A Slow and Steady Rush

by msermesth

Summary

Tony watches as Steve blinks, once, twice, five times. Oh. He’s been staring. He wrenches his gaze away to the dartboard on the other side of the bar; his eyes blur with the sudden movement. It’s been a while since he’s been this close to Steve when nothing but conversation had been happening, it makes sense he’d forget his well-honed skill at pretending he isn’t head-over-heels madly in love with him.

That’s just another thing he’s going to have to teach this new body.

Notes

This fic takes place in a nebulous time during Aaron's current run somewhere past War of the Realms and references events from both Avengers and Tony Stark: Iron Man. However, you really shouldn't need to know about those events to understand the fic, at all. The only exception is that you must be aware that Steve is now in possession of this coat. It's a great coat.

Jason Aaron is responsible for the dialogue in the first scene. I lifted it directly from Avengers (2018) #1.

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Tony’s fingertips slip on the cold martini glass holding his cherry-red Shirley Temple, the cold condensation sticking to his fingertips. He picks up the tiny, bright paper umbrella and spins it between his wet fingers. It slips easily around, back and forth, creating a blur of color that draws his eyes from where Steve and Thor are adamantly talking. The world falls away, and he’s anchored only to the now by the twisting wood.

“Times have changed,” Tony says, not sure if he’s been quiet for a few seconds or for a few hours. Time just keeps falling away like this, Tony no longer having the perfect ticking clock programmed in his mind.

“So have we, Tony,” Steve counters, like he isn’t just the same ol’ Cap right now and just about to launch into one of his famous lectures on duty.

Thor’s glass is overflowing, and the smell of whatever beer Thor’s taken a fancy to is now filling Tony’s nostrils. He was never even a beer drinker, but he wants to learn. He tries to shift his focus back to Steve. Tony had built himself a new body and he still couldn’t let go of his old demons. “Then we should recognize when it’s time to step aside.”

“We did that,” Steve tells him. “Now it’s time to step up again. In the way only we can.” Steve’s watching his eyes flutter about the table from the cocktail umbrella to Thor’s beer to the way Steve’s fingers are clenched around the handle of his stein. Steve must know what he’s thinking about. Tony’s not sure if Steve’s grimace is a sign of that.

Tony sighs. How can Steve not get it? “We’re not as special as we used to be.” He spins the cocktail umbrella without thinking about it, just because his body needs to move in some way and Tony only has so much control over the new shell he’s inhabiting.

Steve’s eyes are so close and so blue, they remind Tony of late-night discussions so much like the one they’re locked into now. In the mansion or the tower or in the back of some spaceship; it didn’t matter. Steve always said the world needed the Avengers and Tony always agreed.

If only, this time, Tony could fall into those eyes—and those arms—and believe that the Avengers needed him.

Tony watches as Steve blinks, once, twice, five times. Oh. He’s been staring. He wrenches his gaze away to the dartboard on the other side of the bar; his eyes blur with the sudden movement. It’s been a while since he’s been this close to Steve when nothing but conversation had been happening, it makes sense he’d forget his well-honed skill at pretending he isn’t head-over-heels madly in love with him.

That’s just another thing he’s going to have to teach this new body.

Avengers Mountain can be terribly, terribly cold.
Most of it isn’t. The greatest engineers and architects from Wakanda and Alpha Flight have managed to harness the natural power of the dead Celestial into an effective heating system. When confined to the main areas, most wouldn’t even know they were currently at the North Pole. Unfortunately, Tony’s duties around their headquarters require him to visit parts of the Celestial that don’t have state-of-the-art climate control.

I should have at least brought some gloves, he thinks as he tightens a bolt on their reserve-power generator. His fingers are turning blue.

“You okay, Tony?”

Tony jumps, almost hits his head on the low ceiling, and drops the ice-cold wrench. “I’m fine,” he says on reflex. The concerned voice belongs to Steve. Tony doesn’t want him to worry.

“You’re shivering,” Steve responds and his words are a pin to the balloon of Tony’s appearance of self-control. Steve’s dressed like he knows exactly where he is. Everything about him, including the coat Jan designed, screams cozy. He bends over to pick up the fallen wrench. The pink on his cheeks as he bends over to pick up the wrench becomes him. Tony reluctantly takes it out of his hand; the metal is so cold it feels hot to the touch. Their fingers almost graze each other, a source of fire Tony tries to pretend isn’t there.

“I keep forgetting it’s the North Pole.” Tony vaguely waves at the walls around him.

Something about that is funny to Steve and he doesn’t hide his amused grin. “I can’t say I’ve had the same problem.”

Tony wants nothing more than to curl into that coat. From this distance he can see the tug of the plastic-looking technical fabric it’s made of. Instead he crosses his arms and tucks his hands into his armpits to warm them up. “It’s been a long time since I’ve thought this much about what temperature it is.” He can’t really remember when. Was it before Bleeding Edge? Extremis?

The perfect press of lips that is Steve’s grin falters and Tony wonders if he’s saying too much. He’s managed to keep the downsides of this new, much more fallible shell under wraps. “Here.” Steve pulls out a pair of gloves from the pockets of his coat. “Take these. They got me through Jotunheim, and it was even colder there.”

Tony shakes his head but takes the gloves anyway. They look too thin to be of any use, like the sort of gloves Jarvis would have worn if he was polishing silver. Yet, as they fit around each finger, Tony begins to feel warmth spreading from the pads of each digit and through his hand.

Tony feels the force of Steve’s gaze upon him. The idea of Steve looking at him, seeing him like this, shivering and vulnerable, makes him self-conscious.

“Thank you,” Tony says, his voice far softer than he would ever intend. He’s showing too much of himself like this.

“You could take my coat, too,” Steve offers, the sound of his words somehow echoing Tony’s. He’s surprisingly close, the steam of his breath moist on Tony’s cheek.

Steve looks so warm and comforting. What Tony wouldn’t give to know if his observations were correct. “I don’t need it,” Tony says despite not meaning to do so. Deflection has become second nature to him. “But thanks for the offer.”

Tony must imagine the way Steve’s smile falters, right at the edges of his mouth, because he’s not even allowing himself to look at Steve’s lips. “Well, if you ever need it, you know where to find
“Of course, anytime,” Tony responds, his brain still on autopilot, because he’s not sure if he has the balls to knock on Steve's door and ask for his coat.

Steve steps away and Tony misses him before he’s even left the tiny alcove. His skin is buzzing with pure nervous energy like Steve’s presence was electric. For a moment it seems like a really good idea to run after Steve and stop him and… what? Kiss him? Tell him he loves him?

No. Tony shakes his head and with it rejects the pop-up fantasy that’s taken quick ownership of his brain. He should know better.

The very public failure of eScape keeps Tony even busier than he likes for a few weeks after they beat the Controller.

Normally, Tony would welcome the excuse to keep himself busy. It’s just that now the stress sits a little tighter in his shoulders and his jaw. He feels the stress like he long since thought he didn’t anymore. And even when he isn’t thinking about it, when he’s working with all the bright minds of the R&D team or fixing up the armor or participating in one of T’Challa’s mandatory team-building exercises, it’s there, slowly building.

Maybe this is what it’s like to get older, he thinks as he stands alone in the new workshop of Stark Unlimited, but that isn’t the truth of it. This is what it’s like to wake up in an entirely new body. This is what it’s like to live without Extremis and Bleeding Edge.

Some good ol’ fashioned stress relief is what he needs. A massage would be welcome, but Tony’s still too shaken to spend time with a stranger in such a vulnerable position. Exercise maybe, if he wasn’t just so tired, but his muscles are telling him he hasn’t slept much in the last couple of weeks.

Sleep could work, of course. Tony sinks into the chair beside him. It’s surprisingly quiet in the building this late at night. It’s a Friday, he supposes, people are enjoying themselves. Even Bethany’s not here. With surprise, Tony realizes it’s been a long, long time since he’s been this alone.

He closes his eyes. He hears the whirrs of motors and the soft, almost imperceptible, humming sound of the hologram tech. They’re the sounds of innovation, of hard work, of a job well done.

Still, as Tony takes deep breaths and tries to will his mind to slow down, he can’t just hear the sounds of the lab. His thoughts bounce back-and-forth in his head. Numbers swirl in front of his shut eyelids; there is so much he needs to be doing, so much to fix.

With a sigh he sits up in the chair. There is no way he’s going to be able to sleep like this. He can barely sit still for a few minutes.

It’s too late to be awake, but he’s too wired to sleep, and with the way his brain keeps trying to grasp at worries, he’ll never be of any use if this continues.

The idea pops into his head—there is one thing he could do—and he frowns. Tony sneaks a look at his crotch and despite being alone in the room, feels self-conscious about it. It’s almost been two full months since he returned from his coma in his new body, and he hasn’t had an erection the entire time. There hadn’t been time to get into the mood, hadn’t been anyone around. But now that he has
his mind on it, the invisible absence of any sexual pleasure feels much more enormous than he would have thought.

He tries to conjure up a fantasy—something reliable, something his mind would know enough to respond to. A tried-and-true classic. He leans back in the chair and undoes his own fly just enough that he can reach in and take his own dick in hand. The door of the workshop is locked and it’s late enough that anyone who would bother him would also be forgiving if they found him with his hand down his pants.

In the fantasy, Steve and he have just returned from a nice dinner. Steve would be dressed simply, like he was confident enough to not ask for input from an outside party. He’d be wearing a button-down and fitted slacks, and as they get out of the cab, Tony would be able to tell he showered and shaved right before the date by the softness of Steve’s cheek and the smell of his collar. Steve would follow him into the penthouse, the presence of his body overwhelming him, and Tony would be ticking down the moments until the door would close and he could press Steve against the wall.

In the real world, Tony tries to capitalize on the electric thrill his thoughts are sending to his groin by stroking himself as efficiently as he can. That means tight and quick jerks of his hand, the kind he tended to reserve for instances he’s crunched for time.

Except, this time, he isn’t. He just wants to get hard.

Back in the fantasy, Steve’s putting those lips to good use, kissing down his neck and the skin at his collarbone that becomes more and more available as he plucks down the line of Tony’s shirt buttons. Tony sighs as Steve pushes the shirt past Tony’s shoulders and down his arms. He is just so close and there and Tony can’t avoid running his fingers through Steve’s short, soft hair.

In the fantasy, Steve needs a couple of tries to get the first button of Tony’s fly open. In the fantasy, Tony would be happy to help him slip off his pants.

Yet, in the fantasy, Tony’s dick was still soft.

“Fuck,” Tony grits out through his teeth as reality crashes back into his life. He gives up and stuffs his dick back in his pants. He’s so fucking frustrated. He wants, that’s for sure; the problem isn’t the wanting, it’s that his body won’t get the memo.

This isn’t the only instance he’s been unable to make his body respond in the way he needs it to. Just yesterday, he had been flying through a set of training maneuvers he had developed all the way back during the Extremis era, and right when he was about to finish the third three-sixty turn mid-air, his head spun in a way he hadn’t been expecting. It sent him flying in the opposite direction with nothing to steady himself beside the suit, except, it had been years since he needed the suit to stabilize him. He’d gotten so used to doing that sort of things by feel.

The idea keeps coming in and out of his head, and every time he’s been able to settle the question, it just comes back again—What does it mean to have an entirely different body? Is he really even himself anymore?

The next day comes, and then the day after that, and then many more. They happen just the way they’re supposed to, in order and without significant incident. Tony goes to work, sleeps in his workshop, goes to Avengers’ Mountain, and then sleeps on the couch in the small common room.
It's simple. It's ordinary.

And Tony still feels like he’s outside himself looking in.

Or maybe it’s the other way around. It’s as if he’s somewhere in his body, filling up his hands and his feet and his chest, but not the limbs in between. It’s as if he’s got eyes and ears but no sense of touch, and his brain keeps filling in the blanks of the sensation with memories from long ago.

Except that’s not really like it, at all. Tony can feel the lacquered wood beneath his hands just fine. It’s a bit sticky, catching his fingertips as he moves them across the surface. There’s just something not entirely right.

“Are you paying attention, Iron Man?” T’Challa asks, breaking Tony’s concentration. His eyes snap up from where’s he’s been tracing the wood grain of the table and he sees the rest of the Avengers staring at him with looks on their faces that range between concerned and annoyed.

“Yes,” he responds, but amends it because it’s not true. “No, actually. What were you saying?”

Tony expects T’Challa to continue with whatever he’s talking about, but it’s actually Robbie who says, “I’m worried about my car.”

Tony blinks at that and has nothing to add while the rest of the Avengers discuss the logistics of performing an exorcism on the Hell Charger. He tries as hard as he can manage to pay attention; T’Challa runs a tight ship, and will notice if his mind wanders far.

He kinda succeeds, but mostly because Steve has ideas and is arguing about them animatedly. He clearly cares about Robbie—he’s using his hands and arms to make all of his points, stretching the fabric of his uniform against his bulging arms and chest. His face shines when he’s like this. A little red shows in his cheeks and his eyes get even bluer.

He’s beautiful, Tony thinks and he startles for a moment because it feels like he just said that aloud.

No one around the table notices, however, so maybe he didn’t. It’s just that the thought was so significant, so concrete, that he could have screamed it and it wouldn’t have hit him so hard.

“So, it’s settled?” T’Challa says. Everyone around the table nods in agreement. Tony nods because he’s pretty sure based on context clues and Steve’s self-satisfied smile that he’s just consented to exorcise a car. It’s not really his area of expertise, but he’ll find a way to help.

The rest of the Avengers shuffle out of the room but Tony stays seated out of sheer inertia. He’s tired, more so than he can remember being in a long time, and he knows he has board meetings in New York tomorrow morning. Getting up from the table is the first step in not sleeping all night and then stumbling through tomorrow. As of now, he’s willing to put that step off as long as possible.

“Are you okay?” Steve asks, somewhere behind him.

“I’m okay.” That is if ‘okay’ could mean ‘ready and willing to fall asleep right here’.

Steve takes the seat to Tony’s right. Oh no, Tony thinks. He looks concerned. Tony feels like a burden like this, and he’s too tired to perk up and convince Steve otherwise.

Tony amends his earlier statement. “I’m just tired. Didn’t sleep much last night.” He hopes he sounds convincing.

Lines form between Steve’s eyes as he considers that. “Hot date?” he asks, with no conviction, like
it’s a question he doesn’t want to be asking.

That’s hilarious. “Ha!” Tony croaks involuntarily. “Like I have time for that. The last time I went on a date was…” He trails off, his eyelids too weak to stay open. *Focus*, he tells himself. “Let’s just say it’s been a long time.”

Steve’s doing this odd thing with his face where his eyes go a little wider, like they do when they’re confused. “Oh,” he says, quiet and small, and very un-Steve-like. “You put out that Make-A-Match profile, so I thought you were dating—”

“Huh?” It’s Tony’s turn to be confused. It’s takes him the entirety of ten seconds to remember what Steve’s talking about. “Oh, yeah, right. Make-A-Match. That happened.” It feels like that was years ago.

Steve nods, his jaw tight, as if to silently agree that *yeah, that happened.*

“That was just a thing. We were trying to do a thing, about...a thing.” Tony can remember the details, in a nebulous sort of way, but actually explaining the whole thing sounds like effort he doesn’t have to give. “I should probably take that down.” Tomorrow, though. *He’ll take it down tomorrow.*

“So you’re not…?” Steve doesn’t finish his thought, which leaves Tony to wonder if he means to ask if Tony is seeing someone or wants to see someone or something else Tony can’t even imagine.

He doesn’t ask Steve to clarify; he’s surprisingly comfortable living with the ambiguity.

“Did you even look at the profiles?” Steve asks. His white T-shirt looks so soft. Like a pillow. Tony has to reprimand himself for staring.

“Only while we were trying to catch Sunset red-handed.” Tony shrugs. “Lots of good looking men and women sent me requests. Didn’t even occur to me to follow up.”

He has the strongest impression that he said or didn’t say something important. That idea sits with him and unsettles him while Steve's disturbingly quiet. Tony can’t read his expression. “You look very tired,” Steve says, finally, the topic of Tony’s non-existent love life tabled for another time.

Tony looks at the table in front of him and laughs. “Yeah, I really am.”

Without warning, Steve lifts Tony up by swapping an arm around his shoulders and gingerly guiding him to the Mountain’s common room. Tony's right, Steve’s shirt is very, very soft.

The last thing he remembers that night was settling into his favorite couch. He wakes, wrapped in a throw blanket, just in time for his meeting.

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Tony takes a week off work after that. He technically doesn’t have vacation time because as the head of the company, he’s expected to be always available, but he makes sure everyone knows he’s only to be called when it’s necessary. He then sets up shop at the abandoned Stark International headquarters in Long Island. He brings the most-recent iteration of the Iron Man armor, a week’s worth of frozen pizzas and a bottle of lube in case he could use it to blow off steam.
It’s so odd to schedule a vacation for its actual purpose, and not to mislead villains or step out at Iron Man.

For the first two days, he does little more than sleep and lay in bed while scrolling through non-emergency news stories while eating everything he brought. When he finally has the strength to get out of bed, he orders the fixings for a salad and a bottle of Tums.

He keeps forgetting what it means to have a human body.

After he’s showered and walked around along the path out back and generally feels rested, he sets up a series of instruments he created long ago to test the skills of the armor. One-by-one he performs every maneuver he knows before comparing the results to tests he did years ago. He flies; he flips; he shoots repulsors at a wide range of targets. The numbers are clear—he’s lost much of the responsiveness that he had before. He’s not as fast or as precise.

Dread sinks in. He’s easily distracted, sure, but he knows he hasn’t lost any cognitive ability. His brain is fine, but his body…

Tony calls Steve. With each ring, a plan falls into place.

“How’s your vacation going?” Steve asks before Tony has a chance to say hello.

“It’s fine—” Tony pauses, looks at the screen again, and continues, “—actually I have something I need to talk to you about.”

Silence passes for a couple of beats. “Sure, what do you need?”

“I need to take a break from the Avengers.” The sentence comes out of Tony in one whole breath before he has time to back out and hear anything on the other line which would make him feel like Captain America was disappointed in him.

“That’s…that’s fine. We all need some time off, and I know you were thrown back into the fray pretty quickly after your coma,” Steve says in his most diplomatic voice. “Though, I think this is a conversation you need to have with T’Challa, not me. He’s the leader of—”

“No,” Tony cuts in, too quickly. “You’re the one I want to talk to right now.” He’ll talk to T’Challa and Carol and Thor and the rest of the team soon, but right now he needs Steve. “What was it like,” he asks, the question swirling around his mind, “all those times you lost the serum?”

Steve must not be expecting that question. “Oh. It wasn’t always the same when it happen—”

“The last time, I mean. When you were old.”

“It was…” Steve takes a deep breath. “…strange, I guess. Why’re you asking?"

“I’m experiencing side effects I didn’t expect after I created my new body. I thought I was making myself better, you know, by fixing whatever bugs Extremis and Bleeding Edge and everything else had left behind… except, I might have gone too far.”

“Is something wrong?” Steve’s voice cracks, sounding as worried as Tony felt about the situation when he called.

Hearing that concern in someone else’s voice has a way of putting it in perspective for Tony. It isn’t that bad. Right? “I’m not dying,” he starts, “but I’m noticing some loss in my physical abilities. Stuff like slower reflexes, reduced strength, increased fatigue, you know, baseline human things.” He says
the last part like it’s not that important. He adds in a fake-casual laugh for effect.

“And this has been going on since you woke up?” Steve has a way of asking these sorts of questions that make you think he’s planning something.

“Yeah. It’s taken a while to really figure it out. I knew something was wrong when—”

“Wait,” Steve cuts in to say, abruptly leaving Tony quiet with a simple command. “Are we talking about a permanent leave or just a temporary one?”

Tony tries to think of a way to phrase that that won’t raise alarm but still convey the depths of his worry. “If I can’t respond as fast in the suit then I can’t be Iron Man.” What’s the point? He wants to argue. What’s the point of any of it?

“You were Iron Man back when that meant transistors and extension cords, way back before Extremis and all that. Tony, you don’t—” Steve stops himself from continuing, leaving Tony with a number of ways of finishing Steve’s sentence. “How far away are you?”

Tony’s a little stunned by the shift in conversation. “I’m in Long Island.”

Steve hums, like he’s thinking. The connection is crisp, clear, but it’s still very obvious that it isn’t Steve murmuring in his ear. His presence is more than his voice.

“Where do you want me to be?”

A pause. Clearly more thinking is going on on the other end of the line. “Stay there. I’ll come to you.”

“How far away are you?”

“Huh?” Tony asks, but he gets no explanation. Steve’s hung up without saying goodbye.

Tony has run another series of tests by the time he hears the Quinjet landing outside. Steve, the lone occupant, struts down the stairs in a way that makes Tony very aware of him. Steve’s dressed in his old Commander Rogers regalia, and based on the dirt covering his face and the tears in his uniform, he could have stepped right out of a mission. Tony wonders just what he interrupted.

“Rough night?” Tony asks. He’s looking for particulars and the reassurance that nothing too dangerous had been happening before.

“Maybe for the other guys.” Steve’s grin is just on the line separating sure and cocky, but he straddles it well. Tony feels sorry for whoever had the pleasure of Steve’s time today.

“You gave em’ hell, huh?”

“Nothing too bad.” Tony concludes that Steve’s not diving into details because he’s not concerned with them. Steve’s now right in front of him, so close that Tony can see the threads of his torn collar. “Are you okay?” he asks, sounding so much like he had on the phone, so much like all the times before.

Tony throws caution to the wind. He needed help, he asked for help; Steve’s here, offering help. He’s emboldened in a way he isn’t before. “I am, now that you’re here.”
The facility’s floodlights shine off the strands of Steve’s golden hair. There’s a thing Steve wants to say, and what comes out of his mouth isn’t it. “Any chance you have something else I can wear?”

Tony’s not sure about that. He only brought things for himself, and he’s not sure if any T-shirt he owns is going to survive Steve’s shoulders.

“We’ll figure it out.”

Tony cues up the tests again while Steve disappears for a few minutes for a quick shower. The idea of running through the gauntlet again exhausts him, but Steve should see the problem in order to understand the problem.

“We don’t have to do this tonight,” Steve calls out when he enters the hanger. He’s wearing the sweatpants and Stark Unlimited T-shirt Tony slept in the night before. The pants fit fine if not a little tight around the waist, but the shirt’s cotton is strained. The combat boots he arrived in are also missing, leaving him in only socks.

“No time like the present.” He’s not entirely sure what else they’d do tonight anyway.

Steve’s lips become a fine line but he doesn’t argue.

Tony keys in one of the challenges he was using before. “Let’s start with a classic.” Holographic orbs fill the space. “This is just a basic test. I have to dodge the orbs and shoot them before they shoot me.” Steve’s eyebrows rise, so Tony adds, “It’s all fake. Look here—” On the screen was a line graph with a very stark drop-off. “My peak responsiveness correlates with the debut of the Model 51. That dramatic dip is from today.” Tony swallows around the last couple of words. It looks so scary seeing it like that.

The warmth of Steve’s heavy hand on his shoulder nudges him out of that thought. “That’s still impressive,” Steve says, in a way that makes it sound like he’s really analyzing the numbers in front of him.

“That’s not the worst of it,” Tony adds, abruptly, without even meaning to do so. This is the part he was meaning to keep to himself, the part that made him feel strange. “This is only the part I can quantify.” Tony lifts up his hand and feels a faint, almost imperceptible, lag between when he feels his fingers move and when he sees it. “It’s not just when I’m Iron Man. All the time, every day since I woke up from the coma, I’ve felt like I’m not of my body, just inhabiting it. All my senses don’t line up. I no longer perceive the world around me in the way that my senses are used to processing.”

He looks at Steve and hopes that he can understand. If anyone could, it would have to be Steve, right?

He continues when Steve only offers comfort with his eyes and not his words. “Sure, I’m more tired and slower and all that. I could design around that, though. I guess I’m just not sure if I’m in the right body at all.”

There’s a look in Steve’s eye; it’s a question he can’t say out loud. But it’s there, waiting to be asked. “Let me see the test,” he says, kindly.

Tony nods once. His shoulders are tight. Now that he’s confessed what he’s thinking, the room feels
smaller and Steve, closer. With a thought he summons the armor and cages himself within metal.

The HUD lights up across his field of vision. The readouts are blurs of bright colors as he moves his head from side to side. Trying to focus on one thing just makes it harder to see the rest, but he tries. He hears a _ting_ telling him the test is ready, and he gently flies himself up and away from Steve.

A golden orb appears only feet away from him. In a matter of seconds, it’s glowing, brighter and brighter, giving Tony almost no time at all to shoot it with a repulsor blast before it shoots him. He succeeds, but with only a little bit of time to prepare for the next one that appears behind him. The golden orbs begin to smooth into each other until the brightening light of them knits together, until there is more light in his vision than the warehouse.

A grunt in a voice that is not his own breaks him out of his thoughts. He looks down right at the moment his armor vibrates to signal that he’s been hit by one of the orbs. The holograms fade away and leaves him the clarity to see the grunt came from Steve, who’s lying face down on the concrete floor.

_No, no, no, no, no..._

Tony’s on the ground before Steve begins to push himself up. “Are you okay?” he asks as he sees Steve smile when Tony offers him a gauntleted hand.

“’M good. Been a while since I’ve been hit with a repulsor blast,” he replies with no accusation in his voice. Tony’s breath catches—he’s been careless, shooting indiscriminately around the workshop without thinking it through. Steve’s on his feet easily, but Tony still winces as Steve stretches his back out.

“I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

Steve raises a hand to silently cut him off. “No need to apologize. It’s training. It’s what we do.” He looks past Tony’s shoulder to the computer screens displaying the exercise’s results and frowns. “How’d that feel?” he asks.

Tony looks behind him to see the trend line documenting his response times. He sighs; it’s the lowest score, yet. “It felt...wrong. I could barely keep up.” He looks back at Steve’s worried face. He doesn’t want to ask the question, it feels too much like defeat, but— “What am I going to do?”

For a few seconds, Tony's worried that Steve’s going to tell him _I don’t know_ because that’s what it looks like on his face. He’s not sure he could handle hearing it. “We’ll figure it out,” Steve says instead and it’s not really a much more reassuring answer.

Tony steps away. He’s so tired. He just wishes he wasn't so goddamn tired all the time.

Steve grabs him by the shoulder before he can get far away.

The world stands still, but Tony’s mind is jumping from detail to detail—the pressure of Steve’s grip, the space where his white shirt is stretched over his upper arm, and the way his jaw is tense, his lips almost in a smile. “Steve—”

Steve uses his hold to pull Tony a little closer, the momentum of it enough that Steve’s lips crash into his, and oh shit, this has to be an accident, Steve wouldn’t mean—but he must, his mouth opens, and they’re kissing.

They’re definitely kissing.
Without a doubt, Steve is kissing Tony.

(Tony winds his fingers through Steve’s hair just to make sure.)

Steve’s not shy; he kisses like he doesn’t want Tony to forget him and Tony holds on like he never will. He tastes like that electrolyte gel he only drinks after big fights, he smells sharp like a generic brand of soap, and from this close Tony can feel the lingering dampness in his hair from an earlier shower.

Tony just feels him all around, from the way one hand fits perfectly against the small of his back to the other that’s still awkwardly clasped on his shoulder. It’s enveloping, every sense completely overtaken by the thought of Steve, like Steve could absorb him into his very self. He goes freely as Steve walks him slowly backward into the computer console.

“Umph,” Tony grunts as he hits the aluminum. Steve doesn’t break a sweat, just gently fits his hands around the back of Tony’s thighs and lifts him enough until Tony sits with his butt on the metal and his legs wrapped around Steve’s. It’s cold and a shiver goes up Tony’s spine; a shiver which leads him to hold on to Steve tighter for all of his warmth.

“We’re going to figure it out,” Steve mumbles into the corner of Tony’s mouth. “I promise.”

Tony’s forehead drops to Steve’s chest. The weave of the simple cotton shirt scratches his skin; it’s not nearly as soft as it looks. “You can’t promise that.”

Steve places his two hands on either side of Tony’s head, fingers splayed wide to tip his head up so they’re looking eye-to-eye. “You’re Tony Stark. You make the impossible happen.”

That faith shakes Tony past his physical body; it sinks through the skin and the muscles and the bone until it hits his very soul. “Do you think it’s going to be impossible?” he asks, half in jest and half in fear.

Sweetly, softly, Steve shakes his head. “No, I don’t.”

They kiss, and Tony’s not sure who initiates it.

“Maybe it’s time to get back to basics,” Steve says. He’s washing his cereal bowl in the warehouse’s tiny kitchen while Tony watches how the chilly morning light floods through the windows. All they did last night was sleep, but Tony still has that giddy and nervous after-sex feeling, like he’s supposed to be trying for a second date with the man he’s known most of his adult life. “Want to focus on hand-to-hand techniques today?”

Tony nods. It feels like starting at the beginning, and that’s discouraging, but Steve doesn’t look daunted. He has a plan. Tony can do a plan.

He expects to follow Steve to the warehouse, but instead Steve takes him to one of the offices on the first floor. It’s empty, having been stripped when they moved to Manhattan, but the carpet is still on the floor. Tony supposes that’s why Steve has chosen this space.

With the enthusiasm of his much younger self, Tony begins to stretch out his muscles, naming each one as he does and trying to remember they’re all a part of him. It’s been months, but the feeling that
he’s a foreigner in his own body still creeps up whenever he has to interact with it. “How do we start?” he asks as he assumes a fighting stance.

Steve mirrors his position. “With the basics,” he responds before his aims a high kick to Tony’s right shoulder. Tony evades with a rolling crouch that sends the room spinning, but he manages to get up and on to his feet in enough time to block Steve’s left hook.

*Basics, huh?* Tony thinks as Steve continues to attack. Steve manages to land a few hits, but Tony’s still surprised at how much he’s able to evade. The old rhythm of sparring together builds with every second. Tony knows Steve’s pulling his punches, but he isn’t slowing down, and after not too long Tony’s sweating and exhilarated. The room’s walls and carpet fall out of his mind—there is only the fight, and Steve, lit through the window’s sunlight.

Tony’s missed this. His stamina is not where it used to be, but it still feels exhilarating to move, to respond and to think, and to know Steve thinks he can do this. He doesn’t want it to stop—

—Until it does. Steve has him on his back with a maneuver that anyone who appreciates hand-to-hand combat would call ‘inspired’.

Tony opens his eyes to see Steve’s hand reaching for his. “Ouch,” Tony grumbles as he takes Steve’s hand, more because he needs something to say than because he actually hurts.

The power of Steve’s arm as he drags Tony to his feet is enough to inspire him to fight again. “Hope I didn’t hit you too hard,” Steve says, his tone genuine. “You’re doing good. Better than you’re giving yourself credit for.”

Tony really doubts that, but he nods, because it’s a nice thing to hear coming from Steve’s flushed lips. “Want to go again?”

“Naw.”

Tony frowns. He hasn’t planned anything for the rest of the day. “Then what do you want to do?”

“Uhm.” Steve swallows, and his throat works in a way that’s hard to ignore. “Actually, maybe, there might be something we could be—” His eyes dart across the room, looking everywhere except...oh.

Tony knows it’s there only for a split second before he sees it, but the visual confirmation is good. He’s sporting an erection that’s clearly registering as a tent in his sweatpants. The sight stuns him; it’s been a very long time since he’s been hard.

“IT’S BACK!” Tony shouts.

Then Steve makes a little sound in the back of his throat and Tony remembers he’s not alone.

He looks up at Steve, but he’s unable to meet his eyes. “I mean—”

Steve doesn’t let him finish. His back presses against the wall the very moment his lips press against Steve’s mouth and his hard dick presses against Steve’s thigh.

He groans, but the sound is muffled by Steve’s lips. Steve’s leg presses in closer and Tony’s hands go from Steve’s chest to his back to the firm curve of his ass.

“Want to—” Steve begins to ask before Tony cuts him off with a kiss. He both knows and doesn’t know what Steve’s asking, but he answers by grabbing Steve’s hand and walking them both backwards out of the room.
Somehow, even if their clothes form a breadcrumb trail in their wake, their bodies make it to the bed without hitting too many walls. Steve has somehow managed the art of being *there, everywhere*—his hands, his sweat, his hair, his lips brush against Tony with every step. All Tony knows is that it’s Steve touching him, and it’s what he’s been waiting for.

His calves bump the mattress and alert him that, while being vertical is great, being horizontal is also an intriguing idea and one he should be pursuing. With a hand gripping each bicep, he pulls Steve down onto the mattress with him. It bounces like it’s going to break, and the two of them still, waiting for something to happen.

It seems like now is the moment where Tony’s supposed to ask *what the hell is going on?*, but Steve’s looking into his eyes, all wonder and awe, like it’s an answer to that very question. That’s why Tony tilts his head up and pulls Steve down so they can kiss.

It starts softly, gently, as Tony runs his fingers down the ridges of Steve’s muscles and along the knobs of his spine, pass the valley of his lower back and the jut of his hip bones. He takes the time to feel everything before him, everything he always longed to touch but never did.

“Oh,” Steve sighs when Tony’s fingers find his already firm nipple. He breaks the kiss to look down and see its dusty pink color. Steve’s breath becomes noticeably faster, harder, and that does things to Tony.

With a shove, he pushes Steve away enough so that he can then tilt him back on the bed and then underneath him. On top, he has a much better view of Steve’s body. The only light in the room is the sunlight streaming in through the dusty window, casting a dim glow on Steve’s sweat-damp skin. The colors of the room are all muted, shaded with gray, but somehow still vibrant and memorable to Tony’s new eyes. There is a rich depth to the yellow of Steve’s hair and his blue eyes and even the shadow emphasizing the erection in his briefs.

He looks, and looks, and looks—

“Tony?” Steve asks.

That broke him out of his stupor. “Huh?”

Steve rubs his hand up and down Tony’s arm—a comforting gesture, not a sexual one. “You got all quiet and still. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Tony says, on autopilot. But he’s trying to do that a little less, so he amends it with, “I just got distracted taking in the view.”

He commits the smile that brings Steve to memory. “The view from down here isn’t too bad, either.” Steve looks like he means it; his eyes are big and entranced and watching.

Tony traces his finger down the center of Steve’s chest and sees him shiver, feels it under his skin. Delicately, he explores the line between the band of Steve’s briefs and his body, all while counting Steve’s breaths. He hooks a finger beneath the cotton and listens intently for the exact moment Steve’s breath becomes a gasp. *Good,* he thinks, but it’s more than good. It’s every fantasy he’s ever had before, even if the light is a little off and his muscles are sore and instead of the Quinjet or the penthouse, it’s here.

“Is this okay?” he asks.

A second stretches between the question and the answer.
“Yes, please.” And as if that is not eager enough, Steve lifts his hips and begins to pull down his own briefs.

Tony stops him so that he can do it himself, dragging them down Steve’s legs far enough so that Steve can kick them off his feet. No longer distracted by the moving of fabric, he can look, really look, at Steve’s cock. “Yes, please,” Tony says to himself as his hand wraps around it and watches Steve’s eyes shut and his breath go ragged.

He’s beautiful like this. The sheen of sweat covering his skin glows, highlighting the straining muscles of his body. Tony commits it all to memory—not just the way he looks, but:

The way he sounds, like he’s holding back even louder gasps.

The way he smells, exercise and the soap Tony keeps stashed in the shower.

The way he feels. The soft, delicate skin over his hard cock.

There is so much to take in. The feeling that washes over Tony is akin to intoxication, but different in a crucial way. Instead of feeling like he’s lost control, he’s gained it.

He strokes Steve, taking care to find the technique that leads to Steve gripping the sheets. “Is that good?” he asks, more because he needs something to say; Steve’s response tells him enough about how good it is.

Steve grips Tony’s shoulder and pulls him down into a kiss. Tony doesn’t let up on his touch—he likes the way Steve breathes against his lips—and Steve doesn’t stop him. All he does is slip his own hand below the band of Tony’s boxers.

Tony discovers he’s not nearly as quiet as Steve when Steve’s hand finds his dick.

The kissing stops; Tony’s too compelled to speak. “Fuck,” he says. “Fuck, that feels good.”

Steve chuckles. “That’s the point.”

Tony’s sure he can’t actually feel every ridge of Steve’s fingerprints, but it really does feel that way as they glide against his dick. Steve takes it slow. It highlights every move of his wrist and every time his thumb slides against the slit. “I forgot,” Tony confesses as the realization hits him. “I forgot how good that feels.”

“I’m glad,” Steve tells him, but he kisses Tony like that’s an inadequate way to express what he’s thinking. “Do you have a preference?”

‘Preference’ seems to indicate that Steve’s talking about anal. It takes a few seconds for that to sink in for Tony, and then a few seconds more to remember he packed lube.

Tony breaks the kiss and stills his hand. Steve’s eyes are so blue. And perhaps Tony isn’t imagining the fear in them. “I don’t mind either way,” he says, dreading that there might be a wrong answer.

Steve squints. Maybe that was the wrong answer. “We don’t have to, if there is something else—”

Tony shuts him up with a kiss. Don’t overthink it, he tells himself. Be honest.

“Can I fuck you?” Tony asks, and once he asks it, he knows that he means it by the way the question goes right down to his dick.

Steve pulls him into a punishing kiss. “Yes,” he says against Tony’s lips. “Yes, yes, yes.” He pulls
down Tony’s boxers so that Tony’s dick is now rubbing against Steve’s thigh. “Do you have any —?”

Tony nods and regretfully pushes himself out of the bed. “One second,” he says, and he walks backwards to where this suitcase is stashed near the wall. Rummaging through it while keeping his eyes on Steve is difficult, but he finds the familiar small and heavy plastic bottle.

Steve’s watching him the whole time, eyes lidded and face flushed, his cock heavy against his stomach. *I know what that feels like,* Tony tells himself as he takes in the sight. He feels incredibly lucky to see Steve smiling, to know he played a part in that smile.

The mattress dips while he situates himself on the bed as Steve hitches up his feet and spreads his legs. Tony drips more than enough lube onto his hand and rubs Steve’s thigh in reassurance. “Are you ready?”

Steve strokes his cheek. There’s so much affection in the gesture that Tony blushes. “I’ve been ready for fifteen years,” Steve says without bite.

Surprise washes over Tony. That’s something they’ll have to talk about later. “Me, too.” As tenderly as Steve is touching him, Tony presses his lubed fingers to Steve’s rim. He applies as little pressure as he can, letting the moment one finger slips inside happen naturally. Inside, Steve is warm and soft. “That okay?” he asks, gently pushing further in.

“Yeah.” Steve’s breathing is controlled. Tony uses his free hand to tug at Steve’s cock, just enough to get him gasping again.

Then it’s another finger. *Easy,* he tells himself. They have all the time in the world. In and out, he goes, feeling the way his lubed fingers move with Steve’s breaths. He moves deeper in and presses up to try to find a bundle of nerves that will make this so much better.

He finds it. “Yes,” Steve mutters. Tony applies pressure to the area and watches as Steve’s chest heaves and his hand reaches for something to grip on to. It’s a good look on Steve, and it’s one that heightens Tony’s desire, sending electric pulses down Tony’s body and to the tip of his cock. It feels terribly untouched, like his sheer need to be inside Steve could kill him.

He adds a third finger, but even slower this time. *All the time in the world,* he keeps telling himself. It’s a good lie, one he can almost convince himself of. “Do you think…” he begins to ask when he’s not sure he can wait anymore.

“Yes, Tony.” Steve’s adamant. “I would really like you to fuck me. Right now.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Tony repeats. Steve strains to keep his legs parted and in the air while Tony pours more lube and positions himself. He plants a small kiss to Steve’s lips and guides the tip of his cock past Steve’s rim. “That’s...wow.” He pushes in, slowly, savoring every second. The warmth, the tightness, the entirety of the sensation spreads throughout his body.

Steve wraps his legs around Tony and hooks his ankles around Tony’s hips, tugging him even closer until every inch of Tony feels every inch Steve has to give.

“You’re...Steve...You’re...I can’t even—”

Steve kisses him on the cheek, and then he says, his breath warm against Tony’s ear, “Trust me—*oh*—I feel the same—*yes*—way.”

“Okay.” Tony’s sure that can’t be true, but Steve’s doing such a great job of convincing him. “I’m
“That’d be nice,” Steve says. Tony chuckles.

It definitely is very nice. Tony starts slow. His nerves are on fire, every sensation dialed up to ten. It’s all so overwhelming he shuts his eyes tight just so he can focus on how it all feels.

He can only go so slow for so long, however. The want that had been so dormant within has been lit with a fury that Tony can’t describe. Steve’s kissing his face, his lips, saying things in his ears that don’t make much sense.

He hears “don’t stop,” and “please, harder,” and “don’t hold back,” but it can’t be right. He focuses on keeping a rhythm, on keeping it together, on not letting go.

He focuses on maintaining something that at least looks like control.

“Tony,” he hears. “Tony, is something wrong?”

He stills instantly. “What?”

“Is something wrong?” Steve repeats. “It started to seem like you disappeared.”

_Breathe, Tony thinks. You’re supposed to breathe._ “I’m right here.” His heart is beating out of his chest, and Steve’s still warm below and around him.

“I know that.” Steve clenches around his cock in a challenge that makes Tony see stars. “It’s just...you don’t have to impress me. I feel like you’re trying to impress me.”

Tony’s forehead drops to Steve’s shoulder. “I’ve got a reputation to maintain,” he says. He’s not sure what Steve’s getting at.

Steve threads his fingers through Tony’s hair and pulls Tony up to kiss him. “I don’t care about that. I care about you,” he mumbles against Tony’s lips. “And I want to see what you look like when you’re enjoying yourself.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” It could all go wrong.

“Naw, it’s a great idea.” Steve spreads his thighs even further apart and lifts one leg in the air so he can grip it by the ankle. His other hand grabs onto the pillow behind him. His stomach is smeared with the pre-cum that’s leaking out of his cock, and the rest of his skin is damp with sweat. He’s Grade-A spank bank material. “Trust me, Tony. You can let go.”

Maybe Tony isn’t supposed to say no to this. “Okay,” he says under his breath as he realigns himself above Steve.

Steve smiles in a way that doesn’t look related to the dick in his ass.

He starts fucking Steve slowly, deliberately with his mind tuned into every glide of his cock as it moved within Steve. With every thrust, he catalogs the different sensations—the cotton sheet beneath his hand and Steve’s smell and obscene mix of sounds filling the room. Steve’s not saying anything out loud, but he grunts every time Tony bottoms out and exhales as Tony’s cock slips away.

The next time Tony is going to show him how good of a lover he can be, because there is definitely going to be a next time, but for now he doesn’t fight the pleasure that’s reaching throughout his body and building where he meets Steve. The want is no longer just about wanting. Now, he can have.
A sequence of nonsense phrases flows from his lips. He praises Steve and Steve tightens around him and grips the pillow even harder. In this position, with Steve spread so open, Tony finds no impediments between them.

He fucks Steve like he’s been dreaming about doing it for more than a decade. The smooth thrusts grow erratic and uncoordinated. If he’s following a rhythm, it’s nothing he knows.

“Steve, you’re so good.” He wraps his hand around Steve’s cock and revels in the deep moans that elicits. He’s so close.

“Are you going to come for me?” Steve asks him and clenches on his dick.

Tony tries to balance jacking Steve off while maintaining his thrusts. Sheer need keeps him going. “Yeah...fuck...yeah, I think—”

Steve pulls him into an uncoordinated kiss. “Tony,” he whispers against Tony’s mouth.

Tony comes three quick thrusts later while calling Steve’s name.

Steve comes two thrusts after that.

Tony has no qualms about settling into his come-covered chest while Steve wraps his arms around him. Below him, Steve's chest heaves with the effort of filling his lungs and Tony listens to his heartbeat.

"We're going to do that again, right?" Tony asks. His eyes are softly focusing on the window pane.

Steve presses a light kiss to Tony's hair. "I was counting on it."

That sinks in, in dribs and drabs, timed to Steve's breaths, but he still needs to know. "Was it good?"

Tony lifts his head to see Steve's eyes scrunch. "Was it..." Steve shakes his head. "It was perfect."

"I'll be more perfect next time." A promise. In case Steve needs it.

"Mmmhmm," Steve hums.

The room is peacefully quiet. A sense of calm and relaxation fills the room.

"How do you feel?" Tony asks. Not because he needs to fill the silence. Just because he wants to ask it.

Steve stretches below him, each muscle working as his arms and legs find a more comfortable position. "Good. Better than I have in a long time."

Tony asks for more information with a look, not a question.

"Losing the serum was hard, but getting it back...getting my body back, getting my self back, that was harder. It's still hard, I guess." Steve pushes a strand of hair out of Tony's face. "I kept trying to use my body like I did before, but there were so many times I forgot my strength, it overcompensated my control of it, and I learned, step by step, I was using a different body than before." He smiles. "And that was okay. I'm still me, after all."

"Steve, you're always going to be you." Tony kisses his temple, and then his cheek, and then his lips.
“That’s my point.” Steve’s staring up at him.

Oh. “Please tell me you didn’t sleep with me to teach me a lesson.”

Steve laughs and shakes his head. “No. I slept with you because I’ve been wanting to for a very, very long time. I am just, right now, seeing the connection.” He tilts Tony’s face so that Tony can’t avoid looking into his eyes. “Actually, I was going to say it might be a long time before you feel back to normal. But I know you’re going to do it.”

“Why?” Tony asks.

“Because you’re still you.”

Tony’s struck silent by the true depth of Steve’s conviction. He sinks into Steve’s arms. Time becomes measured only by Steve’s heartbeats. He finally says what he had been meaning to. “We need to talk about the whole ‘wanting to fuck for years’ thing.”

“Oh, we’re going to talk.” Steve shifts his weight so that he’s leaning on his elbows, straining his come-covered stomach. “Just after we shower.”

End Notes

For the longest time this fic was titled "Needs a Name", and then Breathe by Faith Hill came on the radio just days before I posted it and I found exactly what I needed.

This fic has a tumblr post!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!