A Higher Form of War
by sabrecmc

Summary

Tony is a King with a surprising number of people out to kill him. Steve and the rest of the Avengers are fighting for Pierce’s rebellion and end up with Tony as their prisoner. Oops.

Basically one of those bodice-ripping romance novels I don't read (ahem) but with far more gay.


Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

The sun hung bright and low in the sky, glaring in his eyes as he squinted at the horizon, dotted with jagged, rocky mountains. The heat was incredible out here, pushing down like a physical force, as if he was closer to it somehow. *Time for the show to start,* he thought dully. He turned with a flourish, facing his generals and soldiers as they dotted the landscape behind him. He had arranged for this little demonstration in one of the most remote spots in the kingdom, all the better to go unnoticed by Pierce’s forces. Out here, in the barren, dry lands, with just a handful of his most loyal commanders, he could finally show them what he had cooked up in his workshop. While it probably wouldn’t be enough to end the conflict once and for all, it would certainly go a long way towards putting Pierce’s forces on their heels. Not to mention make the city virtually impenetrable.

“Is it better to be feared or respected,” he asked rhetorically as everyone wisely stayed silent. “I say, is it too much to ask for both? With that in mind, I present what I like to think of as the crown jewel. Certainly cost that much,” he huffed out as General Ross stared on placidly. He knew Ross thought he was a bloviating weakling, a pale husk living in his father’s ever-diminishing shadow, but he thought Ross was an arrogant asshole, and he wore the crown, so he was pretty certain he was going to win that argument. “They say the best weapon is one you never have to use. I respectfully disagree. I prefer the weapon you only have to use once. That’s how my father did it. That’s how the Starks have always done it. And it’s worked out pretty well so far,” he offered, as the soldiers blinked back at him. Eh, speeches weren’t really his thing, but they were expected, after all. “Find a reason to use one of these, and I guarantee you, the bad guys won’t even want to come out of their tents.”

With that, he raised his arms wide in signal. A moment later, the soldiers released the trebuchets, their baskets filled with earthenware projectiles chocked full of that wonderful mixture of saltpeter, sulfur and charcoal, all brilliantly aglow as they sailed across the hard desert sand. Smaller clay cylinders mounted on stands and propelled by slow-burning wicks soon joined the carnage, spraying rocks and sand, digging huge holes into formerly sturdy and seemingly impenetrable mountainsides. His new designs for the trebuchets and catapults were far more accurate and offered greater distance.

He couldn’t decide if the huge explosion was more fun or if he preferred Ross’s startled, high-pitched yelp as he peddled backwards and fell down rather spectacularly on his ass as one of the shells exploded rather near him. Completely by accident, of course. Once the clamor died down, he walked over to the covered tent where an attendant handed him a drink. Thank the nonexistent, but still useful, gods.

“To peace,” he said, lifting the cup to his lips and sipping the chilled wine. “Jarvis, send a runner with a message to Obie, and let him know the test was the success that I assured him it would be.”

“Of course, Your Grace. Will there be anything else?” Jarvis asked.

“Oh, just ready to get back home,” Tony replied, shucking his velvet doublet, embroidered in lines of Stark red and gold, off as he sat on the cushioned seat. He spared a glance at the handful of commanders who were cautiously examining the nearby cache of grenades and smirked, pleased with the day’s exhibition. “I’ll throw in a casket of wine with all the shipments,” Tony offered to the obvious delight of the soldiers. A little largesse with the men went a long way, he supposed.
He knew well enough that one of the problems Ross and others laid at his feet were the issues with the troops, too few of whom had answered the call when the banners were raised, too many of whom had shown up wearing Pierce’s own shield sigil and hoisting his flags across the battlefield. He wisely left the inspiring speeches to Obie, far preferring his workshop with its chemical compounds, forge and tools. Ross could hardly argue with the results of his efforts, though, considering the ruins still smoking outside.

“I shall have the carriages prepared for departure, Your Grace,” Jarvis said with a bow as he left the tent.

“That was impressive,” Rhodey said as he knelt, rather half-heartedly, Tony thought.

“Of course it was. After all, I did it,” Tony said with a fond smile. Rhodey managed to be one of his few commanders to actually seem to genuinely like him, rather than fighting for the Crown itself. “To be fair, Ross and his sycophantic bunch would act impressed if I stood out there and took a shit. Now get up. I hate it when you do that.”

Rhodey rose to his feet and returned Tony’s grin. “True, they’d probably clap politely,” Rhodey agreed, earning a grin from Tony. “But still, quite the demonstration. Can’t wait to see that at work out in the field. We could certainly use some advantage, given our numbers.”

“Are we still having issues there? I sent extra supplies, not to mention enough of that shit mead Ross likes so much to drown half the army,” Tony groused.

“We’ve had some desertions, I’m not going to lie,” Rhodey grimaced. “I’d like to think something like this will end this thing quickly, but I’ve learned not to be so optimistic,” Rhodey admitted. “Pierce and his bunch are not what you’d call rational about this. Somehow, I don’t think the threat of additional loss of his forces is exactly going to keep him up nights.”

“True. Doesn’t mean we can’t make them think twice about coming at us. Speaking of coming at us, any news on my least favorite annoyance?” Tony questioned, taking another drink from the attendant, who then offered one to Rhodey.

“We’re not drinking. We’re working right now. Strategizing, remember? I’m supposed to keep you informed and then report back to the Council that I’ve kept their king informed about the progress of his war? Any of that sound familiar?” Rhodey admonished. Of course, Rhodes would decline. All responsible and crap. Spoilsport.

Rhodey grimaced before delivering what Tony assumed must be bad news. “We’ve had reports of them striking at a couple of our storage facilities, the armory down near the delta, two troop transports, and four bridges that we needed for the supply line, not to mention the problems with the Eastern fortifications and the reinforcements that were supposed to be coming from the southlands that ended up somehow rerouted to Gods know where, which I’m fairly sure I can blame on them as well, though damn me if I know how. And I think they were behind the prisoner escapes three weeks ago. We lost a good number of Pierce’s forces that we could’ve traded for our own men. Our teams have engaged them a couple of times, but…we were unsuccessful, let’s just say. They’re good, I won’t lie. Really good,” Rhodey informed him, the frustration evident in his voice. “‘And there’s another thing. That’s why I came out here, to talk to Ross. I couldn’t see it at first, but…if Pierce is planning a major assault against the city, they’ve been pretty successful at cutting off any chance a large number of our troops have of making it back quickly to the front lines, not to mention the lack of supplies making it to the city lately has left our stocks pretty low. I don’t know why Ross sent so many of our troops so far afield. Hell, he’s got May all the way down south to flank Pierce, which is fine if we’re going to war, but I don’t like having our troops spread out this much. And these Avengers keep attacking our convoys, destroying our bridges and keeping
any messages from getting through, though I can't figure out how. Our supplies are dwindling as it is, because the Court continues to behave as if there isn't a war knocking on the castle gates. Lower than I’d like if we’re facing a possible siege, that’s for sure,” Rhodey admitted grudgingly.

“Fantastic. I’m being outwitted by…what was that idiotic name they call themselves?” Tony asked.

“The Avengers, if you can believe it,” Rhodey responded, shaking his head in disdain. “We can’t get a good read on them, to be honest, though I’m pretty sure they’re working for Fury directly, not Pierce, though that amounts to the same thing these days. Not even sure how many there are. Reports from the battles say anywhere from twenty to forty of them. One report even said one of them was a woman. I think a couple are foreign. Mercenaries, maybe. We know Pierce has brought some of those in, anyway. That Batroc who hijacked part of the fleet off the Northern coast was one he hired out of the desert lands. He’s rotting in a cell now, but it probably cost us more than he was worth to get him there. As for these Avengers, they’re led by a Captain, but none of the prisoners we’ve questioned will say more than that, no matter what I offer them. Damnedest thing. And since you won’t let me do more than make deals…."

“Offer them more,” Tony ordered, ignoring Rhodey’s implication. His position on the treatment of prisoners was yet another strike against him as far as most of his men were concerned, in no small part because he knew they, likely rightly, believed their own men weren’t exactly getting such consideration with Pierce. “I want these Avengers handled. They’ve been entirely too successful. Not good for morale, and Ross and the council are already on my back about the issues with the troops, as if it’s my fault they don’t like me. You like me. What’s not to like?” Tony asked, waving off Rhodey’s raised eyebrow. “Look,” Tony continued quieter now, “I know what they think about me. The military. The troops. Too much drink, my bed’s entirely too crowded, too arrogant, think I know it all. Not to mention that I suffer from the great failing of not being my father. It isn’t like I haven’t heard the increasingly loud whispers, Rhodey. I’m not like you,” Tony said, waving his hand vaguely in Rhodey’s direction. “I’m not cut out…"

“That’s not—you know how proud I am to serve under you. You know that. When I put on my armor, head out into battle, I see every person that follows me out there. Every one of them. I know they will put everything on the line for me, for you, for the kingdom. I think…I wish you had that. People you could count on, other than me, Obie and Pepper.” Rhodey declared, entirely too solemnly for Tony. “Your men…Their families have followed the Starks for generations. They want to follow you now, I know they do. You just have to give them a reason. You—You don’t have to be like me. But…forgive me, Your Grace, but you are more than what you are. ”

“I wish that were true, but what you see is what you get, Rhodes. Sorry to disappoint,” Tony said heavily as Jarvis returned to the tent. “Just…find this Captain and whatever of his little band of misfits you can round up. The sooner he’s strung up in chains, the better. The last thing I need is him killed anonymously in battle, all martyred and shit. One thing I learned from dear old dad was that you never win fighting a symbol. It does about as much good as fighting air. I need this Captain of theirs for a nice, very public hanging, or I’ll end up with an enemy that won’t die no matter what we do.”

“We’ll put more men on the searches, of course. Maybe this new…” Rhodey waved his hand at the still smoldering ruins several hundred yards away, “…whatever it is will draw them out, make them make a mistake. All I need is them to slip up once. Everyone makes a mistake eventually,” he promised.

“What about our maniacal friend in the mountains?” Tony asked, waving the attendant off and pouring himself another drink.
“Schmidt’s been pretty quiet, other than a few raids here and there. I think he’s waiting for you and Pierce to kill each other before he makes his move. Or at least deplete yourselves so much that whatever is left at the end of this isn’t in any position to argue with his demands,” Rhodey warned quietly. “He—Schmidt—I don’t know what it is about him…but he scares me more than Pierce’s whole army, to be honest,” Rhodey admitted.

“You’re not wrong,” Tony agreed. “I know Ross thinks I’m insane every time I try to tell him we need to send more spies to see what Schmidt’s up to. Granted, every one we’ve sent so far has failed to make it back. At least, not every piece of them,” Tony grimaced.

“Ross thinks Schmidt can’t mount the kind of occupying force that Pierce has, so he isn’t too worried. Which, with our forces spread as thin as they are…well, I can’t disagree with that,” Rhodey responded grudgingly.

“You worry about these ‘Avenger’ assholes. Leave Ross and Schmidt to me. Tell you what, you bring me this Captain, and I’ll grant you a Lordship, how about?” Tony offered mildly.

“Don’t threaten me like that,” Rhodey said with a smile. “I’m a soldier. Keep your castles and lands for your political friends. I’d start a war out of sheer boredom.”

“You’re carriage is…as you requested, Sire,” Jarvis interrupted archly from the entrance of the tent with a slight nod to Rhodey.

“Let’s get out of here then, J,” Tony said, rising from his seat and grabbing another drink as he walked toward the three carriages waiting to take him and his retinue on the long journey back to the castle. Rhodey followed behind, having picked up his helmet and sword along the way. Someone opened the carriage door for Tony and he climbed inside, smiling at the two half-naked young women draped over a nicely built and bare-chested young man that waited for him inside.

“Here, hold this,” he said, handing his drink to a very disapproving Rhodey.

“Ah, come on, don’t be sour. It would be irresponsible not to enjoy a bit of comfort on such a long journey. Come on, get in. There’s plenty to go around,” Tony chortled, leaning back against the padded interior of the carriage as one of the women slunk across the carriage to wind herself around his lap while the man dropped to his knees in front of Tony.

“You are absolutely incapable of being responsible,” Rhodey said his voice full of censure that Tony decided to let slide, all things considered. Rhodey stared inside the carriage and shaking his head. It was probably all he could do not to make clucking noises.

“Now, if you’re going to be like that…this is the fun carriage. That,” Tony pointed out the carriage door towards the other carriage parked behind it, “is the responsible carriage back there.”

“Nice,” Rhodey said with what Tony decided was a very stern frown that probably struck fear into the soldiers under Rhodey’s command, as he handed Tony back his drink and stepped back to close the carriage door. Rhodey thumped on the side to indicate to the driver it was time to go. “See you back at the castle.”

Tony closed his eyes in the relative cool of the carriage. He let his head fall back against the cushioned interior as someone, he wasn’t sure which one of them, undid the tie to his breeches. A moment later, a wet heat engulfed his cock, as soft hands deftly lifted his shirt to stroke up and down his chest, teasing at his nipples, and someone started licking and sucking a line across his jaw. All in all, it was good to be King, he supposed. The road back was worn and bumpy, not particularly well used out here where few even attempted to hash out some kind of life so far away
from civilization. He let the bump and jostle of the carriage move him, enjoying the languid thrill of someone else doing all the work as his hips swayed in sync with the carriage, his mind wandering back to the unfinished creations waiting for his attentions back in the workshop even as his hands drifted down to grip hair tighter, pulling slightly for more friction and earning a soft grunt in return.

The abrupt halt of the carriage sent a jolt through him, as he, probably rather rudely, considering, nearly fell forward off the seat. The wet heat left his cock with a slurp and someone squealed, hands that had been toying with his nipples clenching and grabbing for his shirt as everything tilted. It all happened so quickly, he had no time to do more than grab for the side of the carriage to steady himself before a loud boom echoed, close, too close, and he looked up and could see sky, how did that happen, he wondered with a detached calm.

Then someone was screaming, or was it the horses, he couldn’t tell, and he was rolling and slamming into the floor of the carriage, landing in a heap on someone soft, but when he tried to grip and pull, his hand came back sticky and wet. The door to the carriage was jerked open, allowing smoke to pour in. There was another loud boom, right on top of him this time, it seemed. His eyes watered, stinging and tearing, as his ears rang from the blast. He looked up to see a soldier, one of his shouting at him, but he couldn’t understand what the man was saying, so he just sunk down, making himself as small of a target as possible.

He choked on his own breath as thick, black smoke filled the carriage. He couldn’t stay here, trapped like this. He needed out, needed air, needed to see... He stumbled out, hands reaching out to either help or simply grab onto him. He tried to grab at the hands clutching at him, tried to form some kind of shout, but then someone was telling him to get down, pushing him down, and he dropped clumsily against the carriage wheel, part of which had been blown off. He tried to see Rhodey, Jarvis, anyone, but the smoke was so think, like it had weight, and he could barely open his eyes, and then, only for a second or two.

Something landed on the ground next to him, and he stared stupidly at the clay shell for a moment more than he needed to as the fuse burnt down to a nub, long enough to note the stamp on the side with the Stark crest before he was scrambling away on all fours, clawing through the dirt, debris and the soft, fleshy things he didn’t want to think about. The next blast hit, a scream echoing from somewhere close, and he was flying backwards, sent sprawling into the mud as bits and pieces of the carriage blew past him, sharp as knives now, he knew, trying to cover his head with his hands.

He tried to rise, found he couldn’t, something wasn’t right, something was...then he felt it, the searing pain, blinding him more effectively than the smoke. He felt bile rise in his throat as he looked down at the front of his shirt. Deep red blotches began to appear against the fine cream silk, first one, then another, then another. He choked on something, coughed, couldn’t get air in, and felt his head loll back against the dirt, fingers reaching out, scrabbling for something to hold onto.

The silence around him was almost more concerning than the blasts. He tried to choke out some kind of call, but managed only a rasp of air. He looked up as the smoke cleared enough for a patch of bright sky to peek through. It was the last thing he saw before he passed out.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” a voice echoed around him as he came slowly back to consciousness, some accent he couldn’t place, not exactly threatening, but he could find little comfort in it as his hands scrambled over the metal disc embedded in his chest.

“What the hell did you do to me?” Tony asked harshly, breathing in and out in furious gulps of air, eyes trying to adjust to the darkness. He looked up and saw rock, triangular shapes of it jutting
down from the ceiling, dripping onto the sandy floor beneath him. A cave, then. There was a torch perched in a holder embedded into the rock wall to his left. It offered little illumination, but sent shadows dancing around the cave.

“What I did? What I did is to save your life,” the man said simply, kneeling beside him with a cup of water that he offered. Tony realized his throat was parched. He tried to drink it down, but found himself coughing and sputtering as he tried to swallow and the cup was removed. “I took out all the shrapnel I could. Your chest…you have quite an unfortunately large wound. Not terribly deep though, thank the gods,” the man informed him, which was not at all comforting. Tony looked down at his chest where an almost perfectly circular metal disc had been sewn, the skin stretched taut around delicate holes at the edges.

“I’ve seen many wounds like that in my village. We call them the walking dead. Soon, infection takes hold, the skin burns red, oozes and then…well. I had no way to seal it completely while you healed, so I covered it with what I could find around here. It is not much. But I cleansed it in the fire first. Better than the scraps of cloth around here to keep the blood sickness at bay,” the man offered, shrugging delicately. Clearly, the man was not particularly confident in this whole idea.

“You—what? You’re not serious? You put…what the hell?” Tony stuttered, trying to pull himself to a sitting position and looking down at his chest to see what had been done to him. He tried to piece together what he could remember…gods, the carriage…Rhodey? Jarvis? At attack? There had been explosions. His own work. The crest. What the hell had happened? “Is there…anyone else here?” Tony asked, looking around and realizing for the first time that he was lying on a pile of moth-eaten blankets covering a mattress of mildewing brush in nothing but his breeches. Even his shoes were gone.

“Just us and…well, them,” the man said as Tony’s head cocked to the right, hearing the sound of metal scraping rock as a door he hadn’t initially noticed was wrenched open, three men stepping inside the cave, one holding a large torch aloft while the other two brandished long, curved daggers. A moment later, another man, shorter and stockier than the first three, entered behind them.

“Stand up, stand up,” the man kneeling at his side urged, pulling Tony at least partially upright by the elbow. He leaned against the wall of the cave for support, finding standing to be a bit of a tall order at the moment. “Just do as I do,” the man told him. “Come on, put your hands up,” he said, raising his own arms. Tony stared at him agog, but raised his hands as high as he could manage under the circumstances. The men who had entered the cave began shouting, speaking in harsh, guttural tones, some language Tony didn’t recognize, but he definitely recognized what they had in their hands. They were holding one of his own shells, the new ones that could be thrown or launched via a trebuchet using the short fuses, just like the ones he’d finished demonstrating to Ross and his band of idiots.

“That’s mine,” Tony said, looking down at the shell, unblemished fuse hanging out the end. “How did they get that?” Tony asked, staring at the men uselessly.

“Do you understand me?” the man asked and Tony nodded, still staring at the shell. “Do as I do,” the man ordered urgently. The stocky, bearded man gesticulated as he spoke, pointing in Tony’s direction. “Welcome Your Highness, the most famous mass murderer in history,” the man translated. “He is honored.”

“I’ll bet he is,” Tony replied grimly, earning a sharp look from the man.

“He wants you to build this…this weapon,” the man said. “The one you just demonstrated. This one,” the man said, indicating the shell in their captor’s hands.
“I refuse,” Tony said indignantly, because really, he’d had just about enough of all of this and where the fuck were Rhody and Jarvis and Ross and all the fucking idiots that were supposed to be his subjects for fucks’ sake?

As it turned out, refusing did not go so well.

When they dropped him back on the makeshift cot, wet and choking, clutching his chest, he managed only to roll over to his back before someone grabbed him and jerked him upright again, slamming him against the back of the cave making his head bounce off the rock. He cast a bleary gaze down at the man shaking him, willing himself to keep standing and not pass out directly on top of the man who’d spent the last few days trying to drown him like a witch.

“He says they have everything you need to build this,” the man said. “He says for you to start working immediately. And when you are done, he will let you go,” the man translated, nodding as he did and not taking his eyes from their captor.

“No he won’t,” Tony replied, nodding in seeming agreement towards his captor.

“No he won’t,” the man agreed, his expression unreadable.

Yinsen, was the man’s name. Turned out, he was some kind of doctor, rather well known in scientific circles. While he hadn’t exactly risen to Tony’s attention, Tony had apparently met him at some banquet at the castle years ago, something Tony had been too drunk to remember, but Yinsen seemed not to hold it against him.

“I’m sure they are looking for you, Your Grace,” Yinsen said, as Tony placed the various materials on the table in front of him. “But they will never find you in these mountains.”

Tony raised an eyebrow and grunted. “You don’t know…well, you don’t know Rhody. He—well, at least he—aw, fuck it. Yeah,” Tony admitted bleakly, staring at the items laid out in neat rows before him. These mountains were virtually uncharted. The cave system was impossible for anyone who hadn’t grown up here, and even then, it was constantly shifting as they dug out new areas or other areas caved in. He wasn’t even sure who from the convoy had made it out, if anyone. It was entirely possible that no one was looking for him, not having any idea he had survived.

He found himself wondering idly who would mourn him. Pepper, his scarily efficient steward, sure. Probably a few of the wine merchants and no doubt, the various courtiers who enjoyed his parties and nocturnal activities, though he could hardly expect them to exactly rend their garments over his loss. He tried not to let that get to him, but it was the thing that skittered around his mind late at night in the silent darkness of the cave. Not that no one was coming. That no one was missing him. Hell, Ross was probably beside himself with glee with Obie running things as Regent in his absence. Wasn’t that what the council had been pushing for since practically the day he’d taken over upon his majority and started to immediately disappoint?

“Look at what you just saw,” Yinsen said evenly. “This…this is your legacy, your Highness. Is this the last act of defiance of the great King Anthony Stark? To die in a cave, surrendering everything you’ve worked for to the hands of these murderers? Or are you going to do something about it?” Yinsen demanded.

“Why should I do anything? They’re going to kill me, you, either way,” Tony acknowledged, throwing the rag he’d been clenching in his fist on the table. “And if they don’t, I’ll probably be dead in a week,” he said, waving his hand over his chest where the skin around the metal plate was puckered and swollen with infection, red lines spiraling out from it in a deadly spider web on his
“Well, then,” Yinsen replied calmly. “This is a very important time for you then, isn’t it?”

Tony stared at him for a long moment. He braced the knuckles of his hands on the table in front of him. He could sit here and wait for the rescue that wasn’t coming. He could acquiesce to these assholes’ demands and build the damn weapon or whatever else they wanted and hopefully buy a bit of time. Or he could make a different choice.

He’d never had to fight for anything in his life. It had all just come as his due. Now, there was nothing left here to fight for. Maybe that meant that it was only the fight itself that mattered.

“If I’m going to do this…I’m going to need a few things,” Tony said, casting a sideways glance at Yinsen, willing him to understand.

“That doesn’t look like the thing our lying friend had in his hand,” Yinsen said a few days later, gazing down at what Tony held on the long ends of the tongs over the forge’s fire.

“This? This is our way out of here,” Tony responded, voice low and even as he worked, using the heat to meld the metal together, banging it into shape with the large, flat hammer. "Along with that," Tony continued, indicating the yellowish substance sitting in a bowl on table.

It didn’t work, of course. Well, it did. The suit of armor he built, the tiny rockets he created, the small metal shells with short fuses that exploded on impact, and that wonderfully stable yellow mixture that exploded so beautifully, the thing he’d been idly toying with in the back of his mind for years, that all worked.

It didn’t work for Yinsen though. Tony wasn’t quite good enough for that. He made it out of the cave, bursting into the sunlight, the armored mask protecting his eyes from the glint of the sun, armor keeping the heat from the bright flashes of white-orange fire and huge chunks of debris and dust that appeared as he lobbed the metal shells, filled with his own special new mixture, the yellow substance that was so easy to pack tightly into the shells, at bay as he stalked through the camp.

He wasn’t sure if it was fear or anger or both that fueled him at this point, just the desire to be gone from here, away from this cave, this place that held so many reminders of the things he’d done, the things he’d failed to do. Someone came at him with a sword, earning a glancing blow off the shoulder of the armor as he swiped at the man with an armored fist, sending him reeling backwards into a boulder. Tony was running now, as best he could in the armor anyway, shouts and screams echoing in the valley behind him.

He shed the armor as he went. It was too bulky to run and climb in effectively and now? Now he needed speed and stealth. He darted through the rocky path, stumbling and rolling onto the soft, hot sand below. He could see the explosions continuing to ricochet behind him as one cache after another caught and sparked, dark, black smoke filling the camp, but he had to get up. He couldn’t stay here, it was too open, too close.

Tony forced himself to his feet, heart pounding in his chest as he placed a hand over the metal plate in his chest. Even through the shirt, he could have sworn he could feel it hot against his palm. He ran on, not sure for how long, before finally collapsing behind a large rock, taking in deep gulps of air, sure the pounding in his heart was echoing throughout the canyon like a beacon.

He forced himself to breathe quietly, leaning his head back against the hard stone and staring up at the sun blinking down at him. He’d made it out. The plan, such as it was, had at least somewhat
worked. Enough to get him this far. The problem was, he had no idea where here was, no idea which way to go that would take him in the direction of his kingdom or his forces. Hell, Pierce could have his own people out here, scouting around, for all Tony knew. He realized his throat was parched and dry, and he was incredibly thirsty all of a sudden, sand and grit and dust and smoke the only things he could taste. He had a small ration of water he and Yinsen had carefully hoarded, but it wouldn’t be enough, it was never going to be enough and why hadn’t he thought this out more? He’d escaped only to die in the desert, food for the vultures to pick apart.

Tony struggled to stand again, putting one foot and then the other in front of him as he trudged down the path. He wasn’t sure how long he’d run from the camp, how far he’d gotten. He couldn’t hear anything anymore, but he could still see the smoke rising in the distance. At some point, he stopped, took a long swallow of water, that turned out to be so long that he’d drunk the entire contents of his bottle before realizing what he’d done. He upended it above his mouth, draining the last drops, before putting the bottle back in his bag, in what he assumed was naive optimism at the prospect of finding drinkable water out here. He took off the shirt he’d been given to wear, wrapping its ratty fabric around his head to try to shield himself from the oppressive heat as he walked.

It was night, the stars blinking brilliantly behind the mountains before he heard it. A shuffle. A loose rock skittering down the side of the cliff. A scratch of metal along stone. They were coming. He picked up his pace as best he could, breaking into a run as the sounds drew closer, and then there were dark shadows behind him, the bright glow of fire raised high, someone shouting and pointing. He tried to find something big enough to work for cover, but it was useless, there was nothing here at the base of the mountain but sand and skinny scrub trees and the few rocks big enough to be called such, but hardly of a size to shield a man.

So, this was it then, he thought as the shadows lengthened in front of him. This was how he died. The great Anthony Edward Stark, King of the realm, blah, blah, blah, was going to die in some gods-forsaken wasteland from that probably wasn’t even on any of the maps running from some half-rate kidnappers. He wondered idly, as he fell behind the largest rock he could find, if Pepper would cover those hideous paintings she insisted line the castle walls with black drape, as would be traditional. That might make this all worth it, he thought with hysterical laughter threatening as he pounded his head back against the rock face in frustration.

Well, fuck it, he thought. If I die today, I die standing up. Iron Will, the Stark motto, not for nothing, see, Dad?

That worked for all of the few seconds it took for him to stand and turn before something hard and solid struck him on the side of the head, sending him stumbling to the side, falling to his knees as pain bloomed in his head. He touched two fingers to his temple, pulling them back carefully and studying the bright, red wetness in mute horror before looking up at his pursuers. Two of them moved to either side of him, one holding a torch in one hand and grabbed a fistful of hair in the other. The man pulled back sharply, saying something Tony assumed was fairly rude by the tone, and bringing a stinging pain to Tony’s eyes as he reached up to try to grab at the offending hand only to have a cold, steel blade pressed against his throat where he knelt.

“Kill him,” one of them, a tall, bald man with sharp, hard eyes said in Tony’s own language. “We don’t need him anymore. And he was supposed to be dead months ago.” Well, that just plain hurt.

The man with the sword at Tony’s throat said something, and the other man holding his hair pushed him forward, sending Tony to all fours in the sand. Tony managed to raise his head enough to look at the tall man, bargains and prayers and all manner of pleadings running through his head. He said nothing. He was a Stark. The King. He would not beg. It wasn’t much, out here in front
of no one, at the end of all things, to have this, but when it was all you had...it was the only thing that mattered. A fourth man came out of the darkness, having obviously come from in front of Tony, and gods, he’d never even really had a chance. The fourth man pressed a long, wooden staff against the small of Tony’s back to keep him in place.

He looked straight at the robed man in front of him and opened his mouth to say something he was sure was going to be either profound or, at least, profoundly insulting, when an arrow whizzed past his head and lodged into the throat of the man holding the sword above him. The man swayed for a moment, gurgling and clutching desperately at the protrusion in his throat as he dropped his sword. Well, if the sky is just dropping weapons in your lap, Tony thought, grabbing the handle of the sword and swinging it upwards towards asshole number two, who was busy pointing the torch here and there, glancing furtively around the rocks for any sign of where the arrow had come from.

The sword opened the man’s stomach, emptying it onto the dry sand below. The torch hit the sand next to Tony’s head as he rolled out of the way. Tony tried to stand then, but the bald man brought the end of his curved sword around, knocking the pilfered sword from Tony’s hand. The fourth man swiveled the staff in a wide arc, landing a solid blow to Tony’s stomach that knocked the breath from him, followed with a hard jolt to the underside of his jaw that sent him flying back landing heavily in the dirt again. The pain spiked out from Tony’s head and jaw as he hit, white spots dancing in front of his eyes as he was momentarily paralyzed trying to swallow breath again.

“Now, you die, in the dirt, like nothing. And no one will even know your name,” the tall man said, picking the sword that Tony had dropped up and raising it above his head with both hands before bringing it down. Tony could see the moonlight glint off the edges, everything thrown into sharp relief as he watched it happen. He tried to force his body to move, to kick, to do something, but it was all so fast, and it was happening and it was there and it was—his vision darkened, the moon and stars blotted out and there was a loud clang, but his skull didn’t break open and there was no pain, and he realized he’d closed his eyes.

He heard a solid grunt, something shifted in the sand behind his head and then he opened his eyes long enough to see the man with the sword was flying backwards, slamming against the wall of rock, sword dropping from his hand as he slid down, blood pouring from his nose. A tall, broad figure was in front of the downed man, blocking Tony’s view. The taller man kicked the sword out of the way and stared down at the robed man as he lay slumped in the dirt.

Tony started to shift himself upright, moving his hands underneath him and trying to still the desperate pounding of his heart. It felt like it was going to burst through the metal plate in his chest. He stilled as he felt a hard, cold point press against his throat. He managed to look to the side long enough to see captor number three wheezing next to him, kneeling with an arm wrapped around Tony’s throat now, the other hand clasped around a long dagger, the tip drawing a thin bead of blood where it nestled under his jaw.

The tall figure turned slowly, still hidden by the shadow of the rock wall. Tony wanted to stutter something out, some words to tell him not to let this asshole get away with this, whatever it took to fucking do something, to—Holy Shit! That was about all Tony’s mind managed as something large and round cut through the air and knocked asshole number four backwards a good several feet before ricocheting off the side of the rock wall to be deftly caught by the same tall figure, all in one seemingly easy motion. Asshole number four moaned and started to roll over, groping blinding for the dagger in the sand. Tony’s eyes darted back and forth between the two figures, not sure what the hell had just happened.

“Son,” the figure said, deep voice piercing the darkness, “Just don’t.”
Most of the dialogue between Tony and Rhodey in the tent is taken from the IM dialogue when they are on Tony's plane with the stripper poles and just paraphrased a bit. I realized I'd never actually paid attention to what Rhodey was telling Tony (because stripper poles, Tony!), about how he needed people he could count on.

I use the term "Your Grace" here as convention for Tony's title and the idea of "gods" in this universe mostly to suggest that this is not our world. Just totally made up VaguelyMedievalishLandVille, m'kay? mumble/alsoIwasreadingGameofThronesandGRRMusesit/mumble.

If you are at all curious, Tony basically invents TNT in the cave, the yellow liquid that is briefly mentioned, a vast improvement over gunpowder largely due to its stability. I figure that is comparable to miniaturizing an arc reactor in a cave. But again, see that Fantasy tag? I'm serious about it. If you want to see what chunks of TNT look like, go here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinitrotoluene
Chapter 2

That gave asshole number four pause, to be sure, but not enough to stop him from reaching for the only weapon within striking distance. Tony took full advantage of his distraction as the man groped for the dagger in the darkness and flung a handful of sand into the man’s eyes before rolling adroitly away.

As the attacker lifted the dagger, another knife flew out of the darkness, embedding itself in the man’s chest. He managed a startled look before crumpling forward to the ground, further impaling himself. Tony watched for a long moment as blood pooled slowly out from under the man’s body, still trying to process what had just happened. All Tony could hear was the furious staccato of his own heart beat echoing in his ears, punctuated by panting breaths as he tried to calm himself from almost being killed.

Twice.

Not his best day, all in all.

Someone lifted the torch one of his pursuers had dropped, pressing it’s dying embers against another torch that appeared seemingly from nowhere, this one held by a smaller man with dark, wavy hair. “So, uh…that was…unexpected,” the smaller man said. “Not every day you happen upon an execution, I mean. Even in our line of work.”

“What’d you do to piss off the Ten Rings that much?” another man said as he dropped down from a shelf on the rock wall above Tony’s head, landing lightly and stowing his bow in the quiver on his back. Tony stared at him in momentary confusion. He decided silence was the best strategy while he waited to figure out what was going on.

“What are we going to do about him?” a red-haired woman who had materialized from the ether asked, staring down at the bald man with the broken nose now slumped unconscious in the dirt. She poked at him with a leather boot before kneeling to begin stripping the attacker of anything of value. Thieves then, Tony wondered? Maybe he could offer them a reward for returning him to the Castle.

“He’s in no condition to move, and we can’t carry him or stay here much longer. We’ll have to immobilize him and leave it to the gods to sort out,” the tall man holding what Tony now realized was a round shield said, his voice holding the air of command Tony readily recognized from years spent dealing with military-types.

“Might be a death sentence out here, Cap,” the archer said. Tony thought that sounded just fine to him, and these newcomers were being way too nice about it, but wisely decided his opinion was probably not exactly prized at the moment.

Tony reached over and picked up the shirt he’d dropped in the dirt in the skirmish, the one that he’d been using as a head-scarf, and put it back on, uncomfortable with the frank scrutiny of his chest that everyone was trying, but failing spectacularly, to be subtle about.

“Somehow, I think there will be more of his brethren arriving soon. Our information never suggested the Ten Rings were operating this close to Stark land. Seems bold, even for them. We shouldn’t linger here,” the tall, blond man said. Tony immediately knew he was right. They were looking for him, meaning there would be more searchers headed this way soon, particularly if this party didn’t report back.
“Good plan,” Tony ventured, earning four sets of gazes swiveled to him. “About the leaving,” he clarified. “We should do that.”

“We?” the woman asked, raising a delicate eyebrow and glancing at the one they called ‘Cap’ again.

“Doctor?” the tall man called, and the smaller man who had remarked on interrupting Tony’s imminent execution stepped forward. “Sir, are you wounded?” the tall man asked, gaze dipping seemingly involuntarily to Tony’s now-covered chest.

“Uh…no, I’m good. I mean, I can walk,” Tony elaborated, as that seemed the important bit of information to impart now that the red-haired woman was tying the unconscious attacker to one of the sturdier scrub trees with a thick rope.

The smaller man with the wavy hair, apparently the doctor, came to his side and took a quick look at the wound on the underside of his neck, a jagged red line that was still leaking a small amount of blood. He ran his hands over Tony’s neck, then held one hand on Tony’s chest and the other against his back while he breathed, before turning back to the group.

“He looks fine. A little battered, and I don’t even want to begin to think about that thing in his chest, but seems okay to walk,” the doctor informed them.

Tony nodded vigorously in agreement as he watched the red-haired woman shove a greasy rag into the bald man’s mouth and pat him on the head before standing again. Quite frankly, she concerned him, and he was man enough to admit it.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” another voice said from the darkness. And really? More of them? “We are not taking on a straggler, Steve, just no. We have leagues of Stark land to get through, not to mention not really needing another reason for the Ten Rings to want you dead.”

“He’s not a straggler, he’s a prisoner. We’ll take him to Pierce to deal with,” Cap, now, apparently, Steve, said, as the dissenter came down the path his attackers had chased him, toting a long, wickedly sharp spear. The first thing Tony noticed about the newcomer was that one of his arms was missing, a crudely wrought metal one with a star sigil on the bicep, painted red, in it's place.

“We can’t deal with this right now and you know it,” the metal-armed man offered. Tony decided he didn’t particularly care for this one all that much.

“We can’t just leave a prisoner behind, Buck, you know that,” Steve replied, but there was a tone of convincing there that hadn’t been present with the others that Tony wasn’t comfortable with.

“Actually, you don’t need to worry about me. I mean, thanks. For the saving thing. Really, that was great, but ah…I can take it from here. No need to worry about me, I can, uh…make it back to my, uh…village. Where I live. It isn’t far. I’ll be fine, not to worry,” Tony tried, taking small steps backwards as he did. That worked fine until he backed into something large and solid. Turning around as he stumbled forward from the impact, he looked up at a large blond man holding the biggest warhammer Tony had ever seen clutched to his chest like a child’s toy. This day really couldn’t get more surreal.

“Verily, brother, I wish that it could be so,” the blond mountain proclaimed in a deep voice that reminded Tony of some of the players that occasionally came to entertain at Court. “You faced certain death with honor and cunning worthy of the gods, but alas, you have seen us and know overmuch of our whereabouts and purpose. This could be valuable information to our enemies, who would use it to thwart our noble efforts.”
Tony just blinked at him. Okay, apparently the day could get more surreal.

“Um, no, no information. No, ah—no need to worry. Besides, I’m not anyone. I mean, I’m not an enemy. I’m just a, um, an armorer. Just, ah, got myself caught up with these, um…troublesome fellows here. Ten Rings, did you say? See, I’m not even someone who’d know what they call themselves, but hey, it’s all good now, so thanks, I’ll just be going, back to my, uh…shop. Where I work,” Tony offered.

He knew it was highly unlikely he would be recognized by foot soldiers such as these, and they certainly hadn’t given any indication they had any idea who he was thus far. Still, some kind of cover story seemed logical. Something with enough truth in it that he could live the lie if needed.

These were not the kinds of people who would have ever had reason to encounter him, that much was certain, he thought, taking in their bedraggled appearance and cheaply-made weapons. Even if they had seen him from a distance at one of the official events he occasionally showed up sober for, he looked radically different after three months in captivity, beard shaggy and unkempt, hair long and curling now, not to mention the weight loss leaving him far more gaunt than he’d been since his teenage growth spurt. Plus, who would ever even think you’d just happen to come across the king about to be executed in the middle of the desert?

“You’re one of Stark’s men,” the one named Steve said lowly. “I don’t suppose you’d like to tell us what you were doing way out here?” Steve asked with false lightness.

“I’m not—ah, fuck, how do you even know that?” Tony asked, because they obviously weren’t buying it and weren’t going to let him just walk away.

“As you were kneeling, waiting for the sword to fall, you said ‘Iron Will.’ Those are the Stark words,” Steve replied. He had? Sure, he’d thought the Stark words…well, fuck. This was his recompense for paying attention during Jarvis’ endless family history lessons?

“You’re one of Stark’s,” Steve repeated. “And you’re out here, in the middle of nowhere.”

“And you’re Pierce’s, and you’re out here in the middle of nowhere, except that the middle of nowhere happens to still be close enough to Stark lands to be so in all but name. So, there’s that.” Tony accused mildly, because, really, what were these people, whoever they were, doing out here? This area was remote, sure, largely left wild and untamed, but most of it was still technically Stark land, his land. And if Pierce had spies out here…well, that definitely did not bode well, though he wasn’t sure he understood exactly why. It niggled in the back of his head though, all Rhodey’s concerns about Pierce laying the groundwork for something big.

“So we are,” Steve agreed. “And now you know that. Which is why we can’t just let you go—ah, do you have a name you’d be willing to give us?”

“It’s—I—I’m Tony. Tony. You can call me Tony,” he replied, for some reason feeling odd about giving this man the familiar name he saved just for close friends, but he figured it would be easier to remember and keep up the charade if he stuck as close to the truth as he could.

“It’s—I—I’m Tony. Tony. You can call me Tony,” he replied, for some reason feeling odd about giving this man the familiar name he saved just for close friends, but he figured it would be easier to remember and keep up the charade if he stuck as close to the truth as he could.

“Doesn’t mean we have to take him with us, Steve. It’s just going to be trouble,” the metal-armed man Tony now detested said. “If you don’t want to deal with it, you know I will. I’m just saying,” he continued, holding his hands out, palms forward in supplication, at Steve’s sharp glare, “this is going to be way more trouble than it’s worth. Pierce won’t care about some armor maker dumb enough to get himself captured, and Stane or whoever is running the show sure as hell doesn’t care about a fucking peasant, so why bother? Leave him with ring-man there, and let’s get the hell out of here. You saw the smoke. You heard the explosions. Something big is going on,
something we don’t need to be involved in, and you know we need to get back to camp with…
everything,” the man finished, glancing at Tony with dark, hooded eyes that telegraphed his
distaste quite clearly.

Tony returned his gaze steadily, until the other man looked away. “Whatever, it’s your call,” the
metal-armed man said, stalking forward down what managed to very optimistically be called a
path through the twisting rocks, stopping just on the outside of the torchlight’s reach.

“He goes with us. He’s a prisoner of war. Stark’s man or no, he doesn’t deserve whatever fate the
Ten Rings have planned for him, and we can’t just let him go. We’ll turn him over to Pierce once
we get back,” Steve announced again, before turning to Tony. “They sometimes do prisoner
exchanges,” Steve offered in a gentler tone. “I don’t know how they decide who gets picked,
but…well. I can put a word in with General Fury.”

“Great, thanks,” Tony responded dully. Fantastic. He managed to escape one captivity only to fall
into Pierce’s hands like some kind of gift from the gods.

Before he could muster more of a response, the one call Steve was standing in front of him,
holding out a rounded pouch. Tony didn’t like being handed things, as a rule, but he nevertheless
found himself reaching out to take the pouch Steve offered him. He drank deeply, realizing just
how thirsty he was. Before he knew it, he was chewing on some kind of jerky that Steve had dug
from his pack, trying to force himself to chew between bites as his stomach roared to life.

“Thanks,” he offered, meaning it at least somewhat sincerely this time.

“It’s a long walk,” Steve said by way of answer.

“Not many prisoners left to exchange for now,” the archer smirked. “One of my personal favorite
‘Go Fuck Yourself’ gifts to Stark, if I do say so myself,” he continued bitterly. “Far more fun than
taking out a few bridges, anyway. Hope we at least got to be his last annoyance before divine
retribution struck.”

“Clint,” Steve warned, casting a sidelong glance at Tony.

“Oh, come on, he’s not going anywhere. Besides, even if he actually somehow makes it back to
Stark’s side, it’s not like Stane or anyone else up the command is going to listen to what some
random armorer has to say,” Clint objected. Tony willed himself not to object to the idea that even
his fictitious self was simply a random armorer.

“Clint,” Steve repeated, the warning more forceful this time, and the archer clamped his mouth
shut as the woman slapped the back of his head.

And wait, what? Tony’s mind finally got over the nonexistent insult to process what the archer had
been saying. These people were the ones behind the prisoner escape that Rhodey had mentioned?
The bridges? This bunch was the so-called Avengers? The ones who had been causing him so
many problems? A couple of soldiers, a woman, a mountain with a hammer and a doctor? He let
out a huff of derisive laughter before he could stop himself. The gods had to be kidding with him.
He was going to give Rhodey such crap. Steve cast an odd look in his direction at Tony’s burst of
inopportune laughter, but Tony just crossed his arms in mute challenge. The other man didn’t
seem inclined to push it.

“What….what happened? With the King, I mean?” Tony questioned, trying for nonchalance,
though he was starved for information at this point. His captors had not exactly been forthcoming.
The metal armed man had mentioned Obie running things…which was great, obviously, because
that meant things hadn’t fallen apart in his absence. He wasn’t going to consider that between
Obie, Pepper, Rhodey and Jarvis, things might actually be functioning at a much higher level since his capture.

“Who knows?” Clint shrugged. “Heard he was being held for ransom or some shit, but if that’s true, why wouldn’t the Crown pay up? Makes no sense. Guy’s dead, in some shallow grave somewhere. My money, if I had any, would be on Ross. He’s had it out for Stark for ages.”

"Wouldn't put it past Ross," the doctor added.

Tony swallowed past the lump in his throat, forcing himself to form words that didn’t sound too strange coming from a supposed armorer. “So, who’s running the kingdom, then?”

“Stane,” Steve said with a shrug. “Acting as Regent while they figure out succession, I suppose.”

“Good riddance, I say,” the one named Bucky said. “Stark got what he had coming.”

“Bucky,” Steve admonished. “He was still the King, no matter how poorly it may have suited him.” And okay, ouch. Not that he would expect Pierce’s people to be exactly fair in regards to his leadership, but that was awfully judgmental there, soldier, Tony thought with a grimace of distaste.

“Aye, the loss of a monarch leaves a hole in a people that is not easily filled,” the blond mountain agreed amiably. “I will raise a toast to King Anthony once we reach our destination.”

“Oh, don’t give me that show some respect shit, Steve. Not from you. Not after—just don’t,” Bucky ground out, casting a dark look in Tony’s direction. “You know where you can put your toast, Thor. Don’t even start,” Bucky said as the one apparently called Thor started to say something else.

“I do understand your bitterness, my friend, but it does not serve you well to speak ill of the dead, if that truly is his fate,” Thor observed.

Dead? Well, at least they definitely had no idea who he was, so that was something. Still, everyone thinking him dead meant no one would be looking for him, no Rhodey riding to the rescue.

“Enough about Stark. We need to get moving. I’d like to make the edge of the tree line before dawn. Natasha, see about our guest, would you?” Steve requested.

Tony found out what exactly the Captain, as he now realized that was who he was dealing with, meant by that a moment later when the woman, “Natasha,” he supposed, patted him down for weapons, taking the few precious yellow squares from his pockets with a curious glance and tossing them into her bag, which he could only hope she routinely held over an open flame, and then tied his hands in front of him, leaving a length of rope hanging down, which she wrapped around her arm as a lead.

She looped a second rope around each of Tony’s ankles, leaving enough slack in between for him to walk, but definitely not run or climb, effectively hobbling him and any chance of escape he might have entertained. He glared at the Captain for a long moment before holding up his bound hands and asking “Really?” in a voice laced with frustration and annoyance.

“Can’t say you aren’t a flight risk, considering,” the Captain intoned almost guiltily, and okay, sure, that was perhaps a bit fair, considering that he’d been running away from his previous captor when he’d met up with this bunch, but he wasn’t really in the mood to be fair.
Getting tied up wasn’t nearly as fun as he remembered, he thought harshly as the woman gave a little tug on the rope connected to his hands, propelling him along like the world’s most expensive ox. He thought she might share his assessment from her slight smile as she jerked the line to hurry him along. When Rhodey rescued him, he would make sure to return the favor, he thought, returning her smile as he pictured the lot of them being pulled behind his carriage in chains.

He let that thought sustain him as he trudged somewhat awkwardly forward, a few paces behind the woman with the mountain carrying a hammer bringing up the rear of their little parade. His steps had to be small and somewhat uneven, making him feel ridiculous, all trussed up like this. The ropes chafed a bit, but it was the humiliation of it that stung the most. The woman tugged more insistently, and he took a deep breath and pressed forward, imagining tugging sharply enough on a chain to bring the good Captain to his knees.

That was a surprisingly pleasing image.

The trek gave him time to think as he tromped along with ungainly steps, trying not to fall flat on his face. Every now and then he’d stumble, and feel a strong hand from behind steady him, but he refused to offer his new captors any gratitude. So, he was presumed dead or his fate at least unclear, and Obie was running things, perhaps trying to figure out succession in the wake of his supposed death without an heir. Pierce or Fury had these Avengers out here on the edge of the world doing gods’ knew what, but probably something that wasn’t good for him. Oh, and he managed to make one dramatic escape, but that was apparently his quota for the day. At least these idiots had no idea who he was, so small favors and all that, he thought as he rolled his eyes at the absurdity of the situation.

He couldn’t let them turn him over to Pierce though, that much was clear. Pierce would know who he was, obviously, and he doubted Fury or Pierce would have any compunction about using his captivity to their best advantage.

He wasn’t going to get far like this though, so he needed to bide his time. They were near his lands anyway. If he could slip away sometime when they let their guard down, after they came to think of him as less of a risk, just some “random armorer” as the archer had put it, someone they didn’t need to track quite so closely, then he may be able to make one of the outposts that was still garrisoned or even one of the few scattered keeps out in this area. He couldn’t remember who was holding these lands for him, and could practically feel Pepper cringing for his lack of knowledge of the intricacies of the Realm, though he kept trying to tell her that was just job security for her.

For the time being, it was probably best to just play along, make nice and let them get a little too comfortable with his supposed ineptitude before he tried anything. He needed supplies and to be closer to somewhere he could find shelter and safety if he was going to attempt any kind of escape this time.

If his last attempt had taught him anything, it was that the plan for after the escape itself was just as important. And if he was going to escape, it would help to have his last supplies of the mixture he’d created back from that Natasha woman. That would certainly come in handy as some kind of distraction. At this point though, playing the role of non-threatening armorer seemed the better part of valor, all things considered.

They made the tree line at the edge of the forest, where it met the desert sand as if the canopy of trees simply suddenly decided to stop their forward march, just as the sun was rising against a pink sky. Exhausted, Tony nearly fell to his knees on the soft ground once they stopped, sure he couldn’t move another step. If they were going to tie him up and leave him, then he’d take his chances with that over attempting to put one foot in front of the other again.
“We’ll camp here,” Steve said, setting down the pack he’d been carrying. “Bucky, you take first watch. I’ll take second.” The metal-armed man, Bucky, of all the ridiculous monikers, nodded glumly and cast another sharp glance in Tony’s direction as if he was somehow responsible for him not getting to go to sleep immediately.

“Here,” Steve said, handing Tony what had to be the shabbiest blanket he’d ever seen, which included the rat-eaten one he’d slept on for three months in a cave.

Tony surprised himself again by actually taking something the Captain handed to him, grasping it gingerly between two fingers of his bound hands and spread it out as best he could on the soft dirt under one of the trees, offering at least some shade. Steve took the lead rope that bound Tony’s wrists and tied it to a sturdy, protruding tree root, much to Tony’s annoyance as he gave it an experimental tug. He could try to undo it and the one binding his feet, but he wasn’t even sure where he was at the moment, and the illusion of safety offered by these people with their food and water and knowledge of the land was too appealing at the moment to attempt anything else.

The rest of the team settled in for the day, attempting to find what snatches of rest they could under the glare and heat of the sun. He noticed the Captain had laid down on the grass a few feet away, shield by his hand and sword out of its scabbard next to him, with one hand wrapped around the hilt, already seemingly at peace. Must be nice to be able to fall asleep that quickly, though he supposed that was a necessary trait for a soldier to learn.

Tony had never been able to get his mind to calm down that fast, something usually whirring around in his head, sleep eluding him in favor of mixtures and metal and better ways to kill. At least, that had been how it was for so long, he’d forgotten it could be any other way.

As he lay on the hard ground, he took a sadistic satisfaction from watching the Captain sleep while he pulled at the threads of the blanket, silently tearing the it to shreds as the others shifted about the makeshift camp. It was a small, petty thing, he supposed, but it was what he had.

When he woke, it was dusk and the camp was silent but for the shuffling, rustling, chirping sounds of the forest around them. The Captain was gone, he noticed, his eyes immediately darting to where the man had slept not too far from his own spot. He sat up and scrubbed his eyes, realizing that he rather badly needed to relieve himself. Tony looked around and caught the doctor’s eye over a low fire where he was heating a pot of something, which seemed to be enough to indicate his predicament.

“Uh, over there. Behind the tree. Just stay where I can see you,” the doctor said as he undid the knot securing Tony’s wrists to the tree with a shrug, as Tony struggled to stand with the rope between his feet. Tony held out his hands in hope that the doctor would be more accommodating, but the man just shook his head. “That’s Cap’s call, sorry.”

After he was done, he plodded over to sit on the ground by the fire, surprised when the doctor placed a small, slightly bent metal cup with steaming liquid inside in front of his bound hands, and glory to the gods, coffee. Bad coffee, actually, terrible coffee, he mused, taking a sip, but still. Coffee. Okay, so the doctor was his new favorite. He scratched absently at his shirt over the spot where the metal plate covered his chest, earning a curious gaze from the doctor.

“War wound,” Tony offered in answer to the unspoken question.

“Want me to take a look?” the doctor asked. “I don’t have much in the way of supplies out here, but might be able to put together something to help.”

“Uh…sure,” Tony replied nervously, lifting his shirt as the doctor approached with his pack in tow.
“This is…unusual,” the doctor said, pressing light fingers along the edge of the metal disc. “I’m Bruce, by the way. Feel like we should probably be on a first name basis.” The doctor grimaced as he traced the angry red lines splaying out from the edges of the disc.

“I can make you a poultice to try to help reduce the swelling and soreness. And some willowbark tea for the pain. But this…you make armor and weapons, right?” Bruce asked, raising a questioning eyebrow. Tony nodded. Close enough. “Then you know this can’t stay like this. The metal…it will degrade. Get inside you. Like a poison. The wound underneath looks pretty severe…I might could try to repair it, but the way the skin has grown around the plate…I don’t know. Might do more harm than good,” he admitted. “Sorry.”

“Yeah,” Tony acknowledged with a nod. Yinsen had warned him, after all. All this to die of blood poisoning from the thing that had kept him from dying in that cave? He shook his head before turning his gaze back to the doctor. “Poultice. Tea. That would be…thanks.” It might help stave off the inevitable long enough for Tony to figure something else out, anyway. He could hope, at least until hope became a delusion.

The doctor nodded solemnly and stood up, making his way back to the fire with his bag while Tony sipped the coffee. “Enjoy it,” Bruce said in parting. “That’s the last of the coffee.”

Tony wanted to weep.

A few minutes later, the woman, Natasha, made her way into camp holding a skein of rabbits and handing them to the doctor, who set about skinning them efficiently with a small knife.

“I almost had that last little bugger,” the one called Clint said, striding into camp behind her. “It’s okay to admit you couldn’t kill the bunny, Clint,” the woman teased.

“He was looking at me, Nat. With those big, brown eyes. And he was so fluffy!” Clint said dramatically, clutching his chest and placing the back of his hand to his forehead. Really, these were the crack troops thwarting his best commanders? Tony put his forehead in his hand and rubbed away the phantom pain that thought caused. “Where’s Thor?” Clint asked, peering around the makeshift campsite.

“Paying homage to the gods, or something like that,” Bruce answered. “I’m not sure if that’s a euphemism or not.” Clint chortled happily as Natasha shook her head and muttered something that sounded like “boys” under her breath. Tony smiled in response, see, practically one of you guys, he mentally suggested, and continued to nurse his coffee as the rabbits cooked on a spit over the fire.

“And the Brookland boys?” Clint questioned.

“Steve wanted to scout ahead a bit. James went with him,” Bruce replied, turning the rabbits a bit and going back to grinding some herbs against a flat stone.

“Brookland?” Tony asked sharply, looking around with sudden wariness. “They’re from…there?” He found himself unconsciously brushing at his clothes, as if that would ward anything off.

“Yeah…grew up together there,” Bruce responded. Natasha dropped a pouch of water at Tony’s feet that he ignored. She exchanged a look with Bruce, who went back to crushing his flowers and twigs with a newfound focus. Tony’s gaze swiveled from one to the other, but no one else offered anything more.

Brookland. Not like he hadn’t heard the stories. Everyone had. It had been, what? Eight? Ten? How many years ago now? He couldn’t recall. He’d been newly crowned, enjoying taking the
reins from Obie, who had been serving as his Regent after his father’s death until he came to the age of majority. But he’d certainly heard the tales.

Some kind of sickness. A plague they said. Wiped nearly everyone out, entire villages. The Crown sent supplies, of course, medicines, food, that kind of thing, trying to help, but nothing save the passage time had ever had any effect, and even now, the area was mostly uninhabited. Most of the people there hadn’t made it a year past the onset of the disease. Great tragedy, blah, blah, blah. He was pretty sure he’d even declared some kind of national day of mourning, paid for some memorial to be built for the victims, that kind of thing. Kingly stuff.

He had not heard of any survivors, though it made sense why that would not be something you would exactly seek to share, given the stigma. No wonder those two were thick, if they’d survived that.

Didn’t explain why they’d joined up with Pierce though. Brookland was part of his own holdings, though far removed from the castle and city. They were Stark men, or should be, he mused. He’d never been, but had always heard it described as rather bucolic, near the rivers, lush and green from the descriptions. Most of the people there were farmers or fishermen, simple folk that sent fresh food and woven baskets for his coronation. He remembered because he’d given the baskets to Pepper, who had thought them beautiful, but, if the Crown’s art collection was any indication, she had strange tastes. Never any notions of dissent from that area, as far as he knew. So, why were they off stoking Pierce’s rebellion for him when they should, by rights, be serving their King?

A moment later, as if formed from his thoughts, Steve was standing behind him, casting a long shadow from the sun glinting through the trees as the day lengthened. Tony supposed stealth was probably a useful trait for a spy, but it was rather annoying when he was holding hot coffee and trying not to spill it on delicate parts. Tony shot him a disgruntled look, and noticed Steve was holding the remnants of his now shredded blanket crumpled up in his hands. Tony had to suppress a shit-eating grin at the stoic look on the good Captain’s face.

Probably not the best way to start trying to earn their confidence, but he figured if he seemed to give in too quickly, they’d never buy it. Also, that little bout of rebellion had been eminently satisfying for someone who had been held captive for three months. And the look on the Captain’s face as he stared down at his blanket, well, now blanket strips, to be more precise, was truly priceless.

“Barnes get lost? I hope?” Clint asked.

“He decided to go ahead and scout a little further,” Steve said evenly, though Tony could tell that wasn’t all there was to it by the tight way Steve was holding himself and tense line of his jaw. They’d fought again, probably over him. He wasn’t sorry. The more division between the team, the easier they were to manipulate. “We found a deer trail we can use once it’s full dark to skirt the village. Beyond that, we’ll have to avoid the roads, but it doesn’t look like we should meet too much in the way of resistance until we’re closer to the River. No sign of any troops, at least.” That last part seemed to register something fleeting across the woman’s face, but Tony couldn’t quite figure out what it was. He really should’ve paid more attention all those times Rhodey was trying to talk to him about military tactics.

As far as he was concerned, no troops in the area meant no easy way to find a handy battalion to run to, but beyond that, it really didn’t seem like it would be necessary to have troops here when most of the fighting was along the Western front and to the South. Or at least, it had been. He realized he actually had no idea what was going on now, and should probably see what he could glean about the current situation with the war effort before making any kind of escape plan.
“I think this is yours,” Steve said, handing him the shredded blanket that Tony had left lying forgotten in the dirt.

“Oh, I’d never use something in such poor condition, Captain, but thank you so much for the offer,” Tony replied, staring at the Captain as he stood there holding the blanket towards Tony with obvious reproach. Well, fuck him and his blanket, too, Tony thought. “I’ll just curl up with my nice, comfy ropes. Don’t worry about me,” he offered, holding his bound hands in the air and shaking them a bit for emphasis. He took a rather large amount of delight in the Captain’s frustrated grimace.

“Fine,” the man said, voice laced with disappointment as he stalked over to his pack and shoved the blanket inside. Tony congratulated himself on getting under the man’s skin that quickly.

“Friends! A great hunger is upon me! Let us feast under the gods’ own sky, as it was intended,” the one called Thor said in a booming voice as he made his way back to camp and dropped neatly down by the fire. Tony found himself glancing at Steve as he came to sit down by the fire, who opened his mouth to say something and then ended up just shaking his head and smiling a bemused smile. There was clearly a great deal of affection there, between all the team members, really. He had to admit that, whatever else he thought about them. They’d certainly been successful against his forces. Despite the non-bunny-killer.

“You’re not from around here, are you, big guy?” Tony asked Thor pointedly.

“Indeed, man of Iron, I am from a far away kingdom to the North, called Asgard, a most beautiful place, where I was once a prince, but due to mine own hubris, I have been rightly exiled to these base lands to learn the true meaning of power and to become worthy of my destiny,” Thor said as if announcing the weather. Tony looked around the circle of people sitting next to the fire, handing out cooked rabbit parts as if nothing unusual had just occurred.

“Okaaaay, then. Well. Um, welcome, then, I guess. Good luck with that,” Tony stammered.

Thor nodded happily in appreciation and took a large bite of rabbit leg. “Your warm tidings are a boon to my spirit, Man of Iron,” Thor said agreeably, munching heartily on the rabbit.

Tony braved another look towards Steve where he sat on the cold ground next to him, only to find him looking the opposite direction with a hand over his mouth, clearly trying not to laugh. Tony found himself trying to suppress his own grin. It felt odd, after all this time, like his face had forgotten what to do with mirth of any kind.

“So, how did you all meet? Become a team and all that?” Tony questioned. End up working for Pierce? He put the cup of coffee down and took a part of rabbit still roasting on a long stick that Bruce handed to him, finding it smelled like the most heavenly thing ever, and took a big bite. It somehow tasted better than any of the elaborate dishes his chef had prepared.

“Well,” Barnes began, as he made his way out of the layer of dusky darkness shrouding the trees and knelt by the fire, leaning against his spear for support. “I guess you could say we all bonded over our mutual hatred of all things Stark.”
Chapter 3

Steve watched Tony closely as Bucky tromped into camp and took his place next to Steve by the fire. “Did you find anything further ahead?” Steve asked Bucky pointedly, choosing to ignore Tony’s question and Bucky’s response. The last thing he wanted to do was talk about the King and everything that had led them to where they are now. The past was best left buried. It wasn’t that he didn’t understand Bucky’s bitterness, but using it to needle their prisoner because he was somehow loosely connected to Stark was hardly fair.

Bucky obviously wasn’t happy with the whole situation, but they’d had little choice. Or little choice that didn’t involve crossing lines Steve was in way prepared to cross, not for the sake of expediency anyway, he acknowledged.

He knew as well as anyone that war was brutal and required making compromises. Didn’t mean he had to make ones designed to make his own lot easier. That wasn’t what he’d committed to when Fury had found him in that alley, one arm holding Bucky’s prone form up, bleeding all over the place, but still standing. Being part of this, of what Pierce and Fury were trying to do, protecting people, that had to mean something even when it was hard. Especially when it was hard. Or they might as well have stayed in Brookland and died with the rest of them for all the good they’d be.

It was harder to convince Bucky of this after what had happened to Peggy.

“It’s clear as Barton’s head,” Bucky replied, grabbing a piece of rabbit and gnawing on it with gusto.

“Sitting right here, Barnes,” Clint responded evenly.

“Thought you were a log,” Bucky grinned, juice dripping down his chin. He wiped it with his good arm, reaching for the cup of water someone had placed in front of him. Steve had a brief flash of the baker’s wife back home, pushing her two boys apart where they were rolling in the mud, pummeling each other, grabbing them by the collars and shaking them both. He thought he understood her position a lot better now.

“So no one wants to share their stories?” Tony asked.

“Story night! I call the one with the guy who has the harem,” Clint cackled, banging his bow into the dirt for emphasis.

“Every time, Clint? Really?” Bruce questioned, a pained expression scrunching his features. “I don’t think I can read about the veils again. Just no. And I don’t think those are the kinds of stories Tony meant.”

“What’s story night?” Tony asked. Steve watched him out of the corner of his eye. He didn’t quite know what to make of the man. To have survived the Ten Rings…that said something. Not many did. Not any, really. The smoke they’d spotted in the mountains the day they’d found Tony… he’d seen enough of Stark’s methods to know that they relied on the firepowder a lot more than Pierce did, though he suspected that was largely because handling the stuff usually resulted in more deaths than it caused. Tony said he was an aromorer, but Steve could tell there was truth and lie in that, he just didn’t know which part was which or how it all fit together.

And he’d shredded Steve’s one half-decent blanket, which, while annoying, Steve couldn’t help but respect a bit. He understood well enough what it was like to feel powerless about your fate, to
want to find any way to strike out, to do something to control your circumstances, even if that something was against your own best interest. Not like he hadn’t spent a good part of his life doing stupid things against impossible odds.

He didn’t know what it was about Tony, couldn’t quite puzzle it out, but certainly, he was no mere armorer. In the first place, the Ten Rings would not have fooled with him for as long as they apparently had, based on Tony’s thin frame and bushy beard, if he was someone of such meager value. And though Tony often spoke informally, there was an undercurrent of cultured, educated tones that even Steve could pick out.

But it was more than those things. There was something indefinable about the way he stood, the way he looked at Steve and the rest of the team like they were something stuck to the bottom of his boot, how he held himself just slightly above and apart, unconsciously, Steve would swear because he wasn’t quite naïve enough to be fooled by Tony’s seemingly casual, ingratiating questions or his lackadaisical manner. He didn’t know what it was that was shifting behind those dark eyes, but he saw too much, understood far too much.

He had no doubt Tony was plotting something. His seemingly simple questions, like how far until they reached their destination or whether there was a river nearby to refill their water supplies, which were running low after their jaunt through the desert. Perfectly innocuous questions, in and of themselves, and the kind of thing someone in his position would ask….but Steve was absolutely certain that Tony wasn’t asking out of idle curiosity or genuine concern. The other man was planning, building some kind of web of information in his head, though for what end, Steve couldn’t be sure.

Steve hated the feeling of being outplayed, and yet, at the same time, found himself anticipating what would happen next with something akin to relish. They had spent so long doing what they had to do, to survive, to win, if what victory to be found in war could be called a win. Trying to figure Tony out, to keep one step ahead or at least not fall too far behind, was more exhilarating than any battle he’d fought in a long time, though he wasn’t sure what it said about him that it was so. He’d been thinking about it over and over, picking at it like something stuck in a tooth, ever since they’d found the men attacking Tony, something about the whole situation not sitting right with him. A part of him wished it would just come to a head and they could be done with it, but when had things ever worked out so cleanly for them?

“Story night is…not tonight,” Steve answered, glancing quickly over at Tony to gauge his reaction, wondering if he would ask more of his questions. “Maybe some other time. We have to get a move on. It’s a clear night. We should make good time.”

“Aw, man, come on, it’s been ages since—“ Clint started.

“You take point,” Steve said to Clint, standing up and shuffling sand over the small fire. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Tony looking down and away to try to hide his grin. The team began quickly and efficiently clearing the campsite, leaving little trace they’d ever been there. Steve watched Natasha double-check Tony’s bonds and the annoyed eye roll from Tony in response. “Nat, take off the leg ropes. We need to make up some time. But…we’re close to the village, so…” he said with a nod. “Sorry about this,” Steve apologized, causing Tony’s head to snap up when he realized Steve was apologizing to him.

“Happy to oblige, Cap,” Nat responded.

“Thanks ever so much. Really. You’re too kind,” Tony said, not at all gratefully, as Natasha approached him to check his bonds. She knelt gracefully beside him and just smiled as she pulled out a long, thin strip of fabric and held it up in front of his face. Steve thought the dramatics were a
bit much, but held his tongue.

“Oh…oh, you have no idea how many people are cheering you on right now, Red. You should know, I’m going to remember this,” Tony said with an almost feral smile, as Natasha stepped behind him, slotting the gag between his teeth with a sharp tug. Tony’s comment may have been directed at Natasha, but he was looking directly at Steve when he said it, something hard and determined in the lines of Tony’s face as he looked at Steve balefully across the fire when Natasha tied the gag behind his head.

“That’s a good look on you,” Bucky said to Tony with slight grin, tossing the rabbit bone to the side and standing up.

“Leave him be, Buck,” Steve said, stepping between the two of them. Bucky just shrugged and grabbed his pack from the dirt, heading off down the trail at a steady pace. That left Steve to deal with Tony.

Steve tried to ignore the pang of guilt. Tony was a prisoner after all. The last thing they needed to have to deal with was a bunch of angry villagers roused from their beds by Tony screaming for help. Steve shook his head as he gathered his pack. There was nothing for it, really, though the sight of it set him on edge in a way he couldn’t quite describe.

If a man could wear bonds with dignity, he supposed Tony managed it somehow, looking imperviously at him as he stood there when he should, by all rights, look beaten and subdued. Somehow, he doubted the man was capable of such a feat. He helped Tony to his feet as best he could, considering the awkwardness of the bindings. Everyone else had set off already, leaving him holding the end of the rope that connected to Tony’s wrists.

He stared at it dumbly for a few seconds, wishing he’d thought to ask Bruce or Clint to take over, but he hadn’t. And he really couldn’t ask them to do something he wasn’t willing to do himself. Yet the thought of pulling Tony along like some…well. It had been one thing in the desert, when he’d really thought Tony might bolt, or try to grab for a weapon, which would’ve been a much worse strategy. Now…he sighed. “You walk in front. I’ll follow,” Steve said. For a split second, Steve thought Tony was just going to flat out refuse to walk, but he just turned and walked nonchalantly down the trail, as if he did this all the time, Steve feeling ridiculous as he followed behind.

They made good time through the forest, even at night and with Tony not exactly being used to this kind of march, following the deer trail he and Bucky had scouted earlier. Clint checked in from time to time, noting nothing of concern along their path. Once they were far enough from the village, Steve called a halt for a respite, everyone gratefully dragging out their water and stores of food. Steve stepped over behind where Tony sat on the soft ground beneath a towering oak and undid the gag, stashing it in his pocket in case it was needed again. “We’re far enough from the village now. They wouldn’t hear you anyway, so I’m going to ask you to not even try it,” Steve offered, holding the bearded man’s gaze. He handed Tony his own jug of water and some of the hard, dry cakes they all carried, which Tony chewed delicately while making a distasteful grimace.

“I know they’re not exactly the best, but they travel well,” Steve informed him as he undid his scabbard and set it down next to him on the grass opposite of Tony, propping his elbows up on bent knees.

“So do bricks. Doesn’t mean I want to eat them,” Tony said, still trying to chew his way through his first bite. Steve mostly managed to keep his smile in, though that took some effort. The team, save Bucky, rarely joked with him, the chain of command, even as loose as they were in the field, still working to keep his relationships with the rest of the team at a certain distance.
“Your assessment of this fare is most astute, Man of Iron,” Thor said as he took a large bite of the hard meal cake. “In Asgard, we would eat suckling pig roasted over a spit for days, rubbed with herbs and mead. But I find I have a much greater appreciation for those who have not such things, and yet live lives filled with joy and worth, never lamenting what they do not have, but taking pleasure in the things they do.”

“Is he—” Tony began.

“Pretty much all the time, yeah,” Steve answered with a lopsided smile. “We, uh…I mean me… I’m honestly not sure if he really is the rightful prince of some far away kingdom filled with riches or completely insane. Either way, he wields that hammer like it’s an extension of him, so…”

“Fair point,” Tony agreed. “How’d you end up with him?”

“We were part of a battalion marching through the lowlands and came to a village that had given him shelter for a time on whatever journey he feels he’s on. He offered his life in exchange for sparing the village. We actually had no intention of doing anything to the village except maybe trying to barter for some food, but he didn’t know that. They’d all heard stories about crops burned, villages destroyed and, uh, other stuff,” Steve explained, clearing his throat over the words. “Anyway, Fury didn’t know what to do with him, so I offered him a spot on the team. Gotta like a guy that would offer to sacrifice himself for a bunch of people he just met. He’s been with us ever since.”

“So he doesn’t hate Stark?” Tony questioned. “Your friend,” Tony said, nodding at Bucky, who was leaning against a large tree drinking from his own water jug and studiously looking anywhere but at Steve or Tony, “Said all of you did.”

“I don’t think Thor hates anyone,” Steve confessed, chewing on his own brick cake. They really were terrible. You got used to them because you had to, because there wasn’t much else out here, but they seemed to taste worse when someone pointed it out.

“And the rest of them? I mean, uh, other than your friend, who is pretty obvious about it?” Tony continued to press.

“They all have their reasons,” Steve said noncommittally, looking down as he used a stick to draw in the dirt in front of his feet. He wasn’t sure what he was drawing, the lines and whorls not quite coming together just yet.

“And you?” Tony asked, watching him as he traced the end of the stick through the dirt. “You and Barnes survived the plague to cross leagues of Stark land to go work for Pierce? Makes no sense, is all I’m saying. You seem to hold a lot against Stark, but Pierce is a liar and oathbreaker and yet you fight under his banner. He betrayed his King,” Tony spat out, as if the words themselves offended him. Steve should’ve been surprised that Tony knew where he and Bucky had come from, but he couldn’t dredge it up. Tony was entirely too good at finding things out.

“He had his reasons. I guess we all do,” Steve said pointedly.

“Excuses aren’t the same thing as reasons,” Tony replied, staring at him as the torchlight danced off his shield.

“I didn’t say excuses. I said reasons,” Steve snapped, staring right back, but there was something unnervingly accusatory in Tony’s gaze, as if he’d offered the man some personal affront. He suddenly wanted to look away, to get up and walk on ahead, leaving Tony to Natasha or Bruce to deal with, and not have to be looked at like that anymore, but he stayed here he was, returning
Tony’s look as calmly as he could. They sat like that in silence for a long moment before Tony finally looked away, cleared his throat and took another sip of water. He handed the jug back to Steve, who took a long swallow himself, if only to give himself something to do.

Steve ducked his head between his legs, pressing his forehead against a fisted hand. They were all tired, Tony probably more so than the rest of them, given the effects his captivity and not being used to this kind of travel. And Tony had gone from being a prisoner to a moment of freedom to being a prisoner again. Now, he faced becoming a prisoner of war, rotting somewhere while the privileged few argued over which soldiers were worth trading for, which lives were worth striking a bargain. Were their situations reversed, he would probably be handling it far more poorly, to be honest. Steve had to admit that he would certainly be trying to escape every chance he got, would feel that was his duty, under the circumstances. He could hardly hold it against Tony for feeling the same.

“I know it probably sounds odd, but…I’m sorry about all this. You…I’m sure you were…are…just trying to do what you think is right. I know Bucky can be harsh, but…a lot of people have followed the Starks for generations. I mean, I understand. Your loyalty. And I respect that, I do. My dad…he died in service to King Howard during the Great War,” Steve admitted to Tony’s surprised look.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Tony offered, an odd note of solemnity in his voice.

“I think… I think he went off to die, to be honest. Or, at least, I don’t think he planned on coming back, which in a war amounts to much the same thing,” Steve said, wondering why he was bothering to tell Tony this, but feeling he owed the man some kind of explanation, even if it wasn’t the entire one. “That…was probably for the best. For my…for everyone. He wasn’t…ah. Well. Anyway,” Steve shrugged, not sure why he even mentioned that about his Dad. He hadn’t really thought of it in years. Or he hadn’t let himself think of it. He knew well enough the genesis of his need to do something, to always be the one stepping in the middle, standing up when he should lay down.

“Sounds like he and Howard would’ve gotten along great,” Tony replied gruffly, giving a derisive snort. Steve raised an eyebrow at the bitterness he heard in the other man’s voice. Clearly, King Howard had been something of a disappointment to Tony, yet he seemed fond enough of the younger Stark, which was honestly the opposite opinion of most of the populace.

“I thought…well, I always thought King Howard was considered a good man?” Steve said, brow furrowed in question. “I mean…not that we really had much to do with any of the politics of the Crown, not out in the Riverlands, but I guess…he seemed well-liked enough,” Steve finished rather lamely.

To be honest, all of the political intrigues had been so removed from his life growing up, he really hadn’t paid much attention when the topic would occasionally come up. After all, what would make a king take any interest in them, way out there in the middle of nowhere, with their boats and their nets and their small patches of farmland? He closed his eyes for a brief spell, feeling the bile in his throat start to sour, clawing at his throat as one image after the other flashed before his eyes, his nostrils flaring with the scent of smoke, ash coating his mouth. He wasn’t aware that he’d clenched his hands into fists until he felt a warm hand clasp his own.

“You…uh, you okay there?” Tony asked hesitantly. Steve managed to open his eyes, and tried to say something in response to Tony’s question, but before he could form words, Bucky was at his side, throwing his longspear down in the dirt, metal fingers cold against the side of Steve’s head as he grasped both sides of Steve’s jaw and forced Steve’s gaze to meet his own.
“Steve? Steve, you with me? Don’t do this to yourself, please, just don’t…we’re not there anymore, it’s done. Don’t…don’t think about it, okay?” Bucky’s voice pleaded. “It’s done. It’s over. Just…we have a mission, Steve. Remember? The mission? I need you to focus, okay?”

“I—yeah, I’m okay, Buck,” Steve stuttered out, but it sounded like it was coming from the end of a very long tunnel. “Really,” he reiterated, hearing his voice get stronger. “Thanks, Buck. I’m good.”

“What the hell did you say to him?” Bucky demanded loudly, turning on Tony.

“Hey, I just mentioned something about Howard the Apparently Wonderful, may he ever shoot rainbows out his ass, and he went all blank on me. Believe me, I’m completely fine not mentioning Howard again,” Tony replied, still looking over at Steve with something akin to concern or at least stupefaction. Steve should congratulate himself on managing to surprise the man for once.

“It’s okay, Bucky. He didn’t say anything. I just…it was something I was thinking about. I’m good now, really. Thanks,” Steve said, patting Bucky on the shoulder and giving him his best reassuring nod.

“Whatever. You—‘ Bucky started, pointing at Tony, “You’re an asshole.”

“Bucky—that’s enough,” Steve said sharply, nudging the man harder on the shoulder, putting some meaning behind it this time.

Barnes looked at Steve a long moment, and Steve could tell he worried and frustrated, and anxious to get back to Fury with what they knew. “Fine. Fine, Steve, you’re on your own with him,” Barnes said tightly, moving to the far end of the small glade where they’d stop to rest, radiating disapproval.

Steve watched Tony lean back in the grass, pillowing his hands behind his head as best he could with the rope binding his wrists, and staring up at the starry sky peeking through the tree branches above. Steve wasn’t sure what to say. His attempt at empathy by talking about King Howard had not gone well, to say the least. He was oddly compelled to try again though. Maybe because Bucky’s harshness or maybe because he’d gotten locked in his memories again and Tony had seen that, but wasn’t looking at him any differently.

“You can see part of the Ox from here,” Steve said, gesturing to a cluster of stars that formed part of the great Ox that the ancients believed pulled the moon up each night.

“You know the stars?” Tony asked with a tone of surprise.

“A bit. The fishermen, back home, used to use the stars to navigate,” Steve explained. “They would go out in the morning, before dawn and return late in the evening, nets full. Sometimes the stars and their knowledge of the coast were all they had to make it back.”

“Of course,” Tony nodded. Steve had a moment to wonder what thoughts were shifting behind dark eyes.

“You thought about being a fisherman?” Tony questioned curiously.

“I—well, no. I mean, I would have, but…I wasn’t exactly what you’d call robust as a child,” Steve admitted, glad for the darkness as Tony looked him up and down with a raised eyebrow. “Yeah, well, I grew,” Steve said with bit of a huff. “But you apprentice when you’re young. My Dad was dead by that time, so it was just mom and me, and—Well. I picked up what of it that I could, just from listening to them talk. And one of the fishermen, he’d lost a hand to some kind of accident, so
couldn’t go out with the boats anymore, but he could patch a net like no one else. He’d patch it once and it would never break again, they said. He showed me a bit, when he could,” Steve explained with a slight shrug, still poking at the dirt with his stick.

It was a ship, he realized. He supposed he’d been talking about home too much. There were the sails, wind puffing them out, giving the ship a sense of speed as the proud bow cut a line through the water. He stared at it a moment, caught Tony looking too, and scratched it over with his boot.

“But you didn’t become a fisherman or a…net-patcher…you became a soldier. Why?” Tony asked, the intense, studying gaze back again, as if Steve was some kind of bug he had stuck a pin in and was studying. Steve knew he shouldn’t say more. He could hear the rest of the team shuffling about camp, packing up and ready to keep on moving.

“After I got a bit older, grew, stopped being sick all the damn time…well, a lot changed. I was strong and fast, could do things that I’d never been able to do as a kid. It seemed like a gift. There aren’t a lot of options, not for people like me or Bucky. I thought…I should serve. Do something to help,” Steve said, breaking the twig he’d been drawing with into smaller and smaller pieces. “I wanted to be a part of something that was going to make the world better, something I could believe in,” Steve said quietly. Tony was watching him again, in that focused way that so unnerved Steve. He was probably planning to kill him in his sleep, Steve thought with a grimace.

“Just that I understand, is all. I mean, why you support Stark. Or the Crown or whatever it is you’re loyal to,” Steve continued. “That isn’t a bad thing. Too little of that these days, when it comes down to it. Pierce…he’s hired a lot of folks, good men, mostly, and to be fair, a lot of the men who joined up wouldn’t be here if there weren’t a daily ration in it. But…it isn’t the same as fighting for something you truly believe in. Bucky, he…lost a lot and puts most of that on the King, rightly or wrongly. I don’t know,” Steve sighed.

“Maybe it’s just easy to hate someone so far away, to blame them for everything that went wrong. Maybe it never could’ve gone right again. But…I can’t help but think…all that power to help people. I mean, can you imagine? To have that and to…shun it? To use it to serve yourself instead of your people?” Steve asked, looking down at Tony, something pained flashing across the man’s expression, but it was gone before Steve could do more than register it. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand. Maybe I don’t want to. Anyway, I don’t pretend to understand the mind of a King.”

“Me neither,” Tony said with a grimace, head thrown back as he stared up at the stars. “Me neither,” he breathed out.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony followed along as behind Steve as dutifully as he could manage. His muscles ached a bit, fingers tingling with pinpricks that he tried to massage away. He spent most of his time alternately avoiding tripping over roots and landing face first in the dirt and imagining various suitable punishments for his captors. Barnes, he could lock up in the stocks. Have the city’s occupants toss rotten food or other foul items at him. That was a hugely satisfying image. He dwelled on that whenever the man turned to glare at him or smirked at him when Tony took an ungainly step.

He could put the woman’s skills with a blade to good use peeling onions by the sack full down in the kitchens. Or maybe send her to work in the laundry, wringing the lye from the linens until her hands cracked and bled. The archer he could have clean out the stalls with the smallest spade he could find. Or scrub the latrines in the soldier’s barracks. Put that keen eyesight to something more suitable than scanning the horizon for Stark troops. He grinned happily at the image. The doctor he actually kind of liked, oddly enough.

Bruce was, at least, genuinely concerned about Tony’s injury, so there was that. Seemed bright. Knowledgeable about plants and herbs. Tony had spied a rolled up bag of medicines carefully arranged in individual pouches. Tony wondered idly what had led the doctor to this group, how he’d ended up part of a team like this, working for Pierce, when he seemed so mild-mannered. He wondered if he could persuade him to come to work for him in some capacity. They always needed good doctors, and he seemed to be at least serviceable.

Thor…well, it was hard to muster any kind of anger at someone so gods-damned genial all the time. It was annoying, to say the least. But, he couldn’t stop himself from smiling nearly every time the man opened his mouth, enjoying the drama and the team’s collective reaction, or sometimes the very determined lack thereof, particularly from the Captain. He could use Thor to repair some of the damage Pierce’s forces had done to the city’s fortifications, put that hammer-swinging to good use, he supposed. Thor would actually probably enjoy that a tad too much, but Tony had the suspicion that Thor enjoyed most anything a tad too much.

As for the Captain…well, that, as it turned out, was a bit harder. He’d have to think of some degradation truly suitable for the man who’d ordered him bound and gagged and then dragged through his own gods-damned lands like cattle. But every time his mind focused on potential acceptable punishments, he thought about blank stares and hard, horrible bread he’d taken from his own pack and given to Tony.

The important thing to focus on for now was to convince the team to stop being quite so vigilant around Tony, to see him as unthreatening, perhaps even willing to be complicit in return for a few comforts. In short, someone too out of his element to possibly try anything. Unsurprisingly, he seemed to be having something of a difficult time pulling that off. The good Captain saw far too much, Tony knew. The red-haired woman was entirely too perceptive, as well. And she still had his explosives, those precious few chunks of fire and death tossed casually into her pack.

Sometime close to dawn, the Captain called a halt to their little march. Once again, Tony found himself practically asleep on his feet. He didn’t get a blanket this time, but made himself a place by the small fire the doctor had started.

“Want me to check that?” the doctor asked, pointing an elbow at Tony’s chest as he stirred some
kind of brew in a small pot over the fire.

“Later. It’s fine for now. The, uh, poultice thing seemed to help,” Tony admitted, hoping that perhaps praising the man’s skills might ingratiate him a bit. “Thanks.”

Bruce just nodded and went back to stirring. “Captain’s orders. You’re to get as much medical care as I can muster out here, which, admittedly, isn’t exactly ideal. You should keep the poultice on it, though. It’s the metal that’s the main problem. It’s poison to your body, but it’s also protecting the damaged tissue and the pocket underneath while it heals. That’s a pretty deep wound. It should’ve killed you, to be honest.”

“It almost did,” Tony replied heavily, running a hand over his chest unconsciously.

“Well, the clay will help leach out the poison, but I have another idea. It’s a salt that I’ve heard of used in some of the villages down the river from the mines. Makes a solution when boiled. It’s hard to come by though. Not exactly your usual sea salt, I mean. I’m going to talk to Cap about it. See what we might be able to do,” Bruce promised.

“Can’t see him deviating from the mission to go after a seasoning,” Tony said, staring down the empty trail ahead of him.

“He might surprise you,” Bruce said, going back to his pot of stew and adding a pinch of some kind of spice. The woman was sitting on the grass a few yards away, sharpening her knife on the edge of a piece of flint, while the archer climbed a tree like one of those long-limbed creatures that king from the desert lands had brought to court with him. What a stir he had caused, with his menagerie and attendants and, of course, that wonderful chunk of rock he’d gifted Tony with as a token of friendship between their kingdoms. That wonderful chunk of metal with its incredible purity and lightness…the one Tony had been idly studying on and off in his workshop, trying to think of what to do with it…he tapped the plate in his chest again. Huh. There was an idea.

Barnes and the Captain were nowhere to be seen, probably scouting ahead again. He turned his attention back to Bruce, who was adding some sprigs of herbs to the pot, apparently their dinner. Breakfast. Whatever. His stomach twisted and rumbled at the thought, though he wasn’t sure if it was hunger or nausea.

“Where’d the rest of them get off to?” Tony asked, trying for nonchalance.

Bruce just shrugged a bit and went on with his stirring. Tony sighed in frustration. It was like they didn’t trust him. “Look, it’s not like I’m going to—” he cut off, the unmistakable sound of metal striking metal echoing around him. He shifted his head back and forth in confusion, looking for the source of the attack. “It’s just Thor and Steve,” Bruce said calmly, taking a small packet of spice from his pack and adding it to the mixture. “They’re sparring,” he offered, by way of explanation.

“Uh-huh,” Tony said, craning his neck to try to locate the two of them, but the sound was too dissonant to pin down.

“Wanna go watch? This needs to boil for a bit,” Bruce offered.

“Sure,” Tony responded, rising to his feet and following along, holding the rope that dangled from his wrists up enough that he wouldn’t trip. They walked further down to where a copse of trees had formed a half-moon around the side of the trail.

The Captain and Thor were circling each other, both grinning like fools, as Steve held his shield in
one hand, sword in the other, and Thor twirled his heavy hammer in sweeping circles, finally arching it up and slamming it down where Steve’s head had been a second earlier, instead reverberating off the center of the shield. Barnes stood off to one side, leaning on his longspear for support, jeering at both of them in turn.

Watching them, it was hard not to be impressed. Thor’s brute strength, longer reach and fearlessness against the Captain’s speed, agility, and seemingly prescient knowledge of his opponent’s weaknesses and tendencies. At some point in the melee, the Captain lost his sword, but somehow managed to turn the shield itself into a weapon.

All in all, it was truly an incredible display of fighting abilities. For all the casualness they projected around each other, the teasing and easy banter, Tony would not want to be faced with any of them on the battlefield. He could appreciate a bit more where Rhodey’s grudging admiration had come from. These were warriors, through and through, battle-honed in blood and carnage and death. When they were both left panting, shoulders hunched in exhaustion, Steve finally raised the hand not holding the shield, a wide smile on his face, making him look entirely too young for this kind of thing. Tony blinked, turning to find Bruce watching him thoughtfully. Another damn one of them that sees too much. Fantastic.

“A draw, then, my friend?” Thor offered, raising his hammer high, arms spread wide.

“I’m the one that lost my weapon, so I’ll take it,” Steve said with a deferent nod to Thor as he walked over next to Tony to reach into his pack and grab the water pouch. He nodded to Bruce, who then shuffled back to the fire and their dinner, leaving Tony standing by Steve.

“I could’ve killed you both like five times,” Barton said, dropping down from the tree and landing in a crouch and walking back to the fire without another word.

“You didn’t seem exactly weaponless,” Tony observed as Steve watched Barton walk away. He nodded toward the shield Steve had leaned against the tree while he drank.

“Anything can be a weapon,” Steve replied with a shrug, taking a long drink. “Guess I don’t have to tell that to the sand-thrower.” Tony found himself grinning before he could stop it from forming.

“I’m also a hair-puller,” Tony said, still grinning.

“I knew you were trouble,” Steve said with a crooked smile, shaking his head as he stowed his water bottle back in his pack.

“You two practice like that a lot? You seemed to know what he was going before he did,” Tony questioned curiously. He’d watched close enough to notice Steve catching the bigger man off-guard a couple of times, managing to get in some strikes that appeared merely lucky, but Tony doubted that was what they were.

“We’ve done it enough I know a few of his tells. He probably knows some of mine, too,” Steve admitted.

“Indeed, a mock battle with a friend can be even more edifying than merely flaying your enemy,” Thor observed. “You are more likely to let your guard down with a friend, who can then see where you might be at a disadvantage. Truly, it is a blessing from the gods to be able to spar with one such as my shield brother!”

“I like sparring with you, too, Thor. I learn something every time,” Steve said, rubbing his shoulder
as he picked his sword up out of the dirt and slid it into the scabbard he’d grabbed from next to his pack.

“I take it today’s lesson was something along the lines of ‘don’t drop your sword’?” Tony asked, leaning back against the tree behind him.

“Today’s lesson was what to do if you drop your sword,” Steve sighed.

“Good lesson, I suppose. Where did you learn to fight like that? Not in Brookland, I presume,” Tony questioned, his interest piqued.

“Phillips,” Steve said simply. Well. Huh. That explained a lot, Tony thought. Phillips was older than dirt, been around for as long as Tony could remember. He’d been in the Royal army at one point, worked closely with Tony’s father in the Great War, then broken off to do his own thing. He trained soldiers to be elite fighters, the best of the best, but he only took the army’s top candidates, if any. These days, it seemed he spent his time rejecting candidates rather than training anyone, or, at least, that was the last bit of information Tony’s mind was able to supply.

Tony couldn’t remember how many the Crown had sent to him that he’d actually accepted into training in the years before the war started. Five, maybe? Out of tens of thousands? Rhodey would know. Hell, Rhodey had applied for a slot, and been summarily rejected. How had some kid from Brookland ended up training under Phillips with no Royal commission, not even a sponsorship from one of the lesser houses behind him? Didn’t seem possible.

“Dinner!” Bruce called out, leading to something akin to a stampede of wild horses back to the fire. They all lined up, Natasha nudging Barton out of the way, Barton knocking Barnes’ bowl out of his hands before Bruce could empty a spoonful in it. Though it was really just a few boiled vegetables in water and what looked like part of a roasted bird of some kind, it still smelled delicious, and Tony wasn’t sure when the last time was that he’d had fresh food. When Tony finally got his serving, he quickly lifted the bowl to his mouth for a long swallow. He couldn’t recall the last thing that had tasted this good.

He settled down in the soft grass by the fire next to Bruce and Thor, watching, Barnes, Natasha and Barton across the fire. “Where’s Steve?” he asked curiously, looking around and realizing for the first time that Steve hadn’t followed them back after Bruce’s pronouncement.

“He’s on watch,” Natasha said, sipping delicately from her bowl. “He wouldn’t eat anyway,” she said with a slight shrug of her shoulders. “Says he likes the biscuits.”

“No one likes the biscuits,” Barton interjected through a great gulp of soup.

“The Captain likes a team that is strong and healthy, I believe,” Thor said, draining his soup bowl and passing it to Bruce for a second helping. “That is as filling for a leader as any meal.” Thinking about the hard, tasteless travel cakes, Tony somehow doubted that. He shifted his gaze down the trail again, but couldn’t make out anything even in the morning light.

After breakfast-dinner-whatever, they all found their respective places, making what comfort they could from their packs and blankets on the grass. The woman tied the rope around his hands again, then knotted the lead around a small tree.

Tony tossed and turned for far too long before finally falling into a fitful sleep that seemed to last no time before he was being shaken awake by the Captain. He blinked, surprised to see the sun still high in the sky. The Captain had seemed determined to move at night, this deep into Stark lands anyway.
“We have to move,” Steve said. “Sorry. Riders,” was the only explanation given as the gag was thrust into his mouth again and he was hauled to his feet. “Let’s go,” Steve said to the team. “Clint, you take point. I want your eyes looking out. Bucky, hang back and see if you can follow them for a bit. I’d like to know where they’re headed. Nat, you have him?” Steve asked, and Tony knew he was the ‘him’ meant by that when the redhead unwound his lead rope from the tree trunk and nodded.

The makeshift camp was quickly packed up, Bruce covering any evidence of the small fire he’d used earlier for their soup, Barton and Barnes carefully breaking branches and scattering leaves in opposite directions, in an attempt to conceal their trail or at least confuse anyone who might come upon it.

Tony found himself pulled along behind the woman, Steve following some distance behind Barton and Thor behind him, eyeing the forest as if it was going to suddenly come alive and present something of a challenge. At some point, they veered off the trail for no reason Tony could discern, but by the tenseness of the team’s movements, he assumed the riders, whoever they might be, were relatively near. Near enough to be of concern, anyway.

The team was using hand signals now, communicating silently as they made their way through the brush. He heard the solid, rhythmic thump of hooves before he saw them, six columns of riders, two abreast, making their way down a wider cart path that largely paralleled the deer trail the team had been following deeper in the woods. Two other riders joined them a moment later, appearing out of the forest in front of the larger group, clearly having come from some position ahead of the team along the trail or close enough to it. He squinted against the sun, trying to see, finally able to make out the distinctive red and gold of his colors on their surcoats and shields as they drew closer to where he and the woman crouched behind large oak.

He could try something, now, with his men so close. Overwhelm the woman, make a run for it. Get the gag out, shout for help. It might work. It might be enough. Would they hear him through their armor and the sound of the horses? Not a definite, but it might be the best chance he got. Freedom was too close not to---dammit. He glared up at the woman as she held the blade up in front of his face, a knowing look reflected back at him. “Don’t,” she warned softly. She cocked her head at a soft, trilling noise, almost a birdsong.

“I have him, Nat. Go,” Bruce said quietly, sitting down by Tony. The woman looked at Tony for a long moment, and then slowly wound the end of the rope attached to his wrists around one of the tree’s roots that had surfaced out of the ground, tying it with what appeared to be the most complicated knot known to man. She nodded once to Bruce and took off through the foliage, in the direction of the riders.

Tony looked balefully at Bruce, raising his bound hands in supplication and rolling his eyes. Bruce just patted his shoulder, but it felt enough like commiseration to be something of a comfort. So close. So very, very close. Story of his life. Anything he wanted was always just that much out of reach. Or, he spent too much time tied to tree roots. Hard to say for sure.

He let his hands rest in his lap, while Bruce scanned the road down which the riders had disappeared. He leaned his head back against the trunk of the tree, staring up at the sun filtering through the dense branches of the trees, letting himself stretch out his legs. Which was when his knee hit the pack. The woman’s pack. The one she’d left behind with Bruce and Tony while she went off to probably suck the life out of Tony’s soldiers. The one with the yellowish rocks that blew up so beautifully that she’d taken from Tony when they’d first captured him.

Tony shifted lower, leaning back against the tree root where he was tied, and turning on his side, as
if resting. Bruce glanced down at him, but quickly went back to scanning the forest when he saw Tony wasn’t struggling or attempting to undo his bonds. He let his hands fall to his side, inches away from the woman’s discarded pack. Another low, trilling birdsong filled the wood, and Bruce’s gaze shifted, becoming sharper, tension making him stand up straighter as he studied the forest and cart path.

Tony nudged his knee against the woman’s pack, tipping it just enough that the opening splayed open a bit. Enough for him to carefully insert his bound hands while Bruce listened for approaching riders, scrabbling fingers finding a surprisingly soft blanket, clothes, something sharp that nicked his palm and finally, finally, there. There. He wrapped his hands around the small, sackcloth bag in which he’d watched her drop the chunks of explosive. He pulled it out carefully, angling his knee to block what his hands were doing, hoping not to draw Bruce’s attention away from his careful watch of the woods. He kept his hands clenched around them for a bit, making no sudden movement. Finally, he moved his hands as if to scratch at his chest, which Bruce knew itched from the infection, and dropped the bag with the chunks of chemical into one of the pockets in his shirt.

Bruce looked down at him as Tony shifted slightly, but not with the suspicion that always etched the woman or Barnes’ gazes. Tony wrung out a grimace as best he could around the gag, as if he was in pain, and saw the concern flash in the doctor’s eyes. He would’ve felt bad for the deceit, except for the whole being held prisoner by people who were trying to overthrow him thing.

He wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that. Long enough for Tony’s muscles to grow tired and cramped, but the sun hadn’t changed position enough for too much time to have passed before the Captain was kneeling at his side. With a quick nod to Bruce, he removed Tony’s gag and handed him a pouch of water. Tony realized his throat was parched from trying to swallow around the gag, and drank deeply.

“Sorry about that,” Steve said with a grimace. “They were a little closer than we would have expected, but they’re gone now. I don’t know what they’re doing out this far from one of their encampments, but…well. Anyway, here,” he said, pressing one of the hard, horrible cakes into Tony’s hand. Tony mumbled some kind of less than heartfelt thanks, but nibbled on the cake anyway, finding it actually settled his stomach a bit.

“We can’t keep to the trail any longer. That’s going to delay us even more,” Steve told Bruce. The woman appeared seemingly out of nowhere behind Bruce, Barnes following close behind.

“Clint says they’re following the river,” she told Steve. “I don’t like it. Something’s not right here.”

“A lot of things aren’t right here,” Steve agreed. “Let’s just focus on getting back to camp. We’re already going to be overdue.”

“Our foes have departed, my friends,” Thor said as he ambled back to their circle. “Good riddance, I would say, but their logic leaves me baffled. It is not a feeling that I welcome.”

“We can’t neglect our mission to go on some folly after ever Stark soldier we see. We have to get back and report. You know that. And, there’s Tony now…so,” Steve said, looking off down the cart path as if he wanted nothing more but to follow the Stark soldiers. Good plan. Let’s do that, Tony almost said. “But, I agree. Something is off. We’ll keep to our route, generally, but we’re close enough to the river to follow it for a bit, see if we can spot them again. If we can figure out what they’re up to out here, Fury might be a bit more willing to help on other things. It’s worth at least a try, anyway.” Steve said, grabbing Natasha’s pack from the ground beside Tony and shouldering it before reaching down to undo the knot the woman had tied in Tony’s bonds.
Tony gave the water pouch back to him, with a mumbled thanks, before they all started filing through the woods again, this time with Steve and Thor cutting through the underbrush where needed, keeping away from any discernible trail, Barnes pacing them some distance behind. They went on like this for some time, until the trees and bushes began to thin, the leaves under their feet becoming looser as the land sloped downward toward the river.

Natasha and Clint joined them after some time. Tony watched Natasha take her bag from Steve and sling it over her own shoulder, apparently not a witch possessing of a third eye because she did not notice anything amiss. Tony felt the weight of the cubes against his side where they were concealed in the bag in his pocket. He wasn’t yet sure exactly how he would use them, and he needed something he could use for a fuse, not to mention a light and the right moment to make it worth the risk, but at least now he had a tool. Something he could use. A way out, if he played it smart.

The river was close. They’d have to cross it at one of the many skinny, haphazard bridges that had sprung up along the river this far away from the city, long past where the Royal engineers would have bothered. Built by peasants, most of the bridges were rickety contraptions, wide enough only for a man on horseback or perhaps pulling a small wagon or cart to cross. Spindly, wooden things that would burn so easily. If he could put the fast-flowing river between him and the rest of the team, he could find the Stark riders and salvation. Get them to take him to Rhodey or the nearest encampment or stronghold. He could see it. How it could work. Taste it. It was so close. He just needed the right opportunity.

He continued to trudge along behind Bruce, who was holding the rope attached to his hands, staring ahead, working out more and more details of his possible escape plan as he went. A shadow of a plan was forming in his head, but he needed more information, more time to turn it over and over again in his mind, taking it apart and putting it back together. He was still mulling it over when Barnes shoved past him, shooting him an annoyed look as if Tony’s presence in the space he wanted to occupy offended him. It was enough to send him stumbling into Bruce, who steadied him with a hand.

“Careful, James,” Bruce warned lowly.

It was enough to shift his mind from plotting escape back to his second favorite mental pastime. Barnes cast a look back at Tony in the wake of Bruce’s warning. Tony grinned widely in return, causing Barnes to blink in confusion before shaking his head in disgust and making his way up ahead to join Steve near the lead of their merry band.

With each grudging step, his mind conjured up an image, something to sustain him while he planned and waited for his chance. Barnes, in the stocks, with rotten vegetables thrown at him. Rotting garbage was a good look for Barnes. Natasha crying over sacks full of onions. Barton mucking out the horse shit with a tiny trowel, making sure to dig deeply into the groves of the stable planks while Tony looked on in disdain. Bruce making himself useful in one of the medicinaries. Thor pounding away at block after block of much-needed additional fortifications to the wall. As for the Captain….Steve, he could…

Well. That was certainly not the image he’d been expecting, he thought, glancing up and catching sight of a tall, blond head bobbing through the trees. Not that he was opposed to it, of course. Sure, in theory, it wasn’t allowed, but it was his rule, after all. Not like anyone would gainsay him. Not like he couldn’t offer a choice. Dark, dank cell or…an alternative.

Barnes, in the stocks, with rotten vegetables thrown at him. Tony grinned spitefully. Rotting garbage was a good look for Barnes. Natasha crying over sacks full of onions. Barton mucking
out the horse shit with a tiny trowel, making sure to dig deeply into the groves of the stable planks while Tony looked on in disdain. Bruce making himself useful in one of the medicinaries. Thor pounding away at block after block of much-needed additional fortifications to the wall.

Steve sprawled naked on the red velvet coverlet of Tony’s bed, looking up at him with dark, hooded eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are like those little pellets of crack they feed the rats in lab experiments. Sooooon sooooon.
Soooon sooooon sooooon.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve crouched by the small stream, watching his distorted reflection in the concave back of the shield as he drew the blade down the column of his throat. They’d finally stopped their march late in the day as the sun dipped to the horizon, never actually encountering the Stark outriders again, but Clint and Bucky kept the team close enough to their trail.

What the Stark soldiers were doing out here, this far from the fighting, was certainly of concern. Those weren’t foot soldiers, nor were they scouts. Those were officers, and not exactly the definition of dispensable, so whatever they were about, it was important enough for Stane or whomever was in charge at this point to dispatch a dozen field commanders. That was reason enough to be curious, though Steve knew their timeline for getting the information they had back to Pierce was quickly narrowing. At least they were still headed in the general direction towards the camp, though he would have preferred to stick to the forest a bit longer before attempting the river crossing.

Steve knew that he couldn’t afford to chase after paper targets, but there was the possibility that this might be something worthwhile…something that might garner favor with Fury and Pierce…enough favor to ask for a small boon. Like a prisoner exchange.

Switching the blade to the other side of his neck, he glanced over his shoulder, and sure enough, there was Tony, eyeing him with that sharp, assessing gaze of his once again. Steve couldn’t quite put a name to it, but at some point since he’d woken the man up this morning for their mad dash after Stark’s troops and now, something had shifted and somehow, he’d garnered even more of Stark’s attention. For whatever reason, the new frankness of the man’s new assessment of him managed to set Steve more on edge than when Steve just assumed Tony’s coldly calculating watchfulness was about plotting his murder.

Steve finished his shave and rinsed the blade off in the small stream that cut through the area where they’d stopped for the night. A bit uncertainly, he walked over to where Tony sat leaning against a fallen log in the late afternoon sun while Bruce brewed one of his horrible smelling teas for him. Bruce had already told Steve the ingredients he needed in order to try to make some kind of medicine for Tony. The evidence of whatever issue Tony was having with the metal plate in his chest and the wound it concealed beneath was becoming harder to ignore, fine red lines creeping up Tony’s neck, and forming a crackling pattern on his chest where his shirt gaped open.

Tony was watching him as he walked over, dark brown eyes following his movements the whole time, though Bruce was saying something that Steve assumed must be directed towards Tony. Those two had developed something of a rapport over the past few days that Steve was alternatively glad for and suspicious of. Not that he didn’t trust Bruce. But he didn’t trust Tony not to use Bruce’s good nature where and when he could. Steve suspected Tony was probably far smarter than Tony hoped they’d figure to give him credit for.

“You want?” Steve asked, holding up the razor.

“You’d trust me with that?” Tony asked, nodding at the blade, but not taking his eyes off Steve. Steve tried to hold the other man’s stare, as if it wasn’t disconcerting to him in the least, but found he couldn’t quite manage it for long before he was darting his gaze around the camp to anywhere
“If you can escape all of us with this, I’d say we deserve to lose,” Steve replied, kneeling down in front of Tony to loosen the man’s bonds. “And you are far too stubborn for suicide.” Tony smiled at him, in a way that was probably meant to indicated the other man and found something he’d said amusing, but Steve felt almost certain it meant Tony found him amusing in some way he wasn’t going to share, but made Steve uncomfortable in some indefinable way. Steve thought about the farm cat his mom had kept, the old Tom he used to watch release a mouse he’d caught just long enough to reach a paw out and pull the skittering creature back by the tail.

He handed Tony the razor and watched him walk over to the stream to crouch in front of Steve’s shield, using the back of it as a looking glass as Steve had done. Tony splashed water on his face and quickly set about trimming his scraggly beard and hair that had started to graze against his shoulders during whatever captivity he had suffered with the Ten Rings.

“How’s he doing?” Steve asked, sitting down next to Bruce while Tony continued his ministrations by the stream.

“It isn’t critical yet, but I think it’s getting there. You can see the infection,” Bruce said, adding another sprig of something to his tea. Steve nodded, grimacing a bit. “He doesn’t mention much, and it’s hard to tell what’s from the metal and what’s just from his captivity, but there’s muscle pain. Nausea. I’ve been trying to make some simple things for him to eat, but he doesn’t eat what he should. I’ve seen him rub at his hands a lot. I know you didn’t tie those ropes that tightly. I think that’s part of it, too. And he’s having a hard time with his balance, stumbling a bit more than can be explained just by the terrain. Could just be he isn’t used to this kind of thing and I’m inventing symptoms, but, I don’t think so,” Bruce said lowly.

“All that from that…thing…in his chest?” Steve asked.

“It’s the metal getting into his blood. Works like a poison. I don’t…I don’t know how long he can really make it like that. I’ve heard of people who drink the waters coming off the mountains where the iron mines are who have the same kind of problems, and they can live for years before it really becomes a problem. That’s where I got the idea about the solution. One of the healers I met said they use drops made from a special type of salt dissolved in water to treat it, along with the clay, which I had had a bit of because of James. Helps where the metal is attached to what’s left of his arm. That skin never healed right, you know. Anyway, the solution I have in mind might help. Might not. The healer also swore up and down that the key was killing a goat under the first full moon of the solstice and adding a drop of the blood to the mixture,” Bruce informed him with a crooked smile.

Steve huffed out a small laugh. “There’s always some magic to science, if you ask me. Dr. Erskine kept a small altar in his infirmary. Caught him saying his formulas in front of it. Looking for a sign, maybe. I think we were all desperate enough at that point to try anything that might help. The gods didn’t seem too interested though.”

Steve picked up his sword and set about honing the edge with the piece of yellowish-gray whetstone he kept in one of the pouches at his belt for just this use. The small stone was one of the few things of value that was actually his, since his sword and shield had been issued by the army. Phillips gave one to all of his graduates, as a reminder to keep their swords sharp, a euphemism the man used to deliver his message that a soldier had to always be ready to fight and that could only be done by constantly honing your skills. He paused in his strokes with the whetstone and glanced back up at Tony, who was studiously going about chopping large chunks of hair off in rather haphazard angles.
“Interested enough,” Bruce corrected, nudging Steve’s shoulder.

“Didn’t really seem that way,” Steve responded, forcing his gaze off Tony and back to where he was sharpening his sword before he ended up losing a finger. “Where would we find what you need to make this medicine?”

“I know there isn’t much on this side of the river. Maybe at one of the bigger port cities upriver. They have a lot of trade barges coming downriver from Kingstown. May be able to find what I need there,” Bruce suggested. “Those places are technically Stark’s, but this far from the capital, their loyalties are more to their purses than their liege.”

Steve shook his head. “We really can’t take any more time before we get back to Fury. We’re late as it is. The closest port town of any size is a good three days out of our way. The information we have is too important. We…we won’t give up on it, I promise, but we have a mission, Bruce. That has to come first. I know you know that, but…we just can’t. I’m sorry,” Steve continued with a shake of his head. “It’s just too big of a risk for the team.”

“I know. I do. It’s just…once I start treating them, they’re patients, so…I have to try, you know?” Bruce said with a shrug.

“Yeah, I do,” Steve replied, with a nod in understanding to Bruce as he saw Tony’s back stiffen almost imperceptibly, not for the first time wishing he could trust the man enough to have an actual conversation with him. “Think Clint is going to be able to bring back something for dinner?”

“Nat’s with him. I think pretty much any living thing just offers itself up to her in supplication,” Bruce said with a slight smile. “So, I suspect we’ll have some dinner, one way or the other.” He and Bruce enjoyed a companionable silence for awhile, until Thor arrived toting an armload of wood that looked as if it had been pounded into submission.

“For your fire, Sir Doctor,” Thor said, depositing his armload next to Bruce.

“Thanks, Thor. And just Bruce is fine. For the thousandth time,” Bruce said evenly, picking up the driest pieces of wood for the fire.

“Indeed, it is a fine and worthy name, Sir Doctor,” Thor agreed, causing Steve and Bruce to trade smiles.

“When Bucky gets back, he and I will go on ahead. See if we can find a good crossing point or any sign of those riders. Clint said they weren’t exactly trying to hide their trail. Seem pretty sure of themselves, especially for so few of them this far from any Stark stronghold, let alone the bulk of their forces. You’d think they’d keep a lower profile,” Steve observed.

They were only a couple of days from the mountainous desert territory claimed by the Ten Rings. Yet the Stark riders seemed unconcerned. And they’d been coming from the same general direction as his team, which was odd. What would twelve officers be doing out this far from the Royal army? What could possibly be important enough to draw them this far from the safety of their numbers and risk an encounter with the Ten Rings?

“James isn’t going to be pleased with that assignment, you realize,” Bruce said, stacking the wood inside the circle of stones he’d gathered earlier from the stream and adding a few pieces of leaves and other tinder before striking the stones to catch a spark. He blew on the small flame that appeared moments later and added a few small pine boughs, their scent filling the air momentarily as they caught.
“He won’t like it,” Steve agreed. “But, he’ll come.”

Steve’s eyes were drawn to Tony again as the other man splashed water from the stream onto his newly shorn face. He looked years younger, without the wild hair that had given him such a hirsute look since they’d found him and left with just a neatly trimmed scrabble of beard, but despite the newly youthful appearance, the look he shot Steve as he handed the razor blade back was one of pure arrogance, of someone who knows well enough that he looks good and is used to using that to his own advantage. For a moment, he reminded Steve a bit of Bucky, years ago before everything had gone so very wrong. Bucky, who could always get the attention of anyone in a room he wanted, yet spent most of his time hanging out with Steve, letting Steve cough all over him and fail miserably at talking to anyone if it went beyond polite greetings.

Tony also looked entirely too satisfied with himself, Steve noticed, though he couldn’t figure out why that would be so. Steve put the razor in his pack and looked back up to find Tony holding his hands dutifully out for Steve to re-tighten his bonds. Steve sighed and gave up trying to figure the man out for the time being, as he redid the knots around Tony’s wrists. Natasha and Clint returned to camp as he finished with what looked like pheasant for dinner. Bucky followed a few paces behind, munching on a handful of berries, the remainder of which he passed to Bruce, along with a few mushrooms and some greens.

“Buck, you and I have work after dinner,” Steve said. “Thor, after we’re gone, you take first watch, then Clint.” Everyone nodded in answer, though Steve caught Bucky’s questioning look and shook his head once to indicate now wasn’t the time to discuss it. Bruce set about defeathering the bird while Clint added water and other ingredients to the pot, setting it to boil over the fire.

“What’s this I hear about story night?” Tony asked, settling in next to Steve by the fire and crossing his legs underneath him and clapping his hands in mock anticipation. He cast Steve a speculative, almost challenging, glance. Tony was sitting close enough to Steve that he could feel the warmth of his leg pressing against his own, just a little too close to be anything but deliberate, though to what end, Steve couldn’t figure. Bucky leaned over them from behind, reaching between them for the cup of water Bruce handed to him, shuffling Tony’s leg aside with his foot as he stepped forward to grab it.

“Sorry,” Bucky said, looking down at Tony and not sounding the least bit apologetic as far as Steve could tell.

“Not a problem,” Tony replied with a grin that didn’t make it to his eyes. “Just trying to keep warm,” Tony explained, holding his hands out to the fire and returning Bucky’s narrowed gaze with the kind of wide-eyed innocence that only someone completely lying through his teeth could possibly pull off.

“Story night would be a welcome respite, Captain,” Thor pitched in, breaking whatever staring contest was going on between Tony and Bucky. Bucky moved back to sit next to Natasha and Tony dropped his hands back to his lap, turning his focus back to Steve again and raising an eyebrow in question.

“What? I’m sure as hell not offering you a blanket again,” Steve responded, taking the proffered cup from Bruce, who was obviously trying not to laugh.

Tony grinned at him in reply. “Blankets would just get in the way,” Tony said, seemingly apropos of nothing. It was an innocuous enough reply, even if it didn’t make much sense, but there was something in the way Tony was looking at him, something heated and watchful. Steve felt his face grow warm, having nothing to do with the fire.
“Get in the way of what?” Steve asked in consternation, growing tired of whatever word game Tony was playing, watching as something flared behind Tony’s eyes that looked vaguely like approval. Whatever it was Tony opened his mouth to say in reply was cut off by Clint’s coughing fit, apparently brought on by Natasha’s elbow. Steve looked back over his shoulder at them in question.

“You didn’t have to do that, you damn harpy. I think you broke a rib,” Clint complained.

“There was a bee on him,” Natasha said, shrugging mildly.

Steve shook his head at the two of them, catching Bucky eyeing Tony with disdain and generally ignoring the antics of their resident spies.

“So…” Steve said, turning back towards the fire where Bruce had set the bird on a spit. “Story night, it is.”

“I’m not reading that one with veils again, and no, Clint, you can’t just recite it. Thor, you wanna pick?” Bruce asked, pulling a tattered book out of his pack.

“Your stories are rudimentary tales of simplistic everyday strife, not the heroic odes of my people,” Thor said, and Steve assumed that was a no.

“Okay,” Bruce said, drawing out the word. “Well, then, Nat, how about you? Want to take over? I have to finish dinner anyway.”

“Bet you’ve got a good reading voice there, Cap. How about it?” Tony asked, grabbing the book out of Bruce’s hands and flipping through the worn pages. Tony looked up a moment later when there was no response, casting a sideways glance at him. “Come on, which one’s your favorite? I bet it’s the one with the knight and the dragon. Tell me I’m right, and you can read that one,” Tony offered as if he was suddenly in charge of story night.

Steve found himself suddenly tensing up, though he wasn’t sure why, exactly. Not like it was a secret or anything all that unusual, though watching Tony casually scan the words on the page like it was nothing made getting the words out oddly difficult. It also made Steve wonder what kind of supposed armorer knew how to read.

“Bruce is our reader,” Steve said, nodding at Bruce, who was watching him with an odd, tight look. “Well, we’re pretty sure Nat reads in ten languages, but she won’t admit to anything.”

“I’d tell you, but then I’d have to kill you,” Natasha said, sounding like that was not an unfavorable outcome.

“How exactly is it that a simple armorer learns to read?” Bucky asked pointedly.

“Of course, I read. Everyone learns…wait…none of the rest of you can read? That’s not…that’s not…how did you not learn to read?” Tony asked, seemingly to the group, but he was looking at Steve as he posed the question.

“I was a street kid. Not much time for school when you’re trying to steal enough to eat,” Clint chimed in. “Fell in with a traveling troupe of performers as I got older. Didn’t need to read to be able to relieve young lords and ladies of their purses. Among other things,” Clint snickered, earning a droll look from Natasha.

“And Thor reads, but he spends more time criticizing the story than reading,” Bruce said, adding more seasoning to the pot and turning the pheasant.
“‘Tis true. Your stories are woefully told tales that lack the artistry of mine own histories,” Thor said, tempering the criticism with a sad, sympathetic smile.

“You really don’t read?” Tony asked Steve in surprise. Steve tried to detect some censure in his tone, but it actually sounded just oddly flabbergasted, as if the thought had never occurred to him and now that it had, he had no idea what to do with it.

“They don’t exactly spend a lot of time teaching letters to fisherfolk,” Bucky said lowly from his spot behind them. “Why would they?”

“That’s not…But there are supposed to be schools,” Tony replied, looking around at each of them in turn. “You know, those places children go to learn things. Like reading and math and history. Basic stuff. The Crown sends funds to all the provinces to be used for education. Has for years.”

“Huh, right. Stark spends his money making sure peasants can read? How would he be able to screw them over so easily on their taxes if they could actually read the bill?” Bucky demanded.

“Buck, forget it. Bruce, I’ll finish dinner, you go ahead. This isn’t the time for—“ Steve started, only to find himself cut off by a suddenly agitated Tony.

“No—what—what are you even talking about? What tax bills? And there are funds for schools going to each province. Every year. It was something m—Maria, uh, Queen Maria started after she married King Howard. She insisted on it, in fact.” Tony asserted stridently. “Look.” Tony said, sounding frustrated, “hate the King if you want, but I’m telling you, he has sent money to the Regional Governors each and every gods-damned year to pay for schooling. And yes, he would rather have an educated populace that can advance themselves and the kingdom rather than a bunch of…” Tony trailed off, realizing what he was about to say a moment too late for the meaning to have been lost.

“Regional Governors?” Steve asked, frowning and casting a look at Bucky who gave a derisive snort and scrubbed the ground with the heel of his boot.

“What?” Tony asked, looking from Steve to Bucky. “Who is the governor for the Riverlands?”

“It was Lord Stern. Don’t know who it is now, if there even is one. Can’t imagine many lining up for that duty,” Steve answered, brow furrowing in remembered disapproval. “Somehow, I doubt any funds the Crown might have sent made it much past Stern’s coffers.”

“More like one of his mistress’s chests,” Bucky added, mouth twisting.

Steve watched Tony’s mouth open and close a few times before his shoulders slumped, an odd, defeated air suffusing him for a moment. It didn't sit right on the man, making Steve's gut churn uncomfortably at the sight. “Son of a bitch,” Tony said.

“You seem to know a bit about what goes on in Kingstown. Assuming you won’t give us troop counts, you got any gossip?” Clint asked, changing the subject and apparently giving up on a story night that didn't involve his favorite tale, gossip being a second choice to veils. “I heard something months ago that King Anthony was going to marry that Latverian prince what’s-his-name. Guess that didn’t work out.”

“Huh?” Tony responded, sounding distracted, but managing to pick up the thread of conversation. “Ah, yeah, no. That would be a big, giant no. They—uh—didn’t exactly get along. I mean, you’d have thought, maybe, since both of them like to build things, but it turned out after about five minutes together, they mostly wanted to build things to kill the other one with. So, no. I, uh,
“Sounds perfect for Stark to me,” Bucky remarked, smirking at Tony’s annoyed look.

“I heard he was with that Potts woman that runs the castle. Then she left him for a carriage driver or something. Ouch,” Bruce suggested, not looking up as he turned the pheasant on the spit again.

“That’s—a gross misstatement of what actually happened,” Tony insisted, furiously plucking blades of grass out of the ground, apparently for want of the ability to do something with his hands.

“One of the archers in Hill’s group said the King would have a new bedwarmer each night, sometimes common folk, sometimes one of those rich Lords or Ladies, probably hoping he’d suddenly mend his wicked ways and finally settle down,” Clint offered.

“That’s…a little true,” Tony confessed. “Not exactly a crime, though, Barton. Bit hypocritical of you, considering you just admitted to your own share of, shall we call them ‘youthful indiscretions’?”

“Wasn’t criticizing. More offering an explanation for how your King might have missed all his money going to fund Stern’s whoring instead of teaching a few decent folk like our Steve and James here how to read and do their numbers. Among other things that might not have gotten the full of his attention, you see, what with him being the King and having a few more responsibilities than, say, a street performer, though gods know I’d hate if he had to be distracted from his important, uh…tasks…long enough to worry about the minor details of running a kingdom. But what do I know? I’m just an illiterate street urchin,” Clint sneered. Tony clamped his jaw shut on that, and turned back to stare at the fire, but not before Steve caught a flash of something that looked like hurt across Tony’s features.

“Personally, I like to think he caught some disease that makes his parts fall off and the Crown is just keeping it quiet,” Clint cackled at the thought. If anything, Tony tensed up even more at that.

“You go too far, Clint,” Steve said, voice hard. Clint had the good grace to look abashed.

“Yeah…yeah, sorry, wasn’t thinking,” Clint replied, nodding at Steve in agreement. “You know I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I think that’s enough gossip for tonight,” Steve observed, clearing his throat in the silence that followed Clint’s diatribe. He risked a look at Tony, who was still studiously staring at the smoking pheasant. A pang of guilt washed over him. Here they were, jeering at Tony’s King, whom he obviously respected. Whatever Steve might think of the King, it felt wrong to take that out on someone who had simply grown up believing in him. “Uh…Were you named after the King, Tony?” Steve asked, trying to steer the conversation to something less charged and finding himself suddenly curious to know something about the man. “I know it’s kind of a tradition for parents to name their children after a prince or princess around the time they’re born and you seem about the King’s age, give or take.”

“Actually, it was a family name, I guess you could say,” Tony said, lips pursing a bit in some wry amusement known only to Tony.

“My Dad wanted to name me Howard,” Steve admitted.

“Well,” Tony said, shifting his body a bit away from the fire to allow him to go back to staring at Steve in that frank, scrutinizing way that had something vaguely uncomfortable behind it, making Steve shift a bit and look away, unsure of why exactly Tony’s gaze disconcerted him so much. “I
can’t tell you how glad I am that didn’t happen.”

Chapter End Notes

The clay mixture is sodium bentonite clay and the salt solution is sodium edetate, both of which can be used to treat metal poisoning. The internets said so, so it must be true. The whetstone Steve uses is Belgian Coticule, which has been legendary for the edge it can give to blades since Roman times.
Tony lay on the grass by the low, crackling fire, trying to find some path to sleep. The camp was quiet, with Thor off on watch and Steve and his far less interesting friend off scouting or whatever they were up to. Tony found it hard to quiet his mind after the night’s discussion.

He’d missed Pierce’s path to betrayal, and now Stern’s pilfering, and who the hell knew what else had gone on while he’d had his head stuck in his workshop or in other, less respectable, places. What Clint had said…it had stung because it had the ring of truth to it, Tony knew. When Steve put a stop to it, Tony had felt irrationally grateful. Still seemed a bit petulant of the lot of them to turn on their King over the actions of one asshole governor like Stern, especially considering Stern had switched his allegiance to Pierce the first chance he got.

Tony sighed and rolled to his side, pillowing his bound hands underneath his head. It still sat heavy in his chest though, the thought of his mother’s legacy being tarnished like that, of people he was supposed to be helping going ignored for so long while Tony blithely assumed everything was being handled. Dammit, Obie was supposed to be handling that kind of thing. Pepper ran the Castle and Obie handled the day to day operations of the kingdom. Had Obie truly never done an accounting? That lack of oversight didn’t sound like him, but living proof walked out of camp just a few hours ago. Maybe he had asked too much of Obie, particularly in the wake of his parents’ death when Tony had been overwhelmed with the demands of being suddenly thrust into a leadership role he was either ill prepared or ill suited to handle.

But Obie had been at his father’s side for so long, particularly when things got bad with the drinking, always managing to cover for Howard’s increasingly embarrassing behavior, to keep the kingdom running when Howard would have pissed it all away searching for relief at the bottom of a bottle that wasn’t forthcoming. Obie had seemed to relish the responsibility, and Tony had been grateful not to have to deal with the minutiae, content to let Obie take the reins on anything that didn’t involve designing and building those wonderful weapons in his workshop or mixing his beautiful chemicals in his laboratory.

Maybe it had been too much for Obie. He wasn’t a young man anymore, after all. Maybe Tony had placed too much responsibility on him, asked more than what any one person could reasonably be expected to give. Pepper had often tried to get Tony to take more of an active role in governance. Had she had seen the strain on Obie over the years? But if that were so, why not just tell Tony she thought Obie bore too much of a burden? It sure as hell wasn’t like Pepper not to speak her mind.

Tony scrubbed his face with his hands in frustration. There were no ready answers, just seemingly endless questions, one leading inexorably to the next. None of which could be answered until he managed to make it back to the Castle, as often as he turned it over and over in his mind. The attack on the carriages after his weapons demonstration, his captivity with the Ten Rings, the rather galling lack of any attempt at a rescue, what the tall, bald man had said about how Tony was supposed to have been dead long before…there was something binding all of this together, but he couldn’t see it. If Pierce or Fury had been behind it, these so-called Avengers wouldn’t have interfered back in the desert, unless they were too low in the pecking order to know about it. Would be highly ironic if they were to deliver him to Pierce only to find they had managed to foil one Pierce’s own plans for his execution, though not the sort of irony he particularly relished, considering.

Pierce would definitely be willing to allow someone else to do his dirty work, and Tony wouldn’t
put something like that past Fury, either. Fury had followed Pierce and his little rebellion for his own unfathomable reasons. Not that he and Tony had ever been close, though Fury, like Pierce, had long served his father.

Creepy, one-eyed bastard had terrified Tony when he was a child, seeming to have the ability to appear at will anywhere he wished. Tony had thought him a sorcerer, could recall his father’s laughter when he’d suggested as much. Howard had said Tony should tell Nick that, but Tony had never managed to work up the courage to pose the question. Fury had been far less understanding than Obie when Howard’s drinking had spiraled into something beyond a habit or a crutch, something much darker and dangerous. That much he understood well enough, though why his former Master of Intelligence had decided to follow Pierce so quickly after the death of Tony’s parents, he still didn’t understand. Hell, maybe now he’d get a chance to ask the man.

It was some time before the shifting and snuffling sounds of the camp quieted to something more even and restful. The end of Tony’s rope was tied several times around a large rock this time, meaning the rest of them were free to do what they needed to do in the camp while three of their members were away. It also meant that no one could feel the tug and pull of the rope as Tony moved his hands inside his shirt to grasp what he’d stuffed in his pocket earlier in the day.

Long, chunky strands of the hair he’d gratefully chopped off. With careful fingers, he started to weave the strands into small braids, using some of the clay from the poultice on his chest to secure the ends. When it dried, it should hold together, at least for as long as Tony would need it to. He held a braided strand up, eyeing it for a moment. Perfectly serviceable, easily burning, short fuses, if he did say so himself. He pulled the yellowish squares he’d taken back from Natasha out of one of the inner pockets of his shirt and pressed the fuses, such as they were, firmly inside them.

He’d heard what Steve and Bruce had discussed while he shaved and cleaned himself up next to the stream. Bruce thought he was getting worse, and he was, unfortunately, probably correct. The things Tony had written off as discomfort from the trek now seemed far more ominous signs of his affliction. All the more reason to make his move sooner rather than later. He couldn’t afford to wait much longer before he would likely be unable to do much of anything, if his physical, and gods forbid mental, condition began to seriously deteriorate from the poison leeching into his blood thanks to this damnable metal in his chest. Steve had nixed the idea of going out of their way to do anything to help him, which, while Tony understood the tactic behind the decision, it had still stung to hear that his life wasn’t worth a few extra days delay.

And now…now there was the added element of Stark soldiers close enough to have raised the hackles of the entire team. He would have to wait for the right opportunity, but the way back home seemed far shorter than it had just a day ago. It would have to be Bruce, he thought as his fingers twisted and wove the thick strands of hair, which made it both easier and more difficult. Bruce had the stones he used to start the fire in his pack, which Tony would need to light the fuses. And Bruce cared enough about Tony’s health, at least, to offer him some modicum of trust, enough leeway for Tony to use to his advantage, though he found himself feel an odd pang of guilt at the thought. But with his health deteriorating and too good of an opportunity for rescue falling into his lap, he was left with little choice. He’d make it up to Bruce later, once this ridiculous war was over and these Avengers were begging for largesse. He could be generous and forgiving when the situation warranted, after all.

After he finished making the quantity of fuses he needed, he carefully placed them back in his pocket, concealed inside his shirt next to the small chunks of yellowish explosive. He rolled over onto his back, staring at the stars above as they peaked through the branches of the trees, a quarter moon smiling down. He found himself scanning the forest for a tall, blonde head to appear, but the trees remained still. He closed his eyes and tried to find sleep, but none came. He tried doing
equations in his head, but that served only to work his mind into a frustrated frenzy when he couldn’t exactly start running tests on his theory in the middle of the night when sleep eluded him, as he could back home.

Having few things left to him of comfort to think about and wanting anything to distract him from the thought that even now, his own body was slowly being destroyed, his mind called up his mantra of images, Barnes in the stocks, dripping with rotten food, Clint on his hands and knees cleaning out the stalls, Natasha sobbing pitifully as she chopped a never-ending supply of onions, Thor pounding heavy iron nails into the planks of the outer fortifications in a long, unending row, Bruce lancing boil after boil in the city’s infirmary for the poor…and, of course, there was Steve. Steve lying on his bed, hair mussed, dark blue eyes heavy-lidded, a red blanket of the softest velvet draped across his torso.

Tony had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from groaning. He cast a furtive glance around the camp, but his remaining captors were still with sleep. He reached his bound hands down, slipping them underneath his breeches to grasp his hardening cock. Amazing that just the thought of the man in his bed could get him this hard, this fast. He stroked his length a few more times, craning his neck up for a quick look around the camp once more, as he thumbed the moisture from the head and used it to help alleviate the friction.

Steve, he thought, closing his eyes, Steve, in the glow of flickering candlelight, with his eyes dark and wide as he looked up him as Tony came to the bed. Watching in that way of his that seemed to be at once utterly open and giving nothing away, as Tony wrapped a hand in the blanket and pulled, letting it glide off, slowly revealing more and more fine golden skin sculpting hard planes of muscle like one of those statues Pepper insisted on having on display in the museum come to life, so beautiful it almost hurt to look at, but he wouldn't be able to look away, and why should he, when this was his, when Steve could finally know him, could see how wrong he’d been all this time.

Steve would be hard already with want, desperate for Tony to touch him, stroke him, ready and eager. He would have been waiting for this, for Tony to come to him. Steve would lean up, bracing one hand on the bed and using the other strong hand to cup Tony’s jaw for a kiss, before moving his hand lower, down over Tony’s fluttering stomach, lower to wrap around Tony’s shaft, leaning his head up to kiss a path along Tony’s jaw as he stroked rhythmic circles up and down Tony’s cock, bringing his lips to Tony’s ear and just as he thumbed the dripping slit, “My King,” he would whisper, words floating into Tony’s ear, and holy fucking hell, Tony’s brain stuttered as his balls tightened painfully. He had to bite the inside of his cheek to hold in the groan, and could swear he tasted blood, as his hips bucked against the ground, white star points dancing behind his eyelids. He came harder than he thought possible, his body wracking with spurts of warm fluid against his hands as he spent himself.

He tried to catch as much as he could before it soaked his breeches and left a rather telltale stain. He cupped what he was able to catch in his hands and carefully withdrew them from his pants, spilling the mess in the dirt and covering it over. He wiped his hands in the grass and leaves, redoing the ties to his breeches as he forced his breathing to slow to something approaching normal, blinking against the images that still flashed across his mind. And just what the hell had that been? he wondered, scrubbing his other hand over his face.

Tony wasn’t sure how long he stared at the night sky, ears perked for the sound of returning footfalls that never came. When he finally did fall asleep, he dreamt of his escape from the cave, coming across the body with its throat slashed open as he stumbled out, but when he turned Yinsen over, it was Steve’s blank blue eyes that looked at nothing. He woke up grabbing at his chest where the metal plate was attached and then found he couldn’t return to sleep, no matter how hard
he tried.

The camp stirred early, just as the sun peeked over the horizon, casting a milky blue glow to the wood. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and snapped his head around in surprise as he was handed one of those gods-awful biscuits that tasted like bitter rocks and a cup of water by Bruce. He swore to himself that as soon as he was back at the Castle, he was going to order the cooks to prepare the most lavish feast they had ever created just for him.

He scanned the camp, but Steve and Barnes hadn’t returned during the night. He wondered what could have been so important to take them away from the team for so long, but knew he wouldn’t get an answer if he asked. He mumbled his thanks to Bruce, who nodded and went about his business packing up the remainder of the camp, along with Thor who appeared to be carrying three packs.

“We’ll be just ahead. You know the signal if there is any issue,” Natasha said, hefting her pack over her shoulder and tapping Clint on the back. “Don’t be long,” she warned.

Tony chewed a bit on the hard biscuit and took a sip of water as he watched the archer and the woman head off into the wood, following some trail obvious only to them, leaving him, Bruce and Thor behind. “What about the Captain and his friend?” Tony asked with as much casualness as he could muster, still trying to force the bite biscuit down his throat. You’d have thought his gag reflex was long dormant, but apparently not.

“We’ll meet up with them later. Probably by midday. By the river crossing anyway,” Bruce answered with a shrug. So, they were crossing the river today, or, at least, that was the plan. Then this was his chance. A river with him and a militia of his own men on one side and his captors on the other. He honestly wasn’t sure if twelve of his men would be a match for half as many of these Avengers, but he certainly had no desire to find out. He just wanted to get away, get home, get back to being who he was and sort the rest out later.

Catching Bruce’s attention, he jerked his head to one side, indicating he needed the relieve himself. Bruce nodded in the direction of a nearby tree, which offered a bit of privacy. Stepping a bit away from the tree, he made a show of stretching his muscles, reaching high and bowing his back before bending low, letting his hands dangle against the ground. As he did so, he scooped up two small, gray rocks.

When he was finished, Tony dutifully returned to sit by Bruce as the other man stowed various items in his pack and covered the evidence of last night’s fire as best he could. Bruce smiled over at him somewhat ruefully, and Tony returned the grin, priding himself on not letting his eyes dip to the pack at Bruce’s knee that he was busy filling with cooking utensils, his blanket and medicine bag, and, off to one side, the pouch the two stones, one a dark gray flecked with golden sparkles, one a paler, translucent gray, that he used to light the fire each night.

Tony reached for his cup of water and biscuit, letting his hand shake as he did so, knocking the cup over and spilling the contents into the grass.

“Something wrong?” Bruce asked sharply.

“It’s…I don’t know. Just…feel kind of dizzy. All of a sudden,” Tony responded, dropping his head to his knee and hunching his shoulders, as if overcome and placing a hand over his chest. He let out a shuddering, ragged breath and squelched his face in pain. “It…ah…it kind of burns. I don’t know…it was hurting last night, but not like this…” Tony gasped out.

“Why didn’t you say something? Dammit, Tony. You have to tell me. Let me get you another
poultice made. Ah…Thor? Do you have James’ pack? I need something out of it,” Bruce said, getting up and walking over to where Thor and Natasha were finishing their packing and eating what little breakfast they could manage before they began their walk for the day.

“Here you are, Sir Doctor. I am to hold it for our friend until we meet again,” Thor said, handing Bruce the small, worn bag that Barnes carried. Bruce fished inside, trying to find the round metal tin that Tony knew contained the clay mixture Bruce used to treat the area around Tony’s wound, as well as Barnes’ arm, though wherever they did those ministrations were always far from Tony’s eyes. Tony, bent over far enough to block the angle from Bruce and Thor’s view, grabbed the small pouch containing the firestones, and quickly made the switch with the ones he’d picked up, and replaced the pouch next to the medicine bag as Bruce found what he was looking for in Barnes’ pack and returned to kneel by Tony, rubbing a soothing hand up and down his back as he did so.

“We’ll try this. And I can make you some tea,” Bruce said, a bit uncomfortably as he looked into the forest where Natasha and Clint had disappeared minutes earlier. He set about pasting the clay mixture in a binding that could be wrapped around Tony’s chest.

“No…no, I think I’ll be okay. Just got to me there for a second. I’ll be fine. Just give me a minute,” Tony assured him, making sure to take a few gasping breaths.

“You sure? You don’t look alright. You’re sweating, for one thing, and your breathing is far too rapid. Take some time, Tony. It’s okay. We’ll catch up. Or they’ll wait. You don’t have to push yourself so much,” Bruce told him, and Tony felt a stab of shame at his deception, even if it was for a perfectly legitimate reason, like escaping his captors.

“I think I can walk now. Just maybe let’s go slow, if that’s okay?” Tony suggested, staggering a bit as he got to his feet.

“Here, Thor, can you help?” Bruce asked, motioning Thor over to Tony’s side.

“Of course, Sir Doctor. Here, take my arm Master Tony. My strength is your strength,” Thor offered, completely sincerely as far as Tony could tell. The going was slow, picking through the trees and underbrush in the same general direction as Natasha and Clint had disappeared earlier. Tony made sure to occasionally stumble and lean his weight on Thor a bit, which seemed to have absolutely no effect on the larger man. Bruce hovered in his concerned way, making Tony stop and rest or checking the poultice from time to time. Tony decided to be magnanimous and give Bruce a decent infirmary after the other man saw the error of his ways.

“How do you even know we’re going the right way?” Tony asked, looking around for any sign that would indicate they were following some kind of trail.

“Our fair Widow has a gift for subtlety, but she has left her mark upon the forest,” Thor observed.

“Huh?” Tony replied, glancing around again. Thor brushed his hand over a broken branch, and moments later picked up a small rock that was sitting on top of a fallen log. Okay. Huh. Clever, Tony had to admit.

“Took me awhile to get used to it, too,” Bruce admitted.

“How did you fall in with this group anyway?” Tony asked. “You don’t seem much like a fighter.”

“I might surprise you,” Bruce said with a small grin. “But no. I leave most of the fighting to the rest of them. Just try to keep everyone patched up as best I can.”
“Didn’t answer my question,” Tony responded.

“You don’t say?” Bruce asked mildly. Tony shook his head and huffed out a small laugh as he followed along dutifully behind Bruce, still leaning a bit on Thor as he walked. It seemed like hours later that he heard the whooshing susurration that he knew must be the river.

They stopped at the edge of the treeline, staring at the wide expanse of rushing river in front of them. This was the major tributary bisecting the kingdom. Whereas the Riverlands themselves hugged the coastline and contained an uncounted number of much smaller rivers and streams, thus earning the name, this river flowed from where Kingstown sat at its mouth as it emptied into the sea all the way down to the snow-capped mountains beyond Stark lands, where Schmidt was lurking with his crackpot nonsense and creepily devoted followers. The river itself wasn’t terribly deep, he knew, requiring the use of barges to go up and down for trade, though the barges didn’t come down this far from the city where so few towns of any size existed to make the trip worthwhile. The river did move fast at several points, including here, where white caps dotted the darker blue waters as the river raced over rocks and boulders peaking out from the depths. Not something you’d want to try to swim or ford.

“You’re late. We got riders,” a disembodied voice called out. Tony looked up, twisting his head this way and that to try to find the source, but the source just dropped down in front of them, landing in a crouch where the grass of the forest began to give way to the sandy bank of the edge of the river. “Looks like a decent number of them. Far away, but approaching fast,” Clint informed them. “Nat’s checking out the bridge,” Clint said, nodding his head downstream a bit, and sure enough, there was a small wooden bridge snaking its way across the river, floating with the rush of it on various barrels and other flotsam. The woman was a quarter of the way across, walking with a nimble grace as if the movement of the river didn’t affect one such as her.

“All the more reason to get across then,” Bruce said. “Any sign of Steve or James?”

“Other side,” Clint said, pointing to the opposite shore. Tony couldn’t see them at first, but then Clint raised a hand and something glinted in the sun on the other side of the river. A shield, Tony realized. “I spotted dust the riders kicked up,” Clint warned. “Not too far. Not far enough for comfort anyway. We need to get across.”

“Same ones? Why are they still here? I thought they’d be long gone,” Bruce questioned, looking around nervously.

“Couldn’t tell for sure. No idea why they’d hang around. But we don’t have a lot of time before they’re on top of us, if we’re going to cross here,” Clint urged.

“Alright. Tony, you up to this?” Bruce asked in concern. “These bridges can be pretty unstable. Not exactly the feats of engineering you might be used to in the city. Just things thrown together by the locals. I don’t want you toppling over. Be a shame to have you drown after all this trouble,” Bruce said, trying to make a joke of what was probably a legitimate worry on his part.

“What’s wrong with him?” Clint asked, giving Tony a sharp look.

“He had a bad morning,” Bruce answered.

“’Tis true, my friend. He has not been well our entire morning’s journey, though I have attempted to alleviate his burden. It was why our arrival was most unfortunately delayed,” Thor informed him. Clint eyed Tony rather dubiously.

“I can make it,” Tony said. “I feel better. Let’s just go.”
They walked as a group down to the bridge, which turned out to be a bit of an insult to bridges, as far as Tony was concerned. More of a glorified walkway, really. It moved with the river, strung together by gods knew what and fashioned from what looked like things in such poor condition that no one had any other use for them. Tony knew, logically, it was because these were not created to be permanent structures, seeing as how they would be destroyed each year as the river itself rose with the spring rains or knocked away by the large chunks of ice that sometimes floated down from the mountains in the winter.

He would’ve asked how they hell they were supposed to make it over that rickety deathtrap of a so-called bridge, but Natasha was already halfway across, walking with slow, but confident steps. They trudged down to the water’s edge, none seeming particularly eager to follow Natasha across, but Clint went next, stepping carefully onto the swaying bridge, followed by Bruce, who handed Tony his rope without a word and started to shuffle across. Thor came last, right behind Tony, ready to offer a hand to Tony for balance, if he needed, it, Tony supposed.

Tony spared a glance downriver. From this vantage, he could see the dust stirred up by the horses’ hooves as they pounded down the sandy edge of the river. It wouldn’t be long and the riders would reach their location. He just needed one chance. Just one, and he could finally be free again. He stepped carefully, finding the sway and rattle of the bridge disconcerting. Bruce really hadn’t been joking about falling off and drowning, he thought, looking down into the murky water beneath him. The river ran much too fast for him to swim against, he knew. He had to be careful here, time it just right, what he’d planned. He looked again for the cloud of dust, trying to estimate the time. He slowed his steps, hoping to give the riders a bit of extra leeway to arrive.

“Are you unwell?” Thor questioned in worry as Tony slowed.

“Yeah. I—yeah, just a bit dizzy,” Tony answered, shaking his head as if to clear it. Thor nodded in answer and waited for Tony to take a few deep breaths and move along. Tony took his time. He could see Natasha step off the bridge and onto the shore of the river. A moment later, Steve and Barnes joined her from where they had been concealed in the nearby woods.

He could see Steve holding his shield clearly now, having come out from the copse of trees where Tony had seen the shield flash earlier. Even at this distance, Tony could tell by the set of the other man’s shoulders and bearing that he was tense. Worried. Shuffling slowly, Tony inched his way across the bridge trying to take as much time as he could without actually being picked up and carried by Thor. Finally, Tony reached the other side and stepped off, Thor just a couple of paces behind him. Tony staggered and swayed a bit for effect, bending at the waist and dipping his head low as if the crossing had taken all his energy. This time, it was Steve that was at his side, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and helping him right himself. Bonus for playing the invalid, he supposed, forcing himself not to lean in to the Captain’s warmth.

“Tony? Are you alright?” Steve asked. Tony could swear he heard actual concern in his voice, but that was probably because Tony was holding them up and the riders were closing in. “We have to move,” Steve said firmly, confirming Tony’s assumption.

“I’m okay. I can walk. Just moving a bit slowly here, Cap,” Tony replied, clutching at his chest a bit and taking deep breaths.

“Bruce?” Steve called, as Tony had hoped. “Can you stay close to Tony?”

“I got him, Steve. Let’s just go,” Bruce replied. They started to move away from the river’s edge as one, Steve in the lead, followed by Natasha, Barnes, Thor and Bruce striding next to Tony. Clint brought up the rear, using his sharp eyes to keep a lookout, Tony figured. He couldn’t help
but be somewhat impressed by how seamlessly they worked together, the way that much of what
they did was unspoken and simply understood or communicated in some way that was beyond
Tony. Maybe Steve could give a few pointers to his commanders. From bed, obviously, Tony
thought, trying not to let a lascivious grin slip out as he thought of General Ross listening to Steve
give him leadership suggestions while Steve was sitting naked in Tony’s bed. He had to stifle a
laugh at the image. Bruce would probably think he was having some kind of fit. Somehow, he
rather imagined Steve could pull it off though.

He knew there were any number of books on military tactics in the library. He should really get a
tutor for Steve. He owed him at least that much, and the knowledge that his mother’s educational
initiative had been undermined by that asshole Stern rankled, even if he thought taking up arms
against your King was a bit of an overreaction. He’d be willing to let Steve make it up to him
though. He was magnanimous like that.

Maybe he’d even let Barnes learn. From somewhere far removed. He did stumble a bit as that
thought ghosted through his mind, wondering where that had even come from. He didn’t like
Barnes, sure, and Barnes despised him, that much was obvious. As he righted his footing, his eyes
went up to find blue ones turned back towards him as they marched. Barnes caught up to Steve in
a couple of quick steps and nudged him along, some words passing between them that Tony
couldn’t hear.

Steve was far too cognizant of what was going on with the team for Tony to be entirely
comfortable this insane plan of his had a chance of working, but there wasn’t much to be done for
it. Things had aligned too closely to back out now. He watched the two of them for a moment
longer, as Steve nudged Barnes back making the other man startle to the side, laughing a bit, the
smile softening his face to something far more boyish as he shook his head and clapped a hand on
Steve’s back. Tony wanted to knock it off.

He heard Bruce clear his throat a bit and Tony realized he’d slowed down again, this time without
actually meaning to do so, still trying to process the apparent fact that he wanted Barnes to stop
touching his things, even if no one knew they were his. Yet. Of course, if Steve were his, then no
one would dare, certainly not Barnes. A grim thread of satisfaction uncoiled in his gut at the
thought.

“You okay?” Bruce asked. It was time, if he had any shot of making the bridge as the riders
converged on it. He hesitated for a brief moment, looking at Bruce’s worried face.

“Ah…it’s just…it’s hurting again. I think maybe the poultice got wet as we crossed, I don’t know.
Can we just…just let me take a minute. I’ll be okay,” Tony rasped out.

“Hang on, I’ll get some more of the mixture, pack it in there a bit tighter. Sit down and rest,”
Bruce offered, helping Tony down to the ground to a sitting position. “Steve, hold up just a
second. James! I need your pack,” Bruce called as he walked ahead to grab the pack from Barnes
and began rifling through it, to Barnes’ annoyance.

Tony hunched over, as if in pain, caught Steve watching him out of the corner of his eye and
shifted a bit to the side to lean his head against a nearby tree, angling his body away from the rest
of the team. As he did so, Tony took the pouch of yellow explosives from the inside of his shirt and
the two rocks he’d taken from Bruce that morning, shielding them from view between his knees.
Clint appeared behind them, asking what the hold up was, earning a sideways flick of her head
from Natasha.

Clint just grimaced and shook his head as he stalked past where Tony sat on the ground. Now or
never, he thought, making sure the short fuse was buried deep inside the malleable substance.
Bruce was taking the metal tin of clay from Barnes’ pack and removing his own pack, presumably looking for something to use to replace the bindings for Tony’s chest wound.

Tony clutched the striker stone in one hand, the handstone in the other. He saw Steve take something out of his pack and hand it to Bruce, and realized with a bit of a pang that it was the blanket Tony had shredded to pieces, which apparently was now to be used to bind his wound. There was something about that which bothered him, discomfort flitting across his mind before disappearing with a spark as he struck the striker rock down against the handstone with a clean, hard stroke. The tiny spark leapt onto the fuse, flaring brightly and sizzling with a slightly bitter odor. Tony stood, balling the lead rope that bound his hands around his wrist and threw the explosive to the side of the path as far as he could given that his wrists were bound.

He watched Bruce turn to him in concern, while Steve’s head snapped to the place the charge had landed. Tony had a moment to see something shift on Steve’s face, and then he ran. Tony headed back the way they’d come, down the makeshift path through the trees. He heard the loud boom behind him, not a huge explosion, but big enough for a diversion. Certainly big enough to garner the attention of any riders that might be passing by, or so he fervently hoped. He came out of the treeline, feet digging into the sand as it became much finer and softer near the river.

The bridge was ahead of him, tantalizingly close. His heart was pumping fiercely in his chest, breath coming in great, hacking gulps as he ran. The bridge swayed violently underneath his feet as he bounded onto the bridge and for a moment, he thought he was going to lose his footing and fall in, as Bruce has warned, and wouldn’t that just be the perfect irony, but he caught his balance. He quickly lit the smallest of the charges, barely the size of a large pebble, and tucked it inside the thick rope that rose out of the water and attached the floating structure to a large post embedded in the ground. He turned and ran. A moment later, the rope blew to pieces and the structure began to float listlessly with the current, curving against it as it did so. It wasn’t moving as fast as he would’ve hoped, but it was drifting slowly out of reach of the shore.

Across the bridge, thank the gods, he could see them, the riders. He recognized the red and gold of his colors on their shields. He was half of the way across, running full tilt, as if his life depended on it, which it probably did, when an arrow landed in front of him, causing him to stop short and risk a look behind him.

He couldn’t see the archer, though Clint was obviously there somewhere, hidden in the trees. He saw Steve and Barnes on the beach, racing towards the bridge, Steve outpacing Barnes by a good bit. He couldn’t help but feel a moment of relief that Steve was apparently unharmed. Steve would reach the bridge in a few moments, he knew. Tony knelt down and drew another charge from his pouch, striking the stones together, but having a harder time of it as the footbridge undulated with the river and it took him several tries to get a spark. It finally caught, and Tony left it at the halfway point.

He looked up, only to find Steve almost to the bridge. Tony quickly shortened the fuse, needing it to go off sooner then he’d hoped. It wouldn’t give him much time to get across, but it should be enough. Tony stood up and took off again, figuring if Clint was going to shoot him, there was really nothing to be done for it. He was almost to the end, waving his arms in the air as best he could with his wrists bound together and shouting to the riders as he ran. He couldn’t believe it, but it was actually going to work. Two insane escape plans in under a week, and both had worked. Well, except for getting caught again the first time. He hopped off the end of the bridge, landing in the shallow of the river with a splash. He scrambled out to stand in front of the oncoming riders, holding his bound hands in the air to signal he wasn’t a threat.

Tony scanned the riders as they approached, looking for a familiar face, someone that might
recognize him, despite his current condition. He found one.

Shit.

*shitshitshitshitshit.*

His eyes had immediately gone to the one rider that wasn’t like the others, not wearing his colors or any armor, but instead, dressed in a long, flowing robe the color of desert sand. Tony watched in horror as the tall, bald man, the one he’d last seen tied to a scrub tree in the desert after trying to kill him, began to gesticulate wildly, shouting something to Tony’s men that he assumed was some version of “There he is, get him!” He didn’t have time to wonder what the holy fuck that asshole was doing with his men or why they were taking orders from him, he turned back and ran full tilt towards the bridge.

He clamored on again, bridge swaying beneath him and he almost lost his footing again, before righting himself and taking off down the slim expanse. Tony looked over his shoulder as he ran and saw the riders had dismounted and were running towards the bridge, swords and crossbows being unsheathed as they went.

“Get down!” he heard Steve shout, and he dropped immediately. Two arrows sailed over him, where he’d been standing a second earlier, landing harmlessly in the river. He could see the charge he had placed a few yards in front of him, fuse almost burnt to the end. He crawled towards it, making it just in time to look up and see Steve take a great running leap onto the portion of bridge slowly drifting downstream, landing in a crouch, before rolling right up to a run.

*Holy fucking hell,* Tony thought. He turned his head around and saw the crossbowmen taking aim, two kneeling down on the bridge and three standing behind them. Steve was shouting at him to stay down, but Steve didn’t even have his shield with him, nothing between him and the bowman lining up at the other end of the footbridge. Tony grabbed the charge and drew himself up to a kneeling position to be able to get some kind arc behind it and hurled the explosive down the bridge towards where the supposed Stark men were trying to kill both him and Steve. He rolled over and covered his head with his hands as the charge landed at the feet of the bowmen, who stared at it stupidly.

A second later, the bridge exploded, pieces of wood, debris and what he could only hope was traitorous bowmen flying through the air. The part of the bridge that Tony had been lying on fell out from under him and he hit the cold water, coming up sputtering for air and grabbing at anything floating by for purchase as the water swept the rest of the makeshift bridge away. He could hear shouts from the shore, but couldn’t tell from which side they originated. He tried to scan around for Steve, couldn’t see him, but got a mouthful of water for his efforts. He could swim, though it wasn’t exactly his best skill. Enough to float, but he wasn’t sure how long, not in the fast-moving river. He tried to swim a few strokes against the current, but quickly gave up, realizing that would tire him far too fast.

He heard another shout, and turned his head only to come face to face with a large chunk of barrel floating directly at him. He dodged to one side, splashing the water to try to push it around him as he did so. He felt the brush of wood against his cheek as it passed him, turned to watch it falter downstream just in time to see it slam into a large rock protruding from the river. *Well, fuck,* was all he managed to think before the force of the river pushed him directly into the path of the rock, his head doing a good impression of the barrel as it smashed against the unforgiving rock as everything went black.

His first thought upon waking up was that he had sand in his mouth, the grit coating his tongue and teeth. He was lying on his back, which he knew because the sun was high overhead. He turned his
head to the side, finding the movement caused a wave of nausea and dizziness to well up, and spat out what he could, along with a good portion of river water that his stomach forced out. He coughed and choked into the sand beneath him before looking up. His ears were filled with water, making all the sounds seem distant and hushed. He blinked against the harsh light, and tried to rise, but found he couldn’t make it more than a few inches off the ground. Things started to come into focus as his eyes adjusted to the brightness of the sun overhead.

“You son of a bitch,” he heard before someone grabbed him by the shoulders and jerked him to a sitting position, shaking him hard enough he swore he felt his teeth rattle. Something very hard rammed into his jaw, sending him back into the dirt. He raised a hand to his face, the other reaching out in what was probably a vain attempt to ward off another blow. “You---how could you—you selfish fucking little—”

“That’s enough, James,” Bruce’s quiet voice interrupted. “Just…just leave him be.” Though Bruce’s voice was soft, Tony ears weren’t so full of water he couldn’t hear the underlying anger there, deep and seething. He looked at Bruce for a moment and wondered if Bruce stopped Barnes because Bruce wanted to be the one to kill him. He actually thought in that moment that Bruce was probably the more likely. It was always the quiet ones you had to worry about.

“St—st—Steve?” he choked out, looking around. His eyes came to rest on Steve, a surge of relief gutting him before he really looked. Steve was on his knees, head bowed and naked to the waist, a large red slash cutting down his side, dripping red into the ground. His breathing was odd, stuttered and raspy, as if he couldn’t get enough air in. He leaned against Natasha’s side, where she cradled his head, slowly stroking through his hair and murmuring words in a language Tony didn’t know.

“What’s wrong with him? Is he okay?” Tony asked, hating how harsh and wrecked his voice sounded. Natasha just looked up at Tony, and Tony figured, nope, not Bruce then. She was going to be the one to kill him. Most definitely. Thor hung back to the side, holding Steve’s shield and sword, along with his own warhammer. Bruce and Barnes had gone over to hover around Steve as well, Bruce opening his medical kit and laying it on the ground as he started to pick through his supplies to find what he needed. Tony dragged his eyes away from Steve long enough to look over the river. The other side was empty.

“Rest of them rode off after Steve came up with you. Couldn’t keep the horses calm for long between the explosion and the smoke, but they waited to see what happened with you. Odd, wouldn’t you say?” Clint said, staring over the river and not looking at Tony as he spoke. “Seemed rather disappointed, ‘specially that one fella. He sure seems inclined to kill you, coming all this way and meeting up with Stark’s own men to get the job done. Not that I hold that against him, mind you. He’s starting to grow on me.”

“You tried to shoot me,” Tony reminded him, recalling the arrow that had landed in front of his feet on the bridge.

“I don’t try to shoot anything,” the archer responded, leaving Tony with nothing to say as Clint walked over to the group that encircled Steve.

Steve had come up with him, Clint had said. He’d avoided the barrel and hit the rock, that was the last thing he remembered with clarity. But here he was, safe on the beach, and he and Steve were the only ones soaked, though it looked like Barnes and Clint were both partially wet. Steve had saved him.

Steve had somehow managed to find him in the water and swim with him back close enough to the shore for Barnes and Clint to grab them. They were obviously some ways downriver from where
the bridge had been, though he couldn’t tell how far they had drifted with the current. One person swimming in that current with rocks and debris everywhere would’ve been nearly impossible. One person swimming in it holding the dead weight of another…he didn’t really want to think about what that had taken.

Yet, Steve had done it, even though Tony was an enemy bent on escape, willing to put Steve and the rest of the team at risk to accomplish it. He didn’t know what to do with that. It was just so outside of what he had thought was a wealth of experience. People helped him because of who he was or what he could give them. This…he didn’t know what this was. But it occurred to him that he had come very close to seeing something that had been long hidden from him and had probably managed to lose his chance without ever realizing he’d had one.

“Is he—Steve, are you—” Tony said, trying to dig himself up out of the sand.

“Stay where you are, Tony,” Natasha warned. And it was definitely a warning. Tony sank back into the sand on his knees, feeling utterly helpless. Barnes knelt behind Steve, placing his good hand on Steve’s lower back, just below his ribs and leaned him forward a bit.

“Breathe through your nose, Stevie, come on, you know this. Keep still, you’re fidgeting. Just listen to my voice and breathe in slowly, there you go,” Barnes encouraged. “Slowly, now. Small breaths, Steve. Not all at once. Now out. That’s the hard part, you know. You’re almost there. You’re gonna be okay. Now, don’t breathe in again until I tell you. Let it settle. There you go. Okay, now in again, good. There, that’s good, Stevie, you got this.” Barnes moved his hand up to massage Steve’s neck, continuing to talk him through breathing, soft and encouraging. Tony recalled his earlier thoughts about Barnes, and felt a mild pang of guilt. Whatever it was between the two of them, it was deeper than Barnes just trying to keep Tony at bay, that was for damn sure.

Bruce stalked over to stand in front of him. “I need to burn some herbs. It’ll help him,” Bruce said, voice hard. Tony blinked at him for a moment and then realized he was asking for his firestones back. Tony patted his shirt, searching for the pouches he’d carried with the stones and his own explosives, finding neither. Tony shook his head, feeling terrible at the look of utter disgust on Bruce’s face.

“Clint, can you get a fire going?” Bruce asked. Clint nodded and started gathering dead branches and dry leaves. He quickly made a small circle of rocks and stacked his finds inside, offering some protection from the wind that blew off the river. Using his bow and a dead branch, he set about trying to stoke a fire in the tinder he’d found. A couple of minutes later, he tossed it aside in frustration.

“Everything’s too damn damp here. I can’t get a fucking thing going,” Clint bit out, glaring at Tony.

“It’s…okay…Clint,” Steve managed to croak out between breaths, each word sounding as if it was ripped from somewhere deep inside and forced into formation against its will. Tony felt his body sag boneless into the sand, leaning forward to lay his head against the sand in front of his knees. He’d done this. This was on him. He’d nearly gotten himself and Steve killed, and it wasn’t exactly for lack of a good reason, he knew, but it still felt like something inside him had been hollowed out, gutted and left bare and open.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Bruce demanded as he started to clean the gash at Steve’s side of the grit and sand embedded in it. Tony heard Steve hiss and watched him turn his face to the side, burying it in Natasha’s hip while Bruce worked. Tony wasn’t sure if Bruce’s question was aimed at him for his escape attempt or Steve for his rescue of Tony. Bruce probably thought both actions equally stupid.
Tony decided to answer anyway as the question hung in the air. “I was thinking that you’re going to turn me over to Pierce, who is probably going to kill me or worse, and that’s if this thing in my chest doesn’t do his work for him first, and you can’t be bothered to take time from your important mission destroying the Kingdom to stop and get me any medicine. And for what it’s worth, I was trying to put a river between you and them, get myself rescued and keep anyone else from being hurt, but I knew the risk, knew something could go wrong. I did it anyway. Sorry to disappoint you by not rolling over and playing the good prisoner while you help Pierce wreak havoc on the Kingdom. You want to kill me, fine. Go ahead,” Tony finished. “I’d rather one of you do it than waste away with this—” Tony broke off as Steve stood up. Tony thought for a sickening moment that Steve was going to be the one to do it, and felt a stabbing pain at the thought. Instead of grabbing his sword though, Steve rummaged through his bag that sat in the ground by Thor’s feet, coming up with something held in his hand and stalking over to where Tony knelt in the dirt.

“Here,” Steve said brusquely, shoving a few of the gods-awful biscuits, a pouch of water and another, much smaller pouch into Tony’s hands. Much to Tony’s shock, Steve pulled a small knife from the sheath at his belt and cut through the ropes binding Tony’s hands. “You want to go so badly, go. You’re free. I’m done with this.”

“No, Buck. We’re done. I’m…no, I can’t do this. He wants to tell someone we were out there? Let him. It’s hardly information worth any of us dying over,” Steve said, looking down at Tony. “And if he stays, that’s what’s going to happen. Because he isn’t going to stop trying. Would you? Would any of us? Do you think I would want you to?” The team was silent in response.

Tony looked up at him, feeling like the ground beneath him was shifting like that watery sand that sucked a person deeper and deeper the move they tried to escape it. He had no idea what to say to that, so he opened the tiny pouch Steve had handed him and stared inside. Tiny white crystals glinted back at him. The salt for the solution Bruce had mentioned. The one that could help the symptoms of the metal poisoning his body, Tony realized, staring dumbly down at the crystals.

“You’re going to want to dissolve that in boiled water. Drop a day should do it,” Bruce said, pulling out a small needle and looping a fine thread through the end of it.

“You—you said we couldn’t get this. We were too far from a city that would have it. Too far out of the way for the team…you said, I heard you,” Tony stammered, at a loss. “You…you…you knew I was listening. We are close to a trading port. Probably Gulmira. You didn’t want to give away our position.” And the team hadn’t gone, just Steve and Bucky had made the trip, able to move much faster without Tony in tow, as well as keep him in the dark about just how close they were to territory firmly in Stark control, or at least it had been last Tony had known. Dammit all to hell.

“Go, Tony. Just go,” Steve said, sounding utterly exhausted and hissing out a breath as Bruce pushed the needle through his flesh sewing the gaping skin together.

Tony stood up and stared down the river. He could walk away, maybe make it to Gulmira or one of the other port towns closer to the capital. He didn’t have the skills to live off the land like the team did, but if Steve and Barnes had made it to a town big enough to have the salt and back again in a night and afternoon, he could probably manage it. On the other hand, back to what, exactly? His men were working with the Ten Rings. He’d seen it with his own eyes. Which made what the tall, bald man had said about Tony’s death needing to have been accomplished much sooner all the more concerning.

Clearly, the attack on the carriages that had landed him in captivity had been accomplished with
the help of someone on the inside, one of his own people. Ross? Maybe. The guy hated him, thought him incompetent and lazy, that was for sure, but murdering your King? When Tony generally let the military do what they wanted and stayed out of it? Made no sense.

And then there was the issue with Stern and the money. Stern had overseen a large swath of territory that included the Riverlands and the forest they’d been marching through, all the way to the river they just crossed, Tony recalled, dredging up the governance chart Pepper had tried drilling into him, but that area also eventually melted into the desert wastes where Tony had met with his generals for the demonstration. And the weapons that had ended up in the hands of the Ten Rings, the same ones that had been used on the carriage attack, the ones with his own crest stamped on them, mocking him…thoughts swirled in his head, pieces of puzzles he hadn’t known needed to be put together.

Who would benefit most from this? Who would have been in a position to negotiate an assassination with the Ten Rings, arrange an attack on a Royal caravan, funnel money to Stern in return for Stern turning a blind eye to activity between Stark forces and the Ten Rings happening right under his nose? But Stern’s governorship went back years. How long had this been going on? A thought formed, a terrible one, one that he didn’t want to voice out loud. Saying it made it seem all the more plausible. It was crazy, wasn’t it? It had to be. He wanted it to be. He tried to find it, the thing wrong with the conclusion his mind was drawing. It fit, it did fit, but it couldn’t be…could it? All these years…But that meant…Because if he was right…Gods, if he was right…Pepper, Rhoduy, everyone…the whole fucking thing. It was all in danger.

Tony took a deep drag of air, trying to calm himself. His heart was pounding, a bitter, metallic taste filling his mouth and something stung at the back of his eyes. He wanted to crumple to the ground with the force of it, the betrayal, the fear, the fucking self-recrimination because he hadn’t seen…he’d let this happen.

He’d been so easy to manipulate, happy to be left alone to his laboratory and inventions, his parties and drink, trusting his responsibilities to others, telling himself it was better that way, though better for whom? Himself or the Realm? Which had been his true concern? He was honest enough with himself to admit he really couldn’t say. Well, if he was right, then it was on him to fix it. And he couldn’t do that if he ended up as Pierce’s prize or in the hands of his own forces that he now knew he couldn’t trust not to simply kill him outright. He needed to find a way to get someone to listen to him. Someone who would at least hear him out.

“I know you have no reason to trust me. I know what I’m asking is a lot. Impossible, maybe. I admit that if our roles were reversed, I wouldn’t give it a moment’s thought. But I think you’re a better man than I have ever been,” Tony began, finding the words strangling in his throat. He forced himself to look at Steve and hold the other man’s gaze. “You said you wanted to serve. To be a part of something that would make the world better, something you could believe in,” Tony reminded him. Steve gave a slow nod, brow furrowed.

“I think Obediah Stane murdered King Howard and Queen Maria. I think he tried to kill the King and is attempting to take over the Kingdom. And he’s using the Ten Rings to do it. I need you to take me to General Fury,” Tony announced to stunned silence.
“All of a sudden, you want to go to Fury? After you just about blew up half the river, not to mention us, to get away?” Barton questioned, disbelief dripping from his voice. “I say we find something heavy and see if he’s a witch,” Barton suggested, shaking his head in obvious disgust.

“Clint,” Steve admonished. He understood the frustration, standing there dripping and bleeding, still reeling from watching Tony’s head disappear under the dark water of the river and fail to resurface. He dove in without much thought to how he was going to get both of them to shore between the river’s steady current pushing them unfailingly downstream and the Stark riders that remained on shore firing their quivers of arrows at them. The thought that he might not find Tony, that he might have already been carried down the river and out of reach before Steve could reach him hadn’t even occurred to him, probably because the alternative of simply leaving the river without Tony hadn’t occurred to him.

He had heard Bucky and Natasha shouting from the riverbank, though he couldn’t make out the words over the rush of the river. He was fairly sure it was something along the lines of “Get your stupid ass out of there, you idiot!” from Bucky, at least.

Growing up along the sea, with all the small rivers and streams of the Riverlands area flowing through, he knew how to swim, though his sickly small frame had never allowed him to do much of it when he was younger. He knew what to do though. With all that water around, drowning were a parent’s nightmare, so all the children learned the basics, even him. He knew how to swim at an angle to the shore, floating on his stomach downstream, avoiding the whirlpools created by the rocks where he could.

He wasn’t sure how far they’d floated after he’d found Tony lodged against the rock he’d hit, caught up in part of a desiccated tree that had long ago also become lodged there. It had been one of the branches that had scored his side, though he hadn’t felt it much at the time. It had only hurt after he dragged Tony to the shore, pressed air into his mouth as he’d been taught, until the man coughed up the murky river water, rolling onto his side with a groan.

Steve had looked around for the rest of the team then, but they hadn’t reached he and Tony yet. He’d felt like the air he poured into Tony wouldn’t go back in right, felt the familiar feeling of taking in gulps of air only to find it burned ice cold in his lungs as he coughed in an effort to draw more air in, chest constricting with the effort. He hadn’t had one of these breathing attacks in years, the last time brought on by heat and smoke and strain and the utter terror that he wasn’t going to be fast enough or strong enough and someone he cared about was going to die.

By the time Bucky and the rest of had made it downriver enough to find he and Tony, Steve been on his hands and knees, head bowed towards he ground wheezing out whistling breaths, panicked eyes searching desperately for Bucky. Bucky had always been able to help him through these attacks, when his own body was its worst enemy. Steve’s mom had shown the other boy what to do years ago, shortly after Steve figured out that Bucky wasn’t just being nice because his own mother made him, but actually genuinely liked spending time with Steve, even if that meant sometimes kneading in the dirt and rubbing Steve’s back while he strained with the effort to get air back into his body.

Steve sighed at the memories, and shook his head. It wasn’t the time or place for that now. He
grabbed his sodden shirt to put back on, after Bruce gave him a nod indicating he was done stitching up the wound on Steve’s side. It stung sharply, the skin pulled taut where the branch had sliced through, though the cut itself wasn’t all that deep. The stitches itched where they delved in and out of his skin, but he’d had enough wounds to know not to scratch at it.

The team was frustrated and angry, he knew. He could see the dark looks directed at Tony, questioning glances thrown his way after his pronouncement that Tony was free to go. Though they wouldn’t gainsay him, the tension fairly vibrated between them. The whole situation had gotten far more complicated since Tony’s aborted escape attempt.

Those Stark riders were now well aware of their presence, and likely were perfectly capable of predicting their intended route and destination. And Stark was apparently now working with the Ten Rings, a development that would certainly be of interest to Fury and Pierce. He wondered again if the information they carried, particularly with this new knowledge of Stark’s involvement with the Ten Rings could be enough to garner a favor, secure a prisoner exchange for Tony.

Setting Tony free, ordering him off alone, had been an act borne of anger and frustration, as well as a calculated risk to see what the other man would do with such a proposition. And he had certainly not failed to disappoint on that score. Steve knew perfectly well he couldn’t simply let Tony wander off, and not just because of whatever value Tony might have to the rebellion’s efforts.

The ferry crossing at Gulmira wasn’t all that far away on horseback. He and Bucky had made it on foot and back in just over half a day’s time, having left the camp last night shortly after dinner. Bruce had given them specific instructions about how to find his contact in the city, a medicine man that Bruce assured Steve would have what he needed for Tony and wouldn’t cheat them. They’d found the shop just where Bruce had said it would be, a dark wooden door with a stamp above it showing two snakes twisted together standing nondescriptly between a rug merchant and a boisterous wineseller.

As Steve expected, Bucky had been none too pleased about the assignment, grousing and arguing the better part of the way before giving up and treating Steve to stony silence. He knew it was dangerous to venture into a city even as loosely controlled by Stark forces as Gulmira, but he couldn’t very well let a prisoner suffer because he wasn’t willing to take a risk. Those riders could cross the River and be on them in a much shorter time span. Which meant sending Tony off on his own, freeing him, such as it was, probably amounted to a death sentence the same as if Steve had done the deed with his own hand. And that was something he knew he couldn’t do.

Steve couldn’t quite put it all together in a way that made sense. Everything since they had come across Tony nearly getting his head separated from his body had been a series of twists and turns that fell into no discernible pattern nor came with a simple explanation. As far as he knew, the Crown had never worked with the Ten Rings. They were little more than murderers and thieves, largely troubling the common folk who eked out a living in the harsher, more remote parts of the kingdom or in nomadic camps that roamed the desert area.

The Ten Rings occasionally sold their so-called ‘assistance’ to the highest bidder, yet were known to be perfectly willing to double-cross a patron if a better offer came around. Even Pierce, who occasionally used mercenaries, a practice Steve had argued strongly against with Fury after the incident with Batroc, wouldn’t have anything to do with the Ten Rings. But he’d seen the man they’d left in the desert riding with the Stark men as if he belonged there, even giving orders. If they had been hired to kill Tony, they were certainly going above and beyond their usual sense of dedication to make sure the job was done.

None of this sat right with Steve. There was some piece of the puzzle he was missing, and he was
fairly sure he knew who had it. So, he couldn’t really simply let Tony stumble off into the night and hope it worked out for him. Didn’t mean he had to simply agree to do what the man demanded though. And it was a demand. Never had a prisoner just caught trying to escape, dripping wet and surrounded by angry soldiers managed to look more imperious as he attempted to negotiate, Steve thought trying to keep a slight smile from escaping.

“You say the kingdom is in danger. From Stane. Who has been the King’s Chancellor going back to King Howard’s reign. But it’s you the Stark riders were chasing. You they have apparently decided to work with the Ten Rings in order to see dead. That’s an awful lot of determination on the part of the Ten Rings to seeing you dead. They usually don’t lift a finger if there isn’t a chest worth of gold in it. And chasing a prisoner this far from what territory they’ve carved out for themselves,” Steve shook his head. “Who are you, Tony? If you’re telling the truth…why does Stane want you dead so badly? Those things you used. On the bridge. What were those? I’ve seen my share of ordinance….You’re no mere armorer, so don’t even try it,” Steve finished as he saw Tony take a breath to answer.

“I—no. No, I’m not. Not just, anyway,” Tony said hesitantly. “The explosives. That—that’s what I do. I make them. For the Crown. Alchemist, some would say. Those rocks Natasha took from me, uh…temporarily…they aren’t rocks. Obviously. It’s a compound that I created while I was held captive by the Ten Rings. Like the powder you’ve probably seen used for the shells, but more powerful and very stable. Can be liquefied, but won’t dissolve in water, as you may have, uh, noticed. That’s…that’s why they’re after me. The Ten Rings wanted weapons. I was out in the desert giving a demonstration to the military commanders of some new methods. I think Stane set up a trade. Have me make them the weapons and then they would kill me. In return for the weapons, they would help Stane arrange the King’s death,” Tony finished, a weary, defeated tone to his voice that didn’t sit naturally on him.

There was truth there, Steve could see. He cast a look up to Natasha, who gave a small nod in agreement. But it was covering a lie. More misdirection. He blew out a long, frustrated breath. Tony was trying to talk circles around him, throwing enough information out to sound convincing without actually telling him much of anything he couldn’t figure out on his own.

“Look. You’ve seen what I can do. Without me around, the Crown would be at a disadvantage in the war, something Stane could use as part of his attempt to seize power. The Generals hate the King, for the most part. Think he’s bungling the war effort. Not taking a hard enough line with the rebels, not willing to do what needs to be done to win. They’d welcome Stane’s leadership,” Tony said bitterly. Between the rumblings Steve had heard from Fury and Coulson about the King’s strained relationship with the military and Clint’s colorful gossip, he knew there was something to what Tony was saying, even if it didn’t explain everything.

“You said Stane tried to kill the King. That he killed King Howard and Queen Maria…but that was years ago. The accident, I mean,” Steve prodded.

“I—yeah. Yes. It was. A long time ago. But I think this has been in the works for a while. It was probably easy for a long time. King Howard…after the Great War anyway…he drank. A lot. Enough that Stane was essentially running the kingdom for years before the so-called accident. Stane was probably content to work behind the scenes while the King was young. The Council named him Regent anyway, so he Had all the power he craved. As the King came of age…well. You’ve all obviously heard enough rumor about him to have an idea. But then the rebellion happened, and the King was suddenly expected to take a more active role. That would have interfered with Stane’s plans, so he needed the King out of the way. Maybe he wouldn’t kill the golden goose outright. It’s possible he has him prisoner somewhere, floating some story about him being held for ransom, waiting to see if he can use him for leverage, maybe with Pierce, I don’t
know,” Tony suggested, waving a hand in the air in what appeared to be genuine frustration with his lack of understanding about what Stane might be up to.

“Meanwhile, Stane and whoever is working with him, probably at least Ross and Stone, is using the ransom story to buy time, not cause a panic or succession struggle in the middle of a war. All the while consolidating his power and sinking his teeth further into the kingdom. You watch, he’ll have the Council declare that rat bastard cousin of Stark’s the King and the two of them will run the kingdom into the ground,” Tony bit out.

“Sir Gregory? You think he has something to do with…what you’re suggesting?” Natasha asked carefully.

“He hates the King. He lusts for power. Everyone knows that. And Stane would need someone with Royal blood to get the Council to sign off on it,” Tony offered, his voice hard. “Gregory would love nothing more than to sit the throne, and he sure as hell wouldn’t be above a little regicide to get it.”

Steve stared at Tony as he wove his tale, unsure what, if anything, to believe. What Tony was suggesting…it boggled the mind, made his head spin with question after question. It didn’t seem possible. And yet…there was obviously something going on between Stark’s men and the Ten Rings. Something that involved Tony. Someone who could make a weapon like what Tony had used on the bridge would be hugely valuable, that much was true, as far as it went.

If even half of what Tony was suggesting was remotely true…then Fury and Pierce needed to know about it. It could change everything. Pierce’s whole rebellion…if Stane and this Sir Gregory had been manipulating things…if they really had conspired to kill the King or hold him prisoner somewhere…maybe Pierce’s grievances with the King were unfounded, or at least misplaced, better laid at the feet of Stane and whomever was working with him.

But Pierce had said it was the King who had given the order, said he’d heard it from the King’s own lips. Pierce had argued against it, vehemently, he’d said, but the King would not be swayed. Fury had been there, too, during the Council meeting that decided so much of Steve’s life from leagues away. Fury had confirmed that Pierce had fought bitterly against the proposal. It had been one of the things that had led Fury to follow Piece into rebellion. Steve shook his head in frustration, catching Bucky’s eye.

“Don’t even start, Steve,” Bucky gritted out through clenched teeth. “There’s no absolution to be had here, you know that.”

“I know what this sounds like. I do,” Tony interrupted. “And I know after what, uh, what I just did…that asking you to believe anything I say is probably asking entirely too much. Maybe I’m completely mistaken. Maybe I don’t have all the facts. Maybe. But, if I am right, and I usually am, then the Realm is in danger. Stane and Gregory will lay waste to the entire kingdom in order to squeeze every last bit of power out of it for themselves, and they won’t care who it hurts. Hate me if you want, but you can’t think I want to see that happen,” Tony declared adamantly. “I don’t know if Fury will believe me or if he does, how that might be able to change anything. But…I have to try. I can’t just sit back and let this happen. I just can’t. I’m not asking you to believe me. I’m asking you to do what you were going to do to begin with, that’s it. If you won’t do that, then I’ll walk away right now and find him my own damn self.”

“You’re right, that is asking too much,” Clint shot back. “Steve…you aren’t going to listen to this guy, are you? He’s mad or lying or at the very least manipulating the hell out of you because you’re you and won’t just deck him for it.”
“I am, to my dismay, all too familiar with the machinations of royal life of which Tony speaks, Captain. It is an unfortunate burden of the powerful that finding those you can trust is your greatest task, and the one at which you most often fail,” Thor said softly. “Your King would not be the first to place his trust unwisely, for the burden of rule is great and the temptation to renounce what responsibilities you can is great as well. Mine own brother sought to undermine my place in Asgard, and the entire kingdom suffered for my blindness,” Thor continued, an air of melancholy tainting his voice that Steve wasn’t used to seeing on the man. “Indeed, it is part of why I choose to leave my beloved Jane and follow you, Captain. You are the rare sort who does not seek to relinquish such burden to others. You have no way to appreciate how remarkable that makes you.”

Steve found himself watching Tony as Thor said his piece. Something shifted behind the other man’s brown eyes. Regret, Steve recognized a moment later. It was regret. He was familiar enough with the sentiment himself to see it’s reflection in others.

“Fury will want to talk to him, Steve,” Natasha remarked. “It wouldn't be a bad thing to let him decide how to handle this. We don't know what information he might have that he hasn't shared with us.”

She turned to Tony, addressing him directly. “You could have died. We could’ve died. You think you know more about this…this thing…you’ve created. That you can control it. We live in a world that is chaos. You can’t bend it to your will. It doesn’t work like that. I’ve seen regimes rise and fall. Everything is replaceable. Except the things that aren’t. If you try something like that again, I’ll kill you myself, before he can so much as raise an objection,” she said, nodding towards Steve. Tony was watching her with wide, dark eyes, his expression tense and grim.

“I agree to your terms,” Tony said with a solemn nod. “Captain…Steve…you…you saved my life. Twice. I haven’t forgotten that. Give me a chance to let it mean something. Please. I need to do this,” Tony pleaded, looking straight at him, eyes dark and full of some deep-seated determination, the same kind that Steve recognized from many an ill-advised youthful scrapes with far bigger foes, the ones he should’ve walked away from, yet never could.

If he said no, refused to take Tony with them, then Tony really would try it on his own, however ill-equipped he was to deal with being out in this terrain on his own and despite the threat from the Ten Rings and those riders. Whatever lies had fallen from Tony’s lips, he’d been telling the truth when he said he believed the Realm was in danger, that much was apparent.

“Alright. We take him to Fury,” Steve declared, watching as relief briefly lit Tony’s features before he shuttered them again.

“Steve—“ Bucky interjected.

“I said we take him to Fury, Buck. That’s it,” Steve cut him off. Bucky sent him a baleful look, before shaking his head and stalking off, standing a few paces off with his back to the group, gripping his spear tightly in his good hand.

“I am in your debt, Captain,” Tony replied, looking back at Steve and nodding in no way that could remotely be considered deferential. There was an odd expression on his face, that sharp, focused look he seemed to reserve solely to unnerve Steve. “I look forward to repaying it. In many ways.”

Chapter End Notes
Wow, well, that was chapter of exposition. Sorry. Did I mention slow build? Um, slow build. Yeah. So, as always, thank you so much for reading and commenting and kudo-ing. Very encouraging! This is a bit of a beast to write, but fun.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony felt a wide swath of relief rush through him at the Captain’s words. He’d latched onto the idea of getting to Fury, trying to convince his father’s once-loyal friend and councilor that whatever his past grievances with Tony, more was at stake now. Far more. While he’d never fully trusted Fury, the man’s secrets had secrets, after all, he had once trusted that Fury wanted what was best for the Realm, however much they may have differed on how exactly that was to be defined.

He wondered how much of Pierce’s rebellion and Fury’s willingness to go along with it had been due to whatever machinations Stane had been up to while Tony kept his head out of whatever matters didn’t interest him, which, unfortunately, had encompassed most anything that didn’t involve his laboratory or his bed. Meanwhile, at least until recent events, his kingdom and the people in it had been the ones who had borne the brunt of his ignorance. Maybe there was some justness in his current situation. More than some, he thought, rubbing a hand over the metal plate covering his chest wound.

The team started shuffling about the shore area in varying degrees of dissatisfaction, as far as Tony could tell, shoving things in packs, checking weapons and casting long glances down the river towards where Gulmira must sit. Steve was kneeling down by his pack, rifling through the meager contents, apparently searching for something. He pulled out a small, rolled up piece of leathered hide, tied with a piece of string and opened it up, looking intently at whatever it was he’d unfurled. Steve…Steve, whom Tony had spent long miles trussed up, being pulled behind Bruce or Natasha, thinking about how good the man would look splayed out beneath him, how he could get Steve to respond to him despite himself, what it would be like to undermine some of that steady control, to make him beg, and, of course, the many ways he could get to a yes that wasn’t quite a no. Offer pardons to the rest of the team, perhaps? He was sure Steve would have agreed. Tony felt vaguely nauseous at the idea now, looking at Steve in his soaked clothes, blood seeping through his shirt where he’d been injured saving Tony’s life. Again.

He also didn’t want to examine too closely how his fantasies tended to involve Steve asking him for forgiveness for misjudging Tony so harshly. That while it was thoughts of how good Steve’s mouth would look around his cock that had made walking tricky, it was thoughts of Steve seeing the truth of him that made his stomach turn over and something tighten in his chest. He’d wanted that more deeply than he’d realized. Because if Steve told him how wrongly he’d judged him, then it had to be true. Now…now he wasn’t so sure if he wanted Steve to truly see him or not, and what exactly Steve would see if he did.

Steve, who separates himself from his team and marches into an enemy stronghold to obtain something that might help alleviate a prisoner’s pain. Who then risks his life to save that of a man who had just nearly gotten them all killed in the desperation and hubris of an escape attempt. Tony was fairly certain the number of people he knew that would do that for him, for Tony and not for the King, amounted to Pepper, Jarvis and Rhodey.

He didn’t know what to do with that, with Steve, who was fighting against him, and doing an annoying spectacular job of it, but who swam towards him instead of away, even knowing he couldn’t even fucking breathe properly. Tony honestly didn’t know what to do with that. It was so outside of his experience. He had people that would die for him, sure, because of his title and his name and the power those things commanded, because if they failed in their duty, there were
consequences. But someone who would risk everything for him for no boon or recognition, no glory or cause, but because they thought it the right thing to do? That was a rather distressingly short list.

While it was true that Tony hadn’t wanted any of the team to be hurt during his attempt at escape, had done what he could to minimize the chance of that occurring, he had nevertheless accepted there had been a chance of it happening. That, or worse. He’d known it was a possibility, can’t lie to himself about that, and had taken the risk, despite the potential cost. Told himself it was worth it, if he was able to get free, get back to his life, to where he was supposed to be. His life was worth more, after all, or so he had grown up believing.

Any truth that remained of that idea had never seemed more a result of pure happenstance of birth than it did now.

They were the enemy, anyway, actively working against him. If they were harmed as a result of his escape, well, that was simply the risk all soldiers faced. They were enemy combatants, hardly innocents. Objectively, there was truth to that.

And then he’d woken up to Steve kneeling in the dirt unable to breathe, soaked to the skin and dripping blood, each of the team members regarding Tony with such hostility for what he had almost done, what they could have lost. He’d sat there in the dirt watching them try to talk Steve through his breathing, watching Barnes turn gentle, and realized it wasn’t guilt he was feeling, not exactly or not entirely. It was abject terror.

Tony shook himself from his reverie and walked over to where Steve was kneeling in the soft sand, staring down at a piece of parchment, eyes scanning over the page, a furrow of concentration lining his brow. A map, Tony realized. An incredibly detailed map, he noticed, peering closer. Showing his lands, with various roads, bridges, and cart paths marked, along with villages and cities, ports and rivers. And troop positions, supply lines, fortifications, even the location of various ordinance storage.

Tony tried to analyze as surreptitiously as he could, but soon found himself leaning over Steve’s shoulder to get a better look, because the level of detail was impressive and the knowledge of his troops’ movements, including arrows presumably indicating anticipated future positions, disturbingly accurate. “Where the hell did you get a map like that?” Tony demanded, crouching down by Steve to take it all in.

“Drew it,” Steve responded evenly, causing Tony to do a double-take. “Bruce wrote in the names.”

“You drew this? But…but…where did the information come from? Did you bribe someone? Did Natasha get that for you? Son of a…that’s…you’re not supposed to have…does Pierce know all this?” Tony sputtered, feeling his chest constrict and stomach roil. This practically gave away Ross’s entire strategy. Steve just gave him a long look, because of course he wasn’t going to actually provide Tony with a complete answer.

“I didn’t bribe anyone, Tony, and you should apologize to Natasha for the insinuation. I’ve fought against General Ross long enough to be able to figure out what he’s most likely do next, all things considered,” Steve replied. Tony sat back on his haunches, bewildered at the turn of events and having, once again, severely underestimated Steve, a mistake he seemed rather annoyingly prone to making. Steve got up and walked to Barton, the two discussing something on the map in low tones that Tony couldn’t hear. Son of a bitch. No wonder Rhodey was worried.

“No offense intended,” Tony said, turning to Natasha, with a slight, deferential bow.
“Oh, none taken,” Natasha assured him lightly, twirling her dagger over the backs of her fingers like a child’s game. Tony was no expert, but he was pretty sure she was offended.

“We’ll take the Southern route to avoid Stark’s encampment near Genosha. We’ll have to cut through the Fenyick Pass, which I know will take us close to the disputed territory Schmidt claims, but it’s fairlyremoved from his base, and we have no reports of it being heavily trafficked,” Steve announced, earning a nod from Natasha. “The terrain will make it nearly impossible for those riders to follow us, at least not on horseback. It’ll take longer to get to Fury, but it’s too much of a risk to cut through Stark territory when they know you’re here, Tony, and are actively looking for you. Besides, we heard rumblings in Gulmira that the bounty on the Avengers had gone up again,” Steve said, and Tony’s mind darted back to his conversation with Rhodey in the tent after his little weapons demonstration. *Offer them more…I need this Captain of theirs for a nice, very public hanging*…Tony blinked in surprise as something in his gut clenched, found himself actually taking a step towards Steve to…to what? He wasn’t sure. He couldn’t take back his flippantly spoken words, when the Captain was simply an annoyance to be handled so he could go back to his more interesting pursuits and not have to deal with Rhodey’s concerns and vague disappointment.

He didn’t usually allow such things with prisoners of war. He’d spoken in haste and annoyance because it had been at least the fifth time that Rhodey had complained about the Avengers and their successes. What if Rhodey had actually managed to capture Steve, brought him before Tony in chains, as Tony had so arrogantly demanded? Doubtful that he would have treated Steve remotely as well as the man had treated him. He didn’t particularly want to think about what might have happened had their circumstances been reversed. He was fairly certain he would have noticed Steve, though he wasn’t proud of where that line of thinking got him. Tony could see him, proud and refusing to yield, defiance flashing in his blue eyes. Oh, Tony would have noticed alright.

The prisoners his troops had captured were surprisingly loyal to this Captain, Rhodey had said, and Tony had needed the man brought low before he became a symbol, wanted to crush whatever was brewing in the hearts of Pierce’s forces before respect and admiration ripened into something more. People fought a man for many reasons. People followed a man for far fewer. The last thing he had needed was for Pierce to find a hero. And then he’d actually gotten to know Steve a bit and realized he was far too late. He wouldn’t have had that chance if Rhodey had been successful. Could very easily have ruined something he wouldn’t have taken the time to even see was a possibility without ever realizing his loss.

“Gosh, I’m beginning to think the Crown doesn’t like us much. I’m deeply hurt,” Barton asked with a smirk, drawing Tony’s attention back to the conversation. “How much am I worth now? Might turn myself in.”

“Keep talking, Barton, and I’ll pay them to take you,” Bruce said lightly, clapping the archer on the back and grinning congenially as he did. “Who wants in?” Hands went up automatically around the team, except for Steve, who was trying to keep from smiling so hard it must actually hurt.

How they could manage to go from arguing one moment to joking at the expense of one of their own the next, Tony couldn’t fathom. But then, most people were too busy currying favor with him to make jokes, particularly at his expense. He felt something like envy uncurl in his chest, which was ridiculous, of course. What did he possibly have to be envious of? Putting aside having his kingdom gutted and getting sent to his death by the people he trusted, he had everything he could possibly want at his fingertips.

Except…except there was a blink-and-you-missed it smile between Steve and Bruce, a fond grimace from Clint, slight smirk playing on Natasha’s lips and wide grin breaking across Thor’s
face, hell, even Barnes shoulders were tense with the effort not to laugh, hand high in the air even
as he had his back to the team, and Tony thought maybe he didn’t really have nearly as much as
he’d thought.

inevitably betray you for the life of leisure to which I am rightly entitled, I want you to know, your
downfall started right here.”

“That will haunt us, I’m sure,” Steve said drolly, earning a surprised spurt of laughter from Tony
before he stifled it at the team’s disgruntled looks, as if Steve’s humor belonged only to them.

“Let’s move. We need to put some distance between us and the river before nightfall,” Steve said,
looking at the sun, just beginning its descent into the sea. Everyone finished stowing their packs,
and all of them except Bruce drew weapons.

“We won’t be able to move much at night. Terrain’s too rough. Clint, I want your eyes out in
front. Buck and Natasha, you’re on the wings. Rendezvous at the Falls,” he said, and the two of
them separated out to each side of the team, leaving different trails, Tony realized, as they moved
into the woods by the river’s edge. “Tony? Think you’re recovered enough to keep up?” Steve
asked. Tony nodded in reply, forcing his muscles, coming off the exhaustion of the escape attempt
and lovely swim in the river, to move. He followed Steve’s footsteps through the wood, Bruce and
Thor marching behind at the quick pace the Captain set.

They walked in silence for awhile, until some point in time not obvious to Tony at which Steve
decided they were far enough from the river and presumably from where the riders might easily
overtake them to allow the team to relax a bit, some signal communicated that was apparent to
Bruce and Thor that Tony missed, and suddenly Thor was telling a story of nearly being run down
by his beloved Jane on her horse upon their first meeting. It appeared to be a story the others had
heard before, but Tony enjoyed hearing the man’s enthusiasm and clear relish for the tale, and no
one seemed inclined to tell Thor to stop.

“She is a wise woman, my beloved Jane,” Thor told him, eyes shining brightly with remembered
happiness. “She charts the stars and uses her knowledge to assist the farmers and fishermen in
their efforts, truly a boon to those who will put aside petty prejudices and listen to a woman. Woe
to those who would dismiss her because of her gender,” Thor said with a frown. “Our own fair
Natasha uses the weaknesses and judgment of others to her advantage, but these things are borne of
ignorance and though they may aid our cause, it is still a great failing.”

“The King’s Steward is a woman. Pepper Potts. She’s brilliant. Runs the Castle and handles most
of the administration of Kingstown. From what I’ve heard, I mean. He couldn’t get anything done
without her. They say,” Tony offered.

“I think my Jane would like this King’s Steward very much,” Thor replied readily.

“I’ve heard the King has an interest in the stars, as well. I’ll bet he would enjoy meeting your
Jane,” Tony suggested, thinking of his vast library and the large looking glass he’d just had
installed on the top of the Tower, above his private quarters.

“How’d you come to work with explosives, Tony?” Bruce asked, in what Tony assumed was a
poor attempt at prying something remotely useful out of him.

“My Dad was involved with weapon-making. Explosives, sometimes. Guess I picked it up from
him, when I was young. Then…it just seemed the thing to do. With the war on and all,” Tony
responded, all of which had the benefit of being true without actually saying anything.
“Ah yes, following in the footsteps of one’s parent is a noble pursuit,” Thor acknowledged. “Our Captain’s father was a soldier. I believe you always sought to serve, Steven, even when your health was too frail to allow it, is that not so?”

“Yes,” Steve replied simply, saying no more, but that seemed enough to satisfy Thor. Frail health? Tony had assumed Steve had been away from home when the plague had swept through the Riverlands, and that was how he and Barnes managed to make it. Maybe not. He wondered if Steve had suffered from whatever the sickness had been that had wiped Brookland off the world with such deadly efficiency. He’d heard no one survived, but those things were always exaggerated by the time it reached his ears.

“You were sick?” Tony questioned. His voice sounded odd and tinny to his own ears, for some reason. “Was it…was it from what happened? In Brookland?”

“No,” Steve replied, staring steadfastly ahead as they walked through the woods, the trees becoming taller and thicker as they moved further from the river. Tony noticed a slight incline from the way his calves burned. “I…I told you I wasn’t a robust child,” he explained. Tony nodded, picturing a smaller, skinnier Steve with the same determined jaw and bright, unwavering eyes. “I was sick. A lot. When I was young. I was older when the plague came. That? That was the one thing I didn’t get,” Steve said harshly, swiping at a wayward branch with his shield.

“It was a terrible thing that happened there,” Tony said, voice low and unsure, because this obviously was still hurtful to Steve. To be honest, it had been so far removed from his life at the time, he hadn’t really given it a whole lot of thought other than an vague sense of sadness for a tragedy affecting people he didn’t know. He remembered concerns about keeping the sickness from spreading. No one would touch anything that came from that area, the baskets Pepper had so admired ending up in a bonfire of other items that had the misfortune of originating in a region that had suddenly become deadly. He couldn’t imagine what it must have been like for Steve, living through that, losing so many people, his entire world wiped out almost overnight, finding himself thrust out into a world he would have barely recognized, so different was it from what he would have known there.

“A lot of terrible things happened there. The sickness was one of them,” Steve replied enigmatically, stirring Tony’s curiosity.

“What do you—“ Tony started, something cold unfurling around his spine.

“Enough, Tony. It serves no purpose. Leave it,” Steve said tightly, quickening his pace enough to make any attempt at conversation a shouting match. Tony looked askance at Bruce in question, but the doctor just studied his feet as he walked. They kept marching for what seemed like the better part of the day before Steve called a halt. Tony’s legs were nearly ready to collapse beneath him, but he refused to be the one to complain. He looked at his surroundings and quickly realized they had come to what must be the place Steve had called the Falls, though that was something of an exaggeration, in Tony’s opinion. A small waterfall, just taller than two men, trickled down over large, grey boulders that stacked neatly against a ridge where the land seemed to suddenly jut up, reaching into the sky with fingers of rock. The rock hollowed out behind the wall of water to form a small cave.

Tony could see the mountains in the distance, and noticed for the first time that the foliage had changed a bit, the leaves growing thicker and the canopy of trees denser, spongy moss cradling the trunks and roots of the larger trees. He had been too distracted with his own thoughts and the pain and exhaustion of walking far more than he was accustom to notice before, but they were definitely gaining altitude as they marched away from the river. He couldn’t see them yet, but he knew they
were heading towards the disputed lands in the shadow of the ice mountains that Schmidt claimed for his insane little sect of worshippers, using the mythical hydra beast as their symbol.

Tony heard a high-pitched trill echo, like the call of a bird, and looked up to notice Barton sitting on the flat-topped boulder that formed part of the top of the Falls, dangling his feet in the stream as it cascaded down. “Not so much as a bear taking a shit, Cap,” Barton informed them. “Everything’s quiet. You know that means we’re probably all going to die.”

“If it is quiet that is deadly, I feel certain you will ensure our safety,” Steve said dryly, placing his shield down by the stream and unbuckling his sword belt.

“Cap’s not wrong, Clint,” Bruce said with a chuckle. Tony grinned too, but was careful not to outright laugh this time, his enjoyment of anything obviously still a source of irritation. The team set their packs and weapons down, and Bruce started to organize what he could for a fire. Barton leapt from rock to rock before landing on the soft ground at the base of the Falls, and walked over to Bruce to hand him his bow. He shot Tony an annoyed look at the indignity of having his bow used for anything as pedestrian as a fire, but they didn’t have much choice since Tony had lost the firestones Bruce normally used in his escape attempt.

A few minutes later, Natasha appeared in their midst as if she had materialized out of the waterfall like a water sprite. “No sign of riders or anyone else. Looks pretty clear behind us,” she said, sinking gracefully down next to Bruce where he was working Clint’s bow and a small twig to try to get the fire going. Tony saw a small plume of smoke finally begin to curl after some effort, and watched Bruce carefully add dried leaves to the tiny flame, blowing gently on it in encouragement.

“Tony, if you have the salt crystals, I’ll show you how to dissolve them for the solution you’ll need to take. I think it will help, though I admit I’ve never seen a case quite like yours,” Bruce said, pulling out a small metal pot and some tongs. Tony dug out the bag Steve had given him and handed it to Bruce, who dropped several of the fine crystals into a bit of water in the pot and held it over the flame with the tongs.

When the salt finished dissolving, he poured the solution into a tiny cylinder and handed it back to Tony. “A couple of drops a day should do it. See how you feel after maybe a fortnight of it. By the time we get to Fury, I think we may have been able to counteract most of the effects of the metal poisoning, though I don’t know how long something like this can work. We might have to make the solution stronger as we go,” Bruce said, mouth twisting a bit in dissatisfaction. Tony nodded in thanks and took the cylinder from Bruce, stowing it carefully in one of the pockets inside his shirt where he had hidden his explosives.

Tony upended the cylinder in his mouth, allowing a few precious drops to hit his tongue before he swallowed. Oddly enough, he actually trusted Bruce to help and was somewhat optimistic this might even work, even if for no other reason than Bruce wouldn’t have let Steve risk himself and Barnes for something he didn’t think had an actual chance of having some kind of beneficial effect. At the very least, it might buy Tony enough time to get to Fury and then back to the Tower and that wonderful chunk of metal the King of Wakanda sent as his coronation gift. He’d been fascinated by the damn thing’s properties since he’d gotten it. He’d studied it at length, and it was like nothing he’d ever seen before, though he had never quite figured out what to do with the damn thing. It was sitting on his desk in his laboratory at the moment, the world’s biggest paperweight. And now, it might just save his life.

Tony sank to the ground next to Bruce and opposite Natasha while Thor, Steve and Barton stepped off to the opposite side of the small stream that flowed from the Falls, meandering its way down to the river, Tony assumed. There was a small open area there, a flat space between the trees devoid
“You’re going to love this,” Bruce said with a smile. “Watch.” Tony looked around curiously, and started to ask what exactly he was going to love, when Thor took a giant swing at the Captain while Barton lashed out with what should’ve been a brutal kick to the knee. Steve sidestepped Thor’s swing easily and blocked Barton’s kick while planting one of his own that sent Barton flying backwards, though the man landed in a surprisingly agile crouch. It went on like that for long minutes, Thor and Clint attempting to land punches and kicks and Steve parrying them with such speed, skill and grace that it was truly amazing to watch.

Bruce had been right, though perhaps not entirely for the reasons Bruce would have expected. Steve was beautiful in motion, truly. Tony had seen enough displays of fighting from his knights and commanders to know that he was watching something special, that he would probably never see the like again. From what little Tony had observed, Steve was exceptional with the sword and that damnable shield was like an extension of his arm, but in hand-to-hand combat, he was, at least in Tony’s experience, unparalleled. Awe was probably the right word for what he felt, though probably also not the only one that described his reaction. Tony felt a shudder run through him, his breath deepening and evening out as he grew hard inside his breeches. All that power, all that fluidity and motion, all that strength and focus….it was incredible to behold. And it was being used to unseat him, but for the first time, Tony found himself truly pondering what it would be like if it wasn’t, if Steve pledged fealty to him, took up Tony’s red and gold banner and carried it as his own, if Steve was his…

Tony felt himself grow painfully hard against the laces of his breeches with a suddenness that took him by surprise. He shifted where he sat, trying for a more comfortable position, or at least to hide the evidence from Bruce. Tony forced himself to think through the problem of the topology of algebraic curves and surfaces that he’d been working on before he’d left to go meet Ross and his men on that fateful trip. “I know. Impressive, huh?” Bruce said, taking in Tony’s slack jaw. Tony doubted Bruce did quite know, or rather, hoped he didn’t, but he nodded anyway, as that seemed to be what Bruce expected. “The first time I saw them practice…well, that was around the time I decided I’d cook,” Bruce said with a lopsided grin.

“Phillips trained him?” Tony asked, and Bruce nodded, setting out his cooking pot to boil water for dinner and gathering his tea leaves in a small cup. “Never heard of Phillips training someone…uh…someone…” Tony struggled for the right words that didn’t sound terribly pretentious.

“Someone not a former squire or knight sponsored by the Crown or from a family rich enough to support their ambitions? Or an illiterate not-quite-fisherman from a plague-infested area?” Bruce offered with a raised eyebrow. “Just trying to make sure which group we’re judging,” Bruce clarified, though not unkindly. “Well, Phillips doesn’t train for free, that’s true. Steve was a special case though,” Bruce said.

“I have no doubt,” Tony replied, finding he meant it.

“Well, Steve…he’d be the first to tell you that he owes a lot to this doctor he knew. Guess Phillips knew him, too. Guy gave Steve a recommendation and that was apparently enough for Phillips,” Bruce explained. “Doctor Erskine. You heard of him? He worked in Kingstown years ago, I’ve heard. Was kind of a big deal, at the time.”

“That…that name does sound familiar,” Tony pondered, trying to dredge up the memory. “Where do I know it from?” He could tell Bruce was attempting to decide whether to respond or not, and how much of an answer to give.

“He worked for King Howard for a time, I think. He was one of the first people sounding
warnings about Schmidt and what his merry band of lunatic devotees were up to. Got a lot of grief for that, I believe. Wasn’t a popular opinion at the time. Anyway, he left the city and somehow, years later, he ends up in the middle of Brookland around the time everything went to hell. He was…brilliant, as I understand it,” Bruce said, pouring water into the cooking pot and setting it over the fire.

That did sound somewhat familiar. Erskine would have probably been in the city while Tony was still deeply involved in his studies and other, less erudite pursuits, aimed largely at annoying his father or at least causing him to put the mead and wine down long enough to remember he had a son. Being despised was a thousand times better than being ignored, after all. He certainly hadn’t been paying attention to the ravings of random doctors about something possibly happening leagues away, but Bruce’s statements dislodged a memory nonetheless.

“That Erskine…yeah, okay. I do remember the name, though I can’t picture him. So, he knew Phillips?” Tony asked, glancing quickly at Bruce before turning his attention back to the fight. Barton was out, sitting cross-legged in the grass and nursing his side, but offering a continuous, and wildly unhelpful, commentary as Thor swung his tree-trunk limbs at Steve, who dodged and weaved with seeming ease.

“They worked together during the Great War. Him and Phillips. Anyway, Erskine gave Steve what must have been a good enough recommendation to get past all of Phillips’ concerns, because Phillips ended up taking on Steve when he showed up at his door with the clothes on his back. Based on what little I know of the man, I’m betting was not out of the goodness of his heart,” Bruce replied. Tony pictured Phillips’ gruff demeanor in his mind, recalling the way each word the man said practically sounded like it had a bite to it. Bruce was, no doubt, correct about Phillips. Hard to imagine him agreeing to train someone with no background in combat and no fat purse to make up for it.

Tony’s eyes followed Steve’s movements as Thor swung a massive fist at his head, Steve ducking and twisting himself into Thor, instead of away, and using Thor’s own momentum to throw him off balance, sending the bigger man stumbling to the dirt. Thor was laughing heartily and congratulating Steve on his fine display. “I shall take the first watch as my penance,” Thor announced good naturedly. Obviously, accepting Steve into his training program had been a good call on Phillips part.

Natasha stood up from where she had been reclining by the fire. “My turn,” she said with a small smile tugging at her lips. Clint made a long “ooooohhhhh” sound as Natasha walked over. A moment later, Tony understood why. The woman fought like water, nearly impossible to catch and hold. And she was quick, too, nearly as fast as Steve, but her movements were an entirely different style, though no less effective. She lacked Steve’s strength, but clearly met him in skill.

Still, Steve was slightly faster, slightly better. You could see it as they sparred, the way she kept having to wrap herself around Steve, trying to get purchase for a strike while holding herself too close to give him any leverage. It worked for a short time, but had the side effect of putting her in easy reach. At one point, she leapt up onto Steve’s back, twisting her legs around Steve’s waist and attempting to thread a slim length of rope under Steve’s chin, a garrote, Tony realized. He braced his hands underneath it before she could tighten it, earning applause from Barton and a hiss of concern from Thor.

“I believe our rules of team combat called for no weapons?” Thor asked, looking at Steve in confusion and petting his hammer as if it might feel left out.

“Sometimes you have to fight with no weapons. Only fools agree to it up front,” Natasha
answered, breath coming in pants as she struggled to tighten the garrote against Steve’s grip. A second later, Steve tossed her off his back and into the dirt, where she rolled away and lay still.

“Nat?” Steve asked in concern, rushing over to her prone form. He bent one hand down to gently shake her shoulder, and she promptly sat up and placed a long knife she pulled from nowhere at his throat.

“And bigger fools believe they only have the one. Surrender, soldier,” she said, grinning.

“Damn,” Steve responded with a grimace, standing and raising his hands out in front of him in placation.

“You always fall for some variation of that, you know? Every. Single. Time. If I do nothing else in my life, I’ll get you trained to think the worst of people,” Natasha said, pulling herself upright with no small effort. She was rubbing the shoulder she’d landed on, but didn’t look any worse off than Thor and Barton, both of whom were nursing sore muscles.

“She get you again, Steve? What was it this time? Hurt ankle? Twisted knee?” Barnes asked, walking into camp, clutching his spear and setting his pack down by Steve’s shield. “Haven’t I warned you to check her for weapons before you spar? Not that you’d find them all. Where the hell do you keep those things anyway?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Natasha said with a smirk, brushing past Barnes as she came back to sit by the fire, accepting a cup of some kind of bitter smelling tea from Bruce.

“That was impressive, to say the least,” Tony said honestly as Natasha took a place across from him. “All of it. Don’t suppose you’d like to tell me where you learned that?”

“Everyone needs their secrets, Tony,” Natasha remarked innocently, stirring her tea and blowing on it lightly as she peered at him across the fire, something in her look setting Tony’s teeth on edge.

“I—uh, yeah. I guess. If you don’t want to say, that is. Not any of my business, anyway,” Tony stammered, unsure of what exactly had just transpired. “Well, he’s good, that’s for sure. I’ve never seen anything like it. I mean, I’ve seen a few graduates that Phillips trained before, but nothing like that, I would swear. Looked damn near unbeatable,” Tony admitted, watching Steve as he sat down by his pack and took his sword from its scabbard.

Steve reached out a hand to Barnes, palm up, and Barnes looked annoyed and grumpy about it for a good, long stare, but even he couldn’t seem to do anything that would disappoint the Captain. Barnes rummaged in his pack and handed Steve a gray stone, which Steve set about using to sharpen his sword. It was on the tip of Tony’s tongue to ask where the fine whetsone he’d seen Steve use before, the one he knew Phillips gave to his graduates as some kind of token wrapped in a pithy saying his father had liked to repeat and he’d liked to ignore. Then Tony realized where the whetstone had gone. The cylinder of solution felt suddenly heavy in his pocket. Tony swallowed thickly, mouth suddenly dry. Who trades the one thing they have of any value to possibly help a prisoner they barely know? Gods, he had no idea what to do with this man, and it was driving him crazy.

Natasha watched Tony from over her cup of tea, long eyelashes sweeping against the fine bones of her cheeks. “He’s the best I’ve come up against. And that is saying something, believe me. I’ve never seen anyone that can fight the way he does,” she said, shaking her head, eyes wide and bright as she watched Steve run the stone up and down the length of his sword to sharpen it, an odd melancholy hanging over her features. “It isn’t his abilities I worry about. It’s his heart that’s
going to get him killed one of these days,” she said, voice tinged with the deep sadness of certainty. Tony felt something in his gut twist, cold sluicing through him. He tasted something vaguely like river water in his mouth.

Thor grabbed his warhammer and climbed the rocks with surprising nimbleness to sit atop the falls and keep watch. Steve came over to grab his pack from where he’d dropped it near where Tony now stood. “To the victor, the spoils,” Steve said with a grin, producing a handful of dark, round blueberries and dropping them in Natasha’s cupped hands. Tony thought he might have whined. “Found a few of them when we stopped awhile ago,” Steve explained.

She leaned up and placed a light kiss on his cheek, causing him to startle a bit, looking at her strangely. “What was that for?” Steve asked. Tony watched the whole exchange with no small amount of fascination, Natasha’s earlier words still ringing in his mind.

“For always being the good guy,” she answered, popping a plump berry into her mouth as she walked back towards where Bruce was stoking the fire. Tony wasn’t sure if his eyes were following the sway of her hips or the berries. Damn. Both looked fantastic. After so many of those fucking biscuits, he’d be hard pressed to pick which was more appealing.

“That was quite the impressive display,” Tony offered, drawing his eyes away from Natasha and her…berries. “I’ve seen some of Phillips’ graduates before. They come to the city sometimes, showing off for King and Court, but I’ve never seen anything quite like that.” Steve just shrugged noncommittally.

“It occurs to me that, considering the far greater number of people who want me dead than I’d previously realized, it might be a good idea for me to learn a few things along those lines. I’ve had some, uh, very basic defense training. Being a weapons-maker, the military guys are pretty accommodating. But nothing like what you can do. So, I was thinking…maybe you could train me up a bit,” Tony suggested, leaning against a large oak as Steve knelt down to rummage through his pack for gods knew what could possibly be in there. Probably more of those horrid biscuits he kept trying to feed Tony.

“You want me to train you. To be better at defending yourself. Are you…are you touched in the head, Tony? I gave you a razor blade and told you that if you could escape us all with it, we deserved to lose, and you nearly managed to do exactly that. I’m not helping to make you more lethal,” Steve replied, shaking his head at Tony’s audacity, but there was a smile tugging at his lips that he was trying to hide by peering entirely too intently into his pack.

“I’m not talking about anything too complicated. Just a few moves I could use if it ever became necessary. What if the team was attacked? I’d be a liability and you know it. I can make just about anything, but beyond a few punches thrown here and there and some fairly serious hair pulling, I haven’t exactly had the call for much in the way of personal defense until…well…let’s just say until recently,” Tony admitted. “Just…just enough so that I’m not completely defenseless. If something happened, I mean. I think…I think I could be useful to you. To the team. If you’d let me try, that is,” Tony continued. “And I’m willing to trade for the training.”

“Trade?” Steve asked, brow furrowing in the way that Tony had come to expect when Steve was trying to figure out where the trap was in whatever Tony was saying.


“Don’t need to know much about blowing things up except where to put the thing with the burning fuse,” Steve replied, standing up and hooking his pack over his shoulder.
“Not the explosives. I mean, in the first place, I don’t even have the right materials for that and no offense, but I’m not arming you further. You all are entirely too good without things that go boom to help. I meant reading. I could teach you,” Tony offered. Steve had started to move to walk away, but he stopped at that, head snapping back to Tony, blue eyes shining bright in surprise.

“You would? Why?” Steve asked, sounding oddly wary in a way that bothered Tony for some reason.

“I told you. A trade of skills,” Tony said.

“But you already knew I was going to train you anyway,” Steve guessed, and not for the first time Tony was somewhat nonplussed at how easily the other man was able to read him. “Why even bother?”

“Let’s just say I feel I owe you that much. You have saved my life twice. And you’ve been far more pleasant than my last captors, which believe, me I find just as ridiculous to say, as you find it to hear, so there’s that,” Tony admitted with a grin, knowing he’d already won.

“Always good to hear a compliment,” Steve said dryly, and then they were both laughing lightly. Tony could feel the rhythmic thump of his heart inside his chest as Steve smiled at him, a real smile without any hint of artifice, and Tony realized he hadn’t seen something like that in a very long time. “I know my letters. And a few words,” Steve mumbled, ducking his head and transferring his pack from hand to hand. “My mom taught me some before she died.”

“Good. Then we won’t be starting from scratch,” Tony replied evenly, not letting a hint of how that admission, so honestly and hopefully given, made him feel creep into his voice. “You want to start now? I can get that book from Bruce,” Tony offered, trying not to sound too eager.

“Not just yet. Bucky and I are going to walk a perimeter. You should eat. And rest,” Steve replied, eyes dipping almost imperceptibly to Tony’s chest where the metal sphere peeked out from underneath his shirt. “We have a long day tomorrow. And the terrain doesn’t get any easier until we’re through the Pass.”

“One thing, come on. I’m a quick study. Promise,” Tony cajoled.

“I have no doubt,” Steve admitted, running a hand through his hair, leaving it in awkward spikes. Tony’s hand itched to follow it. “Alright. One move, then dinner and bed,” Steve ordered.

“Yes, Mom,” Tony said, not at all obediently.

“Alright. Well. Come on,” Steve said, gesturing over to the small clearing where he’d been sparring with the others. “Now, let’s say someone comes at you with a dagger. What do you do?”

“Try to knock the knife away and punch the bastard?” Tony guessed.

“Tony, someone is coming at you with a dagger. You run. Remember, the object here is to live,” Steve said. “No one is going to remember that you bravely and uselessly stood your ground because you’re too arrogant or too stupid to run away. Sometimes retreat is the best strategic move. Live to fight another day. That’s your goal. And that’s your first lesson,” Steve announced, rather smugly to Tony’s ears, but he couldn’t help admire it a bit. It wasn’t often anyone outthought him, and he rather enjoyed the challenge.

“Oh, no, no way, Rogers. Nice try, but that absolutely does count. I want a real lesson or I’m going to give you some life-lesson bullshit, too. Tell you how the stories in your head are better
than the words on the page, or some rot,” Tony said with a laugh, tugging insistently on Steve’s sleeve.

“You don’t know when to quit, do you?” Steve asked, mouth flattening out and lips pursing in annoyance.

“Wouldn’t be alive if I did,” Tony answered truthfully, earning a sharp look from Steve, but then he felt Steve relax under his hand, breath coming out in a long sigh.

“Fine. Okay, so someone comes at you with a knife. And you can’t run for some reason that will probably never be applicable in real life,” Steve said obstinately. Tony grinned in return. Steve stepped a couple of feet away from him and held out his hand to hold the imaginary knife. “What you want to do is step to the side. Create a lateral line between you and your attacker’s arm that’s holding the weapon,” Steve instructed.

“Can’t I just kick him in the balls and be done with it?” Tony asked.

“Not saying that isn’t a viable solution under some circumstances, but an attacker with a weapon is usually leaning forward. If you kick him there, he’ll lunge forward on instinct and you might find you have a knife buried in your belly for your trouble,” Steve explained. Huh. Well, okay then, Tony thought, mildly humbled. Guess he should actually pay attention to this.

Tony did as directed and moved over a bit to set up the correct angle. “Good. Then, you strike the attacker’s arm, and at the same time, use your other hand to punch his stomach, side or back as hard as you can.” Tony tried the motions, using one hand to knock at Steve’s arm, while the other he curled into a fist and placed lightly against Steve’s stomach. He tried very hard not to think about how close they were standing and how warm Steve felt against him.

“Exactly like that. Good,” Steve said, and Tony couldn’t help the way the praise washed over him. "Okay, so once you have deflected his weapon, you want to follow up by planting your foot and bringing the knee of your other leg up, like that, yes, and hit him in the upper leg, good, exactly,” Steve continued as Tony followed along, movements slow and lumbering, but he could see the logic of them, the symmetry and angles and anatomy of why they would work. “That should go a long way to incapacitating someone,. It hurts like hell. But don’t stop, not yet. You want to block his right hand with your left fist, and then punch, as hard as you can, against his lower back. If he keeps coming forward, kick him in the stomach or back again, using the ball of your foot, keeping the other one firmly planted. Hitting him on the same spot again should be agony at that point. Definitely should give you enough time. To run,” Steve reminded him with a small chuckle at Tony’s annoyed look.

“Okay, let’s run through it once to see if you can get the basics,” Steve said, raising his imaginary knife. Tony went through everything he’d just learned in his head, planted his feet firmly and took a deep breath. He nodded to Steve, who lunged forward immediately. Tony did exactly as Steve had instructed. And Tony ended up on his back in the dirt with Steve straddling him holding an imaginary knife to his throat. All in all, not a bad lesson, Tony thought, gazing up at Steve.

“The hell? I did exactly what you told me. That is completely not fair,” Tony groused, not at all unhappy with the turn of events.

“And that is your final lesson of the night. No matter how much you train or what techniques you know, there is always someone who knows more or who trained harder. Assume that is the guy you’re fighting against,” Steve said, climbing off of Tony and standing up. He offered Tony a hand to help him up. Tony stared at it for a moment, willing his body to calm down from it’s reaction to Steve’s closeness. Finally, Tony grabbed Steve’s outstretched hand and quickly found
himself jerked upright. “You okay? You’re still having some effects from that…uh…thing…in your chest, I mean,” Steve stammered. “Your balance and muscles…Bruce said…we should probably have waited…”

“No, no, I’m fine. Just…uh…winded. Yes, winded. That…that was good,” Tony admitted. “Honestly,” he reiterated at Steve’s look. “Come on, my turn now, show-off,” he said, clapping a hand on Steve’s shoulder. They walked together back to the fire, drawing curious stares from the rest of the team, sans Thor who was standing atop the falls surveying the area like some kind of deity.

“If I’d known we were going to play throw Tony into the ground, I’d have offered my services,” Barton groused, taking an obscenely large bite of jerky and chewing loudly.

“Pretty sure he wanted Steve for that,” Bruce mumbled as he stirred the pot of liquid simmering above the fire. Bruce’s shoulders were hunched and shaking a bit from silent laughter.

“Thanks, Doctor. You’re so very helpful,” Tony said tightly, walking over next to Bruce. “May I borrow your storybook?” Bruce shrugged and dug into his pack, pulling out the battered book and handing it to Tony without further comment, but he was barely managing to contain a smile.

“Teach him to read the one with the veils,” Clint said with a wide, jerky-filled grin. Barnes was watching the whole thing unfold with ill-concealed disapproval, which Tony decided to simply ignore.

“Clint, you and Bucky walk us a perimeter. You know what to look for,” Steve ordered as Tony took the book from Bruce’s outstretched hand and walked back, brushing past Steve as he went back to the clearing, away from prying eyes and ears. He sat cross-legged in the soft grass, flipping through the book, looking for something appropriate to try to use to help teach Steve. He wasn’t a good teacher, he knew that. He’d never had the patience for it. He’d never had the patience for much of anything, come to think. He finally stopped on a story about a knight winning the heart of his lady love, and decided that would work for now, the words being fairly simple and commonplace. Steve sat down next to him, and Tony immediately felt his warmth, legs just close enough to almost be touching.

Tony opened the book between them, turning to the first page in the story. “We’ll just try some basic words and sounds tonight. Let you get a feel for them.” Tony started with a few letter sounds, then combinations of letters. Steve already seemed to know at least that much. He recognized a few basic words, so Tony moved on to other words that appeared in the story fairly often. I, you, he, she, and a few other sight words, which Steve picked up with surprising ease. He tried a few harder words, which took some repeating, but Steve caught on remarkably quickly. Tony wasn’t sure how long he spent at this, surprised to find that he was enjoying Steve’s progress, absurdly proud to see it.

“I think that’s enough for tonight,” Steve said, handing the book back to Tony as the sun had disappeared completely now, and their light was rapidly waning. “Thanks, Tony. That was amazing,” he remarked with a grateful smile. “But I should go relieve Thor from watch. And you still need to eat and rest. It’ll be a good four days of hard travel until we reach the Pass.”

“Sir, yes, Sir!” Tony said with a jaunty salute.

“Don’t think you much pull that off, Tony,” Steve chuckled lowly. “Eat. Sleep. Don’t plot,” Steve called over his shoulder, as he climbed the rocks along the edge of the Falls with nimble ease to exchange places with Thor.
Tony grinned. If Steve had any idea the thoughts that ran through Tony’s mind at night, he’d probably run him out of camp. He walked back over to sit by Bruce next to the fire, taking the proffered jerky and hard biscuit with nary a grimace of distaste. It wasn’t nearly enough after the day they’d had, but he couldn’t exactly complain. By the time Barton and Barnes returned, he’d managed to make a small bed of leaves and the long, thick needles that had fallen from the trees nearby. It was something. Steve had come down from his perch and was speaking quietly with Barnes. He glanced Tony’s way with a quick uptick of his head in acknowledgment then went back to discussing whatever it was with Barnes, probably something about how it was a terrible decision to have anything to do with Tony, let alone train him or, gods-forbid, learn something from him. Tony resolved not to hope Barnes would die tragically, if only for Steve’s sake.

Steve walked over to where Tony lay and, without a word, sat the small bag he carried those damnable biscuits around in next to Tony’s hand and then went back up the rockface to continue his watch duties. Tony was hungry, though the idea of another one of those glorified rocks did not sound at all appealing. Still, his stomach rumbled at the thought of any food. He grabbed the bag and opened it, pouring the contents into his open hand. He had to stifle a surprised laugh then, and found himself looking around the camp, eyeing the others rather guiltily. He stared at the fat, round blueberries in his palm for a long moment before shoving the entire handful in his mouth. Divine, gods, it was the best thing he’d ever eaten in his whole misbegotten life. He tried to look up and spot Steve on top of the Falls, but didn’t have a good enough angle.

He closed his eyes and shifted back down on the makeshift bed. When all this was over, he was going to have the palace cooks prepare a huge feast, with every possible delicacy he could think of laid out on long tables. His mouth watered at the thought. And then he’d put a big bowl of blueberries in front of Steve and they’d smile at the shared memory of—wait. Oh for fuck’s sake, stop it, Tony admonished himself. Fantasies about Steve were one thing. Let’s face it, you’d have to be blind and castrated not to fantasize a bit. Completely understandable. Particularly after long months of absolutely nothing. Totally rational. Anything beyond that had no place. Though… well, really, Steve should eat more. He kept giving part of his food to Tony, and since they all obviously carried enough for their own needs and no more, that meant not enough for Steve, so, really, it was probably only fair to repay him at some point. It didn’t mean anything. Just repaying a debt. Because letting Steve loose at some fancy dinner was just the same as Steve sharing what little he had with someone he barely knew whose very presence was putting himself and his friends in additional danger. Yep. Totally the same.

Tony forced himself not to think anymore about Steve and tried to shut his mind down long enough to find sleep. He couldn’t do it though, shifting around on his bed, unable to settle down. He finally gave up and started designing Barton a different bow in his mind. He wasn’t sure how long he spent mentally adjusting the specifications before Steve’s booted feet clamored off the rocks and walked over to shake Barnes awake. Barnes dutifully got up, yawned and stretched, and set off up the rocks for his turn at watch while Steve settled down, taking the shreds of blanket out of his pack to ball up and use for a pillow. Damn. Owe him a blanket, too, Tony thought. So, food and a blanket, but that was definitely it. Well, and some new clothes. The ones he wore had gotten soaked in river water. Really though, if he was going to do that, he should probably throw in a new sword and shield. Something not standard issue like the crap Pierce outfitted him with, something decent. But that was the absolute end of it.

Well, maybe a few books, Tony thought as he drifted off to sleep beneath the stars.

The problem, Tony thought three nights later at the end of another very long day’s march over what, as Steve had promised, turned out to be increasingly difficult terrain to navigate, was that once he had given himself permission not to hate these people after they didn’t kill him when his escape attempt had failed so spectacularly and, at least Steve, anyway, had actually listened to his
insane story about Stane…well, they suddenly became downright likable.

Smart and scarily efficient, sure, but also generally kind and decent people, who laughed and teased and argued and sniped like the rest of humanity. And then there was Steve, who made everything far more complicated with his easy, genuine kindness offered without any expectation of repayment. His smiles, surprisingly dry wit, and bright, blue eyes. His fierce intelligence, different than Tony’s sure, but nonetheless impressive for it. His earnest excitement about learning, and his ability to lead, to truly lead, not because of rank or birth, but because of who he was. Tony had never been much of a follower, that was a given. Yet Steve? He could see how easy it would be to follow him, not because he was perfect or always right or some such impossible standard, but because he was someone Tony could trust. Trust that whether the decision was perfect or right or not, Steve was doing it for the right reasons.

Steve did, best not to forget, have the one glaring character flaw of fighting on the wrong side, true, but gods…if he wasn’t…if Tony could convince Fury that Stane was the problem…maybe, maybe this whole mess could end without further bloodshed. Maybe things could get back to some semblance of normal. Maybe Steve could see that he’d been wrong about Tony, or wrong about the King and right about Tony, because the thing was…the thing was, Tony was fairly sure that Steve actually liked him, though he’d be damned if he knew why exactly. No one could be that affable if they didn’t. People didn’t just like Tony though. People respected Tony. People feared him. People wanted him. Lots of people wanted things from him. But like him? Not even his dad had managed that.

Except by all indications, Steve seemed to be willing to spend time with Tony, listen to him prattle on or work on a project. When Tony had mentioned a new type of bow he had in mind for Barton, Steve had given him the back of one of his maps to draw out a design on, listening intently while Clint and Tony hashed out how it might work and what would be needed. Steve had continued his practice sessions with Tony each night, and though this still ended up with Tony flat on his back in the dirt, he felt it was ever so slightly more difficult for Steve to get him flat on his back in the dirt. Assuming Steve wasn’t just asking, anyway, in which case, Tony would be fine with that.

And Tony spent time each night going over words and short, simple sentences in Bruce’s book with Steve. As they marched towards Fury’s camp, he found himself walking next to Steve when the pace was slow enough that he could, and when Steve wasn’t off scouting, grilling him on words and sound combinations at first that slowly became short, clipped conversations about Steve’s past, his training, the King, what was going on with Stane…they were both still so wary of the other on anything to do with the war effort, and not for poor reasons, Tony knew. They were still on opposite sides, when it came down to it, even if it felt less and less true each day.

But, to Tony’s surprise, those more controversial topics flowed into discussions about what should be done, what could be done, how things could be better…it was fascinating to hear such a different perspective. He had traveled so much of the Realm, learned from the best tutors from all over, read everything he could get his hands on…he’d never considered that he might still be woefully isolated and out of touch until listening to Steve.

Tony flopped down in the soft moss beneath an overhang of mountain pine, completely exhausted. Hard biscuits and jerky were removed from packs, a sparse dinner but they hadn’t taken the time from their march away from the river to try to find game. Steve handed him some, which Tony felt certain were from his own diminished stores, and Bruce passed around cups of hot tea he’d flavored with some of whatever herbs he had left in his medicine bag that wouldn’t kill you. Tony sipped it lightly and decided never to drink tea again.

“That bad, huh?” Bruce asked, chagrined, at the face Tony made.
“No, uh…it’s fine. Fine,” Tony insisted, not wanting to complain, considering. “Good. Thanks.”

“It tastes like horse piss,” Barton said, drinking down a long gulp. “And that might be insulting to the horse.”

“It’s nice of Bruce to share his—“ Steve started.

“You poured yours onto that bush, don’t start,” Barnes said, punching Steve lightly on the shoulder. Steve cast a forlorn look at a bare, half-dead little bush to his right with a sigh, and the two of them burst out laughing. Tony just shook his head at them, but found it next to impossible to keep from smiling. The rest of the team had no such compunction, grinning easily at the obvious camaraderie. Whatever it was that bound the two of them together, it was tight, that much was obvious. Damn. Now he was going to have to stop hating Barnes, because Barnes clearly had the one redeeming quality of being liked by Steve. This was all so confusing.

“That thing had flowers on it two minutes ago,” Steve said, looking dubiously at the very much flowerless bush. The two of them promptly burst out laughing again, leaving Tony shaking his head and biting his inner cheek not to join in.

“Fine, fine, you are all horrible people who can make your own damn tea,” Bruce groused, though Tony could tell immediately that he was enjoying the banter, and that this was likely not the first time he had faced insults for his tea. “Tony likes my tea. And he’s obviously far more refined than you lot of heathens, scoundrels and wastrels.”

“Ooohhh, I call heathen!” Barton shouted, raising his cup of tea in the air.

“Wastrel,” Barnes called out.

“Scoundrel,” Natasha said smoothly, grinning widely at where Steve and Barnes were still occasionally slipping into more bursts of mirth each time they caught the other’s eye.

“You know, when all this is over and I have my pharmacy and tea emporium all set up, none of you are invited,” Bruce warned.

“Promise?” Barton asked jovially.

“That’s your plan for after the war?” Tony asked Bruce, genuinely curious. He chewed rather resentfully on a bit of jerky and tried to swallow it down with the horse-piss tea.

“Eh, I don’t know. Not really a plan. I mean, I’ve thought about it, but…there are so many variables. Who the hell knows what’s going to happen with all this? If you’re right, that changes a lot. Would Pierce press on, even if the King is dead? What if we lose and you’re wrong about things and the King isn’t dead? Does he just up and decide to pardon anyone who fought against him because he’s feeling magnanimous that day? Would Pierce sue for peace if he found out a lot of what he thought was wrong was really Stane’s little coup?” Bruce asked rhetorically, shaking his head. “Too many things between here and there to call it a plan. Just a…thought, I guess. A nice thought. But probably unrealistic,” he amended. “Best thoughts are a bit unrealistic though.”

“Aw, Bruce, you have to let me come to your shop. You can’t expect me to drink regular, run-of-the-mill horse piss when I could have your refined horse piss,” Clint guffawed loudly, clearly appreciative of his own humor. “But never you mind, I’ll probably be too busy seeing to the affairs of my lordly domain to venture into the city. Lord Barton. Say it. Remember it. Respect it.”

“Uh-huh, more like Lord Coulson, I’m thinking, if you’re lucky and Coulson hasn’t come to his
senses by then,” Barnes cut in. “Fury might reward his right-hand man with a Lordship. You? You, he’ll reward with not kicking your ass after that crap in Madripor.”

“That was not my fault,” Clint started.

“How was I supposed to know that donkey would bite if you touched it there?” the entire team chorused all together, causing Tony to blink at them in stupefaction. They all promptly burst into laughter, even Clint, who was smiling and shaking his head, rocking back in forth with laughter. Tony couldn’t help but join in, though he felt a burst of envy at their closeness, their shared stories and traditions to which he wasn’t yet privy.

“You are all uninvited to my keep, just so you know,” Clint said. “Except Steve. Phil would probably tie me up and make me watch that scary nursemaid that tends to Lady Anne’s kids, if I banned Steve.”

“Thanks, Clint. I’m touched by your heartfelt offer of hospitality,” Steve said dryly.

“Well, so, we know Clint is going to do whatever Coulson says, Thor is going to marry his beloved Jane and rule Asgard, obviously,” Bruce said, and Thor saluted him by raising his tea cup and offering a huge grin. “And it’s pretty much a given that Natasha is going to take over the world using her pinky” Bruce said, earning a conciliatory nod from the woman that clearly said she wasn’t planning to offer whatever thoughts on the subject she might harbor. “What about you, James? Any big post-war plans, while we’re all sharing?” Bruce asked.

“Eh,” Barnes shrugged. “Thought I’d see about maybe heading for the coast. Can’t exactly fish anymore, but I miss the sea. Maybe see about getting a plot of land. Farm. I don’t know.”

“And you, Steve?” Natasha questioned softly. “Any idea what you’d like to do when this is all over?”

“Don’t know, really. Haven’t thought about it a lot,” Steve answered with a shrug. Tony heard the unspoken part of that loud and clear, finding his stomach clenching uncomfortably. He hadn’t thought about it because he didn’t think he’d make it out of this. Not really. And he was probably right, odds being what they were, Tony thought, swallowing thickly around the lump in his throat. “I’m sure there will be plenty to do to help rebuild when the war is over. If we win, I mean.”

“Aw, come on, that’s just depressing. Help people? Rebuild? We’re talking about fantasy here, Steve. Let’s face it, we could all do with a bit to look forward to,” Clint groused. "Figured you for settling down, adopting about eight or so war orphans or some such.”

“I know what Steve’s gonna do. Steve’s going to go to the city and paint bowls of fruit or something, isn’t that right?” Barnes offered, nudging Steve with his shoulder and smiling a wide, fond grin.

“Don’t imagine there’s much of a demand for fruit bowl painters, Buck. I’d like to be able to eat in this fantasy life, if you don’t mind,” Steve replied evenly.

“You paint?” Tony asked. “I mean, I know you draw. With the map and all. You know, the King…he has lots of art, all kinds of paintings from all over the world. Probably the best collection in the world, really. He, uh…he has them in a building and let’s anyone who wants to come and look at them. Sometimes people come and paint there. In the museum, I mean. The King’s Steward handles it all, but, well. It’s…I mean the King has art,” Tony finished, feeling ridiculous and unsure what possessed him to even mention that.
Steve blinked at him in surprised confusion. Well, probably everyone did, but Tony was focused on Steve. “Really? That’s nice that he shares it with the people like that,” Steve remarked. “I’m sure it’s amazing. And I don’t paint. Not really. Or, I don’t know if I do. I mean, maybe,” Steve stuttered, for the first time since Tony had met him sounding unsure and abashed, a faint blush staining his cheeks that Tony found oddly endearing and felt himself smiling warmly at Steve in response.

“Oh, I don’t know. What do you think, Tony?” Barton asked, voice low and sly as he turned towards Tony with that sharp gaze that Clint sometimes got when he wasn’t playing the part of the jester. “You think…well…you being all cultured and such, I mean…You think there would maybe be someone who would pay our Steve enough to sit around painting fruit or whatever the hell he wants? You being from the big city and all refined and knowing so much about art as you do.” Tony knew perfectly well what the archer was implying. It wasn’t unusual for artists who were not particularly well known to enjoy the attentions of a patron or two, who supported their artistic ventures in return for the pleasure of their company.

“Can’t imagine why anyone would want to pay that much for a painting,” Steve said, turning to reach behind him to retrieve his pack and missing Natasha’s sharp kick to Clint’s booted foot.

“Fine, if you’re not going to paint, at least ask Pierce for a knighthood. You’ve earned it, and it isn’t like you aren’t due for some good things to happen. Why not? You’d be great. The Realm should have leaders like you. Isn’t that the whole point of Piece’s rebellion? Better leadership?” Barnes pressed. And okay, that stung. “Hell, if what you figured out actually works, Pierce should give you a Lordship.” Tony’s ears perked up at that, but Barnes said no more. It wasn’t the first time someone let slip something about supposedly important information the team had, though they were careful enough not to reveal anything useful. Tony wondered if it was more obfuscation meant to throw him off or actually true, which was probably just the reaction they hoped he’d have. Steve liked him well enough. But Steve did not trust him. Not that he could exactly blame him, considering Tony was harboring his own, fairly vital, secrets.

“What would I do with a Lordship? Besides, don’t really see a kid from Brookland ending up with a title, Buck, do you? World just doesn’t work like that,” Steve responded.

“Actually,” Tony found himself interjecting. “Did you know the King’s great-grandfather married a peasant?” He got blank looks at that. “Story goes that he was riding back through the streets of Kingstown after a day of hawking. He passed by a butcher shop and suddenly a huge pile of bloody innards is slung at the feet of his horse. This young woman comes out and sees who it is, kneels down and says how sorry she is, right? But as she’s kneeling there, she starts berating him for how she wouldn’t have to throw all this stuff out in the street if he would just build some sewers and a drainage system and telling him how she would go about constructing it if he’d only listen to reason,” Tony recounted, recalling leaning at his father’s knee and listening to his father talk about his grandmother and all the improvements that began with her.

“Her father rushed out to apologize for her imprudence, but the King was impressed. He brought her to Court and made his engineers listen to her. Lots of the innovations of the city stem from her ideas. He also married her. Made a butcher’s daughter his Queen. Helped get a bunch of reforms through that probably never would have made it to the King’s desk if not for her. Really helped. Made things a lot better, I mean. For everyone. Uh, they say…they say he…the King…loved her very much,” Tony finished, suddenly having to swallow past a lump in his throat.

The camp was silent for a moment, just the sound of the fire crackling to break the quiet. “Never knew that,” Bruce said. “That’s…that’s a nice story, Tony.” That seemed to be the signal to everyone that it was time for bed. It had darkened considerably while they chatted and ate. He
could just see a sliver of moon peeking through the trees as he shifted a bit to lie down.

“Tony didn’t tell us his post-war plans though,” Natasha observed, staring at him intently over the flickering fire as she settled down under her blanket, a small smile tugging at her lips. “Just some fairytale about a king who marries a peasant and how the Realm was better for it.”

Chapter End Notes

Sherman, on his march to Atlanta during the Civil War, utilized fabulously detailed maps that his cartographers prepared, largely based on local knowledge they'd gleaned in the field. It was a huge tactical advantage. I thought that was a cool thing for Steve to have.
There was a long, pregnant pause as Tony stared at Natasha over the fire, though whatever it was that passed between the two of them was obviously not something either intended to share. Steve knew Natasha to keep her secrets close and what she didn’t know even closer, long years as a spy for Fury still too ingrained to ever truly volunteer anything that wasn’t strictly necessary. Tony looked away first, appearing slightly flustered, dark eyes bright in the reflection of the firelight as he grabbed clumsily for his cup of horrible tea and drank it down while Natasha’s smile widened to something challenging. Steve was momentarily glad he wasn’t the only one occasionally disconcerted by Natasha, though he could certainly understand why Tony would be uncomfortable sharing any post-war plans in such company as this. Probably rather awkward for him, sitting here amongst those fighting against his chosen cause, Steve mused, feeling mildly uncomfortable at the thought.

“Tony isn’t obligated to share any plans he might have, Nat. Leave him be,” Steve interjected, earning a wan smile from Natasha, but he noticed a flicker of surprised relief cross Tony’s face.

Steve stood up and picked up his sword and fitted it neatly into the scabbard at his waist. He set his shield down by his pouch near where Bucky sat with his spear across his lap, sharpening the point while he nibbled on one of the salted beef strips. “I’ll take first watch,” Steve said, which was enough to shutter whatever further conversation might have occurred, as everyone quickly moved to finish their meal and head for bed, sleep being too prized a commodity out here to ignore for simple curiosity’s sake.

“I’ll come with you,” Tony volunteered, pulling himself up from the ground and handing his empty cup back to Bruce with a nod. Steve noticed Tony was studiously avoiding looking at Natasha, though she now seemed quite preoccupied with arranging her assortment of daggers in a neat row according to their length.

“You should rest while you can, Tony,” Steve replied. Tony seemed to be feeling better the past few days, Bruce’s poultices and salt concoction seeming to do their job, as the symptoms Bruce had blamed on that piece of metal in Tony’s chest slowly abated. He was eating more, Steve had noticed, and sleeping better. He seemed to have more energy, as well, though Steve wasn’t sure if that was due so much to his improved health as to being free from his captivity. Steve refused to think why so much of his attention seemed to focus on Tony, other than that he had a responsibility to see to a prisoner's well-being. Anything beyond that was...not worth contemplating.

“Not particularly tired right now,” Tony answered. “Be good to do something useful.” Tony was watching him closely over the fire, and for a moment Steve wondered if he said no, if the man would just follow him anyway until the trouble of denying him became more than the trouble of having him along.

“You know I’ll just follow you until you give in,” Tony continued, causing a startled laugh to escape from Steve before he could stop it. Tony grinned amiably in reply and walked over to stand next to him. Steve caught Bucky’s annoyed look from across the fire, but decided to ignore it for now. They were too far removed from civilization or any military encampment to make a disturbance at all likely, though the routine of watch was important to keep regardless of the likelihood of an encounter. A stray shepherd was probably the most dangerous foe they might encounter in this lonely stretch of wood, though Steve knew better than to let his guard down.
Still, it wasn’t a particularly risky time to have Tony along on watch, as these things went, Steve rationalized to himself. It had nothing to do with wanting to spend time with Tony.

Tony waved an arm in an expectant motion towards the forest when Steve didn’t immediately start off, eyes bright and clearly doing his damnedest to suppress a triumphant grin at his success. “Come on, Cap. Got to watch out for... whatever we’re watching out for. Out here. In the middle of nowhere. Where things need watching,” Tony urged, grinning maniacally in anticipation of getting his way. It was all Steve could do not to return the smile, but that would just encourage him.

Okay. Well. It might have a little to do with wanting to spend time with Tony, Steve admitted to himself.

“It’s possible he’s the only person I’ve ever met as annoyingly stubborn as you, Rogers,” Barton observed. Steve shook his head in surrender and started off into the woods, Tony following behind him as thick boughs of evergreens dipped low to brush against them as they moved through the trees. He wanted to find a high point, maybe something with a view of the Pass, if he could manage it. He scanned the ground until he found what he was looking for, light, rounded imprints of deer tracks, delicately winding their way through the forest.

It was cooler now, the temperature dipping with the night and the higher altitude. He’d woken up yesterday morning to a glistening sheen of frost covering the ground before the rising sun melted it away. The thicker brush they’d fought through down by the river had given way to tall, long-limbed trees and damp moss covering the ground near progressively larger rocks. He could see the snow-capped mountains plainly now, spires rising up into the clouds, as he stepped lightly along the path of the tracks, figuring that the deer knew better than he did the easiest way to move about the forest. They’d reach the Pass that snaked around the bottom of those mountains late tomorrow.

On one side of the Pass, somewhere hidden beyond the first line of peaks, Schmidt and his Hydra fanatics sheltered in their mountain fortress doing gods only knew what, a concern about which he felt Pierce was entirely too dismissive, despite Steve’s, and occasionally even Fury’s, arguments to the contrary. Steve had heard enough stories from villagers who refused to go anywhere near the mountains now, stories of people who ventured close and never returned... and there had been Erskine’s warnings as well, though what Erskine had suggested seemed nigh impossible.

He briefly considered asking Tony his opinion on whether or not what Erksine had feared could even be done. Despite his worries, Steve realized he wasn’t high enough up the chain of command to have all of the information. Perhaps Schmidt really was just some religious zealot and there really was nothing to fear from him and his followers. It could be that it was all simply clever propaganda on Schmidt’s part, to attract those who would be like-minded followers and keep any potential challengers at bay, as Pierce seemed to think, and that Schmidt had no larger ambitions. But why the secrecy then? Steve looked at the mountains again and felt a shiver run down his spine.

“Cold?” Tony asked from behind him as they climbed. “Going to get colder. If I’d only known I was going to get kidnapped and dragged through half the kingdom, I’d have packed better,” Tony said, looking down at his tattered clothes with exaggerated affront.

Steve shot him an annoyed grimace. “You can have a strip of my blanket,” he answered brusquely.

“Yeah, uh. Sorry. About the blanket thing. Believe it or not, I will actually make that up to you,” Tony promised. “And for the almost blowing you up thing,” Tony muttered lowly. Steve glanced
back at him, but Tony was watching his feet as he walked.

“I told you that I didn’t blame you for trying to escape. Any of us, we’d have done the same if our situations were reversed,” Steve answered, moving the branches aside and holding them out for Tony as he picked up the tracks again.

“You’re a terrible liar,” Tony responded flatly, still watching the ground as he kept pace. “You’d have never risked it, not just to save yourself. For others, for something you believed in, sure, but just so you could escape? You say that because you don’t want the rest of them to be pissed at me about it, though the gods only know why you care,” Tony bit out harshly. “I did that for me, Steve. Risked you, the team. I thought I could control it, predict exactly what would happen if I just thought it through enough…thought I had accounted for all the variables…that I was smart enough to think of everything. That’s what I do. Know the future, not because of some sorcery, gods, no, don’t look at me like that. I can see the patterns in actions, predict outcomes. Or, I told myself I could. Of course, that’s exactly when the gods decide to show you just how much you don’t know. About a lot of things.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself, Tony. This is war. Nothing we do is without risk. And…I know things are…different now. With the team and all. But…you can’t blame yourself for seeing us as the enemy then, just because we’ve grown on you,” Steve said, flashing a wan smile over his shoulder at Tony. “We’re still on opposite sides of this thing,” Steve reminded him. He spied a large rock outcropping up ahead, jutting off a low rise built of large boulders and hard earth, dotted with a few small, sparse trees clinging to the sides for purchase, and veered off the deer’s trail to head for that, hoping for a few jagged footholds that might allow him to climb high enough to catch a glimpse of the Pass.

“Are we?” Tony asked, words soft, but Steve heard the challenge thrumming through the seemingly easy question. “On opposite sides, I mean. Are we really? We both want to protect the Realm. We both want the fighting to end, to let our soldiers go home. We both want the King to get his head out of his ass and pay attention to what the fuck is going on. To actually rule like the Realm deserves. How are we on opposite sides of this thing,” Steve reminded him. He spied a large rock outcropping up ahead, jutting off a low rise built of large boulders and hard earth, dotted with a few small, sparse trees clinging to the sides for purchase, and veered off the deer’s trail to head for that, hoping for a few jagged footholds that might allow him to climb high enough to catch a glimpse of the Pass.

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“Tell me I’m wrong,” Tony repeated softly, something desperate, almost a plea, echoing there.

“You’re not wrong, Tony,” Steve admitted. “I don’t know what we are. But we aren’t enemies.” He watched the tenseness drain from Tony’s face at his words and felt something warm fill his chest at the sight. He felt a sense of relief at being able to acknowledge that whatever they were, maybe not quite friends yet, but something more than strangers. And that they weren’t enemies anymore, if they truly ever had been. Though he had certainly distrusted Tony at the beginning, it was hard, if not impossible, to dredge up a memory of seeing him as an enemy. “I know you’re worried about what Fury will say, whether he’ll believe you about Stane,” Steve continued, catching the look of shocked surprise that momentarily clouded Tony’s features before he carefully shuttered them behind a studiously blank countenance.
“Whatever he says, it doesn’t change anything between us. You and the team, I mean,” Steve corrected quickly. “I don’t know what is going to happen with all this, but you...I don’t see how I could be your enemy, Tony. If there is something to what you’re saying about Stane, I’ll help make sure he is brought to justice, you have to know that. This whole war, rebellion, whatever you call it…it’s about making things better. If Stane is part of the problem, then we’ll deal with it. I promise.”

“I find it very annoying when you do that,” Tony said, sounding somewhat disgruntled. “I’m not accustomed to being so easy to read.”

“Maybe you’ve just never let your guard down before,” Steve suggested, taking in the mockery of a smile that twisted on Tony’s face and feeling a pang of sadness as he thought about his friendship with Bucky and what it would be like not to have that in his life. Lonely, he imagined.

“Maybe I’ve never had a reason to,” Tony replied eyeing Steve in that assessing way of his that immediately set Steve’s nerves on edge, though he found himself strangely pleased by Tony’s offhand admission. Still, Steve had to bite the inside of his check to keep from smiling in response. Keeping Tony even somewhat off balance was an accomplishment, as far as he was concerned, as the man managed to keep him feeling more unmoored than he’d ever felt in his life.

“I figure if I get one-tenth of what goes on in that head of yours, I’m doing good,” he answered. “Probably better off not knowing the rest of it,” Steve said with an attempt at a smile.

“You’re not wrong,” Tony replied, eyes glittering and hard in some way Steve couldn’t quite grasp, but for a moment, there was something hanging in the space between them, and for some reason, Steve thought of that odd charge that you got when you rubbed fur against a piece of amber. Steve remembered a peddler that had come through Brookland when he was a boy, proclaiming the healing effects of the translucent brown and gold stones as he showed a gaggle of kids how bits of straw would dance towards the amber stone after he swiped a bit of fur against it. There was energy and life harnessed somehow in that stone, he’d seen it. Steve had begged his mom for one, sure that it would help his ailments, finally give him a way to keep up with Bucky and the rest of the kids who were spending the hot afternoons splashing in the shallows while Steve stayed in bed trying to breathe without choking on the air. They hadn’t the money, of course. Bucky had brought him all kinds of stones and rocks over the next few weeks, but none produced the same effect as the amber, much to their mutual disappointment. But it was the straw moving inexorably towards the dark stone that he thought of now, for some reason, he’d seen it. Steve had begged his mom for one, sure that it would help his ailments, finally give him a way to keep up with Bucky and the rest of the kids who were spending the hot afternoons splashing in the shallows while Steve stayed in bed trying to breathe without choking on the air. They hadn’t the money, of course. Bucky had brought him all kinds of stones and rocks over the next few weeks, but none produced the same effect as the amber, much to their mutual disappointment. But it was the straw moving inexorably towards the dark stone that he thought of now, for some reason, as he looked down at Tony and realized he’d stepped closer and there wasn’t actually much space between them at all. He opened his mouth to say something, though he wasn’t quite sure what, but the snap of a branch took the words with it, snapping his head around to the direction of the sound. A doe stood at attention several feet away, watching them silently, ears perked, before bounding off deeper into the forest.

Steve shook his head and turned back towards the direction where he’d spied the outcropping, feeling Tony’s hand slide off his shoulder as he did, whatever he’d been about to say sloughing off with it. “I’m sure Fury will listen to you. I don’t know what he’ll do with the information, but he’ll at least listen. Fury will have to look into what you’re saying about Stane. He served King Howard for years. He won’t just discount a plot like what you’re talking about out of hand,” Steve argued, though he wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince himself or Tony of that.

“You don’t know that,” Tony countered tightly. “There’s a lot riding on Fury actually listening to what I have to say. He isn’t exactly known for his temperance.”

“I’ll vouch for you,” Steve promised, earning a sharp, surprised look from Tony. “I don’t know if what you accuse Stane of is true or not, but I know you believe it to be true. That’s enough for
me,” Steve replied, wondering when that had become true, though he realized as soon as he said it that it was. “It’s at least something that should be investigated. And you might be surprised by the rest of the team. Bruce thinks there’s something to what you’re saying. He’s not an admirer of General Ross, and he’s traveled enough to have heard a few rumblings about Stane and that Gregory person you mentioned. He was King Howard’s bastard, right? From before he married Queen Maria?” Steve asked, looking back over his shoulder as he marched on. Tony nodded in response. “Bruce said King Howard legitimized him and gave him a title before his death.” A nod, again. Tony and silence bothered him, Steve realized, like words were a part of Tony in some inexplicable way that made their absence a concern.

“And Natasha has been to Court. Part of whatever she did for Fury before she joined up with us. She doesn’t trust Stane at all, though, to be fair, Nat doesn’t trust most people.” Steve turned again and realized Tony had stopped walking and was staring at him, hands on his hips and mouth hanging slightly agape.

“Natasha has been to Court?” Tony repeated slowly, as if turning over each word in his mouth before speaking.

“Apparently. Doesn’t talk about it much,” Steve answered. “Some years ago, I guess. She…uh… she’s good at…well. People talk to her. Like to impress her. Or try to, I think.”

“So, Natasha found Stane to be untrustworthy. And no one trusts Gregory. That’s a given. Did you…did you ask her about the King? If she met him?” Tony asked in an oddly hushed tone.

Steve nodded. “She said he had an overwhelming need for admiration, didn’t seem to care much about the feelings of people around him, was given to grandiosity to gain attention, was arrogant and rude, and tended to be disdainful and patronizing to anyone he felt was beneath him, which represented pretty much everyone, though I suppose, that’s probably somewhat fair for a king to feel,” Steve admitted.

“The King is the last one who should feel that way, and you know it, so stop trying to be so gods-damned diplomatic about it,” Tony said with a grimace, voice brittle as he started to walk again, brushing past Steve as he stalked off towards the rocks.

“She also said she thought he was a good man or could be, anyway,” Steve said loudly into the darkness, though Tony didn’t acknowledge him. “I’d like to believe that, but…it’s hard to reconcile with…everything.”

“Fabulous,” Tony’s voice rasped from the bottom of the rock outcropping. “You know, Natasha is awfully judgmental for someone who managed to see through Stane, but didn’t do anything about it. Barnes, Barton…all of you…you…have no idea what…you have each other. Everything is so clear and simple for you, so easy out here where it is just fight the bad guys, no politics, no intrigue, no responsibility beyond the mission, just you lot running around doing Pierce’s work for him. Did you even ask him why? Why he rebelled? Did he give you some spiel about how much better he could do if he just had the power he needed? Did he tell you how he spent years letting things go to shit trying to get that autonomy, plotting with Stern and Hammer and their ilk in secret while King Howard drank the Realm into the ground, ignoring the grievances, letting Howard practically bankrupt the Realm all the while cultivating the in-fighting over resources that were becoming more and more scarce, just so Pierce could swoop in shuttle the King off to the side when the time was right? Stane ruined his little plan by killing the King and Queen, or maybe he just moved the timeline forward, who knows?” Tony went on, bitterness and anger dripping from every word.

“A lot of the problems you want to lay at the King’s feet are there because Pierce let them build
for years, hoping to use those issues for his own little coup while King Howard drank his kingdom away. It’s true that when…when King Anthony came to power, he turned a blind eye to what was going on, trusted Stane when he obviously shouldn’t have. He was young and stupid and not ready to deal with his responsibilities. He didn’t care, as long as he got to live the life he thought he wanted. He was a selfish asshole, truth be told. He should’ve seen Pierce’s betrayal coming leagues away, but he was too busy drinking and whoring and letting Stane supposedly handle everything. He fucked up. He fucked up and the Realm bled for it, which is something he is going to have to deal with for the rest of his life, if the gods are willing to allow him that. But Pierce’s hands aren’t clean in this either, Steve, far from it. He covets power. Always has. Just hides it a damn sight better than most. And you follow him…you…why? Is it because of whatever grievance Barnes has with the King? I just…just why, Steve? Tell me why. If you can’t fight for the King, why fight at all? Why Pierce? Just…why?” Tony demanded, voice tight with strained emotion as he stared straight ahead at the large stack of rounded boulders in front of them as if they were the most fascinating things he had ever seen.

Steve blinked and stuttered to a halt at the sudden shift in the conversation. It wasn’t like Steve hadn’t seen something like this coming, though he was surprised that it was Natasha’s report on the King that had brought it on. This had been building for awhile, their careful conversations along the march tiptoeing around the issue with increasing difficulty.

“Tony…” Steve started, then found he wasn’t really sure what he wanted to say. He knew Tony believed what he was saying about Pierce and the rebellion was true. He wasn’t lying, unless it was to himself, of that, Steve was certain. Tony had surely heard those and many other pernicious rumors about Pierce repeated many times in the capital. The King’s supporters were willing to say anything to sway the masses to the King’s side, after all, but rumors could only hide the truth for so long. He realized he didn’t want to be the one to take ‘Tony’s faith away. However misplaced it was, he’d meant it when he had told Tony that he respected Tony’s loyalty to the King. It was an admirable trait, and he well understood the lingering pain that came with a betrayal of that kind loyalty, no matter how far removed it was from where you stood. And they were just rumors. Lies propagated by the Crown to hide the things Pierce was trying to expose, to discredit anything he would say. They had to be lies. If not…

He remembered sitting in Fury’s tent, listening to him talk about that fateful Council meeting, how Pierce had denounced the King’s actions and resolved to do something to ensure there was a change, that something like that couldn’t happen again, even if it meant going against everything Pierce had sworn to uphold. Sometimes, Steve knew, things were too far gone to be repaired from within, even though he did not doubt that there were still well-intentioned people, like Tony, who worked hard for what they believed to be for the good of the Realm. Sometimes, the whole structure had to be torn down and rebuilt, remade.

He’d believed that for so long, but now, here was Tony arguing a far different version of events. It was impossible to completely reconcile everything. His mind was whirling with questions, all breaking off at the end with no answers, just dark roads that led to nothing. Pierce as some kind of power-mad traitor, undermining the Crown for years before being forced to incite a rebellion when King Howard’s untimely death at Stane’s hand threw his machinations into the chaos of a new, perhaps inept, young King who was himself being manipulated by Stane? Steve couldn’t…it if there was any truth to that…any at all…what the hell had they been fighting for?

He wasn’t sure if he felt Tony couldn’t be right about Pierce because it didn’t make sense or if he felt that way because the alternative was too disturbing to contemplate. He shook his head in frustration. He had never shied from thinking about the hard questions just because he didn’t like the answers, but here, there were no answers to be had, just questions that led to more questions. Tony wasn’t the only one anxious to get to Fury.
“I don’t want to argue with you about this. I know what you believe to be true about Pierce. Like most rumors, there is some truth there,” Steve acknowledged, unwilling, for now, to let Tony see how much his words had affected him. “He did fight against the King’s plans, and maybe he took that further than he should have before declaring himself opposed to the King. I think that was because it wasn’t what he wanted to do, though I understand how it would look like he was acting the traitor. But…but you don’t…there are things that happened…you should talk to Fury about it. About why he joined Pierce. I don’t…I think it should come from him. Maybe your theory about Stane is right…maybe…I don’t know. I don’t know what that would even mean,” Steve said in frustration.

He knew Bucky would say that Stane’s involvement, if true, did nothing to absolve the King, but Steve couldn’t shake the sense that if it was dereliction rather than outright cruelty, maybe that did matter. Stane was obviously someone the King had known his whole life and trusted completely, and if it was, in fact, Stane who was responsible, then that mattered. He just wasn’t sure how much, at this point, it actually changed. He thought about the information they were carrying back to Fury. It could stop this war. He looked over at Tony’s stricken face, noted the tense set of his jaw and the way his hands were fisted at his sides and realized he wasn’t going to say anything to Fury about what they’d found until after he heard what Fury had to say in response to Tony’s allegations about Stane.

He thought about Tony’s words about Pierce…He knew there were all sorts of scurrilous rumors about Pierce emanating from the King’s supporters. That was true enough, so far as it went. But somehow, he didn’t think Tony was a man given to being led by the rumor mill. And therein was his problem, the kernel of worry that gnawed at his gut. Tony was so sure…and Tony was not someone given to being wrong all that often, Steve would bet, well, bet a lot on. The question was just how much. And that was an answer he didn’t have yet.

Even if Tony’s accusations were unlikely to be true, he couldn’t simply ignore them just because he didn’t like the idea of being played a fool. If he was wrong about this, about Pierce, as Tony suggested…he shook his head, trying to find some semblance of clarity in the whirlwind Tony managed to create in his mind. Everything had been so simple until Tony had burst into their lives, he reflected with a grimace.

And…if there was anything to what Tony was saying about Pierce’s tactics under King Howard, anything at all, he needed to know it before he handed Pierce the crown on a silver platter.

He looked over at Tony, watching him with that inscrutable expression he often wore, the one that made Steve feel as if Tony could see all the pieces that made him whole.

“It may not matter much if the King is really dead, you know,” Steve observed softly, noticing Tony flinch at his words. “There would still be a succession problem. Pierce isn’t going to just walk away and let some Council decide the fate of the Realm. Not after everything that’s happened. And now…now isn’t the time to have this discussion. We can’t solve anything out here between just the two of us anyway. It isn’t as simple as what you and I believe. When we talk to Fury…after we…there’s just nothing to be done for it now, Tony. Let’s just take our watch,” Steve continued. He watched the rapid play of emotions cross Tony’s face, frustration and anger followed by steely determination and something Steve wanted to name hope, but wasn’t sure.

Steve moved briskly past Tony to examine the rock edifice, looking for the best way up, wanting nothing more than for this conversation to end, for now, at least. Maybe he was running from something he wasn’t yet ready to fully face, but he needed time to think. Steve had spent much of the past few days’ walk through the forest towards the Pass talking over a huge swath of subjects with Tony, arguing sometimes, true, but Steve found he relished the challenge.
Tony saw the world very differently, but he was also thoughtful, knowledgeable and scarily intelligent. He was also one of the very few people who would push Steve, question his reasoning and make him defend his stances while Tony poked and prodded the edges. The rest of the team tended to defer to Steve with ready ease. He wasn’t sure if it was because they trusted his judgment that much or trusted their own so little. While Steve appreciated their confidence in him, there was something about the way Tony forced him to justify his decisions that was strangely satisfying.

Tony had a way of getting under his skin, making him question everything, just like he did when they discussed anything from taxes to law to faith. It usually left Steve somewhat exhilarated, if he were honest with himself, but tonight, his stomach was roiling and he couldn’t seem to quite focus any of his thoughts, they just kept cascading over and over each other, filling all the space in his head. He couldn’t be wrong about this. He had to be sure. And right now, in the face of Tony’s certainty, he wasn’t sure of anything.

“What if the King isn’t dead?” Tony asked, looking up at the starlit sky as he did. “What then?”

“I don’t know,” Steve responded honestly. He heard Tony let out a long breath next to him. A moment later, Tony seemed to shake himself out of whatever state he’d worked himself into, apparently deciding to let the matter drop, though Steve doubted it was more than a momentary reprieve.

Steve quickly found small lines of jagged layers he could use for hand and footholds. He adjusted his scabbard and made quick work of the climb, coming to reest on a high ledge that afforded him a view over most of the treetops that formed a sea of dark green below. He looked down to see Tony staring up at him from the ground beneath him. “Can you make it? With your…” Steve gestured vaguely to his chest, suddenly concerned that he’d pushed Tony too far. He thought Tony was doing better, but the day’s walk might have taken too much out of him to attempt the climb. Short though it was, it required quite a bit of strength and coordination to pull yourself from one handhold to the next. He wasn’t surprised when Tony started climbing, mulish stubbornness being one of the traits they shared. Steve moved quickly back down the rock face, meeting Tony as he climbed, pointing to the hand and footholds and offering him a steadying hand the rest of the way up. Steve pulled him up onto the ledge with a strong tug, earning a relieved grunt from Tony for his efforts.

“Never done much climbing. Unless you count into and out of various beds,” Tony amended, panting lightly as he recovered from the climb and startling a slight huff of laughter from Steve as he sat down next to Tony on the ledge. It was colder up here, without the protection from the wind offered by the trees, and Steve found himself grateful for the warmth. And the company, if he was honest. Watch was lonely duty, and he couldn’t deny that having Tony along gave him no small amount of pleasure, despite the heated nature of their conversation.

Steve scanned the forest, finding the spot where the rest of the team slept and noting that he couldn’t see the smoke from Bruce’s fire anymore. He turned his gaze south and picked out the craggy entrance to the Pass in the distance, nestled at the foot of one of the larger mountains that delineated the border of Stark’s lands. He knew there were other places on far side of the mountains, though few had ever ventured to take that route, and certainly, with Schmidt holed up there, no one would dare these days. Most took the far longer, but safer trip across the ocean to trade, bringing back ships laden with spices, gold, silver, ivory, incense and reams of the fine cloths softer than a baby’s skin that Lord Hammer favored. Steve remembered Hammer insisting he feel the sleeve of the shirt he had been wearing, the way the material felt almost like water against his fingers. Impractical for fighting or building the explosives Hammer was supposed to be working on, Steve had thought, but kept that to himself, recalling that if Lord Hammer’s expression
had been any indication, he had been quite pleased with his garment.

Tony was fidgeting next to him on the ledge, the few moments of stillness apparently overwhelming him. He probably didn’t even realize what he was doing, but Steve had observed him long enough to know that the man was constantly in motion. When Tony had volunteered to join him earlier, Steve had assumed that watch duty would not suit Tony particularly well, but figured that showing rather than telling would work far better with Tony. They were far enough from most of civilization or any point of military value that he didn’t expect anything untoward to happen for the few hours they were on watch anyway. Despite Tony’s threats to follow him, he knew that he could have insisted Tony stay back in camp and the others would have seen to it. He’d found the last few days of Tony’s company entirely too enjoyable to turn him down the opportunity, if he was honest with himself. Of course, he hadn’t exactly anticipated the turn of conversation on their walk through the forest tonight. Still, he couldn’t ignore that, even arguing, there was an intensity, a purposefulness, about Tony that captured his attention like nothing else, drawing him in, pulling all of Steve’s focus toward Tony. Everything else just seemed to melt away, until it was just him and Tony and that fissure of whatever it was between them.

Steve reached over to place a hand over Tony’s where the other man was sitting next to him, alternately snapping his fingers and popping his fisted hands together in some kind of rhythm discernible only to Tony. “Ugh…sorry,” Tony said. “When I was a child, my, uh…well, my parents were away a lot. Busy and all that. There was an, uh, older man, a hired hand, I guess you could say, that I stayed with a lot. He used to say the only way to get me to keep quiet was to tie my hands. Not that he really did that, of course,” Tony explained.

“I have no doubt it would have proved to be wasted effort on his part, and you’d just come up with some elaborate plot to escape,” Steve intoned wryly. Tony grinned widely in return.

“Of course. I’ve never been one for keeping still though. Don’t see how you do it,” Tony said with a shrug of his shoulders, as if to bolster his point.

“Had to, when I was little, anyway. Sick all the time. Stuck in bed most days. Guess that’s where the drawing comes from. It was one of the few things I could do to pass the time. I’d draw on just about anything I could get my hands on, since paper was far too expensive for me to ruin like that. Drove my mom crazy,” Steve replied, smiling wistfully at the memory. “Some of the rocks down by the sea could be used for chalk, and we’d get bits of charcoal I could whittle down. She would find pictures drawn on the walls of our house, the outsides of her pots and pans, the bags she used to carry vegetables to market…I think she liked it though, really. She never made me stop, at least.”

“I’m sure she did. Must have been hard, just you and her, and you sick,” Tony offered quietly.

“It was…I guess. I mean, at the time, I didn’t really understand. I knew there were times when we didn’t have a lot. She could stretch a sack of potatoes into a week’s worth of food though. Honestly, looking back, I know things were rough, particularly on her. She worried a lot. About what would happen to me when she wasn’t there to care for me anymore. But…at the time, I was happy. I think she was, too. I hope so, anyway,” Steve replied, twirling a small rock between his fingers as his eyes darted around the forest from their vantage point on the ledge.

“Was it…did she get sick?” Tony asked carefully.

“Not with the plague,” Steve said, answering the unasked question. “She died three summers before that. Thanks in part to having to deal with me and all my health problems, she became something of a healer for the area. She’d brew up concoctions from plants and flowers that seemed to help with various ailments, took care of the old folks when it was their time, helped with the
birthing, that kind of thing. People would usually give her a basket of food or maybe do some work on the house or the garden in return, so it was a help all around, her doing that. I think she liked it, too. She was always wanting to do someone a kindness, if she could,” Steve tried to explain. He knew he wasn’t really answering Tony’s question, though Tony didn’t press. He hadn’t talked about his mom in years. He wasn’t sure why he was now, except that Tony had asked and he had already refused to talk to Tony any further about why he’d chosen to follow Pierce, so it felt wrong somehow to deny him this, too. He didn’t want Tony to think he didn’t trust him, just because there were some arguments he wasn’t ready to have with Tony just yet.

Steve took a deep, steadying breath before he continued. “One of the fishermen came back from a long trading trip down the coast with a ship full of wares and a cough that wouldn’t go away. At first, it wasn’t really anything to be concerned about. People got sick, particularly on long voyages to areas they didn’t usually visit. But, his cough kept getting worse. People started talking. There was concern that maybe it was more serious than just a cough. Then he complained of his chest hurting. Caught a fever and stopped eating. His kids got sick, then his wife. Mom knew her. Not well, but…the baby had been sick when she was little and Mom had made a salve to rub on her chest to help her breathe, just like she had with me. She went to try to help,” Steve stated, keeping his voice flat. “She didn’t come back. The fisherman died. So did his family. The town elders isolated their cabin, refused to let anyone near. I tried to go to her, but Bucky stopped me. I saw her at the window once. She couldn’t talk. She had a rag over her mouth. She waved. That was the last time I saw her until Bucky and I buried her.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony said after a long, silent pause. “She sounds very brave.”

“She thought if you could help, you should try, that’s all,” Steve replied, scraping the pebble he’d been holding against the rock beneath him in a hard line.

“Maybe that’s what bravery is,” Tony offered. He was staring out at the forest, though Steve could tell he wasn’t really seeing any of it.

“Maybe,” Steve conceded. “What about your family? You said your parents were away a lot?” Steve questioned, trying to move things away from memories he didn’t want to relive. The last thing he needed was to have one of his ridiculous attacks up here with nothing between him and the ground below.

“Yeah,” Tony replied, drawing his knees up to his chest and circling his hands around them as he scrunched closer to Steve for warmth. “Left to my own devices for the most part. Not always the best strategy when it came time for making important life decisions, as it turned out. Always liked to build things, though. Like my Dad, I guess. Though, he would have told you that I am nothing like him. The one thing I ever managed to excel at in his eyes was disappointing him. Don’t look so surprised, not that I don’t appreciate it,” Tony said at Steve’s shocked look. “He always wanted a different son, some ideal he’d built up in his head that we were supposed to be, even if he had failed miserably at ever achieving it. Naturally, when I couldn’t meet that standard, I did my damnedest to find the absolute limit of the opposite. If he was going to hate me anyway, might as well give him a really good reason. He and mom…they’d grown apart years before. Largely lived separately, though tried to keep up appearances. Then they died. Accident. I dealt with it by spending lot of time pretending to enjoy myself until I was so good at it that it almost didn’t seem like pretending anymore,” Tony muttered bitterly and looked over at Steve rather appraisingly.

“He’d have loved you though. Gods,” Tony chuckled, a brittle sound as it echoed over the rocks. “You’re exactly what he would have wanted in a son. Not some fuck-up like me. If he could see me now…this…the war, everything…he was right. In the end, he was right. Can’t exactly deny it at this point.”
“Don’t be ridiculous, Tony. That’s…if your father couldn’t see what a remarkable son he had, that’s his failing, not yours. The war is hardly your fault. I know you made weapons for the Crown, but it wasn’t your decision to use them. You can’t blame yourself for what’s happened,” Steve insisted. “You take too much on your shoulders.” Tony closed his eyes and lay his head against his bent knees, silent and still for a moment before turning his head to face Steve.

“I think maybe I haven’t taken enough,” Tony replied, stone-faced. “But that will change. Get me to Fury and that will change. I promise you. I know you don’t believe me about Pierce. I wish I were wrong, Steve, and this was as easy as explaining to Fury and Pierce that it was Stane plotting all along and they’d just end this conflict before more lives are lost, but it isn’t that simple. Pierce is dirty. He’s using you and the rest of the team, and you can’t see it because your hatred for the King has blinded you to Pierce’s lies, but I’m telling you, Steve, he is lying to you. I can’t make you believe me, but I can at least warn you. I don’t know what his end game is, but he isn’t above letting the Realm burn in order to get it, and you? The team? Pierce couldn’t care less about you, whatever he’s said, let me assure you,” Tony bit out scathingly.

“I’m just a soldier, Tony. We all are. He doesn’t have to care about us, just the mission. The Realm. And it isn’t as if your King cares about what happens to any of us, so don’t—“ Steve began.

“The King cares more than…than…the King…he cares. For…for his people. Even you and your band of misfits. He cares. I know you don’t believe me about that, but it’s the truth. Gods help me, it is,” Tony stammered. Steve didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t lead to another argument, so he kept his own counsel. Tony seemed to be in silent agreement with that strategy and lay back against the rock wall, shifting this way and that, causing Steve to roll his eyes. Steve wasn’t sure how long they sat like that, though the moon was high in the sky and he spotted a pair of nighthawks circling prey only their eyes could see by the time he heard Tony’s low snores next to him. He scratched absently at the jagged line scored on his side when he’d rescued Tony after the incident on the bridge. He’d need Bruce to take the stitches out soon, he thought, knowing from experience their removal would be almost as bad as putting them in had been.

As he watched Tony’s restless sleep, he kept replaying Tony’s words about Pierce and Stane and the King over in his mind, searching for holes in Tony’s theory. Tony lived in the city, worked closely with the military as part of his duties making weapons. Had probably even seen Pierce and Stane at some point, perhaps even the King, even if only from afar. He was obviously more in the know about politics than Steve, who had spent the past years training with Phillips. Bruce and Natasha didn’t trust Stane…and none of them really knew Pierce…it was Fury he had initially followed, Fury who had recruited him after he found him in that alley, prone forms of Fury’s own personal guard littered around him, who had decided to recruit him instead of arrest him after Steve explained about the tavern girl his men had refused to leave be.

And it had been Fury who told him about the Council meeting and Pierce’s vehemence in arguing against the King’s orders…It had seemed so easy. The King did terrible things, and Pierce had tried to stop him. Fight for Pierce. Make things better. Sure, it meant compromising some of what he had been raised to believe in, loyalty to the Crown foremost, he supposed. They’d all taken their oaths to protect and defend the Crown, after all. But this was supposed bring about a Realm where people could be safe, live out their lives in relative comfort and security, instead of at the mercy of a tyrant. It was supposed to mean something. That was what all this was about. Except if it wasn’t.

He wasn’t going to solve anything sitting on a rock out in the middle of nowhere with Tony, that much was certain. They needed to get to Fury. Steve needed to hear from Fury himself…he’d said it was the King’s orders…had it been? Truly? Or had it been Stane, as Tony would likely claim?
Bucky may not see a difference there, but it was hard for Steve to measure the two actions as equals. He cast a fond glance over at Tony, slumped against the rock wall, fast asleep. He knew there were always good men on either side of a war, and you didn’t stop fighting for what was right just because of that. But…he couldn’t imagine fighting against Tony, someone he admired and respected and, well…trusted, oddly enough, since he’d only known the man a short time and he had, admittedly, almost gotten Steve blown up, Steve thought with a slight smile. A war that demanded that of him required questioning, he supposed. Steve’s ears perked up when a soft trilling sound echoed from below the ledge. He leaned forward over the edge and peered down to the wall of trees below.

“Looks like a herd of ducks tromped through here,” Clint said from below. Tony sat up comically fast, hair sticking in all different directions and wiping a string of drool from his mouth as he stuck his head over the side to look at Barton in question.

“Ducks?” Tony asked in confusion.

“He means you walk flat-footed,” Steve explained. Tony actually glanced at his feet, earning a wide grin from Steve. “Not literally. Just that you don’t know how to conceal your trail.”

“I think there were actual arrows scraped in the dirt,” Clint remarked, climbing up the side of the rock and poking his head over the edge of the ledge. “Barnes is going to have a fit over it, you know that, right? He was pretty pissed about you taking city-boy here with you to begin with.”

“I’ll deal with Bucky,” Steve answered with a sigh. “Nothing’s moving out here except some mice about to be dinner,” Steve said, nodding at the birds in the distance. “Climb down after me,” Steve instructed Tony. “Put your hands and feet where I put mine. It’s harder going down than up, believe it or not.” Tony nodded in understanding and looked somewhat concernedly down the rockface before following Steve over the edge, dutifully placing his hands and feet in the spots Steve used.

Steve dropped the last few feet to the ground. Tony followed, though a bit less agilely and stumbled into Steve, who steadied him with sure hands around his waist. He looked down at Tony, and for a heartbeat, Tony swayed forward to meet him, no longer due to any ungainly step, or maybe Steve pulled him forward, he wasn’t certain, but Tony was suddenly closer, there, right there, in Steve’s space, his hands felt heavy on Tony’s waist, like moving them would be an effort and now he could feel the hard, lean muscles bunching beneath them, and Tony was so very, very close that Steve could see the bright orb of the moon reflected in his eyes and he thought that if he breathed in, it would be the same air Tony breathed out. Tony was staring up at him, eyes wide and dark. Tony’s tongue darted out to wet his lips, and Steve watched the motion in fascination.

“Tell Barnes he has third shift, okay?” Barton called as he made his way nimbly up the side of the rock wall, breaking through the fog in Steve’s head. Steve stepped back quickly and dropped his hands to his sides, though they hung awkwardly, as if they didn’t really fit there anymore, and he found himself more aware of his hands than he’d been before, unable to find anything to do with them that felt natural. To his surprise, Tony matched his movement, shifting forward, moving closer to Steve again, something at once defiant and pleading in his gaze. Steve felt his muscles coil and tense, as if readying for a fight, and he opened his mouth to say something, but the words were lodged in his throat.

“We’ll tell him,” Tony answered, voice rough with sleep as he stared up at Steve, causing Steve to wonder when it had become ‘we’ that answered for him. Clint grunted his acceptance in return, and Steve forced himself, limb by limb, to move away from Tony and start back through the forest towards their camp. The return trip was largely silent, save for the sounds of the forest that seemed
amplified somehow by their own noiseless passage. They reached the camp faster than they’d departed, though Steve measured his steps so as not to overtax Tony after such a long day. Natasha and Bucky stirred at their approach, as Thor continued to snore loudly, curled around his hammer like a child around a soft doll. Bruce didn’t so much as move.

Steve nudged Bucky, wordlessly communicating that he had the last watch, and unbelted his sword, removing it from its scabbard and placing it next to his shield on the hard ground, ready if he should need it. Tony walked to the opposite side of the now extinguished fire and found what Steve assumed was the softest spot he could, before sinking to the ground and pillowing his hands behind his head. Tony’s eyes were closed, but Steve could tell from his breathing that he hadn’t fallen to sleep just yet. Steve shifted the few items in his pack into more comfortable positions and placed it under his head. Tony’s breathing finally evened out, indicating he’d succumbed to sleep. Steve realized his own breathing had unconsciously matched Tony’s, and forced out a long breath.

Everything Tony had said swirled about in his mind, thoughts tumbling over themselves trying to find anything that made sense, that could force the story Steve had believed to fit the one Tony told, but it was like trying to catch smoke. You could for a moment, but it wouldn’t last. He finally drifted off into a fitful sleep.

His eyes snapped open, instantly awake, sometime later, breaths coming in thick pants, body tight with tension and cheeks wet. The pale bluish light of dawn suffused the camp, though a shadow hovered over him. He started to sit up, but felt a hand press against his chest. “It’s okay,” he heard Tony whisper. “You—you’re okay. I’m here. It’s fine. You…you called for me,” Tony said, by way of explanation.

He looked up at Tony in momentary confusion, then his eyes widened as images flashed before them. A dream, he realized. One he’d had before. Or was it? He lay his head back against his pack, blinking against the light that filtered through the trees. He heard Tony shift and lay down next to him instead of moving back to his spot nearer to Bruce. It had been his mom, in that house with the fisherman and his family, no surprise there, not after his conversation with Tony. He should have expected it, but it always managed to seem to come out of nowhere, something dredged up that should be long buried. His mom, going in with her basket of potions and ointments, he could see it if he closed his eyes, could smell the bitter, oily scents. But when the curtain had been pulled back from the opening that served as a window in the small hut, when he knew she had waved, waved to him that last time, that thing he’d seen a hundred times or more in his dreams, it had been Tony instead, Tony stuck inside there, with a rag over his mouth, dark from blood, and he hadn’t waved to Steve, like his mother had, light, gentle fingers splayed in an attempt at reassurance.

He’d screamed.

Chapter End Notes

Amber conducts static electricity when rubbed with something like fur. The Greeks 'discovered' this property.

Natasha's description of the King includes traits that are considered evidence of a narcissistic personality disorder that I thought actually described Tony for someone who doesn't really know him all that well.
Steve's mom died of tuberculosis, and the description of symptoms is based on that.
Chapter 10

Tony watched Steve scrub his face with his hand, as if whisking away the scattered remnants of whatever dream had plagued him as one would wipe away a stray cobweb, and blink himself to wakefulness. The rest of the camp, by all appearances, was still silent with sleep, though it was of the shallow, expectant kind as if they were anticipating the day already.

Steve sat up on his elbows and looked to his left, where Barnes’ usual place sat empty. Tony assumed Barnes had taken his turn at watch sometime in the night. He saw Steve’s eyes dart around the camp, lighting for a moment on each of the team members’ slumbering forms before Steve let his head fall back against the ground in surrender to the oncoming day. Barnes first, Tony noted, a tad uncomfortably, then Natasha, Bruce, Clint and finally, Thor. Tony wondered briefly where he fit in, if he did at all. He wondered if Steve was even aware that he did it. He’d watched the man closely enough in the days since his capture to see habit in the pattern.

Clint was sprawled on the ground next to Thor, limbs thrown akimbo, one hand on his bow as he slept. He snored at haphazard intervals interspersed with the occasional muffled grunt. Tony shifted his weight back on his haunches, trying not to think about the terrible, desperate way his name had sounded as it had been torn from Steve’s lips as he slept. It had shaken Tony from the depths of his own dreams, and he’d found himself scrambling the short distance to kneel at Steve’s side, unsure if he should wake him or leave him be. Steve had taken the decision from him, sitting up abruptly, eyes wide and searching, still caught in the panic of whatever nightmare filled his vision to find Tony leaning over him. All things considered, Tony was probably lucky Steve hadn’t taken his head off in the cover of darkness.

He wanted to ask, of course he did. What had Steve dreamed about Tony that had so disturbed him? It had been a hell of a night, their conversation during their watch taking a path Tony hadn’t foreseen. He’d jumped at the opportunity to have Steve to himself for a bit, away from Barnes’ disapproval, and whatever bond that tethered Barnes and Steve so tightly. Not to mention being free of Natasha’s long, calculating stares.

When he’d shunted himself into watch duty with Steve, it honestly had not been his intention to rail at the man over Pierce, though, upon reflection, they had been dancing around the subject for days, he supposed. All their discussions and debates over the course of their march, heady and engaging as they were, had left Tony more and more confused and frustrated as to why someone like Steve would join someone like Pierce so readily. He clearly wasn’t doing it for the money or the glory, seemed, rather impossibly in Tony’s experience, to genuinely desire no reward other than the ability to serve, to try to make the Realm a better place.

Tony hadn’t realized how very badly he wanted Steve to question Pierce’s motivations until Steve dismissed Tony’s warnings as rumor-mongering by supporters of the Crown. That had...hurt, cutting deeper than Tony would have thought possible. Of all the betrayals he had suffered over the last few years, he wasn’t sure why one soldier’s should sting so sharply. Tony had been so angry at Steve’s stubborn refusal to listen last night, so overwhelmingly frustrated that he wanted nothing in his life so badly as to grab Steve and shake him and tell him that he had been there, had seen the way the kingdom had been left at end of his Father’s reign. Explain that he had demanded to know why Pierce hadn’t done more, hadn’t told someone, only to get the same old respect for the Crown, Howard had been the King crap that Pierce then turned on its head and used against
him, proclaiming far and wide that Tony had known of the problems for years and ignored or exacerbated the issues while engaged in less savory pursuits.

Suddenly every one of his failings, and there were many, a voice that sounded much like his Father’s reminded him, his mistakes and casually flung misanthropic statements had a voice in every town square from one end of the Realm to the other. Pierce had wasted no time pointing out that the Council was unable to check the Crown’s unbridled power, that the whole situation was ripe for abuse and there was nothing between a cruel, uncaring or incompetent King and a quick disintegration into brutality, using the very outcomes Pierce himself had helped engineer as his evidence of this likelihood.

And the people, his people, who had suffered for too long under Howard’s neglect and paranoia, which, admittedly, turned out not to be so off-base, had no way to know of Pierce’s own role. They latched on to the sparks of discontent Pierce fomented so expertly, turning what should have been a quickly squashed attempted coup into all out rebellion. Clever, even Tony had to admit. To say he’d been blindsided by it all, by the quickness with which the rebellion had found support, was an understatement, but the issues Pierce pounced on had been brewing for years under Pierce’s own careful tending while Howard drank himself to a stupor night after night.

And for Steve…for someone like Steve to follow Pierce? It stung, twisting in his gut each time he looked at Steve, seeming to get worse the closer they got to Fury. Intelligent, brave, kind Steve, who hated his King enough to join a rebellion, but would vouch for Tony. Thought Tony was remarkable.

Not the King, not the man who makes such amazing things, of which he’d gotten only a glimpse and then it hadn’t even worked, not the person who ran a kingdom or had a name that mattered. Just Tony. Tony, who Steve argued and laughed with, challenged and encouraged, respected and asked more of than anyone Tony had ever met before. He honestly didn’t know what to do with all that. But there was something there, pulling at him, each time he was around Steve, dragging him ever forward into Steve’s orbit, as if just being near him long enough would somehow make him someone worth vouching for. Someone remarkable in the ways that truly mattered. Someone worthy of Steve’s loyalty. And he wanted that more than he’d wanted anything in his memory.

Gods, but it was driving Tony crazy. He’d been perilously close to just telling Steve the whole truth and demanding his fealty right then and there before rational thought had prevailed. The loyalty of one soldier was hardly worth risking the Realm over, he told himself, and he had no idea how Steve would react to the truth. Whatever it was that had driven him to Pierce’s service had clearly hardened him against the King, though Tony, after dismissing the idea that it had something to do with bitterness over lack of schooling as ridiculous, still had no idea what could have turned someone like Steve against him.

And therein lay the thing that kept skittering around the back of Tony’s mind, like some itch he couldn’t reach no matter how he contorted himself. If he was such a King that a man like Steve thought a wheedling asshole like Pierce a better choice for the Realm, what did that say about Tony? He could put only so much of the problems off on Stane and Pierce, he knew. No matter how much a role they had played in the morass that things had become, it was ultimately Tony’s responsibility to protect his people, and he had failed mightily, as only King’s can, he supposed. Though Pierce used his own failings against him, twisting and distorting them for his purposes, they were Tony’s shortcomings nonetheless. He had given Pierce the tinder and handed Stane the match, then watched agog while the Realm burned, wondering how such a thing could have possibly come about.

“Sorry I woke you,” Steve said quietly, so as not to disturb the others, though Tony caught
Natasha’s eyes flicker open briefly before closing again. “I—sometimes I—have dreams. Bucky usually—he’s usually here. Anyway, I’m sorry,” Steve repeated tightly, sitting up and reaching for his pack.

Steve rummaged around in the pack for a few moments before pulling out the bag of hard biscuits and his water pouch, though Tony noticed his hands trembled a bit as he undid the laces that tied the food bag together, and he resolutely refused to think about what the hot spike anger conjured by the image of Barnes comforting Steve through his nightmares or the way the man seemed to be there whenever Steve needed anything. Tony may have discarded the vengeful fantasies that had sustained him in the early, ignominious days of being held prisoner, but that didn’t mean he had any intention of facilitating whatever it was between Steve and Barnes, not when Barnes was so intent on poisoning Steve’s mind against his King for whatever misbegotten reason. Barnes could have his plot of land by the sea, for all Tony cared. Hell, he’d give him a decent sized keep, if that was what it took. One far, far away from the Castle and city making frequent visits impractical was all, Tony thought as he watched Steve dig around in his bag, his hair askew from sleep, and resisted the urge to run his hands through it. No one, and certainly not Steve, could argue that was in any way cruel hearted. That was downright generous, all things considered, if somewhat self-serving.

Steve shoved one of the gods-scorned biscuits at Tony and took a drink from his waterbag before passing that to Tony as well. Tony looked at him closely, noting the hard set of his jaw and furrow that creased the center of his brow. He wasn’t surprised to find some of last night’s discussion creeping into dreams. He couldn’t recall his own dreams, but he’d woken up to Steve’s cry clutching his chest and gasping for air of his own. It made sense that their discourse had followed them into their sleep, but what Tony didn’t understand was why, with all the threads of conversation from last night, Steve’s dreams would be disturbed by thoughts of him.

“It’s fine. Time to get up anyway, right? Think we’ll make the Pass?” Tony asked quietly, watching some of the tension drain from Steve’s shoulders as he moved the conversation to more neutral ground. Steve nodded in reply, but otherwise kept silent. Steve took a bite of the biscuit and chewed steadily, eyes fixed on some spot on the ground near the deadened fire, resolutely not looking at Tony, as if eye contact might signal a return to the discussion of the night before.

A moment later, Steve’s head snapped around behind him, and Tony glanced up to see Barnes walking back to camp, using his longspear like a staff. Barnes stopped short at the sight of them sitting so close together, shook his head and went over to sit by the now non-existent fire, using his foot to nudge Bruce and Clint awake as he walked by. Steve’s eyes tracked Barnes as he did, a grimace twisting his mouth when he forced himself to look away, staring down at the partially eaten biscuit-shaped stone in his hand instead of Barnes’ angry back. Tony wondered idly if Asgard was by a sea and had a spare keep. He shifted his stance, sitting down in the dirt next to Steve to eat a bit of the thing the team insisted on calling bread, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Barnes’ return seemed to be some kind of signal to the rest of the team. Natasha sat up and stretched, feline-like, arching her back and reaching long fingers towards the first morning rays. Thor unraveled himself from his bear hug on his hammer and yawned widely.

“Good morn, my friends,” Thor greeted them with the obnoxious joviality of someone who loved the morning, truly an unnatural state of being, as far as Tony was concerned. He must not have been alone in this because Clint threw his pack at Thor’s head, though Thor dodged it rather easily, picking it up and holding it out to Barton with a seemingly sincere, “You have misplaced your pack, Sir Archer,” that Tony was absolutely certain was merely said to fuck with Barton. Tony really rather liked Thor.
“Nothing out there, Buck?” Steve asked Barnes pointedly.

“Just some birds,” Barnes confirmed in the same perfunctory manner, as he took his own bag of food and pouch of water out of his pack. “Thought I’d hunt a bit later. See if I can get us anything other than this rationed shit to eat. Think I’d rather eat a handful of rocks.”

“Better for your teeth,” Clint said agreeably, still lying spread-eagled in the grass with his eyes closed.

“There were some tracks in the woods last night. Deer. Think I saw a few ptarmigans nesting on some of those rocks,” Steve offered, standing up swiftly and gathering his shield and sword. “I’ll take point today. Bucky, you and Nat take the wings. See if you can get us some supper while you’re out there. Won’t be much game once we make the Pass. Clint, you take the rear. Keep a good pace behind us and make sure we’re not being followed. It’ll be slower going once we reach the Pass. That terrain is going to be tricky, and we might have to do some climbing to get around rockslides, if it is in remotely the same condition as the last time I was there,” Steve explained. “I don’t want to get bottled up in there,” Steve said, a fissure of concern lacing his voice. “There isn’t much in there to use for cover if we were ambushed.”

“Bruce, I think these are ready to come out,” Steve said, kneeling down by Bruce and hitching up his shirt to show where the large gash across his side, earned during his river rescue of Tony, was sewn together, the deep red, raised mark vivid against hard, pale skin. Bruce took a quick, studied look and nodded in apparent agreement. Tony remembered sitting on the riverbank as dark rivulets of blood dripped down while Steve struggled to breathe, and felt his own chest constricting for a moment, as if in shared memory. He wanted to look away, knew he should probably feel abashed, but couldn’t stop himself from watching as Bruce took a small, sharp dagger from his bag and used it to dig under the knots in the string he had used to stitch the skin of Steve’s side back together. Dark spots of blood appeared where Bruce pulled the string away from flesh, glittering like rubies against Steve’s skin. Steve was looking the opposite direction from Tony, not making a sound or moving much as Bruce worked, save for a small hitch tightening the muscles across his stomach each time Bruce jerked the string from his side.

“All done. Looks like it’ll hold. No more battles with trees though,” Bruce suggested mildly, tossing a slight look across the camp at where Tony was sitting in penance, watching the scene unfold. Steve grunted his thanks and got up, sheathing his sword and lifting his shield onto his arm as he did.

“Keep your eyes open, everyone. We don’t have good intelligence on just how far afield Schmidt sends his patrols, and there are still those Stark riders and whatever friends they might bring. I know it seems we’re in the middle of nowhere, but stay sharp,” Steve ordered, in what Tony had decided to call his Captain’s voice because it seemed to have some uncanny ability to make whatever he said sound utterly reasonable. Tony was fairly sure Steve could’ve used it to tell them all to hop on one foot all day and they would have calmly set about bouncing through the forest.

With a quick jerk of his head, Steve strode into the forest without looking back, even his large form quickly swallowed by the low-hanging branches thick with boughs of evergreen, presumably heading towards the Pass, though Tony still couldn’t figure out any discernible semblance of a trail that seemed to materialize for the rest of them. He caught Barnes watching him stare at the place in the trees where Steve had disappeared and returned the man’s gaze with as much defiance and challenge as he could muster, sitting on the dirt in tattered clothes gnashing his teeth on his biscuit. Barnes didn’t like him, fine, mutual and all that. But Steve liked him, at least enough not to dislike him, and Barnes definitely didn’t like that one bit, which Tony found thoroughly enjoyable. He smiled at Barnes and tipped his biscuit jauntily in the air by way of greeting.
“Our…guest…is your responsibility today, Bruce. Don’t let him fall behind,” Barnes ordered flatly, since by some de facto agreement Tony could only assume was based on length of time knowing Steve and not actual usefulness or skill, Barnes was apparently in charge when Steve was away. Tony could practically hear the effort it took for Barnes not to sneer over the word ‘guest.’ Barnes derision annoyed him, because he had really been doing better once Bruce’s medicine seemed to begin working, and how were the effects of the thing trying to kill him even his failing to begin with? Not like he had exactly chosen to nearly get blown up by his own damned ordinance, let alone still be stumbling through the consequences months later.

“Your concern is duly noted, Barnes,” Tony replied evenly. “Going to remember how much you cared, want you to know,” Tony promised, returning Barnes’ hard stare with one of his own. Tony wondered idly what might be further from Kingstown than this Asgard place, assuming it actually existed.

“If the two of you are done playing ‘who misses Steve the most,’ can we get a move on?” Natasha interjected, her annoyance obvious. Tony didn’t bother to try to deny the crux of their mutual dislike. Barnes’ scowl just grew more pronounced, much to Tony’s delight, though he nodded in response to Natasha and started gathering his pack, returning to his usual state of pretending Tony didn’t exist. Tony finished his awful breakfast and did what he could to help break down the camp, clearing away their debris and hiding evidence of their stay as best they could. Granted, this largely involved him staying out of the way, but he liked to think that helped.

Barnes and Natasha left a short time later to sweep to the sides of the rest of the group, while Clint shouldered his bow and walked back the way they’d come the day before to follow their trail later in the day. That left Tony with Thor and Bruce, an admittedly welcome respite from having to deal with Barnes all day. They kept as brisk a pace as they could through the thick mountain forest. He spent much of the walk discussing various topics with Bruce, easily moving from discussions of how the body and mind worked together to the effects of various plants and minerals, with the occasional surprisingly thoughtful interruption from Thor. He often spoke of the advances Jane was working on charting the stars and how she felt they and the other planets were actually moving around the sun, rather than everything circling them, a bizarre, but interesting notion. Tony listened to it all, fascinated and intrigued, finding, to his chagrin, that even with all his years of tutoring and the wealth of knowledge at his disposal, these people, who had actually lived in the world he ruled, offered new and compelling ways to perceive it. He had always assumed those less educated, less brilliant, less everything than him, had less to offer, but again realized he had long ago confused different with lesser, to his detriment.

They stopped around midday and lunched on strips of salted beef, refilling their water pouches at a small stream that barely qualified to name it such. It trickled in small runnels down the side of a large rock formation, as if barely squeezing its way out of the nearby mountains. At some point, the ground dipped and narrowed, even Tony could see it, the beginnings of a true trail spilling out of the trees and opening up beneath the shadows of the snowcapped peaks looming up from the ground to their right.

Natasha joined them silently sometime after midday, like a dryad forming out of the trees. She gave a short shake of her head to Bruce and took her place at the front of their small line, walking with a quiet grace through toward whatever point she had in her mind. There were two skinny hares clipped to her belt, and Tony’s mouth watered at the thought of actual food. Barnes arrived sometime late in the afternoon, a doe slung over his shoulders, her neck and head swinging loosely down Barnes’ back as Barnes gripped it the carcass around his neck by its thin legs.

Tony wondered if that was the deer that had left the tracks he and Steve had followed the night before, and felt an uncomfortable shiver shake through his body as he watched the animal’s pink
tongue dangle from its mouth, unseeing black gaze seeming to following Tony’s steps as he marched along. His Mother, always a superstitious woman, would have said it was because someone had walked past the crypt in the Cathedral. He would one day be interred there, next to all the other dead Starks, the monuments they had built to themselves and their glory faded and crumbling, eroded to anonymity by time, like all things.

He wasn’t sure why he thought of that just now. Even amidst the height of the war and his time as a prisoner in the cave, he hadn’t let his mind dwell on such morbid thoughts as that fact that some sculptor somewhere was chiseling away at the statuary that would one day adorn his bones. Yet, as he watched Barnes trundle along, the deer’s head sagging over his shoulders, the inevitable meaningless of it all had never seemed more present. He was going to survive this and win this war and it wasn’t going to matter for shit, he thought, because he wasn’t someone you vouch for and he wasn’t remarkable, he was just bones and dust disguised as form. He looked away, moving his gaze through the sparse trees and low shrubs, realizing he was searching for someone who wasn’t there.

He’d seen no sign of Steve all day, in fact, though couldn’t stop himself from continuing to scan the trees for his familiar form. Steve was nothing if not thorough and efficient in his determination not to have anything to do with Tony after their nighttime conversation, Tony thought, letting the bitter sting of it seep through him. He didn’t like it, not being able to watch Steve as he had grown accustomed to doing while they walked. Talking with Bruce was easy and engaging. Talking with Steve was like pouring something of himself out, yet finding every part of him filled to overflowing. Everything seemed to loom larger without Steve’s presence, Tony realized, as if he filled more space than any one man truly could.

He thought perhaps the others felt something similar. There was a discomfort, an anxious edge to their march today that he hadn’t noted whilst stumbling along next to Steve’s sure steps. The team coalesced around Steve in some unfathomable way, and even Barnes would probably admit to being a poor substitute. Tony recalled his thoughts of the morning, how drawn he was to Steve’s presence, blinding out the rest of all things, like one of those moths chasing the flickering light of a fire that burned too bright for it to ever touch, and wondered if the rest of the team felt something similar, pulled toward Steve without ever really being able to be close enough. Barnes did, Tony thought with a start. That’s why the sneering disapproval always directed so staunchly at Tony. Barnes recognized the same desperation in Tony, the same need to have Steve fill the vacant crevices by just being Steve, to take what Steve so easily gave, and Barnes needed the same thing. And he didn’t exactly relish sharing. Too fucking bad, Tony thought. You got him your whole life, and see the end to which you nearly led him?

They finally stopped for the night, earlier than usual, by Tony’s estimation, the sun still glaring bright and round overhead. Tony looked around at the newly barren ground, littered with rocks of various sizes and shapes and not much else, save a few scarce waifs that dared to call themselves trees. Even Tony could clearly see the start of the Pass up ahead, shadowed by steep walls of rock building pyramids to the sky.

Steve was sitting against one of the larger rocks, shield leaning against the base of it and sword laying across his lap and one of his maps rolled up in his hand as they walked up, hair golden in the sunlight, looking for the world like a sculpture come to life. Tony’s mind flashed to black eyes filled with nothingness before he drew himself to a halt. It was men like Steve who should adorn monuments, he thought abruptly, not someone who happened to die with the right last name, as if that were a feat deserving of commemoration instead of the gods having the last laugh on men who thought their lives were measured with greater worth for nothing more than the circumstance of their birth. How different might things have been for the Realm if Howard had gotten the son he wanted instead of Tony?
“Pass looks clear, from what I can tell. Went ahead a ways climbed a bit to take a look. Not much stirring, and no tracks or other signs that it has been used recently. Looks like there was a flood a few months ago, when those storms blew through. Would’ve washed away anything from earlier. Still, all our information says this is rarely used these days. Most stick to either the river or the King’s Road, or one of its offshoots nowadays. Even Schmidt’s men seem to stay deeper in the mountains doing…whatever it is they’re doing. Don’t think we’ll have any trouble,” Steve finished, kicking at a rock with his boot. He bent to pick up his pack, placing the rolled up map back inside.

Tony could tell Steve didn’t quite fully believe the words he was saying, unease radiating off the man in waves of tension and eyes that couldn’t stop scanning the mountains, and wondered if Steve was trying to convince the team, Tony, or himself. He looked tired, worn out in a way Tony hadn’t seen on him before, and it didn’t sit well, clenching sharp and hot in Tony’s gut. He had put that weariness there, Tony realized, by raising the specter of doubt about Pierce and his motivations. A soldier needed a cause, and Steve more than most needed one he could believe in. Still, Tony couldn’t help the warm rush of relief and something damnably like happiness to know that Steve had been troubled by his words about Pierce, that he hadn’t dismissed Tony’s protestations entirely as the results of mere rumor and propaganda. He needed Steve to listen, to believe him, believe in him, for the Realm and for reasons to which Tony didn’t want to give much more consideration.

“I shall take first watch, if that is acceptable, Captain?” Thor offered, and Steve nodded gratefully in response.

“I’ll sweep the Pass again after supper,” Clint said as he arrived behind them, trotting to a halt and bending at the waist, hands on his thighs as he caught his breath. “Figured there’d be nothing left if I didn’t hurry,” he said with a glance at Thor.

“I would give you mine own biscuits, were there no food left, but I see Sir Archer has managed to hold onto his wayward pack all day, so has plenty of his own for sustenance,” Thor observed approvingly, grinning widely. Tony really liked him.

Clint stuck his tongue out at Thor, who, if it were possible, grinned even wider, and tossed his bow down to Bruce to use to start the fire. At least he didn’t shoot Tony another disgruntled, betrayed look this time. Clint unslung his quiver of arrows and sat down, taking a proffered hare from Natasha’s outstretched hand and setting about skinning it. Barnes was gutting the deer, starting at the pelvis and working his way upwards with the tip of a long, sharp blade, the sickening squelch of innards enough to turn Tony’s stomach. Though not usually squeamish about the realities of life, he found he couldn’t quite bring himself to watch this time, and walked over to stand beside Steve where he leaned a hip against the boulder.

“Feel up to sparring?” Tony queried, keeping his voice low so as to avoid any unwelcome advice on the subject from Barnes. It was still light out, as they had stopped earlier than usual. Tony assumed Steve wasn’t particularly fond of the idea of starting their traverse of the Pass in the dark. Steve looked surprised by the offer to spar, but nodded in agreement. Tony didn’t think he was wrong in finding something relieved and grateful in the gesture. “There was a bit of a clearing a short walk back. Since it is probably going to be me on my ass, I’d rather dirt than rock, if you don’t mind,” Tony ventured, earning a slight grin from Steve.

“Buck, we’ll be a gone for a bit. You know the signal if there’s any trouble,” Steve said, grabbing his shield and slipping his sword into the scabbard at his waist, walking back the way they had come earlier before anyone could raise a question. Tony followed quickly, catching up to Steve and walking next to him the short distance towards the canopy of trees that covered softer ground.
They came to the spot Tony remembered a short time later, a small grove of trees forming a nearly perfect ring, almost like mushrooms were wont to do after a spring rain.

“Thought we’d work on defending against a spear attack,” Steve said as they stopped in the middle of the copse of trees. “Bucky’s really good with his. It would be better for him to do it,” Steve admitted, but Tony just raised his eyebrow in question. “Okay, yeah, maybe not. I don’t know why he--He’s—he’s had a lot to deal with,” Steve tried to explain.

“Is it because of his arm?” Tony asked, curious. “I mean, why he hates me in particular. I’ve seen a lot of Stark men without a limb, thanks to Hammer’s efforts, so can’t say as how I’d completely blame him if he held me responsible. I very well might be, you know.”

“He doesn’t hate—“ Steve grimaced, stopping himself. Not good with lying, Tony thought rather fondly. A Court full of intrigue, everyone wearing some mask, but not here, not with Steve. “No. His arm…he didn’t lose it in the war, if that’s what you were wondering.” He didn’t expound, and Tony knew better than to press, though it niggled at him, like with so much about those two. Never the obvious explanation.

“Anyway, so with a spear, it looks simple,” Steve began, unbuckling his scabbard and unsheathing his sword, leaning it against a tree with the hilt up, ready to be grabbed, one of those little things Steve did by rote that signaled care and attention in a way made Tony feel at once uncomfortable and more secure than he had felt in a long time.

“Stay away from the pointy end?” Tony suggested with a grin.

“Exactly. But, it isn’t as easy as you’d think. A good spearman can use both ends of the spear and adjust from a two-handed grip to a one-handed grip if need be, which makes defending against them difficult in one on one combat. Bucky…you should really see him with that thing. He uses his metal arm in place of a shield a lot of the time. Gives him a lot more maneuverability,” Steve said, the pride for his friend evident in his voice. “Assuming your opponent is thrusting his spear at you, not throwing it, what you want to do is get in under the arc of the spear and get at him before he adjusts his grip,” Steve began, entering into an explanation of the best way to defend against an attack with a spear. Considering Barnes’ dislike of him, Tony figured he should probably pay more attention, but he was enjoying just listening to the timbre of Steve’s voice, basking a bit in the attention after a day of dealing with Barnes’ reprobation and worrying about how to make Steve believe him about Pierce.

Admittedly, his relationship with the rest of the team was improving. He was still trying to figure out if Natasha recognized him or not, but if she did, as he told himself last night, she would have said something. He was reading entirely too much into one innocuous comment from her. Just because everyone actually was out to get him didn’t mean he had to create problems where none existed. If Natasha suspected anything, she would have told Steve, and Steve remained completely unaware. Natasha was still the scariest woman he’d ever met, but she genuinely cared about her team and didn’t seem to despise Tony once he stopped nearly getting Steve killed with his asinine plans. Thor and Bruce were good company, and actually seemed to like him well enough. Even Barton wasn’t so bad once you got past the gruff, sometimes uncouth, exterior.

Steve handed Tony his shield and explained how to keep low in his advance, sprint the last few yards and attempt to deflect Steve’s phantom spear off the shield. Tony hefted the disk in his hands, looping his arm through the leather straps on the back, the weight feeling oddly misplaced in his hands. He charged, running fast as Steve had instructed, and quickly found himself landing on top of the shield in the dirt.

“You should probably also be aware that a spearman can also move to outflank you,” Steve
deadpanned, standing over Tony’s prone form. He stuck out a hand to help Tony up, but Tony
growled in frustrated annoyance and pushed himself up on his own, lifting the shield again and
readying for another attempt. Steve continued to offer instructions and suggestions as they
 sparred, which Tony tried to follow, only to find himself more often than not meeting the ground
again, despite him having the shield and Steve having nothing but his hand held aloft around a
spear of air. He was hot and tired and frustrated, more with himself than anything else, but just
once, he was going to have the upper hand if it killed him.

Tony readied himself again, brushing dirt off the seat of his pants where he’d landed last time and
shifted his stance, setting his feet wide apart and centering of balance low. With a low growl, he
rushed at Steve again, but this time, instead of engaging with Steve’s imaginary spear, he tossed
the shield like a discuss, hurling it at Steve without much force but hoping the element of surprise
would give him the advantage.

To Tony’s amazement, which he barely had time to register, instead of dodging the giant piece of
metal coming at his head, like any sane, normal person, Steve made a one-handed grab of the
shield in mid-air, spun with it in his hand and brought it back up in a smooth, effortless motion to
block Tony’s assault. Tony skidded to a near-comical halt, attempting to avoid the shield now held
in front of Steve like a metal wall. Steve was already lowering it to avoid Tony running full tilt
into it, a long arm darting out to grab Tony before he plummeted backwards. Tony’s momentum
was already too much though, his feet flying out from under him as he dropped instinctively to
avoid running directly into the shield. Steve wrapped a hand around Tony’s upper arm, but it
wasn’t enough to stop Tony’s descent, and instead, Steve stumbled forward, lurching off balance
with Tony’s weight. His feet tangled with Tony’s as Steve tried desperately to avoid bashing
Tony’s skull in with the shield. Tony landed hard on his back, the breath momentarily knocked
from his body as Steve fell none too gracefully on top of him, the shield slamming into the ground,
forming a deep grove a few inches from Tony’s head.

“Tony, gods, are you—are you okay?” Steve shouted down at him, letting go of the shield so it
fell harmlessly to the ground near Tony’s head with a thud, one hand braced on the dirt while the
other ran over Tony’s head, threading through his hair and around his skull, checking for any signs
of injury. “I didn’t mean…why the hell did you do that?” Steve demanded. “You could’ve gotten
yourself killed, you—gods, you idiot! I can’t believe you—“

When Tony finally caught his breath, it came in pants, shock and wonder warring in his mind, and
somehow, those ended up coming out in the form of a burst of laughter. Once he started, he
couldn’t stop himself, huge gusts of laughter shaking his body as Steve glared down at him.

“You’re laughing. This is funny to you. You—I don’t even—gods, you’re just so—“ Steve
stuttered, as Tony watched the play of emotions over his face. He’d scared him, Tony knew. All
fun and games until someone loses a head. Tony supposed, the thought producing another round of
laughter that he couldn’t contain, much to Steve’s utter annoyance, which just spurred Tony’s mirth
even further. This fit of laughter was probably the culmination of a lot of things, a release of some
tension he hadn’t realized had been building. He laughed until tears streamed down his cheeks,
and each time he tried to stop himself, one look at Steve’s disapproving face was all it took to set
him off again.

Later he wouldn’t know what exactly possessed him, except Steve was sitting on top of him, knees
splayed around his torso, looking so damnably, adorably vexed at Tony’s fit, that little furrow Tony
liked deepening between his brows, so Tony, never having much in the way of impulse control, did
the first thing that came to his mind. He reached up both hands, snaking them under Steve’s shirt,
and tickled him, just over his ribs, where they arched around his chest. Steve’s whole body
immediately curled up in on itself, instinctively trying to dodge Tony’s wandering hands, but he
was laughing and squirming, his face a rictus of mirth and astonishment.

Steve grabbed for Tony’s wrists, but Tony twisted them away, skating his hands across Steve’s torso and up his chest again. Tony took advantage, of course he did, bucking his hips and shifting his weight to throw Steve off balance, sending him tumbling to the side, whether due to Tony’s efforts or purely from surprise, Tony didn’t know. Tony rolled on top of him and planting a knee on either side of Steve’s chest. Steve finally managed to get his hands around Tony’s wrists, holding them away from his body while he tried to stop laughing and regain some control of a situation that had suddenly gotten away from him in spectacular fashion.

Tony cackled triumphantly above him. “Looks like I win this one, Cap,” Tony announced, a huge grin straining his face, struggling to disentangle himself from Steve’s hands. Steve lunged up, startling Tony and splaying Tony’s hands wide. Steve drew in a shuddering breath to begin what Tony was sure would be a righteous scolding about appropriate battle tactics. Tony didn’t really think about what he did next, just leaned forward and pressed his mouth to Steve’s, stealing the words from Steve’s lips as Tony swiped his tongue along Steve’s mouth, dipping inside just enough to taste the soft, wet heat of him, and gods it was so good, he wanted to do this forever and this was never going to be enough. Maybe he would have stopped there, maybe not, but Steve’s mouth opened beneath his, softening just enough to be permission, the hands holding Tony’s wrists slackening, but not releasing, and suddenly Tony was moving his mouth across Steve’s, his tongue pushing past lips and teeth to writhe with Steve’s own, plunging deep to taste and tease.

Tony rocked his body forward, leaning in and tilting his head for better access, shifting his weight to flatten his chest across Steve’s, pressing their bodies together. Tony’s arms had gone slack, and somehow Steve’s hands had moved from his wrists up his arms, grabbing at his shoulders as if he didn’t know what to do with his hands now. Tony braced one hand on the ground and let the other trace the line of Steve’s arm before dropping between them and following his earlier trail up Steve’s abdomen and across his chest, but this time with gentle, teasing brushes of fingertips over planes of hard muscle.

He felt Steve’s stomach clench as he ghosted his hand over Steve’s navel, before splaying his hand wide around the side of Steve’s chest, letting his thumb swipe over Steve’s nipple as he did. Steve’s whole body shuddered beneath him, and he tore his mouth from Tony’s with a trembling, hissing release of air around the most arousing groan Tony had ever heard. Tony let his hand fall to the side, grinding it in the dirt next to Steve to keep himself from grabbing Steve and continuing what they were almost starting.

He hovered over Steve, staring down at him, shirt hitched up, lips swollen and red, glistening with the evidence of Tony’s mouth on his, cheeks flushed high with color, his eyes wide and the deepest blue of the sea before a storm, arms still gripping Tony’s shoulders for some kind of purchase. Steve was sweaty, dirty and looked utterly debauched. He was the most beautiful thing Tony had ever seen. But it wasn’t how he looked at Tony, trusting and open and so very, very unguarded. Like Tony was someone he would vouch for. Like Tony was remarkable.

Tony blinked and sat up abruptly. He scrubbed his hand through his hair and down his face, feeling the prickle of the days’ old growth of beard he now wore. He was so hard, he ached, and if Steve so much as touched him, he was probably going to come right then and there, like some unpolished schoolboy, because Steve was looking at him for gods’ sake. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t do this to Steve, not like this, with such a lie as this sitting between them. He wasn’t sure when Steve wanting him, the real him, had become more important than him wanting Steve, but there it was.
He wanted Steve in his bed, true, he wasn’t an eunuch, but fuck, if he didn’t want Steve in his life as well, and when the hell had that even happened? His mind flashed to being handed hard biscuits given over without complaint, Steve shaking as he tried to breathe, dripping and bloody, Steve cutting Tony’s bonds and handing him temporary salvation in a bag of salt crystals, a bedraggled bush earning riots of laughter, a small pile of blueberries and long miles of conversation on a path chosen solely because Steve had believed him, believed in him, enough to go against everything he thought he knew. If he did this, as much as he wanted it…if he let himself have this, pressed his advantage here and now, he’d risk ever having that for real. And he wanted it. Wanted this to be something real with a depth of desperation he hadn’t known he possessed.

He needed to stop this before it went any further. But if Steve kept looking at him like that, he was going to give in, he knew it. He wasn’t that strong, not even close, and he wanted this so very, very much. He could do it, he knew. He had many areas where his shortcomings were glaring, but this was hardly one of them, and Steve was wonderfully, fantastically inexperienced. He could kiss him senseless, touch and taste and overwhelm him with how good it could be. He would end up having Steve here, beneath the trees and the gods, and Steve would never forgive him for doing that while lying to him so thoroughly, but damned if Tony was strong enough to stop himself when Steve was offering so much without any expectation of anything in return. Steve was going to have to be strong for both of them, even if it broke Tony to put him in that position.

Tony pushed himself back, balancing his weight on his knees so he wasn’t actually sitting on top of Steve, which might be slightly embarrassing for at least one of them at this point. “Guess I have two ways of winning,” Tony said huskily, absurdly pleased by the way Steve’s body leaned ever so slightly towards him, as if Tony’s voice pulled him closer before the words fully registered. He saw the moment they did, the split second of time plastered in his memory when Steve realized what Tony had said before Steve’s whole expression shuttered like a portcullis closing. It felt nothing like winning when Steve used the hands still clutching Tony’s shoulders to push him back, spilling Tony off of Steve’s stomach in a tangle of limbs. Steve stood up in a swift motion, grabbed his shield from the ground where it had come to rest near where Tony’s head had landed and walked over to brace one hand against the tree where his sword leaned, staring up at the evening sky. Tony took the opportunity presented by Steve’s momentary distraction to reach down and pinch the head of his cock sharply, closing his eyes against the painful sensation, but at least he wasn’t going to come in his pants and have a rather awkward bit of explaining to do.

When he looked back at Tony, Steve’s eyes were blank and face expressionless, all traces of what had happened a moment before seemed washed away, save for the slight touch of color high on his cheeks. Tony wanted to claw the words he’d said back, take away whatever it was Steve thought he’d meant by them, go back to being the person Steve looked at like he had before.

But more than that, Tony wanted to be that person that Steve could look at like that and have it be real. He needed it to be real. He opened his mouth, to say what, he wasn’t sure, but closed it in confusion when Steve suddenly wound his scabbard belt around his forearm and made a soft, low-pitched whistle. To Tony’s astonishment, a large bird of prey dropped from one of the nearby trees and landed on Steve’s arm, giant talons curling around the leather of the belt that Steve had wrapped around his arm. Steve reached up to stroke the bird’s head, running gentle fingers down the trail of feathers to the bird’s tail. Tony forced himself to shut his mouth before gods knew what tried to fly in it.

“Now you charm birds from the trees?” Tony asked incredulously. Steve was still stroking the bird, which made a harsh ‘kak, kak’ noise in response, though didn’t attempt to fly off, so Tony assumed it must be pleased with the situation.

“Tony, meet Redwing,” Steve said in a soft voice, ceasing his petting to take the jesses Tony now
noticed hanging from the bird’s feet and wrap them around the fingers of his hand holding the bird. A trained bird, then. A messenger. And one known to Steve, one which managed to find him where most maps ended with drawings of mountains with many faces holding nothing but the promise of death.

Well, this day just kept getting more and more interesting didn’t it?

“I’m not saying hello to a bird,” Tony mumbled as the falcon cocked its head and eyed him rather suspiciously. Steve shot him a disgruntled look and continued stroking the bird. Tony was not going to be jealous of a bird. He was not.

Tony watched Steve undo the small cylinder from the bird’s foot and pocket it without taking whatever scroll was inside out to attempt to read. Steve gave Tony his sword and hoisted his shield in his other hand, signaling the abrupt end to whatever it was they had been doing, much to Tony’s relief. He needed to get away from Steve before he prostrated himself in apology, the image of which just brought up other things he could do on his knees, which was not at all helpful. Steve nodded towards his sword, indicating Tony should carry it, and started off back towards the camp without another word. Tony forced his limbs to move, standing up and walking over to grab the sword where it leaned against the tree. He turned to watch Steve’s retreating back for a long moment, his mind still reeling from the realization of exactly how deeply he was in this with Steve. With a sigh, he hefted the sword and started down the path after Steve, keeping his head down and ignoring the pang in his heart at Steve’s silence.

They retraced their steps back to camp, arriving to find a large fire burning, part of the deer spitted over it while Clint and Thor held long sticks with skinned hares roasting over the flames. It smelled better than any feast Tony had ever attended. He felt his stomach contract at the mere thought of it. Since his captivity with the Ten Rings, he’d gotten so used to being constantly hungry, it didn’t register as such anymore, at least not until faced with the prospect of honest to gods food. He couldn’t help but think about Steve and his matter of fact admission of how scarce meals had been as he grew up, his mother stretching what they had to last as long as possible. Tony remembered piles of uneaten food inevitably left over after parties or banquets. He didn’t think he’d ever been able to look at a feast again without thinking about a sack of potatoes and felt his stomach curdle a bit at the thought. He’d spent a good bit of time the last few months cursing the unfairness of his life, which seemed the height of oblivious self-absorption, considering.

“That Redwing?” Clint asked in astonishment as they walked up to camp, the bird perched haughtily on Steve’s crooked arm. “Holy shit. I swear Wilson has this damn bird magicked somehow. How the hell did it find us out here?”

“Looks like he’s been out for awhile,” Steve said, putting his shield down next to his pack a few paces from the fire. “Bruce, can you cut up some of that hare? He keeps pecking at me for food. Sam knew where we were before we came across Tony. He must have heard we’re late reporting back. When we didn’t show up back at Pierce’s camp on schedule, he must’ve sent Redwing looking for us. He probably figured we were heading for Fury instead, tried the usual routes first and then sent him further afield when he couldn’t find us. Suppose it’s important,” Steve said as he took the metal cylinder he had pulled off the bird out of his pocket and handed it to Bruce.

Bruce removed the tiny cap and upended it, dumping a small roll of paper onto the palm of his hand. He unrolled it gently and studied it for a moment before giving a quick glance to Tony and then looking back up at Steve. Steve nodded his assent, and Tony felt absurdly grateful that, whatever Steve thought about what Tony had said, he wasn’t angry enough to shut him out completely.
“Says Pierce wants Nat and Clint back at his camp. Now. Sounds pretty antsy about it, too. Reading between the lines, I’d say Pierce is a bit pissed we’re so late reporting in,” Bruce said, looking up at Steve with raised eyebrows.

“See? Dammit, Steve, I told you what would—“ Barnes began.

“I heard you the first time, Bucky. Pierce isn’t going anywhere. He might not be happy right now, but he’ll wait. I’m not even…” Steve trailed off. “We’re going to Fury. I’ll deal with Pierce.” A stilted silence settled over the camp, everyone who wasn’t Barnes or Steve trying to look busy while the two of them stared at each other, until Barnes finally looked away with a twisted mockery of a smile.

“So fucking stubborn, Rogers,” Barnes muttered lowly, shaking his head. “I’ll be on watch,” he said belligerently, annoyance dripping from his voice. He stood up and ripped his spear out of the ground next to him where he’d impaled, glaring back and forth between Tony and Steve.

“It was my intention to—“ Thor started.

“I said I’ll be on watch,” Barnes bit out, giving Steve a long stare, daring him to argue. When Steve remained silent, Barnes stalked off without another word, disappearing into the shadows which fell from the cliffs that bracketed the Pass. Steve took a small step in the direction Barnes had taken before stopping himself short.

“Let him be, Steve,” Natasha warned. “He’ll come around. Or he won’t. You know he’s just worried about all this. Hell, I’d have argued louder if it weren’t for what we found. Pierce’ll be pissed, but he’ll forget about it once he knows,” she shrugged. Tony wanted to bang his head against one of the nearby rocks. What the hell was it they were all skirting around so carefully? They’d found something out there in the mountains or somewhere thereabouts, around the area where they had found Tony, but he had no idea what it could possibly be that Natasha thought it would assuage Pierce’s anger over their delay.

There was nothing out there, which had been exactly the reason Tony chose the location for his little demonstration all those months ago. The Ten Rings and a few nomadic groups roamed the mountains, enough reason to stay well away from that whole area. Beyond that…well, if you went far enough, he supposed, you’d run into the Riverlands on the other side, then the water and the high, sheer rock cliffs that hugged the sea, eventually giving way to the lowlands and river basin that surrounded Kingstown. But that was leagues away and impassable anyway, except by ship, and the city was entirely too well fortified for any kind of naval assault to be successful, even if Pierce conjured the ships for it. The point was, there was nothing there. Certainly nothing of tactical value to Pierce.

Except that there was, because Steve was a terrible liar. This wasn’t some elaborate ruse to mislead him, Tony was certain. Yet another reason he had to get to Fury before the team reported to Pierce.

“Wonder what he wants with Nat and Clint?” Bruce mused uncomfortably.

Steve ran a light hand down Redwing’s feathers, letting out a long breath of air. “Not our place to know,” Steve replied, voice carefully even. “You’ll have to double back. It’ll be a more direct route to Pierce if you cut through Lady Everhart’s lands instead of following us through the Pass. She’s probably still in Kingstown, anyway, and her men never patrol beyond the tavern in the village,” Steve said, addressing Natasha and Clint.

Tony wanted to laugh at that, recalling the very, uh, aggressive Lady Everhart, who had once held
out hope of rising above the title of Lady. She did end up above her station, but not quite the way she’d imagined, Tony remembered, running a finger across his bottom lip at the memory. He almost wished he could’ve been there when Pepper escorted her out of his rooms in the Tower. Might have been worth breaking his policy of not spending the night with anyone, the way those two crossed exceedingly polite verbal swords at the next party.

“Damn. I don’t like splitting us up like this, but there’s nothing to be done about it. Wait until tomorrow. Start out at first light,” Steve finished, jerking Tony’s attention back to the matter at hand.

“It’s probably just some recon crap, like usual,” Barton suggested, turning his hare over the flame to char the other side.

“Probably,” Steve echoed in a way that made it clear he didn’t actually think it was that simple at all. “Don’t…don’t say anything just yet. To Pierce. Wait until I get there.”

“’Course, Cap. Wouldn’t want to, anyway. Not exactly my area. Pierce would probably just think I’d been drinking. Not totally without cause, mind you,” Barton admitted. “Look, no one’s as good as Nat at recon, you know that. He’s just got some mission, and wants the best,” Barton said, puffing out his chest a bit.

“But he asked for you, too…” Natasha said, tapping a long finger at the corner of her mouth, her expression one of exaggerated bemusement. That seemed enough to lighten the mood, at least for the time being. Bruce handed Steve a handful of rabbit meat on a square of leather, which Steve placed on top of a large, flat rock and unwound the bird’s jesses. Redwing hopped off Steve’s arm and flew over to devour the meat in short order. Steve unwound the belt from his arm and walked over to Tony, taking the sword Tony had been holding with the blade pointed to the ground and sheathed it carefully in its scabbard again.

“Thanks,” Steve said, glancing quickly at Tony before looking away. He was rubbing absently at the marks on his arm where the bird had gripped, and Tony resisted the urge to reach out and brush a hand over the same reddened skin. Instead, he settled next to Bruce by the fire, reaching his hands out to enjoy the heat.

“How was this evening’s match, Captain? Has our new friend managed to best you as yet?” Thor inquired. Tony’s gaze snapped immediately to Steve, who flushed a lovely shade of red. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Natasha raise a delicate eyebrow speculatively.

“I believe he did,” Steve replied, eyes locking with Tony’s for a moment before looking away again. Damn. Damn it all, this was what being noble got you.

“Well done, Man of Iron!” Thor called, bobbing his head approvingly. “We shall make an Avenger of you, yet!”

“Not sure I’m Avenger material, Thor, but thanks for the thought,” Tony replied amiably enough, though something about Thor’s casual words bothered him. Obviously, he didn’t want to be an Avenger. Went without saying, really. He was the King and they were…they were…well. He couldn’t really say the enemy. Not anymore. Certainly misguided, though hardly deserving of the demonization his generals had wanted to assign them. True, he wanted them to understand that he wasn’t as terrible as the caricature Pierce and Stane had created. He wanted them to realize they were wrong, and hoped they would eventually see that their skills could serve the Realm far better working under his banner. Yes, he did entertain the thought, upon occasion, that perhaps after the war was over, they would see him differently, maybe even consider him in a positive light. Steve…well, Steve he had definite ideas about, but Barnes aside, he wouldn’t mind actually
spending more time with the rest of the team as well. Even Barton had grown on him.

Once they had sworn fealty to him, they were welcome at the Castle. He might be able to offer some minor assistance with various missions, if they did choose to continue to serve. Even without Pierce, there were always any number of threats to the Realm that wouldn’t just end with the war. He had some ideas for a new bow for Barton that he wouldn’t mind actually seeing put to use. With his new explosive mixture, he might even be able to construct projectiles small enough to add to the tips of the arrows, give Natasha a few small orbs she could throw with the kind of deadly accuracy she usually reserved for her daggers, that kind of thing.

When he hadn’t been able to talk to Steve during their walk to the Pass, he and Bruce had discussed some ideas for improvements in armor that might allow the team more protection from deadly blows and give them added maneuverability at the same time. Might be able to help out here and there with various armaments, should such be called for. The team might feel awkward with all that, coming from Pierce’s side to his so soon after the war, so would likely not be comfortable in the barracks. He had plenty of unused space in the Tower, though. No reason they couldn’t stay there until something more permanent could be arranged, though he could only imagine the objections that arrangement would produce. Not that anyone would gainsay him openly. Being the King had some privileges. Steve would probably like having them close by, anyway, and that thought sent a warm rush of heat pooling beneath his stomach having nothing to do with the fire in front of him. And there was the rest of that wonderful metal. After seeing Steve’s prowess with that shitty piece of steel Pierce had outfitted him with, Tony was anxious to see what he could do with something far superior. It could work. Tony only really needed a small piece of it for himself, and had kept the damn thing around for years without putting it to use. So, there were some things he could do, some ways he could improve things for the team, and certainly, working closer with them, he was sure to find other ways he could be of use. They would be protecting the Realm, after all, surely a far better use of his resources than creating the means to destroy parts of it. Who was to say what he might be able to create, given the right circumstances.

But, it wasn’t like he wanted to be an Avenger.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are like gifts from the gods.

So, I don't think I'm quite to the half way point with this...I'm not sure if that makes people more interested or less, but there you go. I do finish what I start, as you can tell from my other works. I'm anal and Type A like that. Plus, I'm just really enjoying this one. It's totally different, but fun to write. As always, thank you so much for reading!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Bruce, will you write out a response for Sam? Tell him to let Pierce know Nat and Clint are on their way. They’re probably three days out from his camp, at the most,” Steve asked. “Tell him we’re heading for Fury.”

“Want me to—“ Bruce began.

“No,” Steve answered quickly. “Not yet. We’ll have to, but…not yet.” Natasha and Barton exchanged a significant look, but neither gave voice to whatever they were thinking. Want me to tell him about Tony, Tony’s mind filled in. Steve didn’t want Pierce to know about him yet, which was…gratifying…and oddly humbling, the amount of faith Steve was putting in him. It made the lie sitting between them sting all the more though.

Tony didn’t deserve the amount of trust Steve gave him so readily, but he could not turn it aside, not when so much depended on Tony reaching Fury and convincing him that his faith in Pierce and mistrust of Tony were misplaced. He couldn’t tell the team the truth, he knew, even though the lie ate at him more and more each day. There was just too much at stake for him to gamble the fate of the Realm. He had no idea how the team would even react. Barnes barely tolerated him, and Natasha and Clint were hardly what he’d call warm to him, though they didn’t seem to actively despise him any longer. Even Steve…Steve, who held whatever grievance he had with the King close to his chest…he couldn’t be sure how that knowledge of Tony’s identity would change things. He could feel obligated to turn a prisoner of that magnitude over to Pierce, promise be damned, though even as the thought ran through his mind, he realized he didn’t quite credit it.

He had to get to Fury before Stane did more damage, it was as simple as that. And then put an end to Pierce’s rebellion once and for all. Sue for peace or get Fury to negotiate on his behalf…something. It galled him to even consider granting Pierce any concessions, but if it ended this war, he was ready to at least consider it. Steve respected the man, so maybe there was something there that Tony wasn’t seeing. If Steve could be so wrong about Tony, Tony at least had to admit to the possibility he had misjudged Pierce.

There was just so much that depended on him being able to convince Fury that his complaints about Tony’s rule were better placed at the feet of Stane. The Realm. His people. He just hoped Fury would listen. Believe him or believe him enough to start questioning things, at the least. He had to. Fury had been Pierce’s friend for years, Tony knew, and convincing him was hardly a given, but Fury also had a reputation for not trusting anyone, even those he called friends. And he had been loyal to Tony’s father at one time, though the relationship had soured over time, like most of Howard’s friendships. That shared history alone should earn Tony Fury’s attention, if not his confidence. And Steve? Steve would be there, next to him, vouching for him...he honestly couldn’t say if he was afraid of what that moment might bring or hungry for it. Maybe a bit of both.

Bruce turned the tiny bit of paper over in his hand and dug in his pack, pulling out a thin piece of wood charcoal, which he held in the flames until the end turned black. He scrawled something out on the small scroll, blowing the mist of black dust off when he finished. He rolled it up again and placed it back in the tube, which he handed to Steve. The bird cawed at Steve, almost as if it saw the cylinder and understood what task it meant, but Steve shook his head and stowed the message container in his pack for the time being. “Rest, Redwing. We’ll get you back to Sam soon
enough,” Steve told the bird, who just cocked his head at Steve and then took off into night. Steve seemed unconcerned that the creature would return, and Tony decided to have an in-depth conversation with his own Falconer when he got back to the Castle. He had never had much interest in the sport, but that bird was uncannily observant.

“Think dinner is about ready,” Bruce said. “There’s plenty for everyone,” Bruce observed mildly, which Tony took to be aimed at making sure Steve ate something more substantial than those stone-biscuits. Bruce cut a hunk of deer meat off the spit he’d erected over the fire, while Barton and Thor removed their rabbits from the flames, Clint poking lightly at his blackened hare. Bruce cut the meat into chunks with efficient strokes of his knife, handing it out to each of them in turn. He passed extra to Thor on a soft, leather square, presumably to take to Barnes when Thor relieved him from watch duty. Tony felt his stomach churn with anticipation, his mouth watering at the thought of the sizzling meat. They were all too hungry for much conversation while making quick work of the hearty meal. Tony held up his piece of deer meat and motioned to Thor, who promptly handed him the cooked rabbit and took Tony’s proffered chunks of deer meat. For reasons he didn’t want to examine too closely, Tony didn’t particularly want to eat the deer.

Dinner passed in relative silence, and beds were quickly cobbled together by digging a bit in the dirt to soften the earth and remove rocks.

Bruce kept the fire burning lowly as they all took what comfort they could on the hard ground. The team seemed to find their way to slumber without any trouble, the weariness of the day finding welcome respite on a quiet night, the cool mountain air deepening their sleep.

Sleep refused to come to Tony though, the events of the evening playing over and over again in his head. He rolled onto his side, watching across the fire where Steve was already fast asleep, with one hand on his sword, chest rising and falling in soft, deep breaths, eyelids twitching lightly. Tony wondered what he dreamed of, if his dreams were battles much like Tony’s own, filled with his own demons and horrors, and how exactly Tony fit into them.

Sleep had not been a refuge these long months since his captivity, fears that were kept at bay during the light of day rushing in once darkness took hold. Sometimes it was a pain in his chest, bursting open, a hole to the world, his life seeping out of him while he tried desperately to keep the red tide inside. Sometimes it was the water, being held under by his captors after refusing to do as they had demanded, and his dream would be nothing more than the bottom of a bucket with muted sounds filling his ears.

When he finally did sleep, it wasn’t the rush of the water that filled his mouth or the clenching of his chest as he searched for air that woke him. It was Steve’s face beneath him in the water, eyes wide and black as coal, mouth open in a silent scream. He came to wakefulness with a sobbing gasp, chest heaving with the effort to draw in gulps of air, and immediately looked to where Steve lay, undisturbed, a dark form in the pale moonlight, curled around his sword in a bed of dirt and rock.

Tony lay there quietly, curled up on his side, letting his breathing return to normal and heart quit its stuttering rhythm. Sometime later, he heard Thor get up, stretching out the kinks as he did, and watched through hooded eyes as he gathered his hammer and the bit of food tied in the small piece of leather for Barnes. Steve sat up as Thor passed by him, and the large man bent low to say something to Steve that Tony couldn’t hear. Steve nodded and watched Thor walk off into the night, gave a quick glance across the fire, eyes lighting on Tony for fraction of a second before skipping over to where Barnes’ pack sat in the dirt, then on to Natasha’s sleeping form, curled up catlike next to the fire, Bruce, passed out on his back with an arm thrown over his face, then Barton, wrapped around his bow, before laying back down and closing his eyes, a soldier’s ability
to fall asleep in an instant on full display. Tony told himself not to dwell on it, the way Steve’s eyes had searched for him first, but he couldn’t deny the rush of warmth that suffused him at Steve’s attention, turning his limbs languid and pliant, all over the gaze of one man, which made no sense, he knew, yet held the inescapable truth that he mattered. He mattered to Steve, and somehow that meant more than any accolade or honor he had ever received.

Tony rolled over onto his back, staring up at the blanket of stars above, picking out the constellations from memory, tracing over the outlines of the familiar visages. Maghouin, the she-bear who birthed the seas. Dauv, the Ox who pulls the moon. Neidr, the snake who circles the world. And Laoch, the warrior, sword blade pointed to the heavens. One of the holy men who had tutored him as a boy once told him people used to believe the warrior had been placed in the stars to tell mere mortals that wars were the province of the gods only, who fought with floods and moved the earth with shudders strong enough to rip apart the world. Well. He was certainly showing them, wasn’t he? How many dead in this war? How many more before it was over? All to decide who got the privilege of rule, as if that amounted to anything.

Giving up on sleep for the time being, Tony rose to his feet and walked down the trail towards the start of the Pass, careful not to stray too far from the fire’s grim, flickering light. He sagged heavily against the large boulder where Steve had rested earlier that day, when Tony and the rest of the team arrived. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do about Steve, couldn’t pull his mind away from the way Steve’s mouth had felt, opening beneath Tony’s so freely, the warm, heady feel of how Steve had looked at Tony, full of trust and want and hope. No one had ever looked at Tony like that. Not even close. Everyone always saw him for what he was, not what he could be. Everyone except Steve, who saw something in Tony that Tony desperately wanted find in himself, however impossible it seemed. He could almost believe it, just because Steve so clearly did. It was almost enough, Steve’s faith. He could be that person, and if he could, maybe he could actually have this, for real, in the ways that truly mattered. Not Steve beneath him, but Steve beside him.

Tony looked down and scuffed his boot through the dirt, scraping out lines in the sand. It was so close, everything he wanted. If he could just get Fury to believe him…get Steve to believe him…the rest of the team would listen to Steve, he was sure of it. They could go back to the Castle, figure out some way to stop Pierce. Hell, who knew how much easier this whole thing might be if he had people like this on his side? He looked back over at Steve, dozing by the fire, battered shield and worn sword clutched protectively to him against the night.

“I see the way you look at him, you know,” Barnes’ low voice came out of the shadows behind him. Tony spun around, his eyes trying to adjust to the deep blackness filling the Pass. He finally caught a gleam of moonlight off metal several paces away, leaning against the side of the rock wall that jutted up, forming the first layer of the ragged mountains that stretched to the sky.

“Do you?” Tony asked with false curiosity. Making more of an enemy of Barnes than he had already was the last thing he needed. However that ended up, it was not going to go well for whatever it was he wanted with Steve. He wondered when it had come to pass that how Steve would want him to act was such a touchstone for his own behavior, but decided not to question it for now.

“That night, right after we found you. When he asked you about the blanket?” Barnes continued, pushing himself off the wall and walking slowly over to where Tony leaned on the boulder. Tony was abruptly conscious of the his chest wound, in a way he usually wasn’t, like it pressed harder, had weight, and he wanted nothing more than to return to his spot across from Steve and watch the rise and fall of his chest until Tony managed to fall asleep to the rhythm of it, but he was not going to back away from Barnes, not on this. He searched his mind for what Barnes was talking about,
“He asked you what blankets would get in the way of,” Barnes reminded him, shaking his head at the memory, a brittle laugh cutting off any reply Tony might have offered. “And you? Hell, I’ve seen starving men look at banquets with less interest.” Tony remembered Steve’s confused question, and what exactly Tony had been busy insinuating at the time. It was not something Tony cared to remember. His fantasies, how he would exact his revenge for the slight of taking him prisoner, had sustained him at first, when freedom had been snatched away by fate, a way to cope with his lot when it seemed he was destined for ignominy, but now…now, he could hardly bear to think of what he had considered his due at the time. Barnes’ judgment wasn’t exactly misplaced. He had to remind himself that Barnes, for all his less than fine qualities, was Steve’s best friend. Whatever poor influence he might be, he cared about Steve, even Tony could see that.

“You have this idea, about how things can be, when all this is over. I see it. Hell, I get it,” Barnes scoffed, pointing one end of his longspear in the dirt with a sharp slash. “He’s…he’s Steve. And you’re…what you are,” Barnes said, looking him up and down derisively. “Of course, you want him. How could you not?”

“And if I do?” Tony challenged, voice low and even. Friend of Steve’s or no, he was not going to be pushed around by Barnes, not about this, not when it came to Steve.

“It will never happen,” Barnes told him, and it was the absolute certainty in his voice that cut through Tony’s more rational thoughts. He felt his heartbeat quicken, suddenly thundering in his ears as rage swept through him, his entire body coiling and tightening, ready for a fight. Tony took a deep breath to try to calm himself, though it was mostly wasted effort. Seriously, Asgard, wherever the fuck that was, was not far away enough for this asshole, he seethed silently.

“Guess we’ll find out.” Tony bit out through clenched teeth. Barnes, the prick, just dipped his head, shaking it back and forth again, and was actually grinning, smiling a wide, knowing smirk back at Tony. He wanted to hit him, he really, really did, but it wasn’t Barnes’ smile that stammered his heart out of rhythm, it was the utter lack of doubt in his voice, the confidence and certainty that Tony lacked in all of this, particularly where it concerned Steve.

“See, you think it’ll all just be okay when the war is over. That you can go back to making your bombs or whatever it is you do, and set Steve up painting fruit bowls or whatever. You get him, and you get your life,” Barnes jeered. “That’s not how this works. That’s not how he works. He isn’t going to go back to Kingstown with you. He isn’t going to turn his back on his duty. He isn’t going to serve Stark, no matter what you fill his head with about Pierce, and yes, I know what you’ve been busy doing. You’re just making it harder on him to do what has to be done, you know that, right? But no matter what you do, no matter how much you talk, Stark will never, ever be Steve’s king.”

“You’re so sure of that, aren’t you? You have to be. It has to be true because if you’re wrong about him, if you’re wrong, and Steve does listen to me, then what does that say about you?” Tony pressed, watching Barnes flinch with deep satisfaction. “About what your life has become? Some bitter, twisted wreck of a man who follows Steve around making sure his best friend is as fucking miserable as he is, that’s what,” Tony accused harshly, keeping his gaze level on Barnes as the other man’s eyes widened and jaw tensed with fury, his good hand tightening spasmodically around the shaft of the spear. “I won’t let you keep him down here with you, not when he could be so much more.”

“The fuck do you know about being more? You follow that bastard king of yours, make him fancy weapons to kill his own people, little more than a merchant of death. At least Pierce is trying to do
something, trying to make this shithole of a Realm mean something again,” Barnes said, advancing towards Tony with slow, measured steps until they were inches apart. “You think you know what’s best for Steve? You think you know him? You don’t shit about Steve.” Barnes seemed to deflate before Tony’s eyes, a haunting sadness masking his features as the anger suddenly departed. “I know him. I do. Not you.”

“If you were really as sure about him as you claim, you wouldn’t be out here, skulking around in the middle of the night, telling me what he will and won’t do. We both know you’re not trying to spare my feelings here. You’re so afraid he will actually listen to me, you can’t think straight,” Tony pushed, watching the other man founder, a ship suddenly unmoored against the tide. “You don’t hate me because I’m loyal to the King, Barnes. You hate me because Steve could be again, and then where would that leave you? You hate me because I would give him another path, and you’re scared shitless that leads away from you, because this…this anger you carry, it’s all you have. And if Steve changes his mind, you’d be left with a choice between holding onto your hatred or holding onto Steve. You couldn’t have both, and that absolutely terrifies you.” He should have stopped, he knew it, a part of him even wanted to, but the words were spilling from his mouth, pent up anger and frustrated vitriol pouring forth. Barnes was shaking, vibrating with unbridled fury, and Tony was sure he was about to find out just how good the other man was with that spear. He instinctively shifted his feet apart, bending at the knees slightly, his body readying for an attack that seemed sure to come as Barnes’ hand tightened around the shaft.

“Everything okay out here,” Bruce’s voice called uncertainly from behind where he and Barnes stood nose to nose.

“Fine,” Tony said after a protracted pause, his eyes never leaving Barnes. “Just getting some night air.”

“Uh-huh. Well, if you don’t stop with your midnight stroll, I’ll have to wake Steve and tell him you two were out here…strolling,” Bruce said with a hard edge to his voice. “James, you, too.”

Barnes eyed Bruce warily for a moment, jerked his spear up and stalked off. Tony shifted to watch Barnes go, noting Bruce’s disapproving look that tracked him. Damn. This night had gone spectacularly poorly. Barnes slowed to a halt as he reached Bruce’s shoulder, turned his head to look back at Tony.

“I know which one I’d choose, if I had to. The Captain? I could find someone else to serve under. Steve? I’d follow him anywhere. But it’s you who’ll have to make a choice, Tony,” Barnes said softly, looking at some point in the mountains rearing up behind Tony’s back. “Steve or Stark. You can’t have both.” Bruce raised an eyebrow at the exchange, but said nothing.

“That isn’t a choice I can make,” Tony ground out in frustrated annoyance.

“Then you’ve already lost him,” Barnes said, and to Tony’s surprise, it was almost regretful. Barnes cast a quick look to Bruce and then gave a sharp nod and walked back to where his pack sat in the dirt near Steve, placing his spear down next to him and unrolling his threadbare blanket as he rumpled his pack under him for a makeshift pillow. Bruce gave Tony a lingering look and then returned to his own spot, pointedly turning away from where Tony still stood as he lay down.

Tony sat back against the boulder, needing the support. His thoughts warred with each other, turned over everything he’d said to Steve, every indication he’d used to convince himself Steve was listening to him about Pierce, anything that could possibly be a chink in Steve’s loyalty to that traitorous blowhard, and found he still wasn’t sure what to think, except that Barnes had to be wrong. Steve would listen to reason. He had already listened to Tony’s plea to take him to Fury, at least believing that Tony believed what he was saying about Stane, even if not sure of the truth of
the accusations. Steve could be convinced. He would see how wrong he had been. And then…
then, once Steve accepted the truth about Pierce, once he realized he had deeply misjudged the
King, Tony would tell him the truth. Whatever Steve’s reason for joining Pierce, because of
something to do with Barnes or something else entirely, Tony could make it right, if Steve would
just give him a chance. He would fix it, whatever it was. That was what he did. He was good at
fixing things. And if it meant gaining Steve’s loyalty in recompense, there was very little he
wouldn’t do to have that, Barnes be damned.

He finally made his way over to his spot across the dwindling fire from Steve, tucking his arm
under his head and pulling a large pebble out from behind his hip. He thought about his huge, soft
bed back in the Castle. That led to other, far baser thoughts, so he forced himself to try to calm his
mind, but, of course, once he concentrated on trying to sleep, none would come. He sighed and
rolled to his side, watching Steve sleep, the shadows tossed by the fire dancing over his skin. He
watched the rise and fall of Steve’s chest as he breathed, and felt his own breath even out to match
Steve’s. He wasn’t sure when he fell asleep, but he woke up to the sun peeking over the horizon
and Bruce uncovering the meat from last night’s meal to make a quick breakfast before they started
out for the day. He rubbed his eyes and immediately looked over to where Steve had been
sleeping, but his place was empty.

“He’s escorting Nat and Clint back a ways. Left about half an hour ago,” Bruce explained in
answer to the question Tony didn’t need to voice. “James went with them. They’ll be back soon.
Steve wanted to get an early start on the Pass. Thor’s scouting it out for us. You should eat
something while you can. Long day ahead,” Bruce said, pulling one of the now dried strips of
salted deer meat from where he had hung it over the low air of the fire.

Tony’s stomach curdled a bit at the thought, but he took it anyway. He glanced around the camp,
taking stock. The bird was gone, too, Tony noticed, assuming Steve had taken it, and it’s message,
with him as well. He tore off a piece of the hard, cured meat, the salt making him thirsty. He
realized he had grown accustomed to Steve just handing over his water pouch when needed, but he
hated to rummage in the man’s pack without permission. Bruce seemed to have anticipated him,
and poured him a cup of his horse-piss tea, handing it to Tony with a slight, challenging grin.
Tony nodded his gratitude and drank deeply, no small amount of effort required not to spit the vile
concoction out. He was afraid to ask what Bruce used to make it.

“It’s better if you can make it with milk. Or some butter, if you can get it. But, I find tea
calming,” Bruce explained. “You may have noticed that we live something of a stressful life,”
Bruce mused lightly.

“You don’t say,” Tony added. “Well, to your health,” Tony offered, lifting his cup in salute and
draining down the pale green mixture. It was quiet without Natasha and Clint around, Tony
observed. Not that they talked overmuch, particularly Barton, but it seemed wrong somehow, the
camp emptier, the space wider, without the two of them. “You, uh…you think you would like it to
be…not as stressful? I mean, once everything is over. You mentioned maybe setting up some kind
of apothecary. Think you’d still work as a doctor or is it the potions that interest you?”

“Always liked helping people. I’m a good doctor. But…I’m better with putting things together.
Plants. Minerals. Figuring out how they work and how they can work together,” Bruce
acknowledged.

“No argument here,” Tony said, taking out the small bag of salt crystals to melt and mix with water
to form the solution Bruce had crafted for the issues the metal in his chest was causing. “You
would probably need some kind of laboratory. I imagine that kind of thing requires a lot of
experimentation. You don’t, uh…test those things on yourself, do you?”
Bruce shrugged. “Sometimes. Wouldn’t want to try some of it on someone else until I knew the side effects. Sometimes you can use animals. Rats and mice are good. Depends on what it is though. Guess I’ve always been fascinated by how something as simple as a leaf of a certain plant can have so many uses, depending on what you do with it. In a roundabout way, that’s how I met Steve and James,” Bruce said, in a way that Tony knew the words had not been at all casual, despite Bruce’s tone.

“Really? I assumed you’d just been…assigned…to the Avengers by Pierce or recruited or something,” Tony replied. Curiosity was eating at him, but he forced himself not to press. Bruce had obviously heard some of what had been exchanged between Tony and Barnes last night, and this opening was hardly happenstance.

Bruce shook his head. “No, no, nothing like that. I met them first. Before Steve went to Phillips, actually. Years ago, before there even was a rebellion. I was young and…stupid. I’d met a girl, fallen in love with her. Hard. They way only a young and stupid man can, I suppose. But, her father didn’t approve of the match. I’m lowborn and it isn’t like a doctor has much to offer. He wanted more for his only daughter. Refused to give his consent. I was angry. Very angry. Made something to try to calm myself down. It…had the opposite effect, as it turned out. It got…bad. I’ve never…I mean, I never meant for that to happen, but…I knew the risks. Or I should have. I just didn’t care, at least not then,” Bruce continued, face scrunching at the memory. Tony let him talk, afraid that interrupting would cut off whatever it was Bruce seemed inclined to share.

“Her father tried to have me arrested. Swore he’d see me rot in jail. I scared her. Could’ve really hurt her. Almost did, truth be told. Hell, I scared me. I—I wasn’t myself. Can’t deny it. It came from me. The potion just set it free. Did the only thing I thought I could do. I ran,” Bruce said, blinking rapidly against the tide of memory. “I made a horrible mistake, and I lost her. She couldn’t trust that I wouldn’t try something like that again if my temper got the best of me. I don’t blame her. Even then, I didn’t blame her. I couldn’t trust myself, after all. But it hurt. It hurt, and I was so angry. With myself, with her father, even with her, unfair as that was. I was angry with everything, to be honest, always had been. I think because of my dad. He—well, he had a lot of anger, too. Anyway, I didn’t know how to deal with it, so I didn’t. Just decided that if I couldn’t be with her, not much else mattered. Every doctor around was talking about what was happening in the Riverlands. Decided I would try to help.” Bruce continued, face scrunching at the memory. Tony let him talk, afraid that interrupting would cut off whatever it was Bruce seemed inclined to share.

Tony nodded, resisting the urge to prod Bruce along to how he met Steve. Something about the way Bruce’s dark eyes were watching him was unsettling, and he tried to roll Bruce’s words around in his head to find the meaning behind them that Bruce was trying to convey. “You were trying to help. That was…noble of you. And very brave,” Tony argued, finding that he meant every word.

“Brave? No. No, Tony, it wasn’t brave. It was probably the most cowardly thing I’ve done,” Bruce began, massaging his chin with his hand. “I was low, Tony. I wanted to die. Or, well, I didn’t care if I lived, let’s say. I wasn’t going there to help them. I was going there to help me. I didn’t care if they lived or died, not really. I cared about finding a way to ease my pain, and telling myself I was going there to try to find a cure was just an easier way to die. And then I met Steve and James. James was hurt, bad. His arm. Gods, it was awful,” Bruce said, running his hands up and down his arms at the memory.

“Suddenly, I’m on the side of the road, cutting some guy’s arm off, while some other guy is holding him down. Didn’t think James would make it, to be honest. I stayed with them for awhile,
to see. Think I was just waiting for the inevitable, to be honest. Maybe we all were. But...he got better. They had this letter from Doctor Erskine they couldn’t read,” Bruce recalled, shaking his head again and turning to take the rest of the dried meat off the strings he had carefully hung over the low fire.

“I don’t even know how it happened, really,” Bruce said, sounding somewhat abashed. “One minute, I was going to Brookland to get the plague and die ‘bravely and nobly,’ miserable and alone, and the next, I was fixing Steve’s feet so he could walk to Phillips, letter of introduction in hand. And then, it just seemed so easy to say yes when he asked me to come along, because sure, it just made sense that Phillips would probably need a doctor. Erskine had intended to go with Steve, after all. So—so, somehow I just ended up going along. Want of a better plan, I guess. Not to mention, have you ever tried to say no to Steve when he gets an idea in his head? Might as well refuse to let the sun set for all the good it’ll do you,” Bruce said with a small, fond smile.

“I—I went there, to Brookland, looking for an easy out, because I thought I’d lost the life I wanted. Ended up finding something that I didn’t know I was looking for. All I’m saying is... sometimes things look like an end, and they’re not. Things happen that you can’t control, can’t stop...but we make our own destiny. There’s always a choice, Tony. Always. You just have to be willing to make it. You could—” Bruce started, but whatever he would have said was cut off by Steve’s arrival.

“Nat and Clint are off. Hopefully, they’ll reach Pierce’s camp in a couple of days,” Steve informed them, striding back into camp with Barnes a few steps behind, looking grumpier than usual in Tony’s opinion. He had stopped trying to convince himself that the way his heart leapt into his throat was a purely physical reaction days ago, but he couldn’t deny the way his whole body seemed to tremor in response to Steve’s presence. “Redwing is on his way back to Sam. He should be able to let Fury know we’re only a few days out from his encampment. Thor still out?”

“Yeah, he shouldn’t be much longer though,” Bruce replied, starting to gather up the various utensils and items he had set about the fire pit. “Not much to look at except a bunch of rocks.” Steve nodded in reply, but obviously did not truly agree. Tony could see the tension rolling off him in waves, though whether it was from their traverse of the Pass or the loss of Natasha and Clint or something else, he could not say for certain. They all set about decamping, packing up their things and clearing away the evidence of their stay as best they could.

Tony saw Steve’s head snap up, hard stare focusing on the Pass, and a moment later watched a blonde head appear, followed by a large warhammer that heralded Thor’s return. “No threats have appeared to me, Captain,” Thor announced. “Though I’ve a queer feeling about this place. It should not be so, rock and earth is all that calls this home. Yet, there are shadows where there should be none. It does not portend well, good Captain. We would be wise to keep our guard.” Tony felt a shiver of foreboding worm its way down his spine, and he was sure he was not the only one who felt it.

“And so we shall, Thor,” Steve echoed. “You heard him. Let’s stay sharp out there,” Steve ordered. “I’ll take point. Thor, you have the rear. Bucky, keep your eyes on the high ground. We can’t afford to miss anything.” Barnes and Thor nodded, everyone seeming to move with more purpose now that Steve was back.

Despite Thor’s warning and the general unease they all felt being boxed in by the mountains, the rest of the day’s journey went unmolested. They made good time, Tony felt, given the terrain they were dealing with, which involved having to climb over rockslides twice and made a mockery of any sign of sure-footedness, save for Steve, who rarely seemed affected by the rocky terrain. Conversation was kept to a minimum by necessity as any sound tended to carry, echoing off the
rock and winding its way to the heavens. They ate as they walked, not stopping until late in the day, when the sun hung low in the sky, nearly touching the edge of the horizon. Tony kept turning Bruce’s words over and over in his mind, finding himself increasingly bothered. He’d missed it when Bruce had first said it, fascinated as he had been by Bruce’s tale. But now, now it stuck out, glaring like a torch in the night. Steve’s feet. Bruce had mentioned needed to tend to them, so Steve could walk to Phillips. Now that he had it, it was a kernel stuck deep in his mind that he couldn’t stop working at, trying to loosen some kind of explanation.

Why would someone have to leave a plague-ridden area so quickly they could not take the time to put shoes on?

Tony still had no answer to the riddle by the time they stopped for the night. The Pass had widened, opening up in a u-shape and spilling into a small, grassy meadow, dotted with trees. A small stream gurgled down the rock wall from the mountains, hopping lightly over rounded rocks until reaching the obstinate wall opposite it, pooling beneath it in a glassy pond that fed the meadow. Steve seemed to have known of this place, and once again, Tony wished for a look at his wonderful maps. He walked over to the stream where it tumbled over the smooth rocks at the bottom of the mountain and cupped his hands in it as it splashed over the stones. He drank deeply, the water cool and crisp, then splashed some on his face, scrubbing it through his beard and hair. He wished for the chance to shave again, but there had not been time for the privilege. He briefly amused himself by imagining Pepper’s reaction to his current state, bedraggled and bearded, wearing clothes that stank with leagues of walking and evenings spent getting his ass knocked to the ground more often than not.

Tony walked back over to where Bruce worked and sank to the ground gratefully, resisting the urge to wallow in the cool, soft grass after hard miles over rock and grit. Bruce was making a small fire, harder now without Clint’s bow to create the needed friction, but he had a flame flickering to life after a few moments of sustained effort. Bruce removed long strips of cured meat from his pack, passing them out to each of the remaining team in turn. Tony tore a bite off with gusto, relishing the way the salty flavor filled his mouth. Steve came back from replenishing his water supply in the brook and handed his water bag to Tony before taking the meat Bruce offered. Thor offered to take watch, and at Steve’s nod, grabbed his pack and a few extra strips of meat and walked off into the darkness to find a vantage point. Tony and the rest ate in companionable silence, finishing quickly, hunger being a constant out here and one thing they all shared.

Tony looked over at Steve, sitting across the deliberately middling fire from him, shield and sword nestled next to him as he sat with his arms wrapped around his drawn-up knees. Worried about Natasha and Clint, Tony thought. Steve did not like having his team separated, that much was obvious. He was anxious and tense, his whole demeanor making his displeasure with the situation obvious. Steve was entirely too open and honest to hide his emotions well, that much was certain. What he needed was a distraction.

“Want to do some sparring?” Tony asked, trying desperately to keep that sounding like an invitation rather than a proposition, last night’s session aside.

Steve just raised an eyebrow in response, but moved to pick up his sword and shield. “Sure. If you feel up to it,” he replied, giving away nothing of what he was feeling or if he was even thinking about the way their last sparring match had ended. Tony felt his whole body go taut, anticipation flooding his veins, setting his nerves to tingling. “Don’t expect you’ll win again,” Steve said nonchalantly as he stood up, hoisting his shield and gripping his sword with one hand. “That was probably a fluke. I won’t be played the fool a second time,” Steve answered, scrutinizing Tony the same way he did one of his maps.
Damn, damn, damn, Tony thought. Steve’s whole body was rigid with undisguised hostility. So, clearly, last night had not been forgotten or forgiven, and Steve thought Tony had only kissed him in order to win their stupid match. Tony wanted desperately to explain what he had truly meant by his seemingly casual words, to put things right between them, but what was there he could possibly say? I want you, but I need you to know who I really am first, so you can hate me for that in addition to misleading you?

Tony got to his feet somewhat reluctantly now, and walked over to where Bruce was poking at the fire, busily ignoring the two of them the best he could. He nudge Bruce’s knee, earning a questioning gaze in return. Tony held out his hand and crooked his fingers a couple of times, and that was enough for Bruce to let out a rather exasperated sigh and open his pack, reaching his arm in and shifting the contents around until he came out clutching the tattered storybook. He handed it to Tony without a word. Barnes’ gaze snapped back and forth between Tony and Steve, displeasure obvious, but for once he held his tongue.

Tony nodded his readiness to Steve, and followed as Steve turned and began walking away from the fire. There was still enough light out to see, gray and diffuse though it was. They wouldn’t have long and should probably be resting. Certainly, given what Steve obviously thought Tony had meant last night, this was probably not a wise course of action, but Tony felt his thoughts coalesce around Steve, focus narrowing to the man walking in front of him in a way only Steve seemed able to command, and couldn’t have turned back to the stillness of the camp for anything in the world.

Steve generally preferred to have their sparring sessions away from the camp, Tony knew, though Tony honestly wasn’t sure if it was to avoid scrutiny for those or for after, when Steve practiced his reading, stuttering out words and letter combinations while Tony listened and offered instruction and assistance when required. Tony had been surprised at how much he enjoyed those times, how much pleasure it gave him to watch Steve learn, how proud it made him to witness the strides Steve was making. His own patience at such a task would no doubt be news to Pepper and Rhodey, but he couldn’t deny the pleasure he took in watching Steve’s quick mind light with new knowledge, a gift Tony was actually able to give him.

They moved away from where Bruce and Barnes were seated by the fire towards a small grove of scraggly trees, which offered the benefits of a slight amount of privacy and something to muffle any noise. Bruce had the good grace to attempt to look busy, shuffling around the fire, moving his implements and utensils around in a desultory manner. Barnes had no such compunction, openly staring at the two of them as they walked off. Tony narrowly resisted the urge to turn around and stick his tongue out at the man, but couldn’t shake Steve’s words about feeling the fool from their previous encounter. There certainly wasn’t going to be a repeat of that, Tony thought with no small amount of disgust at himself.

“Okay, let’s try something different today,” Steve suggested glancing around at the flat, somewhat grassy area. Despite the grassy cover, the ground out here was still hard enough that Tony didn’t relish the idea of getting knocked down on it, even if it was Steve knocking him down. “We’ve worked on defensive maneuvers and how to handle an attacker with a knife or spear. It’s time you tried something a bit more offensive,” Steve said, slipping into the mode of teacher as easily as fitting on a glove, his tone and stance mulishly professional.

Steve unbuckled his scabbard belt from his waist and handed it to Tony, who grabbed it with one hand and held it out in front of him, staring at it dumbly. It was heavier than he’d expected, given the ease with which Steve routinely carried it in one hand and the shield in the other. Tony wasn’t exactly unfamiliar with the use of a sword, but the family sword was gleaming steal with delicate patterns engraved down the blade and a finely wrought hilt inlaid with gold and precious gems, used to imbue knighthoods and for public spectacles, clearly the product of some Stark ancestor
with a flair for the grandiose and useless. It was much lighter than this one, the plaint, flat steel nicked in places from use, the pommel at the end of the hilt a simple metal disk instead of the large ruby that glinted from Tony's, a grip of wood covered in leather and a straight, metal crossguard offering some protection to the hand. It was a soldier's sword, made to be used and discarded, melted down to make more swords and other implements, yet Tony had seen Steve take care of it, keeping it deadly sharp and ready, efforts made somewhat more difficult after he'd traded his gift from Phillips for medicine to help Tony.

Same with his shield, Tony thought, noting the careful way Steve placed it down by one of the trees, though the shield was even more battered than the sword, one strap having been tacked back on after being torn off at some point, dents and divots clearly evident over the face of it from years of hard use. The paint was almost entirely chipped off the front, though he could see that at some point there had been a design there. Perhaps a star? He couldn't say for sure.

Tony set the scabbard down by the shield and held the sword with both hands. As he did, his mind drifted to the idea that had struck him the night before for a new shield for Steve. That chunk of metal, the gift from the King of Wakanda for his coronation, the one that he hoped to use to replace the metal disk covering his chest would and eliminate the problems common metal caused….It could work. He couldn't help the ease with which his mind slipped to the image of presenting it to Steve, watching his face light as he realized the extent of what he could do with something like that.

“Okay, first,” Steve began, holding up a long stick he'd debrided of its limbs while Tony had been lost to his thoughts. “You want to take the sword from the scabbard before you engage. Believe it or not, it takes longer to remove it than it does to get hit by your opponent. Never attack unless your sword is out.” Tony nodded in agreement and tested the weight of the sword in his hands, finding he could hold it one-handed, though he honestly wasn't sure for how long. “Good. Now, make sure you keep your feet shoulder width apart. When you move, slide your feet along, don't lift them. If you're knocked on the ground, you're likely moments from being dead, so balance is key. When you block, keep your sword close to you, don't stick it out in front of you or you'll open yourself up to attack.”

Steve poked the stick in Tony's general direction, and Tony brought the sword up, careful to keep his feet apart as instructed, and knocked the stick to the side. He felt immediately triumphant and grinned broadly, only to find a stick poking in his neck. “Also, you don't want to get cocky,” Steve said with a wide smile. Tony found himself grinning in return, slipping easily into the familiar role of student and teacher.

They practiced with the sword for a good while, until Tony felt his muscles shaking with the effort. Steve finally called a halt, handing Tony the water pouch. Tony was breathing too hard to form words yet, so he just drank deeply and nodded his thanks to Steve. He carefully set the sword down in a neat row next to the scabbard and shield by one of the trees before looking back at Steve, appreciating for a moment the long line of Steve's throat as he drank, sweat trickling down his brow and the neck of his shirt. Whereas Tony had a full beard at the moment, Steve managed little more than a dusting of fine, blonde hairs over his jaw and the line of his cheeks, managing to actually make it look good, damn him.

At least he'd managed to make the man break a sweat, Tony supposed grimly. That was something. There was a reason he left the more martial aspects of war to Rhodey and others. This was hard. Terribly, dangerously hard. He could feel it in every movement as he held the sword, the lethal thrust of it, the sharp whistle of the blade as it cut through the air. This was a dance of death, however casually they practiced it now, the fragility of the line that tethered them to the world never more apparent than when he held the blade in his hands.
It was one thing to create his infernos, his contraptions that spewed death from a discrete distance. This required that you look in a man’s eye as you killed him, watch as his lifesblood milked out into the ground. And this was what Steve did, at least when he wasn’t escorting Tony across half the Realm. It was easy to forget that, out here in the middle of nowhere, how close Steve and the others lived to that line between death and one more day. He thought about Steve and his non-plans for the future, the great empty chasm where dreams of what could come after the war was supposed to be.

Steve was going to die out here. Steve knew it. Natasha knew it. Maybe even Barnes knew it. Maybe that’s why he clung so closely, scrabbling up anything he could before it was too late. Maybe that’s why they all did. Steve was the center, the one that held them together, and it was like they could already see him fraying and so they grasped tighter at what threads they could. Barton’s sharp tongue for anyone except Steve, Bruce’s concerns about his health, the way they all tried to find enough food so Steve felt he could eat without taking something away, Thor’s sometimes forced joviality, and Natasha’s protective watchfulness…maybe they saw this, too, maybe they could feel the center slipping inexorably away and tried to hold on, but it was like trying to catch air in your hand or cling to sand. There was nothing to hold onto.

It was his heart that would get him killed, Natasha had said, and Tony found he suddenly couldn’t draw in a breath, some great weight having settled itself on his chest right over the metal plate, pressing down and flattening him out until there was no form left of him, just a husk, dry and wasted and crackled with fissures. The thought shook him to his core, the only sound filling his ears the useless staccato bleating of his heart, stuttering in his chest.

Steve was going to die because of a war Tony had created, a rebellion he’d allowed to fester because he couldn’t be bothered to care, and it was going to take Steve away and there would be no crypt and no monument and no one, likely not even Tony, would ever even know. A sense of loss so profound washed over him, threatening to engulf him in its wake. He didn’t know how his knees didn’t buckle with the sheer force of it, the realization of a world where Steve no longer existed, the outcome written in blood and battle, the exegesis so obvious now, as he watched Steve place his sword back in its scabbard with gentle care. It was what Barnes had been trying to tell him. There was no simple end to this, not for Steve, not for the team. He’s going to die because of me. They’re all going to die because I wasn’t a better man.

He had been worrying about giving Steve blankets, food and shiny new weapons and how to get him into his bed in the most expedient way possible, planning a life of Steve painting fruit bowls, as Barnes had so casually mocked, and didn’t that thought rankle, and they are all going to die because of me, he thought, the images cascading through his vision one after the other. This didn’t end with Fury believing him or Steve forgiving him, and had he really expected them to just slot themselves right into his life, leaving what they fought for behind so easily? They weren’t going to follow him merely at his behest, because of who he was, that was the whole point of this rebellion, after all. They weren’t just going to put down their goals and call themselves done because Tony had not been quite as horrible as alleged. What had Barnes told him last night? He didn’t follow the rank of Captain, he followed Steve. And that was the thing Tony had never had and the Realm desperately needed.

“You okay, Tony?” Steve asked concernedly. I'm thinking about you dying, Tony cried silently, and I didn’t know. I didn’t know it would be like this.

“Sure,” he managed to choke out somehow, jolted from his macabre reverie. “Fine,” he replied, because he had nothing left to say.

“Ready for something a bit calmer?” Steve inquired, nodding towards the book Tony had brought
with him that was sitting next to where Tony had placed Steve’s sword and scabbard after their bout. Steve walked over and picked up the book, sinking gracefully to the ground and opening it on his lap. Tony watched all of it through some kind of fog, felt his limbs move to sit by Steve and watch as Steve’s bright, blue eyes scanned the delicate pages, gentle fingers leafing through them with such care, hands that had just been showing Tony how death was so easily dealt, how close it was, just skirting the edges of your vision, unbowed by such human trivialities as justice and virtue and what was deserved.

“Let’s try some short sentences,” he heard his own voice echo, as if through a long tunnel. “Put the words together and see if you can pick out where they stop and start.” Steve nodded agreeably, turning once again to his favorite story, the one with the chivalrous knight seeking the favor of his Lady. Tony listened with one ear, still reeling from his revelation, though not just from the truth of it, but the truth of what it meant to him. *I didn’t know,* he thought again. *I could have lost this and I didn’t even know.* He should tell the Royal sculptor to put that on the inscription for his crypt. “Here Lies King Anthony Edward Stark, He Did Not Know.” Perhaps not the most inspiring, but it had the boon of being entirely accurate.

Steve stumbled over “He told her of his quest,” quest being a new word they hadn’t yet worked on. Tony bent over to help him sound it out, tried explaining the logic of ‘q’ and ‘u’ and finding it surprisingly difficult. Steve kept on, searching the pages for short bursts of words he could try while Tony’s mind turned his time with Steve and the Avengers over and over, wondering how much anger and humiliation and fear had caused him to fail to grasp.

“I love you,” Steve said, causing Tony’s head to whip around, drawing his mind from far afield to an immediate, stuttering halt, his heart suddenly thundering in his chest so loudly he didn’t know how it was that Steve didn’t hear the missteps in its rhythm.

“I—what?” Tony balked, sure he’d misheard. Steve looked down at the book in his lap in confusion, brow furrowed in diligent concentration as he mouthed the words silently.

“Is that—is that not right?” Steve asked, blinking up at Tony, shifting under Tony’s bewildered scrutiny. “It—I thought I had it,” he said, looking down at the book in frustration.

Tony closed his mouth and forced his eyes down to the page where Steve’s finger pointed at the words written in a scrolling script. The knight proclaiming his love to his Lady before leaving on his quest. Of course. Tony almost laughed out loud at his own unmitigated folly, but caught himself before embarrassing Steve. “No, no, that’s right. It’s fine. Lost my thoughts to the wind,” he explained tightly, repeating the common turn of phrase.

“Sorry, I know this probably isn’t particularly exciting for you. You don’t have to keep doing this, you know,” Steve replied in an uncharacteristic mumble, ducking his head from Tony’s gaze. “I’d keep sparring with you anyway. I don’t mind. This—you don’t have to, is all. It’s not necessary. I don’t even know what the point—well. I mean, I appreciate it, don’t get me wrong. But that’s probably enough for tonight,” Steve said with a forced laugh that didn’t meet his eyes.

“No, no, it’s fine, Steve. I just drifted. Don’t—don’t stop. Not yet. Teaching you…I like it, okay? Gives me something to do with myself. Really,” he reiterated when Steve started to protest again.

“You’re sure?” Steve questioned. “Because, Tony, you don’t—“

“I’m sure,” Tony interrupted, voice shaking. “I’m sure, Steve,” he said, not at all sure what he was even saying. “I’m sure.”

Tony paused, felt something open deep inside him and well up, warmth radiating out from somewhere in his chest, lancing down his limbs, a key turning in a lock he didn’t know had ever been barred. Tony looked up at the sun as it flattened against the horizon, the bright orb flashing before his eyes, drenching his vision in a ring of bright white. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the rough bark of the tree behind him.

“That part. The one you just read. Read it again,” he said, trying not to make it a plea. I didn’t know, Tony thought. Gods, how could I not see? He’d spent his time wondering what Barnes’ grievance with him could be, what had led the two of them to join the rebellion, why it was that he could not command Steve’s loyalty, when he should have been wondering what he could possibly do to earn it.

He’d wanted their loyalty, their fealty, wanted them to serve him, instead of seeing that these amazing people were already working to achieve the goals he should have had all along, not to see the war ended and himself restored to the throne, but the safety and protection of the Realm and its people, who had only suffered under all of this with no hope of anything more than continued struggle no matter who’s ass warmed the throne. They were willing to give their lives, not to place Pierce on the throne, but to see a more just world, to offer themselves to the hope of a brighter future for those they didn’t even know.

And Tony? He had long ago become a part of a system that was comfortable with zero accountability. He had seen his own men killed by weapons he created to protect and defend them, and spent his time worrying over whether Fury would rush to his cause if he could foist responsibility onto Stane and how he might get Steve to see the reason that had long ago escaped Tony.

Looking over at Steve, his golden head dipped toward the page again, reading carefully through the passage once more, Tony thought about how Steve believed him to be remarkable, someone worth vouching for. He wanted to be that, needed to be that, for the Realm, for Steve and the team, for himself. Why it had taken this man, these people, to open his eyes, he didn’t know. But he just now understood what that meant. What it meant to be someone remarkable, someone worth vouching for. It had nothing to do with the circumstances of his birth, his power or might. It had nothing to do with ending this war. It wasn’t knowing what the fight had cost, it was knowing what the fight was worth, why it had to be fought. He’d hated Pierce for trying to take what was his, instead of realizing that it was he who belonged to the Realm, to these people, his people.

He thought back to Bruce’s story this morning, how he had sought one thing and found something worth living for, worth fighting for. He had more to offer this world than just making things that blow up, barking orders from afar while his people grasped and strove for scraps of recompense that would not come. He had known power all his life, and had lost respect for that power and what it truly meant to wield it. He had spent too long making decisions consistent only with the highest good for himself, not the Realm. But that stopped today. Now.

He had spent years reaping the benefits of destruction done in his name. These Avengers as they called themselves, perhaps far more presciently than Tony had realized, were out here trying to protect the people he had put in harm’s way. He couldn’t walk away from that. He shouldn’t even be alive, all things considered. Unless it was for a reason. And he finally knew what he had to do, knew in his heart that it was right, because Steve said he was remarkable and worth vouching for, and Steve didn’t lie. If he could just be the person actually deserving of that…and if anyone could make him a better person, it was Steve. He turned his ear to listen as Steve haltingly repeated the passage, quickly looking up to Tony for approval or correction.
“That’s good, Steve. That’s really good,” Tony said quietly, this time, hearing the words fall from Steve’s lips so easily a second time not as startling, though he had not recognized the tension of anticipation until it had dwindled as Steve read, the warmth of his voice flowing over Tony like the sun. *I didn’t know, but now I do. I know.*

“Think maybe I should stick to swords and leave this stuff you and Bruce,” Steve suggested, snapping the book closed. “But, thanks. For helping, I mean. That’s—well. I really appreciate it.”

“Let’s just say I owe you at least this. And you’re helping me, so we’re good,” Tony replied, forcing his knees to move out from under him as he stood. Swinging the heavy sword had been harder than he would have thought, and his muscles tingly with the effort. Steve handed him the book and bent to retrieve his sword and shield.

Tony followed his silent steps back to the fire, where Bruce was already nestled against his pack, eyes closed. Barnes has his good arm crooked under his head, but he was watching their approach with a casualness too stilted to be anything other than deliberate, though he shifted his body in the grass and closed his eyes once Steve set his sword and shield down to the left of him. Tony took his place next to Bruce, the fire already snuffed out and covered with dirt. It was cold here, below the mountains. Too early for snows yet, but you could taste the moist air, the way it seemed to infiltrate deeper inside when you took a breath. He wished he could suggest body heat as a solution, but doubted that would be welcomed at the moment.

He risked a glance over to Steve, who was sitting up, arms wrapped around his knees, looking at the quarter moon hanging sentinel over the peaks. He closed his eyes, thinking he should probably try to work through some equations to take his mind of things, but woke the next morning, surprised that he had slept so soundly. Between the difficult journey through the Pass and his sparring session with Steve, he probably should not have been. He would have expected his thoughts to have driven sleep from him, but found the opposite to be true. A decision made, something accepted deep within him, and he slept in peace for the first time in months. Longer, really. The rest of the team slept on, the first rays of morning just now finding passage through the peaks to touch the small meadow where they had stopped. Steve was gone, his spot empty, but Thor was back, so Tony assumed Steve had taken over for him on watch.

He sat up on his elbows and looked next to him to find a water bag and small square of leather wrapped around what he rather disappointedly assumed was one of those hard biscuits. Still, he couldn’t deny that the care and attention signified by the gesture made his stomach do that odd fluttering thing. He took a drink of the water and unwrapped the biscuit, eating it by rote and obligation as much as anything. Bruce and Barnes were stirring as the light grew brighter, though Thor slumbered on, soft snores lifting the strand of hair that had fallen over his face.

Bruce slowly blinked to wakefulness and rubbed his fists against his eyes, almost childlike with his curly hair spiked in every conceivable direction. Barnes got up quickly and walked off for a moment of privacy, clapping a hand on Thor’s shoulder to wake him as he went by, earning a rousing, “The bilgesnipe is mine!” from Thor before he rolled over and went back to his sonorous sleep.

“Your turn,” Barnes called over his shoulder to Bruce as he headed off to the trees where Tony and Steve had sparred the night before. Bruce let out a long sigh, and got up to go try to wake Thor. Tony couldn’t help a small smile as he choked down the biscuit. With Thor finally roused, breakfast quickly disappeared and the camp, such as it was, disassembled.

“Come on, let’s get going,” Bruce said, shouldering his pack.
“What about—“ Tony started, looking around the empty meadow for a familiar blond head.

“He’ll be back at the Pass. James’ll be with him. They’re just arguing and don’t want us to hear it,” Bruce said calmly.

“Indeed, I believe something troubles our Captain and his friend greatly,” Thor pronounced. Yeah, me, Tony thought, not sure how he felt about it anymore. “It is this place, I tell you true. There is something here that does not sit well in the hearts of good men.”

“It’s just mountains, Thor. Steve has been here before, and didn’t have any trouble. Natasha said none of our patrols have seen anything unusual. I know there are stories, but…that’s just talk,” Bruce replied, though Tony wasn’t sure who he was actually trying to convince.

They walked back towards where the Pass coiled around the mountains, and sure enough, Steve and Barnes were leaning against one of the large boulders that formed the feet of the peaks, only the way Steve looked down the Pass instead of at Barnes any indication they’d exchanged any tense words.

“We’ll stick close together from here until we reach the bend,” Steve said. “It gets too narrow to spread out. Keep your eyes open for anything. Anything at all.”

“You really think someone could get around those mountains? Looks pretty steep up there,” Tony questioned, holding his hand over his forehead to peer up at the walls of stone above them.

“See those white dots way up there?” Steve asked, pointing. Tony squinted his eyes and finally found what Steve was pointing to. “They’re mountain goats.”

“Okay, so goats. Unless they’re really militant goats, I’m not following,” Tony replied, enjoying the way Steve’s mouth quirked with the effort not to smile.

“If goats can get through, then a man can get through. If one man can, then more men can. If a group of men can, then an army can,” Steve answered, earning a sharp look from Barnes. “It looks impassable, but safety is a deception here. Every place here, save for where we are, is the high ground. One man with good aim is all anyone would need.” Comforting, Tony thought grimly, his apprehension spiking. Death felt closer here, maybe because one was forced to feel his insignificance. Maybe that was what sparked his revelations last night, deep within the bowels of the mountains where everyone was a mite of dust on the world built by gods.

Almost as one, the remaining team members looked up uneasily at the tiny white dots moving along what seemed so precarious from this distance. They looked between each other for a moment, then seeming to shake off whatever foreboding they felt, began to march on, Steve leading the way while Thor trailed behind, fingers clutched around his hammer as the gravel crunching beneath their booted feet echoed loudly within the trench. They walked for what seemed like hours, and Tony felt his legs protesting at the harder ground, stumbling over loose rocks and gravel that slid under his feet, though he refused to be the reason for any delay. He watched Steve’s head moving in front of them, shield held high to cover his chest, a far more defensive posture than how he usually carried it, dangling casually from one hand. His sword was out of its scabbard, Tony noticed, recalling his lesson from the night before, and Steve’s head swiveled this way and that, eyeing the many rocks that offered an enemy their protection.

If he hadn’t been watching Steve so closely, he might have missed it, he would think later, but he was, and he didn’t miss it, the way Steve slowed and tensed for a split second, before turning and shouting, “Cover!” at the team before crouching and raising the shield for protection. Something sailed in a high arc from behind one of the larger rocks up the mountain side above them, leaving a
tail of smoke as it wandered across the sky. It hit the far wall of the Pass, perhaps three paces from Bruce, who was in front of him. Tony had only a fraction of a second to process what it was before part of the wall exploded outward in a projectile cloud of dust and debris. Tony ducked down, pillowing his arms over his head and ran for the side of the wall from which the explosive had been hurled, flattening himself against it and looking around in panic as he coughed for air. Bruce was face-down in the dirt, but Tony could see him crawling quickly towards one of the larger boulders that littered the Pass, folding himself up and scrunching behind it.

He looked forward, down the Pass where Steve had been, but couldn’t find him for a desperate moment. Another shell landed ten paces to Tony’s left, and he crouched down as it exploded in the dirt, a pebble scoring his cheek with enough force to break the skin. He lifted his head again, eyes searching, and finally found Steve, shield raised above his head as he leapt onto one of the boulders and then from there, up to grab part of the wall that overhung the Pass below. He swung himself up, and Tony lost sight of him behind the rock, but a moment later, he saw him using the large boulders as stepstones, moving steadily up the mountainside until he reached a ragged outcropping protruding overhead.

Steve swung his shield in a wide arc, sending the black-clad figure in front of him to the bottom of the Pass, his neck twisted at an odd angle. An arrow impaled itself in the dirt next to Tony, and he moved quickly from his exposed position to Bruce’s side, shifting around the large rock, trying to figure the best vantage for cover from wherever it was the new attack originated. He stuck his head up quickly, before Bruce yanked him down by the arm, though he managed to spot Thor down the Pass behind them. He was pulling himself up the side of the rock wall high enough to plant a foot on a protruding part of the rock giving him enough balance to hurl his hammer at whoever it was unfortunate enough to be hiding inside a large crevice that split the wall in a jagged line. Even over the melee, Tony heard the sickening crunch as hammer met bone and winced. Thor climbed the rest the way up to the crevice to retrieve his hammer, then moved forward along the rocks above the Pass towards Steve with surprising agility.

Tony snapped his head around, looking up to try to locate Steve again. He had ascended the rocks that formed almost like large, rounded steps up the mountain side, the result of some long-distant rockslide, and was grappling with two black-robed attackers. He knocked one aside with his shield, sending him flying back, landing hard on top of one of the boulders beneath them. The other thrust his sword forward, but Steve parried it easily, using the hilt of his own sword to knock the other man’s from his hand, then twisted around behind him and thrust his sword through the man’s back sending the point through the attacker’s chest with a splatter of red. Steve pushed the man off his sword and turned to some sound Tony couldn’t hear, but the other attacker dropped the dagger he had held aloft and looked down in stupefaction at the spear impaled through his stomach. He fell forward, off the rock to the ground of the Pass below, and Tony saw Barnes step out from the side of the wall long enough to jerk his spear out. Barnes lifted his head to nod to Steve, who was looking around for another source of attack.

“I believe this one is the last of our foes, Captain,” Thor said from behind Tony, gripping a struggling man by the neck and twirling his hammer in one hand with obvious menace. “He hid while his brethren attacked. Perhaps we should find out to whom we owe our debt,” Thor called out grimly. Steve climbed down, jumping the last bit of distance to the ground. He cast a quick glance at Barnes and walked past where Tony and Bruce huddled, motioning with his hand for them to stay down. Thor shoved his captive to the ground, the man landing hard on his hands and knees in the dirt at Steve’s feet.

“P—please…please, I mean you no harm!” the man cried plaintively. “I am not one of them, I swear it. Just a humble goatherd, showing them a way through the mountains, that is all, kind Sir! You have rescued me, and have my gratitude, meager as it may be.” Steve reached down and
lifted the man’s wrists, turning his hands over to the light.


“The first of many,” the man hissed, smiling a great, wide smile that was all teeth. “Kill me and two more shall take my place. Hail Hydra!” the man shouted, a manic sort of determination in his eyes.

The man clamped his jaw together, saying no more and staring mutinously at Steve. “Hydra, huh? Great. That’s-- Buck, watch him,” Steve said, his voice tight. Barnes moved to stand next to the man, while Steve walked over to where Bruce’s pack had been dropped, picked it up and came over to hand it to Bruce.

“You still have any of that rope?” he asked, without looking at Tony, the last occupier of said rope, who sat next to Bruce by the rock they’d shared for cover. Bruce nodded and opened his pack to look around, Thor coming over to loom behind them, eyeing their prisoner with poorly disguised disgust. “Check him for weapons or anything else, Buck,” Steve called out, glancing back at where Barnes hovered over their captive. Barnes planted his spear in the ground and bent down, patting the man down for anything of interest with his good hand, as Bruce handed Steve the length of rope.

It was Barnes’ sharp call of, “Shit!” that got their attention, but it was too late to move as the thing the man had thrown landed in a smoking pile few feet behind where Steve stood holding the rope. Tony didn’t think about it, not really, not beyond that Steve was there, and that thing was close, too close, and force and trajectory all coming together in his head to equal something horrible that his mind couldn’t comprehend, so his last thought as he launched himself forward, scrabbling the last couple of feet in the dirt to throw himself over the projectile, wrapping his body around it as if hugging it close, was, *Now, I know, I finally know.*

He waited for the rush of pain, the burst of fire and death that would be the last things he felt, but they never came. Someone was grabbing him, yanking him up and shaking his shoulders until his teeth rattled, shouting at him while they did, and then strong arms were wrapping around him and pulling him close, a head burying itself in the crook of his neck and he felt a warm dampness form there. He was suddenly freed, pushed back to stumble haphazardly as he took in the scene before him, trying to make sense of things. Why wasn’t he dead? Steve was pacing back and forth in front of him, running a hand through his hair and opening and closing his mouth like words refused to come out. Bruce was still kneeling in the dirt, holding his pack open, staring at Tony wide-eyed. Thor walked over to the thing still sitting in the dirt smoking lightly and stared down at it, face a mask of censure, as if the projectile itself had wronged him.

“It’s a dud,” Bruce said, as he stared at Tony. “A dud. Gods. Tony. What were you—”

“He wasn’t. He wasn’t thinking because he doesn’t think, he doesn’t, he just jumps in, and doesn’t even think…You are such an idiot, Tony, you are such…why, why would you even…You—how could you—why—Tony, you could have been killed, what the hell—what were you thinking?” Steve stammered, eyes bright and face flushed with pique. Steve was suddenly in front of him, back to grasping him by the shoulders and shaking him again, which was fine by Tony if Steve would follow that up with that hug thing. Tony felt a grin spread wide, not sure if it was relief at surviving or satisfaction at Steve’s obvious distress over his possible demise. He shouldn’t feel that way, he supposed, since Steve was clearly upset, but he couldn’t help finding it gratifying after a night of Steve’s coldly professional treatment.
“I thought you were going to die. As between you and me, that seemed an easy choice,” he answered honestly. See, I know. Steve stopped shaking him, though a tremor ran through the other man as he stepped away from where Tony stood. “The Realm needs you more than it needs me.”

“How could you even think that? You—I’m not—Don’t do that again,” Steve shouted, stomping over to where their captive was lying face down in the dirt, a spear through the back of his neck, skewering his throat where a pool of red stained the sand beneath.

“Steve…I’m so sorry. He got the jump on me. I was looking for weapons and not even thinking about…he knocked me off balance for a minute and just pulled that thing right out of his robe somewhere. I don’t even know how he lit it that fast, I should’ve been more careful, I know, I just…I’m sorry, I fucked up, alright,” Barnes said bleakly.

“It’s okay, Buck, it wasn’t your fault,” Steve said, and Tony almost felt sorry for Barnes when he flinched at those words. He knew it was harder sometimes to be forgiven than to face reprobation. Steve ran a hand through his hair again, and Tony couldn’t help but smile wider at the harried image he presented. He caught Bruce’s glance out of the corner of his eye and almost swore the other man was about to roll his eyes. Thor was watching him with ill-concealed approval.

“That was a most brave thing you did, Man of Iron!” Thor proclaimed. “There is no greater privilege than to die in glorious battle, giving your life to save your fellow warriors.” This time, Tony didn’t bother correcting him, if there was even a correction to be had anymore. “Friend James, do not let your guilt over a single mistake supplant what you know your Captain feels for you. These villains fight with their majicks from a distance, without honor or cunning. It is hard for men of good conscience to foresee the craven actions of a creature such as this.”

“He had this on him,” Barnes said, offering up a metal cylinder, about the length of a man’s forearm, to Steve. Steve took it and unscrewed one end, turning it over so the rolled up scroll inside would fall out. Tony caught sight of the seal that bound the scroll together, a skull pressed deeply into the red wax and felt a fissure of unease spark up his spine. Steve spread out the scroll and stared at it for a moment before walking over and handing it to Bruce. Bruce took it and stood up, eyes roving over the page, forehead scrunched in confusion.

“This…I’ve never seen anything like this before…nothing you recognize?” Bruce asked, looking up at Steve.

“Could be references to points on a map, but nothing like I’ve ever seen before,” Steve answered. Bruce glanced quickly over at Tony in question, and Steve nodded his agreement. Bruce stepped forward and handed the sheet of paper to Tony. Tony looked down, frowning over the series of numbers that lined the page. There didn’t seem to be a pattern, at least not one he could immediately discern, but he had read enough to suspect what he was looking at.

“It’s a book cipher. A code. A thousand or so years ago, the holy men used something like this to share knowledge during the Uprising. Each number was tied to a word in the Codex, painstakingly counted out by some monk deep in a cell somewhere,” Tony informed them.

“Is there a way to break it?” Steve asked.

“Whoever is sending it and receiving it has to have the same book, that’s the key,” Tony replied. “Don’t suppose you know of anyone wandering around the battlefield with a book they never leave behind?” he jested, then looked up to see that Steve had gone rigid, eyes focused on the scroll Tony held in his hand as if the thing would burn him if he touched it. He looked deflated somehow, smaller then he should be, and that disturbed Tony more deeply than anything else.
Steve cast a long glance down the Pass, hunched his shoulders and bowed his head. He raised his gaze to Tony and stared for a long moment, then seemed come to whatever decision he had struggled with.

“Pierce does,” Steve said flatly.

Chapter End Notes

Some of Tony's internal monologue during his "epiphany" is taken from the Iron Man movie.

Bruce is making tea from cannabis leaves. Because he has a huge bag of weed.
Exposition happens.

Forcing the words out was tantamount to something of an admission, Steve supposed, glancing around at the shocked and disconcerted looks the rest of the team was giving him. Steve watched as Tony’s face froze for a moment, eyes glazing, mind clearly turning inward, as he took in the implications of the words Steve had hardly been able to bear to utter.

He should feel something about the implication of Pierce’s possible actions, Steve thought bitterly. Instead, when he drew his thoughts to it, all that coursed through him was a dull nothingness, some vast gulf where betrayal and anger should lurk. He couldn’t quite muster the right emotions, though, as if everything had drained out of him the moment Tony threw himself over the explosive and somehow managed to survive, the benefit of a largesse from the gods that was rarely given, in Steve’s experience.

Steve tried to force his roiling feelings to calm, but it was next to impossible. When he closed his eyes, it wasn’t the sting of potentially being quite spectacularly wrong about Pierce that made his heart leap over beats, it was the image of Tony, clinging to the shell, and his ridiculous statement that Steve’s life was more valuable than his own. How could he even think that, when Tony could do so much if he would just put his mind to making things happen instead of simply willing them to? Steve was just a soldier, and he well knew his lot in all of this. Tony was…different. Even out here, when they had almost nothing, Tony could accomplish the nigh impossible. And he had almost thrown all that away. For Steve. He had no idea what to do with that, other than to accept the truth of it for what it was.

He had thought Tony had been playing some game with him for which no one told Steve the rules. Steve had spent entirely too much time thinking about that sparring match…tickling him? Who did that in a fight? Tony, obviously. Only Tony would do something at once both completely crazy and inherently bold and have it actually work. Steve had found himself laughing both at the sensations and the sheer audacity of it. And then…then Tony had kissed him.

It had been a feint, he told himself. Just a way to gain the upper hand in the way Steve would never have anticipated. Just another ploy, nothing more. It hadn’t meant anything, he had been certain. Tony’s words made that plain enough. While Steve may not have liked Tony’s tactics, he couldn’t fault the man for trying to win in the ways he could, for using Steve’s own weaknesses against him. And Tony…Tony was a weakness, had been from the moment the team found him facing death and mouthing off to it. Bucky, who knew Steve all too well, could see it clearly, that much he knew from their many arguments on the subject and the disapproving glances Bucky kept shooting his way. He was pretty sure Natasha knew it as well, if for no other reason than he had simply learned to assume she knew everything.

Since the beginning, Tony had been able to get at Steve in ways no one else had been able to manage, always pushing and prodding around the edges, as if testing Steve somehow. Tony never backed down, never gave ground simply because surrendering was the easier option. Whatever Steve managed to gain had to be won, earned, something he found at various times exhilarating.
and frustrating, or some mixture of the two, but it was certainly never dull. Tony could be harsh and blindly determined, arguing through his logic puzzles and forcing Steve to justify his decisions, to see things in different ways. But he could then turn around the next minute and be surprisingly generous with praise, patience and an amazing willingness to listen and be swayed if you worked hard enough for it.

However much Steve enjoyed their talks during the long walk to the Pass and the exhilaration of their sparring, it had been the quiet times when Tony worked with him and the book, painstakingly showing him the letters and helping him make their sounds, which meant the most to Steve. He should have felt far more vulnerable then, opening himself up to mocking and frustrated criticism he was sure would materialize, but had never come. It had been an odd haven for a time each night, something done solely for his benefit, and he had come to realize that it was one of the few things that had ever met that standard, though he couldn’t fathom why Tony wanted to offer his time for such a task.

Steve thought he had hidden his admiration for Tony better, but it must have been more obvious than he realized for Tony to be able to use it to his advantage. Tony was, at least ostensibly, still a prisoner and any way to gain Steve's trust, to work to insinuate himself with Steve, who would soon present him to Fury, was just good strategy. All of that made complete sense in his head, had been something he was able to accept and even understand it in a way, though he couldn’t deny the sting of hurt that spasmed through him at the realization that Tony's attention was calculated. But he had been able to accept it for what it was, at least right up until Tony threw himself over an explosive in some insane self-sacrificial leap and then stood there, wide-eyed and grinning like a madman, and told Steve that he mattered more to the Realm as if stating the color of the sky.

Steve’s whole body was thrumming with some brew of seething anger, abject relief and utter incredulity that made him want to either shake Tony until he saw reason or grab onto him and refuse to let go until he promised to never, ever do something like that again. He had settled for some distant mirror of the two, though neither had been particularly satisfying.

Steve was still trying to reconcile the thoughts volleying across his mind when Tony asked about any commanders carrying books around with them, and everything he had been struggling with about Pierce had clicked into place as his mind flashed to the small chest that sat on the edge of Pierce’s desk inside his tent, often atop various maps, troop pieces painted the Stark red and gold in neat rows ringing Kingstown. He could see it so clearly in his mind. With no small effort, he forced his thoughts away from whatever it was that lingered in the space between him and Tony and back to the more immediate concern.

“Steve…just because Pierce carries a book or two around with him…you can’t know that has anything to do with…this code thing from Schmidt,” Bucky reasoned, though even he looked uncomfortable, and was staring at Tony holding the coded message with something akin to confused alarm.

“I’m not saying I know anything. Except that Pierce has books. He keeps them with him in his tent, and takes them when he travels. I noticed because I remember thinking…well, I remember thinking it admirable. A man so learned, he wanted to have books with him wherever he went,” Steve admitted, looking over at Tony, who was still clutching the message and alternately staring at the string of numbers and up at Steve.

“Do you know what books?” Tony asked, dark eyes flashing.

“No,” Steve sighed in frustration. “I couldn’t read the titles. Not texts, though, I’m almost certain. Not like what a doctor would have or books of maps, that kind of thing. They…the covers were…I
liked the pictures. Thought I’d like to draw them, if I ever had the time,” he admitted, feeling his cheeks burn the way they did anytime he talked about his art. “But…it was out of place for a military commander. That’s what drew my attention in the first place. You can’t carry much. Every amount of space is priceless and to fill it with storybooks that could be so easily damaged and served no useful purpose was…unusual. When we traded for Bruce’s book, I remember thinking I understood better, after many nights of the same conversation,” he grimaced.

“Steve, if Pierce is working with Schmidt…” Tony trailed off, brown eyes wide as whatever was going on in his head seemed to finally come together. “They could be planning a major offensive. If Schmidt has anywhere near the number of followers rumor says he does, then together with what Pierce commands, they’d have enough force to lay siege to Kingstown itself. Pierce’s problem has always been with his numbers. He lacks the men to truly challenge the city and without taking the city, he can’t possibly claim the throne. If this…if this is true…”

“I know,” Steve said. Tony started to speak again, but Steve cut him off. “I know, Tony. I know.” He looked over at Bucky and Bruce, in turn. Pierce’s lack of manpower had long been a barrier to truly launching any kind of offensive against the capital. Instead, he was forced to spend his time picking off Stark’s forces at the fringes, hoping to draw them out, away from the walls and trebuchets, archers and cavalry that the city possessed. Stark couldn’t allow the rebellion to go on forever without sending his forces out en mass, or so the thinking had gone. But, instead, the King kept the bulk of his army near the city, protected by the city’s fortifications and armaments, with the sea and the river forming an impassable ribbon around the walls, leaving little room for Pierce to maneuver. Pierce said it was because the King didn’t care about the Realm outside of the city, but it was hard to argue with the decision from a tactical perspective, which was what prompted Steve’s whole idea that had led the Avengers westward to begin with.

“We don’t know if Pierce is working with Schmidt. And if he is, we don’t know his reasons,” Bruce said, though even Steve could hear the weakness of that argument in the other man’s tone.

“Give me one legitimate reason for Pierce to be working with a fanatic like Schmidt, and I’ll eat that rope,” Tony responded, echoing Steve’s own thoughts. “You know what they say Schmidt has done, right? Whole towns destroyed…holy sites ripped apart…experiments on prisoners…this isn’t from just me, Steve. This isn’t some Stark propaganda…you’ve heard the same thing, don’t tell me you haven’t. I’ve seen the way you’ve been on edge since we got near these mountains. You know the stories, and sure, maybe some of it is just that. Stories. But you know about what he and his Hydra fanatics did in Tonsberg. That isn’t rumor. I heard—I…the survivors gave testimony at Court. I heard about it. It was brutal. Almost the whole town, wiped out, because Schmidt wanted some mystical artifact for his collection. Look, I don’t know what this says,” Tony argued, holding up the scroll and shaking it at Steve, “but they aren’t sending coded messages to each other about the weather, that’s for damn sure.”

“If the message is even for Pierce. Which we don’t know,” Steve reiterated. “We don’t, Tony,” he repeated, as Tony opened his mouth to argue. The problem was, he could see it, all too clearly, the whole thing of it spreading out in front of him. He remembered the game they had played as children, lining up pieces of bark they chipped off the trees in the soft sand by the shore, one after the other in neat rows, then knocking the first one down, sending the rest cascading behind it in quick succession. This was some macabre recreation of the same thing, writ large, all the pieces lining up in his mind until everything was left ruined in the dirt.

“Steve, I can’t speak for everyone,” Bruce began. “But…until we do know…this…we can’t be wrong about this. Not with everything we know. We can’t. A Realm at the mercy of Schmidt? We just can’t take that chance,” Bruce said, running an absent hand over his face, scraping it over his stubbled chin.
“I must agree with Sir Doctor, Captain. I have heard tales of this man’s cruelty, even in Asgard. They say his disfigurement was the gods’ way of revealing his true nature. He seeks power, absolute. I fear for your Realm should he find it,” Thor intoned gravely, a trace of sadness in his voice. “I know too well the harm that can result from one who wants power for its own sake, rather than the benefit of others. I would not wish this on your world. If we have served unwisely, let our eyes be opened sooner rather than later, and a new path be forged.”

“We don’t know enough to make any decision, except that we need more information. Until we have it, we can’t do anything that would aid a leader we cannot fully trust,” Steve finally said, letting his words have a chance to sink in before he moved on. He could sense the relief from Bruce and Thor, though Bucky’s own countenance remained uncertain. “And we have Natasha and Clint to think about. They’re off doing gods’ know what for Pierce, with no idea that they might be working for someone willing to align himself with evil to get what he wants. I don’t know about you, but I want to know who I’m really fighting for before we go any further.”

Steve stopped long enough for the import of his words to be clear, then took a deep breath before laying out his fears. “There may be more to this than we realize. We must bear in mind that we do not know that Pierce and Schmidt have made any kind of alliance or that this message was even meant for Pierce. But…Tony, what you said, about Stane and King Howard’s death?” Steve prodded. Tony looked sharply at him, but just nodded, waiting for Steve to continue. The pieces seemed to fall, one after the other, he could see it now.

“What if…what if Stane is working with Pierce and Schmidt?,” Steve suggested, watching Tony’s face crumble a bit as he immediately caught on. “He arranges the deaths of King Howard and Queen Maria, then inserts himself into the Council through Lord Stone, gains the King’s confidence, all the while undermining the King’s rule. He makes a series of questionable decisions, but done carefully, without the King knowing precisely what is being done in his name.”

“That gives Pierce the chance to sow the seeds of rebellion. Argue against Stane and gather support,” Tony interrupted. “Get Fury and others on his side. Not that the King wasn’t doing his part by being a giant idiot, mind you,” he said with a pained grimace twisting his features.

“Exactly. Meanwhile, Pierce works with Schmidt, building a much bigger army than anyone anticipated. Pierce sends Fury’s troops South, forcing Stark to send some of his men to counteract the threat. Schmidt sends his forces through the mountains and down the Pass at some appointed time, and they make their way to Pierce’s flank, head down the river and form a pincer around the Stark forces surrounding the city,” Steve continued grimly. “It could work. That valley outside the city’s fortifications where Stark’s troops are positioned used to be farmland. Good, fertile soil. Low though. Pierce and Schmidt would have the high ground and could box Stark’s troops in before they knew what was happening.”

“Stane…and Pierce…and Schmidt,” Tony echoed. “Gods. It’s…how did I not see this?” he asked in a wrecked voice. “Cut off one head…It’s Hydra. It’s fucking Hydra, trying to take over the Realm, is what it is. While the King…the King…he…”

“No one knew, Tony,” Steve said quietly. Tony was clearly distraught by all of this, let alone the thought of what had been done to his King. It was entirely possible Stane was keeping the King prisoner somewhere, but that was a loose end Steve suspected Stane would not want, though he refused to give voice to that belief when Tony was already this upset.

“Well, this is all just horrible,” Bruce said stoically after a moment’s silence when no one seemed ready to give voice to their thoughts. “Say you’re right. Where does that leave us, Steve?” Bruce questioned grimly. “We don’t have very many options out here and it isn’t as if we can just walk
up and ask Pierce if he is, by chance, working with some red-faced freak who wants to wipe out whoever happens not to agree with him on everything. Probably a short line to a hanging in that.”

Steve drew in a long breath and let his eyes drift shut momentarily. They were all waiting for him to decide, though he realized he had already made the decision. It was giving a voice to it that was the hard part. He had sat at the entry to the Pass, waiting on the rest of the team and stared at the map in front of him for what had seemed like forever, the familiar lines and symbols watering before his eyes the longer he looked. Had he known, even then, what he would choose to do and simply not wanted to admit it, even to himself? Maybe.

He could see the map clearly in his mind. Fury’s encampment, a few leagues on the other side of the Pass from whence they had come. And Captain Rhodes’ forces north of Fury’s, using Lord Ellis’ massive holdings as a base, trying to keep Fury’s army pinned against the mountains and unable to join Pierce’s numbers in the North. Natasha’s intelligence said that Captain Rhodes himself had been oft absent during the last few months, taking patrols far afield, skirting the edges of Stark’s land, for reasons unknown. But supposedly he had returned to his camp, and was leading the efforts to keep Fury’s forces in check. The decision to separate Pierce’s forces, sending Fury to the South to challenge Stark loyalists in that region had been one that Steve had argued himself nearly hoarse trying to derail, to no avail. Now, he could see why his argument failed to sway Pierce. With Fury backed up against the mountains, Schmidt could move his army through the Pass and out the other side with none of Stark’s forces the wiser. Steve took a deep, steadying breath and rubbed the edges of his forehead with his hand, suddenly feeling like one of those small rowboats based against the dock in a storm, unable to move, forced to stand against the waves or be crushed.

“We’re not taking Tony to Fury,” Steve said, surprised at how good it felt to actually say it. “If we’re right about Pierce, then we don’t know how deep this thing goes. Fury may have been deceived, as we were, but we don’t know that for sure. And we are not taking that chance, not with so much at stake here.” He looked over at Bucky, expecting an argument, but Bucky just shrugged.

“He made his choice,” Bucky said, eyeing Tony.

“Turns out there wasn’t actually a choice to make,” Tony replied, directing his remark at Bucky, and to Steve’s surprise, Bucky’s lips curled in apparent satisfaction. He wasn’t sure what he was missing, but there was clearly something passing between the two men that they were not inclined to share.

“Captain Rhodes is using Lord Ellis’ keep as his base of operations. Natasha spoke highly of Rhodes. Said he was honorable and loyal to the King. Tony, what do you think? Is he someone you would trust or do you think he could be working with Stane?” Steve asked.

Tony was looking at him rather oddly, blinking rapidly as his eyes shone before he wiped a hand over his face and looked away. Tony worked his mouth open and closed twice as his eyes darted around the camp before he finally settled on his words. “I would trust Captain Rhodes with my life,” he replied, voice rough with some emotion Steve couldn’t identify.

“If we’re right about Stane and Pierce, it may be a lot more than your life at stake,” Steve reminded him. “You’ll have to convince him to help stop Stane and find the King, if he lives. Whatever search efforts have been going on, Stane has probably ensured they wouldn’t find much of anything. If the King is being held somewhere, Stane will know of it.”

“Oh, I’m sure Stane has been kept well aware of the King’s whereabouts,” Tony said evenly, though there was a tension to the set of his shoulders, that belied the lightness of his words.
“Believe me, my first order of business will be making sure Stane gets exactly what’s coming to him, that much I can promise you,” Tony said, staring down at the dirt near his feet, though his hand that held the scroll was clenched tight around the delicate paper.

“Good,” Steve nodded. “I’ll take Tony to Captain Rhodes, then. It will be easier for the two of us to slip past Fury’s encampment unnoticed. I know the basic strategy he uses for his patrols, and I think we can skirt—” Steve started.

“Good Captain, there are many unknown dangers here. I worry for those caught in between, who know nothing of the threats which menace this Realm,” Thor interrupted. “I would ask for your indulgence, my friends, as I see to the safety of my beloved Jane and her village, which sheltered me when I needed succor.”

“Of course, Thor,” Steve nodded, though the loss of Thor, however temporary, certainly made his task more difficult. “We all understand. Of course, you should make sure Jane and Selvig and the others are safe. Bruce, you go to Fury. Someone needs to report in, or it will look even more suspicious, but tread carefully when you reach him. Tell him I plan to talk to Pierce again about recalling Fury’s forces and the use of mercenaries, see how he reacts,” Steve instructed. “Talk to Sam. As Fury’s Falconer, he hears rumblings that miss our ears. Ask if he’s seen any missives that are just numbers. I’ll give you a message for him. Tell him you’re asking for me and need it kept quiet. He’ll help.” Bruce nodded in agreement.

“Bucky, you head towards Pierce’s camp, though stay out of sight. Nat and Clint will find you, once you’re close enough. They’ll want to know what you’re doing there by yourself, so just lay low. Tell them what we’ve learned and what we suspect,” Steve ordered. “Meet at our magician friend’s sanctum, or whatever he is calling it now. He won’t like the interruption from…whatever it is he is doing, but he won’t turn us away.”

“You could all just come with me,” Tony said with what Steve knew perfectly well was false casualness. Steve had spent enough time studying the other man to notice the firm set of his jaw, the way his eyes darted everywhere but refused to stop long enough to see, how a tremor faltered his voice just enough to roughen it, a trail of something like desperation leaking out despite Tony’s attempt at mildness. “To Captain Rhodes, I mean. You may be surprised at how willing Rhodes would be to listen to you all.”

Steve and Bucky exchanged a glance at that, though Bucky just looked away, scanning the mountain again as he had been doing since the attack abated. “Rhodes may be someone you trust, Tony, but I hardly think us marching into one of Stark’s main strongholds is a good idea,” Steve replied carefully. “I’m sure you have influence, and I appreciate that you would seek to speak on our behalf, but Rhodes is a man of war. He can’t just take you at your word that we mean the Realm no harm. We’ve caused Stark’s forces a fair amount of damage. Rhodes isn’t just going to be able to let that go.”

“That, I know,” Tony agreed, giving him a bit of a piqued look. “But Rhodes would listen to you. He would, Steve. I can…No harm would come to you, I swear it. I--you don’t have to do this alone, is all.”

“Even if what you say is true, we can’t, Tony. There’s Clint and Natasha out there with no idea what might be going on. And I need to know for sure...all of this...its suspicion and guesswork. Isn’t that what you accuse me of holding against the King? If I was wrong about Pierce, then I’ll deal with the consequences of that, but I won’t risk my team without knowing for sure who we are fighting and who we are fighting for,” Steve responded. “We just...we have to be sure, Tony.” Tony was watching him, an odd look of longing marring his features.
“And when you’re sure?” Tony asked softly, kicking the dirt with his booted foot, hand reflexively tightening again around the scroll he still held.

“When I’m sure, we fight the battle that needs to be fought, the one we can’t fight on our own. It’s why we came together in the first place,” Steve said, spreading his arms wide to indicate the team. “To be something more than we could on our own. Maybe that’s why you’re here, too, Tony.”

“I think maybe it is,” Tony whispered, turning his head and looking away so quickly that Steve almost didn’t catch his reply. “But I mean—”

“I know what you’re asking, Tony, and I don’t know,” Steve interjected. “I don’t know what it will mean, if we’re right about all this.”

“But you said yourself, it could have been Stane and Pierce working together from the beginning,” Tony reminded him, walking over to stand next to Steve. He handed Steve the scroll, which Steve carefully folded and tucked into one of the pockets inside his shirt. “Not the King. Not the King, Steve. Maybe he was derelict, but…okay, fine he was a shitty king to not notice, but don’t tell me that wouldn’t change things for you. Don’t tell me that wouldn’t matter.” Tony was pushing, needling the way only Tony could, and Steve knew what he wanted of him. A part of him wanted to give in, if for no other reason than he could tell how much it meant to Tony, how deeply this divide prayed on his mind, though he didn't quite understand it.

“It isn’t that it wouldn’t matter, Tony. I can’t—it isn’t just—bending the knee means more than just swearing loyalty to someone,” Steve argued. “That’s part of it, of course it is, but…it means pledging your life to them, putting your trust in that person. Do you know what the oath even says? ‘Love all that he loves, shun all that he shuns.’ It isn’t something given lightly, Tony. I know you are loyal to your King, but even if Pierce isn’t who we thought he was, that doesn’t mean that I can just turn around and kneel to someone like Stark. It doesn’t work like that.”

“I know what the oath says,” Tony gritted out quietly, eyes raking over Steve with something Steve would have named possessiveness if that made any sense at all under the circumstances. He knew Tony wanted him to see the King as he did, though even Tony had admitted to the King’s failings. It wasn’t as simple kneeling and putting on new colors though, not for Steve.

“Alright. We all know what we’re supposed to do. Not much daylight left now, so let’s get a move on,” Steve ordered, walking over to pick up his sword and shield where he’d dropped them in his haste to reach Tony. He dusted them off and sheathed the sword in the scabbard dangling from his belt. He grabbed his pack from the dirt nearby and dug out his water pouch, taking a long drink before holding it out to Tony, who walked slowly over to take it from his hand. The rest of the team was gathering their gear as well, strapping on packs and picking up supplies that had spilled out in the melee. “Let’s hide the bodies in the rocks as best we can. No need to announce our presence any more than we already have,” Steve said, gazing again up at the mountainside where only the goats seemed to be observing their progress, though he knew that could well be an illusion.

They hid the evidence of the skirmish as well as could be expected under the circumstances, though Steve wasn’t particularly satisfied it hid much of anything. It would have to do though. He found himself reluctant to separate the team further, though he knew there wasn’t much choice. He didn’t have to like it though. “Remember,” Steve began. “If you can’t make it to your destination or run into anything that raises concerns, head directly for the sanctum. We can regroup there and decide what to do. No one mentions Tony or anything about a prisoner or Schmidt. And if anyone asks, our mission was fruitless, just like Pierce predicted. Hopefully, he’ll be too pleased to have been proven correct that he won’t question it too much.”
“What about Natasha and Clint? Won’t they have told Pierce about me?” Tony questioned, a flicker of worry crossing his features.

“No. I told them not to say anything,” Steve replied, bending to pick up his pack again and handing it to Tony to carry, since he would have the sword and shield.

“You did?” Tony asked in bewilderment. “Why? Could’ve gone a long way to helping alleviate any concerns Pierce might have had about your lateness.”

Steve shrugged. “You didn’t trust Pierce. I guess I trusted you enough to at least respect that. And we were going to Fury anyway, so it didn’t seem…well, it just didn’t seem something we should share,” Steve said as he buckled the scabbard belt around his waist again. He looked up to find Tony watching him in that assessing, careful way of his again.

“You…you’re faith in people…I don’t know what to do with that,” Tony mumbled, voice thick and rough, though his eyes were soft and questioning. “Someone believing in me like that, without…well, without expecting anything in return except the same.”

“Well, that’s why they call it faith. Anyway, I was right about you,” Steve said with a small smile, nodding towards the useless ordinance Thor had kicked out of the way. “Now, it’s just truth,” Steve finished, watching the play of emotions flicker across Tony’s face. Tony shook his head, wild hair tumbling around his face and bearded jaw. He hadn’t looked this raggedly since Steve fished him out of the river, and Steve found himself wondering idly what Tony would look like cleaned up, in real clothes. Of course, considering how haughty Tony managed to look even in such a bedraggled state, he could only imagine how relieved Tony would be to slide back into his own life again.

Steve felt a keen ache in his chest, realizing for the first time what this new plan of his truly meant. He was going to be saying goodbye to Tony in a few days’ time. Given everything, it was unlikely he would see him again, whatever thoughts might come unbidden in the dark of night. There was no path to that kind of ending, even if it was something Tony would want. Tony would likely be back in the city soon, helping with the King’s war effort, while Steve and the team did…whatever it was they were going to do if his suspicions about Pierce were confirmed. And whatever that was, it did not end with Steve finding Tony at war’s end and offering…offering not much, let’s face it. If he was right about Pierce, that wasn’t something he could walk away from, not matter what he might have to walk towards.

Steve turned to the remainder of the team. “You all know what you are to do. Any problems, head for the sanctum.”

“Uh…” Tony started, clearing his throat for effect. “If you run into any Stark people…I mean, if you have any problems. If…tell them…tell them you are an Avenger. Just…just tell them that.”

“The Crown has a price on all our heads, Tony,” Steve reminded him. “I don’t think that is—“

“I know what the Crown has done. Just…you trusted me when you probably shouldn’t have,” he said, looking over at Steve. “I’m asking you to trust me on this now. Tell them. Tell them you are an Avenger. I swear to you, it will be okay, if you just tell them. Please. Please, Steve, just tell them.” Steve saw three pairs of varyingly skeptical eyes dart around, but no one outright refused. It was the pleading in Tony’s voice that unnerved him. Tony didn’t beg, never had. Even when a prisoner or with the Ten Rings ready to hack his head off, Tony didn’t beg. He argued and ordered and pushed and cajoled, but he didn’t beg.

“Alright. You all heard Tony. If you run into Stark’s men, tell them you’re an Avenger,” Steve
repeated firmly, careful to keep the concern out of his voice. He saw Bucky open his mouth to say something, before snapping it shut again. “Either we trust him or we don’t. I trust him,” Steve said, looking at each of his team members in turn, earning quick nods from Thor and Bruce.

“Move out.”

Bucky turned around the way they had come and headed back down the Pass for Pierce’s encampment. Thor followed him, eyeing the mountains with poorly hidden distaste. Bruce and Tony set out after Steve, Tony toting Steve’s pack while he took point, trying to spot any further movement from the rocks, though the waning daylight made the shadows move and twist, making picking anything out against the rock all the more difficult. They were largely quiet as they walked, stopping only long enough for short breaks here and there. Steve had to reign in a laugh when Tony took out his biscuit and banged it against the rock wall, cupping a hand over his ear as if listening for an echo.

“You get used to them,” Steve said evenly.

“That’s the most depressing thing I’ve ever heard. And that includes all the stuff about a grand conspiracy to take over the Realm and doom everyone to the rule of a corrupt and evil organization run by a madman who, by all accounts, scarred his own face in some mad spell gone wrong,” Tony responded without looking up. Bruce just shook his head with a smile and tore off a piece of deer jerky. “I’m just saying, these things are awful,” Tony finished, glancing between Bruce, who was trying not to laugh around bites of jerky, and Steve, who had given up and was chuckling lowly as he tried to swallow around the hard bread. “First thing I’m going to do when I get back is have a decent meal, swear to the gods. No offense, Bruce, you make a fantastic roasted...whatever Natasha kills.”

“Thanks,” Bruce mumbled with a flat smile. “Wouldn’t mind some real food myself. Not much you can do out here but throw some salt on it. Speaking of, we need to change your poultice. I’ll pack up the ingredients for you to take with you and write down the mixture for you. Should be able to find what you need in the city without much trouble. The salt crystals, too. Be good to have a doctor look at your wound again though, when you get back to the city. Might be able to close it up now or work something else out.”

“Yeah, I have a few ideas on that, actually,” Tony replied, arching an eyebrow. “There’s a metal that I have a, uh, sample of…it isn’t like any ordinary metal. Very rare. Pretty amazing, actually. Hard to work with, but I think if I make an alloy with iron, it can work. But, I think I can work something up that won’t cause the same problems, even if it has to stay there a long time.” The two of them launched into a hushed discussion about what Steve simply liked to refer to as ‘science things’ in his head, though he enjoyed listening to the animated way Tony used his whole body to talk when anything to do with creating something came up. Tony clearly loved working with metal and the process of invention, whether he particularly cared for the end results or not.

Steve wondered how many weapons Tony would be building for the King once he returned, and tried not to think about the implications of that. Even if they were right about Pierce and Schmidt, there were good people fighting for Pierce’s cause. People had legitimate grievances with the Crown, which at least Tony seemed ready to acknowledge. He had admitted the King had been woefully absent, though he had expressed it far more colorfully than Steve ever could, he recalled with a slight smile. Tony thought the King, if he lived, could make up for it, set things right. Steve knew some things couldn’t be made right, though he couldn’t help feeling gratified that Tony would want to see that happen, even if it was impossible. Not even the King could fix everything.

Steve hoped to make the end of the Pass by that evening, but they were forced to climb over a rockslide, which took too much time out of their day and they couldn’t risk moving through the
Pass at night. One wrong step and they could end up with a broken ankle or leg, something which did not bear contemplating. Steve didn’t want to risk a fire that night, despite the dropping temperature, so Tony and Bruce curled up with Bruce’s blanket, Tony casting an apologetic glance at Steve as he tugged the tattered cloth around his shoulders. Steve climbed as high as he dared in the dim evening light and sat first watch. Nothing stirred, for which he was thankful. After some hours, he heard a soft whistle below him, and peered down, able only to make out a shadowy form. He clambered down and nodded silently to Bruce, who climbed part of the way up to Steve’s former perch and sat atop a large boulder, leaning back against the rock behind him, sharp gaze raking over the Pass and up and down the mountain.

Steve walked over to where Tony slept, cocooned in Bruce’s blanket, and lay down with his back pressed against Tony’s for warmth. He was absolutely certain of that, because he lay his sword down next to him as he always did, so there was no explanation for why he woke with the moon still high in the night sky with Tony sprawled on top of him, snoring softly and drooling a bit against Steve’s neck. He tried to shift Tony off of him, but the man just fisted his hand in Steve’s shirt and curled himself closer, making a soft, insistent shushing sound.

“Tony?” Steve whispered, rather urgently, because if the man didn’t stop moving over him like that, this was going to end in an awkward situation for both of them. He reached up to peel Tony’s fingers from his shirt, and jumped as Tony’s hand shot out, whip-fast, and wound his fingers firmly in Steve’s, pressing Steve’s hand back down against the ground by his head. Steve looked up, able to make out the dark shape of Tony above him, the sliver of white glittering in the moonlight where his very wide-awake eyes looked down at Steve. He opened his mouth to say something, though he wasn’t sure what, exactly, but managed only a puff of air as Tony ground their entwined hands into the dirt, rocking his hips against Steve’s just enough for it to be impossible to be anything other than deliberate.

Steve swallowed back a groan, tried to protest, to push Tony off of him, he was stronger after all. Or intended to do so, he wasn’t sure whether it actually became an action or not, because Tony’s other hand found its way between them, stroking lightly down Steve’s stomach and coming to rest over Steve’s hardening length. That was really all it took for Steve to forget why he had ever had any thought of stopping this, whatever this was. “T—Ton—” Steve breathed out in a hushed stutter that seemed to echo too loudly in the darkness, though he was sure no one could possibly hear it over the pounding of his heart thundering in his ears like a drum.

“Shh…” Tony whispered against Steve’s mouth, running his lips gently back and forth over Steve’s as he did, the scrape of his beard rough against Steve’s chin. “Let me. Let me, Steve, please.” Steve couldn’t have told him to stop if his life depended on it, as he watched in something akin to awed stufation as Tony brought his hand up and spit into his palm, then used his knees to nudge Steve’s legs apart. He pushed Steve’s breeches down far enough to give him access. Then Tony’s wet, calloused hand began stroking him in earnest, wrapping long fingers around his shaft, gently tugging the foreskin over the head of Steve’s cock and swiping his thumb over the moisture pooling at the tip on the end of each stroke, Steve’s whole body bucked, hips rising and pressing harder against Tony’s hand, searching for friction and contact, anything that meant Tony touching him more, just more. The hand that wasn’t wrapped around Tony’s reached up for purchase, grasping at Tony’s shoulder as Steve buried his head into the crook of Tony’s neck and squeezed his eyes shut against the sensations bursting over him in waves of pleasure so intense, he thought he might pass out, and wouldn’t that just be a fitting end? He felt his head fall back against the dirt, neck arched as he gripped Tony’s hand and pressed his hips up with a low moan.

“I got you, Steve,” Tony’s low, throaty voice said into his ear, alight with a soft, pleased fondness. “I got you. There you go. Gods, you’re so beautiful like this, Steve, you have no idea. I could look at you all day, just like this. That’s it, Steve. Come for me. Come for me, Steve.” Steve was sure
he was blushing, whether at what Tony was doing or his words, he didn’t know, but he had always been good at following orders. His hips jerked once, then twice, and he felt his stomach clench and whole body tighten. Tony traced his slit with his thumb, and that was all it took, he was spilling himself into Tony’s cupped hand, whatever cry he would have released caught in Tony’s mouth as he pressed his lips to Steve, nothing gentle about it this time, just heat and possession, thrusting his tongue deep inside Steve’s mouth in time with the jerk and twist of Steve’s hips as he came in warm spurts, plundering Steve’s slack mouth as if mapping it, the hand holding Steve’s own curling around Steve’s fingers, lacing them together into a fist.

Steve let his hand fall down from its death grip on Tony’s shoulder, gliding lower over Tony’s shirt, stopping only when he felt the warmth of Tony’s skin under his fingers. He splayed his hand wide over Tony’s stomach, felt the muscles bunch and shudder under him and started to move his hand lower in uncertain, stuttering movements, but Tony pulled back his mouth back, shaking his head, leaving Steve panting for air and some sense of focus that was currently escaping him. “Not tonight,” Tony said against his mouth, the words seeming to flow inside Steve with each breath. He wondered if he had done something wrong. “This…just you. Tonight. Just needed to touch you, Cap,” Tony breathed out. Steve looked up at him in confusion, but Tony just shifted to the side, rolling up to his knees and removing his hand from Steve’s breeches. He stretched his arm out some distance away to bury the evidence in the dirt, wiping the remainder off on his own pants.

Steve quickly tucked himself back into his breeches and leaned up on his elbows, again trying to form some kind of question from the hundreds that were filling his head, but Tony just leaned down and stole anything he would have asked away with another kiss, this one far less demanding, seeming to pour everything into Steve, which was somehow more intimate in its gentleness, the way Tony put so much of himself into it. When Tony released Steve’s mouth, he didn’t immediately pull back, leaning his forehead against Steve’s instead, eyes closed and breathing low and heavy. Tony pulled back enough to press a long kiss to the place his forehead had rested a moment earlier, then rolled to his side and shifted his back against Steve’s side again, as if nothing untoward had occurred.

It wasn’t possible for Steve to recover as quickly, though a soldier’s need to find sleep where he could was too ingrained to allow him to stay up for long, no matter his inner turmoil. When he woke in the morning, Bruce was sleeping next to him, a breeze lightly ruffling his hair. Steve looked up, and caught sight of Tony’s foot hanging down from a rock above them. He blinked himself awake quickly, sitting up and letting his eyes adjust to the light. His sword and shield were as he had left them the night before, sword next to his right leg, shield leaning against the rock wall to his left. He ran a hand over his face and nudged Bruce’s shoulder to wake him.

He grabbed his pack where Tony had left it the night before and searched around until his hand closed on the dwindling bag of biscuits and jerky. They needed out of the Pass today if for no other reason than their food supply was becoming more meager with each turn of the sun. A moment later, he looked up to see a shaggy head and dark eyes peering down at him, almost curiously. He held up the bag towards Tony, who turned and scooted down the large boulders carefully, landing with a soft thud at the ground next to Steve as he hopped the final few feet off the last one.

“Sleep well, Captain?” Tony asked, which should have sounded perfectly innocent, but did not even come close, much to Steve’s chagrin. He could feel himself blushing, hated his fair skin for giving his thoughts no protection. Last night had some sort of dreamlike quality to it, and when he had initially woken up, a dream seemed far more likely an explanation than any other. Yet, here was Tony, standing in front of him in the bright light of morning, slightly too close, though not enough to look out of place, Steve noted. Just enough to throw Steve off-balance, pushing into Steve’s space with deliberate familiarity. “Good dreams?” Tony questioned slyly, as if reading
Steve’s mind, a skill he had once accused Steve of possessing, though Steve thought the charge fit Tony far better.

“Fine,” Steve answered, giving Tony what he hoped passed for a long-suffering glance, though the man’s amused stare seemed entirely unfazed. If anything, Tony’s smile widened. He picked up his sword and belt, buckling the latter around his waist, though he kept his sword at the ready. Bruce was up and moving, turning his water pouch upside down over his mouth to grab the last few drops. Steve offered him his, but Bruce shook his head. He wished for mint leaves or rosemary to chew on to clean his mouth, but settled for swishing it out with some of the remaining water, only because he knew they would be out of the Pass today and could refill their water pouches.

He turned back to Tony, offering him the waterbag, only to find the other man stretching his arms high above his head, which had the effect of hiking his shirt up enough to revel hard stomach latticed with dark hair, trailing down and disappearing at the top of his breeches. Steve felt his hand flex in memory of tracing that same path last night, the warm, hard skin shuddering beneath his touch. When Steve managed to draw his eyes back to Tony’s, he found the other man watching him knowingly, with what could only be described as a pleased look. Steve at least knew when he was outmatched, shoved the water bag into Tony’s hand and turned away to walk ahead down the path, giving himself some time and space to calm his heartrate down, which always seemed to peak around something to do with Tony. Bruce and Tony tromped after him a moment later, the first light of day still breaking over the white-capped mountains.

They made the end of the Pass without incident shortly before midday. Steve could see the relief evident from both Bruce and Tony, quickly exchanged glances and grateful, if somewhat stilted smiles. The Pass emptied into a dense forest that ringed the mountains, bisected only by the river on this side. Steve had no idea what lay on the other side of the summits towering behind them and no desire to find out. His own map marked it simply with a many-headed monster, wrapping itself around the mountains, and he supposed that was all that mattered.

“This is where we separate,” he said a few hours later as they sat in the shade of tall trees, still dappled with leaves, just now beginning to give up their color. It almost felt odd to hear the sounds of life stirring around them, insects and birds that were largely absent in the Pass and whose calls went largely unnoticed until they were noticeable for their absence. “There’s a narrow road about a league away. Stay off it, but you can use it to guide you. There will be a small mill on an offshoot of the River with a field beyond it. Cut through it and keep heading east. Fury’s encampment will be on the other side of the forest beyond, but he’ll have patrols coming that far south. Find one of them and tell them who you are. They’ll take you to Fury or Hill. They’ll want a report, so think about what you’re going to say before you say it. We’ll take a wider circle and keep to the forest to get to Lord Ellis’ land. Bruce…be careful,” Steve said. “I want to believe Fury wouldn’t be a part of this, but…it isn’t like any of us are that close to him.”

“No one is that close to him. And remember, Fury ran the intelligence operations for the Crown for years. He’s not just a spy, he’s the spy. Fury’s secrets have secrets,” Tony cut in. “Basically, don’t believe a word he says. Look at what he does.”

Bruce nodded and clapped his hands together. “Not gonna tell anyone anything, don’t worry. I’ll see you at the sanctum. Try not to take too long. Strange and Clint under one roof? You know that isn’t going to end well,” Bruce said as he stood and brushed the grass and dirt off his breeches. “Good luck.” Tony stood up as well, and the two men shook hands, until Bruce grabbed Tony by the shoulder and drew him close enough to wrap his arms around the other man. “Stay safe, Tony,” Bruce said, clasping Tony on both shoulders. “Try to behave, if that’s possible.”
“You too, Sir Doctor, though I would rather like to see you lose some of your control just once. Hard to imagine it,” Tony replied, earning a grin from Bruce. “Seriously, Bruce, I wouldn’t have made it this far without your help. I won’t forget that.” Steve stood up as well, clapping Bruce on the back and giving him the berries, edible leaves and nuts he had managed to collect on their walk through the forest wrapped in a piece of torn blanket.

“Take care, Bruce,” Steve told him, feeling the loss of the last of his team keenly as the time finally came. "Don't forget to talk to Sam."

"I won't," Bruce promised.

“Remember to tell them you’re an Avenger, if you come across any Stark men,” Tony reminded Bruce, eyeing him sharply as Bruce adjusted his pack in readiness to depart.

“Yeah, not sure I’m going to start off with that, Tony, but I’ll keep it in mind for sometime after duck, run and hide,” Bruce replied with a wry twist to his mouth. Bruce nodded to both of them and turned to go. Tony moved to stand next to Steve and, by silent agreement, they watched Bruce’s departure until he was out of sight.

“We should go,” Steve said once Bruce’s form disappeared into the trees and shadows. He dug the few remaining berries and nuts out of his pocket and grabbed Tony’s hand, turning it over and dropping them in it. “Eat. It’s a long way, and I don’t want a fire out here, so no game for awhile.”

“You should eat, too,” Tony said, trying to hand him back the nuts and fruit.

“Not hungry.” Steve said, bending to grab his sword and shield and handing his pack to Tony to carry. He was suddenly uncomfortable in Tony’s presence, unsure if he should ask about the prior night’s…activity…or ignore it, as Tony seemed inclined to do. He wrapped his arm though the straps of the shield and turned the sword over in his hand, staring down at his distorted reflection in the blade and trying to decide what to possibly say.

“I’m going put a banquet in front of you every day and just watch you eat,” Tony said out of

Steve just shrugged. “You learn to eat when you can and not complain about what you get,” Steve remarked. “Just part of being a soldier, I guess. I’m used to it. You’re not. It’s fine, Tony. Really. Speaking of banquets, you should hear Thor talk about the food in Asgard,” Steve said, shaking his head and smiling at the memory. “Makes me want to believe it really exists, if just so I can find out what roasted bilgsnipe tastes like. About the only food he finds worthy here are these flat pastry things he can eat by the dozen. Never seen anything like it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Tony replied, spooning some of the berries into his mouth, the juice staining his lips, and Steve was definitely not going to think any more about that or what they would taste like or really, anything to do with Tony seemed like it should be off limits.

They walked side by side in silence for some time, all of Steve’s nerve endings seeming to tingle in anticipation of a conversation that apparently wasn’t happening. He started and stopped a number of them in his head, never quite able to force the myriad questions running circles through his mind into actual words.

“When I was a boy, I used to leave the city unattended when I could get away with it, which was often, seeing as how I was smarter than those who were trying to stop me,” Tony said out of
nowhere as they walked, interrupting Steve’s internal struggle. “There was a forest nearby, just down the River a ways. Bit different than this one, come to think. Far more well-traveled, for one, since the Kingsroad runs through it. It was Stark land, and most of it was reserved as hunting grounds for the King and his Lords and vassals, which in King Howard’s later years meant no one much used it for that. Anyway, there was a lake there, well, a pond, really, probably would look tiny if I saw it now. I used to watch the other children swim in it, splashing and playing games, skipping rocks, that kind of thing.”

“Sounds familiar,” Steve replied wryly. “I remember watching Bucky and the other boys play in the rivers and streams or down at the shore, chasing the waves as the tide came in. Couldn’t do much more than watch though, not if I wanted to keep breathing. How come you didn’t jump in though? Have them building a bridge or dam or one of those cranes like Bruce says they use down at the port in the city to unload cargo? Would’ve loved to have something like that to unload fish. We did it all by hand and net.”

“I told myself I didn’t want to, but I suppose the truth was that I didn’t see how I could possibly fit in with them. I thought if they…well, they wouldn’t want me, not really, though they would have done it. It would have been grudging, though, and that would have been even worse,” Tony finished, looking off into the forest as they walked, anywhere but at Steve.

“That’s your father talking,” Steve snapped, unable to keep the frustration out of his voice. He stopped abruptly and grabbed Tony by the shoulder, twisting the smaller man around to face him. “Do you even want to go to Captain Rhodes? You don’t have to. We can find other ways to alert him about Stane, and Pierce, if it comes to that. I didn’t think…I didn’t say, I guess…but, you know you could stay. With the team. I mean, if you wanted. You…you would be welcome. An asset. To the team. To—I…Tony, there isn’t anyone I’d rather have beside me. I know I speak for the rest of the team on this. I think…together…well. Together there isn’t much we couldn’t do,” Steve declared, the thought coming to him in a flash, though he found he knew it to be absolutely true.

Steve had only rarely allowed himself to think of scenarios for after the war, and even then, only sparingly, when the temptation was too great, vague notions of things that could not be. There were too many obstacles in that path, he knew. But the idea of Tony actually joining them, now, becoming an Avenger, working with the team to stop whatever was going on…he felt something warm flood his chest that he recognized as hope. Nothing had ever felt so right, this idea burgeoning in his mind.

Tony’s expression looked stricken, twisted by some profound grief Steve couldn’t place. “I don’t know if I should love it or hate it when you do that,” Tony remarked.

Had he said something wrong? He’d thought…well, he’d leapt to the thought that Tony was hinting at joining them, but that was far more likely to be Steve’s own desires manifesting themselves than Tony’s. Obviously, Tony had many things waiting for him back in the city, his own life, of which Steve actually knew woefully little. And what could this life even offer a man like Tony? Terrible food, hard living and early death, Steve’s mind repeated the familiar mantra from Phillips. Part and parcel of being a soldier, but Tony could be so much more. It was the height of selfishness to ask him to give up all that, of course it was.

“I—I didn’t mean to imply…of course, you don’t, it’s just…well, we would, the team would, I mean…be better for having you, is all,” Steve stammered, words that weren’t pleas failing him.

“Steve,” Tony said quietly, dark eyes liquid and almost golden in the patchy light that filtered through the trees above. “You have no idea how much I would like to take you up on what you
offer. Or what it means that you would even ask. You—it would be so easy. So, very, very easy,”
he continued, shaking his head and blinking rapidly as he looked up to catch the sun. “But I can’t.
I—there’s so much I have to do. I can’t take the chance…just because…there is just so damn
much at stake,” Tony went on. “I just can’t. Just…please don’t forget that you offered, no matter
what happens, don’t forget that at one point, you wanted this.” It was the answer Steve had
expected, had steeled himself to receive, but the rejection slashed through him nonetheless.

“I honestly don’t know what I want from you, Tony,” Steve murmured, looking down at his feet,
certain he had far overstepped Tony’s intentions.

“Then let me give you everything,” Tony replied, snapping Steve’s gaze back to his. He wondered
what Tony saw, when he looked at him like that. Did he see Steve looking back with just as much
need, with the same longing desperation? Was Steve just seeing his own thoughts reflected onto
Tony? It was so hard to be sure. Give him a battle to the death any day over figuring out what
Tony felt for him from one moment to the next.

“You don’t have to—“ was all Steve managed to get out before Tony’s mouth was on his, warm
and wet and pressing insistently against his, demanding entrance. Steve’s mouth parted willingly,
letting Tony’s tongue dart in, and he had the time to think of ripe, red berries, before he forgot to
think anymore. It was Tony who finally pulled away, panting, eyes wide and dark and fixed on
Steve’s mouth like a beacon.

“I keep telling myself I’m not going to do this. That I’m going to wait. All the reasons this is a
terrible idea, and then you say these things and look at me like…you have no idea, do you? How
you look at me. No one…no one sees me like you do, and I just want…I want to…Gods,” Tony
blurted out, stepping back and running a hand through his hair, leaving it in wild disarray.

“We…we, uh…we don’t have to wait. I mean, I don’t…I’m not…I—I would like. Damn. I’m not
doing this right, am I?” Steve asked, sighing in frustration and shrugging his shoulders helplessly.

Tony let out a low, brittle laugh. “You? You are doing everything right. It’s me who—fuck.
Look, we do have to wait, because I want more than just this. And if we do this now, you’ll hate
me for it. No, trust me, you will,” Tony went on, raising his hand and talking over where Steve
would have objected.

“I’m not going to hate you, Tony. That isn’t possible,” Steve replied, exasperated and still
humming with confused want every time he looked at Tony. “What is it you aren’t telling me? I
know there’s something. There isn’t anything you could say that—“

“Just—we can’t, that’s all. We can’t. Not…now. Please. Please, trust me on this,” Tony cut him
off.

“You say not now like there will be another time, but you don’t know that, Tony. There’s so much
that can happen. Of course, I want…I mean, I would, after everything is over, we could…Bucky
wants to find a place. By the sea. We could maybe go with him. I could work a plot of land, or
fish, or I don’t know…we could stay in the city, if you wanted. I could find something to do, I’m
sure. Don’t think they’ll exactly let me join up, even if that’s what I wanted, but I could maybe
help with the rebuilding,” Steve offered, feeling utterly ridiculous, his stomach dropping with each
syllable, but he was unable to stop the words tumbling from his lips. Once he actually said them,
though, he realized the truth of what they meant. He did want this, wanted Tony, wanted the
something more, whatever it was. “I know I’m not…I mean, I can’t offer much. But, I think we
could…we could be happy.”

Tony backed away from him so swiftly, it was as if Steve’s words burned. Tony turned on his heel
and walked several steps away before coming to a stop, swaying in place, his eyes squeeze shut and the palm of his hand pressed over his mouth.  “Tony?” Steve called.  “I’m sorry—I---I shouldn’t have said—“

“Let’s just get to Rhodes,” Tony mumbled.  “Let’s just…we need to get to Rhodes.  Then…then we—things will be different.”  Steve felt his whole body sag with disappointment and mortification.  Suddenly his sword and shield felt heavy, his whole body seemingly pulled to the ground.  “But my answer would be yes.  If you wanted to ask that again one day,” Tony continued without looking at him, starting to walk forward, leaving Steve standing there, completely confused, but with some bright bloom of giddy relief mixed with happiness pooling in his stomach.

Maybe it had taken almost losing Tony or being faced with the prospect of Tony leaving, possibly to never see him again, that had made Steve suddenly so reckless.  Whatever the reason, now that the idea had taken shape, now that there was some possibility of it, of an after, a life beyond the war, one so close, he could almost touch it, he realized he wanted it more than anything, and suddenly couldn’t stop the huge grin that spread across his face, not caring if Tony saw it or not, though he suspected the man did because he was dipping his chin to his chest and shaking his head every time he looked back at Steve trailing behind him.

They walked the rest of the day, neither saying much, both lost in their own thoughts, though Steve couldn’t fathom what occupied Tony’s mind for that long.  He kept looking over at the other man and getting the sense that if he had turned to look a moment sooner, he would have caught Tony smiling, the ghost of it still lingering on his face, softening the edges and lighting his eyes.

His own steps felt lighter somehow, whatever weight he had carried for so long seeming to have lessened once he acknowledged that he felt something beyond simple caring or attraction for Tony.  They supped during their walk, the last of the hard biscuits he carried with him, and a piece of Bruce’s jerky he tore in half.  By some unspoken understanding, when they stopped for the night, Tony curled up against his left side, using Steve’s arm for a pillow, and leaving his right hand free next to his sword, the shield leaning against the tree trunk behind them.  He stared up at the quarter of moon he could see through the tree branches above, pondering the day’s revelations.

He wasn’t sure if he should say anything further or not, Tony’s insistence that they wait until Steve got him to Captain Rhodes felt odd, though Steve couldn’t say exactly why it should concern him.  “Tell me why you joined Pierce,” Tony’s voice sounded quietly in the darkness, warm breath against Steve’s neck.  Steve closed his eyes against the darkness or the memories, he wasn’t sure.  He supposed he owed Tony this, though he almost never spoke of it.  But if they really were going to try to make something of this, he had to be honest with him.  And this still sat between them, a wall that couldn’t be breached, and he realized he didn’t want that, not anymore.  If they were to move past it, it was only fair to tell Tony his reasons, hoping it would help the other man understand, though he almost mourned the illusions the telling would shatter.

He only occasionally allowed himself to think of it, afraid it would signal one of those damnable states he sometimes found himself in, when all he could hear were screams, when the ash and smoke filled his mouth and he couldn’t breathe.  It never happened in battle, thank the gods, just when he was relaxed, when he had his guard down, letting ghosts slide through the cracks.  Bucky knew, of course, though he had been so far gone, he didn’t remember much of the end of it.  Bruce knew some, having come upon them on the path afterwards.  Nat, Clint and Thor knew some, the barest facts, nothing more.  He hadn’t been able to speak of it in years, though he found himself oddly eager to share it with Tony, to let some of the burden of knowing cleave to someone else, though he supposed that was selfish of him.
“Bucky went away, did you know that? No, of course not. He did though. We’d talked about it for years, planned for it, how we were going to join the army, but take some tour of the Realm first, see a bit of the world before we committed. Mostly Buck wanted to, but it was as good a plan as any that was never going to happen. Oh, I came up with some rather creative schemes to get myself to Kingstown, mind you, but we had no money, no tradable skills, and I couldn’t walk twenty paces without needing to sit down, so the likelihood was slim,” Steve recalled, catching Tony’s quick smile at the image and letting the memories wash over him.

“Bucky did it though. I think it just about killed him to leave me behind, but I told him to go. He had to get out of there, I knew. He was going to be a gods-awful fisherman,” Steve chuffed, shaking his head a bit. “I thought I’d never see him again. But he came back, almost a year later, with Peggy in tow. He’d met her on his tour. She was a foreigner who had been visiting with her father when she met Bucky. He always had a way with girls, even when we were kids. Could charm anyone. Always told him he could just talk the fish into the nets if he tried,” Steve said with a slight laugh. He had to ease into this or he would never get through it, he knew.

“Barnes was married?” Tony queried in curious surprise.

“Yeah. He and Peggy found a holy man soon as they got back to Brookland. Peggy…she was real special. All fire and determination hiding behind this soft exterior. I think she could’ve moved mountains with sheer force of will,” Steve remembered, thinking about deep brown eyes light with laughter and love. “Buck adored her. I’d never seen him so happy. They moved into Bucky’s parents’ house. Fixed it up real nice. He talked about enlisting again, but not with the same fervor he had before. Then Peggy got pregnant, and Bucky joined one of the ship crews, taking the long voyages for the bigger fish that always brought more at market. While Bucky was away on his journey, I’d…changed, I guess you could say. Whatever it was that had been waiting around all those years finally kicked in. Got over a lot of my health issues. Grew a good foot and put on several stone.”

“Bet he was surprised,” Tony surmised, not unkindly.

“True,” Steve smiled. “He’d told Peggy all these stories about his poor, sickly friend who desperately needed him and then they show up and I look like this. I was already practically living with the Buchanan’s while he was away, what with mom gone and all. Peggy kind of adopted me while Bucky was gone on his fishing trips, like some project she could turn into something just right if she tried hard enough. Everything seemed perfect, and for awhile, it was. I had Bucky back, and he had Peggy, and they were going to have a baby. It was like having a family, or close enough to it that I didn’t much mind that it wasn’t quite real. We were happy. They were happy.”

“And?” Tony prodded, though it almost sounded like he did it out of obligation and would rather if Steve ended the story there, even as he demanded to know more.

“Then the plague happened,” Steve said, forcing the words out with a deep breath. “We don’t know how it started. Not for sure. Some think it came in on one of the ships. Some say a traveler brought it. Some blame insects. Some say it was witchcraft. I don’t know,” he said, rubbing a hand over his face. “I just know that when it hit, it hit hard. The old and young first. It seemed like overnight, you couldn’t hear a child’s cry anymore. I never thought about how silence really sounded, you know? It isn't right. That kind of quiet,” Steve continued in a hushed, thick voice. “You—you don’t know what this sickness does. It’s…I’ve never seen the like. People would burn with fever, lose themselves to it. The pain…their bodies were…it was like their insides liquefied. They would bleed out anywhere the blood would flow, eyes, nose, mouth. It was horrible. Peggy…she got it first. The baby came too early, and he was…he…I can’t…” Steve stumbled, taking a shuddering breath. He felt Tony’s hand find his, squeezing tightly.
“You don’t…that’s enough, Steve, really. I don’t…it’s okay, you don’t have to talk about it,” Tony assured him, his other hand snaking up cover Steve’s chest, pressing against him in an attempt at calm.

“I know. I know, but you should know. Someone should know what happened. I’m not—someone should know,” Steve replied, finding his voice surprisingly steady and calm. Someone should know. If he didn’t survive this, he needed another human being to know what had happened, and there was no one other than Tony that he could imagine sharing this with.

“I buried him. Bucky’s son. He couldn’t do it. He didn’t want to leave Peggy, and it was…it was just too much, you know?” Steve asked rhetorically. “There was so much blood. Too much, as it happened. Peggy didn’t make it.”

“Gods. I’m sorry, Steve, I’m so very sorry,” Tony whispered, breath warm against his cheek.

“Erskine arrived the next day,” Steve continued. “He said he had seen something like this before and was working on a cure. He set up a laboratory just outside of town in what used to be a smokehouse. I helped when I could, doing odd jobs for him, bringing what food I could find. For whatever reason, I didn’t get sick. Of all things, everything I had dealt with over the years…but this thing, this one, horrible thing? This passed me by, though it hovered over everyone else in town. In the whole of the Riverlands, though we didn’t know it at the time. Then Bucky started to show symptoms. I took him to Erskine. He wanted to try something. A possible cure, he said. Some formula he’d been working on for years. Wasn’t like we had any other options,” Steve remarked, unable to keep the bitterness entirely out of his voice. “I don’t think he really believed this version would work either, but what choice did we have? We had to try something,” Steve said, remembering Erskine’s questioning glance and a quick nod of agreement to try something that would probably kill his best friend ever so slightly faster than the other thing that was killing him.

“There was this stretch of bay, between the shore and where the waters formed an inlet in the cliffs that the boys used to dare each other to swim,” Steve began, listening to the nightbirds as they trilled and hooted in the distance. “I was always too sick or too weak to swim it, of course. At least, when I was young and it mattered,” he recalled, catching Tony’s confused stare at the abrupt change of topic.

“It was about a week after that, when it happened,” Steve kept on, forcing the words out when they would have lodged in his throat. “Bucky was resting, actually doing a bit better that day, and Erskine told me to go out for the afternoon, just get away. There was no away to get to, not really. Everything was quiet, shut down, windows covered and doors closed, the way they never were in summer. It was hot, I remember that. High days of summer. Maybe that’s why I thought of it. The inlet, with the churning waters. I swam it, crossed to the other side and climbed the cliff there. There’s a path, if you know where to look. Steep, but you can make it. Sat at the top, the way I’d seen the boys do when I was young. It seemed you could see the whole Realm from up there.”

“I can’t even imagine what that must have been like, watching all that happen and not being able to do much to help,” Tony said softly, his fingers clenching tighter on Steve’s where their hands intertwined. Steve brought their linked hands up, laying them together across his chest, liking the weight of them as he breathed.

“You have to understand…this went on for awhile. It didn’t just happen all at once, though it seemed like it was happening all too quickly at the time. As the summer dragged on, more and more got sick. We couldn’t fish, and we couldn’t trade. No one would have anything to do with
our goods anyway. Without the trade, we didn’t have a way to get the food that was needed. We were getting desperate. Between the sickness and the lack of food, people were scared,” he remembered, taking a deep breath, the last moment of calm before the plunge. “So…so when the Stark troops showed up…everyone was so relieved.”

“The Crown sent supplies. Medicine, food, that kind of thing,” Tony remarked, sounding almost pleased. Steve felt the familiar churning anger deep within him, but pushed it aside. It wasn’t Tony’s fault, he reminded himself. He bore no responsibility simply for believing in his King.

“I could see them, from my vantage point on top of the cliffs,” Steve said, careful to keep his voice as even as possible. “I could see them,” he started again, finding his throat tightening and chest compressing as he struggled to get the words out. “There was this boy, maybe eight or nine. Richard was his name, I think. I should know that, but…I can’t remember it now. I should though—I,” he stuttered to a halt, giving himself a moment before forcing the rest of it out. “He ran out to them, maybe hoping for a handout, maybe just because he was excited to see soldiers, I don’t know. I think I could see it before it happened, but I couldn’t do anything, just watch. The soldiers…they had their swords out, see? I knew…I knew something wasn’t right. I couldn’t place what it was, not until later, one of Phillips’ many lectures,” Steve said, wiping a hand over his eyes. Tony had gone stiff as a stone next to him.

“No…” Tony whispered, almost a plea.

“They ran him through. He was so small, he was actually lifted up on the sword before he slid off into the dirt. I was halfway down the cliff before I realized I’d moved. I swam back across the channel as fast as I could, but by then, most of the town was aflame. I had no idea what I was going to do. No weapon. We didn’t have swords in Brookland, just tools for farming and fishing. A few bows. Hell, I didn’t even have my shoes. I’d taken them off to swim over. .” Steve said, blinking against acrid smoke that wasn’t there. “I grabbed my shirt from the beach and ran to Erkine’s hut, but it was already on fire. I could see the black smoke pouring from it by the time I got there. I went inside, but couldn’t see anything at first. Covered my face with the shirt, got down and crawled under the smoke, but it was so thick,” Steve choked out, gasping for air at the memory. Tony’s grip on his hand was almost painful, but enough to ground him, to keep him from slipping too deep into the memories.

“Bucky had fallen out of his cot. Part of the roof had collapsed on top of him. His arm was crushed by one of the beams, and…it was…burning. I could smell it, even over the rest of the fire, and he was screaming, like nothing I’d ever heard before. I grabbed him, pulled. Probably a terrible decision, but all I could think about was getting him out of there,” he shuddered. “I couldn’t breathe. I was going to pass out, and we were both going to die, I knew it. All I could think about was getting to air. I don’t know how we got out. Just we suddenly were, and it was bright and it hurt to breath, but it was the best thing I’d ever felt,” Steve said, dragging in a long breath.

“The soldiers were moving through the town. Erskine was running towards the soldiers with his hands up, trying to tell them to stop, that he had found a cure, it was okay. Someone shot an arrow through his neck,” Steve told him. “I should have gone back, should have done something, fought, I don’t know. But I didn’t. I ran, dragging Bucky with me. I remember looking back at one point and seeing I was leaving footprints behind me and thinking they would follow us, the Stark men,” Steve continued, a shudder running through him. “I cut through one of rivers, across the delta where all the tributaries flow into the sea, took to the cliffs. We stayed there until the smoke turned white. Bucky’s arm was in terrible shape, and he was too far gone from the pain to do much of anything. I got us down the other side to the forest, one of the roads there. Just a farmer’s path, really, for wagons, but I couldn’t walk on the rocks anymore. I don’t know where I was going.
Wasn’t thinking about anything except getting away. Bruce found us, by some miracle. Said Bucky’s arm had to come off. Bruce told me to hold him tight, keep him from moving. Bucky was calling for Peggy the whole time. I didn’t know what to say.”

Steve scrubbed his face with his hand, surprised to find it wet with tears he hadn’t realized he was shedding. His eyes stung, phantom screams still ringing in his ears. Tony was rigid next to him. He probably should have eased into that more, rather than spilling everything out at once. He knew that Tony cared for his King. He should have been more careful, but once he began his tale, he couldn’t seem to stop.

“I looked down and realized I was still holding my shirt, though it was almost black with soot. Erkine’s letter to Phillips was in the pocket,” Steve remembered, his hand fisting around phantom paper. “Seemed as good a plan as any. Bruce even came with us, though probably because he thought Bucky was going to die of blood poisoning without him.”

“Tony?” Steve asked gently when Tony remained quiet after long minutes. “I know that isn’t what you wanted to hear…”

“The King didn’t do that—he would never—never, Steve, you have to believe me. Never,” Tony pleaded, something broken and desperate in his voice as he turned to face Steve. He looked terrible, Steve though, somehow hollowed out and less than Steve was used to seeing him, so often seeming bigger than the constraints of life would normally allow. “He sent troops, yes, but they were taking supplies. Supplies, for gods’ sake. Food, medicine. Gods fucking dammit, they were supposed to be helping!” Tony shouted standing up abruptly, stalking away and pacing back and forth in front of Steve’s prone from with some kind of manic energy animating him. “It was Stane, it had to be. He—he must have countermanded the order—we heard everyone died from the plague—I swear, I never knew, I never fucking knew, Steve, I wouldn’t—“ Tony broke off, gasping and clutching at his chest.

“Tony, don’t…don’t…it was a long time ago. No one knew. Wasn’t like they wanted it to get out. You didn’t have anything to do with it,” Steve assured him, watching Tony’s face twist with pain before he dipped his head enough to hide his expression from Steve. “I just…thought you should know before we…before. I wanted you to know. I know you think the King is a good man, and maybe he is, maybe it was Stane, but it wasn’t like we joined Pierce on a whim. After training with Phillips, I honestly didn’t know what I wanted to do. There hadn’t been any plan beyond get to Phillips. Bucky and I got into a…well, he would stop me here to say that I got Bucky and I into a bit of a disagreement with some of Fury’s soldiers…Fury found us after it was over. Thought he was going to arrest us, to tell you the truth. Instead, he recruited us. Said he was looking to put together a team, something different than the usual battalion or regiment. Something special,” Steve said, feeling his voice steady a bit as he got away from talking about what had happened.

“We weren’t going to do it, not at first. But, somehow, we got to talking. Fury’s good at that, I think,” Steve continued with a wry smile. “Told him we were from Brookland. He got this look on his face…said he had been in the Council meeting when the King’s order had come down. Destroy the town, can’t risk that kind of thing getting out. I guess a part of me even understood it at that point. I’d been able to rationalize it. I can see it, the thought process. It’s too risky. If the disease got out of the Riverlands, it could have devastated the entire Realm. Better to just cut it off there. I mean, I understand why, I suppose,” Steve said, unable to fully keep the bitterness out of his voice. “A King has a duty to protect the Realm. But…we were part of that, too. We were his people, and we needed help…instead, it was just easier, safer, to get rid of us. What would it matter, anyway? What did we matter? I just couldn’t imagine it, sitting there in a meeting, talking about killing your own people, without even trying anything else.”
“That never happened. There was no order,” Tony said hollowly. He was tapping at the metal plate in his chest in some kind of internal rhythm known only to him, not looking at Steve, eyes staring fixedly at nothing.

“Tony, Fury was there. Pierce argued against it, apparently rather vehemently. Fury said he had been disappointed with the King’s decisions for some time, but this…it was the thing that finally led Fury and Pierce to rebellion,” Steve told him. He didn’t want to argue with Tony about this. Tony was understandably upset about learning the truth of the man he followed, though he seemed more distraught by the revelations than Steve would have thought. “If it was really Stane and not the King himself—“

“Then the King is a fucking bastard who let this happen…let this…his own fucking people…gods, how could…because he was too busy screwing and drinking his way through life to care what was going on so long as it didn’t affect him,” Tony bit out, the words coming harsh and guttural, filled with the force of judgment and recrimination. “Did you know there’s a monument? Well, it’s a plaque, really. Very tasteful. The King had nothing to do with it, of course. His Steward chose it. Arranged a little remembrance ceremony. Lots of great Lords and Ladies in attendance, all dutifully solemn in their mourning attire. The King was hung over from a night of debauchery, and his Steward had to drag him out of bed and remind him what day it was. He spent his afternoon surrounded by a sea of discarded black clothes,” Tony informed him flatly, still staring without seeing. “You were right not to serve him. He doesn’t deserve it.”

“If he truly didn’t know…If he was deceived by Stane as much as we were deceived by Pierce, then—“ Steve began haltingly, Tony’s words still stuck in his mind, the image of the King too drunk to rouse himself to even mourn them. Maude and Thomas, who once gave him a pot of butter after he repaired their fence to keep the goats from straying. Brennan, who loved the sea so much they said he swayed with it as he walked, and his sister, Anne, who sang hymns from memory. Peggy. Bucky’s son, who Steve knew he had named George, after his father, though he never spoke the name now.

“Don’t. Just don’t, Steve. Don’t make excuses for him. It isn’t the same thing, and you know it. Barnes was right. There is no absolution to be found,” Tony ground out, rubbing his forehead in his hand, and looking utterly gutted, perhaps more so than Steve.

“Tony,” Steve started, reaching a hand out to grasp his shoulder, only to have the attempt knocked away. “Tony, what—“ he began, confused.

“Don’t touch me. I’m not—I can’t do this. Fuck. Just…gods, this is my recompense, isn’t it?” Tony asked the stars. He finally looked over at Steve, but couldn’t seem to meet Steve’s eyes, just let his gaze track over Steve’s dark shape in the wood, fleetingly, but Steve could almost feel it running over him. “For…for being a fucking idiot, I get children impaled on swords? People, innocent people, slaughtered and burned? I get to be close enough to touch this…this…thing,” Tony broke off, waving a hand to the air between where he and Steve stood.

“Tony, you are being entirely too hard on yourself. I never blamed you for trusting the King. And you had no way to know any of this. It’s hardly your fault for choosing to serve the only King you’ve known. Please don’t do this to yourself,” Steve begged, becoming concerned by Tony’s increasingly agitated state. He should have waited, shouldn’t have sought to unburden himself at Tony’s expense.

Tony sank to the ground, bending his knees and pillowing his head against them. “I know this is not a debt that can ever be repaid. Nothing will take away the pain and grief it has caused you. I know that. Just…just know that…the King…he will do anything you allow of him to try to make
it up to you,” Tony said quietly, voice deep with a longing so profound and pain-filled, Steve thought he had never heard the like of it. He walked over to where Tony sat on the ground beneath the tress and knelt down next to him, rubbing a gentle hand up and down his back in a soothing motion that, after a moment’s hesitation, Tony leaned into with a sigh that was more of a sob than anything. “And if what you require of him is absolutely nothing, then he will give you that as well,” Tony vowed as he pressed his face into Steve’s sleeve. "I promise."
Steve curled his body around Tony’s, drawing him closer. “The King owes me nothing more than what he owes everyone else. To rule well and justly, that’s all,” Steve replied softly, resisting the urge to press a light kiss to the top of Tony’s head where his scraggly mass of tangled hair stuck up everywhere after he’d run his hands through it repeatedly. Tony kept his own counsel about whatever it was that troubled him so deeply, apparently not something he wanted to share.

“You make it sound so easy,” Tony said, sounding somewhere between exhaustion and defeat, making Steve’s chest tighten to hear the tremor in his voice.

“Doing what is right has never been hard. It’s knowing what the right thing is to do that’s the hard part. We all just do the best we can, Tony. No one can demand more of any man, be he King or peasant. And if we’re right about Pierce and Stane, the Realm will need a leader who can do that now more than ever,” Steve told him.

“The Realm might be screwed, you know,” Tony replied, in a voice devoid of emotion.

“I don’t believe that. And neither do you,” Steve reminded him. “You…you obviously believe in the King. I would never want to disabuse you of that faith. I hope you are right about him. I hope he can be the kind of ruler the Realm needs. Good men are made, Tony, not born. Who knows how all of this might change him? Facing death and knowing betrayal? Sometimes it takes being weak to find strength you didn’t know you had. Let’s just hope that is true for your King.”

“My King?” Tony echoed. “But not yours.”

“Even if he isn’t someone I can follow, that doesn’t mean he can’t be someone worth following,” Steve replied, ignoring the barb behind Tony’s words. Tony took this all personally, he knew. He even understood, considering Tony’s involvement with the production of weapons used by the Realm. He could at least appreciate how difficult it must be for Tony to accept that the things he made had been used in ways that horrified him.

“Well,” Tony chuffed, scrubbing his hand over his face. “If a little death and betrayal is all it takes to make a good King, he’s about to become the finest the Realm has ever seen.”

“Then maybe all of this will be worth it,” Steve yawned. “Sleep, Tony. We have another long day tomorrow, but if we make good time, we should reach the fringes of Lord Ellis’ land by tomorrow evening.” Steve closed his eyes, listening to the sound of Tony breathing against him, waiting for it to even, but he could hear Tony rending blades of grass from the ground next to him and occasionally tapping on the metal plate in his chest, too wound up to sleep.

“Other things can make someone want to change, too, you know,” Tony burst out suddenly, as if he had been holding it in like a great gulp of air. “Make them want to be better. To be worthy.”

“You don’t need to change to be worthy of anything, Tony,” Steve replied sharply. “You just need to see that you already are.”

“I see what I am just fine,” Tony ground out.

“No, you really don’t. You see the person people have told you that you are,” Steve objected. “I
told you before that you take too much onto your shoulders, Tony. Stop punishing yourself for things beyond your control. I know you think you have this influence and power because you make the weapons Stark uses, and maybe you do have friends in the military or at Court, I don’t know, but you aren’t responsible for the decisions made by those who do wield power. You would carry guilt that isn’t your burden. Lay it to rest, Tony.”

“Would that it were that simple,” Tony sighed.

“If we’re right about Pierce, what price should I pay for supporting his cause? Do you hold me to answer for his crimes? The team? Believing in someone does not make you accountable for their actions. Would you see me strung up next to him because I chose poorly?” Steve demanded, feeling Tony stiffen next to him at his words.

“Of course not!” Tony nearly shouted at him. “You had no way to know. None. But the King should have known, Steve, surely you can see that? He should have found out. This was happening right in front of him, in his name for gods’ sake. He was too busy whoring and drinking his way to an early grave to care.”

“You are quick to forgive the failings of others, but not your King’s?” Steve questioned, raising an eyebrow. He could see how deeply Tony was affected by all of this. He shouldn’t have told him about Brookland. He knew how Tony felt about his King, but he had told him anyway because he wanted Tony to understand, to stop thinking his loyalty a fickle thing to be dissuaded so easily, but it was hardly fair to place the grievances he carried at Tony’s feet and expect him to ignore them when there was a possible way to blame himself. He tried a different tactic. “You said the King ordered supplies be sent. That he intended to help. That is not the work of a man who does not care. I think you judge him harshly because you feel responsible for how your weapons may have helped Stane,” Steve said quietly. “You think if he had been a better King, you wouldn’t have been so deceived.”

“It’s true, isn’t it? How many have died in a war that didn’t need to happen? How many have I helped kill that died for nothing?” Tony demanded. “I—there was—the Crown put a price on your head. Yours, Steve. You said so yourself. He wanted to hang you, you know? You were nothing to him, just an annoyance to be dealt with. How--how am I supposed to live with that?”

“What of the Stark men I killed? Good men, Tony. Who won’t get to go home, won’t see their spouses or children again. Fighting for what they believed in, which it seems may very well turn out they had the right of it. It--it could have been you. Some other time, some other place, and it could have been you,” Steve stammered. “And what fate do you think would have befallen you or your King if Pierce won? It’s war, and its ugly and there is no winning, just degrees of how much of yourself you lose. If we go down this path, it will never end. Heroes are for the history books, Tony. They don’t live here. We’re just soldiers. We don’t make the world, we just try to make it a little bit better.”

“I’m not a soldier,” Tony sighed against him. “Would you forgive him? The King? If he was misled?” Tony asked quietly after a long pause, though there was a bated tension to his tone, the way his eyes stared fixedly at the ground

Steve measured his answer carefully. He honestly didn’t know what to think about the King’s actions now, when he was able to connect all the maplines and see far more than he had known was there to find. “Would he forgive me? A soldier? If I was misled?” Steve echoed.

“Of course he would, but it isn’t the same and you fucking know it. Don’t. Don’t do that, dammit. Don’t forgive him that easily,” Tony bit out harshly, looking away again, refusing to meeting Steve’s eyes.
“It doesn’t have to be the same,” Steve replied, winding his hand through Tony’s as he did, tugging slightly to pull the other man’s gaze back to him. “You mistake what is equal for what is fair,” Steve said, shaking his head at the turn of their conversation. Was he actually arguing with Tony over how lenient he should be in judging his King? Only Tony could manage to twist his mind into the feats of logic required for that, he thought with an exasperated smile.

“Not that I don’t appreciate your willingness to forgive my mistakes, but you know it is rather likely the King, if he lives, won’t be quite as eager to pardon those who fought against him as you are,” Steve said, stretching his arms out and folding them under his head as he settled back in the grass, watching the susurration of the canopy of leaves above as they caught the night wind. “I know you think you have influence with the military because you make some of their weapons, but you must realize that it is far more likely that the King will see us all as traitors, even if we help stop Pierce. We did join the rebellion in the first place. Hard to argue too much with that conclusion,” Steve said after Tony remained disconcertingly quiet.

“Your mocking of my influence and power is going to come back to haunt you,” Tony told him, sounding a bit more like himself.

“Bruce mocked, not me,” Steve deflected with a low chuckle. “Considering, as Bucky pointed out more than once, that I’ve done pretty much everything you have demanded of me since we met, I’m completely confident of your ability to persuade.”

That, at least, finally earned a wry twist of Tony’s mouth, close enough to a smile that Steve was going to count it. “Fine, you just think I’m having delusions of grandeur or something,” Tony groused. “I don’t know if I should be offended by your doubt or pleased that you don’t care one way or the other.”

“Sleep. You can tell me all about why you’re all powerful tomorrow,” Steve ordered gruffly.

“Tomorrow,” Tony mumbled against his side, making it sound like a promise.

“I’m sleeping now. You can keep talking if you want,” Steve replied evenly, closing his eyes, though he knew it would, by necessity, be a light sleep and not a particularly restful one. They didn’t have the numbers to keep a regular watch, and both he and Tony were exhausted from the hunger and exertion. He would have to rely on his general alertness to things that sounded wrong in the forest to force him to wakefulness if anyone happened to come close to them during the night, though he judged that unlikely. The forest was too thick for regular patrols by horse, and it was doubtful Fury would send men out this far to an uninhabited, and, thus far, undisputed, region without cause.

Steve woke with a start some hours later, something triggering his senses. When he strained to listen, all he heard were the usual night sounds, a chorus of crickets and birds overlaying the wind bracketing thick branches lined with leaves. He didn’t feel Tony’s warm length nestled against him and flicked his eyes open to find Tony sitting next to him, arms wrapped around his bent knees, staring down at him, silent and still, for once. Steve’s first thought was that he looked beautiful, decorated by moonlight, all shadow and angles. He only realized Tony had been crying when the other man swiped a hand across his face, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. Steve started to reach out, ask what was wrong, but Tony’s voice broke the silence before he could.

“My father hated me, you know. I’ve told myself a hundred stories why over the years. Because he thought I was weak, worthless. Because he was jealous that I might be smarter, better at what we did. Because he wanted me to be some ideal he failed to reach and hated both of us when I couldn’t. I don’t know,” Tony whispered brokenly. “It was like he was always looking for something else, never satisfied with anything he had. I think he was a good man at one time.
People seemed to admire him long past when they should have stopped, and that must have come from somewhere,” Tony stated with a half-hearted shrug of his shoulders. “I kept telling myself he was wrong, that his hatred came from bottle at his side, not from anything to do with me. Yet, I lived my life striving to be exactly what he said I was. I don’t know why I did that. You were right. About me. Being the person that other people say I am. I spent so much time being terrified he was right about me that I didn’t notice I was the one proving him correct.”

“Tony—” Steve began.

“I’m sorry. About James’ family,” Tony broke in with a choked off sob, voice thick with sadness and a grief so profound it made Steve’s heart twist like someone squeezed it in a vice. “I said things to him. To James. I shouldn’t have said those things. I should’ve just kept my mouth shut, but I can never do that. Always have to have the last word. Can’t just fucking leave it be. Except now, when it matters, when the last word should be an apology, I don’t get to do that.”

“Ah, Tony,” Steve sighed, running his hand over his face, unsure what to say. “Buck…he…well, he wasn’t exactly your friend, I know. Not at first anyway. And he can push, gods know. But he didn’t hold anything you may have said against you, that much I’m sure of. He was just…worried. About me, really. He thought I was letting myself get in too deep, that you…he didn’t trust you, is all.”

“He wasn’t entirely wrong. You must know that,” Tony said quietly, sliding his hands through his hair again and gripping the sides of his head, as if in pain.

“I know there are things you aren’t telling me, but that doesn’t mean I doubt you, doubt this…whatever this is. There’s a difference,” Steve insisted. “I said I trust you, and I never say what I don’t mean. I see you act the part of a man who knows his value, but you know nothing of your worth. Not really. You say your father searched for an ideal he couldn’t find, but you demand perfection from yourself that isn’t possible for anyone to achieve. Everyone makes mistakes, Tony. Gods know I have my own to answer for. But you don’t have to pay for them for the rest of your life. Good people can make bad choices. You’re a good man. I know you are. Do you honestly think I would have offered…that I would want to…Dammit it all, Tony, quit trying to find reasons I’m wrong, and prove me right.” Tony blinked at him for a moment, but even in the moonlight, Steve could see his expression shift, the grief-laden defeat sliding off and the far more familiar mask of determination slipping into place as a knight might put on his helm.

“I think you see a man I’ll never be, but damned if I’m not going to try,” Tony finally stated carefully, though Steve could hear the force behind each word.

“Nothing you do or fail to do is going to change how I feel, Tony. Not about this. I promise,” Steve vowed, trying to put as much of what he felt into the words, though they seemed entirely inadequate to contain it. It was as close as he was able to come to saying the words that had already written themselves in his heart, but it seemed cruel to say them now, when they were so close to parting. It set up an expectation to which it wasn’t fair to tie Tony, not when so much was still left to be done. The words he did speak seemed to be enough to settle Tony, though, who scooted over to lie down next to him, sliding the length of his body against Steve’s side. Steve reached his hand up, gingerly at first, and pressed his hand against the hard metal plate in Tony’s chest.

“It’s awful, I know,” Tony breathed out, disgust evident in his tone and the way his mouth twisted as Steve touched traced the metal disk embedded in Tony’s skin. “I’m going to make something else. Something better. Maybe not exactly good to look at, but…maybe not quite as…”

“This new thing…this metal you told Bruce about…it won’t hurt you? Like this one does?” Steve
Tony shook his head. “Thought you weren’t paying attention when Bruce and I talked?” Tony asked archly, though Steve could hear the note of pleasure in his voice. Steve rolled his eyes. Tony liked an audience, there was no doubt, though he honestly did enjoy listening, even if he often had no idea what the two of them were talking about. He thought it would not do Tony’s ego to hear that he could happily listen to him talk about most anything. “Anyway, not a bit. Might still look odd, but won’t be trying to kill me,” Tony explained.

“I like it. I mean, I hate it. I mean…I mean I hate that it happened to you.” Steve stuttered out, squeezing his eyes shut in frustration at his own ineptness. “That you were hurt, I mean. But, this…this thing…what it stands for…everything you went through…it brought you to us. The team. So, I can’t look at it without thinking about that. Can’t think of it as awful, I suppose,” Steve replied softly. Tony let out a long sigh next to him.

“Sleep,” Tony said after a long pause where he stared up at the stars peeking through the roof of leaves. “Tomorrow is going to be a very long day. For both of us.”

Steve drifted off in no time, though he dreamed he looked up to see Tony sitting sentinel in the night, haloed by the moon. He woke up early, the sky just graying enough to signal the start of the day and shifted his arm out from underneath where Tony had pillowed his head for the night. He picked up his pack, untying the topknot and opening the small bag that contained his few possessions. He took out his roll of maps, unfurling the one he intended to give to Tony and placing that to the side. He took another, this one unfinished, showing just a few bits and pieces of the roads and villages that dotted the lands around where Pierce was camped just outside Kingstown. He took out his small bit of charcoal, little more than a nub now, really, ground down so much by use. He took out his knife and carefully sharpened the edge, then began sketching, dark, swift strokes across the bottom corner.

They had talked about the future, he and Tony, danced around it enough to make it something that seemed real, anyway, instead of this great, blank gulf where thoughts of his future usually resided. But Steve had never been one to lie to himself, and despite Tony’s certainty that the King would be forgiving and there could be a place for them after the war, Steve knew the likelihood of both of them surviving to see that future was small, even if such mercy was offered. He looked over at Tony’s prone form, curled in the dew-spotted grass. He wanted something more permanent than his memories to carry with him.

When he finished his sketch, he stared at his work for a moment and then tucked it away at the bottom of his pack. He rolled up the other maps and placed them back in the pack as well, but this one, this one he would keep. He scouted ahead a bit, looking for familiar markers that might indicate if Rhodes or Fury were sending patrols out this far. He found a blueberry bush growing wild against a desiccated tree trunk and picked the few meager berries still left after the birds had feasted off a bush before heading back to where Tony slept, curled on his side with a hand out, grasping the ground where Steve had been, making Steve’s stomach do that odd, looping drop, like it was suddenly unmoored and set adrift.

Steve took the piece of folded paper out of his shirt pocket and stared one last time at the coded message in his hand. He had studied it carefully over the past couple of days, spent so much time with it that he knew he would remember the numbers until the day he died. One last glance and he shut his eyes, seeing the series of numbers in his mind exactly as it was laid out on the page.

Hesat down next to Tony and nudged his shoulder to wake him, though Tony seemed to consider waking to be far more of an involved process than Steve. Tony finally set up, and Steve handed
him the water pouch with its remaining sips and took his hand, spilling the berries into Tony’s palm. “Breakfast,” Steve said with a small smile. Tony just looked at him like he had grown two heads in the night, so Steve backed away long enough to give the other man a chance to truly wake.

“That is not what that is, but okay,” Tony declared, looking down at his hand in annoyance. “You eat. And don’t even try any of that ‘I’m not hungry’ crap.”

“I already ate,” Steve said instead with a cheeky grin. Tony threw a berry at his head that Steve dodged easily. “You’re just wasting them,” Steve admonished.

He picked up his sword and shield, giving Tony a few moments of privacy before they left for the day. Steve turned around to find Tony waiting for him, Steve’s pack slung over his back, looking expectant, practically bouncing with anticipation. He was clearly happy at the thought of returning to civilization, not that Steve could blame him. These weeks out here had been tough on all of them, but far more so on Tony, who was obviously not accustomed to this type of hard travel.

“Before we head out, there’s something I need to show you,” Steve said carefully, picking up the map he had set aside while Tony slept. “Here,” he said, offering the rolled up paper to Tony, who took it and opened it, staring at it curiously.

“It’s Kingstown. That’s the Castle and Tower. The River. Stark’s forces. Pierce’s…so?” Tony asked, looking up at him in question.

“Right. Now, turn it over,” Steve instructed. Tony flipped the map over, studying the sketch on the back carefully.

“Is this…it’s Brookland, isn’t it?” Tony guessed.

“Yes, it’s Brookland. That’s where we were. The team. Before we took a detour through the desert to avoid Stark’s lands and see if we could map that area a bit,” Steve replied. “Fold the back of the map over the front,” Steve instructed, watching as Tony did so.

“I don’t—what am I missing?” Tony questioned, staring down at the map. “It’s…is that…wait, that’s not right. That isn’t supposed to be there…”

“I know. It isn’t. At least, it isn’t on any maps that exist. Except for that one. The fishermen talked about it for years, decades, really, how the sea was giving ground to the cliffs. You could always make it at low enough tide. I remember watching Bucky and the boys wade across, maybe chest high back then. But each year, it got easier and easier. That channel I told you about? Where I climbed the cliff? By the time the plague came, it was the deepest one, the only one that still filled with water high enough you have to swim it. It isn’t like that anymore,” Steve told him. “Do you see, Tony?” he prodded.

“If you can get one man through—“ Tony started.

“An army can get through,” Steve finished for him. “It would take time to make the climb, and you’d have to time things with the tide, but you could do it. The team could do it. The city isn’t fortified on that side because the cliffs are supposedly impassable and there’s no other way to get to that part of the city except by the River, which is dammed, so you can’t get ships of any size near that area. But the cliffs…you couldn’t get heavy horse or cannon through, but you could get a big enough team in. That side is barely even guarded. Enter the city under cover of night, take the gate, “ Steve went on, pointing at the various marks on the map as he did. “The bulk of Stark’s forces would be trapped outside the city walls, with their own cannons and trebuchets facing them
on one side and Pierce’s forces pinning them in on the other. Blow the dam and that whole valley floods. That’s why it’s such arable land. Used to be covered by the River until some clever Stark ancestor decided decades ago that he wanted a food source closer to the city. You could wipe out half of Stark’s forces without so much as taking out your sword.”

Tony was preternaturally still and quiet for an endless moment while Steve’s words sank in. “Gods. Fuck. Fucking hell, Steve,” Tony stuttered and stopped, shaking his head in horrified disbelief as he looked down at the map, then back up at Steve in stupefaction. “Couple of guys from Brookland were going to take the whole fucking Realm.” Steve started to say something in reply, but whatever he would have said was stolen by Tony’s burst of laughter. Steve blinked at him in confusion, brow drawing together into a frown, which seemed to just drive the man further into his fit of hysteria.

“I guess I’m glad you’re handling this so well,” Steve muttered dryly, casting a put-upon glance up to the gods, causing another spurt of laughter from Tony.

“You—you have no idea. Gods, this…shit, Steve, you were going to…and now you’re going to be…holy hell. I don’t even know what to say, except can we please, please, by the gods, Steve, from now on, try to be on the same side of things? If that isn’t too much to ask,” Tony managed to gasp out between laughs. “I don’t think the Realm can take it if we aren’t.”

“Fair enough, I suppose,” Steve replied, glowering a bit at Tony in confusion, which just produced another round of laughter from Tony. “You ready?”

“Oh yes. Yes, very ready,” Tony said, rocking back and forth on his heels and snapping his hands together in agitation as he waited.

“You should show that to Rhodes or someone you trust to get word to the King, if he’s found, or, if not, whoever is going to be running things, I guess. Though gods know the last thing the Realm needs is a bunch of contenders for the throne coming out of the woodwork, if he isn’t. Whoever it is, they’ll need to fortify the eastern side of the city, get some real guards up there and not whoever drew the short lot that day,” Steve told him as Tony nodded absently. “Here, take this, too,” Steve said, holding out the folded message that had Schmidt’s code on it. “If Nat knows the books Pierce has, I’ll try to find a way to get you the titles. If not, you’re the best chance we have of breaking the code, if that’s even possible.”

“It’s possible,” Tony replied. “Not easy, mind you, but possible. You really think Nat might remember that kind of thing?”

“Maybe. She’s good with details like that and has spent more time with Pierce than the rest of us. Wouldn’t surprise me, anyway” Steve replied. “You know, Nat seemed to think Stane was promoting the rumor that the King was being held by the rebels, but she insists Pierce doesn’t have him, and if anyone would know, she would.”

“What’s Nat’s theory?” Tony asked idly as they walked. He was tearing the leaves off a small branch he had picked up, seeming to need to occupy his hands. There was some kind of manic energy animating Tony today that was new, at least to Steve. Something about his manner was strained, distracted by his thoughts, though Steve could understand that he would be somewhat nervous to be back with his own side, particularly given his long absence and the circumstances of his return, not to mention the news of Stane’s deception that he carried with him. Still, Steve couldn’t shake the sense that Tony’s nervousness had something to do with him and wondered if it was because of the things he didn’t say last night.

“She said the most likely thing for Stane to do is keep the King somewhere in the city,” Steve
recalled. “There are apparently miles of tunnels and subterranean vaults under the city, most complete unmapped.”

Tony nodded at that. “True. It’s a fucking maze down there,” he agreed.

“She thinks Stane is keeping him alive as insurance until he or that Sir Gregory guy actually assume power,” Steve continued. “Stane wouldn’t have done the actual deed himself. He would have hired someone, left himself with deniability. It’s entirely possible the King has no idea that the people holding him were actually hired by Stane. If his plans with this Sir Gregory don’t work, the King could suddenly be ‘rescued,’ a rescue during which his captors are most unfortunately killed, and therefore unable to talk, and restored to power, none the wiser to Stane’s schemes. Grateful to him, even. Stane’s already laid the groundwork to undermine the King, as you said. Wouldn’t take much to start a few rumors that the King has become unstable after his captivity. Can’t handle the burden of rule. Needs a permanent Regent. And who better than the man who has seen the Realm through this crisis? Council steps in, for the good of the Realm, of course, and Stane gets what he wants anyway. Stane used the Ten Rings to get you out of the way, or at least try to, which would make it all the more difficult to fight Pierce without the King’s weapons’ maker. Ross makes sure the war efforts begin to fail. If he is working with Pierce, then how long would it be before Stane decides it is best for the Realm if he surrenders to Pierce and Schmidt’s combined forces?”

Tony paused and looked at him, his gaze some mixture of amazement and horror. “Remind me never to plot against you,” Tony said, though there was no levity to his words this time. “That… could have worked, you know.”

“Maybe,” Steve acquiesced with a shrug. “But, if she’s right, and Stane has people holding the King, when Stane finds out that people know what he’s done, the King’s life would be in danger. You have to keep this quiet, keep it to a small group that you are certain are loyal to the King. Rhodes. Ellis, I think. The King has a bodyguard who doubles as his carriage driver that Nat says can be trusted. Just…be careful. Stane is dangerous, Tony. The kind of man who would do this… would go so far as to murder King Howard and Queen Maria? Would plan this for years, gaining the King’s trust and favor only to have him kidnapped and held prisoner? That is not someone to underestimate.”

“Oh, I won’t, believe me,” Tony replied, something lurking in his tone that made Steve’s eyes snap over to Tony’s face, though his expression was blank. “How much further?”

“A few more hours’ walk and we should reach the edge of Lord Ellis’ holdings,” Steve answered. “You shouldn’t have far to go from there to find some of Stark’s soldiers patrolling the perimeter.”

“Good, good,” Tony said absently. “Not much longer then. You’re all going to meet up with the team at that sanctum place, right? Some magician friend?”

“Yes, Stephen. Calls himself ‘Doctor Strange’ in the trade, though don’t ask me why. Used to be a medical doctor, according to Bruce, but he injured his hands in a riding accident. Got involved in sorcery. Spells, incantations, the like. From what I can tell, this largely involves spending a great deal of time meditating before making some convoluted proclamation that no one understands, though he’s harmless enough and willing to help us when we need it,” Steve responded.

“Your friends are truly an odd sort, you know that, right?” Tony chuckled.

“Look who’s talking,” Steve grinned. Tony laughed, loud and bright, the sound tinkling through the forest, as he mock-stumbled into Steve, deliberately knocking him off balance. Steve returned the light shove and soon they were both laughing like idiots.
“Don’t’ suppose you want to tell me where this Strange person lives, huh?” Tony asked mildly.

“Even if I wanted to, I can’t, Tony. That’s Stephen’s confidence to give, not mine,” Steve replied. Tony nodded in apparent understanding, though Steve caught the way he pursed his lips at Steve’s answer.

They talked quietly the rest of the way, sometimes about Pierce and Stane, speculating about plots and plans that Steve could barely fathom he was actually discussing, but sometimes swapping stories of boyhood travails. From what Steve could glean, this generally involved Tony creating increasingly concerning explosions and Steve generally getting the crap beaten out of him when he just couldn’t let something go.

Steve had intended to savor the day, but it went by all too swiftly, time swept away by the pleasure of Tony’s company. It was dusk by the time they reached the outer boundaries of Lord Ellis’s holdings, a low rock wall, just a few feet high, cutting through a field marking the beginnings of where his lands separated from some other vassal’s holdings before becoming spoils of war, now held by Fury’s forces.

“There,” Steve said, pointing. “You don’t want to follow the wall, though keep to the forest, it’s too exposed. Try to keep it in your sight, though. Rhodes usually sends regular patrols out, and there are guard posted once you get closer to the town and keep. I’m sure it won’t take long for you to be found,” he finished, staring out at the field where the breeze made the dried grass undulate in shadowed waves.

“Come with me,” Tony said suddenly, a request that had the feeling of a command, something about the tone sounding differently in Steve’s ears than he was used to hearing from Tony. Tony moved to stand in front of Steve, eyes glittering and dark, and Steve had a moment to wonder if it was really a request before Tony’s mouth was on his, slanting his mouth over Steve’s, gently sucking at Steve’s upper lip before darting his tongue inside Steve’s mouth, flicking the tip against Steve’s own. He heard a dull clang as he dropped the sword and shield he’d been holding and of their own volition, his hands ended up wrapped around Tony’s, gently sucking at Steve’s upper lip before darting his tongue inside Steve’s mouth, flicking the tip against Steve’s own. Steve heard a groan and thought it might have been his own, but wasn’t sure, since Tony’s tongue was doing amazing things inside his mouth again, pressing flatly against his, in and out, in a mimicry obvious even to Steve.

Steve leaned in, winding his hands up Tony’s back to run through his hair, as he tentatively touched his tongue to Tony’s lips, earning a deep, throaty groan from the other man. Tony’s hands cupped his jaw, tilting his head just so, tongue darting out to lick along Steve’s bottom lip in encouragement. Steve deepened the kiss, pressing his tongue inside Tony’s mouth, trying to think clearly enough to remember what Tony had done that had felt so amazing. Never let it be said he wasn’t a quick study when it counted. It wasn’t long before the kiss turned into something else entirely, demanding and needy, hands that had been gentle turning rough and grasping.

“Come with me,” Tony whispered against his cheek as he broke away, pupils full dark, his hands moving to clinging tightly at Steve’s arms, and Steve knew Tony realized this was a goodbye. Tony pressed his head against Steve’s chest, voice coming out in an anguished plea. “It would be so much easier if you would.”

“You—you know—that I can’t—do that,” Steve managed to get out between trying to find enough air for words. “I have to go to the team, Tony. They’ll be waiting.”
“We’ll go together. Later. Soon. That’s how it should be, you know it,” Tony pressed, sounding at once anxious and demanding. “Come with me, Steve. This is the last time I’ll ask,” Tony said. He was watching Steve’s face with such intensity that Steve had to fight to recall why he couldn’t simply do as Tony asked.

“I can’t, Tony. I’m sorry. I—I’ll find you, if that’s…I mean if you still want…” Steve stammered. Tony was eyeing Steve with an almost fond sadness, if such a thing could be, and Steve was reminded of his mother, standing in their doorway, a study in unsurprised disappointment when he came home with yet another bloodied lip.

“Then this is goodbye. For now,” Tony amended quickly, tilting his head and pursing his lips at something hidden from Steve’s understanding. He handed Steve his pack, and turned to start off into the forest, paralleling the wall as he went. “Remember,” he called out as he walked away. “If you should happen to see Stark soldiers. Remember. Tell them you’re an Avenger. And try not to kill any of them, if you can help it. That would be awkward.”

“I’ll do my best,” Steve said wryly to Tony’s retreating back, shaking his head a bit at the abrupt about-face from Tony. One minute the man was kissing him like nothing else mattered and the next he was just walking off with little more than a farewell while Steve was still reeling from both the kiss and the impending loss.

“Steve,” Tony called out again, stopping after he had gotten a few paces away, back still to Steve. “Remember what you said. That nothing would change this. Between us. No matter what. It won’t change for me, either, so you know.”

“I remember, Tony. Go. Be careful. I’ll—I’ll find you, then. After?” Steve asked, hating how halting and uncertain his voice sounded. Tony turned, finally, and Steve could see something that looked like trepidation and anticipation warring on the other man’s face.

“Seeing you again is all I can think about,” Tony replied, staring at him with the same mixture of hope and worry that Steve was sure was reflected on his own features. Tony was gone without another word, leaving Steve standing there, surrounded by his sword and shield littering the ground, clutching his pack and realizing that Tony hadn’t actually answered him at all.

Steve watched until Tony was completely obscured by the forest. He waited, longer than he should have as the sun set and the forest darkened, just to be sure he wasn’t coming back, though he truly didn’t believe Tony would suddenly change his mind, not once he had it set on something. He rivaled Steve’s own stubbornness sometimes. He turned to go with one last look back down the path Tony had taken moments earlier. Hunger gnawed at his stomach, and he knew he would have to find some kind of food soon. He wondered if Tony would finally get a decent meal this night, thinking back to his caviling over the biscuits soldiers carried on long travels as if they were a personal affront.

He could walk a brisker pace now, since he didn’t have to slow his pace for Tony. Once he had a bit of space from Tony’s overwhelming presence, Steve realized he actually felt very little doubt left that Tony would be successful in convincing Captain Rhodes of the plot he alleged against Stane, and only hoped Captain Rhodes proved as worthy of Tony’s trust as he seemed to believe. There was too much at stake to risk the information falling into the wrong hands, which brought his mind back to Fury and his possible involvement. He wondered briefly what Bruce might have been able to learn from the former spymaster, though honestly doubted Fury would reveal much to him, unintentionally or otherwise. Natasha, maybe, could get a better read, but time was against them in all of this.

He was careful to walk a different path than the one they had come, stepping lightly and cautiously
as he had been trained, leaving as little evidence of his passage as possible. At various points, he doubled back, walking over his trail to confuse anyone that might try to follow, keeping to rocks and streams when he could, avoiding the soft dirt that would leave tracks.

It wasn’t long after he set out from where he and Tony had parted that he heard horses in the distance, sharp neighs and whinnies and the soft, rhythmic thudding of hooves striking ground that he knew all too well. A good number of them, too, he thought, and spread out, on all sides of him, he was sure. Rhodes was not putting on a display with no effort behind it, he realized. For whatever reason, Rhodes was sending out almost his entire battalion to look for Steve. Surprising that he would leave Ellis’ holdings so undefended merely to come after one enemy soldier, but it was entirely possibly the keep had been re-garrisoned with additional troops since the last Steve heard of Rhodes’ forces. He wondered what Tony thought about all that, if he was surprised by Rhodes’ zeal or hopeful it succeeded, given that Tony had so ardently wanted him to come with him. As tempting as it was to simply acquiesce, Steve knew Rhodes was not likely to be as forgiving as Tony.

Steve ducked low in the bushes and stayed where he was, listening carefully for a long time, trying to determine the precise direction from which the sounds emanated. It was next to impossible to discern, though he felt they were drawing closer as the night progressed, the sounds becoming more distinct. In the distance, he saw torchlights dancing through the trees like the swamp wisps his mother used to say would change your fate if you followed them to their homes.

He flashed back to Tony’s certainty that he could convince Rhodes that Steve wasn’t a threat, and couldn’t help but wish he could have been there to see the argument that must have taken place when Rhodes insisted that, no, Tony, he really did have to look for the enemy soldier lurking on their lands with vital information, and then felt a bit guilty for the impulse. Tony liked to think Steve believed the best of people, but Tony’s certainty about how Captain Rhodes would react, his faith that his King would make things right…it was humbling, in a way. From the time Tony had argued so vehemently against Pierce, echoing a lot of the concerns Steve had nursed for months writ far larger than his mind had allowed, Steve had refused to let his mind think too far past finding out more information, but now, as he crouched low, planting his shield to the ground so it didn’t catch the light, he couldn’t help but let his mind wander over what all this might mean.

He knew what Tony wanted of him, seemed to want with some sort of manic desperation at times. Steve had meant it when he told Tony that the oath meant more than simply declaring oneself loyal to a particular liege. At least, it did for him. When he said those words, he wanted to mean every one of them, and he didn’t know if he could do that with the King, if the man even lived. Once he wouldn’t have much cared, but now he found, even if only for Tony’s sake, he hoped Natasha was right, and the King could be found.

It wasn’t as if it was entirely up to him, though Tony liked to place the entire decision in Steve’s hands, he had noticed. The oath had to be accepted, after all, and it was far more likely, despite Tony’s assurances, that the King would send the lot of them to hard labor for their crimes against the Crown, and that was if he was inclined to mercy. Tony lived in a world where he could solve things if he just put his mind to it. Steve lived in a world where some things couldn’t be fixed, no matter how hard you tried.

As he walked, he couldn’t help but let his mind drift to a future he hadn’t thought possible, but now seemed, if not within reach, at least visible in the distance. Tony would be fairly well known in the city, at least among soldiers. Finding the King’s weapons maker couldn’t be that difficult, though when Nat once tried to explain the number of people who lived in the city, Steve had barely been able to wrap his mind around that kind of number, not when he had grown up knowing the names of everyone in town, their relatives and ancestors as familiar as his own. There had to be a
way to get a message to him, and hopefully, one day, to find him again when all of this was finished, though that possible future seemed little more than a ripple at the bottom of a well, indistinct and fleeting.

He walked for hours, long into the night that gave him cover, though he had to go to great lengths to stay out of the way of the riders that still dotted the forest. They were stymied by the dense undergrowth, unable to reach the deeper parts of the forest that Steve could travel with comparative ease. The forest felt bigger now that he was alone, he thought, slashing his way through a thicket of vines that had twined themselves over the low bushes that dotted the ground. The world felt bigger, to be honest, or he felt smaller, he wasn’t sure. He hadn’t realized how much space Tony occupied until he was no longer there. At various times during the night, he found himself casting a glance to his side, half expecting to see a dark tangle of hair bobbing along next to him, or opened his mouth to point out an owl’s nest curled into the hollow of a dead limb, because Tony seemed fascinated by simple things that Steve had long ago stopped really seeing.

Steve finally rested for the night, curled against part of a rotted tree trunk, partially reclaimed by the forest now. He listened as the sounds of the horses that had been his constant companions all night slowly grew more distant, fading into the rest of the waking forest noises as the sun began its rise. He nibbled a few of the white button mushrooms he had collected earlier, the meaty texture satisfying enough. He thought he’d made it deep enough into the lands held by Fury that whatever forces Captain Rhodes had sent after him would not dare to follow, but it was good to hear their echo finally quiet. No matter how badly Rhodes would like to claim an Avenger as a prisoner, he wasn’t likely to venture too far onto Fury’s lands or risk ignite another skirmish that he didn’t seem to particularly relish.

He gathered his pack, sword and shield, and picked up his pace as he walked, eager to reach Stephen’s sanctum. He hiked the rest of the way as quickly as he could, living off what bits he could forage and spending long hours of wandering footsteps imagining the nearly impossible, a life with Tony after all of this was over. He still didn’t think living in the city was a realistic goal, but perhaps Tony would be willing to follow him to a more removed location, somewhere the King’s justice would be unlikely to reach.

Steve didn’t miss the irony that he was now all but fighting for a King he had foresworn, but that appeared to be the case. He had turned it over and over in his mind, and couldn’t shake Tony’s absolute certainty that the King had never given that order, never intended what happened in Brookland to occur, though he couldn’t piece together why Pierce would have argued against it, if Fury was even to be believed.

Where did that leave him? Considering how he himself had been misled by Pierce, he couldn’t very well hold the King responsible for Stane’s deceit, at least, not in the righteous manner he had been. It didn’t mean the King had done everything right, but he knew enough of command to know that no leader ever did. The long miles of the walk to the sanctum were filled with alternately thinking about a life with Tony and how he could reconcile his feelings for the King, somehow the two becoming so jumbled as to almost amount to the same thing.

It took him almost a week to reach Strange’s sanctum, a temple once, many centuries ago, now partially ruined and decaying, the forest slowly renewing its claim, its gray stone walls toppled and crumbling, yet still somehow giving off an air of the supernatural. When Steve knocked on the large wooden door, Bruce answered, a huge sigh of relief crashing over his features when he saw Steve. “You made it, thank the gods,” Bruce said. “I was beginning to wonder.”

“Rhodes sent riders after me,” Steve responded to the unasked question. “Seemed like the entire battalion was out there looking. Had to take my time, make sure I avoided them, and then didn’t
particularly want to have to explain to Fury why I wasn’t going directly to him or Pierce.”

“Didn’t want to run out and tell Rhodes that you’re an Avenger?” Bruce queried with a smile that seemed somewhat forced, the strain of the wait evident on the other man’s features.

“Saving that for far more desperate times,” Steve replied, returning the smile. He looked around the inner room of the sanctum as he stepped inside, a kitchen of sorts, with pots and pans, small, delicate jars made of precious glass, a large pot over a small fire, bubbling with some noxious mixture, and herbs drying from the ceiling. He recognized rosemary, thyme and sprigs of clover, though many of the others were foreign to him. A few candles burned on the table and workbench, sending odd-shaped shadows playing over the walls. Steve wondered if the effect was deliberate. He wouldn’t put it past Strange. “Did you get anything out of Fury? Any sense of where he might fall in all of this?”

“He wasn’t even there. Neither was Coulson. Hill was running things, and she mainly just demanded to know where you were and what the hell we thought we were doing wandering over half the Kingdom. You know, the usual,” Bruce replied, though Steve could hear the note of concern that laced Bruce’s voice. Fury’s absence didn’t sit well with Bruce, or with Steve for that matter. He certainly hadn’t anticipated that. What could have drawn him out now, when Captain Rhodes was so near and the Realm was moving inexorably closer to chaos in the King’s absence. It was odd, to say the least.

“Where is everyone else? We need to figure out where we go from here. I’m anxious to hear what everyone else has to report,” Steve asked, looking back and forth around the room, wondering if perhaps the others had gone hunting to try to replenish Stephen’s stores.

Bruce’s face darkened, and he rubbed the back of his head with his hand, and Steve took in how haggard the doctor looked. “Well,” Bruce began, his brow furrowing into a worried frown. “Actually Cap, you’re the first to arrive. After me, I mean.”

“What?” Steve demanded sharply, alarm immediately spiking its way through him. It had been almost two weeks since Bucky had parted from them. Plenty of time for Bucky to find Clint and Natasha, if they were done with their mission, or make it here on his own if they weren’t. Bucky wouldn’t have waited that long for them to show, not so close to Pierce’s camp. Unless something was wrong.

“No one?” His stomach churned, clenching with a spasm of fear at the implication. Thor may still be with Jane, and it was possible Clint and Natasha were still occupied with whatever assignment Pierce had recalled them to his camp to undertake, but Bucky? Bucky wouldn’t have waited this long, not when he knew Steve would be coming here, expecting to find him. Damn. Steve’s stomach churned, suddenly sour with the realization of what that likely meant. He set his sword and shield down near the sanctum’s door and walked to the small bench to sit. He was exhausted and hungry and had half the forest pasted into his skin, or so it felt, but there was no other choice to make, not really. He couldn’t leave Bucky to whatever fate might have befallen him at Pierce’s hands, not when they knew all but knew what Pierce really was. For a moment, Steve just sat there at the long trestle table, his elbows propped on the table and his head folded into his hands.

“Ask Stephen if I can have some food and fresh water. It’s about a week’s march to Pierce’s camp from here. Whatever he has to spare would be appreciated. Tell him I’ll owe him,” Steve said stoically as he finally raised his head. Worry over Bucky prickled through him, though his tired muscles were already shaking with protest at the thought of walking even more.

“Steve…I know what you’re thinking, but James would absolutely not want you to do that,” Bruce told him.
“He went back because I told him to, Bruce. If something has happened…I can’t just leave him there,” Steve snapped at Bruce, his voice all but a shout in the small room, then immediately felt bad for his behavior. He was angry at the gods, at circumstance, at Pierce…at the loss of a future he had just begun to believe in, but he couldn’t take that out on Bruce. He drew in a deep breath, but it did little to help calm his frantic mind. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.”

“I know you’re worried,” Bruce said carefully. “But, James went back because he’s a soldier, and Clint and Nat needed help. Look, you don’t even know that what we suspect about Pierce is true,” Bruce argued. “Maybe he just had to check in, give a report. Any number of things could have kept James, Steve. You said yourself you had to take your time to avoid Rhodes’ troops. Don’t find the worst possible conclusion and latch onto it because you’re worried.”

“Not this long. He wouldn’t have stayed away this long, not if he were free to leave. Come on, Bruce, you were obviously upset when I got here. You know something isn’t right about this, damn it. I can’t sit here and wait, clinging to hope while Bucky…” Steve cut himself off, running a frustrated hand through his hair and steadfastly refusing to let his mind think of that possibility.

“Wait for Thor then,” Bruce argued. “He could help. Hell, Nat and Clint might show up anytime now.”

“Or they might be in the cell next to Bucky. And you know that we have no idea how long Thor will be. He doesn’t exactly keep to any kind of schedule. Bucky could be dead by if we sit around on our hands waiting for help to fall from the gods,” Steve snapped back, then took a steadying breath. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, but I have to try, Bruce. I can’t…he’s my best friend. This is our team, our friends we’re talking about. This whole thing…Pierce and Schmidt…” Steve started, then stopped and lowered his head to his hands. “I led us here, to this. I chose Pierce. If this ends with Bucky dying because I—because I chose poorly, then I don’t—I just have to go, Bruce. I have to try,” Steve said. Bruce took in a long breath and let it out slowly.

“James made his choice, too, Steve. All of us did. You may have noticed we aren’t exactly easily swayed,” Bruce said with a sad, wry grin. “And we all know the risks. James, too. Steve. He wouldn’t want you to do this,” Bruce repeated.

“We don’t always get what we want,” Steve replied flatly, thinking about dark eyes and promises that weren’t meant to be kept after all as he let go of something he had only just begun to grasp onto. It had been a fool’s dream, anyway, truly. He’d known that all along. Perhaps that was the reason he hadn’t actually been able to say the words to Tony, words that would have made vague, whispered promises all too real. “You can’t seriously think I can just sit here and wait for them, hoping it all works out? When does that ever happen for us, Bruce?” Steve asked with a mirthless laugh.

“I know I can’t talk you out of this, but you know if you’re right about Pierce, this is probably a one way trip,” Bruce said, voice heavy and low in the darkness of Strange’s sanctum.

“I know,” Steve responded, closing his eyes against the sudden burst of sadness and loss that threatened to send him to his knees. Tony. Everything he had thought about as he walked here, all his plans, the small slice of hope that had buoyed him during the journey seemed to fade, like writing scrawled into the sand licked away by wave after wave. “But it’s my choice.”

Bruce insisted that he rest, at least for the night, despite his protests that he was fine. He fell asleep at the table, a piece of warm, crusty bread forming a pillow, as if Bruce needed further proof that he was in the right. Steve set out at first light, thanking Strange for his hospitality and hugging Bruce tightly once before he did. He didn’t want to meet Bruce’s eyes, knowing he would find nothing but sadness and trepidation there, though he felt he owed at least that to the man who had
done so much for him.

“Stay here for another week, at least. If something does—if we don’t make it back, try to find the others,” Steve ordered not wanting to put into words what they were both thinking. “Tell them about Pierce and Schmidt. See if Natasha remembers what books Pierce has with him. If she does, try to get that information to Tony. Can’t be that hard to find the King’s weapons maker. He has Schmidt’s message,” Steve told him, not bothering to admit that he had memorized the numbers, unsure what good that would do at this point.

Bruce nodded solemnly, and Steve could feel the weight of Bruce’s gaze follow him as he walked away. “Gods go with thee, Steve.”

“And with you, Bruce,” Steve responded by rote, though he doubted he had ever meant it more.

It took him five days, not the usual seven to reach Pierce’s camp. For obvious reason, he had hurried, though the path was all the faster due in no small part to his maps, which guided him to the best routes to use. He spent the evening of his arrival skirting the edges of the camp, hoping against hope that he would find some sign of Bucky, could knock him upside the head and get back to the sanctum with none the wiser, but it wasn’t meant to be. Neither Clint nor Natasha materialized, though he knew he was making his presence known well enough that if they were lurking around, they would have noticed.

He got as close as he dared to the prison cells, a small, squat structure of stone just outside camp, one of the few walled buildings of any permanence that Pierce had ordered constructed, used only for higher-value prisoners and the occasional unruly soldier who got out of line, as most prisoners from battle were simply kept fettered and tied in the middle of camp, under heavy guard. He couldn’t see any guards on the cells, which told him they were most likely unoccupied. There were other places in camp that a prisoner could be held, of course, but he felt foreboding prickle at the back of his mind. Nothing about this felt right.

It was early the next morning after his uneventful scouting of the night before when he heard riders approaching the spot where he rested, trotting along at a slow pace. Loud, unconcerned voices enough to tell him he was well into lands held by Pierce. He got close enough to recognize Rumlow, leading one of Pierce’s strike teams on patrol. The strike teams were highly trained and heavily armed, loyal to Pierce, he knew. A few of the other members looked familiar as well, though some were unknown to him.

As good a time as any, he supposed, stepping out into the clearing where the riders trotted casually along, trading insults and stories, many seeming to center on what must have been a recent skirmish with Stark’s forces. He couldn’t help but wince a bit as they described the encounter, seeming to revel in the gory details. He had only met Rumlow in passing, but had never thought of him as anything other than a good soldier, at least until now.

“There’s bunch of pussies marching around with their stupid fucking flag…did you see that little bitch think he was gonna shoot me with his bow? Ha! Shaking so bad, the little cunt couldn’t get the damn arrow notched,” one of them recounted. “His head looked real pretty on the end of my spear.” Steve’s whole body startled, tensed as the man’s words and their implications washed over him.

“Liked how that little Lordling squealed the best,” one Steve recognized as Rollins chortled. “Big, brave man riding out to save his keep. Heh, don’t think he’d ever sat a horse in that much armor before. Well, he begged nicely in the end. Like it when they’re all fancy and formal and shit. ‘We’re here to treat! You cannot do this!’ Prick. Thinks he’s fucking untouchable because of some stupid-ass piece of cloth. Wasn’t so untouchable—-“
“Hey,” Rumlow cut him off. “Where the hell did you come from?” he asked, addressing Steve. Hearing their words, Steve would have chosen to fade back into the woods, if he’d had the chance, but it had been too late, he was too exposed.

“Rumlow,” Steve replied evenly, keeping his hand wrapped around the grip and his shield positioned in front of his body. Every part of him seemed to vibrate with anger, though taking on a group of eight mounted strike team members would have been foolishness of the highest order. He couldn’t be certain of Bucky’s status, or that of Clint and Natasha. How much Pierce may know or suspect was a mystery. He had no choice but to act the part, at least for now, and hope Pierce remained in the dark.

“Well, if it isn’t the good Captain! Long time, Cap,” Rumlow replied with a friendliness that was clearly false.

“I’m to report to Pierce. Wouldn’t mind some company for the rest of the trip though, if you can spare a mount,” Steve said with an easy smile. “Been a long time since I’ve been back this way.”

“Yeah, sure, Cap. Happy to oblige,” Rumlow responded, not looking particularly happy at all. “Bet you have some stories to tell, eh?” Rumlow asked, trying for a casualness he could likely never manage. Like Steve, he was too much the soldier to be particularly good at anything other than directness.

“Not much to find, as it turned out. Though, I should report to Pierce first,” Steve said carefully. He wasn’t sure how deeply Rumlow might be involved with Pierce and Schmidt’s plans, though he knew the strike teams reported directly to Pierce. Had Rumlow and the others simply found an outlet for their cruelty or were they in deeper than Steve would have suspected?

“Parke, give Cap your horse. You can buddy up with Ward,” Rumlow ordered. “Or walk back and explain to Pierce why you’re late getting in, your choice,” Rumlow said, when it looked like the man he had named Parke might object.

“Thanks,” Steve acknowledged, waiting for the strike team members to shift around before mounting. He shifted a bit in the saddle, unused to sitting a horse after long months, but it was an old skill, one that returned easily when you needed it once your muscles accepted the change. “You seen Bucky around?” Steve couldn’t help but ask. “He headed back ahead of me. Hoped to meet up after I see Pierce.”

“Haven’t seen him, Cap. I’ll ask around though. We’ve been gone a lot lately, so he could’ve come in while we were on a mission. Lots of places for someone to disappear around the camp, you know,” Rumlow responded, casting a look back at Steve over his shoulder.

“If you see him, just let him know I’m looking for him. He’ll find me,” Steve replied. Steve strongly suspected the only one Rumlow would be informing of Steve’s desire to find Bucky was Pierce, though he couldn’t say for sure what set that thought in his head. Maybe the way Rumlow had said how easy it was for people to disappear. An odd turn of phrase, chosen too carefully to be anything other than intentional. He looked around at the mounted strike team members, all armed to the teeth with various weapons with growing unease. Nothing to be done about it now, though. He had no choice but to follow along for the time being.

They rode the rest of the way back to Pierce’s camp largely in silence, broken only by the occasional jawing back and forth amongst the men, though far less colorfully than they had been doing before they noticed Steve’s arrival. Their words were still swirling in Steve’s head, the import clear. Attacking a Lord and his escort under a flag of truce? It was the kind of thing that he would once have immediately brought to Pierce’s attention, but now…now he wasn’t sure they
weren’t acting under orders, explicitly given or otherwise.

Steve could smell the familiar odors of the camp before he saw it. Smoke and sweat, and other less savory smells, but such was the nature of camp life. He saw the first tendrils floating lazily to the sky as they crested one of the low hills that covered the region. A short time later, the clearing opened up into a large field, dotted with hundreds of tents in various shades of a color Steve thought of simply as dirt, since brown didn’t seem nearly descriptive enough, and thousands of men, most simply sitting around, waiting taking up the largest chunk of any soldier’s time. Most soldiers slept on the ground, around campfires, while officers were afforded tents. Knights, though there were only a few of those, had larger tents, closer to Pierce’s massive double-belled tent bearing his colors, green, gold and black, a flag flying high above emblazoned with Pierce's shield sigil.

“We’ll find you an empty tent, Cap. Let Pierce know you’re here. I’m sure he’ll want to talk as soon as he can,” Rumlow told him.

“Thanks,” Steve replied, keeping his tone even and light. “I could use a chance to clean up first,” he said, looking around and taking stock without letting his gaze linger too long on any one thing. More men, he thought. More than he recalled anyway. Not too many more, not enough that it would be particularly noticeable. Easily explained as new recruits, except they weren’t, Steve thought as dismounted and handed the horse’s reins back to Parke. The ranks weren’t swelled with green boys coming to join a rebellion or farmers who had lost lands and had few other options, Steve noted. These were soldiers, holding their weapons with practiced hands, sitting around their fires in the way soldiers sat, lounging and easy, but with a wary readiness lurking beneath the surface that he well recognized.

Rumlow directed him to an unoccupied tent near the center of camp, and he lifted the flap and peered inside, nodding his thanks again as Rumlow turned to go after a long glance around the interior. Looking for what weapons might have been left inside, Steve thought. He wants to know what I have access to. He knew something was wrong about this. Rumlow was all solicitousness that range utterly false, though he couldn’t point to what exactly it was that bothered him so about Rumlow’s actions. Except that Steve was fairly certain that if he tried to simply walk out of camp right now, he wouldn’t make it.

Steve picked up a small metal saucer that sat next to others like it by the campfire that burned in the center of the ring of tents. It held a pool of tallow grease and took one of the strips of his old blanket out of his pack. He found himself hesitating a moment, something pricking at the back of his eyes as he dipped the tattered piece of cloth in the grease, setting it alight. There was no place for sentiment here, he knew, but for a moment, as it splashed in the grease and sparked with light, it seemed a portent of things to come. He shook himself, trying to clear his mind of useless thoughts and ducked into the tent. He held the light up and saw that there was a blanket and small basin filled with water in one corner of the tent, a bucket in the other for obvious uses.

He went to the water first, using the wooden cup next to it to drink away his thirst. Steve lifted up a piece of leather cloth and found a few of the hard biscuits underneath, grabbed one and chewed gratefully, though he couldn’t suppress a smile thinking of Tony’s likely reaction to such a meal. He tied one of the tent flaps back to give himself more light and put his shield down in the opposite corner. He unbuckled his belt, removing the sword from its sheath and leaning it against the taut fabric of the tent wall next to his shield. He took his knife from his pack and dipped its edge into the tallow grease, letting it cool before applying it to his neck and face where the beginnings of a beard had sprouted, drawing it up the line of his throat and across his cheeks and chin from memory.
Clean-shaven, he used the rest of the water in the basin to wash as best he could. He had no clothes to change into, and knew how he must appear, but there was nothing to be done about it. He ran a hand through his hair, flattening it down and wishing he had Natasha’s steady hands to trim it for him. There was nothing to do but wait now, hope the cover of darkness offered the opportunity to explore the camp and see if he could find Bucky. He took the dirty water outside to dump into the dry dirt, noting at least three members of the strike team within ten yards of his tent, looking anywhere but at him. He went back inside and took the roll of maps out of his pack, sat down on the hard ground and settled down for what he was certain would not be a long wait.

Moments later, Rumlow’s dark head appeared at the open flap to his tent, calling out to him. “Pierce wants to see you,” Rumlow informed him. Steve stood immediately and followed Rumlow outside, leaving his sword and shield behind and forcing himself not to look back at where they set. It wouldn’t be appropriate to bring them to meet Pierce, he knew. They wove their way through the camp towards the large tent that dominated a low hill near the center. He nodded to a few familiar faces as he passed, but otherwise used his time to take in the state of things, noting the stacks of wooden shafts waiting for their heads and fletchings to be attached, the metal masters hard at work even as blades were stacked knee-high outside their forges. Preparations, then, he thought rather dully.

Rumlow held the large flap back for Steve to enter Pierce’s tent. He didn’t even have to duck his head, the large, oval pavilion with a tall center pole raising the roof several feet above Steve’s head, guy lines extending out from the exterior into the ground for additional support. Alexander Pierce, Lord Pierce to Steve and the rest of the men, sat behind a massive wooden desk, dressed in a simple leather doublet over his tunic and breeches, not too far removed from what his officers wore, though of finer quality. He looked around for a quick moment, aiming for awe at his surroundings, as he took in the contents of the tent, eyes darting over the chest on the corner of Pierce’s desk where Steve knew he kept his books. Damn. Closed. He stepped forward to stand in front of Pierce’s desk and knelt on one knee, waiting to be told to rise.

“Wellcome back, Captain. I understand you have a report for me,” Pierce said, leaning back in his chair and watching Steve hawkishly.

“Yes, my Lord. We were able to map a great deal of the territories still held by the King and those areas where he is holding his forces,” Steve informed him, keeping his eyes downturned, focusing on the pattern on the rug beneath him. “As to my personal request, which you were kind enough to grant, we found nothing of consequence in Brookland, my Lord. The rivers have reclaimed much of the area. It appeared wholly uninhabited. Again, I thank you for your leave to explore it, my Lord. It’s fate…as you know, it’s fate has long concerned me.” Not for the first time, Steve was glad he had not informed Pierce of his other reason for wanting to visit Brookland. He’d told himself it was because he did not want to disappoint Pierce if his idea about the channel being passable had failed to pan out, but now, he wondered if something else had held him back, that inner voice that rarely led him astray telling him to keep that information close.

“You may rise,” Pierce said in a clipped tone. Steve stood, standing opposite the desk from the smaller man, feeling exposed without his shield. “Yes, the fate of Brookland saddened us all, Captain,” Pierce went on. “You have more maps for me?” Pierce asked sharply.

“Yes, my Lord,” Steve replied, taking the roll of maps and unfurling them on Pierce’s desk. Pierce placed a few of the heavier items from his desk on top to keep them flat and stared down at them.

“These are finely done, Captain. I’m sure they will be of use in our efforts, though I think your other talents can be of far more value in a more direct capacity,” Pierce said with a slight smile,
meant to be charming, but Steve could hear the clipped undertone, the slight ripple of something feral behind the man’s eyes. “I’m sure Romanov and Barton will be pleased to see you when they return. Where is the rest of your team, by the way?” Pierce asked calmly. There was a trap here, he could feel it, a spring loop covered by leaves, waiting for the hare to step in it, though if Pierce was to be believed, Nat and Clint were not even back yet.

“I dispatched Sergeant Barnes to return to you shortly after Romanov and Barton returned to you on your order, my Lord. I escorted Doctor Banner to General Fury, where he remains. As you know, Thor is…a volunteer. He felt the need to check on his fiancé, whom he has not seen in some time. I believe it is his intention to rejoin the team as soon as possible,” Steve continued. “Once I escorted Doctor Banner to General Fury, I made my way here. I’d hoped to join Sergeant Barnes here, my Lord, and Clint and Natasha upon the conclusion of their mission. We have typically worked under General Fury’s command, as you know, so I would request that the team be reassigned there once we have reassembled. Of course, that is by your leave, my Lord,” Steve said, trying to instill the proper amount of deference in his voice. Pierce was silent, letting it linger and hang in the tent, like it had weight. He wanted Steve to keep talking, Steve knew. An old tactic, but one that often worked.

“Hmmm,” Pierce said speculatively. “Rumlow said you were looking for Barnes. As far as I know, he has not reported in as of yet, but I’ll have someone check around for you. I hope nothing untoward has befallen him,” Pierce replied, watching Steve for any reaction. He knows where Bucky is, Steve thought. He knows, and this is a test of some kind. This is some game to him, moving pieces around a board to crown a king, and we are nothing more than pawns.

“That…concerns me, my Lord. With your permission, I would like to try to locate Sergeant Barnes. Perhaps send a message to General Fury with an inquiry, in case he has shown up there,” Steve requested evenly, trying to keep the mounting panic out of his voice.

“I understand your worry for your friend, Captain. However, the war doesn’t stop because one man is late, as I’m sure you know. I gave you leave to visit Brookland as a favor, but we have been without your assistance for a long time, Captain,” Pierce said smoothly. “I’ll have a message sent to General Fury to ask after Barnes’ whereabouts, but for now, the best thing you can do is await his return here. I’m sure Barnes will turn up soon, Captain, and you must be tired from your journey. As for your request to rejoin General Fury, I’ll have to think about the best way to use your team’s…unique skills,” Pierce mused, tapping his finger on his chin. “For the time being, return to your tent and wait for instructions. Dismissed.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Steve replied tightly and left the tent in carefully controlled steps, only letting his breath out once he was several paces outside. Rumlow was waiting right outside the tent flap behind him, likely listening to every word that had been said.

“How did it go?” Rumlow asked curiously.


“Eh, just wondering,” Rumlow answered. “Lots going on, you know. King missing, Ross hurling these fucked up explosives at our perimeter night and day, and now that asshole Rhodes is on the move. Never thought he’d leave until he had Fury’s other eye as a necklace.” Steve managed to keep the relief off his face by sheer force of will. Tony had done it, by the gods, he had actually convinced Rhodes about Stane. Hopefully, Tony was on his way back to the capital with Rhodes or possibly even there already.

“It sounds like I missed a lot,” Steve acknowledged. “Lord Pierce must have a great deal on his mind. I’m sure he doesn’t have the time to worry about one soldier, but you know how it is with
your team members. Any help you might be able to offer locating Sergeant Barnes would be appreciated,” Steve offered, curious to see how Rumlow might react.

“Huh? Yeah, I checked around and no one has heard from him. One of Lord Stern’s men said he heard he was around camp, though. Probably sleeping off a night of it somewhere,” Rumlow lied.

“Lord Hammer wants to see you, by the way.”

“Lord Pierce said to wait in my tent,” Steve repeated, glancing back over his shoulder.

“I’m just giving you the message, Cap. You feel free to decide which one is going to be more annoyed if you ignore them,” Rumlow said, clapping him on the back in an almost friendly gesture. Steve looked around the camp as if struggling with the decision. Going to visit Hammer would give him an opportunity to see a great deal more of the camp, look for anything out of place. There were hundreds of places Bucky could be held, if he were here, but of those, only a handful were truly likely, and Steve could pick out a tent under guard from a hundred paces. Pierce would likely not summon him for some time though, and he wondered what Hammer wanted with him. He suspected it was simply to fish for what information he could get, there always being something of a competition between Hammer and Stern as to which one could kiss Pierce’s ass with the most fervor.

“I suppose I can spare a few minutes for Lord Hammer,” Steve said, feigning reluctance.

“Great, Cap. Rollins and I will walk with you. We were headed that way anyway,” Rumlow said, waving the other man over. It was almost like Pierce didn’t trust him, Steve thought wryly.

Steve and his escort wound their way through the camp to Lord Hammer’s tent, which was smaller than Pierce’s, though not by much, almost as if it was only that way by design. He nodded to the guard, who stuck his head inside and then held the flap open for Steve to enter. Hammer was leaning against the side of his bed, one leg propped against the floor while the other sprawled atop one of the many pillows that littered the bed. He wore one of the silken tunics he favored, large bell sleeves open at the elbow as he feigned interest in the letter he was clearly not reading, due to the fact of it being upside down. Sir Jasper sat at the desk, apparently taking notes on whatever it was Hammer was saying, though Steve couldn’t imagine a scenario where Hammer said anything noteworthy. He was little more than a useless sycophant, his one saving grace being his ability to poorly design weapons, from what Steve could tell.

Steve fought the urge to roll his eyes and knelt, waiting for Hammer to acknowledge him, which he seemed in no particular hurry to do, Steve realized after a few minutes. He was talking to Sitwell about Ross’ apparently rather high-powered explosives, which were now traveling far enough to threaten Pierce’s perimeter, apparently rather frustrated with the lack of progress on his own inventions and complaining bitterly about his inability to get Pierce to assign more men to his project.

Finally, as if just now realizing Steve was there, Hammer swung his leg off the bed and leaned back against the heavy wooden frame, tossing aside a pillow as he did. “Captain!” he greeted Steve. “So nice to have you back, though you look as if you brought some of the road with you, my friend,” Hammer said with a low whistle, pushing himself up and walking in a circle around Steve. Steve kept his eyes down, though there was something about the feel of Hammer’s eyes as he inspected him that set his teeth on edge. “Heard your little trip was a waste. Too bad, too bad,” Hammer clucked his tongue, taking the cup of whatever it was that Sitwell offered him, leaving Steve to wonder how he knew that already. “Still, you never know, am I right? Gotta try these things, gotta try. I know how you love your little maps and drawings and all,” Hammer said, coming to stand in front of Steve, the toes of his soft leather boots filling Steve’s vision, closer than
Steve thought entirely necessary, but it wasn’t his place to object. He heard a muffled snort from Sitwell for some unfathomable reason, but kept his eyes firmly downturned until given permission to look elsewhere.

Hammer remained as he was for a long moment, then placed a hand on Steve’s shoulder, drawing it up and tracing the underside of Steve’s jaw, fingers lifting Steve’s head up, gentle, but insistent. “Rise, good Captain, rise, of course, you must be so uncomfortable down there. On your knees like that,” Hammer entreated, the tip of his tongue darting out to wet his lips as he clucked it a few times in displeasure. Steve stood and looked down at the smaller man and tried to stop the flush of embarrassment at the frankness of Hammer’s scrutiny at his appearance. Steve knew what he looked like, standing here in clothes torn and stained with dirt and blood, one boot having lost its welt somewhere along the way, though the derision of someone like Hammer, who rarely got his hands dirty on anything, was almost too much to bear.

“Tell me of your travels, Captain. We always love a good story, don’t we, Sir Jasper?” Hammer asked. Hammer sat down at the desk, crossing his feet on top of it and taking a long drink from his cup, never taking his eyes off Steve.

“Not much to tell, my Lord,” Steve replied easily. He cast a glance at Sitwell, who studied Steve with ill-concealed contempt. “Nothing remains of Brookland, though there is a herd of sheep gone wild that seem to have the run of the place,” Steve replied.

“Sheep!” Hammer blurted, laughing too loudly. “Wild sheep, he says. You hear that, Jasp?” he asked Sitwell, who just nodded, seemingly enough to satisfy Hammer. “You are just too much, Captain, I swear. Too bad, too bad. Hate to hear it. Camp life hasn’t been nearly as interesting without you…and your, uh, team, around. Listen, I know you’re just back and all, but anything you need, you just let me know, okay?”

“Thank you, my Lord. That is very kind of you. But Lord Pierce will require my attendance soon,” Steve said uncertainly. Hammer grinned, too wide, Steve thought. Nothing about this man was real. He was suddenly wildly uncomfortable, and wanted nothing so badly as to be away from Hammer and his smile that had too many teeth and his eyes that seemed to pick Steve apart. “May I be dismissed, my Lord?” Hammer waved a hand in the air, which Steve took to mean ‘yes,’ and picked up a stack of missives and maps that were strewn haphazardly across the desk. Steve stared at what was underneath them.

“Lord Hammer,” Steve said, steeling his voice. “You were so kind to offer your assistance. I wonder, if it isn’t too much trouble, if I might borrow that for a bit?” he said, extending his arm and pointing at the object on the desk.

“Didn’t think you read, Rogers,” Sitwell said, neatly stacking the papers Hammer had shoved his way.

“I don’t, Sir. Never learned. As Lord Hammer said, I like to draw. I thought—it—it looks like it might have some pictures I could use, is all. I find it relaxing....a soldier’s life offers little in the way of finer things. If you don’t need it for a bit of time, of course, my Lord,” Steve said as evenly as he could manage, wondering how they couldn’t hear the hitch in his breath or how hard his heart was beating in his chest. Hammer wasn’t exactly a reader either, he would stake his life on that. Yet he had a book, one book, not many and not locked up tight. Steve was certain that were he able to look, he would find that same book that sat so haphazardly on Hammer’s desk amongst Pierce’s collection, but Hammer, being either too stupid or too lazy, carried only the one that he might actually need with him. On an instinct he didn’t quite understand, he added, “I would be honored to show you the drawings when I return the book. If you’d like.”
Hammer picked up the book and flicked through the pages, looking at Steve with a raised eyebrow. “Ah, why not? Just careful with it, Rogers. I’ll need it back by tomorrow though, no later, you hear?” Hammer ordered, dropping the book on the table.

Sitwell shot Hammer a rather annoyed look, but kept silent. Steve bent down and grabbed the book, Hammer’s hand snaking out to press atop his as he did. “Tomorrow, Captain. And I look forward to discussing your…drawings with you. At length. I’m sure you can make the time,” Hammer said. Steve thought he saw Sitwell roll his eyes, but could be sure because it would have been rude to look away from Hammer when he was being directly addressed.

“Of course, my Lord. Thank you,” Steve replied quickly, picking the book up and resisting the urge to clutch it to his chest as something dark and speculative flickered in Hammer’s gaze. Steve turned and took carefully measured steps out of the tent, grateful when the flap fell into place, whatever the band was that had been constricting his chest the whole time he was in there releasing its grip a bit once he was out in the air and daylight.

He tucked the book into the waist of his breeches and covered it with his shirt, walking through the camp in an unhurried manner, hoping not to draw any attention to himself, though the pounding of his heart seemed loud enough to call back the dead. As he walked, he noted that everywhere he went, a member of the strike team watched him closely. He made his way to the metal smith’s tent, ostensibly to ask about another whetstone and then to Pierce’s cartographer’s tent to discuss the maps, all the while keeping a careful eye scanning his surroundings for any sign of a tent under guard, though he saw nothing that remotely suggested such a thing in the camp, which left only the stone cells if Bucky was even here.

He had been so sure, when Bruce told him Bucky hadn’t made it to the sanctum, that Pierce was holding him prisoner, but now, he was beginning to doubt more and more that Bucky was even in camp, if he ever had been. If they were holding Bucky here, Pierce and Rumlow were entirely confident that Steve wasn’t going to find him, that much was certain. Though he was being watched closely, no one tried to restrict his movements. That was entirely too much latitude if Bucky was trussed up in a tent somewhere. Having exhausted his plausible errands, Steve picked his way back through the camp, nodding to a few familiar faces as he went. He saw Parke and Rollins at various points during his circuit, both seemingly ignoring him while maintaining complete awareness of where he was and what he was doing. He recognized other faces from the strike team he’d ridden into camp with as well. Two ducked into the mapmaker’s tent shortly after he left, probably to inquire if he’d said anything of interest. The one called Ward was sitting by the campfire closest to his tent, talking in low tones to several other soldiers.

When he finally reached his tent, he ducked inside and let his eyes close long enough to let out a relieved sigh before sitting down on the blanket and staring the book in his hand. Opening it meant knowing, no more speculation, no more room for denial. He was fairly certain he was about to find out that he had fought for a cause that didn’t exist, had never existed, except as an illusion, a shroud to cover the horrible truth beneath, but he couldn’t let the fear that he had failed so miserably keep him from the truth. He knew he should make another attempt to get a good look at the cells, but with the book in his hand, he had to know. The truth was too close to merely set aside, and the strike team was watching him too closely for him to do anything at the moment anyway.

He brought the numbers to his mind, brought the tallow dip candle closer and turned to the first page to begin counting. It took the rest of the afternoon and most of the night by the time he finished. Some of the words he couldn’t decipher with only his rudimentary knowledge, but he was able to piece together enough to understand. Sometime during the early hours before dawn, he stumbled outside his tent and threw up what remained in his stomach. He kept seeing the words
float in front of him when he closed his eyes. Pass. Army. Ready. Join. Soon. River. That much he had expected, he supposed, though actually seeing it spelled out so clearly galled him to read nonetheless. Some kind of planned attack then, with Schmidt bringing his forces through the Pass to flank Pierce’s by the River, boxing in the Stark forces. But it was the other words that turned his stomach. He didn’t recognize many of them, but the ones he did stood out in terrifying relief. Ships. Sickness. Death. Ships, he wondered. Where would Pierce get ships?

He took a cleansing breath and looked up at the still-dark sky, luminous with stars. It all made a terrible sense, though the extent of Pierce’s betrayal, the depth of the depravity…he could not have predicted. And he had been serving this man. Had fought for him. Led his team against those this man named enemy. Had foresworn his own King to take up this man’s cause. To save the Realm. To make it better. All the bitterness and anger that he’d held at bay for so long came rushing on him at once, threatening to overwhelm as the vastness of the deception became clear. He bent at the waist, gripping his knees with his hands and sucked in great gulps of air, his eyes shut against the images that came cascading through his mind. Peggy, in a bed of blood, the tiny infant he’d wrapped in one of the blankets Peggy had sewn in anticipation, his eyes dark red pools, Erskin choking around an arrow’s broadhead in his throat, and the smell, gods, the smell of it…the smoke and ash that wasn’t ash, and Bucky’s arm, sizzling like meat long after Steve had pulled him free and carried him out of the burning house.

In the end, it was the grief that nearly finished him. He thought of Tony, sitting up in the dark of night, crying silent tears because of words said in anger to Bucky, and understood better. It was regret that broke you, the paths you didn’t take, the things you failed to prevent. It was all spread out before him in a macabre tableau of what could have been, had he questioned more, done more to be sure instead of letting his anger and self-righteousness overcome years of unwavering loyalty. Hadn’t he once told Tony that Bucky hated the King because it was easier to hate someone so far away? And what did that say of him?

Fury had told them that Pierce argued against the order. He felt a bitter laugh curl up in his gut at that. Pierce had argued against it. Of course he had. He looked back at the tent where he’d flung the book aside and thought of the final few words he had been able to read and understand. What they meant.

‘Needs two months to reach full effect,’ the message had said, surrounded by words he didn’t understand. Pierce hadn’t argued against Stane’s attack because he felt any opposition to the order itself. He had argued against it because it had been too soon. The experiment hadn’t been over.

He stood up on wobbly legs that didn’t seem ready to support him and looked around the sleeping camp, his eyes drawn to the stone cells on the outskirts, though they looked deserted, dark and unguarded where they sat outside the main part of the camp. His whole body tensed a moment before he heard the crunch of boots walking rapidly behind him. He glanced inside quickly, judging the distance to his sword and shield against the patter of approaching feet. Too many, he thought immediately. He turned to find Rumlow and the rest of the strike team he’d encountered the day before striding quickly through the tents toward him.

“Cap,” Rumlow called out, a note of solemnity in his voice. “Pierce wants to see you.”

Steve didn’t pretend to misunderstand or feign ignorance. There was no use, he knew.

With a nod, Rumlow started off, and Parke nudged Steve’s shoulder indicating he should move. Steve followed Rumlow, the strike team surrounding him as he walked. In a strange way, he was almost glad of it, relieved to know who he was fighting and why, the veil of uncertainty lifted after long days of endless speculation and what ifs that amounted to nothing. Not for what was coming,
though he had known the risk he was taking and had accepted it as some kind of penance, he
supposed. He didn’t want to die, but he’d never expected to live, not really, only just recently
beginning to imagine some life that extended after this, some vague, blurred image where he drew
fruit bowls while Tony built things that didn’t kill people. That had been a dream that had only
barely begun to take shape, so the surge of despair he felt at the loss of it was wholly unexpected.
He wished now that he had been clearer about his feelings, that he had actually said the words
instead of letting his fears keep them hemmed inside.

Rumlow pushed the flap to Pierce’s tent back, jerking his head toward the inside, so Steve stepped
in, Rumlow, Rollins and Ward following him while the rest of the strike team waited outside,
probably ringing the tent. Pierce sat behind his desk. Steve stood in front of the desk, staring at
Pierce, waiting it out. For a long moment, Pierce simply watched him, saying nothing. Hammer
was sitting with one hip casually perched on Pierce’s desk.

“No kneeling?” Hammer asked, waving a hand between Steve and Pierce. “I liked the kneeling.”

“Captain,” Pierce acknowledged. “When we spoke earlier about Sergeant Barnes, it seems you
neglected to mention the whereabouts of another of your team members. Perhaps an oversight?
No?” Pierce offered with a shrug when Steve remained silent. “Something…or should I say
someone…you want to tell me about?” Pierce asked casually.

He knows, Steve thought, a fissure of fear spiking through his belly and pooling low in his
stomach at the unexpected turn of events. He knows about Tony. But how? The answer
presented itself at once. Of course, they’d been seen. In the Pass. There must have been someone
watching in the mountains, someone they didn’t see. Whatever scouts Schmidt had placed out
there could count, at the very least. And word must have reached Pierce sometime before Steve
even arrived in camp that the Avengers had an extra person with them. Which meant Steve wasn’t
going to walk away from this. He wondered how much Pierce knew. Whatever it was, he wasn’t
going to give him more. He took a deep breath and returned Pierce’s gaze without flinching.

Steve looked over at Hammer, and for just a moment, the other man’s eyes flicked to the chest of
books on Pierce’s desk. Hammer hadn’t told Pierce that Steve knew about the book, Steve
realized instantly. Either he was too stupid to figure out that Steve knew about the message and
how to decode it, or he didn’t want to admit to his own carelessness to Pierce, and certainly not that
he had handed such a thing over to Steve. What would it matter anyway? Steve knew what was
coming, had known it was the likely end from the moment he left the sanctum. He had no idea
how Pierce’s lack of knowledge on that score got him anywhere, but he felt better holding the
upper hand on something, however fleeting it might be.

“You had a guest with you, Captain. Care to tell me about this man?” Pierce asked mildly. Steve
remained stoically silent. He blinked slowly, his jaw tightening, but otherwise refused to let any
reaction show.

“You and your new friend took something that was meant for me, I think. But what then?
Hmmm?” Pierce pressed. “Let’s see…Captain Rhodes has been busy this past fortnight, as it turns
out. Headed back to the city with an unusual amount of haste, we hear. Why do you think Rhodes
would be doing that, Captain?” Pierce asked, all insouciant curiosity. “No idea? You know,
falling to tell me about a prisoner you lost along the way would be grounds for disciplining.
Collaborating with the enemy, on the other hand…well, you do know the penalty for treason, don’t
you?” Steve swallowed past the lump in his throat and nodded, never breaking eye contact with
Pierce.

“Do you?” Steve rejoined immediately. “You would sit there and call me traitor, but you’ve been
working with Schmidt and Stane for years, decades most likely. You helped Stane undermine King Howard, turned the other way so he could murder him and Queen Maria. You watched Stane set King Anthony up to fail, let him take the blame for your own machinations,” Steve accused, hearing his voice rise and feeling his hands clench into fists. “But your secrets are out there now. Rhodes knows. Soon the King will know, too. Stane has already lost, he just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Admittedly, it would have been easier with Stane sitting the throne,” Pierce shrugged nonchalantly. “A few days of siege followed by a quick surrender. But, I’ve never been one to leave that much to chance. The Realm will fall, Captain. It’s only a matter of time. Stane was an asset, no doubt. He’s been incredibly useful over the years. But he isn’t indispensible. Cut off one head, two more shall take its place. You might have heard that somewhere before?” Pierce said with a slight smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “No? Well, I’m sure it will become familiar in due time.”

“Where is Bucky?” Steve snapped.

“Barnes?” Pierce repeated, standing up and striding around the desk to lean against it next to Hammer. “I told you he wasn’t in camp, Captain. He’s...well, let’s just say he’s performing a service for the Realm. Finishing something that was started years ago, you might say.”

“What is that supposed to mean? If you’ve done something to him—" Steve started.

“You’re hardly in a place to be making demands, Captain,” Pierce cut in. “Barnes, as well as Romanov and Barton, will be dealt with in time.”

“They had nothing to do with any of this. The decision was mine alone. The consequences should be as well,” Steve said, gut clenching with fear. It wasn’t that he hadn’t expected it, but hearing the threat fall so easily from Pierce cut to the bone.

“Speaking of the rest of your team, you realize this whole thing implicates not just you, but your team, as well, don’t you, Captain?” Pierce asked. Steve couldn’t help the flinch at that. Nat and Clint...he had no idea where they were, if they were still on a mission for Pierce with no idea of what was going on, or if they had found Bucky and were safely at the sanctum. Whatever the truth of it, he couldn’t risk letting them suffer for his mistakes. “Discipline of foot soldiers typically falls under Lord Hammer’s discretion,” Pierce said evenly, turning to Hammer and pursed his lips in question as if he suddenly had no control over the situation.

“Well,” Hammer drawled, pushing himself off the desk and coming to stand next to Steve’s shoulder before circling around to stand behind him. “Ten lashes each is the usual punishment for following orders given in dereliction of duty.” Pierce raised his eyebrows and steepled his fingers against his mouth, casting a speculative glance at Hammer. “Since we don’t currently have the offenders themselves in custody, I suppose the Captain could stand proxy for them,” Hammer said after a long moment where he pretended to ponder how to handle the situation. A spectacle then, Steve thought. An example to the other soldiers, whether as a lesson or evidence of their triumph, he didn’t know, but they wanted this known, wanted to destroy whatever esteem the other men may have held in favor of him. That was why he was even standing here, why Rumlow hadn’t simply had him killed the moment he stepped out of the forest, this end had been a foregone conclusion.

“Very well then. You may administer his punishment at first light. He can hang tomorrow,” Pierce agreed, standing up and sidling around the desk to stand next to Steve. “Rumlow, take him to a cell for the next few hours. You and Rollins stand guard on him. No mistakes,” Pierce added. Rollins and Ward moved to stand behind and in front of him while Rumlow grabbed his upper arm and tugged. Steve knocked Rumlow’s arm off and walked to the tent’s entrance,
Standing still for a moment to wait for Rumlow and the others to catch up. He stepped out into a ring of strike team members, weapons drawn, all watchful and ready. He could fight, and a part of him wanted nothing more than to do that if only for the sheer satisfaction of slamming his fist into something, though he knew it would prove ultimately useless. Not even with his skills could he take on the entire armed strike team.

Surrounded by the strike team, Steve walked towards the outer ring of the camp, to a structure of stacked stones. By necessity, it one of the few actually built on the site, seeing as how cloth tents tended not to hold prisoners especially well. Rumlow took out a ring of keys and unlocked the heavy metal door, opening it wide enough for Steve to step inside. There were only eight small cells, none of which were occupied. He couldn’t help the small sigh of relief, though he did not want to think too much on what that meant for Bucky’s fate, Pierce’s words still a puzzle he couldn’t calm his mind enough to figure out. Rumlow lit a torch in the outer hallway and opened one of the cell doors for Steve to enter. He stepped inside, Rumlow coming up behind him and nodding toward the manacles hanging from a ring that jutted out from the stone above his head. “Sorry, Cap,” Rumlow said as he pressed Steve forward, took Steve’s left arm and locked the first cuff into place before reaching for Steve’s other wrist. It allowed him to bend his arms a bit at the elbows, but kept his hands extended above his head. “Nothing personal.”

“Feels pretty personal,” Steve replied, earning a slight grunt from Rumlow as he knelt to attach the leg chains to Steve’s ankles. The length of chain ran between rings through the restraints at his feet, hobbling them together and then attaching to a large ring in the floor so he couldn’t lift his legs far off the ground. It left him without much ability to move, let alone sit, the tension forcing him to stand, with nothing to look at but the wall in front of him, though there was a small, putrid smelling bucket within reach. Fantastic.

Rumlow stood and tugged on the chains to test their resistance, then stepped back outside the cell. Steve could hear him dismiss most of the strike team, keeping on himself and Ward on guard duty, though chained up and without any kind of weapon, Steve wasn’t sure what they thought he was going to do. He tested the manacles experimentally, pulling as hard as he could, hoping for some slight movement in the ring that held the chain above, but it remained as steadfast as always, despite his efforts. He tried the same with the leg chain, to an equally useless effect.

Some time later, he heard another voice outside the cell, louder than the other’s, and recognized Hammer’s burst of laughter as he shared some joke with Rumlow. He supposed it was within Hammer’s province to check on prisoners, though he suspected the man had merely come to gloat. The cell door opened behind him, hinges creaking with old metal as Hammer stepped into the small cell, craning his head around and whistling in obvious disdain at the interior.

“Well,” Hammer said finally, and Steve could turn his head just enough to see Hammer standing just inside the doorway behind him. “Did not see this coming, gotta tell you, Cap. Can I call you Cap? Or is that too personal? Captain doesn’t seem right, seeing as how you’re probably stripped of rank and privilege, all things considered.” Hammer continued, appearing to enjoy the sound of his own voice enough not to require a response. “Always thought you were all duty and honor and all that righteous soldier bit, but here you are, aren’t you? See where that gets you? You wanna get ahead, you gotta make things work for you, see? Too bad, though. Really liked seeing you around camp, Cap,” Hammer said, echoing his words from earlier in his tent. Steve felt something run up his spine, his senses suddenly heightening, muscles tensing against a phantom fight.

“Guess I’m happy to disappoint you,” Steve responded, ducking his head a bit so he could see Hammer moving around the cell.

“I thought we could talk a bit. Maybe work a few things out,” Hammer offered casually. “See,
Cap, I’m not like Pierce. I mean all this ‘Hail Hydra,’ let’s purify the Realm thing? That’s not me, Cap,” Hammer protested, raising his hands in false chagrin. “I’m just the weapons guy, you know? So, look, now, this thing in the morning, it has to happen, nothing to be done about. Brought it on yourself, really. Could’ve ended up with a knighthood, maybe even a bit of land, if you had been a bit more willing to play along, but no, had to go off get all noble and shit,” Hammer said, making a disapproving whine for emphasis.

“Not smart, Cap,” Hammer said, clapping his hands together. “Brave maybe, but there’s really a fine line between brave and stupid. But, I like you. Think you’re a stand up guy, and I admire that, even if we aren’t always on the same side, see? So, I’d like to think that we can work something out. You think we can work something out, Cap?” Hammer asked, his constant motion stopping suddenly, and Steve realized he was standing at his side, close enough for Steve to feel his hot breath against his neck.

“Don’t see much to work out, unless you want to let me out of these chains,” Steve responded.

“Can’t do that, Cap. You’re a dangerous man, after all. Trained by Phillips and everything. Not many men get to say that, and I heard you were one of the best, least that’s what the men say. Speaking of, going to have to check you for weapons. Precaution, you know,” Hammer announced, stepping around behind him.

“You really think I’ve got some knife hidden somewhere that I’m going to hurl at you with my toe?” Steve asked, exasperated. He wanted Hammer to leave, give him these last few hours of peace before what waited at dawn, but he couldn’t very well demand it.

“Still, can’t be too careful, Cap, isn’t that right Rumlow?” Hammer called out loudly.

“Just let him do it, Cap,” Rumlow shouted back, though he didn’t sound particularly happy about it. Steve suspected Rumlow liked Hammer about as much as Steve did. Steve sighed as he felt Hammer’s hands pat up his legs, over his arms, then down his back and around his chest, and that was when the pats softened, became something else entirely, hands rubbing, fingers scraping. Steve jerked abruptly, rattling the chains in surprise as he tried to twist his body away automatically.

“Stop,” he ordered, twisting his body away as best he could, which wasn’t much, but it got the point across well enough. “What do you think you’re—”

“Cap, Cap…see, you gotta think this through,” Hammer said, voice low and rough and right there next to Steve’s ear, the words seeming to spill out against his skin. Hammer ran one of his hands that had moved to rest on Steve’s back lower, over Steve’s hip, pausing long enough to grip and squeeze before skimming lower. The other hand snaked up his chest, under his shirt and across skin. His whole body jumped, pushing back, stretching against the chain, but there wasn’t room to maneuver, and Hammer’s hand skimmed lower, down his stomach, dipping through the waist of his breeches and wrapping long fingers around him.

“See, this thing that’s happening in the morning? It can be bad, Steve. Real bad. Or…not so bad, you see what I mean?” Hammer whispered, breath warm and moist against the back of his neck as he moved behind Steve, one hand gripping tightly at his hip while the other continued its ministrations. He could feel Hammer’s hard length pressing against him and Steve didn’t want to move, didn’t want to feel it, or feel anything really. He looked up, because he couldn’t look down anymore. Steve stared at the stone in front of him. There were small grooves scraped into the stone. Eight of them. Well, seven and a half, really, the last one not quite as long as the others. For some reason, it bothered him. That last one. The partial one. He looked harder at it, wondered what had made it, until his mind managed to supply fingernails as the answer. Someone
had dug their nails into stone until they couldn’t do it anymore.

“You gotta use your head here, Steve, is all I’m saying. You don’t have much time left…really
want to spend it in that much pain when you don’t have to? Huh? I could even maybe forget the
count a bit…” Hammer offered, pressing his body flush against Steve’s back. Steve cast a glance
back over his shoulder again and could see Rumlow and Ward shift a bit outside the cell door. He
saw Ward send an uncomfortable look into the cell, but the soldier said nothing, raised no
objection, as Hammer nuzzled behind his ear, rocking his hips back and forth as he did, his hard
length rubbing up and down against Steve. Steve tried to shift away, but every movement pressed
him harder into Hammer’s hand, causing a low chuckle from the man behind him.

“So, what do you say, Cap? Your call, man,” Hammer whispered, pressing himself tighter against
Steve and rocking his hips forward, harder this time, more insistent.

“Stop,” Steve repeated. He meant it as a command, but it came out broken and wrong. He didn’t
recognize his own voice, it sounded dim and distant, the way the sea sound echoes when you hold
a shell to your ear. He focused his eyes again. Still eight lines. Seven and a half, really. The last
line bothered him.

“You sure? I mean, really sure about that? Hey, look, this your first time, Cap? I get it, I get it. I
can make it good, Cap, real good,” Hammer promised, louder now, and Steve turned his head
around enough to catch Rumlow glancing back into the cell before looking over at Ward with a
shake of his head. It was worse somehow, though he couldn’t say how exactly, that Rumlow and
Ward were right there, a few feet away, knowing what was happening in here and doing nothing.
“And look, fifty lashes, Cap, that’s a lot. A lot. Trust me, you don’t wanna do that without a little
bit of give and take, see?” The hand on his hip was making wider and wider circles, rubbing and
squeezing lightly as Hammer nudged himself closer. Hammer’s other hand continued its stroking,
harder and more insistent, moving lower to cup and squeeze before returning to its task.

That last line, he thought, staring straight ahead. The partial one. It felt wrong. It bothered him.

“You sure, Cap? You really need to think this through. Little accommodation goes a long way.
You got one night left. Sure you really want to spend it like that? That much pain? Doesn’t have
to be that way, Cap. No reason for it. Just say the word, and you can walk away with a few stings
tomorrow, no problem,” Hammer offered, pressing his mouth against the back of Steve’s neck,
leaving a wet stripe there when he pulled away. Steve tried to focus on what Hammer was saying,
but it was too close to what Hammer was doing, so he stared at the lines, counted them again, each
number filling his head so it was the only thing there. The last one. Should it be a half or should
he count it as eight? It seemed important to think about that, to make a decision.

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“Fine. You want to be stubborn, fine. Just remember, this was up to you, Cap. Could’ve had it a
lot easier, but fine by me. Your choice, man” Hammer said, abruptly releasing him and stepping
back, leaving Steve momentarily reeling. “Rumlow, I’m out of here. Fuck, I need a drink. Where
the hell is Sitwell? Hey, see that our prisoner is ready for me at sunrise. I want to get this over
with. My tailor is coming at ten.”

Steve heard the door to his cell shut, the key sliding into place and turning with a sharp clang,
sounding louder than it should, taking most of the light with it. He looked up and realized his
hands were still on the wall, curled into fists, and he forced them to unclench and relax, though he
couldn’t lower them much. He leaned forward, letting his forehead rest against the stones, and
then pulled back quickly, blinking in the low light flickering through the space between the door
and the floor. He could see shadows move along the floor of the cell, like long fingers reaching
under the door. He pressed his hands against the stone, feeling around in the darkness until he
found the scratches, tracing them with his fingertips, counting each one has he went. He took a long breath, trying to calm his stuttering heart. Nothing had really happened, not really. Hammer had offered, and he’d said no, and now he had something far more horrible to look forward to come dawn. That was it. Nothing had happened.

He heard movement outside the door, stilled and listened, but the key never rattled in the door, so he let out the breath he’d been holding and ran his hand over the grooves in the stone. The thought that he wished Tony were here flickered through his head before he immediately discarded it. Of course, he didn’t want Tony anywhere near here. That was a ridiculous, selfish thought. Except once in place, it proved hard to dislodge, stubbornly floating at the back of his mind each time the shadows reached out across the floor. He was overreacting, he knew. Nothing happened, not really, just Hammer trying to get to him, needle him a bit. Hammer hadn’t done anything to hurt him. The real show was in the morning. He needed to concentrate on being ready for that. He couldn’t let this get to him, that was just what Hammer wanted. He ran his hands over the grooves again, digging his nail into the last one, the partial one and scraping downward, then back up again, repeating the motion over and over. He heard movement outside the cell door and felt his whole body tense, the taste of metal filling the back of his throat, but no one came. Each shift of the light, each scrape of a shoe against the dirt seemed magnified, the rest of the night spent straining to hear anything that might signal another visit.

His eyes had adjusted enough to the light that he could tell the subtle shift in color as the dark of night began to soften around the edges. The shadows clenched, growing smaller, until only the bare tips peeked under the door. He heard the scruff of boots and the sound of the key scraping into the lock before the door was thrown open, Rumlow and the rest of the strike team on the other side. Rumlow came over to undo the chains, unlocking the ones holding his arms up first. Pinpricks stabbed through his upper body as he lowered his arms while Rumlow bent over to undo the ones around his ankles. Rollins produced a new, shorter set for his hands, that Rumlow snapped on.

“Should’ve done what he wanted, Cap,” Rumlow said flatly. “Would’ve gone a lot better for you.” Steve looked down at his broken nail, bruised and red along the edge. But there were eight lines now. He could see that clearly in the light that spilled into the cell from the open door. He’d done that. He could leave it here and that last one wouldn’t have to bother him anymore.

He was led to the center of a clearing near the cell where he’d spent part of the night, a tall wooden post the only thing ornamenting the area. A hook had been pounded into the top of it. A large group of soldiers had come to watch, even this early. He scanned the crowd, and was at least somewhat gratified not to recognize many faces. Someone had nailed a sign that said ‘Traitor’ on the post, and Steve was strangely grateful that he could read it, though kept his expression neutral. Hammer was there, of course, gripping a long, braided leather whip in one hand and swishing it through the dirt. And Pierce, he noticed. Stern, too, he saw. He wanted to shout to the man that he owed him some reading lessons, and almost managed a laugh at the thought of Stern’s undoubtedly confused expression. Rumlow nudged him along, and he walked to stand in front of the post. Rollins took hold of the chain running between the cuffs on his wrists and stepped onto a small stool to climb up high enough to link the chain over the hook at the top of the post. The position forced him to stand almost on the tips of his toes, his face against the post, skin of his back stretched taut and centering his weight in his shoulders, done solely to cause an offender additional pain. Rumlow brought out a small blade and cut a stripe down the back of his shirt, then again at the collar, along the shoulder, tossing the scraps to the ground. He nodded at Hammer and stepped away, leaving Steve hanging against the post, naked from the waist up.

When he closed his eyes, he could see eight white marks against the blackness, and felt his muscles
tighten as he felt the first whoosh of air. He knew that was the worst thing you could do, but was helpless against the instinct. The first lash struck the center of his back, a searing coldness preceding the pain. He didn’t have much time to process it before the second licked a stripe across the first, rending the skin of his back open. He tried to count, but couldn’t keep track.

At some point, the sounds changed from the sharp slap of leather hitting skin to something wet, something slippery and meaty as the lash licked between layers of skin. The pain was too much, far too much, just building and building, never a moment to recede before the next count. He had told himself he wasn’t going to scream or beg, wouldn’t let them hear him, but at some point could hear harsh, guttural cries each time the thick leather end of the lash landed that he realized were coming from him.

The crowd was tossing jeers his way, insults and invective, calling him a traitor, shouting encouragement to Hammer, though the words just blended in, absorbed by haze the pain. He heard Hammer complain loudly about how sore his arm was getting, and shout the crowd to ask if anyone was keeping count, earning a round of laughter from the gathered mass.

At some point, cold water splashed over his face, and he realized he had passed out for a moment. “You back with us, Cap?” Rumlow asked.

“I could do this all day,” he slurred in response. It began again once he was coherent, and he closed his eyes and thought of patient hands pointing out letters, a soft, deep voice giving them sound.

By the end, it was only the chain holding him up, his body long since unable to bear its own weight. There was nothing but the pain, his back a mass of skin and blood, every movement agony. Rollins got up on the stool and unhooked his chain. Rumlow was at his side, trying to support him, but he was unbalanced and heavy, and it wasn’t enough. He slipped to the ground like a stone, falling forward in the dirt. Someone was shouting at him to get up, but he couldn’t move, his body could only bleed, it refused any other command. Rough hands grabbed him on either side and lifted him to his feet, though he couldn’t get purchase underneath himself to hold his own weight. The arms half-carried, half-dragged him away, back to his cell, and dropped him to the ground against the wall. They didn’t chain him again, thank the gods, though his hands were still held together by the fetters.

Rumlow closed the door, shrouding the cell in darkness save for the light filtering in through the space between the door and the ground beneath. He leaned his head against the cold stone of the wall, trying to think of anything but the fire pouring over his back in wave after wave, but it proved impossible. He honestly wished they would just ahead and hang him, though he knew this day was as much a part of his punishment as anything else.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed since they deposited him in his cell, but at some point, a small panel in the bottom of the door opened and a bowl was shoved through. He looked at it, but didn’t reach for it. There was a brown substance of some kind inside the bowl. Something moved within it. For a moment, he thought of Tony and his ongoing disdain at the biscuits they carried before his stomach roiled and he tasted bile, his body shaking as it tried to expel whatever was left. Once the shaking started, he couldn’t seem to get it to stop, his body having stopped obeying him some time ago. He dug his hand into the hard dirt on the floor next to him as his body was wracked with pain from his convulsions and it came away wet and dark with blood.

The pain eventually became a dull, throbbing ache, his back stiff and muscles unable to relax enough to allow him the respite of sleep. He watched the shadows play across the dirt floor, listened to the muffled voices that occasionally spoke outside his door and waited for the clatter of the key in the lock. He resisted the temptation to try to stand and touch the grooves again, count
them, see that there were eight now, eight full ones standing in relief against the gray stone. He felt an odd sense of accomplishment at that. His life would be remembered by six people and a stone inside a cell in the middle of a traitor’s camp. He thought of the cairns that had marked the graves back in Brookland, stacks of stones without names or inscriptions, just a knowledge passed between generations, and supposed it was fitting.

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the stone again, drifting in and out of consciousness as the pain seemed to ebb for a time and then crash over him in searing bursts. Once, he woke up and saw Tony sitting next to him, a smattering of blueberries cupped in his hand. He offered one to Steve, but when he put it in his mouth, it tasted like salt. He looked down and saw he had a metal plate in his chest, but it wouldn’t stay in, so he pressed, harder and harder, until his chest caved in with it, a gaping hole gushing red rivulets down his stomach. He panicked and moved too quickly, groaned as pain ripped across his back for his efforts and blinked against the darkness. Tony wasn’t there, of course. Just the bowl of gruel and its unfortunate occupant.

Steve hadn’t realized day had broken when they came for him. He needed help to stand and had to lean against Rumlow as he walked, but walk he did. If this was his end, he wasn’t going to be carried to it. A hastily constructed gallows had been set up just outside the cell. He walked over to it, but knew he couldn’t do the steps. He looked over at Rumlow, who cast a look at Rollins, and the two men grabbed him under the upper arms and helped him up the steps to top. He vision swam with black for a moment from the pain, but he managed to stand on his own after a moment, swaying slightly, but remaining upright. Rumlow pressed him forward where a rope hung, a large circle formed at the bottom. He stepped behind it and waited. He didn’t want to feel any relief at this, didn’t want any part of himself to welcome it, but it was hard to remember that when his back was on fire and everything hurt so badly it was all his mind could focus on. It felt like giving them a victory they didn’t deserve though, so he kept his gaze as defiant as he could muster through the haze of pain, his eyes steadfastly forward, staring at the sunrise. His last, he supposed. He wished he could say it was some glorious morn, that he would have one last glimpse of something beautiful, but it was gray and damp, the light muted under billowing clouds.

Rumlow took out the key to the shackles binding his wrists and undid one, then repositioned his arms behind him. He couldn’t help the hiss of pain at the new position, pulling the broken skin between his shoulder blades tight. The whole moment had a sense of the unreal about it, as if everything in his line of sight was softer around the edges, though he was still coherent enough to realize it was the haze of pain and start of sickness that lent the dreamlike quality. He could see Hammer, yawning, the bastard, and Pierce sipping a cup of something that steamed against the chill of the morning.

They were chatting, nothing important, just passing the time, and in that moment a fierce hatred, pure and unchecked raced through him. He hadn’t felt that kind of rage since…since he’d buried George, he realized. It was the anger of the impotent, hatred borne of being unable to do anything to change the outcome. Dying in combat, dying for a cause or a person you believed in…he had never shied away from that, never asked to die old in his bed, surrounded by loved ones, only to die well, to have lived a life that meant something. But this was all there was, he thought as Rumlow slipped the noose over his head and tightened the knot against his neck. Rumlow cleared his throat and looked over at Pierce, waiting for direction. Steve knew there was a door that opened beneath his feet, forcing his body to drop, the weight of it slowly strangling the air out of him while he struggled. He’d seen hanging before, rapers and murderers. Never thought he would be attending his own. He took a deep breath, relishing the burn of it down his throat.

“Any last words?” Pierce asked, blowing on his drink as if it was too hot to consume. There was no one here to convince, no one to persuade, no great speech to be given. It was just him and these men, who had taken so much. From him, from the team, from Tony, from the Realm itself. Who
were going to continue to take, until someone stopped them. It wouldn’t be him, but he could hope he had done enough to set that end in motion. But now, it was just him and the sum of his life, what he wanted it to mean, if it could have any meaning now.

Oddly, he thought of Tony and their sparring session, tickling him into submission when he couldn’t win any other way, refusing to surrender by redefining the rules of the game. He had spent much of his life refusing to give ground to bullies, getting knocked to the dirt and asking for more, and these men were no different, not really. The fleeting image of dark brown eyes, alit with laughter ghosted across his mind. Soft words of encouragement never judging as he stumbled and stuttered over words, fierce arguments making him justify his every thought and gentle hands making his body come alive. Tony, who believed so completely that his King could do better, could be a better man, if given a chance. Steve had admired that faith from the beginning, perhaps because he longed for it himself. For all that he had joined Pierce’s rebellion, Pierce himself had never inspired that kind of devotion, at least not for Steve.

In the end, the only thing that mattered, he supposed, was what you stood for. You didn’t have to win, you just had to stand. When there were no battles to fight, no speeches left to give, nothing left to stand for, all you have is who you choose to stand with. Maybe, in the end, those were the same thing. He didn’t know what he believed in anymore, but he knew he believed in Tony. That was enough to make the decision for him. He took in his last breath of air and let his voice ring as loud and strong as he could.

“Long live the King.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, Steve. *hides*

Well, if it is any consolation, there is no character death tag, so take that for what you will.

As always, thank you so much for reading, commenting and kudo-ing. Up next, Tony's been a busy, if frustrated, boy.
Chapter 14

Drawing on reserves of strength he didn’t know he possessed, Tony managed to walk away from where Steve was standing, looking utterly debauched, with his hair mussed by Tony’s hands, lips swollen and red, eyes wide and dark with lust and longing and something else that Tony couldn’t look at too long, like trying to stare into the sun. Tony had known that Steve would refuse his entreaty, but he had to at least make the attempt. That didn’t mean that the disappointment was any less bitter for it. Still, he knew he could not linger.

What he hadn’t expected was for things to get quite so out of hand that quickly, though. He knew that if he looked back again, he would not be able to walk away. He would turn around and things weren’t going to end with a kiss this time. He only had so much willpower, after all. Tony shook his head and picked up his pace, though each step only added to his growing anxiety. Weeks out here with Steve, wanting him, waiting for what seemed like an eternity to be able to tell him the truth and to have it all so close…it was both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time, twisting his stomach into knots of warmth and making his chest tighten in panic as he walked away, though he knew he needed to hurry and quickened his pace as he placed more ground between himself and Steve.

A part of Tony could not help but wonder at the absurdity of showing up at Matthew’s keep like this, bedraggled, dirty, with a fair growth of beard and a giant metal disc in his chest. Rhodey used to say he liked to make an entrance. Well, never do things in half measures, he supposed. Matt had squired at the Castle in his youth, though Matt had been considerably older than he and the two of them had only rarely crossed paths. Truthfully, Tony counted Matt as more acquaintance than friend, but there was no denying that Matt had been steadfastly loyal in this debacle. He was about to find out just how far that loyalty would extend.

Matthew’s keep shouldn’t be too far ahead, but he was hoping to run into a patrol or guard station before he reached it. If not, he was going to give Matt hell for that, he thought. Steve had steadfastly refused to tell Tony where this sanctum of their doctor friend was located, making time even more precious, since he had no idea which direction Steve might be heading. If Steve was cutting across lands held by Fury, that would certainly complicate matters.

As he thought about Steve, about seeing him again, he couldn’t help but remember the events of the night before and Steve’s revelations about what had happened in Brookland, what had almost happened to Steve. If anyone had asked Tony before last night if there was any way he could hate Stane more, he would have told them it was not possible, but the gods seemed to like to reward such hubris. Many nights ago, Steve had told him that he had reasons, not excuses, for joining Pierce’s rebellion, and that might have been the understatement of the century, Tony thought bitterly.

When he closed his eyes, Tony could still see Steve’s face, the tense, terrified mask of guilt and despair that had slowly sloughed off his usual calm, steadfast gaze with each word that tumbled from his lips. A part of Tony had wanted to beg him to stop, to keep the words that he knew were coming inside, not speak it aloud and give it form, make it real, but another, deeper, part knew that he had to hear. That this, sitting there and having to listen as Steve relieved the horror that had befallen people he cared about on the whim of some power-mad asshole leagues away, this was
part of Tony’s penance, something he had to endure because he couldn’t leave this behind. It had to be held close and not forgotten to time or distance, simply because it would be easier to leave it in the past. And to do that, Tony couldn’t look away from it, couldn’t refuse to see this man he cared about so deeply in such pain, much as he might have wanted to, even as the telling nearly tore Steve apart.

It was Tony’s to bear witness to, his to take from Steve’s shoulders and carry with him from now on. He had let that happen. While he may not have given the order himself, it had been his own selfishness that let Stane’s machinations go unchecked for so long. Had he cared more about the world beyond the things immediate to him, he may have prevented that from happening. He couldn’t change what was once done in his name, but he could damn well make sure that his past mistakes were not repeated.

Making it up to Steve may prove to be an impossibility, but he had to try. And Barnes. He owed them the attempt. If their forgiveness couldn’t be had, he could at least offer them a real outlet for their anger, not some nebulous title leagues away. Let them hate him, if that was what Steve needed, if it helped in some minimal way to have a real target to pour that onto, then he had no cause for complaint. It was well earned, after all.

Tony had been prepared for that to be all Steve might accept from him after finally hearing about what happened in Brookland. He told himself that was no more than he deserved. He had spent most of his life getting everything he demanded and nothing that mattered, so it was almost fitting that he would lose the one thing that did before he even got a chance to hold it. What had he been doing while Stane was busy ordering the deaths of his people? Ordering Steve’s death? He didn’t want to think about it too deeply, afraid he might actually recall an answer.

But then…by some grace of the gods he had long eschewed, Steve offered him an exoneration that he didn’t deserve, but so desperately wanted to cling to, grasp onto and never let go. He almost told Steve the truth right then and there, but fear held him back. Fear that when faced with the person he had hated for so long standing in front of him, Steve’s forgiveness would not be quite as forthcoming.

At least…and he knew this thought didn’t serve him well, but he couldn’t help himself…At least if he told Steve after he was brought to Matt’s keep, Steve couldn’t just leave. He would be safe. Safe and cared for and wanting for nothing. Hating Tony, perhaps, but hating him from behind strong walls with feasts spread out before him. That was an end that Tony could at least live with, though having everything he wanted so very close and yet so unattainable might be the worst part of valor, a fitting punishment designed just for him.

If he was honest with himself, there was a part of him, a dark, selfish, twisted part, which thought to use Steve’s own self-recrimination about Pierce’s deception, to accept the absolution Steve offered so freely. He knew that was not fair, not to Steve, not to Barnes, and not to the people who had suffered for his negligence. He owed them all at least to stand accused of this, to face it, to answer for it, if there were any answers to be given, and to offer what recompense he could, whether it was accepted or not.

Tony couldn’t deny that Steve’s words gave him something that felt remarkably like hope though, however small. Steve wasn’t cruel or vindictive. He wanted to find the best in people, to see them as they could be, and gods help him, Steve believed in Tony for some unfathomable reason. Just Tony, as if that were enough, and when had anyone thought that of him? Always had to be better, smarter, more. That was what Starks did, simple as that. Yet Steve saw him at his absolute lowest point and found him remarkable. He had no idea what to do with that, though every fiber of his being wanted nothing more than to cling to it and refuse to let go, but some newfound part of him
buried deep underneath the metal plate in his chest balked at that thought. If Steve’s hatred was to be Tony’s payment to the gods for his past selfishness, then so be it. But he could not put aside Steve’s words so easily. Steve wanted Tony to forgive his King because he saw how heavily it sat upon Tony’s mind. How far a leap then to earning Steve’s forgiveness?

Tony sighed and brushed a large, low-hanging branch aside as he walked. Flat-footed, he thought with a grin, thinking back to Steve and Clint poking fun at his inability to walk with any kind of stealth. His head snapped up at the sound of hoofbeats hitting the hard ground, distant, but approaching fast. Tony ducked down, finding what cover he could amongst the tree limbs and bushes, mindful that the last time he had run toward Stark riders, he had found himself face to face with the man who had tried to shorten him by a head-length. From his vantage point, he could see the dust billowing up in a small, golden cloud as the riders raced along the short stone wall he had been tracking as he walked through the forest. Once they were close enough, he could see Matt’s familiar colors reflected on their armor and shields, save one, the rider in front, who wore his own red and gold.

A rider he would recognize anywhere.

Heady relief burrowed its way through Tony, settling in his stomach with a shaky, twisting kind of nervousness, and for a brief moment, it was too much, after smoke and pain, dank, dark caves and truths he did not want to hear. Tony closed his eyes against it. He almost didn’t even want to look again, lest it be taken away, shown to be a trick of his own mind. Until Steve mentioned Rhodey being at Matt’s, he hadn’t been sure that Rhodey had even survived the attack on the carriages, and even after Steve’s revelation...the flow of information was too unreliable to be certain of anything these days. He forced himself to open his eyes, and Rhodey was still there, fierce and sure, as always. You are more than what you are, Tony recalled Rhodey’s words from so long ago in his tent when he had denied them. When he had not wanted to hear them, because hearing them hurt. It had taken far too much to realize that refusing to hear them hurt others far worse. But he heard them now, loud and clear, they rang with the echo of a promise he was only now realizing he had already made.

Tony stood up, moving aside the brush that served as his cover and stepped out into the clearing, walking, then running toward the wall and the approaching riders, his heart pounding in his chest. The riders pulled up their reins sharply, horses rearing back at the effort, weapons at the ready, as he neared. He stopped short, panting, chest heaving with the exertion, suddenly overcome with relief and exhaustion. A part of him wanted nothing more than to sink to his knees in supplication to the moment, if nothing else, but knew he couldn’t do that. Instead, he stopped still, holding his head high and armorimg himself with all the condescension he could manage to muster, all things considered. The riders pulled up short, horses jarred to a sharp halt as he came into their path, grunts and whinnies mingling as the riders tried to control their mounts.

“Hey! What in the name of the gods do you think you’re—‘ one of the men began.

“Oh my gods! Its—Gods, oh my gods! Your Grace!” Rhodey burst out, voice managing to go from astonishment to concern without skipping a beat. “Someone—you there, get His Grace some water, now! Now!” Rhodey shouted as he dismounted, racing to Tony’s side to grasp him around the shoulders, running strong hands up and down Tony’s arms, over his head and back around, looking for injuries. Rhodey’s hands stilled as Tony’s shirtfront fell open, the top of the metal disc just visible.

“Good to see you, too, Rhodey,” Tony said with a wide grin. “It’s okay. I’ll explain later,” Tony nodded, casting a quick glance down to the metal plate before adjusting his shirt to cover it.
Someone pressed a water bag to his hand and he drank deeply, the cool water soothing his parched throat. The man who handed it to him immediately knelt, the others quickly dismounting and following suit. Rhodey dropped to one knee and bowed his head. “Your Grace,” he said. “I cannot tell you how good it is to see you,” Rhodey said, looking up at him, a fond smile quickly widening into a grin. “Damn. Damn-- It is good to have you back, Sire.”

“Oh, get up. All of you,” Tony commanded with a wave of his hand towards the other men. Rhodey’s armor clanked as he stood, rubbing against the chained mail beneath.

“Where did you come from? How did you even get here? What—Your Grace, what happened? No, wait, nevermind,” Rhodey amended, looking around at their exposed position in consternation. “Lord Ellis’ keep isn’t far. Porter, give His Grace your horse. Let’s get you back, Your Grace. Lord Ellis’ physician can check on you, and I’m sure you’ll want a report. Some food—food, gods, does anyone have any food with them?—its just—gods, Your Grace—this—I’m still trying to—” Rhodey stammered, shaking his head in consternation.

“There will be time for that, Rhodes, but listen,” Tony began, finding his voice sounded different as he spoke, the familiar tones of command and rule sliding into place. “There is a man in the woods. Tall. Dark blond hair. Worn clothes, a lot like these,” Tony said, indicating his own attire. “A soldier. He has a sword and shield with just the faintest trace of a star painted on it. I need you to find him. Find him and bring him to me. Under absolutely no condition is he to be harmed in any way. If he tries to fight or flee, tell him you surrender. It will throw him completely off. Tell him the King…the King requests his presence. Just---Just bring him to me,” Tony ordered, looking around at the men. The men shuffled their feet in the dirt a bit and eyed Rhodey in confusion. Well, that just wasn’t going to do at all. “I don’t think I stuttered,” Tony snapped at them. Huh, well, that got them going, Tony thought. Guess he hadn’t entirely lost it.

“You heard His Grace. Move out, now. Evans, ride back to Lord Ellis’ keep and gather…” Rhodey began, casting a quick look at Tony.

“I want him found, Rhodey,” Tony replied to the unasked question. “He is your priority right now.”

“Leave two battalions at the keep to garrison it, but send everyone else into the woods,” Rhodey commanded. “Your Grace, this…soldier…was he one of the ones that took you? Did you escape him? I swear to you we will—“ Rhodey started, his eyes burning bright.

“He saved me,” Tony broke in, finding he had rarely meant anything more. “Find him. Do not harm him. I mean it, Rhodey.”

“Yeh-Yes, Sire, of course. You heard His Grace. No harm is to come to this man, by order of the King. Evans, make sure it is known,” Rhodey said to the men. The man, the one called Evans, Tony supposed, remounted his horse, pulled sharply on the reins and took off the way the riders had come. The others were standing around, generally looking at him with something akin to awed confusion, if he could put a name to it. He could only imagine what he must look like after all this time, let alone the fact of their King simply appearing in their midst out of nowhere. “Porter, Gregg, you’re with us. The rest of you, search the forest—“

“Head southwest, along the wall towards the lands held by Fury’s forces,” Tony broke in. “I left him no more than a league back, though I don’t know which direction he will take from there.” The men nodded and mounted their horses, save for the one called Porter, who would be having a nice stroll back to the keep, since Tony was using his horse. Tony thanked the man, who immediately started blustering and stammering and generally behaving appropriately. Tony had almost forgotten what it was like, had gotten so used to being treated as simply a man that the role
of King suddenly seemed ill-fitting somehow, too tight and uncomfortable. He had changed out there, he knew. How much remained to be seen, but if it meant that a simple expression of gratitude to one of his soldiers was so unexpected as to render the man virtually speechless, he supposed the change was long overdue.

“Let’s get you to the keep,” Rhodey said, gently pulling Tony over to one of the less-agitated animals. “Is there anything else you need? Are you—that, uh, that thing—do you—are you in pain, Your Grace?” Rhodey asked, his eyes drifting again to Tony’s chest. Tony wanted to laugh at that, but couldn’t force it out. He tapped a hand over his chest, a dull, hollow ringing sound echoing back.

“I’ll be fine. Right now, there are three things I want to do. I want to eat real food, take the longest bath in the history of time and put on clothes that could not walk themselves to the laundry,” Tony replied. “And then…then we have to talk. About a lot of things, Rhodey. But first, find him. The soldier. I—I need him, Rhodes.”

“Of course, of course, Your Grace…it’s just…damn, if I haven’t missed you, Your Grace,” Rhodey said, blinking rapidly and placing a strong, tight hand on Tony’s shoulder, giving it a slight squeeze.

“I missed you too, gorgeous,” Tony said with a grin as he slipped a booted foot into the stirrup and pushed himself into the saddle. “Now, find me my soldier and get me to honest to god’s food. In that order.”

“Yes, Your Grace!” Rhodey responded with a grin. “Next time you ride with me, okay?” Rhodey whispered, leaning in close.

“Yes, dear,” Tony replied with a wry, deprecating grimace.

Rhodey and two of the others escorted him back to Matthew’s keep, while the rest of Rhodey’s party began the search for Steve. They rode into the inner bailey to little fanfare, only curious gazes since Rhodey’s party had been so diminished. Tony handed the reins to a groom without a word, dismounting and following in Rhodey’s wake as they walked inside. With each step into the keep, it was almost like donning armor, feeling the iron shell of who he was and what that meant coalesce around him as he walked inside, heads beginning to turn his way in curiosity, though he could tell no one recognized him, not yet anyway. Unsurprising, that.

They walked into the great hall, Rhodey in the lead while Tony took a moment to steel himself, momentarily undone by a sudden, surprising rush of sadness at leaving behind something he never realized he craved. Being Tony, being just Tony, had been wonderfully liberating for that small amount of time he had spent with the Avengers. Earning Stev e’s regard, his trust, meant so much more to him than any favor anyone had ever offered, because it had been given so freely, so earnestly to Tony. Not to his title or his power or his money, just to him and for him alone.

Only now, as he prepared to step back into what had been his life, to leave Tony behind and become who he was again, did he realize how precious a gift that had been, despite the circumstances. Thousands had sworn loyalty to the King. Only one had ever placed his trust in Tony, bereft of anything other than sheer faith alone to guide him. It was humbling, that, even for one who did not wear humble well, he thought.

“Sir James, what is this I hear of you sending all but a few of my men out to hunt the woods for some soldier? I hope you have a good reason for such—“ Lord Ellis began, then stopped, brows drawing together in a deep furrow. “Sir James? What is—who is—” Lord Ellis stuttered, words faltering to a halt. “By the gods! Your Grace, is that you?” Matthew barked out, taking a few
steps forward to the stunned surprise of his attendants who were milling about the hall as the time for supper neared.

“My Lord, it is my deepest honor to present His Majesty, Anthony the Fourth, by the Grace of the Gods, King of the Realm and Dominions beyond the Seas,” Rhodey intoned loudly over the expectant hush that fell over the great hall. It took everyone a moment to catch up, a quick murmur rushing through the gathered crowd, and then everything was happening at once. The entire hall knelt as one, though whispers still swept through like locusts over a sea of bowed heads. Tony tapped Rhodey on the shoulder where he had gone to one knee again, and the other man stood.

“You may rise,” Tony called out to the rest of the hall, the sound of his own voice seeming to fill the space for a moment before the assembly regained their feet. It sounded odd to his own ears, the last vestiges of those few weeks with the Avengers slipping slowly away as he stepped back into the familiar role. Once, it had felt a show, one of those pantomimes the mummers put on to entertain, a mask he had hidden behind for far too long. Now…now, it had never been more real. Standing here, the weight of it no longer a burden, but a gift, a way to help, to set things right. His eyes pricked and stung, wishing with all his being that Steve were standing here next to him, making all the expectations seem plausible.

“Lord Ellis, I thank you for your hospitality. I’m sure you have many questions, but first, I must speak with you and Captain Rhodes privately. There is much to share, and the Realm needs your help now more than ever,” Tony replied. Matt’s eyes widened a bit, but he gave a jerky nod of his head and swept out a hand.

“Would you not like to rest first, Your Grace? You must have been through an ordeal. Please, Sire, allow us to ensure your health and well-being before we speak of other matters,” Lord Ellis pleaded. “Surely those can wait until you have eaten, Sire? Ford, have my physician come immediately to see to His Grace.”

“I appreciate your concern, my Lord, but I’m afraid what I have to say cannot wait,” Tony insisted. “I would not say no to a bath and change of clothes once we have spoken, though,” he went on a bit more congenially.

“Of course, Your Grace. Of course. I’ll have my chambers prepared for you immediately,” Lord Ellis said, earning quick nod in response from his steward who set off promptly to move Lord Ellis’ things for the time being and set the room up for Tony. “We can speak privately in my solar. This way, if you please, Your Grace,” Lord Ellis said, sweeping his hand out to indicate the direction for Tony and Rhodey. He followed Matt and Rhodey up the stairs and down a hallway lined with doors to the family’s chambers into Matt’s private solar, a small, rounded room with a window overlooking the bailey and battlements lining the wall that ringed the keep. A desk and several large, stuffed chairs filled the room. Tapestries lined the torch-lit wall.

“Your Grace, forgive me, I’m just—I’m thrilled to have you back, safe and sound, of course—we…we worried…Lord Stane said—” Matt stuttered as he paced the room, waiting for Tony to sit. Tony sank into one of the large chairs as Rhodey lit the fire with one of the torches and replaced it in its sconce. “This is just most unexpected,” Lord Ellis said as he sat down in the chair opposite Tony. Rhodey dropped to one of the low stools near the fire and scooted it closer, forming a tight circle as the men talked.

“I know, Matt,” Tony replied evenly. A servant came in, bearing a tankard of warm wine, mulled with spices and a tray of cheeses, meats and breads. Tony stared at it a moment, thinking of hard biscuits that would crack your teeth if you bit too hard. He rubbed a hand over his face, his gaze catching on the flames of the fire for a moment while he gathered his thoughts. He took the small
pouch of crystals from his pocket and dropped one into the warm wine, drinking deeply and
tinking that Bruce would likely not approve of his methods of self-medicating. He followed that
with a bite of the soft, warm bread, the salted butter coating his tongue. It was heaven. He had
thought perhaps he had forgotten how food could taste after those foul biscuits and whatever it was
the Ten Rings put into the gruel they served. He swallowed and took another drink of the warm
wine, forcing himself to take a few more appropriately refined bites of food instead of shoving the
whole tray into his mouth, his stomach clenching in protest.

Tony waited until the servant left before beginning his tale, and, to his surprise, found the retelling
was more difficult than he would have thought. He stumbled a bit as he told them about his escape
from the Ten Rings, his breath hitching on Yinsen’s name. And then being saved, or recaptured if
you wanted to be technical about it, by Steve and the Avengers. He saw Rhodey frown out of the
corner of his eye.

“So…just so we’re all clear here…you’re saying that Stane murdered your parents, ordered a
massacre of our own people, orchestrated the attack on the caravan after the weapons
demonstration, effectively handed you over to the Ten Rings with the caveat they were to kill you
when they were done using you to stockpile their weapons cache, and is now trying to set himself
up as Regent in your stead, with the help of Sir Gregory and possibly General Ross and Lord Stone,
all so that he can hand the Realm over to Pierce, who is working with that lunatic Schmidt and is
about to march a huge army against the capital,” Rhodey summed up, looking back and forth
between Tony and Matt, as if hoping someone would contradict him. “And these Avenger people
are helping you now, and we’re supposed to bring them directly to you if any of them are found.”

“That…yeah, that’s pretty much it,” Tony confirmed, looking down at his hands that were gripping
the tankard of wine, the light from the fire prickling over the ripples like bright threads.

“That’s…well…that’s just…damn,” Rhodey said, shaking his head and standing. He walked over
to the fireplace and stoked it with the long iron poker, clearly trying to give himself something to
do while he absorbed the information.

“I would second Sir James’ epithet, Your Grace. This is…a lot to consider. I’m afraid you have
left me at a loss for words,” Lord Ellis told him somewhat stiffly, clearly taken aback by Tony’s
revelations. “If your suppositions are correct, then we must move quickly to remove Lord Stane
from power before more damage can be done in your name, Your Grace. Will he stand trial?”

“That’s the plan. We have to get back to the castle, Rhodey,” Tony said, though he could already
see Rhodey’s mind working. “And do it without drawing attention to ourselves.”

Rhodey nodded in agreement. “We’ll leave at first light. Just you, me and a few outriders. We’ll
need to travel fast, but keep your return quiet until we have Stane and the others in custody,”
Rhodey said firmly.

“And Captain Rogers. He will be with us as well,” Tony replied smoothly. Rhodey’s mouth
thinned into a line, but he nodded, knowing Tony well enough to know when to argue and when to
let something lie, though the air of disapproval bothered Tony for some reason, perhaps because it
seemed to somehow reflect on Steve, and that was simply something he could not countenance.

“Rhodey…James…you told me, all those months ago in that gods-forsaken tent that you wished
for me to have people that would put everything on the line for me, people that I could count on. I
found them, Rhodey. I know that sounds crazy and I know a part of you thinks I’m suffering from
some kind of ill effects of captivity or something, but I’m not. I’m not,” Tony repeated.

“You know I’ll do as you ask, Your Grace, of course, I will…I just…don’t let your gratitude to
these people be twisted into something more, simply because it so happens that they seem to have
a conscience, at least when they didn’t know who you are,” Rhodey protested. Tony understood his concern, even could appreciate it on some level, but hated the implication behind Rhodey’s worries. “They did serve Pierce, after all. Maybe they were misled, maybe we all were, but…they fought against you, against us. That’s—just, of course, it will be as you wish, but are you sure, Sire? This could be a plot, some deception by Pierce to gain inroads with you, get his people into the city...” Rhodey suggested, trailing off.

“You told me I could be more than what I was,” Tony reminded him. “That day, in the tent. You were wrong about that, though. I don’t need to be more than who I am to do this. To do this right. I just need to be who I truly am, though I didn’t know that person until all the rest of this was stripped away. He…I…can be someone...someone remarkable, Rhodey. I believe that. For the first time, I think I really do, because...because he wouldn’t lie. Not about that. So, it must be true. Look, I know that I have a lot to make up for, Rhodey. A lot to set right. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean,” Tony interrupted when Rhodey opened his mouth to protest. “But I can do this. I have to do this.”

“This Captain…the one nearly my entire garrison is out looking for,” Matthew started, raising an eyebrow in question. “He is...important to you, Your Grace?”

Tony didn’t pretend to misunderstand the query buried there. “He is,” he replied firmly. “More than I can say, Matt.”

“Well. Well, then, I shall look very forward to meeting him, Your Grace,” Lord Ellis said, giving Tony a deferential nod, but there was a small smile there that Tony caught before Matt schooled his features.

“I’ll join the search, Your Grace, with your permission,” Rhodey offered, and Tony understood that for the conciliation that it was.

“Thank you, Rhodey,” Tony replied, then nodded down at his torn and dirt-caked clothes with a wry twist of his mouth. “Think I’ll take you up on your offer of a bath and some food now,” he said to Matt.

“Of course, Your Grace. Allow me to show you to your chambers,” Matt replied. “Hot water and food are waiting.”

“My Lord…Matt…I don’t know how to thank you. Not just for this, but for your loyalty. To me. To the Crown. But mostly to the Realm. You’ve always been a good man, which is why, I suspect, you have avoided Court as much as you could,” Tony suggested. Lord Ellis huffed out a small laugh at that, but kept silent. “When all of this is over, I would be honored if you would serve on the Council. I need people I can trust there. And by that, I mean people I can trust to tell me the truth, to challenge me when I’m wrong, and to put the Realm before their own interests. That’s you, Matt. Always has been, but I was too much of an idiot to see it.”

“I—Your Grace—I don’t know what to say—except…the Ellis family has always served at the pleasure of our King. I could do no differently now, Sire,” Lord Ellis replied.

“Thanks, Matt. I mean it. For everything,” Tony said, clapping the man on his shoulder as he followed him from the room. “Rhodey, would you—“ Tony started.

“I’ll see if I can get an update on the search. If he hasn’t been found, I’ll lead the next party myself,” Rhodey replied, turning to walk down the steps to the great hall while Tony kept on Matt’s heels up the stairs to the Lord’s chambers.
Tony stepped inside a large, comfortable bedroom, a fire already roaring in the stone hearth and a large copper tub sitting in front of it, steam rising from the water inside. A veritable feast was laid out on a trestle table in the corner, he noted. His shrunken stomach already felt full from the earlier fare, but he knew Steve would be hungry when he arrived. Hungry and pissed, probably, Tony thought with a wry grimace. He looked at the food and felt something warm spill through his chest at the idea of having Steve join him in a real meal. Tony walked over to the table and tipped a bowl slightly towards him, the plump, ripe blueberries spilling over each other inside. He couldn’t suppress his grin at that, and wondered if Steve would remember.

“Is everything to your satisfaction, Your Grace?” Lord Ellis inquired.

“Fabulous,” Tony replied, letting the bowl of blueberries settle back on the table.

“I shall send attendants to assist you at once,” Lord Ellis said, bowing at the waist and closing the door as he left. It wasn’t long before Tony was sprawled out in the tub while Matt’s barber carefully trimmed his hair and beard into its usual shape. He dressed carefully in a fine, but simple dark blue doublet over tan breeches, something borrowed from Matt that one of his seamstresses quickly altered to fit Tony’s much trimmer figure. He didn’t want to overwhelm Steve all at once. Greeting Steve in his usual raiment would probably be a bit of a shock, to put it mildly. This way, at least, he would have a chance to allay Steve’s concerns about finding himself at Ellis’ keep before easing into the whole issue of Tony’s real identity. Every time he tried to call to mind some scenario where that went well, his mind went carefully blank. Fantastic. He was going to be left with something along the lines of, ‘See, I told you I was all-powerful, now have some symbolic blueberries.’ This was probably destined to go poorly.

When he finally glimpsed himself in the looking glass, it was a reflection he barely recognized. Whatever softness he had accumulated over the years had been lost in the captivity and starvation by the Ten Rings, and the miles of travel coupled with lack of the kind of food and drink to which he was accustomed with the Avengers, tanned skin now stretched taut over sharp features. He gave Matt’s physician the recipe for Bruce’s poultice, though the clay that Bruce used was not native to the area, so the doctor was going to try some other mixture he felt might help alleviate the symptoms of the metal leeching into Tony’s blood. At least he hoped that would suffice until he could get back to the city and replace this damnable disc with the Wakandan metal that he hoped would prove far less likely to keep trying to kill him.

The servants removed the tub and bowed as they closed the door, leaving him alone for the moment. He stared at the oak planks of the door, willing Rhodey to return with Steve in tow. In his head, he began and discarded a dozen or more scenarios for what to say, each becoming slightly more desperate and pleading as he went. He wanted to offer excuses, apologies, pledges, anything that would convince Steve that he was sincere, that the deception he had undertaken did not extend to his feelings for Steve, but he knew all he could truly give Steve, what Steve deserved, was simply the truth. He would sit here and answer any questions, meet any demands that Steve might ask of him, and hope that the forgiveness Steve had so earnestly offered the night before held true in the light of truth.

He sat down in one of the large, overstuffed chairs by the table and let his eyes drift over to the large, ornately carved bed, bedecked with hangings depicting Lord Ellis’ coat of arms, the plump mattress covered with fine linens and a soft velvet coverlet. It was probably overly optimistic to hope that Steve might let him apologize quite that profusely, he assumed with a sigh. He nibbled at some of the foods, picking bits and pieces off here and there, still marveling at the sheer amount of it after becoming used to such meager fare. He wanted to wait for Steve though. There was something about dining with him, getting to finally be the one to provide something for Steve instead of the other way around, which was vastly appealing. A knock on the wooden door
brought him to his feet with such force it sent the chair rocking on its legs.

“Enter,” he called out, regaining his bearing, though he couldn’t stop the way his heart suddenly found itself clawing up his throat as Rhodey entered. He was alone though, Tony noted at once, dismay churning his stomach.

“Your Grace,” Rhodey addressed him, kneeling down.

“Oh, stop that, for the sake of the gods Rhodey,” Tony said with a wave of his hand. “Where is he?”

Rhodey stood and grimaced, meaning Tony was not going to like what he was about to say. “We have not yet located him, Your Grace. We found some possible tracks, but in the dark…our riders are searching by torchlight, but it is hard going in that wood. There are too many places a man can disappear, and this one…he knows what he’s doing, Your Grace,” Rhodey reported stoically. Damn. Damn the man and his annoying competence, Tony thought in frustration. “We’ll keep looking, of course. But…we might not be able to locate him before morn. I—I am sorry, Your Grace.”

Tony forced himself to swallow past the lump in his throat. “Yes, thank you for the report. That’s…That’s—ah, fuck, Rhodey, that—he’s going to—it isn’t safe for him, for any of them. If Pierce finds out—fuck,” Tony stuttered, running a hand through his neatly trimmed hair, leaving it all askew. “Just keep looking. He was heading for something called the Sanctum. Home of some magician called Stephen Strange. You might ask around if anyone has heard of him. Used to be a doctor, but took up sorcery, apparently. Not too many of those around, one would think. Someone must know where he can be found.”

“Of course, Your Grace. That will help, I’m sure,” Rhodey replied. He shut the door behind him and came to stand beside Tony near the fire. “I know you’re worried, Tony, but we have hundreds of men looking for him,” Rhodey said, addressing Tony less formally now that they were alone. “And I’ve already sent messages to our commanders to spread the word that if we come across anyone identifying themselves as an Avenger, they are not to be harmed, and I am to be notified immediately. We’ll find him, Tones. Try to get some sleep. I think we can make it in a week or so, depending on how the roads into the city are, but it will be hard riding. The roads are a mess now.”

Tony nodded, though couldn’t quite meet Rhodey’s eyes, a flutter of worry settling low in his gut. This wasn’t how this was supposed to go, damn it all to hell. Why could nothing be simple? Was he still paying his debt to the gods that they wanted to continue to make his life difficult? He sighed, no answers from the gods being forthcoming, and sank back into the chair. “Speaking of ways into the city, there’s something I have to show you,” he told Rhodey as he grabbed the unfinished map Steve had given him off the table where he had set it when he undressed to bathe. “Take a look at this and tell me what you see.”

“Where did you get this?” Rhodey asked sharply.

“Steve. He drew it. Draws these incredible maps, you’ll love it,” Tony promised. Tony went over the drawing, meaning to show Rhodey what it meant, as Steve had shown him, but Rhodey’s face was already crumpling in understanding.

“Gods, Tones. This—if he is right—does Pierce know?” Rhodey questioned.

“No, just the other Avengers, thank the gods,” Tony replied.
“And he just gave this to you?” Rhodey repeated.

“He’s a good man, James. How many would have something like this in their hands and want to use it only to protect the Realm?” Tony asked quietly.

“Not many, I’ll admit,” Rhodey said, looking away for a long moment. “Fine. Fine, but I’m still going to have a stern talk with him about his life choices.”

Tony barked out a loud laugh. “Just please let me be there for that,” he requested, grinning widely.

Rhodey left Tony’s chambers long enough to tell one of his commanders to see what could be discovered about the location of Strange’s sanctum, and then returned to Tony, obviously eager to go over the map and what it meant for their defense of the city. They talked long into the night, going over Steve’s map and the implications, discussing the necessary fortifications to the city and how best to handle a trial for Stane and General Ross, and what to do about Tiberious, the weasel. Tony was fairly certain Gregory, his erstwhile “cousin,” would be happy to testify against both of them in return for keeping his head attached to his body. Rhodey left his chamber sometime close to midnight, promising to check on the status of the search and return with a report if anything had changed, but Tony knew Rhodey well enough to know that the man would not have stayed with him this long, doing his damnedest to distract him, if he thought they were actually going to locate Steve.

Tony lay in the soft bed, staring at the hangings that draped over it, the way the low-burning fire cast shadows against the walls. He was warm and comfortable, well-fed and well-groomed. He looked next to him at the empty place that had for so many nights been filled by Steve’s steady presence. Even in this comfort, he found it hard to find slumber without Steve’s solid warmth next to him. He rubbed the velvet coverlet between his thumb and forefinger, thinking about a far coarser blanket.

It was a long time before Tony slept, and when he did, it was to dreams of drowning, wrapped in grasping tree limbs that refused to let go. He woke up with a start, his body tangled in heaps of covers he had gotten used to sleeping without. The first rays of sunlight were peeking over the horizon, the sounds of the keep beginning to stir with the dawn.

He had fallen asleep in the clothes he had worn the night before, but quickly found upon rising that someone had brought him freshly tailored garments in the night, some poor seamstress probably working her fingers to bleeding in the effort to get the King new clothes for the day. A tray of food, and gods bless Matthew, a jug of coffee followed quickly. He knew Matt didn’t drink the brew himself, just kept the beans on hand for visitors, and appreciated that he had apparently recalled that Tony favored it.

Rhodey joined him a short time later, grimly shaking his head as he entered in answer to Tony’s unasked question. Everything was in readiness for him to leave, to head back to the city, to save the Realm from Stane and his machinations. Everything except that Steve wasn’t at his side, hating him or loving him or a bit of both, the lack of his presence like an open wound, raw and tender. He followed Rhodey down to the gatehouse where Matt and several riders who would be serving as escort were waiting. His own mount was Matt’s finest, a beautiful black gelding with three white stockings around his hooves. “I can’t thank you enough for what you have done, you know that,” Tony said as he swung into the saddle, supple leather creaking beneath him. The groom handed him the reins and he wound his hands in them, the feeling of sitting a horse familiar from years of practice.

“It was my honor, Your Grace. I hope you know that I speak for us all. We are King’s men, you
know, always have been. But, and forgive me my forwardness, but never more so than now, I think, Your Grace,” Matthew said. “We shall continue to search for your soldier. I will send a message as soon as he is found. I promise he will receive all the hospitality we can offer.” Tony nodded, blinking against the dawn, his eyes suddenly stinging.

He was leaving a possibility behind here, he knew. That thread of hope which told him that all that must be done could be accomplished far better with Steve at his side, for the sake of the Realm, if not for Tony’s sake. Steve would have done it, he knew, and a part of him had felt so strongly that this was how it was supposed to be that he had counted on his plan to find one of Matt’s patrols quickly, order them to find Steve and bring him to Tony…he had expected it to work if for no other reason than it seemed like such an end was inevitable, any other outcome seemingly unworthy of consideration because damn the gods, that was just how it was supposed to be. Every fiber of his being rang with the truth of that yearning, yet here he was, embarking for the city without Steve, the wrongness of it tasting bitter on his tongue. There was nothing else to be done for it though, he knew. They rode out the massive gate to the keep and down the narrow road that would eventually connect them to the much larger Kingsroad. He paused, drawing his horse up, and cast one long, lingering look at the woods, still able to pick the low, stone wall out in the distance. Turning, he nodded his assent to Rhodey and switched his lead, indicating to the horse to pick up speed as they left the grounds around the keep.

The ride back to the city was largely uneventful, this part of the Realm still being held by his own forces. They kept a low profile though, not wanting to tip off Stane or anyone else to his return. It did end up taking nearly the full week Rhodey had predicted to reach the city, though. Damage to bridges forced them to cross the slow-moving, shallow rivers that webbed the area or, in two cases, take a longer route searching for fordable areas. Certain areas where villagers and peasants gathered to avoid the fighting were to be avoided, meaning they were sometimes required to circumvent the main road.

Tony wore a cloak, keeping the hood low over his face, helped by the simple fact that no one was remotely expecting him to simply ride into the city surrounded by little more than a sparse set of horsemen. Rhodey was recognized easily, of course, his party waived past the Stark forces encamped around the city, forming a ring outside the stout walls. Several of the commanders called out to Rhodey in warm greeting as they rode through the lines and wound their way past tents and other vestments of camp life. They reached the main gatehouse to the city, and, with a quick word from Rhodey to the guards standing at attention in the guardhouse, were ushered through the portcullis.

They had agreed ahead of time to go directly to the apartment Pepper occupied. It was as good a place as any to conceal his presence until they had Stane and his conspirators within custody, though Tony did not relish simply dropping in unannounced on Pepper after all this time. He had never actually taken the time to visit their residence, though he had a vague idea where in the castle complex it was located. He had always taken for granted that they would simply appear when he needed them, though past experience told him that much was true. Not for the first time on this trip north, he wondered what it would have been like to arrive with Steve, introducing him to Pepper and Happy, working out the best way to apprehend Stane and the others together as a team. He hadn’t realized how much he longed for that end until he was forced to relinquish it.

Rhodey sent Ellis’ men off to report to where the troops were garrisoned, while he and Tony took the narrow back alleys that filtered through the capital towards Pepper’s apartment. Tony kept his head down and hood up, and dressed as simply as he was, blended in to the crush of the crowd. It was Rhodey that drew the notice of various passersby. He was well known in the city, and many called out greetings and questions as they walked, most of which he answered jovially without really answering anything. They came to the entrance to the apartments where Pepper lived, a
complex of white-washed buildings with wooden doors painted in bright, cheerful rosemaling.
Rhody rapped heavily on the door and waited at attention for one of Pepper’s servants to answer.
A woman in a cream-colored headscarf and long, green woolen dress opened the door, wiping her
hands on her apron as she did. Seeing who it was, she quickly greeted Rhody with a short curtsey
and invited him in, her eyes sliding over Tony without recognition.

“I’ll tell Ms. Potts you be here, Sir. Please sit ya selves down a bit,” the woman said, bustling off
to find Pepper. Tony stayed behind Rhody, hoping to avoid drawing the woman’s curiosity, if
such a thing even existed. A moment later, his steward joined them, looking harried, reddish
blonde hair escaping the pins that tried to keep it in check.

“James!” Pepper exclaimed, walking quickly over to embrace him. “It has been far too long! I
thought you were overseeing Lord Ellis’ garrison though? Has he relinquished you so soon?”

“Something more important turned up,” Rhody said with a smile, shifting out of the way so
Pepper could get a look at Tony.

“Pray tell what is more important than our southern front? If His Grace were here, he would tell
you—” Pepper scolded lightly.

“That maintaining the southern front is crucial to preventing Pierce from combining his forces and
posing a threat to the city,” Tony finished, pushing back his hood, a self-deprecating twist of a
smile trying to form on his face. It was so very good to see Pepper. He hadn’t realized until this
moment how much he had missed her stalwart presence. “Hey, Pep.” Granted, he probably should
have eased into that a bit, he thought a moment later as Rhody’s quick reaction time caught her
before she hit the floor.

“Oh my gods! Oh my gods! Tony! Is it…it’s you? It’s really you?” Pepper demanded, blinking
back tears. “Your Grace…Tony…I didn’t think—I didn’t want to think—but you were gone so
long, and we didn’t know---I—but now you’re here—you’re here…you’re really, really here,”
Pepper said in wonder.

“I have so much to tell you,” Tony told her, walking over to where she was leaning against Rhody
for support and wrapping his arms around her, drawing her close and burying her head against his
shoulder. “It’s good to see you, Pep. Gods, I’ve missed you.” Rhody left them alone long
enough to dismiss Pepper’s servant for the day and bring her a cup of wine, which she took
gratefully. It took awhile after that for Tony to get his story out again, frequently interrupted by
Pepper’s questions and her additions of what information she could supply about Stane’s actions
since Tony went missing.

“He said he had information that you were a prisoner, and they were negotiating for your release,
but he wanted to be sure you were alive before he agreed to anything. That was why he said it was
taking so long,” Pepper informed him. “I can’t believe the temerity of that man. To stand there
and lie to my face. To my face, Tony. To all of us,” she said, her voice rising in anger with each
word. “And those people in Brookland. Tony, those poor people. I can’t even—I just don’t know
what to say.”

“I have no idea what I’m going to say either, to tell you the truth. I’m going to see that Stane is
brought to face the King’s justice, though, that much I promise,” Tony ground out. “Rhody is
going to arrange for Stane’s arrest, and the arrests of the Gregory and General Ross, as well.
Stone, too, though I don’t know if I’ll actually be able to connect Ty to the plot. He’s slippery as
one of those eels that chef of yours insists on keeping in stock.”

“I should go, Your Grace. Ellis’ men have been told to keep quiet, but something like this isn’t
going to stay secret for long,” Rhodey said, rising from the wooden bench and giving them both slight bows. “I have arrangements to make.”

“Of course, of course. Pepper and I will be in the castle at the appointed time. I must admit, I am looking quite forward to seeing dear Obie’s face,” Tony said with a smile that didn’t quite rise to his eyes.

“You and me both,” Rhodey replied with feeling.

“You’ll ask about any messages from Lord Ellis,” Tony said as Rhodey gathered his things and prepared to depart. He tried to keep his voice from sounding anxious, but from Rhodey’s quick look, he doubted he managed to pull it off. He knew he couldn’t sit around worrying about Steve, though the journey to the city had necessitated long stretches of silent, hard riding that had given his mind too long to think on all the possibilities. Hell, he’d spent a good three leagues of travel redesigning the Tower apartments in his mind to distract him from his concerns.

“First thing. I promise,” Rhodey agreed. He nodded in goodbye and left them then, and for a moment, it was quiet. Tony leaned back against the soft chair and propped his feet up on the low stool, embroidered, he noticed for the first time, in his own red and gold, with his family’s words sewn across it.

“What aren’t you telling me, Tony?” Pepper asked softly. “Stane, Gregory…gods, Pierce and Schmidt? It’s almost too much, but…there’s something…you’re different. I can only begin to imagine what all this was like for you, but…I don’t know what it is, but you’ve changed.”

“I have, Pepper. There’s so much…honestly, it started with this,” Tony said with a fatigued sigh, pulling at the ties to undo his doublet, letting it fall open to reveal the metal disc that covered the wound in his chest.

“Tony! Oh, Tony,” Pepper agonized, reaching out careful fingers to graze over the cold iron. “Does…does it hurt?”

“Not anymore, not really. Gave me hell at first though,” Tony admitted. “Thought I was going to die before the Ten Rings could kill me, to be honest.”

“Is that—is that pus?” Pepper stammered, drawing her hand away, lips pursed in appalled disgust she couldn’t quite hide.

“What? No, no it’s not pus—it’s from—look there was a doctor—one of the Avengers—and he made a poultice from this clay and—and—it’s not pus, okay?” Tony ground out, pulling his doublet back over his chest and redoing most of the laces to bind it together at his throat. “It was causing a problem, though. But the doctor, Bruce is his name, you’ll like him. Smart guy. Anyway, he made these special poultices for me using some kind of clay, which he knew about because one of the others, Barnes, kind of a dick, though I can’t really hate him now, but anyway, he has a metal arm, so Bruce makes the same thing for him.”

“So, from what you’ve said, this team of Pierce’s that found you…one is a doctor, one thinks he’s a prince of some mythical realm, one is a woman who is a deadly spy, one is an archer who can hit anything and one is…I’m not using the word you used…but he has a metal arm?” Pepper repeated, eyebrows practically joining with her hairline. “And this Captain that you’re trying to find, he is the one who drew the map that shows Pierce how to destroy us?”

“I know what this looks like, but I’m not touched in the head. I promise, my mind has never been clearer,” Tony replied sternly. “Also, Steve gave me the map, not Pierce, so…so…there’s that.”
“Alright, Tony,” Pepper said evenly. “Tell me more about these people, these ‘Avengers.’” So, he did, finding himself surprisingly eager to have someone to talk to about the team, all their quirks and foibles, how they worked together so incredibly, somehow made better by the combination. Bright, clever, fearsome Natasha. Wry, watchful, kind Clint. Thor and his tales and good humor that belied his keen awareness of those around him. Barnes and his fierce protectiveness of Steve, the way he could get Steve to laugh and stop being so serious for brief spells of time. Kind, brilliant, Bruce, who refused to dwell in his sadness or let it be an excuse for a life without meaning. And Steve, of course. He was probably making him out to be something of a paragon, some heroic figure from the old tales, but he couldn’t stop himself from waxing poetic a bit, particularly since Pepper seemed inclined to indulge him.

“I know how it sounds, Pep, but they’re good people. They’re—you’ll like them. They’re trying, so hard, trying to do what I should have been doing all along. Protect the Realm. Help those who need it. Make this world a better place however they can. Even with almost nothing to give, they manage to give everything. Watching them, being around them—they opened my eyes, to my own failures, yes, but—I—I don’t know if I’ve changed or just finally realized who I am, who I can be,” Tony said, watching Pepper’s face soften and something like pride flash through her eyes. “And it was because of them. Him, mostly, I guess. Without everything, without the façade or the name or the glory…they saw me. He saw me. And—and that was enough. I never thought it would be, but it was. I was enough.”

“You were always enough, Tony,” Pepper said sadly. “No matter what your father said.”

“I always did manage to live down to expectations, though, didn’t I?” Tony replied sourly. “But no more of that, Pep. I know my choices always left you with a lot to deal with on my behalf, and I can’t possibly express how sorry I am for that. Things will be different though. You’ll see. Steve—I don’t know, Pepper. It’s like—I can’t even explain it. I’m better when he’s around. I think I make him better, too. We just—we work, you know? It’s like something slotting into place where I didn’t know it was missing, but now that it’s there—now that he’s there—I can’t imagine ever going back. I’m terrified I’m going to lose this, mess this up somehow. But I have to try for it. It’s worth it. He is worth it. Worth anything, really.”

“I’m happy for you, Tony, really, I am. It’s wonderful to see you like this. And if they—this team, Steve—if they are part of why, then of course, I’ll welcome them,” Pepper said, a soft smile chasing her words.

“When they come, and they will, I want to have places for them ready. It will be awkward for them here, at first,” Tony told her. “Not everyone will be so understanding of their decision to serve Pierce, at least not until we are able to tell the people all that really happened. And they work better together than any group I’ve ever seen. Gods know we can use the help, not just with Pierce, but after, getting the Realm put back together…there’s so much still to do. They need to be close, I think, be able to train together, talk, plan, all that. There’s plenty of room in the Tower. Those apartments are never used.”

Pepper took in a deep gulp of air at his words. “Just so we’re clear…You want me to make the Royal apartments ready for Pierce’s most elite strike team?” Pepper asked, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I don’t even know how I’m going to begin to explain this.”

“Not for you to explain,” Tony replied. “Last I checked, it’s my Castle. My Tower. I know because it has my crest on anything in there that would stand still, thanks Great-Great-Grandfather. If anyone has a problem with it, they are welcome to bring their grievances directly to me. I know just what to do with them.”
“Fine, fine, I’ll see to it, of course. You have to admit, this is highly irregular though, Tony. Given everything…well, it is going to raise speculation,” Pepper warned.

“Let them speculate. Not like anyone is exactly going to gainsay me,” Tony pointed out. “And, uh…about the apartments. I want the one down the hall prepared. Pick some paintings to go in there. Do we have any that depict Brookland? No, wait,” he interrupted before she could answer. “That might be too soon. I don’t know, is it? Or would he like that?” Tony demurred, running a hand through his hair, finding its new, short length felt a bit odd. He kept grasping for more and coming away with nothing. Story of his life, at least lately, he supposed.

“You want me to prepare the rooms down the hall? From you? The rooms down the hall from you?” Pepper repeated carefully, blinking at him as a single furrow appeared down the center of her brow. “Tony, those rooms are for—”

“I know who they’re for. I’m saying I want them ready. In case, is all. Just—just get them ready. That rounded parapet room in there with the big window? Put some paints, brushes, easel, that kind of thing in there. He would—well, he might—I think he would like to try painting and that has good light. You can see the sea from there, too. He’d like that. Being able to see the water, I mean,” Tony finished, feeling a bit embarrassed by Pepper’s obvious scrutiny. “And some books. Some of those primers, but those art books you love so much, too. Maybe some histories. Military stuff, gods, I don’t know, just pick some things. He’s—I’m teaching him, but—it’s still new, though he’s a fast learner. We’re working on it though.”

“Let me get this straight…you…Anthony Edward Stark…you are teaching someone to read? I have seen you become so impatient with visiting Court scientists who did not understand your theories fast enough that you had one of them in tears, two literally running out of the Castle like their boots were on fire, and that one poor soul who named you a heretic. Well,” Pepper went on, a genuine smile forming. “You were never able to do things in half-measures, I suppose. Alright, Tony. I mean, of course, I’ll do it, you know that. Just—are you sure? Really sure? That’s—well, it isn’t completely unprecedented, I guess, but—what about the Council?” Pepper asked.

“Will they object? I thought they were keen on that Latverian prince? Something about trade alliances?”

“Council serves at my pleasure, last I checked. And since I am, let’s say, ‘quite displeased’ by their service of late, I’ll be relieving them of their obligation and replacing them very soon. Look, either they were in on the plot, or they are woefully incompetent,” Tony pointed out. “Lord Ellis already agreed to join the Council. I think Lady Van Dyne would be good, too, if I can pull her away from her beloved wardrobe long enough to serve,” Tony groused.


“I have one other person that I think would be perfect for the Council, but I’m worried she will say no,” Tony said, watching Pepper’s face closely.

“Who? You know putting one woman on the Council is going to cause controversy, let alone two, Tony, though Lady Janet is extremely well respected. What about James? He would be good,” Pepper suggested.

“He’s too valuable where he is. Besides, he has never cared for the intrigues of political life. No, someone who serves on the Council must be able to maneuver the Court and be willing to tell me when I need to quiet myself and listen,” Tony said, reaching out to take her hand. “Actually, I’ve
given this a fair amount of thought, believe it or not. Looked at a number of candidates, trying to figure out who would be a worthy person for this position. And then I realized, here’s really only one other person who I would trust with this. It’s you…it’s always been you.”

“Tony—that’s—I can’t just—I’m not even a noble!” Pepper objected, surging to her feet and pacing around the small antechamber.

“I thought there could be a legal issue, but it turns out, I’m the King, and I actually make the laws, so can appoint whomever I want. Convenient, that,” Tony said with as much deprecation as he could muster. “I could always make you a Lady. No one fits the moniker quite as well as you, you realize that, right? Lady Virginia? Sounds about right.”

“Oh, gods no, please. Do not, under any circumstances, do that to me,” Pepper said with a shrill laugh.

“Congratulations, then,” Tony told her, tipping his cup of wine in her direction. “Take it, just take it,” Tony said, a note of pleading in his voice.

“I—I don’t know what to think,” Pepper blanched.

“Don’t think. Drink,” Tony instructed, pressing the cup of wine into Pepper’s hand. “There you go.”

“You’re crazy, you know that, right?” Pepper admonished, though there was no bite behind it.

“Yes. But you love me anyway,” Tony said.


“Never doubted it,” Tony replied with a grin.

“Will that be all, Your Grace?” Pepper asked, the usual lightness gone from the question.

“That will be all, Ms. Potts,” Tony intoned, then placed a quick kiss on her forehead before standing to peer out the slats of the shuttered window to watch the sun shrink towards the horizon.

A little over an hour later, he donned the hooded cloak and followed Pepper through the teeming streets toward the Castle, swerving his way through swarms of people going about their daily lives. He kept his head down, and wrapped part of the cloak around the bottom half of his face to better conceal his identity. She led him through the maze of streets and alleys to one of the entrances to the Castle used by the servants to bring baskets of dirty laundry out to large vats of soapy water. At this time of day, it was quiet, linens and clothes hanging on long ropes in the waning sun as he and Pepper wove their way through to the doorway and down a flight of narrow steps.

Luckily, Pepper knew the Castle and its schedule well enough to know which entrance would be less likely to be frequented at what time. He followed her down a long, rounded stone hallway, through another door and past small antechambers lined with shelves of various foodstuffs that were stored in the cool, damp air down here. They came out the other end in one of the kitchens, where a startled scullery maid dropped a potato she had been peeling and it rolled through his feet as he swept past, not bothering at this point to do much to hide his face. From the small side kitchen, they walked into the larger main kitchen, ignoring the looks from chefs and butlers and other kitchen workers and what sounded like a low rumble of voices raising to a crescendo that began to follow them. They took the stairs from there as a shocked attendant opened one of the
doors to enter the kitchen and immediately stepped aside with a yelp to allow them to pass.

The first thing Tony saw as he stepped into the Great Hall was Rhodey’s familiar form standing off to one side of the throne that sat at the far end of the hall, his dark face inscrutable. Large windows paneled with rare glass letting in the evening light, and torches burned in their sconces along the long wall. Colorful banners draped from the ceiling, portraying each individual King’s crest over the many centuries of Stark rule. A large fire burned brightly in the enormous, gaping hearth, flanked by two knights armored in stone, though the swords the stone knights held were real enough. He had sliced his finger on one when he was a boy. A number of courtiers milled about rather aimlessly, adding to the low murmur of voices. Servants darted in and out of the crowd bearing trays of sweetmeats and goblets of wine, gossip and alcohol flowing freely amidst the gathered assembly. All in all, a perfectly normal evening at Court while everyone waited for dinner to be served.

Except that Obediah Stane was comfortably ensconced on the gilded throne, Tony’s throne, the Stark throne, gods be damned, a goblet of wine sloshing in one hand while the other held one of the smoldering cheroots Obie had always favored.

Tony caught the slight stiffening of Rhodey’s back and knew the other man had spotted Pepper’s flaming hair across the hall. He stayed in the shadows against the wall, tapping his food anxiously on the inlaid marble floor, though there was now a huddle of cooks, maids and servers standing agog in the doorway that led down to the kitchens from whence he and Pepper had entered. Under other circumstances, he would have found it comical.

“Lord Stane,” Rhodey began, stepping in front of the throne where Obie sat so comfortably. Out of the corner of his eye, Tony noted several other guards who had been unobtrusively mingling amongst the guests come to circle the throne, while others stepped in front of the doorways, blocking the exits. Well played, Rhodey, he mentally congratulated.

“Yes, Sir James, what is it?” Obie asked unconcernedly, taking a puff from his rolled cheroot and sending a circle of smoke Rhodey’s direction.

“Lord Stane,” Rhodey repeated. “I’m afraid that I have recently been informed of grave accusations leveled at you. Due to the nature of these charges, I felt it was best for them to be aired in open Court, so as to preserve your testimony for all to hear, my Lord.”

“Oh, really? Accusations, you say?” Obie questioned lightly, shifting on the throne and leaning back against the cushions. “Such as? Do enlighten us, my boy.”

Tony could see Rhodey shift uncomfortably at Stane’s seeming nonchalance, though he knew Obie well enough to know that the man was taken aback by Rhodey’s pronouncement. He could see Stane’s eyes dart around the room, taking in the soldiers, the expectant, curious eyes of the Court, which had not yet turned hostile. It was still a show to him, still a part to play. Power exists where people believe it does, and right now, Obie had the Realm convinced that he was the one who possessed it.

Rhodey cleared his throat before he spoke again, though his voice was steady and strong when he did. “You stand accused of ordering an attack on citizens of the Realm, specifically those in Brookland, without the King’s authorization. You stand accused of arranging for the deaths of King Howard and Queen Maria. You stand accused of high treason against the King, namely, conspiring with other parties to arrange an attack the King’s coach and kidnap him, hold him prisoner and eventually murder him.” Loud gasps echoed through the hall, shouts rising up in protest. Stane did have his supporters, no doubt, who lined their pockets with Tony’s money in return for casting a blind eye at what was going on in front of them.
“Sir James! What is this nonsense?” Obie demanded in his loud, booming voice. “Your head is filled with such stories, such fantastical tales! Too long on the battlefield can dull even the sharpest mind, or so I’ve heard. Your devotion to your King is well known, but you have spent too long away from home, my friend. The front lines…” Obie said, shaking his head as if saddened. Obie seemed woefully unperturbed by Rhodey’s accusations, Tony noticed. Of course he did. What did he think he had to fear from Rhodey? He wouldn’t be the first soldier to come home convinced of strange tales, sure that forces were at work against him, a phenomenon unfortunately well known at Court where many Lords and Ladies had experienced the same with their own soldiers. And Obie was the current Regent, controlling everything from the purse strings to the military. He also believed he had the Council at his back. Given his position, his lack of concern was not surprising that he would not tremble at the accusations of a mere knight, and one who lacked the backing of a powerful family, at that.

“We all know war does things to a man, Sir James, and your service has been a gift to the Realm, truly, but this…well. I cannot simply sit here and listen to these claims, you understand,” Obie said mildly, leaning forward in the large, gilded throne. A titter of nervous laughter swept through the crowd. “Truly, Sir James…I? Harm the King? Plot to kill our Good King Howard and Queen Maria? Tell me, why would I do these horrible things to people I have loved…loved, Sir James…all these years?” Obie asked, wagging one of the fingers of the hand holding the cheroot in Rhodey’s direction.

“Because you are working with Alexander Pierce and Hydra to destroy the Realm and remake it for yourselves,” Rhodey replied calmly. Even from here, Tony could see the color drain from Stane’s face. He hadn’t been expecting that, Tony thought with vicious satisfaction.

“Well…well, that’s quite the imaginative notion, Sir James,” Obie said, a wide smile forming across his face. “Murder? Attacks? Kidnapping—or should I say ‘King-napping’?” he chortled, though Tony only heard a sparse few uncomfortable huffs of laughter join in this time. “How much of our King’s fine stores have you been into since your return?” he asked sharply, spreading his arms wide, a few drops of wine splashing over the side of the goblet to the stone beneath. His poor jest earned only a muted murmur from the crowd this time, though. The mention of Pierce, of Hydra, that had certainly quieted even those amongst the crowd who did not know Rhodey other than as a simple soldier. Many here, however, knew Rhodey, even if only by reputation, and knew he would not stand here in open Court and make these accusations against the Regent if he believed there was any chance they were spurious.

“I assure you I am completely sober, Lord Stane, and well possessed of my wits. By the power vested in me by King Anthony, I am taking you into custody until this matter can be brought to trial,” Rhodey intoned evenly.

“Oh really? You may have noticed that King Anthony is notable only by his unfortunate absence at the moment, my boy, meaning your power, such as it may be, derives from me,” Stane responded, his voice low and packed with menacing intent. “I think if you really want to remove me from my duly appointed office, we are all going to need to hear a bit more about these baseless claims you make. Are we to know the source of these scurrilous rumors? Surely you have some proof to offer the Court before you and your soldiers simply remove the Regent from office? In other circumstances, Sir James, one might call that treason,” Stane said stiffly, the implied threat clear. “I think I’m at least entitled to hear from my accusers, if there are any willing to step forward and give these slanderous charges a voice. Tell me, Sir James, who is it that spreads these lies about me?”

“That would be me, Obie. And you’re in my seat, you murdering, traitorous bastard,” Tony announced, stepping away from the wall and pushing the hood of his cloak aside.
Tony took a certain sadistic pleasure in the way Obie’s stunned face let his mouth flap open and closed several times, unable to eke out any sounds in the stupefied silence that engulfed the hall. For a long moment, heads simply swiveled back and forth between the two of them, and then the hall erupted into a din of shocked whispers seemingly at once.

Rhodey and his guards seized Obie by the arms, hauling him off the throne and pushing him to his knees on the stone floor. Courtiers raced to Tony’s side, a swelling of voices filling the room as hands reached out to touch, almost as if to make sure their eyes were telling them the truth. Pepper was at Tony’s side at once, ordering people to make way like the finest commander his forces had ever seen as he stalked down the middle of the Great Hall, crowd parting like the river around a rock.

“Tony?” Obie finally managed when Tony reached the bottom of the stone steps leading up the raised dais where the throne stood at the end of the hall. “Is it really you? How? We’ve been looking everywhere! I can’t believe—you’re here, thank the gods!” Obie was good, Tony had to give him that. Had he simply escaped the Ten Rings and made it back without meeting the Avengers, he would have never questioned Obie’s reaction as anything other than heartfelt relief at his return, but now, he could see the shifting terror behind Obie’s eyes. Stane knew the game was up, though could not stop himself from trying to grasp at whatever he could possibly cling to, even as it was all swept away from him.

“You can’t really believe any of this, Tony, my boy? This is crazy! I know James is your friend, but you must know I would never—thirty years, Tony!” Obie argued vehemently.

“Thirty years. Yes, thirty years of you undermining me. Lying to me. Using my name for your perfidious actions,” Tony accused, voice ringing in the sudden silence that befell the hall as he spoke. “Thirty years of treachery, Obie. Thirty years of letting me believe you were working for the Realm in my stead while you were aiding Pierce’s deceit, allowing Hydra—Hydra!—into the Realm.”

“You can’t do this to me. Not to me, Tony. Treachery against the Realm, you say? I’ve been holding you up for years. Decades. You know that. I built this Realm, this Kingdom, from nothing. It was a ruin, after your father, you know that! If I made compromises, it was for your sake, for the Kingdom, you must see that, my boy. Thirty years I have served your family—these charges are spurious nonsense, the guilt of hindsight surely you can see that?” Obie argued, though a faint hint of desperation tinged his words now.

“Served my family? Served us what, Obie? Death and duplicity, that’s all. Did Dad find out? Is that why you had them killed? Or did you just need them out of the way while I was young enough and stupid enough to trust you to handle everything?” Tony demanded. “I’ll grant you that I made it easy for you. And I will have to answer for that the rest of my life. You don’t know it, but your actions may have cost me the one thing that I ever really wanted, and if that is the recompense I must pay, then so be it, but you will not stand here, your ass still warm from my throne, and tell me that you served this Realm! You served yourself, and whatever other masters you answer to, but not the people. Not the people you ordered killed, my people, Obie,” Tony bit out as he took the steps, anger flaring deep within him, boiling and tumbling through his gut, wrapping itself around his chest and squeezing the words out, spots of rage dancing in front of his eyes as the full force of just what Obie had done, had almost accomplished, settled in too perfect of a picture in front of him. “There were my people, Obie. Mine. You had no right. No right, Obie,” he shouted, his voice breaking off harshly before he drew in a deep, shuddering breath.

“Tony—“ Obie started.
“If you call me by my familiar name or refer to me as “my boy” again, I’ll have your head for insubordination, swear to the gods, Obie,” Tony said, looking down where Stane shifted under the guards’ strong hands banding his arms to his sides. “No denials? No shouts to the heavens that you’ve been wronged? Unjustly accused of these crimes?” Tony questioned with false lightness.

“Would it do me any good? You’ve set your mind against me. Your Grace,” Stane spat out. “Months in captivity change a man, I’m sure. You’ll come to your senses, I do not doubt it. You need me. You may not like it, may not like my methods, but you need me. You have never been able to do what had to be done. You were never strong enough. I protected you, saved you from it. I kept you in the dark about Brookland because you couldn’t handle what had to be done,” Obie admitted. “You were soft, you know that. I did what had to be done. You didn’t want to know, not really. You wanted to play with your toys, build your machines and enjoy your pleasures. You didn’t want to govern, to rule. To make the hard choices that had to be made. I won’t stand here and be called traitor because you feel badly for a decision that had to be made to protect the Realm. That’s all I was doing,” Obie protested. “That disease could have wiped us all out, if it had made it out of Brookland. What do the lives of a few fisherfolk matter in the scheme of things?” Tony’s vision went white at Obie’s carelessly thrown words. He forced himself to stand still, hands balled into tight fists at his sides as he let the hammer pounding away inside his chest calm, though the effect was minimal.

“That was not your decision to make, Obie. We’re not—I’m supposed to help. To protect them, dammit! You don’t get to take that away from me and then claim it was my fault for not being able to make a decision I was never presented with,” Tony shouted, his voice clanging through the quiet hall. “You killed them. Not to protect the Realm, but to keep my attention drawn elsewhere, to destroy anything that would threaten your plans,” Tony accused, at once seeing the truth of his words.

Obie hadn’t cared about whether or not the disease would spread from Brookland due to some deeply held concern for the protection of the people of the Realm. Obie had cared that a mass plague would have united the Realm, focused Tony’s attention and undermined Obie’s power grab. Hard to keep a King at bay who is suddenly having to deal with a Realm in the throes of fear and panic. And what would Tony have found, had he investigated the circumstances of Brookland, of the plague and how it had infiltrated the Realm? Hydra, he strongly suspected now, some tapestry of secrets and lies involving Stern and Stane, and somehow Pierce, that he didn’t yet fully understand, but it was there, blurred by time and distance, but there. Stane had needed to keep Brookland isolated, keep Tony away from whatever connections he might have discovered, had he but looked hard enough. And doing that meant destroying it, at least in Stane’s warped mind.

“You should have had them kill me when you had the chance,” Tony told him.

“Your Grace, that was the Ten Rings, not me—“ Obie started.

“Whoever said it was the Ten Rings?” Tony asked mildly, watching the play of emotions—confusion, shock, fear and then finally, anger—rove across Stane’s face. He could hear the murmur of shocked surprise run through the courtiers behind him. “You’re done, Obie,” he said flatly. “Take him to a cell to await trial. You, Gregory, Ty, Ross, oh yes, I know about them, too,” Tony went on at Obie’s astonished look. “They will be joining you shortly. A reunion of sorts, if you will. Get him out of my sight before I forget that he must stand trial before he swings,” Tony ordered.

The guards holding Obie’s arms pulled him to his feet and jostled him down the steps and away, Rhodey dogging their heels. Tony walked up to the throne and for a moment, just stared down at it. He ground his booted foot into the cheroot that still smoked against the smooth stone of the
floor where Stane had dropped it. It was over. This much of it, anyway. There was still Pierce and Schmidt to deal with, a much larger force to reckon with than anyone had anticipated, but once the team was here, he was strangely confident that they would figure something out. Together, they were better. He honestly doubted there were many threats they could not handle when they were united as a team.

Tony turned and sat down on the cushioned throne chair, placing each hand on the end of the arms that were fashioned into the heads of winged lions, and looked out over the expanse of stunned faces that filled the Great Hall. He resisted the urge to clear his throat. “I know there has been a great deal of speculation about the circumstances my absence,” Tony began. “As you have just borne witness, Obediah Stane was responsible for that, and much more. However, I was responsible, am responsible, for the safety and protection of the people of this Realm, something which was a token priority until this day,” Tony admitted, feeling pressure prick behind his eyes. Being back, being here, where he had languished for so long, being everything and nothing that mattered, having to leave it all behind to find the part of himself buried so deep it took nearly losing it all to uncover, it was almost too much.

“When you become King, you start with something pure, something exciting. Then come the mistakes, the compromises. We create our own demons. Gods know I helped create mine,” Tony went on, rapt faces gazing back at him. “I always took it for a duty, being King. For something that had to be done, a job that must be accomplished. It is none of those things. I am the Realm. The Kingdom, its people, and I, are one. We speak with one voice. We work together for a common goal. I succeed or fail with you, not because of you or in spite of you. I am the Realm, and we are born of iron. From this day forward, I will act like it in all things.” He was barely aware of the massive cheer that went up or the shouts and whoops that echoed around the Great Hall. It was all almost too much. He couldn’t stop himself from looking to his right, seeking the purchase of a phantom presence that wasn’t there.

The gathered mass of people greeted him in turn then, welcoming him back, kneeling and swearing fealty anew, more and more arriving as word of his return spread through the city. He stayed until the candles that lit the massive chandeliers above burned low. Pepper finally called a halt to the line of well-wishers and ushered Tony out and up the stairs, down the long hallway lined with portraits of dead Starks to the door that led to the Tower and the Royal apartments. Guards bowed in deference as he passed, servants stopped their tasks and curtsied. It was all exceedingly familiar and so vastly strange. When they finally reached the Tower and his personal apartments, a guard pushed open the heavy door, and he walked inside, then came to an abrupt halt.

“Your Grace,” Jarvis said, standing in the middle of the room, looking for all the world like nothing had changed, no time had passed, as if Tony had simply been out for the evening and only now returned home, but there was a tremor in his usually dulcet tone that Tony could hear, a certain formality in the way he stood, as if holding himself in check against whatever might threaten his usual reserve. Tony sprinted the few paces across the room and flung his arms around the man, burying his face against his manservant’s neck.

“Jarvis, gods—you have no idea how much I’ve missed you,” Tony breathed, some great stone that had settled on his chest for so long lifting and floating away. This was coming home, truly, not the throne, the trappings, nor the fawning and obsequiousness that went with them. This.

“Welcome back, Your Grace,” Jarvis said, slowly wrapping his arms around Tony. “It has not been right around here for quite some time.”

“It is about to get very right, Jarvis. You’re going to have more to deal with than you can possibly imagine. I’ll tell you all about them over dinner. Speaking of, Pepper, see if you can find Rhodey.
Ask if he’s had word from Matt yet,” Tony called out to Pepper.

“James already sent a message that he had not yet heard anything from Lord Ellis. You know he will tell you as soon as he receives any news. He knows how anxious you are,” Pepper replied, voice going soft and wispy as Tony couldn’t keep the disappointment off his face. “Now, you eat,” she continued, pointing at the tray of food someone had placed on a nearby table. “Then sleep. No tinkering, Tony, I mean it.”

“I have to work with that Wakandan metal. Get some kind of alloy made with it. Should work well enough with a bit of iron, though I’ll have to heat it to some insane temperature,” Tony started, his mind already whirring with the details. “Have an idea for the rest of it, too. Need the forge fired up. I’m going to—“

“Eat. Then sleep, is what you are going to do. I don’t even want to think about what tomorrow will bring,” Pepper said, wiping her hands against the sides of her dress.

“I shall see that His Grace takes appropriate care, Ms. Potts,” Jarvis said formally, bowing slightly.

“Of that, I have no doubt, Jarvis,” Pepper replied with a smile and deferential dip of her head. “Tony, I’ve started to make arrangements for the renovations to the apartments, but if you have anything more specific in mind, let me know, and I’ll consult with the masons and carpenters.”

Tony went over to pick at the food under Jarvis’ watchful eye.

“That—what you said—in the Hall—that was good, Tony,” Pepper said quietly as she stood halfway out the door, hand on the curled metal handle to pull it closed. “I—I’m proud of you, you know that, right?”

“Yeah, Pep,” Tony said, staring down at the roast duck and cooked vegetables that waited for him. “I couldn’t do this without you, though.”

“Yes, you could, though I do like to think I make it easier,” Pepper said with a light smile.

“Okay, well, I could, but a lot of this is because of you. I mean that,” Tony insisted, looking over at where she stood at the door, framed by the light of the hallway outside his apartment. He saw her face soften and eyes glisten as she blinked back emotions she was still uncomfortable showing in front of him. “Say, perhaps twelve percent of it is because of you, anyway.”

“Twelve percent, huh?” Pepper repeated, mouth twisting into a wry smile.

“Eh, give or take,” he grinned.

“Will that be all, Your Grace?” Pepper asked softly.

“That will be all, Miss Potts,” Tony replied, digging into his dinner lest he incur Pepper’s ire.

“We are to have guests then, I take it, Your Majesty?” Jarvis questioned smoothly, going about setting the room to what he felt was the appropriate standard, poking the fire higher and turning down the bed, laying out a red silk robe for Tony by the large, sunken bathtub that dominated one of the antechambers.

“We are. Soon, I hope. You’ll like them, Jarvis,” Tony said over a bite of succulent duck.

“I have no doubt of that, if they are friends of Your Grace’s,” Jarvis replied drolly. Given Tony’s past associations, he could understand Jarvis’ lack of enthusiasm about inviting people to move in with him.
“They’re not that kind of friends, I promise, J,” Tony said with a laugh. “They’re—they’re brave and kind and good. And insulting and obnoxious and annoying.”

“Indeed, Your Majesty? Well, that sounds rather familiar, though it describes a certain person of whom I am incredibly fond,” Jarvis responded cheekily. “In that case, I truly look forward to making their acquaintance,” Jarvis responded with a smile, this one genuine. “It will be nice to see the Tower put to proper use. It is far too drafty as it is. I understand from Ms. Potts that we are redoing your Mother’s old rooms, Sire?” Tony heard the question under there, of course. “Am I to understand from this that you will soon be—“

“We are not saying that word. Not yet. He—I mean, maybe. There’s a lot—he doesn’t even know. About me. Who I am, I mean. He thinks I just make weapons for the army,” Tony stumbled, as his thoughts of Steve washed over each other in quick succession. He might hate me, he might forgive me, he might eventually forgive me, he might always hate me, but he would be here and that would be almost enough, so very close to enough that I’m willing to take it, if that is the only choice I have.

Jarvis blinked owlishly at him. “You are preparing the rooms reserved for the King’s Consort for someone who does not know that you are the King?” Jarvis clarified. “Mother did so want me to become a clerk,” Jarvis said, turned on his heel and left the room. Tony sat at the table with a bite of duck halfway to his mouth before he started laughing and banging his fist on the table. He had missed Jarvis so very much.

He finished his meal and strode to the large, round tub that sat in the middle of the floor of one of the large antechambers. Hand-painted mosaic tiles lined the walls that surrounded it. He undressed and turned one of the knobs to start the flow of hot water. One of his own inventions, and one of the better ones, he thought. A boiler below heated the water and pressure sent it through metal pipes to his room. Everyone had thought him mad when he’d ordered the stone torn asunder to put them in place, but he liked the novelty of having hot water at will. Jarvis had taken one look at it and told him he had put three maids out of work, but he thought the older man was secretly pleased by the design.

As the bath filled, he surveyed the apartment, finding almost everything exactly as he had left it those months ago, down to the small, soft cloths neatly folded next to the privy, embroidered with his crest. He wondered briefly about the woman who spent her time carefully stitching those so that he could wipe his ass with them and marveled at his life. What would Steve think of all this? Would he abhor the luxury? Or enjoy the small pleasures it could give? There was so much they could do. Steve had offered his version of that life, with such aching earnestness, a house by the sea, Tony working on his projects while Steve helped to rebuild the Realm. They could have that, if Steve would allow it. Just, instead of a house, something a tad more grand. Practically the same thing if one ignored the extra three hundred or so rooms.

He undressed and climbed the two steps to sink into the bath, adding the scented oils that Jarvis had helpfully left on the ledge of the tub. He knew for a fact that this tub would fit more than one person, and couldn’t help imagining how pleasurable it would be to share it with Steve. Provided, of course, that Steve didn’t want to drown him in it. He would manage to find the one person in all the Realm who might very well not be entirely too thrilled to learn it is the King who sought his affections, Tony thought glumly.

Tony lay back and looked up at the mural painted above. Stars dancing around the moon, now all too familiar. He remembered talking to Steve about them, being surprised by Steve’s familiarity with the heavens back when Tony had assumed that a lack of formal education meant a lack of knowledge. He took one of the soft cloths and rubbed the block of soap on it, scrubbing the ride to
the city off his skin. He would have his barber come tomorrow. And his tailor. He would need new clothes. None of his old ones would fit properly now. He should see about new clothes for Steve, as well. A few pieces should suffice until the tailor could get his exact measurements. He was getting ahead of himself, he knew, but couldn’t seem to hold it in check. He wasn’t sure how long he spent letting his skin wrinkle in the water as his mind wandered far afield, starting somewhere around Steve looking good in blue and ending with thoughts of war orphans, thoughts which were definitely entirely too far ahead to deserve consideration. Yet.

After his bath, he wrapped the robe around his shoulders and tied the gold corded belt at his waist. Jarvis had come and gone at some point while he bathed, bearing a flagon of his favorite wine and jewel encrusted goblet, both of which sat unobtrusively on a low table by the fire. He poured a glass for himself and leafed through the stack of missives that Jarvis had also rather pointedly placed on the table, most having to do with complaints from various Lords and Ladies about taxes Stane had been intent on collecting or objections to Stane’s requisitions of soldiers and supplies without compensation. Fabulous.

A light knock on the door startled him from a letter from his current Court Mathematician and Philosopher, the one who refused to actually come and live at Court because he found it “tedious and stifling,” telling Tony why one of his theories was wrong, except he used words like “completely without any merit of any kind whatsoever.” Only Reed would be so damn blunt about it, Tony thought, though Reed had the annoying characteristic of too often being right about things to simply dismiss.

“Come,” Tony called, dropping the letter back onto the pile. Rhodey walked in and knelt down. “Seriously, seeing you do that hurts my back. Get up. Here, have a drink,” Tony offered.

“We received a message from Lord Ellis,” Rhodey began, causing Tony’s head to snap around. “His soldiers have been, thus far, unable to locate Captain Rogers, though he says they have a few leads on this Doctor Strange character and are pursuing those. I—I know that isn’t what you wanted to hear, Your Grace,” Rhodey said, and Tony forced himself to school his features more carefully.

“Send more men to Lord Ellis to aid in the search. A knighthood to the man or men who find him, and the lands to go with it,” Tony ordered. “Just—this is taking too damn long, Rhodey. Something is wrong—something—this isn’t right, gods, this—what if—“

“Your Grace. Tony. It is a big Realm. And he is one man,” Rhodey reminded him. “We are doing everything we can. I know how important he is to you. There is no reason to panic, not yet,” Rhodey urged, and Tony was sure that was probably all very reasonable, but it didn’t do anything to lessen the way his heart pounded in his ears, demanding that he do something. “I do have better news for you, though,” Rhodey went on, shifting around on his feet a bit, obviously ready to move on from the topic. “Sir Gregory is in custody, currently spilling his guts to anyone who will listen and placing all the blame on Stane. Lord Stone is also in custody, though he steadfastly denies any knowledge or involvement. Ross is in custody in the field under Captain Danvers’ supervision, and I’m having him sent back as soon as an appropriate escort can be arranged. Also, though this is a bit of old news around here, we recovered part of the fleet Pierce’s mercenary, Batroc, hijacked. They are damaged, but salvageable. I’ve arranged to have them towed back to port for repairs and reequipping. And—this is interesting—we captured a small party riding in a caravan between the coast and where Pierce is camped out.”

“Huh?” Tony asked, still stuck on the fact that it was now far too long since he had last seen Steve and half his army seemed unable to locate him. Something was wrong, he thought. This—this wasn’t how it was supposed to go. “That’s good, that’s good,” he replied absently.
“Better than good, I think you’ll find. Arnim Zola was part of the caravan. He’s one of Schmidt’s personal physicians. Very highly placed in this Hydra organization, we are given to understand. Not sure what he was doing way up there, that far from Schmidt’s base, but there he was. Him and a few other prisoners, though I’m not clear on their status. They are being transferred here for interrogation. Should arrive early tomorrow morning. Thought this Zola might somehow be connected to what you were saying about Pierce and Schmidt, though I’m not sure how. He’s just one man, and not much of one at that. Though…there’s something about him I don’t care for. Makes me nervous somehow,” Rhodey admitted. “I think he’ll sing like a bird once he’s sitting in a cell in the middle of Kingstown though. He does not strike me as the martyr type. Likes his head where it is far too much.”

“That is interesting…wonder what he was up to, so far from Hydra’s cozy mountain home? Can’t be good, that much is certain. Find out for me, would you, and let me know as soon as you do,” Tony said evenly, eyeing Rhodey sharply.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Rhodey replied. Rhodey left him alone after that, declining Tony’s offer of a drink or food, undoubtedly eager to follow up on all the things he had missed since being sent to serve Lord Ellis, probably at Stane’s insistence, trying to keep Rhodey away from all the duplicitous machinations going on around Court.

Tony sank onto the soft bed, feeling the feather mattress dip beneath him. He stared at the trappings hanging overhead, done in a rich red and gold brocade. Where the hell was Steve? Where were the rest of them? He should never have let Steve walk off, should have just taken his chances and told him the truth, though that might very well have sent Steve running and then where would he be? At least this way, he had a lead, this Strange person’s sanctum. He scrubbed a hand over his face, finding it automatically sought to smooth a coarse beard that was no longer there. He tapped the plate in his chest in a nervous rhythm. Tomorrow, he would work with the new metal. Get some specifications to Pepper for the masons, tilemakers, plasterers and woodworkers for the apartments. His private gymnasium could do with some upgrades if Steve and Thor were going to use it, he figured.

He fell asleep thinking about the large courtyard outside the Tower and how best to arrange archery targets. He dreamed of Steve, sprawled out next to him in the tub, droplets of water clinging to his hair and raining down over golden skin. But when Steve looked at him, his eyes were black pools, and Tony could see his own face reflected in them, his mouth wide in a silent scream.

Tony woke with a start to the smell of coffee wafting through the chamber and shucked the covers off, tightening the robe belt around his nakedness. Someone had closed the bed curtains during the night, so he pushed those aside and blinked as the morning sun leaked through the frosted glass windows. Jarvis was standing by the table where his breakfast was spread out, as he had done every morning since Tony moved into these apartments after his parents’ death. Tony shifted his feet over the side of the bed, slipping them into the warm, soft slippers he knew would be there, and crossed the room.

“Morning, Jarvis,” he said through a yawn, settling into the plush chair and letting his gaze drift over the various foodstuffs until it landed on the small mug of coffee, steam curling from it in the morning chill of the room. “Oh, how I have missed you,” he said, as much to the coffee as to Jarvis.

“Good morning, Your Grace. Sir James is outside, rather insistently demanding to see you,” Jarvis told him with an air of disapproval. “I told him it was not appropriate to disturb you at this time of the morning, but he was particularly strident about it. I suggested that waiting until you have had
“Your first cup of coffee was perhaps—“

“Steve? Did he say it was about Steve?” Tony asked, shooting up from the chair and knocking his legs into the table in his haste, spilling drops of coffee down the front of his robe as he set his mug down. Black, unblinking eyes flashed across his mind as he rushed to the door and pulled it open, taking a quick step back when Rhodey’s form materialized instantly in the doorway.

“Your Grace, I’m sorry to bother you this early, but—“ Rhodey began.

“Is it Steve? Have you found him?” Tony demanded, grabbing Rhodey by the arm and hauling him bodily inside, keeping him from the perfunctory kneeling, because, really, who had time for that now?

“One of the prisoners, one of the ones that came in with Zola? He said he was an Avenger. You wanted to know immediately when that happened, so...so here I am. I don’t have any more information right now,” Rhodey said, raising his hand to stop the questions that were about to pour from Tony’s lips. “I just know it’s a man, and he said he was an Avenger. Of course, now I have about twenty other prisoners also claiming to be Avengers, but we’ll deal with that,” Rhodey groused. “I’ll have him brought here, if that is what you wish, Your Grace.”

“Yes, yes, now. Please. Now—just—just go,” Tony stuttered, heart racing in his chest like it was keeping time with the fastest racehorse in his stable. Retaking his kingdom from a conspiracy of traitors planning his demise? Not a problem. Possibly seeing Steve in the near future? His heart was probably going to explode from the anxious exertion. Tony paced back and forth, stalking about the room, flopping down in one of the myriad chairs only to rise again just as quickly. Jarvis, to his credit, said nothing, merely cleared away the uneaten breakfast and covered Tony’s coffee in the hopes he might drink it later. By the time the knock finally came, some interminable time later, Tony felt as if one more moment of this and his skin would simply burst apart, too frail to hold everything inside for any longer.

“Come!” he shouted, but couldn’t make himself wait for the door to open, and rushed over to grab the handle instead, wrenching the heavy door aside. Rhodey was there, and it took one look at his face for Tony to know it wasn’t Steve. He looked to Rhodey’s side, and there stood Barnes, looking more haggard than Tony had ever seen him, eyes scanning around in bewilderment until they settled on Tony, recognition dawning after a moment of confusion.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Barnes said from behind Rhodey, looking Tony up and down, managing to sound disdainful though he stood there covered in dirt and grime and gods knew what else, hair in straggles around his face, a large gash cutting through the side of his head, just above his ear. His metal arm was gone, just the stump remained, wrapped in a dirty brown cloth. “You lying son of a bitch. What the hell have you done with Steve?” Barnes demanded.

“Hey!” Rhodey barked at Barnes. “You will not address your King like that, I don’t care who you are,” Rhodey said, shaking his head and turning back to face Barnes, and this was definitely not going to go well.

“Not my King,” Barnes replied dully, staring at Tony. “Not my anything. You right bastard, just tell me where he is?” Barnes pressed, pushing against Rhodey, trying to get closer to Tony. “Is he in there? Steve!” Barnes shouted. Three guards were suddenly hauling him back, pushing him hard against the stone wall opposite of Tony’s door.

“No, no, it’s alright,” Tony said, waving a hand at them. “Release him. He’s—it’s fine.”

“I take it this must be one of the lovely people we will be welcoming into the Tower,” Jarvis said
evenly from somewhere behind Tony. Tony would have laughed at the absurdity of it all, the sheer spectacle of a one-armed man shouting at him in his own private room, his manservant mocking him and his best knight looking at him like he was mad, if he could have gotten past the grief and disappointment that it wasn’t Steve hurling invective at him, though he owed it to Barnes to allow that, at least for now.

“Steve isn’t with me. We separated once we reached Lord Ellis’ lands,” Tony told him. The guards had loosened their grips, but still kept Barnes pressed firmly enough against the wall that he couldn’t come charging at Tony again.

Barnes stared at him, and Tony could see the color drain from his face, something shifting from anger to horror behind his eyes.

“What—is it? Do you know where he is?” Tony asked, once again waving the guards away, this time with an annoyed look to get his point across. They finally released Barnes, who sagged against the wall, good arm rising and falling, as if on its own accord, like one of those dolls that danced on strings.

“We’re supposed to meet. At the sanctum,” Barnes said. Tony nodded, because he knew that much already. “Damn. Damn,” Barnes repeated. “If he gets there and I’m not there…he’s going to know something is wrong.”

“No doubt. He’ll worry, I’m sure, but—“ Tony started, then stopped himself, the implication of Barnes’ words sinking in. “He’ll know something is wrong,” Tony said dully. “He’ll go after you. To Pierce.”

“To Pierce. Who knows about you. Well, not about...about this, at least I don’t think so,” Barnes said, pointing his good hand at Tony. “But he knows we had someone else with us. He figured it to be someone on Stark’s…on your…fuck…on your side, since we didn’t report it, didn’t come back with anyone, and didn’t mention anything about a message we retrieved. Not exactly hard to piece together that we stopped working for him. How do you think I ended up with Zola? Pierce would’ve killed me, or held me as leverage, waiting on any of the others to show, but Zola wanted me. Because I’d been in Brookland,” Barnes gritted out. “Wanted to finish it, he said. Gods. Steve. You have to go get him. Bring him here, whatever you want to do, just get to him before he goes and does something damnably heroic and gets himself killed.”

“Tell me where the sanctum is. Rhodey, get him a map,” Tony ordered. He stepped back from the doorway and motioned for Barnes to enter. Rhodey nodded to one of the guards, who darted off down the hallway to find the requested map.

“I’m fine as I am,” Barnes said, looking away with a twist of his mouth.

“Fine. Fine, then I’ll do this here. I owe you this much, at the very least. James, I am deeply sorry for what you have suffered. I was a poor excuse for a King. I spent my life caring about my own pleasures and not the lives of my people. That cost you and Steve dearly. But I did not order the destruction of Brookland. That was Obediah Stane. He confirmed it in open Court yesterday. That does not absolve me from what debt I owe to you and to Steve, I know that. I am not asking you to give me your forgiveness. I am asking you to allow me to attempt to earn it, if that is possible. I can’t bring back those you lost, but I can promise you that I will do everything in my power to ensure that they did not die in vain, and that they will be remembered and their sacrifice honored,” Tony vowed, watching as Barnes’ eyes that had been staring dumbly at him drifting shut upon the mention of those he had lost.

“Just find Steve. Find him. Bring him here safely. That’s where you can start, though it won’t be
enough. It won’t ever be enough,” Barnes replied after a long pause, seeming to wither somehow before Tony’s eyes. “There is no ‘enough.’”

“I know that. Not going to stop me from trying,” Tony said, refusing to blink away from the other man’s hard gaze.

“You just couldn’t leave him be, could you?” Barnes asked, somewhat sadly to Tony’s ears.

“No. I really couldn’t,” Tony answered truthfully. “Do you truly despise me so much that you would want to deny him what happiness he may allow me to give him?” Tony wondered.

“This is what you call happiness? He’ll hate you. Hate this. He won’t—it will never be what you want,” Barnes spat out, betrayal and pain etching every word as he seemed to force himself to hold Tony’s gaze.

“Maybe not. Maybe it won’t be. But he will be here, safe and cared for and given everything he could possibly want,” Tony protested, able to hear the desperate pleading in his own voice, because while he had told these things to himself, it was something different to hear it from Barnes, who knew Steve so well.

“You think this is what he wants? To be kept like a pet? Right. Sure. And how long will that last? Used to not getting what you want, are you? How long until you decide that he hates you anyway, might as well give him a reason?” Barnes demanded, his voice rising to a near shout. Rhodey was looking back and forth between them, eyeing Barnes nervously and shifting slightly to keep himself between the two of them.

“I would never do that. Never,” Tony ground out, appalled in no small part because there was some truth in Barnes’ words. Not now, true, but once. When he had first met them, when he had hated them for his captivity and wanted to see them all brought low. It was not something he cared to recall, no matter how often he told himself it had been powerlessness and vengeance speaking those thoughts in his mind. “Never.”

Barnes shook his head in clear disbelief. “So you say. Now.”

“I am giving you a fair bit of leeway here, James, because of your losses and my role in them. And because of what you mean to Steve. Do not test that too far, though,” Tony warned. Barnes finally relinquished and looked away, tipping his head back against the stone wall and closing his eyes, the anger deflating as rapidly as it had come.

“Just find him,” Barnes repeated softly.

“I am doing everything in my power to do so,” Tony promised. A moment later, the guard returned holding a map spread between his hands. Not nearly as fine as the ones Steve drew, Tony noted with a small flair of pride. The guard held it in front of Barnes while Tony and Rhodey moved to either side. After a moment, Barnes looked up at Tony, a flash of helplessness lighting his face.

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“I’ll send a bird to Lord Ellis with this location, and send out our fastest riders as well. It will be several days before we know anything, though,” Rhodey said apologetically. Tony just nodded,
the familiar ache in his chest expanding as he watched Rhodey disappear down the hallway. Everything was being pulled farther and farther away somehow, he could feel it in his bones.

“Apartments are being readied for you and the other Avengers. In the meantime, Ms. Potts,” Tony said, nodding his head towards Pepper, who had appeared at the end of the hallway, watching the melee with wide eyes. “Ms. Potts is the Castle Steward. She will find you accommodations until something more permanent can be arranged. Pepper, see that my physician sees Sergeant Barnes immediately,” Tony instructed. “You are here as my guest, not a prisoner. Do not make me regret that.” Barnes wouldn’t look at him, but gave a jerky nod before following Pepper down the hall. Tony walked back into his room, slamming the door behind him as he sank into one of the chairs by the fire, letting his head fall into his hands.

“Sire?” Jarvis inquired softly. “Is there anything I can do for you?” Tony shook his head, momentarily unable to speak, any words he would speak sitting thickly in his throat, threatening to be turned into sobs. “Then I shall sit here with you until you think of something,” Jarvis said, taking the seat opposite him.

A week passed with no word. Tony spent most of his time in his workshop, doing anything and everything to distract himself from his worry. He spent long days and nights working himself to the brink of exhaustion and beyond fashioning the Wakandan metal into an alloy that he could work with. He made the slim metal disc first, the gleaming, pure silver glowing in the light of the forge as he hammered it into shape. His physician, Doctor Blake, helped him remove the old disc, slicing carefully where skin had tried to join the metal, and debride the wound underneath, cleaning it as best he could, though Tony swore he could see the fine white bones of his ribs underneath the fleshy tissue. He was also quite drunk when that part was happening, so he may have been mistaken. The new disc fit neatly in place, covering the wound, and hopefully, not sending poison into his body, though he continued to use Bruce’s crystals anyway, at least for the time being.

The rest of the metal, he formed into a perfectly round shield. He commissioned one of the Court painters to create a design, specifying a star in the middle and using the red, white and blue colors of the Riverlands province instead of his own red and gold. He placed it in the rooms down the hall, leaning against a far wall, waiting for its owner to arrive. Pepper let loose with his money and a directive to redo the Tower apartments was a sight to behold. His mother’s things had been moved to storage, and already the room seemed to come alive as large paintings graced the walls over new fabric wallcoverings. She had outdone herself with the paints and brushes, Tony thought, though seeing the easel set up in front of the large windows overlooking the shore sent a pang of longing trepidation through him each time he caught sight of it.

True to the promise he had made before his Court, Tony spent the rest of his time drowning in paperwork and accounts that had been long neglected. He held Court and heard grievances, went over the changes in the laws Stane had instituted while he was absent or simply not paying attention and discussed the needed changes with his legal advisors, signing decree after decree. He toured the fortifications Rhodey was adding to the city’s eastern front, visited the hospital where wounded soldiers were sent and even sat in on the first Council meeting, though Lord Ellis was obviously still absent. Pepper and Jan managed to accomplish more over breakfast than most would in a month’s time, so he felt the Realm was in good hands. If his mind drifted to reading lessons under one of the willows in the garden, sparring sessions in his gymnasium or other, more personal matters, he could hardly be faulted.

It was near noon on the seventh day when Rhodey found him in his workshop, sketching out a new spear for Barnes that would distribute the weight better and compensate for his lack of movement on his left side. “You have news?” Tony asked sharply as soon as Rhodey appeared in the
“We received a message today from Lord Ellis. His forces reached this Sanctum place of Strange’s, but there were only two occupants, Your Grace. Strange himself and the doctor, Banner,” Rhodey clarified. “Banner says Captain Rogers arrived several days before Lord Ellis’ men reached the Sanctum and left the same day for Pierce’s camp upon learning that Barnes failed to arrive at the rendezvous point.” Tony felt the tip of the pencil he had been using to sketch crack under the pressure of his hand. Steve had gone to Pierce. Steve was with Pierce, who knew that the Avengers had been working with someone Pierce believed to be one of Tony’s men. And if Pierce knew about that, he knew about the coded message, though he likely would not assume that Steve would have pieced together the import of that message or that it was meant for Pierce himself.

If Pierce was willing to turn Barnes over to Zola for gods knew what…what would he do with Steve? He looked down at the paper on his desk and realized he had scratched dark lines into it. Suddenly, he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t get air into his body, though he was sure he was taking huge gulps of it, but he was under the water now, they were holding him down and it was running up his nose and down his throat, and he couldn’t breathe. Someone was hitting him, pounding into his back with a hammer, rattling his body and shouting, they were shouting at him, but he couldn’t get any air to make words to respond.

“Your Grace! Your Grace! Tony, dammit,” he heard Rhodey shouting dimly, as if at the end of a tunnel. “Jarvis!” Rhodey called out.

“I’m—“ Tony coughed and sputtered through deep, racking breaths. “I’m fine. Fine. Just. I. Okay. Okay, so Pierce…” he started, then couldn’t say it.

“We’ll work something out, Tony,” Rhodey promised. “We do prisoner exchanges all the time. We’ll go through Fury if we have to. You said these Avengers served under him, right? He’ll want a say in how they are dealt with. We’ll—we’ll figure it out. Stay with me, okay? Just breathe. Here, let me get you some water.” A cup was shoved to his mouth and he drank, then spat it out, the water tasting vile and wrong in his mouth. He realized he was shaking and rubbing a hand over the disc in his chest in rhythmic circles.

“Tell Barnes. He deserves to know, and won’t want to hear it from me,” Tony said dully. “Get a message to Fury, but keep it quiet. Use back channels, if we still have them. Let him know we—let him know that I—want to talk about a prisoner exchange. He’ll probably already know what I mean,” Tony ordered.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Rhodey replied carefully. He turned for the door, but paused on the threshold. “I told you I would find him. I’m sorry I failed you, Your Grace. You have no idea how very sorry I am for that.” Tony wanted to wave him off, assure him that it wasn’t his fault, but he couldn’t make the words come out, Rhodey’s apology sounding far too much like a condolence.

He went back to sketching, this time a bow for Clint, because there was nothing else he could do. Actually, there were hundreds of things that he probably should be doing, but he couldn’t seem to walk away from the rack and pinion cranking system he was designing, which would make pulling the bowstring in place far easier. It seemed important to finish. Someone, Jarvis he assumed, placed a tray of food beside his elbow at some point, though he ignored it. When his sketch was finally complete, he stared at it for long moments, then crumpled it up and tossed it into the fire. Reaching out, he grabbed the hunk of soft, warm bread, intending to force at least a few bites down before he picked up his next distraction for the evening.

Something fell into his lap.
He startled for a moment, then reached out to pick up the small roll of paper that had been tucked unseen under his bread. He quickly unspooled it and read the words written there, then read them again, his eyes dropping briefly to the small, black spider drawn in the bottom right corner as he did so. Okay, then.

He accomplished nothing the rest of the day other than what he considered the overwhelming task of not drinking himself into a stupor to calm his nerves. Shortly before the predetermined time, he left his chambers, nodding to the guards to stay put as he departed. He made his way down to the Castle proper, then down further, following the narrow stone steps into the bowels of the Castle itself, where the deep, subterranean vaults and cells formed a maze of tunnels and rooms, largely forgotten to time, though Tony had spent enough of his youth exploring to know his way around. He held the torch he carried high, but it cast only a circle of light around him. When he finally reached his destination, he saw light spilling out of a chamber ahead. Stepping into the small room, with its arched ceiling curving around him, he blinked in shocked surprise at the occupants.

“General Fury, I hate to tell you this, but you’re kind of under arrest,” Tony said mildly to the man sitting at a simple wooden table in the center of the room.

“Your Grace,” Fury said, with no hint of deference. “We need to talk.”

“Well, that would be pleasant for all, no doubt, but you see, you kind of rebelled against me and joined a Hydra-worshipping asshole to try to steal my Kingdom, so…not so much interested in the talking right now,” Tony replied, taking in the rest of the room. Coulson was there, standing behind Fury as usual. “What could you possibly have to say that I would be interested in hearing?”

“We’re not your enemy, Your Grace,” Coulson said. “We never have been.”

“Doing a pretty good job acting like it,” Tony accused sourly.

“We had to,” Fury said. “I didn’t know what was going on, not at first. Stane…Pierce…the Council. I wasn’t sure if maybe you weren’t a part of it, at least not until you got yourself kidnapped.”

“You’re supposed to be the Spymaster, Nick. How do you fail to notice Hydra growing right under your nose?” Tony demanded.

“You’re meeting in the bowels of your Castle in what is a glorified latrine. I noticed,” Fury replied, his one good eye trained on Tony.

“How many paid the price before you did? You noticed, but just now decide to tell me? Leave to join up with him to—what—try to find out more? Hell of a gamble, Nick,” Tony said, voice low with tension.

“Had to be sure who was on the side of the Realm. At the time, it was hardly obvious that it was you. Your Grace,” Fury responded, raising his eyebrows. Tony’s mouth twisted at the bitter truth in that.

“Even if I believe you, why now? Why come to me now?” Tony questioned sharply.

“You had your good Captain Rhodes try to send me a message. We intercepted it, of course,” Fury responded evenly, steepling his fingers. “Thought we should do this is person.”

“Sit, Stark,” a voice called from behind him. “You—you need to hear what he has to say,” Natasha said, coming to stand behind Fury as well. She wasn’t looking at him, her eyes focused on the flat top of the table, as if deciphering the scratchmarks there.
“Did you always know?” Tony asked curiously, unsurprised by her presence given the note he had received.

“Not at first. You don’t realize how different you looked. How different you were. From before,” she clarified. “Not like I expected the King to just fall into our hands in the middle of nowhere,” Natasha explained, sounding slightly chagrined by the admission. “You wouldn’t have been the first person with Stark blood who bears a resemblance, you know. Lots of by-blows out there, so it didn’t occur to me at first. Then you told that story, about the Butcher Queen. Not exactly a story the Starks promote. Not many people know about that. Wasn’t hard to figure out from there.”

“Why didn’t you say anything then? Tell the others?” Tony questioned. Tell Steve? he wondered silently.

“Why would I? We were going to Pierce, then to Fury. They would know, obviously. Why say anything to the team? Most of my life has been spent trading in knowledge. Information is power. Secrets are currency. Why tell what you don’t need to share?” Natasha asked, but she was still staring at the table, gaze fixed on the rents in the wood, and it bothered Tony for some reason he could not name. “And…it would have made it harder. On Steve,” she went on, and her eyes darted up to Tony for the briefest moment. “To turn you over. Turning over a prisoner was hard enough for him. It isn’t something we’re usually involved in. Turning over a King? Well. That was a weight I wanted to spare him, if I could.”

“Did you know about Pierce and Schmidt? If you knew and didn’t tell Steve—“ Tony started.

“I didn’t know, not then,” she snapped. “Of course I didn’t! You really think I would have let him serve Hydra by extension if I’d known? I know what that would do to him. To all of them. All of us,” she corrected sharply, looking over at Fury with a baleful gaze.

“I didn’t know either, not at first,” Fury said, striking a note of regret for the first time. “Suspicions are one thing. Proof? That’s another entirely. Pierce was already in the throes of betrayal. Seemed better to get in where I could keep an eye on things. Be prepared for whatever would come. Pierce didn’t have the men to do more than poke at your army anyway, or so it seemed at the time. And by the time I had enough proof of his true intentions, you lot were long gone on your little adventure,” Fury replied, casting a quick glance at Natasha.

“Clint says no one followed him down here, by the way,” she reported after a beat, which seemed to signal her acceptance of Fury’s explanation.

“Barton is here?” Tony asked, looking behind him. He had neither seen nor heard anyone, though he supposed that meant little with these people. “Do you know where Steve is?” Tony asked. He thought she saw something shift in Natasha’s eyes again, but couldn’t be sure in the poor light. She was looking anywhere but at him though, and that was what did it, because Natasha did not look away from the hard things. Panic flared in his chest, stealing his air and blanking his mind. “Does Pierce have him? I know he left the Sanctum when Barnes didn’t show. Just tell me. We can work something out, make some kind of trade, I don’t know…” Tony stammered, hearing the desperate entreaty, the pleading in his own voice.

Don’t say it.

Don’t say it.

Please.

“Tony…” she started, then stopped, looking away and biting her lip, and it was that, that one slight
tremor in her bearing, which punched him in the gut, forcing all the air from his body, his vision suddenly twisting and distorting as he blinked against the wetness that welled up.

“Your Grace,” Coulson began, then turned to Fury helplessly. Tony wanted to order them to stop, to keep the words at bay so they wouldn’t be true, not yet.

“Pierce had Captain Rogers hanged for treason at dawn three days ago,” Fury said. “I’m truly sorry, Your Grace. The Captain was a good man.”

“The best,” Coulson interjected softly, but with a note of such sad earnestness that it undid whatever calm he had been clinging to, shattered the last wall of control holding back the disbelieving pain that tore through him, stabbing white hot behind his eyes and through his belly, winding its way to clench and grip and crush right where the metal disc sat harmless now, protecting something that was already broken beyond repair.

Someone, Natasha, he thought, drew him to a simple wooden chair at the table and forced him to sit on legs that weren’t responding to his commands. Fury was talking, telling him about Pierce and Schmidt and what he knew of their plans, how he had first suspected a conspiracy afoot, why he maneuvered to separate his forces from Pierce, doing a piss-poor job of battling Ellis for the southern front. Coulson went over steps that needed to be taken to prepare for all out war with Hydra, laying out the groundwork for defense of the city and the consolidation of Tony’s forces to protect it against the coming onslaught.

Tony mostly heard a dull roar in his ears. This couldn’t be happening. This…it was too much. How did one survive this kind of pain? How was that even possible?

“Did he—was it—was it quick?” he heard himself asking the room, cutting off Coulson’s suggestions regarding resupplying the front lines, though he barely recognized it as his own voice, thin and reedy and empty.

He saw quick looks pass between the three of them, though it was Natasha who answered. “I’m sure it was,” she lied softly. Tony had seen enough hangings in his time, bodies swinging and twitching as the unfortunate soul gasped for air that wouldn’t come. “That’s enough for tonight,” she said quickly to Fury and Coulson. “I’ll take Tony back to his chambers. We’ll need to meet again soon. Bruce should be here shortly. And Thor. Apparently, he actually did just walk up to a patrol of Stark soldiers and announce he was an Avenger.” She grasped his arm gently and pulled him to a stand. He blinked and shook his head, scrubbing a hand over his face and through his hair. This was happening. This had happened. All the power, all the might at his command and he could not save the one thing he could not live without.

“Stark,” Fury barked out. “That little speech you gave the other day. Don’t forget it. The Realm needs its King now more than ever. He wouldn’t want you to quit, not because of him.”

He wanted to tell Nick to go fuck himself, quite frankly, but he couldn’t muster the energy. It didn’t seem worth it. Nothing did. Not anymore. One thing was left though, and that was enough.

“I’m not going to quit, Nick. I’m going to destroy them,” Tony said, hard gaze meeting Fury’s own. “Pierce. Schmidt. I’m going to lay waste to them the likes of which the Realm has never seen, and salt the earth I burn them on. The gods may show them mercy, but I won’t. I may do little else, but that? That I will do.” Fury nodded once, slowly, and then Natasha was ushering Tony out the entrance and up the stairs, across the Castle complex and eventually to his rooms. The guards didn’t even blink when he returned with a beautiful woman in tow.

“Where is James?” she asked after depositing Tony in his chamber. “He should hear this from a
friend.” Tony just stared at her blankly. He wanted to tell her not to tell Barnes, each retelling making it more and more true, but he could hardly keep this from the man. Somehow, he managed to stammer out directions to Barnes’ room. She made a move to leave, then stopped, looking at Tony in that scrutinizing way of hers. She leaned down and pressed a kiss to his brow. “I’m sorry, Tony. None of us ever wanted this to happen.”

“We don’t always get what we want,” he said flatly.

“No. No, we don’t,” she said softly as she closed the door to his chamber.

Tony wasn’t sure how long he sat there, but decided to measure the time in bottles at some point, opening one after the other, trying to diminish the pain or send himself into a stupor where waking was an option. He realized at some point that he could not recall the exact way Steve’s mouth curled when he was trying not to laugh at something he felt was inappropriate for mirth, and put pencil to paper in a vain effort to try to capture it. Tony could draw well enough, models, weapons and armors, machines and buildings and useless things, but he had never delved into the human form. His sketch ended up looking like an armored knight, though he couldn’t get the face at all, finally giving up with little more than a domed head with simple slits for the eyes and mouth.

He found himself stumbling down the hall, ignoring the entreaties from his guards, and pushing open the door to the rooms Pepper had worked so hard to make just right. This was Steve’s place, or would have been, and he needed to be here. It was the closest he could be, though it felt empty and hollow now, the breath before a joyous shout waiting for a jubilation that would never come. One of the guards followed him into the room and lit the fire in the hearth and torches along the wall. Tony stood staring silently at the shield leaning against the wall until he couldn’t look at it anymore.

Tony leaned back against the wall, halfway through his third bottle, when a hand grabbed it from his mouth with alarming speed, sending bright red drops splashing down his chin to his chest, gliding over the gleaming metal disc. Barnes took the bottle and sat down across from where he had slipped to the floor, pressing his head back to lean on the mattress that dipped over the side of the bed. Barnes looked as wrecked as Tony felt, eyes red-rimmed and glistening, the rest of him washed out, diminished somehow, as if made lesser by the loss of Steve’s presence in the world. Tony imagined he would look much the same if he could look at himself.

Barnes surveyed the room, gaze stopping briefly on the paints, a rainbow of colors now dripping haphazardly down the wall where Tony had hurled them against what had once been a lovely pastoral scene. “He would have liked that. The paints. Would have liked all the colors,” Barnes said, watching the rivulets of color race down the wall. “He tried to tell me once that there were different words for ‘green’ as if this were the most fascinating thing he’d ever heard,” Barnes said, chasing his words with a long drink from the bottle. Tony closed his eyes and tipped his head back, knocking it against the wall with enough force to rattle the painting hanging above him. A seascape. He wanted to tear it apart.

“What are you here?” Tony asked, voice slurring over the words. “To torment me? Come to tell me how I am responsible for this? That I did this? That he would have been better off never having met me? I am doing quite spectacularly well on my own, so don’t trouble yourself.”

“My mother once told me not to make an unworthy request of the gods or they may just grant it. I didn’t understand what she meant. Not then. Not until now,” Barnes said, seemingly apropos of nothing. Tony blinked at him in confusion.

“I prayed for you to know loss. Real loss. The kind that guts you, tears you apart and won’t let you get put back together. I wanted you to feel what it was like, to lose everything that mattered.
You—you had so much though. How could anything possibly touch you? But I asked for it, begged the gods for that one thing. To make you hurt, as I did. And look! I got what I asked for,” Barnes finished, tipping the bottle at Tony in mock salute. “The gods are great, indeed. Cruel bastards.”

“You can’t blame yourself for words said in grief, James. It—this—was because of me…” Tony started, voice hitching in a sob around the words. “Me. It was because of me that Pierce did this. How is this not a fitting punishment for what I was? For what I let happen? To my Realm? To my people? You cannot tell me I did not earn this, though why they would make him—why he would be the one to—it should have been me!” Tony cried, voice rough with the grief and despair, harsh and grinding through him, wearing him out and leaving everything bared and open. “It should have been me.”

“I was the one that got captured by that asshole Rumlow. I was the one that didn’t make it back. He came looking for me, Tony. He went to Pierce because of me. It should have been me,” Barnes ground out, returning Tony’s hard gaze. “And I was the one who made him hate you. Turned him to Pierce in the first place. You were right. What you said that night. I needed him to hate, too. It meant I was justified. I could keep it going. And if I kept it, held it close, didn’t let it go…I kept them close, too. Peggy and…Peggy and George. It was the only way to keep them. It was all I had. How selfish was that? To try to deny him happiness so I could cling to my pain? What do I have left to live for anyway? It should have been me,” Barnes echoed, taking another drink.

“I’m sorry. About your family,” Tony said quietly.

“They were dead before anything you did or didn’t do,” Barnes told him, taking another drink and holding up the bottle to check the remaining contents.


Barnes nodded quickly and took another drink. He pulled something out of one of his inner shirt pockets, a small metal cylinder that Tony recognized as the same kind that the messenger birds used. Barnes pulled the end off and unfurled the small paper inside. Tony could see it was little more than a corner torn off a page.

“I couldn’t reconcile the person who would throw himself on a grenade to save one man with the King who would so casually order the deaths of his own,” Barnes said, tracing just above the piece of paper with one finger, almost a caress. “I know you didn’t do that. Maybe you do have some retribution to pay, Tony, that is for the gods to decide, but it wasn’t this. It wasn’t Steve. That isn’t how it works. Good people don’t die to pay the gods the wages of our sins. If that is how it worked, both of us, our debts would be paid, wouldn’t they? Do you feel that they are?” Barnes asked.

Tony shook his head slowly. “Not even close.”

“Not even close,” Barnes repeated, mouth thinning into a hard line. “We don’t get off that easily.” He stared at paper for a long minute, then handed it to Tony. Tony looked down at the picture drawn on the paper, dark charcoal strokes standing in sharp relief. It was a woman, dark curls framing a wide, generous smile and eyes that held a fierce brilliance.

“Peggy,” Barnes said. “Steve drew her from memory for me. And…and he started, but then couldn’t,” Barnes finished. Tony’s eyes dropped to the figure outlined below the woman, a curved skull covered in dark hair, small fist drawn up to its chest, just the suggestion of a face started. “He got this, though,” Barnes said, upending the cylinder again and Tony saw a tiny brown curl fall into Barnes’ hand. He watched the man stroke it delicately, as if it would break if he touched it too
hard. Tony thought of Steve telling him about what happened in Brookland, with Peggy and then George, how hard it must have been for him to bury his best friend’s child, but then to care enough to bring back a token, something tangible Barnes could have to show that his son had lived, if only for a moment, that he had been present in this world, a part of it, if only for the briefest of time.

He realized he had nothing of Steve. There was nothing left to show that Steve had existed, and the wrongness of that, the deep, absolute iniquity of it burned a path up his spine and wrapping around his middle so painful he almost doubled over with it. “How do you do it?” Tony asked. “How do you go on? Live each day. I can’t—I don’t know how to do this. I don’t want to know how to do this. He was—he was supposed to be here. With me. I thought—I thought—it was all so clear. And now…I don’t know what to do.”

Barnes’ mouth thinned into a hard line. “We can’t bring him back. We can’t make this right. But we can damn sure avenge him,” Barnes said, voice suddenly holding something vicious and biting. “That’s what we do.”

“I’m not an Avenger,” Tony said dully, forcing himself to relinquish the scrap of paper back to Barnes. It was surprisingly hard to loose it from his hand, this thing that Steve had drawn, had held at some point, touched and traced and felt the course grain.

“Are you not, Tony?” Barnes asked softly, eyes glittering in the low light of the fire. “I think maybe you always have been. You just didn’t know it until now.”

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU!!!! YOU AMAZING PEOPLE, YOU! Thank you all so much for sticking with this and leaving your wonderful comments and kudos and just generally being awesome and supportive. It is truly a huge motivator.

So, that was like 20,000 words of Hopeful!Nesting!Tony, followed by another 5000 or so crushing his dreams into a tiny pulp. Next up, how's it hanging, Steve?

According to Marvel-Wiki, Bucky's father's name was George, so that is where the name of his son came from in this.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Long live the King.”

Steve felt the words echo through the nearly empty yard, likely meaningless to all save himself and the gods. He allowed the words to reverberate through him, enjoying the solidness of them, the way they settled in his chest, as if they had weight. Oddly though, making such a declaration made him feel lighter, freed something deep inside that had been locked away long ago. Knowing who he was fighting against was one thing. Knowing who he was fighting for was something else entirely, something he hadn’t had for years, not really, he supposed. It should have seemed a release, letting go of all the anger and damnation that had compelled him to join Pierce in the first place, but instead, it felt like grabbing onto something, clinging to an idea long forgotten.

It was perhaps useless to find that purpose now, here at the end of things. One last act of any consequence, a final defiance, however futile it may be. Hammer snickered and said something out of the side of his mouth to Stern that Steve couldn’t catch, the words lost to the wind, though Stern’s puckered mouth broke into a simpering grin. They were just bullies, Steve thought, nothing more, hiding behind an army and an excuse, but bullies all the same, exalting in a victory they gave nothing to win.

Pierce bit the inside of his lip and shrugged, hands in the pockets of his breeches, a slight, almost respectful, smile playing across his mouth. Pierce nodded in Rumlow’s direction and Steve felt the rough length of rope tighten even more around his throat, the knot brushing against the base of his neck as Rumlow tugged at it to check the tension.

Steve shivered against the morning cold, his skin prickling. He found it hard to swallow past the noose, though he knew, rationally, it wasn’t actually that tight, at least not yet. His back was on fire from the new position of his arms behind him, pulling muscles and separating flesh, the sticky wetness oozing down his back again. It was becoming increasingly difficult to gulp in air. He had to force his lungs to expand, the tightening of his throat all too familiar. He recognized the panic as his muscles strained against the rope and fetters of their own accord, his hands balling into fists against the small of his back. He would not succumb to this weakness, not here, not in front of these people. Steve drew in shallow, practiced breaths, trying to stave off his own body’s rebellion. He was not going to do that, not now, not standing here like this. He fought for control, shuddering with the effort.

It was all almost too much though. The pain in his back, the thick weight of the rope coiling around his neck, the heavy burden of his failures. He had let Fury convince him of this path, let himself be led by his own self-righteousness to become an easy mark for deceit, ready to believe what aligned with his own conclusions without question. If this was to be his reparation for that failure, so be it, but the thought that his negligence had cost Bucky, and perhaps Nat and Clint was almost enough to pull the lever of his own, though he would never allow himself such an easy escape. He may have damned himself to this fate, but could not forgive his transgressions if they led his friends to the same. He was supposed to be their leader, they trusted him, put their faith in his judgment, in his cause, but all he had managed to do was to lead them into a web of lies, some dangerous game where they were all mere pawns to be sacrificed.

Death was a fair penance for that failure, he knew. He should be glad to swing, he thought, though it was hard to find any solace in that truth. Better a quick death than the other fate that awaited
him, rotting away in that cell, waiting for the half-death begun by the whipping to find its completion. He had witnessed enough hangings to know this was not the easiest way to go, body struggling against the rope, choking on nothingness, face reddening and then turning a deep purple, bowels loosening and eyes bulging with the strain. He thought of sitting on the dock back home, watching the fishermen haul in the day’s catch, silvered fish in webbed nets, mouths opening and closing uselessly. An oddly fitting fate, for a boy from Brookland, he thought. It was not a pretty death, nor without pain, though the agony that wracked his body with each movement made the thought of a few more moments of struggle seem far less daunting.

Behind him, Rumlow moved back, stepping to the side of the raised platform where a lever waited like a sickle. Steve’s heart thundered loudly in his chest as he cast his eyes away from Pierce and the others, wanting his last sight to be something else, though finding little in the dreary morning sky to offer any satisfaction. He took a deep breath, tasting the smoke and dust of camp on it, the reek of the sweat of too many bodies too close together, letting it fill his mouth and lungs as he waited. Steve closed his eyes against the barren nothingness in front of him, pictures racing through his mind as he did. Bucky, grinning down at him and offering a hand up after one of Steve’s many scrapes with the local boys, teasing a bloody smile from his lips as he did. His mother, brushing his hair back after one of his coughing fits, a soft smile warming her face. The way the sea could be so many shades of blue at once. The team, with their banter and camaraderie, their fierceness and loyalty, the way it felt to be part of that, part of something greater than himself.

And Tony. Brown eyes filled with laughter, sparkling with determination, darkening with something Steve still couldn’t quite name. Tony. For all that he regretted in his life, little stung quite as much as the loss of what might have been. He should never have reached for that in the first place. It had always been too far away. Tony had been too far away, he had known that from the beginning, but as much as he had tried to convince himself of that hard truth, when he was with Tony, it had seemed so close. And it had been so easy to want it, to covet a chance at that life. In his mind, he conjured up a small stone house, the sound of gulls and smell of salt on the air, bits and piece of metal and wood strewn across the floor, a fire burning in hearth, drawings of gadgets and fantastical mechanics spread out on the table, alongside images of ships and sails. It was a fantasy, true, but if he was to leave this world, he figured he deserved the indulgence.

The moment stretched out, a long, anticipatory pause, too long, he realized. Steve opened his eyes, dully curious at why it was taking so long. Sitwell had joined the viewing party, Steve noted. Sir Jasper was gesticulating wildly, voice heated and insistent, holding something in his hand and pointing at it, jabbing it with his finger repeatedly for emphasis. Pierce took whatever it was from Sitwell’s hand and looked at it for a long time, then sent a sharp look up at Steve, eyebrows raised in speculation. There was something vaguely predatory in Pierce’s gaze, assessing and shrewd. Slowly, Pierce walked over to stand below the platform, staring up at Steve. Pierce unrolled the paper in his hand and held it up to Steve.

“Captain,” Pierce addressed him, voice sounding mildly questioning, as if merely curious, but Steve could tell it was false, a trap for the unwary, a snare waiting to spring with the lightest touch. There was something behind Pierce’s tone, though, a thread of discomfort and something like surprise that did not sit well on the man. “Who is this man?” Pierce asked. In his hand, Pierce held the unfinished map, the one Steve had used to draw his sketch of Tony the night before they parted, the one he had buried, forgotten in his haste to find Bucky, in the bottom of his pack.

In the sketch, Tony was asleep on a bed of grass at the base of a towering oak, leaves and branches barely hinted. Tony was depicted curled on his side, his elbow forming a pillow, the other fisted under his chin. He had only sketched Tony’s face in any detail, the lines of his body only suggested, loping and curving against the outline of the tree under which they had lain that night.
Steve blinked down at Pierce in confused surprise, for a brief moment unable to shift his mind from his thoughts churning with bewilderment to exactly what the man was demanding, then shuttered his gaze as best he could and shook his head sharply. “No one,” Steve rasped out, then cleared the dryness from this throat. “Just a drawing. I do that occasionally. A way to pass the time,” Steve answered, though it sounded unconvincing even to his own ears. He had never been good at lying, even when someone deserved to be lied to as wholly as Pierce did. Sitwell and Hammer were deep in whispered conversation a few paces behind Pierce, heads bowed together. Stern was nodding along, but occasionally his gaze would dart up to Steve, something hungry and speculative there.

“Huh,” Pierce said noncommittally, though with obvious disbelief. “Was this the man with you in the Pass, Captain? The one you failed to report? The one you let wander off?” Pierce demanded, ignoring Steve’s denial. “Think carefully here, Captain.”

“I’ve never seen him before,” Steve replied, returning Pierce’s gaze stoically while desperately trying to keep his voice even, though his whole body thrummed with mounting tension. Did Pierce recognize Tony from his time in the city? Had they known each other? Was that one of the reasons it had always been so personal for Tony, Pierce’s rebellion, Steve wondered, recalling Tony’s vitriol directed at Pierce the night they had shared watch duty. Pierce had surely worked closely with the military…had he met Tony that way?

But to what end was all this being played? It made no sense. Tony was safe with Rhodes. Steve knew from Rumlow’s words about Rhodes’ abrupt departure for the city. There was nothing Pierce could do to hurt Tony, not now, but some instinct he couldn’t name told him that Pierce already knew the answer he was demanding. He was looking for a reaction, judging Steve somehow. Even if Pierce already knew his mind, Steve was not going to confirm anything for him, not with Nat and Clint’s whereabouts still unknown and Bucky’s fate a looming question. It might be pure mulishness at this point, but he was not going to stand here with a rope around his neck and give anything to Pierce, not if he could help it, and certainly not anything that could compromise Tony in some way.

“Well,” Pierce began, looking over his shoulder at Hammer and the rest of them. “Well, this certainly is an interesting development,” Pierce continued, chewing at the inside of his cheek as if considering the situation. “You may be of use to us yet, Captain. Take him back to his cell for now, would you?” Pierce requested, nodding to Rollins and Rumlow. Steve looked around the yard in uncertainty, noting Hammer’s perturbation and Stern’s practically gleeful expression. Pierce kept the map with the sketch of Tony clutched tightly in his hand, eyeing Steve with what Steve knew to be a practiced nonchalance.

Something had caught them off-guard here, rattled Pierce somehow, something about Tony. Steve wasn’t naïve enough to think that his denials had carried any import. Pierce recognized Tony, no matter how different the man may have looked whenever it was that they had known one another. What exactly it meant to Pierce that the King’s weapons-maker had been crossing half the Kingdom with the Avengers, why that had swayed Pierce to spare Steve, at least for now, Steve could not quite understand. Did Pierce think to seek to use Steve as some kind of bargaining chip, relying on Tony’s influence with whoever was running the Kingdom now? What could he realistically hope to gain by that?

There was some gap here, some piece he was missing, though he was fairly certain he had unwittingly given an answer to a question Pierce had not known to ask. The idea that Pierce knew about Tony, knew who he was, and that this meant something, something strategic, something useful, put Steve off-balance in a way that felt out of proportion, all things considered. The implication that his life was spared to somehow be used against Tony or the King, used in
furtherance of Pierce’s goals, sat heavily in his stomach, turning sour and bitter, though there was nothing to be done for it now.

Rumlow came behind him and loosened the knot of the noose, slipping the circle over his head and grabbing him by the upper arm to lead him down the steps. Steve couldn’t hold back the harsh, choked-off cry of relief that scraped from his throat once the coil was off his neck. Freed of the rope, Steve’s legs felt like they were moving through sand, the tension born of fear and anxious expectation that had kept him upright this long seeping out. He stumbled on the steps, falling heavily against Rumlow’s side rather than tumble face first into the dirt, and Rollins quickly reached out to grab his other arm.

His limbs seemed to have obeyed him as long as they were able, and now, whatever strength had been animating him this morning left in a rush, the pain, the aching, burning pain, which had briefly receded in the face of a deeper, more terrifying emotion that had threatened to overwhelm him as he stood on the platform, raced back to replace any thought or command over his body. He felt his limbs go soft and stumbled again, struggling to right ungainly steps as he swayed between the two strike team members. He had almost forgotten what this was like, this helplessness, the way his own body could betray him, how much he hated being weak.

Rollins and Rumlow managed to support his weight long enough to get Steve back to his now-familiar cell. Steve brought himself up short at the entrance, his eyes catching on the scratch marks embedded in the stone wall, visible now in the light of morning. There were still eight of them. As he stared, his mind rebelled at the idea of being strung up again, rendered helpless like that, though he wasn’t sure what power he had to prevent it. He simply knew that he could not go willingly to it this time, though, not knowing, though his mind skittered away abruptly at the thought. He stared at the jagged lines hewn into the rock as Rumlow and Rollins attempted to nudge his planted feet forward. He couldn’t do it, though each shove sent a wave of pain down his back. He shook his head, swaying against the excruciating bolts of pain arching through his back, but refused to budge.

“Move,” Rollins ordered, jerking Steve forward by the arm, unbalanced as the sharp contact with the floor sent a spike of pain through him, the room tilting around him. Then the other knee collapsed under him, and he sat back on his heels, back bowed and hands still chained behind him. He couldn’t move any further. Would not do it. If they wanted him to, they were just going to have to carry him.

He heard Rumlow sigh near his ear, and the next sound was the lock on one of the fetters chaining his hands behind him. Steve gasped as the release of the pull on his shoulders sent shards of ice lancing down his back and arms. He heard himself groan and fell forward on fisted hands in the dirt as a wave of dizziness hit him. He wretched, dry heaves of nothing cramping his stomach as his back muscled clenched and shuddered, a burning soreness slowly replacing the sharper pains.

“You done?” Rumlow spat out in annoyance, jerking him back up to a kneel and clamping the manacles back together, locking them in place. At least his hands were in front of him now, a small boon, he thought as he forced his breathing to calm, taking deep, controlled breaths through the haze of agony.

“That’s good enough. Not like he’s going anywhere,” Rumlow said to Rollins with a shrug. Steve looked to his side and saw booted feet departing. He heard the screech of the door hinges as the cell was shunted into darkness once again, the thin sliver of light peeking in under the door the only illumination. Steve sat back on his heels again, then slowly, carefully crawled his way over to the corner, as far from the door as he could get. He curled forward, wrapping his arms around his knees, letting the chain dangle down his legs, trying to keep his mangled back off the dirt
covered wall as best he could. He’d seen Hammer allowing the tip of the whip to drag through the
dirt, whether due to carelessness or on purpose. Steve had spent enough time around festering
battle wounds and listened to plenty of lengthy lectures from Bruce to know that his efforts to
spare the wounds on his back from causing further harm were likely futile.

His mind whirred with thoughts of Tony and what it could possibly mean that Pierce knew of his
association with the Avengers, what about that could be so important to Pierce to stave off the
denouement of this farce with Steve that he so clearly wanted to finish. Pierce wanted him dead,
and not just dead, but branded a traitor beforehand, to quell any sympathetic rumblings that might
foment amongst the men, to set an example, to destroy an idea before it became an ideal.

Yet, Pierce had put that off. All because of a sketch of Tony? It made no sense. Unless…Tony
had been so confident of his position, so sure he could influence the Stark forces…and it appeared
he had been able to convince at least Rhodes to listen to him. That still did nothing to explain what
Pierce hoped he might gain for Steve’s life, if he truly intended to use that as some kind of leverage
in future negotiations. What concession could Pierce possibly think to be granted? Did he truly
believe that Tony held such sway that he could convince the Council or whomever was in charge
now to make concede to Pierce’s demands? That seemed wildly unlikely, yet here Steve sat,
decidedly not dead. Pierce obviously thought he had more value to his cause alive than that which
might have been offered by the message communicated by his death, even if Steve failed to
comprehend how.

Every question seemed to lead to more uncertainty, like a vine that twisted and bent around itself,
distorting its true form. No explanation seemed to fit all the facts. Hold Steve’s life in forfeit to
keep Tony from further serving the King? From building him more weapons? Tony could hardly
refuse his duty, if ordered, whatever regard he might have for Steve. Steve shook his head.
Nothing made sense, and his mind was too fogged with exhaustion, pain and relief to think clearly
about it. He bent his head to his hands and scrubbed them over his face before trying to rub the
chill from his arms.

Sitting in his darkened cell, waiting for an unknown fate seemed far worse, somehow, than waiting
for certain death, though he recognized the illogic of the feeling. He closed his eyes, meaning to
try to clear his head for a moment, and woke with a jolt some unknown time later to the sound of a
key turning in the lock to the cell door, heart pounding in his chest. His body tensed involuntarily
as he pushed himself upright from where he had apparently slumped over in sleep, the manacles
binding his hands clinking loudly in the dark.

Steve blinked against the sudden light that spilled in from the open door, tasting something bitter
and metallic in the back of his throat as every nerve jumped to attention at once. He raised a hand
to try to shield his eyes from the brightness, the chain between his wrists clanking lightly as he
did. He was pressed back against the wall now, his earlier concern about trying to keep his
wounds clean forgotten in the panic that washed over him at the thought that someone was
coming, someone was coming and they could—no, nothing would happen. He clamped his jaw
together, grinding his teeth, his hands clenched into fists and body coiling tight, though he didn’t
know if it was to fight or flee.

It was just Ward though, shoving a bowl of food across the floor at him. Ward shut the door with a
heavy thud without a word, barely glancing at Steve. He leaned his head back against the wall,
withstanding the tension to ease out of his body and his heart to calm its frantic rhythm. He hissed out a
harsh, wet breath, almost a sob, and tried to quell the dread racing through his veins.

Steve knew if he closed his eyes, he was going to see eight damn lines and refused to do that, not
again. It felt like giving something up each time he did, some part of himself being chipped away,
though he was at a loss to explain why, exactly. Steve forced himself to push off the wall, gasping out a hiss of breath against the pain as his abraded skin clung against dank stone. He stretched forward far enough to grab the bowl, for once glad of the concealing darkness. Though his mouth was dry from thirst rather than hunger, he knew he had to eat something. It had been far too long since he had eaten the few meager bits of hard biscuits when he arrived in camp. His strength was already sapped, and each hour he spent without nourishment ebbed it away all the more. Considering the last meal they had brought him, he thought he might have a better chance of success if he couldn’t see what it was that he was eating.

Steve sat cross-legged on the floor and brought the bowl to his mouth, tipping it up to allow a few thick drops through his lips. He gagged on the first attempt to swallow, choking through hacking coughs as he tried to clear his throat. He took deep breaths and tried again, the awful taste of it at least familiar now. He managed three bites before his stomach rebelled in great heaves that doubled him over. Death by starvation was beginning to hold some appeal, he thought morbidly, frowning into the darkness where his hand gripped the bowl. Steve closed his eyes again, the rancid taste still stuck in his mouth, coating his tongue. His stomach roiled, though with hunger or nausea, he couldn’t be sure. Giving up for the time being, he put the bowl down and drew his knees to his chest again.

He tried to listen for the guards, gauge the changing of the shifts or when one might step away for a break or to get a meal, though it was hard to discern much of anything from in here, and he wasn’t sure how he could use the information given his current circumstances. Still, he gathered it, if only by rote and for something to occupy his time, marking the passing of the hours by the footfalls and shadows that moved under the cell door.

Steve woke abruptly some unknown passage of time later, not having intended to sleep again, but he seemed unable to stay awake. He shivered against the cold dampness that coated the room, wishing for a blanket or shirt to cover himself. He drew his arms around his shoulders, rubbing the skin to add warmth, if only for a moment. The cell door opened again, and he realized dully that the noise from the key in the lock must have woken him. It was another member of the strike team, one he did not recognize. The man stepped inside, holding a torch aloft in the darkness of the cell. He picked up the bowl and looked inside the empty bucket, then spared a glance down at Steve, dropping a water bag in the dirt near Steve’s feet before he left. The heavy door clanged shut, the key grating in the lock as it twisted. Steve could hear the low murmur of voices outside, though he was unable to pick out any words.

Steve groped blindly for the waterbag in the dark, fingers raking through the dirt covered floor until he found it and drank deeply of its contents, washing away whatever it was that had been his dinner. He made himself slow down, counting out breaths between measured sips, despite his instinct to drink it dry. When he had emptied it, he leaned his head back against the wall, the satisfaction of the moment fading, and drew his knees to his chest again, threading his arms around them in a vain attempt to keep warm, the cold metal of the manacles and chain completing the loop. Now that he was awake and aware of the chill, it proved impossible to think of much else. His stomach was filled with a dull emptiness now, not exactly discomfort, just an awareness of the absence, the lack of something. Steve knew enough about being sick to recognize the warnings. Pierce may have spared him the noose, but that may be a false reprieve.

Thirst sated, at least for now, he drifted into sleep again, fitfully this time, his back throbbing and stomach cramping. He dreamed, vivid and clear, Tony calling for him from behind the rock wall, but the more Steve scratched at it, the more the dirt and stone collapsed and destroyed whatever progress he made. More and more poured over his hands, until the cell itself was filling with it, sand and rock rising like the tide until it was all he could breath, coating his throat with grit as he rasped out a cough. It was his own wracking coughs that woke him, body bowing and back
screaming in protestation at the sudden jolt.

He was lying curled around himself on the floor of the cell, shaking against the cold, the gleam of the sliver of light peeking in under the door telling him that it must be morning. A short time later, Rumlow opened the door and put something wrapped in a cloth in front of him, along with another waterbag. Rumlow nudged Steve’s shoulder with his booted foot, which Steve immediately grabbed and twisted on instinct, sending Rumlow stumbling back against the door, knocking against it, as much in surprise as with any force Steve could muster at this point. The loud thud and Rumlow’s shocked grunt causing the other guard to call out a question in concern.

“You don’t wanna eat, that it, Cap?” Rumlow demanded, bending down to shout in Steve’s face. Without thinking, Steve threw a handful of sand in the man’s face, causing him to sputter and spit as some of it got in his mouth. Steve knew the impulse had been fool-hardy, and paid for it a moment later when Rumlow planted a sharp kick to his stomach, but he found himself laughing numbly as Rumlow grabbed the food and waterbag where he had dropped it and stalked out, rubbing the grit from his eyes and shouting in annoyance at Rolllins as he slammed the door behind him. Tony would have been proud, Steve thought with immense satisfaction, falling back against the frigid ground.

“Not tickling him though, Tony,” Steve said out loud to the empty room, voice hoarse from disuse and other things he did not want to think on too long. He ran a hand over his face and could feel the warmth, the slick of sweat across his brow. His eyes pricked and watered. And now he had lost his food and the water his parched throat so desperately craved for a moment’s rebellion. This was not going to end well, though he supposed it was better this way, stopping whatever it was that Pierce planned in its tracks before it could somehow reach Tony, before Steve could bring harm to one other person he cared about. And dying of a sickness, however unpleasant, was hardly unexpected for him, almost comforting in its own way, easing into the familiar throes of fighting for air and trying to stay warm while his body burned.

He knew he should not succumb to sleep, but he lacked the energy to stay awake for any length of time. Steve wasn’t sure how long it went on like that, sleep, interrupted only by dreams with dark eyes and rough hands turned gentle, a deep, warm voice asking him to draw ships in the dirt floor, but when he traced his fingers through the sand, they came away bloody, the skin sloughing off, the white bones shining beneath, and when he held up his fingers, there were eight of them. When he next opened his eyes, the light under the door gleamed a warm yellow from the torches, meaning it must be night. He watched the shadows dance and flicker on the floor, imagined he could see shapes in them, the way he and Bucky used to lay in the sun, finding castles and dragons in the clouds floating by overhead. He drifted off again, and dreamed of fire, hot lashes of it against his skin, consuming him, turning him to kindling, his skin blackening and cracking, until all that was left was gray ash and when he brought his hands to his face, he dissolved into nothing, his last thought that death had followed him from Brookland, shadowing him until it could finally claim its prize.

He woke abruptly, a scream forming on his lips, finding himself suddenly being pushed upright, held in place by firm hands on all sides, and someone was tipping his head back, holding it there against his ineffectual struggles. Light burst into the room at once, too much light, like fire, it was blinding and everywhere, all around him, filling the entire space and pressing, clawing against his eyes. There were words, voices, someone asking for something and then hands gripping his jaw and opening his mouth. Something wet was poured down his throat, a thick liquid, vile and bitter tasting.

He tried to swallow, but coughed instead, spitting up whatever it was as his throat convulsed against the invasion. He bent over, coughing harder, before being jerked back up, a hand forcing
his mouth open again and another covering his nose as more of the liquid was tipped into his mouth. The hand holding his jaw clamped it shut, holding his mouth together as he tried to spit out the offending liquid, but couldn’t, and he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t get air, the remembered panic setting in at once as he struggled, but he had no strength left, and there was no air, and he couldn’t get air, opened his eyes to see black spots dancing in the glow of torches and realized they were faces hovering over him. He coughed against the hands holding his jaw together, but finally got the liquid down, that or drown in it, and tore his head to the side as he was released, gasping for the air he so desperately needed.

He struggled for a moment to draw in a breath, taking too much on his first attempt, trying to fill the void, and ending up in another coughing fit, though it quickly subsided. The coughing fit left him drained, his muscles went weak and languid, refusing any entreaty to further effort, and he slumped forward, falling to the floor, coughing again, dry, hacking spasms, though not with the earlier ferocity.

“Stern wants him ready in half an hour,” one of the black dots muttered. Steve blinked in the direction of the voice and tried to focus, but his vision swam and a wave of dizziness washed over him.

“He looks like shit. Smells worse, too,” another dot said. Rumlow, he recognized dully, looking up over his shoulder where he crouched on the ground, huddled on all fours in the middle of a group of people inside his cell. “Five gold pieces says he dies before we even get there.”

“You don’t have five gold pieces,” someone said, earning a quick punch to the shoulder from Rumlow.

“Not going to need ‘em. Come on, look at him. He can’t even stand. No way he makes it,” Rumlow concluded.

“Rumlow’s right there, Cap. You’ve definitely looked better,” a voice said from the doorway. Hammer, Steve recognized instantly, his body snapping taut at the sound, a hot spike of shame running through him at the impulse, however involuntary. He tried to think clearly, tried to focus his thoughts. Nothing had happened. He was sure of that. Nothing. It was fine. He was fine. “Not sure he’s going to be much use to us now. Not like this, anyway. Stern wants to try though. Idiot,” Hammer snorted derisively. “Thinks he can curry favor with our friends this way. Bet Cap here pukes his guts out all over the place, and Stern gets sent packing. Not worth much now, Cap, hate to tell ya. Too bad,” Hammer finished, sounding not at all displeased.

“Careful, my Lord,” Rumlow said lowly.

“Give that stuff a few minutes, and he won’t remember his name, let alone anything I say,” Hammer argued, waiting a hand in the air. “Get him ready. Stern is an impatient bastard, and we should really only keep him waiting, oh…just a bit longer than strictly necessary. Here, take this,” Hammer said, handing a dark bottle to Rumlow. “Keep giving it to him every few hours.”

“How much?” Rumlow asked.

“Well...if he passes out, pisses himself or dies, you’ve given him too much,” Hammer said dismissively, turned on his heel and walked out. Steve couldn’t help the swell of relief as Hammer left and hated himself for it. Strong hands pulled him to his feet where he swayed blearily, blinking against the sudden lightheadedness of being upright. Someone unlocked the shackles binding his wrists together and a shirt was shoved over his head, coarse material scraping against the still raw wounds on his back. The shackles were quickly replaced and new ones attached to his ankles, a thick chain linking the ones binding his arms to the irons hobbling his legs. Someone
prodded him forward, and he took an awkward step, stumbling for a moment, before hands gripped under his arms, half propelling him through the door and outside the small stone building that housed the prisoner cells.

It seemed like it had been an eternity since he had actually seen the sun, but now it was too bright to take in, and all he could do was try to shield his watering eyes, though the chain between his wrist shackles and the ones binding his ankles wouldn’t allow him to raise his hands too high. His eyes watered against the light, and he stumbled again, seemingly unable to get his feet to obey his commands, but someone righted him and nudged him forward again, past curious stares and blinkered expressions, the faint buzz of whispered questions following in his wake as he skirted the edges of the camp. They came to a carriage, Lord Stern standing outside, looking harried.

“About time. Did you stop for snacks? Get him in,” Stern said in annoyance, pointing at the carriage. “There’s no telling how much that idiot is spilling trying to save his hide.” Steve wondered who Stern was talking about, but Stern made no other comment, just went to speak to someone Steve assumed was the driver, since he was standing by the horses, checking their harnesses.

Steve had the brief, rather absurd thought that this was his first time in a carriage before someone pushed his head low, forcing him to duck inside the dark, enclosed space. The seats were cushioned, but threadbare, obviously old and worn, matching the chipped wood and paint on the outside. It smelled sweet, too sweet, sweat and odor and the sickly cloying scent of perfume used to cover it mixing. His stomach clenched, a wave of nausea washing through him, and he leaned out the open door to try to find fresh air, but Stern was climbing in, pushing him back against the seat, Rumlow and Rollins on his heels, filling the space inside the carriage.

He tried to ask where they were taking him, but his mouth did not quite work properly, his words coming out slurred, as if his mouth was full of rocks. Stern just looked at him impassively without answering. The carriage creaked and rocked as someone climbed into the driver’s seat above them. A moment later, he heard a whip crack, his body going rigid at the sound, and the carriage rumbled forward. The bump and sway of the ride was enough to lull him into an odd, inexplicable reverie. He should wonder about where they were going, ask, demand to know, but that all seemed to be far too much effort for a matter of little import. He recalled Hammer’s words about whatever concoction he had been given, but it was with a vague disinterest. Everything seemed less interesting, in fact.

A wash of calm, almost pleasure, though that seemed impossible, came over him, claiming his whole being in its wake. He felt better, good even, in a way, his mind clearing against the haze that had settled there since he had been unceremoniously thrown back into his cell. He remembered when, as children, he and Bucky would sometimes float down one of the gently meandering streams that fed the larger rivers in Brookland. It was the one way Steve could swim, just letting the stream’s current carry him, doing nothing more than staying afloat while the sun warmed his skin.

The time passed as the carriage made its way steadily to its destination, but it had little meaning for him. If a thought passed through his mind to wonder at their speed and urgency, it was only with a rather detached interest. It did not seem to matter, though he felt it should somehow. He just could not rouse himself to care.

He wasn’t hungry or thirsty, his earlier aches and pains present, but seemed to have receded somehow, though he found he was able to focus on distinct things, like the sounds of the horses’ hooves hitting the ground, the way the carriage rocked and bucked in time, the beads of sweat sitting on Lord Stern’s upper lip, Rumlow’s snores and the way Rollins fidgeted in his seat. He
was warm, almost too warm, but it was okay, didn’t really seem to matter. At some point, Rumlow thrust the bottle of thick, brown liquid to his mouth again, and he drank willingly, because he could not think of any reason not to, swallowing easily this time.

They stopped once, late into the night. A fresh set of horses and driver waited off one of the main roads. Stern slept through the change over, though Rumlow and Rollins got out to walk around, taking Steve out long enough to relieve himself. He ate what was given to him, drank what they placed in his hand, then slept soundly against the door of the carriage as it sped on, strangely peaceful, though he didn’t question the placidity. He could still feel the sickness leeching life from his body, sapping what little strength he had left, his body still aching from his wounds, head throbbing with fever, but it was all simply too much to worry about, so he didn’t, putting it aside and letting himself fall into the welcoming embrace of the calm tranquility, the warm, simple ease of just being, just existing.

They stopped again the next morning for a short time, allowing the horses to be watered and fed before resuming their journey. Stern talked during the ride, though Steve could not focus on what the man was saying, nor did it seem important to do so, his voice becoming part of the cadence of the carriage’s traverse over the Realm, fading into the background. The sun was high when the stopped again, Rumlow tipping the last of the bottle’s contents down Steve’s throat before stepping out of the carriage. Steve leaned forward in the cushioned seat and peered out the open door. He could see plumes of smoke rising in the distance, and the air had changed. It was cooler, a breeze wafting through the trees and there was the faint tinge of salt on it.

“Riders coming, m’Lord,” the driver said cautiously from atop the carriage where they had come to a halt. “Stark’s by the look of ‘em.” For the first time, Steve noticed a white banner drooping lazily against the back of the carriage. A truce banner then, he thought, idly curious. We’ve gone north, though the thought held no real interest for him, just a simple recitation of a fact, an observation with no meaning. Though…there was something….it should have meaning, he thought, struggling for a moment to grasp onto why, but coming away with nothing of substance.

Stern nodded expectantly and stepped out of the carriage while Steve remained inside with Rollins. Steve heard the fast pounding of approaching hoofbeats and wondered idly what was going on, but it didn’t seem to matter, though he frowned at the thought. Something didn’t feel right about this, though it was hard to call to fore any real concern. It just didn’t seem important right now, when everything was so serene and simple in his mind, the flush of pleasure at the calmness a wall against any intrusion.

He heard voices shouting outside the carriage and Stern’s placating tone in reply, but he couldn’t make out the words and did not care to attempt to try. After awhile, Stern and Rumlow took their places in the carriage and they were underway again, though this time escorted by riders bearing the red and gold of the King, Steve noted absently. The hours ticked by as they passed through farmlands, forests and villages almost too big to be called such. From the window in the door of the carriage, Steve could see the telltale signs of where Stark’s army camped, smoke plumes rising high in the sky, scavenger birds darting and roving for their meal. And there, there in the distance rose the high, gray walls of Kingstown itself, sitting almost precariously on the edge of the world, the sea to its back, the river tracing one side as it returned to its mother’s welcoming embrace.

Steve couldn’t help but stare in awe at that as they approached. The turrets of the Castle rose like mountain peaks towards the clouds, huge spires decorated with carvings too far away to discern. It was enormous, sprawling over a good part of the city, a large red and gold banner depicting a knight holding a burning sword in each hand flying high above. He had heard stories of the capital, of course, imagined what it must look like, all those people, so much happening. But he could not have pictures this, the scale of it, the sheer size and scope of people and buildings, one
seeming on top of the other, though none built higher than the lowest turret of the Castle, he noted. It was overwhelming, almost too much to take in, the size and scope of it, and the knowledge that people had done this, had built this stone by stone.

They had not even had a two-story house in Brookland, and here was something reaching up to touch the gods. Amazing. To think people had done something like this. Builders. Inventors. Dreamers. They had done this. People. Conquered this part of the Realm and bent it to their will, changing the course the River laid down by the gods in the doing. He couldn’t imagine it. The sheer hubris of it. Of people. People like...people like...he blinked, a strand of thought catching as it danced lightly through his mind. Tony. Tony was there, somewhere, and he was being taken here because of something Stern thought he could gain. What had the man said...gods, how long had it been now...yesterday morning? He couldn’t be sure, the passage of time the past few days entirely mutable. Something about someone spilling their guts, but who? A trade then, Steve thought dully. A prisoner for a prisoner, not unheard of, but why Stern would think they would be willing to part with some high-value prisoner in exchange for Steve, he could not fathom.

The wide walls of the city were lined with rows of soldiers standing sentinel and machines of war made ready, huge trebuchets, bombards and cannons. Turrets were evenly spaced along the ramparts, and Steve could see vague shadows moving behind the arrow loops, and thought of Clint. It occurred to Steve that Tony was likely in there somewhere, wholly unaware that Steve was near. He blinked and lifted a manacled hand to rub over his face. How could he not have thought of that? Of Tony until now? His head felt heavy and full of a yawning emptiness at the same time, though he knew that made no sense. The past couple of days had been a blur, and he found he was unable to recall much in the way of detail, his usual sharp attention to detail having deserted him entirely. He could not afford to do this, he knew. There was too much at stake. Tony. Gods, Tony was in there, in the city somewhere, and now...Stern was planning something...something that involved Tony, though Steve could not get his mind to find any route to explain how. There was something he was supposed to do, something important, but each time he tried to capture the thought, it skittered away into darkness.

By this point, the road was lined with Stark’s army, troops and tents, horses and machines of war laid out as far as the eye could see. Steve stared out the carriage window as they passed men he had long fought against, their hard, hateful gazes watching closely as Stern's carriage trundled past, shrouded by the white flag fluttering in the carriage’s wake.

As his gaze slid over the encampment that encircled the city, Steve wondered which of the machines Tony may have had a hand in designing, but there was no real curiosity in the thought, as wrong as that felt. A part of him protested that he should be counting troops so he could extrapolate numbers, should be looking for weaknesses, holes in their defenses that he could tell Tony or offer to someone to sweeten whatever deal Stern might conjure, but it all seemed a useless endeavor now, and he could not get his mind to focus that long anyway.

The carriage made its way to an enormous arched gate in the wall under a towering barbican, where it stopped momentarily, the guards coming from the guardhouse to converse with the Stark riders before allowing them admittance. Steve looked up to see the spikes from the metal portcullis gleaming overhead as they passed underneath. Finally, they were ushered through and followed the patrol that formed their escort to a nearby bailey surrounded by high walls, more guards materializing from nowhere as soon as their conveyance came to a halt.

He wasn’t sure how long they sat there, though Stern and the others grew increasingly impatient as they waited for some cue, shifting in their seats and casting quick glances out the carriage door. Eventually, a smartly dressed woman with red-blonde hair arrived, standing outside in a circle of well-armed guards bearing the Stark crest on their doublets as Stern crawled out of the carriage.
“Miss Potts. So good of His Grace to send...someone of your stature,” Stern said with a slight, insincere bow.

“Lord Stern,” the woman replied, returning his bow with a curtsey of the same feigned respect. “So good of Alexander to send someone of your...renown...to treat in his stead.” Steve decided he liked her. “Please, follow me. I have prepared a room for you to use to refresh yourself from your journey. His Grace will meet you in the Great Hall after he finishes with the Council.” His Grace? Steve thought, startled. But that meant...that meant the King was back, and finally, finally his mind seemed to snap back into something familiar. The flag. Of course. The flag was flying because the King was in residence. How had he missed that? He shook his head again, more firmly now. *Think, dammit,* he told himself in frustration. *Tony is here somewhere and they are going to try to use you against him. You have to think.* He was missing something. Something important. There was still something to be done, but each time he tried to chase the thought, it disappeared into a calm nothingness.

“Of course. If you will just permit me a moment?” Stern asked smugly. The woman nodded and turned away, towards the Castle, smoothing out imagined wrinkles in her impeccable dress as Stern made his way back to the carriage.

“Wait here,” Stern said as he opened the carriage door and leaned in. “I’ll send for you when I’m ready, if all goes accordingly.” Stern looked over where Steve sat, gaze raking him from head to toe. “Let’s see what you might be worth, Captain.” Stern turned on his heel and followed the woman out of the courtyard through an arched doorway.

He wasn’t sure how long they sat there, growing hotter by the minute in the stifling carriage. It seemed a long time, the sun beginning its descent to meet the sea somewhere beyond the Castle walls. Rumlow and Rollins passed a waterbag between them, but Steve did not even bother asking. He looked at the door to the carriage and then down at his shackled hands and feet. No real chance of making a run for it, and not real idea of where he would go if he could. Throw himself at the mercy of one of Stark’s men? Plead to see Tony and hope they believed him?

“Looks like you aren’t worth as much as Stern thought,” Rumlow offered, eyeing Steve. Rumlow shrugged and grunted, stretching his arms above his head and cracking his back as he did. “Seems to me, Stark isn’t so keen on a deal. Told Stern he was crazy. Not your lucky day, Cap.” Steve slumped back against the seat of the carriage, staring at Rumlow. Why would Stern think the King would trade something, or more likely, someone, for him? Because of Tony’s influence? Could Tony really be on that close of terms with the King that he could ask such a favor? That seemed a flight of fancy of the kind Pierce was unlikely to indulge, yet here he was, baking inside a carriage in the shadow of the Castle where Stern negotiated his life. The King would be a fool to trade a prisoner of strategic value for someone that his weapons-maker...cared for? And whatever his thoughts regarding the King, he knew the man was no fool.

A light rap on the carriage door drew his attention and startled glances between Rumlow and Rollins. Rumlow reached over and undid the lever, opening the door. A guard stood outside, dressed in the Stark red and gold, of course, looking rather disdainfully at the occupants of the carriage.

“Lord Stern requests your presence in the Great Hall,” the man said. “This way, please,” he asked, sweeping out a hand towards the Castle. It was not a request, Steve knew. Rollins and Rumlow exchanged a look, then Rumlow climbed out of the carriage. He reached back in to grasp the chain that swung between the manacles binding Steve’s wrists and tugged. Steve followed him out carefully, trying not to trip on the chains as he hobbled out of the carriage, Rollins clamoring down after him. Out of the carriage, he could get a better look at the scale of things, the sheer mass of
the city almost overwhelmingly daunting. Everywhere he looked, large buildings reached for the sky, a huge Tower dominating the far side of the Castle. Guards teemed about, lining the courtyard and walls, and surrounding the carriage, eyeing them with ill-concealed enmity.

The guard who had delivered the message began to walk towards the archway through which the woman and Stern had disappeared some time ago, Rumlow following and Rollins nudging Steve none too gently to keep up. His steps were awkward, hampered as he was by the chains forcing him to stumble along on shuffling feet. His head throbbed, a sheen of sweat glistening on his brow. For the first time since he had woken in his cell to that damnable liquid being shoved down his throat, the pain in his back sent wrenching spasms down his spine. It was as if his body suddenly remembered its ailments, his muscles cramping and shaking as he trudged gracelessly forward.

Several more Stark guards fell into step around them, no slouches they. He saw several heads turn as he passed the guards assigned to watch the carriage. He could only imagine how he looked. It had not seemed to matter earlier, but now, the fog having slowly begun to lift from his head, he could see himself clearly reflected in their gazes. Bound in chains, covered in dirt and grime, several days’ worth of unkempt beard, a traitor to both his King and the cause he had once claimed. Clearly, whatever plot Stern had hatched was not going well. Would Tony be there? He didn’t think he could take seeing him only to be dragged away again, but they were here under a flag of truce. No one could touch them. If the King did not agree to Stern’s demands, there was nothing Tony or anyone else could do about it.

They reached a heavy door, flanked by two guards. One hurried to pull the heavy metal ring, opening the door for their small party. They stepped inside and walked down a long, narrow stone corridor, lined with small slitted windows, then up a widening set of steps to another hallway, this one far wider and longer. There was a deep red carpet running the length of the hall, covering smooth stone floors in swirls of pale golden color unlike any stone he had ever seen before. It gleamed and shone in the rays of sun, streaming in through windows paned with leaded glass. Glass, Steve thought. Glass everywhere, he saw in amazement. Glass was a prized possession, used sparingly, yet here it was lining every window. He couldn’t imagine. His feet sank into the plush carpet, like wet sand, he thought idly.

Their party walked the length of the hall, then descended another set of steps, the chains at Steve’s feet clinking against the golden stone. He kept trying to take it all in, to see, but there was too much. Tapestries depicting battles or hunting scenes hung on high walls of the shining stone, inlaid with other colors of the same stone, forming patterns and designs. At the bottom of the steps, the room opened into a large foyer, teeming with elegantly dressed people, all of whom seemed to turn at once to stare at their strange assemblage. Steve saw one of the women cover her mouth and nose with a delicate cloth, another pair dipping their heads behind a painted fan to whisper loudly in speculation.

A man with skin nearly the color of coal approached with sure steps. He wore finely honed armor over a red and gold tunic, a sword buckled at his waist. “Rumlow,” the man said by way of greeting, though there was nothing but ice and menace in his tone. “Can’t say as it’s good to see you around here again.”

“Fuck off, would ya?” Rumlow shot back. “Shouldn’t you be dancing attendance around Stark anyway?”

“If you refer to the King as Stark again, I’ll have you thrown out, white flag or no,” the man warned. “Now, I know how much you respect the terms of negotiation. I heard about young Lord Ralston and his party. That was your work, wasn’t it? His father serves the on the King’s council
of law. Think he would like to introduce you to the finer points of justice.”

Rumlow just shrugged. “Don’t seem to recall a white flag. Hard to tell with all the blood and screaming though.” The man’s mouth flattened into a hard line.

“Who the hell is this supposed to be?” the man asked, nodding his head at Steve. “Trying to garner sympathy by dragging one of ours here? Gods, what the hell did you do to him?” he demanded, looking Steve over from head to toe. “This how you treat prisoners? The King has already said he would trade prisoners under the usual terms. You don’t need to parade one around for show. I don’t know what Stern thinks he’s going to accomplish here.” Rumlow just shrugged and remained silent.

The dark-skinned man’s lip curled in disgust, then he turned sharply on his heel and nodded to the Stark guards that flanked their party. “They can go in. Stay close though. If any of them so much as use harsh language within earshot of the King, you have my permission to knock them on their assess,” the man said. The guards nodded in understanding and followed them through the two huge, carved doors, gilded reliefs jutting out from their frames depicting each of the gods in their human forms.

The hall is enormous, a cavernous space that seems to go on and on. He looks up to the dizzying ceiling above, where banners sway and huge chandeliers flicker with hundreds of candles. The floor is set with more of the inlaid stone, though he can’t make out the patterns underneath the crush of people. Steve followed on Rumlow’s heels, as quickly as he can, past stares and whispers, buzzing like finely dressed bees. He kept his head down, avoiding the questioning gazes, the pity, the derision, though he could hear the rumblings in his wake as their small party wove through the parting crowd. Most didn’t even look at him, gazes sliding past as if he wasn’t there, and maybe to them, he wasn’t.

His mind was clearing, thank the gods, but that made way for the pain to worm its way back in, pulsing to life with each step. He grunted at a sharp twist in his back, his knees threatening to buckle, but Rollins grabbed his upper arms and righted him. He looked to his side and for a moment, saw three versions of Rollins’ glowering face before his vision swam into focus. His stomach was in knots, though from the situation or the vile brew they had been foisting on him during the journey here, he could not say. Some hidden thought was pressing against the back of his mind, insisting that there was something he missing, something important, a niggling sense that he had to do something, one last task set before him. He couldn’t catch it though, not yet. They passed a massive hearth, stone knights guarding the flames.

The King is here, he thought, his stomach dropping and roiling. He was going to meet the man he had hated for years, blamed for his sufferings, wrongly as it turned out, and now would prostrate himself before, hoping that he would be allowed a chance to atone. He had betrayed the man, fought against him. He was owed no boon, but could not help but to ask for it. Beg for it, if need be. Shame lanced through him, not just at his past actions, but this entire spectacle. Here, in front of a mass of courtiers, ladies and lords, and him a bedraggled shell stalked by death, with even less to offer now than he had ever had. He would give it all to see Tony again though. He needed to tell him, to say the words. If that was all that was left, so be it. It might be crueler this way, to come so close to what he wanted only to have it slip through his fingers, but he had to try.

He looked to his side, scanning the crowd for a familiar mop of dark brown hair, but finding only hard eyes and wrinkled noses staring back at him. His gaze slipped over the finely dressed men and women, all straining to listen intently to whatever was being said by the men gathered at the end of the hall.
He could hear loud voices up ahead, the crush of people thinning as they approached a raised dais, atop which sat a spectacular throne, shining a brilliant gold against blood red cushions. The dark-skinned man stopped and turned back to Rumlow. “Not a fucking word, you got it?” the man demanded, voice low and full of threat.

“Whatever, asshole. Just tell Stern we’re here,” Rumlow replied, folding his arms over his chest.

“Who’s we exactly?” the man asked, nodding at Rollins and Steve.

“Rollins,” Rumlow huffed. “Stern knows. Come on, get on with it.”

The dark skinned man looked back at Steve, something sad and pitying in his gaze, before he turned away to pick through the tightly knit crowd to get to where Stern was apparently in discussion at the front of the hall. Steve thought of Tony again, casting a brief look around the crowd again. Tony…”I’m an Avenger,” Steve rasped out, voice sounding like footfalls on dry leaves.

The dark skinned man stopped abruptly, pivoting back around to stare at Steve, mouth dropping open in astonishment. “You’re….what…oh, gods…fuck, you’re…” the man stammered, holding out both hands in front of him and shaking his head in dismay. But Steve wasn’t looking at him anymore, because the crowd had parted and he could see a long table at the front of the hall, Lord Stern reclining in a plush chair, looking overly pleased with himself.

Another man, no, not a man, he realized. Well, yes, a man, but no ordinary one, stood leaning over the table, both hands flat against the surface. He was dressed splendidly, in a deep red tunic of velvet embossed with gold silk threads weaving a brocade pattern over the chest and down the sleeves, over tight-fitting black breeches and high leather boots, a long surcoat trimmed in ermine over this, dripping down to dust the floor, a gold chain linking it across his shoulders. An sword with gilded handle set with gleaming gems was buckled at his waist, and of course, a crown, the gold circlet surmounted by arches inset with jewels, a spinel set with a ruby the size of a bird’s egg resting on the top.

“One? One? To hand over Zola and empty our entire dungeon of prisoners? You’re insane,” the King bit out, a harsh and bitter laugh escaping him. “Unless his name is Alexander Pierce, I’m not interested.”

“Really, Your Grace? Are you sure?” Stern asked, steepling his fingers in front of his mouth to hide a self-satisfied grin. Stern looked over his shoulder to where Rumlow stepped behind Steve, the dark skinned man looking back and forth between the King and Steve, a terrible, pained grimace on his face.

The King followed Stern’s gaze, his dark eyes widening in shock and something that looked almost like anguish, and for a moment, it felt like all the air had left the room, only to slam back into Steve like a physical blow.

“T—T--Tony?” Steve stuttered.

He blinked in confusion for the briefest of moments as it all slotted into place. Of course. Gods, of course. He was such a fool. How could he have been so blind? Tony…no, gods, he couldn’t call him that. What must the King think of him? Him and his ridiculous ideas. A house by the sea…some pathetic hut strewn with half-finished gadgets and pictures of ships. Ships.
He did have one final task, after all. One gift for his King, one token of atonement for the Realm. “The ships,” Steve fairly shouted to the stunned silence that filled the Hall. “Burn the ships.”

Chapter End Notes

Art saves lives.

Coming soon: Yeah, I don't think it is going to go too well for Hammer. Just a hunch.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This chapter picks up directly from when we last left Tony.

The first light of day was already spilling through the frosted glass windows of the Tower’s parapet when Jarvis and a guard helped Tony to his feet and down the hallway to his own bed. Barnes, he noted as he staggered to his feet, was still passed out against the edge of the bed, his good hand curled around an empty bottle as if it was a child’s favorite toy, the hair covering his face billowing against soft snores. Tony envied him the respite from the revelations of last night, though watching Barnes’ brow furrow in sleep, he wondered just how much peace could be found in dreams for either of them.

He wasn’t sure what it was between him and Barnes now, somehow shared grief had become something of a balm. Barnes’ need to share what he knew of Steve converged with Tony’s desperate desire to know, to cleave to a pale shadow of what might have been. During the night, promises of vengeance had become softly whispered reminiscences, Tony greedily absorbing everything Barnes deigned to share, as if some threshold of words could be reached that would make Steve’s life more real in this world. Stories could become legend, after all, a permanence denied to all but a privileged few. It was a lie, he knew it was, but sometimes lies were the only things left to the living. Steve would fade to all but a few, but it was something to cling to, a tattered bandage for wounds too deep to heal. He thought about torn strips of a blanket wrapped around his chest wound to keep the poultice in place and gut clenched with phantom pain.

Sleep eluded him the rest of the morn. He spent his time watching the dust motes dance through the air and listening for the sounds of the Castle stirring. Daybreak meant casting the demons of the night aside, but it also demanded recognition that time brokered it’s ill-gotten spoils for no man, no matter how worthy he may have been. The new day came and would go, as it always did, and the next after, immutably steadfast in its refusal to bow to the grief of men.

Jarvis returned to his room at some point with his breakfast, setting the tray on the table and placing Tony’s slippers in their usual spot. He had to get up, get up and go on somehow, do what had to be done. Yesterday, it had seemed to be a role filled with possibilities, endless chances to make things right, make them better. Today, getting out of bed, putting one foot in front of the other, breathing in and out, all these tasks felt nearly insurmountable.

Tony rubbed a hand over his face, finding it came away damp, and forced his legs off the bed, feet scraping the floor as he sought his slippers. Wouldn’t want the King’s feet to be cold, gods no, what a tragedy. He wondered if Steve had been cold, waiting for the noose. Hungry? Had they given him anything to eat before? Had he been scared, alone like that, knowing what fate awaited him? Had they hurt him, in some vain attempt to learn what he might know about Tony? No, fuck. Stop. Gods, he couldn’t think like that. He would never accomplish anything save curling himself into a ball if he let his mind slide down that path.

He reached for the robe that had been placed on the end of his bed and wrapped it around him as he walked over to the table. Jarvis had set a tray of food and jug of coffee on out for him and stoked
the fire in the hearth to scatter the chill. His clothes for the day were laid out for him. Just another day, everything as it had been a thousand times before, except that nothing was the same and nothing would ever be the same and everything was always the same and would never change because this was his life now. Perhaps his true punishment was being given a glimpse of what he could have had before the gods stole it away.

It would be a fitting requital for a man who had everything to place the one thing he wanted above all else beyond his reach. I didn’t know, he thought. And even when I did, you still took him from me, and for what? To prove that no man is above reprisal? To ensure I felt this war as much as any who have lost? You gave me leave to open my eyes and left me with nothing but a void to stare into, he accused silently. If they heard him, the gods chose not to answer, or perhaps they had offered answer enough already.

Barnes swore Steve’s life was not forfeit to Tony’s transgressions, but with all the power at his disposal, he could not help think on how useless he managed to be when things mattered. The consequences of the lapses of kings loomed large for the common man, after all. How many of his people had faced their own losses because of decisions he made, actions he failed to take? Why should he be above that? Why should he not have his share of that sorrow doled out, whether by the gods or by his own hubris?

Whatever excuses Barnes might offer him in the throes of grief, Pierce had killed Steve because of Tony’s presence amongst the Avengers, because Steve had placed the fate of the Realm above his own life, placed Tony’s life before anything else. He did not delude himself that Steve had not known what he was doing, what he risked, what he demanded the team to risk in order to get Tony to safety. For all that he said he was doing it for the Realm, there were other ways that could have shielded the team from suspicion, Tony well knew. Yet, Steve had not taken those paths, had probably never even considered them, as unfathomable as that was to Tony.

Even when Steve thought of Tony as a man like any other, he had still believed in his worth, something that still managed to send a surge of warm longing through Tony when he thought on it. Steve had wanted him, wanted Tony, not the King, just him. Had found Tony to be enough, more than enough, even. Remarkable.

When Tony had suggested some kind of life after this war, Steve’s first thought had been what he could give Tony, not what he could take, and Tony had not gotten the chance to tell him what that meant, how rare that truly was. This was on him, he knew, whatever Barnes’ assurances to the contrary. If he had never crossed paths with the Avengers, Steve would be alive, perhaps even here now at Fury’s behest, but for Steve’s inability to leave well enough alone. Steve had saved the Realm and damned Tony, and some dark, twisted part of Tony hated him for it, hated him for making Tony feel this way, feel this much, too much, it was all too much.

Tony gripped the sides of his head, which ached dully from the prior night’s attempt to drink himself into a stupor. He welcomed the pain though, finding it oddly fitting. It shouldn’t be easy, not today. Everything should hurt. The day should start brittle and hard, each step should hurt, each thought should sting. Feeling it kept it real in some inexplicable way, and he did not want the sensation to leave him, even something unpleasant was preferable to the numbness that stretched out before him, existing in a world gone suddenly cold.

He knew he should eat, but when he tried, the food tasted like ash in his mouth, and his stomach rebelled at the attempt to choke down a bite. He settled on the coffee, the bitter brew warming him as he drank. There were still innumerable tasks ahead of him, but right now, he needed to be near people who had known Steve, needed the sustenance of their memories, of their knowledge that Steve had existed in this world. It was all that was left, those memories and the task he had set
before him, to be a better man, a better King.

He had promised this to his people, to himself, and, perhaps now most importantly, to Steve. Having never gotten the chance to offer any amends to Steve for his failures, he owed him at least that. He could not neglect that duty, could not lay that burden down now, not out of sorrow he brought unto himself. He had that endeavor to shoulder for the rest of his days. That, and the promise of vengeance, the anticipation of some retribution, would have to be enough to carry him forward when hope turned to dust sifting through his hands. It would have to be enough. It was all that was left.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Jarvis said solemnly from the door. “Sir James requests a moment of your time,” he informed him, his tone quiet and grave. “Your Grace…may I say…I heard the terrible news and I—well. I am deeply sorry, Your Grace. I always hoped—I mean, I wanted—for you—well. I am very sorry for your loss, Sire,” Jarvis said quietly. Word spread quickly within the walls of the Castle, he supposed, especially when it came to him.

Tony blinked up at Jarvis, eyes prickling and stinging, throat constricting around words he knew he should probably say in reply, was expected to offer in response to such expression of sympathy. He could not do it, though, the platitudes turning his stomach sour. His hands dug grooves into the edge of the table, knuckles turning white. He did not want to hear sympathy expressed, not now. Every time someone says it out loud, it becomes more real, and more distant. It is past now, his grief a thing to be consoled, comfort to be offered. He did not want to be comforted or consoled, did not want to feel this devastation fade and grow distant. He wanted it to burn, needed the pain to keep him going, but people were already going through the motions of burying it, of asking him to move on from it.

He did not want it, this compassion, this solace Jarvis so earnestly placed before him. Accepting it meant Steve moving ever more behind him, leaving him. He wanted to tell Jarvis not to speak of it, to stop saying it, stop being kind about it. It was too much to have to receive this kindness right now, to be forced to return the meaningless platitudes to people who did not hurt the way he hurt, who said the words because they had to be said, but did not know the pain, did not feel the ache with every heartbeat that put them further from a time when this horror wasn’t true.

Condolences made it true, made it something he had to deal with, to accept. They shoved it to the past, forced him to set this behind him, to move on from Steve, and he wasn’t ready to do that, not yet. Visceral hatred welled up inside him, and he had to swallow the bile down, force his words not to seek to inflict pain, prevent himself from reflecting something of what he felt back on a friend who offered nothing but sincerely meant sympathy.

“I need to speak to Rhodey. Find him for me, would you?” Tony requested, ignoring Jarvis’ words, because he could not force the requisite acceptance from his lips, not for this, not now. Jarvis seemed to understand, offering him a brief nod, his eyes bright with some emotion that Tony refused to acknowledge because he might break if he did, fall to his knees in front of his manservant and beg him to make it not be true, the way Jarvis had made so many hurts not true over the years. This wasn’t one he could fix with soft assurances that he was loved and warm hands brushing through unruly hair.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Jarvis replied instantly, seemingly relieved to have a task set before him. “Is there…anything else I can do for you, Sire?”

“No, thank you, Jarvis. I’m—I just—I need—uh,” Tony cleared his throat and closed his eyes for a moment before opening them to stare down at the table in front of him. “St—the room. Down the hall. Barnes. Um, he can stay until he is ready to leave. I mean, don’t make him go or
anything. But--will you—it needs to be cleaned up. There--I—just get it fixed. It should—it should be fixed,” Tony finished lamely. “It can’t be—don’t leave it like that.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Jarvis said slowly, punctuating each word with some emotion Tony did not want to dwell upon. “Of course. I shall see to it at once.” He bowed slightly at the waist and ducked out of the room, closing the door behind him leaving Tony alone with his thoughts.

It wasn’t long before a quick staccato of raps sounded at the door. Tony realized he had been staring at the fire, the taste of terrible tea and sound of well-meaned laughter comingling in his mind. That bush used to have flowers, he thought. They’re all dead now.

“Come,” he called out, barely recognizing the rough scrape of his own voice. Rhodey pushed the door open, stepped inside a few paces and dropped to his knee. “Would you please stop—“ Tony started.

“I’m so sorry, Your Grace,” Rhodey interrupted. “I—I failed you. I can’t—I can’t tell you how sorry I am…I should have stayed behind, made sure he was found—this—gods, Tony, I—I should have done more—done something—I don’t know—” Tony meant to thank him, put him at ease, offer up the usual response to such entreaty, but what came out was a hoarse sob, which he quickly tried to cover, shoving his fist into his mouth to cut off anything else, but it was too late, too much, he couldn’t take Rhodey’s sympathy on top of that from Jarvis. “Your Grace—I—"

“Don’t. Just—just don’t. Okay? It wasn’t your—you did everything you could. I can hardly fault you for failing to do what I could not, Rhodey, so please. Please, just don’t. Not yet,” Tony pleaded, knowing how he sounded, broken and worn. “I can’t—please just leave it be.”

“I—yes, Your Grace,” Rhodey said slowly, rising to his feet. “I—still. I am just so damned sorry, Tony.” A moment later, Tony felt a warm, strong hand on his shoulder, and realized that he was shaking with the effort not to come apart. He had never been able to hide much of anything from Rhodey, who saw too much and knew him too well. The silence hung heavy between them for a moment before Tony straightened and brushed his the back of his hands across his eyes.

Rhodey took that for the signal it was and sat down opposite Tony at the table. “Zola wants asylum. Claims he was forced to work for Schmidt and was running from Pierce and using the prisoner transport as an excuse to leave when our patrol picked them up. He’s lying or at least not telling us everything, I would stake my life on it, but I have no doubt he is sincere in his desire to work for us if that is what it takes to keep his head. That man is not a martyr, I’m certain of it. He’s smart. Could be useful.”

“No doubt,” Tony agreed. Zola’s explanation seemed plausible enough, and it wasn’t as if Tony was unaware that Schmidt used captives for his own ends, but he agreed with Rhodey’s assessment. Something about this wasn’t right. Zola’s presence this far north, such a distance from Schmidt’s stronghold, was a mystery, to be sure, though he found it hard to find anything truly frightening about the sniveling excuse for a man he had briefly looked in on the day before.

“I have word that Lord Ellis will be joining us soon,” Rhodey continued. “Apparently, something rather…unusual…occurred at General Fury’s encampment. Some kind of skirmish between Fury’s men. According to Lord Ellis’ scouts, some of Fury’s forces departed, seeming to make for Pierce’s camp. The rest, led by Hill, promptly surrendered to Lord Ellis and requested to be transferred to the city to rejoin our cause.”

Tony took a deep breath. Gods, this just got more and more fucked up. “Yeah, Fury’s skulking around here somewhere. I met with him last night. That was how—he was the one—he told me —“ Tony started, then had to stop because he apparently couldn’t actually say the words yet.
“General Fury is here?” Rhodey asked in sharp surprise, looking around Tony’s room as if Fury might be lurking behind a curtain. Any other time and Tony would have laughed, but he did not seem to have any room for mirth left in him.

Instead, he nodded in answer to Rhodey’s question. “Fury and Coulson. Intercepted the message you tried to send about…well,” Tony began, clearing whatever it was that kept trying to lodge in his throat. “Fury claimed they only joined up with Pierce to find out what was going on. To protect the Realm,” Tony snorted in derision. It still stung, that Fury had so little faith in him that he had gone to such lengths. “Fury knew something was going on, but wasn’t sure exactly what or who was in on it. Once they figured out what was happening with Hydra and Schmidt’s connection to Pierce, Fury started planning his own little rebellion, I guess. Fury must’ve gotten word to Hill to join up with Matt. By the sound of it, not everyone in his group was as loyal as he might have hoped.”

“Well, that’s—gods, I don’t know what that is. Bullshit, I’d like to say, quite frankly,” Rhodey said, clearly stunned by the revelations. “If Fury wanted to ferret out the truth so badly, I don’t see how hieing off to join up with Pierce was the answer.”

Tony shrugged lightly. “Wasn’t sure who he could trust, which meant distrusting everyone, basically. Including me, the suspicious bastard. He thought I might be in on it. Probably suspected I was the one responsible for my parents’ deaths, though he didn’t outright say so. Probably didn’t want to own that particular accusation, considering what happened with Stane. Had to get myself kidnapped and nearly killed to prove I wasn’t in on it, apparently. He separated his forces off from Pierce’s though, poking at Matt’s holdings, but never really accomplishing much besides being annoying. In retrospect, that was clearly deliberate.”

“I think you are far more forgiving of General Fury than I would be,” Rhodey acknowledged with raised eyebrows. Tony shrugged. Fury’s actions should probably bother him more, but he could hardly argue that Fury’s suspicions of his own possible role were entirely unfounded, at least from an outside perspective.

“He had his reasons for mistrusting me. And whatever his failures or misdeeds, he never stopped serving the Realm. Can you honestly say the same about me? No, don’t answer that. Anyway, I don’t think we’re in a position to turn away people of Fury’s capabilities away out of spite. Not right now,” Tony remarked.

“So, Fury is here? In Kingstown?” Rhodey repeated, rubbing his thumb and forefinger against his chin. “I thought maybe there had been some kind of coup when I heard from Lord Ellis.”

“Just some Hydra loyalists that did not take well to the news that Fury wasn’t kowtowing to Schmidt and Pierce, by the sounds of it. At any rate, we’ll need to meet with Fury and Coulson as soon as possible. How are the fortifications we discussed coming along?” Tony asked, for a moment his mind freezing on the image of finely drawn map, Steve’s voice telling him to show it Rhodey or someone who would listen.

“Nearing completion, Your Grace,” Rhodey responded. “Another week, I believe, and everything will be in place.”

“Good, good,” Tony acknowledged, desperate to move on from that subject. “Stane and his cohorts still stewing?”

“Sir Gregory has been most eager to help,” Rhodey said, flashing white teeth. “Lord Stone still denies any knowledge of a plot. Says he was just doing what the Regent wanted. There isn’t much to connect him, to be honest. He was careful, I’ll give him that. All of his Council decisions have
cover. He was never the only one to vote for something and made sure his reasoning was on
record. If he was acquiescing to Stane’s demands, he made it look a lot like politics instead of
intrigue,” Rhodey said.

“I doubt those two concepts have ever been closer than when in Stone’s hands,” Tony observed
through clenched teeth. He was oddly unsurprised by his former lover’s betrayal. It should hurt,
probably, but there was no room left in him for that. Ty had always liked him on his knees, for
reasons that had not been quite as clear to Tony at the time as they were now. He wondered what
satisfaction Ty might feel now, when Tony was truly brought low. That thought smarted far more
than Ty’s actual disloyalty.

“General Ross swears he was only following orders. Considering how poorly he usually manages
to accomplish that task, I find his excuse doubtful,” Rhodey continued in disgust. “I think Sir
Gregory is willing to testify to some communications between Ross and Stane about the carriage
attack, at any rate, though I don’t know if that will be enough to show Ross had knowledge of what
was planned beforehand. More that he shared the route and information about the number of
guards attached to the caravan with Stane, which would not normally raise suspicion. For his part,
Stane refuses to offer anything except further abuse and invective.”

“Charming. I see why he and my Dad got along so well. Up until Stane murdered him, that is.
Probably grounds for a bit of a falling out,” Tony grimaced. “Take your time to gather what
evidence we can before we sit a jury. I don’t want Stane slipping out of this one. As for Ty…I
think stripping him of his title and lands and banishing the slippery bastard will suffice. For now.
He might hate that more than a cell anyway.”

“It will be my pleasure to deliver the news to Lord…uh, to Mister Stone,” Rhodey replied with a
devilish smile. “What about Ross?”

“Ross is too much of a self-serving asshole to get well and truly caught in this, I think you’ll find,”
Tony groused. “Obviously, he will lose his rank and the lands that went with it. Keep him in the
city though. If we banish him, I’m fairly sure we’ll see him across a battlefield wearing Pierce’s
colors.”

Rhodey nodded in agreement of his assessment. “And Sir Gregory?” Rhodey asked. “He has
been…cooperative.”

“I’ll bet,” Tony snorted. “Take away his rank, and we don’t owe the sniveling bastard a trial of his
peers. See if he finds he remembers even more details when he knows I’ll be the one deciding his
fate, not some jury he can cajole. Cut a deal for his testimony against Stane, but he’s on the next
ship bound for the trade routes, as cargo or a conscript, his choice,” Tony ordered.

“He won’t like that, but he’ll take it, I’m sure,” Rhodey replied. “Better that than a rope around his
—uh. I mean—forgive me, I wasn’t thinking.”

Tony sighed heavily. “Don’t. Don’t measure your words, Rhodey. That’s not what
I need.”

“What do you need, Your Grace?” Rhodey asked quietly, but there was a fierce light in his eye, a
steadfast determination behind the question.

“I want whoever was responsible for…I mean—dammit, say his name. For Steve. I want them to
pay, Rhodey. Pierce, Schmidt, whoever the fuck it was that pulled the lev—whoever was there,
you find them, Rhodey. You find them and bring them to me,” Tony ground out. “I want to look
out my window and watch the ravens feast on their flesh. That? That is what I need.”
“Yes, Your Grace,” Rhodey said, pushing away from his place at the table and offering a slight bow. “On my honor, it shall be done.” Tony managed a nod in answer, but found he couldn’t look up at Rhodey, everything was too close to the surface now, threatening to spill over and destroy the mask of composure he was wearing once and for all.

“Doctor Banner and his escort should arrive later today. And I believe Danvers is escorting the man who goes by the name Thor. Should I—should I inform them, Your Grace?” Rhodey asked carefully.

Tony sucked in a deep breath and shook his head. “One of the other Avengers should do it,” Tony said, noting by the quirk of his mouth that Rhodey had caught Tony’s turn of phrase, of course. Other Avengers. “Two of them, Natasha and Clint, are here with Fury somewhere. They…they will want to be the ones to…Bruce and Thor should hear it from them. I’ll have Pepper get them settled in the Tower and then…” Tony trailed off, simply because in his mind, there was nothing that happened after that, just a blank emptiness that spanned across time.

“Of course, Your Grace. I’ll have Jarvis tell Pepper to await their arrival,” Rhodey said, turning to go. “Tony,” Rhodey started, coming to a halt with a hand on the thick wooden door. “You are my King, of course. I serve at your pleasure. But, Tony, you are also my friend. If there is anything I can do, anything at all…” he trailed off, voice laden with something heavy and ponderous. “You have only to ask it of me, I hope you know that.”

“I—I do, Rhodey,” Tony managed finally, though he still could not hold his friend’s gaze. “Thank you. For that. For…everything. It—you’ve always been there. Even when you deserved better friend, not to mention a far wiser King. I do not forget that.”

“Tony—“ Rhodey started, but then stopped, nodding jerkily. Rhodey dropped his chin to his chest and sighed wearily, shaking his head as if to clear it. “There’s something else. I wasn’t sure going to tell you, to be honest. I still don’t know if I should, not now. But…”

“Yeah?” Tony prompted when Rhodey stopped and looked away, staring down the hall as if looking for an escape.

“Got a rider in. One of the patrols to the south. Pierce sent an envoy to negotiate another prisoner exchange,” Rhodey said softly as Tony’s gaze snapped to his.

“Danvers handles those,” Tony replied without inflection, digging his nail into the wood of the table in front of him. It hurt, a sliver of pain spiking up his finger and arm, but it felt good to hurt, something to keep the numbness at bay.

“This one apparently demanded to speak to the King. Says he will negotiate only with you. I was going to tell him to go to hell, don’t get me wrong,” Rhodey continued with a shrug. “According to our man who dealt with him, the envoy was pretty damn insistent about it. Just thought you would like to know. He’s bluffing, no doubt, trying to curry favor with Pierce by getting to see you or some such. I’m sure Pierce is wondering what the hell is going on up here and would love a first-hand accounting.”

“Demanded to see me, huh? Rather forward of an envoy, wouldn’t you say? Who was it, do you know?” Tony asked, watching his nail split against the wood, a small stripe of bright red welling up from the bed.


Tony felt a white-hot spike of rage flow through him, filling the empty places, pouring from his
bones and bleeding out his skin. “Stern?” he repeated. “Stern,” he swallowed around the name. “I think… I think, as it happens, I would be willing to meet with our former Regional Governor to the Riverlands.”

“Really?” Rhodey asked in surprise. “Danvers can handle it, you know that, right? You hardly have to do this just because Stern demands it.”

“I know. It’s just…he owes me some money,” Tony said, careful to keep his tone even, though he could tell Rhodey heard something threading through his voice that worried his friend from the way Rhodey shifted his stance, brow furrowing, though Tony knew Rhodey would hardly challenge him on it. “When will Stern arrive?” Tony asked mildly, hoping the inquiry sounded like nothing more than idle curiosity.

“Probably this afternoon sometime,” Rhodey said. “Shall I see that you are informed when his party reaches the gate?”

“Yes. Yes, do that,” Tony ordered with a nod, grinding his nail further into the table’s surface, watching the blood smear against the grain of the wood.

“Of course, Sire,” Rhodey replied, bowing his head in answer. “And Fury?” Rhodey pressed.

“I have no doubt he will seek you out in his own good time, damn the man, but yes, set up a meeting. Him, Coulson, and Danvers, I suppose, now that Ross is decidedly off-duty,” Tony said. “Hill, when she gets here. And Matt when he arrives. Pepper and Lady Van Dyne. The Council, or as much of it as we can muster, should be present to hear what Fury has to say. And I want the Avengers there as well.”

“Are you sure---Yes, Your Grace, of course,” Rhodey amended immediately, seeing Tony’s firm gaze rise to meet his. “I’ll report to you as soon as we are ready to convene.” Rhodey bowed again and took his leave, closing the heavy door behind him, leaving Tony to his dark abyss of thoughts.

Tony waited until the door was pulled to before standing, pressing the tips of his fingers against the top of the table until they were white with the effort, the chipped nailbed stinging as he did. Stern. Who had taken his money and used it for his own ill-gotten conceits and then turned his back on the people of Brookland when they needed it most. Had he been conspiring with Pierce even then, to allow the disease entry in return for securing a place at Pierce’s side? Tony wouldn’t put it past the man. And he was coming here, to stand before him. To talk. To negotiate.

Tony wanted to smash Stern’s face in, peel it apart with his hands, rend the muscles to shreds and smash the bones to dust, to take some of the pain that had settled deep inside his chest and push it onto someone else, someone who bore responsibility, someone to blame, to punish, to hold accountable and the problem was, he could do it. No one would stop him. Hell, several would probably be happy to help. It was too tempting, all too easy to take the hatred he shouldered for his own part in this and let it twist into something else. He had to regain some semblance of composure before he faced the man or no force of convention, no white flag, would stop him from doing something rash.

He looked down at his hand, fisted now against the tabletop. It hurt, throbbing with a dull pain, which felt right, good even, in its own way. It was something to feel, and anything was better than feeling nothing at all. He was afraid that was all that was left.

He was in his workshop at the base of the Tower, working the water wheel to force air through the large bellows that would heat the smelter to a high enough temperature to liquefy the iron ore over the bits of coal that littered the bottom of the smelter so that it could flow into the moulds he had
carefully hammered and chiseled into shape, having transformed into steel in a process only a choice few even began to understand, when Pepper found him, wearing just his undershirt, covered in sweat and grime, steadfastly pumping away at the wheel, eyes unfocused as he stared at the churning flames.

“Is that—is that an arm?” Pepper stuttered out around a moue of disgust, halfway through a curtsey.

Tony looked up from the wheel, letting it slowly spin to a stop when he caught sight of Pepper framed in the doorway. He glanced down at the moulds that were strewn across one of his worktables. “Eh, come on, Pep. Making body parts is hardly the worst thing you’ve caught me doing,” Tony said, plastering a fake smile that was more a grimace on his face. “For Barnes,” he explained. “He lost his, or Pierce took it, whatever. He needs a new one.”

“And the rest of…of…this…?” Pepper asked carefully, looking around the workshop where a half-finished crossbow sat idle, long, deadly spearheads mingled with smaller arrow points, and a murky yellowish substance bubbled and brewed over a low flame next to small, hollowed metal balls. The perfectly round mould he had spent long hours sculpting himself was shrouded with a cloth in the corner. “You’ve been busy,” she observed carefully.

“Projects,” Tony responded dully, using the valve to release the carbonized iron to flow into the moulds. “I’m working.”

“Oh, Tony. Tony…this…” Pepper began, waving a hand in the air at the room. “I heard. About what happened with…with your Captain. Tony, I’m so sorry. I know, well, I mean, I don’t know, not really, but…I know he meant a great deal to you. And I know these Avengers are important to you, but…Tony, there is so much…Fury and Stane, Lord Ellis on his way, now Hydra and Schmidt to deal with…I can’t even begin to imagine how you must feel…”

“Then don’t,” Tony bit out sharper than he intended, then paused and wiped a hand over his face. “I’m sorry. That was poorly done of me. I know you are trying to help. I know I’ve placed the troubles of the Realm onto your shoulders. I am not neglecting my promises, I swear. I am well aware of what must be done. I just needed…I needed some time. Here. Doing something. Building. I don’t know—I need…I need things to be different today than they were yesterday. I can’t walk out there and pretend it is the same. He—he mattered, Pep. But I’m the only one who fucking knows it. I need things to have changed. Maybe tomorrow, I can. Be the person you and Rhodey and everyone else need me to be. I don’t know. But not today, Pep. I can’t do that. Not today. Do not ask it of me. Please,” he pleaded quietly, trying to keep his voice from breaking at the words, finally looking up at her.

She must have seen something in his gaze, her eyes watering and voice shaking with restrained emotion. “Oh, Tony, no, no, I know you aren’t—I know you are grieving. Of course, you are,” Pepper stammered. “I didn’t mean—I wasn’t accusing you of forsaking your responsibilities, gods no, Tony. I just…I—There is so much going on, and it seems no good can come of it. The Realm needs its King, Tony. It isn’t fair to you. Nothing about this whole thing is fair. You should be able to take as much time as you need, to find solace in whatever suits you.”

“But I can’t,” Tony finished for her, moving his chisel, ladle, hammer, tongs and other tools around on the table.

“No. I’m sorry, but no,” Pepper replied softly. After a moment, she heaved in a long breath and continued, “Stern’s party just passed through the gate. I’ve made a room available to him while he waits.”

“Huh,” Tony said, blinking against the black dots that clouded his vision and clenching his hand
around the hammer he used to break the moulds, feeling the weight of it in his hand. “Well,” he began, keeping his tone as even as he could through the tightness that clamped his jaw together. “Since the former Lord Stern insisted on an audience with the King, I say, let’s give him exactly what he wanted.”

“Oh, really?” Pepper asked slyly. “I haven’t gotten you to dress up properly since your coronation.”

“Stern thinks he merits the King, I say we show Pierce’s flunky exactly what that means,” Tony said, shoving the neatly arrayed tools aside into a pile.

“By all means, Your Grace,” Pepper replied, looking rather eager. “I look forward to it.”

A couple of hours later, Tony stared at his reflection in the mirror in his chambers. Clean from a bath, freshly shaved, and adorned with the raiment of his station, he could only think that he had felt more the King sitting under a tree in the woods on a bed of grass, eating wild berries when the world had been full of possibilities than he did under this much finery. This, the crown, the cloak, the vestments of a title he was born to, these things were nothing more than a façade, a costume, an identity to assume. But power, he had learned the hard way, resided not in the rich trappings of station, but in the sway earned in the hearts of good men.

Pepper walked behind him and held one of the crowns aloft, placing it on his head. Damn thing pinches, he thought. He thought she had deliberately chosen the most ostentatious from the Crown jewels, but couldn’t argue with the effect. Jarvis helped buckle the ceremonial sword to his waist, the jewel encrusted hilt catching the light of the fire.

“Stern awaits you in the Great Hall, Your Grace,” Pepper informed him, brushing imaginary lint off the cloak as she smoothed it over his shoulders.

Tony looked over his reflection one last time. He looked the part, that much could not be denied. Now, he had to play the part, negotiate with that lying bastard, Stern, for the exchange of prisoners, to bring home someone else’s kin or loved one. Someone else’s Steve. He closed his eyes against the wave of pain that threatened to double him over and had to grip the side of the looking glass for support. It should not hurt so. He should be glad of this task instead of feeling a desperate, clawing jealousy well up at the thought.

“Your Grace, are you alright?” Jarvis asked quietly, placing a light hand on his arm to draw his attention from his reflection.

“I’m fine, Jarvis. Let’s go,” he said to Pepper with a quick jerk of his head. She hurried before him, and he followed her quick steps from his chambers and down the long walk to the Great Hall, guards snapping to formation as he passed. He arrived in the Great Hall from his own private entrance, taking the steps up the dais to his throne with measured paces, ignoring where Stern stood off to the side, looking somewhat haggard and ill-kempt from his journey. The assembled courtiers and guests dipped into deep bows or curtsies as he stood waiting before his throne.

“His Majesty, Anthony the Fourth, by the Grace of the Gods, King of the Realm and Dominions beyond the Seas,” his herald announced, his voice echoing down the hall. Tony sat down on the throne and the assemblage rose as one. He turned his attention to Stern, who had managed to keep himself upright the entire time.

“Your Grace, may I present Gareth Stern, envoy of Alexander Pierce under terms of treaty,” the herald said.
“It’s actually Lord Stern,” Stern corrected with an utterly false smile.

“It really isn’t,” Tony said, earning titters of laughter from the crowd. Stern looked over his shoulder at the crowd in annoyance. “The reason I know that is because titles are awarded by the Crown, which, you may have noticed, is me. And you, I’m absolutely certain, are not on the receiving end of one.”

Stern cleared his throat nervously. “Your Grace,” he started. “Before we begin our negotiations, I would like your word, here, before your Court, that you acknowledge and intend to abide by the terms of negotiation. We have traveled a long distance under a flag of truce for this purpose. I would have your word that the usual conditions will be honored.”

“You would stand here and question my honor? That’s some unmitigated gall considering your debt to the Crown,” Tony ground out. “Oh yes, I know about how you lined your pockets with funds meant for education and advancement of the people under your charge. My money, Stern. Mine. Meant for...” Tony stopped himself, drawing in a shaky breath. “Meant for my people, Stern, not adorning your latest conquest. And now you want some assurance of fairness? Where was your sense of righteousness when you stole from me, took what was meant to help and used it for your own gain?” Tony demanded. He knew he was yelling, could see the stunned faces of the crowd who had expected little more than a terse negotiation over prisoners and were now being treated to the spectacle of their King shouting at Pierce’s envoy.

“Where was your honor when you denied the people under your care the ability to better themselves? When you stole and lied? When you charged them illegal taxes to which they could not possibly object because they couldn’t read the damn piece of paper? When you took their lands, their homes, and laid the blame for your scheme at my feet? Where is the honor in that?” Tony demanded. “Tell me—” he heard the words, but it did not sound like his own voice, instead something brutal and raw, scorched and brittled by pain, having replaced it. “Tell me what it is that your version of honor demands of me.”

“Your—Your Grace, I don’t—” Stern started, clearly caught off guard by the turn of the conversation.

“Sit,” Tony ordered, pointing at the narrow table at the front of the now silent hall. He stood and walked down the steps to stand over where Stern crouched in one of the chairs that surrounded the long table. “I will abide by the terms of negotiation,” Tony said, voice low though he knew it echoed through the quiet hall. “And if you question my honor again, I will abide by them while watching to see if you can get your carriage far enough away from the city walls before my archers set fire to your white flag, do I make myself clear?”

“Y—y—yes,” Stern gulped. “Your Grace,” he acknowledged, if somewhat begrudgingly. Stern cleared his throat and pressed his hands flat on top of the table. “Well, uh, with that preamble behind us...as to the terms of the exchange, Your Grace...”

“I will exchange each of the prisoners we hold one for one for the Stark men Pierce is currently maltreating,” Tony said. “That’s it. That is your deal. Take it and get out of my sight before I forget that I am a man of honor, at least upon occasion.”

“Well, Your Grace, it isn’t quite that simple,” Stern began. “You see...in this particular case, our offer is somewhat different than the usual terms. Which is why I needed to speak with you directly, you understand.”

“And just what terms does Pierce seek to offer now?” Tony asked. “We are not exactly in dire straits for men, as you may have noticed on your ride in. I understand Pierce recently lost some...
support,” Tony said carefully, watching Stern’s eyes widen at the not so subtle jibe about Fury, though the man quickly hid his surprise behind a simpering smile.

“Yes, yes, it is true that we have recently experienced some…losses, though our numbers continue to, uh, swell with new recruits. Nevertheless, I think you will be interested to hear our terms, Your Grace,” Stern replied. “We are willing to trade for every soldier of ours you have captured.”

“I already said—“ Tony started.

“And Doctor Zola,” Stern added.

“Absolutely not,” Tony replied quickly. “Zola is not a part of this. We will make the usual trade, that’s it. If Piece does not like that bargain, I have some creative suggestions for what he can do with his terms,” Tony bit out.

“Actually,” Stern replied, his eyes gleaming and feral in the torchlight. “We would accept the return of Zola and all of your prisoners. In return, we will give you one of ours.”

“One? One? To hand over Zola and empty our entire dungeon of prisoners? You’re insane,” Tony barked out with a caustic laugh as he leaned over the table, looming over where Stern sat all too smugly in the plush chair. “Unless his name is Alexander Pierce, I’m not interested.”

“Really, Your Grace?” Stern questioned. “Are you sure?” Stern was almost smiling, which threw Tony off his form for a moment. Something wasn’t right here. Stern was too confident, too certain. He was missing something. Tony stood up, pressing his hands against the table and leaning over, prepared to castigate Stern for his temerity, when he noticed Stern’s gaze slide over his shoulder. Stern was looking back down the Great Hall to where the crowd had parted slightly to allow through two tall men surrounding another, the third man fettered in chains that rattled when he took a shuffling step. Tony opened his mouth to castigate Stern for such a base tactic, bringing a prisoner here, one of his men, to try to guilt him into accepting some ridiculous deal.

Then he looked, really looked and oh-gods. No.

No. It couldn’t--

Steve.

“T-T-Tony?” Steve asked, blue eyes wide and glassy with bewildered confusion.

There was a momentary burst of something opening up in his chest that he might have recognized for joy, and maybe it could have been, once, his gaze raking over a familiar shock of dirty blond hair, eyes like the ocean, tall, strong frame, and he was here, Steve was here, whole and alive and right here for Tony to touch, to hold, to keep safe. He was reaching out before he knew what he was doing, before he really saw, before his mind caught up with his heart.

Barnes was right, Tony thought with terrible certainty, something akin to horror clawing under his skin as he finally registered something beyond Steve’s presence. His mind stuttered to a halt as he drank in the sight before him, the utter wrongness of it all. If you make an unworthy request of the gods, they just might grant it and damn you to hell in the process, Tony thought. All those months ago, he had stood in his tent after the weapons demonstration and asked Rhodey to bring him this so-called Captain causing him such trouble strung up in chains. The gods had granted him his wish, the cruel bastards, and in doing so had likely taken away everything he had ever wanted.

“The ships,” Steve rasped out, his voice ringing louder than it should in the silent hall, eyes bright and wide, something desolate harrowing the pale, drawn features of his face. “Burn the ships.”
Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Stern stiffen with surprise, his face suddenly going still. The Great Hall seemed to have come to a standstill, though he knew heads were turning and necks were craning to see who was the dirt-covered prisoner bound in chains who was calling the King by his familiar name.

“Get those off of him,” Tony shouted, or was he screaming? He didn’t know, didn’t care. He strode forward towards Steve, pointing at the two guards that flanked him, both of whom were looking back and forth between Stern and Tony with ill-concealed shock. “Get those—get them off. Now. Get them off of him!” he roared when no one seemed to move quiet quickly enough, gesturing wildly at the offending chains that coiled around Steve’s hands and feet.

“Let him go,” he ordered, walking towards Steve as if through a haze, his vision clouded with something he vaguely recognized as fury, swift and throbbing against his temples, beating through his ears in a pounding, violent rhythm. He just needed to touch him, to feel Steve’s steady warmth under his hands, to know that this was real, not some cruel trick of his own mind. “Get your fucking hands off of him,” Tony bit out as one of Stern’s guards reached up to clamp a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Get—don’t touch him. Don’t you dare, you fucking pieces of—“

Someone grabbed Tony from behind, and he tried to shrug them off, but they were gripping him tightly, too tightly, and he couldn’t move, couldn’t get to Steve, who was staring at some place beyond Tony’s shoulder, abject misery contorting the lines of his face. It was that which gave Tony pause, stopped him from throwing himself forward and likely prostrating himself at Steve’s feet in supplication.

It was Rhodey holding onto him, he saw, when he managed to see anything but Steve. “Your Grace,” Rhodey said stridently. “I have this, Your Grace. You can’t—Tony!” Rhodey whispered vehemently, shaking him where he gripped Tony’s cloak and doublet in his fisted hands. “Your Grace, please, think! Stern is here under a flag of truce,” Rhodey reminded him urgently. “He can take his flag and—“

“If you break the terms of negotiation, you give Pierce all the excuse he needs to act accordingly. The lives of our men that Pierce holds would be forfeit. You have got to calm down!” Rhodey said sternly into his ear. Tony stopped pulling at the hands holding him in place and finally turned to meet Rhodey’s gaze. “This is what Stern wants. Don’t give it to him.”

“I take it we have a deal then,” Stern said smugly from behind him, watching the scene unfold with ill-concealed lasciviousness. Tony’s vision blurred, something bitter and vile tearing its way out of his chest, taking all the air with it. Rhodey shook him lightly again to garner his attention.

“I got this,” Rhodey repeated. “Make the deal,” he said, shoving lightly at Tony in the direction of where Stern practically beamed from the table. Tony looked around to find all eyes focused on him, mouths agape, the low stirring of stunned conversation beginning to rise in volume. He looked up, suddenly desperate to find Steve’s warm, blue gaze that now stared down at his feet, swaying slightly now that the two men had released their grip on his arms. Only Steve’s refusal to look at him stood between them now, but it was a gulf wider than anything Tony could possibly cross.

“Steve…” Tony began, but realized he had no words worthy of entreaty. “Steve, please,” he managed. That was enough to draw Steve’s haunted gaze to his, at least for a moment, though long enough for Tony to catch the shadow of hurt and flash of anger before they were replaced by a bleak emptiness that filled Steve’s gaze when it finally brushed past Tony.

“Your Grace,” Steve said flatly, looking anywhere but at Tony.
It wasn’t like feeling Steve slip through his fingers. It was the realization that he had never had him, not really. It had been an illusion he had allowed himself to believe because he desperately wanted it to be true, this idea that Steve had seen the truth of him beneath it all and found that, found him, remarkable nonetheless. Someone to vouch for. Someone worthy. But Steve had cared for a man who did not exist. And he clearly could barely abide to even look upon the one who did, when the full brunt of Tony’s sins were laid bare. Can you lose something you never really had to begin with? Maybe that was what regret tasted like.

Tony looked over at Rhodey, his gaze hard with determination. “Get those off of him,” he said, voice low and broken, but absolute.

“I will. Make the deal,” Rhodey reiterated, keeping his voice quiet.

“What you said—about our men—its right, I know. I know, Rhodey, I do. But if they touch him again, I’m not going to care,” Tony told Rhodey, finally drawing his eyes away from where Steve stood, surrounded by a Hall filled with disdainful curiosity, contemptuous stares that made Tony’s stomach turn over. He wanted to shout at them until they quailed before him, until their scorn and derision shrank to nothingness. “See to it that does not happen. Get him out of here. Take him to the Tower. Quickly,” Tony commanded, voice louder now so those gathered in the Hall could hear, could know that this was no mere prisoner at whom to be gawking. It set off another round of curious speculation buzzing through the crowd, but he could do little but ignore it for the time being.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Rhodey replied. “Right away.” Rhodey stepped over to Steve and took the key to the manacles from one of Stern’s men. “If you want to get out of here with your head on your shoulders, don’t put another finger on him,” he heard Rhodey tell Stern’s men. Rhodey moved quickly to undo the chains binding Steve’s feet, tossing the offending links out of the way, sending courtiers skittering out of the way in surprise as they slid across the marble floor. Rhodey rose to his feet and began to unlock the wrist cuffs.

“The ships,” Steve repeated, barely a murmur now as he looked down at his hands where Rhodey worked the key into the lock. “Burn them. The ships,” he implored, voice sounding garbled and distant somehow, but insistent nevertheless.

Rhodey looked over his shoulder at Tony in confusion, waiting for some kind of guidance. Ships? Tony had almost forgotten in the span of the moments it took to grasp what he had lost, the reward for forsaking his duty all those years.

Who the hell even knew? Steve. was probably exhausted. Gods knew what he’d been through at Pierce’s hands. He may not even know what he--“The letter,” Steve mumbled, head drooping to his chest as he watched Rhodey. “The ships,” he repeated insistently.

“The letter…” Tony began, brown furrowing as he watched Rhodey unshackle the chains around Steve’s wrists and toss them unceremoniously aside. Fuck. Schmidt’s letter. “Rhodey--The ships—the ones taken by that mercenary, Batroc…you said we recovered some of them…” Tony began, mind whirling as he started to see it fall into place. “Zola. Fucking hell. That’s what Zola was doing this far north. The ships. Gods…Admiral Westbrook!” Tony shouted, calling to his Master of Ships.

“Yes, Your Grace?” a man replied at once, stepping forward from where a group of smartly dressed military officers gathered near the front of the Hall.

“Burn them. Burn the ships and anything that was onboard. Do not allow them to reach the city. Quarantine anyone who had any contact with the ships or any cargo. Absolutely nothing gets
through,” Tony ordered.

Tony turned on his heel and stalked back to where Stern sat at the long table. “You’re a wretched bastard, you know that, don’t you?” Tony ground out, almost mildly but for the muscle ticking in his jaw. Stern looked stunned and vaguely ill at the turn of events. “You allowed Pierce to unleash a disease on those entrusted to your care? What kind of man is he that he would fight a war with sickness, prey upon the weak and the innocent, use the lives of women and children for his own gain? Is this the measure of the man you kneel to, Stern?” Tony demand. “Did you tell him they wouldn’t matter? That no one would care about a bunch of peasants far from the city? Did you assure Pierce and Stane that I would not notice?”

“Your Grace—I—I don’t know what you’re talking about—ships—disease--this is insane—I’m just an envoy,” Stern stuttered, chest heaving and eyes wide with something Tony truly hoped was fear.

Tony came to stand behind Stern’s chair and leaned in close, next to Stern’s ear, his words meant only for Pierce’s envoy to hear. “I noticed,” he whispered, both a threat and a promise.

Tony stood tall again and backed away from Stern, letting his voice rise again in the Hall. “I will take heart in the fact that you will soon be answering to dear Alexander for why his plan to unleash a plague on the people he seeks to rule failed so spectacularly. We all know how…understanding…Alex can be. After all, the soldier you considered worth so little that managed to scuttle Alex’s whole strategy. And he did it right under your noses. Tell Alex that for me, would you?” Stern had the good sense to blanch at that, gulping audibly, but said nothing in return.

“Well, I’m sure if you forget, word will make it back to him one way or the other. Gossip does so love to travel.”

“Oh, and one other thing,” Tony said, moving around to the other side of Stern’s chair before leaning back down again to let his words slither into Stern’s ear. “Just between you and me. Lest you believe you accomplished some kind of deal here today. Do you sit there and tell yourself that you won some concession from me?” Tony asked quietly. “You should know that there is very little in this entire Realm I would not have given for his return. You have no idea what you could have asked of me.”

“Draw up the agreement,” Tony bit out to the scribe as he stood and walked hastily around to the head of the table. The scribe nodded and bowed, rushing off to grab parchment and ink.

He saw Pepper out of the corner of his eye, her eyes red and watery, one hand raised to cover her lips. She was looking at him with such desperate sadness, he had to wonder what he looked like, what it was revealed on his face that caused her to act thusly, as he watched silently as Rhodey led Steve slowly down the long length of the Great Hall with a gentle hand, the crowd of gathered courtiers, Lords and Ladies parting before them, strange, curious looks following in their wake. Did he look as he felt? Fractured and dimmed, lesser somehow, like part of himself had been shattered along with whatever illusions about him Steve had held.

Steve did not look back.

Of course he didn’t, Tony thought, though he could not deny the way his chest ached at the sight of Steve’s retreating back disappearing out of the Hall. Why would he want to look upon the man who had been the cause of his ruin, who had been responsible for such horror befalling him? From Brookland to whatever he had suffered at Pierce’s hands, Tony was the one constant in the atrocity that had become Steve’s life. And now Steve knew. Knew who was at fault for the injustices that had marked his life, knew who to blame for his plight, for his losses and pain. Knew the extent of Tony’s deception, knew just how willing Tony had been to use him, prey on his trust and honor, to
twist things to his advantage, all to protect himself, no matter how he preferred to name it protecting the Realm. There were no secrets anymore.

Why would he want to look upon Tony and be reminded of that?

It wasn’t worth it, he thought, wanting to shout it to the world. He wasn’t worth it. That was the truth that he could not escape, the certitude that Steve now knew. He turned back to see Stern sitting stiffly at the table, while the scribe scratched out words on the parchment. “Get up,” Tony ordered.

“Your Grace, we aren’t quite done with the particulars—“ Stern began.

“I didn’t say you were. You do not sit in my presence while I stand. I said, get up,” Tony reiterated. “Please, let me make you,” he warned, voice low and tight with constrained fury, enjoying the way Stern’s mouth thinned as two guards came to stand behind his chair.

“As you wish, Your Grace,” Stern said slowly, rising from his seat. Tony stared at him until the man looked away.

“Is that done?” Tony snapped at the scribe as the scratching finally stopped after some interminable time.

“Oh—um, Yes. Yes, Your Grace,” the young man stuttered, blowing lightly on the ink on the second parchment to dry it. Tony looked over each parchment carefully, though everything seemed to be in order. He signed his name and used the stamp and wax the scribe provided to affix his seal. Stern signed below Tony’s name as proxy for Pierce.

“We’re done here. Escort these…people…to their carriage and have Captain Danvers see to it that they do not linger on Stark lands,” Tony ordered to one of the guards, who nodded in understanding. “Stern,” he called as the man turned to leave. “Know that this will be the last meeting of ours that you walk away from. Next time, there will not be enough cover in all the Kingdom under which you can hide.” Stern paled, but said nothing as the guards hustled him forward none too gently, the two men who had accompanied him following closely behind on hurried steps.

Pepper was at his side in an instant, grasping his elbow to draw his ear. “Go. I’ll clear the Hall. Just, go,” she whispered. He was already in motion though, moving towards the private entrance that would lead back to the Tower rooms, to Steve. He had no idea what he would say or do, but he had to see him, if for no other reason than to assure himself that he was truly there.

Once, he had promised Steve that the King would grant him any redress he desired. If what Steve asked for was for Tony to remove himself, to leave Steve be, he had offered that as well. He wondered now if he were really that strong, or if Barnes had been right about him. He did not know now if it was within him to willingly separate himself from Steve, to give him that which had been promised so earnestly. Had he not just learned that pain, no matter how searing, was better than the emptiness that waited in having nothing at all?

He made his way to the Tower, rushing past startled guards and servants who rushed through half-accomplished bows and curtsies. One of the guards quickly pulled open the heavy wooden door that led to his chambers and those he had reserved for Steve. At the end of the corridor, Barnes stood pacing in tight circles outside the door to Steve’s rooms. Tony was nearly running now, brushing past Barnes and the guards as he made to open the door. It was Barnes who reached out to still his hand, gripping his wrist tightly with his good arm. One of the guards stepped forward to remove Barnes’ hand, but Tony shook his head quickly and the guard stepped back with a slight
“I’m supposed to stop you,” Barnes said, and Tony’s heart clenched. Steve refused him entry. Did not even want to see him. So be it, then. He could not make Steve want to see him, but he would damn well not be told where he could and couldn’t go in his own Castle. He opened his mouth to tell Barnes what he could do with his rejection, but Barnes was shaking his head, and Tony’s words died on his lips as he took in Barnes’ countenance. His hair hung in wild disarray, his jaw clenched so hard it was a wonder Tony couldn’t hear the teeth grinding together. But it was his eyes that drew Tony’s attention, dark and wild, rimmed in red and glistening with tears Barnes wasn’t even bothering to hide.

“I’m not allowed back in until I can ‘get control of myself,’” Barnes huffed, giving the door a disgruntled look. “Bruce doesn’t want you there either. Thinks you’ll be a hindrance.” Barnes reported evenly, eyeing Tony the whole time, assessing, watchful. “I’m supposed to send you on some errand. Tell you to get some things that Steve needs. You’d do it, too. Hell, you’d probably go dig up the stuff yourself, if I told you it was for him. Bruce can be a wily bastard, don’t you forget it.”

“I just want to see him. I’m not going to do anything,” Tony insisted quietly, trying to meet Barnes’ gaze, but finding that the man saw too much, and it hurt to be laid so bare, to be seen so clearly by one who claimed the regard he desperately wanted with such ease, to have to return Barnes’ stare and find pity there, or worse, understanding.

“I hope that’s not true,” Barnes said, snapping Tony from his thoughts. “It was Hammer. Just so you know. You—you’ll take care of it, won’t you?” Barnes asked, his gaze piercing, something brutal and savage lurking in the depths of it, holding Tony’s when he wanted to look away. He wasn’t sure what Barnes was on about, but there seemed only one right answer.

“I will,” Tony promised. “Just let me see—dammit, does he really need something? I can get—“

“I’ll give it to your man, the creepy guy who looks at me like I just took a shit on the rug and tried to hump the good silver,” Barnes replied.


Barnes nodded and started to walk down the corridor. He stopped a few paces away, though did not turn around. “Hammer. When you do. I want to be there,” Barnes said quietly.

Tony frowned, but nodded, though Barnes was already walking off again and couldn’t see him. He turned back to the door, a sense of trepidation washing over him. All of a sudden, he did not want to go in, did not want to see what had driven Barnes from the room, did not want to know how deeply he had failed Steve, how great the chasm between them had grown.

“Oh, and you look ridiculous,” Barnes called as he stalked off down the corridor. Tony looked down and realized he was still wearing his ceremonial outfit, the one he had put on to show Stern his place. Fucking hell, he thought, unbuckling the heavy sword from his waist and handing it, the crown and cloak to one of the guards, who looked rather abashed by the embarrassment of riches Tony tossed into his hands.

Smoothing his doublet down, he forced himself open the the door and step into the room on leaden feet. The torches were lit along the wall and a large fire burned brightly in the hearth. Two medium-sized pots of something had been set to boil over it, bubbling lazily with the heat. He stopped where he was, in the empty foyer, partially hidden behind the carved wood screen that
partitioned the entry from the rest of the room, though the curtains were drawn back, allowing him to
take in the scene before him.

Steve was sitting on the edge of the bed with his back to Tony, his head hanging low to his chest.
Bruce was in a chair pulled close to the bed next to a low table he was quickly filling with various
packets and jars from his bag. Natasha sat on the bed next to Steve with one leg crooked
underneath her, a hand resting lightly on Steve’s arm. Clint stared out an open window into the
distance, though he didn’t really look to be seeing much of anything. Thor hovered by the head of
the bed, a deep frown marring his features.

“Do you know what it was they gave you?” Bruce asked. Steve shook his head slowly, once and
no more. “Do you remember what it looked like? Tasted like?” Bruce questioned. “Anything at
all?”

“Brown, I think. Bitter,” Steve replied carefully, as if each word required great effort.

“Fuck, okay,” Bruce said, running an agitated hand through his hair. “Bastards. Do you know
how long ago? How much they gave you?” Steve didn’t move for a moment, the stillness
disturbing in some way Tony couldn’t define, then shook his head once again.

“Any idea, Bruce?” Natasha asked, her gaze remaining on Steve.

“Poppy juice, by the sound of it. Bad enough on its own, though I can see why they would go for
that. Would certainly keep him complacent for the journey. Probably the only way he could
manage it, all things considered. But it means that I can’t give him anything else. Too risky,”
Bruce responded.

“Must you do this now, Sir Doctor? Can it not wait until our Captain has recovered from this foul
brew?” Thor asked.

“Can’t wait. I don’t even know if this—we might already be too—gods, fuck—this—“ Bruce
stammered, his usually steady hand knocking over a jar of something on the table that he quickly
moved to right. Bruce took a deep breath and arranged a few of the jars in no pattern that Tony
could discern from here, but it seemed to give Bruce the moment of calm focus that he needed.
“He’s burning up. I don’t know how long he’s been like this. I don’t know when he last had any
food or water, but its been awhile. Too long. You can tell when you pinch his skin. Gods, I don’t
know. I’m not equipped for this. I stitch people up and make fucking tea. I don’t know what to
do with this. I’ve seen this before, we all have. You know how it ends, for fuck’s sake. We all
do. Even if we do this, he’s going to die anyway, most likely, and in far more pain than he now.
I’m not sure it wouldn’t be kinder to just—“

“Bruce,” Natasha cut in softly. “We have to try something.” Her voice trembled and wavered, and
though her gaze did not leave Steve’s face, it slipped a bit, gave away something in a way Widow
was usually careful to avoid.

Tony’s stomach dropped, his vision blackening as the room twisted and slanted in front of him.
What the hell was Bruce on about? This made no sense. Steve was here, he was safe. He’s
burning up…A fever then, so he was sick. No wonder, what with how Pierce must have treated
him. Just fucking treat him already, he wanted to shout at Bruce, wanted to grab the man and
shake him by the shoulders and tell him to make this right, stop talking about anything else,
because it wasn’t, it couldn’t be, because Steve was here, and he was safe. That was the one thing
Tony could do, the singular gift Tony could offer that Steve could not refuse. He was supposed to
be safe here, protected, even if that was all Tony would be allowed to give. Words locked in his
throat, and he blinked against the stinging in his eyes as the world melted to a blur of gray.
“Fine, fine. I know, look, I do, it’s just—gods, I don’t want to do this,” Bruce sighed heavily.

“I know. But we have to, so let’s just get it done and over with, okay?” Natasha replied, holding Bruce’s gaze until he nodded his acquiescence.

“Always thought Hammer had a lighter touch,” Clint said from the window, still staring into the darkening sky outside.

“He can,” Natasha said carefully, looking over her shoulder at where Clint stood. She turned back to Steve then, cupping the sides of his face with her hands and carefully drawing his eyes to her own. “Steve…” she started, and Natasha, who never seemed at a loss for words, faltered, clearing her throat slightly, eyes darting around the room for a quick moment. “Steve…are you—“ she closed her eyes and then opened them again, her jaw set hard. “Do you have any other injuries?” she asked. “Bruce needs to know, Steve. It’s okay if you do. We just have to know.”

Other injuries? Was he hurt? Tony’s mind stuttered and sought for purchase. He couldn’t see any evidence of it, but when he looked closer, saw something beyond the sight of Steve refusing to return his pleading gaze, he noticed the pallor that clung to Steve’s skin, the fine sheen of sweat that glistened on his brown, dampening his hair in lank clumps against his forehead, the way his eyes were wide, watery and unfocused.

“Nugh,” Steve slurred, shaking his head a bit in her hands.

“Steve,” she went on, brow drawn into a furrow. “I know about Hammer. I know what he—“ she stopped, swallowing past something and looking over quickly at Bruce, who’s mouth flattened into a thin line before he looked away. “Bruce just needs to know.”

“Nothing happened,” Steve said, and Tony could hear the wrongness in his tone, the flat, tenseness of it, like saying anything else might shatter something fragile. “Nothing happened,” Steve repeated.

“Steve,” Natasha began, her voice laden with sorrow as she pulled Steve’s head down low enough to place her forehead to his.

“Nothing happened—he just—just touched—nothing happened,” Steve stumbled over the words.

“It’s okay, don’t. Don’t, it’s alright. Bruce, do you have what you need?” Natasha asked, placing a soft kiss to Steve’s brow before releasing him, though she did not move away. Other things were said, low murmurs of voices spilling over each other, the clink of jars and bottles, but all Tony could hear was the wooden, vacant tone of Steve repeating that nothing had happened ringing in his head like a bell pealing its time in a tower. Nothing happened. He just touched. Nothing happened.

*It was Hammer.*

He couldn’t say that it was like any feeling he’d had before, because there was no feeling, not really, it had all been gutted out of him, destroyed, utterly and completely, turned to cinders at Steve’s words. There was nothing left, just some ruined and rotting husk that opened up and swallowed the only thing it could grab onto, a black pit of venomous rage that cleaved to his bones, rattled in his chest and finally coiled in his gut, simmering and seething, an impotent tempest that hardened into despair. Gods, what had he done? What had he allowed to happen? How much pain was he to loose into the world before it spit him back, a feckless, useless thing that he was. He, who could not accomplish the one task he had allowed himself to be charged to bear, keeping Steve safe.
“Alright, let’s get this off him. Nat,” Bruce said with a tug of his head in her direction. She drew out a long blade and moved behind Steve to carefully slice down the length of the back of his shirt. “Clint, grab the pots, would you? They’ll need to cool a bit.” Barton moved from the window and picked up a rag to grasp the handle of the pots that simmered over the fire, carefully moving them over to where Bruce sat by the bed.

“Stern’s gone,” Barton said as he put the pot down and backed away. Tony saw the handles of knives and other implements sticking out of one of the pots and wondered at it.

“This wasn’t the time, Clint, you know that,” Nat said as she finished cutting away Steve’s shirt and carefully pushed the frayed edges off his shoulders, leaving his back bare. Or what was left of his back, anyway. Tony could only assume the strangled, guttural, animal sound that rang in his ears came from him because it was enough to alert Nat and the others to his presence. Someone had done this to Steve, hurt him, broken him open and left him like this because of Tony, because he had chosen to protect a man who lied to him. Steve had born the punishment that should rightly have been Tony’s to take, his penance to serve. Instead, it was Steve they ripped apart, though Tony felt cloven in two by the sight of it, cracked and fissured by a torment of his own rendering.

“Steve…” Tony breathed out, an invocation, maybe, though he knew not to whom. Steve’s back was a mass of weals and welts, reddened and swollen strips of flesh that bled with death. He could see it in the way the skin peeled and oozed, smell it, in the putrid sweet stench of it seeping into the room.

“Gods-dammit, James,” Bruce ground out, catching sight of Tony. “You shouldn’t be here.” His words were harsh, but his tone was almost kind. “You don’t want to see this, and I can’t deal with you, too.”

Tony walked over to the side of the bed where Steve sat in something of a daze, reaching out gingerly to run a light caress down the side of Steve’s face. A shudder ran through Steve at his touch, and he honestly couldn’t say if it was pain or revulsion. He wanted to fall to his knees, bow his head, an appeal for forgiveness he did not deserve.

“You shouldn’t—“ Steve murmured quietly, turning his head from Tony’s touch, blinking rapidly as he moved, a hiss of warm breath ghosting over Tony’s palm. Tony jerked his hand back as if burned though it lingered in the air between them, the spike of pain turning his stomach over so fierce that he was surprised he didn’t double over from it, from the shame and guilt and awareness of just how much he had taken from the person he most wanted to give everything. I don’t get this, Tony reminded himself. Not even to provide comfort, apparently.

“Steve, I’m going to do what I can to clean your wounds, okay? I have—this is—“ Bruce started, looking around helplessly. “I don’t even know how much he’s understanding right now.”

“Talk to him, Sir Doctor,” Thor said, his voice heavy. “Your words will comfort him, even if he knows not what you mean.”

“He knew enough to tell me about the ships,” Tony said, hearing the sound of his voice as if from the bottom of a well. “Schmidt’s letter. Steve must have figured out a way to decode it. That’s what Zola was doing up here. Poisoning whatever it was on the part of the fleet we so fortuitously recovered from that mercenary, Batroc, that Pierce hired. Stern was rather surprised to hear it. Somehow, I don’t think that will sit well with Pierce.”

“Okay. Okay, listen, Steve, I’ve got to debride the wounds on your back. Then clean them. I can’t give you anything else, not yet anyway,” Bruce said, studying Steve’s face closely. “Do you —Thor could—“
“Just do it,” Steve managed, slumping forward. Nat and Thor moved to help position Steve on his stomach in the bed while Bruce got his tools ready, sliding a small, slim blade from the pot of boiling water. He leaned over Steve’s back and set to work while Widow threaded her hand through Steve’s fingers. Tony wasn’t sure how long it took, days, weeks, it felt too long, like time had slowed, measured in each snick of the knife where Bruce cut away desiccated flesh, poked and prodded, digging deep to release the bile from the wounds where it threaded through Steve’s body, spending its poison. He only stopped when they began to flow red, deep and crimson, Steve’s breath hitching around sobs, his fist shoved in his mouth to prevent their release.

Tony watched it all, served his sentence in this purgatory. He could hardly look away from the suffering he had wrought. He owed Steve at least that.

“Thor, Clint, I’m going to clean him up now,” Bruce said, taking one of the jars and adding it to the cooling water of the second pot. He sighed. “I’ll need you to hold him.”

“Hold him?” Tony questioned, looking back and forth between the frowns mirrored on the faces of Thor and Clint. “He’s fine, he’s done fine. Gods, Bruce, what else do you—“

“It’s brine,” Bruce replied, dipping a ladle into the second pot. “Saltwater. They should’ve applied it after—well. After. It helps cleanse the wounds. Might be—“ he stopped at Nat’s look. “Maybe, it’ll help. Now. Hurts like holy hell though. Steve, you with us?” Bruce asked, running a hand along the side of Steve’s head, carding it through the sweat on his brow.

Steve mumbled over words that might have been agreement, but it was hard to tell. Bruce grimaced and then nodded to Thor and Clint, who moved to wrap strong hands around Steve’s upper arms, pinning him in place while Nat shifted to straddle his legs. Bruce dipped the ladle into the brine and lifted it out, pouring it over the open wounds on Steve’s back. He cried out, a shout of torment that echoed in Tony’s head, that he would probably hear when he took his final breath, soft and warm in his bed. His back bowed against the weight of Thor and Clint’s holds, a sob wracked from his body as Bruce poured more of the mixture.

“Almost done. Try to keep him still,” Bruce said to Thor and Clint. “He’ll tear them open more.”

“Yeah, thanks for the tip, Bruce, but you might have noticed that’s a bit of a difficult request to meet at the moment,” Clint barked. Bruce just clamped his mouth together and spooned out another bit of the brine, but Steve’s arm came loose as he thrashed and his hand knocked into it, sending the ladle and its contents skittering across the floor, his body contorting, seeking an escape that was not to be.

“Fuck,” Bruce muttered, reaching for it. “Steve? Steve, I need you to be still, if you can, okay?”

“Huuuurrrttttssss,” Steve moaned, pushing his face into the mattress. “Pleaaaasssee,” he gurgled, twisting beneath them, writhing in agony. “Please, stop. Please—there are eight—eight—please—no more,” he was gasping now, wracking sounds, choking against whatever was still in his stomach trying to claw its way out.

Tony had moved before he really thought about it, pushing Clint aside to climb to the head of the bed and kneel by Steve’s head. He should have to participate in this, rather than simply bear witness. It was fitting that he be a part of causing Steve more pain. “Look at me, Steve,” Tony ordered, his voice oddly calm considering the way his mind recoiled from anything to do with this. “Look at me.” Steve did, his eyes wild with a haze of pain and fear. It was the fear that nearly broke Tony, made him want to drive them all away, make them leave, just stop this, even if it was meant to stave off something probably too far gone to prevent.
“Just keep looking at me. It’s almost done,” Tony said, looking to Bruce and silently imploring it to be so. Bruce gave a quick jerk of a nod and went back to his mixture, adding more to Steve’s wounds where it bubbled and foamed, runnels of red striping down Steve’s back onto the mattress. “Just look at me, Steve,” he instructed when Steve tensed against the sting. He reached out and gripped Steve’s hand where Natasha had released it, bailing his fist around it and pulling it to his chest, pressing it against the metal plate that was digging its way into his skin. “You have to keep still. Can you do that for me?” A fraction of a nod was all he received in reply, but it was enough.

“Good. Good, Steve. Keep your eyes on me. It will be over soon, I swear it,” Tony whispered brokenly. Steve finally focused his gaze on Tony, and Tony hated himself for what he saw there. Glassy eyes filled with pain warring with a bleak helplessness, a vulnerability laid bare and exposed in a way Steve would never have allowed in any other circumstance, but he stayed as still as possible, kept his eyes riveted to Tony’s for as long as he could. At some point, Tony saw him suck in a sharp breath and felt Steve’s hand go slack in his, his eyes rolling back and finally closing.

“Steve? Steve!” Tony jolted forward in panic, grabbing at Steve’s head with his hands and trying to rouse him, his heart stuttering so hard in his chest he was surprised he could not hear it bang against the metal disc.

“Leave him, Tony,” Bruce said. “He’s just unconscious. Let him have peace.” Tony backed away only far enough to allow him to keep a hand on Steve’s shoulder, feeling the hitching rise and fall of his chest, the rattle of each labored breath leaving him.

“Done,” Bruce announced after gods knew how long. He put the ladle back into the empty bowl with a clang. Tony decided to melt it down. Bruce took long strips of clean, white cloth and laid them over the marks on Steve’s back. Tony watched them bloom with red.

“That Rhodes guy said Fury and Coulson want a meeting,” Clint announced, moving away from the bed. “I’m going to go find Phil and see what’s going on.” Gods, right, because there was a war tearing the Realm asunder. He bit back the bark of hysterical laughter that threatened.

“Fury kept us waiting long enough. I’d say he can wait a bit longer,” Natasha observed. “You can’t just leave, Clint.”

“There’s really not much to do now, but wait. And watch. I’m going to make a poultice for his back later, and I have some medicine that will help with the pain once I’m sure the poppy juice is out of system,” Bruce remarked.

“Let Sir Archer go, fair Widow,” Thor intoned. “Do not ask him to use his eyes to mark the passage of this. We will stay with our shield brother and mark his breaths with our own.”

“I’ll stay,” Tony interjected. “I mean, I’m not going to leave. So. Someone needs to hear from Fury and Coulson. Lord Ellis should be here soon, if he isn’t already. The Council will be meeting. I told Rhodey to allow you to join them. So, you go. If you want. I’ll stay. I just—I can’t--He’ll be alright now, though, right?” Tony asked quickly, eyes darting around the room, trying to find someone who would meet his gaze.

“He’s young. And strong,” Bruce said, choosing his words with care. “But, Tony—he’s been like this for days. I don’t know when he last ate or drank anything except that crap they shoved in him to get him upright. Wounds like this...they’re poison. Don’t tell me you don’t know that,” he finished sadly, voice thick and tight with barely suppressed emotion.

Tony heard the soft thud as the door closed behind Clint. He realized distantly that he was running
his hands through Steve’s hair, staring at the far wall without seeing.

“Do you pray, King Anthony?” Thor asked, his name and title falling easily from the man’s lips, as if it was little more to him than any other words.

“I don’t believe in the gods,” Tony replied numbly. “Whatever homage I pay them is show or habit, nothing more. If they existed, they left this place a long time ago.” Then, from a memory long forgotten, he heard the old words spill from his lips. “Let me never forget thy bitter penitence that thou suffered for my transgressions, for in thy blessed wounds is the truth that you must teach me. Gods grant that I may love thee so that the wisdom of the world may cleanse me, that I might come to see thy face, in whom all is my comfort, my joy and my solace.”

He felt the tracks of wetness down his cheeks, but could not take his hands from Steve, warm and alive beneath his fingertips, in order to wipe them away. He leaned his head back against the headboard and looked up at something beyond even the reach of kings. “Do not take him from me.”

Chapter End Notes

HUGE, ENORMOUS thank you to those of you who have taken the time to read this monstrosity. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I really wasn't sure when I began this one if there would be any interest in something like this, but I always said that I would write what I wanted to read and let myself be happy with that, regardless of the reception. So, thank you for spending some of your valuable time with this fic. I know there are tons of great fics out there and this one is huge, so I really, truly appreciate it.

Comments and kudos make Tony stop projecting his insecurities. Ok, not really, but they are deeply and truly appreciated. Seriously. I have all the comments saved in my inbox and go back and reread them from time to time. I'm that needy.

Fun fact: After a whipping is administered, it was actually common to apply brine to the wounds as an antiseptic, since infection was so common. Also, the internet is very mean to Steve.

2/4/2015: Next chapter is almost done. Hope to have it up soon. I ended up reworking a lot of it, so it took longer.

The prayer Tony recites is cannibalized from a medieval prayer from the collection of a Chester nun.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn’t even wide enough to earn a name, everyone just called it the river, a name for this particular stretch of water and used for its many sisters that twisted and wound their way through the forests, past the cliffs and out to the sea, distinguished by the townfolk only when necessary and only in the simplest terms. The river by the oak grove. The river that runs through the Reilly’s farm. The river where the O’Shaughnessy girl drowned, though the O’Shaughnessy’s hadn’t lived in the Riverlands for two generations. Barely a few lengths across, though it might as well have been the River herself to Steve, unbreachable, an impenetrable line of demarcation splicing through the Riverlands towards the sea.

The current was not particularly strong here, where this particularly tributary of the River plodded lazily over stone and through brush and trees that splayed their roots wide to accommodate its passage. That’s why they’d chosen this place to launch their raft, a patched-together ruckus of reeds, sticks and bits of the softened wood that washed up along the shore, leached of hardness by the sea. They had bound it together with pieces of the climbing vines that scaled the trees and stretched out from the forest to claim what they could of the town. The townsfolk called Ben Doyle’s stone hut the ‘greenhouse’ for the vines that wrapped it in their cover, hiding it from view. The adults of the town meant it derisively, for Doyle preferred his bottle of shine to the work of keeping the forest at bay. Steve thought it somewhat magical, the way if you looked just so, letting your eyes unfocus a bit, the house would disappear into the green backdrop of the forest, like one of the homes of the faeries that came and went with the moon.

He ran his hand over the dried wood, feeling the brittle hollowness beneath his fingers. He had seen enough of the rotted hulls of the fishing fleet to know what the water did to wood over time, but it was different to hold it in your hand, to feel the lightness of it, to know that the sea itself had sucked out what life there once had been in the wood. The first men to settle this land had tossed pieces of the wood of their ships into the sea, and they staked their claims where it washed ashore. The town’s Sept had a door built of that very wood, gathered from the shore after it found their ancestors a home, or so the holy men claimed. Steve wasn’t sure if it was true, but he liked to look at the driftwood door and imagine it was so, that this wood had journeyed across the sea and then been trusted by the explorers to find providence upon a sandy beach.

It had taken them months to collect their bounty, needing the sticks and reeds to be roughly the same length and thick enough to support their weight. His mother said all she had seen of him the whole of the summer was the top of his head, eyes pointed downward, scanning the ground for anything they could use. That was probably true, at least when he hadn’t been sick. He had enjoyed the task, finding just the right pieces. He had an eye for it that Bucky lacked, able to see how the pieces would fit and which ones were of no use. There was something beautiful in the pile of wood and reed, though he couldn’t say exactly what it was. A promise, maybe. Something anticipatory about the way it sat there, growing steadily over the summer, waiting to become something else.

It had been Bucky’s idea, of course. Steve suspected it was because Bucky knew how much he longed to swim the channel or play in the river with the other boys, building dams that inevitably flooded or having mock battles of mud and water, using the cattails that grew along the banks for their swords. This was Bucky’s way of giving him something of that experience, or at least a piece of it anyway. An adventure, Bucky had promised with a cheeky grin. To make up for all the ones
he would not be able to have, Bucky had not said out loud, though the words hung in the air. Something for him to cling to long after Bucky had become a man and he was left still a burden.

They put their raft in at one of the shallows, where the water gentled and stilled, lapping against the shore and winding its way through the tall reeds. Steve climbed on first, Bucky wading out with it, pushing it to the deeper channel that ran down the middle of the river before jumping on, setting the thing to rocking precariously for a moment before it righted. His stomach roiled with the motion, clenching tightly, but he didn’t embarrass himself, thank the gods. He settled himself flat on the raft, as Bucky paddled them to the center of the river, where the current was strongest.

Steve felt the heat of the sun pressing down on him, settling on his chest almost as if it had weight and could push him under, raft and all, if it sought to try, a dense, leaden burn that made it hard to breathe for a moment. He could feel the sweat dripping off of him, pooling in the small of his back and between his shoulder blades. When he tried to move, the rough hewn of the wood and reeds poked sharp edges at his back, sending stinging barbs down his spine. They should have put some grasses down for a mat, he thought dully, trying to shift away from the way the pieces of the raft prodded and stabbed at him, finally finding a position that seemed the most comfortable.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Steve said to Bucky over the low buzzing hum of dragonflies that raced the river. The other man sat beside him on the raft, a dark, shapeless form, haloed by the sun’s brightness.

He had thought Bucky had forgotten about their project, to be honest. It had been weeks since he had seen his friend, though he had dutifully stacked up what bits of scrap he could find that they might put to use, partially in the hope that their project would be remembered and partially simply for something to do. He had gotten sick again after the summer rains swelled the river and emptied into the sea, just a cough this time, but enough for his mom to insist he keep abed. Bucky stopped by a couple of times, only to be met with wet, hacking sounds when Steve tried to get up out of the bed to greet him.

Bucky had stayed away after the second attempt, though Steve had seen him out of the window once, racing in the middle of a pack of boys, howling like loons as they chased imaginary foes down to the channel to see what the deluge may have wrought upon the shore. There were always interesting things that washed up after the rains, carried downriver and gifted to the sea like tribute. Tommy Murphy got part of a wagon wheel once, and he had crowed about it for weeks, carrying the damn thing everywhere. Steve had wondered what one did with part of a wheel, but found he coveted it nonetheless, if only for the happenstance of it, the sense that fortune had smiled upon him in some small way. He was never there to collect anything first though. Bucky found a hoe one time, years ago, though it was full rusted from its journey. They’d spent days pondering what to do with it, until Steve’s mom had discovered them sitting out by the fence, passing it back and forth. She had taken the thing away, shaking her head and muttering under her breath about cuts and poison, and didn’t they know better?

Once, the carcass of a cow had arrived, bloated and swollen, though perfectly intact, save for the eyes that had been the feast of fishes. This find delighted the town’s children, who set about poking it with sticks until the better sense of adults prevailed. Steve’s mom had forbidden him from going near the thing, but he had walked close enough to the shore to see the rounded hulk of its body, almost like a large log, but it was a different kind of debris, unsettling in a way the other occasional finds were not.

“Yeah, Steve. I’m here,” Bucky’s wraith answered, drawing his mind back from its wanderings.

“‘Til the end, right?” Steve replied, since that was the point of the whole thing. Ride the river until
the end, when it gave out into the embrace of the sea. It wasn’t really such a long way to go now. It had taken them nearly all day to walk here carrying the raft, but the river would bear them to the sea much faster. It wouldn’t be long now.

“’Fuck, Cap,” Bucky choked out, looking away and swiping at his face with the back of his hand. “You stop that shit right now.”

He quieted at Bucky’s sudden outburst, and flung an arm over his eyes to shield them from the brightness above. The heat was consuming, blanketing him, drawing the strength from his body. He felt as if his skin would slough off his bones, melt into rivulets the way a candle dripped as it burned. He let his hands and feet dip over the sides of the raft, into the river, some small relief offered by the cool water.

He shifted on the raft, felt the splinters of the wood, the sharp points of the reeds jutting out against his skin, and stilled his movements at the sharp burst of pain.

“Try to still yourself, Captain. It will ease your suffering,” Bucky entreated, voice deep and sonorous. He thought about turning over, pillowing his hands beneath his head and letting the susurration of the river lull him to sleep, but they were floating, and Bucky told him to keep still, so he stayed as he was and let his eyes adjust to the glare.

After a time, he could see past the sheen of the sun’s rays to the sky above, puffy clouds drifting by far above. They took on shapes as they moved, undulating on the air. A bird, he thought, until it changed again, shifting into something that reminded him vaguely of house, much like he had grown up in, though it was gone before he could really see it, carried away into something else.

He wasn’t sure how long they had been floating down the meandering river, watching the clouds shift and change. He should ask, but when he tried, he started coughing around the words. Typical. His throat was parched and raw, he realized, dried out and painful as he tried to swallow around it.

“Drink,” Bucky said. He dipped his hand into the river and cupped a bit into his mouth, the taste a bit odd, salty and thick, but not unpleasant. He drank again, deeper this time, then found himself coughing around the liquid as it fought with the air in his chest to see which one would be kept down. The air won, and he sputtered thick droplets of water over his lips as he coughed and sputtered. He wiped them away, casting a quick, guilty look to Bucky.

“You gotta drink something, Stevie,” Bucky said, sounding distant and close at the same time, a tremor in his voice, soft and urgent and laced with something darker. “Please. Please, Stevie. For me. Drink.”

Steve tried again, scooping a handful of water to his lips and letting it run down his throat, raw and tight, making swallowing harder than he had expected. Bucky was right. He could taste the dryness of his mouth, feel the way his tongue roughed against his lips, scraping and dragging. But it was such a chore and it was nice to just float, buoyed by the river, letting it take him where it would. Easier this way. Simpler to just float, coursing along with the river.

He was so tired. It had almost been too much, this whole endeavor a folly from the beginning, but Bucky had insisted and Steve had wanted something so close to normal that he could close his eyes and pretend it was. It had taken so much effort to build this thing, then drag it down to the shallows, far enough from where the river reached the sea that they could spend the day drifting home.

Getting this far upriver had been so hard, he recalled dimly. His whole body was sore from the
effort, though they’d taken gods only knew how many breaks for him to catch his breath. Finally, Bucky had just grabbed the thing and carried it most of the rest of the way, quickening his pace as he hefted the raft. Steve stumbled along several paces behind him, insisting he could help, could be of some use. He felt a rush of humiliation sink low into his belly. He should not have allowed Bucky take all of that on himself. They’d begun this together, after all. He should not have let Bucky bear the burden on his own.

He leaned up on his elbows, meaning to apologize, when he caught sight of the man on the riverbank, silhouetted against the cliffs in the distance. Just a shape, really, outlined by sky and rock. He nudged Bucky and pointed at the man. “He shouldn’t be here.” He couldn’t say why exactly, except that the man did not belong here. There was something worrying at the edges of his mind, though he could not grab onto the thread of thought long enough, feeling it slip lightly across his mind without taking hold.

“He’s helping, Steve,” Bucky answered tiredly. It did not make sense. How was the man helping? Steve watched as they floated past, but the man made no move to follow, just stood there, studying them as they drifted, saying nothing, but it somehow discomfited Steve. The man should not be there. This wasn’t right.

“But he shouldn’t be here,” Steve reiterated, though it lacked any force despite his certainty.

“Well, I can’t just make him leave, Steve,” Bucky said. That much was true. The shore was too far away and the current was too strong for Bucky to drag the raft over there. And what would they do if they reached the man? If the man wanted to stand there, it mattered not to him, after all, though it felt as if it should for some reason just out of eyesight, the way you think you see something from the corner of your eye, but when you turn your head, it is something else entirely. They would be past him soon. Already, he was fading, shimmering around the edges, a shadow on the horizon. Steve lay back against the raft again, feeling the sting of the hard edges of the wood prodded at his back, but it wasn’t as bad as before.

He thought he might have slept some, because when he next opened his eyes, the stinging brightness of the sun had faded somewhat. He was thirsty again, he realized, and reached over the side of the raft to drink of the river. It went down easier this time, like his body finally remembered how to swallow after a long bout of forgetfulness.

“That’s good, Steve,” Bucky said, though his voice sounded odd, different, but the comfort of it was there. “Not too much at once, okay?” Steve slowed, drinking carefully so as not to induce another fit of coughing. “Damn. They’re tearing again,” Bucky said with a flash of annoyance. Steve sat up slightly and groped for the riggings, but the vines they’d woven through the planks and sticks to form the raft seemed as tightly bound as ever.

When he looked up to tell Bucky that the craft was sturdy enough, the man was at the river’s edge again, though this time, he was slumped against a fallen oak, sleeping against its boughs. “Why is he here? He shouldn’t be here,” Steve observed.

“He stayed with you,” Bucky replied quietly, though his voice must have carried because the man stirred from his slumber. “I think…” Bucky started. “I think he’s afraid he will lose you if he leaves.” Again, it made no sense. It wasn’t possible to be lost, not on the river. It had only one destination, one destiny, one purpose. There was only one ending.

Steve looked back up at the waning sun, staring at the bright orb until he could see it when he closed his eyes. It was getting late. His mother was going to be furious if he came home after supper. He would have thought they’d have reached the end by now. It had not seemed so long of a journey on the walk up to launch their craft. “Mom is waiting,” he reminded Bucky.
“No, Steve, no—don’t—we’re waiting, dammit,” Bucky said, running a hand through his hair, the gesture familiar enough, though it sat wrongly on Bucky for some reason. He didn’t know why Bucky would be upset about that, though. They really should be getting home soon. This was taking too long.

“Is he awake?” the man asked from the shore, sitting up quickly. His voice was close, too close. They had drifted near the bank, Steve noticed suddenly, swirling lazily in an eddy where the water churned in on itself.

The man reached out to grab the raft, and Steve pushed at his hand, swiping at grasping fingers where they sought purchase. “Don’t!” Steve said sharply. The man snapped his hand back as if burned, and the raft drifted off again, floating free of the eddy’s currents. Steve looked up at the man, trying to make out his face, but could only see the dark circle of the sun, ringed by light, filling his vision.

Why would the man try to stop them, Steve wondered. They had to get to the sea. It was waiting. He could feel it pulling at him, almost taste the salt in the air. That was the whole point of this, to finish it, to end there. He looked back and the man was still there, kneeling on the riverbank, his arm outstretched. Some part of Steve wanted to reach out for it, but he held back. They were almost there. He couldn’t stop now. This would be over soon.

His back ached, probably from laying on unyielding wood for this long. He closed his eyes again, letting the steady rise and fall of the raft as it rode the river lull him from the pain. When he opened his eyes again, it was dark, a swath of stars blinking against a blanket of night. He hadn’t realized how long this would take. “How much longer?” he asked Bucky. His own voice sounded strained, faded with the light of day.

“I don’t know,” Bucky said, his voice pitched low and softer somehow, tinged with an unusual melancholy.

He rolled to his side and looked down at the river moving beneath him, small waves peaking with light as they rose from the depts. The moon swam next to the raft, its surface rippling as it went. When he looked again, the man was standing along the shore, the watery moon reflected against his chest, gleaming a pale blue circle light where the man’s heart should be.

“Steve? Steve, do you—can you hear me?” the man called from the sandy shore. “Stay with me, Steve, please,” the man begged, his voice the rough scrape of rock against steel, as if he had been shouting for a long time. “Don’t go. Don’t leave me. Dammit, Steve, don’t you do this to me!”

The man’s terror rang deep inside him, vibrating through his body with a steady, thrumming beat. Steve suddenly wanted, more than anything, to go to the man, offer him what comfort he could. Stay with him, if that would offer the man some peace. But he couldn’t possibly swim that far. He’d never make the shore before his lungs gave out and limbs turned soft with the effort. “I have to,” he said sadly as they floated past the man, though he wasn’t sure if the man heard him over the gurgling churn of the river. Steve watched the shore until he could see only a pinprick of light in the distance. He stared at the moon as it chased them, seeming to grow larger the closer it came to the sea. Ancients believed the Great Ox pulled the moon from the sea each night. They wore necklaces strung with moonstones pulled from the living rocks of the sea to honor the moon’s journey. Each night, the moon found its way back to its home, pulling the sea to meet it. He felt the same pull, the same downward force drawing him inexorably further, away from the man on the shore when he would have stayed, but he could not turn back, not now, no matter how the man’s request resonated inside him. When he looked back to the shore, there was nothing but darkness.
He must have slept through the night, because he woke up to blazing, sweltering heat, the glare of the sun surrounding him, reflecting off the surface of the water in darts of light that made his vision swim. He looked over to where Bucky sat next to him, but he was formless, a dark mass of shape against the rays that beat down upon them. He tried to move, but his whole body protested at the effort, shuddering and quaking around him as coughed, dry, rasping heaves that did nothing but leave him weak and nauseous. It was impossibly hot, his skin was baking with it, his eyes scorched, his whole body burning from the inside.

“Buck—” he called out, reaching forward blindly to grab at the silhouette next to him. He couldn’t take this. It was too much, this boiling, sweltering heat weighing him down, peeling away layers, baring him to the bone. He tried to call out again, but his tongue felt too big for his mouth, swollen and heavy.

He heard his name, his head snapping around to the shoreline, where the man stood, stretching out an arm to him, fingers flexing with the effort. But he was too far away, unreachable, and Steve was going to float past. It was too late. He was almost there. The man was calling to him though, insistent and pleading, something desperate there, something Steve did not care to hear in the man’s voice.

Steve looked downriver again, tracing the path of the river as it widened, spilling into the briny waters that waited for it. He could hear the sea, the pounding of the surf against the sand, the broad expanse of brackish river spreading out as if a hand opening, watery fingers reaching, as it met the sea.

There were eight of them, he saw. Eight thin strands of river stretching to the darker blue of the sea. That…that wasn’t right. He shook his head. This wasn’t right. The river didn’t do this, he knew that. It gaped wide and full, a fan of water emptying itself into the sea, not this. This wasn’t right. He did not want to go further. Whatever waited there, he did not want it.

“This isn’t right,” he said, turning to Bucky, but Bucky wasn’t there. The other side of the raft was empty. He was alone, drifting with the current, and there was no one to go with him.

He sat up quickly, scanning the water, expecting to see Bucky swimming along next to him, telling him someone had to get them to shore, after all. He saw a dark mop of hair sticking out of the water and scrambled for it, panicking as the raft wobbled with his efforts.

He reached out, stretching his body as far off the raft as he dared and grabbed a fistful of hair, pulling hard at the weight at the same time he realized it was all wrong. The dead cow bobbed upwards, eye sockets picked empty, tongue lolling out of its mouth. He released his grip immediately, shimmying back across the raft too quickly, sending it reeling, and almost spilling himself off the raft on top of the thing.

This was wrong. This wasn’t how it happened. They’d built the raft, but Steve had gotten sick again, right at the end of summer when the weather started to change, and they’d not had the chance to do this before the cold set in and Bucky deemed it too risky for Steve. They hadn’t done this. This wasn’t right.

He’d spent the rest of the fall and winter thinking about what might have been, seeing it over and over in his head as he laid abed, listening to the gulls as the fishermen heaved in their catch, but this had happened only in his dreams. But the sea was there, right there, and he was almost done, he could see it, smell it, the salty tang of it filled his mouth and nose when he breathed. He could finish this, so easily. There wasn’t really any other way. He couldn’t possibly reach the shore, it was too far for a spindly chest that did not hold air and thin limbs that could not move his weight against the current. All that was left was to float, to end at the sea. It was waiting. It was so close.
“Steve!” the man called to him from the riverbank. “Please. Please, Steve.” The man wasn’t supposed to be here, but the sight of him, waiting against the shore, filled Steve with a longing so deep, it rivaled the depths of the sea the fishermen talked about, where the lines fell and fell and never found purchase against the seafloor. He wasn’t alone, but the man was unreachable. He didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t swim that far. He’d never make it.

The man started wading into the river toward where the raft floated in the churning waters. The river rose to meet him, wrapping its arms around the man and clawing its way ever higher.

No, Steve thought, surprised by his vehemence. If the man came here, he would die, Steve was sure of it. This wasn’t a raft, it was a pyre, and all that waited was death. He could not allow that to happen, though how to prevent it, he did not know.

He rolled off the raft, splashing into the cool darkness of the river, letting it engulf him. He kicked his legs, pushing himself upward with whatever last vestige of strength that remained, aiming for the light that flickered above. He broke the surface of the river, gasping for air, already reaching his arms forward, but it was no use against the churn of the river, pushing him down, pressing him towards the deep, and he was suddenly certain that it would simply pull him down forever, darkness without end.

He grasped for the raft, but his fingers just scraped the edge, jostling it further away, and it was gone, out of reach, and he was falling, sinking like a stone. He kicked his legs again, surging upwards, high enough to see the sun glinting above, but his chest was too tight, his throat pressing him to open, to open to anything, even if it wasn’t air, just breathe something. He watched bubbles of air, the last gasps of it, shuffle to the surface of the water and felt the river pour down his throat. Panicking, he kicked out, thrashing for the surface, for anything that wasn’t this cold, black death.

Then arms were around him, clutching at his chest, grabbing his shoulders and pulling him up, up through the water to the precious air beyond, and suddenly he was choking out a gush of water and gasping in huge gulps of it, too much at once, he couldn’t care about the coughing because it meant he was breathing. He was drenched, soaked through to the skin, and weaker than he had felt in many a year, but he could breathe. He shivered a bit against the cold and forced his eyes open.

The room was bright with candles and torches, a fire burning in the hearth. There was a briny smell to the air, under other scents he did not recognize. Indistinct shapes moved outside his line of sight, a murmur of low voices in the background that grew steadily louder as he slowly woke from whatever had held him in slumber. He turned his head slightly, and realized he was face down in a soft bed, a blanket heaped unceremoniously on the floor next to him, using an arm for a pillow. The hand attached the arm that wound under his head was slowly threading through his hair, another hand gripping his shoulder, shaking him gently, a low voice repeating his name over and over again like a chant.

“His breathing is better. Lungs sound a little clearer, thank the gods,” he heard a voice say from somewhere to the side of him.

“Gods, Bruce, I thought—he was spasming—I thought—“ the voice close to his head said in reply.

“Sounded like he was hacking up his insides there,” another voice said. Clint, Steve thought with dull recognition.

“I think the fever broke,” Bruce responded in hushed tones, and Steve felt knuckles brush against his brow. “That’s—that’s good. I mean, he isn’t out of danger, but it’s a good sign that he’s made it this far. Keep him still, if you can. I don’t want to have to redo those stitches again. We still need to get more in him. Try the broth again.”
A small bowl was fitted to his lips and lukewarm broth, salty and slightly thicker than water, spilled into his mouth. He swallowed a few small sips before coughing again, though this time, he was able drink around it, letting the broth soothe his tender throat.

“Steve?” Bruce asked hesitantly, a thread of hope in his voice. “Can you—no, don’t try to talk. Just nod. Can you hear me? You with us?”

Steve nodded, the small effort draining, but it was a good sort of exhaustion, different somehow than the haze he had been fighting through for gods knew how long. He was already slipping back towards sleep, his body lulling with warmth and something in his stomach.

“Okay. Okay, that’s good,” Bruce said quickly, running a hand up and down Steve’s arm in reassurance. “The ice. Just a small chip, nothing he’s going to choke on,” Bruce demanded, and one of the shadows spirited away from the blurred fringes of his gaze. “Just let this sit on your tongue. Don’t try to swallow, okay?” Steve nodded, or thought he might have made some kind of movement, and a sliver of something impossibly cold was slipped between his cracked lips. It tasted amazing, like snow, but denser, harder, melting slowly, sending cool relief down his sore throat. He may have mumbled his thanks because another frozen sliver quickly followed.

“That’s good, right?” one of the shapes asked. Clint, he realized. “I mean, its something, right?”

“Fever’s better. And he’s responsive,” Bruce said with a tired sigh, running a hand through Steve’s sweat-soaked hair and cupping it around his forehead. “It’s something.”

“How much of something?” Nat questioned sharply.

“I don’t know, okay?” Bruce bit out, holding his hands in the air, palms facing outward as if to push back their questions. “I’m not—I’m not sure. But yeah, he’s cool to the touch. He’s lucid. Or at least mostly. I don’t know. It’s too soon to say, not for sure. You’re looking for certainty that isn’t there, Nat. It’s something, alright? That’s all I’ve got.”

“Then let us rejoice, Sir Doctor, and pray this will become something more,” Thor said quietly, as if from far away. Steve could feel himself fading out again. The struggle to wake and the effort satiate his thirst had driven what little strength he had from his body. He pressed his check against the arm pillowed under him and felt the hand that clasped his shoulder clench tighter. He turned his head to the other side, coming face to face with dark hair falling in wild disarray over glassy brown eyes, swollen and wasted.

“Tony?” Steve grated out. “You—you’re here.”

“I know. I shouldn’t be here. I got it, okay? Just eat your damn ice and don’t fucking die on me, and I’ll leave you the hell alone,” Tony replied quietly, the words sifting through Steve’s mind in a jumble. It was too hard to follow them, to try to pick them apart and find the meaning there. He was warm and safe and Tony was here, solid and firm around him, anchoring him to this place. He closed his eyes and buried his head closer to Tony’s warmth.

“You wouldn’t let go,” Steve tried to explain, though the threads of memory were unraveling, fraying around the edges as his thoughts splintered. “Couldn’t breathe.” He felt like he was losing something he had not known he possessed a shock of regret that couldn’t quite find purchase in the haze of his mind.

“Sorry,” Tony said with a sigh, making Steve’s eyes flicker open again. Tony moved his hand off Steve’s shoulder and ran it over his face, then shifted slightly on the bed, flopping his head back against the pillow, though he left his arm underneath Steve’s head. “Won’t happen again,” Tony
Steve wanted to shift closer to Tony’s warmth again, but it seemed too wide a space to traverse, so he just closed his eyes again and let sleep take him once more, though he reached his other hand up to thread his fingers through Tony’s where they flattened against the bed beside his head. He held on and slept instead of floating, though he lost the reason why that distinction mattered.

This time, he slept without the fitfulness that had plagued him, and he couldn’t recall his dreams, great blank spaces of time passing and nothing more, though he woke disconcerted, coughing out phantom water and clawing against the blankets, searching for something he could not find, though gentle hands quickly stilled him, and he drifted again. He managed to force his eyes open at several points, swallowing the water and weak broth that was occasionally dribbled carefully into his mouth as he tried to focus on the encouraging words whispered in the darkness. He knew he was surrounded by friends, safe and protected, yet he felt alone, bereft of something he could not name, though he found himself waking more than once struggling to reach for something that was not there.

When he finally woke to the light of the rising sun, he felt sore and drained, weak in a familiar way that still took him by surprise after all these years, but aware and alert for the first time in longer than he wanted to consider. He could feel something cool on his back, a sweet stench filling his nostrils from whatever ointment Bruce had used.

He was face down on a soft bed, head turned to one side on a pillow, head turned toward a warm fire. He frowned a bit at that, feeling the loss of something that he couldn’t explain because the whole picture was new and unfamiliar. He turned his head to the other side to find Bucky was sitting beside his bed, talking in low tones to Nat, who crouched on a bench at the end of the bed. Steve made some noise in his throat that Bucky rightfully took as a request for water, and the other man rushed to pour a cupful from a pitcher on the bedside table. He drank that and asked for more, finally relaxing his neck and letting his head fall back to the pillow. Bucky handed him a bowl with small, silvery chips inside it around a larger chunk of what could only be ice. He didn’t think he had ever seen actual ice before. Snow, sure. But ice? Frozen water harvested from one of the mountain lakes and shipped on barges down the River, wrapped in hay and cloth. A lot of trouble and expense for something that would soon be gone, no matter how deeply in the cool vaults beneath the Castle they stored it. He remembered hearing from one of the men who had claimed to have arrived from Kingstown that the King had a great carving made of ice for his coronation. The extravagance of that had left Steve shaking his head, and here he was letting piece after piece melt in his mouth and soothe his raw throat.

“How long?” he croaked when he could finally form the words.

“Three days, give or take,” Bucky replied, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, more from relief and exhaustion than anything, Steve imagined. “Thought we were going to lose you,” Bucky continued softly, then turned his head down and away, his shoulders shuddering against the emotion.

“You know I’m too stubborn to die on you,” Steve responded, voice rough and scratchy from disuses as he reached out to grab his friend’s good hand. Bucky curled his fingers around Steve’s, squeezing tightly before finally releasing his hand and nodding his head in agreement, though he was still looking anywhere but at Steve. Steve noticed Bucky had a new metal arm in place, this one far more detailed than any armor he had ever seen, almost lifelike in its appearance, down to fingers with wrinkles across the knuckles and lines curving into half-moons around the ends for nails.
“That’s the truth,” Bucky said thickly. “Should have remembered that.”

“What—what is this place?” Steve asked carefully, sparing a glance around the room as he pushed himself up on his elbows. His back protested, sending sharp, shooting pains through his shoulders and down his spine, but he couldn’t not look. The room was…amazing, he thought, as he finally got a chance to really see it. Trying to take it all in was an effort, he thought dazedly.

He rolled over, groaning with the effort and sat up. Wow. That was really all he could muster at this point, just simple awe. He didn’t think he’d been in a room this big before, and certainly not one anywhere near as finely appointed. There were colors everywhere, on the fabrics that covered the walls, on the drapes that framed the windows and—those were paintings, he realized, actual paintings—paintings in gilded frames that adorned the walls all around the room, amazing works so splendidly real they almost looked like something you could walk into, leave this world behind and find another.

“Hey! Hey, would you—dammit, quit that! Bruce is going to kill me, literally kill me, if you rip those stitches again. You know how he gets when you fuck up his doctor stuff,” Bucky scolded, patting at Steve’s shoulders and trying to urge him back against the bed, though Steve just ignored him. He was sore, true, but knew his body well enough from years of sickness to know when he was on the mend. “Look, just sit still, would you? Bruce’ll be right back. Just stepped out to get a few more supplies,” Bucky assured him. “It’s the Castle. King’s Tower, actually. This is, ah…” Bucky started, then looked over at Nat.

“We all have rooms,” she said, though Steve knew her well enough to see when she was answering with some degree of caution, though that was typical of all of her answers, so he did not question it overmuch.

“Where is everyone else?” Steve asked, still letting his gaze dart agog around the room. Beautifully carved furniture, delicately embroidered pillows, some kind of swirling rock on the floor that had shocks of color running through it that Steve itched to trace with his fingers, a scrolling metal chandelier burning with light, rugs layering the floor with patterns that Steve had never seen before and longed to know what to call them. Actual glass covered the windows fitted in between patterns of metal, and a huge stone fireplace burned with warm light. It was almost overwhelming, a cacophony of color and texture the likes of which he had never seen.

He could see a room beyond where the curtains were pulled back, the walls covered in painted tiles of soft blues and greens, surrounding a large metal basin of some kind below curious spigots in the wall and room beyond that of wooden shelves lined with what appeared to be types of clothing, and he wondered to whom it all belonged. A round metal shield, bright with red, white and blue paint, leaned against the far wall, catching the light of the torches across its surface, making it seem to move and shift.

Things were familiar, but so vastly different than anything he had ever encountered before. It was like waking in a different world, he thought, slipping through the hollow of a tree into the land of the faeries where everything shone and gleamed with such brightness that it was too late before you realized nothing was real. A shudder ran down the back of his neck at the thought. Superstitious nonsense, as Clint would say, but Clint had grown up largely in cities, far away from where the line that marked man’s dominion over nature blurred and sometimes ripped. It was the newness, the unfamiliarity, he told himself, that was the sense of wrongness that scraped against his skin.

“Thor is with Jane and her companions, I think. And Barton is meeting with Fury, Coulson and Hill. Or he was. Not sure if that’s still going on. That’s where, uh…the King is, as well,” Bucky responded.
“Wait, Fury’s here?” Steve asked in confusion, momentarily put off of questions about Tony by the shock of Fury’s presence in all this. “But I thought—“

“Turns out dearest Nick kept a few things to himself when he was inviting us to join his little team of do-gooders,” Bucky said harshly. “He claims he was never loyal to Pierce, so much as trying to figure out who the hell was behind everything going on around here. Pierce’s rebellion gave him a way to build his own coalition while he watched and waited to see who shouted ‘Hail Hydra’ first. Which is to say that Nick managed to double cross basically everyone and live to tell about it. Slippery bastard. Nothing sticks to him, I swear.”

A hundred different questions bubbled to his lips, but he couldn’t sort through them, not right now. It was all too much, and his body was already beginning to tire, calling him back to slumber. He saw Bucky cast a quick glance to Nat, who shook her head once, then stood and walked to the side of the bed to kneel next to his head.

“Sam’s here, too,” she said as she ran a hand over his forehead, carding through the sweat-slick spikes of hair. Gods, he must look a mess. Three days? That last clear thing he remembered was being in his cell back in Pierce’s camp. Everything after that was some kind of hazy blur, images running together, tumbling over each other in his mind, then abruptly skipping past huge gaps where a dark nothingness claimed his memories. That blank space bothered him more than any memory might, however unpleasant they might be. There was something…something he needed to do. Tony. Something about Tony—he needed to tell him—to explain…something was wrong…but it was like trying to reach for something that wasn’t there anymore.

“I—uh—there’s something that—I’m not—I need to talk to To—to the King—its—I have to explain—“ Steve stammered, shaking his head carefully, trying to clear the fog. “There was—I can’t—was there—something to do with—water maybe Sinking—was I sinking—no, that’s not—damn. I can’t—but, I have to—”

Bucky and Nat looked at each other for a moment. “The ships,” Nat said. “You figured out Pierce and Schmidt’s plan about the ships. You already told him, Steve. In the Hall. With Stern. He had the ships burned, and anyone who came in contact with them is in quarantine. You saved the city a horrible fate. I don’t know how you figured it out, probably something stupidly brave.”

The ships. Of course. Stern…the carriage…being led into the Hall and…Tony. Gods, Tony. He let out a hiss of breath through his nose and put a hand to his cover his eyes, rubbing gently at their edges.

Tony was the King. They’d kidnapped the King. He had tied the King up and dragged him halfway across his own kingdom. Hell, he had gagged him, fed him scraps, knocked him into the ground multiple times during their sparring and generally gone about nearly getting him killed.

Not to mention, he recalled with something like dawning horror, that he had offered—what? Himself? A life where Tony—where the King, he corrected—did what? Lived in some hovel building from scraps that Steve could provide? Hell, he’d invited him to be an Avenger, one of the people fighting against him. No wonder Tony had refused, had left him that day in the forest to go find Captain Rhodes.

Of course he had. It was absurd, the whole idea of it, laughable even. Tony had laughed, he recalled, when he showed him the map and told him about his idea for an invasionary route, the one he had never shared with Pierce. He must have thought Steve such a fool, telling the King how to fortify his own city, thinking that he could be of use. Gods, he couldn’t even let his mind think these things, he admonished himself too late, leaning his head back against the pillows. He wasn’t sure if it was a laugh or a sob that escaped him, too harsh to be either, a meager echo of
humiliation and regret. He rubbed his hand over his eyes and tried to focus on what Nat had said, on anything that wasn’t how much he had wronged Tony, how high he had unknowingly reached.

“I couldn’t get to Pierce’s books, but Lord Hammer,” Steve stumbled a bit over the words as he forced his body not to tense up. He swallowed around it, but looked away from Bucky’s too-knowing gaze and went on. “He had a book. Figured he wouldn’t carry something like that around if it wasn’t important. I’d memorized the letter from Schmidt. Translating it took all night, and I couldn’t get some of the words, but I got enough.”

“I’m surprised Pierce agreed to trade you, if you knew about the ships,” Nat said, a frown marring her features.

“Pretty sure Lord Hammer didn’t tell him about the book. I don’t think he wanted to admit to that mistake. Not the way he and Lord Stern are always fighting to secure position. And none of them had any idea I could read anyway,” Steve shrugged. “I don’t think it ever entered their minds that I’d translated the letter, to be honest. I think Lord Hammer figured I wouldn’t last long enough to do much of anything with whatever knowledge of the book and what it meant that he thought I might have. Gods, I hope whatever poor soul they got back for me realizes who they are following before it’s too late.”

Steve saw Nat and Bucky exchange a quick look at that and wondered what he had missed, though let their silence pass for now. They were holding things back from him, he could see that plainly enough, though likely attempting to spare him out of concern and worry than any real desire to deny him the truth of things.

“Well. Thank the gods for the never-ending ability of those who place themselves above others to continually underestimate us, right?” Bucky said, biting his lip with false joviality. “Also, I wouldn’t call him ‘Lord Hammer’ again, if I were you. Some people around here wouldn’t care for that, particularly not coming from you. I’m pretty sure ‘stripped of his title’ is just the beginning, so none of this ‘Lord Hammer’ bullshit, okay? Just so you know,” Bucky finished, voice low and vehement with a tone Steve had previously heard him use in relation to the King.

Hatred, Steve thought, visceral and solid. They all knew it was Hammer who oversaw troop discipline for Pierce, after all. Bucky’s feelings were hardly a surprise, and oddly somewhat comforting. He knew all too well how easily Bucky could hold hate so closely to him without letting it consume him. It was easier to let Bucky have his anger, let him nurse it, because then Steve could just stop thinking about it and maybe he wouldn’t stumble over mere words, wouldn’t feel his stomach swoop, feel his muscles tighten for a fight that wasn’t there or see eight lines when he closed his eyes. He could just forget, let it all float away. It was tempting, that, though he knew at once for a selfish thought. He could not place this in Bucky’s hands. The failings had been his own. He had made his choices, followed Bucky’s pain and Fury’s assurances when he could have looked deeper, questioned harder.

“Yeah, so no more of that,” Bucky said with a huff, patting his shoulder and letting his hand rest there, solid and warm where it gripped tightly. Leave it to Buck to know what was going through his mind. “So, uh, about...about Stark...don’t suppose you wanna tell me what happened with the two of you out there?”


“It’s okay. Nothing—I mean, I thought—I don’t know what I thought. I misinterpreted. Obviously. It doesn’t matter, not now,” Steve said quietly, though Bucky just raised an eyebrow and shrugged indelicately, his lips curling. “He’s the King. The King, Buck. How could I not see that? Everything we did—do you know how close we came to—gods, Buck, I don’t know what to
even say. He almost got himself killed. Because of me. Because—because—Pierce and--"

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I’m pretty sure he’s not angry,” Bucky replied with a slight smile, arms held akimbo to indicate the luxury of the room. “At least, not at y—at us. Not so sure you misinterpreted anything, either.”

“He feels terrible, Bucky. About Brookland. It was Stane, Buck, T—the King--he didn’t know about what happened. It wasn’t him. You can’t blame him, not for that. I told him and—you should have seen his face, Bucky—he didn’t know, I would swear it,” Steve stammered, blinking against the wave of emotion that always gutted him whenever he talked to Bucky about what had happened there. “He was trying to help. He thought they were sending supplies, aid—“

“Yeah. I know. Me and him--well. We talked. A bit,” Bucky amended, catching Steve’s dubious look. “I mean, I’m not going to grab a Stark banner and parade around with it or anything, but yeah. He didn’t do that. That wasn’t him. Not—not that,” Bucky responded, looking down at his hands where they cradled in his lap for a moment before he shifted forward to lean his elbows on his knees and peer down at Steve as he lay on the bed.

“Look, Steve, you can’t seriously blame yourself for—for whatever it is you’re trying to blame yourself for,” Bucky admonished quietly. “None of us knew. Well, okay, Nat kind of did, but why would any of us even think that? It’s crazy. The whole thing, it’s just--I don’t even know how exactly how he ended up out there with the Ten Rings. Stane, I guess it was. And Ross. Even the Council, they say,” Bucky said with a shake of his head. “Lots of people apparently didn’t particularly like Stark. Now, personally, I just can’t imagine why that would be the case, but--”

“You knew?” Steve asked Natasha, who had the good grace to look away.

“Well,” she said, drawing out the word, her shoulders heaving with a sigh as she shot an annoyed look to Bucky, who just shrugged again. “This is awkward. Thanks a lot, James,” she said pointedly.

“Don’t mention it,” Bucky replied, pouring himself a glass of something that definitely wasn’t water from a nearby flask.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Steve demanded. “Do you have any idea what could have happened out there? What almost did? Gods, Nat—he’s—he’s the King! He almost died! From that thing in his chest, the bridge, gods—the Pass, how many times did he cheat death from collecting his due? How could you have kept your silence? About this? We should have been protecting him, not—not--”

“Told you he wasn’t going to take this well,” Bucky observed mildly. Natasha shot him a look that promised payback.

“You were on a need to know. And you did not need to know that, Steve. Think. Think about how it would have changed things. He was the enemy. We all felt that way, you and James moreso than most. But--would you have even been able to do it? Deliver the King to Pierce or Fury? I mean, in retrospect, that probably would not have been the right move, but at the time…I thought—I was trying to protect the mission and spare you an impossible choice. Don’t pretend it would have been easily made.”

“You should have said something, Nat,” Steve said quietly, watching her eyes shift around the room. “We’re supposed to be a team.”

“We are. But Fury knows there are few things I would not be willing to do to protect the Realm.
I’m not like you,” Nat offered, her eyes wide and sad as she looked back at Steve. “You have lines you won’t cross. And turning the King over to Pierce, knowing what that would mean? Tell me you could have done that, Steve. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“The entire Realm was jeopardized because you didn’t see fit—“ Steve bit out, feeling his voice rising as the myriad possibilities, the ways this all could have gone to hell ran screaming through his mind.

“I think you’re overreacting,” Natasha said quietly, though there was a guilty flush to her features.

“Just don’t, Nat. Don’t try to talk your way out of this. You should have said something,” Steve repeated. “We have to trust each other. That’s the difference between soldiers and vigilantes, you know that. If I don’t have all the information, how can I trust my decisions? How can anyone?”

Natasha’s mouth flattened into a thin line for a moment, then she nodded, turning her gaze back to Steve. “He lied, too, you know.”

“He lied to protect himself, to protect the Realm. Don’t make it out to be the same thing. What were you protecting? Your precious information?” Steve accused. He knew he was being harsh, perhaps even unfair, but couldn’t stop himself. It felt like so much could have been avoided if Natasha had just said something, told him what she suspected.

Would he have listened to Tony—dammit—to the King then? He liked to think so, but there was a fissure of uncertainty there that frightened him, his stomach clenching and swooping low in his gut. What if he had taken Tony to Pierce, as he first intended? What if it had been Tony chained to that post, Tony with a rope around his neck? His mind shied away from those images, but rage was burning a hole in his chest. He wasn’t sure if his ire was for Natasha or Fury or himself, most of all.

“We were all trying to protect the Realm, Steve. I may have been going about it a slightly different way than you, but we were all deceived. None of us like it,” she said. “For what its worth, I’m sorry. But you’re more angry at yourself than you are at me, though you shouldn’t be, truth be told.”

“I can’t lead if people have their own missions, Nat. If they’re hiding things from me. You know that,” Steve growled in frustration, though Nat was right, at least about the direction of his anger. He had made so many mistakes, not the least of which was letting his feelings get the better of his judgment, letting himself get caught up in what could be instead of seeing what was right in front of his eyes.

“I do,” she said, pursing her lips in dissatisfaction.

“You would not have let that happen, King or no,” Natasha retorted softly. “That’s what makes you different.”

Steve sighed and let his head fall back against the soft pillows, giving in to the weariness. There was no use arguing with her. She put far too much store in her assumptions, but that was all he was going to get out of Nat, and as much of an apology as she was able to make, he knew. It was all almost too much to comprehend, how they had come to this point, sitting in the King’s Tower in the center of the city under the largesse of the King himself.

“I told you two not to tire him out,” Bruce scolded, pushing open the door and letting it close
behind him with a soft snick.

“It was Nat,” Bucky said immediately, shooting her a lopsided grin that wasn’t the least bit guilty.

“Uh-huh,” Bruce replied, sounding utterly unconvinced. “I’ve got some broth and a bit of bread,” Bruce said to Steve. “Thought you might be able to try something more substantial than ice chips.”

Steve’s stomach rumbled at the mention of food, and he realized he was famished. He pushed himself back up to a sitting position against the headboard and took the bowl that Bruce offered, sipping slowly from its contents.

“Go easy, okay? Your stomach hasn’t had much the past week. Give it time,” Bruce admonished. “I had to stitch up a couple of places on your back. I’ll need to check those and change the bandages, put a bit more ointment on, but I needed to replenish my supplies. Comfrey and a few other things,” Bruce said by way of explanation, holding up the jars and pots in his arms. “There’s a whole pharmacy of ingredients here. Hundreds of them. Stuff I’ve only heard about or seen in books. Amazing.” Steve couldn’t help a small smile at the excitement evident in Bruce’s tone.

The door to his room banged open again and Clint strode in, carrying a platter bearing gods only knew what kinds of food on it. Everyone turned to watch his progress, as he walked across the room, popping piece after piece into his mouth, as if hoarding it for winter. He stopped abruptly and returned their questioning stares. “What? Its chocolate,” he said, as if that explained everything. Clint sat down on the sofa, throwing a leg over the arm and placing the tray in his lap, shoving another lump of the brown substance in his mouth and making little noises of pleasure as he chewed.

“Chocolate?” Nat asked, raising an eyebrow. “Haven’t had that since Lord—well. Let’s just say it has been awhile,” she finished, abandoning her position next to Steve and walking over to sit by Clint on the sofa, plucking a piece off the top of the pile and biting it in two. She closed her eyes and made a sound that should probably be banned.

“I vote we let Nat have all the chocolate,” Bucky said, watching her with intense interest. “Every last piece of it. Where the hell did you get that anyway?”

“Kitchens,” Clint answered. “Thought the chef guy was going to beat me with his rolling pin, but then I said I was there to get stuff for Steve, and they all started shoving food at me, asking if there was anything else they could get. Turned out, there was. Chocolate. Never had it, but always wanted to try. Can’t say it disappoints. Really, Tony knows how to live, I gotta say.”

Steve covered his face with his hands and groaned. “You can’t take advantage of his hospitality like that, Clint. Do you know how much that stuff is worth?”

“More than I’ll see in…pretty much my entire life. So? He can afford it. Plus, I spent the past few weeks putting food in his belly—okay, okay, well, I helped,” Clint corrected quickly when Natasha snorted loudly and reached for another piece. “I carried things. Food things. I’m just saying that a little bit of return favor is due, is all. Here, you gotta try this. I’m telling you, it just melts in your mouth. Food of the gods, I swear.”

“I’m not eating that,” Steve said, looking dubiously at the chunk of brown that Clint was offering.

“Your loss,” Clint responded, popping it into his mouth and smiling around it as he ate. “So good.”
“Steve is having broth and bread,” Bruce insisted. “Then a long nap.”

“Feels like all I’ve done is sleep,” Steve said, though he felt the tiredness seeping through his body, his eyes growing heavy as he finished the bowl of broth and passed it back to Bruce, nibbling lightly on the soft bread. It practically dissolved on his tongue, the almost forgotten taste of warm butter filling his mouth. He grimaced as he thought of serving the King hard biscuits and expecting him to be grateful for it, offering wild berries for a treat when the man had chocolate and gods knew what else at his disposal.

How simple he must have seemed. How common. Unable to read or write, save for the bits Tony had taught him. Why had he even bothered with that? Guilt because Stern had apparently stolen the funds the Crown had provided? Or simply to ingratiate himself with Steve, and therefore, with the team? Hadn’t Steve admitted to Tony that he always seemed to end up doing what it was that Tony asked of him? Steve had known he was being manipulated, just not by quite how much. He had let it happen, much to Bucky’s chagrin. At least Tony’s reasons had been legitimate. Noble, even.

But why then risk his life for Steve’s by throwing himself on that grenade when Schmidt’s men had attacked them in the Pass? Tony was far smarter than anyone Steve had ever met, and his knowledge of explosives and ordinance exceeded that of anyone in the Realm, clearly. He had created some kind of advanced explosive in a cave in the mountains. He had created the explosion on the bridge under the noses of the entire team. Had he known it was a dud? A way to lure the team to Tony’s side, to convince Steve to defy Pierce and release Tony in gratitude for a sham?

And what had happened between them that night in the Pass…had it all been a calculation, part of some strategy? Tony had never repeated it, had done no more than kiss him before he left for Lord Ellis’ keep. Had it been nothing more than a scheme to gain Steve’s trust, a boon to convince Steve to go along with Tony’s demands?

He wondered now, looking back, just how much had he allowed himself to be led because he wanted Tony, wanted to believe in the promise he felt in Tony’s hands and mouth. Had it been an act all along? A ruse so that Steve would want to trust him, want to believe what Tony was saying when it came time to make the hard decisions? How much had he allowed his judgment to be influenced because he had wanted to earn something that he could never have?

Tony had known that, known how far apart they were, and that was perhaps what hurt the most, what made his stomach churn and chest tighten with shame. Tony had known there was nothing that could possibly come of it, yet he had allowed Steve’s attention anyway, encouraged it, used it. Had he thought Steve a fool or just felt sorry for him?

Was this, this room, this place, nothing more than guilt, over Brookland and whatever other sins Tony laid so easily, almost eagerly, at his own feet, some kind of penance Tony felt he had to pay? Tony had promised to repay him after Steve saved his life at the bridge, after all. Perhaps all of this was nothing more than Steve’s token, Tony’s way of fulfilling what he considered a debt, relieving himself of a burden he did not want to carry. The King was a good man, Steve knew that much, and clearly felt deep sorrow for the harms done in his name. How much of what Steve dared to believe was something real had merely been a guilt-ridden conscience, little more than the entreaties of a man who wanted to make right the transgressions of his past?

And how much, a small, dark part of his mind wondered, had been pure fabrication, whether part of a scheme of manipulation or simply a way to survive out there amongst people who had clearly been enemies? It made his heart clench in his chest like it was gripped in a vise and sickened his stomach to even consider that Tony had been afraid of them, but of course, he must have been, held
captive like that by people who had sworn to destroy him. Who tied him up and threatened to take him to someone he knew would destroy him and the Realm along with him.

What better way to ensure his safety than to ingratiate himself to their leader? He understood well enough what it was like to feel powerless, how easy it was to compromise when you had nothing left with which to bargain. The idea that Tony may have felt that way, may have felt that way at least in part because of Steve, tore at his insides, clawing and rending its way through whatever it was that he had dared hope could be true.

“Quit thinking so loudly,” Bucky said, nudging Steve’s shoulder with his fist. “You’ll strain yourself or break in out hives or something. Just relax, okay? Bruce is right, you should rest. Lay back before you tear something again and Bruce gets all pissed about it. You know how he can be. Come on, bed’s fantastic, huh? Had to bring you a whole new one after you bled all over the other one, and you’ll never guess what’s in there. Feathers! Honestly, can you imagine? Feathers,” Bucky informed him with a disbelieving shake of his head. “A whole mattress full of them. If you start sneezing, Rogers, I swear I’ll never speak to you again,” Bucky continued with a grin.

Steve pressed his hands down on the mattress beneath him, feeling the softness give beneath him. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before, though he supposed he had actually been sleeping on it for several days now. Like a cloud would be, he thought. Like floating. Sinking—wait—his mind stuttered to a halt, eight white lines arcing across his vision. He took a deep breath and forced his suddenly racing heart to calm. When he looked down, his hands were fisted in the tangle of sheets.

“I think I could stay here all day,” Steve confessed, watching in amazement at the way the mattress regained its shape after he removed his hand and returning Bucky’s grin.

“Pretty sure that was the wh—ow!” Clint cut off, rubbing his upper arm.

“There was a bee on him,” Natasha said, one delicate eyebrow raised practically to her hairline in challenge. Steve frowned and looked back and forth between the two of them. Bucky was covering his mouth with his hand to hide his laughter.

“I sleep for a few days, and you all go mad,” Steve said, shaking his head at them, biting the inside of his cheek to hold in the smile that threatened. “So, everyone is here? Staying in the Tower, I mean?”

“Yeah, though Thor is spending most of his time with Jane,” Clint responded through chews. “Place is great. There’s this whole floor downstairs for practice and exercise. Big courtyard all rigged up with targets that I can shoot while they move on some kind of pulley system. Ingenious, really, though don’t tell him I said that. And Barnes, I fucking know it was you who painted those crappy rabbits on the targets. That’s not funny, just so you know,” Clint groused, aiming a finger at Bucky.

“Just wanted to make it a challenge for you, Barton,” Bucky gloated. “I’ll get Steve to paint them next time and you’ll never be able to hit a thing.”

“What about—I mean—where is—is—" Steve reached for the right words.

“He was here. While you were sick and all,” Bruce interjected, placing his jars and pots carefully on the bedside table, which had apparently become something of a dispensary while Steve was sick. He kept his gaze focused on stacking and sorting the various items, letting his words hang in the air.
“I’m sure he’s incredibly busy,” Steve responded numbly. That was obviously true, he knew that, though he couldn’t help the pool of hurt that pulled at his stomach.

“I think he thought…maybe you didn’t want him here,” Bucky replied carefully.

Steve blinked up at him in momentary confusion, but found there was some truth to what Bucky said, though he did not like to acknowledge it. There was a part of him that did not want Tony here, did not want Tony to see him like this, to know. To know what exactly, he wasn’t entirely certain, his mind shied away when he tried to pick at the edges of it. But when he thought of Tony being here, of the comfort offered by his presence, it produced both a desperate longing and a deep sense of shame and mortification and something that tasted like failure on his tongue. He knew the taste well enough to recognize it for what it was. It was ash, papery and bitter, dissolving in his mouth.

“He asks about you, though,” Bruce continued, pulling Steve from his thoughts. “All the time. I have to give him reports. Or, rather, I have to give his manservant reports because Tony has holed himself up in his workshop when he isn’t busy with Fury and Rhodes and whatever is going on with the war.”

“Oh,” Steve replied, for lack of anything better to say.

“You should talk to him,” Bucky added, somewhat to Steve’s surprise. “I know, I know. But, look, I saw the guy after we thought we’d lost you and—well—I would not wish that kind of grief on anyone. I don’t know what it is between you two, but you should tell him—whatever it is you need to tell him, is all I’m saying.”

Perhaps Tony was trying to allow Steve to save face, maintain a modicum of dignity in light of how much Steve had misread the situation. Better, kinder, really, to stay away and offer gifts and fine things in recompense for whatever imagined slights Tony was ascribing to himself. It had been Steve’s error. He was the one who had let all the questions about Tony that had arisen in his mind these past few weeks be swept away by thoughts that he should never have been entertaining in the first place. Tony had just been trying to survive, to protect the Realm he ruled. It had been Steve who had spent the time thinking of himself, of his wishes of what might be instead of seeing what was happening right in front of his eyes.

“I—I will,” Steve assured him, though he felt less sure of what, exactly, he would say if given the chance. What words could he possibly offer after all the mistakes he had made?

“Well, for now, I need to change your bandages and check your stitches, see if you’ve torn anything during the night,” Bruce chided. Steve dutifully turned over and left Bruce to his ministrations, hearing him clucking over him occasionally in a reassuring manner as he removed the bandages and applied new ointment before placing strips of soft linen across Steve’s back.

By the time Bruce was done, Steve was exhausted, his eyes already heavy with invisible weights as he sank into the soft bed. He would talk to Tony. As soon as possible. At least to offer his gratitude for what Tony had done for him, for all of them. And to beg his forgiveness for Steve’s failures, for the wrongs he had done him, done the Realm. He had paid for his sins in blood and pain, but had never been relieved of them. Only Tony could do that. Tony seemed willing to allow Fury and the others to continue to serve. He only hoped that benevolence could extend to him.

*Feathers*, he thought in amazement as he drifted off to sleep.

Days slipped by without any sign of the King, turning into a week and then a fortnight, though
Steve did get to meet Thor’s beloved Jane, a petite brunette who spoke in words tumbling from her lips at such a rapid pace that Steve was hard pressed to keep up. Thor simply beamed at her, so Steve took his cues from him and smiled warmly as she spoke. Sam stopped by with Redwing perched on his leather-clad shoulder like a feathered sentinel. They talked for long hours about everything that had happened, Sam filling him in on what occurred Fury’s camp after word got out that Fury was recalling his forces to the King’s side. Steve could only imagine the melee that news had inspired as those loyal to Pierce’s cause made themselves known.

Bruce finally pronounced him able to get up and move around, though Steve largely suspected this was because he was going to do it anyway and Bruce did not relish the argument. His back was still sore and tender, but the itchy discomfort of healing was already fading. He’d had enough wounds in his time to know that he needed to keep the skin stretched with careful exercise instead of allowing it to stiffen and contract with disuse. Bruce gave him a jar of oil to use and told him to keep the wounds dry, and instructed him to avoid the bathtub for the time being, as tempting as it might look.

Tony’s manservant, Jarvis, as he had introduced himself when Steve kept calling him ‘My Lord,’ a tall, dignified man who made Steve feel like he should take his shoes off wherever he ventured became something of a regular fixture in Steve’s rooms. He brought increasingly fantastical assortments of food, first for Steve, and then, when it became clear that the other Avengers had simply decided to consider Steve’s room some kind of communal gathering place, for the entire team. Jarvis grumbled and complained about it, but Steve could tell that the man secretly enjoyed himself.

Natasha and Coulson briefed him on what was going on, which at this point, was largely unchanged, save for Fury’s involvement. There was no sign of Schmidt’s forces, though the unspoken ‘yet’ hung in the air.

Once he felt up to spending longer stretches of time out of bed, Steve spent hours exploring the room he was staying in, from the finely woven carpets covering beautiful stone tiles to the obviously bewitched walls that produced hot water on the turn of a handle. Jarvis explained something of the mechanism to him after he caught Steve making a warding gesture every time he walked past the spigots in the bathroom.

A scarily competent woman who identified herself as Ms. Potts, a member of the Council and the King’s Steward, came by, bearing a small painting of a scene Steve recognized instantly, the fishing fleet coming in after a long range expedition, the sea birds circling over the heads of the wives and children waiting on the beach by the dock. He had seen something like this a hundred or more times in his life, but here it was, something he could hold in his hands, a piece of something he had lost long ago. He thanked her profusely, though she insisted it wasn’t her doing. With a little help from Jarvis, he placed the painting carefully on the wall across from the bed where he could see it before he closed his eyes and first thing when he woke.

There was a trove of books in his room, beautifully bound volumes filled with elegantly detailed drawings and so many wonderful words his eyes could barely take them all in. Some were simple, he saw, others far more difficult, but he paged carefully through each one, picking out words here and there that he recognized, tracing the scripted letters, ornaments and decorations that covered the margins. He was holding a fortune in his hands, he knew, though the one he spent the most time with was the storybook, the same as the worn and tattered one Bruce carried for so long. This one was pristine, though, and filled with incredibly detailed illustrations, silvered lettering and gold embossing around the edges of each page.

The book had been covered with a binding done in elaborate metalwork done in gold, inset with
jewels and enamel, a carved ivory relief of a large oak tree in the center. It was a stunning piece of work that he had no business touching, but he kept coming back to it, again and again, flipping past familiar stories that looked incredibly different. The book was entirely too common for that kind of binding, he knew that much, and wondered at why someone would go to the trouble. He felt a bit like the book these days, something simple and base dressed up in far too much finery.

The days ran together, despite the steady stream of visitors. He still tired far quicker than was normal for him, but thought that might have as much to do with the dreams that plagued his sleep as much as his recovery. Each night, he woke, soaked in sweat and tangled in sheets, gasping for air that fought its way down his throat, his eyes opening, but finding only darkness, his mouth sour, hands outstretched, reaching for something that wasn’t there. The dreams disturbed him, not just because of the lack of sleep. There was an insistence to them, a sense of urgency, that left his heart pounding in his chest and his mind searching for answers to a question he did not know how to ask.

As nice as the rooms in which he was staying were, he had to get out of them or he was going to go mad. Jarvis insisted that he had to dress “properly,” which apparently meant something far different here than he was used to, and apparently required a bath, shave and haircut. When he was done, Jarvis carefully brushed nonexistent lint off the shoulder of the dark blue doublet that went over a tunic of the softest material Steve had ever felt, like the underside of a lily pad, he thought as he rubbed a hand over it. It had been the simplest, least adorned of the items in the closet, and he had insisted, despite Jarvis’ protestations that he should try something finer.

“This will do for now, Sir, I suppose,” Jarvis said imperviously.

“Not a ‘Sir,’ Jarvis,” Steve corrected as he stared at the reflection in the full-length mirror for a long moment, then reached out to touch the silvered glass. He had seen his image before, captured in puddles or ghosting over the river as it flowed. The back of his shield had been a serviceable enough looking glass when he needed it, though the image was always blurred and distorted by the metal. But to see his own face like this…so clear…he ran a hand down his face and watched his twin make the same motion. Yet the person staring back at him was someone he barely recognized, some wraith in fancy clothes, ill-suited to the skin. He did not belong here, he thought. This wasn’t his world, but it was all that there was now, though it was something that had left him behind long ago. He was just a soldier, a good one, he considered, but this was a world meant for men of uncommon greatness.

He was as much out of place in this world as Tony had been his. He wondered now if the person he had come to care for had ever even existed anywhere but in his head. Tony, his Tony, the one that spent long hours talking with him as they walked, challenged him and demanded of him, the one that used laughter to set him at ease, the one who spoke to him as if he mattered, who listened, who trusted him, believed in him…that person may very well not exist, not here, at least. It occurred to him that he had never met the King, not really. Just some dim reflection of him, bounded by circumstance and trapped in a place where he could never truly be who he was meant to be.

Steve sighed and nodded to Jarvis that he was ready. Jarvis helped him navigate a long hallway, past a large, ornate set of doors guarded by two Royal guards resplendent in their red and gold whose eyes followed them as they walked. He could feel their curiosity, though they said nothing, and bit his lip to hold in a smile as he thought of what it must be like for them to have the team running around here. For all the team’s prowess in the field, Steve knew them well enough to know that they tended to act like rowdy children when given the rare opportunity to relax. He wondered who occupied the guarded rooms, but it wasn’t his place to ask and Jarvis did not volunteer anything, so he kept his question to himself.
Steve followed Jarvis down a set of curved stone stairs to the gymnasium he had heard so much about. The walls lined with weapons of all shapes and sizes, beautifully detailed armors emblazoned with intricate, scrolling designs and large, soft mats for sparring. Far better to fell a King than grass, Steve thought somewhat Sadly. There had been a time when he looked forward to training with Tony, to being able to teach him something that might actually help him, keep him safe. Perhaps impress him a bit, if he was honest with himself. Looking around here, it was clear that Tony had the best of everything at his disposal, including, no doubt, highly trained knights who would be thrilled to teach the King whatever he might wish to learn. Perhaps already had done so, another feint Steve had failed to notice.

Steve ran his hand along the pommels of the various swords that sat stacked in one of the racks, each of them, mere practice swords, far finer than any he had ever held. He had lost his own sword, back in Pierce’s camp, but wished now to wrap his hand around its worn grip. This world…this place…there was aching familiarity here, but at the same time, it was all so very different. He thought he might have felt less out of place in chains in the middle of a crowd of courtiers than here, trying to pass for someone he wasn’t. How could he possibly fit in here? He wasn’t sure if he even wanted to. The people…the ones he had actually met, Jarvis and Ms. Potts, were kind enough, almost overly solicitous, though there was a distance there, a formality of rank and position that escaped him.

But he had looked out the Tower windows and seen a vast expanse of anonymity, thousands of people coming and going and getting nowhere. In Brookland, everyone had known each other, known their kin, and when one needed something, it had simply been done, without thought or expectation beyond that when it was your turn, it would be done for you. Here…here there were agendas, everywhere. The place swarmed with seekers, grasping hands and covetous stares. He didn’t see how Tony could stand it. No wonder he had looked for any kind of distraction from this place. Steve had once placed quite a bit of judgment on that fact, and now found himself longing for the same, though perhaps slightly different kinds of distractions than the ones Tony pursued.

He knew himself well enough to know what was keeping him here when, by rights, he should have already moved on. Bucky said Tony had stayed with him while he was in the throes of the worst of the sickness, that he had refused to leave even when Steve had seemed to want him gone. As much as his mind understood all the rational reasons for Tony’s behavior towards him during their journey, offered explanations and justifications for every touch, every promise, every deed, as he moved further away from the shock of it all, there was a part of him that protested, louder and louder, that it could not all have been an act.

There had been something there, between them, he could almost convince himself, late in the night as he shook off the vestiges of the nightmare. The way Tony had looked at him sometimes, when he hadn’t even realized Steve was watching him back, there had been something there, Steve would have sworn it, beyond guilt, something more than mere calculation.

On the ledge of rock when they’d kept watch together, Tony had listened to Steve’s talk about his mother and shared his own memories of his father—gods, King Howard, how that fact boggled the mind—who had apparently found Tony, Tony, to be a disappointment, and of Jarvis, who Steve surmised had been the man Tony had spoken of, the one who had cared for him when he was a child. Steve had to believe there had been truth there. Caged, hidden behind obfuscation, yes, but there. He had told Steve that he cared, well, that the King cared. For his people. Even for them, the team, who had shown him nothing but disloyalty, however persuasive their reasons. Maybe that had been nothing more than a generalization, but here they all were, gifted with more luxury than any of them had ever seen, let alone imagined getting to touch and enjoy, instead of rotting away in fetters as they probably by rights should be.
Steve wanted, rather desperately, he acknowledged, to take these things as evidence of something more, something beyond the truth that Tony was simply a good man, a good King that they had misjudged, and that this all meant something beyond just that. Then he would see something like this room and wonder just how far he was willing to fool himself to avoid the hurt that he knew would accompany accepting how wrong he had been.

He had never taken the easy way to spare himself, and could not do so now. He owed some sort of apology to Tony, though he had no idea how to give it. But, he had to do at least that much before…before whatever it was that came after this. He had always had some kind of plan, but now, everything just stretched out before him with a blank nothingness.

The team seemed content for the moment to enjoy the boons offered by the King’s wealth, a welcome respite after all they had endured, but he knew them well enough to know that these things would not satisfy them for long before they grew restless with inaction. These were not people who could watch the Realm burn while they surrounded themselves with the safety of walls and soldiers fighting and dying before them while they enjoyed their sweets and baubles. It simply wasn’t in them to do so.

He looked around the gymnasium again, the walls lined with spears, reams of arrows in neat bundles, shields of all shapes and sizes hung in neat rows. This was a place to play at war, and that would not be enough when the real thing bled at their door. Already, he knew, Clint was practicing with his new bow, the one he had proudly brought to show Steve, practically cooing over it like a newborn. Natasha was sparring with Bucky, and Thor began to distance himself from Jane, coming more and more often to Steve’s room to hear news that brought no answers. They were waiting, waiting for him to decide, do they stay or do they go. Fight for King and Realm or fight for whatever that meant, it ended in the same place, out there, beyond the walls with sword and shield, hammer and bow.

The indisputable fact of the matter was, even if he had not been entirely mistaken about the breadth of Tony’s feelings, there was no path that led to whatever it was he had allowed himself to imagine a lifetime ago in the woods. There was no house by the sea filled with gadgets and warmth, ringing with the laughter of small voices. Whatever might be with Tony, it wasn’t that, and he wasn’t sure how easily he could let that go in return for…for what? When he looked at the other side of the scale, it was empty. He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face in frustration. The ceaseless speculation was pointless. Tony obviously was not going to come to him, and he had to know where he stood with Tony, even if the answer was nowhere. He just had to know.

“I need to speak to him, Jarvis,” Steve said, letting his fingers fall from the swords. There was no question who he was talking about. He knew Jarvis had been anticipating that he would ask. The man saw far more than he revealed.

“Sir…” Jarvis began carefully. “His Grace is very busy, you must understand. The demands on his time—“

“I know. I won’t take long, I promise. But, I just—I have to talk to him. Please,” Steve asked, turning around to face Jarvis.

“I will see what I can do, Sir,” Jarvis responded slowly. “Just—I would ask, if I may, Sir, that you not take his response as a measure of his concern. We learn how to show our feelings, it is not innate. And some are taught far better than others.”

Steve frowned at Jarvis’ words, thinking back to how Tony described his relationship with his father. He nodded to Jarvis, who seemed mollified by that. “I’d like to stay here, if that’s allowed,” Steve requested, casting a glance around the empty gymnasium. He wondered what it
said of him that he felt more at home here, surrounded by weapons of war and instruments of death, than he did upstairs in the room he currently occupied.

“Of course, Sir. You are welcome anywhere you like,” Jarvis replied quickly, a frown pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“Except the places I’m not,” Steve inserted without thinking. “Sorry, that was rude. Thank you, Jarvis. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me,” Steve said and it felt like a farewell, though he wasn’t sure why. He walked over to bat at the hand-sized rings that hung from a chain in the ceiling, as he heard the shuffle of feet as Jarvis left and sank to the ground on one of the mats, his head falling into his hands.

He forced himself to take short, shallow breaths, attempting to keep himself from panicking. He was going to have an audience with the King. Him. A snot-nosed kid from Brookland, who signed the commission papers Fury handed him with an ‘X’ because he could not write his name, who owned no property, held no titles and bore no great name. For a moment, he just marveled at what his life had become. He wondered what his mother would think of this. She would probably tell him to comb his hair, he thought with a small, lopsided smile.

Tony had told him that he was not to blame for siding with Pierce, but it was hard to sit here in the middle of the Castle and see the fairness in that. Jarvis, Ms. Potts, Captain Rhodes… these were the people he had chosen to fight against, aligning himself with Pierce and Hammer and Stern instead, allowing assumptions to stand in for truth. He had fought against his King, against the Realm, against Tony, and he had been good at it. How much damage had he done? How many innocent lives had he taken for an abhorrent cause? And now he had jeweled books and fine clothes, and he hated everything, though nothing more than himself.

It was no wonder Tony stayed away. Forgiving was one thing, and easier done when there was a debt to be repaid, a scale to balance, and Brookland was a heavy weight for anyone to bear, particularly someone like Tony. Forgetting, though, that was another entirely. He wasn’t sure what would be worse, Tony sitting somewhere despising him or simply not thinking of him at all.

Steve knew could not undo the things he had done, but at least now he knew who he was fighting against and, perhaps most important of all, who he was fighting for, though he imagined that would provide little comfort to Tony.

“His Grace will see you now,” Jarvis said quietly from the bottom of the steps some time later. “He is in his workshop. If you will follow me, Sir, I will escort you there.” Steve stood with a slight groan as his back protested, and let Jarvis lead him down another hallway where they descended another set of steps. When they reached the ground level, they continued their descent until they finally reached the front of a large, metal door that had been left slightly ajar.

Jarvis nodded and extended an arm, indicating Steve should enter. He pushed open the door and stepped into an enchanted world of machines that breathed and bellowed with life, or that was how he would think of it to himself later. The room was cavernous, hot from the blaze of the forge, and filled with all manner of contraptions, armor, bubbling glass vials of gods-only-knew what, tools of every conceivable kind, parchments of all sizes covered with detailed drawings of fantastical creations, and half-finished pieces of sculpted metal that would one day bloom with destruction. He could discern culverins, parts of crossbows and arbalests, and what he thought might be parts of a cannon. He blinked at it for a moment, trying to take it all in, but it was like trying to count the white caps on the sea’s waves. Each time he looked, there was more to see.

Tony sat at a wooden table strewn with large bolts and metal coils and what appeared to be part of a ballista, designed to launch large metal darts long distances, though Steve quickly noted that the
pieces of the darts on the table in front of Tony were in the process of being modified, hollowed out at the tips while a wick stuck out the end. Steve had seen enough on Tony’s ill-fated bridge escape to figure out what, exactly, Tony planned to put in those.

“Steve,” Tony acknowledged, without looking up from where he was working on part of a winch. Steve looked at the ground, caught unawares by the array of contents in the room. He started to kneel, though between the simple act of getting ready and making it to the gym and then down here to Tony’s workshop, he honestly wasn’t sure if he would be able to regain his feet.

“Don’t,” Tony said sharply, bringing Steve up short. “Just don’t,” he repeated, softer now, then cleared his throat. “Jarvis said you wanted to speak with me.”

Steve wished Tony would look at him, but Tony’s hands did not stop moving the whole time, Steve realized, watching nimble fingers fly over bits and pieces. It was fascinating to watch and for a moment, he let himself be distracted. It would be easy, here, to forget, he thought. This place, with its jumble of objects that managed to somehow be ordered, it’s heat and casual grittiness, it’s use, this place was Tony, his Tony, and it was so tempting to allow himself that, the illusion.

“Your Grace,” Steve started, watching Tony’s face tighten, the swift movements of his hands slow, just for a fraction of a heartbeat. Tony’s eyes darted up, just for a fraction of a moment, dragging over Steve just long enough to draw out some of his nerve. “I wanted—I wanted—” he stuttered, then forced himself to stop, to cease his useless regrets and simply say what needed to be said. “I was wrong. About you—Brookland—about a lot of things. I know that I cannot make amends for my past actions, but I would ask that you allow me to offer what I can. I sought to serve the Realm. I failed at that, but would do so now, if you would allow it. My sword and shield are yours, Your Grace.”

“Don’t apologize to me,” Tony snapped, his voice harsh and grating, echoing in the room. “You—you do not do that. You do not apologize. Not for that. Not to me.”

“I—yes, Your Grace,” Steve replied, his throat tightening. Of course, the King would not want to hear his feeble attempt to make amends for what he had done. Why would he? Steve may very well owe his life to saving Tony’s. That did not mean that the King could just overlook that Steve had fought against him, sought to take his Kingdom away from him and prop Pierce in his place. Whatever allowances Tony might make for his own mistakes did not absolve Steve of his, that much was certain.

“Of course you can serve,” Tony said, sounding tired as he turned back to continue his tinkering. It felt like a dismissal, and he thought of Jarvis brushing phantom lint off his shoulder. Steve had almost forgotten his request.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Steve responded, voice stilted with uncertainty, unsure now, exactly what it was there was left to say when he had come here to say so much. It hurt, somewhere deep down, to think that after everything, it was as simple as this, though he wasn’t sure why. An offered apology, an easy acceptance, and Steve got exactly what he asked for and nothing he wanted.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done. For me. For the team. We all do,” he amended. “For allowing us to stay here and…well, everything else,” he continued, for some unfathomable reason, unable to just stop, to part ways on the amicable terms of strangers. That was it then, he supposed, as much an answer to unasked questions as anything. “We won’t impose on you very long, Your Grace. I understand General Fury is working for you now, and we can make arrangements with Hill for accommodations.”
“You,” Tony started hoarsely. “You want to move. Of course you do.”

“Well, this—it’s amazing. I mean, I’ve never—but this is your place, Sire, and we shouldn’t—I mean, we don’t need…” Steve trailed off as Tony’s expression went slack and then hardened into a mask.

“Is that all you require of me?” Tony asked in a strange, dull tone, like the words were stuck on his tongue.

“I—yes?” Steve said, making it a question without meaning to.

There was a flash of something across Tony’s face, like surprise, but the kind that came from pain. “So be it,” Tony replied, words measured as carefully as his drawings. Steve paused for a moment and let the words hang in the air, though to what end, he had no idea.

“The shield is yours. A gift. For what you lost. Take it,” Tony ordered in a clipped tone, dipping some tool into molten metal and applying the smoking remains to a broken coupling he was soldering.

“You don’t owe me anything, Your Grace,” Steve protested. “Certainly not gift as fine as that, though I appreciate the gesture—”

“Stop appreciating things. Stop. Just stop. Take the gods-damned shield, take it with you, take everything, it doesn’t even mat—take it,” Tony burst out, slamming his fist in the worktable, then rubbing a hand over his face and closing his eyes with a ragged sigh. “Take it and go, Steve. If that is what you want, then just go.”

“I don’t—it isn’t that I want—it’s just—” Steve stumbled around his words, suddenly adrift in the face of Tony’s anger. He’d done something or said something wrong here, though he was at a loss as to what.

“I heard you,” Tony snapped, and Steve stuttered to a halt. “You’re right. Of course,” Tony said, finally looking at Steve, though then Steve wished he hadn’t. His eyes were hard, flint on stone, something scored and battered in their depths. Tony’s jaw tightened as he stared at Steve, trailing over him, and he felt the scrutiny as if it had weight and form pressing against his chest. Standing here, in these borrowed clothes, he had never felt more like a mummer in a show, playing at something he could never be. He didn’t know the script, after all.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Tony ground out, and he meant it, Steve could tell, for the first time hearing a vein of cruelty threading through Tony’s words that cut far deeper than mere words had a right to do.

Steve couldn’t deny it, after all. Hadn’t he been telling himself that? He did not belong in this place, in this strange, bright world where everyone played a role and no one would tell him his lines. Then why did it hurt so much to hear it from Tony? It made no sense. “We’ll be out of your way by tomorrow then, Sire. Thank you. Again. For—for everything. I know you said you don’t want my apology, but…I—we will serve you well, Your Grace. Let that stand for our atonement, if you will.”

“I have given you what you asked of me. What I promised you,” Tony replied, his hands braced on the table in front of him as he stared down at the bits and pieces scattered across the table, face blank. “Leave me now.”

“Y—yes, Your Grace,” Steve said, blinking in momentary confusion. He found he did not want to
go, did not want to leave it like this, but he had been dismissed, so there was little choice. Tony had already picked up another coil and set to work on whatever he was building. Steve turned back towards the workshop door and pulled it open, only to nearly collide with Captain Rhodes.

“Captain Rhodes, Sir,” Steve acknowledged with a deferential nod. “Sorry, I was just going,” Steve said quickly as he sidestepped. Rhodes looked at him for a moment though there was no surprise there, then his gaze shifted over Steve’s shoulder to where Tony sat at his worktable. Steve risked a glance between them, as Captain Rhodes moved around him.

“You have news?” Steve heard Tony ask. “You may speak freely,” Tony indicated, as Steve felt the heat of Rhodes’ questioning gaze follow him out the door.

“One of our patrols caught up with Hammer and his party fleeing towards the eastern shore, Your Grace,” Rhodes reported. “He died in the skirmish. You wanted to be informed at once.” Steve felt his whole body stiffen, going taut with something he did not want to name at Rhodes’ words. Anger, he decided, because that was better than fear, not of Hammer, exactly, but of remembered helplessness, though whatever he called it, it was chased by shame he could not control. The air in the room suddenly felt dense, sluggish, and Steve wanted to be gone, be anywhere but here, where the room was heavy with the weight of what he was horrified to realize might be pity. He fled.

By the time he made it back to his room, he was so exhausted, he could barely stand. He shucked off the stiff wool doublet, folding it carefully and laying it across the back of a chair, having learned quickly that his attempts at properly folding the clothes in the closet were not appreciated. Too many years of trying to fit everything he could carry into a pack. He tugged off his boots, then let himself fall into the soft bed. He had to admit, he would miss this, he thought as he buried his face into the mattress. It was amazing how quickly you could become accustomed to these useless luxuries.

Once again, he found himself thinking of Tony, gamely trudging along behind him through the wilderness, despite his wounds and the effects that cursed metal were having on him. Sleeping on the hard ground without so much as a blanket for warmth, though that, at least, had been his own damn fault, Steve thought with a ghost of a fond smile passing over his face. Eating those horrible biscuits. Tony’s complaints over those made far more sense now, at least. He supposed Tony had felt the same way out there as Steve felt here, as if he was adrift, without anything to grab onto. Floating, his mind supplied. He frowned at the oddness of the thought.

Tony had managed to adjust to his circumstances far better than Steve had. And when he couldn’t, Tony bent circumstances to his will, and if Steve got caught up in the wake of that effort, it was his own damn fault. Was that what drove his desire to leave this place? Was he running away because being so close was too hard? Maybe, he admitted to himself. He did want to serve, that much was true. This was his opportunity. Had he not asked for just this exact thing? He could hardly abandon it because being this close to something he could see but not touch made his stomach clench and roil.

At least now he had his answer about the extent of Tony’s feelings or lack thereof. Money and the things it bought meant little to someone like Tony. This room, the things in it, there were nothing to a man such as him. Steve had ascribed them far deeper meanings than they possessed, that much was clear. He had been looking for symbols where there were only trivialities of no consequence to someone in Tony’s position. It was better this way, really. What could have possibly come of it, even if Tony had returned his feelings? There was no path that brought them to where Steve wanted to be, so this...this was better. Simpler, really.

That was probably true, he knew, but it did nothing to make it any easier to hear or make the
thought of living in a world where Tony thought no more of him than any other soldier under his command sting any less. At least Tony could now be free of whatever guilt he had borne. Tony had brushed away their past treasons and offered them a place here, allowed them to continue to serve, largely unscathed by what they had done before, though Steve did not delude himself it would be easy to integrate with the Stark forces, some of whom had probably faced the Avengers across a battlefield at some point.

They still had a great deal to make up for, but surely all of this relieved some of the burden Tony had carried. At least he no longer felt he owed anything to Steve, a ridiculous notion to begin with anyway. The final gift of the shield appeared to satisfy whatever recompense Tony felt had to be paid. Steve had to admit, his fingers itched to feel the rounded metal beneath his hands. He had never beheld anything like it. Light, but impossibly strong.

Jarvis arrived some time later with a cart carrying his dinner. Steve thanked him profusely, realizing that he would actually miss the seemingly dour man who had loved Tony when his own father couldn’t see what a brilliant son he had. His eyes glazed over at the assortment of foodstuffs, cured meats, stewed vegetables, soft breads and the ubiquitous bowl of blueberries. He sometimes wondered wryly if Jarvis was trying to outdo himself at each meal, though he always ate heartily and enjoyed Jarvis’ clucking when he came to retrieve the empty tray. Steve had grown up with hunger a constant gnawing in his belly. He did not turn away food lightly, though Jarvis seemed to take that as something of a challenge.

He had little to pack, he thought, as he surveyed the room. Just the few items of clothing he had actually worn, the shield and the ointment Bruce had given him for his back. Everything else he would leave behind. He looked around, his gaze stalling on the door. He was leaving a lot behind. He shrugged out of his pants and shirt, pulling on the soft, thin pants that gathered at the waist with a tie, which Jarvis assured him were for sleeping. He shook his head. And each day, freshly laundered ones appeared. Of all the things he had seen since he arrived here, this might be the most extravagant, and that included a book bound in gold and jewels and a whole bowl full of melting ice. Clothes, solely for sleeping in, he marveled. He shook his head in disbelief and lay back against the pillows, watching the flames flicker lower and lower in the hearth. He refused to think any more of the morning and what changes would come then. He was a soldier. He did not belong in the world of kings.

He woke with a start, gasping and choking down air that wouldn’t obey his body’s commands, his mouth filled with the taste of salt and sand, the sheets wrapped around his arms and legs like vines as he shuddered against a cold blackness that wasn’t there. His whole body tremored with a remembered terror as he blinked into the darkness, eight white lines blinding against the back of his eyes when he closed them, and he reached out, grasping, searching for something he couldn’t find.

Except, this time his body’s plea was met with warm, strong hands locking onto his shoulders and drawing him close as he swallowed down a mouthful of bile, still shivering with a phantom chill. “Steve? Steve, are you—dammit, just breathe, okay?” he heard a low voice whisper close to his ear. Someone was rubbing a calloused hand gently up and down his back, carefully kneading hard knots of tension out of his shoulders as knuckles scraped over his spine.

Steve coughed a few more times, then finally managed to force air into his body at something of a normal pace, though his heart was still pounding a drumbeat in his chest. He raised his eyes to find himself staring into Tony’s concerned gaze, a shock of surprise running through him. He looked around the room quickly, then back to Tony.

“Is—is something wrong?” Steve asked in confusion, a cascade of possibilities, all of them fairly
A harsh laugh escaped Tony before he shuttered his features in the dying light of the fire.

“Everything,” Tony replied quietly, the word slipping out even as Steve could see Tony try to pull it back, but when Steve opened his mouth to ask for more information, Tony cut him off. “No, no, nothing, it’s nothing. It’s fine,” Tony amended, his hands falling away from where they had been tracing Steve’s skin as if trying to keep Steve together on their own.

“Then—then what—” Steve started, looking around as if the room was holding answers in abeyance, because he was suddenly very much aware that Tony was here, in his bed, so very, very close.

“I did not mean to disturb you,” Tony explained carefully, looking at him askance and shifting away on the bed. “I wanted—I just needed to—I thought it would be better this way. Somehow. Fuck, I don’t know what I thought. Then, you were dreaming or—I don’t know—you--you called for me,” Tony said, voice rough and fraught with something that sounded terribly fragile at the same time. “You said my name,” Tony finished, turning his head to stare into the dying fire cradled in the stone hearth.

Steve frowned and tried to force himself to remember the dream that kept disturbing his nights. Like each prior night, the dream limped away into nothingness almost as soon as he woke, leaving behind only the feeling of reaching for something that was not there, and waking to a world that was wrong somehow, dimmer than it should be, as if the bright lines that scalded his vision leched more and more light away each time he saw them.

“I’m sorry,” Steve replied for lack of anything better to say, though he knew instantly it had been the wrong choice as Tony stiffened across from him and looked down at where his hands lay in his lap, the same hands that had, just a moment ago, grabbed onto him so tightly as if they would never let go—grabbed him...grabbed him...his mind chased the thought...he had been floating...no, wait...that wasn’t quite right...sinking, he thought, he had been sinking, light and air and everything else that mattered above him, but out of reach, and Tony, Tony had grabbed him, held him...pulled him back from something, some abyss that his mind kept trying to revisit in his dreams. Anchored him. Saved him.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Steve. Nothing. I should not have—I don’t know what I was thinking,” Tony mumbled, standing up and starting to move way. “This was a mistake.”

“Wait,” Steve called, too loudly in the darkened room, the word seeming to bounce off the walls and move between them. He reached out without thinking and grabbed onto Tony’s hand, before the other man could move further away, pulling him back down to the bed. He didn’t know what he intended to say, not really. That he’d had a bad dream? It sounded childish even to his own ears. He opened his mouth then snapped it shut again, nothing he could possibly say sounding right in his head.

He turned his head away from Tony’s questioning gaze, letting out a hiss of frustrated breath. There really wasn’t anything left to say, but he wanted more than anything to find something that would keep Tony here. Was it any surprise his mind sought Tony in his dreams? Yet, what did that change here, where they were so far apart? Dreams were the proper province for those kinds of thoughts, not this place. He started to apologize again, then caught himself, finally raising his eyes to meet Tony’s stare, his dark eyes dancing with the flicker of firelight, watching Steve intently.

“Do you—are you asking me to stay?” Tony asked carefully, voice clipped and rough with
something that sounded almost pained.

Steve looked down where he was clasping Tony’s hand, watched as Tony’s fingers threaded through his, holding on. There was really only one answer to give, though he wasn’t entirely sure what question he was answering. “Yes,” he said simply, returning his gaze to Tony’s.

A harsh groan, broken and shattered, escaped Tony’s mouth as he shifted forward on the bed, cupping Steve’s jaw in his other hand and pulling Steve’s mouth to his. Oh, Steve thought dimly, the word echoing from the back of his mind as if from a long distance away as his world tilted and spun. Oh.

Tony’s hand slipped from his, winding its way up through Steve’s hair, tugging him forward. Steve eyes fell shut as he felt the warm press of Tony’s tongue against his lips and let them fall open, his breath coming faster and faster as Tony slanted his mouth over his, feeling dizzy, his body melting into Tony’s, reaching for him as if he would otherwise drown. Tony nipped lightly at his bottom lip, worrying it with his teeth. There was an ache building a hollow place inside Steve’s body as Tony swept his tongue inside his mouth. Steve ran his hands over Tony’s shoulders, feeling the muscles bunch and quiver beneath him, heard Tony moan, a warm, shuddering wisps of air filling Steve’s mouth.

The hand winding its way through his hair tightened, tugging his head back just enough to free their mouths. Tony’s lips barely left his skin as they traced a pattern down the column of Steve’s throat, settling in the curve of his neck where it met his shoulder, sucking a mark against his skin. Steve felt his flesh prickle at the sensation, his eyes watering as his vision swam, sinking into the feeling of the wet heat of Tony’s mouth, his heart pounding a staccato in his chest. He reached out, gripping Tony’s shoulders and pulling Tony’s mouth back to his, wanting more, needing to be closer somehow. He wrapped his hands around Tony’s back and ran them up and down in unconscious imitation of Tony’s earlier attempts to soothe him, drawing him closer, seeking connection, anything, more of Tony, more of the feel of his mouth, the taste of him, just more.

Tony obliged with a hoarse groan and found Steve’s mouth again, lips brushing across Steve’s, teasing them against his own. Steve pulled Tony tighter, pressing their bodies together, gnashing his mouth against Tony’s, too hard and rather ineptly, teeth clashing, but it didn’t seem to matter as Tony opened his mouth over Steve’s and flicked his tongue against the tip of Steve’s, all the encouragement Steve needed to trace it along the seam of Tony’s lips, push inside the heat of Tony’s mouth, earning a full body shudder from Tony. It was all happening too fast for Steve, everything at once, not enough and entirely too much, the taste of him, mulled spices and warm wine, the smell of metal, smoke and soot underneath the finely tailored garments, the feel of rough hands gentle against the scarred skin of his back.

Tony tore his mouth away, sucking in great gulps of air as he braced one hand the bed beside Steve, pressing him back against the pillows in one swift, practice motion. His eyes were nothing but inky orbs, watching Steve with the same expression Steve recalled seeing across a campfire. At the time, it had bothered him, left him unnerved in some way he had not been able to understand. Now, it just left him wanting more, wanting everything, the hollow ache in his belly warming and spreading, coiling lower.

Tony’s mouth moved from his again, kissing the hollow at the base of his throat before moving lower, his beard scraping a path over heated skin, damp with sweat. Steve’s whole body tightened as Tony’s hands splayed across his stomach, fingers resting just above the jut of his hipbone, rubbing ever so slightly at the skin there. His mouth continued its path, stopping long enough to trace the small, thin line of red where a branch had torn through Steve’s side in the River. Tony looked up from his ministrations, eyes dark pools framed by slick, matted lashes, mouth wet and
“Can I?” Tony breathed in a hushed tone. It would have been awe on anyone else, Steve though hazily. He was incapable of forming words at the moment, so he just nodded. He had no idea what Tony was requesting, but there was nothing he cared to deny him, not now, when hot breath and teeth were nipping a path over his stomach, lighting his body with sensation. Tony looked up at him, eyes gleaming, cat-like, in the glow from the fire’s embers. Amber, he thought dazedly. Tony’s eyes are amber, he realized with a shudder, though he did not know from where that thought came.

Tony shifted lower on the bed, letting his mouth trail down to Steve’s navel, swirling his tongue around it as he did. Steve gripped his hands in the pillows beneath his head, holding on for dear life while Tony’s mouth and hands kept him pinned in place, the dark bob of his head moving lower as Steve’s mouth slackened, falling open with a gasp as the practiced fingers he had admired earlier in day as they imbued metal with life unwound the tie at his waist and pushed the pants down past his hips. Steve felt a flood of embarrassment rush up his chest, warming his cheeks as he sucked in a harsh breath, his back bowing as if plucked by a string. He squelched his eyes shut, throwing one arm over his face, his breath coming in pants that had long ago lost their rhythm.

“Look at me, Steve,” Tony commanded. Steve pried his eyes open and moved his arm aside, looking down where Tony crouched. He wanted to beg Tony to touch him, like before, in the Pass, anything, just please, please, please—Tony grinned, fond and wanton at the same time, and Steve realized he had been speaking aloud, and clamped his mouth together. Tony tongue darted out to lick his lips, and Steve’s eyes followed the movement, his mouth suddenly dry. He opened his mouth, maybe to plead again, he wasn’t sure, when Tony dipped his head and flattened his tongue against Steve’s hard length, licking a hot, wet stripe from root to tip. Steve’s hips bucked of their own accord, a guttural cry tumbling from his lips as all thought was banished. His mind stuttered and stalled as Tony’s mouth wrapped around the head of his cock, tongue flicking against the foreskin as he drew Steve into his mouth.

The heat of the room, the softness of the bed beneath him, the lambency of the fire, everything faded to nothing but the feeling of Tony’s mouth, warmth and wetness, the pull and drag as Tony as moved his head up and down, sucking lightly, then harder as his mouth rounded on the head. Steve felt his whole body tighten, his shoulders hunching, a sharp cry torn from deep inside as he sought to shift his hips away. He reached down to push Tony away, but Tony grabbed his hand and pushed it back to Steve’s side, threading his fingers through Steve’s as he had done before, anchoring him in place. Tony’s hand clenched harder at his hip, pressing him into the bed, stilling his movements a moment before he lost control completely, hips jerking as he found release.

His breathing slowly returned to normal as he looked down at Tony in mortification. “S—ss— sorry---sorry, I—“ Steve stammered incoherently, but Tony just pulled Steve’s pants back into place and shifted up the bed beside him to bury his head against Steve’s shoulder, rubbing his forehead back and forth as he undid his breeches, licked his palm and took himself in hand, rubbing a frantic pace that couldn’t feel good.

“Just touch me,” Tony said, his voice tight and ragged as he let his head fall back against the pillow next to Steve. “Won’t take much.” Steve moved his hand, stutteringly at first, then firmer, wrapping his fingers around Tony’s cock, as Tony groaned and threw his head back. A moment later, as promised, Steve felt a warm rush in his hand as Tony’s body shook next to him, his hips thrusting an erratic rhythm against Steve’s side.

Steve let his head fall back against the pillows and closed his eyes, trying to focus on evening out his breathing. He wasn’t sure what had happened here, except that his whole body was tingling,
curled around Tony the same way he had in the forest beneath a canopy of oaks and stars, and something he recognized for happiness was flooding his bones and seeping out his skin where it pressed against Tony. He started to wind his arms tighter around Tony, but the other man was already pulling away, sitting up and straightening his clothing. Steve blinked at him in stunned bewilderment, something desperate and horrible clawing its way down his spine to settle in his stomach.

Tony reached to the bedside table and wordlessly handed him one of the towels Bruce had left there for Steve to use to apply the ointment to the scars on his back. He stared at it stupidly for a moment, then took it from Tony’s hand and cleaned himself up as best he could. Tony stood and walked towards the door.

Steve kept his eyes on his task instead of following Tony’s retreating back, though each step echoed somewhere deep inside his chest, pounding down against something that had barely begun to bloom there. He sat up and flung the towel to the side of the bed, drawing his knees to his chest and running his hands through his hair, letting his elbows rest against the tops of his knees. He heard the snick of the door being pulled open and finally let his gaze return to Tony, who stood framed in the doorway. Tony paused and looked back over his shoulder at Steve, his gaze unreadable.

“I think I’m damned,” Tony said, his eyes roaming over where Steve sat in the disheveled bed. “I thought I could do it. I tried to, really, I did. I didn’t mean for this to happen. Barnes was right, though, in the end. He saw who I was. He knew. I think I might hate him a little for that.”

“Bucky?” Steve frowned, the whole conversation having no meaning for him, except that Tony was leaving, and he was—he didn’t know what he was.

“I wish to the gods I was the person you think I am,” Tony said, looking down at where his hand gripped the handle of the door, his voice oddly subdued. Steve just stared at him, taken aback by the turn in conversation, unsure what he had missed. “I’m a selfish bastard, Steve. I’m everything you should hate. You were wrong about me. What you said. Before. I’m not remarkable. And I’m the gods-damned last person someone like you should be vouching for. I’ll destroy you. Ruin you. Turn you into something I can bear to--It’s what I do, you see? Take things apart, break them down to pieces and parts,” Tony choked out, shaking his head and letting his chin fall to his chest.

“I’ll do that to you. I can’t seem to help myself, not where you are concerned. I know it. Barnes knows it. Hell, look what knowing me has done to you already! And yet, even knowing that, I couldn’t just stay the fuck away from you. The one thing I promised to give you if you asked it of me. What does that say about me?” Tony demanded harshly, fingers clenching around the door handle. “You were right to begin with, Steve, you and Barnes. I am the thing you should be fighting against.”

Steve stared at him numbly, his mouth opening and closing, words escaping him.

“You were right to want to leave. You shouldn’t be here. You can’t be here,” Tony continued, letting his gaze settle on Steve, the weight of it almost stifling.

“What are—I don’t understand,” Steve replied in frustration, pushing himself up off the bed and starting over to where Tony stood at the door. “I thought—“ he stopped, because he didn’t know what he thought, not anymore.

“Jarvis will arrange to have you moved at first light,” Tony announced softly, tearing his eyes away from Steve and pulling the door shut behind him. “Do not return.”
In case it wasn't clear, during Steve's fever dream, "Bucky" is each of the Avengers in turn. Steve's mind puts Tony on the shore, unreachable to him. *sob*

I deeply appreciate each and every comment and kudo. Thank you so much for reading this thing! I think probably 2 chapters and an epilogue left, though I thought this was going to be like 80,000 words, so what do I know?

Oh, and raise your hand if you think Hammer just died all nicely "off-screen." Yeah, me neither.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The air was old down here, Tony thought. Cold and dank with the moisture that seeped through the rocks, runnels of murky water leaking down to the sea somewhere below. You could hear it, if you strained, the rushing susurration of the waves pounding against the craggy cliffs upon which the city had been built, slowing carving it away, piece by piece.

Tony sucked in a deep gulp of it, the mustiness giving it solidity, some kind of thick weightiness, as if he had to swallow it down instead of breathing it in. It tasted of decay, he thought, mold and spoliation, yes, but something else, buried under those more familiar smells, something that burned his nostrils, made his stomach turn and recoil.

The tunnel down which he walked was low and rounded, chiseled out by stonemasons generations ago when they built the first castle here for the first Starks to claim dominion over these lands, little more than a large keep then. The walls were rough and uneven and barely wide enough for a single man to pass through, narrowing as he followed the tunnel as it slunk lower and lower, burrowing its way to the sea. He held his torch up, keeping his hand on the rope as it ran through his fingers with each step.

Most of the subterranean vaults that dotted the thick, cavernous rock beneath the Castle were used for storage of foodstuffs that needed the cool, dry cellars that lined the large tunnels far above him. Feeding a Castle’s worth of Lords and Ladies and their various attendants required quite a bit of that, and the servants went regularly to and fro from those cellars, bringing up rounds of cheese, hunks of bread, bags of potatoes and last season’s mushrooms and root vegetables, stored in piles as high as a man’s shoulders.

The vaults here, this far down in the cold underbelly of the earth, were…different.

They went deep, the twisting stairs, little more than small ledges of rock knocked free of the wall, barely large enough for one man’s footsteps. They hugged the wall and descended so steeply at some points as to become nearly vertical. No one really knew just how deep, at least no one alive today. Down here, the tunnels ran like wormholes veering off in all directions, some ending abruptly in a sheer rock wall, others curving around on themselves taking anyone who sought passage in never-ending circles. Meant to deceive, he thought, to confuse. To make sure nothing got out, a voice in his head supplied.

For as long as he could recall, the titled children of the Castle talked about these spaces in hushed voices behind cupped hands lest their tutors see, whispered stories overheard from servants, growing more elaborate with each telling. Though he had always been educated separately, the stories reached his ears same as others. Wild tales from the sons and daughters of the nobility who had nothing to fear save what they could make up. It had all seemed somewhat magical then, the idea of these places shunted down in the earth, hidden passages lost to time and memory.

When he was a boy, he’d found an old drawing locked up in his father’s private library, the one he was not supposed to access. The drawing purported to be a map of the vaults someone had begun centuries ago, faded with age to make the lines nearly indecipherable. It had whetted his imagination though, the idea of this place and its ghosts lurking beneath the Castle. It had seemed an adventure, then, a claim to a feat only a child could consider a measure of bravery.
When Howard caught him studying the drawing, he had promptly grabbed the map and made Tony swear he would never, ever go down here. Howard had put the fear of the gods into him that day, he remembered, shouting and cursing at his imprudence that he would even consider such a thing. Naturally, that little lecture did little to quell Tony’s interest.

It had been Jarvis who found him, shivering and crying, his torch burnt down to little more than an ember in the air-deprived tunnels. He had not actually made it very far past the storage vaults, not really, though the bustle of the Castle, the life of it, had seemed leagues away as he quickly became disoriented in the murky quiet, his mind filling with stories he had told himself he did not believe. It was far more difficult to dismiss those tales when he was down here, in the deep, cavernous womb of the Castle where the dark made the impossible far more real.

Tony remembered huddling there against the tunnel’s wall, the cold, hard scrape of the rock against his cheek, his hands fisted over his ears to staunch the sounds of scratching, nails on stone, the rattle and clank of metal, pounding fists on doors that opened from only one direction, and, he could have sworn, terrible, forlorn screams of the lost filling his head. Jarvis assured him it was all in his mind, fear and imagination warring with reason and winning, something he hated, even as a boy. Fear was a weakness that was not allowed. And Starks had iron will. How many times had he heard that?

He should have been able to overcome it, master the fear, purge it from his mind, like his father could, but he’d heard them again, that night, in his bed in the Tower. He remembered covering his ears with his pillow to try to make them stop, wishing he could go upstairs to his mother’s room, but she was spending the night with friends, as she did more and more often during those days. And he had known he could seek comfort from his father. Even if he could get past the disobedience, Howard would never have allowed such childish fears, not from his son and heir, and the shame of disappointing him would have been far worse than lost sleep. So, he had stayed there, buried in his bed, waiting for dawn to come and accomplish what he could not on his own.

He eventually stopped hearing the sounds that were not there, of course, grew out of the fear of the unknown, as all children must do. There were plenty of things to keep him up at night without allowing the nonsense tales of childhood to cloud his mind. But he had never quite ceased to recall that terror, the panic of being lost, of being down there, with them. The forgotten ones.

He had remembered it again, many years later, in the cave with the Ten Rings, being chained, being held down, the water running into his ears, his mouth, down his nose as they pushed his fact into the bucket, feeling the scrape of the wooden bottom against his cheek, hearing the muffled shouts from above, but being unable to see anything but darkness. He had remembered it then. That fear, that terror of being forgotten, being left. That was the moment he realized that no one was coming for him. There would be no rescue, no white knight riding to his aid. His fate was his own. And he had done it, or almost, anyway, made it out only to find escape did not exist out there, then looked up from the dirt and blood and there was Steve, and he was saved after all.

In the darkness ahead, he could see a faint light that grew larger as he approached, the length of rope slackening slightly as he picked his way carefully down the low tunnel. Rhodey and Barnes were waiting, haloed by the torch Rhody held aloft. Their shadows loomed large, undulating against the crumbling walls of the tunnel. A dark pit of blackness emptied into nothingness behind them. It wasn’t so much dark, as the absence of light. Nothing reached down here, not the slightest gleam of day nor shine of star. It was a place where light did not exist, a darkness so complete that it had form, a solidness to it, as if it would press back against you if you reached your hand too far into it, or worse, draw your hand into it, consuming it, swallowing it.

“You’re late,” Barnes observed, his voice low and quiet, though it surrounded him in the confines
of the cave, the sound seeming to seek passage out of this place as much as anything else. “Was beginning to think you’d had second thoughts.” It wasn’t a question, not really, Tony noted as Barnes’ eyes raked over him. Tony wondered briefly what Barnes saw there in the dim light of the tunnel.

“None,” Tony answered, letting the rope he was holding fall to the ground.

“I have to tell you,” Rhodey began. “If it was anyone else who asked it of me, I would not have been able to do it. Guy will not shut up. I was ready to take his head off by the time we reached Obuda just to quiet him.”

“Open the door,” Tony ordered stiffly, watching as Barnes shuffled out of the way enough for Rhodey to push the large iron key into the lock. It was new, Tony noted, the metal shining in the torchlight, not like the half-rusted locks that guarded the other doors he had passed on his trek down here. He had planned, after all. Prepared. Sent two of his best scouts down here with a rope attached to one of them, the other end tied to the door that blocked the entrance to this section off from the rest of the storerooms above. He had given this thought, perhaps too much of it, but it had passed the time when he could not sleep because Steve could not breathe. Thoughts of this had consumed him, burning through his mind as Steve’s chest rattled and fell with the effort each shaking gasp. It had been this or go mad, though the line between those was probably far closer than he wanted to consider.

Rhodey pulled the heavy door back and nodded to Tony. Tony moved inside, holding his torch up to cleave the inky blackness as Rhodey and Barnes framed him in the doorway.

“Stark?” a hesitant voice rasped out, the man coming to his feet amidst the clink of chains, his eyes squinting into the darkness suddenly stabbed by the light of the torches. “Stark! Oh, thank the gods! Finally, someone with some sense. Took you long enough, gods! Your man there?”

Hammer pointed towards the dark shape that was Rhodey, rattling the chains that bound his arms and tethered him to the wall through an iron ring that jutted out of the rock. Tony turned and handed the torch he was holding to Barnes, who waved it around the room a bit, making the rock appear to move and twist in the shadowy light as if something alive were trying to birth itself from it.

“Little overzealous, Stark, I’m sorry to say,” Hammer continued. “I mean, really, you know me! Tell him, for gods’ sake! I hate to pull rank, you know that, but this treatment is beyond the pale. By quite a fucking bit, I’d say. I tried to tell him I was a peer of the Realm, but he wouldn’t fucking listen to anything I said! One minute, I’m riding hard to get back here to the city, to you, Your Grace, and the next thing I know, that man,” Hammer pointed, “Bound me in chains and threw a hood over my head! Dragged me down here, you believe it? I told him you and I go way back, our fathers wanted us to be practically brothers when we were kids, am I right? All our little adventures together? The parties? That time with the twins? I mean, this is ridiculous! You remember, right, Stark? Come on, tell him—“

“Stop speaking,” Tony commanded brusquely. Hammer’s mouth clamped shut so fast that Tony was surprised he did not hear Hammer’s teeth clacking together. “Do you know why you are here?”

“I know, I know, the whole Pierce thing. Look, it was all just a ruse!” Hammer implored, his voice sounding strangled, coated with desperation. “No way would I join up with someone like that. I mean, Hydra and all that bullshit—crazy, I’m telling you. I mean, come on, you know me, Stark! That’s not me. I’m not a bad guy. Got out as soon as I could. Was coming to you, offer my services and all. Save the Realm and all that. Heard Fury pulled the same thing, and now he’s in
your service again. Same thing with me, Stark, got all kinds of information. You wouldn’t believe

“You took something that didn’t belong to you,” Tony continued tightly, his teeth grinding hard
together as he fought for control. He felt the heat rising in his chest, coiling and tightening like a
vise until it would choke him, his vision swimming for a moment as he looked at Hammer, bile
rising in his throat. He must have taken a step forward because he felt Rhody’’s firm hand
gripping his shoulder, a heavy, steadying weight, stopping his progress.

“What? You mean the weapons? No, no, I didn’t take anything, Stark, I swear to the gods, not a
damn thing. Those were my designs. But, ah, well…I mean, you may have noticed that they
didn’’t work so well. That was me, see? Trying to make sure Pierce wasn’’t too successful,”
Hammer added quickly, with apparent self-satisfaction. “Worked pretty darn well, if I do say so
myself. He never suspected a thing.” Hammer crowed. “Look, if something is missing—you know
—you know who it probably was? Stern. Yeah, he’’s probably the one you want. He was just
here, right? Very loyal to Pierce. Close. In on the whole thing since the beginning. You know he
was funneling the Crown’’s money to Pierce’’s cause, going way back. Look, I can help you get
him, Stark. Both of them. You want that? I can make that happen,” Hammer offered, eagerness
dripping from every word as whatever kind of deal he imagined might happen here seemed to
coalesce in his mind.

“Did you enjoy it? Making him suffer? Did you take pleasure in that? Because he refused you?”
Tony demanded, his voice a low hiss reverberating off the stone walls.

“Wh-what are—who are— “ Hammer stammered, eyes widening a bit as comprehension slowly
sank in. “Rogers? Is that who--this is about some soldier—“

“Don’’t!” Tony’’s voice cracked through the room. “You do not speak his name,” he finished, the
threat there unmistakable.

“I—look, I was—it was my job, I mean—I was in charge of troop discipline. Barnes, tell him!”
Hammer pleaded, looking over Tony’’s shoulder, then taking a stumbling step back at whatever he
saw there. “Pierce was the one who ordered it, not me, Stark, not me! I had no choice. I was as
much a prisoner there as—as—he was, I swear. I didn’’t want to. Hey, it was me that gave him the
book, see? So he could figure out about Pierce’’s plan. Knew he was a smart one. Worked, too,
didn’’t it? He told you, about the ships. That was me, Stark! I didn’’t want to hurt him, you’’ve got
to believe me. Couldn’’t let Pierce know I was double-crossing him, though. Had to keep up
appearances so I could escape, get back to you, help you stop Hydra. Pierce would have suspected
if I’’d gone easy on Rog—on him. Look, I swear, whatever the guy told you--nothing happened,
okay?” Hammer assured him, the chains rattling as he held out his hands in supplication.

Tony registered the feeling of the sharp burn across his knuckles as the back of his hand connected
with Hammer’’s mouth before he even realized he was in motion. Hammer’’s head snapped back
with satisfying force as he stumbled backwards and knocked against the wall behind him. There
was a splotch of red on his lower lip that he pressed the back of his hand to, taking it away and
staring at it with something akin to disbelief. Tony looked down and saw lines of skin scraped
there, where Hammer’’s teeth had grazed and rubbed a thumb over them, relishing the sting.

“St-st-stark? What the hell was that?” Hammer stuttered out, flecks of blood coating his lips and
chin.

“Your Grace,” Rhody said evenly, though he did not move from the doorway. It was an offer,
Tony knew, to do whatever it was Tony might ask of him, here in this place, in the dark where
nothing would ever leave it except what they carried with them.
“It’s fine, Rhody,” Tony said, casting a quick glance over his shoulder. Barnes’ was watching Hammer with a feral sort of avarice, a wolfish smile on his face, his tongue darting out between his teeth, almost as if licking the scent of blood off the air.

Tony closed the distance to where Hammer crouched against the wall, bent at the waist as he patted his broken lip with the heel of his hand, his eyes wild and confused. Tony braced his bloodied hand against the wall next to Hammer’s head and leaned in, his voice low, though it filled the room, echoing off the rough-hewn rock of the walls.

“This,” Tony began, “is called an oubliette. You may be familiar with the term. It is where we put things we want to forget. And you? I will do everything in my power to see that he forgets you,” Tony whispered as Hammer’s eyes darted to his, widening with slowly dawning horror. “I will not forget though, Justin. Never. I will remember. I will sit up there, in the light of day, and I will think of you, down here, in the dark. I will drink my wine and wonder if your tongue is torn to pieces from trying to lick water where it bleeds off the wall. I will sit at my table enjoying my meal and wonder if you have caught a rat, if your mouth waters at the thought of that yet. I will wonder if you’ve dug your nails into the rock until they are left little more than jagged and bleeding stumps, if you have made a list in your head of the fleshiest parts that are left, if you’ve saved the teeth that have fallen out or tried to chew them, too. I will sit on my throne and listen to the musicians play their tune and wonder if you have screamed your throat raw and bloody until you can’t make a sound anymore and all is quiet down here again. But. I. Will. Not. Forget.”

Hammer was staring at him, his mouth opening and closing, attempting to form soundless words. “You—you—wouldn’t—you can’t do this to me! You can’t, you can’t, you can’t!” Hammer chanted, blubbering now, large, round tears falling as his mouth twisted and shook. “You can’t, please, you can’t do this! I’ll do anything, anything, Stark, just ask! Just say the words, anything!” Hammer pleaded nearly incoherently, his whole body trembling with abject terror, as Tony stepped away. Hammer reached out chained hands to grab at him, but he was too far away and the chains did not reach, rattling loudly as they stretched taut. Hammer fell to his knees on the cold stone of the floor, hands still reaching out, fingers grasping at shadows. Tony smelled a pungent, sharp odor and realized that Hammer had lost control of himself.

Rhodey stepped outside the door, holding his torch high and waited. Barnes looked down at Hammer with a curl of disgust on his face, then turned on his heel and left the room, plunging the cell into darkness.

“Please,” Hammer begged around choked sobs. “Please. Don’t do this. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t know, Your Grace, please! I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t have---not if I’d known. Never, I swear! Please. I didn’t know. Please!” Hammer shouted, raw panic seeping into his voice now. “Stark, please. You have to believe me. I didn’t know he mattered to you. Stark! Sta—“

“They all mattered to someone,” Tony said as he shut the door on Hammer’s words. He stood for a moment with his hands braced against it, his fingers curling against the cold metal of the door. After a long moment, he pushed himself away and took the large iron key that Rhodey held out to him and slid it into the heavy lock. It turned with a soft, scraping click. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Barnes nod ever so slightly. It was done, whatever unspoken pact that had bound them fulfilled. Tony turned to Rhodey and placed the key back into his hand. “Melt this,” he ordered.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Rhodey responded quickly, wrapping his hand tightly around the key.

Tony looked at the two of them in turn. “As far as Steve knows, Hammer was killed attempting to escape one of our patrols. He never finds out about this,” Tony ordered. “Never.”

“Finds out about what?” Barnes asked, his mouth twisting around the words. Even in the darkened
tunnel, Tony could see the satisfaction in Barnes’ dark gaze boring into his, and wondered what it was that Barnes found in his own. It seemed to be enough, because Barnes nodded and shrugged his shoulders.

They followed Tony back up the tunnels, eventually winding their way up to the door that opened to the stone steps up to the storerooms above. The air grew lighter here somehow, more breathable. If he strained, Tony could hear the sounds of the Castle above, never entirely quiet no matter the time of night. Rhodey wrapped a tight hand around Tony’s shoulder and squeezed, then reached down and took the rope from Tony’s outstretched hand, untied it from the door that led up to the storerooms and began winding it around his arm in a tight coil. Tony and Barnes both watched him with almost ritualistic attention until the entire length was wrapped around Rhodey’s arm. When it was done, Rhodey shut the door and locked it behind them, and they climbed the remaining stairs to the long hallway lined with storerooms of various sizes, overflowing with foodstuffs and caskets of wine and mead.

Once they reached the main floor of the Castle, Rhodey bowed slightly and left them, heading for his own apartment near the barracks. That left Tony and Barnes to make their way back to the Tower through quiet hallways and staircases, past unquestioning guards used to the odd hours kept by their liege. They walked back to the Tower in silence, though Tony, at least for his part, felt it to be companionable in a strange way. He couldn’t quite say he and Barnes were friends, but they shared a common bond, fused together by their shared devotion.

When they reached the Tower’s apartments, Barnes nodded somewhat stiffly, never quite making it a bow, and left Tony to continue up to his own chambers near the top of the Tower. Barnes, he noted, went straight for Natasha’s room, pushing open the door without knocking and ducking inside. Tony grunted a bit in what wasn’t entirely surprise, though he found himself envying Barnes that, having a place to go to find solace or comfort or just to forget for a moment, find some connection to this world again that did not involve darkness and pain or stink of fear.

The place they had been, what they—what he—had done, it clung to him, settling over his skin like a sheath, and he wondered if Barnes and Rhodey felt the same. They, at least, had the distance that came with not being the one to make the decision. He honestly wasn’t sure if it was justice or revenge or if the line between those two, at least where Steve was concerned, was simply too blurred to see. He should be horrified by the night’s events, but all that he could muster was weariness so deep it filled his bones, making his limbs heavy and slowing his movements as he climbed the steps.

Tony reached the long hallway that contained his chambers and the ones where Steve slept on, unaware of the night’s doings. He went to his door, nodding to the guards as he passed. Tony stopped at the entry and looked inside the empty chamber, everything and nothing waiting for his return, then spared a glance down the hall where Steve’s door stood closed to him. If he could just look upon him…see him whole and safe, and hopefully at peace now, after Rhodey delivered the news of Hammer’s fate earlier today. If he could just see him, let his mind hold thoughts that weren’t poison, just for tonight, it would be enough. Maybe then he could sleep, find the peace that eluded him, though he doubted it, but at least, if he could have those few moments, he would have something else on which to dwell, something good and pure, even if it was not really his. He could pretend, for tonight. It was better than an empty bed filled only with what he brought to it.

He let his hand still on the door handle for a long moment, nerves fluttering in his stomach, though why it should be so, he did not know. He was just going to look in on him, just for a moment. Tony pressed his forehead against the smooth wood of the door and drew in a deep breath, finally pushing the handle forward and stepping inside, past the small foyer and its carved screens and through to the bedroom where a dim fire burned in the hearth. Steve was sleeping on his back, one
arm thrown up over his head, the other clutching the quilted coverlet to his chest.

*He looks so young,* was Tony’s first thought. Steve managed to command the hearts of men by simply being who he was, seemed to take up so much space in the world when he was out in it, but here, here, he was soft with sleep and warmth, the burden of duty sloughed away by dreams. Young and fragile and undimmed by a world that would take everything from him if it could. Steve would give it, Tony knew, because that was what Steve did, picked up his sword and shield and said, here and no further, no matter what it cost him. And the cost was great sometimes, Tony knew. Too high, however willingly paid, and Tony just kept adding to the scale, waiting for the day it was too much.

He should have left, right then, Tony thought later, bringing the cup to his lips and finding it empty. Again. He picked up the flagon and upended it into his cup, only to find a few hearty drops pour forth. Tony shoved it back on the table, knocking the cup to the floor where it spun on its side like spinning wheel. He should have looked his fill and then gotten the hell out of there. No, he corrected. He should never have been there in the first place. He had no right. He knew that, and he’d done it anyway, sitting down in one of the chairs by the fire, watching Steve’s even breathing, letting his own match it in turn, soaking in what he could of Steve’s presence before everything went all to hell. He had been so beautiful there, aglow in a sheath of golden fire where the flames danced over his skin, and Tony had been weak and selfish and unable to just walk away like any decent person would.

How had he managed to fuck things up this badly? All Steve asked of him was to be able to serve. Shortly after they first met, Steve had sat next to him by the fire and told him that was all he had ever wanted to do. To be allowed that one thing. That was all Steve had asked of him, all Steve wanted of him, yet he could not stop himself from demanding more, taking when he should be giving.

He had told Steve, that night in the forest, that if Steve asked it of him, he would give him whatever was required, even if it meant staying away. And he had granted Steve that, had agreed to keep his end of the bargain he had struck with himself when he heard about what happened in Brookland. He had kept his word, down in the workshop this morning, however much the thought twisted and writhed inside his chest. Of course, that promise had barely grown cold before he found an excuse to see Steve, letting himself into his chamber while he slept. He had not been strong enough to deny himself that, not after the night’s events. He had not intended for Steve to wake, certainly not with Tony’s name falling from his lips.

Of course Steve did not want to stay here, and gods, how awkward must that have been for him? How exactly does one go about rejecting a King? Apologize. Offer to serve. Offer heartfelt thanks. Then politely insist on getting the fuck away as soon as possible, leave everything behind, take nothing that is offered, just go. Anywhere, anywhere else, anywhere that was not a place where Tony was would do.

And why not? Steve knew now who it was to blame for the deaths of so many of the people he cared for, knew how easily Tony had bathed himself in willful blindness while Stane and Pierce laid waste to his own people. Steve knew it all, how Tony had lied and used him, used the team, for his own ends, even at the risk of exactly what had occurred to Steve. That was on Tony as much as if he had raised the whip himself. If he had told them the truth sooner, risked the consequences, that would never have happened. And now, perhaps most damning of all, Steve knew what kind of King Tony had been, what kind of person. Hardly someone remarkable. Not someone to vouch for. Someone to escape.

He closed his eyes and steepled his hands over his face. How different was he really from the man
rotting far down below? Degrees? There were many ways to hurt that did not leave marks one could see. Tony had sat there in Steve’s room, watching the firelight color his skin, half-hard from simply looking at Steve sleep. He couldn’t lie to himself, not about this. He’d wanted that, to feel Steve come apart beneath him, hear the desperate cries torn from his throat because of Tony, needed Steve to want him, even if it was just for that. He knew people came to his bed because of who he was and what he could give them, even if it was just a story to share. He was hardly a floundering innocent to think that his those who came to his bed cared for him in any real sense, but he had never used his position to press for something someone did not want to freely give. At least, not until tonight, he thought in disgust.

Steve had asked him not to go, and Tony had taken that for an invitation to stay, though he had known, even then, that it was not. Not really. He was taking more than what was offered, and he’d been well aware of that. What had he told himself as he followed the Avengers through the woods a lifetime ago, when he barely knew Steve and spent his time fantasizing ways to assuage his own bruised pride? A yes that wasn’t quite a no. Tony laughed, a harsh, bitter sound in the empty room. Of course Steve had said yes. Was he really going to tell Tony to get our? Did he know he even could? Rather difficult, after all, for a hitherto enemy soldier to deny the King who shows up in the middle of the night offering to suck him off.

It was better this way. Better for Steve. Maybe better for Tony. At least the temptation to repeat the mistakes of the night would not be right down the hall, entirely too accessible, apparently. Barnes had known. He had seen how weak Tony was. That he wouldn’t be able to stop himself, even after Steve had asked, dammit, asked to be allowed to leave. This is your place, Steve had said. And Steve wanted to be anywhere but here, even to go back to Fury, of all people, whom he would apparently rather serve with than Tony, despite Fury’s duplicity.

It was not as if Steve could stand there and accuse Tony of anything or be allowed his anger, however justified. Steve, no matter how valid his reasons, had fought against the Realm, and Tony knew that Steve was far from naïve about what that meant. Steve had said as much, back in the forest. He knew he was allowed his freedom only because of Tony. Hell, half the Court, if not more, thought the Avengers belonged in the stockade. Steve’s entire world, and that of his team, depended on Tony’s whims, on Tony’s continued largesse. How much clearer a message could Tony really expect to receive under the circumstances?

Tony knew though. Oh, he knew well enough, yet not even that had been enough to stop him. He kicked out at the cup on the floor, sending it spiraling across the smooth stone until it came to rest somewhere near the door. In truth, he may be damned, but he had brought the ruin upon himself. At least Steve was safe, though he would bear the scars of Tony’s failures for the rest of his life. Hours ago, Tony had traced them with his hands, felt the raised welts of flesh beneath his fingers, permanent testament to the cost exacted for knowing Tony. He had been a fool to think he could gift Steve with enough things to fill those spaces, the places left barren by what Tony had already destroyed, whether directly or through his own selfishness.

He could not replace the people Steve had lost with fine things, could not regain Steve’s trust with a book or a shield, could never repair the damage done to Steve’s body and spirit because Tony had chosen, over and over again, to put himself above those he was sworn to protect. He could tell himself he had continued to conceal his identity to protect the Realm until all the air was gone from the room, but he had conveniently conflated protecting the Realm with protecting himself. For that, he had been willing to risk more than he realized. And now he had lost everything. Fitting, that, he supposed. He reached out and tipped the flagon over with his finger, letting it judder loudly against the table, a single drop spilling out. There was nothing left.
Sleep would not come, he knew, so he did not even bother trying. As terrible as the day had gone, he still did not want to give it up to the new morning, because that would mean Steve and the rest of them were leaving. It would all be as it was before, and nothing the same ever again. He needed to get out of here, away from this place. He wasn’t entirely sure he could sit here and allow Steve to just leave, no matter his intentions. The idea of standing idly by while Steve left when he had the power to prevent it seemed a rather insurmountable task, at least for someone such as him. Iron will, he thought with a derisive snort. His father had been right about him. He was weak. Weak and selfish and fucking useless. He took and took until everything was dry and barren and then raised his fist to the gods in blame that nothing remained. Steve should get as far away from him as possible, as quickly as possible, before Tony took what was left of him, too.

He got up rather unsteadily, and changed clothes in a rush, suddenly imperative that he be anywhere but here. He left a note for Jarvis with instructions for what needed to be done, his hand shaking over the words, ink smudging on the parchment. The sun was just barely peeking over the horizon as he walked through his private stable. Outside of his workshop, little gave him more pleasure than riding, flying over the fields and letting the world try to catch him. He had loved it since he was a boy, and his stable was filled with the finest horseflesh in the Realm. His Horsemaster, and occasional carriage driver, when the need arose, came stumbling out, shrugging on his coat and trying to tuck in his tunic at the same time. When he caught sight of Tony, he tried to kneel and immediately over-balanced and fell back on his backside against a bale of hay, appearing rather comically shocked by the entire event.

“Morning, Happy,” Tony acknowledged, unable to keep the smile from his voice.

“Yer Grace! Didn’t ‘spect ta see you here, Sire, though I gotta say, it is good to have you back, Yer Grace. Real good,” Happy replied, standing up and brushing dirt and hay and gods knew what off, a wide, warm smile on his face. Tony could see why Pepper, for all her carefully ordered life and fierce intelligence, was drawn to the genial, easy man. Happy was one of the few truly good people around the Castle, loyal and agenda-free, other than simply wanting to do a good job for King and Realm and the animals he doted on. It was…refreshing, Tony thought. “You be wantin’ ta ride today or just visitin’?”


“Audi’ll be happy to see ya, Yer Grace. Think he’s missed you,” Happy said with a grin, hoisting a saddle and pads and walking back to one of the stalls in the far corner. Tony could hear hooves beating against the ground, the familiar smell of hay and horse that meant the promise of a small bit of freedom filling his nose. A few moments later and the soft, plodding thud of hooves could be heard behind him. He turned to see Happy leading the black out by the reins, its head snapping up and down in time as he sauntered behind the Horsemaster.

Tony walked over and looped the reins in his hands, reaching out to gently stroke the side of the horse’s neck. The animal quickly nudged its warm, wet nose into Tony’s neck, then dipped its head lower, snorting lowly. “Okay, okay!” Tony chuckled. “I think you missed your treats more than your master,” Tony accused lightly, though he gamely stuck his hand in his pocket and came out with cubes of sugar sitting on his palm. The horse devoured them in no time, then tossed its head, hooves dancing lightly over the ground.

“Oh, now you’re ready to go, eh? Spoiled, I tell you. Completely useless,” Tony groused with a fond shake of his head as he placed a booted foot in the stirrup and swung his other leg over the horse's back. “Thanks, Happy,” he said as he took the reins in hand and squeezed with his knees to indicate they should move. He urged the horse a bit faster as they trotted through the courtyard and past the bailey to the cobbled passageway that led to the gatehouse. Rhodey and a battalion of
mounted guards waited by the lowered drawbridge. Tony sighed wearily.

“Remind me, who does Happy take orders from again?” Tony questioned as he sidled his mount next to Rhodey’s.

“He just wants to ensure your safety, Your Grace,” Rhodry said over a yawn as he bent his head in acknowledgment. “You may recall that the last time you went off on your own without me, it did not exactly work out so well for you. So, this? This,” Rhodry continued with a grin, waving his arm wide at the escort, “Is the fun ride. That,” Rhodry said pointing at Tony’s horse. “Is the no-ride. You want to gainsay me, fine, I’ll see you at the court martial after I drag your ass back to the Tower.”

Tony sighed, his mouth flattening into a thin line. Freedom had a lot more people in it than he would have liked, but he could hardly deny the truth of Rhodry’s words. He wasn’t a boy anymore to defy his father and escape to the countryside for the afternoon, playing at being something he was not. There was war on his doorstep, after all. On the other hand, that did not mean he had to make it easy on them.

“You want to ride with me so badly, all you had to do was say so, Sweetcheeks,” Tony said with a cocky grin, then kicked Audi in the sides and they surged forward, racing across the bridge and through the lines of war machines and soldiers that dotted the once verdant fields outside the city, flinging mud and grit in their wake.

He heard Rhodry’s mount moving behind him and the clatter of other hooves in the distance as they cleared the fields and passed over the road into the cover of the forest beyond. He tugged the reins enough to slow their pace and let Rhodry catch up as they moved more carefully through the dense growth of trees.

“Figured you’d be out early this morning,” Rhodry said as he brought his horse up alongside Tony’s. “Heard there is going to be some rearranging in the Tower.”

“Gods, news travels fast,” Tony mumbled, looking away at nothing.

“It does when it’s about you, you know that,” Rhodry replied.

“They should print a newsletter or something,” Tony suggested with a wry twist to his mouth. “Make it easier to keep everyone informed of my private life. Draw pictures of what I’m wearing, who I’m with, the whole sordid record of my life, if they must.”

“Don’t give them ideas!” Rhodry warned with a chuckle, shaking his head. Rhodry cast a look behind them and to the sides, where the other soldiers had spread out to give them a bit of privacy and protection at the same time. “Have to admit, though, after what you said at Lord Ellis’ keep and then last night—well, I was a little surprised to hear that.”

Tony let his silence offer answer enough, and Rhodry, to his credit, did not push for more. They moved on to other subjects, going over the completion of the fortifications called for by the revelations of Steve’s map, Stane’s upcoming trial, and the latest updates from their scouts, which largely amounted to little more than nothing had changed, but the expectation was clearly there. Pierce’s forces had consolidated at their main camp after the skirmish at Fury’s encampment. No one had heard anything from the mountains, and that kind of quiet was nothing if not concerning. Rumors abounded, of course, as they always did, but so far, certainty of anything, other than that they were largely in the dark, managed to elude them.

“You going to let him loose a bit?” Rhodry asked, nodding at the horse. Tony jerked the reins to
the side in answer and nudged Audi forward at a faster pace as they came to a large clearing between the woods on one side and the cliffs on the other, with the sea spreading out to forever beyond. The guards moved to ring the clearing as Tony let the horse trot out of the treeline into the half-moon of the clearing, the grasses waving in the wind like a wide, green carpet.

He spurred the horse forward, using the pressure of his knees and thighs, leaning forward in the saddle and gripping the reins tighter to signal speed was needed. In an instant, the horse’s muscles were bunching beneath him, then lifting, pressing forward as Tony leaned low in the saddle next to the horse’s neck. They raced up and down the clearing over and over again like that, the horse’s legs extending under him, the wind battering his face, small flecks of sand stinging his skin, reins pulling hard against his gloved hands. For a moment, he could forget, let himself go and leave this world behind. Riding had always given him that, that sense of lightness, of weightlessness, being beyond everything, racing along the cliffs with the seabirds screaming at him, the pounding of his heart matched only by the pounding of the horse’s hooves against the ground and the waves against the cliff below, everything, for once, in sync.

It did not last, not today. Even this familiar escape seemed to be denied to him. He circled back, slowing the horse and letting the animal relax under him. Hard to leave this world when there were things you could not leave behind. He trotted over to where Rhodey’s mount stood just under the shade of the trees, dappled by the light seeping through the canopy overhead. “He asked to leave,” Tony told him quietly, looking back towards the cliffs’ edge where the birds dipped and darted, floating on the mist rising up from the sea.

“I’m sorry, Tony. More than you know,” Rhodey responded with a tight scowl. “I’d hoped—well. It is his loss, Your Grace,” Rhodey added, loyal to the end, Tony thought, choking down a bitter laugh.

“I think he has lost enough,” Tony responded quietly, dipping his head to look down where his hands tightened around the reins. Audi nickered in protest and twisted his head to the side. “Well. It’s a beautiful day to discuss treason, wouldn’t you say? Tell me, how stands our case against dear Obie?” Tony asked, noticeably changing the subject.

“Jury is assembled. As above reproach as I could find in this cesspool. Sorry, but you know virtually everyone here is in someone’s pocket, oftentimes your own,” Rhodey complained. Tony shrugged. It was the way of things, of getting things done. Who you knew and who owed you. “But, I think we’ve got enough on our panel that when they render their decision, few will gainsay it, at least not too loudly. Stane isn’t without his supporters, you know. He spent the Crown’s money quite freely, supporting virtually an entire swath of merchant class arming us for a war he helped create. I’m not going to say Lord Murdock’s concerns aren’t somewhat justified. It isn’t that we don’t believe what happened with Stane, but giving the jury enough proof to hang him with, well, that’s another story. And, with the arrest of Ross on top of things, the military is in something of an uproar.”

“I know I have a lot of relationships to repair with the military, but tell me this, will they follow me when the time comes? Or is there more support for Ross and Stane’s other cronies than you’re telling me? You know it won’t be long before Pierce and Schmidt make their move,” Tony asked. “We can’t afford dissention in the ranks.”

“Well, for the most part, they’re soldiers, and most of them are good men. They’ll follow orders. There’s no love for Hydra, that’s for sure. And you do have a lot of loyal people serving you. Danvers, for one, and her opinion carries a lot of weight. Yes, there are some who would, at least silently, prefer Stane’s methods, but I think they are only a small minority. Most of that ilk went to Pierce, and none of us were sorry to see their backs. I think after the trial, you’ll find support
solidifies more. Word of the ships and what Hydra was trying to do to the city is just starting to trickle down. Once they realize how close we all came to that fate...well, I think you might find they’re willing to overlook a lot of your past, uh...” Rhodey stammered a bit, looking askance at Tony. “Let’s go with inattentiveness. Anyway, I think they’ll come around once they understand what you saved them from. You are their King. They grew up as Stark men and women. They just need a reason to believe again, Sire.”

“The ships were because of Steve. I want that known,” Tony ordered sharply, looking to his side to make sure Rhodey acknowledged the command.

“That’s not—fine,” Rhodey agreed at Tony’s look. “Fine, though I’d rather you take the credit. It isn’t as if you don’t deserve some of it. You could use a bit of good publicity right now. You know Stane is going to do his best to drag you through the mud during this trial. His only option is to argue that you are unfit, and he was only trying to protect the Realm, at least as far as Brookland goes.”

“Same thing he tried in Court that day. Whatever his reasons, he can’t deny he went behind my back on that. That alone should be enough for a conviction,” Tony argued.

“Sure, in theory, but Tones, you have to realize that a lot of people agree with Stane’s actions on Brookland. Hell, I’m not sure I don’t. If that disease had gotten out...well, let’s just say that he doesn’t need a whole lot to sway opinion on that one,” Rhodey explained, his mouth tightening into a grimace.

“And that I was too soft to do what needed to be done, I know,” Tony said with a sigh. “I’m afraid I might not have been,” he admitted quietly, pulling his horse to a halt. “What if I’d deferred to him, like I did on so many things? I might have. You know it. I know it. Hell, Steve—well. Even if people agree with him on that, Stane still bargained with the Ten Rings for my life,” Tony replied. “He isn’t going to slip out of this, Rhodey.”

“We have testimony from Gregory and Ross, but they are both compromised,” Rhodey reminded him. “We cut deals with them, after all. Gregory gets to live, though I’m not sure I’d wish that kind of life on anyone. And Ross gets house arrest. Still think you’re being entirely too lenient there. The jury will hear that. I’ve gone over everything with Lord Murdock, and there is virtually no evidence to connect Stane to your parents’ deaths, and our case against Stane on your kidnapping is pretty much your word and the testimony of Gregory and Ross. There is just no trail of evidence. Bastard was careful. Don’t get me wrong, I think it will be enough for the jury. They know your wishes, and have no desire to go against them, but we have to give them some cover.”

“Stane is not going to weasel his way around this one,” Tony promised, though he wasn’t sure who he was promising, Rhodey or himself. “That’s not going to happen, Rhodey.”

“I’m not saying he will. He was caught off-guard when you appeared in Court and things got away from him. He all but admitted his connection to the Ten Rings,” Rhodey assured him. “Look, just don’t let Stane get to you, okay? He’s going to try, you know that, and he knows you well enough to do it,” Rhodey continued. “The last thing Murdock needs is you coming unhinged in the middle of the trial, giving Stane all the ammunition in the world. Murdock’s smart, but he’s not a magician. Don’t play into Stane’s hands like that.”

“He isn’t going to get to me, Rhodey. There isn’t anything he can say that I haven’t said to myself. Let him try to come at me if he wants. Hardly anything he can say that isn’t already known, anyway,” Tony remarked with a slight frown. It was certainly true enough. His foibles and failures were constantly on display. It wasn’t as if Stane had anything to use against him that had not already been picked apart by the masses like yesterday’s bread.
The ride back to the Castle was uneventful, though he noted the heads turning to follow their party as they rode through the encampment outside the city’s walls, several offering slight bows of deference, others merely marking their passage. He would probably never be loved by those who fought for him, but damn if he didn’t want at least their respect. He thought back to Rhodey telling him how the men they’d captured refused to speak of this Captain and the Avengers, even when offered untold rewards. He was fairly sure a large portion of his men would gladly chatter on about him in return for a tankard of mead, even the piss-poor stuff they served in the taverns in the city. To say that he had ground to make up was perhaps a rather daunting understatement, he thought with a sigh.

When he reached his private stable, he handed the reins to Happy, who promised to get Audi rubbed down and fed. Tony walked back to the Tower slowly, his feet leaden as he approached, servants rushing past him unseen. The Tower was eerily quiet, still in a way that blanketed the entire building, a pale, wan shadow that existed only for the fact that there had been something real here not all that long ago. It was absence, he realized. This was what regret looked like. The Tower had never seemed quite this empty before, which made no real sense, yet was true all the same. Easier to never have something than to feel its loss, he supposed, the empty hush a reminder of what his life had become writ large.

No Clint bounding through the halls with trays of food pilfered from the kitchens, no Barnes banging his metal hand against the walls as he walked to annoy the guards, no Thor booming loudly as he showed Jane the “magic water walls” or proclaiming his love for those flat pastry things the kitchens sent up in increasingly disturbing quantities, no Bruce carrying armloads of clinking bottles and jars, muttering under his breath, no Natasha…well, okay, she was actually largely silent, but his walk room was far less of an interesting experience when it lacked the possibility of an assassin appearing out of nowhere in front of you.

And, of course, no Steve filling the empty places with something other than just words and sounds, his presence permeating the rooms with a steady warmth that Tony craved more than he would have thought possible. How can the longing for a mere presence, and one that had been little more than fleeting, produce such a desperate pain in its absence? There had been something close to happiness here for all too brief a time, and it was like the walls wanted to absorb as much of it as they could, hold on to some echo of it in the stone and wood, because they knew it would not soon come again. How long had this place been this quiet, this lacking in whatever it was that could make it whole?

He walked down the hall from his chambers and pushed open the door to what had been Steve’s room. It was largely untouched, as if Steve had left nothing of himself behind and taken nothing of Tony with him, though he did notice the shield was gone, so he supposed that was something. If he accomplished little else, he had given Steve something that would help keep him safe. That would have to be enough, though it barely scratched the surface of what was owed.

Since he was a child, he’d had the finest things in the Realm placed at his feet, never known hunger or cold or what it was like to struggle to survive or provide. It had all been given to him, handed to him with a rather chilling ease. So, it was not as if he could stand here in this empty place, with its comforts beyond the ken of most men and voice any complaints if these things came with a father’s disappointment and a mother’s distance. He knew how fortunate he was, he truly did comprehend it, now, at least, however difficult it sometimes was to appreciate. He would never want for anything money could buy, and for a long time that had been enough, until he had been shown something more.

Tony removed the storybook from the shelf, flipping through the pages until he came to the part he wanted. He sat down on Steve’s bed, cradling the book in lap and traced the words before him
with a finger. He did not need to read them. He knew them by heart, had replayed them in his mind over and over again, though it was not his own voice that echoed them there. He wondered sometimes just how much of a story he had told to himself, ascribing a depth to Steve’s feelings to match his own. Whatever it was that may have been present, however briefly, out there in the woods, it died a quick enough death once Steve knew the truth. How could it not?

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, his fingers running up and down the soft, gilded edge of the pages, before Jarvis found him.

“Everyone has been settled elsewhere, as you instructed, Your Grace,” Jarvis informed him staunchly, a curl of displeasure clear in his voice. “Is there anything else you require?”

Tony looked up at him blankly for a moment, a harsh mockery of a laugh escaping him. “I require a great many things, Jarvis. Doesn’t mean I get to have them,” Tony replied, snapping the book closed, closing the self-pity with it. “Get rid of this. Get rid of all of this. I want it out of my sight. I want—” he stilled, his eye catching on the wall across from the bed. “See to it that he gets the painting.” Tony choked out as he rose, horrified to find he was about to lose his composure entirely.

“Of course, Sire,” Jarvis responded sadly, as Tony brushed past him and out the door, practically running to his chambers, ignoring the questioning looks from the guards. He slammed the door behind him and leaned heavily against it, as if he could block out what was beyond, keep the emptiness from leaking in here, in him.

It was over, whatever it had been, and there was nothing to do but accept that now, though he had never exactly excelled at accepting things. He needed to take his mind off of this until he could think about anything without a pang of want tinged with regret nearly felling him. Work had always provided a distraction, when necessary. It wasn’t as if there wasn’t enough to be done. He had spent too much time indulging in allowing others to do the tasks that must be done. It was high time he undertook them for himself, and if he fell into dreamless exhaustion from it, all the better.

The following weeks were a blur of conferences with Fury, Coulson and Rhodey, sometimes joined by Hill and Danvers, hours spent in his workshop making things he would not give to the people he knew he was making them for, Council meetings and long discussions with Lord Murdock, who would be representing the Crown at Stane’s trial. Stane, not surprisingly, had chosen to represent himself. It would probably be the best show the city had seen since the war began, and interest ran perilously high, half-formed conversations that ceased as he passed in the halls, lingering looks from across the Great Hall as he sat listening to the various complaints brought to him by the Lords and Ladies of the Court, a bated, expectant air hanging over the entire city.

If he ended up falling asleep at his worktable or showed up at the Council meetings with dark circles ringing his eyes, no one mentioned it, though Pepper gave him long looks across the conference table as he tried to force his mind to follow the conversation. Everything seemed to flow together, until he could barely tell one day from the next, an endless stream of demands and decisions, followed by long hours working on projects he would likely never complete.

His days did have the occasional bright spots though, he thought derisively as he stood on the wall walk overlooking the bailey below where the soldiers were in the middle of training. A flash of color on silver caught his eye as he scanned the crowded yard, finally catching sight of a dark blonde head in the far corner, fending off a squad of what looked like Rhodey’s hand-picked troops. It was not the first time his trips around the Castle complex had taken him a rather circuitous route past the bailey.

“I’m becoming depressed,” Rhodey said at his shoulder. “I trained them, you know. Me. And
“You know, I’ve seen you here a good five times the past couple of weeks,” Rhodey observed.

“You can’t see how my troops are doing? You’re the one who always said I should spend more time around the men,” Tony reminded him, leaning against one of the merlons next to the embrasure that allowed him to peer down into the bailey without being seen by the men below.

“Yeah…but it’s just that in the whole of the time I’ve known you, you’ve visited the bailey to watch training, oh, let me think, that’s right, never. You’ve never been here. And that includes the time there was a special exhibition in honor of your birthday. We had a banner, Tony. And flags. It was lovely,” Rhodey rebuked him mildly.

“What are you doing up here, Rhodey? Shouldn’t you be down there where you can see your highly-trained troops get their asses kicked firsthand?” Tony queried, rather enjoying the way Rhodey’s face pinched in disgust.

“Just came to see how you were doing. Can’t a guy check on his friend?” Rhodey asked. “You know, the friend who is skulking about the battlements of his own Castle.”

“I just,” Tony began, then realized he had no idea what it was he wanted to say. He just wanted to see that he was alright? He could have asked and had a hundred reports. He’d needed to see for himself, this little indulgence that was fast becoming a daily ritual the past couple of weeks. He looked down through the embrasure again, watching from afar as the young, dark-haired man approached Steve and shook his hand, then offered him his waterbag. Tony wanted to stop the words before they tumbled out, but his mouth seemed to working of its own accord. “Who is he?”

“Wondered when you’d get there. Sir Culver’s fourth and youngest son, Eric. Won’t inherit anything save a good name, but they are a well-respected family. His commander says he’s bright, capable. Has the ambition of a younger son. Should do well enough,” Rhodey informed him, then sighed and braced his arms against the low stone wall.

“And Steve?” Tony heard himself say as he looked away from Rhodey’s sharp gaze, his voice too high to be anything other than desperate.

“Not sure. Seems friendly enough, but he’s hard to read. Everyone knows we’re close,” Rhodey shrugged. “Look, you know that it wouldn’t be a bad match, at least for the moment. Steve has your favor, if nothing else, and everyone knows that is not without value. Sir Culver is amenable to it, but won’t give his son his consent to pursue it without your approval. Should I tell him he has it?”

Tony watched as the dark-haired man leaned in and said something that made Steve throw back his head with laughter. Even from his vantage here, he could see a wide smile there. Steve certainly looked far happier and more at ease here, amongst the soldiers, than he had ever been in the Tower, in Tony’s place. They looked good together, the way they moved in whatever rhythm was known to fighting men. They would probably have a lot in common, a shared bond that could be the start of something real. Rhodey was right. It would not be a bad match for Steve, all things considered.

Tony looked over at Rhodey and shook his head to the side, once, but it was enough. I am damned, he thought. Rhodey sighed and moved to stand behind Tony. “You’re going to get some sleep tonight, right? Trial starts first thing in the morning, and Murdock will have my head if you’re up there yawnning through the whole thing. You look like someone raised from the dead, if
you don’t mind my saying so,” Rhodey admonished.

“Yes, mother,” Tony mumbled, letting his gaze follow Steve’s retreating back as he hoisted the shield and followed the other man across the yard, hands motioning in the air as he explained whatever it was he was telling his entirely too attentive audience. Tony watched until they disappeared into the barracks, then pushed himself from the wall and left Rhodey and his all too knowing gaze behind him as he walked back to the Tower. He would sleep well tonight, if for no other reason than the very large bottle of wine that waited for him, promising a night of forgetting, of not thinking of easy laughter and shared smiles not meant for him.

The weather seemed determined to match Tony’s mood on the day of the trial, dark clouds, ripe with rain, hanging low over the city, the rumble of thunder warring with the pounding of the sea on the cliffs, the air alive with barely-contained energy. Tony rose early, bathed and dressed, readying himself for what he knew was going to be an unpleasant experience, regardless of any satisfaction that might be had at the outcome. It should not take long, at least. He had seen the list of jurors Rhodey selected, and while they were all genuinely well-respected, they were also Crown loyalists, no doubt, and would do all in their power to ensure that Stane faced justice. Murdock just had to give them something to cling to, without Stane obfuscating his way out of a noose.

Stane was entitled to his mummer’s farce, true, and if he wanted to drag Tony’s sins before the tribunal, then Tony supposed that was a small price to pay. He wanted there to be no doubt about Stane’s treasonous activities, and the last thing he needed were more questions circulating about his ability to rule. Better to present the case to the jury and give all appearances of going through the motions of the rule of law. Then he could hang him, Tony thought, though there was little satisfaction to be had, even with that end.

The truth was, he wanted some of the judgment of the Court and citizens to fall on Stane, where it rightfully belonged. He had faced it most of his adult life, at least some of it due to the machinations of the man he had considered a loyal friend. He wanted them to see Stane for what he was, and if he risked his sins being paraded about for the amusement of those who came to watch with their gleeful, censorious contempt, then so be it. It was nothing more than he deserved. But Stane had earned his fair share, too. It was high time he faced it.

It was oddly difficult to muster any real anger at Stane, at least, not anymore. It had sustained him for a long time out there with the team, the need to get back here and do something to stop the man he had considered a trusted friend, but now, with Stane’s betrayal out in the open, all that ire seemed to have dissipated like ripples on the water. He mostly just wanted to get this over with and get on with whatever it was that was his life now. He looked over his reflection in the mirror as Jarvis adjusted his doublet. It was probably best not to examine why the thought of Stane raised little more than a sense of resigned tiredness while the thought of Hammer still managed to bring a surge of such rage that he nearly had to grip the sides of the mirror to keep from doubling over.

“Are you alright, Your Grace?” Jarvis asked in concern, his hand stilling where he pressed imagined wrinkles from the sleeves of Tony’s coat.

“Fine, Jarvis,” Tony replied tightly. “Just ready to be done with this.”

He met Rhodey and Pepper outside of the tribunal room, then, once everyone else was assembled inside, followed them in. He waited until the herald finished announcing him, then sat down on the large chair in his box, looking down on the courtroom below. The rest of the room sat once he had, the shuffle and creak of seats being adjusted and murmur of anticipation running through the room reaching his ears. He cast a sideways glance at Rhodey, who leaned over and whispered in his ear. “You knew it was going to be a show,” Rhodey said by way of apology at the size of the
The room was packed, hot in the crush of bodies and warmth of the gathering storm, the tang of sweat and perfume permeating the air. It seemed like half the Court was there, all vying for a view of Stane, of Tony, of anything they could take back to their tired lives to dissect over their dinners between the lamb and dessert courses. For a moment, Tony hated them all, but this was a role as much as any other, and he had always known how to play his part. He raised a hand and waved unenthusiastically to the crowd below, letting them gape at the attention paid. Several waved back, as if he had paid them some particular favor. He sighed and raised his eyebrows at Rhodey. “You may begin, Lord Murdock,” Tony announced.

Ross went first, taking the witness chair and detailing how he had provided the details of Tony’s return trip from the weapons test to Stane, though in and of itself, that hardly sounded damning. Ross did at least admit to acting on Stane’s orders to keep the bulk of his men from leaving the testing ground at the same time as the carriages, though he denied any knowledge that this was part of a plot to allow Tony to fall into the hands of the Ten Rings. Ross also confessed to overseeing the preparations for the attack on Brookland, but no one denied that the Council had authorized that attack. All in all, Tony thought, as Rhodey had warned during their ride, there was not much there. Stane was smart, and he had trusted no one with all the pieces, leaving a puzzle for Murdock to try to put together before the tribunal.

When it came time for Stane to question Ross, it was all too easy for him to allow Ross to explain why Stane’s reasoning made sense. Of course, Stane needed to know the plans for Tony’s departure back to the city. And wasn’t it a reasonable calculation that the King, traveling on his own land, surrounded by his own men, was in relative safety? Had the King not arrived in such fashion, with General Ross’s troops already in place? Did General Ross not need those troops to transport the weapons and prevent them from falling into enemy hands, a far more difficult task as trebuchets and mortar rounds could not traverse the woods as easily as carriages? Tony thought grudgingly of his promise to Bruce about Ross’s fate. Ross was entirely too confident that he could thread the needle with half-truths and avoid responsibility for anything. If Ross had not known the extent of Stane’s plan, it was only because he had not wanted to in the hopes of saving his own skin one day.

Gregory, damn him, was almost worse, though he spilled his guts to the Court about Stane’s plans. Oh, he happily testified to every nefarious detail he could, no doubt. The problem was, Gregory was impossible to believe. Even Tony was certain he was embellishing some of it for sheer effect, simply because Gregory was nothing if not a self-aggrandizing asshole, even in this situation. By the time Stane was done with his questions, it was fairly clear that no one believed anything Gregory had to say. Hell, they probably even doubted his name was Gregory at this point, Tony thought, let alone that Stane would chose someone such as him to prop up as a replacement king once Tony was out of the way. It beggared all rationality to believe anyone would ever think Gregory fit to rule, though Tony wasn’t sure who was putting on the better performance, Stane or Gregory. He knew how smart Gregory truly was, and this…this bewildered, exaggerated idiocy was a far cry from the cunning man who had managed to rise from a by-blown to carry the Stark name. Murdock was doing his best, but Stane had covered his tracks well.

Finally, it was Stane’s turn to take the stand. Tony leaned forward, watching as Stane all-too-confidently swore to tell the truth before the gods. Tony looked up to the ceiling as the windows shook with the force of the storm swirling outside. If there were gods, they clearly knew when they were being completely screwed.

“Lord Stane,” Lord Murdock began. “Have you ever had any contact with any person from the terrorist organization known as the Ten Rings?”
“No, Lord Murdock, I have not,” Stane asserted.

“Yet, you admitted, in open Court, that you knew His Grace was being held by that group, did you not?” Lord Murdock pressed.

“I did,” Stane acknowledged, sending a trill of surprise through the crowd.

“How did you come by this knowledge, if you never had any contact with them?” Murdock questioned.

“I received a tip, just shortly before His Grace’s return. We had not verified it yet, and our scouts were working on hundreds of leads, but this one seemed strong. In fact, I had just left a meeting with one of the former Council members discussing that exact piece of information. Unfortunately, Lord Stone is no longer welcome in the city to be able to confirm this, though I’m certain that is merely an unfortunate oversight on the Crown’s part,” Stane explained hastily with a deferential nod to where Tony sat above the proceedings.

“When I saw His Grace, safe and returned to us, thank the gods, it must have been weighing on my mind, though nothing more than an assumption. In the surprise of the moment, it simply slipped out. Like saying the wrong name at an, uh, inopportune time, you could say. I’m sure His Grace understands at least that much,” Stane finished, a rueful, self-deprecating grin on his face. The crowd tittered a bit at the jibe, and Tony caught more than one juror glance his way.

It went on like that for far too long, Tony thought in frustration. Murdock would ask a question and Stane would have an all-too-ready answer, often one that not so slyly aimed at Tony, as much as it answered anything being asked. Rhodey shifted uncomfortably next to him, while Pepper gripped the balcony railing seemingly tight enough to dent it. It was not going well, that much was clear.

By the time Murdock announced he was finished with his questions, Tony was ready to simply call for Obie’s head and damn the consequences. Let them name him a despot, if it meant shutting the man the hell up. He honestly could not care less at this point.

“I would like to give a statement, if I may,” Stane requested, earning a nod from the Chancellor overseeing the proceedings. “Your Grace,” Stane said, turning to face Tony. “I have humbly served the Stark family for many years. I know, I know, you mistrust me now,” he continued, holding his hand up, palms out. “You have accused me of terrible, unspeakable things. Of seeking to do harm to you, to your parents…to the Realm, when all I have ever wanted to do is protect you. Sometimes though, Sire, as with your Father, may the gods grant him peace, that meant protecting you from yourself. Taking the burden onto me that you could not or would not bear. Yes, I brought the solution for Brookland to the Council without your approval, and for that, I offer my most heartfelt apologies. Our memories here may be dimmed by time, but you must all remember,” Stane continued, spreading his hands wide as he implored the crowd. “The whole of the Realm was threatened by this terrible disease. We did not know how it was spread. We did not have a cure. It wiped out most of the Riverlands in less than a season. Your Grace, I sought to spare you from what I knew must be done. To protect us all. If I must die for that, then so be it.”

“That is hardly your only crime, Lord Stane,” Murdock interjected.

“I know what I am accused of, Lord Murdock. You have all heard from my accusers here today. You heard General Ross, a highly respected man until His Grace’s accusations, tell you that nothing I asked of him was out of the ordinary, an was, in fact, advisable under the unusual circumstances. You heard him tell you that it was His Grace himself who insisted on the remote location for the demonstration. How could I have plotted his demise with him making all the
decisions, as is his right, of course? You also heard Sir Gregory Stark accuse me of all manner of terrible things. I’m frankly surprised I do not stand accused of having horns growing out of my head!›” Obie said with a shake of his head as if in disbelief at the entire affair. Answering laughter rippled through the crowd, though it was muted, no doubt, by their knowledge of Tony’s thoughts on the subject. “I will leave you fine people to judge his testimony as you will. And they will soon be back in their rooms, heads firmly attached to their bodies,” Obie pointed out, sending a dull rise of voices through the crowd.

“His Grace has been through a terrible ordeal, we all know that. Months of captivity. It changes a man. I do not blame His Grace for his misconceptions. He has endured torment and pain beyond measure. I would like nothing more than to believe that he is not thinking clearly. Not on this. He wants to blame someone, and I, unfortunately, am convenient. A monster he can charge with these awful events he could not prevent. The deaths of his parents when he was still a boy. His kidnapping and near murder by a known terrorist organization. He sees grand conspiracies where there are only tragedies,” Stane said tightly, almost sadly, as if it truly pained him. “This called me to wonder why I would be targeted? I, who have served him for years…why me? If you will indulge me, my Lords and Ladies, I would like to call my only witness, and I think you will begin to see what has swayed our King to these disturbing actions.”

“Witness?” Tony asked sharply, leaning forward and looking towards the doors. “What the hell, Rhodey?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t said anything about a witness—never asked to meet with anyone, didn’t send any messages—he has friends, sure, if you count people he pays your money to as friends, but someone to speak on his behalf against you? No. I don’t know what he’s about—” Rhodey cut off as Stane moved to stand next to the witness chair.

“I call Captain Steven Rogers to the stand,” Stane announced loudly.

“Steve?” Tony blurted out before catching himself. He was half out of his seat before Pepper’s vice-like grip on his arm pulled him back down. “What the fuck does Stane think he’s doing?” Pepper and Rhodey said nothing, but their worried looks were answer enough. The doors to the tribunal opened and Steve walked in, looking around nervously at the crowded room all staring at him curiously, his eyes rising quickly to pass over where Tony sat above the room below.

“Put a stop to this, Rhodey,” Tony hiss through his clenched teeth. What the hell did Stane want with Steve? Rhodey had warned him that Stane knew how to get at him, but it had never occurred to him that Stane would use the one thing that actually could. While Steve may not want to have anything to do with him, Tony could not imagine that he would actually speak against him. It made no sense.

“We can’t refuse him a witness, unless you want to just end this? You know what will be said if you do that,” Rhodey suggested quietly, placing a light hand on his arm.

“I don’t fucking care about that, Rhodey! I’m not going to sit here while that son of a bitch—“ Tony started.

“Calm down, Stark,” Natasha said from somewhere behind him, making him jump.

He looked up. “Did you just drop down from the rafters?” he asked in bewilderment.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Natasha said in the way she answered things without actually giving you any information. She pulled a low stool forward to sit behind Tony’s chair, sinking casually to her seat as if nothing was amiss. “Let Steve handle this and do not, I repeat, do not, do anything to
“Did Steve send you?” Tony demanded to know.

“No. I just know you, and how you tend to handle things that concern Steve, so thought it best to come and encourage you to…not be so you this time,” she said, pulling a small bag to her lap and removing a sharp blade from her belt. She pulled a potato, of all things, out of the bag and began to peel it in one long spiral.

“You’re preparing dinner now?” Tony asked incredulously. Below them, he could hear Steve being sworn in, the crowd shifting and rustling as he repeated the words.

“I was hungry. I’m thinking a stew. Decided to grab something from the cellars. So many interesting things are stored down there, wouldn’t you agree?” Natasha asked slowly, blinking wide eyes at him. “Like I said, I know how you handle things. Calm. Down.” Tony stared at her for a long moment as she nonchalantly moved the blade around the potato, his hands opening and closing into fists. He wanted nothing more than to rush down there and put an end to this before Stane did…whatever it was he was going to do. This wasn’t about Steve or the charges against Stane, this was about Tony somehow. Gods knew, Stane had found the one way he could actually hurt Tony, he thought, looking down at where Steve stood ramrod straight in the middle of a room full of judgmental stares.

“Please, have a seat, Captain,” Stane offered, almost jovially. Steve nodded and sat down in the chair in the center of the room. Stane paced in front of him in small circles, arms behind his back and head bowed with a slight frown for a moment. Tony looked back and forth between Natasha and Steve, then slowly let himself sink back into his chair, for the moment trusting that Steve knew what he was doing, though gods only knew what that could be.

“Tell the tribunal your full name, if you would,” Stane began.

“Steven Grant Rogers,” Steve replied, back ramrod straight in the chair, watching Stane closely.

“And I called you Captain when you entered. Who was it that awarded you that rank?” Stane asked, perching a hip on the table he had been using and shuffling the papers in his hands almost nonchalantly.

“General Nicholas Fury,” Steve answered.

“General Fury. This was not done recently, I take it?” Stane clarified.

“No, my Lord,” Steve said evenly, though Tony could see his discomfort from his box above. Steve obviously knew where this was headed. Hell, the whole room knew, waiting with bated breath for the wounds to open so Steve could bleed for them.

“Huh. Then, that would mean that your rank was earned while in service to Alexander Pierce, is that correct?” Stane pressed.

“Yes, my Lord,” Steve replied, his eyes darting around the room for the briefest of moments.

“Tell me then, as a soldier for Pierce, how is it that you came to be acquainted with His Grace?” Stane asked.

“My team came upon him in the desert mountains about to be executed by a member of the Ten Rings,” Steve responded. “We did not know who he was at the time.”
“So you say...though, at least one of your team has been to Court before, if I understand correctly?” Stane asked casually.

“Yes, my Lord,” Steve answered, his jaw tightening noticeably around the words. Tony looked over his shoulder at Natasha, the blade flashing in her hands.

“Yeah, he’s pissed at me,” she replied to the unasked question, her gaze fixed on her hands as they moved.

“And, your team, that’s the one called the Avengers, correct?” Stane continued below, his lip curling around the word.

“It is,” Steve replied warily, though there was nothing else he could say.

“Now, I’m going to read a list of items here compiled by, let me see, Captain James Rhodes, it appears. Unless I’m misreading it, this list appears to detail the actions against the Realm of which the Avengers are said to be responsible. You stop me if I come to something you dispute,” Stane said, pulling out a piece of parchment with a flourish and beginning to reel off item after item.

Quite the impressive list, Tony thought, closing his eyes for a moment as Stane continued regaling the Court with the successes of the Avengers.

“Son of a bitch,” Rhodey bit out, grinding his teeth together so loudly, Tony was surprised they didn’t crack.

“Anything, Captain? No? Well, Sir James is known to be quite thorough,” Stane remarked almost idly, his eyebrows raising as he peered up at where Tony sat, though nothing about this was done without intent, Tony was well aware. “Just so we are clear, you admit to swearing allegiance to the rebel, Alexander Pierce. You admit to participating, leading even, these actions against King and Crown. You admit to taking the King captive and holding him prisoner for some period of time. Yet, here you sit. A free man.”

Steve was frowning, a deep furrow forming on his brow as he shifted in the chair, the focus of the scrutiny of the entire room where an expectant hush had settled. “Can you explain why that is, Captain?” Stane demanded. Tony shot a warning glance over his shoulder at Natasha, who pulled out a turnip and began carving it into bite-sized pieces. He grimaced and turned his gaze back to the proceedings below, his chest thrumming with nerves. Where was Stane going with this?

“General Fury—“ Steve started.

“General Fury was never working against the Realm,” Stane countered quickly. “Though I may question his methods, General Fury was, in fact, seeking to protect the Realm, as he has demonstrated to the satisfaction of all. Can you say the same, Captain? Were you never working against the King? Because, I must tell you, these actions are not those of a man doing anything but trying, quite effectively, I might add, to take the King’s throne from him.” Tony watched Steve swallow heavily and look down, his hands gripping the arms of the chair reflexively as Stane pressed on.

I’m going to kill him, Tony thought, staring at Stane. It was the only thing that prevented him from storming down there and putting an immediate end to this farce. He is going to be dead, and I am going to pull the fucking lever myself, Tony silently promised himself. He looked over at Rhodey, who just nodded in apparent understanding.

“We were mistaken. About—about--we did not know that Pierce was working with Schmidt,” Steve tried to explain. “There were a lot of things we were mistaken about. The King was kind
enough to forgive us, and allow us to continue to serve the Realm under General Fury’s direction.”

“Huh. Interesting. Well, we all know the King can be very generous in his beneficence, don’t we?” Stane said, address the crowded room. “I just can’t help but wonder, circumstances being what they are, why His Grace would so easily overlook the actions of your team, to which you have freely admitted, yet so readily condemn me based on, well, let’s just say somewhat tenuous evidence. Can you help me understand that, Captain?” Stane questioned, as if genuinely curious.

“Well, I didn’t try to kill him. So, there’s that,” Steve replied dryly, causing Tony to bite back a surprised laugh, though he heard Pepper coughing to cover hers.

“Right, right,” Stane said with a laugh that entirely failed to convey any mirth. “By the way, from where do you hail, Captain Rogers?”

“Brookland, my Lord,” Steve answered, confusion apparent at the sudden change of course. “Brookland. How…interesting. Our King has a newfound interest in the fate of your province, did you know that?” Stane queried.

“He knows what happened there. He knows what you did. I don’t think it is so much a newfound interest as new information,” Steve replied steadily, though Tony could hear the thread of anger thrumming underneath his voice.

“Hmmm…so, the King forgives you and your team for working against him. He suddenly decides that the unfortunate measures that had to be taken to stop that terrible disease are now unauthorized, despite the Council’s approval and the general agreement that we were left with little choice in the matter…it does seem that His Grace’s heart has been softened in these matters recently,” Stane remarked, looking up where Tony sat stiffly above them. Tony could see it before it happened, knew what Stane was going to do, the trap he had walked himself right into, then dragged Steve in with him, gods-fucking-damn Stane to hell for this.

“Tell me, Captain, when was the last time His Grace visited your bedchamber?” Stane asked mildly. That certainly got a reaction from the gallery, Tony noted, as a wave of voices rose in chorus, all talking excitedly at the titillating speculation while Steve stiffened in his chair, face immediately flaming with humiliation as he looked down at the floor. Tony was halfway to a stand when his foot was knocked out from under him and he was suddenly jerked back to his seat.

“No answer? Hmmm, well, I’m sure we all understand why His Grace would be so swayed to forgiveness,” Stane remarked, looking Steve over with obvious appraisal.

This, this was what Tony reduced him to, someone to be mocked and demeaned, named the King’s whore in front of a roomful of people who were not fit to judge the shine of his boots. Fucking hell, he was going to murder Stane, damn the consequences. Whatever lack of interest that had suffused him this morning was long gone.

“Certainly explains a few things about the King’s behavior of late, I think we would all agree,” Stane continued. “Tell me, Captain, did you whisper to him about what happened in Brookland? Ask him for vengeance? Convince him I, the man you blamed for Brookland, was somehow responsible for His Grace’s kidnapping? How convenient that a group of Pierce’s finest end up in the mountains where the Ten Rings are known to operate right around the time the King happens to be held there. Did Alexander Pierce order you there or was that all your doing? Was Pierce working with the Ten Rings all along? And here, you “save” the King and end up getting a pardon
and awfully nice rooms, first in the Tower, convenient, that, and now cozily ensconced next to General Fury...quite the up and comer, you are, one might say?” Stane suggested knowingly.

“That’s not—“ Steve tried to cut in, only to be drowned out by Stane, playing to his audience.

“And let’s not forget about those ships that the King ordered burned,” Stane said, raising his voice to the crowd and spreading his arms wide. “Who gave the King the idea that those were somehow dangerous? That’s right, Captain Rogers. Quite the coincidence, don’t you agree? We torch half the fleet with war at our doorstep, all on the word of one man that the ships are tainted by some mysterious ailment? What else has he been suggesting to our King?” Stane demanded loudly.

Steve looked smaller somehow, Tony thought, down there in the midst of hundreds of contemptuous gazes, all judging him. He had brought this upon Steve, because he couldn’t leave well enough alone, couldn’t even protect Steve here, in his own damn Castle. Of course he couldn’t. Turns out, the one he needs to protect Steve from is himself.

“Who does he really owe his allegiance to, this man who has the King’s ear? I submit to you that our King has been misled,” Stane accused loudly. “But not by me, who has served the Realm here with you these past thirty years. I have said that I accept responsibility for Brookland. You may judge me as you will. I sought only to protect you, your families, our Realm and our King! I took that upon myself to suffer in His Grace’s stead. To allow my nights be disturbed by what we had done, if only out of necessity. If I must pay for that now, then I will accept your judgment,” Stane continued, hanging his head dramatically. “But the rest...ask yourselves what is the more likely...that I have carried out some grand scheme to dethrone the family I have loyally served for half my life or that a man sworn to Pierce uses the King’s attentions for his own purposes? To seek retribution for what happened to his home and to aid his sworn cause? It isn’t as if I don’t understand His Grace’s interest, don’t get me wrong.” Stane said with a slight smirk. “I think we all understand how easy it is to exploit His Grace’s...weaknesses.”

“Captain Rogers,” the Chancellor interjected, raising a hand for silence. “What say you to Lord Stane’s charges?”

“I suppose it would all make some sense to someone who did not know the kind of man the King is,” Steve began carefully. “Only someone who has absolutely no understanding of the man he serves would think that the King could be so easily manipulated. And it could be persuasive, no doubt, were it not for the fact that Lord Stane has been communicating with Johann Schmidt for some time using a system of coded messages.”

“I imagine it would all make some sense to someone who did not understand the kind of man the King is,” Steve began carefully. “Only someone who has absolutely no understanding of the man he serves would think that the King could be so easily manipulated. And it could be persuasive, no doubt, were it not for the fact that Lord Stane has been communicating with Johann Schmidt for some time using a system of coded messages.”

“Excuse me?” Stane blurted out, clearly caught off guard. “And just what proof do you offer this jury of such an accusation? None. None, because there isn’t any. This is just another ridiculous attempt by this man to obfuscate—“

“Actually, if the Chancellor will allow it, I’d like to ask that the inventory list from Lord Stane’s apartment be brought to the tribunal’s attention,” Steve requested calmly, folding his hands together in his lap as if waiting patiently for everyone else to catch up.


“It will show that Lord Stane was in possession of a certain book. The same book that Schmidt and Pierce used to decode messages sent back and forth,” Steve explained.

“I have lots of books, Captain. That is what educated people do. They read. For information,” Stane said caustically.

“The book is called The Treasure of the City of Ladies,” Steve replied evenly. “I will take Lord
Stane at his word that he needs more information in that area,” Steve replied dryly, and this time, Rhodey did laugh, though he managed to largely hide it behind his hand. “It’s the same book that Alexander Pierce and Justin Hammer both had in their possession. I used it to decode a missive my team captured from one of Schmidt’s messengers. That letter contained information about the ships and the disease they would carry to the city.”

“Having a book hardly proves anything. I have any number of books,” Stane interjected hurriedly. “And he could have had that book planted in my room. Lots of people had access.”

“Except that Captain Rogers did not arrive in the city until after your arrest, Lord Stane,” Lord Murdock pointed out.

“Having the same book, assuming he is even telling the truth, shows nothing, and you know it, Murdock,” Stane argued, heat rising in his cheeks. Tony could see the sheen of sweat across his bald head though, small beads of it pooling down his temples.

“I’m not as learned as Lord Stane, of course. It took me an entire night to decode the message we recovered from Schmidt’s man. I kept thinking how much easier it would be if I could write the count of the letters in the book, just to keep track,” Steve continued, watching Stane with a sharp, hard gaze. “It would make learning how Pierce and Schmidt were trying to destroy the Realm go so much faster.”

The book, of course, Tony thought. He should have thought of that. Why hadn’t he thought of that? Images of Steve’s shredded back, the sounds of him coughing until red coated his lips filled Tony’s mind. Yes, he had been distracted, but he should have thought of this, should have seen the connection. He had translated the rest of the message once he found out the name of the book, but it held nothing more of consequence, and he had put it away without another thought. Pierce and Schmidt would not use a book that was compromised, so it had seemed the matter was done. It had not even occurred to him to look to Stane for evidence of involvement with Schmidt amongst the items confiscated from his rooms. But Steve had thought of it. Steve had given Tony this one final thing, or maybe he had given it to those who perished all those years ago, and Tony was simply caught in the wake.

“You two there,” the Chancellor said, pointing to two of the guards. “Go and fetch this book from where Lord Stane’s effects are being stored,” the Chancellor called out. Stane was standing stiffly, disbelief evident on his face as the whole thing seemed to suddenly come undone around him, and Tony noticed with satisfaction, no small amount of panic settling over the older man’s movements, his eyes flicking around the room, hands rubbing over his face, then twisting together as he waited for what he clearly already knew was a forgone outcome.

A few moments later, the guards returned and handed the book to the Chancellor, who flipped it open, thumping through a few of the pages. “Lord Stane,” the Chancellor said, raising his eyebrows in question. “There appear to be quite a few numbers written above the letters in this book. Care to offer an alternative explanation for why that would be the case other than the one presented by Captain Rogers?”

Stane’s mouth opened and closed several times, rather splendidly in Tony’s opinion. “I—well—I—this—” Stane stammered, looking around the room with something like desperation, but those who returned his gaze only held accusation and shock.

“Anything, Lord Stane?” the Chancellor prodded. “No? Well, then. I believe the jury has heard all they require. Do you need a moment to confer before rendering your verdict my Lords and Ladies?” It turned out, they did not.
“Captain Rogers, thank you for your testimony. You may be excused,” the Chancellor intoned, turning to the jury. “On behalf of the Crown, I thank you for your service. You are relieved—“

“If I may, my Lord, I would like to make a statement,” Steve requested as he stood, calling Tony’s attention back to him from where the guards were wrapping manacles around Stane’s wrists and ankles with satisfying swiftness. “Lord Stane stood before you today and accused the King of being weak, and you all allowed that this might be the truth. That tells me that you do not know the man you claim to serve. If you did, you would never have even entertained the possibility that he could be convinced so easily to bias, or that he is not capable of making the difficult, impossible decisions that you demand he make in your stead. The man that I came to know would not have shied away from doing what had to be done to protect the Realm, even if it meant carrying a burden for that decision that no one should ever have to make. But he would not have done it without first exhausting every other possibility,” Steve asserted firmly, his voice strong and sure in the silent room. “And that is the difference between the King and people like Stane, who would seek the easiest course first, who would use their power for their own gain and treat the loyalty offered them by the men and women of this Realm as evidence of their worth, instead of a debt they must ever strive to uphold.”

“The Stark words have always been “Iron Will.” You can see that on their crest as well as I,” Steve continued. “But above that are other words. “For the Realm.” It is the promise of kings, and the pact we all make when we agree to serve them, that they will place our well-being above their own, hold our cares closer than that which they love, bear our woes with us, and if you believe that makes a man weak then you have no idea what it is to lead. It is not a weak man to do this, it is one who would stand when others would fall, who would rise when lesser men would kneel, who would lay down his own life before he asked it of you. If you cannot see strength in compassion, courage in endurance, power in kindness, then you do not deserve to call yourselves his subjects.”

The room was utterly silent as long seconds ticked by. Steve nodded to the assemblage, as if satisfied now, and moved to follow the guards leading Stane from the room. Steve was halfway out the door when the room erupted, though he did not slow, just kept up his long strides out of the room as pandemonium built, cheering and stomping of feet, tumultuous shouts of Tony’s name and adorations pouring from the crowd. Thirty minutes ago they had been ready to name him a lackwit who ruled with his dick, and now, he was suddenly beloved again. Tony shook his head in stunned silence, rose from his seat and leaned over the railing to the further delight of the audience, who promptly flooded the room below, shouting up to his box and waving perfumed handkerchiefs skyward. What the hell just happened?

“Gods, Tones,” Rhodey said, his eyes wide, eyebrows raised practically to the ceiling. “I think I might be just a little in love with him, too. Just so you know.”

“Get in line,” Pepper said beside him, then blinked in astonishment and looked around, as if unsure where the words had originated. Tony turned around, noticing for the first time that Natasha had disappeared, and actually found himself looking to the rafters, just in case. He moved between the chairs to the doors to the box, but Pepper reached out and placed a light hand on his arm to still him. “Not yet, Tony. You can’t go rushing after him right now. Think of how that will look after what just happened!” she said quietly, though with the din of voices below, it wasn’t as if anyone could hear her. “And let’s not forget what you had Rhodey tell Sir Culver. Yes, I know about that, Tony,” she snapped.

“How did—“ Tony began.

“Oh, stop it, Tony,” Pepper cut him off. “Everyone knows about it, which you knew would happen when you said it, so don’t play at looking all astonished. They know when you enjoy a
different spice on your food, you think people don’t hear about it when you tell a lowly knight’s son to beg off? Now, deal with your sudden admirers down there before you give them even more fodder for the rumor mill. Do you really want to add to whatever it is those gossip-mongers down there are already saying? About Steve?” she pressed.

Tony let out a long sigh, and looked down where the loud hum of voices from the many members of the Court who had attended the trial stirred beneath him. “Fine, fine,” he agreed. “Damn. Just—okay, I’ll deal with them.”

“Listen,” she said, rising gracefully and pulling him into the alcove behind the box. Rhodey moved past them and pushed the heavy curtains aside to stand in front of them so they could speak without being disturbed. “Tony. Whatever it is going through your head, stop it. Stop thinking and just listen. I don’t know what happened between you and Steve, but…Tony, those were not the words of a man that despises you.”

“He asked to leave, Pep. What was I supposed to do? I owe him my life, hell, I owe my throne now, I couldn’t exactly refuse him,” Tony bit out, rubbing a hand over the metal plate in his chest, then forced himself to stop when Pepper looked down to watch his movements. It still stung, sharp and bright, to think of Steve, standing before him, asking to be anywhere but where Tony was. But then, if Steve wanted nothing more from him, if he blamed Tony for that night and what damage Tony’s selfishness brought to Steve’s door, then why say those things? He wanted to cling to that, to make it mean something, but he had been guilty of reading far more into things than was truly there in the past. He honestly did not think he could survive doing so again.

“Um-hmm,” Pepper murmured. “So, when the young man from Brookland, the son of a—what? Fisherman?—stood in front of his King, the one against whom he had taken up arms just days before, and offered to move from the Royal residence if his King wanted, let me guess…you calmly and rationally suggested an alternative arrangement? No? Tooooonnny,” she groaned. “Remember that night at the party for Lord Layton? I was in that ridiculous dress. We danced, then went out on the balcony. I was nervous and flustered and couldn’t stop talking. I think you kissed me half to just shut me up.”

“That was a nice night,” Tony responded with a slight smile, his brow furrowing at the turn of topic. “You looked beautiful, not ridiculous.”

“Well, thank you. It was lovely, wasn’t it?,” she went on lightly. “You were so attentive and charming. You even went to get me a drink, of all things, and then—oh, wait. That’s right. Then you left me standing there and never came back.” Pepper said, eyes narrowing and voice going sharp as blades. “I know you, Tony. At the first sign that someone might get close enough to hurt you, you push them away before they can. But this one…this one, you can’t seem to let go. Maybe you should think about why that is.”

“I didn’t—he asked, Pepper—he asked,” Tony stuttered. He hadn’t done that, had he? He had been so ready for Steve to reject what he was offering, to see him as so many others had, from his father to Tiberious to, hell, half the Realm.

“Tony, you have always been the most powerful man in the room,” Pepper went on. “You wield life and death, determine the difference between livelihood and beggaring over breakfast, and yet when it comes to this, you expect him to make demands of you? What did you think he would do? Ask for your hand? Do you have any idea what that must have been like for him, to even go before you like that? You gift those you care about with anything money can buy, but you hold yourself away from them. Tony…how many presents did your father bring you over the years? Was it ever what you wanted of him?” she asked carefully, a pained expression on her face. “And yet, Steve
comes here today and without any thought of how it might reflect on him, tells the world how he sees you. And he does see you, Tony, the way so very few people do. Is that not worth risking being hurt for? Is he not worth it?”

“He’s worth everything,” Tony replied simply quietly, but he had never meant any proclamation more than this one.

“Then tell him that,” Pepper implored. “But first, come greet your admirers before you set the whole Realm to talking,” she said with a grimace.

They made their way down to the tribunal room, the crowd parting for them as Tony went to thank the Chancellor and members of the jury. Everyone eventually spilled out into the Great Hall where Pepper had a banquet of food prepared and wine flowing liberally, a celebratory atmosphere filling the room as people gleefully rehashed the best parts of the trial of a man accused of killing innocent people and trying to kill their King as if remembering favored acts in a play.

He mingled for as long as he could countenance it, accepting the accolades and congratulations and endless chorus of some version of “I always knew, Sire,” and “Never doubted you, Your Grace,” from those in attendance, the whole time replaying what Steve had said to the tribunal over and over in his mind. Did it mean anything? Or was it just Steve’s way of ensuring Stane paid for his crimes? He wanted so deeply, with a painful sort of desperation, for it to mean something. Needed it to be true the way a drowning man needs air, as if it was everything that mattered in the world in this moment. The idea that Steve saw him that way, thought of him as that kind of man, that kind of King…it was enough to make his heart stutter in his chest around hitches of breath that would not quite fill his body. Pepper was right, he knew. He had let Steve go because he was too afraid to ask him to stay. That had worked in the past, he had moved on, letting whatever it was that may have burned for a moment flicker and die, but he could not seem to do that with Steve.

Finally, Tony nodded to Pepper across the Hall, and she swiftly arrived at his side, deftly disentangling him from a debate between two Lords over what Tony had just begun to label as a litany of adjectives about how fantastic he was. He wondered idly if he poured his cup of wine over his own head, which one of them would compliment him on his form first. It was enough to make him miss Barnes’ not so thinly veiled insults. It took him gods knew how long to actually make his goodbyes and maneuver out of the Hall, but finally, he managed to disappear through his private door.

He took a long, circuitous route to reach the serviceable apartments where Fury, Coulson and Hill were currently ensconced, passing stunned servants as he went. He knew where Steve’s room was, of course, though he had never actually ventured to this part of the Castle. He had liked knowing though, being able to look out from the Tower’s bay of windows and find the small squared pane far across the Castle complex and at least know that Steve was there, within reach though impossibly distant. He reached the simple wooden door too soon, and stood there staring stupidly at it for long minutes. What was he even going to say? He honestly had no idea, but he had to try, had to make the offer. At least then he would know.

Tony knocked lightly on the door, almost wishing Steve wouldn’t answer, but he heard a muffled “Come,” from inside and pushed the door open with trembling hands. Steve was in the center of the room, holding his folded coat in his hands. He stared in shocked surprise at Tony for a heartbeat, then quickly knelt, bowing his head. “Your Grace,” Steve said formally. For a moment, Tony just looked at him, drinking in his fill of something he had come to need as much as the air in his body or the food on his table. Just the sight of Steve buoyed something inside him, easing a weight that had settled on his chest without him realizing it.
“You—you can rise. I told you that you don’t—ah, you don’t need to do that. So, you—you don’t need to do that,” Tony managed, wondering where his vaunted mind seemed to go when faced with Steve’s presence.

“Is everything alright with Stane?” Steve asked with a frown.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, it—that’s—it’s” dammit “All fine. You did—you were—what you said was quite helpful. I should have thought of that. To check. About the book. How—how did you know about the numbers?” Tony asked, mainly to try to get some air in between words.

“I didn’t,” Steve answered, bending to place the coat he had been holding on the bed. “Not for sure. But, people like that…they’re arrogant. They always think they are smarter than everyone around them. That they won’t make mistakes, won’t get caught. They get sloppy, like keeping the book around,” Steve shrugged. "And they like to take the easy way. Seemed like writing the numbers in it would something he would do.”

“Yes, well, that was—that was good. Good thinking, I mean,” Tony blurted out. He forced himself to stop, running a hand through his hair and over his face.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I’m glad I could help,” Steve replied stiffly. “Was there…was there something you needed from me?”

Everything, Tony thought. Please, gods, let me not be wrong about this. “Did you…did you mean it, what you said today at the tribunal?” Tony asked haltingly.

“I—of course I meant it,” Steve replied with a frown, as if caught off guard by Tony’s question. “I was wrong. About--about—well, I was wrong about a lot of things. Stane and Pierce and what happened in Brookland. But I was never wrong about you. You’re a good man. You can be a great king. I would not have asked to serve if I did not believe that.”

“Steve,” Tony swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat. “Gods, Steve, I—you have no idea how much I wanted to hear you say that. I—it occurred to me that—well, it was pointed out--that I may not have been entirely clear, when we spoke before. In the workshop. When you--when you asked to leave—the, uh, Tower,” Tony stammered, trying to hear the words over the hammering of his heart.

“I thought it was perfectly clear,” Steve responded carefully, watching Tony with the same intensity of focus he had reserved for Stane earlier today.

“See, I don’t—I think maybe it wasn’t. And that, that was my fault. I should be the one to—what—what are you—what’s all this?” Tony paused, looking some place other than Steve for the first time and finally noticing the other items on the bed. A new pack, a pair of sturdy boots, coarse, woolen shirt, his sword and shield propped up against the bed.

“General Fury is sending us to the coast. With the troops pulled back to protect the city, a lot of the smaller towns have been left vulnerable. There are people who take advantage of that. A group of pirates have been raiding several of the shore towns, and the reinforcements that have been sent so far have not been able to stop them. Fury seemed to think we could help,” Steve informed him.

“Since when is Fury in charge of—you asked him,” Tony broke off numbly. “You asked to go.”

“I—yes. It seemed a good idea to—to be somewhere else for awhile,” Steve said flatly.

Give him something else, Tony reminded himself. Offer him an alternative. It doesn’t have to be
this way, he thought as his mind edged towards panic. “Steve,” Tony breathed out, stepping closer, moving into Steve’s space, the words Steve had said in the tribunal echoing in his head. “You don’t have to go. You could—you could stay—you could come back. To the Tower. It would—it would please me, if you did. You have no idea how much,” Tony promised, voice low and rough with hushed emotion. “What I’m asking—I would ask that you—“ Tony sucked in a deep breath and looked up at Steve, who was staring down at him, the little furrow in the center of his brow back.

“Your Grace—“ Steve began, and Tony could feel him drawing back, pulling away, putting unsurpassable distance between them, when Tony wanted to hold him close and never let go. He didn’t think about it, just surged forward and pressed his mouth to Steve’s, taking whatever words that Steve might have uttered away as he moved his lips across Steve’s, his hands coming up to cup Steve’s jaw, one slipping down his neck, applying just enough pressure to adjust the angle. He heard a harsh groan, and wasn’t sure from which one of them it emanated, the noise reverberating between them as Steve softened under his mouth, lips parting to allow Tony’s tongue entrance. He felt Steve’s arms encircle him, closing the gap between the two of them, their bodies slotting together like the last pieces to a puzzle where he only just learned the picture, a revelation of something obvious, the sudden surprise of the thing you knew but had not recognized. This was what he wanted, needed, this, right here. Just let me have this, he pleaded with gods he did not believe in.

“Stay,” Tony whispered brokenly as he pulled back. “Stay with me. Please. I know, I’ve messed this up, but I would ask—if you would consider--gods, this is hard—I would ask you to—what I’m trying to say is--“

“Steve, I’m all packed. You ready to go?” a voice sounded from the doorway behind them. “Who is—ah, fu—Your Grace!” the man said, immediately dipping to his knee and bowing his dark head.

Tony stepped back as if burned, looking between where Steve stood by the rumpled bed, the wooden table by the window set with two cups and two plates, the simple brown coat Steve had laid on the bed that was entirely too small for his frame. A laugh escaped, bitter and aching, and then he couldn’t stop for a moment because it was that or sob.

“I’m an idiot,” Tony acknowledged grimly. He nodded his head, as if to clear it, his hands fisted at his sides. “I’m a complete and utter idiot. But, I am an idiot who still expects to be fucking obeyed. You must be Eric. Eric, get the hell out of my city. Now.” Tony turned on his heel, sidestepped the kneeling man, considered it an accomplishment he didn’t knock him to the ground, and moved as fast as he could out the door, just slow enough not to be considered a run.

“Tony!” Steve called out from behind him.

Tony came to halt and spun slowly around to face Steve where he stood in the hallway, one hand curled around the doorframe for purchase, the other reaching out to grab at Tony’s shoulder.

“I did not give you permission to use my name,” Tony roared as he slipped past Steve’s grip, voice hard and abraded with something he thought might be hatred, though he wasn’t sure in that instant if it was directed at himself or Steve. He watched Steve’s face fall from confusion to hurt to a stunned sort of numbness, and let the curl of vicious satisfaction at that wrap itself around whatever was left of his heart.

“What—why—why are you doing this? No, just—Nevermind, Your Grace,” Steve practically spat at him. “I don’t even want to know. This—whatever this is—was—its done. It was probably done a long time ago, and I’m just too damn stubborn to see it. Stane is gone, or will be soon, Fury
and the rest of them are here to help deal with Hydra and Pierce, you’re back where you should be, and I—we—obviously don’t belong here. I don’t know what I’m still doing here.”

“Me neither. I don’t know what the hell I was even thinking. I wasn’t thinking. Not clearly, anyway. My mistake. Was today nothing more than a play for more? I would have given it, you know. Anything you may have asked, and I would have given it. But not anymore. You’re right. We’re done. I never should have—“ Tony stopped himself, taking one last, long look at Steve, framed in the light of the doorway, blue eyes glittering with anger and something that Tony might have thought to be pain, once. “Take the team, Steve. Take them and go. If that—if that—is what you—Fuck,” Tony bit out, swiping a hand over his eyes as they blurred. “I will give you what you want, but do not ask me to abide you in my city, not anymore. Not like this. Go. Just fucking take him,” Tony shouted, pointing at where Eric still knelt, resolutely staring at the floor. “And go. It is all you have wanted since you arrived, isn’t it? To be anywhere but here. Well, now you are getting it. I will grant you that. That, and absolutely nothing more. You’re not worth it.”

Chapter End Notes

So close, Tony. *sigh* As always, THANK YOU FOR READING!!!! Seriously, I cuddle your comments and kudos with me in bed at night, which would be adorable if not for being disturbingly close to the truth. Really, huge appreciation for everything. I know this one is ridiculously long, so the fact that you've made it this far, well. *hugs you!!!* Not only is it great encouragement, but it helps me shape and develop the story. So, for all of you that wanted Pepper to snap some sense into Tony, that scene was for you!

Naming the horse Audi was probably too cutesy, but I couldn't help myself.

A few notes: The Treasure of the City of Ladies is an actual medieval book by Christine de Pizan and in reality, has nothing to do with what Steve (you troll!) implies about Stane's reading habits. I just thought it totally sounded like porn. Classy porn, but porn. It isn't, sadly.

Also, I am rather concerned at how much I enjoyed writing Hammer's fate.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Wherein, Bucky and Rhodey are helpful and Tony is...not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something curdled sour and rancorous in his stomach as Tony’s words settled in. His chest constricted, tightened with momentary panic, the last surge before the break of the water’s surface, that space of time when you could see the light shining through, but everything you needed was just out of reach.

Steve watched Tony walk down the hall from his room in stunned silence, his mouth opening and closing again around words that all sounded wrong, maybe because there was nothing to say, not really. He would not plead for what was never his to begin with. He shouldn’t be here anyway. He didn’t know why it had taken him this long to see that. He should have left as soon as Tony forbade him from returning to the Tower. What more did he need? But something had held him here, for far too long, clearly. No, that wasn’t fair, he corrected. He had allowed himself to stay, though he could not now fathom why. Indecision had never been a failing of his, until now, until faced with every choice meaning moving on from whatever this had been.

He’d let himself believe he lingered because of Stane’s trial. Ensuring justice for the people he had lost, for Tony, and he had wanted to see that through. That had been enough of a balm to fool himself for this long. He had not anticipated Stane calling him to testify, though had known what it was that Stane intended to imply as soon as he was informed of Stane’s plan. Stane, along with most people of his ilk, counted himself entirely too clever, too far above mere men to be subject to the same set of rules. Stane, like Hammer, was the manner of man who would choose the easy path, at least when the more difficult one rested upon the possibility that servants, soldiers and other lesser souls would ever be able to discern his secrets.

For those few moments, as he sat there in the witness chair being insulted and belittled by the man who had ordered the deaths of untold innocents, he had almost been happy, because he finally possessed a reason to explain why Tony would push him away, other than the obvious one that Tony wanted nothing more to do with him. Of course, Tony, who knew Stane better than most, would foresee Stane’s ploy and would seek to keep from lending any more credence to Stane’s story than was already there. Little wonder he wanted Steve out of the Tower and away from him. Why add tinder to the fire he must have known Stane would try to light?

Then Tony came to his room almost immediately after the trial ended and invited him back to the Tower. It all made sense, and while he wasn’t a complete fool and knew what it was that Tony wanted of him, he would be lying to himself if he did not admit that it settled him in a way that nothing else had these past few weeks. From the very beginning, there had been something between them, out there in the woods where things were more real than this place, where everything hides in plain sight. Or so he had felt, and here, it seemed, was confirmation that he had not been alone in that. An inexorable pull, the tide to the moon, his mind supplied, though a fissure of unease that he could not place went through him at the thought. A drag that filled the space between them with a force all its own, one that had drawn Steve to Tony from the moment he found Tony in the desert mountains, standing with words when he could do nothing but kneel
before fate, determined that his last moments be a promise instead of a plea.

Maybe he had fallen a little in love with Tony right then, recognizing a skinny kid with a bloody lip and balled fists in the man on his knees before death, yet managing to spit in its eye nonetheless. At least Steve could name the longing he felt now, as it loosened around him, dissipating into the air like motes of dust off his skin, impossible to recapture.

He had loved Tony, the man who challenged him, demanded of him, required him to be more, but gave so much in return that Steve felt he was on the receiving end of some kind of grace, the way a bird floats on the air and considers that it is so effortless to fly, upswept, held aloft by some force greater than himself. But that person did not exist here, if he had ever existed at all.

_You’re not worth it._

“Don’t just stand there, go after him,” Eric said brusquely from behind him. Steve turned in surprise, having completely forgotten the other man was there.

“I don’t think there’s anything to go after,” Steve replied as he stared back down the empty hall. He was surprised at how calm his voice sounded over the din of noise pounding in his ears.

“Come on, Rogers, don’t be an idiot. The King showing up down here—I’m pretty sure he’s never been within a stone’s throw of this part of the Castle in his whole life. He did not do that idly. He’s just pissed because he thinks I got there first,” Eric suggested with a shrug of his shoulders. “Hell, everyone knows he’s fucking panting after you like a bitch in heat. Look, go make nice with him. Put that mouth to the use the gods meant it for instead of arguing with him, and he’ll forgive you anything, I’m willing to wager. You just have to be smart about this. Think about your future. The King—he doesn’t keep someone long, but he’s always generous when he’s done. I have the right family name, the old kind that people respect. You play this right, and you’d have enough to set us up real nice. It would be good for both of us. It isn’t as if you’ve many other options. And, I’m not exactly opposed to the idea,” Eric finished, eyeing Steve with a look that momentarily reminded Steve of the way one looked at day old food to see if you were hungry enough that it could still be stomached.

Steve stared at Eric in confusion for a moment, his mind too consumed with thoughts of Tony to follow much of anything else, and it took that long for Eric’s words to fully penetrate the fog. “It’s not like—wait, what?” Steve asked sharply.

“Pretty sure he’s suggesting you whore yourself out to Stark long enough to make it worth soldier boy here’s while,” Bucky said, balancing the tray laden with their dinner with his good arm. “Isn’t that right?” Bucky queried, voice low and even, though Steve knew him well enough to hear the threat underlying the soft words.

“I would hardly put it so crudely, though I suppose I shouldn’t expect any different from—“ Eric began.

“Oh, fuck you, too, you uppity asshole,” Bucky snarled, stepping forward.

“Buck,” Steve cut in, reaching out to put a hand against his friend’s chest, though he honestly didn’t know whether he was meaning to warn him off or encourage him.

“What? He can find another escort home. He ain’t comin’ with us, Steve,” Bucky responded through gritted teeth.

“You won’t find many better offers, you know. Not many are willing to overlook such matters,”
Eric replied, smoothing his hands down his doublet. He raised his eyebrows in question, then lifted his hands in supplication Steve’s hard look. “Well,” he continued with a slight sigh, “It appears I’ll be leaving the city slightly earlier than I anticipated. Under the circumstances, I shall arrange a different escort to my family’s homestead.”

“You do that,” Steve ground out, turning to stare back down the hall again where the guards shuffled as they waited as Eric took his leave of them. Why should it surprise him that the one soldier who had made an effort, talked to Steve on the training ground, even taken a meal with him once, turned out to be interested only in what he could use for himself? Of course, he was. These people here, they swarmed like flies at the first sign of possible gain.

“What the hell happened while I was getting dinner, for fuck’s sake?” Bucky demanded, following Steve into his room and setting the tray of food down.

“I’m leaving. He wants me gone from the city,” Steve answered, grabbing his pack off the bed and shoving the few remaining items in it. “I don’t think he meant it for the whole team, not really. And Fury needs you all here, now more than ever. Clint has Courlson, and how long have they been apart? A year? More? Thor has Jane, as well as her companions, to consider. I can’t ask them to leave the people they love, just because—because—“

“But what? ‘He,’ who? Oh, right, him,” Bucky supplied at the look on Steve’s face. “Of course, him. He’s the only one that can get under your skin that fast.”

“He—he wanted—I don’t what he wanted. Us to move back to the Tower. Not to go on this mission, I guess. He—he wants what he always wanted. You’ve said as much yourself,’” Steve reminded him when he saw Bucky’s expression pinch together.

“Yeah, but Steve, that was…well, that was before. I mean, I saw the man when we thought you were dead. Look—that was grief, not guilt. I sure as hell should recognize the difference,” Bucky said quietly.

“Whatever it was—I guess he thought Eric and I—and now he doesn’t—he’s not—I’m not worth it, not anymore,” Steve repeated dully, though it left a bitter taste on his tongue to acknowledge it. “So he wants me gone. That’s it. And he’s the King, so he gets what he wants. Look, it’s probably better this way, Buck. Just—I should just go. This place, it’s never been for me. I don’t fit in here, you know that. Never have,” Steve acknowledged, sinking to sit on the edge of the bed. “For as long as I can remember, I just wanted to do what’s right. I’m not sure I even know what that is anymore, not with these people. I thought I could throw myself back in, follow orders, serve and that would be enough. But, it’s just is not the same. Not here, anyway.”

He had spent the time since they moved from the Tower trying to find something here where they could carve out a place for themselves, despite the scornful looks, the comments said too loudly not to be intended to be heard. It wasn’t as if he had ever expected it to be easy. They had fought against these people, and he understood the hate, if not the outright derision they received in return. He’d tried though, for the team’s sake if nothing else, taking his meals in the mess hall with the other soldiers, training with them, offering to teach what he’d learned so well at the end of Phillips’ sword, but he had ended up with nothing to show for his efforts save an increasingly disturbing number of destroyed practice dummies to match his new collection of rather colorful insults. Even Clint was grudgingly impressed.

It wasn’t until the trial that he more fully understood the soldiers’ dislike. They thought Steve weakened their King at a time when they desperately needed him to be strong. They were scared, all this talk of Hydra and the uncertainty about who to trust after their own general was arrested, and fear made men search for someone to blame. Since Tony was well beyond their reach, it fell
on Steve. At least it was something he could understand now, perhaps he could have attempted to counter it, as he hoped his statement to the tribunal might begin to accomplish.

“That’s horseshit, Steve, and you know it. Fine, so this isn’t Brookland and never will be. It isn’t us off with the team doing our own thing. The world has changed for better or worse, and none of us can go back. That’s just the way it is. You think I don’t miss it? You think it’s easy for me here? The freak with the metal arm?” Bucky demanded roughly, raisings his arm out in front of him. “Look, all we can do is our best, and sometimes, the best we can do is start over. We’ve done it before. This could be that chance for you, Steve. A new beginning. I know you’ve been trying, but one word from Tony and those guys will shut the hell up, you know that,” Bucky asserted.

“I don’t need to run to him every time something isn’t easy, Buck,” Steve insisted. “I know how hard it is for you—for all the team—that’s why I’ve been trying—“

“We’re not your responsibility, Steve, not like that. You can’t fix everything for us by trying to shoulder it yourself,” Bucky argued. “That’s now how this works.”

“Good to hear, all things considered,” Steve responded, grabbing his half-full pack and starting to shove the remaining items on the bed into it.

“Oh, stop that. Come on, he’s not kicking you out of the city. He couldn’t take you going off on watch without him, for gods’ sake,” Bucky said as he slammed a tankard down on the table, the sound echoing loudly in the small room. “Not to mention that he nearly got himself blown to bits trying to save you, and when you were sick? He was fucking terrified.”

“Nat admitted he could have known about that mortar being a dud. He’s the best there is with that stuff, you know that. It would have been a good way to gain our trust, get us to cooperate with his plans—“ Steve offered.

“Would you stop? Listen to yourself. Fuck, Steve, not everyone thinks through things like they are a gods-damned battle plan. You see tactics and strategy and ulterior motives where maybe there was just honest-to-gods reaction. And Tony? Gods, that one is nothing but reaction, at least where you are concerned. Maybe—okay, I’m saying maybe-- maybe he played us, hell, he probably did, at least at first, but you? You he didn’t expect. Gods, you should have seen the way he watched you, like you were some kind of hero from a story come to life that he’d just stumbled upon in the middle of nowhere,” Bucky recalled with a grunt, running a hand through his hair in frustration. “Yes, yes, he wanted you, sure. That was more than plain, but honestly, he could barely contain how badly he needed you to think well of him. He did all but demand it, and gods that must have just about killed him to keep his mouth shut. I don’t think that’s his best skill, to be honest,” Bucky observed dryly.

“It really isn’t,” Steve acknowledged with a wry grin.

“Look, you didn’t see him when we thought you were dead. He knows what it feels like to lose you, Steve, and it almost killed him. So, he panicked and tried to hold on too close, and when that blew up in his face, he pushed you away. But he’s not going to be able to let you go far, I’d stake my life on that,” Bucky bit out, looking half frustrated, half amused. "Fuck, if we turn around now, we'll probably run into whoever it is he sent after you."

"He seemed pretty damned adamant, Buck, what with the armed escort," Steve reminded him, grimacing at the memory.

"Dammit, Steve, look, if you want to walk away from this place, fine, but do it because you
honestly think there is nothing here for you, not because you’re pissed at Stark. At least talk to the idiot before you do,” Bucky pressed. “He’s just got his head up his ass because of Culver, the giant prick. You might not have noticed this, but Stark gets a mite possessive when it comes to you. Hell, gods only know what he had planned for me until he decided we were more or less brothers. I mean, I saw the looks he gave me every time I got near you,” Bucky told him with a grimace and slight shake of his head. “Just go talk to him, would you?”

“To what end, Buck?” Steve asked. “Eric may have been—well, rude,” Steve continued over Bucky’s snort. “But he wasn’t wrong. You know that. Stane saw that from his cell and tried to use it to save himself. Even if you’re right and he does…care, I guess…what does that even mean?”

“Sounds like something to ask him, Steve, not me,” Bucky shrugged.

“I know,” Steve said with a sigh as he held his pack between his hands, feeling the familiar weight of it. It had always been somewhat reassuring, the ability to go anywhere, the freedom it represented. Now, looking at it, it was less about freedom and more about having nothing to cleave to, nothing that bound him to anything. He could go anywhere because he had nowhere to go, and that was far from the same thing. “Alright, fine, you’re right. I’ll—I’ll go try to talk to him.”

“I’ll wait here in awe of your maturity,” Bucky replied with a rakish grin as he sat down at the table and started sorting out the food.

Steve bit his lip to stifle a laugh as he breathed out a hiss of air. “Which you should obviously do more often,” Bucky admonished lightly, as he tossed the brown woolen coat at Bucky’s head with a snap of his wrist. “Put that in Clint’s room. I do not need to know what it is he is doing that manages to get those kinds of holes and tears, but tell him that I’m going to raise my concerns about his well-being with Phil. That should take care of it.”

“Well, see, now you have to leave because Clint is going to drop a rock on your head or something even less pleasant,” Bucky replied with a grin. He held the coat up by the shoulders and twisted it around in his arms. “Nice, Stevie. Can’t even see ‘em. Mama Rogers would be proud. Next time I get injured, I’m letting you stitch me up, screw Bruce and his five thumbs,” Bucky groused.

“I learned to sew fabric back together, not skin, Buck,” Steve reminded him, but there was a smile underneath it.

“Quit stalling, and go,” Bucky urged as he chewed around a bite of mutton and laid the coat over the back of the chair. “Hey, Steve,” Bucky called out as Steve pushed himself off the bed and started from the room. “If it isn’t what you want, that’s okay. We can leave. We’ve started over before. But—if it is—if you do want whatever it is that Stark’s offering—that’s okay, too, you know? I know how we were raised and all, but…if he makes you happy…well, there’s precious fucking little of that to go around these days, and you got no guarantees in life. I should know. It’s okay to choose to be happy, is all I’m saying. Even if it isn’t everything you want, it can be something good, even just for a little while. And that can be worth more than you realize.”

“I—yeah. I know. I—thanks, Buck,” Steve replied softly as he turned and walked out the door of his room and down the empty hallway. He pushed the rounded oak door at the end of the hall open with one hand, his mind full of one discarded thought after the other. A part of him wanted nothing more than to do as Bucky suggested, to say yes to whatever it was Tony might offer. Let his life be that easy, for once, to choose his own happiness over honor, above duty. It could be so simple. Another part of him shouted loudly in his head that he did not belong in Tony’s world, this strange place that had somehow moved forward and left him to stagger behind without him
realizing what was happening. He had been fighting for something that probably did not exist, not anymore, not in this world overflowing with compromises born of distrust and fear, and this place would devour him if he stayed.

Tony’s words stung because there was truth there, underneath the cruelty. You’re not worth it. What could he possibly offer, after all? He was just a soldier, same as any other. This place, these people, they needed leaders, visionaries, people who could see and shape the future, not relics of something simple and ordinary that they would all sooner honor with flowery words and then forget as they marched ahead to whatever was next.

His first thought as he pushed the heavy door that opened on the small stone staircase that led up to the bailey was that he really should have heard them and Phillips would have had him running laps of the training field for his lapse. His second thought was that it was damn hard to get in the last word with a King.

“Rogers,” one of the four guards said, looking down at him from the top of the steps. “We’ve been instructed to see you out of the city.” Steve looked them over for a moment. Two boys greener than the summer grasses, barely able to lift the swords they held, an older, more seasoned guard who looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here, and one of the commanders he recognized as the one who had “accidentally” spilled his lunch in Steve’s lap. Twice.

“Gentlemen,” Steve replied evenly around the weight of disappointment, the horrible, crushing kind that comes when what you suspect to be true is confirmed. “I just wanted to speak with His Grace before we departed,” he tried. “If you would allow me a moment to—”

“No can do,” the commander—Ketterson, Steve’s mind supplied—interjected. “Who do ya think we got our orders from? ‘Bout time, I’d say, too.” He could fight them, he knew. They were aware of it, too, or at least everyone except one in charge seemed to recognize that a few steps of high ground did not actually afford them any advantage.

But why bother? Tony had ordered this. Tony had set his guards on him, for gods’ sake, and how that thought burned an ache through his body. What more in the telling did Steve need to hear? It was as if whatever it was tethering him to this place that managed to be both familiar and horribly wrong at the same time, snapped in two. The thing he had clung to when everything seemed to be coming apart was gone, setting him adrift, and for a moment, the world seemed to slip to quicksand beneath his feet, a vortex that would consume him the more he struggled against it. It was time to stop struggling to hold onto something that was no longer there.

“Fine,” Steve said, stepping back to hold the door open as the guards descended the steps. “I was just readying myself to leave.”

“Good. We’ll just wait here while you finish then,” the commander said, moving to position himself outside Steve’s room while the others crowded the end of the hall near the door.

Steve let his chin dip to his chest for a moment and drew in a long, shuddering breath, then squared his shoulders and walked back into the small room that had been his since he left the Tower.

“What now?” Bucky asked, already up from the table and glaring out the door at the commander looming in the hall.

“Looks like I’m leaving after all. Now, apparently,” Steve replied, placing the last few remaining items in his pack and bending to pick up his sword where it leaned against the wall beneath the painting of Brookland that had appeared in his room one afternoon shortly after they moved.
Bucky leaned out the door and peered down the hall. “You have got to be shitting me,” he hissed through his teeth. “Stark is a fucking idiot. You know we could just—“

“No. I’m done. I’m just—I’m done, Buck. He wants me gone this badly? Fine. I’m not going to fight soldiers who are just following orders,” Steve answered quickly.

“Give me a minute, let me grab my things, then,” Bucky said, moving to go down the hall to his room.

“Buck, no. You—there’s no reason for you to leave, too. It’s me he wants gone, not the rest of you,” Steve said, his mouth twisting painfully around the words.

“And what do you think you’re going to do? Go after a bunch of pirates on your own?” Bucky demanded, throwing his good arm up in the air.

“Of course not. I could maybe help with fortifications though. Give them some ideas about means of defense, that kind of thing,” Steve suggested, though, honestly, the idea had just come to him. For the first time in gods knew how long, he truly had no idea what he planned to do. Get out of here, leave this place behind and just…be anywhere else.

“Ah, to hell with that, no way I’m letting you go off on your own. You know that, come on,” Bucky urged, placing a hand on Steve’s shoulder as Steve buckled his belt and scabbard around his waist. “I’m not leaving you.”

“No, Buck, just—You can help. Here. You know that. Be with Nat, if that’s what you want. What? Don’t look so shocked, I pay attention,” Steve said, a sad smile slipping out. “You could have something here, if you wanted it.”

“I already have something, so shut it, Rogers, and grab your pack,” Bucky muttered through clenched teeth as he grabbed bits of their dinner and wrapped them up as quickly as he could.

“You done there, Rogers?” Ketterson demanded impatiently from the doorway. Steve looked back around the small, simple room, then made a decision. He walked over and picked up the shield, winding his forearm through the straps on the back.

“I’m done,” Steve replied, and found he meant it. “What about the rest of my team?” Steve asked with a resigned sigh as he followed the guards out the door and down the hall.

Ketterson shrugged. “Not my problem,” he replied.

“I need to speak with them before we leave,” Steve insisted.

“No going to happen, Rogers. My orders are pretty damn clear. You’re out of here, and good fucking riddance, I say,” Ketterson barked loudly.

“Come on, Steve. Not like they aren’t going to find out what happened. You might have noticed that news travels fast around here. The team can handle themselves. Anyway, I’d kind of like to see these assholes try to tell Natasha to leave. She’s not as gentlemanly as you,” Bucky said, tugging lightly on Steve’s shirt to hurry him along. “Let’s go.” They walked through the bailey and across the Castle complex, surrounded by their escort, a hundred satisfied, if curious, looks following in their wake. Steve kept his eyes straight ahead, on the bobbing, helmeted head of the guard in front of him.

“What’s this?” an out of breath voice inquired from the crowd as they approached the city gates. “Cap?”
“Sam,” Steve replied with relief at the sight of the familiar face feeding scraps of meat to the falcon resting on his leather-clad arm. “Gods, its good to see you,” Steve rushed out. “I can’t explain everything now, but tell the team that me and Bucky are leaving, would you? They aren’t to come after us. We’ll—we’ll be in touch when we can.”

“You’re leaving? Now? That’s…not good. At all. Look, we need you here, Cap. Now is really not a good time for you to be leaving,” Sam declared earnestly, coming to stand next to Steve.

“Things here—I—we—can’t stay,” Steve managed, his voice suddenly rougher than he intended. Though it was probably obvious to Sam what was happening, he found that he did not want to admit that it was Tony who had ordered this. “It’s fine. Tell them that this was my choice, okay? They don’t need to worry. It’s fine. It’s—this was my choice.”

“I—yeah, okay, Cap, but, I gotta tell you. Doesn’t look like much of a choice from where I’m standing,” Sam responded, jerking his head towards their escort of guards. “Let me go talk to Fury or something, would you? Just—you can’t just leave, Cap.”

“King’s orders, bird man,” one of the younger guards blurted out, then immediately cowed at Sam’s look. Frankly, Steve thought Redwing could take the young soldier without any assistance.

“You sure about this?” Sam questioned carefully.

“Yes. Yes, Sam, we’re fine,” Steve assured him. “Thank you. For everything. Tell the team—tell them—that it’s easy to find something to fight against. Find something to fight for instead. Wars are won by people, but it matters what kind of people. Tell them to stand when they are told to sit. Tell them to speak loudly for those who have no voices. And to fight the good fight.”

“You think that up first, or was that off the top of your head?” Sam asked, stepping back sounding slightly awed.

“Enough pretty words, Rogers, let’s go,” Ketterson said, shoving a hand against his shoulder.

“Hey, that’s Captain to you,” Sam called out after them. “Dick,” Steve heard Sam mutter under his breath as they passed and had to repress a smile.

When they finally reached the barbicans that stood on either side of the city gates, the guards stopped as he and Bucky walked under the portcullis and across the bridge. He did not look back, though it took all his years of discipline. They picked their way through the lines of people, wagons, carts and horses that were swarming in and out of the city, coming to trade, find work or simply visit, past the trenches where soldiers sat in the dried mud, eating rations by low burning fires.

By unspoken agreement, they kept to one of the main roads that veered off from the city, which would take them to the coastal towns suffering without much in the way of men left to guard them. It was true that Steve did not really know what, if anything, they could do there, but it was still a mission they had been given, and if nothing else, he could see that through before they had to think of what came next.

“So what’s the plan?” Bucky asked, as if reading his mind. “We could stay in one of these villages. They’re likely to be pretty desperate for help, even ours. Might be friendly enough, at least for awhile.”

“Maybe. I don’t know, Buck. Not much in the way of work there, if you don’t have any land to
work or a boat to fish. It isn’t as if they have a lot to share, particularly considering what they’ve faced lately,” Steve replied as they walked, the city walls receding behind them, fading into the horizon. “We could go to Gulmira. I could work the docks. They always need people.”

“Of course, they always need people. That shit is nothing more than a path to an early grave. You know how many accidents they have on those docks?” Bucky demanded. “One of us needs to keep all his body parts, and I’ve seen too many former dock-workers who caught the bad end of a barge coming in too fast or a crate that isn’t secured properly. Forget it, we’ll think of something else,” Bucky muttered under his breath as he squinted against the dying sun.

“Not like we have a whole lot of good options,” Steve pointed out. It was true enough. He knew there was not exactly a great deal of demand for two illiterate former enemy soldiers, one of whom had earned the King’s anger, the other without a limb. However able he knew Bucky to be, he understood well enough how others perceived him. Even Fury had not wanted Bucky on the team initially, but Steve had insisted he could more than carry his own weight, and Bucky never let him down, even if he had to work twice as hard as the others.

“They could think of some more bad ones,” Bucky countered. “But you’re not doing that.” Steve sighed and just nodded for now. It was easy to turn away at a bad option when your belly was full and you were barely a few miles from warmth and comfort. Harder to refuse when you got desperate, he knew. He didn’t like the idea, but they may not have much of a choice before too long.

He doubted they could find work at any of the larger keeps, certainly not anyone with any knowledge of the manner in which they left the city, and it wasn’t as if they were difficult to recognize. It was unlikely that anyone would allow them to join a garrison, assuming Steve could convince them that Bucky could be an asset, or even work in the stables, if it came to that. No one would want to risk the King’s displeasure, not over the two of them. Bucky said they had been here before, forced to start over, and that was true enough, but at least then, after Brookland, they’d had Phillips to go to. A destination. A promise of something more. Now…they had nothing.

They walked in silence for long stretches after that, stopping only when they had to rest. Bucky had thought to wrap up a few items from their forgotten dinner, which they ate as they walked since the food would not keep for very long. It was full dark when they stopped for the night, the cobblestone road that led out of the city having long ago given way to dirt, hard-packed from use, and narrower now, out here in the rural areas where farmers needed only room enough for two wagons to pass each other on their way to and from the city’s markets. When he looked back, he could still see the lights of the city far in the distance, fires twinkling like stars against the night sky.

“Team’s gonna be pissed,” Bucky said as he sank to the ground and drew out his water pouch. They’d found a well not far outside the city, used to water animals and refill the supplies of passersbys, so at least had enough fresh water to drink for now. “I’ve got, let’s see…okay, absolutely nothing, go figure, but I’m willing to bet it all that Nat kills him, makes it look like a complete accident, takes over the Realm and declares Thursday the Sacred Day of Chocolate. What do you have?”

Steve breathed out a rueful chuckle at Bucky’s jest, though he wasn’t sure who the team would be more upset with, Tony or him. “They can be happy there, Bucky. And they should be. They deserve it. Jane seemed so excited about the tools the King offered her, and Coulson has the task of helping Fury deal with Hydra and then rebuilding what was lost. Nat’s as close to Fury as most anyone, I suppose, and she’s the best at what she does. They can help. Do what we thought we were doing from the beginning. They’d follow us for a time out of loyalty and misplaced devotion,
but their places are there now,” Steve replied, trying to keep the sadness out of his voice. “I can’t ask that of them. You should have stayed, too, you stubborn idiot,” he finished, nudging his shoulder against his friend’s as he sat down beside him in the sparse grass under the cover of the trees that lined the road.

“Look who’s talking,” Bucky murmured, leaning back against the trunk of the tree. “Besides, this is far more exciting a life than walls that weep hot water or beds made of feathers.”

“I liked the bed,” Steve admitted.

“Is it me or did the ground get harder?” Bucky grumbled, poking at a tree root with his booted foot, and then they were both laughing, full belly laughs that doubled them over. Steve realized it might have been the first true laugh he had enjoyed in some time, which probably told him all he needed to know. When they finally caught their breath, Steve felt more relaxed and, oddly, more at ease than he had in a long time, sitting here, next to Bucky, with no money, no food, no particular destination and little prospect for that to change in the future.

“Let’s get some sleep. I got a chance to look at a map after Fury gave me the mission. We should reach the first of the coastal towns tomorrow. Not much to it, but its somewhere to start,” Steve said, suddenly finding himself exhausted. Not only had it been some time since he had put in this much walking in a day, but his body still wasn’t quite back to the way it was before. His back still stiffened at night, and his movements sometimes lacked the fluidity he was used to, though things had improved considerably with training and the exercises Bruce suggested for him. There would probably always be some difference, though he thought he could likely compensate for it with proper conditioning. Still, his muscles ached with the day’s exertion now that they finally rested, and damn if the ground didn’t feel harder underneath him.

Steve lay back and looked up through the covering of limbs, sparse with leaves this time of year. It was impossible to not allow his mind to wander to another night under a green canopy, the sky painted with stars and woods filled with promises. Bucky was quiet next to him, but Steve could tell by his breathing that he wasn’t yet asleep. “You said you didn’t know what happened between us out there,” Steve began quietly. “I asked him to join us. The Avengers. And I offered…well, I suggested, really more just thought out loud…that maybe after everything was over—we could—the two of us, maybe—find a place or--” Steve stuttered, tongue twisting against the words.

“Oh, gods, you proposed to the King, didn’t you?” Bucky marveled, pushing himself up on his elbow to look at Steve. “I mean, granted, you did it horribly, really, incredibly poorly, but still. Make an honest man of him? That’s too adorable, Steve, really. Your mom would be so proud. And what did he have to say to that?” Bucky asked.

“He said…he…said…if I asked him again one day, he would say yes,” Steve said quietly. “But that wasn’t true. Or, even if it was true once, out there, when his life depended on it, it ceased to be so once he got back to being who he really is, and he could just have what he wanted without anything more being required of him.”

“I don’t know, Steve. I think maybe you should try asking him that and find out,” Bucky responded carefully.

“I did try. You may have noticed the soldiers,” Steve reminded him, crossing his arms over his chest to ward off the chill.

“Yeah, but when do you give up that easily?” Bucky asked. “And it isn’t like you didn’t have ten different ways back into the city figured out before we hit the gates. Want to know what I think?”
“Probably not, but when has that stopped you?” Steve replied with a fond, familiar sort of disgruntled resignation.

“I think you’re rather terrified that he might actually be crazy enough to say yes, and it’s you who doesn’t think you’re worth it, who doesn’t think you have any business here, in this place, around these people. You think you’ll be nothing more than a…a…performing monkey or something for those vipers at Court to gawk at and say things behind their hands. You look at all this and see a world where you don’t fit, and you think you’ll just end up hurting him, weakening him, if you stay,” Bucky said grudgingly. “You’re the first one to do whatever it takes to protect people, even if that means giving up what you want,” Bucky chided, though there was nothing save a distant sadness behind it. “You’re giving up because you think it’s better for him, for the Realm, even if it kills you.”

Steve blinked at the stinging behind his eyes and scrubbed a hand over his face. “It isn’t that simple, Buck. This is the whole Realm we’re talking about,” Steve reminded him sharply. “It can’t just be about what I want. Or even what he wants. This is something bigger than both of us. Gods, Buck, look at how wrong I was about all of this, think about what harm I’ve wrought already because of what I thought I could do--He—it deserves someone powerful and strong, someone who can inspire, who can help the Realm, make it what I know it could be, what we always wanted it to be.”

“Maybe the Realm has had enough of strong and powerful. Maybe it needs the little guy,” Bucky suggested, poking at Steve’s chest with the thump of his metal hand. “A man who was weak, and knows the value of strength and of compassion. That’s you, Steve. You’re a good man. Sure, Tony throws himself on that mortar to save you, and that’s amazing and brave and all that shit, it really is, but you? You’d do it for strangers because it’s the fucking right thing to do, even if none of them will ever be half the person you are on your worst day. And maybe that’s what the Realm needs more than anything else. Someone who would do that for anyone, so everyone knows they matter. That’s a leader, Steve. That’s a hero. That’s who I follow. That little guy who thought every fight mattered, because it was the whole world to someone. That’s who the team follows. Stark sees it, gods, does he. Fury saw it. We all do. You stopped being just a soldier a long time ago, but you’re the one who has to believe it. And, no, I don’t know when I became Stark’s champion, it’s fucking ridiculous, is what it is. I’m going to sleep now. You brood. Then, when you’re done, let me know what we’re doing, okay?” Bucky finished as he put his pack behind his head and abruptly snapped his eyes closed.

Steve stared at the sky peeking through the white fingered limbs and wondered if Bucky’s words sounded like truth because he wanted it to be so or because he actually recognized that it was. He wasn’t sure how long he stared at the blinking sky above him when he heard Bucky shift next to him.

“I still dream of Peggy, but I can’t see George’s face anymore. Sometimes, I think I can, but then I don’t know if that’s a real memory or something I’ve just made up to fill the blank spaces. I hate myself a little for that, but I also can’t help but be a bit glad. And then I hate myself for being glad of that,” Bucky said calmly. “Me and Nat. We’re never going to be what we could have been.”

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“Stark sees it, gods, does he. Fury saw it. We all do. You stopped being just a soldier a long time ago, but you’re the one who has to believe it. And, no, I don’t know when I became Stark’s champion, it’s fucking ridiculous, is what it is. I’m going to sleep now. You brood. Then, when you’re done, let me know what we’re doing, okay?” Bucky finished as he put his pack behind his head and abruptly snapped his eyes closed.

Steve waited him out, to see where he was going with this. He almost never spoke of the wife and child he’d lost, and Steve wasn’t sure why he chose to now, of all times. “I’m too messed up. And she deserves so much better. See?” Bucky questioned brokenly. “I can do my own version of penance. It isn’t like I don’t get it, Steve. We shouldn’t have made it. We shouldn’t have lived when all those others died, but we did. All those people, good people, and they’re gone, and we’re
here. Why us? Two kids from Brookland who got nothing to their name. And now the King—the King for gods’ sake—it makes no sense that we get this life when they didn’t get anything, when Peggy didn’t get to hear her son laugh, and I never got to teach him to fish or how to throw a stone and make it jump across the river. It isn’t fucking fair, it isn’t right, nothing about this is. But that’s what we have to carry with us every day. You just have to decide how much of a burden you’re going to let that be. Enough to drag you down until all you have left is what you took with you out of that hellhole? Or something you can build from, piece by piece, something you can stand on when there’s no other way to see. Your choice.”

“When did you get so smart?” Steve inquired softly, letting his head loll onto Bucky’s shoulder, the one above his metal arm where the flesh was puckered and distended.

“Learned from the guy who wouldn’t leave me by the side of the road to die like I wanted to, no matter how much I cursed him for it,” Bucky answered.

“I want to be with him,” Steve admitted after a stretch of silence, memories flitting through his mind of their own accord. Tony's sure hands on him, making him feel, almost too much. The way Tony's eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, when Steve made him smile. Or how hard Tony pushed when he believed in something, meeting Steve's own sometimes stubborn certainty with his own. How he could make Steve feel like they could do anything when they were together, so sure and certain, almost enough to make it so.

“Well, thank the fucking gods,” Bucky replied in an exaggerated expiation. “I’m not saying getting yourself barred from the city isn’t a hurdle, but at least we’re getting somewhere.”

Steve huffed out a low laugh. “Get some sleep. We should reach the first village early tomorrow. Let’s see what the situation is and then we can decide what to do,” Steve suggested.

He lay there a long time, watching the wind shuffle through the trees, sending the limbs swaying against unseen hands. Bucky knew him, all too well. They shared too much of the same history, both lost in a world that had moved on from the tragedy that still consumed so much of their lives. In a way, they were still stuck there, surrounded by ghosts who they could not give rest, so they carried them along with them, placing them between themselves and the rest of the world. Maybe that was why he felt so removed from the people of the city, like some kind of watcher on a wall, looking at them going about their daily lives as if from a distance, unable to find anything to tether him to this incomprehensible world, save for Tony.

In a way, the Avengers had been about finding a place for themselves again, as much as fighting a battle. A group of remarkable people, Fury had said, brought together to fight the battles that had to be won. But each of them, for all their skills, was there because they couldn’t be anywhere else. They were all fighting for a world they could barely stand live in.

You could die doing that, die well and with honor, a forgotten sacrifice to the greater good, and that was what they probably all intended to do, however unspoken that might have been. He wasn’t sure how to be someone other than a soldier. Being simply their Captain had been enough, had given him a clear purpose, a way to contribute, or so he had thought. That had been all he thought he needed. Until Tony showed up and offered another choice, one that required them to be something more, a king who places his knights on a quest they did not know they were being asked to undertake. An antiquated notion, he supposed, but it was true. When had he ever taken the easy route, the safe path, the one that promised comfort instead of the one that offered a chance, however slim, to do something that mattered?

He didn’t know if Bucky was right, if Tony truly thought that about him or if, as his mind kept insisting to his heart, it had all been part of ruse to use him to get what Tony needed. It was
somehow easier to think of that way, instead of considering too fully that Tony might have actually meant everything he said, and even the things he could not say. He knew he was guilty of doing exactly as Bucky said, of thinking only in terms of plans and stratagems.

After all, if you could think it through, see it coming, then you would not be surprised, sitting on a cliff and watching your world burn before your eyes.

He rubbed his knuckles against his eyes, grinding the sting out as best he could. Even if Tony wanted more from him than what the whisperers and gossips speculated, it was hard not to think of reaching out and taking it as selfish. He knew what Bucky meant, about serving penance for living, how choosing to be happy felt a lot like saying goodbye. But Tony lived with such brilliant, radiating force, and it was that spirit which drew him to Tony as if awakening from a dream of dark and cold to something bright, shining like a beacon.

Perhaps there was no way to truly turn away from that, even if he wanted to do so. Whatever his life was to become, it was entwined with Tony’s in an inexplicable way no matter how much he might struggle against it. He could fight that, push it away, as Bucky claimed he was wont to do, or reach out and try to hold onto something, a promise of more, of what they could be together, greater than the sum of themselves. It was a risk, he knew, in many ways, an impossibility. He did not have much to give, but, he owed it to Tony to offer what he could, even if that was all he had. He could say the words and mean them this time, feel it with every splinter of bone, every breath of air, he could make it truth. Either that would be enough or—or it wouldn’t.

He turned to his side and tried to quiet his mind enough to find sleep, but it was a daunting task. Sometime in the night, his whirl of thoughts finally settled, though he woke up feeling unrested, the wisps of dreams still catching beneath his eyelids. A man on a sandy shore holding the moon, Steve thought, followed by the vague idea that the man was too far away, fading before he could really grasp it.

Bucky was snoring softly next to him, so he nudged him awake and reached for his water pouch, drinking deeply and rinsing out his mouth. They had no food, so might as well make an early start of things. Bucky sat up with a start, blinking at their surroundings, then groaned and lay back in the dirt. “I thought maybe it was all just a bad dream,” Bucky quipped lightly. “So? You spend all night worrying yourself sick or what?”

“No all night.” Steve answered with an easy grin. His stomach protested its emptiness loudly, but there was nothing to be done for it. Game was too sparse this close to the road, and they did not have time to deviate from it.

“Well? What are we doing then?” Bucky asked.

“We still have a mission. Those villages are woefully unprotected, that much is clear. We’ll make the first one by mid-morning if we hurry. See what we can do. From there, it’s just a couple more days down the coast to where the first reports of the pirates originated. Shouldn’t take too long to look into. At least we can report back to Fury on the situation and let Coulson know what is needed, other than just more boots on the ground that we don’t have right now,” Steve replied, standing and clasping his sword belt low around his waist again, the steady weight a comfort.

Bucky grinned widely. “So, we’re going back, then?”

“Yes. I think—yes. I need to know. I don’t have much of anything to offer, Buck, I know that. Only one thing to give, really. If he refuses it—me-– then…well, then I’ll know,” Steve replied. “But I owe him that much, at least. I should have done it sooner. You were right. What you said last night,” Steve continued softly, placing his hands on his hips. Bucky just nodded jerkily and
continued gathering his gear without looking in Steve’s direction, the confessions of the night so much harsher in the light of day. “I don’t want to walk away from this is there’s a chance I can have something that really matters.”

They walked a quickened pace most of the morning, without the need to guard their trail or weave through the woods to keep their progress hidden. This far from the city, the road was rarely used and parts of it were already being reclaimed by the forest, at least until the spring harvests brought more traffic along this route.

It was as they crested a small rise that Steve saw it in the distance, the billowy plumes of white smoke drifting on the winds from the nearby sea. He looked over at Bucky, who had stopped beside him, a deep frown marring his features.

“That doesn’t look good,” Bucky observed. “Should we cut through the woods, come in from a different route?”

“No reason to now. Whatever happened here, we’re too late. They would have come in the night, most likely,” Steve replied, starting down the hill at a near run. Bucky caught up to him, and they sprinted the rest of the way, until the first burned out crofter’s hut came into view, sitting on a rocky peak overlooking the sea, a shell of wood and stone now. Steve cast a quick look inside, but he didn’t really need to. The smell told him what he needed to know. It was distinct, even here, mingled with the salt air. Once you smelled it once, you didn’t forget though.

“I’ll check the village. You check the beach for any signs of them,” Steve ordered. He nodded to Bucky, who watched him for a long moment before turning to walk over to the ridge and scan the shore, away from the worst of it. Steve moved on, further into the ruined village, if only because he had no choice. He had to sure, though he knew all too well what he would find. He tried to slow his breathing, not think of it, not allow himself to fall into the familiar surge of panic that tensed his body, stole his air and blurred his vision against black smoke that wasn’t there.

He could do this. He had to, though it was the same everywhere he looked. The village had been small, little more than a collection of a few scattered homes, a well, and a sept that appeared to double as a school buttressed by stalls for cattle and sheep. A few families, closely bound to each other and the sea. He walked through the charred pieces of lives with a hand over his mouth to block the smell as best he could, spitting out saliva coated with soot when it grew to be too much. When he looked up again, he saw Bucky standing by the edge of the cliff, gesturing to a well-worn path that led down to the beach.

“Tracks,” Bucky said as he approached, his voice rough, the words scraping their way out. “A lot of them. Up, then down again. You were right. Probably last night.”

“Buck—“ Steve started.

“They’re dead, Steve. There’s nothing here. Let’s just fucking go,” Bucky snarled, turning abruptly and walking back the way they’d come moments earlier. He was right. There was nothing left here, no one to help, no village to defend. He took one last, long look around, then followed in Bucky’s wake back to the gravelly path that wound up to the road. There was nothing more to be done here, save to bear witness to what had happened. They started back towards the road in a heavy silence, Steve’s mind flipping through pictures of the village like pages from a book. One moment, these people had homes and families, were dreaming warm in their beds, and the next, everything was gone, snuffed out by the evil of men and the cruel hand of fate—wait.

“Her hands,” Steve said, coming to a sudden halt.
“What?” Bucky queried sharply. “What are you talking about?”

“Her hands—the—the woman back there, in the larger house, the one that had two stories to it… she had rings on them. Three. Nothing fancy, but nice enough. Heirlooms maybe. One had a pearl and a bit of gold to it,” Steve said, the memory searing through his mind.

“Yeah, so?” Bucky pressed. “I get it, it’s fucked up, so let’s go, okay, Steve? We don’t need to be here. We’ll check the next village, see if anyone is there to warn—“

“No. No, Buck—think about it. When have you ever known pirates to leave behind plunder?” Steve asked. “And that’s not all. The sept was torched, but otherwise not touched. Nothing ransacked looking for metals or valuables. I bet if I went back and looked, there would be coins in the alms box. They didn’t take anything, Buck. Not a damn thing.”

“Okay—so—” Bucky started, eyes widening.

“Not pirates. Something else. Someone that attacked a few of other villages so no one would question it when they came to this one, it would be just another raid. They put ashore here, came up the hill and wiped out this village, the closet to the city, so no one would be able to report them when they didn’t go back to their ships this time. They killed everyone, then went back down to the beach, where their tracks are washed away by the morning tide,” Steve explained.

“You’re thinking Pierce or—Hydra,” Bucky guessed. “But how?”

“Nat said Tony burned the ships they recovered, but that was only part of the fleet that Batroc originally captured. Where are the rest of them?” Steve continued. “They could have put men ashore here, maybe with some longboats to carry to get around the deeper areas, then used a skeleton crew to take the ships out to sea, undetected. The city is virtually impervious to a sea assault from warships, but—“

“But a few hundred elite soldiers climbing those up those rocks from the beach? Yeah, it could work. I’ve watched kids from the city scamper up and down there enough to know it can be done. They use the drains built into the walls to go in and out of the city, then down the rocks looking for clams and crabs in the tide pools,” Bucky cut in. “Damn. Damn, Steve. Fucking Hydra.”

“It will take them longer to reach the city by the beach, but they have a half-day’s head start. And if they’re making for the city, that means Hydra and Pierce are on the move, and no one in the city seems to know about it,” Steve added. “Or maybe they do, at least by now. That’s what Sam was trying to tell us without outright saying it. Damn. I didn’t listen. I was upset and—we have to go back to the city. Now. Before those soldiers make the shoreline beneath the city.”

It was miles over hard ground back to the city, they were both reeling from the events of the morning, nor had they eaten anything since yesterday, but there was no time for those kinds of excuses now, Steve knew. “You’re the better runner,” Bucky added quickly, interrupting Steve’s thoughts. “Give me your sword and go. I’ll just slow you down, you know that. I’ll catch up when I can, but don’t wait on me.” Steve nodded and unbuckled his sword belt, handing it to Bucky. “Want me to take that, too?” Bucky asked, nodding at the shield.

“No. I can run with it,” Steve answered, running a hand over the smooth rim. “Hurry, Buck. We may not have much time.”

“I will. Go,” Bucky urged. “Be careful, Steve.” Steve nodded, then hoisted the shield to his side, flexing his fingers around the leather straps. “Though, if you see that Ketterson guy, feel free to knock him on his ass for me.”
“I’ll keep that in mind,” Steve replied, then nodded and was off, racing down the path, trying to find a rhythm and speed to sustain him over the distance. He knew better than to spend his energy in one burst, and for once, found himself grateful for the laps Phillips insisted they run over and over again until his lungs no longer burned with the effort and his muscles stopped quivering when he paused. Still, it was evening by the time he saw the city walls rising in front of him. He slowed a bit as he approached, finally coming to a halt just outside the where the ring of soldiers camped outside the walls in ripples of trenches that spread down the hillside into the valley below.

Steve bent at the waist, breathing heavily as he placed his hands against his knees. It had been a long time since he had tried something like that, and his whole body screamed in protest. After he caught his breath, he couldn’t help veering off the road and taking the time to walk over to the side of the cliff, leaning over long enough to watch the waves splash over the empty shore below. Not long now, though, he thought.

He looked up at the Castle looming above and the Tower in the distance, a light blazing from the window near the top, and wondered that it had only been a day since he had called this place home, though only in the barest sense of the word. He trudged back to the road, breaths still coming in painful heaves and wiped the sweat from his brow with the tail of his shirt.

There were hundreds of people streaming into the city, he noted. Women and children and old folk, leaving homes and farms and lives behind for the safety of walls of stone and the protection of an army. They knew what was coming, and this was the last place to stand before the Realm burned. He joined in with a crowd of curious onlookers following a couple of merchant wagons loaded with goods. As unobtrusively as he could manage, he grabbed a burlap bag off the back of one and upended the items in it into the back of the wagon, shoving the bag under his arm as he ducked off to the side long enough to shove the shield inside the empty bag. It still looked like a shield in a bag to him, but it was something. He knew that people who were not looking for things, tended not to see them, and the sheer volume of the crowd gave him cover, at least for now.

Steve kept his head down as the wagons trundled along the road next to the city and came to the bridge leading through the gate. The guards that lined the road this close to the city looked over the crowd, their eyes passing over him and the other peasants who were poking curiously at the merchandise without really stopping to truly see, lumping them all into the same category, and he supposed there was truth to that. The guards at the gate, however, had sharper eyes, he knew, being far more accustomed to spotting things that did not belong, such as peasants who walked like soldiers. He forced his gate to shuffle a bit, hunching his shoulders and averting his eyes. He certainly looked the part, he thought, as he stared down at his sweat-caked clothes and mud-covered boots, worn so through now that he could actually feel the warm stone beneath his feet.

Once through the gate, the wagons moved towards the marketplace at the city center, and most of the crowd followed, leaving him with little choice but to separate. He ambled off as nonchalantly as he could, clutching the bag with the shield to his chest. He followed one of the narrower cobblestone streets to the part of the Castle where the servants came and went, toting laundry and baskets of fresh foods, huge hunks of meat slung over strong shoulders, pots of oils and caskets of wine balanced precariously on small pillows atop the heads of young girls and boys seeming too fragile to lift such things. He nearly ran into a woman holding two chickens by the feet with one hand, the other wrapped around the chubby arm of a young boy, and twisted the side to get out of her way. “S—sorry,” he stuttered, though she paid him no mind.

“Miss me, soldier?” a warm voice curled from under the awning overhanging a low doorway. He stopped and let his head dip to his chest with a sigh.

“Hey, Nat,” he replied around a grimace. “How’d you know?”
“A not-so-little bird has been out looking for you, and came back to roost just before sundown,” she informed him. “I assumed you were soon to follow. This is the way we came when that old fossil moved us from the Tower. Figured you’d be coming back this way. I know you wouldn’t want to wander around places where you didn’t know where the exits were, and don’t pretend you didn’t count them when we moved,” she continued, pushing herself off the wall and striding over to where he stood. “I take it we need to talk.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “We do. Got some place we can do that?” Of course, she did, pulling him through the low door she’d been standing next to and down a series of hallways and staircases.

“Where’s James?” she asked as he followed her down the long hall, the walls lined with torches on either side burning brightly against the night.

“Somewhere on the road behind me,” Steve said, looking back and forth as they walked. She hummed a bit under her breath, but didn’t say anything else. Ahead, he heard the scrape of boots scuff across stone and the clank of metal that meant soldiers. He grabbed her arm to slow her.

“We’ve got at least four coming right at us. I’ll take the lead two out, and then we’ll meet—“

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable,” Nat said suddenly as she turned to face him.

“Yes, they do—“ he managed before she was pressing her mouth against his, pushing him back against the wall behind them. He wrapped the arm not holding the shield around her for lack of anything better to do with it, and tried not to watch the guards as they passed right by them without even slowing. Once the guards had moved down the hall, Nat peeled herself off, a slight smile playing about her mouth.

“You still uncomfortable?” she queried lightly, patting him on the arm.

“That’s not exactly the word I would use,” he responded with a frown.

“Guess I don’t have to ask who your last kiss was with,” she said, smiling ruefully. “Tell him you need to practice.”

“That bad, huh?” he asked dryly, following her down the hall again.

“No, but you should tell him that anyway,” she replied with a sly grin. “Here,” she said, indicating a small, unoccupied solar that overlooked the courtyard outside. “Okay, first, tell me what brought you back. Then we can talk about how Tony is a giant ass, and you make it ten times worse than it needs to be. Go.” He sighed, but began explaining what he and Bucky found at the village and his suspicions about Hydra’s plans for the attack.

“You’re right about Pierce being on the move,” Nat informed him. “Redwing brought word to Sam from one of the scouts just yesterday. We should have heard sooner, but most of our scouts lost their cover when part of Fury’s forces went over to Pierce’s side. We lost whatever head start we might have had. Pierce’s troops, and whatever of Schmidt’s forces we’re going to have to deal with, will be within sight of the city by tomorrow night. If you’re right about these other soldiers, then the attack could happen faster than we’d assumed. You should tell Fury and Coulson. I’ll go wait for James.”

“Nat, you know I can’t just walk around here. Not now, anyway. I was going to try to find a way to speak to Tony, but if Pierce is really that close to the city, he has more on his plate than he needs right now without me----well, without me,” Steve finished lamely. “Look, tell Fury what I told you. Question Zola about it, he might know something.”

“What?” Steve asked in surprise. “That—that—wasn’t a good trade.” That was a terrible trade, actually. Zola was part of Schmidt’s inner circle. If anyone knew what plans Schmidt and Pierce had in store, it would have been him. No one in their right mind would make that kind of trade, not during wartime when that could mark the difference between victory and defeat. He didn’t know what to say to that, though it did explain a lot of the soldiers’ anger towards him, he supposed. Pierce held their brothers, their friends, and Tony traded what currency he had for Steve. No wonder he was so despised. “Okay, well, question the other soldiers we have, maybe they heard something, even if they don’t—what?” he stopped at Natasha’s frown.

“He traded them for you, too,” she explained quietly. “Fury wanted to question them, as well. That’s how I found out. He traded everyone for you, and from what Pepper says, it’s a damn good thing Stern didn’t think to ask for Tony in exchange, because he might just have done it.”

“That’s—I didn’t know that,” Steve replied. “I never thought…I…why would he do that?”

“Steve, do you remember that night when we all sat around the campfire and talked about what we wanted to do after the war was over?” Natasha asked, seemingly out of nowhere. “Bruce wanted to find someplace calm, quiet, where he could help people, make them happy without having to live his life as a nomad. Clint wanted to be able to provide for Phil, instead of always being the one to take from him. Thor wanted to be with Jane and finally worthy of his father’s approval. James wanted to go home, or as close to it as he could get. You wanted a family, to be something other than just a soldier. None of you were talking about your real plans for the future. I don’t think any of us really had them. You were talking about your dreams, what you wanted but thought you couldn’t have. Do you remember what Tony talked about?” she queried.

“He—he told that story,” Steve replied softly, lost in the memory for a moment.

“Tony told a story about a king who found someone who challenged him to be better, to do better, and gave him love in return,” Natasha reminded him. “That’s his dream, Steve. An equal. Who would love him despite seeing his flaws. That’s the thing he didn’t believe he would ever find.”

Steve sucked in a deep breath at her words and leaned his head back against the wall behind him, staring out at the willow swaying in the night breeze in the courtyard outside the window. “I have to see him,” he said firmly.

“Yeah, you really do,” Natasha prodded. “He’s holed up in his workshop making everyone who comes in contact with him completely miserable. Made Fury and his generals come there for the meeting this morning and then spent most of the time alternatively ignoring them or yelling at them when they didn’t have answers he wanted fast enough.”

“Alright—alright, you tell Fury about the beach assault and get those drains barred. Put archers on the wall back there and move some of those barrels of oil into position. I’ll—I’ll go see if he’ll speak to me,” Steve told her.

“Steve,” Natasha called as he strode towards the door. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” he replied. “I think I’m going to need it. Find Bucky, if you can, or ask Sam to do it. Tell him I owe him—and Redwing.” She nodded brusquely, as he leaned against the door, listening for a moment before opening it to an empty hall.

He retraced their steps, finding himself back in the bailey again, servants and delivery persons walking swiftly to and fro bearing their goods. The Tower stood proudly on the other side of the
Castle complex, a world away. He knew from experience that it was far easier to traverse this area of the Castle undetected. Once he made his way closer to the Great Hall and the offices, apartments and other areas frequented by the Court and King, it became substantially more difficult. There was nothing for it, but to do it, though, so he shifted the shield to where he could hold it properly even inside the bag and started to make his way across the complex towards the large forebuildings that stood on either side of the Great Hall. If he could make it close enough to the Tower, he might be able to spot Jarvis or Ms. Potts. He hoped they would at least listen to him before they had him arrested.

He ducked through a covered archway that he knew led to one of the inner courtyards, though to get there, he would be forced to pass by the armory, which meant guards far more alert than what he really wanted to deal with, but it was the shortest route. It would take too much precious time to be caught like this and then try to talk his way to someone who might listen. They were just as likely to throw him into a cell as give him the benefit of the doubt, anyway, considering how he’d left the city. For all he knew, that was Tony’s standing order, he thought bitterly, then instantly regretted the thought.

He moved as nonchalantly as he could down the tunnel, though there was a reason Nat never let him do any kind of work that required subterfuge, he thought as a voice shouted from behind him, “Hey! You there!” the guard called. “You’re not supposed to be in this area.”

“Uh, sorry, my mistake,” Steve said over his shoulder, walking hurriedly without looking back. He gripped the bag containing the shield tighter.

“I’m going to have to ask you to wait there, sir,” the soldier said, and then two more stepped into his path. Beyond one’s shoulder, he could see the pale ground of the courtyard beyond. He didn’t think, just let his body react, the way it was taught, pulling the shield from the bag and launching it at the men in front of him, even as he spun and landed a well-placed kick, if the man’s huffed whoosh of air was any indication.

The shield knocked the two in front of him to their knees, bounced off the armored chestplate of one and back into Steve’s outstretched hand as if on a string, and not for the first time, he found himself amazed at Tony’s genius. He slipped the straps back through his hand and smashed it into the side of the helmet of one guard, sending his fist into the jaw of the other, then turned, tripping the man running at him from behind and bringing the shield down against the back of his head as he fell. The entire fight had taken less than a minute, he thought, and while the guards were out cold, no one was seriously injured, though they were all going to wake with fairly unfortunate headaches.

He lifted the shield again and moved quickly, hugging the side of the wall against his back as he darted his head around the corner to look into the courtyard. He wouldn’t have very long before the guards’ absence would be noted. It was a long way around the wall of the courtyard, but he did not relish the idea of crossing that open a space with just his shield for cover.

“Captain Rogers?” a deep voice called out from the entrance to the archway behind him. He turned and raised the shield by instinct, then recognized the figure.

“Captain Rhodes—I mean, Sir James—“ Steve started, then looked down at the shield and the three unconscious guards. “Uh, this isn’t what it looks like?” he offered as his hand shifted on the shield.

“Yeeaaaaah,” Rhodes said, drawing out the word. “Let’s hope not. Because it looks like one man without an actual weapon just infiltrated our city armory and took out the duty guards while managing not to alert the rest of the garrison. So, I’d just like to pretend that’s not at all what
happened, if it’s all the same to you, seeing as how I’m in charge of their training and assignments. What are you doing back here, Steve? I thought you two would be settled in Hempstead by now.”

“Hempstead?” Steve repeated with a frown, his mind drawing a blank around the word. “We—we thought—maybe Gulmira—“ Steve stammered in confusion, taken aback by Rhodes calm demeanor.

Rhodes stepped closer and studied him for a moment. “Sir James, please, I know I’m not supposed to be here, but we found something at one of the coastal villages. I just came back to report it to Fury,” Steve tried to explain.

“Huh,” Rhodes huffed. “That’s funny, because I just got called to an emergency meeting with Fury.”

“Good. That’s good. Listen, I won’t stay.” Steve began. “Not if he doesn’t want me here. I was going to try to find Mr. Jarvis or Ms. Potts. I’d like to see him, if he will allow it,” he finished more firmly. “I know that’s asking a lot when he’s given orders, but I think maybe there was a mistake or—a misunderstanding—or maybe I didn’t understand—“ Steve slowed, taking a deep breath. Why couldn’t he just face down Pierce or Schmidt and his legions of Hydra or something simple? “I just need to talk to him. Once. That’s all. If he still wants me to go, then I’ll leave and not trouble you again. You have my word.”

"Just you here then?" Rhodes asked carefully. "Where's your friend?"

"He's back on the coastal road somewhere. I'm faster. I, uh," Steve stammered a bit, looking down at his disheveled appearance. "I ran most of the way back. I think Nat--Agent Romanov--was going to look for him," Steve replied.

“Yeah,” Rhodes said again. “I’m going to have to arrest you.”

“What?” Steve blurted out in surprise.

“Trust me, it’s for your own good,” Rhodes promised. “Can you possibly not kick my ass and make me look ridiculous in front of whichever of my men find my unconscious and bloodied body? I have a reputation to protect, you know. Not much of one, but its there,” Rhodes said, stepping forward and placing a light hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Steve, please. I’m asking that you trust me on this. You want to come with me.”

Steve studied the other man for a moment, then nodded once and started forward, letting himself be led wherever it was Captain Rhodes was taking him. He did not particularly relish the idea of waiting in a cell to see Tony, but if that was what it took, then he supposed he didn’t really have much choice. Except that Rhodes did not veer off towards the prison or even to one of the guardrooms or offices, just kept walking a brisk pace to the Tower, Steve following closely on his heels.

“Captain Rhodes?” Steve asked as they entered the inner courtyard and kept going. Heads were turning and murmured voices rose in chorus as they passed by groups of onlookers milling about.

“Just keep with me,” Rhodes replied steadily. With a curt nod, Rhodes walked past the guards at the inner wall and kept on going to the Tower doors. Two soldiers quickly swept the doors open for them and before he could quite set his mind to what was happening, Steve found himself trailing behind Rhodes down the familiar hallway to what had been his room in the Tower. Rhodes nodded silently to the two guards that flanked the hallway and pushed the door open, stepping inside.
“Captain—this doesn’t seem like a good idea,” Steve said as he paused at the threshold.

“This is a great idea. This is the best idea I’ve had in, oh, let me think…ever,” Rhodes replied. When Steve still didn’t move, Rhodes walked back and grabbed his upper arm, steering him inside. “Do you know why we are here? No? Because this is your room. The reason I know that is because it has probably the finest set of paints and brushes in the entire Realm on the off chance that you might like those things. It also has books on subjects you might enjoy, art and history and “military stuff,” which I know because I was asked to provide ideas of books on, and I’m quoting, “military stuff,” and while it pains me to call the Annuls of the Battles of Midgard “military stuff,” who am I to argue when the King wants something? You may also find blankets of every stupid variety because, apparently, that was a thing, and there’s even a gods-damned fruit bowl, though I have no idea what that’s about, except that Jarvis has to make sure it is there and fresh fruit is in it every day,” Rhodey continued as Steve’s gaze darted around the room.

“This? Steve, this is your room. It was made for you because he wanted you to like it here so much that you will like him, even just a little, because that’s how he thinks, as messed up as that may sound to normal people. That’s how I ended up with five sets of armor I don’t use, and Pepper has a dozen dresses she won’t wear, though she likes the shoes, even though she won’t admit it,” Rhody informed him. “Now, sit down, wrap yourself in a blanket, eat some fruit and paint something or whatever it is that you do, but for the love of the gods, do not leave this room, because if I have to drag your ass all the way back from Gulmira, I’m going to be frankly rather sore with you.”

“I—okay?” Steve replied, blinking at Rhodes as he tried to take all that in at one time.

“Good,” Rhodes said, and pulled the door shut behind him with a loud bang.

Steve looked around the room, this time with different eyes then the awed ones that had perused the room after he recovered from his illness. Then, it had just been some kind of fantasy world, full of gadgets and luxuries that amazed and delighted him, but he had not thought of any of them as truly personal. They were just things, and not even his things, or so he had thought. They went with the room, and it wasn’t his place, just a temporary abode while he recovered, spectacular in the way he assumed everything here must be, and it had all be so much at once, Tony and this place and everything so different and strange. It had been overwhelming.

Now, when he looked, he could see what Rhodes meant. He had thought the shelf of books interesting, but had not considered that they all were interesting to him. There was, in fact, a stack of blankets in the wardrobe. He remembered running his fingers over them, marveling at the softness. He had not understood them to be replacements for the one Tony destroyed. There were clothes in there as well, and Jarvis had always helped him with figuring out what each piece was supposed to do and how they all went together, but he had not really considered that they all fit him nearly perfectly or that they were done in the deep blues of the water, vibrant greens of reeds and grass, and the rich golds of sand and sun. He had just liked them, without really considering that someone had chosen them with his tastes in mind, because who would even do that? And there was, in fact, a bowl of fruit on one of the tables. Had it been put there because Bucky had teased him about wanting to paint fruit bowls? It seemed absurd, yet the instant he thought it, he knew it was true.

The door opened behind him, and he put the orange he had picked up back in the bowl, turning around to find Jarvis coming in with a tray of food in his hands. At the sight, Steve suddenly realized he was famished. “Hi, Jarvis. Thank you, that looks wonderful,” Steve said, as Jarvis placed the tray on the table and began plating the food.
“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis replied rather stiffly.

“I don’t suppose you’d tell me if you’ve heard any word of Bucky--Sergeant Barnes--or the team yet?” Steve asked.

“I am not usually privy to such information, Sir,” Jarvis said, which was no answer at all, but Steve didn’t press.

Instead, he walked over and watched Jarvis at his task for a moment, his mouth watering at the smells as he looked over the enormous portions of food Jarvis was placing in front of him.

“Jarvis,” Steve said with a frown, then broke into a smile. “The blueberries. He did that, didn’t he? Because I gave him blueberries when we—when he was with us—and so now, I—what—get them with every meal? Forever?” Steve said with a shake of his head. He had just thought that was what people ate here, for gods’ sake.

“His Grace was very specific,” Jarvis said curtly, though his face softened a bit. “Shall I prepare your bath while you dine, Sir?”

“You know, this is very different from the last time I was arrested,” Steve observed in amazed tones as he sat down at the table. “Uh, thank you, Jarvis. That sounds…wonderful, actually.” He knew what he must look like at this point, and probably smelled just as bad after running most of the way back here, and suddenly, he wanted to look nice.

After he finished dinner and bathed, he found that Jarvis had laid clothes out for him on the bed, a pair of boots shined to high gloss leaning next to it. There was a shaving blade, with a vat of soap near the wash stand. He couldn’t help stare at his reflection in the long mirror when he was done. It was still disconcerting to see his likeness captured like that, but he judged he managed to be presentable.

Steve turned abruptly from the mirror a knock on the door, and felt his stomach swoop. He forced himself to take slow, careful steps to the door, then took a deep breath and opened it, the breath he had been holding without realizing it sinking out as soon as did. “Wow,” Bucky said, looking Steve up and down. “Can I be arrested, too?”

“Hey, Buck. Sam, good to see you, too,” Steve said with a smile, stepping back into the room to let the two of them inside. Bucky immediately sprawled face-forward on the bed with a groan of pure pleasure.

“Oh, bed of feathers, how I missed you,” Bucky said, burying his face in one of the pillows. Steve just shook his head.

“That’s sad, Bucky. Truly,” Steve said with a smile, sitting down on the edge of the bed and using a pillow to urge Bucky to budge over.

The door opened again, this time without a knock, and Natasha and Thor entered, talking animatedly about what seemed to be some kind of creature. “Huge, scaly, with big antlers? You do not have those?” Thor asked in obvious disappointment. “I wished to vanquish one and bring its skin to my beloved Jane as a token of my esteem.”


“But how will this prove to her my worth as a warrior?” Thor asked in confusion.

“Have you met the head gardener? He’s militant about those roses. Trust me, you take your life in your hands,” Natasha assured him to Thor’s wide grin.
“Then I shall capture these prized flowers for my beloved Jane and best this combative flower keeper,” Thor announced happily. “Captain, ’tis good to see you again. We heard your sojourn was not without discovery, though. Truly, it is a fortunate thing that you were so committed to your mission.”

“Thanks, Thor. I’m glad we could help, just wish we’d been able to get there sooner,” Steve responded, plucking at the corner of a pillow where soft fringes of fine threads formed a rainbow of colors around the edge.

“Fury and Coulson are meeting with the King right now. Rhodes, Hill, Danvers and some of the other commanders are there, as well. Admiral Westbrook, too, since we will have to reposition the remainder of the fleet if there are Hydra ships floating around out there,” Natasha informed them. At least that answered Steve’s unasked question about Tony’s whereabouts. “Our scouts report a large army bearing Hydra flags marching on fast approach from the south, and we have heard stories that they are burning whatever stands in their way. We’re getting a lot more refugees into the city. Pepper is coordinating the efforts, along with Lady Janet and Lord Ellis and half the Castle staff, but it’s a daunting task.”

“And us?” Steve asked. “Do we have an assignment?”

“Not yet. Clint’s been keeping to the galleries above the Hall for the most part, but I asked him to see if he could find out anything about the meeting,” Natasha replied.

“Good,” Steve nodded. He could feel the leashed tension in the room, scurrying underneath everyone’s casualness. The sitting around and waiting was far worse on all of them than a fight, he knew. They were not idle people, not when Hydra was marching to their gate, though Jarvis’ arrival a few minutes later bearing more food and drink, even a plate full of those flat pastries that Thor adored more than anything except Jane, seemed to alleviate some of the strain.

“You talk to him yet?” Bucky asked from next to him as the room went carefully silent.

“No, not yet. He was in his workshop when I arrived, according to Rhodes, and, now, I guess, he’s in the meeting with Fury. There just hasn’t been time,” Steve replied, looking over at the door as if he could will Tony to walk through it.

“Well, look,” Bucky said, sitting up and scooting to the edge of the bed. “I love you, Steve, but don’t ask me to choose between you and this…this pillow,” Bucky teased, holding up one of the soft feather pillows and shaking it in Steve’s face. “Not again. Our bond only goes so far.”

“Thanks, Buck, I’ll keep that in mind,” Steve intoned dryly, shoving his friend lightly, and then harder when Bucky shoved back, and before he knew it, they each had a pillow and were pounding away at the other, laughing as they rolled around on the bed like fish out of water. He thought he heard Jarvis sigh heavily over the melee as he left with the empty food cart, but suddenly had a pillow knocked into the side of his head hard enough to ring it like a bell in a tower.

“I had not thought to use these as weapons, but woe to the warrior who would threaten me with bed linens!” Thor shouted, raising a sofa cushion like it was his warhammer and bringing it down to smash into the metal arm Bucky was using to block his face while he curled on his side in laughter. Thor held the pillow aloft again, and then suddenly it was rent in two, white feathers spilling out and floating through the air as an arrow bounced harmlessly off the opposite wall.

“First, I had to put up with waiting for servants to fill my bath for me instead of having the water come right out of the wall, all because you wouldn’t let me lock the two idiots in a room together, which I could so have done, Natasha!” Clint accused loudly, pointing an arrow in her direction,
where she sat perched on the sofa arm. “Now, I get stuck with spying on Fury and you all get food and a pillow fight?” he demanded incredulously, as he shouldered his bow again. “This is so unfair.”

“Please. First, you hadn’t had an actual bath in your life until we got here, except that time Peters knocked you into the horse trough, and second, they started it,” Natasha replied evenly, pointing to where Steve and Bucky quickly shoved the pillows they were holding behind them. “Your Captain, my friends,” Natasha said, waving her hand in the air in a mimed swirl of acknowledgment over a round of snickering from Sam and Bucky.

“This is so unfair,” Clint repeated as he plopped down on the sofa and picked up the other cushion, casting a baleful look at Natasha. “Also, the King is hovering in the hallway outside.”

“What do you mean?” Steve said, sitting up in surprise and turning quickly to the door, clutching the pillow to his chest as if to mute the sudden thump of his heart.

“Well, I mean, I’m sure he’s hovering all regally and shit, but he’s pacing back and forth outside the door muttering under his breath, so whatever you want to call it,” Clint said calmly as everyone stared at him. “Ooo-can I have one of those pastry things?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, almost there! One more long chapter and an epilogue, though those will be posted at the same time. Thank you all so much for reading this thing. I know that is a huge time commitment, so I truly appreciate it.

I'm on tumblr as sabrecmc. I generally don't know what I'm doing and just reblog Stony things, but hey, come on over and watch me flail uselessly.

A few Author's Notes: Hopefully, you have noticed that Steve (and Bucky, though he is not a POV, so we don't really get into it) suffers from fairly serious PTSD. Between the flashbacks, trouble sleeping, dreams, hyper-vigilance, worry about losing people he cares about, feeling that he doesn't have a future, etc., that has hopefully been conveyed. I think that is pretty much canon, at least if you include the deleted scenes from Avengers. Symptoms of PTSD also include feelings of inadequacy and detachment from the world around you, which I used in this story as sort of a proxy for Steve being a 'man out of time,' and what is commonly called 'survivor's guilt.' And the Avengers have been a bit of a crutch for that, but now he's woken to a world that is very different where there is a huge power differential between him and Tony. So, there's that...

Dear Eric's suggestion to Steve is a shout out to the lovely Marvel comic write who tweeted the suggestion of a blow job as a way to settle their issues. They make it so easy sometimes.
Okay, I know I said one more chapter and an epilogue, but this chapter got ridiculously long, so I ended up cutting it in two. The second half isn’t far behind, hopefully by this weekend if I have the time to finish the last part and epilogue, since I want to post those together. But, it was pushing 40K and that seemed like a tad long for one chapter. So, uh, here you go...

It was anger that sent him surging forward, plowing down the hallway unseeing, as he swallowed down anything else that may have animated him. Anger, visceral and raw, betrayal cutting through him, cleaving him in two. It powered his steps until he could feel himself vibrating with it, his hands shaking so badly he wound them into fists without realizing what he was doing.

He wasn’t sure if it was aimed more at Steve or…gods, what was even his name…or at himself for his own folly. Perhaps it was big enough to encompass all of them. He couldn’t breathe, the air seemed to catch and hold in his throat like a burning ember. No, that wasn’t quite true, he thought, as he drew in a ragged, shuddering mockery of a breath. He could, it just hurt, a wrenching tightness in his chest that would not ease, but seemed to constrict with each further step. Everything hurt, in truth, it just didn’t matter that it did, almost felt somehow right that it should. He was trying to swallow around a grief and hurt, a pain so bright it nearly blinded him, and maybe it did, at that. Maybe he had been blind for far longer than he realized.

He needed to get away, be anywhere but here, before he turned into someone—something—he would despise. Barnes had been right about him, or close enough to it. He had seen that part of Tony that Tony refused to acknowledge, the soft, dark underbelly that wanted to take as much as he could, take everything, just take because he could, because it was his right, because he wanted, until he reached that point just shy of having to call himself a monster. He stopped, breath coming in heaving gasps as he braced a hand against a rounded stone column, ignoring the startled looks from those passing him by with curious stares, probably wondering what he was doing over here, though he suspected they may know that answer better than he did.

He wanted nothing more than to simply walk back in there and order them apart, the two of them, so similar and easy together, and how that tasted of envy, sweet and bitter, like the skin of a too ripe plum. And he could, too. Therein lay the rub of it. He could simply forbid it, deny whatever measure of happiness Steve had found here because it pleased him, so that this dark maw of his own hurt would lessen somehow, and what did that say about what he had become that he would even consider such an abhorrent thing?

“Your Grace? Are you…are you alright, Sire?” a soft voice asked, and he turned to see a laundress toting a basket of linens in her arms, her brow lined with concern, mouth dipping at the corners as she took in his demeanor. He wasn’t sure what would come out of his mouth if he tried to answer her, so he just nodded his head, and she shuffled off with a deepening frown and quick curtsy.

Tony looked up and caught his reflection in the distorted glass of the window pane, his face twisted and grotesque for a moment, exaggerated into a rictus of pain and grief, like the masks the
players sometimes wore. Perhaps that was apt. He closed his eyes against the image, taking a deep, fortifying breath. His first instinct was to run, and he knew himself well enough to recognize the impulse. Run and hide away in his workshop where he could control all the variables, left alone with his devices and machines, his potions and metals, to create the world he wanted. It had long served as his refuge from whatever it was that he did not want to face, and that, he knew, was as much a cause of the brutality sweeping the Realm as anything Pierce had done.

He could not do that, not now, not anymore. Steve, the Avengers, the whole damn thing of it had changed him in some inexplicable way and there was no going back, even had he wanted that path to be laid before him. Somehow, in all of this, the burden of responsibility had turned into a terrible privilege, one that he could no longer ignore, and moreso, now had no desire to set aside. He had meant his words to the Court. It was as much a promise to himself as to them. He would not run or hide or shirk his duty because it seemed easier. He had well learned that the ease of those choices was as much an illusion as the reflection in the window.

Tony pushed himself off the column and tugged his doublet down to straighten it, forcing his head high against the curious stares of those that passed him in the hallway, sliding carefully over him as they pretended not to be looking at their King have some kind of fit in their midst. He traced his earlier steps out of this part of the Castle complex on hurried feet, suddenly eager to put distance between himself and doing something truly foolish, because it was there, he could see it, feel it pulsing in his ears, ringing in his head. He wanted it, gods help him. Barnes had known, had seen what Tony would want to choose, and he did want it, desperately so, and he hated himself for that, maybe even feared it a bit, that he might have that in him after all, however strongly he wanted to deny it.

He needed to get Steve away before he made a choice he couldn’t take back. He owed Steve his life, several times over, and knowing that and what Steve had suffered in his name, should be enough to earn Steve the release he so clearly wanted. From the moment Steve first woke up able to form a coherent thought, he had wanted to be away from Tony. Were not his only words to Tony during his illness to repeatedly tell him that he should not be there? Steve did not want him near, not now that he knew who really was, and he could not blame him for that. Steve may still want to ensure that Stane paid for his crimes, but that hardly absolved Tony of his own, no matter what words might be used to sway a jury, sweet lies to see that justice is carried out and not ruined by Tony’s own stupidity in failing to see how Stane would twist things.

Tony had sworn, all those nights ago when Steve told him of what truly happened in Brookland, had promised to leave Steve in peace, if that was what was asked of him, but those words had been easily spilt on a night when Steve was so close and the path to what Tony wanted, always what Tony wanted, had seemed so brightly lit. Steve and this…Culver…they were planning to leave anyway. That needed to happen now, before Tony did something he could not take back.

If he allowed Steve to stay here, if Steve was this close and chose someone else, found the happiness he deserved apart from Tony, he knew himself well enough to know that he could not bear it, not for long. He would see them, hear of them and think of them, and he would covet that happiness until he placed his own above Steve’s, because that was what he did, over and over again, from the bridge to leaving Steve in the forest, he always held his own desires above others, above Steve’s.

That was what power allowed, the temptation to take what was beyond your due. That was the unspeakable truth of it, the heinous selfishness Barnes had warned him of, that he had once denied so forcefully. He was not strong enough to do this, to be this close to everything he wanted, yet have it ever unobtainable, a ladder to the sky, so he told himself that letting Steve go was different than pushing him away. Less selfish somehow. It had to be. It hurt far, far more.
“You there,” he called to one of the guards that lined the hallway as he brought himself to a halt in front of the startled man.

“Yes, Your Grace?” the man replied quickly, snapping to attention.

“Down there, in the officers’ quarters…there are two men. Captain Rogers and…another man. I want them gone. Out of the city—just gone. Give them what time they require to gather their belongings and provisions, but they are not to remain in the city past sundown, is that clear?” Tony demanded. “See to it that I am informed when it is done.”

“Yes, Your Grace, of course,” the guard answered quickly. “It shall be as you command, Sire,” the man assured him, bowing as he hurried off. Tony nodded and braced his hands against his hips, casting one more look down the hallway at the door that led down to Steve’s room. Had it only been minutes ago he had found his way there, filled with anticipation and hope? It seemed so very much longer now, as if time had unraveled and infiltrated the space between them, hanging heavy and leaden between him and everything that could have been.

Tony made his way back to his chambers, though he could not recall the journey later. He resolutely did not look at the door to the empty room down the hall from him as he brushed past the guards and threw closed the door to his own room, letting out a long breath as he leaned back against the solid wood. He scrubbed his face with his hands and let himself simply rest there for a moment, the hitch in his chest slowly lessening as his heart stuttered towards a normal beat. He pushed himself off the door and poured a cup of wine from the flagon on the table, walking over to stand at the window. He gazed out at the horizon as the sun went down, spreading out into a shimmering golden veil over the sea. He watched it until the last gossamer strands disappeared from the whites of the waves.

He wondered what the team would do, if they would follow Steve or stay here. They loved each other in their own strange way, but Steve was the bright center radiating with whatever it was that bound them together. They knew it, too, sought his light in the darkness even when they didn’t quite realize what they were doing. He had seen it in the way they watched over Steve while he was sick, an air of vigil wrapping itself around them all, slowing everything down, reducing them in some way that was hard to comprehend, as if his loss suddenly separated them into parts, pieces of a whole that wasn’t there anymore.

“Come,” he called out when the knock on the door sounded. A guard entered, a commander by the look of him, and knelt, sword scraping the stone floor beneath him as his armor clanked with the effort. The commander kept his head bowed, and Tony knew he was waiting to be acknowledged so that he could give his report. Tony looked back over his shoulder out the window at the darkening sky, a hazy, changeling blue, like the deep of the ocean, beyond the reach of mere men. He closed his eyes and saw behind their lids a gaze of the same color, and snapped them open again.

“You have news for me,” Tony stated, though a part of him, too large a piece, in fact, screamed in deafening, piercing shouts that rang in his ears like drumbeats that he should not hear, should not allow this man to speak these words. “Speak.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the guard replied. “We escorted Captain Rogers and his companion to the city gates. I watched them depart myself, Sire.”

“Did—“ Tony cleared his throat. “Did he object?”

“No, Your Grace. Not as such,” the man answered, and Tony felt a stab of phantom pain behind the disc in his chest and fought the urge to rub his hand over it. “He said it was his choice to go,”
the guard continued, missing Tony’s wince at his words. “He raised concerns about his team, is all. Those—uh—Pierce’s people, the—um,” the man stuttered.

“Avengers,” Tony filled in for him. “They’re the Avengers. They’re—they are good people, Commander. Honorable. Misled, yes, but were not we all?” Tony queried, wondering at his sudden need to defend them against the commander’s enmity.

“As you say, Your Grace,” the Commander agreed, though Tony could hear the carefully neutral tone, and it bothered him, this dissent, though he had known to expect it. That had been one of the reasons for moving the team to the Tower, not only to give them a place away from the censorious gazes of those who did not yet know the full story, but to provide them with the benefit of Tony’s confidence and approval, something that went a long way in determining how they were received. Of course, he had managed to undermine whatever gains may have been made in the short time they were in the Tower by promptly having them removed, though the extent of that harm had not seemed so glaring until just now.

“I only spoke to the Captain on but a few occasions, Your Grace,” the Commander continued, clearly perceiving Tony’s silence as disapproval, and Tony supposed it was. Tony’s frown deepened at the man’s response and the implication there.

“I’m surprised at that,” Tony replied mildly. “I was told Captain Rogers regularly took his meals with the officers and spent considerable time on the training field as well.”

“I—yes, Your Grace. I—yes, he did, at that,” the Commander acknowledged cautiously.

“But you did not speak to him,” Tony said evenly, noting the way the man’s cheeks puffed out, reddening as a bead of sweat trickled down. Tony’s mind flashed back to Rhodey telling him in his tent all those months ago that the prisoners they had in custody refused to betray much about this Captain of theirs, and how it had rankled him, that loyalty when he was accustomed to a world where such things were for sale to the highest bidder.

How much had Tony managed to alienate Steve from those with whom he would have found friendship, without even realizing what he was doing? Trading all those prisoners for Steve, installing the team in the Tower, yet sending them off so abruptly like that, refusing to have anything further to do with them…why had he not considered how that would be interpreted by the common folk, how they would talk? Stane had seen it, used it, or tried to. Attempted to make it something base and immoral, to lay bare Tony’s weaknesses and let the jury judge Tony as much as Stane. Steve had turned that on its head, but Tony wondered how much truth lurked beneath Stane’s lies. Had there truly been nothing to it, it would not have had the traction it had obviously gained, these stories. And, of course, it is Steve who suffers for it, again. The great irony of it all that Tony had sent Steve away from him in an attempt to protect him, and instead, earned him nothing but derision and insults where he should have had only welcome and respect.

“No—uh, no, Sire, I—I—Sir James has seen fit to grant me many responsibilities, Your Grace, and I’m afraid they keep my time quite filled,” the man explained, though Tony could hear the lie bleating loudly underneath the truth of that.

“Did anyone have the time, Commander? Was there not one of my men who welcomed them then? These people who saved my life and helped reveal the treachery of those who sought to steal my throne?” Tony asked, voice carefully low and even. “Did no one have the time to speak with him when he sought your company?”

“I only saw the Culver lad with him, Your Grace. They seemed to get along well,” the man responded. Tony stared at him as he knelt for a long moment, then heard a harsh, grating bark of
laughter and watching the man startle, realized it had been torn from his own throat.

“He found the time, did he? This Culver?” Tony asked, nodding his head as he turned away from the man and braced the hand not holding the cup of wine against the wall, letting his knuckles press into the stone until they whitened. He breathed out a ragged sigh as he released his clenched fist and turned back to the guard. It was, perhaps, its own form of retribution, the gods’ having their final laugh at his own hubris, that it would be his fate to send Steve to someone else, someone who, unlike this idiot kneeling before him, had obviously been able to see Steve for who he was, had seen past whatever the gossips had whispered to the truth of the man with whom he had been gifted. Tony had done this to himself, in the end, and it was only fitting, he supposed, that be his own hand to deal the mortal blow.

“Did he—the Captain--before they left—did he…” Tony sucked in a breath, almost stopping himself, but unable to quite do so. “Did he say anything of me?” It sounded pathetic, even to his own ears, and he well knew what the Commander must think, though could not bring himself to much care what this ignorant sot thought of him.

“N—no, Your Grace,” the man replied, as if searching for the right answer. “He gave that Falconer of Fury’s a message for his team. That was about the extent of it.”

“Do you recall the message?” Tony asked, looking down at the empty cup in his hand where a drop of wine trailed down the inside in a long, red trail, and his mind flashed to rivulets of blood, dripping over pale, wet skin that convulsed around shuddering gasps of air.

“Eh, fancy words, nothing more, Sire,” the Commander replied, then shifted and cleared his throat nervously at Tony’s continued expectant stare. “Something about standing and speaking loudly—I don’t really recall. Wasn’t anything of substance, Your Grace,” the man finished, mouth flattening into a disapproving line.

He wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake him until Steve’s words fell out, the ones this asshole named as useless, inconsequential things, but Tony knew Steve did not speak idly, and certainly would never give his team nothing save pretty words in parting. This man could no more hear Steve than he had been able to see him. This was the kind of man who should be beyond Tony’s walls, he thought, this great lump of a follower who ignored what was in front of his face and let waspish whispers shape his thoughts instead. Tony stared at the man in distaste, his mouth curving into a sneer. He wondered if he merely hated the messenger because of the news he carried or if the man was truly as loathsome as he perceived. Whatever it was, he wanted no more of his company.

“That will be all. You may go, Commander,” he told the man, to the Commander’s obvious relief, as he dipped his head and ambled to his feet, bowing lowly before finally leaving.

Steve was gone, and as much as he kept trying to tell himself that it was for Steve’s own sake that he had sent him away, he knew he was as much trying to convince himself of it as anything. And at that, he was failing rather miserably. He’d stood in Court and named Stane a liar and a traitor, little more than fancy words for coward when you stripped everything away, yet here he sat, huddled in his room lest he let his own inadequacies turn him into something truly despicable, or so he told himself.

Let it be to protect Steve, and he could live with his rash decision, even if it was Tony’s own weaknesses that were the source of the risk. Let him name it that, and he would hate himself, true, but could sit here and allow that, however unjust it may seem, it was not an act born of selfishness. But the truth of it, cloaked in what he wanted to call concern for Steve, was that he had sent Steve from him not because he apprehended his own tenuous resolution, but because he feared the pain
that having him this close, but ever unattainable, would cause. The dread of living that way snaked through him, insidious and bleak, telling him it was for Steve’s own sake that he did this thing, a hateful chorus of how much better off Steve would be away from here, away from him. Maybe there was truth to that, but he had not been able to allow that to be Steve’s choice.

Pepper was right. It was easier to push someone away, to hurt them enough before they inevitably chose to leave him, so that when they left it was because he wished it to be so. He needed this with Steve to be a selfless act, but as much as he tried to convince himself of that, now, here, faced with the simple truth that Steve was gone because he wasn’t strong enough to deal with a rejection for which he had laid the foundation, he could see that it was nothing more than the same cowardice that led him to run away from Obie’s lies or Pierce’s machinations or his own father’s failings.

Stop being such a coward, boy! You’ve been coddled by wealth and it’s made you weak. He’d always wanted to deny the truth in his father’s words, to push them aside as the ramblings of a drunken fool who saw the ghost of his own failings in his son instead of himself, but it was hard to repudiate what Howard had seen now, in the face of this.

Cowardice, after all, was nothing more or less than putting yourself before others, and that was what he had done for years, because it was easier than risking what came with bravery. Hadn’t he told Steve, a lifetime ago out there on that ledge, that bravery was nothing more or less than trying to help others where you could? Could he really sit here now and choose to safeguard his own heart and thereby punish the one person who had ever really taken the measure of Tony and found him to be enough and whose only guilt was the great failing of loving someone else?

Most people only cared for Tony to the extent of his usefulness, except Steve, who had traded the only thing he had of value for something that had only a possibility of helping Tony. Had done so because he judged it the right thing to do, and so had done so without any expectation of benefit in return. And this was to be Steve’s reward for that, because it hurt too much to see him look upon another with the same fierce affection he had once saved for Tony? What did it say of him that when given the chance, he chose to be weak and selfish instead of giving Steve whatever comfort and safety he might accept, that he would seek to hurt, to punish someone who had done nothing but try to help him, even when he did not know the kind of person he was helping. He thought he had turned away from that, yet here he was, forcing Steve away because it pained him too much to see him find happiness with someone else.

“Dammit,” he sighed, grinding the heel of his hand against his forehead as he let the empty cup dangle from his fingertips. He pushed himself away from the wall and strode to the door, tugging it open too forcefully, the handle slipping free of his hand, sending the door banging against the wall, startling the guards outside to readiness.

“Your Grace?” one of them asked in question.

“Send for Sir James. Now,” Tony ordered, then grabbed for the door and shut it in the guard’s face. He walked back to the fire and sank into the cushioned chair, then reached across the table to refill his cup with the warm, spiced wine. He wasn’t sure what it was he searched for in the flames, but they offered no answers. He thought of Clint, working a stick with his bow, leaning over to gently blow air on the tiny ember to encourage a fire on cold nights when they huddled close for warmth, the striker and hand stones Tony had stolen in his aborted escape attempt lost to the bottom of the River. Because that was what he did, take from others for his own gain and damn the consequences for whomever was left in his wake.

He scrubbed his free hand over his face, then took a long drink, letting the wine warm the pit of his stomach. He knew he was indulging in a self-pity that he could not afford, not now, when so much
demanded his attention. He needed to fix this, make it as right as it could be and move the fuck on, let Steve move on. He wanted to give him everything, but he owed Steve at least that. A knock on the door broke his maudlin reverie, and he tipped the cup back, downing the remaining contents before calling out permission to enter.

Rhodey stepped rather cautiously through the doorway, looking around the room with practiced eyes. Rhodes closed the door behind him with a soft click, and it took Tony a moment to realize that his friend clearly expected to find a much different scene here. When Rhodey’s gaze finally fell on Tony, he took a knee in a fluid motion, waiting for Tony to lift the silence.

“I may have made an error in judgment,” Tony said after a moment’s pause. “Get up, James.”

“You, Your Grace,” Rhodey acknowledged with a slight nod as he rose. “You called for me,” he stated calmly.

“I sent him away. Steve and that—Tony stopped, mouth twisting around the words. “His companion. Culver. I sent them from the city. They were leaving anyway. Together—it just—I—I may have hurried that along. A bit. And with more permanence than likely was intended.”

“Tony,” Rhodey said through a long-suffering sigh, rubbing his fingers in small circles over his temples. “Please tell me that with Pierce and Schmidt and gods know what marching to our gates, you did not banish one of our best resources on Pierce’s strategy because you were jealous.”

“You say that like it’s a problem,” Tony mumbled. “Okay, yes, I know, it was stupid. I was stupid. It was a mistake. For a lot of reasons, including the one you just pointed out. Fuck. I wasn’t thinking, Rhodey,” Tony admitted harshly, his voice rough with chagrin. “I just wanted—he to be away before I—did something I couldn’t take back. Gods, that’s—that’s not even true. I don’t know. I sent him away because I was pissed and wanted to hurt him, and because I could. That’s what I do, Rhodey. Hurt others who deserve better, who deserve—who deserve what I cannot give.”

“Tony, you—” Rhodey started.

“Get him back. Both of them. Gods, fuck—both of them. Bring them back. I—I rescind it. Just—tell him he can stay here. Of course, he—they—can. In the Castle or the city or whatever,” Tony finished waving his hand indiscriminately in the air. “Whatever he wants. Just—get him back.”

“Tony. You are—you may have noticed the stream of people coming in the gates?” Rhodey asked, pointing towards the window, his voice rising with each word. Gods, he was really getting going now. “You call me here because you—you! Tony—you. You act like a—I don’t even know what—and now you want me to fix this for you—I’m kind of in the middle of fixing your other issues right now, Your Grace,” Rhodey spat out.

“I know. Gods, Rhodes, I’m sorry. I’m—I know. Forget it. I shouldn’t have bothered you. I know what I’ve asked of you, what you’ve had to deal with in my absence. I do pay some attention, Rhodey,” Tony assured him with false lightness. “I’ve been working on the new compound for the ordinance and coordinating with Danvers on the calculations for the trenches. I met with the generals and Admiral Westbrook on the battle plans, though the best they have to offer amounts to little more than thanking the gods and long-dead Starks for building strong walls. Pepper is trying to coordinate supplies for the refugees, a task made all the more challenging by the fact that a certain ridiculously effective team operated for months destroying our supply lines and storage facilities. The forges are working night and day to restock the armory. I’ve recalled all our forces, but that still might not be enough, particularly since a number of them won’t make it back before being cut off by Pierce’s forces, including May, who has nearly all our heavy horse. We’ve
reinforced the walls, strengthened our fortifications of the dam, since you know they'll try to cut off our water supply, placed sentries with signal fires as far South as we dare. I am trying, Rhodey. I am paying attention. I screwed up on this, okay? I made a shit decision, yes, but I have not been neglecting my responsibilities, not this time. Not those responsibilities, anyway.”

“I’m sorry, Your Grace. I should not have judged so quickly. I don’t mean—I know what he means to you, Tony. I’m sorry. I should have done more to make sure Culver kept away. I did not think he would fail to heed his father,” Rhodey said with a frown, his hands going to his hips.

“There is no fault here, Rhodey, and certainly not of yours. I never should have given that order. It was…it was beneath me. Don’t,” Tony interrupted before Rhodey could object. “You know I’m right. I should want his happiness, and if that is not something I can give him, then begrudging him that from someone else is nothing more than the basest jealousy, and you know it. Don’t try to absolve me when I don’t deserve it.”

“I’ll send men after them, Tony. Culver’s family home is outside Hempstead. They can’t have gotten far. Our riders will catch up quickly enough,” Rhodey observed. “But—are you sure, Tony? Hell, look, if this makes things easier for you, then...that isn’t without value, if you don’t mind me saying. You can’t afford a distraction right now, and truth is, I’ve already spoken with Captain Rogers extensively about his knowledge of Pierce’s troops and strategy, as have Fury and Coulson,” Rhodey admitted grudgingly. “Yes, I’d like to have all the help we can get, but it isn’t as if the whole war hinges on any one man.”

Tony nodded and stood, indicating their conversation was at an end. Gods knew, he had enough to occupy his mind other than these maudlin thoughts. “What shall I have the men tell him when they find him?” Rhodey asked carefully, with the tone of a man who wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer.

“Tell him…tell him…that he has a home here, should he ever want it,” Tony replied. “And that I would be…honored…if he—if they--would choose to return and make it so.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Rhodey said with a quick nod and slight bow as he turned to leave. His steps slowed as he placed his hand on the door handle, pausing for a moment before he left. “I am sorry, Tony. I know we can’t always choose who makes us happy, but—for whatever it may be worth—he made a damn poor choice.”

“Thank you for that, James,” Tony responded evenly, dark eyes studying Rhodey as if looking for chinks in his armor. “Turns out, there wasn’t actually a choice to make,” Tony finished softly to Rhodey’s retreating back, hearing the bitterness in the echo of the words he had once said to Barnes after the incident in the Pass. He bent over with his elbows against his knees and ran his hands over his face and through his hair, for a moment letting his head hang there before taking a determined breath and standing up. There was work to be done, too much of it, truth be told.

It was enough to occupy him for the remainder of the night, which quickly turned unnoticed into the dark hours of morning as he toiled in his workshop, brewing what of the compound he could with the supplies he had left, his hands covered in heavy leather gloves, a fine linen mask over his face and thick rounds of glass over his eyes, tied with strips of leather around the back of his head. There were others in the Castle who could work the ordinance nearly as well as he, but not this one, this new, bright thing he had birthed in a cave. It took some refining, but he finally got it into a workable solution, though he lacked the supplies and time to produce it in bulk. Still, with the advanced siege guns and catapults they had, it would give them a distinct advantage and something for which Pierce would not have known to prepare, no matter what Schmidt conjured.

The sun was already burning the remnants of the night away by the time he dragged himself back
to his chambers. Jarvis, gods bless him, was waiting with a pitcher of coffee and selection of meats and breads for breakfast. “Any word from Rhodey?” Tony asked as casually as he could muster this early.

“Not of which I am aware, Sire,” Jarvis intoned as he poured Tony’s coffee and placed a selection of food that Tony wouldn’t eat on a plate for him. Tony grunted in response and sipped on his coffee, savoring the familiar warm bitterness. “You have a meeting with General Fury and other commanders this morning, Your Grace. He asked that I remind you.”

Tony let his head fall to the table, rolling his forehead against it a few times for effect. “Fine. They can come to the workshop and explain why they don’t know what the hell they’re going to do while I at least make some attempt to do something useful,” Tony announced with a grimace, reaching again for his coffee.

“I’m sure they will be pleased to hear it,” Jarvis responded, and Tony huffed out an aborted laugh.

“Let me know if you hear from Rhodes,” Tony replied, ignoring Jarvis’ not so subtle jibe.

“May I inquire as to what message it is you await from Sir James?” Jarvis asked as he rearranged the food on Tony’s plate as if that would tempt him.

“He’s retrieving something for me,” Tony said after a long pause. He knew Jarvis was likely well aware of what was going on, news about anything to do with the King traveling entirely too quickly to eager ears.

“Very well, Your Grace,” Jarvis replied quietly. “Will that be all?” Tony waved him off and picked up the sheaf of parchment that was on the top of a stack of missives Pepper kept moving closer and closer to wherever he was. Soon, she would paper his pitcher of coffee with them, he thought fondly. Most were quickly dismissed as nothing that demanded his immediate attention, but the one she had carefully put off the side of his desk, he saved for last. He picked it up and leaned back against the chair, hearing it creak with his weight as he read over the parchment in his hands, then read it again, until the words were engraved on his mind as if chiseled there.

Upon the Judgment of His Peers and By Order of His Grace, King Anthony Edward Stark…it began. A place for his signature and seal waited on the bottom of the scroll, glaring only for their absence. He couldn’t put it off any longer, he knew, though his lack of relish for the task took him somewhat by surprise. Everything was in readiness, and he knew the value of the spectacle it would bring, particularly when the people needed what reassurance there was to be had. Rhodey had ordered a cage for the body to be hung over the city’s walls for Pierce to see upon his arrival. It just needed his approval.

It was unexpectedly difficult, even knowing what Stane had done, to sign the order to hang Obadiah. Not because of any sense of mercy owed to Obie, but, he supposed, it was, at least in part, a final admission of just how wrong Tony himself had been. Obie’s fate was earned many times over, and he bore no regret there, not really. It was the finality of it all, the sense that this was all there was for every wrong that had been done in his name, this was all that it amounted to. As much as he had sought retribution, as much as thoughts of it had consumed him, it proved small satisfaction when compared to what was done. This was all there was though. This was what passed for justice, however dim it might be. Steve should be here to see it, Tony thought dully. Steve should sign this, really, make his mark in blood and tears, if that was what it took. It was to him and those who were lost that this was owed.

Tony’s fate was to serve his penance in another way, it seemed. He’d known that was always likely, though had allowed himself to hope. Too much, as was his wont to do, like disappointment
was something he could never quite get his fill of, no matter how many times it was visited upon him. He wondered if anyone thought his sentence as unfulfilling as he found Obie’s to be. If only they knew what his malfeasance had cost him. He dipped the quill in the pot of ink on his desk and signed his name in a large flourish on the bottom of the page, then melted a bit of red wax in the metal cradle atop the candle, dribbling it in a round pool beneath his signature.

He took his seal, the knight clasping the two burning swords in his hands, and pressed it into the wax, blowing on the impression until it cooled and hardened. He stared at it one more time, now that it was complete, then put it aside for Pepper to have it posted. He wondered briefly on what Obie felt, sitting there in his cell, and something cold prickled down his back as he thought of another cell, darker and deeper and forgotten by all but a few. He rubbed his hands over his arms to ward off the sudden chill, then stood, refilled his cup of coffee and left for his workshop where the bones of war waited to be assembled into things that would move and shudder, bringing death and salvation and not ever knowing the difference between the two.

The day slipped by with useless meetings, impossible amounts of work and still no word of Steve, a lack that came to gnaw in his gut as the day lengthened. Jarvis brought trays of food to his workshop that he picked at absently as he worked.

A host of his commanders crowded in the overrun spaces between worktables and forges around mid-morning, joined by Fury and Rhodey, and spent precious time telling him the many ways he could lose this, the endless problems the overburdened city faced, and arguing that he should close his gates now, before they became overwhelmed by the influx.

“I’ll not hide behind our walls while my people are made fodder for Pierce outside them, Nick, and you know it,” Tony snapped without looking up from where he was piecing together the armament for a bombard, these particular ones packed with his new mixture, short fuses flowing out, waiting to be lit.

“Your Grace, there are preparations to be made in the fields and trenches that we cannot do with all these people—” one of the commanders offered with careful aplomb.

“I know what the risks are. I’ll adjust the calculations for the counterweights on the trebuchets and cannons if need be. But we are not closing the gates. Not until we absolutely have to,” Tony ordered, looking up from his worktable at the shifting crowd of disapproving faces. “Is this all somehow unclear to you?”

“No, Sire. Of course not,” another of the officers ventured.

“I wondered, because I seem to recall having this exact same conversation two days ago and three days before that. I do not care for repeating myself. See to it,” Tony commanded brusquely, turning back down to the delicate task at hand.

“Your Grace, perhaps we should go over the troop deployments once more before—” Rhodey began, at least making the attempt to mediate.

“Have they changed? Do you think I did not hear you the first time? I realize that Ross exaggerated our troop strength, and we all got complacent, and now, we cannot not pull all our forces back to the city because of how far afield Ross sent them on fool’s errands, guarding pastures or ports no one cares about. I know Stane and Ross set us up to fail without anyone, including me, questioning their decisions. I know that all of this happened on my watch, but it happened on all of yours’ as well, so don’t stand there and take comfort that I share your failures. Pierce spent years culling some of our key tactical people to his side, leaving me with a few boys and old men who know how to pour powder without blowing their hands apart doing it. That,
gentlemen, is one of the reasons I’m down here, trying to get you some weapons that might actually make some kind of fucking difference if any of you ever get the balls to actually use them!” Tony shouted, slamming his balled-up fists on the table, then forcing his hands to unfurl, the tight leather protective gloves he wore creaking as he did. He sucked in a deep, calming breath and looked again at the line of nervous faces opposite him.

“My apologies,” Tony began, voice low and careful now. The last thing he needed was to erode what support he had left because he could not control his temper. He wasn’t even angry at them, or not nearly as angry as he should be, he supposed. It was his responsibility, ultimately, and they were serving as nothing more than a convenient outlet for an anger that was not theirs to carry. “I know you are all working very hard, under extremely difficult conditions. We all are. Just be sure we are all working for the same thing, and that it is not a peace that tastes like defeat when you try to swallow Pierce’s terms.” That seemed to be enough of an admission to spur them to continue, one after the other, giving him their reports, most of which consisted of no news or more items to add to his list of concerns.

A part of him wanted nothing more than to order them out, retreat to the tasks of putting things together in ways that made sense, that had purpose, lose himself in this refuge where all that mattered was what he could create, not what he destroyed. But, he had promised himself, the Court, his people, that he would put them first, even if it meant sitting through another damnable meeting listening to Fury and the rest of them explain again how they knew virtually nothing about Pierce’s movements, troop strength or artillery because their spies and scouts had been discovered in the aftermath of half of Fury’s forces turning out to be loyal to Hydra or how too many of his troops had been dispersed from the city under Ross’s orders and were now too far away to be of immediate use in the city’s defense. So, he sat. He listened. He nodded. He asked the right questions. Good questions, for which no one had any answers. He offered suggestions and made decisions that would cost lives or save them. And he did not think of things he could not have.

“Look, I know the obstacles,” he finally interrupted as one of the officers was halfway through a litany of concerns about their medical stores should disease break out. “I have listened to you lot tell me nothing but the hurdles we face, and I know you’re trying to warm me to the idea of terms, but that is not happening. Put that from your minds now. We will sit this siege out, if that is what it truly takes, but I will not sue that bastard for a peace as fragile as the paper the lies are written on,” Tony continued, watching them all search for anything in the room to look at but him. “He tells people that to build a better world, you have to tear this one down. Do you really believe that what he would offer freedom? He offers certainty and security, a peace that is built on the remains of dissent, order broken under the yoke of coerced conformity. That isn’t freedom, its fear.”

There were curt nods and quick bows that Tony largely ignored. He thought he caught a look pass between Fury and Rhodey, but had no time to contemplate it. There was too much to be done. “Enough. We’ve gone over this gods know how many times. I can’t hear it again, and you won’t change my mind no matter how many times you repeat the same. Rhodey,” he called as the commanders filed out his workshop door. “Any word on the other matter?” He tried to make it sound an idle inquiry, but doubted he managed it, not with Rhodey, anyway.

“No, Your Grace. Not yet,” Rhodey replied. “I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything. I promise.” Rhodey cast a quick look out the door, apparently judging the rest of Tony’s guests a sufficient distance away. “You’re right. What you said. They don’t see a way out of this that isn’t a long, brutal siege. They’ve got families and their men…some of them remember what it was like during the Great War, you know. It got bad, at least for a lot of people. I remember my own mother telling me of boiling the leather from my dad’s shoes so they would have something to eat. We don’t have the supplies we need to last, Tony. Not with all these new people. They’re coming in with little more than the clothes on their backs. Not to mention, you know how easy it is for
disease to spread. Pierce poisons our water supply, and we’re the walking dead. All this talk of Brookland and those ships…people are scared, Tony.”

“I know,” Tony said quietly. “It isn’t that I don’t see it, Rhodey. Give me an alternative. Give me an idea. Anything. I’m doing everything I can here, but---They keep hoping for a salvation that isn’t going to come, not at Pierce’s hands, anyway. They think they know him because he was here. Some of them worked with him, went to parties at his manor. Hell, I showed up to his niece’s birthday! Its—they want to think he’s the man they remember. He never was, not really. He’s Hydra, Rhodey. They may want to pretend they don’t know what that means, but I do. I cannot let him win. This is everything, Rhodey,” Tony finished, realizing it was as much a plea as anything. He braced his elbows on the table and let his hands slide slowly through his hair, his shoulders sagging with exhausted frustration. He wasn’t even sure who he was trying to convince at this point.

“We won’t, Tony,” Rhodey promised. “I don’t know how, but we won’t. You just have to consider what winning might look like.”

Tony sighed and put down the mortar ball he was drawing a fuse through. “I know. I don’t like it, but I do know that,” Tony admitted. Rhodey dipped his head again and left, pulling the door shut behind him, leaving Tony alone with his thoughts of battles fought to degrees of losing. Maybe that was all there was to be had. Maybe compromising was the only path to anything that resembled victory, but for what end, he wondered.

His generals and commanders wanted him to give up something that’s value was only apparent once it was gone. Where was the line that allowed him to call what would be left a just world? Pierce wanted a world of what he called order and security. That was little more than subjugation hiding behind a flag of peace.

He spent the rest of the day working feverishly to get as much of the compound prepared as he could, liquefying it over low heat and pouring it into the shells that would rain death on Pierce and Schmidt, or so he told himself. He met with the group of soldiers who mixed and loaded the traditional powder into ordinance and mortars, then with Danvers on the trench lines again, and bearings for the trebuchets and catapults. Those calculations had to be precise or their own munitions could take out part of their army or walls. Coulson brought an update on the efforts to add heavy rocks to the base of the walls, making it more difficult for Pierce’s sappers to dig underneath, should they get that close to the city.

The hours melted away, one thing after another in an endless effort to convince themselves they were doing all that could be done, though he found himself watching the shadow on the sundial with increasing regularity as the day progressed. The riders Rhodey had ordered to Culver’s family home should have returned by now, surely. Perhaps Steve had refused his entreaty to return, and Rhodey simply didn’t want to pile that bit of good news on his shoulders to end the day. He rubbed a hand over his eyes at the sudden sting, his empty stomach churning sour.

“Your Grace,” Jarvis called out, knocking lightly on the workshop door. “My apologies for interrupting, Sire, but Sir James requests that your attendance at a meeting with General Fury. I believe it is of some urgency.”

“Again? Gods, what now? Did he say?” Tony asked, tossing aside the scrap of parchment he had been using to go over the equations counterweights and distances for the wheeled trebuchets that lined the walls for the third time.

“No, Your Grace, though he was most insistent that I impart to you the importance of your presence,” Jarvis replied. “I have taken the liberty of laying out a change of clothes on your bed,”
Jarvis said with an almost imperceptible sniff. Tony looked down at his stained and soot-soaked clothes and forced himself to his feet with a long-suffering look at Jarvis.

“Where is this urgent meeting that I simply must attend? I swear, if they start about the fucking rations again—“ Tony broke off with a sigh. It was hardly Jarvis’ fault that he was frustrated by, well, everything. “Thanks, Jarvis,” he amended, following the older man upstairs to his chambers.

“In the large war room, Your Grace. I believe everyone is waiting,” Jarvis informed him. Not surprisingly, this did little to hurry Tony’s movements, though he did consider that they should be grateful he did not stop for a drink before making his way across the Castle to Fury’s bellicose little den.

“I feel like we just did this,” Tony announced grimly as he sat down at the large table, littered with maps and carved markers depicting troop placements. The others sat down after he did, Rhodey to his right and Fury and his band of loyalists across from him.

“We received new information,” Fury explained, leaning his elbows on the table and folding his hands together. “It appears a group of Hydra soldiers may be behind the recent attacks on a number of villages along the coast. We believe they put ashore at the closest hamlet to the city, burned it to the ground and killed everyone there to hide their plan. It would appear that they are now making their way up the beach route using longboats to get around the areas where the cliffs make it otherwise impassable.”

“Fabulous,” Tony replied, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “Fuck. How the hell is Hydra always at least a step ahead of us? You're supposed to be some kind of master of intelligence, Nick. How do we keep getting outthought here? Damn it! How would Hydra even—gods, damn them all to hell! They're using my own fucking ships, aren't they?” Tony demanded, slamming his hand on the table forcefully enough to make the troop markers jump and what looked like a red one that stood in for Schmidt topple over. If only it were so simple, he thought dully.

“We believe so, Your Grace,” Rhodey responded.

“If they killed the inhabitants of the village, how do we even know—“ Tony started to ask, but then the answer supplied itself and he had to bite off a curse as a terrible mixture of joy and dread spiked through his chest. “He went on the mission anyway, didn’t he? Just the two of them? What the hell was he thinking? They could’ve been killed! Even if it was just pirates, let alone fucking Hydra--How could Culver let him do something like—They’re supposed to be—he came back?” he stopped, clamping his mouth together before he could let more slip out.

Fury just raised his eyebrow and ignored him, and for once, Tony was glad that the man largely considered him insufferable, if occasionally useful, though he thought he caught Hill frowning at him before she schooled her features.

“We’ve already increased our fortifications of that area and moved archers and oil masters into position. We think they may have intended to use the drain culverts as access points to the city, and have sealed those as well,” Coulson interjected into the silence before it could become awkward. “But, this does seem to suggest that Pierce’s timetable may well be sooner than what we had anticipated.”

“Great, then we can be unprepared all the faster,” Tony shot back. Granted, Obie and his conspirators had seen to it that the city’s defense was not what it should be, but it was galling nevertheless to sit here in the greatest city the Realm had ever seen and be expected to cower like a child in the dark of night before Pierce and Schmidt because the great unknown of Hydra loomed so large over everything.
“Your Grace, we have readied the city for siege as best we can, given the provisions and state of the army at this point, but you should consider that this may be a long reckoning,” Coulson continued with his usual equanimity. Tony just stared back at him until the other man looked away.

“I have considered a lot of things. I will not sit here and let Hydra scratch at my door and hope that winter and time does what you all seem too afraid to do,” Tony retorted. “Figure this out,” he bit out, casting a hard look at Fury’s implacable face.

This was becoming a tiresome argument, and he knew they believed his demands little more than the futile chest thumping of a king who suddenly found himself in a precariously position. Fury was dealing with the situation as he saw it, and the odds were always in favor of a well-fortified and provisioned city outlasting an attempted siege, no matter the enemy’s strength, but something about this, about the confident way Pierce and Schmidt marched through his lands, told him that they did not come to sit and wait. This was a force that hoped to find the city rotting away with disease. They did not come to discuss terms or wait for hunger to loosen concessions from him. They intended to make the city bleed, to leave nothing here but food for the carrion crows.

“I’m just looking at the numbers, Your Grace. We have a lot of refugees to consider and our supplies are not what they should be, nor are our troop levels. Your armory is woefully stocked and much of what is there is not even usable,” Fury reminded him. “I’m not ruling anything out. But, we have to consider all our options.”

Between Stane acting virtually unchecked, Ross running roughshod over the other generals and Tiberius moving the Council whatever direction he wanted, the three of them had managed to considerably weaken the city’s defenses without anyone the wiser. Learning that news had not been Tony’s finest hour, he could admit now. He strongly suspected that many of the wonderful weapons he had built Ross over the past years were about to be aimed right back at him.

“Fine,” Tony ground out. “You do that, Nick. You consider the options were we sit here behind our walls and ration ourselves into starvation waiting for peace that looks a hell of a lot like surrender.”

“If you have a better idea, then I’m listening. I’m nice like that,” Fury replied evenly. “Your Grace.” Tony sighed, but finally had to look away in silence. “Anything else then?” Fury asked the room. “Good,” he said to the silence.

Tony sat where he was as the chairs scraped against the floor where people moved from the table. He was watching Rhodey across from him, waiting until the room cleared. As soon as Hill passed through the doorway, Tony leaned forward opening his mouth with a hundred different questions, but Rhodey held his hand up, cutting him off before he could start.

“Just give me a minute, would you?” Rhodey asked. “He’s fine. I put him in the Tower.”

“You what?” Tony demanded in surprise. “I—I can’t—Rhodey—they can’t be there.”

“Not they, him. Culver wasn’t with him. He’s back on the coastal road somewhere. I think Rogers ran most of the way back here with the information once they realized what was going on,” Rhodey explained. “Agent Romanov was going to go search for Culver, I guess, which just tells me that Rogers managed to make it not only halfway into my armory, but back into the Castle long enough to talk to Romanov. Gods. If I wasn’t annoyed with him, I’d really rather admire the guy,” Rhodey grumbled, and Tony had to bite his lip to keep something that resembled a proud smile off his face. “Look, Tony, I don’t know what happened, and I don’t know what is going on here, but he was talking about the two of them going off to Gulmira, and you know what a shithole that
“Rhodey! Dammit,” Tony shouted. “Why would you—Wait, why would they go to Gulmira? Culver’s father objected, didn’t he? Because of me. Gods, Rhodey. Gulmira? There’s nothing for him there—What’s he even thinking? Fuck. Just—fuck. What the hell have I done?” Tony demanded, standing up in one swift motion and sending the chair careening backwards, scraping loudly across the stone floor. He braced the tips of his fingers on the table, suddenly wanting nothing more than to upend the entire thing, dismantle their carefully structured maps and markers into the useless pile of toys they were. “He never should have been there, not just the two of them. Gods, what if something happened? He was supposed to go there with the team—I didn’t think—that’s the fucking problem though, isn’t it—I didn’t think—I never think—not when I—not with this—I just do, and damn whoever gets hurt—and now—“

“Tony, gods, calm down. He’s fine, really,” Rhodey assured him, raising his palms in a placating gesture. He pushed himself out of his chair and came to stand by Tony, his voice low in Tony’s ear. “And it’s a damned good thing he’s even more stubborn than you, because the last thing we need is a fifth column in the city,” Rhodey pointed out. “He asked to speak with you, by the way. I think you should take him up on that. And do me a favor and do it before Agent Romanov returns with Culver? Please? For me?”

“Yes, dear,” Tony replied, though it came out far more grimly than he intended. Rhodey nodded and came around the table to clap him on shoulder, giving it a solid squeeze before he followed the rest of the officers out of the room, leaving Tony and an empty table that may very well mark the end of his reign.

He made his way back to the Tower on quick steps matching the thumping rhythm in his chest, and made for his chambers. As one of the guards swung open the door to the hallway that led to his suite and Steve’s, he heard a burst of laughter echo off the stone, followed by loud, raucous voices raised in something he had not heard for far too long. He moved on leaden feet down the hall, stopping outside his room, one hand pressed against the smooth oak as he listened. The door behind him opened with a clatter, and he turned abruptly, nearly slamming into Clint before one of the guards moved to step between them.

“It’s fine,” Tony announced, as Barton looked him up and down, eyebrows raised to the ceiling.

“Stark,” Clint said by way of greeting. “You get your head out of your ass yet?”

“I am trying,” Tony replied tiredly, staring down the hall where dull voices leaked out from behind the wooden door.

“Outstanding. I’ve got a bet with Phil that I do not want to lose,” Barton said agreeably and brushed past him down the hall. “And I fucking hate waiting on hot water,” he shouted over his shoulder. “Hey, did they eat everything? Those assholes!” Clint said accusingly as the door opened in front of him and Jarvis pushed a decimated food cart out of the room. “Okay, I’m shooting something,” Barton promised as he unshouldered his bow and pushed the door open to another round of laughter.

“Barton—wait—“ Tony began, only to have the door slammed shut in the archer’s wake. Tony stood in the hallway, blinking dazedly at Jarvis. “What the hell just happened?”

“It appears your guests have returned to the Tower and chosen to congregate in Sir’s quarters, as per usual,” Jarvis said with a delicate frown. “I believe they hope to discuss more pressing matters of the Realm after pastries,” Jarvis informed him with only the barest hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth.
“Is—is it just the team, then, Jarvis?” Tony asked, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. If Natasha found Culver, and he was sitting in there with the team, with Steve, Tony honestly didn’t know what he would do, and probably did not need to find out the answer to that.

“There is a newcomer,” Jarvis began, sending Tony’s heart into a skitter. “Whom I am given to understand is Fury’s Falconer. Doctor Banner has been assisting Ms. Potts with the preparations to use the Great Hall for a temporary infirmary and has not yet arrived,” Jarvis answered. Tony nodded, and then snapped his eyes back to Steve’s door as another gale of laughter rose up.

“Glad to hear this whole war thing is so amusing,” Tony said with a frown.

“I believe their mirth is directed at Sir and Sergeant Barnes, who are currently engaged in a rather rousing pillow fight,” Jarvis explained, the corners of his mouth tugging up ever so slightly.

“Excuse me?” Tony said sharply, doing a double take from the door back to Jarvis. “They’re—what?”

“I said Sir and Sergeant Barnes are currently bashing each other quite determinedly with the bedpillows, Your Grace,” Jarvis repeated entirely too calmly.

“Okay, first, Jarvis, you’re really going to have to learn to lead with information like that,” Tony said, running a hand through his hair and letting out a huff of laughter. He put his hands on his hips and let his head dip to his chest for a moment before sparing a glance at the guards who were resolutely pretending to be both blind and deaf and looking up at his manservant again. “Second—gods—fuck. Jarvis, what do I—should I—do I go in there—” he stammered.

“I believe that Sir would like to speak with you,” Jarvis said as he leaned in, smoothing Tony’s doublet and straightening the folds at the shoulders. “He seemed…pleased…to be back here, Your Grace. Perhaps the time away has provided some clarity.”

“I do not think there is anything left to say, Jarvis,” Tony said quietly. “Just a chance to undo some of the damage I’ve caused. I think that will have to be enough.” He looked over at Jarvis, the older man’s face creased with sadness and something beyond that, a disappointment that bordered on pity that Tony did not want to see. Another burst of laughter echoed from the room, catching Tony’s attention. “It’s almost enough, Jarvis. Him being happy. It’s so close.”

“May I speak plainly, Your Grace?” Jarvis asked, pulling Tony down the hall and away from the guards. Tony nodded, still distracted by the laughter cascading from the room and what he was about to do. “I have known you since you were a babe with your wetnurse. You long ago learned to settle for almost enough from people. I do not believe you can do that here,” Jarvis continued.

Tony sighed and placed a hand against the wall, letting his head hang to his chest for a brief moment before slapping the flat of his palm against the stone. “I don’t think there’s anything left but almost enough, Jarvis. I screwed it up. Probably a long time ago. Before I even knew him, I was destroying his life, and every moment he’s known me, I’ve chipped away more and more. He almost died. His back—you’ve seen it. Now…now I just need him to be happy. Or at least have the chance at it. I can give him that. I should have been giving him that from the beginning, but I—I wanted a little more of him.”

“As you say, Your Grace,” Jarvis replied tightly as he pushed the cart past Tony and down the hall. Tony watched him go for a moment, then drew in a deep breath and raised a hand to knock on the door, only to have it wrenched open. Steve stood in front of him as Tony’s fisted hand drifted down to his side. Tony couldn’t help drink him in for a moment, the sight of him some kind of balm to a wound he did not know he had until now, until it was laid bare and raw like this, like all
the hidden parts of him suddenly were, ripped open and exposed.

Steve brought himself up short, his momentum carrying him almost into Tony before he caught his steps. “Your Grace,” Steve said, moving backwards out of Tony’s space, and Tony found himself reaching out to draw him back, before he forced his hands to his sides, gripping at his doublet as if to straighten it.

Tony looked over Steve’s shoulder to the room filled with hard, mostly angry stares. Barnes was sprawled on his stomach the bed, clutching a pillow with his good hand, while Thor sat on the bed’s edge, staring curiously at the scraps of what appeared to have once been a perfectly good cushion. Clint was chewing part of a pastry, under Natasha’s watchful, if rather disgusted, gaze, while a dark-skinned man with a wide grin sat next to the archer.

“King Anthony!” Thor greeted him loudly, raising a pillow in salute. "‘Tis good to see you again, and indeed, under far better circumstances than when we last had your company. I thought perhaps we had displeased you, though I know not why. You have been missed, my friend. Sir Doctor will be here soon, and our team restored once more. Glory awaits us, I do not doubt it. Come, have one of these delightful pastries, and let us speak of the glorious battle that lies ahead. Our Captain has returned with news of the perfidy of these cowards who would dare to call themselves warriors. It is most fortuitous that he was able to learn of this treachery so that we might prevent it, was it not?” Damn, Tony thought, in silent admiration. Thor, for all his occasional boyish exuberance, managed to see far too well when it suited him.

“I am glad of his return, as well, Thor,” Tony said, earning a muffled snort from Barnes. “Really. Thank you, Steve. It seems the gods not only forgiven my idiocy, but have granted it favor.”

“Your Grace, I know I’m not supposed to be here, but Captain Rhodes—he said—well—I’d just like a moment to speak with you, if you would allow it,” Steve asked with a slight frown. “If you still want me to leave, I’ll go and not trouble you, you have my word.” It took all his willpower to focus on what Steve was saying, instead of just standing there, drinking him in, absorbing his presence the way they all did, because Steve would always give more than he received.

“Huh? Uh, no. Yes, I mean, no—“ Tony broke off with a frustrated sigh, closing his eyes for a moment. “Yes, we can speak. No, you do not need to leave. That was a—misunderstanding,” Tony obfuscated. “Okay, that’s not really—can we have some privacy?” Tony asked over Steve’s shoulder to the room full of watchful eyes.

“About damn time,” Clint said around a bite of pastry, though he rocked himself off the sofa and helped the Falconer to his feet. Tony watched the team file out the door, one by one, almost like the wheel of a clock ticking down, until it was just him and Steve left in the room. Well, and Barnes, who had not moved from the bed.

“Bucky,” Steve huffed out, without turning around.

“Oh, you meant me, too?” Barnes answered innocently. “Fine,” he grumbled, pushing himself awkwardly off the bed with his good arm. He trudged past Steve, smacking him in the stomach with the pillow he still held, because they were children, Tony thought with a spike of something that definitely wasn’t envy burning through him. “Don’t make me choose, Rogers. I mean it,” Barnes said, seemingly apropos of nothing, nudging Steve’s shoulder as he walked by. He gave Tony a long, assessing look as he passed, but said nothing, though Tony was left with the odd impression that Barnes was not particularly pissed at him, an unusual enough state of affairs to make note of it.

When the door finally closed behind Barnes, Tony turned his head to follow the sound and give
himself a moment before looking back at Steve. It was a bit like staring at the sun, then turning away and still seeing the outline of a circle behind your eyes, the way you carried the impression of the thing with you, Tony thought. There was no place to look now that wasn’t filled with Steve, because he was as much a part of Tony as breathing or creating, and he carried that with him now, bound to him somehow, for good or ill. It had never been something he could set away from himself. That had been the illusion.

“You came back,” Tony observed simply, and realized for the first time that this was the thing that had been rolling around in his mind since the meeting with Fury. People left, in Tony’s experience. That was familiar and known, something he recognized and even understood in a way. They did not return, at least, not to Tony, not really.

They all pulled away when it, when Tony, got to be too much, which he inevitably did. Hell, look at his reaction to Steve and Culver. Even Pepper and Rhodey distanced themselves to a degree. Pepper had Happy and her own life that she kept carefully insulated from Tony, insisting, for example, on not being given a title and all that came with it, as much a barrier to Tony’s world as any. And Rhodey, who could have had a lordship and the lands that came with it, wanted to spend his days with the soldiers on the training field, coming to Tony when the army needed something they thought they couldn’t get. They both cared for him, he knew, but they kept their own lives carefully delineated, understandably so. Tony would consume them, if given the chance, not because he meant to, but because it was so very, very empty. There was just so much space in this life, in him. Or, there had been, until he had started taking more and more of Steve, greedy and eager to have whatever pieces of this he could cling to.

He knew what he was doing, and was as powerless to stop himself as the team. They were all alike in that, this need to have something, to be close to something good in this world where it was so hard to know what was even worth fighting for. Steve was the bright center they were all drawn to in some inexplicable way. He wondered, if he asked, if Bruce would tell him that Steve was steady and calm, if Thor would tell him that Steve was a worthy leader, if Natasha would call Steve a true friend and Barton describe him as certain and sure of himself. Barnes saw him as someone to follow, someone he could trust, with his life, true, but with more than that, with something deeper, pulling Barnes from some precipice over which he always seemed to hover, keeping him from becoming a tragedy of what could have been. He trusted Steve to make the choices he couldn’t let himself make, they all did, because they saw in Steve the things they desperately wanted to find in themselves. A rudder, steering others when they could not or would not do so themselves, giving direction and purpose to people who desperately needed this all to mean something.

Steve did that, willingly, filling these roles for each of them, whether intentionally or not, because that was what he did, he served, as he had always wanted to do. Maybe that was why Tony never stood a chance. Steve was everything he’d ever been told he should be, not in some storybook way of a hero who slays a beast, but in a real, true way, a man who offers everything because that is what he has to give.

And Tony wanted to take, because that was what he did, who he was at his core. He wanted, a craving that burned inside him, through him, seeking an escape, some chink in his armor that would let it out, let it free to have what he so desperately needed. He wanted to take everything he could of Steve, grasping, clinging hands rending and tearing away to fill all the empty places inside him. It would be so easy to do. This had to stop. Before he took too much and left nothing but a dry husk in his wake, drained of everything that made Steve who he was. It was the one thing he could give Steve that mattered. It might be the only thing that mattered.

“We found the burned out village,” Steve was saying, oblivious to the overflow of Tony’s thoughts. “They will probably try to infiltrate the city under cover of darkness, maybe as early as
tomorrow night. I talked with Coulson, and I have some ideas. We’re…working on some things. I hope—well. I hope you’ll allow me to contribute, Your Grace,” Steve continued, making Tony wince at the use of his title. It always sounded so wrong to hear it in Steve’s voice. Once, he had wanted Steve’s obeisance, but now, it sat like a stone in his stomach.

“I don’t…I don’t know where this all went so wrong. We said…you said…things wouldn’t change, but—I mean, obviously, that can’t—I know that can’t be true. I’m not asking…I mean, I do understand that,” Steve paused, clearing his throat, staring at Tony with such a sudden intensity that Tony felt his body thrumming with it, the way it did standing on the Tower wall waiting for a storm to sweep in from the sea. “I don’t know what to think,” Steve admitted, his shoulders straightening as if bracing for a blow. “I thought I knew. Out there, when we were…uh, when it was just us. I mean, I know why you had to lie, obviously. I understand that, I do. I just need to know if—if any of it was the truth,” Steve said, taking a deep breath. “All this—the room, these things…I thought it might mean something,” Steve finally said, voice soft and fragile somehow, like snow crunching beneath a booted foot.

“I owe you my life,” Tony began, and watched as something streaked across Steve’s face, contorting it, a shadow gone in an instant before he schooled his features again. “Several times over, by my reckoning. You may well have saved the city, hell, the Realm. For that, you suffered immeasurably, Steve. I know you did. I saw it. And while you may forgive my role in what happened to Brookland, but I cannot set that aside so easily.”

“I told you that wasn’t your fault,” Steve insisted, stepping closer to Tony, too close, because Tony could feel his warmth so close, he could just lean forward and melts into it, and that was far too great a temptation. He forced himself to move away, stepping around Steve under the guise of moving closer to the fireplace. “You tried to help. Stane. Pierce. Stern,” Steve listed off through gritted teeth as he turned to follow Tony’s progress. “Those were the men responsible. None of this was your fault.”

“I think you know that isn’t entirely true,” Tony replied quietly, looking away from Steve for a fraction, his eyes landing on the easel where a canvas had been set up, the beginnings of a figure outlined in light charcoal streaks. He wondered at it briefly, wishing he could ask about it. The only thing he had known Steve to draw were maps and Barnes’ family, as if art fell into the categories of useful or beloved and nothing in between.

“You don’t owe me anything,” Steve snapped, voice brittle and rough. “Not anything more than you owe any other of your subjects. I told you that. I made my choices, and you are hardly accountable for them. We both made mistakes. Mistakes that cost the lives of innocent people. We can’t change that, not now. All we can do is try to make it right.”

“That is what I am doing,” Tony responded softly. “Trying to, anyway.”

“I want to make it right, too. I miss—what we had. Or what I believed—hoped. Maybe. I thought—or Bucky thought—about Eric—well, maybe you thought and that was why,” Steve stammered uncomfortably, a flush creeping up his cheeks. “He was nice—that’s all. I mean, he was. Until—but we weren’t. Damn. I start out knowing exactly what I want to say to you and then you’re…and you,” Steve said, waving a hand at Tony and releasing a long puff of air in obvious frustration. Of course he was nervous, Tony thought, blinking against the sense of loathing that crept up his spine. He’d just been banished from one of the last bastions of safety this far north, all because he couldn’t love the man who had nearly cost him his life and everything in it. “He offered—or—well—I’m not with him. Like that, I mean. If that’s what you—if that was why you were upset—“
“You should be,” Tony said quietly. “You should be with someone like him, Steve. Someone who can make you happy. Who can give you what you want. What you deserve. We both know I can't do that,” Tony continued, eyes flicking away from Steve, anywhere but at Steve, because if he looked at him right now, he wasn't going to be able to do this. He didn't have that kind of strength in him. "I saw you with him, you know. Out on the training field. You—could be good together. The two of you, you…it’s a good match, Steve. His father has lands, a good family name, and he approves, or will soon enough,” Tony said with a shrug. The father would like it or shut the hell up about it, he thought miserably.

“You—you want me to—you think I should be with—someone like Eric…that we would be a good match…” Steve repeated his words back to him slowly, deliberately, face carefully blank, and how it hurt to hear his own words tumble from Steve’s mouth, a hundred pinpricks down Tony’s spine, his stomach clenching around each syllable.

He wanted to deny the truth of it, to sink into the relief that had momentarily surged through him at Steve’s denial that there was anything between him and Culver. But that wasn’t fair. It had been Tony keeping them apart. Culver’s interest was obvious. He had even gone to his father with it, but Tony had told Rhodey to rebuff it, out of nothing other than pure possessiveness that served neither him nor Steve. The man clearly saw past everything that must have been laid at Steve’s door, however unfounded those rumors were, and cared enough to try build something with him, to make him a part of his family, his future. Something Tony had put a halt to, because he had been jealous, because the thought of Steve with someone else twisted at his insides like he had swallowed knives.

He had, as always, or at least until this day, chosen to lessen his own pain at the expense of Steve’s happiness. He could no longer allow himself to salve his wounds with the misery of others. It was neither fair nor right in any way, and he knew it, but still, standing here, it was so tempting to simply take what he wanted, hear what he wanted, and ignore that Steve had a chance to find something more than what Tony would ever be able to give him, someone whole and unbroken, who would put Steve before anything else. That was the final thing he could give him, the thing that mattered. He could set him free, release him from whatever hold it was that bound them together. Let Steve go, let him find happiness with this Culver person or elsewhere, let Tony finally give up more than he took.

“I do,” Tony replied, the words momentarily stuck in his throat so they sounded slurred when he finally managed them. He wanted to say more, to tell Steve that he was trying to do what was best for him, but he was afraid if he said anything, it would be little more than pleas for things he could not have. “I don’t deny my interest in you,” Tony admitted. “I’m not blind or an eunuch. I completely overreacted, after everything with Stane’s trial. Of course, you are welcome here, if what you want is to stay and serve. You, the team, Culver, whatever. Stay here until you are settled. Its fine. Look, Steve, I should never have—I wasn’t thinking—I—what I did,” Tony forced himself to slow down, let his mind catch up with his mouth long enough to get the words out. “My actions were…unwarranted. I owe you and Culver an apology,” Tony went on. And one day maybe he could be in the same room with Culver and give it, though it was hard to imagine such a thing ever being so. “But, you could…you could have what you wanted. He could give you that, and we both know that I can’t. You could have something real with him, Steve. It would be selfish beyond measure for me to try to deny you that. You deserve every chance at happiness. If you think there is a chance he can give it to you, you should take it.”

There was a quiet in the room, deep and thick, expectant, kind that comes from every effort being made not to make a sound. Tony was overly conscious of his breathing, the way his heart rang so loudly in his ears, he thought it must be noticeable in the hush. He wasn’t sure what he wanted, too many conflicting emotions roiling around inside his mind, battling for any kind of purchase. It
hurt, not a pain or an ache, really, but a wash of regret and sorrow accompanied by a bittersweet sense of joy, of finally doing something right, something mattered. Giving Steve a chance to find what he could not have with Tony, even at the expense of Tony’s own happiness—no, especially at that cost. That was as it should be.

It hurt, yes, but the hurt was good. The hurt was right, had purpose, meant something, this ability to let go, to put someone else first, for once in his gods-forsaken life. It gave him something he did not know he had been lacking, a second life, a chance to begin again as a different person, and if what gave him this was also slowly leeching the life out of him, so be it. The price was worth the reward.

“I see,” Steve said stiffly. “Thank you for the offer of a place to stay. The team will appreciate that. Clint in particular. I think there was some kind of bet involved,” Steve said with small, too brief smile, though there was clearly no real amusement behind it, almost a resolute sort of melancholy instead, Tony thought. “I should—I have a meeting with General Fury. I need—I need to go. If there is nothing further, Your Grace?”

“Huh? Oh, of course, please. If you need to—“ Tony stuttered out, watching as Steve turned on his heel and walked to the door, pausing for a moment as he pulled it open before Tony could shout the word stop, because it was on his lips before he even realized it.

“Thank you. For everything. I mean it. For giving me a home, for making me see, for forgiving me when you can’t allow the same for yourself, for choosing to be better because you know you can be, even if you don’t have to be. Especially when you don’t have to be,” Steve said, calm and steady as he gripped the handle of the door, though Tony could see the tension there, in the line of his shoulder to where his fingers curled around the curving metal. “You’re going to be a great king. Whoever you were before, you left that person behind in that cave. That isn’t you now, if it was ever anything other than what your father created in his own image. He gave you his failings so he would not have to answer for them. They were never yours. Do not carry them with you any further. If you owe me anything, grant me that.”

“Steve—“ Tony breathed out, as Steve’s blue eyes rose to his. His mouth was suddenly dry, parched, his tongue too thick to form words, because what could he possibly say to that? He wanted it to be true far too badly to deny it, but there was something about Steve’s words that disturbed him, sent a prickling sensation through his chest as he drew in a breath. There was a wrongness underneath it all, however much he wanted to believe it. After all, how many times had he told himself that if Steve thought him worthy, then he could almost believe it, because Steve didn’t lie, except perhaps to himself, and then only to think the best of people. *It’s his heart that’s going to get him killed*, Tony thought, Natasha’s words coming to mind unbidden.

Which was when he realized what that was, why it struck him so deeply, yet unnerved him at the same time. It was not just some pretty speech, a heartfelt expression of gratitude or loyalty.

It was a goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

Again, just a huge THANK YOU to all who have taken the time to read this. I watch the little counter with something like the attention of a lab rat hitting the crack button. I can't believe I'm almost done. It has been such a huge part of my life since October.
But, they're so close, I promise!

The quote that Tony recalls from Howard is an actual Howard quote from 616-verse. Don't know the context, but it seemed to fit.

Kudos are cherished and comments, even raging frustration with me and the boys, are always deeply appreciated. But come on, if they just sat down and talked like mature adults, we'd never have any fun and this story would have been done 240,000 words ago. Huh. I don't know if I'm helping myself there or not. One of the whole themes of this fic is the idea of some kind of cosmic justice, and you see that with Tony getting exactly what he asked Rhodey in the beginning for with Steve, in chains, ready to be hanged so he can't be a martyr, only it is, of course, horrible. But, when Tony does something like help Steve learn to read, that ends up helping Steve to get the critical piece of info to help save the Realm. So, for this chapter, I wanted to finally get Tony to a place where he put Steve's happiness before his own. This is a romance, and basically this is the Pride and Prejudice moment where Mr. Darcy chooses to help restore the honor of Elizabeth's family so that she can be happy, even if it isn't with him. Of course, now that Tony has gotten there, he will, naturally, get everything he wants. I swear, people! Don't hate me. He had to get to this point to get his "reward," if that makes sense.

I randomly do stuff on tumblr: www.tumblr.com/blog/sabrecmc. Pretty much all Stony, all the time. Feel free to come on over and send me any questions or prompts. I have nothing to write after this except more ridiculousness for This Is Not a Drill, the even crack-ier sequel.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Almost there, almost there...I'm so excited!!! Thank you all so much for reading this. One more chapter, which is partially written and a (comparatively) short epilogue. I swear. That's it. Honestly. No, really. I'm stopping.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The skies seemed to have absorbed his mood, Tony thought dully the next morning, as he looked up at the graying clouds that hung low over the courtyard. Moisture was already beginning to pool in the air around the awning under which he stood. He shifted his feet, digging a booted toe into the rug. The wool is never going to dry properly, he thought idly, though he knew it was probably Pepper’s doing, all the trappings she insisted upon. His seat was atop a raised platform built just higher than the simple wooden dais some distance away in the center of the courtyard. A plush chair sat unused behind him, a tray of sweetmeats and goblet of wine on a small table next to it. He had the absurd thought to wonder at the person selecting the repast for today’s event. What, exactly, was deemed appropriate fare for such as this? Apparently, he was to munch on olives, honey-coated pears and roasted chestnuts, sipping spiced wine while watching a man die.

He glanced around the courtyard once again, his eye catching for a moment on the banners flapping loudly in the wind, one of the few blurs of movement shadowing over an otherwise largely still gathering. Considering the weather and current goings on around the city, it was a good turnout, he supposed. He would like to think they were here to see justice done, pay some kind of homage to the atrocity that had been committed those years ago, but he suspected most were merely curious, eager for a spectacle, even one of this kind. He couldn’t help but scan the crowd for a dark blond head, though it was impossible to really make out any features in the crush of people, most keeping their heads cloaked against the impending downpour.

Obediah Stane was standing on the raised dais, arms tied behind his back, a gag binding his mouth, drawing the corners back into a rictus of a smile, his pale, bald head all the more unusual next to the black-masked executioner. Around the bottom of the platform stood a ring of armored guards bearing sharply gleaming halberds, more to keep the crowd at bay than anything. Stane’s chance at escape had passed long ago, after all, lost to Stane’s own blinding arrogance.

Even from this distance, Tony could feel Stane’s hard stare bore though the circle of rope that hung in front of him and into Tony, falling over him like a curtain, or perhaps, more aptly, a shroud. Stane didn’t break eye contact as he hacked out a thick wad of spittle in front of where he stood, and Tony had no doubt to whom that was directed. Let him have his little display of defiance, Tony thought. It was nothing more than a show, now, and Obie had always relished an audience.

There was a low hum of conversation from the throng of people in attendance, along with the occasional shouted insult from boys not yet old enough to be men and too young to be children who mistook such things for moments of bravery. Tony raised his hand and the murmuring came to a shuddering halt, eyes turning from him to where Stane stood on the wooden platform, straight-backed and tall, his expression mutinous.

Tony nodded once, and the herald stepped to the front of the awning, reading the proclamation
Tony had signed yesterday in a loud voice that carried over the heads of the assembled mass to the battlements beyond, where archers and oil masters stood at the ready, stoking fires beneath large pots and attaching fletchings and tips to shafts of wood that would soon rain down as surely as the weeping skies.

The crowd shifted a bit, almost in a wave of brown and tan wool, as the herald finished announcing the list of convictions. Were they thinking of the people killed those years ago in Tony’s name or wondering if they would be the next to fall to a war that might as well have been fought between kings and monsters for all the say they had in the events shaping their lives? They were farmers and builders, parents and spouses, and wanted nothing more than to lead lives untouched by the grasping power struggles of those who thought themselves above them.

Once, he would not have considered the devastation inflicted upon these people as anything other than vaguely regrettable. Now, he had every evidence before him as to just how easily the failings of those who sought to rule could be visited upon them in ways least expected, where a sickly boy with no education or fortune could change the course of the entire Realm. Tony suddenly wished he had something to do with his hands, needing something hold onto that wasn’t there. He balled them into fists at his side, but the posture didn’t feel right, and he forced himself to relax, though his limbs felt too heavy and obvious.

Above him, the sky crackled and rumbled, and the rain began falling in earnest now, fat drops of it soaking the crowd and running down Stane’s face in rivulets that looked like tears from this vantage. In the distance, on the far side of the dais near the back of the crowd, Tony spied a glint of silver raising up to pull a hood forward against the oncoming torrents. Tony moved forward slightly, craning his neck over the heads of the spectators to get a better view, almost certain it was Barnes’ shaggy head under the sodden hood, and yes, there was flash of fiery red framing the face of the smaller figure next to the man. He did not see who he was looking for though, and wondered at what would cause the absence, why Steve would fail to attend when he was one of the few people to whom this redress was actually due.

Tony had spent a sleepless night alternately staring at the door to his chambers, willing himself not to open it, and drinking himself into such a stupor that he could not do anything if he tried. Jarvis’ disapproving frown the next morning was proof that he had succeeded, though perhaps not particularly well. He felt his teeth grinding together, the familiar tension permeating his jaw as he thought of what had transpired last night. It kept playing over and over again in his head, everything all jumbled with his desperate need to say what needed to be said, just get it out, before he lost his resolve.

He gave you his failings so he would not have to answer for them. They were never yours. Do not carry them with you any further. It both astounded and rather terrified him just how clearly Steve could see him, all of him, cut open to be picked apart in ways Steve never did. How easy it would be for Steve to use that to wound, to draw something out of Tony that he did not want to give, yet the only thing that was ever reflected back upon him was an unwavering certainty that left Tony reeling under the weight of it. If your father couldn’t see what a remarkable son he had, that’s his failing, not yours.

His father had never told him he loved him, never even told him he liked him. Hell, Howard’s happiest day had been when Tony had been old enough to shunt him out of the Tower to his own suite of apartments where Tony could be cared for by those paid to do it. And now the whole future of the Realm was riding on Tony, on his father being wrong. Except that proposition had somehow become the same thing as Steve being right, and he didn’t know how to reconcile those things, but believing in Steve was a hell of a lot easier than trusting Howard, even about this. What did Steve see, when he looked at him, now, when he knew the truth?
If your father couldn’t see what a remarkable son he had, that’s his failing, not yours. He gave you his failings so he would not have to answer for them.

Had he? Howard had always seemed so unreachable when he was a child, disappointment making him distant and unyielding. Yet he had been well-liked by the people and courtiers, though a small voice niggled in the back of his head that Howard had never seen fit to challenge much of anything if there was a cost involved. He had let his kingdom be run by others, the likes of Stane and Pierce given power because they sought it and paid Howard the proper homage, absolving Howard of any responsibility to make choices where there were none.

Howard had turned away Tony too early for him to truly remember it, pushing him away until Tony responded by becoming as much of reflection of his father as he could manage, all of Howard’s vices ended up being visited on the Realm once again. It was almost laughable, really. Was it possible that in all his attempts to be what Howard wanted, he might be the better man for the lack of success that had driven his father’s bitter disappointment with him? All of his efforts and energy spent to emulate a man who hated himself so very, very much? At that, if nothing else, Tony had succeeded rather spectacularly.

Until someone saw him, stripped down and laid bare, without the armor of his title and wealth, without the power of his name, with nothing left but Tony and said that was enough.

He had spent his life trying to be an illusion, turning himself into what Howard told him he was, Howard’s greatest creation, a son in his own misbegotten image. How could Howard be so terrible if Tony outdid him, even at that? Now, he wanted desperately to be as Steve saw him. Someone remarkable. Someone worth vouching for.

He remembered his entreaty to Steve all those weeks ago in the forest before they parted. It was supposed to be them. The two of them, together. They had, unbeknownst and unnoticed at the time, begun down a path that Tony was almost certain was meant for them, two unstoppable forces pulled together by fate or the gods or whatever you wanted to call it.

They started something that mattered, that day in the desert. Because of Steve, the Realm changed. Tony changed. He had been made to see, all too plainly, that worth was not measured by blood or name, but by what lived inside, in the spaces between, where what a person believed and how he acted upon those beliefs counted more than any title. Steve said Tony had left that part of himself behind in the cave, and maybe he had, but something else was swept away in the River that day, and in its place was something far more precious, and far more precarious. He could not go back, not now. He could not allow himself to be diminished, however easy it would be, not when so much depended on being the person that was birthed from those waters.

You’re going to be a great king.

Let it be so, he prayed silently to gods that had yet to answer, closing his eyes as the sky lit with flashes of brilliant white streaks. Please, let it be so.

But Steve was leaving, as if whatever path they had been on suddenly forked. Maybe to go with Culver, maybe just to be anywhere but here, who the hell knew? Leaving. Leaving him. And it hurt, burned through him like a fire that refused to be sated, excoriating him with each breath.

What had Tony expected, really, after he had already cast him out once because of his own stupid jealousy? Some shell of an existence where Steve built his life, and Tony let the thing inside him fester and harden until it broke him? Steve was no fool, and after the incident with Culver, he was hardly going to wait around for Tony to decide almost enough was not sufficient any longer. Tony had been fooling himself to even think it.
The idea of watching Steve live his life safe and happy sounded fine in the bright light of morning, but in the dark, deep hours of the night, when images cascaded behind his eyes, he wondered how long he would have been able to bear it. Steve, teasing and smiling with someone else, sharing an embrace with him when they caught a moment, Steve with his child on his shoulders, laughing and carefree...the very thought of it opened something inside of Tony that he did not want to dwell upon, but he thought it might live in the depths of the Castle, with other things that were best forgotten.

However much as he tried to tell himself that Steve leaving was for the best, it was a losing battle, he knew. He could not deny that wanted Steve here, even if he was close enough see and hear and touch, but never have. Tony had always been able to accept almost enough before, in the guise of locked doors and loud, disappointed voices. He could learn to content himself with that now, because Steve was worth every moment of bittersweet agony such would entail, but not if Steve refused him that chance. *Let me look upon him and see that he is happy,* Tony entreated to no one he believed would hear it. *I swear that can be enough. I will make it enough.* Tony blinked and realized all eyes in the courtyard had turned to him. He shifted his footing slightly in the deep pile of the rug and cleared his throat, nodding his head towards the dais.

“Let it be done,” he said tersely, surprised at how loud his voice sounded in contrast to the hush of the crowd.

At Tony’s nod, the hangman pushed Stane into position, looping the coil of rope around his neck and tightening the knot. It was quick, Tony would grant the hangman that. The trapdoor opened as soon as the lever was pulled, dropping the carefully measured bags of sand to the ground as the noose tightened around Stane’s neck where he dangled, legs kicking jig-like in their spasms. A startled gasp went up from the crowd, as if this had somehow been unexpected, then the jeers and shouts began, a rising tide of almost exultant excitation that dwindled as Stane’s body twitched and danced, his face reddening and eyes bulging almost comically wide. Tony forced himself to watch it all. He could not be seen to look away, though a part of him wanted nothing more than to turn from the sight of it. Even knowing what Obie had done, the man had once shown him kindness and attention when his father was too drunk to care and his mother too distant to notice. Perhaps that had all been nothing more than manipulation, but too many of his childhood memories were filled with it to take any true pleasure from this, only a grim satisfaction that the thing was done.

When it was finally over, he watched the body shift and sway, the crowd noise fading to a rumble and shuffle of feet. The body would be hung from the walls, where Pierce could see it, though Tony doubted the sight of the fate of his conspirator would give him much pause. He stepped down from the platform and walked through the rows of guards that lined front of the platform and the carpet running back to the Castle. Someone ran up to him with an umbrella of oiled, red silk in an attempt to protect him from the rain. Considering there was an army of untold numbers converging on the city, he almost laughed at the effort, but merely shrugged it off and strode into the Castle as the crowd continued its taunts, though already it began to disperse, the weather and too much needing to be done sending people scurrying for drier ground. He shook his head a bit as he entered the Castle, sending droplets of water flying from his hair. Rhodey met him almost immediately, coming over to walk beside him.

“So. That went as well as could be expected,” Rhodey stated, eyebrows raised as he looked Tony up and down. “You’ve looked better. I’d like to think it was the good kind of sleepless night, but I already know that Rogers didn’t spend the night in the Tower.”

“This is why I like talking to you. You already know everything. Gods, news travels fast,” Tony
said, mouth twisting in a frown as they walked down the hallway towards the Tower. He had meetings and more meetings and too much work to do in his workshop to worry about this, he knew, but couldn’t seem to keep himself from nearly grabbing Rhodey and shaking whatever it was he may have heard that drove him from his duties to Tony’s side out of him, and wagging tongues be damned.

“Indeed it does. Take this news, for example,” Rhodey offered. “Culver is in his father’s home in Hempstead, rather alarmed at the armored guards showing up at his doorstep demanding to know where Captain Rogers is. Apparently, Culver was quick to assure them that he had absolutely no knowledge of Captain Rogers’ whereabouts, nor any interest in finding out.”

Tony stopped short, turning to face Rhodey even as he cast a quick glance at the guards interspersed down the hall. It was no wonder gossip traveled so quickly around here. The place was thick with ears just waiting to hear something that could be shared. “If Culver didn’t go with him, then who the hell—fuck. Barnes. Of course, he did,” Tony said with a sigh, rubbing the heel of his palm against the pressure building behind his forehead. “He went with Barnes,” Tony repeated. “Why not Culver? I thought—I mean—I saw—he was there, with Steve—in his room. They seemed—”

“*I only saw the Culver lad with him, Your Grace. They seemed to get along well.*”

“Culver claims he was merely looking for an escort home, what with all the goings on, and Rogers offered, seeing as how his team was heading that general direction towards the coast anyway. Not sure what, exactly, happened, there,” Rhodey said around a frown. “Culver did spend a good while telling your guards how he is but a loyal subject of the Crown, a Stark man through and through. Or so I am told he repeated quite a few times. But it was definitely Barnes that went off with Rogers. Commander Ketterson confirmed it. Hard to miss a man with a metal arm.” Rhodey added with a shrug.

“Ketterson’s an idiot,” Tony bit out.

“Sure, and I already had a talk with him about his behavior, but I think that misses the point,” Rhodey argued with an air of annoyance.

“Wait, what behavior?” Tony asked sharply.

“Why do you think he’s—you know what, never you mind. I don’t think I want to tell you. We already had one hanging today,” Rhodey replied calmly, holding up a placating hand.

“Rhodey—“ Tony began.

“No, and I mean it, Tony. I handled it. You’ll just be all—you—about it, and we need you to focus on the giant army coming to destroy us right now, not who may have been—look, forget it, okay? Fury wants to meet with you—I know, yes, again,” Rhodey continued before Tony could interrupt. “He said he could do it in your chambers, if you preferred. He has some ideas. I’ve only heard a bit of it, but, it might be the best chance we have, if we have to fight.”

“You still think sitting out a siege is the best course?” Tony asked dubiously, trying to follow the shift in conversation with enough clarity that it didn’t spook Rhodey. Steve had not left with Culver. Steve had not left him for Culver. It was almost the same thing, he told himself, but it didn’t feel the same. “Pierce isn’t going to camp outside our walls for long. He means to break them. You watch, he’s going to come over those hills with battery towers to breach our defenses and sows ready to fill in the trenches and moat. He’s prepared for this, Rhodey. He has thought about this a lot longer then we have, and we’re running out of time to be wrong here. Hell, he was probably planning how best to attack us when he was here, telling everyone who would listen that peace wasn’t an achievement, but a responsibility. See, this is one of the reasons I have trust
issues,” Tony snapped, flinging his hand out in agitation.

“I know, Tony. I’ve…been convinced, let’s say. But, most of the generals still think we should play the odds, and if we just had more time…maybe some of our troops could make it back,” Rhodey suggested. “I know, Pierce may not give us a choice. That’s what Fury wants to go over. Call it a contingency plan.”

“Fine. Give me a few hours in the workshop, and we can talk after dinner. I still have to meet with the Council this afternoon, and I am not putting Pepper off, even for Fury,” Tony said, watching Rhodey hide a grin behind his hand. “Any other news I need to know now?”

“Nothing that can’t wait until tonight. Everyone knows what they are supposed to be doing. Go,” Rhodey said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Don’t fall asleep in one of your potions and accomplish Pierce’s task for him,” Rhodey called out over his shoulder as Tony waved a hand in the air dismissively.

The rest of the afternoon was spent getting an update from the Council, the influx of refugees and other administrative issues being handled so efficiently, he considered that he shouldn’t put Pepper, Jan and Matt on the issue of the war instead of his current stable of generals. It was enough of a distraction to keep him from dwelling on Rhodey’s news, at least for too long, though his mind kept skittering back to it like a squirrel darting to the center of the path and back to its tree again, checking the winds for dangers that lurked in the line of thinking his heart wanted him to take.

Barnes had gone with him. Not Culver. Steve had denied the existence of a relationship, and of course, Culver would have been a fool to pursue something after Tony forbade it, so that was no surprise. Yet...if Steve had not left with him—if there was really nothing there—and Steve came back. With vital intel, sure, but that could have been conveyed quickly enough, yet Steve remained, even sought Tony out. Tony had granted Steve the release he was due, given him a chance to find whatever it was that would make him complete without Tony hovering like a wraith over his life, and that should be the end of it. He had meant it, too. He wanted Steve’s happiness above all else, including his own, and if that was the price, then so be it. He would pay it gladly. He was giving him this, dammit, but Steve acted as if something was being taken. And yet...yet, his heart leapt like a jackrabbit in his chest when Rhodey delivered his report.

Tony didn’t know what to do with that truth, but his heart kept insisting on twisting into something it might not be. But if it was...If there was a chance that it could be...Point being, he should probably stop playing with explosives and thinking about Steve at the same time, Tony thought, looking down at the metal tongs he was using to pour the liquefied compound into a metal casing.

By late afternoon, he had run out of the supplies he needed to make any more of the new compound, so spent the remainder of his time brewing the traditional preparation, though that work was being done by others as well and his contribution was probably more symbolic than actually helpful. He didn’t want to leave the workshop, truth be told, though he recognized his own excuse-making when he saw it.

When he finally shook off his gloves and removed the goggles, it was past dinner, his stomach gurgling around a sudden emptiness. It was hot down here, with the forges going, and he wiped a rag over his face, dabbing at the sticky sweat there. He shoved a hand through his hair, slicking it to his head. He thought briefly of greeting Fury from his tub, the image bringing a fleeting smile to his face.

He trudged up the stairs of the Tower from his workshop to his chambers, ignoring the guards as he passed. They were used to his bedraggled, soot-covered state by now anyway. He pushed open the door to his chambers, then stopped himself, looking briefly down the hallway at the closed
door at the end of it. Before he knew what he was doing, he was knocking on it, lightly at first, then harder when he received no response. When only silence greeted him, he pushed it open, stepping into the alcove and glancing surreptitiously around the room, finding it empty, though there was a sense of expectation hanging over it, as if he had only just missed its occupant.

A blue doublet was carefully folded on the bed, shiny black boots neatly tucked on the floor next to it. He walked over and ran a light hand over the coat, for a moment fancying that he could feel the warmth slowly leaking out of it. He picked it up and brought it to his nose, breathing in deeply, the scent conjuring images of rolling around on the hard-packed ground, laughing and equal parts humbled and triumphant. Safe. Happy. Enough. For once in his life, not feeling he had to strive to be more, better, something always just out of reach. He had not realized it was such a precious and heady thing until it was gone.

Everything in the room had been left as it was found, he noted, save for the absence of the shield. That, at least, went with its rightful owner. All these objects, these things, that had once been so important to him to give, seemed to mock him now, and why wouldn’t they? His mind flashed to an endless parade of toys and books and, later, horses and jewels, fine clothes and useless swords disguised as love. Had he ever believed it, when he had been on the receiving end? He doubted it, yet he kept repeating the same sins.

He walked slowly over to the easel, eyes roving over the canvas he had noted last night. A half-formed figure of a man standing on the bank of a river holding the moon in his hands sketched out in deft, sure strokes met his gaze. He let his fingers trace the outline, smudging the edges just slightly as he went, and he knew he should stop, should pull back, but it felt oddly satisfying, the way he could touch this thing that Steve had created, leave his mark on it, make it in some way his, too. Thiers, his mind supplied. It was a fanciful thing, he knew, in a time when he could not afford indulgences such as this, yet he peeled the canvas carefully off the easel and rolled it up, taking it with him as he left the room and the promise it once held behind.

He came to a halt just as he was about to leave, his eyes falling on the bedside table where a book lay open. He strode to it, staring down at it for a long moment, until the words blurred. It was the storybook, of course, the one he had Pepper ferret out, finally finding it in some silk merchant’s private collection. It had been difficult to find an appropriate copy, this not being a particularly popular tome, and not something that would typically be so finely done. Something like this had to be commissioned, an expense usually reserved for religious texts or family volumes. He’d had it rebound, of course, the cover wrought in gold and jewels. He’d had his carver chisel out the ivory panel that sat in the center to depict a large oak tree, branches spread wide, appearing almost as feathered arms reaching out in the bone whiteness of it. He wondered if Steve looked at it and thought of nights spent leaning against the rough trunk, forming sounds that became words.

It was open to the story of the knight and his quest, the one that had been Steve’s favorite, which they had used, night after night, Steve fighting as hard with the words as Tony ever battled with him during their training sessions, each finding equal pride in the accomplishments of the other. He liked to think of Steve reading the story again, having the same warm thoughts, though he wondered if they were pitched with something else now, haunted by all the lies Tony had told. It had been his own lack of oversight that let Stern funnel the monies intended for the education of the populace in the Riverlands into his own coffers. Tony’s sudden desire to play tutor looked far more self-serving in that light, and perhaps it had been, at that.

He had wanted to fix something that could not be mended, not so easily, anyway. But, if he were entirely honest, he had wanted to teach Steve for his own reasons, for the stolen time together, away from prying eyes, for the grateful way Steve looked at him when he sounded a word out correctly, and, he chuffed out a harsh snort of derisive laughter, because he had not wanted Steve to
be embarrassed when he stood at Tony’s side. He had not wanted people to talk, not about that, though they would find plenty to occupy themselves, but he did not want Steve to face censure for something Tony had caused, however inadvertently. How well that worked out, Tony thought bitterly, leaving the book where it lay.

Once in his own chambers, he placed the rolled canvas on his desk, then used the water in the basin to scrub his face and hands, at least making himself somewhat presentable before Fury arrived. Jarvis or someone had left dinner on the table, still warm under a cover, and he sat down to eat, perusing the various missives stacked on his desk as he chewed the succulent pheasant and wished for hard biscuits that tasted like dust.

A sharp knock on the door drew his attention from the letter from Lord Hawley he wasn’t reading. “Come,” he called out, tossing the parchment onto the stack in front of him in what he considered the “to be ignored” pile. Fury, Coulson, Rhodey and Hill filed into the room, Steve on their heels.

It was like being punched in the gut, the unexpected sight of him coming without warning sending the air coursing from Tony’s body. Steve had changed clothes, wearing a simple soldier’s uniform, similar to the one he had worn when they met in the desert. Tony’s cheek prickled with memory of the coarse threads pressing against it as he slept, rough and comforting, though Tony missed seeing him dressed in things he had more directly provided. There was something satisfying in that, a vague sense of possessiveness and pride that had warmed him last night, seeing Steve looking so beautiful in the clothes Tony had given him. Those, like most everything else, were not things Steve cared to take with him, Tony supposed.

Steve was looking around Tony’s chambers, almost as if in surprise, his gaze not really resting anywhere, and avoiding Tony altogether. Tony could see a fleeting frown cross Steve’s face as he looked back at the door, and Tony realized Steve had never actually been in his chambers. He wondered what Steve thought of it, but Steve’s face had turned impassive, impossible to read.

“Your Grace,” Fury said, bones creaking with either age or disdain as he began to kneel. “Let’s skip the formalities, Patches,” Tony interjected quickly. How long had Tony wanted Steve’s show of fealty? And here he could have it, and it was like poison in his mouth, a vile, bitter taste that made his gut clench with wrongness. Steve should not kneel to him, prostrate on the floor like some commoner, his mind rebelled at the thought, at the same time recognizing the ridiculousness of the impulse.

“Very well,” Fury said, somehow making it sound like he was the one granting Tony some boon. “Captain Rogers briefed us on what we consider the most viable plan we’ve heard to date. He would like to present it to you, Your Grace,” Coulson said calmly, as if the world wasn’t spinning too fast right now. Tony could only nod slowly in response as Steve stepped forward.

“Your Grace,” Steve began and Tony flinched at the words as if they were an epithet, though he was the one that had so hastily demanded it. “We know that there is a force of unknown strength coming toward the city by way of the beaches. Based on when they struck the village and the timing of the high and low tides, I believe it likely that they will make the beach beneath the city tomorrow night, likely attempting to infiltrate the city through the drain culverts under cover of darkness. I think they may well have planned to attack tonight, but the storm will slow them down, just as it will Pierce’s army. I know you’ve already taken steps to fortify the drains, but, with your permission, I’d like to take a small force down the rocks and wait for them to set ashore. We have the advantage of surprise. I believe we can overcome them before they realize what’s happening.”

“That’s—that makes sense,” Tony replied, making it almost a question, or enough so that he saw
Fury’s slight nod. “At least that’s one thing we don’t have to worry about. You, uh…you plan to lead it, then? This mission?”

“Yes. I’ll take the team with me, save for Bruce, who is helping set up an infirmary, and Bucky. He—he can’t make the climb with his arm,” Steve answered with a grimace.

“Bet he’s not happy about that,” Tony observed with a raised eyebrow.

“Not particularly. I’m surprised you didn’t hear him expressing his feelings on the matter, even down in your workshop,” Steve remarked, his voice pitched low and warm with exasperated fondness. “I don’t know what all those words meant, but I’m pretty sure he wasn’t pleased.” Tony barked out a small laugh, watching Steve’s shoulders relax a little, and, for a moment, it was just the two of them here, sharing some private joke and Tony relished the feeling more than he should.

“How much of that…explosive rock…you made that do you have?” Steve asked.

“Not enough. But, even a little can do considerable damage,” Tony responded.

“That, I do know,” Steve acknowledged. “Enough to blow a good sized hole in your dam?”

“Yes,” Tony replied, drawing the word out as he lifted his chin in question. “Why exactly would I want to do that?”

“We can’t blow the whole thing or the city would risk losing the fresh water access it provides. If the siege goes long, you’ll need that. But, if we could divert enough of the water to make it even knee-deep across that flood plain between the rise and the Castle, it would help,” Steve explained.

“I don’t—why? It won’t stop them,” Tony observed, shaking his head in confusion.

“Pierce has soldiers in cheap armor, and not many on heavy horse. Have you ever tried to wade through water in armor? Or push siege engines or wagons through mud?” Steve asked wryly, an almost-smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Haven’t had the pleasure, but I’m guessing that’s difficult,” Tony said, momentarily struck by the simplicity of it.

“Difficult. And tiring. It will buy you some time, and when they do get across, they’ll be exhausted and miserable,” Steve continued. “You’ll have to pull your army back, within the city gates to get out of the way of the waters. Pierce’s forces will come over the hill and see the water. I don’t think they’ll try to cross immediately. They’ve been on a fast march for too long, and Pierce will realize that his goal just got a lot harder. He’ll need to rethink his strategy. They’ll make camp, at least for a night,” Steve added.

“Makes sense. What does that gain us other than a night of hurling insults from my walls?” Tony asked, his mind whirring in anticipation. There was something about watching the way Steve thought, about being surprised by it, that Tony loved more than almost anything. All their discussions—debates—whatever you wanted to call it—as they walked through half the Realm, Tony had never found someone he couldn’t outthink, well except Reed, but he was an asshole. Steve, while not anywhere nearly as learned, thought differently, understood the world from a perspective Tony had never even known existed, and would have probably discounted if he had. Steve’s intuitive grasp of people and how they would behave, like being able to anticipate Ross’s movements because he’d fought the man before, immediately understanding the implications of the coded message they found, undermining Stane’s plan to upset the trial before it could take root…Steve’s mind worked in a different way, but was no less brilliant for it.
“Pierce will take the high ground of the hill for himself, but he’ll send his men forward to camp down near where the river will settle,” Steve was saying, unaware of Tony’s line of thinking. “He’ll want you and the all the city to see what they face. When you pull your men back, have them leave behind as many barrels of mead as you can spare, salted meats and the like to stoke their thirst. Make it look hurried, unplanned. As if they just had enough time to get out of the way of the waters. I don’t know about Hydra, but most of Pierce’s men are made up of either sellswords he’s paid for their allegiance or peasants with more hunger in their bellies than passion for a cause.”

“So, tired and hungover? I like this better and better,” Tony said, wrapping the words in a true smile, awash in hope and what felt a lot like relief, because finally, finally there was something to cling to in this morass of mistakes and ineptitude. A chance, however slim. “Steve, this—this is good. This is very, very good. This is good, right, General?”

“I think it’s the best idea we have, Your Grace. We can only hope that your forces from the South haven’t been entirely cut off or overrun by Pierce’s march. If we can gain enough time…” Fury said, his voice oddly tight as he cast his one good eye over at Steve. “Do we have your permission to proceed, Your Grace?”

“Of course. I’ll prepare the charges for the dam myself. When do you need it to blow?” Tony asked.

“Just before sundown tomorrow,” Steve answered, looking over at Fury, something passing between them that Tony couldn’t identify.

“That fast, huh? Okay, it will be ready,” Tony promised. “You’ll see to moving the men back, then, General? Rhodey, talk to Pepper about whatever our stores can spare. Anything else?”

“The city is filled with people. And you have a lot of refugees here now,” Steve said.

“I know,” Tony sighed. “Pepper has been coordinating rations and shelter—“ Tony began.

“No, I mean let them help,” Steve interrupted, then looked abashed for a moment before continuing. “It’s their Realm, too, Your Grace. You should put them to use. People like to feel that they’re doing something,” Steve argued. “It helps keep the fear at bay.”

“What do you suggest? I suppose they could carry things, tend the wounded, help move supplies around, that kind of thing. They don’t have the skills to make weapons or man the armaments, though,” Tony observed. “And we don’t have the time or manpower to train them.”

“They can do those things you suggested, true enough, but why not use the skills they do have?” Steve countered. “I’ll bet you could walk into your courtyard and find five hundred women who can sew. Have them sew clothes stuffed with straw. Put those on the battlements holding your banners. From a distance, no one will know. At least it will give Pierce pause about your numbers. Not to mention that any arrows that hit them are just as good as Pierce handing us arrows to use against him,” Steve said with a shrug. “You have men who can weave ropes into nets in no time. Cover your windows with those so that projectiles don’t breach the interiors. Shepherds mend their fences and make their own tools all the time. Let them carve stakes for the moat. Farmers replace the metal tips on their plows almost weekly. Have them put points on arrows. You’ve rebuilt or refortified portions of your walls. Let the children gather the bits of rock left over from your efforts to be dropped from the walls. They’ll think it a game. People can do amazing things when it is required of them, Your Grace. Ask them what skills they have to contribute. They might surprise you.”
“Of that, I have no doubt,” Tony responded in quiet admiration. Leave it to Steve to see what rank and privilege blinded so many of them to. “Coulson?” Tony called, glancing at the man.

“I’ll see to it at once, Your Grace,” Coulson acknowledged with a firm nod.

“Thank you for your time, then, Your Grace,” Fury said. “We will see to final preparations. Coulson will coordinate with you regarding whatever assistance you might need for the dam. Captain Rhodes, if you would select the men to accompany Captain Rogers on his mission?”

“Oh, of course, General,” Rhodey replied. “How many are you thinking you’ll need?” Rhodey asked, looking over at Steve.

“I’d like a full battalion, but I’ll take what you can spare,” Steve said. “You know what I’m looking for.”

Rhodey said nothing for a moment, his eyes flicking to Tony ever so briefly, then nodded again. “As you say, Captain,” Rhodey agreed.

“That many?” Tony asked. “Do you really think they’re sending five hundred men up the shore? Seems a tad excessive, even for Pierce.”

“Better to have too many than too few,” Rhodey responded, a ready answer, Tony thought, something about it setting off an unease in the back of his mind, though Tony nodded, not really being able to argue the logic of that. “I’ll see who I can find for you,” Rhodey told Steve.

Silence fell after that, an air of finality filling the room. Steve was going to fight, and gods only knew how that would go. The company of Hydra men snaking up his beach could be far larger than speculated, for all they knew. Fighting in those kind of close quarters, even if they had the advantage of surprise, numbers and held the higher ground offered by the rocks, it obviously wasn’t without risk.

“Alright, people, this isn’t a party, let’s go,” Fury urged, pausing long enough for a bow so shallow and quick as to be mistaken for a bout of stomach pain. The rest made their bows and took their leave, filing out the door in a tired, but determined line, Steve lingering last as those of higher rank departed.

“Stay,” Tony heard himself call out, his mind immediately recalling Steve making the same request that night in his room, when things had gone so terribly wrong. Rhodey looked over his shoulder at Tony in momentary question, his mouth twisting as he shook his head when he saw the answer, then shuffled out of the room. “Please,” Tony amended, trying to make it a request instead of an order, as Steve slowed to a halt with one hand wrapped around the edge of the open door. “Just for a moment.”

Steve let the door shut softly behind Rhodey, staring at it for long seconds before he turned back to Tony. “Yes, Your Grace?” he asked.

Tony had spoken so hastily that he wasn’t sure what to say now that he actually had Steve here with him, except some insane desire to hoard these moments like a crow collecting its treasures, so he said the first thing that came to mind. “I was surprised I did not see you. This morning, I mean,” Tony clarified at Steve’s confused look. “I thought you would want to be there.”

It was almost like a portcullis dropping, how quickly Steve’s features shuttered into something so carefully fixed that he could have been a portrait for all the life that flowed from his expression. “I’ve seen enough hangings for one lifetime,” Steve replied. Oh, Tony thought, the dawning
horror of it rushing over him in waves, battering against his mind, the image of Stane on the dais with the rope around his neck suddenly replaced with Steve, sending a harsh cough of air out of him as something hit his gut like a fist. His hand went to rub his neck before he realized what he was doing, though he saw Steve watching the motion, and quickly ran it around the back of his neck as if rubbing out a stiffness that wasn’t there. How many times was Tony to come to the precipice of losing this man, only to have the gods pull him back? Little wonder Steve wanted to leave. How much was one man to endure because of his association with another before he simply said this far and no more?

“Is there anything else you—” Steve began.

“I—uh—” Tony stammered, still completely unsure what he wanted to say, but unwilling or unable to relinquish Steve’s company just yet. “I wanted to tell you—to thank you—for what you suggested. Those are good ideas, Steve. I meant that. I should have thought—the people, I mean. I’ve been—we’ve all been—thinking of them as a burden, but you’re right, of course. They could be a resource. I should have thought of that. Or someone here damn well should have,” Tony grumbled.

“I’m glad I could help,” Steve said stiffly, the whole line of his body radiating tension. He clearly wanted to go. Obviously, he had a mission to plan, though how much planning really went into ‘climb down and fight the bad guys,’ Tony didn’t know. Steve looked up at Tony, eyes clear and bright. “That’s all I ever wanted to do.”

“I know,” Tony breathed out. “I know that. It’s just—they don’t—the generals, commanders, hell, probably most of the people here—they think we can just sit this out and sue for peace in a month or so. They want to believe this is about rationing and fortifying, and maybe I’m wrong, but—” Tony started.

“You’re not wrong,” Steve interjected. “Pierce is not going to sit over there and wait, not with Schmidt at his back. That was the whole point of their plan to insert a force within the city. They weren’t sending all those men to poison your well and let you waste away. They were coming to open your gates.”

Tony was nodding, an air of relief floating through him, because at least someone else understood what the others did not want to see. “You talked to them, didn’t you? Rhodey and the others?” he asked, remembering Rhodey’s confession that he had been convinced.

“Yes. As many as would listen,” Steve admitted. “I don’t know if they all believed me, but they needed to stop thinking of Pierce as the man they knew. If that person ever existed, it is not him they will face, not anymore. It’s Hydra.”

“Thank you. Again. For that as well, I mean,” Tony replied quickly, pushing himself away from the table and standing up, mainly for want of something better to do. He looked around the room for anything else, any other topic of conversation he could dredge up that might hold Steve here a little longer when he so clearly wanted to leave. He wasn’t sure what that kind of desperation said about him.

“I should probably go speak with Captain Rhodes about the mission,” Steve said, eyes darting to the door, though he remained where he stood. He was asking permission, Tony knew, and he hated it and hated himself that he was going to use the fact that Steve couldn’t simply walk out.

“Dinner? I mean, have you eaten? I have food. Too much of it, really. Jarvis always brings more than any one person could possibly eat. Well, if you’re not you or Thor, I guess. What’s with the damn pastries, anyway?” Tony babbled, unable to stop himself, afraid if he did, Steve would ask to
leave and he’d have no reason to refuse. “But, lots of food. It isn’t exactly inedible rock biscuits, but its food. There’s really plenty. You should eat,” Tony urged hopefully, spreading his hands wide to indicate the table and tray of half-eaten food, suddenly realizing how that looked, considering that everyone else in the city was probably carefully rationing. “Don’t want it to go to waste, I mean,” he clarified.

“I ate with the soldiers,” Steve said, though it wasn’t as sharp as before, softer somehow.

“Oh,” Tony replied stupidly. “How—uh, how was that?” Gods, this was pathetic, he thought in grim frustration as he rubbed a hand over his chin, feeling the rough, familiar scraggle of his beard. It hadn’t been this awkward when he was bound and gagged.

“Fine,” Steve replied. “I think they missed me,” Steve said, and it was meant to be sarcastic, Tony could tell, but it came out more weary than anything. He thought about Ketterson’s words, how the men had ignored Steve, to the point where, apparently, the rest of the team did not even try to make any inroads. They probably took their meals in their rooms instead of—oh. Of course. They took their meals in their rooms, which was why Barnes had been in Steve’s room when Ketterson found him. The two places set for dinner. Gods, he was an idiot. He fancied himself a visionary, able to think his way through most problems and predict outcomes, so what was it about Steve that made him react to every damn little thing without thought?

He had an impossible amount and absolutely nothing left to say, both impulses warring with each other for dominance. Tony honestly did not know what he intended to say until he said it, and then it seemed the only thing he could say. “Barnes went with you,” Tony said, the din in his ears going suddenly silent, the sounds of the castle and yard fading to nothing until it was he and Steve in a weighty, expectant silence.

“Yes,” Steve responded with a slight frown, oblivious to what that meant to Tony. “I…didn’t think you meant what you said to truly apply to the whole team. He insisted though.” Tony closed his eyes, letting just how much he had misinterpreted things settle in for a moment.

“I’ll apologize to him tomorrow. That—that--I never should have--I’m sorry,” Tony said, his throat suddenly closing tightly, making his voice thick and rough. “The village. That…must have been hard for him to see. For both of you to see,” Tony acknowledged carefully.

“Yes,” Steve responded with a slight frown, oblivious to what that meant to Tony. “I…didn’t think you meant what you said to truly apply to the whole team. He insisted though.” Tony closed his eyes, letting just how much he had misinterpreted things settle in for a moment.

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“It would have been hard for anyone to see,” Steve said simply, and Tony supposed that much was true, but it was Steve’s pain that concerned him right now, and Steve hurt for Barnes as much as for himself, he knew. “May I go?” Steve asked, eyes staring at some point just slightly behind Tony’s left shoulder. It was on the tip of his tongue to refuse the request, but even he couldn’t be quite that petty, so he nodded once and looked away then back again, not wanting to actually watch Steve walk out the door, but unable to resist the temptation to have whatever memories he could gather, even if it was this.

Steve turned to go, brushing past Tony’s desk as he walked. He stopped, then looked down at the desk for a moment before he reached out to unroll the canvas Tony had dropped on top of the stack of missives after taking it from Steve’s room. Steve unfurled it and stared down at it, then looked over at Tony in obvious question. Tony said nothing at first, just returned Steve’s gaze, measure for measure, his heart pounding out a staccato rhythm so hard, he was surprised it did not clang against the metal plate that sealed his wound, tolling like a bell.

“Who is it supposed to be?” Tony queried, trying to make it sound like idle curiosity.

“I don’t know. Something from a dream, I think,” Steve said after a time, looking back down at the canvas, his finger tracing the lines of the figure in unconscious mimicry of Tony’s earlier

“Steve,” Tony said, pushing himself up from where he leaned against the table and taking a few steps toward the desk where Steve stood, watching him silently. “Don’t—don’t go. Not like this. Don’t leave and go out there to fight—not like this. Please—you said nothing would change,” Tony said, meaning it as a plea, but it came out almost an accusation. “And I know it did, I know, gods—fuck. I know it had to change, okay? I get it. I can’t change who I am or take back what I did. But, whatever—I don’t—none of us know what’s going to happen with this. I—I don’t want—just can we—can we go back? To what we were? Just for tonight. Can we be those people? When you didn’t—just for now, for right now, can we—“

“I don’t see how we can do that,” Steve said quietly. “Your Grace,” he said pointedly.

“You were my friend, Steve. Out there, if nothing else, you were that, and I miss my friend,” Tony stated fiercely. “All those things...All the things I said and did—I’m—I’m so, so sorry. I know that's not enough, but I hope you will allow me the chance to earn your friendship back. I don't deserve it...I just hope you let me. I'm not as good at—at anything as I am when I'm doing it next to you, Steve, and that’s the truth,” Tony pressed, willing Steve to understand, to believe him. “I miss you, dammit. I miss the team. Even Barnes,” he admitted after a moment’s pause. “I miss you, dammit. I miss the team. Even Barnes,” he admitted after a moment’s pause. “I miss almost being a part of something more. We could have that again. Here, in the Tower. Maybe not exactly the same, but—it could be close enough,” Tony heard himself say, the words sticking in his throat as his jaw tightened around them. Close enough. That could be enough. He would make it enough. “You could have a home here. All of you. If you wanted.”

Steve seemed to pause on the verge of some kind of response before finally giving a quick nod, his rigid posture slackening a bit. “I think they would like that,” Steve replied quietly, his head turning slightly to look at the canvas again. “I meant it when I asked you before,” Steve continued, dragging his gaze back to Tony, and Tony’s heart skipped several beats at that, because he remembered, oh, did he remember. A house by the sea, a place for them together, the meanest of existences far richer than anything Tony had here.

“About being an Avenger. In whatever role you want. It would be good. For the team, I mean. They'll need—they should have that. A place they can stay. A home. And I will always be your friend. If that is what you want, then you have it,” Steve promised, a flash of something breaking across his face, gone before Tony could catch it. “Besides,” Steve said, a slight smile forming. “I think Clint would put an arrow through me if I denied him access to the tub in his old room. He has plans.”

“Plans, huh?” Tony echoed, suddenly languid and almost giddy with relief and something that might be hope, but he was afraid to name it such.

“I can’t even look Coulson in the eye anymore,” Steve deadpanned with a sigh. Tony barked out a surprised laugh, and then Steve was grinning, too, so bright it was almost blinding. Tony wasn’t sure how he ended up so close to Steve, except that one minute he was laughing, watching Steve’s face break into a familiar smile, and then he was here and Steve was so close, he could feel his warmth like a beacon, his nose filling with the phantom scent of grass and dirt for a fleeting moment before it was gone.

“Steve,” he scraped out, mouth dry as if filled with sand, his hand reaching out, hanging limply in the air between them. “Just—” he didn’t know what he was asking, for everything, probably, but the words wouldn’t come. Steve was closer now, so very close. Within reach, Tony’s mind
supplied. He moved into Tony’s space as if pulled by string, whatever bond it was that connected them seeming to act of its own accord. “Just for tonight—just—can we be at least what we were?”

Steve watched him, gauging somehow, like tipping a weight on some scale Tony couldn’t fathom. Steve raised his hand up between them, and at first, Tony thought he was going to push him away or maybe take hold of Tony’s outstretched hand, where it hung, reaching for something he couldn’t quite trust himself to grasp. Instead, Steve’s large hand settled on the center of his chest, fingers splayed wide over where the metal disc pressed against the fabric of the thin work shirt he wore. Steve was staring at his hand, an expression of wonder arching across his face so quickly, Tony thought he might have imagined it, but then it came to him, all at once, a man holding the moon in his hands, and he knew, he knew, wonder and trepidation vying for purchase. He draws the things that are useful or beloved, Tony’s earlier thought echoed in his mind, the realization making his stomach twist and turn, warmth pooling in his gut. Tony didn’t really care which one of those he was. It was close enough.

Tony pushed himself close, seeking more, anything, just more, until Steve’s arm was caught between them, his hand still pressed against Tony’s chest. Tony wrapped his arms around Steve’s shoulders, drawing their chests together, winding his hand to the back of Steve’s neck and letting his fingers roam through Steve’s hair. He watched as Steve’s eyes widened, then darkened, deep pools of liquid lapis, shuttering as Steve bent his head against the press of Tony’s hand on his nape.

“Say my name,” Tony breathed out against Steve’s lips, so close, he could feel them brush his as he spoke, the tinkle of mingled exhales of breath heating the space between them. Steve’s eyes snapped open, watchful, gleaming in the firelight that lit Tony’s chambers. “Say my name,” Tony repeated, his other hand coming up to cup Steve’s jaw, cradling it there against the rough skin of his palm.

“Tony,” Steve whispered brokenly, making the word almost a groan, sending need flooding through Tony in a frantic burst of exultation that nearly sent him to his knees. His body seemed to know what to do, though, almost as if it had been primed for this, everything pared down to just this, just them, teeth gnashing together and tongues licking and warring their way in, hot and wet and brutal, too hard, just this side of painful, too much, but not enough. He needed more, needed to touch, to feel. “Tony,” he heard Steve say again when they broke apart long enough to draw in air, his name coming out thready with undisguised want. The sound of it sent a pulse straight to Tony’s cock, his back bowing tautly against Steve’s chest as he scraped his beard along Steve’s jaw to find his mouth again, wrapping his hand around the back of Steve’s neck, letting his fingers tease at the fine hair at the nape, before winding their way higher, pulling Steve’s head closer, angling his mouth to grant Tony better access.

“Please, Steve,” Tony begged as he broke for breath, for once not caring how he sounded. “Please, gods. Please.” He thought he heard his name again, but the hand that Steve had pressed against his chest had moved lower, long fingers wrapping around the bulge where Tony’s arousal pushed insistently against his breeches, the heel of Steve’s palm rubbing against the base of it, leaving Tony panting out low, aching little moans of pure need. “Please. Need you, Steve. Want to feel you. Want you inside me, please, gods, please, Steve. Need you,” Tony rambled, voice high and breathy with too much want, too eager, he knew, but he couldn’t help the frantic, stuttering movements as his hands sought skin, tugging Steve’s shirt aside to find the laces of his breeches, Tony’s fingers shaking too much to be nimble or quick about it.

At his words, Tony heard a thick, shuddering moan against the column of his throat where Steve’s mouth was sucking a line, the vibration sending shivers down his spine, directly to his hardening cock. Steve’s hips juddered against his at Tony’s words, and he could feel the hot, hard length of
him rutting against the cradle of his stomach, though he was almost sure Steve wasn’t even aware of what he was doing. He pressed himself forward, thrusting into Steve’s hand, searching for the coarse drag of more friction, aching need making him desperate.

“Please. Just stay. Stay with me. Give me this night, and I’ll let it be enough. Anything, Steve, I’ll give you anything. A title, lands,” he babbled, capturing Steve’s mouth again, letting his tongue dart in, swirling and searching, the tip tracing the outline of Steve’s lips as he drew back, mouthing along Steve’s jaw. “Name it and it’s yours, I swear. Anything, just let me, stay, please, I—“

He felt Steve still beneath his hands, abruptly cold as Steve pulled away, stepping back from him. It took Tony a moment to catch up, his body still on fire, hands reaching out to seek the lost contact. “No, wait—I--I didn’t mean it like that, don’t—don’t—that’s not—“ Tony stammered, feeling the world tilt and shatter around him, splinters of it piercing his skin. He looked up, not sure if anger or disappointment would be better, and instead found Steve gazing down at him with a calm sort of resigned acceptance that was somehow far worse. “Steve, please, listen to me. I talk when I get—when I should know better. You know I don’t think—Just, let’s—can we go back to—"

“I thought I could do this,” Steve cut in, running a loose hand through his hair and straightening his clothing, a tepid sort of resigned steadiness to his voice that felt like someone had reached in Tony’s chest and was squeezing his fist around Tony’s heart, crushing and twisting, wringing out whatever had been there. “Give myself this night, but…I don’t think we can go back. I don’t even know if there was ever really anything to go back to.”

“There’s—there’s us,” Tony stuttered, his mind still trying to catch up with what was happening while his body kept sending him a confused volley of signals. “We had something out there, something real. I know we did. Tell me you know that, too, Steve.”

“How was that real? How was any of that real? I didn’t even know—I thought—you didn’t have to--That night. That night, when we were sparring and you kissed me. You told me there was more than one way to win,” Steve ground out. “I guess I didn’t understand what you meant until now. I know why you lied about who you are, but you didn’t have to make me think—‘” Steve cut himself off, clamping his jaw together so tightly, Tony was surprised he didn’t hear teeth cracking. “You used me. You let me believe you were someone else, not your name or your title, but you. You used me to get what you wanted, and you can’t tell me it was all done in the service of the Realm. You treated me like an equal, acted like you cared, and then here—here—you—all you seem to want from me is this. You put me down the hall from you, you show up in my room whenever it pleases you, then when you think someone else—when you think I was with someone else, suddenly, I’m not worth it. But now that you know the truth of that, I’m invited back to your bed? Was this all it ever was for you? Is this what you want so badly?”

“What? I—no—I don’t—that’s not what I want--I do, obviously, I mean, but not just that, Steve,“ Tony stammered, trying to focus on what Steve was saying, because it was impossible, the things Steve was saying, that he would think that. How had this gotten so far away from him? “I want you to be happy. Whatever that means. That’s all I want.”

“Happy with someone like Sir Eric?” Steve demanded harshly, face flushed and eyes hard with undisguised anger.

“Don’t call him that,” Tony snapped at him, though he couldn’t understand why that mattered, except it did. It shouldn’t, maybe, but it did. He didn’t like hearing the sign of respect fall from Steve’s lips, not for someone who had denied their acquaintance to Tony’s own guards.

Steve gave a harsh bark of laughter that had no mirth behind it, the sound all wrong coming from
him. “I thought you liked titles,” Steve retorted, turning sharply on his heel and stalking towards the door.

“Do not walk away from me!” Tony shouted, the words out and echoing around the room before he could help himself. He watched Steve draw himself up to a halt so fast anyone else would probably have fallen over. He stared at Steve’s back for a long moment, his mouth opening and closing around words that refused to loosen themselves. He wanted to say that he hadn’t meant it that way, but it was a lie. He had. He did. It would be so easy, to let this thing he feared he might be take rein. That had been an order. He knew it, and Steve knew it. What manner of man was he, that he would go from thinking of what Steve suffered at Pierce’s hands for the crime of helping Tony with one breath and with the next commanding him to…to what exactly? Steve sprawled naked on the red velvet coverlet of Tony’s bed, looking up at him with dark, hooded eyes. That’s not who I am anymore, Tony thought vehemently, a vicious spike of loathing settling in his gut like a weight.

I am not that man. I will not be that man.

Please do not let me destroy him any more than I already have, he beseeched gods who had long ago turned a deaf ear to his pleas.

….see what a remarkable son he had…

…I’ll vouch for you…

“Will there be anything else, Your Grace?” Steve asked calmly over his shoulder, not a hint of inflection in his voice, his back still turned to Tony.

You’re going to be a great king.

I am not my father.

“Just go,” Tony replied flatly.

Chapter End Notes

So, this was all about setting up the battle and Tony dealing with his Daddy issues. Not solving them, because it doesn't work like that, but coming to the point where he realizes that he might actually be the better man for having disappointed his father.

Steve's battle plans are loosely based on the Battle of Okehazama, where this batshit crazy guy took like 2000 soldiers against an army of anywhere from 25,000-40,000 and won. The other ideas he mentioned, including the use of dam warfare to flood the valley, are all things actually used in various sieges that I just thought were neat and put them together for this. The internet said so, so it must be true.

I do truly appreciate all who have followed along with this story. I'm very excited to get to this point. I know it has been a long wait (6 months and 260K or so words, so yeah...). Thank you again for taking the time to read this. I also appreciate the passion about these characters and how, uh, invested, some of you have been. That's amazing. So, again, thank you. Hope you enjoy the rest.
If you're interested and still reading at this point, I have posted a partial, unedited version of Chapter 22 on my tumblr. It's maybe a third of the next chapter? Anyway, just in case anyone was interested.
Chapter 22

The waters were largely still now, dark glass holding the waning, almost transparent moon as the horizon lit with shades of red and gold, something he decided to take as an omen, as they were currently somewhat short of them. He could not afford to be particularly choosy. So it begins, Tony mused with an odd sort of detachment as he gazed at the thousands who had come to take this from him. He should feel something more, he thought. Anger or fear. Something deeper than this, surely. Instead, it was more a sense of resigned finality.

He’d spent his anger long ago, arguing with Steve as they walked to climb onto a rock outcropping to spending a night watching nothing and everything happen. The fear that remained, the thing that clawed in his gut and kept him pacing the Tower last night, the heaviness that kept pressing on his chest like a boulder, was not for himself or this bit of stone he called his own. People were going to die today, in his name or against it, but it all came back to him, one way or the other.

The responsibility was not solely his own, of course. He knew that. Pierce had thrown his lot in with Hydra long before Tony was even born. Yet this happened while he sat the throne, and he would be lying if he said there was no shame in that. He had failed his people in so many ways, and today, they would find out the price to be paid for those failures.

Let them come, then, he thought, shoving the guilt and recriminations aside for the moment. Let them come, and let us see if who we are amounts to more than our walls and our weapons, our rations and our numbers. Pierce seeks control in the guise of order and security, but fails to comprehend what Tony understood too late. Or nearly too late, he could only hope. Steve would tell him it is never too late, but Steve wasn’t here, and it was hard to lie to himself as he stood here atop the Tower and watched the slow march of destruction approach his city.

Control was an illusion, a temporary thing to make men feel like gods, as if so much of their fate was within their own grasp. Maybe that was why they held on so tightly to power, once gained, or sought it when they lacked it. Control. It could consume a man, if he let it, the desire to control the outcomes of his life. It could destroy. Was that not what this was today? An exercise in control, a battle for dominion over people who had never ceded either Pierce or Tony anything except a trust long betrayed?

It was like trying to capture smoke in a bottle for all the good it did him, ruling by fiat because he could for a reason no more sturdy than a name and title. A happenstance of birth, he’d once reflected, not surprisingly after meeting Steve. It had not occurred to him to ask them to follow him, to ask for their allegiance, whether by way of words or deeds, instead of simply demand it. Always, he had held himself above those around him, and all that earned him was distance, when he needed trust, scorn, when he needed faith.

Until Steve. Until he saw a different path, where he could earn something and thereby lay claim to something all the more valuable. But even with the realization, he had not known how to do so. No one had ever shown him what he was supposed to do, what that truly meant. He had a destination in mind, but the path before him was a hazy ruin of little more than good intentions.

Do not walk away from me.

The entire landscape of the Realm had been shifted and reformed before him like it meant to mock
the tribulations of his own life for the infinitesimal turns they were. *I can remake the world in mine own image*, the River sang as it deepened its swath through the valley. *Bind me or free me, I am eternal, and you are but a ripple against the tide of time unchanging.*

Control, Tony thought, did nothing to sway the hearts or minds of men. It was nothing more than the trapping of a power that you never truly held. Had he not learned that lesson thoroughly enough already? Did he need to see it carved into the stone of city, written in the blood of his people, as well?

Tony leaned forward, placing his elbows on the stone battlements of the Tower and brought the hand lens to his eye. He stared down at the valley below the rock on which the city had been built untold years ago, a cradle of earth dug long ago by the forces of the waters that emptied from the mountains. It was hard not to think of the mountains without thinking of Steve, of the team, and all that had transpired in their shadow. That had been the turning point, the moment of realization when Steve had decided to trust Tony over everything he thought he knew to be true. No coincidence then that it also seemed to mark when everything began to go so very wrong.

How had Tony repaid that trust? With trinkets and fine things to show his regard, because that was what he knew how to do, to give these things that people wanted of him so that he might tell himself it was the same as wanting him. He had learned that early enough in life, after all.

Ever since Steve arrived here, bound and sick from what he had suffered for his loyalty to the Realm, Tony had tried to give Steve enough to keep him, make him happy. Have him close, if nothing else, something he could call happiness without hating himself for it, but all he managed to do was drive Steve further and further away. Steve did not want those things from him. He wanted something far more difficult to give, and probably far more precious for it, only it had taken Steve leaving him for Tony to see it.

Steve asked Tony to consider him a friend, to see him as an equal, and Tony had responded to this one request by treating Steve as a subject whom he could order about. *This is your room now. These are your things. This is what you will do, and who you will do it with. I will give you everything, I will be your world, and you will never leave mine, and I will never be alone. And if you fail at that, I will name your happiness for you, and call it self-sacrifice.*

That wasn’t friendship, and certainly not love, not the kind between equals, anyway. That was control, or a poor attempt at it. He had not trusted Steve to love him, so he had not trusted him with anything else either. He said he wanted Steve to be happy, but then tried with all his might to dictate the terms of that happiness. Had he even asked Steve what he wanted? Steve thought Tony only desired him in his bed, but why would he think differently when had Tony never treated Steve as if he wanted him by his side?

From the moment Steve arrived, Tony had been making decisions for him, not believing in Steve enough to leave him to his own course because that might steer him away from Tony. Having lived through what losing him felt like, he had been terrified of going through that again. When he couldn’t trust Steve to stay of his own volition, he tried to cleave harder to him, unable to see that he was pushing him away the whole time. And how had that ended for him? With exactly the thing he so feared coming to pass.

Out there, in the woods, he had been different, Steve was right. He had listened and trusted and believed in Steve, but as soon as Steve knew the truth of who he was, he had let his fear damn him before Steve could, the same mistakes he made with the Realm revisited in his every interaction with Steve. Control was an illusion. Was that not what his entire reign should have taught him? The illusion that he had power while something dark festered underneath, something his own
hubris allowed to foment? Something unearned would not hold, not with the Realm and certainly not with someone like Steve.

Tony braced his hands against the stone walls of the Tower’s roof, watching the sun ripple streaks of light across the waters. Actually, when you got right down to it, at least part of this whole mess was Barnes’ fucking fault anyway, Tony thought with a grimace, though he knew the thought for a lie as soon as it passed through his head. It had been Barnes’ suggestion, that night as they traded dreams for the future masquerading as plans, that Steve be granted a Lordship for his service to the Realm, something Tony’s desperate mind latched onto because it was something so easy for him to understand when the other things Steve demanded of him were beyond his reach. Titles and the wealth that accompanied them were their own kind of currency in the city and, particularly at Court. Those who would ignore a common soldier on the bailey would never refuse to dine with a Lord. Some asshole like Ketterson would never dare speak of Steve’s words with disdain again.

He could bestow those upon Steve with ease, and Steve would stop feeling as if Tony did not see him as an equal, or so it had seemed to line up so clearly in his mind. Of course, someone like Steve should have those things. He would actually know how to use them in service of those in his charge, the way such things were intended, and, if it would help Steve stop spitting Tony’s title at him as if the words themselves had barbs, it was an easy enough price to pay.

If this happened to have the added benefit of making someone like, say, a mere knight new to his spurs not such a good match for a newly minted Lord, well, such were the vagaries and fortunes of Court life and Culver and his ilk could just fucking deal with it. Or, that’s how the jumbled mess of it all got started in his head.

He sighed heavily and watched as a few sea birds flew low, searching for what the waters might have disturbed as they churned through the valley, their familiar hungry screeches filling the air. In the first blush of morning, the birds were little more than dark shapes against the lightening world. At the base of the far hills, Tony could make out a cavalcade of tents made bulbous by the wind that swept through the valley, like great, white beasts come to pasture.

Once, this whole area had been at the River’s mercy, until some Stark had decided food should be a lot closer, and built a dam to divert the flow, holding the might of the waters captive for these hundreds of years. Now, thanks to the carefully measured and positioned charges Tony had placed on the dam, part of the River flowed freely through the valley, filling the basin like a trough, separating the city on one side from the hills that rose up on the other. Though only a portion of the River actually followed this new course, it was enough to leave the waters just above knee-high to a man at their deepest, near the center, and make the valley sodden with mud. Enough to slow Pierce’s army down, or so Tony fervently hoped.

Pierce’s army, many times as strong as his own contingent within the city, arrived to find a lake where the valley they planned to traverse used to be, and what Tony hoped looked like the detritus of a quick departure of his own troops, who had all been pulled back within the city’s curtain wall. He had watched Pierce’s army set up a makeshift camp most of the prior evening, their campfires flickering in the distance, torches moving back and forth along their lines like fireflies. He hoped they enjoyed his largesse, partaking liberally of the mead and foodstuffs his troops left in their wake. Let them face the glare of day tired and sated, finding no joy in the task morning would bring.

He knew from Rhodey’s report that Steve had taken the battalion down the rocks sometime shortly after nightfall the night before last to wait for whatever force was coming up the beach route. He was certain that it was no coincidence that Pierce’s army showed up the next morning. Were it not for Steve, Pierce and those siege towers of his sitting across the valley in pieces waiting for
assembly would be pounding away at his walls right now, and gods only knew what kind of chaos unleashed in the city. At least now they had a chance. He owed so much to Steve, the whole Realm did, though they likely remained blissfully unaware of the role of one man in their fate.

Tony did not want to think about the difficulties of making that descent down the rocks in the dark, without benefit of torches, in order to better conceal their presence. They had not worn armor, either, the metal too heavy and unwieldy for the climb, as well as being too loud and noticeable for stealth. He had spent most of last night atop the Tower, watching Pierce’s forces and listening for any sounds that might echo from the beach. Whatever had happened down there, the waves pounding against the beach coupled with the usual cacophony of the city ensured no trace of it reached Tony’s ears.

No one had yet returned, though Rhodey assured him that was not cause for concern, not yet anyway, yet the lack of any kind of message weighed heavily on his mind. He understood how careful they had to be, sending messages with Pierce’s army sitting on top of them, but surely, something…it felt wrong. The whole thing of it felt wrong, not the least of which the way Rhodey wouldn’t quite meet his eyes when he gave Tony his assurances.

Even without the hand lens, from here atop the Tower, Tony could easily make out Pierce’s shield banner flapping defiantly above his tent where it perched atop one of the higher hills, the bulk of his army spread out below him. And what an army it was, Tony thought with the vestiges of yesterday’s dismay as he watched column after column march over the hills like long lines of ants. Most were armored, though poorly, he had noted, lacking a full knight’s armor and many without helms.

With the infantry came a host of siege engines, mangonels, ballistas, trebuchets and a massive battering ram dangling from chains under a massively armored penthouse, all meant to breach his walls, one way or the other. They’ve spent most of the day moving in, a long train of men and supply wagons, parts of towers for siegeworks and ranged weapons meant to crumble walls, many of which were his own damn designs, probably paid for with his own coin, too. The irony of the fact that he had likely spent years arming his enemy was not lost on him, though he supposed it served him little to dwell on it now.

Above Pierce’s banner, the Hydra symbol, a red skull with six tentacle arms curving beneath it, swayed lazily in the light breeze. Not being shy about it now, are we, Tony thought bitterly as dawn crept across the land in a wide stripe of brilliant gold, as if pulling back a curtain on the world. He supposed he should be thankful for small favors. At least there would be no lingering questions about Pierce’s true allegiance. If nothing else spurred the city and his army to action, that sight ought to do it. At least they knew now who they were truly fighting. No more hiding in the shadows, manipulating events with unseen hands. This was as much a declaration of purpose as one of war.

Tony was quiet for a long moment, watching the camp across the flooded valley stir to life. He thought he heard a distant horn echo over the water, tinny and distorted as it made its way to his ear. Slowly, at least to Tony’s untrained eyes, the men began gathering their armaments, dismantling camp and moving with a singular direction towards the now relatively calm waters. So it begins, he thought again.

He watched the steady advance of Pierce’s army from the Tower, appreciating the slow, plodding progress they were forced to make as they crossed the valley. Far easier for his own bowmen and mortars to find their slow-moving targets, he thought. As soon as they were in range, cannons and trebuchets began launching what ordinance they had, sending huge plumes of water and debris belching high into the air, the shouts of men reminding Tony of the seabirds as they screamed for
prey.

Soon, too soon, Tony thought, the sky outside his gates was a dark maw of flame and smoke, an endless sea of men and machine bearing destruction and death down upon them. There was no doubt Pierce’s army had been diminished during their valley crossing, particularly their larger siege weaponry, which Tony knew Rhodey had deliberately targeted first.

Tony rather enjoyed the sight of several of the larger parts of the armored siege towers Pierce was attempting to move across the River splintering into pieces under the onslaught from the trebuchets, but more made it than didn’t. Tony watched from his perch as Pierce’s soldiers began assembling the parts for the towers behind large screens covered in animal hides and armor designed to protect the men and parts of the towers from whatever could be launched from the walls.

Despite far greater losses than Pierce must have anticipated, he nonetheless pressed his forces forward until they were within the arch of the larger trebuchets’ trajectories, effectively rendering them useless. Little more than empty trenches, a few of the smaller cannons, his archers and the moat stood between Pierce’s soldiers and the curtain wall. Tony put the hand lens down, taking one last, long look down the beach, and made his way from to the steps that led from the Tower’s roof. It was time to be a king, whatever the hell that meant, gods help him.

As he walked through the inner bailey, Tony could still hear the muffled shouts echoing over the city, the continuous snick of hundreds of arrows volleying over the walls, the thrum of the catapults and trebuchets, their bellies filled with little more than rocks and shrapnel at this point, by the sound of the impacts, Tony noted.

Servants and soldiers were nearly running into each other in their hurry to be wherever it was they were needed, stopping only long enough to bow their heads as Tony passed before continuing on their tasks. He wondered what they saw when they looked at his face. He should be stalwart in the face of this, for their sake if nothing else, offer them some kind of solace. Instead, he moved with an odd listlessness, almost as if all of this was happening to someone else. His role seemed to be to watch his city burn, a witness to a fire he had helped stoke.

“Report,” Tony ordered as he walked into circular conference chamber which had become their central war room in the past few weeks. The large table looked like a child had been at play, the shield-shaped pieces meant to represent Pierce’s army all moved to sit next to the model of the Castle and city, strangely comical for a moment. All those shields offering the opposite of defense, Tony thought, as if Pierce had chosen his symbol deliberately, a bastardization of what people should be able to trust to protect them.

“They’re using barges,” Rhodey said as he strode into the room, one hand gripping the hilt of the sword that hung at his waist. Too tightly, Tony noticed. “Brought them down the River with mangonels secured to them. We’ve tried hitting them with the trebuchets, but you know how inaccurate those old ones are, especially against moving targets,” Rhodey told him, as if he needed the reminder. Part of what he had been doing in the desert that day of the exhibition had been showing off new trebuchet and ordinance designs. He suspected he was about to find out just how well they worked, though not in the manner he had envisioned.

“The valley is too shallow for the barges, thank the gods, but those mangonels have the range to reach the walls, even from the River, and a few of the barges had nothing but dry earth and timber packed on them,” Rhodey continued stoically. “Along with whatever debris they’ve gathered, they’re using that to try to fill the moat so they can get ladders up. We’ve got our archers and oil men on them, but they’ve got a line five deep of soldiers using pavise shields as screens and their
diggers under those armored sows while they fill it,” Rhodey informed him, sounding grim.

“My shields, by the way, that should be sitting in my armory. Well, your armory, but you take my meaning,” Rhodey said, scrubbing a frustrated hand over his face, leaving streaks of sweat and dirt in its path.

“The gates?” Tony asked, knowing those were their most vulnerable point.

“They’ve been trying to get their battering ram to them since midday. So far, we’ve managed to damage the penthouse with our mortars, but can’t penetrate the armor to do much damage to the ram underneath. The damn thing got stuck in the mud out there for two hours this morning and we did some damage they’ve had to repair, thank the gods for small favors, but they’ll make the gates. They’ve already had men building a causeway in the moat so they can get the ram into position. We pick them off, but more keep coming. Hail Hydra, I guess.”

“How soon?” Tony questioned.

“I don’t know. An hour, maybe?” Rhodey guessed, his expression tight and grave with obvious concern. “With the drawbridge up, we have an extra layer of protection there, and I’ve moved the bulk of our infantry behind the gates in the event they do break through.”

“You mean when they do. Damn. Damn—I—I didn’t think it would happen this quickly—I thought we’d have more time—how—how is the rest of our ordinance holding up?” Tony asked, running a hand through his hair. It was all happening too fast. All the planning and strategizing seemed fruitless in the face of the sheer number of forces and equipment Pierce brought with him, much of it gleaned from years of raiding his own armory, apparently. Damn Ross and Tiberius to hell for this, Tony thought dazedly. How many years had they spent gutting his army while giving him enough interesting projects to keep him busy? And the last few months, Stane had given them free reign to leave the city’s defenses in tatters.

“We’ve been careful, but we’re low, no doubt about it. We did make good use of it when we had the chance. The adjustments to the counterweights you made for the trebuchets worked well. Still, I don’t like the idea of being down to hurling rocks and harsh language. I don’t know how much of that stuff of yours you have left, but—Rhodey started.

“My bow, Phil!” a shout rang out. “He broke my fucking bow with that gods-damned shield of his. After I save his ass, I’m going to kill him. Do you know how long I had that?” Tony’s head snapped up as he recognized the frustrated voice.

“Pretty sure we can find you another bow,” Coulson replied evenly as he followed Clint’s rapid, agitated steps into the room.

“Clint, calm down. Do you think it’s possible that Captain Rogers thought your skills might be of more use here?” Coulson asked, gripping Clint’s shoulders and giving him a small shake. “Look at me, Clint,” Coulson said calmly. “Come on, think about it. You’re an archer. He wants your eyes up high, spotting the best targets.”

“That’s what he said,” Clint admitted through gritted teeth. “But—we’re a team, gods-damn it, Phil! You know that. That’s the deal. That’s—that’s who we are. I’m supposed to be there, not—
not this. I’m not supposed to be the one that gets this.”

“Ah, Clint,” Coulson said with a twist of his mouth, pulling the other man close. “Hey, look, if things don’t turn around, none of us might get this. So, there’s that.”

“You really know just what to say to a guy,” Clint mumbled into Coulson’s shoulder over a huff of air that was half sob, half laugh. “Fine, I’m going to the wall by the gates. Tell Barnes for me, would you. I am not going to be the one to deliver this bit of news. And you!” Clint said, pointing part of the broken bow at Tony. “What the hell were you thinking, sending him out there with his head like that?” Clint demanded, gesticulating wildly with the broken pieces of bow.

“I—what?” Tony asked, blinking in confusion as he looked from Coulson to Clint. “Where’s Steve? Why didn’t he come back with you?” Tony demanded, looking Clint up and down. He didn’t seem much worse for the wear, save for the broken bow he was holding in both hands. “What the hell happened down there?”

“We won. Of course we won. Have you met us? That’s what we do. Then—and this was a dick move, a dick move, Rogers!” Clint shouted to the rafters, raising his arms high in the air as if looking for sympathy. “He broke my bow and told me to get back here to help at the wall, which is complete crap, because it isn’t like I can’t fight, Phil, it isn’t,” Clint grumbled loudly.

“I take it Captain Rogers has determined the flanking maneuver we discussed earlier is feasible?” Rhodey asked, voice low and tight.

“What flanking maneuver? What the hell are you all even talking about? There’s no—wait, ‘you know what I’m looking for’?” Tony quoted Steve’s words back to Rhodey. “You knew about this?” Tony flung the accusation at Rhodey, his voice rising to a near shout. He drew in a breath in an attempt at a calm that wouldn’t come. Steve wasn’t here. Steve wasn’t coming back. Gods help him, Steve was not going to come back to him. “You knew and you didn’t—how could you not tell me?”

“Because,” Rhodey began, grabbing Tony’s arm and pulling him close, leaning in so prying ears could not hear. “Because this is the right thing to do for the city, and I was afraid you wouldn’t be able to see that,” Rhodey whispered into his ear. Tony’s head shot up at that, and he found himself returning Rhodey’s stare, finding no judgment there, just a deep empathy in Rhodey’s dark eyes. “Captain Rogers proposed that once his men had taken the strike team coming up the beach, he would reconnoiter the state of the battle,” Rhodey said, stepping back and raising his voice to a normal level. “If he believed he could outflank Pierce’s forces by tracing the route back down the beach and coming up the lower cliffs, he would do it. I take it from Barton’s report that this is exactly what happened.”

“What happened was he gets an idea into his damn fool head and—“ Clint began.

“That’s insane!” Tony burst out, flinging his hands out wide to the room. “Everyone else sees that this is insane, right? He took a battalion with him, Rhodey. A single battalion…what, five hundred or so, if that? Pierce has thousands, even after everything we hit him with! That’s…what the hell is he even thinking?”

“That he can give us some time to get at that battering ram before it hits the gates, for one thing, which is true, Your Grace. Hell, we were just talking about it! That he can push some of them back enough to get within range of our trebuchets again. That he can give us a little more time, a little more advantage, a little more something,” Rhodey went on. “And we need it, Your Grace. We need something. Our soldiers won’t be able to stop all those laddermen for long, Pierce is going to get those siege towers up, those mangonels are going to punch through the walls, and
there is nothing I can do about it. It’s just a matter of time. This is…Your Grace…this is the best we have. I’m sorry,” Rhoddy replied steadily. “Look, I wasn’t going to suggest it this soon. I didn’t want the people to know. But…we have a ship waiting for you, Your Grace. You know there’s a route through the vaults. I’ve, uh, seen your map,” Rhoddy said, clearing his throat as a sharp look passed over his face. “Maybe you should go. Before…well, before.”

“Before he dies trying to do what I’m supposed to be doing for me, you mean,” Tony responded dully, watching Clint flinch out of the corner of his eye. “Before you all do.”

“You think this is about duty? Being a soldier? Serving the Realm?” Clint bit out. “Maybe partly, sure, okay. We all got red in our ledger for this thing with Pierce, for what we did. But this? This is about more than that, and you know it. You send him out there thinking…do you know how men fight who have nothing to come back to?” Clint demanded hotly, pointing the piece of bow at him like it was a long, accusatory finger. “They fight not to die. It’s a damn sight different than fighting to live. You think he doesn’t know what your fate will be if Pierce wins? You really think he wouldn’t do anything, risk anything, if he thought he could help prevent that? He wants to save the city, sure, we all do, but it’s you he sees when he thinks about it. We fight for what we love.”

“I—I didn’t—he wanted to go, Clint. What the hell was I supposed to do?” Tony shouted back. “Tell me. You seem to know so damn much. What was I supposed to do when he wanted to go? I can’t—I’m trying—he wants to be treated as an equal. I can’t demand he stay—I—“ Tony stopped, swallowing back the words of protest as it finally hit him, like something he had long known, only forgotten. “Your path shall be my own,” Tony recited from memory, the true import of those words, what they really meant, finally settling in. It was a pledge of trust as much as anything else, something Steve had tried to tell him all those weeks ago, he realized. “I’ve been trying so damn hard to keep him with me, to make him stay. I didn’t see. I’m supposed to follow. That’s what—he wants to go. Well,” Tony continued, almost jovially, feeling lighter, like whatever it was he had been carrying with him was suddenly lifted. “Fuck it, I’m going, too. Rhoddy, get my armor.”

“Damn right,” Clint agreed with a firm nod.

“Are you coming with me then?” Tony asked Clint.

Clint walked over to the line of weapons on the wall and snatched a crossbow off its hook. “It would be my genuine pleasure.”

“Your Grace, I don’t think—” Rhoddy started, shaking his head.

“That wasn’t actually a suggestion,” Tony said calmly. “My armor. Now. Look, I know you think I’ve lost my mind, but I’m not taking a ship. I’m not leaving my people, Rhoddy. Not just Steve, but everyone here. I am the Realm, remember? Their fate will be my own, gods help us all. Get Pepper, Lady Janet and Lord Ellis and their families on the ship. There’s my succession plan. Write it down, and I’ll sign it. Tell them if we lose, I expect a rebellion to put Pierce’s to shame.”

“Your Grace, are you sure? We still have options,” Rhoddy questioned carefully. “That out there—it’s chaos and death—it is no place for a King.”

“We have no choice. I have no choice. So, we fight—and we win. There are no other options,” Tony replied firmly. “And the line between my people and chaos and death is exactly the place for a King. My armor. Now.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Rhoddy responded after a moment’s pause, his dark eyes searching Tony’s
features, apparently satisfied with what he saw there. Tony could have sworn something vaguely like approval flitted over Rhodey’s face. “As you say. You there,” Rhodey pointed to a guard. “Find His Grace’s armorer.”

“Yes, Sir,” the man said spritely.

“And tell Mister Jarvis to send my latest projects along as well,” Tony called out to the young guard.

“At once, Your Grace,” the rather shocked guard replied quickly, then bowed and hurried off.

“What men can we spare?” Tony questioned.

“You’re really going to do this?” Rhodey observed, a hand coming to rub at his jaw as he considered it. “Okay, look, the drawbridge is up and the gates are sealed, for now, and we obviously aren’t opening them, so we can’t go out that way. Rogers will bring his forces around the right flank, which is good because that’s where they’re at the weakest, since they’re working so hard to get to the gates. We can use the postern gate. It’s a bit removed from where they’re concentrating their efforts, but that should give us a chance to form a defensive line before they realize what’s going on. We filled in the tunnel with rocks and debris and fortified the door, but we can get it cleared out. It is only big enough for a single man to pass through at one time, and Pierce knows it’s there, but is not like he’ll expect to see us coming out it.”

“Us?” Tony asked quietly. “I can’t ask you to do that, Rhodey. Besides, you’re needed here.”

“Putting aside that I am sworn to protect you with my life, you’re my best friend, Tony. ’I’d be at your side whether you wore a crown or not, you know that, right?” Rhodey replied, placing a firm hand on Tony’s shoulder as Tony looked down and away before finding his friend’s steady gaze again. “Besides, you don’t really think I’m going to let you have all the glory, now do you? Fury and Danvers can handle things here, and we all know Fury’s going to survive, one way or the other,” Rhodey continued with a shrug. “I’ll advise the Council of your decision and send a message to Admiral Westbrook to let him know to ready the ship for guests.”

“I—thank you, James. For everything,” Tony acknowledged. “Now, what do you say to dying valiantly while looking fantastic?”

“Pretty much my job description, Tones,” Rhodey agreed drolly. “Let’s get you suited up,” he said with a nod as Tony’s personal armorer and assistants filed in, each carrying pieces of Tony’s personal armor. The armor was lighter than the traditional knight’s armor, meant for ceremonial use and not battle, Tony knew. Finely wrought, with intricate designs winding their way around the vambraces and across the breastplate, lacquered in red and gold.

“You could just use some regular armor, you know,” Rhodey offered.

“I want their attention on me,” Tony said, shrugging off his doublet and pulling on the soft, leather jerkin that went underneath the armor and mail.

“Well, that’s not going to be a problem,” Rhodey observed with wry amusement. “What’s the plan?”

“Buy us some time. Hope Steve knows what he’s doing. And that ram. We’ve got to take it out. Our weapons aren’t breaching the penthouse, so we’ve got to get at the underbelly, where its vulnerable. I have a little bit of the compound left. Still, even that amount will be plenty, if I can get close enough to the ram,” Tony suggested. As plans went, it wasn’t much, but it felt like
something more than it was, the rightness of the whole thing settling in. This was what he was
supposed to do. This was what he was meant for.

“Stark,” Barnes said to Tony by way of greeting, as he strode into the room, a glaive gripped
tightly in his good hand, its long blade glinting sharply in the torchlight. “Barton, did you just give
him your bow when he asked nicely?” Barnes questioned lightly, shaking his head in mock
amazement. “You’re an idiot,” Barnes added in response to Clint’s grimace.

“Shouldn’t you be off doing nothing whatsoever useful, Barnes?” Tony asked as the armorer
snapped the breastplate into place, tightening the fastenings under his arms.

“Heard this was where all the people who were doing nothing whatsoever useful were gathering.
Figured I’d join in,” Barnes quipped without breaking stride.

“That’s your King you’re talking to, Barnes,” Rhody warned.

“Not my King. Think I told you that. I’ve had my fill of kings and those who think they should
be. But, if you’re going out there,” Barnes said, looking over Tony’s partially armored body. “I’ll
follow you, King or no.” Barnes replied, leaning against the table and idly toppling one of the
miniature siege towers that sat on the table with his finger.

“Why follow me then?” Tony asked, curious more than anything. Whatever it was that had
happened between him and Barnes when they thought Steve dead, it had cooled upon Steve’s
return, but there was something still there, always vibrating under the surface between them. He
couldn’t hate a man whose love for Steve rivaled his own. And his dislike for Barnes was
almost…fond in its own way.

“You love him more than you love all this,” Barnes said, sweeping a hand over the table to indicate
the miniature city and Castle. “But I’ll follow you because you’d do it whether it saves him or
not. He’s your reason. But he’s not why.”

“Tell me why then,” Tony said quietly, making it a request. He thrust out his arm in front of him
and slid his hand into the metal gauntlet, flexing his fingers in the unfamiliar grip.

“Because you escaped the Ten Rings. Because you threw sand in the face of someone with a
sword. Because you nearly escaped us with nothing more than a blade and your wits. Because you
jumped on the mortar. Because I knew a little guy who was just as idiotically noble as you, and I’d
follow him anywhere,” Barnes replied steadily, his gaze never wavering from Tony’s. “You’d do
it because that’s who you are, not because of your title. I’ll follow you for the same reason. And
so would he.”

Tony stared at Barnes for a long beat, for a fraction of it, unable to speak. There was no doubt who
the ‘he’ was of whom Barnes spoke, and it hurt in a way, but in the right way, Tony thought, a pain
from a pleasure too great to bear. “Then, if we must go to the end of all things, let us do so as
brothers,” he said quietly, stretching a gauntlet-covered hand out in Barnes’ direction.

“As Avengers,” Clint corrected, shaking his head and placing his gloved hand on top of Tony’s.

“Avengers,” Rhody said, stepping next to Tony and adding his hand to the pile. “I can’t believe I
said that, by the way.”

“Avengers,” Barnes repeated, adding his metal hand to the top, because he was an asshole, Tony
thought with a wry grin.

“Your Grace,” Jarvis said as he strolled into the room, looking like the world’s most deadly butler
as he carted the twin hand cannons in, one gripped carefully in each hand, a leather pouch secured across his body containing Tony’s remaining stash of the new compound. “This is highly irregular.”

“Sorry, Jarvis, time is a bit of the essence,” Tony said grimly as the armorers finished attending him. He took the proffered leather pouch from Jarvis and attached it to his faulds, the flared metal at his waist, which protected his hips and thighs.

“No, Sire, I mean these hand cannons are highly irregular. New designs, then?” Jarvis clarified, placing the pieces carefully on the conference table.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. They’ll each fire ten rounds, accurately, too, which believe me took some doing,” Tony said, pointing to the wide, shorter barrel that sat atop the longer tube, just where the handle curved underneath. “I modified the touch hole and powder placement to make it easier to light with the cord, too,” Tony added.

“I’ll go gather up what men I can pull off the walls and see about getting the tunnel out the postern gate cleared,” Rhodey announced, moving quickly out of the room. “Meet me there.”

“No stopping for snacks!” Tony called out to Rhodey’s retreating back. “Barnes,” Tony said, snapping his head to the side to indicate they should go. “We’ll see you at the gate,” Tony told Clint, then nodded once to Coulson, unsure what, exactly, he could possibly say. Coulson returned his gaze stoically, but at the last moment, Tony saw his eyes flicker away for the briefest second, and when Tony looked back, Coulson only had eyes for Clint, the two of them melting into each other’s space the way children let their shadows join. Tony looked over at Barnes, who was resolutely staring down the hallway, watching servants, guards and runners hurry past.

“You left with him,” Tony said quietly as they started to walk. “When I, uh…”

“Acted like a jealous ass?” Barnes filled in with a smirk.

“One could characterize my behavior as such,” Tony admitted with a grimace.

“Well, you weren’t totally wrong,” Barnes added. “I don’t mean about Steve, don’t panic or anything on me. You’re completely blind where he’s concerned, by the way. But Culver—I tried to tell Steve to leave it alone. Those soldiers were never going to accept us, so why bother? But, it’s like trying to tell the River to reverse course when he sets his mind to something,” Barnes continued. Tony huffed out a small laugh, one of the few he’d had these last few days. “That Culver guy was a dick, though. Had it in mind that there could maybe be something in it for him, once you were done with Steve. Trade his good family name for whatever boon Steve ended up with or some shit,” Barnes explained, looking at Tony askance for a moment, and Tony could see the calculation there, as he felt anger wash over him in a tidal crash, churning and pounding through his head, though he wasn’t sure if it was more aptly directed at Culver or himself. Eh, might as well direct it at Culver, he decided.

“Guess I have a reason to live then,” Tony gritted out, catching Barnes’ sharp, catlike smile before he hid it.

They walked in silence the rest of the way out of the Castle and across the yard towards the postern gate, concealed in the curtain wall, some distance from the main city gates. As they passed the frantic servants, courtiers and guards remaining on duty inside the Castle stopped what they were doing and bowed their heads or curtseyed, a gesture of respect he had long since overlooked, but now, he couldn’t help but notice something different pass over their faces as he and Barnes strode past. A solemnity, true, for the situation was grave, no doubt, but something had shifted since he
donned his armor, and what was once a gesture suddenly seemed to have far more meaning than it ever held before. They obviously knew. No secret was well kept within these walls, and certainly not that the King was intent on joining the fray. He wondered what they thought of it, foolhardy or brave, rash or daring.

“Gods go with you, Your Grace,” one of the Ladies said as she curtsied.

“Gods go with you,” a pimply-faced guard barely old enough to hold a sword, let alone swing one, said as they walked by.

“Gods go with you, Your Grace,” echoed around him, from serving woman to Lord, until it was a chorus, rising to the rafters, ringing in his chest until it burned. What is a king, but a man given opportunities for greatness? The price of greatness was the yoke of responsibility, but the promise of greatness was an extraordinary destiny.

To be remarkable.

By the time he and Barnes reached the postern gate, he could see the clouds of dust billowing out of the tunnel where men worked to clear the debris that had been placed there to block this entrance. The noise of the attack was much louder here, the indistinct shouts and distant thuds that filled the Castle suddenly made far too comprehensible this close to the fighting. He could hear the archers calling for more arrows, the engineers shouting for the all clear before loosing the trebuchets, the pounding ricochets of the cannons, and cracking thunder of mortars hitting the wall. When he looked up, the sky was hazy with smoke, the sun’s light turned brown and dimmed as it strained to seep through.

He spied Rhodey’s armored form among a throng of soldiers, shouting and giving directions off to one side where a line of men passed rocks and sharpened poles, flat pieces of wood spiked with nails and the like from inside the small arched doorway that led to the smooth stone tunnel, hollowed out from the thick rampart of the curtain wall. A long-forgotten escape route from before the city left the crofters and farmers cottages of the valley in its wake, largely made useless by time, now a way out of the city that offered no such safe passage.

“How much longer before we can get through?” Tony asked as the soldiers stepped to the side, bowing their heads and lowering the shields they clasped to their chests. Tony and Barnes to stand beside Rhodey, Clint sprinting up a moment later, a new bow and full stock of arrows in his back quiver, the crossbow he had pulled off the war room wall clutched in one hand.

“Few more minutes and we should be able to squeeze by,” Rhodey answered. “We have nearly a full company, and I put more archers on the wall above our position,” Rhodey said, nodding to the men milling around them, seasoned knights by the looks of them, Tony thought as he looked them over. “All volunteers, Your Grace.”

“Your service does you credit,” Tony called out to the assembled men over the booms and shouts that spilled over the wall. It seemed a small thing to say, one of those things that must be said, but it felt hollow, fragile. The soldiers shifted, eyes moving from the tunnel to the wall, faces taut. They could hear the sounds, too, knew what awaited them out there, and glory was for the living.

His eyes scanned down the line of men, each trying to steel himself for what was to come. He recognized Ketterson in their midst. Asshole or not, he was here, Tony thought grimly. Perhaps you did not have to be a good person to be a hero. Maybe that’s what being brave was, helping those who needed it, despite your own weaknesses. Maybe that was the void that had to exist before something we call bravery could fill it.
“You know who I am, but you don’t know me, not really. Nor I, you,” Tony said over the din outside the wall and dull scrapes of stone being unearthed inside the tunnel. “Sir James says you volunteered for this. I don’t know why that should surprise me, but it does. All my life, I was told to think of you as ordinary men. The truth is, I was never one to lay my life on the line for others, to make the sacrifice for the greater good. I never thought there would be a time when I did not have a choice, when I could not come up with an alternative because I was smarter, better, cleverer. For me, it was always about a way out. That kind of thinking is what is ordinary, not you. I see that now. We may die today, but whatever the outcome, I have been in the company of heroes, and in the company of heroes, I shall remain.”

It was one, at first, a slow, dull pounding, then another, then more, until as one the soldiers beat the hilts of their swords against their shields, a sonorous hammering that rose to a thunder. “Gods, quit with that shit, would you? You’re becoming more and more like him,” Barnes said as he leaned over and whispered in Tony’s ear. Tony had to bite his cheek to stifle his smile, but he could see Barnes shaking his head in mock dismay out of the corner of his eye.

“You know who I am, but you don’t know me, not really. Nor I, you,” Tony said over the din
held it there, then adjusted the leather pouch that hung from his hip, before nodding to Barnes.

“Let’s go,” Barnes said quietly as the last soldier picked his way down the tunnel. He lowered his glaive, the wicked looking point of the blade extending forward into the dark of the tunnel.

“Barton, eyes in the air, okay? Steve’ll kill me if something, say, lands on him and flattens him to a bloody pulp. For example.”

“It’s almost as if you’ve given it some thought,” Tony muttered under his breath, though it was oddly friendly. Barnes tossed him a wide smile over his shoulder as they stepped over boulders and around pieces of timber. Tony could already hear the shouts and screams ringing from outside the door as Rhodey and his forces pressed forward against what were no doubt rather shocked attackers.

“Who hasn’t?” Clint asked from behind Tony as they made their way toward the light in front of them, shape after shape pouring out the door and into the fray. Tony looked over his shoulder at the archer and found him grinning in return, eyes bright with amusement.

I wish you had that. People you can count on…Tony recalled Rhodey’s words all those months ago in the tent, before everything changed. He smiled in return, knowing how he must look, but unable to help himself. He was probably going to die, yet he’d never felt more alive than this moment. He turned back towards the tunnel exit, watching man after man disappear into the bright of day.

You’re more than what you are. Gods, let it be so, he thought with a fierce sort of determination as he stepped through the door. Who of us is without guilt? Let us not be remembered for our transgressions, but what we try to do in the face of them, he pleaded to gods he hoped were listening. Iron Will. This is what it means, Tony realized. Here, and no further, that is our promise and our duty, his mind registered even as the rich smells of dirt and brine overlayed with soot and smoke greeted him. There was something else here, too, something underneath, a metallic stench that Tony recognized far too well.

In front of him, Rhodey and his men were engaging a group of Pierce’s soldiers, the loud clangs of metal on metal meeting Tony’s ears. Overhead, lines of arrows arched across the sky in wave after wave from the additional archers Rhodey had moved to this position to give them much-needed cover. He looked left immediately without really meaning to, his eyes falling on a swath of heavy fighting, though all he could make out were Pierce’s soldiers, their backs to the city as they fended off the attack from their flank. So many, Tony thought dully.

“Can you see anything?” Tony called over his shoulder to Clint.

“Can’t see shit from here,” Clint shouted above the melee. “They’re fighting. That means someone is on their feet. Let’s get this done before they figure out what we’re up to. Good news though, I think you got their attention. Nice armor, by the way,” Clint offered casually, as Tony heard startled shouts from the soldiers and looked around to see a sudden burst of Pierce’s green and black heading for their small force.

“Wow. I really am the most popular person literally anywhere I go,” Tony responded with a grin. “No, really, this is just like that time at Lady Everheart’s ball. Except with less outright animosity. Swear to the gods.”

“You’re insane,” Barnes said, grabbing Tony’s arm and pulling. “Let’s go.”

Tony looked to his right, where the battering ram, protected from their mortars under the armored penthouse was being slowly pushed by the men underneath toward the bridge that spanned the
moat, leading to the city’s gates. In between, the two massive siege towers Pierce’s army had managed to construct from the pieces that made it across the valley were being moved into position near the wall. Soon, Tony knew, the towers would be close enough to the curtain wall that Pierce’s troops could lower their gangplanks, allowing the men hidden inside the tower structures in relatively safety behind armor and leather hides, to move over the wall despite the moat beneath. Pierce had known just how big to make the damn things, too, Tony thought bitterly.

Tony darted down the line of the wall next to the moat, letting the archers overhead provide cover as Rhodey and his men fought to hold a line against Pierce’s troops. Barton and Barnes followed closely on his heels.

Despite their surprise, Pierce’s army was beginning to realize that their quarry had come to them, Tony noticed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something glint in the sun, turned almost too quickly, for a moment losing his footing before he righted himself, only to find Barnes pulling the blade of his glaive out of the neck of one of Pierce’s infantry.

More were quickly on them though, and seemingly without warning, they were surrounded, cut off from Rhodey and the soldiers. One of Pierce’s men swung his sword in a wide arc, knocking Barnes’ spear to the side long enough to press his advantage, only to have his sword deflected by a metal arm that Barnes then smashed into the man’s face, breaking his nose easily and sending him into the dirt. Two more dropped with arrows to the neck, one of the few vulnerable points in the armor, but more were coming.

Tony raised the hand cannon, and moved his thumb off the touch hole, allowing the glow of the slow match to reach the black powder inside. Ten rounds shot out of the cannon’s barrel as he swung it in a line in front of his body, the rounds piercing armor and flesh. The advancing line of soldiers looked down rather stunned at the holes that suddenly appeared in their plate metal, red rivulets slowly oozing out and down their breastplates. Cheap armor, Tony thought gratefully as he tossed the now empty hand cannon to the side and raised his sword.

He turned again towards where the huge battering ram was being wheeled up the road to the bridge, the front of it just jutting out over the moat. “Hurry!” he shouted to Barnes and Barton, but it was lost to the clamor of battle as more of Pierce’s men poured in despite the archers on the wall doing all they could to give them some time.

“Go! Go!” someone was yelling in his ear, pushing hard between his shoulder blades. Something landed a few paces behind him, where he had been standing mere seconds before, sending dirt and shards of rock and debris into the air. He fell to the ground, ducking his head, then struggled up to all fours as he surveyed the area, trying to get his bearings.

Everything was so loud, he thought, the oddity of the moment disconcerting. He stumbled forward, crawling on the ground briefly, then found his feet again. He spied Barnes holding off three men with his glaive, slashing and cutting in a wide, sweeping motion, holding his metal arm in front of him as one of the attackers brought his sword down. Clint was firing arrows almost too rapidly to be seen, his arm reaching over his shoulder to grab another arrow and load his crossbow a blur of fluid movement, until his foes closed the gap, too close to fire arrows, so Clint simply grabbed one, spun it in his hand and stabbed the man in the neck with it like a dagger.

Another wave of Pierce’s men moved to outflank where Rhodey and the other soldiers were fighting, a hurried rush meant to overwhelm quickly, before the defenders could block it. Tony raised the second hand cannon and fired at the front line of the assault, opening the touch hole and letting the slow match hit the powder even as he fanned his arm in a wide sweep, letting the
projectiles spray out in an arc. The front row of attackers went down, though more were on their heels, but it gave Rhodey enough time to reposition men to cover his flank. Tony picked the slow match out of the cannon and tossed the weapon aside, empty and useless now.

Something exploded to his right this time, next to the moat, dirt and rock spraying his face as he ran, weaving his way between the carnage. Tony held his arm up in front of his face to try to block some of the spray, though it did little good. He could feel the grit in his nose and down his throat, pungent and coarse. The battering ram was in front of him, maybe twenty more paces, but it was already half on the bridge, and would soon be out of his throwing range.

Tony reached across his body and shifted the flap of the leather pouch at his waist aside, grabbing for the last two remaining mortars prepared with his new compound. He’d filled the shells himself, attached the fuses, though he’d need time to light them against the glowing slow match of the hand cannon. He just hoped it would be enough. If he could get close to the undercarriage, maybe roll one or slide it—

“Umph!” Tony huffed out in startle as a sword swung where his head had been a moment before. He hit the ground and rolled, coming up in a crouch on one knee as he lifted his head to face his attacker. He blinked for a moment, the man’s square-jawed face somehow familiar to him, though the source of the memory did not come at once, only dawning slowly as the man stalked forward.

His attacker had been in the Great Hall when Stern had presented Steve in barter, Tony realized. He had been one of the ones holding Steve in chains, while he silently dripped blood against the pale marble of the floor. Tony raised the other hand cannon and pointed it at the man, but before he could light the charge, the man thrust his sword forward. Tony raised his own sword in time to knock it away, but the force of the blow nearly sent him to his knees.

What had Steve said, Tony’s mind raced, trying to remember his lessons…balance….feet apart…keep your sword close to you to block, not out in front of you…it all swam through his thoughts as the man moved forward. Tony shifted his stance and drew the blade closer to his chest, preparing to block.

“Oh, so the little king thinks he can play soldier, huh?” the man chided with a smirk as he tossed his shield to the ground and brought his sword in front of him in a two-handed grip.

“The little king thinks he’s about two seconds from blowing you to a—fuck—“ Tony broke off as the man burst forward in a blur, swinging the sword upwards in a wide, powerful arc. Tony stumbled back, the tip of the sword tearing a line through his breastplate as if it had been traced there. Tony brought his sword up again in front of him and tried to regain his balance, separating his feet into a wider stance.

The man rushed at him, bringing his sword over his shoulder and slashing down again, aiming for the vulnerable point between the neck and shoulder, and Tony had the absurd thought that Steve had not gotten to this part yet. Get under the arc, his mind supplied helpfully, and he lowered his body, bringing his own sword up to meet the attack, but it wasn’t enough, he wasn’t trained for this kind of thing, and before he knew it, the man was in his face, swords pressed down into the dirt between their bodies as they fought for purchase.

Without warning, the man slammed his helmeted head into Tony’s, and Tony staggered back, falling to his knees in the dirt, the swords untangling enough for the man to wrench his back enough to twist it so the tip pointed at Tony’s neck, pricking the skin just above the neckguard, sending a warm wetness trailing down his neck into the armor.

“You just never know who you’re going to run into out here,” the man said, almost cheerfully,
though there was something cruel about the way he looked down at Tony. “I wonder if there’s a Lordship in it for me if I bring Pierce your head?”

The man leaned slightly over him, pressing the end of his sword against the neckguard of Tony’s armor. “Going to beg? I’m going to tell Pierce you did. Tell him you begged prettier than some dockside whore, tell him you—“ Whatever else it was that the man would have told Pierce was lost, as the impact of something large and round lifted him off his feet and sent him flying, the sword at Tony’s throat disappearing with him.

The man struggled to all fours in the dirt, looking around for his weapon, only to have it skitter across the dirt to bump into his outstretched hand. “Pick up your sword, Rumlow,” Tony heard a voice he would recognize anywhere call out, oddly calm amidst the surrounding chaos. Steve moved between Tony and where the man, Rumlow, Tony’s mind repeated the name Steve had used, slowly got to his feet, hand flexing around the hilt of the sword that Steve had kicked to him as he did.

Frankly, Tony thought Steve was being a tad too honorable, since now Rumlow had his sword back and Steve lacked his shield, except that a moment later, Tony realized those things really didn’t matter, because Steve wasn’t just good at this, Steve was fucking amazing at this. Whatever display he’d put on sparring with Thor and later Tony, had been little more than some kind of ritualistic practice, a game for children, because this was a Steve intent on killing, brutal and efficient, and that was a wholly different thing than Tony had ever seen.

From his vantage, Tony could see the two swords flash in the sunlight, and imagined he heard the clash as they hit, though over the rest of the noises of battle, he knew it unlikely. He saw Rumlow reel back, and Steve advance forward, circling around as Rumlow brought his sword up to block an attack, holding Steve’s shield with the other hand, though it dipped, as if perhaps that arm was injured.

Rumlow kept shifting back, keeping out of range of Steve’s reach, almost making Steve chase him. That didn’t seem much of a problem, Tony thought a moment later, as Steve feinted left, then spun swiftly around, getting in a blow on Rumlow’s helmet, sending him to one knee. Steve slashed his sword down again, but Rumlow brought the shield up just in time, pushing back with all his might to counter Steve’s attack and rising to his feet with a stagger. A flurry of blows followed, too quickly for Tony to catch, and then something hit Tony’s foot and he looked down at Rumlow’s surprised expression, only to realize a moment later that the rest of Rumlow was being hauled off Steve’s shield some a few paces away.

“What, in the name of the gods, do you think you are doing out here?” Steve shouted as he stalked back over to Tony, grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled Tony, armor and all, to his feet. Steve was covered in blood, dirt and soot from head to toe, like some fell creature born from the earth, and maybe that wasn’t too far off, for the Steve that existed out here, on the battlefield, was someone else entirely.

“We have to get to the ram,” Tony yelled back, the battle too close and too loud for whispered words. “I can blow it, but I only have two mortars left. They’re too small to fit any of the cannons, but they’ll take that ram out if I can get them up there.”

“Blowing up the ram. You’re right, that’s absolutely too complicated a plan to have just explained to someone not you,” Steve told him, his mouth flattening into a tight line. For a brief moment, Tony wanted to laugh, felt a surge of happiness so right and pure that it left him dizzy with the absurdity of it, here, in the middle of a battle where they were both probably going to die, but they were together and Steve was scolding him, what anger that was there under Steve’s words was
laced with a calm acceptance that Tony could not help but relish.

It was how it was meant to be, the two of them, together. He’d told Steve that before they parted, but he had not really understood what it meant until now. *I am meant to stand beside this man in all things*, Tony thought.

Steve yanked Tony forward and pushed him further back, shoving him down behind one of Pierce’s supply wagons that had made it across the valley only to be damaged in the shelling and left a half-overturned wreck. The battle was too close, all around them now, more and more soldiers filling in the gaps in Rhodey’s line, pressing forward against the row of shields that offered them meager protection. The line was going to fail, and soon. Tony didn’t need to be a soldier to see that much.

Through a haze of smoke, Tony picked out Barnes’ by his metal arm, and for a moment, followed the thrust of Barnes’ glaive as it disappeared through the armpit of one of Pierce’s men. Even one-handed, he was good, using his metal arm alternatively as a shield or a bludgeon. Steve had not merely been bragging. Tony couldn’t see Clint or Rhodey, just a lot of Pierce’s men and too few of his own.

He picked up his sword from the ground, the slow match still glowing where he held it tightly in his metal hand. The battering ram, he saw, was sitting on the bridge over the moat now, the front of it pointing at the raised drawbridge that added one more layer of protection to his gates, as the men underneath the penthouse readied it to begin swinging.

“We won’t make it,” Steve observed, as he peered from behind the wagon’s broken wheel at the lines of Pierce’s men between them and the bridge where the ram sat.

“We have to,” Tony replied, lifting his head up, only to get himself shoved down again with a stern glance that he realized he’d missed seeing. It was this Steve he had fallen in love with out there, traipsing across half his land, not the one Tony had tried to create here, some shadow of the man he thought he could hold onto, giving him gifts while he stripped him of who he really was.

“You said that stuff you made will still work if it gets wet, right?” Steve asked, bending low to shout through the small hole in Tony’s helm that allowed him to hear. Tony nodded, looking curiously at the moat. “We can float those down to the bridge. They’ve got the ram on top of that causeway they built, and the weight of it already buckled the drain underneath the bridge. Look at the way the water’s flowing,” Steve said, pointing in the direction of the stone bridge that jutted out over the moat, leading up to the point where the drawbridge would normally reach when lowered, but which was now filled with the earth, debris and rounded timbers on top of which Pierce’s forces had placed a temporary causeway to allow the ram to reach the gates. “Find something we can put those mortars on, and they’ll float right down there. We’ll blow the whole thing.”

Tony was already shaking his head as he looked down the moat to where the ram was being positioned against his gates. “Won’t make it to the bridge before it blows. Fuses are too short. I could maybe try to find something to make longer fuses, but--”

“Get it to the ram. Clint’ll get the fuses lit,” Steve shouted over the echo of cannon fire and dull thuds and clangs of the battle that inched closer by the moment.

Tony took the mortars from the leather pouch and looked dubiously at the small fuses protruding from the shell casings. “You sure?” he asked, watching while Pierce’s men began moving the undercarriage of the ram in a swinging motion, the momentum of which would soon be directed against the heavy gates of the city. He could see several of them already attempting to lay charges
to weaken the doors, though Tony’s own archers and oil men were doing their jobs, picking them off as soon as they stepped out from the cover of the ram’s penthouse.

“As long as there aren’t any bunnies on there, he can hit it,” Steve replied, a sudden grin lighting his features, too fleeting for Tony to return, but something in his chest skipped and stuttered, as if just now being woken, despite the battle. “Nat? We need the team,” Steve called over Tony’s shoulder. Tony startled and fell forward, catching his hand in the dirt to stop himself as Natasha appeared out of nowhere next to him.

“Seriously, how do you even do that?” Tony asked, glaring at her rather ineffectually as he pushed himself back to a crouch.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she said by way of not answering. She stood, and faster than Tony’s eyes could catch, sent twin spiked metal stars flying at two approaching soldiers, then made some kind of complicated hand gesture that Tony assumed translated to something along the lines of ‘hey boys, get the fuck over here,’ because a moment later, Barnes, Barton and Thor were crouching next to him in a circle by the side of the wagon, Clint leaning against a piece of the wheel while he reloaded his crossbow.

Tony risked a glance over the wagon and then promptly wished he hadn’t. It seemed like the bulk of Pierce’s army had finally caught onto the fact that Tony was out here and what his goal might be. He looked over at Steve, who was following his eyes over the stream of armored men rushing at their rather precarious position behind a half-bombed out shell of a wagon. Whatever line Rhodey had managed to hold thus far was quickly being overwhelmed by sheer numbers, too many to count, all seemingly intent on being the one to get to Tony first.

“We need to get the King back inside—“ Steve began.

“I’m not going back,” Tony broke in quickly, holding up a hand when it looked like Steve was going to protest. “I’m not, Steve. I can’t, so don’t ask it of me.”

“You can’t—the Realm needs you—the ship—you need to be on the ship,“ Steve argued, looking quickly at the ram as it picked up speed, pounding at the large doors that guarded the city, then back at Tony. You think he doesn’t know what your fate will be if Pierce wins? He wasn’t sure exactly what it said that Steve knew about the ship that was intended to spirit Tony to safety, but it sent something warm flooding through his chest.

“We fight for what we love.

“The Realm needs me here, not fleeing on a fucking ship,” Tony shouted back. “I can’t leave. I can’t do that. If I leave you out here, I leave me behind, too, whatever part of me it is that I didn’t know I was fucking missing until I met you lot. This is who I am, Steve! This is who I’m supposed to be. An Avenger. You said so yourself, once. Don’t ask me to walk away from that, because I won’t fucking do it,” Tony insisted stridently. The sounds of the battle were closer now, too close, yells and strikes and metal scraping and pounding, the thwack of arrows being loosed by the hundreds, dull thuds as the less powerful mortars found their targets. “There’s no time to argue, and you know I won’t listen anyway. So…let’s go be heroes. That’s what we do, right?”

“Tony—“ Steve started, then caught himself, something fragmenting behind his eyes, almost as if he was in pain, but Tony could see the decision settle across his features at the same time, a mask of determination falling into place over whatever emotion moved behind it. “Yeah, that’s what we do.”

“Then call it, Captain,” Tony ordered with a firm nod, holding the mortars up in the direction of
where the ram swung almost lazily against the city gates, its pointed head aiming for just below where the large bar locked into place on the other side.

Steve looked at him again, hard and sharp, searching for something, apparently finding it. “Alright, listen up,” Steve said to the group. “Until we can get these mortars to that ram, we’re going to use containment. Barton, I want you on that partially built tower. They’re not using it, we might as well. Eyes on everything. Call out patterns to the cannons and archers on the wall and keep as many of them off us as you can. Bucky, you and Nat give Rhodes forces the help they need to give us a perimeter long enough for Tony to get the charges set and into the moat. When the mortars reach the causeway, Clint, you light them up. Thor, you’ve got to try to bottleneck Pierce’s forces and buy Tony and I some time. Get some of Rhodes’ men to form a turtle with their shields. You’ve got the hammer, use it on that siege tower of theirs. Its missing some pieces that didn’t make it through the shelling, and Clint watched them throw it together this morning with little more than a few nails and prayers. We need a barrier. Bring the thing down.”

“Just like Obuda,” Natasha said with a sharp nod, her eyes narrowing as she surveyed the approaching army.

“You and I remember Obuda very differently,” Clint intoned evenly, looking skeptically over his shoulder at the approaching army.

“Aye, Captain!” Thor shouted, hefting his warhammer and shaking it at the sky. “To glorious battle, my friends!” That seemed to be all the signal anyone needed, Barton scampering off to climb the half-built siege tower, Thor heading for the one that was leaning at a rather precarious angle as they attempted to lower the gangplank from its top that would allow them to cross to the walls, and Bucky and Natasha rushing over to help Rhodey regroup their paltry forces long enough to give Tony and Steve a chance.

“Let’s go,” Steve said, casting a quick glance over the frame of the wagon. “Now!” He grabbed Tony’s forearm and pulled him to his feet, raising the shield as he did, pushing Tony forward in front of him. Tony did not need to be told twice. He ran towards the moat, nearly sliding into it as he skidded to a halt. He glanced around at the various pieces of debris that littered the edge and floated rapidly past as the water chugged along, searching for the escape route offered by the damaged drain under the bridge. After what seemed like far too long, he found what he was looking for, a wooden piece that had sides, almost like a hollowed out drawer, and grabbed it as it floated by.

Behind him, he heard the tap-tap of several approaching armored footsteps, but stopped only long enough to look over his shoulder as Steve spun around, shield held aloft and sword at the ready. Grunts and the sharp scrape of metal on metal followed, but he didn’t look up from his task as he sat the precious mortars inside the makeshift raft, carefully laying their fuses out and saying a quick prayer the whole thing didn’t get upended or the fuses too wet to catch.

He placed it back in the flowing moat with a little push and silent prayer, then picked up his sword and turned to give Steve what aid he could, only to find himself flying through the air, ears ringing and eyes suddenly blind. He hit the ground hard on his back, the air leaving him with such force that he couldn’t get it back quickly enough and started gasping and choking for want of it.

Disoriented, he rolled to his side, bringing his hands up to cover his ears, the metal fingers of the gauntlets scraping against his cheeks as he did. He’d lost his helmet in the blast, he realized dully, his mouth filled with blood and grit. He spit a great glob of it out, hacking around the rawness in his throat. He looked to his right for the familiar flash of red and white on metal, but his vision remained a haze. How close had that been, he wondered? He pressed metal fingers over his eyes,
and they came away coated bright red. Red on gold, he thought with an odd sort of detachment. My colors.

“Steve,” he spit out around sand and the tang of powder coating his teeth and lips. It didn’t actually sound like more than the rough edge of a word, his tongue too big for his mouth all of a sudden. He pushed himself to all fours, and tried to force himself to a kneel, but as soon as he raised his head, a wave of dizziness assailed him, and he lurched back to the ground, or meant to, anyway. His left arm slipped and skidded across the dirt, then down into cool water, and he realized just how close he was to the side of the moat.

A creaking, splintering sound split the air with a loud snap, marking the collapse of the siege tower Thor had been working on, which tumbled to heap, carrying the men inside down with it and giving Rhodney and his troops a much-needed bit of cover, while blocking Pierce’s forces from outflanking them. At least one thing was going right, he thought dully.

“Steve,” Tony repeated, actually able to form the name this time, though it sounded like he was saying it from the end of a tunnel, far too low to be heard over what must be a field filled with noise, though that, too, sounded distant. He finally looked to his left, noticing for the first time that there was a huge crater of rubble and dirt a few paces from where he had been preparing the mortar a moment earlier. Far too close, he thought, shaking his head and forcing himself up to his knees, still scanning for Steve’s tall form, but it was a sea of soldiers and smoke that shifted and moved too quickly for him to focus with his head ringing from the blast and blood still dripping into his eyes.

Further down, he looked to see the battering ram punch a hole through the drawbridge that covered the gates, its cone-shaped nose plowing through to pierce a small hole in the gates themselves. Next to the bottom of the gates, a small charge blew, leaving a gaping wound where the side of the gate that held the locking mechanism used to be. Damn, Tony thought. Pierce knew their defenses, and their weaknesses, all too well. Probably because Pierce himself had helped engineer those weaknesses, all with Tony’s blessing, he thought with no small amount of bitter irony.

He swiped at his forehead again, where blood was still seeping a thin, red veil over his eyes, feeling pain flare there, bright and sharp. The world swam in front of him for a moment, his vision blurring. When his eyes finally cleared, it was only to show him how he would die, a group of six of Pierce’s soldiers having broken through the line and decided they were of one mind about what their goal should be. He reached out in front of him and wrapped his hand around the hilt of his sword, putting the tip in the dirt long enough to push himself up. At least he could meet death standing up this time, he thought as he raised the sword and braced his legs apart.

That was when the world ended.

Or, more accurately, Tony thought a moment later as he hit the water of the moat, that was when the mortars he had placed so carefully in the moat’s current blew the battering ram and the makeshift causeway to splinter-sized pieces. It was fucking annoying that his last thought was apparently going to be that Clint, of all people, had done a good job, he thought as the foul water flooded his armor, pulling him inexorably down almost like a bottle being filled.

Tony took a gulp of air before the water closed over him entirely, his arms scabbering out to grab onto anything that he could hang onto, at least keep his head above water, but his armored hands were already suffused with water and everything was sliding by too quickly. He blinked as the sun turned hazy and brown all of a sudden, and realized he was underwater as something floated overhead, momentarily blocking the light, and in an instant, his head was pressed to the bottom of a dirty bucket, and he couldn’t breathe, and it was dark, so very dark.
He felt panic threatening to overwhelm him as the memories swept over him, but pushed it aside, reaching out to grab for anything that would slow his descent, but finding nothing but the rough stone that lined the moat and whatever detritus was drifting past. Then just as suddenly, everything was bright again, and he was coughing and sputtering out spittle of water drops as he was hauled by the pauldron covering his shoulder over to the side of the moat.

“Quit trying to drown yourself!” Bruce shouted at him as he heaved Tony to the side of the moat.

“Bruce?” Tony asked, blinking up at him in surprise, but grabbing on tighter by instinct, if nothing else, as Bruce pulled him to the edge.

Behind where Bruce crouched next to the moat, thousands of dark shapes seemed to have converged into one teeming mass of soldiers, steel gleaming as it caught the light, the occasional roar of the cannon punctuating the screams of the dying. Tony thought of seabirds, and wondered if he would soon be providing a meal for them, as Stane’s body had done.

“So, this all seems horrible,” Bruce observed mildly, glancing over his shoulder where whatever line Rhodey, Nat and Bucky had managed to hold this long was clearly failing. As far as the eye could see, the field seemed to fill with Pierce’s soldiers, thousands of them, all streaming towards their position. Bruce’s face was caked with dark flecks of blood and dirt, and a large flanged mace lay in Tony’s eyeline where Bruce had dropped it by the moat in his dive to reach Tony, stains of red and bits of flesh and hair clinging to the sharp ridges on the end.

“What are—“ Tony coughed, spewing out a spray of water from his nose and mouth, “--you even doing out here?” Tony asked as he reached out to grip the side of the moat.

“Smashing things. I find it soothing. Well, that and tea,” Bruce replied with a shrug, nodding rather distantly at the mace. “I told you I might surprise you,” he said, a small, wry grin twisting his features briefly before his usual mask of concern tightened his features. “Not sure how we’re going to get you out. Maybe I could—“

A shadow fell over them, and Steve slid down the embankment to wrap a strong arm under Tony’s arm, circling his back. “Grab him,” Steve shouted at Bruce over the approaching noise, gripping the other pauldron and pulling up in one impossible heave, his legs braced against the side of the moat for leverage. Tony fell partially forward, halfway out of the moat and on top of Steve as Bruce helped pull him the rest of the way out.

He rolled over off of Steve into the dirt, staring up at the sun as the rank moat water leaked out of his armor. A rather ignoble way to meet his fate, Tony thought idly. Or perhaps not, he corrected, looking between Bruce and Steve. Perhaps, if it must be so, there was no more noble a way.

Steve picked his sword and shield up from where he had dropped them reaching for Tony andstood, moving between where Bruce crouched and Tony lay prone, staring at what surely must be a rout at this point. He held his shield raised as meager cover against whatever projectiles might be aimed their direction, his sword gripped tightly in his other hand, sunlight catching his hair, making it golden, his skin a mass of blood and dirt and dark with water from pulling Tony out, standing between them and whatever was coming.

Tony had never loved him more than in that one instant, the way it burst over him with such sudden awareness of every inch of him, inside and out, like Tony could see all of him at once and it was the most beautiful thing he would ever know and all that mattered in the world was right here, right now, in this singular moment.

Tony’s ears were pounding, a rising thunderous roar of too many feet, steadily growing louder and
louder until it filled his head and chased everything else away. He could feel his whole body thrumming with a slight vibration, his head filled with a warm, dull throb. Once the water was out of his suit, he rolled to his side and pushed himself to his knees. He tried to rise, but ended up coughing around water that wasn’t there, trying to get air that he knew was plentiful, but wouldn’t come.

“Steve,” Tony said again, little more than a ragged breath of a sound. It felt like it might be the only word he was capable of uttering at this point. And maybe it was the only one that mattered anyway.

Steve was at his side before he could say anything else anyway, kneeling next to him and pulling him upright, while Bruce checked his head, as if that really mattered at this point. Tony pulled the gauntlet off one hand and reached out, placing his own over where Steve’s curled around his sword, needing to just touch him, feel the warmth of his skin, at least have that much.

“Tony—“ Steve started, looking at him with an expression of wonder on his face, and it crossed Tony’s mind with something like amazement that such a look might actually be for him. “Tony, you did it,” Steve said, lowering his shield. “You did it,” he repeated with something akin to awe, which made no sense, but then, he was smiling, oddly out of place, all things considered, but it was real and true, and Tony hadn’t see it for so long, so very long, and if that was what he got before the gods meted out judgment, then so be it.

“Huh?” Tony said, looking at him in confusion, then followed Steve’s gaze out to the battlefield.

“The cavalry’s here,” Steve said, beaming widely. “General May and your cavalry, they made it. Look,” he pointed towards the valley.

“What?” Tony asked again, blinking as he tried to stand, using Steve’s shoulder as leverage to get upright. He would not meet this moment, whatever it was, on his knees. So, he stood, dripping and covered in mud and bits of earth clinging to his armor, watching as the remnants of Pierce’s army were either slaughtered or fled, the tide turning so quickly he almost could not truly believe he wasn’t caught in some kind of fever dream. Steve reached out a steadying hand as Tony swayed against the dizziness that washed over him as he stood, and Tony gripped in his it like a lifeline.

A dazed combination of relief, joy and satisfaction spread inside him as he took in the sight across the valley. The pounding in his ears was not an army of Hydra soldiers bearing down on them, but a tight line of five thousand of his mounted knights on armored steeds making their way down the far hills, picking up speed as they went.

He could just make out May in the middle, black armor to match the black destrier whose powerful legs cut through the knee deep water of the valley like it was air. A clamoring of shouts erupted among Pierce’s soldiers as they realized what was happening. As one, the lines of heavy cavalry at the front lowered their lances, the rear ranks behind them stocked with crossbowmen and archers on lighter mounts raising their ranged weapons to provide cover and a secondary assault.

As they picked up speed to a full gallop, the entire field of Pierce’s army descended into chaos, scattering and breaking formation as the horses and their riders bore down on them, sweeping through the ranks of Pierce’s soldiers like they were paper targets. Whether mercenaries or Hydra, there was no way they could withstand a cavalry charge of that magnitude, even Tony knew that much.

“To the King! To the King!” Tony heard Rhodey call out, and saw what remained of the troops who had come with either Steve or Rhodey rushing over to join the soldiers sprinting from the bridge, forming a line of shields ten men deep in front of where he, Steve and Bruce knelt by the
A huge, quaking bang sounded off to his side, and Tony turned to see the massive drawbridge drop over the rubble of what had been Pierce’s makeshift causeway. His own soldiers rushed from the city gates to join the melee, carefully picking their way around the giant hole in the center of the drawbridge the ram had created, while the archers that lined the walls sprinted to move closer to the gates, giving even more cover to where Tony and the rest of them gathered.

Pierce’s troops were surrendering en mass or attempting to flee to the woods, May’s horsemen in pursuit. Tony’s own troops were pouring over the walls using the siege towers to get down while the Hydra troops caught inside hurried to leap out of the way. Tony wasn’t sure how long he remained standing there, staring dazedly as the world shifted beneath him yet again. It seemed to happen quickly, but he could tell by the way the light had grown diffuse and dim that some time had passed. He knew it must have lasted longer than it seemed, though there was almost too much to take in, making time feel as if it were skipping ahead too quickly.

“I should get back to the infirmary,” Bruce said, rising to his feet. Tony looked back behind him, realizing Bruce and Steve had not moved either as they watched the rout unfold. Only later would it occur to him that they had stayed for him, though each for their own reasons. “I think we’re about to have an influx of patients, though not as many as I’d feared, thank the gods.”

Tony just nodded slowly as Bruce shuffled off towards the now open city gates. They’d done it. They had actually done it. As impossible as it had seemed this morning, watching Pierce’s massive army make its way to the curtain wall, they had done it. The city was battered, and there were losses, more than he wanted to contemplate right now, but the Realm was safe. They were safe. Steve was safe.

Steve. Tony looked down where Steve knelt at his side. Steve had lowered the shield, but not let go of it as he knelt by the moat, watching the battle they expected to die in come to an end.

“Schmidt’s dead,” Steve said, without looking at him.

“Are you sure?” Tony asked, surprised.

“He was the one that threw the shell at you when you were setting the mortars,” Steve said by way of answer, keeping his gaze on the battlefield, though the way he said it was enough for Tony to understand Steve’s certainty.

“Oh,” Tony replied, unsure of what else to say to that. He thought if he watched Steve closely enough, he would actually be able to see one skin slough off to be replaced by another, whatever it was that animated Steve on the field of battle leeching off of him as the battle receded. Maybe all soldiers left something of themselves behind, Tony thought with idle wonder. Maybe they had to.

Steve cast a quick, furtive look his way, then squared his shoulders a bit, seeming to take up more space than he had just a moment earlier. He shifted, bringing his shield to his side, his hand sliding from Tony’s grasp, taking everything with it, as he moved to grip his sword, placing it its tip in the dirt in front of him, leaning his head against the steel for a moment with the kind of relief that could only come after a reprieve you never expected to receive.

“Your Grace,” Steve began. “I wanted to—"

“Don’t. Don’t do that—don’t—I don’t want to be that. Not to you. I’m—I’m this. This is who I am, this person out here, standing with you, with the team, standing for something bigger than all of us, something that matters,” Tony stopped himself, running his free hand through his hair and...
dragging out a ragged sigh. “Steve, please—please. Just—look, I know I messed this whole thing up—gods, did I fuck it up. But.” Tony pleaded, stumbling over his words as he recognized the rising desperation to do this right, to say the right thing, whatever it was that would make this thing between them what he knew it was supposed to be.

“You wanted to know what I was doing out here?” Tony reminded him gently. “I had to protect the one thing I can’t live without. That’s you. I tried it the other way, once. When I thought you were dead. I don’t know what that was, but it wasn’t living. I couldn’t do that again.” When Steve remained silent, Tony cleared his throat and plowed ahead. He owed Steve at least this. He took a deep breath, letting it fill the empty places. “Steve—I will give you whatever you ask of me, even if you want nothing of me,” Tony vowed, voice coming out raw and gravelly to his own ears. “I promised you that much.”

Steve wasn’t looking him, his head dipped down to his chest as he stared at the ground next to Tony’s feet. “I guess there isn’t anything left to say,” Tony said dully, a sense of finality washing over him, feeling as if whatever fragile bond had tethered them together out here was slipping away, stretching and fraying apart. “It was never going to be me, was it? I guess I knew that. Maybe that’s why I tried to hold on so hard. I’m sorry for that. You deserved better. You deserve better. I can give you anything, but I can’t give you more than who I am, and I understand if that isn’t enough. If I’m not enough. Look, you don’t have to—you can go---” Tony broke off, unable to make the words that would release Steve come from his lips, though he knew Steve was owed at least that.

Steve lifted his gaze to Tony, blue eyes piercing in their directness as he stared at Tony with a calm sort of certainty, his back ramrod straight, one hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword where it pierced the dirt like a cross. This was it, Tony supposed. This was all there was, but as he looked at Steve’s grime-covered head, he realized that it was enough. Steve was safe and whole and had a chance for happiness, and Tony would call him friend no matter what, and that was more than he ever hoped to hold in this miserable life. Probably far more than he deserved, at that.

Maybe we all get what we deserve, in the end, he thought with a piercing sort of twisting pain in his chest that was almost happiness. Close enough, anyway, he thought.

Then Steve began speaking.

“By the gods, before whom my sword and shield are presented, I will be to you faithful and true, and will observe my homage to you completely and against all persons, and love all that you love, and shun all that you shun, and your path shall be my own, according to the law of the gods, and according to the world’s principles, and never, by will nor by force, by word nor by deed, do ought of what is loathful to you, on condition that you hold to me as I deserve, and fulfill our agreement as it was when I submitted to you and chose your will before mine own.” Steve repeated the words of the oath, his words reverberating through Tony like drumbeats, the force of his stare pinning Tony in place, unmovable against a force stronger than both of them, something old and deep, holding a power long since forgotten by men, even if they be kings.

He had heard these words repeated hundreds of time, accepted pledge after pledge as his due, a great wheel of words without meaning, given by rote or duty or command. Never before had he ever felt each one, heard it with each beat of his heart, burned into his skin and etched into his soul like a brand, because Steve meant them and chose to give them to Tony. He was choosing Tony, and it was the choice that mattered above all things.

“Steve,” Tony breathed out, taking a step towards where Steve knelt behind his sword. Tony reached out his free hand, not sure what he meant to do, just needing to touch. He cupped Steve’s
cheek against the palm of his hand, his mouth opening and closing around too many words, the world gone silent and shrunken to just the two of them. Steve had finally given him the words he had longed to hear, so he said the only thing he could think of that would offer the same. He would make his own choice, though he supposed it was one he made long ago, and simply had not known how to offer it.

“Build me a house. By the sea. Where you can work the land or fish, and I can build things,” Tony whispered brokenly. “I want that. So much, Steve,” he ground out through gritted teeth. “So very much.”

“I will give you anything you will have of me, for as long as you will have it,” Steve answered steadily.

“I want everything. I want forever,” Tony replied, letting his hand drift down Steve’s cheek to cup his jaw, tilting it up just so as he watched a slow, soft smile spread over Steve’s features.

“Then that is what I would pledge to you,” Steve said.

"You do not kneel to me," Tony said, hardly recognizing his own voice before realizing it was tinged with a burgeoning joy. "Steve, I will love you all of my days, in this life and the next. For you are my equal in all things, and above all else, you are my friend." Steve was looking up at him with such blinding certainty, it was almost too much to bear. He sees me, Tony thought dazedly. All of me.

Then he was tugging Steve up and pulling him in close, for a brief instant, just enjoying the feel of him, hard and strong and warm beneath his hands, and then his mouth found Steve’s, and everything else was forgotten as Steve’s lips parted with a sigh, the warm air ghosting across Tony’s lips. Tony swiped his tongue over Steve’s bottom lip, pressing just enough to gain entrance, then delving inside, licking deep as he slanted his mouth over Steve’s, searching for the right angle.

“Gods, would you stop? You two look like a couple of animals fighting over a piece of fruit,” Rhodey interrupted mildly, causing Steve to immediately tear their mouths apart and step back a bit, though he looked suitably dazed. “You do know there’s still this whole battle thing going on a few hundred paces away, right? I mean, far be it from to tell you to take it the fuck inside, because that would be disrespectful to my liege, for whom I have only the deepest devotion, but if you don’t get your royal ass behind the walls, I will personally drag you there. Your Grace,” Rhodey finished pointedly.

“I told you, I’m not just going to leave,” Tony stated in annoyance. “Look, they’re surrendering! They are literally on their knees with their hands up. What are they going to do, wave at me to death?” Tony demanded in frustration.

“Captain Rhodes is right. You need to get inside while we finish up out here,” Steve insisted. “Besides, I think your people would like to see you. You know how quickly rumors spread. They don’t know what’s happening, and they’re scared.”

“You can’t make me go,” Tony replied petulantly, though even as he said it, he knew Steve and Rhodey were right. Didn’t mean he wanted to hear it.

“You’re not wrong,” Steve said, entirely too agreeably, making Tony immediately suspicious. “Nat, would you escort His Grace inside?”

“Oh, no. No, no, no. You think just because she’s scarier than Pierce’s whole army, I’m just
going to meekly follow along—“Tony objected.

“Let’s go, Stark,” Natasha said, slapping the back of his armor as she passed by. “I still have a poison dart left, you know,” she continued, patting a small black pouch at her waist.

Tony shot a look at Steve, who just shrugged nonchalantly, as if there was nothing untoward about the whole situation. “She probably does,” Steve said evenly. “Neck’s the vulnerable spot, just so you know.”

“Fine,” Tony said with a grimace, but nonetheless started to follow slowly behind Natasha, absently rubbing at the skin above his neckguard while Natasha shot a knowing look over her shoulder. “I’ll uh—I’ll find you. Later. Okay?”

“I’d like that,” Steve answered, a soft, almost shy smile passing over his features.

“Whoot! Looks like someone is getting tub time, after all,” Clint crowed as he hopped down from the skeleton of the partially built siege tower. “Tell Phil I win,” he called to Natasha.

“Coulson’s with Fury. You really want me to deliver that message?” Natasha asked, one eyebrow peaking in question.

“Loudly,” Clint replied, face a mask of utter seriousness as he nodded slowly. “And repeatedly.”

“You’re an ass,” Barnes said as he approached. “Pierce is dead, by the way. Found his body. Looks like he was trying to make a run for it.”

“Could you tell how he died?” Rhodey asked with a curious frown.

“Poison dart to the neck.” Barnes answered with a small, sharp smile that flashed teeth as he looked over at Natasha with undisguised interest. Nat managed to be the only one not to show any reaction to that news, other than to give Tony a pointed look.

“I would not advise testing our fair Widow’s resolve, King Anthony,” Thor suggested solemnly as he walked up, massive warhammer held with seeming ease by one hand, resting across his shoulder. “Lesser men than we here assembled have been felled by such false bravado. But surely, you do not wish to remain here. In times such as these, a king’s place is among his people, is it not?”

“Fine, I’m going, I’m going,” Tony announced with an exasperated shake of his head. He cast one last, long look at Steve, then turned to follow Natasha back to the city.

From behind him, he heard Barnes whisper entirely too loudly to be anything other than deliberate, “I feel like this is the time when I need to explain about blankets getting in the way.”

Tony grinned. All in all, Barnes was really rather growing on him.

Chapter End Notes

Ten round hand cannons were an actual thing. I'm sure Tony's would have been awesome. Gold engraved and red and black painted armor did, in fact, exist, though probably not too much gold and red. Tony's just awesome like that.
I figure if Joss can have all the Chitauri just die, then I can have the cavalry show up. I mean, if Marvel is just going to give me something called The Cavalry....its too perfect not to use.

The oath Steve gives (hey, remember like 150,000 words ago when that was mentioned???) is based on a medieval oath of fealty.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

For onemadeglass....

It was hours later, well after dusk, when Tony finally disentangled himself from the mob of advisors and courtiers who demanded his attention. He then spent a good half an hour being alternately yelled at and hugged by Pepper, while Happy looked on uncomfortably, twisting his hat in his hands.

He hadn’t even had a chance to get out of his armor, still half covered with muck and flecks of gods only knew what, though everyone else still seemed to be in battle dress as well, so he figured it was fitting. He was dirty, exhausted, damp from his not so refreshing swim and hungry, he realized as his stomach growled with protest, and he wanted nothing more than to find Steve, and assure himself that whatever it was that happened out on the battlefield hadn’t faded as good sense settled back in the place of the fervor that accompanied a fight for your life.

He met with Fury, Coulson, Danvers, May and the rest of his commanders who weren’t still out in the field, listening with a half an ear as they went through the battle with the level of detail and interest only soldiers could muster for the retelling. Pierce and Schmidt were dead, Zola and Stern were prisoners, along with a substantial number of soldiers who had either been captured or surrendered. There were long, hand-wringing conversations about exactly what to do with that many enemy combatants, during which Tony spent his time replaying Steve’s words in his mind, feeling the warmth spread through him, the way the air thinned and everything seemed inexplicably lighter.

Still, he counted that the meeting went well, all in all. He had been unable to resist amusing himself with entirely too many casual references to what a bloodbath the fight had been, how good it felt to have the Realm cleansed of Pierce and his ilk, how the city was positively bubbling over with joyful relief, among others, all the while watching Coulson turn a delightful shade of red. Fury and the others probably thought he was utterly daft, but it was worth it, he decided.

By far the most interesting development to come out of the meeting was that General May had apparently received a message from what she described as a very determined falcon some time ago requesting that she return to the city, as the King’s weapons maker believed the Realm was in danger. Apparently, when Steve sent Bruce to Fury’s camp to feel out Fury’s loyalties, he had also asked him to have that Falconer friend of his send a message to General May, realizing long before the scope of the betrayal by Stane and Ross became apparent to Tony that the mounted knights under her command had been positioned furthest from the city for a reason wholly unrelated to Pierce’s supposed southern plans.

May, reading between the lines, quickly realized exactly to whom the message was referring and took it for the Royal summons that it, in effect, truly was. They hadn’t know, of course, if May had, in fact, heeded that request, but the hope was enough for Steve to want to try to gain the city additional time for her forces to arrive. Between the unexpected impediment of the flooded valley and Steve’s troops pulling so many of Pierce’s forces off their attack on the curtain wall, they had managed, just barely, to do exactly that.
All because, even then, Steve had trusted Tony. It humbling, that belief. A responsibility that bore no weight, because it was given with no expectation, just on simple faith alone. That someone like Steve would place that much in Tony’s hands, more than he had ever thought to place in his own. Yet now, it was something he could never let go, would never want to relinquish, a part of him now, like the thing in his chest, keeping him from falling apart.

Tony made his way to the Great Hall, that in and of itself being an accomplishment, as everyone from the meanest serf to Lords and Ladies of the Realm seemed insistent on stopping him and offering thanks. It was gratifying, in its own way, but he didn’t want their appreciation when it stood between him and Steve. When he stepped into the Great Hall, he was accosted by more well-wishers, though he quickly put them off with a wave of his hand, Bruce’s dark head already in his sights.

He passed a number of empty pallets, but far more were filled with soldiers in various states of distress, and even a surprising number of city residents, whom Pepper had informed him had volunteered to help man the walls when Rhodey moved more infantry to the gates. The courage of his people was anything but common, he thought. He hated that it had taken this for him to see it, but what a sight it was once revealed. He forced himself to slow down, take his time, and acknowledge those who were in pain or grieving, and suddenly the gratitude that had been visited upon him seemed hollow. It belonged here, with these people, not at his feet, but all he could do was act as a poor messenger.

As he passed one of the pallets, the man on it coughed and reached out, hacking out what sounded like a word. “W—w-w-wait,” the man asked. “Your Grace, I—“ he stopped, lost to another bout of coughing. Tony stopped and looked down, recognition coming slowly.

“Commander Ketterson? Are you alright?” Tony questioned, brow drawn together in a frown as he surveyed the man. He was almost absurdly glad the man had survived, though had no explanation for why it should matter, except that it did somehow. He flagged down a passing serving woman with a quick wave, she stopped to refill the man’s empty cup from the pitcher she carried.

“Fine, fine, Your Grace. Too hard-headed to die, or so my wife would tell you. Saw what your Captain did out there,” Ketterson rasped. “Wanted to say I was sorry. About how we were to him and his friends. He was far better to us than we ever were to him. Maybe that should have told us something. Might be that we all shouldn’t have been quite so quick to judge,” Ketterson said, risking an altogether unsubtle look at Tony.

“Really?” Tony asked drolly, his face squelching in pained question as he rubbed fingers and thumb against opposite sides of his head. Ketterson just shrugged. Tony resisted rolling his eyes only because the man had fought beside him today, but it was close. Now he was being lectured by his own men about how he had wronged Steve?

“Just thought it needed saying, Your Grace,” Ketterson said with a hard, knowing look. “He’s a good man, your Captain. I’ll be proud to serve him. And I’m not the only one. Lots of us bought into Stane and Ross’s bullshit about you, if you’ll pardon me for saying so, Your Grace. Shouldn’t have held the same failing so strongly against him and his.” Ketterson rasped out. Tony nodded absently, then looked down at the man and placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t expect I’ll be seeing much of him around the barracks anymore, so you’ll tell him that for me, then?” Ketterson requested.

“I will,” he replied. “He will—he will appreciate that, Commander,” Tony continued, knowing it was true. “I do, as well.” That seemed enough to soothe the man, who nodded solemnly at him and tried to thank him again, though prevented by another fit of coughing. A serving woman came
rushing over with more water, curtsying so quickly to Tony that she nearly dropped her pitcher in her haste.

As he walked away from the Commander’s pallet, Tony wondered just how many other things had been left on the battlefield along with this man’s animosity. Some things you leave there, and some you bring back, he supposed, but maybe it was up to each man to decide how to carry it. So much of anger was directed at the unknown, he mused, and hard to sustain against the simple truth of a man trying to live in an imperfect world. Hadn’t Steve told him that same thing about Barnes’ anger towards the King so many lives ago now? And look at the two of them now—some mixture of intense dislike and willingness to die for the other mingled into an almost friendship. Maybe that was why Steve kept trying with Tony’s men, despite the derision he must have faced.

Tony sighed and moved away, walking down the pillared Hall. He caught sight of Bruce’s dark mop of hair where he was talking to a seated figure Tony would recognize anywhere. When he finally made his way to Bruce, he was leaning over Steve’s arm, wrapping a bandage around a slash that ran from his elbow nearly to his wrist. “You know the drill. Keep it clean, use the salve I gave you, the usual,” Bruce was saying, voice low amidst the clamor of the room.

“You’re hurt?” Tony asked, too loudly in a place meant for healing, drawing curious glances, though it wasn’t as if anyone was going to rebuke him. Steve and Bruce’s heads snapped up at the interruption.

“No—well, yes, but it’s fine,” Steve said quickly, grabbing the bandage from Bruce’s hands and finishing the wrapping jog rather unceremoniously. “Just a scratch. How’s your head? You—there was a lot of blood,” Steve finished, looking down and away, and Tony thought, Schmidt’s dead, and wondered exactly how that happened, though he doubted he’d ever truly find out.

Tony had honestly forgotten, and raised his fingers to prod at the wound he’d sustained earlier. Bruce stepped around to stand next to him and swatted his hand away, peering up at the injury with a quizzical gaze. “Looks like it’s already closed up. Head wounds bleed a lot, but this isn’t actually that deep. Should be fine, just need to clean it up,” Bruce told him. “Give me a minute, and I’ll get some supplies. Have you fixed up in no time.”

He just nodded absently to Bruce, unable to drag his eyes away from running up and down Steve, drinking him in, the way his mere presence could somehow warm Tony all over. Desire, yes, but something else, something that his whole being responded to, making him feel somehow more, though more what, he couldn’t say exactly. More everything, maybe. More of himself, whole in a way he wasn’t before, the piece he hadn’t known was missing slotting into place.

He realized after entirely too long that he was just staring, and it had probably gotten awkward for Steve several minutes earlier. “Uh,” Tony cleared his throat. “So, everything pretty much being handled out there?”

Steve frowned, the familiar crease appearing in the middle of his brow. “Didn’t you just come from a meeting with Fury and Coulson?” Steve asked in confusion.

“Huh? Oh, uh, yeah. I did. I mean—I—I—they—yes?” Tony mumbled, making it sound like a question as he felt the frustration spike through him. He hated sounding the fool, but wasn’t sure what to say. So much of what stood between them seemed littered with traps of his own making. This was all so new, and it still felt too fragile to be considered real, and he was already screwing it up, and Steve was going to—

“Have you eaten anything yet?” Steve asked.
“What? Uh, no, not yet, I was…” Tony’s eyes shifted to the side as he bit the inside of his cheek.

“Meeting with Fury and Coulson about how everything had been handled?” Steve supplied helpfully, a slight smirk playing about his mouth, fond and playful in a way that Tony had not seen for so long. Tony wanted to kiss it off, and actually found himself taking a step forward as if to do just that before he caught himself. He looked to his side and caught a serving woman duck her head to hide a smile as she tucked a blanket around one of the patients. Cheeky, he thought. He’d have to tell Pepper to give her a promotion.


Steve lifted his shoulders in a slight shrug. “I don’t have any plans tonight,” he said with a small grin that was nothing if not invitation and offer at the same time, and Tony felt his breath hitch in his chest, his skin heating and body tightening with sudden energy. The whole room seemed to shrink to just the two of them, the rest of the world falling away, Steve appearing in sharp relief against a faded background, looking up at Tony full of promise and devotion and something so profound that it felt as if the whole of the earth should move from the sheer pull of it.

“I’ve turned into an enormous, green rage monster, by the way,” a voice said from somewhere next to Tony’s ear. “Ripped right out of my clothes. It’s rather embarrassing. If anyone cares, that is.”

“Huh?” Tony asked, his head canting to one side with a startled jerk, and actually looking Bruce up and down in confusion, earning an eye roll from the other man.

“Just seeing if you were still with me,” Bruce responded calmly. “I think you’ll live,” he continued, pressing a small bit of wet wool over the wound on Tony’s head. Bruce patted his shoulder, then cast a quick look at Steve, before wiping the smile that was forming away with his hand. “I’d suggest rest and nothing too strenuous, but obviously neither of you are going to listen to that,” Bruce finished wryly as he gathered his supplies and moved on to other patients.

Steve stood, pulling his sleeve down over the bandage, almost self-consciously, his eyes bouncing around the Great Hall, not seeming to really see much of anything. Tony wondered if he had been back here since that first time, and shuddered a bit at the thought. “Let’s get out of here,” Tony suggested, watching Steve’s posture relax infinitesimally as he nodded and bent to lift his shield and sword. Tony could feel hundreds of eyes follow them as they picked their way back through the Hall, Tony’s booted feet clanging against the marble floors, too loud, even over the low buzz of voices.

It didn’t take nearly as long to get to the Tower as he would have expected, given his experience earlier, but credit to his people for being perceptive enough to know when to get the fuck out of his way, though he caught more than one entirely too smug look trailing after them. He knew all too well that there were no secrets here, not really, and what had happened out on the battlefield, or some version of it, had already likely spread far and wide. Steve followed after him as they ascended the steps up to the Royal apartments. Tony paused outside his chambers, staring down the hallway at Steve’s door, suddenly at a loss as to what, exactly, to say.

“So, dinner,” Tony started. “I’ll have Jarvis bring something… I need to get my armorer up here to help get this stuff off. I think it’s pretty well done for, but… ah, so—Jarvis can tell you when the food’s here, I mean, if you still wanted to—“

“Huh? Oh, yeah, sure—thanks. That would be…helpful,” Tony replied, wishing the floor would just open up and swallow him before he said anything further. One of the guards pushed open Tony’s door, and Steve followed him inside, putting his sword and shield down against one of the chairs by the fireplace. The fire was stoked and torches already lit, so Tony knew Jarvis must have already been here. He peered over at the table, and sure enough, a tray of food and flagon of wine were waiting. He risked a glance towards the tiled room that held his large tub, and saw motes of steam rising from the heated water, and, in an instant, this became something else entirely, awareness prickling through his body, making it hard to swallow past his suddenly dry throat. Word does indeed travel fast, he thought, looking over at Steve and wondering what, if anything, he made of all this.

Because there were two goblets sitting on the table next to two plates, two soft towels carefully folded on the edge of the bath, and Tony was certain, if he dared look, he would find the bed linens turned down, two robes and two pairs of slippers by the bed. Jarvis was apparently done being subtle.

“Can I?” Steve was asking, and Tony wasn’t sure what permission he was requested, but obviously the answer was yes, so he just nodded. Steve stepped forward, and reached his hands around the back of Tony’s neck, and Tony leaned in on instinct before realizing that Steve was merely unfastening Tony’s neckguard, the circular piece spreading apart under his fingers so he could remove it. As he did, Tony felt Steve’s fingers run across the skin at the base of his neck, cupping under the neck piece so it didn’t scrape against Tony’s skin as it came off, something anyone familiar with armor would know to do, but it sure as hell felt different than when Franks, his armorer, did it.

Steve moved to the pauldrons at his shoulder next, then down his arm, gently pulling the leather-backed vambrace off his forearm with one hand, the other tracing its path to soothe the skin underneath. Tony felt a shudder wrack his body, though Steve didn’t pause in his ministrations, so he wasn’t sure if he had noticed. Steve tugged the remaining gauntlet off next, the pauldron and vambrace following with the same almost ritualistic care.

This should be perfunctory, Tony thought in something of a haze. Not this…whatever this was, like each piece of armor that came off laid Tony all the more bare, stripping away the layers that seemed to always stand between them, title and history and lies and pain sloughing away with metal, until it would be just him standing here, just Tony, in the way he could only be with Steve, and he would be enough.

He forced himself to keep still, the simple act of not moving to watch Steve at his task enough to make his chest tighten with a thousand pinpricks of pleasure-pain, his stomach clenching as Steve knelt next to him to remove the cuisses that protected Tony’s upper legs, wrapping strong fingers underneath the metal as undid the fastenings, just below where it attached to the breastplate just above the juncture of Tony’s thighs.

Steve wrapped his hands around the edges of the cuisse as he pulled it off, his knuckles just barely ghosting against the cloth of the linen pants Tony wore under his armor. He set that piece aside, then bent over slightly to remove the greave that covered Tony’s calf, rubbing against the back of Tony’s knee as he reached under the metal piece to pull it off. The metal covering Tony’s booted foot came next, then Steve shifted over slightly to perform the same process on the armor covering Tony’s other leg, leaning over, head bowed, almost penitent. Careful, practiced motions, Tony noticed, that should be little more than rote by now, but managed to somehow convey a reverence that left Tony reeling, want and trepidation warring for place.

The room was heavy with silence, the only sounds the occasional scrape of metal as Steve carefully
set the pieces on the floor to the side, though Tony was certain Steve had to be able to hear his short, rasping breaths that were quickly devolving into pants, the way his heart was pounding too loudly in his chest, how each effort to swallow past his dry throat took far too much force. He was hard already, could feel his cock pressing against the linen of his breeches, the material roughened now from drying after his dip in the moat. Gods, he was going to come from Steve taking off his armor, he thought as he stifled a groan when Steve set about removing the other thigh piece.

When he finished the leg pieces, Steve stood again, finally meeting Tony’s gaze, his eyes gone a dark, deep blue, his face tight with emotion and desire, and maybe it was the utter lack of pretense there, the way Steve wore his feelings so openly that made everything that had seemed to still stand between them, all those things Tony couldn’t figure out how to say, melt away, shed with each piece of armor Steve removed with such care.

“I dreamed of you,” Steve said softly, reaching to Tony’s waist to wind the leather pouch that had held the mortars from where it crossed across Tony’s chest, then to the faulds that jutted out from the bottom of the breastplate. It took Tony longer than it should to catch up, still so intent on watching Steve’s movements that he didn’t register the words right away, just felt the warm, cadence of his voice reverberating around Tony.

“When I was sick, I dreamed of you,” Steve explained, almost casually. “Everything hurt…it had hurt for so long, and a part of me kept wanting to…to go…just to make it stop. Make it all just stop. Maybe ever since Brookland, I don’t know. I thought I’d lost everything then. My whole life, everyone I knew, except Bucky. Everything I thought I wanted to be, it was all wiped away, and—and the world—the rest of it—it had just gone on, like fate had passed me by, but left a world that had nothing of me in it. I didn’t know how to live like that, so I took someone else’s cause for my own,” he continued, his tone strangely even, not really looking at Tony, almost as if he was just speaking to the room. Tony wondered briefly if he was speaking of Barnes or Pierce. “It wasn’t living though, not really. I think I was still sitting on that cliff, watching, waiting for my turn. I kept thinking you weren’t supposed to be there, in my dream, but you were what kept me here when everything I’d been waiting for since Brookland was right there.”

“Steve—“ Tony started, flinching at the words and what they meant. Steve moved to his shoulder, lifting Tony’s arm up to rest on his shoulder as he set to work on the fastenings at the shoulders and sides of the breastplate, pulling it apart and laying it carefully at his feet.

“I thought I was ready, but—you were there,” Steve said quietly, eyes focused on his task, taking apart the fastenings with deft hands. “Everywhere I looked, you were there. I just—I don’t know why I get this. Why me. It’s—it’s hard. To accept something good. But—I could leave the rest of it behind. I couldn’t leave you.”

“I’d just follow you,” Tony replied quietly, meaning to lighten the mood, but it came out too fervently to be anything other than a promise.

“I noticed,” Steve replied wryly, his lips twitching slightly as he stepped in front of Tony. He pulled the mail over Tony’s head, wrapping one hand around the back of Tony’s head so he could slowly tug it over Tony’s head without catching on his hair, fingers winding gently through the still damp curls as he did. Steve held the chain mail up by the shoulders and then spread it out on the back of the nearby chair, arranging it carefully so as to avoid the links tangling. Steve stood there a long moment, staring down at the braided metal links as they caught the firelight, utterly still, until he reached out a hand to trace the dark stains that marred the metal. “I noticed, Tony.”

“You think I don’t question every minute I get with you? Why me? Why do I get this when I have left everything else I touch in ruins?” Tony demanded, softly at first, then louder, his voice rising
against a tide of emotion, as if the whole of the day was finally able to break over him, maybe
break him a little. “Why choose me? No one—“ Tony broke off, scrubbing his face with his hand
and letting it run through his hair. “You deserve so much, Steve. So damn much. And I don’t
know how to give that to you, except that you--you make me enough somehow. You do that,
because it isn’t me. It’s never been me. I’ve stood on my title, my name, my power, but I’ve
never been enough, not until I stood next to you. I’m broken somehow, and I think maybe I’ll
break you, too, and gods know that’s the last fucking thing I want to do, but I keep hurting you--
look what I’ve done already--“ Tony said, face twisting into a pained grimace.

He looked down and realized he had one hand splayed over his chest, covering where the metal
disc pressed against his tunic. The gods had marked Schmidt for his hubris. Perhaps they had done
the same to Tony, he mused. Something cold and hard where his heart should be, marking him as
broken so everyone would know what he’d known his whole life. Except now, he knew who he
wanted to be, but how to get there was a blur, loud and disappointed and stinking of black
powdered and drink. He saw Steve still as he arranged the chain mail, then he turned back to
Tony, gaze steady, a slight frown furrowing his brow.

“Not when we’re together,” Steve replied, voice firm and devoid of whatever detached distance
had affected it when he talked of Brookland. Tony’s eyes snapped to Steve’s, the hand flattened
against his chest suddenly warm as Steve placed his own on top of it. “Show me someone who has
tried to make this world a better place, really tried, and isn’t a little broken. It isn’t our
transgressions that define us, unless we let them. It’s what we tried to do in the face of them.
Maybe we’re both a little broken, I don’t know. But we’re not broken when we’re together.”

“Steve—“ Tony started, then ran out of words. Steve closed the space between them until Tony
could feel the heat from Steve’s body, and wanted nothing so much as to press himself against the
length of him, hold him there like that, so close you couldn’t tell where one began and the other
ended, as it should be, as maybe it already was. Steve bent his head against Tony’s jaw, the sweep
of his hair brushing along Tony’s cheek, Tony’s own chin pressed into the curve of Steve’s neck,
just shy of an embrace. Steve’s lips were close enough to Tony’s skin for him to feel the warm
softness of them without really touching, some sort of half-realized action of touching, as if just
suggesting the idea of it of a kiss, somehow all the more intimate for it.

“I meant it, you know,” Steve said softly. “What I said out there on the battlefield. Every word of
it. You are so much more than you see, but if you need me to be able to see it, then so be it. I don’t
know what it is that I have to offer you, but everything that I am is yours, Tony. I love you more
than I know how to say,” he whispered against Tony’s ear, sliding his arms around Tony’s waist.
“My King,” he breathed, lips forming the words against Tony’s skin like a brand.

He had once wanted to hear those words as a sign of a deference that he had believed was his due.
This was anything but deferential, he thought, and all the more valuable for it. Meant as a promise
or endearment, perhaps, it sounded more like a declaration of possession as much as anything, and
that was all it took for every other thought to leave Tony’s mind.

Whatever control had given him stillness under Steve’s careful hands while he removed the armor
snapped in an instant at Steve’s words, and Tony was pushing his body forward, melding it to
Steve’s, searching, seeking more, anything, just more. Gods, it was never going to be enough, not
from Steve, he wanted everything, and Steve was offering it to him, and it was the near blinding
how bright that thought flashed in his mind, settling white-hot in his stomach, then lower, coiling
heat in his groin, making him hard.

“Steve, please,” Tony breathed out, words trailed by a low, ragged groan against Steve’s skin
where his head dipped into Steve’s neck. “Please, let me,” he begged, warm breath heating the
Tony pressed his mouth there, at the juncture of Steve’s throat and shoulder, let his tongue flick out against the warm skin, then sucked lightly, letting his teeth rest against the flesh in imitation of a bit. He felt Steve’s hands tighten reflexively where they held his waist in response, a harsh, guttural sound thrumming from Steve’s throat, reverberating through Tony’s lips as he watched the bob of Steve’s throat work as if trying to swallow. Steve’s hands clenched into Tony’s hips, drawing him in, slotting their bodies together.

“Tony,” Steve cried out, stretching out the word to something in a thready, needy sort of groan. Tony drew back, putting enough space between them to look up at Steve’s face, eyes half-lidded, dark with lust, mouth agape and skin flushed as he looked down at Tony. One of Steve’s hands left his waist and came up to cup his jaw, his thumb tracing down the line of Tony’s beard, across the bone of his jaw, the around to follow the swell of Tony’s mouth. “You’re so beautiful,” Steve whispered, eyes still intent on Tony’s face as though the thought had slipped out without his knowledge.

Tony let his eyes drift shut as a tremor wracked his body, his hands coming up to fist in the front of Steve’s shirt, dragging him closer, as he swallowed heavily, throat suddenly tight. He let his head fall to the center of Steve’s chest where he rested his forehead, his eyes squeezing shut again, and felt Steve’s arms wrap around his back, running up and down in gentle motions. “I don’t know how to do this—how can I—I never was, you know—how-how can I be enough for you?” Tony asked thickly, wonder and dread warring for purchase.

“Tony—Tony, you’re not just enough,” Steve responded quietly, and at that, Tony felt his heart stutter and seize under the metal disc in his chest, his mouth open to a denial that he couldn’t quite form. “You’ve never been just ‘enough.’ That’s—that’s too—who could think of you that way? You’re—you’re everything. To me, you’re everything.”

Tony’s mind flashed to this morning, standing on the top of the Tower, watching the dam burst and the waters free themselves, finding their way to where they were always meant to be, as if they knew it and had merely been waiting until they could find their path again. He didn’t really mean to say it, at least not now, not like this, while they were both dirty and ragged, riddled with bruises and scrapes and still trying to work their way through everything that had happened today, everything that stood between them, but he couldn’t not say it either, as if the words were just born from the ether and he was only the conduit, because they were the only words that mattered, and anything else would have been pale imitation.

“Marry me,” Tony asked as he leaned his head back to look up at Steve, surprised at how steady his voice was when everything inside him was quaking and liquefying. “I meant it, too. Everything. Forever.”

Steve’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second, then he smiled, almost tentative at first, then wider, lighting his eyes. “I thought I was supposed to ask you,” Steve replied, lips curving into a smile.

“Well,” Tony said as he ran his hands up Steve’s arms, winding around Steve’s neck and over the fine hairs there, light and teasing, letting his mouth work up the column of Steve’s throat as if chasing his hands. “You’re late, Rogers,” Tony added, using his chin to nudge Steve’s head to a tilt as Steve breathed out a huff of a laugh that quickly became more of a breathy sigh. Tony let his beard scrape over the tender skin there, just under Steve’s jawline where a path of soft flesh connected to his throat, then apologized with his lips and tongue, laving at the spot, then mouthing
against the wet patch of skin. “Say yes,” Tony urged, the words humming against Steve’s skin.

“Yes,” Steve said at once, his breath stuttering across Tony’s cheek in a sigh of warm air that sent shivers down Tony’s spine. Tony groaned, a harsh, broken sound, half sob of relief, half claim of possession, and pushed his body closer to Steve’s, wanting more, wanting everything.

Tony wound one hand through Steve’s hair, tugging just hard enough to shift Steve’s head down, slanting his mouth to just the right angle to meet Tony’s. His other hand dipped between them, nimble fingers working at the ties to Steve’s breeches, delving in to stroke Steve’s hard length, root to tip, letting his thumb graze over the slit with gentle pressure. He opened his mouth to capture Steve’s moan, felt his hips just barely rock into Tony’s hand, seeking more friction, languid and slow at first, then harder once he found it.

“There you go, there you go, Steve, I’ve got you,” Tony murmured against Steve’s mouth. “Do you know how long I’ve thought about this? Used to imagine it, walking behind you, watching you across the fire. I’d lie there and think of this,” Tony told him, swirling his thumb around the head of Steve’s cock in a lazy circle, loosening his grip enough for Steve’s length to slide through the circle of his fingers. “I’d think of what you would feel like, how you would taste, the sounds you would give me. I’d wonder how you look with my name on your lips when you came.”

“Gods—T-Tony, stop--stop talking,” Steve stammered, hips juddering against Tony’s hand, a warm spurt of liquid coating Tony’s thumb. Tony grinned wickedly and brought his mouth back to Steve’s, placing light, quick kisses against the corners, then nipping at Steve’s bottom lip, more insistently, using the angle of his lips to encourage Steve’s to open his mouth. He pushed the tip of his tongue through Steve’s parted lips, letting it delve just inside the warm, wet heat, then began pressing the tip against Steve’s tongue before pulling back, in and out.

Tony let the hand slowly pumping up and down Steve’s cock mimic the same rhythm, rubbing his thumb up and down over the slit at the head of Steve’s cock in time with the tongue sliding between Steve’s parted lips. Steve’s tongue was chasing his, the kiss growing sloppy. Tony’s rhythm faltered as Steve moaned into his mouth, a wanton, greedy sound filled with want and need that went right to Tony’s cock, which twitched and hardened almost painfully in response. He forced himself to pull his mouth away and slow his hand before this all ended a lot earlier than he had planned.

Tony craned his head back to look up at Steve as he slowed his strokes around Steve’s cock until he just held the hard length wrapped in his palm, and found his pupils were so dark, they looked nearly black in the low light, his mouth slack, bottom lip red and swollen, glistening from Tony’s kisses. Steve’s throat was working convulsively as if trying to swallow or speak and caught between the two, a look of awed devotion so pure on his face that Tony couldn’t have looked away if the gods themselves demanded it of him.

“Tony,” Steve ground out, as much a warning as a plea, and Tony couldn’t stop himself from grinning as he pressed his own lips against Steve’s again, letting his tongue slide in, sinking into the warm, wet heat of it as it swept deep, winding its way around Steve’s mouth, flicking and coaxing against Steve’s tongue. He captured Steve’s low groan, feeling the reverberation fill his own mouth. Tony opened his mouth wider and immediately felt Steve’s tongue dart in, the kiss suddenly turning hard and demanding.

Steve’s hands moved from Tony’s waist to lift up his leather tunic, tearing their mouths apart long enough to tug it over Tony’s head in one swift motion, all the careful caution of earlier gone, then did the same with his own shirt, tossing it to the floor in a heap on top of Tony’s. Tony let his fingers run up and down the hard planes of muscle over his stomach, then back up, tracing a line
over Steve’s nipple and feeling it harden, relishing the sharp intake of breath, the way Steve’s hips stuttered against the coil of his hand.

Tony’s fingers glided lightly over the taut peak, then lazily traced around the dark pink skin that circled it. He dipped his head and swirled his tongue along the same path before pursing his lips and sucking, just barely grazing his teeth over the top of the small nub, which must have been a good thing, because he suddenly found himself propelled the last few paces to the bed, Steve’s mouth on his again, all teeth and tongue and want, as the back of Tony’s knees brushed up against the mattress.

He fell back onto the bed, wrapping his arm around Steve’s neck to pull him down, relishing the feel of the full length of Steve’s body pressed against his. Steve kept his arms braced on either side of Tony’s head, one knee between Tony’s legs, the bulk of his body pushing Tony into the soft mattress beneath them.

Tony let out a low, ragged groan, arching against Steve, letting his hands splay over Steve’s back, feeling the hard, raised slashes of skin there. One day, he would take his time, kiss each one, make Steve forget the pain that came with them, wipe away memories that should be left in the bowels of the Castle where they belong. He would tell Steve that he was beautiful and perfect, every part of him, until Steve believed it, too. But not tonight. Tonight, he needed this, to feel Steve against him, safe and whole and his, only his.

Tony toed off his boots, hearing the dull thuds as they hit the floor by the bed. He reached up and wound his hands around Steve’s shoulders again, pulling Steve’s mouth back down to Tony’s own, licking lightly across Steve’s lower lip before thrusting his tongue in, then using the flat of it to swipe against Steve’s. He shifted his hips slightly, lowering them and splaying his knees just enough to find the right angle, rubbing his arousal against Steve’s thigh where it was planted between Tony’s legs.

“Gods, Tony,” Steve stuttered, breaking off the kiss to glance down between their bodies, then squeeze his eyes shut as he inhaled a large gasp of breath.

“Need you, Steve, please, need you so much,” Tony murmured, dragging his cheek down Steve’s jawline, letting his lips follow the same path, soothing the skin against the rough scrape of his beard. “Please, now, inside me, Steve,” he pleaded, rubbing his cock against Steve’s leg in one long, slow line as he ran his tongue down the column of Steve’s throat, stopping at the dip where it met his neck long enough to suck again at the thin skin there. It was going to be bruised tomorrow, Tony thought idly, finding that the idea of that left some deep-seated sense of satisfaction in its wake. Of all their wounds, perhaps these marks were the hardest earned, after all.

“T—Tony…gods…please—” Steve stammered, panting for air as he looked again between their bodies, watching Tony rut up against him. Tony just sped up his thrusts in response, grinding harder and faster against Steve’s leg. He stopped long enough for his hands to drop down to Steve’s waist, pushing his breeches the rest of the way open and over his hips, freeing Steve’s cock to jut out between them, beads of white dripping from the head. Tony reached out and caught one on his thumb, then brought it to his mouth and licked the salty taste from the pad.

Steve closed his eyes slowly, drawing in a ragged breath as he held himself braced above Tony, letting his head fall slack between them, almost in supplication. “Tony,” Steve managed to choke out as a tremor ran through his body.

When Steve opened his eyes and looked up at Tony again, something fierce and heated had replaced whatever uncertainty may have been there before. Steve turned over to sit on the edge of the bed, removing his boots and pushing his breeches the rest of the way down his legs in short
order. Tony took the moment of opportunity to slide his own pants off, kicking them to the floor before shimmying up the bed far enough to reach the small vat of oil warming over a low candle. He dipped his fingers in the warm oil, coated both hands with the slick substance, then sat up on his knees, bracing them apart facing Steve, his appreciative gaze raking up and down Steve’s body in the low light.

He reached his hand behind him and found his entrance, working the first oiled finger in to the knuckle, then pressing deeper, his eyes fluttering as he felt the familiar burn. Steve had turned around to face him, half on the bed, one leg still dangling off where he had discarded his clothes, his eyes darting from Tony’s face down to where his hand disappeared behind him. Tony wrapped his other hand around his cock and started to stroke, watching as Steve’s eyes darkened, one hand curling into the bedsheets so tightly that his knuckles went white.

“Touch me,” Tony panted, releasing himself after one long, slow stroke, and nodding down to where his cock bounced lightly against his stomach with the movement of his fingers at his entrance. Steve moved forward on his knees, reached over to spoon some of the oil onto his hand, then scooted closer to Tony so their cocks rubbed together, Steve’s on top of Tony’s, and Tony had never appreciated the idea of following the spirit of an order instead of the letter of it more than right then.

“Gods, fuck, Steve,” Tony ground out as he threw his head back and tried to draw in a shaky, shuddering breath, before looking down again, a fierce sort of satisfaction robbing him of any further thought other than a wild sort of possessive hunger. This is mine, he thought. I get this. I get to give this to him. He wasn’t sure how his life ended up here, how horror and pain could produce something like this or why he should be the recipient of whatever beneficence the gods were meting out, but he was going to take it. He was going to hold on and never let go, and gods protect the man who tried to take it from him.

Steve wrapped his oiled hand around both of their cocks, coating them liberally with the fluid, until they could glide smoothly together through Steve’s hand, letting the motion of Tony’s hips control their movement. Tony added a second finger, plunging deep and pressing them apart against the walls of his entrance until he felt the telltale give of the ring of muscle there. He finally managed to drag his eyes away from watching their cocks move together long enough to look at Steve, who was watching him with a blinding sort of intensity that made Tony’s muscles weaken and quite literally took his breath away.

He cupped his other hand around Steve’s neck and pulled him in for a hard, sloppy kiss, lips gnashing together, tongues clashing. He could hear feel the frantic, fluttering beat of Steve’s heart as it pounded against his chest, Steve’s other hand carding through Tony’s hair, then gripping, pulling back until Tony’s throat was exposed, letting Steve kiss a line down to Tony’s shoulder, where he mouthed the skin there, sore from being pulled out of the moat, Tony assumed, as he felt a dull flare of pain. Steve stilled, and for a moment, Tony thought he had perhaps noticed a mark there, but then heard Steve’s breath hitch in his chest as his hand tightened where it held their cocks together, his hips canting forward in small, quick thrusts.

When he looked to his side, Steve was peering over Tony’s shoulder, watching Tony’s fingers work their way in and out of his body, eyes wide in fascination, his tongue darting out to lick at his lips in a movement Tony was almost certain he wasn’t even aware of. He felt Steve’s cock jerk as it moved against his and buried his head into the curve of Steve’s neck to hide his smile, then placed a light kiss on the spot he had marked earlier. He turned his head to watch Steve, then pushed a third finger in, groaning at the stretch, the way his body felt fuller all the way inside his belly somehow, and heard Steve’s sharp intake of breath at the same time he felt a spurt of warmth coat his cock.
As much as he would enjoy seeing Steve come from simply watching Tony pleasure himself, tonight, he wanted more. He pulled his fingers out and pushed Steve back upright long enough to lay down against the pillows, pulling his knees up and apart with Steve kneeling between them, his eyes watching Tony’s every movement with something between trepidation and longing.

“Need you, Cap,” Tony said, surprised at the breathy, needy sound that was his voice. “Gonna feel so good, have you inside me, filling me up.”

“Tony—Tony—“ Steve breathed out in a stammer, his name being the only thing Steve seemed capable of saying at the moment. Tony grabbed at Steve’s elbow and nudged him closer, until Steve had his arms braced on either side of Tony again. Tony moved his hips lower, shifting so that he felt the press of Steve’s cock against the crease of his ass. He leaned up on his elbows, then reached down to wrap his hand around Steve’s shaft, lining it up properly. He stroked it once, then moved his hand lower to cup Steve’s balls, tight and full already, and let one finger glide behind them, stroking the patch of skin that ran up to Steve’s entrance, wringing a surprised, desperate cry of pleasure from Steve, who blinked at him almost in confusion. Tony smiled widely, enjoying Steve’s reactions as much as his own, because each one came with the promise of more.

He leaned up to place a firm, quick kiss against Steve’s mouth, his tongue sweeping in deep and wide, then withdrawing, repeating the motion again encouragingly. He felt the head of Steve’s cock press against his entrance, stretching the muscle there as he pushed slowly, almost tentatively, past the resistance. He didn’t want Steve to be nervous or, gods forbid, stop, so he bit back a groan at the burning drag of it, trying to force his body to go lax when it wanted to tense up at the invasion.

“So good, Steve,” Tony mumbled, bending his neck to kiss the top of Steve’s head as he looked down between their bodies, watching his own cock disappear inside Tony. “Feels so good,” he assured him again.

“Tony,” Steve groaned, long and low, thrusting deeper, until Tony felt Steve bury himself fully inside of him with a grunt, his body shuddering around the effort. He stayed that way, still and careful for a long moment, his gaze finding Tony’s. There was an awed sort of gratitude reflected there that made Tony’s heart break a little, something warm and rich flowing through him, leaving him languid and oddly peaceful. He wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck and pulled himself up again to find Steve’s mouth, taking his time to explore, letting Steve have a moment to adjust. He flicked his tongue against the underside of Steve’s, and Steve immediately reciprocated, thrusting his tongue into Tony’s mouth, delving deep, then licking against Tony’s lips in light, quick strokes.

“Need you to move now,” Tony said against the side of Steve’s mouth as they broke apart. Steve shifted his weight a bit, then moved his hips back, almost experimentally, then pushed forward again, finding the rhythm quickly enough. “That’s it,” Tony encouraged, lifting his hips enough to find the right angle. As soon as he did, his back arched, body going taut as Steve’s cock plunged deep, hitting just the right spot to make Tony’s body sing with pleasure.

“Fuck—yes—gods—yes—there,” Tony stuttered through the steadily harder, faster thrusts. It wasn’t long before Steve’s movements became jerky, pounding into Tony with quick, sharp motions. At some point, he grabbed one of Tony’s legs under the knee and lifted, mimicking the angle Tony had sought so that each thrust slammed against Tony’s body just right. Thank the gods for a fast learner, Tony managed to think before rational thought was driven from his mind.

“Ah-ah-ah,” Tony stammered in time with each snap of Steve’s hips. “Love you. Love you, Steve, love you, gods—fuck—you—just—ungh!”
Steve wrapped his still oiled hand around Tony’s cock where it jutted up against Steve’s stomach and began to rub up and down, his thumb sliding over the head as Tony had done to Steve’s earlier in fast, hard strokes. Tony’s vision whitened and the world went dark, spots dancing against the back of his eyelids. He felt a warm gush deep inside him even as his own balls tightened and cock jerked, body thrashing and writing beneath Steve’s as he coated Steve’s hand and stomach. A few more shallow thrusts and Steve stilled above him, collapsing to his elbows over Tony, his head dipping to press against the metal disc in Tony’s chest, breathing heavily. His skin was flushed and glistening with heat and sweat, back bowed, breaths uneven and shaky.

“Tony,” Steve repeated, low and long, just his name, but Tony could hear all the world in the way Steve said it, so full of love and joy and desire that he almost didn’t recognize it as his own name.

Tony ran his hands up and down Steve’s arms, feeling the muscles there quivering underneath his fingers. He felt the stinging drag as Steve pulled out, then the flood of emptiness that always followed. Steve rolled to Tony’s side, still heaving in long pulls of air. Tony turned to grab a towel off the bedside table, then cleaned them up as best he could, then lay back down and wrapped himself around Steve, burying his head in the crook of Steve’s arm and placing light, quick kisses to Steve’s chest, letting one hand run up and down over Steve’s sweat-slickened chest.

“Tony,” Steve said again, and this time Tony couldn’t quite bite back the smile.

“Are you going to be able to say anything other than my name?” Tony teased, grinning against Steve’s side. “Not that I’m not flattered, mind you.”

“I’m—that was—I—” Steve started. “Tony—” he repeated, then stopped himself, looked flustered for a moment, then huffed out a laugh. He grinned rather goofily down at Tony, eyes bright and wide, face flushed.

“It’s okay. I happen to like hearing you say my name,” Tony replied around a smile, adding more kisses to the side of Steve’s chest.

“Um..should I—” Steve asked awkwardly, his eyes darting to the door.

“Huh? Oh, no—ah—I mean,” Tony began, then threw a leg over Steve’s and curled his arm tighter across Steve’s chest. “Stay,” he implored, feeling Steve relax beneath him. “Stay, forever,” he repeated softly against the curve of Steve’s arm, feeling Steve press a long kiss against the top of his head that felt like agreement.

They did eventually eat, though Tony suspected that the blueberry stains on the sheets was going to be a new one for the laundresses, even coming from his room, which was saying something. They bathed, though the water was well past warm by then. Much of it ended up sloshing over the sides and onto the floor anyway, as what started as attentive care quickly became another kind of attention entirely. He drifted off to sleep sometime later with Steve curled around him, the smell of grass in his nose, a canopy of stars filling his mind.

Tony woke warm and sated the next morning, a pleasant soreness suffusing his body, his cheek pressed against the pillow in a small pool of what he was going to pretend was not drool. He reached out and ran hand along the bed, searching for skin. When he didn’t find it, he opened his eyes, blinking against the warm light. He rolled over and pushed himself up on his elbows to look at the empty bed. Or, almost empty, he clarified, picking up the scrap of parchment that lay across the other pillow.

A small sketch greeted him, his own face slack in slumber, caught in a peaceful stillness he had trouble associating with himself. He flipped the sketch over, and on the back there was a light,
obviously quickly done, drawing of what he knew was the gymnasium downstairs. He sighed, then lay back down on the bed, scooting over to catch the fading warmth from the other side of the bed. He really was going to have to teach Steve how to write, along with continuing his reading lessons. The idea rather thrilled him, to be honest. He liked watching Steve’s mind work, and giving him something that Steve seemed to value so highly was a privilege he had missed.

He forced his legs to the side of the bed and slid his feet into the slippers there, noticing that the other pair was somewhat askew, as if Steve had tried them and then been unsure what to do with the soft, furlined shoes, and felt a soft smile forming. The other robe was gone though, he saw, as were Steve’s sword and shield. It looked like Steve had at least attempted to straighten up the room after the events of last night. The wet towels were draped over the side of the tub, and the puddles had been cleaned up off the floor, and their clothes had been neatly folded on one of the chairs. No wonder Jarvis liked him, Tony thought, feeling his grin widen to something giddy as he stretched his hands high in the air, working out the kinks in his back.

A knock sounded at the door, drawing his attention. “Come,” he shouted as he wrapped the robe around himself, and the door promptly opened, producing Jarvis with a tray of food and, gods bless him, coffee.

“Morning, Jarvis,” Tony called out lightly, then almost laughed at the sound of his own voice. Gods, he sounded ridiculously happy. Jarvis must have noticed as well, because he saw his manservant’s features pinch together in some sort of superhuman effort to hide a smile.

“Good morn, Your Grace. I trust you had a restful evening,” Jarvis replied drolly, shooting Tony a look under raised eyebrows. “I believe I saw Sir in the gymnasium as I was bringing breakfast.”

“Yeah,” Tony acknowledged, looking down again at the sketch of him sleeping. He put the parchment scrap on the table by the bed and walked over to take the proffered cup of coffee from Jarvis, sipping the hot, bitter brew and letting it push him into wakefulness. Jarvis busied himself getting Tony’s clothes ready for the day, setting out Tony’s razor and the pot of thick lather he used.

“Miss Potts would like to see you when you have time, Your Grace, and the entire Council is meeting this afternoon. General Fury and Sir Rhodes have also requested that you join them this morning for a meeting in the war room, and several of the regional governors who sought refuge in the city have asked for time to discuss the immediate needs of their provinces,” Jarvis informed him. Tony winced at the litany of demands, but then sighed and downed the rest of his coffee in a few long swallows. He sighed heavily, then rose to start to dress. This was part of it, he knew, though the idea of spending the day in meetings while Steve was…not in meetings…sat like a leaden weight in his stomach.

“I took the liberty of telling them all to go to hell,” Jarvis announced calmly as he helped Tony into his surcoat.

“Excuse me?” Tony said, his head jerking around to stare at Jarvis.

“Politely, of course,” Jarvis continued unfazed. “As I said, Sir is in the gymnasium. With the other Avengers, as I am given to understand our guests are called.”

“I—I really should—I mean—“ Tony started, then cut himself off. He looked at Jarvis, his eyebrows raised archly as he watched Tony, then felt his mouth curl into a smile. “Thank you, Jarvis.”

“Oh believe, me, it was my pleasure, Your Grace,” Jarvis replied. Tony chuckled at that, then
dressed quickly, though with care, and made his way down to the gym as casually as he could manage, wanting nothing more than to see Steve again. Just being in his presence would be enough.

More than enough.

Tony heard raised voices before he reached the bottom step and rounded the corner that led to the gym. He recognized Barton’s dulcet tones easily enough.

“This!” Barton shouted. “This is totally unacceptable, Steve, I’m telling you! This is some lowball shit, is what this is!” Barton continued loudly. Tony walked into the gym and saw Barton in the open doorway that led to the practice field, a large, round target held aloft in his hand. Someone had painted a rather finely detailed bunny in the center.

“What makes you think I had anything to do with it?” Steve asked evenly.

“The bunny is holding a fucking shield, Rogers,” Clint ground out, pointing a finger at the round object in the rabbit’s paws.

Steve looked over at Barnes, who stood next to him, a spear in his good hand. “I might have had something to do with it,” Steve admitted, sounding not at all guilty. Barnes just shook his head, his shoulders shaking with restrained laughter.

“I like that even with everything going on, you were able to prioritize your time,” Barnes said, clapping Steve on the shoulder with his good hand.

“I take my leadership duties seriously,” Steve agreed.

“This isn’t funny anymore!” Clint yelled, shaking the target in Barnes’ direction.

“I know you’re upset, Clint. But, don’t worry, I have an inspirational speech that should perk you right up. I know how much you love those,” Steve assured him calmly.

“Seriously, does Stark know what an utter shit you are?” Clint demanded, dropping the target to the ground and stalking over to plop down on one of the large, hay-filled mats that covered the stone floor.

“He’s beginning to suspect,” Tony said mildly, walking into the gym. He grinned at Steve, who looked up at him in momentary surprise, then smiled, wide and honest, dipping his chin almost shyly, a faint blush staining his cheeks. Steve walked over to stand in front of him, arms fidgeting at their sides like he didn’t know what to do with them. He kept looking at Tony, then dropping his gaze to Tony’s mouth, as if his eyes couldn’t settle on where exactly they wanted to stare. Tony smiled, then drew Steve into his arms, wrapping his hands around Steve’s waist and feeling Steve do the same, his fingers dipping just low enough to rub gently at Tony’s lower back.

“Hi,” Steve said, breathy and somewhat unsure.

“Guess I don’t have to ask how last night—ow—what the hell?” Barnes broke off rubbing at his upper arm as his smirk dropped off his face.

“There was a bee on him,” Natasha said evenly.

“Gods,” Barnes mumbled, casting a glance at Steve and Tony, then rolling his eyes and walking off shaking his head. “Nat, please kick my ass and save me from true love here!”
“Happily,” Natasha replied.

“Hi,” Tony replied, ignoring Barnes and leaning up to place a light kiss on Steve’s mouth. “I missed you this morning.”

Steve’s blush immediately intensified and Tony filed that information way for later. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Wake me,” Tony insisted, nuzzling his mouth against Steve’s jaw. “Wake me, and I’ll show you a better way to burn off some morning energy,” Tony promised. He felt Steve’s throat bob as he swallowed convulsively and let out a low chuckle.

“Are we practicing then, my friends?” Thor asked as he rounded the corner into the gymnasium, warhammer swinging lightly at his knee. “King Anthony, ’tis good to see you, to see all of you, in such fine spirits this morning,” Thor went on, actually winking at him. “Except for Sir Archer, who has been thwarted yet again by these furry rodents of which he is so fond, I see.”

“Just—that’s not even—dammit, Steve!” Clint yelled, hooking his hands together and running them back and forth over his head.

“We are indeed fortunate that our Captain is so diligent as to help you overcome your weakness, Sir Archer,” Thor pronounced with all seriousness, though Tony could see his eyes twinkling with mirth. “What was it that you did to draw our Captain’s attention to this woeful deficit?”

“Hey, this is not my fault!” Clint protested.

“How was I supposed to know that donkey would bite if you touched it there?” they all chorused together, Tony finding himself joining in halfway through the remembered refrain.

“Indeed, it is a blessing that our enemy did not employ such cowardly tactics as the deployment of these foul creatures against us,” Thor continued with what Tony knew was exaggerated effect. “Why, they now seem to seek to threaten us with weapons of their own devise. I would not have thought it, but, truly, these are worthy foes,” Thor observed mildly, hefting the target and looking down at the painting.

“I hate you all,” Clint said to the room.

“Who do we hate now?” Bruce asked as he walked into the gym carrying a small cup of what Tony assumed was horse piss tea. “It’s so hard to keep up,” he said with a quick glance and small smile at Tony. “Tea, Clint?”

“Fuck off,” Clint replied, but he was twisting his mouth and dipping his head to hide his laughter, and Tony knew them all well enough by now to know that this, as much as any training or sparring, was a vital part of what made them a team. They loved each other for their weaknesses as much as for their strengths. It was strength that bound them, true, but it was the missing pieces in each of them that were filled when they were together.

Tony smiled widely, feeling Steve’s low hum of laughter against his chest. He had been so intent on giving them a home, Tony mused, he had not realized they already carried that with them. He let his eyes roam the room, lighting on each of them, before his gaze came to rest on Steve.

“We are all of us broken things, he thought.

_But not when we’re together._
“May I take from your utter lack of attention that Prince Steven is returning from the Riverlands today?” Jarvis asked drolly as he picked up the sheaf of papers from in front of where Tony sat at his desk and neatly stacked them.

“Hmmm?” Tony murmured absently, fingers tapping on desk as he tightened the lever on the repeating crossbow he was working on for Clint. Or, well, untightening it, as it turned out, he noticed, frowning down at the piece. “I’m paying attention…I even signed all of Pepper’s paperwork,” Tony pointed out, nodding at the stack of parchment Jarvis was carefully arranging.

“Yes, I see that, Your Grace,” Jarvis replied evenly. “Even this proclamation renouncing your Regency, declaring Miss Potts the Queen and requiring all homage to be paid in the form of footwear.”

Tony blinked at his manservant. “It’s possible that I did not read all of those thoroughly.”

“As you say, Sire,” Jarvis responded with a slight twitch at the corners of his mouth. “I think I speak for everyone when I say that we are all quite looking forward to Prince Steven’s return as well.”

“Now, why do I get the feeling that was directed at me?” Tony questioned with a grin.

“Oh, no, Your Grace. You are ever the soul of fortitude when he is away,” Jarvis replied, arching his brow quizzically.

“Well, now I know that was directed at me,” Tony said, leaning back in his chair and grinning widely in return. “I know the rebuilding is important to him, particularly there, and I admit that having a deepwater port in that area is a smart move for a lot of reasons, but…it’s been too long.”

Tony finished more seriously than he intended. It sounded like a complaint, he knew, and he didn’t mean it that way, not truly. But Steve had been away nearly two months now, and that, Tony had decided about a month and a half ago, was entirely too long, despite the occasional missive in Steve’s carefully neat writing Wilson’s harpy of a bird kept bringing back to him.

He well understood the importance of what Steve was doing, and why he was so adamant about being the one to help. In the years since Pierce’s rebellion, the Realm had rebuilt and, in many ways, been reborn. The city itself sustained relatively little damage in Pierce’s attack, but the countryside had not been spared that fate. The city had swelled with even more refugees seeking food and shelter as winter approached after crops and homes had been destroyed as Pierce’s forces marched north, but Tony had learned to see opportunity behind the guise of burden. He had undertaken the planning of a massive public works effort, including the laying of irrigation canals, mills, pumping stations to send fresh water where it was needed, new roads and other infrastructure. But it was Steve who went out and made it happen somehow, marshaling resources and bringing people together to actually accomplish the tasks Tony only imagined in his head.
They also spent considerable time and resources restocking and refortifying their armed forces and the city’s defenses, which had suffered from neglect and outright gutting at the hands of Pierce, Stane and the rest of them. Not surprisingly, Steve’s ability to work with the generals and commanders far outstripped Tony’s own, and that was one task Tony was more than happy to lay at Steve’s feet. This left Tony free to solve the technical problems Steve brought to his attention, while Steve oversaw the growth and training of a new force to defend the Realm. He well understood why all of this was important, though it did not diminish his distaste for Steve’s absence.

Speaking of reasons all of this was important, Tony thought a moment later as the door to his chambers burst open unceremoniously with a loud bang.

“I saw dust from riders! Lots of them, I think,” the boy said, launching himself at the window for the best view. He held the hand lens to his eye and squinted the other one closed, scanning the tree line in the distance.

“And you saw this from your comfortable and safe vantage point somewhere down on the ground, I presume,” Tony asked knowingly.

“I’m not going to fall,” Peter said mildly, pushing himself away from the window to come crawl in Tony’s lap.

“Okay, literally everyone says that right before they fall,” Tony grumbled, setting his project aside so the boy could climb onto his knees.

It was still hard for Tony to think that he had ever objected when Steve brought the boy home. Of course, Tony needed an heir, and they’d talked about a family, but, as he had calmly explained to Steve when he returned from one of his rebuilding campaigns with a mop-headed orphan boy of five in tow, they would wait until they could adopt a highborn infant, often one with Royal blood somewhere in his lineage, as was tradition. It happened, unfortunately, with some frequency, childbirth still being a far deadlier trial than most wars, and, even if the Lord still lived, it was considered an enormous privilege, of course, for the boy to be adopted by the Royal family. This boy was the son of a common soldier, raised, until recently by his elderly aunt and uncle, with absolutely no connection to title or Royal blood, and at least nobility was required by law. The boy’s uncle had been killed by brigands some years ago, and his aunt recently passed, leaving him alone. It was not as though Tony was unmoved by the boy’s plight and large, watchful eyes, but there was simply no way for this to work, he had told Steve. They just needed to be patient, he’d told Steve, and it would happen in due time.

Steve had simply looked at him and then casually wondered aloud how nice it would be if only they knew someone with the power to bestow titles posthumously or change laws. And because Tony could rarely deny Steve things he didn’t actually want, he should have known right then that he would never be able to deny him this. He had agreed to take the boy for a ward, assuming that would satisfy his husband and be the end of it.

Which just went to prove that he could still be a blind ass from time to time, he thought, placing his hands over Peter’s so he could pull back the lever on the bow without risking fingers. Because Steve managed to see Tony far better than he did himself sometimes, and it soon became clear that as much as the boy liked to hold his wooden sword aloft and practice with Steve, he was Tony’s son as much as if his own blood ran through his veins, often spending long hours with Tony in his workshop or even sketching out some of his own designs, and every time Tony peered over his jars and moulds and tools and saw a dark head bent to task, he saw something he had not known he was missing until he couldn’t imagine a world without it.
“Alright, let’s go see if it’s him,” Tony announced, lifting the boy out of his lap and taking him by the hand as he pretended to avoid noticing Jarvis’ smirk.

Peter tugged him down through the Tower towards the main part of the Castle, chattering the entire way about what he wanted to tell Steve about when he saw him, which included a somewhat involved tale of the capture and ultimate daring escape of a rather large and determined toad.

“He’s going to ask about your studies,” Tony reminded him, because Steve always asked about the boy’s schooling. How many nights had he watched Peter sitting up in bed in Steve’s old room reading some book while Steve curled around him, his eyes carefully following the words while their son read them aloud with such ease?

“There you are,” Rhodey said, coming up the stairs below them. “Your Grace, Prince Peter,” he said with a slightly awkward bow. “A runner just arrived. Prince Steven should be back by dusk, and says, and I’m quoting, just so you know, that ‘Peter is not to be on the Tower roof looking for the dust from the horses without an escort, and Tony is not to sign any paperwork or work on anything that explodes until he gets back.’ Like I said, just quoting the man,” Rhodey reiterated, holding his hands palms out in the air at Tony’s eye roll.

“Dusk? Runner must have gotten here fast if they’re that far out,” Tony observed, leaning heavily against the stone wall of the stairs as he looked out one of the slender windows showing the sun still high in the sky.

“You noticed, huh? Yeah, one of your husband’s new recruits, apparently. Got a sister coming, too. Some kind of witch or something. If she’s anything like her brother, though, I’m throwing her down the first well I come to. Damn, this kid’s annoying,” Rhodey said as he turned and walked back down the steps.

“More Avengers?” Peter asked, excitement clear in his young voice.

“Sounds like they’ll fit right in,” Tony grumbled, running a hand through his hair. “Tell Clint he has babysitting duty,” Tony called out to Rhodey’s retreating back, earning a light wave of a salute in reply.

Tony looked down at his son, whose face was already starting to scrunch with disappointment.

“Want to go sign things and play with stuff that blows up?” he asked, taking the whoop of joy that echoed up the stairs as Peter took off for the workshop as a yes. They spent the rest of the afternoon happily ensconced in their various projects, though once the light outside began to dim, both of them were too busy watching the door to accomplish much, and Peter was practically bouncing out of his seat at the worktable.

“Your Grace,” Jarvis called out as he pushed the workshop door open. “Prince Steven has—oomph!” Jarvis huffed out as Peter shot past him and out the door. “Arrived,” he finished with as much aplomb as he could muster. “Shall I bring dinner to your chambers?”

“That,” Tony began as he pulled the gloves off and tossed them on top of the table, rising from his stool as he did. “Sounds fantastic. Thanks, Jarvis.” Jarvis stepped aside to let him through the doorway, and he took the steps up to his chambers as quickly as dignity would allow.

“---and then I put it in a wooden box with some dirt and grass and I made a little dish of water for it and went to the stable and found some bugs in a spider web and brought them to it and I wanted to name it Harry, and Father said he would knight it and make everyone call it Sir Harry—oh, wait, I’m not supposed to tell you that part—but then it jumped out of the box and Miss Potts found it on top of some of her papers and it kind of made a mess, but Miss Potts said that one was to Lady
Everheart and so it was appro—appro—“ Peter broke off his story, and hopefully took a breath, as he struggled for the word.

“Appropriate?” Steve supplied helpfully, trying to bite back a smile. Tony had no such hesitation, grinning widely at their son's recitation, and Steve's discomfort.

“Appropriate,” Peter repeated.

“See, this is what happens when you leave,” Tony accused lightly as he walked into their room. They'd long ago given up on the idea of separate rooms, and when Peter came along, neither of them wanted him down in what had once been Tony's childhood room, so Steve’s easel and the few other items that still remained in his old room migrated to their shared suite. Tony found he liked looking at the partially drawn sketches or beginnings of a painting almost as much as the finished products that decorated their walls.

Useful or beloved, Tony thought, his eye catching briefly on the unfinished sketch of Tony and Peter sitting on the easel, heads bent together and fingers overlapping as Tony showed their son how to work the bevels into what would become gears for a mill. And then he looked to his left where a perfectly lovely painting of a fruit bowl graced their wall, and had to bite back the smile his one year anniversary present always brought, because his husband had a decidedly strange sense of humor sometimes.

“Hey you,” Steve said, almost shyly as he turned towards Tony. He had Peter in his arms, so bent his head just enough to capture Tony’s lips, the kiss lasting only until the exaggerated sounds of retching could be heard from their son, but there was promise there, enough to sustain Tony at least until they got Peter to bed.

“I heard about our latest guests,” Tony announced, raising his eyebrows in question. The door opened behind him and Jarvis came in with their dinner, setting it out on the table while Steve put Peter down long enough to remove his sword and shield and take off the riding jacket he had been wearing.

“I know the boy is a handful, but I think they’ll be useful,” Steve replied, sitting down at the table next to Peter while Tony took his place across from Steve. “And I think we will need the help,” Steve continued, a thread of worry softening his voice. “We had a ship into port while we were there, carrying seeds and grains, mostly, but more rumors came with them.”

“Our friend with the flamboyant armor?” Tony asked carefully. “What?” Tony sputtered at Steve’s look. “Red and gold is one thing. Even I think putting gems on your gauntlet is a bit much.” Steve just nodded, but Tony caught the look of concern flit across his features.

“We hear more of him all the time. Just talk, really, but--I don’t like it,” Steve said quietly after a moment, then cast a significant look to Peter, who was tucking into dinner with his usual enthusiasm. “Tell me how your studies are going,” Steve asked, whatever concerns he might have slipping away for the time being as he listened to their son with obvious pride.

When dinner was finished, Steve carried Peter to his room in the crook of one arm, his sword and scabbard in the other hand, listening again to the story of Sir Harry’s fateful bid for freedom. Tony followed along, unable to keep the contented smile off his face. Steve helped Peter into his nightclothes, then tucked him into bed, extinguishing a few of the torches to darken the room.

“Tell me a story,” Peter pleaded. “Please!”

“What kind of story?” Steve asked as he perused the shelf of books.
“Uncle Clint said to ask for the one with the veils,” Peter announced.

“Well, Uncle Clint is probably going to get a stern talking to,” Tony said around a laugh. “I have a story you haven’t heard before. I think you’ll like it.”

“What’s it about?” Peter asked, picking at the blanket as he settled into bed. Steve took up a seat across from the bed, next to the fire, as Tony sat down next to Peter. Steve took his sword from the scabbard and the fine, gray stone from his pouch, beginning to run it up and down the length of the blade with practiced care.

“It’s about a king, who is taken prisoner by a soldier,” Tony replied, watching Steve’s eyes slide to his as his hand slowed almost imperceptibly.

“That wouldn’t happen,” Peter protested. “Soldiers work for the King,” he pronounced with all the certainty of youth.

“Well, this one didn’t, because this king was not a very good king, not yet anyway. And the soldier did, in fact, take the king prisoner,” Tony went on, his eyes growing soft and voice suddenly thick with emotion.

“What did the soldier do to the king?” Peter asked, eyes wide and curious. Tony looked over at his husband and then back down to their son, and just for a moment, it was almost too much. He blinked and swallowed around the sudden tightness in his chest, his hand wrapping around Peter’s and drawing it to his chest, just over the cool metal disc beneath. His eyes caught on the ring he wore on his finger, two hands cradling a round diamond between them, and he could almost feel the words engraved on the band beneath, pressing into his flesh.

*Everything. Forever.*

“He set him free.”

Chapter End Notes

If, after all of that, you would still like to read more from this ‘verse, there is a Coda to this fic in my Thank You Fics. It is set a few months after the end of the main fic and several years prior to the Epilogue, sort of filling in some of the gaps. Yes, they do talk to each other. I know! Went for something different. *snort*

As always, a huge THANK YOU to those of you who have taken the time to read this. I hope you enjoyed the journey. I genuinely appreciate every kudo, comment, rec, etc. You have no idea how wonderful all of that is. This has been quite the project, though I really had fun with the challenge. I can't thank you all enough for the encouragement along the way.

Ridiculously Long Author’s Note No One Asked For: I was watching Iron Man and actually listened to the dialogue between Rhodey and Tony on the plane…it is actually all about how Tony needs people, needs a team he can count on, which, of course, becomes the Avengers. You don’t really even hear this, or I never did, because there are stewardesses…excuse me, flight attendants…dancing around a stripper pole. So, hard to notice. But, it’s there. That was sort of swirling in my head, and then a couple nights later, I saw the scene of Steve being brought before Tony in my head.
That somehow became this story. I knew I wanted to write something in the vein of those historical romances I read when I was younger, and I wanted to incorporate ideas and themes from the movies and a few bits of the comics. You will have probably noticed some obvious things, like Pierce brewing Hydra under everyone’s nose, Tony inadvertently providing them with the tools to use against him, Steve losing his whole world except for Bucky, a little bit of the idea of Civil War, where they both have some good points, but really need to work their shit out together to get it right. I tried for some less obvious ones as well, though I think a lot of people picked up on them. Tony’s journey really reflects a lot of the Iron Man movies. He gets to the point of his “I am the Realm(I am Iron Man)” speech, which is great, but he doesn’t actually know how to be that person yet and keeps falling back into old habits, sort of two steps forward, one step back, particularly with Steve. You can see how well that worked in Iron Man 2, when he’s hiding things, taking too many chances, in some ways being cruel to the people he cares about the most, even while giving them things like a suit for Rhodey and the company to Pepper. He still treats them like crap, to the point of getting drunk and scaring Pepper and fighting with Rhodey, not to mention the huge Daddy issues in the background of everything. Then Avengers where they are pushing at each other, hurting each other the way only the two of them can. Finally, you get to Iron Man 3 where he is trying so hard to hang on to Pepper and this life he wants, but in doing so, is pushing her away, so that was kind of the idea for a lot what he was doing with Steve towards the end here. He doesn’t know how to have a healthy relationship and there is a huge power imbalance. Think of the offer of land and a title as a giant bunny, basically. All of this with a bit of the mindwipe idea in the background, because there are some points here where Tony really takes away Steve’s agency completely to either push him away because he tells himself it’s better for Steve (really, for Tony, but whatever) or keep him close because he’s so desperate to have that. But, he eventually gets to the point of realizing that to love someone, really, truly love them, you have to treat them as an equal, as a friend first. And then he gets everything he wants, because cosmic justice is a whole big thing here (so, Tony asks for Steve brought to him in chains in the beginning and then gets it and its horrible, but he teaches Steve to read and this ends up saving them all). Then poor Steve is dealing with PTSD, which, wow, do those symptoms line up well…one of the big ones is not feeling like you fit in anymore, a sense of detachment, survivor’s guilt, not feeling you are supposed to be happy, that kind of thing. I think we see some of that in CA:TWS. He’s asked what makes him happy and CAN’T THINK OF ANYTHING. So, that’s a little bit of what I was going for with this. I don’t know if I always achieved it, but that was in my head. I really wanted both of them to have some kind of arc other than just fall in love. Obviously, that happens, but I wanted them to change based on their experiences with each other. Again, I hope you enjoyed it and thank you so much for reading.
Art for Steve

Chapter Summary

Done by the amazing superfizz. Find her on tumblr: http://superfizz.tumblr.com/
Art for King Anthony Stark

Chapter Summary

Done by the amazing superfizz. Find her on tumblr: http://superfizz.tumblr.com/
Fanart from Chapter 12 by Stitchy

Chapter Summary

This gorgeous artwork was done by the incredible Stitchy for a scene from Chapter 12 where they are in the forest heading to Lord Ellis' holdings. Check out Stitchy's art tumblr at stitchyarts.tumblr.com
This absolutely stunning artwork was done by charlotvanh. Please visit her tumblr at charlotvanh.tumblr.com and deviant art at http://charlotvanh.deviantart.com for more gorgeous works and information about commissions. I cannot recommend highly enough. She is amazing.
End Notes

If you are at all curious, Tony basically invents TNT in the cave, the yellow liquid that is briefly mentioned, a vast improvement over gunpowder largely due to its stability. I figure that is comparable to miniaturizing an arc reactor in a cave. But again, see that Fantasy tag? I’m serious about it.

Works inspired by this one:

- Various fanarts inspired by fanfic and headcanons by DragonK
- A Trade of Skills [ART] by Atsadi

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