The Man with the Clockwork Heart

by indigostohelit

Summary

A de-anon (finally) from the capkink meme. His village destroyed by the northern Empire, Steve Rogers is sold as a slave to Lord Tony Stark, a man with no heart but a ticking clockwork machine inside his chest. He’s been told that Lord Stark takes pleasure slaves, and bitter, grieving, and terrified, he expects nothing more of a northerner. But months pass, and Stark does nothing. In a rapidly unfolding chaos of scheming politics and a clockwork world, Steve begins to wonder what sort of man Stark is-- and whether he’d mind being a pleasure slave at all.

Notes

Well, it only took four months. Thanks to everyone who read it on the kink meme, if you did read it way back then. Special thanks to people who volunteered to beta.

“They say he’s heartless,” says the woman in the back of the covered wagon eagerly. “He sold his heart to a barbarian demon long ago to get eternal life.”

Steve stills instantly. Barbarian. It’s a word he’s always known that the northerners use, but it still hits him like a punch in the face. The woman tosses it out casually, as if she were discussing the weather—his skin must be pale enough so she thinks he’s a northerner, then. Thank the gods for his
sun-bleached hair. He wouldn’t want to be a barbarian. Not in front of her.

“That’s ridiculous,” says a huge, dark-haired man calmly. Steve still can’t quite speak, the air gone from his lungs.

“It’s not,” insists the woman. “He traveled to the barbarian desert lands to find one of those foreign demons, and then he told it he would sell it his heart if he could live forever.” She leans forward conspiratorially. “And now he doesn’t have any heart at all. Just a little clockwork device that ticks, and ticks, and ticks.”

“Mm-hm,” says the dark-haired man, leaning back. “And who exactly are the ‘they’ that say this?”

“Everyone,” says the woman confidently. “And that’s not all. I heard that his house is run entirely by clockwork. He has a clockwork bath, and a clockwork staircase, and even a clockwork woman who does his business work for him. And when he buys slaves, he takes them into his workshop and cuts them apart and tinkers with them until they have clockwork hands and arms and legs and finally clockwork heads—”

“Stop it,” says Steve at last, and the woman falls quiet. “You’re scaring her.” The little girl looks up at him, her eyes wide and not a little bright with tears, and Steve ruffles her hair.

The wagon goes over a large bump, and everyone is thrown into the air for a moment, landing hard on the wooden benches. The woman gives a snort, rubbing her backside. “All right, then,” she says to the dark-haired man. “If you’re so clever, what does go on in his mansion, then?” She rolls her eyes. “You can’t tell me he uses slaves for the usual things—housework, fetching, chores. There’s something funny about that man, everyone can see it.”

There’s a short silence, and then the dark-haired man says, “I won’t repeat what I know. It’s not appropriate for mixed company.”

The little girl doesn’t seem to be paying much attention, having curled up in the corner and begun sucking her thumb, but Steve stares at the dark-haired man. Can he possibly mean what Steve thinks he means? He’s heard of what the newspapers delicately refer to as “pleasure slaves”, a phrase Bucky had never used to say without spitting hard into the sand, but he’d thought that it was just a rumor, one of the wilder exaggerations his neighbors had believed about the North.

“I hear he only takes men,” the woman says maliciously, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “Big men. Strong men. Handsome men.”

The man shoots her a glance. “Then you’d best listen to those who know more,” he says tartly. “He takes men and women.”

“But he does take them for… that?” Steve cuts in. “For his… entertainment?” He can feel his ears reddening; he’s not used to the casual way the northerners speak of these kinds of things.

“Let’s just say I don’t think the footmen spend much time cleaning,” says the woman, and smirks.

Steve sinks into the wall behind him, all the breath leaving his body in a rush. The world around him seems pale for a moment, fragile, as if it might break. After everything he’s been through, every hardship he’s endured, is this how it might end? As a pleasure slave in the mansion of a rich northerner?

He sees again for a moment, clear as water, fresh as day, the sun on the bright brass buttons of the smirking general who’d marched into the village, followed by a regiment of pale-faced soldiers. He’d taken a blue and white flag, planted it in the center of the village, and barked, “I claim this land in the
name of the Empire. Any arguments?"

The chief, a man elderly but still fit, had stepped up to the general. He’d met the man’s eyes firmly, raised his time-worn staff of office, and said, “Yes.”

The general had shot him in the chest. Steve still remembers how the blood had looked on the sand: so dark, and so clean.

In less than an hour, the entire population of the village had been crammed into a few tiny wagons. Steve had put his head on his knees and tried to breathe slowly. A fair-haired girl, nearly a woman, had been sitting next to him, young and lovely, her belly huge with pregnancy, and next to her an ancient matriarch with a wrinkled face.

As the wagon had bumped and shuddered over the sands of the desert, the air had rung with the screaming of children and the gentle, rasping sobs of the elderly. Even the men sat stony-faced, their fists clenched, their eyes bright. But the fair-haired girl had been calm. She'd almost been smiling, in a quiet way, as if she knew some private secret.

A few hours into their journey, the fair-haired girl had pulled the collar of her garment out and reached down between the curve of her breasts. Steve had looked away discreetly, and when he looked back, she'd been holding a thick, prickly leaf in her hand. He blinked, and blinked again, and she was still holding it: a leaf from the ujayi bush, what the old men called the desert apple, the most poisonous growing thing within a thousand miles.

The pregnant girl smiled, and raised the leaf to her mouth.

The old woman beside her seized her arm. "No," she said.

"I'll protect the baby, Nanna," the girl said dreamily. "My baby won't grow up in the north. Not a slave. Not mine."

"I won't allow it," said the old woman.

"I won't let them have my child," said the girl, and raised her hand again. The woman seized it, her bony fingers wrapping tight around the girl's.

"Sharon, you listen to me, and you listen to me good," she said softly into the fair-haired girl's face. "You can't give up. You can't give them that. That's what they want, more than they want your work, more than they want that damn child inside your belly. They can break our bodies, easy—they don't care about that. If they break us on the inside, they win."

Sharon had turned her face away, and the old woman had gripped her chin roughly and turned it to face her. "You hear me, Sharon?" she said sharply. "You keep fighting. You let them push around your body, but you don't let them push around what's in your head. You get up in the morning, hold your chin high, they can't get you. You fight, and you teach that baby in your belly the same. I'm not having any great-grandchild of mine go out quiet."

Sharon had been silent, and her grandmother had slowly taken the desert apple leaf, crushed it under her heel, and gently kissed her on the cheek. "It'll get better," she said. "It always does, don't it?"

Through the journey to the North, separated from his friends and family, whipped and sworn at and sold from slaver to slaver until he'd finally reached the Empire's capital city, Steve had heard the old woman's words in his head, again and again: *It'll get better. It'll get better. It'll get better.*

And now he sits in the back of his last slaver wagon, on the way to his last auction block, about to be
sold to a man who will use his body for pleasure if he manages to bid highest. Steve stares straight ahead, his face a perfect mask. It will not get better. It will not get better, and he will die in the North, a hated stranger in a strange, hateful land.

The wagon rolls slowly to a stop. Steve hears the harsh clicks of boots, and the back of the wagon slowly swings open, light washing into the cramped space. He shades his eyes with his hand. There's a silhouette standing there, the slaver's assistant, who barks, "Out. Now."

They make their way out of the wagon and onto the cobbled street. It's only Steve's second look at the city, and it still shocks him in some deep place in his stomach to see a grey sky, covered with clouds. The buildings are tall enough that he can't even see the whole of that sky, and the streets are filled with horse-drawn carriages and cabs. Steve gives a bone-deep shiver. He's not at home. Not at all.

"Come on," says the slaver's assistant, and he herds them all through the door of one of the tall buildings and into a long hallway, carpeted with something that scratches Steve's bare feet. They take the first door on the left into a stone room, a door on the opposite side of it, where the slaver's assistant stops.

"Strip, and wait here," he says curtly, and leaves.

They all know how this goes, they've all done it before, Steve can see by the resigned, familiar way each of the others goes to strip quickly and efficiently. Even the little girl needs no help getting out of her dress in a few moments. Steve has to look away from her before his own calm mask shatters.

They sit in the cold stone room without meeting each other's eyes for what seems like hours. Steve stares blankly at the wall, trying not to think. He can't break down now. He can't.

The door opens, and the slaver's assistant comes in. He nods at the little girl, and she gets up and follows him through the door across the room. There's a brief burst of music and laughter before it shuts behind them and they're left to themselves again.

The woman is next when the slaver's assistant comes back, walking through the door with her chin held high and her back ramrod-straight. She's not smiling now, and Steve wonders absently who she'll be sold to, what work she'll be made to do, if her wild stories will survive under the whip of whoever will own her.

The huge man with the dark hair is next, leaving Steve alone in the room. He can't hear much but the hammering of his own heart against his chest, and he stares at the blank stone wall without seeing it.

When the slaver's assistant ducks into the room again, he nods at Steve. Steve stands up and follows him through the door.

He's blinded by the light for a moment, but he can hear conversation, laughter, the plink of a piano in the background. The slaver's assistant leads him up a brief flight of wooden steps and onto a wide stage, and as Steve's vision finally clears, he can see the tableau spread out before him.

He's standing on a stage at the front of a large room filled with shadows and lit by gas lamps. The ground in front of him is scattered with small tables where men and women sit, talking or sipping drinks. As he comes to the lit part of the stage, their attention begins to turn to him, and he sees a few eyebrows rise. Somebody near the front wolf-whistles, a handsome, golden-skinned man with messy dark hair and a mustache, and an uncomfortable chuckle ripples over the crowd. Steve hears someone whisper drunk, and someone else coughs loudly.
"Ladies and gentlemen," says the voice of the slaver from a point to Steve's left, "may I present to you this unique specimen, Steven Rogers, who has been imported all the way from the barbarian deserts for your consideration." There's a brief pause, and Steve can feel their eyes raking over him, appraising him, judging his worth. He's never so badly wanted to cover himself.

"Strong, as you can see," says the slaver, "and quite intelligent, for a barbarian. Docile enough, but not dull, and reportedly good with children." Steve feels the assistant's elbow in his side and a hiss of "Turn around."

He turns slowly on the spot, letting the light play over his naked body, and the crowd murmurs in appreciation. Steve stares straight ahead at the far wooden wall. He's not here, he's not here, he's back at home, in the town with Bucky, sneaking looks at Peggy as she carries water home from the well, sprawled on the sand by the oasis with a warm leg of lamb, he's not here...

"Bidding starts at ten thousand," says the slaver. "Takers?"

"Ten," says the handsome man who'd wolf-whistled, flapping a ringed hand. Steve sees the red-haired woman with him roll her eyes and lean back in her chair.

"Eleven!" calls a dark-skinned man behind him. The first man turns to look at him, raising an eyebrow, and the dark-skinned man grins. "Sorry, Tony," he says. "You know I couldn't make it too easy for you."

"Betrayal, Rhodey," says Tony, shaking his head. Rhodey laughs.

"Twelve!" bellows a bulky man with blond hair that falls to his shoulders.

"Thirteen," says Tony.

"Fourteen," says a voice in the back, and the room stills. Steve squints. The man who's bid has dark skin like Rhodey, a bald head, and an eyepatch covering one eye. Though he isn't dressed flamboyantly like some of those here, or surrounded by slaves and friends, he commands an undeniable air of power that makes Steve blink and look at him more closely.

"Fourteen thousand to Nicholas Fury," says the slaver, sounding a little unnerved. "Going once. Going t—"

"Fifteen," says Tony, and if Steve thought the room had gone quiet when Fury spoke, it is utterly silent now. Next to him, the red-haired woman closes her eyes and rests her forehead on her hand.

"Sixteen," says Fury calmly.

"Seventeen," says Tony. There isn't so much as a whisper in the room.

Fury turns to look at Tony with his good eye. "You sure you know what you're doing there, Stark?" he says, as casual as if he were discussing the weather.

"You know me, Fury," says Stark, smiling widely at the man. "Never could resist a pretty pair of pecs."

There's a long pause. Fury and Stark are staring at each other, some indefinable tension running between them, and Steve realizes he's holding his breath.

After what seems like a lifetime, Fury looks away. A ripple of surprise runs over the room, and Steve sees Stark hold out a fist to the red-haired woman to bump. She gives him a look, and he shoots her a
brilliant grin.

"Seventeen thousand to Lord Stark," says the slaver, sounding slightly shell-shocked. "Going once. Going twice?" There's a brief moment when it seems as if the eyes of the entire room are on Fury, and then the slaver's mallet comes down with a bang. "Sold to Lord Anthony Stark," he says, and just like that, Steve has an owner.

The slaver's assistant is shoving at his side in a moment, leading him off the stage, down a small flight of stairs, and into another stone room. This one contains a neatly folded set of clothes in the corner. Steve starts to move towards them, but the slaver's assistant stops him.

"Hand," he says. After a brief moment of confusion Steve holds his hand out, and the slaver's assistant snaps a black bracelet around his wrist. It fits snugly against his skin, and when Steve turns it, he can see two gold-embossed letters: AS. Anthony Stark. His new owner.

"Dress," says the slaver's assistant shortly. "Lord Stark's companion will be in to take you to their table shortly." His boots click out the door, and Steve reaches for the clothes. A plain black pair of trousers, a dark button-down shirt, a shiny black pair of shoes; they're not fancy, though nothing like what he would have worn back at home. He pulls them on, and he's just done tying up the shoes when the red-haired woman from Lord Stark's table comes in.

She looks him up and down and sighs. "Well, let's hope you're worth this week's shitstorm," she says resignedly. "Come on. Steven, right?"

"Steve, ma'am," says Steve, after a shocked pause. The ladies back home never used that kind of language.

"Let's go, then," says the red-haired woman, and she leads him back out into the room, where they navigate the winding route between the chairs to Stark's table.

Stark's face lights up at the sight of the two of them. "Pepperpot," he says, "and the new eye candy? This is my lucky day. Here, I pulled up a few more chairs, you two sit down. Wait, no, Pepper, could you grab me another drink?"

"I'm not getting you any more to drink," says Pepper warningly.

"Well, I'm not doing it myself," says Stark, wrinkling his nose at her.

"That was the idea," mutters Pepper, so quietly that Steve's almost sure he wasn't meant to hear it. The corners of his lips twitch up nevertheless. Pepper sees him and casts him an amused glance, before turning to Stark.

"So was there any point to that little escapade?" she says acidly. "Or had you just not filled in your daily pissing-off-Fury quotient and decided now was a good time?"

"Point?" says Stark, sounding affronted. "Point? Of course there was a point. I preserved my sterling reputation as a drunken fool, I hit a whole new level in surrounding myself with gorgeous people—you did see this guy's abs, right?—and I made that bastard Fury's blood pressure skyrocket. I would call that a very productive five minutes, with minimal consequences."

Pepper doesn't say anything, just glances meaningfully to her left. Stark's head turns and he swears imaginatively enough to make Steve blush. "Right," he says. "Dealing with Coulson. Not a minimal consequence. My apologies, Pepperpot, eye candy."

Steve looks. A short, balding man in a dark suit is making his way over to the table, where he takes
one of the vacant chairs Stark pulled up earlier and nods around at the table.

"Miss Potts," he says, his voice a model of politeness. "Lord Stark. How nice to see you again. It's been too long."

"Absence does make the heart grow fonder," says Stark, equally polite. His whole demeanor has changed, Steve sees: his back is straighter, his eyes sharper, his voice tighter. The faint drunkenness in his manner is gone. "Or so they say. You know me, Mr. Coulson, I'm a scientist. Maybe we should test out that hypothesis a little longer."

"I don't think that will be necessary," says Coulson. "How have you been, Lord Stark? Well, I trust?"

"Oh, I'm a model of good health," Stark agrees. "And how is your job with Mr. Fury, Mr. Coulson?" He smiles brilliantly. "It must be so strange, working as a human in the position of a lapdog."

"You are quite heartless, Lord Stark," says Coulson calmly.

Stark's face goes tight for half a moment, then smooths over. "So I hear from the doctors," he says.

"I have heard of your frequent visits to the hospitals," says Coulson. "I wonder what your father would say."

"That I was using disappointingly low-quality doctors," says Stark. "Mr. Coulson, with the utmost respect, Miss Potts and I were engaged in important business." Steve stares at him for a moment, trying to see if his face will betray the enormity of the lie. It doesn't flicker. "Though your company is as welcome as ever," Stark continues, "I can't help but wonder what your purpose here is...?"

Now Coulson smiles, a vicious, tight smile that reminds Steve of a snake. "Actually, Lord Stark, I was sent here to thank you," he says.

For the first time in the conversation, Stark looks thrown. "Thank me?" he says.

"Indeed," says Coulson. "Your armored carriage design has just made its way into the Ministry of War. Mr. Fury theorizes this will make the southern campaign ten times more efficient—at least, until the enemy gets their hands on it as well. Still, we take our advantages where we can, hmm, Lord Stark?"

There is a pause for the span of a few heartbeats, where Stark stares at Coulson, and Coulson smiles like a cat with a bird trapped between its paws. Then, in an instant, Stark is leaning across the table, every pretense of politeness gone. "Who-," he hisses, and then he is cut off by a huge clap on the back that nearly sends him nose-first into one of the glasses littering the table.

"Tony, my friend!" bellows a huge man with long blond hair. Steve recognizes him a moment later as the one who bid twelve thousand on him. "How goes it?"

Stark shoots up, the smile back on his face, now with an edge of wickedness. "Mr. Coulson," he says, "may I introduce you to Thor Odinsson, prince of the far north. Thor, this is Mr. Coulson. I'm sure you two will get along fabulously."

"The son of Coul is known to me, indeed!" booms Thor, who Steve is beginning to suspect ends all of his sentences with exclamation points. "He has of old been a thief of the works of Jane, my betrothed!"

"Thief is a very strong word, Mr. Odinsson," says Coulson, leaning across the table to shake Thor's
hand. "I prefer appropriator. How have you been?"

"I have health, drink, and women aplenty, thanks be to the Allfather!" Thor roars.

Coulson's smile is starting to look slightly fixed. "All well, then?" he says. "I had heard of some, ah, family trouble."

"Aye," shouts Thor, who Steve is now fairly sure has no volume lower than a bellow, "my traitorous brother did once more make a bid for the throne! But the valiant efforts of this son of Howard," he claps Tony on the back again, sending him nose-first into another drink, "as well as myself and the Warriors Three, did send that trickster into the deepest of Asgard's dungeons! Thanks be to Odin!"

Coulson blinks a few times. Stark's grin looks like it could split his face. "Well, it's been fun," he says, "but I believe my business here is done. Thor, I do hope I see you again. Mr. Coulson, good luck with that inter-species job adjustment." He stands, brushing imaginary lint off his lapel, and Pepper stands with him, Steve a hasty moment later. Stark bows slightly to Thor and Coulson, and then he's striding through the tables, Pepper and Steve following behind him.

"That was quality entertainment," he says quietly as they make their way towards the door. "God, Thor is always maximum value for money. Pepper, can we put him on the payroll? Give him a few thousand to just show up at whatever social functions I have to go to and just talk at people who annoy me?"

"We can't put the prince heir of the far north on our payroll, Tony," says Pepper, smiling. "The logistics alone would be a nightmare. Just carry on giving him financial aid whenever his brother acts up and he should be on our side." They've reached the door, and Stark pushes it open, leading them back out into that long hallway and down it to the outside world, where the grey sky is beginning to darken in the early evening.

"And speaking of logistics," he says sharply, "we need to talk about that conversation back there." He stops at a carriage parked alongside the street and opens the door, bowing elegantly at Pepper. She climbs in, waving Steve after her, and Stark slides into the seat next to him. "Make yourself comfortable," he says, winking at Steve. "It's a long way home." It's a small carriage, but Steve could swear his hand must have somewhere to go other than Steve's thigh.

"Right," says Pepper, suddenly in business mode. "The last sweep for government spies was in the financial department, a month and a half ago. We'll conduct another one right away in—who could have seen that armored carriage?"

"Beats me," says Stark, grim, "and that's the issue. I thought those plans were only visible to people with the access key to my workshop, and right now, that's just me and you. We have to..." He's going on, rambling about security checks and better locks, but Steve has stopped paying attention. He's noticed something.

There's a faint ticking noise in the carriage, rhythmic, relentless. It's mechanical, like a machine. Like clockwork. And it's coming from Stark's chest.

The world goes pale again for a moment, and Steve has to focus on his breathing, on holding himself together. Stark is the one the woman was talking about. Stark is the one who buys pleasure slaves. Stark is the one who's just bought Steve.

Stark is the man with the clockwork heart.
Stark wasn’t lying when he said the journey was long. The carriage bounces along for an hour, and not once during that period does Stark’s hand move from his thigh. Steve stares straight ahead, trying to pretend none of this is happening.

When the carriage finally rolls to a stop, Stark hops out in a moment, and Steve hears his boots land with a thump on dirt. Steve slides out after him, looks up, and stares.

It’s a house. It’s got to be a house, but at first glance it’s an enchanted castle from a fairy tale. Curved towers and layers build on each other, folding outward in strange geometries of silver and white, and water surrounds the mansion, glimmering with sparkles. The whole great building is covered with glass windows, and the sunset glimmers off them at a thousand different angles, so that the house glows red and gold in the dying light.

“Home sweet home,” says Stark cheerfully. “Hold on a sec, I have to turn off the driver.” He turns to the carriage and opens the driver’s door, and Steve feels his stomach twist and his mouth drop open.

There’s no man there. Instead, there’s a seething mass of clockwork, which Stark leans into and peers around at for a few seconds before tapping something. Immediately, the turning of the cogs slows and stops, and Stark withdraws his head and closes the door.

“What are we waiting for?” he says, and bounds up the dirt path to the glass front door, which swings open at his touch. Steve and Pepper follow him.

The inside of the house is more than a match for the outside, with sweeping staircases, tumbling fountains, and a view from the windows that lets Steve see all the way across the ocean. The house must be on a cliff. He can’t do much more than stare.

“I’ll be in the workshop, Pepper!” yells Stark’s rapidly receding voice from down a hallway. “Get the new guy settled in, ‘kay?”

Pepper rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling. “Come on,” she says to Steve. “I’ll show you to your room.”

“Will—will Lord Stark be expecting me tonight?” says Steve, barely able to choke the words out of his mouth. He’s suddenly, horribly assaulted by the memory of Stark’s hand on his thigh just a few minutes ago, the lewdness in it, the expectation. He can’t do this. He can’t.

Pepper frowns at him. “I don’t think so. He’ll be in the workshop all night, and probably get two hours of sleep. Don’t worry about any of that yet.”

Yet. Steve follows her down another corridor and right into a small bedroom, carpeted and furnished with a bed by a window, table, dresser, and a gas lamp that casts a gentle glow over the tableau. The sun has faded from the windows, and what the lamp doesn’t illuminate is lost in shadows.

“I should have some clothes for you by tomorrow,” says Pepper. “They’ll be outside your room in the morning.” She nods at him and leaves the room, shutting the door behind her and leaving Steve alone with his thoughts.

He eases himself down on the bed, and it gives with a creak of springs. The room is small, and nice, and comfortable, and he would give anything right now not to be there.

He carefully unties his shoes and puts them by his bed, then strips for the second time that day, blows
out the lamp, and slips beneath the covers. They're warm, and the quilt lies heavily on him like a comforting hand on his back. He closes his eyes.

Back at home, he'd said his prayers before going to sleep each night. But his mother had taught him the gods he prayed to were the gods of the sand beneath his head and the town down the road, the oasis and the endless blue sky, and Steve can't feel them here, doesn't believe they've come with him from the desert. There are no gods in this room.

He'd been a scrawny boy when he was younger. Short, small, and you could count his ribs, and his mother had despaired of his ever being able to keep up with the other boys in wrestling or the annual footraces held in the town. But one glorious summer Steve had sprouted and grown shoulders and muscles that finally reflected all the work behind them, and soon he was outrunning the other boys, outworking them, outfighting them.

It had been the least surprise to Bucky, his best friend since before either of them could remember, who had roared with laughter, punched him in the shoulder, and said, "Bet you still can't get the girls as fast as me, though." And it had been the biggest, or so it seemed to Steve, to Peggy Carter, the girl who lived near Steve.

For years, every morning without fail, Peggy had carried two buckets of water home from the well by Steve's tent. Steve would greet her each morning, fascinated by her: the sway of her hips, the sun on her dark hair. She'd never say hello back, just raise a perfect eyebrow and go on. He'd offered to help her carry the water once or twice, and she'd refused.

A few weeks after he'd won the annual village footrace for the very first time, he'd gathered up the courage to ask her if she'd like to go into the town with him. She'd considered him for some time, pursed those perfect lips, and just as Steve was gearing himself up to accept her rejection, said yes.

"Not because you have muscles now, Rogers," she said tartly to the disbeliefing, delighted look on his face. "Because you asked if I needed help carrying my water back when you didn't. Let's meet next festival day."

It was a week after that the soldiers had come.

Steve lies awake in the darkness, staring at nothing. He knows he will never see Bucky or Peggy again. They've been sold to other masters, in cities far away.

But he cannot shake the feeling he has missed his date.

He's woken the next morning by the sunlight pouring into his room. He stirs and pushes himself up in bed, unable to remember for a moment where he is.

"Good morning, Steve Rogers," says a disembodied voice, and Steve jumps about a foot in the air, landing in a tangled mess of sheets and quilt and limbs. "Welcome to Stark Mansion," the voice continues, unaffected. "Miss Potts has placed your clothes outside the door and requests you come to the kitchen for breakfast."

"Who is that?" pants Steve, disentangling himself from the quilt. "Who's talking?"

There's a brief pause, and then the voice says, "JARVIS-point-three-copyright-Stark-Industries-not-for-sale-sale-strictly-prohibited-description-building-oriented-automaton-"

"All right, all right," says Steve. "You're, uh. I didn't understand any of that, but-

"Good morning, Steve Rogers," says the voice with exactly the same inflection as before. "Welcome
to Stark Mansions. Miss Potts has placed your clothes outside the door and requests you come to the
kitchen for breakfast."

"I heard that part," says Steve. "Do you happen to know where the kitchen is?"

"Good morning, Steve Rogers," says the voice. "Welcome to Stark Mansions. Miss Potts has placed
your clothes outside the door and requests you come to the kitchen for breakfast."

Steve gives up and goes over to the door, opening it a crack and swiping in the pile of clothes
Pepper's left for him there. It's nothing more than a white shirt and jeans, better than the wild,
shameful expectations his mind had conjured up, but as he pulls on the T-shirt, the sleeve slides over
the bracelet on his wrist and catches. Steve winces. It's not a collar, but it might as well be. It's still
there to remind him of what he is, of who he belongs to.

There's a note in the pocket of the jeans. Steve pulls it out and reads in tiny, crabbed handwriting,
*Kitchen is left two doors and then the first on the right. I'll show you around the mansion once you've
eaten. Don't mind Tony in the kitchen, he probably hasn't slept yet.* -Pepper Potts

Steve's mouth twists into a half-smile. Against all odds, he thinks he likes Pepper Potts, even if she
does work for Stark.

He leaves the room and follows the directions to a gleaming kitchen with polished floors. The smell
of eggs wafts from around a corner, and Steve's stomach growls. He steps around the corner to find-

-Stark, dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a black T-shirt, poking blearily at a plate of eggs in front
of him. Steve is pretty sure that's a Bloody Mary by his plate. Occasionally Stark will miss the plate
and come up with a forkful of nothing, but it doesn't seem to deter him, or even to register; he'll
shove it in his mouth nonetheless, and look mildly surprised when there's nothing to chew.

He blinks when he notices Steve. "Mornin'," he says. "There a cure for hangovers you know it looks
like I haven't tried yet?"

Steve mutely shakes his head.

"Wunnerful," mutters Stark. "JARVIS, one plate eggs size large, 'kay? Guy needs breakfast."

"One large plate of eggs coming soon, sir," says the disembodied voice Steve heard earlier. He
jumps a foot in the air again, which sends Stark into such paroxysms of laughter it looks like he
might choke on his eggs. Steve can feel himself going red.

"Steve!" says Pepper's voice, businesslike, and she appears in the kitchen a moment later, red hair up
in a bun, fresh and bright for the day. "Good, you're awake. I'll get JARVIS to make you breakfast
—you've met JARVIS?"

"Lord Stark already, uh, ordered me a plate, ma'am," says Steve. "Is JARVIS that person who keeps
repeating things out of the walls? He greeted me this morning."

Pepper smiles. "JARVIS isn't a person," she begins.

"Correction," says the voice. "According to user-Tony Stark, I am quote *more damn human than
most of those leeches at that bastard Fury's parties* unquote. According to Dictionary H-L,
"humans" are defined as within the category "people". Therefore, I am a person."

"Tony, I swear if you foist off your self-esteem issues on talking machines one more time I won't
reschedule any of your business meetings for two weeks," says Pepper. Stark gives a mildly horrified
Pepper turns back to Steve. "JARVIS is a clockwork machine installed everywhere in the house," she explains. "It's set up to respond to certain vocal commands, like 'make eggs', 'what time is it', that kind of thing. Once you learn the phrases it uses, it's the most useful thing in this mansion."

"Hey," mumbles Stark, who has by now run out of eggs to shovel into his mouth and who hasn't appeared to notice.

"One large plate of eggs," says the voice, JARVIS. There's a ding, and a metal door opens in the wall, revealing what is indeed a large plate of eggs. Steve's stomach grumbles.

"Take it, it's yours, sit down," says Pepper, waving a hand. Steve hesitantly grabs the plate and the fork next to it and carries them to the table.

Stark looks up, his eyes clouded with haziness. "You should try th' Bloody Mary," he says. "Best thing in the worl' to cure a hangover."

"He hasn't got a hangover, Tony," says Pepper patiently.

Stark frowns and squints at Steve. "Oh. Right. Eye candy, right? Bastard Fury wanted you?"

"That's him," says Pepper. "Steve Rogers, by the way, not 'eye candy'. I think that might be sticking it to Fury a little too far."

Stark considers this for a while, then announces, "I should probably sleep."

Pepper makes a noncommittal noise.

"Ma'am?" says Steve, holding out his empty plate. Competing with the other kids to grab a leg of lamb from the spit taught him to eat fast, and the habit's never really faded. "Uh, sir? Where can I put this?"

"Leave it on the table, JARVIS does the dishes in half an hour," says Pepper. "Come on. I'll show you around the mansion, let you know where you'll be working."

Steve's stomach drops, but he stands up, lays his fork carefully on his plate, and follows Pepper out of the kitchen. "Don't mind Tony, he's just sleep-deprived and slightly drunk," says Pepper, not bothering to lower her voice as they go down a hallway. "This is a whole hall of bedrooms. No, I don't know why we have so many. Blame Tony's father, Tony always does."

"Uh, will he be like this every morning, ma'am?" asks Steve, trying not to think about the bedrooms. He's not sure he's ever seen someone as quite as incoherent as Stark.

"Get a few pots of coffee in him and he'll be fine," says Pepper. "This is the dining room, by the way. Nothing's actually wrong with him, he's just been up in the workshop all night, tinkering with a design for a mechanical unicorn that does cartwheels or something. And he did have too much to drink at that auction last night, so he probably has a bitch of a hangover." She sounds slightly gleeful at the thought.

"You don't really seem to mind it, ma'am," Steve ventures as they wind through another hallway.

"This is the sitting room where Tony has most of his guests, and it does serve him right for all the smoothing-over I'm going to have to do today," says Pepper. "I have to make nice with the Ministry of War so they don't lean on the papers to use whatever leftover blackmail they've had on us for
ages, I have to make nice with the auctioneer so they aren't offended by Tony being a drunken ass, I have to apologize to Coulson for siccing Thor on him, I have to apologize to Thor for siccing Coulson on him, and that's just until lunchtime. Watch your step."

They're heading down a flight of stairs. "Is that your job?" Steve asks. "Public relations for Lord Stark?"

"Secretary, officially," Pepper answers. "Which reminds me, I have to find a business meeting to schedule around four o'clock today. He was planning to go and see a car show in the city at three-thirty," she explains to Steve's confused look. "Very sad, he's missing the show of the year, but it's unavoidable and all that. Four o'clock I'm apologizing to Lady Everhardt for Tony completely ignoring her at the auction. Again. You'd think the woman could take a hint."

"It sounds like you don't like Lord Stark very much," ventures Steve as they approach two huge wooden doors, held together with what looks like a very complicated lock.

Pepper gives him a strange look. "Of course I like him. He's Tony." She bends down, whispers something into the lock, and the doors swing open. "And this is the workshop."

It's covered with metal parts. Cogwheels, wrenches, long sheets of steel, and other things Steve can't put a name to are scattered over tables, chairs, and the floor, and he's pretty sure that's an old-fashioned forge there in the corner. On one of the tables there's something half-put together, some sort of iron suit. It's the most metal Steve has ever seen in one place at one time, and he can't do much more than stare.

"Don't worry, I don't understand what half of this is either," says Pepper. "You'll probably be down here a lot, though, so try to remember where it is. The door's been re-voice-locked as of last night, Tony's design, so you can't get in without the password." She closes the doors and Steve hears the click of a lock sliding into place.

"And that's about all you need to know," she says. "You'll learn your way around the mansion soon enough. You'll probably run into Happy at some point, he's the bodyguard and ex-chaffeur and everything-JARVIS-and-I-don't-do, so be sure and introduce yourself." She pulls a pocket watch out of her neat blue coat and winces. "And I have to go kiss some asses so Tony doesn't end up a pauper. See you around, Steve."

"Good luck, ma'am," Steve calls after her retreating back, and can't help but smile. In the oddest of ways, Pepper Potts reminds him a little of Peggy.

He climbs the stairs after her, still smiling, and almost runs straight into Stark at the top of the flight of stairs. Stark's hair is wet and messy from a shower, his clothes look newly laundered, and his eyes are clear. Steve stops dead.

"Sir," he says. "Uh. Good morning?"

"I'm awake, I'm awake," says Stark petulantly. "I took a shower and drank two pots of coffee, what more do you want from me?"

Steve blinks at him, confused.

"You and Pepper, I swear the whole world is against me," mutters Stark, shaking his head. "Who pays your wages, huh?"

"Uh, no one?" offers Steve.
Stark blinks at him. "Oh, right, the slave thing. Okay, no one pays your wages, but you're too pretty to be as mean as Pepper in the morning." He pats Steve's arm. "See? That is the arm of a nice person." After a brief pause, he frowns. "Not that Pepper's not pretty. Pepper is definitely pretty. Not as pretty as you, but never, ever tell her I said that, I like all my limbs firmly attached to my body."

Steve stares.

"I really should sleep sometime this week," says Stark thoughtfully. "Probably won't, though. One of these days Pepper is going to stop JARVIS making me coffee, and I think I'll die. Or fall asleep. One of the two. And I'll miss business meetings. Which will be Pepper's own fault, really, but she'll blame it on me for sleeping in too late, or something. You know how she is."

"Was there something you wanted from me, sir?" asks Steve as politely as he can. Stark fixes him with a stare that's far too sharp for his rambling speech, and Steve gulps. There is something Stark wants from him, and he'd do well to remember it.

"Not right now," says Stark. "I'll have JARVIS call you if anything comes up that I need you for. Just... wander around the house, okay? Get food, go on a run, read a book, compose a symphony, whatever it is you normal people do. What do normal people do, anyway? Don't answer that."

He starts to continue down past Steve in the direction of the workshop, but stops abruptly. "Wait. Hold out your arm."

Steve holds out his arm, and Stark examines his bracelet with apparent interest. "Huh," he says. "Not my design, but it's all right. Hammer, probably. I wonder what the password is?" He drops Steve's arm, though not without patting it one more time, and jogs down the stairs. A moment later, Steve hears the workshop doors open and close.

Steve stares after him. He doesn't think he's ever met anyone quite like Tony Stark.

He rubs uncomfortably at the place on his arm where Stark touched him. There's a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach, one that won't go away. He'll forget, sometimes, in banter and clockwork and every new wonder found around each corner of the house, what he's been brought here to do. Then he'll be reminded, and it's like the sky has suddenly clouded over.

He's not here as an equal, however much Pepper might crack jokes around him. He's not here for his own comfort, however nice his accommodations may be. He is here for one purpose, and one purpose only: to serve as Stark's pleasure slave, and the bracelet is there to remind him of that. Whatever he might be tricked into feeling, he is nothing more than Stark's property.

He finishes climbing the stairs and, after some wandering, finds his way back to his bedroom, where he sits on the bed and leans his head against the window. The morning sun turns the strands of hair that have gotten caught in his eyes into fiery gold.

*It'll get better, better, better,* sings in his ears, and Steve tries as hard as he can to believe it.

Maybe the woman was wrong about some things. "The footmen don't spend much time cleaning," she'd said, and it doesn't seem that there are any other slaves, let alone multiple footmen. And Stark doesn't have a clockwork staircase, or a clockwork woman who does business work; the staircase and Pepper are as normal as can be.

Stark does have a clockwork heart, though. Steve had heard its ticking on the staircase and tried not to flinch. And whatever evidence Steve may find for the woman's other misinformation, the nature of Stark's interest in Steve is painfully clear. At some point, he will expect something more than *eye*...
candy from his slave, and Steve will have to provide it.

He closes his eyes against the rainbows refracted in his eyelashes, and takes a few deep breaths. He has to prepare himself. He must adapt himself to the idea of his new life, however much it may sicken him just to think of it. This is what he is now, what he has to do, and no amount of despair will help that. One day Stark will call him to use him for his own pleasure. He has to learn to deal with the knowledge that that day will come.

But it doesn't.

Two and a half weeks go by. Steve meets Happy and Rhodey, learns how to talk to JARVIS, can walk around three whole floors of the mansion without getting lost, and not once during that time does Stark use him as a pleasure slave is meant to be used. That's not to say he doesn't touch Steve, or wink at him, or make lewd comments, or continually refer to him as "eye candy", despite Pepper's eye-rolling and protestations. But the touches are brief, nothing more. The winks and teasing are just that, winks and teasing. Not once does he seem to expect more from Steve than that.

The first time he'd called Steve into the workshop, Steve had expected the worst. But Stark had been bent over a table, his hair a mess, a streak of grease down one cheek, a screwdriver and a hammer held in his hands and a wrench in his teeth. He'd glanced at Steve, gestured with his head to a vague spot on the complicated metal structure he was creating, and said, "Ahoodis daa?"

"Excuse me?" said Steve, taken aback, and added "sir," as an afterthought.

Stark carefully spit out the wrench onto the table. "Can you hold this down?" he enunciated carefully, gesturing with his head. "Do me a favor and press hard, this'll be easier if the auxiliary plate is closer to the hip mechanism anyway."

Steve selected a spot on the structure that looked vaguely close to where Stark gestured and pushed down hard. Stark made a pleased noise. "Perfect. You are a fantastic eye candy." He bent over the plate and began to bang at it with a hammer, then, after a good minute and a half, stood up straighter. "All right, done. You can go and flex your muscles now."

The structure had looked exactly the same to Steve, but he'd turned and gotten out of the workshop as quickly as he could, before Stark could ask him for anything else.

But Stark didn't ask him for anything else. Doesn't ask him for anything else.

They still eat breakfast at the same time. Most of the time, Stark is sleep-deprived, or hungover, or even still drunk from the night before. Stark is a creature of habit; Steve is beginning to learn how he likes his coffee (sweet as honey and black enough to take the roof off your mouth, and after the fourth cup he usually has to stop Stark drinking straight from the pot) and his eggs (scrambled).

Stark will talk nonstop during these breakfasts, rambling on and on about Stark Industries, or the latest insult one of his ex-girlfriends has slung at him, or the weather outside, or the latest thing he's designing. Steve can't get a word in edgewise, but he doesn't mind. It's not as if he'd have anything to say, anyway.

The weeks pass. He holds things down, fetches objects from tall shelves, carries whatever's too heavy for Stark. He learns the mansion, its grounds, its quirks and tics, and, to his own surprise, he begins to adapt.

He misses the desert. It's like a physical ache in his chest most of the time, a gap inside him where something ought to be. It comes whenever it rains and he hears the drops pattering down on the
windows, whenever he turns a corner and unexpectedly catches a view of the sun shining on the sea, whenever he sees a huge, leafy tree or a whole rolling expanse of grass. It comes, too, whenever Pepper throws the newspaper down on the table and he sees a headline like *Barbarian Resistance Continues in Southern Campaign*. It's always followed by something like *22 Men Lost in Recent Skirmish*, and Steve will wonder how many desert people were lost that the newspaper doesn't talk about. How many *barbarians* there are that aren't worth mentioning.

The newspapers never call the North the North. Instead, they call it the Empire, and that explains a lot to Steve. The northerners don't come to the desert, he begins to put together, just because they want slaves. They intend instead to build an empire stretching from their land in the North all the way to the end of the continent, and Steve's village's destruction was only another step in their way.

Stark never talks about the war to build the Empire, Steve notices. In all the breakfasts they have, as he rambles about the company and politics and society and his inventions, he never mentions a word about the campaign in the southern deserts. It's more than a simple disinterest. Whenever he even comes close to the topic, his face will shut down for a moment, so quickly that Steve barely catches it, and he'll leap to another subject without missing a beat.

He never calls Steve a barbarian, either. He's heard it from the others. Happy's said it once or twice, Rhodey as well. Even Pepper made a quick reference to "the barbarian deserts" once before stopping and correcting herself hastily. But Stark hasn't ever said the word. Not once.

Steve still doesn't like him. Well, *like* is the wrong word. He doesn't trust Stark, however the man might seem on the outside. He can't forget that the man buys slaves, bought Steve. He can't forget, in the back of his mind, the woman's words in the back of the slave wagon. And he can't forget the endless, mechanical ticking he hears whenever there's a quiet moment at the breakfast table: the unnatural and inhuman ticking of Stark's clockwork heart.

So it's a surprise to even him when, on a day like any other when Stark calls him into his workshop to hold up a heavy machine so Stark can do something complicated with a screwdriver to its underside, Steve sees a piece of paper with a careful, neat drawing of a man made out of metal and says, "That's very good."

Stark looks up from his work, startled. "What?"

"That drawing," says Steve, nodding toward it as best as he can. "It's very good. Sir."

Stark puts the wrench on the table, ducks out from under the machine, and picks up the drawing. It's a design for the outside of a robot, with rectangular holes for the eyes and a complicated array of chest plates and joints. "Yeah?" he says, sounding surprised and delighted. "You draw?"

Steve does draw. Did draw, back in the desert. He'd used what little extra he made working for the other men in the village to buy charcoal and paper, and when he couldn't afford that, sketched on the walls with sticks of wood from last evening's fire. He'd been good, even very good. Somewhere in the desert right now, there's probably a scrap of half-burnt paper blowing around with nothing remaining on it but Peggy's smile.

"Yes, sir," he says, setting the machine down carefully on a workbench. "A little."

"I'll get you pencil and paper," says Stark. "You can stick something up on these walls that isn't some kind of modern art."

"I don't want to put you to any-"
"That's an order," says Stark, and smiles at him. Steve's heart leaps.

"Thank you, sir," he says, and means it.

Stark rubs his forehead, leaving a streak of grease behind. "Look, you can give it a rest with the sir, okay? I'm not my dad. Tony is fine."

Steve surprises himself again by saying, "If you stop calling me 'eye candy'."

Tony looks startled, but there's something new in his eyes now, something almost like respect. "All right," he says, and holds out his hand. "Steve."

"Tony," Steve agrees, and they shake on it.

When he returns to his room that evening, Steve finds a pencil and a stack of paper on the table by his bed. He smiles, pulls up a chair in front of the table, and begins to sketch absently: strong jawline, messy hair, dark eyes, wicked smile. He's halfway done before he realizes he's drawing Tony's face.

The next day at breakfast, Tony's going on with a full mouth of toast about the latest societal disaster he'll be required to attend that night, some kind of ball to celebrate somebody he hates. He's rambling about having to find a date, and how whoever he goes with the papers will assume their wedding is next week-

"-and that we're having it because she's pregnant, and the baby isn't mine but I don't know," Tony goes on, "and I'll hate them and I'll have to dance with them and probably end up ignoring them in favor of getting shitfaced-"

"You could go with Pepper," Steve suggests.

Tony looks startled again. Steve doesn't blame him; this is the first Steve's spoken at the breakfast table in a very long time. He considers it for a moment, then shakes his head. "There's enough people who think she slept her way into her job already. I'm not making them say she's actually dating me, it'd be a nightmare."

"Happy?" Steve asks. "Rhodey?"

"Rhodey's got a date," says Tony, "and Happy has the same issue as Pepper." He smirks suddenly. "You know who I'd like to bring? JARVIS."

Steve starts laughing. JARVIS says from the ceiling, "Activated by mention of name. Good morning, Lord Stark."

"JARVIS," says Tony solemnly, "will you be my date tonight? I swear I'll be a perfect gentleman, won't get past a kiss at the front door."

"Definition found for term 'date' suggests this arrangement would be impossible, sir," says JARVIS, and Steve could swear it sounds amused. "I am an intelligence built into your home and am not capable of mobility. However, your repeated experimentation with automata over the course of ten months points towards results for term 'kissing'."

"That's all Steve needs to hear, thanks, JARVIS," says Tony, but he's grinning.

"You should bring JARVIS, though," says Steve. "Build his personality into an automaton and dance with him all night."
"We'll tell them the baby's due in six months, and that it's actually Phil Coulson's," Tony says. "That bastard Fury's wanted to get his hands on an intelligence like JARVIS for months. I'll just sue for custody of the clock-kid."

"Evidence shows you would be a poor father, Lord Stark," JARVIS says dryly from the ceiling. "May I suggest instead foisting this hypothetical mechanical child upon Miss Potts?"

"She did schedule me into three board meetings in one day last week," Tony muses. "And she made me do paperwork. All right, we'll give it to her."

"Give what to who and is it going to involve a lawsuit?" says a weary voice from the doorway into the kitchen. Pepper's standing there, purse over her shoulder, pulling on a pair of long white gloves.

"We're giving you JARVIS's illegitimate robo-baby," Tony explains.

Pepper blinks once or twice and says, "All right, I don't want to know. Tony, I have a stack of papers for you to sign— no, you don't have to get to them right now, stop looking like a kicked puppy. Steve, it would be great if you could weed the flower patch sometime today."

"Where are you going?" asks Tony.

"I'm off to tell Lord Stern that you're incredibly sorry, but you have a bout of the flu and can't make it to his doubtlessly magnificent party celebrating his promotion," says Pepper, adjusting her hat.

Tony looks as if all his Christmases have come at once. "You are the best robo-baby foster mother of all time," he says fervently, "and I would marry you if JARVIS wouldn't get jealous. I don't know how I would survive without you, really."

"You're welcome," says Pepper. "It's your reward for remembering my birthday yesterday."

Tony's face is caught halfway in between delight and despair. "I had really fabulous thoughts about you," he offers. "If you had heard them, you would have been impressed by just how much I appreciate you. Honest."

"Mm-hmm," says Pepper. She smiles warmly at the two of them and is gone from the doorway a moment later.

"Welp, I'm fucking," says Tony cheerily. "JARVIS, any excuse on not reminding me it was her birthday?"

"Miss Potts directed me not to quote warn him this time unquote," says JARVIS, without a hint of inflection in its voice. "I felt it was advisable to follow her orders."

Tony rubs his forehead. "Okay. JARVIS, tell Happy to go out to the city and buy her two tickets the most expensive opera he can find, all right? On me."

"Yes, sir," says JARVIS.

"When I was in the desert," says Steve, and Tony turns to him, startled again. Steve can't speak for a moment. He clears his throat, finds his voice, and goes on: "When I was in the desert, my friend Bucky would be— stepping out— with a new girl every week. But there was this one that he went with for three months, and I could never understand why, because any time he did even the smallest thing wrong, like promise to meet her in the town and show up a minute or two late, she wouldn't speak to him for days."
"Well, thank God Pepper's better than that," says Tony, leaning back in his chair. "I deserved that, anyway. She's wanted to go to the opera without having to take a drunk me along for ages now. She'll go with Happy, they'll have a great time."

"What's an opera?" asks Steve, and feels himself going red at the look on Tony's face. "We don't have them in the desert," he says. Didn't have them. Won't ever have them.

"No, no, it's not," says Tony, running fingers through his hair so that stands on end, "it's fine. I hate them, anyway. All the people are pretentious and there's never enough champagne. I'd rather go for a dance-hall musical, the girls show more leg."

Steve gives him a blank look. Tony sighs and runs his fingers through his hair again. "A bunch of people stand on a stage and sing at other people in a language nobody can understand but everybody pretends to. Then everyone dies. Never tell Pepper I said all this, she'll kill me, she loves the whole thing."

"Like the theater?" Steve asks. The town back home had had a theater, a little place where children would put on pageants for holidays. He suspects this may be decidedly different.

"Except with more singing," Tony agrees, "and more singing, and more singing, and more death. I saw one where at the end the best-looking girl died of consumption and she didn't even do any high kicks. Ruined the whole thing."

Consumption. Steve pictures that, a lovely young girl wasting away in her bed into nothingness. He wants to draw it suddenly, the shadows around her, the fragile bones of her face, a handkerchief by her mouth with a few dark spots in it.

"How are the pencil and paper, by the way?" asks Tony, and Steve realizes he's been absently sketching in the dust of the table with his fingernail.

"They're wonderful," he says. "Thank you."

"You still owe me something for the walls," says Tony, kicking his chair back to balance it on two legs. At Steve's momentary confused look, he prompts, "A drawing that isn't modern art? You promised in the workshop?"

"Right, right," says Steve, feeling his cheeks go red again and dropping his gaze. "Uh. I'll draw something for you very soon— the mansion, maybe, or the clockwork chauffeur—"

"Actually," says Tony, "I was hoping you might draw me."

"And hang it on the walls?" asks Steve, raising his eyebrows.

"Well, no one ever accused me of being too humble," Tony says cheerily. "I'm thinking a ten-foot portrait of me in the entrance hall, totally nude, and behind that— I'm joking."

Steve sneaks a glance upward. Tony is grinning, but there's something almost shy, in his eyes. He thinks for a moment of the sketch of Tony's face already in his bedroom, hidden nearly away in one of the desk drawers.

"Sure," he says. "I'll do it."

Tony's grin gets that much wider, and he reaches over the table to clap Steve on the arm. "Great!" he says. "I'll see you down in the workshop later today, 'kay?"
Steve isn't sure if he ever expects the picture to actually get drawn. It certainly never does. He goes down to Tony's workshop that afternoon, and Tony greets him enthusiastically and shows him the latest thing he's done, an intricate clockwork arm that can pick up a wrench and put it down again, and then the hand attached to it, complicated enough to write a word or two in big, blocky letters, and by the time they're done with clockwork arms and clockwork hands and Steve finally picks up a pencil the sun is red in the windows and it's dinnertime. So of course the next day he has to come back again.

And the next day.

And the next.

About a week in, he stops bothering to bring pencils.

Autumn slides slowly into winter. Steve's heard that the North gets snow, but there's nothing much at the mansion, just some slush on the path up to the door and frost on the windows. He's fascinated by the frost, sketching patterns in it and staring at the icy crystal residue that collects under his fingernails. All the flowers in the garden wilt, and sleet and hard pellets of hail smack against the roof nearly every day. Sometimes Tony's workshop is the only place in the whole house that's warm.

Tony and Steve are huddled together beside Tony's forge on a particularly bitter day when Steve asks, "All your inventions, do you keep them?"

Tony stares at him. "Well, I sell them. How do you think I'm so ridiculously rich?"

"No, I mean, do they let you keep them?" says Steve. "Some of these things seem like they would be really useful if they were public. The clockwork hand—you'd never lose another man trying to grab something down in mines-"

Tony cracks a grin. "That bastard Fury'd just love that, if I went public or started working for him. No, I'm keeping my copyright until it runs out. Means I can sell these things to who I want, for what purpose I want. So my clockwork hand isn't—isn't grabbing people's throats if there's a rebellion in the Middle Colonies, or something." His voice catches a little, and Steve frowns.

"Doesn't Fury get mad?" he asks.

Tony laughs. "When is that bastard not mad?"

"I mean, does he try and get back at you?" asks Steve. "Block you politically, or-"

"Once he sent a professionally trained assassin named Natasha Romanov to pretend to be my secretary," Tony says calmly. "She could have killed me if he'd told her to. It was just my good luck that he didn't."

Steve stares at him.

"I found out when another man did try to kill me, a guy called Vanko," says Tony, his eyes far away. "Long story. He had whips made out of lightning, I'd kill to replicate them, you have no idea."

"You sound like a dangerous man to be around," says Steve, and he's only half-joking.

Tony seems to return to the present suddenly, and his face lights up. "I should teach you to fight."

"What?"
"I should teach you to fight," Tony repeats, jumping up. The warmth of his body suddenly vanishes from Steve's side, and Steve pushes himself to his feet. "I know self-defense, I box with Happy all the time, we can head to the practice room-

"I can fight," Steve says.

Tony looks taken aback. "You can?"

"I learned in the desert," says Steve. "Wrestling and boxing, and a little bit of martial arts. I can fight."

Tony frowns. "Well, I bet I can beat you."

"I bet you can't," is out of Steve's mouth before he can stop himself. Tony looks positively delighted.

"Practice room," he says. "Come on, if we run maybe we won't be freezing by the time we get there."

Steve doubts it, but he dashes up the stairs anyway after Tony's retreating back. The practice room isn't far, and he's smiling as they jog up to the door. He hasn't fought in a long time, not since the desert, but he knows his body remembers how. The only difference is that now he's not fighting to prove himself to the other boys, or to show off in front of the girls. No one's watching but him and Tony.

They change into sweatpants and loose shirts, workout clothes. The floor of the practice room is made of wood; Steve tests it with his feet, shifts side to side, and bounces up and down a few times before looking at Tony.

"Well?" he says.

Tony gives Steve a wolfish grin and springs at him.

He's good, there's no denying it. Steve thinks as he dodges a kick and aims a punch at Tony's shoulder. He's not a natural fighter, but he's obviously been trained, and far more than Steve has. He's fast, too, dodging Steve's blows quickly.

When it comes right down to it, Tony moves with grace. Sometimes, in the desert, Steve would see the dark cats that came for the sheep at night. They'd blend in with the sky, just one more shadow, and you wouldn't know they were there until one of the sheep was missing. Tony doesn't quite have that, the easy, silky movements of the big cats, their subtlety and their silence, but it's in his nature. Steve can see it in him.

But if Tony is one of the big, dark cats, Steve feels like a lion; he's bigger, and he's stronger, and for every punch Tony can dodge he can throw two. The two of them are struggling to breathe now, and Tony's arms are gleaming with sweat, but his eyes are still bright. "Come on," he pants, "come on, is that all you have, I thought you told me you could fight-

Steve tackles him to the ground.

They're frozen there for a moment, the two of them. Tony's wrists are pinned under Steve's strong hands, and Steve has his knees on either side of Tony's hips. Tony's staring straight into his eyes, his gaze dark, for a long, immobile second, his chest rising and falling with his quick breaths.

Steve finally rolls off Tony, gets up, and dusts himself off, his back turned. "I can fight," he says. "Better than you, anyway."
"Fine," says Tony, sounding petulant. "But I still understand physics better than you do."

"I'm all right with that," says Steve dryly, turning back and holding out a hand to help Tony up. His hand feels warm in Steve's palm.

That night, Steve sits down at his desk to draw, as he has for most nights over the last autumn and winter. Not for the first time, he finds himself sketching messy hair, the dark line of a mustache: Tony's face, appearing slowly in line and shadow. But the Tony he draws now isn't an empty figure, staring blankly out at the viewer. It's the Tony in the practice room, fists raised, body tense, eyes focused intently on Steve. The light is gleaming on his arms, and his shirt is just a little too tight, outlining the muscles of his chest and stomach.

Steve stares at the finished drawing a moment, then carefully folds it and puts it in the very bottom drawer of his desk. It is the only drawer he's so far managed to keep empty, and he hadn't ever intended to put anything in there.

Winter passes on. The continual frost fades from the windows, and the green dust of new grass sprinkles the garden. Slush and hail turn to endless rain, and rain to fog, and fog to sunshine. It's been nearly nine months since Steve was sold to Tony at the auction.

At breakfast and in the workshop he still hears that mechanical rhythm, the continuous ticking of Stark's heart. But it's not the frightening, inhuman sound it once was. In an odd way, it's almost a comfort.

There's something new in the orbits of the people at the mansion, something that makes Tony flail with excitement, and Pepper roll her eyes and dump piles of paperwork onto Tony's desk in some form of revenge, and JARVIS gain a new tone to its voice that is, if possible, even dryer. It's called the Annual Exposition and Ball, and it's happening in two weeks.

Tony says the Annual Exposition (and Ball, he adds dispassionately) is the event of the year. It'll have the absolute latest in technology, cars, everything an engineer could hope to see in an evening. All of his contemporaries in the field will be there, quietly and viciously competing to win notice from a patron with money. Tony's got money enough already, and besides, he's been invited as Lord Stark, not as CEO of Stark Industries, so he won't be called on to give a demonstration of anything. There'll be a ball later, possibly masked, but Tony tells Steve that isn't important. What's important, he explains, is the exposition of technology. Lots of technology. New technology. New technology everywhere. Steve thinks he might be drooling.

Pepper explains to Steve later in an undertone that the Annual Exposition and Ball is the social and political event of the year, and that Tony's already offended at least three members of the aristocracy by not asking them to come with him. Pepper's hard at work as usual, trying to figure out who Tony can least afford to snub. It's traditional for the ball to be masked, so that no one knows anyone else's identity, though Pepper points out not-so-quietly that people can usually tell Tony by finding whoever's the drunkest.

The people of Stark Mansion are constantly at work as spring wears on, arranging logistics, trying to design Tony a mask, and searching continuously for a date. Tony complains plaintively to Steve in the workshop one day as Steve sketches the way the light falls onto the tables through the windows.

"I feel like I'm a princess in a fairy tale," he says. "You know, one of those ones where the fairest princess in the land has her hand promised to an enchanter who turns out to be a dragon. Or the one with the glass slipper, except other people are all the maidens in the kingdom, and the glass slipper is me."
Steve makes a noise of helpful agreement. He's never heard northern fairy tales before.

"I would make a wonderful princess," says Tony. "Wouldn't I?"

Steve pauses in his sketching, considering. Princesses. From what he does know about northern fairy tales, he can conjure a few images. Princesses, he recalls, are supposed to be lovely, demure, prone to fainting, and patient as they wait to be rescued by their prince.

"Uh," he says.

"I could wear a dress," Tony offers, grinning.

Steve stares at him. Tony's grin only gets wider. "What?" he says. "You don't think I'd look pretty in a dress?"

He would. That's the problem. "I don't think-" Steve begins, before the door bursts open.

"Lord Stark," says Pepper's voice tightly, and Steve spins around in his chair. Pepper never calls Tony that. Pepper's standing in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest, looking as if she's swallowed a lemon. She heaves a sigh and says, "Allow me to present Mr. Nicholas Fury."

Tony's standing in a moment as Fury stomps into the workshop. "Why the hell did you let him in?" he hisses to Pepper, ignoring Fury.

"I didn't have a choice!" Pepper hisses back. "He just came in, flashed his identification, and demanded to see you! You know what the Ministry of War said last time we kicked him out-"

"Lord Stark," Fury interrupts, holding out a hand to shake. "It's been, how long?"

"Nine months," says Tony curtly. "Go away."

"I'm not going away, Stark," says Fury, putting his hands on the table between them and leaning into Tony's face. "Do you have any idea how hard the Ministry has been leaning on me these last few weeks? I have been berated by every-"

"If this is about your little book club with Natasha, I already told you it'd take more incentive for me to sign up," says Tony. "You'd have to get better people in it, for one. Like Thor. Thor would be fun." His face lights up. "Or Steve here! Yeah, get Steve to join, I'd definitely sign up then-"

"This is not about the book cl- the Avengers," Fury growls. "This is about the war, Stark."

"Go away," Tony says flatly.

"Work with me," says Fury, leaning against a work table. His hand is resting on a pile of papers. "You really have no idea what's going on down in the desert, do you? Our men are fighting barbarians every day, our men are dying, and if you can't get off your lazy ass long enough to give up on this damn pacifist kick-"

Tony says, "I am not building you weapons," very softly, very calmly.

"It's your men down there!" Fury barks, his fists clenching. "The longer this war goes on, the more of them will die! The only reason it's financially reasonable to keep building the Empire right now is the weapons you sold us back when you had your head on straight!"

"Then maybe it's time to stop building the Empire," says Tony, still quiet.
Fury stills. "That's treason," he says sharply into Tony's face.

Steve, watching, feels a sudden wave of apprehension wash over him. Something's wrong here. This doesn't sound like a new argument; it's one Tony and Fury have clearly gone over a million times before. What could Fury possibly have to gain by coming all the way to Stark Mansion to hash it through again?


Fury steps back, his one eye narrowing. "Nine months ago I asked you if you knew what you were doing," he says.

"And I told you I never could resist a pretty pair of pecs," says Tony, his teeth bared so widely that his grin turns into a grimace. "Still can't, huh, Steve?"

"It's nice to know you still love barbarians so much," says Fury, and then he's marching out of the workshop, fists still clenched. The breath runs out of Tony in a great whoosh, and he viciously kicks a table leg.


"Unfortunately, he is director of the Ministry of War," says Pepper dryly.

Tony's pacing the workshop. Steve bends over his piece of paper and begins to sketch, surreptitiously, the lines of his body. "I just wish I could get back at him somehow," says Tony furiously. "Just once, disrupt his nice little world, show him I'm not just another airheaded aristocrat, break his stupid rules."

"It could be worse," says Steve comfortingly, looking up from his sketch. "He could have asked you to the Annual Exposition and Ball."

Tony stops pacing.

"No," says Pepper immediately.

"Yes," says Tony gleefully. "Yes yes yes yes yes. Steve, I love you, you are fantastic, you are a genius. Yes."

"No," says Pepper. "This is a bad idea, Tony. I already have enough of your messes to clean up-"

"What?" says Steve.

Tony turns to him triumphantly. "Steve Rogers," he says, "will you go to the Annual Exposition and Ball with me?"

"Say no," says Pepper.

"Doesn't matter what he says, that's an order," says Tony cheerfully. "I'd prefer it if he said yes, obviously, but I'm taking him whatever he does."

"Yes," says Steve. "But I can't dance."

Tony says, "I'll teach you."

Pepper covers her face with her hands.
They meet in the sparring practice room the next day, where they've come a few more times over the past months to fight. The sun's streaming in through the windows, dappling drifting patterns on the floor. Tony's in a suit from an earlier business meeting, but Steve's in his gardening clothes, old, ripped, and stained with dirt, and when Tony sees him, he bursts out laughing.

"I should change," says Steve.

"No, no," says Tony, "trust me on this, you look fantastic."

Steve rubs at the back of his neck self-consciously. "Well?" he says. "Are you going to teach me to dance, or what?"

"Right," says Tony, "right, okay. Step forward and grab my hand, like this." He takes hold of Steve's right hand and raises it up in the air. "Now— okay, I'll follow. Put your hand on my waist." Steve, his face red, puts his hand just below Tony's ribcage, and Tony shakes his head.

"No, no," he says, "like this," and he puts his warm hand over Steve's and guides it down until it's just above his hip. "And then I put my hand on your shoulder. And then we dance."

"We haven't got music," says Steve. He's pretty sure he's bright red.

"Oh, you're going to like this, I just installed it yesterday," says Tony. "JARVIS, track four."

Steve has just enough time to wonder what a track is, and what tracks one through three are, before there's a click and music, wonderful, glorious music, begins pouring out of the walls. Tony grins up at him and says, "Move," and Steve begins to dance.

Or try, anyway. It's only a few seconds before Tony says, "Look, this isn't going to work if you're holding me at arm's length the whole time."

"I don't want to be rude," says Steve. Tony sighs, and suddenly he's pressed right up against Steve, their height difference tucking his head just below Steve's chin.

"Like this," he says. Steve can feel Tony's heart tick against his chest.

"Okay," says Tony, after they've been dancing for a few more moments, "now spin me." He sighs at Steve's bewildered expression. "Let go of my waist and lift up your other arm." Steve does, and Tony performs a neat spin under his arm that finishes with a twirl back into Steve's arms. Steve catches him on instinct. Tony smiles up at him.

"See, you're a natural. Dip me."

That one's more obvious; Steve dips Tony, and they return back to dancing, Steve's arm around Tony's waist, Tony's head on his chest. There's something that does come very naturally about dancing with Tony, this smooth glide of bodies, the movement and the rhythm of the music, the way Steve can feel it so closely when Tony chuckles after Steve misses a step. A woman's voice is crooning out of the walls, like magic: "birds do it, bees do it, we do it," and Steve feels like he could do this forever.

A week passes. Pepper is running on the edge of lunacy. She's been rushing in and out of the house in a constant panic, making calls on every fashion designer in the capital of the Empire, trying ineffectually to cover up that Lord Stark is going to the most important social event of the year with a slave. Tony's been gleefully detailing his fantasies of the expression on Fury's face to Steve over breakfast. And Steve's been waiting for the day of the Annual Expo and Ball to come. Waiting, and worrying.
He hasn't been into the city since the day he was sold. He hasn't been off the grounds of the mansion since the day he was sold. Tony may be thrilled about showing Steve around, but Steve remembers how nearly every northerner has reacted to him throughout his entire life: scorn, condescension, contempt. To them, he won't be Tony's date, no matter how much Tony would like him to be. He'll be Tony's slave. Tony's pet barbarian. The bracelet on his wrist that marks him as belonging to Tony Stark will set him apart from the northerners, make sure they know he's not one of them.

He hasn't voiced these thoughts to anyone, but one day he's idly drawing and what takes shape on the page is a monkey, a trained ape with a shock of blond hair and a bracelet around its wrist, and below it a crowd throwing peanuts. He looks at it a moment, crumples it up, and throws it across the room.

The week until the ball seems to take forever, but when the day does come, Steve can't help but wish in a terrified kind of dread that it'll be suddenly delayed for a month. He can't deal with this. He's not ready for this.

Pepper marches into his bedroom in the late afternoon, just before it's time to leave. She's carrying something, a set of folded clothes, a suit. "This is what you'll be wearing," she says, laying it down carefully on the bed. "I ordered it for about a thousand yesterday— it's impossible to find a nice suit in your size, do you know just how big you are?— so don't spill anything on it. We're not decking you out in a full costume, only tacky people do that, so once you're changed into the suit I'll bring in your mask and we can see how they look together."

"A thousand?" says Steve.

"It's Tony's money," says Pepper, "and I don't really think he'll mind. Just do me a favor and don't rip the cufflinks." She's sailing out of Steve's room in another moment, closing the door behind her.

Steve tentatively lifts the suit from the bed. A thousand! That could have fed his whole village! The material's finer than anything he's ever felt, and the suit fits as if it were tailored to every last inch of him. He runs his hand down the sides of the jacket, marveling at its smoothness. He can't quite believe any suit is worth a thousand, but this comes close.

When he opens the door, Pepper looks more pleased with herself than she has in weeks. She hands him a scrap of blue cloth, and he stares at it, confused.

"What is this, ma'am?" he asks.

"Your mask," says Pepper. "It's a hood thing, I ordered it from a woman in the city. She says it's the latest word in fashion." She sighs at Steve's bewildered expression. "Look, I don't understand it either, just put the damn hood thing on."

Steve puts the hood thing on. It's almost like a ski mask, with holes for the eyes, but it goes all the way around his face and buckles at the chin. He rubs absently at it, then says, "Is there a mirror, ma'am?"

Pepper seems to have drifted off for a moment, staring at Steve's face. She snaps to, nods, and says, "Uh, come on. I'll take you to one of the bathrooms with a full-length mirror. Remind me to pay the newspapers a lot of money to say nothing but good things about Van Dyne Designs for a while, will you?" She glances at him again. "A lot of money."

"Yes, ma'am," says Steve, forehead furrowing in confusion. What's going on?

They've just turned a corner when they run into Tony himself, wearing what Steve can only really
describe as "lots of red and gold". He's got on a suit that looks more or less like a cloth version of a suit of armor, with red plates and golden joints at the elbows and knees. He's practically glowing. Steve stares.

Tony's also staring, as it happens. Right at Steve. With an overdramatically trembling hand, he raises his finger to point at Steve and says, "Is that my date?"

"What the hell are you wearing?" demands Pepper.

"Someone up there really likes me," says Tony matter-of-factly, still staring at Steve.

"You are not going to the Annual Exposition and Ball in that suit," says Pepper. "Absolutely not."

Tony snaps to attention. "I am so going to the Annual Exposition and Ball in this suit," he says. "It took me an hour to design."

"It took Jan van Dyne a week and a half to design just Steve's mask," says Pepper, "and it cost you a lot of money for me to buy you a suit that wine stains probably won't show up on and you look like a giant tomato splattered with mustard and you are changing into the suit I have put in your room right now."

"Send Jan van Dyne several buckets of flowers from me, then," says Tony cheerfully, and ambles past them, down the hallway. Pepper rubs her temples.

"All right," she says, "that was... not the worst thing I've ever caught him wearing." She grimaces. "Comes close, though. Look, here's a bathroom with a full-length mirror, go in and appreciate yourself."

Steve ducks in through the doorway of the bathroom, turns to face the mirror, and stares.

He looks good. He looks *good*. The suit fits him perfectly, its smooth dark lines making him look dapper, professional. He looks more formal than he can ever remember looking, like one of the high-class lords from his auction. Someone who kisses ladies' hands and dances waltzes. A gentleman. Almost a northerner.

But that's not the reason why Steve stares. Steve stares because of his mask.

It's less of a mask than a cowl, cloth pulled over his head to cover his face above the mouth. There are two holes cut for the eyes, angled to draw attention to Steve's eyes themselves, and— Steve doesn't know how the designer did it, but the blue of the mask is the exact blue of his eyes. On each side of his head are small wings, a pair of them, made from some pale, glimmering material that clings to the sides of the mask and makes the eye glance to wherever the light falls on Steve's body, and in the center of Steve's forehead is a small, neat A. The mask buckles beneath his chin like a soldier's helmet, and as Steve looks, he realizes he does look like a soldier, some ethereal gentleman soldier with a kind eye and a bright smile.

He stares. There are definitely good things about the North.

"Hello, eye candy," says Tony in Steve's ear, and Steve jumps about a foot in the air.

"Hello, Lord Stark, sir," he says dryly.

Tony winces. "Point taken. Hello, Steve Rogers, you look positively fabulous in that suit and I am fully prepared to challenge anyone else who asks you to dance to a duel to the death, unless they are bigger than me, in which case they can do what they want." He raises his eyebrows at their
reflections in the mirror. In the reflection, Steve looks about twice Tony's size.

"You look nice, too," says Steve, and means it. Tony's changed into a normal suit, and if Steve's suit makes him look like a good gentleman soldier, Tony's makes him look like a well-dressed devil. His hair is its usual mess, his mustache is dark against his golden skin, and the always-present gleam of mischief in his eyes seems transformed into downright wickedness.

"Why, thank you," says Tony, grinning and trailing a hand down his own pant leg. "I always look nice."

"Where's your mask?" asks Steve.

Tony makes a wide-eyed face at him, taps the pocket of his suit, and whispers very softly into Steve's ear, "There. Red and gold like the old suit. Don't tell Pepper, she'll confiscate it."

Steve nods at him imperceptibly. He can see Pepper rolling her eyes at the two of them right next to Tony's reflection, and he's pretty sure Tony can too, but when Tony gives him a solemn wink he still winks solemnly back.

"If you don't leave about five minutes ago you'll miss the opening presentations," says Pepper sweetly. Tony swears, grabs Steve's arm, and tugs him out of the bathroom. They hurry along the corridors and down to the front door, Tony's hand never quite leaving Steve's arm, dash down the front path, and slide into the back seat of the carriage with the clockwork driver. Tony's panting.

"One day," he says, "I will invent something that flies."

"We have something that flies," says Steve. "It's called a bird."

"Then bring me one of those large enough to ride," Tony grumbles, but he settles into the corner of the carriage and taps his fingers in a complicated rhythm on the glass in front of them. "Telling it where to go," he explains. "Nice thing about clockwork, it has any number of triggers you can use. I set JARVIS and the lock on my workshop door to a voice trigger, which, let me tell you, is a bitch to set up. The clockwork chauffeur responds to tapping, which is slightly less of a bitch to set up but still a pain." The carriage jolts into life, and Tony looks pleased. "But worth it," he adds.

"Is there anything I should know before we get there?" asks Steve. "Which fork to use, sort of thing?"

Tony laughs and shakes his head. "No formal dinner, thank God. The Expo is pretty much a fancy version of the city fair. There'll be places to pick up snacks. Don't worry about forks, it'll all be finger food, you know how it is."

That wasn't what Steve meant, but he lets it go. The mask is too hot for the close confines of the carriage, so he pulls it off, folds it neatly into quarters, and tucks it into the pocket of his jacket, where only a hint of blue shows it's there. Tony looks disappointed. Steve raises his eyebrows at him.

"I really am looking forward to the masquerade," says Tony. "See, for most of the dancing, no one knows who anyone else is, but no one really cares, either. It's just some woman in a black and white bird mask and a red dress, you know? Nothing special. But you-" He taps his fingers on his leg, smirks.

"I am special," Steve fills in, laughing.

"You are the specialest of the special kids," says Tony sincerely. He reaches over to ruffle Steve's
hair into a mess, and looks pleased at the result. "The society divas won't know what hit 'em."

"I don't want to hit anybody," says Steve, smoothing down his hair again, a little crease between his eyebrows.

Tony's eyes crinkle up in a laugh. "It's a figure of speech, Rogers. I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't want to hit anybody, though. You saw the little wings on that mask? You looked like some kind of avenging angel in a suit."

"Maybe I am an avenging angel," says Steve, smiling. "Saving society divas from people like you."

Tony makes an injured noise. "I will be perfectly charming to every single one of those people! I will be 
absurdly charming to every single one of those people. I will charm them so hard they'll wake up in the morning wanting a man in a red-and-gold mask to dance with them all day and night and they won't know why. I am so charming it's cruel, I swear."

Steve rolls his eyes. "That's the point," he says. "You'll be making eyes at some fine lady, and she'll be giggling back at you and her date will be furious. So I'll swoop in from the sky and thwart your evil plans."

"I like the sound of that," muses Tony. "I'm flirting with a courteous gentleman, and you jump in."

"I fly down from the ceiling," says Steve.

"How do you fly?" says Tony, raising one eyebrow.

"My loyal sidekick, the genius who works with clockwork, has built me jet boots," Steve explains. "Unfortunately, I don't know my mild-mannered companion's secret identity as a wicked villain who flirts with courteous gentlemen."

"Interesting," says Tony. "I work for you even though I'm also your arch-enemy. You must have really great health care." He clears his throat. "I'm flirting with a courteous gentleman when you swoop down from the ceiling, looking all disapproving like you do when I haven't slept in a little while."

"Sixty-four hours isn't a little while, Tony," says Steve. "I swoop down, looking all disapproving, and tell the courteous gentleman that he should flee for his life because you are actually..." He trails off pointedly.

"Because I am actually a mass murderer and corrupter of the innocent," says Tony, "and also, I have terrible taste in suits."

"The man flees for his life, obviously," Steve says. "And for his fashion sense."

"Curses!" says Tony. "Foiled again!" He holds out his arms, wrists up, and bows his head. "Well, I guess you'd better take me to jail, Mr. Avenging Angel in a Very Nice Suit."

"And don't do it again," says Steve, clasping his hands around Tony's wrists. They fit all the way around. Steve can feel the hot pulse thrumming under them, vibrant and energetic. He wonders for a moment how the clockwork heart pumps blood, and then he's distracted as Tony meets his eyes.

Tony looks surprised for some reason, his lips parted just a fraction, as if he's about to say something. His eyes are unfathomable as ever, and they seem to be searching Steve's gaze for something that Steve can't quite name. He blinks once, slowly.
"You can probably let go of my hands now," he says. His voice is just a little rough.

"All right," says Steve, but it takes him a second or two longer to release his hold on Tony's warm wrists. The carriage jolts along beneath them, and their gazes don't break for another few long moments.

"I still can't wait to see that bastard Fury's face," says Tony, and the spell breaks. Steve looks away.

"Yeah," he says.

Tony's going on about Fury, and Steve falls back into the familiar habit of letting him babble. His attention isn't on the conversation, anyway. He's realized something.

Tony looks good in that suit. That's part of it. It makes him look like—not like another person, but like Tony, if Tony was just a little bit more dapper and just a little bit more wicked. More importantly, the suit doesn't just make Tony look good. It makes Tony look handsome.

Most importantly of all, there is a small but significant part of Steve's brain that isn't thinking about how Tony looks in the suit, but how he might look out of it.

Tony, typically, hasn't even noticed that Steve isn't listening. Steve watches him talk, trying to think. When did this happen? Where did it even come from? Is it new?

He's pretty sure it's not.

He thinks, abruptly, of the last time he was in the city, and the jolting, dark hold of the slave wagon, and the people he met there— of the woman who'd tried to scare them with stories of Tony's clockwork heart. She'd told them, as well, that Tony took pleasure slaves, bought people to use them for his entertainment.

As Steve looks at Tony now, there's something in him that says, quietly, I wouldn't mind that.

"-and right then the man comes out of the next room," says Tony, "and she just smiles at him, grabs a whole handful of sweets, and runs."

Steve takes his cue and laughs. The bumping, jolting progress of the carriage is slowing now, finally rolling to a stop, and Tony opens the door and slides out, beckoning to Steve to follow him. Steve climbs out of the door and stops dead.

The spectacle before him is like nothing he's ever seen before. The exposition seems to be held in a park, but a park bigger than any he's ever seen. Colored lamps hang from every tree, and the branches are strung with candles, lighting the paths in a thousand shifting shadows and colors in the dying sunlight. Faint music hums all around them, something with singing violins and the slow plink of a piano. The air is warm and scented by smells rising from food carts all along the paths: frying meat, baking bread, cinnamon and spice. And in the distance, rising tall above the paths and trees, is the huge dome of a building that's so bright Steve thinks it might be outshining the sky.

"Welcome to the Expo," says Tony's voice in his ear. "Let's face it, it's basically a glorified county fair."

"It's beautiful," says Steve fervently.

"Yeah," says Tony, and smiles at him, and offers his arm. Steve takes it, and together they proceed down the path towards the glittering dome.
"We won't actually be going in there until the ball," Tony explains, nodding at the dome. "The Expo — it really is pretty much a county fair, when you think about it— takes up the whole park, and we can go and see new inventions and technology and get some food and see the new technology and inventions and what people have been doing and look at all the inventions technology and inventions. And then there's the ball, but that's not until the sky is totally dark anyway."

Steve is still mesmerized by the enormous spectacle. It seems as if he's in a dream, some landscape of the imagination his mind has conjured up. The only thing keeping him anchored to reality is the presence of Tony at his side, his arm looped through Steve's, the lines of heat where their bodies touch.

Every color seems otherworldly, every sight something impossible, every new sound and smell and touch brand new and brilliant. Booths, stalls, and stages line every path, featuring some new contraption that looks as if it's come straight out of a storybook.

Steve sees a life-size clockwork man dancing with a laughing woman (step right up, ladies and gentlemen, and take a turn around the stage with the shocking Clockwork Flirt!), a carriage that floats in the air for a few brief seconds before crashing to the ground (in the future horses' hooves won't even need to touch the ground! save hundreds on horseshoes!), and a complicated mechanism that can draw on paper in smooth, lovely circles and swirls (lords and ladies, the latest in modern art! progress is coming, so be the first or your friends to get a clockwork-drawn sketch!)

It's all so incredible, so brilliant, so unlike anything he's ever seen before. Steve drifts through it all in a haze, Tony’s steady chatter in his ear piercing his fog. His imagination can't stretch to fit everything he can see here, let alone his eyes. This can't be Earth; Earth wouldn't be able to fit all of this impossibility. They must have stumbled into another world.

"Steve!" says Tony. From the sound of it, it's not the first time he's said his name. Steve snaps to attention.

"Sorry," he says. "What is it?"

Tony's smiling at him, and from the look on his face, Steve's pretty sure he understands exactly why Steve's distracted. He probably even approves of it. "I asked if you wanted to get some food," he says.

"Sure, all right," says Steve. "Do you know somewhere good?"

Tony gestures to the stall they've stopped by. "Yeah, here. They do these things from the Far East, this grilled meat wrapped in these spicy fluffy pancake things— it's the best, you're trying some."

Steve's not that well acquainted with northern food, let alone Far Eastern food, but he lets Tony haggle over the price of a couple of pancakes and takes his when Tony returns, triumphant. They settle on one of the marble benches placed along the path to eat.

The pancake thing's good, but that's not the thing about it. The thing about the pancake thing is that it's messy. Really messy. Steve can't help it when juice from the meat runs out of the corners of his mouth and all down his chin, and he can't help watching how it runs down Tony's.

He really has to deal with this.

"Tony!" says a voice from next to them. Steve looks to see a man with slicked-back brown hair and a pair of black glasses smiling ingratiatingly at them. "How ya doing?"

"Hammer," says Tony, and his voice is suddenly colder, his face tighter, in a way that Steve isn't
"Doing good?" says Hammer, sitting on Steve's other side on the bench. He leans across Steve to tap Tony's chest. "Ticker still going?" he asks.

"Still ticking," says Tony, and Hammer tilts his head back and laughs loudly.

"See, that's why I like you, that's why we're buddies," he says. "Hilarious, Tony. We got a real joker here, huh?"

"Enough about me," says Tony sharply, "what about you? Business still failing?"

Hammer laughs loudly again. "Funny! Funny man! We're doing great, haven't you heard? Fourteen government contracts this month! We've got an exhibit somewhere close to the dome, you should really go look at it."

Tony coughs. "Have you met my date, Steve Rogers?" he says, with what Steve is pretty sure is the greatest effort at politeness he's ever made. "Steve, Lord Justin Hammer. Hammer, Steve Rogers."

Steve reaches out his hand to shake, but Hammer grabs his wrist and pulls up his sleeve, revealing the black bracelet with Tony's initials that Steve's been wearing ever since the auction. He stares at it for a moment, then bursts out laughing again, even louder than before.

"Man, Tony Stark, huh!" he says. "I heard you'd brought a slave to the Expo and Ball, but I thought it was just a rumor, you know? I thought, even my good friend Tony Stark can't be that crazy!" He reaches around Steve to slap Tony's back. "What a joke, huh? Is the slave really a barbarian?" His eyes search Tony's face for a moment, before he laughs again. "Man, a barbarian at the Expo! Think he's going to start smashing things up? I heard they have these huge axes down there, they just hit everything with them—barbarians, you know." He wiggles his eyebrows up and down.

"Steve didn't bring an axe," says Tony. Every line of his body looks relaxed, but his voice is cold as ice. "I wish he had. I could have used it right around now."

"That's our Tony," says Hammer, "what a joker," and he slaps Tony on the back again, gets up, and leaves.

Steve and Tony sit there for a few minutes. The sky is fading from a deep purple into a deeper grey, and there's still a faint noise of piano, gentle in the cinnamon-scented air. Steve thinks he can see, very faintly, the glimmerings of the first star. His hand is an inch away from Tony's on the bench, and that inch feels like a thousand miles.

"Let's go see Hammer's exhibit," says Tony eventually. "He talks big, but he's an idiot. I bet it'll be some toy soldier that walks up and down and claps its hands, we've seen a million of those before. Hammer can't do anything right." His voice is insistent

They stand up, and Steve glances at Tony. Tony meets his eyes for a split second, then looks away.

Slowly, hesitantly, Steve offers his arm. Tony looks at him for a long moment. There's something in his eyes, something Steve can't quite define, before Tony slips his arm into Steve's and they set off down the path, bodies pressed close together.

Hammer's exhibit isn't a little toy soldier. It's a big toy soldier. It can shoot targets from about five feet away, and it can hover for a few seconds, and it can walk across the stage, though it crashes when it's asked to turn. The only part of it that's even close to the other wonders Steve's seen is its hand,
which has such fine motor control that it can write HELLO in big, blocky letters. There's something vaguely familiar about it, for whatever reason, though Steve can't quite place what. It's unimpressive, and it's not up to standard, and Tony whispers that softly in Steve's ear, his fingers digging into Steve's side.

The sky has gone entirely dark. The rainbow lights of the paths and the glittering dome are far outshining the stars; next to the world around them, everything above looks faint, dull grey moon on a dull grey sky. The music is fading from around them, the song reaching its end at last. The people on the paths are beginning to drift towards the dome, laughing and talking. Tony and Steve share a glance and follow them.

A doorway in the dome leads into an entrance hall, with white marble pillars that sweep up into an impressively vaulted ceiling. There are folding screens set everywhere, and people are ducking behind them and emerging with masks on, then continuing from there through another door. Tony tucks himself behind one, so Steve finds another, taking his blue mask out of the pocket of his jacket and pulling it over his head.

He ducks out from behind the screen and glances around for someone who looks like they might be Tony. It doesn't take him long. Tony's by the doorway in a full-face mask that's cut to look like it's made of red and gold metal faceplates. His eyes are slits, his mouth a flat line. If Steve hadn't seen the suit he knows was meant to go with it, he would feel uneasy of that mask. As it is, it's a little bit ridiculous.

He drifts over to Tony and says, holding out his hand, "May I have this dance?"

Tony says, "Oh, darling, I thought you'd never ask," and takes hold of Steve's fingers, and together they advance into the ballroom.

The doorway leads onto a high balcony, from which Tony and Steve can see the chiaroscuro swirl of the dance floor. There are more marble pillars along the walls, and pictures of northern gods painted on the ceiling. Down from the balcony sweeps a long, beautiful marble staircase, almost twice as impressive as everything else in the room. Steve stares.

"Every single time I'm here," Tony whispers in his ear, "I just want to slide all the way down that banister."

Steve's mouth curls into a smile. "Come on," he says. "Let's dance."

The steps are familiar enough now that Steve doesn't have to think about them. One of his hands is curled around Tony's waist, the other's fingers tangled with Tony's. Their bodies are pressed together, close enough that Steve can feel the tick of Tony's heart against his chest, close enough that he doesn't want to let go.

The musicians are playing something slow and sweet, something that makes Steve think for some reason of the cold, clear stars over the desert, something a little sad. They whirl through the dancers, Tony in Steve's arms. The room is quiet but for the music. For the first time in a long, long time, he feels at peace.

They dance for what seems like forever.

After a while, Tony leads Steve by the hand to a corner of the room, where they lean against the wall, their fingers still interlaced. Now that he's off the floor, Steve has a chance to look properly at the dancers. They look, well, expensive. He's pretty sure there isn't a suit in the room that cost under five hundred. The masks are elaborate: he sees bright purple one with spikes on the eyes, one
decorated to look like an ant's head, even an elaborate red and blue full face mask that looks as if it's covered with spiderwebs.

And he notices something odd: the dancers are all watching each other. Though their feet tread the steps perfectly in sync and they hold their partners close, not a single person's attention is on the person they're dancing with. They're watching each other, watching to see who makes a mistake, watching to see if they're fitting in, watching each other rather than simply being there.

So this is where Tony's lived.

Steve nudges Tony and whispers, "Can we get some fresh air?" Tony nods, and leads him by the hand through a small door at the back of the dome out into the park again.

They find a bench and sit down, their fingers still laced together. The vendors have packed up their stalls and left, and all the warmth has faded from the air, leaving the cold, sharp smell of night. There's a cloud half-covering the moon. Steve can't make out Tony's face in the darkness, all smooth cloth.

"Take off the mask, will you?" he says. "I want to see you."

Tony pulls off the mask, and now his face is made of sharp shadows and angles, the moonlight illuminating what it can. Steve can't see his eyes.

"Hey," says Tony, low and quiet. They're sitting very close on the bench, so close their bodies are almost touching.

"Hey," says Steve softly back.

"I still like your mask," says Tony. "It makes you into some kind of angel, look at those wings," and he reaches up to trace the outline of one of the wings on Steve's mask with one finger.

"I'm no angel," says Steve. Tony laughs softly at that.

"Do you know," he says, "this is the very first Expo and Ball where I haven't ended up blackout drunk at the end of the night?" The shadow of his lips twists. "I guess I deserve what they say about me. I'm a drunken fool who can't stand a moment out of the spotlight."

Steve looks at the broken angles of shadows and moonlight that make up the man in front of him, and he remembers the look Hammer gave him after he saw his bracelet: like he was an object, like he was a bug, and he remembers acutely for a moment the intense realization that he was not one of these northerners, that he would never be, that they would always see him as an object to be either admired or thrown away, that he would never, ever belong.

He remembers the swirl of people on the dance floor, mask after mask after mask after mask, all watching each other through their eyeholes, making sure they're not doing it wrong, making sure no one misses a step, all those masks, all those eyes.

And he remembers dancing with Tony. He remembers the warmth of their bodies together, and the way their fingers intertwined, and how well Tony's head fit against his collarbone. And he remembers peace, and laughing with Tony in the workshop, and he wonders for half a second if Tony knows what it's like not to belong there, too.

"No," he says. "I don't think so."

"Nice of you to say," says Tony. He laughs again, low and bitter. Steve wants to reach out and touch
his shoulder, but before he can, Tony stands up.

"We've stuck around long enough, probably," he says. "Never saw that bastard Fury's face once he saw you, but that's okay, never really cared about it anyway." He turns to Steve. "You coming, eye candy?"

"Coming, Tony," says Steve. He stands up and, for the last time of the night, offers his arm to Tony. Tony takes it, and they make their way back to the clockwork carriage, the moon lighting the paths to the edge of the park in silver and white.

The ride home is quiet. Tony leans against the window of the carriage, his eyes still in shadow. Steve watches him from the other side of the seat. The carriage bounces along, jolting and rough in the silence.

When they arrive Steve waits for Tony as he turns off the clockwork chauffeur before continuing up the path beside him. The mansion is dark, with only one flickering light coming from a window. Pepper must be reading in bed. Tony pushes open the door and says, "JARVIS, entrance hall lights to half," and the room glows suddenly, faintly, with a dim light that leaves colors uncertain and the shadows long.

"Anyway," says Tony, "now that's over with. Don't have to worry about finding me another date 'til next year, unless I just drag you again." His mouth is twisting in a smirk.

"It was fantastic," says Steve honestly.

Tony looks surprised, then pleased. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," says Steve, and smiles at him, because it wasn't fantastic, not really, because it can't ever be fantastic as long as he's a barbarian among northerners, can't ever be fantastic as long as Hammer refuses to shake his hand, can't ever be fantastic as long as he's nothing more than a slave to them, but he doesn't care, because saying it was fantastic makes Tony smile back.

"We should get to bed," says Tony, but he doesn't move.

"Probably," Steve agrees, and doesn't move, either.

There's a pause for a few moments. Even after a night of dancing Tony still looks impossibly dapper in his suit, impossibly good. He's looking at Steve, still as a startled deer, his eyes dark and his face searching. There's something in him that Steve thinks he's seen before—some kind of still motion, silent grace. And he's watching Steve with something in his eyes, something that wasn't there before, and he's— he's watching Steve's lips, watching his lips and his face and his body with something almost like hunger.

Steve can't breathe, suddenly.

"Steve," says Tony, and can't seem to go on.

"Tony," says Steve, and kisses him.

Tony kisses back as if he's been starved for it— his lips on Steve's lips, his tongue licking into Steve's mouth, his stubble scraping Steve's chin, battling with Steve for dominance of the kiss. Tony has his fist in Steve's hair, and Tony has fingers digging into Steve's hip, and Tony’s body is pressed to Steve's like he never wants to let go.

Steve breaks away for air and finds he still can't breathe; Tony's looking at him, panting raggedly,
like he's the only thing in the world that matters. Steve kisses him again, and this time Tony lets Steve take control without a fight, only letting something out that might be a moan. Warmth is pooling low in Steve's gut, and there might not be a single drop of blood left in his head. He doesn't care.

When they break apart again, Steve doesn't bother to try to catch his breath. Instead, he goes straight for Tony's neck, licking and kissing and biting, teasing Tony until his head is thrown back, his pupils blown. It doesn't take long. Both of Tony's hands are in Steve's hair now, his breath coming in sharp gasps. "Steve," he says, "Steve, Steve, fuck, Steve," and Steve hums invitingly into his skin and begins to work on leaving a bruise on Tony's collarbone that'll last for days. Tony lets out a groan, low and hungry, and Steve's remaining control disappears.

He pulls back, trying to ignore Tony's impossibly enticing "Steve," of disappointment, and goes for Tony's clothes. The jacket is on the floor in a few moments, the bow tie not long after that, and then Steve is working on the buttons of Tony's shirt, his hands finding their way onto Tony's skin wherever he can get an opening, and Tony is gasping, panting, his hands sliding straight under Steve's shirt. Steve is pretty sure his expensive clothes are going to rip and he doesn't care.

They're both shirtless now, skin pressed to skin. Steve's lips have found Tony's again somehow, and he's licking into Tony's mouth almost sloppily, desperately. Tony is so warm and pliant under him he thinks he'll fly apart from sheer want. He pulls back just to hear Tony's whine and says, "Not here, not the entrance hall."

Tony nods, but Steve isn't sure if he's paying attention. His eyes are so dark there's almost no iris left to them. Steve wraps his hand around Tony's wrist, warm, pulse thrumming, tugs him out of the entrance room and down a hall filled with bedrooms, slams him up against the wall of the first one he ducks into, kisses him fiercely.

The first time he was shown this hall, he'd just arrived at the mansion. He'd been terrified, then, and horrified, at the thought of being Tony's pleasure slave, sick at the idea of it, but now there's something in him that almost thrills at it—

Tony turns his head away from Steve's. Steve tries to follow it with his mouth, possessive, wanting, but Tony just turns his head further away and says, "Steve, stop."

Steve stops and releases his hold on Tony, taking a step back. Tony remains against the wall, his eyes turned away.

"What's wrong?" asks Steve. He's half-hard already, and he's pretty sure Tony is too, but the look on Tony's face, worse than he's ever seen it, a mixture of misery and want and guilt and worry, eclipses everything else.

"We can't do this," says Tony. He still won't meet Steve's eyes.

"Why not?" demands Steve.

Tony says, "You're a slave."

It's as if someone has dumped a cold bucket of water over Steve's head. He's a slave. He's a slave, and Tony Stark can't make love to a slave. Tony won't touch him, because he's an object, he's a thing to be admired or used or thrown away and not a person to kiss. Tony can't do this, because Steve is a barbarian.

"I'm a slave," says Steve, flatly.
"Steve, I-" says Tony, and there's something in his eyes, something almost like heartbreak. Steve ignores it. No one has their heart broken because they can't fuck a barbarian slave.

"Thought you couldn't resist a pretty pair of pecs," he says, taking another step back and half-turning away.


"I heard from another slave before you bought me," says Steve, still not turning back. "You went to the deserts and sold your heart to a barbarian demon so you could live forever." The word comes surprisingly easy to his lips; he thinks he could say it again, and so he does. "Barbarian. Barbarian heart, and barbarian deserts, and barbarian demons, and a barbarian slave. I know why you bought me— to be part of a set."

"Steve," says Tony. The simple brokenness of his voice hurts Steve like nothing else— how dare Tony sound like he did on the bench in the park, how dare he sound like he's not just another northerner, how dare he sound like he knows what it is not to belong.

Steve walks out the door before he can turn around.

They don't speak for another two weeks.

Steve stops coming to breakfast. He'll wait until he knows Tony's disappeared from the kitchen, then swing in, ask JARVIS for a piece of toast, and eat it in his room. He doesn't go down to the workshop any more, either. Tony is spending more and more of his time there, sometimes whole days without once leaving. Sometimes he'll go out at night, to society functions or something, Steve doesn't know, Steve doesn't care, and return home just as the sun starts to gleam on the windows. But Steve isn't paying attention. It's not a slave's duty to worry about what their owners are doing.

He'd thought Tony was different. That's what hurts most. For all his flirting and teasing, he'd thought Tony wasn't just another northerner. He'd thought Tony saw him as more than just a slave, as more than just a piece of property he owned. He'd thought- Well. It doesn't matter what slaves think.

Steve is in his room, sitting on his bed and looking out the window at the sparkling sea below, when he hears a brisk knock on the doorframe. He turns, and Pepper is leaning against the doorway, her arms crossed over her chest. "Steve," she says. "We need to talk."

"All right, ma'am," says Steve, turning fully around and swinging his legs down and off the bed. Pepper's always been fine with his calling her ma'am, she's never tried to pretend he's something he's not, she’s never lied and made him think he’s an equal.

"About Tony," Pepper confirms, and Steve's stomach drops.

"All right," he says again.

"Have you seen him come home these last few nights?" says Pepper. She looks almost threatening there in the doorway, with her hair in a bun and her face fierce.

"He comes home early in the morning, ma'am," Steve says. "But that's not my business."
"Yeah?" says Pepper. "Have you seen just how he's coming home?"

"No, ma'am," says Steve.

Pepper says, without ceremony, "He's drunk as hell. I'm surprised he manages to walk up the driveway, let alone tap the instructions for getting home into the chauffeur."

"With all due respect, ma'am," says Steve tightly, "it's none of my concern how Lord Stark comes home in the morning. I'm a house slave."

"Bullshit," says Pepper, and at last takes a few steps into Steve's room. "Bullshit, Steve, you know that's bullshit and so do I, so cut it out, because Tony's hurt somewhere and you made it a little better for a while but now it's worse than ever, and I want to make you promise you'll make it better again."

Steve says nothing.

Pepper crosses the room to sit on Steve's bed beside him, folding her hands in her lap. "Look," she says. "I've known Tony for a really long time. Longer than you. And I don't know what he saw in you at the auction, or what you changed in him, but I do know that Tony used to get drunk every night. I mean every night, whether he had a party to go to or not, whether there were people around him or not, and he used to do- really stupid things-" Her voice catches. "He still does really stupid things," she amends, quietly. "Just... not like he used to."

"Maybe he's finally growing up, ma'am," says Steve, staring straight ahead.

Pepper sighs. The set of her shoulders relaxes, and the hard look in her eyes seems to have burned itself out. She says, "You read the newspapers, right?"

"Yes, ma'am," says Steve.

"So you see what they call him," says Pepper. "When he's making a deal it's 'successful entrepreneur Lord Tony Stark', when he's made a new invention it's 'renowned inventor Lord Tony Stark', right? And when he hasn't done either of those things, it's 'billionaire playboy Lord Tony Stark.'"

Steve nods, slowly. He's seen all those things.

"The thing is, though," says Pepper, leaning back and looking at the ceiling, "that's not true. Well, he is a successful entrepreneur, and I suppose he's a renowned inventor when people aren't busy hating his guts, but when they call him a playboy- how do I-"

She sighs and rubs at her temples. "When Tony loves someone," she says, "he does love them. He won't cheat on them. He won't break their heart. What Tony is isn't a playboy, it's a serial monogamist."

She pauses. "Tony hasn't brought someone home to the mansion since you came here."

Steve says nothing.

"I don't know what's going on between you two, but I do know that this last week, Tony's been worse than I've ever seen him, and it's got something to do with you," Pepper says quietly. "He's inconsiderate, self-absorbed, narcissistic, and an absolute prat. I won't deny that. But he is a good man."

She stands up. "Just think about it, all right?"
Steve is silent. Pepper leaves the room.

His mind keeps returning, almost obsessively, to the Exposition and Ball. He'll remember, without warning, the way Tony's hands felt as they danced, the cut of his suit, the warmth of his body, the way his smile felt against Steve's chest.

He shoves those memories away whenever they come, replaces them with something else. The chief of his village, crumpled on the sand. The searching, probing gazes of the northerners as he stood naked on the auction block. Fury's glare.

He's on his bed one evening when he sees that the lowest drawer in his desk has been left slightly ajar. He frowns at it and sits up, pulls it open to see what's inside, and freezes.

Tony Stark's looking at Steve from the page with his fists raised, one eyebrow cocked, his shirt sticking to his chest with sweat. He has a half-smile twitching at his lips, wicked and inviting. His eyes say, *Come and get me. I dare you.*

For a long, long moment, Steve can't breathe.

He throws the paper back in the drawer and slams it closed, squeezes his eyes shut and tries to think, to call up something, anything, that will banish the little flare of heat that curls up in his chest. He forces himself to remember the pregnant girl, prepared to eat poison— Coulson's snake smile— Hammer, laughing and laughing, Hammer, who though he had none of Steve's strength and half his brains, still had three times Steve's respect, the incompetence of Hammer's clockwork man, how it couldn't hover, couldn't shoot, the only decent part about it its strangely familiarly dexterous hand—

Its clever, nimble hand.

Its clockwork hand.

Steve's up in a moment and out the door without thinking. He's running through the hallways, down the long staircase, through the door of the workshop, and Tony's there, looking up, his face a mixture between something startled and worried and heartbroken and maybe just a little hopeful—

Steve says, "Hammer stole your clockwork hand."

Tony says, "What."

"Hammer stole your clockwork hand," says Steve. "Not the actual hand, I mean the design. It was in his presentation at the Ball and Expo, that toy soldier made out of metal, the one that couldn't hover and couldn't shoot but it could write. That was your hand it could write with. That was your idea, your design."

Tony is perfectly, utterly still for a moment, then says, "Shit," and dashes to a pile of papers scattered over one of the tables, throwing them every which way in his frantic search. "Steve," he calls from the floor, peering at papers and tossing them aside, "come on, help me look, it's got to be here somewhere, I'm going to kill that bastard-"

"Find what?" says Steve, who's already on the floor next to him, shuffling through papers.

"The plans," says Tony, "the blueprints for the clockwork hand." He sits back on his heels and meets Steve's eyes, and a little swoop goes through Steve's stomach. "They're not here, are they."

Steve looks at him, his heartbeat thundering in his ears.
"I don't let my employees into the workshop any more," says Tony, "and God knows I'd never let Hammer in. Pepper never would, Hammer is a sleaze to her at parties, and Rhody hates Hammer's guts, and Happy's been in love with Pepper for years. You just told me the hand was stolen, and Hammer was a bitch to you at the Expo, can't be you. Hammer isn't smart enough to program JARVIS."

"Activated by mention of name," says JARVIS smoothly from the ceiling. "What seems to be the problem, sir?"

"The problem is that Justin Hammer is an asshole and I don't know anyone who doesn't hate him," says Tony, now pacing back and forth along the workshop floor. Steve leans back onto a table and comes back up with dust all over his back. He turns to the table and frowns; none of these things have been touched since the last time he was down here. Tony hasn't even been working.

"Think, Tony, think," Tony's saying, his fingers going through his hair, "what the hell is that brain of yours for, anyway, what do you use it for, who's been in the workshop, who's-"

He looks up, snaps his fingers, and stops dead.

"Who?" asks Steve.

"That fucking bastard," says Tony mildly. "Hammer told me. He told me. Fourteen government contracts this month, he said. Doing well, he said. He told me, right there."

Steve's pretty sure he already knows the answer, cold and hard and low in his stomach, but he asks again anyway. "Who?"


"Okay," says Steve, later, over a grilled cheese sandwich. They've come upstairs for lunch and discussion. Tony's got a piece of paper and a pencil, and he's writing with one hand and eating his sandwich with the other, bits of melted cheese and grease occasionally dripping onto a word or a line. "So Fury's got your plans, and he's using them. For the war hangs heavy in the air to him, loud and unspoken, but Tony doesn't seem to notice.

"Right," he mumbles around a mouthful of grilled cheese, waving his pencil. "And even if he weren't powerful as crap and able to pay off the media and all that, there's no way in hell we could prove it to the courts."

"Do you think Fury stole any other plans besides the hand?" asks Steve.

Tony looks thoughtful. "Probably," he says. "Which, okay, shit. Yeah. There was some plans for stuff down there when I was scrambling around on the floor I didn't see— upgrades for JARVIS, a big explosive thingy, a flying carriage—"

"Tony," says Steve, almost laughing, "in what possible universe would a 'big explosive thingy' not have military applications?"

Tony looks at him, suddenly. His eyes are dark and his face is still- not still like he's relaxed, but still like he's been arrested, still like he's frozen, still like he can't move. Steve used to see that look on the faces of fighters back in his village, old soldiers who had heard one too many northern explosions and now twitched and froze at the sound of even a pan clattering to the ground.

"I'm sorry," he says immediately. "Tony, I didn't mean it, I'm sorry."
"No-o," says Tony, dragging the word out. "No, there's a story I have to tell you. I probably should have told you a long time ago, huh." He runs his hand through his hair and gives Steve a grin that isn't half as charming as it should be. His hand's shaking. "Typical of me."

"You don't have to tell me anything you-" Steve starts.

"Steve," says Tony, "I love you, but shut up."

Steve stares at him.

The sunlight is pooling on the table. The sea is sparkling in the distance, an endless span of blue, going on and on to the end of his vision. The kitchen is as familiar to him as his own village. He's been here nine months, and Tony loves him.

Tony leans back. He won't meet Steve's eyes.

"Tony," says Steve, his voice catching, "I-"

"No, you don't," says Tony. "Shut up, Steve, and listen to me. I'm telling you how I got my clockwork heart."

Steve listens.

***

Tony sells weapons. Good weapons. Powerful weapons. New weapons, like the Ministry of War's never seen before, and they'll give him just about anything to get their hands on them.

Tony doesn't mind. In fact, he's a fan. The Ministry pays him millions, and he gets to be in his workshop all day, tinkering around with things that go boom. It's the sweetest deal he's ever heard, and if a few Empire-hating peaceniks call him a murderer every once in a while, well, nothing's perfect. Besides, he's heard worse from half the people he's fucked.

The reason he's in the desert isn't even anything major. He's headed down with a weapons delivery so he can demonstrate a new bomb to one of the generals. It's really nothing more than an excuse to show off and tour the Empire, and everybody knows it, and nobody cares.

He's left Pepper behind, minding the business, and Happy with her. There's nothing to it, a week down to the desert, a week back up, and he'll probably have worked his way into the beds of half the people in the platoon by that time. It's practically a vacation.

In the middle of the desert, the carriage explodes.

Tony may be a playboy, he may be a drunk, but underneath all that, at his core, he’s a very smart man with a very extensive knowledge of physics. And with his vision fading, coughing out blood onto the gritty sand, his knowledge of physics tells him that a) statistically, he's probably the only person who survived the explosion, and b) there aren't a whole lot of things that could cause something like that. A freak accident, no. An enemy bomb, maybe. But Tony's last, uneasy thought, before his vision grays out and he slips into unconsciousness, is that he's pretty sure the only bomb that packs that kind of power comes from Stark Industries...
He wakes up days later, in a cave, with a scar on his chest.

There's a man with him, dark-skinned, with round wire-rimmed glasses perched on his hawk nose. A barbarian, Tony thinks, and figures he doesn't speak English until the man turns to him and says, "You're awake."

"I noticed," says Tony, pushing himself up and looking around. The cave is almost entirely dark, except for a gas lamp in the corner. There's a table near it, on which something metal is gleaming.

"They'll come in soon," says the hawk-nosed man. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" says Tony. "How did I get this scar? Was I hurt in the explosion? Is this some kind of barbarian hospital?"

The hawk-nosed man looks at him with sad, dark eyes, but before he can say anything, the sound of boots echoes down a tunnel to Tony's right and a huge, bearded barbarian appears, bellowing, "Stark!"

"That's me," says Tony, pushing himself up further. A few equally huge, equally bearded barbarians have appeared after the first. One of them is holding what looks like a child's doll, and Tony squints at it. It seems incongruous.

The first man—Tony figures he's the leader—is sneering at him. "Welcome to the land of the barbarians, Stark. Is it everything you expected?"

"Yes, yes, wonderful hospitality, I'll be sure to give you a good report when I get home," says Tony, flapping a hand, "but where am I, exactly? And what happened? I mean, the carriage blew up, obviously, but-"

"We put a bomb in your carriage," says the leader.

Tony shuts up.

"A Stark bomb," the leader goes on, smirking. "Traded to us by one of your generals. It's amazing, really, what you northerners will do to keep your lives. If I were being uncharitable, I might say your people have no concept of honor at all."

"O-kay," says Tony slowly. "You got your very first Stark bomb and you went kind of crazy with power. That's, uh, that's okay. I get that. We don't have to do anything crazy or-"

"Oh it wasn't our first bomb from your company, Stark," the leader interrupts. Tony blinks. "Nor," he continues, "will it be our last."

They're all staring at him. Explosion-addled and freshly conscious as he is, it takes Tony a few moments to get it.

"No," he says flatly, for the very first time. "Not building weapons for you. No way. Not happening."

The leader smirks and holds out his hand, and the barbarian holding the doll places it in his grasp. It looks so tiny in his palm. Tony frowns and is about to speak when every nerve in his body is suddenly transformed into a screaming beacon of pain.

It's as if he's being slowly crushed in a giant vise. He wonders distantly through the agony how he doesn't shatter, how he hasn't broken into millions of pieces and scattered like dust, and he wishes
desperately for a moment for death, for release, for anything at all that will end the pain—

It stops.

"Have you heard of the Eastern concept of voodoo, Stark?" says the leader's voice as the haze begins to fade from Tony's eyes. Someone's moaning quietly. He thinks it might be him.

"It's the idea that one part of your body can control the rest," the leader goes on. "We've experimented with it quite a bit. We used hair at first, and fingernails—useless. Blood was better, but still not good enough; once the body replaced the blood cells, the effect ended. No, we needed something more lasting. Something that went deeper."

There's a long, low chuckle, and Tony closes his eyes.

The leader says, "Haven't you wondered yet how you got that scar on your chest?"

"You won't die," he continues, the clicks of his boots echoing as he walks across the cave. "We're very good at this. Your heart will survive. But as long as it beats in your chest, it beats in this doll. As long as your heart beats, Stark, we can control you." He pauses. "Perhaps you'll rethink your answer."

The bootsteps of the barbarians fade down the tunnel.

There's noise at Tony's side, gentle hands helping him to sit up, checking his pulse. Tony blinks a few times. It's the hawk-nosed man from earlier. He's squatting in front of Tony, and his eyes are sad and kind.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs.

"It's not your fault," says Tony hoarsely. "What's your name?"

"Yinsen," says the man. "You killed my family."

"What?" says Tony, his voice cracking helplessly.

"The northerners came into my village, shot my wife, ran my youngest daughter through with a bayonet in her cradle and my younger son as he huddled in the corner," says Yinsen. "They set a bomb in my house and told my oldest son to stay in it or they'd shoot my older daughter. Stark guns, Stark bombs. My son stayed in the house. I ran. They let me go. I wandered in the desert for two days before these men found me and took me prisoner."

He notices Tony's expression and sighs. "Stark, I'm not telling you this to hurt you. I'm telling you so you'll know why I'm helping you."

"Why are you helping me?" says Tony faintly. Yinsen's pouring water between his lips now, and he raises his eyebrows at Tony.

"Because I'm a good man, Stark," he says. "Because my gods preach forgiveness, not hatred, not Empire. Because you are a man, just as I am a man, and worth no less than me, even after all you have done. There are no barbarians, Stark. Just those who kill and hurt and destroy, and those who do not."

There's a long pause, and then Tony says, "I'm not building them weapons."

"Good," says Yinsen calmly. "I will pray for you when you die."
"I'm not going to die," says Tony.

Now Yinsen looks up at him, eyebrows sweeping together. "Impossible."

Tony smiles for the first time today, a hard smile, a tired smile, a tight smile. "Impossible, my ass," he says. "I can do whatever the hell I want. I'm Tony Stark."

He starts building the next day.

They don't give him much to work with. This isn't exactly his workshop back in the Empire; he's essentially making this in a cave with a box of scraps. But it's enough; and besides, this doesn't require JARVIS, or his forge, or anything like that. It's delicate work. Yinsen helps, as best he can. He's not an engineer on Tony's level, but then again, no one is, and Yinsen's got one of the strongest aptitudes for clockwork Tony's ever seen in anyone besides himself. They work during the day, and in the freezing desert night, they huddle together on the cave floor and tell stories from back home.

The leader comes back, sometimes, to check on Tony's progress. He doesn't understand what Tony's building. This angers him in the early days, and Tony learns every last torture that can be inflicted on a voodoo doll, learns how it feels to die a thousand different ways. Eventually Yinsen manages to convince the man that Tony is doing his job, that the strange clockwork device lying in pieces on the work table is the beginnings of a weapon, that Tony's been broken. It takes some time.

Tony owes Yinsen his life. He knows that. And he also knows how many other lives he owes Yinsen: his wife, his sons, his daughters, his village, his people. His weapons killed them. His weapons have nearly killed him.

He begins to work late into the night, by the flickering light of gas lamps, long after Yinsen goes to bed, sometimes until the sun's light starts to spill into the edges of the cave. He works without knowing how time is passing, without knowing that time is passing. He works without food, without sleep, until his eyes are blurry and his hands are shaking. He works, and sometimes when he's quiet he can hear his heartbeat thumping in his chest, and he has never hated and feared it more in his life.

His hands hesitate over the tools, once, and he thinks, what if it doesn't work? What will he do? Will he give in and build weapons? Will he break like the leader believes he already has?

There's a little knife with a sharp, sharp blade that he uses in his work. He draws it against his finger to test the edge, and a thin line of red appears and swells with blood. Tony watches it, and taps the point of the knife against the veins of his wrist, and thinks, and plans.

And then it's done.

It sits on the work table, gleaming in the lamplight. Tony stares at it. So does Yinsen.

"Are you sure it will work?" says Yinsen eventually.

"Hell no," says Tony. "Are you sure he won't be back until tomorrow morning?"

"Completely," says Yinsen.

They look at each other.

"This could kill you," says Yinsen.

Tony says, "It's better than the alternative."
Yinsen sighs and gives him a nod. Tony goes to the hard cot he's been using as a bed, peels off his shirt, and lies down. "Come on, Doc," he says, trying for a light tone and failing. "Hit me."

Yinsen goes to a bottle on the corner of the work table, grabs a cloth, and pours the liquid in the bottle liberally over the cloth. "I'll pray for you, Stark," he says, coming over to Tony's side.

Tony means to say something flippant in reply, but he can't think of anything. It's probably just as well, though, because Yinsen's pressed the cloth over his nose and mouth and the world is spinning, spinning, and fading into light…

He wakes up.

Yinsen's face is right by his, terrified. As Tony's eyes blink open, it relaxes. "How do you feel?" he asks.

Tony sits up, his hand going to his chest. It skitters over skin, then hits something smooth, something metallic. He presses his palm flat against his breastbone. It covers the round, solid shape of the case in his chest.

"Lighter," he says. He does. There's something empty about his chest now, though he can't quite define what. "All right, though. Fingers and toes are getting circulation. I can breathe fine. No light-headedness or dizziness."

The breath comes out of Yinsen in a rush. "This is a miracle."

Tony opens his mouth to say something about his genius, not superstition or luck, and closes it again. Yinsen's face is so pale it looks like milky tea. Tony's blood is flowing in his body, and he thinks he hears something faint, something at the very edge of his senses. A ticking.

"Yeah," he says. "A miracle."

They sit in silence for a long while. Tony's arms are wrapped around his legs, his knees pressed to his chest. He can feel the cold metal of his new heart on his thighs through his trousers.

"I buried your flesh heart beneath your bed. The homing beacon you put in the new device should be working," says Yinsen eventually. "Some of your soldiers will arrive in a day or two."

"Yeah," says Tony. "Yeah, they will. They'll come in here and kill those damn bandits, they'll kill them and then they'll take me back home," and as Tony says the word, he feels something rise up in him, something warm and choking. Home, with Rhodey and Happy, and Pepper scowling at him, and the familiar chaos of his workshop, and the comforting sarcasm of JARVIS coming from the walls, home, home. He thinks he'd give anything right now, anything at all, just to be home.

"Yinsen," he says on impulse. "Come with me."

Yinsen's standing, back to Tony, at the work table. He turns back. "To the Empire," he says, and it's not really a question.

"Yeah," says Tony. "The Empire. The soldiers will want to pick you up when they come around anyway, bring you in for questioning, make you help them find out exactly who these guys are. Were. Will have been, whatever, just when they're done, come with me-"

"As a slave," says Yinsen.

Tony stills. "As," he says, and then finds he can't go on. "As a friend," he manages to get out
eventually. "As a friend."

"You think your Empire soldiers will accept that?" says Yinsen. He's turned around fully now, leaning on the work table. "A barbarian as an equal? You know the only way I would go to your Empire is as a barbarian slave, Stark."

Tony can't say anything for a few moments. The only thing he comes up with, feebly, is, "But you don't have any other choice."

Yinsen raises an eyebrow at him, and Tony looks away. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"There is always another choice, Stark," says Yinsen.

Tony frowns and is about to ask what when noise comes from the tunnel to his right, too loud, too quickly. Footsteps. Bootsteps. The leader, who wasn't supposed to be back until tomorrow morning.

Yinsen's moving, grabbing Tony's shirt and throwing it to him, but before Tony can shove it over his shoulders, the leader is inside the cave. His eyes go to Tony, and he may be violent, may even be a madman, but he's no fool. In an instant, he's roaring in rage, pulling a knife out of his boot— Tony thinks for one wild second of stories of barbarians waving massive axes— and rushing at Tony.

But Yinsen is there, his hands on the man's arm, shoving it back. He's thin and wiry next to the leader's bulk, but he's still holding him back, long enough for Tony to scramble up and dash to the entrance of the tunnel.

"Yinsen, come on," he shouts, beckoning.

Yinsen's face is dark with effort. The leader is stronger than him, bigger than him, and he won't last long, Tony can see. He looks up at Tony and, slowly, shakes his head.

"Come on," Tony repeats, beckoning again, urgent.

And the last words he hears Yinsen say are, "Always... other... choices," before the leader's knife comes down into his chest. Yinsen staggers back, staring at the hilt.

The leader's turned to Tony at the mouth of the cave. He's reaching into his belt for another weapon, his teeth bared, when Yinsen, tottering forward, sinks the knife into his back.

Tony's no fool, either. He turns and flees down the tunnel, as fast as he can.

There aren't any footsteps that follow him.

He wanders in the desert for what must be a day. There's no water, no food, and so after some time he simply sits in the middle of the endless sand and waits.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wonders if this was Yinsen's plan all along. If he hadn't died trying to save Tony, what other choice would he have taken? Tony is sure, in the pit of his despair, that Yinsen would not have come back with him to the Empire. Would he have run, and walked through the endless desert until he collapsed from hunger and thirst and loneliness? Would he have aided the bandits against the soldiers, and so been killed? Or would he have taken that sharp little knife, the one Tony had been fingering not a few day ago, with him to the Empire?

Tony owes him his life twice over now, and it is a debt he will never be able to repay.

The Empire's soldiers come after a day.

Tony watches the horses approach in a cloud of dust, growing steadily larger, and as they come, he becomes aware of a noise. It's been in the back of his mind for some time now, but at this moment it seems louder than sound itself. His clockwork heart is ticking.
He thinks of Yinsen's wife and children, dead from his bombs. He thinks of Yinsen himself, there on the floor of the cave, choosing to be dead rather than a slave. And he thinks, maybe I deserve this, as the hoofs of the horses get closer and the ticking in his chest goes on and on and on and does not stop.

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Tony stops.

Steve reaches out, tries to cover Tony's hand with one of his own, but Tony pulls it away. "And that's why you're a slave," he says, in a voice that's almost dead, "and why your village is gone, and why this whole war won't stop. I built the weapons. The war, the slavery, is my fault. All of it is my fault."

"Tony," says Steve, soft, but Tony continues, his voice still flat and dead. "And when I saw you on that auction block," he says, "when I looked at your eyes, I saw Yinsen, I saw what he'd done for me, and I couldn't let that bastard Fury take you and use you for God knows what. I couldn't. I owed you at least that much."

He looks up at Steve, and his eyes are so, so dark. "And that's why I couldn't kiss you," he says. "I'd already taken your village. I'd taken your people. I'd taken your freedom. Your choice of who to kiss, who to touch, who to want, who to, to, to love— I couldn't take that, too." He looks away. "I'd done enough."

Steve stands up and crosses around the kitchen table to Tony. He takes Tony's hands and lifts him from his chair. Tony still won't meet his eyes, so Steve takes his chin and pulls it around, gently, until Tony's gaze at last reluctantly meets his.

"Hey," says Steve, "I want you."

"You don't, though," says Tony, his voice catching. "You can't. Not after what I've done."

"Hey," says Steve, so soft even he can barely hear it, "I love you," and he bends down to kiss Tony, and with a choked almost-sob, Tony opens up beneath him, there in his arms, kissing him soft and slow and sweet and sad.

Steve's the first to pull back, though he doesn't let go of Tony. He says, "I thought you didn't want me because I was a slave. I thought you saw me like Hammer saw me, or Fury, like some kind of animal."

Tony stares at him. "You? Steve, anyone who thinks you're an animal needs a new brain, you're more human than most of the bastards at the Expo, more human than JARVIS, more human than me-"

This time Steve kisses him to shut him up. It's deeper than the last kiss, and Tony is leaning into him with a groan, his arms around Steve's neck as if they're dancing again. The sunlight glimmers across Steve's back, a hundred points of warmth, and the kitchen smells of soap and grilled cheese and something familiar, something Steve can't quite place, that rubs at him in all the right ways. He hums into Tony's mouth, and slowly, hesitantly, Tony hums back.

They break apart again, Tony's eyes meeting Steve's, and after a pause, Tony's mouth curls in a half-smile. "Yeah?" he says, a question.

"Yeah," Steve affirms, not even sure what he's agreeing to, but sure nonetheless that the answer is yes.

After that it's a broken sequence of images, sounds, smells. Steve remembers the hard surface of the wall of Tony's bedroom, the way it scrapes against his fingers as he presses Tony against it, the warmth of Tony's skin, the roughness of his stubble. He remembers the endless expanse of the bed, softer than anything he'd ever felt, smooth fabric and the way Tony gasps for air when Steve touches him. He remembers each unsteady breath, each broken moan, each inch of golden skin and how Tony looks against his own dark sheets, his eyes bright, his legs spread and his lips parted an inch.
and his body open for Steve's taking.

Steve remembers the coldness of the clockwork heart in its smooth iron casing, and the spiderweb network of scars around it. He remembers how those scars feel under his lips, rough and tender, and how Tony gasps and bucks when he touches them, hissing Steve's name again and again into the air. He remembers, then, the liquid smoothness on his fingers, and how wide Tony's eyes go, and how wanting, and how he lets his head fall back and his breath sigh out of his lungs as Steve presses into him.

Steve doesn't remember coming. He remembers Tony, though, and the noise he makes, sweet and desperate and almost a little sad, and how afterwards Tony curls into Steve's body and presses his head against his collarbone. Steve wraps his arms around Tony's waist and sets his chin on top of Tony's head, and holds him until his breath is slow and regular and Steve's eyelids are as heavy as he's ever felt them.

When he wakes up, Tony is gone.

Steve sits up, his body tangled in a twist of dark sheets. His pants are in a corner of the room, and he pauses before he puts them on, remembering quick hands at his waist and his zipper, sloppy kisses into his mouth. His shirt has a button missing, but he ignores it, pulling it over his shoulders. One of the sleeves catches on his slave bracelet, and he pauses a moment before running a hand through his hair and turning his eyes away.

Through the halls and down the stairs to Tony's workshop, the shadows now long and the twilight starting to creep into the house. Steve's slept the afternoon away, and so he's not surprised to see light pouring out from under the doorway of Tony's workshop. This is Tony's favorite time of day to work, sometimes; he says it's late enough to be drunk but early enough to be sober.

The door isn't locked with the usual clockwork keypad. Steve pushes it and it swings open. "Tony," he says, "did you-"

He stops. Tony isn't there.

The lights are on, though, and some of the dust has been brushed off the tools. Tony's been working. Steve traces a line through the grey on a workshop table and feels an unaccountable warmth swell up in him, like hot soup on a cold day.

Something catches his eye. There's a note on one of the tables, on the kind of red and gold stationery Tony adores and Pepper barely restrains herself from incinerating. Steve crosses to the table and picks it up. It reads, in big, blocky letters, GONE OUT TO THE CITY. MIGHT NOT BE BACK FOR A DAY OR TWO.

Steve stills. A day or two? Why would he do that? What does he have to do in the city that came up so suddenly he couldn't tell Steve about it?

"Tony," shouts a voice from the stairs, "I have three sets of paperwork for you to sign and an executive meeting I can't rearrange. For God's sake, come here or I'm dragging you up."

"Ma'am?" Steve calls back. "Miss Potts?"

There's a sudden clatter of heels, and Pepper appears in the doorway of the workshop. She scans the room in a moment and raises an eyebrow. "So where is Tony, then?" she asks.

"He left a note, ma'am," says Steve, waving the note. "It said he'd left for the city and he'd be back in a day or two."
"A day?" repeats Pepper, outraged. "Or two? Who does he think he is, the emperor? He can't just run off to the city without warning me-" Abruptly, she stops and turns to Steve, her eyes narrowing. "Steve," she says, "I like you, but if you said anything to Tony-

"I didn't," says Steve quickly, before she can go on. "I— Tony and I, we're not, anymore, we-" He can feel himself going red.

Pepper raises an eyebrow. “All right,” she says, not quite coolly. “I’ll talk to Tony when he’s back, I suppose.”

Steve knows her anger isn’t directed at him, but he feels a shiver of unease nevertheless as she climbs the stairs. And, as well, a persistent confusion.

Why has Tony left? What possible cause could he have to leave Steve right after they’ve finally made up? Steve casts a glance over the workshop—the tools with layers of dust, the notes in Tony’s tight, messy handwriting, the sunlight lingering on the edges of the windows—and turns himself, and begins to walk up the stairs, something dark and unhappy in his chest. Something’s wrong. He can feel it.

The sunlight is gone by the time he slides into bed, and the night sky outside is glimmering with stars, but his sense of unease hasn’t faded. He lies awake for a long, long time before finally slipping into sleep.

And wakes up sometime after midnight, his eyes wide open, his heart pounding.

The tools with layers of dust. The sunlight on the windows. The notes in Tony’s handwriting.

Tony’s tight, messy handwriting.

And the note. The note, in big, blocky letters.

Someone wrote that note. And it wasn’t Tony.

Steve’s out of his bed in a moment, dashing down the halls and down the stairs to the workshop. He hadn’t bothered to lock it behind him, and he flips on the lights and grabs the note.

The handwriting. He’s seen it before, somewhere. It’s tugging at the edges of his consciousness, and he grits his teeth, trying to recall—

And then he remembers. A cool night, the soft plink of a piano. Tony’s hand, warm in his, and a mechanical man, writing words on a piece of paper with its stolen clockwork hand.

Steve goes utterly still.

“JARVIS,” he says quietly, a moment later, “is the carriage still here?”

“The carriage is located in the garden,” says JARVIS.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid and sloppy, he hadn’t even bothered to cover up his tracks, make it look like Tony had left. Which means he expects them to realize Tony’s been kidnapped. Which means he doesn’t care.

Which doesn’t mean anything good for Tony.

“Is there a list of the codes to tap into the carriage?” Steve asks, walking towards the stairs slowly, deliberately.
“The codes are stored in my memory,” says JARVIS. “May I ask the location of your destination?”

“Wherever it is that Justin Hammer works,” says Steve.

“The carriage will take you to your location when you have entered it,” says JARVIS, and there’s a soft whine, which probably means he’s gone to sleep for the night. Steve doesn’t really notice. He’s walking up the stairs, through the halls, out to the garden, as if he’s in a dream. The carriage door shuts behind him, and the wheels begin to turn, carrying Steve onward, out of the mansion, and into the city where Tony is.

He arrives later. He doesn’t know how long it’s been. He’s lost track of time—but he thinks, in a painful swoop, that Tony must not have, that he must have been waiting for Steve this entire time, waiting for him to come, to rescue him—

The carriage door opens. Steve slides out.

Hammer’s workshop is ostentatious, fancy, the kind of building that Steve suspects he spent at least a million on, with tall, swooping pillars and curling arches made out of marble that gleams in the moonlight. Steve walks up the steps and examines the door. It’s locked.

He knocks.

After a few moments, the door opens to a flat-nosed, squinty-eyed guard, who glares at Steve. “You got an appointment with Mister Hammer?” he asks.

Steve punches him in the face. He goes down like a tree.

He steps over the guard’s unconscious body and down the hallway. Everything in here is white: white floor, white walls, white ceiling, white doors. It makes Steve want to hit something, to smash one of the doors down, just to make this damn place dirty. He walks straight on, though, until he reaches the end of the hall.

There’s a door there, with a note posted on it that reads, Don’t come in!

Steve opens it.

There’s a— a something. It has to be a machine. It's a huge, huge metal structure, full of wheels and gears and pistons and red sparks, pumping and turning, and the noise of hissing steam and ticking clockwork and working gears is enormous. The room must be soundproof. The whole place is full of billowing steam and grey smoke that stings at Steve's eyes and fills his lungs. He's blinded and deafened for a moment, and he turns to cough, but each new breath of the steam and smoke is worse than the last.

"Tony?" he chokes out. "Tony?"

There's a pause, and then someone in the midst of the steam says, "Shit," and Steve hears the sound of running footsteps, and the click of a door.

And then another voice says faintly, disbelievingly, "Steve?"

"Tony!" says Steve through his lungful of soot, and he stumbles toward the sound of Tony’s voice. It’s only a few steps before he sees a dark shape in the fog, and a few more before he can make out Tony, tied to a chair, his head fallen to one side.

Steve is next to him in a moment, untying his ropes, kissing him, helping him up out of the chair.
"Come on," he says, "we have to get you out of here-

"Steve, no," Tony interrupts him.

Steve stops. "What?"

Tony says, "That machine is a bomb. It's going to blow up this whole building in less than an hour."

Steve stares. Then he says, "You'd better explain."

Tony says, "I went down to the workshop. Hammer was there— him and a goon. Knocked me out. When I woke up—" He stops, coughs. "I was here. Hammer told me this thing was a weapon. For the war. Told me to finish it, pretended he could but he just wanted me to— slimy talentless bastard—"

"Go on, Tony," Steve urges.

"This kind of weaponry's illegal," says Tony. "Against some kind of war code. Not like they don't use it anyway, but gotta keep it under wraps, deny they know it exists— anyway, I said no." He stops, shudders. Steve squeezes his hand.

"When his goons were done with me," Tony goes on after a while, "they let me loose on the machine. Wanted to make it harmless, but didn't have the ma—" He stops. "Didn't have the time. Made it a bomb instead. Figured I'd take Hammer out with me. He couldn't tell the difference between a waiting bomb and one that was already ticking."

"Tony," Steve starts, but Tony shakes his head, slips out from under Steve's arm.

"This is illegal," he repeats. "Go get Hammer, and we can use this to put him away for good. That bastard Fury won't own up to paying him for this. Go get Hammer."

"But what about the machine?" asks Steve, but Tony pushes him away.

"I can fix it," he says. "Go get Hammer."

Steve hesitates one more second before turning and heading through the steam in the direction Hammer's running footsteps had gone.

There's a door on the other side of the room. Steve only has to fumble along the wall for a few moments before he finds it and stumbles out into another hallway. There's only one door in this one, and he runs through it, gasping the clean air, and stops dead.

There are two men there, big as houses, the ones that Tony called goons. It's a good word. They're both about as big as Steve and half again, which can't really be said of many people these days. Their faces are flat and ugly, and their hands are curled into fists. Behind them is Justin Hammer.

Steve is suddenly very glad for his practice time training with Tony. He crouches down, keeping his stance low and easy, relaxed.

One of the goons lumbers towards him. Steve stays low, then aims a hard jab at his stomach. The goon grunts, the breath knocked out of him, but now the second one is behind Steve, and only a quick dodge saves him from a flat tackle.

He skips back, then goes for the second one's knees, but the first one has his wind back and is staggering forward, swinging at Steve. He dodges one punch but gets the second right in the chest, and he lands on the floor, his head spinning.
The second goon kicks at his head, and Steve sees his chance, grabs his foot, and yanks. The huge man lands on the hard stone floor and doesn't move again.

Now there's only one, but the man's face is contorting in murderous rage. He digs into his belt and pulls out a knife.

Steve goes utterly still for a second. A knife. He's doomed.

The goon slashes at Steve, catches his arm. Steve feels a warm trickle slide down to the curve of his right elbow. He ducks to avoid the next swipe and tries to go for the goon's stomach, but his injured arm is too slow, and the goon catches it with one huge palm and hits him over the head with the butt of the knife, hard.

Steve nearly passes out. The world shakes, shivers, shrinks, and begins to fade. He can't breathe-

Tony, says a voice in his head, and his arms are moving, pushing his body up from where he's fallen to the ground, his hands are grabbing at the man's huge hands and twisting so the knife drops to the ground, his foot is landing squarely in the man's stomach, his fist is hitting his solar plexus, and the man is falling and landing with a crack on the ground and the world is wavering, wavering, but it'll hold.

It'll hold for long enough.

Hammer's alone now. He's pressed flat against the wall, and he looks terrified. When his eyes meet Steve's, his face crumples into something like a smile.

"Come on," he says, "no hard feelings, huh? It's just business. That's how business works. Sometimes it's a little cutthroat- ah!"

Steve's hands are around Hammer's throat. The world is still faint, and he can't see the room, can't hear the now-faint noises of the machine from the other room. All he can see is Hammer in front of him, who kidnapped Tony, who stole designs, who-

"You killed my family," he growls, and squeezes.

"That was Stark!" Hammer gasps, and Steve pauses.

Hammer takes his advantage to nod frantically. "Stark," he says. "Stark built weapons, we're still all using his designs, I couldn't have built that thing in there without him. Literally, haha, you should ask him about it, does he let you do that? I know some people don't let their barbarians talk to them, you guys usually don't have much to say- ah!"

Steve's squeezing again. "No," he says. "I don't care if Tony made the weapons. He didn't kill my village. You did. You did when you called me a barbarian. You did when you asked if I had brought my axe. You did when you picked up the newspaper and saw that we were dying and realized you could make money. You did when you decided it was all right to profit off of murder-"

He lets go. Hammer slumps down, coughing.

"And that's why I'm not going to kill you," says Steve.

Hammer looks up, and Steve punches him in the face. He crumples to the ground.

"There are no barbarians," Steve tells his unconscious body. "Just those who kill and hurt and destroy, and those who do not."
He walks away.

It's a slow, difficult walk back across the room, into the hallway, and to the room with the machine. The door is open now, and some of the steam and smoke has dissipated into the hallway, but Steve still coughs and coughs. His vision is pale. It's a miracle that he's holding himself upright.

He staggers into the room and calls, "Tony?" through the smoke.

There's no answer.

He makes his way further into the room, moving in the direction of the machine. The great noise of the room has changed: instead of the awful, aching grinding of the machinery, it's something quieter. Something more orderly. Hope blooming in his chest, Steve takes a few more steps.

And there's Tony, lying on the ground, unmoving.

Steve takes one more step forward, then another. Tony's lying face up. His eyes are wide open, and his face is unnaturally pale. His right arm has flopped over his body, his fingers trailing on the floor.

Steve bends down, and carefully moves the arm, and sees the hole in Tony's chest.

His legs won't obey him any more; they give out, and he lands on the ground, by Tony's body. With effort, he forces himself to sit up, casting his eyes along the ground.

And there it is, the round little case of Tony's heart. Steve's fingers close around it, and he knows before he looks what he will see: the cogwheels ripped out, the machinery gutted, and he remembers Tony telling him, "I didn't have enough ma- and stopping, and going on, enough time."

"You had enough time," Steve tells Tony's body. "You didn't have enough materials. You needed more machinery to work with, Tony, you idiot," and the wavering world wavers even more as his eyes fill up, beyond his control. "Tony," he says, and then it comes to him.

He carefully turns the case around, peering at it. The disobedience of his legs is spreading to the rest of his body, and it's taking all his strength to stay conscious, to stay thinking.

And there it is: the little switch on the side of the case. The homing device that had saved Tony in the desert. He'd never bothered to take it out. Steve presses it with the last ounce of his strength.

There's a beep, and a soft whine. It's coming from his wrist. Steve lifts his arm, his mind working too slowly to register anything other than bewilderment, and he sees the glow coming from the monogrammed TS on his slave bracelet. As his body wobbles, it gets brighter when he gets closer to Tony, fainter as he gets farther away. It's leading him to Tony.

He thinks, confused, My master.

Then, stronger, My Tony.

And then the world finally shrinks to a point and disappears and he thinks nothing at all.

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"Justin Hammer Defeated; Violent Plot Exposed," says a dry voice by Steve's ear. "Empire City, the
Empire. A slave of renowned engineer Lord Anthony Stark foiled the violent, seditious plans of well-known inventor Lord Justin Hammer early this morning. Hammer, who had kidnapped Lord Stark himself, had created a machine that engineers were able to confirm was designed to cause a large explosion in the city. The slave, Steven Rogers, apparently escaped from his quarters in order to search for the kidnapped Stark and thwart Hammer's plot. In a feat of daring strength, Rogers knocked out Hammer and his employees, while the rescued Stark used his own mechanical heart to adjust the dastardly machine—"

The voice breaks off, and says, "Dastardly, I swear to God these things get more and more sensationalist every day."

There's a heavy sigh. Steve slowly opens his eyes. Paint's peeling on a white ceiling above him, and sunlight is streaming in from somewhere to his right. He's in a bed.

"Luckily," the dry voice goes on, "Rogers activated a homing device around two o'clock a.m., which drew police to the site a few minutes later. The unconscious Hammer, Stark, and Rogers were discovered, the illegal machine uncovered, and Hammer taken into custody. Meanwhile, Stark and Rogers were removed to the hospital, where Stark's condition stabilized around three-thirty. Both he and Rogers are expected to make a full recovery."

There's the sound of paper rustling. Steve turns his head to the right. Nick Fury says, "Oh, look. The Mets won."

Steve blinks slowly. Fury looks up from his newspaper, gives another heavy sigh, and folds the paper, setting it down on the table next to him. "Look, Rogers," he says. "You haven't put me in a great position here. Just this morning I've had to decline to comment to three different reporters. I've enjoyed the lovely company of your master's secretary, who screamed at me for half an hour before suing me for all I've got, plus some. And in about," he checks his watch, "ten minutes ago, I'm going up in front of a board of half-asleep government officials to explain how I could let something like this happen."

"Is Tony all right?" says Steve. His voice is rusty and hoarse.

"He's fine," says Fury. "You saved his life, et cetera." He tilts back his chair, balancing it on two legs, and rubs at his good eye.

"The papers think you're a hero," he says. "The public thinks you're a god. The government thinks you're dangerous, and they sent me here to talk to you."

"What do you think?" says Steve.

Fury lets his chair thump to the ground. "I think you deserve a reward," he says. "A big one. Anything you want, maybe."

He's staring at Steve, his good eye dark and flat, and in the blink of an eye, Steve gets it.

"You're paying me off," he says. "To keep me quiet about the machine you told Hammer to build."

"I wouldn't pass this chance up if I were you, Rogers," says Fury. "The government is prepared to do a lot for you. Money. Property." He lets slip, casually, "You could go home."

Steve goes absolutely still.

They're offering him his freedom.
He could go home. He could find a village and live there, feel the sand under his feet. He could use the government money to find Bucky and Peggy and free them, bring them with him. He could walk beneath the open sky without this bracelet on his wrist, hunt with the desert men, smile at desert women, be with his people again. He could go home.

And then he understands what he has to do, and he has to close his eyes to stop the tears leaking out.

"Don't send me home," he says. "Send your own people."

Fury says, "What?"

"End the war," says Steve. "Bring your soldiers back to the city. Stop destroying desert villages. Stop killing families. Stop taking slaves. Put down your swords and let your men come back to their wives and children." He opens his eyes. "This Empire has grown great enough," he says. "You don't need to grow any more."

"You're asking something big, Rogers," says Fury.

"I'm asking something good," says Steve, quietly.

Fury looks at him for a long, long time, and Steve thinks he might see something almost soft in his eyes. Then he says, "I can't end a war all at once."

"I know it might not happen all at once," says Steve. "All I'm asking is a start. Stop killing. Come home."

Fury stands up. "You're an impertinent ass, Rogers," he says, "just like your master."

"Yes," says Steve. "I am."

"I like that," says Fury, and walks out.

Steve shuts his eyes and starts laughing. It's either that or cry with the relief.

They bring him home from the hospital the next day, and Tony a week later. Pepper won't stop fussing over them, confining Tony to his bed for another three days and ordering JARVIS not to let him out. She tells Steve he'd better stay in his room as long as Tony is in bed, with raised eyebrows, and so he stays there, drawing.

Summer is coming. The days are growing longer, the light brighter, the rain less frequent. The sun comes up on the garden early enough to send the dewdrops on the flowers into a flurry of refractions and rainbows, the shadows long and sharp. The world is warmer now, and the sky is an impossible blue.

Tony appears at Steve's door one day, his hands in his pockets, his face lined. Steve looks up. "Hey," he says.

"Hey," says Tony. "Wanna take a walk down at the beach?"

Steve's been to the beach once or twice before. It's not a soft sea of sand, as he'd expected, but covered with smooth, shiny pebbles. He and Tony walk through the pebbles now, their feet slipping on the stones.

Eventually Tony says, "I know Fury offered you your freedom." Steve glances at him sharply.

"Yeah," he says. "He did."
"I'll give it to you, if you want," says Tony. "You don't have to stay with me. I owe you that much."

Steve watches the sun glitter on the water, and he feels something let go inside him, something that's been holding on for a long time. The sea is shining. The world is full of light, and the air is clear and sweet.

He says, "Let's get married."

Tony stops dead and turns to him, his eyes wide. "Are you sure?"

Steve nods.

Tony rubs at the back of his head. "Steve— I want to, God, I want to, but aren't you worried? People are going to talk. They're going to say I bought you so I could fuck you, that you're some kind of prostitute."

"Who cares," says Steve, and turns his face up to the sky. His heart feels lighter than it has in a long time.

Slowly, a smile spreads over Tony's face, uncertain but happy. "All right," he says.

"All right?" says Steve.

Tony kisses him, slow and deep and sweet. When he pulls away, his arms are around Steve, and his eyes are bright. "All right," he says.

They start to walk again, their fingers tangled together. "You'd better be careful, though," says Tony, his voice light. "I hear I'm heartless."

Steve looks at Tony— his Tony, who belongs to him as much as the other way around, who lives on coffee and clockwork and doing the impossible, who gets drunk and makes rude jokes and whose laugh makes him want to laugh too, who has given his life not once but twice rather than hurt others, who loves machinery, who loves metal, who loves Steve.

He says, "I don't believe it."

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