**What Happens In Vegas**

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### What Happens In Vegas

by [sabrecmc](http://archiveofourown.org/)

**Summary**

“What the hell, Tony?” Rhodey demanded brusquely. Tony winced and drew the phone away from his ear. “You’ve got cops and Feds all over the hotel. I’m watching you perp walk out of the police station on repeat on CNN. They’re saying you tried to bribe Stern? Fox News has you selling weapons on the black market, and God that picture they’re using is the one from Bali in ’09. You look like shit. They wheeled Stern out and put him in an ambulance, by the way. Got some paparazzi swearing you decked the guy. Now they’ve got ‘copters following it like he’s OJ.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Sourpatch, I’ve got it covered. Uh, though, I should probably tell you that, purely in the interests of national security and the greater good, I kind of had to fake marry that stripper-gram you sent. Thanks for that, by the way,” Tony added quickly.

**UPDATED WITH FANART IN CHAPTER 3**

### Notes
This was for my Thank You Fics, the prompt being Fake Marriage. It kind of grew into a thing.
“Do not say anything,” Matt admonished him firmly. “At all, Tony. I mean it. You do not need to antagonize these people. Let me talk to them, okay.”

“How am I still sitting here?” Tony demanded, looking around the small, windowless interrogation room at the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. “They don’t have any proof of anything.”

“They have you supposedly attempting to bribe a Senator and not exactly denying that you were trying to sell your tech to the highest bidder on the black market. This is serious, Tony,” Matt told him in a hushed tone. “And whatever you may think of Stern, his word is not nothing, Tony.”

“They don’t even want me! Or, they do, but they want the damn tech more. Which they can’t have, by the way. I told Senator Asswipe that,” Tony bit out in frustration, one hand slamming down on the metal-topped table in front of him.

“Stern wants the tech, true, but don’t think the Las Vegas PD or some hot-to-trot local FBI wouldn’t love to be the one to serve up Tony Stark’s head on a platter. You’ve got to be smart about this,” Matt urged. “Not your usual kind of smart, the one that goes off half-cocked and tries to catch a shark with a cane pole. Stern played you, Tony. They’ll try to get a warrant for whatever is on that drive that Batroc says he was trying to buy, at the very least.”

“Well, stop them! Look, not to overdramatize, but this is a matter of life and death, Matt. If the government gets its hands on the tech, they’ll weaponize it, you know they will. And that’s the good scenario. You know what I told you about Stane, Pierce and the rest of them,” Tony reminded him.

“Theories, Tony. Compelling, I’ll grant you, but you have no proof of anything. You can’t go around accusing people like Alexander Pierce of…of treason without something to go on other than conjecture and your certainty that you know more about everything than anyone else,” Matt replied, which had the annoying ring of truth to it, Tony knew. Damn. This had all gone to such utter shit.

“Look, Tony, right now, it’s your word against Batroc’s about what was supposedly on the table, and the guy’s got tons of priors. They know he’s dirty, has all kind of shady dealings and connections to even worse, but they’ve never been able to actually directly link him to a terrorist group. Not that they haven’t tried,” Matt admitted. “It’ll be hard to get a judge to sign off on a warrant for corporate secrets based on the testimony of someone like that, though they’ll certainly try. Stern wasn’t wired, so it’s just him saying you offered him anything, though God knows who around here is in his pocket. Between the two, though, I have to tell you, it’s probably enough for some judge to sign off on it. I’m sure the D.A. is waking one up right about now.”

“We can’t let them get their hands on what’s on that drive, Matt. We can’t. This was a set-up, pure and simple, and yeah, I walked into it, but you’ve got to, I don’t know, do your legal voodoo and get me out of this,” Tony pleaded.

A sharp knock sounded at the door, drawing both men’s attention. Pepper Potts stuck her head in and quickly stepped inside, her face ashen.

“What is it?” Tony demanded immediately.

“There’s a witness,” Pepper said. “From the penthouse. Someone was up there and supposedly overheard the whole thing with Stern.”

“What?” Tony barked back in surprise. “No. No way. There wasn’t anyone else up there. Stern was
alone. I insisted on that much.”

“Well, I don’t know, Tony! I’m telling you, I heard them talking when I went outside to make a call. They just brought him in. I tried to see in the other interview room, but I couldn’t get a look,” Pepper said worriedly. “Tony—“

“No. This is crap, Matt. There wasn’t anyone else up there. I swear it. This is one of Stern’s cronies lying for him, the bastard!” Tony shouted, standing up and pushing away from the table. “No way. No way he gets away with this.”

Tony made for the door, side-stepping Pepper’s outstretched hand and ignoring Matt’s pleas to stay and let him handle it. He stalked down the short hallway, past a couple of uniformed officers who looked at him with idle curiosity, like they couldn’t quite place who he was immediately, not here, without the usual trappings of celebrity and wealth that floated around him most of the time. It took them long enough to catch up on who he was and that he was no longer where he was supposed to be that Tony had pushed open the door to the other interrogation room before they reacted.

“Sir! Hey, you can’t go in there!” Short Cop shouted, reaching for his shoulder.

Tony ground to a halt in surprise, staring at the man sitting opposite him across the twin of the table that had just been in front of him in the other room. Two investigators in ill-fitting suits too hot for the Vegas weather turned in their chairs and looked back at him. “Get him out of here! Dammit, Walsh, can’t you keep one eye on the door and the other one worrying about what Connie’s doing with Spinelli?” Bad Tan Suit called out to whoever it was over Tony’s shoulder. “Mr. Stark, I’ll have to insist you wait in the interrogation room with your lawyer while we discuss matters with the witness.”

Tony’s mouth opened and closed while his brain tried to process what he was seeing. It was the guy. The guy. From night before last, when Tony had let Rhodey take him out and get him drunk. Or possibly the other way around. At any rate, they’d ended up at some strip club just off the main drag, Rhodey insisting he was bored while drinking Tony under the table, and Tony throwing money at whoever happened to walk past. Honestly, strippers were only really interesting because they made Rhodey uncomfortable. Otherwise, it was all just sort of sad and the secondhand embarrassment was usually not worth what little thrill they offered. He thought he might have nodded off, until Rhodey’s elbow in his rib cage got his attention and pointed to the stage.

He’d gotten one look at the stage and immediately taken back every not-so-glowing thing he’d ever thought about strippers. Strippers were wonderful. Strippers were the best thing God ever put on this green earth. And this one? Tall, blond and incredibly muscled, though not the scary-huge kind that made you concerned they were just going to explode if you poked them. All-American good-looks right down to his red, white and blue striped thong. God Bless America. Tony had never felt more patriotic in his life. He’d even sent a wad of bills back with the waitress in the hopes of some private time, but all he’d gotten was an apology, a seemingly sincere ‘His loss,’ and a refund from the sympathetic waitress. He hadn’t been sure if she’d been gazing longingly at him or the roll of cash. Actually, he was pretty sure which one it was, and that didn’t do much for his disappointment. The night hadn’t exactly ended how his mind had briefly envisioned, though he’d put those thoughts to good use later.

And now Yankee Doodle himself was sitting across from him in the interrogation room, looking stunned and rather abashed, eyes darting all over the place like he was checking for possible escape routes. What the hell? Why in the world would this guy be in his—oh. Rhodey. Dammit, Rhodey. Okay, fine, good taste and taking the initiative and all that. Ordinarily, this would be a giant basket of mini-muffins coming his dear Rhodster’s way, but right now, this was so not good. If this guy had
been in the penthouse, and fuck, he’d given Rhodey the spare room key that night...if this guy had been there and heard what Tony had said to Stern...combined with whatever Batroc was crowing about, that was at least enough for a warrant to get the hard drive.

He was trying not to panic, but could feel his heart stuttering in his chest. A year of planning, and it was all going to come tumbling down because he hadn’t been able to shut up about how hot the guy was and Rhodey had, for once, listened to him, the idiot. There had to be some way to keep the guy from talking. Matt had to know some legal crap that would keep the guy from talking—wait.

“You can’t talk to him,” Tony said suddenly, pointing across the table.

“And just why the hell not, Mr. Stark?” Ugly Navy Suit demanded.

“Because we’re married. He’s my husband. Last night. Vegas tradition, right?” Tony blurted out.

“So, that’s a thing. A privilege thing. He can’t talk to you. Because of the being married to me thing.”

The Ugly Suit Twins burst out laughing. Not an auspicious start.

“It’s true,” Tony insisted. “I’m telling you, and in a minute, my lawyer’s going to be telling you, you can’t talk to him.”

The investigators swiveled in their chairs to stare at the man. “Is this true?” What Not to Wear One asked in disbelief.

The man looked up at Tony, who carefully held his hand in front of his chest and rubbed his thumb over his forefinger in what he hoped was the universal symbol for ‘Play Along And I Will Pay You Cash Money.’

“Yes,” the man said slowly. “Yes, that’s true. I married Tony Stark.”

“Uh-huh,” What Not to Wear Two said. “Where exactly did these nuptials take place?”

“I can’t quite remember,” the man said smoothly. “We were both pretty tipsy. It had the word chapel in the name, if that narrows it down any.”

“You’ve just described any of over a hundred possibilities in the downtown area alone,” the investigator snapped in annoyance.

“So, that didn’t narrow it down any, then,” the man said evenly, raising one eyebrow slightly while Tony struggled to bite back a laugh.

“What’s going on in here?” a woman with a nametag identifying her as Connie asked as she came into the room. “We can hear you all shouting out in the bullpen.”

“Stark says he married this guy last night. Claiming spousal privilege if you can believe that,” Ugly Tan Suit announced. The woman, Connie, looked between the man and Tony.

“I believe it,” she said.

“Thank you,” Tony and the man said in unison. Tony looked at the man with a frustrated grimace, but he just shrugged, ducking his head to hide a smile, and wasn’t that just adorable? No—intrigue, world at war, Nazis. Focus, for fuck’s sake. "I admit it was somewhat impulsive. Believe me, my lawyers have been screaming pre-nup at me all morning, but, hey, you can't fight love, right?” Tony said with what he hoped was a sheepish shrug. By the looks he got from the investigators, he didn't
think he pulled that off particularly well.

“And what’s your new husband’s name, Mr. Stark?” the other investigator asked, turning around again in his chair to look at Tony.

It was always the little things, Tony thought, as he looked desperately at the man across from him, but one of the investigators was eyeing him, so there really wasn’t much the man could do. The answer, Tony assumed, was probably not Hot Thong Guy. More’s the pity.

“Steve!” Pepper shouted, nearly bumping into Tony as she practically flung herself into the room. “Oh, I mean Mr. Rogers. Or can I call you Steve now? I don’t know, this is all so sudden,” she ground out through clenched teeth, throwing a pointed look at Tony.

“What’s she doing here? Get her out! Is this freaking visitor hour or something?” someone was shouting.

“Sorry, am I intruding, gentlemen? I thought the interview was over,” Pepper replied calmly.

“I believe it is, Ms. Potts,” Matt said evenly from outside the crowded doorway. “Since Mr. Rogers—or, are you going by Mr. Stark, now?” Matt asked with a placid humming noise. “I suppose that can be sorted later. At any rate, he cannot give testimony about his husband regarding events that happened during the course of their marriage, I think we’re done here for now. If you’d like to set up another time to speak with my client, you have my office’s number.”

The man, Steve, Tony corrected, got up and walked slowly around the table to stand in front of Tony. Tony reached out and grabbed onto his hand, because wasn’t that what newlyweds did? Kept touching each other, all cloying and obnoxiously happy about life? He had no idea how he was going to pull that off.

Steve smiled down at him, soft at first, then wider and before Tony could do more than open his mouth to say God only knew what—hopefully words, but that was honestly up in the air at the moment because he couldn’t think of any—Steve brought his hand around to cup the back of Tony’s neck, tilting his head just so and bent down to press a long, lingering kiss to Tony’s lips, close enough that Tony could feel the promise of warm, wet heat. Steve pulled back, his tongue darting out to taste his lips, as if he wanted just that bit more, and fuck if that didn’t go right to Tony’s cock. He felt himself smiling stupidly up at the man, still clinging to his hand like a kindergartener on his first school trip.

“Honey,” Steve breathed out, eyes bright with amusement and a spark of something that might be challenge. “I missed you so much.”

Maybe this whole pretending to be happy thing wasn’t going to be so hard after all, Tony thought dazedly.

“I’ve been thinking about you all day,” Tony told him, and that much at least was true enough. “So sorry about this whole crazy misunderstanding. Dear.”

“Alright, you two, that’s enough. Mr. Murdock, see that your client provides us with a copy of his marriage license, would you?” Thing One requested smugly. “I’m sure you have such a precious document commemorating your wedded bliss on hand. Isn’t that right, Mr. Stark?” Tony saw Steve’s eyes go wide in panic and lock on Tony’s immediately. Whoever he was, Tony thought, he was someone used to playing a role, but not outright lying, that much was clear, Tony thought bemusedly.
“Of course,” Tony said, smiling and sliding his sunglasses out of his pocket. He had no such thing, of course, but if he could miniaturize an arc reactor, he was pretty sure that hacking the county clerk’s office was probably not going to present nearly the issue that dealing with Pepper’s wrath was likely to produce. “You’ll have it on your desk by morning,” Tony promised. “Signed, sealed and delivered.”

His merry band followed him out into the hall, Pepper’s frown enough to quell the stares of the mere mortals they passed on their way out of the police station. And now, the true trial by fire, Tony thought as they approached the tinted glass doors that led outside. “So, look, Steve,” Tony began, stopping long enough to turn to the man at his side. “There are going to be about a hundred or so press out there. Most just want to snap a good photo, but to get that, they’re going to shout all sorts of things. Ignore them. They don’t know about you yet, and they don’t need to right now, so just follow along behind Matt and get into the limo, okay?”

“Oh, okay. Sure. I can do that,” Steve said, a note of trepidation in his voice for the first time.

“It’s going to be fine,” Tony assured him, reaching out and squeezing Steve’s hand, then dropping it like it burned. What the hell was he doing? There was no need to play it up right now. Just get out of here, into the limo and back to the hotel.

“You’re letting him go?” a shrill voice shouted from behind them. Tony spun around in time to see Stern barreling down the hallway, an angry hand pointed in Tony’s direction. “You can’t let him go! Where’s Judge Abernathy with the warrant? Go pull him out of the Cheetah Club and get him to sign it,” Stern demanded.

“At this time, we don’t feel we have enough to get a warrant that would require Mr. Stark to turn over proprietary technology,” Navy-Suited investigator explained, though he didn’t sound happy about it.

“I thought you had a witness!” Stern barked.

“Turned out to be Mr. Stark’s new husband,” Tan Suit told him, leaving Stern’s mouth to open and shut a few times as he tried to digest the news. “Can’t talk to him.”

“Congratulate me, Senator. I’m a married man,” Tony grinned waspishly.

“You—you—that can’t—no—that’s not possible,” Stern spluttered uselessly, looking from Tony to Steve, as if noticing the other man for the first time.

“Hey, don’t I know you?” Stern asked, eyes narrowing.

“You—you—that can’t—no—that’s not possible,” Stern spluttered uselessly, looking from Tony to Steve, as if noticing the other man for the first time.

“Hey, don’t I know you?” Stern asked, eyes narrowing.

“Why? Does my face look familiar?” Steve deadpanned. Tony couldn’t stop the sharp, half-aghast laugh that burst out of him at that. Cute and interesting. Tony thought with a smile, then caught Pepper’s eye and realized he was smiling like a lunatic at Steve and promptly coughed into his hand to cover another laugh.

“Oh, come on!” Stern pleaded to the heavens, tossing his hands in the air. “That guy isn’t Stark’s husband. For crying out loud, Stark just picked him up at the— at some establishment. He’s just some fuck boy Stark rented for the ni— ow!!! Ewasshl!” Stern shouted, one hand flying to his nose as he tipped his head back to stop the flow of blood.

That hurt, Tony thought, shaking his hand to clear the worst of the stinging pain from his knuckles. Surprisingly satisfying, though. “That’s my husband you’re talking about, Senator,” Tony bit out.

“Idewseedat?” Stern mewled. “Eehitme! Myhrt! Cntbreef! Arrestem!” Stern shouted, pointing in
agitation at Tony, who just rolled his eyes and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“He started it,” Tony said hurriedly.

“I’ll say,” Navy Suit agreed.

“Oh, for the love,” Pepper muttered under her breath, rolling her eyes. “Tony, stop. Senator, you can press charges if you want, we’re right here, but are you sure you want it all over the papers that you insulted Mr. Stark’s new husband, Senator? And just how exactly you have knowledge of Mr. Rogers’ perfectly legal occupation?”

Stern blinked at her, and one of his hangers-on leaned over to whisper something in the Senator’s ear. “Mimishtake,” Stern said after a moment.

“See that it doesn’t happen again,” Tony replied, then grabbed Steve’s hand and pulled him out the door, forgetting for the moment that he’d told Steve to follow along behind Matt so as not to draw any more attention to him that necessary. So, when Tony Stark finally exited the Las Vegas Police Headquarters, he ended up going out arm in arm with who would soon be called an “unidentified man,” the biggest red flag to a snorting bull of a paparazzi there was.

By the time they made the limo, Tony had realized his mistake, but it was too late. Steve was red-faced, eyes wide, looking for the world like Bambi after someone made his mother their dinner. The things the photogs shouted at Tony to try to get a rise out of him for just the right terrible picture were old news, but probably no amount of warning could really have prepared Steve.

“What—why—those things they said—” Steve stuttered, turning and pointing at the crowd of news people outside the limo.

“Don’t worry about it. Pep will handle the press,” Tony promised.

“I—this is going to be all over the news, isn’t it?” Steve said dully, as if the realization was just now occurring to him. Maybe it was. One thing to think he could get out of police questioning and maybe make a little money by agreeing to Tony’s crazy charade without really thinking it through. Another to suddenly see that his face was going to plastered on the internet as one of Tony’s conquests, if nothing else. And there was probably going to be something else. When the press got wind of the idea that Tony was married, they were going to make Steve’s life miserable, and from the look of it, Steve was beginning to catch on to that fact. “What are they going to say?”

“Nothing. Right now, at least. But, truthfully, it won’t take long. Someone inside the police or Stern’s office is going to leak it,” Tony told him resignedly. “They’re going to be horrible. They’ll find out about your work. Anything you’ve done in your life that remotely looks bad. They’ll take it and turn it into something sordid because you’re connected with me now. They’ll try to destroy you. I’m sorry,” Tony said truthfully as Steve’s face paled. “Look, I know this is all probably seeming insane to you about now, and you’re thinking about bolting the first chance you get. And if you want to walk back in there and tell the police the truth, you can. I’m not going to stop you. But I do owe you a reason for asking you to help me.”

“Tony—“ Matt started.

“No, this was me throwing a Hail Mary, Matt. And Steve here caught it without really knowing what it was going to mean,” Tony said, suddenly weary of the whole thing. This was not how this was supposed to go. Nothing about this was right. He’d screwed up with Stern and now this poor sod was caught up in it all, his only fault being insanely hot. That was probably not a sin worth having
“Steve, here’s the deal.” Tony began. “If you tell them what you heard between me and Stern, they’re probably going to use that to get their hands on my technology. As soon as it’s out of my hands, Stern can get to it. One way or the other, he’ll have it. And if he does, it’s going to be bad for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is that Stern’s dirty. I think you might know that,” Tony prodded.

Steve was watching him intently. He said nothing, but finally tilted his head just slightly, but enough for Tony to take it for agreement. “Okay, say I believe you,” Steve replied cautiously.

“What’s in it for you, right? Why risk it?” Tony asked. “I just need a few days. A few days, and this contact of mine, Batroc, he’s going to take the sample tech I gave him not to a terrorist cell, like the Feds are currently freaking out about, but to Obadiah Stane, the CEO of Stark Industries, who is then going to give it to Alexander Pierce. You’ve heard of him, right? Okay,” Tony continued at Steve’s slow nod. “Pierce not going to turn this over to the authorities. In fact, he’s going to use it to try to make weapons for a group called Hydra. Heard of them? No? Well, very bad people, suffice it to say. Like Nazi bad. Look, there’s a lot more to it, but I’m telling you this so you’ll understand that this isn’t some game for me. This is real. This matters. I can’t let them get their hands on this tech, not this way. It’s too out in the open. The Feds would be all over it and the whole thing would go South and Pierce would skitter back into his hidey-hole. I can’t just destroy it now, because they know about it and if I blow this hard drive to kingdom come, they’ll be all over my files in a heartbeat.”

“You know how this sounds, right?” Steve asked, looking between Tony, Pepper and Matt, like one of them was going to suddenly yell ‘Gotcha!’

“I do. I promise, I’m not crazy and, unfortunately, I’m not lying or wrong about this. Steve, I’m asking you to do this for me for a few days, a week tops. In return, I’ll make it more than worth it for you. You know who I am. I think you know that I can keep that promise. But, not if I end up in jail on some bogus attempted bribery charge,” Tony finished quietly, letting that sink in.

“I heard you with Stern,” Steve reminded him.

“Yeah, that probably sounded bad,” Tony admitted.

“What were you doing with him?” Steve asked carefully, almost like he didn’t really want to know the answer.

“Trying to bribe him,” Tony said quickly, leaning back in the seat.

“Toooonnnnny,” Pepper groaned, bringing her palm up to massage her forehead.

“For a good cause. He’s in it with Stane, for sure. I needed to see if it was about the money or something else. Now, I know. He’s Hydra, too,” Tony explained. “Steve, look, I think you’re smart enough to know that I’ve told you enough here that you can hurt me with it. I’m taking a gamble that you’re actually the kind of guy who cares about doing the right thing. Granted, I’m basing that on the fact that you sent my one grand back to me instead of just keeping it, but still. I like to think lap dance integrity still means something in this country.”

“Matt, you can’t just let him keep talking like this,” Pepper said, kicking at Tony’s lawyer with her heel.

“I’m sorry, I’ve gone temporarily deaf, what was that?” Murdock asked placidly. “Hey, I went instantly blind. It can happen,” Matt said at Pepper’s silence.
“You should’ve just gone to James with this in the first place. I don’t know what the hell you thought you were doing, Tony. This is insane. Someone is going to find out about this. We don’t—and I’m sorry here, Steve—but, we don’t even know anything about him, and now I’m supposed to spin that you’re married to him?” Pepper hissed. “You?”

“Well, it isn’t as if no one will believe I got drunk and married a stripper, Pep,” Tony replied cheekily.

“Tony, so help me God, I’m going to—“ Pepper began.

“Fine,” Steve interrupted, cutting off what probably would’ve been a truly epic tirade. Tony could only imagine what was going through the poor guy’s head, but if it got him to agree, all’s well that ends well. “I’ll do it. But what about the license? They’re going to want to see that.”

“Oh, yeah, don’t worry about that,” Tony said, digging out his tablet. “Jarvis? I’m going to need a Clark County Nevada marriage license dated sometime yesterday, if you’d be so kind.”

“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis responded, startling Steve.

“Is that your butler?” Steve asked, peering down at the tablet curiously. “Who forges documents for you?”

“Something like that,” Tony acknowledged as his phone started to buzz insistently. He picked it up and looked at the screen. Right on cue, he thought.

“Why, hello, old chum, old pal,” Tony answered.

“What the hell, Tony?” Rhodey demanded brusquely. Tony winced and drew the phone away from his ear. “You’ve got cops and Feds all over the hotel. I’m watching you perp walk out of the police station on repeat on CNN. They’re saying you tried to bribe Stern? Fox News has you selling weapons on the black market, and God that picture they’re using is the one from Bali in ’09. You look like shit. They wheeled Stern out and put him in an ambulance, by the way. Got some paparazzi swearing you decked the guy. Now they’ve got ‘copters following it like he’s OJ.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Sourpatch, I’ve got it covered. Uh, though, I should probably tell you that, purely in the interests of national security and the greater good, I kind of had to fake marrying that stripper-gram you sent. Thanks for that, by the way,” Tony added quickly.
Chapter 2

Stark, the blind man Steve had figured out to be Stark’s attorney and the woman, Ms. Potts, were huddled in the penthouse suite’s living room, heads drawn together conspiratorially as they talked in low voices, punctuated by the occasionally outburst from Stark and sharp versions of “Tony!” from Ms. Potts, which seemed to function as anything from a stern ‘no’ to the equivalent of ‘you’re insane,’ as far as Steve could tell.

No one seemed to pay Steve much attention once he’d agreed to his role in Stark’s hasty plan, other than Ms. Potts asking for his social security number and Stark pointing towards the kitchen after they exited the suite’s dedicated elevator, announcing, “There’s food. Probably,” with an air of distraction as he tapped at his ever-present tablet without looking up.

He was hovering, he knew, bouncing from one foot to the other, hands fisted at his sides because he wasn’t sure what to do with them. He was standing far enough away so as not to appear to intrude on whatever they were doing, but he couldn’t exactly wander around, so he tried to still himself, feeling vaguely ridiculous though he was just standing there, unsure what to do with himself. He didn’t usually feel his size, but standing here in this place he didn’t belong, he almost felt like he was expanding, taking up too much room. Being too obvious, though it was their utter obliviousness to him that made him feel that way, which almost made no sense, except it did. The world, rather uncooperatively, Steve thought, refused to just open up and swallow him when he needed it to.

“I’m just gonna—“ Steve started, holding up his cell phone with one hand and jerking his head towards the balcony that sprawled beyond the French doors, overlooking the Strip. Ms. Potts finally looked up and gave him a quick, distracted nod before turning back to Stark again. He’d been dismissed, Steve decided, and realized that had probably happened long before, and he just hadn’t noticed, which made it worse somehow. The heat hit him as soon as he opened the doors to the balcony, like it had just been laying in wait to find its way inside. Below him, the Strip glittered, waving in the heat of the afternoon sun, lights already beckoning. Not for the first time, he wondered why he hated these lights as much as he missed the way New York lit up, how one could feel so empty and the other like a beacon. Maybe that had nothing to do with the lights, he thought dully. Vegas was a last resort, desperation writ large, and when he looked at it, he couldn’t see anything else.

Steve dug the small spiral notebook from his pocket and flipped to a new, clean page where he listed their names and stared at it a moment before tucking the notebook back into his pocket. This was crazy, he knew. But he’d known he was going to agree as soon as Stark asked him. He could tell himself it was the chance to do something that mattered again, at least Stark was to be believed, or, hell, tell himself it was about the money Stark practically dangled in front of him not so very differently than he had at the club. Those things were enough to justify it, at least make it believable enough that he would be able to tell everyone those had been his reasons once this was all over.

He turned the phone on and scrolled through his somewhat thin contact list for Nat’s number. The screen was cracked, distorting her name, and he had to hit it a few times to get it to dial, like the damn phone itself was fighting him on it.

“Where the hell are you?” Natasha demanded by way of answer.

“Stark’s penthouse,” Steve replied.

“Is this like the thing with—“ Natasha started.
"No," Steve cut her off sharply. "No, it’s fine. It’s…ah, I can’t say exactly, but, um, I might be here a couple of days,” Steve explained. Or tried to. Mr. Murdock had been very specific about what to say and what not to say, after Steve had argued that there was no way his friends would believe that he and Stark had actually gotten married out of some kind of love at first sight thing. This whole plan was paper thin to begin with, but they only needed to buy a few days, or so Stark said. Wouldn’t do for Steve’s friends to start talking to the press about how something was off about the situation and expose the whole charade for what it was.

“Steve,” Natasha said softly, her voice heavy and somewhat sad, though it was the kind of sadness born of expectation, not surprise, and maybe that hurt as much as anything.

“It’s not—it’s not what you’re thinking,” Steve said, face scrunching into a pained wince. He pinched the bridge of his nose between his forefingers before continuing. Lying was hard enough for him. Lying to Natasha was a bit like riding to work on a unicycle. You could do it, but it was going to hurt and what was even the point?

“I’m coming to get you,” Natasha replied.

“Nat-“ Steve started.

“No, no. Just no. Whatever it is, you’re in over your head, I can hear it in your voice, so don’t even start,” Natasha objected. A part of him wanted her to, wanted her to tell him this was crazy, he needed to come back, that he couldn’t do this. Natasha would, he knew. She was too good at lies not to know the truth of it when she saw it.

“It—no—I mean, yeah. Yeah, I got in a little over my head, but not—it’s not bad. Not really. Just, we need a few days to work things out. He—ah, Stark and I—we kind of hit it off last night, and we were both pretty plastered, and we—we, ah. We ended up at one of those 24-hour chapel places,” Steve said in a rush, sucking in a breath. The silence on the other end of the phone line seemed to have weight and form, and he was almost compelled to try to fill it with flimsy explanations that he knew Nat could see right through. “I know it was stupid, completely, beyond stupid, right? Me and someone like Stark. Obviously, he knows that, too, but we need a couple of days to deal with the legalities, and there’s press. Of course, I mean, he’s Tony Stark, so they’re going to be all over it. So, um, I need you to not talk about this. To anyone. If they contact you or any of the others at the club, okay? Can you tell everyone? I mean, it’s…it’s probably going to look bad. Him and me. So, just don’t say anything for a bit.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” Natasha replied after a moment’s pause. “But you know that. And you’re trying to sell me this anyway, so I guess you have your reasons. Maybe a few days away will be good for you.” And there it was, Steve thought, feeling some of the tension that had been needling against the back of his spine leave him. “I’ll tell Clint to cover your shifts at the club. He’s got this Robin Hood routine he wants to try out that is truly terrible. Like, amazingly bad. Think ‘Men in Tights’ and you’ll have the mental image, but there’s no telling him that. Ass thinks he’s Errol Flynn.”

“Hate to miss it,” Steve said, picking at a thread on the sleeve of his shirt until it started to unravel and curl. He wound it around the tip of his finger tight enough to whiten it, released it, then repeated the process. As a stress reliever went, he figured it was better than other options.

“Stop doing whatever it is you’re doing,” Natasha said abruptly, and Steve let the thread go with a slight sigh. “What do you need from me?”

“Can you swing by the apartment and grab a few things for me?” Steve asked. “I didn’t exactly bring much with me. And…check on him. I’m going to call. Explain. But, you know, maybe just stop by a
couple times. Until I can get over there.”


“Thanks, Nat. I mean it,” Steve replied.

“So, what’s your new hubby like, anyway? I saw him the other night. Not that he took his eyes off you long enough to notice, but good tipper,” she noted, a light, teasing tone infusing her voice.

“He’s…I don’t know. Talks a lot. Seems nice enough,” Steve said with a shrug he realized she couldn’t see, and looked over his shoulder in automatic embarrassment. “He’s what they say, I guess.”

“They say a lot of things,” Natasha reminded him.

“Yeah,” Steve replied, suddenly tired. “Yeah.”

“Did you tell him that you—” Natasha began.

“No,” Steve said quickly, cutting her off. “No reason to.”

There was another of Natasha’s long pauses before she spoke again, but this time, Steve resisted the urge to break the silence with words. “Okay, well, you know I’m here if you need anything else,” Natasha said slowly. “Seriously, Steve. Anything. I mean it. I don’t care who he is or what’s going on, you want out, say the word, okay?”

“Hey, Army here,” Steve replied, feeling strangely buoyed by her concern, however misplaced it might be. “I can take care of myself, you know that, right?”

“Yeah, you’re doing a bang-up job so far,” she said, though there wasn’t really any judgment behind the words, just a sad sort of bitterness that he knew wasn’t really directed at him.

“I—I’m trying, Nat,” Steve replied, rubbing a hand up and down over his face, before dropping it to his waist. He wasn’t sure which one of them he needed to convince more.

“I know,” she said wearily. “I know you are. Okay, so look, I’ll drop the bag by—was it the Bellagio?” Natasha asked.


“Classy,” Natasha snorted. “They’ve got a dedicated concierge just for that suite,” she informed him, and he didn’t really need to ask how she knew that. “I’ll drop your bag with them.”

“Thanks, Nat,” Steve replied.

“Hey, grab all the shampoos and soaps you can for me, will you? Maybe a couple of towels. Need the Rio to complete my set,” Natasha said, her voice teasing and light, and he knew it was more for his benefit than hers.

“Will do,” Steve promised, feeling a smile tug at the corner of his mouth as he heard the click of Natasha disconnecting the line.

His next call was perfunctory, letting the foreman of the road crew he worked on during the day know he wouldn’t be available for the next week or so, which earned him the knowledge of just how easy he was to replace. At least the same couldn’t be said for the club, where he knew he was popular enough that the owner would give him a bit of leeway, no matter that you could toss a bottle
top in Vegas and hit three people willing to take their clothes off for money. The things he was thankful for had certainly taken a sharp turn somewhere, he thought, meaning the thought to be wry, but it felt harsher than that as it floated around his mind.

He stared down at the blank phone screen for a moment before hitting the other number in his favorites. It rang too long, and the default voicemail picked up. Steve clicked the phone off and tried the number again, but got the same result. He thought about calling Nat back, asking her to go on over, and turned the phone over a few times in his hand trying to come to a decision. It shouldn’t be this hard for him to make a decision, not after everything, but even small choices these days felt like someone chinking away at whatever it was holding him together. He breathed out and forced himself to hit the button to dial the number again. This time, when the voicemail picked up, he didn’t hesitate.

“Hey, Bucky, it’s me. Listen, something came up with Stark. Nothing—nothing bad, not really, just a stupid misunderstanding, but there, ah, there might be some stuff on TV or the internet about it. We, ah…we kind of accidentally got married,” Steve rushed out with a wince. “We’re getting it straightened out, of course, I mean, crazy, right? But I’m going to be here a couple of days, probably, just dealing with the lawyers and all. But, look, you can’t talk to anyone if they come looking for me, okay? Just—just don’t say anything to anyone. Nat’s going to stop by the apartment and grab some of my clothes, and just, you know, check on things,” Steve said, stumbling over the words a bit, because he knew Buck was going to resent the hell out of Nat stopping by, but also knew that would do absolutely nothing to dissuade her. “So, ah, it might be a bit before I make it back. Just, ah—just remember to take your meds, okay? They’re all on the list on the front of the ‘fridge. Be sure to take them at the right times, okay? You know what the doctor said about that. It’s—that’s important. So, don’t forget. Please. All the times are on the list. And do your exercises. They’ll help. Your hearing is on Friday. I should be back in plenty of time for that, so don’t worry. There’s some cash in the box in the back of my closet, if you run low. Not much, but…if you need it. I mean, that’s what it’s there for. If you need anything, anything at all, just call. Anytime. Day or night. Me or Nat, if you want, even if you just need to talk, or—“ the beep cut him off, and he was left with half-spoken words on his tongue, staring dumbly at the broken screen.

Steve spun on his heels at the sound of a throat clearing behind him. Stark was standing in the doorway of the French door, one of the sheer curtains that filtered and dulled the lights of the Strip fluttering around his feet. “Everything okay?” Stark asked.

“Oh, yeah. Fine. Just. Just leaving a message for a friend,” Steve said quickly, groping for words to cover the embarrassment that clung to him as he pocketed the phone. He wasn’t sure why he even felt that way, but he didn’t like the exposed feeling that the idea of Stark listening in on his conversation with, well, Bucky’s voicemail, left him with, which he knew was the height of irony, all things considered. But that…that whole thing, the dancing, taking his clothes off, letting them look, that was a performance. It wasn’t him, no matter how brittle that wall had started to feel lately.

Stark looked at him for a beat longer, and Steve could feel the weight of the other man’s scrutiny, making his skin crawl, but Stark didn’t push for more of an answer. “Listen, ah, sorry about before. Ignoring you, I mean. Pep tells me I’m being insensitive,” Stark said with a deprecating, almost bashful smile that didn’t quite meet his eyes, and Steve could see the charm that Stark was famous for almost coiling around the man. It occurred to Steve that he wasn’t the only one performing, but the point was meaningless. Performance was what was required, at least for now.

“No, no problem. I mean, it’s fine. I just had to make a couple of calls,” Steve replied, trying to read something in the man’s expression, but the assessing look had dropped off his face almost as soon as Steve turned around. “My friend is going to bring some stuff by, if that’s okay. I told her not to talk to anyone. Honestly, if anyone from the press did try to talk to her, they’d probably be spilling their
own life story in no time. Nat’s got, well, a way with people.”

“About that,” Stark began, stepping out onto the balcony. “Pepper says the press has wind of the situation. The, uh, marriage thing. They’re camped out in the lobby. TMZ has our marriage certificate. Jarvis works fast,” Stark said, waving a hand in the air as if that answered any questions Steve might have. “So, anyway, she thinks it would be a good idea for us to be seen together. Let them snap some pictures that aren’t the two of us running out of police station. Happy couple and all that,” Stark continued, his eyebrows dancing up a bit as if he found the whole thing absurd, which he probably did, but this whole thing with his company and the government clearly mattered to the man, and if this was the way to get what he wanted, Steve suspected he was going to commit, if only so that Steve didn’t rabbit on him.

“What did you have in mind?” Steve asked carefully.


“I don’t—“ Steve started, looking down at his t-shirt and jeans and mentally cataloguing what options existed in his closet that he could beg Natasha to bring. He had that jacket he’d worn to Bucky’s hearing, but he almost laughed out loud when his mind supplied the mental image of him standing next to Tony Stark in tan corduroy with faux suede patches at the elbows and his one good pair of khakis.

“Huh?” Stark said with a frown when Steve didn’t elaborate. “Oh. Right. Ah, let me just…” he trailed off, glancing quickly over his shoulder and back inside the penthouse. “Actually,” Stark paused. “This could be good. The hotel has some stores we can hit up. Very Pretty Woman-ish.”

“I’m going to try not to be offended on a number of different levels,” Steve replied dryly. To his surprise, Stark laughed at that, then started toward him, one hand reaching out like he was going to grab Steve by the shoulder.

Steve flinched out of reach without really quite meaning to, but the thought that they weren’t supposed to touch him was too ingrained at this point to do anything else. Don’t let them, not once, Natasha’s words echoed in his head. If they do, walk away, because if you stay, they’re going to take that as permission, so it was half-instinct at this point to jerk away, though by the startled look on Stark’s face, he’d taken it entirely the wrong way. He had kissed the man in the police station, so the confusion was certainly understandable, he could freely admit. That was part of the show, though, and he’d learned to do that. Perform. Slip into a role and tuck himself deep inside it so it didn’t consume him.

“Sorry,” Steve said at the same time Stark mumbled his own apology and stepped back almost comically fast.

“My mistake,” Stark said, eyes darting down and away, and it occurred to Steve for the first time just how horribly awkward this must be for him. What if Stark was dating? That Ms. Potts maybe, or someone else entirely. Not to mention how the press was going to paint all of this. Tony Stark visits Vegas and ends up marrying a stripper. It was the depressing side of cliché, he supposed, but he it was a big risk for Stark any way you looked at it. Even if you took out the high stakes game of chicken he was apparently playing with some very important people and whatever legal fallout there might be from Stern, hadn’t Ms. Potts said something about the stock drop in the car ride back to the hotel? There were almost too many moving parts for Steve to keep track of, all intersecting and overlapping like gears pistoning inside an engine. One gets off track and the whole thing falls apart.

Steve sighed deeply and straightened his spine, almost unconsciously falling into something near
enough to parade rest to have the comfort of familiarity. “No, it’s me. It’s nothing. I’m just—sorry. This is…this is all very strange,” Steve admitted. “I’m—I’m trying. When we’re out there, I’ll be fine. I promise.”

Stark was watching him somewhat skeptically, but nodded, then stepped aside, spreading one arm wide to indicate Steve should head back into the penthouse. He stepped through the door and scanned the room. Ms. Potts and Mr. Murdock glanced up at him from their places at the long dining table, which had apparently become some kind of war room stand-in, littered with papers, files and humming laptops emblazoned with the Stark Industries logo. Ms. Potts was talking into her cell phone, rapid-fire instructions that seemed to be their dinner order, all beginning with ‘Mr. Stark would like…,’ the fact that it wasn’t on the restaurant’s menu seemingly not an insurmountable problem.

“Any allergies?” she asked, cupping her hand over the phone’s speaker. Steve listed them off, feeling Stark’s eyes on him again. “Okay, anything you aren’t allergic to?” she amended when he was finished, then just smiled and waved him off as she went back to ordering for them, though there was genuine warmth in her expression.

When she was finished, Stark jerked his head in Steve’s direction. “Cinderella here needs a bit of fairy godmothering,” he said, having apparently decided on what he thought was a less offensive metaphor. Twenty minutes of sitting on the couch trying not to let his silence mark him as mentally deficient later, three suits were delivered, which she handed to Steve and guided him to one of the suite’s bathrooms.

He shut the bathroom’s door and just leaned back against the frame, holding the garment bags filled with suits hugged to his chest for a moment, breathing in and out steadily, trying to convince his heart to slow down to a comfortable jog instead of the rapid, pounding that had slowly built as he sat out in the living area listening to Ms. Potts and Mr. Murdock detail what to expect and how to act, what to say, topics to avoid at all costs, every detail mapped out like with mission-like precision. What had seemed freeing in the limo ride started to grow steadily more oppressing with each admonition.

When the tightness in his chest subsided, he hung the bag up on one of the bathroom hooks and took a moment to look around. The bathroom might be bigger than their apartment, he noted, then eyed the toiletries and smiled as he thought of Nat. He shook his head to clear it and unzipped the bag, unfolding the corners over the suit options.

The first, a sleek, slate grey colored one barely fit over his shoulders. The second, a dark navy, worked better, so he settled on that, pairing it with one of the deep blue shirts that had been sent along with the suits. Apparently blue was the new neutral, he thought as he buttoned up the shirt that seemed the best fit, though it was still a bit tight. He couldn’t help run a hand over the material, which had a slight sheen to it. None of the items had a price tag on them, which he assumed meant that if you had to ask, you probably couldn’t afford it.

He ran a hand through his hair as he took in his reflection in the mirror, then straightened. It wasn’t really all that different from putting on his outfit for the club, slipping into a different skin for the night. When he looked again, he could see less of himself, like he had faded somehow, and he supposed that meant he was ready.

When he walked out, Ms. Potts was on the phone again, and she held one finger in the air in a gesture clearly meant as ‘hold on,’ and went back to her conversation, which stopped abruptly. Steve turned his head back to her, and caught her with her mouth parted, as if she’d stopped mid-word before she snapped it shut. “I’m going to have to call you back,” she said to whoever it was on the
phone. “You. You, ah—where’s Tony?” she asked, dropping the phone onto the table and walking off.

“I think you look great, too,” the blind lawyer said.

“You probably say that to all the guys,” Steve replied without missing a beat.

“Of all Tony’s insane plans, I like you the best,” Murdock said evenly.

“Bet that was a tight race,” Steve grimaced, then realized the other man couldn’t see his expression, though you wouldn’t know it by how the lawyer’s snort of cut-off laughter.

“It’s probably not going to feel like it at times, but you’re doing the right thing here,” Murdock told him. “How did your friends handle the news of your rather shocking nuptials?”

“One of them offered to bust me out of here and then demanded bath soaps,” Steve replied.

“I think I’d like your friends,” Murdock said, sounding oddly gleeful about the whole prospect.

“Not sure they exactly have the best opinions of lawyers. No offense,” Steve said apologetically. “Just haven’t had the best experiences with the legal system.”

“None taken. You don’t have a record, though,” Murdock said with the certainty of someone who had checked.

“No,” Steve replied, leaving the obvious question hanging unanswered in the air.

“Pepper says you’re ready,” he heard Tony call out as he came out of the suite’s master bedroom. Stark and Ms. Potts had some kind of nonsensical shorthand exchange that Steve simply blanked on because he wasn’t ready, wasn’t even sure if he remembered what it felt like to be ready, not anymore, not here, where every inch forward was so damn hard.

“Happy’s bringing the car around to the front of the hotel, so we can walk the gauntlet of press downstairs. Just smile and ignore them,” Stark continued as he walked into the living room. He was looking down at his wrist, adjusting the clasp on a watch, when he glanced up at Steve, eyes darting around the room before he went back to fiddling with his watch. Stark’s suit certainly wasn’t off the rack, Steve noted, and he wore it well. Steve wasn’t blind, after all. Stark took two more steps as he worked the watch onto his wrist, then looked up again and halted like he’d run into an invisible wall.

Steve could feel his cheeks heat, though why, he couldn’t say exactly. The man had seen him naked, after all. Hell, he still had a hundred dollar bill folded in his wallet from their last encounter, but here he was, shifting between feet while Stark stared at him, mouth opening and closing once before he shot a somewhat annoyed glance over his shoulder where Ms. Potts was watching him with a smirk from the doorway of the bedroom.

Maybe his embarrassment was because he couldn’t quite fade all the way into this role. It required him to be more present than the dancing, so Stark was seeing more of him now than he had at the club, though he doubted that was what was running through Stark’s mind, and it was harder to slip into this almost-him skin than just leaving himself behind for the other.

For the first time since the limo, Steve wanted to bolt. This was such an impossibly bad idea. It all seemed so clear now, seeing Stark all dressed up for their ‘date,’ such as it was. He shouldn’t care, he supposed. At this point, it seemed vaguely pointless to give a shit, but he was going to walk out into the hotel’s lobby with this man and become a punchline, and that was never something he’d imagined he would become. Maybe he shouldn’t care, but there it was, pricking low in his stomach,
making it sour and churn while he fidgeted under Stark’s gaze. Tell him you can’t do this, Steve thought. Tell him you want out. Walk away. The ways this is not your problem are many and varied. Just walk away.

But then his mind flashed to Stern’s blood-soaked face and the way it had felt that someone thought he was worth defending, even knowing, the way Stark’s eyes had almost been pleading in the limo when he explained why he was doing all of this, trying to stop people who wanted nothing but to use their power to hurt the very people Steve had once tried to protect, bullies behind desks and armored in letterhead, wielding pens and keystrokes and doing more damage than one of the bombs that carried Stark’s name. How long had it been since he’d had something to fight that could be beaten?

It wasn’t like there had ever really been a chance he would say no to helping Stark. No one ever said atonement was easy. Steve swallowed past the lump in his throat that he was fairly sure was the remnants of what little pride he had left. Stark needed a husband, one the press and police would believe he’d been drunk enough to marry on a whim. He could be that person for a few days. He’d faced worse, after all. Stark was watching him, a quiet, assessing look on his face. He shook his head, a grimace splitting his features, defeat and self-disgust, recognizable only because Steve had seen them too many time to count.

“Look, this was insane. I don’t even know what I was thinking. I never should have involved you in any of this. Pepper will get you a check and—“ Stark began.

_They’ll try to destroy you_, Stark had said in the limo.

Too late, Steve thought viciously.

“I’m ready when you are, Mr. Stark,” Steve heard himself say, surprised to find that he meant it.
Chapter Summary

Okay, I know it isn’t a real update, but look! Stripper!Steve! No wonder Tony wanted to fake marry him. Find more art and commission info at sgtjimbarnes.tumblr.com. In the meantime, enjoy the beauty that is a mostly naked Steve Rogers. Tony sure is.
“Rogers, Steven Grant,” JARVIS’ voice sounded from the tablet on top of the dresser as Tony adjusted his tie in front of the mirror. “Born in Brooklyn, New York, 1981. Currently residing in Las Vegas, Nevada, as you know. Unmarried. Father, Joseph Rogers, deceased in 1989. Mother, Sarah Rogers, deceased in 1999. Graduated from Fort Hamilton High School and subsequently enlisted in the Army the following August. During his enlistment, he earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Middle Eastern Studies from American Military University in 2005. He went on to complete Army Ranger School 2008 and attained the rank of Captain before receiving an honorable discharged just under a year ago. Employment tax records indicate that, in addition to the employment of which you are already aware,” JARVIS continued primly, while Tony rolled his eyes. “Mr. Rogers also works for a road construction subcontractor called Comstock Paving. A search of property records did not reveal any real estate holdings, past or present. No prior criminal history. No bankruptcies. One Visa credit card with a balance of just over $4300. One application for a loan with Chase Bank and one with the Bank of Nevada, both denied due to insufficient assets. One Macy’s card account, opened in 1999, now closed and paid off. No other credit history. One bank account, with a current balance of $567.58 and a savings account with just over twenty-three thousand dollars.”

“Army?” Tony asked in surprise. “Really?”

“The Hundred and Seventh,” JARVIS clarified. “Stationed in Afghanistan, for the most part, according to the service records I was able to access.”

“Huh,” Tony said, a frown creasing his brow. “That it?”

“For now, Sir. My analysis is only preliminary,” Jarvis responded.

Army vet, Tony mentally repeated. That was…strange. Didn’t quite fit the narrative his head had conjured up on the limo ride back to the hotel. Struggling actor, maybe. Dancer trying to work his way up to one of the casino shows. Wannabe model. Someone he could fling money at guilt-free and get what he needed. Veteran working two jobs…well, it wasn’t really any of his business.

It was just…it felt different. Probably shouldn’t, Tony could acknowledge, but it did. He had done his own tour of duty, so to speak, in Afghanistan not too long ago, after all, as the souvenir in his chest could attest. It didn’t change that he needed the guy to cooperate for a few days before this whole thing blew up in his face. It didn’t change anything, really.

Really.

*Is it cool if I take a picture with you?*

They had been so young, Tony remembered, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger as he let out a long hiss of air. He leaned forward and braced his hands around the top of
the dresser, then looked up at his reflection in the mirror. So damn young, he thought again. They’d paid the price for his mistakes far more thoroughly than he ever had. He owed them this, owed them some justice, however hollow the comfort may be. If Obie was really behind his kidnapping, the funneling of weapons to terrorists and now…now this thing with Pierce and Stern…the scale of it still left him adrift, like his mind could only take that thought so far and then had to stop before it rolled right off some mental cliff into an abyss of denial.

It still didn’t seem possible, but he’d slowly watched the evidence build until he couldn’t ignore it any longer, which was why he’d gone to Rhodey and Matt in the first place. The insane scheme he and Rhodey cooked up brought them to Vegas, dangling the new arc reactor tech Obie wanted so very badly in front of Batroc like a worm on a hook.

The shit with Stern had been a stupid move, he knew. He’d gotten close enough to see how it all fit together and had gone after Stern, the slippery bastard, too quickly and nearly gotten himself played. He was almost certain now that Stern and Batroc were working directly for Pierce, which meant Obie was in it with Pierce, too. Maybe had been from the beginning. Someone with military connections had to have set the whole abduction thing up, given away the Humvees’ position, and then scuttled any rescue attempt that wasn’t Rhodey commandeering a couple of choppers on a single piece of intel and a prayer. Few would’ve had that kind of authority, but Pierce was certainly one of them.

Honestly, it wasn’t that it seemed impossible, not really. It was that he wanted it to be impossible. Obie—God, fuck it all—he’d known the man his whole life. Looked to him as a surrogate father after Howard died. Hell, before Howard died. If this was all true, then he’d given the reins to a weapons empire to the backpocket man for a terrorist organization that seemed to have its fingers in virtually every dimestore knock-off al-Qaeda wannabe that popped its head up out of the sand. That kind of reach didn’t seem possible, but hell, if Obie was funneling arms and money to them, maybe it was, Tony thought, shaking his head in disgust.

It was Pepper who told him about how Obie was busy slithering his way through the Board of Directors, her voice quaking but firm as she laid it out for him. He had listened with first disbelief, then denials that got more and more strained even to his own ears as she walked him through what she had discovered buried in the mound of data and obfuscation that was SI’s financial records. It was well-hidden, Tony would give Obie that. Money hoarded off-book until it could be run through legitimate projects, or laundered through multiple shell companies until it was so clean, it practically sparkled. Hundreds of accountants and no one noticed a damn thing, or if they did, they knew to keep quiet about it, Tony thought in frustration.

Only one person in the whole God-damned company had the brains to figure out something was off and the balls to do something about it. He really needed to give Pepper a promotion. Well, good news! A CEO position is about to open up. Sure, the company was teetering on collapse with the switch to clean energy, his employees’ retirement savings, heavily invested in SI stock, were slashed in half, the best and brightest were probably updating their resumes, and the Board, led by the nose by Obie, probably had a lawsuit already drawn up, but hey, every new opportunity has its challenges, Tony thought, somewhat hysterically.

So much was riding on this. So very, very much.

He couldn’t fuck this up.

Well, obviously, he could, because Stern pushed all his damn buttons and he’d gone off-map at the first exit, much to Pepper’s dismay, but Stern was the link to Pierce, and if this really went that far, then they had to know about it. It wasn’t just the company at stake, not anymore. Obie was willing
to kill to protect what he was up to. How far would someone like Pierce go? Someone with that kind of power wielding it to subvert and destroy exactly what he was supposed to protect…Well, fuck if that didn’t sound familiar, Tony thought, lifting his gaze to the mirror.

Pepper, Rhody, Matt…and now this poor schmuck involved, and it was entirely possible the whole thing was going to collapse from underneath him if he wasn’t careful. Because Obie was smart, and Obie was mean, but above all, Obie was fucking careful. Tony was very well aware of on whom, exactly, Obie planned to pin the blame if his black market weapons sales came to light. That was what had triggered Pep’s suspicions in the first place, because she watched over everything to do with him like the world’s most militant mother hen. Tony’s name where it shouldn’t be. Clever, backstabbing, careful bastard that he was, Obie’s only paper trail led right back to Tony.

He scrubbed his hand over his face and pushed away from the dresser, straightening his tie as he walked towards the door. He grabbed the suit jacket where it hung on the valet stand and swung it around his shoulders, jabbing his arms into it and reaching up to smooth the collar as he opened the suite’s bedroom door. No reason to put off this charade any longer, he supposed. Dinner, Pepper said. Somewhere popular. Be seen, she insisted. Look married, she told him. Tony had suggested he could work his way through a bottle of scotch while Steve spent the weekend on the yacht of a “friend,” but that had not gone over particularly well.

So, dinner it was.

God, how had he gotten himself into this mess? Well, probably best not to answer that, he thought grimly. Dinner. Smile. Pretend to be dopey in love with the stripper for a few days. Bring down Obie, Stern and Pierce. Write said stripper a fat check. Wash, rinse, repeat. Everyone gets what they want. No one gets hurt. What could possibly go wrong, Tony admonished himself somewhat sardonically. He knew how tenuous this whole thing was. Hell, Vegas was the perfect place to build a house of cards, and why not throw in a little faux nuptial bliss while he was at it? He could handle that. He’d spent most of his life, and certainly all of his relationships, pretending, so why not? Putting the proverbial ring on it shouldn’t make that much of a difference.

“Pepper says you’re ready,” Tony said as he walked into the suite’s living room, still fiddling with his tie and collar until he finally got the knot right. Pepper had picked out the burgundy striped Charvet and probably hidden the Ferragamo with the tiny racecars on it that she hated and he loved. “Really?” Tony asked, holding the tie out in front of him with a frown.

“You cannot wear the Hot Wheels tie,” Pepper said without looking up from her tablet. “I don’t care who made it.”

Tony frowned, but tightened the knot into place, then patted his pockets for his phone, which was shoved none too gently into the center of his chest by a well-manicured hand. Tony put the phone into his pocket, then shook his wrist where his watch hung loosely, reaching his other hand over to tighten the band. His fingers skated over the clasp, fiddling for a moment with the small catch before it caught.

“Happy’s bringing the car around to the front of the hotel, so we can walk the gauntlet of press downstairs. Just smile, look like you adore me—I don’t know, pretend I have dollar signs in my eyes if it helps—and ignore them,” Tony mumbled, flashing a grimace of apology towards the general center of the living room.

He stopped then, slamming into some invisible wall that suddenly filled the space in front of him. Tony stared, and yeah, he knew he was staring and it was rude as hell, but it hit him then, like a lock clicking into place as he took in Steve standing there in the flashy new suit Pepper had conjured for him.
God-damnit, Tony thought viciously. He’d bought a suit. The guy had bought a suit for his mother’s funeral because he had wanted something nice. An extravagance, probably picked something he thought she would have liked, and now he was standing here in Tony’s hotel suite, looking more uncomfortable and ready to bolt as he tugged at the lapels of his suit coat than he had on that stage without a scrap of material between him and all the eyes watching him, caught up in this insane scheme on nothing more than Tony’s word, and wasn’t that a hell of a thing?

Tony sighed heavily, hands flexing into fists where they hung at his sides. There was wrong and then there was completely fucked-up and pulling the stripper with a hero-complex into this mess of a plan was definitely tilting firmly towards the latter, Tony had to admit to himself. He glanced over at Pepper, who caught his look and started to open her mouth, then snapped it closed again, teeth worrying at her bottom lip instead.

“Look, this was insane,” Tony started. This really was. He knew it. Pepper, Matt and Rhodey sure knew it, though they would try, because they were the kind of people who couldn’t walk away from this, but at least they knew the stakes. Obie had tried to have him killed. God only knew what Pierce was capable of doing to protect his secrets.

Pulling Steve into this because Tony had screwed up with Stern was not only an absolute shit thing to do, but quite possibly destined to blow up in his face at the worst imaginable time. Law of averages. On average, if it could go wrong, it was probably going to happen to Tony and in some incredibly public way that screwed up his life and managed to spread the utter fuckery around to anyone in the blast radius. Including, apparently, Army vets who want one nice suit for their mom’s funeral, because this was now how he lived his life, Tony thought, a fissure of familiar enough self-loathing running through him.

Is this the last act of defiance of the great Tony Stark?

“I don’t even know what I was thinking. I never should have involved you in any of this. Pepper will get you a check and—“ Tony started.

“Ready when you are, Mr. Stark,” Steve cut in, voice surprisingly steady and sure. “I think you said something about dinner? Being seen? The happy couple, right?” Steve continued with a slight lift of his eyebrows in question. “I said I’m in. I meant it.”

Tony could almost hear the clanking of Steve’s jaw set in grim determination, but his gaze met Tony’s steadily across the living room, unflinching, the effort was too pointed not to be purposeful.

“I believe he meant it,” Matt chimed in, because he was helpful like that at twelve-hundred an hour.

“I believe he meant it,” Matt chimed in, because he was helpful like that at twelve-hundred an hour.

“Fine,” Tony conceded, drawing out the word over a long breath. “If you’re sure.”

“He’s sure,” Matt interjected.

“Would you stop doing that?” Tony demanded, hands going to his hips as he shot his attorney an utterly wasted look of exasperated frustration. “Look, Steve—it isn’t that I don’t appreciate you doing this. I do. We all do,” Tony continued, gesturing his arms wide around the room.

“Mostly Tony though,” Matt added with a placid smile.

“Ignore him. No one likes him,” Tony said pointedly.

“Foggy likes me,” Matt objected.
“Foggy has terrible taste in—well—everything,” Tony retorted with a snort. “Point is—point is—I had a point.”


“Wow. It really has been a day,” Tony admitted balefully, scraping a hand across his mouth. “Okay, so what’s the plan? We go out. Eat. Drink. Be married, whatever. We get ourselves seen—shouldn’t be hard. Act all, you know,” Tony continued, waving a hand in the air. “Press eats it up. Police back off. We buy a few days. Batroc takes the phony arc reactor specs I gave him to Obie, and bless our hiring department for not having anyone on payroll smart enough to know that those are all crap. I mean, granted, there are few times when you can really pat yourself on the back for promoting incompetence, but—”

“Tony,” Pepper cut in with an impatient nod.

“Right. Obie takes the junk specs to Pierce. Pierce turns it over to the obviously bad guys, and boom! We’ve got them straight up sharing tech with a terrorist organization. Steve here and I have a very amicable ‘divorce,’” Tony said, flashing air-quotes with his fingers. “Simple.”

“It’s the equivalent of playing Jenga on quicksand and having to pull the pieces out with your teeth,” Matt corrected.

Tony blinked at him, then opened and closed his mouth. “Okay. How can you even play Jenga?”

“Tony!” Pepper shouted, aghast. Steve’s eyes were darting between them like he was watching Serena and Venus on the grass court, but Tony caught the blink-and-you-miss-it quirks of Steve’s lips and couldn’t resist grinning in return. Steve dipped his head and looked at the carpet where his new shoes were digging a rut in the wool rug, but not before Tony saw his shoulders hunch a with a bitten-back laugh. “My God. Would you—just go. Happy has the car waiting downstairs. You have reservations at Guy Savoy’s. Go. And remember,” she said, coming to stand beside him and flicking away nonexistent lint off his shoulder. “You’re happy. Thrilled. You’re in love. It’s ridiculous, but you just can’t help yourself. Got it?”

“Yes, Pepper,” Tony replied with a nod. “Completely and totally not fake-married. Got it.”

“Steve?” Pepper called out, expression going soft. “I know this is crazy. Don’t help, Matt!” she ordered briskly, cutting the lawyer off before he could interject. “You really are doing the right thing. I know it might not seem like it—what with the lying to the police and pretending to be married because someone couldn’t just wait it out like we talked about and had to go try to get Stern on the hook, too, because he doesn’t like the ass—Senator—but it is.”

“By someone, she meant you,” Matt said, nodding in Tony’s direction.

“If you don’t mind me saying so, Ma’am, I learned a long time ago that trying to do the right thing usually ends up a mess. But not trying ends up with something far worse,” Steve said, gaze flicking over Tony almost hesitantly.

“Yeah? What’s that?” Tony asked.

“Absolutely nothing,” Steve replied evenly, though something hard sparked behind his eyes.

“Well,” Tony said slowly, the beginnings of a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Let’s go make a mess then.”
Steve watched Stark—Tony, he mentally corrected, trying the name around in his head like he would a new word—walk over to the suite’s private elevator and press the button. The pseudo-art deco styled doors pulled open with a soft whoosh, and Tony stepped inside, extending a hand out to the empty space next to him. It was an affected, orchestrated gesture that was probably intended to seem casual, but Steve could see the rigid way Tony was standing, shoulders back, eyes flicking over the people in the room with something Steve would have called nervousness if he’d had to name it, though that didn’t seem quite right.

Everything about Stark was orchestrated, come to think, down to the tie he wore and the fancy watch, as much a performance as anything Steve did up on stage down at the club, though probably far harder for Stark—Tony, damn--to shove in a locker and leave behind at the end of a day, Steve supposed. He had some understanding of how wearing it was on a person to keep up a façade that didn’t quite fit, like each day scraped away a little more of who you were. It hadn’t occurred to him to think of someone like Tony that way, but he suspected he wasn’t wrong. In some ways, Steve supposed, Tony took the stage as much out of obligation as he did, and certainly, if the things those people shouted at them as the left the police station were any indication, took just as much judgment for it. Though, Steve thought, taking a last quick look at the suite, there were definitely a few more perks to Stark’s routine than his own.

“Remember,” Ms. Potts began as she reached out a hand to hold the elevator door open. “You’re happy newlyweds with the completely above-board, if spur of the moment, marriage. You are also completely silent newlyweds who have absolutely nothing to say to the press. I’m working on a press release now, so that will give them something to spin. Steve, just follow Tony’s lead with the press, okay? They are going to be all over this. We don’t need to hand them more fodder than what Tony already did down at the police station. God, you should see the photos Stern’s office leaked. He’s got more bandages on his face than King Tut, I swear. His people are threatening to sue, by the way, though Matt says that’s a bunch of legal posturing.”

“Not exactly the words I used,” the lawyer piped up from his place on the sofa.

“Oh, and remember how I said TMZ has the marriage certificate? Well, now they have an Elvis impersonator who claims to have been serenaded you two as you walked down the aisle,” Ms. Potts finished, ignoring the interjection. “Who knows what they’ll dig up next.”

“Strippers. Elvis. Quickie marriages. We’ve hit the Vegas trifecta, Pep. I love this town. Please let it be Love Me Tender?” Tony asked, eyebrows raised in question.

“Can’t Help Falling In Love With You,” Ms. Potts replied, forehead crinkling with a frown as Steve slid past her into the elevator.

“Aw, honey, we have a song,” Tony said, tossing a smirk over his shoulder at Steve.

“As long as it isn’t Jailhouse Rock, I’ll take it,” Steve agreed. The twist of a grin on Tony’s mouth widened, brightened for a flash of a moment that seemed like genuine surprise before it slipped into a more practiced look.

“All this and a sense of humor? I’m such a lucky man,” Tony said with a bob of his head. “Night,
“Do. Not. Say. Anything.” Ms. Potts reiterated sternly. With that admonition, she moved away, allowing the doors of the elevator to slide shut. The silence was the sudden, noticeable kind that you felt in your chest like it had weight to it. Steve wanted to fill it, say something, but he had nothing he wanted to say that didn’t sound either panicked or stupid in his head when he tried it out. A beat later, he decided to settle for stupid just to break the quiet.

“Hot Wheels tie?” Steve asked curiously, the thread of the earlier disjointed conversation between Ms. Potts and Tony finally taking root in his mind.

“Okay, really? That’s what you latched onto from all of that?” Tony demanded somewhat incredulously, his head swiveling to the side to look at Steve while he rocked back and forth on his feet, the earlier tenseness Steve had noted replaced by a flurry of movement that seemed to touch every part of Tony’s body in some way. “Not the whole Get Out of Marriage Free Card? The tie is what you want to lead with?”

“It left a question in my mind,” Steve said with a slight shrug of his shoulders. Tony’s gaze seemed to have an almost solid pressure to it as he studied him, but Steve returned it steadily enough. He wondered briefly what it was that Stark saw when he looked at him. An unfortunate complication, probably. Something to be handled, the way they’d all handled him up there earlier. Say this, don’t say that, wear this, go here, smile. Giving the paying customers what they wanted was familiar enough by now, at least. It didn’t sting quite the way it once had, being an object, some moveable piece they didn’t really have to deal with. Except…except there was that moment, that brief span of a single look, where Tony had seemed to actually look at him and see someone. Guilt, probably, Steve assumed. It just…it felt so good to be seen. For a little while, he could be Steve Rogers again and stop being whoever it was he was slowly becoming. Whatever it was with Stark, that, and Steve’s own innate stubbornness kept him here this long, when all good sense said to get the hell out.

“Stane’s dirty,” Tony said, interrupting Steve’s thoughts and apparently ignoring his attempt at a neutral topic of conversation. “If who I think is at the top of this is involved, then he’s even worse. The really bad kind of worse, and this coming from someone Stane has already tried to kill once,” Tony told him, dark eyes intent on Steve. “I’ve known him my whole life. There were times he was more of a father to me than my old man, truth be told. Or I thought he was. Hell, I rode on his shoulders when I was a kid, for Christ’s sake. That’s the kind of man we’re dealing with. If you were smart, you’d take what I assure you would be the world’s best alimony deal and run.”

“Not so good at running away,” Steve acknowledged quietly. Above his head, the round numbers blinked on and off as they slowly descended from the penthouse suite like some kind of countdown, though to what, exactly, Steve wasn’t so sure anymore.

“I noticed,” Tony replied, one corner of his mouth tugging up. Steve had the vaguely uncomfortable sensation that Tony noticed a lot, though he seemed to filter those observations through whatever thought process required them to be broken apart into their pieces and put together in some pattern Steve didn’t quite understand yet. Like the aborted attempt at touching him out on the balcony. Tony hadn’t come within a two feet of him since then, even now, in the confined space of the elevator, standing as far away as he could. But, he’d noticed. He noticed and cared enough to try to accommodate Steve, which mattered, though Steve supposed it said something about his interactions of late that basic human decency was a tipping point.

There was some strange information loop playing in Tony’s head that seemed to alternately want to push Steve away and draw him further into this, doling out bits and pieces, then suggesting Steve
make a break for it. He didn’t think it was calculated, not exactly, but it had the feel of a test Tony
didn’t even realize he was administering. He has a team and no idea what to do with them, Steve
realized with a flash of insight at Tony’s warning about Stane. Stark has never really led before, so
much as expected people to follow by sheer force of name, his money, his intelligence and a
personality that needed its own zip code, and now he has something serious to deal with, and he’s
terrified. Terrified he’ll fail, that people will get hurt, and terrified how much he wants to do it
anyway.

That, at least, was something to which Steve could relate.

“Stane’s been in the club with Stern a couple of times. During the weapons industry convention a
couple months ago. Then again a few weeks back,” Steve said, keeping his tone mild.

“Obie works the political side for SI. Perfect cover,” Tony added speculatively after a beat. Steve
could almost see the wheels working in Tony’s mind, dissecting this new piece of information and
filling it into whatever blank spaces there were in the narrative he had already devised. “I’m
surprised you remember him.”

Big hands, Steve recalled. Soft though. Doesn’t work with them.

“Smokes cigars. Fancy ones,” Steve said instead. “Crappy tipper,” he continued, catching the brittle
huff of almost-laughter from Tony. “The thing in Afghanistan. That’s what you mean. That was
Stane,” Steve continued, moving the subject back to one he instinctively knew Tony wouldn’t linger
on, then immediately regretted the impulse. In the frosted gold metal of the elevator doors, he could
see Tony’s distorted reflection shift a bit, head snapping back just a fraction before he caught himself,
hands curling into fists in the center of his chest. It hadn’t even really been a question, because he’d
known the truth of it even as he said it, but Steve waited, letting it hang there between them, on the
chance that Tony’s answer might actually give some insight.

“Yeah,” Tony answered slowly, letting the word out in a huff of air. “Probably,” he hedged, face
twisting into a grimace. “Yeah.”

“Pierce, too, though, right? He was in on it,” Steve guessed. Tony didn’t reply other than a curt
nod, but his look was sharp now, focused and edged with something that Steve would have called
almost hopeful. It didn’t sit easily on Stark, that much was clear. Steve could see how quickly it
pushed the other man off-balance, like he’d been hovering on some cliff just waiting to fall over it.
He was back to curling his hands into almost-fists and then snapping them together, rapid-fire bursts
of energy that he couldn’t quite seem to contain. Tony’s breathing was becoming harsher, more
labored as he patted at the center of his chest, Steve noticed, before he seemed to regain some
semblance of control.

Tony looked askance at Steve, then seemed to consciously drop his hands to his sides with some
degree of effort. Steve recognized the signs of an anxiety response, if nothing else. Sam would be
so proud, he thought sarcastically. Actually, Sam would probably tell him to get the hell out of here
and quit expecting change to come from the outside, which sounded like something annoying correct
that Sam would say. Still, definitely anxiety. Probably accompanied by panic attacks. The chest-
tapping thing seemed like some kind of coping strategy, like counting by sevens like Sam told him to
do. Not for the first time, Steve wondered exactly what had happened over there. The official story
was bullshit, Steve could tell that much just by reading between the lines, but whatever it was, it had
clearly taken its toll on Tony.

“It was a military operation,” Steve pointed out, watching Tony’s eyes narrow as he seemed to
consider Steve in that thorough, assessing way he had that probably should feel intrusive, but
somehow didn’t. Maybe he was just used to being looked at, being surveyed and considered. Got to
be old hat after you’d stripped down in an office while some guy took pictures of you that didn’t always include your face as part of a job application. “The convoy, I mean. Never should’ve been that far from base with that little firepower and no air support. Not in that area. We hadn’t had any signs of insurgent activity in that area for awhile, and had been downgraded from a hot spot—active combat zone—but we knew they still had artillery and personnel in those mountains. You never should’ve been there,” Steve ground out through his teeth. Highly trained military contractors were used fairly extensively in the field, but someone like Tony Stark? It had been like waving a red flag in front of a bull who wanted YouTube hits. Stupid, bordering on reckless or, if Tony was to be believed, something far more sinister.

Tony raised his eyebrows in question, though Steve could tell there wasn’t any actual surprise there. Steve assumed they had done some kind of background check on him to make sure he wasn’t a mass-murderer turned stripper or something truly terrible, like a Palin supporter. Couldn’t be too careful these days.

“I was in the Army. Stationed near there,” Steve explained. “But you knew that.” Tony just watched him, side-eyed, then shrugged in acknowledgment.

“Needed a dramatic background for the Jericho missile test. The explosions look so pretty in a mountain setting. Really sells them,” Tony muttered, bitterness edging his words like they were cut from him. On the heels of the tightness in his voice, Steve could see Tony’s whole body drawing in on itself, a reflex Steve knew well enough to recognize. Tony’s eyes flicked down and away from Steve, dropping his gaze to the floor before staring steadfastly at their mutual reflections in the panels of the elevator doors.

“And you can stop them. Stane, Pierce, Stern and whoever else is involved,” Steve continued. He turned towards Tony, one hand braced behind him around the metal bar that wrapped around the middle of the elevator. It was cold and solid in his hand, something to hold onto in that flicker of a moment when the bottom of the elevator felt like loose sand shifting under his feet. He made himself look down at the gleaming metal bottom of the elevator car where nothing moved except their oddly truncated reflections.

“Yes,” Tony replied, voice hard with a tinge of malice, all the salesmanship from earlier gone. “I can stop them.”

“I want seven thousand dollars,” Steve told him. “Whatever happens. Seven thousand. Look,” he continued when Tony opened his mouth to interrupt. “I’m already in this, whether I walk away now or later. The story is out there. They know who I am. Whatever risk there is to me, it was there as soon as I took your friend up on his offer, even though no one knew it at the time. I didn’t ask to be a part of this, but I am. Might as well get paid.” Steve finished with a shrug. Seven thousand. That would do it. He’d figured another few months at the club to save up that much extra, but he could have it in under a week, and it would be over. Granted, he had no idea what came after that, and he probably should’ve asked for enough for a cushion, but that felt wrong for some reason. He’d figure the rest out, he supposed, one way or the other.

“Seven thousand, huh? Fairly specific request. You owe someone?” Tony asked carefully.

“Yes,” Steve answered simply. That much was true, at least.

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“Yes,” Steve answered simply. That much was true, at least.

“My name’s Stark, not Tony. Call me Stark,” Tony corrected him. Steve could feel the anger in his voice, the bitterness edging his words like they were cut from him. There was a calculating, curious look floating over his features, eyes narrow and mouth drawn into a pinch that was clearly an aborted question, but he shrugged his shoulders and turned back to watching their reflections in the doors of the elevator instead of Steve. He was probably entitled to demand to know, Steve admitted to
himself. Anyone Steve was in hock to could potentially jeopardize this whole thing, but Tony didn’t push, and Steve was absurdly grateful for that. “It has these little racecars on it. Pepper hates it. Says it’s tacky. But, then again, you should see all the art she makes me buy. Looks like someone got a four-year old high and handed them a couple of spray guns of paints. One just has a big black line down the center like someone was eating Oreos and thought, ‘But what if it was reversed?’ Questionable taste doesn’t begin to cover it.”

The non sequitur caught Steve off-guard for a moment before his mind found the thread of conversation. They were back to the tie thing as if they hadn’t been discussing attempted murder and international terrorism.

“A Newman?” Steve guessed, the startling color fields filling his mind. The MOMA had them on exhibit back in high school, and he had wondered how something that seemed so simple could pull you in so completely. He could see it, the line of deep black bisecting the white, could recall the feeling of standing in front of it, like you were being sucked into it, becoming a part of it somehow. Steve looked over at Tony out of the corner of his eye. He’s the vortex, and I’m still tilting towards it, maybe I have been this whole time, Steve thought, the image of blood on sand, how it turned almost black, flitting across the backs of eyes as he let them shutter for a moment. Or jumping. Same result, except when it wasn’t. Down the rabbit hole, Steve thought somehow hysterically. They all did—Ms. Potts, Murdock, Colonel Rhodes—all let themselves be pulled towards this infinite space that Tony occupied, seemingly with practiced ease, though something kept Steve from quite believing it was really that simple for Tony either. All the world’s a stage, after all.

“Seriously?” Tony blurted out, face squinching in shocked surprise as he spun to face Steve again.

Art. They were talking about art. Abstract expressionism, his mind supplied. Million dollar paintings that Tony bought because his assistant liked them, when he wanted to wear a tie with racecars on it. A man who wanted to expose a terrorist network apparently within their own government if he was to be believed, all tied to whatever it was that happened to him in Afghanistan that he could barely talk about without resorting to fight or flight. Stark was a maddening contradiction of impulses, if nothing else.

Steve thought back to when he first told Bucky he’d taken the job at the club, and Bucky had just looked at him, long and slow and filled with a choking remorse, and reminded Steve that he couldn’t dance. Maybe everyone who compromises is a contradiction, Steve told himself, the thought dull and heavy in his head.

“I like art,” Steve responded. “Almost went to art school before the Army.”

“Don’t tell Pepper. She’ll like you better than me,” Tony grumbled. The numbers on the elevator dial had reached single digits, each seemingly brighter than the one before it as the car neared the lobby level.

“I’d never try to take the kids from you in the divorce,” Steve remarked evenly, earning a sharp bark of laughter from Tony. Steve found himself smiling in return, the rush of warmth at the banter coming so swiftly and easily that it startled him, the way his mind recognized it almost at a distance, some foreign, unfamiliar interloper that needed to be studied.

“Well, dear. It’s showtime,” Tony said, nodding towards the illuminated numbers as a ping announced their arrival at the hotel’s lobby level.

As soon as the doors pulled apart, light flashed into Steve’s face, brilliant and intrusive, like it had physical force behind it. He heard the whirs and clicks of cameras under the shouts, but it all barely registered over the bursts of light in front of his eyes, so fast they were almost dizzying. They’re too
close, was Steve’s first thought, and he felt himself tense and step back in preparation for—for something—before he caught himself. Too many nights where flash-bangs meant something else entirely, he thought grimly, composing himself.

Steve cast a quick look at Tony, who was looking at him in question, though, Steve realized, it wasn’t a demand, and saw that Tony had his hand out, held suspended in mid-air, waiting for Steve to take it or not. Steve grabbed for it like it was a lifeline and felt Tony give his hand a slight, reassuring squeeze. Steve held on as Tony propelled them forward through the lines of reporters pressing in from all sides. A man he recognized as Tony’s driver appeared next to Tony as soon as they were out of the elevator, some kind of human shield against the throng. The reporters were shouting things at them, snippets of it filtering through to Steve’s ears.

“---pull ‘em down and show us—“

“---how much for a lap dance---“

“---does he shout ‘dollar’ or ‘stock options’ when he—“

“---hope you got tested---“

“---got a fiver right here Rogers---“

“---how drunk were you this time---“

“---really sticking it to the Army in all kinds of ways---“

“I’m so sorry about this, Mr. Stark. I don’t know how they do this. I swear to God they weren’t here five minutes ago,” a well-dressed woman with a gold name badge pinned to her blazer lapel said appearing at Steve’s shoulder. “Security has been trying to clear them out all day, but we have so much traffic in here between casino patrons and hotel guests, they manage to crawl back in.”

“Security should try harder,” Tony’s driver said over the din. Happy, Steve remembered. Like the dwarf. Guess that made him Sleazy, Steve thought with a grim, determined sort of humor. Tony had his head slightly down, eyes shielded behind the sunglasses, religiously not saying anything. Steve wondered if he even heard it anymore or if this was so common for him that it all just bounced off. I’m rubber, you’re glue, Steve mentally recited the familiar refrain. It had been crap when they were kids and it was crap now, he thought, glancing over at the top of Tony’s ducked head.

“---first time you could get it up since---“

“Wow, this is—wow,” Steve said loudly, grinding to a halt and pulling himself up to his full height, arms spread wide and chest out. Taking up space, or taking back space, whatever it was. One thing dancing had taught him was how to use his body to effect. “You’ll all have to forgive me. I’m not used to having this much attention with my clothes on,” Steve said with a slight smile to a round of surprised laughter. “Tony said you’d want pictures, though I think he’s a bit shy in front of the camera,” Steve continued with a knowing grin to another chorus of startled guffaws. “You’ll have to help me out if you want a good picture of him. Look, guys, I know you are all just trying to make a living. Maybe you don’t exactly love the way you have to do that, but its honest work. Not like you’re the ones creating the market for it, right? I kind of get that,” Steve continued pointedly, earning a couple of knowing looks. “How about we take a few pictures—heck, it is our honeymoon. I wouldn’t mind a few things to remember it by. We, uh, didn’t exactly plan this, you might have heard.” That got another smattering of grudging chuckles, but they had moved back and the clicking and flashes had almost ceased once the competition part of it got taken away. Everyone is willing to be the guy doing it until they are the only guy doing it, Steve thought. He’d seen
enough of that in his time. “Then maybe you let these nice hotel people have their lobby back before they call the cops. Really like to try something on my honeymoon that doesn’t involve the police. Just for a change of pace.”

“Sounds a lot like your honeymoon, eh Lenny?” one of them shouted and the rest laughed, another one gently nudging a pudgy, balding man with his elbow as he brought his camera up.

“Twenty years and counting, so crawl back to your moms’ basements, you asshats,” the one who must be Lenny replied. “Can we get some smiles? Everyone likes a Cinderella story.”

“Pretty sure it wasn’t my footwear that caught Tony’s eye,” Steve offered with a wink to burst of laughter from the crowd. “Here, Tony,” Steve said brightly, pulling Tony’s hand until he was against Steve’s side.

“And you all thought I married him for purely prurient reasons,” Tony mumbled, then gave a quick look down his nose at Steve before pulling the sunglasses off and smiling widely.

Steve slung his arm around Tony’s shoulders, pulling him against his side, and leaned his head in Tony’s direction. The paparazzi jostled for position for a few moments, cameras whirring, and Steve gave them a practiced smile that he was fairly sure was reflected on Tony’s face, though when he chanced a look down between flashes, Tony gave a quick, slightly confused look before his face broke into a grin for the cameras again. He was probably pissed, Steve realized with a guilty jolt. Do. Not. Say. Anything. Well. He’d managed to follow orders for all of an elevator ride from the penthouse. Bucky would probably proclaim that a new record.

“Alright, alright,” Happy broke in. “That’s enough, that’s enough. Gonna need to get the happy couple to their dinner.”

“Gentlemen, if you wouldn’t mind,” the woman, whom Steve assumed was some kind of hotel manager, added with a sweep of her hand that clearly meant ‘Get the hell out of my lobby,’ though that thought was also conveyed fairly effectively by the uniformed security that dotted the way to the hotel exit, Steve noted.

Steve let his arm slide down from Tony’s shoulders, but kept it at the small of Tony’s back, as the reporters departed. “Let’s get out of here,” Tony said after a beat of what felt like silence after all the shouting, though the lobby was still filled with onlookers. Tony shot him another assessing look, then shook his head, as if to clear it from all the flashes. He took the sunglasses from his pocket and pushed them back onto his face, though he didn’t move away from Steve like Steve half expected him to do. Still plenty of people with cellphones, Steve figured, glancing again around the hotel lobby. Sure enough, several people were pointing and holding up their phones. He was really going to have to have an actual conversation with Bucky about all this. They didn’t have internet or TV at the apartment, but it wasn’t like they lived entirely under a rock.

“Car’s out front, Boss,” Happy informed them. “Sorry about all that. I tried to talk to that woman about her security, but…” he shrugged with a ‘what can you do?’ expression.

“No badges, huh?” Tony asked.

“Seems really lax to me,” Happy agreed as two doormen swept the doors open for them.

“He has strong feelings about badges,” Tony said with an air of distraction.

“Who doesn’t like badges?” Steve replied evenly as he followed the driver out, his hand still on Tony’s back, something warm and solid and---safe. He almost jerked his hand back as the thought
flitted through his head. Tony was anything but safe, that much was clear from their discussion in the elevator. But, he kept his hand where it was, though he looked down at it, almost curiously, more conscious of the press of it to the curve of Tony’s back than he had been a moment before.

“See? You shouldn’t mock the badges,” Happy said.

“Calumnies. Lies. Aspersions,” Tony objected. “I have never mocked the badges.” There was a loose smile on his face, and it was obvious this conversation was a rehash of one of many, but Steve could feel the affection between the two of them. How many times had he and Bucky spoken their own, secret language, he wondered a tad wistfully. It had been a long time since they’d talked like that. Well, it had been a long time since they’d really talked about anything that wasn’t overlaid with guilt and remorse, and at some point, the retread of those conversations got so tiring, they both just stopped talking. Listening to Tony and his driver, Steve couldn’t help a tinge of jealousy at their easy camaraderie, though it was the kind that simply coveted the same, not that wanted to take it away.

Seven thousand, though. Seven thousand. Tony hadn’t even blinked. And all in under a week. Bonus points for getting to keep his clothes on, Steve thought with a slight grimace. They could finally start to move on, to get back to whatever it was their lives were supposed to be that had gotten so derailed he could hardly recognize things anymore. Sometimes, it was like he was living someone else’s life and just didn’t know how to stop, and, at some point, he knew, there wasn’t going to be a way back to whatever was left. Lines drawn in the sand, he thought out of nowhere, then shook his head and tried to wet his suddenly dry mouth. Everything had been day to day for so long. Looking at a future that had an actual start date on it was…well, it was something they hadn’t had for a long time. He could do just about anything for that chance.

Steve blinked as his eyes adjusted to the low evening light and looked around for the limo. In front of him, he heard the chirp of the alarm as Happy unlocked a sleek, black Rolls Royce Phantom. Happy held the car door open for them, and Tony ducked inside and slid over. Steve folded himself into the back of the car, resisting the urge to run a hand over the cream and blue interior.

“This is nice,” Steve offered instead.

“The limo’s too hard to park,” Tony said as he pocketed his sunglasses and tugged his phone out of his pocket, already beginning to tap away at the screen. “Takes up two meters, and I never seem to have change on me.” He gave Steve a slight eye roll that told him that Tony didn’t really care whether or not the limo was hard to park, but Happy was nodding vigorously, so Steve figured this, like the badges, was an ongoing topic of debate between the two of them.

“Not you who gets yelled at by the Prius people, Boss,” Happy pointed out.

“You’re right. This is much less ostentatious,” Tony agreed, sitting back in the seat and letting his head fall against the curved headrest. “Now, we blend,” Tony added, glancing over at Steve, dark eyes sparkling with humor. Steve found himself smiling in return, a rush of almost giddiness hitting him. Seven thousand dollars. It was going to be okay.

“You’re not a Prius person are you, Steve?” Happy asked.

“God, Hap, you make them sound like the mole people,” Tony protested with a huff of air. “He doesn’t trust electric cars.”

“Not driving something you plug in,” Happy said indignantly. “I mean, hybrid? Hybrid with what, a Power Wheels?”

“Uh, no. I—um. I have a bike,” Steve admitted.
“Harley?” Tony asked, sitting up a bit in seeming interest.

“Schwinn, I think,” Steve replied. Tony blinked owlishly at him for a moment, like it took him a beat to process that, then seemed to still himself to near motionlessness, like if he moved at all he would squirm. It was kind of adorable—no, wait, that wasn’t the word—that was a ridiculous thought—refreshing. It was refreshing to see Tony thrown a bit off-kilter, Steve thought, if for no other reason than it was just nice it wasn’t him this once.

“Sorry. That was stupid of me,” Tony blanched. “I didn’t mean—"

Steve let out a low laugh, though he tried to cover it behind a cough and quickly realized he’d failed miserably. “You should see your face,” Steve chuckled.

“Bike-riding is great exercise,” Happy called out. “You should give it a try, Boss.”

“Plenty of better ways to raise the heartrate,” Tony retorted, then looked back over at Steve in the seat next to him. “So. That went a little off-script back there.”

“Yeah,” Steve admitted. Well, they were back to him being the one making an idiot out of himself. That took all of ten seconds. Could be a personal best, he thought drolly. He rubbed his hands up and down over his thighs, smoothing out the nonexistent wrinkles in the suit, wishing he had something better to do with his hands. Mercedes-Pullman limousine. Rolls Royce Phantom, his mind supplied. He would have to write those down later. “Sorry about that. I know what Ms. Potts said about not saying anything. I just—I thought if we gave them something, I don’t know. Maybe it would help. With this…whole thing,” Steve rushed out in one long breath.


“You can’t know that,” Steve pointed out.

“Do you see an angry redhead in the cab next to us?” Tony asked, and Steve found himself turning to stare dumbly out the tinted window.

“No,” Steve replied, turning back to Tony.

“Then she isn’t all that mad. Trust me, it will be fine,” Tony said again. “Here, look,” Tony said, handing Steve his phone. “Pics are already out there. We make a damn fine couple, if I do say so myself.”

On the screen, the two of them were beaming at the camera, Steve’s arm wrapped around Tony’s shoulders, anchoring him to his side. They looked…well, good, Steve had to admit. Tony photographed well. He rather thought he looked like a blonde ghost under the flash with his pale skin, but the suit helped. They looked—well, happy. Steve could tell his own smile was plastered on, but he doubted anyone else, except maybe Bucky, would be able to. Tony was smiling, too, though, at least in this particular shot, he was looking slightly up towards Steve, and the smile the camera captured was almost disconcerted, like he’d been caught off-guard by something. Probably by Steve’s sudden desire not to listen to anything he’d been told not to do.

Steve wasn’t sure how long he stared at the screen, but it seemed like no time at all before Happy was announcing their arrival. Of course, Caesar's wasn’t exactly a long drive from the Rio, though he didn’t blame Tony for wanting to stay a bit off the Strip. Almost as soon as the car was in park, Happy was out and opening the door for Steve to step out. They were at the VIP entrance, Steve noted, which was considerably less crowded than the main lobby, and for that, he was immensely
“Mr. Stark,” a man said as he approached. “Welcome to Caesar’s Palace and congratulations, gentlemen. We are so pleased you have chosen to celebrate with us. I’m Stewart. I’ll be your host this evening. If you should need anything, please do not hesitate to ask. In the meantime, the Chef’s Table is yours for the evening, and we’ve reserved you spots at our VIP tables, as usual, Mr. Stark. I believe craps was your game last time we enjoyed your company. If you would like, I’ll be happy to prepare your chips for you while you dine.”

“Feeling lucky, hon?” Tony questioned as they strode through the entrance behind Stewart.

“Very,” Steve replied, and found that, strangely enough, he meant it, at least for the time being. He was going to get the money he needed, maybe be able to actually do something that mattered to get it, and about to enjoy a meal that was going to cost more than his monthly budget. All he had to do was pretend to be in love with Tony Stark. Which was, he thought somewhat distractedly, as he felt for Tony’s hand and felt his own squeezed ever so lightly when he found it, a lot easier to do than he’d thought it would be.
Chapter Notes

The lights from the Eiffel Tower glimmered brightly through the far bank of windows as the elevator doors slid open to the second floor restaurant. Not the actual Eiffel Tower, of course, just the Vegas wannabe. No one did copycatting quite like Vegas, Tony supposed. Everything here was bigger and brighter, trying so hard to be more that it always seemed to fall blindingly flat. There was probably a parable for his life in there somewhere, but he wasn’t going to examine it too closely.

In his pocket, Tony felt his phone buzz, alerting him to yet another text from Pepper for him to ignore. It wasn’t that he didn’t understand her undoubtedly perfectly reasonable points about the benefits of a prepared statement and controlling the press, but he was honestly still too…too something…at Steve turning the tables on those asshats in the lobby to worry about media strategy at the moment. He was…confused. Perplexed. Surprised, definitely surprised.

The thing was, Steve’s little speech, as off the cuff as it had seemed, had been as much an attempt to divert the paps’ attention from anything to do with Tony as it had been a way out of the situation, and that just made no sense. Why even bother? They’d already agreed on Steve’s ridiculously low, well, fee, Tony settled on with a mental shrug. So what the hell was the grand posturing about? Tony could still hear it in his head. The actual speech, sure, but what was under it all was what kept repeating itself ad nauseam.

*Make it about me. I'm the punchline here. I know it. You know it.*

Give them an excuse to make the sordid into a joke, and they were bound to take it. Tony was master enough at deflection to recognize it when he heard it. He just wasn’t used to hearing it used for his own benefit. Spin, sure. Pepper and whoever the poor saps in SI’s media relations department were did that all the time.

But Steve might as well have wrapped himself in raw meat and gone sauntering through a pack of rabid dogs, despite all the momentary camaraderie with the press his words seemed to have sparked. The pond scum that made up the paparazzi didn’t work that way, not in even the vaguest sense of the long-term, and Tony would like to put it down to simple naïveté on Steve’s, except that he didn’t believe that for hot minute. Steve had known exactly what he was doing, which made absolutely no sense, unless you just discarded rationality and self-interest completely, which, sure, Steve seemed like a good enough guy even with his clothes on, but still. People didn’t just put themselves out there for a virtual stranger without there being something in it for them. That didn’t happen.

That almost never happened.

*We need more time.*

Most people didn’t, anyway, Tony mentally corrected. Most people weren’t like that.

Most people were like him. Takers. Not like...not like, well. Not like that.

Heads swiveled their way like meerkats on the savannah and the dull buzz that resulted from the combination of conversation, laughter and dinnerware clinking died to a low, almost conspiratorial whisper as he and Steve followed Stewart past tables full of Vegas’ other version of bigger, brighter and trying too hard.
Normally, Tony wouldn’t have even noticed, public scrutiny being such a part and parcel of his life that it had long ago become some kind of autonomic function that registered only in its absence. This time though…this time, he was strangely conscious of the looks. Their gazes settled over him with a vague, constraining kind pressure, making him almost overly aware of every movement, every inhale and exhale, the noise of his own heart beating loudly in his ears in a rush of too-quick, staccato thumps.

For some reason, he thought of a game of hide and seek he’d played with Jarvis, watching through the slats of the closet doors with a strange combination of excitement and a creeping sort of dismay that he would be discovered. *Seen.* A nervous sort of jitteriness hit him seemingly in an instant, making his heart jump inside his chest at the same time the pressure pushing down on his shoulders began to seep into them, tensing the muscles until it felt like someone was trying to pull him apart.

*Hold him down.*

*No.* Damn it, just no, Tony thought with a frustrated grimace as he tried to even out his breathing, letting it out in a long, harsh hiss as they walked by a large table of women with faces frozen in various stages of Botox. Not now. Not here. He did not have time for this shit. Almost involuntarily, Tony ran his free hand down over the center of his chest out of habit. Beneath his shirt, he could trace the now-familiar hard shell of the reactor thrummed with power, keeping him alive.

They don’t know. They can’t see it, he reminded himself. It’s safe. He was safe. He was. There was no reason to be reacting like this. None, he told himself firmly, scrubbing his hand over his face and swallowing thickly past a suddenly dry mouth. This was ridiculous. They were just tourists, taking in the sight of him and Steve just as much as any other spectacle Vegas had to offer, exactly as they were supposed to do. This was the whole point of the evening. Hell, everything was going right, God-damn it. Better than right, thanks to Steve and his little stunt back there. Not exactly sticking to the plan, but it had hardly been a catastrophe, and now, he was fucking losing it all over again because---because---

*I’m gonna go buy you some time.*

*Stick to the plan!*

For a second, the world tilted, and Tony’s ears rang with sharp bursts of gunfire instead of the clicking of phone cameras. He hadn’t realized he had let go of Steve’s hand until his own arms were crossed together over his chest, clutching at a bulky weight that was no longer there.

“Right this way, gentlemen,” Stewart said, the words sounding hollow and distant. Their host was sweeping one arm out in front of him to indicate the wood-paneled room behind glass doors where the Krug Chef’s Table sat waiting for them. A bottle of champagne sat chilling in a silver bucket on the table, the neck wrapped in metallic swirls of ribbon. Time to celebrate, Tony thought wildly. He was either going to throw up or curl himself into a ball or, actually, both would be great, come to think of it. “Compliments of the house,” Stewart demurred with a slight nod.

“Stewart, would it be possible to meet the Chef? I’d like to go over a few things. Allergies,” Tony heard Steve say apologetically from somewhere behind him, though the words echoed tinny and too distant in his ears.

“I believe Mr. Stark’s assistant already made the necessary arrangements. I’m sure it won’t be a problem to accommodate your needs,” Steward assured them.

“I’d really like to speak with him myself, if you don’t mind,” Steve said, rather sharply. He phrased
it like a question, though there was an air of command there, Tony was able to note, if only because it was the first time he’d heard that kind of tone from Steve. “Hate to end our first dinner as a married couple on the wrong end of an epi-pen.”

“Of course. Of course,” Stewart said, clearing his throat noisily. “I’ll—I’ll just be a moment. If you’d like to have a seat,” Stewart replied hurriedly, darting off towards the immaculate kitchen.

Good boy, Tony thought, feeling a bubble of hysterical laughter threaten. Fetch.

He needed to get out of here before he completely fucking lost it. Get some air. Get—get anywhere else. Anywhere else would be better than here, where they would all see, record it with their cameras, watch it over and over again—how many times had Obie watched that video, Tony wondered as his mind tumbled through the images. Tied to a chair, bleeding, trying to be defiant and just managing not to break down begging and counting that as a win, thinking it was being sent to someone who would help, but it had all been a lie. Everything was a lie. His whole life was a fucking lie and—Tony’s thoughts cut off abruptly as he felt Steve’s arm slide around his waist, careful, the touch light, barely there, but warm and oddly steadying.

Steve shifted them around just enough so that his truly unfairly broad shoulders blocked Tony’s angle to their avid audience, his other hand winding its way up to cover one of Tony’s. To the rest of the world, it had all the markings of an embrace, two lovers holding each other on a night out, even if it wasn’t anything close to that, even if this, too, was a lie, like everything else, just something Tony could use, because that’s what he did, he used people, used them until there was nothing left.

_This was always the plan, Stark._

_It’s okay. I want this. I want this._

“That’s good. You’re doing good,” Steve murmured against the side of Tony’s head, lips close enough that Tony could feel the warm tickle of his breath against the hairs there. Surprisingly, Tony felt something in him give a little, the invisible vice that had clamped itself around his chest relaxing ever so slightly as he breathed out a long, shuddering hiss of air.


“Too easy,” Tony muttered. It sounded garbled, shaky and slightly slurred, even to his own ears, but at least he could get words out without wanting to choke on them, so there was that.

“Just supposed to be hard enough to make you have to think about it,” Steve said, moving back a little to give Tony space he hadn’t quite realized Steve had been taking up until just then, when some great whooshing sound seemed to fill the void as the buzz of noise in the restaurant switched on like someone had unmuted it. He didn’t let go of Tony’s hand though, keeping his own wrapped around it, and Tony felt himself squeeze again on fifty-six out of reflex more than necessity. “Probably should try differential equations for you, I suppose. Next time,” Steve promised, eyes strangely soft.

“Here,” Steve said, nudging just enough to get Tony into motion.

Tony felt the press of one of Steve’s large hands against his back, gently guiding him towards the room that held the Chef’s table. It wasn’t exactly private, with its glass front and view of the kitchen, but it was away from the other diners, at least. Tony sat down in one of the high-backed chairs. Someone came by and poured water into his glass from a silver pitcher with a white cloth cupped under it to catch any overspill. Steve was sitting next to him, back turned the other direction as he talked to the man Tony assumed was the Chef by the somewhat clichéd white hat and apron, but one hand was still wrapped around Tony’s under the table, the pressure light, but steady. Steadying, Tony corrected as he breathed out on one-hundred and eighty-two. It didn’t make sense. He barely knew the guy, and now he was latching onto him like his own personal stress squeeze ball.

Boundaries, Tony heard Pepper’s voice sound in his head. Try them. They’re nice.

Ignoring the Pepper-voiced angel on his shoulder, he hit three-hundred and twenty-two while Steve talked to the Chef, squeezed and breathed out again, finding the rote of it getting easier and easier. There was a lulling quality to listening to Steve talk, and Tony let it carry him along for a moment.

There were small starbursts from the lights dangling above the table reflected on the silver flatware, Tony noticed. White china proudly displaying the Chef’s moniker outlined in silver stared back up at him from the table top. His gaze followed the outline of silver and swirls and curls that made up the custom crest. The glassware had its own design on it as well. Something custom, no doubt. His throat was parched, but if he tried anything now, it would taste like it had sand in it no matter how much he told himself it didn’t, it didn’t damn it all to hell, but he knew from prior experience just how well his stomach listened to his head.

Beside his shoulder, Steve was nodding while someone—Stewart again, Tony realized—spoke in animated tones about things that didn’t matter. Food and champagne pairings and palate cleansers. Someone reached around Tony’s shoulder for the champagne bottle from the silver bucket, making the icy water slosh and crunch, but he heard Steve tell them they weren’t ready for it yet. This hyper-awareness of detail coupled with a blurry dullness of the full picture that followed in the wake of one of his little episodes was familiar, though there was nothing comforting about it. It was just… something to get through. One more legacy of Afghanistan he got to carry with him these days. Though, that hadn’t been as bad as other times, where he’d been left shaking and sweating, rocking back and forth on the floor.

So, all in all, a win for Team Not as Bad as It Could Have Been, Tony thought dully.

“Better?” Steve asked when the Chef and the rest of the waitstaff had departed, leaving them as alone as they could be in the middle of one of the most popular restaurants in one of the busiest tourist destinations in the world.

“Yeah,” Tony answered. “Sorry. That was—sorry. I’m just tired. Long few days. Ignore me. I’m fine.” Steve hummed noncommittally under his breath, but he didn’t move his hand away, and Tony was absurdly grateful for that.

“I’ve been fine before, too, Tony,” Steve said quietly after a pause. There was an echo of rueful
understanding in his voice that Tony recognized as sympathy’s far less judgmental cousin, empathy. He didn’t say it was going to be okay or that Tony didn’t need to be embarrassed or ashamed. He didn’t tell him it was only natural after everything or tell Tony how strong he was for dealing with this. Which was…honestly, just such a God-damned relief, to not be reminded that he was different, other, transformed into someone whose life this was now.

He knew Pepper, Rhodey and the others didn’t judge him. They loved him and only wanted to help. He knew that. But, they had known him before, and as much as he knew it was him and not them, there was always this pressure to go back, to be the person he was before, to get better, get past this. Steve’s calm acceptance that this was simply part of the meal, like a coughing fit after you swallowed wrong, part of Tony, scraped an edge of guilty tension off that Tony hadn’t even realized was there.

“You’re going to have to help me with this,” Steve told him, gesturing with his other hand to the elaborate place setting in front of him. “I just nodded along when the Chef asked me if I liked whatever it was we’re about to eat. Concasse of oysters sounds like we interrupted an important shellfish meeting.”

Tony wheezed out a surprised huff of a laugh at that, feeling the tightness in his chest ease a bit at the movement. “Never thought about it that way, but yeah, it kind of does.”

“Apparently, there’s a video on here,” Steve said, picking up one of the iPads that sat by their plates while Tony frowned at it disdainfully. “Supposed to walk us through the meal. Even has a live-feed of the kitchen.” Tony supposed that had been part of the introduction he’d missed while trying not to curl into the fetal position. Steve held the tablet up, then set it back down, apparently as uninterested in a narrated meal as Tony was. “More a steak and potatoes kind of guy, to be honest,” Steve admitted with a slight frown. “To new experiences, I guess,” Steve proposed, clinking his glass of water against where Tony’s sat on the table.

“Bad luck to toast with water,” Tony said automatically.

“I like to live on the edge,” Steve replied with a grin, taking a quick sip. “Walk under ladders. Swim right after I eat. Open my umbrella inside.”

“A risk-taker. Guess that’s probably good for me, all things considered,” Tony said with an answering smile. “Champagne?” At Steve’s nod, Tony waved one of the waiters over. When the cork popped, he didn’t even jump, though his mind chose that moment to remind him that he was still holding Steve’s hand under the table, and he was suddenly very, very conscious of the heavy, warm weight of it across his thigh. He let go and reached for the flute of champagne, raising it up with a slight nod as he felt Steve’s hand slip away. They clinked the slim flutes together, and Tony took a long drink, watching Steve out of the corner of his eye. The cool, bubbly liquid felt like heaven on his parched throat.

Steve took a drink, then held the glass away from him, tilting it into the light. “Tastes different than the stuff at the club,” he observed.

“I’ll bet,” Tony replied. “So,” Tony began, clearing his throat. “Army. Lover of art, which you will never mention to Pepper, or I won’t get you back. Now, Vegas. Quite the…varied life experiences, there,” Tony tried, struggling for the right, or at least most non-judgmental, words. He was…curious, he had to admit. How Steve ended up doing what he was doing. Not that there was anything wrong with it. He sure as hell couldn’t talk. Still, he was…interested. And they had the evening of enforced togetherness. Might as well make some effort, particularly given that Steve had some kind of untapped Tony-whispering talents that kept them from becoming more of a spectacle than what was just the norm for an evening out with Tony.
“Is Ms. Potts upset about the press thing?” Steve asked. Instead of answering, Tony noted. “You were reaching for your phone earlier,” he said by way of explanation.

“Nah, it’s fine. We’ll deal with any fallout,” Tony assured him. Actually, he was fairly sure there was a lecture in Steve’s future, and while he was all about the whole leave no man behind kumbaya, he wasn’t going to throw himself on that particular pyre for anyone. “How long were you in for?”

“Three tours. Two in Afghanistan, one in Iraq,” Steve answered.

“Didn’t want to make a career of it?” Tony questioned.

Steve shrugged and took another sip of champagne. “Things change.” The words sounded flippant, but their tone was laced with something heavy, though, again, Tony could feel the pushback of getting too close to something Steve didn’t want to talk about. At least, not with his fake husband, which, fair enough, Tony thought. They weren’t even friends, just sort of temporary teammates, Tony supposed.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, resisting the urge to tap at the center of his chest. “That, they do.”

“Speaking of change, I hear you’re trying to move Stark Industries away from the weapons business,” Steve said, making it a question. “You could always tell the Stark tech from the other gear, though we grunts didn’t exactly get to play with the really fun stuff.”

“We’ll still supply plenty of tech to the military. Lots of what we do now, you don’t even see. Hardware and software behind the scenes, body armor, drones that can scan for IEDs, advances in medical and disaster response,” Tony explained, warming to the idea of a shared topic. Besides, he was still trying to figure out how SI could help soldiers, without continuing to manufacture weapons. They’d had God only knew how many internal meetings on the subject, brainstorming sessions with R&D, and all kinds of powwows with the brass, but it couldn’t hurt to pick the brain of someone who’d actually been out there dealing with it in realtime.

Putting aside Obie’s connections to a terrorist organization and attempts to have Tony assassinated, the man wasn’t wrong about the difficulties transitioning the company. It was going to be painful, though Tony knew it would ultimately be worth it. To do something that actually made the world better, safer in ways that actually solved the problems that laid the foundations for war and strife and brought people like Steve home before he had to learn how to count by sevens.

“Sounds great,” Steve said in a way that said it sounded anything but.

“You sound decidedly unconvinced,” Tony remarked, eyebrow raised in question.

“No, I mean it. Really, it does. Well,” Steve amended almost apologetically. “Okay, your clean energy project—I read in the paper you were here looking at property out in the desert for it—the kind of power you’re talking about generating…you have to know that most of that can be weaponized, even if it isn’t by you,” Steve pointed out.

“Thaaaaaat is…definitely true,” Tony acknowledged carefully. “But, to be fair, the same could be said of a lot of seemingly harmless tech. Trust me. Give me a screwdriver and some duct tape, and I could weaponize that iPad into something far more sinister than a glorified storage-eating kid-occupier,” Tony argued. “Hard to stop that kind of thing.”

“Nothing the military hates more than something freely available to everyone who isn’t them,” Steve replied easily, then leaned back a bit in his chair as their first course arrived in a flourish of tuxedo-clad servers.
“Can’t argue there,” Tony acknowledged. “That one,” he said, pointing at one of the small forks above the top of the dinner plate as Steve frowned down at the variety of flatware spread before them.

“You don’t want the military turning your IED-sniffing drones into missile delivery devices. So, for one thing, sell those same drones to, I don’t know, FedEx or something, and let them put it to use finding the best delivery spots,” Steve suggested, taking a somewhat experimental bit of the oysters. “They’d be using the same basically the same behavioral probability algorithm and mapping triangulation.”

“Seriously? How are even—you know what? Nevermind,” Tony said, waving a hand in front of his face. He couldn’t help the bark of laughter that escaped, though Steve took it in stride, just raising his eyebrows, lips curling into a smile. Tony shook his head and downed another sip of the champagne before nodding in agreement. “Okay, fine, not an absolutely terrible idea. What else you got?”

As it turned out, Steve had a lot more to say than Tony would ever have believed, at least, once the guy got going. They talked through all seven courses, or, rather, talked through four, argued through two and laughed through one, when Steve started telling him about the time one of his fellow soldiers got tired of rations and bought a goat from a local herder. None of the manly-men soldiers could quite bear to do the deed when it came down to it, so the goat ended up basically having the run of their makeshift camp on the edge of nowhere, east Afghanistan to the point that they all started calling it General and saluting when they passed it grazing on the dry grasses that dotted the rocky landscape.

To Tony's surprise, he'd managed to actually find something of an appetite for the food instead of just the magically refilling glasses of champagne, something of a rarity after one of his little episodes. Though, he mostly blamed Steve for constantly telling him he should try a certain dish or how good one of the courses tasted. And then making those ridiculously exuberant happy faces while he ate. Hard to resist participating at least somewhat in a meal that managed to accomplish those kinds of looks.

“A lot of the problems could be at least improved if we found a way to lower the unemployment rate among the young people. You don’t see too many radicalized twenty-somethings from the middle class who want to blame America for their desire to kill innocents as opposed to blaming their last crush who friendzoned them,” Steve said, taking another bite of the Fondant au Chocolat. They had worked their way through the champagne pairings, and Tony was feeling the warm, relaxed haze that came with a good meal and good alcohol.

Tony slung one elbow over the curved back of the chair, which let him twist around comfortably enough to appreciate the view, manners dispensed with in favor of the ability to gesticulate his point. Ms. Claridge would be horrified. Rap his knuckles with her ruler, he thought as he watched Steve’s tongue dart out just enough to lick the taste from his lips. Tony’s mind promptly conjured up the image of Steve on that stage, hips gyrating and grinding against the smooth metal pole, that crossroads deal of a back tapering down to the most perfect ass Tony had ever had the pleasure of seeing, which, statistically speaking, was quite the sample size.

Someone is not paying attention to his lesson, Tony heard the memory of his etiquette instructor’s voice in his head. No fucking kidding, Martha, he thought, somewhat giddily. He cleared his throat and tried to force his mind to something that didn’t involve the way Steve’s mouth curved around the spoon and how good it would look around other things, which turned out to be a task putting Hercules’ labors to shame. Tony sighed and let his head fall back against the chairback for a moment, gazing up at the wood-paneled ceiling before turning back to Steve, having restored
minimal ability to focus.

“You got your degree in Middle Eastern Studies, right?” Tony said, pulling the words from a brain that rather uncooperatively wanted to send blood elsewhere, making him shift in his chair and thank the waitstaff for not being overly-efficient enough to have taken the napkins from their laps just yet. “Must’ve been tough doing that while you were enlisted,” Tony continued at Steve’s nod.

“You seem to know a lot about me. Now that we’ve solved world peace and all, what about you? I mean, I know—obviously, I know who you are. The basics, anyway,” Steve amended. “You don’t seem much like your basics, though.”

“And what, pray tell, are my basics?” Tony asked with mock censure.

“Billionaire, genius, playboy, philanthropist,” Steve reeled off quickly.

“Well, you’re not wrong,” Tony replied easily.

“I’m not entirely right, either, though,” Steve responded carefully. “You seem, I don’t know… different than how I’d pictured you.”

“You pictured me? Tell me more about that,” Tony said with a teasing grin, though, and he decided to blame the champagne for it, the thought of Steve thinking about him, maybe some kind of celebrity crush or something, sent a spike of something warm low through his belly.

“I figured you’d pulled your company out of weapons because you got spooked and felt guilty, which, maybe that isn’t fair to judge, but I know how much we rely on the stuff we use out there to work properly, to keep that barrier of safety up just a little longer, so I kind of resented it a bit. I still know a lot of guys serving over there, so… I don’t know. Thought you’d gone tree-hugger because you had to see it up close. What you profit on. And maybe that’s a luxury only someone like you can have, you know?” Steve began.

“Yeah,” Tony said, letting out a long hiss of air as he leaned back, staring at the ceiling again, this time for a very different reason. “I know.”

“But, that’s not it,” Steve continued in a rush. “Or, not all of it. You’re doing this because you care. Because you can, and maybe that’s the same thing as you should. You’ve clearly thought about this. A lot,” Steve continued with a slight heavenward look, and, yeah, okay, Tony had been talking his ear off, though he didn’t get the sense Steve was complaining so much as making an observation. “And you can see a better way. Something maybe all of us missed. Sometimes… we get so entrenched in what is, we can’t see what could be. Particularly something as big and immovable as the military industrial complex. Sometimes the best you can do is to start over.”

“That why you left the Army?” Tony asked. “To start over?”

“No,” Steve said, mouth flattening into a thin line, before one corner ticked up in a self-deprecating grimace. “I got spooked and felt guilty.”

“Why don’t I quite believe that?” Tony replied.

“Probably because you have a suspicious nature,” Steve said, slipping into an easy grin as he leaned back in his chair. “Though, to be fair, not entirely without some justification. Should we… should we head out?” Steve asked, casting a look over his shoulder. Tony followed his gaze, surprised to see that there were only a few other patrons left in the restaurant. Tony waved the head waiter over and settled the bill while Steve stepped out to the restroom. When he walked out of the alcove where the Chef’s table was located, he found Steve complimenting the Chef and apparently, along with
waxing poetic about the food and service, thanking the man for preparing dishes that didn’t kill him.

“Ah, Mr. Stark! We are so honored that you decided to dine with us tonight,” the Chef beamed. Probably thinking about all the free press, Tony thought with an inward sigh.

“It was really fantastic,” Steve was saying.

“Haven’t enjoyed a meal more since this cheeseburger I had a year or so ago,” Tony replied as he approached. He took a moment of pleasure watching the Chef’s face squelch together with the effort not to comment on that one. Smiling, Tony threaded his arm through Steve’s, mainly because he could, hell, was even supposed to when you got down to it, though he recognized he was more than a little buzzed from the champagne. “Feel like rolling the dice, gorgeous?”

“This way,” Stewart announced, appearing at their side from the ether or wherever it was that paid sycophants went when they weren’t trying to crawl up your ass. “I have a table reserved for you in our VIP room. If I remember, craps is your game, Mr. Stark. And you, Sir?” Stewart asked, addressing Steve.

“I play a mean game of UNO,” Steve replied placidly. Tony watched Stewart’s expression falter then recover, enjoying it far too much because this wonderful obnoxious streak that Steve hid behind being an all-around decent kind of guy liked to rear its head at the best of times. “I’ll just watch tonight though,” Steve assured their host.

“Bet you hoard the Draw Fours,” Tony accused lightly. Steve tossed a look at Tony, where he stood—leaned, whatever—against Steve’s side. “Lull everyone into a false sense of security.”

“ Uno isn’t for the weak,” Steve agreed, then smiled widely, making Tony suspect he wasn’t the only one a bit tipsy. “ Only the strong survive,” he agreed.

“This way, Gentlemen,” Stewart said, sweeping an arm forward. Steve wound his arm around Tony’s shoulders and pulled him along towards the elevators.

The high limit room, like everything else at Caesar’s, looked a bit like Versailles threw up, but it was private, separated from the masses still losing their money in the main casino. They followed Stewart to the craps table, where a tray of chips waited for them.

“Mr. Stark,” the boxman said in greeting when Tony sidled up to the table. He picked up a stack of chips and placed them on the ‘Pass’ line. The stickman pushed the dice boat with six dice towards Tony, and Tony selected two, then shook them a bit in his fist and held his hand up to Steve.

“Blow me,” Tony said, smiling widely at Steve’s startled look. “For luck. Come on.”

Steve gave him a side-eyed look that seemed more challenging than actually disapproving, and Tony’s mind flashed to that moment in the police station, when Steve had kissed him, though why he would think of that, he wasn’t sure. Steve’s mouth ticked up at the corners, just a bit, and only someone who was looking—okay, staring—would notice, but Tony had given up trying to maintain eye contact, because Steve’s mouth was really just unfair, but he knew Steve was watching him. He could feel it, seeping into his skin, heating it.

Steve brought one hand up and wrapped it around Tony’s wrist, then tipped his head down to where Tony’s hand curled into a fist around the dice. Tony felt the barest brush of Steve’s lips over his knuckle, then a pulse of warm breath across his skin, and who knew the knuckles were erogenous zones? Tony felt the hairs on the back of his neck bristle, his whole body seeming to contract, then loosen, almost too loose, like he was being liquefied part by part, admittedly, starting somewhere in
his groin. Steve was looking down at him through truly ungodly long lashes, and what had been a joke, because he could, because this was the kind of thing he did, teased and talked and made it a game because that way there was some distance, had become something else entirely, though damned if Tony knew exactly what.

Except that he wanted nothing more right now than to shove one of those $10,000 chips in Steve’s hand, get on his knees and show Steve exactly what a mouth could do. It wasn’t exactly news that he wanted Steve. Hell, he’d spent the night after his and Rhodey’s foray into Vegas sightseeing of the decidedly less family-friendly kind jerking off to thoughts of the guy, but now he wanted Steve, who shamed reporters because they said mean things and saluted highly-ranked goats and made sure the waiter didn’t pop the champagne because he knew the sound would bother Tony.

“Mr. Stark?” Tony heard someone say.

“Huh?” Tony said, head darting towards the sound, then back to Steve like a magnet. “What?”

“Would you, uh—the come out roll? Would you like to roll, Sir?” the stickman asked with a note of uncertainty. Tony felt Steve release his wrist and watched him shift slightly away, putting some space between them, though Tony’s hand that still held the dice hovered rather stupidly in the air. He finally managed to flick his wrist a few times, shaking the cubes between his fingers, then tossed them down the table where they bounced off the end and rolled to a rest.

“Up pops the Devil,” the stickman called, indicating a seven, though Tony caught the knowing smirk and had to forcibly suppress the desire to roll his eyes.

They played a few more games, though Tony didn’t ask Steve to repeat the good luck gesture. It was that, or he was going to have to spill the drink that magically appeared next to him on his pants to hide the evidence that he was reduced to a fifteen-year-old ready to cream himself because his fake husband breathed on him. It was embarrassing. He’d care, but Steve seemed to be having a good time watching Tony gamble and before he quite knew what was happening, he was explaining the rules and letting Steve toss the dice. It was absurdly delightful to watch Steve win or lose. Tony didn’t care about the money, but Steve’s expressions ranged from looking like someone had given him a pony when he won to frowning at the table like he could will it into submission when he lost.

“There is absolutely nothing about this game that makes sense,” Steve protested when he lost again. He sat down heavily on the stool next to Tony, a deep furrow appearing in the center of his brow. He was worrying at his bottom lip with his teeth again, something he did when he was thinking, Tony had noticed. Noticed because he’d been staring again, sure, but, in all fairness, only because he was awake. Tony sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, closing his eyes behind it. When he opened them again, he promptly wished he hadn’t.

“Anthony! Is that you?” Justin Hammer called out. “Hey, pal!”

“My least favorite person on Earth,” Tony muttered through his teeth. Next to him, he felt Steve stiffen, either at Tony’s words or the intrusion.

“How are you doing?” Hammer asked. He stepped up to the table and leaned over, eyeing Tony’s stacks of chips, before looking back at Tony. And then over to Steve. And then back over to Steve with a long, appraising look, because Hammer was an ass and couldn’t even bother to try for subtlety. In theory, Tony couldn’t entirely blame him. That would be hypocritical. “Forget I asked!” Hammer said with a snicker. “Looks like you’re, ah, doing just fine.” Dear God, he actually put that last bit in air quotes, Tony thought with an annoyed grimace.

“To what do I owe the incredible lack of pleasure?” Tony asked.
“You’re not the only rich guy who gets the private table, Tony, come on,” Hammer protested. Tony watched his eyes flick to Steve again, tongue coming out to wet his lips as he did, though, thankfully, Steve was studiously studying the wood paneling at the far end of the room or just about anything that wasn’t Justin Hammer. “Sharing is caring. Am I right?”

Okay, so he was, in fact, a giant hypocrite, but Hammer could just fuck off, because that last bit was way over the fucking line.

“Congratulate me. Steve here made me an honest man,” Tony said, drawing Hammer’s shocked gaze to his. “That’s right. Tied the knot. I’m officially off the market.” As he said it, Tony leaned back on his stool until his shoulder bumped into Steve’s chest. He groped behind him with one hand and finally managed to wind his arm through Steve’s, tugging Steve’s hand forward to thread their fingers together. Huh, he thought as he looked down. He should really see about getting them rings. Complete the picture and all that. People would probably notice.

People would notice the rings and then they would back the fuck off. That was the whole point of rings, right?

“No kidding? Aw, hey, Stark, come on. We kid, right? We’re kidders. Go way back. Tony loves me,” Hammer prattled on.

“Oh, that’s not true,” Tony corrected.

“I mean, we’re competitors, sure, but friends,” Hammer continued as if Tony hadn’t spoken. “Where’re you staying? I’ll send you a gift.”

“Pretty sure we’re at least one knife short of a full set,” Steve commented over Tony’s shoulder. Tony swiveled his head around with a gleeful smirk at that, but Steve just gave him a strange, oddly tight look and slipped his arm from Tony’s grasp. Steve turned away from them and braced his hands on the rounded edges of the craps table. He didn’t look back again, which bothered Tony for some reason. Probably because he’d spent the past day or so watching Steve catch everything head-on, and this was new. Whatever it was, Tony found he didn’t like it. At all.

“Excuse me, Mr. Stark. Your table is ready, Mr. Hammer,” one of the other executive hosts said, indicating a poker table off to the right.

“Well, I’d say it’s been good seeing you, but I hate lying, so,” Tony said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Ah, Tony. Always joking. That’s what I like about you!” Hammer replied, patting Tony lightly on the shoulder as he brushed past and sauntered over to the poker table.

Later, Tony was self-aware enough to know, he would probably blame the alcohol. Too much champagne, coasting on the left over anxiety from a near panic attack, too little beautifully presented food, all combined with generally poor impulse control, and you got decisions eleven out of ten would not recommend, but none of that seemed to matter at the moment. Tony turned around towards Steve and slipped off the stool, leaving almost no room between where he stood and where Steve leaned over the craps table. Tony ran one hand up Steve’s arm where it slashed across the front of Tony’s chest and brought his other hand up to cup Steve’s jaw, applying just enough pressure to get Steve to turn to look at him. Steve’s eyes were bright and incredibly blue, the kind that startles you, because it shouldn’t be real, that color.

Tony’s gaze darted over Steve’s shoulder, just once, because he was an ass, but whatever. Sue him. Then he stretched up and pressed his mouth to Steve’s, fistig his hand in the sleeve of Steve’s jacket.
as he did, whether to hang on or pull Steve closer, he wasn’t sure. It was a dick move, kissing Steve here, like this, when it was public enough that he had to at least play along, and Tony would feel badly about that later. Probably. Right now, he couldn’t feel anything beyond how fucking amazing it felt to finally get his mouth on Steve’s. Steve shifted underneath his hands and, for a moment, Tony thought he was going to get pushed away and told what to do with his little stunt. Instead, he felt Steve’s mouth slant over his, opening just enough for Tony to deepen the kiss, slipping his tongue out to trace the seam.

Steve tasted like chocolate and the sweet, honeyed tang of champagne, and something else, deeper and warmer and far more intoxicating. What part of his mind that was currently working was blaring danger signals in his head, but those hardly seemed worth listening to, not when Steve’s tongue was sliding along the edge of his own, licking into Tony’s mouth, tentative at first, light and teasing, then harder, just the right side of rough, and Tony was lost to anything that wasn’t how good this felt. Heat pooled low in his belly, making him suddenly all too aware of the rub of his trousers across his half-hard cock. He wanted more, more friction, more heat, more Steve, just more. More of all of it. He felt the weight and heat of Steve’s hands circling his waist, drawing him closer and holding him there, so damned close to what he wanted that he heard himself let out a low, needy groan.

Steve tore his mouth away at the sound, sparing quick look at the casino workers standing around the craps table looking anywhere but at them. Honestly, Tony was this close to tossing the tray of chips at them and telling them to go have fun absolutely anywhere but here, but there was still Hammer, and that was all the show Tony felt like giving the asshole. When he looked up, Steve was gazing down at him, eyes half-lidded and a little glazed, and his mouth, oh, God in heaven, help me, Tony thought. Steve’s lips were dark pink and wet and there were little patches of redness on his skin from Tony’s beard, and fuck if that wasn’t the hottest thing Tony had seen since…well, since a long time.

“You, ah,” Steve began, then stopped to clear his throat, looking down and away before finding Tony’s eyes again. A small, crooked smile ghosted over his expression before he seemed to catch himself and shutter it into something Tony recognized now as Steve’s stage-face. “You ready to go?” Steve asked, then looked down pointedly. Tony realized he had one hand clutched tightly on the sleeve of Steve’s jacket and the other wound into Steve’s hair, still trying to tug Steve’s mouth back down to his like his hand hadn’t quite gotten the message that they were done just yet.

“That is…one thing that I am,” Tony remarked flatly, swallowing thickly. He drew his hands back and shifted his hips towards the table, trying to breathe deeply and think of Mr. Stout, his paunchy, balding eighth grade Latin teacher who favored comb-overs and smelled of Pine-Sol for God only knew what reason. It was that or hump Steve’s leg, so better part of valor and all. “Color me up, William,” Tony told the stickman.

“Of course, Mr. Stark,” the stickman replied and moved Tony’s stack of chips to the center of the table for the boxman to count. “Shall I just apply your winnings to your account?” Tony nodded and waved his assent, wanting nothing more than to get out of here. He dug into his pocket for his phone and called Happy to have the car ready, then grabbed his jacket from across the stool next to him and folded it over his arms so that it hung in front of him.

Stewart came by, probably to thank them or some such, Tony didn’t know or care. Steve did the heavy-lifting for both of them, chat-wise, while Toy handed Stewart an orange chip, which he figured was really all that mattered. By the time, they made it to the car, Tony could at least sit down comfortably. Gratis ago tibi to you, Mr. Stout, he thought with a flash of annoyance directed at himself. It was just a kiss. A great kiss, okay, sure, fine, whatever, but still. Just a kiss. He was hardly some schoolboy who’d been mouthing at this hand until now. Jesus fucking Christ, calm down, he admonished himself as he slid into the back of the car next to Steve.
“Where to, Boss?” Happy called out from the driver’s seat after he shut their door.

“Hotel, Happy. Think we’ve had enough fun for one night,” Tony replied.

“Sure thing, Boss,” Happy answered, deftly weaving the car away from the crowd that swarmed around the VIP exit, hoping for a glimpse of whomever might be coming or going.

Steve was, objectively, hot as hell, Tony acknowledged to himself as they drove away from Caesar’s. So, yeah, Tony had gotten a little carried away back there, though that was mostly Hammer’s fault for being a giant douche. Important to be clear about that, but still, no reason to go throwing fuel on the mushroom cloud just because he didn’t like how Hammer had looked at— because he didn’t like Hammer. He was supposed to be playing this safe, after the fuck-up with Stern, if nothing else. Publicly mauling the person playing nice with their little plot was probably not on Pepper and Matt’s to-do list for him.

Tony cast a quick, furtive glance over at where Steve sat next to him in the back of the car. Steve didn’t look pissed, not exactly, Tony thought, so that was something. He looked…distant was the word that came to Tony’s mind as he watched Steve stare out the window where the lights from the Strip lit the night like garish parade floats, blinking and rippling and doing everything they could to grab the attention of anyone who might need to leave some money behind.

“Sorry about that. Up there,” Tony finally settled on. “I mean, I know we’re being all Newlywed Game here, but I should’ve said something first. We haven’t really talked about, you know, the, ah…the parameters of this. Hammer’s a talker, and he clearly had the wrong idea about you, so…” Tony finished with a shrug, letting the rest of his admittedly thin justification hang in the air.


“Look, I really am sorry,” Tony began. “About all of that. About all of tonight, actually. The reporters. The thing in the restaurant. I don’t usually—I mean, that doesn’t happen that often. Not anymore. All this—this stuff with Obie and Pierce. Me being a dick with Stern and nearly blowing everything to hell. It just got to me. Had my little stop, drop and roll moment, and now I’m fine. Largely because of you, it turns out. Thanks for that, by the way.”

Steve didn’t answer, but the set of his shoulders relaxed a little, and the little tick of muscle in his jaw stopped pulsing, so Tony counted it as a win.

“Ms. Potts and your lawyer are probably going to want to talk to me about the reporter thing, aren’t they?” Steve asked, sounding tired, but not particularly worried. Tony strongly suspected that Steve was the type the drill sergeant yelled at while Steve stood there and took it and then went right back to doing whatever it was that Steve thought was best. Independent thinking wasn’t something he normally associated with Army enlisted, but Steve kept managing to turn Tony’s other assumptions on their heads, so why not?

“Eh, don’t worry about it. I’ll handle it. You did fine. Better than fine,” Tony assured him. “Pepper worries that I’ll say something that doesn’t fit the script, and, let’s face it, that’s not exactly outside of the realm of possibility. Matt thinks I’m going to say something that’s going to sound bad when they repeat it back in court one day. I get it. They’re trying to protect me. Protect what we’re trying to do here. But, you want to say something? I trust you. Have at it. You clearly have better instincts for it than I do,” Tony admitted with an indifferent shrug. “The only reason I haven’t announced to the world what Obie’s up to is that I promised Pepper I wouldn’t put her through a protracted he said—he said, not when we can get him red-handed, anyway.”

“You and Ms. Potts…” Steve said, letting it trail off into a question. “Are you two…”
“Me and Pep? No. Strictly professional,” Tony told him. “She’s great, though. Should be doing more than what I give her, but I haven’t run her off yet. Says she hates job hunting,” Tony finished, flashing a grin at Steve, who chuckled.

“That, I understand,” Steve agreed.

“You, ah…do a lot of that? Before the, ah…the, I mean…” Tony tried, then winced at how it sounded.

“Did I look for other ways to earn a living before I settled on taking my clothes off?” Steve asked archly, one eyebrow raised. “Yes, Tony. I did. Figured I’d use my degree to find something with a military contractor after I got out, but they weren’t hiring. Or, they weren’t hiring me, anyway. And, it turns out, an education in understanding the people you’re trying to help or trying to fight, outside of military applications or academia, which I don’t have the resume for, turns out to be fairly useless,” Steve continued, then shook his head. “It isn’t so bad, really. The club, I mean. You can make a lot pretty quickly doing this. Most of the customers are nice, just looking to have a good time.”

“I know. Sorry. That…that came out wrong,” Tony said. “I didn’t mean—damn, look, I don’t care about the stripping thing. I’m certainly not going to judge you for it. I mean, really, me? Have you Googled me? Okay, then, see? Not judging. You just seemed, I don’t know, bothered up there, I guess. You can’t let Hammer get to you. Guy really is a complete prick,” Tony told him.

“That, I do know,” Steve replied. “He’s been in the club a few times,” Steve went on, still staring out the window. That would make some sense, Tony thought to himself. Explain why Steve seemed so out of sorts about the whole thing anyway, not that it was any of Tony’s business if Hammer knew Steve from the club. If he’d gone to watch Steve. Seen Steve up there, maybe gotten some private time in one of the rooms Tony knew the club had in the back. Nope. Not Tony’s business if Hammer got his rocks off over Steve.


“Think he recognized you?” Tony heard himself ask.

“Didn’t seem to,” Steve answered quietly. His hands were fisted on the tops of his thighs, rubbing up and down like he was trying to push them through the fabric and into the skin there. If they were a couple, this was the point when Tony would do something solicitous like lean over, run a hand across Steve’s back and ask him what was wrong, because he hadn’t been like this with Stern, so it couldn’t just be about someone knowing what he did for a living. Hell, Steve had turned the tables on Stern so fast, the guy hadn’t known what hit him. Well, technically, he’d known that Tony hit him, but metaphors, whatever.

“Okay, well, good, I guess. Doesn’t matter. Forget him,” Tony amended, waving a hand. “Just, you know. Don’t think about him.” That…seemed to be an important point. The car pulled up to the Rio’s VIP entrance, though that, too, was packed this time of night, with people dragging themselves back from other casinos and hot spots. A few of them shouted as he and Steve got out of the car, but, luckily, most of the crowd was too drunk to be anything other than friendly. Tony nodded good night to Happy and followed Steve inside the hotel.

“So, that went well, I think,” Tony offered once the elevator doors slid shut. He put his room key into the slot to access the button for the penthouse, then pressed it. Actually, the whole evening had gone incredibly well, Tony mentally acknowledged. Ironically, he had to admit, his best date in, well, let’s just say a long time, had been with his fake husband. Which was exactly the plan. They were doing what they were supposed to be doing. That was all.
“Good. Glad to help,” Steve replied. “I had a nice time,” he continued after a pause.

“UNO, next time, though, right?” Tony promised with a slight smile.

“Ah. You have played right into my hands,” Steve whispered lowly, rubbing his hands together in mock glee. He looked over at Tony, then burst out laughing, clutching one hand over his stomach. “You’re something else, Tony.”

“Eh, back ‘atcha, husband dear,” Tony teased, bumping his shoulder against Steve’s. Steve smiled again, softer this time, whatever had been bothering him seeming to have slipped away as they ascended. “You know, I haven’t played UNO in years. I think I was at camp or something.”

“We had a deck someone sent us in one of those shoebox Christmas package for a soldier things. It was a Star Trek UNO. Some kind of special edition. Anyway, it had these special cards, like one was a Mind Meld card and one was Beam Me Up, and it was just so bizarre. We’d be sitting around on the ground in the middle of nowhere, Afghanistan, and there would be five guys raising holy hell because someone slapping down the Double Tribble card,” Steve recalled. “The real trouble with tribbles is that they are bad for unit cohesion, apparently.”

“Oh, oh, well, now we are definitely going to have to play,” Tony said around a laugh. “High stakes Trekkie card games? Be still my heart.”

“We played for ration wafers and sheets of toilet paper, but hey, if you think you can handle that kind of high rolling,” Steve offered with an innocent smirk, hands shoved into his pockets while he rocked back and forth on his heels. A sharp ding announced they had arrived at the penthouse, and the doors pulled apart, emptying them into the suite’s living room, which was occupied by a sole inhabitant watching the basketball game on the big screen and eating one of the ten dollar packs of peanuts from the minibar.

“Rhodey!” Tony shouted when he saw the figure sitting on the sectional. “I know you’re upset you didn’t get to be best man, but try to put your feelings aside and just be happy for me.”

“This is my happy face,” Rhodey said, pointing at his face.

“I thought that was your Tony-What-Did-You-Blow-Up-Face,” Tony muttered. “Honey-bear, meet Steve Rogers, my temporary ball and chain while we handle this tiny bump in the road, which was mostly not my fault.”

“Uh-huh. Nice to meet you, Steve, is it?” Rhodey asked, a slight frown marring his expression.

“Colonel,” Steve replied as he shook Rhodey’s hand.

“Have we…met?” Rhodey asked, a slight frown marring his expression.

“Um…yes?” Steve said, looking back and forth between Tony and Rhodey in confusion. “At the club?”

“Right! Right, sorry. I don’t know where my head was,” Rhodey said, shaking his head quickly as if to clear it. “Look, man, I’m real sorry to have gotten you involved in all this,” Rhodey offered. “I, of course, had no idea Tony would jump the gun with Stern.”

“Yes, having only known him for less than a day, that does seem shockingly out of character for him,” Steve said with a dubious look aimed in Tony’s direction. Tony threw his hands up in his best ‘who me’ attempt, then gave up at Rhodey’s look and dropped them to his sides.
“Oh, he’s got your number already, Tones,” Rhodey warned, barking out a laugh. “Better watch out.”

“And yet he still fake married me,” Tony countered. “Love is truly blind.”

“Is that my bag?” Steve asked, pointing at a tan camouflage duffel sitting at Rhodey’s feet.

“Got it off some redhead down at your concierge,” Rhodey explained. “Concierge guy didn’t want to take it because you weren’t listed as a guest, but damn if he wasn’t corrected on that one. She a friend?”

“Yeah. She works at the club. I asked her to grab some stuff for me. Thanks for bringing it up,” Steve said, walking over to pick up the bag.

“Not a problem. She a, ah, fellow dancer?” Rhodey asked. Tony shot him a look and rolled his eyes. “I’m asking for a friend.”

“Nat?” Steve said around a chuckle. “No. Bouncer.”

“Bouncer?” Rhodey asked incredulously. “She’s like this big,” he said, holding his hand out to shoulder height. Steve just shrugged.

“You try her and let me know how that works out for you,” Steve suggested mildly. “Ah, I’ll just—if you don’t need me, that is—I’ll just go to my room?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, sure,” Tony replied. Steve nodded and clutched his duffel to his chest.

“Night, then. Colonel, nice to see you,” Steve said as he departed. Tony watched his back until he disappeared into the guest bedroom and shut the door, then turned back to see Rhodey doing the same thing, though, granted, Rhodey was probably thinking very different thoughts.

“So, before you lay into me about this whole thing, can I just say that this is actually working pretty well, and none of it was Steve’s fault, and Stern isn’t going to be a problem, anyway,” Tony rushed out before Rhodey could protest. “Not to mention that our dear Senator and Obie are definitely tighter than I’d realized. Steve has seen them at the club together, and yes, that thought kind of makes my stomach churn, too, but I’m trying not to picture it—“

“Tony,” Rhodey cut in. “I have seen him before.”

“No homo. Gotcha. Go on,” Tony said with a slow nod.

“Of course, you’ve seen him before. We all have. That’s not the point,” Tony added.

“No, not Stern. Rogers. You know, your not-husband,” Rhodey said, jerking his head towards the closed bedroom door for emphasis.

“Rhodey, hon, have you been testing the Air Force’s high altitude breathing equipment again?” Tony asked in confusion. “You literally just saw him the other night at the club. And then apparently later, when you arranged a little private party for me. Thanks again for the thought by the way. Admittedly, ot the best timing ever, but I’m not holding that against you.”

“Oh for God’s sake—I know I saw him at the club. I saw a lot of him at the club, and maybe I wasn’t quite paying so much attention to his face. I mean, you know I don’t roll that way,” Rhodey began, holding his palms out in a stop motion.

“No homo. Gotcha. Go on,” Tony said with a slow nod.
“But I’m not blind, either, Tony. So, maybe I didn’t notice it then, but I’m telling you, I’ve seen him before. So have you, but you probably didn’t notice or don’t remember. Not that I blame you, all the shit that happened, but, yeah, it’s him. I’m almost sure of it,” Rhodey said firmly.

“Who’s him? What are you talking about?” Tony demanded. Some other club or a party, maybe, though Tony took umbrage at the idea that he wouldn’t have noticed Steve. He hadn’t been that drunk since the 90’s.

“Well, I’m pretty sure the last time I saw him, he was pulling me out from under a Hum-drum-vee,” Rhodey replied quietly, staring at the closed bedroom door with a deep frown.

Chapter End Notes

Dun, dun, duuuuuuunnnnnn....

Comments and kudos will be given high-ranking goats.

I'm on tumblr, if you're interested. Stony, complaining about writing and now, Star Wars. sabrecmc.tumblr.com.
Steve closed the door to the suite’s guest bedroom, muffling the voices from the living room, and dropped his duffel on the corner of the bed. A cursory glance around the room that would be his for the next few nights revealed the basics of any hotel room, though far more elegant than any he’d seen before. By Vegas standards, it was practically understated, despite the gilded metals and plush bedding, with soft whites and grays, punctuated by splashes of black on the pillows and lampshades.

The artwork on the walls was not the typical mass produced kind, either, Steve noticed. Something probably commissioned to go with the room, beautiful and neutral and nothing like what art should be. Probably no one was going to object, though, which he supposed was the point. No one objecting. Or, no one who mattered objecting. Amounted to the same thing, in the end. If he’d learned anything out here, it was that, he thought, a dull, familiar sort of ache spreading out from the center of his chest.

Hammer hadn’t even recognized him, and that was…he honestly wasn’t sure what it was. Good, he told himself. It was good, though he couldn’t quite pick out a reason why that made much sense. Less awkward, certainly. Tony had put on a show of it for Hammer’s benefit, which was probably for the best, all things considered. If he kept telling himself that, maybe he’d even believe it. He could try, anyway.

He wasn’t sure if he was pissed or shocked or just—just empty. Hollowed out where there should be something, some emotion, anger or indignation or something, anything at all, that just wasn’t there anymore. Whatever it was, it sure as hell didn’t feel like a good thing. It felt like…well, it felt like a thing he didn’t want to think about, so there was that. Sam would tell him the list of things he was carrying around was getting a tad long, but Sam managed to never make that sound like a judgment, probably because Sam carried enough himself to understand how hard putting any of down could be.

Sam would probably be completely behind this mess with Tony, if for no other reason than it gave Steve something to do that didn’t revolve around Bucky. Get out, live a little, find something that makes you happy. Wasn’t that what Sam was always saying? Well, Steve thought, glancing around the decadent room, this certainly qualifies as living a little.

Dinner tonight, and what came after, had been a nice change of pace, he could admit. A part of him wanted to call Bucky and rehash the whole evening with him, the way they used to talk through things, shorthand conversations punctuated by insults that somehow meant love, but a call to Bucky was not going to end with him talking about how good the soup had been or Tony’s thoughts on neutralizing conflict. Nat would probably get a kick out of the whole thing, though. All the fancy foods with their elaborate names too big for what you were actually served. She’d find that amusing. He should have asked their waiter for a copy of the menu. Would’ve made a nice souvenir for when he looked back and couldn’t quite make himself believe this whole thing had ever really happened.

He should write down what he could remember, anyway. At least then he’d have something to attest to the fact that he once ate toasted mushroom brioche with Tony Stark preserved for posterity. He shook his head and smiled a bit at that. Tony was…a hundred things popped into his head, but none of them seemed quite right. Interesting. Different. Larger than life and trying to be smaller than he was, which was a strange combination.

His clothes from earlier were folded in a neat stack on the bench that was pushed against the end of
the bed. Steve dug the small, spiral notebook from out of the pants’ pocket, pulled the pencil from the metal coil at the top and sat down heavily on the bed, which bounced softly underneath him. He shook his head in amazement at that and ran a hand over the down comforter. He was probably going to end up sleeping on the floor, but damn if he wasn’t going to try the bed.

He couldn’t quite remember the entire menu, and hadn’t bothered paying attention to the names of the various types of cuvee that paired with each course, but he did his best. It was something, at least. Here’s your hotel towel, fancy soaps and a handwritten menu of what I ate. Thanks for not choking Bucky while I was gone, Steve thought with a small huff of a laugh as he stared down at the notebook and imagined Natasha’s reaction.

When he finished, he snapped the notebook shut and tossed it aside, then leaned across the bed and unzipped the duffel. Steve half expected something to pop out of him, snake-in-a-can-style, but it was just clothes and a pair of running shoes. He had to rifle through the contents a bit before finding his shaving kit near the bottom. There was a stick of deodorant and his toothbrush with a tissue wrapped around the bristles, along with the scrunchied up tube of toothpaste, shoved into a sock next to it. This had the feel of Bucky helping with packing, Steve thought, the corners of his mouth tugging up in amusement. Bucky would have helped, no doubt, if for no other reason than to get Natasha out of the apartment that much faster. A few shirts, two pairs of khakis, some jeans, boxers and his gym clothes were all that remained, except for Nat’s silent judgment about his wardrobe, or the lack thereof.

Grabbing the toiletries and a pair of blue plaid boxers, Steve shoved himself up off the bed and headed for the bathroom. The light flicked on when he hit the switch with a soft, warm glow that probably made everyone look better than they really did. He walked over to the marbled sink and dropped his shaving kit and other items next to it, then turned on the faucet, letting the hot water run until it started to steam the mirror above.

There was a stranger staring back at him in the mirror. He hadn’t realized how different he looked. No wonder Hammer hadn’t recognized him. Or Rhodes, for that matter, though one soldier in desert fatigues looked much the same as any other, and it wasn’t like Rhodes has been exactly focused on Steve at the time. Hell, he barely recognized the man looking back at him in the mirror, standing in one of the most expensive suites in town, wearing a suit that cost God only knew how much. His face was flushed, eyes bright and hair mussed, sticking up in the back—from Tony’s hand, his mind supplied helpfully. Two nights ago, he’d been shoving a cock ring on under what he was certain was violation of the Flag Code, and now he was here, swept up in the middle of something that was halfway between insane and wonderful. He was going to get the rest of the money they needed, all within a few days’ time, and apparently, all he had to do to get it was pretend to be in love with Tony while getting to live the high life for a bit. Not exactly a trial, he’d be the first to admit.

He undressed carefully, treating the suit with kid gloves, and pulled the boxers on, then hung the suit up in the closet, along with a few of his own clothes, which managed to at least provide a striking contrast, if nothing else. Outside the door, the voices had quieted, or Tony and Colonel Rhodes had moved their plotting to another room, he couldn’t be sure. Rhodes, Ms. Potts, Mr. Murdock…small circle for someone who supposedly knows everyone who’s anyone, Steve thought to himself. Not that Stark—Tony—didn’t have reason not to trust, if even half of what he said was true.

“Did you see which way they went? Which way did they go?” Rhodes shouted, voice hoarse, blinking sand, blood and smoke out of his eyes as he tried to find something where there was only desert and the bright, white glare of the sun. “Which way did they take Tony?”

He hadn’t seen anything, except the world tilting round and round as the Hum-Vee he’d been riding in cartwheeled off the road with the force of the explosion that gutted the front of it. The answer to
Rhodes’ question had come later though, but that was something else he didn’t want to think about tonight, though that thought came with a flash of annoyance at himself behind it.

Speaking of things he didn’t want to deal with…there were twelve missed calls on his phone, he saw when he finally lay back against the pile of bed pillows and checked. All from Bucky, of course, though just one message, which consisted of, “Call me back, you jerk,” and nothing more. He didn’t really have answers for what Bucky’s questions would boil down to, namely, what in the world was he doing mixed up in whatever this was with Tony Stark, so he cradled the phone to his chest until the screen went black, then put it on the nightstand to charge in what doubled for a clock and speakers.

He should call Bucky back, but Bucky was going to see through all this marriage bullshit in two seconds flat, and he just…didn’t want that. Not tonight. Tomorrow, he’d have to deal with it, but for now—for now, it had been a good night. Surprisingly good. Maybe it was the food or the alcohol or the jolt of seeing Hammer again like that or something else entirely…something like the fact that if he thought on it, he could remember how Tony’s mouth tasted, honey-sweet from champagne, how it felt, warm and soft against his, the sharp scrape of Tony’s beard offering almost too much of a contrast of sensations…so, really, it could be any number of things, but he was going to let himself have at least this. Just for tonight. Reality could wait until tomorrow.

Falling asleep was supposed to be a struggle in a new, unfamiliar place, with its too-soft mattress and ridiculous stack of pillows, but Steve woke up with a start, disoriented and surprised at the realization that he had slept until sometime after the sun was peeking up over the Strip, turning it from dazzling to just gaudy. He peeked out the bedroom door long enough to determinate that the rest of the suite was still dark and quiet, so he made himself put his gym clothes on and took the elevator down to the private gym reserved for concierge guests. It was empty at this hour, save for a young, perfectly-tanned, blonde woman steadily climbing invisible stairs while watching one of the hosts on the Morning Blend good-naturedly get his face licked by a black and white spaniel mix up for adoption.

“Morning,” Steve nodded in greeting and started adjusting the weights on one of the machines.

“Morning! I see I found the only other early riser in Vegas not headed for the 99-cent buffet,” the woman said airily as the Stairmaster adjusted the incline for her.

“Workout first. Then food,” Steve acknowledged with a slight smile. “Though, I don’t think anything around this place is in the under-a-dollar range.”

“No kidding,” she agreed, giving him a quick laugh. “Have you seen the minibar prices? Ten bucks for a candy bar? Of course, the fact that I know that probably tells you why I’m in the gym before 7am.”

“We had dinner at Guy Savoy’s last night. I think there were thirteen courses,” Steve said with a deprecating smile. “So, yeah. Gym.”

“Savoy’s, huh? Nice. You celebrating or something?” she asked.

“Ah—“ Steve started. Damn. Right. He could do this. “Yeah, ah. Just married, in fact. A bit, um, bit of an unplanned thing, so,” Steve finished, holding up his ringless hand when he saw her eyes dart that direction.

“Really? Wow, well, congratulations!” the woman said, smiling. “That’s great. Your wife is a lucky woman.”

“Husband, actually,” Steve corrected quickly. “I think I’m required to say that I’m the lucky one,
but, turns out, it’s kind of true.” That, at least, didn’t feel like a lie. Whatever this thing was with Tony, it was a stroke of luck that had been missing from his life for a long time.

“Oh, how sweet are you?” she cooed. “All the good ones are gay or taken or, apparently, both,” she continued with a teasing frown. “Seriously, though, congratulations. That’s wonderful. Sooooo, newlyweds, huh? Did you get married in Vegas or just honeymooning here? You said it was unplanned—not even rings? He pop the question or you? Wait, don’t tell me. Bet it was him. I don’t know why, but you seem like the kind of guy who’d plan everything out. He’s probably more a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants sort, am I right? But, that’s so romantic, to just decide to go for it, you know? You just don’t get that a lot these days. People wanting to commit to each other, I mean,” she wheezed between breaths as she climbed. “Seems like everyone is always trying to run away from their responsibilities, duck out of what they can, right? Not your guy, though, huh? That’s nice to see.”

“Oh, yeah, I—yeah, it is,” Steve stammered, trying to follow the unexpected stream of conversation. “Got married here. In Vegas, I mean. Honeymooning here, too, I guess. I mean, we just—we haven’t really—we’re just staying here a bit. Him—uh, he did. The asking,” Steve clarified with a wince. “He, uh, I mean, it was spur of the moment, but, you just know, right? It wasn’t—the moment, I mean, the proposal. Uh, that wasn’t exactly planned, but, doesn’t mean it wasn’t thought through. He definitely thinks things through. People—I think they think he isn’t maybe the most responsible person. He’s sort of…well known. People like to judge, I suppose. Me, included, I’ll admit, before I got to know him. But, he’s actually—he tries really hard. Maybe harder than anyone I’ve met in a long time. To do the right thing.”

“So, you’re the right thing? Hmmmm…well, that’s good to hear,” the woman said. The Stairmaster beeped to a halt and lowered and slowed, until she was barely climbing, while Steve finished adding the weights he wanted. “You see a lot of people come out here and do something stupid without really thinking it through. I mean, you’re in Vegas, having a good time, people drink a bit too much, suddenly, you’re married to someone named Franco by a midget in a pirate costume, you know what I mean?”

“I guess,” Steve admitted with a slight frown. He was bad at lying on his best days, and trying to juggle the narrative Tony and he had agreed on in the face of questioning from a well-meaning stranger was somehow harder than dealing with everything the press had been shouting at them last night.

“Sounds like you have the real thing, though,” she told him, grabbing the towel that was draped over the handles of the machine and dabbing lightly at her face, which wasn’t even all that sweaty, really.

“I think so,” Steve replied. “I mean, I hope so. He’s—he’s a good man. People, maybe they don’t want to see that about him. If they did, it would say a lot more about them, trying to take him down, so they see what they want to see, and he lets them, for some reason. It isn’t who he is, though. Doesn’t take being married to the guy to know that, but he deserves someone who’ll see who he really is.”

“And who is he? Really?” she asked quietly, watching him with slanted eyes. The question hung in the air, but Steve couldn’t quite get himself to respond. What had he thought about Tony last night, still running on a high from the drinking and food and the feel of Tony wrapped around him? Interesting. Different. Larger than life. All those things and none of them seemed to fit the man he got to know last night.

“He’s—” Steve stammered, trying to find the right words and finding too many flashing across his mind. Tony was a lot of things, that much Steve could admit, but easy to put into words wasn’t one
of them. Everything his mind conjured felt a bit like settling for something that wasn’t really quite what he meant. He didn’t owe this woman anything, not really, but he wanted an answer for himself as much as for her, and because she was, maybe not now, but at some point, going to talk to people about meeting Tony Stark’s temporary husband, and he didn’t want to not have had an answer. That seemed unfair to his end of the bargain somehow, though why it mattered so much that it left him tongue-tied, he couldn’t quite say.

“He’s more,” Steve said finally. As soon as he said it, he realized that was what he’d been trying to wrap his mind around since last night. How long had it been since he’d met someone who was truly more than they appeared, and not less? So long, he’d apparently forgotten what it felt like to be pleasantly surprised. “More complicated. More determined. More intelligent. More caring. More thoughtful. More brave. More stubborn. More annoying. More everything. He’s more than what everyone thinks he is. More than what he thinks he is. Just…he’s more. That’s the best way I can put it.”

“Sounds like a lot to deal with,” she observed, one perfectly done eyebrow arched in question.

“He’s worth it,” Steve replied, putting the last weight on the machine and pointedly sitting down on the bench. The conversation had gone far afield from what he’d intended, though he supposed he should be better prepared to deal with this kind of thing. Tony would have given her a few choice one-liners and gotten out of it with practiced ease, but Steve couldn’t quite find the graceful exit that didn’t involve just flat-out running out of the gym, though that option was beginning to have some appeal.

“Well, good luck to you both,” she called out as she slung the towel around her neck. “Hope it all works out, planned or not.”

“Thanks,” Steve replied, watching in the gym’s mirror as the door snicked shut behind her.

He was oddly unsettled by the whole conversation, though, looking back, he didn’t think he’d flubbed it too much. If he was this bad with a stranger, he was really going to have to work at it to sell anything remotely like a lie to Bucky, though, which was something he’d been putting off dealing with and couldn’t really let it hang out there any longer or Buck was liable to do something stupid like demand that Steve have an actual conversation with him.

He finished the rest of his workout uninterrupted, then went back up to the suite, showered and changed before making his way out to the kitchen in search of food. Instead, he found Tony with a phone headset of some kind sitting at the dining table sipping a dark green smoothie that looked like the picture in the dictionary next to the word ‘revolting.’

“Uh-huh, well, if the Board wants to get outside consultants to take another look, that’s fine, but the numbers aren’t going to change,” Tony was saying while he rubbed at his forehead with one hand. “I know what the stock hit is going to look like. Hell, I still have a controlling interest, so who do you think is taking the biggest hit? I’ll take care of the ESOP loss,” Tony said, waving Steve over and indicating a seat across the table. “Food’s on its way,” he told Steve.

“I don’t know, I’ll write a check? I’m saying we’ll figure it out,” Tony continued, rolling his eyes. “No, no—oh, come on, venture capital, my ass. I’m not handing this over to a bunch of Silicon Valley wannabe entrepreneurs. Listen, the Board wants to sideline the whole thing into one of Tony’s pet projects, and that isn’t—no I’m saying, if we start small, this will never happen. Because, they’ll find a reason to screw me over on it. I know what they’re saying. I don’t give a fuck if they line up fifty shrinks, it isn’t going to—Fine,” Tony continued after a pause. “Just get back to me.”

Tony pulled the headset off and tossed it on the table, took a sip of his smoothie and grimaced.
“Are those leaves in there?” Steve asked, nodding at the glass as he sat down.

“Probably,” Tony replied. “Ah, finally,” Tony said as the elevator doors slid open and two attendants rolled a cart of dishes covered by silver domes into the room. Steve felt his stomach rumble as the food was put on the table between them. Tony’s hand darted out for the small cup of espresso as soon as it was poured, and he made a satisfied sound as he sipped it while signing for the room service bill.

“So, what are the plans for today?” Steve asked. He filled his plate with pancakes, bacon and eggs, and he was trying to figure out how to eat everything at once and ask if he could keep the tiny bottle of hot sauce for Natasha without coming off as a total dork, but not coming up with anything. She’d get a kick out of it, though, he thought, remembering her delight at the small bottle of maple syrup Clint had brought her one time.

“Your turn on the catwalk. Pepper thinks we should do some shopping,” Tony amended at Steve’s blank expression. “Press’ll eat it up. Maybe dinner and a show after, I don’t know. She’ll tell me where we’re supposed to be. In between all that fun, I thought we’d talk about how you were in Afghanistan with the convoy that got hit, apparently saved Rhodey and the two other guys who had the good fortune to choose the hum-drum-vee, and didn’t think to mention that. But, our schedule’s pretty flexible, so.”

“It…didn’t seem relevant,” Steve said with a shrug after a long moment of staring at his plate. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat under the weight of Tony’s scrutiny. Tony was watching him in that pin-the-bug-on-the-board way of his, and, yeah, Steve knew that wasn’t much of an answer. He wasn’t even sure himself why he hadn’t said anything, except that he wasn’t sure what there was to say about it.

“Not relevant? Give me the food back,” Tony said with a wave of his hand.

“What?” Steve said stupidly, fork halfway to his mouth as he blinked at Tony in confusion.

“Food. Back. No food for you,” Tony repeated, sitting up in his seat. “Can’t have my ball-and-chain choking on his own idiocy. Not relevant? Do you have any idea—” he bit off, shooting Steve a disgruntled look that actually bordered on downright pissed off. “Oh, for God’s sake, eat something. Quit with the kicked puppy look.”

“It wasn’t relevant to any of this. This--between us,” Steve argued, which, though true enough as far as it went, sounded like utter bullshit when he said it out loud. “I helped Colonel Rhodes and a couple of the guys who were injured. They’d already come and gone with you by the time I got out of the Hum-Vee. It was on its side, and the door was jammed shut. That’s it. End of story. It doesn’t—that has nothing to do with any of this.”

“God, you are truly awful at lying. Really, don’t even sing ‘Santa Clause is Coming to Town,’ you’ll never make it through the chorus,” Tony said after a moment’s pause. “Why do you even need seven thousand dollars—no, wait, thirty thousand. You have twenty-three in savings. What’s the thirty thousand for? You said you owed someone. Who? Not a bookie or loan shark, I’m pretty damn sure of that. So, who then? SI gave settlements—generous settlements—to the families of those who—” Tony stopped, cleaning his throat. His gaze dropped from Steve and darted to the window, where he stared at nothing. “To everyone who was hurt in—in what happened.”

“I wasn’t hurt,” Steve replied quietly. Tony was agitated, he could see that clearly enough, and it was a strange sensation to have it be for a shared reason, to know that the same faces were playing across Tony’s mind, except for Tony, they were smiling and laughing and on the cusp of what would come after, the part that Steve got to see when he closed his eyes. He honestly wasn’t sure
why he hadn’t told Tony from the beginning, but not talking about it was so rote by now that he had honestly thought he could get through this without it coming up, which seemed the definition of a pipe dream in retrospect.

“You’re kidding me with this, right?” Tony demanded, throwing his cloth napkin on the table in apparent disgust. “Not hurt, he says,” he muttered under his breath. “Why don’t you just ask me for the money?”

“Can I have seven thousand dollars?” Steve parroted, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms over his chest.

“Depends. Does it buy me a straight answer?” Tony retorted, eyebrows raised in challenge.

“Because you know all about straight answers, right? You dangle just enough of this plan of yours in front of me to where you know I’ll feel obligated to go along with it, but you’re not exactly telling me everything, either,” Steve snapped back.

“I think I’ve been more than upfront with you,” Tony argued.

“Really? If everything you say is true, why haven’t they tried again? These incredibly powerful, well-connected people, who had the capacity to orchestrate a kidnapping by the Ten Rings in the middle of nowhere Afghanistan have now just, what, turned the other cheek while you play your game of supersecret telephone and hope you catch someone with his hand in the cookie jar?” Steve snorted derisively. “You’ve got something they want. Something that, for some reason, they can’t just kill you to get. Share-chair’s all yours, Tony,” Steve said, sweeping a hand out in invitation.

“You’re need to know only,” Tony replied with a flat grimace.

“So are you,” Steve countered.

“Fine. God, you’re—quit being annoyingly observant and eat your pancakes, Gypsy Rose,” Tony flung out. “Why are you doing this? Don’t say the money. That’s bullshit. I think you’ll give you the money.”

“And I think you know I’ll do this thing with you,” Steve retorted. “Does it really matter why?” he asked with a muted sigh.

“Yeeeeesssss,” Tony ground out, drawing out the word in obvious frustration. He scrubbed his hands up and down his face, then through his hair, leaving it sticking out at odd angles. “Anyone ever tell you that you’re stubborn as a damn mule with an Atlas-complex? I’m so confused. Why are we arguing again?” Tony asked, smacking his hands down on the table so that the silverware clanked against the plates.

“Because neither of us like to be called on our own shit when it’s so much easier to call someone else on theirs,” Steve offered with a slight roll of his eyes. “I should’ve told you about Afghanistan,” he conceded after a beat. “At least so you weren’t blindsided by it. I’m sorry. That was selfish. I wasn’t thinking about how—how it might be for you to hear it when you weren’t expecting it.”

“It’s not a game of supersecret telephone. Okay, it is. Gross oversimplification, but anyway. The telephone message, in this case, is a bit of technology called an arc reactor,” Tony said, seemingly apropos of nothing, his mouth flattening into a thin line. It took a moment for Steve to catch up to what Tony was talking about, partly because he was just absurdly grateful they weren’t talking about Afghanistan anymore. “My dad had the original idea. Years ago. Power source. Very impractical at the time, though. I’ve…made some modifications. Think of it like…splitting the atom, let’s say.
Can do very good things with that kind of energy, and very, very bad things. Guess which side of the coin they want it to land on? I have the only functioning prototype in existence, and they want it, but it…it isn’t something they can just grab from the safe. At the same time, killing me would, let’s just say, definitely put that bit of technology way too close to public for their comfort,” Tony responded after a beat of hesitation.

“Okaaaaay,” Steve replied. “That doesn’t really tell me much.”

“Pot-kettle,” Tony shot back, then started digging into his breakfast like they hadn’t just been discussing his own possible murder. “We’ll get you some clothes at the Forum.”

The topic switch caught Steve off-guard, but he was starting to adjust to Tony’s rapid-fire conversation changes. “My friend brought some over,” Steve reminded him. “Last night.”

“Yeah, no. Forget assassins, the plaid would kill me. Slowly, which is just cruel,” Tony smirked, while Steve looked down at his—okay, fine—plaid shirt. “I’m in pain, right now. It physically hurts. You’re married to me, remember? Got to look the part.”

“Because you’re all about style,” Steve huffed out. “Racecartie,” he coughed into his hand.

“That was designer,” Tony argued, grinning back at him. “Point being, people will buy me marrying a stripper on a drunken whim. That’s half expected, truth be told. People will not buy me marrying—God, you look like Andy Griffith. Or Mr. Rogers. Do you have a cardigan? You do, don’t you? You’re going to ‘aw-shucks’ and ‘swell’ me any minute now. I can feel it. I need more coffee. I can’t handle this without caffeine.”

“It gets chilly at night,” Steve replied, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

Tony snorted out a huff of a laugh. “You should be in Gucci or Prada or nothing at all,” Tony declared, then went still, catching himself. “Sorry,” he said quickly, mouth twisting into an apologetic grimace. “That was--I didn’t mean—I don’t know what I meant. You know what? Ignore me.”

“It’s okay, Tony,” Steve assured him, though Tony’s obvious and somewhat newly discovered discomfort with Steve’s occupation was strangely endearing. “So, shopping and date night, huh? You ask a lot, but I’ll try to persevere. I do need to call my friend and let him know I haven’t gone insane or been kidnapped or something. He worries. Thinks I get myself into trouble. Can you imagine?” Steve smirked in response to Tony’s short bark of laughter.

“Shockingly poor judge of character, obviously,” Tony acknowledged with a nod. “He, who?”


“He’s not on the lease,” Tony replied, then smoothed a hand over his mouth like he wanted to take the words back.

“Is that a problem?” Steve asked carefully, feeling his back stiffen. He had no doubt that Tony and his people had run a background check, though he hadn’t really been prepared for quite the level of information Tony seemed to have about him. This, Afghanistan, the savings account, who knew what else? He understood Tony’s lack of trust on one level, but couldn’t help the fissure of unease at the feeling that his life was being peeled away, layer by layer. He’d signed up for a lot, getting involved with this thing with Tony, but not for that. Or, he hadn’t known he had, though it seemed that it tended towards the latter, given the amount of information Tony seemed to have already dug up on him.
“No. No,” Tony repeated. “Just an observation. I just…can’t risk any loose ends. Loose ends like upset boyfriends, who show up and make a scene in front of the shutterflies still camped out in the lobby pretending to be tourists.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Steve replied.

“No big. Just, you know. Had to ask,” Tony said, dipping his head back down to where he was pawing at his eggs with the tines of his fork.

“Then ask,” Steve retorted, one hand fisting around the cloth napkin while he waited Tony out.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Tony finally muttered. “It isn’t a big deal, if you do. We just need to know.” He picked up his phone and started clicking on unread messages with sudden interest, which Steve knew was crap because he only ever answered messages from Ms. Potts.

“No. Do you?” Steve drawled.

“I’m married,” Tony answered with an aghast smirk, giving him a doe-eyed, innocent look that was ninety-percent challenge, if Steve was a numbers man. Steve rolled his eyes and glanced away, mainly so he wouldn’t give in to the smile that was trying to form.

“You’re an ass,” Steve replied good-naturedly.

“What about my ass? Tell me more,” Tony jibed, craning his neck to the side to peer over his shoulder with a speculative glance. The elevator doors dinged open across the foyer and Ms. Potts walked in, phone to her ear. “Pepper, Steve’s talking about my ass.”

“Steve, don’t encourage him,” Ms. Potts ordered, one hand over the phone’s speaker. She held a finger up in the air to shush whatever Tony was going to say to that and went back to her phone conversation. Tony shot Steve a shit-eating grin and went back to pushing his food around on his plate.

“Wait, who said what? No, no, no, that—no. We have not released an official statement. You’ll get it at the same time everyone else does, Diane. I don’t know where that’s coming from. I mean, I don’t disagree—Mr. Stark is, as you know, very concerned with—yes. Yes, he is. I’m not confirming or denying anything right now. Well—“ Ms. Potts broke off, hands going to her hips as she listened to whatever the other person was saying. “Well, yes. I would—in theory, I would agree with those statements, of course, but I can’t—at this time, I can’t give you anything more definitive than that. Okay. Fine. You’ll be the first call, I promise,” she finished, then looked up at the table, gaze darting between Steve and Tony.

“Uh-oh,” Tony observed mildly with absolutely zero concern evident.

“Steve,” Ms. Potts began, taking a deep breath.

“Oh, thank God, it’s you,” Tony beamed and went back to not eating his eggs and toast.

“Did you talk to someone from Vanity Fair about Tony and your marriage?” Ms. Potts asked.

“I—no?” Steve replied with a frown.

“It’s okay, if you did. Actually, it’s not bad. At all, really. The quotes they have. It’s just that we like to control the message. Tony, you should put him in charge of all your press,” Ms. Potts admonished lightly as she sank down on the sofa. “Christine Everhart has what she’s calling an exclusive statement from your new husband here.”
“Who? I haven’t—“ Steve started as a pit of realization opened where his stomach used to be. “Oh.” The woman in the gym. The friendly, highly-inquisitive woman in the gym.

“Oh? Steve, did you take candy from strangers again? We’ve talked about this,” Tony said archly, picking up his tablet and typing something into the search bar, though there was no real censure in his voice. If anything, Tony sounded rather gleeful about the whole thing, if only because it was in Steve’s lap and not his own.

“I’m sorry. I thought—she was in the gym this morning. Working out. Like a guest here. I didn’t think…” Steve stammered, feeling humiliation wash over him. He’d known something was off about the whole encounter, but had risen to the bait she’d dangled in front of him without even looking back. He should have known better, but apparently, his own better instincts took a nose dive when someone, what? Gave him a chance to play his part and sing Tony’s praises like a lovesick, backwater idiot who couldn’t spot a set-up when it didn’t even make it to the hill portion of the workout routine, apparently.

“Huh,” Tony grunted after a moment of perusing whatever it was showing up on his tablet. He looked up at Steve for a brief flash of a moment, something shifting across his face that looked a lot like surprise before he masked it behind a grin. “He sounds appropriately twitterpated for a newlywed. That’s what he’s supposed to do. What’s the problem?”

“It isn’t a problem with what he said. That was good, Steve. A little off script, but its fine. Everhart has had her people nosing around local chapels, apparently, so maybe this will put her off for a bit,” Ms. Potts replied. “But, now that we’re talking to the press, albeit by accident, every other news outlet is breathing down my neck. I think we’re going to have to do a press conference. Tony, I know you hate them, but it would throw them a bone to talk about for a few days. Maybe buy enough goodwill to get us through this if you play the happy couple and give them some soundbites. People magazine is running you two on the cover. Would be nice to at least give them a half-decent shot that isn’t you exiting a police station.”

“People magazine?” Steve choked out. For some reason, even though he’d known, in theory, what becoming involved with Tony Stark meant, and the interest that would undoubtedly arise from the press, magazine covers hadn’t really entered into the equation.

“Hey, look at that. First cover for doing something respectable,” Tony pointed out, holding his hands up in the air.

“There was the one with you and that actor we had emcee the last Expo back in—what—‘93?” Ms. Potts said, letting her head rest against the curve of the back of the sofa.

“I don’t think there was anything respectable about him, but okay,” Tony quipped with a shrug. “So, set up a press conference. You give me talking points. I’ll actually stick to them. Steve will stand there looking pretty. It’ll be great.”

“I don’t like this. I still don’t know what they have. I mean, the stripper thing, sure, but everyone loves a Cinderella story. Still. One misstep and the police are going to not just have the right to interrogate Steve, but probably charge you both with obstruction. Steve—no offense—but, we still don’t know a lot about you. I know you went through Matt’s questions, but I’d like to get a bio from you that I can work up and give to the press. Something a bit more colorful than your social security number,” Ms. Potts requested. “Maybe some details from your childhood or your military service? Everyone likes a veteran.”

“Leave that out of it,” Tony spoke up before Steve could say anything.
“Tony—” Ms. Potts objected.

“Leave it, Pep,” Tony repeated. “We’re not using that.”

Steve figured he probably should speak up, tell them it was okay, he didn’t mind, but he couldn’t quite get the words to work themselves out of where they were stalled in the middle of his chest, so he kept quiet.

“Alright, if you say so,” Ms. Potts said with a slight frown. “I’ll handle the details and let you know. Steve, be thinking about what we can tell them about you. You two—shopping. Go. Be seen. Be obnoxiously happy. And for God’s sake, look at rings.”

“I read that I apparently dropped the ball on that one,” Tony said, watching Steve across the table with an inscrutable expression. Steve looked down and away, suddenly embarrassed, not just that he’d screwed up with the reporter again, but that Tony had gotten to read what he’d said, which didn’t make much sense, he knew. Of course, Tony was going to read whatever the press put out there about them. At least for the next few days, they had to be careful. He knew that. And, he’d already managed to nearly mess things up twice. Tony probably thought he was an idiot, which was fair enough, considering, though the thought sent a pang of hurt through his stomach. Even Ms. Potts said he hadn’t done much damage, other than turn the press from rabid dogs into rabid, competitive dogs, who didn’t like a bone being thrown to one of their own. He was saying what he was supposed to say, after all. He’d just have to do a better job keeping his mouth shut. He sighed, imagining Bucky’s reaction to his chances of accomplishing that particular goal.

“I’ll figure out something for dinner and text Happy,” Ms. Potts continued as if Tony hadn’t spoken. “I have a pod reserved on the High Roller for you tonight. Figured that was Vegas-y enough for your “spur of the moment” wedding and honeymoon. I’ve already leaked it to the usual press, so expect a crowd.”

“Literal high performance art,” Tony announced. “Sounds fun,” he said, sounding decidedly uninterested, as he gave Ms. Potts a long look and something passed between them that Steve couldn’t quite read.

“I, ah, I need to call my friend. Bucky,” Steve said into the silence. “I’ll just…” he pointed, indicating the balcony. Tony nodded and took a sip of his shake, then shot a glare at Ms. Potts.

“Don’t start. It’s good for you,” Ms. Potts said without looking up, fingers flying over her phone screen.

Steve shut the balcony door on whatever Tony was going to say in response and pulled out his phone. He stared at it for a long moment, then looked down over the Strip where the morning sun was already making it spark and flash with a trying-too-hard sort of brightness. He hit the contact button for Bucky and waited out the rings. It went straight to voicemail, which helpfully told him it was full before clicking off. Figures, Steve thought.

He tried Natasha’s number next, and got her voicemail, too, but this one let him leave a message. He really didn’t have much to say, but thanked her for bringing his bag by and heard himself promising her a tiny bottle of hot sauce without really meaning to. He tucked the phone back into his back pocket and braced his hands against the balcony railing, watching one of the big, red, open-top tourist buses make a stop not too far away. When they first got out here, he’d taken Bucky on one of those tours, hopping on and off at different points of interest, trying to get a feel for a city so very different than they one they’d left.

They’d been so full of hope, then. Or, he had. He wasn’t sure about Bucky, or if Buck had just
gone along with him on this desperate, cross-country jaunt for lack of anything else to do, or simply out of habit at this point. He’d just...figured things would work out. They’d get the appeal paperwork done with the VA. Explain things to the nice man behind the desk. People would listen. It all seemed stupidly optimistic and naïve at this point, but it had taken months to realize that they’d passed as good as it was going to get a long time ago.

Steve tugged his phone out again and scrolled through his calls until he came to the number he wanted. He punched the call button and waited until the receptionist answered.

“Romotive Group, to whom may I direct your call?” the tinny voice asked on the first ring.

“Carl Estes, please,” Steve replied.

“May I ask who is calling?” the receptionist said.

“Steve Rogers,” Steve answered.

“One moment,” the voice said, and music clicked on in Steve’s ear while he waited. He was fairly certain she had just put him on hold and wasn’t actually checking with anyone at this point. He figured he’d called enough times, they probably had his number memorized.

“Mr. Estes is not available at the moment,” she announced. Of course, Steve had known that would be the response before he called. Estes had been unable to take his calls for a long time. “May I take a message?” the receptionist asked, sounding decidedly uninterested in Steve’s response.

“Please. Ah, tell him that Steve Rogers called. He’ll know what it’s about. Tell him I have the money. If he can get back with me on when it could be ready, I’d appreciate that,” Steve replied, giving her his phone number again for the hell of it.

“I’ll give him the message, Mr. Rogers,” the receptionist replied wearily.

“Thank you,” Steve said, but the line had already gone dead. He should feel a sense of accomplishment or relief, he supposed, but it was hard to trust the universe enough to let himself. Maybe he should have waited until he actually had the rest of the money from Tony. Probably would have been the smart thing to do, but he’d been waiting to make that call for months, since Estes had shown him the door for the last time with a trespassing threat following Steve out.

He tried Bucky’s number one more time, with exactly the same result, so chalked it up to temporary insanity. Behind him, he heard the balcony doors open.

“Happy’s got the car downstairs when we’re ready,” Tony announced as he stepped out onto the balcony and came to stand beside Steve. “Everything ok with your friend?”

“Couldn’t get a hold of him, but yeah. It will be, anyway,” Steve responded. “Should I change before we go?”

“Nah. I’ll probably get some kind of service badge from helping you cross the street,” Tony chided, nudging an elbow into Steve’s side.

“Thanks,” Steve said dryly. Making it to Tony’s car was not quite the medieval gauntlet of the prior night, though Steve did notice a couple of brightly dressed “tourists” surreptitiously snapping photos as they made their way through the hotel lobby and out to where Happy had the car humming.

“Forum shops, Hap,” Tony called out when they slid inside the back seat of the car. Tony pecked out various things on his tablet on the short ride over, not exactly ignoring Steve, but clearly, his
mind was occupied elsewhere. Steve wondered if it was about what he’d overheard Tony discussing on the phone earlier, but didn’t ask. It wasn’t really his business. “Ready to get your Eliza Doolittle on?”

“The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain,” Steve intoned evenly. Tony snorted in surprise, then laughed out loud, shaking his head back and forth a bit.

“Happy, my husband is a sarcastic little shit,” Tony called out.

“Yes, Boss,” the driver responded, as if this was the normal course of conversation. “Takes one to know one, is my experience, Boss.”

“You’re fired. He’s fired,” Tony said, turning to Steve, mouth pursed and eyes sharp with glee. “No respect, I tell you. Let’s go,” Tony urged as Hogan got out to open the door. Steve crawled out after Tony, grabbed the hand that Tony extended and followed him inside the Forum Shops at Caesar’s Palace. Meant to be a study in opulence, they were, in a word, gaudy as hell, Steve thought, with its columns and Romanesque statutes, even a replica of the Trevi fountain. Instead of elegant and refined, the interior looked like the Olive Garden threw up on it, with nearly every surface that would stand still detailed with some color or edifice.

People called out Tony’s name like they knew him as he and Steve passed through the front entrance, and, Steve supposed, in some way, they probably thought they did. Tony either ignored them or gave a nod and kept going, dragging Steve along in his wake. He seemed to consciously make himself slow as they walked inside, cleaving to Steve’s side so closely that Steve could feel the brush of Tony’s body moving in time next to him. Probably ready to throw himself bodily in front of anyone Steve tried to talk to, Steve thought, giving Tony a sideways look.

“So, babe, I’m thinking Tiffany’s. I know, I know, probably too fussy, but we should look,” Tony was saying, loud enough that passers-by could hear if they wanted, which, Steve noticed, it seemed they did, since everyone was paying attention to what Tony was doing and trying to aim their cell phone cameras at the same time. “Gucci first, though. This? Is cruel and unusual and makes the baby Versace cry,” Tony said lightly, tugging at the sleeve of Steve’s plaid shirt.

Ms. Potts had apparently called ahead to warn the store, which turned out to be a good thing, as a flood of people suddenly descended in desperate need of picking up and putting down all the stuff they couldn’t afford. The salespeople helpfully ushered them out and closed the glass doors across the front of the store, giving Steve and Tony the run of the place.

Steve wasn’t quite sure he could explain quite what happened when Tony waltzed into the Gucci store, except that the siren song of a black American Express card must be audible only to those who work on commission. A good seven salespeople appeared out of the ether where beautiful salespeople were apparently stored until needed, and before he knew it, someone he felt oddly certain was named Laken--spelled with a ‘qu’--he was promptly informed as if that mattered somehow, was shoving him into a dressing room bigger than his own bedroom with a rack of clothes to try on.

He turned around and nearly bumped into Tony, who was standing next to the dressing room’s door while one of the blondes, whom Steve had decided to call Paul and Not-Paul, held out ties, belts and, well, other things for Tony’s inspection. Tony was looking back and forth between Steve and the group of people huddled outside the store’s doors with the phones raised, trying to play it all off as being overly-interested in what Not-Paul was offering.

“Which one should I try first? You like the red or the blue?” Steve asked with a slight jerk of his head towards the ties dangling from…Not-Paul’s…yep, definitely Not-Paul’s hands. Tony blinked
at him, then seemed to snap out of his momentary stupor, took two of the ties and sauntered in the
dressing room. He walked over to Steve and held up first the red, then the blue tie to Steve’s neck.

“Blue, I think. Matches his eyes,” Tony said over his shoulder where Not-Paul waited.

“Of course, Mr. Stark,” Not-Paul said, quickly snatching the red tie away like it’s feelings had been
hurt. Apparently, Steve’s opinion on the matter didn’t rate. “The new collection has some other
blues that would really pop with his coloring.” Tony muttered something that Not-Paul took for
assent to charge, Steve assumed, because he darted so fast, Steve was surprised there wasn’t a puff of
smoke where he’d been standing. Tony walked back over and pulled the dressing room door closed,
paused for a moment, then turned back around to Steve.

“So,” Tony began, sounding almost hesitant.

Steve shrugged, then toed one shoe off, then the other, then bent to pull his socks off. It wasn’t like
Tony hadn’t seen him, after all. His hands went to the buttons of his shirt, making short work of
them and shrugging it off. Tony took a seat in one of the ornate armchairs and started placidly
picking at the corner of his suit jacket, eyes darting around the room when Steve looked up, so he
unbuckled his belt and slid it out of the belt loops, dropping it on top of his shirt on the round, fringed
ottoman that sat in the center of the room.

It wasn’t a big deal, of course. One more part of the act they were putting on for the rest of the
world. Not to mention, Steve had been the one to invite him in, and Tony, obviously, knew what
Steve did for a living, Steve reasoned. This wasn’t any different from what he’d done a hundred
times or so now. Not really, anyway. He undid the button of his pants and pulled the zipper down,
pushing them down past his hips and kicking them to one side. Behind him, he heard an aborted
huff of laughter from Tony at what Steve knew was the sight of his plaid boxers, but he didn’t turn
around, just reached for one of the shirts hanging up nearby and pulled it off the hanger too quickly,
making the hanger sway and rattle against the wall.

It wasn’t any different.

It wasn’t.

It was the quiet, Steve thought, as the bang from the dancing hanger seemed to echo in the room.
That was different, he admitted. The bright and the quiet. No music, no stage lighting, no costume.
He was suddenly very, very conscious of his movements, his body, even his breathing, in ways he
hadn’t been since those first few times he stepped onstage. Except that it felt more intimate for some
reason, taking his clothes off here. For Tony, his mind whispered, making his heartbeat skip, jittery
and flashes of tightness coiling and unfurling around his chest, making it hard to get quite the right
amount of air.

Just for Tony.

It shouldn’t matter. One person or an audience, it was all the same, when you got down to it. They
all wanted the same things from each other. It wasn’t like he wasn’t aware of the interest in his
body. Given what he currently did for a living, it would be silly not to acknowledge what it was.
They paid to see his body and to have him be a blank slate for whatever it was that got them off, and
he’d long ago slipped into giving them what they wanted so well that he wasn’t even sure anymore
what there was of him left. But now, here, there was no faceless crowd shouting to see more, but
Tony, who was blindingly smart, but listened anyway, who teased and made Steve laugh and acted
like that had been an actual goal, who wouldn’t let what happened in Afghanistan be used, even to
his own advantage. Tony, who was doing his best to avert his eyes and give Steve a shred of
privacy, even though there wasn’t any reason to, though that thought made the effort mean that much
Steve could hear his heart thudding against his chest, could feel the blood pounding through his temples, something edging on embarrassment, but not quite that, not really, burning its way through his veins and pooling in his stomach. He was hyperaware of the way his breathing seemed to require concentration, the swish of fabric, the way his teeth were too tightly clenched together, making his jaw tight, the stretch of skin as he pulled the shirt around his shoulders, the angle he was presenting when he bent to put on the slacks. He was hurrying more than he meant to, fingers fumbling with the buttons on the shirt until he finally got them done.

Steve would have sworn he felt the moment that Tony’s gaze finally finished its sweep of the room and flicked over to settle on him, like a pressure across his skin, heating it, making his heart thump loudly enough he could hear it pulsing through his ears. Steve caught a glimpse of himself in the three-way mirror, and saw the reflection of Tony’s eyes drift to catch Steve’s before his gaze snapped away, suddenly preoccupied with anything that wasn’t Steve.

“So,” Steve started, then swallowed past the dryness in his throat. “What do you think?” he asked, voice sounding oddly searching as he pivoted around to show the outfit to Tony. “It isn’t plaid.”

Tony stared at him for a long, silent moment, one finger tracing up and down the arm of the chair as he looked Steve up and down, slowly, almost nonchalantly, but his mouth was slightly parted and his eyes were dark and wide, roving over Steve without any pretense now that he apparently deemed himself to have permission, almost to an exaggerated effect. It should feel ridiculous, standing here, letting Tony inspect him like his own personal Ken doll he’d dressed up. There was a layer of embarrassment that slowly built as he stood there for what seemed like an inordinate amount of time, but there was something else, too, a flare of heat that was almost pleasure, the same sense of being seen that he’d felt before, like he was suddenly standing in three dimensions when everything had been flat for so long.

“You’ll do,” Tony said finally, voice rough and thick, and clearly not as unaffected as he would like to seem, which did something to Steve’s stomach that made it flutter and roil. “Just, you know. It’s all good. Get what you want.” Tony blurted out, standing up from his seat, one hand going to the center of his chest in what Steve realized was something of a habit. “I’ll just—I’ll be outside. If you need anything, ask. I’m sure any one of the Twelve Dancing Princesses out there can get you anything you need.” He was out the dressing room door before Steve could formulate much of a response, so he ended up trying on a few other items before just grabbing some others in the same size and heading out.

Tony was waiting for him when he walked out, tapping away at the ubiquitous phone again, an earpiece in his ear. He popped it out and walked over to stand in front of Steve as the clothing was whisked out of Steve’s hands to be put into boxes and garment bags. Steve had changed back into the first outfit, the one he’d shown Tony, and Not-Paul was using a brush of some kind to smooth the wrinkles out of the shirt until Tony waved him away with a slightly annoyed grimace that slipped off his face as soon as he glanced up at Steve. Their purchases would somehow magically appear back at the hotel, so they left the store empty-handed for all that Tony’s black American Express got quite the workout. They waded through the crowd that had gathered outside, whoops and catcalls following them, though most seemed genuinely good-natured.

“You’re adoring public,” Tony said with a nod when they were free of the mass of people.

“Don’t think it’s me they’re interested in,” Steve countered with a crooked smile as they walked side by side past the shop windows.

“No. You wouldn’t,” Tony replied, giving Steve a side-eyed, uncertain look that he quickly shook
“So, rings.”

“We’re not—I mean—“ Steve stammered.

“We’ll go look,” Tony said, answering the question Steve couldn’t ask in public. “Don’t want to impulse buy something this important. Should be a statement piece. Something classy and tasteful that can stand the test of time. But, with far more me.”

“Why am I picturing something Inspector Gadget-y?” Steve replied dryly. “Maybe with one of those buzzer things attached to it?”

“Sounds about right,” Tony agreed with a sharp bark of surprised laughter. They spent the next half hour trying on rings at Tiffany’s, before assuring the salesman that they would think on it and decide. Steve figured they could get some decent costume jewelry if needed. No reason to spend that kind of money on something neither of them would use again. At least, with the clothes, he could somewhat justify the expense if he never, ever looked at the receipt.

“Pepper has us reservations at Robuchon’s for dinner tonight,” Tony told him, clicking his phone off and pocketing it as they walked out of Tiffany’s. “We have a few hours to kill though. Want to engage in a little more consumerism?”

“Actually,” Steve said, taking Tony’s hand and pulling it up to his mouth, placing a light kiss on the underside of his wrist, where the skin was smooth and he could feel the pulse beat against his lips. By the slight intake of air, the gesture startled Tony, though it took a moment for Steve to realize why. Though he’d certainly been doing his part, it was generally Tony who waited for Steve’s cue to touch him, at least after that first aborted attempt out on the balcony. Even when he’d been having a panic attack in the middle of the restaurant, he’d waited for Steve’s permission.

Except for the thing with Hammer last night, Steve amended, which had been…he didn’t know what that had been. A show, sure. But, it had felt like something more than just that, though the thought floated through his mind and away before he could really settle on what, exactly, it might have been. He thought back to the Gucci store and Tony shooing Not-Paul off. He notices, Steve thought again. Even the little things, the ridiculous things that Steve knew he needed to get over. He notices and makes it matter, which was perhaps Tony’s most remarkable trait, even if he didn’t seem to take the same care with himself.

“Actually,” Steve started again, clearing his throat around the sudden lump there. “I was thinking we try something a little different. We have the High Roller thing tonight after dinner,” he reminded Tony, thinking of the huge observational wheel that dominated part of the Vegas skyline. “Should be public enough for Ms. Potts. Maybe something a little more low-key than playing performing monkeys for the zoo visitors,” he suggested, recalling the crowd of people smashed against the glass doors back at the store.

“What did you have in mind?” Tony asked.

“You’ll see,” Steve replied with a grin.

“Go off the very responsible and completely vetted schedule Pepper has so carefully laid out for us? Sounds not at all advisable,” Tony pointed out, clucking his tongue and shaking his head.

“Naturally, I’m in. But, I will be blaming you. Feels only fair to tell you up front.”

“I can take it,” Steve said with a lopsided smile.

“Famous last words,” Tony mumbled. “Lead on, my incredibly well-dressed sacrificial lamb.”
took them thirty minutes to walk there, eschewing Happy’s offer to drive, which gave Steve the chance to play tour guide for a bit. He tried to remember as much Vegas lore as he could from their tour bus ride around the city and his one trip to the mob museum, which wasn’t much, but Tony seemed entertained at least, though he was surprisingly quiet during their stroll down the Strip.

A few dozen surprised stares and the now-typical click of camera phones followed them, but otherwise, they made it to their destination across from the Hard Rock Casino without anyone doing more than asking for Tony’s picture, which he declined with a shake of his head and politely pointed, “On a date.”

“So, here it is,” Steve said, biting his lip to keep the smile off his face. “Only one in the world. And it’s right here in Vegas. Couldn’t let you miss out.”

“This is a thing. This is a real thing, and I’m standing here,” Tony stated flatly, looking up in disbelief at the sight of the larger-than-life reliefs of the members of KISS atop a wrecking ball that marked the entrance to the KISS Monster mini golf. “Is this the Hellmouth? You’re not serious? No way. I’m not doing this. My reputation would never recover.”

“If you get a hole in one down Gene Simmons tongue, you get a free slushie from the snack bar,” Steve deadpanned, watching Tony’s face twitch with the effort not to smile at the sheer insanity of the whole thing. “My friend Bucky worked here for a bit when we first got to Vegas,” Steve told him. “It’s—I know it’s insane. It’s Vegas, so. That...just sort of comes with the territory. Look, the way I see it, no one will expect us here. No press. No one who comes here is going to much care about us. We can just...relax for a bit. We’ll do the public thing tonight.”

“The public thing? Bet that won’t be as much fun as it sounds,” Tony muttered under his breath. “Sure. Fine. Why not? There isn’t enough cognitive dissonance in my life. Hell, nothing says relaxing and low-key like day-glow painted, KISS-themed mini-golf,” Tony snarked. He gave Steve a long, considering look, then threw his hands in the air in apparent defeat. “But, if we’re doing this, we’re making it interesting.”


“Winner of each hole gets one question. Loser has to answer. No half-assed, ‘I wasn’t hurt’ crap, either,” Tony challenged.

“You sure you want to play for those kinds of stakes?” Steve questioned evenly. He knew enough about Tony to realize that the man hated not knowing things, probably justifiably so at this point, but he wondered how much of it was just Tony’s personality that seemed unable to do anything other than try to accumulate facts about the people in his life the way a squirrel hoards nuts. Tony thrived on control, wanted to fix, to solve, to improve things, that much was clear enough. And that? That required knowing as much as you could. Decisions in an information vacuum would probably send him into cardiac arrest, Steve thought ruefully. Or cause him to do more damage than good.

“Might be the only way I get something other than name, rank and serial number out of you,” Tony said. “Besides. Golf is basically just physics. Let’s just say, I like my chances.”

“Fine by me,” Steve responded, shrugging. He waited next to the first marker while Tony got their tickets and clubs, plus two neon golf balls, one bright yellow and one blue.

“That was a fluke,” Tony declared after Steve won the first hole by two shots, though he gave Steve a disgruntled look that verged on a pout, which Steve definitely did not find adorable at all.
“We don’t have to do this,” Steve offered. “We could just play.”

“Seventeen more holes of information are coming my way,” Tony proclaimed, balancing his hands on the top of his club like a cane. “Bring it on.”

“Why don’t you wear the race car tie if you like it?” Steve asked.

Tony stared at him, mouth opening and closing. “What the fuck is it with you and the damn tie?” he demanded.

“Ah, judge? We’re going to need a ruling,” Steve said with a slight pause. “Judge says not an answer. Tough call,” he finished with a faux-sad shake of his head.

“Fine. The tie. I don’t wear it—because—because I’m supposed to—to look a certain way,” Tony sputtered. “I represent the company, and we don’t—Starks, we don’t—it wouldn’t be something I’d wear out, okay? It’s just a stupid tie.”

“But, you like the tie. You hate all the business stuff. I mean, you care about it, because they’re your employees. I get that. The ESOP thing? That’s their retirement plan, right? You said you’d just write a check for the stock hit they’re going to take. But, you don’t like the day to day stuff. You want to do something with the company that’s going to be painful, but it’s what you want to do, even if it hurts. What you think is the right thing to do,” Steve corrected. “But, you circle around it. You don’t actually do it.”

“It’s a fucking tie, not a metaphor! Plus, that’s…not a question. And you already had your one,” Tony said, giving Steve an appraising look, squinting at him, mouth flattened into a thin line. “You got all that from part of one phone call, but can’t figure out that the perfectly coiffed and incredibly friendly blonde working out at fuck-all o’clock is a reporter fishing for info?”

“You can save that question for when you win a hole,” Steve replied mildly.

Which, as it turned out, was hole fifteen, when one of the bachelorette party members in the group behind them hit a stray ball and knocked Steve’s ball out of the area of play and towards a row of claw machines promising a winner every time. They’d run through Tony’s favorite movie—Raiders of the Lost Ark—favorite kind of food—New York pizza—his best childhood memory, an afternoon of building a pinewood derby car with his butler, which had taken far longer to answer than Steve would have anticipated, and ended on his favorite way to spend his downtime on hole fourteen, when Steve figured Tony was one hole away from stomping his feet in annoyance, but he’d started the whole challenge thing, so Steve wasn’t going to feel guilty about using it to his advantage.

“Do you have to ask?” Tony smirked, before launching into a discourse about his workshop and robots he’d named and seemed to constantly be on the verge of donating to a city college, though Steve could see the obvious fondness when he talked about them.

Hole fifteen was Steve’s downfall, which Tony handled with gentlemanly grace. Except, not.

“Yes!” Tony shouted, pumping a fist into the air in triumph and dancing in a circle around his golf club. “My march to victory begins. How do you know Justin Hammer?”

The unexpectedness of the question sent a jolt of shock through Steve. He stood there, in front of a large, black platform boot, with silver stars glowing up the sides, and tried to find some kind of answer that he wanted to give.

“He comes to the club sometimes,” Steve said finally, gaze darting down and away as he shifted back and forth on his feet, nudging the head of the club at one of his new shoes. He could see the
mirrors of the disco ball overhead reflected in the tops of them, and for a moment, he just stared at that, because it was something to look at.

“Judge? Judge says bullshit,” Tony replied smoothly. “Take your time. I think Bachelorette Number 3 is probably going to hurl her tiara at you if we don’t hurry, but I got all night.”

Steve sucked in a deep gulp of air, trying to force the sudden rigidity out of his body, like he was stuck in place, and wasn’t that just the thing? He wondered how much Tony was going to push this. He couldn’t really force Steve to answer, but if he didn’t answer, that was probably more of an admission than he wanted to give.

“I did an after-hours thing for him a while back. Like—uh, like—for you,” Steve stammered, because the words didn’t seem to want to cooperate. “During some weapons industry convention they were having here. We had a…misunderstanding about the nature of the services I would be providing. I handled it,” Steve stated in what he hoped was an even, unremarkable tone.

“Let me guess. You ‘weren’t hurt,’” Tony said quietly. He was watching Steve closely, too closely, and it was almost too much for a flicker of a moment, but there wasn’t really anything to tell more than that, so didn’t add anything, just looked back down at the stars reflecting on the tops of his shoes and nudged at the toe with the tip of his golf club. A shriek of laughter followed by loud whoops from the bachelorette group punctuated the heavy silence that hung between them.

“No,” Steve managed to husk out after a long moment. He absently nudged Tony’s neon golf ball towards the hole with the tip of his golf club.

“Don’t. Just don’t,” Tony snapped in a hard, brusque tone. He brushed past Steve and bent to pick up his golf ball, before turning back and giving Steve a long, measuring look. “I don’t like it when people touch my stuff.”

Chapter End Notes

The KISS Monster Mini-Golf is totally a real thing. You can Google it. It is awesome.

I am self-aware enough to know that I basically write the same story over and over.

*shrugs* Hi, my name is sabrecmc, and I love tropes. Hi, sabrecmc!

Swear to God, Bucky is coming up soon.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Okay, so, wow. It has been a long time for this fic. To those who have been patiently waiting, thank you so very, very much. I was writing Celestial Navigation and Catching Lightning in a Bottle along with this one, and three WiPs at once was just too much for me. This one drew the short straw. But, I never wanted to abandon it. I'm going to try to work on it much more steadily while I also work on The Prize.

As always, I think you for reading, commenting and hitting the kudos button. You guys make it all worth it.

Getting your ass kicked at KISS mini-golf was quite the humbling experience, Tony decided as he waited for Steve to collect his trophy slushie for scoring a hole-in-one down Gene Simmons’ tongue. Words that Tony wanted to never, ever think again.

“Sure you don’t want one?” Steve called out over the buzzes, beeps and some kind of throwback, eighties-era synthesizer music from the arcade machines.

“I’ll pass,” Tony replied, flattening his mouth and trying to frown, though it wouldn’t quite hold. Steve was entirely too excited about his stupid free slushie. Should’ve taken him to a 7/11 instead of Gucci, Tony thought, shaking his head. “Ready to head back?” Tony asked as Steve approached, slushie in hand. “I can call Happy. Have him pick us up. Or, I guess, we could walk a bit while you regret your life choices,” Tony offered with a nod at the drink. “Would serve you right, since I’m pretty sure this whole thing had ‘set up’ written all over it.”

“I prefer to think of it as a well-planned recon op,” Steve countered, then ducked his head and sipped at his—God, it was actually blue, Tony noticed with a shudder--drink. “Bucky—my roommate? He’d let me play for free when he worked the counter here,” Steve admitted, giving Tony a sheepish look from under his ridiculously long lashes. “One of his first gigs when we got to Vegas.”

“Entrapment. Rigging. Trickery. Subterfuge. Where is the Vegas Gaming Commission when you need them? You set me up,” Tony accused, biting the corner edge of his lip and nodding.

“Maybe a little bit,” Steve said, making it sound like a question. “Sorry,” he said, then smiled, a ridiculously huge, blue-tinged lip, honest-to-God grin. The kind Tony hadn’t really seen on Steve before, just these little glimpses of it almost there, but here it was, full-force. The effect of it was doing something fluttery to Tony’s stomach and making an odd, pleasant warmth fill his chest. Tony blinked, momentarily dazed. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

He looks...happy, Tony realized, the thought settling in Tony’s mind with no small amount of satisfaction. Happy, and practically radiating a carefree brightness the sloughed all the hard edges away, and God, there were so many of those, weren’t there? Made all the more apparent when they were temporarily brushed away. All prickly and hard-wired and don’t-touch-me, and then underneath, this big, goofy kid who loved the dubiously named Blue Raspberry slushie and went to no small amount of effort to get Tony to talk about himself.

“Why don’t we just walk some of the way back?” Steve suggested. “Maybe Happy could meet us
halfway or something.”

“Well, you’re clearly on your way to healthy living, so,” Tony said with another nod at the drink, then shrugged his shoulders. “Why not?” He was…enjoying himself. Oddly enough. He should hate everything about this. Tired, day-glo, seventies-rock mini-golf, terrible drinks that didn’t even have the benefit of water-down vodka, walking. “I think you owe me a couple of questions, though, just to be fair. Since you, you know, completely took advantage of my innocent and trusting nature back there.”

“Shoot,” Steve said good-naturedly as he pushed open the glass exit door and held it for Tony. Tony blinked at the sudden brightness and pulled his sunglasses out of his pocket, shoving them on his face while deciding what to ask.

A part of him, okay a big part, wanted a follow-up on that thing with Hammer, but Steve had a giant Do Not Enter sign over that particular rabbit hole. Hammer hadn’t even recognized Steve last night, and that had bothered Steve. A lot. More than Steve had wanted to let on. That much, at least, Tony had been aware enough to notice. I’m too late. I’m late for an important date, Tony thought, beating at the metaphor with a stick. He’d missed something, though.

He sighed and tried to tear his mind off the image of Steve performing for Hammer like that. Hammer was a sleaze, and he’d been at enough of the same parties to know that Hammer was handsy, and he had a lot of guys around him who were paid rather handsomely to do what he wanted and look the other way, but how far did that go? He looked over at Steve as they took the few steps outside the entrance and made a mental note to have JARVIS do some digging.

“I told you my best memory. Ante up, Mini-Golf Rainman, what’s your best childhood memory?” Tony settled on instead.

“Getting beat up in an alley behind a movie theater,” Steve responded immediately.

“God, I think you might be more fucked up than I am. Which, believe me, would be an accomplishment,” Tony muttered. “Okay, I’ll bite. Why is getting your ass kicked your favorite memory?”

“You asked for my best memory, not my favorite,” Steve pointed out as they strolled down the wide sidewalk towards the Strip, already glittering in preparation for the night. Steve took a sip of his ill-considered drink and slowed his pace a bit, cutting around a group of Japanese tourists wearing headsets and following a bright, orange flag that bobbed and weaved along the walkway. “Guy had been giving these two ladies a hard time, just because they were there together. Just trying to watch a movie, you know? And he just wouldn’t let up about it. Like it was a personal affront to him somehow that they existed. I was ninety pounds of asthmatic nothing, but,” Steve shrugged. “ Couldn’t seem to stop myself.”

“Always a White Knight, then, huh?” Tony prodded, eyeing Steve thoughtfully.

“Don’t know about that. Got the shit kicked out of me a lot,” Steve admitted. “That time, let’s see… fat lip. Bloody nose. The works. Bucky—he kind of saved me. Happened a lot, actually. Hip pulling me out of trouble. We’ve sort of known each other forever. Buck says I woke him up coughing in the hospital nursery. Says he’s been hollering at me ever since. That’s not—he’s actually a little over a year older, not that it—I mean. Anyway. He showed up. Gave the guy a what-for. I used to think he had some sixth sense for when I was in trouble, but he swears it was just pretty much going to be a given, so law of probabilities and all that. Got into a lot of fights,” Steve explained with a grimace and another shrug that was trying for nonchalant and failing spectacularly.
“Gotta say, doesn’t sound like a particularly great time,” Tony observed, tipping his head back and squinting up at the sun from behind his sun glasses as he slowed to a halt on the sidewalk in front of a street billboard that promised the best slots in town, though no actual slot machines were pictured next to the scantily clad woman holding a bag of casino chips. Ah, Vegas. Stay classy.

He looked over at Steve, who stopped beside him, though he was looking somewhere past the obnoxious advertisement, past Tony, through the throngs of pedestrians either staring up at the Vegas skyline or down at their phone screens. Sometimes, Tony wondered if anyone out here ever actually saw anything. It was a strange, unsettled thought. Someone stepped on your grave. That’s what Ana would have said. And that…well. That was far too close to being true, wasn’t it?

“I’d always had something of a knack for getting myself in trouble. Shooting my mouth off with nothing to back it up, trying to do these crazy stunts, giving my mom fits, I guess,” Steve began, speaking slowly, drawing Tony’s attention back to him. “I don’t know, kid stuff, mostly. Stupid. But…that time, for the first time, it didn’t feel like kid stuff. It felt like I was making some kind of decision, sitting there watching the previews, with my pockets full of so many contraband snacks I think my pants shook when I walked. I was suddenly going to do something, but…something that mattered. Me. Nothing-to-him-Steve-Rogers. Even if I did get my ass kicked. Because it was the right thing to do. Crazy, I guess,” Steve said, running a hand around the back of his neck and looking away, like he was glancing down the Strip, but Tony thought he wasn’t seeing much of anything except maybe a darkened theater.

Cave, Tony’s mind supplied.

No.

We are not doing that, he told himself firmly, running a hand through his hair to hide the sudden tremor.

“Maybe not so crazy,” Tony acknowledged. “Or, the kind of crazy that I get. Whatever,” Tony said, slashing a hand through the air in front of him.

He started walking again, dodging around two tourists peering over one of those free maps they give you with the open-top bus lines drawn out in various colors. He needed to move. Standing still had always been difficult for him, but now, after Afghanistan, if he slowed down, if he stopped, he could feel it, a whirring whine where there should be a steady beat.

The consciousness of it, that was what did it. You weren’t supposed to be conscious of your heart beating in your chest. One of those things you got to not think about, but not him. Not anymore. If he stopped, he would feel it, and feeling it meant thinking about it. Meant thinking about it not working. Tony had to forcibly stop his arms from coming up to cradle a battery box that wasn’t there. He could feel it, though. The weight of it. The way the cables brushed against his chest or tugged, if he stretched too far. Sometimes, he could swear he could feel the pull of it across the skin of his chest, but moving, going forward, that helped. Made the sounds something he could tell himself was exertion, made the tug in his chest just a need for air, not something else. It helped. Sometimes.

“Tony,” Steve called out over the cars and chatter of other passersby. He caught up, shoulder brushing against Tony’s as he matched Tony’s pace. A hand caught Tony’s, and his first impulse was to jerk away, before he realized it was Steve’s, and they were doing this thing where they were a couple and held hands sometimes, because couples did things like that. Hold hands and not have flashbacks in the middle of the sidewalk next to a guy in a dapper suit with a stuffed horse’s head cradled in one arm hawking a Vegas mob tour. “Is this okay?” Steve asked, giving Tony’s hand a small squeeze.

It was fine. Surprisingly fine. Centering, somehow. Something to hold onto when he couldn’t hold on to the phantom life-preserver that wasn’t there anymore. Tony focused on the feel of Steve’s hand, warm and gentle where it wrapped around his own in a loose grip. The sound of his heart thudding in his chest faded to a dull, distant echo as he slowed. The pulling hitch in his chest lessened. Just a bit. But, it lessened. I don’t like being handed things, except Steve, apparently, Tony thought with a sort of maniacal glee that surged from the pit of his stomach. His therapist would tell him dramatic emotional shifts were a sign of trauma-induced anxiety, but that was just that kind of unhelpful information that stopped him from going to his sessions.

“So you…” Tony started, groping for the string of conversation. “You, ah…illegal concessions, fights…bit of a rabble-rouser in your misspent youth, huh?”

“Something like that,” Steve said, then smiled and shook his head, looking up at the sun with a squint. “What about you? You were some kind of kid genius, right? I remember reading a profile about you. Said you went to MIT when you were, what, sixteen?”

“Fifteen,” Tony corrected.

“Bet you were a handful,” Steve said with a grin. Steve gave a small nod in the direction of a couple of teens snapped their photo as they walked by. Tony wondered how quickly it would be making the rounds on social media. Pepper would be proud. He let out a sigh, then smiled and waved half-heartedly, making the teen jump up and down in their excited attempt to wave back.

“Something like that,” Tony agreed, mimicking Steve’s words, as he let his hand fall back to his side.

“Pretty young to be off on your own like that,” Steve commented. They wound their way down the widening boulevard, the casinos and hotels rising up in front of them, glittering in the Nevada sun and somehow even more garish in the light of day.

“Yeah, not my finest decision-making, training montage, admittedly, but I met Rhodey. You remember him? Skinny. Kind of on the shorter side. Quotes Langston Hughes and Monty Python, likes jazz, a good Scotch and long walks on the beach. You pulled him out from under a Hum-Vee and then forgot to mention that little tidbit? That guy.”

“I didn’t know he liked jazz,” Steve said.

“You know, communication is key to a good marriage, I’m told,” Tony grumbled, flattening his mouth. Next to him, Tony felt Steve stiffen, then heard a small sigh.

“I wasn’t even supposed to be there. Though, that right there told me something was up with the op. They pulled us--my team, I mean--and put a bunch of green-eared grunts on your detail, which was strange enough at the time. I thought maybe you'd complained or, well, I'd had a bit of a run-in with the base commander,” Steve said with a shake of his head.

"I'm somehow containing my surprise," Tony muttered, pursing his lips to keep the smile from forming. "I wish you hadn't been, though. There, I mean. I wouldn't want that for anyone. Glad you...you know. That you're 'not hurt' or whatever the cool kids are calling it these days.”

"Not that it mattered much, but I'm glad I was there. Just wish I could've done more. I should've known something was--" Steve broke off, glancing down at Tony.

"No one knew a damn thing, except those who did, and they were very, very good at hiding it," Tony pointed out. "I didn't see it. The pattern. Not until it was behind me, anyway. And I'm kind of
smart, you might have heard," Tony's mouth twisted into a grimace on the last. "Then--now--it seems obvious, and I feel like the world's biggest dupe. Maybe I was. At least I can do something about it now, and I'm getting the sense that might have more to do with you than just all this wedded bliss. I know I'm out of Gene Simmons' inspired questions, but..." he trailed off with a light shrug.

"My squad was the first one there. After everything. Came looking for us when the convoy didn't check in at interval," Steve said with a twist of his mouth. "We didn't do much except hold things together until the evac and trauma teams got there. Wasn't much we could do."

“Still…helping Rhodey, though… I wish you'd just come to me for money like a normal person and not…” Tony muttered, letting the thought trail off with a wave of the hand Steve wasn’t holding.

“Because it’s better to try to get some--some reward for doing my damn job than get paid to take my clothes off?” Steve demanded, voice taking a hard edge to it.

“I didn’t mean it like—I just—I would’ve helped, okay? ‘S all I’m saying. I would’ve helped. I think. Probably. If you could’ve gotten past Pepper’s gatekeeping, gold digger radar. I mean, she’d take one look at you and imagine picking up your dry cleaning, which, to be fair, isn’t without some precedent, so,” Tony acknowledged, dancing his head back and forth and rolling his eyes. “I’m just—I’m saying, I helped them. The others. Their—the families. I helped them.”

“I know you did,” Steve said after a beat of silence. “That was good. What you did.”

“Are you kidding me with that?” Tony demanded. “They got killed. Protecting me, they got blo—they were just kids. With—with MySpace accounts and Maxim subscriptions and stupid, kid peace sign bullshit, and you—I’m not good for throwing some guilt money at them, okay? Don’t—just don’t. I didn’t do it because I’m good. I did it so I could maybe sleep a few hours a night,” Tony said, raking his hand through his hair. “And it wasn’t even anything. Not to me. What, an hour of interest on some hedge fund, and barely that,” he laughed bitterly. “So, don’t tell me that it was good. Every, single thing about that was the least good thing I’ve done in my damn life.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Tony. What happened. They were soldiers. They knew the risks,” Steve said quietly, into the wind, so only Tony could hear. Tony sucked in a steadying breath and felt his hand digging into Steve’s, though he couldn’t quite bring himself to soften the grip. He wasn’t sure what he was holding onto, but he was sure that if he let go, he’d fall. Fail. Fall, fail, it was all the same.

“They were there because of me,” Tony muttered through his teeth, jaw clenched tight. “They died because of me.”

“They died because of the Ten Rings, and whoever—“ Steve broke off, looking down.

“Whoever what?” Tony asked, side-eyeing Steve.

“Your route was classified. Highest levels. In fact, there were three routes, standard procedure. Things change on the ground so fast, you need options. No one knows until the go-route until the last minute. It was one of the reasons it took so long to get out there. We couldn’t get confidence on your last position. So, if the decision wasn’t made until you were about to head out, how’d the Ten Rings know exactly where to be to hit the convoy?” Steve asked, shaking his head in obvious agitation.

“We’ve always known someone talked,” Tony said. “One of the translators, maybe. Someone put some money on the table, or… I don’t know, maybe there only ever was the one route. Rhodey thinks—but, this is really the place for this,” Tony broke off, glancing over his shoulder at the passersby. “Ears everywhere,” he added, nodding at a young man ducking in front of them to snap a
“It wasn’t your fault,” Steve insisted as his jaw worked around the words. Stubborn man, Tony thought, with a surprising surge of affection.

They stopped at the curb in front of a striped crosswalk. A large, red tourist bus drove past them, droning information about something that was barely a landmark, but someone famous had done something stupid there, once upon a time. Give me a few more days, and they can add a story to the rotation, Tony thought grimly. Down the street, a car horn blared. The electronic pings and whirs drifted out of the casinos up ahead like siren songs.

“The missiles literally had my name on them. I think that makes it a little my fault,” Tony replied. He could feel a weariness that had nothing to do with the afternoon sun seep into his bones. How many times had he been over this with Rhodey or Pepper or himself, in the mirror, when he could stand to look at the man staring back?

“You’re not a bad person because you made weapons, Tony. You think I’m a bad person because I used those weapons you made?” Steve asked pointedly.

“I’m not against weapons. And I have a soft spot for soldiers, let’s say. Hard spot? Eh. Whatever,” Tony teased, pulling a face. “You think that was the first time they tried them out? Of course not. My little desert fun ride wasn’t some kind of test run. They’d used them before. Against our soldiers or innocent civilians or both. Someone was double dealing on my watch, and that’s on me. But, we should—God—” Tony broke off, running his hand over his mouth. “Talk about something else. Like, say, what you’re doing in Vegas in the first place. Pretty far from Brooklyn. You and your… slurpie-enabling roommate.”

“Someone did the homework,” Steve observed, though the rebuke was more along the lines of weary acceptance, Tony thought. “And it’s not really your concern.”

“Not really my concern,” Tony parroted, letting his annoyance drip into the words. “Hard to believe you went through life with so many people wanting to knock sense into you, you know? Really shocking. I just wish you’d…come to me. For help. Instead of…whatever this is you’re trying to do here,” Tony said as they started across the street. “I mean, look, to be clear, we both know I’m not opposed to you taking off your clothes for money,” Tony added with a small shrug. “I’m just saying.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Steve slowly turn his neck to look down at Tony as they hit the opposite curb. He was biting the inside of his cheek, trying to hold in a smile. The effort didn’t last long. A wide grin spread over Steve’s face and he was laughing, loud and uproariously, with his whole body. The hand holding Tony’s pulled and jerked, and Tony found himself stumbling sideways into Steve.

He was laughing, too, he realized, more because of Steve’s reaction than anything, but it was like someone had hit a release valve and everything that had been building up since they left the mini-golf came spilling out. Tony rocked back on his heels, felt a small pull at his hand and leaned forward again to the center of Steve’s chest. He blinked. Looked up. Steve’s hands settled on Tony’s waist. Tony’s breath hitched, his chest tightening and stomach swooping. Whatever he might have said caught in his throat and refused to budge. Steve was smiling down at him, laughter sparkling his eyes, lips still blue from the ridiculous drink he was so proud of winning, all handsy and adoring all of a sudden, like Tony was the only thing he cared about in the world. He was beautiful.

Oh, dear God, fuck me, I like him, Tony realized with an abject, blazing horror.
I like the stripper I’m faked married to. The one I’m paying to be all handsy and adoring.

People were looking. A few had their phones up, taking pictures or videos. Someone dog-whistled. A few called out his name as they walked past, as if they were old friends who just happened to run into each other on the street. Tony waved, nodded his head, did the thing. This was good. The whole afternoon stroll thing. Probably looked really spontaneous and romantic. Newlyweds. They were supposed to be newlyweds. Can’t keep their hands off each other. Spontaneous bursts of laughter. Public displays of affection. People did that. That was a thing. Besides, that was the whole point of this visit with the unwashed masses, right? Right.

“Oh, so…we’re going to talk about this now, huh?” Steve asked, shaking his head and letting out another laugh, as he turned and tugged Tony along, this time wrapping his arm around Tony’s waist and sliding it under his suitcoat so his thumb caught on the band of Tony’s trousers. It was casually intimate, the way people in relationships probably were all the time, so perfectly and seamlessly done, like it was the most natural thing in the world. Tony’s stomach did the thing again where it felt like he was falling, only his stomach was falling faster than the rest of him, and he turned his head to watch the traffic whiz past, not really seeing anything.

Ah, fuck me, I like him, Tony thought, a cold, tingling sensation spiking down his back and settling in his chest.

“You were the one broke my heart,” Tony reminded him, clearing his throat when the words came out rough and scraping instead of teasing. “Rhodey insisted on ice cream, I had the urge to watch Bridget Jones, listen to ‘I Will Survive.” I don’t know. Pretty sure there were manful tears happening.”

“Don’t think your heart was the organ you were having issues with,” Steve replied around a knowing smirk.

“Ah-ha! You noticed me. See. I knew it,” Tony said, narrowing his eyes and wagging a finger in Steve’s direction, finding his rhythm again as they walked. Okay, so he liked Steve a little bit. Big deal. Really, it made this easier. “You like to play it all coy, but you totally copped a look. It’s okay. Own it, I say. Besides, you’re one to talk. Not like you weren’t up there saluting America or whatever,” Tony countered.

“Kinda hard not to notice you, Tony,” Steve pointed out.

“And yet, you turned me down. Rebuffed my advances. Blew me off. Not the good way, either, more’s the pity. Luckily, you saw the error of your ways. Or, possibly your bank account balance. Whatever. Point is, you, being a good sort and all, changed your mind and now…here we are,” Tony added, eyebrows rising in challenge. “Wedded bliss.”

“And now here we are,” Steve agreed.

“What did change your mind?” Tony asked. Someone shouted congratulations at them as they walked, and Tony raised a hand in acknowledgment, though they didn’t slow. “Rhodey can be persuasive, but you strike me as post-nuclear-winter-cockroach level of not letting go of an idea.”

“I don’t usually do them,” Steve admitted, a faint blush tingling his cheeks as his mouth twisted around the words. “The private things. A few here and there, but…it’s awkward. The one on one. When I’m up on stage, I can just sort of let go, forget about it all. Do my routine. It’s a bit like being someone else for a while,” Steve said with a shrug. “I didn’t think I could do that with you. If it was just you, I mean. So, I said no.”
“Because of Afghanistan,” Tony guessed, leaning in and keeping his voice soft. He felt Steve stiffen a bit next to him, but he kept his stride as they walked.

“Because of Afghanistan,” Steve said, darting his eyes down at Tony.

“Then, you changed your mind,” Tony said softly, looking down at his feet as they walked and adjust his sunglasses when the slipped down his nose. He didn’t like thinking about Afghanistan, much less talking about it, and yet, he seemed to keep falling down that particular rabbit hole with Steve. Shared life experience, he supposed.

“Well, it was a lot of money,” Steve laughed, drawing Tony’s eyes back to his profile where he squinted up at the sun as he maneuvered them through the throngs of people that crowded the sidewalk with a sort of deft ease that Tony envied, still clutching Tony’s hand, though his grip had loosened somewhat as they walked. “And, I don’t know, I thought—this is weird, I guess, but, I wanted to see you like that, in a way. I thought, maybe then, you wouldn’t be Tony Stark, any more. The guy we were supposed to find and who found us, instead. You’d just be a customer. Some guy who wanted to look at me, just like everyone else there. No big deal. I thought it would, maybe— I don’t know — change things or something. Maybe I’d look back at it all, and it would be different, then. It’s stupid. I know.”

“Hey, hey, whoa…what do you mean ‘the guy we were supposed to find’?” Tony demanded, pulling up short and getting shoulder bumped by the woman behind him who was looking down at her phone. “Rhodey found me. Or, I found him. There was a lot of finding happening, I don’t know, hard to keep the sequence exact. Technically, I think I had heat stroke, so.”

“I didn’t mean we—we, I meant we-the Army,” Steve amended quickly. “Speaking of heat, maybe we should call Happy. It’s getting hot out here.”

“Oh, you didn’t say, ‘I’ll take Changing the Subject for $200, Alex,’” Tony replied. “And that was phrased in the form of a complete fabrication instead of a question, so judges say no points for that one. Care to try another category? Like, ‘Stuff I Should Probably Tell Tony’?”

“There were a bunch of teams looking for you,” Steve said.

“You, though? You were looking?” Tony demanded, then reached up and tugged on the front of Steve’s shirt until he got him to turn towards him. “You were looking for me,” Tony said, eyes narrowing as he honed in on the slight flinch at the corner of Steve’s eyes. “You were!” he repeated, shock pulling his eyes wide.

“My team,” Steve corrected. “Look, can we just forget it? What does it matter? Everyone in boots was looking for you. It was the biggest search and rescue operation I’ve ever seen,” Steve pointed out, tossing a hand in the air, then bringing it to his hip. “We didn’t find you. Like you said. It’s no big deal.”

Steve’s jaw flexed, tight, and he dropped his gaze to the ground. People were looking, Tony noticed. They did that when you stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and had a loud discussion with Tony Stark. Tony sighed, blowing the air out of his mouth in a vibrating, frustrated groan, shook his head, and reached into his pocket for his phone.

“I’m calling Happy,” Tony told him, punching Happy’s number on the cell. “We’re not done with this conversation, by the way. Happy?” Tony said when he heard the other man’s greeting. “Yeah, we’re at the corner of…where the hell are we? The one that makes me want to shout, ‘Are you not entertained?’”
“Caesar’s,” Steve said.

“The pizza one,” Tony added.

“That’s…Little Caesar’s,” Steve huffed out. “And you know that.”

“Caesar’s Palace, Happy. Hurry it up, okay? We’re having a Dr. Phil moment on the street, here, and it’s probably going to end up on YouTube—you better not downvote this,” Tony remarked to the man recording them as he ended the call to Happy and turned back to Steve. “Seriously? You drop that on me in front of Toga Party by RuPaul, here?”

“I didn’t mean to—I–I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t’ve said anything. I don’t know why I…” Steve trailed off, raking a hand through his hair.

“Okay, that….literally was the opposite of what I said? Look, whatever it is that you’re holding back on, I’m going to find out, I am, because that’s what I do, and I think you know that, so you’re dropping these little breadcrumbs so that when I do, you can say, ‘ah-ha! I told you about that!’ Except, you didn’t, not really, and, hey,” Tony blustered, giving Steve a little shake. “‘Whatever it is, whatever happened that got you here, I don’t care? You really think I’m going to judge you?’” Tony demanded with a groan of exasperation. “Come on, you just heard me bare my soul over how much I’ve screwed the pooch in life, and if you want to go toe to toe on that column, I’ll see you a narcissistic personality disorder, volatility, self-obsession, a few too many daddy issues…stop me whenever you want, by the way.”

“You hit on me,” Steve said abruptly, lips quirking.

“Yes,” Tony replied, drawing out the word. “I think we can both acknowledge that I expressed a certain interest in showing my deep and abiding love for God and country—“

“In Bagram,” Steve corrected.


“On the airstrip, right after you and Colonel Rhodes landed. I said, ‘Welcome to Bagram, Mr. Stark. I understand the items for your weapons demonstration have arrived ahead of you and are being deployed to the staging area’,,” Steve continued. “And you said—“

“‘Please tell me you’re here to help me shoot off my missile’,” Tony quoted, remembering. “Oh my God,” he groaned. “You’re Hot Disapproving Guy!”

“Did your plane really have dance poles inside it?” Steve asked.

“If you say that was what inspired your current occupation, I’ll seriously have those installed in the limo,” Tony teased. “I do remember you. Okay, well, only vaguely, I think we can both acknowledge that I expressed a certain interest in showing my deep and abiding love for God and country—“

“Green berets. And not French,” Steve muttered. Tony grinned. They walked over to the car as Happy jumped out to open the back door for them.

“I do remember you. I mean, I didn’t know it was you-you, but I remember you,” Tony replied as he
slid across the seat and waited for Steve to fold himself into the car. He tapped a finger on the glass of the window and looked out. For a second, it was all too bright. He closed his eyes, drew in a breath and opened them again. “All of that, it’s kind of a blur, you know? The plane ride, the base, glad-handing the brass, the trip out to the testing site. Everything just sort of blends together. But, you…you said something. As we were leaving. Told me you hoped I had a pleasant stay. All sarcastic as shit about it, because you had to be nice, but weren’t going to give an inch, not to some rich asshole who shows up to a warzone on a plane with stripper poles, half-drunk and lobbing innuendos at you. I remember thinking about that. Later. When I was—after the thing happened. I was on a C-130 heading to Germany, and all I wanted was to be left alone and have an honest-to-God cheeseburger, and I thought about it. Kind of a crazy, bitter thing, but I thought about it. What you said.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve said softly, looking down at his hands for a moment before looking up at Tony. “I shouldn’t have—I didn’t—“

“No, no, no—-not like that. I mean,” Tony broke off, sucking in a shaky breath and twisting in his seat to look at Steve. “I’m not—I’m not saying this right. Everyone there, everyone, was part of this roadshow thing. Me, Rhodey, the generals out there toasting our partnership. None of it was real, until it was. Way, way too real. Not much in my life had been particularly real up to that point. So, I was sitting there, with my arm in a sling and Rhodey playing nurse in the non-fun way, and I thought about that. What you said. And I kind of hated you in that moment, a little, I think. Looking down your nose at me, all self-righteous and sure of what you were seeing when you looked at me, because I wasn’t that person, except neither of us knew it. None of what happened was pleasant. About the furthest thing from it.”

“I know, I—“ Steve started.

“It was awful and terrible and I kind of nearly died, but I’m glad it happened. Well, I don’t know if glad is the right word, but…like your—your best memory thing? You got the shit kicked out of you, sure, but, you—you felt something change. Something important. That’s how it was for me,” Tony told him, breath hitching around the words. “I can’t believe that was you,” Tony added after a moment, shaking his head and letting out a huff of disbelieving laughter.

“I didn’t think you were an asshole,” Steve said after a moment.

“I did. I was. Maybe I still am, I don’t know, but I’m trying not to be,” Tony replied, mouth twisting into a flat grimace as he leaned his head back against the curve of the car seat. “And, let’s face it, you’d truly have been an Army of one on that particular perception. Rhodey excluded, of course.”

“You’re—hard on yourself,” Steve told him.

“Ah, Pot, our color is black,” Tony said, shooting Steve a challenging look as Happy swerved the car through afternoon traffic. He pulled out his phone and checked his messages. A missed call from Rhodey. Twelve from Pepper, mostly about the press mentions, one about a stock swap that probably wasn’t going to happen, and one reminding him that she had arranged dinner for he and Steve tonight. “Pep’s got dinner for us at Robuchon’s place at the Grand,” Tony told him. “Then a champagne thing in a private pod on the High Roller. Should be some good press. Lots of photo opportunities.”

“Any news on that…Batroc and these phone specs you gave him?” Steve asked.

“No news, not that I know. I’ll get an alert as soon as any of those files are accessed,” Tony replied. “But, if Obie has it, he’s smart enough not to open them himself. Keep that plausible deniability going until it’s in
Pierce’s hands. Don’t worry, though, it’ll happen. Just a couple more days of the whole marriage of inconvenience thing and you’re free to ride off into the sunset on whatever seven large will buy you,” Tony said, throat going tight all of a sudden. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Steve frown, then turn his neck to look out the window.

“And Stern?” Steve asked. “With the whole punching thing?”

“His lawyers are still saber-rattling, but it’s going nowhere,” Tony answered, looking down at his phone for no reason other than it provided a distraction. “Showing up at a strip club is practically a rite of passage for a congressman, sure, but hanging out at one that caters to a gay crowd? We’ve come a long way, baby, but not that far. He’ll let the punch slide.”

“Good,” Steve said, glancing over at Tony before going back to studying the view from the car’s window. “You didn’t need to do that. Not because of what he said, I mean. But, thanks. I guess. Been awhile since I had my honor defended,” Steve finished, looking over at Tony for a moment with a slight, soft smile that made his eyes crinkle down at the corners before he turned away again.

“He had it coming,” Tony said with a shrug that he hoped signal nonchalance and gave nothing away of the warmth that filled his belly at Steve’s words. “Not going to lie, it felt pretty damn good after what he pulled.”

“We were the ones who were supposed to be on your detail. My squad. We got bumped at the last minute. That’s why we were on base when the call came about what happened. Why I met up with you on the airstrip. It was supposed to be us,” Steve said quietly, jaw clenching on the last so hard that Tony could see a muscle tick in his cheek.

“Almost here, Boss,” Happy called from the driver’s seat.

“Keep telling yourself that. That’s what I do. You can see how well its working out for me,” Tony deadpanned, spreading his hands wide. “Ready?” he asked, nodding towards the door as the car slowed to a halt in front of the Rio’s entrance. “Showtime, then,” Tony said at Steve’s stiff-necked nod.

“Welcome back, Mr. Stark,” the doorman said as he held the door for them. “Captain Rogers.” Well, at least Pepper was on top of things, Tony thought with a slight smile as he palmed a fifty to the guy.

People gasped and pointed, called out his name and dug for their ubiquitous phones to snap photos. Steve smiled down at him, easy and bright and completely fake, as Tony slid his arm around Steve’s waist and maneuvered them towards the hotel doors.

They headed through the lobby at a slow clip, aiming for the palace suites far at the backend of the property in the most conspicuous way possible, though seemingly immersed in each other. Steve was leaning down, a soft smile playing on his lips as he whispered sweet nothings about Army dress regulations, which he seemed to have memorized for no reason Tony could discern, in Tony’s ear,
warm breath like a caress against Tony’s neck, and no—no, he wasn’t think about that. Or the way
Steve’s hand fit around the curve of Tony’s waist like it belonged there. Or how Steve seemed to
use his bulk in a way that took up more space than it should, angling himself just so, and how the
pictures, when they did show up, were mostly going to be of a random blonde man’s profile and
shoulders.

He really needed to call Rhodey.

Passing by the security desk, they headed for the elevator to the suite. As soon as the doors slid shut,
Steve dropped his hand from Tony’s waist and stepped away, like someone hit the ‘off’ button.
Tony flattened his mouth and pocketed his sunglasses, glancing over at where Steve stood, a few feet
and a world apart.

“I liked the…golf thing,” Tony said, rocking a bit on his heels and scratching at his eyebrow before
shoving his hands in the pockets of his pants.

“Me, too,” Steve said. He as looking up at the numbers on the elevator dial, watching as they ticked
up to the Palazzo suite at the top. “Thanks again for the clothes.”

“Well, I, of course, morally object to putting you in clothes, but, be that as it may…” Tony grinned.
“It’ll be a couple hours before dinner, so, take a break. Hang out. There’s food in the fridge and a
full bar. Help yourself,” Tony told him as the elevator doors opened to the suite. “I’ve got to make
some calls, and—Pepper!”

“Oh, good, you’re back,” Pepper said. She had a tablet in her hand and an earpiece on her ear.
“Yeah, hold on just a second, Mike, Mr. Stark just walked in. Where are we on the little bug
things?”

“The highly-advanced microrobotic surveillance drones? We’re going with little bug things on
those?” Tony asked. “Two weeks.”

“Two weeks, Mike,” Pepper said, holding a hand up to her earpiece. “Just the prototypes. Full
production won’t start until next year. Right. We’ve already got orders from the Rapid Equipping
Force for two thousand units and chargers. Uh-huh,” she said after a pause. She waved to Steve
and mouthed something to Tony, holding up her other hand to the side of her face to mime a
telephone when Tony frowned in confusion. “Rhodey!” she hissed. “No, not you, Mike. Sorry.”

“Apparently, I need to call Rhodey,” Tony announced, giving Steve a slight apologetic look.

“I’ll just…” Steve pointed at his room. Tony nodded and watched him disappear, then caught
Pepper watching him watch and rolled his eyes.

“You looked, too. Granted, I didn’t see it, but we both know you did,” Tony said, wagging a finger
in Pepper’s direction. She mouthed ‘Call Rhodey’ at him again, and he took the hint, heading for the
privacy of his bedroom before pulling out his phone. He sank heavily onto the bed and scrubbed a
hand over his face, then hit the contact button for Rhodey, grinning as a picture of a wide-mouthed,
sleeping Rhodey clutching a pink unicorn that was catching a line of drool popped up on the screen.
Ah, Spring Break. Good times.

“Have you changed the picture yet?” Rhodey asked by way of greeting.

“I like this picture. I feel it really defines you as a human being,” Tony protested with a smile.

“You put that on my personnel file,” Rhodey reminded him.
“For like two hours, when we were 21 and drunk, and only because you said I couldn’t do it, so basically, your fault,” Tony reminded him. “No news on the hard drive yet?” Rhodey asked.

“Nothing. JARVIS is on it. The second it’s accessed, we’ll know, and then JARVIS can trace it, find out who has it,” Tony told him. “So, what’s got my favorite mouthbreather in a tizzy?”

“Well, while we’re waiting on Evil, Inc. to get their act together and since you’ve been enjoying the honeymoon phase, I took it upon myself to do a bit of digging on your hubby, one Captain Steven G. Rogers, U.S. Army,” Rhodey continued. “God, saying those words out loud hurts. You couldn’t pick up some nice, down-on-his-luck ex-flyboy?”

“Too late. Did that at MIT. Now, I’m stuck with his clingy ass,” Tony said, smiling widely. “I did find out he was Special Forces. And, get this, we met him in Bagram. I hit on him. Try to contain your shock. But, even more interesting, it was his squad originally assigned to my protection detail for the missile test, but they got pulled at the last minute. He seemed to think it was weird. Not the usual SOP.”

“Don’t use the acronyms. I’ve told you,” Rhodey cut in. “You hit on—ohhhhh. Was he the smug one you kept yammering on about? Hot Disapproving Guy,” Rhodey recalled with a snap of his fingers that Tony could hear through the phone.

“In my defense, you’ve met him and tell me that isn’t accurate,” Tony groused.

“Anyway, yeah, I got his record, and you like that coincidence? You’re going to love this,” Rhodey said. “Hot Disapproving Guy was the one who got the intel about your location. We’d been searching a whole different grid space, but all of a sudden, we get re-routed to nearly right on top of that hidey-hole where they were keeping you. Just followed the destruction from there, and boom, there you were, all Lawrence of Arabia and shit about it,” Rhodey laughed, a bit of awe and remembered relief creeping into his voice. “I couldn’t believe it. All those months, and there you were, just strolling through the desert, shooting peace signs at me.”

“Okay, wait, so…you’re saying that intel, the information that kept me from becoming Lot’s wife out there, came from my stripper-fake-husband?” Tony demanded, sitting up on the bed and catching his reflection in the mirror. His face was ashen in the darkness of the room and the hand that clutched the phone was white-knuckled. Bleached bones, Tony thought and felt a shiver run down his spine and coil low in his stomach, cold seeping through his skin.

“First, this is classified. What I’m telling you, I got from a guy I know, because this shit is above even my pay grade. There was an op. It went south. They were at a place called Gulmira. Looking for you, maybe, my guy wouldn’t say. Him and his squad. Got pinned down there, with the Ten Rings all around them using civilians as human shields. Which meant no air support, no back-up, just them, for three weeks, snipers picking ‘em off, taking shells, missiles, whatever. Not the kind you build in your garage, either, but some pretty sophisticated stuff.”

“My stuff,” Tony choked out and closed his eyes, rubbing a fisted hand over the center of his chest. His stomach dropped. Nausea crept in, clawing its way up the back of his throat. It tasted like sand. No. No, he was not going to do this. “God, Rhodey. They were mine, weren’t they?”

“Maybe. Maybe, Tony. We don’t know that,” Rhodey said, voice going low and quiet. “We just don’t know.”

“They were. Gulmira. Come on. You know they were,” Tony said dully.

“Maybe,” Rhodey admitted with a sigh. “So, anyway, situations bad, right? They’re holed up there,
no support, no reinforcements, no resupplying, nothing. And yet, here he comes out of it with half his squad, a parade of civilians with wagons, goats, cows, the works, a bunch of dead terrorists behind him,” Rhodey went on grimly. “And a location. We get in a chopper, and boom, there you are, pretty as you please.”

“How’d he get the location?” Tony asked.

“No idea. That’s all the detail my contact would give me, and that’s on penalty of you-don’t-want-to-know,” Rhodey replied. “Though, not classified, more just rumor, but he did say there was talk about putting Rogers up for a Medal of Honor, but then the guy walked away as soon as his time was up, whiiiiich,” Rhodey said, drawing out the word. “I thought was odd, too, so I checked around, since I figured you were too busy padding the love nest.”

“Funny,” Tony cut in, though there was no humor in the word. His mind swirled. Steve talking him through a panic attack, steady and comforting. Steve and his stupid general goat. Laughing through swapped stories over mini-golf. Steve telling the reporters off. The way Steve’s mouth felt under his. The way Steve looked in the dressing room, trying on clothes, with a blush staining his skin while Tony tried to convince himself not to look.

Steve watching his fellow soldiers get blown up by Tony’s weapons.

“Rogers joins the seventh fresh out of high school, gets shipped off to sit and wait in bumfuck desert locale. Doesn’t like that much. Goes to RASP. Gets his Ranger tab. Goes back. In the middle of all that, gets a degree, picks up a few languages…Then, he gets tapped by SFAS—Special Forces Assessment and Selection Course—apparently on the urging of one Colonel Phillips,” Rhodey continued. “Who I tracked down on a fishing boat down in Clearwater.”

“What’d he have to say?” Tony asked.

“Well, here’s the thing you gotta understand, Tones. None of that career trajectory is normal. Looking through his record, you could tell, Army loves this guy. This is the guy they want, okay? This one is going to make four-star one day, and as much as a rag on the grunts, that’s not nothing. Anyway, Phillips is this irascible, old-school drill-sergeant type like you see in the movies. Doesn’t want to talk to my hotshot Air Force ass, that’s for sure. Hung up on me. Twice. But, I finally get through that I’m calling about Rogers, and I swear, Tony, you should’ve heard the guy. He was practically glowing. And, I’m pretty sure Phillips wouldn’t glow if you set him on fire.”

“So…everyone loves Steve, Steve’s going places, yadda, yadda. Why’s he dropping trou at some Vegas dive for a few bucks?” Tony prodded. “A career decision I support, but still. It’s the roommate, right? I’m still mentally putting air quotes around roommate, by the way. You’re not helping.”

“James B. Barnes, also of Brooklyn, New York, a year older than your ball and chain. Enlisted out of high school. Sniper, mostly, it looks like. Made Sergeant pretty fast. Not like your golden boy, but record’s good, clean. Impressive confirmed kills,” Rhodey said. Tony could hear the forced nonchalance in his voice. Great.

“That’s comforting…by the way, I have something to run by you when you finish telling me how Steve’s roommate is good at killing people,” Tony replied, mouth twisting into a grimace.

“Anyway, Barnes is hurt during the whole Gulmira thing. Pretty badly, too, it seems. I don’t have the medical records, but he was posted back stateside for medical treatment after a stint in Ramstein,” Rhodey said. “Then, and here’s where things get murky…”
“Oh, just now?” Tony quipped dully.

“Something happens. Some incident at a bar, but it was on base, which means military police. Whatever it was, it enough to get time served and a bad conduct discharge, which is the kicker, I suspect,” Rhodey told him.

“Let me go out on a limb here,” Tony said wearily. “And guess that a bad conduct discharge affects your benefits.”

“Yep. No benefits unless the VA review board determines you’re eligible. I’ve called my VA guy in DC, but haven’t heard back yet. Since we’re in Vegas, and I’m a betting man,” Rhodey said, letting the words hang in the air.

“Barnes needs some kind of medical treatment, the VA is stonewalling, so Steve…” Tony trailed off.

“Yeah. Sucks,” Rhodey added after a pause.

“Well. Great. Hey, now that I feel like complete and utter shit, I have one miniscule, barely-there–really not that important, probably shouldn’t even mention it–kind of issue to bring to your attention in the middle of a national security crisis and my betrothed’s martyrdom,” Tony said. He rubbed a hand over his forehead and squinted his eyes shut.

“Tony, none of that stuff had anything to do with you. Not even you can stretch your guilt complex that far,” Rhodey huffed. “Spill. Come on. Did you sleep with him? You slept with him, didn’t you?”

“Worse,” Tony sighed.


“I-I might. Maybe? A little. Like, just a tiny bit,” Tony said, scrunching his face together as he waited for Rhodey to tell him how much he fucked up. “I mean, I know, it’s only been a couple of days, and I’m not talking drawing his names in hearts on my TrapperKeeper, here, I’m just…I like him. I like him, and I’m kind of responsible for completely fubaring his life, and now, I’m paying him to pretend to be head over heels for me. I am literally paying him to like me, Rhodey. That’s so fucked up, I can’t even–did I tell you about the time my parents bought me a friend? Well, not bought. Wait, can I say that around you? Anyway, rented, I guess. For the summer, so I’d have someone my age to entertain me when I was home from school. I didn’t think I’d sink to that level, but here I am.”

“You are not sinking to your parents’ asinine level,” Rhodey countered. “That shit they pulled with you was so low, we get oil out of it now. Look, you like the guy. So? Sure, this is awkward, with the whole bogus wedding thing, but, hell, why not? People meet in weird ways all the time.”

“Weird doesn’t really cover this,” Tony grimaced. “There’s too much going on for me to…do this. And Steve, he’s not—he doesn’t…it’s—he’s just trying to help, you know? Like a job-thing. Get his stupid seven grand and help his roomie—“

“Stop making the air quotes,” Rhodey interjected

“Help his friend. Who lives with him. Who he left a great career for,” Tony continued. “And I’m…what? The guy who let his weapons get in the hands of terrorists, Rhodey. The same weapons that probably killed half Steve’s squad and caused whatever happened with Barnes. You don’t think that’s going to put a pin in whatever this—this thing could’ve maybe—fuck.”
Rhodey went quiet, though Tony could feel the weight of the other man’s presence through the phone. Tony’s chest tightened. He had to resist the urge to rub the heel of his hand into the reactor, where it thrummed between his ribs. His stomach rolled, clenched. His eyes prickled at the corners, so he rubbed at them, then blinked up at the ceiling.

He hadn’t realized how much he wanted something with Steve until it was gone. Just like that. Snapped up by some past mistake he was still paying the price for. This time, that price was Steve, apparently. Steve’s blue-tinged grin and earnest insistence that what happened wasn’t Tony’s fault flickered across his mind, like images on an old film, flat and broken.

“Maybe…” Rhodey started, finally, then stopped, biting back whatever it was he thought might come to his head to say.

“No,” Tony said firmly. “We get this thing with Obie and Pierce done. Steve gets his money. We go our separate ways. End of story.”

“Tony,” Rhodey said. “We don’t know it was your stuff. Even if it was, that’s not on you, Tony. We’ve done this song and dance. It isn’t.”

“How would you feel? If it had been your people. Carol, maybe? If it had been Carol, how would you feel?” Tony demanded. He could hear the tension in his voice, the plea, the knowledge, all of it, and damn, why did even care so much? Sure, Steve was great, but it wasn’t like any of this was real in the first place. It was all just for show. Leave it to him to try to twist a simple business transaction into something more just because someone was nice to him for a while. God, he was pathetic sometimes.

“That’s…come on, Tony, that’s not fair, man,” Rhodey replied around a frustrated sigh.

“Yeah, well. Life’s not fair, is it?” Tony pointed out.

"Look, it’s only a few more days before all this goes down, Tones. If you want to throw yourself on your sword after that, fine, but we need this guy cooperating. I don’t need to tell you how this could look for us if it goes South or if Pierce gets wind of anything," Rhodey reminded him. "A few days, Tony. Let it ride until this is over, okay? Then, we'll sit him down and you can say your piece. I think he might be a bit more understanding than you think."

“You’re going to find out about this VA thing?” Tony asked after a long beat of silence, swallowing thickly as he tried to find the thread of conversation again. “I’ll find out from Pepper who on the VA Committee owes us. I want that handled.”

“I’m on it,” Rhodey promised.

“God, Rhodey, this sucks,” Tony spat out, voice high and quaking, almost a laugh, then closed his eyes.

“I know,” Rhodey said. “I know, Tony. It really, really does. I’m sorry.”

“I’m going to nail Obie to the wall, I swear to God,” Tony ground out.

“We are going to nail Obie to the wall,” Rhodey corrected.

“Look, I’ve got to go. Dinner date with the hubs and all,” Tony rushed out. “Should be fun.”

“Tony, come on, don’t do th—“ Rhodey began. Tony hit the end call button before Rhodey could finish, then stared down at his phone. It buzzed in his hand, Rhodey’s picture lighting up the screen
again. Tony sighed and hit the answer button.

“I know you did not just hang up on me,” Rhodey said pointedly. “Look, I get how this looks right now, okay? I’m not saying it’s an easy thing, something like that. But, it isn’t on you, Tony. It just isn’t. Not the way you want to take it on you, anyway, because you’re Tony Stark and you know all, and so anytime something goes wrong, that’s on you. I know how you think. You’ve done that to yourself for years, but this one? This one’s on the guy who sold weapons under the table to make a few more bucks than what you were already giving him, and the assholes who used them on their people and our soldiers. Yeah, you’re smart as hell, but not even you can control everyone and everything, no matter how hard you try.”

“I should’ve seen it. Stopped it. *Years,* Rhodey. He was doing it for years,” Tony said, teeth grinding together on the words. “Patting me on the head and sending me off to the workshop while he did *this.* And I went. And now, here we are. If this—if not getting some possible thing with a guy I like—if that’s what I get, then that’s what I get, okay? Maybe that’s—penance or balance or, I don’t know, the universe getting her Karma on, whatever. Fair’s fair. It’s—he’s one guy. I mean, a great guy, sure, but it’s not the end of the world. It’s fine. I’m good. Really. Look, I do have to get ready, though, so…we good here?”

“Course we’re good here, Tony, come on, man. You know I got your back,” Rhodey responded immediately. “Call me tomorrow, okay?”


“Her name is Rainbow Sparkles, which you know, and no, I will not, because you mocked her,” Rhodey answered.

“There’s a glitter bomb in my future, isn’t there?” Tony asked.

“You’ll never see it coming,” Rhodey told him ominously. The phone went dark and silent as Rhodey ended the call. Tony shook his head to clear it, the smile fading away as he stared at the black screen.

Tony showered, took his time shaving and getting dressed for dinner in a sleek, silver-gray suit. What he told Rhodey was true. Steve was a great guy, but there were lots of great guys. He’d only known Steve a couple of days, anyway. Maybe the guy picked his nose. Liked processed cheese or voted Republican. Or a true dealbreaker, liking having a Team Edward t-shirt hidden somewhere. Point was, he really didn’t know Steve all that well, and what he did know of him was part sham, part best behavior. He was reading way too much into those few moments of pretense. Tony opened the bureau drawer and perused the tie selection, then pulled out the one with the tiny racecars on it with a smirk.

By the time he stepped out of his bedroom and into the living room, he felt better. More himself. Maybe, had things been different, something could’ve worked out with Steve for a bit. They could’ve had some fun, who knows? But, losing out on something with Steve wasn’t exactly the end of the world.

“Hey, Tony. Wow. You look great,” Steve said as he stood up from his seat on the sofa in his suit that fit him like the silkworms wound it around him and smiled softly at Tony. Tony’s breath caught in his throat. His chest hitched and his stomach sank to his knees then floated back up to a cradle of warmth that filled his belly. “I like your tie,” Steve told him, a small, shy smile tugging at his lips.

Ah, fucking hell.
It might be the end of the world.
I like your tie?

Honestly, this was probably what Bucky meant when he said Steve had no idea how to talk to people. He just… Tony walked out, looking amazing, and Steve’s mind went blank, which in no way stopped his mouth from working, apparently. He’d already spent nearly twenty minutes trying to de-slushie his mouth, because it was that or spend an evening with Tony Stark while looking like he’d been snacking on a bunch of Smurfs. And now he was staring at Tony Stark the way he used to press his face to the glass at Williams Candy, with its rows of blue and pink cotton candy dangling in the window over trays of candy apples they dipped right there in the store.

Steve swallowed, shook his head a bit and shoved his hands in his pockets, looking down at the carpet, where his shoes shone with such a high polish, he could see a bit of his reflection distorted across the toes. When he looked back up, Tony was looking him up and down with an almost shocked expression, that Steve hoped meant that clothes made the man and all that.

“I mean, you look nice. With the—the tie and suit and all,” Steve stammered. “The different suit. Than the one from earlier.”

To be fair, Bucky really did have a point.

“Thanks,” Tony said in a somewhat rough, strangled tone. He cleared his throat and made something of a show of checking his watch, then looked back up at Steve. “So. Dinner. Wheel of death thing.”

“Right,” Steve nodded. They stared at each other for a moment, and then Tony’s face slipped into a practiced grin that didn’t quite seem to want to stay on his face.

“It’s the High Roller, not the wheel of death, and I have a private pod for the two of you with champagne waiting. Stand close to the windows, look at the sights, wave to the nice people with cameras as you go by,” Pepper said as she strode into the room.

“Why does this make me think of fish in a bowl? Can we get a ‘Don’t tap on the glass’ sign?” Tony asked rhetorically. “I feel like there’s a Free Willy joke in here somewhere that I’m missing, and that’s the real tragedy, let’s be honest.”

“Along with that tie,” Pepper retorted, flattening her mouth and giving Tony a pointed look.

“Steve likes my tie,” Tony countered. “He said so. Thinks it makes me look all hot and manly and oddly fashion-forward, sort of a Warhol-esque renaissance thing happening, in fact.”

“I…didn’t say that,” Steve corrected.

“It was implied,” Tony shrugged, then flashed a smile at Steve. Pepper rolled her eyes.

“Alright, get going. Take your fashion disaster enabler with you,” Pepper added.

“Well, shall we, husband dear? The night is young, as they say,” Tony said. “Someone, and by someone, I mean Pepper, has tipped off the press to our evening plans, so try for besotted with a side of enamored.”

“And don’t talk to anyone,” Pepper chided as Steve walked over to meet Tony by the elevator. “I’m
working on scheduling a press conference, though I hope that all of this wraps up before we need to put you in front of the cameras. They’re salivating over it, of course, but the last thing we need is to lose control of the narrative.”

“Hear that? Stranger danger,” Tony teased. “No taking candy from the nice men in the white news van.”

“I’ll try to resist,” Steve promised with a deprecating smile. He pressed the button to call the elevator and glanced over at Tony standing by his side. He was bouncing on his heels as he stood, hands in front of him, fingers snapping as they waited, all uncontained energy and motion.

“You look nice, too,” Tony told him, craning his neck a bit as he offered the compliment and adjusting his tie, though it didn’t need it. Steve had the thought that either Tony’s hands or mouth needed to be doing something at any given time, and then felt his cheeks warm at the unintended meaning.

“Thanks,” Steve replied.

“Rhodey told me about Gulmira, Hansel,” Tony said, voice going tight and quiet. The elevator pinged, making Steve jump. His heart raced. Just the elevator, he told himself. It’s just a damn elevator chime. “Sorry, that’s—timing, yeah. I know. I’m—shit. I’m sorry, here,” Tony rushed out, bracing an arm across the elevator door to hold it. “I just thought you should know. That I know. That he told me, I mean. Not the—not the details or whatever, just that you were there and uh, that you—I guess I kind of owe you my life, seeing as how I’d probably be still doing my forty years of wandering in the desert if it weren’t for you, so there’s that, and, so, I wanted to say, you know…thanks and that’s really, really small, and—I like the tie, too, so. Yeah. Thanks. For the tie thing, but mostly the location thing, however you got it, and I’m sorry for—for what happened to you and your team over there. You should know that I’m terrible with guilt. Truly, truly awful. Back me up here, Pep—Pep?”

Tony trailed off, looking around for back-up, apparently, and finding the suite empty. The elevator sounded again and the doors tried to slide shut, though stopped as they brushed against Tony’s outstretched arm.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said again, looking down and away before dragging his gaze back to Steve. “What happened to you. That’s on me, and—I just thought you should know. Believe it or not, this sounded really profound in my head,” Tony added after a moment of silence. He dropped his arm and let the elevator slide shut. He looked at Steve, flattened his mouth and rolled his bottom lip between his teeth, and gave a quick nod, though Steve hadn’t said anything to agree with. A flicker of something that looked almost like sadness crossed his face, then was gone, and an airbrushed smile fell into its place. “You can bow out of this if you want. God knows, I’ve fucked up your life enough as it is. You know I’m going to give you the damn seven grand, so…”

“That’s classified. The stuff you said,” Steve said. He could feel a buzzing whine building in the back of his head. Not just hear it, but feel it. It made him want to shake his head until it stopped, cover his ears with his hands, something. Breathe, Sam would say. Focus. Find order. What’s the first thing on our to-do list? Breathe.

“I know. I know, and I shouldn’t have just dropped that on you, obviously, I—I wanted you to know—I thought you need to know. That I knew. That—so, if you did want out, I mean, I get it,” Tony replied.

“I’m not bowing out of anything, Tony,” Steve said, harsher than he’d intended, but he was still reeling from the mention of Gulmira. “Why do you keep doing that? Trying to give me an out? It’s
like you want me to walk away from this, but you’re the one who pulled me into it in the first place.”

“I—” Tony started. He broke off and sucked in a breath, glancing down for a long moment. “I
don’t want you to walk away from this. I don’t. I need your help. Not just with Stern and that
whole thing, but this whole marriage thing is a great distraction. Everyone thinks I fucked up. Not
without some precedent, I’ll admit. I’ve gotten five emails from Obie, all about whether I got a pre-
nup or how I can get a post-nup and what lawyers he used for his divorces.”

“Might want to hang onto those,” Steve advised. His stomach twisted. Because of Gulmira, he told
himself, and could almost believe it.

“Well, look, whatever Obie thinks is going on, it isn’t that the shit’s about to hit the fan on illegal
arms deals. If we call this off now, it looks weird. Raises suspicions. Believe it or not, it’s pretty
easy for most of the world to believe that I went to Vegas and got drunk and stupid. That’s a
narrative not many people are going to question. It’s useful,” Tony acknowledged with a shrug that
made Steve give an internal wince at how easily Tony accepted that kind of judgment. “I’d like to
keep it going. But, I’m using you a bit here, and I know it. Willing participant, I get it,” Tony said,
holding his hands out in front of him in a placating gesture. “Look, I’m just… I’m trying out this
whole honesty thing,” Tony continued, mouth twisting into a grimace. “You helped save my life.
What happened. What got you here, to this place and this point in life, I think it had more to do with
me than—than maybe I realized, and I don’t want to take advantage of something I caused in the first
place. That feels a bit like what I’m doing here.”

“For fuck’s sake, Tony, you got kidnapped,” Steve snapped drawing Tony’s wide, startled eyes to
his face. “Look,” Steve continued, trying to soften his voice, mostly so it wouldn’t shake. “I know
you want to take everything on you, because then, if it’s on you, you’re the one who can do
something about it. Make sure it doesn’t happen again. I get it. Believe me, I get it, I do,” Steve bit
out, then stopped. Sucked in a breath. Scrubbed a hand over his face. The words tasted coppery in
his mouth. Adrenaline, he knew, though the knowing did nothing to lessen it. Focus. Put it in
order. “But that isn’t how this works. We had orders. We did our job. We knew the risks.”

“Maybe you didn’t know all the risks,” Tony mumbled quietly. He held Steve’s gaze for a fraction of
a second, then looked away, a fisted hand fluttering over his chest, but never landing.

“Maybe a lack of perfect information is part of the risk,” Steve shot back, then let out a puff of air
through his nose. “Come on, Tony, do you honestly think I don’t know what someone trying to take
advantage of me feels like? This isn’t it, okay? Trust me.”

“Fine,” Tony said abruptly, then turned back towards the elevator and hit the call button again. “I
can’t believe I fake married the only idiot in Vegas with both the guilt complex and penchant for
public nudity that rival my own. What’re the odds?”

“Penchant for public nudity?” Steve echoed as the elevator doors slid open again.

“Don’t go on YouTube,” Tony warned. “Or, do, but understand, one—okay, that fountain was very
cold. It was December. You can tell by the Santa hat on my—Anyway, I was festive, okay? ‘Tis
the season and all that. Two,” Tony continued as he stepped into the elevator car. “The tramp stamp
was not permanent, though, I think, a butterfly lends itself to a certain metaphorical quality, and
three, that thing with the statute taught me what I feel is an invaluable lesson about chafing that I
cherish to this day.”

Tony caught Steve’s eye roll in the reflection on the elevator doors, clucked his tongue in his cheek
and grinned.
“What? Don’t tell me you never did anything dangerously stupid in your misspent youth. Besides the dangerously stupid thing we’re doing now, I mean,” Tony clarified with a huff of a laugh.

“I jumped on a grenade in Basic,” Steve replied with a shrug.

“Excuse me?” Tony demanded, voice pitching high. “You did what now? Because, here I was, secure in my knowledge that giving Oceanus a bit of holiday cheer got the gold star on the What Not To Do Chart, but you come back at me with ‘jumped on a grenade in Basic,’ and my whole worldview is shattered. Is grenade a metaphor for explosively hot guy with a, ah, short pin? I’m not judging,” Tony assured with a quick wave of his hands.

“No,” Steve said around a laugh that got bigger as he tried to contain it. “How are you even real?”

“The question everyone gets to, eventually, but I see you skipped right over mine, so try again. Grenade? Jumping on?” Tony pressed. “Do tell, Steven.”

“The Colonel who was in charge of our training—Phillips—apparently had this first day tradition of tossing a dud at the recruits. To see how everyone would react. Which, you know, duck and cover is generally what you’re going for with a grenade,” Steve said.

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open. Steve gave Tony a quick look, then reached for his hand, grasping it tightly. There were only a few people milling about, but Steve could feel heads turn as they passed by. There was a change in the air, an awareness of him that he had gotten used to not having except when he was up on stage, under lights bright enough he didn’t have to see their faces if he didn’t want to.

Tony gave his hand a squeeze, and Steve’s head bobbed once, jaw tightening, and they were in the brightness of the lobby, skirting suitcase-laden carts, a loud group of women wearing tiaras and feathered boas in a rainbow of colors and a group of young men who were mimicking the Hangover, down to one of them sporting a sunglasses-wearing doll in a baby carrier strapped to his chest. Steve just shook his head. Vegas was equal parts wonderful and terrible, and you never could quite pin down which one was winning. The House. The House always wins, right? Maybe not this time, though, Steve thought with a quick look at Tony.

They strolled through the lobby at a leisurely pace this time, since the gauntlet of reporters had thankfully disappeared or gotten far better at blending in. Two young girls came up to ask Tony for an autograph, and he seemed happy enough to oblige, making quick work of the signing and small talk before agreeing to take a selfie with his admirers.

“Get my handsome husband in here,” Tony insisted, tugging Steve’s hand until he hunched down for the photo. “He’s quite the catch, am I right? No one can blame me,” Tony teased, making the girls laugh and blush as they looked at Steve. It was silly and playful, and Tony made it so easy on everyone, even the girls, who looked vaguely starstruck, but managed to answer Tony’s questions about their college majors and whether they’d tried the KISS mini-golf yet. Best slushies in town, Tony told them, flashing a grin at Steve.

By the time they made it outside, Happy had the car waiting with the door open for them, and Steve ducked into the backseat after Tony.

“Look how cute we are,” Tony said, holding up his phone where the picture from a moment before had popped up on his Twitter feed. “JARVIS?” Tony called out.

“How may I be of assistance, Sir?” a British voice answered from Tony’s phone.
“See if you can get this trending, how about?” Tony requested.

“Of course, Sir. Ms. Potts has already requested I monitor social media, and I’ve prepared several algorithms for maximum exposure,” the voice said.


“Jarvis is your…computer?” Steve asked.

“AI. Artificial intelligence,” Tony corrected.


“Among his many talents,” Tony confirmed with a nod.

“You designed him?” Steve asked.

“I did. Been working on AI since my MIT days. Some of my earliest ‘bots have basic learning algorithms in their programming, but JARVIS is far more sophisticated. He helps with my research projects, company stuff, keeping track of things for me, that kind of thing. At least, he did, until you became the Bonnie to my Clyde and led him to a life a crime,” Tony shrugged, shooting Steve a cheeky grin. “Today, forgery. Tomorrow, he goes all shall-we-play-a-game on us. Good place for it, I guess. Vegas. History and all.”

“They used to watch the testing from the Sky Room at the old Desert Inn,” Steve said. He turned to look out the tinted window, where the Strip blazed with color. “The rich and powerful people who ran Vegas. They’d have parties up there and wait for the mushroom clouds. I read that somewhere.”

“Howard—my father—he did some work on the Manhattan Project. Probably went to those parties at some point. If there were women and booze there, it’s probably a given,” Tony said lightly, though there was a stiffness to the way he said it.

“Your father…he started your company, right?” Steve asked, pulling at the thread of memory.

“Yeah. Believe it or not, Stark Industries started out as Stark Cannery, up in your old stomping grounds. Worked mostly out of a basement in some dump down by the wharf,” Tony told him. “Wasn’t much at first. But, he designed and built all the processing equipment. Most of it was automated way beyond what was standard back then. I’ve got a picture of him, somewhere, standing in front of this conveyor belt of cans being filled with pureed tomatoes.”

“I didn’t know that,” Steve remarked.

“I think it embarrassed him, later, the whole food thing, but that’s where he got his start,” Tony sighed. “World War Two was great for him, though. Canning business was booming with the boys needing food overseas. Made some money. Let him do other things. And what other things were needed most? Weapons. Turns out, Dad was pretty good at making those, too. So, Stark Cannery became Stark Industries, and the rest is history, I guess.”

“Seems like an exciting way for you to grow up. Someone like that as your old man. For you, anyway. Someone who would, I don’t know, get you, I guess. But, you said…yesterday, you kind of mentioned you had, ah, issues. With your father,” Steve said.

“Why did I marry the one person who pays attention to me? It’s really annoying,” Tony grumbled. “Yes, okay, Howard and I, we had our…differences. I mean, you’d think, he and I, it’d be great, right? I don’t know, he was busy, I was obnoxious, mom was overwhelmed. Never really seemed
to connect, for whatever reason. Shipped me off to boarding school as soon as I was old enough, then paid them a lot of money to take me back when I acted like me. Probably for the best, to tell you the truth,” Tony shrugged. “I did, eventually, grow up, despite what you might have heard. We even managed the occasional holiday discourse when not studiously ignoring each other right up until he died, like we knew, if we moved past the weather and his golf game, it was mutually assured destruction. No yelling. No blow-ups. Everyone was calm. Polite. We had the quietest house you can imagine. Worked great.”

“I didn’t know my dad. He left when mom told him she was pregnant. Gave her a hundred dollars and told her to get an abortion. He died when I was eight. Cancer,” Steve said. He dropped his gaze from the window, down to his hands, where the lights trailed in long, blurry streams through the glass. “Never even tried to see me. Even when he was dying.”

“To Fathers of the Year,” Tony said, tipping his hand up in the air as if holding a glass. “What a couple of assholes.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed.

“We’re here,” Tony said, peering out the window as they pulled up to the front of the MGM Grand with its giant, gold lion statue guarding the entrance. “Happy? Pull us right up in there by Simba, okay? Do the whole floorshow bit with the car.”

Happy swerved the car into the valet lane near the entrance and left it running while he hopped out to open the door. Steve stepped out, followed by Tony, who was quickly met by the casino’s VIP hostess, who identified herself as Trisha and ushered them inside. Past glass doors etched with a lion’s head, the Grand’s massive lobby was awash with rich, deep golds and jewel tones, and another golden lion statue greeted them when they stepped inside.

People turned, stared, grabbed for phones. Steve was starting to get used to it, at least a bit. Tony had his plastic smile plastered on his face, and was nodding along with Trisha while she explained how he could spend his money once they were done with dinner.

They followed her through the casino and out past the Cirque du Soleil theater, where huge posters of gravity-defying performers hung on the wall. The restaurant’s entrance curved outward and heralded the famous chef’s name over the door. Black and white patterned tiles crisscrossed the floor underneath a glass chandelier dripping with beads that looked almost too heavy for the ceiling. They were met by the maitre’d, a tall, thin man dressed all in black who welcomed them with a thick, French accent and escorted them to a table in the middle of the restaurant that was flanked by an elongated, curved purple sofa on one side and black lacquered, cream-backed chairs on the other. Tony took the chair the maitre’d pulled out, leaving Steve to slide into the sofa…thing.

“I understand the menu for your dinner has been pre-arranged with the Chef this evening,” the maitre’d said.

“My husband can’t even watch Finding Nemo without swelling up. Wait. That sounded wrong,” Tony said, canting his head at Steve with a quizzical expression before his face fell into a laugh. Steve shook his head and made a show of rolling his eyes, but he found himself smiling in return.

“I can’t take you anywhere,” Steve commented in mock anger.

“Well, certainly, the aquarium is out,” Tony agreed. Steve couldn’t help laughing at that, though he tried to contain it when he caught the maitre’d’s carefully bland expression. Tony seemed delighted by it all, grinning widely with a look that said he had gotten away with something, and Steve’s mind flashed to a quiet, beautiful house where everyone was polite and no one yelled.
Our sommelier will have your wine out in a moment, Mr. Stark. The ’47 Petrus, was it?” the maitre’d asked. Tony shrugged and nodded. Another waiter came by and filled their water glasses, while someone else spun in and dropped a basket of bread on the table, all with practiced grace.

Excellent choice, Sir.”

Steve was fairly sure ‘excellent choice’ was a euphemism for ‘really, really expensive,’ but he didn’t ask. He probably wouldn’t be able to drink it if he knew the cost. Looking across the table at Tony, he balanced his arms on the table and leaned back against the purple couch, studying the man for a moment.

What a contradiction, Steve thought. Not at all the kind of man he had expected, at least not based on their short-lived interaction in Bagram and the bits and pieces he picked up from the news. Oh, that Tony, the brash, flirtatious ne’er-do-well was certainly on display at times, but underneath it all was a charming, generous, funny and blindingly smart man who was trying to put something terrible to right, and willing to use that flawed perception of himself to do it.

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“That was nice of Pepper to arrange dinner,” Steve remarked.

“Pepper’s a nice person,” Tony said, then his mouth cut to a grimace. “She should be doing more than making sure some shellfish don’t kill my better half. Once all this is over…”

“Once all this is over, what?” Steve pressed.

“I was thinking about, maybe, taking a kind of sabbatical. Sort of a finding myself, self-discovery road-trip—except not literal, because I don’t really do road trips—Keanu Reeves-Zen thing. I told you about some of my ideas, but there’s…I, ah. I have a lot. Of them. Ideas,” Tony stammered, his face squelching up for a moment at the admission. “Maybe get her to take on some more responsibility on the corporate side of things. Take some off my plate. I mean, I think I can trust that if she wanted to kill me, she’d have done it during the Maxim model thing, so there’s that going for her,” Tony huffed, trying for a smirk, though Steve could see the flicker of hurt twist across Tony’s face.

“Speaking of, did you really…” Steve let the question hang in the air.

“March and I had a scheduling conflict, but fortunately, the Christmas cover was twins,” Tony replied, though his voice had gone cold and flat, and he stilled for a moment before rubbing the heel of his hand into the center of his chest. “It was—it was—quite the year. I guess you could—shit,” Tony muttered, letting his fist drop to the table and reaching for the glass of water in front of him and nearly tipping it over before he let his head fall to his hand. Steve reached out and grabbed Tony’s wrist. He could feel the pulse pounding beneath his fingers.

“Hey. Hey, Tony, it’s okay. It’s okay,” Steve said, keeping his voice pitched soft and low. “Breathe, okay? Breathe for me.”

“Sorry,” Tony garbled out. “Sorry, it’s stupid, I know, it—“

“I sleep on the floor,” Steve said abruptly.

“Huh?” Tony said, pulling his head from his hand and blinking at Steve.

“Some nights. Not always. I’ll wake up and the bed, it’s too soft, like…like I’m going to sink down, right through it, and I’ll wake up and be back over there. I know it doesn’t make sense,” Steve told him. “I know it’s stupid. Crazy. Whatever you want to call it. But, the floor is solid and the bed’s not, and I can tell myself nothing is going to happen over and over, but those nights, if I want to sleep, I have to sleep on the floor. And I hate myself a little bit each time I do it. It’s like that part of
me, that messed up part, is winning when I do it, but it’s not. It’s not, Tony, because we’re here. Each day, we keep going, and we’re here. The messed up part isn’t winning, but it wants you to feel like it is, so it tells you how stupid you are when you sleep on the floor because that’s the thing that’s getting you to the next day.”


“Sometimes,” Steve said. He realized he was still holding Tony’s wrist, making a circle over the skin on the underside with the pad of his thumb and let go, sliding his arm back across the table and busying himself with adjusting the cloth napkin in his lap. The wine came, then, and the sommelier made a show of opening the bottle and pouring a taste for Tony, who drank it down without any of the usual aplomb and signaled for more.

“Grinding Nemo,” Steve said suddenly, making Tony stop mid-drink and have to cough down the rest of his swallow of wine. “Sorry.”

“Excuse me? Did you just say Grinding Nemo?” Tony choked out, then leaned back in his chair and grinned across the table. “I feel like going with porn parody, but not going to lie, I’ll be kind of disappointed if that isn’t some kind of sick fish snuff film.”

“One of the guys at work does porn on the side, and somehow, ended up doing all of these parodies. Says there’s a niche market for them. Forrest Hump. Pulp Friction. Honey, I Blew Everybody. He’s very proud,” Steve said with a small lift of his shoulders.

“How is it that I make high-tech weapons in my basement, get kidnapped by terrorists, build a mechanical suit to escape and you still have better work stories?” Tony asked with a laugh. He took a drink of his wine, dropped his eyes down to the salmon he was picking at, then lifted his gaze back to Steve. “Speaking of your… work. As we are. Are you going to tell me how come a nice up-and-comer—wow, after the porn talk, everything sounds dirty. Anyway, how’d someone like you end up in a place like that?”

“How’d someone like you end up in a place like that?” Steve countered as their first course arrived. Cannelloni and avocado with Scottish salmon in some kind of cream sauce, according to the waiter. Steve glanced over at Tony and raised an eyebrow. “Scottish salmon? Tell me you’re not imagining them in little kilts.”

“If you listen closely, you can hear it mocking the English. Anyway, fair point on the club. Rhodey. All his fault. Okay, maybe, like twelve percent my fault, but, honestly, mostly on Rhodey,” Tony said, bobbing his head with a nod. “And, thankfully so, of course,” he finished, tipping his glass in Steve’s direction. “He’d heard things. About the club and who is a frequent visitor there. Stern, for instance. Some other players in this whole military industrial cesspool. The club’s owned by a shell company that’s owned by a single-entity LLC, that’s owned by another, et cetera, et cetera. But, if you work your way up the chain, you get to a company called AIM, which, if I’m not mistaken, is using a network of these seemingly legit enterprises, like your club, to launder ill-gotten gains from all kinds of black market deals.”

“So, you weren’t just there to watch, huh?” Steve asked. For some reason, it was both refreshing that Tony had some kind of other reason for being there and embarrassing at the same time. He had thought Tony was there to consume, like everyone else, and Steve was there to be consumed. That was the deal. There was something equalizing about that.

“Eh. Well. I mean. I wasn’t exactly not looking,” Tony admitted. “I think we both know that. You came out, and… truth be told, I couldn’t take my eyes off you.” He dropped his gaze down to his plate and twirled his fork against the edge, picking apart the cannelloni without eating it, then
looked back up at Steve with an apologetic grimace.

“That was kind of the point, Tony,” Steve reminded him. “Believe it or not, I didn’t get hired for my scintillating conversational skills.” Tony barked out a low chuckle, nodded and seemed to relax, leaning back in his seat and swishing the wine around in the glass before taking another taste.

“The stripping thing. That’s because of Barnes, right? The crap with the VA,” Tony said.

It probably shouldn’t have surprised Steve that Tony knew about that, though he couldn’t help the slight sting of something like shame that he quickly tamped down. He had long ago promised himself he wasn’t going to feel badly about what he was doing. There was nothing wrong with it. Even if it had been something of a last resort, it was honest money.

That was it, though, he supposed. The trail of other things he’d tried and failed that led to even considering the ‘dancers wanted’ ad. They were going to put me up for a Medal of Honor, he wanted to say. I was someone. I mattered. I didn’t want this life. I tried other things, but there were appointments and sometimes he needed me to stay with him and sometimes the neighbors called because of the noise and sometimes the landlord called because the left the water running in the sink and it flooded and sometimes and sometimes and sometimes. I didn’t want it, but I wouldn’t trade it, because he’s still the best part of me, even if he can’t see that and no one else can see that and sometimes I can’t, either, and that’s the worst part. He didn’t say any of that, of course. It didn’t make a difference now.

“He’s appealing it,” Steve said instead.


“You—you could?” Steve repeated. “You’d do that?”

“Sure. Why not? Guy gets hurt over there, and now they want to keep him from getting medical care? That’s bullshit. Who’d he piss off, anyway?” Tony guessed.

“General Ross. Well, General Ross’s aide,” Steve said. “Buck got between him and this girl he was bothering at a bar. Both of them had been drinking, and Bucky, he—he was having a hard time. I’m not excusing it. He shouldn’t have—it went too far. It did. The guy lost three teeth. Broken nose. It was bad. But, me there, I’d have done something, too. He could’ve gotten a dishonorable or something that would’ve let him keep his benefits, but Ross was out for blood, and…I don’t know. It got political somehow. By the time I got stateside, it was already mostly done. No one was going to cross the General, and Bucky, he just…I don’t know. Shut down. They gave him time served, and everything else beyond getting out, he just didn’t care about.”

“So, you don’t re-up, come back home, try to get your friend some help and somehow end up in Vegas,” Tony finished for him. “Why Vegas?”

“Have you priced housing in Brooklyn?” Steve laughed. “It’s a little outside my pay grade at the moment.” Waiters arrived to deftly remove their plates and replace them with the second course, some kind of soft-boiled egg on a spinach puree with a cheese sauce. It turned out to be delicious.

“Your friend. He means a lot to you,” Tony observed, canting his head to the side as his eyes narrowed.

“He’s my best friend,” Steve said. “He’d do it for me, if things were different. You and Colonel Rhodes—“
“Yeah,” Tony cut him off. “I’m not saying I don’t get it. Rhodey needs me to take my clothes off, I’m absolutely doing it. Mostly, he’s spent years trying to get me to keep my clothes on, but, I take your point. Okay. Well. We’ve established that you’re incredibly self-sacrificing and have little to know sense of self-preservation, which, admittedly, are currently traits that work in my favor,” Tony said, splaying his hands wide while he dangled the fork over his plate. “So, this whole Tony-whisperer thing you have going with me…” Tony began, lips quirking up a bit at the corners. “The counting and the breathing, all that…you seem to have some firsthand experience. Are you seeing someone? Not like—I don’t mean like seeing someone, like that. Like, a professional someone. Not a professional,” Tony amended, taking a breath and flattening his mouth. “Not that I’d be judging that, but a—you know what I mean. Shrink-type person.”

“I go to meetings down at the VA center sometimes,” Steve told him. “Nothing regular, but I try to. When we can. There’s a counselor there. Sam. Well, he’s a peer specialist, they call them. Helps other veterans find services, that kind of thing. I’ve—I talked to him, some. He lets me bring Bucky when I can get him to go, even though, technically, the meetings are VA-sponsored. I did a lot of research on the internet, trying to find some things to help Bucky that we could do, just to, you know, help him cope.”

“Because Barnes is the one who needs the help,” Tony replied in a carefully measured tone. “You sleep on the floor because your too-soft bed might be a portal to a warzone. Steve, you have access to benefits, why aren’t you at least—“

“Wow, you—you really have no idea, do you?” Steve cut in with a bitter huff of a laugh. “The waitlist for an evaluation is four months long, unless you’re an imminent threat. And even then, you only get an evaluation and a few sessions covered. Not to mention that they drug test you weekly at the club, and I can’t have any of that stuff in my system, or I’ll get fired.” Steve looked away for a moment, at the other diners who were enjoying their food, chatting with waiters and occasionally pointing at Tony while surreptitiously attempting to take a photo. “In a little bit, none of that will matter, right? Then I can…do whatever. I don’t know. I’ll handle it. It’s fine,” Steve insisted, going back to his plate of food, mainly to give himself something to do.

“You know, I’ve heard that exact bullshit answer come out of my own mouth,” Tony replied after a beat of silence, though his voice was surprisingly gentle and devoid of judgment. “I’ll help. You know I will. When all this is over, you, Barnes, we’ll figure it out, okay? Whatever you need. We’ll take care of it,” he promised softly, so only Steve could hear.

“You don’t owe me—“ Steve started.

“Oh, God, shut up.” Tony cut in with a groan. “It’s a good thing you’re pretty, you know that? You’re going to drive me crazy with this whole weight of the world thing you have going. Come on, Atlas, fucking shrug for a God-damn minute, would you? I can help. I want to help. It isn’t about owing you, it’s because I happen to care about what happens to you, you stubborn, walking… martyr complex! God,” Tony ground out again, loudly this time, then rubbed a hand through his hair and pushed back against his chair. Steve watch him check the looks of the people seated around them, then pull himself back up to the table and lean over his plate, finishing off the egg in a few bites and downing the rest of his wine, only to have the server appear from the ether to refill his glass.

“I like you. Okay. You’re a good person. Better than…better than a lot of people. I like you, and whatever happens here, I want you to be okay,” Tony said after a moment. He wasn’t looking at Steve when he said it, though he raised his eyes up to Steve’s as the next course appeared and the waiter went through what they were eat. Steve watched as Tony rubbed his lips together, wiped a hand over them, then picked up the fork and knife and held them on either side of his plate before
taking a breath and looking back at Steve. “Eat your…er, did he say chickpea cappuccino?”

“Here. Try it,” Steve offered, taking some on the small fork and holding it out for Tony. “I like you, too, Tony,” he said quietly, barely a whisper, tipping his head up encouragingly. Tony huffed out a low breath, but gamely leaned forward. Steve felt his stomach lurch and tighten as Tony slipped his mouth over the end of the fork and took the proffered bite. It was strangely intimate, sharing food like this, though he supposed that was the whole point of this outing.

“So, you’ve already told me about your experiences with farm animals while in the Army…you know, honestly, everything just sounds wrong after Grinding Nemo,” Tony said with a shake of his head as he bit into his foie gras. “Forget it. You ever think about using your degree? Outside of the military, I mean? Got to be a demand for that kind of thing with, say, I don’t know…some kind of defense contractor-type situation.”

“Subtle,” Steve laughed. “But, maybe. One day. I don’t know.”

“I’m just saying,” Tony grinned.

“You’re a good person, Tony,” Steve said. “You’re smart and you’re good and you’ve got more money than any one person needs, but that doesn’t make it your responsibility to fix me, you know.”

“I’m not—I’m not trying to fix you,” Tony muttered, mouth twisting around the last, as if the words tasted wrong. “God knows, I’m the last person who should be doing that. But—and I know you think I don’t owe you—but, let’s say—let’s say maybe I try to make it up to you, anyway?”

“Put the lighter down, Joan,” Steve said, making Tony frown in confusion. “I’m hardly the only one with a martyr complex at this table, Tony.”

“Well…still,” Tony stammered, dropping his gaze down to the table. “I know you’re worried about your friend, and that’s a lot. On you, I mean. Trying to…to make sure he’s okay, and maybe—maybe you don’t do so good taking care of yourself. I’m only making a suggestion. Purely hypothetical, obviously, because you said you’re fine, and that’s obviously completely the case,” Tony said quickly when Steve opened his mouth to protest.

“You don’t give up, do you?” Steve asked with a sigh. He drew in a breath and let it out again. He didn’t know why he was fighting Tony so hard on this. He could find common ground with the man and deny the existence of the same within the space of a dinner, and he didn’t know why, except that admitting how hard it was to Tony felt like admitting defeat. It’s not failing to ask for help, Sam’s voice echoed in his head.

“Um, you did hear about the whole metal suit, flying out of a cave full of terrorists thing, right? So, yeah, no. Not so big on the giving up,” Tony acknowledged with a deprecating smile. “One of my few finer points that doesn’t involve a Swiss bank account.”

“You got plenty of finer points, Tony, and the least of them is your money,” Steve countered.

“Flatterer. Bet you say that to all your husbands,” Tony accused lightly.

“Just the handsome ones,” Steve quipped. Tony gave a low bark of laughter and went back to eating his dinner, though some of the tightness had drained from his face.

Small talk, mostly some kind of one-upmanship between Tony’s boarding school and MIT days and Steve’s lack of self-preservation both growing up and in boot camp, got them safely through the rest of the meal, which was, Steve could admit, incredibly delicious, even if he didn’t know what half of the food he was eating was, even after the waiter explained the courses. Dessert, it turned out, would
be waiting for them on the High Roller, something that Steve was fairly sure was a bit of an off-the-menu accommodation, but Tony was Tony, so of course, one of the best restaurants in the country delivered to a giant Ferris wheel. Why not?

After Tony settled the check, they strolled through the casino, with Tony waving at a few of the people who shouted his name.

“We should come back to the Mansion one of these days,” Tony said idly as they walked. “High limit room, private pool, VIP entrance, courtesy Rolls, you’d like it.”

“You know me so well,” Steve responded. He reached out and tucked his hand through the crook of Tony’s elbow, which earned him a grunt from Tony, though Steve felt him match his steps and lean into it a bit after a moment.

“Fine. We’ll get you a putting green with bumpers on the sides because you’re a giant cheater who hates to lose, a slushie machine, a shake-weight, so you can, ah, work out on your own, if that’s what you kids are calling it these days, and a courtesy Schwinn. You’d like it,” Tony quipped, making Steve laugh as much in startled amazement as anything else.

“You’re something else, Tony,” Steve said, glancing down at the other man. It was a strange feeling, Steve thought. Being noticed. Being seen. Having someone care enough to pay attention to the stupid, little things that didn’t matter. Almost as nice as having someone notice the big things that did. Good Lord, the man was probably going to buy him a bike and put him in therapy, Steve thought with a chuckle that drew Tony’s eyes to his face. He wasn’t sure if he should shake Tony or hug him or both.

“I, ah. I need to go see Bucky. Tomorrow. He’s not answering my calls or texts, and Nat was going to check on him, but…” Steve said instead of doing either.

In a few days, it wouldn’t matter that Tony noticed him, and he had to keep that in mind, or…or this was going to be a lot more difficult than he’d thought. Tony was going to head back to California and his life once this was over, and while Steve didn’t really doubt Tony’s sincerity about helping out him and Bucky, that was just Tony being Tony, apparently. He’d helped all the other soldiers out, hadn’t he? Steve thought Tony probably hadn’t been too far off the mark about their shared guilt complexes, but Tony had the resources to assuage his guilt in ways that Steve didn’t. It didn’t mean anything, he told himself firmly, other than that his initial perception of the man had been about as far off as possible.

“Of course,” Tony said. Over his shoulder, a young woman called out for Mr. Stark, and Tony turned, flashed a smile and a peace sign to whoops and shouts from the crowd.

“Bucky gave me hell about you, you know. Because of the thing in Bagram. Said I should’ve flirted back. Missed my big chance and all that,” Steve commented as they exited the casino and started across the hotel’s lion-themed lobby again.

“And yet, here you are. The wheels of destiny will not be denied,” Tony proclaimed and leaned his head against Steve’s shoulder for a moment before he seemed to regroup, almost in surprise at his own action. “I’ll…I’ll probably have to go with you. Tomorrow. For appearances’ sake and all that.”

“Well. That should be fun for everyone,” Steve deadpanned, then shook his head and looked to the ceiling as if in silent plea.

“I’ll be on my best behavior. No chewing the furniture or peeing on the rug,” Tony promised with a
sideways grin aimed at Steve. “I’ll stay out of your way. Wait in the hallway or something. Don’t worry. It’ll be fine. Now. Tell me more about how your biggest regret in life is not flirting back with me when you had the chance?”

“Thaaaat was not what I said,” Steve smiled as they approached the etched-glass doors.

“Are you sure? Kind of sounded like it,” Tony argued, then shrugged and waggled his eyebrows. Steve rolled his eyes and grinned down at Tony, and then, without thinking, leaned down and kissed him, quick and light. Next to him, he felt Tony’s body stiffen and he slowed, blinked up at Steve with wide, startled eyes. Steve looked up and caught their reflection in the doors just before the doors swooshed open. For all the world, they were the picture of a happy couple, out for a night on the town, too wrapped up in each other to notice the flash of cameras around them that brightened the glass, the pointed fingers, the stares, the way heads turned and eyes widened.

I like him, Steve thought with the bright suddenness of realization.

It took that fraction of a second for Steve to realize that he had stopped pretending somewhere between a panic attack and Gene Simmons’ tongue. This wasn’t a date. This wasn’t real. All of this, Tony’s attention and interest, this was for YouTube and Twitter and the Vegas police, not for him, not really. In the real world, someone like Tony Stark would never be interested in much of anything beyond the obvious from someone like him, and that had been fine the other day, but now, Steve’s gut twisted, and he felt as if someone had doused him in cold water.

“There’s Happy,” Steve said quickly and pulled his arm from where he’d looped it through Tony’s, cleared his throat and nodded his head towards the valet line.

“Your chariot awaits,” Tony replied, sweeping out his arm. Steve tried a smile at the gesture, but it didn’t seem to want to fit on his face, and from Tony’s look, he could tell he wasn’t doing a good job of it. He kept his eyes on the car, where Happy had jumped out to open the door, and struggled inside as quickly as he could. Tony sidled into the backseat next to him, and Happy shut the door, then rounded the car and hopped in the driver’s seat.

“Something wrong?” Tony asked. He was trying for amused, but Steve could hear the thread of tension in his voice and immediately felt terrible for being the one to put it there. Tony was trying to make this whole farce go as smoothly as possible, obviously, and going to more trouble than he needed to in order to make Steve feel comfortable. “Look, I know, I can be kind of an ass sometimes. Just tell me or nudge me or, I don’t know, we’ll come up with a codeword. That’s a military thing, right? Codewords. Secret handshakes, that kind of thing,” Tony continued, the words coming out rushed and tight, and it felt like someone had reached inside Steve’s chest and was squeezing his heart.

“It’s not—you didn’t do anything, Tony,” Steve insisted. “Sorry. I just…” I just remembered who you are and who I am, and that none of this is real. “We’re just, we’re not…in front of everyone now, so, I figured…”

“Right,” Tony said after a beat, then sat back against the back of the car, the flurry of motion seeming to drain out of him. “Right. Of course. That’s…yeah. Good point. No reason to carry this thing too far, right? High Roller, Happy,” he added, almost as an afterthought, slashing a hand through the air, then letting it drop to his thigh where he fisted both his hands, then splayed them out again, before reaching up to tap at his chest. A habit. Some kind of anxiety reflex.

“On it, Boss,” Happy called out.

The ride over to the Linq Hotel’s promenade was relatively short, even with traffic, though the
silence in the car made it feel as if it took far longer. Steve’s mind kept making abortive attempts to come up with conversation starters, but everything sounded like an apology, and what could he really say? Sorry, I panicked because I think I left the fake part of this behind a while ago and only just realized it? He sighed and looked over at Tony’s profile against the bright lights filtering through the car’s window. Not that it was any kind of a tragedy, being sweet on someone like Tony. Maybe they could even have a bit of a fling, once all this drama was over. Tony wasn’t going to pull out of town immediately, after all.

Sure. Because in between bringing down a black market arms ring that operated at the highest echelons of government and running a multi-billion dollar global conglomerate, Tony Stark was going to want to spend his free time getting to know the stripper he had to pretend to marry in order to avoid a felony charge.

Not that Steve thought that Tony would turn down something physical happening. Steve wasn’t blind to the way Tony sometimes looked appreciatively at him, even when they weren’t in public. Did he want that with Tony? A night or two that Tony would forget as soon as he was wheels up from Vegas? Would he be a joke for Tony to tell one day, like the Maxim cover girls, some notch on his bedpost kind of thing? Hey, remember that time I had to pretend to be married to the stripper? At least he was a decent lay. The thought stung, more than Steve really wanted to admit. Somehow, like with the Maxim thing, Steve didn’t think it would ever be quite so simple with Tony, though. Whatever he’d once thought about the man, it was clear after just a scant few days that Tony Stark was not the person he tried to project to the public, and was barely even good at pretending he was. When he glanced over, Tony was chewing at his lower lip, left leg bouncing in place as Happy angled the car next to the valet stand. The High Roller itself loomed overhead, slowing changing colors as it rotated.

“Pepper’s got a private pod set up for us,” Tony reminded him. “Just drop us here, Hap.”

A moment later, the valet pulled the door open and Tony surged out of the car, slipping a tip into the startled young woman’s hands and heading for the giant wheel’s entrance, leaving Steve to scramble to catch up.

“Hey,” Steve called out as he approached Tony’s side. Tony didn’t say anything, but slowed and let Steve reach for his hand, though the earlier easy looseness with which Tony seemed to melt into his side after dinner was gone.

“There,” Tony said, nodding in the direction of the stairs that led up to the entrance to the High Roller. A black-suited man waiting at the top spotted them, waved, and headed down the steps to meet them.

“Mr. Stark, welcome to the High Roller,” the man greeted them, reaching out to shake Tony’s hand. “Your pod is waiting. This way, if you please,” he said, sweeping out a hand towards the steps. They bypassed the line of people and followed the man through a roped entrance, where a large, round, glass-enclosed pod, almost like a bubble, slowly crawled towards them. The crowd of people waiting cheered and hollered, and Tony waved, smiling brightly. Steve did the same, though it all felt wrong somehow, like it was more of a lie than it had been earlier, though that thought made no sense. Nothing had changed, not really.

“Dessert and champagne are waiting, and if you need anything, just hit the call button,” the man told them. “The ride lasts just a little over half an hour, so, please, relax and enjoy the view.” Tony nodded, flicked a glance at Steve, then threw both hands up in dual peace signs for the crowd, making them whoop out encouragement, along with a few suggestions that made Steve’s face warm.
They stepped inside as the pod slowly rotated. Eight large video monitors circled the top of the pod, though, thankfully, the usual video of trivia and Vegas highlights had been replaced with some kind of eighties technicolor light show set, somewhat incongruously, to a soft Elvis ballad Steve recognized, though couldn’t quite place. A small table draped in a white cloth and flanked by two red velvet-covered chairs sat near the far glass window, with an open bottle of champagne chilling in a tall silver stand next to it. Domed silver dishes were waiting on the table, with a single, long-stemmed rose in a vase in the center.

“Romantic,” Tony commented. “Pepper,” he said, tossing the word or explanation or whatever it was meant to be over his shoulder and walking over to pour the champagne into one of the tall flutes that stood on the table. He poured two glasses and held one out to Steve. Steve took it, frowned down at it for a moment, then held it out in the air in front of him.

“Suppose we should toast. For luck,” Steve suggested with what he hoped was a conciliatory tone. Tony stared at the glass for a moment, then held his up and clinked the edge to Steve’s before taking a long drink and setting the glass back down on the table. He turned to look out the window, shoving his hands in his pockets. Steve walked over and put his glass on the table as well and then stood next to Tony, looking down at the glittering Strip where it spread out below them.

“It’s actually kind of beautiful from up here,” Steve observed after a moment.

“It looks like Christmas and Mardi Gras had an ugly baby,” Tony said, though his tone was more mildly amused than anything.

“It’s not…that bad,” Steve said with a frown. Next to him, he heard Tony huff and saw him give a little shake of his head. “There are lines and blocks. All the neon colors in these geometric shapes, if you look at it a certain way. I saw a painting like that once at the Guggenheim. Sarah Morris. It stuck with me,” Steve said, then dipped his head to his chest and looked over at Tony.

“That was your mother’s name. Sarah,” Tony replied quietly.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “She died right before I graduated high school.”

“You bought a new suit. Macy’s,” Tony said in a dull, flat tone.

“Did your research, huh? Had to. The suit,” Steve confirmed. “I’d had something of a growth spurt. Nothing fit, not even one of Bucky’s. He accused me of shooting myself up with growth hormones or something,” Steve remembered with a shake of his head. “Kept making jokes about it. I think he was trying to distract me or piss me off, something. Get a reaction, I guess. I wasn’t—it was hard. It had been me and mom for so long, and even after her diagnosis, I don’t know. I guess it didn’t seem real until it was over.”

“I know what you mean,” Tony said, keeping his eyes on the lights below as the pod slowly circled higher.

“I guess you do,” Steve replied. “Listen, Tony. I’m sorry. About earlier. I didn’t mean to—to make this uncomfortable than it already is. For both of us,” Steve rushed out, remembering the way Tony had stiffened at his side when he kissed him. “I know this whole thing is a distraction from what you’re trying to do. We just…need to get through it. Make the best of it. And then…it’ll be over.”

Tony sighed heavily and leaned his forearm on the glass. “Nothing that’s happening is your fault, Steve,” he said with a brusque sort of tightness lacing his voice. “Just forget it. You were right, by the way. About the whole guilt complex thing. I do that,” Tony grimaced, then looked over at Steve with an apology written on his features. “And with you, there’s Afghanistan and now this, and…
anyway. Best to stick to our agreement, right? Keep it as professional as possible. Less chance of screwing this up that way.”

“Right,” Steve agreed after a moment, though he could hear the way his voice wavered. “Right, that’s…yeah.”

“That’s what you do, right? Keep it professional? Keep a certain distance, even when you’re…you know,” Tony said, mouth flattening for a moment before he turned to look back down on the Strip. “Probably easier that way.”

“When I’m stripping? Yeah,” Steve replied. “I have to, I guess. Just, let them have that. That part. That’s what they want, so, just let them have it,” Steve shrugged, feeling a fissure of disquiet run through him as they both fell silent and watched the world slowly circle past. The pod’s sound system cycled through another Elvis ballad, though Steve recognized this one as ‘Love Me Tender,’ despite hearing only the first few chords.

Was that what Tony wanted from him? Of course, it was. The show. That’s what this whole thing was, after all. A show, where both parties were supposed to know that it was. This was Tony’s gentle way of reminding Steve of that. Tony was hardly stupid, and he was probably quite used to being on the receiving end of the interest of people far more adept and sophisticated at this than Steve and his blue-slushie-mouth and I-like-your-tie and let’s bond over that time in boot camp my drill sergeant made me drink SmartWater “just in case.”

Steve sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose to loosen the furrowed ridges of his brow. Tony needed him to do this thing for a few days, keep it professional, keep a respectful distance without getting emotionally involved, like he should be able to do, given what he did for a living, not trail after him like a lost puppy who needed a pat on the head.

“Wave to the nice people in the pod below us,” Tony said, though he didn’t wave. Steve leaned his head against the glass bubble and looked down, where, sure enough, a group of people were exuberantly at them, clearly thrilled when Steve acknowledged them with a small wave back. The pod was at the ten o’clock position on the wheel now, floating inexorably to the top, slowing occasionally as pods loaded and unloaded.

Tony wanted the show. He was paying for the show. That was the whole point of this thing they were doing. Throw Stane off the scent, keep Stern and the police at bay, buy a bit of time for Tony’s plan to come together. All Steve had been asked to do was play along, and that was clearly what Tony was trying to tell Steve he wanted from him.

The monitors overhead finished a version of ‘Are You Lonesome Tonight,’ and Steve was almost startled when Elvis’ rich, deep baritone filtered into the pod through the speakers.

Wise men say
Only fools rush in
But I can’t help falling in love with you
Shall I stay?
Would it be a sin
If I can’t help falling in love with you?

“They’re playing our song,” Tony said, glancing over at Steve’s face, which must have registered confusion. “From the supposed wedding we had.”

“Oh. Right,” Steve replied, frowning a bit, then shaking his head with a small, light laugh. “So, they are.”
“Pepper,” Tony said again, face softening. “I think she’s…” he stopped and cleared his throat and waved his loose hand in the air between him and the glass, looking quickly up at Steve and then back down at the view again. “Like I said. She’s a bit of a romantic.”

“Ah,” Steve said. Below them, the people in the pod were waving up at them and jumping hard enough trying to get their attention that Steve could see the pod shake a bit. When he angled his head up against the curved glass, he could see the people in the pod above them trying to use their smartphones as the pods evened-out at the top of the circle.

Like a river flows
Surely to the sea
Darling, so it goes
Some things are meant to be

It hurt. Steve wasn’t going to lie to himself. But, this was the part Tony needed from him, and he’d maybe been trying to tell Steve that the whole night, even if Steve had been too enamored to see it. Hadn’t Tony been trying to make it about the money, about what he could do for Steve, since the beginning? Because that was what this was. A business deal. An unusual one, sure, but Tony was paying for services rendered, and he kept trying to make that clear to Steve, even if Steve’s mind had stubbornly refused to want to see it. Quid pro quo. That’s all this was, and he needed to do a better job remembering that.

Steve swallowed past the lump in his throat and looked over at Tony. The rainbow of lights from below and on the wheel itself lent a bluish-pink glow to Tony’s olive skin, lighting up the dark pools of his eyes, and Steve had never wanted to touch anyone more, and the thing was, he could. He was supposed to, just so long as he remembered exactly what this was. That was what Tony kept subtly trying to tell him. Tony was being considerate because Steve had freaked out on the suite’s balcony, but the whole point of this Vegas date night thing Ms. Potts had going for them was to convince the world they were head over heels.

So, that was definitely a perfectly good explanation for why his palms were sweaty and his heart was pounding in his chest. For why his stomach tightened, then did that floaty, loose thing and dropped to his knees. For why his breath hitched and caught was Tony’s surprised gaze flew to his, seeming to catch on just as Steve’s hand slid up the arm Tony had braced on the glass and wrapped around Tony’s wrist as he leaned his head down, catching the corners of Tony’s lips and the warm huff of breath as Tony turned his mouth to Steve’s.

Tony’s lips were soft. Steve remembered that from the kiss at the police station. That had been a show. Because he hadn’t liked what was going on, because he hadn’t wanted to get involved, because Tony had clearly signaled money, and Steve was desperate enough to be stupid sometimes. He didn’t know what this was. Steve could taste the sweet tang of champagne and wine. There was wet heat beyond, tantalizing him, and he wanted more, so much more.

Who’s pretending now, Steve scoffed at himself, and, later, he wanted to think he would have been able to stop, end it there, a quick kiss for the cameras, and that was all, except Tony groaned into the well of Steve’s mouth, and turned, angling his head against Steve’s and flicking his tongue over the seam of Steve’s lips. Everything he had just told himself, every plan, every certainty, whisked away in that fraction of a moment, and he was drowning, in so far over his head, he couldn’t see the surface. Tony’s mouth was pushing against his, tongue tracing Steve’s lips, then delving inside, deepening the kiss. Steve’s hand had gone to Tony’s waist, twisting him, until Tony’s back was pressed against the glass, and Steve’s other hand intertwined with Tony’s fingers, trapped against the window above their heads.
Tony’s tongue slid along his, then curled back and swirled around the tip, before he drew it back so he could nip and suck at Steve’s lips. Steve felt Tony’s hand winding its way up his back to twist in his hair, holding him in place. Steve pushed forward, pressing his chest against Tony’s, and then stopped, startled, and pulled back, tearing his mouth away from Tony’s long enough to pant heavily against his cheek. He reached out and ran a hand down the center of Tony’s chest, where his fingers found a hard, raised circle.

“Think of it like a fancy pacemaker,” Tony said, dropping the hand that had been gripping Steve’s hair down to capture Steve’s hand where it covered the center of Tony’s chest.

“The---wha?” Steve managed, garbling the words as he tried to get his mind to cooperate.

Tony’s thigh slid between Steve’s legs, rubbing lightly, and the sudden burst of friction slammed into Steve and sent heat coiling from deep in his belly to the end of his cock. He moaned and surged against Tony, earning a pleased sounding grunt from the other man.

“Nothing to worry about,” Tony assured him.

“Are you—are you sure? What—“ Steve stammered. He couldn’t think. Tony’s leg was rubbing in a slow, stroking motion against Steve’s groin.

“They’re watching,” Tony said, though his mouth twisted as he finished the words. Distantly, Steve was aware that they were at the top of the wheel, that the people in the pods on either side of them were shouting, loud whoops and cheers, that there were bright flashes popping in the glass. It was connected to this, Steve knew, but it all seemed so far removed from Tony’s mouth, and the way his body curved into Steve’s. “They’re watching,” Tony said again. “Got to give them a show, right? That’s what you do. That’s what we both do.” The words were encouraging, teasing even, but the tone was all wrong, bitter and tightly wound. Tony leaned his head back until it bumped the glass and looked up at Steve. A flicker of something that looked like resignation crossed his face, and why not? This wasn’t exactly how Tony Stark wanted to spend his free time, was it? Getting groped by a stripper in front of a bunch of tourists who paid twenty bucks and a Groupon to ride the wheel. “Got to give them what they want.”

In the pods next to them, people were yelling and knocking knuckles and the flats of their hands on the glass, though it was impossible to hear anything. They had front row tickets to the Tony Stark Show, and weren’t going to miss a minute.

Take my hand,
Take my whole life, too
For I can’t help falling in love with you

Steve leaned his head down, watching Tony’s eyes flutter shut as he did, pressed his mouth to Tony’s and let himself drown.
“So…I kind of maybe made out a little with my husband,” Tony said with a slight wince as he put the espresso cup down on the glass-topped table laden with an assortment of muffins and baked goods that sat between the bank of outdoor chairs, which were currently occupied by Pepper and Matt.

“We know. Everyone knows. The people in the space station probably know,” Pepper said. “Hashtag ‘HoneymoonInVegas’ is trending. Right behind the new Starbucks drink.”

“Speaking of behind,” Rhodey said, leaning forward to peer at the phonescreen Pepper was holding out in front of her. “Yep, that’s you.”

“That’s an ass pressed against glass. Could be anyone’s ass. Anyone who just happens to have been getting…fantastically groped by perfectly shaped hands against the glass of a Ferris Wheel…what? It happens,” Tony chided lightly.

“You really think after Luau Week sophomore year that I can’t recognize your ass pressed against glass?” Rhodey shot back. “Come on, man. At least here you’ve got pants on.”

“Just so I’m clear, you called us all here this morning because you kissed your husband,” Matt asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous. That would…obviously be a great topic of conversation, but I’d hardly drag you all down here for that. I called this meeting because I liked kissing my husband,” Tony corrected weakly. “Help. Someone? Anyone? Even you, Matt.”

“Thanks,” Matt said drolly. “I fail to see how the fact that you like kissing your husband qualifies as a problem, given the current situation.”

“We’re all silently just going to mutually agree to let the ‘I fail to see’ thing slide, right?” Tony asked, glancing around. “I feel like that was a test. I feel tested. Did I pass? I passed, right?”

“It was not a test—” Pepper began.

“Well…” Matt cut in.

“--and I’m with Matt. Except about the test thing, because I’m not twelve,” Pepper said, giving Matt a withering look before sucking in a bracing breath. “So. You and Steve got a little carried away last night. That’s hardly the worst thing you’ve been caught on camera doing, Tony, come on. It’s great publicity. This is good, Tony.”

“Worst thing you’ve been caught on camera doing had to be that time in the Vineyard,” Rhodey said.
“Okay, first…I did not know that was Whitney’s mother. She’d just had her Botox,” Tony began. “Second—”

“Anyway,” Pepper said pointedly, “while not actually discussing it in any way, shape or form, you’ve certainly dealt with far worse than a little fully-clothed PDA. The public is eating it up, Stern has backed off, which Matt says means the police are dialing it down a bit for now, and the press is too distracted by a great story to do much digging at the moment. Your, ah, enthusiasm is a good thing. Here. For…for now. This whole—thing we’re doing here. I feel like I need to caveat this. Matt? Say something lawyerly.”

“The witness is about to make an admission against his interest,” Matt said.

“I am not. You are all just completely failing to see the bigger, completely-reasonable-time-to-panic-picture here,” Tony objected, flinging his hands into the air in frustration before flopping back against the seat. “And I am simply trying to make you aware. Of the issue. Which is glaringly obvious to anyone paying attention.”

“Just so I’m clear…you’re panicking because you liked kissing your fake husband?” Rhodey asked.

“No, not because I liked kissing my husband. Fake husband. Don’t give me that look. Slip of the tongue. Eh, nope,” Tony said, holding up a hand in a stop motion. “Too easy, even for you, Sugarbear. Is anyone even paying attention?” Tony asked plaintively, glancing around at the confused faces. “Look, yes, of course, I liked kissing him. Have you seen him?” Tony demanded, raising his eyebrows and widening his eyes in exasperation.

“No,” Matt said with a grin, making Rhodey turn towards him with an appreciatively amused frown.

“If you Braille his ass, it spells out ‘Hot Damn,’” Tony replied flatly.

“Oh, for the love--” Pepper harrumphed, rolling her eyes heavenward and apparently waiting for steam to come out of her ears.

“Look, yes, okay,” Rhodey cut in. “He’s definitely that was-that-one-time-in-boot-camp-really-just-because-of-the-whiskey kind of questioning yourself hot, but it isn’t like you haven’t been around good-looking people before, Tones, so what’s with the whole red alert thing this morning?” Rhodey asked.

“You really have hidden depths, don’t you?” Tony asked, looking askance at Rhodey. “Boot camp, really? How have you not told me this? You just throw that out here. Now, I’m picturing bunks. Were there bunks? Did you put a picture of me above your bunk, next to Lisa Bonet? Please tell me there were bunks.”

“Focus, man,” Rhodey told him. “I don’t think it counts, anyway.”

“It counts,” Pepper, Matt and Tony said in unison.

“I like him,” Tony muttered, leaning back against the settee and tossing his hand in the air in a frustrated gesture. “God help me. Or, you all help me, whatever,” he continued, raking his hand through his hair with a grimace. “I like him. Yes, he’s gorgeous, obviously, and of course, I like kissing him. That…fuck, that part’s always easy, right? No talking, no feelings, just do the thing? But, Steve, he’s…nice. Good. Like, really, truly good. I don’t know, he’s—God, it’s such a fucking cliché, I know, I can hear myself saying it, but he’s different. He’s different, and, I’m…what do I do? I haven’t…this is like first grade, when Victoria St. John gave me her Goldfish crackers,
except here, the Goldfish crackers are like listening to me and, I don’t know, being, like, nice and interesting and cheating at mini-golf to get a fucking Slurpee, I don’t know! I don’t know, okay?”

“So, this morning’s Def Con Three, mini-muffin confab is because Steve’s a great guy and you like him?” Pepper asked in a low, droll voice.

“Okay, you somehow got that from what I just said?” Tony blurted out, then wiped his face up and down with his hands with a groan. “I like him, and I screwed up his life, and I know, I know, okay? I know all of that wasn’t totally on me, but some of it—it’s not rational. Not all of it. I know that, but it’s his life and his friends’ lives, and how do I—I need to fix this, somehow. Fix all of this. And I don’t have the first clue how. So. That’s why the panic muffins this morning, okay?”

“Tony,” Pepper began, tilting her head to the side as her face softened.

“I like his dumb jokes,” Tony blurted out, raising his eyes to hers. “And how much of a complete troll he can be, like some kind of an asshole version of Gomer Pyle because it just doesn’t compute when he’s so—so—you know about everything, and how he does this thing where he listens and notices and cares. I mean, yes, that’s ridiculously annoying at times, goes without saying,” Tony added, slashing his hand through the air in front of him, before biting his lip and looking out at the vista glittering in front of him. “It’s just…I like him. He’s smart and funny and good and—I like him, and my weapons killed his friends, who were, let’s recap, all pinned down in that shithole because they were looking for me. And somehow, this whole thing—the stripping, the crappy phone, the fucking Schwinn and whatever the hell else is going on—somehow, that’s all rolled up in there, too, and that’s on me.”

“Hey, they were doing their jobs, Tony,” Rhodey supplied quietly, but firmly. “I told you. That is not on you,” he said, emphasizing each word carefully.

“Feels a bit like it is, what with the whole my name literally spelled out on the things that killed those soldiers. Hard to really pawn that one completely off on Obie,” Tony said.

“You didn’t know,” Pepper said gently. “No one did.”

“I could have, though. I could’ve figured it out. Come on, Pep, I could have. There was a trail. There always is. That’s how we got here, isn’t it? Following the breadcrumbs? I mean, hindsight, sure, and I know you want to let me off the hook here, I get it, I do. Hell, I do, too,” Tony said, mouth flattening. “I wish it were that simple. Poor, oblivious Tony, right? Good story. Easy. Not my fault, right?” Tony asked rhetorically, pointing his hands towards his chest. “Truth is, I trusted Obie. I wanted to let him deal with everything, while I got to keep playing and spending and living my life. He was handling all the numbers and the stuff with the Board. The lobbying, all the crap that I didn’t want to deal with while I built my machines, but I can’t sit here and complain about getting my ass kicked while I was the one who bent over and buried my head in the sand,” Tony argued, casting his eyes down to the table of half-eaten food for a moment before wiping a hand over his goatee and dropping it to his lap in a defeated motion. “I like him,” Tony repeated with a grimace twisting his features. “I’m saying…I think I…like him.”

“Oh,” Pepper said.

“Oh. Wow,” Rhodey replied.

“Yeah, oh,” Tony huffed. “Anyone got anything beyond a single syllable?”

“You should talk to him,” Matt said.
“Why are you even here?” Tony demanded, twisting around to look at him with a shake of his head.

“Gravitas. And the cane is cool,” Matt replied evenly.

“Guess how many fingers I’m holding up,” Tony said.

“Pretty sure I can guess correctly,” Matt grinned. “I’m serious, Tony. Talk to him. You might be surprised.”

“Anyone else have non-insane, actually useful suggestions that don’t involve communication or talking about feelings or any of that nonsense with my fake significant other?” Tony asked, looking around at each of them. Rhodey raised his eyebrows and cupped a hand over his mouth, slowly shaking his head back and forth. “You’re all fired. Rhodey, I want my friendship bracelet back.”

“Gonna have to talk to him, Tones,” Rhodey told him. “With words.”


“Feeling-words,” Rhodey said.

“Of the non-Braille kind,” Matt added.

“Really?” Pepper snapped, shooting Matt a frown.

“I don’t know, man, based on what I saw on Twitter this morning, that might help,” Rhodey argued. “Where is your other hand even at in this one?”

“It’s…a bad angle. Anyway, look, you have to give me something else to work with here,” Tony muttered, squelching his eyes shut for a long moment. “Can I just buy him—hey, Potts, I see you mouthing ‘giant bunny’ over there. That was one time. Just so we’re clear, no one is objecting to me throwing a bunch of money at him when this is all over, right?”

“You’ve got this whole Demi-Moore-rolling-around-on-money fantasy going, don’t you? Please,” Rhodey cut in, holding up a hand. “Do not elaborate. Poetic, really, since throwing money at him is how this whole thing got started,” Rhodey said.

“I reiterate that this whole situation could’ve been avoided by a lap dance,” Tony replied, tossing his hands in the air to punctuate his words.

“Autobiography title,” Rhodey grinned, reaching out to fist bump Tony.

“Words. About feelings. Seriously? This is what my crack team of relationship experts has for me? Put back your muffins,” Tony ordered, then shook his head and groaned, letting his skull clunk back with a dull thud and closing his eyes. He could feel the beginnings of a headache edging just over his eyes and worked his fingers against his temples. Words. Talking. Feelings. Dear God, these people were maniacs. “Pepper, how does that usually work for me?” Tony asked, sitting up and spreading his arms wide in question. “Why are you all so calm? We are taking down a global terrorist network that has infiltrated the upper echelons of our government, and which I’ve apparently been partially funding for years, and, of significantly more concern, I like Steve! This is where you all offer your voices of reason, talk me off the ledge, rein me in, bring me back down to earth, all that, and instead I get this Oprah feelings bullshit? You’re coddling me because you don’t want this whole thing to go off the rails, right? Where’s the righteous indignation at my sudden about-face on romance? Where’s the cynical skepticism about Steve’s motives? The friendly reminder that it’s really only been a couple of days, and I’m too close to this? Matt, the subtle nod to Daddy issues and
unhealthy attachments? Come on. I’m ready. Give it to me. I can take it.”

“Keep him,” Rhodey said, pursing his lips together and giving a firm nod.

“Excuse me?” Tony demanded incredulously, head whipping around to look at Rhodey.

“Keep him,” Pepper repeated, a smile dancing across her mouth.


“We didn’t want to say…I mean, not with everything going on, and the whole, ah, situation. It isn’t our place—yes, that’s stopped me before, Tony, do not even…do you know how many times I had to pick up someone’s dry cleaning under the names of cartoon characters because you couldn’t remember??–But…he’s great, Tony, really. He’s sweet and smart and all that you said. That whole thing with the paparazzi?” Pepper said. “I really like him.”

“Tony. This guy, he pulls me out from under a Hum-Vee, and whatever went down in Gulmira, he’s here, isn’t he? Helping out. Not trying to get rich or screw you over or figure out how he can climb out of whatever hole he’s in on your back or your dime, but just because he thinks it’s worth sticking his neck out? That says something. And, now, you know I’d take my clothes off for you,” Rhodey said, lifting his eyebrows and giving Tony a look.

“Spring Break, ’87. Say no more,” Tony replied, slicing his hand through the air and then falling into a grin.

“Yes, please don’t,” Pepper added.

“But, it’s a pretty stand up thing to do, what he’s doing for his…totally platonic life partner,” Rhodey pointed out.

“Thank you. See, he pronounces it correctly,” Tony said, shooting a triumphant look at Pepper.

“I’m just saying, he seems like a stand-up guy, Tony. Not your run-of-the-mill good guy, either, but like one of those really good ones, and maybe…you know, maybe those don’t come along so often, is all,” Rhodey replied. “Ever since what happened, you’ve been, I don’t know, man…different. That’d mess anyone up, now, and I’m not saying anything, but, the past couple of days, it’s like some switch got flicked and you’re—you got this lightness thing going on that I haven’t seen in you since before your parents died. This whole wide-open-I-can-do-anything vibe, and I’m liking it, Tones. I’m really liking it. I want that for you, man, that’s all I’m saying. If he’s the reason, or part of the reason even, then…keep him. He’s good for you, and I think maybe you’re good for him, too. Guy could use a break, let’s face it.”

“So, just to be sure, everyone is Team Keep Him?” Tony asked, looking around.

“Maybe when this is all said and done…maybe we don’t say anything,” Matt offered, stretching out the words like the thought had just now occurred to him, which Tony knew was utter crap, but he stared at his lawyer anyway.

“Don’t say anything?” Tony replied.

“See what happens,” Matt said.
“See what happens?” Tony repeated.

“Give Matt a hundred thousand dollars,” Matt said. “Just checking,” he smiled into the silence. “Look, all I’m saying is, so far, we’ve done a few slightly illegal things that in all likelihood, no one is going to care about if we get Stane and a few bigger fish on a silver platter for the Feds. So… maybe you just…don’t say anything. To the press, I mean. I’m not saying you make it official while you’re at the courthouse anyway, but, maybe you just…see how it goes. Give it a while. Head back to Malibu. You’ve got, what, twelve bedrooms in that place? Get to know each other some more. Date. For real. Doesn’t work out, we just quietly announce a separation, then, a month or so later, a ‘divorce,’” he finished, putting the last in air quotes. “Steve gets a nice settlement. Everyone goes their merry way.”

“Um, can we let the record reflect that my lawyer is advising me to engage in an ongoing and somewhat elaborate lie basically in order to get laid,” Tony pointed out. “I knew I liked you.”


“So…real date my fake husband. That’s the plan. That’s the plan we have come up with. We have a combined IQ out here of, what, seven hundred, and our entire plan to deal with the situation with Steve consists of date him and talk about feelings?” Tony snorted. “Where do you even get these wild ideas???”

“You gave me the average IQ, didn’t you,” Matt muttered.

“Statistically speaking, the IQ of lawyers is much closer to the average. I spotted you ten points though,” Tony replied, grinning widely.

“You got this, Tony. If TMZ’s front page is any indication, the guy is definitely into you. I mean, parts of him are—definitely interested,” Rhodey said.

“Speaking of, where is my dear Yoko, anyway?” Tony asked, craning his neck to glance through the glass doors into the apparently empty penthouse.

“Working out. Don’t worry,” Pepper shushed him when Tony opened his mouth to object. “Alone. I had the hotel close off the VIP gym for an hour so he could use it in private while we talked about him behind his back.”

“Smart. Good. Subterfuge. Plausible deniability of any discussion of feelings being had. Foundation of a relationship,” Tony said, mouth tightening as he glanced over at Pepper.

“You two doing the tourist thing today or what?” Rhodey asked, taking a huge bite of panic muffin as he did. “You should do one of those bus tour things with the little headsets. I’ll pay.”

“I am not putting him on something called the Hop On/Hop Off bus with the guy he likes and the mission of getting the attention of the press,” Pepper shot back with a pointed look tossed in Rhodey’s direction that made Tony huff out a laugh he quickly covered with a sip of coffee. “Aren’t you an actual rocket scientist?”

“Tiny headsets. With those disposable earpieces,” Rhodey added around another bite. “And the public. All,” he said, making a smoooshing motion with his hand, “crammed together in a bus. A bus! One question. Have you seen Speed?”

“No bus,” Pepper cut in.
“We’re visiting his roommate-slash-definitely-not-boyfriend. I don’t know, maybe grab a box of stuff, make it look like a thing. I think he just wants to platonically check on the guy,” Tony shrugged.

“Dude,” Rhodey said with a wince, sucking in a sharp breath.

“I’m trying,” Tony replied with a sigh.

“Eiffel Tower tonight,” Pepper reminded him. “It’s garishly touristy and very public, so perfect. I’ve got a press conference set up for day after tomorrow. We’ll do it in one of the hotel’s banquet rooms. Inside Edition, Entertainment Tonight, People, your basic puff piece brigade. All friendlies, pre-approved questions, the usual, but you know the police, Obie, the Board, hell—everyone—is going to be watching after what happened…last time there was a press conference.”

“I still don’t know about putting them in front of the press like that,” Matt said. “If they contradict anything they told the police…”

“They won’t. We’ll get them ready. We will,” she reiterated firmly when Matt looked to object. “He has to talk to them, Matt. There is blood in the water, and they know it. That thing with Christine? Sure, it was below the belt, but they don’t care. They just care about why it wasn’t them getting access. We need to give them something or they’ll go find it. A press conference will buy us at least a news cycle. Dump it on the weekend, and that’s a couple of days before they have to come up with something else.”

“Fine,” Matt acquiesced after a moment. “I don’t like it, but fine. I want approval on whatever you’re going to say, though. Just stick to the script.”

“Don’t I always?” Tony asked, drawing a withering look from Pepper. Movement through the glass caught his eye, and he watched Steve enter the living room, then stop and look outside. They all raised a hand in greeting, which, yeah, not at all weird, good call there, Tony thought with a sigh as Steve returned the gesture a little stiltedly, then headed for his room.

“Barnes is why he’s…” Pepper started, then trailed off and looked away.

“Yeah,” Rhodey said after a moment, since Tony was studiously not answering the question.

“Matt’s handling it,” Tony announced.

"By handling it, you mean..." Rhodey asked, trading a look with Matt.

"Lawyer voodoo, whatever, I don't know," Tony shrugged.

"He's actually not far off," Matt replied.

“Speaking of the weekend,” Pepper began, looking down at her tablet, "there’s the dinner thing Saturday night. Defense Innovation Expo. We’re a platinum sponsor, you know. They wanted to give you an award. I declined for you, of course, but, you could put in an appearance. Wouldn’t hurt, especially if the press conference goes south,” Pepper suggested. “Which it won’t,” she quickly amended, giving Matt a sharp look. “But, it would give us a second chance at the news cycle to fix anything, just in case. Obie will be there. Stern, too, probably. He was scheduled to present the award.”

“You don’t say?” Tony replied in a considering tone. “Obie, Stern and a room full of military officers? What could possibly go wrong? I need it. I want it. Make it happen,” Tony said in quick, staccato breaths. “Though, I honestly thought we’d be done with all this and explaining ourselves to
the Feds by then,” Tony said, mouth twisting into a frown. “Do you think Steve would like me in orange? Conjugal visits are still a thing, right?”

“Ah, yes. I finally see it. This is why I went to law school,” Matt said with a slight nod.

“Was that a yes?” Tony asked, taking another drink of coffee. “Anyone?”

“I’ll put the two of you down for a maybe for the dinner. It’s at the Bellagio. They offered to comp you the Presidential suite for the night if you showed. You remember that one?” Pepper asked, without waiting for a reply. “Please don’t make them have to empty the fountain this time,” Pepper said, tapping something into her phone. “Well, I should go work on the press conference. Talk to Steve. Seriously, Tony, talk to him. Don’t get on a bus.”

“If I’m good, can James come over and play this weekend?” Tony quipped with a half-smile as she stood. “Hey, did you get the—”

“Oh, yes! It arrived this morning,” Pepper said, reaching into a black leather bag next to the table and pulling out a small box, which she handed to Tony. “Fabricated yesterday, per your request, Mr. Stark,” she said with a knowing smile.

“You didn’t. You did not. Tell me, that is not what I think it is,” Rhodey huffed out, shaking his head and making a low, whistling sound.

“I am simply being thorough with our tiny, little, slightly-legally-questionable charade-thing here, and you are dumping all kinds of symbolism onto something that is barely even a—a thing,” Tony protested.

“Okay, you know that the vows literally say the ring is a token of love, and the whole circle thing is a symbol, and,” Rhodey said, drawing out the word as he reached over to swipe the box from Tony’s hand, earning a disgruntled yelp from Tony. “And, yeah,” Rhodey said in a low voice that elongated the word. “Just like I thought. Your suit? That I totally don’t know about,” he corrected, glancing around quickly. “You’re such a sap. Like kiss in the rain, hold a boombox over your head, read a notebook kind of sap, you know that right?” Rhodey finished, shaking his head as he snapped the box closed and handed it back to Tony.

“I like that you are manly enough to just list all those off the top of your head. Besides, Beyoncé said if you like it, you should put a ring on it, so,” Tony replied, canting his head at Rhodey.


“Ah, unhelpful people who suggest we play Words With Feelings get the bran,” Tony told him.

“I should really get going. I need to coordinate with hotel security, go over the set up with their tech people—yes, I’m having our people double check it, don’t make the face,” she scolded lightly. “Will that be all, Mr. Stark?” Pepper asked primly as she stood up.

“Thank you, Miss Potts,” Tony said with a small smile. “Think I should change?” Tony asked, looking down at his t-shirt with a cat in sunglasses waving merrily. “What does one wear to meet the former sniper, platonic life partner of the fake husband you want to real date whose life you kind of accidentally ruined until you offered him money to see him naked?”

“Kevlar?” Rhodey suggested, taking a bite of cranberry muffin. “You look fine. Well, dorky, but whatever. Go. You got this. He’ll love you. Why wouldn’t he? Okay, well,” Rhodey amended as Tony pulled a face. “He’ll appreciate that you care about Steve, right? I would, if it was me. You’ll
bond over…things to do with Steve that probably don’t involve nudity—”

“Fingers crossed,” Tony muttered.

“He’ll be Team Keep Him. We’ll all call him White James. It’ll be great. You’ll see,” Rhodey predicted, finishing off the muffin and scattering the crumbs off his pants. “I gotta go, too.”

“I’ve got a call with the investigators this afternoon, just to check in. Like Pepper said, they’ve backed off a bit since Stern isn’t cooperating anymore, but they know something’s up, Tony. This whole thing with Batroc, it needs to happen quickly,” Matt pressed, standing up and extending his walking stick.

“Stop the international terrorists, get the goods on my murderous pseudo-Uncle, talk about feelings with my fake husband, impress said fake hubby’s bestie… I’ll just pencil in privatize world peace for a nooner,” Tony grumbled.

“You got this,” Rhodey insisted. “He likes you, too, Tones.”

“Or, he’s a nice guy who is good at pretending he likes me, just like we all—all of us,” Tony reminded them, making a small circle in the air with his finger, “asked him to. So that we could, you know, save the world, and all that heroic stuff he kind of desperately wants to be a part of. And I’m emotionally stunted and needy and reading too much into a public display of affection that I technically paid for,” Tony retorted, then dropped his head into his hands and tugged on his hair with a nervous, tittering laugh that devolved into a frustrated groan. “I mean, door number two is looking a lot more likely, you’ve got to admit.”

“He likes you,” Rhodey said. “Talk to him.”

Tony watched them file out, then leaned back against the cushioned seat and looked out at the Strip glittering below. Talk to him. To Steve. Hey, Steve, how about we just keep on with this whole married thing for a few months, or, you know, as long as we both shall live, yadda, yadda, whatever. Oh, and sorry about that whole fifteen years or so where I was too busy with my robots and my dick to notice my walking Daddy Issue was selling weapons to terrorists. You, on the other hand, might have noticed that when they killed half your squad. Yeah, great, did you catch the branding then? We spent a lot of money on that logo. Wanted to make sure it could be seen. Good, old Stark tech. Wouldn’t want any one of the grunts not to know what they were getting, after all. God, he was so screwed, Tony thought with a grim sigh. The longer he waited to explain the extent of things to Steve, the worse it would come across when he finally did, he knew, but he also couldn’t risk Steve bailing in the middle of this. Far too much was at stake.

Tony pulled out his phone and tapped the screen. “JARVIS, wake up, Buddy. I’m going to need you bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning.”


“Pull the Hammer Industries filings for the past fifteen years or so—get the proxies and D&B reports-- and poke around, would you?” Tony requested. “We’ll need the PAC reports, too, so go through the FEC and state databases. Then go back and take a look at all the DoD contracts on bid and the ones Hammer got for the same time period and cross reference it against what you’re seeing in their financials and the grease money. See if there is anything that jumps out at you.”

“Of course, Sir. I take it you are suggesting Hammer Industries may have improperly influenced one or more public officials in return for preferential treatment,” JARVIS guessed.
“A scion of the industry like Hammer? Shocking accusation, J,” Tony muttered as he stared out over the Strip. “For shits and grins, go to town on one General Thaddeus Ross, too.”

“Sir, if I may, given the current situation, is it a good time to be delving into this type of inquiry?” JARVIS asked.

*We had a misunderstanding about the nature of the services I would be providing. I handled it.*

“Probably not, but do it anyway. Though, let’s keep this between us for now,” Tony replied.

“Private server, then, Sir?” JARVIS asked.

“You know me so well,” Tony said, looking down at the small box clutched in his hand. Hammer was probably dirty, at least to some degree. Hard to get where he was without greasing a few politicians’ palms to make it happen. It had been years since Tony poked around HI’s network, more out of curiosity, drunkenness and a desire to see just how easy it would be than any real interest in corporate espionage. Hell, the backdoor he’d put in HI’s network was probably still sitting there, waiting to be used. Hammer did his cybersecurity in-house, which meant it was run by a bunch of sycophants who couldn’t get jobs literally anywhere else.

*I handled it.*

The words sort of twisted themselves through his mind and down to his gut, settling cold and sickly there. *I handled it,* my ass, Tony mentally scoffed. Tony was fairly sure that ‘handled’ was code for ‘got the ever-loving fuck out of there,’ but he wasn’t stupid enough to press Steve on it at this point. Still. He didn’t like the way Steve’s whole body pulled taut and rigid whenever he’d talked about it, or the way he wouldn’t quite meet Tony’s eyes when he spoke. He didn’t like thinking about Hammer with Steve in the same sentence, or the way he wouldn’t approve of this little digging expedition, but he had spent most of the last night going over the past few days in his mind and this thing with Hammer was the piece that stuck in his craw more than any other, needling at him until he had to do something about it.

It wasn’t like he didn’t understand his impulse to fix what he could fix and avoid the other things, the unfixable parts where it was him who screwed the pooch, and not some moustache-twirling-tie-me-to-the-railroad-tracks-black-hat like Hammer.

And Ross? Tony knew him more by reputation than anything, but Obie had glad-handed the General enough that Tony could believe there had to be something there. He would just…ignore JARVIS’ question about why now, with everything else going on, Tony had a sudden interest in ferreting out political corruption involving very specific individuals.

Over his shoulder, Tony heard the soft snick of the door opening. He turned, and Steve was there, hair damp from his shower and dressed in one of the casual outfits they’d gotten during their shopping trip. When Steve had changed clothes in front of him, and Tony had timed out of nonlinear partial differential equations somewhere around the time Steve got to PG-13-ville.

“Hey,” Steve said, lifting his hand in a limp, awkward wave. “So.”

Oh, right, because the last time they’d seen each other post-PDA, Steve had asked if Tony thought they’d given everyone enough time to get good pictures, and Tony had managed to choke out something about a call with investors in Hong Kong past the lump in his throat, and definitely-not-run to his room and jerked off over the toilet with a bottle of the hotel’s stupid custom lotion and a wad of tissue while remembering the way Steve’s hands and mouth felt. So, you know, goodbyes
weren’t his thing. Whatever.

“Hey,” Tony replied. “There’s some breakfast left. Sort of. Bran muffins, because Rhodey doesn’t understand the muffin-to-useful-advice reward system. If you want some.”

“I’m good, thanks,” Steve said, taking the chair opposite where Tony lounged on the loveseat. “Everything okay?” he asked, glancing around towards the suite, where Pepper was pacing behind the glass doors with a phone stuck to her ear, gesturing wildly. “Was there news about…the thing? Is that why everyone was here this morning? I didn’t want to intrude.”

“The thing?” Tony repeated with a slight frown. “Oh, you mean the taking down the bad guys thing. Right. Um, no. That is taking a tiny bit longer than expected, but, don’t worry,” Tony said quickly. “It won’t be long. Cross my heart, such as it is. Sorry. I know this isn’t exactly how you planned to spend your week.”

“You’re right. All this hanging out with a handsome billionaire, living in a penthouse, eating at five-star restaurants and spending more on a suit than I make in a month is really taking a toll,” Steve deadpanned in reply, earning a surprised bark of laughter from Tony. “Guess I can manage to muddle through a few more days,” he sighed dramatically, then grinned and bit his lip with a slightly sheepish look that made Tony’s stomach do some kind of leap.

“Speaking of a few more days of our little arrangement, Pep is setting up a press conference,” Tony told him.

“Oh,” Steve replied. “You think that’s a good idea? After…before?”

“After before, when you nodded your head, then entirely ignored our advice and did the completely awesome thing with the press where it somehow made it sound like I was the knight in shining armor they should be nice to here? Yeah, you know, going out on a limb…I’m really okay with the risk,” Tony replied with a half-smile. “Anyway, Pepper says we need to get in front of this, and Matt’s onboard, if we stay on point, which, I’d normally say is directed at me, but you’re a wild card, so, there could be a tranq-gun involved. I’m not sure, but I feel the need to mention the possibility. Don’t worry, he’s surprisingly accurate for a blind guy,” Tony said with a grin while Steve puffed out a short laugh.

“Good to know,” Steve said.

“Still no response from your friend?” Tony asked.

“No,” Steve replied, brow furrowing in concern. “I called again this morning, but it says his voicemail is full. I’m sure he’s fine. He says I worry too much. I think it—he doesn’t want me to feel obligated, you know? And I don’t, not really, not like he means it, but…”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I get it, Steve. You don’t have to explain.”

“Probably just pissed at me for not telling him everything, or broke his phone again or something, but—well. I’d just like to check,” Steve finished with a slight grimace marring his features.

“We can head over whenever you’re ready,” Tony said softly.

“Thanks. Thanks, Tony. I mean it,” Steve said.

“Of course,” Tony replied. The silence hung there for a long moment, both of them staring out at the Strip instead of looking at each other until Tony figured one of them was going to have to either jump off the balcony or actually bring up the room’s pachyderm-shaped occupant.
“So...last night,” Steve began, glancing quickly over at Tony before looking down. “Pepper said that was good. Not the—well, that, but...I mean, that the, ah. The photos and all. That it was good. With the...us. What we...ah. Did.”

“Yeah. Yeah, we’re trending. Apparently,” Tony told him. “Second story on TMZ, right below the possibility that a Kardashian might be pregnant.”

“Good.” Steve said after a pause where it seemed neither of them breathed. He looked over at Tony and caught his eye. “That’s good, right? What you wanted, I mean.”

*Talk to him.*

Later, Tony told himself. Or the Rhodeway-voice in his head told himself, whatever. After the thing with Steve’s platonic BFF. Over dinner, maybe. He could mention it. The whole, hey, I think I-kind-of-like-you-thing. Drop the idea in the conversation somewhere between the soup course and for as long as we both shall live. Smooth.

“Right,” Tony agreed. “Right, that’s...exactly what we wanted. Great publicity. Press is lapping it up. Public loves us. Kind of has this fairy tale vibe going, Pepper says. Playboy bachelor meets stripper with a heart of gold, who tames said playboy’s wild ways, makes an honest man of him, all that.”

“Stripper with a heart of gold, huh?” Steve huffed out a laugh, then smiled in earnest at Tony, which made his clunker of a heart do something that probably amounted to quite literally skipping a beat. It did that sometimes, when his breathing got too irregular and the electric arc ionizing the palladium isotope went wonky. That...explained it. Definitely.

“If the thong fits,” Tony shrugged, returning the smile. “It was nice, though. Yesterday. Your mini-golf subterfuge notwithstanding. Dinner and, uh, all, I mean. Good...food,” Tony finished with a helpless wince, making the last sound more like a question than he had really meant to.

“I had a good time, too,” Steve said, raising his brows, a light dancing in his eyes. “Don’t know much about taming you, though. Sounds like a tall order.”

“Good. That’s—I’m—tame—tall—what?” Tony replied, then promptly ran out of words to say, which didn’t matter much, since his tongue was suddenly too big for his mouth and pasted to the top of it, anyway. Taming...that was...well. That brought some images to his head that he didn’t really need, quite frankly, and damn, that was flirting, wasn’t it? It was so fucking hard to tell with Steve, or maybe it was just the first time in a very, very long time that Tony desperately wanted the answer to be yes.

“Oh, um, by the way. You’ll need this,” Tony said, hands fumbling as he quickly dropped his eyes while his cheeks warmed under Steve’s gaze. “For now. I know we kind of talked about it yesterday. I just figured the press might ask, if we didn’t, I mean. Raise questions. All that,” Tony said, digging into his jacket pocket and pulling out the small box that he held up for Steve. “Nothing fancy. Just something I had laying around, you could say. Not like an heirloom or anything, just some leftover metal that I thought might be nice. Pepper handled it, really. I just...I thought...you know. Anyway, here,” Tony finished somewhat lamely, watching with a strange sort of nervous excitement as Steve plucked the box from his hand.

Steve opened it and stared at the ring for a long moment, then looked up at Tony. “It’s beautiful. I’ve never seen metal like this. What is it?”

“It’s a...proprietary gold titanium alloy,” Tony replied.
“Simple. But…not. Not really. I like it,” Steve said. “I’ll take good care of it, I promise. Won’t lose it or anything.” He was looking down at the ring, but made no move to put it on. Instead, Tony watched him look off to the side, brow furrowing, mouth downturned like he was trying to hold back a frown.

“Here,” Tony heard himself say, though he had no actual thought of saying anything at all. He looked down and saw his hands reaching for the ring, seemingly of their own accord. Steve turned back to him, surprise clouding his features for a moment, then understanding burst across his eyes, widening them, making him blink rapidly at Tony, and coloring his cheeks a deep red, but he let Tony take his hand. Tony’s gaze flicked down where their hands joined, then he slowly parted Steve’s fingers and carefully slid the ring on.

“With this ring, I thee fake wed,” Tony quipped, face pulling into a rictus of a smile. “There,” Tony said, clearing his throat around a sudden roughness. “Looks good on you. Fits good, I mean.” He realized he was still holding Steve’s fingers intertwined with his and let go, sitting back in his seat.

“What about you?” Steve asked, lifting his eyes to look up at Tony from under unfairly long lashes. “I’m sorry, I—I don’t have…” he trailed off, fisting his hand in his lap and frowning.

“Hmmm? Oh, right,” Tony said hurriedly. “Taken care of,” Tony continued, dipping his hand into the pocket of his suit and pulling out a thin, silver band that shone with a recent polish. “This was…actually, this is something of a family heirloom, I guess you could say. Bit of a story, really. It was my butler’s, though he didn’t have it when they first got married, he and his wife. Men didn’t really wear rings back then, and he wasn’t one for jewelry. But, then he got over here with my Dad, and all the GIs coming back from the front, they’d sort of taken to wearing rings. His wife, Ana, she had this necklace that her grandmother had given her when she was a girl. A Chai symbol, for the Hebrew word ‘living,’” Tony explained. “I think they wanted to give it to their kid, you know, but that didn’t…” he stopped, mouth flattening as he glanced away, letting the wind prick at his eyes.

“Even for something like this?” Steve finished for him in a rough voice that made Tony look back over at him, though his face was held carefully tight. “They sound like amazing people. May I?” Steve asked, reaching out to take the ring from between Tony’s fingers before he could reply.

“Here,” he said, lifting Tony’s hand and sliding his fingers along the underside of Tony’s ring finger to lift it. He gently pushed the band on, past Tony’s knuckle, until it settled in place, holding his fingers against it long enough for Tony to glance up at him. For a moment, Tony couldn’t swallow or breathe, and he was sure his heart had simply stopped. Maybe everything had stopped, just for this moment, when it was just him and Steve, and nothing else mattered, and then it was gone and Steve was dropping his hand back to his lap and leaning back in his seat with a slight grimace pulling at his features, almost like a flash of pain.

“They were. Amazing,” Tony replied in a rough, thick voice, looking down at his left hand where the band now gleamed from the third finger. “They’d have liked you,” he added softly, feeling his eyes sting. The wind, he told himself.

“I don’t imagine this is quite what your, ah butler?” Steve asked and waited for Tony’s nod. “Probably not what he had in mind when he gave it to you.”
“Oh, I don’t know,” Tony started, a flippant reply rising to his lips, but he stopped himself and pulled it back with a grimace. “Okay, well, maybe not exactly this. This whole thing with the, ah, the pretending thing—admittedly, probably not. But, you know, you’ve got this whole charming, good-guy-hero-thing going that they’d have eaten up. If they were here, you’d have ended up listening to stories about my misspent youth while having tea and the most amazing butter cookies you can imagine. Jarvis’d probably tell me to stop being an idiot and make an honest man out of you,” Tony said, raising an eyebrow in speculation as he glanced over at Steve.

“I’m sure they’d tell you that you could do a lot better,” Steve replied, giving Tony a lopsided, deprecating smile that made Tony’s chest tighten.

_Talk to him._

Goddamnit, Rhodey, can’t I just mandroid myself in a cave one more time instead? It’d be a fucking hell of a lot less terrifying.

“I don’t…I don’t think that’s really the case. At all. Truth be told, I—well, I—see the thing is…Okay, okay, here’s the thing…” Tony stopped and sucked in a breath. He looked over at Steve and remembered the way his mouth felt, soft and strong and sweet with champagne, the way Steve’s eyes crinkled when he laughed, and how it felt to pull that kind of joy out of him, how good it felt to just be with Steve, period, sitting here, talking—just being together, how easy it was. Doing nothing, really.

Yep.

Just two guys being fake-married pals, sitting inches apart, almost holding hands, trading wedding rings.

Tony looked up at Steve, caught his eyes for a moment, blue and watery in the morning glare, and was hit with a sudden, ferocious surge of want. Not sexual, not really. Or, not only, Tony amended. He wanted this, with Steve, this thing where he woke up and Steve was there, and they talked about their day and maybe flirted a bit, except with slightly less international espionage and more kissing. He just had to get from Point A to Point Steve Forgives Him For Being A Massive Douche For a Couple Decades Culminating In the Deaths of God Knows How Many of Steve’s Fellow Soldiers.

Goddamned clusterfuck of a roadmap to happiness, is what that was.

“Hand to God, I am definitely letting Rhodey arrange all my fake marriages from here on out. Definitely could not have done better myself,” Tony finished with a too-bright smile. Steve’s mouth lifted into a smile in return, but he dropped his gaze to his lap, where his hand rested with the ring on it, and then squinted up at the horizon. I’m such a coward, Tony thought, letting his eyes shut for a brief moment and giving his head a little shake. He was such a fucking coward.

“I guess I’m ready to go when you are,” Steve said. He was already standing up to go, turning for the balcony doors before Tony could cut off his mental beratement and focus on Steve’s words.

“Great—that’s…hang on, I’ll just—let me give Happy the head’s up so he can meet us downstairs. You need to stop anywhere on the way?” Tony asked. Steve shook his head as Tony tapped a quick text to Happy. “He’s in the garage. Did you know there’s a chauffeur’s lounge? He’s excited because they have free peanuts. There are…I literally have texts that are just part of his forehead and a bowl of peanuts,” Tony said, shaking his head with a smile. “Should have the car pulled up by the time we get down there.”

“Great,” Steve replied, though the word lacked any semblance of actually sounding like he thought it
was great. He was standing there, staring at the glass doors to the suite, head down and jaw set, looking for all the world like moving was the last thing he wanted to do.

“I can send someone to check on him, you know,” Tony offered, stopping mid-rise and settling back down. He reached out and tugged on Steve’s sleeve, drawing Steve’s unfocused gaze back to him. “Barnes. If you don’t want to go, it’s fine, Steve. Hey, look at me…I’m not judging. It’s fine, really.”

“No,” Steve said quickly. “No, I want to go. Need to go. Anyone but me, he gets a bit testy with them. It’s the medication. Messes with his head sometimes, and, well. I mean, it’s not just the medicine, but...everything that’s happened, he’s—it’s hard on him. He blames himself, you know, and I’ve told him, if it was me there in that bar, I’d have done the same thing. I tell him, it’d be him up on stage and it would take a hell of a lot longer to get the money, nickels at a time, you know?” Steve said, shooting Tony a half-embarrassed, half-apologetic twist of a smile. “But, it wasn’t me, it was him, and now, with everything...” he trailed off, turning back to look at the Strip and away from Tony. “It’s not that I don’t want to see him. I do. He’s my best friend. It’s just...it’s always there. Him. Taking care of him. He doesn’t have anyone else. I’m not complaining, but...this, the last few days, it’s like some kind of—of dream or fairy tale or something crazy, I don’t know. Going back there, seeing him...it’s...”

“Breaks the spell, I guess,” Tony finished for him with a small sigh.

“Yeah,” Steve admitted. “God, that sounds so terrible, doesn’t it? Here I am, off enjoying myself while he’s stuck in that shitty apartment, and I don’t want to leave it long enough to just do a damn welfare check.”

“Think it makes you sound pretty human, to be honest. Not to mention that you are checking on him. You’ve been calling, right? And didn’t you say you sent your friend over? The scary lady who I thought was a dancer who threatened to make a necklace of certain parts of me of which I’m rather fond if I touched you during our hypothetical lap dance?” Tony asked, trying and somewhat succeeding to get a genuine smile out of Steve. “It’s only been a couple of days, Steve. You didn’t exactly leave him tied up in the yard with a bowl of water and one of your old t-shirts. Wait, did you? I’m not kink-shaming, but...”

“No,” Steve replied, around a huff of a laugh. He swiped a hand over his mouth, hung his head a bit and looked askance at Tony. “You got a way of saying stuff, Tony, you know that, right?”

“You like it,” Tony replied. “Keeps you on your toes. Makes you shrug that boulder off your, let’s face it, incredibly broad and seriously built shoulders every once in a while. It’s a good look on you, by the way. This whole, new, hey-maybe-the-entire-world-doesn’t-rest-solely-on-me thing you have going.”

“’Cause you’d know all about that,” Steve replied, giving Tony a long look.

“No idea what you mean,” Tony said, miming an exaggerated taken aback look. “I’ll have you know that I am personally going for the extremely different, I-can-fix-everything-if-I-just-work-hard-enough-and-then-maybe-people-will-like-me look. I think I pull it off,” Tony quipped, then gave Steve a rueful half-smile.

“You don’t have to fix everything for people to like you, Tony. Colonel Rhodes, Ms. Potts, Mr. Murdock, Happy, they all like you just fine. I like you,” Steve added after a short beat of silence. “You’re a good man. Easy to like, really.”

“Eh, I’ve got, like, an actual list of people who would beg to differ, which I should probably tell you
tops out with my dear, old Dad, and I’m pretty sure the person who has known me the longest recently tried to have me killed, but putting that aside for the moment, your take on all things Tony Stark is somewhat of a, let’s call it a novel approach, shall we?” Tony replied.

“You said that before. About Stane,” Steve reminded him, back going ramrod straight as he sat up, and all Tony could think of was ‘Soldier Mode Activated,’ which made Steve’s frown go all the deeper when Tony bit out a laugh. “All of this. What we’re doing. You’re going to stop him, right? What he did…to you, to—” he stopped and dropped his gaze, looking away as the moment of silence stretched on. “When we were pinned down in Gulmira,” Steve began, dragging his gaze back to Tony. “They couldn’t get in. Our guys. The whole place was covered in anti-aircraft missiles. I watched two F-16s get blown out of the sky. The Rings, they knew we were there, somewhere. That the villagers were hiding us, moving us around from location to location. They just started shelling. Everywhere. They didn’t care. Day, night, it didn’t matter. You couldn’t sleep. You couldn’t calm down. Not when any second, the roof might explode or the wall you were leaning against could cave in. I thought we were all going to die, to tell you the truth. I thought we’d failed. I’d failed. My unit, these people, you. Everyone. We didn’t, not all of us, anyway. We couldn’t even bury them. There wasn’t time, and ground was too rocky. Just had to leave them there. Took their tags for their families, couple of other things we thought maybe their wives or parents might want. Me and Bucky, though, we got out. I think we did. Sometimes, I’m not sure. Bucky…sometimes he’s still there, I think, some part of him is, anyway. Maybe some part of both of us.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Steve, you have no idea how sorry I am,” Tony said softly.

“I shouldn’t—I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have…I didn’t mean to unload on you like that. Hell, I’m not even supposed to talk about it,” Steve told him. “Classified,” he shrugged.

“Fuck that. You need to talk about it. Besides, I’m your husband. Communication is key to a relationship, they say,” Tony tried, then felt his face fall flat. “The weapons…the shells, the anti-aircraft stuff, that was SI, wasn’t it?” Tony asked, mouth twisting into a thin, hard line.

“You could always tell the good stuff,” Steve replied, voice a rough whisper. He lifted bright eyes to Tony, heart-wrenchingly blue and wide, and Tony felt his whole body seize with something that felt a lot like desperation. “You’re going to get them, though. Stane, Pierce, whoever else was responsible for that. This whole thing you’re doing…I can’t tell you what that means to me, Tony. To know the people responsible for putting those weapons in hands that would use them against us, who didn’t care about anything except themselves, all those people who looked the other way while we were dying, to know that you’re going to see them brought to some kind of justice for it…I never thought I’d get that. Thank you, Tony. I mean it. What you’re doing, it’s really something, you know? It really is.”

A whoosh of air punched out of Tony’s stomach, and for a moment, his throat closed off and he couldn’t speak, just opened and closed his mouth, for once truly having nothing to say. He could feel a crawling sensation start low in his gut and work its way up his spine, settling in his jaw and mouth like sewer water.

_The people responsible for putting the weapons that killed Steve’s friends in the hands of terrorists. The people who didn’t care about anything except themselves. The people who looked the other way while Steve’s friends were dying. All of them._

Well, except for one rather glaring exception, who was too busy drinking and screwing and playing with his toys to notice. It had taken all of a couple of days to put the trail of evidence together once he’d gotten back. A couple of days, and he could’ve erased this whole horror show from Steve’s
existence. Steve’s friends would be alive, this Bucky guy, he’d probably be working on some version of the same speech Tony wanted to give Steve, and instead, their whole world was turned on its end, all because Tony had been too busy to take his damned responsibility seriously.

Tony felt a stinging pressure gathering at the edges of his eyes and dropped his gaze from Steve’s face, down to his lap, where his hands were fisted against the tops of his thighs.

“Sorry,” Steve said, with a nervous puff of air that wasn’t quite a laugh. “Didn’t mean to get so serious all of a sudden. The whole thing with Bucky, I guess—and you, it’s…anyway, what you’re doing here, it’s a good thing, Tony. I really do appreciate it. And whatever I can do to help, I want to do it. But, if I—I guess come on too strong or it’s not what you want. What you and Pepper and everyone think is best for this whole…thing, you just need to tell me, okay? I want this to work, and, yeah, it’s personal. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not, but it is. You guys, you’re the experts at the press and all…this, I guess, if anyone is. Bucky’ll be the first to tell you I’m horrible at anything that even looks like lying. Can’t even tell the dentist I floss daily with a straight face,” he grinned, a bit sheepishly, like his less than stellar dental hygiene was some kind of moral failing.

Hey, I didn’t take my head out of my ass long enough to notice my company was diverting weapons to the black market, but, you know, gingivitis, man, I don’t know, Tony thought wildly.

Talk to him, Rhodey’s voice echoed in Tony’s head. He’ll hate me, Tony thought back. Would it be so bad to just lay it all on Stane’s doorstep? Let him take the fall, while Tony played the innocent dupe? I could have spared Steve this pain, Tony thought. I could’ve stopped this from happening if I’d paid attention, dug in, gone through those reports the way Pepper always wanted me to…but I didn’t want to, it wasn’t fun, it wasn’t what I wanted to be doing, so I just…didn’t. I trusted. I left it to someone else, signed what I needed to sign and went on with my life, while people like Steve were—God, suffering and dying on my watch. All because it was boring. The downward pull, the tug in his chest just behind the reactor, he could feel it all slipping away like a physical force, and it was all he could do not to clutch at his chest and try to hold on, just a little bit longer.

“I, ah…I guess we should go, right? Don’t want to keep Happy waiting,” Steve suggested, raising his eyebrows in question and making an obvious effort at a lighter tone.

“Huh?” Tony said, then shook his head, trying to clear the numb stupor that had settled over him. “Right. Yeah. Sure.”

Tony stood and brushed out the non-existent wrinkles on his jacket, sweeping out an arm in front of him. “Our chariot awaits. Probably. Honestly, if they put out fresh peanuts, it’s like sixty-forty we’re ending up in an Uber.”

Steve chuckled and headed back through the balcony doors, sidestepping his way around the living room furniture until he reached the elevator, with Tony following mutely behind him, heart pounding, chest tight and legs putty-like as he found himself stumbling over the rug and nearly knocking his knee on the coffee table.

“You okay?” Steve asked with an edge of concern tainting his voice.

“Fine, fine,” Tony mumbled. “Let’s just,” he waved a hand and reached out to push the call button. Get out of here, he mentally finished, scraping his hand through his hair.

The people responsible…all of them.

Karma is a bitch, isn’t that what they say? Tony stared at the elevator doors, waiting for them to open, his distorted reflection staring back at him. Maybe it was fair. Fitting. Steve was the price
Tony would pay in forfeit for his mistakes. He could live with that, he supposed, he told himself, looking down at his hand where the simple band gleamed from the third finger.

“It would be fine.”

He glanced over at Steve, who shot him a nervous little smile and quickly looked away. Sure. Great. No problem. Steve was just a guy, after all. Not the end all, be all. If it didn’t work out, it would be fine.

Everything would be exactly fine.

God, he really had to get it together or fucking ugly cry, one or the two. Tony sucked in a deep breath, and the elevator doors slid open. They were mostly quiet on the ride down, and the lobby was, blessedly, fairly deserted, being mid-morning. If there were any paparazzi around, they were getting better with their potted plant disguises, Tony thought as he waved to a woman in a garish red and purple hat who was pointing excitedly in their direction and trying to draw the attention of her group of similarly-attired friends.

Happy had the Rolls parked in one of the valet slots just outside the hotel’s doors and was leaning against the side, chatting up a couple of ladies who were far more interested in getting a picture taken with Tony Stark’s car than with Tony Stark’s chauffeur. They were missing out, Tony thought, but Happy deftly extricated himself and turned around to hold the door open for Steve and Tony, while the women were ushered back by hotel security.

“Looking good there, Boss,” Happy said as Tony slid into the backseat.

“Married life agrees with me,” Tony quipped lightly, trying to keep the smile on his face from twisting into something terrible. He pulled his sunglasses out of his jacket pocket and shoved them on, turning to look out the window at the passersby pointing at the darkened car window while Steve took the place next to him on the seat and Happy slid into the driver’s seat.

The glittering hotels of the Strip slowly faded into the distance, and, seemingly, along with it, everything that set Vegas apart from any other post-Depression city, except that it had a parched, bland look that maybe only a desert landscape could pull off. Neutral-colored houses and half-rented strip malls boasting the ubiquitous nail salon and dry cleaners sprang up next to the kind of gas stations where the key to the restroom came on the end of a chain attached to a brick or something, Tony guessed.

It was the kind of poverty that lived paycheck to paycheck, and maybe skipped meals at the end of the month, but got by, barely, one mistake away from desperation. Tony knew he should probably hate that anyone at all lived like this, but it was Steve who filled his thoughts. Steve and his bike, peddling down this road in the wee hours of the morning when the buses had stopped, because a car and insurance and gas were too much when you were saving for…whatever it was Steve was saving for. Something to do with Barnes. Thirty thousand dollars worth of guilt-edged responsibility. Not that Tony couldn’t relate. He’d paid out enough blood money after Afghanistan to sleep at night, hadn’t he? Even if none of it had made it to Steve, because that was Tony’s life. Always one fuck-up away from actually accomplishing anything.

He looked over at Steve, who was staring out the window. His elbow rested on the edge, and his hand was fisted over his mouth, a frown deepening the lines of his face.

“Take the left just past the light, Happy,” Steve said, glancing over at Tony before looking back out the window. “You don’t have to come in, you know.”
“Happy’ll stay with the car,” Tony told him.

“Don’t worry. I’m armed,” Happy replied, turning a bit to give Tony a satisfied look.

“Okay, that…literally is precisely what worries me, so,” Tony said. “I’m knee-deep in a federal counter-terror investigation, and my chauffeur thinks he’s Dirty Harry. Christ,” Tony sighed, shaking his head. “Keep that thing in the glove compartment, would you? We do not need to add How to Get Away With Murder to our playlist this week, okay? I’m coming in. If anyone followed us—”

“They didn’t,” Steve said.

“Well, if anyone did or shows up, whatever, it’ll look better if we’re doing this whole get-your-stuff thing together, all happy couple, okay?” Tony said. “Unless you don’t want me to meet him. Is that what this is? That’s what this is, isn’t it. You know, I’m surprisingly well behaved most of the time. Potty-trained, don’t chew the furniture, only hump the legs of people I really like…but, seriously, Steve, if you don’t want me to go—”

“It’s not that,” Steve protested, grimacing and looking quickly over at Tony before dropping his gaze. “It’s…he’s…I don’t know. Just thought it might be easier, I guess. If it was just me,” he finished, shaking his head.

“Steve. I actually am capable of being a decent human being to your recovering-veteran-best-friend-from-childhood, okay? Cross my black heart,” Tony promised, making a small x on his chest.

“I know that, Tony. You’ve got a bigger heart than just about anyone I’ve ever met,” Steve argued, making Tony blink at him in surprise, though Steve didn’t seem to notice. “It’s just…I don’t know what kind of day he’s having, you know? Some days—most days, really—he’s fine, and then sometimes…I don’t know, it’s like it has all built up, piled up or something, until it reaches some tipping point that I can’t figure out, and it spills over into everything, and…I don’t want you to, I don’t know…think of him like that. If it’s a bad day,” Steve stammered, looking down to his lap, where Tony noted his hands had clenched into fists.

“Bad days. Yeah. You’ve missed my bad days,” Tony said after a long beat of silence. “I’ve had some doozies, let’s just say. Wait, do we say that anymore? Doozies? Anyway, seems appropriately descriptive. I’ve had my share. Not just after Afghanistan. Looking back, before—before what happened, I would’ve told you I was fine. Having fun, even. Waking up miserable and hating myself was just part of it. After Afghanistan, though…God, Steve, there were times I didn’t want to get up at all, because then I’d have to deal with it. The other night at the restaurant? That was just a little, light appetizer of what it was like. What it’s still like sometimes. I’m not—I’m not comparing it to your friend, and I know I don’t have the first clue what he went through or what you did, but I’m saying…I’m saying there’s no judgment here, okay? You hear me? None. I mean it. He’s having a bad day? I get it. We’ll deal with it. Help him figure out how to have more good days than bad, how to keep the bad ones from being terrible, whatever it is. We’ll…figure it out. Together, okay? You and me. It’s not just you now, Steve. Whatever happens…it’s not just you now.”

Steve looked over at him, eyes slanted and dark as his face pulled into something so fragile, Tony wanted to hold his breath. “Thank you, Tony,” Steve said, voice scraping out of his throat. “I—” he started, then huffed out a breath and looked away. “I don’t know why it matters so much. That you like him, I mean. Not like the two of you will really be hanging out. I mean, you don’t have to like him, obviously. It’s just a few minutes, right? I know that, I do. Sorry, I’m just—he’s my best friend. And everyone who meets him now just sees this person who I know he hates being, and it makes it worse for him, that this is how people think of him, and—I just didn’t want that to be you, I
“Then,” Tony began, watching the muscle tic in Steve’s jaw and counting off the seconds with it. “Then, I’ll like him. Okay? I’m not saying we’ll braid each others’ hair or I’ll give him the other half of my friendship necklace, but, he’s your best friend. You want me to like him? I’ll like him,” Tony shrugged.

“I don’t…think that’s how it works,” Steve said, giving him a half-smile, though Tony could hear the gratitude coupled with relief tingeing Steve’s voice.

“Sure, it is,” Tony countered. “He’s stuck with you this long, right? You’ve got this whole…band of brothers thing going on,” Tony continued, waving a hand in the air. “Anyway, if he means that much to you, and he clearly does, then he’s probably someone worth knowing, I figure. Plus, he has the bonus point in his favor of somehow tipping the universal scale to get you to take your clothes off for money, and we all know how I feel about that,” Tony grinned, pulling his sunglasses down low on his nose and giving Steve a teasing waggle of his eyebrows that made the other man’s face relax into something that resembled a laugh, at least. “It’s done. I like him. There,” Tony announced in sharp, clipped words, sitting back in his seat and pushing his sunglasses back up. “He has to like me, too, though. Fair’s fair.”

“He will,” Steve said, lying through his teeth so badly that Tony snorted out a laugh.

“Oh, this is going to be fun,” Tony said, as Happy pulled the car into a parking lot that was surrounded on one side by the wall of a laundromat and a high, chain-link fence on the others. A small, clay-stucco apartment complex jutted up from the center, with metal stairs leading up to the higher floors. The words ‘Paradise Apartments’ were scrawled, apparently without any sense of irony, in cursive painted letters on the front of the building.

“We’re on three,” Steve said, nodding at the top floor where someone had a rack of clothes on the walkway in front of the apartments, drying in the Vegas sun. Steve opened the door as soon as Happy parked, and hopped out, leaving Tony no choice but to follow. He gave Happy a quick look, shook his head and slid out of the car, hurrying over to catch up to where Steve waited at the bottom of the stairs. “Three C,” Steve was saying. “Sorry. I was going to clean, but…”

“But, you got married instead. Happens,” Tony replied, trying for a laugh, but Steve just looked at him, face tight with tension.

“It’s just…it’s not much,” Steve warned.

“Steve,” Tony sighed, slowing down and coming to a halt halfway between floors two and three. “It’s okay.”

Steve leaned back against the railing on the step above Tony and stared off into the distance for a moment, then looked down at where Tony waited with a grim sort of sadness shadowing his expression. Tony desperately wanted to warn him not to lean against the obvious building code violation, but held his silence. Sure, the place was a shithole, but it was Steve’s, and as much as he hated the idea of Steve being here, Tony wasn’t quite enough of an asshole to point out the glaringly obvious level of life suckage going on here.

“I don’t know why I’m being so…” Steve started, then stopped and swallowed the rest of his words. “That’s not true. I don’t want you to see this. I don’t want your pity or guilt or—or whatever. I don’t know. I’ve never really brought anyone here, except Nat, I guess, and she just kind of showed
up one day. I still don’t know how, come to think. It’s—it’s harder to…to tell myself everything’s fine, if someone else comes and sees, and maybe they…think it isn’t.”

“Speaking as someone who knows a bit about locked workshops and things we don’t talk about with others,” Tony began, clearing his throat and glancing down at the parking lot where the car stood out like a blinking, neon Steal Me Please sign. “Help isn’t judgment, Steve. I’m not offering because you’re doing a terrible job here or something. I’m offering because I can. Because I want to.

Because I like doing something that means something. Maybe you know a little about that? Maybe that kind of resonates, just, I don’t know, a tad? See, the guy who listened to my crazy spiel in the back of a limo after we busted out of a police station, and said, ‘Sure, I’m in’? That guy could’ve told me it was my problem, get stuffed, you know? But, you didn’t. You didn’t, and by all rights, you should have, because God knows—God knows, I did more to get myself into this mess than you did to get into yours, so—so I’m saying, I’m not judging, okay? Judgment-free zone. Got it?”

“Yeah,” Steve said after a beat, squinting off into the sun, then dropping his gaze down to Tony. His eyes were bright, but soft, and the way he was looking at Tony made Tony’s stomach do that stop, drop and roll thing. “Yeah, I got it.” He reached out and covered Tony’s hand where it clutched the railing, and for a flash, Tony’s eyes fell on the ring where it gleamed from Steve’s finger. “Thank you. I mean it, Tony. Thank you. You’re—you’re something else, Tony Stark, you know that, right?”

“Been called worse,” Tony smiled up at him. “Come on. Let’s go meet the in-laws or whatever.”

Tony could see the tension ebb out of the line of Steve’s shoulders and the set of his jaw, like a valve being released. Steve smiled, deprecating and relieved, and squeezed Tony’s hand where he held the railing, and Tony realized, in that brief, spare moment, that nothing, when they weren’t doing anything, just standing there, that it might be a bit more than like that he was in, or damn close to it, and wasn’t that just the kicker?

Steve turned and headed for the door labeled 3C, with its paint peeling and the C slightly off-center, where one of the nails had come out and not been replaced. He knocked and waited, then knocked again, louder this time.

The door jerked open, and a man stood there, hair unkempt and a scruff of beard over a grey t-shirt that said Army on the front and was slightly too big for him. Oh, and he was missing an arm. So, there was that.

Tony was really going to need to have a talk with Steve about Stuff We Discuss.

The man looked Steve up and down, rolled his eyes and glanced over at Tony with a look that conveyed a sense of noticing a bad smell in the room and not wanting to mention it.

“Wow. Nice,” the man said, drawing his head back and frowning at Steve before shaking his head and giving Steve a lip-biting nod. “Cinderella, eat your fucking heart out, huh? Quite the glo-up you got going there.”

“It’s just a suit,” Steve said, stepping past the man and into the apartment. He stopped and turned to look at Tony, who took off his sunglasses and pocketed them while Barnes stared. “Guess you heard.”

“That you’re married to Tony Stark? It’s possible that came up a few times here recently,” the man—Barnes, Tony mentally corrected—replied. “Got like fifty voicemails about it. Don’t know how the hell they got my number. They showed up at the club looking for you, Nat said. Had three of them come by posing as salesmen, like anyone would come to this shithole to sell stuff. One claimed
the landlord sent him to check the HVAC, as if Morrison has ever, in his life, sent freaking maintenance to fix something. They tried to talk to Enrique, too, but he just kept telling them he didn’t speak English. In English. It was great.”

“3B,” Steve explained, turning to Tony.

“I like 3B,” Tony replied with a huff of a laugh.

“Police guy came by, too. Left his card in the door when I didn’t answer. Said to call,” Barnes added.

“You didn’t say anything to them, did you?” Steve asked.

“Sir, no Sir!” Barnes replied, going rigid and giving Steve a mock salute before relaxing. “’Course I didn’t, you jerk. You really think I’m going to talk to some press guys or the cops about you?”

“Good. Thanks. That’s—good,” Steve said. “Sorry,” he sighed, wiping a hand across his mouth. “I know you didn’t, it’s just—this is important, Buck.”

“Figured that much. What with you not generally getting married on a whim. Though, if you gotta, go for broke, I guess,” Barnes said, looking over at Tony.


“I am,” Barnes said at the same time Tony did. Barnes shot Tony an annoyed look, one side of his mouth pulling up.

“Hi,” Tony interjected, giving Barnes a single wave. “So. This is incredibly awkward.”

“Come on in,” Steve urged, jerking his head towards the inside of the apartment. “Before the neighbors call someone.”

“Home, sweet home,” Barnes added, scrutinizing Tony with a narrow-eyed look. “Maids had the week off, so…”

“Don’t do that,” Steve snapped at Barnes, who flattened his mouth in response and let out a long breath through his nose.

I will not be a dick, I will not be a dick, I will not be a dick, Tony mentally chanted, eyeing Barnes where he stood in the doorway opposite Steve.

“Love to, thanks,” Tony said, slipping between the two of them and heading into the dimly-lit apartment. Steve followed on his heels, reaching to click on a standing lamp, then frowning at it when the bulb didn’t light.

“You can relax, you know,” Barnes shouted at Steve as he disappeared into the apartment. “Nat already came by for the welfare check. I’m fine. Go back to…whatever you’re doing,” the man said, looking pointedly at Tony when he said it. “Bulb’s out,” he added as an afterthought.

“You couldn’t put another one in?” Steve asked.

“Don’t have one. That was the one I took from the hallway, remember? You felt bad and worried someone’d get mugged or, I don’t know, trip or whatever in the ten feet of no light, and got a new one for it, so now the hallway is like the fucking Shining 24/7, and we gotta feel our way around the
place,” Barnes replied.

“I’ll… put lightbulbs on the list,” Steve said, though Barnes just closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head before sinking down into a threadbare brown tweed chair in front of an old box television that was perched somewhat precariously on top of a fold-out TV tray. “Here,” Steve said, sweeping a hand over the room’s other chair and dumping the bags and dirty clothes that had occupied it onto the floor. It was that or a sofa that looked like one of the cushions had been partially eaten, though it appeared someone had been using it for a bed, which probably shouldn’t have buoyed Tony’s spirits as much as it did. Tony had the words ‘I’ll stand,’ on his lips when he happened to glance over at Barnes and noted the wry, challenging expression on the man’s face. He sat.

“Your appointment’s tomorrow,” Steve reminded Barnes. “I know I said this whole thing would be done, but…”

“But, it’s not,” Barnes said flatly, looking over at Tony, who forced himself to bite back a reply.

“No,” Steve acknowledged. “Not yet. I’ll still go with you, though.”

“Don’t need a babysitter, Steve,” Barnes replied.

“You know I don’t mind going. Sam said—” Steve started.

“Yeah, I know what Sam said,” Barnes cut him off. “I can go to the damn appointment by myself.”

Steve let out a breath, put his hands on his hips and looked off towards the tiny kitchenette, where Tony could hear a small refrigerator humming and could just make out a toaster oven with two burners on top and a microwave on the counter. Packages of ramen noodles were stacked by flavor next to a smattering of crackers in small packages that seemed to have come from a restaurant where someone foolishly put them out for patrons to help themselves.

“I know you can take care of yourself,” Steve finally responded. “But, you don’t have to.”

“You going to tell me what’s really going on here?” Barnes asked, raising an eyebrow at Steve and looking between him and Tony. “Then,” he said into Steve’s silence, “I guess I’ll be going by myself.”

Tony took a deep breath, tamped down on the urge to roll his eyes, and looked over at Barnes.

“Unbeknownst to me, my best friend hired Steve for a private dance in my hotel room, but I ended up sort of trying to bribe a politician, and, in exchange for what I keep trying to tell him is a paltry sum, Steve here agreed to be a stand up kind of guy and make an honest man out of me so as to not have to testify against me, and buy me some time to bring down a global terrorist network that reaches to the highest institutions of our government,” Tony told Barnes in one long breath while Barnes stared at him.

Barnes blinked. Slowly turned his head and looked over at Steve, eyes wide and owlish as he stared. Looked back at Tony. Then burst out laughing. He bent at the waist and slapped his knee with his good hand, gathered himself down to a hiccupping sort of chuckle, looked over at Steve and promptly started guffawing again.

“Great. Great, just great. Have a laugh,” Steve said, shaking his head, but his mouth was pulling into a smile. “It’s not as bad as you think.”

“Only you,” Barnes said between chortles. “Only you, Steve, I swear to God. You crazy
sonofabitch. What the hell have you gotten yourself into now?"

“You understand the need for discretion,” Tony cut in somewhat brusquely. “It would be bad. Not just for me. For both of us. The legal fallout alone would—"

“Yeah, yeah, I got you covered, Stark,” Barnes replied, making a face full of distaste at him. “You really think I’d rat Steve out like that?”

“He just has to be careful, Buck. This is serious,” Steve added. “I’m just—I’m going to grab a few things, check on—make sure you don’t need anything, okay?”

“I’m taking the damn pills, Steve, right on schedule. Each little day’s box of ‘em, okay?” Barnes ground out.

“Good. We can ask the doc about some refills tomorrow, if you need any,” Steve replied, ignoring Barnes’ tone through what Tony assumed was practiced force of will. Steve headed for the kitchenette and started opening drawers and cabinets, pulling out small orange or green pill bottles and lining them up on the counter. He pulled out a small notepad and started writing down what Tony assumed was some kind of pill count. “I think we’re good for a bit,” he announced after a few moments. “I’m just going to grab a couple of things.”

“You do that,” Barnes muttered, though his eyes tracked Steve through the room’s only other door, which Tony assume led to a bedroom. Tony could hear muffled sounds of drawers being opened and closed and the rattle of hangers jiggling together.

“Do I want to know what’s in the shower?” Steve called out a moment later.

“I’m gonna clean it, keep your panties on, Stevie,” Barnes said with a slight sigh when Steve appeared in the doorway. “Just some leftover paint and shit from that warehouse down near Harmon. By the one that burned down? They’re making it into some kind of ‘industrial chic’ club or something,” Barnes replied, rolling his eyes as he put the words in air quotes. “I know it’s not the stuff you like, but I thought maybe you could do something with it, I don’t know. Spruce the place up a bit or something. It was free, whatever. Throw ‘em out if you don’t want them, geez.”

“Oh,” Steve said, turning to look over his shoulder. “That’s…thanks, Buck.”

“He paints. Well. He used to paint. Now, he takes care of me,” Barnes said, looking back at Tony.

“That’s not—that’s not fair, Buck,” Steve protested.

“Nat left your take from last week in the box under your bed,” Barnes replied. “Looks like someone must’ve tipped big,” he finished, giving Tony a long, challenging look. “We gotta drop off the rent by five tomorrow or get another one of those notices. I almost have enough to finish wallpapering the bathroom though, so hold off.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Steve snapped. “Just…give me a minute, okay? Can you do that?” he asked, looking between Barnes and Tony. Tony watched Steve sigh, then turn and head into the small bedroom, shaking his head.

“So,” Barnes said after a pause. “This whole thing is just some kind of play-acting thing.”

“Right,” Tony replied.

“Right,” Barnes repeated, drawing out the word. “You’re just…pretending. So that the police will think you’re married, and Steve doesn’t have to talk to them.”
“That’s the idea,” Tony said.

“How’s that going for you?” Barnes asked, eyes narrowing into a shrewd look.

“I…think we’re pretty convincing,” Tony replied. Barnes snorted out a derisive laugh and wiped his hand across his mouth to cover it.

“One way of putting it,” Barnes acknowledged brusquely. “And when this is all done and you’ve, I don’t know, figured out world peace or whatever the fuck it is you’re doing, you’re just going to hand Steve a check and everyone goes on their merry way, huh?” Barnes asked.

“That is what we agreed to,” Tony admitted carefully.

“Uh-huh,” Barnes harrumphed.

“Buck, I’m going to leave this in the coffee can, okay?” Steve said, walking back into the room with a handful stuffed with bills. “I made a list for groceries, if you want to pick some up. And I wrote down your medicines and appointments. If you miss another PT, they’re gonna take you off the schedule, so…”

“I said I’d go, didn’t I?” Barnes replied. “Just put the lists on the fridge, okay?”

Steve stopped, halfway between the bedroom and kitchenette, and looked down at his hands, then over at Barnes with a sort of helpless expression that made Tony’s heart constrict in his chest. He didn’t like seeing that on Steve’s face. Steve should never look like that, not Steve. Tony watched Steve walk over to the kitchenette, pull out his notebook from his pocket and tear a couple of sheets off and stick them to the fridge with a Wynn resort and casino magnet. He glanced over and caught Tony’s eye, then looked away again and stalked off back to the bedroom, this time closing the door behind him.

Barnes stared at the closed door, then shook his head and turned a hard glare on Tony. “At least this one ended up better than the last private gig he got,” Barnes huffed out. “Married or whatever the hell this is instead of…” Barnes let the words trail off, watching Tony carefully.

“Better than the last one?” Tony repeated, rising to the bait. Barnes shrugged and looked away, towards the one, dingy window next to the apartment’s door.

“I don’t like him doing that stuff,” Barnes said finally. Tony thought again about what exactly was meant by a misunderstanding about the nature of Steve’s services, but he didn’t press it.

“You’re a bit hard on him, you know,” Tony observed, keeping his voice mild.

“You’re just going to let him walk away when all this is said and done, huh? Steve,” Barnes spat out, voice threaded with anger and frustration. “Guy like that, and you’re just going to pat him on the back and thanks for the memories or whatever?” Barnes demanded. “You’re an idiot.”

Tony looked down at where his hands curled in his lap, then sat forward and tipped his chin down, meeting Barnes’ calculating look with one of his own.

“You’re deliberately being a dick,” Tony replied with a touch of surprise that was more like realizing something he should have known. “This is a thing you do. Picking at him, pissing him off. You’re trying to push him away, even if it means him hating you, but, I gotta tell you, and I don’t mean this as a criticism,” Tony said, holding up his hands in a placating gesture, “but, you’re really, really bad at it. The paints? Come on.”
“To be fair, Steve would tell you me being a dick isn’t really that much of a stretch,” Barnes admitted, mouth twisting into the ghost of a smile. “He did used to paint. Was really good at it, too. Always made him happy, you know? I don’t know. Hell, I saw them by the dumpster, and…he shouldn’t be here. Not him,” Barnes husked out in a soft, brittle voice. “He’s not…this isn’t supposed to be his life, you know? Not Steve. But, he’s too damned stubborn and good to just peace the fuck out like a normal person,” Barnes said, tossing his hand in the air with a snort of frustration. “No, he’s going to stay until, I don’t know, forever—where I’m whatever definition of fixed enough is in his head—and meanwhile, his life,” Barnes stopped, swallowed and drew in a shaky breath. “This isn’t supposed to be his life.”

“I don’t want this to be his life, either,” Tony began. “You have no idea. Or, well. Maybe you do, I don’t know. I’m saying…maybe this whole pretending thing he and I are doing…maybe it isn’t so much of a stretch for me, either,” Tony offered quietly.

“No fucking kidding,” Barnes shot back. “He makes lists. Helps him keep his thoughts organized, so they don’t get away from him, turn into something else or whatever. Sam—he works down at the VA on weekends—he got him doing it. Always with the lists, you know? Used to drive me crazy. Lists, fucking everywhere. Now…now, I just let him. Whatever, right? We’ve got hundreds of them, all over the place. Boxes under his bed, in the silverware drawer, in the freezer. We don’t get rid of the lists. God, no. We gotta keep the lists. He doesn’t sleep right. Nightmares. Shit, I don’t know anymore. He won’t talk about it,” Barnes said with a frustrated sigh, waving his hand in the air towards the bedroom door. “Not with me. He needs someone who—who can fucking do something.”

“I can help,” Tony said. “Well, not me. That’s an…infinitely bad idea. I can get him help. Make things easier. For both of you. I want to. I want…I would…be a part of that, if I could. But, even if I can’t, I’m still all in, if he’ll let me.”

“Well, he’s not going to make it easy on you, that’s for damn sure,” Barnes pointed out grimly. “He likes you, though. See him get all prickly about you? Gets his back up, that’s how you can tell,” Barnes grinned, and for a moment, Tony could see the young man he must have been before all of this happened. War. Bureaucracy. Pettiness. Life. Tony. Whatever. Warmth seeped through his chest at Barnes’ words. He couldn’t help it. He knew the roadblock in front of him, but still, hearing it from Barnes, from Steve’s best friend…well, it wasn’t nothing, at least. “God, you should see your face. You’re all,” Barnes pantomimed some kind of ridiculously sappy expression, making Tony’s face pull into a frown. “If you let him go, you’re the world’s biggest idiot, you know that, right?”

“I don’t want to let him go,” Tony admitted.

“Then don’t,” Barnes shot back. “It’s not that fucking difficult.”

“There are…some complications,” Tony replied.

“Fuck your complications. Look, Stark, you may not have noticed, but I don’t have a whole lot going for me, life-wise, at the moment, so if you fuck this up and hurt him, you should probably take that into some consideration. I’m not saying I could kill you at 500 yards these days, but not for nothing, he’s really all I’ve got,” Barnes said.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the whole shovel talk thing you have going, but I swear, the last thing I ever want to do is hurt him,” Tony told him, voice laced with a vehemence he hadn’t really intended, but couldn’t quite manage to keep out.

“Good. Then don’t,” Barnes warned, and that’s what it was, a warning, make no mistake, Tony
thought. Steve was who this man had left, and Tony supposed it said something about him that he was willing to give Steve up if it meant giving him a shot at happiness. An ally like that, someone Steve clearly loved, had to be a good thing, right?

“You know, it would be helpful if you talked to him, maybe put in a good wor—” Tony started.

The bedroom door jerked open, and Steve emerged with a black duffel that sported another casino’s name on the side stuffed full of what appeared to be clothes and shoes. “I guess I’m ready,” Steve said, studiously not looking at Barnes. “I’ll come by tomorrow and pick you up for your appointment.”

“He thinks I won’t go if he doesn’t,” Barnes said.

“Shocking conclusion on my part, considering you haven’t been the last two times when I was working,” Steve pointed out in a droll, tired-sounding tone.

“I said I’d go,” Barnes replied.

“We’ll all go,” Tony blurted out, then winced when the two of them turned their gazes to him. “I mean, I’ll go, too. Happy can drive. Be like a get-to-know-the-best-man-outing-type-thing. Everyone loves a veteran, right? Wounded vet, very sympathetic. It’ll play great. Trust me.”

“I got kicked out,” Barnes reminded him.

“I’m working on that,” Tony replied, waving a hand in the air.

“What do you mean you’re working on—” Barnes started, leaning forward in his seat.

“In fact…okay, new plan,” Tony cut him off. “You, Fugitive reject, come back with us. Now. To the hotel, I mean. Be easier than picking you up tomorrow. We’ve got plenty of room, and you can keep Steve company.”

“Did you just invite me for a playdate with Steve? You’re…not serious,” Barnes said.

“There’s an X-box,” Tony added with a slight shrug.

“Tony, you don’t need to do that, really,” Steve protested at the same time. “It’s fine. Bucky’s fine, we can come by tomorrow—”

“Aren’t you two supposed to be honeymooning it?” Barnes asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“What’s it going to look like, me showing up and third wheeling it?”

“Look, we’ve got people in and out of that place like it’s a 99-cent buffet. Some reporter got to Steve in the VIP gym, for Christ’s sake. Trust me, Pepper will rest easier knowing you’re away from the public, particularly with this press conference thing coming up,” Tony pointed out, reasonably, he thought. “Look, this whole thing is a house of cards, and I get that you wouldn’t do anything to mess it up, but we all slip, and right now, we need as few loose ends as possible. You think these guys, the ones who’ve been doing their Electrolux routine at your front door, you think they don’t know you’re headed to an appointment tomorrow? You think they’re not looking all into your record, waiting to shout all kinds of shit at you to get a reaction? Trust me, that’s how they play this, and they are just waiting for a shot.”

Barnes looked over at Steve, who opened his mouth and then closed it and let out a sigh. “You should’ve heard the stuff they said to Tony,” Steve said, a furrow forming in his brow. “Maybe it’s not such a bad idea, Buck. It’d just be for a few days. Kind of like a vacation. Get away for a bit?
It’s a great place. Really. Got cable and everything,” Steve finished with a small, conciliatory smile.

There was such a cautiously hopeful note in Steve’s voice, it thrummed through Tony’s chest and wrapped around his heart, making it hard to swallow past the sudden lump in his throat.

“That’s it. Done. Settled. Come on, Kato, get your stuff, let’s go,” Tony announced, standing up and reaching for his phone.

“I am not shacking up with you and sugar daddy here. No way, Steve. Forget it. Not happening,” Barnes replied. “Absolutely not going to happen. No,” Barnes ground out, looking over at Steve, then somewhat helplessly at Tony.

“No jumping on the bed. If you build a pillow fort, you have to put them back when you’re done,” Tony said.

“Divorce him,” Barnes said, glaring at Steve, and heaving out a sigh of surrender.

“You did what?” Rhodey asked. Shouted. Whatever. There was a clatter at the other end of the phone, followed by a muffled rustling sound. “Tell me you did not do what I know you did.”

“I kind of adopted his best friend. I mean, not officially, so no diaper cake or anything, but he’s sitting on the couch, drinking a beer and eating about two hundred dollars’ worth of room service. Can I claim him as a dependent? Seems fair,” Tony replied.

“Tony,” Rhodey sighed into the phone. “You couldn’t just, I don’t know, leave the guy a check or something?”

“Don’t talk about my surly, emo son that way,” Tony deadpanned, then ducked his head and scrunched his face together. “Rhodey, I couldn’t leave him there. I couldn’t. Steve—his face when I offered, I—you didn’t see this place, Rhodey. And Barnes, he’s… I mean, God, he’s obnoxious as shit, sure, and I can’t decide for sure if he hates me or wants to help, but he loves the hell out of Steve, and Steve… he’d do anything for Barnes,” Tony replied. “Obviously. And it’s just been all on Steve for so long…” he trailed off, letting the words hang in the phone’s silent condemnation.

“Don’t think I don’t see what you’re doing here,” Rhodey said finally. “Fix Barnes, and maybe Steve will love—or, wait, are we still going with the like thing? Because last I checked, we don’t bring home one-armed, probably painkiller-addicted, felon, ex-snipers on a whim for someone we like.”

“Actually, getting him to get in the car took some doing. He wasn’t exactly thrilled about bunking over in our little fake love nest, believe me. Look, I’m just…” Tony broke off with a frustrated puff of air. “I couldn’t leave him there, okay? I just couldn’t. He’s—he’s Steve’s you, and the idea of you, sitting there being all self-sacrificing and miserable… I just couldn’t. Rhodey. And Steve, he’s so happy. Not just having Barnes here, because I honestly don’t think that was even in his head, but just not having it all be on him. I thought—okay, well, I didn’t think, really, just sort of went with it—but, maybe… maybe Steve sees how this could work, you know? Maybe, with Barnes here, with
the whole we’re-in-this-together-rah-rah-go-team-thing we have going, maybe it doesn’t look so crazy.”

“You mean, maybe it doesn’t look so crazy when you have this whole conversation thing where you tell him how you feel? Because I’m hearing a lot of stuff that involves Steve somehow magically divining that he’s supposed to interpret your grand gesture as ‘I’m completely in love with you and want to climb you like a tree,’ instead of ‘I’m Tony Stark and have more money than I know what to do with,’” Rhodey replied evenly. “And not a lot of where you sit him down and actually tell the man you like him.”

“I’m…we’re going to dinner tonight. We’ll talk. I’ve got a whole…plan,” Tony insisted.

“Uh-huh,” Rhodey sighed.

“I could have a plan,” Tony retorted.

“Is your plan to solve Steve’s life problems until he likes you back?” Rhodey asked.

“Is that a note of skepticism I hear in your voice?” Tony asked with a deprecating laugh that devolved into a groan. “Maybe it scares him away. If I say something now. Too soon, right? That’s a thing. We’ve got a few more days of this, then—then everything can be said that needs to be said without the worry that he finds my whole carving our initials in a tree thing more stalker-lite than romantic.”

“He doesn’t really seem like the type of guy to scare easily,” Rhodey pointed out. “Look, I’m not saying lay it all on the line over the dessert course, but, you know, feel him out. Not that way. I can hear the words forming in your head. I mean, drop some hints. ‘Hey, Steve, ever think about moving to California and being a kept man?’ That kind of thing.”

“So…go for subtle, huh? Good call. Thanks. That’s great,” Tony huffed and dropped his forehead into his hands, rubbing at his temples.

“What are you doing the rest of the day?” Rhodey asked. “Hanging out with your new bestie?”

“Well, we have mani-pedis this afternoon, and then I thought we’d make some cosmos, maybe do something that involves Pinterest…” Tony began, wincing out a laugh when Rhodey snorted. “Ever heard of a company called Romotive Group?”

“Can’t say I have, why?” Rhodey responded.

“Other than my houseguest and the club, it’s the only other number Steve has dialed regularly in the past six months,” Tony explained.

“You hacked his phone,” Rhodey said.

“Of course I hacked his phone. You think I’m going to bring this guy into all this and not find out if he’s got a bookie or crazy ex or, God forbid, one of those Farmville things where he’s going to send me messages about his fake crops? I think we all agree, everyone has a dealbreaker, and updates about your pretend corn—come on,” Tony said. “I had JARVIS take a download of all the data—search history, phone records, messages, all that.”

“Fair point,” Rhodey agreed. “Anyway, no, never heard of it. Since I’m assuming by now you know exactly what Romotive Group is, give over.”

“He watches YouTube videos on how to dance. I’m…having a hard time not finding that
completely adorable,” Tony replied. “Okay, anyway, Romotive is this start-up doing some kind of robotics research, mostly to do with applications that can integrate the robot with smartphones. Kind of a cute, kitschy end user thing, but whatever. DUM-E’s code is probably more sophisticated, with the adaptive interface and—”


“Right. So, anyway, Romotive also has a small, but not totally unimpressive, medical research division doing—I’ll give you one guess,” Tony said.

“Prosthetics,” Rhodey replied.

“Got it in one,” Tony said. “The good kind, not the shit kind the VA can afford, and without insurance of any kind, the starting model’s price is…can I get a drum roll?”

“I’m guessing about thirty grand,” Rhodey said.

“I’m thinking field trip,” Tony announced. “Want to come? You can have the window seat on the bus.”

“I have an actual job. You know that, right?” Rhodey replied.

“So…that’s a yes?” Tony asked.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Rhodey said.

“Pepper’s making arrangements. Little tour thing. Like SI may be interested in investing or something,” Tony told him.

“We’re doing a lot of Scooby-Doo level shit here lately, Tony,” Rhodey said in a low voice, tight with concern.

“It’s just a tour. For…reasons,” Tony said.

“Reasons hanging out with his platonic ride-or-die for the day?” Rhodey asked.

“He’s hovering,” Tony said, swiveling his head to glance through the balcony windows where Steve was standing behind the sofa where Barnes lounged, looking for the world like a man who had no idea what to do with himself when there wasn’t a crisis. “Barnes said he paints. He mentioned that, sort of. That he’d almost gone to art school. Pepper’s having some art crap sent over. Give him something to do, I don’t know.”

“Art crap. Hold me while I swoon,” Rhodey replied. “You’re not going to beat ‘cans of leftover paint you saw on the street and brought back to your shitty apartment on the off chance Steve might like it’ kind of paints, you know that, right?”

“This is entirely unrelated to…what you are suggesting,” Tony said.

“Uh-huh,” Rhodey hummed. “Give me half an hour?”

“Sounds good. Pepper’s going, too. Meet us downstairs?” Tony replied.

“Will do,” Rhodey agreed, then the line went dead.

Tony pocketed the phone. He tapped a finger at his lip, worrying the edge with his teeth, as he watched Steve move around the suite while Barnes sat on the couch watching what appeared to be a
telenovela. Checking his email and reading through a few of the more salacious takes on his and Steve’s evening of wedded bliss passed the time until he realized Shaggy, Daphne and Fred were probably waiting downstairs for him. Pushing himself up, Tony walked to the French doors that led inside, hesitated a moment, watching the two of them as a smile spread over Steve’s face at something Barnes had said, then went inside.

“I see you’re making yourself at home,” Tony observed, nodding at Barnes, who tipped the neck of his beer bottle in Tony’s direction. “I’ve got a bit of an errand to run before dinner,” he told Steve, who nodded somewhat distractedly.

“Of course. We’re fine here. Really, Tony, do what you need to do,” Steve urged, as Tony grabbed his jacket from the back of one of the dining room chairs and shrugged it on.

“Pepper’s sending over a few things to keep you occupied. Nothing fancy, but, you know, enjoy. Whatever,” Tony said with a flat grimace.

“Fifty bucks says it’s paints,” Barnes smirked up at Tony from his place on the sofa, eating Tony’s food and drinking Tony’s beer and being obnoxiously observant.

“Why would it be paints?” Steve asked, confusion flickering across his face.

“It’s not paints,” Tony said, then wagged his head back and forth at Barnes’ look. “Fine. It’s not only paints. Just, you know, something for you to do while you’re stuck here. Whatever.”


Barnes grinned.

Tony kind of hated him.

“Well, he said you painted. Art school dropout thing—look, doesn’t matter. Use the stuff, don’t, not a big deal, okay? It’s just…stuff,” Tony said with a flash of annoyance, waving his hand in the air. Barnes’ smile got wider. Tony bit back a grimace and instead, shook his head and took a deep, bracing breath. “I’ll be back in a couple hours. Call Matt or Pepper if you need anything,” Tony rushed out in a tight voice, then headed for the elevator.

“Tony, wait,” Steve called out, walking quickly across the room to stand next to Tony. “I just,” he started, turning his head towards where Barnes reclined before looking back at Tony. “Thank you. For…everything, really, I guess. Bucky, though…Tony, you didn’t have to do that. But, thank you. It’s…been a long time since anyone put their neck out for him, you know, and it’s—it’s a lot for him to deal with. And he’s a lot to deal with. He’s just…”

“Trying to push you away?” Tony finished in a quiet voice. “As someone who is–let’s go with tangentially familiar—with being a big enough ass to drive people away before you inevitably screw up their lives, I give his performance a solid 7.5.” Steve let out a shaky laugh, and glanced down at Tony, face going soft.

“Still. Thank you, Tony. I know none of this is how you planned your week to go,” Steve said.

“Well,” Tony began. “Not like you exactly figured a lap dance would lead to husband-for-hire status under threat of unfortunate legal entanglements. Though, gotta admit, my standards for a strip tease have gotten a hell of a lot higher. Happy trail and happily ever after or what’s the point?” Tony grinned up at Steve, who shook his head, a fond smile forming over cheeks that heated to a deep pink shade. “I didn’t do it for him,” Tony offered in a soft, low voice that barely carried.
“I know,” Steve replied.

“Good,” Tony said. The corners of his mouth tugged up into a small smile, and he turned, squinting back at Barnes. “No bright light. No food after midnight. Don’t get him wet. You know the drill.”

“We’re just going to stay here and not talk to anyone,” Steve promised as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open. “See you for dinner tonight?”

“ Wouldn’t miss it,” Tony said, watching the elevator doors close on Steve’s smile. There was something wrong with his stomach and chest. They were all tight and twisted, but in a weirdly good way, which made no sense, and his face kept doing this strange half-smile, half-laugh thing that made his reflection in the metal of the elevator’s door look like he was about to burst into song.

“ Whoo-boy,” Rhodey whistled lowly when the elevator opened, pulling back and giving Tony an appraising look as Tony stepped out into the hotel’s lobby. “You okay, or do you need to stop and stamp your foot a few times there, Thumper?”

“Can you not?” Tony asked, sliding his sunglasses on.

“Seems unlikely,” Rhodey acknowledged as he fell into step by Tony. “So, going off-campus, huh? You know, I think a small, robotics start-up is like the twelfth anniversary gift, just saying.”

“We’re just doing some, what do you guys call it? Recon?” Tony asked.

“Don’t do that. It’s weird when you try to jargon,” Rhodey said.

“Okay, there is nothing wrong with my jargon,” Tony protested. “One time. One time, Rhodes, and how was I supposed to know that wasn’t what they meant by the parts on a Hangar Queen? You have to admit, with your history, it’s not exactly out of—”

“Stop. People will believe you, I told you,” Rhodey cut in, shaking his head.

“Pepper’s waiting in the car,” Tony added, waving to a few tourists that milled around the hotel lobby as they passed through. “There’s Happy,” he nodded at the limo by the valet stand where Happy hurriedly opened the door for them with a quick salute aimed at Rhodey.

“Carl Estes is the VP of Development. He’s the guy we’ll be meeting,” Pepper told them as they pulled away from the curb. “It’s a small firm, maybe thirty million in venture cap, but they’ve targeted the military market for their more advanced prosthetics, and have at least one R&D contract with the Army, though no orders on anything yet. Closely held by a few shareholders and an investment group out of San Diego, but from what I can tell, not profitable yet. Reading between the lines, I think they got the R&D thing mostly because Stern’s on the appropriations committee and this is his seat, so it looked good for him, but there are at least four other firms doing similar work who have exhibited at the trade shows just in the past year, one with a neural interface prototype.”

“Interesting,” Tony said noncommittally.

“I’m just saying, it’s probably dripping with debt, no profit in sight, and they are probably holding off bankruptcy because that would void the Army contract, but they have to be close, barely an income stream to speak of, except, well…” Pepper trailed off, glancing down at the tablet in her hands.

“The occasional sale to the public?” Tony guessed. “About that…”

“Yes, okay, fine, they happen to be one of the few putting something on the market. A few. A very
few. Not the high-end ones for the Army, but still fairly advanced compared to what’s out there. Pricey, though. Some surfer who lost a leg below the knee in a car accident has one. This executive who was injured mountain climbing. Not many. I see quite a few GoFundMe’s for people trying to raise enough money for one. These things are way too experimental and expensive for insurance to cover,” Pepper said, then bit her lip and glanced out the window for a moment, watching the cars slide by as they drove.

“So, if someone wanted to get one for their—can we all say it together?” Tony asked.

“Are you honestly this insecure?” Rhodey asked. “Wait, what am I saying?”

“It’s like you don’t know me at all,” Tony muttered, pursing his lips and raising his eyebrows at Rhodey, who rolled his eyes in reply. “Anyway, so let’s say you have no money, but you find out this company will sell top of the line, at least by your standards, prosthetics to the public for the bargain basement price of…!” he pointed at Pepper.

“Thirty-thousand dollars,” she grumbled, nodding slightly. “You don’t have to do this, you know. There are far easier ways of doing this. Rhodey, tell him there are perfectly acceptable—normal—ways of handling this.”

“Uh-uh, I’m just here to watch,” Rhodey replied.

“If I had a nickel for every time I heard that from you…I’d have, like, two nickels,” Tony grinned, turning to Pepper. “He’s very proper. You need to loosen up, I’ve told you that. It’s bad for your health, being all uptight all the time. You’re like Cameron Frye over there.”

“Look, I tried to make up for the whole stripper pole on the jet thing with being a completely awesome wingman and buying you a lap dance with Mr. American Pie, and now you’re in like and having feelings, and I get that’s freaking you out, but there’s no reason to call me out like that. Besides, Ferris, if I’m anyone, I’m the hot sister who can’t get away with shit and tries to get you to behave, but ultimately hates The Man more,” Rhodey protested, giving Tony a firm nod.

“Are you two done?” Pepper asked.

“You are definitely the hot sister,” Tony agreed.

“Damn right,” Rhodey replied.

“Now, Pepper, to your point…really, when have you known me to do things the easy way when there is an alternative that involves a far more personally satisfying, if somewhat dramatic, demonstration of throwing money at a situation with the hope it’s understood as a way of emotionally compensating for things I’m scared to say out loud?” Tony asked, raising his eyebrows in question.

Pepper made a noise that sounded like frustrated surrender and waved her hand in the air like she was swatting away a gnat, then went back to her tablet, apparently deciding ignoring them was the better part of valor for the moment.

“You still have to talk to Steve. This—is this thing you’re doing—you know I have your back, right, but this isn’t actual communication,” Rhodey pointed out. “You can’t just run up and push Steve over on the playground and hope that he understands that means you like him.”

“I honestly think that might work with Steve,” Tony huffed. “I am going to talk to Steve. About feelings. I got this. Don’t make the face. The…doubting face thing you’re doing. I am. Right after I do this thing,” Tony said, shaking his head at Rhodey’s look. “This is just an…exploration of a
possible investment opportunity,” Tony argued. “Now, let’s go have a chat with Mr. Carl Estes, of the many unreturned phone calls from Steve, shall we?” Tony asked.

“Fine. You know this is not how normal people react to things. I’m just saying,” Pepper replied with a frown that melted into something a lot softer. “Like him, huh?”

“A tad,” Tony agreed amiably, biting his lip and looking out the window as the car fell silent. “More than a tad. Don’t let me screw this up, okay?”

“We’re not,” Rhodey said.

“Promise,” Pepper added.

The drive out to the Romotive Group facility wasn’t particularly long, though traffic clogged most of the route. It sat in a nondescript, metal-sided building in the middle of a half-empty industrial park that had seen better days, mainly distinguished by the green and purple someone had chosen for the logo.

“On a scale of one to salt the earth, how pissed do you think he is?” Pepper asked, leaning her head towards Rhodey as she peered out the limo’s window.

“We’re at an industrial park. In Vegas. It’s basically the Upside Down,” Rhodey replied as he looked out the window at the parking lot with its faded, white stripes and walkways split with indomitable weeds.

“So, I should…” she said, pointing down at her tablet.

“In.dust.rial.park,” Rhodey replied.

“Fair point,” Pepper said with a slight groan as Happy opened the limo’s door to let them all out.

“Hello! Mr. Stark! Welcome!” a man in a black polo shirt emblazoned with the Romotive Group logo on the front said as he walked towards them from where he waited at the building’s entrance. “Carl Estes, Vice President of Development. Wow, we are so thrilled to have you here—honored, really. I’m a huge fan, as you can imagine, being in the industry and all. I couldn’t believe it when your assistant called. Told my secretary someone was pulling our leg! But, here you are! Wow. Tony Stark. The Tony Stark!”

“Oh, this is not going to go well,” Rhodey said, low and under his breath.

“No idea what you mean. I hate him already,” Tony grated out through his teeth. Rhodey just shook his head and rubbed at his chin with one hand, trying to cover a fond smile.

Estes held out his hand to shake Tony’s with a wide grin, which wavered while Tony stared at him. The man looked like the kind of guy who was one step from unironically quoting Kerouac, probably listed Tyler Durden as his favorite movie character and spent a lot of time wondering why women always looked right past nice guys like him.

“The one and only,” Tony smiled, ignoring the man’s proffered hand. “This is Ms. Potts and Colonel James Rhodes, U.S. Air Force.”

“The famous Pepper Potts,” Estes said, somewhat awkwardly shifting his hand from where it hung in the air in front of Tony toward Pepper, who shook it limp-wristed, with a plastered-on smile.

“Mr. Estes,” Pepper said.
“And Colonel Rhodes, of course. I’ve heard so much about you from my guys out at Nellis,” Estes said, shaking Rhodey’s hand.

“That so?” Rhodey replied, giving Tony a quick, side-eyed look.

“Oh, yeah, all good things, of course! I mean, when you know the right people, word gets around, right? Hey, how about we get ourselves out of this heat? Give you a tour of the facility, let you meet some of our people? We’ve got a lot going on, Mr. Stark,” Estes told them with all the charm of a used car salesman, as they turned towards the building. “Going to blow your mind, I’m telling you —”

“Doubt it,” Tony muttered.

“—not that I have to tell you, obviously,” Estes continued without only a slight tic of his eyes to indicate he’d heard Tony’s response. “Trust me, you are not going to be disappointed. You really have an eye. Everyone in the biz knows that, of course. I mean, you’re Tony Stark! Know how to pick a winner, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Something like that,” Tony smiled tightly, tilting his head and returning Rhodey’s look as they walked up the steps into the building, Pepper’s heels clacking on the sidewalk behind them.

It was impossible not to imagine Steve making the same trek out here, though somehow Tony doubted Steve, riding up on his bike or walking up from one of the bus stops they passed on the way out here, had received quite the same welcome. Steve, who was no one and everyone who mattered, who would have come out here, maybe with Barnes, but probably not. Probably by himself, Tony decided as a wall of air conditioning and track lighting hit him. He blinked and pocketed his sunglasses, shooting Pepper another look, though she had her head bowed to read something on her phone.

Wouldn’t have wanted Barnes along, Tony thought to himself, in case things didn’t go well. No. Steve would’ve come himself to ask what it would take, and figured out how he could make that happen in the shortest time possible while keeping it this side of legal. Maybe on the ride home. Maybe he’d thought it through, watching out a bus window without really seeing as cinder block and metal buildings became stucco homes flanked by strip malls with a veritable Emerald City looming over them.

“Our lab is right this way,” Estes was saying, sweeping out a hand towards a corridor marked by an ‘Employees Only’ sign. “You’ll want to take a look, of course, and then, I thought we could hit the conference room. Talk some numbers. Mary, would you make sure we have some refreshments—what’s your poison, Tony? Can I call you Tony?”

“Not…ever, no,” Tony replied, making Estes’ smile falter, though the guy recovered quickly enough. Someone like that usually did. “So, you’re into prosthetics.”

“Right. Well, that’s one of our focuses, anyway,” Estes said. “We’ve had some luck with a design that utilizes the spinal nerves to coordinate function with the prosthesis, though it’s all preliminary, of course. The Army is interested. I’m sure you heard. It was in all the trades a while back. Even a blurb about it in USA Today,” he said, pointing to a framed section of newspaper on the wall that did, in fact, mention the company and showed a picture of a young man with a shaved head sitting on a metal table with his robotic arm in the air, fingers opened, as a ball sailed towards him from one of the white-coated lab techs.

This is what you saw, Tony thought, biting the inside of his cheek. This is why Vegas. He caught Pepper watching him, and quickly turned back to the snake-oil guy.
“Part of our outreach program,” Estes announced proudly. “In partnership with Walter Reed and a few other places. We get to test things, get some real-world feedback, and, of course, what we are able to provide far exceeds Army standard issue,” Estes said as they walked down the hallway past pictures of, good Lord, it was actually just pictures of the building itself. Tony sighed. Steve would have been truly offended by the taste level here, Tony thought, then felt himself smiling.

“Outreach. Nice,” Rhodey observed mildly.

“Oh, yes,” Estes said with a bubble of enthusiasm. “This isn’t just about the bottom line here. We’re deeply committed to our men and women in uniform, I can assure you,” he added, glancing over at Rhodey, who just sucked in a breath and flattened his mouth at Tony.

“The article on the wall said it was the first one of its kind that they were testing,” Rhodey pointed out.

“Well, er…yes. I mean, these things take a long time, and, of course, there’s a substantial investment involved, but we hope to grow the program. In the future. Actually, ah…I mean, soon. Very soon. We already have plans to send another couple out for testing. We have a waiting list a mile long. You should see the letters we get. Heartbreaking, I tell you. I wish we could help them all. Heck, I even had this one guy come all the way out here from New York or something, trying to get his buddy on the list. Even offered to work security or scrub toilets or whatever, can you believe it?”

Tony slowed. Turned. Looked at Estes, with his terrible shirt and slicked-back hair and soft hands. “Sounds determined,” Tony remarked.

“Determined? You’re telling me,” Estes huffed out, rolling his eyes a bit. “God, yeah, that’s not the half of it. You wouldn’t believe this guy, let me tell you,” Estes said, slashing a hand through the air and giving Tony a conspiratorial look under his brow. “Wrote all these sob story letters, called like three dozen times, wants an appointment, all that. I mean, I tell him no. The buddy, he was dishonorably discharged or something. I’m like, sorry, you know, but they guy’s not eligible, and even if he was, there’s a hundred better candidates in front of him, so, you know, cough up the thirty grand and we’ll talk, right?” Estes huffed out a low chuckle, then cleared his throat when no one joined in. “Then, the guy just shows up, out of the blue one day, practically begging me to just let his buddy have one. He’ll pay me back, all that. Can you believe it? I mean, the gall on this guy, right? Honestly. He still calls sometimes, though Mary—you saw Mary when you came in? She’s the best. She runs interference on all that kind of thing. The crazies. You must have to do that all the time for Mr. Stark, eh Ms. Potts?”

“Oh, more often than you can possibly know,” Pepper said slowly with a thin smile.

“Man, I bet you know all about dealing with all those nutsos, huh? You being you and all. You must have some stories, am I right? He does, doesn’t he? I mean, this thing with the stripper. Craziness, huh? Vegas. What are you going to do? Not that I blame you. Hell, who doesn’t want to come to Vegas and marry a stripper? Living the dream, man, I’m telling you. Legendary,” Estes said with a broad smile, looking over at Pepper, who was scowling, and Rhodey, who just puffed out a long breath through his cheeks and muttered something that rhymed with sass under his breath.

It physically hurt, Tony thought. That this little man didn’t even remember Steve well enough to make the connection. That Steve had been so unimportant. A nuisance. Someone to be handled by the receptionist. Someone whose desperation could be fodder for a hundred jokes down at some wanna-be-hip bar that played Jay-Z to a crowd of polo-shirted Carls. Tony gave Pepper a quick, hard look, and got a small nod in return.
“So, ah…anyway, the lab’s just this—” Estes began.

“Mr. Estes, I think Mr. Stark would prefer to skip the tour. His time is very limited. I’m sure you understand,” Pepper cut in, tapping something out on her tablet.


“Seems unlikely,” Tony interjected.

“Yeah, yeah, really, I’m telling you. Like when I see something I want, I just go for it, you know? Don’t hesitate, I say. You want it, you make it happen, right? Speaking of…how about we just step right in here,” he finished, pushing open the glass door to a conference room where a large, rectangular table sat with a flatscreen on the wall above with a small mini bar towards the back of the room. “Can I, uh, get you all anything? We’ve got, let’s see, soft drinks, water…some coffee…” Estes offered with a slight frown.

“Not even if I was literally dying of thirst in the desert. I have actual life experience on this, so that’s a pretty solid no,” Tony remarked with a wave of his hands. He walked over and took the seat at the head of the table, swiveling in the black, leather chair until it faced the window. “Pepper?”

“I’m working on it,” Pepper said, typing away on her tablet. “Would you give me a few minutes? It’s not exactly one-click buying, Tony.”

“Working on…?” Estes asked, then laughed nervously. “Ah, if there’s something we need to go over here…our account manager, Keith, he’s just down the hall, I can get—”

“No need,” Tony said. “Earl—can I call you Earl?” Tony started, twisting the chair around and cocking his head to one side, phone held in the air as he wagged it back and forth a bit.

“It’s Carl, actually, Mr. Stark,” Estes replied with an awkward frown.

“Doesn’t matter,” Tony snapped back in a tight, clipped tone. “So, here’s what’s going to happen. I’m buying your little company here—”

“Actually, it’s the note the venture capital firm holds, and you’re paying way too much,” Pepper interjected. “But, it is securitized with the company and all its assets, including the individual shares.”

“Really? Did you not hear the speech thing I was doing there? You’re throwing my rhythm off,” Tony objected, leaning back in the chair and splaying his hands wide.

“I heard you. I was feeling it,” Rhodey said.

“Thank you. See?” Tony replied. Pepper curled her lip at him and shot him a look, then went back to her tablet. “Anyway, like I was saying—you know what? Speech is ruined. Forget it. I had a whole thing planned. There was a metaphor and everything.”

“I was going to cry. Manly tears, but I felt it building,” Rhodey said. “In here,” he added, tapping at his chest.

“ Toxic masculinity, who? You know I love your softer side,” Tony assured him, lips quirking into a smile.
“You love all my sides,” Rhodey replied.

“I will pull this car over, so help me,” Pepper warned.

“Hall monitor says no more PDA,” Tony grinned, then turned back to face Estes, who looked a bit like a referee at Wimbledon. “Look, point being, company’s mine.”

“That’s…wow, that’s great, Mr. Stark, thank you,” Estes grinned. “Wow,” he said, tossing his hands in the air. “SI. You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to be a part of Stark Industries. I sent my resume in years ago. You probably didn’t see it, of course, but it was pretty impressive, even then. You are not going to regret this, Mr. Stark, I assure you,” he said, still smiling, though it wobbled a bit and he laughed, wet and nervous. “Can I—can I ask what made you decide so quickly?”

Tony just looked at the man, then turned his gaze out the wall of windows, thumb on his lip. Why was he doing this? Sure, it was just money, and for him, not even that much, but it was still insane and crazy and…incredibly satisfying.

“You were mean to Steve,” Rhodey answered for him.

“Ex—excuse me?” Estes stammered. “Steve? Who’s Steve?”

“Exactly,” Tony replied. “Are we done?”

“The wire was sent, just waiting on conf—yes, there. JARVIS and your hundred or so lawyers are handling the rest of the closing,” Pepper replied.

“You loaned out enough prototypes—two, I checked--to get a photo-op, get some press, get the doctors and everyone excited, and then you left the rest of the line waiting while you renegotiated things with the Army,” Tony said.

“That, I checked on. They’ve requested six more to test at Walter Reed and Brooke, but you’re holding out, demanding they commit to a big order,” Rhodey added.

“Little pressure tactic,” Tony said. “I get it. Soldiers wanting something, anything that will help, clamoring to their Senators and representatives. Looks bad not to help wounded vets. Lots of pressure coming from Congress, it greases the wheels, right? It’s just business.”

“That’s not…Mr. Stark, that’s not what we were—the rollout has to go slowly, you have to understand,” Estes balked. “These things take time. Negotiations are complicated, you know that.”

“I do, and I’m sitting here, and all that is true, but, honestly, you had me at nutso. Oh, and you’re fired, by the way,” Tony said, standing up and leaning his hands on the conference table. “To answer your question, Steve is the ‘nutso,’” Tony grated out, putting the word in air quotes. He could feel a thread of anger course through his voice, and his chest tighten with tension. “Great term, by the way. Classy. Steve is a highly decorated Army officer, one of the finest men I’ve ever known, someone I probably owe my life to, and Steve was the guy who offered to do anything and everything, including scrub your God-damned toilets, if you would help his friend, which, of course, you didn’t. Because of a lot of reasons, probably. Possibly even some good ones, I don’t know. Maybe once upon a time, maybe I was like you, and wouldn’t have cared. Had a bit of a laugh over the gall of it, you know? But, trust me, how we do this, it matters. When you take away all of this,” Tony said, gesturing around the room, “it’s the only thing that matters. Look, there’s plenty of money to be made. You can make it on the backs of the people you’re supposed to be helping or you can make it by lifting them up with you.”
“I—” Estes began, eyes wide, mouth opening and closing in shock.

“But, mostly, you were mean to my husband. So, you know, go fuck yourself,” Tony said, then turned on his heel and left Estes staring, fish-mouthed, after him, while Pepper and Rhodey slowly stood and followed him out.

Tony didn’t slow until he reached the car, where Happy jumped out to open the door. Rhodey and Pepper piled in soon after, each exchanging a pointed look before turning in unison to look at Tony.

“I feel like that went well,” Tony observed.

Rhodey shook his head slowly, then huffed out a laugh. Then another. Then he and Pepper were suddenly chortling like loons while Happy pulled the car out of the parking lot.

“I cannot believe—wait, yes I can. I can absolutely believe that you bought a company because some dude was mean to your crush,” Rhodey said between bouts of wheezing laughter. “You are insane, you know that, right? I mean, I love you, but that is some next-level romantic overture, Tones.”

“Never again will I criticize the giant bunny,” Pepper said through laughs.

“To be fair, I’ve seen your modern art collection. I think that piece fits,” Tony said with a fond smile as his two compatriots tried to compose themselves. “Laugh all you want. Go ahead. I can take it. Come on, you can’t tell me that putting that giant douche out on his ass wasn’t the most fun you’ve had in a long time.”

“You do know that I fly fighter jets, right?” Rhodey pointed out.

“Okay, but, come on, you just know that guy is consistently rude to the wait staff,” Tony argued.

“You got me there, Tones,” Rhodey grinned. “Okay, look, I’m not saying there wasn’t something kind of, I don’t know, satisfying about this whole adventure. Seriously, though, Tony…you did a good thing. Not just the whole helping the vets, rah-rah, U-S-A thing, but standing up for Steve. I kind of get the feeling no one has done that for him for a long time. Even if this whole thing with you two doesn’t work out, that was still—that was a good thing, is all I’m saying. Guy saved my life. You really think I didn’t enjoy watching Stifler back there get his walking papers handed to him?”

“Pepper’s still trying to be slightly disapproving in the hopes of reforming me through sheer force of will, but she’s secretly doing one of those touchdown dances in her head,” Tony said, lips quirking into a smile as he caught Pepper rolling her eyes and bobbing her head, though she couldn’t quite manage to keep the grin off her face.

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Pepper protested with a delicate arch to her brow.

“I should check in,” Tony said, pulling his phone out of his pocket. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pepper and Rhodey exchange a look that left Pepper sighing and shaking her head, though a smile kept trying to work its way out. “Should I? Or is that too, I don’t know, clingy or something? It’s weird, isn’t it? Is it weird?”

“Tony, we left weird at plunking down, what, thirty million, because some guy insulted your fake husband,” Rhodey pointed out, somewhat reasonably, Tony had to admit.

“I’m just saying, it’s polite. We’ve been gone, what, like…okay, a little over an hour. Shut up. He’s stuck there with grown-up Sid or something, I just want to—seriously, you two are no help,” Tony
“Oh, by all means, call and check in,” Pepper said, clearly delighted.

“You’re going to make fun of me, aren’t you?” Tony asked.

“Barn door open, horse gone, Tones. Long gone. Flicka’s probably glue by now,” Rhodey replied.

“Did you just—” Tony started, then broke off at Rhodey’s exaggerated, wide-eyed look. “Fine, fine, I’m calling him. I feel your silent judgment.”

“Not so silent, really,” Pepper said, lips curling into a smile. “Call him, Tony.”

“Yeah, call him, Boss!” Happy called from the driver’s seat as he maneuvered the limo down the side streets that led away from the industrial park.

“See? Everyone’s in agreement,” Pepper said, biting back a laugh.

“Fine. Fine, I’m calling, okay? See,” Tony said, holding the phone up where Steve’s picture—fuck. “You’re going to make fun of me for that, aren’t you?” Tony asked with a sigh.

“What’s he doing?” Pepper asked, squinting and leaning forward.

“Looks like he’s bending over to pick up a golf ba—is that a giant bust of Gene Simmons?” Rhodey asked, leaning forward with a confused frown.

“I thought it was a great angle, sue me,” Tony replied, pulling the phone back to his ear.

“How are you still single?” Pepper asked, voice slow with disbelief.

“Technically, I’m not,” Tony pointed out with a slight smirk. “Steve? Hey, it’s me,” Tony said, ignoring the amused looks from Pepper and Rhodey.

“Tony, hey, everything go okay?” Steve asked.

“Oh, yeah, same old boring, completely routine meeting thing, you know how it is,” Tony winced. Pepper put her hand to her temple. Rhodey puffed out a long breath of air. Nailed it, Tony thought with a panicky flutter in his chest. “Everything okay back at the ranch?”

“Good,” Steve said. “Ah, thanks for the paints, by the way. It’s an amazing set. You really didn’t have to do that.”

“I told you. All Pepper’s doing. Something to keep you busy during the day so you don’t talk to people and make her blood pressure spike and her face get all splotchy. She hates that. I’ll tell her you liked them,” Tony demurred. Pepper shot him a severe frown, then just huffed out an annoyed sound. He’d actually forgotten about the anything-he-can-do-I-can-do-better-paints, but it was nice to hear the thread of excitement in Steve’s voice.

“I was thinking of setting them up on the balcony. Maybe do something with the Strip, I don’t know,” Steve said.

“I’d like to see what you come up with,” Tony replied, and found he really meant it. Seeing something Steve made like that, it was strangely intimate. For a moment, he imagined showing Steve the armor, and his stomach did that thing where it thought it was Flubber. “So, ah, dinner tonight. Pepper says not too fancy, but suit and tie.”
“Race car tie? Or, maybe step it up and go all out with a cartoon character,” Steve suggested. Tony could hear the smile in his voice, and found himself returning it, though Steve couldn’t see.

“Hmmm…something from the Bugs Bunny pantheon, perhaps? On today’s episode of Should I Be Turned On Or Concerned, my fake husband wants me to play dress up and might have a slight furry fetish,” Tony replied with a sly, teasing tone underpinning his voice. “Don’t worry, I’m surprisingly okay with it,” he quipped with a grin.

“I do not—Tony!” Steve admonished, laughing. It sounded good, Steve’s laugh. All warm and rich and carefree, the way Steve should sound. “You’re incredible.”

“Think you mean incorrigible,” Tony corrected.

“No. No, I really didn’t,” Steve replied, and this time, the laugh was still there, hanging on to his voice, but it was softer now, tinged with something deeper, something a little wistful, maybe. Whatever it was, it made Tony’s chest ache and his heart constrict with a longing so intense, it was like a physical blow, sending the air out of him and making his throat click as he tried to work up enough saliva to swallow.

“So, ah, tonight,” Tony began, then had to stop and clear his throat. “After we do the whole dinner for public consumption thing. I thought maybe we could—you and me—uh, just the two of us, I mean—” Tony stopped himself, gave Rhodey a helpless look, then closed his eyes and let out a sigh. “Maybe we could talk. For real. About things. Us. Us-things. Where we discuss this whole thing. And how, you know, how we see it, sort of, progressing.”

“That sounds good, Tony,” Steve replied. “Truth is…well,” Steve stopped, and Tony could almost hear his jaw grinding together. “Truth is, Bucky’s been on me all afternoon to tell you that I kind of am…well, as he put it, having not exactly fake husband-like feelings, and I guess—well, I guess it’s only fair to tell you. I—I just, I wanted you to know. If it makes it awkward, or uncomfortable, we can figure something out for the next few days. I mean, I don’t want you to feel like you have to or—or anything.”

Tony’s stomach clenched, and for a moment, it was like he was flying, airborne, the sun in his eyes, all gleaming and bright. Steve liked him. Steve liked him, and it was everything he wanted, everything he needed. That piece of himself clicking into place. He’d been looking for the one with the straight edge, the corner piece, that was what he thought he needed, but it was this, this misshapen thing that fit in the center of himself—round, it’s round—and, oh, God, this swooping, joyous, terror, because this was the rise, the lift, and after that, the fall. Didn’t he know that? Some things…some things you can’t piece back together. He’d thought he might be one of them, but here this was, and it fit, and it was right, so right.

The people responsible…all of them.

“I like you, too,” Tony said, voice cracking on the last as he let his head fall back against the seat and closed his eyes.
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has patiently waited on the next chapter of this fic. I rotate through my WiPs, so I really appreciate those who are willing to read along as I work on them. I do finish things. I'm just slow. As always, thank you to @tastes-like-coconut for the beta!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I like you. Deep. Look, single tear,” Bucky said, pulling a face and reaching up to trace a perfectly dry line down his cheek. “Shakespeare, Steve. Truly, you have a gift. I like you. Honestly. Did he say it back? He did, didn’t he? Of course, he did, because you’re both Mr. Staypuft-sized marshmallow dorks, and you look like you’re high or something,” Bucky snorted, shaking his head. “Are you going steady now? Wait. Is it called going steady if you’re already married?”

Steve tried to wipe the grin off his face as he pocketed his phone, but couldn’t quite manage it. Tony liked him. Tony liked him.

“We’re not going steady. We’re…” Steve trailed off with a slight frown. He honestly wasn’t sure what they were. Tony was interested, that much was certain, though what, exactly, that meant, Steve couldn’t be sure. Still, it was something, Steve thought, warmth seeping through his stomach and chest. Tony Stark. Yeah, it was something.

“You just…have it on loop in your head, don’t you?” Bucky asked, grimacing. “No, no, don’t do the face. It’s a good look on you, don’t get me wrong. The whole admitting you’re two steps from drawing a heart around your names thing. Oh, God, you two are going to send me one of those obnoxious holiday update cards one day where you’re all in matching sweaters, aren’t you? ‘Little James just completed his first year of immersion French, is moving into his Cubist period, and currently doesn’t eat paste,’” Bucky sighed, lolling his head back against the sofa and rubbing his hands into his temples. “I can see it now. Stark’s going to make Uncle Buck jokes. You wait. I’m going to blame you for that.”

“It’s not…we just…yes, he said, but—it’s not a big deal. We’re, I mean, I guess, we’re sort of…dating? Maybe. I don’t know,” Steve stammered. “I don’t know if dating’s really a thing Tony does.”

That was the problem, Steve could admit. He didn’t know much of anything about Tony or what this really was to Tony, though, at the moment, it seemed a lot less of a problem than it had when he’d watched Tony head out of the penthouse earlier. Steve knew he had feelings for his fake husband, feelings which were apparently written clearly enough on his face for Bucky to harangue him into manning up. But, Tony—well. Tony liked him, Steve grinned, feeling so much lighter and so wound up at the same time, he felt like he could run a mile and all he wanted to do was lay down on the couch and think about the warm way Tony had said those words over and over.

He was jumping way too far ahead of himself. The fact that they both liked each other wasn’t exactly a declaration of, well, anything. It didn’t necessarily mean what Bucky seemed to think it could mean. Tony probably dated a lot, Steve thought, sort of vaguely remembering tabloid headlines in the checkout aisle blaring their speculation on Tony’s various partners over the years.
Starlets and models. Sports superstars. The occasional writer or academic, and twice, actual royalty. Not too many down-on-their-luck-ex-military-strippers, Steve had to admit.

And, none of those relationships anything other than a short fling. They certainly weren’t around now, that much was clear.

There was that, Steve reminded himself with a sigh. He ran a hand through his hair, frowning a bit at the thought. He had to be a little realistic about things, even if this whole thing with Tony had taken on some kind of fairytale quality, what with the ring and the clothes and a way forward out of this existence he and Bucky had eked out. Keep his expectations in check, feet on the ground, all of that. Tony liked him, sure, but Tony had never been particularly subtle about his interest in Steve, at least physically. Hell, Tony salivating over his body had been what got this whole thing started in the first place.

Maybe that was all Tony meant by liking him. Maybe Tony just wanted a little fun before he saved the world and got back to his real life where he wasn’t tied to a stripper and babysitting said stripper’s slightly-less-than-charming best friend. Maybe he was just humoring Steve, or being nice or letting the poor schlub who needed to cooperate in order for Tony’s whole world-saving plan to work down gently. All of those seemed a lot more likely than Tony Stark developing feelings for someone like Steve over the few days they’d known each other, Steve had to admit.

“Hey, hey, don’t do that. That thing you’re doing in your head now where you come up with all kinds of reasons why you can’t possibly get to be happy so you can avoid disappointment by cutting any chance at a remotely happy life off at the pass,” Bucky said. “What? I do pay attention when Sam talks, you know. Steve. **Steve,** look around you, man. Look at that ring on your finger,” Bucky said slowly, enunciating each word carefully, like he was chewing on the syllables. He jerked his head in the direction of where Steve’s hand gripped the edge of the kitchen bar.

“Come on. Seriously?” Bucky cut in. “Tell me again about how Stark pulls some full-on family ring complete with a damn background story to it out of the vault to wear for this because this whole thing is just some insane plot to fight evil or whatever the hell you two are doing, and it’s all just about convincing people it’s real. Could’ve gotten some random ring from just about anywhere, but no. No, he wants to wear this one he’s been saving for God knows how long. Probably one of the few things he owns that means something to him. That’s the one he wants to wear for this. But, sure, hey, clearly just doing that so he can, what? Use his powers of—of family heirlooms to convince you to pound him into the mattress? Or how about how he drags me back here for my sparkling personality and scintillating conversation. Which, you know, that’s definitely a possibility,” Bucky added with a sage nod. “And let’s not forget you and him going at it like a couple of teenagers under the bleachers on that funwheel thing? Yeah, I saw you. You’re fucking trending, you jerk. You’re really going to try to tell yourself this whole thing, all of this, it’s all an act for Stark? Just some casual, notch on a bedpost thing? Come on. Pull the other one, Stevie,” Bucky ended with a derisive snort.

“It’s complicated,” Steve replied. He looked down at the ring. He kept looking at it. He’d been doing that all morning. He was fairly sure that was what got Bucky going in the first place, watching Steve mooning over his ring, but it was just…there. Something that had never been there before. Something that he honestly never imagined being there, and suddenly, it was there, real and tangible, and this whole charade felt a hell of a lot more real than it had before. Obviously, it wasn’t real. They weren’t really married, of course. They weren’t going to *get* married. They were just…whatever it was they were doing. Liking each other. That hardly meant for as long as they both shall live. That kind of thinking was crazy, clearly, and he *knew* that. He did. It was just, well…
Nothing, except…except, maybe this was a little bit what it would look like if they were, Steve had found himself thinking. A glimpse. Like seeing something out of the corner of his eye, but not really able to quite catch it. Maybe it would be dinners where Tony made him laugh and listened to him, really listened, like it mattered what Steve thought. Or maybe it would feel a bit like being able to do silly, meaningless things again just for the fun of sharing it with someone. Maybe it felt a little lighter, because someone else was sharing his burdens and not even calling them that. A bit easier, because someone else was right there, too, someone who didn’t judge him for it or find him wanting. It would be like that, maybe, Steve found himself imagining as he’d looked down at the ring sometime after Tony and company exited the penthouse, and that…that was around the time Bucky threw a decorative pillow at his head and shouted at him to quit being a giant loser and call Tony. Though with a few more colorful language choices.

Thinking about it again, his fingers itched to write it all down. Organize the swirling thoughts that kept beating against his head into a neat, ordered list. How it might look if this were actually real. If ‘I like you’ meant something else.

“Only because you’re too stubborn to just admit you’re stupid in love with Tony Stark,” Bucky retorted.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s only been a few days, Buck,” Steve protested. “I barely know him.”

Again, his eyes found the ring where his finger curled around the edge of the bar, a gleaming circle of strangely warm metal.

“Right. That’s definitely an important distinction, because you are such a take-it-slow, let’s-look-before-I-leap kind of a guy,” Bucky replied, nodding his head and drawing his brows together in a mock frown. “Also, that wasn’t a denial.”

“Look, he’ll be back soon, and we have this dinner thing tonight, so can you stop with the,” Steve began, making a motion in the air with his hand.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll cut out the matchmaking, but you can’t blame me. Look around. Stark’s a good look on you, Steve, you have to admit,” Bucky pointed out. “This could be something good, that’s all I’m saying.”

“He’s giving us the money, no matter what,” Steve reminded him.

“I’m not talking about the damn money, and you know it,” Bucky snapped back, then grimaced and rubbed his good hand over his mouth. “I’m talking,” he continued, slower, calmer, a bit cajoling this time, a little bit of the old Brooklyn accent slipping in, the way it always did when Bucky was trying to convince him of something. “About you, you idiot. The way you—the way you are, right now. God, Steve, I haven’t seen you look this happy in ages. Do you know what it does to me to see you so fucking miserable all the time? To watch you just barely manage to get through the day? Over and over, and know it’s because of me. Don’t,” Bucky said sharply, holding up his hand when Steve opened his mouth to protest. “Yeah, yeah, that guy at the bar was a dick, but I was the one who went out drinking, wasn’t taking my meds, not the way I was supposed to, anyway, and went spoiling for a fight with anyone who so much as looked at me wrong.”

“You’re not responsible for what I choose to do, Buck,” Steve replied. He left his place at the kitchen bar and walked over sit down next to Bucky on the sofa. “End of the line, right?”

“That was supposed to mean us giving everyone grief at the old folks’ home, Steve, not you shaking your junk for people like that douche, Hammer, so you can get me some shiny, new toy that isn’t
“It’s not about fixing you,” Steve argued. “It’s not. Nothing’s wrong with you. You just need…a little help, that’s all. The new arm, it’ll make things easier, right? Be more comfortable than that one we got before. Let you do more. Be more independent. You can, I don’t know, maybe try a job again. Get out of the apartment more. You wouldn’t feel so different, you know? Sam could—”

“Steve,” Bucky cut him off, shaking his head. “This is what I mean about you fixating on that stupid arm. It doesn’t work like that. I know you know that.”

“It’s not just about the arm! There’s the VA appeal…that can still happen. We’ve got your appointment tomorrow, remember?” Steve reminded him, turning to face him, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He needed Bucky to stop thinking like that. That this wasn’t going to get better. That there wasn’t a way out. He wasn’t even sure if that’s what Bucky was thinking anymore, or if it was just him, or which one of those scenarios was worse. “Tony’s coming with us, by the way,” Steve rushed on. “If that’s okay? He thinks it’ll look weird to the press if I’m there with you and he isn’t, but I think he really just wants to try to help. He does that. Wants to help. He really does. So much of this—hell, that’s what most of this is with him, really, when you get down to it, that’s probably all any of this is. He knows about the convoy attack. About Gulmira. Well, not all of it, but he knows the basics.”

“Thought we weren’t talking about any of that?” Bucky questioned, eyes narrowing on Steve. He huffed out a breath of air, then shook his head lightly. “I’m pity. Guilt. Whatever you want to call it. The money, sure. This whole righteous quest you two want to have at the VA? Guilt 101, man, I get it. You? Whatever that is for Stark, it isn’t guilt, Steve. Alright, fine. Don’t give me that look. It’s not only guilt. There’s something else there, too, which is why I was on your ass this morning to throw the guy a bone. Er,” Bucky added, grinning and making an obscene gesture with his hands. “That would’ve actually been my suggestion. More the direct approach than ‘I like you,’ but I’m just saying…pretty sure it would’ve been, ah. Well received.”

Steve blinked slowly at Bucky for a long moment, then found himself giving in to a rueful smile. “I can’t take you anywhere,” Steve said, flopping back against the sofa cushion.

“I don’t know, I could get used to this kind of life. Room service, sheets so soft you slide right off the bed, fancy soaps—you grab some for Nat?” Bucky asked, earning a nod from Steve. “What is it about that tiny, free shit she loves so much? Look, anyway, whatever happens with you and Stark, and you know I am here for your happiness, totally onboard, right? I just want you to know upfront, and I say this from the bottom of my heart: I’m stealing some of the towels. They’re like little clouds.”

“I don’t think Tony will care,” Steve said. They sat there for a while, Bucky randomly scrolling through the hundreds of TV channels, most of which wanted to sell things to them, and ended up on an eerily fascinating commercial for some special kind of mop on mute. “Do you remember him from Bagram?” Steve finally asked into the silence while the woman on the screen squeezed out the Super Mop to show just how much dirt and grime the thing had picked up.

“Stark? Sure. Hard to forget,” Bucky acknowledged. “The fancy jet and gear, all the brass hanging out playing lapdogs for him. Hard to forget. I do seem to recall that he got a reaction out of you like pretty much no one ever,” Bucky replied. “You wouldn’t shut up about the entitled, obnoxious poser who came to play soldier for a day and had the unmitigated gall to hit on you while simultaneously insulting you. Got you all riled up. I should’ve known right then it was true love.”

“You told me if he was there for a weapons demonstration, I should offer to show him how well I
could aim my missile,” Steve reminded him.

“In my defense, that line has worked. Once. Maybe. You might remember this one,” Bucky said, raising an eyebrow. “We slept together, but she kicked me out at bugle and then you ‘helped,’” he continued, making half an air-quote with his good hand, “and I had to spend two days in the clink on suicide watch? That ring a bell?”

“You were not on suicide watch,” Steve said, rolling his eyes. “Phillips was messing with you.”

“They took my belt and shoelaces, you ass,” Bucky muttered. Steve turned at the sound of the elevator doors sliding open and almost missed the rest of what Bucky had said as he watched Tony step into the suite, followed by Colonel Rhodes and Ms. Potts, though it was Tony who caught his eye, and Steve felt a warm flush creeping up his neck and onto his cheeks. Somewhat to his surprise, Tony, too, had bright splotches of color high on his cheeks and quickly looked away, eyes lighting on Bucky instead.

“Wait, what?” Tony blurted out, coming to a halt and looking back and forth between where Steve and Bucky lounged on the sectional.

“Don’t listen to him,” Steve protested, shooting Bucky a warning look that went totally disregarded.

“Hi, Steve,” Ms. Potts said, pulling out her tablet and tapping at a few things before dropping it back into her bag.

“Hear you like my man here,” Rhodes said.

“He does,” Bucky agreed with a nod.

“Buck,” Steve warned.

“Tony likes him, too,” Rhodes added.

“They should get married,” Bucky deadpanned, making Rhodes chuckle.

“Seriously,” Rhodes said.

“Okay, so, there’s a lot of mutual admiration happening here,” Tony said, nodding and moving his hands through the air in a swirling motion as he strolled into the room. “Lots of…liking of people. None of which we need to talk about right now, here, in front of all of you, at least not without a carefully prepared speech of some kind that I’ve definitely not practiced in front of the mirror. As we discussed in the car. Then again in the lobby, when we were talking about how you weren’t going to say anything, and you nodded, and said, ‘Tony, I’m not going to say anything,’ and then in the elevator when you said, ‘Tony, please, for the love of God, I’m not going to say anything,’ So, anyway, back to the shoelace thing,” Tony said, giving pointed look to Rhodes.

“Subtle conversational pivot there, Tones,” Rhodes observed, mouth flattening, probably to keep from laughing, Steve thought.

“See, me and this new lady cadet back in basic, we got together one night, okay?” Bucky began.

“‘Cept in basic, you aren’t supposed to be fraternizing in the barracks after lights out, ‘cause they’re not co-ed or anything, right? So, anyway, I end up in her room for the night, and usually, no worries, just hide in the gear locker during room check, then get back to my barracks by muster, and it’s all good. But, this time, this girl, she got a tad upset with me. Through no fault of my own.”

“It turned out ‘Something Like Mylie’ wasn’t it,” Steve interjected with a lopsided smile aimed at
Bucky, though he saw Tony’s gaze trip over to him before darting back to Bucky.


“Evolutionarily speaking, how are men still a thing?” Pepper asked, though got only a slight shrug from Tony.

“Anyway, point being, she got a little irked with me, and told me to get out, but where am I going to go because the Sergeant, she’s coming around already, and this girl, she’s... loudly unhappy with my memory,” Bucky recalled, sitting up a bit as he got going with the story. “So, I do what any quick-thinking—shut, it, Stevie—quick-thinking young recruit would do, right, and hopped out her window onto the ledge. She’s fifth floor, so it’s not nothing. I think, maybe I can get to the fire escape, shimmy down or something. But, no, what do I see?”

“What?” Tony asked, glancing over at Rhodes, who had sat down at one of the barstools and was trying to cover his grin with one hand.

“This jerk down there with Colonel Phillips and the whole squad, all dressed for some crack of dawn run that Phillips liked to pull sometimes, and Steve here, what does he do?” Bucky asked, giving Steve a long, disgruntled look from under his brow. “Looks up at me, and calm as you please, in this completely monotone voice, shouts, ‘No, Bucky. Don’t do it. You have too much to live for.’”

“You didn’t?” Tony asked, a smile blooming and quickly turning into a laugh.

“I was trying to keep him from getting busted. Which it did,” Steve replied with a grin. “You had to talk to a counselor, big deal. Another rules violation and you’d have gotten in real trouble.”

“You say that, but you didn’t have to spend two hours talking to some dude with a combover about your relationship with your mom. I’m like, call my mom! She’ll tell you I’m only suicidal when following that Rogers boy around,” Bucky grinned, knocking his fist against Steve’s shoulder.

“And I thought our MIT hack stories were good,” Tony remarked, casting a glance over his shoulder at Rhodes. “You never almost got me committed.”

“He wasn’t almost committed,” Steve sighed with exaggerated exasperation.

“I need to work on some of this paperwork, Tony,” Ms. Potts announced. “For the recent transaction,” she added through her teeth, then gave Steve a bright smile. “Press conference Saturday, so tomorrow, you two have the night off for rehearsal. I don’t want any surprises, and Matt will be here to go over the legal phrasing we want you to use, just basic stuff, don’t worry. Mr. Barnes, I know you have an appointment tomorrow morning, and particularly since Mr. Stark is going with you, it’s very important to remember—”

“Don’t talk to strangers, I got it,” Bucky cut in. “I’m actually pretty good at that one.”

“Strangely, I believe him,” Tony said, clapping his hands together.

“I need to check in back at the base. You got this?” Rhodes asked Tony, who nodded.

“I’m completely comfortable hanging out with Steve and Steve’s BFF until dinner. I can’t think why that would be awkward at all,” Tony agreed, flashing a fake smile.

“I’m going to hit the gym,” Bucky announced, pushing himself off the sofa. “When do you two leave for dinner?”
“They probably should leave in a couple of hours,” Ms. Potts said, checking her watch.

“I’m going to hit the gym for a couple of hours,” Barnes self-corrected, striding for the door. “A whole two hours, when I will not be here. In this suite. For two hours.”

“Good man,” Rhodes said. “Hold the elevator, would you?”

“Eiffel Tower. Remember, lots of, you know, with the…marriage thing…and you have the—the liking thing, happening, so that’s…” Ms. Potts said, bouncing her head back and forth with a vaguely uncomfortable look. “Okay, so, that’s good. You two are good. I’ll just—you know, I’m going to go. James, I’ll ride down with you.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Rhodes replied, sticking out a hand to hold the elevator for Ms. Potts.

Steve and Tony both watched the elevator doors slide closed, then looked at each other with what Steve imagined were twin expressions of bemusement.

“Cowards,” Steve said after a moment, making Tony grunt out a laugh. “So.”

“So,” Tony echoed. “So, this is awkward, right? You and me, and this whole, I like you, you like me, thing, and the pretend marriage thing on top of that. I mean, it’s weird, right? Or, I don’t know, maybe it doesn’t feel weird, and that’s what’s awkward? Or is it not awkward, and now I’m making it awkward by talking about how it’s awkward? I’m feeling some definite awkwardness here. Or panic. Could be panic. Maybe it’s awkward to be panicking? Between the two—”

“Tony,” Steve blurted out, holding up his hands in surrender. He stood up and walked over to where Tony was rocking a bit back and forth on his heels, all barely-contained motion, looking anywhere but at Steve. “I’m not sure how to act either, to tell you the truth.”

“If we’re doing honesty hour, I should probably tell you that it’s been…well, a long time since I, ah…since I spent time with someone I actually, you know, liked, in the way that I have…like…for you,” Tony admitted, rubbing at his forehead with one hand. “You’ve probably seen the articles. And the news reports. And certain…online video-type things that we won’t discuss. Note to self, have JARVIS put SafeSearch on Steve’s computer. Anyway, point being,” he stopped, drew in a breath. “Point being, I know what my reputation is, a lot of it earned, some of it not, but the truth is, I haven’t done this kind of thing with someone I’m actually interested in for a long time.”

“Are you? Interested, I mean?” Steve asked carefully, looking down at Tony, who this time, didn’t look away.

“Look, I should just say, up front, you know I’ll give you the money. Way more than that stupid seven thousand,” Tony offered with a grimace, expression going tight. “If that’s what this is about, just say so, and we both finish this thing out, no complications. I’m not judging,” he said quickly, slashing the air with his hand as if to emphasize how much he wasn’t judging Steve for the idea that must have taken root in his head that Steve might be angling for more. It hurt to hear, that Tony would even think that, but Steve could imagine why. How many people had just been there to use Tony over the years? Rhodes, Ms. Potts, Happy, and the lawyer, those seemed to be virtually the only people in Tony’s circle, even after a lifetime of glad-handing thousands. “I get it,” Tony rambled on. “You’ve got Barnes to think about, the whole benefits thing, not to mention getting yourself back on your feet with that asshat Ross blacklisting you from the kind of jobs you should be doing, and—”

“I don’t care about the money,” Steve interjected. “Okay, I mean, yes, I care about what we agreed to, only because I have...there’s a thing I’ve been saving for, and that’s—that was the goal, yes,”
Steve rambled on, noting Tony sort of winced at that, though he didn’t make any comment about the seven grand this time, as he usually did, so that was something. “But, that’s not what this is about. If you want me to sign something or whatever, I’ll do it. All this, I mean, yeah, sure, it’s great. Not going to lie. All this stuff…it’s nice. Pretty sure Bucky’s going to clean out the towel rack, by the way. But, your money is probably the least interesting thing about you. And it’s definitely not required, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I’m not saying you’re lying, but you have to understand that pretty much no one on the face of the Earth finds my money the least interesting thing about me. In fact, pretty much the only two people who do just left the room, so there’s that,” Tony replied flatly. “But, okay, then. Then, yeah. If you’re sure you don’t just want to keep it simple. Not that you can’t change your mind, but, I mean, for now, if you’re sure, then…then, I’m—I’m interested,” Tony stammered, swallowing hard enough for Steve to hear the click of his throat.

“Good. Me, too,” Steve replied, letting a grin slip out.

“Yeah?” Tony said around a huff of what sounded like genuinely relieved laughter to Steve’s ears.

“Yeah, Tony,” Steve said.

“Does this mean we’re going steady?” Tony asked with a flirtatious smile.

“Sorry, I’m a married man,” Steve quipped, then grinned. “Husband’s the jealous type, too.”

“He’s probably just insecure,” Tony replied. “Does he…do things like buy you amazing gifts that are, objectively, way better than the ones your platonic BFF gets you?”

“He does,” Steve laughed.

“Classic insecurity coupled with a need to overcompensate through what is basically emotional bribery. Probably wasn’t hugged enough as a child or something,” Tony told him.

“Speaking of, I was actually thinking about trying to do some painting before getting ready for tonight,” Steve said. “I haven’t painted in ages. Haven’t wanted to,” he continued with a low shrug. He wondered if that was really true or if he had just convinced himself he didn’t want to. “But, the light’s great out on the balcony right now, and I don’t know, I thought…well, it seemed like something I could do again, maybe. Would you be willing to—er, sort of... model for it?”

“Draw me like one of your French girls? I tried the but-it’s-art excuse with Pepper once for this thing some Pap got on a long-lens when I was on a yacht with—you know, forget it, why am I still speaking?” Tony sort of stumbled to a pause. “You really want to paint me?”

“Not that kind of painting,” Steve said, though his mind had immediately started to conjure the image of Tony sprawled out on some yacht, with the sun beating down on smooth, tan skin, the blue of the water against the bright, white of the yacht. He blinked and tried to focus. “I was thinking more just a portrait. Or, at least, the start of one. You’re very…expressive.”

“I’m all yours,” Tony said. He took his jacket off and tossed it over the back of one of the dining table chairs, then rolled up his sleeves as Steve gathered the paints, brushes and easel from the corner of the room where he had set it after it was delivered. “Mind if I work while you paint?” Tony asked, holding up one of his Stark Tablets.

“Go ahead,” Steve replied.

He set up the easel on the balcony and pulled one of the cushioned chairs around for Tony, who
promptly sat down, cradling his tablet in his lap, seemingly engrossed.

“Working on anything interesting?” Steve asked as he started to sketch lightly on the canvas.

“Depends on your definition of interesting,” Tony replied. “Remember our discussion about transitioning the company away from weapons manufacturing?” Steve nodded. “Bit of that kind of thing. This,” he said, turning the tablet around so Steve could see…something…on it, “is actually the prototype for oxygen-lean torrefaction, so we can reduce the need for large-scale torrefaction reactors.”

“I’m supposed to know what that is?” Steve asked. This was, Steve would realize, how he ended up getting a lecture on biomass torrefaction that could produce biofuels that ran much cleaner than coal, and how much more energy efficient it was to decentralize the process into small scale reactors, something Tony apparently was working on in connection with various military and civilian think-tanks. In his spare time. It was easy to listen to Tony, let himself get lost in Tony’s passion for a project that made little sense in the particulars to Steve, but Tony was strangely good at explaining complicated concepts without sounding like an ass, Steve found. He wondered if Tony had spent his whole life figuring out how to explain things to people who didn’t understand and just took it for granted now how much of a skill it was to do that without talking down to someone.

“So,” Steve cut in when Tony finally came to some kind of stopping point. “You’re making energy from trees, but the machines that do that are huge, and you want to make them smaller.”

“It…physically pains me to agree with that,” Tony said with a visible wince. “But, I’ll allow it. Thanks for coming to my TED talk. Your turn.”


“You want to hear about my childhood?” Steve asked, brow furrowing a bit as he looked between the painting and Tony.

“I know the stats, but—and stop me if you’ve heard this one—you’re not exactly the most forthcoming person on the planet,” Tony pointed out.

“Not much to tell that you don’t already know,” Steve replied.

“Thank you for proving my point,” Tony shot back, giving Steve a small nod. “First crush? Please say the nerdy kid who knew all the science and math answers.”

“You gave me one of his Batman band-aids when Kenny Blackwell shoved my face in the ground after I pushed him off the swing when he made Laura Peters cry because she had to wear her older sister’s clothes, and they were all about three sizes too big for her. True love,” Steve chuckled.

“Why is that utterly unsurprising?” Tony asked with a wide, pleased smile. “Tell me more. You owe me for cheating at mini-golf, anyway.”

“That was not cheating. Technically, that was just using a skill set you didn’t know I had,” Steve protested, but he was smiling at the memory. He would bet that not many people managed to one-up Tony Stark, and he knew himself well enough to know he liked the challenge.

It went on like that for a while, the two of them trading stories and questions, most of them innocuous, but sometimes, Tony would say something, something meant to be flippant that wasn’t, like his first crush, some boarding school classmate with what Steve decided was the asshole-sounding name of Tiberius, and sometimes, Steve would share a memory of his mom or the hospitals, being sick all the time, and there would be this moment…Steve was starting to recognize them more and more, these moments that felt more real than others with Tony.

“How am I looking there, Picasso?” Tony asked after finishing recounting what Steve thought, or maybe hoped, was at least a partially embellished story about hacking the Pentagon’s server when he was fifteen. “Please don’t put my nose on the side of my face.”

“You’re looking…swirly,” Steve said, frowning down at the canvas where the beginnings of Tony’s face were forming, mostly circles of color and shading at this point, more the idea of Tony than any defined features yet, but he would work on it some more later, he figured. He’d been too distracted by their conversation to get too far with it.

“Swirly, huh? Eh, I’ve been called worse,” Tony shrugged, standing up and stretching. The movement hitched the shirt out of his waistband, and Steve’s eyes found the flash of skin there, just above Tony’s hip, and he found himself thinking about yachts and long lens photos and what might be on the Internet. Not that he’d look. It seemed an invasion of Tony’s privacy at this point, which was, admittedly, a bit odd, considering how they met. “Let’s see,” Tony said, making a come-here motion with his hand.

“Nope, not ‘til it’s done,” Steve said, carefully putting the picture down and turning it away from Tony’s prying eyes.

“Big reveal. Bit of showmanship. I get it,” Tony nodded absently. “Guess we should get ready for dinner.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed.

“So. You. Me. The even-more-ostentatious-than-the-original Eiffel Tower,” Tony continued, still with the same sort of haphazard disconnect, like he was reciting something, Steve thought, and wondered if maybe he was. “Given what we, uh, talked about. Earlier. With the whole awkward non-awkwardness thing. You like me, I like you, all that touchy-feely stuff. Not that there will be any touchy-feely, I’m just—I’m saying, with dinner, it’s…”

“Almost like a real date,” Steve supplied, giving Tony a quick look before dropping his gaze to put away the paints and finish cleaning the brushes as best he could on the rag he was fairly sure was one of Bucky’s newfound towels.

“So. You. Me. The even-more-ostentatious-than-the-original Eiffel Tower,” Tony continued, still with the same sort of haphazard disconnect, like he was reciting something, Steve thought, and wondered if maybe he was. “Given what we, uh, talked about. Earlier. With the whole awkward non-awkwardness thing. You like me, I like you, all that touchy-feely stuff. Not that there will be any touchy-feely, I’m just—I’m saying, with dinner, it’s…”

“Exactly. See? You finish my sentences. We’re, what do they call it? In sympatico,” Tony said, snapping his fingers and pointing at Steve. “So, we’ll just have our date, wave to the crowd, take some pictures, et cetera, et cetera. Nothing really all that different from the past couple of nights, right? Except for the explicit acknowledgment of feelings. Which we are both having. That…that might make it different. Maybe. A little. I don’t know. But, don’t be nervous, because we’re only going to be watched by everyone in the restaurant, a bunch of people online, the Vegas police, the FBI, my murderous pseudo-Uncle, and probably a few terrorists. So, you know. Relax.”

“I know none of this with me was exactly part of your plan,” Steve said.
“No, but see…” Tony started, then shoved his hands in his pockets and trailed off, looking off down the Strip where the sun was glinting off the mirrored glass. “It’s terrible timing. It is,” Tony said, giving Steve a quick look as he walked over to the railing and wrapped his hands around it. “Not sorry about it, though. I should be. Bringing you into all this…this craziness. It’s dangerous. More dangerous than you probably realize, not that I think for a minute that would actually put you off the idea.” Tony scoffed, shooting Steve a flat smile before going back to looking at the whirl of signs and billboards that beckoned people to come lose their money. “I can’t seem to…to be unhappy about this. Truth is, I’m glad you’re here. Feels, I don’t know, right somehow.”

“I’m glad, too, Tony,” Steve said.

It was the truth. Maybe, like Tony said, he shouldn’t be glad to be here, but for all the insanity surrounding what he was doing with Tony, he hadn’t felt this alive in ages. It felt right, and he’d learned to trust his gut a long time ago. Right now, his gut was telling him that he was exactly where he was supposed to be. He looked down at the ring on his finger, then over to where Tony was gripping the rail with his left hand where Steve could just barely make out the outline of Tony’s own ring and tapping at the center of his chest with the other, making some kind of strange, hollow sound that made Steve frown.

A fancy pacemaker. That’s what Tony had called it. Steve suspected that was some kind of strange half-truth, but it was Tony’s to tell, if they ever got that far, but as soon as he thought about it, his mind reminded him how he knew about it in the first place. Pressed up against Tony, kissing him, Tony’s hands clutching at Steve’s arms, and Steve’s hands…well. Bucky had a picture of that on his phone that he wasn’t letting Steve live down anytime soon.

Steve wondered what it would be like to kiss Tony now, when it had the chance of maybe, maybe, being real. Or close to real. Steve still wasn’t sure. But, it felt right, and that was all he had, and more than he’d had in a very long time. Steve’s eyes dropped to Tony’s lips, then lower, gaze roving over Tony’s lean frame, down to the place where his untucked shirt batted around in the wind, that patch of skin tantalizingly just right there, like it was waiting for Steve’s hand. He wondered what it would feel like to touch Tony like that, just for the two of them, no performing, no pretending, just because they both wanted it.

What if he just walked over right now and kissed Tony, leaning there against the rail, all sun-warmed, his hair a bit mussed from the winds that came down off the mountains and swept over the desert? Would Tony melt into him, like he had before, all sweet and soft, or would it be something else this time, something a bit darker, a bit rougher, knowing they both wanted it, whatever their reasons and whatever that meant?

“Ready to get your gameface on, then?” Tony asked, turning and leaning a hip against the balcony and one elbow on top of the railing, all practiced nonchalance.

“Huh?” Steve managed, blinking at Tony in momentary confusion as his brain finally managed to get some blood flow. “I guess,” Steve replied finally, squinting out at the Strip and putting away the rest of the paints, mainly to give himself something to do with his hands and keep his body angled away from Tony, which was probably a good idea, considering.

Not that he thought Tony would exactly mind. Tony had been pretty up front about his interest in Steve, at least that way, since the beginning, so he wasn’t sure why he wasn’t just…doing what Bucky suggested. It would be good, he knew that much, but he supposed some part of him worried that might be all he got of Tony, and if that was all, then he just wasn’t ready to pull that trigger yet. It was hard to imagine what Tony’s interest in him could be beyond the obvious, Steve had to admit. Sure, they got along, but Tony probably got along with a lot of his…partners, Steve thought,
struggling for a word that might fit. He got along with them, but didn’t exactly end up in relationships with them, at least not ones that lasted longer than a newscycle, that was for sure. Steve sighed, shook his head to try to dislodge some of the thoughts, and finished putting the paint set, brushes and canvas back into the storage container they’d all arrived in, then looked back at Tony.

“Happy will meet us downstairs in an hour or so,” Tony told him.

He was watching Steve with a sharp, keen expression, the same one he used on the schematics for the prototype he had been fiddling with while Steve painted. Like he was trying to figure something out, get the pieces to work the way he knew they should work, and coming up frustrated, but… enjoying it, Steve realized with a warm pang. It had been a long time since anyone thought figuring Steve out was anything other than a job or a chore, let alone something enjoyable, and even as a part of him bristled at the scrutiny and wanted to push back, pull away, run, there was another part of him that couldn’t help but be drawn to that kind of attention. Chase that feeling of being seen, truly seen, that was both terrifying and exhilarating.

“Oh, I like him,” Tony said gleefully, clapping his hands together.

“Don’t encourage him,” Steve admonished lightly.

“There you are,” Bucky said in a disappointed voice as he walked out onto the balcony. “You’re… painting,” he noticed, glancing down at the storage container and Steve’s t-shirt, which was smeared with a few streaks of paint. “Well, I guess that’s something,” he shrugged, giving Steve a hard look for a moment.

“We’re about to get ready to head out for dinner,” Steve told him.

“That means you’re on your own, so no jumping on the furniture and don’t answer the door to anyone you don’t know. Pillow forts are an acceptable use of time, but it will be checked for structural integrity and points will be taken off for improper use of bed sheets. Speaking of, the porn does show up on the hotel bill, though just as ‘Entertainment,’ at least according to Rhodey. Don’t wait up,” Tony said, pushing himself off the railing and walking past Bucky with a slight nod as he went through his speech.

“Can I order everything on the room service menu?” Bucky asked.

“Knock yourself out,” Tony called out over his shoulder as he disappeared through the French doors.

“Fair warning, if you get fake divorced, I’m going to fake marry him,” Bucky said to Steve, then grinned, probably at Steve’s frown. Steve watched until Tony’s shadow made it through the living room and headed for his bedroom, then gave Bucky a wan smile.

“You painted,” Bucky said again, though, this time there was genuine warmth in his tone. “Haven’t seen you do that in a while.”

“Haven’t felt like it for a while,” Steve acknowledged, then shrugged a bit and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Will you be okay here tonight?” Steve asked.

“I’ll manage to struggle through somehow,” Bucky replied, raising his eyebrows. “You two…” He
trailed off, leaving the question hanging for Steve to make whatever he wanted out of it.

“We’re good. I think. He offered to just pay me, if that’s what I wanted,” Steve said after a moment’s pause. “Do you think it’s about the money?”

“For you?” Bucky scoffed. “Hell, no, man. And look, I wouldn’t be judging you if it were. I mean, I joke about all of this rich stuff, and money doesn’t buy happiness, whatever, but it sure as hell makes it easier to be happy. Most people, yeah, it’d be at least a little about the money, and I think the dude knows that. Probably kind of accepts it, the way you accept that maybe it’s a little about how you look now. Thing is, I know you, and I know your type, and I think you’d like Stark if he were…I don’t know, fixing cars down at Manny’s, you know? And I think he’d like you if you were still ninety-pounds of piss and vinegar. Might take him a bit longer, sure, but he’d get there. You should see how he looks at you. Like…you’re going to disappear if he looks away or looks too long or something. Hey, I’m just calling it like I see it,” Bucky said at Steve’s dubious look. He held up his hand in front of him in a placating gesture. “Don’t get me wrong, the guy’s got eyes. He definitely wants to ride you like that bucking bronco thing they have down at the Mirage. But, I think he wants to, like…talk to you, too,” Bucky finished, making a face at the last.

“I don’t know, Buck. We’re so different,” Steve said, glancing off towards the Strip again. Every time he looked at it, the unreality of all of this seemed weigh heavier on him.

“What’d you two do while I was at the bar—gym? Bar gym,” Bucky asked, biting at his lip and cocking his head to the side with an apologetic frown.

“Talked, mostly,” Steve admitted.

“Kinky. Not my go-to move, admittedly, but I hear there are people who dig that kind of thing,” Bucky said, pursing his lips, as if the idea merited consideration. “Go on, go get yourself all dolled up. You two crazy kids have fun with the whole pretending to be in love while liking each other thing,” Bucky said, then paused and shook his head. “God. Your life is weird, you know that, right?”

Steve smiled back and nodded, then headed for his room to shower and change, while Bucky took up residence on the sofa, holding a room service menu in his hands like it was the Holy Grail. He decided on the navy suit for dinner, mainly because, based on the selections that had been delivered from their shopping trip, Tony seemed to like him in blue. It didn’t take him particularly long to get ready, and before he knew quite what he was doing, he had the hotel’s little notepad in one hand and pen in the other, sketching quickly while he waited to give Tony enough time to get ready.

At the appointed time, Steve strode across the suite, ignoring Bucky’s wolf-whistle, and knocked on the door to Tony’s bedroom. Tony threw it open a moment later, and Steve forgot what he’d practiced saying, the little speech he’d thought would be charming flying right out of his head when he looked down at Tony, who was dressed in an impeccably tailored grey-striped suit, his hair still a little damp from his shower, and the white shirt he was wearing halfway unbuttoned where one hand hovered like Steve had caught him in the act of getting dressed. And that…well, that was enough to make whatever Steve had planned sort of melt into a buzzing blackness, while his mind helpfully supplied a somewhat nonsensical, if predictable, stream of words like skin, bed, shirt, chest, wet, neck and Tony.

“Almost ready,” Tony said with a quick smile.

“Nguh,” Steve choked out, then forced himself to swallow. “Flowers,” he said. He forgot why for a second, while Tony gave him a curious look, then remembered. “I, ah. I—flowers,” Steve repeated, holding out the page he’d torn from the hotel’s notepad where he’d drawn a small bouquet. Holding
it out now, to Tony Stark of all people, who owned Newmans for crying out loud, the tiny piece of paper with the casino’s logo emblazoned across the top and a blue-penned sketch of flowers below it, what had seemed stupidly romantic a few minutes ago in his room, now seemed just stupid.

“Sorry. Sorry, that’s—stupid, obviously, sorry, I’m—I’m a bit out of practice with this whole dating thing, you could say, I guess, and, I don’t know, I thought—but, just nevermind, I—”

“Thank you,” Tony said, looking down at the piece of paper. His voice was quiet, barely a whisper, but it was enough to stop Steve’s rambling, for which he sent a small prayer heavenward. “Believe it or not,” Tony continued, clearing his throat and looking up at Steve, “this is the first time someone’s brought me flowers for a date.”

“It’s nothing, really. Guess flowers are probably not even a thing anymore, huh?” Steve said, feeling his size all of a sudden, that hyper-aware feeling of all his limbs having nothing to do. “Just thought it’d be funny or something. I don’t know.”

“I like it,” Tony said, looking at Steve strangely for a moment. It made something seize up in Steve’s chest, like if he breathed, the moment would slip away. “I like it a lot.” He walked over and put the piece of paper down on the dresser, though, Steve noticed, he did it with care, holding it by the edges as he leaned it against the mirror, one finger tracing over the blue flowers that burst from the center.

Tony picked up his phone and watch, slung the latter onto his wrist, and then typed something on his phone before pocketing it. Steve felt his own phone vibrate in his jacket pocket and pulled it out. There was a message from Tony. He shot Tony a confused look.

“Open it,” Tony urged.

Steve clicked open the message, and the image of a bouquet of red roses filled his phone’s screen. He found himself smiling, darting a look at Tony, who waited at the center of his room, rocking a bit on his heels.

“Thank you,” Steve said, smiling down at his screen. That warm feeling was curling back in his stomach, low in his belly, settling there like it knew its place now.

“Eh,” Tony shrugged. “Next time, I’ll manage the real things. JARVIS? Make a note.”

“Yes, Sir,” a British voice sounded from…somewhere, making Steve look up and around the room, trying to place the sound.

“I like this, actually,” Steve said, dropping his phone back into his pocket. “Very…you.”

“Glad you approve,” Tony replied, then finished buttoning his shirt, though he looked up from his handiwork in time to catch Steve’s eyes following his hands, and raised a speculative eyebrow.

“Shall we?” he asked, sweeping his hand out towards the bedroom door. Steve nodded and let Tony ease by him, then followed him towards the elevator. “Sure your friend will be okay by himself? I can see if Rhodey can come babysit.”

“I lost my arm, not my hearing, Stark, and I’m fine,” Bucky barked from his place on the sofa. “Take Stevie out and show him a good time, would ya?”

“Stevie?” Tony repeated.

“Anthony,” Steve shot back.

“Yeah, that’s a hard no, gotcha,” Tony agreed, squelching up his face with a look of regret. The elevator slid open, and they both stepped in, though Steve did manage one last look at Bucky, who mimed an obscene gesture with his hand and tongue, then gave Steve a thumbs’ up sign. Steve
sighed and flattened his mouth into a line as the doors closed, and he was alone with Tony again.

“So,” Tony began, then left the syllable hanging, making a quickly abortive attempt to tap at the center of his chest before letting his hand drop to his side, where he snapped his fingers almost in time to the floors that lit up on the elevator’s keypad as they descended.

Steve wasn’t much better, he could admit. Now that the time for public consumption was almost upon him, he wasn’t sure how to behave or what, exactly, Tony expected from this newfound situation.

Seven…six….five…. Steve counted down the floors, four…he reached out and tucked his hand into Tony’s. Tony went still. Three. He looked up at Steve and tightened his hand where Steve’s curled around it. Two. I love you, Steve thought, stomach whooshing in a freefall, the air leaving his chest like it had been punched out of him.

Bucky was right. I’m in love with him.

Oh, God.

One.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sabrecmc on tumblr, twitter, discord and dreamwidth. Come say hi.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony TALK ABOUT FEELINGS, OMG, IT'S A MIRACLE.

Chapter Notes

As always, a huge thank you to my beta, tastes-like-coconut, who is wonderful and talented and just all around a great person. Please check out her tumblr for some of her beautiful artwork.

Though Pepper had reserved the adjacent tables to give them a kind of buffer, the din of noise from the Eiffel Tower’s other diners was loud enough to keep whatever awkward silence there might have been at bay while they perused the menu. It gave them both something to do, Tony mused as he went over the appetizer choices.

Their table was situated at the corner of the restaurant, where large glass windows opened on to a view of the Bellagio’s massive fountains as they rose and fell in an undulating dance. Even Tony had to admit that it was a pretty spectacular distraction, as those things went. Roses and champagne had been at their table waiting for them. He’d have to remember to thank Pepper for her subtlety later, Tony thought with a slight grimace as he looked back down at the menu and half-listened to the waiter go over the chef’s recommendations. Steve was explaining his allergies while the waiter nodded and pointed at things on the menu. Tony was, he could admit to himself, trying not to moon like some lovesick teenager who found his boyfriend’s allergies adorable, because that would be pathetic. He was pretty sure that would be pathetic.

Tony glanced again down at the roses, his mind instantly going to the little ink drawing that was leaning carefully against the dresser mirror back in their suite. It had thrown him, that strangely romantic gesture. Grand stunts, epic moments of showmanship, over-the-top gifts meant to substitute for whatever it was he didn’t want to deal with, that was what relationships were built on, not scraps of paper inked with a depth of emotion that Tony couldn’t quite name. Not yet, anyway.

Tony hadn’t been prepared for Steve’s straightforward declaration of being “in like” with him and his hotel-notepad flowers, that much was certain. It made his stomach flutter and drop and his chest go tight just thinking about it, like he needed some kind of swooning couch or maybe a nice moor to run across while considering Steve’s nicely shaped…ankle. Or…something, he thought with a sigh as he mentally settled on the sea bass.

Across from him, Steve shifted a bit in his seat, peeking over the top of the menu at Tony for a flash of a second before looking back down again. Steve had been oddly quiet and fidgety since they left the hotel, truth be told, not that Tony could exactly blame him. They’d both been tip-toeing around each other like any conversation was full of trap doors or jump-scares where things like insecurity-driven one night stands or accidentally arming terrorists could just pop out with one wrong step, Tony thought with a jittery sort of nervousness coursing under his skin. Rhodey had said to wait
until all this was over, then spill the beans on the whole weapons thing and how it connected to Steve and what happened in Gulmira with his unit. That seemed like a good, solid, well-thought-out and prudent plan, right up until Tony fell deeply in like with the flower-drawing, ex-soldier-slash-occasional stripper.

He didn’t want to ruin this, and it suddenly felt like a cracked piece of glass, barely held together and just waiting for any pressure to make it fall apart. What if he told Steve the truth about his role in the weapons sales, and Steve blamed him? Hated him? What if he didn’t, and Steve blamed him and hated him for not telling? God, he needed an emergency exit or something.

Something was up, that much was clear, though damned if Tony knew what had changed between floral doodles and the hotel lobby. In the car ride over, Steve had been looking anywhere but at Tony, and all of Tony’s attempts at conversation fell flat. Tony couldn’t help but feel as if he’d done something to screw it up, though he couldn’t quite work out exactly what. One minute, they’d been bantering about the flower exchange, Steve being crazy-adorable and Tony probably acting like a besotted fool, and the next, they’d spilled out of the elevator into reality and…Steve had clammed up.

Maybe Steve hadn’t liked the whole flowers jpeg thing, or maybe Tony hadn’t made a big enough deal out of the drawing. Neither of those seemed likely, but Tony was at something of a loss. He tended to hyper-verbalize when he was nervous. Deflect. Distract. He knew his MO well enough by now, but Steve was the polar opposite. He rolled in on himself, wrapped in this careful, brittle, stiff-backed quiet that Tony was afraid he’d shatter if he pushed too hard at it. So, he just…hadn’t. Except, now they were here, and people were looking, and Tony had spent the car ride and entire description of the chef’s specials wondering how he’d managed to fuck up a perfectly good relationship just by sending Steve electronic flowers. It wasn’t even a meme, for Christ’s sake.

“So,” Tony said, placing the tip of his finger atop the menu Steve was clutching and pulling it down far enough to finally catch Steve’s eye.

“So,” Steve repeated, setting the menu down.

“Well, good chat. Glad we got all that out on the table,” Tony grimaced, watching Steve let out a low chuckle, which, okay, that was a positive sign. He felt himself relax ever so slightly.

“Sorry. Sorry, I know I’m—look, Tony, I’m not used to…this. Whatever this is. Dating, I guess. Last time I stepped out with someone I really liked, I think her mom drove us,” Steve said mildly, then smiled, shaking his head a little. That was good, Tony thought. Nervousness, he could work with.

“I’ve progressed to ‘really like’, huh?” Tony teased, tossing a narrow-eyed look back at Steve.

“I, on the other hand, have technically been chasing after you since Bagram,” Tony pointed out, looking up at Steve from under his eyebrows. “Never really imagined something happening with you, to tell you the truth. Just, you know, the dance thing. Get paid, get out. The usual. Didn’t really expect you’d be,” he waved a hand in the air in front of him, which Tony supposed meant a hell of a lot more than Steve bargained for in negotiating a lap dance. “I don’t know what I expected. Not this, though. You, me, us. All of this. I guess I’m just trying to get my bearings here a bit.”

“I, on the other hand, have technically been chasing after you since Bagram,” Tony pointed out, looking up at Steve from under his eyebrows. “So, A for effort on my part. Never give up, all that,” he added with a low shrug. “Didn’t expect to see you again after you blew me off in Bagram. In the not-fun way,” he teased, rolling his lips together as he watched a blush redden Steve’s cheeks. It really was a good look on him, Tony could easily admit. “But, you know, stars align, fate, kismet,
destiny, all that. Universe wants to give us a shot, why not go for it?"

"Your best friend hired me to grind on you in a g-string," Steve reminded him with a half-smile.
"Not sure that’s exactly what people mean by karma."

"No, no, you’re discounting this, and this is some seriously romantic, soulmate-level stuff I’m talking about here, Steve. You, me, a few terrorists, a what’s-a-guy-like-you-doing-in-a-place-like-this kind of meet cute, come on! Fate. I’m telling you. Written in the stars and all that. Can’t fight it.
Anyway, I’m pretty sure there’s an ancient Chinese proverb about a red thong connecting two people who are destined to meet,“ Tony grinned wickedly and tipped the champagne to his lips while Steve rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"That’s not what that says," Steve corrected him, though he was smiling through it as the waiter set down a salad in front of him.

"Well, it makes a whole lot more sense my way if you put the ‘in bed’ on the end of it. Speaking of thongs, the whole, ah…Rhodey-arranged dance of perfect timing?" Tony asked, waving his champagne flute in the space between he and Steve. "You said something about agreeing to it because you wanted to see me as just a customer, not—not me. The guy from Afghanistan. And then I got sidetracked because of the you saying how you were one of the people out looking for me, which we still haven’t actually discussed in any real detail. Don’t think I haven’t noticed. But, anyway, I get it. The me thing. It’s a lot,” Tony admitted with a wan smile. “All of this. If that was what was, I don’t know, on your mind or something,” Tony shrugged somewhat helplessly, then set his glass down and interlaced his fingers over his forgotten plate of caviar. “Steve, you’ve barely looked at me since we left the hotel. I know I can be a lot to handle. If I did something…”

"It’s not that. It’s not you," Steve insisted.

"You’re not seriously going to ‘It’s not you, it’s me’ me, are you?" Tony asked, mouth flattening while his stomach clenched and roiled.

"What? No!" Steve said sharply, dropping his hands onto the table with enough force to make the silverware clatter against the plates. “It’s…there’s a reason everyone is skeptical of this relationship, Tony. You have to see it? You and me, we don’t seem to really fit together, at least not from the outside. I mean, I’m a—I’m me. No one. And you’re Tony Stark. But, then you’re—you’re you sometimes. Not Tony Stark, billionaire, genius…whatever. You. And it’s different, and…I can kind of see it. Us. How this can go. How I’d fit. But, then…"

"Then you wonder how this thing can possibly work when we’re not in the middle of—all this craziness?" Tony asked, mouth pulling into a wry grimace. "Cards on the table? I don’t know either. But, you’re not no one, for Christ’s sake, Steve, you’re…you don’t even have the faintest clue how amazing you are, do you?" Tony demanded.

"You could have a thousand good-looking guys lining up with a snap of your finger, Tony," Steve pointed out.

"Oh, I see! You think I like you because of the unfair attractiveness. Well, joke’s on you, soldier. I happen to like the smart, funny, stupidly-heroic, mini-golf cheat underneath. So there,” Tony said, emphasizing the point by stabbing his fork in the air between them.

"Technically, I didn’t cheat,” Steve argued with a small smile playing on his lips as he sipped his champagne.

"Technically, you never actually answered my question about Hammer," Tony pointed out. “Look,
Steve, yeah, on paper, this is insane,” Tony said. But, I’ve got another paper, one with blue-inked flowers on it, that says maybe it isn’t, he thought. “It doesn’t feel insane, though. It feels, I don’t know, like…like something I didn’t know I was missing, didn’t know I wanted, just fell into my lap, and I—I got a second chance, you know? After everything. Me, for some God-damned reason,” he added, mouth twisting around the words. “It has to be for a reason, right?”

“Maybe the reason is…everything else you’re doing,” Steve said quietly. “And I’m just…”

“I couldn’t do this without you,” Tony replied. “Well, okay, I could, but the truth is…” he trailed off, looking down for a moment before raising his gaze to Steve. “The truth is, I can. I can do it by myself, Steve, but I’m better at it with you here. I’ve been so…consumed with getting these people. Fixing what I—what was wrong. But, then you show up, and—and maybe it’s about more than that. Maybe I could be more than the guy who cleaned up his mistakes.”

“You’re already more than that, Tony, how could you even think—” Steve started.

“You were right about me,” Tony cut in. He didn’t want to go any further down that path, not when there were things he still needed to tell Steve about the extent of his mistakes. Not when he was using Steve’s trust for clean-up in Aisle Pseudo-Daddy Figure, he thought with a wince. “The whole persona thing. Tony Stark, name in lights, the bigger, the better, right? The show’s part of my life. Not going to lie,” Tony said, feeling his voice drop, like the guilt was weighing down the words. He could feel his hands clench into fists and forced himself to relax. “It’s a lot for anyone to handle, and you’ve probably got more on your plate than anyone should. It can…consume you. If you let it. Glitz and glamour with a side of rehab, just like Mom did it. But, it’s not who I am. It’s not who I want to be. I’m…” he broke off, clearing his throat. “I’m saying, I’d make a space for you. If you wanted it. Maybe—probably—I wouldn’t have, back in Bagram, if you’d said yes then. We’d have had a great night,” Tony acknowledged.

“No doubt,” Steve agreed, somewhat demurely, Tony noticed, but not without a hint of color making its way onto his cheeks.

“I’d have teased Rhodey about the Army managing to have a better landing strip than the Air Force,” Tony went on. “I wouldn’t have noticed that there was this amazing guy right in front of me. Nothing like a little torture and near-death experience to make knowing when you have a good thing seem a lot less crazy. I don’t have all the answers right now. I wish I did, but I don’t. I don’t know how this will work with us. I don’t know what will happen. Maybe nothing. But, I think we could be a good thing. I think it’s worth…trying and finding out, but if you’re having second thoughts, I mean, I get it. It’s…a lot,” he finished, lifting his eyes to Steve, then glancing away, gaze finding the fountains where they shot up into the air in a blaze of lights. “I’m a lot.”

Steve stared at him across the table for a long moment, then seemingly against his will let his mouth form a grudging smile.

“Bucky thinks I don’t know what to do with the idea of being happy and having it be so, I don’t know, easy or something,” Steve admitted in a carefully neutral tone, like he didn’t want to give the words more power than they already had.
“Glad I’m easy,” Tony replied. “Wait.” Steve chuckled into his fist, turning it into a polite cough. “I get it. I mean, I keep thinking it shouldn’t be so easy, this you-and-me-thing. Everything going on, all our baggage, it shouldn’t be easy, and then it is, and it’s…”

“Terrifying,” Steve said agreeably.

“Seriously, this conversation might be the most afraid I’ve ever been, and I was held hostage by terrorists, so,” Tony shrugged.

Steve lifted his champagne flute and held it out between them. “To being easy.”

“God knows, I’ll drink to that. To being easy,” Tony chimed in, clinking his glass to Steve’s and taking a long drink.

“You’re not what I expected, that’s for sure,” Steve went on, relaxing into the words as the strain seemed to slip off his face. His eyes were bright now, teasing and warm as he regarded Tony. It made Tony’s stomach do some kind of flip and a pool of heat gather low in his gut.

“Says the stripper with a martyr complex,” Tony pointed out with an easy grin, making Steve’s smile widen in response. “You said that already, by the way. If it’s about the TMZ thing, first, I can explain. Second, it was all Rhodey’s fault. Third—”

“I just mean from before,” Steve interjected. “You’re not what I expected. Some of it, yeah, sure. All the—all the this,”Steve began, glancing around and apparently meaning all the craziness that came with being Tony Stark. “Not that it’s bad,” he said quickly. “Bucky keeps telling me I gotta leave a shoe behind or something,” Steve said with a sideways smile that Tony returned. “He was teasing me a bit about meeting you back in Bagram,” Steve told him, the blush creeping back on his cheeks again as he looked at Tony from underneath unfairly long lashes, happy and carefree and full of a fond, teasing warmth. He should look like that more often, Tony decided, raising an eyebrow in question. “Said he should’ve known I kind of maybe had a thing for you because of how I reacted to your, ah…proposition.”

“Ha! I knew you were into me,” Tony said, snapping his fingers at Steve in triumph. “You, with your disapproving face that I may or may not have found also sort of insanely hot. You thought I was an entitled ass. Admittedly, not totally off the mark on that one, I think we can all agree. But, you were totally into me. I knew it. Rhodey owes me a dollar. Can I call him? I want to call him. He said not to interrupt him while he was meeting with the base CO, but I feel like this should fall under some kind of emergency exception.”

“They’re probably just talking about how they are both pilots,” Steve said, giving Tony a wide-eyed, innocent look.

“Met some Air Force pilots, have you?” Tony asked.

“A few,” Steve acknowledged. “Know how I know?”

“They told you?” Tony guessed.

“First thing. Every time. Back at Bagram, we made name tags for them that all just said, ‘Hello, my name is Ima Pilot,’” Steve chuckled. “And, I did think that about you at first. In Bagram, I mean. The whole thinking you were kind of…” he nodded, shooting Tony an apologetic look.

“Kind of a total asshole who flew in on a private jet, half drunk and started hitting on you?” Tony finished for him with a grimace.
“You were just so much, you know? Larger than life,” Steve said, frowning at the memory. “I mean, God, it was hot as Hades out there, and there you were in this perfect suit, looking like you stepped out of some magazine or something, going around glad-handing everyone, talking all fast and smooth, posing for selfies, and I—I bought it. The image you try to project,” Steve continued as Tony glanced away. “You make it easy, Tony, you really do. You’re good at it. Really good at it,” Steve said, voice softening a bit on the last. “You put all that between you and the world like some kind of buffer, and then there was this split second where it was like I was inside that zone or something. Your attention was on me, and…I didn’t have the first clue what to do with it, to tell you the truth. Guess what I’m saying is that I still don’t sometimes, but…I think I’d like to try.”

“Good. Good, then…then we’re just two extremely attractive married people out on a date,” Tony said after a long moment. “I’m going to steal some of your salad now,” he added, then reached across the table with his fork and plucked a bite from Steve’s plate. “Not bad. Want some caviar?” Tony asked, pointing at his plate with his fork.

“Depends on whether that’s an epi-pen in your pocket or you’re just happy to see me,” Steve quipped in dry deadpanned voice, then grinned widely as Tony spluttered into a laugh.

The rest of the dinner was just as easy, Tony thought as they exited the restaurant into the idling car. He felt like he needed Steve to take him on some kind of Brooklyn backalley tour when they made it to New York, after listening to far too many stories that started with something along the lines of, ‘I was getting beat up in this alley when Bucky showed up,’ but all in all, Tony thought it was a good evening. Steve was smart and funny and seemed to enjoy listening to Tony talk, so basically amounted to the real-life equivalent of finding a mermaid riding a unicorn watching a good Adam Sandler movie, as far as Tony was concerned.

“You clean up pretty nice,” Steve observed agreeably, then smiled and did that blushing, bright-eyed thing that Tony was kind of starting to adore. “Can’t believe I’m on a date with Steve Rogers,” Tony replied. “Which reminds me, Rhodey owes me a dollar for losing the bet that you weren’t a little interested, because you were, which you have now manfully admitted.”

“Not going to let that one go, huh?” Steve asked. He bit his lip and turned to look out the window where the lights of the Strip reflected in blinking, brilliant neon across his face. “More than a little,” Steve admitted after a moment, then glanced back at Tony. “Thought about you a bit. Back at the barracks that night,” he added, clearing his throat and flattening his lips together.

“Uh, I’m going to need you to tell me more about how you were laying in bed back at your barracks thinking about me because Rhodey might owe me a bit more,” Tony replied, sitting up in his seat and twisting his body a little towards Steve.
“Not like that. Well. Not only like that,” Steve said, the blush back in full force now, deepened to a rich pink shade by the lights outside the limo. “Bucky—I know it was him—he put that Time magazine with you on the cover on my bunk as a joke, so I read it. Seemed like mostly a puff piece. What you wanted to do with the company for the future. The intelicrops and medical research, that kind of thing. Just a good bit of PR, you know?” Steve said.

“It was. Pepper’s doing,” Tony shrugged. “Thinks I should talk more about those divisions, particularly back then, when there were a lot of questions swirling about the war and the role of government contractors. No one was exactly throwing us ticker-tape parades.”

“Yes,” Steve nodded. “But, there was this one passage. You were—you were talking about being at MIT and your parents and all that,” Steve said, eyes going soft and far away for a moment. “That you worked with the car companies to improve safety features after that. Then taking over the company, and how you felt this obligation to the troops to make sure they had the best gear. How that was what kept you up at night, wondering if you’d done enough, or if some spouse or parent or child was going to get a call like you got. I was in the middle of trying to decide whether to re-up, and I guess that resonated a little more than I wanted to admit. Worrying that you’re not doing enough, and someone else is going to get hurt because of it,” Steve finished, looking down at his lap before turning his head towards Tony.

“I’d forgotten that part,” Tony said quietly. He swiped a hand at his forehead, then looked back at Steve. “Think you’d ever want to re-enlist?”

“I doubt I can with Ross blacklisting me, but I think about it. Sometimes. Feels like I should be doing more, you know?” Steve said.

“There are other options. Ways to help. Doesn’t have to be military,” Tony replied. “Though, and stop me if you’ve heard this, I have some pull there. There’s SHIELD, too. It’s technically Homeland Security, not DoD, so Ross isn’t going to have nearly the clout. Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for you hanging out by the pool with a martini and a smile, all house-husband style, but—ah,” Tony broke off, snapping his mouth shut as the import of the words sank into the pit that had conveniently opened up in his stomach. “That—I didn’t. I mean. What I meant was, ah…well, this has been fun. Happy, slow the car to a nice roll, I’m just going to throw myself out,” Tony said with a grimace twisting his mouth. “Look, that…okay, that came out probably a tad on the getting ahead of myself side, but what I meant was, you don’t have to—you have options. That’s all. Do what you want. Art? You’ve got a hell of a patron. Want to sign back up? I have three Joint Chiefs on speed-dial. Mostly to send cat memes, but anyway. Point being, whatever happens with you and me, I’ll help. It isn’t like it’s contingent on…whatever this is…happening or something, so if that’s what you were worrying about, don’t, okay? Just do what you want. Dream big. Find your passion. Live, laugh, love. Whatever.”

“You want me to come back to California with you?” Steve asked, sounding shocked.

I want you to stay with me, Tony thought, looking over at Steve as Happy angled the limo up to the valet curb in front of their hotel. I want you to love me for real, not just this whole charade thing we’re doing.

I want you, Tony thought, a sharp pang bursting bright in the center of his chest. He had to resist the urge to tap at the reactor, his own little Morse code of a nervous tell.

“I—I do?” Tony said, though it came out sounding more like a question. “I’m not so great at long distance relationships. Or short distance relations. But, anyway, forget that. What I’m saying is, maybe we just…” Tony started, glancing quickly at Steve before looking away, chewing on his lip for a moment. He twisted around in the back of the limo and leaned forward, one arm braced on his
thigh, while he used his other hand to cover his mouth before he said something that was far too
revealing and would probably send Steve running for the nearest exit. “Maybe we don’t say
anything.”

“Don’t say anything,” Steve repeated, a furrow forming on his brow.

“About the whole fake thing,” Tony said. “Maybe we just see what happens. Play it out.”

“Play it out,” Steve repeated again, slower this time.

“If you’re going to keep doing that, what I say is going to get a lot more interesting,” Tony warned
him in a droll voice. “We were thinking that maybe you and I, we just…sort of…keep, ah…going.
Obviously, if it doesn’t work out, we’d ‘divorce’ or whatever,” Tony rushed out, making air quotes
with his hands. “Go our separate ways. Nice bit of alimony for you. No harm, no foul,” he finished
weakly, flattening his mouth into a grim line and turning to look out the window as the limo pulled
up next to the entrance to their hotel.

“We?” Steve said, raising his voice in question.

“Uh,” Tony grunted, pursing his lips. “Rhodey. And Pepper. And Matt, but no one listens to him.”

“You talked about this with them?” Steve asked.

“Give us a second, Hap,” Tony said, pressing the limo’s intercom button.

“Sure thing, Boss,” Happy’s muffled voice came back. Tony heard the driver’s door click open and
shut, followed by Happy’s loud, gregarious tones emanating from somewhere around the valet stand.

“I might have mentioned that I was interested in seeing where this went,” Tony said tightly, glancing
over at Steve, eyes lighting for a moment on the ring on Steve’s finger. He could suddenly feel his
own band, warm and solid where the metal wrapped around his own finger. He didn’t want to take it
off, he realized with a slight start. He didn’t want to stop being a part of a pair, with Steve on the
other side like he had always belonged there. He didn’t want to go back to being just Tony Stark.
He wanted to be Tony Stark, Steve Rogers’ husband. More than that, he wanted to be the man who
deserved that moniker.

“You really want me to come back to California with you?” Steve asked again. He voice was still
high and threaded with disbelief. “For real? And just…”

“And just keep on with, ah, what—whatever we’re comfortable with,” Tony finished for him.
“Though, um, it’s—it’s not like I can’t fly out here on weekends or whatever,” Tony said quickly,
the words sort of building on each other with more and more force as they tumbled out of his mouth.
“It was just an idea, really. Mostly Pepper’s. I mean, it’s crazy, right? Probably is. Who just
pretends to be married for, ah, reasons other than national security? Probably a terrible idea,” Tony
rushed on, scratching at the side of his face distractedly as he scrunched up his eyes for…reasons.
“So, you know, no pressure or anything. If you don’t want to, it’s fine. Obviously. Totally fine, if
you don’t. Probably smarter if you don’t, really. I’m a terrible host. Spend all day in my workshop.
You’d be bored. Not that you couldn’t do stuff. I mean, there’s stuff to do. It’s Malibu, not Iowa.
What do you think they do in Iowa? I’m picturing stuff with corn and…and now I don’t want to
think about that. So. Yeah. Anyway. That was an idea.” He raised his eyes, finding Steve staring at
him, eyes gone soft and bright, crinkling a little at the corners.

“I do,” Steve said in a quiet voice. “Want to come to California, I mean. If you want me to.”
“Really?” Tony burst out, louder than he meant to in the confines of the car. “You do?”

“I do,” Steve repeated. “You sure? I’m probably a terrible houseguest. I drink milk out of the carton. Bucky says it’s gross. He doesn’t roll up the toothpaste when it gets low. Just throws the tube out. Drives me nuts. I don’t want to throw your life more out of whack than it has been already. So, only if you really want this to do this, Tony. There’s no pressure. Really, there isn’t.”

“I do,” Tony said. “Want to. Wait. That sounded—wow, okay, did not mean it to come out quite soGoing to the Chapel, but all things considered,” he laughed with a nervous jolt of energy, but Steve was smiling and doing that adorable blushy thing he did. “I’ll buy extra milk. I’ll…have whoever buys the milk buy extra milk,” he corrected, blinking hard and shaking his head in deprecation. “I don’t roll up my toothpaste tube.”

“I knew I’d find your flaw eventually,” Steve said, then smiled one of those big, soft smiles that made Tony’s heart grow three sizes.

“I’m obsessive about work sometimes. To the point I can forget about everything else going on. And everyone. I’ve been told this is problematic for a relationship,” Tony replied slowly, keeping his eyes on Steve as he watched the smile wobble a bit, then fall off Steve’s face. He dropped his gaze away from Tony, then raised it back again.

“I make lists about everything from what I watched on TV to the bus stops to what songs everyone danced to at the club. I can’t get rid of them. I’ve got shoeboxes full of them,” Steve admitted, then tilted his head to the side and regarded Tony. “I’ve been told this is problematic for a relationship.”

“I use humor and being smarter that most everyone in the room to keep people at arm’s length. I’ll lash out to make sure I’m the one doing the rejecting, and it ends up being this self-fulfilling cycle I can’t break out of most of the time,” Tony replied. “At least, I used to. I don’t know, it’s…easier with you. Nothing like a near-death experience to make you grow as a person, I guess.”

“I have nightmares,” Steve said.

“Ditto,” Tony told him.

“I’m stubborn. Myopic sometimes. It can be good, particularly when it comes to command. Sam says it’s common for people who’ve been in combat. We like everything black and white, because nuance means doubt and doubt will get you killed. Is that woman carrying a bread loaf or an IED, you know? Good focus for getting Bucky this far, I guess. But, sometimes, with relationships, I know I’m shooting myself in the foot, and I still can’t get myself to pull back from whatever position I’ve taken. It’s like, I have to be right about whatever it is or…or it’s that there’s something wrong with me,” Steve said. “I’m working on it, but I’m not going to lie, it’s probably always going to be an issue I’ll have to deal with, Tony. So, if we’re doing this, you should know that about me.”

Tony was nodding. “I get that. For me, particularly after Afghanistan, it’s control. The need to be in control. People think it’s because I think I’m so much better or smarter or whatever, and yeah, okay, I’m not exactly the poster child for a lack of ego, but the truth is, I’m mostly just terrified that something is going to go wrong, and that’s going to be on me. I won’t be good enough. I’ll miss something. I’ll miss something, and people will die. Because that’s what happened, and that’s on me. So, this? All of this with Batroc and Obadiah and the rest of them? Hell, even you. It’s—I’ve got to do it. Me. Matt wanted me to go to the authorities, and I—I couldn’t. I told myself, it was because I couldn’t trust that they weren’t compromised, not as high as this goes, and that’s true enough, but it’s not all there was to it. I wanted to do it my way, where I’m the one with my hand on all the moving parts because I can’t let something go wrong again. I can’t. So, if we’re doing this, you should know that about me.”
“Tony, what happened in Afghanistan wasn’t your fault. How can you blame yourself for what that Stane guy did? He was the one who sold weapons under the table, not you,” Steve protested so vehemently he was practically vibrating with it. “And we’re going to make sure that every single person responsible for that happening pays for what they did,” he announced in a voice that Tony was sure probably had his fellow soldiers scrambling to see who could agree first.

This was it. This was the time to tell Steve the truth of it. Tony even sucked in a breath to do it, but when he opened his mouth, no words came out. He looked at Steve, with his fiery expression and righteous indignation on Tony’s behalf, his unswerving faith, and thought about blue flowers and the weight of the band on his finger and how good it would feel to introduce Steve to the ‘bots and JARVIS, and he just…didn’t. It would be better to tell him after all this was over, Tony told himself. When they’d won. When the bad guys were all exposed and the full scale of their betrayal was on the table. Steve would forgive him for not being totally up front. When he saw how much good they’d done, Steve would forgive him.

It was only a couple more days.

A couple more days, and he’d come clean about everything. He could only hope that it would be a little easier for Steve to swallow hearing Tony’s role in the whole thing when Obie and the rest of Team Orange is the New Black were behind bars.

“Yeah. Exactly,” Tony said, flashing a flat smile at Steve. “Guess we should head in, huh?” he jerked his head towards the limo’s window, where a couple of tourists were leaning close enough that their breath was practically fogging up the glass.

“You really don’t roll up the toothpaste tube?” Steve asked, giving Tony what could only be described as a sulking look.

“Billionaire,” Tony reminded him, then rolled his eyes. “I will roll up the toothpaste tube if it will make you happy.”

One side of Steve’s mouth quirked up. “It’s wasteful not to,” Steve admonished, though his eyes were twinkling merrily, like he’d just watched the one good prize from those claw machines drop into the prize chute.

“See? You’re making me a better person already,” Tony said flatly, then huffed out a low laugh and swiped a hand over his mouth. “It’s really annoying,” he added, then frowned. “Great. Great, just great. Now, I’m thinking of designs for a more efficient toothpaste delivery device. Don’t you dare laugh. This is probably going to keep me up tonight,” Tony grumbled, though he had to bite his lip to hold back his smile.

Steve grinned, clapped a hand on Tony’s shoulder and gave him a little shake that Tony took for some kind of weird signal of approval, then reached for the door, though Tony had already buzzed Happy.

“When I file the patent applications at two a.m., I’m blaming you,” Tony said, scowling at Steve with as much mock indignation as he could muster.

Happy hurried to shoo the tourists away and held the door open for Steve and Tony. Steve held out his hand, and Tony took it as he crawled out, then didn’t let go because that was what couples did. He felt Steve give his hand a squeeze, and he looked up and caught Steve’s eye. Steve leaned his head down and sort of nudged at Tony’s cheek. Not quite a kiss, but somehow even more intimate than any kiss Tony had ever experienced.
It was over in a flash, and Tony wondered if it had been for the cameras furiously recording and clicking around them like a wall of small, intrusive, brightly-colored bricks. But, then Steve smiled, that soft, warm one that made all the worries and questions seem to melt off his face, and it was just for him, Tony realized. This look, that open, easy happiness that smoothed away everything else, that was for Tony. The wide, pasted-on smile, the self-deprecating one he gave the paparazzi, the devilish one he flashed sometimes, those were looks he gave the world, but this one…this one was Tony’s.

They made their way through the milling throng of people that were going in and out of the Rio’s lobby. It was different, Tony noticed, doing this with Steve by his side. What was the term? United front. That was what it felt like. Some kind of warped space that expanded exponentially around them by virtue of being shared, as if the two of them were more than the sum of their parts. He’d never thought of himself as lonely, at least not since MIT and Rhodey, but there was something almost breathtaking about suddenly having someone else grab a part of whatever this weight was that he hadn’t even realized he had been carrying.

When they reached the vestibule with the bank of private elevators for the suites, Steve slowed, pulling a little on Tony’s hand.

“I had a good time tonight,” Steve said. “Feels like…I don’t know,” he stopped and scratched a finger at his temple, looking across the garden that separated the suites from the rest of the hotel. “Like I don’t want it to end,” he finished, then glanced over at Tony with a small furrow forming as he frowned. “Do you—do you think it will be different? In California?”

“Break the spell, you mean?” Tony asked with a slight wince. “Maybe. I don’t know. This is all…it’s happening fast, and there’s adrenaline, intrigue, the excitement of something new…” he trailed off, wiping a hand over his mouth, then dropping his fingers down to tapdance on the center of his chest. “I think I’d like to try boring, you know? Quiet. No one trying to kill me. Might be nice for a change,” he added with a caustic laugh. Steve dropped his chin to his chest, jaw tightening, then looked away. “But,” Tony said, drawing out the word. “All of that—the adrenaline, the excitement, all the crap going on—honestly, none of that holds a candle to what it feels like when I make you laugh. Or when you look at me like, I don’t know, like you think I can actually pull off this insane bullshit I come up with. Or just now, when you’re next to me and it feels like we can handle anything the world throws at us. I don’t think that’s Vegas, Steve. Call me crazy, but I think that’s us. Maybe we shouldn’t work. For all the reasons you were worrying about. But, I think we do. I think we can. And if not, then…fuck it, we’ll move back to Vegas or something. Find some other Eagle Scout project to take on, I don’t know. We’ll—we’ll figure it out!” Tony said, tossing up his hands, then letting them fall flat against his sides.

“Oh kay,” Steve said after a long beat of silence.

“Oh kay? I just gave that speech, and all I get is ‘oh kay’?” Tony demanded in an exasperated whine.

Steve, damn his hide, just shrugged. “I gave a beautiful, heartfelt speech, Steve Rogers, and you give me two syllables—press the damn button—two syllables, if you can call them syllables because they are basically just saying two letters, when I practically bared my soul—”

“I think I might be falling in love with you,” Steve cut in, making Tony’s mouth snap shut as he stared wide-eyed at Steve. His head was tipped back as he watched the lighted numbers above the elevator tick downward. Tony watched Steve’s throat work as he swallowed. Finally, Steve dragged his gaze over to where Tony was probably fishmouthing at him, since no words seemed willing or able to come out at this point. A low, rushing buzz filled Tony’s ears. He was strangely aware of his breathing, or lack thereof, to be more precise. He should probably take a breath, but he thought if he did, he might realize he hadn’t heard Steve correctly. Or Steve would laugh, letting Tony in on
the joke. Or, Tony would wake up. Something.

The elevator pinged, making Tony nearly jump out of his skin. “Ride’s here,” Steve said, sounding completely nonchalant while Tony reeled with, God, he didn’t even know. Shock? Confusion? Terror? Joy? Could you experience all of them at once, Tony wondered dazedly as they stepped into the elevator. Tony felt himself tugged along, almost against his will, and realized that he was still holding Steve’s hand. Though, clawing at Steve’s hand was probably a more apt description, the way his fingers were curled around Steve’s and digging in, as if he let go, he would fall.

“Sorry,” Steve said as the elevator doors slid shut. “That was too soon, wasn’t it? Forget I said anything.”

“Forget you--what is wrong with you? Who just says that? Out loud?” Tony burst out with a gasping, shaking breath, then blinked and opened his mouth to take theharsh, panicked words back, but what came out instead was, “That thing you said. Probably, you know, me, too. With the—for you. Not probably. I mean, it’s, you know, the same. For me.” He was rocking back and forth on his feet, nerves all jittery and stomach clenching and roiling, but he somehow managed to keep his gaze on Steve, watching his throat work and his eyes flutter for a moment.

“Yeah?” Steve said, his voice going all soft and billowy. He turned and beamed at Tony, wide and bright.

“I bought a company today because the guy there was mean to you, so. Yeah, I’m—having the feelings,” Tony replied, the words wobbling a bit on the end.

“Wait, you did what?” Steve asked, turning sharply to look at Tony.

“Romotive Group. I, uh,” Tony stammered, curling his mouth into a thin line and scratching at his beard. “I kind of bought it. I mean, it’s a good investment. Maybe. Honestly, I don’t know or care. But, that Estes guy? He was mean to you, and I didn’t like it, and sometimes I can kind of be a petty jerk, but since I’m rich, we call that eccentric, okay?”

“You bought the company?” Steve asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Pepper said I couldn’t fire him until I did,” Tony shrugged.

Steve went quiet, seemingly fascinated by their distorted reflections in the elevator doors. Finally, the doors slid open on their suite, though they both just stood there until the doors started to close again.

“Just so I’m clear,” Steve began haltingly, then stopped to clear his throat and glance over at Tony with a dubious look. “You bought a company so that you could fire someone? Because he was mean to me?”

“Who bought a company? Who got fired?” Barnes called out from the sofa where he was propped up, watching TV and seemingly working his way through the room service menu by the looks of it. His prosthetic arm, the plastic sort of yellowing where it was meant to be a flesh tone, sat next to him. He’d formed the hand into a one-fingered salute, as if he just wanted that option at the ready.

“Romotive Group. He fired that Estes guy,” Steve said.

“Oh. Good. Dude was a dick,” Barnes replied, then went back to consuming the cheese tray. Tony raised his eyebrows at Steve, who just shot him a disgruntled look.
“That’s not the point, Buck. It’s not good. It’s…I don’t know what it is, I’m still trying to wrap my head around it,” Steve said. “Did you order the whole room service menu?” he demanded, frowning down at Barnes.

“Did you not think I was serious?” Barnes asked, pulling an exaggerated look of disbelief. “Steve, don’t get your panties in a wad over Estes, for Christ’s sake. Tony, Steve thinks it’s awesome, he just needs a bit of time to get his head around it, okay? People don’t usually do stuff like that for him, so he’s freaking out a bit. It’s always him taking care of other people. Case in point, here. He’ll get over it. Steve, please let the nice billionaire who is clearly head over heels do some crazy, rich-people shit for you. Fight for your honor or whatever. Jesus, Steve, you’re killing me with this fall on your sword thing, man. Come on, live a little, would you? The guy had it coming, and you know it,” he finished, saluting Steve with a barbecued chicken wing.

Steve looked between Barnes and Tony, a totally flummoxed expression on his face, then seemed to deflate a bit. “If it’s any consolation, the guy was screwing over the veterans waiting on those prosthetics,” Tony told him. “Pepper’s already working on fast-tracking some prototypes to fill the backlog of requests. I’d like to tell you that was what tipped the scale, but, hand to Edison, I think that thing I said so, ah, eloquently just now means that there will be times when I just can’t help myself. And you, Mr. Smackdown the Paparazzi, aren’t exactly one to talk.”

“That was different,” Steve said.

“How?” Tony asked.

“Because…” Steve began, then broke off with a frustrated huff, his hands going to his hips. “Because.”

“Because that was me, and this is you, and you don’t ever need anyone to stand up for you because you’re not that little guy getting beat up in the alley behind the AMC anymore?” Tony guessed.


“Thanks,” Tony replied, keeping his eyes on Steve.


“So, just to be clear, you’re cool with grand gestures standing in for emotional honesty? Outstanding, this relationship is going to work out so well,” Tony said, clapping his hands together and snapping his fingers with a flat, self-deprecating grimace twisting across his mouth.

“Does this mean I get my new arm?” Barnes asked, glancing between them.

“Top of the line,” Tony promised.

“Can it do this?” Barnes asked, holding up the prosthetic where it shot Steve the finger. “I need it to be able to do this.”

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Steve said, looking up at the ceiling and rubbing at his temples with one hand.

“The neural interface will give you a whole range of obscene gesture options—dare I say it? At your

“Good man. Don’t screw this up,” Barnes said, then went back to poking a cocktail fork at a plate of caviar.

“I’m trying not to,” Steve and Tony both said at the same time, then looked at each other in startle.

“Ugh,” Barnes grunted, sucking in a breath and letting out a deep sigh, aiming for horrified annoyance, but Tony could see a smile trying to break through that Barnes kept trying desperately to hide.

“Good night, Tony,” Steve sighed.

“Good night, Steve,” Tony replied, leaning a hip against the bar that separated the kitchen from the living area. He waved one hand, then shoved both hands into his pockets. Barnes rolled his eyes, Tony noticed.

“Buck, you should really get some rest, too. We’ve got the VA thing in the morning,” Steve reminded him.

“It’s UFC,” Barnes protested, splaying his hands in confusion at Steve’s suggestion, then throwing a pillow at him, which Steve caught and set back down in its place on the sofa.

“Buck,” Steve said.


“Well,” Tony said, clapping his hands together. “I have to go design a toothpaste tube,” he announced, pushing himself off the edge of the bar and grinning as he caught Steve’s almost shy smile that followed him as he headed toward his room. “What time’s the appointment?” Tony asked, turning to look back at the two of them, Steve scowling down at Barnes, who happily munched his way through the appetizer section.

“Nine,” Steve called out. “You don’t have to go, Tony.”

“Buy the VA,” Barnes suggested around a mouthful of cheese.

“How do you feel about California?” Tony asked Barnes.

“’Bout fucking time,” Barnes said.

“I knew I liked you,” Tony replied, then turned and practically floated the rest of the distance to his suite with Steve’s stuttering explanation to Barnes about the whole California thing ringing in his ears. He made it to his bedroom and shut the door behind him. He walked the few steps to the bed and fell backwards on it, bouncing a little with the motion, his face scrunching up into a giggle. God, he thought, scrubbing his hands over his face as he grinned up at the ceiling like a loon.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and hit the button.

“What happened?” Rhodey asked by way of answer.

“I’ll have you know that the evening went very well. Great dinner. Nice view. The fountains are great. Have you seen them? You should see them. I told Steve about the company and that Estes guy. Barnes played referee on that one. Steve’s in love with me, I may have said something similar. Hard to tell. You know how I word vomit when I get nervous. Anyway, we’re moving to
California together when all this is over. I’m designing a toothpaste tube and a prosthetic arm that can flip people off. Because love, I guess,” Tony said, grinning manically as he waited for Rhodey’s response.

“The fountains are pretty impressive,” Rhodey replied in a droll voice.

“See? This is why I call you,” Tony said. He closed his eyes, feeling the ebullience drain away as he lay there with Rhodey in his ear, not judging him and being all supporting and happy about Tony’s happiness. God, it was like a bucket of cold water. Tony reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers, letting out a long breath. “We’re moving too fast. I should focus on the thing with Obie. I still need to tell Steve about everything. I’m getting way ahead of myself, because I found this amazing guy, who, wonder of wonders, likes me, too, and I’m fairly sure if I told him I wanted to walk away from this and live in a yurt and find myself or something, he’d help me milk our yak. Terrible analogy. You get what I mean. Talk me down. Because I like him, Rhodey, I really do. I’m—I’m falling for this guy, and if there’s an off-ramp, then I’m about to pass it, so. So, now’s the time for any voice of reason you want to throw in here.”

“I get it, Tony,” Rhodey replied. “No, alright? None of this makes sense, and, yeah, your timing sucks, man, it does. We have some serious shit about to go down, and your head isn’t in the game like it needs to be, and you know it. But, damn, Tony, you get to be happy. I’ve watched you try to punish yourself over and over since you got back from Afghanistan. You hole up in your workshop and plot and work and build, like that’s all there is. If you think I’m going to be the one to send you back to that when you have a chance for something else, something good, Tony, then, you called the wrong guy. You’ve been happier the past week than I’ve seen you in—in I don’t know when. No, it isn’t smart. This thing with you and Rogers. But, the two of you, you’re both more the run before you can walk types, you know what I’m saying? Maybe this kind of crazy is just the right amount of crazy for you two. Any sane approach and one of you would find a way to screw it up, let’s face it.”

“I have to tell him. About the weapons. About what I did. Or didn’t do,” Tony sighed, covering his eyes with his hand.

“You think he’s going to blame you because you blame you. It’s not like that, man, I’m telling you,” Rhodey argued. “Maybe he’ll be pissed, but he knows enough about how the military works to get how something like this flies under the radar. Hell, he’s probably seen his fair share of graft and corruption over there, and all that happens under someone’s nose.”

“I know you said to wait, but I feel like I have to have him,” Tony said in a dull, flat tone.

“Look, if you have to, I’ve got your back, okay? But, it’s a couple more days, Tony. Batroc just got spooked with the whole thing with Stern, but he’s not going to wait much longer, not with that kind of payout on the line,” Rhodey pointed out. It sounded reasonable. The smart play. It made Tony sick to his stomach.

It will be better when Obie and the rest of them are rotting in jail, Tony told himself. When I can show Steve that I fixed it, as best I could.

“And honestly, Tones?” Rhodey continued. “This whole marriage thing has thrown Obadiah and everyone else totally off whatever suspicions they might have had about your sudden interest in glad-handing in Vegas. He’s in town for the gala thing tomorrow night. So is Pierce. Consider it a good opportunity to assuage any of their concerns that you’re anything other than some half-drunk playboy who found himself a boy-toy at a Vegas strip club to keep himself busy while not paying attention to anything else going on. So, ogle Steve and act oblivious. I feel like you can do that.”

“I just…I don’t know what happened, but I want this more than I realized, and it all seems like it’s
this close to falling apart. Like one wrong move, and it’s going to disappear,” Tony said, dropping his hand to his side. “Two, three days ago, getting Obie and the rest was the only thing I cared about. The only thing that seemed to matter. And now…all I can think about is him. What he’ll think of me. I told him at dinner this was karma. Maybe it is. Maybe losing him, maybe that’s only fair, I don’t know,” he said, breaking off with a shuddering breath.

“Karma can kiss my ass. And so can you, if you think that’s how it works. This happened because some evil-ass men got up to no good. That’s it. That’s the end of it, Tony. Steve, he’s not going to think any differently. He’s going to think you’re the best thing that ever happened to him, that’s what he’s going to think,” Rhodey insisted. Tony could picture the firm nod that surely accompanied the words. “Because you are. And if he doesn’t, then I’ll just sit him down and have a nice, long discussion with him about how you are the best thing that ever happened to him.”

“Don’t think it quite works like that. Besides, I don’t want to have to pull a prosthetic arm out of your ass. Again,” Tony said, lips curling into a smile.

“I told you. Don’t do that. People will believe you,” Rhodey warned, a smile in his voice. “It’s going to be okay, Tony. When all this is over, we’ll sit him down, you and me together, and we’ll talk him through it. I’m not saying it will be easy for him to hear. It won’t. I get that. You’re being way too hard on yourself with this, Tony. Sure, it went sideways on your watch, and I’m not saying that you need to just brush that off, you know I’m not. But, how about we—and I know this is crazy, but hear me out—how about we put most of the blame on the actual bad guys? Just this once? I mean, I know that normally, you like it to be all about you, but maybe this once, we actually let the people responsible shoulder some of that?”

“Sorry, you’re breaking up, didn’t catch that,” Tony breathed out. “Thanks, Rhodey. I’m just---I’m trying very hard not to screw this up.”

“You’re not going to screw it up,” Rhodey replied, his voice softening.

“You got my back, right?” Tony asked.

“Always. You know it,” Rhodey assured him. “I got you a husband, didn’t I? A husband, I might add, who is some God-dammed-heroic-sonofabitch-soldier, which I know is your type since we met when you hit on me at that party—”

“Lies,” Tony said over Rhodey.

“--and a stripper, for crying out loud. Don’t say I never do anything for you,” Rhodey finished.

“I haven’t properly thanked you for that yet,” Tony pointed out. “I keep trying to buy you Rhode Island, mostly for funsies, but I think now I’ve found an actual reason.”

“Sweet dreams, Tony,” Rhodey replied, ignoring him.

“Good night, Rhodey,” Tony said, then clicked the phone off and dropped it next to him on the bed.

He stared at the ceiling for a long time, rolling it all over in his head until he thought it was probably more jumbled than it had been before. Maybe Rhodey was right. Maybe Steve would understand. Forgive him. Maybe it would work out. God, he needed it to work out. What had seemed manageable a few days ago, losing Steve, now seemed unimaginable. How had he ever thought he could walk away from this without leaving some part of himself behind?

Finally, he made himself get up and get out of his shoes and suit. JARVIS checked his emails and
voicemails while he brushed his teeth, deleting most of them, except a couple from Pepper. He stopped on the way to bed and picked up the piece of paper with the doodle of flowers on it from the dresser, staring at it for a long moment before carefully putting it back into place.

“JARVIS?” Tony said.

“How might I be off assistance, Sir?” JARVIS’ voice sounded from the speaker on Tony’s phone.

“Scan this for me, would you? Then have it blown up to something that would look good over the fireplace,” Tony said, holding up the phone for the scanner to get a good picture.

“Of course, Sir. Shall I have it framed and mounted?” JARVIS asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, J, go ahead and do that. Have the Pollack packed and stored,” Tony said.

“Ms. Potts just acquired that particular piece,” JARVIS reminded him. “She felt it was a good representation of his Springs period.”

“She’ll like this one better. Trust me,” Tony replied, then smiled and headed for the bed, tapping off the lights as he went, leaving just the glow of his reactor and the small stream of light peeking through the curtains. In the darkness, he turned and looked at the space next to him, where the comforter was still smooth, the sheets tucked in and the pillow perfectly fluffed. What would it be like to turn over and see Steve there? His heart beat hard against his chest, which tightened with phantom bands. His mouth was dry, and his eyes pricked and stung as he blinked.

Please don’t let me lose this, Tony thought, reaching out and placing a hand on the pillow next to him. Please. Please, I can’t lose this.

He woke with a start to an alarm he couldn’t remember setting. Pepper he supposed, pushing himself out of bed and stumbling for the shower. He dressed in a hurry, shaved and wandered out into the living room where the smell of coffee drew him to the kitchen.

“Yes, you can have the first question, Christine, I already told you that,” Pepper was saying into her phone. She waved at him, shook her head and looked skyward. “No. One question. Not one question in three parts. This is a personal matter, and Mr. Stark is doing you all the courtesy of addressing the interest and putting a stop to the rumor mill. That’s it.” She shook her head at Tony, then headed for the balcony where Tony could still hear her raised voice through the French doors.

He found the coffee and poured himself a cup, then picked at one of the bagels that sat on a tray on the counter. A door clicked open to his right, and Barnes emerged from Steve’s room, looking like someone’s mom had taken a spit-shine to him, or tried to, anyway. He was wearing the arm, Tony noticed, though most of it was covered up by the shirt’s long sleeve. It didn’t quite fit right, but Tony supposed that wasn’t exactly going to hurt his case. Steve followed on his heels with a folder of papers clutched in his hand.

“Let me do most of the talking this time, okay?” Steve urged, rifling through the papers as he frowned down at them.

“You know, we could just skip this exercise in bureaucracy and let me pay for whatever treatment it is he needs,” Tony suggested. “Go play mini-golf instead. I really want to get one down Gene Simmons’ throat. Wow. That sounded wrong. Anyway.”

“Marry him,” Barnes deadpanned, pointing at Tony. “Oh, wait. Anyway, I say we take Thurston Howell here up on his offer. Though, technically, I’m not allowed to go back there on account of how it turns out that they actually are kind of particular about what you put down Gene’s throat.”
Tony frowned bemusedly and tilted his head to the side, opening his mouth, then thinking better of it. “You know, some things are just better left a mystery. But, really, you don’t have to do this, just saying.”

“They’re his benefits,” Steve insisted, then frowned down at Barnes. “They’re your benefits. You served honorably. You got hurt in the line. You earned them. It’s only fair.”

“God,” Bucky said, rolling his eyes. “It’s a damn good thing you’re pretty, Rogers.”

“Really? That’s how you’re going to be?” Steve snapped, lifting his eyes to frown at Barnes instead of the papers.

Oh, good Lord, I’m going to have to take both of them, Tony thought with a heavy sigh. A matched set of self-sacrificing, co-dependent, stubborn-as-fuck, honest-to-God good guy-heroes who bickered like a couple of fishwives. Actually, the prospect wasn’t nearly as daunting as it had seemed a few days ago. He shook his head and watched the two of them glare at each other until Barnes finally relented.

“I mean, not that I don’t find your faith in humanity adorable, don’t get me wrong,” Barnes said, walking towards the kitchen and picking up a bagel, which he took a large bite of, before pointing it at Steve for emphasis. “But, Ross isn’t going to pull his foot off the VA guy’s neck,” he mumbled around the piece of bagel he was chewing. “No way they’re saying yes at this point.”

“You’re entitled to them. I’ve got it all here. Witness statements, police report, the transcript from your last appeal hearing, everything,” Steve said. “The review board has to listen.”

“This is just some stupid formality, Steve, keep your panties on, would you? They’re gonna say no, same as everyone else, and nothing in your little file there is going to change it,” Barnes ground out.

“You don’t know that,” Steve protested.

“Yeah. I do. Thinks he’s Perry Mason or something,” Barnes muttered, though Tony saw a flash of a fondness cross his face for a moment as he watched Steve shift through the papers. He looked younger like that, Tony thought. Softer. It was gone as soon as Steve looked up, like some mask slipping back into place.

“It’s not a formality, Buck, it’s important. This is—this is it. Come on, you—” Steve broke off, running a hand through his hair. “You know how important this is. We’re running out of chances.”

“Speaking of Perry Mason, Matt is meeting us there,” Tony said, drawing two equally surprised looks. “What? This is a legal thing. You need a lawyer.”

“We don’t need a lawyer, Tony,” Steve replied.

“Okay, first, everyone who has ever said that in the history of ever…needed a lawyer,” Tony shot back, tossing up his hands.

“Guy’s got a point, Steve,” Bucky added with a nod.

“We don’t need a lawyer,” Steve repeated, more firmly this time, like if he just ground the words down a bit, they’d work better on Tony.

“Because not having one has worked out so well for you so far?” Tony pressed. “Look, he’s probably just going to be sitting there in silent judgment. I mean, he could be asleep behind those glasses. We’d never know.”
“That’s not true, is it?” Steve said after staring askance at Tony for a long moment.

“Of course it’s not true. When have you ever known a lawyer to sit quietly?” Tony demanded. “Exactly. Steve, he’s there to help. You need this. I should’ve mentioned it, I know, instead of ambushing you, but honestly? I got caught up in the whole liking you and the, ah, other-you thing, and I generally try very, very hard not to think of my lawyer when I’m on a date, though many, including said lawyer, would say that is the exact time I should be thinking about him.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Steve said quietly.

“Yeah, well, technically, I’m not doing anything except footing the bill,” Tony pointed out. “Except Matt said he’d do it pro bono because he likes you more than me or loves America or something, I don’t know. Just take the damn lawyer, Steve, God, you’re killing me here.”

“Technically, I think this is my decision, and I say we lawyer up, Rogers,” Barnes said, grinning in a cat-got-the-canary kind of way. “Be nice to your husband. He’s trying to help. Don’t get annoyed because it’s actually effective. He hates admitting he could use some help. Probably on account of people always thinking he couldn’t do much of anything when he was all sick and this big,” Barnes added, directing his comment to Tony and holding out a hand mid-air at a point that made Steve seem like he had been born a hobbit.

“Would you stop that? Not everything is because of…of all that,” Steve protested. Barnes muttered something under his breath that sounded like a lot of it is, though Steve ignored him. “I’m just saying, we can do this ourselves. We’ve been doing fi—”

“We haven’t been doing fine, Steve. Nothing about this is fine. You up there shaking your junk around while I sit at home trying to make myself get through just one of your lists because I know I should be able to and I know how much it would mean to you, even if I can’t ever fucking seem to, isn’t fine. You coming home white as a sheet and taking an hour-long shower after going to some asshole’s hotel room for a party isn’t fine. None of this is fine, Steve,” Barnes ground out.

“What?” Tony asked, voice going too loud and too sharp.

“What?” Tony asked, voice going too loud and too sharp.

“Nothing,” Steve said, shooting him a quick look

“It’s not fucking nothing, Steve. God,” Barnes muttered, running his hand through his hair, jaw going tight. “Look, Steve…everything you’ve done, it’s…I can’t ever repay you for that, okay? And yeah, sure, situation gets reversed, and you know I’d do the same. Whatever it takes, right? That doesn’t mean that it always has to be so damn hard, Steve. Tony can help. He wants to help. Probably half because he’s a good guy or some shit, and probably half because he wants to get in your pants.”

“Uh, I’d like to think at least 60-40 on that,” Tony cut in. Both of the other men ignored him. "Also, we’re not done with this conversation," Tony added, voice softening as he gave Steve a long look.

“Good. See? What? You need to talk about this shit, Steve, and if you won’t with me, maybe you will with him. Now, climb down off your pyre there, Joan, and thank your husband, would you?” Barnes demanded with a somewhat fond, if pointed, look at Steve. “He’s doing us a solid, and that’s more than most would do. Pretty sure it isn’t because he just loves my witty repartee.”

“Fine,” Steve said after a long moment where he seemed caught between wanting to argue and begrudgingly agreeing with the logic. “Thank you, Tony,” he added with a slight sigh. He rubbed at his forehead with one hand, then gave Tony a lopsided smile. “Do you always get your way?”
“Only when I’m right. Which is most of the time. God, you really hate letting people help you, don’t you?” Tony chuckled. “It’s not a weakness, you know,” he finished, a little more softly.

“I know,” Steve replied.

“Do you?” Tony pressed, the question coming out a little more sharply than he’d intended, but Steve just stared at him for a moment before nodding and tucking the folder of papers under his arm. “Gentlemen, let’s get this party started, shall we?” Tony asked without waiting for an answer.

The ride to the VA building was fairly silent. Steve spent most of it looking through his folder of papers. Barnes looked out the window like a puppy on his way to the vet, trying to get what enjoyment he could. Tony, for his part, checked his email and the daily social media report Pepper had been sending him with all the juicy details on his relationship with Steve. TMZ claimed to have photos of Steve doing his routine at the club. They were definitely not Steve, and Tony was vicariously offended on Steve’s behalf. Pepper swore she and the team of lawyers were already on it.

The Veterans’ Affairs building was sprawling and vaguely modern, done in what Tony assumed were meant to be colors evoking the Southwest, but ended up looking a bit like what would happen if a hospital and a Chipotle had a bastard love child. Happy pulled the car up front and they all piled out. Steve had to go back for Barnes’ jacket, though Barnes just grabbed it and held it in his fist instead of putting it on. Oh, look, someone else gets the Disapproving Face, too, Tony noticed with a small amount of glee. Matt was waiting for them in the lobby, sitting by a potted palm and a stack of last year’s People magazines, including one with Tony on the cover from when he’d gotten back from Afghanistan, which Matt was, for some reason, paging through.

“Really?” Tony said as he walked up to Matt and kicked at the man’s shoe.

“I just like it for the articles,” Matt replied, then set the magazine down on top of the others. “Mr. Barnes, I’m Matt Murdock,” he said, standing and extending his hand, which Barnes shook with his good one. “I’ve read your case file. Sounds like you really pissed someone off.”

“Thaddeus Ross,” Barnes told him. “Goes by Thunderbolt, if that tells you anything. Because, I guess Thaddeus didn’t make him quite sound enough like the total pretentious douche that he is.”

“Hard to believe you wound up on his bad side,” Matt remarked evenly.

“He never should’ve gotten a bad conduct discharge. Not for that,” Steve cut in.

“Probably not, but he did, and he didn’t fight it, so here we are,” Matt replied. “Ready to throw ourselves to the mercy of the completely impartial review board.”

“That impartial, huh?” Tony asked dully.

“Yes,” Matt replied. “Don’t worry. Let me do the talking. You two,” he continued, pointing at Steve and Tony. “Look like a couple who are deeply concerned about their mutual friend. You, try to look less like you want to murder the review board. Smile a little.”

“How can you even know that?” Tony asked as they walked.

“I don’t want to murder them, but they are a bunch of absolute dicks,” Barnes mumbled.

“See?” Matt said, raising his eyebrows at Tony.

“Yeah, but…” Tony trailed off, looking over at Steve, who shrugged and looked amused by it all.
“Okay, so, what’s our play here?”

“Don’t worry,” Matt said, standing up and starting to walk down the hallway as he tapped out a path in front of him.

“Don’t worry?” Tony repeated. He looked over at Steve, who was frowning.

“Mr. Murdock, I don’t know if you’ve had a chance to review everything, but I brought—” Steve began.

“It’s going to be fine,” Matt said.

“You sound pretty sure of yourself,” Barnes remarked as they walked down the hall.

“Oh, I don’t know if you got notice, since it was fairly last minute, but Captain Samuels had to drop out of the review board, so his alternate has taken his place for today’s hearing,” Matt replied.

“Alternate? Oh, really? How…unanticipated,” Tony said drolly. Matt was being cagey as fuck and Barnes was right, he was far too confident, which meant he was up to something. Probably something he didn’t exactly want Tony to know about. At least not the details. Tony suspected the words “plausible deniability” were stamped on the front of Matt’s brain.

“Indeed,” Matt replied. “He got a sudden job offer out in Denver, where his wife is originally from. Unfortunately, the position required he start almost immediately.”

“Interesting timing,” Tony said, eyeing Matt with a narrow look, though he supposed the effect was lost. “Don’t we have a subsidiary in Denver?”

“No idea,” Matt replied.

“Of course not,” Tony said agreeably.

“Who is his replacement?” Steve asked.

“What does it matter?” Barnes said.

“Captain Booker, I’m told,” Matt replied. “I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“Okay, well, it isn’t like we’ve met any of them, anyway,” Steve said. “It’s a whole new board for the appeal.”

“Right,” Matt said. “Also, Major Carmichael decided to retire to Florida.”

“Wait, so two of the review board members just suddenly dropped out?” Steve asked as they rounded the corner. “So, it’s two alternates?”

“Major Carmichael’s alternate had to recuse himself due to personal reasons,” Matt said smoothly. “Which left General Briar to step in.”

“Briar? Why do I know that name?” Steve asked.

“No idea,” Matt replied.

“Personal reasons?” Tony snorted.

“Deeply personal,” Matt said.
“So deeply personal, we shouldn’t even ask, I’m guessing?” Tony said, raising his eyebrows.

“Well, we wouldn’t want to taint the integrity of the process,” Matt replied evenly.

“Definitely not,” Tony agreed with a nod.

“Okay, so it’s Briar, Booker and then it’s… Doctor Stevenson, the civilian, right?” Steve said, looking down at the notice in his folder.

“Well,” Matt began.

“Matt,” Tony sighed and rubbed a hand at his forehead.

“It seems that he had an unfortunate number of complaints when he was practicing in New York, which he failed to disclose to the VA, as it turned out,” Matt replied. “So, a Doctor Carson has replaced him.”

“We have an entirely new review board?” Barnes said, scrunching up his face. “We got an entirely new review board in… like two days,” he said, looking over at Tony. “Nice,” he grinned, then clapped his hand on Matt’s shoulder, giving him a little shake. “Good lawyering.”

“No idea what you mean,” Matt replied. Tony rolled his eyes. “Don’t do that during the hearing,” Matt said.

“Is it offensive that I kind of want to study you in a lab?” Tony asked.

“Foggy would say that’s a fairly typical reaction to knowing me. Shall we go in?” Matt asked, sweeping out an arm while Barnes mouthed, ‘Who’s Foggy?’ at Steve, who just shook his head. “Our witness should be waiting.”

“We have a witness?” Barnes asked. “Who?”


“Colonel Phillips is here?” Steve asked in shock. “Why?”

“I told you, character witness,” Matt said evenly, as he walked through the door that Steve was holding open.

“Does he… know it’s for me?” Barnes asked, then let out a nervous laugh, gaze flicking to Steve.

The hearing room was a bit like a small courtroom, though it lacked a jury box. It was empty, except for Colonel Phillips, who was wearing a brightly colored Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses. He looked over his shoulder at them, frowned and nudged his sunglasses down his nose a bit.

“I should have known I’d somehow end up having to bail the two of you idiots out of whatever it is you’ve gotten up to now,” Phillips said in a slow, drawling voice. “I thought I told you to keep an eye on him?”

“I tried, Sir,” Steve said. “It wasn’t his fault, it just—”

“I was talking to your compatriot there, Rogers,” Phillips snorted.

“In my defense, I kind of got him married to a billionaire, so,” Barnes shrugged, then sat down in the bench behind Phillips. “There’s that.”
“That true, boy?” Phillips asked. Steve, who looked a bit like a deer in headlights, opened his mouth, then closed it and gave Tony a helpless look, trying to cover his laugh with his hand. Phillips’ gaze finally settled on Tony, giving him a once over. “Good. ‘Bout time. That seat’s taken,” Phillips said, turning around to stare at Barnes.

“By who?” Barnes asked, looking around at the empty room.

“Aww, did your daddy not love you enough as a child, Barnes? Do you need a hug?” Phillips demanded. “Move it.”

“I missed you, too, Colonel,” Barnes said, then stood, saluted, and grinned as he moved to the bench across the aisle.

“I left my boat for this shit,” Phillips muttered.

“Thank you for coming, Colonel,” Matt said.

“You the lawyer?” Phillips barked out.

“Yes, Sir,” Matt replied.

Phillips stared at him for a long moment, pushed up his sunglasses and huffed out a gruff laugh. “Figures. Damned blind leading the blind,” he muttered, shaking his head.

“I like him,” Tony whispered to Steve as they sat down.

“I just hope he can help. He wasn’t exactly our biggest fan back in Basic,” Steve replied.

“Matt knows what he’s doing. Admittedly, all appearances to the contrary, he is actually annoyingly good at this stuff,” Tony said. “I could have any lawyer I want, Steve, and he’s the one I chose. It’ll be fine. Trust me.”

“I do,” Steve said, flashing him a quick, reassuring smile. “I’m just…worried, is all.”

“I know,” Tony said. Steve was fidgeting next to him. Tony reached out and covered Steve’s hand with his own where Steve had been tapping out a nervous rhythm against his thigh. Steve’s motions slowed, then stopped, and he glanced over at Tony with a grateful look. Tony gave his hand a light squeeze, and to his surprise, felt Steve’s fingers interlace with his own.

This is what it’s like, Tony thought with a start. This whole relationship…thing. It’s holding someone’s hand when they’re nervous or worried. It’s losing sleep along with them. It’s a soft place to land, when everything goes to hell. It’s wanting their happiness more than anything else because their joy is somehow echoed ten times over in your own. It’s trust that you can do anything together, and faith that even if you can’t, being together will be enough at the end of the day. It’s having someone who would stand up against the world for you and having someone who will tell you when you’re wrong and love you through both. It’s having a partner, in all the ways that really, truly matter, and he wanted that with Steve. In that one flicker of a moment, he wanted that with Steve with such a force and sureness that it was almost overwhelming.

He sucked in a shaky breath and blinked as the door opened and the committee members filed in, one by one. The doctor, not in uniform, so obviously the civilian. Captain Booker, who…limped in on a prosthetic leg. Tony pursed his mouth and gave Matt a sharp look that was totally wasted. Then, the General, with his chest plate of medals and three stars at his collar. The General stopped halfway to his seat and looked out at them.
“Colonel Phillips? My God, is that really you?” General Briar asked, sounding astonished.

Phillips took off his sunglasses and squinted up at the man. “Thomas Briar, class of ’79, wasn’t it?”

“It was, Sir,” General Briar said, puffing out his chest a bit. “Surprised you remember me,” Briar continued. “This man practically had to ride me across the finish line in Basic. I owe my whole career to you, Sir. Best damn CO I ever had. Last I heard, you’d retired to Florida.”

“I did, and son, I have to tell you, I don’t appreciate being pulled off my boat because the God-damned Army thinks it can deny Sergeant Barnes here his due as a soldier injured in the line of duty,” Phillips replied. “Maybe you can explain that one to me, because the way I remember it, we made a promise to our boys, and call me an old fart, but I think Sergeant Barnes has more than paid his due to his country, as Captain Booker over there can probably attest, so you’re going to have to explain to me why,” he continued, punctuating each word with a pounding of his hand on the railing in front of him, “you think this man who I trained and who I personally vouched for as one of the finest soldiers I’ve ever had the honor of sending out into the field was deserving of a bad conduct discharge and losing his benefits all because he punched Thaddeus Ross’s little flunky over getting too handsy with a lady? Please tell me that is not the kind of Army we have nowadays, Thomas, because if it is, then I think some of our commanders need to march themselves right back to Basic and get a nice reminder of what exactly no man left behind means. Well, son? I’m waiting.”

Matt stared forward, blinking placidly.

Tony looked at Steve, who was staring at Phillips all wide-eyed, clearly trying not to smile, then over to Barnes, who was actually looking away, face tight, one hand rubbing at his mouth. Steve glanced over at Tony and caught his eye. He gave Tony’s hand a squeeze, eyes going soft. He mouthed ‘thank you’ at Tony, leaving Tony shaking his head.

Happiness echoed ten times over, Tony thought to himself, looking down at their joined hands, before lifting his eyes back to Steve.

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