before.

Killmonger's outfit was like someone had designed a sexy Halloween costume version of T'Challa's Black Panther suit. Steve had seen some fairly awful "sexy Halloween" versions of Avengers costumes in his time. He still remembered fondly the day Carol removed the entire storefront of a place selling highly-sexualized Captain Marvel costumes that replaced her pants with a leotard that rode unflatteringly up the wearer's crotch.

"Captain," Killmonger greeted. "Nice to finally make your acquaintance."

"I don't know who you are," Steve lied, because in his experience, hitting a villain directly in the ego was the best offense. It put them off-balance. The memory of him using the same approach against the Red Skull on Vormir was one of the few fraught moments of his quest to replace the Infinity Stones that could even now elicit a small smile. Schmidt had been furious when Steve played dumb. It hadn't quite covered up the grief from standing in the place that had taken Natasha's life, but as a small comfort it did its part in holding him together long enough to make his new life in the alternate forties work.

"I'm the rightful heir to the throne of Wakanda," Killmonger snarled, baring his teeth. "You can call me Killmonger. Or Your Majesty. I'm not picky." He glanced briefly around himself. "So what's this place? An armory?"

Steve wasn't much for pre-battle conversation but he was buying time, really, trying to find some fragment of information in his mind that might help him. Killmonger had been a Navy SEAL; he would be deadly. Killmonger had died a few years before the Decimation, so he had probably been here long enough to have been wormed a fair number of times; Steve's own enhanced durability and speed wouldn't be a benefit. Yet again, his mind would have to be his advantage. And his vibranium shield. If Killmonger thought he was the true heir of Wakanda, a shield made of "his" country's metal might put him on edge.

"It's a museum," Steve said, cautiously. "A Kree museum for children, according to Yon-Rogg."

"Oh, if Yon-Rogg says so," Killmonger rolled his eyes. Apparently Yon-Rogg made a somewhat consistent impression on people. "I wonder how many of these are artefacts the Kree stole from others in their domination of the galaxy," Killmonger says, glancing briefly at a rack of sharp spears. "Kind of sounds familiar, doesn't it? White supremacists, blue supremacists, none of you hesitate in steamrolling entire cultures to get what you want. Power." He spat the word out.

Steve didn't say anything. Was there any words that could salve the sort of pain in Killmonger's voice? Besides, Steve knew enough of Killmonger's history to know no amount of attempts at reparation would ever be enough. All Killmonger desired in his heart now was genocide, no matter how he wrapped it up in pretty language and righteous anger.
"I don't suppose you feel like skipping the fight and moving on, find someone else to punch?"
Steve squinted at Killmonger.

"I'm almost tempted," Killmonger said, "except that shield of yours is vibranium, which means it's mine, so I'm thinking I'll take it back over your dead body."

Steve sighed. "I thought you'd say something like that."

Killmonger came straight at him, which was fair enough; the displays were pressed too far into the perimeter of the room to even provide much of a defense. Killmonger didn't have a weapon yet, beyond the claws in his fists, but they were strong enough to make a truly horrendous noise as they collided hard with his shield. Steve gritted his teeth. The shield was his. Steve didn't exactly trust the Grandmaster to make sure Killmonger gave it back, if it was taken from him during this fight. His best option to hold onto it was to stop Killmonger.

That was easier said than done; Killmonger moved fast, flipping easily out of Steve's reach, skipping out of the way of Steve's shield swipe and slipping back in to punch Steve in the face. Steve managed to slash out with Yon-Rogg's knife, his vision blurred from the punch; he thought he managed to draw some blood in return, but he couldn't be sure, because his vision stayed blurry for the next flurry of blows.

Killmonger managed to kick the knife out of Steve's hand in the next attack; Steve could hear it skittering across the floor, but he didn't turn to look where it went. He was too busy fending off Killmonger's spate of attacks,countering each punch and kick as best as he could with his shield. Killmonger launched himself up and did a double-foot kick right at the center of the shield, but Steve anticipated it and braced against his shield so that Killmonger tumbled back harder than he meant to.

It didn't give Steve much of a pause, but it was enough to regroup. Steve spat out the blood in his mouth and glared at his opponent, raising his shield again. Killmonger fought like T'Challa and at least Steve had seen T'Challa in action enough to be able to anticipate some of Killmonger's movements. Even as Killmonger deftly got back to his feet, Steve launched forward in more of an offensive leap, hurling his shield as he did, using the small room to its best advantage, because calculating the rebounds in a space like this was easy for Steve, when he'd got his shield training the hard way, taking down Nazis in dense forests and sprawling underground complexes.

Steve caught his shield mid-leap and kicked Killmonger solidly in the chest, but got smacked hard in the side in response; breathing hard, he rolled out of the way and sprung back to his feet. Killmonger smiled, a little bit of blood running between his teeth, before skipping forward back into the fray, like he'd been barely touched by Steve at all.

It wasn't good. Killmonger was stronger than Steve by far, and his suit might have been a sexualized version of the Black Panther suit, but it absorbed kinetic energy to reflect back the exact same way. Steve was matching most of his blows at this point, but he knew he couldn't keep up that intensity permanently. Steve needed some sort of strategy to defeat Killmonger, but in a room where his only other assets were attached to the wall, Steve's options were limited.

Limited, Steve thought, but not impossible.

As he'd already figured out, Killmonger's arrogance was probably the weak spot. He was overly confident. If Steve feigned injury, Killmonger would buy it, would probably press for the advantage without considering Steve was faking it.

His plan in mind, Steve upped his speed and frequency of hits, hoping Killmonger would think he
was reaching the end of his strength already and thus was falling into a pit of frantic desperation; Killmonger smirked a little in-between parrying Steve's attacks and the smirk only widened further when Steve deliberately started to fall backward.

If Steve wasn't so intent on getting to Tony's side, he'd almost feel guilty for how quickly Killmonger fell for it. It was his fault for thinking Steve would go down easily. It didn't even take much; Steve feinted a fall, and when Killmonger pounced, Steve leapt up, twisted, and used his shield to redirect Killmonger's momentum forward. Killmonger tried to compensate, but he was not used to being smacked by a disc of pure vibranium in the face, and when Steve followed it up with a firm kick, Killmonger was impaled on the weapon Steve was aiming for, a halberd with a sharp protruding metal hook.

Killmonger's body went limp and his mouth opened, blood spilling from it as the light died in his eyes. Steve flinched, backing up, trying not to let the horror he was feeling show too much on his face. He was breathing harder than he should be from the exertion. His mouth still tasted of blood. Steve felt irrationally that his mouth might never stop tasting like it did right then; copper and salt, sour and too-warm.

Steve turned away from Killmonger and looked around for his knife, quickly grabbing it and heading for the doorway that Killmonger came through.

He'd had enough of this particular museum room.

The next room was almost terrible enough for Steve to regret not lingering in the armory for a while longer.

He wasn't aware at first that he might think that; all he saw at first was a large shape that didn't make much sense. Except then, Steve rounded the shape, which looked like a large throne from the back, and—he didn't lose control of his bowels, but honestly, it was a close call for a hot second there.

Because sitting on the throne was Thanos.

A sculpture, Steve realized, after the instant feeling of panic nearly overwhelmed him. Incredibly lifelike, but it was clearly a sculpture; instead of eyes there were glinting jewels in the sockets where eyes might be. But the rest of it was depicted in such startlingly exact detail that Steve felt nauseated and afraid, all at once.

He actually had to stop and force himself to breathe, because his heart was racing at speed, and Steve needed to stay as alert and calm as possible. His gaze automatically drifted back to the Thanos sculpture, the compulsion too difficult to ignore, and a fresh swell of nausea caught the back of his throat.

Steve swallowed hard and tried harder to keep his gaze averted from the monstrosity as he stepped further into the room. It was mostly empty, the walls painted black and purple and dotted with white stars; a few rocky outcroppings dotted around the room that Steve would guess were fake from the way the low lights in the ceiling interacted with them. He strained to listen, because although there seemed to be no one there, someone might be in the next connected room, and if he listened, he could anticipate them. Maybe hide behind one of the fake stalagmites.

There was a noise, a faint thud of a footfall, and it turned out anticipation was a joke when you were trapped in any sort of environment with a speedster around.
"Hi, Captain," Pietro said.

He was standing directly in front of Steve, a knife already up to Steve's throat. Steve didn't stand a chance. Battle Royale. Every person for themselves. Steve should have anticipated even the other Avengers would be his enemies under a scope like that.

"Pietro," Steve said. Even those brief syllables made his throat press further into Pietro's blade. Steve's eyes dropped to it nervously. Well, at least if Pietro killed him, he'd probably make it quick?

"Aw, shit," Pietro said, and pulled the knife away, grinning goofily at Steve. "Didn't know who you were until I got in here." He sheathed the knife and stuck his hands in his pockets while Steve gulped for air, more grateful for the reprieve than he thought he would be. "Woah, you can chill, I wasn't really going to kill you, Captain."

"You might have to," Steve said, grimly.

Pietro rolled his eyes. "Sure. Like we'll all make it that far." Pietro glanced up at the statue of Thanos and pulled a face. "That is one ugly statue, am I right?"

Steve grunted, because "yes" seemed so inadequate to describe the living nightmare that Thanos represented.


Steve opened his mouth, but there wasn't even time to make his response before Pietro was back, Natasha clinging to his shoulders.

She hopped free of Pietro, beaming at Steve. Steve noticed she had a pair of sai tucked into one of the strips of leather that wound around her body to make the shape of the spider; the sai both had long wickedly-sharp side guards around the main shaft. Her hourglass wristbands were missing; they must be her regular weapon. Steve was glad all over again that he'd been allowed his shield from the start of this particular event.

Then Natasha's gaze slid past Steve and she recoiled like Steve did at the sight.

"Well, that's not disconcerting at all," Natasha quipped, only a slight tremble in her voice betraying how perturbed she was at seeing a life-sized Thanos sharing the room with them. "I kind of want to graffiti a dick on his face."

"My kingdom for a Sharpie," Steve said, and then something occurred to him. "Wait, is it safe to talk here?" He gestured surreptitiously at the semi-sphere cameras.

"Oh, yeah, we forgot to mention those before," Pietro said. "Yeah, Tony hacked into it once. They show the images from the cameras, but the audio track the audience get is some sort of commentary."

"They don't understand us anyway, most of them," Natasha said. "Mostly us in particular. Most of the other Einherjar and Tenebrae speak All-Speak."

"All-Speak?"


Steve's brow furrowed. "Thor speaks English."
Natasha patted him on the shoulder. "It's cute you still think that," she said. "C'mon. Let's get a move on. We need a more defensible location than this one."

"If we get separated, we need to try and aim for the roof," Pietro glanced at Steve. "If there's a building, there's always a roof."

"Best not to go back the way we came," Natasha said. "Definite hostiles still active. Seen anyone on your way here?"

"Two. They won't be bothering us," Steve offered, tersely.

Natasha nodded, admiration clear on her face. "We'll retrace your steps, then."

Steve was quiet as they passed back through the rooms Steve had already come through.

Killmonger's body was still impaled on the sharp halberd. He didn't know what he was expecting.

"Good work," Natasha said, prodding his body with her knife, checking to see if he was dead. Steve swallowed and spared Killmonger's limp body a sad stare. He hated everything about this.

"Was this your work?" Pietro asked, his quick eyes darting around, noticing the curved dents from the shield in the walls, in a couple of the displays. Steve ducked his head and nodded. "Nice."

Steve frowned. There was nothing nice about this. He was back again to thinking this place was almost a nightmare, but it was impossible, because his nightmares couldn't have Tony, Natasha, or Pietro in them. There was no way any of them deserved to be anywhere near a living nightmare like this one.

In the room with the spheres, Yon-Rogg's body lay splayed on the floor, his skull caved in. Steve winced at the sight. Now he wasn't fighting for his life, he felt sick to the stomach at the idea of his friends being able to see the terrible evidence of everything he'd done to survive.

Natasha put a soft hand on his arm, her eyes wet. She understood what he was going through. She'd been here for years, years, stuck fighting, stuck doing this sort of thing over and over while Steve had no idea.

They skirted around the outside of the room. Pietro squinted at the spheres.

"Don't touch them with your bare hand," Steve warned.

"Wasn't going to," Pietro said, but they could all hear the lie in his voice.

When they emerged through the next doorway, Steve frowned.

"This was a single hallway before," Steve said, staring at the three hallways there were in front of them. "I'm sure."

"A maze theme," Natasha murmured. She glanced up at Steve. "I woke up in a series of tunnels."

"Did you have to fight anyone yet?"

Natasha shook her head. "Ran like heck away from Hela, if that counts."

"Definitely counts," Pietro said, wincing. "Let me scout ahead a second."

He blinked away in a blur before Steve or Natasha could say something. Natasha shrugged at Steve
and moved with him almost in unison so they could stand back-to-back against one of the walls. Steve's chest ached with how much he'd missed her. Moving with her like this felt like coming home in a way his own home never had.

"Pietro was outside when he woke up," Natasha said. "Far as we can tell, it's a five-story building."

"Yon-Rogg said it was some sort of Kree museum," Steve said.

"Of course you stopped to talk to your opponents," Natasha said. "Mine never want to chat, all they want to do is get on with the stabbing."

"Must be your winning personality."

"Careful, Rogers, I might forget we're on the same side."

Steve shrugged. "You want to kill me, I'm okay with that." He looked at her solemnly. "I've done the outliving you thing. I'm not a fan of it."

Natasha's eyes widened, barely perceptible. Micro-clues were all she ever gave to her real emotions.

"This way, this way, this way," Pietro gasped, suddenly appearing by both of them, his hands on his knees. "I may have slightly sort of pissed off one or two people. Or three. There were probably three."

Steve lifted his head as faint noises reached him. He counted the footsteps. "Three," Steve clarified. "At least."

"Dammit, Pietro," Natasha said, but started running, following Steve down the left hallway.

Except the moving layout didn't apparently always wait for someone to be out of the way before they moved; one moment Steve was right behind Natasha and the next second he was falling.

He let out a brief yell of surprise and he fought to land in a crouch, looking up as his feet solidly hit the floor with a loud clang in time to see the ceiling close up, leaving Steve stuck below.

Great. The Grandmaster probably didn't like them teaming up. He wondered how many more surprises this place held, to make the fight more interesting for his beloved audience. At least the thundering footsteps Steve heard had gone for now, although it meant Natasha and Pietro were probably still being chased down in the floor above, because there was no sign of either of them dropping down to join him. Steve scowled and took in his current location.

The ceiling was too high for him to jump back up. At first Steve thought he was in another completely white room, but then he saw himself looking at him, and himself, and another partial vision of himself. A mirror maze. Of course. Steve stilled for a moment, trying to get a grip on the angles of reflection and refraction happening around him. It took him a moment to pick up the scent of something, a hint of fresh air that was a good clue that the mirror maze lead to an outside location of some sort.

There were several colors of lights plugged into the ceiling. Psychedelia was apparently a recurring theme in this place. There was a low grinding noise and Steve spun on his heel a little too quickly; the repeated red, white, and blue of his reflections spun with him, but settled in a new formation. The faint touch of fresh air changed subtly.

Steve frowned as he calculated what it meant and came to the conclusion that the maze was
moving, somehow. A shifting layout. Great. Well, the fresh air was still there, so it meant there was a way through. He had to rely on the idea that Natasha and Pietro would be trying to get outside too, because that was the plan if they got separated; aim for the roof. Steve sighed that he hadn't quite internalized that being separated was likely; it had clearly already happened to Natasha and Pietro often enough that they knew to decide on a place to meet.

Steve started to follow the smell of the fresh air, the best guide he might have for a mirror maze with a shifting layout, and he sighed when he heard footsteps. What were the chances that was a friend, not a foe? Was anyone really anything but a foe during this Battle Royale scenario?

He cautiously advanced, his shield held protectively forward, and caught a glimpse of crimson in a couple of the mirror panels before he stepped out into a larger section of the maze to see an almost familiar figure: the crimson-cloaked figure that Pietro had called Guillotine.

"Le Capitaine," Guillotine said. Her voice was low, monotone; Steve hadn't heard her talk before, so he was surprised by the timbre of it. French, but not quite. Algerian, perhaps.

"Guillotine," Steve greeted, pronouncing it the French way, which made her smile.

"Ah, your accent is not completely appalling," Guillotine allowed. "Perhaps I will not take my time killing you."

Steve frowned, holding his shield tightly. "I hoped you might share my opinion that as Einherjar we could stick together, take out the Tenebrae first."

"An alliance?" Guillotine cocked an eyebrow under her red hood. "A sentimentalist. You'll find that attitude won't last long in this place." She shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned, I have to face you sooner or later. Might as well be sooner. Besides—" She smiled, showing her canine teeth. "La Fleur du Mal is keen to know if your blood tastes as sweet as it smells."

Steve squared his feet. "On y va," he sighed.

At least with this fight, Steve had an advantage; he had seen Guillotine's sword skills before, in the gym, so he already knew where some of her weaknesses lay. Combined with his shield and the small space, it wasn't as hard a battle as he was expecting. She was unused to someone who defended more than attacked and she was very unused to someone using a shield as a weapon. After taking a few of her hits straight on, Steve was able to lean backward, causing her to stumble; he spun and used the hilt of the small knife he'd taken from Yon-Rogg to block the blade while he sent the shield smashing right into her pretty face.

She rallied pretty well, considering the blood running into her eyes, but Steve was able to spin her into the nearest mirror and her lethal sword shattered it; Steve smashed his shield into her back and she stumbled into the broken mirror, several shards cutting her. Some of the fight seemed to go out of her, so Steve tried to end it as quickly as he could; he used his shield to deflect the next sword parry, and the sharp knife to slit her throat as deeply as he could manage. He watched in horror as her own sword seemed to eagerly drink up the blood as it gushed out of her and he stepped back, breathing hard.

Guillotine seemed dead. Steve bent to pick up her sword, but he couldn't; Steve frowned at it. Weapons that had a mind of their own were probably ones he wanted to stay away from anyway. He prodded her body carefully and straightened up when he was reasonably assured she was dead.

This whole scenario was messed up. Steve looked up wearily and his own reflection stared back at him, looking as horrified and fatigued as he felt. There was blood all over his skirt and thighs; his
face was already bruising from where Killmonger had punched him. He'd killed three people and barely hesitated. Who was he?

The worms would return them to life. This was the equivalent of knocking an enemy out. And it wasn't like they weren't as eager to kill him. It was kill or be killed, and Steve had a job to do. He had to find Tony. The fact that he was still worried about the cost of his actions even though they were reversible was probably also a good sign he hadn't lost sight of who he was.

Reassured, he gritted his teeth and focused his attention back on the mirror maze. The sound of grinding made him sigh, the maze shifting into a new formation, and then he glanced again at the mirror shards covering the ground. He sniffed experimentally to source the location of the fresh air and considered solving the maze correctly for a second, before promptly proceeding to smash his way through the next two large mirror walls. He was rewarded by another of those dark doorways.

Holding up his shield high again, Steve stepped through and was nearly blinded by how bright it was; he took a deep breath and the air was fresh. He was finally outside, standing on a low roof. He was maybe a hundred feet up in the air and when he twisted around he could see a building rising up like tall steps behind him, at least three more stories high. When he looked out into the scene, he could see the sand of the arena surrounding them, and lots of sharp spears embedded point-up into the ground at random intervals. There was a loud sound of battling filling the air, but Steve couldn't see any of it happening, except a curl of fire jetting up into the sky from somewhere on the far side of the building.

Steve needed to get higher. He spied a ladder embedded into the wall next to the doorway he'd just emerged from, so he put his shield on his back, put the handle of the knife in-between his teeth, and took a running leap so that he could ascend the ladder more quickly. He hauled himself up onto the roof in time to see a blur spin off the edge of the next floor up and land in a heap in the middle.

"Oh, hey, Captain," Pietro said, grinning up at him. His teeth were covered in blood. "Can I borrow that knife a second?"

Steve nodded mutely and had barely taken the knife from his mouth to hand over before it was gone and he was standing alone on the roof. Not for long, because there was another dark doorway on this level, and Steve readied his shield again and tensed his shoulders, until he saw a familiar figure stumble out of it.

"Hey, was that Pietro's voice I heard?" Natasha said, beaming at him. She had blood splattered over her shoulders but she was moving fluidly, so Steve guessed it wasn't hers.

Steve raised an eyebrow. "Is that a whip?"

"Two of them," Natasha said, grinning as she finished looping what looked like a jury-rigged version of Tony's arc reactor to her chest, an extra harness on top of the loops of her costume. She raised an eyebrow at Steve and cracked one of them experimentally; electricity sparked out and she grinned. "Oh, this is fun. Do you think Tony would make me a set of my own if I asked very nicely?"

"I find it difficult to think he'd refuse anything you asked," Steve said, watching warily as she tried out the whips again; it was pretty unfair that she was so good with them already, even though this was presumably her first time. "I'm not sure right now that's a good thing."

Natasha grinned at him, almost wickedly, and her grin widened when Pietro blurred up to them.
"Ah, here you are," Pietro beamed at them, waving wearily. He was covered in blood. Natasha immediately lowered the whips, passing both handles into one hand so she could hurry to his side; he side-eyed her fussing, but didn't bat her questing hands away. "Relax, Nat, it's not my blood; Taserface was being a dick again, so I gave him some extra ventilation."

Natasha smacked him on the arm. "You could have said that sooner."

Pietro squinted. "I'm supposed to stop pretty women when they voluntarily want to touch me?"

Natasha mirrored his expression for a long moment before acquiescing. Pietro nodded at what she was wearing. "How did you take out Vanko?"

"Natural skill," Natasha sniffed, and then relented. "Hela had half-done the job when I got there. Pretty easy to finish him off."

"Hela," Pietro said, frowning as he passed Steve back Yon-Rogg's knife.

"Down there," Steve said, quietly. He'd thought he would need to move all the way to the top of the building to see any of the other warriors, but the current big battle going on seemed to have moved with Steve, and he was glad he was up on this half-way roof rather than down there, because it looked brutal.

Down on the ground, Hela was currently engaged in battle with an entire group of Asgardians. She seemed to be laughing. It almost looked to Steve's eye that she was playing with them, and why shouldn't she? There was obviously some sort of popularity contest going on here, what with Steve's instructions last fight to be interesting, and if the audience were here to watch them fight, there was no way they would enjoy a fighter who went down too quickly.

Even as he thought that, Hela speared Volstagg through the chest, grinning through the blood that splattered all over her.

"We should get higher," Pietro said, pointing: Steve followed his gaze to where a blur of red and gold passed overhead and he let out a breath that sounded sharp to his own ears. It was sheer relief. Tony was okay, but he was fighting someone up in the sky. They needed to get to him.

"Lead the way," Steve said.

Pietro found a ladder that would take them up to another roof, higher up, so Steve took defensive position at the base as Pietro zoomed up ahead and Natasha started to climb. Steve kept a watchful eye on the battle raging below, hoping they wouldn't draw any of the attention of those warriors.

Heimdall's giant sword was flashing under the double suns as Fandral, Hogun, and Skurge tried to hold Hela down. Hela lashed out, easily catching Hogun across the throat in one casual swipe of a blade; he bled out even as Fandral tried to pull him out of the way. Odin charged forward, wielding dual swords, but he wasn't enough for Hela's furious agility; she rolled out of the way and grinned as she stabbed Odin right through the heart. Blood cascaded out of Odin's mouth as he slid from her sword to hit the sand below, his single eye open and staring.

Heimdall screamed at the death of his King, a furious incoherent battle yell that rumbled loudly enough for Steve to feel the rage in his own chest, and he furiously fought her, parrying her strikes with his formidable blade. Fandral and Skurge used his onslaught to take Hela by the upper arm, bookending her, and Heimdall launched forward, landing on her chest, knocking her down into the sand. Hela struggled, managing to stake Skurge through the heart in her flailing, and it looked like she was about to escape Heimdall and Fandral when there was a melodic sound in the air and then something zipped through her, rapid red lines that seemed to zip in and out of her body, splattering
blood every which way.

Steve chased that red line with his eyes until it returned to source and he saw Yondu smiling proudly; the blue-skinned Ravager seemed pleased that he'd been able to take Hela down, but his smirk didn't last long as a gloved hand suddenly ripped through Yondu's chest from behind.

Yondu collapsed into the sand as Malekith the Accursed stepped out behind him, holding Yondu's heart aloft in one clawed fist. That triumph didn't last either; Malekith's ugly face creased into an even uglier expression and he had to throw the heart aside into the sand, and Steve couldn't understand why until he saw the ice crystals crawling up Malekith's arm.

Loki stood a short distance away, his hand outstretched, ice running across the sand toward Malekith. At Loki's side, Gamora slowly spun her sword; she shared a brief smile with Loki before plunging into the fight. Apparently the two of them had formed some sort of alliance.

"Captain," Natasha called, from the top of the ladder.

Steve tore his gaze away from the fight going on below. "Maximoff," he called, and when Pietro peered over the edge of the roof, Steve threw up his shield. Better he and Natasha had it to protect them while he climbed, he figured.

"This is so cool," Pietro said, immediately posing with it.

Steve focused on climbing as fast as he could, although he couldn't resist checking over his shoulder to see how the fight below was going; he regretted it, turning just in time to see the Nebula from 2014 decapitate Gamora. Now that was a sibling relationship with issues, Steve thought.

Hauling himself up onto the next roof, Steve was able to see the battle raging up on the very top of the building. Groot was a whirlwind of tree branches, waving them at Ronan, while Tony was zooming around fighting a fire-breathing Killian, who was being backed up by Ellen Brandt. Steve could feel the heat from where they were.

Natasha looked up warily. "There's no ladder up to that top roof."

"Maybe there's a way up inside?" Pietro guesses, gesturing at the dark doorway.

Steve glanced up longingly as Tony swooped overhead, battling alone against the two Extremis-enhanced warriors, and then nodded. "Let's go."

Even though some of the other rooms had been a mind-warping experience, Steve wasn't expecting the creepiness of the room they found themselves in this time.

It was a long dark hallway, with stone archway framed alcoves periodically embedded into the wall, and in each of the alcoves was… well, it was them, wax figures posed like they were about to enter battle. There was an Iron Man figure, posing in full armor, the metal fanned out fully at his helmet, a hand raised out like he was about to repulsor blast. The next alcove had Odin, standing in a pose with both of his swords, Steve was entranced by the detail of them. They seemed so real. He almost forgot where he was, taking in the sight of them.

Steve wandered on, distracted by the figures. He tested the weapon on a couple of them, touching Vanko's whips, and Ronan's "Ultimate Weapon", but they were soft, nothing that would be helpful beyond a basic distraction, so he kept walking onward, vaguely aware that Natasha and Pietro were bantering near the wax figure of Yondu, apparently wondering whether the models were accurate
Steve continued on, and if he passed by some of the Tenebrae figures quickly, Natasha and Pietro were too distracted to call him on it. Hela's expression was haughty and dangerous, Rumlow's Crossbones mask was disturbingly garish, and Gamora's reputation as dangerous was reflected in her intense expression. It was all so unsettling. Whereas Thanos' statue had jeweled eyes that made him look alien, other, these wax figures all had lifelike eyes that seemed to watch Steve with every step.

It was probably a dumb impulse, but Steve couldn't help but feel like maybe the figures would all come to life, which was just what they needed, to have to battle copies of all the other arena warriors. He couldn't resist the urge to check and slammed his shield experimentally into the figure of one of Yondu's Ravager pals. It sliced cleanly through, showing that beneath the lifelike exterior was a thick cream substance that cut like Steve thought a solid wax figure might.

Steve exhaled, more relieved than he wanted to admit, and further down the hallway, Natasha spared him a judgmental eyebrow raise. Steve looked away dismissively. She could look as cool and calm and collected as she wanted; Steve would get it out of her later that she probably had the exact same fear crawl into her mind. If not this time, maybe another time; it was possible Natasha had seen this sort of thing before. Even if it didn't happen during this battle, with the sort of technology the Grandmaster was operating under, the figures could come to live and attack in a future scenario.

This whole situation was teeming with possibilities. Since something as miraculous as loved ones returning from the dead had happened, Steve had found himself increasingly unable to discount anything he'd ever even briefly thought of as impossible. Scratch the idea that a ten percent chance was basically one hundred percent certain for an Avenger; anything near a zero percent chance was a probability to re-examine in a new light.

"We should probably be careful," Natasha said, "check the rest of them, they look pretty—"

She didn't finish her sentence. Mostly because behind her, Pietro hit the ground in a noisy thump.

Steve and Natasha ran to his side, Natasha closer, cupping one hand under his neck, the other carefully checking him for a wound, because Pietro was lying in a puddle of blood. There was a small trail of blood behind him, too.

"Funny story," Pietro said, trying weakly to smile at Natasha. "When I said it wasn't my blood, I kind of lied."

"Get me some material," Natasha ordered, sparing Steve a brief glance before returning her worried gaze to Pietro's face. Pietro was growing paler by the second. "We need something to bind his wounds."

Pietro's eyes were unfocused as he tried to look up at her. Steve's gut tightened. He'd seen that expression on more than one wounded soldier. It was probably already too late. "It's all right, Nisem," Pietro kept his voice low and measured, even through the cracks. "We know how this game goes."

Steve's Sokovian was rusty, but Nisem was one of the words he knew; it was a non-gendered term of endearment for a younger sibling. His heart hurt, seeing Natasha cradling Pietro in her arms. How many times had she had to see this? How many times had she had to endure this? This was barbaric.
Steve focused on the task at hand. The trouble with these wax figures being such good replications were that they were all dressed in their arena outfits, and covering the body was not one of Hrhumhuhr's priorities when stitching the costumes together.

Malekith's coat looked like it had a decent lining of some sort, so while Natasha pressed her hands against the deepest of Pietro's wounds, Steve started to remove it. It was weird to think there were multiple cameras watching him strip naked a detailed, life-sized, and lifelike wax figure of a Dark Elf; Steve didn't know whether to be pleased or disappointed that someone could live over a hundred years and still experience new things.

"More," Natasha said, when Steve handed over the material, ripped into strips. She hadn't even looked to see how much he'd gathered. Most likely the instruction was busy work, to keep Steve out of the way. He didn't blame her; he'd always had a tendency to hover.

There really was a lack of fabric in the costumes for the arena warriors, both Einherjar and Tenebrae. Steve hurried up the hallway, and his gaze nearly slid right over Heimdall, because the Watchman's armor would be no good as bandages, but then his gaze slid back.

There was something wrong with it.

He'd met Heimdall in person before, when returning the Reality Stone to Asgard. He knew what the Watcher of Asgard looked like. He was never hunched over like that; his posture was always upright and strong. Steve padded closer warily, reaching out, and that was when he realized—Heimdall wasn't alone in his alcove. There was another figure, pushed in there with him.

Pressing in closer, Steve cocked his head, trying to see if he could identify the figure squeezed in behind the wax reproduction of Heimdall. It was a dark figure, large, bulky, clad in black, and with a smear of white over its face. Over his face.

Steve realized from that white skull-shaped smear that the concealed figure was Rumlow, a figure he thought he'd already seen a minute before, a moment too late for it to do any good.

By the time he realized Rumlow must have been standing in the alcove this wax figure version must have originally been, it was too late.

Steve whirled on his heel, at the same exact second one of the supposedly-wax figures rose up, readying to slam a blade into Natasha's unprotected back.

"Nat, behind you!" Steve yelled, but he was too far away and too slow to be of any help.

Pietro wasn't, though.

There must have been enough strength left in Pietro to push Natasha to one side, knocking her out of the way, but not enough for him to get out of the way himself; Rumlow's blade slide into Pietro instead.

"No!" Natasha yelled, scrambling to her feet, the whips in her hand immediately lashing up and around Pietro to pull him out of the way, but Rumlow lifted up Pietro's body to use as a shield, even as the light died in Pietro's eyes.

Steve leaped into the fray, launching his shield at speed, ricocheting off the walls. Rumlow pushed Pietro forward, and Natasha launched her whips again, but Rumlow lifted up a one-handed crossbow and shot at her. Steve didn't have time to see where it hit, running forward to catch his shield after it rebounded to hit Rumlow hard in the shoulder. Rumlow staggered into the nearest wall, dropping the crossbow and Pietro, but Steve's attention was briefly distracted by the
realization that Rumlow's one shot had hit Natasha in the chest, dropping her to the ground, and she was spasming on the ground, hurt badly.

Steve roared, running at Rumlow, but Rumlow merely smiled and pulled out a grenade, yanking the pin and rolling it right at Natasha. Steve only had a split second to make his decision. Natasha, of course. Rumlow could wait. Steve had thought the only good thing about this whole situation was seeing Tony, Natasha, Pietro and Vision again, but one more aspect was sneaking into his consideration—the realization he might get to kill Brock Rumlow, over and over and over again. It was a more appealing thought than it probably should be.

Steve shielded himself and Natasha from the grenade blast and of course by the time he looked up from the smoke and destruction, Rumlow was gone. Of course. Natasha coughed, dust from the explosion not helping her lungs, and she was in bad shape.

He should have been with her, at her side when Rumlow pulled that sneaky move of pretending to be his own wax figure, then maybe she wouldn't have taken the hit that Steve was slowly realizing was a fatal one, even though Natasha was still holding on. Steve was furious with himself. Yet again, together had been what was necessary, and one more time, Steve hadn't been at Natasha's side. Together had been the answer and once again Steve had failed to even hear the damned question.

"Why are you angry?" Natasha asked, her voice weak. "Rumlow's a sneaky bastard. Honestly, I'm almost impressed." She coughed up blood and Steve thought his heart broke a little at the sight of it. This was so unfair. Maybe this was hell. But what hell would dare to drag Tony, Natasha, and Pietro into it? If this was hell, the devil better be ready to have Steve Rogers gunning directly for them.

"I should have been at your side," Steve said.

"I was the one who got distracted. You remembered what the mission was." Natasha stared at him. "You're gonna have to be the one to go after Rumlow now." Steve's eyes scraped her face, not wanting to leave her. She smiled weakly, the expression strained. "I've lost too much blood, I'd slow you down. Get upstairs and protect Tony."

Natasha always knew where best to hit, with her fists and with her words.

"I don't want to leave you," Steve said, stubbornly.

"I'm already dead, we both know it," Natasha glared at him. "So go and avenge me, Avenger." Steve nodded as he slowly got to his feet, his eyes lingering on hers. "And Steve: what you're planning, if you survive that long?" Oh, she always knew him so well. "He won't make it easy."

"I know," Steve said, and pretended it didn't hurt to turn and leave her behind.

Outside, it was chaos. There wasn't a ladder on this side of the building either. Steve frowned and moved to the edge of the roof to check his options. There looked to be a ladder going all the way up from a roof that was sticking out perpendicular to the building two stories down, but it was a long way to jump—both distance and drop. Steve glanced back at the dark doorway. He could go back through the hall of wax figures, past Natasha again, climb down a floor on the ladder and go back into the building on that level, try and find a way to that perpendicular outcropping.

As he looked, he noticed Malekith and Loki were still locked in combat, Loki sending bolts of ice at his appointment; even as Steve watched, the two managed to hit each other in the chest almost in
unison. Steve turned his gaze away, pushing aside the terror in the idea of fighting that long with someone, only for neither of you to survive, taking each other out.

As long as it meant Tony being okay, Steve would be all right with that as an outcome.

Steve backed up, hearing an explosion from above, and wondered if that was a viable way up to the roof to join the main fight obviously happening up there from all the noise; get Tony's attention, see if he wouldn't mind giving Steve a lift up to join them. It was while he was backing up to get a better view of what was happening up there that a large shape came careening over the edge of the roof, tumbling down in front of Steve in a mass of furiously shaking twigs.

Groot, the living tree. Groot launched upward and onto his giant treerun legs with a loudly roared "I am Groot", before he turned to see Steve standing there; Steve froze, worried about how he was going to fight an actual tree, but then Groot leaned in really closely and stared at Steve. It didn't seem hostile at all, even though Steve felt acutely aware that Groot had the bulk and strength to tear him apart, and Steve thought his instincts had failed him for a moment, because Groot's arm shot towards him, branch lengthening too fast for Steve to react, but then Groot's arm curled around him instead of attacking him.

"I am Groot," Groot said, his wide face breaking into a wide smile as he started to lift Steve.

"Thank you," Steve said as Groot deposited him on the roof and then joined him, easily climbing up the massive distance, his wooden limbs shortening once he was up there.

Steve lifted up his shield, gritting his teeth and taking in the scene. The roof was massive. It seemed like everyone had migrated up here while Steve had been entranced by the wax figures. At the far end, Killian and Brandt were engaged in a furious fire battle with Heimdall, Hogun, and Fandral. Tony was jetting above them, fighting with Ronan, and Rumlow was engaged in a brutal-looking fistfight with Nebula.

"I am Groot," Groot said, pointing over at Killian and Ellen, before tapping Steve's shield with a branch, before pointing at Rumlow and then himself. Steve thought he understood—as much as it irked him to not be able to immediately avenge Natasha, it made more sense for Steve to go for the fighters on fire, and for the one of them made of wood to go for Rumlow. If it wasn't for Groot, Steve wouldn't be able to even be part of the fight so quickly, so he nodded and took off at a run toward where the remainder of the Asgardian forces were battling the Extremis duo.

Heimdall immediately moved to allow Steve in to join their formation. This Heimdall had never met Steve, but maybe he'd seen him fight with his powers, because their fighting rhythm was almost perfect from the start. It was nice to know not all the Einherjar held Guillotine's opinion. It might be different once all the Tenebrae were taken down, but for now, Steve almost felt like he could relax into the rhythm of this fight, even though relax was the wrong word for a battle like this one.

"Room for one more?" Tony asked, in that so-familiar Iron Man modulated tone and Steve grinned as he saw Tony land next to them, repulsors lit-up as he moved next to Steve.

"What about Ronan?" Steve asked.

"Busy," Tony said, nodding up to where Ronan was spinning through the air, Nebula gripping onto his neck. Steve pulled a face. The definition of the word busy had certainly become more interesting since Steve had become an Avenger. Tony leaned in closer. "Do you remember that fight outside the Rotruvian border, with the Hydra goons who forgot they weren't in Spain?"
That was a blast from the past, almost literally, because that had been one of the missions while they were trying to find Loki's scepter, and the Hydra goons had stolen some sort of energy cannon. Steve's memory recall was slower now than he'd like, but the incident Tony was referencing was an easier one to remember, mostly because it was the first mission after the Battle of New York where they'd been able to work smoothly together from the outset.

"I guess I'll be the rock," Steve said. Tony's faceplate was still down, but Steve could almost see the grin on his face regardless.

"Take the girl, watchman, we're going for the dragon," Tony called, slapping Heimdall on the back before rising up into the air.

Heimdall nodded, rallying Hogun and Fandral into an arrow formation, and Tony started laying down cover fire, trying to separate Killian and Brandt. It worked easily enough, although when Killian realized he'd been separated from Brandt, he roared one of those terrible fire-laden breaths towards Tony and Steve; Steve raised his shield up high, protecting them from the heat, but the flames licked around them to where Groot was battling Rumlow, and the giant tree caught on fire.

"I am Groot," Groot screamed, his burning limbs flailing in Rumlow's direction.

Steve hurled his shield at Killian at the first sign of the fire-breath lessening; it rebounded off Killian's spinning body and Steve leaped to catch it, continue to run so he could kick Killian firmly in the chest. Killian's close-combat skills didn't make him the most skilled opponent Steve had ever taken on, but the fire was definitely problematic, and the strength behind each of Killian's sloppy kicks was evidence that repeated-worming and Extremis were a killer combo.

Tony joined Steve at Killian's other side, making Killian divide his attention and strength between them; Tony joining the fight seemed to make Killian lose his cool even more. Steve made sure that Killian didn't ignore him, trying to keep his hits as economical as possible, learning where best to hit Killian to annoy him. While killing him straight-out wouldn't be an undesirable outcome, it wasn't likely.

Steve smacked Killian in the face with his shield; as Killian stumbled back, Tony nodded at him over Killian's shoulder, and Steve nodded back. Time to go into action. Steve did an overly dramatic spinning hook kick, designed to be interrupted; Killian didn't disappoint, evading Steve's legs to punch him powerfully in the stomach, sending Steve spinning over the roof. Killian didn't notice Steve kicking off at the ground as he spun, so he would land closer to the edge of the roof. Gravel grazed Steve's exposed skin as he rolled and when he stilled, he put his hands out as if he was struggling to get back to his feet. Killian had already decided to capitalize on this moment of weakness, and he was running in Steve's direction, and Steve made as if he was going to stand up, but at the last second, Steve bent down instead, holding his shield over him like a turtle shell, while Tony unleashed his strongest uni-beam at Killian's back.

Killian's own offensive forward momentum took him toward Steve too quickly; the uni-beam increased his speed so that he couldn't control what he was doing and he tripped over Steve's compact crouch. Steve launched up with the shield as Killian fell forward and Tony followed that up with a repulsor-powered flight in Killian's direction, firmly smashing his fists into Killian's body, knocking him right over the edge of the roof.

Killian let out fire as he fell, trying to change his momentum, but it was too little, too late; Tony's last hit was all it took to direct Killian's body right to one of the spears that punctuated the ground. Steve got to his feet, peering over the edge in time to see Killian's body slide down the spear, fully impaled.
Someone was screaming. When Steve looked to see who, he realized it was Brandt, howling at the loss of her friend. Her skin splintered apart as she screamed, faster than it had the last time Steve saw her in battle; she lowered her head and threw herself directly at Hogun, the closest of the Asgardians, and Steve raised his shield in time to avoid being caught by the flaming fallout as she self-immolated. Heimdall covered Fandral with his body, but his armor wasn't enough to cope with the fire. Fandral was sobbing as he laid an unresponsive Heimdall on the ground. Groot—still smoldering from Killian's stray fire earlier—was fully on fire as a result of Brandt's kamikaze explosion, and he launched himself at Rumlow, trying to take him out at the same time, but Rumlow was a sneaky son-of-a-gun and managed to duck and roll, knocking a burning Groot off the edge of the building much like Steve had helped dislodge Killian.

Steve snarled and lurched forward to go after Rumlow, but Rumlow saluted and jumped back, landing on a lower roof, and Steve couldn't move forward any further, because Tony was holding him back.

"He killed Nat and Pietro," Steve snarled.

Tony lifted up his faceplate briefly and stared at Steve intently. "Then we'll destroy him. Together."

That was the magic word; Steve sagged and nodded. "You call the shots."

"Think I like the view from up here," Tony said, flipping his faceplate back down and taking off at a run. Steve readied his shield and grinned when he saw Rumlow being yanked up into the air in Tony's grip. Tony flew up high above them, but then was rocked by a stray blast of energy from Ronan, still locked in mid-air battle with Nebula.
Tony shrugged and dropped Rumlow from where he was. Steve was waiting with a well-timed sweep kick, disrupting Rumlow's attempt to land in a crouch. Rumlow launched back onto his feet without much of a pause and Steve readied his shield to fight, and then Tony flew down to join the fight, and it was a pleasant surprise at how easily they fell back into fighting at each other's side. It was as easy as it was in that first battle against the Chitauri; it was like Steve automatically knew where Iron Man was, they didn't even need much more than getting into position to communicate what they needed from the other.

Where Steve had struggled one-on-one against Rumlow, fighting alongside Tony made it almost easy; they rhythmically hit Rumlow, never letting up, never giving him a second to breathe. When Tony hit Rumlow so hard his terrible skull-mask cracked, Steve followed it with a spinning jump and brought his shield down on Rumlow's head hard enough that both he and Tony could hear the clear snap of Rumlow's neck breaking.

Steve straightened, trying not to look too satisfied at the kill; they still weren't in the clear yet. Something very obvious when a burst of energy took Tony off the roof in one sharp blast. Tony was okay, immediately rising in the air, and Steve glanced up to see Ronan using his hammer—Steve really resented mentally calling it his ultimate weapon when hammer worked just as well—to fly up high above the arena.

Steve's attention was pulled away by someone moving nearby and he readied his shield warily, because it was one of the Asgardians—Fandral. He must have survived Brandt's explosive kamikaze move. For a moment, Steve wondered if they would have to fight.

"Alliance, Captain?" Fandral boomed and Steve nodded, gratefully.

Fandral smiled at Steve, and Steve opened his mouth, but he was too late; light flashed at Fandral's throat, and then Fandral was being thrown bodily to one side and Nebula was standing in his place, grinning wickedly.

"Hello, Captain," Nebula purred. "I always love getting to play with fresh meat."

Steve could see Tony in the background, battling Ronan again. Okay, so he was alone for now. He could work with that. His best bet was to keep her distracted, wind her up, keep her focus on him so that Tony could focus on Ronan and not have to deal with two foes at once. Knowing her older self was a help for that, and he mentally ran through the little fragments in his head he knew because of that.

"Nebula," Steve greeted. "I've heard of you. You're the weakling Gamora said she could beat every time, even with one hand tied behind her back?"

That definitely worked to unhinge her, to the point that Steve was able to disarm her a minute into their fight, dislodging her sword with his shield edge, sending it spinning off the roof; she spared it a glance and bared her teeth in a snarl, but then shrugged elegantly.

"I don't need that to kill you," she growled, and threw herself at him in a vicious tangle of limbs. Steve did his best to parry her, but she was strong, fast, accurate, and Steve's quick ability to adapt was practically useless, because she compensated for it. She changed the type of attacks with every few blows, switching between fighting styles; Steve compensated after a couple of blows each time, able to adjust his stance to deflect them, but then she smoothly changed her style again and Steve was hurting. He couldn't keep blocking her hits and she divested him from his knife as fluidly as he'd gotten her sword from him.

Nebula whaled on him in a dervish of hands and feet; even without her sword she could kill him,
and she was starting to realize that. Her smile widened as she drove him back with her hits. She had him on the ropes and when Steve landed on the ground after a particularly hard punch to the face, both he and Nebula knew he wasn't going to be able to get up again fast enough to stop her. He tried anyway because that was the kind of person he was, and Nebula grinned, readying to take his life.

Except she'd forgotten one thing: Steve wasn't alone.

Nebula realized it from Steve's sudden smile a second too late, but that's all Tony needed; he had his hand right up next to Nebula's head, and his red-and-gold gauntlet was already glowing, ready to hit. "Good night, sweetheart," he crooned, repulsor-blasting her at close range.

Nebula crumpled to the ground.

Tony held out a hand to get Steve to his feet. "This feels familiar," Tony muttered.

"Hey, at least I kept hold of my shield this time," Steve said, because the alternative was remembering what had happened ten minutes later in that battle, and then Steve would probably be thoroughly useless for a substantial amount of time. They couldn't afford that. There was still one more opponent left to deal with.

"Here he comes," Tony said, looking up as Ronan came flying right at them, hammer extended.

Ronan was a ridiculously tough foe, but it turned out working together was the key again.

When Ronan tried to use his invisibility fields, Steve kicked up gravel from the roof to render his shape visible to the naked eye again. When Ronan tried to hold one of them in place with some sort of energy blast that left them suspended immobile in mid-air, the other could break in and attack him, because he couldn't hold two of them in place at the same time. Ronan tried to absorb Tony's repulsor blasts and send them back at Steve, but Steve had a lot of practice in deflecting and redirecting all of Iron Man's usual arsenal, so Ronan ended up having to reabsorb his own reflected hits.

From up there on the roof, the crowds seemed tiny, inconsequential. Steve could see their own fight happening in real-time on identical, multiple big screens, visual echoes around the curve of the arena. Most of Ronan's dangerous attacks weren't designed for more than one attacker, especially a pair like Steve and Tony who could work together without much communication. Ronan tried his best, manipulating gravity with his hammer to knock Steve back, but Tony jumped in on that opening to hit him in the back with a strong uni-beam blast.

It was almost joyous, when Tony leaped onto Ronan's body to press him into the dirt, and Steve used his shield to knock the hammer out of Ronan's hand. Steve idly twisted the hammer in one grip, getting used to it, and when Ronan got to his feet, kicking up at Tony as he did, Steve swung the hammer hard into the side of Ronan's head. Tony followed that up with a repulsor blast, felling Ronan. It didn't take long after that for Steve to toss Tony Fandral's sword, and Tony rammed the blade through Ronan's chest.

As Tony let go of the sword, Steve grinned at Tony in disbelief, Tony lifted up his faceplate to grin back, and for a moment it was almost wonderful. The two of them stood triumphant, the victors of an impossible, terrible battle, and Tony's face was beautiful under the double arena suns.

Except nothing beautiful could last, ever, because Tony's face did something complicated and his grin shifted into something *horrid*; he reached up for his helmet, throwing it to one side with an expression soaked in loathing, and Steve stared at him questioningly, uncomprehending, aware that
Tony was frustrated, but unable to piece together why.

"I won't do it," Tony said, and realization hit Steve as cold and painfully as a spear through his heart.

Battle Royale.

Only one could survive.

Steve shifted his weight from side to side, sadly looking at Tony who stared back at Steve, almost blankly. Neither of them moved for a long moment. Apparently that was enough for the Grandmaster to decide he needed to intervene.

"You know the rules," the Grandmaster's voice echoed around them, his solemn face appearing on all the monitors placed around the watching crowds. "Only one can leave the arena alive."

There was a mutinous expression on Tony's face, an anger in his eyes that he sometimes had right before doing something incredibly dumb, and Steve was overwhelmed by it. He couldn't get them out of this situation. He couldn't let Tony do something stupid.

But more than that, he couldn't watch Tony die again.

Steve closed his eyes briefly and then opened them, fire in his own gaze as he threw his shield to one side with a terrible clanging noise.

"Cap," Tony warned, his voice low and somehow wrecked, "we fight for the glory of the Grandmaster."

Steve could read between the lines enough to realize Tony was saying they should fight. But he knew Tony too well, even now; he knew Tony wouldn't fight him at full-strength, not this time. Tony's mutinous expression spoke to that all too clearly.

Steve wouldn't fight him, but it didn't mean there wasn't a way out. Natasha told him that Tony wouldn't make it easy, but that was fine with Steve.

"No," Steve said. "We die for the glory of the Grandmaster."

Tony looked confused at that.

Steve took advantage of that confusion to move in closer.

"No weapons?" Tony frowned. "I can roll with that, I guess." Tony unpowered his repulsors, the lights fading in them, and Steve realized from Tony's posture that he wasn't going to make the first move here.

Steve stepped in close, moving one arm up as he moved, and god, Tony didn't even flinch. In one swift, graceful moment, Steve pulled Tony closer, his fingertips digging into Tony's neck, his thumb firmly on Tony's cheek, and Tony, damn him, didn't resist for a single second. That was fine. It suited Steve fine. He met Tony's defiant gaze with his own and kissed him.
For a first kiss, it wasn't all that Steve had imagined it would be. There was still blood in his mouth from his fight with Nebula, and Steve had never pictured an audience before. But it had elements of his deepest, secret fantasies; Tony's mouth was warm, and his lips were pliant, and the gasp Tony made into his open mouth shot sparks all the way to Steve's toes. Steve deepened the kiss before he even knew it, holding Tony's face there, exactly where he wanted it, and Tony, maybe unthinkingly, was kissing back.

This was a kiss worth waiting for.
This was a kiss worth dying for.

Steve wrenched his mouth away and grinned at Tony, delirious, giddy; he would flashback to this moment a thousand times, he knew. A million. Tony's eyes were bright and dark and held a million delightful secrets, and Steve felt giddy with the idea he knew one of those secrets now in a way no one else ever would. It was a shared secret, only for them to know, one that devoured and created, one that was made of the same stuff as stars and gravity and eternities were formed from.

But this moment wasn't allowed to be an eternity, as much as Steve wished it would be. Eyes hot, his gaze still locked on Tony's face, Steve whispered, "Morituri te salutant," before forcing himself to break away. He caught one last glimpse of Tony, mouth reddened, jaw a little slack, before he turned and ran, and he heard noises, of the armor reassembling, of the bootjets firing up, of Tony reacting to stop him, but just as he'd hoped, it was too late.

Steve leaped from the roof, spreading his arms wide as he dove. He'd jumped like this before, multiple parachute-free leaps into the jaws of adventure, so the rush of air around him wasn't unfamiliar; only the intention was. This time, he did not mean to survive. He aimed directly for one of the spikes embedded in the ground.

He did not miss.
The worms were still painful.

The familiarity of the sensation did nothing to lessen the pain of it. In fact, it was almost somehow worse, *knowing* that each of the sharp digs and burrowing sensations were being caused by worms. Gross, slimy alien worms that were biting him, recreating him from the inside out.

Steve realized he had no idea how many times Tony, Natasha, and Pietro had been through this process. And Pietro, he must have been here before them—at least Steve had them to help stay sane, what would it have been like to be here, alone? Constantly dying, constantly being painfully rebuilt? Steve still didn't know how or when they got their memories back. Maybe the Control Discs hadn't always been in operation. Maybe Pietro had been under mind control when he was alone, so he didn't remember enough to be terrified?

Steve had questions upon questions and he needed to get answers to some of them. He needed to do what he came here for—to find out what was going on, and to help get everyone home. For some reason, Tony, Natasha, and Pietro had been dissuading him away from asking the important questions, and he wasn't going to let them continue putting him off.

He tried to keep his breathing shallow, but even that was painful. The spear he'd landed on had crushed right through his heart, so it made sense that most of the sensations were focused there, but no part of his body was spared from this process, pain radiating out from his chest like a starburst.

As the worms did their business, unpleasantly pressing up behind Steve’s eyes like a rush of warm acid that wouldn't stop swelling and flooding, Steve wondered how long he'd been dead this time. There was nothing in his memories between landing on the spear and waking up in agony. No thoughts, no restless monsters to keep him awake. Death was the only time the endless questions and worries were silent.

When Steve could open his eyes, he wasn't alone. The room was crammed, at least eleven other slabs around him were occupied. Everywhere he looked were shapes covered in worms. He thought he could see Ghrengrh at the far end of the room, the cyborg bug buzzing around him. When he caught sight of red hair under a burrowing heap of worms, his heart hurt and he didn't think it had anything to do with the worms still squirming in his chest cavity.

At least he was fairly sure Tony wasn't there. As the winner, he'd probably avoided the worms entirely, unless he'd been injured along the way. It's not like the armor made it easy to tell. It's not like Tony gave a straightforward answer to questions on that topic, either.
Steve was almost surprised to realize he still had his memories. Tony must have been right that the audience couldn't hear what they'd been saying during the Battle Royale, because he was sure some of what he'd said made it obvious that his memories were intact. And some of the things that had happened; Steve's heart stuttered in memory of it and that hurt, too. He almost couldn't believe that he'd kissed Tony like that. It was such a dumb idea. Tony had no intention of fighting him, and Steve had needed to distract him, but surely it would have been smarter to hit him? Especially considering how pliant Tony had been, how obvious it was that he wasn't even going to try and fend Steve off?

Tony had kissed back. It must have just been the surprise of it, Tony playing along to see what Steve was planning. Steve had always gotten a kick out of pleasantly surprising Tony. Unfortunately, Steve's surprises weren't always pleasant, and he remembered Siberia with a pang. So many of Steve's restless monsters were named *regret*.

Death might shut the monsters up for a while, but there was another aspect of this place that was able to at least scream over them for a while—once Steve noticed the itching that followed the worms, his body seemed to burn with it until it occupied his every thought.

Steve wanted to scratch his skin off, claw his organs out again with his fingers. Itching probably meant his body was helping with the healing, but it was almost enough to drive him insane. Steve's fingers clenched to resist the urge to scratch and even then it was almost too much to ignore. He could see how winning a Battle Royale—solely to avoid the worms afterward—would be alluring. No other prize needed to be held over their heads.

Eventually Ghrengrh deemed Steve whole enough to leave the chambers and he was released to go back to the Einherjar side of the complex with Groot, both of them with strict instructions to go to the dining hall.

Even though Groot could apparently regrow some of his limbs alone, the worms had been unavoidable for the amount of damage he'd sustained in the arena. Groot repeatedly muttered "I am Groot" in a miserable tone as he slunk with Steve out of the worming chamber; his limbs weren't even fully formed yet, and he was using the stubby branches to try and scratch at his chest. Steve's chest was still knotting together too, like skin-colored twists of yarn stretched across him, and he still wanted to desperately scratch through that reforming skin. He couldn't scratch himself without causing damage, but when he lifted up his hand to scowl at his fingers, like they were to blame for being too strong, Groot twisted in closer and rubbed against them.

Steve almost laughed out loud and reached out to scratch Groot's chest for him. He couldn't tell if it was actually doing any good, but Groot beamed at him so widely for trying that he didn't begrudge the experience. Apparently Groot had decided they were friends, now. Life kept getting weirder.

Their usual table was much emptier than normal. Skurge was the only one at the end of the table that the Asgardians usually sat at; he was holding his head gingerly and glowering through the forcefield to where Hela was sitting. Groot lined up with Steve for food, but took two of the berry drinks instead of any of the meat; Andhrímnir just laughed at the sight of Steve, his claws shaking as he handed Steve a pile of meat and another of the drinks.

Tony was sat at the table but as soon as Steve sat down, Groot placidly planting himself next to Steve—somehow literally, branches shooting into the sand that covered the dining room floor—Tony got up, barely sparing Steve a glance. Steve hunched down over his plate miserably. Pietro was there too, but he shrugged at Steve and kept slowly eating his own meat. Steve wanted to apologize, but without Tony, there could be no silence field, so talking wasn't really an option.
The faint murmur of noise around them as the bugs escorted them to the sleeping room meant that
Tony was deliberately not activating the sound barrier. Steve frowned at the back of his head, but
honestly didn't really blame him. Steve had crossed a line and it was going to be a hell of an
awkward conversation. He lowered himself into the sand gracelessly and he thought maybe he'd be
alone, except Pietro wordlessly curled up along his back, and a moment later the faint hum of the
generator disappeared. Steve found himself holding his breath for a reason he couldn't fully
explain.

"Don't even say a damn word," Tony muttered, and then promptly wrapped himself around Steve
like an octopus. Steve didn't think he would be able to sleep a wink, his restless monsters
screaming in his brain about the conversations they probably needed to be having, but Steve could
feel Tony's breaths, his chest rising and falling rhythmically against him, and that was an
irresistible lullaby.

Natasha eventually joined them at breakfast, her smile looking weary as she sat next to them. She
ruffled Steve's hair with a wink and sat down, scratching idly at her wrist for a while in favor of
eating. Steve wasn't entirely surprised that Tony was still avoiding using the silence barrier. Their
next conversation wasn't going to be pleasant.

The longer they went without having the conversation, though, the longer Steve had to stew. The
Avengers had to know where they were by now, where were they? Why hadn't they started the
rescue attempt?

Steve had worked himself up into such a mood by the time Topaz entered the room with the day's
assignments that he didn't even hesitate to open his envelope and he almost scoffed out loud at the
contents, because wasn't that perfect?

"Match: SPLIT SUNS. TAG TEAM BATTLE. THE IRON MAN & THE CAPTAIN versus IVAN
VANKO & CROSSBONES. 2X2 Battle to the DEATH; VICTORIOUS TEAM WILL BE
SPARED."

Tony made a dismissive noise and casually threw his envelope down. Steve glanced up to see
Natasha leaning over his shoulder to read his.

"Interesting," Natasha said. Steve glanced at her suspiciously, wondering how much she knew,
considering she died before the last battle finished. Natasha didn't make any comment that hinted
of anything else, following up her comment by nodding at Pietro. "What did you get?"

Steve's head lurched up. He'd been so trapped in his own thoughts he hadn't noticed who else even
got an envelope.

"Low Suns. The Fire Dragon." Pietro wrinkled his mouth. "Well, at least it isn't the Fenris wolf
again."

"Or the Devil Hydrasaur," Volstagg offered, breaking into the conversation, his beard twitching
sympathetically as he looked at Pietro. "Are you going to eat all that?"

Pietro stared at Volstagg, glanced down at his plate, and then rapidly stuffed all the meat left in his
mouth. "Sucks to be you," he muttered, through the food.

"I don't know how you resist that face," Natasha said, handing over her half-eaten plate. At Tony's
worried glance she shook her head. "I'm not fighting today."

"Neither am I," Volstagg beamed. "But be prepared, that's what I always say."
"When do you say that?" Hogun muttered, trying to steal a piece of Natasha's meat.

"Beg your own illicit seconds from someone," Volstagg sniffed, protecting the food with one large hand.

"We should go," Tony said, his voice flat. "I have some repairs to finish if we're going to be in fighting form for Split Suns." He glanced at Steve, his expression carefully blank. "You'll need to stop by the Costumer. I'm gonna guess your uniform needed a touch-up or two."

Natasha looked a lot more interested now.

"I got stabbed," Steve muttered.

"Is that what they're calling it?" Tony narrowed his eyes and then shook his head. He looked up at the nearby guard bugs, his gaze catching on their sharp tridents. "Not here."

Steve wrinkled his mouth and Natasha's eyebrows both lifted high, intrigued by the tension.

Natasha didn't have to wait long to find out why Tony was so angry.

Tony whirled on Steve the instant the four of them were alone in the workshop. "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

Steve glared back. "Only one of us could survive." He shrugged. "I made a choice."

"And I'm supposed to be okay with watching you kill yourself in front of me?" Tony stepped closer into Steve's personal space, glaring at him furiously.

"I thought it was obvious what I was doing," Steve said. He folded his arms and glared coolly back at Tony. "I figured a genius like you might have been smart and closed his eyes if he didn't want to see it."

"That's not the point," Tony snarled.

"No," Steve said, as equably as possible considering his blood was racing. "The point is that you disengaged entirely from the situation. What did you expect me to do? Strangle you where you stood while you let me do it?"

"Fine, next time I'll fight back."

"Fine, then next time I'll punch you in the face and do the same goddamned thing." Steve glared back. "Excuse me that I might be a little uncomfortable watching you die considering when I saw you do it, I thought it was permanent. I might be a little messed up about that, still."

"Oh, right, so I have to see you die again, amazing—you know what, no, I'm not doing this right now." Tony whirled on his heel. "You two knock some sense into Mr. Suicide Swan Dive here. I'm gonna go see if the costumer's done with your outfits," Tony said, waving an arm at Steve and Pietro before angrily storming out of the room. Steve stared after him helplessly.

"Wow," Pietro said. "Wow." He glanced over at Natasha. "I'm starting to realize what you meant about them."

"Right?" Natasha said, gesturing at Steve.

"I'm standing right here," Steve said, tightly, aware he was being mocked, even if he didn't
understand exactly what the mocking entailed.

"It's like we didn't even exist," Pietro mused.

Steve pulled a face. Yeah, okay, it had to be uncomfortable third-wheeling an argument. He was sorry for subjecting them to it, but he didn't want to apologize, either. It wasn't an unnecessary topic of conversation; he wasn't looking forward to how long this would probably take to properly hash out with Tony, because the two of them had a regrettably consistent history of taking too long to sort out their interpersonal issues.

"Suicidal Swan Dive, though?" Natasha tilted her head, leaning against Tony's worktop. "And Tony let you?"

"I distracted him," Steve said, omitting exactly what the distraction had been comprised of.

"That still sounds a little dramatic to me," Pietro said, "doesn't it sound dramatic to you?"

Steve flushed. "I lost my knife. I didn't have a lot of options left."

"Oh, you went for one of those spears?" Pietro clutched at his chest in sympathy. "Oof, I'm glad I got shanked by Taserface before it got that far."

"Honestly, I've never survived long enough during a Battle Royale to have to make that decision," Natasha said, "but you did exactly what I would have." She smiled at him approvingly.

Steve shuffled awkwardly and couldn't meet her gaze. In the cool light of day, the kiss seemed like a terrible idea. If he closed his eyes for too long, he could replay it easily in his mind. How Tony had kissed back. How for one second, Steve had surrendered to the kiss and forgotten everything terrible that had led to that moment. Natasha wouldn't have done something so impulsively stupid.

If she'd kissed Tony, it would have been purely for distraction's sake, not for whatever was lurking in the back of Steve's head that told him that maybe his motivation hadn't been as altruistic as he wished it was.

"I don't know why he's so sore about seeing me die," Steve frowned. "When I saw him die, I had no idea it wouldn't be permanent, but whenever I've died here, he knew perfectly well I was coming back." He scratched at himself, almost subconsciously. Those damn worms were a nightmare, but they were also a miracle.

"Ah, maybe we can answer that," Pietro said, surprising Steve. He pulled a face. "You remember back when we met? And my sister, uh, she did that thing where she rummaged in your head, made you see things?"

"I remember," Steve said, tersely. His own vision hadn't been so much a nightmare as a prophecy, in a weird way. The war—the only one that mattered, via Thanos—was over. He went home, if the forties counted as home. He hadn't been able to imagine anything close to what happened to him there. He didn't regret it, as much as he'd also wished he'd never been put in a position where it seemed overwhelmingly better than any other option he had.

"Tony saw us all dying," Natasha said.

Steve tilted his head. "What?"

Natasha stared at him. "He had a vision where we all died and he lived."
"And in the vision, you asked him why he didn't do more," Pietro added.

Steve blinked, blindsided by it. They'd all muttered about their respective visions when it happened; Steve at the time thought they were respecting each other's privacy. He'd thought it was good team-building. If the trauma had been really bad, they could have shared it, but being stoic had felt sensible. They'd all suffered, what was the point of making it worse?

"Didn't you ever wonder why he went so hard and so fast on Ultron?" Natasha shrugged. "Even for him, you have to admit, it was a move that stank of desperation."

Steve stared. "I guess I didn't think about it," he said, dully.

He didn't want to think of it now, really, but that was because even now the guilt punched hard. The suit of armor around the world. Maybe one of his biggest regrets, in the end. Ultron had gone so wrong and he'd been so harsh about it, because it had been so dangerous, and Tony should have told him—except that was part of the problem, wasn't it? Steve knew the whole time during the Ultron incident that there was something he should have been honest about, and yet he'd acted at the time like Tony was the only one keeping secrets? His anger had been purely projection and, as a result of Steve's refusal to examine his own failings, the resulting stubborn fury caused Tony to abandon his work on protecting the world.

That had been such a mistake. Steve and the rest of the Avengers should have rallied around him, enthusiastically supported the next attempt. But he didn't. They didn't. And as a result, they hadn't had anything in place to even try to stop Thanos. How different could things could have been, if they had been more prepared? Steve remembered his alternate timeline with a pang. How different things should have been. Steve had promised together, and then seen it in action in another timeline; it had been sweet agony seeing another band of Avengers defeat Thanos in under a week, succeeding where they'd failed so badly.

Steve took an uneven breath. Lingering on regrets wasn't getting anything proactive done right now. It did make sense that Wanda had been able to mess with Tony so badly, though. If only Pietro knew how much Wanda's power had grown in that area; Doctor Strange had barely been able to rescue her from her own mind. That wasn't a topic for this place and time. There was no reason to worry Pietro unnecessarily; Wanda had been doing so well recently, resisting the urge to dive back into that false reality in her head. Getting Pietro back would only make her stronger in that regard, Steve was sure. He was excited all over again at the idea of getting to bring Wanda her family back.

And Morgan. Morgan's face when she saw Tony was alive. Oh, he couldn't wait to see it. Which begged the question again, why weren't they doing more to escape?

"Okay," Steve said, slowly. "So we've got some past issues to work on...but what about our future plans here?"

Pietro and Natasha exchanged a glance.

"Don't fob me off with some cheap excuse," Steve demanded, softly. He folded his arms, looking between them. "You've been here so long, and you expect me to believe that there's no plan to escape? Because from what I've seen, it doesn't seem like you're trying at all. Any of you."

Pietro and Natasha's glance held a moment longer and then they both turned to Steve, matching somber expressions on their faces.

"There's a plan," Pietro said. His voice wavered a little.
"Maximoff," Natasha warned in a low tone.

Pietro arched an eyebrow at her. "What, are we supposed to pretend we flapped our arms uselessly here for years? He's not stupid enough to believe that." He turned to face Steve, his expression serious. "Yeah, Cap, we have half a plan. If we can figure out how to break the main arena forcefield, there's a chance of mid-battle escape. It has to be mid-battle because that's the only time the gate is definitely connected to the outside world. As it stands, we've maybe got a one in ten chance that we all get out, but yeah, we have a plan that might work, and you deserve to know that."

Steve perked up. "Ten percent is basically a hundred percent," he said, echoing Tony's old words.

"Only retroactively after we've managed the thing," Natasha said.

"But then—"

"All we're saying is we need to be careful," Natasha interrupted. She stared at him. "There's still things going on you don't understand yet, Steve. Things that are hard to explain, things you have to see for yourself first. We need to be sure we can escape. This isn't a situation where hope can carry us out the door."

"It's impossible to be one hundred percent certain before anything," Steve says, unevenly.

"We're trapped in here with monsters, Captain," Pietro said. He was looking in Steve's direction, but Steve had the impression Pietro was looking through him, not at him. "Monsters beyond the imagination. Ten percent doesn't cut it this time. We need certainty." Pietro's eyes refocus and lock surely on Steve's. "Maybe it's better that we stay trapped, if it means we keep the monsters trapped in here, with us."

Steve stared, swallowing hard. Hela. Aldrich Killian. Rumlow. Ronan. Malekith. Kaecilius. All villains that had taken extreme effort to beat back. Steve would never know the full count of lives that had been saved, or the lives of his friends that had been risked over and over in order to save the galaxy from their villainy.

Would escaping be worth it, if they opened the door to those villains returning alongside them?

"He's getting it," Pietro said, softly.

Steve's throat was dry. He swallowed painfully again and looked at them solemnly. "We need to be careful," he agreed. "But take it from the world's leading authority on waiting too long—waiting for the right moment can end up as badly as not trying at all."

"It's not as simple as that," Pietro said. Natasha shot him a warning look, but Pietro shook his head. "There's information he needs. A lot of information."

Steve looked at them patiently, trying to communicate that he was ready to hear it.

"You're used to missing large chunks of time, Steve," Natasha said, somewhat unevenly. "Remember how long it took you to adjust to modern times, after your little sojourn as a human ice-cube."

Steve nodded. He hadn't really ever fully adjusted to modern time, had he? Except maybe that was her point.

"We'll catch you up," Natasha put a hand on his shoulder, reassuring. "Be patient with us, okay?
This whole place isn't exactly a summer cruise."

"Although the sleep room did flood one year," Pietro said. "Remember?"

"Groot grew like, three foot overnight," Natasha laughed, and then frowned up at the door; Steve glanced over to see the light above it pulsing orange.

Natasha frowned. "Did we do anything that would necessitate a Code Orange?"

"Maybe he still wants the Captain to be even more interesting," Pietro said. "Brace yourselves."

Steve frowned, confused, and he blamed the way his thoughts were still lingering on Tony for forgetting what 'Code Orange' meant, and what was necessary when it happened; he almost yelped when Pietro stripped him and hauled him into the bed.

"No time for dignity," Pietro yelped, stripping Natasha and himself in a whirlwind; Steve found himself tangled in an almost whirlwind of naked limbs, the breath knocked out of him, and it was almost funny, which was probably why Steve was laughing. Natasha was laughing too, her face pressed up into his neck, and he thought Pietro was laughing somewhere near his naked stomach. It should have been awkward, somehow, and it was probably the furthest from sexy that Steve had ever felt in his life—but appearance mattered more than substance, something which was proved when the door opened; the Grandmaster entered, and both of the bugs with him immediately turned around, and Steve thought he maybe heard one of them whimpering.

"Whoops," Natasha said, not sounding apologetic at all, and yanked the main coverlet over them. She beamed at the Grandmaster. "Sorry. We didn't hear you coming."

"Oh, no worries, I know your species is almost embarrassingly perverted," the Grandmaster said, beaming at them. "I can understand. When I was married for the third—no, the fourth time—my Badoon mate wouldn't let me leave our marriage bed for nearly a hundred moons, and I can tell you, xie was quite athletic." He cocked his head. "I'm not entirely sure why xer whole extended family had to watch it, but that's the Badoon for you. Almost as weird as you people."

"Thank you for your kind assessment," Natasha said.

"I know, I'm too generous to you four, that's because you're my favorites." The Grandmaster faltered and squinted. "But unless I drank too many A'askvarian Nebulaes last night, I'm only counting three. Where is my favorite?"

"I thought that was the Champion," Pietro said, blinking.

"Oh, yes, of course." The Grandmaster gestured vaguely. "I meant—ah, my Iron Man. There you are."

Steve peered around as Tony slowly walked into the room, with what looked like Steve and Pietro's costumes in his arms, as well as a spool of wire.

"Grandmaster," Tony greeted.

The Grandmaster beamed. "Ah, of course, the leader takes care of his people before his own pleasure, that's so heartwarming."

"Of course," Tony said, cautiously putting his burden down on the nearest surface and smiling blankly at the Grandmaster. "I follow by your example."
"I bet you do," the Grandmaster said, looking back to the bed and winking lewdly at Steve.

"How can we serve you better today?" Tony asked.

"I just wanted to stop by and express my admiration for your tactics," the Grandmaster said, clapping his hands together delightedly. "What a way to make your Captain interesting. A romance, in my arena, I'd never contemplated the potential before, but it's quite marvelous. The audience are thrilled."

Steve pressed his mouth together firmly to stop from reacting too much, even though he was keenly aware of Natasha and Pietro staring at the side of his face.

"We live to serve you," Tony said, his voice stiff.

"I really hope we're going to see this romance develop," the Grandmaster said, stepping forward and peering at Tony with an intent expression. "I'd hate to have to send your paramour back to where I found him."

Steve stared at the Grandmaster blankly, hating the threat implicit in those words.

"That won't be an issue," Tony said, tilting his chin and staring coolly at the Grandmaster.

The Grandmaster beamed. "Excellent. Hm. Maybe I should try a speed-dating event, see if I can get a forbidden love happening between my two warrior factions... I'm gonna go and brainstorm that. Good talk, Avengers. I'll be looking forward to seeing your fight later."

"We fight for your honor," Tony said.

Steve felt wretched as the Grandmaster patted Tony on the cheek and swept out of the workshop with his two bug guards.

It was Steve's spur of the moment weakness that had trapped him and Tony in a charade. Why hadn't he punched Tony as a distraction? He knew exactly why he hadn't. Hurting Tony was out of the question. And kissing him—had been impossible to resist.

All this death had done something to him. Even with the fact it was apparently reversible, from even shattering deaths like explosions, each death and re-worming was making him even more keenly aware of how close to death he'd always been. He still couldn't shake the unerring feeling that each death he experienced might be his last, that no one got constant do-overs, that this gift was limited, somehow. Cats only got nine lives and Steve couldn't keep landing on his feet. And right in that second, on that roof, with Tony standing unresisting, and with Steve knowing so intensely that there was at least one more death in him... the thought deep in his subconscious had been so insistent. Steve hadn't been able to help himself.

He'd wanted to know, even if it was just one time, what kissing Tony Stark would be like. Now Steve knew the answer, sort of, but he still would never know what it would be like for Tony to kiss him from his own volition, because he wanted to. And if the Grandmaster really was insinuating they would have to maybe kiss again like that, in front of the crowds...

While Steve was dying inside, Natasha was already dressed and rounding on Tony with an almost predatory expression.

"Romance?" Natasha said, archly, and Steve blanched, because, yeah, she and Pietro had been dead by the time that part of the battle rolled around. When Tony shrugged at her blankly, she turned to Steve, eyes narrowed. "Care to share with the class what our beloved Grandmaster was talking
about?"

Pietro shrugged at Steve and blurred to the corner where Tony had dropped their costumes, wriggling into his hot pants without a shred of embarrassment of having an audience.

"Uh," Steve said, sitting up in the bed, awkwardly tugging the sheets over himself, "there was a tactical decision made, on the spur of the moment, and, uh—"

"This idiot decided to throw himself off the roof," Tony said, rolling his eyes as he moved behind his worktop. He pulled his helmet out from under the table and began to do something to it that to Steve's untrained eye looked like he was tightening and loosening the same small screw.

"We got that part," Natasha said mildly. "Steve didn't say how he distracted you long enough to manage it."

"I bet he didn't," Tony glanced at Steve with a curious expression.

"I improvised," Steve said, trying not to wriggle under Pietro and Natasha's sudden intense interest.

"Romannnnnnntically," Pietro drew the word out, looking delighted as he pressed some sort of glittery gloop to his chest to make the lightning bolt.

"Don't you have to go get abused by a dragon right about now?" Tony glanced at Pietro, slamming the helmet shut. "Pip's got your weapons." In a quieter voice, Tony quickly glanced at Steve, then away again, muttering, "Yours too."

"I'm going, I'm going," Pietro said, holding his hands up and zooming away. Except then he paused by the doorway. "Do you think if I kiss the dragon, she'd brain herself on the nearest sharp object?"

Tony threw an empty wire reel in Pietro's direction; they all could hear him laughing as he easily dodged it and left the room.

"You two should get dressed," Tony muttered, turning his back on Natasha and Steve.

Steve flushed. He'd forgotten in his embarrassment that he was still naked in the bed. Natasha yanked the sheet away from him and beamed as Steve glared at her.

"You kissed him, huh?" Natasha murmured, sweetly. "Hey, Stark, was he any good at it with you? I had to kiss him for a mission once. Wasn't in my top ten make-outs."

Steve glowered and clambered off the bed to grab his arena costume. "We were busy hiding from HYDRA. Showing you a good time wasn't high up my priority list."

"I guess I'm higher up his priority list than you, Nat." Tony made a sound that was like the very end of a laugh.

Steve gritted his teeth together, shimmying into his arena underpants and skirt, and grabbing the rest of the clothes before making for the door; he could finish getting dressed elsewhere. "I'm going to get my shield," he muttered.

"Hey, Cap."

Steve paused at the sound of Natasha's voice; he turned his head back to see her smiling at him tightly.

"Kick Rumlows ass for me," she said.
Steve jerked his head in a nod and stalked out, before he looked at Tony and said all the things that were currently on his mind.

Steve was still quietly stewing in the Cold Room as he waited for Tony to appear. Pip not only gave him his shield, but returned the ax and taught him how to read the little hourglasses that peppered Valhalla's hallways. Steve was still early to the Cold Room, which was good; he needed time to calm down and get his mind focused on figuring how to survive the upcoming match.

Out in the arena, a blur was battling an absolutely massive dragon; Steve wondered how entertaining it actually was to see Pietro in action. He guessed it was like ice hockey; Pietro was the puck, and the real way to watch was by focusing on everything else. A spatter of blood here; a dislodged boulder there. The clues made up the bigger picture.

Steve stared contemplatively as the dragon roared past the forcefield, scattering sand up in a cloud, obscuring the view. There was a puzzle here to figure out. He had to accept he was a new arrival and he couldn't expect to learn quickly what Natasha, Tony, Pietro, (and Vision) had spent years figuring out.

He was still moodily staring at the dragon when he heard the soft, reassuring noise of the Iron Man armor. Steve was pretty sure most people thought Tony's tech was silent when it was like this, maneuvered by manual power, the bootjets and repulsors dormant, but maybe because of Steve's superserum enhancements, he could hear the tiny crest of noise from the suit. It was almost reassuring.

When he glanced aside, he noticed Tony was using the collapsed form of the suit. The faceplate was open, his thighs and midriff and arms showing. His face looked carefully relaxed but he couldn't hide the intensity of emotions in his eyes. Tony's eyes had always been so expressive.

They still needed to talk about so much. Which is of course why Steve was a total coward and opted for small talk. Well, what small talk amounted to among superheroes.

"I can't believe I only used this for one battle and I still missed not having it for the Battle Royale," Steve said, fondly swinging the ax.

Tony grunted, probably at the reference to the battle that he was still mad at Steve about.

Steve shrugged. He wouldn't apologize for making the right decision. He swung the ax some more, wondering if he'd get any hassle from Thor for copying him. Probably. Thor had been so busy ruling New New Asgard that he hadn't been available to consult over this whole arena business. Steve wondered what would have happened if Thor had been present at that complicated discussion over who should be chosen to die, to infiltrate this place. Steve knew Thor was practical. He liked to think Thor would have agreed that Steve was the best candidate.

Thor had mocked him for "copying" his beard, but then been supportive when Steve wielded Mjolnir, so Steve had no idea what he would say about Steve liking an ax as a weapon. He'd probably approve.

"I'm still surprised you know how to use an actual weapon," Tony grunted, nodding at the shield.

It was nice that Tony was attempting to make small talk back, Steve supposed. "You'd be surprised what weapons I can use now," Steve offered in response.

"Well, you've lived a life since we last saw each other, I suppose there's a lot you know now you didn't before." There was something provocative in Tony's voice.
Steve couldn't meet his challenging gaze, pretending to focus very hard on making sure everything on his flimsy costume was secured as well as it could be.

"I can practically hear your thoughts right now, Rogers." Tony sighed and the background noise faded away, Tony activating the silence field briefly. "It's fine. C'mon. It's not like we're the first people in the world who have to keep up a good showmance." Tony's nose wrinkled, though, and he still didn't look happy about it. And why should he? It was one more thing stolen from them, one more indignity on the heap of a thousand more, and it was all Steve's fault. "I've done worse." Tony eyeballed Steve consideringly. "I've definitely dated worse."

Steve pressed his mouth together into a firm line. "Looks like Pietro's fight is winding down," he said.

Tony sighed and the background noise filtered back in.

Steve knew he wasn't taking this well and he knew Tony deserved better, but he couldn't get his brain to follow-up on those thoughts. Actions proved louder than words, that was something Steve knew now better than he ever had. He'd promised together and never delivered it. And now not only was Tony trapped in a place, away from his daughter, routinely having to go through endless battle after endless battle, but now he had to perform a mockery of a pantomime, because of Steve. He could tell Tony for hours that he didn't mean to cause any trouble or extra pain for him, but until Steve could back that up with his actions, he didn't want to write any checks with his promises that Tony would never be able to cash.

Winning this battle was one way of doing that. The Grandmaster wanted their fake romance to continue because it was a way of increasing the audience's attention. If Steve could fight impressively, make sure he was getting attention for the right reason, then maybe the audience would be satisfied enough that Tony wouldn't have to be dragged along in this unfair charade.

Ivan Vanko and Brock "Crossbones" Rumlow. Vanko had spent months targeting and terrorizing Tony, during a time when Tony had enough on his plate as it was. Steve hadn't heard the full story about that for a long time; when he finally read the report of it online, he almost thought it was a ludicrous story fabricated for Tony's PR. When he realized it was an honest report, that Tony was plugging a radioactive poisonous element in his chest in order to save lives, casually disregarding the cost on his own life…it had been a gut punch of emotion. Tony could have easily retired, used the palladium sparingly, and never saved another person, which would have extended his life expectancy by decades. Not many people would sacrifice longevity in order to be a hero. Tony was a hero in every definition of the word; his flashy public persona couldn't lessen that if he tried.

Vanko used whips, based on Tony's own repulsor technology.

Rumlow was a plague of a different sort, a man devoid of morality. Worse than a mercenary, he was a true believer in Hydra's evil ideology, and that made him extremely dangerous. Definitely not a guy you wanted to put back out in the universe. Maybe Pietro had a point. Maybe it was better for them to stay here, if it removed the risk of their enemies escaping too.

Steve had never crossed Vanko's path, and as far as Steve knew, apart from vaguely being around in the clean-up at the tower after the Battle of New York, Tony had barely met Brock Rumlow, even though Steve and Rumlow had crossed paths in battle several times. One foe, designed for each of them. The Grandmaster clearly knew enough about them to be able to pick the enemies specifically, tailor the fight to the best drama, recreate past battles on the arena floor.

That's what the Grandmaster expected to happen, here. Vanko and Rumlow both would have had the same summons Steve and Tony did. They were probably gearing up to fight the enemy they
knew. That made sense. Rumlow liked to give orders to his men, but would often fight on his own. Steve couldn't imagine Rumlow and Vanko working together.

But working together...That was something Steve owed Tony. And not just an old debt either, working together was the best strategy. Strategy was something Steve's mind took to quickly and a plan had already formed in his mind. One that would only work if he and Tony could still work together, as well as they had during the end of the Battle Royale, and during the end of that frantic time heist.

Steve crouched down, pretending to be very interested in making sure his boots were tightly laced up, before he looked up at Tony. "Give me a hand here?"

Frowning, Tony nodded and crouched down, eyebrows knotted like he really thought Steve might have needed help, until he realized what it was—a cover for Steve's realization at what was going on.

"They chose a villain for each of us deliberately," Steve told him, keeping his voice low so the bugs couldn't hear them. "They want us to split up and fight the enemy they picked."

Tony grinned at him understandingly. "I do so hate doing what's expected of me."

Steve didn't even have to speak his plan out loud; Tony instantly understood it. There were no words to explain what that felt like. When Steve smiled as he got to his feet and the bars dropped to admit them into the arena, it wasn't even a fake smile.

The arena for their battle was set up was mostly sand, with spears jabbed in the ground, point-up, obviously a nod to Steve's chosen form of self-sacrifice.

Steve averted his gaze from them. As much as he didn't regret making his decision to prioritize Tony's life over his own, it still didn't mean he was comfortable seeing something that had recently killed him this close up.

That dive from the roof hadn't been nearly as terrifying as it should have been. He supposed he'd been buoyed by the euphoria of his illicit, stolen kiss. If Steve focused, he could almost feel Tony's kiss again. That was a dangerous line of thought.

The crowds were full and the suns were split apart, one high, one low, making it difficult to make out much detail, but Steve felt dizzy when he noticed a few replicas of his shield, dotted around the crowds. There was still the high amount of red and gold in the cheering throng, and to Steve's dismay, quite a few people were wearing cheap copies of Rumlow's Crossbones mask.

If Steve could sway some popularity his way, maybe he could convince those audience members to stop supporting Rumlow's undeserving, psychopathic ass and cheer for him instead.

There was a banner hanging down almost right to the forcefield that caught Steve's eye and he noticed it was hand-painted with an image which at first he thought was only Iron Man, so he stared at it appreciatively—getting fan art from kids had been one of his favorite earliest parts of becoming an Avenger—until he realized the painting was of Tony and him kissing.

Steve could feel his cheeks heat up and he averted his gaze, realizing belatedly as Tony jetted up into the air and spun that he was supposed to be showing off. He couldn't think of anything new so threw the ax again and did a brief sequence of tumbling; the crowd seemed to like it enough anyway.
The two suns were enough to make him sweat just walking out onto the sand. At the opposite side of the arena, Vanko was crackling his whips out to full length, making powerful strides forward. His arena costume was worse than Steve's, to be honest; the arc-reactor-like power system for his whips was centered on his chest, lots of leather wrapped around his chest in a complex harness, and his only other real clothes consisted of gladiator sandals that wrapped up to his knees and a cream-colored loin cloth. He was heavily muscular and his skin was gleaming, like he'd been oiled up. Steve was glad that wasn't part of his costuming routine.

Rumlow wasn't really showing off so much as pausing every so often to raise his fists into the air and growling. Grace wasn't part of Rumlow's routine; he was straight-forward in both fighting style and bad attitude. There were eyeholes in Rumlow's Crossbones mask so Steve held his eye contact as the Grandmaster's hologram loomed large in the sky and announced the fight.

As the forcefield separating them dropped, and Rumlow started to stalk forward, Steve continued to stare Rumlow in the eyes, grinned, picked up his shield, started to spin—and launched the shield directly at Vanko. At the exact same time, Tony turned his repulsors last-second across the arena to hit Rumlow.

The confusion was excellent. Neither of their enemies were braced for that sort of attack at all, clearly assuming they were going to get the obvious assailant. Vanko tumbled hard across the sand and Steve took off at a run after him, while Tony was doing the same to get to Rumlow.

Steve was vaguely aware that he was grinning as he fought. He wasn't sure whether it was the adrenaline or the high of fighting alongside Tony that was inspiring it. He probably looked half-crazed, but maybe that was a boon when fighting someone. It was a benefit to look intimidating.

Vanko was an expert with his whips, but he also had nothing to help him in close-combat; it just took Steve waiting for the right moment to tie the fight up. Literally. When Vanko snapped his left whip at Steve, Steve caught it around the head of his ax, and when Vanko followed it up with the right whip, Steve agily did a dramatic spin-leap to avoid getting hit by it, and that flip enabled him to catch the edge of the right whip with his ax too. Then it wasn't much work beyond that to wrap up the whip around the ax handle. Vanko realized too late that's Steve's melodramatic sequence of side somersaults that followed weren't meant as kicks to hit him, but instead were designed to wind the whips more tightly around the ax handle, rendering the whips useless. He discarded the whip handles too late to be any good; Steve launched the ax and whips away from both of them with one easy loping throw before diving with his shield against Vanko.

With no close-combat weapon, and an over-reliance on fisticuffs as his close-combat fighting style, Vanko went down into the sand easily; Steve stepped back from Vanko's heaving, bleeding body, wondering what the usual process was like in a fight like this, that had happened so quickly. Would he have to kill Vanko for the fight to be over, or was there any space for mercy?

Steve looked over to see Tony, in the collapsed form of his arena armor—legs, midriff, and face showing—standing over Rumlow's collapsed body. Tony calmly looked at Vanko before he raised a blazing gauntlet and sent a single repulsor blast directly at Vanko's face. Vanko's stuttering breaths stilled almost immediately after that. Steve inhaled and exhaled slowly. Apparently death was the normal procedure.

The crowd cheered riotously as Tony walked across the sand to stand by Steve; he grabbed Steve's hand in his gauntlet and raised their interlocked grip high. The screaming intensified. Tony was breathing harder than he should have been, based on how quickly their match had ended, and when Tony let Steve's hand go, Tony didn't step away. He stepped closer. His eyes locked on Steve's with an intensity that made breathing difficult. Tony had beautiful eyes. Dangerous, beautiful eyes.
Steve wondered for a delirious moment what was happening, because the two suns in the colorful sky made for a dizzying heat, and Tony's gauntlet was cool against Steve's cheek, and for a second, Steve forgot they were on the same team and thought maybe Tony was about to kill him. Steve's eyes fluttered closed in anticipation of that and then Tony's mouth was against his, warm and, oh, the showmance. Right.

The kiss was perfunctory, lingering lips to lips long enough to look genuine. When Tony pulled back, there was a defiance in his expression that made Steve's stomach tense miserably, and Steve couldn't look away from him. There were thousands of aliens up in that crowd, screaming and hollering like this was pure entertainment, like this wasn't their lives on display, being ripped apart for their amusement.

Tony was nodding, like Steve's face was an open book to him. "Come on, Captain," he said. "Let's get away from these bloodthirsty hounds."

Steve had a couple of scorch marks on his uniform, so after dropping his shield and ax off with Pip and a brief shower, Steve had to go by Hrhumhuhhr to get that sorted while Tony disappeared off to the workshop, muttering about touch-ups on the armor. Tony couldn't look Steve in the eye as he hurried off and Steve couldn't help but notice the way Tony's eyes caught on Steve's mouth as he made his hurried goodbye.

It left Steve in a somewhat dazed state so he didn't even really pay attention as Hrhumhuhhr decided that Steve needed to be scolded for ten minutes. He only really jolted out of his daze when one of the bugs jabbed him with a trident to get him to move to the dining hall.

Sulky at the jab, Steve found most of the other Einherjar queuing for meat and sullenly joined the end of the queue.

When Andhrímnir had finally gotten to serve Steve, after the rapidly-becoming-regular snickering as soon as Steve said thank you, Steve saw that Natasha and Tony were sat at the end of the usual table, so he shuffled over to sit by Natasha.

This time was different, though. Before he could sit, Natasha looked up at him with a smirk. "Don't you want to sit next to your boyfriend, Captain?"

Steve clenched his jaw. "What a nice suggestion, Widow. Thank you."

Lifting his chin defiantly, he walked around the table and sat stiffly next to Tony. Tony ducked his head, but not too quickly for Steve to miss his grin. Well, at least one of them thought this situation was funny. Steve couldn't even express the rage bubbling through him, because the situation was his fault. But Tony kissing him like that, in front of the crowd, made him feel so many things, all at once, and not all of them pleasant.

"Where's Pietro?" he asked, instead. Because deflection from emotions was always probably going to be his primary coping method.

"He didn't exactly fare well against the dragon," Natasha's mouth turned down at the edges.

"She's not a fun opponent," Tony pushed his meat around with his fork, looking at it like he wished it was a cheeseburger. Steve was bored of the meat and it had only been a week; Tony must have been eating it for eight years. It was a good thing Pepper had kept their farm going; Steve could definitely picture vegetarianism being a much more attractive concept after nothing but this meat and the berry shakes. "Do you remember the first time Pietro fought her?"
Natasha muffled a laugh into her hand and grinned at Steve. "It was hilarious. There was some hormonal problem—a reaction to the diet they were giving her."

"Maximoff essentially got humped to death," Tony said, gesturing with his fork. "It was just like the end of *Shrek.*"

Steve frowned. "When Shrek finally got into the knight armor and it was too small, so he exploded out and the helmet hit Donkey in the face?"

Natasha and Tony both turned to him and stared, open-mouthed.

"What kind of freaky timeline did you live your boring life in, Rogers?" Natasha demanded.

"Is that...not how *Shrek* ended...?" Steve squinted. "Huh." He knew his arrival in the forties had changed some things, but the amount of ripples it had caused were apparently going to continue to surprise him. Or maybe Natasha and Tony were messing with him. He moodily moved his food around the plate.

"I'll check on him before bed, don't worry," Natasha said. "Pietro's remarkably difficult to kill, so he's not as fast with the worms as some of us are."

"So you saw Pietro's fight," Steve said, slowly. Pietro had mentioned being able to view fights. "Is that through the ventilation system, or...?"

"There's a viewing room," Natasha said. "It's not all that fun. Kind of hard to watch something when you know what it's like. Although—your fight today was pretty fun."

Steve frowned. This wasn't the first time they were reluctant to let him go to that viewing room; Pietro had mentioned it before, and had suggested watching the Three Warriors battle from there, but then backtracked on it very quickly. There were still so many questions that he had, and he wanted answers, but there was another insistent thought pushing ahead of that need.

He had an apology to make. Steve subtly watched Tony out of the corner of his eye and tried not to sigh too audibly. Apologies were difficult enough, but when it came to Tony Stark, Steve had never yet been able to find the right words to say he was sorry to Tony's face.

It's what Tony deserved, though, so Steve needed to find an opening to do it, so he could get it out of the way and finally start getting some answers to what was going on. There was a secret the other Avengers were keeping, and Steve was determined to find out what it was.

It was weird not having Pietro with them in the sand room. Steve supposed Natasha and Tony were used to it, but he wasn't. Maybe it would be dangerous if he did get too accustomed to this place. Complacency didn't go hand-in-hand with escaping.

Natasha was curled up with her back to Steve's and that was reassuring enough in itself; he could feel her breathing, and every faint rhythmical movement of that calmed a little of Steve's tension. A little, but not enough of it; Tony had started out with his back against Steve's chest, but had rolled over in his sleep, his hands reaching out to clench at Steve's tunic, and his hands were resting over where the spear had gone into Steve at the end of his Battle Royale swan dive.

Steve stared down at him, his mouth dry. He wouldn't apologize for that. Sometimes when he saw Tony asleep here, he flashed back to Pepper telling him it was okay, that he could rest. His breath stuttered, the pain almost as fresh as when it had happened. He had a fresh chance to protect Tony. He wouldn't see him die again. He *couldn't.* There was no way he could cope with that happening.
Steve had failed too many people, he wouldn't let Tony back on that list again.

It took Steve much too long to realize Tony's breathing pattern had changed and he was awake, squinting blearily up at Steve in the dim light.

"Awake, huh?" Tony's voice was sleep-rough, his breath warm against Steve's neck. "You should sleep."

"I'm trying," Steve lied.

"Hmm." Tony rarely bought into Steve's lies. "Restless monsters again?"

Steve made an unamused noise. "How could you tell?"

"You were breathing a little too shallowly. I know what anxiety sounds like."

"Oh." Steve swallowed. It was panic. It wasn't fair for Tony to have to deal with Steve's weird feelings on top of everything else. "It's nothing."

"Nothing has you fidgeting like my daughter three minutes before I find something else she's broken in my garage," Tony snorted.

Steve huffed. He didn't want to tell Tony that Morgan still fidgeted when she was nervous about admitting something. It felt awkward, invasive. Intrusive. Steve had no right to know Tony's daughter as well as he did when Tony hadn't been allowed more time with her. Still, there was something bothering him, and he needed to apologize. It was damn awkward doing it with Tony so close, but at least it was too dark for Steve to make out Tony's face and that helped.

"I owe you an apology," Steve said, and if it was a little stiff and stilted, he was still proud of himself for saying it, instead of sitting on it and stewing.

"You're probably going to have to be a little more specific."

Steve bristled. "I'm not apologizing for jumping off the roof."

Tony hummed noncommittally. His hands were folded, still resting against Steve's chest. Maybe it was a coincidence that the point of contact was where the blade had impacted Steve after his dramatic dive from the roof, but Steve didn't think so. Tony seemed to have almost as much trouble reconciling the fact that Steve was there as Steve was having in reverse.

There was something surreal about the whole scenario, still. Like maybe it was happening to someone else. It was like those first few weeks after Project: Rebirth all over again, when Steve had to learn that the strong legs carrying him, the strong lungs letting him breathe without even a hint of pain, the larger hands that could break and bend metal….they were his.

"If you're not going to apologize for that frankly traumatic swan dive, then what are you apologizing for?" Tony asked, gruffly. He had his forehead buried into Steve's chest, so even if he had his eyes open, he wouldn't be looking at Steve, and it made it a little easier.

"Kissing you without consent," Steve said, into Tony's hair.
"Oh." Tony breathed sharply through his teeth, like he hadn't considered that as an option, and Tony hated not thinking of something before anyone else. "Yes, that was terrible of you. Zero out of ten for manners. Six out of ten for execution. I'd have scored you higher, except for the self-execution at the end."

Of course Tony was making a joke. Deflection via humor was how Tony Stark operated. "Still, I've put you in an awkward position—"

"Was the kiss this afternoon that bad from your perspective?"

"You were obliged to, because of my thoughtless actions, so—yeah, it was bad. Morally."

"Morally—" Tony started, made a whistling noise and then gave up. "Okay, yeah, no, I agree, you're a terrible person."

"Thank you," Steve said, glad Tony was admitting it so that they could awkwardly get past this.

Except, Tony didn't get the memo that it was a decent natural stopping point for the topic. "Absolutely awful of you."

"That's what I'm trying to say," Steve gritted his teeth. He'd forgotten why he was reluctant in the first place to ever try apologizing to Tony; he never made it easy.

"Oh no, making me endure an unwanted and unasked for sexual advance from my first ever crush,
"how terrible, how will I cope," Tony continued, dramatically.

"It's put you in the unwanted position of—" Steve started, earnestly trying to explain why this was a matter where an apology was needed, except his explanation faltered as Tony's words sank in. "What?"

"You heard me," Tony said. There was a slightly dangerous tone to his voice.

"How is that—that's ridiculous. You don't have to lie to me to make me feel better about what I did, the position I've forced you into."

"Where did you get the conclusion lie out of my beautifully melodramatic sarcasm?"

"You met me in 2012. There's no possible way I was your first—" Steve's brain was having trouble working, mostly because Tony describing him as a crush at all was making it do somersaults.

"I met Steve Rogers in 2012. But Captain America, ah, that guy was the cause of more than one wet dream when I first realized what my dick was for." Tony's eyes glittered white in the shadows. "My dad was a fan, we had merchandise everywhere; there was this painting of you I used to keep right above my bed, so every night—"

"Okay, I'm not so sure I want to hear this."

Tony's teeth were faintly visible in the dim light too, his mouth stretched in an amused grin. "Oh c'mon, Cap, you have to realize you were the target of a lot of erotic fantasies—all those posters weren't solely being used to raise morale or bond money."

"If you're about to say the posters were raising something else, I'm okay with not hearing that."

"Wasn't just the poster, either. Dad was obsessed with finding you. Obsessed. He had all your showreels, played them constantly. All these behind-the-scenes videos, too, from when Erskine was seeing if you were viable, god, you were scrappy. I liked that. Didn't have to be the strongest to go after what you wanted. Blew my mind that you used to be so tiny."

"Ninety-five pounds soaking wet," Steve admitted, because the other option was to think about Tony essentially saying he'd maybe been attracted to Steve before the muscles and height and that meant Tony had liked him. Not Captain America. He liked Steve. That was almost too much to believe right now.

"How did you even survive? Didn't your beloved Brooklyn breezes not break you in half every winter?"

"Brooklyn's sweet to her fellas," Steve shrugged.

"I spent more than one night thinking about what it might have been like to know you back then. I was a small kid too. No one liked my smart mouth—"

"Shocker."

"Hey, don't mock it, you seemed to like it well enough—"

"Tony."

"Ugh, no one else can pack a sentence into two syllables like you can. The point is, you can stop saying sorry for the kissing. Playboy, remember? I like kissing. I'd count it in my top ten skills—"
don't argue, I know it was a good kiss. It wasn't a hardship. One of those old questions that I never thought I'd get an answer for. So don't apologize. Not for that." Tony exhaled loudly. "You can apologize for the bit afterward, if you like."

Steve matched his noisy exhale. "Nope."

"It genuinely upset me. Aren't you ashamed? I saved the universe, you know. My reputation is universally lauded. You should probably apologize for upsetting an interstellar hero."

"Since when do I do what I should?"

"Way more than I do, buddy."

"Hmmm." Steve's noise of disbelief obviously amused Tony; Tony chuckled too quietly for Steve to hear, but he could feel it, rumbling through him as intimately as if it was his own amusement.

Tony muffled a sigh in Steve's shoulder.

"It was an okay kiss," Steve said, feeling brave.

"Excuse you, it was marvelous," Tony said, immediately, in an affronted tone. "I was part of it."

"Whatever you say," Steve said, closing his eyes. He finally felt sleepy. Apologies lightened pressure, who knew?

"It'll be a spectacular kiss next time," Tony mumbled, settling his head against his hand, his hair tickling Steve's chin a little. "You wait and see. I'll kiss the crap out of you."

"Mm, super romantic of you, Stark."

"I'll romance the crap out of you too." Tony's words were slurred. "Ugh, this whole place really is freaking weird."

Steve hummed in agreement. They were on the same wavelength about that, which was a comfort. The world had always seemed a little brighter whenever he and Tony were on the same page of something.

"Sleep," Steve murmured back, and like it was a spell, Tony did.

Pietro joined them mid-way through breakfast. He looked surly and jumpy. Natasha and Tony just gave him some space, so Steve dutifully copied them, his heart hurting when he saw Pietro scratching under his tunic. The worms were a miracle but they were an itchy miracle.

The surprising hero of the morning was Volstagg, who ignored Natasha's death glare to come sit next to Pietro, and instead of begging for food, he started regaling Pietro with stories of Thor as a child. Even Pietro was chuckling at the end; Steve spared a glance over to another table where Loki was. It was almost a comfort to know that Loki had spent his life being a professional little shit. It reminded Steve that he didn't know who in this room had their full memories or not. He probably wouldn't trust Loki to be a team player. Guillotine was obviously a loner. Gamora, though, he would definitely trust Gamora with her memories. Especially this version of her. The younger version from the 2014 timeline was still at loose in their galaxy, causing havoc, but she'd always offered a fair fight to her opponents whenever the cosmic-bound Avengers had encountered her. This Gamora was their timeline's Gamora, and Quill had spent hours opining how amazing she
was, how much she'd fought against Thanos, how strong she was. If Gamora didn't have her memories right now, it was a definite tick in the shame column. Then again, Natasha had kept her memories because of the Soul Stone, and Gamora had undergone the same death. Perhaps she knew. But did she know the Avengers and Asgardian crew had theirs?

Steve was busy contemplating some of the other Einherjar (Yondu was probably trustworthy, if Quill's glowing tales of him were to be believed, but would the other Ravagers fall into line? There was a tale of mutiny in their history, Steve knew) and he almost missed Topaz's daily visit to the dining hall.

Pietro squished himself in small and tried not to look relieved when she passed him by to hand Loki and Groot envelopes. And then Steve startled in surprise when Topaz paused on her way out to give him an envelope—and then she passed a matching one to Tony.

Tony ripped it open immediately, his eyebrows knotted in upset.

"Again?" Tony's face fell. "C'mon, Toe-rag, we fought yesterday."

The we made Steve's fingers move more quickly to open the envelope. He'd assumed maybe he was finally going to get a solo fight, like Pietro had via the dragon, but if Tony was saying we, maybe he meant Steve?

It turned out that he did. Steve read the match announcement and tried not to groan out loud.

"Match: HIGH SUNS. TAG TEAM BATTLE. THE IRON MAN & THE CAPTAIN versus ALDRICH KILLIAN & KILLMONGER. 2X2 Battle to the DEATH; VICTORIOUS TEAM WILL BE SPARED."

Steve frowned unhappily. Same kind of battle, just at a different time, the earliest arena slot if he was recalling that correctly. He looked up at Tony questioningly, but Tony was still glaring unhappily at Topaz.

"That's Topaz to you, Tin can," Topaz snarled at Tony. "And you're still alive, ain't ya? So quit your belly-aching and maybe go train your boyfriend up a bit so he gets punched in the face fewer times. The audience isn't too fond of his pretty face getting so bloodied up."

"Oh, I'm tempted to punch you at the outset, just for that," Tony muttered, glaring as the Grandmaster's number one stalked off to give the Tenebrae their assignments.

"I'd really rather you didn't," Steve said, mildly.

"High Suns," Natasha whistled. "You'd better go get a move on."

"High Suns, ugh, I nearly missed that," Tony started to cram his food in his mouth, chewing rapidly.

"You'll make yourself sick, Stark," Pietro warned, the first words he'd spoken since his return.

"Maybe projectile vomiting could be a valuable distraction technique," Steve offered, although he was already following suit, eating as quickly as he could.

"Vomit isn't so much fun if you have to kiss afterward," Natasha said.

Steve pointedly ignored her smirk.

[Signature]
Steve was getting too used to this place already. Maybe that was a problem. He felt antsy. Maybe a good fight was exactly what he needed. He was determined, whatever happened, that he was going to get answers to some of his questions today. Which meant they needed to decisively win this battle, no matter what.

He edged over to where Tony was standing in full armor this time, his faceplate flipped up. That was already a sign of how difficult Tony was expecting this fight to be.

"Any strategies in mind?" Steve asked, deferring to Tony's wider experience against these foes.

Tony fiddled with his gauntlet and the background hum disappeared. He glanced at the forcefield and the landscape that was covered in boulders. "How do you want to play this?"

"Against the double Kills?" Tony frowned as Steve glanced at him in appreciation of the nickname of their opponents. "They probably think we'd do the same thing again, which is why they've given us such a blocky field. No straight lines of sight."

"It might work, swapping the enemies we're supposed to go after—Killmonger's built to take close-combat fighting, and Killian's a fire-breathing distance guy—but...that landscape could work to our advantage."

Tony glanced out at the rocks and back at Steve, understanding dawning. "It would be easy to separate them."

Steve nodded. "Work together. Instead of splitting up, we go after one of them together. Consecutive instead of concurrent."

"Killmonger is probably the fastest to deal with. He absorbs kinetic energy, so you need to distract him so I can get in with a uni-beam." Tony frowned, his eyes quickly scanning across the part of the arena they could see. They were the first battle this time, so there was no battle to wait to wind down. "That takes about two minutes to charge up from the sun when there's only one in the sky."

Steve glanced in surprise. This suit was solar-powered? He supposed that made sense. "I can try and pin him down. Can you keep Killian at a distance?"

"My repulsors can keep him at a distance long enough, I think." Tony beamed. "We may still have to improvise." His eyes dipped briefly to Steve's mouth again before he looked away, out into the sand. Steve muffled the smile that wanted to break out. "Don't forget to try and hit the force-field with your shield. We still need the data from that."

Steve nodded. Their last fight had been over with too quickly to try that. "Of course."

Tony nodded as the bars shot down and the force-field disabled, twisting his gauntlet to let the sound in.

Above them, as they walked side-by-side into the arena, the sky was that same riot of color Steve had noticed on that first time on the sand. This time at least he was alongside Tony, not fighting against him. The two suns were high up in the whirlpool blur of purple, pink and green and it was so hot Steve could already feel himself starting to sweat. The crowd still chanted Iron Man! but here and there, Steve thought he heard Captain! and Avengers! in among that riot of noise. He was sure the snowglobe-esque force-field dampened the sound somewhat and that was a blessing, as much as anything could be a blessing in the face of such mortal danger.

The sand was warm beneath Steve's feet, enough that he could feel it through the soul of the boots. Nothing most of them were given to wear provided actual protection. Steve was glad with his
whole heart that Tony was allowed to keep his armor. He deserved as much protection from pain as humanly possible. Steve would do anything he could to make that happen.

Tony paused in their forward advance to squint at something up in the stands. "Is that—is that a banner of us kissing?"

Steve followed his gaze and winced. "Yeah. It was there last time."

"Huh, guess ol' Grandmaster wasn't kidding about the crowd liking it," Tony smirked and started walking again. "How about that." He grinned. "How about I give you a lift up onto one of those bigger boulders?"

Tony was nodding at one of the bigger boulders; there were four of them, near the center of the arena, two on their side of the force-field that briefly bisected the arena floor. Steve nodded and then nearly yelped, because instead of grabbing his arm like they had a few times before, Tony swooped in close and put his arms around Steve's waist.

"Brace yourself, sweetheart," Tony said.

Steve gave him a dirty look after Tony deposited him at the crest of one of the larger boulders; Tony winked and saluted lazily at him as he jetted backward to land on the matching one. It was a good idea, to start from here. Steve could see the whole layout and he was already mapping a path to best pin Killmonger down, one that would give him a good section of the larger domed force-field to test versus his shield. As Killmonger advanced, showing off his agility by leaping up to one of the matching biggest boulders without assistance, his eyes lingered on Steve's shield and he bared his teeth. Steve nodded to himself. Yeah, he could use the shield to lure Killmonger where he wanted him.

The boulders ended up being a marvelous idea, because Killian also clambered up onto one, posing for the crowd as the Grandmaster introduced them, and as soon as the force-field separating Tony and Steve from the double Kills dropped, Tony sent a small missile from his suit at the boulder Killian was posing on. It exploded dramatically beneath Killian, sending the Extremis-enhanced villain to the ground in a heap of exploding rubble.

Steve couldn't linger on the admittedly beautiful sight, he had a villain of his own to deal with.

It wasn't often that events happened as planned, but this battle could almost have been scripted. Killmonger was too easy to provoke and to distract with some flashy spins and kicks. He had no idea that Steve was biding time until it was too late and Tony’s uni-beam smacked him to the ground in a limp smoking heap.

Killian was obviously used to fighting Iron Man because he did dodge the repulsor blasts nimbly, but he wasn't used to two opponents at once, and he couldn't use his fire to keep both of them at bay at once. That made it almost laughably easy, even if Steve did get hit a few times. A few bruises were nothing in the grand scheme of things.

The battle did drag on a little while, which Steve picked up on as Tony playing with Killian, rather than Killian actually being a strong competitor against them. Steve guessed that made sense. People enjoyed getting their money's worth and a short fight wouldn't be all that compelling. Steve did his best to drag out the fight too as soon as he realized what was going on, and it was almost amusing to see Killian smirk like he thought the length of the battle meant he was doing well, when Tony was so obviously playing him.

Eventually Tony's attacks changed frequency and angle, Killian having to battle harder to cope
with them, and Steve realized that was the subtle sign to speed up and bring things to a close, so Steve altered his own fighting pattern to that end. Tony drew Killian's attention, while Steve nimbly flipped up onto one of the smaller boulders and leaped from it, ax attended; Killian leaped out of the way, but Steve spun, swiped with the handle, and knocked him down into the sand face-first. Tony followed that up with a repulsor-blast to Killian's back while left him smoldering and gasping.

Killian was still tensing like he could get back up again and Steve realized it was his turn to make the final blow. He couldn't let Tony keep doing that for him. Steve grit his teeth and sent his shield flashing through the air, hitting Killian with an audible crack, and Killian's body twitched and then stilled. Hating every moment of it, Steve crossed the arena floor, fighting to keep his expression straight, trying to ignore the noise it made to remove his shield from where he'd embedded it into Killian's body, knowing the squelching noise would probably follow him down into his nightmares. He studiously bent and wiped Killian's blood onto the scant fabric of Killian's outfit, which mostly just consisted of tight pants with a dragon design painted on it.

When Steve straightened from doing that, Tony was already aloft one of the boulders, collapsing the suit down to its smaller version and saluting the crowd with his right hand; from this angle Steve could see him tap three fingers against his thigh with his left before following it up with four surreptitious clenched-fist bumps.

Steve's heart fluttered against his chest. Trying to communicate to Morgan, not even knowing she might have a chance of him seeing it, it was clearly Tony's way of declaring to the universe—this is why I fight, this is who I am fighting for. Steve felt dumb for ever considering that Tony wasn't working to get them out of the arena. Of course Tony would move heaven and earth to see his daughter again, as long as he could do it without endangering her.

Tony turned, a beautiful silhouette against one of the Negative Zone's suns, and beckoned for Steve to join him; Steve threw his ax ahead of himself and then took a running leap, having to really pump his muscles to jump up high enough to land on the boulder in one easy movement. Steve straightened out of his crouch with a smirk.

"You're ridiculous," Tony said, taking Steve's face in both of his hands and kissing him.

It was a sweet kiss, somehow, even gentle, until Steve made a noise he didn't intend to, something that rumbled deep in his chest, and the kiss tipped into something else, without Steve meaning it to. Tony's tongue slipped past the seam of Steve's lips, deepening the kiss, and Steve instinctively let himself sink into it. It felt like a kiss that meant something, and it made everything around them disappear. Gravity, heat, all the aches and pains of the fight and sleeping on nothing but a sand-covered floor, all gone. All he felt was Tony, and the heat where their bodies touched, and the beautiful friction of this impossibly perfect kiss.

Like a jolt of ice water, Steve remembered it was a kiss just for show, and his whole body suddenly felt as if he'd been transformed into lead. He pulled away from the kiss, his head pounding, and Tony smirked at him, as the crowd screamed appreciatively in the background.

"Crowd likes me better," Tony said, smugly.

Steve frowned, trying to hear the words in the chanting that had started up that brought Tony to that conclusion. "You think so?"

Tony nodded and started to say, "Oh, I know so—" but his voice trailed off.

Mainly in favor of staring at Steve, as Steve dropped his shield off the edge of the boulder into the
sand, before letting out a triumphant yell and ripping his shirt off, taking a few heaving breaths before screaming at the crowd, pivoting so he could roar in several directions to best effect.

The screaming was, admittedly, almost deafening.

Steve beamed smugly at Tony as they jumped from the boulder together, Steve bending down elegantly to scoop up his ax, shield and the torn remnants of his shirt.

"Hhrumhuhr's gonna kill you for that one," Tony said, but his eyes kept straying back to Steve's bare chest.

Steve shrugged and began walking toward the Cold Room, the cheering ringing in his ears. "Every champion needs a victory pose."

"So you're going to keep ripping your shirt off *every* time we win?" Tony's eyebrows raised high.

Steve just shrugged at him again.

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Pietro and Natasha were waiting for them outside.

"I need to go see Pip about some materials to fix my armor," Tony said, stalking past the bugs. The silence barrier came up briefly further along the hallway, Pietro and Natasha following close behind. Tony glanced at Steve as they walked. "You want me to go take your ripped uniform to Hrhumhuhr, take the heat off you for what you did?"

"Uh, yeah, that would be great," Steve said, handing over the remnants of the shirt. Tony's gaze caught briefly on Steve's bare chest and he quickly looked elsewhere; Natasha smirked at Steve.

"I'll go with," Pietro offered. "I want to see Pip about getting a bigger weapon for my monster fights." He pulled a face. "My knives barely grazed her scales." He glanced at Steve. "I can take your shield and ax to him?"

"You just want to hold the shield again," Natasha said.

Pietro beamed as he swung it from side-to-side as soon as Steve handed it over. "Are you kidding? Wanda and I spent hours as kids playing Captain America and the Howling Commandos."

"Let me guess," Steve said solemnly, "Wanda provided most of the howling?"

"Ah, it warms my heart that you know her so well," Pietro smiled. "C'mon, Iron Man, last one to Pip's a rotten egg."

Tony huffed as Pietro blurred off. "That's cheating, Maximoff." He flickered an apologetic glance at Steve and Natasha. "Guess I gotta go and smell like sulfur for a while."

Steve watched him go, feeling peculiar at the sight of Tony walking away in his Iron Man armor, a sight he never thought he'd get to see again.

Tony leaving meant that Natasha couldn't talk until they were back in Tony's workshop, which suited Steve fine; the way she was looking at him was not an expression of hers that he relished. There was information she wanted from him, and Steve knew it was helpless to resist giving it to her.
He procrastinated, stopping by the shower to quickly wash and change into a set of the bland brown clothes; Natasha waited for him outside, nodding briefly at him when he emerged with what was left unscathed of his arena costume tucked under one arm.

She didn't accost him immediately on their return for the workshop; she busied herself flicking on the audio distraction to broadcast through the door while Steve carefully put the arena clothes into the trunk they used to store them when not being used or out for repair with Hrhumhuhr.

Without looking up, Steve walked purposefully over to the large table Tony did his work on, and pulled out the piece of wood that formed the arena map, starting to make the little stars he'd been instructed to add where his shield had impacted the force-field during that fight with Killian and Killmonger. Steve still didn't know how it helped, but they'd all told him it did, so all he could do was trust them.

When he briefly looked up, mid-task, Natasha was sat on the edge of the bed, swinging her legs. "So we gonna talk about it or not?"

Steve side-eyed her for a moment and then returned his gaze to the map, diligently continuing to scrape in the appropriate symbols onto the map. "Talk about what?"

"All that kissing."

Steve adjusted his weight from one foot to the other and bent down to examine the map more closely. "It's an act."

"Sure."

"The Grandmaster thinks it makes me more interesting, so we're keeping that up because you say that's important."

"It is important here," Natasha said. "Steve?"

Steve stopped pretending to be absorbed by the map and looked up at her heavily. "What?"

"Are you really gonna do this?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Natasha slid from the bed, her eyes still intently locked to his. "Have you forgotten that I already knew about your little crush on Stark, or are we pretending that for the whole two years we were on the run that you weren't pining like a teenager the entire time?"

Steve pressed his mouth into a line. They'd talked about it once, during that time, and Natasha had made him realize his own feelings, but that had been it. He'd thought that conversation had drawn a line under the topic.

Apparently Natasha wasn't going to leave it alone now. "You know, it was almost painful, watching you carry that damn flip phone everywhere. Even after the Decimation, and we didn't know if Stark was alive or not." She tilted her head. "I'd bet you half of Stark's fortune on Earth that you took it into the past with you too."

Steve looked down, even though he knew that spoke volumes, because he didn't want to see her knowing smirk. Natasha always knew everyone so well, knew how to tear them apart, get to the meatiest secrets. He should be glad she was focusing on this one, not pushing to figure out what happened in his other life, in that other timeline, because he wasn't ready to talk about that one,
Still, she'd scraped him vulnerable and raw with her words, and Steve felt brittle because of it. "So I guess this means Bruce is an available topic of conversation too, then?"

He glanced up in time to see her turn away, getting a glimpse of a dark expression before she started to idly cross the room, her back to him. "There's nothing to say about that," she said, her tone carefully blank. Natasha's tone was never that expressionless unless Steve had touched a nerve too.

"He's single," Steve said, plunging in the knife because she never hesitated to do the same with him. "Or he was when I left a week ago." He twisted the blade. "He's been single the whole time."

Natasha froze. It would probably be imperceptible to most people, because she carried on walking, but Steve knew from the slight moment of tension in her back that he'd managed to hit a sore point too.

"Maybe he's moved on since," Natasha's tone was muted this time. "You did from Stark."

Steve stared at her back. Yes, he had moved on emotionally from Tony, but only because Tony had been gone. Dead. Even Tony's marriage hadn't been enough for Steve to emotionally cut the ties. Tony's death didn't cut those thoughts out of him, but it was final enough for him to lock those feelings down, push them aside to one part of his heart to leave space for someone else. It helped that Peggy had always been there in his affections too. He didn't think it would have worked with anyone else.

"Stark and I," Steve started, because if he said Tony he didn't know what she would read into his tone, "it was—an admiration. I admired him. That's all."

"A crush," Natasha amended. She turned and stared at him, a smirk hovering on her lips. "You had a crush on him."

Steve's cheeks warmed. "Yeah, okay, maybe I did have a crush on Tony," he grudgingly admitted. "But did you have to phrase it that way? Because that makes it sound like I was a sad teenager."

"Maybe emotionally you were."

Steve narrowed his eyes. "I've been here for a very short space of time. Bruce is still single."

"Or he was," Natasha said, sing-song. "Maybe time works differently here."

Steve tensed at the introduction of that potential fact. It was an opening for another of those questions that had been plaguing him.

"That means we need to get out of here as soon as we can," he said, firmly. "How does time work here?"

Natasha frowned and crossed over to him. "Is there any chalk?"

Steve nodded and reached for the drawer he remembered Tony stashing the last chunks of chalk they purloined from the gym. He passed her a chunk and she pushed the map aside.

"So time's still a line," Natasha said, drawing one line across the table. "That's our timeline." Steve watched as drew another line directly underneath it. "And this is the Negative World's timeline," Natasha continued. "Now as far as we can tell, this pocket universe is linked to our chronology."
Because of what Thor went through on Sakaar, Carol told me years ago that the Grandmaster had been sentenced to a hundred years on a prison planet. So as far as we can tell, the Grandmaster came from 2116 and set up shop in the Negative Zone, and locked this place to somewhere near 2008."

Natasha drew an arrow from the end of the top line to the beginning of the bottom one, like that was supposed to help explain it.

"But I thought we couldn't go back in time and change anything, because the past becomes the future," Steve frowned. The time travel they'd utilized to gather the Infinity Stones still gave him a headache.

"Tony and Vision have opposing theories," Natasha said. "Tony thinks this is a branching timeline, only the Grandmaster was the person who branched in, by traveling back to 2008. Essentially the Grandmaster's the hero of the story, and we're side characters."

"So there would be...a different branch of the timeline going on out there where...all of this wasn’t happening," Steve said, slowly. That made his heart hurt. In that timeline, where would he be now? How long had he been here? Maybe it would be a Saturday right now on Earth and he would be teaching in class and Tony and Natasha would be dead, no miracle rebirth, no arena.

"Vision thinks time works differently here, somehow, something to do with anti-matter and the possible existence of anti-Infinity Stones—I really hope that's just a theory. Basically he thinks until the Grandmaster got here, the Negative Zone existed at all times at once. It's a real pocket of anti-matter, anti-space." Natasha gestured wildly like she was drawing a cat's cradle in the air with her fingers. "As he explained it, when the Grandmaster got here, he locked one end of the timeline to 2008, so now it's like the Negative Zone's timeline is a car running on a parallel lane at the same speed as the rest of the universe's car."

"Both theories imply we can get back to our timeline."

"Exactly. There's a Gate somewhere that connects the Negative Zone to regular time and space. And the audience are definitely from our timeline, that much we know for certain now." Natasha grinned. "Sometimes they'll try and get behind the scenes to meet the Einherjar in person, and a few years ago I intercepted one such individual in the ventilation shafts." She answered the unspoken question on Steve's face. "There's a tunnel straight from the worming chamber to the 'inside-genitalia' showers. You can guess what this spectator was trying to see."

Steve grimaced.

"Anyway, Tony and Vision ran some tests on the guy, and that's when we found out for sure that the gate is permanently locked to our timeline now, so we can get home. As long as we figure out a safe way to do it. Which is where we're struggling."

"Because we don't want, say, Hela coming back with us."

"We really don't," Natasha said, fervently. "There's a reason she has hell in her name."

Steve pressed his mouth in a line. "So this gate is permanently locked to our timeline? You're sure about that?"

"Tony says so. And we've seen proof more than once that Tony and Vision's equations are right, based on who comes through and what time they're from," Natasha shrugged. "Obviously Vision has an internal clock that still gives us Earth time, if we need it. Even from personal experience, it
seems to work out. Like I got here a couple of days before Tony did."

"And I got here *years* before that," Pietro said.

Steve jolted, turning to the doorway where Pietro and Tony were stood.

"How long have you—?" Steve blurted, meaning *how long have you been stood there*. His cheeks felt suddenly warm. He didn't notice. They could have come in at any time. Did Tony overhear Natasha teasing him about Steve's crush on him?

Pietro guessed what Steve was trying to ask and failed. "I got here nine years before *this* one showed up," he said, already next to Natasha, rubbing a hand in her hair. Natasha slapped almost playfully at him and he grinned.

Steve forgot his embarrassment as he did the math in his head. Natasha had been here eight years, and Pietro had died nine years before that—Pietro had been in this place for *seventeen years*? "And you've been fighting the whole time?" All thoughts of his own confusion were forgotten in favor for how much that idea hurt. Pietro, alone, for so long, fighting and fighting, no idea that there was anyone out there? How many times had he had to suffer the worms in that amount of time?

"Oh, Captain, don't be sorry for me," Pietro said. "Until Stark showed up, I didn't remember much." He tapped his head, where his own non-functioning Control Disc was embedded. "Mindwiping can be a boon, sometimes." He grinned. "I'm also *really* hard to kill. Ironic, really. I was the first Avenger to ever die, and here I am one of the hardest to kill."

Steve had never actually lingered on that idea too much, probably because the idea of losing one of their own had been impossible to contemplate, once upon a time. But Clint had technically sworn Pietro and Wanda in as Avengers during that battle in Sokovia, so Pietro had been an Avenger when he died, barely ten minutes later.

"Honestly," Natasha said, "you should have seen my face when *this* idiot turned up on the slab three days after me." She thumbed in Tony's direction.

Tony's smile was loose as he rounded the table, pulling over the map to look at it. "She wasn't pleased," he murmured, squinting at some of the marks on the piece of wood.

Steve frowned at Natasha. "You remembered?"

Steve remembered, at least for his first match, but that was because of the nanobots in his blood from the injection. Natasha didn't have that.

Natasha shrugged. "Yeah. We think it was because of the Soul Stone." Her small smile was stiff. Steve could identify with that; he knew now exactly how it felt to throw yourself to your death in order to save someone you cared about. Steve had once bemoaned how difficult it was to find people with shared life experiences, now he regretted ever wanting that. *Be careful what you wish for.*

"Was that the same for you?" Steve looked at Tony, trying not to flinch; Tony had wielded all six stones, after all.


Steve nodded. "Pepper mentioned you'd done something with that, before—" The end of the sentence collapsed inside his mouth somewhere. "She said you'd experimented with it on yourself."
"It was a calculated risk. I knew the odds that we would need to wield the Infinity Stones again were high, but as a baseline human, I wouldn't be able to even stand the power of one Infinity Stone, let alone six. The nanotechnology in my suit helped spread out the impact, but Extremis, in the limited form I narrowed it down to, has a healing factor. Not as good as yours but...inspired by it." Tony looked up at Steve then, an intense emotion in his eyes that made Steve's breath catch. The idea that Steve had inspired something like that made him shiver. "Anyway, that limited form of Extremis...It kept me alive long enough to get the job done. Most of it got wiped out by the worms, but enough remained to keep my memories intact until Vision and I could modify the nanotech I had with me enough to make my memories my own permanently."

"So you only really remember the last eight years too?" Steve asked, turning to Pietro.

"Yep. My first nine years are a blur. But man, you should have seen my face when I got the main bulk of my memories back and realized I'd been saved by this asshole." Pietro blurred around the table to wrap an arm around Tony's shoulders and he grinned at him widely.

"Ah, yeah," Tony whistled through his teeth. "That stung, huh?"

Steve frowned at Pietro calling Tony an asshole. It had been so long he'd almost been able to forget that Pietro and Wanda had both started off hating Tony with an absolute passion.

"It did sting at first," Pietro admitted; he was responding to Tony but was looking at Steve, realizing Steve was the one who really needed an explanation. "But I've had eight more years gifted to me, to grow and learn how to forgive something that wasn't really one person's fault at all." Pietro's expression was solemn. "I heard you know something about forgiveness taking a while."

Steve swallowed hard. The three of them had been together for years. Of course they would have talked about the past. It had taken seven years in the end to patch up the rift Zemo had inspired and Steve regretted that lost time every day of his life.

"Yeah," Steve said, softly. "I know a little something about that."

It was almost nice, that night, with all four of them together. It probably should have been awkward, but it was comfortable, setting into the sand as a four-person dogpile. Steve had Natasha's hair in his face, Tony's arm around his waist, Pietro curled up somewhere nearly his knees. There was a peace to it that Steve hadn't felt in a long time. When he slept, it wasn't entirely without nightmares, but waking up and being able to see and feel them so close...it was reassuring, when the waking world was so impossible to think about for too long.

Steve should have known something nice could never last. The calm lingered with him, as they drifted together to get breakfast; Tony put up the suppression field and the Warriors Three took advantage of it to tell some wild stories of Odin's earliest reign and his adventures against Malekith and the Dark Elves. This part of the situation was okay; it reminded Steve of his favorite parts of World War II actually, lying in some far-off ditch with his comrades, staring up at unfamiliar stars and swapping fantastical war stories.

That was when the routine of the morning changed entirely: with the dissolution of the force-field that separated the Einherjar and Tenebrae sections of the dining hall.

Steve tensed in his seat; Natasha made a quiet shushing noise and Tony de-activated his silence suppression field. It was weirdly silent. Across the room, the Tenebrae looked tense and miserable, exchanging unhappy glances. Several extra bugs filed into the room from either side's doorway,
Everyone looked terrified. Steve's hand tightened of its own volition on his fork, but Tony—always next to him since the showmance charade settled into routine—put his own hand on top of Steve's, getting him to calm and release his grip. Steve looked at Tony and nearly swallowed his own tongue, because Tony looked scared. Really damned scared.

The mood that had been so genial and friendly was gone, replaced by a silent, terrified tension. Steve was in the wrong direction now to easily see how the Tenebrae were really reacting to this, but he could feel the bristling tension from their side of the room.

There was an actual trumpeted fanfare and the Grandmaster swept into the room from the Einherjar doorway. Topaz was at his side, nose upturned as she scowled at everyone from his side. Tony's hand tightened over Steve's. Steve was bewildered. He had no idea what was going on and he hated it.

"My glorious warriors," the Grandmaster announced, dramatically waving his arms. He paused from where he'd entered. "Is no one eating? You should eat. Your boar is delicious. I provided it for you. You should be eating."

Tony let go Steve's hand, avoiding Steve's gaze. Slowly, Steve started to eat, trying not to notice how Natasha's fork trembled as she followed suit. Steve's gaze quirked surreptitiously to the side; even Volstagg was having trouble eating, which said something.

The Grandmaster stood at the top of the room, coughing dramatically until all eyes were on him. "Today, as you can guess, is a Melee day. For my glory, you will battle against my beautiful Champion of Death. Win, and that title—and the riches that go with it—will go to you and up to four chosen companions. Fight and choose well, my warriors." The Grandmaster flung his arms out widely. He stared at the lack of response. "You may clap me, I don't think that's a lot to ask for this opportunity." Steve slowly copied Tony in a perfunctory round of applause. The Grandmaster's mouth fell. "Oh, whatever. Usual Melee rules apply, et cetera, et cetera. Match starts at High Suns."

The Grandmaster swept out of the room, going the other way, pausing to kiss Hela's hand. Topaz scuttled after him, sneering at everyone who caught her gaze. The extra bugs stayed in the room, tridents bristling.

Steve eyeballed them warily. Clearly they were there to bring law and order. The Champion of Death had been a phrase Steve had heard a few times, and each time he'd been spoken of in almost terrified reverence. Steve supposed he had been determined to get answers for his questions. It looked like that was yet another wish he should have been more careful about making.

All the Einherjar moved swiftly, once things started into motion. Yondu didn't even partake in his usual shower routine, favoring getting washed and dressed quickly; he stalked off into the distance with his Ravagers, shouting at them as he moved. Steve followed Tony and Pietro on auto-pilot as they stopped by Pip's room to retrieve Steve's shield and ax, and for Pietro to pick up the spear he wanted. Hrhumhuhr started to chastise Steve as soon as he appeared at the Costumer's doorway, until Pietro muttered that it was a Melee day; as soon as Pietro said that, the twelve-eyed yellow bug seemed to shrink down, and Hrhumhuhr handed Steve his mended shirt without a single complaint.

In the workshop, Natasha was already dressed, and she was sitting cross-legged on the bed, determinedly focusing on styling her hair; Pietro blurred into his own clothes and clambered up so he could help her. His fingers were slow in her hair; it seemed to be a ritual that soothed both of
Tony immediately made a beeline for his worktop, yanking out Vision while Steve tied to quickly get dressed into his arena costume, his eyes carefully lingering on what Tony was doing, in case Steve needed to help. Or if he could learn anything about what was making everyone so very scared.

"Did you need to disturb me?" Vision looked disgruntled when Tony put him on the worktop and opened the box up wide.

"It's a Melee day, Vizh," Natasha said, sharply, from where Pietro was still intricately braiding her hair.

Vision immediately widened his eyes; both eyes moved to stare at Tony. "Plug me directly into the power," he demanded.

"Keep all your focus on the force-field," Tony said. He glanced over at Steve, his expression considering. "We have vibranium this time. Maybe that's literally the missing element from our equations."

"Will do," Vision said. Tony picked up Vision's box and set it gently on the floor, doing something with a mess of wires.

Steve tried to focus on getting changed, but the tension was too much and too sharp to ignore. He slammed his shield down on the floor, louder than he meant to, and tried not to look too embarrassed when Tony, Pietro, and Natasha all looked at him warily.

"Someone's going to need to tell me what's going on," Steve said, proud that his voice held steady. Proud that he wasn't screaming, because that's what the atmosphere felt like it needed. "What is a Melee?"

"For the Melee, we go against the Champion of Death," Pietro said, dropping his hands from Natasha's hair. His voice was monotone; his face carefully expressionless. He stared into the distance, apparently unable to meet Steve's gaze. "If we can take him down, we all get to live. If he defeats us, one Tenebrae and one Einherjar are chosen."

"Chosen for what?" Steve asked. His voice was automatically soft, a whisper, even though he didn't remember making the active decision to do that.

"Not to be revived," Pietro said, finally meeting Steve's eyes. "It's based on an audience popularity vote. If they don't think you're entertaining enough, you don't get revived."

Steve stared at him in horror. Why didn't they tell him sooner? That must be why they were so desperate for him to be interesting, if there was some sort of popularity vote. Why couldn't they just say that? He opened his mouth to ask that.

"If we said it, it made it real," Natasha interrupted. When Steve moved his gaze to look at her, she looked almost apologetic. She also looked small, her shoulders hunching in a way to make her body as compact as possible. Steve stared. Who was this Champion of Death to terrify Natasha Romanov so easily? What had happened to them to make someone like her this scared? "You should be fine. We should be fine. We're popular. And now with your showmance—" he could hear the finger quotes in her voice, "—you're safe, too. There's nothing to worry about."

Her words might say that, but her entire body language was screaming something else.
"If we don't fight, they vote for more of us to permanently die," Pietro said. He was still managing to use a matter-of-fact tone, somehow, even if the tension in his shoulders implied he'd rather be screaming right now. "We tried it once, and it—it didn't go well."

Steve nodded. He wanted to ask more, curiosity pushing him to ask for details, but his friends were clearly traumatized. He didn't want to ask them for something that could—would—hurt them to give.

"It's not like the Battle Royale," Tony said. He was wearing his armor now in its fullest, most protective form, except the faceplate was up. "We work with the Tenebrae, not against them. The Champion and his people are our only enemy." His eyes lock on Steve's. "We will die. Don't kid yourself on that front. That's all this is." Tony looked away, apparently his bravery quota spent. "A bloodbath."

Steve swallowed hard. It wasn't like he'd expected much else from the tension. "This whole thing is barbaric," he muttered, instead of pushing for further details.

"Captain," Pietro said, immediately at his side, an arm going around Steve's shoulders, "you're not going to hear any arguments from us."

By the time the Avengers got there, nearly all the Einherjar were already assembled in the Cold Room, standing nearly shoulder to shoulder.

Steve shuffled in past the bugs, giving their tridents a wary eye. When Steve glanced at Guillotine, shuffling next to him in her red cloak and her demonic sword, he expected her to look away with discomfort, but she simply looked back at him sadly with a shrug.

"Battle well, Captain," Guillotine murmured, her French-Algerian accent rumbling in the small space.

Steve nodded, his throat dry. Gamora was the only Einherjar not there. He tried to recall if she'd had a battle yesterday. He didn't think so, but then his focus had been fairly insular, distracted by the insistent need for answers to the more persistent questions in his mind. A lot of them had been answered, but he still had many more questions. Perhaps later, after this battle, if enough of them survived whatever this Melee battle entailed.

He was frustrated, not to have answers, but whenever he felt like protesting that, he recalled how scared Tony, Natasha, and Pietro looked and his frustration fizzled out.

"Stay behind me, Einherjar," Odin barked, as the bars lowered and the force-field blocking them from the arena disappeared. The bugs crowded in behind them, clicking menacingly, chasing them out rapidly.

Steve watched the others carefully as a guide of how to react. There was no peacocking this time. No waving to the riotous crowd. When he looked around, the arena was clear. No obstacles in their way. No buildings to navigate. No spears to land on. Just the sand. At the opposite end of the arena, the Tenebrae were emerging too, but with none of the aggressive swagger Steve had come to expect from them. There was no force-field bisecting the arena in half, only the force-field overhead, and when the Einherjar met the Tenebrae they all turned to face a door in the arena wall at the far end from them.

There was no in-fighting. Pietro was stood next to Taserface; when their gazes briefly met, there was no teasing or fighting words. Everyone's gazes were trained on the same large doorway.
Steve's heart was pounding as the cheering in the arena pitched up to a deafening level, and a moment later the giant doorway opened and four figures emerged. He knew those figures. He knew them. His fingers tightened automatically on his shield and his ax. He knew them.


The group Steve knew as the Children of Thanos.

"The Four Stooges," Pietro murmured, and Steve bristled as he realized he'd heard that term before, a couple of times, but everyone had been so evasive when Steve wanted to know more about them, and was this why?

Behind them, Outriders started piling out of the gate too, forty, fifty, sixty of them. They were larger than Steve remembered. He was beginning to have the sinking feeling that they'd undergone the worms too, which meant they would be tougher than the ones Steve remembered. He blurred them out and stared at the four distinctive figures, because right now, they seemed like the thing to worry about.

Ebony Maw had his long, thin arms crossed over his chest, not even bothering to stand in a fighting stance. Cull Obsidian tossed his massive hammer easily up and down like it didn't weigh sixty tons. Corvus Glaive gracefully spun around the pike that made him nearly invincible. Proxima Midnight walked confidently, her lance leaving a trail in the sand as she stalked forward toward the edge of a line that had been drawn in the sand before they got there.

"Which version of them is it?" Steve asked, keeping his voice low, because it somehow felt that mattered. He looked at Tony's profile desperately. Tony was in full armor, the faceplate down, his entire pose screaming fight.

"Not the dusted ones," Tony said, after a pause, his mask trained on Ebony Maw; Steve remembered Tony had been the one to take him out originally. Steve desperately tried to recall how they had been beaten. Cull Obsidian had been defeated by Bruce, who'd been in the Hulkbuster armor at the time. Proxima Midnight had needed Wanda's immense power to be subdued. Corpus Glaive had been taken out by Vision.

Steve realized the four figures lying alongside Kaecilius in the worming chamber the other day must have been them. He cursed himself for not looking closer at the time.

He took a deep breath. This was a shock, to be sure, but it wasn't that awful, if he broke it down into those constituent memories. What it meant was that they could be defeated. That was a comfort, even as Steve's skin ran cold at the idea of fighting them again.

Then he almost had to laugh. Not because it was amusing. It was hysteria, plain and simple. Because the doorway behind the Four Stooges was massive, and it was still open, and the Champion of Death emerged from that shadowy depth, and Steve forgot how to breathe for a suffocating moment.

Of course.

Of course.

The worms could bring anyone back from the dead.

Even Thanos.
"Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath:

The horror! The horror!"

_Joseph Conrad—Heart of Darkness_

Steve woke up as himself briefly, covered in worms. He vomited profusely and tried to make a break for the door, tumbling from the slab and crawling. Pain washed through him. His limbs wouldn't carry him and someone was lifting him back up. He screamed again. He had to get out of there. He had to get to Tony.

"Put me down." Only one of Steve's eyes was working. The world was a blur. He thought it was a cyborg of some kind holding him, metal arms pinching around open gooey wounds stuffed with writhing worms. "I have to—I have to get—the Avengers—I have to get home—I have to—"

"Noooo," Grhengrh muttered, rushing over to Steve. "We mussst ssstart again. Thisss one issss broken. Ressset, yesss? Makesss him more compliant."

Broken made sense. Steve convulsed, aware of something pressing him down, cold metal, hard claws, biting pain that rolled over his body, and then he went into that dark space, where everything was quiet, even the restless thoughts that were busy screaming him down into the darkest of voids.

The Captain woke, hours after that, and almost panicked, because the pain was bad, the pain was so bad and he couldn't remember anything. What was he even the Captain of? The Avengers. Who were they? They were the group of warriors that the Grandmaster had provided for him to fight with. Yes, that made sense. He existed for the glory of the Grandmaster.

The pain was beyond describing and he opened his mouth to scream.

"Don't ssssspeak," a voice hissed and the Captain obediently silenced, even though he didn't think he was the kind of person to follow orders. He must be wrong about that.

His skull felt like it was going to explode and there was a stabbing pain in his eyes when he tried to open them the first time. He counted to a hundred and then tried again, blinking rapidly. Each blink was a sharp stab of agony. Eventually his eyes were able to open fully and his vision slowly sharpened from a blur into details. A dark room.

There were worms amassed on his chest, on his legs, on his arms. Everywhere he could see, there were worms on him. Big ones, small ones. Different colors. It felt like they were biting him, or spitting up inside him, or rattling around in his organs. Maybe they were doing all three. It hurt so badly his newly-opened eyes were weeping.
By the time he could sit up, worms falling from him to the floor, the Captain was beset by a terrible itch. He wanted to scratch his skin off. When he tried, a pair of gray claws pinched around both of his naked wrists and a large gray face with multiple pairs of eyes loomed into sight.

"Don't ssscratch," the gray bug warned.

The Captain nodded, because when he tried to speak, fresh flames of agony rolled through his body. He looked down at himself in rising horror, realizing the worms were rebuilding his wrecked body. It was disgusting and the pain was still beyond words.

He could see several other empty slabs around him and a large tank in the corner, containing several worms. An orange bug was standing against the wall, nearly seven foot tall, holding a trident in a sharp claw. A cyborg that resembled the bugs was rolling around, making a whirring noise and sweeping up large amounts of worms, stranded on the floor, twitching.

The Captain looked back at the gray bug. "You're the lassst," the gray bug said. "Ssstubborn." The gray bug looked over at the orange bug standing against the wall. "Ssshow him to the dining room. It'ssss time for breakfastss." 

Trying his best not to scratch, the Captain dutifully followed the orange bug down the hallways. The orange bug was muttering about not being paid enough to be a babysitter.

A blue bug served him a plate of meat and said, "You're welcome!", snickering like it was some sort of a joke. The Captain stared at him blankly and the blue bug made a crackling, musical sort of noise.

"He got hisss disssc ressset," the orange bug murmured. "Defective."

"Ah, sssad. He wasss funny." The blue bug stared at the Captain. "What'ssss wrong with him?"

"Ssssame as the ressst," the orange bug shrugged. "Flessshy."

"I'm glad I keep my inssside on my inssside where it belongss," the blue bug offered. "Go, eatssss your meat, Captain. Makesss you ssstronger. Maybe you will be back to tell me jokesss sssoon."

The Captain stared blankly and the orange bug gestured at the tables. "Sssit and eat. Sssoon will sssee if you are to fight today or not."

The Captain nodded. There was a man with bright platinum-blond hair looking up at him; his smile was disturbing, though, so he sat down in the nearest free seat, opposite a dark-skinned woman in a hood who glanced at him and pushed her mouth into a grim line. That suited the Captain better.

The Grandmaster's emissary came by at the end of the meal to hand out envelopes. The Captain didn't get one and he tried not to look too disappointed. He wanted to honor the Grandmaster. Fighting honored him. The Captain would have to train hard today, so his body would be ready to fight and die for the Grandmaster's honor. That's all he wanted, wasn't it? There was something else, pulsing at the back of his mind. Something more important. He couldn't latch onto what that important thing was.

Platinum-Blond gave him another strange look as they filed out to the showers. The Captain washed and dressed, averting his eyes from all the strange sights in there; the blue-skinned man pleasuring himself, the living tree looming in the corner, their King surrounded by four men who all looked immensely sad. Perhaps they too were not allowed to fight for the Grandmaster's honor today.
"This way," Platinum-Blond said, as the Captain filed out of the room, and the Captain made to protest, until an attractive man took his other arm.

"This way," the attractive man said.

"Will it please the Grandmaster if I follow you?" the Captain asked. Both men seemed vaguely familiar. Were they the Avengers the Grandmaster had provided as his fighting companions, perhaps? That felt right.

"He'll be psyched," the attractive man muttered.

The Captain nodded and placidly followed them. He didn't think too much was going awry until they got into a large room and the Captain found himself pushed into the wall by a force he didn't even see coming.

"Hold him down," the attractive man said, hurrying away to grab something.

Platinum-Blond pushed his face near his and hissed, "Hold still."

"This will hurt," the attractive man said. "Sorry, Steve."

The Captain opened his mouth to protest he wasn't Steve, he was the Captain, and then something was jabbed sharply into his neck, hard, and there was a brutal wave of agony, and then Steve's memory thumped painfully back into place.

"Shit," he said, the curse slipping out as heartfelt and ardent as anything else Steve had ever said in his life.

The memories of the last few minutes before his latest death landed fully in Steve's mind and he didn't know what to do with himself, whether he should scream or cry or throw up. He wanted to do all three.

It had been bad. Bloodbath barely covered it. Thanos was even larger than he had been before, stronger and unhinged. The worms had worked on him too and that was terrible.

No wonder they were being so careful with the escape plan. Escaping wouldn't be viable if it meant there was a risk of letting Thanos out with them. Better the Negative Zone stayed locked away, with Thanos and the worms inside. Even if that meant being trapped in with him forever too. Tony had already proved himself willing to die to save the universe from Thanos; why wouldn't he be willing to live in order to accomplish the same?

The battle had been beyond imagining. It was pure slaughter. Steve had been caught up with Cull Obsidian's giant weapon, barely managing to fend him off until Tony's Uni-beam hit against Heimdall's blade, before ricocheting off Steve's shield; the force-field around the arena had shuddered as that reflected beam splintered across it like a spray. That distraction had been enough for Steve to wrench himself out of the way of Cull Obsidian's giant, mutating hammer. But Thanos caught sight that Tony's armor had been the cause of that distracting uni-beam and he'd gone on a rampage against Iron Man, those giant purple fists flying, and Steve had seen one glimpse of Tony's half-shattered mask and had seen red.

Steve remembered screaming in sheer pure agony. He remembered going berserk, like an animal had gotten control of his body, and he'd gone screaming straight at Thanos, yelling at the top of his lungs, anger coursing through his blood, more angry than he'd ever been in his entire life, angrier even than the worst moment of his stolen life in another timeline, when a small body was in his arms, and his hands had been covered in too much blood.
Thanos was an unfair nightmare, a terror they'd already put down. Tony had died to make sure of it, and now he was here, alive? And treated like a King, if the Grandmaster's words before the battle were to be believed. The sculpture of Thanos in that Battle Royale museum suddenly made more sense, too.

Steve pressed his mouth into a firm line and counted his own breaths. "Why didn't you tell me?" His brain was a rolling fire. Was it revenge because Steve had sat on the information about Tony's parents until their whole world combusted? He looked up at Tony. If that was the reason, Steve knew he deserved it. He hated everything as he waited patiently for Tony to snap that back. Sometimes even an apology couldn't stop the way resentment corroded relationships and trust. Some things were too big to apologize for.

"Because he's the bogeyman." Tony huffed a noise that could have been a laugh, but it was sour and had a hint of hysteria to it. "Say his name and we can't live in denial anymore." Tony's eyes landed on Steve's then and there was a wild hopelessness to them. "When you got here, it was a chance to pretend, for a little while, that this wasn't impossible. That we weren't trapped in a nightmare."

Steve returned his gaze sadly. "But we are." Nightmare was the only word to describe it. It wasn't fair. If Steve was on his own, it might be another matter entirely.

Tony grimaced and looked away. "I didn't want to see your face when you understood."

Steve swallowed and echoed Pietro's words from earlier. "That it might be worth it to stay here forever, if it means we get to keep the monsters here with us."

Pietro smiled at him sadly for that.

Then something else occurred to Steve. "Where's Natasha?" he blurted out, panic rising in his throat, almost choking him, because one of them wasn't going to make it back, one of the Einherjar was supposed to be voted off so the worms couldn't bring them back, and oh god, what if it was Natasha? What if Steve's presence had diverted votes to him that should have been hers?

"She's okay," Pietro hurried to say, realizing where Steve's brain has gone. "We're all okay, Captain."

"Steve," Steve said, his voice unsteady. "You should call me Steve. Besides—I'm not Captain America anymore. Someone else is."

"Who the hell could they find to replace you?" Tony demanded instantly.

Steve glanced at him. "Sam Wilson."

"Oh." Tony's ire melted away. "Yeah, okay. Solid choice."

"Some people didn't agree," Steve grimaced. "If Nat's alive, so who didn't make it?"

He glared at Tony and Pietro fiercely, because if he didn't he might cry.

"Volstagg," Pietro's voice trembled. "Of the Warriors Three. And the Tenebrae lost Ellen." His mouth stretched into an unamused, chaotic smile. "Guess the audience got tired of her blowing herself up every battle."

Steve bowed his head and closed his eyes for a long moment. Volstagg. Steve hadn't known him for that long, but he could easily picture his smiling, bearded face and his kind voice and his warm
laughter. How could he be gone? The worms were a miracle, they could keep bringing someone back forever, why would the Grandmaster do this? Bring them back, only to reverse that decision on a selfish, cruel whim? For *entertainment*?

This was a nightmare. One Pietro, Tony and Natasha had been trapped in for years, always having to fight their best in order to be entertaining, always with the anvil hanging over their heads. No hope of real escape. The fact that they were still here, still fighting, was such a massive sign of their strength.

But Steve's appearance hadn't been a sign of hope to them, a symbol that escape was maybe near. He'd been a sign of *fear*. What if the Avengers were able to open the gate on the other side? What if they unknowingly let Thanos out?

Steve looked up at Pietro and Tony, but apparently his despair was too clear on his face.

“Maybe it *would* have been kinder to leave him blank,” Pietro said. Steve's despair shifted into horror.

"No," Tony said, shaking his head. "We need each other. It's not impossible to get out of here. It's just going to be tough. Since when do we shy away from the highly improbable?"

"Not as often as we should," Steve muttered.

Steve didn't see Natasha until it was time for bed. She was escorted into the room at trident-point, her face pinched and strained.

That night, Steve could barely tell where he ended and the others began. As soon as the light dimmed, they huddled together. Natasha clung onto Pietro like a limpet; Pietro carefully helped lower her down to the ground by dropping down with her to his knees, whereupon she yanked Steve in with one hand so he was cuddling up against her back, and manhandled Tony in too so he was almost lying on top of them, and there was a mess of arms, too many limbs, but it still worked somehow. Natasha trembled, not crying, not sobbing, just *shaking*, and their arms around her seemed to be the only thing that could soothe her.

Tony's silence suppression field had to work overtime. Steve was glad at least that he wasn't the only one woken by his nightmares going hyperactive. He was vaguely aware that he was shouting as he woke up more than once; the hands holding him gripped tighter in response. Someone was crying at some point in the night, because Steve woke up at one point to a wet shoulder.

In the morning, it was like the previous night hadn't happened. Natasha was back to being a zombie, her face almost blank. She queued for food only when Steve and Pietro carefully nudged her there and she carried her plate back to the table fine, but when she sat down, there was nothing happening.

At least this felt somewhat familiar, somehow; Steve sat next to her and gently moved her fork from the plate to her mouth, coaxing her to eat, telling her with a soft voice that everything was going to be okay, reminding her to chew and swallow every mouthful. Even though Tony kept the suppression field up, she didn't speak a word.

There were no battles announced, supposedly normal for the first full day with everyone healed post-Melee, and Steve was glad for it. He frowned when the bugs still came to lead them to the showers, though, worried that Natasha might try and drown herself. He wasn't scared she would actively try and kill herself, but he'd seen too many people in this state before. She might just not
get out of the way of a threat in time.

Sadly, he didn't think the bugs would help. He cast around, desperate for another solution, and as they started to file out of the dining room after the bugs, he made his choice.

"Gamora," Steve said, his voice louder than he might like.

Gamora turned to him, her pretty eyes wide with confusion that someone was talking to her.

"Nat's having a bad reaction to the battle we last had. Could you do me a favor and see that she doesn't drown in the shower?"

Gamora squinted at him. "What makes you so sure that I'd do you a favor?"

Steve held her gaze. "Call it a hunch." He lowered his voice. "Next Battle Royale, you get a free hit on me."

Gamora nodded, tersely. "Fine."

Tony watched him carefully but didn't say anything.

Steve showered fast and Tony and Pietro followed suit, although as soon as they were dressed, Pietro muttered about needing to run off some excess energy and blurred off toward the training room.

"That's normal," Tony reassured Steve.

Tony and Steve hurried out to wait for Natasha in the hallway.

Gamora emerged with her minutes after. Natasha was only halfway in her clothes, the material bundled around her arms, her sandals knotted and looped around her neck.

"Best I could do," Gamora muttered. She glared at Steve. "Remember your promise, pink-skin."

Steve nodded tersely as he quickly tugged at her clothes so she was covered.

"That was a dumb thing you promised her," Tony muttered.

Steve looked at him. "Only one of us can survive a Battle Royale. I'm holding no illusions that death isn't going to be an old friend by the time all this is over."

Tony looked back at him wordlessly for a moment before ducking his head and leading the way to the workshop.

Once they were in the workshop, Tony started busying himself with something that looked very complicated. Steve knew this was part of Tony's after-everything ritual. His restless monsters were always on the numerous side, and working seemed to block some of them out. They all had their own coping methods. Steve's coping method of choice was to pulverize innocent punching bags and run until his lungs quivered like he was ten and asthmatic again.

Natasha was beyond the reach of her coping strategies right now. All Steve had to do was make sure she survived long enough for time to numb the overwhelming feelings, for her to remember how to survive without help. Sometimes things were too big to survive alone.

Steve led Natasha over to the bed, talking to her softly the whole time, reminding her that she was
safe and they were all going to be okay. He put the sandals aside near the door and guided her to climb up onto the mattress, let her curl up under the blankets, and he stroked her hair until her breathing evened out. He carefully pulled himself away, making sure she was definitely still asleep, and watched her pensively for a long while.

It wasn't good to let her sleep continuously, but a couple of hours uninterrupted sleep could help. He would stay nearby, in case she woke up.

"How is she?" Tony asked, his voice carefully low. He didn't look up from what he was working on.

"Well, right now she's asleep," Steve said. He looked over at her, checking her breathing was still rhythmical. "Probably good for her, as long as we don't let it go on too long."

"Every time this happens, I worry that I'll have to get her wiped." Tony stared at the circuit board he was working on, like he wasn't even seeing it. "She won't fight, she won't train. She just stands there and—" He inhaled sharply, like he was the one getting stabbed. "I don't think she'd forgive me, but—I can't let her die." His gaze was fierce when he looked up at Steve. "I won't let it happen again."

"We'll do whatever it takes," Steve said, firmly. "That was always the vow."

Tony nodded, his face tight. Whatever it takes had led them all down a too-weighty path; remembering it was too much, even now, so Steve wasn't surprised when Tony looked away again, because Steve was having trouble maintaining eye contact with him too. Whatever it takes had taken Tony and Natasha from him last time. But it was the oath they had made together, and Steve felt bound to it still.

He would get Tony and Natasha home. He had to. Steve still meant whatever it takes with his whole heart, but all he could do was hope that if this time someone was due to pay the ultimate price of an irreversible death, that it was Steve's turn. No matter how Tony would feel about it. He'd have Morgan, and Natasha, and the other Avengers. Tony had to be okay. Steve wouldn't be okay with any other outcome.

"Most vows usually include until death parts us," Tony said. "That means a little less, here, I suppose."

"Does it?" Steve rubbed at his chest absent-mindedly. Thanos had torn his heart out with his fist, this time around. Talk about some emotions literally being made manifest. "Seems like even the deaths here come at a cost."

"You're good with Natasha," Tony murmured, doing something complicated with a soldering iron, squinting like he was overly critical of the output. "You've done something like this before," Tony surmised.

Steve looked around the room. There weren't many chairs. He settled for sitting on the trunk with their arena costumes. It was a good place to sit and watch Tony work. "Seen a lot of it in the trenches," Steve shrugged, leaning back against the wall, watching Tony through half-closed eyes so Tony might not realize Steve was staring. It was a difficult impulse to resist. Tony had been living solely in Steve's dreams for so long that it was hard to reconcile the truth, that Tony was alive. That he'd been all along. That Steve had given up and thrown himself into another timeline, unaware that he should have been home all along, figuring out how to get them back. So many of Steve's restless monsters were called regret and they multiplied.
"Well, at least we should be glad we're not wriggling around in the dirt."

"There was more skulking around forests than anything else. Hydra seemed fond of hiding their bases deep in the woodland."

"Like the rats they were."

"That's mean to rats," Steve said. "That aside, I hope I am good with her. I owe Nat more than I can say."

Tony's mouth pushed into a regretful line. "We all do."

"Well, there's that. But also, she did the same for me. After the Decimation—I didn't exactly handle it well for the first few days. Hadn't—hadn't really lost before, y'know? And I thought—we didn't know, until we got the signal. I thought we lost you too." Steve lowered his gaze to his own hands. "She shook me out of it. So I'm gonna shake her out. It's what family does for each other."

"I like that," Tony said. When Steve glanced up, he was holding one of his tools, not really using it. Staring at it like he wasn't even really seeing it. "Sometimes it feels like this is all that's ever been. That everything before now was a dream. That this is all there is."

Steve was up and on his feet without thinking about it, and holding Tony's hands in his own. "We will wake up from this nightmare, Tony."

Tony nodded, looking at their joined hands instead of saying anything else. That spoke more volumes than had he said anything at all. Tony was sometimes at his loudest when he was quiet and right now Steve could hear him clearly. They were in agreement. They had to wake up. Staying asleep wasn't an option, not if it lost them Natasha.

There must be a way to destroy Thanos and the worms. There had to be. They needed to come up with a plan.

Hope wasn't a plan, but it was all Steve had right now.

There were fewer nightmares over the next night and Natasha managed to eat half of her breakfast without prompting.

Unfortunately, their entire table got envelopes that morning.

For the Warriors Three (Warriors Two?), it would be their first battle in a long while without Volstagg; Heimdall had been chosen to battle with them, against Nebula, Taserface, and Ronan.

Steve opened his envelope with a sigh. Split Suns, so a later battle, and he, Natasha, Pietro, and Tony would be facing Kaecilius, Killian, Ivan Vanko, and Malekith. The last name was the one that made him hesitate. He'd seen him fighting, now. Killian he wasn't too worried about, although he would probably be out for revenge after how soundly Tony and he had defeated him in their last battle. Kaecilius was tough, but at least Steve knew how to predict those portals of his. It was an advantage, even if it was only a small one. Vanko wasn't a villain that worried him either.

Malekith was a different story.

Malekith the Accursed was strong, durable, fast, and apparently had a healing factor that meant he needed to be taken down quickly. He'd also once wielded an Infinity Stone with nothing to ease the burden, just his own strength. He was old, too, older than Thor, so he had thousands of years of
experience over them, many of those spent in various wars. He was skilled in close and far combat.

"We should train," Natasha said. It was probably her first lucid words since the Melee.

Steve should have realized he shouldn't have taken that to mean she'd snapped out of her catatonic state. He'd _wanted_ it to be true so badly that he didn't question it. Not until they'd stepped out onto the arena sand together. Tony zoomed up into the sky to salute the crowd. Pietro ran in circles, sending up little dramatic sand tornadoes; the crowd seemed to like his new weapon—two short swords that he twirled to an appreciative roar.

Steve geared up to do his becoming-usual tumbling entrance when he noticed Natasha was standing in the sand, staring blankly ahead of her. She blinked, the wind tossing the loose hairs that hadn't made it fully into her braid. She wasn't moving. Steve's heart sank in his chest. He'd seen this before, a couple of his men getting too close to the abyss, not being able to shake it in time for the next fight.

Even at the worst point after the Decimation, she hadn't given up so clearly before. Neither of them had.

Steve swallowed hard. They would have to cover her. Cover for her. Survive this match and then work like hell to snap her out of it. They couldn't risk her going down in audience popularity, especially considering they'd have to face Thanos again at some point, because the monster really was inevitable.

"With me," Steve said, putting his shield in front of both of them, wrapping his arm around her thin shoulders.

They were fortunate to have an interesting layout to work with, a different version of the layout Pietro had described as pasta what felt like eons ago. It meant Steve could use one of the blocks as an extra defense, keeping Natasha behind him.

Pietro seemed to be targeting Malekith, who had enhanced speed and agility, just not to Pietro's dizzying standards.

Killian was bearing down on Tony and so was Kaecilius, the two tag-teaming him. It didn't seem to be happening in absolute synchronicity, so it was probably not an agreed-upon strategy. Steve should be glad that it was just one foe for him to handle, especially if he was going to have to cover Natasha too, but his ego was a little bit dented that only Vanko had deemed him a potential threat.

Vanko clearly remembered that Steve had taken him out quickly in their last match and he spat in the sand as soon as his gaze met Steve's. The message was clear. This was a grudge match.

Steve's ego meant nothing. He had to keep Vanko's attention on him, distracting him from noticing that Natasha was out of commission. That was his priority now. Everything else was secondary.

Most of the fighting was happening on the Tenebrae side of the arena and the large line of blocks would keep Natasha out of sight from Killian, Kaecilius, and Malekith for now, if Pietro and Tony could keep them occupied.

Moving quickly, Steve gathered Natasha closer to him, gripping her by the elbow and leaning in close, like he was muttering strategy to her. He backed them up until they were close to one of the large blocks before putting his back to her and striding forward, meeting Vanko's stare with a defiant one of his own.

He couldn't make it obvious from the start he was leading Vanko away from Natasha, but it was
forefront in his mind.

Last time, Steve had been able to hit Vanko when he was completely unprepared; this time, Vanko's whips were already extended and crackling. If Steve threw his shield, Vanko could smack it away. If Steve threw his ax, Vanko could deflect it, because there was no way that Steve could obfuscate his intentions at the moment.

The whips were limited in distance, so being close to the blocks would limit Vanko some. If Steve didn't move soon, Vanko would be too close and Natasha would be in danger. He had to move, quickly. Before it was too late and Vanko had all the advantages.

Steve had to hope Vanko would stay fixated on him. He couldn't protect Natasha from the whips if he stayed static. Considering the lengths Vanko had gone to try and get revenge against Tony, Steve thought he must be the grudge-bearing type. Glaring at Vanko, Steve broke into a run, adjusting his grip on his shield and ax as his feet kicked up a torrent of sand in his wake.

Vanko smirked on seeing Steve's approach. Steve desperately tried to keep his face expressionless, he fought to keep his body as straight as possible so he wouldn't be telegraphing the direction he intended to go. Running directly at Vanko without turning would be too dangerous; Vanko would have too much time to calculate where to lash out with his whips. Vanko's whips had a devastating range, but they also took time to deploy.

Taking on Vanko with Natasha would have been much easier. Taking him on to keep him away from Natasha might have been possible, if it had only been the three of them on the arena sand.

It was a combination of problems, all at once. Tony had driven Killian to the point of explosion. Occupied by deflecting Vanko's relentless alternating whip hits, Steve had been unable to keep Natasha where he wanted her. It took him one moment to see that Natasha had started to wander out into the sand, and another to be able to act to respond to it. Steve backed up and away from Vanko, managing to dodge the whips long enough to cover Natasha and himself with the shield. He only just managed to protect them both from the flaming chunks of Killian's Extremis explosion.

When Steve looked up, Vanko was advancing toward him with a wide grin, having realized his weakness. Steve grit his teeth and had to grab Natasha's arms, looping them around his waist so she was plastered to his back. This took one of his arms out of action so he reluctantly dropped his shield edge down in the sand and held out his ax in his spare hand like a staff.

He was able to fend off two hits, but the third whiplash cracked around Steve—and smacked right into Natasha.

She didn't cry out. Steve couldn't hold onto her as she became a limp weight along her back, falling to the sand. The smell of her scorched flesh hit the air, and Steve cleanly lost sight of all reason.

It was probably a dumb idea to pick up one of the whips directly in his hand as it was traveling mid-air, but Steve wasn't actually in his right mind. It only vaguely occurred to him that this was his own poor way of responding to trauma when the sharp whip bit hard into his hand and the electrical charge shuddered through him.

His own burning flesh was the overwhelming scent that followed, but Steve was too lost in his madness to make the smart move; he clenched tightly onto the whip, even as the electrical surge finished, and he yanked. Vanko clearly wasn't expecting anyone to do something so foolhardy and his chest flickered as he geared up to run a charge through the whips again, and Vanko was already lashing out with the second one, but it was too late; Steve took the butt end of his ax and rammed it into Vanko's face, shattering his nose. Blood gushed everywhere as Vanko's attacks faltered. Steve
efficiently flipped the ax and brought it down on Vanko.

This time it was the sharp head of the ax and the blood spray was more than that of a broken nose, but Steve didn't have time to linger on how disgusting it was. He would have at least liked to have had time to lie Vanko's body down with a modicum of dignity.

Instead, he ended up having to kick Vanko's body to get it loose from his ax blade, sending even more blood and guts flying through the air, because he needed it. There was only the slightest pre-warning, but it was enough; Steve's quick movements meant he had his ax in place to block one of Kaecilius' wicked curved blades.

Steve barely had time to turn around, pick up his shield, and crouch down to block Kaecilius' next portal attack. Kaecilius had noticed Steve was fighting with a handicap. Steve could handle the portals, but Kaecilius hadn't learned solely magic from the Ancient One; her discipline and teaching had apparently included incredibly intricate and intense martial arts training too. He was almost more vicious once he wasn't relying on his magic to come at Steve.

He gathered Natasha to her feet as he blocked Kaecilius' attacks, taking a couple of brutal kicks to his back for the privilege, and deliberately fell back against Kaecilius' onslaught of brutal kicks and hits.

He had to. Protecting Natasha was taking it out of him. Steve had to change his approach. Once they got closer to the blocks, Steve made his move.

"Crouch down," Steve hissed at her, pushing her down. Natasha did dully crouch down, pulling her head between her knees, and Steve pushed his shield into her hands, so she was able to crouch down in the corner of the building, like a little turtle with a red, white and blue shell.

Steve might not have his shield now, but it wasn't a crutch; he could fight without it. While he couldn't say he'd had a lot of ax training—he'd had enough to be confident with it—he'd had more quarterstaff training courtesy of Captain Britain, so when Kaecilius detached the metal head of the massive ax with a deadly scissor kick, smirking at that accomplishment, Steve didn't hesitate.

Without the head, the pole was more balanced, and easier for Steve to control.

Kaecilius had planned for Steve to hesitate, so he was rattled by the blow Steve landed right under his chin; Kaecilius tried to recover, but he was too shaken, and Steve was still seething with leftover anger from facing Thanos on this sand. On top of that, he was almost shaking with rage, because Kaecilius had seen Natasha's suffering and taken advantage of it.

Someone who didn't fight ethically didn't deserve a reserved death.

The best way to protect Natasha wasn't defense. It was a strong offense. Steve didn't hesitate for a second, brutally smashing with his pole, landing blow after blow without pause. Even as he caught Kaecilius solidly around the head, spinning him to the ground, Steve didn't stop hitting him, beating him bloody, beating him even past the moment of death.

Steve breathed hard as he finally stepped back. He was covered in Kaecilius' blood. He snarled, turning on his heel, wondering who else he could take his rage out on.

His view of the battle was a blur for a frustrating moment. Steve hauled in a burning breath and his vision focused in time to see Tony hitting Malekith with a repulsor blast to the back of his head. Something still thrumming excitedly through Steve's veins resonated with that, celebrated it, yes.

Steve's gaze moved over to the corner of the arena where Pietro was still trying to help pen
Malekith down. As Steve shook blood from the ax handle, readying to stalk over and join the fray, Malekith managed to hit Pietro, sending the speedster skidding over the sand.

As Pietro spat sand out and tried to get back to his feet, Tony flew in closer to help him and lifted his faceplate, grimacing over at Malekith. Malekith smirked back at Tony, a wicked curve to his mouth that made a chill run down Steve's spine.

That chill did something to Steve, somehow disrupting the adrenaline and bloodwrath pounding through his body; with that interruption, pain started to flood through him instead. Steve glanced down at his burned hand; the agony of it was more sobering than Steve would like. It left him more aware of what he'd done. The control he'd lost. Again.

Natasha. He was supposed to be protecting Natasha. He looked back to see Natasha getting to her feet, holding the shield unsteadily in front of her. Steve doubled back to return to her side, trying not to be too frustrated he'd left her alone. He hadn't left her unprotected and he'd taken out the closest threats to her. He hadn't let her down.

Steve had to discard his blood-stained ax handle in favor of taking his shield back from Natasha. He put the arm with his injured hand around her shoulder and held up the shield so it would cover both of them. He couldn't leave her again, but with all four of them still standing, Steve didn't think that was something he needed to worry about.

Malekith seemed unconcerned that he had four opponents all now headed his way. He stayed where he was, tossing a dagger easily from one hand to the other. That confidence was unsettling.

Tony had doubled back to help Pietro get to his feet; Steve adjusted his and Natasha's pace so the four of them would meet up before they reached Malekith. As soon as they did, Pietro swooped in and pulled Natasha to him, putting her easily on his back. She looped her arms obligingly around his neck. Pietro nodded at Steve grimly and Steve took point with Tony, matching Tony's stride as they kept moving toward Malekith.

As they walked, Tony collapsed his armor down to its smaller form, his face showing a determined expression. Steve had thought before that it was a dismissive move, designed to rile up an opponent, you are not worth my full attention; Malekith seemed to take it as such as his expression darkened sourly.

Tony drew to a stop, ten paces away from Steve, and Steve mimicked him. For a moment they stood strong, shoulder-to-shoulder, glaring in cool unison at Malekith. Tony twisted one hand and a blade shot out of his right gauntlet; Tony caught it easily and swung it. Steve was caught briefly by the flash of the spear-like weapon, remembering briefly how it felt to see it the first time. How it felt when Tony stabbed it into him, with that blank expression on his face.

*Sine Missione*. All their gladiator battles were without mercy. And this time, it was Malekith who was going to suffer. Steve realized Tony was looking at him, like he was waiting for something. He quickly glanced back to see Pietro was looking at him too, expectantly. Steve returned his gaze to Malekith and returned the dark elf's smirk. Buoyed by the feeling of strength that came from having his teammates with him, Steve knew exactly what Tony and Pietro were waiting for.

"Avengers," Steve called out, staring Malekith down coolly, "assemble."

The crowd adored it. Three Avengers, protecting their fourth, working together to take down one villain? They were reacting like it was the best match they'd ever seen. By the time Pietro had Malekith in a chokehold as Steve swiped out his feet and Tony sank his spear right into Malekith's
heart, the crowd was screaming at a deafening volume.

Steve had to admit, he almost felt good, standing with his team fully intact as the victors, until he remembered his lack of control taking down Kaecilius.

"Aren't you going to rip your shirt off?" Tony murmured out of the side of his mouth as he saluted the crowd.

Steve held up his wrecked hand. "Having a little trouble."

"I can help," Pietro said, lowering Natasha to her feet; a blur and the sound of torn fabric later, Steve was standing shirtless, having to resist the urge to thump his face into his burned and bloody palm. Tony waggled his eyebrows and Steve dutifully roared to the crowd.

When he was done, Tony was looking at him blankly, and Steve was confused until he remembered the showmance angle. But instead of kissing him, Tony put his hands carefully on Steve's wrist and pressed his mouth to the heel of his injured hand, carefully missing the actual injury. Steve stared at him wordlessly. The crowd seemed to love that tenderness as much as anything else.

"Let's get this seen to, Captain," Tony's voice sounded strained, still holding Steve's wrist gently, like he was something fragile. Something precious. Steve swallowed, a lump in his throat. He just nodded.

Natasha refused to get treatment for her whip burn, so Tony and Pietro took her back to the workshop, while Steve's hand was too wrecked for him to avoid going to the worming chamber. Ghrenghr was already fussing over the four Tenebrae. Steve had to avert his eyes as worms were tipped over Kaecilius' too-bloody corpse. The bloodlust had calmed in Steve, leaving him with a headache and the sharp pain of his mangled hand.

Ghrenghr shuffled over to Steve after the worms were busy on the Tenebrae, making Steve sit on the edge of one of the slabs. Ghrenghr peered at the wound, mandibles clicking. "Jussst three wormssss, should sssoort you right out."

Steve had thought it might be easier to undergo the worms for such a small injury, but it was almost worse being awake and conscious to watch the process. He grit his teeth as the pain washed through him. He'd take holding Vanko's live and crackling whips for an entire day before he would consciously choose this again. The pain wasn't any less, just because he wasn't dying.

Once Ghrenghr let him go, Steve had to fight hard not to scratch his hand. It was also hard not to stare at it. He did what he had to as quickly as he could, desperate to get back to Natasha; he barely paid attention to the actual mechanics of his post-battle routine, only to spare a brief thought about how weird it was to have a post-battle routine.

When he took his shield and broken ax to Pip, Pip shook his head sadly and informed Steve he might have to use the ice pick again for the next fight, if it was soon. The idea that they might be battling again quickly made Steve's stomach feel cold and hard. If Natasha was called again, and she still was in that catatonic state, it would be difficult to keep her alive.

When he got to the workshop, there weren't any dubious noises being broadcast from the door—only the vague sound of hammering. Steve pushed open the door to see it was Tony was alone, working on his armor. Well, he supposed that made sense; there was no need to dissuade anyone from coming in to the workshop if Tony was doing what he was supposed to.
Tony looked up briefly and resumed hammering at a large piece of metal.

Steve closed the door behind him.

Tony continued hammering for a few blows but then stilled. He didn't look up at Steve again, but he was obviously aware of Steve's presence, in the tenseness of his shoulders.

"Nat?" Steve asked, trying to keep his voice low.

"Pietro patched up her burn and then took her to the outside gymnasium. Thought some sun might do her good." Tony stared down at his work, like he wasn't seeing it at all. "It wasn't like this in the beginning. First five years, she was fine. But then—"

Steve's gut tightened. Five years had been the moment everything changed the last time, hope arriving in the unlikely form of Scott Lang and his time-bending van. For that time to pass and nothing to change, no hope to arrive—it must have broken something in her. At least post-Decimation she had other things to occupy her; organizing the entire group of Avengers, and helping with her projects to make sure children left alone after the Decimation had somewhere safe to live. Here, even though she had Tony and Pietro, there was nothing but fighting, and losing people, and pain from the worms.

"I hoped you being here, it might be different." Tony shook his head. "It's not."

"I'm sorry," Steve breathed. It was never nice to realize he wasn't enough.

Tony sighed and put his hammer down, abandoning the pretense that he was working. "I didn't mean it like that."

"It's okay."

"It's not," Tony's voice was fierce and he looked up at Steve and Steve almost recoiled. Tony looked awful. Their lack of sleep since the Melee had taken its toll, but beyond that, Tony was allowing himself to look desperate. Steve looked on as calmly as he could. If Tony needed to fall apart, Steve would support him.

"I can't keep watching her go through this," Tony said and just snapped, slamming his hand into what he was working from, smashing metal to the ground in a clatter. "I can't." When Tony pulled his hand back, he grimaced; he'd hurt himself doing that.

Steve pressed forward to take his hand, to check it for himself. He didn't trust Tony to accurately gauge his own injuries.

"We need to get this bound up," Steve said. "Do you have any bandages in here?"

"There's an old tunic in the trunk you can probably tear up," Tony muttered, acquiescing to the fact he needed it. There was a weird tone in his voice when he said, "I suppose you can rip it with your bare hands, huh?"

There was an undercurrent to the words Steve didn't quite understand, even if it made him feel a little warm regardless.

"You were right to press for answers," Tony said, as Steve started to rip strips from the brown tunic loitering at the bottom of the trunk. "We need to get out of here. I don't know if I could bear to see Natasha like this again. And I can't lose her." He looked up at Steve, fiercely. "I won't lose her again."
Steve nodded. He understood. He felt Tony's wrist gingerly, checking for the points where he inhaled too-sharply, and began strapping it up. It felt like a mild sprain.

"You make a cute nurse," Tony said, "anyone ever tell you that before?"

"I've been told." Steve grinned briefly as he focused on winding up the fabric to best support Tony's wrist, the motions to create the binding almost second-nature to the hundreds of times he'd bound his own wrists over the decades.

Steve had been a fragile child who could never resist fighting bullies; instead of telling him to back off, his mother simply taught him how best to cope. She knew asking him not to fight would have been trying to erase the entire core of his character. Tony's hurt was a minor injury, but Steve's own hand still itched; he didn't even want to think about subjecting Tony to the pain of the worms for something so mild. He wanted to kiss Tony's wrist, as softly as Tony had in the arena, but they didn't have an audience, so he didn't have a good enough excuse. He settled instead for gently testing the bandage with a stroke before letting go and stepping back.

Tony immediately began to clear up the mess; he picked up the metal from the floor while Steve rescued Tony's tools. Tony then started to sort through a pile of circuit boards. Steve eyeballed the soldering iron warily, wondering whether it was smart for Tony to be near something that could so easily burn him in the mental state he was in right now. At least Steve could step in if it looked like injury was a risk again.

"You don't have to hover," Tony said, finally picking out one of the circuit boards to work on. "I'm fine."

"Maybe I'm not," Steve admitted. He really hadn't acted with a level head in the arena.

Tony glanced at him briefly. "I forgot how good you were at pretending you were adapting quickly to new situations."

Steve flattened his mouth into a line. Tony wasn't wrong. Steve was good at fooling himself. He thought he'd adapted fully to the future, until Tony and Natasha weren't there.

"How long does this go on for?" Steve asked, settling back to sit on the trunk. He might be good at pretending some things, but he couldn't deny to himself that right now all he wanted to do was watch Tony. "Natasha's fugue state."

"It feels longer every time," Tony admitted. "Never longer than three days. But—"

"But what?" Steve pressed. It wasn't good for Tony to bottle everything up. Maybe he'd felt he had to, with Pietro and Natasha to protect, but Steve had always felt like he and Tony were co-leaders of the Avengers in their time, despite what Tony said about only being there to 'make them look good'. "You're not alone now, Tony. I'm right here."

Tony exhaled like he was thinking about answering. Steve waited, patiently watching. Giving him the space to talk if he needed to, not pushing him any further than giving him an opening.

"It's difficult—I get it," Tony said. "I get why she closes herself in, shuts herself up inside her own head. I get it. Sometimes in the middle of a fight, I think about giving up, letting them kill me." He paused and cocked an eyebrow at Steve. "Aren't you going to ask me why?"

"Do you want to tell me why?" Steve asked, keeping his tone bland, even. Nonjudgmental.

Tony huffed. "Because I want to lose," Tony stared back at his work like it was endlessly
fascinating. "Just for those couple of hours on the slab before the worms kick back in."

Steve hated the thought of that. He'd never be okay with the thought of Tony being dead, so Tony being okay with the idea was a gut punch he almost couldn't handle. "Why?"

Tony’s expression was agonizing. "Because that moment—after darkness, before the worms—my thoughts are still. No thinking. No worrying about how we're going to survive, or if Natasha might never snap out of it, or if my daughter's okay, or if I'm going to be able to protect the Earth from who knows what else is out there."

“Tony,” Steve said, helplessly, hating everything that Tony was talking about. Tony never stopped thinking, never stopped working.

Death was the only time Tony's restless monsters slept.

Tony's gaze lifted up and locked with Steve's. "You know who the monster at the end of this book is now. You know what we have to do, to leave this place."

Steve took a ragged inhale. He understood what Tony was saying. "We can't leave until we figure out how to kill Thanos. Permanently. Kill him, and kill every single worm."

Tony stared at him, like he wasn't sure Steve fully understood. "You know what that means, though."

"No one comes back." Steve nodded tensely. "I get it."

"We'd be destroying the one thing that everyone who's ever lived would want," Tony said, his tone deceptively mild. "Eternal life. No death that could stop you. Immortality."

"Part of the journey is the end," Steve said, quoting.

Tony's eyes darkened. Those were his own words, from his very last video. Did Tony realize it had been played at his funeral?

"We can kill Thanos," Steve said. He took an uneven breath. It was difficult to admit everything he'd seen, everything he'd been through, but he could be strong and talk about some of it. Steve had to push aside the part of him that wanted to keep his stolen life private. This would help Tony. He was sure of it. "I've seen it done."

"Yeah, with the Infinity Stones," Tony said, dismissively, and then he froze, realizing what Steve's intense gaze meant. "Not with the stones," he realized. "You went back to the forties."

"I did," Steve said, mildly.

"And one of the first things I would do with a universe I knew had Thanos in—would be to put things in place to stop him.‖ Tony's eyes were intense as he stepped around the worktop to move closer to Steve. "How did you do it?"

"It wasn't me, so much," Steve said, "I—"


There was a fierceness to Tony's voice and expression. An old torment, probably, wondering if there had been some way to avoid his fate. Some way he might have been able to see his daughter grow up after all.
"It took the full time," Steve said, wanting Tony to be sure there was no easy fix. "Decades of meddling."

Tony exhaled shakily and nodded, like it was a relief. "You insinuated yourself into SHIELD."

"Made sure to root Hydra out from the very beginning," Steve's voice hitched. "No Winter Soldier."

Tony's gaze was hard. "Good. Good."

"Thor went for his head from the start," Steve said. "Due to some...secret SHIELD intel."

"So the head is probably going to be the key again," Tony nodded. "No, this is good. This is really good."

"It took nearly seven decades of meddling," Steve said. "How is that good?"

"Because it's proof it can be done." Tony looked up at Steve fiercely. "We were already close, so close, and now we have something we've never had before."

Steve squinted at him. "An alternate timeline anecdote?"

"You. And hope." Tony squinted back. "And a vibranium shield."

Steve smiled tightly. Hope wasn't a plan, but it would be defeatist to say that out loud. He opted for a response that would at least keep hope alive. "With that combination, how could we lose?"

Tony opened his mouth to say something else, but he caught sight of something and pushed his mouth into a line. "Dammit."

Steve followed his gaze to see that the bar over the door was pulsing, an ugly shade of orange flaring up insistently.


Steve startled, too-slowly remembering the premise that gave them their privacy in this room, and then he was moving, because he knew how to take an order. He threw his clothes off to one side, not caring where they fell, kicking off the leather sandals as he hurried over to climb onto the bed. It was soft. It was too soft. Urgency pushed most realization out of his head, the adrenaline to maintain the cover taking priority in his head, so Steve didn't really parse what was about to happen until he turned over and looked up to see Tony standing shirtless by the side of the bed, an intense expression on his face.

"Gotta make this look good," Tony muttered. His eyes locked directly on Steve's, the question obviously clear on his face.

"Stay right there," Tony murmured, before smoothly rolling onto the bed in one graceful movement; he straddled Steve easily, like it was something he'd done before. Maybe in battle, Steve thought, using those strong thighs to pin an enemy down. Steve swallowed at the sight of it. Tony's mouth was flat, like he was trying to be expressionless, but there was a gleam of something in his eyes that looked like triumph. Like victory.

Steve glanced over his shoulder; the light above the door pulsed three times and blanked. Steve's eyes moved back to Tony's, the question obviously clear on his face.

"Gotta make this look good," Tony muttered. His eyes locked directly on Steve's and Tony smirked as he moved his hands to take Steve's wrists. There was a brief touch of cold metal against the soft skin there; Tony wore a simple thin metal bracelet on one of his wrists. Steve supposed it
must be the silencer Tony was always operating.

The surprise of the touch made Steve go loose and pliant; Tony looked almost surprised when Steve let him grip his wrists tighter, pushing them down in the pillow, maintaining the illusion that Tony could pin Steve down. Or maybe his surprise was because the motion loosened a noise from Steve's throat, a noise that surprised Steve too.

Tony had been through the worming process a lot, Steve could see enough of his body now to see that. Tony's physique was defined before his trip to Titan, his body compact but powerful, but no one would have said he was in the same league as Thor and Steve until now. Now Tony's muscles were impressive, straining with every swift movement, his skin golden from years of training in the outside gymnasium, tanned from hundreds of hours of exposure to the Negative Zone's double suns. He'd been beautiful before, and still was, but like this, Tony's attractiveness was almost unreal.

"Every time I catch sight of you, it makes me wonder if I'm dreaming all of this," Tony murmured, looking down at Steve. "Makes it seem more like a dream than a nightmare."

"Maybe this is a nightmare," Steve said, that particular worry forever lingering.

"Doesn't feel like one right now," Tony said, and Steve began to say something in response to that, but Tony stole the words right from the source, stopping his mouth with a kiss that Steve could feel through his entire body.

Something happened in that kiss. Whether it was Tony's fingers on the most sensitive part of Steve's wrists, or it was the way Steve had gone pliant beneath him, somewhere in there Steve forgot this was an act. And he thought maybe Tony did too, because after Tony pulled away from that first, brief kiss, he ducked back down for another one and everything quickly went warm and pleasant.

The world narrowed down to heat and friction. Steve moved by instinct, dizzy with it; he was surrounded by Tony, the noise and taste of him. Their naked skin slipped together with a thrill of friction; Steve's body was buzzing with adrenaline. Tony kissed like he talked, earnest and frantic, like Steve was scrambling to keep up the whole time, and when Tony's hands slipped down, Steve tried to turn his gaze away in embarrassment, because he was hard.

"Sshh," Tony murmured. "You're not alone." He used his own cheek to force Steve's face back, to make him look right at him. "I'm right here."
It was Steve's own words to Tony, from only minutes before, and Steve stared back, uncomprehending, until Tony pressed down, carefully, and Steve made a noise he thought he should be embarrassed by. Tony kissed him, kissed the noise right out of his mouth, and started to move against him, rhythmical, heated; the matching evidence of how affected they both were by this moment caught together in the rocking undulations, again and again. Steve's skin felt like it was on fire, but in a completely different way from how the worms made him feel.

There was white noise in his ears, and Tony's kisses surrounded him, and Steve knew if they kept this up that he wasn't going to last long; his thighs tightened around Tony's hips automatically, slowing him down, because it was happening too fast, and maybe this was another bad way of dealing with trauma. Steve should slow this down, stop it, but he felt like he was on a runaway freight train, and the only thing that could stop them now was—

The Grandmaster cleared his throat loudly and it was like being doused with ice water. Except not exactly like being doused with ice water, because Steve was still embarrassingly hard. He couldn't help but flush, even as Tony pulled away seemingly without a hint of self-consciousness to tug up the sheets on the bed way too belatedly to really disguise the indignity of being caught like this.
"Apologies, Grandmaster," Tony chirped, settling back down next to Steve and smirking like he wasn't sorry at all.

The bugs chaperoning the Grandmaster had all their multiple eyes focused to the ceiling and honestly, Steve did not blame them.

"I'm sorry to interrupt what looks like a boatload of fun, wow," the Grandmaster said. "I came by to—your redheaded friend's not here, is she?"

"She should be at the outside gymnasium," Tony said. "If you want to wait I'm sure she'll be back soon." He smiled, showing too many teeth. "You know us. Constantly horny."

The Grandmaster's eyes dipped knowingly and Steve tried to surreptitiously move so his knees were tenting the fabric across them, hiding any sign of his still-lingering arousal. He mentally blamed the fact that Tony was still sitting so close and tried to calm his breathing, exhaling slower than he inhaled, trying to get himself back under control.

"I thought it would be a good time to stop by and have a chat," the Grandmaster said. "It's easier without the Widow here. Look, it's cute that you humans are so fragile, I dig it, some of our audience likes it, that's why they're here—they like the shock when your squidgy, pathetic bodies manage to miraculously survive. I mean personally, me, I'm a fan—it's the audience—they're not really digging the helpless zombie act of hers. There've been complaints—not from me, naturally, I love it—that she's not fun to watch at all. And I know how happy it makes you to have all your possibly available Avengers here."

"It's all that I want from life," Tony said, his voice carefully monotone. "That, and pleasing you."

"Of course you want to make me happy," the Grandmaster waved imperiously. "I'm a joy to be around. And it's important for me to make you happy too. Anything I can do, just say it."

Tony arched an eyebrow. "Don't suppose exempting us from the audience vote and giving us a permanent pass to live counts as anything?"

"Ha, you're such a joker," the Grandmaster laughed at his own words.

"Everything you provide is more than generous," Tony said.

The Grandmaster beamed. "Great. Absolutely great." He patted the end of their bed cautiously, like he was scared it might fall apart, or he might get germs from the brief touch.

"Of course, if any new Avengers cross your path," Tony said, in a fake casual tone, "I wouldn't say no." Tony nodded in Steve's direction. "The Captain's stamina has always been difficult to keep up with."

The Grandmaster frowned heavily but nodded. "Consider it done, my Iron Man. You know I love to keep you happy." He turned to go, the bugs with him snapping gratefully to attention, already hurrying to the door, but he paused to look back at Tony and Steve contemplatively. "Just get the Widow to perk up a bit would you?"

"Will do," Tony said, overly chirpily.

As soon as the door closed, Steve froze. He was faintly aware of Tony doing the same, next to him. They stayed like that for an extended moment, until Steve couldn't help the bubble rising up inside him and he started to laugh.
It was infectious. Tony burst out into helpless laughter too, leaning his head onto Steve's naked shoulder, shaking with the release of noise.

"Oh man," Tony muttered. "His face." He leaned back on his hands, looking up at the ceiling with a grin before glancing at Steve. "Your face," he added, his gaze dipping deliberately to Steve's mouth.

Steve felt caught by that intense gaze. "What about my face?"

Tony's grin warmed into something else. "It's right there." He leaned in. "Really close to my face. How about that, huh?" Tony's voice was soft, like a confession. "You missed me. You said so."

"Tony—" Steve said, low and a warning, but he didn't really want to be warning Tony away, and Tony seemed to realize that, because his smile didn't falter.

"We're already in bed." Tony shrugged, making the sheet fall further from him. Steve's eyes caught on the expanse of golden, clear, unmarked skin. Tony saw him looking and his smile widened. "Maybe we shouldn't waste it?"

There were reasons that they shouldn't, Steve thought vaguely, although he couldn't for the life of him remember what they were. Maybe it would help if he could look away from Tony. They might have gotten into the bed to continue a pretense, but a lot of what had happened on it hadn't felt faked. This moment didn't feel like they were pretending, either. Steve lifted up his hand, almost like it was moving of its own volition, and Tony's eyes fluttered half-closed in anticipation of the touch, and the door opened.

Steve shot away immediately, jolting in shock, suddenly remembering one of the reasons why he and Tony shouldn't get close and intimate on the bed right there and then. Mostly because while the door had a clear alarm for intruders, Tony's system didn't count any of the Avengers as intruders.

Pietro's eyebrows were currently making a bid to escape into his hairline at the sight. Steve met his gaze challengingly, like he'd done nothing wrong. There wasn't anything wrong with what had just happened with Tony, not really. Except if anything like that was going to happen, it should involve communication first, and discussion of boundaries, and Steve might also have to stop being the human personification of an exclamation mark, because he'd never considered Tony might even consider any sort of relationship.

The kissing until now had felt incredible, of course, and Tony hadn't shied away from their pretend romantic connection while they were on the arena sand, but there was no good reason for Tony to respond to Steve's inappropriate bodily reaction to their tumble on the bed.

Except it had been years for Tony since he was last intimate with anyone. Maybe Steve was the first available warm body. Erections happened, sometimes with the slightest provocation. Maybe it didn't actually mean anything. Steve's body finally managed to calm down at that thought. Steve needed to lock up those moments into his mind, shelve them away to think about later. It was probably a combination of post-trauma adrenaline and years worth of loneliness and a longing for home.

"The Grandmaster stopped by," Tony said.

"Uh-huh," Pietro said, in a semi-disbelieving tone.

"Wanted us to make sure—we were all happy," Tony quickly changed what he was saying when
he saw Natasha was standing dully behind Pietro.

"Right," Pietro said. He waggled his eyebrows. "Seems like you two were very happy."

Tony rolled his eyes, even as Steve tried his best not to die of mortification.

Natasha was still blank the next morning, but thankfully Steve and Tony were the only Avengers to get a fight assignment. It was an early one, against what the paper designated a Devil Hydrasaur and ended up being what looked to Steve's untrained eye like a T-Rex. It was a large foe, and Steve only had the ice pick to work with, not his giant battle ax, but it was a good enough weapon for the job. Tony ended up dropping him from up high onto the creature's head and the pick went quite cleanly through the skull. Steve toppled from the creature, but Tony caught him, and kissed him mid-air to the sound of screaming.

Tony grinned the whole way off the sand. He barely tempered his grin around the bugs as they dropped Steve's shield and pick with Pip and deposited the now-part-of-the-routine ripped shirt off with Hrhumhuhruhr, but as soon as they headed to the workshop, Tony's grin returned.

Steve had a bit of a headache from the double suns of the arena. "What's that grin for?" he asked, as soon as they got into the workshop.

"Might have been that romantic smooching," Pietro said, from where he was lounging against Tony's worktop.

Tony's grin did somewhat waver. "Get Maxim-off my worktop, Gonzalez." From the face Pietro pulled, this was a common complaint. He narrowed his eyes. "You were supposed to be keeping an eye on Natasha."

Pietro thumbed at the lump on the bed and Steve sighed. "We watched your match and I zoomed us back here as soon as it ended." He eyeballed Steve. "The shirt ripping really is a nice touch. Almost makes me wish I wore a shirt to my fights." He pursed his lips. "Maybe I could rip my shorts off when I win? I mean, I go commando, but—I'm okay with that."

"How about Tony explains why he's been grinning since we left the arena," Steve folded his arms.

"I saw someone with a camera," Tony said, sing-song.

Steve straightened. "Do you think they're the bootlegger who got the footage out before?"

Tony shrugged. "I got a good scan of the device they were using. The audience member we kidnapped said they only got scanned coming in, because what illicit tech could they pick up here to smuggle out? So if they got a camera in—"

"They should be able to get it out," Steve said. He grinned too. "So the Avengers will get proof I made it in here safe."

"Bingo," Tony made finger guns with both of his hands, then looked dubiously at his own gesture. "I think it's good news." His gaze flickered to where Natasha was lying, unmoving. "It's giving me hope, anyway."

"Perhaps I can add some hope to the situation too," a quiet voice said.

Steve frowned in confusion, until he remembered they were never alone in this room. And then he blushed, feeling very relieved Vision spent most of the time in his box. Although how much could
Vision *hears* when he was in it? Steve thought back, trying to figure out if he’d made any embarrassing noises while in bed with Tony.

Unaware of Steve’s rapidly ascending embarrassment, Tony pulled Vision up and onto the worktop. There were still cables running to Vision’s neck.

"I forgot to unplug you, I'm so sorry, Vizh," Tony murmured, in the kind of soft tone that Steve had heard him use on the robots in his lab.

"It gave me the boost I needed to calculate the readings from during your Melee match." Vision twitched. "I'm sorry. I know the Melee is not a topic any of you enjoy hearing about."

"Don't worry about it, Vision," Tony said, obviously resisting looking over to where Natasha lay, still curled up and silent.

"Thank you. I won't." The corner of Vision’s mouth lifted. "I believe the Melee barrier has a weakness."

Steve didn't understand everything that was going on, that was for sure, but those words sounded encouraging.

"They use a different kind of barrier during a Melee battle," Pietro explained, suddenly by Steve's side instead of kneeling by the bed. "That's why they have to spread the Melees out, because they have to store up enough power to shore up a force-field strong enough to keep Thanos inside the arena. They're as terrified of him as we are."

Tony stared intently at Vision. "Explain what you mean by weakness."

"There was a stutter during the energy readings," Vision said, "approximately ten minutes into your match. I have been analyzing it thoroughly because it was so unusual."

"When your uni-beam collided with my shield and Heimdall's sword," Steve swallowed, thinking about it. Heimdall's sword had been the key to the Bifrost, so maybe it made sense that there was some unusual cosmic radiation still in the blade.

"Something about the combination of Vibranium, energy and exposure to dimensional travel…" Tony blinked several times. "I'll need to analyze his sword."

"I'm sure we could lure him out to do some sparring with my shield," Steve frowned. "How often are the Melees?"

"Usually every forty days or so," Tony pulled a face. "Depending on ticket sales, from as far as we've been able to gather."

Steve nodded. "Plenty of time to try and organize it so Heimdall and I can get near the force-field together."

Tony wrinkled his nose. "There'll probably be a couple of Battle Royales before the next Melee. We can probably test the same combination versus a regular force-field."

"From my readings, I'm afraid the key might be that particular force-field," Vision said. "I'm fairly positive with the right energy input into the same combination, it would cause a backlash big enough that we can disable the entire force-field."

Tony exhaled roughly. "Which would give us maybe twenty minutes until the back-up generators
locked down the whole Negative Zone."

"We'd have twenty minutes to escape?" Pietro whistled.

"If we know we can also get the gate open within that time period," Tony frowned. Steve could tell he was already working through calculations in his head. "Well, we knew we'd have to defeat Thanos and destroy the worms within a short deadline. A Melee gives us an increased crowd to work with, too, though."

"Extra chaos could be exactly what we need," Pietro shrugged. "I can clear a path through unarmed civilians, I'm not beyond stacking them into a wall for the bugs to get through." He grinned, an almost macabre expression. "I think if your idea of fun is watching people die, that maybe you deserve the risk of getting a little bit stabbed."

"You're not going to find an argument here," Tony said.

"I'll keep running the data," Vision offered.

"Thank you, Vizh." Tony smiled at him. "Appreciate that. Do you want to go back in your corner?"

Vision blinked twice, which was apparently a nod, because Tony winked back, smiled, and gently shut the door, carefully putting it back on the floor, making sure the cables were still attached.

When Tony straightened again, he looked at Steve and Pietro seriously. "This is more than we've had for a long time. But we can't get carried away. This is good. This is hopeful. But we need more information, we need to do more research. It doesn't mean there's nothing we can do while we get that."

"We need to work on the main problem," Steve said. "Thanos."

Pietro grimaced.

"I take it he's never been defeated since coming here," Steve said, slowly. At Pietro's cautious nod, Steve relaxed. "So he's only been wormed once."

Tony pulled a face. "Ugh, and we can barely touch him, with that once."

"I felt we got closer this time," Pietro offered.

"And it means we definitely need to be able to destroy the worms immediately afterward. Immediately." Tony's gaze and tone were hard. "We can't risk him getting stronger. And we have to make sure our plan is flawless, first try. We'd be punished for any escape attempt, and we can't guarantee any of us would be re-wormed. Maybe none of us. The Grandmaster could wipe everyone out and start picking his warriors from other races."

Steve pursed his lips. "Who has their memories? So I know what we're working with."


"Groot's cleverer than you'd think," Tony said.

Steve raised an eyebrow at him. "You count as barely anyone?"

Tony shrugged elegantly. "It's his voice connections that make everything he says sound like 'I am Groot'. Once you listen close enough...sad to say, Rocket was right about me only being smart in
Earth terms." He glanced sideways at Steve. "If you tell anyone I said that, I'll deny it."

"Well, we need more than a tree," Steve said, "no matter how clever he is."

"I know that look," Tony frowned at him. "You have an idea."

Steve tried not to look too pleased that Tony could read him so well. "Gamora."

"Oh, hell no," Pietro breathed.

Steve grimaced reluctantly. "She's our best shot at him."

"She's a demon. With a blade." Pietro reconsidered his words. "A demon might be nicer."

"We want to destroy Thanos, we need as many people with their wits about them as possible." Steve shrugged. "She'll have had her memories back at some point, right? Nat did, with the Soul Stone. But she's still here, still fighting, and her sister is still alive. If she'd misbehaved. Nebula would have paid the price, isn't that how it works here?"

Tony frowned, like maybe it was the first time he'd thought about it. "You really think Gamora is trustworthy?"

Steve shrugged. "I think she would be a good asset. I trust her judgment. As soon as she knows it's to defeat Thanos and that her real timeline's Nebula is still out there—I'm sure of it."

Tony inhaled sharply. "Okay."

"Okay?" Pietro stood hands akimbo, his mouth slack. "Didn't I cover the part where she's a demon with a sword?"

"I trust Steve's judgment," Tony said, softly. "He's right. We can't do this alone." Pietro fell silent and Tony stared directly at Steve. "Anyone else you might trust with the truth?"

"Yondu, maybe," Steve said. "I don't know his people, but I've heard enough about him that if we spin enough tales of Quill, he might be on our side."

"Might?" Tony pressed his mouth together. "That's a risk."

"We could kill him if he takes it badly," Pietro said.

Tony stared at Pietro like he'd never met him before. "Excuse me, rewind, try that again?"

Pietro shrugged elegantly. "Wouldn't be the first time I've killed a man and claimed self-defense for him impugning my honor." He side-eyed Steve. "A physique this slender… couple of Hydra goons thought me twink-tastic, tried their chances. Regretted it."

"From what Yondu does in the shower every day, people would believe that," Steve said. "But we don't need to necessarily awaken him now. Just at the final battle. Gamora... I'd rather wake her earlier. We need to get stronger. Which means—"

"We need to die a lot more," Pietro said, grimacing. "Because the worms make us stronger."

"So that's our plan for now," Steve said, consolidating it so he had a better grip of what they needed to do. "Try and recreate the moment in the Melee battle with my shield, your uni-beam, and Heimdall's sword. Die dramatically as often as we can so we keep audience votes in place but still get wormed so we're as strong as possible. And try waking up Gamora."
Pietro snorted. "Well, when you put it all together like that, it almost sounds easy."

Tony had said Natasha was never blank after the Melee for any longer than three days, so when Steve woke up on the fourth day to Natasha's expressionless face, he nearly punched the nearest wall. Steve had developed some coping methods when stress reared its ugly head, but it wasn't like he had easy access to a sketchbook in here, or a long run in quiet woodland, and he couldn't be like Yondu, taking himself in hand with an audience.

Steve felt fidgety, like his skin was too tight, like he'd only recently been wormed so he was itchy all over. None of those things were true, it was psychosomatic. Steve felt like he was going to implode so much that he barely concentrated through breakfast, thank goodness for Pietro having it more together, because he focused on getting Natasha to eat.

The mysterious source of his dread seemed to finally make itself obvious when Topaz appeared and deposited envelopes in front of Steve, Tony, and Natasha. Pietro didn't get one. Steve's stomach sank in dread. Natasha wasn't up to a fight. Not today. Pushing his mouth together unhappily, Steve opened his envelope, and wanted to scream.

"Match: SPLIT SUNS. TAG TEAM BATTLE. BLACK WIDOW, IRON MAN; THE CAPTAIN; GAMORA; LOKI versus YON-ROGG; ALDRICH KILLIAN; TASERFACE; NEBULA; RONAN THE ACCUSER. 5X5 Battle to the DEATH; VICTORIOUS TEAM WILL BE SPARED."

With Natasha like this, it was basically a four-on-five fight. And with their attention on her...it was going to be a bloodbath. It was probably a good thing they meant to die, but they needed to keep dying on their own terms, while putting on a good show. The audience might not vote happily for losers, but losers who put up a fight probably drew more admiration than victors who won in a boring manner.

Steve exhaled. Gamora would fight full-force. It was always possible she might win. But if she had her memories, would she want to, or would she agree with them that a dramatic death—and the following worming, to make her stronger—was the best plan toward escape?

"We could try waking Gamora up now," Steve kept his voice low even though the suppression field was up, mostly because he wasn't keen on inviting in the opinions of the Asgardians at the other end of the table. He knew enough of Thor and Valkyrie to know they were a very self-reliant race of warriors; they wouldn't be keen to invite someone else to the party, let alone someone with such a solid connection to Thanos.

"That's probably a good idea," Tony said, glancing up from his envelope to stare across the room at her speculatively. "If it goes wrong, all I have to do is imply to Ghrengrrh that I heard her shouting things during out match that she shouldn't know and she'll be wiped clean again."

Pietro templed his fingers together. "That makes me calmer about the idea," he admitted.

Steve nodded. "I'll approach her after the shower. Ask her to the workshop. Plan B, I'll see where she goes, we can corner her there?"

Steve cornered Gamora after the shower and was shoved into the nearest wall for the privilege. He grimaced as he saw Pietro and Tony carefully usher Natasha off toward the workshop. At least Natasha was fully dressed this time. Steve supposed that was progress. His heart ached at the idea that this time maybe Natasha wouldn't snap out of it. Maybe they'd already lost her. Maybe once
more he was too late.

He shook himself. Worrying didn't solve anything.

"Not you again," Gamora sighed. "If you bother me again, I won't care that we're supposedly on
the same team for our battle today, I'll rip you apart in the Cold Room before we even get on the
sand."

"I wanted to talk to you regarding that favor you did for me the other day," Steve said. "I'd like to
actually make it up to you right now, if you'd let me." He held her dubious gaze. "I'll still let you
stab me in the next Battle Royale if you think it's not worth it."

Gamora narrowed her eyes. "If this is a trick, pink one, I will gut you with my teeth while you
sleep."

Instead of flinching, Steve nodded. "If it was a trick, I'd let you."

Something in his voice or expression persuaded her enough that she followed him cautiously to the
workshop. She pulled a face at the sounds emanating from within, but something in Steve's
expression convinced her to follow him into the room.

Moments later, Gamora yelled as Pietro pinned her to the wall. "I knew it, I knew I couldn't trust
you, you filthy—"

Whatever curse word Gamora was about to use was lost as Tony jammed the injection of nanobots
into her Control Disc.

"You'd better be right about this," Pietro told Steve.

"I am," Steve said, watching as Gamora stilled and gasped as her memories came rushing back.

Gamora, released from Pietro's grasp, whirled on her heels and stared at them, baffled.

Steve stepped forward, his palms open, trying to show vulnerability and honesty. "Gamora. Hello.
It's nice to meet the real you. My name's Steve Rogers, I'm from a planet named Earth, a group
called the Avengers."

"You—you did something to me." Gamora held one hand up to her Control Disc, her other hand
twitching like she wished she had a weapon in hand. Her head tilted. "Avengers. I've heard that
before, from an attractive man who called himself Thor. And Earth...that sounds familiar also."

"It's where Peter Quill comes from," Steve said.

Pietro, Tony and Natasha all moved to block her from lunging for Steve's throat; they were barely
able to hold her back.

"You liar, he's from Missouri. What have you done with him?" Gamora hissed. "What is this
trickery?"

"Missouri's on Earth, dip-shit," Tony said, a note in his voice that said it wasn't the first time he'd
had to say that.

"Quill's fine," Steve says. "He's still on that rickety ship of his, the Banatar, with Rocket, and Drax,
and Mantis, and your sister—"

"My sister is right here," Gamora hissed. "And tell me how you did this, how you woke my
thoughts, so I can do it for her."

"Actually, that's not exactly her," Tony said coolly, interrupting. "The Nebula out there is from a branching timeline."

"Your Nebula is traveling with Quill on his ship," Steve said. "I know her. We've been—well, acquaintances—for the last eight years."

Gamora snorted. "Can you prove that?"

Steve cast his brain back to everything he'd ever learned from Nebula. Nebula adored Morgan; the relationship was decidedly two-sided, but Nebula was chatty around Morgan in a way she wasn't with many other people. Rhodey and Rocket, mostly.

"She loves yaro root," Steve said. "She'll tell you she thinks the tree is the only decent member of Quill's crew, but she's fonder of the raccoon that she wants anyone to know; she identifies with being experimented on. Every piece of metal on her face is from when your father forced you two to battle, and when you won, he would replace part of her body. She's in profound and unceasing pain because of that. Thanos pulled her eye from her head, her brain from her skull, her arm from her body—all because you wanted to win, and all she ever wanted was a sister—"

"There's no way you should know that," Gamora said, her eyes roving across his face uncertainly. She squinted at him. "My father. He—he killed me. I remember—"

"Vormir," Natasha said.

Everyone jolted, no one expecting Natasha to speak. Natasha blinked like she was waking up out of a long and deep sleep.

"Vormir," Gamora echoed, in a whisper.

"The cliffs. The Soul Stone." Natasha smiled tightly, walking up to face Gamora. Her voice was strange, almost detached. "It was like ice-cold hands pulled you out of your whole body by your heart and held you up into a starfield. It was like falling a thousand miles into darkness and then there was ice and then—"

"—nothing that you could see," Gamora finished, her eyes wide and locked onto Natasha's. "But all the way down there was singing."

"Like a thousand voices trying to find a note and failing."

"But for a moment, just a sweet, single moment—"

"Peace, like you've never felt before or since."

Steve realized belatedly he was holding his breath. He thought he'd become quite friendly with death over the past couple of weeks, but Natasha and Gamora's matching expressions told him clearly that he would never know it so intimately or so thoroughly as the two of them did.

Gamora stared at Natasha, suddenly still. "Does this Steve Rogers of yours tell the truth?"

Natasha nodded, looking more awake and alive than Steve had seen her in a long time. "Yes. He's the best man I've ever known."

Gamora inhaled and her gaze landed sharply on Steve. "You are not lying. My sister is out there."
"She is. And we need your help," Steve said. "We need your help to permanently kill Thanos."

Gamora smirked at him. "You should have led with that."

One thing Steve knew how to do on a battlefield was to bide his time and draw a fight out.

It was especially easy on a field full of fighters who primarily did most of their fighting in close-quarters. Steve's primary weapon was a long-distance one, and the way the arena fighting floor had been set up with hundreds of those spiky stalagmites made it almost fun to send his shield ricocheting through them. Since the serum, he'd been able to calculate complex rebounds easily, and from the gasps of the crowd, at least he knew it looked entertaining enough that Steve tried not to be angry again that this was something they paid to see. Did movies not exist on alien planets?

He used his shield as cover to keep an eye on what was going on, forcing Yon-Rogg and Taserface to duck as it bounced chaotically between the stalagmites. Loki and Killian were battling each other head-on. That made sense in a dramatic way; Loki had ice powers and Killian fire. Sometimes the match-ups made sense. Gamora and Nebula, Loki and Killian, they were obviously paired together on purpose.

Tony and Ronan often ended up entangled. So that left Yon-Rogg and Taserface for Steve and Natasha. Recently Yon-Rogg had killed Natasha, but Steve had killed Yon-Rogg in the Battle Royale. Maybe he was overthinking it.

The match that really caught his eye was where Gamora and Nebula were fighting full force, almost viciously. Nebula looked angry. Gamora evidently remembered the aim of the fight, though, because she leaned in and said something to Nebula. Nebula's eyes widened and she stabbed Gamora right in the heart, a wickedly fast movement Steve could barely catch; there was a flash of light and Gamora was bleeding out in Nebula's arms. Gamora was still talking, even as the life seeped out of her, and when Gamora went still, Nebula screamed to the sky, loud enough that all the fighters paused for the briefest of moments to look in her direction.

Nebula's scream sank down Steve's spine like nails on a chalkboard. It wasn't a scream of triumph. It was a scream Steve somehow recognized, a sound of loss that resonated deep in his soul. What had Gamora told her?

He didn't have time to linger on that thought. Taserface was striding over the sand toward Steve, obviously deciding Steve was his chosen target. Behind him, Yon-Rogg was advancing on Natasha. Steve could roll with that. Especially considering Natasha was smiling widely and yelling out insults designed to make Yon-Rogg angry. Waking up Gamora had woken up Natasha too. It was an unexpectedly good side-effect.

Taserface had an ugly face to match his ugly name and, worse, an ugly fighting style. He was all brute strength and ignorance. Steve strode forward to meet him and held up his shield underneath a barrage of ugly blows. Taserface must have been through the worms a lot of times. He was obviously popular enough with the crowd here to not have been voted to die permanently. Yet again, Steve was appalled at what their audience here counted as entertainment.

Steve had to die in this match, but his pride wouldn't let him be taken out by Taserface. Steve eyeballed the other options. Killian was dead now and Nebula was battling Loki, but Loki looked like he was ahead. Steve would much rather be killed by Nebula rather than Loki, but Loki looked like he was going to win that match-up.

He'd have to die some other way. As he fended off Taserface, he caught a glimpse of the fight
Ronan and Tony were having in the sky. Ronan wouldn't be a bad option and he might even make it fast. Apparently a fast death was all one could hope for in this place. His plan decided, Steve stepped up the fight against Taserface, knowing his advanced techniques gave him the edge in a one-on-one battle. Steve was right. It only took a minute after switching from a defensive stance to an offensive one to get an opening, and Steve swung his ax solidly into Taserface's thick neck. The blood was dramatic and Steve didn't even stay to watch Taserface die. He was pretty sure his blow had been fatal, but if it hadn't, and Taserface was able to stagger to his feet and stab Steve in the back? It wouldn't be the worst of Steve's deaths so far.

Steve looked up to where Ronan and Tony were still battling. That was still his best shot.

Squinting and calculating, Steve looked up and launched his shield. It was a good blow. Ronan came crashing down to the ground. Steve started to run, catching his shield from the rebound. He caught it and saw Natasha in the corner of his gaze. He nearly faltered—she was fighting Yon-Rogg and losing—but when she caught him looking, Natasha shook her head, briefly, and Steve remembered their plan with a sinking heart.

They all had to die. That was the whole idea. And if Steve didn't hurry up, he'd be the last one of them left alive. He'd have to see Tony and Natasha die. He couldn't handle that.

Steve took a deep breath and caught Ronan's gaze, deliberately smirking to incense him. It worked. Ronan forgot Tony and came directly after Steve, his coat billowing as he strode over the sand toward Steve.

Dodging around a stalagmite, Steve smashed his shield hard into Ronan's leg, causing him to stagger, and Steve caught the rebound with another smirk that actually made Ronan growl. Steve wished he could spend some time taking Ronan apart, but their plan relied on dying while still being entertaining.

It couldn't look deliberate, so Steve raised his shield and hurled it again, aiming to clip Ronan's shoulder instead of hit him too badly. He gauged the angle perfectly for what he intended; his shield hit Ronan, rebounded upward into the force-field and sailed back in Steve's direction, but at a slightly too-sharp angle so he had to reach to grab it.

Ronan wasn't an experienced fighter for nothing; he saw the gap in Steve's defense and utilized it. He moved closer, but not too close; he could reach Steve with his extended hammer, but Steve could barely reach back with his ax.

Tony started laying down repulsor fire behind him, clipping against Ronan's armor; Steve lurched forward as if taking advantage of that, but Ronan wasn't distracted enough by Tony's repulsor blasts. That was fine. He wasn't supposed to be. With Steve's shield at an angle meant to attack, Ronan dodged it, and slammed his hammer hard into Steve's face.

Steve's face exploded into stars and he could taste blood. He couldn't see, so he wildly hit out, trusting that Ronan knew how to fight, that he wouldn't let a stray blow from a flailing supersoldier take him out at this point. They needed all the possible deaths going forward to manage their plan. They needed to be strong. The worms made them stronger.

Ronan didn't disappoint. Steve opened his eyes long enough to see Tony flying up high above them, his uni-beam getting ready to blast Ronan, but when Ronan stumbled slightly, Tony used that opportunity to miss Ronan with the uni-beam, and it hit Steve in the chest. Right in the heart.

Steve fell down into the sand, gasping for air. Tony didn't miss Ronan deliberately. He'd deliberately pretended to miss, to kill Steve himself. The amount of strength and faith that must
have taken him—Steve's eyes welled up. Death took him almost gently.

When Steve woke up, he was in agony. Terrible, horrible, protracted agony. He tried to breathe and regretted it. He tried to see if he could move, until he remembered why lying still and not moving was a good idea, because it was like being drowned alive in acid.

Except it was worms. He was being eaten alive and reconstructed, all at the same time. Steve knew people sought immortality desperately, and he understood the impulse, but would they be so keen if this was the price? When for every waking moment of this torment, Steve had to stop from screaming, stop himself from begging for that respite of death to take him back?

When Steve could open his eyes, he saw the scene that was rapidly becoming a usual one. Ghrengrrh was pottering around, yelling at someone to, "Ssstay ssstill. Don't ssscratch." Mmurgh was leaning against the wall, clutching a trident and trying not to look at anything in particular. The cyborg bug was rolling around, sweeping up worms that had fallen on the floor.

But when he managed to turn his gaze to the side, Steve was almost startled to realize he wasn't alone. Tony was there too, half-covered in worms. Natasha was lying on the slab next to Tony, more healed than either of them, but there were still worms on her chest and arms and she was grimacing through the pain.

Steve smiled at them fleetingly, even though smiling was probably inappropriate for the situation. He should not be smiling. This was terrible. The pain was beyond imagining, and the itching would be awful, and they probably had to get up and do this all again, who knew how many times? But they were together. And that was more important than Steve could put into words. He'd promised Tony together, and this time, Steve could see that promise through.

The next day, none of the Avengers got an envelope. The Asgardians did, for a mission to try and take out the Four Stooges, and Steve felt a little bad that he was grateful they didn't get that assignment. Steve made the mistake of thinking it might be an impact-free, easy-going day. He certainly felt a lack of immediacy as he followed the morning routine that was becoming much too familiar for his liking.

Natasha didn't appear after the showers, but that was normal; it meant she was probably vent crawling. Steve didn't worry about her. She was awake and herself again. The next Melee might be another matter entirely, of course, but that was a worry for later. The escape plan was still a hazy idea without all the information they needed, and they wouldn't get to do the research with Heimdall's blade today.

Once the three of them were in the workshop, Tony started working on his armor repair. Steve supposed it wasn't exactly like Hrhumhurh or Pip could fix the dents in it. It was loud, though, and Pietro grimaced at Steve after a few minutes of the hammering.

"You want to go spar outside?" Pietro suggested.

"Sorry, am I too loud?" Tony winced. "I can wait."

"It's fine, we'll go," Pietro waved a hand at him. "We can beg some nets and tridents from Pip. I've always wanted to try and figure out how to use them, like the old-style gladiators from movies." He wrinkled his nose. "Sokovia didn't exactly get a lot of the new movies. We lived off old flicks from the fifties. Awful lot of gladiator movies I'll never want to watch again when we finally get out of here."
It was kind of amazing to hear Pietro talking about the possibility of escape.  

"That's a good idea," Steve nodded. "I can't imagine the bug guards wouldn't fight back during any sort of escape plan. We need to learn how to fend off the tridents they carry. We should probably learn how to counter them with our usual weapons, though. Retiarius usually fought against Secutor, it's almost traditional."

Pietro squinted. "Reti-what?"

"Retiarius were the gladiators who fought with fisherman-style equipment. Secutor were specifically trained to fight against the Retiarius." Steve shrugged. "A Secutor would usually have a sword and a shield." He smiled briefly; he did have a fondness for shield warriors of any kind.

Pietro tilted his head. "Since when were you such a gladiator nerd?"

"Not so much me," Steve scratched the back of his head ruefully. "My eldest was obsessed. Dressed as Spartacus for an entire summer." He smiled softly at the memory. Ian would have loved the aesthetics of this place.

"Your eldest what?" Pietro asked, and reality came shattering back down around Steve's ears.

It was because he trusted the Avengers, and he loved them; he'd felt safe, and let his guard down, in a way he hadn't been able to since coming back to the main timeline.

Steve split apart all over again. This was why he tried not to linger on his past too much. Ian was gone. They all were. That was his past now. Nothing could bring them back. No worms could bring them back, not now, but maybe that was for the best. The idea of that much pain...There was no way Steve would willingly choose this nightmare for anyone.

Steve shook his head firmly. "Someone else's lifetime." Steve smiled, a tight expression that he realized from Tony's too-astute gaze that wasn't really fooling anyone. "C'mon, Maximoff, let's see if Pip can help you live out some of your childhood dreams."

"One moment before you go," Tony interrupted.

Pietro and Steve both hesitated.

"If I could borrow Cap for a second," Tony said. Steve temporarily averted his gaze. Of course Tony couldn't let it go.

"I suppose you two sweethearts do need some private time occasionally," Pietro winked at Steve outlandishly. "I'll go see Pip, meet you at the gym?"

"Thanks, Pietro," Tony said, softly.

Steve waited until the door closed behind Pietro to turn back to Tony, his face solemn.

Tony walked around his table to move closer to Steve, his eyes trained on Steve's face. Steve stayed stubbornly quiet. He hadn't even meant to reference his other life. It was a closed chapter in a book that wasn't supposed to be shared. He'd lived it, wholeheartedly, with abandon, in honor of the life Tony had always told him to get, but it was over and that was how life was supposed to work. Every day of it had been an unexpected gift. He refused to regret it, but it didn't mean he was ready to talk about it.

"Eight decades," Tony said, his voice a little uneven. "A person could live a lot of life in that time."
Steve nodded, inhaled sharply, and met Tony's gaze. Tony recoiled. Maybe Steve was more of an open book to him than he knew.

"I never even stopped for a second to think—" Tony started.

Tony's eyes were so close, scanning across Steve's face, and there was real gentleness in his expression. Real kindness. And real pain, for Steve, on Steve's behalf, because Tony had finally probably realized who James really was, and the realization of that had rocked Tony to his core, to a place in Tony's heart where he deeply, finally understood.

"I'm so sorry, Steve. I was so focused on my own kid, I never even—" Tony swallowed and straightened. "I should have asked before now. Are they—did you leave anyone behind?"

Steve's throat felt dry as he shook his head. He knew what Tony was asking. About his wife, or his other children, or any grandchildren.

"I'm the last," Steve said, tersely. At the wash of understanding that flooded Tony's face, Steve shrugged and held his gaze, slightly blurred as it was. "And I wouldn't trade a second of it."

Tony's smile was tremulous. "Yeah. I think I know some of what you mean."

Steve stared at him sadly. "I hope you never do."

For a moment, their eye contact held strong, but Steve couldn't breathe, his chest tight. This was too much. This was far too close to too much. He had to get out of there.

Tony's hand was on Steve's elbow. Steve belatedly realized that might have been all that had been keeping him upright for the last few minutes. "Pietro will be waiting for you," Tony said softly, knowing that he'd already probably pushed too much.

Steve nodded. Tony's kindness was almost too much to bear. He stepped back and the loss of contact seemed to break the moment, so Steve ducked his head awkwardly and hurried off to catch up to Pietro.

Maybe breaking a sweat would clear his thoughts a little. Steve smiled tensely. Death might be the only thing that could permanently silence the restless monsters in someone's mind, but there were some things that at least could quieten them temporarily.

But Steve never got the chance to figure out if he could get that quiet through sparring with Pietro. The door opened before he ever got close enough to it; it was Natasha, dragging Pietro back with her.

"I have legs, Widow," Pietro muttered. "Fast ones, even."

"Whatever," Natasha said. "This was too important to wait." She beamed at Tony. "There's someone new on the slab."

Steve straightened, suddenly alert. He wasn't alone in that. Pietro and Tony were desperately staring at her too.

"Who?" Tony asked, the first of them able to figure out how to speak. Steve could barely breathe. A thousand options were crossing his mind. It also made him wonder about the moment when Natasha was able to tell Tony and Pietro that Steve was on the worming slab.

Natasha's face was alight with an emotion somewhere between joy and despair. "Bucky."
Steve was fractious at breakfast, expecting that he would be the one assigned to kill Bucky as his introduction to the arena.

Topaz did deliver him an envelope, but it was a team-up with Tony against Nebula and Taserface. Steve was sure Tony would agree that they could kill Taserface before allowing Nebula to skewer them somehow. Even with the worms hanging over his head, he was in a somewhat good mood. Answers were coming, Bucky would be able to tell them what the Avengers had figured out, and maybe he even had information that could help them easily defeat Thanos.

"Who the fuck is the Winter Soldier?" Pietro asked, squinting at the contents of his envelope.

Steve leaned over to see the paper, mostly for the thrill of seeing Bucky's title in ink. It was always a joy to know the cavalry was on its way. "Match: HIGH SUNS. QUICKSILVER versus THE WINTER SOLDIER. Battle to the DEATH." The death part quelled his good mood a little, even though he knew it was coming.

"The Winter Soldier is Bucky's operating name," Natasha said, through a mouthful of meat. Every trace of the broken Natasha that had been their companion for four terrible days had disappeared. The conversation with Gamora had broken that spell, and Bucky's presence had lifted her into a kind of giddiness that Steve had seen on her face once before: when Scott Lang turned up on the Avengers Compound security camera feed. "He used to be a brainwashed assassin for Hydra."

Steve carefully watched Tony for any reaction to that. Tony was eating placidly, like nothing was going on. That probably meant his brain was doing somersaults.

"So he's a Tenebrae?" Pietro blinked.

"I said used to be," Natasha repeated. She paused and looked at Tony. "He'll be an Einherjar, right?"

"Let me activate my telepathic link to the Grandmaster a second," Tony said, sarcastically.

Natasha jabbed her fork in Tony's direction. "Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Stark."

Tony placidly wiped his mouth and put his fork down. "Little bit of wit is better than none at all."

Steve hurried up, realizing he was still behind. The table was quiet; Odin, the Warriors Two,
Heimdall, and Skurge had gone up against the Children of Thanos yesterday and both sides had essentially taken each other out. Steve had finally gone up to the viewing room for the first time, intending to take notes on how the Four Stooges fought, but he'd barely been able to concentrate enough.

Bucky was here and that changed everything.

Steve thought he might have felt happier knowing there was another familiar face around, but he didn't. He felt antsy, like when he was a child and his mom wasn't home yet after a late shift and there had been rumors about a fatal illness going around. The other Avengers were similarly tense; they'd spent the night clinging to each other in a tangle of limbs.

They separated for their usual morning shower, although Pietro sped through his and disappeared first, muttering about going to see Pip. Pietro had never met Bucky, but was fidgety anyway, desperate to find out what information Bucky might have.

Steve showered at the same pace as Tony, unwilling to leave his side for long, although they would have to; their own match was scheduled to follow Pietro and Bucky's encounter, Tony would want to do last-minute tune-ups on his armor, and Steve needed to collect the missing parts of his arena uniform.

"I'd better go see if Hrhumhurh has fixed my costume," Steve sighed as they exited the shower room. Tony nodded briefly, but when he Steve to go, he couldn't; he looked to see Natasha gripping his wrist. Her hair was wet, like she'd run out of her own shower to get his attention.

"Win this one if you can," Natasha said. Her gaze was intent. She briefly glanced behind Steve and then glared at him again. "Trust me." She pressed a brief kiss against his cheek and was gone.

Tony stared after her wordlessly as she hurried off. Steve looked at him, deeply worried.

"I'll see you in the workshop," Tony said, trying to sound unconcerned, but his mouth wobbled a little. "I wouldn't hate it if you hurried," he added, attempting even harder to sound as casual as he could. There was a tension around his eyes which belied how much he hated admitting to that small vulnerability, his preference not to be alone.

Steve nodded and headed off at a jog down the hallway to Hrhumhurh's chamber.

"This is for you, pink-skin," Hrhumhurh said the moment Steve appeared, dumping an entire stack of material in Steve's arms.

Steve squinted at the pile of what looked like blue fabric. "What is it?"

"Pre-pupal larvae," Hrhumhurh said, before making a crackling noise which was probably supposed to be laughter. Humor wasn't even universal among humans; Steve doesn't know why he expected an alien's jokes to be any different. "It's copies of your shirt. I made some in bulk. So you can keep ripping it off as much as you like."

"Thanks," Steve said.

Hrhumhurh waved a long yellow arm, which Steve supposed meant something between you're welcome and go away. He didn't need to be told twice.

He spent a few minutes longer with Pip than he meant to, but the ax was still broken, so Steve spent a while picking out a new weapon while Pip unhooked his shield from high up on the wall.
Pip shook his head when he approached Steve with the shield and re-directed Steve to a different spear than the one he was considering. It seemed too long for Steve's comfort, but when Steve tried to put it back and go back for the original one that had caught his attention, Pip shook his head and shoved his choice into Steve's hand.

"This one," Pip said. "Splits into two spears, secret. Press here. Projectile." He ran Steve's hand over a switch, hidden in the handle and stared at him. He lowered his voice. "Pip not supposed to help, but Pip homesick. Wants Brooklyn boy to do well."

"Thanks, Pip," Steve said. He glanced aside too—there weren't any bug guards in sight. "If you got the chance, would you go back to Brooklyn?"

Pip clenched one hand into a fist as he put Steve's wrong choice of spear back into the rack. "Pip would smash the universe to get home," Pip muttered and then, with a wary look at Steve, ran off back toward his table. Steve remembered Tony saying Pip was as trapped as they were and his chest ached in sympathy.

"I think Pip gave me a harpoon," Steve said, after the guard bugs had ushered Tony and him into the Cold Room. He eyeballed it, tilting the weapon to examine it further. "Does this look like a harpoon to you? Do you think he knows something we don't?"

Tony smirked at him. "Pip's from Brooklyn. Makes me draw certain conclusions about what he might know or not."

"You're hilarious."

Tony hummed, considering. "Maybe some Brooklynites know a little something-something."

Steve rolled his eyes and ambled closer to the arena. He stared through the bars and tried not to sigh out loud. Pietro was doing his best to drag the fight out, strutting around the sand, peacocking to the audience. The arena floor was plain, no obstacles. Death by a teammate must be a traditional way to welcome a new warrior. Steve wondered if there would be a new Tenebrae too, but this thought didn’t last long when he saw a flash of steel in sunlight and Pietro drew first blood. Steve’s stomach twisted. He should look away but he couldn’t.

“Hey,” Tony said, his voice gravelly, the way it was just after waking, sleep soft with a rumble. “Look at me.”

Steve reluctantly turned to glance at Tony, figuring it must be something important; Tony moved his face closer, and Steve—still aching about what was happening to Bucky mere meters away from him—didn’t realize what was happening until Tony kissed him.

Tony’s mouth was warm, so warm. Steve recognized the kiss for what it was, a kindness, a distraction, so he made to pull back, but Tony chased him, closed the gap again, and Steve was only human; he sank into the gentle kiss with a full-body sigh.

Tony had a very convincing way of speaking. Fast and eloquent, clever and persuasive; it was easy to be bamboozled by him, surprised into agreeing with him before you fully stopped and thought it through. He kissed much the same and Steve didn’t know if he was good with knowing that fact now, because he never forgot anything. He was young again. If they survived this place, that might be another easy eight decades of life, but this time he would have this knowledge imprinted in his physical memory. He had trouble going a single day without grief for Tony’s original death, and now he would probably replay these kisses the same.
Perhaps that was the real gift. A pleasant memory to take, to carry alongside the grief.

Steve thought that even a kiss of distraction was supposed to end, but Tony moved his hand to the back of Steve’s neck, the cool metal resting carefully around the curve of Steve’s skull. Tony could crush him right then and there with the strength in those metal fingers, but the touch remained gentle and firm as Tony continued to kiss him. The world narrowed down to the coolness of the metal against his neck and the warmth of Tony's mouth against his. As distractions went, it was pretty effective. When the kiss ended, Steve's eyes snapped open in an almost panic, because of what happened after he kissed Tony as a distraction, but Tony was still there, close, a self-satisfied smile on his lips.

"It's midnight, Cinderella," Tony said. "You just turned into a pumpkin."

"Cinderella wasn't the pumpkin, that was the coach," Steve sighed, turning away to look out through the bars again.

Tony smiled, the kind of smile he gave when he was trying to charm someone at a press conference. "You say that like I was supposed to watch those movies with my daughter. Why would I, when I can put them on the screen and let the mouse corporation brainwash my kid?" He looked at Steve appraisingly. “Still, you're right, wrong fairytale. Taking a nap in the ice for multiple decades makes you more of a Sleeping Beauty, I guess."

Steve swallowed back his reply and settled for shaking his head wryly.

"Silence field going off," Tony said, just in time.

"Ssstep back," one of the guard bugs said. Steve and Tony dutifully stood back while the force-field and bars to the Cold Room dropped and Pietro came in, looking stony-faced, his chest, thighs and face covered with blood. Tony had been doing a wonderful job distracting Steve, but the sight of that blood was like a cold slap to the face, because all Steve could think of was that he knew who that blood belonged to.

Pietro didn’t say anything as he passed them. He did give them an odd side-glance and Steve shuffled, trying not to look too embarrassed. Steve’s gaze drifted back to the arena in time to see a couple of the bugs lifting up Bucky’s body from the sand, his metal arm hanging limply as they carried him off toward another door, one that presumably led directly to the worming chamber.

As soon as the bugs disappeared, a dark spread of shadow spilled across the sand. It was some sort of floor, covering up the sand. There was a soft rumble and then it looked like the entire arena floor was lowering down, and down, and down. Steve estimated a drop of about twenty feet before the floor rumbled to a stop.

Tony put his hand on Steve's shoulder, the weight of it reassuring; clearly Tony knew already what this rearrangement of the arena floor meant, and the physical support—and the harpoon—slowly became clear with the rush of water that Steve could hear, even though the forcefield dampened the sound.

Neither Tony nor Steve were fans of fighting in water. Steve steeled himself and stared out. As long as there wasn't ice floating in it, he was okay.

Several platforms were rising up out of the water, so at least there was somewhere to rest, and it didn't look like there were any chunks of ice. The water even looked like it might be warm. When Steve glanced aside, Tony was the one who looked unhappy this time.
Steve flashed back briefly to the very first time he saw Tony Stark. It wasn't in person. It was on a piece of paper in the apartment SHIELD set him up in and Steve had thought it a thorough synopsis at the time. It covered Iron Man's origin story, including brief mention to the water torture the Ten Rings had used to convince Tony to build them a weapon. It has also included a great many of Tony's personal and public failings. Steve had never been wrong about a person so quickly or thoroughly before in his life.

He owed Tony another distraction. A seemly one this time, not one as a diversion so Steve could jump to his death. Another kiss was out of the question, especially with their battle so very close. But perhaps there was something both practical and distracting that Steve could do, considering the upcoming environment.

"I think I'm wearing too much," Steve frowned and dug the harpoon point down into the sand of the Cold Room, starting to detach his right spaulder. Anything metal on his costume that wasn't his shield or the harpoon was probably too much to be carrying in a watery environment. He squinted and weighed up protection versus agility. The boots could probably go too. He glanced up at Tony. "Do you want to give me a hand?"

"Oh, I feel like I've had this dream before," Tony said, winking at him, but dutifully helping with the equipment on Steve's left side, helping Steve detach the spaulder and poleyn knee-covering. Tony let Steve unlace his own boots, though, opting instead to watch him crouch down in front of him with an inscrutable expression that made Steve feel a little unnerved. It was only when Steve straightened to step out of the boots and make sure his shield harness was tied as securely as possible that he noticed that there was heat in Tony's cheeks.

The idea that Tony had been affected by the view of seeing Steve kneeling in front of him… It gave Steve a weird thrill of confidence and he smiled at Tony, easy and slow. "Thanks."

"We missed something," Tony said, putting a hand on Steve's elbow to turn Steve to face him, but he didn't give Steve enough time to react before Tony's gauntlet snagged the fabric of Steve's shirt and Tony tugged swiftly.

The fabric ripped and Tony's mouth swept into a wide smirk as he dropped the ruined shirt deliberately on the floor.

Steve stared back at him, slightly open-mouthed. "That was supposed to be for my victory pose." He wanted to frown but it was difficult to when Tony was openly checking him out.

"I think I can figure something out as a replacement," Tony said, still looking at Steve appreciatively.

Steve was wearing less than Pietro would into the arena now: the basic underwear that thankfully covered everything; the blue leather strips that were supposed to be a skirt and covered nothing, and the leather halter and vambrace for his shield. There weren't a lot of mirrors in this place, the most of a reflection Steve had seen was in the shiny reflective outer of the cyborg bug that swept up worms in the worming chamber, but Steve knew the worms had made him younger again, and stronger. Tony seemed to be pleased by what he saw and somehow that made Steve feel stronger. Invincible.

"Einherjar," one of the bugs barked, "it'sss time."

Tony smiled at Steve. "C'mon, Princess Aurora, let's kick some butt."

Steve side-eyed him as the Cold Room bars descended. "If that nickname sticks, I might
accidentally slip and stab you."

"Aw, but then there'd be no post-match kissing, would you really want to miss out on that?" Tony waggled his eyebrows before jetting out and ahead of Steve into the arena.

Steve scowled after him, hating that it was an actually effective threat.

There was a narrow walkway out across the water leading from the Cold Room. Steve could see Nebula and Taserface walking out on the opposite side of the arena. The Grandmaster's hologram was already high in the sky between them, the twin suns shining behind his eyes.

Steve glanced up to see Tony doing some pretty aerial moves. Steve whistled, loud enough to get Tony's attention, and he threw up the spear high; Tony understood what he was going for and he caught it, while Steve slid his shield into the leather harness on his back and started to run along the walkway.

The walkway ended a short way into the water, but that didn't matter for Steve; he built up enough speed to do a couple of forward handsprings that gave him enough elevation to do a tight double somersault off the end of the walkway. He straightened out of the jump to dive elegantly into the water.

The water was warm and Steve took the opportunity to open his eyes so he could see what visibility was like below the surface. The blocks that formed the white square islands dotted around the water were cubes, so there was some space to use them to hide under the water, but once Steve kicked further underneath, the water was clear for the bottom ten feet of the water.

Steve made sure to break the water soon after that, not wanting to give away how long he could hold his breath for. He pulled himself up onto one of the cubes, elegantly standing up and shaking his dripping hair. Tony lowered to a hover nearby; Steve held out his hand and caught the harpoon without even looking, trusting Tony to drop it so he could do that.

Steve smirked ahead to where Taserface actually looked a little nervous.

Nebula was unfazed, diving off the walkway in an almost balletic arc. She didn't hide how good her breath control was, emerging leisurely on the island cube that was closest as possible to the force-field. Steve glanced to one side to quickly see how Tony was handling the idea of facing Nebula. Tony's face was carefully blank. Steve supposed he was used to it.

Steve hadn't had as much time to adjust. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that this Nebula wasn't the one he'd seen sitting patiently for hours, letting Morgan paint her fingernails. That Nebula was safe. This Nebula was a branch Nebula, and if Steve had learned anything about branch timelines and the people in them, they could be a thousand miles away from the version of them Steve had met before.

Besides, this was a battlefield. A battlefield where death wasn't permanent. There wasn't any time for guilt. Not when it wasn't only Steve's life on the line. He took one last glance at Tony's blank face and forced his focus to where it mattered right now: the match.

Taserface pulled a face when he realized Steve was looking in his direction and threw himself into the water, doggedly struggling to swim to an island cube close to the Einherjar's side of the arena. He hauled himself up onto one not twenty feet away from where Steve stood.

Steve's grip tightened on the harpoon. Taserface would regret moving closer to him. He turned his gaze away from Taserface toward Nebula instead, hoping the Ravager would take umbrage over
"Welcome to our first main match of the day," the Grandmaster's voice crooned. "Who will win? Love or hatred? Our favorite pink sweethearts, or our resident rage monsters? We'll find out. Let the blood flow as freely as the water. Einherjars, Tenebrae, fight for my glory! Die for my honor!"

The Grandmaster's holographic face exploded in a virtual explosion of stars.

Steve carefully stared across at Nebula, taunting her, and she brandished her pair of swords with a wicked smile, holding his eye contact. Steve let his own smile widen and he twirled the spear easily, before casually extending it—and firing it in Taserface's direction.

Taserface wasn't expecting it for a second. Neither was the crowd, who roared in joy that Steve had managed to harpoon Taserface right through the head in one easy blow.

Steve pressed the release button again and was pleasantly surprised at the way the weapon ripped back out of Taserface's body to neatly slide back to him. He quickly reconnected it, ignoring the bright blood on the tip and the way Taserface's body lay on his white cube in a pool of spreading red.

"Well, that was violent," Tony called down, the tone modulated because his faceplate was down.

Nebula sneered up at Tony. "If it's violence you're looking for, Iron Man," she snarled, and bent down slightly before managing to launch herself up so high in the air that she was able to slice one of her blades across his armor.

It didn't do much beyond let loose a dramatic spray of sparks, but Steve was incensed despite himself.

No one came after Iron Man while Steve was on the battlefield. Steve took a running leap to make it to the next cube along, while Tony swooped down to where Nebula had landed with a barrage of repulsor blasts.

"I know you're better than this," Tony called down from above. "You're more than the monster he made you into."

That seemingly drew Nebula's attention solely to Tony, like Steve wasn't there.

"You don't know anything, Earthman," Nebula spat. "You don't know a thing of what you speak."

Steve wondered if there was water in his ears, because that sounded almost like Nebula had her memories, to speak of Earth. But the Control Disc allowed one to accumulate new memories, and access some memories, so it wasn't conclusive. Still, he flashed back mentally to the tortured noise Nebula made when Gamora whispered something to her in that last battle, and it made sense that maybe Nebula's inbuilt technology interfered with the Control Disc.

Nebula seemed to be focusing her attacks and attention on Tony, ignoring Steve. She threw herself up in the air as easily as she lashed out at Tony, her weapon sparking against the Iron Man armor. Nebula effortlessly managed to bound from island to island even when some of them were clearly too far for Steve. Steve felt like he was spending forever chasing a battle he could get nowhere near to; no wonder she was focusing on Tony.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t her entire focus, because as soon as Steve got close enough he fired the harpoon again, but it was clear Nebula was expecting it. She whirled to deflect it with one of her swords, neatly batting it back. Tony took advantage of that minor distraction to hit a repulsor blast
at her. Nebula jumped backward but it clipped her leg, visibly burning off a chunk of her calf.

Nebula hissed in Steve's direction, took a glance at both of them approaching her from two different directions, and smoothly turned and dived into the water in response.

She didn't come back up. Tony hovered over the water, his face mask turning carefully over the surface. Steve could feel the tension coming from him. Although the armor was made of an iron that didn't rust, and Tony had definitely gone underwater many times since his original water-based trauma, it had always been in safer, controlled conditions, like connecting power cables for his ugly tower. Not in battle conditions.

"If she comes up, she's all yours; but for now, leave it to me," Steve said, and took a running dive into the water.

The battle turned into a one-on-one skirmish underwater. Steve was okay with that. Trusting that Tony would warn him with a repulsor blast if he was in too much danger, Steve engaged with the chase. It became clear after a while that Nebula was trying to toy with him, teasing it out into a game of hide-and-seek. Probably hoping she could wear him out and take him out when he was tired.

Steve would probably get bored before he got tired. And if he was bored, he couldn't imagine it being any fun for the audience. Maybe Nebula didn't have to worry about that; Steve couldn't imagine Thanos being okay with one of his daughters being permanently killed for entertainment's sake.

He kept up the pretense of needing to take air every two minutes or so, carefully keeping an eye on how long she could hold her breath for as she kept moving to hide behind the cubes, out of Steve's sight. She could probably hold her breath longer than Steve could, but it was good that she didn't know he could get close to her stamina underwater. After a few near-misses, Steve took advantage of his ploy; when it was time for him to swim up to the surface, he kept holding his breath and anticipated where she was headed.

Steve swam in that direction rapidly and it nearly paid off. He unhooked his shield and slammed his shield against where he gauged she would be, but he'd miscalculated, by mere seconds; he missed Nebula entirely. It had an unexpected bonus, though; the blow caused the whole block to shatter apart. The resulting debris formed an impromptu barrier to the neat reverse-turn Nebula made, her swords dancing out toward Steve and uselessly hitting block chunks instead.

Nebula yelled and a trail of bubbles came from her mouth; she kicked off against the falling, broken block pieces to aim for a hiding place in the opposite direction. Startled, Steve had to break the surface, and he swam for the nearest cube, visually scanning the water as best as he could. He thought he caught a glimpse of her foot for the briefest second.

Steve stared out at the water and formulated a plan. He looked up at Tony, shielding his eyes, the one sun currently in the sky in exactly the wrong place for him to see Tony clearly.

"Help me take out the blocks," Steve yelled.

"Are you serious?" Tony blurted back.

Steve shrugged. "She's hiding too much. We need to give her nowhere to hide."

"Fair play," Tony said. "I'll take the Tenebrae side."

Steve nodded. He hid the smile he wanted to make as Tony started to use his uni-beam blast on the
square cubes themselves, shattering the ones that Steve didn't. The crowd seemed to enjoy the way the blocks dramatically disintegrated.

Tony worked through the Tenebrae side's cubes randomly, but Steve worked on the ones on the Einherjar side methodically. He needed Nebula to anticipate that pattern, so she would fall into his trap and be waiting for him at the most likely spot. Steve continued slamming his shield into cubes before jumping into the water and swimming for the next one, pulling himself onto it before slamming his shield down, and leaping off into the water as it disintegrated behind him.

His calculations complete, Steve destroyed four more cubes, but on the way to the fifth one, he put his hands on the surface like he was going to pull himself up onto it, and then he pivoted, hard, lashing out with the spear-half he had left.

It worked better than Steve imagined it would; he caught a brief glimpse of Nebula’s wide-open surprised mouth, and how close her sword had been to slicing him across the back of his knees. Then all he could see was her limp body as she sank to the depths, the spear-half lodged directly in her heart. Steve couldn't have aimed it truer had he been able to fully see what he was doing.

Panting, Steve heaved himself up on the platform, dripping water everywhere, trying not to look over to where Nebula's blood billowed out in the water like a cloud. Steve’s vision blurred as he thought about the Nebula he knew. The Nebula in the water wasn’t her, but she was a branch Nebula who looked practically identical to the one Steve knew and admired. Steve would never be able to forget now what it would look like, for Nebula to be dead, killed by his own hands…

Steve pushed that thought away, shaking his head like it could dislodge the memory. He knew he would never be free of it. One more death to add to his collection. Steve swallowed down the hint of bile that threatened and turned his face upward to watch Tony fly toward him instead, forever a much more pleasant sight.

Tony lowered down onto the same cube island and collapsed his suit into the short-form armor. Steve was pleased because looking at Tony's face was infinitely better than seeing his own face in a distorted golden reflection on Tony's facemask.

"Oh, that's a good look on you," Tony said, looking Steve up and down deliberately.

It was a performative elevator glance, to benefit the crowd and keep up their supposed showmance, but maybe it was because that pre-fight distraction kiss was still so recent, Steve's mouth still aching from how sweet it was, that he felt his cheeks heat with Tony's open regard.

"That blush of yours is going to ruin me," Tony whispered and tugged Steve in for their end-fight kiss of success.

Steve wanted it to be over quickly, because it was for show, and none of it was real, but Tony held the kiss for a long moment, just pressing his mouth against Steve’s. Even when it ended, Tony tugged him forward so their foreheads were resting together. Steve only realized after a moment that Tony was talking, because his heart was pounding too-loudly in his ears.

"You did so well," Tony was murmuring. His hands were gripping Steve's forearms, and they were shaking. No, it was Steve who was shaking. Steve closed his eyes briefly. Nebula's blood spilled into a cloud again behind his closed eyelids. This whole scenario was horrible. It was horror. And Tony had been here so long, yet he was the one comforting Steve? Tony's voice continued, quiet and low, reassuring. "I'm so proud of you."

The soft praise was too much to bear. Steve's eyes stung and he blamed it on the water, although it
had been fresh and unchlorinated. He stumbled backward, rubbing his arm over the eyes, and Tony nodded, his face carefully blank.

"Let's get inside," Tony said.

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After picking up his discarded pieces of uniform from the Cold Room sand, Steve skipped the shower and Tony didn't even comment, just followed Steve along the hallways as he dripped onto the tiles.

The workshop was silent as they drew up to it. Natasha was inside, sitting on the edge of Tony's worktop. She took one look at Steve's state and hopped off the table to hand him a change of clothes. She also handed a pile of brown clothes to Tony.

Steve crossed the floor quietly and kept his back to Tony as he changed. He could hear the soft whir of Tony stepping out of his armor and the rustle as he got dressed. Worse than that, he could hear small hitches of breath from Natasha's direction.

When he turned back around, Tony was leaning against the workshop and Natasha had sagged to sit on the trunk. Steve swallowed, aware of the thick tension in the air, and preemptively sat on the end of their too-soft bed. If this was as bad as Natasha's expression hinted at, he wasn't so certain his knees would hold him upright.

Tony pulled out a circuit board, because he liked to pretend here that he was working when difficult conversations happened. "So c'mon, Widow. Explain to me why we deviated from plan and skipped today's delightful worming."

"We have a more urgent problem," Natasha said. "We needed time to discuss it before Bucky wakes up."

Tony frowned. "I don't know if I like the sound of urgent."

Natasha took a deep breath and looked Tony straight in the eyes. "I went to check on the worming chamber, as usual, and the Four Stooges were still in there."

"Well that makes sense," Steve said. Tony flashed him a look. Oh. Steve's bad habit of interrupting stories. Whoops. Steve squinted, but he'd started, so he gamely continued. "Odin sliced them up pretty neatly."

"They were awake enough to be talking," Natasha said. She looked desperately upset, shifting her weight from foot to foot before she blurted it out, her hands clenched into tight fists. "We're not the only ones who noticed that energy stutter."

"Anyone could get out," Tony finished for her.

"He's making a plan for that to happen," Natasha said, heavily. "Next Melee."
Steve stared at Natasha wordlessly. His skin felt cold. He'd been so happy that Bucky was here and okay, and everything that implied.

This changed _everything_.

"Well, that's... not good," Steve said, fully aware it was an understatement.

"No shit, Sherlock." Tony sank against the worktop and rubbed his hands over his face. "If we can't kill him, there'd be nothing to stop him from taking your shield, the sword, and my armor—Shit. _Shit._ The bastard could get out. Once he gets past us and the guards..." He sank his face even more fully into his palms.

There was silence as they all contemplated a universe with Thanos back on the loose. Even if they could keep the Infinity Stones from him this time, he'd probably restart his campaign to go from planet to planet, slaughtering half of every population as he went. And thanks to the worms, he was even stronger now. They'd barely stopped him once when he was at his regular strength level, and that was after paying a price that had been way too heavy.

Steve stared across at Tony and Natasha, pictured losing them again, and had to fight hard not to lose the contents of his stomach.

He couldn't face the idea of losing them again. He _wouldn't_.

"Look, we knew we would have to make an escape plan," Steve said, proud that his voice wasn't coming out as incoherent screaming. "This is...on a slightly tighter schedule than we were imagining, but it's nothing we weren't preparing for anyway. And Bucky might have some information that could help us."

"Yeah," Natasha said, "that's possible."

Steve resisted the urge he had to sink off the bed and to the floor, maybe copy Tony's lengthy facepalm. He counted his breaths, attempting to stay calm. "Where is Thanos, during non-Melee time? Do we know that?"

"We researched that fairly early on," Natasha said. "I had this smart idea of crawling through the vents and poisoning him in his sleep."

"Vision was less...disembodied then," Tony talked through his hands. "Thanos is guarded by a smaller kind of the force-field as during the Melee. We don't think he's figured a way out through them, and even if he found some way to replicate the same impact as the vibranium, sword, and uni-beam combo...destroying them wouldn't provide the same blowback as destroying the bigger Melee force-field. We know from a couple of his rare Melee outbursts that the Control Disc doesn't work on him, although we figured out he pretends it does. For the same reason as us, we think. Biding his time until he can escape. Waiting and watching for a weakness." He lowered his hands, slowly looking at them like his palms were fascinating. "And we showed him one."

"This is my fault," Steve said, realization quickening his breaths despite his intention to stay calm. He looked up at Natasha hollowly, imagining all the terrible things that would happen if Thanos were to get back out into the universe. Stronger than before. And Thanos would be furious. There would be very little space for anything but vengeance in what counted as a heart for the angry Titan. "If I hadn't slit my throat, if I hadn't been so damn sure I was the best person for the job—the shield wouldn't have been here, we wouldn't be in this situation. You'd still have time to do this properly, the slow way, the sure way, and—"
"Breathe, Steve." Steve hadn't even noticed that Tony had moved across the room until he realized Tony was holding his hands and talking to him. Steve jolted out of his panic and stared miserably at Tony. "If you didn't come, we wouldn't have this shot to get out. We can deal with Thanos. You've seen it done three times, remember?"

Steve nodded, slowly. Thanos' sad little hut, then on that terrible battlefield, and more reasonably, during his stolen life in the other timeline. That was the most helpful version of events. "We go for the head." Steve stared at Tony intently. "Hold him down and go for his head. If we do it with the force-field up, there'll be no escaping to the rest of the universe, no Infinity Stones for him to reach for. No do-overs."

"We kill him, destroy the worms, and take his body with us so we can make sure he's cremated and can't come back." Natasha moved in to stand next to Tony and she added her hands to the pile. "We can do this. And worse comes to worse, we can leave your shield behind, right? Or get Heimdall to hide his sword."

Steve frowned at the idea of facing Thanos without his shield, even though if it was the logical play he would do it in a heartbeat. He nodded firmly.

"That's my man," Tony said, softly. Words from what felt to Steve like another life. Steve took a long, shaky breath and smiled grimly up at them.

"Together," Steve said.

"Together," Tony and Natasha repeated, in unison.

Tony and Natasha. His two biggest regrets. His two biggest miracles. He wouldn't let them down again. He swallowed and internalized his most fervent promise, because if he made it out loud, they would too, and this time, it was Steve's turn to pay any price necessary to make it happen.

Steve would get them both out of here, alive and safe. Whatever it took.

Pietro took the news as expected. None of them slept well; they became a bundle of limbs and worry. Steve realized several times that he was matching his breaths to whichever of the Avengers was closest to him. They were an antsy, shifting dogpile for the entire night; at one point he woke up with Tony's head in his lap, at another Natasha was draped on him like a blanket. Later he woke to find Pietro curled into a tiny ball with all of them clinging onto him.

Sleep was a wave that advanced and receded. The stretches he managed to snag were unfulfilling and populated by nightmares. Tony's hand outstretched in a defiant pose, ready to snap away the enemies and his own life in one fell swoop. Thanos standing at the crest of a pile of bodies; the corpses each bore the faces of his friends. James' body in his arms as he wept, as Sarah stood by and screamed, as Peggy ran out of the house yelling for it not to be true, for it please not to be true, and Ian watched out of the window, his face pale, because they all knew life would never be the same after this.

At one point in his nightmares Steve was standing in the boardroom again, surrounded by glass, and Morgan reached for the deadly injection, and Steve was late again, one time too many, the continued adventures of the multiverse's leading authority in waiting too long. When he woke up from that nightmare, Steve found that he was gripping Tony's hand in his own, their fingers interlaced desperately, like Steve was falling from a cliff and Tony had caught him, and maybe that was true, metaphorically speaking.
Steve stayed awake from then on and watched over his slumbering Avengers. If he held onto Tony's hand that entire time like doing so was as necessary as oxygen, no one had to know.

Breakfast was tense. Odin and his people were back, but even they were quiet, sensing the Avengers' mood. They probably put it down to Bucky being back. Tony didn't tell them about the increased upcoming danger and Steve followed that lead. It was probably best not to worry them unnecessarily.

One of the bugs, a green one that Steve remembered belatedly was called Bhrehm signaled Pietro over before he'd finished eating. Pietro dutifully trotted away and then jogged back over.

"Gotta go to the throne room, show our new friend around," Pietro said before disappearing off.

Steve, Tony and Natasha exchanged glances. Bucky would have information that might change the current landscape. Maybe the Avengers had some sort of magical solution. Steve snorted quietly to himself, because when were they ever that lucky?

There was no assignment for the four of them, which was a relief. After showering, the three of them trudged silently back to the workshop. Inside, Tony did something to his armor which was probably unnecessary, Natasha started doing yoga in her favorite corner, and Steve paced uselessly, probably annoying the others in the process from the way both of them side-eyed him occasionally.

Steve couldn't help it. His skin itched with the pressure of how much energy was bubbling underneath. Normally he'd go and run a hundred miles, try and knock out some of that excess agitation, but he wanted to be here when Pietro brought Bucky to them.

He needed to be here for that.

"Could you at least, like, do some shirtless push-ups if you're going to do that nervous energy thing in here?" Tony asked, after Steve himself had started fretting that he might worry a groove in the floor, or maybe turn the thin covering of sand into glass from the pressure of his feet.

Steve stopped pacing and eyeballed him. "Why do I have to do it shirtless?"

"Same reason the Grandmaster makes us wear these bandage tops and you guys get to run around in those upsettingly shapeless shifts," Natasha raised an eyebrow, indicating her own shapely, revealing, bandage-style top. "Balance. Fairness. Justice. Give us a show, Rogers. Show off those guns."

"I cannot believe I missed you," Steve said, but he did dutifully take off his tunic and drop to the floor to start doing press-ups. He was going to find it very difficult to deny either Tony or Natasha for a very long time. If he could provide what they wanted, he would do it.

"Okay, yeah, I'm not getting any work done," Tony muttered. "Look at him go."

Steve shook his head and kept going, because it was helping his nerves. After a hundred reps Natasha cautiously wandered over and, at Tony's encouragement, she sat cross-legged on his back, laughing a little as he didn't even falter.

"You should try this," Natasha called over to Tony. "It's weirdly soothing."

"I don't think I'd fit on there with you," Tony said, dubiously, but that lasted for all of four minutes, and Tony's fingers found purchase on Steve's shoulders, and Natasha was laughing, and how could Steve not keep going when his actions were prompting a sound like that in a situation and place like this one?
"Hm, if we have to write a post-mission report after being here, I am definitely including this incident," Natasha said, clambering off Steve with a giggle, but pushing at Tony to make him stay. "Iron Man rode Captain America. Like a pony."

"We were dead," Tony said, "I think we're exempt from writing reports."

Steve was glad that Tony's repeated wormings had made him increasingly muscular; the solid weight of him meant he had to focus on keeping the form of his push-ups straight, and that helped him somewhat ignore the places where Tony's skin touched his.

"Hmm, I'm glad there's at least one upside to the dying thing," Natasha said.

It was nice they were able to joke about their own deaths, Steve supposed.

"Also, I'm not Captain America anymore," Steve gritted out. "Sam is."

"Has there been another Iron Man?" Natasha asked.

"No," Steve said. "There's another Black Widow, though."

Natasha, perched on the end of the bed now so she could enjoy watching the push-up fun, wrinkled her nose. "Yelena, I suppose."

Steve eyeballed her. "You've been dead for eight years, Romanov, how can you still know everything?"

Natasha just beamed. "It's my superpower."

"So this is what the three of you do when I'm not around?" Pietro asked.

Steve immediately froze. He couldn't quite see it, but he could imagine the tableau they made: Natasha sitting on the edge of the bed, and Tony perched carefully cross-legged on Steve's bare back.

"Guess this means we're a go," Natasha said, gracefully straightening and helping Tony stand up.

"I'll fetch our new friend," Pietro said, streaking off in a blur.

"Maybe I need to install some sort of warning for when it's a friend approaching the room," Tony said, glancing briefly at Steve's chest before snapping his gaze back to the door.

"Wouldn't help with Pietro's speed," Natasha commented, with the tone of someone who's had this argument before.

Tony smirked. "We could put a bell around his neck?"

"I heard that," Pietro said, in one second right by Tony's side, and the next by the door, yanking a startled Bucky into the room.

There was a rush of action all at once, which was good, because it meant Steve didn't have time to think about what was going on. Steve and Pietro both worked in one swift movement to push Bucky into the wall. Bucky yelped, but Tony tossed Natasha the nanobot injector and Natasha jumped forward and jabbed it firmly into Bucky's Control Disc, and then they all stepped back to watch the fallout.

Bucky whirled around, grabbing hold of his neck and wincing as his memories painfully slotted
back into place. "Ow," he said, eloquently.

"It'll stop hurting in a second, Buck," Natasha said.

Bucky took a long moment to stare at all four of them, wide-eyed like a cornered cat who was aware his owner was trying to pick him up to take him to the vet.

Steve stared back. He knew what the worms did was a miracle but he hadn't expected that Bucky's arm would be regenerated. Steve didn't realize how quickly he'd internalized Bucky's powerful metal arm. It was weird that it was weird to see him with two regular arms, considering the amount of time Steve had seen him like that before.

"This is unbelievable." Bucky's gaze landed on Natasha and he shook his head. "I mean, I saw the footage, but—it's different being here." Bucky exhaled before glowering across at Pietro. "Did you have to stab me like that?"

Pietro shrugged. "Had to make it look good, man."

"And you," Bucky said, gesturing at Steve, "you have got to stop blowing my mind by being all physically weak and pathetic and then suddenly showing up like this."

Steve folded his arms over his chest, which he belatedly realized was still uncovered. "I was old, not pathetic," he defended, but Bucky had a point; he wasn't keen on this becoming a habit. "Besides, you can talk, you keep turning up with a different number of arms."

Bucky glanced reflexively to where the worms had entirely regrown his missing arm. "Yeah, this uh—this was unexpected." At that, his gaze flickered up to where Tony was hovering by Steve's elbow.

Tony's arms were crossed and this was probably the wrong time for Steve to realize that the last time Tony had probably seen Bucky Barnes this close was in Siberia, when Steve's cowardice and desperation had led to one of the biggest regrets in Steve's whole life. To apologetically also steal Pepper's word, shit.

"Glad you got here safe," Tony said, tersely.

Bucky's face did something complicated. "Thanks for the save. I'm not the biggest fan of being brainwashed."

Tony's face was tight but he nodded.

Steve shifted awkwardly. This tension was his fault.

Bucky kept talking, though, looking between the four of them in open confusion. "Honestly, I thought you'd all be happier in general to see another Avenger," Bucky said. "It means we found you? And we have a plan to get you out?"

"We're...distracted," Steve squinted. "Sorry, Buck. Yeah, it's great to see you."

Bucky frowned like he didn't believe him.

"So what's the plan?" Natasha asked, her gaze hard.

"Straight down to business, okay," Bucky blinked. "Right. We were able to detain a couple of Xandarians who had attended the shows here a few times. Found out some things. Had to break
their Control Discs, though, that was kind of wild—" He tapped at the Disc in his own skull. "—
guess it's why it was so hard to find information about what was going on. If someone talks, these
things electrocute you."

Steve glanced briefly at Tony. "Did that happen with the guy you kidnapped?"

"He only got electrocuted a little bit," Tony squinted and couldn't quite meet Steve's gaze, so Steve
didn't have to ask to know that was an understatement.

"We looked at how to get in and out of this place and it turns out there's a single point of entrance
and exit," Bucky said, "the Gate that locks the Negative Zone to the normal flow of space-time."

"That's what we thought too," Natasha murmured.

"So the plan is there are two plans, one easier, one not so much," Bucky said, leaning against the
wall and trying to look at each of them equally for short spells of time.

"I like the sound of easy," Pietro offered.

Bucky smiled. "Me too. Now, because Steve got the nanobot trackers here, we can locate the Gate
now, wherever it goes. But the Gate is essentially locked from both sides, so we need to knock out
the power on this side before the Avengers can open it on their side. But we didn't know whether
you had any facility to do that."

"If the force-field during the Melee gets knocked out, it would take out the generators from the
backlash," Tony said, slowly. "We'd have twenty minutes before the back-up generators kick back in."

"Great," Bucky said, unaware of the current of terror running between everyone else in the room,
because that information was actually horrific, if Thanos beat them to it. "Excellent. So all we need
to do is amend your LAXE morse code signal to give them a date or time you can manage it and
they'll be sure to be waiting on the other side."

"Complicated but could be possible," Tony said, doing his best to sound emotionless. "Indulge me.
What's the difficult plan?"

"If it turned out you couldn't take the power out from this side, or if we can't get the date or time to
them, then they'll automatically go for the back-up plan," Bucky said. "We're liaising with Charles
Xavier at the moment to borrow one of his teachers, a mutant who goes by the name of Storm."

"A mutant?" Natasha picked up on the term quickly.

Steve winced. "We haven't had time to cover some of the...more incendiary incidents of the last
eight years on our end." He wrinkled his mouth apologetically. "But essentially, the mutants are
what we used to call enhanced."

Pietro's mouth wobbled. "So I'm a mutant? Huh."

"Storm can control electricity. We've done the math. If we can connect her physically to the door,
we're pretty sure she can reach through the dormant connection and leach the electricity from
here." Bucky squinted. "They'll automatically go for that option if they don't hear from us. So
fourteen days after I arrived here, whatever happened, we'd be outta this place."

Bucky beamed and spread his hands like he was presenting something marvelous to them.
"If all the energy goes down, would the Champion be able to get out too?" Steve couldn't help but keep his voice low when he asked that, even though there was no reason to. It felt like asking the question out loud would irredeemably break something.

Natasha's eyes were wide with worry. Tony frowned, like he was thinking it through in his head, adding two and two together repeatedly and constantly coming up with a four that could swallow them whole.

Bucky stared at them. "Why aren't you happy about this?" He dropped his voice. "I risked my life to get you this info. Got punched in the 'nads by Shang-Chi for the privilege, too; I gotta tell you, I'm pleased those gross worms fixed everything."

Tony frowned, turned away and paced into the center of the room, shaking his head. "We should consider getting a message out to get them to stand down." He shook his head uselessly.

"Maybe there's some way we can permanently disconnect the Negative Zone from the rest of the universe," Natasha said.

Steve looked to Tony for his reaction to that, but Tony had paced too far away for Steve to see his face, just the lines of tension in his shoulders and back that Steve identified with.

"You said the Grandmaster fixed the Gate at a particular point in time," Steve said. "Could it be unmoored?"

"Um, okay, so this is not the response I expected to my triumphant the cavalry is here message."

Bucky continued staring, like they were all talking dense science. "Why would we be doing that?" He turned to Steve, his face a mash-up of anger and confusion. "Steve, why would we be even thinking of that as a plan?"

"There's..." Steve tried to phrase it delicately, "...a snafu in the plan."

Bucky snorted. "Isn't there always?"

Steve kept his gaze level. "It's bad, Buck. Real bad."

Bucky sobered, his face falling. Steve took a deep breath and started to talk.

It was only as Steve had kicked off his sandals and gone down in the sand, Tony instantly moving in toward his chest and Natasha lying across Tony's back, that Bucky made a soft noise in the back of his throat, and Steve realized how actually weird their sleeping arrangements might look to an outsider.

Steve hadn't really been here all that long either, relatively speaking, but he'd been here long enough that he knew he couldn't survive the nights any other way. He heard Bucky open his mouth and pre-empted it. "We had worse during the war, Buck," Steve said, somewhat tiredly. He didn't want to hear this necessary way of spending the night criticized. He didn't think he could bear it. "Just shut up and deal with it. Unless you like being cold."

"Captain, my Captain," Bucky said, a note of disbelief in his tone, but Steve could see well enough to see Bucky carefully lie down somewhere next to Pietro. Steve frowned and turned his face away. He still felt weird, like Bucky was judging them.

Bucky hadn't seen Thanos. He hadn't felt that utter despair they all had. Steve had grazed the iceberg, seen the barest fragment of what Tony, Natasha, and Pietro had been suffering for years. It
was no wonder that Vision had become so odd in his decapitated state. There was no easy way to survive this place.

At least Bucky seemed to understand some of their current dilemma, even if he hadn't quite internalized yet how bad it could be. Bucky had been one of the Snapped during the Decimation, so he didn't even get to see how bad things were in those years. It had been such a dark time. Steve had run as far as a new timeline to get away from all the terrible memories associated with the Infinity War, but he hadn't been able to escape it for a second.

He was glad in a way that Bucky didn't understand the full gravity of the situation, even though he'd readily agreed to go with plan A for now, and work with them toward figuring out how to crush Thanos' head during the next Melee.

There were fewer nightmares that night, though, or fewer remembered ones; Steve woke up as Tony's little spoon, his own arms gripped tightly around the arm Tony had laced around his waist. In that small surreal space between being awake and asleep, it felt like Tony was anchoring him to the waking world.

"If you've ever trusted me on anything," Steve murmured to Bucky as they got to their feet when the bugs summoned them to breakfast, "do not ask where the meat comes from."

Bucky pulled a face and nodded.

When Topaz came with the assignments, all five Avengers were handed envelopes, so Steve assumed they'd be fighting together until he actually opened it.

Steve looked down at the paper and quirked an eyebrow at the assignment. "Match: ONE SUN. TAG TEAM BATTLE. IRON MAN; THE CAPTAIN; THE WINTER SOLDIER versus YON-ROGG; KILLMONGER; QUEEN HELA. 3X3 Battle to the DEATH; VICTORIOUS TEAM WILL BE SPARED."

It could be worse, he supposed. All three provided fairly quick deaths and the timing meant that they would have enough time to prepare Bucky with what to expect. He looked over at Pietro and Natasha.

"Nat and I are double-teaming… Crossbones and Humbug," Pietro read out from his paper, squinting. "Who's Humbug?"

Steve glanced up and over to the forcefield and actually saw the villain in question. He supposed that was the answer to if a new Tenebrae was going to be introduced.

"Woah, he's dead?" Bucky nodded appreciatively. "Who we putting money on for that one? Shang-Chi? Spider-Man?"

"Could be problematic," Steve said and nodded at Tony. "Humbug uses an exo-suit and one of the powers included in that is metal manipulation."

Tony nodded. "Guess it can't be as bad as when Melter was here."

"Melter was here, huh? I guess I'm the one who sent him here," Bucky winced. "Sorry, man. I had to knock him through that window, he melted my favorite arm." Bucky squinted again at his whole arm. "I'm never getting used to this."

"I can chop it off again for you if you like," Pietro offered. "Or the Stylist would in a heartbeat. I mean, the worms would grow it back, but you can always re-chop off a limb."
"Thanks for that delightful meal-worthy conversation topic, Quickie," Natasha said, pulling a face at what remained of her meat.

"The Stylist wanted me to grow my hair again," Bucky scowled. "Firm nope."

Steve muffled a grin at Bucky's indignant expression and was sad for nearly the first time since coming here that he didn't have access to a camera.

While seeing their sleeping room through Bucky's eyes had been uncomfortable, watching him take in the rest of the facility—while dutifully also pretending in public to be a mindwiped warrior happy to perform for the Grandmaster—was almost amusing. Especially in the shower, when Yondu happily performed his daily routine, smirking at Bucky, and then Groot ambled by and shed a whole bunch of leaves on Bucky's head.

Bucky was still grumbling by the time they reached the workshop.

Steve tried to distract him by running through a brief precis of what to expect in a match against Hela, Yon-Rogg, and Killmonger. Of the three of them, Hela was the problem. Steve had seen some of Hela's combat now, and honestly, she worried him. There was a reason she was the Queen of the Tenebrael fighters. She was impatient, volatile, ambitious. Dangerous. She had enhanced everything, speed, strength, durability, agility. She didn't even have to carry weapons. Her necroswords, which could cut everything, grew from her own body. She could produce a variety of deadly, strong weapons or armor from her body. She was a master combatant. Basically, if Thanos didn't exist, she could easily be the real Champion of Death.

Bucky sat down on the trunk and listened to Steve's rambling, which was nice. Tony was busy doing something his armor; it looked like he was repairing some of the scratches Nebula had put in the metal. Natasha started to do her yoga routine, while Pietro briefly disappeared to go see the Stylist to get more glitter for his lightning bolt.

"Anything else interesting you want to tell me?" Bucky asked, inclining his head in Tony's direction.

Steve followed the direction of Bucky's sly grin and scowled. Bucky knew how he felt about Tony now, but only because it had been a brief part of their discussion the night before Steve left to return the Infinity Stones. Steve had been keen for Bucky to understand that he wasn't abandoning Bucky; he was living up to something he felt he had to do, something he couldn't do in a world without Tony in it.

Bucky and he hadn't talked about Steve's tragic crush on Tony after Steve's return to the timeline, even though Bucky was the only person who knew most of the story of Steve's last eight decades. Steve knew he'd owed Bucky that tale, even if it had taken a while for him to choke out all of it. That stolen life had many wonderful parts, but the sad bits… Steve sometimes still felt like he was choking on them. So for Bucky to be hinting at it now…

"There's been even more footage of this place floating around the black markets," Bucky said, swinging his legs and staring dubiously at the bed in the corner of the workshop.

Steve followed his gaze and tried his best not to blush. Bucky turned his gaze to Steve with a smile and Steve shuffled in embarrassment; Bucky hadn't turned psychic while Steve was away, had he?

"Turns out there's a lot of people very interested in this terribly romantic couple who fight to the death for each other."
Steve stared at Bucky blankly until he realized why Bucky was waggling his eyebrows. He grimaced. "It was—a ploy. I needed to distract him so he wouldn't stop me from jumping—uh, somewhere dubious." He shuffled uncomfortably, unaware of what exactly Bucky had seen in the bootleg footage.

"Sure," Bucky said. "I often stick my tongue down someone's throat to *distract* them."

"To be fair," Tony said without looking up from his tinkering, "to rate it as a distraction, it was distracting. I was very distracted."

"Carol says the entire galaxy is shipping you two," Bucky said.

Tony squinted. "Nice. That's nice."

Steve frowned. "What's shipping?"

"I'm gonna tell him," Bucky whispered to Natasha.

Natasha glared at him. "Don't you dare."

"I hate to change the topic," Tony lied loudly, glaring like he was daring any of them to call him on the fact he was blatantly changing the subject, "but we need to work on one of the biggest snags in our current plan while we can."

"No, don't say snag," Natasha said, rounding on him with a horrified look. "Last time you said *snag*, I got eaten by Fenris wolf. *Alive*."

Tony winced. "Could be worse than that."

Steve really didn't like the sound of that. "Do we need Pietro for this?"

"Do we need Pietro for *what*?" Pietro said, suddenly standing by Steve's elbow and holding a giant jar of gloopy glitter. He beamed at Steve, deeply enjoying the fact that Steve would probably never adjust to his power.

"Snag with the grand plan," Natasha groused.

"Shit, no," Pietro's face fell. "Last time anyone used the word snag—"

"Natasha got eaten by a wolf?" Bucky interrupted.

Pietro shook his head. "I got squashed by the Devil Hydrasaur."

"We had some early snags figuring out how the arena worked," Tony said, pulling a face.

"How about you stop using the word snag?" Natasha suggested.

"I would," Tony said, "if we didn't have two newer snags to worry about."

"Oh, god," Pietro sank to the floor. "*Two* snags."

"I told you last night before we went to sleep that there would be a hiccup to sort out," Tony said, his tone somewhat mild.

Natasha frowned. "And you said you'd think about how to solve it because it's a technical issue."
"Well, I did think about it. I just don't exactly love the solution in my head," Tony said. "So I'm bringing it to the table so we can—discuss options." Tony looked uncomfortable. Steve didn't blame him. He was unsettled by it too. If it was bad enough a problem for Tony to be asking for help, this quickly, then it was bad. "We know our friends the Avengers are coming in twelve days if we don't send a signal out. And we can stop that if we send them out a date and time."

"But we don't actually know when the next Melee would be," Natasha said. "We never know—" She sagged. "We never know until nearer the time."

"And it probably won't be in the next fourteen days," Pietro said.

"You got out the world LAXE," Steve said, slowly. "Could we get out the word WAIT? I think they'd understand that."

"CGOZ on the same rot 20," Natasha murmured, as used to decrypting ciphers on the fly as Steve was. "Three extra beats?"

"Shouldn't attract attention with that slight a change," Tony said. "The signal runs constantly anyway."

"Then we can amend it to the date and time as soon as we do know?" Bucky suggested.

"Sometimes we only get a few hours warning," Pietro said. He glanced at Bucky skeptically. "Would the Avengers pick up on a change so quickly?"

Bucky nodded. "Queen Shuri's constantly monitoring the soundwaves. I'm sure they will."

"Queen Shuri?" Natasha's eyebrows lurched up. "What happened to King T'Challa?"

"Namor," Bucky said, heavily.

"I already figured out he's no more," Natasha snapped, her eyes narrowed. She had been fond of the Wakandans, Steve remembered. There was so much he hadn't been able to tell them yet.

"Namor," Bucky enunciated. "The stroppy entitled manipulative whiny King of Atlantis who seems to think like Steve here that shirts are optional."

Steve narrowed his eyes and crossed the floor to pick up his tunic.

"T'Challa's alive, just dethroned," Steve muttered as Natasha visibly relaxed at that news.

"Well, that's one snag maybe unsnagged," Tony said. "Still got another fun one to figure out, though. To amend the signal, we need access to the satellite. And to get to that satellite—"

He shuddered.

"I… don't think I like it when the smartest guy in the room can't finish a sentence," Bucky said.

Natasha sighed heavily. "When we established that signal originally, we had Vision, whole and full."

"It's fine," Tony said. "I've figured out time travel before when that should have been impossible." He grinned, showing all his teeth, but Steve noticed that the smile didn't reach his expressive eyes. "I'm sure with a little bit of time I can figure out how to walk through walls."

There was a long moment where they all stared at each other helplessly.
"We'll figure it out," Natasha said. "But first you three have a fight to get to."

"Oh yeah," Tony said, and he crossed around the table to wrap an arm around a surprised Bucky's shoulder. "Let's go and die again in the sand like animals, eh?"

Bucky pulled a face at him. "Maybe I'd win against those three clowns you told me about. A woman who grows blades out of her body; I've definitely dated worse."

"Dying's part of the plan, Buck," Steve said, heavily. "Let's get dressed and I'll fill you in."

"This place just keeps getting better and better," Bucky sighed.

Bucky hadn't been given a new outfit by the Costumer yet, but Hrhumhuhr had helpfully ripped off his opposite sleeve so both of his arms were bare. Pip had also warmed to Bucky's Brooklyn tones and given him a crossbow to work with that he could sling over his back, a pouch full of bolts, a pair of wicked daggers, and a wicked double-ended spear that Bucky immediately elegantly spun around like he was an expert.

Pip probably liked Bucky better, which was definitely unfair, because when Bucky had seen Steve up-close in his arena uniform, it was a good thing that Tony had the sound suppression field up—Bucky laughed for a good minute.

"You look ridiculous," Bucky wheezed.

Steve glared at him. "I thought you'd seen footage of me here," he muttered.

"I only saw it in blurry, blocky footage," Bucky said, shaking his head with an amused grin. "That's certainly a good look on you, Rogers."

"Shut up," Steve muttered, kind of mortified all over again.

"Definitely see why you keep wanting to rip parts of it off," Bucky said, tilting his head considerably.


"Or maybe a single sock, painted to look like his metal arm," Tony suggested, winking at him before lowering his faceplate.

Steve muffled a laugh. The sound field suppressor Tony used for a short spell in the Cold Room before every fight might hide the noises they made, but the bugs could still see their faces, and the Captain probably wouldn't be laughing before a serious fight.

Out on the sand, Kaecilius was finishing slicing up a massive wolf. That must be the Fenris Wolf that Natasha mentioned. Steve winced at the size of its teeth, immediately picturing being eaten alive by it, and he was glad that Kaecilius was winning against it. Not that he particularly liked Kaecilius, more for the fact that he didn't like to picture anyone getting chewed up alive by a giant wolf.

"Hela can take us out on her own," Tony said. "So if you two want to take out Yon-Rogg and Killmonger before we take her on seriously, feel free."

"It would make it look like we're trying to stay popular," Steve said, shrugged. "It would look suspicious if we weren't trying to be entertaining."
There wasn't any real point in wooing the crowd for popularity's sake, because like it or not, everything would be over by the next Melee anyway if Thanos got his way. But the Grandmaster would notice a lack of enthusiasm and they needed to make sure there wasn't anything in their behavior that warranted closer scrutiny.

With that in mind, as the bars lowered, Steve took off at a run, so he could get in a good series of tumbling before reaching the weirdness of today's arena: sand in a ring around a structure made up of cubes that were built up like an uneven mountain. Steve had his ax back, which he appreciated.

The force-field that bisected the arena to separate Einherjar from Tenebrae neatly cut the cube structure in half. Hela was already up at the top of the pile, her branching helmet spreading up as she basked under the roar of the crowd. Steve's blood was pumping, almost too loudly to hear the Grandmaster introduce them. He was always like this on the edge of a difficult fight, but this tension was soured with the dread of what they had to do.

They needed to be stronger to defeat Thanos. So they needed to die as much as possible, because each worming made you stronger. Steve knew it. He just didn't know how he was supposed to cope with deliberately battling across an arena knowing he might have to watch Tony and Bucky die.

Well, Steve supposed he could always die first. And from the way Hela smiled widely at him when she realized he was staring at her, it didn't seem like she was unopposed to granting this particular wish. He could taunt her, he realized. Get her to focus on him sooner. If he was engaged with fighting Hela, he wouldn't have spare energy to be worried about anyone else.

"Hey, Hela," Steve called. "King Thor sends his regards."

"You're a lunatic, Rogers," Bucky called over, shifting his grip on his weapons as Hela let out a frustrated hiss and stared daggers at Steve. "Forgot how much I liked that."

As soon as the Grandmaster finished talking and dropped the force-field, Hela did leap forward, but Tony was ready; he must have been quickly charging his Uni-Beam because he unleashed it full force on her right from the start. Hela let out a yelp and toppled backward in a way that might almost be funny if Killmonger didn't immediately crest the top of a cube far to her right and launch himself with a flying kick at Steve's head.

Maybe the theme of this match was giving them three fighters with a particular grudge against Steve, because he certainly felt like the center of their attacks for the first few minutes of the battle. Bucky and Yon-Rogg in particular seemed to be battling very intensely, but then Steve remembered vaguely that Bucky had dealt with some Kree warriors in that last messy skirmish with the rogue Skrull Veranke, and so he supposed it made sense that Bucky might be more familiar with Kree fighting styles.

Hela didn't care that Killmonger was trying to hog Steve's attention, nor that she was the target of many of Tony's best repulsor blasts; she leaped over the top of Killmonger's head, smashing the guy who was supposed to be her ally to one side. Although that might not have been the dismissive blow it might have seemed, because like T'Challa's Black Panther gear, Killmonger's suit seemed to absorb and store kinetic energy too. Still, Steve had to work pretty hard to protect himself with his shield; Hela was a formidable force, relentless in her kicks and hits and swipes.

Steve almost thought she was playing with him, which would have made him feel nauseated if he had any space to do anything but react, but Hela's attacks were so exact and fatiguing that it was all Steve could do to stay mostly upright. He was vaguely aware of Bucky at his back, keeping him safe from Killmonger's advances. Steve gritted his teeth, forced by Hela into a purely defensive
position, her flurry of swipes and stabs not allowing any space to attack.

Tony came to his salvation on that front, unleashing a heavy uni-beam blast that separated Hela from Steve long enough for Steve to at least heave in a breath. Steve wasn't expecting to see Tony actually land in the sand, shaking one gauntlet out so it deployed on of those golden spears that had killed Steve; that death felt like it had happened years ago now, not weeks.

The world went oddly quiet and Steve glanced at Tony in shock. Tony hadn't used the silence suppression field before, not on an open field. This wasn't a Battle Royale, so they would be heard without it, Steve supposed. Tony snapped his faceplate down. That was smart; the cameras that broadcast the fight on large screens around the crowd wouldn't be able to see Tony's mouth move.

"Don't say anything," Tony said. Steve didn't even nod, because that would make it more obvious that Tony had said something. "Trust me. Win this match."

Steve forced himself not to respond, but he did tighten his grip on his shield. This was the second time in a very short time that combination of words had been employed together. The last time was for Natasha to reveal that Thanos knew how to escape the Melee force-field too. Steve wondered how unlucky they could be, if Tony had also discovered something that meant derailing their current plans. If Tony had something so important he couldn't wait the day it would take for the worms to heal him...

Tony barreled forward in a spinning motion with his spear which drove Hela back into the cubes, smashing her in hard enough that the structure cracked a little, three of the cubes visibly cracking. Steve wondered if the cubes were as fragile as the ones they'd used in the water the other day.

Perhaps he could test that. Steve raised his shield and threw it at one of the cubes, holding up his hand to catch the rebound, and he was pleased to see that the cube he hit did seem to crack in half, although it seemed to be held up by the intact cubes around it.

He was less pleased to see that his little experiment had drawn Killmonger's attention.

Steve was the wrong person to battle Killmonger with his shield, because the accelerated speed of it when thrown gave Killmonger an excess of kinetic force to store in his suit; Bucky with his close-range weapons might be a better choice. Steve made a brief gesture to Bucky and Bucky nodded. This was an old strategy, even if Bucky used to use a gun and not a crossbow.

Steve really was the wrong person to battle Killmonger with his shield, but the important part to that was that Killmonger knew it too, which was knowledge Steve could use. Subverting people's expectations was Steve's favorite battle strategy. Killmonger's sexy-Halloween-Black-Panther-esque suit might absorb kinetic energy, but Steve knew from experience that his face was not afforded the same protection. All it took to get the right angle was for Steve to back up like he was trying to get away from Killmonger, and Killmonger's arrogance meant he couldn't resist trying to capitalize on this perceived weakness.

It was almost the same strategy Steve and Tony had used to take out Killian and Rumlow; because Bucky was starting to stalk towards Yon-Rogg, Killmonger wasn't expecting to be hit by him.

The crossbow bolt that managed to skewer Killmonger right in the throat was testament to that.

Killmonger gurgled and Steve didn't hesitate in smashing his shield forward horizontally, pushing the bolt in the rest of the way, and Steve didn't even look back. He was vaguely aware of Killmonger swaying and falling into the sand, grabbing at his throat, but Steve pushed all thought of him out of his mind for now. Killmonger wasn't a threat anymore, but Yon-Rogg and Hela were.
Not knowing why he was fighting so hard to win undercut the tension of the fight for Steve like an uneasy thrum, but he pushed that aside as best as he could. This was good practice. In the Melee, they would have to try to defeat Thanos, but staying alive during the process was more important than it had ever been before. They needed to know they could both defeat Thanos and survive the attempt. And it wouldn't be just Thanos too. There was no guarantee the Tenebrae wouldn't turn against them at any point in the battle, aiming to score brownie points with the crowd, or simply to gain revenge in an obstacle-free environment.

Morgan was right. Hope wasn't a plan. Even increased strength meant nothing if there was no plan to go with it. They had talked about how Hela could one day be stopped, so Steve assumed it must now be the plan. And the plan for taking out Hela hinged on her being the sole target of their focus. Which meant Yon-Rogg had to die first and Steve had to hope that Tony could fend Hela off long enough to keep her occupied so he and Bucky could do that.

Yon-Rogg was being as annoying as his reputation, though, easily slithering over the cubes, using the varying heights of them to his advantage. The pyramid of cubes wasn't a straight-up slope; the cubes were almost a maze on their own, about eight feet in every direction, an awkward size for easy navigation. The ones in the water the other day had been larger.

It took Bucky using his crossbow to herd Yon-Rogg in one direction to finally corner him somewhere helpful; Yon-Rogg ducked the ax swing from Steve, but wasn't expecting to get the shield launched at his knees moments later, nor the elegant flash of Bucky's spear digging into his side. Yon-Rogg tried to push off the blade but Bucky relentlessly shoved and kept shoving until Yon-Rogg went limp.

The whiteness of the cubes was a problem, both with the way the sunlight bounced from them, almost blinding from some angles, and from the way they looked with blood flooding across them. Steve knew the image of that would stay with him, as stubborn as some of the other terrible memories that lived in his brain.

Hope wasn't a plan, but Steve had been hoping, desperately, that Tony could fend off Hela long enough until he and Bucky could come and help. Unfortunately, when Steve looked up to see what was going on, it was too late, and Steve let out a noise he couldn't suppress, one that made Bucky look at him sharply to see if Steve was hurt.

Tony unleashed his uni-beam on her, close-up; it didn't seem to do much but cause a chunk of her green skintight costume to smoke. In response, she reached a fist out to grab him. When the bright light of the uni-beam faded away, Steve saw the result: Hela was holding Tony up by the throat. The throat of his armor, anyway, which maybe wasn't so bad, but she also had a sword extended to him. Extended, but not penetrating the armor. Not yet. Steve knew exactly why she was hesitating, standing at the top of the cubes again, holding up Tony to the sun, and staring down at Steve. She was clearly taunting him. Come and get him.

Steve's heart was pounding loudly in his ears and he might have lost it entirely, if he didn't see Tony trying to kick at her, still alive for now. Hela seemed patient, content to wait. Probably meaning to make Steve think he could save Tony, before crushing that hope at the last minute. She was a flashy bully, at the end of the day, and if Steve knew something, it was how to fight a bully.
Steve's heart was pounding loudly in have lost it entirely, if he didn't see Tony alive for now. Hela seemed patient, cc meaning to make Steve think he cou crushing that hope at just the last m flashier bully, at the end of the day something, it was how to i
He had a little bit of time and that was all Steve needed to know.

He spun his ax consideringly. Bucky drew up alongside him.

"Why do I feel like you're about to do something really dumb?" Bucky murmured.

Steve muffled the grin he wanted to make. "Because you know me too well," he murmured back, before quickly whispering his plan and handing his shield over to Bucky.

He didn't hesitate any further, leaping up onto the nearest cube. He smiled up at Hela, holding the eye contact like he was faking bravado, when really, he wanted all her attention on him.

Steve kept his climbing pace as even as possible. Twenty cubes between them. She could reach him after he climbed another twelve, more easily so after fifteen. He watched her carefully, willing to increase his speed if it looked like her grip on Tony was going to change, or if it looked like she was going to stab him. Steve had no doubt one of her wicked blades could pierce Tony's armor. He held his nerve, continuing to leap up each cube after a brief pause, stretching out the time so Bucky could be in place for what they needed to do.

Steve climbed onto the twelfth cube and felt like he was holding his breath. Cautiously he pushed himself up onto the thirteenth cube. He was sweating. He could feel the sun's heat at this height above the arena floor more clearly, or maybe it was hotter because the fight had been going on for so long now. All these bloodthirsty people in the audience must be feeling like they were getting their money's worth. But Steve didn't have the space in his heart to hate the audience today. Not when Hela was trying to threaten Tony, just to taunt Steve. His blood wasn't thumping in his ears now, it was roaring.

Steve looked at the next cube. Hela's gaze slid to it too. Her smirk widened, trying to see if Steve would dare to move closer. He shifted his weight. Her hand on the blade edging toward Tony tightened. Normally when Steve played chicken with a villain, it didn't feel like his whole heart
was resting against the tip of a blade, but it did this time.

If Hela killed Tony right now, Steve would rip her into so many pieces with his bare hands that even the worms here would have trouble putting her back together. It was just a shame that Steve knew so personally that even being blown to pieces by an explosion didn't stop the worms.

Steve kept his breathing even as he clambered up onto the fourteenth cube. Hela's smile widened even more, like that was what she expected him to do. She could reach Steve know if she stretched, but she would have to let go of Tony and they both knew that.

Steve stared at the fifteenth cube. The one where she could easily reach him. Hela stared at it too, coolly. Steve put his hand softly onto the edge of it, counted to five in his head, and then couldn't wait any longer.

"Now!" Steve yelled, and that was when Bucky acted, bodily hurling something large and heavy at the pyramid stack of cubes.

It worked even better than Steve expected. Killmonger was dead, but his suit still absorbed kinetic energy, storing it up to be expelled in one blast; Bucky had successfully slammed the shield into Killmonger's suit powerfully enough that when Bucky hurled Killmonger's suit-clad corpse at the cube pyramid, the stored energy was magnified to cause a substantial amount of chaos and devastation.

It was enough to shatter the entire construction of cubes. Of course, it meant Steve tumbled down with the whole mess as it shattered, but more importantly, Hela was surprised by it too, falling from her feet and having nothing underfoot to regain her balance. Bucky had calculated it perfectly; the uneven pyramid of cubes was fully tumbling down, a chaotic mess, cubes cracking and falling and rolling apart.

It was the opening they were looking for. The surprise caused her to drop Tony, and Tony instantly fired his boot jets in unison, kicking her solidly so that her downward momentum from the crumbling pyramid caused her to tumble down the side of the debris and land hard in the sand in a sprawl of limbs.

Steve himself landed on a sharp edge of a cube and pain blossomed hard across his side. It would bruise, but that was a concern for later; for now, he had to help stop Hela. He had to struggle to get up, because lying on a massive pile of shattered cube shards wasn't easy, and he couldn't get his balance. The process must look extremely undignified. He ended up having to roll over them, getting a few more bruises in the process, but none of that mattered. Every moment felt like a painful second too long.

When he finally got onto the sand, he took one second to gather himself and started running around the messy pile of broken cubes that was obscuring the noisy fight happening at the other side. To his greatest relief, Bucky and Tony were still alive. Bucky was fending off shards that Hela was flinging at him, deflecting them with his two-headed spear. Tony was flying high, taunting Hela that she couldn't reach him.

Steve had lost his ax when the pyramid crumbled, but he saw it lying in the sand ahead. He scooped it up as he ran to join in and as he got closer, Bucky threw him back the shield. Steve caught it, nodded grimly, and got to work.

The fight for the next few minutes was more of a blur. They couldn't openly discuss strategy, but they had previously talked about it and agreed that at some point Hela would be good practice for taking on Thanos. Hold her down and go for the head. Steve had taken quite a hard tumble when
Bucky had collapsed the pyramid; he hoped that wasn't why it was so easy in his head to swap Hela's branching, elegant lethality for Thanos' brute strength and power.

In his mind’s eye, it was Thanos in the sand. Thanos who'd held Tony up by the neck, taunting him. Thanos who they had to learn how to take down.

Renewed by the energy of his anger, of his desire to avenge all the pain caused by Thanos, Steve could hear himself screaming as he ran forward, determined to get this done. It seemed like Bucky and Tony were both enhanced by his energy too and their attacks on Hela doubled. And maybe Steve was awash with fury, but he wasn't lost to his bloodlust quite yet, so when the strategy to her defeat slotted into place, he was conscious enough to go for it.

Hela overreached to knock Bucky's spear out of his hand, but then had to lurch backward when Bucky immediately launched a dagger in her direction. She smiled that he'd missed, but hadn't noticed he was a distraction, to get her in the right place for Tony to blast at the sand, and she wasn't expecting to lose the ground under her feet twice.

They moved quickly to pin her down. Steve threw his ax over to Bucky, and Bucky slammed it down so it was half embedded in Hela's thigh, half dug into the sand. She was able to kick it out and she instantly tried to respond, but that small delay was enough; Tony bodily wrapped himself around both of her arms, pinning them into her sides, digging his boots and gauntlets either side of her into the sand. He jolted as she tried to expel shards into him, the armor blocking them as he held firm. When Hela tried to kick up, more projectiles coming from her feet, Bucky was there, stabbing both of his daggers through them to the sand below. He was vicious and didn't hold back.

With Bucky and Tony holding her down, Steve spun his shield between both hands so he had a good grip on it, and he slammed it down into Hela's head. Hela instantly grew a protective barrier around her head, building up the armor there, but Tony and Bucky held her down. Under Steve's continued attack, every layer of armor cracked and shattered, faster than she could produce it.

Steve kept on smashing his shield down into Hela's head, breathing hard and trying to pretend his eyes didn't well up as he did it again and again. In his head, it was Thanos in the sand. Thanos' head he was crushing with the corner of his shield. Only it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. This would never be over.

He only stopped when he felt a strong hand turn him away. Steve nearly smashed his shield into the person stopping him as an automatic reaction; he lowered his shield in shame when he saw Bucky looking at him with such open sympathy that Steve felt as cracked open as Hela's skull. Only instead of blood and brain, Steve was showing too much of himself, the softest part inside. The part that was the easiest to bruise and injure from the briefest exposure.

Bucky tugged him away from Hela's body, making sure her corpse was out of his line of sight.

"Stop," Bucky said softly, his worried eyes scraping Steve's face. "It's done. It's over, Stevie."

Bucky only called him Stevie when Steve got into one of his states. It had been a long time since Bucky had had to. Steve thought the serum had burned it out of him, or maybe he'd matured with age, but apparently it was still there, lodged as deeply in him as so many other of his traits.


Steve wasn't entirely sure how the three of them managed to survive the battle mostly unscathed. There would be a substantial set of bruises on him come morning, Steve knew, but he wouldn't voluntarily go for the worms for something like that. Bucky was limping, heading back toward the
bars with a cursory few waves to the crowd at Tony's quick urging, so it was probably the same for him.

Tony lowered down onto the sand and flipped up his faceplate, his suit collapsing down into the short form so he could stand triumphantly on the sand. As he saluted the crowd, Steve could see a small trickle of blood on Tony's face. Steve almost forgot the crowd, even though there was a warm wall of sound all around them, people cheering their violent victory, in favor of putting his thumb on Tony's cheek, checking for the injury. It looked like a small abrasion near Tony's forehead.

"Kiss it better?" Tony said, clearly joking, but Steve leaned in and pressed his lips close to the injury, so he wouldn't hurt Tony more by aggravating the cut with the brief kiss.

When Steve pulled away, Tony wrinkled his nose.

"Definitely not enough," Tony decided, and took the lead, curving a hand around Steve's neck and tugging him in for a proper kiss. Steve thought it would end when it usually did, but Tony held him there for longer, lazily licking into Steve's mouth until Steve responded in kind. There were echoes of that other kiss in this one, the one on the bed, when Steve had nearly clean forgotten it was supposed to be an act. "There we go," Tony murmured, snatchin a briefer kiss from him before leaning back with a satisfied smile.

Steve's lips were almost buzzing as Tony pulled away and he was glad Bucky was a distance away by now, because he was sure that he was showing too much on his face.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Tony asked, before whirring back up into the air to spin and show off for the crowd.

Steve laughed up at him, because even after all that, Tony was alive and safe, and he could celebrate that, even if he was also a little disturbed by his own lack of control. This wasn't the first time. He still remembered the blood on him from his fight with Kaecilius, the way he nearly kept going after Kaecilius had died. This was a concern. Something he needed to figure out. Losing control wasn't good.

There was time to worry about that later. Right now, Steve had something else to do: namely, ripping off his shirt for a screaming crowd.

Pietro and Natasha were already in the Cold Room, their match up next. Natasha's face drew tight on seeing the three of them coming toward the bars.

Tony went through first and pretended to stumble, activating the sound suppression field briefly enough to hiss, "Win. Meet us in the workshop as soon as you can. Win." He deactivated the field even as he straightened, shooting Natasha an ambiguous glare. "Fight for the Grandmaster's honor, Avengers," Tony said loudly, nodding briefly at the guard bugs as he strode past them into the hallway.

Steve nodded tensely at both Natasha and Pietro and hurried after Tony, Bucky trailing behind. He heard the bars raise up for Natasha and Pietro's match, and heard the bars clang back down into the ground a few moments later, the sound ringing out of the Cold Room to float faintly into the hallway, as if it was following them.

In Steve's opinion, it was a very final-sounding noise.

Steve opened his mouth to ask as soon as they got through into the safety of the workshop, but
Tony shook his head.

"Not until I'm sure." Tony muttered, hurrying off to his worktop, shedding pieces of his armor as he moved.

Steve could read between the lines—they weren't even going to talk about it until the whole team were there. Steve supposed that made sense. Sometimes it was hard enough to say something scary once.

Instead of talking, Steve stripped his uniform off methodically, breaking the task apart into each individual movement needed, focusing on completing each part thoroughly. Left boot. Right boot. Left poleyn. Right poleyn. Left spaulder. *Keep yourself busy after grief, boy.* Chester Phillips advised him once, a fragment of an old memory from Steve's stolen timeline. *It's the only way to survive something as terrible as this.*

Steve's hands had trembled then, but he kept them strong now. He'd learned how to be strong and steady when people were taken from him, because that's what happened when you loved someone.

The world took them from you, one at a time.

Steve took a deep breath and continued getting undressed. Right spaulder. Vambrace. Leather harness. Skirt. Underpants. He wished he didn't have to drop his shield off with Pip after the match, because he felt like he could do with it right now. He knew the vibranium was vulnerable; pre-worms Thanos had crushed it in one blow, but still—it was like Shellhead, the little doll Sarah had cherished from being small. Steve had never told her who Shellhead was, only that he was important. That he would protect her. That he would keep her safe and fight any monsters that came for her in the night. Like that doll, Steve's shield was just an item at the end of the day, but it was an item that provided emotional comfort. Strength when the world was too terrifying to face alone.

Steve was breathing too fast and he was gripping the white underpants between his hands much too tightly. He'd almost ripped them without thinking. He swallowed and methodically dressed, swapping the uniform underpants for looser brown ones, pulling the soft brown pants over the top before tugging the tunic over his head and slipping his feet into his sandals. The regular clothes for all of them were all the same boring shade of brown.

Steve wished for a moment that it was a lighter shade so he could lie down in the sand and disappear.

When he looked back, Tony and Bucky were changed into brown clothing too. Tony had Vision out, plugged into the beaten-up laptop Tony only occasionally seemed to use, but Bucky was sitting on the trunk, staring down at his hands, looking a little perturbed. Steve didn't blame him. This whole place was a mindfuck if you stopped and thought about it for a moment too long.

And Bucky was starting to figure that out too.

Steve crossed the floor, folded his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall right by where Bucky was sitting. He looked down at Bucky, giving him enough time to talk on his own, but after an awkward stretch of silence, it seemed like Steve was going to have to break the silence.

He chose to do it by gently nudging Bucky's shoulder with his elbow. Bucky blinked a few times, slow, like he was just waking up, and then he smiled a little on seeing it was Steve.

"So how you holding up?" Steve tried to keep his voice gentle.
"Fine," Bucky said, automatically, which meant he was lying. At Steve's skeptical glance Bucky winced. "I will be fine," he amended. "Guess I'm still a bit wigged out at the whole arm thing." He wrinkled his nose. "The amount of time I've spent whining for this back and it turns out that I actually miss my metal arm. Huh."

"I can fix that," Tony said, looking up from the laptop.

"Yeah, Maximoff offered to chop it off too," Bucky said, rolling his eyes and waggling his left arm. "Think I'll pass. Thanks, though."

Tony furrowed his eyebrows. "Please, it’s not like I’m on Justin Hammer’s level. I can build you something that goes over your arm. You'll hardly know the difference."

Bucky blinked several times, squinting up at Tony. "You would do that for me?"

Absolutely no question of if he could. They all knew if Tony Stark said he could make something, he could do it. Even the laws of physics weren't entirely safe from his amazing brain.

Tony gave him a flat look. "You're on my team."

"Yeah, but—"

"You're on my team," Tony repeated, rolling his eyes. "C'mon, Barnes, while this code compiles; up, lemme measure."

Bucky looked like he was going to protest again, but Tony glared, like there was no room to protest, and Bucky shrugged and got up, dutifully holding out his arm. Tony had a piece of string and started writing measurements directly on the wall with one of their many stolen pieces of chalk from the gym.

"I appreciate this," Bucky said, and if his voice was a little stiff, Tony didn't call him on it.

"No problem," Tony said.

Steve sank down onto the trunk Bucky had vacated, earning him a wry head shake from Bucky for the cheekiness of it. Tony was already picking out tools, humming to himself under his breath. Steve listened. It sounded like it was maybe AC/DC. Music. Yeah, that was definitely something that was sorely missing from this place.

If this escape went to plan, Tony would get to hear Morgan sing and play piano. That was definitely a pleasant thought.

"You're smiling like an idiot," Bucky murmured, tapping Steve's shoulder to get his attention. "And drooling."

"He was probably drooling," Natasha said from the doorway, pushing the door open and stalking moodily across the floor. She had a wicked shiner already on her right eye; like Steve, she'd skipped the worms for such a minor hit like that. Pietro trailed behind her, walking at a regular pace. His shorts were somewhat ripped and his lightning bolt was smeared in a splatter of blood. Obviously they'd skipped the shower too for now. Steve got up from the trunk and quickly handed them over a change of clothing, which Pietro rapidly distributed to Natasha.
"Okay, out with it," Natasha said, almost violently stripping where she was stood, efficiently yanking her skimpy clothing off and roughly getting re-dressed in the boring brown clothing. Bucky made a small yelp and started staring with great interest at the ceiling. "Why did our plan get diverted again?"

"We have even more of a—" Tony started.

"I swear if you say the word snag I will gut you in the next match we share," Natasha jabbed a finger at him.

"—hiccup in the plan," Tony continued, squinting. He shook his head softly. "I just didn't—I didn't want to sit on this information. I've seen what happens when we sit on information. Nothing good happens." He flickered a brief glance at Bucky and then down at his laptop screen. "That's what keeps us human, which in a place like this is nearly more important than anything: we make mistakes, but we learn from them."

Steve looked at Tony, picking up on both the awkward undercurrent to the words and the practical implication of them. To no one's surprise, that was the element he leaned in on. "What did you learn?"

"I've been running as many scans as I can since the last Melee," Tony said, slowly. "Vizh and I were able to isolate the energy spike that was made when Heimdall's sword came into contact with my Uni-beam and the shield. It had a very particular signature." He looked up again. "A signature my scans picked up again in the arena, when my Uni-beam met your shield and one of Hela's necroswords."

Steve exhaled hard. To say that was not a good discovery was an understatement.

"I don't quite understand the implication," Bucky said.

"It means that we don't just have to keep Thanos from Heimdall's sword," Natasha smiled. There was no amusement in it. "It means that Thanos has access to the same—residual Asgardian energy—in someone else. So in a Melee, we'd actually have to protect Hela, somehow. While stopping her from killing us."

"Well, at least we're the only ones with access to vibranium," Pietro said, glancing apologetically at Steve.

"Killmonger's claws aren't vibranium, are they?" Bucky asked, looking down at both of his hands, automatically clenched into clawed shapes.

Tony shook his head. "I've had to pick out claws from my armor more than once. If they're vibranium, I'll eat Pietro's shorts."

"That searing mental image aside," Pietro said, "it means we still have a back-up plan. Leave the shield outside the forcefield, let Thanos kill us all… I mean, the Avengers won't be able to open the gate it we don't take out the power, so hopefully we'd be revived by the worms in time to change the message, let them know not to bring Storm to the party?"

"Awful lot of hopefully in that plan," Natasha said.

"It's still better than the alternative," Pietro defended.

"He has a point," Tony sighed. "We do have the only vibranium on-site. Even Thanos would be relying on that. So we have an option."
"We might not," Steve said, surprising even himself. He stopped, frowning heavily. A thought had come and gone in his brain, a whisper of a fact, too fast.

"Steve?" Tony prompted, his voice soft.

Steve frowned. Something had pinged in the back of his mind. Something he knew was important. He never forgot anything, but with over a century of conscious knowledge, his brain was a massive repository of information; sometimes recall—when it was a piece of information that was slight or small—took longer than he wanted to admit.

Over the decades, Steve had learned to pay attention when he knew something before he was actively able to remember exactly why he knew it. This was definitely one of those situations.


A fragment of a conversation from his first day here. Topaz had muttered it when they had been talking about his shield:

*We know from the Black Dwarf already that vibranium is nasty stuff; if the force-field fails I wouldn't want to pay the compensation due if he decapitated a couple of audience members.*

Topaz had different nicknames for all of them. Frosty for Loki. Silver for Pietro. Tin can for Tony. If Black Dwarf was one of the Children of Thanos...

Hoping he was wrong, Steve looked up, hoping he didn't look as highly-strung about this possibility as he felt. "You ever recall Topaz calling any of the Four Stooges by a nickname? Maybe, Black Dwarf or something." Maybe if he made it sound casual, it would be less true.

"Oh, yeah," Pietro nodded, making Steve's stomach sink. "The big guy with the hammer. I guess the dwarf part is ironic, huh?"

"Cull Obsidian," Natasha said. Her quick, clever eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Steve made a sucking noise with his teeth that he wasn't quite fully in control of.

"Because my first day here, in the throne room, the Grandmaster and Topaz were discussing how the vibranium in my shield might cause a force-field failure. I'm sorry, I didn't make the connection sooner. I was disoriented, and then I was brainwashed—" No, they were excuses, and excuses didn't matter. Steve exhaled roughly and tried again. "They said... they knew already from the Black Dwarf that vibranium was *nasty stuff.*"

It was like the oxygen was being sucked from the room for a long moment.

"One day," Tony said, the first to find his voice, wobbly as it was, "one of our plans will go smoothly."

"And you'll think you're dreaming and try and put your head under a train," Pietro rolled his eyes. At the several glances he received, Pietro frowned. "Did you guys not see that movie?"

"Was that the one with Leonardo DiCaprio?" Steve asked, because a moment this terrible maybe needed a tiny bit of humor if they were all to survive and not end up screaming into the void for the rest of their short existences.

"Yeah," Pietro said, his eyes lighting up. "And the kid from the sitcom with the aliens."
"Yeah, I saw that movie." Steve nodded. "I liked the bit with the dinosaurs."

The excitement in Pietro's face disappeared in favor of deep confusion. "What?"

Steve squinted back. "Where the dinosaurs ate Tom Hardy's character?"

"Oh my god, are you still telling those dumb jokes?" Bucky raised his eyebrows and stared at Steve, before shaking his head. "Did he try and convince you yet that in his timeline, Darth Mutter was the big villain of Star Wars?"

"Star Trek," Steve corrected him, instantly. "Darth Mutter was Leia's mother in Star Trek."

"I'll Star Trek you," Bucky said, nonsensically. "Especially because you're changing the subject. I'm kinda missing something here. Again. Something scary. And you're not going to hide it from me with some dumb fake cultural references."

Steve looked at Bucky miserably. Steve had made the connection. He'd been the one to think of it too late. He needed to be the one to say the words out loud.

"If Thanos already has access to vibranium, he doesn't need my shield," Steve said, slowly. "And with what Tony discovered today, it means he doesn't even need Heimdall. He can use Hela and Cull Obsidian's hammer, and—probably any number of the other Tenebrae—to get out without us. We've lost all the leverage we had to delay him."

Bucky shut his eyes and shuddered. "I really did not think I'd get here and wish I'd let Rhodey come."

Tony looked up, his face suddenly tense. Steve didn't need him to say anything; it was clear on his face. If Rhodey had come and gone through the worms, his body would have been restored to what it used to be. He could walk without the frame Tony had built him. But they had to destroy the worms, even if they could benefit countless number of people, because those people wouldn't get to live at all—or their descendants—if Thanos escaped from here.

A Thanos who could never die would be the worst thing Steve could possibly imagine, not just for the people of Earth, but for everyone.

Steve exhaled. "It also means in the final Melee we not only have to figure out how to squash the biggest bad we've ever faced, but we suddenly have a lot more moving components to keep separate until we need to combine them. Because if the force-field goes down while Thanos is still alive—"

"He'll start to raze the universe again," Bucky filled in, his voice monotone.

"And he'll start by leveling Earth to the ground, like he promised," Natasha added. For a moment, there was the ghost of her catatonic self on her face, but Steve put his hand on her forearm, stilling that storm, although for how long, Steve couldn't tell.

He wouldn't blame her for it, if she couldn't take this. This was too much for anyone to take alone. But they weren't alone. They were together. They had time to come up with a plan, and that's what they needed to focus on.

"We can do this," Steve insisted, trying not to wonder who exactly he was trying to convince. "We just have to stick to plan." He kept his voice firm, faking strength where it maybe didn't really exist. "And while we don't have a full plan yet, we will. But we need to keep moving forward on the parts of the plan we do have. The parts of the plan we know we need."
"Changing the satellite signal," Bucky said.

"Where's the chalk?" Steve held out a hand.

"I get all shivery when you order me around," Tony handed him the chalk with a smirk.

Steve rolled his eyes and picked a large section of the wall, starting to draw neat lines and boxes, using all the parts of the arena he knew. He then held out the chalk to Natasha. "You can fill in the gaps."

Natasha smiled in realization and took the chalk, expanding the diagram out, keeping Steve's firm lines in place and starting to add dotted lines.

"Well, that's pretty," Pietro said, "but why are we drawing random shapes on the wall?"

"It's a map," Bucky said. Steve nodded at him. He was hopeful it was going to work out to be a bit more useful map than when they'd been testing the regular arena force-field, although Steve suspected that was an invention of Tony's to make Natasha and Pietro feel like they were being useful, to help them keep hope in the idea of escape more than actually being helpful.

He kept that theory to himself. Hope on its own may not be a plan, but he wasn't about to go around killing it for no good reason.

"The satellite interface panel is here," Natasha said, drawing a star on the map. "We need thirty minutes to connect it up and change it."

"I can work to shave that down," Tony offered. "It's an amendment to the signal, not a brand new code. I'm pretty sure I can get it down to ten."

"Can we use a lookout system?" Steve asked, doubtfully.

"The bugs patrol too much for that. Give me a couple of days, I can try and map out the movements of the bugs more thoroughly," Pietro nodded. "I get a lot more freedom around the hallways than you do."

"He's been running errands for the bugs for the last few years," Tony murmured.

"They think I'm in for it the extra berry shakes," Pietro said. "But I give them to Groot. Even I can't drink that many."

Steve nodded. Pietro's familiarity with them made more sense now.

"The access to it is entirely from the Tenebrae side of the arena," Natasha explained. "But even with Pietro's wider access to the bugs, we can't get there. There's force-fields, security, patrols—"

She exhaled. "We can walk through some of the hallways without drawing much attention, but getting to the satellite panel..."

"And how exactly did you get to it last time?" Steve asked.

"Vision phased through a twelve-foot bulkhead, here," Natasha pointed at the map where there was a solid block of color, diagonally opposite to the Costumer's room. "Then he just had to get across the hallway and into the vent systems and it was easy from there."

"Even then it was risky," Pietro said. "The bugs do a regular circuit of all the hallways, like clockwork. And even Vision couldn't tell when passing through that bulkhead what he was going
to see when he came out. There was no way of getting a signal through it."

"I tried everything," Tony said, which really did speak volumes, because if Tony Stark couldn't figure something out, it really might be impossible with the equipment and materials they had available to them.

"And we can't access the satellite anywhere else?" Bucky asked.

Pietro pulled a face. "Not unless you're hiding a spaceship somewhere on you."

"Sorry, I left that in my other pants," Bucky quipped.

"There's a back-up option if we can't figure it out otherwise, one we talked about last time rather than risk Vision getting caught, but—" Natasha blew out her cheeks. "I don't think there are any of the Tenebrae that we could trust not to sell us out to the Grandmaster for a little extra meat at night or a free pass from the Melee vote."

"We'll put that thought aside for the moment," Steve said, softly. "Vision did make it successfully last time?"

"We timed it up to the right second," Pietro said. "I had to put in a last-second distraction, but even at my best—I was able to delay a pair of bugs for about ten seconds."

"It was enough time, but it was cutting it close," Natasha sighed.

"It took us about two days last time to map out all the timings," Tony said. "Pietro, if you make that your priority. Nat, if you can explore the vents, see if anything's changed. I'll work with Vision on shaving down the time needed to change the signal and mask the change. Steve, if you and Bucky can get familiar with the layout. You two have different expertise to us. Maybe a military mind will see something we missed."

"Of course," Bucky said.

"Perhaps I might have an idea," a voice chirped out of seemingly nowhere.

In another place and time, Steve would have laughed himself hoarse at the way Bucky's eyes went almost comically wide, but it was a testament to the heavy pressure of the situation that all Steve managed was a small, weary smirk.

"Yeah?" Tony crouched down to pick up Vision's box and put him carefully on the table. Natasha flipped open the door.

"That is...incredibly unnerving," Bucky muttered, forever irritated whenever he visibly lost his composure.

"As weird as it is for you to see me as only a head, please be assured it is infinitely weirder for me, Mr. Barnes," Vision said. His eyes swiveled to Natasha. "If you could pick me and my box up for a moment, and hold me over the worktop, about half a foot. I'd appreciate it."

Curious, Natasha did that, picking up the box and lifting it the required amount. "Now what do you want me to do?"

"Drop me," Vision stared up at her placidly. "And the box, please."

"Drop you," Natasha repeated.
"Please," Vision said.

Sharing a confused look with Tony, Natasha pulled a face and did as Vision asked. Steve was obviously expecting the box to hit the worktop with a thump, but that's not what happened. Vision hit the floor with a thump, and tumbled out of the box onto his nose.

For a moment there was a desperate scramble as Pietro blurred Vision back into the box and then lifted the box back up onto the table.

Bucky leaned forward with a frown and casually wrapped on the worktop table with a knuckle. It was still as solid as ever.

"Woah, okay," Bucky breathed.

"I have been working on extending my phasing field, for want of an easier term for you to understand," Vision said. "With conscious thought, I believe I could extend it a little distance."

"How little?" Tony asked, looking like he was already doing calculations in his brain. Or maybe that was his default expression.

Vision hummed for a moment. "Perhaps enough to envelop a whole other person."

Natasha's eyes were bright. "So we could just train someone else to work the interface."

"We can work out all the options," Steve said. "Find out our best shot." He glanced at Vision. "That's good work, Vision."

"Thank you, Captain," Vision said. "I'll work on developing this further." The corner of his mouth quirked. "I must admit, I had quite given up on the idea of ever returning home, but the idea has taken root in me. Even if you couldn't fix my body, I would very much like to see Earth again." His eyes flickered up to Pietro. "And Wanda."

"Agreed," Pietro nodded, looking around at all of them. "I think we can do this. I really do."

Steve smiled, and although all of them nodded, there was a brief moment where Tony glanced at his wrist briefly with an expression that made something in Steve tense up, nearly as much as he had when Thanos had appeared in that large Melee doorway.

Tony blanked that expression away rapidly, smiling and winking at Vision as he moved him back to his favorite corner to resume working on the task, but Steve was unsettled.

One more question to add to his pile. And from the way even Natasha seemed unaware of Tony's brief flash of obvious worry, Steve realized that Tony was keeping something a secret still. Steve had to fight to keep his own face calm. He trusted Tony. If there was a secret he was keeping from the others, Steve had to trust there was a reason.

But it wouldn't stop him from doing his best to wrangle it out of Tony, as quickly as he could get Tony alone again. The last time Tony had kept a secret from the rest of the Avengers, it had been because he'd been in his lab, building what would turn out to be the suit he intended to die in.

There was no way Steve could allow that to happen again. Still, he put a pin in it for now. If he confronted Tony in front of the others, Tony would clam up or change the subject or find a reasonable-sounding lie. Steve needed to confront him later, in private. Tony was too much like Morgan; sometimes when it came to approaching emotional things face-on, you had to approach him from the side. Sneak attack.
Pietro walked past Steve to stare up at the map.

"We'll probably have to wipe this," Pietro pulled a face at the chalk diagram. "That's almost a pity."

Steve stared at it carefully. "It's fine," he said, and moved past him to begin wiping it from the wall, smoothing the chalk away with his fingers. He grinned at Pietro. "Super-serum gave me a photographic memory. I can just redraw it when we need it."

"Well, in that case," Pietro said, and a blur later, the wall was clean again and Pietro was holding up his brown tunic sleeve, a white smudge running on it from wrist to elbow. He grinned. "We all have our strengths, Cap."

"And it's combining those strengths that's gonna make this work," Steve said.

"Well, when you say it like that, it makes escaping almost sound easy," Bucky said.

Natasha shuddered, the movement barely perceptible. Steve glanced at her questioningly.

"Easy has almost as bad a connotation here as the word snag," she explained.

Steve remembered the story about the downsides of the word *snag*, recalled the size of Fenris wolf's teeth, and winced appropriately.

"Is that it for now?" Natasha raised one eyebrow. "No other revelations? Anyone else hiding any other skill that might help? Because otherwise I might have time to do a bit of reconnaissance now before dinner." She pulled a grim face. "Maybe there's something we did miss last time."

"I can help keep lookout," Pietro offered.

Tony nodded at both of them. "Stay safe. I'll see you at dinner if not before."

Natasha nodded and left with Pietro.

Steve watched them go, still feeling awful that it had taken him this long to make the vibranium connection.

It made things harder. It didn't make them impossible.

"So what do you do after matches in this place?" Bucky said, briefly eyeing the bed with a slightly worried expression.

"Well, for today I can show you around, get you familiar with the layout," Steve said. "There's a good gym, too, if you have any excess energy from that fight to work off."

"Sounds fun," Bucky wrinkled his nose. Then he glanced at Tony. "Do you, uh, wanna come with us?"

"I've got to set Vision off with this problem. And I need to start work on that arm of yours," Tony exhaled and shut one eye, glancing briefly at Bucky. "What kind of features do you want? Knife arm? Flamethrower arm? Giant Hulk arm?"

Bucky whistled. "You could do that?"

"It's a pity we don't actually *have* a Hulk here," Steve said, sighing. He'd feel better about going after Thanos with Bruce in his full Hulk form by his side.
"No," Tony said, his head tilting to one side, "we don't have a Hulk." His expression was frozen. On anyone else, Steve might have thought they'd been stunned into silence, but this was Tony, and Steve knew what that expression meant.

Tony had figured out something.

Tony had a plan.

Steve waited patiently, shushing Bucky when the silence stretched out awkwardly, intently staring at Tony, giving him space to say what he'd figured out.

"We don't have a Hulk to take on Thanos," Tony's eyes brightened and locked onto Steve's as he smiled. "But... we might have an army."
Part IX: DISTRACTION

Oh, pardon that in crowds awhile
I waste one thought I owe to thee,
And self-condemn'd, appear to smile,
Unfaithful to thy memory

*Lord Byron—If sometimes in the haunts of men*

Tony wasn't back from his fight yet.

It wasn't a particular worry, at least not for the heist. The timing of Tony's battle didn't matter much. Neither did the timing technically need Tony to survive. The plan hinged more on Bucky, Pietro, and Steve finishing their fights on time. Steve would feel better if Tony was around, that was all.

"He'll be fine," Natasha said.

Steve froze mid-pace and eyeballed Natasha where she was lithely stretching in her favorite corner. "I didn't say anything," he said. She snapped open one eye balefully and he sagged. "Are you sure extensive experience with the worms doesn't make you psychic?"

"Can't count anything out, I suppose," Natasha said, closing her eyes again and taking a deep breath.

Steve folded his arms and glared at the empty wall, realizing too late that it was his pacing that had betrayed him. He felt itchy, no worms to explain it this time. Plans that relied on such tight timing never sat easily with him. It didn't help that the last time they planned a heist, Natasha died, and Steve and Tony nearly got stranded in the 1970s. Steve's restless monsters lived under his skin and were multiplying.

This wasn't a time heist. This was a simple one. A satellite heist. Steve wasn't a big fan of the name, but it was hard to say no to Pietro and Bucky when they'd both expressed excitement at being part of a heist.

The heist had to be done between breakfast and dinner, because that was the only time the Einherjar were allowed out of the sleeping room. It had to be done during the period of the day where there were matches on, because the bug guard were re-diverted to cover that. Outside of those times, the short patrol cycle made it too difficult.

Today was a high stakes day. Every hour they put off broadcasting the new signal was a risk. It had already been a week since Bucky's arrival and this had been the first opportunity they had to try and change the signal. How many more opportunities would they even get?

Natasha had to do the complicated part of the heist. Her timings to get through the vents with
Vision unseen by the relentless bug patrols were exact.

Steve's job was relatively simple. His scheduled match was at Half-After Suns. His task was not to die too quickly. He had to keep the fight going for long enough so that Pietro and Bucky's match would start at One Suns as scheduled; if a warrior died too soon, they would sometimes send out the next warriors scheduled early, to stop the crowd from rioting, Steve assumed.

Twenty minutes into Pietro and Bucky’s battle was when the heist would properly begin; their job was to make their match last at least that much time. That would ensure even if the following two matches were cut short, Natasha would have enough time to finish the task and be in place to get to the Cold Room for her own match.

During One Sun and Last Sun, there was always a slightly stretched-out patrol cycle. Pietro had kept his ears close to the ground and found out that some audience members would skip the last four matches of the day in order to queue up early for the gate, so they could catch some sort of public transport in time, and bugs got diverted to deal with that. Steve maybe shouldn't find it so reassuring that even alien cultures had trouble getting their public transport to run perfectly. It was an unanticipated taste of home; it felt weird to get such a familiar feeling in a horribly alien environment.

That would be Natasha's opportunity to work, and work fast. There was a vent system she could get to at the beginning of One Sun, skirting a couple of patrols on the way; she couldn't afford to be seen carrying anything large through the halls and Vision was too big to hide. She could get to the vent opening near the Costumers twenty minutes after setting off. After that, she would need to get across the wide-open hallway there without being seen. Then Vision could utilize his now-perfected expanded field to hopefully let Natasha walk straight through that twelve-foot bulkhead. Ten minutes to connect the interface and upload the new code to be broadcast, and then she could reverse the journey, drop Vision off in the vent system to be retrieved as soon as possible, and come out in a much less monitored hallway where she could plausibly head straight to the Cold Room to wait for her own match at Last Sun to begin.

The Control Discs could be used to locate them within the arena, too. But Pietro confirmed they didn't check their locations unless they weren't at the Cold Room before their match with at least ten minutes to spare. Which would only be a problem if Steve, Pietro, and Bucky couldn't keep their own matches running on schedule.

Just one glimpse of Natasha and Vision would crash the whole plan down around their ears. Even if Natasha got the signal out and broadcasting, if she was caught on the return journey, there was the possibility the signal would be swept for and found.

When Steve wondered out loud if planning to put the original signal out was as difficult, Tony looked so haunted that Steve wanted to swallow his words back and pretend he'd never uttered them.

The LAXE signal had only, by Carol's account, been broadcasting for a year. Or they'd only discovered it a year ago. Steve wasn't sure exactly how long ago the original signal went out, because they said they sent it when Vision was whole, and that they sent it out years ago. They hadn't given Steve a finite number, which made him suspect they were doing so out of kindness. The idea of that signal, going out for years, and never having proof… Thinking for years that maybe it hadn't been heard yet, that they went to all that risk for nothing… Steve already felt guilty that it had been going for at least a year. Perhaps knowing the real figure would rattle him too deeply.

It was reasonable to be anxious. This was an important step. If it went poorly, they wouldn't be
able to stop Thanos. Well. There was maybe one way. Steve had a sneaking suspicion about the secret Tony was keeping. He hoped he was wrong about it. He hoped to find out soon, but with their focus on the satellite heist, Steve hadn't yet had the opportunity to find out for sure.

The door clattered open with a thump and both Steve and Natasha were instantly in fighting pose.

"Nice," Tony said. He was carrying his armor in its fully collapsed form in both hands.

Steve and Natasha shared a brief, embarrassed look and relaxed their stances. Steve felt glad that he wasn't the only one on edge.

"How'd it go?" Natasha asked, ambling over to Tony's table.

"Same shit, different day," Tony shrugged, putting the suit down. He grimaced at Natasha. "We might be eating Bilgesnipe for dinner, though."

Steve swallowed back his soft sigh of relief that Tony was okay. He knew he was staring, but he couldn't stop himself. Tony's hair was wet and his tunic clung damply to his shoulders; Steve's eyes were drawn to the rise and fall of Tony's chest.

Maybe Steve would never be able to fully really believe Tony was alive. He had to clench his hand into a fist to resist the urge to cross the room and take Tony's wrist, to feel his heartbeat under his own fingers. Sometimes in this place, Steve stayed awake just listening to him breathe. He knew it was irrational, but couldn't stop doing it anyway.

"Isn't it time for you to get ready to go?" Natasha asked, startling Steve out of his reverie.

Steve's gaze lurched to meet hers. The only emotion visible on her face was amusement at the target of his distraction. Tony himself seemed thankfully oblivious to Steve's attention, preoccupied with his armor. Steve knew amusement wasn't the only emotion Natasha was feeling, though. She was the epitome of an iceberg, only the merest hint on view, hiding a deceptively deep and deadly form beneath the surface.

Steve couldn't find any words, his throat a knot of feelings, so he nodded and started to change into his arena costume. Natasha smiled at him once he was done, but it was a little tight at the edges. He didn't blame her. This plan hinged mostly on her, after all.

Steve didn't wish her luck as he left. He meant to, but whenever he tried to find the words, even good luck sounded too much like see you in a minute.

Heimdall stalked ahead to the force-field, leaning on his sword and staring out across the arena at the gate where the Tenebrae would emerge.

The layout was a familiar one, boulders spotted around the sand, this time peppered with the occasional stalagmite. There was a clear enough path, though, so Steve took a run-up and did as dramatic a series of tumbles that he could in the space.

Heimdall's eyes slid only slightly toward Steve, as Steve spun his ax and drew up alongside him. "I hope you do not expect me to kiss you when we win this battle."

"I'll try not to be too disappointed," Steve said.

As the gate opposite opened, Ronan and Malekith emerging and striding dramatically across the sand, Steve noticed Heimdall's eyes lingering on Malekith, clearly wanting to go after him
personally. Steve didn't mind. Ronan was probably his preferred combatant anyway.

"Do you have a preference?" Heimdall asked, his mouth barely moving as he talked.

"Yeah," Steve said, and because Heimdall's golden eyes were still stuck tracking Malekith, he opted for flippant, "I'd prefer to go back inside, maybe take a nap."

The corner of Heimdall's mouth lifted a little.

As the Grandmaster's face appeared high in the sky, Steve ignored the way his stomach was churning. He tuned out the Grandmaster's rambling introduction, focusing instead on the battle ahead of him.

The aim was to make the battle last the right length of time; the outcome was less important. This landscape would aid in that. As the Grandmaster droned on, Steve plotted out the layout of the boulders in his head and was confident he could make the battle last long enough. He had to. His team was counting on him. The whole universe was.

So far into his arena journey, Steve had dispatched a couple of foes early in battle. He couldn't afford to let his guard down for a second, lest Ronan or Malekith be the same way inclined. There had been plenty a sports game lost in history by a goal scored in the first few seconds of the match while the goaltender's guard was down, believing it impossible. The last thing Steve needed in this battle was for it to happen to him. Heimdall could possibly still draw out the fight, but Steve wouldn't be happy dying before his twenty minutes were up.

Ronan was the perfect target, mostly because of the bigger fight unavoidably coming their way. Steve knew during the Melee itself that Ronan should also be focused on the Champion of Death, because that was the lure of the Melee; if you personally took the Champion down, you took his place.

But while Steve wouldn't be fighting Ronan during the Melee, he would be fighting the Children of Thanos, and Ronan was almost a perfect combination of them.

The hammer was the main reason for this. Cull Obsidian's ever-shifting weapon mostly took the form of a hammer, even though it could transform into other weapons at will. Ronan could move it as gracefully and fluidly as Corvus Glaive could move his pike, and it also emitted fields as deadly as the ones wielded by Ebony Maw. Ronan's close-combat skills were easily on a par with Proxima Midnight's. Figuring out how to survive while fighting Ronan would be excellent practice.

Surviving that Melee was going to be more important than ever; the plans to take the worms permanently out of the equation would make death as permanent as it was supposed to be.

Steve's life or death made no difference to the heist, as long as he did his part and made this fight last long enough. Still, Steve kind of thought he wanted to win. He was willing to sacrifice a little strength later for the time now to be available to assist if anything went wrong with the heist. Besides, he was sure no amount of worming would catch him up to the strength he'd actually need to be, in order to be any good in a one-on-one fight with Thanos, as much as Steve's fists itched to be the one to punch Thanos right in his ugly, blocky face.

As soon as the fight started, it seemed like while Ronan was quite content to play cat-and-house with Steve, Malekith the Accursed seemed pretty intent on ending the battle quickly. He was probably insulted that he was given the Einherjar who were subordinates; Heimdall to King Odin, Steve to Iron Man. It probably made him sore to serve under Hela, too. It was to Steve's great disappointment that only a minute had passed before he ended up facing Malekith one-on-one.
Malekith might want the fight to be over quickly, but his regenerating worked against his agenda, and for Steve's. Malekith couldn't understand why Steve kept smirking when his skin grew back. Steve used as many delaying tactics as he could, hiding behind boulders, using his shield to bounce patterns throughout them, calculating the most dramatic angles at his disposal. Steve didn't have an internal clock, but he was still pretty sure he'd delayed Malekith about six minutes by the time he ended up hitting where Heimdall was standing, and they stood back-to-back for a minute, defending blows from Ronan and Malekith, both deciding to take the fight close-up rather than at a distance.

As Malekith kept kicking and slicing at him, and Ronan sent unrelenting energy waves at Heimdall that the watchman was able to block with his giant sword, Steve realized he needed to do something, or they would be stuck in a stalemate. Delaying the battle too long was almost as dangerous for Natasha as ending it sooner because it might alter the bug patrols too much. Steve was grumpy for a moment that he wasn't battling with Tony, because Tony would understand what Steve was planning to do. Or Steve could quietly mutter *quack* and Tony would immediately know.

Heimdall, however, didn't have any experience in fighting with Steve. Tony barely had any, and they'd moved so well together during the Battle of New York, but Steve couldn't sulk about that now. Right now, he and Heimdall were being penned down, and Steve needed to do something to open up the fight.

Steve gritted his teeth, held up his shield against Malekith's next slice at him with his wicked dagger, grabbed his ax by the middle of the handle, and swept it backward, low, at the same time as ducking himself. Not expecting a hit from his own ally, Heimdall was knocked to his knees, and it was perfect; with Steve ducking low too, Ronan's next blast sailed right over both of them and smacked directly into Malekith. Ronan, expecting it to hit Heimdall, looked stunned for a moment, which was just the opening Steve needed.

"Sorry," Steve yelped, grabbing Heimdall by the forearm and tugging him back up to his feet before hurling his shield at Ronan. It glanced off Ronan's head. Steve took off at a run to catch it, doing a forward roll to avoid a blast from Ronan and leaping back onto his feet at the end of it in time to grab his shield from another rebound. Ronan was as incensed by Steve's tactics as Steve hoped he would be, and he started to follow Steve, Heimdall forgotten to Malekith's attention. That was the thing about villains with Ronan's level of pride—they didn't like to be made fun of.

Steve headed for the boulders at the edge of the arena, because they were more densely packed; Ronan would have a hard time aiming his blasts or manipulative fields at Steve without a direct line of sight. He could use his weapon to fly, of course, but then he wouldn't be able to send blasts at Steve, so Ronan was forced to stay on the ground.

As soon as Steve had gauged that the match had been on for long enough, he drew himself up and focused on finishing the match; Ronan was starting to get the hang of the way Steve could bounce his shield around the boulders and stalagmites, but he seemed to think because Steve only used them, that his shield was limited to that. It left him wide open for Steve's next move.

Steve jumped up and hurled his shield in the direction of Ronan's face. Ronan ducked it easily and smirked. The rebound smacked Ronan in the back of his head hard. His shield bounced away from that blow and fell uselessly to the sand, too far away for Steve to pick up, but it had served its purpose.

Steve took a running start, jumped up onto the nearest boulder, and then hurled himself off it in a dramatic somersault, his ax extended. Ronan had stumbled enough from the shield blow that he
couldn't get out of the way and Steve was treated to the graphic sight of an ax being brought down on someone's head hard enough to split a skull wide open, and the graphic feel of various bodily viscera splashing all over him.

Pretending he wasn't too affected by the sight or the smell of what he was covered in, Steve kept hold of the ax handle and kicked Ronan's body so the blade dragged free. Steve coolly dropped and scooped up his shield and then started jogging to where Heimdall and Malekith were still battling.

Malekith only spared Steve one brief look on his approach to join in with their fight, but it was must have rattled him enough. Perhaps it was the way Steve was covered in Ronan's blood and brain matter, but the fight seemed to leech out of him and into the sand. Steve used his shield to protect Heimdall so Heimdall could go fully on the offensive, his large sword flashing in the sun. It was a matter of seconds by that point; Steve deflected the dagger while Heimdall impaled Malekith, the massive sword sliding straight through his heart.

"I never grow tired of killing him," Heimdall murmured, before slamming the blade down, brutally cutting Malekith's body in half. Steve had to fight hard not to blanch at the sight. He supposed if an enemy could regenerate, dismembering them was the only decisive way to win a battle.

Steve turned his face up to the roaring crowd and ripped off his shirt with a roar of victory he didn't feel, just so he didn't have to look at the gore at his feet. It was nice to have a good excuse.

Steve had to force himself not to rush when he left the arena, Heimdall at his side.

He nodded tensely at Bucky and Pietro, already waiting in the Cold Room. They both shot him ambiguously blank looks. They were all pretending to the Grandmaster's mind-controlled slaves. Steve tersely nodded back at them and focused on keeping his face blank. He had to, or he might start screaming.

Heimdall was efficient in the shower, shedding his complex armor so quickly that the bug guard that had arrived to turn the water on for them yelped especially loudly in horror before turning around, covering its eyes with its limbs and muttering under its breath about how disgusting humanoid nudity was.

Even as Heimdall threw on his brown tunic, picked up his armor and clanked out of there, Steve stayed longer under the water.

He felt like he would never be free of Ronan and Malekith's blood and viscera, like he would always be scrubbing it from his body. As debris fell from his hair, Steve tried to tell himself he couldn't determine the part of the body they came from, even though his brain had already identified a piece of intestine as it flowed with the shower water toward the drains. He had to fight hard not to gag.

Steve couldn't keep scrubbing himself. He was anxious to get to the workshop and see what was going on, and the bug guarding him needed to be released back to their usual work. It was that thought that spurred him out of the shower and into action, even though he still felt decidedly unclean.

He dressed rapidly and hurried out of there, carrying his arena uniform in one hand and his weapons in the other, quickly dropping by Pip's armory first to deposit them. Although Steve hadn't yet tried to go back to the workshop with his weapons in tow, Pietro had assured him that the bugs would chase him to get them to the right place, and although that was an amusing mental image, that was the last thing they needed right now.
When he entered the workshop, his tattered uniform in his hands, Steve tried to pretend his heart wasn't trying to forcibly remove itself from his chest to lurch up his throat. Describing himself as nervous was an understatement that did a disservice to the word.

"You're back," Tony said, his tone carefully neutral.

"Couldn't plausibly lose after dragging it out that long." Steve said, rubbing his spare hand through his hair like that would help it dry quickly.

If Tony knew it was a lie, he didn't call him on it; the same way Steve didn't point out the way that Tony minutely relaxed on seeing him.

"Nat get off to her start safely?" Steve asked, setting the pile of his costume down on the floor, too weary to put it away yet. Worrying took up more energy than fighting did.

Tony nodded tersely.

"I'm glad we don't have to do this again any time soon." Steve stretched his neck from side-to-side. Changing the signal once the new interface was in place was much easier than this complex heist. The original interface hadn't been designed to be changed. Steve supposed they'd thought they might soon be rescued after placing it.

Steve didn't want to think about how it must have felt, being so sure their message would be picked up. How their hope must have died a little more, day after day. The despair after the Decimation had been bad enough; enduring the same feeling again was agony beyond imagining.

This version of the message was designed to switch from CGOZ to a briefer message, TUC. Or as the Avengers should be able to translate it: NOW. It could be remotely activated, too, because while the force-field blocking them from the Tenebrae side of the arena blocked any kind of remote signal, they also knew they had an opening, particular to the Melee—Steve remembered that when the Grandmaster came in to announce the last Melee, he had dropped the force-field that separated the dining room while he made the announcement. Apparently this was a regular thing, and was the precise opening they needed; Tony could remotely amend the signal at the exact same time that the Melee was being announced.

Tony had tools and wires spread around his worktop and he was doing something with them. Trying to keep busy, Steve supposed, so that he wasn't panicking about the potential consequences of this all going wrong. Some restless monsters could be pushed aside by focusing firmly on one.

"Is that the arm for Bucky?" Steve asked.

"Yep." Tony hummed under his breath as he worked with what looked like a soldering iron. "Working on the framing at the moment." There was only a brief pause before the word framing, which meant framing probably wasn't the technical term; even in this moment of stress, Tony was translating for him. "Actually, I could probably use your help for this part."

"Sure," Steve said amiably, ambling over to the worktop. "What do you need me to do?"

"Round this side," Tony gestured at the space next to him. Steve obediently rounded the table. "Left arm. Hold it out." Steve held it out, hovering it palm down. "Palm up." Steve dutifully twisted his hand the other way. Tony was staring at him funnily when he did that.

"What?" Steve asked.

Tony stared at him wordlessly for a moment before pulling open one of the drawers and pulling out
a length of string. "You know, I get it. I was really lax with Nat for a long time. Couldn't believe she was back. But you gotta be careful. One of these days I'll ask you to do something terrible and you'll regret it. Do you really want to just say yes immediately to everything I ask?"

Steve blinked. Tony's gaze was intent and so close to his. They were close enough to be kissing, Steve thought, and tried not to think that again, lest his desire to reduce that distance to nothing be too clear on his already too-transparent face. "So are you saying I shouldn't trust you now?"

Tony exhaled. "I guess not exactly agreeing with my point immediately means there may be hope for you yet. Hold still."

Steve squinted. "And now I'm tempted to wobble my arm deliberately."

Tony showed his teeth in a brief grin. "And you would probably suffer if you did," he said, before tapping something on the table, and Steve blinked as what looked like a stream of gray particles lifted from the surface in a cloud, before settling around his forearm and interlacing into a wide cuff of metallic-appearing scales.

Steve openly stared at the cuff in fascination. No one did technology like Tony Stark did. Queen Shuri might have been producing some mind-boggling tech, filling a very necessary void for the Avengers, but Steve wasn't joking when he told Morgan that Tony's engineering was a kind of art all on its own. Shuri might be more advanced than Tony, but she didn't have his style.

Steve was already fidgety at the idea of Natasha out there in the complicated vents system, doing her part of the heist with a severed head for company. Tony's close presence as he did something intricate to the tech currently on Steve's arm only served to increase that agitation. Steve felt like he should be holding his breath.

"I know this is awkward, but it's easier once it's in place," Tony muttered, staring intently as he manipulated the metallic-looking surface with two tools that Steve couldn't name. "And using my own arm means I have to work one-handed."

"I don't mind," Steve said, although it came out a little cracked, Tony's proximity affecting him more than he'd like to admit. He couldn't help staring at Tony as he worked, and not just at the entrancing way Tony's fingers moved.

"Captain America, always willing to lend a hand." Tony flashed him a brief, cheesy grin. "I told you, I'm not Captain America anymore."

"Sure. Sam. Oh. Like Uncle Sam. I get it."

Steve pulled a considering face. "That is what Morgan calls him."

Tony paused working to stare at Steve in disbelief. "Uncle Sam? Uncle Sam?"

Steve shrugged, making sure to only move his shoulders so his arm stayed level. "Pretty much all the Avengers get Uncle or Aunt before their names. Everyone's tried to be as involved in her life as possible." Tony's gaze flickered up to Steve's patient gaze as if to check he wasn't joking. "It's the least we could do."

"Yeah, but, Uncle Sam? Does she say it with a straight face?" Tony asked, starting to work again, furrowing his brow like he was concentrating deeply.

Steve stared at Tony's profile, wondering whether it was okay to keep this conversation going. His
own kids were always a sore spot. Then again, Morgan was alive and waiting for Tony to come home. "Sometimes she smirks."

"That's my girl."

"When the Guardians call in… Quill makes it his business to tell everyone he can that he's Morgan's favorite uncle."

Tony shot him a quick look. "Please tell me that's his deluded ego talking."

"Uncle Rocket is absolutely her favorite. He's soft and lets her scratch his ears."

"Please tell me Pepper has her up-to-date on all her shots," Tony said immediately.

"Can you imagine that not being the case?"

"Guess you've got a point," Tony said. "Make a fist."

Steve did, raising his eyebrows when the metal softly restructured itself to adjust for his clenched muscles. "What happened to you adding please?"

"Aw, but you follow my orders so sweetly," Tony waggled his eyebrows lewdly.

Tony was still so close, and his fingers kept brushing against Steve's forearm as he worked. Steve was definitely a little more light-headed than he wanted to be. Would Tony kiss him back, without the threat of being discovered leaning over them? Maybe he would. Tony's fingers circled Steve's wrist lightly as he did something to the cuff, digging in a little more than maybe he needed. Like he was checking Steve's heartbeat, like Steve wanted to do to Tony, incontrovertible proof he was there and real and alive.

If that's what Tony was doing, he would have to notice that Steve's heart rate was faster than it should be. That it increased in speed with every grazing touch that Tony accidentally made while he was working on the cuff. It might have been Steve's imagination that Tony was missing the cuff with his fingertips as he worked more often than not. Steve couldn't look away. He was aware his breathing was heavier than it should be. To him, it felt like it was a roaring wave of noise, too loud not to notice, but Tony didn't say anything about it. Would he if he actually noticed?

Maybe it was all in Steve's head, but it seemed like Tony had stopped working meaningfully on the cuff. Was he closer than he was before? Steve's breathing hitched and Tony's eyes unmistakably went from Steve's visibly rising and falling chest, to Steve's mouth. Tony licked his lips and Steve almost forgot how to breathe entirely, and Tony definitely didn't miss that. A faint smile tugged at the corner of Tony's mouth that widened when he noticed Steve's gaze briefly flitting to his mouth too.

Steve was nodding. He wasn't quite sure why, but he was nodding, and Tony nodded back once, roughly, like he couldn't control it, and dropped his tools in a clatter. The arm dissolved and fell to the worktop in a rush of pieces, but neither Tony nor Steve paid any attention to the chaos; Tony's hand was cupping Steve's cheek, Steve's hands found Tony's waist, and they were kissing.

For a moment, it was off-rhythm, too-noisy exhales and an unbalanced beginning, but Tony nudged Steve into the wall behind them and Steve turned his face a little, and then it was perfect. There was heat and friction and the sounds Tony made went straight to Steve's groin. The world went hazy around his ears, narrowed down to the frantic joining of their mouths.

"Look at you," Tony breathed, breaking the kiss apart with a loud noise that might have
embarrassed Steve in another life, because it managed to sound dirty, despite this being just a kiss. Could something that felt like this be called just anything? Tony tipped their foreheads together, leaning hard into that point of connection, breathing so rapidly that Steve could feel his exhales, he could try and inhale them as his own. "I feel like I could do anything to you right now and you'd let me."

"I would," Steve said, his voice low. "Anything you wanted. If you wanted it, I'd want it too."

Tony pressed a kiss in, and laughed, one note of a laugh that seemed distinctly giddy. "Oh, I have some ideas, Mr. Rogers."

"I bet you do," Steve murmured, and kissed him again, because waiting another second seemed unbearable. It felt wrong to feel so good while his friends were out there, in danger as this was happening, but it was difficult to even hold his thoughts on them when Tony was kissing him this thoroughly. It turned out that Tony's competence in kissing was as high-level as his engineering competence.

"Bed," Tony said. "Now."

Steve nodded jerkily, backing up carefully, holding Tony up and maneuvering them both as they kissed their way across the floor. Tony's kisses were addictive, claiming. Steve shuddered, because this was going to be beyond any of his greatest dreams. He got them to the end of the bed and gently, still supporting Tony, managed to sit down, and Tony immediately threw himself up in one movement, expecting Steve to understand and get himself in position to catch him. Steve did easily, pushing himself back and adjusting his arms in one smooth movement so Tony could plant his knees either side of Steve's thighs, loop his hands around Steve's neck, and keep kissing him.

"Your balance is amazing," Tony mouthed along Steve's jaw, and after a brief look at Steve, bit the same area lightly with his teeth, laughing in actual delight when Steve shuddered at the action. Every single inch of Steve's body felt alive. "You can control every part of your body like that, can't you?"

"Not every part," Steve admitted, and Tony's hips undulated once, deliberately, his gaze locked onto Steve's at the whole time. Apparently they really were in this thing together.

Tony's smile widened. "Oh, I can tell," he said. "And believe me, I'm gonna—"

Steve never found out what was about to follow that. Because a small protracted high pitch of noise softly filled the air, and Tony stilled. Immediately. His head whipped to the door, all color fading from his face. Steve froze too, because he wasn't going to continue anything that Tony wasn't also enthusiastically into, and he followed Tony's gaze in horror.

"Purple?" Steve questioned, realizing the light above the door was pulsing purple, not the orange of the Grandmaster.

"I've been working on an early-warning system for the door," Tony said, pushing himself off Steve in one furiously fast movement, "and I had to set Pietro's further out to compensate for his speed, and—"

Steve was already on his feet too, panic cooling his body down immediately. There was no boner-killer as fast and effective as imminent doom. Doom might be the right thing in their future too, because the door opened, and a blood-splattered Pietro tumbled through.

Pietro's eyes were wild, his hair stuck every which way, and he saw Tony, and... Steve's brain
couldn't even interpret what he was seeing. Pietro was shaking, which on anyone else would be a visible tremble, but Pietro was a wet smudge of paint in every direction. It was like looking directly into a tear in the universe.

Steve didn't even need to really know *what* had gone wrong to start desperately running the numbers. As Tony approached Pietro, Steve grabbed the chalk, and headed straight for the wall, rapidly rewriting a few of the tables of numbers, quickly and roughly redrawing the map.

"C'mon, speedster, breathe. I need you to breathe," Tony urged, his voice low.

He was so good with Pietro and Natasha both, Steve thought, even as his eyes scanned the wall desperately as he marked down the timings, trying to figure out how things could fall out now, if he was to assume that Pietro and Bucky's match was over. There were two other matches scheduled before Natasha was due to take the sand, but they would take time to set up, and the bug patrols would have been impacted. At least Natasha definitely still had time to make her appointment, if they could figure this out. Hopefully.

Pietro gasped for air but stopped blurring, mostly, although he did look a little indefinite at the edges. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I couldn't stop it—I tried so hard, but we didn't know—"

"I know it's against your nature, but I need you to slow down," Tony said, holding onto Pietro's elbow and looking him in the eye. "Pietro. Please. What happened?"

Pietro hiccuped and started to ramble and while his words weren't exactly slow, they were at least coherent enough for Steve to follow. "There's some sort of—I dunno, some special guest of the Grandmaster came. A gold lady. She didn't—she didn't want me to battle. Said she couldn't see me and she'd paid a lot to see fights. The bugs got me to leave the arena. And Bucky— It was supposed to be Nebula, and Bucky could have handled that, but the gold lady wanted Nebula gone too, and Humbug came out instead—and it was over in seconds. Humbug used his exoskeleton, smashed Bucky with his own weapons—" He stared at Tony in wide-eyed horror. "I've ruined everything. I gotta—I gotta get Nat out of there before we're discovered."

"You can't," Steve said, staring at the map in horror.

"Explain that. Now." Even though his words were tinged with anger, Tony's voice was barely above a whisper, like he was worried anything louder might shatter the whole building, bring it down around their ears. If this all collapsed underneath them, he might not be far wrong.

Steve knew the anger wasn't directed at him. It was sheer panic for Natasha. "If the numbers resettle the way we thought they would with a too-short match… She's going to be seen," Steve said, shaking his head. "Here." He pointed. It was the same dangerous stretch near Hrhumhuhr's room. "Even if she manages to hold back from being spotted on the way out—" the vent in question allowed some visibility to the hallway beyond, "—there's no way she can gauge what's happening on the other side of the bulkhead."

"So we find some way to turn her back," Pietro said. "I can zip through the hallways."

Steve tried to calculate the numbers. "The vent she's in…when a match ends early, some of the bugs pile in that room there—" he gestured at the block that they assumed was some sort of staff room for some of the bug guards "—we can't be sure you wouldn't be seen. And you definitely wouldn't be able to get her out of there in time for her to get to the match."

"Maybe if Pietro passes a message to the vent exit by the costumer," Tony gestured at the right spot on the map. "She'll be stuck there a while if she realizes the patrols have changed."
"Could she phase into the costumer's room itself, we could distract Hrhumhuhr—" Pietro started.

"Those twelve eyes move independently, it's risky," Tony sighed.

"Everything's risky at this point," Steve said. "We can't eliminate risk entirely right now. Now it's a matter of figuring out a solution and minimizing the risk."

"We could get Vision to get her into the Armory, that might be possible in the time," Pietro said. "Pip only has one pair of eyes. And he might be in his workshop."

"He's still under the sway of his Control Disc," Tony said.

Steve frowns, about ready to suggest they try, because maybe they could get lucky, but then another plan flickered into life. He double-checked the numbers. Twenty seconds, was that possible? He tilted his head. That would be all she would need. If the patrol bugs on cycle 14D could be delayed by twenty seconds...

"I know that expression," Tony said. "Steve has a plan and he doesn't like it."

"What?" Pietro was a blur of panic, occasionally literally blurring. Steve pressed his mouth into a line as he thought about it. They couldn't use Pietro if he was losing control of his powers that badly. It would definitely look suspicious. "What plan?"

"I'm tired of planning a heist and then having to improvise," Steve said. He glanced at Tony, whose mouth quirked briefly in memory of how close they had been to botching their last attempt at heist improvisation. "Right here." He pointed at a corner nearby Hrhumhuhr's Costume sewing room. "If we can distract the next round of patrols, right here, no less than twenty seconds, no more than thirty, then Natasha will still have time to get across the hallway and into the bulkhead."

"Let me go," Pietro insisted. "I know some of the bugs, I can figure out something."

Steve glanced at him. Pietro was still distinctly fuzzy at the edges, glitching out completely every few seconds. "Can you stop vibrating in the next sixty seconds, though?" He hurried to the corner, opening the trunk and picked out three of the shirts Hrhumhuhr had given him that he'd ripped in battle. There was no way to carry anything large through the hallways without suspicion, but clothing wouldn't look suspicious, and even if it did and the bugs checked, they would only find shirts in Steve's hands.

"I can try," Pietro said, starting to clench his fists and trying to breathe more regularly. The hitching noises that came out of him belied that assertion.

"Hallway's three minutes away by walking," Steve nodded at the map. "Natasha will be reaching there in three and a half minutes."

Natasha had to get to that point of the hallway through the vents because she didn't have a legitimate reason to be carrying something as large as Vision's head. Vision could only do the trick long enough for two trips through the bulkhead. But if Steve could get her to the bulkhead unseen, the rest of the timings could go back to the usual schedule.

"I'm going," Steve said, heading for the door.

"Let me help you carry those," Tony said, taking one of the shirts. Steve threw him a look, but nodded. "Pietro, don't worry. We've got this. Clear the wall and wait for us to get back."

The last thing Steve saw as he closed the door behind them was Pietro's haunted, distraught
"So what's your plan?" Tony asked, keeping easy pace next to Steve.

Steve kept his face neutral as they walked along the hallway, glancing up at the hourglasses on the wall periodically. Now he could read them, he almost wished he couldn't, because he resented each drop of sand bringing Natasha one second closer to danger.

Tony brought up the silence suppression field. It was easy to tell when it was on or not because Steve had grown to realize the whole arena had the same faint hum. It must be the power generators that would collapse under the blowback if the Melee force-field was hit with the correct combination of energies. It was a key that Tony had figured out, a key to escape. It was a terrible misfortune that Thanos had figured it out too, but why wouldn't he? He was the sadistic Cassandra of his own planet, his morality desperately warped, blinding him to any idea but that the outcome justified any cost.

"Did you ever get the full story of Ragnarok from Thor?" Steve asked. He kept his posture stiff and as expressionless as possible. That was how the Captain had felt, how the Grandmaster and his crew expected him to behave. Steve hated every second of it. Sometimes disguises were freeing—he still remembered Peggy's delighted peel of sheer glee when Steve debuted his Nomad codename and corresponding outfit—but some could be frighteningly restrictive.

Tony glanced at Steve in surprise. "You want to do Get Help?"

Tony quickly rearranged his own face so that his surprise was hidden, but Steve couldn't respond immediately, because there should be a patrol of bugs around the next corner. He glanced at Tony's wrist and there was that effortless teamwork that Steve had missed every time it wasn't available; Tony immediately turned the field off.

The bugs were there, right on schedule. They did check what Steve was carrying, but on seeing the ripped fabric in their hands and the direction Steve was walking, they nodded and let Steve and Tony pass.

"More like Damsel In Distress than Get Help," Steve muttered, as soon as the silence suppression field could be turned back on.

"I wish I had my stealth armor here," Tony sighed. "It basically makes me invisible."

"Next time leave it in your will that you want to be deep-frozen in it," Steve suggested, although the idea of Tony dying again made him feel even more nauseated than he already did. His head was pounding.

Tony nodded briefly as they rounded another corner and he disconnected the field, because there were two more bugs standing at a doorway. Steve tried not to look too visibly relieved, because he wouldn't be able to explain why he was happy to see them. Especially because the real reason was he was glad they were on schedule, because it meant their plan could work.

Steve only had to distract the bugs for twenty seconds. He felt a little dizzy. Was this even possible? He glanced at an hourglass. One minute. See you in a minute. Steve's breath hitched. After they rounded the next corner, the relevant part of the hallway in view, Steve forced himself to breathe. This was it. There was no room for failure. He would not fail Natasha again. He refused to.

Natasha should be in that very vent right now. She should have been there for at least a minute. If
their timing had been on course, she would have had time on reaching it to get straight across the hallway to the bulkhead, but with the post-battle routines back on course with the arena changes, Steve knew she must have caught the back-end of the patrol that moved counter-clockwise. The fact that Steve and Tony hadn't been turned around yet meant Natasha must have seen the end of that patrol and stayed in the vent.

He wondered what she was doing. There was every chance that she was counting. Probably trying to figure out a safe way back to the workshop somehow. Trying to figure out which room she could try and cut through. Fight her way past any of the bug guards she did come across. Although then if any bodies were discovered, security would crack down and they would never get to the satellite interface at all. If Natasha was to escape from that vent, she needed to do it unseen.

Natasha was only in that vent because she trusted them. She trusted them to have her back. She'd voluntarily put herself into this bottleneck, no-way-out position because of that trust. He thought back to the Natasha he met right at the beginning, on the helicarrier. That Natasha would not be in the vents right now. That Natasha would never have let herself be cornered in a place where she'd need someone else's help to get out.

Steve would distract the appropriate patrol of bugs for the right length of time. There was no other choice.

Right as expected, a pair of bugs appeared at the end of the hallway, heading the same way as them; they would see Natasha if she emerged now. Steve could feel Tony's tension, because it echoed his own painfully. Steve's heart was pounding in fear for Natasha, in fear for all of them.

Steve and Tony were a short distance in front of the bug patrol. It was almost a game of chicken, but if Steve waited much longer, there was a patrol that would be briefly visible for a few seconds at the far end of the hallway. Only that end part of the hallway was part of their patrol, but they wouldn't hesitate to notice Natasha either.

Steve held his nerve, and as soon as they drew close to the vent Natasha was in, he dramatically tripped over his own feet.

The important thing about this fall was that Steve could control where his flailing limbs were going, and where the shirts ended up. It was probably the most slapstick moment Steve had ever been part of in his life, and he'd once seen Carol pick up Rhodey—while still in his armor—and essentially use him as a giant human-shaped baseball bat mid-battle.

In his carefully controlled chaos, Steve managed to get a shirt in one bug's face and two over the next, his foot hooking around one of the bug's lower leg segments to trip them, a hand clumsily colliding with the other bug's trident to smack him in the shirt-covered face.

Steve knew rather than saw or felt what was going on behind him: Tony quickly opening the vent from this side, closing it behind Natasha while she legged it the short distance to the bulkhead. He could picture how it looked in his mind; Tony ushering her on, and Natasha, trusting them, disappearing fully into the solid wall.

He counted the twenty seconds in his head. Had twenty seconds ever been so long before? Steve leaned up to "help" extract his own shirts, "accidentally" twisting them onto the bugs' heads more tightly. He thought he caught a glimpse of red hair in the corner of his eye and when that ghost of an image was gone, he relaxed.

If Natasha wasn't through and in place now, there was no way to save the plan anyway.
"I'm so sorry," Steve said, yanking one of his shirts away so the bug on the ground could see properly; Tony was now helping the other one. "I'm so so sorry. Please don't tell the Grandmaster I shamed him like this. Please."

"Don't touch me," the bug on the floor yelled, climbing angrily to its clawed feet. "You should be sssorry."

"I am," Steve said.

"Don't worry, as his leader, I'll punish him," Tony said, raising his voice. "To dishonor the Grandmaster in this fashion won't be ignored." He helped tug the last of the ripped shirts from the bugs, wincing at them in apology. "I'm so sorry. He's so clumsy. Honestly, I don't know what to do with him."

"I've heard what you do with him," one of the bugs muttered, looking appalled.

"It's my fault as well I guess, so I'm sorry too," Tony said, holding up one of the shirts, "I really like to rip them from him. Can't help myself."

"I'm so sorry." Steve added, looking as contrite as he could even if he didn't know how familiar bugs were with human body language.

"Ssstop apologizzzing," the second bug snarled, righting his target. "Jussst get out of our way."

Steve nodded, stepped aside and hung his head.

"Make sure you slice him right in the Malphigian tube," the first bug advised to Tony.

"I'll slice it and tie it off," Tony said.

The first bug's mouth widened in a wicked, sharp-toothed smile. "Good."

The two bugs stomped off, one of them already bemoaning how gross and stupid humans were. Steve felt like he was holding his breath until the second bug said that doing the paperwork to get Steve punished by the Grandmaster himself was too much work to bother, and that Steve was lucky that Iron Man would only stab and knot his Malphigian tube, whatever that was.

Steve exhaled hard. There was already a patrol of bugs going past one end of the hallway, and another appearing at the opposite end. This hallway was crawling with bugs. Steve wanted to stay in the area, check that normal patrols were resuming, that Natasha could execute the escape as well and still get to the Cold Room in time. He had a vague plan forming as to how they could do that too.

"Should we go?" Tony said, his gaze dancing briefly to the bulkhead. One of the other bug patrols was glancing across at them from the distance.

Steve held up the ripped shirts. "Actually, I think I'm going to apologize again."

Hrhumhuhr might be about to actually explode. There was a torrent of crackling noises from Hrhumhurh's mouth.

"The amount I have to do today and you wassste my time with thisss," Hrhumhuhr started, "I should—"

"I was hoping to borrow a needle and thread to fix them myself," Steve said.
Hrhumhuhr stopped mid-tirade and blinked all twelve eyes at once. "That'sss almossst nice."

"That's the Captain for you," Tony said, putting his arm around Steve's shoulders. "Handy with anything that impales."

Hrhumhuhr swiveled eight eyes in Tony's direction, disapprovingly. "Hmm."

"You've done the work of making them, the least I can do is fix the damage," Steve said.

"Over in the corner," Hrhumhurh said, all eight arms starting to work again. "Cause me too much bother and I'll throw you out personally."

Steve nodded and headed over to the indicated corner where there was a box of thread and some packs of needles.

"I'll help," Tony said, unnecessarily loudly.

There weren't any seats designed for humans in the room—why would there be?—but there was enough space on the table the box was on to sit on the edge. Tony sat next to him, held his hand out imperiously for one of the shirts, and when Steve passed him a needle and thread, Tony did dutifully start sewing.

Steve kept an eye on the door as he threaded a needle. The sound around them disappeared, but instead of looking at Tony, Steve kept surreptitiously glancing at the doorway. There should be three more patrols that passed this room in the time when Natasha would be in the bulkhead space. The vent had been different—she could look out and realize she couldn't come out yet—but the bulkhead exit solely relied on their timing being correct.

"You'll have to be clumsy later too," Tony muttered. "So it doesn't seem too out of character."

"Shouldn't have to keep it up for more than a few weeks, though," Steve said, lightly. If he said it, maybe it made it true.

Tony lowered his head. "Nat'll hold the extra two minutes, won't she?"

Pietro had figured out that even if disrupted by something, the patrols still occurred on the same cycle, just delayed. If Natasha hooked up the interface, ran the ten-minute program and counted two minutes, she should have thirty seconds to get into the vent. For an action that took ten seconds at most, there was a decent margin for error. Steve was still massively tense.

"She will," Steve said. That wasn't something he needed to say to convince himself. Vision had all the plans they'd come up with memorized too. He would remind her. He hated to think about how she must be feeling right now. Much like Natasha only pretended to know everything, she also only pretended to feel nothing.

One patrol of bugs clattered past the doorway on schedule but time still felt permanently slow, each second stretching out to an eternity. Steve was glad his hands had something methodical to do. Hrhumhurh had patiently created these shirts to tear and they had all ripped easily along the seams. Steve could even follow the old puncture marks in the fabric as a guideline.

He counted down the seconds, matching his stitches to the drops of sand in the hourglass, and then the second patrol of bugs appeared—and then turned into the room itself.

Steve had to fight to keep his face still.
"Sssorry for the brief interruption, Hrhumhuhr," Bhrehm called. "The Sssovereignsss have requested more pillowssss."

Hrhumhuhr made a crackling noise that Steve had already heard several times over the last couple of weeks and he knew to translate it as serious displeasure. "Fine."

"Watch thossse two," the bug next to Bhrehm added, pointing a trident at Tony and Steve, "they're ssskanky. Grosss."

Keeping his gaze firmly on the bug, Tony deliberately leaned in, tugged Steve's tunic to one side and pressed a lingering kiss to the skin there.

"Disssgusting," the bug said, turning rapidly around. "Come on, Bhrehm. Let'sss move on before we get reprimanded."

Steve had to literally bite his tongue not to react or smile too much. Tony's mustache tickled his skin in a way that made him want to shiver.

"None of that behavior in my room," Hrhumhuhr said as Bhrehm quickly followed his friend out of the doorway. Hrhumhuhr said those words like the bug was almost choking on something.

"Sorry," Tony said, trying to look appropriately contrite.

Steve stared as Bhrehm and the bug with him disappeared off to the left. "They were the second patrol due, I think," Steve muttered, "Everything's still okay. As long as everything else runs—to plan."

Steve's face tightened as another bug appeared in the door, tottering under a pile of gauzy gold fabric. Tony knocked off the suppression field.

"I'm sssso ssssorry," the bug gasped.

Hrhumhuhr made that crackling noise again. "Again?"

"She ssssayssss she needssss another," the bug said.

Steve's entire body went cold. Shit. *Shit.* This was bad. What was he thinking, trying to get this back on track? Pietro had said it himself, the Grandmaster had a special guest. He should have been able to foresee something going. He'd wanted to eliminate the risk for her as much as possible, but if there were extra bugs running around the hallways trying to cater for some unknown special guest… There was no way to know if Natasha would be safe now. And it was all much too late to turn back. Had Steve doomed her?

"You're lucky I have one ready," Hrhumhuhr said, throwing a gauzy piece of fabric at the bug. "Put the new material here."

"Yesss," the bug said, bowing slightly and taking the scarf, before skittering out of the room without even looking in Steve and Tony's direction.

"Relax," Tony said, which was rich for someone whose dark eyes were warily tracking the hallway as he sewed. "One bug doesn't mean this is game over."

"Keep the field off so we can listen," Steve said, tensely. Shit. He should have sent Pietro to slip the note into the vent. Natasha could have crawled back to the Armory, dropped through the wall, maybe she could have made it past Pip. If there were extra bugs running around, and Natasha had
to come out of that bulkhead on blind faith alone—this was unbearable.

If the bugs saw her, this was all over. Maybe they should have waited a day. This was unbearable. There had to be a way. How much could they fight their way out of this? But Bucky was in the worming chamber right now, and even if he, Pietro, Natasha, and Tony could somehow escape the arena, rip out the Control Discs and hide outside somewhere, the Grandmaster would surely make Bucky pay the price. But if that sort of escape was possible, Natasha, Tony, Pietro, and Vision would have done it years ago, even with Thanos here.

There had to be some way of getting Natasha out safely, no matter if another bug did appear. They needed another distraction, but it had been a struggle to distract the bugs for those twenty seconds to get her out of the vent, and Steve's brain was all over the place. His breathing hitched involuntarily as he thought about how barely any time ago, Tony had been in his arms, voluntarily kissing him like he needed to. There had been smaller clues at other times that Tony was maybe into him, and not just his admitted adolescent crush on Captain America.

Like when Steve had gone to his knees in the Cold Room before the water fight with Nebula and Taserface. Steve's heart skipped a beat, a hazy plan for a distraction forming instantly in his mind.

For the next three minutes, the hall should be empty. So Steve and Tony could technically go out and stand in that hallway. If there were bugs running around doing errands, Steve wasn't sure at which end of the hallway they would appear. They needed a distraction that would cause any bugs that arrived from any direction to look the other way from the bulkhead and vent. Steve thought he had one, but he was pretty sure it was completely terrible.

As much as the bugs hated human nudity, they hated anything even vaguely sexual too. Steve had even thought it himself before: about having to give the command to someone to have sex during battle as a distraction tool. **Drop your socks and grab your cocks, we have alien bugs to make aggressively look in the other direction.** This was a battle too, even if it wasn't happening out there on the arena sand.

Trying not to shudder, Steve glanced up at the hourglass and then as the third bug patrol passed by the gate. The bugs were still headed in the right direction. It was possible that the next three minutes could proceed as planned, and Natasha could safely get to the vents again. A distraction might not be necessary at all. But if it was, this one…would probably be seen as plausible regular deviant human behavior.

Steve finished his current stitch and, even though he wasn't finished with the shirt, he folded it like it was and threw the thread into the box, leaving the needle in the shirt, just in case. He got to his feet, feeling Tony mimicking him by his side. Trusting him. It was a heady feeling. Maybe heady was the wrong word to mentally use, considering.

"Thank you," Steve said to Hrhumhuhr.

Hrhumhuhr started laughing. "You're welcome," the yellow bug chortled. "Andhrímnir said you were funny. I sssuppossse it'ssss true."

Steve hesitated, blindsided by the fact that he would never understand the bugs' sense of humor, but that only made him falter for a second, before he focused firmly on the goal of rescuing Natasha, and he turned and left the room. Tony was close on his heels and he stopped when Steve did, out of sight from Hrhumhurh's doorway. This was a good spot. Steve glanced at the nearest wall, his chest tight. That would give the best vantage point. Steve glanced at Tony's wrist deliberately and Tony quickly put the field on.
"Not for long, we need to listen out," Steve said.

"Do you want me to blow out a wall?" Tony asked, because of course his brain had also been racing to find a solution. "Maybe we can try and pass it off as an accident?"

Steve frowned. "Have you ever done anything like that outside of the arena?" At Tony's slight shake no, Steve's frown deepened. "Can we risk that? Something that wildly out of our normal behavior—if we get any closer scrutiny, the whole plan could fall apart."

"Do you have a better idea?" Tony hissed, disbelief making his whisper rough, like wind traveling over broken glass.

"Yes," Steve said. His face pinched and he gestured for Tony to turn the suppression field off. Tony did and there was nothing for a moment. And then there was something that made Steve's skin run cold, a faint sound in the distance that sounded like a trident staff hitting tile floor.

Tony and Steve both turned their faces to look in that direction. Steve strained to listen, and he could hear it more clearly after a moment—the distinctive clack of two bugs walking down a nearby hallway. Coming closer.

Steve's muscles tightened, but this was fine. The timing could be worse. This would give his plan time to work.

Tony looked back at Steve. Tony's face creased, a thunderstorm of worry, and he held out his hand, and a swirl of nanobots slid up from his sleeve, starting to form into a gauntlet. Steve lurched out and grabbed Tony's wrist; on a guess he squeezed, and it seemed to halt the gauntlet procedure, the nanobots sliding back.

Steve shook his head and eyeing Tony as firmly as he could, he nudged Tony into the nearest wall with a gentle shove. Tony let him, his eyes wide. The amount of trust he was showing Steve right now was almost overwhelming, because Tony hadn't connected the dots Steve had, and hadn't quite realized what was going on.

Not until Steve dropped to his knees and put his hands under the hem of Tony's tunic to rest his fingertips deliberately on the waistband.

Tony's eyes widened a little. Imperceptible to most people. But Steve had spent years watching Tony's face, marking those small changes and realizing what they all meant. Steve dropped the shirts he was carrying on the floor beside him.

"I'm gonna need your consent this time," Steve whispered, light enough that he hoped they wouldn't need the silence field. He barely recognized his own voice. If it was hoarse now, it would be worse later. He licked his lips automatically, out of need and reflex more than anything, but Tony tracked the movement with his eyes and his breathing stuttered audibly. Tony nodded, that moment small, and Steve's hand inched up, touching the warm, firm flesh of Tony's abdominals rather than the stretchy elastic of the brown pants Tony wore. He could feel Tony trembling. He hoped it was anticipation, not fear. "Out loud, Tony."

"Yes," Tony said, probably faster than he would have, had he been in control of the situation. Then, more firmly, his gaze softening, "Yes."

Steve nodded, keeping his gaze on Tony as he tugged Tony's pants down to his knees. Just far enough for Steve to make it clear what was going on. Steve's breath caught despite himself, because Tony was attractive everywhere. He'd dreamed for a long time at getting his mouth on
Tony; of course, Steve's daydreams of old had more been along the lines of shutting Tony up. Tony mouthing off in his garage, maybe, being condescending over some technological discovery, and Steve getting wound up so much that the only way to shut him up would be to pick him up, sit him on the nearest surface, and let Tony finally realize what they had been missing out on.

He'd pictured it clearly, over the years, how Steve would shove Tony's tools to one side, strip Tony's pants off him without ceremony, spread his legs and go to town. Tony would hold his head, make Steve choke on the full length of him, and Steve would be almost crying with how stretched out and filled Tony would make him feel, solely from the thrust of his dick in and out of Steve's mouth. Tony would hook Steve's jaw wider with his finger, maybe, and he would think he had the power because Steve was the one on his knees, but Steve would suck, ripple his tongue and throat around the addictive length, draw Tony's orgasm out of him with relentless suction, until Tony's bones gave way, until Tony knew that Steve was the real power-holder in that position.

In that fantasy, Steve would have time; to explore with his fingers across Tony's heated skin, to press kisses on his inner thigh, to use his hand to help tease out Tony's erection to full hardness before his mouth could close over the full length, but right now, Steve didn't have time. Natasha and Vision still weren't in sight, which meant they could drop out of that hatch at any time. And while Tony and Steve could mildly justify being in the hallway, there was no way to justify why Natasha and Vision had been in those vents. There was one way to guarantee the bugs wouldn't be looking, even if that happened. And with the bugs getting closer, Steve didn't have time to take this slow.

Pushing Tony's tunic up and to the side, Steve didn't even wait to use his hands, opening his mouth and easing Tony's flaccid cock in as it was. Steve knew from experience that it was easier to deepthroat like this, even with his minimal gag reflex. Peggy had taken the knowledge that Steve had fallen in love with a man during his adventures in the prime timeline in her stride. More than that, she'd admitted to really being into the idea of seeing him with another man. It didn't happen often, but occasionally, if Peggy came across someone at work who could be convinced into a discreet bedroom adventure, Steve would find himself dishing out dinner for a stranger, knowing an hour later he would be on his knees in their bedroom, sucking the stranger's cock while Peggy watched, pleasuring herself and smiling the entire time.

Steve didn't even hesitate, starting to suck noisily, and Tony was definitely responding, getting harder with every suck. Fast enough that Steve knew he was probably going to have a headache afterward. He couldn't slow down, though. The further they were into this, the worse it would look to the bugs. He knew now that their nudity terribly upset them, and he had his theories why, and he knew from Yondu's shower escapades that the bugs found acts of this nature particularly disgusting and any bugs walking on this scene should, if all went to plan, immediately turn around.

It would give Natasha time to get down and out of sight, back into the vent she needed to access that would get her back to the workshop quickly and unseen.

Later, Steve hoped Tony would be interested enough to maybe revisit this scenario, to give it the time it deserved, but he was faintly aware this might be the only opportunity he would ever really have. Tony was physically attracted to him, but maybe it was situational, or relief after years of not being physically touched the way he needed. Even Tony's consent now wasn't as full and freely given as Steve would desperately want.

It would have to do. Goodness knows this isn't how Steve would want this to happen either. But this was the smart play. And from the way Tony was rapidly growing and hardening in Steve's mouth, at least Steve could derive some small comfort from the fact he could make this as enjoyable as possible for both of them, even though circumstances were far from ideal.
In a very ideal world, this would be in a bed. Steve would have a pillow for his knees and not the hard unforgiving tiles. No one would be there to walk in on him. Tony would be naked, all that golden skin and taut muscles on display for Steve's eager, hungry gaze. His for Steve to see alone. Steve would have time, all the time in the world, to tease Tony into hardness, to test his arousal limits, to find out what really turned Tony on. He'd use gentle touches and warm kisses, spend hours exploring the landscape of a body he'd already spent hours thinking about. He wanted to know which parts of Tony's body were the softest. Which parts of Tony's body would make Tony shudder with a single touch.

In this ideal world, Tony loved him back.

Situational attraction, a warm touch after years of probably being physically starved for it… Tony really could be touch-starved to react like this to a single blowjob. It made sense, because where in their situation, if you weren't the exhibitionist that Yondu was, could you even masturbate in a place like this? There was very little privacy. Perhaps fighting and dying expelled some of that energy, but it was still something missing from their lives, something which had to be frustrating.

Steve breathed through his nose and forced himself to focus and remain mindful of what was happening right then. If this was to be his only real taste of an old fantasy, Steve wanted to remember it, to imprint it so fully on his memory that he would never have to fight to recall it.

The weight of Tony's penis on Steve's tongue was a heady sensation. Steve's mouth watered from how comforted the experience made him feel. This was the best way he'd found yet to reassure himself that Tony was here and alive. This was incontrovertible, undeniable proof of Tony's life, here and filling Steve's mouth. He was surrounded by it, enveloped by it; as Tony's penis continued to harden, Steve felt like he was swelling along with it, inflated with a wave of happiness he couldn't fully explain. He wanted to do this forever. His fingers found warm skin and gripped tightly; Tony had ditched his tunic to one side at some point, and when Steve realized that, his hands moved almost of their own volition further back and Tony did jolt at that, but in a way that made him laugh at the same time and slide a hand into Steve's hair.

Steve moaned quietly, hoping Tony would read that as the encouragement it was, and he looked up, hollowing out his cheeks as he did, and Tony seemed to understand, sliding both hands into Steve's hair and setting a rhythm, not letting Steve move much at all. That was fine with Steve and he focused on sucking, on the way the heated flesh felt against his tongue.

He was eager for this, wanton in a way he'd never been before, desperate to get more and more of Tony inside him, around him. Tony's grip in his hair became firmer, like Steve was making him lose any hint of control, and Steve empathized, because all he wanted to do was this. He knew how Tony tasted now, the very essence of him. He'd always know now. Unless they all died in the next Melee, and there was no coming back from that, but Steve didn't want to think about that.

Not when he had Tony's hands around his skull, and Tony in his mouth, and Tony's gasps in his ears, and Steve sucked eagerly, wondering whether Tony had always been uncut, or if he'd been circumcised before and the worms had fixed that. And then Steve's brain filled in the fact that with all the injuries and deaths and remakings that they'd both been through, maybe Tony's body was as new as his own. So technically these were two fresh bodies, maybe the first time for sex for either of them. Brand new. He liked the idea more than he thought. Fresh territory.

Tony came down Steve's throat at the exact time as the bugs finally turned the corner and saw them.

Honestly, the way one of the bugs shrieked almost made the entire embarrassment of being seen like this worth it. Steve didn't like that this moment had been seen—had to be seen by design—but
the cause was more than worthy.

Both bugs turned their backs immediately. Steve's heart was pounding. This still might not work, if they didn't stay turned away for long enough. He meant to keep counting while he was on his knees, but it had rocked him more than he expected. How long until Natasha was due to appear from the bulkhead?

"Why are you ssso grosss?" the bug on the right demanded. His friend seemed to be making hitching, sobbing noises.

The bug on the right turned around again, glancing speculatively, and then let out a little cry, because on seeing him, Steve immediately let Tony out of his mouth, and there was evidence of the incident on Steve's face. Normally he would have tried to swallow it all, but Tony was—as in everything—able to produce everything in large amounts, and apparently bugs were as grossed out by that sort of bodily fluid as they were with the nudity.

"I'm so sorry," Steve said.

"Human biology, sometimes we can't wait," Tony added.

"Don't be sssorry, get your coveringsss on and go," the bug yelped, turning around again and trying to cover its eyes too even though its back was turned, which was problematic; the bug had six arms but that wasn't apparently enough for the number of eyes there was to cover.

Steve almost cried in relief, because it was a few seconds after the bug turned around again that Natasha phased through that section of wall, Vision's head clutched securely in her hands.

Her eyes widened briefly at the scene, apparently realizing how much trouble she might have been in, how close they'd come to failing, and Steve gestured at the vents with one hand desperately. Natasha nodded and dove for the vent, sliding in. She shot Steve a grateful nod before disappearing into the tunnel and Steve breathed a sigh of relief.

Tony and he moved efficiently, gathering up their clothes; the bugs flinched, the gold fabric in their arms rustling. They weren't a scheduled patrol at all. There'd been no way to expect this or plan for it. They had been lucky. Later, Steve would think about how close it all was and he would scream, but for once luck was on their side. They couldn't rely on luck a second time.

"Disssgusssting," they heard one of the bugs announce behind them as they headed into Hrhumhuhr's room.

"No exessskeleton," the other one said, "of courssse they're sssensssitive. If my ssseminal vesssiclessss were on the outssside, maybe I'd go off like a rocket too."

"You should be sssso lucky," his friend said.

Steve started moving quickly. Tony copied him and at Steve's pointed look at his wrist, Tony turned the suppression field on.

"We need to make sure the hallway she comes out on isn't being used for this special guest too," Steve said. His voice was hoarse. Neither of them mentioned anything about that, although Tony couldn't quite look him in the eyes. Why should he? Steve had crossed a line.

That hallway was as empty as it should be. They even managed to see her briefly; Natasha gratefully nodded at them as she stalked quickly past them on her way to the Armory for her weapons, a barely visible incline of the head. The timing was cutting it close, and Vision was still
in one of the vents to be retrieved later, but she was alive, and Steve almost wanted to cry because he was so relieved.

He didn't, but much like this satellite heist, it was a very close thing.

It took a few days for them not to be unbelievably busy.

Steve found himself obsessively tracking the numbers in his head every day. He didn't write the numbers down, but ran them in his head silently anyway. Every day that passed where the numbers didn't work out left him more relieved than he wanted to admit.

The tension between them was weird, but Steve thought it was growing less with every following day. The narrowness of success aside, they'd succeeded. They'd also succeeded yesterday with the less-demanding heist to retrieve poor Vision's head from the vent, and it was achieved by Pietro, desperate to atone for what he thought was a mistake, even though no one else considered it as one.

Even that heist didn't go exactly perfectly—Pietro ended up having to throw Vision's head directly at the wall of the workshop and Vision managed to phase himself through the wall to land nose-first into the sand. Hardly dignified, but at least it worked. Steve would have to find a way to apologize to Vision for being the one to suggest it as a strategy.

Tony had barely managed to look Steve in the eye once since the hallway distraction. Steve didn't blame him.

Night times had subtly changed too since the heist, with the five of them huddled together in a mass, Bucky slowly realizing—after undergoing the worms a couple more times—that proximity really was the only way to cope with this place. That communal need and tension meant Tony couldn't even use his silence suppression field to let Steve talk to him without the others being wrapped up in the conversation too, and if they talked, it would keep everyone awake.

Steve thought no one had really noticed that he and Tony were barely connecting, but then the next Battle Royale event occurred and apparently after that it was terribly obvious that they had been uncomfortably avoiding each other.

The Battle Royale had been in some sort of skyscraper that even with his vast experience Steve immediately labeled as futuristic. He had to laugh at himself for the thought, because he'd experienced the future, and he kept experiencing it, and it was time to stop framing everything as if he was still that man from the forties. It was a cyberpunk aesthetic, really—black walls and neon lights—and multiple floors that were doubles of each other, with identical stairways leading from one to the next.

Steve wasn't able to fully explore the structure. He managed to meet up with both Tony and Bucky fairly early on, although he did brain Bucky with his shield before he realized that it was an ally who had frog-jumped from the upper staircase to attack him. But then they also came across Gamora, who was engaged in a furious sword battle with Humbug and Yon-Rogg.

Tony was no good once Humbug realized Iron Man—and the excessive metal-content of his armor—had joined in the fight, so Bucky and Steve joined in to help Gamora dispatch Humbug. Then, during the ensuing battle with Yon-Rogg, Steve remembered his promise to Gamora, so once Yon-Rogg was dispatched, he nodded at her, and deliberately moved his shield to one side so she could kill him—she would be quick, he knew, and he would die anyway, so why not repay the promise he'd made her when Natasha was catatonic?—and Tony shoved Steve out of the way, Gamora's sword scraping against his armor, causing sparks.
Steve had ended up smacking Tony in the faceplate with his shield, purely as a strategic move, and Gamora had impaled Steve through the heart in one swift movement that Steve never really saw coming. He just saw the blade through his chest, then he looked up at Tony. Tony had the faceplate down, but the bright lights in the mask flickered. Steve didn't remember much after that.

When he woke up from the worms, he saw Tony on a slab near him, and that nearly hurt as much as dying had.

Steve was released from the worming chamber a little while before dinner; he must have been killed before a lot of the others, because there were still a lot more bodies in the chamber.

The following morning, only Pietro got an assignment and it was a very early one. The rest of the assignments fell nicely too, sparse and regular. The only reason Steve was not horrified by that perfect set of circumstances for the satellite heist was that this was technically day fifteen of Bucky being here, so it would have come too late.

Steve went to the training room to punch the training bag; Bucky and Natasha came with him, sparring athletically in the corner, Bucky showing her some of the moves he'd learned from Shang-Chi and Iron Fist, and Natasha showing him some moves in return that looked a lot like Gamora's way of fighting. When they both suggested going back to the workshop to see how Pietro's match turned out—Natasha admitted she begged him to win to stave off a little of their usual post-Battle Royale melancholy—Steve followed them.

Steve was distracted as they walked the halls. Maybe it was because he couldn't help but notice the bug patrols that moved around the hallways like clockwork. He'd never really paid them much attention before the heist and now he couldn't unsee them.

It was only in the workroom, where Pietro was animatedly chatting with Tony, that Steve realized he was being set up.

Pietro immediately loudly decided he wanted to go to the viewing room. Bucky, loudly and not meeting Steve's eyes, announced he would go with him. The two hurried out of the room with a strangled, "Later!"

Steve frowned at the door, still mostly unaware that he and Tony were being left alone on purpose until Natasha loudly said, "You know, I think I'll go with them."

"That sounds like fun, maybe I could come too——" Steve started, but Natasha put her hand on his chest.

"No, you don't," Natasha pushed him back until the back of his legs hit the bed and Steve sat down, staring numbly at her. "You're going to stay here——" she lowered her voice, "—and talk."

Steve blinked at her. Natasha hadn't brought it up since the heist happened, keeping it a secret from the others, but apparently that didn't mean she'd completely forgotten it. She moved as if heading for the door and then paused, turning on her heel, and deliberately walking over to where Tony was apparently very focused on Bucky's arm again. He looked up at her when she hovered close to the worktop.

Natasha leaned in close to Tony. "Just so you're clear, I did not teach him that as a method of distraction." She beamed at him, before turning around and heading for the doorway. As she closed the door, she mouthed talk! at Steve again. Even though it was silent, he could hear the exclamation mark in the order.
The door closed and Steve tried not to stare at it resentfully. Like it was to blame for him being left alone here. Natasha was right. They did need to talk. The way that Steve had died in the last Battle Royale shouldn't have been such a mess. Miscommunication had always been at the heart of all of their conflicts. Steve exhaled carefully and then turned to look at Tony.

Tony was already staring at him, and not even from behind his worktop. He must have moved around the table while Steve was glaring at the door like it had majorly wronged him. Tony was casually leaning against the table, his arms folded.

"No," Tony said, as soon as Steve opened his mouth to start saying how sorry he was for his idea of a distraction.

Steve clenched his jaw tightly for a moment, glowering at Tony. "You don't know what I was about to say."

"Yeah, I do." Tony's eyes were dark. "And I don't want to hear it. Don't you even dare try and apologize. You saved the plan. That is not something you need to apologize for."

Steve pressed his mouth together and frowned mulishly at him. "I shouldn't have put you in that position—"

"I said I didn't want to hear it." Tony used the worktop to propel himself forward, unfolding his arms in favor of trying to jam them in his pockets, before remembering the tunics didn't come with pockets. He scowled briefly down at his hands, like they were the things betraying him, before letting them hang loosely at his side so he could glare at Steve. "Last time to save the universe I had to die. And this time I had to orgasm? Via a person I've constantly done crazy things around, and am—coincidentally—quite crazy for?" Tony shot Steve a heated look. "I think I'll survive."

There was too much in there for Steve to wrap his head around. It almost sounded like Tony—like maybe Steve's feelings weren't as one-sided as he thought they were. That couldn't be true, and yet what other way was there to interpret that? His brain flitted around that briefly, but it couldn't concentrate, mostly because there was another part of his brain fritzing out, screaming at him like he was howling into an abyss.

It was a bigger thing more than that implication that was wrecking Steve. Those last four words: *I think I'll survive*. All Steve could picture was Tony falling, Tony dying, Tony dead. Over and over.

"Please," Steve said, the word wrenching out of him. He didn't mean to sound so desperate, but the idea of Tony dying again was too much. He couldn't hold it in his head. He'd barely survived it once. He knew the odds of surviving it again were way below ten percent. Way below one percent. Basically nothing. "Please survive. Please."

Steve's voice was wrung out. Hoarse like it had been after the hallway, although he didn't have that as a reason to explain his wrecked voice right now.

"Steve—" Tony started, his voice gently.

"I left this timeline once because you weren't in it." Steve stared at him miserably. "I don't have anywhere else to go if that happened again."

"And you don't think it would be the same for me?" Tony's voice wasn't wrecked, but it was quiet.

"You have people waiting for you on the other side," Steve said patiently.

Tony frowned. "And you don't?
"I've lived a life, Tony. You haven't."

"It's not a contest. Nor a competition." Tony stalked closer, looking furious. "This isn't an either-or, or something we take in turns."

"And you aren't hiding something?" Steve tilted his head. He didn't get to his feet. He felt like he was on fire and weary, all at once. "Because I didn't recognize the tells last time around, when you were sneaking away from us to basically build your own coffin. But this time I know the signs. Look me in the eye and tell me there's nothing going on of the same magnitude."

Tony paused for a moment, but that moment was guilty enough.

"Tony," Steve said. He felt like he had packed in a lifetime's worth of weariness and grief into those two syllables. Tony's name had always had a certain gravity to it, a ring of importance. It was his name but it was also a solid part of any sentence. It was punctuation.

"There may be… a contingency," Tony admitted in a quiet voice, folding his arms again. Only this wasn't confrontational. This was him trying to make himself as small as possible. "It's...not great."

Steve's deepest suspicion was correct, then. After he'd realized Tony was keeping a secret, he'd run it through his mind, and he'd come to only one conclusion. The secret Tony was keeping must involve stopping Thanos, but at a terrible cost.

Steve took a deep breath, because his first impulse was to shout, and he knew that would only serve to make him feel better, and only for a few seconds.

"Are you going to keep it to yourself again?" Steve asked.

Tony barely shifted his shoulders, but it was enough of a movement to give him confirmation for that too.

"Tell me about it," Steve said, keeping the entreaty as gentle as possible.

Tony looked at Steve heavily. His shoulders slumped and he looked tired, like someone had seeped away all the sleep he'd had for a month.

"The Negative Zone was never supposed to be tethered to the time-space flow of the main universe," Tony said, slowly, making Steve realize he was translating it from the real technical words into something Steve might understand. "And undoing that tether—it's not like cutting a cord. Just like taking down the Melee force-field, there's blowback."

Steve stared at him miserably, because the blowback from Tony's modified gauntlet had been what killed him. “And you can cut that tether?"

Tony nodded his head jerkily. "It wouldn't only kill me, though," Tony said, his eyes softening around the edges when he realized where Steve's thoughts had headed. "It would crush the Negative Zone, like crumpling a tissue. Concertina back in on itself so nothing could survive inside." He made a helpless noise and shrugged limply, shaking his head.

Steve's mouth was dry. "It would kill us all," he said, not because he needed to speak the words to come to that conclusion, but because he felt like if he didn't say it out loud, he'd never believe it.

Tony shot Steve a horribly pained expression that made him wish they had the kind of friendship where Steve could pull him into a hug. Steve could feel the rage bristling inside him. He wanted to pull the Grandmaster apart with his bare fingers. How dare he do this to Tony, put him in this
Steve had to swallow back that rush of anger, before he started vibrating with it and Tony mistook it for fear. "How long have you been sitting on this?"

Tony folded his arms and sank against the wall. "Since about two weeks after knowing who the Champion of Death was. Which, incidentally, was about three weeks after coming here in the first place."

"Tony," Steve breathed. "And you've told no one about it?"

The worst part was that Tony looked like he was bracing himself for some sort of hit, verbal or otherwise. That was the part that was really twisting Steve up. The idea that he'd given Tony enough reason to believe that was a likely response, especially to a question like that.

Steve was more worried about the price of holding in a secret like this must have been having on Tony's sanity. Eight years of having that power, of knowing you might have to use it, and keeping to himself. Keeping it as a burden to himself meant it would have been wearing away at Tony, like waves eroding a cliff.

"You don't always have to keep all the hard stuff to yourself," Steve said, as gently as he could. "I've had to. Pietro's not as stable as he seems. And with Nat—" Tony swallowed. He shook his head, his shoulders only minutely relaxing at Steve saying something kind rather than something biting, something judgmental. Tony had no way of knowing how much Steve regretted every single moment where he'd let his anger overwhelm his composure. "With Nat the way she gets… We owe her, so much. She held us up for so long during the Decimation, and I should have been there then too, but I wasn't. I'm here now. And I couldn't—there's only so much a soul can take. I had to protect them. I've been their leader here for so long, and that's all I could do—"

"You still are their leader," Steve said. "But I'm here now. You can share that burden with me." His smile was slight. "Together, remember?"

Tony stared at him and for a long moment it was like the universe went still around them again. Steve's chest felt warm and tight. He couldn't look away.

"Vision knows," Tony continuing to stare at Steve, like maybe he thought if he kept talking he would finally prompt the reaction he was expecting. "That's why he's—like he is. Because I didn't keep it to myself." Maybe Tony was expecting Steve to start drooling in a corner too.

Steve squinted. "Could you have?" At Tony's blink, the universe felt like it was stuttering back into life around them. "Vision's his own person, I know that, but a lot of that person… Jarvis is still in there. And there's enough of you in that part of him to make me confident that if you hadn't figured out this unmooring process, he would have soon enough."

Tony huffed, shaking his head. "Maybe you're right." He at least straightened up from where he was learning and stretched his own shoulders, like he could physically shake loose all the tension from them. "I think even Jarvis would have scrambled his own code on learning how likely it was that we might have to crush this place like a soda can."

Steve hadn't been crushed to death yet on the arena floor, but he thought he had a pretty good idea of how it might feel. "How does it work?" He stared at Tony. "If something happens to you, I need to know how it works."

Tony stared at him and stepped closer. "Do something for me first."
"Anything," Steve said.

Tony tilted his chin. "Promise me, if I do die, that you'll still get Natasha and Pietro out of here if you can."

Steve felt sick. "Tony—"

"I told you. I warned you that I would ask you to do something terrible and you would regret immediately saying yes."

Steve's heart ached. He stared up at Tony with open intent so Tony couldn't mistake what Steve was saying was anything but the truth. "I promise. If you die, but I can still save the others, I will do everything I can to make that happen." Steve paused, before continuing, because he had a proviso to that promise. "But I don't promise to be as careful about what happens to me after that."

"You stubborn son-of-a—" Tony started, but exhaled roughly. He unfolded his arms and crossed the floor, pushing his sleeve up. "Here. This is how it works."

Tony showed Steve. It didn't take much. The device on his wrist had a small screen. Tony tapped a red icon three times and a tick mark replaced it. "Hit that three times and it'll activate the untethering."

"That simple?" Steve asked.

"Red icon three times, green tick mark three times, boom," Steve said.

"Well, maybe more like sechlllllnkkk," Tony pantomimed crushing something between both palms. He seemed satisfied when Steve pulled a displeased face. "Maybe Vision was right, though."

"About what?"

Tony stared at Steve, almost challengingly. Like he was daring Steve to prove him wrong and was confident Steve couldn't. "He wanted me to do it as soon as we figured it out. Maybe I should have used it years ago."

Steve tried to pretend his heart wasn't hurting at Tony even suggesting it. The idea that Tony might have woken up here with Natasha and Pietro and Vision, and crushed the Negative Zone to save the universe, that he might have paid that terrible price again to stop Thanos, and the universe would never know—

Pepper would have had to live knowing Tony's body had disappeared, but she would never know why—

"You did the right thing waiting," Steve said.

Tony snorted, but he clearly wasn't expecting that as a response; he shuffled his weight from foot to foot and he only did that when he was rattled. "Or it was selfish."

"It wasn't selfish to wait." Steve took a shuddering breath and looked Tony in the eye. "You're
right. If we did it right now, and disconnected the Negative Zone, we might be able to save the entire universe from Thanos."

Tony flinched and looked down, closing his eyes.

"I'm going to say his name," Steve's voice was firmer than he was inwardly feeling about it. "Thanos. Thanos. We can't be this scared of him. Yeah, he's stronger, but we're all stronger too. We can do this. And if the worst happens and he somehow gets out—there are more Avengers out there now. More than you can imagine. And the Eternals—wow, you're gonna love them. I mean, Thena's gonna try to eat you alive, but I think you could square up to her."

"Yeah?"

"Blonde and stubborn and hellfire on the battlefield." Steve side-eyed him and riding this swell of bravery, he added, "Thought maybe that was your type."

Tony opened one eye, staring speculatively at Steve. He grunted instead of responding, but his eyes flickered tellingly to Steve's mouth for a second, and Steve tried not to do something mood-breaking, like a subtle fist punch of success. Teaching teenagers had maybe given him a couple of bad habits.

"And you know why we haven't jumped to plan Z," Steve continued, in such a strong voice that Tony opened both eyes to pay attention. "Same reason you didn't leap in to use the gauntlet as soon as we had it." Steve swallowed softly. "Even here, when the stakes for death weren't so high, killing yourself is only acceptable when it's the best of the two options remaining."

Tony exhaled and stared away from Steve, like he could see through the walls to a distracting sight far in the distance. "I've been battling the Cha—Thanos—for so long here, I think... If he'd lost a month of sleep before, he now looked like someone had scooped ten years of sleep from him. "I'm nervous, I suppose. If you can call it that. It seems like dramatic hyperbole to me—"

"Nervous is more than accurate. And apt."

"I suppose you're right," Tony said, reluctantly. "It's just—" He swallowed, like his throat was dry from his thoughts alone, and he stared into the distance a moment longer before looking at Steve, his expression anguished. "What if I don't fight him in the Melee like I should? We've spent years fighting in this place now, knowing death had no consequence at all. What if—what if after all this, what if I've forgotten how to stay alive?"

"Chalk," Steve said, finally getting up from the bed.

Tony narrowed his eyes. "I've just admitted my innermost fragile worries and you want to, what, list popular forms of limestone?" Steve rolled his eyes and held out his hand. "Oh, right." Tony passed over to the worktop, picked up a piece of chalk, threw it to Steve, and frowned as Steve easily caught it. "How is this supposed to help?"

"For once in your life, Tony Stark," Steve said, crossing to the wall and putting the chalk against it, "shut up and learn something."

Tony mimed zipping his mouth closed and moved to take Steve's place on the bed, leaning back on his hands and watching Steve. He kept quiet. Steve almost wondered whether asking him to be quiet was a mistake, considering the last terrible time Tony had been silent, but—even then, Tony had made noise, his dying breaths terrible, rattling sounds that Steve wished he could erase from his mind. Right now, he was being genuinely quiet, his dark eyes watching what Steve was doing,
At first, Tony clearly had no idea what Steve was doing. Steve didn't explain what he was doing, not wanting to spoil the surprise. He never used to be able to draw with chalk, but an entire lifetime was a long time to pick up all sorts of things; as well as other weapons and skills, Steve expanded his artistic repertoire. Steve had ended up illustrating some comics for a spell, when money was tight; SHIELD had collapsed for a long while after Peggy chased out the HYDRA influences, and with their household finances needing help, it had made sense for Steve to get a job.

Softer drawing implements like pastels, chalk, and charcoal hadn't been part of that. Those he had picked up on his own time. The more materials he had, the better he could recreate his lost loved ones using them, copying them right out of his memories onto the page. Chalk on brick hadn't been a common combination of artistic materials for Steve to use, but he'd drawn a few portraits on a chalkboard before, and this was almost the same thing.

Tony did break the silence, but only when he realized what Steve was drawing. And by the time Steve stepped back, Tony was openly crying. Realizing Steve had finished, Tony wiped his tears away with the back of his hand, and he stared up at the portrait openly, with the same expression Steve knew was on his own face the first time he saw the Sistine Chapel ceiling in person.

Morgan was Tony's Sistine Chapel, Steve supposed. Steve stood by patiently, waiting for Tony to drink his fill.
"This is why you fight," Steve said. He kept his voice quiet, like they were standing in a sacred place and speaking too loudly would bring the ceiling down around their ears. "You still have a chance to escape. There's still hope to see her again. So that's what you're going to do. You'll keep fighting. For the exact same reason you died in the first place."

"She's so beautiful," Tony said, and when he turned to look at Steve he wasn't crying anymore, but his eyes were still wet, and his smile was elegiac and warm all at the same time. He straightened and stepped forward. Steve still had the chalk in his hand; Tony slowly and deliberately took that hand in his own and pressed a soft kiss to his fingers, looking Steve in the eye when he did so.
Steve's cheeks warmed. Tony was so close. His breathing hitched automatically and Tony's smirk quirked to one side. Tony lifted up his hand and dragged a single finger across Steve's cheek, dropping to trace the line of his jaw. His smile widened when Steve's breath hitched again. As Tony's eyes lingered on him in a way that could easily be described as wonder, Steve couldn't look away from him. It was like they were locked together by a force bigger than both of them.

"Oh, I could get used to seeing you like this," Tony's voice was lower than usual.

Steve held his gaze. "Do," he said, simply. Meaning *feel free* and *yes please* and *I hope you're not kidding because this is everything I've wanted for literally longer than I ever knew.*

Tony's eyes darkened like Steve had said all that out loud.

"You unmoor and collapse the Negative Zone with us in it, and we're all dead," Steve said. "So no talk of using that contingency until it's the best of the two options left. There's still hope that you won't have to use it. So we're gonna stick with that hope as the plan."

"Hope's not a plan," Tony said.

Steve's chest ached, remembering Morgan saying the same thing to him, and his own lackluster, unhelpful response at the time. He'd been given a second-chance on so many things already and he finally knew that when that happened, you didn't waste it.

"You're right," Steve said, holding Tony's gaze intently. "Hope's not a plan. But you sure as hell can't win without it."

They probably hadn't had quite the talk that Natasha was imagining, because she waggled her eyebrows on their return like they had done something naughtier than have a conversation.

All signs of their actual talk had gone. Tony's wrist device was hidden safely along with its secret under his sleeve. The portrait of Morgan had been cleared from the wall. But there was less strain in the atmosphere than there had been, and Tony could occasionally meet Steve's gaze now. Tony seemed happier as he moved around, no more of that heavy tension in his shoulders, and when they slept that night, there seemed to be less urgency to the closeness, less grip in their hands. When Tony said *hope* any time over the next few days, his mouth lifted up into a brief smile that no one understood but Steve.

They knew it was coming, but it was still almost a surprise when Pietro came into breakfast, his face bright with excitement. He'd lost a match dramatically against Kaecilius yesterday but he healed faster than a lot of the other Einherjar.

"Ghrengrh said there was something fun tomorrow," Pietro said, after sitting down with his food and checking to see that the suppression field was up.

Steve almost forgot to swallow the piece of meat he was currently chewing. The last Battle Royale was a while ago.

"Nat?" Tony asked, softly.

"Didn't see the Four Stooges in the worming chamber this morning. Only saw Guillotine, Pietro, and Rumlow." Natasha's mouth tightened, like she regretted not being able to jump out of the vent and tip him off his slab.

"Does that mean—?" Steve couldn't finish the question. The meat tasted like ash in his mouth.
"Wait," Bucky said, looking between them in confused. "What am I missing?"

"Ghrenrh only thinks two things are fun," Steve said. "Which basically means anything he gets to use a lot of worms on afterward. Those two things are the Battle Royale, and—"

"The Melee," Bucky realized. His eyes widened and he ducked his head, trying to regain his composure, because now he was on the same page as the rest of them. Now he knew.

Tomorrow, they would get out of there.

Or they would die.

And from this death, there would be no coming back.
"That looks exactly like his usual arm," Steve said.

Maybe it was because Tony was brilliant at everything he did that Steve was expecting more, but the arm that Tony had lying on his worktop just looked... like the metal arm Steve was used to seeing Bucky wearing.

Tony smirked at him conspiratorially. "Good. That means it's working."

Steve frowned, except Tony's smirk was contagious and Steve found himself smiling and frowning at the same time, which was somewhat confusing. Steve had resigned himself long ago to not knowing what to feel when Tony was around. Usually he labeled it as too much and pushed the whole mess of emotions to one side. Which was one of the things that had caused so many of their problems in the first place.

"Penny for your thoughts," Tony said. Steve swallowed awkwardly, watching Tony's capable hands do their very clever work with Bucky's metal arm.

"I think it's fairly obvious what I'm thinking about," Steve muttered, and his mind immediately wanted to bundle up his storm of emotions, knot them off and push them aside. He couldn't keep doing that. Time alone to talk with Tony was rare. This could be their last chance for a private conversation. The odds of that were much bigger than Steve wanted to admit.

"I meant is there anything in particular rattling around that head of yours?" Tony paused from amending something in one of the fingertips of the metal arm lying on his worktop. "Any restless monsters I can help quell?"

Steve's mouth quirked a little at the reference. "Worrying about the plan, I suppose."

"Well, that's specific." Tony's sarcasm was as thick as usual.

"The logistics of it," Steve tried to clarify, but realized that wasn't specific enough either. "It'll work. I know it will. But only if—" He cut off that sentence with a sharp inhale. Had he meant to say that? Tony needed a clear mind for tomorrow, not to deal with Steve's single remaining real insecurity in life.
"Only if what?" Tony prompted, like he couldn't imagine a terrible end to that sentence.

Steve could. The biggest failure in his life. The biggest promise that he'd never lived up to. Should Steve really share this particular thought with Tony? Their shared past was painful. Steve shouldn't dig around in it and risk cutting something loose that might make this day harder on Tony than it should be.

"Only if what," Tony repeated, staring at him.

Tony was asking. Tony was offering to help. Tony was there and offering to help. It wasn't selfish to talk to him about this.

Steve took a deep breath. "Only if we do it together."

It was like every muscle in Steve's body had been tensed at once; saying the words out loud felt like a mass release of tension, a wave of something bitter leaving his body in a wave.

Tony shot him an inscrutable, brief glance. "I thought we had been doing things together."

"We have," Steve nodded. "It's just—together." He pressed his mouth in a line and forced past every little voice in his head that screamed to just swallow it all back down and deal with it later. Later wasn't always a guaranteed period of time. Especially with their looming deadline. Which was not a fun word to think right now. "That's where I've let you down, before. More than once."

Steve's staring was apparently intense enough to get Tony to reluctantly move his concentration away from what he was doing, so he could return the stare. Tony stayed silent, obviously realizing Steve was still chewing over the remnants of the worry.

"I just don't think I could bear letting you down like that again," Steve finished.

Tony stared at him silently for a long moment, long enough for Steve to forget where they were. They could be anywhere. Everything narrowed down to this moment. The Negative Zone could collapse around their ears and Steve might not immediately notice.

"I'm surprised that's one of the things still bugging you," Tony said, eventually. His voice sounded a little strangled. "I mean. Since you got here…" His face twitched, like he was fighting to find the right way to phrase what he was saying. "It feels like we're together, right?"

Steve swallowed hard. He couldn't look away.

But Tony could, and he turned back to start working on the arm again, every gesture somehow carefully casual, and he continued, "We've fought really well together, and whenever we've made plans, we barely have to even discuss them. If that's not together, I don't know what is. We're on the same page, I think, and—" Tony might be acting casual, but there was a faint pink tinge at his neck, "—that makes me feel like we can do anything. I mean. Even when we were the worst undercover agents in the history of spying, it should have been awful. But we did it. And I think that's because we did it together."

"I guess I'm finding it hard to cope with the idea that I might be an albatross." Steve stared at his fingers and unfocused his eyes slightly, until visual satiation kicked in and his fingers became shapes that didn't make sense. "A recurring pattern. I show up and you die. Over and over. You were safe and you were happy—and I got you killed."

Tony obviously realized Steve wasn't really talking about the more recent cycle, where they'd been repeatedly dying in the arena just to get stronger. He pressed his mouth in a line and reached out to
briefly touch Steve's hand to get his attention. Steve's head lurched up at the touch of Tony's fingers against his. He hated how much he needed the touch right now, the anchor to reality. The reminder Tony was alive.

"My armor has two forms," Tony said. "You've seen it. The short form and the one that covers me."

Steve nodded, wondering where Tony was going with this. It wasn't what he was expecting to hear. Then again, that was a recurring pattern with Tony himself: he was unexpected, in all the best, most unimaginably brilliant ways. After Project: Rebirth, Steve had been positive he'd never meet anyone who could share even a fraction of his life experiences, let alone mirror so many of them so painfully well; Tony made a habit of shattering people's expectations, and Steve wasn't spared that experience either.

"I presume that the armor I was wearing when I died was too wrecked by the stones to bury me in," Tony said, sounding way too casual about the event that had wrecked Steve so immensely he'd hurled himself into another timestream to try and escape the pain.

"It had to be destroyed to even get it off you safely," Steve said. He was proud he didn't choke on the words.

"But I always had it in my wishes that I'd be buried in a suit."

"Pepper asked me for the nano-suit," Steve swallowed hard, remembering how it had felt for Tony to push that into his hands in the first place. Tony could have ripped out Steve's heart and handed it to him; it hardly could have hurt any less. "I assumed when she asked that it was part of her efforts to keep Stark tech safe."

"My cryochamber was supposed to be safe." Tony snorted. "But the raccoon was right. I really am just a genius on Earth. The rest of the galaxy—some of these places must be running hundreds of years ahead of us."

"And still no one else came close to stopping Thanos until you managed it," Steve reminded him, even though thinking about it still made him feel dizzy. Apparently it always would. "He'd destroyed countless words. Countless billions. You're famous throughout the universe now. Everyone knows your name."

"Yeah?" Tony's eyes sparkled like he enjoyed the thought. "Huh. Almost wish my old man was alive to see that."

"He'd have hated it," Steve said, flashing Tony a brief grin.

"Well. Anyway. The Grandmaster picked us all up with what we had on us at our death."

"Which is why I had my shield." Steve used my, because it was quicker than my alternate timeline's counterpart's shield that I gave to Sam, and he must have put it in my coffin.

"That's how I've had enough nanotech available to make the device that can reverse the Control Disc's power. And how I was able to make the… contingency work."

Steve nodded. While he meant to correct any of them who said Champion of Death instead of Thanos, because it was important they go into tomorrow's battle without as much fear as possible, the euphemism for the item that could crush them all instantly dead was much more necessary.

"I had to swap a lot of my armor from nanotech to real metal, and the remaining, non-harvested
nanotech makes the collapsible parts." Tony tilted his head wryly. "It's not exactly like I can manufacture more in an environment like this."

"So you've been working knowing they were a finite resource for all this time?" Steve's chest hurt at the thought. Tony had been here for years. The thought must have struck him at some point that they could be stuck there for an eternity. Steve supposed if it came to it, Tony would have used the contingency, rather than fight here endlessly. Take their death, rather than waiting for it to come to them. Steve felt sick at the same time he realized he wouldn't have blamed Tony for it.

"I've had enough time to keep slowly replacing parts of the armor. I try to make it a little more dramatic each time so the Grandmaster thinks it's in his honor." Tony rolled his eyes over the last three words.

"So the short form is the metal parts, and the parts that collapse are nanotech."

"Exactly."

"And it's some of that spare nanotech that you could collapse the Negative Zone with."

Tony huffed. "I forgot how quick you could be." A tight expression crossed his face, like he was wrestling with something, and then he pushed his sleeve up. "This is mostly nanotech too, although it has a solid frame too; it collapses small enough that I can hide the full panel from view."

Steve had seen the panel before, when Tony showed him how to activate the contingency. But he hadn't really looked at it. The edges had a silver tinge to them. Tony showed him how it collapsed to the metal bracelet Steve had noticed Tony wearing once, before he expanded it into the full version and then tapped at the silver edging.

"It's understandable if you don't recognize it," Tony said.

Steve frowned and stared at the wrist device again, unsure of what Tony meant.

"The Grandmaster picked all of us up in what we were wearing at death," Tony repeated, and Steve looked up at him, wondering why he was repeating that fact, wordlessly trying to read Tony's face for clues. "I didn't just ask to be buried in the suit. There was...something else. I ended up having to butcher it to get the inner workings out, a lot of which became the interface for our satellite signal." Tony's smile twisted to one side, self-deprecating. "I carried that damn thing around the whole time. Rhodey mocked me like hell, said I was pining like a sad teenager."

Steve froze in realization. "The flip phone," he murmured, connecting the pieces. His breath caught and held, because he'd known Tony and Pietro had heard some of his conversation with Natasha, but he hadn't realized they'd heard that much.

Tony had heard Steve admit he had a crush on him. But the way Tony said that… How soon could Steve have sought a reconciliation with Tony? Had they actually wasted those last three years, at least, that Tony was technically single? Could they have been together, for all that time?

"Breathe, Steve," Tony said, and Steve hauled in a breath that tasted sharp; he hadn't realized he wasn't.

"How can I breathe?" Steve looked up at Tony, miserable. "Ever since I woke up from the ice, I've always been out of time. Never had time to adjust to anything. Nowhere felt right, until Avengers compound. And that was—that felt like home. You built it, and Natasha was there too. That's what made it home for me. But when everything happened—Nat was gone, the compound destroyed, and you— Every second was restless monsters. Every second my brain wouldn't rest, telling me
how much it should have been me, not you. You had everything to lose."


Steve couldn't look away. Couldn't breathe. It was still all too much. He felt like he'd hallucinated the last few minutes. "That's really the flip phone I sent you?"

"Yep."

"And Rhody—"

"Told me if I woke him up at 3am whining about how unfairly attractive you were ever again, he was going to come over and punch me in the face and no jury would convict him."

"Nat said about the same thing to me in reverse," Steve admitted.

Tony's smile was sun-bright. Steve couldn't bear to look away. The idea that they weren't just in the same book, but on the same page, maybe the same line, maybe the same word was exhilarating.

The idea that this could all be gone in a day was unbearable.

Tony died last time not knowing how Steve felt about him. That had been one of his biggest regrets.

"If this is our last day—" Steve started.

"No," Tony said.

Steve halted, feeling embarrassed. He'd said too much. God, he was an idiot, Tony had given him an inch and he'd taken a mile, read too much into it—

"And none of whatever you're thinking right now," Tony added, wrinkling his mouth for a moment.

Steve blinked. "Does too much exposure to the worms make you psychic?"

"I really hope not," Tony said, instantly. "Because I still plan on getting out and I believe there are things specifically in Clint Barton's head alone that could drive a man mad."

Steve pressed his mouth into a line. Humor as deflection from a serious topic was classic Tony Stark behavior. The only way to deflect from the deflection was to dig straight back in with something serious. Steve almost thought he would choke on the words, but he pushed forward with them anyway. "I just hate the idea of you never hearing how I feel about you." Maybe they were a little bit fast, but they were coherent enough.

For a moment, Tony stared at him wordlessly. Then he looked down at the arm and picked up a tool and bounced it in his hand for a moment. For a time it seemed like he wasn't going to say anything, as he started to scrape the tool against a little of the metal, and then he started to talk. "I just feel like I know how that conversation might go, that's all. And I'm—it's an amenable topic, I just—I think we should wait."

Steve swallowed. But he stayed quiet. Tony had more to say.

"This plan is something we need to concentrate on," Tony said, continuing to scrape the tool in soft, careful motions. "And unlike your very strong, moral, ethical, driven-by-intrinsic-values self, I'm deeply shallow. I need as many carrots to lure me into doing things as possible. Fate of the
universe, box of donuts, cheeseburger kind of... carrots. I am deeply driven by extrinsic goals and getting to hear you finish the end of that paragraph—" Tony tilted his head from side to side, like he was considering it. "Kind of think it might be up there in my personal top ten moments, when it happens."

"Oh," Steve said. His heart was pounding like the words had actually been said.

"And when we win this, and get out of here, you're going to tell me how that sentence was going to end." Tony finally looked back up at him and his smile was off-center, quirked up wide to one side the way it did when he knew he was saying something good, "And I'd like to think my reply might make you a little giddy."

Steve stared, feeling heat rise in a few places in his body at once. “Okay," he said, shakily. "I’ll put a pin in that discussion for now."

Tony inclined his head and smirked, slowly, and his eyes dipped briefly to Steve's mouth.

Steve felt reckless when he saw that, mischievous and buoyed by the hope that Tony wasn't just messing with him. “Because we're being honest and communicating right now, I want you to know something. Just so we are clear, and on the same page."

Tony looked almost frightened, until Steve stepped around the worktop. Slowly, so Tony could put a stop to this too, if he wanted. He moved in close to Tony's personal space, mirroring the smirk Tony had used just a moment earlier.

"And what is that?" Tony asked, his voice a little thicker than normal.

Steve let his gaze dip deliberately lower and tried not to smile too widely when Tony inhaled, realization turning the sound sharp. "I could have had an entirely different incentive in mind for when we win, and now you'll never know." Steve kept his voice low and his smile teasing.

Tony's mouth opened a little but he made no sound. Steve's smirk widened. Tony was rarely shocked speechless.

It didn't last long.

"We were interrupted," Tony said.

Steve's gaze moved deliberately over to the bed and back again. "Three times, so far. I've been counting."

"Well, I gotta admit, that's, uh, an interesting area of—a thought experiment I might be interested in pursuing—an avenue, certainly—" Tony squinted at Steve, smiling despite himself. "You're always going to turn me around, aren't you? Always gotta be a surprise."

Steve moved his hand to Tony's waist. It could be construed as almost innocent, but it felt daring, and he let his eyes linger on Tony's face, drinking in every detail. God, he could fill a thousand sketchbooks alone, just with Tony. He must have drawn Tony’s face a million times in that alternate timeline.

Even right from the first time they met, when Steve had mistaken Tony’s noisy bravado and shallow public persona as the whole package, Tony's entire existence had felt like a splinter under his skin. Slowly, that splinter dug in and lodged deep. It had wormed its way into Steve's heart until Tony was nothing but necessary. Just another fundamental part of Steve's make-up. He was from Brooklyn, he had sandy hair, he loved to draw, he hated bullies, and he loved Tony Stark. He
learned to love more than one person, and he learned to let other people take on the bullies that Steve could not, but that fact remained the same. He'd loved Tony when they were apart, when he thought he'd lost him, when he had lost him. Tony had been eighty years dead from Steve's perspective, and Steve had still loved him.

Sometimes he was still haunted by it, a mysterious timeline where Steve had realized earlier. Where he'd been braver. Where he'd kissed Tony in that tiny shared bed on Clint's farm that they never talked about, then or since, and told him everything he'd learned from Zola about what Hydra had done to Tony's parents.

Even that timeline had been an impossibility. Steve had to make do with a whole new world with some haunting similarities, and some terrible dissimilarities. Even though Steve had thrown himself to an entirely new timeline to get away from the one without Tony in anymore, he'd landed in another one where Tony never got to exist at all. Steve had learned to live in an entire universe that didn't have Tony Stark in it, and now... Tony was here. Steve would never have to learn again how to live somewhere Tony wasn't. Steve refused to consider any other option.

Tony seemed to realize Steve had gotten lost in his own thoughts, cast adrift into the space of his mind without a cable, because he reached up to touch Steve's cheek, to anchor him back with a reassuring, human touch. The tip of Tony's thumb grazed Steve's mouth; maybe that had been deliberate, or maybe it was an accident, but the slightest touch was like fire and gunpowder, and Steve was aflame.

When they kissed, it was an explosion. Tony reached around him, pushing something aside, and then Tony lifted Steve up onto the worktop. Steve moved willingly, gripping Tony's waist easily for balance with his thighs. Steve was already breathing heavily, his eyes sweeping Tony's face, desperately seeking for consent, for affirmation, for something, and Tony gave him it all, furiously nodding, his own breath quickening, too loud in the small space between them.

The kiss that followed the first was pure devastation.

The conversation might have to wait until they were free and home, but maybe this part didn't. Tony moaned into his mouth, the sound unmistakable, and Steve's blood was thundering in his ears. This was everything he'd been missing, his entire life. He thought he'd lived before, but had he really? Or was everything else just a warm-up to this?

"Is this just to distract me from thinking about the upcoming battle?" Tony asked, breaking his mouth away from Steve's, and Steve geared himself up to protest, except Tony was yanking Steve's tunic from him frantically, as if the item of clothing offended him deeply.

"Mm, demanding," Tony complied despite the protest, before leaning in to start kissing Steve again, and there was a desperation to it that neither of them could ignore. Despite the oath to put the pin in the actual words, there was no way to hide that this could be their last chance to be together, and Tony seemed as desperate to take advantage of this moment as Steve was.

"Maybe it's to distract both of us." Steve helpfully held up his arms so the tunic could be divested faster. "Yours, too."

"Mm, demanding," Tony complied despite the protest, before leaning in to start kissing Steve again, and there was a desperation to it that neither of them could ignore. Despite the oath to put the pin in the actual words, there was no way to hide that this could be their last chance to be together, and Tony seemed as desperate to take advantage of this moment as Steve was.

Steve could run a hundred miles and not have to breathe this hard. He linked his hands around Tony's neck. "You like it," he said, eagerly kissing him again. Tony knew what he was doing; his mouth moving against Steve's was arousing enough, but then Tony's hand slid down Steve's naked back, pushing the waistband of his pants aside to get to the naked firm flesh of Steve's ass, and he squeezed.
Steve went from half-erect to fully hard so fast his head swam with it. He clenched Tony's neck too hard in response and they both looked down at the bulge in Steve's pants, and the growing damp patch.

"Y'know," Tony said, lifting his gaze from the incontrovertible proof of Steve's attraction to him and licking his lips, "I am going to remember all your forms of distraction when we get out of here."

Steve shivered at the sound of that. He dragged Tony's head closer so he could whisper in his ear, "I can't wait to feel what it's like to have you inside me. Where you belong. I'm going to keep you there for so long you'll forget what it's like not to be."

"You have no idea how much I wish we had time for that right now," Tony breathed, and Steve was about to ask why they didn't, but Tony was tugging at Steve's pants, and Steve obligingly lifted up enough from the worktop so Tony could tug them down, which he did, but not all the way, before yanking his own down.

Tony was hard too, almost painfully so, red and leaking, and apparently the reason they didn't have time was purely physical: they were both just too close to do anything but rapidly fall apart. Tony was more coordinated; he took both their erections in one hand and slid them together, kissing him fervently to swallow up Steve's gasp at the sensation of their slick flesh connecting in the heat of Tony's perfect grip.

It didn't take long, or maybe it took an eternity. Steve was used to the sensation of being taken apart and remade by the worms now, but this was an inverted, joyous version; one without pain, without fear, only pleasure. There was heat to accompany the floating feeling that enveloped his whole body; if he hadn't been gripping at the nape of Tony's neck, Steve felt like he would have forgotten he had a physical body at all. Nothing existed in this sharp, beautiful moment but Steve and Tony and the perfect crescendo their bodies made together.

Steve had erroneously thought once that the Avengers compound had been his home. A home that Tony had designed and built with Steve and the others in mind, an exact space made to perfectly hold them and inspire them to grow together as a team. But he'd been wrong. Right here. Anywhere Tony was. That was home.

Tony was laughing, giant wet hitching noises against Steve's neck, and it was contagious. Mostly delight strung through with hysteria, but that had been one of the lessons learned in Steve's long life, that sex with someone you could laugh with was the best kind there could be.

Steve guided Tony's mouth back to his, less frantic now, but still claiming. Showing that beautiful coordination again, Tony cleaned them up with one of their discarded tunics while they kissed; Steve wasn't sure whose it was, but it didn't matter, they had a match to dress for soon, an easy rematch against the Devil Hydrasaur.

Wait. Soon. Their fight was soon. Natasha and Bucky had an early warm-up round against the Shambler, which according to Pietro hadn't killed an Einherjar in about six years, apparently not since Skurge had tried to use its single eye as a trampoline, mocking it loudly as he jumped. Apparently the Shambler had a sore spot when it came to the length of its tentacles.

Pietro said he would be watching them, but Tony had told him to get Bucky to come back here after the match, so Tony could finish fitting him with the arm. Which Tony had pushed aside so that he could put Steve on the worktop.

The ease with which Tony had lifted him made him flush even more than the last few minutes had.
Tony had been wormed so many times his already impressive muscles were insanely strong. Since the super serum, Steve hadn't met enough men who could match him physically, and the mental images he was having of what Tony could do with him in the bedroom now were dizzying ones. Oh god, they had to survive this upcoming battle. They had to.

Tony had to, whatever happened. Steve swallowed. That meant making sure Thanos got his ugly stupid purple giant head crushed into a million pieces.

And oh, thinking about Tony had scrambled his brain again. Maybe it was because Tony had pulled him close again and was kissing him lazily, his fingers roaming easily over Steve's back and the swell of his ass. If Tony moved his fingers a little more, just a little lower, followed the curve, then he would find a part of Steve equally willing to take him, as eager as his desire for Tony's tongue to keep meeting his.

Soon. That was it. The others would be coming back soon. Steve broke the kiss, reluctantly, and opened his mouth to suggest that they get dressed again, when the door opened.

Tony froze. Steve stared at him.

"Praise your conquering returning heroes," Bucky announced, "for we have—holy heck, Steve, that is more of Steve than I am used to seeing, what the fuck."

Steve shared an almost comedic wince with Tony and slipped off the worktop, hurriedly trying to put his pants back on. Tony slapped at his hands, stopping Steve from managing it quickly. Tony just grinned when Steve shot him a frustrated look.

"Oh, don't hurry to dress on my account," Natasha purred, peering around Bucky's firmly-turned back and smiling at them toothily. "It's a nice sight, Barnes, I don't know why you're complaining." She nodded at Tony. "Is it a better view from the front?"

"It's an amazing view from the front," Tony nodded. Steve tried to shoot him a brief look of annoyance.

"Actually, he's right, it's not bad," Pietro said, already leaning by Tony and squinting at Steve, one eye closed.

Steve just laughed good-naturedly and pitched the piece of chalk on the worktop at Pietro's head. It was either roll with how mellow he felt for the moment, or try to sink through the floor in embarrassment.

It was Steve's tunic that had been sacrificed for the cause, so Steve finished yanking up his pants and ambled over to the trunk, ignoring the side glances and elbow nudging happening between Bucky and Natasha as he pulled out his uniform for the arena. He might as well get ready now. While he changed, Steve ignored Natasha's knowing smirk and watched as Tony showed Bucky his new arm.

"There are several modes," Tony explained as he held it up. "I took inspiration from Cull Obsidian's hammer. They took information from us, it's only fair that information flows both ways."

"So what does it do?" Bucky said, looking highly interested.

"It can cycle through various forms," Tony explained, starting to demonstrate. "With various activation triggers—verbal if you want something specific; it also cycles through modes if you double-clench your forearm muscles quickly; and I can program in specific gestures if that's easier
for you."

Steve glanced up in time to see the arm melt onto Bucky's arm. He supposed with this last Melee coming up, Tony had felt he could use the last of his precious remaining stash of nanobots to do this. In fact, there were a couple more leg-pieces of armor on the ground, so maybe Tony had sacrificed even more of his nanobots.

Bucky cycled through the different modes, his eyes lighting up with each one: a long blade that jutted out; a gigantic hammer fist; a large cylinder which Steve presumed was the promised flamethrower; a curved scythe; a version with spikes like his entire arm was a morning star. Finally the arm grew massive. Hulk-sized.

Bucky clenched it into a fist and grinned. "I like this. I really do feel like one of the Hulks."

Tony smiled and nodded and then paused. "Hulk plural." His gaze swiveled sharply to Steve. "You've been holding out on me."

"Jennifer's been around so long I forgot she would be new to you," Steve said. "Sorry. And there's Amadeus, too."

"And you forgot Red She-Hulk," Bucky pointed out.

Steve squinted. "I thought Betty had gotten that under control?"

Bucky pulled a considering expression. "That's been kind of debatable, recently. Oh, Lyra, too."

"I guess you miss some things when you're busy being dead," Tony leaned up to show Bucky how to disconnect the arm. It melted off his arm and reformed into its whole state on the tabletop.

"You also miss things while being deep-frozen," Bucky picked up the arm with his right hand. "High five of solidarity?" Bucky walked over the sandy floor with the arm extended and offered the palm toward Steve. Steve dutifully high-fived the extended metal hand.

"Did you manage to talk to everyone you were planning to?" Tony asked, looking over at Natasha.

"Yeah, I talked to them all," Natasha said. "They're in."

Steve was the only one who had needed a shower after their match with the Devil Hydrasaur; it turned out that giant mutated dinosaur monsters could store quite a lot of mucus up their distended red scaly nostrils. Tony refused to kiss Steve in victory at the end of the battle, but the crowd roared anyway when he slapped the cheek of Steve's ass that had managed to survive unscathed by the goop.

Tony left Steve alone to his shower, murmuring a reminder to him to go straight to the gym afterward as he left. It was probably a good thing Tony hadn't stayed. Steve was still buzzing so much from their earlier encounter, and so affected from that last ass slap and look of promise, that as soon as he got undressed in the shower room, the bug turning the shower on for him started to sob about how humans were the grossest things in the entire galaxy, and he needed a new job, immediately.

Thankfully the showers were cold, so by the time Steve was dressed, the bug guard had stopped crying and Steve could drop his shield and ax off with Pip without dripping Hydrasaur mucus all over Pip's Armory.
By the time Steve got to the outside gym, he wasn't the last to arrive. Odin was single-handedly taking on Skurge, Heimdall, Fandral and Hogun in a mock duel, all wielding practice swords from the racks along the wall. It might have been Steve's wishful thinking, but Odin seemed to be moving like Thanos. Steve watched him cautiously, marking the brutal moves he made, how he slowed them down just long enough to telegraph his intention. He was drilling his people in how to survive instead of mindlessly attack. Odin was a good king to his people.

Bucky and Natasha were engaged in one of their balletic duels, while Tony and Pietro watched on, seemingly keeping score somehow. Pietro flashed Steve a smile. "Captain, over here, we saved you a ringside seat."

Steve dutifully headed over. They weren't directly watched out here—there were a pair of bugs guarding the opening on the way in, presumably so they could step in if something untoward happened—so it was one of the best places to use the silence suppression field. Tony hadn't activated it yet.

A few moments later, Gamora came in, the last missing member for their meeting. Her eyes flickered warily toward the Asgardians.

"I'm here," Gamora hissed, quietly, "like I promised." She turned her gaze to Steve. "Promises mean as much to you as they do to I. So here I am. I hope I am not wasting my time."

"You're not," Tony promised, and activated the silence suppression field.

Gamora's eyes widened as the faint hum of the arena disappeared.

"All right," Tony said, louder, "the bugs can't hear a word we say. Pietro, keep an eye on the door."

"Sir, yes, sir," Pietro stuck his tongue out, but shuffled until he had a direct sightline to the doorway.

Odin and the Asgardians continued to battle, but when their wooden blades hit, they made little sound. It was a beautiful masquerade.

"Your summons sounded urgent, Stark," Odin called across. "Our mellow slate today implies a Melee on the morrow. Is there something that means this one is different?"

"Yeah," Tony said. "We're either getting out of here tomorrow or we're dying permanently. Thought you might want to know that."

Skurge forgot to keep pretend-battling and was consequently walloped in the head by Heimdall's training sword. "Yeah," Skurge muttered from the sand, shaking his head roughly. "Yeah, you thought right, Man of Iron."

Tony kept it as concise as possible. How, once the Melee was announced, he would send the signal out to the Avengers, but they had no idea how long it would be until help could come. He explained how Thanos could break the force-field, and how they needed to kill him before the force-field fell, or the whole galaxy would be lost, and probably all the other realms along with it. He explained why they had to destroy the worms.

"We'll get to go home," Skurge said, his voice vibrating in soft reverence. His face fell. "If it survived..."

"What do you mean by that?" Fandral looked astounded at the idea.
"Hela's here," Skurge spat out. "It means something killed her. I died before that happened, but I heard Prince Thor's plans for how to end her."

"It was Surtur," Heimdall muttered. "It was the only way to stop her. Without that, we would all be dead."

"Surtur?" Hogun blinked. "Thor deliberately unleashed Surtur on our realm? How would it survive that?"

"It didn't," Heimdall said. "But Asgard's not a place. It's a people. Thor got as many of our people out as he could. It would have been more, but for Thanos." His golden eyes narrowed. "I would like very much to do my part in avenging the half of our survivors that he slaughtered."

"What is gone can be rebuilt," Fandral said.

"It already has been," Steve said. "New Asgard. It's..." He shook his head briefly, smiling at the soft memory. "It's beautiful. Thor did wonderful work on it."

Odin almost flinched at the sound of his son's name. He had been silent since Tony's explanation began.

"We will help you avenge our fallen people," Fandral said to Heimdall. "Thanos will pay for his crimes."

"How about the green wench?" Skurge smirked at her over the sand and got solidly whacked in the jaw by Fandral for it. "She's never there. So why is she here now?"

"Shut your mouth or I'll remove it from you permanently," Gamora said, her head tilted arrogantly. Steve glanced at Gamora quizzically. She hadn't been at the last Melee.

Natasha nodded at Bucky, who halted their current duel, and she threw her sword to Pietro, getting him to swap places with her.

"None of your speedster shenanigans," Bucky warned and then jolted when Pietro slapped him on the ass, too fast for Bucky to even see him move.

"Don't know what you mean," Pietro joked, but did obediently start to deflect Bucky's blows.

Steve took Pietro's spot to casually continue watching the doorway, still keeping an eye on the unfolding conversation.

"You're never at the Melees," Natasha said, softly. "Will you join us for this one?"

"I may not have had all my memories for these past years," Gamora said, staring off into the distance like she could see her life being replayed there, like a movie. "But I had enough." Her gaze snapped to Natasha. "I slit my throat before every Melee, like clockwork. Because I am a coward. Because I thought I could face anything, except him." Gamora tilted her chin. "I am done being scared. I'm ready to face my nightmare, straight on. I'm ready to destroy my nightmare."

"We'll do everything we can to help you," Natasha said.

"So how are we going to do this?" Hogun asked. "Because no offense, I have been at every Melee, and we haven't come close to defeating him yet."

"I've seen Thanos die three times now," Steve said, aware of the attention he was getting. "Once in a way we can't replicate." His gaze caught briefly on Tony, his mind overlaying that terrible image, of Tony dying on the battlefield. Quiet, Tony had been so quiet. Too quiet. "But two in a way we can. And his weak spot has been the same every time. You need to go for his head."

Natasha nodded at Gamora. "We'll get him down. Think you could take care of that part?"

Gamora smirked. "With pleasure."

"I presume you have gathered us here because you also have a plan, Tony Stark," Heimdall said, his mellifluous voice ringing out like a bell. He smiled enigmatically, even as he continued swinging the wooden sword like it was second-nature. "As Watchman of Asgard, I saw everything in all realms. I must admit, your adventures as Iron Man were some of my favorite, when I glanced upon Midgard. And your hijinks beforehand were quite diverting too, on occasion."

"Uh," Tony said, "thanks?" He blinked and then squinted at Heimdall. "Just out of interest how much of those hijinks could you, uh, could you see?"

Heimdall smirked. "Everything."

"Wow, that's—I probably owe you a thousand hours of therapy," Tony blinked several times again and shook his head like he was physically dispelling that train of thought. "But you're right, we have a plan."

Tony outlined it all: what he expected to happen; what he had in place to combat the things that were most likely to happen.

He didn't mention the contingency. Steve was glad he had to keep his gaze to the doorway, because it meant his back was to the Asgardians. It meant they couldn’t see the flash of guilt on his face. It was the smart play, not to admit they had such a brutal back-up plan to stop Thanos. People fought better when they didn't know there was a safety net. This particular safety net came at a terrible cost. It wasn’t the first time Steve had kept a terrible truth quiet, but this time it wasn’t cowardice; it was the right thing to do.

"I'm not saying this is going to be easy," Tony said. "It's probably going to be the hardest battle we've ever been in. Or at least, higher stakes. Thanos gets back out into the universe at his current strength, we can't guarantee he won't go after the Infinity Stones again."

"Even if not, he'll resume killing half of the life forms on every planet he can reach," Gamora said. "He's relentless. He's so powerful because he believes in what he's doing. And I was at his side long enough to know he'll start with revenge on those he believes have wronged him here. Your Earth, your Asgard, nowhere would be safe. Those who wrong him... “ She shrugged helplessly. "He doesn't stop at half. He'll go for all."

"We have a chance. To kill him. To get out of here. If we work together. So that's what we're gonna do." Tony looked at them all heavily. "We're going to do our best and then we're going to blow this popsicle stand."

There was a long pause as his words and the heaviness that accompanied it settled in.

Hogun snorted. "What in the nine realms is a popsicle stand?"

Steve muffled a laugh as Tony explained it was an Earth idiom that meant escaping somewhere as quickly and thoroughly as possible, and that a popsicle was edible, a piece of flavored ice or ice cream on a stick.
"So a popsicle is food," Fandral sighed. "Volstagg would have loved to try one of those."

"One?" Hogun said, earning himself a dig in the ribs from Fandral's direction. His mirth softened. "Then we will fight, and we will win, and we will travel back to Earth and try one of these frozen delights in his honor."


"I also think this is a plan worthy of our fallen friend," Heimdall intoned.

"We'd better finish our drills and return to where we normally would be," Natasha said. "Perhaps you should leave first?" She looked over at Heimdall. "If there are any more questions or strategies to think out, we will have time at the dinner table."

"Until then, Lady Natasha," Heimdall said.

"I don't have anywhere to be for a while," Gamora grinned at Natasha. "I would like to learn some of the moves you do."

As the Asgardians trooped away, Steve spared them a worried glance. Odin had been silent throughout. He didn't know enough of Thor's father to know if that was unusual, but years of working with the Thor from two different timelines meant it didn't feel right.

"Maybe he needs a little time," Bucky murmured, following Steve's glance to Odin's broad back as he silently led his warriors away. "The price you have to pay for it is steep, but the gift here is immortality. Lot of people might not want to give that up."

"The Asgardians are a long-lived race," Steve replied, trying not to frown too deeply as the Asgardians disappeared in. Bucky was probably right. He'd keep an eye on him during dinner to be sure.

It wasn't like Steve wanted to be right, but it was nice to know his intuition wasn't wildly off base.

Throughout the meal, Odin was staring into space, eating only when prompted. At least the bugs had seen this sort of behavior before, from Natasha, not to find it too strange. Odin’s silence was oppressive and it was affecting everyone’s mood. Steve was getting agitated by it. Odin was their leader. It was his job now to be strong, to be a good example to his people.

At least Steve wasn't the only one of them seemingly annoyed.

Heimdall was the one to lose patience first. "You must eat, sire," Heimdall said, firmly, holding up a forkful of meat to his King's mouth again. "You must have your strength for the battle tomorrow."

Odin's single eye didn't look in Heimdall's way. It was fixed, like he was staring into space. At first Steve thought that Odin was going to stay silent, but he did speak, and Steve went cold.

"I don't know if I will be battling with you tomorrow, old friend," Odin said.

At Steve's side, Tony tensed. Steve wanted to reach out and comfort him, but the bugs would notice if too much physical movement happened. Maybe they would even see how their table were all tensing up, like they'd become stiff statue versions of themselves. From behind, maybe they would look like a row of gravestones.
They may as well be gravestones right now if Odin refused to join them in this last fight.

They needed him. They *needed* his strength, expertise, and skills in a Melee to have any chance of them all surviving. They needed all the Asgardians at their best, and without their King, Steve wasn't sure whether that would be possible.

"You must, sire," Fandral said, his voice soft, entreating.

Odin's eye rolled in its socket to form a baleful stare directly at Fandral. Even though it was brief, Fandral visibly quailed, shrinking in on himself; Hogun looked at his friend with a deep agony on his face that resonated in Steve.

"Since when did you become someone who would order their King around?" Odin spat, his voice rumbling. Steve fancied he could hear thunder in the tone. No wonder Thor had been born with lightning itself in his bones. "Must? Must? What must is there? I refuse. This plan—it gets us out. But will it get all of us out? Who will die in this madness? If I'm supposed to stand idly by while my son, my daughter, get ripped apart to die bloody in the sand on this damned alien moon, with their last chance of salvation destroyed, solely to stop *one* monster? I lost my Loki and my Hela once before. I never thought to gain them back. Here I have them, safe, so they never die. Can we not amend this plan so we all stay here?"

"We can't," Steve said, slowly. "I'm sorry. But Thanos knows how to get out now. If we don't stop him, he'll kill all of us, even if he has to come back here to finish the job. Loki and Hela won't be spared from that fate, and he won't stop there. He'll go to New Asgard and pull that apart too. Raze your people in half, at the very least. You said monster. That's what Thanos is. *Monster.* And whenever you try to remove an evil from this world, there's always a price to pay."

Odin resumed staring into space again.

"You have a son out there," Steve said. "And you can fight to at least get your other son out safely too."

"You speak so cavalierly about these matters, Captain," Odin moved his stare to Steve with a combination of anger and weariness that Steve could feel, right to the core of his soul. "Do you even know how much I have suffered in this place, to see my son and daughter die in the sand, night after night? Do you even know what it's *like* to watch your own child die?"

Odin's face was smug with certainty, that he had won his argument. That there was no way any of them could understand.

But Steve could. More than Odin could know.

"Yes," Steve said, simply.

He was aware that the table had gone quiet. Aware that everyone was staring at him. Deeply aware that Natasha and Pietro in particular had matching, slack expressions, and that Bucky's head was lowered, because he alone knew the whole story.

Tony knew a little, and his hand slipped under the table to squeeze Steve's knee reassuringly. That gave Steve the strength to hold Odin's gaze. To take a deep breath and tell his story. The stakes here were impossible. Steve's urge to keep his past secret, tight and safe in his own heart and mind, was something he couldn't afford to indulge. Not anymore.

His heart pounding, Steve met Odin's stare with his own, and let none of the pain in his heart retreat. For once, he let it all show, on his face, and in the way his voice trembled.
"I know you think humans have short lives, but I've lived longer than most. Over a hundred and eighty years so far. And in that time, I had three children. Two sons and a daughter." Steve swallowed, his mouth dry. He had to fight hard not to tremble too openly, lest the bugs be drawn over to them and realize the silence suppression field was up. "Two of my children died in my arms. One came home in a box, about this big." Steve held out his hands and was proud they only barely trembled when he indicated the size of the package.

Odin's face twitched, just a little.

Steve wasn't done. Now he'd started, he needed to get it out. Needed Odin to understand why fighting was important. He kept staring at Odin, even though the Asgardian's face was a blur to him. "My son James was eight years old when he was hit by a car, saving my daughter Sarah's life. She was fourteen. He pushed her out of the way. That compelled her to become a trauma surgeon in his honor. She volunteered to help out on the front lines of a war, didn't make it home. And Ian —"

Steve inhaled deeply and let it out more noisily than he wanted. Even telling this story once to Bucky eight years ago had nearly broken him apart, and the parts of it that Tony had pulled out of him had caused deep cracks. Saying the words out loud now was a risk; Steve felt fragile, like he was about to shatter.

"Ian was a firefighter. Honestly, out of my three kids, I thought he'd die first. But he lasted the longest. He was stubborn like that. He got that from me." Steve's mouth twitched wryly into what might have been a smile, if he didn't feel so bone-aching sad. He could see all three of his children in his memory again. Their small faces. The way it had felt to see their tiny hands reach for his. He had loved them in a way he'd never expected, desperately and solid, like every day they existed made the universe expand and grow and flourish.

And once they were gone, the universe shrank down and died, a little more every day.

"He still died in my arms," Steve's mouth quirked into an ironic smirk. "Old age."

"Captain—" Odin started, but whatever he was about to say, Steve didn't want to hear it.

"You have a son out there," Steve said, and pointed with his fork at the door. Like Thor might be right there, in the next room. Alone and vulnerable and in need of protection. "And one in here. Thanos isn't just a monster. He's an extinction-level event. For every planet, every realm. You have a chance to protect your sons by joining in with this fight. By leading this fight. And protecting your children?" He shook his head briefly. "That's the only job you get when you become a father. Don't fail it, or you carry the burden of that failure with you every day of your life. Believe me."

There was silence for a long moment. Steve tried to keep calm, keep breathing, but even that part felt almost impossible. His chest felt tight and heavy, like he was breathing through tar. But he held Odin's gaze and he didn't back down, continuing to stare until Odin nodded, slightly.

Steve felt like he could breathe again, but at what cost? His eyes burned and he was shaking too much. The meat tasted like ashes in his mouth, like all food had for a long time, over and over again, because grief was a burden that kept coming back, even when you thought you should be over and done with it.

"I'm going to go sleep," Steve said, maybe a little too loudly. The sound of the room snapped back in as he pushed off his chair, taking his plate back to the designated spot and keeping his back carefully to the others as he stormed out of the room.
It was playing in his mind, over and over, the most vivid of Steve's restless monsters. He understood what Tony meant before, that death was the only place where restless monsters slept. Those moments before the worms kicked in and brought them back to painful reality again were blissfully dark. The agonies that the restless, monstrous thoughts brought with them were finally still.

As he headed to the sleep room, kicked off his sandals and lay down on the sand in their usual corner, his back to the door, the memories kept coming. He closed his eyes and let them.

The day of James' death had been like any other. Ian and Sarah were out in the street with their friends. It was a safe neighborhood. Usually. James had been on the front porch, playing with his blocks. He laughed when Ian kicked the ball too hard and knocked his tower over. Nothing bothered James.

Peggy was in the kitchen. Steve was trying to teach her how to cook an omelet, because he had a mission coming up where he would be away for a week and he needed to know his wife and kids wouldn't starve. He ended up laughing, dancing with her to get her to move away from the stove before she burned something else. The windows were open as they always were when the kids played outside, so they could hear if they ever got into trouble. They never had, but Steve listened dutifully all the time.

Even he wouldn't have been able to get there in time. A scream pierced through everything; Ian, screaming at the top of his lungs. Screaming and screaming and screaming, a sound so terrible Steve had never heard the like. He and Peggy ran, Peggy stopping to turn the stove off, so at least their home didn't burn down behind them; she knew that Steve would get there faster than she ever could.

But it was too late. The driver had been so drunk he'd fallen asleep at the wheel. Sarah had been standing on their front lawn. The car should never have been there, but it had swerved, and Sarah and Ian, caught up in their game with their friends who lived in the same street, didn't notice.

But James, little James… he did. All across their porch were the colorful wooden blocks James had knocked aside as he'd run his little heart out to get his sister's attention. He ended up tackling her out of the way, knocking her into the street, but the corner of the car clipped him. The car continued to smash through into their neighbor's car, and Steve got to James quickly, but it was too late. It would always be too late.

Peggy went catatonic for a while. That was how Steve knew so well how to deal with Natasha. Peggy broke down and barely did anything. Steve concentrated as best as he could on keeping her and his other two kids alive, and one day she simply snapped back awake like nothing had happened.

Steve hadn't broken down. He had developed enough coping mechanisms by that point to deal with grief. He did learn, a lesson he wished he never had, that every grief came in its own shape, made you fall apart in new, different ways; it may leave you alone sometimes, but it always came back, even when you couldn't predict it. But sometimes you could predict it. There were words that could summon it, as certain as any spell.

But maybe those words could be weakened by use, given less power, so that Steve wouldn't feel like he'd been stabbed every time he heard their names. He'd never thought of it that way before. And now, tomorrow, he might finally run out of time, for good.

He felt Natasha's arms slip around him; she came in and nestled close, her nose digging in to the nape of his neck. She pressed herself tightly to him. The sound disappeared. Tony was close again,
then. Steve hated that it felt like he could finally breathe again.

"You surprised me," Natasha said, and at Steve's flinch, he could almost hear her smirk. "I only pretend I know everything, remember?"

"You make it difficult to remember that," Steve mumbled.

"I sort of thought James might have been an old lover," Natasha wrinkled her nose. "I'm not usually that far off the mark."

Steve kept his eyes closed. "It's understandable that you'd find it hard to look at me and think father."

"I don't know," Natasha said. "I've heard more than one person want to call you daddy."

Steve snapped open his eyes and turned over; Natasha obligingly moved her arms enough so she could tighten them around him again as soon as he was facing her. There was still enough faint light that he could see her face. "I'm not going to think about that," he said, after a pause.

Natasha tried to look innocent, but her mouth twisted into a wicked smirk despite that attempt. But even that faded into a more serious, earnest look. Her voice was soft when she said, "I bet you were a great dad. And I'm really sorry about what happened to your kids. I wish I could have met them."

Steve swallowed hard. "Yeah. They'd have loved their Aunt Natasha."

She smiled at him sadly and looked over Steve's head; a moment later, Tony came down to the sand next to him. Tony didn't say anything, Steve just knew it was him, purely from the first touch. Tony wrapped his arms around him, winding them between Natasha's. Steve hadn't realized he'd needed the support so much. They all did. He could feel Pietro curl up at his feet somewhere and he knew Bucky would be sliding into whatever gap was left in the pile.

Steve closed his eyes and sleep took him faster than he expected, considering how nauseated he felt. Whatever happened tomorrow, they would be together. He would cherish every single possible second of that for as long as he could.

Tony held off changing the broadcast satellite code, even when the Grandmaster dropped the force-field, until the second that the Grandmaster said the actual word.

"Today, as you can guess, is a Melee day," the Grandmaster announced, and Steve could feel the brief tension from everyone else on their table when Tony's hand slipped to his wrist, just the once. Tony kept his eyes on the Grandmaster, but tapped one finger surreptitiously twice against his temple which was the sign: mission complete.

Hopefully their tension read to the Grandmaster and his lackeys as regular Melee fear. The beginning part of this plan relied fully on the element of surprise.

Tony didn't deploy his silence suppression field for the rest of breakfast and Steve was glad about it. He didn't think there was much else to say. They showered briefly and met up in the workroom to get changed. It felt so weird that this could be their last time in this room; Steve felt this way and he'd been here a small fraction of the time as Tony, Pietro, and Natasha.

They were all quiet as they got changed, lost in their own thoughts. Pietro applied his glittery lightning bolt to his chest and looked at the half-full pot left of the paste he did it with like he
couldn't believe he wouldn't be using it again. Bucky put on the new arm before collapsing it down to the thin band of metal that was its smallest form and then started struggling with the mess of belts that his costume comprised of, looking glad this was the last time he'd have to wear it. Natasha was in her ridiculous costume faster than all of them and was stretching in the corner.

Steve put his own costume on methodically. The room was so quiet that he barely noticed that Tony had sidled up to change alongside him, and had activated the silence suppression field, although the others were still in the room. His eyes were dark with focus. He kept his eyes averted from Steve, focusing on putting his armor on, the parts locking together with soft whirs that were reassuring somehow.

They both knew the stakes. And what the terrible price would be, if failure looked imminent.

"Is the code ready?" Steve asked, his voice almost a ghost. The others might not be able to hear them, but they might notice their mouths moving. Maybe if they did, they would think he and Tony were swapping softer words than the reality of this last small secret exchange.

Tony nodded, dully. "Ready to broadcast if we need it." He pushed a piece of the armor against his wrist and Steve watched as the panel slid into place as part of it. "I've coded the nanobots to retreat at your touch too," he added, as a wave of red covered the panel sleekly.

Tony looked at Steve, his mouth turned down at the edges. "Last time I had a plan Z like this one, I had to use it."

"One thing I know for sure from going through more than one time period for a second time," Steve said, "is that things rarely ever happen the same way twice."

Tony flashed him a look. "That would be more reassuring to me if I was the sole casualty of plan Z."

Steve met that look and just smiled sadly. Tony disconnected the suppression field so the others wouldn't notice he'd deployed it. Steve thought maybe Natasha had, but from her sad smile, it looked like she'd assumed it had been a tender goodbye.

Even though they weren't coming back, they all automatically folded the clothes they'd removed and placed them in the trunk. Pietro and Natasha burst out laughing when they both put their folded clothes down at the same time.

Humor was a good way to cope with imminent threat, Steve thought. Although was it humor, or was it hysteria? They needed to get morale back on track. Steve knelt to finish lacing up his boots and when he looked up, Tony was mostly in his armor, his faceplate up, and Steve waggled his eyebrows at him.

Tony rolled his eyes and laughed fondly for a moment before helping Steve up to his feet. Strictly speaking, Steve didn't need the help. Tony knew as well as Steve did that wouldn't stop him accepting it.

"You gonna do the big speech or should I?" Tony asked.

Steve hummed and thought about it. "My track record is shit."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Excuse you, I distinctly remember you receiving compliments at the last one I heard."

"Yeah, and what happened afterward?"
"You're superstitious?"

"I'm a soldier. We go by track record on that kind of thing. Ergo, my track record is shit."

"Yeah, maybe you have a point. Terrible track record. Ended World War II, but hey, that was a small skirmish, tiny, really—"

"Lots of people contributed to that, Tony. I was a fraction of the war effort. A cog in the machine. Everyone did their part."

"You're still singing from that sheet after eighty years since last being exposed to that? I really have to look more into capitalizing on propaganda."

"You're the leader here, so really—"

"Oh my god, I'd heard about this," Bucky said loudly, jolting both Steve and Tony out of their discussion. "But I hadn't managed to see it for myself, I thought people were kidding."

"Oh yeah, it's been this bad for years," Natasha nodded. "All the soulful gazing, and mom and dad talks. It’s like even from the beginning, these two skipped straight from antagonism to straight-up married banter."

"You're hilarious," Steve deadpanned.

Natasha beamed at him. "Honestly, after Ultron, I kept expecting to find a wedding invitation in my e-mail."

"Please, Steve would handwrite them," Pietro waved a hand. "All that fancy swirly writing."

"Shut up," Steve muttered, rubbing the back of his neck.

"You didn't," Tony said.

Steve squinted. "It was the forties, there wasn't as much hullabaloo over weddings as there is today?"

Tony made a snorting noise and mouthed hullabaloo. "Fine, I'll concede, your track record is dodgy, I'll give the rousing pre-battle morale-boosting speech."

"Are you sure we have time for this?" Pietro asked.

"Funny," Tony pulled a face. "All right, Avengers, this is it. We're all probably going to die. Try not to." He beamed at them, proud of himself.

Bucky squinted. "That's it? That's your great speech?"

Tony shrugged. "It was either that or let's take ass and kick names."

Steve sighed. "I don't know why I expected anything else."

"So stun us with your speech, Cap," Tony challenged. "C'mon. Smack out one of those zingers."

Steve inhaled and looked up at the others. "Eight years ago, we thought we'd saved the galaxy. But it came at a cost that was hard to take. And we were wrong."

"Very morale, much boosting," Tony said.
"Now who's interrupting," Steve muttered back. He huffed and squared his shoulders, settling into the words. He never thought he knew what to say, but somehow, the words always seemed to come anyway.

"We all know in life how rare second chances are. Somehow we've been lucky enough to get one final shot. And that's what this is. One last roll of the dice. You all know your parts. Do those and look out for each other. There are no do-overs this time. No worms waiting for us on the other side. You die, you stay dead this time."

He took a deep breath. "I know it feels all kinds of unfair that we're here again, on the brink of everything falling apart, but no one else can do this job like we do. We're Avengers. And Avengers do the job no one else can do. This time, we have a chance to stop a disaster before it needs to be Avenged. We can stop Thanos. We will. Because no one else can, and the universe needs us to. Whatever happens today, remember you're not alone. We're here, together, and we have friends coming for us. If we stay together and fight together, then we're all going to make it out of here. Together."

"All right Avengers," Tony said quietly, nodding to himself like the speech had energized him. "Let's go get you armed up."

"And then we can take ass and kick names," Bucky said, patting Tony awkwardly on the shoulder with his new metal arm as he passed him on the way to the door.

Tony hung back, letting the other three out first.

"What's in the bag?" Natasha asked, opening the door wider so Pietro and his unusual new accessory could fit through.

Pietro grinned. "A surprise."

Steve glanced at Tony as they started to follow them. "You know you could have said you didn't want to give the pre-battle speech."

Tony winked at him. "But where's the fun in that?"

They were early to the Cold Room and it wasn't even open yet. Steve leaned against the wall and repeated the plan to himself mentally. He closed his eyes and listened out for the soft whirring of Tony's armor. The sound reassured him, more than it probably should.

Then Steve's eyes snapped open, because the ambient noises disappeared, and it was just Tony's armor and someone else's weapons rattling, and Steve looked to one side to see the imposing figure of Odin, wearing his battle armor and looking more than ready to fight.

"I wanted to thank you for your words yesterday, Captain," Odin said. His eye was trained on his people, a hint of sadness in his expression. Probably as worried as Steve about how many of them were going to survive this. "I know they cost you much and I'm ashamed that I showed such weakness in front of people so much weaker than myself."

It was the kind of passive, back-handed compliments that Steve was at least used to from Thor, so he barely bristled. "You were honest," Steve said. "That takes as much strength, if not more, than bottling it all up." Steve smiled wryly and, because Odin was not looking at him, Steve turned to look at Tony when he said. "Take that from someone who flung himself into another timeline in an attempt to avoid facing his own feelings."
Tony's face did something complicated. Steve looked away, because it was the only way to settle the instinct to knock Tony out and put him away somewhere safe until this was all over. He knew Tony would never forgive him for it. Steve caught a glimpse of Natasha, Pietro, and Bucky all exchanging worried looks and his eyes caught on Natasha's red hourglass tattoo. She'd had it redone for this battle, because the worms remade her without it, every single time.

Steve glanced up at Odin, something occurring to him. "The worms healed Bucky's arm. How come they didn't heal your eye?"

Odin made a thin sound in the back of his throat and stalked off without even looking at Steve or saying a single word more. Seconds later, Heimdall slipped in, joining Steve in leaning against the wall.

"Let me guess, you asked about the eye," Heimdall said. He did look at Steve.

"Couldn't help it," Steve said.

"He's reluctant to talk about it. But I have my theories." Heimdall grinned. "I'll tell you when you visit me at New Asgard."

Steve smiled back at him, briefly. "I'm looking forward to it."

Heimdall inclined his head and stalked away from Steve to stand near his people.

Steve took a deep breath and glanced at Tony. "You have the injector ready?"

"Right here," Tony said. "You sure you want to do this?"

"You want to tell Quill that we could have saved Yondu and Gamora and we didn't do our best?"

"I kinda do," Tony said. "Dude's an a-hole. Tell me you constantly don't get the urge to piss him off."

Steve shrugged. Tony wasn't wrong. "It's more of a compelling idea than it should be," he begrudgingly admitted.

The Cold Room opened then and any of that vague moment of amusement drifted away. Steve swallowed and stared at Tony. Tony stared back.

"Let's do this," Tony said, and his eyes lit up, "Aurora."

"I'll pay you back for that later," Steve muttered.

"Do," Tony said, simply. Steve heard everything else he was saying, with that single-word answer, and a quiet determination like a small fire set up space in his gut. They could do this. They really could.

Steve and Tony hung back a little so they could keep an eye on the bugs and gauge the best time to move. It didn't take a while for the two bugs guarding them to lose attention. He nodded at Tony and they both surreptitiously moved either side of Yondu.

Tony deployed the silence field and Yondu startled at the instant death of noise, his face only starting to slide in Steve's direction in curiosity.

"If Peter Quill means anything to you, you're going to stay upright and facing forward," Steve warned. The bugs weren't paying attention now, but they might if he collapsed in the sand. He was
ready to try and forcibly hold Yondu upright if this went wrong.

Yondu squinted, unaware that Tony was lifting the nanotech injector up toward his Control Disc until it happened. He did let out a yelp of pain which thankfully was muffled by the suppression field.

"Listen and listen hard, we don't have much time," Tony said. "This match, we have two objectives. You stay alive and we kill Thanos before the force-field goes down. If you can help us do that, we have a way out of here, and we have Peter Quill waiting on the other side."

"If you're lying to me I'll kill you myself," Yondu muttered, staring straight ahead. "No one uses my boy's name in vain."

"Tony," Steve said. Tony nodded at the warning and collapsed the field. The bugs' attention didn't drift for a few more minutes, but when it did, they moved back over to where Pietro, Bucky, and Natasha were waiting. Tony briefly nodded at Natasha as if to say task done.

Steve kept his voice low even with the silence field temporarily back in place. "Everyone definitely has their strategy clear?"

"All I know is that I'm the star of this show," Pietro winked at him.

Natasha snorted. "Remind me to get your autograph at the stage door."

"I know what I'm doing," Tony said, and if his gaze dipped to his wrist, Steve was the only one who knew the significance of it. He stared across at Steve. "Don't take risks. Don't do anything stupid."

"Mm, it's like Stark knows you, Stevie," Bucky said.

"Yeah," Steve smiled at Tony, "he does."

Tony grinned back, but it only lasted a second. "I swear it, though. This is our final do-over." His gaze was flint-hard. "You do something stupid, I'm joining you."

Steve swallowed at the intensity and nodded at him in lieu of saying something.

Pietro, distracted by shifting nervously in the sand, only heard half of that. "Where are you joining him?"

Bucky looked away. Steve didn't blame him. If Steve said anything close to the truth—joining him in death—then Pietro would spook and he wouldn't be the only one. Killing morale was a quick avenue to killing your whole damn team, and that was one of the two things they couldn't afford today. The second was Thanos dropping that damn force-field and getting to the Gate, because either Thanos would escape, or Tony would crush the Negative Zone whole, with them all inside it.

Still, Pietro was looking at him for an answer, so Steve shot him the least panicked smile he could manage. "Where our restless monsters sleep," he said, while Tony shot him a sad, knowing look over Pietro's head.

"I only asked a simple question, you didn't have to be rude about it," Pietro grouched, shuffling off to stand closer to Natasha.

Steve looked over at Tony helplessly. Escape or death. Whatever the outcome of this battle, he would do it with Tony. This time together would be his only guiding star.
As the bugs used their tridents to prod them out of the Cold Room, Steve did have one regret. He kind of wished he could do something terrible to those bugs. Chop them up and leave them bleeding in the Cold Room, slaughtering them as easily as the bugs helped nudge them to their deaths, day in, day out. Unfortunately their plan hinged for them maintaining the status quo, right up until the very moment that they heard their cue.

The stands were full to bursting, a swell of people in a blur of colors. There were the usual patches of aliens wearing their favorite warrior’s colors, mostly purple today which made Steve curl his lip in disgust, because bad enough that anyone thought cheering on violent deaths were fun, but supporting Thanos? Steve knew at least some of the crowd were from planets that Thanos had personally devastated, and all of them had experienced the effects of the Decimation, some of which couldn't be undone. It didn't make sense to him.

Maybe the ones from races who should hate Thanos the most were the ones in the colors and masks supporting them, though. There was a swathe of them in red-and-gold. Pure gold for Odin seemed popular. There was a particularly loud group of what looked like men (honestly, Steve should probably stop trying to use his own experiences to map onto aliens, but despite the range of creatures he’d fought over the years, he had very little other point of reference than Earth) with red hourglasses painted on their chests. There was even a small smattering of red, white, and blue which could only be for Steve. He'd be charmed if he actually thought they were cheering him on to live, but you never knew. Maybe he was just their favorite to see sliced into pieces and left bleeding into the sand.

Steve kept looking up at the crowd until he saw the one thing he needed to be sure of, and when he saw it, he lowered his gaze to the large doorway where Thanos would emerge soon. At the other side of the arena, he could see the Tenebrae coming out to the sand. The Tenebrae probably wouldn't be anything to worry about at first; indeed, they might even be allies, at least until Thanos hit the floor.

Once the force-field was down, the Gate was open, and other Avengers appeared, Steve wasn't sure what would happen. He only knew there were some of the Tenebrae that the universe would be better off without.

Hela's horned helmet grew dramatically as she led the pack of Tenebrae to their usual pre-Melee starting spot. She definitely counted in that category.

Steve nearly trembled when four shapes emerged from the large, looming doorway. He had to glance to one side to calm himself down. Tony was there, in the full version of his armor, his faceplate already down. As much as Steve would have loved to see his face, it was better that Tony was as protected as possible. Although they were sure that any type of electrical power could work with the vibranium and Asgardian-metal combination to knock out the force-field, Tony was still the obvious option for Thanos to try and steal as part of his own escape plan.

The idea of Thanos coming anywhere near Tony turned Steve's stomach and he regretted eating breakfast that morning. But they couldn't let this day look like it was going to be anything other than a normal, regular Melee day.


For the period in his divergent timeline when Steve worked as a comic book artist, his company had once been tasked to come up with some original villains for the hero to destroy. Steve had actually pitched Corpus Glaive, Proxima Midnight, Ebony Maw, and Cull Obsidian. They were
rejected as too powerful to be believable. Steve laughed that night until he cried.

The Children of Thanos came forward as they always did, walking up to the edge of the line drawn in the sand, even though there was no force-field blocking them from going any further. It was a moment of drama. They liked the attention on them. They were cocky with it.

That arrogance was what Steve was counting on, for the first part of their plan to work.

The Outriders came next and assembled the same as before, filing out to form a line in a semi-circle around the arena edge.

Steve could see in the Four Stooges' faces that they were expecting this Melee to be different, although not in the way they probably should. He could already tell Thanos had given them certain assignments, because instead of saluting up to the crowd, they were looking over toward them. He could see Proxima Midnight's gaze lingering on Hela briefly; Proxima briefly nudged Cull Obsidian, whose head tilted in Steve's direction after that. Corvus Glaive was looking at Heimdall.

And worse than those three, Ebony Maw was watching Tony with his keen, too-clever eyes. Steve's blood was boiling and that was before Thanos himself emerged from the doorway.

Steve swallowed even though he knew what to expect this time. Was Thanos always this big? Maybe the doorway was designed to make him look bigger. Steve's eyes were dry and he blinked rapidly, trying to even out his breaths and repeating his favorite pattern for that—inhaling for a count of two, holding for a count of three, exhaling for a count of four. His heartbeat didn't return to normal but that was to be expected.

It might have been his imagination, but just for a second, as Thanos posed dramatically for the crowd with his fists clenched, Steve thought Thanos was looking directly at him.

The Grandmaster's face appeared in the sky, ready to introduce them. Last time—as apparently for every Melee—everyone in Thanos' cohort had waited for him to finish introducing the battle.

But there was no force-field bisecting the arena, no force-field protecting the Children of Thanos, and no reason for the Einherjar to play by those unspoken rules.

Not today.

"Welcome," the Grandmaster said, and that was their cue.

Barely a second later, several things happened at once.

Pietro was standing by Steve, triumphantly holding the pike that made Corvus Glaive too powerful, a clear trail of his path in the deep sand of the arena floor.

Bucky had put a crossbow bolt directly in Proxima Midnight's right eye.

Tony had sent his uni-beam at Ebony Maw's chest, sending him stumbling to the ground already, smoke rising from him.

And Hela, not part of the plan at all, picked up on what was going on more quickly than anyone else and launched a barrage of spikes directly at Cull Obsidian, several of which managed to hit him before he brought up his large hammer and twisted it into a clumsy large shape which Steve thought was supposed to be a shield.

There was absolute chaos, from every direction at once.
"Rally, Einherjar," Odin yelled, pushing forward, his golden horned helmet shining under the suns. "To me, my warriors. Onward!"

Steve took a deep breath, held up his shield high, and plunged into the battle.

The name of the game was together and that was how the battle started, at least.

Odin gathered Loki close to him, muttering something at him that made Loki light up and start lancing ice around them, making a protective barrier that allowed one enemy through at a time, essentially bottleneching Outriders out in the wide-open arena space.

When they made their plans, Steve had guiltily worried about the Tenebrae for a short while, because would they really fight to stay alive if they didn't know the worm safety-net was effectively null and void for this fight? But of course all of them were fighting to stay alive, mostly occupied with the persistent rush of the Outriders, because Thanos and his Children were too busy with their own escape mission to bother too deeply with the fighters they considered inconsequential, and the brainwashed Tenebrae all thought they stood a chance of being named the new Champion of Death if they could survive long enough to take on Thanos.

Steve could care less who struck the winning blow, as long as it was done.

It was difficult to keep an eye on the wider battle while being overrun by Outriders. There were so many of them and they were so much more powerful than they were last time. It didn't matter how careful Steve was, injuries were going to happen, and he was probably lucky that he lasted five minutes this time without getting hurt, considering how rapidly he had died in the last Melee. As much as the Avengers tried to stay together, it was impossible, because they knew certain elements needed to be kept apart. As much as Steve wished he could fight alongside Iron Man, it was tempting fate to stay too close to him.

One Outrider managed to bite deeply into Steve's side, even as he brought the ax down on its thick neck. Steve pressed a hand into the wound, grit his teeth, and keep going. Adrenaline would mask enough of the pain for the moment. For now, all he could do was keep battling.

As he fought off Outrider after Outrider, Steve tried to gauge where they were with the plan. Proxima Midnight's energy seemed solely devoted to Hela. Hela was giving as good as she got, so Steve vowed to keep a weather eye on that situation for the moment. Most of the Outriders, Einherjar, and Tenebrae alike seemed to be giving them the space to duke it out.

Corvus Glaive didn't have his weapon back yet, but he'd taken a spear from someone and was chasing after Heimdall. Steve struggled to decapitate the Outrider that had tackled him, trying to get to his feet to join in the battle, but Bucky got there first, snatching the spear away from Heimdall with his metal arm turned to the Hulk fist. A moment later, Bucky was expelling fire from his hand right into Corvus Glaive's face. Even that wasn't about to stop Corvus Glaive, and he was seconds from smacking Bucky viciously out of his way, until something else hit him—something round and green.

Steve didn't recognise it until the object impacted directly in Corvus Glaive's face. It was one of the spheres that had been in that room with Yon-Rogg during his first Battle Royale. At first Steve couldn't remember what the green spheres did, but then Corvus Glaive began puking everywhere. Bucky got covered in it, his expression clearly saying he might have preferred to be stabbed.

"Nice," Pietro said, suddenly standing by Steve. He was wearing thick gloves Steve hadn't seen on him before and he was pulling something out of his bag—another one of the spheres. This one was
purple. Steve hadn't gotten to see what the purple ones did. "Pip gave me them when I said I wanted to cause some chaos," Pietro said, grinning at Steve as Steve used his shield to protect them from another snarling, drooling Outrider.

Steve beat down the Outrider, meaning to go after Corvus Glaive while he was distracted, but Natasha, Bucky, and Guillotine were there faster. Natasha and Bucky used their knives to pin his arms down while Guillotine, screaming at the top of her lungs, brought her sword down on Corvus Glaive's neck, severing his head in one go.

Proxima Midnight let out a heartbroken howl and then got sliced in the arm by Hela for the privilege; that looked to be a mistake, because Proxima Midnight increased the speed of her blows, pressing Hela back toward the barrier.

"Shit, I'd better stop that," Pietro said, blurring off. A moment later, there was a streak of purple—Pietro throwing the current sphere in his hand—and there was an actual explosion, ricocheting off the inside of the force-field and sending both Hela and Proxima Midnight tumbling in a heap of limbs.

Unfortunately, the two foes looked intact.

"Concussive force," Pietro explained, instantly back at Steve's side. "Wait, you're bleeding." A second later, Steve had a bandage wrapped around his midriff. "There you go."

"C'mon," Steve said, "let's make sure we get enough time for me to get used to that talent of yours."

Pietro grinned.

Steve scanned the battlefield for Tony as he fended off another Outrider. He did catch a glimpse of Gamora and Nebula, battling each other for a moment, and then Gamora yanked Nebula close and said something, and moments later, they were fighting the Outriders together. Steve hoped that meant that Gamora had swayed Nebula to her side, rather than the other way around.

Tony was up high, circling Thanos, which made Steve's heart hurt. To go up against the actual monstrosity that was the reason Tony never got to see his daughter grow up, the monster that killed him? That was pure bravery. If Steve didn't already love him, he might now.

Thanos seemed to have his own target in mind, but was waylaid with every step by a clever cycle of attacks. Tony was unleashing his uni-beam as much as possible, leading Thanos to lose interest in him while it re-charged—Tony's armor would only be useful in destroying the force-field if it was fully charged—and then the Asgardians were surrounding Loki, protecting him while he threw several ice spears at Thanos. As Thanos lurched toward them, Gamora and Nebula jumped in, roughly fighting him, Yondu joining them with his arrow, stretching that attack out. When they were beaten back, a group of the Tenebrae were capitalizing on the chaos and were working together, seemingly taking it in turns to land a blow while the others protected them. When they inevitably got bowled back, Tony had re-charged enough to start the cycle again.

Steve couldn't keep his focus on that part of the battle, though. Because someone else finally crashed into his part of the arena, snarling and staring at Steve.

On realizing Steve had noticed him, Cull Obsidian started lumbering toward him. An Outrider tried to jump into his path, to lunge at Steve, but Cull Obsidian swept the Outrider away himself with the edge of his hammer.
Steve glowered up at him and tightened his grip on his ax and his shield. If Cull Obsidian had been large before, Steve didn't quite know what word to use instead to describe him, because massive didn't quite seem to cut it. He was twice as tall as Steve and probably four times as broad; what showed of his skin was almost reptilian. Steve ran through the brief file of characteristics in his head. Super-strength, enhanced density, impenetrable skin—and that damned hammer.

Cull Obsidian would be a slog to fight. Steve knew that from even before the worms had ramped up Cull Obsidian’s strength to insane levels. Steve didn't necessarily have to be strong enough to defeat Cull Obsidian. He just needed to be sure he kept the shield away from him.

Cull Obsidian was focused when he fought and relentless. The Outriders seemed to have learned the lesson from their fallen colleague and weren't attacking, which honestly was a mistake on Cull Obsidian's part. Because Steve was able to focus fully on this fight, that would give him the edge. He hoped. Pietro had bandaged his wound, but it had still weakened Steve.

Pietro was with Bucky and Natasha at the moment. It looked like they were moving in with the Tenebrae collaborators, protecting Ronan. That was good. Ronan's hammer was a formidable power source. At first it seemed like there was a small amount of dispute, but Bucky yelled something, and their maneuvers against Thanos resumed. Steve supposed it was because Bucky, Natasha, and Pietro had promised to leave the killing blow they wanted—to win their place as the Champion of Death—to them.

Steve was utilizing every strategic and fighting lesson he'd ever been given to fend off Cull Obsidian, but he was being forced back against the sand. Not much, an inch at the time, but every inch was adding up and Cull Obsidian knew it, his grin widening to show more twisted, wicked-looking teeth with every piece of gained distance. Steve tried to twist the path of the fight, a curve not a straight line, drawing it out. If he could keep Cull Obsidian occupied, then the giant couldn't go after the fighters working on Thanos. There were enough teams annoying Thanos that it was keeping him mostly in the center of the arena; he wasn't being allowed to move much in any particular direction.

Unfortunately, there was one component that they couldn't keep away from Thanos, and Thanos managed to swipe Ronan's Ultimate Weapon from him. Ronan clung it to furiously, getting lifted up in the air, only for Yon-Rogg to leap up, Killmonger spring-boarding him up high enough, to snag Ronan away, a split second before Thanos was about to flick him away. Yon-Rogg yanked Ronan away, pulling him away to safety, and Thanos lashed out with the hammer, sending the group of Tenebrae—along with Natasha, Pietro, and Bucky—spinning head over heels.

Steve didn't have time to panic, even though it meant Thanos had his power source now, because Cull Obsidian was fired-up by seeing his master succeed in one element of the plan. Steve rallied as best as he could, but it was always jarring to find out first-hand your best wasn't good enough, because he only managed to hold on a minute longer. Cull Obsidian smashed down on Steve's shield with his hammer with so much force that Steve was pushed right down into the sand. Although Steve swept his legs out to regain his balance, using the ax to help get himself back to his feet again a moment later, it was a moment too long. There was a blur of movement and Steve found himself fifteen feet in the air.

Cull Obsidian had Steve by his throat. The world blurred out at the edges. For all that he'd died here, again and again, this death felt different. It was because this time, he was really failing. This time, his death wasn't to save someone he loved. This time, his death meant he was failing the one promise he cared about. Together.

Steve struggled in the hold, kicking against Cull Obsidian's arm, trying to get some leverage. He
held onto his shield, desperate not to fail at this, and he cast around, trying to see if he could get it
to one of the others, but his vision was too blurred. He geared up, aiming to hurl his shield in the
sky, hoping Tony would have his back this one last time to keep the shield away from Thanos, but
when he tried, Cull Obsidian punched his arm with the staff of his weapon. Steve could only let out
a helpless gasp as he felt it drop to the sand below, and he heard Cull Obsidian's laugh of glee. The
darkness closed in and Steve tried to fight it, but he was so cold, and his body was failing, much
like he had.

Except the expected end didn't come.

Something smashed into Steve, and it hurt, but it also came with a rush of oxygen in amongst that,
a glimpse of hope, of survival. Steve landed hard on the ground, enough that he was vulnerable for
much too long, and he gasped for air, trying to at least roll over so he wasn't lying weaponless and
belly-up on the sand, and his vision crept back in with an instant, blistering headache.

It was Pietro, standing triumphantly between Steve and Cull Obsidian. He had Corvus Glaive's
pike in his hand. There was blood along with the glitter on his chest and a wide smile on his face.

"Together goes more than one way, Captain," Pietro said, and Steve opened his mouth to yell, but
there wasn't enough breath yet in his lungs for it, and he lurched in horror, because Cull Obsidian
was rising up behind him, and Pietro shouldn't be looking at Steve, this was unbearable.

The scene in front of him unfolded like it was happening in slow motion, but at the same time, it
happened too fast for Steve to register. The aftermath of it was like he'd been stabbed himself. Cull
Obsidian's weapon had shifted seamlessly into its scythe form, and the wickedly curved sharp
blade was impaled directly through Pietro's shining, sparkling chest.

No. No. Steve's eyes stung and he might have been screaming as he scrambled desperately to his
feet, sensation slowly coming back to his battered body, because this wasn't fair, this wasn't fair.
To come so close to getting Pietro back to Wanda, and to lose him now, like this, like they lost him
last time? Protecting someone else, when he should have been elsewhere across the battlefield,
saving himself?

Steve could feel the remnants of his bruised sanity fleeing his mind in a rushed wave, because
Pietro's chest was rising and falling, and Pietro was smiling as he died, and Pietro was laughing
like this was the funniest thing ever to happen to him.

"Wow," Pietro said. "I've heard girls complain about this before." He twisted on the spot and
grinned up at a surprised Cull Obsidian. "Just because you have a massive weapon, you shouldn't
rely on size, y'know? Learn some technique."

Steve blinked as he struggled to grasp what was going on. Weapon. He needed a weapon. He
needed to avenge...Pietro's death...which hadn't actually happened?

Pietro simply walked off Cull Obsidian's scythe, leaving Thanos' stooge completely bewildered,
and it was the perfect opening. Steve's left arm was too weak, but his right arm was still strong
enough; he scooped his shield back up in a burst of adrenaline, fueled by the intimate knowledge of
how close he had come to death. The explanation of Pietro's miracle would have to wait.

Pietro's miracle had not only saved his own life, but it was also the perfect distraction; Cull
Obsidian was still squinting at his weapon, wondering how he failed, when Steve was able to
launch himself at him. Pietro joined in too, a blur of movement, skewering Cull Obsidian with
Corvus Glaive's pike, while Steve brought the shield down hard on Cull Obsidian's head,
slamming it down so hard his skull caved open.
"Nice," Pietro said. "Gory." He yanked the pike out of Cull Obsidian's chest and got showered in a spray of black blood for the privilege. "I'm glad I look good in black."

Steve slammed the shield in once more to be sure and stepped back from the body, shaking his head and lifting up his shield defensively, but the Outriders seemed to be concentrated elsewhere. He glanced over at Pietro.

"Ah, you wanna know how I survived that," Pietro said. He blurred over to Steve's side, opened his bag, and gestured for Steve to peer in. It was a bag with a partition, and one half still held a couple of the spheres, but the other...

Steve stared down at Vision's head, smiling up at him from the sack below.

"Hello, Captain," Vision said, placidly. "Turns out weapons are easier to phase someone through than a twelve-foot bulkhead."

Steve raised his eyebrows. Pietro shrugged.

"Pip admitted he only let me have the bag because it was a Melee; we couldn't have used it to smuggle Vision to the bulkhead, so you don't have to worry about that." Pietro put his arm around Steve. "So I figured, why not bring him along? C'mon, I've still got two spheres left." He waggled his eyebrows at Steve. "Wanna see how Thanos copes with the vomiting one?"

Steve managed a crackling exhalation which might have been a laugh in another situation.

"We have to play keepaway with that, too," Steve nodded at Cull Obsidian's scythe. "It's vibranium as well."

Pietro nodded and went to scoop up the hammer in a blur, but apparently Vision couldn't protect him from every blow, because someone else smashed him away, and this blow definitely hit—Pietro went tumbling across the sand. It made sense, for the length of time Vision could hold the phasing, that Pietro couldn't be permanently invincible. Steve exhaled roughly when he saw who had knocked Pietro away—Proxima Midnight. Of course. In the background, Hela was fighting an onslaught of Outriders, flailing wildly under a shadow mass of writhing limbs and snapping claws.

Proxima Midnight smiled at Steve as she picked up Cull Obsidian's hammer.

"I don't suppose you'll stand back and let me crush the life out of that one for stealing my love's weapon?" Proxima Midnight tilted her head. "I credit that as the reason for his death. You're an Avenger, are you not. Would you deny me my own revenge?"

"You can try," Steve said, which was pure bravado, considering he was still struggling to stand.

Proxima Midnight inclined her head and started to move toward Steve in a pelting run, but then there was something stopping her. A hand, yanked directly through her chest. Steve held up his shield and backed up, to see Proxima Midnight fall lifelessly into the sand, black blood flooding out of her. Hela stood behind, a victorious smirk on her face as she held up Proxima's heart like it was a beautiful trophy.

"Hmmm," Hela said, throwing it aside and swapping it for Cull Obsidian's hammer, regarding it with sharp, knowing eyes. "There's a lot of fuss over this weapon all of a sudden." She tilted her head and shifted it in her hands, cycling it through its various modes. "I think I see why."

Steve geared himself up to fight, backing up to protect Pietro, and it was only because he'd been so focused on this small part of the wider battle that he had no idea that everything was about to fall
apart so rapidly and so thoroughly.

Hela raised up the hammer to attack Steve, and it was yanked from her, by a smiling Thanos.

"I'll take that," he said. Hela turned and immediately began to attack him, but he gestured with Ronan's hammer and she raised into the air.

Tony swooped down, immediately trying to blast her, and Thanos swept out with Cull Obsidian's hammer, glancing Tony out of the sky. According to Peter, Tony had held back Thanos on Titan for an astoundingly impressive amount of time, but Tony didn't have his fully-nanotech armor here, and crashed into the sand from the force of the blow. Steve scrambled toward him as Tony got to his feet, bootjets and mask flickering briefly before blazing back into full strength, but it was too late.

Thanos reached out and snapped Hela's branches from her head, throwing her aside like she meant nothing. Thanos looked over in their direction. Pietro was up now, holding his head, and Tony was holding him up, and Steve lifted his shield to protect them both, but Thanos merely turned his gaze and started to stride toward the force-field, like they meant nothing to him.

In this scale of things, perhaps they did. Steve, Pietro, and Tony began running forward, Steve smashing a rogue Outrider in the face as he lurched into the highest speed his battered body would allow, but it was too late.

It was too late.

Thanos combined Cull Obsidian's hammer and Hela's crown in one massive fist. He pushed them into the force-field and raised Ronan's hammer, blasting a wave of energy at them.

The force-field sputtered briefly, lightning crackling over the inside of the curved sphere, much like it had in the last Melee. But this time, once the lightning had stopped, there was a hole in the top of the force-field. Small, but it was visibly growing wider. Thanos grinned and smashed the three weapons against the side of the force-field again.

The quiet determination that had settled in Steve's gut like the tiniest flame had been burning this whole match, even when he nearly died in Cull Obsidian's grip. Watching the force-field sputter at the second blow quenched that fire.

The crowd was screaming as a whole, finally starting to realize this wasn't a planned part of the show as Thanos made a third strike and the lights around the arena went out, the screens died, and the force-field fully disappeared.

Thanos raised his face to the kaleidoscope sky in triumph, his wide mouth grinning. "I am inevitable!" he roared, his voice alone making the arena tremble.

Tony stuttered to a stop and glared up at him. "And I am fucking pissed off," he snarled. His gaze dipped to his wrist but Steve quickly closed his hand over Tony's gauntlet.

"We've got time for one more attempt," Steve said. And his jaw clenched. "The Avengers are on their way too. They have to be. We've got one more shot at stopping him." He looked across at Tony. "And if he gets within twenty feet of the Gate, or if he gets hold of you—then do it."

Tony's eyes were wide with fear, but he nodded, and put his faceplate back up, while Steve tried his very best not to think this might be the last time I ever see his face again.

"Make the call," Steve said, and he turned his gaze back to Thanos.
Tony's voice boomed across the sand. "Avengers, assemble!"

The crowds were still mostly jammed into the arena seats, and they were screaming, the small exits causing severe bottlenecking. The screams grew louder when the remaining Outriders realized they were no longer trapped, and they began crawling up the walls and flinging themselves into the audience. Steve felt no sympathy for them. If they found people fighting to the death entertaining—and two of them would have permanently died had this been a regular Melee—then they would have to enjoy fighting to survive themselves.

Thanos smirked, clearly believing there was no threat now, and he turned to the arena wall too, leaping up to scramble over the top.

Nebula and Gamora were the first to rally. It looked like Thanos had smashed them out of commission earlier, because both were bleeding, but they jumped on him together, and managed to knock him back down into the sand.

It was like everyone knew this was their last chance, even though not everyone had their memories back. Or maybe everyone knew an opportunity when they saw it. Steve ran across the sand, yelling a hoarse battle cry at the top of his lungs, aware of Bucky and Natasha in his peripheral vision joining in, Tony flying just ahead of them, and Pietro already blurring ahead, stabbing Corvus Glaive's pike into Thanos' foot.

It was beautiful chaos. Ivan Vanko's whips curled up one of Thanos' arms. Ronan and Yon-Rogg leaped in to hold down Thanos' right leg, Killmonger and Rumlow stabilizing them. The Asgardians came in and managed to hold down Thanos' left leg. Yondu, Tony, Natasha, Steve, and Bucky jumped in for his right arm. Nebula and Gamora dashed in with their swords to finish it off and Steve thought this is it with a tremulous flood of glee, but Thanos bulged his left arm and snapped Vanko's whips, hurling Vanko away; Kaecilius, Guillotine, and Killian all moved in to recapture that arm, but it was too late to avoid Thanos causing one last piece of irredeemable damage, as his flailing hand found purchase on Nebula's head and squeezed.

Gamora's howl of pure grief was heartrending, and even though Kaecilius, Guillotine, and Killian managed to hold the arm down, it looked for a moment like Gamora was going to fail at this last stage, her grief choking her back. Groot jumped in, extending all his branches, trying to wind them around Thanos' entire body, but as Thanos fought back, the branches were snapping and breaking, Groot roaring from the pain.

"She was from an alternate timestream," Tony yelled, flipping up his faceplate so he could make eye contact with her. "Your actual sister is out there, waiting for you. I promise. You die now, you'll be letting her down twice."

Those were the magic words. Gamora's eyes narrowed and she was all business for the next minute, and although Thanos rallied enough to knock half of them back, it was too late. Gamora sliced and sliced like she had been dreaming of this her whole life. She probably had. Steve stumbled, tears threatening out of a sheer almost choking glee, and Tony was holding him up, face still visible, and Natasha was at his side, and this was happening, this was happening. Thanos was dead. He was dead.

They'd won.

Tony's face turned to Steve in almost pure disbelief. "The generators," Tony said. "They'll kick back in, fifteen minutes, tops."

Steve nodded, almost wearily. "The worms," he said, and turned in the direction of the worming
chamber.

"Attention! Attention, Einherjar, Tenebrae, this is your Grandmaster speaking!"

Steve glanced briefly at Tony, whose expression reflected exactly what Steve was feeling: *What now?* Steve glanced around until he could see the Grandmaster, standing up near a long window at the top of one of the arena walls, speaking into something in his hands; a megaphone of some sort, he supposed.

Tony snapped his faceplate back down. "Go to hell, Grandmaster," he yelled, the armor making his voice boom out, louder than the Grandmaster's.

"I don't know where that is," the Grandmaster yelled back. "What do you think you're going to do? Even united, there's not enough to you to get past my bugs *and* my monsters."

Steve looked around. The arena wall was full of doors and each of them were opening. And out were piling bugs. Hundreds of them, it seemed. All armed. All making clicking noises. And some of them were opening up larger doors, and there were familiar faces behind those bars. The Fenris Wolf. The Devil Hydrasaur. The Shambler. The Fire Dragon.

The Grandmaster grinned. "Surrender, and I'll only kill half of you. Final offer."

"You made a mistake selling tickets to this show, Grandmaster," Tony said.

The Grandmaster scoffed. "Really? Because I feel like I made a fortune."

Tony shrugged. "You brought me an army."

This had been Tony's big realization when they'd talked about the Hulk, and Tony had remembered Loki's taunt from so long ago: where Loki had an army, but they had a Hulk. They didn't have a Hulk here, but they would have an army. Steve had that extra knowledge coming in of the Control Discs being weaker for the audience, and Tony talked a little about the one they'd found on the audience member they found trying to perve on Natasha in the showers; they were much weaker. Much easier to hack. The Grandmaster had a control panel on his wrist and over the years, Tony had been surreptitiously scanning it so that he could program his own to override it if necessary. But he was Tony Stark, of *course* he was going to steal all the functions he could.

And one of those was the general override to control the audience members.

The audience members stopped trying to escape and started running toward the arena, balling their hands into fists, screaming at the top of their lungs.

"Then have fun battling between yourselves too," the Grandmaster yelled, tapping something on his wrist panel. "Tenebrae! First to bring me the heads of all the Einherjar gets riches beyond imagining."

Tony sighed as the Tenebrae gathered near them grabbed their weapons and started to look interested. Tony punched in something on his own control panel; the Tenebrae started grasping their heads, and some of the Einherjar too. "Listen up," Tony yelled. "You can listen to him and risk being trapped here forever. Or you can fight with us. We have a team on our way right now to rescue us. Now a couple of you might be facing jail if you do that, but I don't know about you, a few years in an Earth prison beats this place by a mile. And the rest of you, we can get you home too."

"Steve," Natasha took his arm. "We've got this. Go get the worms."
Steve nodded at Pietro and then at the bugs streaming toward them. "You think you can clear us a path?"

Pietro grinned at him. "It would be my genuine pleasure."

Pietro got them inside but disappeared back out into the main battle, probably knowing he would be more useful there.

"Thirteen minutes," Tony said, checking his gauntlet. He glanced at Steve thoughtfully. "Pip has explosives in his workshop. Now the force-fields are down, we can get into it via the Armory."

Steve nodded. "Let's go."

There were a few bugs on the way there, but Tony didn't hesitate to repulsor blast them into the nearest walls. Hrhumhuhr was even in a main hallway instead of their usual spot; Hrhumhuhr let out a squeak and cowered, letting them pass.

Most of the bugs must have been summoned out to the arena. Steve's heart hurt for his friends. The main Gate was obviously still not open and Steve couldn't imagine the Grandmaster would happily do so now they were all on the loose. They needed the Avengers to turn up and force it open from their side, which apparently they could do, as long as the power was down. Twelve minutes. Steve didn't want to think that maybe they'd gotten this close and still might not end up being able to escape just yet.

Steve risked a quick glance to his side as they ran through the halls, at Iron Man's familiar red-and-gold. Thanos was dead. If they could crush the worms and make sure that was permanent, they still had a chance to come up with a new plan if they needed to. They could do anything if they were together; they had proof of that now.

As soon as they rounded the corner into the Armory, their path was blocked.

Pip held up a crossbow, looking terrified. It looked like he had been cowering behind his desk, probably hearing the tumult of the bugs fleeing their patrols, knowing something was going on without knowing what.

"Pip knows you shouldn't be in here. You can get wormed if I kill you. The Grandmaster would be proud of me." His lower lip trembled. "We're here for the glory of the Grandmaster." His grip straightened.

Steve sighed. "I'm really sorry for this, Pip. I do like you."

Pip looked confused, but couldn't react in time to stop Steve's shield hurtling directly at his face. Tony chipped in with a repulsor blast to knock the weapon out of his reach and Steve hurtled over the floor to quickly pin Pip down, wrestling him down as the small troll struggled until he was facedown in the sand.

"Indulge me for a second," Steve said, as Pip continued to wriggle. "Do you have any of those memory-saving nanobots on you?"

"Sure," Tony said, frowning. "I guess we can knock him out if this goes badly."

There was enough of a dose in the injector to press into Pip's Control Disc. Steve jumped back and Pip held his head in agony, before throwing himself to his feet and staggering past them to the middle of the room.
"Um," Steve said, as Pip ripped off the blue pendant he wore and suddenly started growing, larger and larger until his head was scraping the ceiling. "Maybe this wasn't my brightest idea?"

Well, now the mystery was solved why Pip had been called a troll, Steve supposed. As Pip grew to a good twenty-foot height, *troll* made much more sense.

Tony glanced at him. "You think?"

Pip let out a roar that stank the room out and then he tilted his head. "Pip remembers. Pip remembers *everything*. The Grandmaster stole Pip. He *stole me*." Pip swiveled around the room, lurching forward with a loud thump, eyeballing the walls like the Grandmaster might be hiding in the room.

"We need explosives to stop the Grandmaster," Steve called up. "You think you can do that?"

Pip turned to glare at Steve, his expression showing a few more teeth than tiny, brainwashed nervous Pip had. "You. You were nice to Pip." He narrowed his giant eyes. "You're Captain America." He leaned closer. Steve tried not to recoil at his warm, smelly breath as he added, "You're from Brooklyn too."

"We might be able to get you to Laxidazia in return for your help," Steve said.

"I'd prefer New York," Pip said.

Tony lifted his faceplate and grinned. "That's where we're going."

"We're trying to escape," Steve said. "Back to New York. I can get you back there. If you help us."

Pip straightened, beating his fists against his chest. "Pip trusts you. Pip will help. Pip wants to smash the Grandmaster's face."

"Buddy, take a number, join the queue," Tony muttered.

Steve ignored him. "We can give you the chance to help ruin everything the Grandmaster's been working for, and stop him from ever making a cent from this appalling place ever again?"

Pip grinned and smashed his fists together, beaming. "Tell Pip how. Pip will enjoy that."

It turned out you didn't need explosives when you had a twenty-foot troll on your side, but Tony was planting them anyway.

Steve might have felt sorry for Ghrengrh if he had any emotional space left to spare, because the gray bug that had brought him back to life over and over was crying in the corner, holding the cyborg bug that Steve had gleefully smashed with his shield, and sobbing about his "beautiful wormsss, my wormsss, my babiesss, you monssstersss."

Steve hardened his heart to that impulse. The worms had brought Thanos back to life and could do so again. They needed to be destroyed.

Pip methodically smashed the tank up and took great pleasure squashing as many worms as he could with his giant feet.

"The explosives would have done this too, but this is kind of fun," Steve admitted.

"Oh, I'm still definitely gonna explode it too," Tony said. "Belt and braces, always the safest
method, darling."

"I like that better than Aurora," Steve said. He noticed a book on one of the slabs, *De Vermis Mysteriis*. When his hand went toward it, he noticed Ghrengrh's sobbing increased, so he deliberately tucked the book into his waistband.

"Pip, time to go," Tony called up.

Pip's face fell, but he obediently trundled after him, and then smiled as Tony turned back and hit the worming chamber with a neat repulsor blast that crumbled it behind him.

Pip stuck with them as they headed back to the main battle, following the hallway that Steve assumed was the one the bugs used to carry their bodies to the worming chamber from the arena. When Steve emerged onto the sand, he had to struggle not to let his disappointment show.

The battle was absolute chaos. And there wasn't a single Avenger in sight. Had they not got the message in time?

"Five minutes," Tony breathed, glancing briefly up at the two suns in the sky. Several bugs had seen them already and started to head towards them, tridents glinting in the sunlight, but then Pip stepped forward and the bugs visibly quailed.

"We've still got time," Steve said.

Tony's mouth lifted at one corner. "Still with that eternal hope."

Steve matched the expression. "Can't win without it."

Tony nodded before sliding his faceplate down, and together, they headed out to join the mess of a battle.

There was a countdown going in Steve's brain that had more gloom to it than he wanted, but it stopped midway, a familiar swooping feeling in Steve's chest that made him want to holler in supreme joy, because he knew that feeling. His fingertips tingled. He switched his shield to his injured left arm, bracing it on tighter in anticipation.

"Gate's open," Steve yelled. He was sure the Avengers nearby heard him, but only Natasha had space in her fight to look at him. He beamed at her. "The Gate is definitely open."

Natasha frowned. "I like your faith, Winghead, but I need a little more than hope to go on."

Steve smirked and held out his hand. "Since when did I say I didn't have proof?"

Steve's smirk widened into a grin when Mjolnir thumped satisfyingly into his hand. Hela might have smashed the original, but apparently it had never crossed Thor's mind that more than one may have been made the first time; Jane Foster had uncovered her own Mjolnir years ago, and it operated by the same rules. Which meant that Steve could wield this one, too.

"Nice, Thor's here," Tony whooped, roaring into the sky, sending out repulsor blasts in a glorious spin. He was maybe showing off, but who could blame him right now?

"One of them," Steve called back, which make Bucky smirk.

The next part of the battle was a blur, because more fighters started to stream into the arena, a bright spread of colors.
Jane held out her hand when she landed in the arena and beamed at Steve, her cape billowing dramatically behind her.

"Thor's not as tall as I remember," Natasha said, tilting her head and looking at Jane appreciatively.

"Thanks for letting us know you were here," Steve said as he tossed the hammer back to her.

"No problem," Jane said. "I presume anything with mandibles or claws is free to smash."

"Or tentacles," Steve clarified, nodding at the Shambler.

Jane grimaced. "Why do these things always have tentacles," she mumbled, before kicking off and going after the Shambler, hammer first.

Steve didn't have time to watch the rest of that fight, distracted by the arrival of someone else.

"On your left," Sam yelled, dramatically landing in the sand next to Steve, looking much too pleased with himself.

"Think you dropped something," Steve said, waggling the shield at him.

"In a hole six feet under, even," Sam said, pulling out two guns from his side that looked like Rocket the Raccoon creations to blast at some of the bugs. "Buried it too." He shot the weapons and grinned at Steve. "You're looking good, old man. I hear Stark thinks so too."

"Shut up and shoot bugs," Steve sighed.

Steve could barely keep up with what was happening now, Avengers dropping into the battle from every direction. Shang-Chi was punching bugs over in the corner. Peter Parker was leaping around, gathering up the survivors; he was currently helping Yondu find his fallen Ravagers, see if any of them had survived the Melee. It looked like two of them were okay, but one of them was wounded badly.

It wasn't the full complement of Avengers joining the fight and Steve was glad. The idea of the Earth being left unprotected didn't sit well with him. He couldn't see Clint or any of the other Guardians joining this battle. Power Man and Iron Fist were there, but none of the other Defenders. Kamala was leaping around, comparing her massive fist with Bucky's metal one.

Rhodey landed in War Machine right in front of Tony, in time to knock away a thrown trident from an over-enthusiastic bug guard, who was now left weaponless and unable to parry the repulsor blast Rhodey sent his way.

"Rhodey," Tony sounded choked up, even through the modulator.

Rhodey flipped up his faceplate and grinned at him. "This time, I got you covered."

"Mm, that sounds good," Tony briefly flipped up his faceplate too, unable to hide his giddy smile any longer. "Cover me all you want."

"Death made you weirder, I knew it," Rhodey sighed, unable to hide his matching grin.

Steve turned in time to see Carol skidding down in a blaze of power, smashing through the Fenris Wolf, moments before it was about to try snapping at Tony and Rhodey. She straightened up and grinned at Tony, pulling a piece of what looked like one of the wolf's inner organs from her hair.

"Seems like you're making it a habit of rescuing me, Ms. Danvers," Tony said.
“Well, you died to save a universe I’m rather fond of,” Carol said. “Think I can squeeze in a few last-minute dramatic rescues in thanks.”

“We’ve got to get a move on,” Steve yelled over. “The generators will be back on in a minute.”

Tony tensed at that too, immediately scanning for an exit.

“Eh, we brought back-up for that,” Carol pointed up to where someone was floating up in the sky in a crackle of energy.

Steve laughed as he saw a glimpse of her beautiful face. Ororo Monroe was up in that cloud of energy, smiling beatifically as she used her power to do something. Destroy the power generators, probably, Steve thought. “The X-Men let her come anyway?”

“Eh, we couldn’t risk that your code wasn’t compromised, somehow,” Carol shrugged and used her power blasts to single-handedly take down the flailing Devil Hydrasaur. It hit the ground and she squinted. “Wait, was that a T. rex? Your post-mission report is going to be insane.”

“Tell me about it,” Steve grunted, nodding in the direction of Thanos' corpse.

Carol’s expression was delightful. “Is that—”

“Yep.” Steve nodded. “We’ll need to bring it with us.”

“Yeah, your report about this is going to be a riot,” Carol breathed.

“I died. A few times. Doesn’t that disqualify me from post-mission criteria?”

“Honey,” Carol said, patting him carefully on his uninjured arm, “if dying got you disqualified from being an Avenger, there’d be a few more of us off the register by now.”

With Storm there to keep the Gate open, they could take a little more time. She floated down, declaring the power generators destroyed, and joined in with Jane, helping round up the brainwashed audience. The bugs were surrendering; one glance at Carol’s epic power and they were compliant. The Tenebrae were equally compliant, although Steve suspected it was so they could try and escape later from an environment less oppressive than the Grandmaster’s arena.

The Grandmaster had already gone missing. Steve barely had the energy to sigh. He’d probably slipped out with some of the crowd.

The bugs were surrendering. Pietro made sure to point out Ghrengh and Carol muttered something to Sam, who personally went to capture the gray bug who had brought so many of them back to life. They needed to know more about the worms, in case Thanos could get resurrected again. The thought of it was… wearying.

Gamora refused to let go of Thanos' corpse, but she did let Groot help carry it too, the only one she trusted.

Rhodey was the one who led Steve, Natasha, Bucky, Tony, Pietro, and Vision (nestled safely in Pietro’s bag still) out to the Gate. It was an actual gateway. Steve didn’t know what else he was picturing. The Gate itself was intricately carved, big enough for Pip to troop through alongside them.

“He’s with us,” Tony said, when Rhodey shot the large troll a glance.
"I'm not sure he'll fit on our ship," Rhodey blinked.

"The ship?" Pip tilted his head. "The ship to take Pip to New York?"

"Yeah, we'll be flying to New York," Rhodey said, slowly.

"Pip will fit," Pip said, and looped the blue pendant back over his head, shrinking down to his smaller size. He pursed his lips and then moved closer to Steve, obviously deciding he was safest at Steve's side. Steve had to admit he enjoyed the idea that someone still thought he could protect them.

The Gate led out to some sort of field on a planetoid with a bright blue sky and only one sun. Steve blinked up at it, surprised by how much he missed that sight. There was a ship parked at the edge of the field with a wide ramp leading up into a cargo bay.

Steve stopped walking and sat down in a heap on the grass of this presumably-alien planet. He wasn't alone. Rhodey's face, visible again, creased in empathy as Natasha, Bucky, Pietro, and Tony all sank down on the ground, leaning against each other.

Just being free this far was a relief, and the fact that they didn't die once they passed through the Gate reassured Steve more than he wanted to admit. He'd worried, as they walked through, that maybe they would step through and then immediately drop to the floor, like puppets having their strings cut.

Steve checked over the others, but honestly, Steve was the one who looked the most bashed up. Apart from Vision, obviously. Pietro pulled Vision's head out of his bag to sit on his lap and Rhodey kept shooting the android perturbed glances. Vision kept staring up at the sky and smiling, like he'd never expected to ever see something so beautiful again. Steve's gaze slid to Tony's face, also tilted up to the sky; Steve understood what Vision was feeling.

As Steve followed their gaze upward, several smaller ships started swooping down and Carol came flying out of the Gate, waving at the ships, briefly joining them to explain.

"Made a call to some friends to help us round up the audience members," Carol said. "We can't convict all of them, but attending an event like this is illegal in so many places."

"We should get you in the ship," Rhodey said.

"Not yet," Tony said, his eyes on the Gate. He looked worried, his eyes glancing to his wrist, obviously contemplating whether they needed to crush the Negative Zone after all.

"We're planning to take that with us," Rhodey said, misinterpreting Tony's worried gaze. "Guy called Richards, he's got a shielded basement, he's gonna make sure nothing else comes through it. He's smart. Maybe even as smart as you, Tones."

"Lies," Tony sniffs, distracted.

Steve closed his eyes and let out a long breath. They'd done it. They were free.

He didn't know how long they sat in the grass like that for, but he opened his eyes when Sam dropped to the grass next to him.

"On your left," Sam chirped again.

"One day you'll tire of saying that," Steve sat up straighter.
"We cleared out the place," Sam said. "Performed the regular scans. There's no bugs left, all the audience is accounted for. We're as sure as we can be that everyone is out."

Even the bugs had been extricated from the arena. Steve saw Hrhumhuhr, Andhrímnir, and Bhrehm among the survivors. There was even a very giant boar sitting in the grass that Steve felt terrible about; it must have been the animal that had been dying every day to feed them all. At least he had survived this whole mess too.

Steve settled back to take in the scene. The other Einherjar who had pulled through were also sitting down in the grass, having seen Steve and the others and copied them. Gamora had Thanos' corpse lying on her legs and she snarled viciously at anyone who tried to come near. Guillotine was pacing, looking around herself skittishly. Heimdall had Loki in his arms; Loki was unconscious. Skurge, Fandral, and Hogun were nearby, the three of them collapsed together; it looked like Skurge might have slid in to complete the Warriors Three in Volstagg's place. Yondu was trying to chat up Jane and Storm, who were laughing in what at least looked like genuine amusement at his attempt; Yondu's two Ravagers were patching up the third that had survived.

Groot was pushing his roots into the ground like he was trying to plant himself in the grass right where he was. His arms were missing, tiny wiggly stumps, but Steve had seen Groot grow them back enough times to know it was possible. Groot's face was a picture. Apparently he did not agree with this planet's soil. "I am Groot," he wailed, pulling his roots back. Steve still might not understand anything Groot said, but he understood the tone.

Behind them, the Tenebrae were being moved toward the ship, T'Challa there to herd them along. They all seemed to have some sort of glowing handcuffs on them. The technology looked like Skrull tech, which was backed up by the fact that Yon-Rogg and Ronan both looked horrified. Malekith, who Steve thought he'd seen go down early in the battle, was limping along, scowling wildly. Aldrich Killian was swaggering along like this was his plan all along. Vanko smiled up at the sun, like he was simply pleased to be alive. Killmonger looked specially displeased to see T'Challa. Probably following Gamora's example—she still refused to let anyone else carry Thanos—Nebula's and Taserface's bodies were being carried out by Shang-Chi and Sam. Rumlow was the last in the line, narrowing his eyes when he caught sight of Steve.

Steve almost wanted to collapse back to the grass and sleep for a month. It hadn't been easy, and yet, there was something in his brain that was whispering something quietly insidious: It's not over yet.

Steve knew to listen to those impulses. They'd saved his life. Usually they did mean there was a memory somewhere in his century-plus of memories that was useful. Something that meant something.

The bugs had been checked for. The audience had been accounted for. The Avengers were all there. But…

There was someone missing from the Tenebrae.

And there was an Einherjar missing too, Steve realized.

"Hela and Odin," Steve breathed.

The only way Thor had managed to stop Hela in her own genocidal tracks was by razing Asgard to the ground. When it came to monsters, she didn't measure up to Thanos, but she came close. And she was ruthless in her quest for domination. There was no doubt in Steve's mind. If she escaped the Negative Zone, she might not be able to do as much damage as Thanos, but any damage she did
do, it would be their fault.

"What?" Carol asked, looking worried by the expression on Steve's face.

Steve staggered to his feet, staring at the Gate, before moving his gaze to Carol. "Hela and Odin," he said, louder, and started to run.

"Oh, no," Tony breathed, immediately pushing up and following Steve. Apparently they were going to do everything together now. Steve had no complaints, as long as Tony stayed safe.

Steve didn't go directly to the Gate. He ran to Heimdall first. Heimdall saw everything. There was no way he hadn't seen this too. Heimdall looked up at Steve wearily. Heimdall's hands were trembling, even as they tightened protectively around Loki's curled up, unconscious body.

"It was his last wish," Heimdall said, looking utterly torn. "I will protect his sons. I will not leave my sire's last wish go unheeded."

"The Gate," Tony said, pulling at Steve's shoulder, and they ran.

Steve's head was pounding.

The intricate structure was only a little bit open and as Steve pushed it, he could see it: Hela, speeding toward the gate. Steve lifted his shield and with Tony, he pushed the Gate shut again, and held it closed for a moment as it shook.

Steve swallowed. Hela was one of the monsters that shouldn't ever leave this place.

The Gate rattled terribly. And then it stopped. Tony nodded at Steve and together they opened it again.

Hela was there, straining to reach them, but Odin was behind her. His hands were clamped tightly around Hela's ankle as she screamed.

"I must stop her," Odin yelled to Steve. "My Thor, my Loki, she will kill both of them. And she will kill all our people. She'll raze every realm to ashes and dust. I will not allow it." He clenched his jaw. "I have seen into your soul, Stark. It's my turn to be the hero this universe needs. You can trap me in here with her, I know you can. Do it."

Steve lurched forward, realizing, but Tony was pulling him back. There wasn't time.

"He's sacrificing himself to make sure she doesn't get out," Tony hissed. "Do not let his sacrifice be in vain." His eyes were sad and focused all at once. "This is his choice, Steve."

"Tell my sons," Odin called over, staring with his one eye at Steve, "that I did right by them!"

"I will," Steve said. "I promise."

With Tony's help, Steve closed the Gate again, his heart aching at the idea that he couldn't save everyone. Thor was going to be heartbroken. Thor might never forgive Steve and Tony for doing this. But Thor would be alive. Hela wouldn't be out here, causing untold death and damage.

Steve staggered back, ashenly staring at the large, intricate structure. He was vaguely aware of the Avengers hurrying up to join in, see what was going on, but they wouldn't be able to understand.

Tony held up his gauntlet and, staring sadly at Steve, he pressed the right commands. There was a cracking noise and then people started yelling, as the large intricate Gate crumpled inward
suddenly, like something massive and invisible had crashed into it from their side.

Steve barely saw or heard anything, until a hand grabbed hold of his, and Steve kept looking across at Tony, scarcely able to believe it.

It was done.

The Negative Zone was gone, forever.

They were free.

Tony squeezed his hand and stared at him, relief and shock warring for space on his face. Steve held onto his hand for dear life and stared back.
"And he knew now, as he had never known before, the priceless measure of his loss. He knew also the priceless measure of his gain. For this was the way that henceforth would be forever closed to him—the way of no return. He was "out". And, being "out", he began to see another way, the way that lay before him. He saw now that you can't go home again—not ever. There was no road back."

*Thomas Wolfe—You Can't Go Home Again*

"What if she doesn't remember me?" Tony's voice was full of sheer panic, but Steve didn't need to know him to read that solely from his voice; Tony was bouncing his knee, wrapping his arms around his body and then straightening them, chewing on his lower lip and then stopping the moment he realized he was doing it. Tony was a compilation of obvious nerves.

"Every day," Steve said, simply.

Tony turned large, worried eyes in his direction. "That was you pacifying me."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Since when have I gone out of my way to make you feel better?"

"Hair petting," Tony said, instantly. "And there was all the suicidal jumping to your death so I wouldn't have to go through the worms again."

Steve stared. "I can't believe I missed you."

"Hair petting," Sam said, with a very judgmentally-raised eyebrow. Steve glanced over at him wearily, but Sam grinned his best shit-eating smile in response. Sam was very lucky Steve had barely enough energy to stay awake at this point.

Carol had borrowed an old Xandarian cruiser to get them all home. It wasn't as big as the Skrull ship they had access to, but Steve was glad of this one; the lack of space meant he had to sit squeezed in next to Tony, Tony's thigh pressed against his. He could feel the warmth and solid reality of Tony's existence in a tangible way that was honestly keeping him from shattering apart with the exhaustion that otherwise made up his DNA. He was tired to the core of his bones, to every molecule that he was made of.

"Is that guy staring at me?" Tony asked.

Steve looked over to where Shang-Chi was openly staring at Tony. Shang-Chi startled.

"Sorry, man," Shang-Chi held up a hand. "I'm star-struck. You're a little bit famous, y'know?"

"A little bit famous, how about that," Tony shot Steve an amused grin.
"This is Shang-Chi, he's probably the greatest empty-handed fighter I've ever seen," Steve said. "Defeated the Mandarin a few years ago single-handedly, too. I think you're going to like him."

Tony stared at Shang-Chi in confusion. "Trevor Slattery needed defeating?"

Shang-Chi narrowed his eyes. "Who's Trevor Slattery?"

Steve patted Tony's bouncing knee consolingly. "There's a lot to catch up on." He couldn't help the smile that slipped onto his face when he said, "We have time."

"Yeah," Tony's eyes shone. "Yeah, we do."

Tony's worry was completely unfounded.

He'd barely appeared at the top of the ramp before Morgan's familiar face appeared. She shoved her way through the crowd, running as fast as she could, and Tony stumbled down the ramp toward her, his face pure wonder.

Steve followed down the ramp a little slower, watching the re-union with a joy that almost choked him.

Morgan was yelling in Tony's ear, coherent words of joy degenerating into sobs, and they clung to each other in desperate glee.

"You're so beautiful," Tony kept saying, "how are you so—you're so beautiful."

This entire moment made all the pain and fear worth it.

As Natasha came down the ramp, she leaned in and kissed Steve on the cheek and smiled up at him. Bucky sidled up alongside them before leaning up and whispering something in Natasha's ear. Her face changed, and she was looking up, her eyes darting around the crowd until she saw the face she was looking for; then she was off and running, hurtling at full speed despite the exhaustion, and she threw herself at an overcome Bruce.

"What did you say to her?" Steve murmured, realizing Bucky was still hovering at Steve's side.

"Bruce gave me a message to give to her, should everything work out," Bucky nodded in their direction. "Guess she liked it."

There was joyful chaos everywhere Steve looked.

Wanda and Pietro were a blur of a hug, and then Pietro pulled back from the hug, opened his bag, and presented Vision's head to her with a shy expression. Wanda stared and then burst out crying; after a moment, she moved her hands and Steve almost laughed out loud when she used her powers to bring his body back, right then and there. Vision looked poleaxed, blinking furiously before hugging her.

Pietro tilted his head and then turned his back on them with a wince. Clint—who had been eyeballing Natasha and Bruce and trying to wait his turn to welcome her back—caught sight of Pietro and lifted his hands to punch the air, yelling in joy. Pietro beamed at him.

"Miss me?" Pietro asked, zooming up to him.

"Of course I did, you little shit," Clint breathed, yanking him into a hug.
The sound of crackling lightning caught Steve's attention, and he turned his head to see Thor—*their* Thor, not Jane—land in the grass, scorching another complex pattern into an area of the lawn Carol had begged him not to ruin. Steve guessed she would be lenient about in the circumstances. Thor, always more in touch with his feelings than anyone, burst out into loud tears and hugged the Warriors Two first, before slapping Heimdall in the shoulder, and shaking Skurge a little, and that was before he even noticed Loki, still lying on the grass nearby where Heimdall had put him down moments before.

Loki—Heimdall admitted during the flight that he'd been the one to knock the trickster out—was slowly regaining his consciousness, his brother looming over him. Steve knew what it was like to wake up when you'd missed a chunk of time, so he had some empathy for him, but Loki had caused so much chaos over the years—him *and* the divergent Loki from the alternate Battle of New York who'd been *such* a little shit—that Steve also very much enjoyed the look of sheer confusion on Loki’s face.

Over where Morgan and Tony were still hugging, Tony squinted around her when he noticed Peter Parker and Harley Keener both hovering nearby, both clearly agitated.

"All right," Tony sighed, "gonna have to widen this hug up, kiddo. Apparently some other people are getting antsy. You still know how to share?"

"Yeah, I guess," Morgan sighed. "As long as you're all mine later."

"Square deal," Tony grinned at her.

Morgan laughed joyfully, and amicably shifted over a little way. Tony opened his right arm wider. "Okay, all my other kids, get the hell in here," he yelled.

From Tony's expression, he was imagining that meant Peter and Harley. He wasn't quite expecting Nebula to count herself in that number. But this was Tony; he rolled with it anyway, holding all four of them and smiling like he couldn't stop.

Natasha had finally let Bruce go and was now hugging Clint; it was difficult to tell that there were two full people in that embrace, they were wrapped so closely together. A little distance away, Bucky was showing an interested Bruce his new arm, growing it out to Hulk-size.

Over at the ship, Rocket the Raccoon was yelling at the top of his lungs when Groot lumbered out, and Steve could see why—his worries in the arena were unfounded and the Groot Steve knew was still alive, hanging shyly behind Rocket and staring up at the much bigger Groot.

"You damn well get yourself blown up and make me raise your kid and then you shuffle in here expecting me to be happy about it?" Rocket screamed.

"I am Groot," bigger Groot said, shrugging.

"I am Groot," younger Groot toed the ground.

"I am Groot," bigger Groot nodded wisely, and moments later, younger Groot and Rocket were hugging bigger Groot, Rocket bawling louder than anyone else there.

There was a loud thump as Thor sank to the ground, tears on his face; his were perhaps the only ones of grief. Steve's heart hurt. He must have learned about his father. Steve swallowed. He would stand up for what they did, on Odin's request, but he understood if Thor never would fully accept it.
Gamora intervened where Tony was getting squashed by Morgan and the collection of the children he'd somehow accumulated on his various pre-Thanos adventures. Gamora shyly tapped Nebula on the shoulder, and when Nebula lurched up with a horrified expression, hating that she was being disturbed, her expression slid into—well, it looked like ambivalence. Both of them hugged, very stiffly, before Gamora pointed over to a big heap.

Thanos' body had been covered with a sheer parachute from the ship storage so as not to wreck the reunion mood, but Steve could see a purple finger falling out of the material. Nebula ran over to it and viciously kicked the finger underneath, before briefly peeking under the sheet, and then determinedly putting the sheet back down. Nebula then clambered on top, sitting on Thanos' corpse with a triumphant expression, like she'd killed him herself.

Gamora watched her fondly, and then was disturbed by someone else. Her face when she saw it was Quill was a beautiful picture. She buried her face in his shoulder and loudly yelped about denying later that she had emotions. Quill admitted that he'd waited for her, and Gamora called him an idiot and kissed him, so passionately Steve was about to look away, but then someone was clapping the moment, and Quill pulled back from the kiss to protest, and caught sight of Yondu.

"That's my boy," Yondu beamed, as Quill stared in open surprise. "Although I didn't think I raised me a cryer." It was hypocritical. Yondu was crying too.

"I'm not crying," Quill defended. "It's raining. Just on my face. Localized rainstorm. Totally normal Earth meteorological behavior."

There was more hugging happening, everywhere where Steve looked. Steve swallowed, feeling oddly displaced, like gravity had increased, like all the world had tilted a little on its axis. He didn't ever think he'd have to feel like a man out of time again. Yet here he was, watching all these reunions, and he hadn't felt like such an outsider in decades. He took a deep breath and pushed that sadness away. He'd done the impossible. He'd helped get Tony home. And Natasha. And Pietro, and Vision (well, the important part; Wanda had seen to the rest), and so many others. He should be feeling nothing but happiness.

Steve took a deep breath and wobbled a little, abruptly aware that he had been badly injured in the fight and he should probably get the wound looked at. He turned toward the compound, thinking that was probably the best direction, only to see someone in his path.

In the chaos, he hadn't noticed Morgan had even left Tony's side.

Morgan's jaw was clenched as she glared at him. "Well," she said, folding her arms. "I guess I finally see why you always said dad wanted to punch you."

Steve smiled at her, tight and sad. "Ten percent, kiddo. I heard it the same as you." He squinted. "I've just had a few more years of experience in doing dodgy things." He opened both eyes fully to fix her with a glare. "I swear if you even think of doing anything like that ever again, I'll be much less kind."

Morgan stared. "You slit your throat in front of me! I'll have nightmares about it for the rest of my life."

"I had seniority. Only one of us could be a dumb-ass in the name of saving your dad."

"You were a dummy," Morgan said, and threw herself at him, her arms tangling around him as far as she could reach. Steve exhaled into the hug, feeling some of his misery seep away. Perhaps his feeling of displacement had been jealousy, that he'd had no one here so happy to see him. He felt a
little moisture on his neck, Morgan crying, and was stunned to realize how very wrong he'd been about that. "If you do it again, I won't forgive you."

Steve huffed, unable to lie to her. "If I did it again it would be for the exact same reason, and I'd never forgive myself for not doing everything I could."

"Don't use logic in the face of my rational upset," Morgan scolded.

"Does Stark know you've stolen his kid?" Bucky asked, startling Steve.

Morgan detached from the hug, rolling her eyes at Bucky, before she pulled a face and looked him up and down, noting his injuries as she did. "You died to help get my dad home too, didn't you?" she asked, eventually.

"Yes," Bucky said, cautiously.

Morgan pressed her mouth together for a moment, considering, before leaning up and kissing him briefly on the cheek. "Thanks, Uncle Bucky," she said, before turning on her heel and dancing away.

Bucky stared after her, blinking.

"Did—did that just happen?" Bucky said, touching his cheek in wonderment.

"It did," Steve said. He looked out at the crowd of happy people, to where Morgan was throwing herself back at Tony, to where Natasha and Clint were hugging each other, to where Pietro and Wanda and Vision were sitting in the grass, smiling and smiling and smiling at each other. "It definitely did."

Most of them needed medical attention. There had been a dedicated medical team at Avengers compound as a matter of policy for the last seven years, even though convincing the same people to stay at such an explosive environment (alas, too many times that was literal) was difficult.

Doctor Helen Cho had been one of the only stable members of medical personnel here. Pepper kept funding her work with the Cradle, which had been more and more useful as the existence of more Avengers brought more chaos, and Steve had asked her once why she stayed when she could be making billions of dollars in the private sector.

"We all owe Tony Stark a debt we can never repay," Cho shrugged. "If I can use a tenth of his strength, and put that toward helping people, that's the best way I know how to say thank you for what he did."

Needless to say, her face, when she saw who was among her first batch of patients for the day, was an unforgettable one.

Tony refused to be treated unless Steve, Natasha, and Pietro could stay nearby. Steve appreciated that more than he had the energy or words to say. Cho rolled with it, and got three more beds rolled into one of the few private medical rooms in the Compound. Morgan tried to refuse to leave, but Nebula, Harley, and Peter worked together to convince her to give her dad some time to heal. Steve wasn't sure who was sulking more heavily over that, Morgan or Tony.

There was only one especially awkward moment. When Steve was sitting on a chair, an IV hooked up to his wrist, Guillotine was led by, supported by Kamala. Kamala had to go on ahead to get a nurse’s attention for her—Guillotine was nursing a fairly wicked slash on her forearm, her cloak
tied above her elbow as a makeshift tourniquet.

Tony was next to Steve, patiently letting Rhodey help strip him out of the armor. Guillotine's eyes darkened as Kamala led her past.

"You had the power of unlocking our memories the whole time?" Guillotine's eyes were dark with hurt. "Who made you god to decide who of us got their memories and who did not?"

Tony stared after her as she was led away. "She's right. I should have."

Steve reached out and put a hand on Tony's arm. "You made a risk assessment. As one of her Battle Royale targets, I'd stand by your decision to not risk waking her; her alignment to the greater good was in question. She's lashing out because she's scared and in shock."

Tony flickered him a blank look and fell silent, obviously still brooding about it.

When Sam helped Steve up onto the bed, after his wound had been checked and stitched up, and his other injuries had been attended to, Steve was uncomfortable, and not solely from the pain, or the feeling of drugs slipping through his veins. Now he was back to his full-strength, Cho wasn't sure if the painkillers would even work on him, but Steve was okay with a little pain. Every little reminder that he was alive to see this was fine by him.

It was the bed which was uncomfortable. Uncomfortably soft. This was an old trauma, slipping back into existence like an old toxic friend. Steve wasn't sure he was going to sleep at all, but apparently the drugs worked, even if not as effectively as they would on someone without the superserum in their blood. As the room slipped away, Steve tried to keep his gaze on Natasha, Pietro, and Tony in their nearby beds. All of them had already succumbed to the drugs in their IVs, but the image of them slipped away with Steve's hold on consciousness.

Steve slept for longer than he expected over the next few days.

That was one thing about the worms—they'd hurt tremendously, but even the itching faded after a limited number of hours. Steve's wounds were bad enough that Cho predicted all four of them would probably be released from her care at the same time.

Steve would believe that they were allowed to leave only when it happened; he'd heard the plans of tests they wanted to run. They were as worried as he had been, that the worms had been only a temporary fix.

They slept through most of the first three days, partially because of the drugs. Every time he did wake up, Steve found comfort in the others being there.

Steve woke on the fourth day to the sound of soft voices talking, voices he recognized even with his eyes closed.

At first it was Carol and Pepper, talking from a distance. It was a faint conversation, like they were chatting right outside the room, in the hallway.

“I don’t know,” Carol said, her voice thinner than usual. “The doc said she walked in at 3am and they were all lying on the floor.”

Steve flattened his mouth and frowned, the bed sinking too softly beneath him. He almost thought he'd dreamed that moment.
"What was wrong? Are they okay?"

"Yeah, it wasn’t—there wasn’t a medical reason. They apparently...got out of bed and went to sleep on the floor together. Barnes said something about them having to sleep on sand in the arena. I guess—they’re not used to beds?"

Pepper exhaled loudly. "I can’t even begin to imagine what they’ve all been through."

Sleep must have taken him again, because the next time Steve was awake and aware, it was Tony and Pepper talking this time. He kept his eyes closed, letting the soft wave of Tony and Pepper's voices roll over him.

"Just spit it out," Tony was saying, quietly.

Steve tensed, worried that Tony was going to face something horrible, until Pepper awkwardly said. "I got married. While you were away." Steve relaxed. Tony knew that already. Tony had anticipated it.

"Congratulations, I'm happy for you," Tony said, promptly. "Steve told me."

"Steve did," Pepper hummed. "Interesting."

"I am happy for you, Pep."

"Thank you."

"And you've done such a good job with Morgan. I couldn't ask for a better ex-wife."

Pepper laughed gently, although there was half a sob in it. "I don't think a better ex-wife even exists."

"In case you're worried, I'm not going to contest the paperwork, even when I legally return from the dead. Besides—" Steve couldn't see it, because he was facing the other way, and his eyes were still closed, but he could hear Tony's smirk when he said, "I kinda think I'm dating Captain America now?"

"Really."

"I know, right?" Tony made a snorting noise. "It's definitely a level up from dating you."

From the way Pepper laughed, Tony must have made one of those faces, to make it clear that he was joking. "Maybe on the muscle front," she conceded.

"Those muscles, though, Pep, Pep, it's like touching a warm, firmly bouncy wall."

"He had them when he was old, too," Pepper said, as Steve silently died of mortification.

"Really? Nice. Nice. I'm gonna date the shit out of him."

"Of course you are, Tony," Pepper said.

Steve opened his eyes tentatively to see that Natasha, in the bed facing him, was awake and smirking helplessly at him.

"Oh my god," Natasha mouthed.
Steve couldn't help but smile back.

Steve's fears that there would be copious tests were not unfounded.

All of them were being excessively tested. Steve was uncomfortable at having his blood taken, considering the contents of it, but Tony personally tinkered with the security tech, doubling-down on how well protected it was, and he attached some sort of GPS to the samples. Steve glazed over a little when Tony explained it, enjoying the sound of Tony sliding back into his normal self.

It wasn't just blood tests, though. In-between the steps of the extended physical, Steve, Natasha, Pietro, and Tony sat together on a mat on the floor, even though Steve was vaguely sure they were supposed to be using the chairs by the tables, where there was food and drink.

To Tony's dismay, their food and drink was being strictly regulated, since their second day home, when Morgan and Happy tried to sneak Tony a cheeseburger for breakfast, and Tony's stomach—unused to anything richer than boar meat—promptly vomited it up all over the place, and made Cho panic that his body was rejecting the worming process after all.

As Steve tilted his head back, he covertly watched Tony, who couldn't rest even though they were supposed to be resting; he was doing something on a tablet, fingers moving rapidly.

Steve was diverted from his staring by a hard elbow in his ribs.

"I'm still healing there, Widow," Steve said, reluctantly moving his gaze of admiration to her face. Under the fluorescent lights of the compound, it was almost harder to believe she was real and actually here than it had been in the arena's warmer lighting.

Natasha nodded over at Tony and raised her voice. "So what's this I hear about Captain America being your boyfriend, Stark?"

Tony lifted his head from the tablet. He was hard to startle, but there was a soft pink that slipped into his complexion when he realized his conversation with Pepper had been overheard. Tony's gaze slipped almost automatically to Steve's chest which, to his apparent disappointment, was covered. His gaze slipped back to Steve's face, with an almost challenging expression when he said, "I think he is."

That explained the challenge, then. Tony was challenging Steve to deny it.

Steve closed one eye and looked at Tony speculatively. "You know, I've had over a century of life experience now, and I've never had a boyfriend before?"

Tony winked at him and said, "Well, you've always been a late bloomer, Rogers." His tone was mocking but he couldn't hide the sincerity of his smile, and Steve was more than okay with that.

The euphoria from being home and safe was only going to last so long. Cho refused to release them yet; the feeling that settled like they'd somehow exchanged one prison for another was bound to kick in at some point, make everyone a little more fractious than they would want to be.

Being an Avenger and a good patient seemed to be mutually exclusive concepts.

Carol had them writing reports, because she was mean, and apparently Steve wasn't the only one who was having a genuinely awful time revisiting some of it, because it took about thirty minutes before it degenerated into miserable sniping. Vision had innocuously commented about how long
ago Tony and he had figured out how to collapse the Negative Zone and it was all downhill from there.

"I was protecting you," Tony snapped. "That's what I do, if you hadn't noticed."

"Because you're the only one who can do that," Pietro sniffed.

"And you?" Natasha whirled on Steve, her eyebrows creased. "You knew?" She shook her head. "Haven't you learned your lesson about secrets yet?"

Steve stared at her, unblinking, and then turned on his heel and left the room before he did something he regretted. One of Cho's nurses did leap up from his seat on seeing Steve leave the room, but he sank back to his seat the instant he caught Steve's furious expression.

"You're not cleared to go outside yet," the nurse tried to whimper, but Steve moved past him as if he hadn't said anything.

Steve knew the Compound layout well enough that he was able to slip down a back staircase and outside to the gardens without seeing anyone. The Tony Stark Memorial Garden had been one of the keeping-busy projects Pepper had done after Tony's funeral. Most of the flowers were red and gold.

Steve stormed to one of the benches and sat down, staring out at the roses. There were a hundred better ways he could have dealt with that. He supposed it wouldn't be long until someone came to fetch him back.

He was only a little surprised to see that it was Tony that was the first to come along the gravel path. Steve had come outside wearing the med room clothing they'd been provided—a loose white t-shirt, white pants, and white slippers—and he was freezing. Tony was smarter and had brought one of his bed blankets with him, wrapped tightly around his shoulders like a cape.

"The medical team have gone nuts," Tony said, sitting down next to Steve slowly, like there probably wasn't a handful of people out looking for them.

"I'm surprised you found me so quickly," Steve admitted, not quite looking at him. He was embarrassed, rubbed raw by the reminder of how much his lying had nearly ruined everything.

"Pep said you liked it here," Tony said.

Steve nodded. "How's it going in there?"

Tony inhaled and exhaled noisily before glancing at him pointedly. "You know the kind of silence that's like a brick wall?"

Steve pulled a face. "I'm sorry I left like that." His gaze slipped away to the view. Sometimes looking at Tony, alive and breathing and there, was almost too much. Steve's chest felt like it was going to burst when he looked at Tony sometimes, like there were too many feelings for his body to contain. Steve had spent time in this garden over the last eight years. It was so odd to see Tony here, in a place which he had never been, in a place that existed as somewhere to mourn him.

Tony shrugged. "It's nice to have the option of walking away from a fight."

Steve huffed. "Eighty years trying to learn how to live a full life and I still can't handle conflict when I can't reach for my shield."
"I heard Sam made you keep it," Tony said.

Steve grunted. He didn't feel complete without it, that was true. But he'd also gotten comfortable with handing the baton over to the next generation. He wasn't sure he was ready to take up the Captain America mantle. Maybe he wouldn't ever be ready. He wasn't allowed to keep the shield in the medical room, probably because they were more than aware of his tendency to reach for his shield when angry, so Bucky was keeping hold of it for the moment.

Steve glanced at Tony's profile. Tony was staring out at the view now, looking content. It was much nicer out here rather than the oppressive atmosphere inside. "I guess I'll head back in and apologize soon."

"I'm not sure you were in the wrong."

"Natasha had a point." Steve shook his head. "I haven't learned my lesson about lying."

Tony didn't look at him, but he frowned, so Steve knew he was listening. "Go on," Tony said, cautiously.

"Do you remember a couple of weeks ago, when I said you were just a factor of me throwing myself into another timeline?"

Tony frowned, which knocked some of that unhappy tension from his shoulders. "And I accused you of lying then?"

Steve exhaled noisily. "You were right," he admitted.

"My favorite three words," Tony quipped.

"Not when you have to say them."

"Well. Depends on the scenario. And there's some things that I don't mind being proved wrong on. Like teen me would have sworn blind he would never get a blowjob from Captain America."

His blush was almost immediate, his heated cheeks a stark contrast to the cool breeze. Steve suppressed his sigh. Tony said things like that as a challenge, to see how far he could push people. The only way to respond was to not emotionally overreact. "And you still didn't," Steve corrected him, like it was an incorrect fact about the weather. "I'm still not Captain America right now."

"Ugh, semantics." Tony waved a hand. He shot Steve a challenging look. "All right, I'll bite. What was I right about this time?"

"It wasn't just a factor," Steve said, swallowing hard. "Me leaving with the stones and not going straight back. You were the whole damn reason. I couldn't bear the idea of living somewhere where you weren't. I didn't have any right to think that, but——"

"You did," Tony said. He startled at that like he was surprised by the outburst himself, and his tone softened when he continued, "You had every right. More than most. You—you were important to me." Tony smiled ruefully, but still didn't tear his gaze away, and oh, that bravado was always attractive when Steve got to see it in person. "You are important to me."

Steve exhaled. "I never thought I'd hear you say anything like that." Tony had been brave, so Steve had to be too. "I wanted you to. Even if it took me a while to realize why your good opinion meant so much that I became unbearable when I thought I didn't have it."
"You always did. Even when we were fighting." Tony huffed. "Especially when we were fighting." Tony's forehead creased, like he didn't quite believe they were having any of this conversation for real. "That last trip through time, the one we took together, I—it makes me sad now when I think about it."

That wasn't easy to hear; Steve thought back to it fondly, even now. He still smiled at how bad they both were at undercover work.

"I don't regret it," Tony added, quickly, seeing Steve's slight disappointment and misinterpreting it. "It reminds me of how much time we wasted not talking to each other, when if we'd—if we'd somehow talked everything out—"

"That was my fault," Steve insisted, instantly, because it was.

When he thought back to his anger during the whole Ultron debacle he nearly wanted to scream at himself. The years had brought him nothing but time to reflect over his worst decisions. He'd only been so touchy about Tony not telling him things because of sheer projection, guilt over the secret he'd been keeping. Fear that it would impact the world somehow as badly as Tony and Bruce's Ultron secret had. All those emotions had blanketed everything, muddied the waters. Made them miss what had really been going on.

Tony had been the only one who saw the need to shore up their defenses early and go hard on them. A modern-day Cassandra who was only appreciated once he'd literally given his life to save untold billions of lives, because Thanos didn't mean to stop with Earth. And arguably, Steve's secret, that he'd convinced himself at the time was almost noble… it could have essentially ruined everything.

Except Tony's heart had once again been big enough to cover for all their errors, all the things they should have done and didn't. Tony Stark didn't only have a heart, he had the biggest heart in the universe.

"Darling," Tony said, softly, like he wasn't sure he was allowed to use that word on Steve, unaware that it might be the only thing Steve ever wanted Tony to call him again, "it takes two to fuck up that badly." He wrinkled his mouth. "I'm pleased you want to try and make me feel better by taking some of the blame. But I had a lot of time to think in that place. More than any person should. There's so much I gained, even when we failed, that I can't even regret the bad parts. Because it led us here."

Steve exhaled. "That's a nice way to think about it," he said, because he had words for that, but none to describe the swell of emotion that was trying to make his heart tattoo right out of his chest.

"That's not quite what you were thinking, though, was it?"

"No," Steve admitted. "I suppose I was thinking about kissing you."

Tony smiled. "Since when was Steve Rogers a thinking guy, not an action guy?"

Steve leaned in and took that as the invitation it was; Tony met him halfway. It was a mild kiss at first, just their mouths pressed together. The warmth of it made Steve aware of how cool the air was around them and how thin his clothing was. Tony drew him in closer, his hot hand cupping Steve's cold cheek; he angled Steve's face with his touch and the kiss turned into something a little more heated.

"There was a conversation we were putting off until later," Steve said, when they broke apart.
"Yeah?" Tony's eyes darted across Steve's face.

Steve took a deep breath. "I love you." Did his voice crack too much on that? He tried again. "I'm in love with you."

Tony smiled, aiming for smug, but falling too far into genuine delight. "I figured that was where that conversation was going."

"It took me a while to figure it out." Steve smiled, sad, but not overly regretful, not even now. Tony was right. Steve had seen how a timeline could ripple from the smallest of changes. Steve had seen what Tony was willing to pay to keep Morgan safe, twice now. He had been willing to pay the same cost himself. He may have regrets, but he couldn't let them tear him apart, because it was all their decisions and actions as a whole that had led to them being alive, being together right now.

"You got there, that's what counts." Tony swallowed. "And, I—I suppose—if you need me to say it—"

"Only if you want to," Steve broke in. He wouldn't push for something Tony wasn't ready for. Maybe Tony wasn't as all-in as Steve was. That was fine. Steve would take anything Tony was willing to give him, even if it was nothing, as long as Tony was alive to make that decision. But there had been so much in the last few weeks, so much that had happened, that made Steve pretty sure he wasn't in this alone. He could wait for the actual words.

"Oh. There's a long list of things I want," Tony said. "It's on that list."

Steve warmed, hearing the words in those words that were intended, so he leaned in and kissed Tony again, trying to communicate the emotions rolling through him as best as he could.

Tony was breathing hard when he pulled back, his hand still lingering on Steve's cheek. "I always thought you'd kiss like this."

Steve tried not to shiver, but it wasn't the temperature—it was the words, and the look in Tony's eyes, and how hoarse Tony's voice was, solely from that kiss. "You thought about it?" Steve's voice was rough too, a fact that made Tony's smile widen.

"I'm human," Tony said patiently, like that was a valid response. He took his hand away from Steve's cheek, and Steve was about to complain, but Tony took Steve's hand in his, and that was just as good. Tony's gaze grew intense. "Remember when I told you once that sometimes I wanted to punch you in your perfect teeth?"

Steve nodded, stomach tightening with the memory of what had happened in that boardroom. It had been one of his most restless monsters, imagining all the other different ways that conversation could have gone. How it was yet another easy opportunity for Steve to tell Tony the damn truth, and he hadn't.

"Well," Tony said, "when I said that, I meant with my mouth. I wanted to punch your mouth with my mouth." There was a challenging light in Tony's eyes as he stared at Steve, daring him to call him a liar.

"If we're being honest," Steve said, "at that moment, I wanted you to. I just… didn't figure out I did until later." He winced. "Too late."

Tony's fingers tightened around Steve's. "Doesn't feel like too late to me."

"I nearly did sign the Accords that day," Steve said. There was only so much honesty he could
"Then..."

"Then?" Tony prompted.

Steve pulled a wry face. "Then I realized I probably shouldn't sign something just because I was distracted by how good your ass looked in those pants."


Like he was casually discussing the weather, Steve said casually, "You look better in nothing."

Tony inhaled sharply through his teeth and grinned at him. "You're always going to turn me around, aren't you?"

"Always gotta be a surprise," Steve replied, echoing Tony's words that had only been a week ago, but felt like another lifetime. "A pleasant surprise, I hope."

"Emphasis on the pleasant," Tony murmured, and leaned in.

Steve smiled into the kiss, unable to help himself.

A loud pointed cough broke them apart. Steve looked down in embarrassment, before taking a breath and squinting up at the interrupter.

It was Helen Cho. Steve supposed he was glad it wasn't Sam or Rhodey; neither of them would have let Steve or Tony live it down if they'd caught them escaping from medical rest to make out in the garden.

"I don't think either of you have been medically cleared for that yet," Cho said, raising one eyebrow at them. She didn't have to say how annoyed she was that she'd had to chase them around; her expression said that clearly. Steve winced apologetically.

Steve sighed and got to his feet. Tony was still holding his hand.

"Come on," Steve said. "I need some moral support when I go and apologize to Natasha."

"Fine," Tony threw Cho a dirty look. "For you."

Steve did get progressively more nervous about the apology as they walked back to the medical room, but Tony refused to let go of his hand, and that helped a little. Natasha had been angry, rightfully so, even if he still agreed with Tony about how he'd dealt with the situation, considering how close they all came to losing her for good.

It turned out he didn't even need to worry about how he was going to start apologizing to her.

"I'm sorry," Natasha threw herself at Steve as soon as Cho opened the door and Steve and Tony walked back in.

Steve put his spare arm around her, Tony reluctant to let his hand go even now. When Steve shot him a look in illustration, Tony shrugged one shoulder, a clear what are you going to do about it motion. Nothing. That's what Steve was going to do. Or not to do, rather.

Steve took a deep breath. "You're one of the very few people here not scared to always tell me the truth," he said, slowly. "For someone raised to lie as easily as they breathe, it's a gift I treasure." Steve released her, but only far enough so he could look her in the eye. "Never apologize."
Especially for calling me out when I need it."

Natasha exhaled roughly. "I never usually let my emotions get the best of me," she shook her head. "I'm sorry for that. I could have been less...aggressive in the delivery of what I was thinking."

"It was my fault too, I started off the argument," Vision offered, looking wretched. "I guess I'm still learning how to be human."

"It's a journey, Vizh," Tony assured him. "One you never stop traveling on. No matter how old you are." Tony smirked at Steve. "Some of us for longer than others."

Steve shook his head ruefully at the dig at his age.

"We're all pissed off at being kept here," Pietro sighed. "It's not an excuse, but a reason, perhaps?"

"A very understandable one," Steve said. "I'm sure it won't be long."

"And if it is?" Tony asked, finally letting go of Steve's hand, but only after flashing him a loaded look full of promise.

"This place is much easier to escape from than the arena," Steve shrugged. "And Bruce, Clint, Sam, Rhodey, Bucky, and Wanda would all be here with us in a heartbeat to help. This new generation of Avengers might be doing a stand-up job at protecting the Earth and the galaxy, but they've never faced the original generation." He grinned at them. "Just watch them try and keep us here any longer than we're okay with."

It took three more days to actually get the clearance.

The final snapping point was when Carol kept coming into her office—which was only coincidentally the furthest point in the Compound from the medical bays—to find the five of them chilling on the floor, playing cards (it was nice to have something fun to do), or having a picnic (Pietro's energy needs were almost on par with Steve's), or trawling through her computer files (Tony couldn't help himself.) She personally intervened to get them cleared faster, although Cho sulked, and made them promise to check in regularly with her, because they had no idea what the long-term effects of the worms might be.

They were cleared to leave the medical bay, but there was still the matter of going public, or if they should. The world still believed that they were dead. It was a dilemma, but not one that needed to be solved today. Being cleared from the medical bay meant they could spread out to anywhere that was protected by the Wakandan-upgraded force-fields, and that included the apartments nearby where Wanda and the Barton family and Bruce lived. It also included the Stark house, and, by extension, Steve's house too.

Natasha had open invitations from pretty much everyone to stay with them, but she'd decided to take one of the spare rooms in the Compound for now, deciding she needed a little of her own space. She and Bruce had talked and were going to take it slow. Pietro was given an apartment to the side of Wanda's. Pepper had been by every day, insisting that Tony's part of the house was ready and waiting for him; Tony had been unrelentingly and vocally pleased about the idea of being able to see Morgan any time he wanted, outside of school hours.

They all had somewhere to go now they'd been cleared. There was no reason they should all still be standing outside the Compound in civilian clothes for the first time in weeks, squinting awkwardly out into the slightly damp weather.
Steve shuffled. He was as reluctant as the rest of them, almost shocked by the upgrade in freedom. He couldn't imagine how much more of an impact it was for the other three. "I don't know what state it's in after weeks of being empty, but I could show you around my house, I guess?"

"Yes," Pietro said, probably too fast. "Great idea."

"I'd like that," Natasha said.

"Might as well," Tony said, faux-casually.

Tony did throw a quick, nervous glance at the Stark house when they passed it, but the lights were off. Morgan had been forced to go back to school by a stern Pepper, so there was no one home, but Steve imagined Tony would want to go there soon afterward. There was nothing like your own home to remind you that you weren't stranded in enemy territory anymore.

Steve had been proud of his little house before, but as he approached it now, he felt like he was looking at it with clean eyes, and he tried to think about how a stranger might see it. Would they notice how the roof tiling was two different colors, because Steve had used leftover materials from the apartment complexes that had been built next to the Compound? It was so small, too. Steve could cross the length of it in four seconds.

Feeling deeply self-conscious, he keyed in the entry code—the security was the part of the house that Pepper had insisted that he allow outside help on—and awkwardly stood aside, gesturing for them to enter the building that had been his home for eight years.

It smelled a little musty, so Steve occupied himself with opening the windows, busying himself with airing it out so he didn't have to think about them looking around. He hadn't realized he would be so desperate for them to like it, didn't realize how much of himself he'd put into the building and the furnishings.

He didn't realize, until Tony smiled and said, "I like it," and Steve could breathe again.

Pietro disappeared for a moment and then skidded back, making one of Steve’s paperbacks on the sideboard flutter open from the backdraft.

"Nice bedsheets," Pietro complimented.

"You built this whole place yourself?" Natasha asked, her fingers lingering on the mantelpiece that Steve had made from a piece of driftwood.

"Yeah from scratch," Steve nodded. "Obviously the appliances were bought in, but the wiring and plumbing's all mine too." He shrugged. "Picked up a few skills here and there."

"I like it," Pietro looked around, his hands shoved in his pockets, "it's cozy."

"There's a bedroom and bathroom upstairs, but this is pretty much it." Steve shrugged again, feeling a little more self-conscious than he expected he would. "And honestly, I tell everyone this and barely anyone listens, but—my home is your home. Mi casa es su casa. You need a bolthole, you need somewhere to stay, you want somewhere quiet to hide, or you want to raid my fridge; anything, you’re welcome any time. Oh, but that's a thought." Steve pulled a face.

"What's a thought?" Tony asked and glanced at Steve's fridge like maybe it was secretly a bomb. He might not be far wrong.

"I didn't exactly plan the whole dying thing," Steve said. "So I didn't… exactly empty my fridge."
He squinted at the closed door, like it might contain monsters. "Do you think anyone thought about that?"

Natasha and Tony pulled a face in unison.

Pietro was already slamming the fridge door closed, grimacing, before Steve even noticed him move. "Yeah, you don't want to look in there. Not even worms could bring that stuff back."

"Throw the whole thing out," Natasha pointed at it and squinted at Steve's look of horror, because that sounded horrendously wasteful. She quickly changed the subject away from the fridge. "How about the food in your cupboard?"

It turned out with some investigation that the food in Steve's freezer was all still good. Pietro nearly cried when he saw the pizza pockets, Natasha found a jar of peanut butter and settled in with a spoon, and Tony's eyes strayed longingly toward a frozen home-made lasagna before he said something vague about the granola in Steve's cupboard that made Steve almost want to throw the box of it out the window. Deciding on the dubiously-more-sensible option, Steve pulled out the lasagna and put it in the microwave to defrost as he turned the right knob to preheat the oven.

After spending so long together, Steve almost wondered whether they'd run out of things to say, or find talking about the arena too difficult, but none of those predictions came true. Sitting in his small sitting room eating pizza pockets with the three of them meant this place felt comfortable, safe. No Code Oranges to watch out for, or bug patrols to avoid. Here, the arena felt like almost like a terrible dream they'd had. A shared psychosis that was already fading away at the edges. Steve's memories would never let him forget a moment of it, but he knew in time, if he kept making more and more memories, they would become harder to recall. He hoped he would be able to make hundreds of happier memories soon with the people in this room.

When the oven timer beeped, all the pizza pockets had already been eaten, so Steve ended up dishing up the lasagna for everybody. There was still a lot left. Steve had originally made it in anticipation of Bucky and Sam being hungry after their mission in Canada—it had sounded like a bad one when Bucky briefly updated him while in the middle of what sounded to Steve like a gun fight—but he could make another one. It felt like he'd made this one another lifetime ago, but it smelled delicious as he scooped it onto clean plates. He only barely had enough crockery for all of them.

"This is amazing," Natasha breathed, picking at it carefully, wary that her stomach would reject it. "Where did you buy it?"

"I made it," Steve blinked. "Learned to cook in the other timeline." He smiled ruefully as he sat down next to Tony on his small two-seater couch. "My wife couldn't cook worth a damn, unless it was steak and you didn't mind it charred black."

"I think I'm going to skip plain meat for a while," Pietro said. "This is definitely doing it for me, but plain chunks of meat—nope."

"And definitely no smoothies," Tony pulled a face. Smoothies used to be one of his favorites. Trauma stole things from you, sometimes. That's just how it seemed to work. But the bonds it created could be nearly unbreakable. They could be resolutely unbreakable if there were no secrets, so Steve summoned his bravery, took a deep breath and leaned back to the nook where he kept his art supplies, pulled out his sketchbook, and handed it over to Tony.

Steve couldn't quite find the right words, but that didn't seem to matter; Tony read him clearly, saw what was being offered and understood without Steve having to say it. Tony balanced his plate on
the end of the coffee table and took the sketchbook almost reverently, like he knew he was essentially holding Steve's entire heart in his hands.

Tony was careful as he opened it, and he grinned widely at the first sketch—Iron Man in his armor, jetting up to the sky. "Nice," Tony said, appreciatively tracing his fingers over the curve of the suit, but not touching the page.

"It's a copy of the memorial in Chicago," Steve said, as Pietro and Natasha peered over to see the sketch too. "They put it near the Bean—you know, that big ugly shiny weird mirror sculpture?"

"Still calling structures you don't like big and ugly, huh?" Tony's eyes lingered on the sketch.

"You should come with me and see it in person sometime," Steve said, "the reflections of the statue are incredible. I go every few months to see it in person, because for a second, I could—" He was already embarrassed and feeling vulnerable, what was one more thing? "I could pretend for a second you were flying by me again, and for that second—everything felt okay."

Tony looked up at Steve, held his gaze for a moment, and Steve gave in to sinking into that rush of joy he always felt when he remembered Tony was alive, and here, and safe.

"Ooh, we should roadtrip to Chicago, I've always wanted to see more of the states," Pietro enthused. "I'm up for it."

"I'm not sure we were included in Steve's invitation," Natasha said, dryly.

Steve flushed and tore his gaze away from Tony. "Of course you were." He smirked. "Maybe we'll get more than one hotel room, though."

"Could be an idea," Tony said, trying to sound casual about it even as the look he flickered at Steve held more than a note of promise to it.

"Lockable doors," Natasha sighed happily.

"I'm gonna be living right next door to Vision," Pietro laughed. "I don't think locked doors are in my future."

Tony flipped the page of the sketchbook, still smiling in amusement, and then his smile faded a little, flickering into sympathetic pain. He looked up at Steve in almost shock. "Is this—?"
Steve nodded, sadly, as Tony's eyes lingered on the same picture that Morgan had found, weeks ago. The one of Peggy, James, Sarah, and Ian. He'd passed it off as faces he'd seen in a dream. Sometimes his stolen life felt like that, someone else's dream.

But it was like Tony had told him, out in the garden. How could he regret what they'd been through, when it gave him his kids, even if it wasn't for as long as he'd hoped for? He loved being a dad. He knew he'd given them as good a life as he could hope for, considering.

"They're beautiful," Tony said. "May I—?" He tipped the corner of the book toward Natasha, and
when Steve nodded, he passed it over so she could see it too. Pietro zoomed over so he could look with her. Steve's heart jolted a little at the way Natasha's eyes lit up when she saw them.

"They really are," Natasha said, sounding a little choked up.

When Steve looked back, Tony was staring at him.

"I'm sorry," Tony said, his voice soft. "I'm so, so sorry."

Steve shrugged. "I got to see two of my kids grow up. I saw one of them live an entire life. You missed that for Morgan and I'm so sorry, because that bit—it's pretty great."

"From what I've heard," Tony said slowly, "you've kept a good eye on Morgan for the years I missed. I do appreciate that."

"You'd have done the same for me."

"In a heartbeat."

Steve smiled at him sadly. "The thing is, I'd forgotten," Steve shook his head helplessly, "that I was the only one who knew them." This was hard to say, but if he couldn't manage it in this safe, small place filled with people he loved, where else would he ever manage to say it? "When people die —"

Tony leaned across and rubbed his back soothingly. "You don't have to talk about this now."

"I do." Steve looked at Tony. "When people die, you can keep them alive for others in stories. That's what I did for Morgan, by making sure we kept you as alive as possible by telling your story. Every day, I told her as many stories as I could think of, and when I ran out, I got the others to talk about you. You didn't get to see Morgan grow up, but you were with her like that, every single day. And it wasn't until the arena that I realized that if I died, and I stayed gone, that I would in one way be letting my family die all over again." He looked at Tony, intently. "I've spent so long not talking about them that it might take me a while to get used to it. But I want to talk about them with you. I want you to get to know them, through me."

When he looked up, Tony's eyes were shining. "I'd be honored," he said, simply.

"Count me in," Natasha added, handing him the sketchbook back.

"Me three," Pietro said, already back in his seat.

Steve worried he might have broken the mood, the way talking of sad things sometimes did, but then Pietro asked what time it was, and the StarkHub lit up. Pietro stared at the gadget in shock as it told him, in Friday's lilting voice. Steve relaxed back and enjoyed the fun, Natasha helpfully suggesting what to ask the device, Pietro continuing to stare at it in delight.

Even Tony looked surprised at some of the developments to it, but he did laugh when he revealed there were some backdoors in the software he'd put into the early versions of it that were still there —including a command for if Justin Hammer ever uttered that he was a better inventor than Tony in hearing range of a StarkHub, the device would start playing Hammer Time, louder and louder until no one could hear a word Justin was saying.

Steve, Natasha, and Tony resumed eating, laughing as Pietro got increasingly involved in discovering what else the StarkHub could do, having died before voice-activated tech really became so widespread. Steve couldn't even be mad that Pietro ordered a Quicksilver plushie when
he found out it was available from the Avengers official merchandise store (all proceeds went to charity), and the money was instantly drawn from Steve’s bank account. Pietro offered sheepishly to cancel it, but Steve shook his head—before verbally removing the link to his bank account from the device.

"Aw, if we'd left that link on, could we have ordered even more food on this thing?" Pietro asked, longingly scraping at his now empty plate.

"Unfortunately the delivery drones can't get through the force-field Shuri set up," Steve said, "not at least without alerting the Compound they've come, which would alert—"

"—the villain who calls herself our dietician?" Natasha finished for him, wrinkling her nose. "As far as the tests said, we basically have the innards of an eighteen-year-old." She smirked. "I think it can take a bit more junk food, now and again."

"Well, we can't have any delivered here yet. But there is still lasagna on the counter, though," Steve pointed out. Pietro's eyes widened, like he was unsure that was something he could have. "I told you. Mi casa es su casa. Anything. Any time."

"Thanks," Pietro managed to say through a new mouthful of lasagna, his plate suddenly heaped up again. "You're the best."

"Well," Tony winked at Steve, "maybe in the top ten of the best."

"Top ten of the best people named Steve," Natasha nodded solemnly. "Maybe top eleven?"

"At least the top twelve," Pietro mumbled through more lasagna.

"Thanks," Steve said. "I can always count on you three to help keep my raging ego in check."

"We do what we can," Tony said solemnly, grinning at Steve, and Steve grinned helplessly back.

The front door slammed open, hard enough that Steve didn't even need to be in the line of sight to see who it was. He blamed Tony for distracting him enough that he hadn't even noticed Morgan coming up the front path, even though he had a good view of the window from where he was. Then he realized he shouldn't blame Tony for something which was Steve's own fault. Tony being distracting wasn't technically Tony's fault.

"I saw the light was on," Morgan said, warily looking around the four of them, "so I came to ask if you'd seen my dad, but—" She gestured at him and narrowed her eyes. "That is definitely not on the approved list of foods mom has already tacked to the fridge."

Tony looked from the forkful of lasagna in his hand to her. "Does your mom still hate most carbs in existence?"

"Yeah," Morgan said, cautiously.

Tony shrugged. "I'll split the rest of this plate with you if you don't tell mom?"

Morgan slid her gaze to Steve. "Did you make it or is it one of mom's?"

"I made it," Steve confirmed.

"I'll get a fork," Morgan said.
Natasha shifted up to the arm of the chair, patting the seat to make Steve come and sit next to her. She leaned her weight against him as the conversation continued, easy even with Morgan there. Morgan was fascinated as Pietro told her a story about his first encounter with the Shambler, and Steve could see Tony's jaw relax a little when Pietro said the match ended with him fainting. Tony had been worried that perhaps Pietro might be a little more detailed about the way battles ended in the arena when they lost them. And sometimes, Steve thought, remembering his first match with Kaecilius, winning didn't mean getting to skip the dying part.

Steve had no idea how long they would have kept talking, had Hugh not come to find where Morgan had gotten to.

Morgan whined when he turned up at Steve's door and she let him in, folding her arms and glaring at him.

"I'll try not to take that whining personally," Hugh said. Steve looked up at Hugh and nodded softly to welcome in into the house. A lot of people thought Pepper's new husband was similar to Tony in looks, but beyond the dark hair, mustache, and broad shoulders, Steve couldn't see the resemblance. "The front desk said you were last seen headed this way, so I assumed when Morgan didn't appear for dinnertime—"

"Whoops," Morgan said, checking her phone screen and grimacing. She didn't sound all that sorry.

"Understandable," Hugh said. "Does it help that I came looking to steal your father, too?"

"Acceptable," Morgan decided after a moment.

"You not going to introduce us, Stark?" Pietro asked, looking up at Hugh with interest.

"Yeah, of course," Tony gestured at Hugh from the floor. "Nat, Pietro, this is Hugh Howard. Pepper's new husband. Hugh, this is Pietro Maximoff, Natasha Romanov. I presume you already know Steve."

Hugh nodded at Steve. "You look a little different. Did you do something with your hair?"

"Hair dye," Steve deadpanned, making Hugh laugh.

"Hello Hugh," Pietro said, shoving his hand out.

"Pleasure to finally meet you," Hugh said, not even startled that Pietro had suddenly appeared directly in front of him, placidly taking Pietro's ability in his stride. He was a good man.

"What is it you do, Hugh?" Natasha asked, putting her plate down and crossing the carpet to shake his hand too. "You look familiar."

"I was a pilot, SHIELD contracted me a lot before the…collapse," Hugh explained. "You've been on a mission with me, I think. I was the pilot on the Odo Island expedition."

"The destruction of the Eiko-Maru," Natasha nodded. "Yeah. Tough shakes." She stepped back and cocked her head. "You have a terrible sense of humor."

Hugh mimed being shot in the heart, his mustache twitching as he repressed his chuckle.

"You definitely know Hugh," Morgan piped in, ducking out of the way and cackling when Hugh tried to tug at her hair, an old move of theirs. Steve caught Tony watching with a longing expression on his face, clearly realizing Hugh had been in his space for a while and the jealousy of
it must sting. Steve put his arm behind Tony as surreptitiously as he could and spread his hand on the small of his back, warm and solid. Reassurance that he wasn't alone and he had support. The ache that was clear on Tony's face settled a little.

"It's good to have you back, Tony," Hugh beamed at him, not a trace of the awkwardness from him that Steve was almost expecting. Steve didn't know what he was expecting, though. There wasn't exactly a manual of how to react when meeting your wife's surprisingly-back-from-the-dead-ex-husband. Tony had mentioned that he knew Hugh and Pepper were dating, but Steve was still expecting some friction; the way Tony looked pleased to see him was unexpected. "You're looking good for someone who we thought was spending his afterlife as a human popsicle."

Pietro looked confused.

"I had my body stored in a cryogenic chamber," Tony said, and noticing Morgan's expression he added, awkwardly, "while I wasn't using it."

"You can say you were dead," Morgan said. "I knew what dead meant when I was three."

"She accidentally beheaded one of the chickens with a baseball bat," Tony explained.

Morgan grimaced. "It ran around the yard for twenty minutes with its head at this angle," she illustrated her words. "And then we ate him for dinner."

"Or, I buried it in the backyard and I put a nicely pre-prepared one from the local market in the oven and swore blind to your mom that it was the same chicken," Tony winced. "I mean. That could be a thing that happened. I'd deny it."

Morgan laughed and clapped delightedly.

Hugh sighed. "And now I'm complicit in this act of villainy."

"We all go down together," Morgan said solemnly.

"Cryogenic, Stark?" Pietro asked, still confused about that earlier part. "Like. Walt Disney? You froze your body like Walt Disney?"

"That's all rumor." Tony hummed and glanced at Steve. "But I'd heard being deep-frozen doesn't do a body all that much harm."

Steve rolled his eyes. "The Grandmaster took you from the cryogenic chamber before your body had been there ten minutes," Steve pointed out. "Barely time for your body even to cool."

"Eh, technicalities," Tony said as he clambered to his feet, shaking his legs out. He looked over and opened his arm so Morgan could bury into his side. He ruffled his hair and looked down at her like his smile was stuck onto his face. Steve could relate to that. "Pep eager to have us home, huh?"

"Eager as an alpaca high on goji berries," Hugh said. His gaze slid to their dirty plates. "She's been cooking, though. Maybe we'll skip the part where you've already eaten something." Hugh glanced at Morgan and pointed at his own cheek; Morgan winced and quickly wiped the back of her hand over the smudge of tomato sauce that was there.

"We'd best go before mom panics," Morgan sighed. She looked at Steve. "Thanks for the lasagna I didn't eat."
"You know you're welcome here any time," Steve said.

"I'd probably go too," Pietro said. "Before my sister thinks I've been abducted."

"You can give me a lift," Natasha said, and Pietro nodded.

They all wandered outside to make their goodbyes.

"I like your house," Natasha said, leaning in and pressing a kiss to Steve's cheek. "Don't be a stranger."

"You either," Steve nodded back at his house. "Even if I'm not here, you're welcome, any time."

When Natasha glanced at the number pad, Steve huffed. "Since when has any lock stopped you?"

His amusement faded a little. "You can probably guess the number. Six digits."

Natasha thought about it for a moment, then frowned. "052970?" At Steve's brief eyebrow twitch of acknowledgment she sighed. "You're a lost cause, Rogers."

"Probably always have been," Steve admitted. "Would you want me any other way?"

"You could be a little less handsome," Natasha said. "You might be easier to look at. Sometimes it's like trying to stare right into the sun." She winked at him before turning to Pietro. "Yo, Speedy, how about a lift to the Compound, hm? I feel like going fast."

"I can do fast," Pietro nodded. He saluted Steve briefly, two fingers to his forehead that he flicked away. "Later, Cap."

Steve barely had time to open his mouth to start to say goodbye, but Pietro had already scooped Natasha up and he was gone in a blur. He snapped his mouth shut. "I'm never gonna get used to that at all, am I?"

"Nope," Tony said. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

Steve smiled at him. "Yeah," he said, ignoring the twist in his stomach at the idea of being apart from him again. "You know where I am if you need me."

"Same," Tony said, stepping back awkwardly. His gaze flickered toward Steve's mouth and then he turned away determinedly, jumping over to Hugh and Morgan, wrapping an arm around each of them. "So what's Pepper got on the menu for my triumphant return home?"

Steve watched them walk away and turned away resolutely. He could do this. He wanted to be released from that medical room as much as the others did. He knew the consequence was them separating from each other. Steve had spent most of the last four decades essentially on his own. He shouldn't be so rattled by the notion that tonight would be the same.

It was fine. It would all be fine.

It wasn't fine. Steve couldn't breathe for the first minute back in his house. His house had seemed so small for a moment had become so beautifully warm and cozy. Now his guests had left, it was cold and empty again. Painfully so.

Steve exhaled. He was out of rhythm, that was all. He spent half an hour cleaning up his dishes, washing them and putting them away. He did the routine maintenance of his fireplace before lighting it, hoping the warmth and glow might erase some of the stiffness of the air inside. He sat
down in his armchair by the fire and tried to pick up the book Pietro had ruffled, but his eyes glazed over the page.

Maybe he was tired. Steve took a deep breath in and out. Maybe a good night's sleep in his own bed was all he needed.

The bath was particularly nice. No risk of one of Yondu's daily shows. No risk of Groot shedding leaves on him. No one watching, or bugs turning away in disgust at his naked body. Getting dressed in his own usual sleep clothes was nice, too, even if they were a little tight because the worms had done things to his muscles that Steve didn't like to think about. Real toothpaste was very nice.

Ablutions done, Steve climbed into bed, pulled his covers up and stared at the ceiling. His curtains didn't fully close and the usual thin beam of moonlight crossed his ceiling. Like the force-field bisecting the arena before a fight.

Steve sighed and turned into his side, his sheets rustling loudly as he moved. He closed his eyes. Sleep. Sleep would help. The sleep in the hospital had been copious, but because it was mostly because of the drugs, it hadn't been restful. The only nearly-restful night of sleep they'd all gotten was the first night, when they'd somehow all had the idea to migrate to the floor, only to be shooed back into their beds by horrified, well-meaning medical staff.

Maybe it was the sheets. He usually changed his sheets weekly. He'd been a couple of days away from a change before he died, but maybe the weeks of lying dormant had made them too stale to be comfortable in. Steve got up and methodically stripped the bed of the sheets and took them downstairs to push them into his laundry machine, smiling at the scent of his regular detergent because it was so unlike any of the smells of the arena, and it was only when he set it off that he remembered he only had the one set—his routine was to set them on a wash and dry cycle in the early evening, so they were warm just in time for bedtime; why did he need a spare set of sheets if he could use the same ones?

Steve sighed, set the machine to wash and immediately dry afterward, and resigned himself to being unable to go to bed for a couple more hours. He was awake anyway, so he pulled out his cleaning supplies, a couple of trash bags, and after a moment's thought found a peg to put on his nose, before delving into his fridge. It wasn't as bad as Pietro had intimated, but Steve threw the contents anyway and deep-cleaned it, pulling out the shelves to wash in hot, soapy water, taking a toothbrush to the rubber seal to clean in the crevices, and drying every part of it before putting it back together.

Then he realized he should empty his trash can too, so he took the bag from that and the fridge devastation out and locked it in his small shed; he would have to drive out once the embargo was lifted and they were declared alive and allowed to leave the designated safe zone to take it to the tip. Pepper insisted on recycling everything possibly, normally, but there was no way Steve wanted to sift through the moldy items that had been in his fridge. Steve would probably still end up making a donation to one of those conservation charities that had sprung up after Tony died, raising money and support for green energy initiatives in his name.

After that, Steve had to sort through the food he had left in the freezer and food cupboards, checking the best before dates, making a note to get some vegetables soon. Pepper let him share her vegetable garden—it was too big for her to maintain alongside her duties at Stark Industries, so in return for him helping, he was allowed to help himself to its bounty. The tomatoes would be ready for harvest now. He hoped they hadn't overrun in his absence, although he couldn't imagine Hugh would have let the whole vegetable garden fall into chaos. If it had, Steve could still try and
wrangle it back into shape. Unless Tony wanted the duty, of course. It was technically Tony's project; Pepper had mentioned composting, apparently, and had woken up the next day to garden plans all over the floor, and Tony reading in-depth science papers about advanced farming techniques.

But then, Steve was dating Tony now. Apparently. Well, they hadn't actually talked about it. So far Steve had simply nodded his head and accepted the words, too thrilled to question the concept. They hadn't been on a date yet, not really. Maybe it was all a situational bond and it would fade for Tony. Steve sighed noisily, wishing his brain would shut up. Wished he didn't know how well death did quiet those most restless, monstrous thoughts.

The sheets dry, Steve re-made his bed, then realized he needed to shower and change his clothes again because he was messy from cleaning the kitchen. Toweling his hair dry, Steve noticed his hamper was full enough now for another load of laundry, so he took that downstairs to put in the machine. He trudged back up to his bedroom and his clock at the top of the stairs made it look like it was 4am. Steve frowned and headed back into his bedroom. The bedside clock blinked 4am at him too.

Steve sighed and climbed back into the bed, closing his eyes. This was fine. He had no plans for tomorrow. Carol had cleared him to start teaching again a week on Saturday, but that was so far away. Steve had already made his lesson plans weeks in advance. He should check those. Later. He should sleep first.

He tried and failed for the following four hours.

The therapist they'd already been forced to see had already tried to advise them to spend time apart. They emphasized that it was healthy to work on regaining their lives. But they'd also said to start small, so Steve didn't feel bad immediately agreeing to the midday message Tony sent over the StarkHub, inviting Steve over to see his garage. It was only after Steve grabbed his jacket and headed out the front door that he realized it might be a euphemism.

If it was a euphemism, or if Tony really was going to show him his car collection, Steve was good either way. Tony knew how Steve felt about him now. Everything else was going to be in Tony's hands, at Tony's speed. Whatever Tony wanted. The idea that Tony wanted him back was still hard for Steve to wrap his mind around.

Tony waved to him from in front of the small structure that Steve had passed thousands of times without really paying it too much attention. Pepper had called it Tony's garage before, so he'd assumed it was for one of Tony's many cars, but Steve was about to discover how wrong he was, when Tony let him in a side door, and the room inside was a glass and steel structure, with a keypad and what looked like stairs descending downwards.

"Welcome to my garage," Tony said, taking Steve's wrist and pushing it up to a panel to the right of the main door. "Friday, clear this one for access, any time."

"Add him to the family subroutine?" Friday's lilting voice filled Steve's ears.

Tony glanced at Steve and smiled. "Yeah, Fri."

"Roger that," Friday trilled.

The panel turned green. Steve tried not to linger on how dry his mouth was at how casually Tony had added him into that category.
"I'm glad you weren't busy," Tony said as a glass door opened and he beckoned Steve to follow him down the steps.

"I'm ready for my Saturday class and I don't have any other plans yet," Steve shrugged. "You? Settling back in to—any of this?"

"Heh," Tony said, "awkward doesn't even begin to describe this re-entry. Been catching up on what's been going on the last eight years. There was a real Mandarin, huh?"

"Yeah. That was a hard time for Shang-Chi."

"Stark Industries needs some updating for sure. Its upward trajectory is a little more stagnant than I'd like. Pepper's been doing her best, of course." Tony moved to one side, spreading his arms wide. "Welcome to my garage."

"You said that once already," Steve said, mostly because he was too stunned by the sight. "Tony," he added weakly, "did you build yourself a bat cave?"

Tony beamed proudly. "You really did catch up with popular culture when you were away, didn't you?"

Steve murmured his assent, walking deeper into the cavernous room, looking around in wonder at Tony's tech wonderland. Tony had clearly been down here already, because there was a half-eaten piece of wholewheat toast on one of the tabletops. There were several tabletops with half-constructed devices on each, light screens that activated as they stepped onto the floor, a spinning hologram in the corner showing a diagram of the Earth, a flashing dot on it that Steve suspected if he asked would be Morgan's precise location.

This place had been here the entire time? Steve had been basically living on top of it. He wondered where in this garage his house was, whether he could dig a hole in his sitting room and land near the line of armors that were lining one wall, showing the progression of the Iron Man suits over the years.

Tony excitedly started showing him around, talking rapidly about each of the projects, each of his ideas, bemoaning the amount of research he'd have to do to catch up, but the world wasn't as ahead as he'd feared. Steve was able to explain that, because coping with the Blip had taken everyone's attention and resources. The world had only recently started recovering enough to get back on track.

"This is what I was working on this morning," Tony said. "After Morgan went to school." He shot Steve a dark look. "I don't know if I approve of that."

"Routines are good for teenagers," Steve said.

"Education is overrated."

"You do realize you're technically saying that to a teacher." Steve raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm accredited and everything."

Tony looked him up and down for a moment, smirking. "Maybe I'm starting to see the appeal of school."

Steve glanced away. That smirk was usually the kind of expression that Steve would think about later, lock in his mind so he could maybe draw it sometime. It was the kind of expression that made Steve desperately want to kiss him.
Then Steve swallowed, but by the time he remembered he probably could lean in and kiss Tony, Tony was already moving to show him something else, and he was so excited about it that it was as fun to listen to him enthuse and watch him gesture as it was when they'd kissed in the arena.

"This is a portable force-field based on the arena ones," Tony gestured, blew up a diagram of an intricate-looking device. "I worked for years trying to figure them out, how we couldn't break them. The way that it took the resonance from the vibranium and the Asgardian metal to break the stronger version gave me the missing parts of that puzzle."

"Portable force-field with the strength of the arena ones could be really useful in so many situations. Shoring up a landslide, keeping a building from falling—" Steve smirked at Tony, "— or as a shield."

"Of course your brain went to shield," Tony said fondly, then his gaze caught on something in the diagram and he tilted his head a little. "Shield. Huh."

Steve smiled ruefully. He knew Tony's 'I've got an idea' face. It was either the precursor to the whole world being tipped on its head, or he was about to lose Tony for a few hours to an invention bender again. He cast his gaze around, landing on a couch that was near the worktable and had a good view of it. That would be a good place to wait it out.

"Oh, hey, hang on a moment—" Tony started, and immediately started tinkering with it, frowning at something and picking up a tool to jab at it. "Friday, zoom in on this bit, do you think we could increase the efficiency here? Should cause a cyclical boost on the—" He froze, partway through his mumbling. "Sorry, almost forgot you were here for a moment." Tony winced at Steve.

"I've been around you long enough to know not to take it personally," Steve said. He squinted. "Is that going to take long?"

"You can take a seat," Tony offered, which meant yes. "There's a tablet on the side-table, there might be some good books on it, or it hooks up to the Compound network, if you wanna peek at Carol's paperwork."

"Does she know you can do that?" Steve raised an eyebrow, crossing over to the couch and finding the StarkTab in question, picking it up and sitting down.

"Um," Tony said, "define know."

"I'll stick to the books," Steve said.

Steve hadn't been able to settle into reading since coming back, but there was something about this environment that made it work for Steve. Or maybe it was because he could keep peering over the edge of the tablet, watching Tony move in his element, humming under his breath and chatting to Friday at a rate of knots. He'd always enjoyed catching glimpses of Tony at work, even back before he knew his admiration was deeper than being impressed by seeing the science-fiction of his youth turned into science-fact by Tony's amazing brain.

He could tell when Tony was winding down by the way his shoulders started to slump and his instructions to Friday became less clear. Eventually, Friday said, "Boss, why don't we run this set of simulations and you can come back to it later?" and Tony squinted at his screen, before looking over at Steve, and then nodding to himself.

"Sure, let's do that," Tony said, nodding to himself before ambling over to look down at Steve. "Hey, good looking, whatcha doing?"
Steve laughed and put the tablet screen on sleep-mode, putting it to one side. "Nothing."

"That's not the right answer." Tony tilted his head. "I don't think I've ever actually sat on that couch since getting it."

Steve mirrored his expression right back at him. "Then what's it here for?"

"Napping, obviously. Important part of any engineer's creative process." Tony nodded sagely. "Here, I'll show you how you're supposed to sit on it," he added, before promptly throwing himself on the couch, landing with his head in Steve's lap. Tony grinned up at him and crossed his legs, belatedly kicking off his shoes and wriggling his toes happily. "Sorry I took so long."

"It's not like I've never met you before," Steve said, dryly.

"Hm," Tony squinted, "is that sass? Am I hearing sass?"

"Thought you liked my smart mouth."

Tony's eyes met his and locked. He swallowed visibly and his smile was soft. "I really have kept you waiting, haven't I?"

Steve kept his gaze steady. "If you think I wouldn't wait another eighty years to see you like this, safe and alive, you'd be wrong."

"I don't like being wrong," Tony muttered, his words slurring together.

"Didn't sleep too well last night, did you?" Steve kept his question low.

Tony shook his head. "You know what would help?" He waggled his eyebrows.

"If you're too tired to speak clearly, you're too tired for anything remotely strenuous," Steve said.

"Ooh, I like the forward implications in that statement." Tony grinned. "I meant hair petting. You liked doing it."

"Did I?" Steve asked, but couldn't resist it, sinking his hand into Tony's hair and trying not to sigh too loudly in pleasure.

"Gonna close my eyes for a moment," Tony mumbled. "Then I can show you more cool stuff."

"Sure, Tony," Steve said, soothingly continuing to stroke his hair, "show me your stuff."

Tony snickered, but his eyes were closed, and it didn't take long until he'd drifted off, right there on Steve's lap.

Steve should probably pick the tablet back up and read. It was probably weird to sit and stare at Tony's sleeping face. He had to keep petting Tony's hair because that was practical; stopping that motion woke Tony up, and Tony needed to sleep. It was the staring that was entirely unnecessary. Steve was going to stop doing it. Soon. Tony stirred, but only to turn his face in toward Steve's stomach, making a soft snuffling noise as he burrowed in, seemingly unaware he was doing it.

It was almost hypnotic. Steve matched the hair stroking to the rhythm of Tony's shallow breaths. He didn't know how long it went on for. He was reluctant to wake Tony, when Tony was clearly exhausted.

Steve was starting to think about closing his own eyes, trying to get some sleep of his own, but the
chance slipped away.

"Tony?" Pepper's voice floated tentatively down the stairs.

Steve froze and looked toward the glass doors cautiously, his every instinct saying to flee, because of how compromised this moment looked. Tony, asleep on his lap, clutching onto Steve’s shirt with one hand. Steve should probably shake Tony awake, get him to sit up, because it was one thing to know your ex-husband and a close friend were dating—even if he and Tony still needed to have a formal conversation about that and to figure out what they were actually doing—and another to see it yourself.

Not that he and Tony were even doing anything scandalous, but Steve was aware of how intimate this moment would look. He still couldn't bring himself to wake Tony up. His gaze dropped to Tony's face again, a sight which caused his chest to constrict with sheet contentment.

By the time he looked up again, Pepper was standing in the doorway. She was wearing a dark skirt suit, probably having come home straight from work, and her cheeks were a little flushed. Steve didn't know if it was embarrassment or if the wind outside had picked up.

"Oh." Pepper blinked, frozen awkwardly when she was, and then she tried continuing into the cavernous space like she hadn't frozen at all. "Uh, hi, Steve. Didn't know you were here."

"I wasn't planning to still be here, but—" Steve gestured helplessly as Tony make a snorting noise and didn't wake up.

Pepper looked down at Tony, a fond smile twitching across her face. "I came to get him for dinner. The doc sent over a schedule—"

"Yeah," Steve winced, he hadn't exactly been following his own as well as he should, if his night-time regime was any indicator. "We should probably wake him for that," he said, reluctantly.

"Another hour couldn't hurt," Pepper said. "He hasn't been sleeping much at all." She looked at Steve, worry creasing her forehead. "Have any of you?"

Steve shrugged helplessly in answer. He couldn't answer for Natasha and Pietro now, but in the medical room they shared, none of them seemed to be able to sleep for more than a few minutes at a go.

"I'm kind of impressed, though." Pepper leaned against one of the tables, still watching Tony sleep with a fond expression. "I could never get him to stop. Not ever."

"I don't think I've managed that either," Steve admitted.

"This is still probably the best attempt at it I've ever seen," Pepper said. "Take the win."

Steve swallowed, his mouth a little dry. "Pepper—" he started, awkwardly. "I don't—I mean, this is —" He was making a mess of this.

"Oh, Steve." Pepper cast around and found a chair tucked under one of the other tables. She pulled it over and sat down and looked at him. "Didn't you ever wonder why I insisted you stay? Insisted you stay quite so close? I wasn't merely being kind," she preempted quickly as he opened his mouth to say so.

Steve shrugged.
"Tony's always loved you," Pepper said, looking down at Tony's peaceful, unaware face. "That's why I kept you close. Not because you loved him, although that helped, it was nice to know at the hard points that so many people loved him. But I kept the people close who he loved, because it was the best way I could honor him. I could never measure up to him for a minute, but I could keep those he loved close, and in a way, it was like keeping some of him close." She looked up at Steve, her eyes wet with unshed tears. "I'm sorry if I was so selfish in keeping you so very close." She smirked. "The babysitting, the bitching over wine, and the free garden labor… now that stuff was all just a bonus."

Steve laughed, even though it wasn't exactly pure joy that he was feeling. Some other emotions were knotted through the laughter. Grief still, for the years they did lose. Tony was alive, but he'd been through hell and back to manage it, and the cost for that was still immense: years of Morgan's childhood, lost forever; years of trauma still to deal with.

Steve's eyes traced over Tony's sleeping face again. "When I woke up after the ice, the first time, I was lost. Everything was confusing. But after the Battle of New York—"

"During the Battle of New York, there was this moment where we connected mid-fight. No discussions, no practice, I just knew what he wanted from me."

It had been effortless, reflecting Tony's uni-beam from his shield. They'd worked in perfect, beautiful unison, no words required. For two people who'd gotten off on such a wrong foot, it had been almost as startling as waking up and learning he'd missed seven decades.

"Tony was the first thing about the future that ever made any sense to me," Steve finished, shrugging.

"Tony and made sense? In the same sentence?" Pepper squinted. "Well. I guess it's good he's finally found someone that can understand him."

"Maybe I wouldn't go as far as understand. I don't think anyone really understands him." He looked at Pepper as evenly as he could. "With your blessing, I'd like to try."

Pepper's eyes widened. "My blessing? It's not like you need my permission."

"Doesn't mean I wouldn't like it." Steve kept his gaze level, trying to let her know he was being serious. "Tony explained what I think I already knew. Even if your marriage was never what we all wanted it to be for you two, you're still necessary and important to each other in a way I don't think anyone could ever break, or get in-between, and I would never want to. You're his best friend. If I don't have your support, I would be able to trust it's for a good reason, and I'll back away."

Pepper took a deep breath and shook her head as she got to her feet. "You're an idiot. But a cute one, so I'll let this moment of stupidity slide." At Steve's look of hurt, she smiled widely. "You have no idea how happy he is. The look on his face when he used to talk about you. Which, FYI, was all the time. Even when you were fighting, sometimes he'd say your name and somehow forget his own."

Steve looked down at Tony. That was a stunning thought. The fact that thinking about Steve could empty that big brain of his was more of a pleasing idea than it probably should be.

"I'll send Morgan down to fetch you for dinner in an hour," Pepper said, pushing the chair she'd picked up back under the nearest table. "Friday, set an alarm." Her eyes flickered toward Steve, as if gauging whether he understood the implication.

He did. He supported it. Morgan was going through a lot right now with the miraculous return of
her father from the dead. It was a lot to adjust to, let alone the idea of her dad dating someone new. Steve nodded.

"Thank you," Pepper said.

Steve frowned. He felt like he should be saying that to her. "What for?"

"Oh, Steve," she said again, her pretty eyes brimming with tears again. She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "You brought the father of my child home. My best friend. I'm going to be grateful to you probably every day for as long as I live."

"You better make that as long a time as possible," Steve said.

Pepper pulled back and squinted at him. "Didn't bring any of those worms back, huh?" Steve's expression apparently spoke louder than any of his words could. Her face fell. "Was it that bad?"

"Worse," Steve admitted. "It's probably—it's probably going to be bad. I'm messed up and I was barely there." His fingers resumed their path in Tony's hair, almost automatically, and Tony stirred a little but stayed asleep.

"We'll be there for him," Pepper promised. "And for you. Anything you need."

Steve nodded, watching Tony's chest rise and fall, so entranced by it that he barely noticed Pepper leaving them alone.

Tony woke up before the alarm and looked confused when Steve verbally canceled it.

"You set an alarm?" Tony asked, sounding almost adorably confused. Steve would never admit how much he liked the first few minutes after Tony woke up, the moments before Tony's brain engaged fully with the day. He was always just that little bit more unguarded. It made Steve really understand how much Tony trusted him, to let him see that vulnerability.

"No, Pepper did," Steve said. "She came by nearly an hour ago."

That caused Tony to wake up a bit more quickly, although he still seemed deeply uninterested in moving away from Steve's lap. "Hm," Tony blinked, rubbing at his eyes. "What did she want?"

"To remind you it was dinnertime."

"Did she give you a hard time? Your face looks like she gave you a hard time."

"Pepper didn't give me a hard time," Steve sighed. "She complimented me, if you're really interested."

"Really?"

"She thought I'd managed to get you to stop. But you never stop." Steve shuddered through a breath, looking at all the projects over all the tables again. Tony's brain was a constant whirl of worry and sheer creative energy. "Your restless monsters never let you stop, do they?"

"No, because they never stop," Tony sighed. "But sleep makes them quiet, for a little while." He looked up at Steve intently. "Like some other things I can think of."

"You mean like dying." Steve's stomach felt uneasy.
"Other things," Tony insisted, leaning up and kissing him. The kiss soothed the knots in Steve's stomach and replaced them with a growing heat instead, accelerating from soothing into something hot and heavy.

It would have accelerated even further, except for the interruption—someone knocking at the door to Tony's garage followed by a voice that let them know that whoever it was wasn't waiting for a response to the knock before coming in.

"Dad?" the voice said.

Tony and Steve froze, staring at each other. Steve shouldn't have even been surprised. Pepper had told him what was going to happen. Tony had managed to almost completely empty his brain.


"Dad, you still down here?" Morgan called down. "Uncle Steve? Mom said it was time for dinner now. She said I had to drag you upstairs, no excuses."

Thank goodness the idea of being caught in a compromising situation was like a wash of ice-water; by the time Morgan finished coming into view, Steve was sitting cross-legged on the sofa, a cushion casually in his lap, and Tony was sat on the floor, like they'd been innocently chatting.

Morgan's eyes slipped between them, almost suspiciously, but she didn't say anything. "Dinner?" She nodded at Steve. "Mom wants you to come too."

"Only if you want me to," Steve said.

"Sshh, you're staying," Tony said, climbing elegantly to his feet. "C'mon, m'lady Morguna, you can tell me what your mother's so kindly made for us."

"Lentil and Chickpea salad," Morgan said, while Tony pantomimed vomiting. She laughed. "But I got Uncle Happy to smuggle in some egg mayo sandwiches. I checked, they're on your list. I got him to stash them in Uncle Steve's fridge, I'm sure one of us can manage to sneak out to his house later to get you one, Dad."

Steve was suddenly glad he'd definitely cleaned out his fridge last night.

"Smart," Tony said. He turned his face, making sure Steve was following them. "See how smart she is? That's my girl."

Dinner at the Stark house was much more pleasant than Steve was expecting, even though he tended to avoid them when Pepper, Hugh, and Morgan were all available at meal time, because he knew how important family bonding time was. But this one was easy. The conversation flowed freely. It seemed, from Steve's perspective, to be Tony bridging any awkward gaps, and it was probably from his years of schmoozing other rich people out of their money at galas and benefits. As soon as there was even the briefest lull, Tony knew how to steer the tone back to jovial and light.

Eager to show off with Steve there, Morgan played piano for them at the end of the meal while Pepper made a quick fruit sauce to go with ice-cream (for Morgan, Hugh, and herself) and dietitian-approved plain yogurt (for Steve and Tony). Tony cried as Morgan started to sing and Steve surreptitiously held his hand, letting go before Morgan ended her song and saw them doing it.
"Ugh, all I want is to admire you all day every day," Tony sighed, grabbing Morgan off her piano stool the moment she finished, and wrapping her in a hug. "Bunk off school tomorrow so I can stare at your face?"

"Tony, no," Pepper called over. "She has an assignment due tomorrow, and a History test."

"Our overlord has spoken," Morgan muttered sadly into Tony's chest.

"I heard that," Pepper said.

"Ugh, I've been landed in this terrible situation in hard mode," Tony sighed. He turned to Steve with a sad expression. "How am I supposed to cope with my child at school. You've had kids and dealt with this, how do you cope with the eight hours of torture when they're away from you, without resorting to hacking into the school’s security cameras?"

"Um," Steve said, acutely aware that Pepper and Hugh both looked confused. "Keep busy, try not to think about knives."

"Why would I—" Tony started, blinked, and sighed. "Now I'm thinking about knives."

"Relax, mom has like, eleven bodyguards stashed at my school," Morgan said.

Pepper swore as her hand slipped as she stirred her fruit sauce, splattering peach juice all over the splashback.

Steve muffled his own smile. Shit really was Pepper's word.

Hugh hugged Steve when it came time for him to return to his own house.

"What was that for?" Steve asked, as he stepped back.

"Losing a kid is a tough roll," Hugh said. At Steve's hard look, Hugh shrugged. "Morgan's not mine, but I could tell you for sure, no way I'd be off in another place if there was a chance for me to be here, getting to help, see her grow up." Hugh looked at Steve evenly. "You're a good man, Steve Rogers. And you're not alone here."

"Yeah," Steve said, shoving his hands in his pockets and glancing at Hugh, then at Pepper, Morgan, and Tony, smiling at each other. "I'm starting to finally understand that."

Steve tried to sleep, but even though he made himself stay in bed from 11pm to 7am the next morning, he only managed a few minutes. He puffed out his cheeks and forced himself to get up.

Maybe he needed to tire himself out. They were restricted to the area that the Wakandan force-field covered, but that still included a lot of woodland, so Steve slipped into his running gear and headed out for the trail he used when he didn't want to run into anyone. Even though he ran for what must have been hours, based on the movements of the shadows of the trees around him, Steve wasn't tired. The serum had always made him strong and boosted his stamina, but the worms had increased those qualities exponentially.

Perhaps it was a mistake trying to wear his body out. Maybe he needed to wear his mind out. He exhaled noisily and ran back to his house, quickly taking a shower and changing into comfortable clothes, sweatpants and a t-shirt. Then he settled himself into his little conservatory, mind rolling over options for his class a week tomorrow. He opened up the lesson plan he'd already prepared, busy wondering about changing some of the warm-up exercises when he heard someone knocking
on his front door.

Steve wondered if it was Morgan, because it was Friday, which meant art homework. But it was too early for her to visit, and her version of knocking was slamming his door.

"Thank the Vishanti," Tony breathed as Steve opened the door, "you're in. I was so bored."

Steve smiled automatically, so widely that it nearly stunned him into forgetting how his mouth worked for a moment. "I, uh. Sure. Come in." He waved Tony into the house.

Tony didn't sit down. He wandered in and started fiddling with some of Steve's things, picking them up, looking at them, and putting them down again. He broke Steve's electric pencil sharpener with his fidgeting, pulling a face before carrying the pieces over to the small round dining table Steve had in the kitchen area. He placed the pieces down in a careful line. "You have a tool kit?"

"Cupboard by the sink," Steve said. Tony nodded, pulled out the toolbox, and started to fix the small, inconsequential device that Steve barely used anyway—it had been a holiday gift from Sam a couple of years ago. "I meant to ask, and never did. Since when did you pick up Strange's language? Vishanti, I mean. It doesn't seem like your... regular dialogue."

Steve wandered over to the sink, filling up his kettle and sliding it onto a burner, pulling out a fruit tea that had been approved for them because the caffeine content was so low.

"Oh, I mean. The bugs said it a lot. It was hard not to pick up some of their vocabulary." Tony shrugged. "Besides, the Vishanti are real, some sort of distant race. God...the one god I could have used there...thankfully didn't turn up."

Steve grimaced, pulling out two mugs and starting to spoon the apple tea powder into them. "Have you heard from Thor?" Tony wasn't used to Jane yet; Steve didn't have to clarify which Thor he meant.

Tony shook his head. "He's talking to the others. Just not to you and me."

Steve reached over and squeezed his shoulder comforting. "He'll come around. And even if he doesn't, I don't regret what we did."

Tony brought up one of his hands to put on Steve's, turning his face to exhale into Steve's arm. Steve's body lit up, simply from that small warm moment of connection, of Tony letting Steve support him through this. "What we did," Tony repeated, quietly.

"What we did," Steve repeated, firmly. Tony looked up at him, eyes wide. Steve held his gaze. "I was right there with you in that decision. And Odin fully knew what he was asking. Allow him the dignity of his choice."

"You're right," Tony sighed. He pressed a brief kiss to Steve's hand and let it go, ostensibly so he could use both hands on fixing the sharpener again. "This is a terrible design," Tony sighed.

"Tell Sam, he bought it." Steve turned back to his whistling kettle, pouring out water onto the powder in the mugs, and stirring them.

"I will tell Sam. And I'll build you the heck out of a better one."

"I can use a manual sharpener," Steve said, pushing a mug in front of Tony.

"Hm. Or I can watch you make some more art sometime and I can figure out what else I can build
to make the process look cooler," Tony beamed at him, and then said, "What is this?" He had been moments from just blindly drinking it, just because Steve handed it to him.

"Apple tea," Steve said, sipping his own.


"Ran in circles. Didn't get tired." Steve shook his head, leaning back. "I'm not sleeping much," he admitted, and glanced at the bags under Tony's eyes. "Guessing I'm not alone in that. Bed too soft, huh?"

"Bed too soft, not enough light, too much light," Tony shook his head. "And the monsters don't want me to allow Odin the dignity of his choice."

Steve put his mug down and looked at Tony evenly. "Death isn't the only way to shut those restless monsters up, y'know."

Tony shot him a disbelieving look. "I went on an inventing spiral to try to shut them up," he said. "Sometimes that works."

"I can think of something else," Steve said.

Tony put his mug down. "I'm so wired from not sleeping, I'll try anything," he said, earnestly. "What's your plan?"

Steve remembered how easily Tony had let him comfort him, and how easily Tony kissed him in the rose garden, and let that feeling buoy him into leaning in closer, smiling slowly. "Thought you liked how I distracted you."

"Oh my god," Tony said.

Kissing Tony in the privacy of Steve's own home was a giddy privilege. Steve cupped Tony's face gently in his hands and held his face there, kissing him slowly, almost methodically, aiming to undo him completely. The kiss tasted faintly of apples from the tea. It felt so much better than anything had a right to. Tony made a whining noise as he kicked his chair at an angle so they could shift closer, pushing his knee between Steve's thighs, and the kiss deepened. Tony's hand slipped to Steve's waist, digging out the t-shirt from the waistband of his pants so he could rest his hand on Steve's bare skin.

"This working?" Steve asked.

"Less questions, more kissing," Tony managed to say, trailing kisses down the length of Steve's jaw, then to his neck, and he was pawing at Steve's shirt. "Off, off," he muttered, and Steve obligingly let go of Tony's face so he could tug his shirt up and over his head. Tony grabbed it from him and threw it into the corner of the kitchen. "Bedroom," Tony said, low and with a desperation that resonated right through Steve.

"Bedroom," Steve agreed, and picked up Tony, scooping his hands up under his thighs and lifting him up. Tony obligingly locked his feet behind Steve's back, kissing him deeply, laughing joyously when Steve managed to lift him, climb the stairs and still attempt to kiss Tony at the same time.

"This really might work as a distraction, I can barely think at all," Tony said, wondrously, making sure to rub the length of his body against Steve's as Steve finally let him down on the landing.
"Good," Steve breathed and kissed him again, the taste of apple fading, but it was still such an addictive feeling. His entire body sparked into fire as Tony kissed him back, pushing him into the wall. They laughed as a clock dislodged and tipped to the ground. Tony reached out to pick it up and Steve diverted him, a finger on his cheek. "Later."

"Pushy," Tony said, giddily, before pushing Steve toward his open bedroom door. They got as far as the bed, Tony taking the lead, pressing Steve down into his mattress as Steve tried to get Tony's shirt off as well, too desperate to be coordinated. He nearly succeeded, Tony looking down at him triumphantly, so beautiful, and then the door slammed.

It was Friday. Not the AI, the day. Friday.

"Morgan," Steve said, eyes widening as he recognized the distinctive door slam. "She comes by every Friday afternoon for help with her art homework."

"And you indulge that?" Tony tilted his head and then his expression froze as Steve's words sank in.

They both moved rapidly, Tony yanking his shirt back on, Steve pulling a new one out, realizing with dismay his was downstairs somewhere, abandoned.

"Stay up here," Steve leaned in and kissed him again, "she never comes upstairs."

"Go," Tony shooed him. "I'll see you later."

Steve smoothed down his hair, took a deep breath, glanced back at Tony—pleasingly flushed, his hair and shirt disheveled—and had to fight hard to turn his back and run downstairs.

When he got there, Morgan was already setting up at the coffee table.

"Oh, hey Uncle Steve," Morgan greeted. Steve casually snagged his shirt with his shoe, kicking it out the way toward the stairs before she turned around to see him. She frowned at him. "Are you okay?"

"Right as rain," Steve said, trying not to sound choked up.

And then the leg dropped down by the window. Steve swallowed the curse that nearly slipped loose. Of course Tony would try and climb out of the window, because he might be one of the smartest guys on this planet, but he had the occasional dumb streak.

Morgan's gaze drifted to her phone screen, which she held in her left hand. Unfortunately that would give her a bigger chance of seeing Tony drop down. Steve resisted the urge to facepalm.

"So how did that project with the books go?" Steve asked, and maybe that was too loud.

Morgan looked up at him. "You know that thing where I don't tell people they're morons to their face, even when they are?" At Steve's slow nod, she winked at him. "I can tell my dad's trying to jump out of your bedroom window. He's not exactly subtle."

Steve pressed his mouth together. "I'm not sure—" he started.

"He's wearing his Iron Man shoes," Morgan said, thumbing at the window where, sure enough, Tony had gotten both of his legs out the window and they were bright yellow with red Iron Man
masks painted on it. Steve hadn't even noticed. He hadn't exactly been looking at Tony's feet. "You don't have to hide it from me."

"Hide...what?" Steve said slowly, rounding the coffee table toward the armchair he usually sat in when she came over. He didn't usually feel so sharply exposed.

"Please, my dad constantly whined about you and your, quote, 'perfect face and your perfect abs and your stupid perfect hair' unquote, when I was small. When I met you, I thought he was full of it. Now—" Morgan spared him a brief, dismissive glance. "Maybe I get what he was whining about." She wrinkled her nose. "Sort of."

Steve's gaze strayed to where Tony's legs were wriggling. Steve wasn't as tempted to go and help him as much as he thought he might be.

"And I've always known that you're in love with my dad." Morgan put her phone down then so she could stare at him. "C'mon, Uncle Steve. Everyone knows. They talk about it when they think I'm not listening. Even if the Avengers weren't worse gossipers than my mixed volleyball team, I'd know. You talked about Dad every day. And when you do, you get this soft look in your eyes I've only ever seen from mom, when she talks about me, or Hugh. Ergo, you love my dad. Don't deny it."

Steve stared at her. "I do love him," he admitted. She deserved honesty. You couldn't protect someone forever with lies. It might have taken him a little too long to learn that particular lesson.

"Ha, I knew it," Morgan breathed, like maybe she'd only been 60% sure about it after all. She beamed. "I'm glad you love him back."

Steve smiled ruefully. "Sometimes I feel like I could burst with it, like it’s all I can think about," he admitted.

"Sometimes I just want to dance because he’s real, because sometimes I think I imagined him," Morgan said. "And—him being back—"

"It feels so unreal," Steve finished.

"I almost don't know what to do with myself," Morgan said. Steve's honesty was catching. "I keep thinking I’m going to wake up and he’ll be gone again."

"Yeah," Steve said, trying not to be choked up with the thought, "I know that feeling."

Morgan looked at him, her expression on the edge of desperate. "How do we cope with it?"

Steve made a mental note to very carefully suggest to Pepper that maybe she and Morgan could book a session with the Compound's therapist. People always forgot that the impact of trauma could ripple out and snag the loved ones caught in the fallout. "I suppose," he said slowly, "we enjoy every second of it. We stay present, and enjoy the gift of having him back."

"Present, gift..." Morgan narrowed her eyes. "Is that a pun?"

"It's cheesy," Steve said. "But a little bit of cheese is good for you."

Morgan nodded and then she gestured at the window. "Should we go rescue Dad or leave him hanging a little longer?"

"As tempted as I am to leave him, we should go and give him a hand," Steve said. Morgan was so
diverted by her dad’s antics that she nearly left her ever-present phone on the coffee table. Steve stopped and pointed at it. "We should have video proof of this moment."

"Of my dad sneaking out of your bedroom," Morgan said, raising one eyebrow at him.

Steve flushed. "Maybe when you inevitably share the video with your friends at the Compound, you could be a little bit vague about the location of the window."

The medical check-ups felt endless.

Steve was the second one freed from Cho's next battery of tests and, feeling like he's been prodded all over, he headed for the cafeteria to see if this was where Natasha had drifted after she was released first. His instincts were correct; she was nestled in a chair at the table by the window they all liked, because it gave them such a good view to the trees beyond.

Before joining her, Steve stopped by the serving hatch, asking for a bottle of water and one of the approved protein bars that was on his new menu plan.

"Have you still been banned from the caffeine too?" Natasha nodded at Steve's bottle of water as he sat down opposite her.

Steve pulled a face. "I skirted the sleep question, but—"

"You can't really fool trained doctors too much," Natasha finished. "Did you do your group therapy assignment?"

Steve was probably going to have to accept today was for grimacing. "It's not like it's difficult for any of us to pick a traumatic incident from before the arena."

"That's the problem. Picking one." Natasha played with her own bottle of water a moment before looking at him. "Tell me if I'm crossing the line talking about it, but... While you're digging into painful memories—I mean, what happened with—I mean, the loss of one child on a relationship is hard enough. Three—"

Steve bowed his head and tried not to flinch, realizing Natasha was just being nosy about Peggy. He needed to learn how to talk about this. If not with Natasha, then who? "We made it. Can't say it was an easy time. But when you get the miracle of a second chance—makes you fight harder, knowing how fragile things are." He looked at her sadly. "How easy it is to lose someone you love."

Natasha took in a shuddering breath. "Yeah. I keep wondering what the world would be like if we'd managed to bring any of those worms back..."

"If the world finds out somehow, we have to be firm about the threat Thanos represented. The Decimation is still fresh enough in everyone's mind." Steve smiled at her sadly. Perhaps today wasn't solely for grimacing after all. "Strange is due in today at some point. Maybe he can set our minds at rest that the worms were only a Negative Zone thing."

"Since when were we ever that lucky," Natasha sighed. "At least Gamora and Nebula have finished with the project."

The project was the codename for the undertaking to divide Thanos’ body into pieces and scatter them far and wide. If more of those worms existed somewhere in the universe, then they needed to be sure no one would be able to reconstitute him.
Stephen Strange was due to be stopping by the Compound today, to pick up the book Steve had found in Ghrengh's worming chamber, the *De Vermis Mysteriis*. Maybe they'd soon have some answers. It might not be the whole reason why none of them could sleep, but all of them had been blown into pieces by one of the two Extremis villains at one point or the other, so they knew the worms could put a body even in hundreds of pieces back together.

Maybe sleep would come more easily if they knew Thanos was forever gone. His body had been carefully incinerated in the hottest furnace on Earth, and his dust was being scattered apart so far that it should be highly unlikely for him to return, but as long as the potential for more worms existed, the probability would never be zero. As Steve had discovered, even the smallest probability numbers could be problematic.

"You can tell me where to shove it," Natasha said, "but...how did you handle knowing your wife was going to get dementia? Unless you found a cure for that, or some hopeful news that it can be avoided, that would be nice, some proof it can be affected by environmental factors..."

Steve whistled, a little stunned by the question. That was Natasha. Never shy to make him face the painful truths. Then again, life was about learning lessons, and she'd seen what Steve was likely to do with the truth if left to his own devices—sit on the truth, painfully, for a period of time usually denoted as *way too long*.

"The truth is, I don't know," Steve moved his gaze out of the window, because if he looked Natasha in the face, he might break down before he could say it. "Change one thing, and the timeline ripples in ways you can never imagine. And I changed more than one thing."

"How did she die?" Natasha's voice was a ghost.

"Rogue Hydra sleeper cell, in the eighties." Steve could still feel the same rush of pride when she'd shown him her research with bright eyes. No one had believed her, so she'd stayed up late, scraping all their contacts for endless hours until she connected the dots. Her discovery had saved a lot of lives, if not quite her own. "There were two detonations, different parts of the underground. We had to split up, no one had believed us in time. She managed to evacuate the station, but she thought she could disarm it, and—" Steve lowered his gaze. He'd been able to disarm his, but hers had a faulty wire. At least it was fast. And now Steve had the actual experience of being blown up. She hadn't suffered much. Sometimes traumas could weirdly become a blessing. "We'd talked about it. I broached it as a hypothetical. About how we would want to go out. And I know dementia was her worst nightmare." Steve's smile was soft. "Of all the ripples I caused...it meant I got to save a woman I loved dearly from her worst nightmare. How could I ever regret that?"

"You're a good man, Steve Rogers," Natasha said. When he glanced at her, she was smiling, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "And I'm so glad you found your life. And that you found someone and moved on. All those years of pining for Stark, it was never what I wanted for you." She tilted her head. "Are you sure you know what you're doing with Stark now?"

"Absolutely no idea," Steve admitted. "But—I can't help it. I don't think I ever stopped loving him. Peggy knew. She loved me anyway, showed me I had room to love her, and our children, and room to spare. She was a gift I don't think I ever deserved. She was okay with the knowledge that a little bit of my heart was locked away somewhere she couldn't reach."

"Steve," Natasha breathed, like she was sorry for him.

"Don't get me wrong," Steve said, wanting to make sure he was clear on this point, because he didn't want to have his feelings for Peggy or Tony be something that anyone pitied him for. "I was happily married and it was great. But part of me—never gave up." He smiled ruefully and shook
his head. "Giving up was something I never learned how to do."

"Did you—" Natasha's voice was hushed, like she wasn't sure she should ask the question, but when she looked up at him he nodded, encouraging her to go ahead. "Did you see him? Tony, I mean. In your timeline. At all?"

Steve remembered Pepper's reaction to his next piece of news. She'd taken it really well, but he guessed it was because she was stressed, and slightly tipsy by that point, that she hadn't really understood the full implication.

"Honestly when it comes to Tony Stark," Steve exhaled roughly, "all I do is make mistakes. Turns out if you go back far enough and change enough you can really fuck some things up. I guess I fucked it up so hard— Tony. Tony never even got to exist."

He stared into the distance. It was considerate to his mood and blurred appropriately. Sometimes when he thought about what happened like that, he wanted to claw his own skin off.

"Well, Tony would probably be okay with it." Natasha shrugged. "He likes to think he's one of a kind. To find out it's true might do bad things to his ego."

"The Starks still had a child. A girl."

Natasha's eyebrows raised. "I will pay you good money to be there when you tell Tony that."

"Howard was one of the few who knew some of what was going on. So when he wanted help with a name—"

Natasha looked confused when he trailed off. Steve looked at her knowingly. She would catch on. It was her superpower, after all.

She didn't disappoint. "You didn't."

"Yeah, I asked him to name her after you." Steve huffed a wry laugh. "After that, well, I mean, I'd already saved the Bucky of that timeline and stopped Hydra."

"Of course. Good."

"So I tried to find the other version of me, help speed that process along," Steve shrugged. "Thought it might be nice if he didn't have as much of a time gap, experience a little less culture-shock."

"Uhuh," Natasha murmured.

"But it was nigh-on impossible. Even with my meddling, we only found the plane about four years earlier. And—"

"And?"

Steve squinted and said it very fast and kind of hoped he wasn't coherent, because even saying it once made him feel a little odd. "And he married Natasha Stark a few years later?"

Natasha stared at him. "Oh my god," she wheezed. "Oh my god."

"What's oh my god?" Tony asked.

Both Natasha and Steve startled; Tony and Pietro were standing by their table, and they were so
deep into the conversation they hadn't noticed. Steve clammed up, embarrassed.

Natasha had no such compunction. She wrapped her arm around Steve and beamed up at Tony. "Apparently alternate timeline Steve married alternate timeline girl you."

Tony blinked several times. "Girl me," he repeated, slowly, like he wasn't sure he'd heard that right. He tilted his head in Steve's direction. "Girl me?"

"Yeah," Steve admitted, wincing.

Tony pulled a chair out, put a bottle of water down, and looked at Steve as he sat down next to Natasha, raising a single eyebrow. "Was she hot?"

Natasha snorted. "Of course that's your first thought."

"Ridiculously hot," Steve admitted, because it was the truth.

"Ha, of course." Tony nodded like he was satisfied with it, although Steve did catch him glancing briefly in the direction of his crotch, like he was wondering what it would be like to have something different down there.

"Terrible personality, though," Steve continued.

"Well, obviously," Tony agreed.

Worn out after the group therapy session, and because Tony was busy doing something with Harley and Peter in the labs, Steve decided to hang out in the chairs in the lobby rather than walk home. He needed to meet up with Strange soon enough anyway.

Carol caught him first, nodding when she caught sight of him.

"Never getting used to seeing you like this," Carol said, smiling at him toothily.

"Re-entry is always hard for everyone," Steve said solemnly.

"Good luck with it," Carol nodded. She turned to go, and then paused. "Did I tell you that we actually got a follow-up message from the Eternals?"

"Oh?"

"The leader, Makkari. She wanted to deeply apologize for Ikaris' response when we reached out to them for help. She and the Uni-Mind council agreed that LOL NO was an inappropriate reply to our distress."

"Really?" Steve didn't think that sounded right.

Carol quirked a grin at him. "He was supposed to say FUCK OFF."

Steve smothered his amusement as best as he could. "Sure hope they don't need our assistance any time soon."

She laughed as she hurried off to her next meeting. Carol was never still. She seemed to take it personally whenever anything made her slow down. She and Tony really were going to get on well, Steve thought, not for the first time.
Talking with Carol meant that Steve had missed Strange coming into the compound—if he'd even used the front doors. Although now Steve knew how to anticipate portals, so he was going to assume Strange had entered when Steve was laughing with Carol.

"Yeah," Strange was saying to the receptionist, "I'm here to see Mr. Rogers and Ms. Karolina Dean."

Karolina had punched right through Strange's best wards to get into the boardroom to warn them about Morgan; according to Pepper, she had agreed to help test the wider wards to help figure out how to strengthen them against any potential villain who may have similar powers.

"Hello, Steve," Strange said, before turning around.

Steve suppressed his sigh. Maybe wizards weren't his favorite kind of people. He pulled out the book from his bag, knowing by the time he did, Strange would be there with his hand out. His guess was correct; Strange immediately started flicking through the book and nodding to himself.

"It'll take me some time to translate this," Strange said. "I'll update you as soon as I have anything." He smiled fondly at the book. "There have been many rumors about the *De Vermis Mysteriis* but I've never seen it in person until now."

"What kind of rumors?" Steve asked.

Strange lifted an eyebrow, eyes traveling over the strange text in the book. "The kind I usually deal in." Enigmatic as ever. "I'll do my best," Strange bowed his head, pushing the book into the lining of his cape, and then frowned as he caught sight of Steve's expression.

Strange followed Steve's gaze to the main doors, where Steve had only just caught sight Morgan approaching the front door.

"You should go," Steve said.

Strange shook his head and then tilted his chin. "No. No, I don't think I will." He smiled briefly at Steve. "I have something to say to Miss. Stark, if she lets me."

Steve didn't have time to ask for more particulars, because Morgan was already approaching them. He got the feeling Strange wouldn't have offered answers, even if Steve asked nicely.

Steve still found himself feeling anxious as Morgan approached. He didn't have Strange's odd confidence. Then again, he'd also had a layer stripped from him during their group therapy chat. He abruptly felt a little swell of weariness. Perhaps he might be able to sleep tonight, after all.

"Hi, Uncle Steve," Morgan smiled at him as she approached. Then her expression distinctly cooled as she turned to Strange. "Hey, Mr. Fourteen Million."

"Actually, I meant to say something to you about that," Strange said, "if you would be so kind."

"Why would I—" Morgan started.

"For me," Steve interjected. "I've got a feeling you might want to hear this."

Morgan pursed her lips, looking behind them, clearly thinking about escaping and finding her dad. But she looked back at Steve and nodded.

"You know the story, Ms. Stark," Strange looked at her, but Steve had the odd feeling that he
wasn't so much seeing Morgan as looking at the galaxies of atoms that she was made up of, the chaos combination of destiny and chance. “That before I made the decision to hand over the Time Stone to the mad Titan Thanos, I saw fourteen million versions of the future. Before anyone else, I knew what was going to happen.”

"Yeah," Morgan spat out, bitterly. "You knew my dad was going to die and you didn't do anything to stop it."

"Fourteen million versions of the future. And I personally experienced all of them myself, sequentially." Strange stared off into the distance like he could still see those futures, fragmented but simultaneously existing all at once. "Your dad died in thirteen million of them. Four million he didn't even reach the battlefield. Two million times he died on the battlefield before reaching Thanos. Once—well, once he died slipping in the shower about two days before you were born, I was very embarrassed for him. And four million times, he made that self-same sacrifice play."

Morgan swallowed, looking distraught. Like she was picturing her dad dying on his knees, four million times, one after another.

"And out of all those four million deaths," Strange held up one shaking finger. "This was the only set of circumstances that he got to come back."

Steve stared, the implication of it sinking in. What Strange was saying—They'd all assumed the same thing, that when Strange handed over the Time Stone, he was basically sentencing Tony to die. But the more Steve thought about the strange set of circumstances that had led them to here, with Tony alive, with Natasha and Pietro and the others alive...

It was like one of those giant Rube-Goldberg Machines. So many moving parts. So many times where Steve had thought we can't be so lucky and been proved wrong.

What if it wasn't luck? What if these random coincidences had been the chosen coincidences, of each of the paths Strange had seen?

And the implication he'd lived each one of those fourteen million options? It was thirteen years, all told, between the events of Titan and now. Steve had thought Tony and Natasha and Pietro's multiple deaths had been unbearable, but to live fourteen million lives, and to watch yourself lose over and over again? Vision had crumbled, Natasha nearly had, and that was nowhere near what Strange had experienced.

Nowhere near what Strange must have suffered in order to reach this, the most perfect combination of scenarios.

"This is where it all changes," Strange said, looking at Steve. "From now on, this is where I have no idea what happens." He smiled oddly. "I find myself quite looking forward to it, actually."

Morgan's eyes were full of tears. She'd clearly understood what Strange was saying too. "But I've been... I've been so horrible to you. You've let me be so horrible to you. Why?"

"I couldn't risk telling anyone anything about what was to come. Any interference on my part might have made it all unfold very differently," Strange looked at her, her usual confidence briefly breaking into a sad expression.

"But—"

"I took your ire because it was well-deserved," Strange said, firmly. "Your father was stolen from you for eight years that you will never get back. That is a terrible loss, for both of you."
Your...attitude was part of my penance.

Morgan shook her head slowly and then threw herself at him. "I'm still sorry I was so horrible."

Strange looked nonplussed as her arms went around him. Steve smirked. Strange might be a master of both the medical and mystical domains, but when it came to kids, he was clueless.

Morgan pulled away from the hug and looked up at him with a contemplative expression. "One out of fourteen million options?" At Strange's brief, jerky nod of confirmation, Morgan turned to Steve and beamed. "That's like, 0.000007 percent chance. Basically impossible!"

"It happened," Steve came closer and smiled at her. "Which means it actually had a one hundred percent chance of success."

"Retroactive probability doesn't negate the risk you took," Morgan sniffed and then caught sight of someone. "I gotta go. I promised Aunty Nebula I'd spend some time with her. She thinks I've been neglecting her." She wrinkled her mouth. "Guess she was right."

Strange and Steve both watched her go.

"You didn't stay completely out of the way," Steve said, because Strange had meddled, in a tiny way. Nudging things in the right direction. If he hadn't said the word *stain*, Steve would never have thought of Obadiah Stane's paralyzing device; he might not have been able to stop Morgan from getting to that lethal nanotech injection. Who knew what other small machinations the Sorcerer Supreme might have done over the years, nudging them quietly to this ending? "Thank you," Steve said. It wasn't quite big enough, but it was all the words he had.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Strange smiled enigmatically as he started to sweep away, his cape rising dramatically as he walked. He glanced back over his shoulder. "But you're welcome, nonetheless."

Steve grinned back at him.
Slipping back into his usual Saturday morning routine was easy.

Steve stopped by the cafeteria for a mug of dietitian-approved fruit tea and then he headed for the classroom, opening it up early and sitting at his desk, scrolling through the spreadsheet to double-check the notes from the substitutes that had been teaching this class since he'd died.

It looked like Danny Rand had taken a couple of them—Steve could tell because of the damage report and the shiny new display screen behind him. Peter had covered the rest, because there were notes about a chemical reaction gone wrong, which meant neither Danny or Peter had stuck to the right syllabus, so Steve was correct to start where he'd left off. Right after villain recognition was learning how to spot a trap.

Steve was busy thinking some interesting ideas for a few practical exercises for the topic when his students started filing in. Normally they were noisy, and they were when the door opened, but the chatter abruptly faded when they noticed him sitting at the desk. Steve regarded them surreptitiously over the top of his tablet as they quietly filed into the room. It was nearly a full complement, except for Morgan—her attendance was never mandatory, and she'd taken, for good reason, to following her dad around whenever she could.

"Okay, class," Steve said, lowering the tablet, "good morning. Today we're going to be covering trap recognition. Now I know you've had a bit of disruption recently—"

"Yeah, your funeral kind of made us miss a class or two," Nico said, never one to shy from speaking up.

Steve shrugged. "This is part and parcel of learning to become an Avenger, Nico. You have to learn to roll with the weird and find ways to keep going around or through it."

Nico's eyebrows lifted high. "Okay, then."

"We've had a bit of disruption," Steve repeated, flickering a brief glance at Nico, winning him a smile in return, "but I'm going to get you back on track, don't worry. If you can bear with me, and put a bit of extra work in over the next few weeks, we can avoid having to extend this program through your vacation time. Is that a deal?"

There was a lot of disgruntled murmuring, but Steve took the general nodding as an approval, and,
because he strove to be a good teacher and use his powers for good, he started his lesson with a video of the time Clint didn't check the door of a villain's lair for a trap and landed on his ass in a dumpster for the privilege.

Steve handed out the homework assignment—find an active or retired Avenger and ask them about one of their experiences with a trap—and sat back down with a repressed smile. He almost couldn't believe he'd missed the sounds of their soft complaining.

"Any questions before we go?" Steve asked automatically, expecting to hear is this assignment mandatory or do we have to ask verbally or can we do it by e-mail or excuse me Mr. Rogers but I think I broke my screen.

Karolina's hand shot up in the air. When Steve nodded at her, she frowned. "Can I ask a question about, well—I mean. It concerns recent events?"

Steve inhaled and exhaled slowly. Of course they would have questions about what happened. "I retain the right not to answer it if it's inappropriate or crossing a personal boundary," he said, slowly. He liked to encourage questions, though. Curiosity and the willingness to question authority were two traits he wanted them all to have.

"You're like—" Karolina waved her hand at him, "—all young again, and fit. Buff, even." There were giggles at that. "Why the heck have they stuck you in here with us? Shouldn't you be out saving the world again?" She shook her head, like none of it made sense to her at all. "No one wants to be in a classroom on a Saturday. And when you were gone they made it perfectly clear how low-priority we are. So why are you here, when you're—I mean. You're Captain America."

Rayshaun tensed in his seat. "Sam Wilson's Captain America," he muttered.

"Nu-uh," Teddy corrected. "He's officially back as Falcon. Said he's done his bit for the country but he was thinking of stepping down anyway, so he's done that now."

"I haven't officially taken up that mantle again," Steve said, cutting across that interruption before Rayshaun started throwing fists to defend his hero. "I might. I might not. That's not important right now." He exhaled loudly and walked around the desk to lean against it. He folded his arms and looked at all of them. "I'm sorry for being gone, mostly because it left you open to some of the adults here letting you believe you're low-priority. Believe me, I will be having words with some people about that." Severe words, Steve thought grimly. "You're not low-priority, not a single one of you."

It wasn't often that his class was silent, hanging onto his every word. Steve took advantage of it, trying to sweep his gaze over all of them, so he knew he meant this for each and every one of them.

"I've lived a long time. Longer than one person should. But one thing I see over and over again is that an idea is only good if it has people to continue believing in it. The Avengers don't exist because of any single person, not one current person now or any of the first Avengers are the Avengers. Because the Avengers are an idea. And for the Avengers to be able to keep growing, to keep protecting the Earth, it needs the next generation. And I firmly believe, and I will fight anyone who tells me otherwise, that you are that next generation."

In the arena, Steve had hated how the crowd watched him. But this feeling was the opposite of that. This was the kind of attention that was worth giving your all for.

"Your strength, your capability, your intuition, your initiative—it blows me away. In particular, I
was in a bind a few weeks ago, and it was the quick thinking and strength of a few of you that managed to save someone's life. And I'm so proud of all of you. And I'm so looking forward to seeing what you could all accomplish. I'm here to pass on my knowledge and experience so that you can reach your potential. So you avoid the mistakes we made. You'll go out there and you'll make some of your own—"

They laughed at that and Steve shrugged, smiling wryly. "But you'll learn and you'll grow and hopefully you'll go on to be the amazing Avengers I know you can be. And I hope some of you will then choose my path, to use your knowledge and experience to help mentor the next batch of young Avengers. I believe the Avengers are an idea worth nurturing. This world and galaxy need protecting and we've been given the privilege of these powers, and using it to protect other people—however we can, with whatever strengths we have—I believe is the only way to win against the darkness in the world. Sometimes that's out on the battlefield and sometimes that's somewhere closer to home. I know sometimes it feels hopeless, like we have enemies everywhere and the fighting will never stop. But if they never stop, we'll never stop. You can stop an individual. But you can never stop an idea."

"Heck, yeah," Teddy yelled, fist-pumping the air. At RiRi's judgmental glance—she despised anyone making too much noise, it was never personal for her—he glared at her. "C'mon, Williams, when was the last time any of the adults here treated us like we were anything but a nuisance?"

"They wouldn't give us classes if they thought we weren't worth it," Cindy muttered, "right?"

"Maybe to shut us up," Noh-Varr offered.

"Yeah, because we're real quiet," RiRi sniffed.

Steve cleared his throat and they fell silent, which was a compliment, when it came to his students. "So to answer your question, Karolina: if I'm stuck here, it's because unlike you, I actually want to be here." At her smile, Steve unfolded his arms and put them on his hips instead. "But you're right, I am young again. And I'm stronger than before. Which means I might be taking over some of your physical ed Sunday classes." Steve beamed at the sudden groaning. "I'm fond of cross country."

"Try to get him to skip the burpees," a very familiar voice called out from the doorway. "He'll forget not all of you have super-strength."

Steve startled to see Tony leaning against the doorjamb, folding his arms and grinning at the class. Knowing he'd been seen now, Tony straightened up and walked into the room.

"This is what my money has been going on, huh?" Tony pursed his lips and glanced around at the group of students. "Hm. Acceptable." He thumbed in Steve's direction. "He's pretty good at the speech thing, right?"

"We've heard that's not all you think he's good at?" Lana said. Cindy thumped her in the ribs with their elbow.

"Oh, yeah, Harley said some of you little shits hacked the arena footage."

"Tony, you can't—you can't call my students little shits."

"Ah, you're right, my bad. That's Pepper's word. She's copyrighted it. I'll apologize to her later."

Steve pressed his mouth in a firm line. It was that or smack his head against the desk, and Tony's presence was already eroding enough of the respect he commanded as their teacher, he needed to cling onto whatever remained.
"Remind me to keep the ones with burgeoning criminal aptitude away from Lang," Tony added.

Steve's jaw clenched. "Do you need anything in particular, Mr. Stark?"

There was giggling that rippled around the room that changed sharply into whistles and hollering
when Tony stepped forward and kissed Steve on the cheek. "Stealing teach for lunch, that was the
plan." He winked at the class. "You all fine with that?"

"Keep him," Rayshaun said, still apparently miffed at the idea that Steve might be to blame for
Sam not being Captain America anymore.

Steve deliberately pretended not to hear Rayshaun, because they'd all been through enough in his
absence. "Class dismissed," Steve said, and tried to pretend to be mad at Tony as he yanked him
out of the room to a resounding wave of wolf-whistles.

"I'm thoroughly embarrassed," Steve muttered. "I'm saying that out loud so you're aware."

"Oh, I know." Tony beamed smugly.

A few heads lifted up when they walked into the cafeteria, but all of them quickly looked away,
realizing it was rude to stare. Steve understood their impulse. He was still finding it hard not to
stare at Tony in wonder all the time.

"I went to see Vision." Tony kept his tone conversational as they headed to the counter, both of
them sparing a jealous glance at the main meals available. Alas, their dietician had decided to leave
them lunches to pick up from the main cafeteria fridge, taking advantage of them being restricted
to living close to the Compound. Steve wondered if someone had confessed about their pizza
pocket party, as Tony charmed the luncheon workers to hand over their two labeled boxes.

"Yeah?" Steve took his box from Tony and they picked up cutlery and water and headed over to a
table by the window. Tony preferred places where he had a good view, where he could pretend
they weren't still in a prison of a sort. At least this one was larger, had forms of communication
available, and, even better, had Morgan in it. "How's he doing?"

"Not as well as I hoped," Tony picked up his fork and flipped open the lid of his lunch box. "He
wasn't used to losing, so losing to Thanos multiple times was hard to start with. When he learned
how likely it was that we'd have to die permanently again, all because of Thanos—you were right
about hope. He lost it, and lost it hard. It's not an easy thing to come back from."

"He'll get there," Steve said. He kind of knew what Vision was going through. Steve had thought
he'd known what it was like to lose, but losing to Thanos that day in Wakanda—it had been the
first real time Steve had lost since taking up the shield. Even going down into the ice hadn't really
been a failure, in the end, but those long five years after the Decimation were difficult to survive,
and so many people gave up. Vision had a long road ahead of him. They all did.

A little depressed at the thought, Steve opened his box to find whatever their lunch was supposed
to be today. Some sort of bean salad, Steve thought, along with…. Steve leaned in closer. Was that
a couple of tater tots? When he looked up, Tony was already eating a tater tot of his own, grinning
when he noticed Steve had found the surprise.

"Bribed one of the cooks," Tony said. "I won't tell if you don't."

Steve suppressed a grin and ate the illicit potato. And then he jolted. He looked at Tony
suspiciously. "You want to play footsie? Here?"
Tony looked innocent. "I don't know what you mean."

Steve tried to look annoyed, but he was enjoying the pink tinge to Tony's cheeks too much to make the expression plausible. "Vision will get there," Steve said, trying his best to pretend Tony's foot wasn't dexterously sneaking up his leg. "We all will."

"Footsie in public?" Pietro asked, suddenly sitting by Steve and shaking his head. He leaned over and snagged Steve's last illicit tater tot. "Mm, cold potato."

Tony lowered his leg and looked irked. "Why have you chosen right now to ruin all my fun, Maximoff?"

"Danvers sent me to find you." Pietro waggled his eyebrows. "Guess who we found."

Carol understood Steve well enough that she knew he'd want to be part of the squad to bring the Grandmaster in, so instead of bracing for the fight, she automatically invited Steve, Tony, Natasha, and Pietro to join the mission to bring him in.

The proviso was that they wore stealth suits which came with something Shuri called a "visage obfuscator" which made it impossible for anyone to see their faces clearly, or capture it on any kind of recording. The four of them were still legally dead. The Avengers' legal team was still trying to figure out the safest way to officially bring them back to life. Steve reluctantly agreed laying low was probably best for now.

As far as the world still knew, Tony Stark had died to save them. There had been several pieces of legislation worked up as a result that protected the Avengers Initiative, gave them certain powers, allowed them to limit any governmental supervision. They needed to be positive they could safely reveal Tony as alive without causing any of that legislation to be revoked.

Plus there could be chaos, if everyone found out they had found a method of resurrection, of immortality, and hadn't managed to secure it for the rest of humanity. They would be targets for anyone who wanted to bring back a loved one, or cure their own terminal illnesses. They would never be safe.

Maybe it would be better if they stayed dead. Steve had done it before, taken on a whole new identity. He'd carved out a brand new space and life for himself in that alternate reality so that when their Steve was found in the ice, he didn't find himself usurped by an older doppelganger. Their Steve could slide into the life he was supposed to have; it made Steve feel less guilty for stealing some of that timeline for himself.

Their therapist had been trying to coax Steve into consciously stepping back to analyze his own feelings, to try to learn how to verbalize in his head what he was doing and why. Steve was only letting his thoughts wander now because he was nervous about facing the Grandmaster again. Tony picked up on his nerves, because he handed Steve his shield as they were getting ready to go.

"I can't take this," Steve said, sadly. "I don't think it would be easy to explain why some random person was using Captain America's shield."

"So save it for when we get inside the building big GM is supposed to be hiding in," Tony said, holding the shield out.

"But what about on the way there?"

"Did you really think I wouldn't have thought about that?" Tony turned the shield around where
there was a small device attached to it; when Tony depressed the switch, the shield disappeared. Tony smirked at Steve's look of horror and rapped his fingers against the vibranium before moving his hand down and flipping the switch, revealing his shield again.

"Oh," Steve said, feeling a little slow for not realizing what was going on.

"You know you'll feel better if you have it," Tony said.

Steve huffed and took it, because Tony knew him too well. "I could have put it in a bag, I suppose."

"You'll feel better with it on you," Tony said.

Steve ignored him, mostly because Tony was right about that too. He slipped the shield into the harness on his stealth suit, something Tony had probably also intervened with because no one else had shield clips on theirs, and tried to ignore the fact that Natasha and Pietro were laughing at him.

"Busted," the Grandmaster sighed to his audience.

Carol's intel was perfect, and they found the Grandmaster bunking down in an apartment in downtown San Francisco. He was surrounded by a bunch of women in white flimsy nightdresses who turned out to be genuine citizens of the area that had apparently fallen for the Grandmaster's charms and joined him in some sort of bizarre cult.

The Grandmaster didn't even try fighting when Carol broke down the door with Steve and Tony right behind her. The Grandmaster was lounging shirtless on a plump leather armchair like it was a seat as grand as his throne, the women were kneeling on the floor and staring up at him worshipfully, and he didn't even get up even though there were several angry superheroes pointing various weapons at him.

Sam and Rhodey started processing the women while Natasha got in a brief and brutal fistfight with Topaz, who had been hiding in the kitchen with a six-pack of cheap beer. Topaz did not win that particular fight.

Carol stepped in to strip the Grandmaster of his wrist device, and even she was a little discomfited by the fact that none of the women there even had the excuse of Control Discs for their behavior.

"It's my magnetic personality," the Grandmaster said. "And my beautiful looks." He nodded at Carol. "How about you? Would you like me to show you how I earned my name?" He waggled his eyebrows. "It's both grand and I am a master."

The fact that Carol didn't immediately photon blast him in the face was a testament to how well she'd grown and developed into a leader.

The Grandmaster's gaze slid past Carol to where Tony and Steve were watching. The Grandmaster's smile widened. "Ah, my Iron Man."

"I'm not yours," Tony said, tapping two fingers against his thigh, and Steve smiled as Tony's armor formed over the stealth suit. Steve wasn't the only one whose uniform sometimes performed double-duty as a security blanket. "I never was."

The faceplate flipped up as Tony stepped forward, coolly making and maintaining eye contact with the Grandmaster. Steve dropped his shield from his back and switched it to visible, flanking Tony. He felt settled. Like maybe this was his home. Not this Earth, or this timeline, or the Avenger's
compound, but here. By Tony’s side.

Carol rolled her eyes on seeing Tony's transformation, like she wasn't surprised that he'd brought his armor. She and Tony had a lot in common; Steve had always thought they would either get on well, or not at all. He was looking forward to finding out which of those predictions was closest to the mark.

"Are you here to kill me?" the Grandmaster asked, gratifyingly looking a little nervous when Tony flexed both of his hands.

"Arrest you," Tony said, coolly. "You'll be grateful. Our prison isn't as horrific as yours."

"Aren't you pleased, with what I did for you? For all of you? Life. You were dead. Wasn't it a gift?" The Grandmaster straightened in his chair. "It was for you. The arena was all for you. It was all about you. Or didn't you notice, how it was all designed perfectly to show you off? When I gracefully finished my deserved sentence in those terrible mines, I came out to a galaxy that was singing one name. Tony Stark, Iron Man. The hero who died to save us all. The whole universe knew your name, Stark, and the sacrifice you made to save all of us. That's when I knew I had to have you as my warrior. That's why the Negative Zone was locked to 2008."

Tony kept glaring at the Grandmaster, but Steve could see the twitch of a nerve in Tony's face. The Grandmaster's words were getting to him. Steve clenched his shield more tightly.

The Grandmaster stared at Tony. "You had to think that was a weird year to choose. I could have picked any time in history. The greatest warriors. Hercules. Zuras, in his prime. Frigga, before she was tethered to the Asgardian throne. But I chose you. I geared the whole arena around you. My first attempt to find a villain worthy of you was the Iron Monger, I wanted him as my Champion of Death. I know the galaxy feared Thanos, but to get the most out of a hero, you need the mightiest villain. The one they called Stane, oh...he would have drawn such strength out of you, my Iron Man."

"He's not yours," Steve managed through gritted teeth.

The Grandmaster spared Steve a brief glance. "Quite. My bad." But then he turned back to Tony, staring at him. "Sadly in 2008, I hadn't quite perfected my worms. I brought your monstrous Obadiah back for a terribly painful seven days I'm afraid he didn't survive. The guy with the whips, Vanko, he was my earliest success. I gathered all these heroes and villains specifically for you, Tony Stark. For the bravest warrior, you have to assemble his biggest foes and that's what I did in your honor. You're stronger now than you've ever been, because I engineered that. And now, look at you, you're beautiful. Now the universe can lavish the love on you personally, the amount you deserve. Now you can shine forever."

Tony tilted his head, blinking rapidly. "What's your aim with all this? To flatter my ego? To woo me to your side? Because wow, yeah, that does actually sometimes work on me."

The Grandmaster smiled at Tony hopefully.

"It never works on me," Steve said.

The Grandmaster's smile faded.

Tony collapsed his armor and quietly walked out of the room, missing the moment that Steve punched the Grandmaster directly in the face, but Steve was quietly pleased to know someone would have been recording the incident. Shuri gave them nanobot-cams to deploy while on
mission for accountability's sake, so Tony would be able to enjoy the moment later, if he wanted to. Steve would probably watch the punch a few times himself.

Steve was forcibly told to leave the room while they detained the Grandmaster and Topaz. He turned his shield invisible again, checked over his shoulder as he left to make sure they were both being cuffed, and then he hurried out of the room. He didn't always so willingly and quickly comply with orders, but he did when they aligned with his own desires. His own desire was to get to Tony's side as quickly as possible.

Steve found Tony on a park bench on the street below. The street was fairly busy, but no one was sparing Tony a second glance. No one spared Steve a glance either as he sat down next to him. Steve stayed quiet. Waiting until Tony was ready to talk.

"He was probably bullshitting his ass off," Tony said, "but—" He exhaled noisily. "If all that was true. If that arena was my fault—"

"Look at me," Steve said. The obfuscator hid their faces to strangers, but let them see each other as they were. Shuri's tech was like Tony's—in a category of its own. Tony puffed out his cheeks and then reluctantly turned to face him. Tony looked like he'd aged ten years in a second, somehow. The tension in his shoulders alone made Steve's body ache in empathy. "You can't take credit for what someone's done, even if you're somehow the inspiration for their actions. Do you know how many villains since you've been...gone—" Tony wrinkled his nose at the euphemism, but Steve carried on, "—have blamed you for their actions?"

Tony narrowed his eyes. "I was dead, how was I to blame for anything?"

"There was this guy called Quentin Beck, he tried to frame Peter for terrorism. The bastard actually got Peter thrown in jail for killing him, which turned out to be an act too. Peter's fine now, but... it was a pretty bad time. Apparently it was all your fault for naming Beck's invention in a comedic fashion when he deserved to be taken seriously," Steve said.

Tony stared at Steve, confused. "Beck was a half-hinged lunatic with delusions of grandeur who designed half a page of graphical user interface. That we scrapped anyway for a verbal input subroutine."

"There was some sort of an explosion in Latveria, and the ruler there put in a complaint to the Avengers that too many of his citizens had died because Iron Man wasn't there to save them."

"Well. Maybe I could have. If I hadn't died." Tony blinked. "Isn't Latveria in Europe? How fast do they think I can fly?"

"There are some people that blame you for the real Mandarin, because you incited Aldrich Killian into appropriating the real Mandarin's mythology, causing people to believe the real one didn't exist, and therefore, it was your fault that the real Mandarin was causing so much chaos and murders in secret."

Tony leaned back a little. "So what you're saying is I ruin everything and everyone is better off dead?"

"How is that what you took from what I said?" Steve took a deep breath. Maybe this was how you learned how to deal with conflict without reaching for your shield; you had to find a person you couldn't bear to hurt, and learn how to communicate with them. "Villains always give excuses. They never take ownership for their own crimes. You've inspired so many people, and most people have taken that to heart. You've been immortalized in green initiatives, embracing your
legacy of green energy. There are agreements in place over nuclear weapons and world peace that have been made in your name, because we lost Earth's best defender. Are you going to take credit for all the actions of people doing good in your name, too?"

"I might, actually," Tony said, indignantly. His eyebrows quirked in a way that made Steve know that Tony knew he was being ridiculous. It made it easier to respond in kind.

Steve shrugged a shoulder at him. "Then it balances out."

Tony exhaled through lips pressed together, making a plosive dismissive noise. "You're kind of annoying. I don't know why I love you."

Steve tried not to grin too widely at that offhand declaration. "But you do anyway," Steve teased, lightly.

Tony leaned over and rested his head against Steve's shoulder, rocking him until Steve put his arm around his waist. "I do anyway," Tony muttered.

Steve was finding it hard to sleep again, but it might have had something to do with that offhand love declaration that kept playing in his mind, again and again. He felt almost giddy. It was ridiculous. He tried to keep himself busy with some mindless chores—weeding some of the vegetable garden, writing up an exam for his class to take—but he kept finding himself standing still and staring into space, like he was a video and someone had pressed pause.

Tony had some designs to check at Stark Industries; Pepper was planning to smuggle him in through a back entrance with the aid of one of the visage obfuscators, but he'd promised to stop by and see Steve when he was done, and Steve was almost bristling with energy at the thought of it.

He shouldn't get his hopes up. Tony would likely get sucked into looking at the tech, probably reworking them somehow. Pepper had mentioned an egregious problem with the safety protocols on a new energy project; who knew how long a snafu like that, of a problem unsupervised by Tony for eight years, would take someone even as clever as Tony to sort out?

It turned out it was a problem that only required a couple of hours for Tony to solve, if the loud, off-beat rapping at the door was any indication. Steve put aside his papers and almost ran to the front door, which meant he couldn't exactly pull off the cool and suave greeting he wanted to. At least Tony looked just as jittery.

As soon as Steve opened the door, Tony pushed his way inside, dropped a bag on the ground, and then leaned up and kissed Steve, wrapping his hands around his neck. Steve stumbled back a little, letting Tony push him into the edge of the counter as they kissed. Pain blossomed along his hip where it connected with a drawer knob, but Steve barely felt it. Was it always going to feel this good, every time they kissed?

"Are you okay?" Steve asked, realizing Tony was shaking.

"Yeah," Tony breathed, resting his forehead against Steve's for a moment, breathing hard. "This morning was more difficult than I was expecting. There are so many potential dangers that all need solutions. The galaxy's bigger than we ever knew. There are so many more monsters out there. And it—" Tony made a happy noise as Steve rubbed his back. "It's only now actually hitting me that my restless monsters aren't going to sleep again. For a long time. Those breaks were all that kept me going in the arena."

Steve tried not to shudder too hard, because the breaks Tony was talking about were his death.
"It feels like having to learn how to ride a bike, all over again." Tony nodded. "I had a coping mechanism that's impossible and now I need to learn how to cope again, without it."

Steve exhaled, thinking about it. Tony had been holding onto so much in the arena. He'd been keeping so much to himself. Death, knowing he would get that brief moment of silence in his brain… Steve could see how it would become an outlet, of sorts.

He could see how death would so easily become something to look forward to, and Steve hated that thought with every fiber of his being.

"I'm not going to rush out and accidentally forget I'm mortal," Tony reassured Steve. "I have Morgan to live for. I have you. I'll remember. I just...think it's going to be hard to forget how much I want that silence for a while."

"I can't let you give in to that impulse," Steve said. "You have to know that by now. I wouldn't survive it. I won't. You go, I'm going with you. Together. You're stuck with me."

"Good," Tony breathed. "I can't do this without you."

"So no situations which might… make your restless monsters sleep," Steve said slowly, glad of the euphemism for death, too wired now to string Tony and death even in the same thought without him wanting to scream. "But I can help you keep them quiet for a while."

Tony looked confused, until Steve eased their mouths back together and kissed him. After a while, Tony pulled away to lean his head against Steve's neck with a loud groan.

"What's the problem?" Steve asked.

"Here's the thing," Tony said. He puffed out his cheeks and stepped back, looking up at Steve warily. "I'd like this to go further. I'd love to have sex with you. Non-arena-located sex. Leisurely, though. Leisurely sex. As two people in love. Lots of lubricant and plentiful mess and a truly embarrassing amount of kissing. That sort of sex."

"I'm on board with that plan," Steve said slowly, wondering what the catch was gonna be.

"But I can't shake the feeling we'd be interrupted here," Tony said, "and my body is agreeing." He took Steve's hand and rubbed it over his groin in illustration, looking frustrated. He eyeballed Steve warily. "How do you feel about a little road trip?"

"I'd love to," Steve said, immediately, honestly, even though he wasn't really having the same problem. "But we're kind of grounded. Where would we even road trip to?"

"I've got a solution for that," Tony said. He held out his hand. "How about it?"

"Hmm. Follow you and have sex, or stay here and finish writing a paper for my students that doesn't need to be done for another three months," Steve pretended to think about and got yanked out of the door for the privilege, Tony scooping his bag with them as he kicked Steve's front door shut.

There were a few cars in Tony's garage, you just had to go through the door at the other side of the building to get to them.

Tony chose one of his flashiest cars, a convertible of a type Steve couldn't name. He wouldn't be surprised if it was a one-of-a-kind Stark creation; Tony had always been obsessed with cars. Tony
tossed Steve one of Shuri's obfuscator and Steve slipped it on.

"You don't have to activate it quite yet," Tony advised, jumping into the driving seat and throwing the bag in the back. "C'mon. Let's get a move on."

Apparently Tony was relying on Steve trusting him for the moment. That was fine with Steve.

As they hit the road, the trees rushing by, Tony had him turn on the obfuscator. Steve saw the sign that indicated where the force-field ended, but instead of slowing down and running a keycard over it, like most people had to, Tony fiddled with his watch and drove to the point where the force-field operated at full speed.

Steve frowned. Tony had to know what he was doing, right? His trust was well-founded and they passed through it without incident. Steve sighed in relief and tried his best to ignore the little voice in the back of his head that compellingly whispered if it had gone wrong, we'd have been injured together.

"Turns out my portable force-field has a terminal compatibility issue with the Wakandan force-field," Tony yelled, grinning as he increased his speed. "Alas, it means we can slip right through undetected. I guess I'll have to fix it at some point."

Steve smiled at him. "But not right now."

"Not right now," Tony agreed.

As they drove, Steve settled back in the seat and gave in his impulse to stare at Tony. Tony caught his gaze and smiled at the attention.

"So c'mon, Rogers, spill it," Tony said, raising his voice enough so Steve could hear it over the wind. "When did you first want to kiss me?" He waggled his eyebrows.

Steve thought about it. "Probably the time you hoped no one had."

There was a pause as Tony worked that out. "That's a... long time."

Steve continued to stare openly at his profile. "Not the answer you were expecting?"

Tony looked contemplative. "Well, I suppose I thought maybe you'd say from the first time you saw me." He winked at Steve in the rearview mirror for that one.

"It was the first time I saw you," Steve said. "Really saw you. Although the actual first time was a report that I think Natasha wrote. It wasn't flattering. The photo was kind of hot, though. You look good in a suit." He said it casually, like that realization hadn't been world-shaking at the time, when he'd looked at Natasha's report on Tony, and thought, well, don't you look like a self-centered smug attractive asshole.

Steve had been so wrong. And he'd internalized all of his feelings about Tony, squashing them down for years, not wanting to look too closely. Frightened what he'd see, if he looked too closely.

"I look better in nothing," Tony said, his words casual, his expression distinctly not.

"I answered your question. Fair's fair."

"I already told you, when I was fifteen."

"When did you first want to kiss Steve Rogers," Steve clarified. "Wanting to kiss Captain America
"Probably the time you called my building ugly," Tony admitted. "Not many people are honest to
my face. I guess I like it. But if I hadn't even liked you at all, that would have changed now, for
sure. Carol told me the full story of what you did to save Morgan."

Steve pressed his mouth into a line and stared out at the speeding landscape. "It was worth it," he
said. "I'd do it again."

"You really love my kid too, don't you?"

Steve's gaze flew back to Tony's. "Of course," he said, his voice a little rough.

"There's a lot you can catch me up on," Tony said. "She told me what Strange said. But I don't
know if I really did lose all those eight years. Seems she's had a lot of family around her, watching
her grow. A lot of aunts and uncles." Tony smiled softly. "I want to hear some of your Morgan
stories." His eyes darted back to the road. "Later, though."

"Why later?" Steve asked.

"Oh," Tony said, making a sudden right turn, taking them off the main road, "we're going to be a
little busy for the next while, doing something we really do not want to be interrupted for."

"So it's close, where we're going?" Steve had been half-hard since Tony had shown up at his house.
It definitely showed no sign of flagging now at that news.

"It's a prototype cabin I built," Tony explained, "before I built the Stark house. I come up here
occasionally when I need some quiet. I sent ahead, got it aired out."

"Planning ahead, huh?" Steve whistled, his stomach jumbling with instant butterflies of excitement.
"Thought you were gonna get lucky?"

"I'm a Futurist," Tony said, smirking at Steve's reflection in the car mirror before turning his full
attention back to the road. "It's my job to successfully predict the future. Are you going to say I'm
wrong, make me doubt my own capabilities?"

"Sneaky," Steve chastises. "Of course not. I'm totally easy, for you." He widened his legs and
smiled when Tony cursed under his breath and started to drive faster.

The cabin wasn't too much further, which was probably good for their safety, because Tony was
nearly vibrating by the time he pulled the car up in front of what looked like a smaller version of
Tony's home with fewer windows.

Tony killed the engine and hopped out, picking his bag out of the back-seat and hurrying Steve on
with his words. Steve was already hard before they got to the front door, anticipation driving him
crazy; he could see Tony's nerves in the way Tony uneasily adjusted his weight on the spot as he
keyed in a number into the security pad on the front door. Steve was nervous too, in a good way. It
was one more thing that he and Tony were together in.

Tony kicked the door closed behind them and threw a bag in the corner before turning and taking
Steve's face in both hands, kissing him firmly before Steve could even say anything about how
nice the one-room cabin was. It was pleasant enough—a small kitchenette in the corner, a door
slightly open to a small bathroom, and a TV in one corner with chairs and couches. Steve's
attention was drawn to the big bed in the far corner of the room, invitingly dressed in plain sheets
and plump pillows.
But his attention was drawn more to the man in his arms, and Steve slipped his arms around Tony's waist and tugged him in closer.

The kiss was plausibly tame for a few seconds, could be construed as a greeting, or just hello, there you are, but that didn't last long for either of them. Steve was panting by the time he pulled back, and Tony's eyes were almost wild.

"I'm not being presumptuous about this, am I?" Tony asked, smoothing his thumb down Steve's cheek, gaze darkening as Steve shuddered a little from the touch.

Steve shook his head. "Absolutely not," he promised, sliding his hands down to grope Tony's ass in punctuation.

Tony unwrapped Steve from his clothes like he was unwrapping a gift, pausing to kiss him in-between every small portion of clothes removal.

Steve let Tony get as far as leaving him shirtless before he couldn't help himself; he dropped to his knees, desperate to see Tony, to see all of him, and to see if Tony would look at him the same way as he did last time he went to his knees. Tony did, making a keening noise that made something in Steve's chest flutter desperately. Steve's hands shook when he started to reverently peel down Tony's pants, pausing to press kisses against the strong muscles revealed with each small tug.

Tony was planning this, because he wasn't wearing underwear, so his erection was almost immediately freed by Steve's motions. Tony looked down at him, biting at his lower lip as Steve continued to slowly peel the pants away, ignoring the substantial evidence of Tony's arousal in favor of continuing to press gentle kisses down those beautiful legs that had carried Tony so far, that had supported Iron Man through hundreds of amazing battles.

Tony helped Steve, lifting up his feet so he could step out of the material, and Steve's hands pressed to the back of Tony's thighs, tugging him in closer to mouth against the firm skin. Steve trailed his kisses closer to his destination. He batted at Tony's t-shirt until Tony got the picture and pulled that off, and Steve drunk in the sight eagerly. This was like a thousand of his best wet dreams all in one go. Tony's body was insanely attractive; his muscles still golden from the arena suns and unbelievable defined. His stomach was firm and Steve's gaze caught on the slim dark trail of hair that led southward and his breath quickened. He hadn't gotten enough time in the arena to admire the view and by goodness, he was rectifying that now, even though his own erection was already pounding and painful with it. Tony's cock stood straight and proud out from a nest of dark curls; he looked achingly hard, the shaft swollen and reddened, a pearl of moisture already glistening at the tip.

It was funny. Steve was the one on his knees, but as he looked up at Tony, he was the one who felt powerful.

He couldn't wait. He needed to taste Tony again. Steve moved in slowly and licked, taking his time, the time they couldn't afford last they did this. Tony's fluid spread on his tongue like liquid satin and the flavor washed through Steve like a flood; it was a little salty and a little sweet, all at once, and it was thicker than Steve's used to from his own emissions. He immediately wanted another taste and Tony let out a noise that was almost addictive.

"I need—" Tony started and failed to find the word, which was ridiculously hot, because when was Tony Stark ever lost for words? Steve was the one who did that to him. Power was right. "Something."
Steve took pity on him and slid his hand up, taking a moment to find the right angle; he gently closed his fingers over the heated shaft and tugged a little, but it was too dry. Steve removed his hand and licked his palm; when he closed it back around Tony's shaft, it was easy to slide it back and forth, torturously slow.

Tony opened his mouth to say something but then whatever it was caught in his throat as Steve closed his mouth over the end of Tony's penis; he sucked it carefully, flattening his tongue under the head and being cautious not to take too much too quickly. He had time today, and he planned to use it. He took it a little deeper, thrilling at the way he felt; his right hand moved almost on autopilot, keeping up a slow and steady rhythm on the base of the shaft.

Steve's left hand slipped behind Tony, gripping on to keep his balance, and when Steve realized his hand was on Tony's ass cheek, Steve moaned, even though his mouth was still occupied; the reverberation of that seemed to do something to Tony, because Tony let out a strangled noise that went straight to Steve's erection, and Tony's cock seemed impossibly to harden within the heat of Steve's mouth.

This whole combination of sensations was too heady; Steve bobbed his head as slowly as he could bear to, the rhythm smooth and steady. A little more of Tony's sweet fluid filled his mouth and he lapped it up eagerly. Steve pulled off with a sucking noise that made him blush; as he fought to regain his breath, his right hand continued idling up and down the heated flesh. Tony bent down, put a hand under Steve's chin and kissed him thoroughly, even though Steve's mouth was lit up with Tony's intimate taste.

Tony dragged Steve up to his feet; Steve tried to protest that he wasn't done.

"Any more of that and the night will be over before it's begun," Tony said, kissing Steve thoroughly before he could protest, cupping his face with both hands. Steve kissed back helplessly, so caught up in the swell of it that he barely even noticed when Tony's clever hands moved from his face to Steve's waist, tugging at the rest of Steve's clothing.

Tony nudged Steve over to the large bed and Steve went willingly; maybe he was even too pliant about it, because they fell backward onto the soft mattress, and they were both laughing as Tony managed to pull Steve's pants off the rest of the way before pitching them into the corner. Steve reclined, staring up in wonder as Tony adjusted his position over him, smiling in success.

"You're so beautiful," Steve said, stunned into that truth.

The smile in question wobbled a little and Tony raised an eyebrow. "You don't need to flatter me to get me into bed with you. If you hadn't noticed—" he pushed his hips forward, that beautiful erection catching Steve's now-naked skin and they both gasped at that contact "—I'm a sure thing."

"Oh, I know," Steve said, his eyes briefly catching on the smear of liquid on his thigh. He felt hot all over. "I'm just being honest."

Tony's smile was beautiful. He shifted until he was sitting next to Steve, their thighs pressed together, and he turned toward Steve and kissed him again. Steve met each kiss with the same amount of fervor; everywhere their bodies met became sparks and fire.

"How do you want to do this?" Tony asked, in-between hot, lingering kisses that he pressed along Steve's shoulder. Steve shivers with each one. "There are lots of things we can do." One of his hands idled across Steve's chest; his fingertips caught on a nipple and Steve hissed. Tony's eyes brightened and his kisses lowered, before he licked a broad stripe over each of Steve's nipples in turn. Steve pressed his lower arm over his face so he could bite into the skin there, because this
was too much; he was bright and burning all over. "You can fuck me, if you like," Tony said, and Steve's erection jerked between them. "You like that, huh?"

"Hmph," Steve managed, the picture of eloquence.

"Or we can frott. I already know you like that. Rub our bodies together; slow, intimate, torturous —" Tony smiled and surged up to kiss Steve; Steve panted into the kiss, head spinning from all the options. "Maybe you could fuck my thighs. Get them good and wet, go to town."

Steve made a noise he couldn't help as Tony lowered his head to the juncture of Steve's neck and shoulder, and Tony's teeth lightly nipped at the skin there. The bed felt like it was dropping below them, eternally falling in a gravity well of softness. Who knew when they'd have uninterrupted time again to be together, to take their time without the fear of having to stop? Everything Tony listed was a heady option, each one equally alluring. But if this was the only time they would get together in privacy for a while, Steve wanted to remember it. He needed to be able to feel Tony long after this moment had passed.

"I want you inside me," Steve managed, proud he'd figured out how to string a logical sentence together. "If you—if that's something you'd be into—I want—" Apparently that was his quota of coherency done for the moment, but it was enough, because Tony was staring at him with an expression of almost wonder.

"You'd want that, darling?" Tony's hand cupped the visible part of Steve's face, his thumb catching on Steve's mouth.

Steve sucked the pad of it into his mouth, licked at it for a moment before pulling back and looking up at Tony intently. "It's all I can think about."

Tony full-body shuddered, and Steve didn't think his smile had faded since the cabin door had closed. "Well, never let it be said that Tony Stark doesn't know how to make someone's dreams come true. Although in this case—maybe you're the one making my dream come true."

"Hmm. All those adolescent Captain America wet dreams?"

Tony shook his head. "All those very grown-up Steve Rogers ones."

Steve tried to pretend that the keening noise that came out of his mouth wasn't actually him.

Tony lifted up his hand. "Lick these for me," he said, hooking two fingers into Steve's mouth. Steve opened his mouth wider obediently, sucking in the digits, so focused on hollowing out his cheeks that it took his some time to realize Tony was openly staring at him. "Still not tired of doing whatever I ask, huh?"

Steve pulled off Tony's fingers with an audible pop. "Guess it might take a while for the novelty to fade."

That was the point words became a little too difficult, because Tony wrapped his hand around Steve, and Steve gasped, light sparking in the corner of his vision.

Steve had imagined this moment before, a quiet fantasy that had never gone away, but this moment was nothing like Steve had been expecting. He'd imagined calluses, formed from Tony's hands-on approach to engineering, but Tony had been wormed so recently his fingers were still smooth, and Tony kept his grip maddeningly light. If they kept doing this, Steve thought dizzily, Tony's fingers would get more calluses over time. There would always be new things to learn about him, every single day. Steve shuddered, full-body.
Tony paused, but only to lean over and pick up something from the side table. Steve's cheeks felt warm. It was the copious amount of lube that Tony had promised. Tony liberally coated his fingers, keeping his gaze on Steve's the whole time, before he returned to what he was doing. Steve loved how Tony's fingers felt, dragging up and down the length of Steve's cock. Tony was an expert, which was not unexpected; he kept the pressure at the right level, twisting his fingers at the tip, and he kissed Steve throughout. Steve's heart was thundering in his ears, and he reached out, trying to return the favor but Tony shook his head.

"Saving it for you," Tony murmured against Steve's lips. "You're so responsive like this."

"Too responsive?" Steve asked, worried this wasn't as perfect for Tony as it was for him. He gasped as Tony's strokes didn't let up. The sound of Tony's slick fingers around him filled the air; Steve was panting, aware he was aiming for something just out of reach. Everything in him was tightening, his hips trying to jerk upward out of Steve's control; Tony smiled into the next kiss, like that was doing something for him.

"It's not a bad thing at all," Tony assured him. "It feels like you were made for me, somehow."

"Maybe I was," Steve gasped, and came all over Tony's hand. Tony stroked him through it, softer now, smiling as Steve's hips stuttered uncontrollably, as white warmth shot over Tony's hands and Steve's thighs. As Steve trembled, Tony rubbed his clean hand over him, everywhere he could reach.

"I'm right here," Tony said. "I'm not going anywhere." Tony kissed him, on the shoulder, on the stomach, before starting to lap at the fluid on his own hand, holding eye contact with Steve the entire time.

Steve had died more times than he wanted to think about, but he'd never felt so much on the brink until that sight.

"That's probably not on—" Steve inhaled sharply, Tony leaning down to continue the cleanup, chasing the trail on Steve's thigh with the tip of his tongue. "Probably not on the dietician's list of—oh god—of cleared food items."

"I won't tell if you don't," Tony murmured, leaning up and pausing just before Steve's lips, which Steve decided was cruel and unusual punishment. "You okay with kissing me right now, considering?"

Steve surged up and kissed him thoroughly in answer.

"Guess so," Tony said, looking at him curiously. "How do you feel about rimming?"

"Love it both ways," Steve said, and then paused, regretfully. "But I don't want to stop kissing you."

Tony frowned. "They didn't have dental dams in your alternate timeline?"

Steve blinked. His sex life had died out by the time they were popularized for other things; Steve had relied on condoms with the strangers Peggy brought home for him to blow, and Peggy and he were otherwise monogamous. "Never used one before?"

Tony smiled. "Kind of nice you still have a first for me to share with you. Gotta be rare for someone a hundred years old. Be right back." He quickly pecked Steve on the cheek and rolled off the bed.
Steve admired the view and waited until Tony reached the bag he'd thrown onto the sideboard to say, "Never had a real dick up my ass, either."

Tony promptly lost all concentration and walked into the sideboard. He yelped and looked back over his shoulder. "Really? I didn't—"

"Peggy lived up to her name sometimes. And she liked to bring men home for me to fellate for her entertainment. But this would technically be my first time." Steve smiled slowly, spreading his legs a little, enjoying how Tony visibly swallowed. "You like the thought of that?"

"You are definitely not real," Tony breathed, yanking out a handful of items from his bag and hurling back to the bed, throwing them without care to the bedspread beside Steve before kissing him urgently, like the world would end if he didn't.

Tony ended up coaxing Steve onto his hands and knees, swearing it would be easier on him, and Steve was still in that pliable state where it was so easy to do what Tony said. He knew that honeymoon feeling would fade eventually, but he didn't feel like fighting the sensation now, not when it was rewarding him, over and over. He fought the urge to glance back. Steve had never felt so exposed in front of a single person before, and he'd spent hours standing naked in front of multiple scientists as they tried to twist him into the perfect soldier.

There was more lube, Tony's fingers rubbing it between Steve's cheeks, and it was almost too cold. Steve could feel that intimate part of him clenching almost automatically, desperate for Tony to satisfy the heated itch rising inside him, and he whined audibly when Tony pulled his fingers away.

"Eager," Tony whispered, like he was proud that Steve was like this for him. Steve tried to speak, but it came out as nonsensical syllables, because Tony followed that gentle touch by settling the dental dam over Steve's asshole. When Tony touched his tongue to it, Steve swore he could see stars and he moaned, unable to help it. He wondered briefly how it would feel without the sheet in the way, but honestly, it was almost too much as it was.

"You're ridiculously hot," Tony sighed behind him, before diving in again. Steve tried to form words, to tell Tony how he was feeling, to let him know how amazing Tony was for doing this, how wonderful Steve felt, and how expressly ready he was for more. Steve was so hard again already he was almost in pain. Tony's tongue moved from the opening down to the softer skin below, but he kept lapping in a dizzy rhythm, and Steve's knees felt so weak.

One of Tony's hands cupped Steve's balls, softly rubbing them, and Steve whined again, because that wasn't what he needed. "Slow, sweetheart, it's okay, I've got you. There's no need to rush."

Steve almost cried at that, because he needed something, and he didn't know what it was, only that he needed it now. He felt like he was stuck against a locked door, and he'd been there so long, and there was something on the other side he needed, and Tony had the key to unlock it, he was sure he did. "Please," Steve whispered. He barely recognized his own voice.

"Just gotta warm this up," Tony said from behind him, and then a moment later it was like Steve could breathe again; a small pressure probed at Steve's asshole before barely sliding in, catching on the rim. It must be one of Tony's fingers; the lube wasn't cold this time. Steve shuddered in another breath as Tony's finger slipped in deeper, like it was no effort at all, and oh, yes, this, this was what Steve had so desperately needed. Tony moved his finger in and out, in a mockery of the rhythm Steve was craving. It was the barest of touches and it already felt like Tony was in him so deeply that Steve might never be able to let him go. "That's it, sweetheart. You're so good at this. You're squeezing my finger oh, so right—I don't know if I can even get my cock in you."
"You can," Steve mumbled into his arm. "Please. You can. I need you."

"You're going to be my undoing," Tony murmured, "I can tell."

Steve opened his mouth to say something, to promise that he wouldn't undo Tony, he _couldn't_—but instead he gasped, because there was more lube being pushed into his body, and god, Steve needed to add ass play into his regular masturbatory routine, because this was a brand new world. Tony was circling his finger inside of Steve and it was insane how good it felt.

"Please," Steve sighed, not even knowing what he was asking for anymore. Tony kept up the pressure, slowly moving in and out, fucking Steve with the tip of his finger.

"All right," Tony said, and his voice sounded strained, like Steve was really affecting him, and Steve could hear the foil packet of the condom being torn. "Tell me what to do if this isn't as good for you as it is for me."

Steve, already half out of his mind with pleasure, couldn't believe Tony could be feeling any better than he was. "I will. Just please, get inside me. I need you, Tony."

"Oh my god, you're going to be a hazard to my productivity forever, aren't you?" Tony hummed under his breath. "Don't worry, I'm not complaining." He pulled his finger out and ran a hand down Steve's spine; Steve arched into the touch, desperate for it. "I need you to relax, sweetheart, okay? Listen to the sound of my voice. And don't forget to breathe."

Steve wondered how someone might forget to breathe, and then somehow promptly did so, when there was a pressure against his opening, and Steve thought, _oh, no, maybe this won't work_, but he took a deep breath and thought about relaxing, thought about floating in warm water, and Tony's arms around him, cocooning him, keeping him safe. He thought about how Iron Man always had his back in the arena, always saving him, always there when he needed him the most. That was the thought that did it, somehow, and they both moaned when Tony managed to slide inside.

"Stay there a moment," Steve gasped and Tony obligingly froze, his dick pulsing, just from that small movement into Steve's ass.

Steve hadn't felt anything like this for a long time. It was uncomfortable for a moment, Steve's brain confused by the sensation of something where something normally wasn't. A muscle memory pinged and wanted to push Tony out, but Steve breathed past that, and forced himself to think about how it must look. Steve on his knees, wantonly spread out, begging for it, and Tony _inside_ him, right against Steve, intimate and close. The mental image of Tony's beautiful cock fully sheathed in Steve's welcoming heat was too much to resist. Steve took a deep breath and willed his body to respond, to welcome in the hard, velvet length of Tony's desire that matched his, atom for atom.

"Try moving now," Steve said. Tony hesitated, so Steve pushed back a little.

"Okay, I got it," Tony soothed, and pressed forward gently, not very far.


Tony laughed, but it wasn't a mean laugh. "Should have known you'd be a pushy bottom."

"I'll pushy bottom you," Steve murmured nonsensically, but then ended up mouthing at his own arm again instead, because Tony pushed again, and Steve's body opened up for it, easily, and something jolted around all the fringes of Steve's senses. There was no ozone in his nostrils, so it wasn't Thor somehow interrupting this perfect moment. This electricity was all Tony.
"You're amazing," Tony said, "you're amazing, you have no idea—"

Steve muffled a noise, wanting to deny it, but knowing Tony wouldn't let him. He chose a different word instead. "Please."

"Please what?" Tony asked, his weight briefly settling fully down Steve's back, his voice warm against Steve's neck.

"Fuck me," Steve gasped. "Please, fuck me. Tony. Please."

"Oh, I love how you say my name," Tony lifted up his weight in favor of gripping Steve's waist and slowly pulling back. Steve cried out when Tony pushed back in.

Tony kept his thrusts small and shallow to begin with, and each one was a ruination; Steve was crying out nearly constantly now, he couldn't help it, he barely recognized his own voice ringing in his ears, begging for something he couldn't put into words, he only knew he needed it. The noises they made as their bodies met was almost obscene.

"I wish you could see this," Tony muttered, his words running into each other. "You're glorious, so responsive, and your asshole is so eager, it's demanding I fuck into it, it's pulling me in so deep I don't know if I'll ever want to climb out again. I want to live here now, inside you. Have you any idea how amazing you are?"

Steve pressed his forehead against his arm, shaking his head back and forth, because Tony was the one who was amazing, Tony was the one who saved the universe, and was now taking Steve apart from the inside out. Tony was hitting Steve's prostate with nearly every single devastating short thrust; Steve's vision became whirling stars and darkness. He felt like he was chasing the edge of something important, the edge of a lightning bolt, the blaze of a brand new star, the heat of a forming universe.

"Your voice," Steve gasped, "you have no idea—no idea—"

"Yeah, you like it, huh?" Tony's voice was enveloping him, as much as his cock was claiming him.

"I love it," Steve admitted. "I've always—oh, there, there—do you know how many times I've come thinking about your voice? Your—your hands—"

"Oh wow," Tony breathed. "Yeah, we're going to have some fun times together." He gripped Steve's hips tighter, gaining purchase so he could keep thrusting, deeper now, still rhythmical and unrelenting. They had both suffered to be remade, over and over, and were at the height of physicality from that trauma, and at least it seemed like they were reaping some form of reward for it, because their stamina was far beyond anything either of them had felt before. "Maybe I could make you come, solely from my voice," Tony whispered, his hips snapping forward, Steve's vision a crescendo of fireworks and heat.

But even enhanced stamina couldn't make this moment last forever. Steve slammed his hand into the bed, palm open, before gripping the sheets with his fingers so hard he thought he heard the fabric ripping, which he should be concerned about, but nothing mattered—nothing but the way the universe narrowed down to where he and Tony were connected, in this most primal way.

Steve thought he couldn't possibly feel anything more, and then Tony's hand slipped under their bodies to wrap around his almost forgotten cock, and Steve didn't want this to end, but it was going to, there was no choice but to surrender to where he was, Tony fucking into him with that rhythm as old as time.
Steve's orgasm slammed into him like a sledgehammer, come streaking out of him hard enough to instantly give him a headache, and he was trembling around Tony, squeezing, and he realized Tony was coming too, pulsing inside him, and Steve's only regret was he hadn't asked to forgo the condom, because he suddenly wanted that, Tony's come inside of him, painting him from the inside out. It was too late for tonight, but they had the chance for other nights now, and Steve thrilled at that thought.

Tony's weight collapsed onto Steve; Steve could feel Tony's breaths, his chest rising and falling against Steve's skin, and Steve managed to move enough to tip them both onto their sides.

They both sighed as Tony slowly withdrew. Steve heard the sound of Tony removing the condom, tying it and throwing it in the direction of the trash can. Steve didn't turn to see if Tony hit his mark, because he was too busy turning in Tony's arms to kiss him, urgently, like he might die again if they didn't.

After pulling back, Tony made a noise and then disappeared from the bed for a moment and Steve was stung, did he do something wrong? The worry caught in his throat until Tony's weight hit the bed again, and a warm washcloth moved over Steve's belly. Oh, right. Clean up. That was a very good idea. Tony folded the washcloth over before gently wiping between Steve's legs too, careful and gentle with it, wiping up some of the lube before he threw the washcloth into the dark corner of the room.

Then Tony coaxed Steve up far enough that he could roll the quilt and top-sheet they'd defiled in the process up from the bed and throw it haphazardly to join the washcloth. Neither of them had been clear-headed enough to put towels down first. It left them without any sheets or blankets to snuggle under, but Steve didn't mind. He liked being naked in front of Tony; he loved the way Tony's gaze lingered on his body. Tony settled back down into Steve's arms with an expression that screamed one thing: deep satisfaction.

Tony's hands slipped to Steve's waist and he lazily kissed Steve again, warm and addictive. He pulled back with a smile. "So, Mr. First Time With A Real Dick, how was it for you?"

Steve laughed. "That's the line you're going with?"

"Frankly you're lucky I'm forming faintly coherent syllables after that," Tony said, reaching down to slap Steve's ass.

"It was great," Steve said, honestly. "Couldn't have hoped for better."

"Good," Tony says, and tugged Steve closer again, lazily pressing their mouths together. "I want to kiss you until I forget what it feels like to have my tongue in my own mouth."

"Maybe I should kiss you so you can't say anything else so weird," Steve said, but didn't let Tony's ridiculous line stop him from enjoying the attempt.

Steve's fears about only getting to do one of Tony's suggestions were unfounded. Apparently Tony had meant which one first.

Tony admitted he'd always had a fantasy of Steve holding him up against the wall and fucking him, which led Steve to wonder out loud about the logistics, and five minutes later, Tony's back was high on the wall, his ankles locked around Steve's waist, and he was making wet hitching noises into Steve's neck as Steve thrust up into him, showing him the same lack of mercy that Tony had shown him.
They laid down on the bed to rest a little after that, which led to more kissing, and when Tony reluctantly said he should get home, they somehow ended up fetching towels to lie in before frotting up against each other, murmuring nonsensical words into each other's skin. Tony took them both in hand like he had in the workroom, except this time there was lube, and time, and when Steve came for the fourth time in three hours, because this post-worm refractory thing was wild, he nearly passed out from the wave of pleasure that rushed over him.

They both had to finally concede that fucking Tony's thighs was probably a task for another day, although Steve could already tell how good it would be, to thrust in-between those solid muscles, to kiss Tony's neck, to have so much of their skin pressed up against each other.

Tony laughed. "Fucked-out is a good look on you."

Steve hummed and kissed him, their tongues slipping and catching on each other lazily. "It's better on you."

"Agree to disagree," Tony decided. He sighed. "I almost wish we could stay here forever."

"There's no tools here," Steve pointed out. "You'd be bored sometime in the first four hours."

Tony shot him an askance look. "How dare you, we know how good you are at distracting me." He stared up at the ceiling and his smile was mischievous. "I'd make it at least four and a half hours with your abs to distract me."

"My abs win me an extra thirty minutes?" Steve rolled onto his side and wanted so much his mouth was dry with it to put his hand on Tony's bare stomach, to feel the warmth there, to tangibly experience the slight rise and fall from his breathing. Then he remembered he could. There was no more holding back. There were no secrets left. He smiled as his hand rested where he wanted it to. "What does my ass get me?"

Tony squinted at him. "Four minutes for the left cheek. Maybe three for the right."

"I don't think I want to know your reasoning for that."

"Yes, you do. You like my voice."

Steve flushed. He did. He really did. "I regret telling you that."

"You don't." Tony laced his hands behind his head. "It was after that match with the Devil Hydrasaur and you were covered with goop and honestly, it was a good look on you." He grinned like he could see Steve puff out his cheeks. "I slapped your right ass cheek then, so I need to make it up to the other one."

"That's fair."

"It's patriotic."

"You're patriotic."

"I'm doing Captain America. The only way I could make this more patriotic is if we used the stars and stripes as a bedsheet. Or would covering the flag in Captain America's spooge be considered desecration?"

"I think it might," Steve said. "And I told you, I'm not Captain America." He sighed. "Sam stepped down officially this week and won't take the shield back. He thinks because I picked it up to take
Tony brought his gaze down, distracted temporarily by Steve's hand on his stomach, like he'd somehow only just noticed it, and then he looked up at Steve's face. "Yeah, I've kind of been thinking about staying dead, too."

Steve might never be used to how well Tony was able to read him. "It's tempting, isn't it?" He shrugged. "Even in the other timeline, there were restrictions. Constraints. My hands were tied—"

"There's a thought for later," Tony said, approvingly.

Steve considered that for a moment and felt pleasantly warm. If Tony hadn't already worn him out, the stirring in his loins would have manifested more than an interested twitch. Tony's dark eyes caught that tiny sign, though, which meant there would be a future discussion about it for sure. Steve was looking forward to that conversation. "I guess what I'm trying to say is even all the years I've lived now... I've never really had a choice. What I wanted to do. Who I wanted to be."

"And now we do." Tony looked at Steve, like he was enjoying the view. "I can't imagine you idly sitting by during a crisis. How long did that last when you tried to follow my advice to have a simple life?"

"Not long," Steve admitted.

"We don't have to decide anything right now." Tony shrugged. "But right now, alas, we do have to get up."

"You said that last time," Steve said.

Tony laughed and reluctantly pushed up onto his elbows. "I have to be back before night time. Morgan's been calculating how many bedtime stories I owe her. And someone taught her about interest, so I'm in debt." Tony wrinkled his nose. "I've never been in debt in my life, it stinks."

"You love this kind of debt," Steve corrected him, helping Tony by getting up from the bed and walking out of reach.

"I really kind of do," Tony sighed. He nodded up at Steve. "We'll figure this out."

Steve nodded, charmed merely by how easily Tony used the word we.

The drive back was almost quiet. Steve's body felt pliant, like Tony had managed to fuck all the tension out of him. By the way Tony was humming under his breath, his shoulders loose and his smile light as he drove them back, he could tell he wasn't alone.

Tony drove them home and parked in the garage. They paused outside the small building for Tony to pull the door down, and it locked itself automatically.

Tony cast a glance back at the house and then back at Steve.

"Look," Tony said. "I know I'm not great at this communication thing. And it's gonna take time for us to—to be better at that. To adjust to being together and—balancing out our strengths and weaknesses when we're not on a battlefield. I think we're worth...we're worth that effort. I want to give us the time to try. It's gonna be bumpy as hell, sometimes, but—"

"You want us to be dating, and you're formally asking me to date you instead of assuming it," Steve
finished.

Tony blinked and looked up at Steve. "Exactly. I want us to be dating. And I'm formally asking you to date me instead of assuming it."

Steve would do a surreptitious fist pump later, when no one could see him do it. He winked at Tony for now, trying not to show how thrilled he was to hear it. "I figured that was where that conversation was going."

"You're a little shit, sometimes, Steve Rogers," Tony squinted. "Anyone ever tell you that?"

"I may have heard it before, here or there." As Tony spluttered, Steve shrugged. "No one will believe you, that's the best part."

Tony snorted. "Ha, I'll show everyone the real you. Just give me time."

"That's the plan," Steve leaned in and pressed his mouth to Tony's, enjoying that he could linger over it. "And the answer is yes, I would very much like to date you. And you can have all the time you want."

Tony huffed a laugh. "Be careful promising something like that. I might take all that you have."

"Do you hear me complaining?"

"You're going to be the death of me, Rogers," Tony shook his head.

Steve's smile faded. "I'd rather be the life of you."

Tony inhaled sharply, before surging up to kiss him again, like he couldn't help it. He followed it with a brief brush of lips and then stepped back, like he wouldn't be able to stop touching Steve without the distance.

"You should go tell Morgan her story," Steve said.

"Yeah," Tony nodded. "She keeps asking for stories about Captain America. Apparently you were a little too Iron Man-fixated in the stories you told her."

Steve squinted. "Not the cactus story."

Tony's face fell. "C'mon, that was the best one." When Steve glared and folded his arms, Tony sagged. "Fine. Not the cactus story." He wagged it eyebrows at Steve. "It was a pretty great story."

"Not the best one," Steve said. "Go. I'll see you later."

Tony smiled and, shoving his hands in his pockets like he was scared what he would do with them if he didn't, turned on his heel and disappeared into his house.

Steve watched him go, before turning and heading towards his own home. The cactus story was embarrassing, and Steve didn't doubt Tony would tell Morgan it immediately, and he was resigned to imminently finding a cactus on his doorstep or kitchen table. Tony was wrong, though. It wasn't the best Captain America story.

He thought the best one might be the one where Captain America met Iron Man for the first time. After all, everyone loved a love story. Theirs had a few more ups and downs than most people, but it had all the best elements; heists, heroes, sacrifice, a villain, even an interfering wizard. And hopefully, with time, communication, and effort, it could also have something else fairy tales
usually came with too: a happy ever after.

Except there was one problem: this story might possibly not be a fairy tale.

Steve had read enough fairy tales to his kids to know that fairy tales didn't often come with an insomnia element. Sleeping too much was usually the problem, not being unable to sleep at all.

Maybe it was too early, but Steve didn't have anything else to do, and he hadn't slept without the aid of drugs for days, not for longer than tiny five minute naps that did him very little good at all. He should be able to sleep. He was exhausted. Not even amazing sex with Tony was apparently enough to wear him out. If that couldn't do it, what could?

Steve tried lying down in his bed, but he couldn't get comfortable. He headed back downstairs to his conservatory. The way the moonlight came in through the windows gave the room a dull glow, and the large windows gave the room a lower ambient temperature than the rest of his house. It reminded him of the sleep room in the arena. Maybe that would help? He shook that thought away. Why would that help him get to sleep? The arena had been a nightmare.

He settled down into his usual chair anyway and closed his eyes. He counted to ten and measured his breaths, but now the thought was in his head, it was intrusive, a restless monster that wouldn't let him sleep at all until he faced it head-on. The arena, it whispered, you slept in the arena.

Steve really couldn't sleep now with that thought pushing at him. He tapped his hands against the arm of his chair. Would it really be all that bad, if he...just...recreated that sleep room here? Just a little?

Perhaps it was the sleep deprivation, but it was like the next hour was Steve's body moving on autopilot. He methodically emptied his conservatory of all the furniture. He squeezed his favorite reading chair into the sitting room. He pushed the bookcase up against the dining table in the kitchenette; he rarely used the table anyway, eating on his knees or a fold-up table more often than not. Out in his small tool shed there was still some leftover sand from when he'd re-made Morgan's new sandbox years ago. It took him four trips to lift all the sacks of sand into his house.

The conservatory floor was wooden, polished by Steve's own hands and covered in a soft blue rug that he methodically rolled up and pushed under the dining table. There was an old tarpaulin that was a little too big, but Steve rolled over the edges so it would fit the room, and then he opened the sacks of sand and started to cover the tarp. When he was finished, he rolled the sacks up and added them to the rug under the dining table.

Then without even thinking about it too hard, he kicked off his shoes and curled up on the sand. A long exhale slipped out of him like a relieved sigh. This was it. This was what he'd been missing. A deep contentment settled over him, like a weighted blanket. It was the first time since coming back he felt like he'd be able to sleep for longer than five minutes without drugs being involved. Even though it wasn't late, Steve curled up in the sand and drifted into a light sleep. This. This was almost exactly what he needed. Almost, though, that was the problem. Deep sleep was evasive, but even a light sleep was better than no sleep at all.

It was a shallow enough sleep that all it took was the lightest noise of someone tentatively knocking on his front door to wake him fully. It hadn't been a deep sleep, but it was deep enough to be mildly disorienting, and Steve was up and opening the front door before he had time to think better of it.
It was Tony at his front door, so Steve automatically opened the door and invited him in. It was still weird seeing Tony in color, instead of brown. The crimson jacket he was wearing was probably a muted version of the shade, but it seemed bright to Steve's eyes. It was hard not to smile that Tony was still wearing the same clothes as their afternoon together.

"Hey, I was wondering if—" Tony started, coming past into the main room, and then his lively expression froze. Tony's voice sounded thick when he said, simply, "Steve?

Tony's stunned expression was enough to finally jolt Steve fully awake, and realization of what he'd done hit him. Shame clawed up Steve's throat, that he would even dare do this, that he would replicate the prison Tony had been trapped in. A sight like this would be undeniably traumatic, and Steve felt wrecked by the thought that it was something he'd done that was making Tony relive that horror. The years he was trapped in that place, in what must have felt like an increasingly hopeless situation, thinking no one cared enough to even find the satellite signal, Vision nearly falling completely apart, Natasha breaking down, reliving trauma after trauma, thinking there may never be a way out...

What had Steve even been thinking? There must be something desperately wrong with him, that he needed this.

Tony's eyes flickered from the sand to Steve's worried expression. For a moment, Tony's face was blank, but then it creased, into something else.

"This isn't something I even thought of doing," Tony said, slowly, starting to slide his jacket off, "but I gotta admit, it's a solution."

Steve stared at him, uncomprehending, as Tony toed off his shoes and reached down to peel off his socks. "Tony—" he started, and fell silent. He couldn't find the right words to explain himself.

"I can't sleep either." Tony's voice was wrecked and he straightened up, stepping in closer, and reaching up for Steve's cheek. Tony's fingers were cool as they slipped to the nape of Steve's neck. "I thought some fresh air might help, a little evening walk, but then I saw your house and before I knew it, I was at your door."

Steve shuddered a breath. "I haven't been able to sleep since we got here," he admitted. "I can't get comfortable, anywhere. This was the only thing I could think of." He squeezed his eyes shut. "It's not right, I know it's not right, it's—"

His words were stopped by Tony's mouth. Tony's lips were cool against his, probably from the evening walk he'd just mentioned. Steve's eyes opened warily as Tony pulled back from the kiss.

Tony's smile was almost sad. "Come on," he said softly, drawing Steve's mouth to his for another brief buss before moving his hand down to take Steve's. Tony laced their fingers together and tugged Steve toward the sand. "Let's try and get some sleep."

Steve's throat was too choked up by the understanding on Tony's face and the almost echoing need he saw, reflected in Tony's eyes. Maybe this wasn't the reminder of the trauma Steve was fearing. Maybe it was what Tony needed, too. Steve followed Tony, lying down on the sand, and something jammed in his chest came loose when Tony curled up in his arms, tightly clinging onto him.
"By the way," Tony muttered into Steve's chest, "on the topic of dating and good communication…"

"Yeah?"

"I love you," Tony said. "I figure it's probably a thing we should say more than once. Y'know. Here and there."

Steve's heart did its best to punch him in the chest and he knew he wouldn't be able to start smiling for a long time. "I love you too, Tony. I have for the longest time." All the way through wars, and
chaos, and a whole other lifetime. Steve would let him know that later. Now was for sleep and enjoying the feel of someone in his arms who he loved, who loved him back.

"Good," Tony said, his breathing already slowing, evening out. "That means you might consider petting my hair again."

Steve muffled a laugh in Tony's shoulder but obliged, starting to softly comb his hand through Tony's hair. Tony made a muted noise of pleasure, but didn't say much after that; he was already asleep. Steve smiled down at him, his chest almost exploding from how it felt to have Tony in his arms, close and safe.

Steve had stolen one life for himself already. He'd made as good a shot at it as he could and he would never regret that. Life wasn't like a fairy tale. It wasn't even a book, not really, even if it came in chapters. That life, with Peggy and his children, would always be an important chapter in his story, an important part of him, like all the other things. His name was Steve, he was from Brooklyn, he had sandy hair, he loved to draw, he hated bullies, and he loved Tony Stark.

Now it was time for the next chapter in his life to begin, and in this one, he intended to have Tony by his side for it, as much as possible. If it needed a title, Steve decided he already had the perfect name for it: Together.

Steve must have drifted off to sleep, because Tony woke him up with a shoulder shake that had him blinking awake sluggishly. He was still dozy with sleep deficit, slow from it, and his body felt heavy with fatigue, his legs especially felt as if they'd been weighted down somehow. His vision adjusted to the dim light. Tony was still close to him, curled into Steve's body in a familiar way, and his eyes were bright.

Steve squinted at Tony in the semi-darkness, worried that something was wrong, but Tony put a couple of fingers to Steve's lips and used his other hand to point down at their feet. Oh. He knew those silhouettes. The weight against his legs made sense.

Natasha and Pietro. Steve's breath caught in his throat, choking him up for a second, and Tony's hands looped back into the front of his shirt, squeezing and holding on tight. A part of Steve's brain suddenly said, in a quiet voice, yes and this is what was missing. This was the element that removed the almost from almost what he needed.

This was weird, though, right? This should be weird. Steve exchanged a confused glance with Tony, who stared back. Steve shrugged.

"Are you two okay?" Tony asked, keeping his voice low.

Natasha made a low noise of displeasure, the noise a little hoarse like her throat was dry from sleep. Steve squinted. Maybe the dim light was the oncoming dawn. How long had they been here?

"Couldn't sleep," Pietro said quietly from Natasha's side. "Can't sleep anywhere."

"You did say mi casa es su casa," Natasha mumbled.

"I meant it," Steve said, feeling a little choked up. "Always."

He'd made the offer to nearly every other Avenger. No one ever really took him up on it, besides Bucky occasionally crashing on his couch and Morgan's regular afternoon visits.

"Well, then," Natasha said. "What are you still talking for? Both of you, go the fuck to sleep."
Tony looked at Steve, smiling in a way Steve hadn't seen in any room that didn't have Morgan in it.

"Yes, ma'am," Steve breathed, lighting up with a feeling he couldn't really explain when Natasha put her head down, and Pietro wriggled even closer, now that they were known additions to the sleep pile.

"I just...I couldn't sleep. This is the only place I've been able to sleep since we got back," Natasha admitted.

"Same," Pietro said.

"Yeah," Tony sighed. "Us too."

"Couldn't sleep without you," Natasha murmured, curling in even tighter to Steve's legs, muttering the words directly into his thigh. Steve couldn't help the smile when he heard her breathing level out, and Tony's head lolled onto Steve's chest, and Pietro made that kind of hitching noise which he insisted wasn't a snore, but really did sound like one.

Steve thought about how in the hospital that they'd gravitated to the floor together, and the medical staff had freaked out. He wondered how this would look to someone else, from the outside. Maybe a stranger would find this weird, that they hadn't been able to sleep any other way. Maybe they should try and figure out how to rehabilitate fully, listen to their therapist and put more of an effort into fitting back into social conventions.

The sandy floor was so much better than any mattress Steve had felt since coming back and still, for a moment, it felt like it dropped away beneath him, only Tony's hands balled tightly against his chest as his anchor to reality. Everything dropped away with it. It was like his mind was clear and he could finally breathe.

Maybe a stranger looking in wouldn't understand it, how necessary the other three felt. How this was the first time since coming home he'd really felt a true, bone-deep calm.

They wouldn't understand how important it was that here, in the embrace of the people he loved the most in this world, was one more place Steve's restless monsters could sleep.

There was no way a stranger would be able to understand what they'd been through, together. They wouldn't know how much sense it made that the only place they could find any calm was together. Together had been Steve's guiding star to survive the last battle against Thanos, but why should he stop following that star now? They'd escaped together. Steve supposed they'd have to keep doing things together.

Steve drifted off, briefly waking up again up to a world where he wasn't alone, he wasn't in pain, and Tony Stark wasn't dead. For a moment, while he looked over his friends to check that they were still okay, and his gaze lingered on how beautiful Tony was with his face relaxed by sleep, he wondered if he was dead.

If they had all died in the Negative Zone, in that last, terrible battle, Steve was kind of okay with it. It was possible. His idea of heaven definitely had Tony, Natasha, and Pietro in it. His idea of heaven was somewhere that felt exactly like this. If this was the kind of thing therapy was supposed to fix, Steve didn't care. It didn't feel broken.

Tony stirred a little. Steve watched him patiently, wondering if it was a problem that he couldn't stop staring at him. He may never get over the fact that Tony was alive. Steve was okay with never losing that same dizzying jolt of wonder every time he saw him.
"Whatcha looking at?" Tony murmured, his voice sleep-rough, his eyes still tightly closed.

"Everything," Steve said.

Tony hummed in response and pulled him in closer. Steve closed his eyes, rested his forehead against Tony's, and let sleep take him again. Tony would still be there when he woke up.
It takes a village to raise a child, and a community to write a fic like this. A thousand thank-you's are in order. I apologize deeply if I forget anyone; I loved everyone who helped or supported me on this fic journey.

Thank-you to tanghali who asked me to write this fic when I was too scared and intimidated to. This is for you. <33

Thank-you to bootycap and ishipallthings who let me shout at them about the idea for a solid week after coming out of the theater seeing Endgame.
Thank-you to synteis who for some reason volunteered to beta this fic, and that volunteering occurred after they knew the fic would be over 170k.

Thank-you to Flor and to ha-kko who have been amazing artists to work with and so supportive. And neither of them ran for the hills when I flung a 230k long draft at their beautiful heads.

Thank-you to the Cap IM mods for modding this event. I've always wanted to do this event as a writer so I'm pleased to finally make it happen! (I was reluctant before as I was unsure whether I could make the 25k minimum. Haha. HAHAHA.)

Thank-you to the crew who helped with my outline: athletiger, synetis, ishipallthings, laramara, tanghali, xtaticPearl, bootycap.

Thank-you to everyone on You Gave Me A Home for putting up with my whining and supporting me so so so much. I can't name everyone who had a hand in cheering this fic along because we'd be here for another couple thousand words. I'm sorry this isn't a 616 fic. Next year, hopefully! <33

Thank-you to the WORMS crew: everyone who joined in on the WORMS joke and made it come to life in various different ways. WORMS has long been the codename for this fic, as a nod to the Big Bang guidelines where you keep it mostly secret what you're working on pre-claims, because I don't think anyone would look at my summary and think "hey this must be about worms", so it seemed like a safe codename to pick. (The title also spells out WORMS, but that was a retroactively-occurring joke.) Somehow it degenerated into a joke where my fic must be about 3000 worms in a trench coat that think they're Steve Rogers? (I was referencing my favourite Spider-Man from the Spider-Verse storyline: Spiders-Man, thousands of spiders who think they're Peter Parker; then combined it with Steve's constant idea in the 616 universe that he can disguise himself just by wearing a trenchcoat.) At one point, I needed a melee weapon that Steve could use versus Iron Man, and RowanTree suggested an ice pick. So then the joke further devolved into the idea of Cap-worm having to carry his ice pick in his mouth. Steve is fake dating Tony for part of this fic, so he is worming his way into Tony's affections.

I may have also joked that the following is my actual fic summary: "Steve's having a bad day. He's been turned into a worm and now he has to whack Iron Man with an ice pick. What's next on the menu? Voring Galactus? NAPPING?? This is Steve's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Week as WORM-CAP."

Several people joined in on this joke; thank you so much, Team WORMS! GemAnthony, for the Cap-worm art; Ironlawyer who made and sent me a Cap Worm figurine; Cathalinaheart's WORMS poetry; and s-hylor's art.

Thank-you to everyone who sent me panels from the comics whenever worms reared their wormy heads (there are so many worms in Marvel continuity, woah.)

And thank-you for reading this entire fic! <33333333 I appreciate it more than you know. <3333

My Tumblr Post | Ha-kko's Tumblr Post | Kakushimiko's Tumblr Post

Works inspired by this: Where Our Restless Monsters Sleep [Art] by ha_kko, Art for Where our
Restless Monsters Sleep by KakushiMiko, 3000 worms in a trenchcoat by Cathalinaheart

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!