One Step Backwards

by LagLemon

Summary

Steve Rogers went to bed last night and everything was fine. He had Bucky back, friends that accepted him for who he was and a lover he never wanted to stop snuggling with.

The next morning, things have gone to hell in a hand basket. He wakes up in hospital bed, recovering from a seventy year long coma - a coma caused by the apparent failure of the Super Soldier Serum. He's small again - and he's not Captain America anymore. Bucky is.

What's Howard Stark doing alive? And what happened to Tony and the rest of the Avengers?

Did he really dream everything up? Or did something happen to change the world?

Steve doesn't know what's going on, but he's damned sure he's going to figure things out.

Notes
There may be typos - let me know if anything is too messed up :)

This is a multi-chapter fic which I will hopefully be updating every week on Tuesday/Wednesday. Most of it is written already, I'm just proof reading it. (As of this posting, it was something like 447 pages long, so bear with me as I proofread and go insane at the same time.)

Heads up for Howard Stark being a total asshole - he's not a nice guy in the comics, and he's not a nice guy here.
Warnings for Loki too (but I'm not going to quite spoil that :D)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Everything smelled like strawberries. Steve wasn’t exactly sure why that was. He hadn’t been eating strawberries before bed, and for that matter, they were in bed, weren’t they? Why did it smell like food? They weren’t anywhere near the kitchen.

Was it shampoo? Maybe it was Tony’s shampoo. But that wasn’t right either, because now that he thought about it, the smell might not have been strawberries at all. Some kind of berries perhaps, because there was a fruity finish to the scent in the air, but he couldn’t for the life of him name what it was.

Wait… something was familiar again. Now it sort of smelled a little bit like that air freshener Clint loved to spray all over the couch whenever he thought the air was getting to stale; he sure loved that air freshener. Steve had never been able to figure out what it was that Clint liked about it so much. Frankly, he had found it a tad sickening and he always had to leave the room whenever Clint started spraying it all over the place. Super senses, especially his sense of smell, didn’t like being assaulted by things so strong and he had never been able to get the taste of the stuff out of his mouth after he breathed it in, even if he gargled with mouthwash. It was always there, cloying and heady no matter what flavor he used to chase it away.

That was it! Air freshener! It had to be air freshener! But who would have sprayed air freshener in their bedroom? Tony was always complaining about the chemicals they put in that stuff, claiming that the aerosol cans caused cancer or something like that. Steve hadn’t put much thought into it, but he trusted Tony’s judgement, so he supposed that the whole cancer thing might be true. Tony was a genius after all.

Something was wrong.

The berry smell was going away, and being replaced by something that smelled… antiseptic.

Cold.

Mechanical.

Wrong.

That wasn’t right at all. Now everything smelled like tech, and they didn’t have any technology in their bedroom – he hadn’t let Tony drag any of his machinery in because it was their bedroom for Pete’s sake, not a workshop. Bedrooms were supposed to be calming places to get some sleep and to maybe snuggle in for a while. They weren’t supposed to be places where welding happened at three in the morning. No one liked to wake up to the sound and smell of welding; not even Tony, who practically lived through welding.

Something was definitely wrong.

White light burned its way into Steve’s brain even though he had his eyes tightly shut; or at least, he was pretty sure he had his eyes tightly shut. He could see blobs of red and white on the backs of his eyelids, everything becoming unpleasant and hazy when it had been nothing but sweet darkness before. His thoughts were mangled temporarily as he tried to fight through the pain when the light burned brighter. Steve tried to squint; he wanted to rub his eyes to clear his vision, and then stilled, hearing an odd sound from somewhere up above him.

Wait… they didn’t have anything up above their bed except for Jarvis’s speakers, and those were
hidden in the ceiling panels. They didn’t make noises like *this*; aside from hearing Jarvis’ dulcet tones through them, those speakers only played music, and on the rare occasion those silly fake news programs that Tony liked to listen to before bed. Tony always offered to keep the volume turned down low because he knew how much Steve disliked waking up to the sound of someone talking in his ear. He was sweet that way.

So where was the noise coming from?

It might have been a voice, maybe a machine, and it was unbearably loud; for the first few precious seconds after regaining consciousness, he was terrified that he might go completely deaf. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get the sounds to stop or at least quiet down; not that he could move of course. Two other sounds kicked in, making their own fuss as if annoyed that they had been left out of the party. He flinched as another sound started up, an incessant beeping noise that blasted out from the space just to the right of his head. Every sound combined together now, a cacophony of unintelligible noises creating a symphony of agony, all being performed for Steve’s displeasure. The combination was overwhelming, like he was standing right in front of the stage when a band trying to get in tune, warming up together while all playing different shrill notes.

Boom.

Hiss.

Creak.


Hiss.

Boom.

Steve tried to cover his ears; his arms felt like they were being weighted down with sandbags, and wouldn’t move. His eyelids felt a little like they had been cemented shut. How was it possible for a person’s eyelids to get so heavy? He would have frowned had he not been so damned tired.

His lip must have twitched, because all of a sudden he heard something move.

“Sir! I think he’s waking up!” someone bellowed from above him. Steve didn’t recognize the voice; he couldn’t see anything except for the insides of his eyelids either and that view wasn’t helpful in the least. The voice was breathy, as if the speaker had just run a marathon, and just a tad excited. It was a woman’s voice, he could tell that much. The strange scent of berries was back again – just a hint of it this time near his face.

What was going on?

How had everything had gotten so heavy, so clinical, so painful?

He could remember going to bed with Tony after coming back from SHIELD HQ to visit Bucky in the Medical Bay after his suicide attempt; that had been it. They had crawled into bed and fallen asleep together, wrapped in each other’s arms in the wee hours of the morning, utterly exhausted and emotionally drained. Tony had been covered in bruises from Bucky’s assault, a living finger painting of purple and red fist shaped splotches. That had been awful to see, worse than war wounds and amputations, in Steve’s opinion. He had wanted to wrap himself around Tony so tightly after that fight, afraid of losing him; it hadn’t been fair that all that rage had been taken out on Tony instead of on him, but for some reason Bucky had felt that Tony was the more appropriate choice to vent his frustrations on. All this because Steve had come out to him, explaining carefully that he and Tony
were in love, and that he was happy for the first time in his life.

They had fallen asleep after coming home. That was no reason to end up in a hospital…

A hospital…

That was why everything was so familiar!

He had woken up like this only once before…

When he had finally escaped the ice…

Oh god! The ice – not the ice again – please let it not be the ice!

Steve struggled against his body’s fatigue and managed to force his eyes open a mere fraction of an inch. He wasn’t in the ice anymore – he wasn’t – He was warm and comfortable, so it couldn’t be that again. He swum from his panic, settling for a nice, evenly spread dislike instead.

“It’s probably just a muscle spasm Dahlia. You know how it is with these guys. They move around all the time, but there’s nothing going on in there.” A man said from that same somewhere up above Steve. That same someone drummed on his forehead; the blows heavy and slow, as if someone were striking at him with the base of a candlestick. He didn’t like that sensation one bit; he didn’t like being someone’s plaything.

Footsteps echoed across the ground and he heard springs creaking.

Everything went brighter.

Steve squinted, his eyes watering as the bright white light dimmed, changing into an expanse of ceiling tiles and two reddish lumps that may or may not have been people. He almost couldn’t handle the shimmer of the fluorescent lighting above; it was so bright, and the hum they emitted was awful. Tears dribbled down his cheeks, leaving rivers of salt in their wake. Green blobs splattered everything in sight when he managed to pry his eyelids apart even farther; he regretted it instantly, trying to blink the colours away.

He spent a moment quivering again, trying to push through the pain that was merrily jolting through his eyeballs.

His vision cleared and he saw a stranger, a woman, staring down at him. She was a nurse or a doctor, judging by the Hello Kitty hospital scrubs, and she had one of those light pens that Steve hated so much held up in front of her at the ready. She shined the light in his eyes and he groaned, forcing his arm up to shield his eyes from the painful beam. He wanted to tell her to knock it off, but he couldn’t seem to form the words, his tongue heavy and thick in his mouth. His arm flopped pitifully onto his chest, his energy utterly drained, unable to move any more than an inch upwards afterwards.

He had little black spots in his vision now, dancing with the red and green ones, but he had shielded the worst of the light; the black spots weren’t any better than the red blotches, but they weren’t any worse either. They did seem to be fading faster at least, taking the red and green with them.

The glare from the room became a less agonizing swirl in his vision by the time the nurse lowered the light pen, seeming astonished by his reaction.

“Sir – he’s conscious! This isn’t just a muscle spasm –” The woman shouted. Maybe she wasn’t shouting, Steve thought while grimacing, because the other person in the room, the chunky looking
man working at a computer terminal a few feet away, didn’t seem to hear what she was saying.

Maybe he wasn’t listening.

The woman smiled apologetically and patted Steve’s hand; the touch hurt, her fingers seeming to sink through his flesh. He gasped in agony.

“I’m sorry if that was too loud for you, sugar. I’ll go get the doctor, alright? Please try to stay awake. You’re safe here. It’s alright. You’re safe.” She said, enunciating every word, as if that would let him understand her better.

Steve watched her walk off, feeling more than a little lightheaded; his stomach started screaming bloody murder, gurgling away like he hadn’t eaten in months. He took in a deep breath, and clenched his teeth, trying to sit up. It felt like someone was sitting on his chest, and they had apparently set up shop.

Something solid and rubbery was stuck to his forehead; if he concentrated really hard he could feel something sticking out of his side, right above his hip too. It pulled every time he tried to move, and although he wanted to yelp, all he could manage was a sort of strangled whimper. There was something between his legs, he realized in horror. Some kind of thin tubing that kept rubbing against his inner thigh whenever he tried to move…

Oh god… he recognized those tubes…

Steve blinked up at the ceiling, close to hyperventilating. He was in a hospital hooked up to machines and tubes and he was alone. Where were the others? Where was he? He spent every few weeks visiting or laying in a hospital bed with all the work the Avengers did, so they should be here, shouldn’t they? They wouldn’t have left him alone, would they? Tony couldn’t have left him here alone, could he?

Tony wouldn’t leave him to wake up alone unless something had come up. He was probably taking a coffee break; there was nothing to worry about. Steve swallowed hard. He needed to stay calm. Everything would sort itself out eventually. He just needed to stay calm. The nurses and doctors had things under control after all, or else he wouldn’t be alive to begin with.

Why did he feel so weak? He hadn’t even felt like this after waking up from the ice. The only thing that came close was when he had woken up in the hospital with pneumonia when he had been fifteen; his mother had warned him about staying out in the snow, but he had done it anyways and he had cursed himself for days after it had happened, trapping in a hospital bed with nothing more than a view of the hairy old man two beds over for company.

It wasn’t the same. This was an exhaustion he hadn’t fought off before; it tugged at his eyelids, trying to get him to fall asleep again, dragging him down into soft, tempting darkness.

No.

He wouldn’t go to sleep yet. He couldn’t, not without knowing what was going on.

Steve struggled, managing to turn his head and upper body, using up most of his remaining strength. He couldn’t just sit around like this without knowing where he was. For all he knew he could be in an AIM hospital – or somewhere even worse; he wouldn’t have put it past Hydra to whisk him away to some underground facility and he had no interest in taking part in any of their twisted experiments. The nurse seemed nice enough but you could never tell.

He looked down at his wrist, hoping to see some kind of hospital bracelet or ID tag that might tell
him where he was.

What Steve saw would have had him on the floor had he not already been lying down.

His arm was slender and pale, tiny, with a wrist that someone could have easily encircled with their fingers.

This wasn’t the right body – this wasn’t the right –

Steve fought to catch his breath, gasping shallowly as the nurse returned; she prodded him in the shoulder to get his attention, rolling him over onto his back as easily as someone might roll an infant. The brief contact of her hand touching the strip of exposed skin around the neckline of his hospital gown made his entire body go stiff like a board; it was as if he had been electrocuted, his skin alive with prickles that sparked all over.

Steve stared up at the tiled ceiling again, floundering, sure that his face was going purple from the effort of trying to get oxygen in.

“There, there. It will be alright.” The nurse stroked his stomach, not knowing that she was making it worse with each caring caress.

The chubby man approached the bed, limping slightly, giving Steve a good look at his face as he leaned in to take a look at him. The man was wrinkled and liver spotted, likely well over sixty years old and nearing retirement, unfamiliar just like the nurse. He stared down into Steve’s confused eyes; Steve stared right back at him.

“Easy now son. Easy.”

A tall, curvy, woman with long flowing black hair and red lipstick appeared beside the doctor, leaning over his shoulder to get a look of her own – yet another nurse in a line of nurses that kept appearing at the edge of his vision; Steve hoped to god that he wasn’t seeing double because he didn’t think he could handle that too on top of everything else. The nurse with red lipstick was pleasantly surprised when they locked eyes. She smiled at Steve, winking, the look so enchanting and fond that he could see it on the back of his eyelids every time he blinked.

“Sweet Jesus! You’re right! We have to call Howard –” The doctor said.

Howard?

Who the hell were they talking about?

They couldn’t be talking about that Howard could they?

“Where’s Tony? I need Tony…” Steve croaked; his voice was no more than a whisper, his throat and mouth dry as a desert. Each sound came at a cost, every swallow afterwards like trying to drink liquid sandpaper; his eyes watered again, his vision blurring. He was parched, choking on the cold air from the air conditioning, his body screaming for liquids, and he couldn’t even croak out for water.

Goosebumps popped up all over his pale skin, lumps that were so painful he almost blacked out when the nurse ran her hand over his cheek. He started shivered uncontrollably, shaking so hard that he could feel it in his very bones like he was going to shake to pieces, his entire body almost vibrating where it lay.

“What’s going on?” Steve rasped.
“Just a minute honey.” Hello Kitty Nurse disappeared from Steve’s line of sight, pressing a button on the side of the bed. Nurse Red Lips was gone when he looked back up from glancing in revulsion at his hand again. He had been praying that something might have changed while he had looked away, that this was all just a hallucination from the pain but it had stayed the same.

This was real, oh god it was real!

The bed gave a jerk, folding in half with an electronic scream, lifting Steve up so that he was sitting instead of lying down. The servos grinding in the frame were only marginally quieter than the other noises in the room, a litany of creaks and groans. This here was his symphony, the blasted noise that had almost deafened him laid out plain for all to see. He shivered.

“It’s so loud.” Steve cried out finally, coughing so hard that he felt like he was going to throw up.

Nurse Hello Kitty adjusted his blankets (blankets that felt so heavy, oh so heavy) and then held out a paper cup with a lemon-yellow straw sticking out of it; water, sweet precious water.

“Here, take a sip of this, alright?”

He reached but couldn’t take the cup, his fingers refusing to curl despite his mind’s willingness.

“That’s alright honey. Here, I’ll do it for you.”

She tucked the straw between his chapped and cracked lips because he was too weak to do it himself and then held the cup for him so that he wouldn’t accidentally dump water all over himself; it was such a kind gesture, he almost felt like crying. Steve sucked at the water as hard as he could, getting only a trickle with each pull, unable to manage enough force for a real sip. His lips tired before her arm did, trembling awkwardly from the effort. He swallowed at what little came up, greedily taking in as much as he could.

“Careful now. Drink too much and you’ll make yourself sick.” The doctor said.

The nurse set the mostly full cup down on the overbed table she pulled across his hips, arranging it so that everything was neat and tidy, white table over blue blankets. She shook his head at him when he tried to reach pathetically for the cup.

“Give it some time honey.” She said.

He didn’t want to give it time – he wanted water, goddamn it! He opened his mouth to protest but was cut off when the doctor snapped his fingers in front of his face to get his attention.

“Do you know who you are son?” The man asked, clearing his throat. He was staring at Steve, ignoring the chart and pen he had with him even though he had brought them with him for some reason. There was an ink stain across his lip from where he had been biting the end of the pen; it had burst, but he hadn’t noticed.

“I’m Steve Rogers.” Steve managed to get out, wheezing. His chest felt tight as if his lungs couldn’t handle the air anymore— oh god. No. He didn’t have asthma again – he couldn’t –

“Calm down son. You’re fine. You just need to breathe nice and slow – You’ll be fine Steve –” The man said, trying to grab for Steve’s hand.

Steve’s eyes rolled into the back of his head as he blacked out, silently screaming.
When Steve came to again he was lying in the same bed wrapped in the same blankets, only this time, he was facing a different direction. He had no idea why they had moved the bed around and wondered if it had something to do with that Feng Shui thing that Tony had talked about in passing once; he still had no idea what Feng Shui actually was. He had never gotten around to looking it up, remembering the name and the fact that it had something to do with furniture but not much else.

The view hadn’t really improved all that much, even with the redecorating. He could see the door now and a bit of the salmon pink hallway, not that it did him any good. His body still felt heavy and uncomfortable, and now it felt like he could fall through the mattress; he wasn’t sure if that was an improvement or not. He could move his head, and if he wiggled, he could even almost lift himself upright.

It was a start; a better start than he had expected.

The drag and pull of his limbs was more manageable now, less mechanical and more human. He was still a bit like one of those dolls you could pose, stiff and crooked from the waist up, but at least he could look around without blacking out. He could hold his arms up for more than a few brief seconds at last now too and moving around made it seem a little less like someone was borrowing his body as a spot for a picnic; he liked being able to breathe free, his chest light as a feather. He had almost forgotten what asthma had been like – he would have been happy to forget about those horrible, desperate moments forever, but apparently that wasn’t in the cards.

He braced himself against heavy-duty plastic safety rails, engaged sometime during his flight into unconsciousness, and lifted himself a little higher up the bed, unsticking his sweaty back from the gown he was wearing with a twist of his back; the railing didn’t move no matter how much he twisted around against it. Thank god for safety rails or else he would be on the floor and either unconscious or upside down.

“Careful!”

He recognized the nurse from before as she zoomed to his side, fretting over the fact that he had decided to move around on her. She must have been sitting somewhere nearby waiting for him to wake up; he felt a little foolish for not having picked up on her being in the room. She looked chipper, wearing different scrubs from before, her hair was pulled back in a loose pony-tail. He wondered how long he had been out for. He hadn’t even heard her get up, she had been so quiet. She offered him a cup of lukewarm water and stroked his hair softly, whispering what he supposed she thought were calming words and endearments; it was nice of her, but he wasn’t really interested in comfort.

The doctor was gone, and the computer desk on the far side of the room was uninhabited, the computer turned off, its dark screen standing out against the brilliance of the white walled room like a portal to another dimension. Sticky notes were lying all over the table, neon pink against the cream-colored table, the combination both jarring and ugly. They were too far away to read, the handwriting spidery and thin.

“I’m Dahlia, by the way sweetie. I know you’ve got some questions, so I’ll try to answer them real quick-like before you fall asleep again, alright? First off, your eyes were having problems adjusting to the light because you’ve been asleep for a really long time, so we’ve dimmed everything.” She said, pulling his attention back to her.

The nurses had talked to him like this after the ice too, all smiles and soft touches, trying to keep him calm and well-adjusted so that he wouldn’t try to murder anyone with a bedpan. Not that they had let
him get a hold of a bed pan; he had been practically tied to the bed then because they were afraid that he would make a break for it. The only reason he hadn’t attempted anything back then in his panicked state had been because he was so sleepy, pumped full of drugs. They had known that using a little would get them a lot of pain for their troubles, so they had used as much as they had on hand; everything had been blurry and fuzzy, all the colours muted and grey. He hadn’t liked being like that, but he knew why they had done it, even if it didn’t sit right with him. They had been worried that he would go berserk, rampaging through the base. He wasn’t just some average Joe then, he had been a monster of a soldier that they couldn’t control. They had weaned him off the cocktail of painkillers and anti-psychotics eventually, but the feeling had stuck with him, chilling him to the bones. He had had nightmares about it – about being trapped in a bed, tied down and pumped full of drugs, weak and docile while they walked around him taking readings on their fancy hospital equipment.

He was glad that they hadn’t thought about restraining him this time. The restraints had scraped against his skin and left red welts on his arms; they had itched something awful too and no matter how much time passed, he had always been able to see the lines they left behind.

He would be able to leave this time, and there would be nothing to stop him. He took in a breath; his side itched. He breathed in and out again. The itch continued. Well that was just fantastic. Could this day get any better?

“What was sticking out of my side?” Steve asked through gritted teeth, his throat scratchy and dry.

“You had a Gastric Feeding Tube. They took you up to surgery while you were unconscious so that they could remove it.” She said, keeping her voice soft and sweet. He recognized the name of the tube, but didn’t know where he had heard it from. Maybe from one of those television documentaries Jarvis always helped him find. He and Jarvis had watched a lot of those kinds of shows together whenever Tony was busy working. Well, Jarvis was an AI of course, so he hadn’t really been watching the way a person might, but it had been nice to have company anyways, especially when Tony was too busy working to watch with him.

“The Feeding Tube was inserted into your body through an incision they made in your side. They had to slide it in past the muscle and bone so that it could reach your stomach, dear. We had to start giving you liquid meals to keep your body alive, because you were sleeping for so long. The doctors took the tube out once they were sure you were going to be awake permanently.” Dahlia explained, almost robotically, like she was reading off a piece of paper. She wasn’t holding one, so maybe she had practiced this spiel; maybe she said this often, although judging by the look on her face, coma patients didn’t just wake up every day. “They ran a few brain scans on you to check to see if everything was functioning properly as well. I know it sounds complicated, but it just means that they knew you weren’t going to fall asleep on us without waking up again, alright?”

Steve knew the terminology she was dumbing down for him, although he didn’t know why they were bothering with the actual dumbing down part. They had given him an EEG, monitoring and mapping his brain to make sure that he was still functioning cognately; they were making sure that he wasn’t a vegetable, in other words. Something had happened to him, something bad and something big. He had been through medical tests like these a thousand times over and again, it was nothing new, yet she kept acting like it should be, like he should be having a panic attack. That irked him to no end.

The Gastric Feeding Tube scared him a little in truth. It had felt strange, although the urinary catheter he still had in him was much more uncomfortable. He wasn’t ashamed to admit that he felt extremely self-conscious and uneasy with it being there, even if it had been put there for a good reason; he didn’t like that other people knew it was there, even if they were nurses and doctors. He wanted it gone, and soon.
“And the catheter?” Steve coughed.

“They’ll take that out later today, so just try to get some rest and don’t worry about it.” She said, noticing the way he kept fidgeting. Steve flushed, wanting to clamp his knees together; he knew what would be happening when they took it out, and while he wanted it gone, he wasn’t looking forward to the actual removal procedure. He was mortified with the thought of strangers touching him... there. The only person who he had let between his legs was Tony, and well, that had been nerve wracking the first few times on its own.

Dahlia handed him another cup of water, noticing his distress and he drank, reclaiming his voice.

“Can I see Tony now?” Steve asked.

She stared at him, a sad smile on her lips, shaking her head. “I don’t think you know a Tony Mr. Rogers. Was he someone you knew during the war?” She made herself more comfortable in the chair beside his bed, fluffing up the green pillow behind her, probably out of nervousness more than anything else because the pillow looked mighty fluffed up already.

He gaped at her, confused and then looked down at his hands again, crestfallen. It was a shock to see that he was small and slender; a nightmare returned from an age long past. At least he wasn’t boney and emaciated anymore. He had some muscle mass now, and he had put on some weight. If he really had been in a coma, he would have expected the mass to be gone and the weight too. This seemed a lot like the kind of thing that Loki might do. Maybe it was a spell gone right – or wrong.

“Did Loki do something to me?” Steve asked, curious in his maudlin moment.

She smiled at him again, meek and tentative this time.

“Loki?”

“Did he use magic?” Steve asked, feeling weary, knowing the response as soon as he said it.

“Magic?”

Well, she obviously had no idea what he was going on about, and the mention of magic seemed to have made her eye twitch. She must have thought he was crazy or going there at least. Well that had been a waste of time.

“What year is this?” Steve asked on a whim. The look of sympathy on her face almost made him start panicking all over again.

“It’s the year two thousand and twelve Mr. Rogers.” She responded, speaking in that slow and careful way of hers, like he was mentally deficient. Had he hit his head or something? She hadn’t said anything about him having had head trauma and she had been pretty forthcoming about what was going on.

The year was still 2012? That was a relief; it had been 2012 when he had fallen asleep the night before, and it was still 2012 now.

So where was Tony?

What was going on?

And why wasn’t anyone from the team here?
At the very least he had expected to see Coulson, or maybe Fury lurking in the hallways waiting to brief him on the situation, but no. Neither of them had shown their faces yet. He was starting to wonder if he was in trouble or something. Maybe they hadn’t appreciated his little talk with Bucky.

Someone out in the hall cleared their throat loud enough to draw Steve’s attention away from the kind but useless nurse; he jerked his eyes off of her and locked eyes with the man in the doorway. Howard Stark grinned at him posing with a wave, his hip cocked to the side. He laughed, the sound merry and rich, strutting through the room to stand beside Steve’s bed.

Steve stared up at him in awe.

Howard had been dead the last time Steve had heard!

How was it possible that Howard was here?


Howard bent down and embraced him, wrapping his arms around Steve’s middle, mindful of the stitches from the Gastric Feeding Tube; he pressed Steve into the crook of his neck, enveloping him in warmth and the strong smell of tobacco and whiskey. Howard hadn’t smelled like this before, not that Steve had gone around smelling people of course. He had been hugged by the guy a few times, that was all. Howard had always gone on about how it was weak for a man to smoke and drink when there were better addictions out there. Steve wondered what had changed that.

Howard squeezed Steve twice more and let him go, snapping his fingers at the nurse, telling her to go away because he wanted some privacy. He was a little more rude and curt than usual, spitting the words out like she should have already known them without him having said anything in the first place. His nearly white moustache twitched in amusement when she wandered off muttering profanities under her breath; this wasn’t the first time Steve had seen a nurse walk off angry from something Howard had said or done and it likely wouldn’t be the last.

Aside from the greying of his hair and the thinning of his face, Howard hadn’t changed much since the war; well, he hadn’t changed much aside from the whole not being dead thing. He was dressed in a casual black suit with a grey dress shirt that was wrinkled and not quite buttoned up the right way as if it had been put on in haste; a lot of Howard’s activities were done in haste, so this wasn’t all that much of a surprise either. Howard did seem to look a little more tired and drawn than before. He probably hadn’t slept much if the rings around his eyes had anything to say about it. When Steve had first met him, Howard had joked that he never had time for sleep; he would sleep when he was dead, he had joked, not knowing that he would be dead much sooner than he would have liked.

“So you’re finally awake.” Howard said. His voice cracked, his gaze fond. He cleared his throat, smiling at Steve, all teeth.

“What’s going on Howard? No one’s telling me anything and –” Steve started. He looked down at his small hands, clenching the blankets over his hip, holding them tight against his body. What was he supposed to say? Was he supposed to ask why he was tiny? Why his body felt heavy and his stomach empty? He knew the answers, even though no one had told them to him yet. He could just feel the words waiting to take to the air.

“You’ve been asleep for almost seventy years now Steve. You were put into a coma as an effect of the Super Soldier Serum – Project: Rebirth was almost a failure because of what happened to you, you know? Well no, I suppose you don’t know, seeing as how you were unconscious the whole
“I know that. That’s not the problem. What’s happened to me? Why am I like this – What happened to the Avengers? Where’s Tony?” Steve asked. He felt winded from spitting all of the questions out at once, but he hadn’t been able to keep them in any longer; the words had been clawing at him, trying to break free ever since he had woken up.

Howard would know what he was talking about; this wasn’t like asking the nurse. Howard was Tony’s father – he had to know about what was going on. Steve was sure of it.

“How’s Tony? Who are you talking about?” Howard asked, bewildered.

Steve’s blood ran cold.


Howard boomed out a laugh. He slapped his knee, looking relieved.

“Oh! You mean my Tony. I don’t think you’ve ever seen him before. I’ve never sent him to visit; well except for when he was a child and he came along with me... not that you would have woken up to say hello of course.” Howard snapped his fingers. “You must have picked up bits and pieces of the things we told you when we visited! Bucky and I have been stopping by ever since the serum failed, don’t you know.” Howard seemed a little chagrinned then, as if having been caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar. He scrubbed a hand against his moustache, dislodging crumbs from a hastily eaten meal. “I used to come in here once a day, and then it became once every week after they told me that you didn’t expect you to ever wake up. I couldn’t stop visiting, seeing as how you were here all alone.”

“Bucky? Bucky came to visit?” Steve asked.

He had seen Bucky the night before – Something was definitely wrong here.

“We figured that you needed the company, whether you knew it or not. I tell you everything about what’s going on in my life when I visit, kid. They told me that you wouldn’t remember any of it of course, but I did it anyways. You know how stubborn I am. I knew that some of it would sink in, and I guess it sort of has. You were always strong-willed, and the serum wasn’t the cause of it, that’s for sure.” Howard chuckled.

Steve rubbed the bridge of his nose, his head hurting, fighting off a migraine. Howard didn’t notice anything amiss, continuing on oblivious to Steve’s discomfort.

“Captain America comes to visit you too of course – sometimes we run into each other here, but more often than not he slinks in when he has time and I do the same. That’s what they call Bucky now these days – Captain America. I figured you would like the name. It’s very patriotic. Very grand and all that. Speaking of Bucky... I should probably phone him and let him know that you’re up and about.” Howard pulled a cellphone out of his pocket, a few bits of lint coming with it, pressing haphazardly at the touch screen; he put the phone up to his ear, rolling his eyes at Steve when Bucky didn’t pick up immediately after the first ring.

Steve watched Howard conducting his call in silence, not quite sure what to think. Howard was alive… and Bucky was Captain America? Just what was going on here? He could handle not being
Captain America of course. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t been just plain old Steve Rogers before; they had called him little Stevie at the soda shop, not that he had ever liked the nickname. He had been through much worse, and waking up in an alternate reality, or whatever this was, was par for the course for an Avenger. He could handle this just fine. He could; it was starting to feel a little too much like the mantra he had whispered to himself as a boy. I’ll be fine – I’ll be fine – I’ll be fine –

Howard began to chatter away with whoever it was that had answered his call, excited and enthusiastic in ways that reminded him of Tony after his fifth cup of coffee in the morning.

That hurt.

What the hell had happened to Tony? The way Howard was talking, they had never met before, and if that was true… what did that even mean? He loved Tony! He wanted to spend the rest of his life with Tony – and the night before –

“Bucky says that he’ll be here in a half hour. He’s doing some government work and has to ask for leave before he can drag his ass over here – he’s excited to hear that you’re awake. Are you feeling up to having visitors?” Howard asked, cutting in on Steve’s thoughts; his hand covered the bottom of the phone for a moment, eyes on Steve awaiting a response.

Steve nodded slowly. Seeing Bucky would be good; maybe Bucky would be able to explain everything to him and even if he couldn’t, he could always get Bucky to bring along Fury or Coulson. One of them would know what was going on. They always knew what was going on.

“Steve says that he would be delighted to have company. Right. Ok we’ll see you when you get here. Oh fine, I’ll ask – Bucky wants to know if you’d like him to bring you something to eat. I’ll ask the doctors and see what he’s allowed to have and we’ll phone you back, alright Buck? Ok. Talk to you later.” Howard hung up, setting the cell down with a clatter on the overtable above Steve’s lap. He gestured to the sleek black phone as it spun in lazy circles, grinning like a madman, his eyes gleaming.

“You’ll really like the technology – I know this is all new to you, but you should just see it all! We have phones that you can carry around in your pocket. We have computers that don’t take up an entire room –”

“I know. I’ve seen them.” Steve distractedly. Nothing felt out of place – not like it had back when he had woken up after the plane crash, wrapped in a blanket of ice and fractured memories. Only, he thought with a frown, had he really seen any of this before? This all felt real, and he didn’t think that any of it was a hallucination or a dream, because he would have woken up by now if it was. He had been pinching himself while Howard was talking to see if he was dreaming, and so far all he had gotten was a shooting pain up his arm for his trouble. Even his fingers hurt from the effort; he could already see bruises forming on his skin, little circular red marks that would be turning purple after a few hours.

God – this body really was pathetic. It had always been frustrating when he had grown up in it, all elbows and jagged angles, but it was worse now putting up with such a weak body knowing what it had been like to be strong.

Steve blinked back darkness and slowly drifted off to asleep, listening to Howard ramble on and on about the newest advances in technology. He didn’t think he would miss all that much; the drone of Howard’s voice was pleasant, like a lullaby about the miracle that was Blu-ray.
Steve woke up with someone stroking his hair. It was oddly comforting, the touch so gentle and slow that he almost drifted right back off to sleep. He blinked back drowsiness, yawning, and peered into Howard’s equally sleepy eyes. Howard was lying down beside him in the bed, having disengaged the safety railing while Steve was asleep to make some room; his face was a few inches away from Steve’s, his body sprawled back against the pillow, hanging half on the bed and half off. It couldn’t have been very comfortable being stretched out like that, and for an older man, it must have been a thousand times worse, but he looked unconcerned, a bit rumpled, but unconcerned. Up close, Steve noticed that age had truly caught up with his friend. Howard was lightly liver spotted, his once cream coloured skin speckled like an egg. Maybe Steve’s eyes had been playing tricks on him earlier, because it seemed very obvious now that Howard was elderly. He was probably around his late eighties, and if he was a day over Steve wouldn’t have been surprised. There was a hint of cloudiness to Howard’s irises, the blue much paler and lighter than it used to be; crow’s feet marred the once smooth skin around his eyes, frown lines between his eyes made more pronounced when he yawned, waking up fully.

“Sorry… I think I fell asleep on you.” Steve murmured in apology, trying to focus his eyes in the dim light.

Howard smiled softly, letting his hand drop from Steve’s forehead, settling it on Steve’s stomach; for the moment Steve didn’t mind, the hand a comfortable weight against his flesh.

“It’s a lot to take in, I know. They said you would probably drift in and out. It’s standard procedure and all that jazz for someone in a coma, or so they tell me. I think I went a bit too fast for you to be honest. I should have known that it would be too much to handle; really, you’ve only been awake for a few hours or so if you add it all up. How are you feeling? Are you up to having visitors?” Howard yawned. Steve had a sneaking suspicion that Howard had been sitting around the whole time waiting for him to wake up again; he looked like he might blink and fall asleep even in that uncomfortable position.

“How long was I out for?” Steve asked, voice breaking. He coughed, covering his mouth with his hand, shaking from the effort as his throat tried to steal away what little breath he had left.

“Oh, a few hours.” Howard shrugged. “Don’t worry about it.”

Howard got up and stretched, grabbing a pitcher of water from beside the sink, cracking his neck as he rolled his shoulders. He filled up a glass; Steve noticed that he wasn’t the only one who had a slight tremor to his hands anymore. He could see the muscles in Howard’s arm struggling against the weight of the pitcher and it was frightening watching age catching up with the man who had once saved the world with his bombs and weaponry.

Howard handed the full glass and a straw off to Steve, still smiling as if he hadn’t just spent hours waiting for Steve to be a part of the conversation again. Steve sipped at the water, downing it all and then grimaced, feeling his stomach churn. He fought off a wave of nausea that threatened to send it all back up again like a science fair volcano, focusing his attention on Howard, silencing his protesting body as best he could; this was all old hat, really. He had been keeping himself from throwing up since he was five and had his first fever.

“The doctors came in while you were napping. I took the liberty of making them tell me everything so that I could give you the gist of it all. Saves us the trouble and the bullshit, right?” Howard said. He refilled the empty glass, pouring a little more water in case Steve got thirsty again, settling back in his chair with a groan. “I’m getting old of course, so I don’t have the patience I once had for young whipper-snapper doctors who don’t know how to talk without trying to hit me in the face with a
"When did you ever have patience?" Steve teased, lips curling at the corners. He squinted, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hand. "What did they say?" He pinched his arm, focusing on the pain instead of the churning in his gut and the burning in his eyes; the distraction did wonders, and soon he almost forgot about his stomach.

"The doctors said that, just like Erskine suspected, the serum didn’t exactly fail. They’ve been monitoring your health ever since you ended up here, and it did affect your body. You’re as healthy as can be expected for a man your age, but that’s the thing. You haven’t even aged a day Steve – in fact, you look healthier than you ever looked when you were still pre-serum. They ran some more advanced tests on you when you passed out the first night to make sure that their records were up to date, and you’re in perfect health – you didn’t catch anything when you were in your coma either, but they had to be sure that nothing came back after you woke up. They had you in a fully sealed room for the first few years actually, now that I think about it. I think they were afraid of your allergies killing you, but what do I know, right? I’m no doctor – I’m an engineer. Anyways, they did a more up-to-date set of allergy tests on you yesterday too and surprise, surprise, you’re allergy free. They checked and double checked until they were sure they had all the details right – I paid for the overtime, so don’t worry about them being put out. But that’s boring, isn’t it. It’s over now. You’re awake and up.” Howard’s words were rushed and restless.

“So… I’ve been here? For seventy years?” Steve asked in disbelief. This couldn’t be happening again. It must have been Loki. Something must have happened for him to end up here like this – with Howard alive, and Bucky as Captain America – with Tony gone. Steve’s heart ached at the thought.

What had happened to Tony? What had happened to the Avengers?

“Yes honey. You’ve been here for seventy, long and painful years. You haven’t set a foot outside of this room since the day we brought you in on a stretcher.”

Steve tensed. That couldn’t be right! Had all the times he had spent with the Avengers, all the times spent curled up in Tony’s arms – all the happy moments, the sad and the frustrating ones… had they had all been lies? Were they all figments of his imagination?

Howard’s hand covered Steve’s. “Steve… you alright?”

“No. I am not alright. I… I don’t understand what’s going on. I… I have memories of things – things that you say couldn’t possibly have happened and I don’t understand… Have I really been here? For all these years? None of this looks different – I’ve seen all of it before and if what you’re saying is true –” Steve said, his voice rising, hysterical; he wanted to slap his hands over his ears, to not listen to a word that Howard was going to say, because it had to be a lie, it had to be. “It can’t be true.”

He looked into Howard’s eyes and saw sorrow there; even when he was delivering bad news to a fellow about their buddy having died while on a mission, Howard had always managed a cocky grin. Sorrow looked odd on him.

“Howard, it can’t be true!” Steve insisted, desperate for an answer.

“You need proof I take it?” Howard asked with a quiet sigh.

Steve nodded feverishly. “Yes, please. Anything you can do – anything at all.”

“Alright… I’ll do this first, seeing as how it’s the quickest way to get the point across.”
Howard stood up slowly, muttering to himself about his back and strode over to the sink, where a flat mirror had been set out beside some scissors and a towel. He came back to the bed with the mirror in hand, sitting with it held face down across his knees.

“I have people who usually come in once every couple of months to trim your hair – so it didn’t get unruly. I…” Howard sighed. “Don’t be afraid, alright?” He lifted up the mirror and held it out to Steve, who took it with trembling hands; the mirror was heavy, almost unbearably so, but Steve managed to lift it and keep it upright so that he could stare into its silvery depths.

A slender looking young man stared back at him; it was him in the reflection, he could tell that right away even if he didn’t look exactly the same way he had pre-serum and yet it was almost like looking at a stranger. Steve wasn’t as emaciated and gangly as he had been, that was for sure. His cheeks and face had plumped out, and while he was still pale as ever he wasn’t sickly looking like he had been pre-serum. His hair was bright golden-blonde, and it was long, hanging around his ears, bobbing under his chin. He hadn’t noticed it, hadn’t even felt it when he had sat up. It had never been this long before. It had always been cut short to keep it from becoming something to grab in combat.

“Howard, this doesn’t exactly prove that I’ve been asleep for seventy years.” Steve protested.

“I can show you video surveillance for the room if you need more proof. All the files from the security system are stored on my private server, accessible only by me. I set the cameras up myself. We have years and years of footage – hours and hours of visits recorded for the sake of giving you come comfort when you finally woke up…” Howard patted Steve’s hand again; his hands were soft like silk, old and scarred from years of use. “I’d carry you over to take a look at them right now, but… well I’m not a spring chicken anymore, kiddo. I’ll bring you a laptop to look at tomorrow instead, one of the good ones, not those hospital crap-outs that they use with all the other patients.”

“It’s alright…I … Howard? What… what happens now?” Steve set the mirror down on his lap, looking down into it, arms too tired and weak to hold it upright. The hysteria had left him as quickly as it had come, leaving him numb and empty.

Steve knew what he wanted to do – he wanted to go find Tony. He wanted Tony to hold him tight and tell him that it was all just a bad dream, but was that even true? Was this a bad dream? And if this was the real world – if there was no world like the one in his memories, then what should he do?

No matter what happened, he needed to know what was going on, even if it was going to be a hard pill to swallow. He needed to know the truth one way or another. If this was Loki’s doing, the Frost Giant was going to need to run like hell to get away from him. He would hunt the little rat bastard down to the ends of the earth if that was what it took.

“Focus on getting better I suppose. You’re lucky that way at least. The doctors didn’t find any atrophy in your body, and you didn’t suffer any mental degeneration or sicknesses when you were unconscious. Thank god for that. They did some expensive scans on you, you know – looking for brain death and all the like. I think they were hoping that they were going to get a chance to autopsy you to get some of their precious serum back. Bastards, the lot of them. I paid to have you kept safe here and I damn well intend for it to stay that way! Director Fury isn’t going to be sticking you with any needles – no blood for him and his little vultures at SHIELD!” Howard growled.

Steve looked up from the mirror with a jerk. Finally, a mention of SHIELD and the Avengers! “SHIELD? Howard, I know all about them – SHIELD, the Avengers Initiative – the Helicarrier. I know it all. How is it possible that I –” he blurted. They were real, so what he had in his head had to be real too!
“I don’t mean to rain on your parade love, but I told you all about those things while you were sleeping. Bucky did too – although he probably wasn’t supposed to be spouting off anything about the Avengers Initiative and their great many adventures as he calls them. That man doesn’t know when to keep his mouth shut – never did. I should have put him across my knee and given him a good walloping back when my wrists didn’t crack. God knows he won’t listen if I try it now… Youngsters these days…” Howard laughed, shaking his head.

Steve’s excitement drained away, killed by that laugh.

It couldn’t be true.

None of it could be true – there couldn’t be – he remembered it all!

This wasn’t real – it had to be some kind of trick! This had to be Loki’s doing – it had to be!

He was **Captain America** – Tony was **Iron Man** – this didn’t make any **sense**!

Howard must have seen the dismay in his eyes, because he squeezed Steve’s hand again, trying to calm him. “They said that you might be getting some cognitive dissonance kiddo. Your brain chemistry changed when you were given the serum – apparently it adapted to protect you. They tried to study the effects on Bucky a few times to no avail. He had problems at first too, just like you. Kept remembering things from missions he had never been on… for a while there, we thought that the serum had driven him mad. He used to think that he had died falling from some train. Can you believe that? He said that it cleared up after a while, so don’t worry about it too much, alright?” Howard shook his head sadly. “He kept waking everyone in the base up with his screaming. It was awful those first few years.”

Steve looked down at his small hand trapped underneath Howard’s, staggered. Was that true? Would the memories go away with time? Would he lose them? Those beautiful moments gone, lost to time?

“I don’t believe it. This has to be because of Loki.” Steve refused flatly, pulling his hand free. He hauled his blanket up around his shoulders, rolling on his side, grimacing as his stiches twitched from the quick movement. He would have to remember to move slower now, or risk ripping his stitches; he hated the feeling of thread being pulled out of his skin.

“I know it’s hard to believe, Steve. You’ve lost so many people while you were asleep. I…” Howard took in a deep breathe; he looked like he wanted to say something and then thought better of it. “I can’t claim to understand, or to know what you’re going through. All I can say to you is that you’re alive, here and now, and that… You should get some rest. I’ll come back tomorrow and I’ll bring that laptop I promised. You can look things over while you recover and decide for yourself. And as for Loki… well, **Loki** doesn’t have nearly this much power, believe me. Loki doesn’t even know you exist.” Howard said, standing up.

He leaned down, kissing Steve on the cheek with a loud smack; Steve winced at the touch, the scratch of Howard’s beard against his skin almost too much to handle. His thoughts drifted back to Tony as Howard walked out, about how Tony had kissed him like this with the same scratchy beard. Steve’s eyes welled with tears he refused to shed. He burrowed deeper into the pillow, hiding from sight, not wanting to give anyone the satisfaction of seeing his misery. He would get through this – he would figure things out and then he would go find Tony. Tony wouldn’t want him to give up so easily. He could do this!
True to his word, Howard showed up the next morning a little after ten with a laptop bag slung over his shoulder and a paper bag filled with breakfast foods from A&W clutched so tightly in his left hand it looked like he might rip clean through the flimsy paper. He took off his jacket, flinging it casually over the back of the chair and set about rearranging the room. He spent a few lazy moments pulling his chair closer and then went about setting the laptop up on the overtable; he shifted everything so that it was closer to Steve’s hips, grumbling to himself the entire time, half of it technical jargon and half of it complete gibberish.

He plugged the charger into the wall, cracked his back and opened the paper bag to pull out one of the greasiest looking bacon and eggers Steve had ever laid eyes on. Howard paused then, eyeballing him as he manhandled the burger; he seemed curious by the way Steve’s eyes were still on him. He split the burger in half, smirking.

“I see how it is.” Howard chuckled.

The breakfast burger was a thing of beauty. No one had taken so much as a cracker into his room before this. Steve missed solid food. All they had given him was a liquid breakfast that morning at eight; the nurse had brought it to him in a plastic cup, forcing him to down every last drop to insure that he had enough nutrients to keep him puttering around. He was promised he would get another one to enjoy for lunch, and boy had he not been looking forward to that. She had lectured him for almost half an hour after seeing the disgusted look on his face, explaining in a somewhat high-pitched voice that his body needed to slowly reacclimatize to having solid foods again, seeing as how he had been fed a liquid diet through the Gastric Feeding Tube for the past seventy years. Steve had been given that same lecture once before, assuming of course that the original lecture was real and not some figment of his imagination; it had been word for word the same speech as last time too. He wasn’t sure if he should be reassured by that fact or not.

The shake had tasted like someone had mixed chalk in with milk, adding just a hint of what may or may not have been chocolate, and it had been the vilest thing he had had aside from D-ration bars back during the war. Steve highly doubted that any of the nurses had ever tasted that shake, even though they had gone on about how delicious and filling it would be; even as he was gagging, choking the awful thing down, Dahlia had been praising it. He was starting to suspect she was a lot crueler than he had initially thought.

Tony always claimed that healthy things weren’t supposed to taste good. Steve had never really believed that until now; he was all for healthy things, but that shake made it seem like a health food company had been taken over by Dr. Doom. No, scratch that. Even Dr. Doom wouldn’t have been that cruel.

Steve’s stomach rumbled. He was almost drooling when each twist of Howard’s hand had the cheese stretching. It had never been more intense watching someone tear a burger in half before. He craved meat – a cheeseburger or something that he could really sink his teeth into; had been craving it, really, for the past few days. He had tried asking for one, just a teensy little cheeseburger. The nurses had turned him down with a smile, saying that he wasn’t ready for anything substantial. He had almost started weeping.

Howard broke the half in half again and then handed Steve a greasy piece, winking at him, all-knowing.

“Don’t rat me out.” Howard grinned.

“Thanks.”

Delighted, Steve chewed slowly, savoring the flavor of cheese, egg and bacon as if it had been his
mother’s cooking. His mother would have swatted him upside the head if she had heard him say that out loud, but he couldn’t help guiltily thinking it with each delicious nibble. His stomach protested after he swallowed the last bite and he glared at it; he had been throwing up a lot lately, and he would be damned if he threw this up. This was the first good thing he had eaten in days.

The nurse had been rather specific about his eating habits. The not eating solid foods part had been first on their list, not that Steve particularly cared; Dahlia probably would have been horrified, especially since she probably knew how much salt and fat was lurking there in that oh so delightful processed egg patty. Everyone had been pretty adamant about him taking things slowly, telling him that he should be healing and relaxing instead of overexerting himself; they didn’t like him getting up and moving around without a chaperone, and he didn’t really like having to have a chaperone in the first place.

Steve hated being forced to laze about, taking things easy; never had really, he preferred a challenge, and sitting around with only his thumbs to twiddle was depressingly boring. Things being peaceful, he always assumed, came with a price tag, and he never had enjoyed paying the piper when all things were said and done. Sure, he liked to go on vacation as much as any other fellow, but sitting around for long extended periods of time with no access to a gym, and nowhere to run made his skin crawl. He would have loved to be out there on the streets again, jogging through the morning mist, but it seemed like he wasn’t really going to get much of a choice in the matter; not that he would have been able to jog through the mist anyways. He probably wouldn’t have made it off the curb. The nurses had already threatened to chain him to the bed for trying to get up to go to the bathroom on his own, which according to them was a sin worse than murder in the eyes of the nursing staff. Apparently that had been too strenuous an activity for him, even if he had made it there on his own just fine; the way back had been a different matter, but he was counting the way there as a victory anyways, even if it was only a partial one.

The worst part about all the waiting he was doing was that it left him with too much to think and not enough time to power down; once he had gotten around to puzzling out what would happen to him after recovery, it became a little like trying to make a cake without finishing it, leaving the proverbial baking pan filled with goop on top of the stove instead of baking it. For some reason he just couldn’t shut off anymore, couldn’t let go of those tantalizing thoughts about what the world was going to be like.

Half of Steve’s nights were spent drifting off to sleep and then waking up again, praying each time that things would go back to normal or get better somehow; the other half were spent awake filled with endless thoughts of dread and of what little he had left to hold onto now that he was here, alone. The world refused to change back no matter how many times he squeezed his eyes shut, and so he would eventually end up stare up at the tiled ceiling, bitterly hoping that it would come crashing down on him so that he might die and get the waiting over with at long last. He didn’t want to think about what the world was like now, but it was there, itching at him like a healing scab every time he closed his eyes. Things were the same and yet different. This was worse than waking up after sleeping in the ice; he hadn’t thought that anything could be worse than that, but this definitely counted as worse.

Steve didn’t like hospitals all that much and this stay was the worst in a long line of hospital visits that had been equally taxing. It wasn’t that the people working in hospitals were horrible or cruel – they had been very kind and almost loving, handling everything with the kind of patience and grace his mother used with all of her patients in their old neighborhood. Half of the people working in Steve’s wing alone were descendants of the original nurses and doctors who had taken care of him when he had first fallen into the coma; he had found that out from one of the night nurses, who had
been just as bored and lonely as he was. She sat with him after noticing he was awake and had read to him from the funny novel she had brought in to kill time. He wanted to get a copy of that book one day, just to keep the depression at bay. She had said it was called Catch 22. Maybe Howard would know where to find it. It had seemed strange to him that everyone on staff had been so excited about having the chance to meet him; a few had dropped by on their days off just to get a look at him, amazed that he was finally up and about. He felt a little like a zoo animal, fresh off the boat from some strange and exotic land. He could understand their excitement a little, even if it seemed morbid to him. They had been waiting a long time, just as Howard had, hoping to see a good conclusion to a sad story. He had liked those kinds of endings too.

Steve’s stomach settled at last; he took a sip of tepid water that the nurse had left him. Howard was here, and the mysterious security footage that he had been going on and on about had come along with him. Maybe that would help answer some of the many questions floating around his head.

“Did you get any sleep?” Howard asked, crumpling up the wax paper wrapper. Steve shrugged noncommittally. He didn’t want to talk about the nightmares or the fear. The only one he had ever really talked to, aside from Natasha, had been Tony.

Howard stuffed the balled up wrapper back into the paper bag and started in on the second bacon and egger with renewed gusto. Grease dripped down the side of the wrapper, narrowly missing his finely pressed dress pants. Howard really shouldn’t have been eating greasy fast food at his age. Not that Howard would probably appreciate being called old. Steve debated on teasing him about the breakfast burgers, but he held his tongue instead, the joke leaving him as abruptly as it had come. Who was he to tell someone else off for their eating habits? He had enough people telling him wanting to eat solid food for Pete’s sake.

“How’s everyone been treating you? Found yourself anyone special here? Or were you waiting for little old me to show up again?” Howard grinned.

“It’s been fine. The nurses are very nice.” Steve said politely. The truth was that he had been in a bad mood ever since he had woken up that morning even thought he had known that Howard would be coming to see him. It hadn’t been Howard that he really wanted to see, but that was hardly Howard’s fault, now it? It wasn’t Tony’s fault either, and despite knowing that, it almost felt like some kind of betrayal that Tony wasn’t here with him right now. He knew he was being ridiculous, but still somehow a part of him kept dredging up unhappy thoughts about what had happened, thoughts like Tony off with someone else, married with children; Tony, living a life without him. He pushed the thoughts away, sipping water as if that might somehow lessen the sting.

“Well that’s good! They all seem very taken with you. You might even get a few phone numbers if you work it right, hot stuff.” Howard laughed, winking in a way that was so lewd Steve was a little embarrassed to even be seen sitting by him.

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“Well that’s good! They all seem very taken with you. You might even get a few phone numbers if you work it right, hot stuff.” Howard laughed, winking in a way that was so lewd Steve was a little embarrassed to even be seen sitting by him.

“Very funny.” Steve grumbled. He was really starting to get tired of being trapped in a hospital bed, especially since the bed made it difficult to walk out on irritating conversations.

“I’m serious! They think you’re a sweetheart! Get laid while you’ve got the chance kid, because believe me; you’re not going to be young forever. Well… maybe you will. Seventy years and you look like this? I’m starting to think that we should just bottle you and be done with it. I wouldn’t mind scraping a few years off myself while we’re at it. Do you come with a warranty I wonder? Perhaps a coupon?”

“I was in a coma for seventy years. How could they possibly know that I’m a sweetheart?” Steve
snapped in exasperation, putting on a fake smile if only to keep Howard from asking if something was wrong; Howard didn’t seem to notice the difference between the genuine article and the falsity. Instead he ignored Steve, gesturing to the laptop with a cheese covered finger, impatient and ready to start off. Thankful for the change in conversation, Steve relaxed, letting his body go slack. He followed Howard’s gesture with his eyes, noting that Howard was staring rather intently at the power button as if trying to will the laptop to start up on its own. He couldn’t help but crack a real smile at that.

“I’m assuming that you want me to turn it on.” He said dryly.

“Yes, yes. Press the little button there – the one that looks like a horseshoe with a line in the middle.” Howard instructed around a mouthful of burger, almost spitting some of it out in his haste to get the words out.

Steve followed the instructions step by step and it was easy, criminally so. He had hoped to get some joy out of that fact, but it was more frustrating than anything. Had nothing changed? Sure, the operating system seemed a little different and a lot slower, but all the commands and mouse clicks led him to the same things. He frowned at the little box in the corner that said Windows 7; it had always read Stark 14 when he had looked before. Was Stark International not making computer programs anymore? Tony had always been very particular about not using ‘crap’ as he had called it, when designing his technology, so why were they using something with Windows 7? What was going on?

The computer finished loading, chiming with the enthusiasm of a child being offered chocolate before bedtime. It was set to one of those strange musically-themed displays that Steve had tinkered with in his off time. He had styled his laptop’s desktop red and blue when he had first learned how just so that Tony would stop badgering him about it. He had left it on default settings the first time on purpose, and for some reason that had driven Tony absolutely batty. What use did he have with a red and blue desktop anyways? He never had been very fond of personalizing technology, and the only reason his phone had a background at all was because Clint had changed it on him when he had left it unattended. He knew how to mess around with that stuff of course, had picked it up quickly after Tony had shown him the ropes; he wasn’t stupid, he just didn’t particularly care what colour the start bar was. He found desktop wallpaper pointless because really, how often did he spend looking it in the first place? All he ever did was play around on the internet and stream the documentaries that Jarvis found for him. He barely ever saw the thing unless he was minimizing something.

It hit him then that this was all assuming that he had had a laptop in the first place. He stared down at the laptop on the table, daring it to do something different while at the same time praying and waiting for everything to finish loading the way it always had, his fingers poised over the keyboard. He nervously drummed his thumb on the spacebar, unsure if it would be better if he recognized what was happening, or worse.

Howard gestured to the keyboard with a greasy finger. “When did you learn to type?” He finished his food, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, ruining what Steve was fairly certain was a dress shirt worth a few thousand dollars. Steve grimaced. Most people couldn’t afford a shirt like that after a year or two of scrimping and saving, and here Howard was smearing grease and cheese all over it.

“A friend taught me.” Steve shrugged; it had been Tony who had taught him, although truth be told he had learned the actual skills from one of the computer programs that Tony had forced him to use. One night Tony had caught Steve finger typing for the last time Tony had sworn, eyes twinkling, and they had started off down the path of computer aided learning. Steve smiled at the memory. Tony always did have such a charming way with words; the threat to tape all his fingers together had been extremely effective too.
“Lucky dog! Was she hot?” Howard laughed. “She must have been hot if she got you to learn how to type. Back then that was women’s work.” When Steve scowled, he sobered up a bit, clearing his throat. “Double tap on the touchpad – the little flat part at the bottom with the – oh for god’s sake let me do that.”

Howard scooted his chair closer and turned the laptop towards him, reaching around Steve, who had to press himself up against the safety bars to keep from toppling over; he swiped his finger across the touchpad, and double tapped on a shortcut labeled Security Footage. A folder opened up to reveal thousands of files, so many in fact, that the computer wasn’t able to fit all of them on the screen at the same time. The scrollbar on the side of the window seemed to go on endlessly, a tiny bar that couldn’t really get any smaller but seemed to want to try anyways, plummeting endlessly downwards.

Steve gaped at the screen, his mouth hanging open. Howard grinned at him, slapping him on the shoulder; his chest pressed against Steve’s back as he leaned forwards again. “You’re going to catch flies…” Howard teased. It was strange to be this close to Howard. They had never been particularly cozy with one another before. Mind you, Howard hadn’t really been cozy with anyone back then because he hadn’t been able to sit still for more than a few seconds at a time. Steve had remembered thinking that his inability to sit still had been a godsend at the time. At least it had kept Howard busy and out of harm’s way; you couldn’t shoot at someone who wasn’t sitting still. Age appeared to have dampened that urge in Howard, and he seemed contented to just stay there leaning against Steve, looking over his shoulder, breathing in his ear.

“I know – it’s crazy right? Back in our day it was all typewriters and paper – everything is electronic now and paper’s gone the way of the dinosaurs. This is the digital age, my friend. No more typewriter ribbons and correction tape, I promise.” Howard said.

“I can see that.” Steve said, uninterested. “What was the last day Bucky was here?”

“Two days ago.” Howard growled, moving back, putting some space between them, clearly not appreciating the sudden switch from technology to Bucky.

“Can I see the video from that day please?”

Howard muttered out something that sounded suspiciously like a garbled curse word and double clicked on the file Steve had requested, opening up a video player. “I have the best quality cameras of course. Everything is state-of-the-art – Just replaced them as a matter of fact, although I suppose that was a bit of a waste now, huh?” Howard said casually, leaning forwards again to plaster himself back against Steve’s back.

The footage began to play, streaming seamlessly with people moving into frame as the camera did a quick pan and then settled in the centre of the room. It was a little grainy despite the so-called state-of-the-art camera equipment, but it would do. The Bucky onscreen moved a chair to sit beside the onscreen Steve’s bed. Bucky looked pensive, lost in thought; his body was much larger than it had been before, his muscled shoulders so broad that they almost filled the entire screen. He was dressed in Captain America’s uniform –it didn’t look quite as nice as Steve’s had; he took a guilty bit of pride from that. It was still red white and blue with a big white star in the middle of the chest, but it just didn’t seem to stand out all that much, looking almost like it had been pieced together from of a variety of different concepts like a patchwork quilt; the fabric around his hips was studded with little white stars, and the top half around his shoulders was draped with red and white stripes.

Bucky reached out and took the sleeping Steve’s hand, sandwiching it between his much larger ones; the move was delicate, like Bucky thought he might break Steve’s fingers by accident. Knowing the serum, he probably could have done just that.
“Hey Steve... I know I haven’t come to visit in a while – I’m sorry about that. I got tied up with a few Avengers missions and was away from the city for a while. Did you miss me?” Bucky said. He looked around for something out of frame and then sighed, still clutching the sleeping Steve’s hand carefully in his own. He seemed to relax after that, looking a lot less sombre and a lot more like the Bucky that Steve remembered.

“Things were busy this week. We were fighting Doctor Doom again – you remember him, right? He’s the crazy guy with a mask and an obsession with magic and robots. He has his own country – Latveria, remember? I told you about him last time didn’t I? Oh well… not like you’re going to tell me to stop talking just because you’ve heard it twice already. So anyways –”

The video clip went still, the frame freezing on screen as Howard viciously hammered down on the pause button; when Steve tore his gaze away from the flickering image, Howard was glaring at Bucky’s stilled form, his lips curled in a vicious sneer, his eyes locked on Bucky.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked, startled. He rested his wrists on the edge of the table, watching Howard curiously. For a moment he was convinced that Howard was going to have a full-fledged temper tantrum right then and there, but Howard’s glare vanished, albeit slowly. He grimaced, closing the video player down, loading a new file at random, leaving a greasy streak on the touchpad where he had touched it. Steve itched to clean the mess away but restrained himself.

“Bucky pissed off a lot of people with the stunt he pulled a few nights ago. I had to personally fund the repairs to half of Brooklyn because he decided that it would be better to blow up a few buildings on Wall Street because the Doombots were in hiding and he didn’t want them run away. He has a bad attitude sometimes – I know you like him and all, but honestly Steve, I don’t know what you see in him half the time. He’s a menace – even if he is Captain America, he makes the stupidest decisions when he’s frazzled. Honestly, my idiot son could do better. You can’t just flush out enemies by blowing everything up – it doesn’t work like that in the real world. You need controlled blasts, not chaos.” Howard muttered in way of explanation.

“I'm sure he did what he thought was best.” Steve said tersely.

“I'm sure he did, but it was obviously a crap decision.”

Howard’s phone sprang to life in his pocket and he groped for it, cursing; he didn’t look at Steve’s face, which was a pity, because he would have been treated to a rather nasty glare.

“Hello? I thought I told you that I would be out of the office for the rest of the week! I told you – Fine. Pepper, calm down – yes. I’ll deal with him, don’t worry. He did what? Oh lord…” Howard groaned. He held his hand over the receiver, scowling, tapping the laptop casing with his free hand.

“You’re going to have to entertain yourself. We’ve hit a snag at SI and I have to go and personally smooth things over with some investors. They’re demanding blood money or some damn thing – I don’t know what the slang is these days – My son started beaking off about the new tech not being ready and they’re having heart attacks in the lobby, threatening to drop the contracts if they don’t get to see me in person right now. I’ll see you later Steve.” Howard said. He carefully untangling himself from the laptop cords with the phone still pressed against his ear, leaving a void of warmth where he had been sitting, grabbing his jacket as an afterthought. He pushed the chair back with his knee, gave Steve a scratchy peck on the cheek again and then left the room while incoherently mumbling away to his phone.

It was a stroke of luck that Howard had left so early; he wasn’t exactly great company, even at the best of times. Steve had been dreading the thought of spending the next ten, fifteen minutes listening to Howard caption every damned thing on the screen, and it was a pleasant surprise to be left without
the running colour commentary. As much as he appreciated the effort Howard was making, he didn’t need the hand holding. He hadn’t appreciated that little jibe about Tony being ‘his idiot son’ either. What the hell had *that* been about?

It was better to not have Howard perpetually leaning over his shoulder anyways; it uncomfortable enough watching the one-sided conversations people had had with him as it was, *particularly* since those people thought their conversations were *private*. Howard probably hadn’t told anyone that they were being recorded. Wouldn’t that be fun to explain? Oh hello, nice to see you again – I’ve been watching our conversations to catch up and wow, you sure told me some personal stuff. He shuddered at the thought.

Steve was normally all for the right to privacy, so he it was with reluctance that he turned back to the computer. He had to know for sure what had happened – what could be written off as a dream and what could be counted as reality. People would understand eventually. And if they didn’t, well, he would apologize later.

Looking at the long list of files made his head hurt; the files flooded the screen, little movie reels repeated over and over again, taunting him, an army of amassed in his sleep.

There had to be *thousands* of files here, each one with a different screen capture on it. Were they all separate files, or just duplicates stored in the folder to trick him? Would Howard do that to him? Things didn’t feel right.

While he hadn’t been outright locked into his hospital room, it still felt a little like they were keeping something from him. Sure, he could see the outside world through his windows, and the world didn’t look all that *strange*, but sometimes it sure felt like something was going on; at least the windows in the room actually opened. They weren’t anything like those holographic lies SHIELD had use back when he had woken up after the ice.

It felt like trickery, but it didn’t seem to be. If someone, like maybe SHIELD, had been trying to trick him they would have done something to stop him from getting visitors and the doors would have been closed and locked all the time. Yeah, he couldn’t get out of bed yet, but he had plenty of people to chat with, and he had been wheeled down the halls tons of times on his way to medical exams. He wasn’t completely in the dark and they definitely weren’t in a base somewhere. They had children’s drawings taped up on the walls, and once, he had seen families visiting in one of the other rooms. He definitely wouldn’t have had any visitors if this was a ploy. If he was planning on keeping someone complacent in a cell, he certainly wouldn’t have let them have any visitors that were like Howard Stark. Howard was all razzle dazzle – a shit disturber if he had ever seen one and for that matter, Howard had been *dead* in the other world. Why would they have even bothered with Howard if that other world *had* existed? Yes, Howard was a friendly face, but it wasn’t as if they had been *best* friends. Why not bring Bucky in first? Or Tony for that matter?

It seemed a little too convenient that SHIELD had washed their hands of the entire thing, if that was indeed what had happened. What were they playing at? Howard obviously hadn’t seemed to think much of Fury, even though the Avengers Initiative worked hand in hand with SHIELD. So where was he being kept then? Howard hadn’t said anything about this being a SHIELD facility, so was he really in some plain old hospital? Weren’t they concerned about the serum getting out? They should have been, seeing as how he had survived seventy years in a coma with hardly any side effects. That had to have counted for something, even if he had been a failure. The serum falling into the wrong hands would be a disaster.

Why no guards? And why no secrecy? Why hadn’t he been taken into custody or thrown into a lab
to be studied like an animal? He had signed his life away, hadn’t he? He was the property of the American Government.

Maybe SHIELD wasn’t involved at all.

Steve had been able to read Howard like a book ever since they had first met; Howard was an awful poker player, and he had lost more than a few bucks to the guys when they played cards. He had once come to Steve to ask for tips about how to ‘play innocent’, and Steve had just laughed at him and chased him off. Men had made small fortunes off of Howard Stark’s failed attempts at bluffing; it had made Howard plenty mad, but he had had the grace to hold his head high and pay up. The man couldn’t bluff his way out of a wet paper bag, so if he knew that SHIELD was involved, Steve was damned sure he would have read it on Howard’s face by now.

So was it real then?

Or did Howard not know if SHIELD was involved either? Were they in this together, the both of them trapped, being worked over by SHIELD agents who wanted a piece of the serum? At the very least Howard would have said something about SHIELD if he had known that they were involved, even if he only mentioned it in passing. Howard always had hated playing by the rules, even when they suited him just fine.

That led to another problem. Steve rubbed the bridge of his nose. Was Howard really who he said he was? He was basing all of his proofs on the idea that Howard was actually the one and only Howard Stark, billionaire inventor. What if this wasn’t even Howard? He seemed solid enough – and he wasn’t keeping his distance, so he had to be human, right? But then again, they did have LMD’s… That was one possibility he didn’t want to consider; bringing LMD’s into this mess would bring a whole pack of paranoia with it, because if you couldn’t trust anyone to be human, who could you trust?

Steve sighed.

Howard could have been an LMD, but they had never been able to make them that lifelike, even when Tony had taken a stab at it, and anything Tony did turned out pretty damned amazing. SHIELD’s scientist made LMD’s had always had dead fish eyes half the time, their smiles a little too unnatural, and frankly, they had been creepy. They hadn’t been able to play-act even with their supposed personality chips helping clear the fog. Tony’s attempts had been more lifelike, but they still hadn’t quite felt like people, especially when they were leaning up against you. Steve had been able to hear the current running through them whenever they were near, and no matter what, their skin had never felt right. It was like touching some strange combination of oily silk and old meat, hardly human at all. Of course most of them didn’t even know that they were LMD’s in the first place, which led to a whole other sack of snakes.

So who and what could he trust then? Could he trust anyone? Was SHIELD out and Howard running the show? And what about Bucky?

If Bucky was Captain America then maybe they really had dumped him like a sack of garbage on a rainy Wednesday morning. SHIELD didn’t have time to waste with failures; that had been Fury’s favourite tagline. Maybe that was it. They didn’t need the weaker version of the serum, because they already had Bucky.

Steve scowled.

It wasn’t like he was of much use if they had the real thing already.
Maybe Howard had bought them off, paid for him to be taken to a private facility. That certainly made a hell of a lot more sense than SHIELD wasting some poor tech’s time making a few thousand fake twenty four hour videos for some nobody in a hospital bed. Even if they had done it over a few years, it would have been costly.

It all came back to the videos, didn’t it?

He was drowning in a sea of technology, but it was all familiar with even though it wasn’t supposed to be. Did they know that? Was it an accident, or had they gone about it on purpose to try and startle something out of him? They couldn’t have been that good at acting. Most of what he had seen so far was technology that wasn’t even as advanced as some of the things Tony had shown him. Everything still had the same old familiar feel no matter what he tried to tell himself.

It was odd to think that the new was old and familiar now. Boy was it odd.

Back on point, he wasn’t strong, he wasn’t a threat and he wasn’t a part of the Avengers anymore. What would be the point of trying to pull the wool over his eyes? He didn’t have any say here – no pull at all, except maybe with the night nurse, who read to him. So was it someone else? Was it Loki pulling the strings? Loki wasn’t one to waste any of his time on things like security footage either; there wasn’t anything magical to this whole operation, even if he was scrawny again. Sure, Loki loved illusions, but this wasn’t something he would find entertaining; it was more pitiful really. Even if Loki did love causing chaos, Steve didn’t think he would have bothered with something so… bland.

He had woken up like this once and it had felt just as frustrating then, trying to piece together what had gone on while he was sleeping. And yes, SHIELD had tried to trick him in the past, but that was just to protect the serum. It wasn’t like they had been trying to intentionally mess with his mind. They had been trying to help him stay calm. But he wasn’t Captain America now. He was Steve Rogers, failed experiment.

Was that it? Was he Steve Rogers now and nothing more? Did no one care about what happened to him? Howard had cared enough to visit for all those silent years, and so had Bucky but did anyone else know he existed aside from the pair of them and maybe Fury?

Was he a nonentity?

This was the ice all over again! He was trapped in a facility, albeit a hospital this time, and no one even so much as knew his name aside from people that had been involved with Project: Rebirth. He was alone here; he had Howard and Bucky, assuming they were real, but otherwise he was alone.

So what should he do? Should he believe it?

What would Tony do?

Steve looked down at the laptop and knew exactly what Tony would do. Tony trusted technology more than people half the time; he had plenty of reason for it too. If there was anything that could be real, it would be the videos. Videos didn’t lie. They could be edited, but then so could the newspapers and so could hospital charts. Tony would trust the videos because they had time stamps and metadata in them. If there was proof that this was a con, it would be there, buried inside a nest of numbers and images. Fakes wouldn’t be perfect; SHIELD had never been the greatest at ripping apart video files, no matter what they had said. They had played the wrong ball game that day he had woken up, and if they could make a mistake once, they could make one again and he would find it.

But that was just it. Would they have even bothered? He knew SHIELD, perhaps better than most,
and SHIELD wouldn’t have wasted their time by hiding the truth in a hundred thousand video files; they would have just done the same stupid set-up they had done the first time. It was simply too much work, even for them. Too much cost, too much overhead and far too much work to do just to keep one sickly little guy from Brooklyn in the dark. They could have just flat out denied him access to the videos in the first place.

The tactician part of Steve tried to plot and discount theory after theory, desperate to figure out what was going on. He knew what he had to do after a few minutes of quiet contemplation. He steepled his fingers underneath his chin, letting out a long shaky breathe. He would watch the videos until he was satisfied that he had the truth; he would take advantage of the time stuck in bed, and then he would decide for himself what was real and what wasn’t. They wouldn’t keep him from the truth. He felt sure of it.

Steve watched videos on the laptop all through the rest of the day, relentless in his search for what had happened to him. He was so determined to work that he only stopped twice, resting when the nurse came back in with his protein shake for lunch and dinner; he always had been good at pulling all-nighters, just like Tony, so it wasn’t too much trouble. They had once joked about it, holding on to each other for dear life, staggering down the hallway to their bed after being up all night thwarting Doctor Doom’s latest plans for world domination via enchanted blender. That night seemed like a million years ago.

Steve’s eyes were bloodshot and sore by the time the lights went off in his room, shut off by an irate nurse he hadn’t bothered to learn the name of who had gotten tired of watching him staring at the computer like some kind of deranged zombie. He hadn’t appreciated the darkness, even if his eyes had applauded her actions. The nurse politely asked him to go to sleep and he sulked, ignoring her until she was gone.

He would sleep later.

He turned the lights back on using the switch beside his bed once she was out of sight. It was stupid of course; that was the brilliance of hindsight.

She didn’t appreciate his unwillingness to go to sleep one bit. He was informed tersely a few minutes later, that if the lights magically turned on again he would be getting a piece of her mind; then she shut the lights off again. He turned them back on. She shut them off. He may or may not have back-talked her after that. He couldn’t remember. All he could remember was the images on the videos, Bucky’s face and Howards, talking and laughing while his had been still, like death lying in the same bed he was now sitting so casually in.

She physically took the laptop away from him after that to get the point across and he had been more than a little angry. He was deliberately rude to her when she came in later on during the night to check on him, because somewhere within those files was the truth about everything that had happened to him. He was pretty sure that he had tried to explain that to her, and she had been polite and understanding about it even though she had looked hurt by his words; he felt bad after that, realizing that he had taken his anger out on the poor woman for no reason at all. He hadn’t apologized, too out of sorts to manage anything coherent.

She had put her foot down anyways in the end. He would go to sleep and that was final. Peggy would have been proud of her. Peggy probably would have taken a swing at him if she had seen what an ass he had been.
The laptop was left on the counter across the room from him, so close it was almost like she was taunting him with it out of spite. Steve stared forlornly it for a whole hour, wanting nothing more than to be able to get up and go get it, but he hadn’t, partially out of shame and partially because his legs shook uncontrollably whenever he tried to stand up, and he was afraid that if he actually did get a hold of it he would drop it and break it trying to make it back to the comfort of his bed; then there would be nothing to see, no more truths to be learned. He closed his eyes, flashes of Bucky and Howard playing about on the backs of his eyelids until sleep claimed him.

Steve didn’t see Howard again until three lonely and long days had passed. Those three days had been spent glued to the laptop, scrutinizing and studying everything, barely living. He had been sleeping only when forced to, stopping only to eat during the day or when the nurses dragged him off to see a specialist or the physiotherapist. He hadn’t been very interested in what they had to say, and during the physio, he had actually fallen asleep on the gym mats they had set up for him so that he wouldn’t fall on the hard ground. The physiotherapist had not been impressed.

The nurses were at their wit’s end and decided to take the laptop away again right before Howard showed up. This time, they physically locked it up in a tall cupboard to keep him from limping over to the counter where they had been keeping it, not that he would have bothered at this point.

Steve found himself angry with everyone and no one in particular; it wasn’t the doctors or the nurses that were driving him mad, it was someone much closer to home. He was angrier with himself for a whole assortment of things, like for not having been able to keep it together enough to fend them off, and for not having stopped the entire nightmare from happening to him in the first place; it was a familiar rage, one that he knew too well now.

He rationalized the anger, parceling it out like Christmas presents. He needed to find some hint that said what he remembered was real, and the real world he was in now was imaginary, an elaborate spell or perhaps some kind of forced dreamscape. But rationalizing it didn’t help either. He knew he was being miserable and awful to people who were only trying to help, but he couldn’t seem to help it. What made him angriest was that it was that it was starting to look like he wasn’t going to find any proof of dishonesty, not matter how much time he spent looking for it. Bucky would have told him that he was on a quest for Unicorns; something that was very obviously not there.

Every file he had looked at had contained whispered conversations between someone, usually Howard or Bucky, and his sleeping form, and every file was useless, a menagerie of details that meant absolutely nothing to anyone other than the paparazzi. Howard and Bucky told him every goddamned thing when they visited, every story from their lives for the past 3640 weeks or so; some of the things he hadn’t ever wanted to know.

Did he need to know that Howard clipped his toenails on Sunday afternoons at precisely four thirty? Did he need to know that Bucky had gotten a new houseplant to keep his fern company? Did he really need to know that the fern was called Fern and the plant called Plant? The details were mindboggling. It seemed unlikely that he had gotten his memories from anywhere other than those quiet moments sleeping in bed while someone rambled away at his bedside; every second of every day was catalogued, filed away for future reference.

He wanted it to not be true.

He raged as he desperately tried to find some kind of acceptable solution, but he always, always, came back to those stupid files and those damned whispered conversations. Nothing else made sense.
If what Howard had said was true, about Bucky experiencing the same thing, then there was nothing he could do. Maybe the memories floating around in his head really were something created by the serum; he shuddered in despair at the thought, wanting to claw out his eyes. Was nothing real at all? Even those precious moments?

That was the only thing he and Bucky shared now; stupid, broken memories that their bodies had made to protect them. They weren’t soldiers – he wasn’t a soldier. Bucky was Captain America. Steve was a scrawny little brat from Brooklyn stuck in a hospital bed until further notice, a scrawny little brat who had memories stuck in his head that weren’t real; memories that he had made up.

It all seemed sort of pointless after that. With the laptop gone, he found himself listless, unable to concentrate anymore, unwilling even to rage. What else was he supposed to do? What else could he do? The search was over; he had lost and there was nothing left for him.

“He’s been on that bloody laptop for the past three days Mr. Stark. It’s not healthy! He doesn’t even try to get up and move around – he just sits there, sulking with his videos streaming in front of him like some kind of loony.” Dahlia growled.

“He can’t be that bad.” Howard snorted.

“He’s obsessed!”

“He’s just taking to the technology. We’re lucky he’s not having a fit.” Howard grumbled, dismissing her rage with a flap of his hand.

“He’s obsessed. We’ve been forced to take the laptop away once nighttime rolls around because he doesn’t sleep if he has it. He doesn’t eat either – he acts like the world is over! He’s going to end up killing himself if he keeps this up, and we can’t be there with him all the time.” Dahlia hissed.

“He’ll adjust. He’s been asleep for seventy years for god’s sake! What did you expect would happen?”

“I’m not saying that he’s supposed to get over this in a few days, I’m just saying –” Dahlia snapped.

“Then what do you suggest I do hm? Do you want me to take the laptop away from him? You want me to take away the last little thread of hope he has? He wants to find something – he hasn’t found it yet, but he’s looking. He’ll find it eventually – just give him time! He’s looking for lost friends, or whatever is going on in his head. Leave him be.” Howard snapped back.

Steve sat up and pulled on his hospital slippers, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and staggered towards the window, taking it one step at a time.

They were right of course; Howard and the nurse. Even if he couldn’t find any proof that his dream-world existed, it didn’t mean the world was over.

Tony was still out there somewhere.

If he could find Tony, he could work things out; it didn’t matter if the dreams were fake, what he felt for Tony was real. Nothing had ever been more real for him than Tony. Tony was life – Tony was everything.
Of course in order to get to Tony, he would need to get better and to get better he would need to get back into shape. Being angry with everything wasn’t going to get him anywhere; he knew that. He had been putting life off for too long, obsessing over things he couldn’t change, and for what? A few more minutes a night staring at a computer screen so that he could watch the past? This he could change; his body he could work with and mold to his will.

His legs weren’t all that bad really; while being weak and shaky, the muscles weren’t damaged, just out of practice. Steve caught himself against the windowsill and threw all his weight against it, completely out of breath but not quite panting. His arms quivered from the stress of holding himself up, but they weren’t going to fail just yet. He ignored the tell-tale burn in his muscles and stared out at the world outside the window, watching the cars and trucks pass by on the freeway down below.

Hope was clear when it had once been a vague little blob in the back of his mind; this was New York, and even if it had changed, it was still New York. He had listened to its slow metamorphosis every visit Bucky had made in those damned videos. Bucky loved to rant about the freeway down there, out beyond the window, as if it was some kind of old friend that wasn’t keeping up with the neighbors. He had ranted about the city more often than not when he visited, always taking the time to pull off his leather jacket before he started in on it; his rants varied, usually going into great detail about how buildings from their youth had been replaced by newer, slicker looking stores and restaurants. He hated the changes, even though he had been there every step of the way watching it happen. But when all was said and done, it was still New York. It would always be New York. He was still Steve Rogers too. Things had changed, but he was still Steve Rogers.

Steve could see the world through this window, and it was just as busy and beautiful as it had been in his dream-memories; he pushed the window was open a crack, letting in the breeze which while not carrying the best of smells, at least made the room smell less like a hospital.

If New York could go on, if America could go on, then he could too. This was just a set-back – nothing that he couldn’t work with.

Steve grimaced. There was one thing still nagging at him; he wished it would just shut up, but it wouldn’t. If all of the memories in his head were the product of Howard and Bucky’s stories, how had he developed a relationship with Tony? Had he simply made it up, like the doctors had said in order to cope with the coma? Had he made it up so that he could deal with the fact that he liked men?

Steve bit his lip. Maybe. Maybe that was true.

But why Tony? According to Howard, he hadn’t even met Tony, and he obviously hadn’t seen him, so how had he known what Tony looked like? It wasn’t as if Howard had given him a description to work off of, hell, Howard hadn’t even brought in a picture of the family to show off. For a man who had described every detail on his own clothing to an unconscious coma patient, he had been surprisingly sparse with details about his family.

Did he really know Tony? Or had his mind just played a cruel joke on him, making someone to tease him with, someone to keep him company in the dark?

Howard was another mystery. Why had he thrown details like Howard’s untimely demise into the mix? Had he been angry with something Howard had said while he was asleep? He couldn’t remember being all that angry then. They had met and talked over coffee and cookies the morning before the ‘big show’ as Howard had called it; that had been the last time they had spoken really. They hadn’t said a word to one another the night of Project: Rebirth, and they had parted friends. It had been a strange year long friendship before that night, one that Steve hadn’t entirely loved or hated.
God, why were there so many questions? Couldn’t he have peace for a few minutes? He bit his lip so hard he could taste blood, and wiped it absentmindedly on the back of his hand. Why couldn’t he ever turn off his brain?

Howard laid a hand on the small of Steve’s back, pushing him upright against the windowsill, jarring him from his thoughts; Steve stiffened.

“So they tell me that you’ve been busy researching.” Howard drawled, moving his hand from Steve’s back to his hip, fingers digging into the soft flesh there as if looking for a handhold. Steve frowned at the unwanted contact but didn’t saying anything, biting his lip again instead, bearing with the unwanted attention for the time being. It would be pretty stupid to pick a fight with the only other person he knew in the world aside from Bucky by punching said person in the face, even if said person also deserved it; if there was one thing he had learned since growing up, it was when to pick his fights. Today was a day for playing nice, not for broken noses; Howard liked nice, and he could make things awfully difficult if he thought he wasn’t getting what he wanted.

At least his brain was doing something useful now.

Steve released his lower lip, running his tongue across the worried and slightly bleeding skin; he could taste copper there, but it was faint, a mere trace left behind and nothing more. Howard was harmless, even if he was being a little handsy. He had to think tactically now – no more letting his emotions get the better of him. He could grieve for those he had lost later once he was sure they were really gone, until then he would build up his strength and work on a back-up plan. He liked plans; plans were good.

“I’ve gone through the first thousand videos…” Steve said, loud enough for only Howard to hear him, eyes still on the traffic outside. He tried to ignore the reflection of Howard practically wrapped around him and channeled his rage into digging his fingers into the windowsill, picking at the peeling paint like it was a scab.

“And? Do you believe me now?” Howard prodded, moving closer, leaving no space between them at all. He reluctantly sagged against Howard’s chest as his strength finally gave out, collapsing backwards. He held onto the windowsill with trembling fingers, ready to pull away if he got any strength back. Howard’s smell surrounded Steve like a miasma, the scent that of liquor and stale cigarettes, this time with a hint of body odor thrown in to boot. Had Howard even bothered to shower since the last time he had been to the hospital? Steve wrinkled his nose and sneezed. The force of it sent him tumbling backwards, crashing into Howard; it wasn’t as if the collision bothered Howard any. He barely moved.

Steve flushed, absolutely mortified. He had never been knocked over by a sneeze before. Geeze!

He hung his head in shame.

“Sorry…” He apologized.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll get back on your feet in no time.” Howard said softly, squeezing Steve’s hip. Steve scowled down at his slippers, keeping his face out of the reflection in the window by raising his arm. It had been bad enough seeing himself in the mirror all those days ago; he didn’t want to catch his eye anymore.

“So what did you think of the videos? Do you understand now?” Howard asked. Steve shrugged aware of nothing except Howard’s warmth melting through the thin hospital gown he was wearing;
he got cold a lot now, no matter how many layers of clothing he wore. Any heat he managed to keep in eventually flittered away, so heat was a precious commodity, and he couldn’t help but take stock of where it was at all times. Was it the serum that had done this to him, making it so easy to notice the heat people radiated? Was it some kind of side effect from the failure? He unhappily shared Howard’s warmth, basking in it like a turtle sunbathing, disgusted with himself for having to resort to it to keep from shivering in the air conditioned room. Howard was still solid for an older man, his muscles not quite gone after years of working with metal and machinery. He probably had trainers to keep him in shape. Tony had told him once that it was all the rage in Hollywood. He didn’t enjoy the feeling of lean muscle against his back one bit.

“I’m starting to believe it all, yes.” Steve conceded, unenthusiastic about having to admit it. It was bad enough thinking it in his head. “Can we go sit down? My legs feel like they’re going to drop off.” It wasn’t quite a lie, but at that point he would have told Howard he was going to have a stroke if it meant getting away from him and his cursed warmth.

“Sure honey.” Howard said. He slipped his arm around Steve’s shoulder and walked them back towards the bed, one hand still holding on tightly to Steve’s hip. Tony had called him honey all the time, usually when he wanted to curl up and go to sleep. Steve bit back his misery and allowed himself to be settled into bed again, Howard tucking the blankets around Steve’s legs with care. He then sat down in the padded chair beside the bed, stretching out like a lazy grey cat.

“I talked with the nurse. She says that you’re getting much better but that you’re a lousy patient.”

Howard laughed, smiling crookedly at Steve from his slouched position. Steve tried to smile back at him. He had heard the conversation of course. They hadn’t exactly been quiet.

“On a good note, they did say that you’ll be ready for discharge soon.” Howard continued, examining the finely manicured fingernails on his right hand with an air of boredom. That got Steve to look up again, eyes wide, lips twitching into a genuine smile. He hadn’t heard that part.

“Really?”

“Have I ever lied to you? No, don’t answer that.” Howard rolled his eyes. “They said that you’ll be eating people food and everything for the rest of the week, provided of course that you get your sleep and exercise your legs a bit more. You’ll be out of here by Friday at the earliest. They didn’t think you’d be ready so soon, but apparently the serum has done wonders.”

“Th—that’s great!”

“IT is – there’s a problem, though.”

Steve hung his head, weary once more. There always seemed to be a problem. It must have been Murphy’s Law, and all that. Tony said that a lot whenever things went wrong. Steve had no idea who Murphy was, but he apparently had the worst luck in the world.

“It’s not that big a problem –” Howard broke in quickly, holding up his hands. “I’m just going to have to work out the logistics of your moving around, that’s all. Obviously your old apartment is long gone. It got torn down decades ago when they put in one of those newfangled malls. Before you start, don’t worry, I had the stuff you had in it was put into storage, so it’s all waiting for you when we’re finally able to move you out of here. Most of its all junk now, but the pictures and important stuff are packed away in my mansion for safekeeping. I’ll have it delivered when you’re ready – oh. Yes I almost forgot! You’ll be visited tomorrow by my tailor for a few hours. He needs to take some measurements for your new clothing so that it doesn’t hang off you like some dame’s dress. You’re a little on the small side, and apparently it’s hard to come up with things that look decent on such a slender body.”
“Howard –” Steve objected.

“No complaining. You’ll accept the clothing and the place to live and you’ll like it.” Howard growled, crossing his arms over his chest. He sure looked formidable like that, playing the gruff old bear; Steve could see why people followed Howard’s orders so easily. You couldn’t take orders from a person you didn’t respect, and Howard commanded respect with every fiber of his being when he was serious.

“Thank you. I appreciate the help. I really do.” Steve said. He was thankful for course, but it still irked him that he had to take Howard’s handouts, especially when he knew that they always came with a price tag attached. What would Howard want, he mused, in exchange for housing and clothing? The touches made him think of a few things, but Howard wasn’t like that.

“No problem. I’m just glad to have you back – to tell you the truth, I wasn’t expecting to live long enough to see you awake again.” Howard said somewhat humble for a moment, almost tearing up. It was an odd sight, and one Steve probably wouldn’t ever see again; Howard Stark almost never shed tears unless he was drunk or in extreme pain, or so Peggy had told him once. She had seen that mythical moment alone – Howard hadn’t been able to look her in the eye after that, so maybe he had done something to deserve the tears. Steve really wished that he had taken the time to ask.

“You’re not that old. You still look like the same Howard to me.” Steve rolled his eyes.

“Gee, thanks. I’ve always looked like a geezer to you?”

“You still look like you, just a little greyer.”

Howard laughed at that, preening. “I can deal with a little grey. Still, it would be nice to be able to go out and pick up a few dames on the base again, eh?” He leaned forwards, elbows resting on his knees, eyes on Steve. “Oh for those days again.”

“You and me both.” Steve said. Only it wasn’t true anymore, was it? He didn’t really want to go back to those quiet days; he was glad to be here, here where Tony was waiting. Going back would be like tearing himself in half, taking the good away one jagged chunk at a time. He smiled through the lie, hoping that Howard wouldn’t notice anything off.

“Speaking about the old and outdated, Bucky says that he’s going to visit you tomorrow after the tailor gets in. He’s sorry that it’s taken him so long to get here.” Howard said rather stiffly, almost as if he were forcing the words out at gunpoint. He probably didn’t like being Bucky’s errand boy. He never had been any good at making up excuses, at least not for other people.

“Oh, no. We’re pals.” Howard said.

“Oh?” Steve quirked an eyebrow, amused by the lie.

“I take it that you and Bucky still aren’t getting along?” Steve asked; not getting along was an understatement of course. He had watched the pair glaring at each other in the security cameras for the past thousand videos, and somehow he didn’t think that it had gotten any better even with seventy years’ worth of time. They had attempted to hide it for a while, pulling fake smiles on the moment they stepped into the camera’s view, but Steve had seen it. Sometimes they forgot where they were, and the hatred slipped out. They had gone their own ways, moving on and yet those same childish attitudes had come along for the ride no matter the occasion. He had seen more than a few raspberries and stuck out tongues when the pair had thought no one was looking; they forgot about the cameras a lot. Those two were stubborn beyond belief, and if time couldn’t blunt those sharp edges, nothing could.

“Oh, no. We’re pals.” Howard said.

“Oh?” Steve quirked an eyebrow, amused by the lie.
“We go out for lunch all the time. We’re friends.” Howard insisted. He had a strange look in his eyes then, and Steve had to force himself to look away to keep from blatantly staring at him in disbelief.

“Well that’s good. At least you two worked out your differences. I’m glad.”

“Yes. We’ve worked out a lot of things over the years. Now, I’ll look into finding you a place to live if you want. Well, you don’t really have a choice about that I’m afraid. I’m not going to leave you by yourself in all of this mess.” Howard said, gesturing at the window, all business again. The funny little look in his eyes was gone when he looked back. Steve wondered what it had been.

“That’s very kind of you.” Steve said.

“Don’t be so thankful – It’s just to keep Bucky from sticking you in some godforsaken hole. He doesn’t have the kind of pull I do, even if he is Captain America. I’m not going to have you living in some roach motel. You can stay with me. I’ve got plenty of rooms, even with all of the Avengers living like locusts in my mansion, eating me out of house and home as it were.” Howard grumbled. Oh yes, Steve snorted, Howard and Bucky were best friends.

Hearing about the Avengers made Steve’s heart ache all over again. He had been worrying about them, just like he had been worrying about Tony, but hadn’t known how to broach the subject with Howard; it was hard to talk about a lot of things, and the Avengers were right up there on the list under Tony. For some reason he couldn’t form the words, and when he could, after spending an hour composing them in his head, they didn’t seem to be able to leave his mouth. Then all he wanted to do was curl up in a little ball because all he could see was their faces, the Avengers, his friends, and it all came crashing back that he didn’t really know them anymore; they weren’t his anymore.

Asking about the Avengers Initiative would be poking the classified beehive with a stick. Judging by the conversations he had overheard in the videos and the funny way Bucky had kept looking off screen all the time when he talked about them, the Avengers were top secret still. SHIELD had always been pretty tight lipped when people weren’t the right rank, and even though he had been a member of Project: Rebirth, he was still only ranked as a lowly private at the end of the day. He had seen it in writing when he had peeked at his chart and it had been a bit of a shock. He wasn’t even a Captain anymore.

“You want me to live with the Avengers?” Steve asked skeptically. He would be lucky to see a napkin from the mansion on his own; living there seemed more like a delusion than an actual option, even if it was Howard saying the words. Howard couldn’t seriously think that SHIELD was going to let him into the building, could he?

“I will have to talk to Fury first of course. It’s just a formality. He can’t really stop me. He’s going to have kittens.” Howard continued, grinning. Steve smiled and nodded along. He sure hoped that Howard was right.

The next morning found Steve with company. He had been expecting the tailor to show up of course, so it wasn’t that much of a surprise, he just hadn’t expected the guy to show up so early in the morning. He didn’t mind being up early, but it would have been nice to have a few minutes to wash up first. The tailor didn’t seem to care about how he looked, so Steve relaxed and let the man do his job, hoping that it would go by quickly and with as little embarrassment as possible.
He received a phone call from Howard while he was being poked and prodded by the tailor for the umpteenth time; the tailor had measuring every part of him with the ruthless efficiency Steve had only known only of medics on battlefields, and it had been a little frightening at first to have someone’s hands all over him like that. Even the doctors hadn’t been so hands on when they had been giving him a physical. It seemed almost too friendly, but from the look on the man’s face, he might as well have been plucking weeds in his garden or maybe cleaning a toilet with his tongue. The nurse brought the cellphone Howard had left for him over from its place on the over table and gingerly held it out to Steve as if the thing might bite her; the ring tone was some god-awful racket that Howard must have dredged up from the world of cyberspace as a joke, something that sounded a lot like the word nyan repeated over and over. If it had been ringing near him, he probably wouldn’t have wanted to touch it either.

He answered the phone, standing on rubbery legs while the tailor measured his inseam for the fifth time in a row; at this point he wasn’t sure if he was being measured or groped. He sure hoped it wasn’t the latter.

“Hello?”

“Hi honey. I’ve got some bad news.” Howard’s voice growled in his ear; Steve almost had to turn the volume down.

The tailor adjusted Steve’s stance and began to measure his arms, making him hold the phone at an awkward angle; at least that solved the volume problem. Steve switched the phone between hands until the tailor had what he wanted, trying to keep in mind that the manhandling was for a good reason.

“Steve? You still there?” Howard asked. He sounded tired and raspy, with just a hint of boredom still lurking in the shadows.

“Just being measured by the tailor, that’s all.” Steve said as the tailor began to measure his waist again, as if he hadn’t done that fifteen times already.

“Ah, I see, I see.”

“What happened?” Steve said, feeling a little nervous. Had something happened to Bucky, or to Tony? Howard hadn’t said that he was going to call today, and Steve hadn’t gotten a single call from the man since he had been given the phone in the first place. No one had called him, not even an accidental call from a telemarketer. He had been kind of lonely.

“Fury says that it’s a no-go. I can’t bring you to the mansion because there’s too much classified information lying around and they don’t trust you. Fury spouted some garbage about you being a sleeper agent, and I told him it was complete bullshit, because, come on, you’re you. Then he told me that if I even let you set so much as one toe into the Avenger’s mansion he’d have me kicked off the team. While I am the primary funder and the veritable owner of the mansion, as I so kindly reminded him, I apparently have no say in matters of national security. He said some choice things about me being an irritating old coot and I gave him a few words of my own which I will not repeat lest your delicate sensibilities suffer. Sadly we are at an impasse. I have to work on wearing him down, which means regrettably kissing his military behind until he agrees to do what I want him to do –” Howard blathered angrily into Steve’s ear, barely stopping for air. It was a miracle that he hadn’t passed out; maybe he had an oxygen tank beside his desk in his office for such occasions.

The tailor rolled up his measuring tapes and scribbled down some random numbers on a page in what had been a mostly blank notebook when he had walked in; there were quite a few measurements written down there now, so many so that Steve was starting to wonder just what they
were all for. He was tempted to ask Howard about it and then promptly waved the idea away; he had the internet after all. He didn’t need to waste time asking Howard a thousand questions when he had that at his fingertips. He liked not having to ask questions so much nowadays. It was a relief that others didn’t have to know that he didn’t know what was going on. It wasn’t that he didn’t like to ask – he just didn’t want to badger someone relentlessly, because there were so many different things he didn’t know anymore. He hated not knowing things; hated being ignorant with a passion.

The tailor packed everything up and gave Steve a quick once over, not quite frowning but coming close to it. He was probably trying to figure out just what tiny Steve Rogers had to do with the impressive and powerful Howard Stark; the wrinkling of his nose seemed to suggest something of the like, or maybe he just didn’t like being in hospitals any more than Steve did. Steve couldn’t blame him. The smell of antiseptic and death was heavy in the air, even though they were in a recovery ward of sorts. The only fresh smell was air freshener, a bottle of some mixed fruit spray that Dahlia brandished like a wand every time she came into the room. At least now he knew what that smell was. It wasn’t so bad now – wasn’t as over powering as it had once been. All of his senses had lost their superior status, leaving him sneeze and headache free when she sprayed it around; another good thing was that he didn’t have to smell the scent of urine wafting down the hall from the door over when his elderly neighbors had accidents.

“Thanks for coming.” Steve said, trying to at least be civil.

The tailor left the room, bag slung over his shoulder without so much a grunt in response. The only things he had said to Steve when he had arrived that morning was his name and the command ‘stand straight please, son’. Steve wasn’t sad to see him go. He had met doorknobs with more personality.

“Hold on for a second Steve, I need to find something.” Howard croaked; something crunched in the background, but Steve couldn’t tell what it was. Probably had something to do with work, considering after a quick check of the caller ID it was coming from a Stark International hardline.

“Alright.” Steve sat down on the edge of the bed, doing leg lifts to work the kinks out of his stiff muscles, listening to the sounds of Howard continuing to rustle through things on the other end of the line; his legs complained after a thirty repetitions, but it was worth the burn. The physiotherapist had given him a list of exercises after he had sheepishly admitted during their latest session that he might not have been paying attention the last few times; she had given him this look, a mixture of a smile and annoyance and had then proceeded to flick him in the forehead. She had given him a whole list of things to try out, compiled in curvy handwriting that bordered on illegible, enthusiastically walking him through a few of them so he wouldn’t accidentally cripple himself twisting wrong. He had borrowed a little of her enthusiasm, storing it away to save for a rainy day and had left panting and sweaty, having gotten far more of a workout than he had expected. He knew he wasn’t going to be running any marathons anytime soon, but it had felt great. He would at the very least be able to walk in a straight line without keeling over when all was said and done, and that was something to be happy about.

Dahlia’s playful tabby cat sat beside Steve while he worked out, staring at his flexing leg muscles with was very obviously evil intent. The cat liked to sit on his bed whether he was awake or asleep, stalking him everywhere he went, be it to the physiotherapists, or the bathroom. He hadn’t exactly been introduced to it formally; it had sort of just wandered in one day and hadn’t left. The furry little thing had taken a liking to him for some reason; it didn’t even have a collar, so he didn’t know what her name was. The only reason that he even knew she was a she was because of the amount of times her rear end had ended up in his face when she did her mandatory seven-time-circular-turn-around on his chest before settling in to sleep there. The night nurse had laughed when she had seen it, prodding the cat in her blubbery haunch in an attempt to get her to leave Steve alone for more than a few minutes. Steve had flushed and told her that it was alright. It was just a cat after all, nothing to
get concerned about. As long as she didn’t sleep on his face, he would be all right. She had smirked at the reference and winked at him, leaving him to his sleep.

The cat slept strangely too, with her face pressed against whatever she was sleeping on, with the rest of her body curled up like a wheel of cheese. She was a total sweetheart, easy to please and affectionate as hell, even if she was a bit nippy when you got her annoyed. Petting her had been better therapy than he had expected, although he ended up with too much cat hair on his clothing afterwards for his liking.

His sleep had been better than ever with the cat curled up in the middle of his chest, and boy, she weighed almost as much as one of those textbooks Bruce used to read for fun; he had been almost nightmare free for the entire week, a new record, even with her crushing the air out of him. He had been allergic to cats once if memory served, and it was nice to be so close to one without having his eyes watering and lips swelling up like one of those sausage shaped balloons. Not breaking out with hives was nice too; he had looked like a duck suffering with acne when an allergic reaction struck back then, and he hadn’t been able to leave the house for days. Thankfully those days were long gone.

Dahlia brought the cat in every day because it had anxiety issues when left alone at home and tended to shred things that were left out, sometimes going so far as to eat whatever was left behind after said shredding was done. She had told Steve more than a few of the horror stories, rubbing her hands together in glee as she tried to find the ones that would freak him out the most; she was a bit of a sadist. She had come home once to find that the cat had eaten an entire newspaper as well as all the toilet paper and a paper plate. It would have been funny if she hadn’t told him about the aftermath and a few other stories too, like how the cat had eaten the money right out of her wallet when it had gotten bored, and how it had apparently snuck into her bedroom and eaten her wedding photos right out of the album, plastic covers and all. The cat’s love for chewing paper was the main reason why no one left anything made of paper unattended in the hospital for more than a few minutes.

No one seemed to mind that it was left to its own devices. The cat, who Steve was starting to suspect was actually just called The Cat, spent her days wandering the halls while Dahlia worked her shift, looking for warm victims to sit on. Some of the patients seemed to look forward to the visits just as much as the cat did. Steve knew he certainly did.

Howard continued to natter away over the phone while Steve did his exercises, oblivious to the fact that he was still talking into the phone; the one sided conversation was weird, peppered with bits and pieces of stock information, what Howard wanted for lunch and the fact that Howard needed some new paperclips delivered a.s.a.p.

Uninterested, Steve stretched out, curling his toes. The cat continued to stare at him; he stared back and her.

“Steve?”

Steve tuned back in when he realized that Howard wasn’t talking to his secretary or stapler anymore.

“I’m back now, Steve. Where was I?” Howard yawned.

“You were saying something about why I can’t stay at the mansion.” Steve supplied, quickly looking away from the cat so that she didn’t pounce on him.

“Oh! Right. So this means that you can’t stay with me. You’ll have to stay with my son – I know it’s not the same or ideal, but he’ll behave himself, I think. Well, to tell you the truth I don’t really know what goes on in that boy’s mind half the time. He is such a brat – honestly Steve, I wouldn’t leave
you with him unless it was an emergency. I would have put you in an apartment of your own instead
if it was safer – Hell, I would have lit myself on fire first if that didn’t mean Obadiah taking over and
sinking my business while I was in the hospital recovering.” Howard grumbled. “Are you alright
with that? Because –”

“Staying with Tony sounds fine to me.” Steve cut in quickly, heading off the next part of Howard’s
rant before it could start; once Howard got rolling, it was hard to stop him. Steve didn’t feel like
sitting around listening to the tirade. He had listened to enough ranting when he had first entered
Project: Rebirth, thank you very much. He liked his ears where they were.

He rubbed his hands together in glee, the cat staring at his hands like they were some kind of edible
monster. He would get to stay with Tony! It was like a… Steve frowned, his happiness faltering. It
was like a dream come true. Those words tasted hollow and chalky, even if he had only said them in
his head.

Dreams weren’t all that much of a relief anymore; not that he had ever really been a fan of them in
the first place. There was something awful about them now, even the ones that had been happy were
twisted, warped wrecks of things he had lost; there was something in them now that had never been
there before, lurking in the shadows, waiting to strike. Every time he woke, eyes wide in the dim
light of his hospital room, he would clutch the blankets helplessly, his breath catching in his chest.
He could always see the nightmares there, in his room, shadows of those he had lost prowling in the
corners of the room; they didn’t leave, no matter how many times he squeezed his eyes shut. If the
cat hadn’t been there, he might have had panic attacks every time. Thankfully she had always been
there purring in his face. He was going to miss having her around when he got out of here.
Hopefully Tony would be around to take her place. He didn’t know what he would do if he woke up
alone with them waiting for him in the dark.

“I’m glad that you’re so optimistic about it Steve, I really am.” Howard said.

“Well he’s your son Howard. I trust everyone in your family.” Steve said, switching legs to begin
another set of repetitions, carefully avoiding the cat’s eyes. She didn’t seem pleased by that. She
stepped forwards, the blanket flattening underneath her clever feet, and batted his thigh; he ruffled
her back fur in retaliation. She started purring like a freight train, kneading the blanket, her blue eyes
squeezed shut in pleasure.

“I’d have left you with Maria first if she wasn’t dead. Honestly Steve, my son is a mess – an awful
boy. I’m embarrassed that you even have to hear about him, let alone that you’ll be meeting and
staying with him. Is that a cat I hear? Or am I going senile?”

“Maria died?” Steve asked, eyes widening in horror, shocked to his very core. Howard hadn’t
mentioned much about Tony or Maria, sticking to topics like the weather and technology. Steve had
found it strange at first, figuring that it was because Howard was trying to handle him with kid
gloves just like everyone else. He had wondered what had happened to Maria, her absence
something of a mystery, but he hadn’t thought her dead. She could have been living in Boca Raton
after a lengthy divorce for all he knew. He had kind of expected it to have been divorce, knowing
how Howard was around women; the man was lucky he didn’t walk around perpetually with black
eyes. Maria had been sweet, a kind woman who had once kissed Steve on the forehead after he had
tripped and crashed headlong into her, knocking them both down. After helping her up she had run
her fingers through his hair as he apologized, his face flushed with embarrassment; she hadn’t cared
about the fact that he had ripped her expensive looking dress when they had fallen to the ground, and
when he had offered to pay for the damages, she had laughed and kissed him on the head again,
telling him that he was ‘too sweet for his own good’.
Steve let out a weary sigh, a habit he had picked up ever since waking up; there didn’t seem to be many days when he wasn’t sighing anymore.

“Unfortunately, yes, she died. We married a year after the war ended. We didn’t have much time to date during the war, seeing as how we both had work to do, so it was a surprise when she said yes. It would have been nice if you had been at the wedding – the entire thing was boring as hell, and everyone was so gloomy.”

“Your wedding was gloomy?” Steve snorted, rolling his eyes. Only Howard could think a wedding was a gloomy affair.

“Well we weren’t all that happy then, even after the war was over. I think we were all too worn out from searching – not that it was anyone’s fault of course. She enjoyed herself immensely. She had a grand old time dancing with Peggy and the Commandos while I entertained the champagne table. Even Bucky got a few dances in if I recall correctly. She liked you, you know.” Howard said.

“She knew Peggy and the Commandos?”

“Oh yes. She met the Commandos through Bucky, and Peggy through me. She and Peggy became best friends after the whole serum failure. They met in your hospital room when I was busy making arrangements, tying up loose ends and all that. Maria found your sketchbook in your things and brought it by. Wanted to make sure you had it when you woke up. She talked about the drawings all the time, but she was always too upset after what happened to you to want to visit again. I think she took it as some kind of personal insult that the entire thing failed. Peggy seemed to think so too. I still have the sketchbook in storage. She had it hidden away in her things.” Howard drawled.

“They knew each other well?” Steve asked, surprised. Peggy had always seemed so serious, he had been afraid to ask about her other friends; he had also been a little concerned about taking a fist to the face at the time too, because she always got this funny little glint in her eyes when he asked her personal questions. He wished now that he had had the nerve to ask her more. She had always been kind, even when she had seemed angry with him. She probably would have put up with the questions, but he had been too scared to ask. He started crying, sniffing a little. Maria had been so kind, just like Peggy. Strong but kind; he could have gone to them with anything, but he had been too damned scared to ask for their help. He wiped at the tears, hoping that his sniffling wasn’t loud enough for Howard to hear over the phone.

“Oh yes, Peggy and Maria were two peas in a pod by the time Tony was up and about. They died in a car crash in case you were wondering. We were all together, coming back from some function or another – I don’t really remember the event and a lot of the details are hazy. Hit my noggin pretty hard on the back seat, so it’s mostly a blur of events all out of order. It was lucky that I made it out of there at all. Both of them though…” Howard said, his voice turning morose. “They died on impact. Peggy was driving with Maria in the passenger’s seat. I was passed out, drunk as a skunk in the back seat. I suppose it was a miracle that they didn’t suffer much.” Howard sighed.

“I’m so sorry.” Steve whispered into the phone. He had heard about the accident from Tony before… No. He had to stop thinking about the world using those lost memories! Things were different now, and he couldn’t keep relying on those fractured memories. It was so hard not to rely on that other world. Everything had changed so suddenly, and then it had gone and changed again while he was trying to catch up. It wasn’t fair! He slapped himself in the forehead, trying to steady himself, tears dripping down his face.

Peggy and Maria had died together; he hadn’t expected that. Back in the dream-world, Howard and Maria had died in a car crash when Tony was twenty, and Peggy, well Peggy had died in a rest home with Alzheimer’s, her family at her side every step of the way. He had been glad that she had
had family, that she had moved on and lived her life without him. She had deserved great things in her life, things he hadn’t been able to give her, even if he had been around.

She would have liked Tony.

She would have liked his shit-eating grin, and the way he could make someone smile no matter how down they were. He wondered if Tony had known her well, if she had babysat him and tended to his birthday parties. Had she been by his side for his graduations? Had she and Maria spent lazy afternoons together chatting about the Army and all the idiotic things the Howling Commandos had gotten themselves into with Tony playing in the garden? He closed his eyes; he could see them like that, sitting around together, the sun warm and the breeze sweet with the scent of flowers. Maria had always carried around books about roses. She probably had gardens of them, gold and crimson and white blossoms settled together, all arranged in a neat square. Her father had been a botanist, she had told him, a man who had little time for nonsense. She had begged her mother to teach her how to grow roses so that they could spend time together. She had never talked about whether it had worked or not; she had never really talked about her family either, except for little asides she let slip when Steve was fighting with his asthma.

“Don’t worry about it, honey. It all happened years ago and I’ve made my peace with it all.” Howard said. “Anyways, getting back on topic, I’ll pick you up on Friday night and shuttle you over to Tony’s place. Tailor says he’ll have all of your new clothing ready by then. While I enjoyed seeing your pasty white ass in those delightfully chic hospital scrubs, I highly doubt the rest of the world would enjoy the spectacle as much as I did.”

“Your tailor is named Tailor?” Steve snorted, almost falling off the side of the bed as the cat head-butted him in the side; apparently snorting was a no-no in the cat’s world. She bit his scrubs, slobbering all over them as he tried to free them with one hand, refusing to let go no matter how much he tugged at them.

“Yes. God, hearing it out loud… that’s absolutely ridiculous. Poor bastard. Anyways –” Howard murmured thoughtfully. “Did you want anything in particular for when you move in with Tony by the way? You used to sketch, right? Do you want some sketch pads and pencils? I can pick up a few things for you from an art supply store I know while I’m in between meetings and the like. Did you have any special foods you wanted? I remember that you used to like eating those god-awful cookies – what the hell were they called again?”

“Fig Newtons?” Steve barked out a surprised laugh. He wiped his eyes on his arm again, trying to reign his emotions back in.

“Yes! Those damn things. Personally I think they taste awful, but to each, their own right? I’ll pick up some stuff and have Tony’s fridge stocked with all your favourites. Don’t worry about it.” Howard said.

“You don’t have to –”

“Nonsense. I insist. Now don’t worry your pretty little head about it. I’ll check in with you on Friday.”

Howard hung up before Steve could even say goodbye, leaving Steve feeling empty and alone. He frowned blearily at the phone and then set it down on the table beside his bed, rolling his shoulders. At least Howard had phoned and told him about the change in plans; it was nice to know that someone was at least trying to keep him in the loop.

It would be nice to have a sketch book again. He had been itching to try out his skills ever since he
had seen Cindy, the night nurse’s trainee protégé, doodling in her notepad when she thought no one was looking. He hoped that the artistic talent he remembered wasn’t just another part of his dream-memories; maybe he would start off drawing some roses.

With his luck he would probably be good at drawing nothing but stick figures and speech bubbles.

He continued to do his exercise all through the afternoon, using the same piece of elastic he had nearly brained himself with earlier to create more resistance when it got too easy; he had reveled in that victory, chasing away the sadness of lost friends for a brief moment of bliss. The cat stole the elastic away with a flick of her paw after that, and he had to wiggle a bit of string he had pulled off of his sheet in her face to trick her into giving it back. After that, he had been more interested in the cat than the exercises, pleasantly distracted by furry flailing limbs and a tail that could have given him whiplash if he didn’t watch it. The nurse on duty walked past his door on her way out and rolled her eyes at the sight of the pair of them, tired and lying flat on their backs; the cat’s tail lay on Steve’s upper lip like a faux mustache.

He couldn’t stop giggling after that; the cat swatted him with her tail a few times, telling him off, but he just kept giggling, too much emotion bubbling up and out. Some days he wondered why Tony had even bothered to put up with someone like him – someone that couldn’t even keep himself in check.

But there was no Tony to see this, no Howard, no Bucky, or Maria or Peggy either; there was only the nurse, who wiped his face with a wet washcloth and rubbed circles on his back, letting him cry into her shoulder when the giggling finally stopped. He didn’t want to talk, but he choked out bits and pieces in between sobs, feeling foolish and ashamed the entire time. The nurse stroked his hair and whispered that his friends wouldn’t look down on him for missing them so much. They wouldn’t fault him for loving them. He sobbed harder, but it didn’t hurt so much after that, with her hands in his hair and on his back, holding him tight.

As Steve was drifting off to sleep later that night after being tucked in red-eyed and drowsy, he realized that Bucky hadn’t shown up. Did it have something to do with their last meeting, and the fight they had gotten into? Had he said something? Or done something wrong? Bucky had never been able to stay mad at him for long, but was that still the case? Was he holding a grudge?

But that was nonsense, wasn’t it. That other world had all been a dream, all except for Tony, and Bucky couldn’t have known about the argument, not unless he was telepathic and reading it right from Steve’s head; he started crying again, choking on the tears as he tried to hold them in.

Did that mean something? Did Bucky not want to see him after all these years? Was he that horrible a friend?

Steve curled his body, pressing his face to the pillow, willing the tears away, digging his fingers into the soft meat of the pillow. He sniffled, wiping his nose on the sheet wrapped around his shoulders; his misery was dry and sore in his chest, his throat worn out from sobbing for so long. The nurse had brought him dinner after he had calmed down, and sat with him the whole time, passing him Kleenex when he needed it; he had been feeling better too, less tired and more numb, but better. Now that was all gone. All the progress, lost because of one stupid thought; all because Bucky hadn’t bothered to show up.

He missed Tony. God did he miss Tony.
He missed all of his friends, but he missed Tony most of all; Tony had been his light in the darkness, and it was hard to see where he was going now that that light had gone away. The dream world might not be true, but Tony had to be. Tony had to be real.

The cat’s tail thumped him across the back of the head, her feet pushing against his skull, toes kneading his hair. He ignored her, wishing that he could just wake up and that things would go back to the way they had been before, even if only for a few minutes; he would have cherished those minutes forever. He missed the smile Tony always had on his face when it was bedtime, the both of them curled up together, pressed close, limbs tangled. He missed the way Tony smelled, the way he walked and talked and most of all the way he had been there whenever Steve needed him most.

The cat kicked him in the head for not paying attention to her; laughing through his tears, falling asleep with one of her feet in his ear, Tony’s face in mind, smiling.

The rest of the week went by like he was watching an old mule dragging a wagon full of rocks up a steep hill; it was slow, tedious work, even if it was rewarding, and no matter how much he urged it on, it just wouldn’t go any faster than it wanted to go. Steve spent a good deal of his time pacing up and down the hallway directly outside of his room with a nurse shadowing him, waiting to catch him if he collapsed so that he wouldn’t split his skull open like some kid’s party piñata; she was rather calm about it too, padding along behind him with a book in her hand, one eye on him and the other on the page she was reading. The cat also stalked him, but that was only because she wanted to grab him by the ankles and seemed to want to kill him for some unknown reason. He had to make a few unscheduled stops to untangle his socks from her claws, and that was probably the most exciting thing that happened that week.

He had savored those still moments, even though he had had to almost kill himself tripping over the cat to get to them. There was something calming about problem solving, the way the solution slowly slid into place as he worked through what was wrong; in this case, untangling the cat’s pesky claws from his already mostly holey socks.

The cat climbed up onto his back after the last untangling and sat on his shoulders while he paced the rest of the day away. She seemed to like the view, even if he wasn’t all that tall. At least someone didn’t mind that he was short; being a whole five foot one was exhausting, and having to take so many extra steps to keep up with people made it feel like he was a child again, trying to keep up with his mother.

At least he was healing faster now.

In childhood, his body had been pathetic and weak, wracked with sicknesses every few months that made a simple game of tag feel like he was going for a 10k hike through the forest. He had bounced back of course, surviving possibly through sheer will-power alone, but that feeling of helpless dread remained firmly entrenched in his mind and every time a doctor walked past he had to steady himself to keep from running in the opposite direction. It wasn’t that he didn’t like doctors; it was more that he hated getting bad news, and more often than not, they were the ones to give it to him. They had been the ones to tell his mother about the pneumonia, and the asthma; they had been the ones who had told her about the broken bones and the allergies, not that she hadn’t known all of it already, from her years nursing strangers back to health. She had stitched him up often enough to know what he looked like when he was in pain. Worst of all, they had been the ones to tell him about her tuberculosis and that there was nothing they could do. For a long time he had avoided the hospital, even if he had been sick, too heartbroken to want to go in; he saw his mother in anyone who so
much as sneezed near him, and it had taken months to stop calling out ‘mom, I’m home!’ to an empty
house.

He was strong and healthy now, even if he was still slender and far too small for his liking; his
mother would have been happy to see him like this, without a constant sniffle or bruises. He wasn’t
nearly as fast at recovering from bruises or scrapes as he had been when he had been Captain
America but he made do with what he had; what did it matter to him if a scratch took more than a
few minutes to heal? It wasn’t as if he was out on the battlefield, worried about bleeding to death
anymore. The only thing scratching him was the cat, and most of the time those weren’t even all that
deep. At least he couldn’t get a lung or a bladder infection anymore. He didn’t even want to hear
those words again: bladder infection. Being stabbed had felt nicer.

The doctors were surprised by his recovery, marveling at the fact that in such a short amount of time
he had shaken off seventy years’ worth of coma with nothing more than a weeks’ worth
physiotherapy and a bunch of protein shakes. They had the nurses taking vials of blood after every
meal, hoping to catch something of the healing process as it happened; it was irritating getting stuck
with needles every few hours, but at least it kept them off his back the rest of the time. So far, they
hadn’t found anything worth mentioning, although Steve suspected that if they had, they wouldn’t
have told him. He was low on the chain of command – possibly beneath the chain entirely, with
some small specks of dirt out of sight on the floor below it.

He didn’t want to ask really, didn’t want to question anything that happened to him. He was an
experiment, and while he was sure Howard could have told him about it all if he wanted to know, it
felt awkward. Getting the information wouldn’t be all that hard, maybe just a little bit of wheeling
and dealing on Howard’s part; he didn’t want to add another favor to the already staggering pile of
them he had been handed. It would be better to save them for when they were really needed, instead
of bartering for information he already knew. And besides, that would mean talking to SHIELD,
which would mean talking to Fury, and he knew just what Fury would say on the matter.

Experiments didn’t get rights. They didn’t sign up for rights, and if he was suddenly an experiment
again, then he would get chucked into a SHIELD cell, lost under a bunker to be tested on against his
will, the perfect guinea pig. Even Howard wouldn’t be able to keep that from happening if he poked
around too much. He had heard about what SHIELD had done in the past, the secret facilities that
were government funded and so far under the radar that it would have been easier to dig to the centre
of the earth. No one would find him there, not even Tony; he would become a lost thing, nameless
with only a number and if he was lucky, a blanket and bed to call his own.

He knew what the serum supposedly did for the most part anyways; he could figure the rest out on
his own without a bunch of lab coats chasing after him with needles. Besides, he didn’t exactly want
to just hand them any knowledge they didn’t already have. He had to have some cards up his sleeve
in case of emergency. Bucky had probably told them most of it, but it always paid to plan ahead.

Howard showed up at Steve’s room at 6 p.m. on the dot, carrying a plastic bag filled with what Steve
assumed was some of the clothing Tailor the tailor had custom made for him. He hadn’t even thought
about clothing, and was glad that Howard had, or else he would have been going out in hospital
scrubs, a rather unpleasant thought seeing as how he didn’t really have anything of his own aside
from his underwear. He would have given anything for a bath, but beggars couldn’t be choosers, so
he made do without, hoping that he didn’t smell too bad.

Steve was a bundle of raw nerves by the time Howard approached his bed. He hadn’t been able to
close his eyes for more than a minute or two at a time the night before, afraid that something might happen to delay their departure; the anxiety had been so strong, he had almost asked the nurse on call to give him a sleeping pill before he remembered that it probably wouldn’t work because of the serum. By midnight he had been praying for daylight, begging for it, muttering to himself like a madman. The cat had slept so close to his face he had almost choked on her fur; at least the muttering had been drowned out then, and he had been able to lose himself in that loud, incessant purring.

Today was the day.

Today he would get to see Tony!

If left up to his own devices now, he would have probably just run out the door, clad in nothing but the underwear he had on, consequences be damned; he wanted to be outdoors again, with the wind blowing the scent of antiseptic floor cleaner away. The clothing in the bag was practical, far less ostentatious and more comfortable than he had expected from Howard. He didn’t know what he would have done if Howard had brought by a three piece suit. He hadn’t worn one of those in years, and his had been too short, the legs of his pants hiked up above his ankles after his last growth spurt; not that he had gotten taller from that spurt. He had gained a whole inch, which he had been insanely proud of at the time, and his mother hadn’t been able to afford a new one to replace the old, so he had gone to church in it for the next few years.

Howard sat down on the arm of the chair beside Steve’s bed, watching as Steve changed from his hospital gown into the new clothing, drumming his fingers on the safety rails. He wasn’t quite staring; Howard’s gaze flittered around the room like he hadn’t ever been in it before, constantly moving around, refusing to settle on anything for too long.

Steve pulled on a pair of brown slacks, fumbling with the zipper, his fingers clumsy and slow. A white button-up dress shirt waited for him sitting beside a highly polished pair brown leather shoes; there were socks too, and they were hot pink, likely Howard’s attempt at a joke. All of it was custom fitted; the price must have been outrageous, because Howard kept giving Steve these little looks, as if he could see the money on him.

“You look nice! Very suave. I especially like the fit of the pants.” Howard cleared his throat, looking Steve over, his tongue dragging leisurely over his lips. Steve went faintly pink, startled by the comment. He finished buttoning up his shirt with fumbling fingers, cursing himself for not doing enough of the hand exercises he had been shown.

Howard was all bluster. There was nothing to worry about. Now if only he could stop the blushing so that he didn’t look like he was appreciating the unwanted attention. Luckily for him, Howard had turned away again, checking the time on his phone.

Steve could certainly appreciate the way the clothes fit. He hadn’t worn anything custom made before, even if he had been offered a tailor’s services by Tony on more than a few occasions. It had been hard to find clothing and he could still recall the strained look on his mother’s face whenever they had gone searching for shirts that would fit him; some of those outings took hours, and most of the time he ended up getting things from thrift stores because it was all they could afford. The tailored clothing was like a second skin, smooth and comfortable. A quick look at the numbers in the waist of his pants confirmed what he had suspected; he had gained weight, and with it, muscle mass. How much more muscle it actually had gained he didn’t know, but he was fairly certain that he had put on at least twenty pounds.

Maybe.

He hoped.
It had been uncomfortable being back in this scrawny body and at first it had seemed completely unnatural, like he was piloting one of those clockwork toys Tony had used to make to amuse the children at the hospital, moving around all stiff and twitchy. But now it was almost like coming home after being away for a long time, pulling on an old shirt he had thought he had lost. Everything was just like he remembered, including every freckle, scar and wrinkle. At least he didn’t have to worry about hitting his head on doorframes, or accidentally breaking things with his grip anymore.

Steve picked up one of his new shoes from beside the bed, pulling his leg up to rest against the edge of the railing, slipping it on. It fit like a dream, as had everything else. He hadn’t noticed the tailor taking his shoe size. Apparently Tailor the tailor was either extremely good at guessing or had found another way of sneakily getting shoe sizes without actually asking any questions; maybe he had taken lessons with Coulson. He froze at that thought. Could SHIELD have been –

“The shoes fit alright?” Howard asked snatching up the laptop bag from beside the bed where Steve had unfortunately left it unattended. He shouldered the bag in one easy swing, smirking as Steve fought with the laces of the other shoe with his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth.

“Yes, everything fits really well. It’s a little creepy how well actually.” Steve said, standing up and adjusting his shirt. The fabric was smooth and soft, some kind of expensive cotton. He liked the feel of it. “Who did you get your tailor from by the way?”

“He’s been working for me for years. Doesn’t touch anyone unless they’ve got the cash. SHIELD would die if they saw the cost of those pants.”

“I see… They are nice pants.” Steve admitted.

“Well that’s good. At least they won’t fall off when you’re walking. Not that I would mind.” Howard chuckled.

“Very funny.”

“Well really… you look young enough to be my grandkid or something. I’d be a lovely grandfather. They’d sit on my lap, enjoying stories of the war, eating chocolates.” Howard mused.

“Grandkids…” Steve mumbled thoughtfully. He had never really thought that Howard would marry, let alone have a child, and the thought of him entertaining grandchildren was absolutely mind boggling. He supposed that it was just what you did back then. You got married, had children, the whole nine yards, but there were just some people where you had to stop and wonder how the hell they had managed to find someone to put up with them long enough to get to that point.

“Yes, grandkids. I want grandkids. Try to keep up, will you? You’re making me feel old.” Howard laughed as he led them out the door, an arm slung over Steve’s shoulder.

“Same here.” Steve smiled awkwardly.

The Nurses and Doctors had gathered around in the hallway waiting for him. Steve said goodbye to each and every one of them, going through the line of them as they passed by on their way out the door; these were good people, ones he respected even if he had been a bit surly towards them. He was hugged by a few of them, held close by the physiotherapist who was going between crying
about losing him and lecturing him about keeping up his exercise. Even the cat decided to show up, drawn from her nap by the noise in the hall.

He picked the cat up and gave her an affectionate squeeze, snickering when she licked his chin with her rough pink tongue, rubbing against his cheeks until he was covered in fur. Howard rolled his eyes at them, and then smiled softly, backing off to stand in the corner playing with his phone; Dahlia embraced Steve in a bone crushing hug and patted him on the back, practically in tears. Steve blinked back a few tears of his own.

“I’m sorry I was such a grump.” Steve whispered as she hugged him for the second time, the cat trapped between them, a reluctant passenger.

“Don’t worry about it.” Dahlia whispered back, giving him a kiss on the forehead.

He wanted to apologize to the cat too, some inane part of him needing to say he was sorry for leaving even though she wouldn’t understand a single word of what he had said. She seemed to know that something was wrong, and ended up attaching herself to his pant legs as he tried to head back to Howard, holding onto his ankle for dear life. Steve picked her up one last time and gave her a kiss on the head, burying his face in her soft fur; she purred loudly, licking his nose and then promptly bit him.

“I don’t think she wants you to leave.” Dahlia laughed. She held out her hands so that Steve could hand the cat over; he did so, reluctantly, having to pry her claws out of his shoulder. He wiped his eyes.

“See you later.”

“Bye for now Steve. Take care. If you need anything, you know where to find us. I’d better not see you in here again.” Dahlia threatened, shaking her finger at him. The cat took that opportunity to lunge from her hands to the ground with a loud meow.

“You won’t, I promise.” Steve grinned bashfully.

It took them almost an hour to make it down the hallway; it was so crowded with well-wishers and hospital staff that he almost had to fight free from all the handshakes and hugs. The cat wouldn’t let go of his leg and scratched Dahlia when she tried to pick it up again, so he had to carry her down the hall to Dahlia’s office and set her down in her basket, whispering soft words to her while scratching behind her ears until she fell asleep. He closed the door, feeling a little guilty about locking her in, but it was time to go at last and he couldn’t leave Howard standing around forever.

There was a car waiting outside on the street; Steve had to block the light with his hand, almost blinded by the sun when he took his first few steps of freedom. The sun was still a shock, no matter how many times he had looked at it through his window and he couldn’t help but wince while looking up at it. He had been out on the visitor’s balcony earlier in the week, and it had taken him almost three minutes to be able to see again after the sun had peeked over the cement walls; he swore that it had never been this bright before. His vision went spotty, a mirage of black, red and white splotches and he let out a contented sigh despite the pain. He had missed this. He was warm on his own for the first time in ages, soaking up every ray of the sunset that touched him. He closed his eyes for a moment as his vision cleared taking comfort in the way the warm breeze caressed his cheeks, breathing deeply the scent of freshly cut grass. This was life – this was freedom, right here.
“Do I need to get you and the great outdoors a room?” Howard snorted.

“I’m ready, I’m ready.” Steve said, prying his eyes open. He frowned at the laptop bag slung over Howard’s shoulder. “I can carry that you know. I’m not an invalid.”

“I’m sure you can, but I’d rather do the honors. Don’t want you to sprain anything getting to the car.” Howard teased, leading Steve to the older model Lexus sedan sitting by the curb.

“Nice car.” Steve said. It didn’t look as futuristic as some of the other cars around, and even though it was expensive it didn’t look it. Steve had seen a Lexus before of course; Clint had showed him a catalogue once, making jokes about how Steve needed to work his charms on Tony to get him a ‘sweet ride’. He had car watched from the window in his room when he was in between meals, the cat sitting on the windowsill beside him. She had liked to pat the glass when someone drove by too fast and loved smacking at corvettes far out of reach.

“I wanted to go with something simple. I didn’t want to end up with any reporters following me around.” Howard said.

The driver, who had been obscured by tinted glass, opened the door and stepped out, straightening his immaculate sports jacket; Howard pulled the bag off of his shoulder and hefted it towards the man, who caught it with practiced ease, as if he was thrown expensive computers every day.

Steve gaped.

It was Happy – Happy Hogan!

He tripped on the curb in his surprise and had to catch himself on Howard’s arm to keep crashing into the ground. Steve gawked at Happy, eyes wide, not knowing what to say or if he should say anything at all.

Steve untangled himself from Howard and peered into the back seat, which turned out to be disappointingly empty; his glance put him in Happy’s range, and they locked eyes briefly. For a second, Steve thought that he was going to get a friendly ‘Hi Steve!’, but no. Happy blinked at him with no sign of recognition and then went about putting the bag away in the trunk, doing his job just like he would if Howard had been escorting a client around town.

“That’s Happy Hogan. He’s my driver. Happy say hello to Steve Rogers.” Howard said, staring at his phone again.

“Hello Mr. Rogers. It’s a pleasure.”

“It’s nice to meet you too Happy. Please, call me Steve.” Steve held out a hand as Happy came back around to open the car doors for them. Happy shook his hand firmly, bobbing his head.

“Sure. Anything else Boss, or are we setting off now?” Happy said, dropping Steve’s hand.

“Yes, we’re off. No need to dawdle. Best get there before he’s too out of it. God knows what he’s going to do when he answers the door.” Howard said ushering Steve into the car. “Come along slow poke.” He settled Steve beside him in the back seat as Happy closed the door behind them, moving around to the other side of the car to clamber into the driver’s seat. The interior of the car was covered with smooth grey leather, buffed and cared for as any expensive car was when in the hands of a Stark. It had likely been Happy who had done the actual polishing in this case, but the spirit was all Howard’s; it was sleek and clean, not a crumb in sight. Steve looked around, a little mesmerized by the familiar interior. He had seen this car before – it had been one of Tony’s cars! Tony had taken the team out for dinner in this car – or at least, a similar car. He couldn’t help but stare at everything
again, looking for anything else similar, entranced by the familiarity.

The reverie was broken when Howard leaned over and did up Steve’s seatbelt for him.

“I do know how to do up a seat belt you know.” Steve said, rolling his eyes.

“Sure you do. Just making myself useful, that’s all.” Howard smirked. “I’m sure you’re looking forward to getting out of everyone’s hair for a few days, hm?”

That was true. It would be nice to have some time to just sit around with Tony again; being able to sleep in a room where there weren’t security cameras and nurses constantly watching would be a real treat.

“It sure will.” He agreed. “I just hope that I don’t embarrass myself in front of Tony.”

He had thought a lot about today over the past week, mainly debating on which approach would be best when he saw Tony again. God knew he could botch it badly if he didn’t watch out. It would be better to make a good first impression if he had to make one again, and if Happy’s introduction had been anything to go by, he might actually need to go with his contingency plan. They had almost hated each other on sight when they had been introduced the first time. Of course, Tony hadn’t really known the real reason why Steve had been so rigid and uncomfortable, so it wasn’t as if either of them could have done anything to fix the problem; even Fury hadn’t known a thing about it, and he had seemed down right surprised at the lethal banter they had been slinging at each other.

Being attracted to an older male teammate had been a little too much for Steve to handle back then; thankfully, that wasn’t going to happen this time around. He would be on his best behavior no matter what happened and Tony would get to see Steve Rogers, not the Captain America persona he had once worn like a security blanket.

The car slipped away from the curb and into traffic without even a pause in motion, a testament to Happy’s skill as a chauffeur. Howard’s arm slid over Steve’s shoulder at the same time, his hand resting comfortably behind Steve’s head, fingers splayed and tangling in the hairs on the back of Steve’s neck.

For a split second, he thought that it was Tony touching him. Tony had always loved to trail his fingers down Steve’s back and around his shoulders when they were together, relishing the way Steve wriggled and flushed at the contact. This wasn’t Tony’s hands casually perusing his body – this was Howard’s.

“What are you doing?” Steve blurted out. Usually he was better than this; he cursed himself for his lack of tact.

Howard didn’t jerk his hand away in shock like Steve had thought he would. He didn’t even twitch, continuing to stroking the back of Steve’s neck, a slight leer on his lips; it looked grotesque on him, a look so lustful it would have scared off perverts in the park.

“Oh come on Steve, grow up. It’s not like I groped you.” Howard purred.

The problem was, it sort of felt as if he had.

Steve shifted his shoulder, trying to put some space in between them. The last thing he wanted was to get into a fight, even if the touch had made his skin crawl. When that failed to get Howard’s hand off of him, he leaned against the door as heavily as he could, hoping that Howard would get the hint.

Howard’s hand soon dropped down onto the backseat, leaving Steve’s neck alone; he could still feel
the tingle of Howard’s fingers, and forced himself still, wanting to scratch at the skin as if to scrub away the contact entirely; he distracted himself with the traffic outside his window.

And then of course the moment Steve finally felt comfortable again, Howard’s hand migrated its way to Steve’s thigh, caressing it as if he had been invited. Steve abruptly turned a shade of cherry-red, as he had his first aneurism of the day; he sat up ramrod straight in his seat.

“Hey—”

“Relax. We’ll be there in a bit.” Howard murmured, his thumb rubbing a line up Steve’s inner thigh, following the inseam of Steve’s slacks like it was the yellow brick road. Steve glared at him, still bright red in the face, trying very hard not to wind up and sock Howard in the jaw right then and there.

“Howard.”

“You have very nice legs. Did you know that?” Howard asked, cocking his head to the side.

Steve wasn’t going to fall for that bait, no siree. There would be no face punching in this car, no matter how bad it got. “I’m very flattered, but stop that please. It’s making me feel very uncomfortable.” He kept his voice as neutral and emotionless as possible; he had read all about sexual harassment in one of the many pamphlets SHIELD had given him, and at the time he had thought that they were just telling him to behave himself. He was suddenly glad that he had read the thing the whole way through. It had talked about things like this – about people with busy hands and unwanted touching in the workplace. He wasn’t in the mood to play mind games. He had enough on his plate already without having to deal with Howard messing around with him too.

“Oh?” Howard said, his thumb pausing in its movements.

“Yes. It makes me uncomfortable and I find it hurtful that you’re doing something like this to me.”

“You know it’s legal now, right?” Howard asked. He sounded bored, as if he were reading a dictionary instead of feeling up his friend.

“Is that so?” Steve asked, crossing his arms in irritation.

“Oh yes. They did away with those archaic laws years ago. We can have so much fun now, you and I.”

What the hell was Howard playing at here? Did he think this was funny? He studied Howard’s face, but found no traces of humor lurking there; there was nothing friendly either. It was like he had become another person, something else borrowing Howard’s face.

Howard had always had a strange sense of humor; it had seemed more playful then, like he had just been kidding around with one of the guys while trying to play a prank or two. Nothing serious, just a few slaps on the back or pokes and prods when no one was paying attention, catching people off guard at odd times. It had been for laughs, Howard had insisted, even after he had been punched out after creeping up on a young man fresh out of basic training. Peggy had put a stop to it when she had noticed how uncomfortable Steve had gotten walking down the hallways, looking around every time he walked near a pile of boxes, or when he was passing a doorway.

He felt stupid for not having seen it before. He had thought that Howard was his friend, but this wasn’t how friends behaved around one another. This was just plain cruel.

“Steve?”
Howard’s hand was still on his thigh.

“Yes?” Steve said, gritting his teeth.

“I’m talking about homosexuality, Steve. It’s alright for you to fuck men now – they won’t throw you in jail for it anymore you know. Even the army is doing its part – don’t ask don’t tell was repealed.” Howard said. He emphasized the word *fuck*, digging his thumb against the seam as he said it; Steve didn’t flinch. He watched as Howard’s thumb returned to rubbing circles, moving so lazily it was as if it was a separate sentient entity altogether. Howard’s lip twitched at the corners, waiting, eyes glinting with promises of things to come.

Steve clung to his patience, willing it to stay strong; this had been his friend – a man he had trusted. He channeled the rage bubbling up inside him and took in a deep breath centring himself before prying Howard’s hand off of his thigh. He turned to face Howard, staring him down as the seatbelt cut into his shoulder.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about Howard, and while I’m all for change, please don’t touch me like that. It makes me uncomfortable. You’re supposed to be my friend.”

Howard pretended to look crushed and threw his hands up in front of his face, mock swooning at the reprimand; the drama queen, as always. He and Loki should have gotten together and taken their show on the road.

“You’re so mean! Honestly…” Howard pouted.

“I’m mean because I don’t want you pawing at me?” Steve said.

“Well when you put it that way…” Howard sighed. “You make it sound crass.”

Howard shrugged, leaning against the door with the casual air of a predator waiting for the kill, eyes still trained on Steve, studying him with renewed interest; Steve would have preferred that interest to have died a long, slow and painful death. He wondered how many other things he had missed about his so called friend; how many other people had he done this to over the years? The urge to punch was much stronger, almost uncontrollable.

“You used to react differently. I remember you turning white as a sheet once when I grabbed you from behind while you were talking with Peggy. Now you just blush like some kind of virginal waif and whine about your feelings.” Howard grinned wolfishly. “It’s entertaining. I like it.”

“I’m surprised that you don’t still have the black eye she gave you. I think it took what… a good week and half to get rid of it? She had quite the swing. She would probably slug you again if she was around right now.” Steve commented dryly.

“Heh, yes well, that was Peggy for you. She always did know what to do to get people to back off… Iron fists and all that jazz.” Howard sighed, shaking his head. “I’m sorry… I guess I was just hoping that something might have changed with you. I was always interested in you honey. I wanted to take you out on a nice date, but of course you were unconscious and all so that would have just been awkward for the both of us. I suppose I’m far too old to try and win over you young lovelies anymore. Cradle robbing, they call it now.” Howard grumbled, flapping a hand at Steve.

Steve snorted, rolling his eyes. “Maybe they just don’t want to rob the grave.”

Howard looked genuinely shocked at that; it lasted a whole thirty seconds before he burst out giggling, hands clasped over his mouth, face turning redder than Steve’s had.
“Good god – you’ve still got quite the bite to you, don’t you? I’d almost forgotten you were so mouthy.”

“I have to be. I’m small enough for most people to step over. If I don’t bite back, they’ll just push me around, and I hate bullies.” Steve growled in warning.

“True enough.” Howard sighed. He scrubbed a hand over his beard, thoughtful all of a sudden. “There are some things you should know, I suppose.”

“What things?” Steve asked, suspicious about the change in topic.

“Oh, just some things about my son… Some warnings for you really, nothing overly complicated.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tony’s quite the handful – completely shit-faced half the time I visit, and honestly, I don’t know why he does it. Personally I think he just wants to poke a finger in his old man’s eyes, but really, what do I know. I’ve never been good with people of his kind.” Howard said.

“People of his kind?” Steve frowned.

“You know. Children – little ones. He didn’t exactly grow up right in the head, which is entirely Maria’s fault by the way. She let him get away with too much – but that’s not really important. What is important is that he’s not quite the charmer that I am.”

“And that means, what, exactly?”

“Well, it means that he doesn’t really have manners. I wanted to give you a heads up before he stuck his hands down your pants and tried to do something to you ten seconds into the stay. He’s…” Howard trailed off, pursing his lips. “He lacks initiative except for when he does something to piss me off. I suppose he blames me for his mother’s death, or something of the sort. We don’t talk all that often and as I’ve said before, I would rather you be staying with me then with that degenerate, but Fury isn’t backing down anytime soon, so we’ll just have to make do.”

“I’m sure he’s not that bad.” Steve said, grimacing at the window. How could Howard talk like that about his own son? Steve had heard kinder words spoken by super villains in the heat of battle!

“He’s useless is what he is. I have him learning responsibility these days. So far nothing has stuck. Maybe having you around will give him the motivation to get his act together.” Howard grunted, turning away to look out his own window.

Steve had never wanted a car ride to end so quickly before. He was pretty sure that if Happy didn’t start driving faster someone was going to be met by a very untimely demise, and it wasn’t going to be him.

Steve had to stifle his urge to cheer when he realized that they were indeed at the end of their journey. They pulled up in front of a large mansion that could have been on a magazine for home and gardens if the front yard wasn’t quite so diseased looking. The mansion wasn’t falling down, but it lacked the certain splendor of most wealthy homes, and it certainly didn’t look like a place Tony Stark would be holed up in; the paint was peeling a little at the sides near the shutters, and the hedges looked like they had taken on a life of their own. The lawn seemed to have been cut by someone
who had no idea how to make straight lines, someone possibly drunk out of their mind.

This mansion wasn’t the same as the Avengers Mansion; it wasn’t even in the same league really. There were just the two floors to the place, three if you included the roof. Steve counted only seven windows on the front side of the building. This must have been one of Howard’s smaller mansions, something he had bought just to use as a throw-away, or maybe for the tax break.

“I lent this place to the brat so that he could get out of my hair. It’s not his of course. He’s more like a caretaker. We have an understanding. I don’t charge him rent and in return he cleans up his own messes and doesn’t light the place on fire. He grew up with too much silver spoon and not enough of the lash I’m afraid. He doesn’t understand the real world at all.” Howard sighed in despair.

They got out of the car sluggishly, stretching their stiff limbs. It hadn’t been a long drive, only an hour or so from the private hospital, but it had been long enough for Steve to get a few kinks in his legs; he suspected that he would have had those even if it had only been a fifteen minute drive. His legs still weren’t completely friends with him yet, and they didn’t appreciate spending any amount of time lounging around.

Happy trailed along behind them carrying Steve’s new luggage as Howard led the way up the driveway, humming a tune that sounded mysteriously similar to the wedding march. Steve lingered for a moment beside the car to catch his breath, not quite sure that he was ready for what he might see. His stomach felt as if it were doing somersaults, not to mention the fact that his heart was practically lunging up out of his throat and into his mouth; with his knotted leg muscles the way they were, he felt like he was going to have to crawl up the driveway, a gnarled hunchback.

He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. He was shaking – oh god, he was shaking! He took another breath, and another. “Get it together Steve – you can’t break down now.” He muttered to himself. He started up the driveway, determined to see things through till the end, ignoring the way his hands were trembling uncontrollably; he had been shot at before, and his hands hadn’t shaken then.

Howard climbed up the porch with a whistle, taking the steps two at a time. He banged hard on a large red double door nearest him, a rough clang sounding with each strike as the wrought iron knocker bounced in place, the angry lion now holding a dancing loop. He stood in front of the door with his hands on his hips, grumbling to himself about useless ingrates and lazy bastards, tapping his foot, every so often looking at his wristwatch as if he was wasting a serious amount of time being there on the doorstep. Steve stood a step behind him, waiting on the edge of the porch so that he could try to catch sight of Tony from around Howard’s broad shoulders. For an eighty-something-year old-man, Howard was still impressively wide in the shoulders which made it remarkably hard to see anything around him aside from a small patch of white on the door frame.

The door swung open, making Steve jump in place as it slammed into the wall, the ring clattering.

This was it – he would see Tony, and everything would be –

Tony Stark stepped out of the front door clutching a beer bottle in one hand and a television remote in the other; Howard stepped to the side, avoiding the door as it bounced back towards him, and it was then that Steve got a better look at Tony. Tony was around five foot nine, thin, worn, and a lot less healthy looking than his dream counterpart had been. He had bags under his eyes that a raccoon might have envied, skin so pale that it looked like he had rolled around in melted marshmallows. His dark brown hair, while being its normal messy self, looked brittle, as if he hadn’t been taking much care of it; the only part of him that looked maintained was his beard, his iconic van dyke, which was
He wasn't at all like the Tony that Steve remembered from his memories; this wasn't the same Tony at all.

Steve felt like he had taken a blow to the solar plexus, staggered by the sight.

Tony’s eyes darted from Howard to Steve. He sniffed disdainfully at Steve and then ignored him altogether, attention and wobbly gaze square on Howard.

“I told you on the phone, I don’t want him. You can take him somewhere else, because he’s not staying here.” Tony said, leaning against the door frame. He swayed, very obviously drunk.

Steve stared at Tony, his mouth going completely dry at the sight of Tony’s unforgiving glare. He took a step backwards and then to his horror tumbled down the steps with an audible oomph as he hit each step on the way down. He came to a stop on the last step, winded and wincing, eyes filling with tears that he tried to convince himself were only there because of the pain in his backside. Howard was beside him in an instant, scooping him up, dusting him off with rough hands that went everywhere; for a moment Steve felt as if he was going to completely seize up, his breath stuck in his chest. He swallowed hard, trying to suck in air that just wouldn’t come.

“Jesus, Steve, be careful! You’ve only been out of the hospital for an hour! They’re going to skin me alive if I bring you back all banged up!” Howard grumbled, patting Steve on the back. Steve looked down at his feet, studying the dust on his once perfectly shined shoes, trying to keep from blacking out. He had faced down bullies and soldiers before, but this …. All he could hear was Tony’s voice saying four words repeated in an endless loop.

Tony didn’t want him.

Tony didn’t want him.

Tony didn’t want him.

The words bounced around inside Steve’s head, bashing into the memories of Tony wrapped up in arms; the memories of months and months of smiles, kisses and soft touches, shattering the relationship he had built into nothing more than dust.

“Take a breath kid, it’s fine.” Howard said soothingly, rubbing a circle between Steve’s shoulder blades; Steve let out a breath he hadn’t even realized he had been holding, almost gasping for air when he did, a fish out of water.

“Look at the guy – he can’t even stand up. Why the hell did you drag him out here in the first place? Scrawny little fucker looks like he’s going to cry too.” Tony complained, taking a sip of his beer, gesturing with the remote as if it were a sceptre. His eyes lingered on Steve, looking him up and down; Steve felt as if he were being x-rayed, his insides ripped out and laid bare for all to see. He shivered and stepped away from Howard, trying to regain his balance, the world lurching beneath his feet. He gagged into his hand, eyes watering and burning.

“Behave yourself Tony. He’s still a little off because he was in a coma for seventy fucking years – honestly! The one time I need you to do something useful and you’ve fucked it up too!
Congratulations! Are you happy now? Jesus – Steve, are you alright?” Howard settled a hand on Steve’s shoulder, looking absolutely livid and concerned at the same time. “Say something honey. You alright down there?”

Steve shook his head; his mouth didn’t seem to be able to work anymore and his tongue felt as if it had been dipped in lead. He simply stared at Tony unable to look away. Was this the man he had fallen so deeply in love with? The man who had pulled him out of his misery and given him a home?

Tony stood forbidding and vicious in the doorway, a rabid animal protecting its den.

No. This wasn’t his Tony.

Steve swallowed hard, making eye contact with Tony in a last ditch attempt at drawing out the man he knew and loved, the man who had to be there; he just had to be. Tony’s eyes narrowed into slits. He scowled darkly at Steve.


“I…” Steve managed to get out, his voice no more than a squeak. He endured the intense glare for a few moments longer before being forced to look away, ashamed and at a loss.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause any problems.” He whispered, hands hanging at his sides, limp and useless. He hung his head. He had lost a part of himself; something had gone rushing away, leaving him hollow and staggered. He hadn’t even felt this broken the day his mother had died all those years ago. Losing her and Bucky had been nothing in comparison. He had known it could be bad, but he had never thought that it could be this bad.

It had been stupid, he realized, to think that Tony would remember when no one else did. He had been blind. He had been senseless and stupid. He had been hopeful. He should have known better than to trust blindly in anything. He should have known better than to believe in miracles. He was pathetic – why had he even bothered getting out of that hospital bed?

“You…” Tony stared at him, eyes widening. He bobbed in the doorway, pushing himself away from it and approached, watching Steve like this were the first time he had seen another person before in his life.

“You’re sorry? Why the hell are you sorry?” Tony asked; for a drunk, his voice wasn’t the least bit slurred. It was a little frightening how clear he was, how apparently in touch with his thoughts he seemed to be.

“I shouldn’t be here. I should be…” Steve sighed, voice barely audible almost drowned out by the cars passing by behind him. A cricket chirped, and then another, sounds picking up from where they had stopped off like the war starting up again after a ceasefire. He wished it was gunfire he was hearing. He could deal with gunfire.

Tony frowned, the beer bottle hanging from his fingertips, forgotten, liquid sloshing inside as the bottle tilted threatening to spill out.

“What?” Tony asked, confused.

“I shouldn’t be here. I’m disturbing you and it’s… it’s not fair that you have to have your life disrupted because of me – I should go –” Steve mumbled, still staring at his feet, his words tumbling from his mouth like broken teeth. He wished it was broken teeth; he could have handled a mouthful of blood, bleeding lips and hands. He wished that this could be anything else. Anything to kill the dull pain in his heart.
“Oh, nonsense! Tony’s glad for the company, isn’t he? You can stay here for as long as you need. It won’t be a problem.” Howard barked, giving his son with a look so venomous that Tony actually took a step backwards, flinching; the beer bottle clanked, hitting the railing and the last few precious drops splashing onto the porch. Tony cursed.

“Great…” Tony whined. “Now the beer’s gone.”

“Yes, the beer is gone. Jesus Tony. Grow the fuck up.” Howard snapped, moving forwards as if to grab at his son’s shirt. Howard’s phone gave a sharp beep. He let out a hissed breath and pulled the phone out to glare at it instead, flicking the touchscreen. He stuffed the phone back into his pocket, looking grim.

“Happy, please leave the bags here. Tony will help Steve carry his things inside. We have a meeting, as I have been so kindly informed by the lovely Ms. Potts, with the board in half an hour and I would hate to show up late. Steve…” Howard said, resting a hand consolingly on Steve’s shoulder, turning his back on Tony. “Don’t worry about him. He’s always been a big disappointment. You’ll get used to it, I promise.”

Happy set Steve’s bags and the laptop bag down beside Steve’s feet as Steve floundered, marching back to the car. Howard gave Steve’s shoulder a good squeeze and went back to the car as well; he cast a glance over his shoulder at Tony, eyes narrowed and then got in, waving goodbye to Steve through the window. The car pulled away.

Steve turned to watch them go, arm half raised in protest, half to wave goodbye, his brain on autopilot. He saw Tony out of the corner of his eye bending down to pick up his bags, the television remote tucked into the waistband of his sweatpants to keep it from falling to the ground.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s always been a big disappointment. You’ll get used to it, I promise. He’s such a jackass.” Tony muttered bitterly to himself, hefting Steve’s bags over his shoulder. He gestured to the laptop bag with his foot, the now empty beer bottle clenched in his other hand, his knuckles white.

“Pick up your laptop and let’s get this show on the road. I don’t have all day – well… really, I do have all day, I just don’t want to spend it this close to sober, so move it short stack.” Tony said, stomping unsteadily up the steps.

Steve hefted his laptop bag over his shoulder, and followed Tony inside. He moved along, putting one foot in front of the other; his mind was moving at a snail’s pace, chugging along while the rest of him tried to desperately catch up with what had just happened. He was lost, waking up all over again not in reality, but in a nightmare.
Steve bumped into Tony’s angular back, startled at the sudden unexpected contact; they had gotten inside the house somehow, the journey something Steve hadn’t noticed, and were now standing in the doorway of an empty bedroom looking in. Tony gave Steve a disapproving frown and then dumped Steve’s bags on the floor beside the bed before turning and leaving without saying a single word.

Steve inched his way into his new room, shuffling forwards, his head hanging low. He set the laptop bag down with care, shoulders slumped.

The room was nice at least.

Much better than the hospital room where he was always under the watchful eye of the nurses. Steve knelt down and untied his shoes, placing them together beside the door, a matched pair in a world where his own matched pair had suddenly gone missing. He crawled onto the bed and lay down, pressing his face into the soft pillow, smelling the soft scent of lavender and dust as it wafted up from the blankets.

It was true then; all of the things he had been told in the hospital, all of the videos he had watched in the dead of night, all the whispers and rants Howard and the doctors had said. He had memories that meant nothing. Memories that had been built to protect him from something he didn’t understand. He cried, tears streaming down his cheeks, face pressed into the pillow as if he could press hard enough to smother all of his misery. He didn’t make a sound, shoulders shaking, biting back a futile scream of agony.

He had wondered once what it would be like to lose Tony; now he knew.

He wished that he didn’t.

He would have given anything to take the last half hour back. He wished that he had never woken up from his coma. It would have been better to live in his dreams; at least then he wouldn’t have been so alone. For the third time in his life, Steve wished he was dead.

The bed dipped lower. Steve hadn’t noticed Tony come in, hadn’t heard the sound of feet treading on carpet; he didn’t want to think about what that dip in the mattress meant, wanting only to spend the rest of his life drowning in empty thoughts. It would have been nice to just lay there staring at the walls beside his bed waiting for some kind of blissful end to his torment, but fate wasn’t on his side today.

Tony shifted, sitting beside Steve’s huddled form on the opposite side of the bed. He leaned back against the headboard letting out a burp, a new beer bottle held in his hands like a talisman to ward
“Hey, look… I’m disappointed with this too…” Tony started lamely. He cocked his head to the side. “I mean, who in their right mind would want to be stuck with the fuck-up?”

“You’re not a fuck-up Tony.” Steve murmured, not looking up. He drew his knees into his chest, trying to not-so-subtly disappear from the universe.

Tony patted Steve on the head. The touch made Steve flatten against the pillow, eyes squeezing shut. The thing touching him wasn’t his Tony; it was another man wearing Tony’s face, using Tony’s voice, saying things that Tony would have never said to him. This wasn’t Tony. It couldn’t be Tony. Please let it not be Tony.

“Hey…” Tony said, sighing. He set the beer bottle down on the bedside table with a clink, legs splaying out to bump against Steve’s knees. “You’re a cute little guy.”

“What?” Steve mumbled, confused. He turned his head, squinting in Tony’s general direction, seeing nothing more than Tony’s knees.

“I said that you’re a cute little guy.”

“What are you talking about?” Steve said in exasperation, lifting his head higher to look Tony in the eye.

“I don’t know. It seemed like something you’d like to hear. Everyone likes being told they’re cute when they’re feeling bad.” Tony shrugged, eyes tracing Steve’s face, inspecting everything again like he suspected that something had changed since the last time he had seen Steve.

“I really don’t know what to say to that.” Steve said, closing his eyes.

“You don’t have to say anything. I’m just making a statement. You’ve got nice eyes, soft looking skin and a pouty little mouth – very attractive in parts, excellent as a whole. It suits you.”

“You were glaring at me two hours ago.” Steve grumbled, rolling over, putting his back to Tony.

Tony’s bony knee bumped against the small of Steve’s back, tapping him, demanding attention.

“Oh, that. Don’t worry about that. It didn’t really mean anything. I glare at everyone he brings over to stay. It’s expected of me, and I would hate to disappoint him.” Tony grunted. He continued to move his knee against Steve’s back rubbing uncomfortable circles. Steve winced.

“That hurts. Stop it.” Steve said, scooting across the blankets to get out of range.

“What did he tell you about me? Nothing good I expect.” Tony said, his knee still bumping against the blanket even though Steve was nowhere near him.

“He told me that you would try to put your hands down my pants ten seconds into the stay. I guess he was wrong, seeing as how we’re well over ten seconds into it.” Steve retorted. He wanted to scream at Tony to just get out and leave him the hell alone so that he could mourn his losses; he wanted to mourn his Tony in peace, without a stranger tapping him on the back every five seconds.

Somehow he couldn’t bring himself to say anything, too wrung out to even offer a token protest at the invasion of privacy.

“Did he now? I guess he knows me better than I thought. Well…” Tony rolled onto his side and
pressed up against Steve’s back, draping his hand over the edge Steve’s hip. His fingers slid expertly
down the front of Steve’s pants, cupping Steve with his bare hand. Steve let out a gasp, flushing, and
squirmed in place torn between confused arousal and annoyance.

“What are you doing?” Steve snapped.

There was no response.

“Tony?”

Tony started snoring, his face mashed into the side of Steve's neck, his breath hot and wet. Steve
froze, swallowing hard. Tony’s hand was still very much down his pants.

And now Tony was out cold.

What the hell had Tony been thinking?

Steve gingerly pulled Tony’s hand free and then held it in his own, staring down at the offending
appendage in disbelief. Tony’s hand was familiar, rough and grease stained, the nails dirty and
frayed; he ran his fingers over Tony’s knuckles, his body relaxing of its own accord.

Was this Tony?

Tony snuggled closer in his sleep, nuzzling at Steve’s ear like Dahlia’s cat used to do. He was a wall
of warmth at Steve’s back, burning with the intensity of a wildfire; he was too close, a stranger far
too close. Steve pushed at Tony with his elbow, trying to move him away, but Tony was too heavy
and refused to be shifted with something as simple as an elbow to the gut. This sure seemed a lot like
the Tony that Steve remembered. He had always had to use his super strength to untangle the man
when they were sleeping; Tony had always clung like a limpet once he was comfortable, refusing to
be dislodged without a fight. Steve had always found it cute; right now, it was annoying as hell.

Tony leaned forwards as Steve tried to wiggle is way out from under him, half draping himself over
Steve’s body like a blanket. He let out a long sigh that smelled faintly of sour beer before he started
snoring again, oblivious of Steve’s struggles.

Well, so much for that. Steve was now officially trapped. No amount of wiggling was going to get a
hundred plus pounds of extra weight off of him.

He wanted to be mad, but it was weirdly comforting to be so close to Tony again. He could feel
Tony’s snores in his back, a low vibration that made his skin tingle all over. Steve smiled. Even if
this wasn’t Tony, they were similar. He even smelled like Tony, aside from that wafting odor of beer
of course.

Steve closed his eyes; he might as well get some sleep. It wasn’t as if he was going to be able to do
anything else any time soon.

Steve woke up with the sun in his eyes. He squinted, trying to bury his face under the blankets,
wanting a few more minutes of blessed sleep. “Jarvis, close the blinds please.” Steve mumbled.

Wait a minute…
He sat up with a jolt, remembering what had happened the night before. He looked around the room but could find no traces of Tony aside from the crumpled blankets on the other side of the bed and the faint imprint of another body having lain on the sheet beside him; he ran his hand over the imprint in wonder, but it was cold, devoid of even a trace amount of warmth. Tony had been gone for quite some time then. Steve rubbed sleep out of his eyes, wondering if it had all been some kind of dream. He snorted at that. The idea of *this* being a dream was almost as cruel as something Loki would think up.

Steve tried to straighten his bedraggled clothing; he was tempted to go find himself an iron to set it right, but he didn’t like the idea of snooping around to find one. It would have to do for now. He could hear noise off in the distance, and where there was noise, there was Tony. He slipped off of his bed and wandered out into the hallway, scratching at the side of his neck where he could feel the familiar itch of beard burn. He recognized nothing in the house from the night before, and stopped in the middle of the hallway, confused. Which way should he go? It had mostly been a blur when he had walked down it the first time, and it wasn’t looking any better now. One quick glance told him that his room was at the end of the hallway; thankfully, there was only one direction to go in.

Relieved, he started down the hall and then paused to sniff the air, noting the scent of frying bacon. More clattering rang out.

Ah, so that was it.

Tony was in the kitchen, which was odd because Tony didn’t usually get up so early in the day to cook anything; brewing coffee yes, cooking breakfast no. Steve’s stomach rumbled in complaint, the sound almost deafening in the silence of the hallway. He had missed dinner the night before, not that he had wanted to eat anything, and his stomach wasn’t too impressed with *that* shoddy decision. The nurses would probably smack him if they learned that half a day later he was already ignoring their instructions. He padded forwards, following the scent of bacon to the kitchen.

Tony was indeed cooking, standing in front of a stained and off-white stove with a flipper in his hand. He had his back to Steve, captivated by the bacon and its greasy sweetness as it fried in the pan in front of him, his shoulders hunched and head bowed. He was dressed in a different pair of sweatpants and shirt than he had worn the night before and he had showered, although judging by the condition of his hair it must not have been a really thorough one. It still looked fairly greasy, even if it was mostly wet.

Steve approached in silence, tiptoeing up to Tony; without thinking, he wrapped his arms around Tony from behind, resting his face against the small of Tony’s back, hugging him. He was tall enough to reach Tony’s shoulder, but not quite the right height to rest his head there without half climbing up Tony.

“Good morning!” Steve said.

“*Who the hell told you that you could touch me?*” Tony snarled, pulling free from Steve’s embrace with a vicious shake of his shoulders.

Steve skidded backwards, halfway out of the room as he reeled from the verbal explosion. He tensed, preparing to be attacked. Oh god, what had he just done? This wasn’t his Tony – oh – he had just walked up to a stranger and – oh!

Tony didn’t turn around or say another word. He cooked, single-mindedly watching the bacon as if he hadn’t just *screamed* at Steve a second before. Steve stared at Tony, his face draining of blood. He had to apologize. All he had seen was Tony from behind, and it had been like everything had gone back to normal. Why hadn’t he thought? *Why?*
This wasn’t his Tony; this wasn’t his Tony at all. How had he forgotten that?

Steve opened his mouth halfway and then stopped, mouth shutting with a click of his teeth. He didn’t know what to say. He could apologize, but the words weren’t going to ever sound right. What was he going to say? Sorry, you looked like my dream boyfriend for a second there? That would just make things worse.

Steve turned and crept out of the room, fleeing to his bedroom before Tony could turn around, ashamed.

He tripped on the carpet when he made it back into his room, landing in an awkward heap as his head tried to lurch away from the rest of his body. His face pressed into the soft carpet when he landed; he could feel the pain of the collision in his gut and knees, the breath having been knocked clean out of him.

Well that was just fantastic.

He didn’t want to get up again; getting up was too much trouble. Every time he got up to do something, he did it wrong, so what was the point?

He lifted his head and stared forlornly at the bed. No, he couldn’t go there either. He would still be able to smell Tony in the blankets. Steve closed his eyes and pressed his nose back into the carpet. Everything he had done since arriving at Tony’s house the night before had ended up a disaster. First he had embarrassed himself by falling down the stairs, and then he had been groped by a drunken man who didn’t even seem to remember what he had done the night before. At least nothing else had happened. He didn’t know what he would have done if Tony hadn’t fallen asleep when he had.

Nope.

Steve didn’t want to get up ever again, now that he thought more about it. The floor was just where he wanted to be. At least it wouldn’t yell in his face or grope him, although this was Howard’s house, so it could have been possible that it had carpeting capable of perversion.

He was supposed to be doing his morning exercises right now to strengthen his legs and arms; he didn’t feel that it was all that important anymore. There was no rush, no pressing matter waiting for him. He would be better off in the hospital. Maybe if he was lucky, he would fall back asleep again and never wake up.

A knock on the doorframe almost made Steve yelp. He squeezed his eyes shut tighter, wrapping an arm around his head to shield himself from the verbal assault that would be coming his way. He just knew it. Tony was going to let him have it, and he would deserve every nasty word thrown at him.

“Hey – are you going to eat breakfast or what?” Tony asked, leaning into the room, hanging off the doorknob. He frowned down at Steve, noticing his position on the floor.

“What are you doing down there?”

“I’m trying to drown myself. It’s not working. Apparently that requires the use of water.” Steve mumbled into the carpet.

Tony chuckled and strolled into the room, flopping down to sit cross-legged beside Steve; he leaned forwards, staring at Steve’s prone form curiously.

“What’s wrong?” Tony asked. “Did you hurt yourself?”
Steve’s eyes snapped open. He peered cautiously up at Tony, completely baffled by the fact that he wasn’t being screamed at. Had he fallen through the floor and into the twilight zone? He had touched Tony without permission – violated his free space and his trust and… Tony was asking him if he had hurt himself? What was going on? Did that mean that Tony wasn’t angry with him?

“Steve?”

Steve dropped his head back onto the carpet, closing his eyes.

“I’m sorry I hugged you.” He grunted into the carpet, unsure of what else to say.

“Huh? You’re still hung up over that? That was a while ago.” Tony grumbled, reaching out to prod Steve in the back with one bony finger. “So did you hurt yourself or not, because most people don’t just throw themselves onto the carpet and lie there. Should I be concerned?”

“I…” Steve stuttered. This was the strangest conversation he has ever been involved in, even when it came to conversations with Tony. It felt as if they were reading pages from two very different scripts; he was tempted to look around to see if there was something he was missing, like maybe one of those little hidden cameras from those spy camera game shows Clint liked to watch. When he did finally work up the will to look up again, Tony looked sheepish, scratching his hair so hard Steve was afraid he might hurt himself.

“Are you –” Steve started.

“Look, I’m the one who should be saying sorry. I think I ended up in your room last night when I was drunk and I didn’t really plan to do that. Uh… I hope I didn’t do anything to you… although judging by the hug this morning I think I may have done something I regret?” Tony mumbled.

Steve stared blankly at Tony.

“What?”

Tony chuckled, nimble fingers moving from his hair down to scratch at his beard; his eyes had a nervous quality to them, and no matter what he seemed to always be looking everywhere at once, never really focusing on any one thing for too long. The dark rings around his eyes were half faded now, but not gone. The previous night’s sleep had probably done him a world of good; breakfast would probably do even more to get rid of the sickly pallor on his skin, at least if he started eating regularly that was.

“I’m sorry?” Tony repeated, clearing his throat.

“You don’t remember what you did last night?” Steve questioned, lowering his head back onto the carpet before Tony could respond so that he didn’t have to see anything in his eyes. It was hard enough looking at Tony as it was without having to see those blank, uninterested stares instead of the intense knowing ones he was so used to.

“Not a clue. Was it something bad? I didn’t grope you, did I?” Tony joked, attempting to smile; it looked too timid, almost like he was expecting something bad to happen to him. He continued to look down at Steve, abandoning the smile when he saw that Steve wasn’t quite looking at him, pursing his lips. “Because if I did –”

“It was nothing. Don’t worry about it. You fell asleep on me, that’s all.” Steve said after a few minutes of careful deliberation. There was no point in mentioning the hand that had found its way into his pants. Being drunk was no excuse, but there wasn’t much point in fighting about something Tony clearly didn’t remember. Tony seemed apologetic, so he could let it go for now, assuming that
it didn’t end up happening again.

Tony probed Steve in the shoulder again; his bony finger hurt.

“Well, alright then. As long as you’re alright with it, I guess we can just forget about the whole thing. You should eat though. The food is getting cold. Come on.”

Tony struggled and stood up; his knees cracked so loudly Steve almost thought he had broken them. He nudged Steve with his foot and damnit, even Tony’s toes were bony!

“You going to get up or what?”

Steve didn’t really want to get up, but the look on Tony’s face made it pretty clear that it was expected of him; he managed to get himself into a kneeling position while his body protested at the sudden change in position, getting vertigo for his troubles. Tony cocked his head to the side. A tentative grin spread across his face, something real this time and without even a shade of remorse; Steve found himself suddenly in the air, his knees leaving the carpet in one fell swoop. He dangled in Tony’s grasp, his stomach rolling as he tried to steady himself with nothing to latch on to aside from the man in front of him. He inadvertently swung closer to Tony, colliding with Tony’s chest, his chin smacking into bone.

Tony smirked; Steve struggled against gravity, feet dangling a good inch off the ground, furious.

“Jeeze, you’re so small!” Tony laughed.

“What the hell is wrong with you –” Steve sputtered.

Tony’s eyes flickered to the left; he dropped Steve like a hot potato, laughing and edging towards the door, biting his lower lip. He started looking around so fast Steve was sure he would give himself whiplash, shuffling his feet every so often, scratching idly at the ankle of his opposite foot with his big toe.

“I think I need a drink.” Tony mumbled.

Steve stared up at him from his position on the floor, limbs tangled and throbbing from the impact; he hadn’t even hit anything solid on the way down, but his body seemed to think he had dropped himself out of a second floor window.

A drink? Tony needed a drink?

“Yeah… I think I really need a drink.” Tony muttered to himself.

This was Sober Tony, Steve realized after a startling moment of clarity. There were two different Tonys and the version standing in front of him hadn’t been around the night before; apparently they didn’t share playbooks either.

Sober Tony.

Drunk Tony.

He had seen quite a few drunks in his time, had fought and grown up with his share of angry ones and sad ones. Sometimes, old Mr. Anderhadden across the street had broken down crying in the street when he was drunk, and even Mrs. Anderhadden couldn’t get him to quiet down. Steve’s mother, and quite a handful of the other neighbors had called the police about him, but they had never really been able to do anything about it. He had never thought that there would be such a
Tony had gotten drunk around him before too, but Tony had always been Tony when he was drunk, and it was a rare occasion when he was drunk; he had had several semi-serious discussions with the engineer in his intoxicated state, and the next day, Tony would be able to parrot back whatever they had been talking back with nothing more than a groan for coffee and a sullen need to spend some quality time with a few doughnuts. But this, this was different. Tony had never been like this before. The man standing in front of him was a completely different person from the night before. He was tentative, even though he had just dragged Steve up off the floor and laughed about it. The man from the night before had been boisterous, a real party animal with no respect for personal boundaries.

Tony scrubbed his hand over his beard and focused his attention entirely on Steve. “So uh… are we going to go eat then?” Tony asked the nervous smile returning.

Steve rolled his shoulders, rubbing his thumbs against his forehead. He couldn’t exactly blame Tony for not being what he had expected; this was certainly Tony, but it wasn’t his Tony, that was for sure. Tony wasn’t the only one who was different from the dreams; hell, Steve wasn’t the same guy either, but that didn’t mean it was a bad thing. He didn’t approve of the drinking, didn’t like the idea of anyone getting that plastered, but that was Tony’s choice to make and not his. It had probably been a few beers before meeting company – nothing he hadn’t seen from the Howling Commandos before their next mission; liquor to calm the nerves. Tony probably hadn’t even intended to get that drunk. He had said so himself – he hadn’t wanted to end up in Steve’s bed like that. He would just have to give the guy the benefit of the doubt. He had made a bad first impression just like Tony but it could be fixed with some hard work.

Steve stood up, stretching out from toe to finger, easing the pain in his muscles one movement at a time. He watched Tony as he moved, digging at his shoulder with stiff fingers. The man was a little abrasive, but it wasn’t as if Tony hadn’t been like that before; the man was Tony after all, just a different Tony than he was used to. This was oddly familiar, a dance he knew the steps to even if there wasn’t the same music as before.

“Did you eat yet?” Steve asked, stretching and slinking towards Tony.

Tony shook his head but didn’t say anything. He began to back out of the room, stepping whenever Steve did, not watching where he was going; even going backwards, he was balanced, cautious but in control. At least he wasn’t going to back into anything by accident. Steve didn’t want to have to go back to the hospital for stitches. Dahlia would skin him alive, even if it wasn’t him getting said stitches.

He took two quick hops forwards and grabbed Tony by the arm, using his momentum to spin Tony around; Tony didn’t seem to mind the touch on his arm for the moment, so he pressed his luck and pushed against the flat of Tony’s back, shifting them both down the hallway towards the kitchen. He had ferried Tony to the kitchen like this back in his dream-memories, back when Tony had been without food or coffee for too long. Usually it ended up being Steve walking with Tony thrown over his shoulder giggling into his neck. It was startling to be looking up at Tony, with Tony having to stoop to lock eyes with him.

“Hey!” Tony protested with a yelp as they made it to the kitchen, stumbling along in front of Steve. He didn’t lose his calm confused smile as their feet touched linoleum, simply letting himself be moved.
The kitchen was barren, devoid of anything homey save a well-used looking coffee machine and a
dining room table complete with rickety looking chairs; all of it had seen better days, and the coffee
machine happened to be the only thing in the room that looked as if it had been made in the current
century. Everything had a scavenged quality to it, likely having been rescued from someplace else,
possibly from someone’s grandmother’s garage. There were two chipped plates of bacon and eggs
sitting on the dining room table nestled in the corner of the kitchen waiting for them. The plates
might have been Maria’s from before her marriage; they certainly looked old enough to have been
around then.

Tony had apparently taken the time to lay out breakfast before he realized that Steve wasn’t standing
in the kitchen behind him anymore. Why had he done that? Why hadn’t he just gotten himself a cup
of coffee and started eating? Actually, there didn’t seem to be any empty coffee mugs lying around,
which was odd, because Tony always had coffee with breakfast. Steve looked around and noted that
the coffee pot wasn’t even turned on; had he forgotten, or simply not wanted any?

He steered Tony towards one of the chairs, letting him go and then sat down in the opposite one, feet
dangling an inch above the ground. He looked around for his cutlery and pulled a bent fork out from
under his plate. He raised an eyebrow at Tony, who shrugged and sat down in his own chair,
rummaging around for his own misshapen cutlery, one eye still glued on Steve.

“You’re pushy.” Tony grumbled, starting in on his eggs.

“I have to be. I’m small, remember?” Steve growled.

This Tony was definitely something different. Not bad, certainly confusing, but not bad. Yes, Tony
had groped him and then fallen asleep on him the previous night, but it hadn’t exactly been like it had
been some kind of wicked plan; it hadn’t reached Howard levels of horrible, just a misstep on
Tony’s part.

Tony had been like that back before they had started dating – in his dream-memories. Sometimes he
just decided to curl up with someone if he was feeling down; he did the same thing if he thought
someone else was feeling blue and needed some help getting out of their funk. Steve had walked in
on quite a few impromptu hugs, cuddles and naps between Tony and the other Avengers, and while
it had been annoying at first, Steve had grown fond of the way Tony looked out for everyone.

Of course this wasn’t that Tony now was it? He felt weary down to his very bones. He reluctantly
remind himself that while it had been nice to feel Tony wrapped around him again, it hadn’t meant
anything; they weren’t dating.

“So uh… I guess you’re going to be here for a while huh?” Tony asked through a mouthful of eggs.

Steve nodded slowly in agreement, poking at his bacon; it shattered into crooked pieces, having been
extremely overcooked. He ate it anyways despite the blackened edges, nibbling through each bite so
that he didn’t break his teeth. It was still bacon, even if it was a little more crunchy than usual; it
didn’t do much to assuage the melancholy in his heart, but it gave him something to focus on instead.

“What were you living before? He mentioned something about you being in a hospital. You’re not
some kind of whack-job, are you?” Tony asked, trying to make a joke out of it by smiling that funny
smile again. He looked far too suspicious for it to be taken as anything said in jest though. Steve
wanted to hang his head again.

“Who’s he?” Steve asked instead.

“Him – Howard.” Tony’s lip twitched.
“Oh… What about Howard?” Steve asked.

The reaction was instantaneous. Tony’s lip twitched again, his eyes narrowing. “I’m not talking about him. I asked you where you were living before.” Tony huffed.

“I was in the hospital.” Steve frowned.

“I know that – What kind of hospital was it? He didn’t say, not that I expected him to tell me anyways. Do I have to start sleeping with a baseball bat by my bed or something? Did you kill somebody or something?” Tony snapped.

Steve stared in distress down at his burnt bacon bits.

Was that what Tony had been expecting of him when he had come to stay? Tony had expected him to be some kind of monster? What kind of people had Howard been bringing over before him?

He could understand Tony’s apprehension of strangers all too well; he had felt it every day he had gone into his high school, and every day he had gone into a movie theatre. If a stranger had suddenly shown up at his doorsteps and had been forced on him, he would have been feeling pretty uncomfortable too. He could just imagine what kind of things were going through Tony’s head right about now, all put there because Steve had agreed to stay without even thinking about what would happen when he got there. Tony didn’t even know who he was, and if he hadn’t had any choice in the matter... oh.

Was it true?

Did Tony really think he needed to sleep with a baseball bat by his bed?

Did he look that bad? Did he seem that unhinged?

“Hello? Crazy guy?” Tony grunted, tapping Steve’s plate with his fork. Steve went from pasty white to faintly pink, realizing that he had been caught sleeping at the wheel. He would never hurt Tony! Although Tony didn’t exactly know that, now did he?

“Sorry? I got lost in thought there for a second.” Steve sighed, rubbing his eyes.

“I was asking you if you were a whack-job. You know – a former mental patient? Did you fly from the cuckoo’s nest or something? The whole hospital thing –”

“It was pretty vague, I know. I was in a coma for seventy years.” Steve said, chasing the last of the bits of bacon around the plate with his fork, not looking up. Saying it aloud made him feel as if he might actually be an escaped mental patient; it certainly sounded crazy enough. How many people survived comas? Probably not many… And how many lived that long and woke up after seventy years of uninterrupted slumber? He wasn’t sure he would have believed it either.

“Seventy years – What the… how are you…” Tony gestured at Steve with his fork, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

“I was the first recipient of the Super Soldier Serum during World War II. You know – the stuff that made…” Steve sighed, stabbing a lumpy chunk of eggs with a little more viciousness than was strictly necessary. “Captain America.”

“Captain America?” Tony gaped in awe. His face was flushed when Steve glanced up from his plate. Tony coughed and looked away, not quite willing to meet Steve’s gaze. “I mean it’s not like I’m some kind of fanboy or something…” Tony mumbled.
“It’s not a big deal if you are. Captain America… was pretty great.” Steve said, peering morbidly down at his empty plate. Talking about Captain America was harder than he had thought it would be. It stung to hear the words Captain America, knowing that they were associated with Bucky instead of himself – Bucky, who hadn’t even had the nerve to visit him in the hospital. Steve wasn’t bitter about that, or at least he tried to tell himself that he wasn’t. It wasn’t as if he didn’t know the responsibilities that came with being Captain America. Bucky had things to do that were much more important than coming for a visit with his old friend in the hospital. Ok yes, so he did feel a little bitter, but it wasn’t as if he didn’t have a good reason. Bucky had promised to visit – twice! And he hadn’t shown up either time!

“What do you mean was? He’s amazing –” Tony sputtered, pushing away his plate; the scraping noise caused Steve to look up again, alarmed. Tony’s looked practically feral, mouth half opened with his teeth bared.

“I’m not saying that he isn’t – I’m just… It…” Steve set his fork down. He was thankful for the meal even though it had been like eating out of an ashtray. He was at a loss of what to do, with nothing left to occupy his hands. He drummed his fingers on the table, trying to gather his thoughts, knowing that every second he spent thinking was another second of silence. He was usually good with inane conversation. Normally, he could talk about whatever needed to be said, be it about the weather, or the way Clint needed to stop super gluing quarters to the floor in the lobby; he liked small talk, would have majored in it if he had completed college. It was just that he hadn’t expected to walk into a sore spot so quickly, and about Captain America no less; it seemed strange that Captain America and Steve Rogers were now separate things in his mind after only one short week. He had been Captain America once. He had been something other than the puny little thing he was now. The change felt too new still, too raw to talk about. He pushed the thoughts away in frustration. What was he supposed to say to Tony? I was Captain America once? Then Tony really would think he was from the loony bin.

“I was the first test subject for the Super Soldier Serum that Dr. Erskine created. It failed. It put me into a coma for some reason.” Steve managed, finding nothing else that fit quite as well. Dr. Erskine’s work for the government was common knowledge these days, easily searchable on the internet. He had read the press releases while in the hospital to see what had changed, and very little actually had, at least where Dr. Erskine’s involvement was concerned. He had a statue now, praised after death for creating the Super Soldier that had helped bring a stop to World War II. He was glad to see that Dr. Erskine was getting the recognition he deserved.

Talking about the serum though, that was different; that wasn’t small talk at all. Including himself in Dr. Erskine’s history felt wrong. He didn’t deserve the attention for what had happened. There were much more interesting things to talk about than his coma. Every time he talked about the coma, he felt worse about what had happened. He had been given a chance to become something better – to become something good, and he had wasted it, lost his chance and caused the only man who had given him a second glance a tarnished reputation because of his failure. Erskine wouldn’t have been angry with him – he knew that, no matter how angry he was with himself. It was lucky that second dose of Serum was there, ready to be used, or else there wouldn’t have been a Captain America to begin with, and then who knew what might have happened?

Steve fiddled with the fork, bending it back into its former shape, careful not to snap the warped metal in half. “That was in 1941. I woke up last week.”

“Oh.” Tony said, the anger leaving him as if the wind had gone by and blown it away. Suddenly he was Tony again, the man that Steve had been talking with minutes beforehand; a concerned and cautious man trying to get what was going on.
“So you’re really old? Just like Cap? You just don’t look like it because of the serum? You’re all
puny.” Tony said, gesturing with a piece of bacon in one hand.

“Puny?” Steve said, his eye twitching.

“Yeah, you know… small. In stature.” Tony said, clearing his throat. “So it didn’t work at all?
Except for the whole making you sort of immortal thing?”

“It fixed my old health problems, and I guess I heal a little faster now. They didn’t really explain
anything more and I’m just starting to get the hang of things again… Look, I’m sorry if I say
something offensive. It’s… I…” Steve said.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it eventually. Cap sure did.” Tony said
brightly, pushing back his chair.

Was this some kind of test? Or was it some kind of game? He used to read people’s moods in their
postures, but Tony had flipped through those like a child with a picture book; there had been too
many different faces in such a short period of time to make any sense of it. Was Tony concerned or
not?

Tony strode over to the fridge and snagged a beer that was stuffed in the door shelf beside some
condiments, settling back down in his chair with the bottle set out in front of him. He slid it back and
forth between his hands, leaving a wet streak across the tabletop as he retrieved a bottle opener from
somewhere hidden. He popped off the metal cap, tipping the bottle back to take a long gulp.

Steve frowned at Tony’s half-finished plate; Tony had barely eaten anything, and now here he was
drinking. It looked more like he had shoved everything around on his plate, making a mountain of
squashed food particles, instead of actually eating anything.

Steve squinted at the square clock on the far wall barely able to make out the time.

*Good god* – What the hell was this? Millar time?

“It’s *nine in the morning* Tony. Should you *really* be drinking that?” Steve asked, crossing his arms
over his chest. It came out a *rad* more judgemental than he intended. He had wanted it to be a more
casual, *dry* comment, but his inner Captain America had come calling again, apparently not dead
even though his body was.

He didn’t expect Tony’s reaction; Steve had expected sarcasm and maybe a flippant comment about
his mother being some kind of diseased whore. Instead, Tony went very still, then he stood up and
left the room, bottle clutched to his chest.

His eyes were empty and devoid of life.

He didn’t say a word.

Steve stared after him, horrified.

“Tony! *Wait!* I didn’t mean –”

Tony didn’t hear him.

Steve cursed himself.

Why had he commented on the drinking? Why had he been so stupid? He should have kept his trap
shut – what was it his business to go around telling Tony off? They didn’t even know each other – a little voice whispered in his ear ‘oh but you do know him’ and he cringed, wanting to bang his head on the table to get it to stop.

No.

He didn’t know Tony.

No matter how familiar the face, the eyes and the smile, this wasn’t the man he knew. He couldn’t just say things like that anymore. Tony didn’t know him; he didn’t know that Steve meant it because he cared, hearing only the condescension and not the worry. Oh jeeze, Howard probably said things like this to Tony every time he visited! Now he was just like Howard, and that was so much worse. He wished that he could go back in time and take the words back, but it was too late now. Tony was gone, hiding somewhere in the house licking his wounds, and he wasn’t going to appreciate being hunted down even if it was for an apology; he hadn’t exactly looked approachable to begin with, but that look in his eyes had been heartbreaking. He wanted to gather Tony up in his arms and kiss that look away, to chase it off forever, but it was him who had caused the hurt – he who had gone off talking without thinking again.

It was better to give Tony some space. He had done enough damage already as it was.

Steve scooted out of his chair, needing to do something to calm himself. He busied himself with clearing away the remains of breakfast, hands shaking pathetically from the weight of his plate. He wouldn’t know what to say if he even caught up with Tony anyways. What he said might just make things worse, although how, he wasn’t sure.

Steve cleaned up their dishes, scraping Tony’s plate into the broken down garbage can he found under the sink; while he hated wasting good food, it would be rock solid if he just left it out to wait for Tony’s return. He was tempted for a brief moment to just leave it there on the table, annoyed with himself more than anything else. He had messed things up again, and it wasn’t even half an hour since the first screw-up of the morning! He wanted to punch something, preferably something hard and breakable but he didn’t even have a punching bag to assault anymore, so that was out of the question. He felt yet another stab of pain in his gut. He had lost it all, hadn’t he? He didn’t even have a photo album to his name anymore, just a few bags full of stuff Howard had gifted him with, and he didn’t even know what was in those bags. All the rest of it, all the thing he had collected and saved over the years were gone, lost to the ravages of time or stuck in storage in Howard’s mansion never to be seen again. All his old sketchbooks, all the dime store pulp fictions he had saved from being binned, all of it gone. What a waste.

Steve put the plates and used cutlery down on the counter and then stared forlornly into the empty sink.

What had he been thinking when he had agreed to leave the hospital early? At least there he would have been able to play with the cat, or maybe get one of the nurses to lend him something to read. Things were different now; the world wasn’t like it had been in his memories. Things hadn’t been exactly easy then either, but they had been straightforward for the most part. Tony had been straightforward; his life had been straightforward. He had hunted down the bad guys, the bullies and the tyrants and it had been just fine, pleasant even. He had a friend and a lover in Tony. They had talked about everything, about every nightmare and every loss. Most days had been good, chatting about the way the coffee tasted in the morning when Bruce made it, or the way Natasha hadn’t glared at someone for the first time. It had been soothing, having those talks, whispered conversations at five in the morning because no one had been able to sleep in past then, too many nightmares haunting all of them to let them sleep in peace.
And Tony, well Tony hadn’t really hidden anything from him in a long time, and Steve in turn had never had to hide his feelings or thoughts from Tony. They had been inseparable and now… well now what was he supposed to do when his other half was gone?

Steve leaned against the counter, elbows resting against the cold metal edge of the sink, shivering as the cold wormed its way through his limbs. He had hoped that he would find a Tony just like his had been; he had hoped he would find Tony.

He could try and see what this world had for him, if he really wanted to put himself out there again; he could try with this Tony, maybe. Things might be great. He might get that relationship back eventually, if he really worked at it and if Tony grew to like him.

But what happened if it turned out badly?

He wasn’t sure he could handle being alone again – being without Tony and the other Avengers would be worse than death. That was it though; he was already alone. He had already lost the Avengers, and Tony wasn’t on the same page as him either. He had nothing to lose in this, and everything to gain. It all came down to one little question. Did he want to do something about the way things were? Did he want to take a chance? He didn’t want to sit around and wait like some useless lump; he could go up over that hill if he wanted to, whenever he wanted. There was nothing stopping him, nothing holding him back.

He had options, didn’t he? It wasn’t like he would be going into this blind. He was better at this than he had been before. He wasn’t hopeless at showing emotion and he was definitely comfortable with showing affection in public now.

He did want some kind of relationship with this Tony. He missed having a friend to rely on – one that would show up and be around all the time.

He could help this Tony out as best he could, try to repair the crap job he had made of it, and see where things went from there. It wasn’t as if he could make his life any worse at this point. He didn’t have anything else to botch, no job, no Avengers, no Captain America to defame. The only thing he had was this new Tony, a stranger who looked like he could use a friend too. It may not have been what he expected, but it could be enough, provided that Tony didn’t hate him of course.

He could work with that. He could make things better.

Steve had worked with a lot less in the past, and this wasn’t just for him. He could help Tony; he could do something good for him somehow. Tony deserved that much. He deserved to have someone around who loved and appreciated him. And maybe, if Steve was lucky, he could get someone like that too someday.

Steve went back to his room to start unpacking his things, feeling jittery down to his very toes. He was going to be staying, and it seemed stupid to be leaving everything all packed up like he was going to sneak off in the middle of the night. Not knowing what was in the bags Howard had brought him was gnawing at him too. He hoped there wasn’t anything… bad inside those suitcases. He wasn’t sure what he would do with a bag full of women’s underwear and porn, which seemed like something Howard would do now that he thought about it.

Steve dragged the first bag to the bed and hefted it up, muscles straining; it was embarrassing just
how heavy a stupid suitcase was now. He was panting and sweaty by the time he finally managed to wrestle the damned thing up onto the mattress, which wasn’t even that high off the ground. He unzipped the bag with shaking hands, feeling woozy; he debated on spending a few minutes face down on the bag to catch his breath, but soldiered on needing to know what was in the thing that could have made it so heavy. The bag contained a large collection of art supplies, most of which were still covered in plastic and price tags, having been stuffed in without thought to how it would all sit; thank god for the weight of those art supplies, because he didn’t think he could handle being beaten by a suitcase full of socks.

Steve gaped at the price tags, horrified that Howard had gone out of his way to spend so much money on him. There had to be a thousand dollars’ worth of stuff in this bag alone! Howard wasn’t the first Stark to buy Steve art supplies of course. Tony had gotten Steve some sketchpads once, but he had been discrete about the prices, trying not to let Steve feel too bad about the fact that a family could have bought groceries for a few months on what it had cost him; Steve had found the price tags balled up in the wastepaper basket in the kitchen later on, and he had been just as horrified by the prices then as he was now. At least Tony had had the decency to try and hide them in the first place.

Steve pulled out sketchbook after sketchbook, stacking them in a neat pile that teetered precariously on the corner of the bed, threatening to tumble down onto the carpet; he counted seventeen blank pads in total, which in of itself was a mind boggling number of sketchpads to own all at once. Howard had probably cleared out a whole shelf all by himself.

Underneath the sketchbooks Steve found packs and packs of drawing implements ranging from pencils, to pens to pastels and coloured pencils. There was almost too much, and he stared open-mouthed at them, looking from pack to pack trying to figure out what had been going through Howard’s mind when he decided that Steve would want crayons. Howard must have just gone through the store with a shopping cart, flinging things in at random.

There was a note at the bottom, wedged amidst a handful of blending stumps and scattered erasers. It simply read: Have Fun! – Howard.

Steve scowled at the note, crumpling it up in his hand; he stuffed it into the bag underneath a pile of erasers. He had a sneaking suspicion that Howard would be going through their household garbage; he felt a little crazy thinking that way, but there was just something about the way Howard had looked at him in the car that made him think that he might not be completely… alone here in his bedroom. Clint had told him all about the paparazzi and their digging through celebrity trash. He wouldn’t have been surprised if SHIELD decided to dig through their trash as well. He snorted, imagining what it would look like if the pair of them started arguing over the trash bags on garbage day. A fist fight wasn’t out of the question; he could just see it now, an agent and Howard Stark punching each other out over a ripped green bag of garbage.

Steve packed everything away again, leaving out a sketchbook and a pack of pencils to practice drawing with, humming to himself. At least he would have something to do now. He could find somewhere in the house to set up and then –

Something cold and hard dropped down on top of Steve’s head. He went rigid, fingers still extended to pull the zipper across the open bag to seal it shut.

“I take it this means that you’re settling in?” Tony asked; his voice was gravely with not a hint of warmth. Steve hadn’t even heard him enter the room.

“I guess so.” Steve said, shifting underneath the cold object on his head; it was a beer bottle he realized, and a frosty one at that. His teeth started chattering and he bit down hard on his lower lip. It
hurt, but at least it stopped the noise of his teeth clicking together.

“Do you mind?” Steve grumbled once he had gotten control over his teeth again.

“Not at all.”

Tony lifted the beer bottle off of Steve’s head and then leaned over him, staring into the bag with mild interest.

“Art supplies? Very kinky.” Tony smirked, taking a swig of cold beer. This bottle was almost full and different brand that Steve didn’t recognize. Ah, so Tony had been to the kitchen again at some point after he had left in order to restock; he would likely be meeting Drunk Tony very soon. Fantastic.

“I used to go to Art College before the war. I wanted to be an illustrator.” Steve explained, zipping up the bag. He dragged the bag off the bed, letting it drop to the floor with a thud and wrestled it over to sit with the others. Tony watched him, following his movements as Steve shuffled across the floor hunched over, arms straining as he dragged the next bag to the bed. Steve’s face flushed; he pretended that it was because he was moving an extremely heavy bag and not because Tony’s eyes had settled momentarily on his backside.

He tried not to think too much about why Tony was now lurking behind him as he got ready to lift the bag up onto the mattress; he needed all the concentration he could get to keep from pitching over. This bag was been much lighter and if he had to guess it was probably packed with clothing. It was still heavy, but far less painful to lift compared to the bag of art supplies; looking at that bag’s contents now, he was surprised he had even gotten it across the room, let alone up onto the bed. He wished that Howard had had the sense to label the bags after he had packed everything. Then he would have at least known what he was getting into before he gave himself a hernia.

Tony snatched the bag from Steve’s hands as he stooped to lift it, tossing it onto the bed with an idle swing of his arms.

“What did you do that for?” Steve wheezed, trying to keep his composure as he caught his breath. Tony smirked around the rim of his beer bottle, lowering it from his lips in order to leer in Steve’s general direction.

“You look like you’re about to pass out. Just thought I’d lend a friendly hand, that’s all.” Tony snorted.

Steve stooped and grabbed the last bag, hefting it to the bed before Tony could snatch it out of his hands again. It was embarrassing enough to be wheezing away like this. He didn’t need Tony carrying things around for him too.

“I was not.” Steve denied, panting. He grabbed the zipper just to hold on to something, pointedly ignoring the quivering of his fingers; he hoped that Tony hadn’t noticed, although it was kind of hard to miss at this point. Tony would have had to be blind to miss it.

“Hm.” Tony murmured. Steve was manhandled out of the way with a squawk when he went to open the bag, Tony shoving in front of him to take his place. He pulled a pile of tailored clothing out of the bag, all of it sealed in plastic with handwritten warranty cards tucked inside; Tony snorted in disbelief, lifting up a pair of underwear, also tailor made, giving those a little wave.

“Wow…” Tony chuckled darkly.

“Oh jeeze…” Steve groaned. He put his face in his hands. He hadn’t thought that Howard would
waste money on tailor made underwear; he hadn’t even known that they made underwear that way. What a waste of money!

“I guess he really likes you, huh?” Tony said, dropping the clothing back into the bag. He sat down beside the bags, chugging his beer now. The smirk had left his face, replaced by a look that almost resembled jealousy or maybe he was just trying not to throw up; it was hard to tell when people were that drunk.

Steve took a better look in the bag while Tony drank, sighing to himself. All the clothing was too formal for everyday use, unless of course he suddenly got a job as a doorman at some posh building. Most of it was designer button-up shirts with matching vests and dress pants; a TV news anchorman would have been pleased with this kind of haul, or maybe a businessman in training. Out of everything there, Steve could only see three shirts, including the one he had on, that would work outside of a banquet; there weren’t any pants that were casual and the only truly salvageable thing was the underwear, and he wasn’t so sure he wanted to touch those with a ten foot pole.

Steve sighed loudly in despair.

This would mean taking a trip to the mall, one of the places he hated most in the world. He had never liked the mall; it was too noisy there, and the people were rude with all their pushing and shoving. They couldn’t keep their hands to themselves, and he had seen quite a few Christmas shoppers literally stealing things from each other’s carts. Shoppers these days didn’t even stop once they walked into someone, and half the time, Steve was surprised that he hadn’t witnessed all out brawls from those zombie-like collisions. It had been hell to go to the mall when he had been Captain America Steve, the man who had been a solid wall of muscle. Going there as Steve Rogers, miniature human being, would be a thousand times worse; at least he wouldn’t have to stand around politely signing autographs anymore. He would probably be stepped on instead, or shoved into a dumpster be it on purpose or by accident. With his luck, he might be shoved into a dumpster that would be then shoved into another dumpster. He didn’t want to know what would come after that, but it would probably be bad.

“Too many big boy clothes, huh?” Tony snorted, setting the beer bottle down on the nightstand beside him. He started doodling in the condensation left behind, finger moving in slow laborious spirals.

“I guess he doesn’t know what normal people wear. All I needed was a couple of pairs of jeans and a few t-shirts…” Steve sighed, shaking his head. He rubbed the back of his neck, glaring at the clothing that, while probably fitting perfectly, would make him look like the distant cousin of the Monopoly Man. All he really needed was a top hat, a monocle and some gloves and the resemblance would have been uncanny.

“You can borrow something of mine for the time being, I guess. It’ll probably look like you’re wearing a dress though.” Tony mumbled, leaning back against the headboard. His position on Steve’s bed was reminiscent of the one he had been in the night before, the sprawl so open it was almost inviting trouble; Steve flushed and focused his attention on the third bag, the one that Tony hadn’t rummaged around in yet.

The third bag, an ugly looking mustard yellow coloured thing, contained a large assortment of clothing, most of which were only semi-useful. Steve’s bankbook and wallet were there lying amongst some powder blue slippers, two pairs of pajamas and a fluffy housecoat that looked like it belonged on a Barbie doll: the housecoat had the word Princess embroidered on the back of it in neon-pink script. He nudged the housecoat with his thumb. Very funny Howard, very funny. The joke was on Howard though, because the fabric was so soft that it seemed to melt under Steve’s
fingertips. It might actually be nice to sit around in every once in a while.

He liked soft things far more than he liked to admit. He missed the comfort of his old pillow, a velvety thing that Tony had gotten from god knows where. Clint had laughed at the fluffy pillow, naming it ‘Stevie-kins’. He had thought about throwing the pillow out, just to stop with the catcalling and whistles when he brought it out to sit with on movie night, but then he had started finding Tony curled up with the pillow when he would come back from long missions for SHIELD and by then dear old Stevie-kins had become more of member of the family rather than a source of irritation. There were quite a few pictures of Stevie-kins on Clint’s camera too, which Steve had always found a little odd. Clint had said they were for Coulson, but he wasn’t really sure if he believed that. Maybe Clint had some kind of pillow fetish no one knew about.

He had tried to keep away from the effeminate things when he had been Captain America Steve, and not Tony’s Steve; it hadn’t really been a choice, more of a panicked attempt at covering up what he had once been like. Bullies had often gone after him for the littlest things and being able to knit hadn’t won him any points with them, even if he did make some of the nicest scarves on the block. So what if he had known how to knit! It hadn’t been that big a deal, but they had blown it so out of proportion that he sometimes felt queasy at the mere thought of yarn.

His mother had taught him about knitting when he was five as a means of keeping him from going outside where he might hurt himself, and while it had been ‘women’s work’, as Mr. Dorn had called it in school, he had enjoyed it. He was good with patterns, and had started learning crochet shortly before his mother had gotten sick for the last time. By the time she had died, he had been able to make gloves and even hats without them ending up like oversized monstrosities. His mother had loved even the worst of his knitting, and had dutifully worn the first glove he had ever made as a hat every winter, claiming that it kept her head warmer than her real hat did. He had never finished the last hat he had made for her, a replacement for the silly glove-hat she had loved so much. It sat in his closet for two years before he was accepted into Project: Rebirth; it was probably nothing but dust and fluff now, if it was still in a box somewhere at all.

Memory lane was a nice place. At least he had a few new ideas to chase down now; he could start up knitting again if he got himself some yarn; they probably wouldn’t beat him up for knitting now. It was almost a relief actually, because it was something he knew how to do, something that hadn’t changed on him while he was sleeping. More importantly it was something that didn’t require the strength he had once almost taken for granted. Anyone could knit, provided that they had to coordination to not stab themselves in the eye with a knitting needle.

“Princess?” Tony laughed, squinting to make out the letters on the housecoat. Steve took it out of the bag and set it aside. The rest of it could go in the one dresser the room had, where it belonged, out of sight.

“I guess you want to go to the mall or something, huh?”

“I guess so.” Steve agreed.

“I don’t really want to go.” Tony grumbled.

“Neither do I.”

“Yeah. Right, sure you don’t.”

While Tony seemed to like making himself at home with Steve’s things, he didn’t seem to be trying to make himself endearing in any shape or form. Did he want to get into a fight or something again? Was that why he had stumbled into Steve’s room like this?
“I don’t really like the mall.” Steve shrugged.

Tony raised an eyebrow, arms crossed over his chest, clearly disliking that response.

“It’s not that bad. I can make due –” Steve said, wishing that there was some way to outright ask Tony what was going on without seeming rude; no matter what he said it still felt like he was butting into Tony’s business, even when it was Tony asking the questions and suggesting solutions.

“You’ll need clothing for when we go to work on Monday. I’m not having you showing up there looking like some kind of spoiled brat or hobo – and you’re definitely not showing up in the buff, not matter how cute you are.” Tony cut in with a grumble, sitting up to grab his beer again. He took a long draught from the bottle, draining it, and then put it back down empty, eyes never leaving Steve’s face once. That was starting to get… for the lack of a better word… creepy.

“I’m going to work with you on Monday?” Steve asked, bewildered. What would the point be in him going to work with Tony? Tony was an engineer – and Steve, well Steve could follow instructions but he didn’t think he was going to be of much use unless Tony needed someone to take notes or maybe go photocopy things. It wasn’t like he could do the heavy lifting anymore, and he certainly didn’t have any fancy degrees to his name.

“Of course you’re going to work with me. No offense squirt, but I’m not leaving you alone here – you’re liable to break a leg or get trapped under something heavy, and then he’ll chew me out and I’ll never hear the end of it.” Tony growled.

Steve sat on the edge of the bed and scowled, determinedly not rising to the bait; he could put up with Tony’s rude sense of humor. It wasn’t like he was new to this particular tango. Tony had been plenty rude before – in the dream-world, at least. He kept his back to Tony, watching the carpet in front of him just so that he could have something to focus on that wouldn’t stare back at him so intensely. He had been right then; Tony didn’t want him around. He was some kind of burden – a pet to be taken care of because it had been ordered to happen, something Howard had thought might be good company but nothing more than that.

Tony poked Steve in the small of the back with his big toe. Steve grimaced.

“So do you want to go now or what?” Tony asked, sounding annoyed and or mournful. Steve didn’t have the heart to turn around and check which it actually was, too drained emotionally and physically to muster the willpower to move again.

“How are we going to get there?” Steve asked, resigned to his fate. Going to the mall was bad enough, but dragging a now drunk Tony with him through crowds of people was a disaster waiting to happen. By Steve’s calculations, Tony had been drinking steadily since breakfast, although he wasn’t quite sure how much had actually been consumed. There was no way he was going to get into a car with Tony behind the wheel, assuming of course that this Tony even had a car to begin with. He hadn’t seen one in the driveway, and he hadn’t seen a garage when they had driven up either, which was yet another thing to add to his growing list of ‘strange things’. Most houses as big as Tony’s had their own garage; No one with money parked their car outside where rain or god forbid, birds could befoul it, which made it odd that there wasn’t anything around for a car to park in aside from the driveway. He hoped that Tony hadn’t driven drunk into the thing.

“I’ll give Happy a call and he’ll drive us out there.” Tony said with a burp. Steve watched out of the corner of his eye as Tony wipe his mouth on his hand, more than a little mournful now himself. He didn’t mind seeing Happy again, but with Happy came Howard and he really didn’t feel up to seeing Howard just yet – or ever again, for that matter. He sure hoped that Howard would have meeting today, many, long meetings, if possible. If they were lucky, the board of directors would make a
stink about something big and keep him there all day long.

“Maybe I should go take a shower or something.” Steve said. He meant to add an ‘and you should sober up a bit before we go’ to the end of the sentence, but tactfully kept it to himself.

“Yeah, you should probably do that. You look a little bit like you crawled out from under someone.” Tony sneered.

It had been meant to be crude of course, to try and draw him into some kind of fight. Maybe Tony expected Steve to lash out at him. Maybe he even wanted Steve to. Who wouldn’t want to get into a fight with a scrawny little guy like Steve? It wouldn’t be hard to win, that was for sure. Anger, however, seemed like a world away to Steve. Tony was right of course, even if it had just been a comment made out of spite. Here he was, not a day out of the hospital where he had been having showers only when the nurse had been able to pencil them in for him. The rest of the time he had been forced to endure uncomfortable sponge baths that didn’t do nearly enough; he probably smelled awful, and he certainly felt dirty.

“Alright.” Steve said.

He shuffled off into the bathroom, putting the door in between himself and Tony. He leaned back against the closed door, taking in short shallow breaths, trying not to hyperventilate and cry at the same time. He was a grown man. Grown men did not cry because their dream-lover’s living counterpart was an asshole. He could cry later, he had things to do; he had to get ready to go into hell itself, and he didn’t have time stop to cry about it. Steve sniffled once and then pushed away from the door, managing to keep the tears in. He could always cry in the shower. No one would know then. That was what he would do. He would take a shower, and then he would feel better.

Maybe.

Steve undressed in a slow, methodical rhythm, not wanting to look at himself. He dumped his clothing into a crumpled pile on the floor one piece at a time and then scoured the room for some shampoo and soap. The door snapped open behind him and with a rather girlish yell Steve quickly covered his lower half with a towel yanked off of the towel bar behind him.

Tony looked him up and down, lips twitching, gesturing to the cupboard under the sink.

“I forgot to tell you that the shampoo and stuff is under the sink.” Tony said, slinking further into the room without a care in the world.

Steve really wished that he had locked the door. He held the towel tight against his body, shivering as the cold claimed his mostly naked body.

“You could have told me that through the door!” Steve snapped, his cheeks turning bright red.

“But then I wouldn’t get to see you without a shirt on!” Tony cackled, grinning from ear to ear.

Steve backed up in surprise, almost tumbling into the tub in his haste to retreat. Tony snagged him by the shoulder, keeping him from falling by grabbing Steve’s upper arm; his hand was warm against Steve’s bare skin, his callouses familiar and yet alien.

Tony’s eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly, in awe that his *entire hand* could wrap around Steve’s upper arm; he didn’t seem to notice that Steve was cold, or that he was staring down at a mostly naked stranger. He didn’t notice the strange way Steve was staring up at him either, eyes wide and filled with longing.
“You really are tiny, aren’t you?” Tony said.

Why did Tony seem so hell-bent on poking at his size? It wasn’t like Tony was a giant either – sure, he had to crane his neck to look Tony in the eye, but it wasn’t like they were that far apart in height!

“So what!” Steve said angrily, pulling free from Tony’s grasp.

Did Tony have no shame? Accosting someone – a guest even – in their bathroom while they were trying to take a shower was just plain rude! Did Tony have no shame? Steve had never felt so angry before, not since the days before he had – no. Steve let out a choked grunt, the anger melting away, tears welling up in his eyes without his permission.

He hadn’t ever had any of those days in his memories. He hadn’t spent months pining over Tony, not understanding his feelings; he hadn’t spent months in love with him either. This was a different Tony and this was a different time. He had to remember that. He had to focus on something else, or else he would break and be of no use to anyone. He couldn’t keep jumping between dreams and reality like this – it wasn’t right.

So Steve did what he thought might get Tony to back off. It was a petty move, one that he didn’t really think about before he did it. He dropped the towel onto the floor and clambered into the shower, pulling the shower curtain around him as he fumbled to turn on the hot water; he didn’t regret the nudity. What he did regret was turning the shower on while he was standing directly under the spray. Steve spent a few precious seconds flattened against the wall before he was able to creep free to adjust the strength of the spray again. He spat out water, idly remembering that he didn’t have asthma anymore and relaxed, letting the warm water melt away the cold. At least he wouldn’t choke to death on the steam. The last thing he needed was to spend the next fifteen minutes sitting down on the floor with his head between his knees trying to catch what little breath came.

“Um… does this mean you want me to get you the shampoo and etcetera?” Tony asked, his voice muffled by the sound of the water crashing into the bathmat. Steve could just make Tony out through the shower curtain, standing there with his hands on his hips, illuminated by the lights above the mirror.

“Yes please.” Steve called out, almost having to shout to be heard. He dunked his head under the spray, spitting out water when it went in his mouth and up his nose and then shook like a wet dog. He squinted in the spray, his hair plastered against the top of his head. He almost shouted again when Tony peeked around the curtain, holding out a bar of white soap.

“Here.”

Tony placed two bottles on the side of the tub with one hand, waiting for Steve to take the soap from the other, half leaning over the lip of the tub; he blinked owlishly, wiping his face on his sleeve when Steve took the bar of soap, nodding curtly to him. Tony gave him one more quick glance before abruptly pulling his head out and retreating, his cheeks faintly pink.

Apparently Tony did have a small sense of decency after all. At least he hadn’t crawled in with him.

What Steve expected to hear next was the sound of the door opening and closing. What he did not expect to hear the sound of Tony hopping up onto the counter to sit perched beside the sink.

“You’re not leaving?” Steve grumbled in exasperation, sneaking a peek around the curtain.

“Why would I leave?” Tony asked, perplexed. “You might need something else.”

Steve blinked and retreated back under the shower, letting the water drip down over his head. That
had sounded like a genuine reason, not sarcasm. He had assumed that Tony would have been taught some kind of manners growing up regarding social situations such as when not to harass strangers who were in the shower. Yet here Tony was, sitting on the counter across from the bathtub, waiting patiently for Steve to finish his shower or issue an order. This was just getting weirder and weirder.

“Can I ask you a question?” Steve asked, lathering himself with soap. He forced himself to move slowly even though he could tell that Tony was watching him through the shower curtain; he blushed, glad that the heat of the water and the curtain covered up the evidence, hoping to god that he wouldn’t have any other unwanted evidence popping up. This shower might turn very cold very fast.

“I think you just did.”

“Very funny.”

“Ask away then.”

Steve hesitated for a moment; there was nothing to lose by asking, so he might as well just bite the bullet.

“What was it like for you growing up?” Steve asked.

Tony didn’t responding for several minutes, humming and hawing over the question as if it were some kind of impossible math equation he was being forced to solve. Steve was almost certain that he had fallen asleep or passed out when he finally cleared his throat and decided to answer.

“Well, I spent a lot of the day doing my own thing except for when I was in school. I was supposed to go to boarding school, but Cap suggested to him that it would be better if I grew up like a normal kid, so he stuck me in a private school in town instead. Then after I graduated from there, I went to university. He paid for it all, although I had to pay him back afterwards.” Tony said.

“So you were alone most of the time? Howard just left you by yourself all day? What about Jarvis? Wasn’t he there to take care of you?” Steve asked, washing the soap out of his eyes. He rubbed shampoo into his hair, relishing the way it smelled like mint and green apples; he had used this shampoo before, he realized. He didn’t remember the brand name, but at least it was something real and not just another false memory; he tried not to feel too excited about that. It was just shampoo after all, nothing to write home about.

“Who’s Jarvis?” Tony asked.

Steve nearly killed himself as he dropped the soap and slid on the escaped bar towards the drain; he flailed as he tried to keep himself from ripping the curtain clean off the hooks, hanging on for dear life to the slick curtains.

Steve steadied himself by clinging to the wall. He had wondered why Tony didn’t have any AI in this house. Jarvis had been modeled after the butler with the same name from Tony’s youth, if Steve remembered correctly. Tony had told him stories, usually when they were drinking hot chocolate with little marshmallows in it; Jarvis had ruled the place from behind the scenes, making hot chocolate and taking names. Maria hadn’t been able to run the place on her own, Tony had said, because Howard wasn’t much help and he kept chasing off the other staff she hired. Jarvis had stuck around no matter what hell he had been put through.

Had there really been a Jarvis? Or had Jarvis just been someone he had imagined up to keep Tony company as a child? It sure seemed like it, and if that was true then who else had he dreamed up? He
wanted to pull out his hair, frustrated that there was so much he didn’t know about Tony’s life.

“Who’s Jarvis?” Tony repeated, sounding tense.

“Sorry… he was a butler I think I used to know. I’m not really sure.” Steve said, scrubbing the shampoo out of his hair and off of the wall where he had nearly brained himself as he regained his balance.

“A butler? Why would you know a butler? You were a poor kid, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was. I used to go to public school, just like Bucky did.”

“What was it like for you?” Tony asked.

“I used to get beat up all the time because I always back talked them when they teased me for being small. I think I was left lying in every dumpster in that school. Not some of my favourite memories, that’s for sure.” Steve said. He purposely left out how he knew Jarvis, feeling bad about having brought it up in the first place. It wasn’t like it was important. The Jarvis that Tony would have known was probably dead now at any rate if he had existed at all.

“Hey! I got stuffed in a couple of dumpsters too!” Tony said blithely.

“Why did they stuff you in a dumpster?”

“They claimed it was because I was a smartass, that and they didn’t appreciate me showing off my impressive brain. Cap told me that I needed to just blend in and they would leave me alone. I tried taking his advice and all, but it didn’t help much, well, at least not until I graduated and went off to M.I.T. Then they all left me the hell alone and I could work on my projects and my robots in peace. M.I.T was nice. It was the only place I got any descent sleep.” Tony mused. Steve could hear him drumming his fingers on the countertop from inside the shower; the sound was oddly hypnotic.

“What was M.I.T like? It sounds like you had a lot of fun there.” Steve asked.

“M.I.T was nice.” Tony repeated in monotone.

“What did you study?”

“M.I.T was nice.” Tony said again, arms crossing over his chest.

That was the end of that then. He hadn’t expected Tony to open up and chat like they were best friends, but it would have been nice to hear a few more stories. It wasn’t like he hadn’t been willing to reciprocate.

Bucky had been involved in Tony’s upbringing; that was something Steve hadn’t expected to hear. He had expected Bucky to maybe visit Tony on birthdays, or on special occasions, but this was something else. Bucky had given Tony advice? Bucky had never really gotten along with children before – at least not the spoiled rich kids, as he called them. Bucky and Howard hadn’t ever seen eye to eye on anything, and putting a child in between that kind of ferocious squabbling seemed unusually cruel. Had they played nice in front of Tony, hiding the animosity? Or had it been an all-out war between them no matter who was around? The way Tony had talked about Captain America before in the kitchen made Steve think that Bucky had played nice, offered friendship and advice freely, so it couldn’t have been that. He and Howard must have played nice, an uneasy alliance perhaps. The only thing else they had seemingly done together was visiting Steve when he was in a coma, and even that had ended in fights. They had been two spitting cobras fighting for control of a comatose body; his comatose body. He really hoped that Tony hadn’t had to see any of that
Bucky’s advice wasn’t quite what Steve had expected to hear either. The Bucky that Steve had known would *never* have told a kid being bullied to hide in the shadows and hope that it went away. The Bucky that Steve remembered, the man who helped him get through all the broken noses and scraped up shins, *should* have told Tony to fight for whatever he believed and to never give up. Bucky should have gone to the school and talked to the kids to get them to back off, or at the very least someone should have done something about it. Bucky had always been very adamant about sticking up for things he believed in even if it looked like he was going to lose the argument; it usually ended up with Bucky throwing punches left and right. Not that fist fights were the only way to deal with problems of course, but Bucky had always gone that way and Steve had often tagged along.

Did he really even know Bucky anymore? None of this made any sense. He knew that people could change over time, but he couldn’t believe that Bucky would ever do something that might make a child’s life worse *intentionally*. Something else had to have been going on in the background – something that Tony hadn’t known about, but what? And why had Howard agreed to send Tony to a public school to begin with? Howard had gone to some Ivy League pre-schools, or so he had said. It seemed odd that he would put his son in public school if he had the money for private.

“What was your Art College like?” Tony asked suddenly.

Steve lurched and caught himself on the shower curtain again, almost slipping despite the presence of the plastic bathmat firmly under his feet. He hated being so awkward, so horribly unbalanced all the time. He was taking a shower for Pete’s sake, not ice skating! It wasn’t that complicated to just *stand* still under the shower!

“Well… well from what I remember everything was very relaxed. Everyone was going through the same sort of problems, so we helped each other out when we needed life models and art supplies. It was a pain to get a hold of paper during the war, and pencils were expensive too. Art supplies in general weren’t all that well… *affordable.*” Steve managed, slightly out of breath.

“I find it hard to believe that they were all a bunch of Saints.” Tony snorted.

“Oh they weren’t *Saints*. They stole from the school when they were down on their luck, just like everybody else. Once, I even had my sketchbook swiped right out of my bag when I was talking with one of the instructors. No, they definitely weren’t Saints. Everyone was pretty desperate back then. The fees were almost too much to keep up with, so people even tried haggling over broken supplies just to get something to work with. I had to work three jobs to just to keep going to classes, and when the war *really* hit I ended up having to drop out because I couldn’t keep up with the payments, rent and food. I could do two, but not all three. I figured that the army was the way to go after that – I wanted to do some good in the world. Make my mark or something. Kept failing the physicals though, so if Dr. Erskine hadn’t let me in I would probably have been left out of the whole war. I was too small to do anything useful they said.” Steve said.

“They picked a skinny little guy like you for Project: Rebirth? They must have been asking for trouble. You’re lucky you didn’t get drained dry when they took blood samples.” Tony chuckled.

“Well it wasn’t as if I had a choice!” Steve growled. “What was I going to do with my life? I couldn’t exactly pay for college anymore and then Bucky went off and got himself *drafted* – it was go into the army or stay at home alone watching from the sidelines while everyone I knew died or did their part in the factories. I was stuck. I couldn’t even *get* a factory job because of all my allergies. I almost passed out once trying to sweep the *floor.*” Steve could still remember the hours spent pleading for with the floor managers of three different factories, only to be turned away every
time. Being left out had made his blood boil.

“You could have settled down or something. Found a job somewhere else. You seem nice enough. Someone would have hired you. You could have had… I don’t know… kids? White picket fence? A chicken in a pot or something?”

“With who? No one was going to look twice at a beanpole like me even with all the other guys off at war. Besides… I wasn’t all that interested at the time.” Steve turned the water off, opening the curtain half way. He stooped to retrieve the towel he had dropped on the carpet in front of the tub.

“You didn’t use conditioner.” Tony said, almost sounding uninterested despite having pointed it out.

Steve wrapped the towel tightly around his waist and stepped out of the tub, trying to tell himself that he didn’t have to be ashamed of standing naked in front of Tony. He had been in the army after all, and they had showered together all the time. Of course none of those soldiers had openly stared at one another while they were toweling off, and none of them had had a smirk on their faces when they had seen him naked. Well, some of them had smirked, but none of them had openly gawked at him; at least he hadn’t caught them at it, anyways.

“It’s fine. I don’t really need it anyways – not like anyone is going to notice.” Steve grumbled, trying to dry himself off without pulling the towel away from the lower half of his body. He flushed when he saw Tony eyeballing him again and hid his face in the towel, patting his forehead dry; the faint breeze against his backside made him break out with goose bumps and he cursed them with all his heart, hoping that Tony couldn’t see.

“You want me to get you a shirt from my stuff? I don’t have anything in boy’s large, but it should do until we get you something more your size.” Tony said, slipping off of the counter. He cast Steve a strange look before walking out of the bathroom, leaving Steve alone at last.

Steve caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and glared at himself.

Steve fidgeted as he sat squashed beside Tony in the backseat of a cherry-red Lincoln town car; he twiddled his thumbs, praying for the traffic to be light. Getting stuck in a car with Tony Stark was starting to look like some kind of death sentence. The man couldn’t stop twitching and staring at him; it was like he had some kind of neurological disorder, and no matter how much Steve squirmed around to try and get comfortable, he couldn’t find a spot where he didn’t feel Tony’s unrelenting gaze. It was unnerving.

Happy had driven up twenty minutes after Steve had finished showering in the flashy Lincoln town car sans Howard, which had been a relief. Tony had grumbled something about the car being there as Howard’s surrogate penis, and Steve had almost choked on the granola bar he had been eating. Steve had to agree with Tony on that one, although the idea of driving around in what was now essentially dubbed ‘Howard’s penis’ made him want to take a taxi instead; that, and he also now wanted to throw up. He had chosen the high road and kept his gagging in check, getting into the car with Tony clambering in after him. What surprised him more than the phallic car joke was that Tony and Happy hadn’t said hello and hadn’t even looked at each other since their cursory nod as they were getting into the car.
Happy parked near main entrance to the mall and informed them that he would be back to pick them up in three hours; he didn’t seem to be all that concerned about sticking to a schedule, but he did seem to be keeping an eye on the clock nonetheless. He turned around in the driver’s seat and handed Steve one of Howard’s bankcards.

“Mr. Stark insists on paying for the new clothing. He feels bad about not getting the tailored stuff right.” Happy said.

“That’s alright… I uh…”

“Take the card. Don’t worry about it.” Happy said, giving Steve a knowing look. “You don’t have a card of your own, right?”

“No… I guess I don’t really have much a choice, do I?” Steve sighed, reluctantly taking the card.

“Probably not.” Happy agreed, unlocking the car doors. “It’s a tap card, so don’t worry about passwords or any of that stuff. He had this one made especially for you.”

Steve was ready to leave the mall before they even arrived; he could tell that Tony wasn’t too happy about being here either, although he was doing a pretty good job of hiding it. It wasn’t that they stood out, or that they were being stared at, on the contrary, Steve had never blended in better than he was at the moment and the same went for Tony. Tony was dressed in a pair of faded jeans and a Black Sabbath t-shirt, both of which were surprisingly tear and stain free. He was also wearing sunglasses, most likely to hide the fact that his eyes were bloodshot as hell from having been drinking all morning; the sunglasses weren’t quite the same as the Ray-Bans he normally wore, but they were similar enough to make Steve’s heart ache.

Steve was dressed in a pair of the brown khaki pants he had found at the very bottom of his bag and one of Tony’s overly large shirts. It had the Stark Industries logo on it, and as Tony had suspected it hung off of Steve as if he were wearing a nightgown from the thirties. Steve didn’t mind. The shirt smelled like Tony with a hint of laundry soap; the shirt didn’t look like it had been worn in a while, so the smell was likely from one of Tony’s better days. That was something Steve would have liked to see, Tony on a good day.

Tony led the way to the nearest department store, a Macy’s, marching through the bustling crowd as if he were a soldier on a mission instead of a hung-over engineer searching for a few good pants. Tony shoved his hands deep in his pockets, and hunched his shoulders; he didn’t stand out in the crowd at all, and he certainly wasn’t trying to draw any attention to himself. Steve kept pace, having to scoot through the crowds at top speed just to keep from getting separated from Tony who walked like he was trying to break the sound barrier.

Steve was almost bowled over when a woman and her daughter stormed past him to get to a sale on shoes, not watching where they were going; he was forced to dart into the nearest row of clothing to get out of the way. This row, unfortunately, ended up being in the bra and panties department; Steve dashed out of the aisle, mortified. One of the female shoppers gave him a dirty look. He stumbled back out into the crowd, casually throwing a flowery bra that had gotten snagged on his shirt back at the rack without looking to see where it landed.

For one terrible moment he couldn’t spot Tony amidst the crowd.
Steve went up on his tiptoes and raised a hand to his eyes, trying to see over the heads of what seemed like a few thousand shoppers, scanning the crowd; Tony grabbed him from behind and Steve nearly jumped out of his skin, yelping.

“Aww, did you get lost?” Tony teased.

“I wasn’t lost.” Steve grumbled.

Tony smirked at him, and dragged him to the one place in the store that would likely have clothing that would fit him: The boy’s department. Steve glowered at all the colourful t-shirts and shorts, irritated by the fact that Tony hadn’t been wrong to start there; all of the clothing on the racks was his size, and all of it couldn’t have been mistaken for anything other than children’s clothing. He hadn’t had problems like this when he had been younger and once he had had the serum – well… it was sufficient to say that he had never really had a problem with clothing shopping afterwards, even though he had been big in the shoulders by then and taller than most people.

One look at the children’s clothing made it very clear to Steve just how tiny he was. He fumed silently as he looked around for something that didn’t look so tacky, starting with the shirts. He pulled one off the rack and held it out in front of himself, comparing sizes. Tony’s shirt was massive and it made the clothing in his hand seemed miniscule, as if someone had grabbed it and shrunk it down for a toy and then accidentally put it back in the wrong place.

There were more than a few problems with having to wear this kind of clothing. Children’s clothing nowadays was made to stand out, possibly so that parents could keep an eye on them in a crowd or with binoculars. It was surprising that there weren’t any reflective strips sewn into the fabric, or any of those little GPS tags SHIELD loved to stick to people. Coulson had once joked about GPS collars for children after scolding Clint for wandering off in a crowd; Steve had thought that he was kidding, but looking at the clothing on the racks in front of him made him think that Coulson hadn’t been kidding at all. Steve sighed. Coulson had been a really great guy; he usually had a few jokes hiding up his sleeves for the rare occasion when he needed them. Steve kind of missed those jokes now. He could use a good laugh, anything to distract him from the fact that he was a grown man shopping in the children’s department.

“See anything you like?” Tony asked, faking innocence as he thumbed through a row of smiley-faced shirts.

“No.” Steve said.

Steve poked around in a different rack, hoping to find something that wouldn’t burn out his retinas from just looking at it. No matter what the advertising above claimed, neon colours were not appropriate for a t-shirt. He tried to keep from judging everything he saw, but it was tough. Some of the shirts had artwork on them, and while that was all nice and fine, it was oddly sexist that the boys’ shirts seemed to have more interesting artwork on them than the girls’ ones. He glanced around and saw that the clothing for girls was also in the same area but it was cordoned off like it had done something shameful; the girls’ side was smaller too, and there was a distinct separation of clothing by the not so clever use of hangers that turned from blue, for boys, to pink for girls. He didn’t like the distinction all that much; he could imagine that it would cause quite a few problems for kids and parents alike. And really, who cared if a girl wanted to wear a shirt with skulls on it? Some of them were actually kind of cute.

He picked up one of the girls shirts and held it up with a weary sigh, sizing it up. It would fit too. Great. Wasn’t this just magical…

“Here.”
A shirt landed on Steve’s head, temporarily blinding him and he heaved yet another sigh, gingerly removing it. Tony grinned at him, gesturing to the shirt Steve had just peeled off of himself. It was a Captain America shirt, blue and white with the Captain America shield on it. His shield – once. He looked down at the shirt in despair, realizing that he had lost yet another thing in his life that he had cherished. He had lost his shield. It had been like his arm once. He had slept with it in his room, sitting beside his bed, never letting it out of his sight. How could he have forgotten about his shield?

“That one’s on sale.” Tony commented, going back to shuffling through another rack of shirts to find something new to throw at Steve’s head. Steve draped the shirt over his arm, biting his lip. He debated on sticking his head into the rack so that he could have a few seconds of grief to himself; that thought went away abruptly when the world went dark again, Tony having hit him in the head with a pair of jeans.

“Must you throw things at me?” Steve grumbled, removing the jeans and slinging them over his arm and the shirt. The jeans covered the Captain America logo perfectly, and he was grateful that he didn’t have to look at it, his mind already too frazzled to handle much more.

“Must you complain so bitterly?” Tony grumbled back, looking at Steve from over the top of his sunglasses.

Steve rolled his eyes and turned back to the clothing. He could put up with a few pieces of clothing hurled at him; god knew he had put up with much worse things before. Steve stumbled upon a few plain t-shirts that would likely fit, slinging them over his arm to join the pants, delighted that there was some hope left for humanity. He was then promptly hit with three more pairs of pants and manhandled towards the changing room with his spoils wrapped around his neck and arms like a bulky boa constrictor.

“Tony…”

Tony snapped his fingers. “Move it or lose it.” He shoved Steve inside towards the nearest empty stall, following him in.

“What are you doing?” Steve panicked.

“I need to see how it looks. It might not be the right size.” Tony said.

“Well can’t you just wait outside or something?”

“Fine. Party pooper.” Tony scowled, slipping out of the stall. Steve shut the door behind him quickly and locked it before Tony had a chance to slip back in. He changed into the first pair of jeans in the pile and pulled on one of the Captain America t-shirts, checking himself out in the mirror. It looked alright. Not too baggy and not too tight – just the way he liked his clothing.

Tony banged on the door.

“Are you coming out of what? Do you need help? It can’t have taken that long to put on a pair of pants.”

“I’m fine!” Steve snapped.

“Well get out here. I want to see! If you don’t, I’m just going to crawl under the door.” Tony warned.

“You wouldn’t.”
“You don’t know me Steve. Is that a dare I’m hearing?”

Steve opened the door with a huff.

“There. See? That wasn’t so hard.” Tony grinned. He tugged Steve out of the stall and spun him around in front of one of the mirrors on another closed door. Tony inspected everything with a critical eye, making Steve bend over to see the fit in the back of his pants; he even ran his hands down Steve’s thigh to check to see how much room was there. Steve tried very hard not to go beet red; he failed rather spectacularly.

“Is there a reason why you’re doing that?” Steve growled, hoping that his face wouldn’t light completely on fire as Tony’s hands roamed up and down his legs.

“You’re a growing boy – need to check the fit. We wouldn’t want you to grow out of them, now would we?” Tony shrugged. Tony hadn’t been groping him at least; it had been more professional than anything. Tony had always been like this when they had been shopping – well… Dream-Tony had, at least.

“Now go try on the other stuff!”

“But they’re the same kind of pants!” Steve protested.

“Do it.”

Steve sighed and went back into the change room.

Once Tony was satisfied that they had the right sizes, they went back to the racks and picked out five pairs of jeans, and ten t-shirts, stuffing everything into a cumbersome red shopping basket that Tony found at one of the unmanned tills. Tony carried the basket slung over his arm, whistling as he walked. He laughed when Steve tried to take it away, far more amused than he should have been.

“You’re going to die if you try to carry this.” Tony rolled his eyes.

“I am not! It’s not that heavy!” Steve protested.

“Fine. If you can pick it up, you can carry it.” Tony smirked, holding the basket out for Steve to grab. Steve almost went face first into it as the weight of the basket pulled him down; despite the extra weight of Steve almost in the basket, Tony held on to it, still wearing that same stupid smirk.

Great. Now he couldn’t even hold up a shopping basket.

“Ready to give up?” Tony asked.

“Alright, alright. I admit defeat. Take it back.” Steve said, trying very hard not to glare at Tony as he adjusted his shirt.

“What’s next?” Tony asked, shouldering the basket again with ease.

“Underwear and socks.” Steve grunted.

“Alright then. Lead the way.”
While Steve didn’t normally mind shopping for underwear in a department store, he did mind when Tony started picking things out for him. Steve was not going to wear Captain America underwear no matter how many times Tony threw the pack at his head – he drew a line there. He was also not going to wear the selection of thongs and G-strings that Tony had (Steve assumed) thrown at him in jest. He didn’t care how patriotic they looked. It wasn’t going to happen. Luckily, after Steve had thrown a few packs into the basket slung under Tony’s arm, the underwear topic went stale and they moved on, drifting down the aisle.

Steve wanted nothing more than to walk out the door, but Tony was still exploring, poking at things that looked interesting, which counted as pretty much ninety percent of everything he walked past. As Steve tried to step out of the aisle, ducking under a pair of gaudy looking mittens, he noticed that he had been left behind. He looked around, and spotted Tony a few feet back, holding up a set of Captain America pajamas, his eyes twinkling.

“These look pretty cool. What about these?” Tony said.

Steve slunk back under the pair of mittens blocking his way to get a better look at the pajamas, ready to give Tony a firm no. They did look pretty comfortable though. He pursed his lips, tempted, but unsure.

“They’re on sale.” Tony sang, dangling the price tag in Steve’s face. It was a good sale too, almost sixty percent off from regular price, not bad at all.

“Alright.”

“Excellent.”

Tony grinned broadly, stuffing the pajamas into the basket.

“You know…” Tony said as they made their way towards electronics department. “We should probably get you a jacket.”

“I guess.” Steve agreed unenthusiastically.

Tony dragged Steve across the store yet again in search of a suitable all weather jacket, peering suspiciously at anything that looked remotely like outerwear as they trudged past. After ten minutes of aimless wandering, they found the actual outerwear section and began to look through the many racks of jackets, moving through the heavier winter ones to the lighter summer jackets; it was a bit of a surprise to actually see winter wear around, and Steve had to drag Tony away from it to keep from getting saddled with a jacket for all seasons.

The adult section was unusable of course. Everything was miles too big, so Steve reluctantly made his way to the children’s section again, trying to stick to the less pricy side while being yet again traumatized by the plethora of bright colours he found there. He didn’t really want a day-glow orange rain slicker even if it was on sale; he also did not want the rubber boots with little yellow ducks all over them that Tony brought him, although secretly he hadn’t actually minded them as much. The idea of being able to splash through puddles was oddly enthralling. He would have gotten some strange looks if he had been doing it in his Captain America regalia; not one would know him now, so he could do whatever he wanted. He shook his head at Tony, rolling his eyes when the engineer continued to dangle the boots in his face.

“No.” Steve said firmly.

“Aww, but they’re so cute!” Tony squeezed the little yellow duck hanging off of the boots; it gave a
deranged squawk, its eyes bulging in their sockets. “They have widdle duckies and everything.”

“No.” Steve sighed.

“Fine.”

Before he even realized Tony had wandered off, Tony was back carrying three of the jackets from the women’s section. He forced Steve to try everything on in front of a mirror they found drilled into one of the support pillars, busying himself with checking zippers and pockets for holes or breaks while he made Steve spin around in a circle. The jackets fit well, which made it hard to decide, especially when Tony just kept bringing more for him to try on. He didn’t really want a pink Dora the Explorer jacket though, he knew that much without having to look.

“No.”

“They’re on sale.”

“That’s nice. No Dora. Just get the normal jackets, alright?” Tony ignored him of course, and kept bringing back new hideous things for him to try on, gleeful when his searches turned up something truly dreadful.

“I don’t want a pink jacket.” Steve half growled, not quite snapping at Tony but coming close to it after yet another soft pink jacket collided with the side of his head. His hair looked like he had gone through a hurricane and no matter how many times he tried to flatten it down with his hands it just kept standing back up. He had so much static cling in his hair now that things were actually sticking to the side of his head if he leaned too close. He was tempted to buy himself a hat just to hide how awful his hair looked.

“But you look so cute in pink!” Tony hooted, putting the jacket back on its rack; at least he was putting things back on their hangers afterwards and wasn’t just throwing things into a pile on the floor. He didn’t even want to think about what the mess could have looked like.

Tony wandered off again and returned with a brown micro suede jacket that, according to the tags, was waterproof. It was a bomber jacket, just like the ones Steve had once yearned for after getting his first look at them in a catalogue as a child. He eyed the price tag, not really wanting to even touch a jacket that cost over two hundred dollars. Even in this day and age that seemed like an awful lot of money to spend on a jacket.

“Just put it on and see if it fits grumpy-pants.” Tony grunted, forcing Steve’s arms into the jacket. He zipped it up for Steve too, adjusting the front to see the fit, spinning Steve around a few times to examine the collar and the pockets; he took great care examining the finer details, like the stitching and lining, muttering away to himself.

When he was done inspecting everything, giving it his stamp of approval, Tony pointed Steve towards the mirror and stood behind him, making Steve raise his arms up and down to test the fit in the shoulders.

“It looks good. Looks like it fits like a glove too. Get it.” Tony said, running his hands over Steve’s shoulders.

The jacket did look good. Steve was surprised that Tony had been able to find anything in the men’s department that would fit him to begin with. He looked down at the price tag again, frowning to himself.

Should he or shouldn’t he?
It was a really nice jacket….

“Seriously – if you don’t get it I’m not going to respect you at all. It’s the only thing in this place that makes you look like you’re in your twenties and not like an old man or a teenage girl.” Tony joked, lips twitching. His expression was caught between serious and humorous like he couldn’t quite decide which to go with, so he had gone with both of them. Steve watched Tony’s reflection in the mirror, smiling to himself. There was a sense of sincerity to Tony even when he was intentionally trying to be annoying. He did like the jacket and well, he didn’t feel so bad about buying it with Howard’s money, seeing as how Howard had found it appropriate to grope him in the first place.

“Alright.” Steve said, grinning. He took the jacket off, carefully folding it, and placing it on the pile of clothing already there. The basket was almost overflowing; Steve hadn’t thought they would find so much so fast.

“Seriously?” Tony raised an eyebrow; apparently he hadn’t expected Steve to give in so easily.

“So what’s next on the list? Is this all of it?” Steve asked, edging closer to take a tentative grasp of its handle. “Uh huh. Hands off.” Tony smiled, pushing him out of the way playfully as he hefted the basket up. He pointed at the shoe department, catching the jacket as it and the pile it was sitting on tried to make a break for the floor.

“You’ll need sneakers and steel toed boot seeing as how you’ll be in the lab.” Tony scowled, the bemused smile gone so fast Steve was almost certain that he had hallucinated it into existence. Tony seemed almost upset, as if he had just said something excruciatingly painful.

“I don’t have to go in your workshop if you don’t need me there.” Steve started, fidgeting. Tony stared at him blankly. “It’s not a big deal.” His cheeks went slightly pink as he shrugged. “I’m sure we’ll have fun.”

Fifteen minutes later they made their way to the till where they waited in line while the cashier scanned through their purchases, hoping that it didn’t look like they had gone completely insane with the Captain America merchandise; it did look a little ridiculous, now that Steve got a good look at everything laid out in one place. The woman at the till raised an eyebrow at Steve when she scanned through the fifth piece of Captain America clothing, not saying anything, simply looking between Tony and Steve as if they were playing some kind of elaborate prank on her. Steve produced Howard’s bank card when everything was scanned, laughing nervously and although the bill totaled up to something like four hundred dollars, he didn’t feel too bad about it. Besides, he could always find a way to pay Howard back later if he needed to. He had his own bank account after all; he just needed to get one of those plastic debit cards to use it, and then they would be square. He wished that he had had his card in the first place. It would have been nice to go through this without all the extra fuss.

They carried Steve’s new things out of the store, stopping at a bench to rearrange their bags; Steve carried two bags. He would have taken more, but Tony had flicked him in the forehead and told him no. He hadn’t been too happy, but at least the weight was more spread out this time around. That and at least what he was carrying wasn’t going to knock him on his ass in the next ten minutes.

“So… what should we do now? We’ve got…” Tony looked at his wristwatch. “We’ve got an hour until Happy gets back. We may as well get lunch or something.”
“Alright, that sounds good to me.” Steve agreed. His stomach had been rumbling for the past hour or so, but he hadn’t said anything because he hadn’t wanted to be rude.

“Of course it sounds good. It’s been four hours since breakfast – who wouldn’t be hungry?” Tony snorted.

“What should we eat then?”

“We can take a trip to the food court and see what’s there. Hopefully there will be something grandpa can eat.”

“Very funny.”

“Just a warning – I don’t think they serve prunes here Steve.”

“I’m not that old.”

“Says the man who’s over ninety.”

Steve sat nestled in amongst his pile of bags, waiting at their orange food court table while Tony braved the crowds to go get them something to eat. Tony hadn’t asked what he wanted, and Steve hadn’t really said; he wondered idly what Tony would choose to bring back. Tony had always been partial to French-fries, or at least Dream-Tony had been. He wasn’t sure how close his guesses about Tony’s food preferences actually were anymore, dream versus reality; everything else was just as much of a mystery. For all he knew, this Tony might have some kind of obsessive love for popcorn shrimp and guacamole.

Steve rested his chin in his hands. How much of his dreams applied to the real world, if any of it actually did? That was a good question really. He cast a glance around at the horde of hungry shoppers and spotted Tony standing in the lineup for New York Fries a few seconds later.

He chuckled to himself; at least a few things were the same.

Steve watched Tony, feeling more adventurous now that Tony wasn’t standing two feet away, peeking over the top of his new messenger bag to get a good look at the engineer. Tony certainly still carried himself like he always had, and now that he was alone he seemed to have puffed up a bit. He looked almost arrogant standing there in line, and he wasn’t letting anyone push him around, even when an angry looking young woman threatened to shove past him. There was something different to him though, something that seemed to make Tony look small in comparison to the rest of the customers. How was that possible? Tony had always been larger than life, but that was when Tony was the figurehead for his company Steve reminded himself; it was fairly obvious that Tony wasn’t running Stark International, and that Howard was.

What did Tony actually do for the company? Howard hadn’t really mentioned anything and neither had Tony for that matter; Tony usually talked and talked about whatever project he was working on. He loved going into details, breaking things down into the minutest part so that he could explain just how much of a genius he was. Steve had found it endearing, although half the time he hadn’t understood a word Tony was going on about. The famous genius engineer part of Tony hadn’t changed at all if the magazines they had walked past were anything to go by; Tony’s face was still on the front page of a few of them, his grin so addictive it was hard to look away from. Steve had been tempted to sneak back and buy one of them just to have that smile to keep.
Tony suddenly looked around, spotting Steve and then turning back to the line, inching closer to the till; it was like he was expecting Steve to have vanished somehow. He kept looking around after that, always managing to keep his gaze free from obstruction, eyes always returning to Steve and their table. Steve gave him a wave and then his head on the table, listening to the thrum of the mall around him. He could almost fall asleep like this, right here amidst all of the chaos. It didn’t matter that people were talking so loudly around him that they couldn’t even hear what they were saying. It all felt safe and familiar, even though he hadn’t been here before. All malls felt similar, but this one in particular reminded him of the streets outside Brooklyn where his mother and Bucky had walked with him on weekends, searching for nothing more than a place to sit down. New York bustled; the mall seemed to do the same, a constant influx of noise and humanity perfectly timed to be brash, loud and just a little bit obnoxious.

Tony set a tray down in front of him and Steve smiled up at him, yawning and stretching. Two large fries sat perched on the tray, their escaped fries littered the paper liner beside three overfilled ketchup cups; napkins hung off the side as if they were waving goodbye. Everything smelled delicious even if it was just grease and potatoes. Nothing could beat that smell.

“They didn’t have any gravy so I loaded up on ketchup. I’m sorry – I hope that’s ok.” Tony said, half yelling to be heard over the crowd. Steve blinked drowsily up at him. He hadn’t heard Tony apologize for anything before unless it was absolutely necessary, and that happened so rarely that it was almost like seeing meatballs falling from the sky. He had watched Tony argue with senators and dignitaries and even Fury, saying things that Steve wouldn’t have ever thought anyone would be able to get away, and yet here he was apologizing for the lack of gravy.

Whatever the case, food was here, and he was starving. He had never been really fond of gravy anyways.

“Ketchup is dandy. Thanks, I’m starving.” Steve said, stretching to grab a fry.

Tony’s face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Ok then. Uh… did you want something to drink? I could use a drink.” Tony babbled, looking around at the different food stands. For a split second Steve thought Tony meant that he wanted to get a beer; after some pained whiffle-waffling, he realized that Tony was waiting for him to suggest something to drink, something that was available in the food court and not sold in a brown paper bag.

“What’s good? I don’t really know half of the stuff they have here.” Steve admitted, alternately nibbling and blowing on a boiling hot fry to keep from scorching off all of his taste buds.

“Well if you like soda there’s root beer or coke, or I don’t know, sprite? They had those when you were – you know – right?” Tony asked, watching Steve carefully.

“Yes they had soda when I was ‘you know’.” Steve laughed, finishing his fry.

“So that would be ok with you then? Soda I mean?” Tony asked tentatively.

“Yes. Can you get me a root beer please?”

“Alrighty. I’ll be back.” Tony rose from the table and wandered back into another line, vanishing from sight temporarily when a large man with shoulders that could have withstood a barrage stood behind him in line, eclipsing him. He reappeared when Steve was halfway through his fries carrying a massive root beer in front of him like it was the Holy Grail. Tony set it down on the table and then pushed it towards Steve, watching him again, his eyes dancing from the root beer to Steve’s face.
“Thanks.” Steve said, taking a sip. The root beer was good, sweet as sin with a hint of vanilla. It wasn’t quite the same as root beer from before the war; not a lot tasted the same as it had back then. He hadn’t had anything spicy like that since Prohibition. He pushed the soda back towards Tony, offering it back, surprised when Tony shook his head and waved the cup away. “Don’t you want some?”

“I’m not really that thirsty.” Tony said, clearing his throat.

That was a lie. Steve could tell just by the way Tony said it. It was a stupid thing to be lying about, which made it all the more infuriating; after all, it was just a few sips of soda. It wasn’t like Steve had offered him some plutonium, or a cup full of ground up glass.

“Can you tell me if it tastes the same as it usually does? I haven’t had root beer in a long time, and I swear it used to taste spicier.” Steve said; it wasn’t quite a lie, more like a fact checking mission. The last time he had had this kind of root beer was when he was dreaming, so he really didn’t know what the flavor was supposed to be like. It could have tasted like cabbage or bacon for all he knew, and really, he only knew now that bacon really tasted like bacon.

Tony sighed dramatically and took a reluctant sip. The sip turned into a chug, and he looked embarrassed, scratching at his beard, having drained half the cup without realizing it.

“Uh… yeah. It tastes like root beer.” Tony said with a burp.

Steve grinned at him and ate another fry, gesturing to the other container to try to try to tempt Tony into eating; Tony could use some fattening up, and fries were just the way to go. Things turned very uncomfortable very fast. Steve couldn’t say what did it exactly, but Tony’s expression went from sheepish smile to unhappy scowl in a matter of three seconds flat; it had to be some kind of record. Tony crossed his arms over his chest, an unpleasant frown on his face.

“I’m not hungry.” Tony said.

Steve blinked, stopping in mid-bite, a fry held aloft. Tony wasn’t hungry? He could hear Tony’s stomach rumbling from across the table even over the sound of the crowd. People three tables over could probably hear it.

“Your stomach is growling.” Steve pointed out with a smile.

Tony’s stare didn’t waver, he remained stiffly seated, uninterested in eating; he went so far as to cross his legs too, his body language so closed off Steve was almost afraid to ask him anything else. The last thing he wanted to do was have Tony thinking that he was trying to ram fries down his throat.

“I’m fine.” Tony repeated.

“Don’t like French fries?” Steve asked curiously, ready to slap himself in the face for opening his mouth again. He ate another fry, his stomach complaining about the lack of food coming its way.

“Not really.” Tony said, lying again, eyeing the fries over the top of his sunglasses. He was clearly tempted, and his fingers twitched against his arm as if he was struggling against the urge to reach out and snatch one up.

“What can you eat?” Steve asked, trying to be subtle as he nudged the fries closer to Tony with his elbow. He could almost see Tony drooling as the fries got closer; Tony licked his dry lips, swallowing hard.
“You sure ask a lot of questions.” Tony grumbled, pushing the fries away.

“I’m curious. I want to get to know the guy I’m going to be living with.” Steve said, pushing the fries back.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Tony.”

“I said I’m not hungry!” Tony snapped, lowering his sunglasses to glare at Steve with all of his might; it was an impressive glare, his red eyes making it look all the more blood thirsty. Steve jerked back, startled by the sudden outburst. He was glad for the noise around them, thankful that they had a sound buffer; no one so much as blinked in their direction. The world continued on around them, people laughing and chatting without a care in the world, oblivious to everything except for their own conversations.

Tony turned his chair around, facing the crowd, apparently finished with the conversation yet again; Steve felt a like he had been slapped. This was worse than being walked out on! Had he done something that wrong by offering Tony the fries that Tony had bought?

“Look, I’m sorry, alright? I didn’t mean to be rude.” Steve said.

Tony didn’t turn around, stubbornly staring in the opposite direction.

“Is it because your stomach doesn’t feel right after the uh… drinking?” Steve asked, not sure whether he should still be bothering to talk. He didn’t really expect to get an answer; he didn’t get one per say. Tony nodded his head ever-so-slightly, the move almost imperceptible from where Steve was sitting.

“Well alright, I’m not going to force you to eat. I was just concerned, that’s all.” Steve poked at the now cold fries with dismay; they had been so warm and crispy before, and now they were all warped and soggy looking. It was such a shame. He would have been able to eat all of the leftover fries if he was still in his other body. As it was, he had barely finished the medium fries that Tony had bought for him, and now he felt like he was bursting at the seams, likely to start spitting them back up if he sneezed. He supposed he could take them home and reheat them in the microwave. They wouldn’t be quite the same, but at least then they wouldn’t be in the garbage.

“Fine.” Tony growled. He spun around with a shriek of metal as his chair scraped across the ground and grabbed a handful of fries, stuffing them into his mouth, chewing with fake relish. He made happy sounds, as if it was the best food he had ever eaten, eyes still hidden by the sunglasses. Steve looked down at the table feeling awful again; he hadn’t meant to force Tony into anything. The look on Tony’s face made Steve want to curl up in a little ball. “Happy?” Tony winced, nearly choking on the dry fries as he spat the word out.

How could Tony think it would make him happy to see him choking like that?

Steve nudged the root beer back towards him and Tony took a grateful swig, thumping his chest with his fist. He shoved the soda back towards Steve, begrudgingly going back to eating the fries, taking it one fry at a time after that.

Steve took a sip of the root beer, trying to savor the sweetness and wash away the bitter taste in the back of his mouth. He had always liked root beer because it had been the sweetest drink he had been able to get a hold of growing up; he had always had a bit of a sweet tooth, which hadn’t exactly been the best thing for a boy with no money. He hadn’t even been able to buy penny candy, although his
mother had saved up and splurged for his birthdays sometimes; he cherished those memories of waking up on Christmas morning with a little handful of those sweet peppermints and butterscotch toffees waiting for him. His mother used to make root beer in jugs too if they had managed to scrape together enough sugar to put into the mix they bought at the grocers; it had been a real treat to drink back then, and one glass bottle had taken him hours to finish. Now it just felt cheap, useless, like everything else in his life.

“Did they even have fries when you were – you know?” Tony muttered.

“If they could get the cooking oil to fry them, yeah, we had them. Sometimes that was hard to manage though, so it was sort of a lucky thing to get them. It was the same thing with root beer actually. Sugar was pretty hard to come by aside from rations, and those didn’t last long.”

“I feel like I’m talking to someone’s grandfather again. Back in my day….”

“You young whipper-snappers don’t know anything about anything these days.” Steve smiled shyly, picking up another fry. Tony let out a loud bark of laughter, wiping at his eyes. He took off his sunglasses and placed them beside the tray, smiling genuinely for the first time that day, although Steve had no idea why.

“You’re a weird guy Steve.”

“Thank you.”

“Shut up and eat your fries old man.”

“I could say the same thing to you.”

They trudged out of the food court carrying Steve’s bags feeling bloated and happy, grinning from ear to ear. When Happy pulled up at the curb, however, Tony stopped smiling so fast it seemed like the look had been snatched clean off of his face; Steve had been tempted to check him for whiplash.

At first Steve didn’t understand what was going on; it was just Happy after all, arriving when he had said he would, and then he noticed that this was a different car than the one Happy had driven in the morning and everything made sense. This wasn’t just Happy pulling up to get them; they had a guest. Well that sure wiped the smile off of Steve’s face too.

Howard rolled down the window, eyeing them both with a look that may or may not have been thinly veiled contempt. He brightened considerably when saw Steve and even went so far as to prop open the door with his leg as he waited for them to stash things into the trunk; he didn’t set a foot outside the car, lounging inside while Happy slammed the trunk closed, lumbering back to the driver seat.

Steve and Tony clambered into the car one at a time, having to practically crawl over Howard’s knees to get enough space because Howard refused to move from his seat directly beside the door. Naturally, Tony made for the other side of the car, leaving Steve just enough space to be wedged in between the pair of them; Howard was certainly happy about that, Steve not so much, although he was glad enough to be acting as a human shield.
Tony turned slightly in his seat and spent the trip facing the window, eyes on the road, silent. Steve fidgeted.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Steve pulled Howard’s bankcard out of his pocket and handed it over. He wanted it gone as fast as possible so that Howard didn’t try any funny business. Howard took the card back, taking the time to sneer around Steve at his son even though Tony wasn’t looking at him. He put the card away in his expensive Italian leather wallet, slipping it into his breast pocket.

“You look like you’re wearing a sack, dear. Who dressed you this morning?” Howard laughed, gesturing to Steve’s shirt.

“It’s comfortable.” Steve shrugged, scooting a little closer to Tony when he noticed Howard creeping closer, reaching out for his thigh again. He scowled, hoping that Howard might get that what he was planning wasn’t appreciated. Apparently Howard either didn’t care, or didn’t seem to notice even though he was looking Steve dead in the eye; that or he had gone blind for a few minutes. Steve couldn’t escape completely even though he had managed to put some distance between them.

“Howard –” Steve protested.

Howard’s fingers were soon brushing against Steve’s upper thigh, nimbly avoiding Steve’s attempts to block him.

“The office is a disaster right now, especially with all that insider trading crap-talk going around. I’m putting out fires all over the place – I wish I could be inventing something instead of dealing with all of this bureaucratic garbage. This is the first break from it that I’ve had since yesterday.” Howard groused with an almost dreamy tone to his voice, leaning closer to Steve.

Steve’s eye was now twitching in a way that was far from pleasant; he would likely have a nervous tick by the end of the car ride if Howard kept it up, and there wasn’t enough room to wind up and thump him one either, so he would just have to put up with it.

“I see.” Steve said, shifting closer to Tony. His knee bumped against Tony’s bony thigh; Tony turned in his seat to look at him, glancing at Steve from under his sunglasses. His eyes lingered for a moment on Steve’s face before drifting down, taking in the sight of Howard’s fingers walking their way up Steve’s thigh; he frowned and turned away, staring out the window as if what he had just seen was nothing more than a piece of dust blowing across the seat.

“Can you stop that please? It’s making me uncomfortable.” Steve said, frustrated. Howard’s hand stilled for a moment, lying flat against Steve’s upper thigh, dangerously close to his groin.

“You’re always whining! I told you – it’s fine to be with whomever you want now Steve.” Howard grumbled, moving his hand upwards a few inches. Steve grabbed him by the wrist, tugging Howard’s hand off of his thigh; it took all of his strength, even though he was fighting against a somewhat elderly man. He would have been embarrassed if he wasn’t so damned angry.

“And I’m grateful for the change in attitudes and everything you’ve done for me, but I’d appreciate it if you kept your hands to yourself.”

“So ballsy! I wish some of that gumption would rub off on someone else – maybe they would learn a thing or two.” Howard said, disappointed, dropping his hand onto his own lap. His stare was penetrating, looking Steve over inch by inch, constantly watching for signs of acceptance or giving in. Steve moved unconsciously closer to Tony, his leg pressed up tight against Tony’s, leaving no space between them.
“Well I’d rather that I not dance around the issue Howard. I wouldn’t want to lead you on.”

“Hm. I suppose I should be grateful then that you haven’t just punched me in the balls yet. Not that you could do much damage, mind you, it’s just the thought that counts, I suppose.” Howard laughed. “So how was your day then? Have fun wandering around the mall with all the other cretins?”

“It was fun. Tony helped me pick out a bunch of really swell things.” Steve said.

“Oh? I’m surprised – I would have thought he’d have you parading around in women’s clothing or perhaps some of the garbage he dresses in.” Howard commented, inspecting his fingernails.

“Everything went fine. I had a lot of fun. Tony’s a great guy.” Steve said. He hoped that Tony was listening. God knew the guy deserved someone saying nice things about him; the way Howard talked, Tony might not have even been in the car at all. Tony’s knee bumped against Steve’s just once, the tap light and sharp; Steve could see Tony’s slight smile in the reflection of him on the window. He smiled in turn, settling his hands on his lap to keep Howard away, guarding his thighs for dear life.

“Well that’s nice dear. I’m sure anything would do really. Are they almost home Happy?” Howard called out in annoyance.

“Fifteen minutes away sir.” Happy responded from the driver’s seat.

“Have you eaten anything today Steve?” Howard asked, stretching out. His arm draped down across the top of the seat, fingers tangling in Steve’s hair, lounging again. Steve shuddered at the touch and shifted closer to Tony yet again; he would have climbed into Tony’s lap if it would have convinced Howard to leave him alone at that point, but he highly doubted that Tony would have appreciated that. With so little space between them, it was hard to really do anything at all, and Howard seemed more than content to condense their space even more, even if it meant grinding Steve into Tony in the process.

“We ate at the food court.” Steve said, trying to remain pleasant. His voice must have sounded strained, because Tony’s hand dropped down and brushed against Steve’s knee momentarily before settling back on his own lap; it was a small movement, and Steve was sure glad that Tony had done it. Thankfully, Howard didn’t notice, his eyes locked on Steve’s, looking for once above the waist.

“Ah yes, food court fare. I’m sure your doctors would approve of that healthy lifestyle choice.” Howard said dryly.

“This, coming from the man who eats greasy breakfast burgers…”

“Touché. What did you eat then honey? Something good I hope.”

“We had fries. It wasn’t bad – not like those hot dogs they sell at the ballparks.”

“Ah yes. Those things could have clogged your arteries with the smell alone. I suppose you’re right. Fries do indeed seem the healthier option. Well here we are…”

Tony was practically out of the car before it stopped moving; he was up the road and at the door before Steve could so much as blink in his general direction, shoving the key into the lock. Steve smiled at Howard with forced calm and clambered out after Tony, meeting Happy at the trunk so that he could grab his bags. Howard leaned out the door, draping himself against the side of the car, watching Steve with a lazy smile.

“Well I’m glad that you at least had fun Steve. I was starting to worry that you would be utterly
disappointed with this new day and age. God knows I left with you the worst possible guide.”

“Tony’s great, Howard. Don’t worry about me.” Steve said, shouldering the bags with a grimace as the plastic cut into his shoulder. “Thanks for the ride and the clothes.”

“Not a problem. Glad to be of service.” Howard said leaning forwards to give Steve a kiss. Steve bit back his rage and leaned in closer, letting Howard give him a peck on the cheek even though he knew he would regret it later. He was going to have to scrub his face until it bled to get rid of that touch. He could still feel the slight prickle of Howard’s beard against his cheek. He cleared his throat. “See you later.”

“See you later honey.” Howard purred back.

Steve started up the driveway as fast as he could, finding the front door wide open; he turned back around and gave Howard a curt wave goodbye once he was in the front hallway. Howard returned the wave, winking in a way that was more suggestive than it should have been.

Steve shut the door with a snap.

Well, that could have gone so much worse; a kiss was nothing compared to what Howard could have done if he felt like it. He wondered what Howard might have done if there hadn’t been two other people in the car at the time, and then shuddered. It was mind boggling that Howard considered Tony the depraved one in the family.

Steve dumped his bags on the floor and locked the front door, leaning back against it. It was silly, but he almost hoped that Howard could hear the sound of the lock clicking, just so that he would know that he had been locked out. Howard was such a damned lecher! Why couldn’t Howard get it that he didn’t want anything to do with him? Steve would have rather chopped off his own feet rather than start something up with him; it didn’t seem to matter how many times Steve said no, Howard just kept hearing yes, or some deranged variation of it. Maybe Howard thought he was playing hard to get or something; either that or he was being deliberately obtuse.

What had hurt more than the groping was that Tony had sat there, ignoring it all keeping his distance. It was stupid to be angry at Tony, and he felt like a fool for it. Tony had only known him for little more than a day. Even if they had been lovers in his dreams – Steve pressed his hand to his temple, grimacing – it wasn’t like Tony had to care about him. No matter how bad he felt, he wasn’t going to start fights over things that Tony couldn’t possibly understand; that would be petty and insane. He was the one with the memories of things that hadn’t happened. He was the one who loved a man who didn’t know him, not the other way around.

Great. Now he had a headache. Perfect. Just perfect.

Steve picked up his bags and headed to his room, dumping the new clothing out on the bed, wanting to get his mind as far away from Howard as possible. He sorted through things, setting the sneakers and steel-toed boots down beside the suitcase filled with Howard’s ridiculously formal tailored clothing. He had never had this many different things to wear, even if he added up all the things he had worn since he was a child. Like most of the kids on his block, he had dreamed of what it would be like to have money – to be somebody. It had been a good dream then, one every kid had enjoyed. Money was power, and half the time they didn’t even have enough money to pay the electric bill.

Times sure had changed. Sure, he had a bank card and essentially, money now, but what did that mean? He didn’t particularly have anything to spend it on. He would have preferred to go back and work, but what skills did he have now, aside from the little things he remembered learning in his dreams? How far could he go with drawing? It hadn’t really been all that useful before the war and it
certainly wasn’t of any use now, seeing as how so many other people were in the field with more training than he could shake a stick at. He could get a job waiting tables or maybe washing dishes if he was lucky. That was all he was qualified for now. He had a couple of bags full of clothing and a few sketchbooks to his name, and that was it. Money meant nothing if men like Howard Stark could come by it so easily.

“What do you want for dinner?” Tony asked, appearing in the doorway. He had a beer in his hand, and was listing to the right, tipsy again. Steve tried not to feel disappointed with him; the frown on his face was getting hard enough to manage as it was, and he couldn’t really blame Tony for wanting a drink after that car ride.

“I don’t know. What do you want to eat?” Steve asked. Out of habit he started sorting the clothing into piles so that he could throw it all into a washing machine and be done with it. He ripped the plastic tags off and then gathered up a handful of the paper and plastic bits. No sense in leaving a mess.

“I don’t know. He stocked my fridge with a bunch of food I don’t normally eat. Why don’t you go pick something out?” Tony said. Although Tony was drunk, he didn’t slur his words, making it hard to tell that he was intoxicated; he looked like he was perfectly fine, except for the slight stagger of course.

“Alright.” Steve started towards the kitchen, still surrounded by his own personal gloom cloud. Dinner sounded like a good distraction too. He sniffed his shirt and found to his horror that Howard’s musty cigarette smell had leached into the cloth, killing the sweet scent that had been there before. Why did Howard have to ruin everything? He had had one good shirt, one last thing to tie himself to Tony and now it was tainted with the sickening smell of smoke and sweat.

Tony snagged Steve’s arm as he passed by, his hand enveloping Steve’s entire wrist in its warmth.

“Are you alright? You look a little…” Tony started, taking sip of beer.

“I’m fine.”

“You look like you could use a drink.”

A drink?

Normally Steve wouldn’t have bothered to even take a tiny sip, but today he felt like crap. What the hell, it wasn’t as if a little beer could hurt him. Maybe it would taste better this time.

Tony handed Steve the beer, his fingers warm and wet from the condensation on the bottle. Steve sipped. Nope. He remembered the taste of alcohol alright, and while he had drunken beer before, he had never really been a fan of the taste. This was definitely not any better than the last time. He grimaced, resisting the urge to stick his tongue out in response to the hoppy flavor. Tony laughed; he took the beer back and pushed Steve down the hallway with a hand on the flat of his back, steering him towards the fridge. It felt nice, Tony’s hand so warm and gentle against him. He let Tony push him along, dumping the handful of tags and plastic into the garbage as they passed.

“What to make, what to make…” Tony sang, yawning out the words. He gave Steve a little push, aiming him towards the fridge and then wandered off out of sight.

Steve threw open the fridge expecting to see was a few shelves of food, maybe one with vegetables if he was lucky. There were a few shelves alright, but you wouldn’t have been able to tell by looking
at them. The sheer amount of food crammed inside made it seem like someone had lost their mind while shopping, buying anything they had walked past; he was surprised that whomever had stocked it had been able to close the door after they had crammed it all in.

The fridge was an older model, sturdy and large, big enough to stick a body in. Someone had been doing regular maintenance on it to keep it in working condition; there were scrapes along the sides where someone had pried open the paneling to look inside. Tony had been tinkering, Steve thought with a smile.

There were three shelves in the fridge; each one was stuffed to the nuts with every conceivable thing Steve could have seen when he was a child. How Howard had remembered half of these was a mystery, because Steve hadn’t even realized that he had known so many different kinds of foods to begin with. It wasn’t as if he and Howard had shared a childhood or swapped recipes either; this was like someone had reached into his head and stirred around until the memories about food came up to the top.

Steve whistled, stooping down to pluck a bag of multi-grain bread out from the freezing depths of the fridge.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to put bread in the fridge?”

“He does. Always has.” Tony grunted, leaning against the open fridge door; his shoulder bumped against Steve’s head, jostling him. Steve almost dropped the bread in surprise. He was starting to think that he should always be expecting to see Tony when he turned around, seeing as how the man didn’t seem to know the meaning of personal space.

“Would you eat grilled cheese if I made it?” Steve queried, dropping down to his knees to sort through the pile of cheese nestled against the left hand side of the fridge. Howard had bought so many different types there wasn’t much room to fit it all; Steve only recognized half of the varieties aside from the mild cheddar and a few blocks of mozzarella stacked near the back. Unnecessary extravagance yet again, hallmarks of Howard Stark having gone shopping. Some of the cheeses had the strangest names too. What the hell was Gouda? And what was Gorgonzola? Bruce would have known what they were; he did a lot of cooking, and liked to use all kinds of foreign ingredients. Steve had helped out a few times, but he couldn’t remember the names of half the stuff they had used; Bruce didn’t really work off of recipes, and it had been more of a point and retrieve thing that Steve had been doing. Chances were that he wouldn’t find the recipes now unless he looked it up on the internet. That sounded fun, now that he thought about it. He had plenty of time on his hands now after all.

“I’m not really hungry.” Tony said, watching Steve carefully as he always did; it was getting annoying, but at least he was predictable in some respects.

“What about a sandwich?” Steve asked, trying to not have an aneurism from the way Tony was playing the ‘I don’t want to eat anything’ game again.

“I’m not really hungry.” Tony grumbled again; he grabbed another beer from the top shelf, moving out of Steve’s field of vision. Howard had stocked the fridge with beer too it seemed – way too much beer. The upper shelf was swimming with the stuff, and while there was a bunch of root beer and cola mixed in there with it, the beer was far more prevalent, a plague amongst the food.

“You should eat something.” Steve said.

“You’re not my mother.” Tony retorted from somewhere in the kitchen, out of sight.
Steve sighed.

This was going to be another one of those things, wasn’t it?

He was going to have to back off and let things run their course until Tony finally decided that he wanted to eat. He wished that Tony were here to – no. Tony was here, and that was the problem in the first place!

“Alright then. I’ll make some grilled cheese.” Steve decided, fishing out a container of margarine and a block of plain old cheddar. He carried his loot to the counter, pushing the fridge shut with the flat of his foot and set about getting the ingredients ready, laying it all out in a line. Tony handed him a pair of scissors so that he could cut open the cheese and then helpfully gestured with his beer bottle to the various cupboards where he kept his chopping board, knives and flipper. It was teamwork at least, even if Tony wasn’t actually attempting to help with anything.

Steve worked without thinking, chopping the cheese and buttering the backside of the bread while Tony drummed his fingers on the countertop, sitting on the counter beside Steve watching him while he worked; Tony was sitting so close that Steve could have reached out and prodded him if he had wanted to. There was a faint smell of beer floating around, one that made Steve’s nose wrinkle as he fended off a few unwanted sneezes.

Tony sipped his beer slowly, legs swinging out, tapping the cupboards underneath him with his heels; somehow he had lost a sock. Hopefully he wouldn’t be finding it somewhere unexpected.

As Steve went to put the first grilled cheese in the frying pan, he found that some of the cheese had mysteriously vanished. He chuckled, knowing exactly where it had gone. He didn’t look at Tony, chopping up more cheese to replace what had been devoured instead. Tony chewed quietly, taking sips of his beer with each pilfered bite, actually trying to hide the thievery; it would have been easier to miss if the cheddar wasn’t bright orange against Tony’s pale skin.

“Oh damn, I cut too much cheese.” Steve fake mused, stacking up the extra strips of cheddar that Tony hadn’t successfully managed to pillage. “I guess I’ll have to make two.” Tony continued to watch him, his eyes not settling on Steve’s stooped form.

Steve finished the second grilled cheese, humming to himself as he split it in half with the flipper. Tony began to sniff the air, biting his lower lip as he watched Steve spin the grilled cheese sandwich around in a circle on the plate; his fingers twitched against the beer bottle when Steve slid another plate out of the cupboard, setting out the second sandwich. Tony always did have problems leaving food alone when it was sitting all by its lonesome looking warm and unattended.

The moment Steve took his plate and the ketchup bottle to the table, Tony descended upon the other plate like a vulture. They sat together in silence, slowly eating with cheese strings hanging from their chins. Tony ate only half of what was there at first, pausing to stare morbidly into his beer before offering it once more to Steve, who waved it away.

“You sure?” Tony asked, sounding surprised.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m good.”

Tony set the bottle down and started in on his food again, a little slower than the first time, a hint of a smile on his lips. He nibbled away at the chunk of grilled cheese, ignoring the crusts and then sat back when he was done, leaning against his chair with a distinctly satisfied look on his face.

“I take it you liked dinner?” Steve laughed.
Tony rolled his eyes. “It was alright.”

“Well good. I was afraid I might have overcooked it. Are you finished?”

Tony nodded, hiding a belch behind his hand.

“Alright then.” Steve collected both of their plates and set them beside the sink amongst their dirty brethren, scraping Tony’s crusts into the trash with practiced ease. He frowned at the pile of dishes lurking in the sink. He might as well get some work done, seeing as how they had more than enough plates sitting around to do a proper wash-up. The egg from breakfast were caked on; he should have soaked them before they left for the mall, but they had been in a bit of a rush to get out the door, even though Happy had been more than willing to wait. He filled the sink up with hot water and splashed some soap in from the half-used bottle he found beside the sink, humming to himself. It was nice to keep busy, even if it was just scrubbing some sticky eggs off a few plates.

“What are you doing?” Tony asked from his chair, watching Steve with a lazy look in his eye.

“I’m doing the dishes. Why, what does it look like I’m doing?” Steve laughed. He dropped the egg caked plates in the hot soapy water to soak, watching them vanish under a blanket of bubbles. He leaned against the sink, lounging as he breathed in the warm scent of lemon dish soap.

“But you’re a guest…” Tony said, raising an eyebrow.

“And I’m staying here, so I should take some responsibility for the mess, don’t you think?” Steve said.

Tony looked stunned. Steve wondered if it was because Tony was drunk or because he had never met anyone who had done the dishes by hand before; most people thought he was crazy for doing dishes by hand. He had gotten into quite a few arguments with Clint over that particular topic. He turned back to the sink, scrubbing at a particularly stubborn egg stain with a green scrubbing pad, enjoying the hot water as the warmth leached into his body from his fingers up.

“How many people have you had stay over with you?” Steve asked, working at the stain until it vanished.

“He had three people stay over. You’re the fourth.”

“I take it none of them helped out with the chores?”

“They were only around for a week or so tops. Not like you. How long are you planning to stick around, anyways? He didn’t say.” Tony asked, sounding bored.

Steve wasn’t sure what to say; he could leave of course, once he found out how much was in his bank account, but truth be told, he wasn’t sure he really wanted to leave. It would be lonely living alone. He was used to being constantly surrounded by other people, and the thought of being without that constant chatter made him feel sick to his stomach; he had started to crave the company, no matter how annoying or loud it was. The Avengers had been – well, no. He had never been with the Avengers, had he? Well, it felt like he had, so he supposed there wasn’t any harm in thinking of them as former roommates or something. He brushed his bangs out of his face and then batted away a blob of soap bubbles that tried to cling to his cheek.

“So? How long are you going to stay?” Tony repeated; he didn’t sound annoyed with Steve having not answered. In fact, Steve was almost sure he heard a kind of hopefulness in Tony’s dulcet tones.

Maybe he was imagining things.
“I’d like to stay as long as I can, if you’ll have me that is. It’s nice here, and I like having company.” Steve said, smiling even though his back was still turned to Tony. His mother had always said a smile could travel through your voice. He sure hoped that was true.

“Really? Why?”

Steve turned, the plate he had been working on held dripping in one hand.

“What do you mean why?” Steve asked.

Tony looked genuinely confused. “Why would you want to stay here?”

“You’re a nice guy Tony. I like spending time with you.” Water dripped down Steve’s arm and he wiped it away with his free hand.

“You don’t know me.” Tony grunted. He got up and put his empty beer bottle beside the sink, grabbing a ratty looking dish towel off the bar on the side of the stove. He started drying the plates, waiting patiently for Steve to start the next one so that he could continue with the chore, his eyes on his work. Steve hadn’t seen Tony pick up a dish towel unless physically threatened with pain and or death. This was strange. Had he hit his head on something when Steve wasn’t looking? He jammed his hands into the water again to keep from actually checking Tony’s scalp for bumps. Somehow he didn’t think Tony would appreciate soapy hands in his hair.

“Well you seem nice so far.” Steve said, going back to his dishes.

“You really don’t know me.”

“Well I guess I’ll just have to get to know you then.”

They finished the dishes in less time than Steve had expected; he had figured it would take at least a half hour with the way Tony had been moving along, drying each plate meticulously, but time had flown by. Looking at the pile of dishes in the drying rack, he wasn’t surprised. There were only two people living here after all, not a whole herd of people. Two people seemed like such a small number now.

“So…” Steve said.

“Yeah…”

They stood together in the kitchen, awkwardly shuffling their feet, looking around at everything but each other. They could watch TV maybe – or talk some more. Talking would be nice. Steve opened his mouth, ready to suggest a nice friendly conversation, but he was beaten to the punch.

“Well, I’m going to go to uh… sleep.” Tony said, stumbling towards the hallway.

“Oh.” Steve tried not to feel let down; it wasn’t as if he had been expecting Tony to spend time with him anyways. This wasn’t his Tony. He hated saying that, having to repeat the words over and over because they didn’t seem to want to stick.

This wasn’t his Tony.

Tony didn’t owe him anything. He was going to be disappointed by a whole lot more things he shouldn’t have been disappointed by if he didn’t get it through his thick skull soon that his Tony was gone.
Steve stared down at his feet.

Tony was gone. He really was, wasn’t he? There wasn’t going to be any more mornings waking up wrapped up in bed with him, no more quiet moments spent watching Tony work in his workshop. Those things were dead and gone, buried in his memories where no one could ever see them.

“Well goodnight then.” Tony said.

“Goodnight.” Steve said softly, not looking up from his feet.

“Goodnight.” Tony gave Steve a wave goodbye and then fled.

Steve gazed at the clock, wiping at his eyes when he was sure that Tony was really gone from the room.

The clock said that it was only seven o’clock. Contrary to popular belief, Steve Rogers hadn’t gone to bed at seven p.m. since he was six years old. He had a bag full of art supplies to play around with after all and he was itching to try them all out. Maybe some art would make things better.

Steve sat at the desk in his room staring blankly at his sketchbook, trying to figure out what he should draw. He hadn’t really noticed that the room had a desk in it to begin with, having been more interested in the bed and the floor the first few times he had come in here; it had been a pleasant surprise to find that he would have some place to draw that didn’t require him to sit in the kitchen or in the living room, out on display. He was pretty sure that Tony would appreciate the privacy too, and it was nice to at least have a place to ground himself.

Everything in his new room was plain, not exactly the way he would have expected someone’s guest room to look, let alone Tony Stark’s guest room. The utilitarian bookshelf in the corner was empty, devoid of books or knickknacks like most guest rooms would have set out as decorations. Even the curtains were a drab grey. Steve was used to army barracks, so this was still a step up. He had repurposed the bookshelf as an art supply holder and put the few things he owned out, trying to get some structure back into his life. When he had finished, it still wasn’t even close to being filled up, but at least now it looked like someone lived there.

It would have been easier to get started if his room had had something interesting in it to draw. He would have given anything for one of those little ceramic dogs that his mother had collected. His sketchbook mocked him with its blank white pages, staring up at him from the tabletop like two empty eyes; it was far too clean a page for his liking, without even a few tentative sketch lines to guide him into something better. He held a pencil above the page, poised, ready to draw; the will was there, but his subject matter, however, was not. He had plenty of options he supposed, even without having something tangible to draw. He could draw his mother, maybe sketch out her face so that he would have something to remember her by. He had lost most of his pictures to the ravages of time; Howard had said something about having his things from his apartment in storage somewhere, but so far nothing had shown up. Maybe Howard was holding all of it hostage in exchange for some kind of favor.

Steve’s mind drifted back to Tony as it usually did in when given free reign; the Tony he had known in his dreams was still there, drifting amongst his thoughts of the old and the new, with that oh-so-Tony smile of his. Steve could still see it, Tony’s lips curling at the corners, batting his eyelashes while he waited for Steve to do something to entertain him. Steve loved that smile more than...
anything else. That smile had been warm and forgiving, as if he could never do anything wrong ever again. Steve sighed aloud and set the pencil down. This new Tony didn’t have the same smile at all. Maybe he didn’t have a reason to smile yet. There was always time, Steve mused, to test that theory out.

No, he wasn’t going to be doing any drawing tonight no matter how much he racked his brain for inspiration. All he wanted to do was sketch out Tony before those memories faded, yet it felt wrong, like he was doing something dishonest by thinking about that other Tony while there was a new Tony living in the same house. The two Tonys were like twins, similar and yet worlds apart. Steve lay his head down on the table beside the sketchbook, staring crookedly at the pages that were still taunting him.

He wished that he could talk to someone about what he was going through; he might have said something to Howard, if he hadn’t been such a pervert. They hadn’t even offered him a counsellor to talk to in the hospital, although he wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to anyone else about his dreammemories; if Natasha had been around he would have talked to her – or to Tony even, but both of them were long gone now, and he just didn’t feel comfortable talking with strangers. He never had been good at opening up with people he didn’t know; he ran his fingers over the tabletop, finding not a scratch there. It felt like someone would take advantage of those conversations, like they could be used against him, and he didn’t want to put anyone at risk by having any extra knowledge about him, even if he wasn’t Captain America anymore. It was stupid. He knew damned well that councillors were different now. There were rules and confidentiality in play; they wouldn’t just run around chatting about his life over drinks. Still, he couldn’t help but feel nervous. SHIELD had never really followed the rules when it came to privacy; Natasha had as much as said it to him when they had first met. No. They had never met – he had to stop thinking like they were his friends. They were strangers too – they weren’t his anymore!

He must have drifted off to sleep at some point, because when Steve opened his eyes next he was wrapped in a soft blanket. His face hurt something awful; he sat up, pulling the blanket around his shoulders and glanced around the room, eyes bleary with sleep and unshed tears. Tony lay curled up on the left side of Steve’s bed just behind him, his eyes closed, snoring up a storm. Steve smiled softly; Tony looked absolutely adorable with his face squished against the pillows. He could see traces of dream-Tony in him, somehow still there even if that Tony wasn’t.

Tony snorted loudly and woke himself up. He looked around, realizing that he was being watched.

“You fell asleep at the table.” Tony said with a yawn, not bothering to sit up. He slid lower down the bed so that he was laying on his back, staring up at the ceiling through half-lidded eyes, his breath slow and steady; Steve staggered over to the bed, climbing up, settling on the opposite side. He wrapped himself up like he was in a cocoon, leaving only his head visible, too tired to think straight.

“Nothing on the page though. Couldn’t think of anything to draw?” Tony asked dragging half of the blanket out from under Steve so that he could huddle underneath. They weren’t quite touching, but it was a very near thing, with Tony’s arm almost brushing against his; Tony didn’t seem to want to do much more, even if he was burrowing for warmth.

Steve stared up at the ceiling, not wanting to scare Tony off. Part of him itched to pull Tony against him so that he could curl up in those oh-so-familiar arms, while the logical part of him screamed for him to pull away, to not get attached.

“Too many things to draw… I couldn’t pick.” Steve murmured, dozing. He closed his eyes, trying to mute the voices whispering in his ear; voices murmuring of days long gone, days he had cherished, days he had loathed. Tony shifted beside him, rolling over, wiggling a few inches closer until his
bony knees were bumping against Steve’s thigh and the blanket was draped all the way over his back, covering them both.

“You could try to draw objects you know, if you can’t think of any people to draw, that is.” Tony suggested with a yawn.

“That’s true…” Steve yawned back. He blinked, almost drifting off to sleep again without meaning to. Tony prodded him in the chest; he was gentle about it, fingers almost caressing the spot he had touched as if to push away the moment of discomfort he had caused. This was probably Sober Tony, Steve realized with a blink. Sober Tony seemed, well… honest. Steve wasn’t sure just how sober Tony really was of course, but there was a distinct lack of beer bottles cluttering up the nightstand, so the chances were good that Tony had dried out at least a little.

“What do you usually draw?”

“Everything… Portraits and landscapes… I used to draw cartoons and caricatures… I wanted to be a comic book artist…”

“Really? Like… drawing Captain America?”

“Yeah… I was pretty good at it… I think…”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t remember how much of it was real. I have these memories… of this other life where everyone was different and other things happened. I don’t know. It’s weird.” Steve said. He probably shouldn’t have been talking about the dreams with Tony, but he was too far gone to care and the words just kept coming.

“Like what? Family? Friends? Pets that don’t exist?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“That sucks.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Do you miss them?”

“Yes. They gave me a home.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It really was.”

Steve drifted off with Tony pressed against his side. He could have sworn that Tony was smiling, but that might just have been part of a dream he may or may not have been having.

Tony was smiling at him when Steve came down into the lab. Dummy waved his arm, wheeling closer as Steve stepped over a bundle of cables left strewn across the threshold. It was always peaceful here, and the only strange part was the fact that the music was oddly absent –
Steve woke with a start; he reached up and touched his cheek, finding it wet. He had been dreaming again, about Tony this time in particular; it hadn’t been an unpleasant dream, but all of it had been about Tony: Tony wearing his sunglasses, Tony in his work clothing fiddling around under the hood of one of his many cars. Tony, Tony, Tony, a mass of Tonys that stretched on forever, fading into the distance, an optical illusion of Tonys.

Tony stirred against Steve’s side, snuggling closer in his sleep. He had stayed the whole night it seemed; the light was sneaking in through the curtains a few inches at a time, getting closer and closer to Tony’s face. The Tony lying beside Steve didn’t look all that dissimilar to the Tony from his dreams. He was still handsome and rakish, a hint of a devil-may-care smile permanently etched on his face especially present now that he was asleep. This Tony looked tired, as if he hadn’t gotten enough sleep for years. He had lost the softness to his cheeks, and his jaw and cheekbones were much more pronounced than usual; the bags under his eyes were so dark that they almost looked as if they had been drawn on his face with a bit of spare charcoal; they might even have been permanent, because the past few days hadn’t done anything to get rid of them completely.

“You’re staring…” Tony mumbled; cracking open one eye to peer impishly at Steve, as if he hadn’t just been caught pretending to sleep. Steve burrowed a little deeper into his blanket, hiding his smile under the covers.

“Sorry.”

“Sure you are. You’re just a big ol’ pervert, aren’t you?” Tony mumbled, eyelids drooping.

“I am not –”

A series of loud bangs crashed through the quiet morning, echoing from the front door, jarring them out of their quiet conversation. Steve and Tony sat up almost in unison, wiping sleep from their eyes, the blanket dropping down around their hips in a crumpled arc. The doorbell rang again and again, the noise almost maddening with its intensity and frequency. Tony clapped his hands over his ears, trying to block it all out; he lost his balance when he tried to catch himself on the edge of the bed and slipped off, ending up lying with his head half under the bedframe, groaning upside down in agony.

“Are you alright?” Steve asked, worried.

“I’m fine – just go answer the damn door and stop whichever asshole that is from knocking so goddamned loud.” Tony whined.

The doorbell continued to ring, occasionally accented by knocks that sounded like a boxer assaulting a heavy bag; Steve recognized the knock. There was only one person he knew who would be so relentless with their bludgeoning of a door that had gone unanswered. Steve got up and stalked through the hallway to the door, straightening his clothing so that it didn’t look too dishevelled. He smoothed his hair as an afterthought, approaching the door with caution. Tony crept along behind him, hands still clamped over his ears, eyes bloodshot and red.

Steve unlocked and opened the door; he was almost flattened by the fist that was attempting to knock again. Bucky pulled his arm back just in time to avoid smashing Steve right in the head. He grinned from ear to ear, a little apologetic about the near disaster, and then lunged forwards, scooping Steve in one of the most powerful bear hugs Steve had ever had. Steve gasped, pressed tightly against Bucky’s heavily muscled chest, half smothered by the loose t-shirt Bucky was wearing; he tried to wrap his arms around Bucky’s middle, but he was too small to manage it, and had to resort to clinging helpless to Bucky’s sides, laughing whenever he could get enough oxygen in to manage it.

Bucky lifted him up and Steve dangled a good five inches off the ground. He shifted Steve so that
they were face to face, slipping his arm under Steve’s thighs; Steve grinned, not able to help himself. He had been waiting to see Bucky for such a long time that he hadn’t been sure what to expect.

“Steve! God you’re a sight for sore eyes!” Bucky laughed, shifting Steve again so that he was now sitting comfortably against Bucky’s hip. The Bucky that Steve had remembered had been far less at ease with extended physical contact than this; Bucky could manage a hug or two, but anything more than that would make him uncomfortable and fidgety. Time had apparently changed that.

“I was wondering when you would come visit.” Steve chuckled almost giddy with delight. Bucky strode into the house with Steve held against him, a bag dangling from his free hand; his grin almost vanished when he caught sight of Tony, leaning not-quite-so-casually against the wall.

“You’re staying with him?” Bucky asked, voice tightening. “Howard didn’t say anything about you staying with him.”

Steve looked around in confusion, not sure what was going on. He caught sight of Tony, who looked a little hurt.

“Is there a problem?” Steve asked, twisting in Bucky’s grasp; it felt like he was being encased in iron, and no matter how much he wriggled, there was no way he was going to be free. Suddenly Steve didn’t like the embrace all that much.

Bucky shook his head and gently settled Steve on the ground with a slight bend to his knees; Bucky was massive, like some kind of muscled mountain, not at all like the man Steve had remembered in his dreams. Well, Bucky had always been bigger than Steve, but the Super Soldier Serum had changed Bucky into something closer to that of marble statue then a man; Steve was a whole of five foot one when he was in shoes, and Bucky was almost six foot two now, towering over him like a gentle giant. Steve almost couldn’t believe it. He blinked through memories, remembering when he had been tall, the growth spurt caused by the serum… He shook his head, trying to forget about what he had lost for a moment. The memories could wait; right now he had his friend back. He had been waiting for this for a long time and it would be a shame to waste it.

“Nope, it’s no problem at all. I was just wondering why he would have left you with his son rather than setting you up at the Avengers mansion with the rest of us, that’s all.” Bucky said breezily, flapping one massive hand in Tony's direction. Tony had flattened against the wall, eyes wide and awestruck; he looked very unwilling to move closer, and remained there, almost cowering against the wallpaper.

“Hello Tony.” Bucky said, nodding once to acknowledge Tony’s presence.

“Hey Cap.” Tony said quietly. He looked around, giving Steve a serious look before averting his eyes.

“I take it you two know each other well?” Steve said dryly, knowing full well that the pair had indeed met before.

“Of course I know him. I grew up with him. He’s Captain America.” Tony said, rolling his eyes as if Steve had lost his marbles. He then cleared his throat, edging along the wall. “I’ll leave you two to have your reunion. I’ve got… things…” Tony vanished around the corner, disappearing from sight.

“Well that was rude.” Bucky snorted. He closed the front door behind him and locked it, moving so gracefully it hardly seemed like he had moved at all; he walked as if he owned the place, and while it was fascinating to see someone so confidant, Steve was left feeling a little uneasy by the show. They made their way into the living room with Bucky leading the way, and settled down on a green and
black couch sitting side by side, slightly turned to face one another. Bucky sprawled, wrapping an arm around Steve’s shoulder as he talked, completely at ease.

“We were fighting a bunch of Doom bots – uh… robots that a crazy bastard called Doctor Doom made – and things got a little hairy. Nuclear bombs and stuff may or may not have happened – Tasha took care of it. Anyways, I meant to come and visit you in the hospital, but then Howard called and told me that you were busy and, well, you know how it is. Missions always take priority.” Bucky said, shrugging. “Oh, I almost forgot!”

He dropped the plastic bag he had been touting into Steve’s lap.

“This is for you. I know it’s not the real McCoy, but lots of people like to have them these days. Captain America draws quite the crowd.” Bucky said.

Steve opened the bag up with a loud crinkle, the hard plastic peeling apart, half melted from the weather outside. Inside was a round flexible Frisbee shaped like Captain America’s shield; his old shield. Steve swallowed hard. He stared down at the plastic disc in his hands, lost.

*He wasn’t Captain America anymore.*

*He had never been Captain America.*

Steve wanted to mumble out thanks, wanting to be polite, but couldn’t gather the words in time before Bucky started speaking again. He listened in a daze, not sure if what was going on was real or not.

“It’s great, right? I left the real thing at home in the mansion. There was too much stuff to wander around with, and Howard said that it might make you uncomfortable to see the real thing. He seemed to be under the impression that you thought that you were Captain America! He made all these crazy claims that you thought you were a member of the Avengers too.” Bucky laughed, slapping Steve on the back.

“I…” Steve ran his hand over the Frisbee-shield, pausing to press his thumb to the white star in the centre, caressing it like an old friend.

“You have the same weird memory problem I did, right? Howard didn’t say it outright, but I kind of guessed as much. It was pretty hard coming out of it – I remember I spent my first week having panic attacks in my hospital room while they ran tests on me, trying to make sure I hadn’t gone completely nutso. You really scared me Steve. They told me that you were probably going to die and…” Bucky reached out and set a hand on top of Steve’s head, stroking his hair gently; Bucky’s hand was warm, and each time he stroked Steve’s hair, shivers went down his spine. The bedhead was soon flattened out, his hair softly curled around his ears.

“I really missed you. There’s so much I wanted to talk with you about, and you were just… lying there in a hospital bed, completely gone.” Bucky murmured.

“I missed you too Bucky. They told me that you visited me every week.”

Bucky beamed at that.

“I… I almost couldn’t believe it at first – not that I thought that you hadn’t visited of course – I just… everything had gone on and passed me by.” Steve mumbled quietly. He set the Frisbee-shield on the cushion beside him, smiling softly up at Bucky, who had watery eyes just like he did. At least he wasn’t the only one having a hard time with this. Misery always did love company.
Bucky sure looked different. He had always been a handsome man, but now, there was something about him that was almost… mesmerizing. Did Bucky realize that? That the look in his eyes was so soft and gentle all of a sudden? Steve looked away so that he could wipe his eyes on his sleeve. Bucky had always been someone he had looked up to, no matter what the situation. It had been Bucky who had helped coach him through the bullies and the sickness and starvation; it seemed fitting that Bucky was here now, coaching him through the years he had lost. If there was anyone who could have stubbornly withstood the hands of time, it was Bucky. God, he had missed Bucky so much!

Bucky cleared his throat, wiping at his eyes even though he was determinedly not crying.

“Well uh… I mean this is depressing as shit. How are things going with you? Howard didn’t tell me anything. I think he was trying to stick it to me for not coming to visit in the first place.” Bucky growled.

“Things are… going. I got here two days ago, and so far things are nice. Tony’s a great guy. Howard, on the other hand, is a massive jerk, and I am this close to punching him in the face.” Steve said with a soft chuckle.

Bucky ruffled Steve’s hair, smirking all knowingly.

“Well he always did want to get in your pants. I never understood it myself, but there you go. He apparently likes them young and slender, if you know what I mean. If you want to get rid of him, I can help you hide the body.”

“Hilarious.”

“It’s true though, about the dames and shit. He’s had a string of slender blondes around him ever since that wife of his died and not just of the feminine persuasion either. Personally I think he was just waiting for her to kick the bucket so that he could get back onto the market. He’s pretty disappointed by the way his son turned out – probably wants to get some offspring with better genes so that they can run the company for him.”

“That’s harsh. Tony’s a good guy.”

“Yeah so you say, but to Howard, Tony is the King of Crap Mountain. He’s really pissed about all of the guy’s whoring and boozing. Howard doesn’t give the kid much in the way of freedom, granted, but he’s right about it. I mean, it’s not like the apple fell far from the tree, so come on, but Howard’s always got to have the last say with everything. I’m surprised his kid managed to keep from shooting himself for this long. If it was me, living with Howard constantly nagging and nagging I’d have put a gun in my mouth years ago. Baby Stark doesn’t have the balls or the motivation I guess.” Bucky shrugged.

“Bucky –”

“I mean, I feel for the kid and everything, honest, I really do, but Tony Stark is wasting his life away under Howard’s thumb. If he had half a brain he would just wander off one day and never come back –start over, pretend to be someone else or something. Although knowing Howard, he wouldn’t get far. He’d find the kid again and drag him back kicking and screaming.”

“Is it really that bad – I mean… I know they don’t get along…”

“Steve,” Bucky said, patting Steve on the shoulder sympathetic to his ignorance of the matter, “Howard Stark would be happy if his son walked into traffic and got hit by a dump truck. He would
pay for it to back over him after too. I kid you not. But let’s talk about something more cheerful, huh? How about all this technology, huh? It’s great, isn’t it?”

“I…” Steve fell silent. He looked down at his hands, his chest tightening ever-so-slightly.

How was it that they could go from a conversation about Tony being abused by Howard to one about how great the future was? Didn’t Bucky understand that he loved Tony? No, Steve supposed after a moment of quiet agony, Bucky didn’t know because he wasn’t in Steve’s head; the doctors had said that the memories would go away with time, and maybe they really had for Bucky. Maybe they would go away for Steve too. That thought alone made his insides freeze up again.

He didn’t want those memories gone.

He couldn’t lose all those little moments, the small ones where he woke up with Tony wrapped around his stomach or the ones with the Avengers patting each other on the back after a job well done. He didn’t want to lose those things. He didn’t ever want to lose that look Tony got on his face after Dummy had done something particularly stupid – or that one Tony made when he was irritated because Steve had told him to come up to bed three times already. Each wrinkle on Tony’s face, each smile, each tear – all of it was precious, so much more precious than anything else Steve had with him. He would rather die than lose those thoughts.

“Have you seen television yet? Boy, things have really changed from our day! I tell you, when we were kids we couldn’t dream up half of the shit they have now. Did they show you the internet? Did they introduce you to music yet? Did you see the cars?” Bucky raved, grinning so hard he was actually bearing his teeth.

“I’ve only been out of the hospital for a week and a bit Bucky. They didn’t really have a lot of things there that I hadn’t already seen before in, you know… The Dreams.” Steve managed to get out. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, his head pounding all of a sudden with the fiercest headache he had ever had; he had been having so many headaches these days. Please let it not be what makes my memories go, Steve thought to himself, suddenly afraid. Please let it not be this.

“Ah. Well… I guess you should ask me to show you some stuff, huh? I’ll take you out to a ball game someday. It’s crazy what they’ve done with the stadiums! The hotdogs are a little different now, but hey, you have to make some concessions for progress right? At least now they might only be fifteen percent rat.” Bucky laughed, elbowing Steve. The move was jarring, painful in a way that Steve couldn’t quite comprehend.

“I suppose that would be an improvement.” Steve allowed.

“They moved the Dodgers on us though. It wasn’t really the same after that.” Bucky said sadly, his shoulders slumping.

“Were you… did you live through the last seventy years?” Steve asked in dismay, looking up from his lap. The thoughts of his own memories vanishing went away, replaced with the abject terror at the idea of his friend having suffered alone.

Bucky’s eyes went dark and hollow. He didn’t seem to want to talk at first. All he did was wrap his arm around Steve’s shoulder, pressing Steve up against his side, seeming to need the contact to go on.

“I don’t know if you’d call it living really. I was there alright, but…” Bucky started. He squeezed Steve’s shoulder, fingers digging into the soft flesh above Steve’s elbow as if he wasn’t aware of his super strength. Pain burned up Steve’s arm; he hissed and jerked in Bucky’s grasp like a wet cat
being pulled out of a bathtub.

“Shit – sorry,” Bucky blanched. He loosened his grip, rubbing at the spot he had almost crushed with the palm of his hand. It would bruise of course, Steve was sure of that. He would be surprised if it didn’t. He patted Bucky’s hand, wanting to be reassuring. Bucky hadn’t meant to hurt him; it had been an accident.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure?” Bucky asked hesitantly.

“It’s fine… just a little sore.” Steve lied. His skin was already hot and prickly and the constant pressure of Bucky’s hand against it was like being touched with a hot poker, every cell and hair follicle too sensitive for its own good. He put on a smile, tacking it in place to try to keep from crying out from the pain. He had felt worse. This wasn’t that bad.

Bucky seemed content again, still rubbing at Steve’s arm even when Steve started flinching every time he did it. “It wasn’t really life… at least not until the Avengers came about. They had me doing shows and things for them. They had me doing shows and things for them. Whenever they found something useful for me they sent me out, like on missions for the Allies and to the sets of those propaganda films they loved making. After the war I spent a lot of time living in SHIELD’S facility being their guinea pig – Did they talk to you about SHIELD? I don’t really care about breaking their confidentiality agreements and all that garbage, so I can tell you all about them if you don’t know.”

“I know about SHIELD – well… about most of it I think. Some of it is from the dreams… the memories.” Steve grimaced as Bucky’s hand made another circle, his skin crying for mercy.

“Yeah – I know what you mean. Maybe it’s a shared memory thing – Erskine didn’t really know most of what the serum could do and when he died half of the shit he did know wasn’t written down. It died with him, you know? You were unconscious when he was killed – they told you that, right? Some guy snuck in – Hydra agent – killed Erskine and ran off with the last vial of serum. I hunted the fucker down and just when it looked like I’d get some information out of the bastard he took some kind of pill… offed himself so we couldn’t take him alive. Fucking coward. Anyways… like I was saying before, there really wasn’t much of a life. I’ve only really felt alive for the past three or four years. I watched all my friends die Steve. Everyone grew old and… they…” Bucky leaned, resting his cheek against the top of Steve’s head. “The only one left is you.”

Bucky pressed a kiss to Steve’s forehead and then stood up, clearing his throat; a screaming cry came from his pocket, making both him and Steve move apart with an abrupt jerk. Bucky pulled a small round device from his pocket and scowled darkly at it. It was a communicator of sorts, nothing new or special. Steve didn’t have feel like marveling at the new piece of technology, so he didn’t, ignoring it like it was the microwave, something he had seen a thousand times over. Bucky didn’t seem to notice the lack of excitement.

“Assembling time. That’s my cue. I… I’ll come back again later, alright? I’ll be back. Avengers business and all that. You know how it is.” Bucky said.

Steve heard the sounds of Bucky’s footfalls and then the harsh sound of the front door slamming shut. He didn’t look up, staring straight at his hands, trembling, tears streaming down his face.

He had been so good, holding it in for so long; he had been so good.

Too much…
Even Bucky couldn’t stick around to talk him through it. He had lost Tony, and now he was losing his only friend to a job he had once known so well. His arm hurt, but his chest hurt worse, a hollow throbbing that wouldn’t stop no matter how hard he tried to clamp down on it.

*It was too much –*

Tony’s hand settled on the back of Steve’s shoulder, warm and comforting, touching without asking; he sat down in the void Bucky had left, his fingers tangling in the hairs on the back of Steve’s neck, fixing the collar of Steve’s shirt. He noticed that Steve was crying and still with a nervous smile on his lips, unsure of what to do.

“Are you alright?” Tony asked.

Steve didn’t respond. His voice was trapped inside, buried under the sobs and screams he had struggled to keep locked within his chest for the past week; he needed to keep them in or it would all be lost, all of it for nothing because who would want someone so broken, something so pathetic?

Everything felt as if it were moving in slow motion. Tony pulled Steve closer, lifting him from the couch cushion onto his lap in one smooth motion. He tucked Steve under his chin, wrapping his arms firmly around him, holding Steve close. Steve was pressed so close, he could feel Tony’s heartbeat thumping a deep lub-dub into his flesh. The sound was rhythmic, beating along in time with Steve’s heart. He felt himself calm, his body going limp in Tony’s arms.

“You’re white as a sheet! What’s going on?” Tony whispered.

Steve leaned into Tony, his mind still racing. He was used to loss; he had lost so many people in his dreams, and he had lost many of those same people now. Bucky was still alive, and Steve was thankful for that of course, but it still didn’t take the pain out of losing Captain America – losing himself, and the shield, the two things he had held on to so tightly over the years.

He had had a future once, back in that dream world. He had thought he would be spending the rest of his life with Tony; he had wanted that so much. Tony had joked about them living together with a few cats to keep them company once the Avengers weren’t needed anymore. Steve would have taken that – he had wanted children one day, but he would have taken Tony and a few cats in a heartbeat if it was all he was going to get. But that was gone now. All those discussions they had together – all those moments spent lying in bed looking up at the ceiling as they drifted in and out of sleep, whispering about the future – all of that was gone. He had *nothing* to look forward to now – no life left, nothing! The same old hurts were still there, magnified. All of the people he knew from before the serum were dead or dying from old age, having lived full lives. He had slept through it all, through all the weddings, funerals and births. Bucky had been there to watch it all from the sidelines; Steve had slept through a lifetime, lying prone and still in a hospital bed with only dreams for company, dreams that couldn’t even give him comfort anymore.

But now, he had lost *Tony* – he had lost the best thing that had *ever* happened to him. Even the serum didn’t compare to what Tony had brought into his life. He had lost Tony.

“Steve?”

It would have been better if he hadn’t woken up at all. The thought was bitter; he could taste bile in his throat as he thought the words. He wanted to bite his tongue, to silence the traitor in his head once and for all. Why wouldn’t it just shut up and leave him alone? Couldn’t he have any peace? Couldn’t he mourn for once in his life without having to hear that goddamned voice whispering away in the back of his mind?
“Steve?”

He almost didn’t hear Tony’s voice, so angry with himself for having let it all happen in the first place. And that was it, wasn’t it? He had let this happen – he had taken the goddamned serum and this is what had happened to him. He deserved everything he got, every heartache, every bit of pain, all of it. He had sold himself out to make himself something better than what he was and this was the terrible cost of his arrogance.

“Steve? Are you alright?”

Steve looked up, blinking through tears. Tony’s bristly chin came into view, close and a little out of focus. Tony leaned forward so that he was completely wrapped around Steve, enveloping him in warmth; his beard scratched against Steve’s cheek, sharp and reassuring. Steve didn’t flinch away. He leaned into the touch consciously, pressing his face against Tony’s, closing his eyes.

“I was sort of spying on your conversation – I’m not sorry for that by the way, because hey, Captain America was in my house and I kind of thought that was awesome – you guys were talking and then all of a sudden you went all weird and pale and then he made a break for it like you set his ass on fire. What happened?” Tony rambled.

“He got called away on Avengers business… But I think it was too much… for both of us.” Steve said his voice cracking.

“Yeah?”

“He lived through seventy years of this… all by himself… he watched them all die…”

Tony’s breath was hot against Steve’s scalp, making Steve’s hair blow to the side with each breath he let out.

“The Howling Commandos and Peggy Carter were with him, but yeah you’re right, they all died of old age. He had that at least, right? Bucky even used to visit him when I was little. I think it was when I was three or four years old when he first started dropping by. I don’t really remember why he was there exactly. I think it had something to do with SHIELD and their band of misfit toys or something.” Tony said.


“He never said why and Bucky didn’t either. They both got this funny look on their faces when I used to ask, so I stopped asking. Bucky used to drop in on me when I was building things in my room. Spoke about all these grand adventures, where tiny little Steve fought off bullies three times his size. Of course I didn’t know who the hell he was talking about at the time…” Tony shrugged.

“Bucky is a good man.”

“He’s the best. He’ll probably come around again … then maybe you guys can do something fun instead of spending your time crying on my couch. I don’t know. The point is that everyone has their own life. You can’t change that. We all go our own way no matter what happens. And yeah, sometimes we take the hard path. It happens. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.” Tony said.

“Can I ask you something?” Steve said, wiping his face on his sleeve; he hadn’t been all out bawling, but it sort of felt like he had. It was a good feeling; a clean feeling.

“I think you just did.”
“Very funny.”

“Well then, ask away. It’s not like I’ve got anything better to do.” Tony said, pulling them both backwards against the couch cushions. Steve’s head bobbed with each rise and fall of Tony’s chest; he tucked himself under Tony’s chin again, his lower half twisted so that his legs dangled off Tony’s lap.

“What do you think I should do?” Steve asked his eyes squeezed tightly shut. He had been afraid to ask before; he had always been afraid to ask, because somehow hearing it from Tony would make losing him real. Asking for Tony’s opinion had always made things real for Steve; that was why he and Tony had been such good partners. Even when they had been just Avengers, and not lovers, he had valued Tony’s opinion over most of the team aside from Natasha’s. She had always been too scary to ignore for long.

“What should you do? About what?” Tony asked, startled.

“All of this. My life – everything.”

“You’re asking ME what you should do with your life?”

“Yes. I trust you.”

“Wow…”

Tony’s arm dropped down onto Steve’s lower back, lying against the edge of Steve’s hip, his bare forearm rubbing against the small strip of skin revealed when Steve’s shirt had ridden up. The touch was electric, making him warm all over.

“Wow what?” Steve asked, not looking up for fear of Tony seeing his blush.

“I uh… well. I don’t normally get asked questions like that. Usually I get more of the ‘what shouldn’t I do with my life’ kind of questions. Not that anyone really asks…” Tony said. “I don’t really know what to tell you Steve. I mean… you should probably get on with your life, right? Think about the stuff you like to do and whatnot? Focus on the good things and not the bad? Maybe start drawing… look into the things you used to do before the whole Super Coma thing. Did you play any sports – well, looking at you I think I already know the answer to that question.” Tony rambled on nervously.

“I used to box. I think.”

“Then get yourself a punching bag and some gloves or something. Do something to occupy your mind – you know, like reading and watching movies on TV or whatever. I uh… I… I don’t know. Does that sound reasonable? Because I’m pretty much running out of healthy habits for you to work with here. You could take up drinking if you felt like it, although I wouldn’t recommend it for a feather weight like you. Beginners don’t have as much fun as us professionals, and while it’s a great way to time waste, it’s not quite as entertaining if you’re busy throwing up in your own dresser because you couldn’t make it to the bathroom in time.”

Oh Tony. No, he hadn’t lost Tony; they weren’t together, but this here was Tony.

“Thank you.” Steve said, laughing softly. He wiped his eyes again with his sleeve and then sat back on Tony’s lap, looking into his eyes. Tony looked up at him from his place squashed against the couch, his chocolate brown eyes a little wider than normal.

“Uh… you’re welcome?”
“Thank you for putting up with me – with all the… crazy.” Steve smiled.

“Sure. I can deal with crazy. I’ve got a whole bag of it myself. It’s not so bad once you get used to it, but it tastes awful. I think I need a drink or something… to wash the taste out of my mouth – Uh… I’ll be back.” Tony stuttered, pushing Steve off of his lap. He struggled upright and slipped out of the room leaving Steve to stare after him.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Steve tries to get things back on track, but things always seem to end up going wrong somehow.

Chapter Notes

Steve does some questionable drinking - heads up folks - Do not drink whiskey like Steve does. Dump that shit down the drain, and please don't ever drink that much without eating something. This is your public service announcement for the day :P

Tony was right, Steve decided, gathering himself up from his sprawled position on the couch. He couldn’t let the darkness control him anymore. He had a life to live, a whole new world to explore and all he had to do was go out there and take it back. He could keep the darkness at bay. He knew how; he had done it before. He couldn’t escape it if he kept avoiding it, he knew that; it would go away slowly, just like it had in his dreams, he was sure of it.

The first thing he needed to do was to stop wallowing in his misery. He had hobbies – he could do things. First off, he needed to get a punching bag introduced to his life again. A proper one, not one of those kiddy inflatable things that they had in the catalogues he had found in Tony’s junk mail pile. Why Tony received junk mail, Steve didn’t know. At least was something to read. There weren’t really any books or magazines in the house; there wasn’t really much of anything now that he thought about it. Tony apparently didn’t care for books or trinkets all that much, and even though he had bookshelves, he hadn’t put anything in them. They were barren, like he had bought the shelves just to take up the extra space.

Punching bag – right. Where could he get one? A sporting goods store was his best bet, and there had to be a ton of those around. Now all he needed was a phone book!

Unfortunately, Tony, like most modern people, didn’t have a physical phone book anymore so when Steve went looking for it, he came up with a whole lot of nothing. He sat down on the couch again, contemplating his options. He couldn’t exactly find any of the sporting goods stores in the area without physically going down there and looking for them the old fashioned way and while he liked the idea of walking around, getting to know New York again, he didn’t relish the thought of walking all over the place with his legs the way they were. It would take months to get back in shape enough to jog, and he didn’t really want to wait around until then. That would be torture!

What he did have easy access to was the internet, an endless void of information that could find him anything he wanted. Steve headed back to his room, lifting his laptop bag up from the floor where it had been sitting for the past few days, neglected. He unzipped the bag and set up the computer, looking around for the proper plugs; then he hit a snag. The computer booted up just fine, but the internet, it seemed was another monster entirely. There was a little Wi-Fi icon at the bottom of the screen, and it was busy flashing. He clicked on it.
There was no internet.

He frowned at the box, puzzled. Jarvis had usually done this for him, and the hospital had had its own open network, so he hadn’t had to go searching for signal there either. A window that said ‘Open Network Connections Centre’ popped up on screen so he clicked it, hoping that it was the right thing to do. Ah, yes. This looked right. He clicked on the only router in the connection list and then cursed, seeing the little lock on the icon a split second too late.

Locked. Tony had password protected his Wi-Fi. Great. He pushed the chair back and set out for the living room, hoping that Tony might have returned there after getting his drink.

No such luck. The living room was empty, without so much as a moved pillow to show that someone had been there. Maybe he would have more luck in the kitchen. Steve went down the hall and came upon his first clue; a bottle cap lay in the middle of the kitchen floor glittering in the dim fluorescent light. Steve stooped and picked it up, looking around but there was no sign of Tony.

A second bottle cap caught his attention instead, lying on the carpet at the other end of the kitchen; Steve had never been down that particular hallway before, so he moved cautiously, collecting the bottle caps up so that no one would step on them. He found himself wandering room by room, collecting bottle caps as he went, plucking them out of the strangest places. He found one in a planter sans fake plant, and even plucked one off of a bookshelf.

The rooms Steve passed by didn’t have much in them; they were empty and dark, lit only by bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Most of them were modest in size, but because there was nothing in them to take up space, they looked massive. The mansion was large but it wasn’t exactly the kind of place someone could get lost in. At least not if that someone was sober. Tony seemed to be staggering every which way, bottle caps left behind in a breadcrumb-like trail.

The workshop was a little tricky to find. It was nestled in the basement, its entrance hidden behind a broken metal grate that looked like it had been scavenged from somewhere. If he hadn’t been collecting bottle caps, he might have missed it completely. It hardly looked like a door, more like something you could get tetanus from.

He pulled the grate back and wandered down the cement steps it revealed; mindful of his bare feet and the plethora of abandoned bottle caps he found littering the floor in front of the workshop door. The door was made of heavy wood, something with wrought iron hinges on it that looked like it could withstand an attack or two with little difficulty. The light above the door flickered, an old, yellow bulb that looked like it needed replacing. Steve knocked on the door, but no one responded.

“Tony?” He called out.

No response came from within.

Was Tony even inside? There was light coming from under the door, so someone must have been in there. Steve cleared out a space in front of the door, shooing away bottle caps left and right; he kneeled down, peering under the crack of the door. He couldn’t really see much, even with the help of the yellow bulb above him. There was something on wheels in the workshop, but it wasn’t moving around. It might have been Dummy, but he couldn’t tell. It could have just been a table on casters, or some other bit of furniture for all he knew. There was a black bit that was close to the ground which looked like a couch and – there – a hand hanging off the side beside it.

Was Tony sleeping? He sure hoped so. Steve stood on his tip toes and pulled at the door handle, trying to get it open with no luck. This sucker was locked up tight; he wasn’t going to get in there unless he had Thor around or the key. This seemed more like a fortress than an actual work room.
There were no glass walls around this workshop, no Jarvis guarding the corridor either, just a sad lonely bulb and a field of bottle caps. It was simply a room in the basement with a large heavy wooden door on it.

Steve banged on the door again as hard as he could and was rewarded with the sound of drunken mumbling.

“Tony?”

“Go away.” Tony slurred.

“Are you alright in there?” Steve knelt down and peered under the door again. Tony’s hand had moved and was now gone, somewhere up on the couch if Steve had to guess. He pressed his ear closer to the gap and heard snoring – loud snoring.

“Tony – what’s the Wi-Fi password?” Steve said, thumping against the door, not put off by the snoring.

Something shuffled behind the door. Steve caught sight of bare feet moving towards him and then a post-it was shoved under the door almost into his face. He rolled back, accidentally sitting on a few bottle caps and swore, pain lancing its way through his backside. He picked the bottle caps out from underneath him, hoping that he wasn’t bleeding from their sharp edges, and scooped up the post-it.

The Wi-Fi password was written in scribbled script, barely legible, but clear enough that he didn’t have to ask for clarification. He stood up, cradling the post-it in one hand and banged on the door again.

“Oh my god – what do you want?” Tony whined with a groan.

“Thank you!” Steve shouted.

“S’fine. Now piss off.”

Bristling, Steve turned to leave. He reluctantly turned back to the door and knocked again.

“Stop that!” Tony groaned.

“What do you want for dinner?”

“I’m not hungry.”

Steve rolled his eyes at the door, wishing that Tony could see him. Sure Tony, Steve wanted to say, you’re not hungry, you damned liar!

He made his way back to his room and plunked down in front of the laptop, sticking the post-it to the monitor. He made short work of searching for sporting goods stores, even without Jarvis around to help point him in the right direction. He searched around in a few different places, comparison shopping, and found a nice leather punching bag on sale in a little place called Smash Tack.

He didn’t think that he needed to buy heavy bags in bulk anymore, seeing as how he could barely lift the laptop case onto the table without winding himself. While the bag was cheaper than normal, the price brought up a rather unpleasant truth; he had no cash. He would need a credit card or a debit card to get the bag, which meant that he would have to either apply for one or go to Howard to borrow a card. Applying for a credit card would take weeks, assuming they took applications for people who looked twenty three and were actually over ninety; they might think he was trying to
defraud them too, and he didn’t even want to get started with the fact that he had virtually no credit history. That left really only one options. He would have to go to the bank and get a debit card issued.

Howard had been dealing with all of his finances while he had been in a coma, so all Steve knew was that he had a bank book in his suitcase and that the account may or may not have had money in it. He had had a few hundred dollars in his account when he had gone into a coma, if he remembered correctly, so it was probably still there. If he was lucky, he would be able to get himself whatever he needed without having to beg and borrow.

He wasn’t looking forwards to taking a trip to the bank. Steve had always been nervous talking to the tellers about his finances, and it had been embarrassing to see such a small figure listed there at the bottom of the page in his bank book, written in red ink. He had always dreaded that one day one of the tellers would look at the number and laugh in his face asking him why he even bothered keeping his money in the bank instead of under a mattress like all the other poor people.

It wasn’t like he had to go alone anymore. He would just have to take someone with him. But who could he take? He had no intention of asking Howard for help again anytime soon, which left Tony as his only viable option. Sadly, since Tony was currently passed out in his workshop, going tonight was out of the question. Having a workshop apparently did not mean actually working in it.

It was strange to think of Tony as being a work-at-work kind of guy, and the idea of Tony actually having a full day of work in another building only to go home to this at the end of it seemed terribly inefficient. This Tony didn’t appear to do a lot of tinkering with things in his spare time, except for maybe the fridge, although when that tinkering had happened was a mystery; Tony seemed to spend his time doing more productive things, like drinking until he was practically blind.

It was hard to imagine Tony without some project to mess about with. Tony had always been easily bored when left his own devices for more than a few hours at a time, and he had always disliked keeping office hours. Inspiration struck when it struck, Tony had said in the dream-world, and it didn’t wait around for office hours so neither did he. Steve had once caught him elbow deep in the dishwasher, when said inspiration had struck him at three in the morning, trying to find a way to improve the sound buffer. The dishwasher had never been the same afterwards, and Pepper had informed them all quietly the next morning, while Tony was napping off his inspiration-bender, that the thing had started beeping ominously at her ever since she had tried to put in a cup. Jarvis had insisted when anyone asked that the thing was completely safe, but no one had been convinced. Three weeks later, when a spy had broken in to steal files from the Stark Tower’s mainframe, the dishwasher had saved the day by shooting an electric pulse through the floor, incapacitating the man in one hit. After that the dishwasher had earned their begrudging respect, but no one used it to wash the dishes anymore. Steve could have sworn that it had been a bit sad after that, although how a dishwasher could be sad was beyond him.

With nothing else to do, he decided to start on dinner.

Steve leaned against the stove, idly prodding a pot of boiling noodles with a fork as they softened. Something pasta-like was on the menu for dinner tonight, although he wasn’t really sure what kind to make. He found a few jars of Alfredo sauce in the cupboard that weren’t expired and punched the air in triumph, glad that he didn’t have to fish out tomato sauce. Some of the things he had found in Tony’s cupboards on his first crawl through were years past the expiration date, so he had gathered and stacked them up by the stove. Steve was surprised that they hadn’t just grown legs and walked away on their own. He would wash them later so that Tony wouldn’t accidentally give himself food
poisoning.

Steve recalled that Alfredo with mushrooms was one of Tony’s favourite meals – one of Dream-
Tony’s favourites at least, so it might be acceptable. The fridge had plenty of mushrooms in it to
work with – the edible variety, thank you very much, not the kind that grew on other food that had
been in there for too long. The fridge was remarkably clean, although Steve highly doubted that it
had been because of Tony’s diligence; he suspected that the same people who had stocked the fridge
had cleaned up before they had dumped everything inside. There was a piece of paper stuck to the
front of the fridge under an archaic looking magnet that listed the schedule when food was going to
be delivered too, so it seemed likely that they might be back at some point in time.

At least that took some of the pressure off of Tony, seeing as how they didn’t have to go grocery
shopping for a while.

Steve chopped up mushrooms, trying and failing to keep his mind off of his talk with Bucky that
morning. He had been getting better with the whole panic attack thing – not that he had ever actually
had a panic attack before. Clint just called it that whenever Steve had had some kind of emotional
moment in his life. Clint had done it to make him laugh, Steve supposed, although it was a poor
attempt at best because all it had done was made him feel uncomfortable about the whole thing; he
had laughed, mostly because he had felt a tad uncomfortable if he hadn’t. He felt itchy inside just
thinking about it even now.

Steve tried not to think negatively about things. He tried to look on the bright side, but some days,
well some days it was just harder than others to stick with the program. It had been hard to get out of
that dark place today; it had been easier than the night he had woken up to find that Bucky had tried
to kill himself in his dreams, but that didn’t mean much anymore. Tony had been there for him in his
dreams then too – Tony had held him, just like he had held on to him this time, wrapping his arms
around him until things were alright again.

For a moment, Steve had felt like he was back in that dream world. That itchy, gut-wrenching feeling
that had been strangling him had gone away with the touch of Tony’s hands; Tony hadn’t had to step
in, but he had done it anyways without a second thought. That was just so… Tony.

Tony was certainly was an anomaly, even in the real world. By all accounts, he should have been
enjoying himself on some luxury yacht surrounded by beautiful women and or swimming in a giant
vat of money; god knew that Dream-Tony had spent his fair share of years doing just that. This Tony
had graduated from MIT, which was no playground, so some things must still be the same. He was
an inventor, just like he had been back in Steve’s dreams, but there wasn’t much about him that
Steve really knew, and asking questions didn’t seem to be a good idea just yet.

Desperate for information, Steve had turned to the internet.

What he had found wasn’t the least bit flattering, even if the writers of said garbage had been
thoughtful enough to mention Tony’s awards from childhood and his other academic accolades
while discussing his general ‘ickyness factor’. Most of the information Steve had gathered focused
on the bad-boy Tony Stark persona that Howard seemed to be spreading around like manure,
whispering all the hush-hush secrets to anyone who would listen. The papers liked to print things
about Tony bringing women home by the hundreds, sleeping around like there was no tomorrow.
Some had even labeled him the Slut of Stark Industries and another paper had named him the
intrepid King of Gonorrhea. They even had polls to see who would be the next ‘victim’ of the year,
as they put it. Steve had wanted to punch the writers out for that comment alone, even if he would
have only broken his fist on the bastard’s face in the process.

It seemed that most people had a very low opinion of Tony and his lifestyle, not that it was a
surprise; most of the media directly quoted Howard in their articles, so it wasn’t as if they were pulling things out of their asses, which was even worse than if they had been. How could people talk like that about a stranger? It was so harsh, especially since Tony hadn’t even attempted to defend himself in the press.

With all the garbage out there, there had even been a few paranoid theories about what was going on in the Stark household. A few newspapers had half-heartedly suggested that Tony was some kind of prisoner in his own house, being used as some kind of punching bag by Stark Industry investors when things went wrong. It sounded crazy. Steve sure hoped that it really was just garbage.

One thing was for certain. Having Tony in the spotlight all the time kept Howard in the shadows; Howard was practically drowning in sympathy the way people prattled on about how unfortunate it was that his son was such a wastrel.

Steve found it all disgusting.

He searched the web for information on Howard next and had found more than a few scandals about unsavory events Howard had been linked to or supposedly attended. Orgies had been one of the most notable items on his list of achievements, the most favourite party activity of the rich the paper had said; it hadn’t just been Howard with that ‘achievement’ either. Tony’s name had been scrawled in there too, in between his father’s name and someone called Tiberius Stone, whoever that was. The idea of Tony and his father participating in something like that – together no less – was horrifying. The orgy business was all bullshit; it had to be. He couldn’t believe how serious the papers seemed to think it was.

Unsurprisingly, according to the papers, Howard had been charged with sexual harassment more than twenty times over the years, although the news seemed to sweep that under the rug for the most part, focusing on Tony’s depravity instead. Money was good at sweeping things away after all, and Howard had plenty of it to spare.

Steve cleared his browser history after that, afraid that Tony might find out that he had looked him up in the first place; he had watched the doorway like a hawk after he had started searching, afraid that he might find Tony standing directly behind him at some point, reading over his shoulder. This Tony seemed a little paranoid – following someone into their shower wasn’t normally a rational person’s first move after all. He had no idea what Tony would do if he found out about his little search-fest, but he had a feeling that he might be duct taped to a chair in retaliation.

Steve dumped the mushrooms into a frying pan, dodging a splatter of oil as it tried to splash up his wrist. He put some more linguini into the pot and leaned back against the counter, humming softly with an old song he had heard on the radio; he couldn’t remember the name or most of the words, but it was comforting nonetheless. He could do this kind of busy work with his hands tied behind his back. It was mind numbing and that was sort of… delightful in a way.

He liked being in the kitchen. Cooking was a hobby that he had always enjoyed dabbling in, and even if he hadn’t really made this meal from scratch, he was glad for the challenge; the only time he disliked cooking was when he knew he would get in someone else’s way, and in the dream-world, that had happened pretty often. He and Bruce had shared the kitchen most days, and they had written up a schedule of sorts to keep from bumping elbows. Of course the kitchen in the tower was a monstrosity, so big that he probably couldn’t have bumped elbows with Bruce even if he tried, but it had just felt right to keep out of the way, so he had. He supposed that he didn’t really need to worry about cooking schedules anymore. The tower’s kitchen wasn’t real after all, and if Tony was going to continue to deny being hungry he probably wasn’t going to be trying to sneak in to cook anything.
Steve glanced at the kitchen table where his sketchbook sat unattended; a half-finished sketch of Tony stared back at him with bland disinterest. He was good at drawing it seemed, as good as he had remembered at least. He didn’t think that he was some kind of amazing artist, but he was good enough to make things look lifelike. He had tried a few portraits and then moved on to a caricature of the small dog that had lived in the yard across from his old apartment. Everything looked alright, nice, lively and proportional. He was pleased to find that his fingers didn’t seem to be having any problems keeping up despite the fact that they hadn’t drawn or held a pencil in over seventy years. It was a relief knowing that his drawing skills hadn’t all been a dream; they had been such a big part of his afternoons, usually spent sitting with Tony in his workshop, catching ideas before they could fly away.

What he really needed now was a few books from the library so that he could have some reference material on hand. Sure, he could use his computer, but sometimes it was nice to have something solid and reassuring like a good book around for times when he wanted to start drawing in the middle of the night. He had owned quite a few reference books as a child. Most of them had been scrounged and collected from the library waste bin when they had been thrown out because pages had gone missing or the spines had split. He had even kept some old newspaper clippings away in a scrapbook as inspiration. Bucky had stolen an encyclopedia from their high school for him once, and he had kept it under his bed for over three years before he had returned it anonymously. It had been a good book. A good friend to him over the years and he had taken good care of it so that someone would be able to use it once he was done with it, feeling guilty but also proud that it had survived for so long.

“You’re cooking again?” Tony said, slipping into the room soundless even though he was still marginally drunk. His voice was slurred, and he had to hold onto the wall to keep upright, fingers tracing their way along the paint as he scooted further into the room.

“I like cooking. It takes my mind off things.” Steve said, crossing his arms over his chest. He combatted the urge to order Tony to sit down before he brained himself on something and won, managing to only twitch his lips in displeasure. Tony wobbled over to the kitchen table and sat down, sprawling across the table with his cheek pressed against the cool surface. He prodded Steve’s sketchbook with a finger, spinning it around so that he could see what Steve had been working on without so much as raising his head to look.

“These are pretty good! I guess that means you can draw, huh?” Tony said, closing his eyes, wincing at the sound of his own voice. Apparently Tony hadn’t been paying all that much attention to what he was looking at, because he didn’t comment on the subject matter. Steve turned back to the food stirring the noodles to make sure that they didn’t stick to the bottom of the pot. Sticky noodles would be wasteful and he didn’t feel like wrecking his wrist scrubbing the pot out.

“You want some water?” Steve asked, filling a glass without waiting for Tony’s response. He set the glass down in front of Tony and went back to the stove, fishing out a strainer so that he could rinse his pasta without losing it all down the drain.

He cast a glance over his shoulder after a few seconds of silence and noted proudly that Tony was sipping the water, although he did seem to be wincing each time he swallowed. At least he was getting the water down.

“Are you alright over there?”

“Fine and dandy, buttercup.” Tony groaned, finishing the water with one last chug. He slid the cup
towards Steve, blinking blearily, nearly knocking it off the table. Steve took that as a sign for 'give me more water’ and caught the wobbling glass, refilling and returning it to Tony.

Tony stared at the water.

“Didn’t I just drink this?” Tony asked, confused.

“Nope. You’re imagining things. Drink your water.” Steve said. He dumped the steaming noodles and Alfredo sauce into the frying pan with the mushrooms and stirred everything together one handed. He hoped that Tony would be able to keep it down; he didn’t look forward to having to clean noodles off of the floor and or off of Tony if he decided to throw up all over himself. Alfredo sauce might not have been the wisest choice, considering the heaviness of the cream now that he thought about it. Well, he mused, if he had known that someone was planning on showing up drunk for dinner, he might have been able to plan for it.

Tony sipped at the water just as slowly as before, pausing every few seconds to come up for air. He pushed the glass away when it was half empty and rested his face against the table again, eyes closed, looking comfortable and ready to start sleeping like a little drunken angel. Steve had to stifle the urge to pinch his cheeks.

He didn’t bother asking Tony if he was hungry. He went ahead and scooped a Tony-sized portion of into a red and green bowl he found in the cupboard and set it and a fork just in front of Tony’s face hoping that he might get the picture.

“Why are you feeding me?” Tony whined into the table, not looking up.

“I don’t know. Why did you help me when I was having a panic attack in the living room?” Steve questioned in response, not really expecting an answer.

“They always do stuff like that on TV. It looked like the right thing to do.” Tony shrugged, sitting up.

Steve almost dropped the bowl he was filling for himself; he looked over his shoulder at Tony in disbelief. Tony looked honestly confused. This wasn’t one of the Tony Stark Sarcastic Responses that Steve was used to. This was Tony admitting that he had no idea what the hell he was doing.

When Tony noticed that Steve was staring at him, he stared back, not breaking eye contact.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Steve said, a little guiltily. He went back to filling up his bowl, trying to ignore the way his face felt hot.

“Was that something I wasn’t supposed to do? Because if it was I’m sorry –” Tony blurted, sitting up straighter in his chair, poised on the edge of flight. He probably wouldn’t have made it far; he looked like he might fall onto the floor if he did manage to get up at all.

“It was fine. I was just surprised, that’s all. I didn’t think you would be so friendly with a stranger.” Steve said, shutting off the burner. He sat down in what he was beginning to see as his chair and began to eat, chewing fondly on the noodles. The mushrooms were cooked perfectly –

“I’m not. It’s just what they show on TV.” Tony repeated, moving to stand up.

“It’s fine Tony. It didn’t bother me at all.”
Tony slouched and grabbed the bowl in front of him. He started to swirl the noodles around in a circle, looping them around the tines of the fork, not quite able to get the swirl right; he stuffed the food-covered fork into his mouth and began to chew, almost choking on the noodles that had managed to stay on the fork. Half of the noodles remaining in the bowl hung from the edge of the bowl, clinging for dear life. Alcohol was definitely the killer of sensible judgement if this was anything to go by.

“You might want to cut those up.” Steve commented wryly.

“I know how to eat. Sheesh.” Tony grumbled through a mouthful of food.

Steve chopped up his own noodles, making sure that Tony could see what he was doing. He used to do things like this with the neighbor’s kids when he was babysitting; they always did love to play copycat. He hid his smile behind his hand when he saw that, as hoped, Tony had started cutting up his noodles, scowling at them as if they had offended him.

“Who taught you to cook like this? I thought they didn’t have this kind of sauce back in the forties. Wartime rations and all that jazz.” Tony asked.

“I don’t know. I remember eating it once and I found it in the cupboard so I figured that I would use it.” Steve shrugged, finishing the rest of the noodles in his bowl. It had been good. He had missed having flavorful food; they loved their bland, unassuming foods in the hospital, so he hadn’t really gotten anything satisfying there. Maybe if he was feeling particularly inventive, they could have steak or something meaty for dinner tomorrow. He licked his lips at the thought.

Tony blinked up at Steve from over his empty bowl; he looked like he might want seconds, but didn’t seem to want to get up to go get them.

“Want some more?” Steve asked.

Tony shrugged. “I guess.”

Steve took both bowls away to the sink, setting his down with a clink, turning to fill Tony’s up with a little bit more. He gave it back to Tony after scooping some extra mushrooms in, returning to the cupboard to find a container to put the leftovers in. They could get at least another half meal out of what was left, and there was no sense in throwing it out when they could just eat it tomorrow.

Tony nibbled away behind Steve as he worked, finishing his meal one laborious bite at a time. He actually looked like he was enjoying the food for once, instead of eating it just because it had appeared in front of him.

“We have to be up at six to get ready for work tomorrow.” Tony said after he finished his last bite, pushing his bowl away. There were only a few strands of cut up noodles left behind now; Steve was pleased to see that every last mushroom had been munched.

“What should I wear? Do you have a dress code?” Steve asked.

“Wear whatever you like. I’d recommend not wearing anything expensive, seeing as how there’s a lot of grease and shit in the workshop and that stuff doesn’t always come out if you get it on your clothes. And make sure you put on your steel toed boots.”

“You have shit in your workshop? That doesn’t sound very sanitary.” Steve chuckled; it was a lame joke, and even he knew it. He took Tony’s bowl and scraped it out, piling things up beside the sink, ready to wash dishes again, mentally smacking himself for making such a poor joke. Think Rogers! Think before you speak, he berated himself, mercilessly squeezing the dish soap bottle; a tiny trickle
came out of the top, dropping into the sink with a plop.

“Har-de-har-har. You have a weird sense of humor Steve. I figured that you wouldn’t have one at all… seeing as you have the whole… thing.” Tony mused, shaking his head. He remained seated at the table, not approaching even when Steve started running hot water into the sink.

“Yes, well…” Steve rolled his eyes at the wall. “I wasn’t born during the ice ages, if that’s what you’re thinking. They did have humor when I was a kid.”

“Sure. You keep telling yourself that Steve.”

“When are we leaving for work tomorrow?” Steve sighed.

“We’ll be waking up at around six to get there for eight. We stay till five. Bring a sketchbook or something else to keep you occupied, because I’m not going to have a lot of time to babysit you.”

Tony yawned; he stretched, cracking his back and then stood up and wobbled towards the door looking a little less awkward than he had when he had first come into the kitchen. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning then.”

“Alright. Good night Tony.”

“G’night Steve.”

Steve woke up at five fifty nine the next morning almost bouncing off the walls despite the normal jitters he had about going to work in an unfamiliar place. This would be the first time he had been allowed to wander around without a babysitter as Tony had so politely put it, and he was looking forward to being able to look around town without someone breathing down his neck every few steps; the nightmares hadn’t been around last night, so he had gotten a full night’s sleep for the first time since leaving the hospital. He was rested and ready to go.

Steve got out of bed in haste, pulling off his pajamas, folding them up to leave on his pillow. He quickly did the bed wearing only his boxers and then, satisfied that there wasn’t a crease to be seen on the comforter, turned to go get dressed.

He probably should have expected to see Tony standing in the doorway; that was what Tony seemed to love to do after all. Tony had a mug of coffee in hand and was casually reading the newspaper, his eyes going between the paper and Steve’s half naked body every five seconds; Steve was ashamed to admit that he may have had a bit of a heart attack, because, hey, he had no idea how long Tony had been standing there for. He was really starting to miss his super soldier senses. The engineer moved like a cat; he wondered if Tony would notice if he snuck a bell on him.

“How long have you been – never mind.” Steve grumbled in exasperation, fishing a pair of jeans and one of the Captain America t-shirts out of the pile of clean laundry from the basket beside his bed. He had run his clothing through the wash the night before after Tony had wandered off to bed for lack of anything better to do. Doing laundry had at least been entertaining. He had sat in front of the machine watching the clothing go around and around for the entire load; Tony had one of those newfangled side-loading machines in his laundry room. It reminded Steve of a Laundromat he had
seen on television, and it had been fascinating to see how everything had moved inside. He didn’t feel too bad about sitting in front of the washer; it wasn’t like he was the only one who did that sort of thing. He had caught Clint doing it once when they had been barbequing and he had gotten sauce all over himself after an ill-advised juggling attempt with chicken wings. Clint hadn’t dropped the chicken wings – he had been knocked into them when Thor had lunged for them. Steve and Clint had made it a weekly activity to just sit up and watch the washer after that; sometimes Clint even brought popcorn. Sometimes Natasha came too, if not for the show, for the popcorn. Steve sighed wearily. So many memories of things that hadn’t ever happened… he wished that he could find a way to keep them all safe somewhere. Maybe he should start writing a journal to keep everything safe and sound.

“I was going to wake you up, but it looks like you beat me to it. You’re that excited about going to work? Who would have guessed? Steve Rogers, the ‘keener.’” Tony chuckled. He looked almost like a different person now; the bags and dark marks around his eyes had cleared up for the most part, and the smile on his face was closer to an expression of genuine amusement than it usually did. Well, as close to amusement as Sober Tony could be, at any rate. He had even taken a shower and given his beard a trim. All in all, Tony looked very handsome; it was hard to look away.

Steve shrugged, getting dressed, aware that Tony was watching his every movement like a well caffeinated hawk. He slipped on a pair of socks and then grabbed his steel toed boots from the floor beside the bed. He strode past Tony to the kitchen, thinking about what to make for breakfast, trying not to think about Tony starting at him the entire way there.

He hadn’t expected to find breakfast already made. Tony had cooked oatmeal – real oatmeal, and it had apricots in it, judging by the orange lumps.

Tony patted Steve on the head as he went past him to go sit in his spot at the table; a half-eaten bowl of oatmeal was waiting for him, spoon leaning against the rim of the bowl like it was taking a well-deserved break. Tony set his coffee down beside his bowl and then almost as an afterthought set the newspaper down as well, picking away at his food while Steve got his own breakfast ready. One eye was always on Steve, watching carefully.

Steve was beginning to find the staring annoying. This wasn’t one of those ‘I’m attracted to you so I’m watching you because I want some excuse to jump your bones’ kind of thing; this was more of an ‘I don’t like you in my space’ thing. He bit his lip and focused on eating, glad at least that he didn’t have to have Tony’s eyes boring into the back of his head anymore. He would just have to get used to the staring he supposed, and he had to admit that it made Tony easier to keep track of. You couldn’t really lose him if he was always under foot, staring at you.

“I didn’t know you ate oatmeal.” Steve commented with a yawn.

“You don’t know much about me Steve. I am a man of many mysteries.” Tony shrugged, eyes moving from scanning the paper to Steve every few seconds like clockwork.

“Sometimes I forget that I don’t really know you all that well.” Steve sighed around a mouthful of apricot.

Tony didn’t comment on that, thankfully, and Steve didn’t really feel up to continuing the small talk; his excitement for the day was trickling away with the realization that he was probably going to be stared at all day by either Tony or the security cameras, and possibly by both at the same time. The upside was that he might get to see Pepper Potts today. She hadn’t been his best friend, but she had always been there for Tony. It would be nice to see her again, or rather, for the first time. Howard had mentioned her a few times, so Steve assumed that she was still working for Stark International, although he didn’t know what exactly she did there. She had been the CEO back in the dream-
world, having worked her way up the corporate ladder by starting off as Tony’s personal assistant. What would she be now? She was a remarkable woman, no matter what happened to her, always willing to roll with the punches. He admired her resilience. She had always been able to get things done. He couldn’t wait to see her again.

When they finally got out of the car after being driven to Stark International by a somewhat sombre looking Happy, Steve realized that things were a little different than he had assumed they would be. He had expected to get into an elevator and go right up, maybe to a nice office on the top floor where Tony would be working with a team. Instead, they were met by Pepper curbside, just in front of the main doors. She was tapping her foot, her arms crossed over her chest in a way that looked uncomfortably tight, like she might be attempting to break all of her ribs with her own hands.

Other than the tapping foot and crossed arms, Pepper looked lovely as usual. She was wearing a business suit of navy blue, and her hair was flowing around her shoulders in a crimson shower; the moment her eyes settled on Tony, her entire demeanour changed. She stiffened; her lips formed what Steve could only assume was a semi-permanent frown and her hands found their way to her hips. Framed in front of the massive Stark International Tower, she looked just as formidable as Howard.

“Potts.” Tony said, walking past her without a glance in her direction. Steve stood stock still, watching him disappear inside the building through the glass doors, realizing only too late that he had been left behind. He saw Tony go into the nearest elevator without so much as slowing down to nod at the security desk; the elevator doors closed a second after he entered, and then he was gone, leaving Steve behind for Pepper to deal with. Pepper let out a long suffering sigh and then seemed to notice Steve for the first time. A dazzling smile spread across her face. She held out a hand and took his tiny one in hers, shaking it vigorously. Steve practically bounced up and down from the strength of the shake; he couldn’t help smiling back at her.

“Pepper Potts. I’m Tony’s secretary and caretaker. It’s great to meet you.” She said.

“Steve Rogers. I guess you would call me Tony’s resident leech or something like that.” Steve joked. Pepper smiled almost impossibly harder at that.

“I take it that you’ve heard about how this is going to work then?” She asked while leading them through the front door to the same elevator Tony had disappeared into moments before. They walked over polished black marble, the room swimming with glass and steel, everything modern and sleek looking. Steve tried not to gape at it all.

“Howard didn’t tell me much, and Tony only mentioned the fact that I might be going in his lab at some point.” Steve said. He tapped his steel toe clad left foot on the floor for emphasis.

“Ah well, that’s pretty close to what’s going to be happening.” Pepper said, waving a badge at the security desk. The two burly looking guards nodded to her as she pressed the up button, casually pointing at the elevator doors.

“I’m not sure if you’ve ever seen one of these before… Mr. Stark gave me a briefing, but well… with him, you never really know what to expect.” Pepper said.

“I’ve seen elevators before, don’t worry. They’re not as new as you’d think, although they’re a lot fancier than they used to be, that’s for sure.” Steve chuckled.
Pepper blushed, scratching the back of head. “Always better to be safe than sorry.”

“You got a briefing on me?” Steve asked. He had expected that Howard would have sent some kind of memo around, but he hadn’t expected a full briefing to find its way into Pepper’s hands; Howard hadn’t said anything about that happening.

Everyone was so paranoid that he was going to have some kind of mental breakdown over seeing something like one of those trendy new staplers that could staple over a hundred pages at once. The only one who hadn’t been all that concerned for Steve’s mental health had been Tony, who hadn’t really been concerned about anything. That could have been because he had been drunk for most of the weekend though. Steve supposed that Pepper would at least know what kind of mess she was getting herself into; it left him with a lot less to explain.

“Mr. Stark was obviously very concerned about you being upset by all of the new technology in the building. He mentioned that you handled the laptop very well, so to be honest I’m not really all that concerned about you turning into a puddle of goo in the hallways when I’m not looking. Once you’ve seen the internet you’ve seen the worst we have to offer really. You’ll be helping me out today – well… you’ll be helping me out pretty much every day. Tony is very particular about who goes in and out of his workshop, so you won’t be in there all that much. Frankly, I find it a little obsessive, but when you work with geniuses, you have to put up with a fair amount of strange to begin with.” Pepper sighed.

“I hear you.”

The elevator chimed, doors popping open.

“Also, I should probably let you know that you shouldn’t expect to be getting a key to his house any time soon. It’s one of his ‘things’. He doesn’t like having people anywhere near any of his personal stuff and he made it very clear to Mr. Stark that you aren’t allowed to wander around without permission. I’m sure you’ve heard all about the temper tantrum a few days ago by now…” Pepper said pressing a button marked STF Floor 9.

“Temper tantrum?”

“Oh! You don’t know? I’m surprised you didn’t hear. Mr. Stark was pretty upset about it. Tony threw a chair off the balcony. Almost hit one of the investors in the head. The guy was visiting and schmoozing with some of the other designers, and for some reason they didn’t think to invite their lead designer. It wasn’t pretty. I had to call Mr. Stark in to smooth things out, because Tony looked like he was going to start pitching filing cabinets too if I didn’t bring in the big guns.”

“That sounds bad.”

“It wasn’t the worst. I’ve seen him… well. He’s done some things that are much worse, but he usually doesn’t get violent about it. He’s temperamental, but he’s not vicious.” She said, shaking her head. When she noticed the way Steve had paled, she patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry – it wasn’t about you coming to stay in his house. He had a few other things on his mind at the time. He has some deals with Mr. Stark that… well I don’t know the details to tell you the truth, but I don’t think they’re the nicest things in the world. Hell, I’d be surprised if they weren’t something awful. Mr. Stark doesn’t really play nice.”

“I hate to be rude Miss Potts, but why exactly are you telling me all this?”

“You’re not rude, and please call me Pepper. Tony is the rude one, but to get to the point, he’s not going to tell you anything unless you catch him off guard. He’s generally locked away in his
workshop – Secure Testing Facility Floor Nine, if you were wondering – and he doesn’t really talk these days unless you physically force him. I take it that he’s been staring at you all weekend? Possibly leering?”

“Yes, he has.” Steve said, starting to feel uncomfortable.

“Good. At least he’s keeping the staring out in the open and not hiding behind walls peeping at you like a creeper. He used to be pretty bad about it when I first started working for him. He tried to sneak a security camera onto my bookshelf a few times before I put my foot down and told him that if he wanted to know what I was doing all day, all he had to do was ask.” Pepper said.

“I was under the impression that you two were close.” Steve said, wincing.

“What? Oh no. No one is close to Tony Stark – not even his family. They’re like magnets – you know, opposing poles and all that – repelling way from one another when they get near. It would be fascinating to watch, really, if it wasn’t so sad.”

They stepped out of the elevator and made their way through the gauntlet of security doors and hallways to a large glass walled office; Steve could see Tony inside through the walls already working, fiddling way with a prototype for what Steve could only guess was some kind of phone. Tony’s back was turned to them, making it hard to tell just what he was doing until he held the prototype up over his head to examine it in the light.

Steve watched a security camera swivel around to focus in on them as they approached and gave it a wave. Tony turned around and waved back twice before turning back to his work, a screwdriver clenched between his teeth.

Pepper looked absolutely floored.

“What?” Steve asked.

“I… It’s just… he never does that.” She said. She pursed her lips and then gestured to her desk, where two chairs were waiting for them.

Pepper’s office wasn’t really an office per say; it was just a section of the room where her desk and things happened to be. The rest of the room was filled with metal canisters labelled with names like ‘scraps’ and ‘prototypes’ and one especially long one marked with ‘things that have been collected from the lab that need to be stored somewhere else for safety’s sake’. Whoever had done that last one had used quite a few post-it’s to get the job done. Oddly enough, it might have been Tony’s handwriting, although Steve wasn’t sure.

“Well, this is home.” Pepper said.

Pepper’s part of the room was just as technologically advanced as Steve had come to expect of a modern day office; there was a mandatory hardline phone and personal computer with printer sitting along with what looked suspiciously like one of the machines he had seen in the hospital that was used to start people’s hearts again. He wondered if that was what it was but didn’t ask, figuring that she would tell him if he needed to know. She cleared him a space on her desk so that he could work and then logged onto the computer, pulling up files she needed to work on. He recognized the programs she used; a spreadsheet program and a document one – things he had seen and used in his dreams. He didn’t know the names, but he knew what they were for; all of this was a shade too familiar.

“So…” She said, turning in her chair towards him when she was ready. “I guess we need to work
out a schedule to get things going.”

“Alright. What did you have in mind?” Steve said, clasping his hands in front of him.

Pepper pulled up Tony’s appointment book on the computer; there was very little on it at the moment, but Steve assumed more would be added at some point. She opened a drawer and took out a sheet of paper and a pen, scribbling Steve’s name on the top of the page in careful, precise script that rivaled that of the computer’s. Steve was impressed.

“Every morning he gets in at eight a.m. precisely and makes his way up to his office. He likes to take his coffee break at ten. Usually I have to bang on the door to get him to let me in, so you might have to spend a few minutes trying to get his attention. On occasion I have had to threaten to break the door down to get him to take the damned coffee from me. Speaking of coffee, he will only drink the coffee from the machine against the wall beside his office because he can watch it with his cameras. Five sugars, no milk.” Pepper started, scribbling everything down with a number one circled beside it.

“He takes lunch, when he decides to eat it that is, at around one. Again, you’ll have to bang on the door about a thousand times before he pays any attention to you. He likes… well…” She looked at Steve, biting her lower lip. “I’ve never actually found out what he likes for lunch. He has a tendency to eat whatever you put in front of him if he’s hungry enough and he’s usually plenty hungry by then because half the time he doesn’t eat dinner the night before. Mr. Stark has a food account for him which you’ll be able to access through this card.” She pulled a card out of the desk drawer and presented it to Steve, amused by the way he accepted it with almost reverence, tucking it into his wallet.

“Don’t worry about it too much. You could feed him lint and he’d eat it, and honestly some days I’m tempted to see if he notices the difference. You can bring him drinks throughout the day, although no alcohol – he’s not allowed to drink during the work day. He should drink more water, so you can try and get him to drink that with lunch or with a snack you can take him at around three or four. He also likes sugary drinks and soda, but try to limit those. Sugar is almost as bad with him as the alcohol. Now on to number three, which is probably the most important of all the things you’ll have to do during the day. Try not to rip out your hair. I mean it.” She said.

“What?”

“Number three is ‘don’t rip out your hair when Tony does something obnoxious’, like not letting you into a room or ignoring you when you’re trying to do something for him. He does this with everyone. He does it for any number of reasons and to tell you the truth, he probably does it out of spite because people tend to irritate him. So… You can do pretty much anything you like in between the feedings and bringing of drinks. I usually take care of the paper work, but if you want to staple things or… I don’t know, wander around the building? You can do that too. Oh! Your pass! I almost forgot.” Pepper said, snapping her fingers.

She pulled her purse out from under her desk where she kept it nestled between her feet, and rummaged around until she found what she was looking for. She handed the pass to Steve, smiling, brushing a strand of escaping hair out of her face. He was surprised to see that whoever had made the card had managed to find a current picture of him somewhere; the plastic pass was attached to a lanyard, made of some kind of woven fabric, with a little plastic clip on it. The bottom of the pass was covered with writing that he almost couldn’t make out without the aid of a magnifying glass. There was a barcode there on the side too, so security could scan it right into the system when he came in the door.

“It has your name, a security chip and number to identify you to the system and your picture so that
they don’t kick you out onto the street for wandering around somewhere they don’t think you should be. Mr. Stark approved access to everything in the building as well as his own office up above in the penthouse. He said that I should tell you that you can visit whenever you like and that he’ll always have time for you.” Pepper patted Steve’s hand knowingly. “I’m sure you’ll be avoiding those offices like the plague. God knows I do.”

“Is there anything else I should know?” Steve laughed, bashfully.

“Well…” Pepper drummed her fingers on her chin, looking up at the ceiling.

“Aside from the security cameras being practically everywhere… I guess the only thing you should know is that whatever you see in here can’t be talked about aside from with me, Tony or Mr. Stark. I should get you to sign an NDA just to be sure – not that I don’t trust you, it’s just a formality and believe me, it’s a formality you want when you work around so much tech. It might save your ass someday – especially when you don’t want to answer some rather irritating questions from some equally irritating reporters.” Pepper stood up and pulled a folder out from the filing cabinet against the far wall, leafing through papers. She licked her finger as she flipped pages, setting out a three page document for him on the desk, pointing out where he needed to sign. Steve didn’t bother reading it. It was all boilerplate stuff, standard for anyone who had worked in the army. He had signed quite a few before he had been allowed to take the serum.

He signed the last page and gave it back to her. She checked it over and then filed it away carefully returning to her desk fiddling with the mouse, looking a tad nervous now that the talking was done. She cleared her throat, and looked away.

Steve took that as his cue to start doing something productive so that she could get on with her work.

He took his sketchbook and pencils out from his bag and set up his corner of Pepper’s desk, arranging everything precisely so that he didn’t drift into her area. He still had two hours before he had to go get Tony his morning coffee, so he might as well get some drawing done in the meantime. He started sketching, lines appearing on paper in quick, steady movements, dark graphite on white paper; he started with a sketch of the front of the Stark International building, working off of memory alone, drawing the lines without the help of a ruler. It was easy, work that took so little time he was soon on to other drawings.

He sensed Pepper’s eyes on him and looked up; his hands were smudged with lead and a little sore from how hard he had been gripping the pencil. He had been working on a basic sketch of Pepper, and smiled nervously at her, hoping that he hadn’t offended her with the quality of the drawing.

“That’s really good! Have you thought about going to school to study art?” She asked, leaning forwards to get a better look at his sketchbook. “May I?”

Steve nodded and she took the book from him, flipping back to the front, working her way back through the sketchbook with an expression of wonder on her face.

“I used to go to an art college back when I was younger. I had to drop out after the war started because it cost too much.” Steve said, feeling awkward from all the attention.

“That’s too bad. These are really good Steve.” Pepper said, handing him back the sketchbook.

“It could have been worse. I could have been in the hospital with no money for bills. God knows I was there enough as it was. I take it that you like art?” Steve asked.

“I love art. I think I would have studied to be a museum curator if I hadn’t been scooped up by Mr.
Stark. He has me working on his private art collection nowadays – which is great. It also, sadly, means that I have to spend a bit too much time in his presence for it to be fun anymore. I can get you some information on art schools around here if you like – there are a few that you might find interesting.” Pepper said.

“I don’t know if I’m up to going back to school yet. Don’t worry about it. But thanks for the offer.”

“Well, let me know if you get interested.”

“Alright.”

She glanced at the clock.

“Almost coffee time. My how time flies….” She sighed.

“So I see.”

“Better go bring the beast his coffee.” Pepper winked, turning back to her computer. “And remember to breathe. Breathing is key to surviving here.”

Steve got up, stretching out his stiff back, and went to go find the mysterious ‘acceptable’ coffee machine. It was right where Pepper had said it would be, pressed up against the wall directly in the line of sight of the security cameras beside Tony’s glass-walled workshop. It was the only thing in the hallway, so it was kind of hard to miss; the camera whirled around and tracked him as he moved, zooming in as he went further down the hall.

Steve carefully read the instructions on the machine, tracing his finger along the sticker. It was a bit like when they had found a Japanese toilet in the Avengers mansion one day. Tony had bought it for no other reason than because it had been amusing to watch other people trying to figure out how to use it; no one had been sure how he had known their problems with it, and Clint had been fairly certain that there was a camera in the room watching them. That toilet had had far too many buttons then should have been necessary to do a simple thing, like flushing; in the coffee machine’s case it was far too many buttons to just make a simple cup of black coffee with sugar, and thankfully there was no flushing needed to get that particular job done.

After a few hesitant starts and corrections, Steve managed to get the machine to work. It wasn’t all that complicated, just new and titchy, like all technology ended up being. He watched it fill a paper cup with his hands on his hips, cheering it on and then took the machine’s offering to Tony’s door. He hoped that he hadn’t screwed it up too badly.

“It’s open.” Tony called out from the other side of the door, his back still to Steve.

Steve pushed open the door and headed straight for Tony, avoiding chunks of metal and plastic tubing that had fallen to the floor in Tony’s wake; it looked a bit like a hurricane had hit, tossing things every which way. Tony took the cup from him, sipping and tinkering at the same time, apparently oblivious to the mess around him.

“You have lead on your face.” Tony said, letting out a pleased sigh as he swallowed down the coffee. “Nice job with the coffee squirt. I guess old dogs can learn new tricks.”

“Gee, thanks mister.” Steve rolled his eyes, wiping at his cheek.

“It’s still there.” Tony smirked and went back to work.

Steve waited beside him, lips pursed. Should he wait to get the coffee cup back or not? Tony didn’t
seem to even notice his presence so it wasn’t as if he was getting in the way. He decided to err on the side of caution. He started to back towards the door, carefully stepping around the mess, almost tripping on a bundle of wires. Better to keep Tony happy then to stand around invading his space any more than he had to; the workshop was Tony’s space after all, and Steve knew just how annoying it could be to have someone butting in when he was working. The moment he reached the door, fingers just touching the cool steel of the door handle, he found himself seized from behind; he squawked. Tony snagged him by the hips and steered him back towards the table cluttered with parts, forcing Steve to sit on a padded stool he yanked out from under it.

“I need an opinion.” Tony said taking a gulp of hot coffee that should have scalded him. He threw the paper cup into a garbage bin with a flourish and held out the contraption he had been working on earlier, watching Steve’s face expectantly. Steve stared at the device in Tony’s hands, curious. It looked like a box with windows all over – vaguely familiar as being the template for some kind of futuristic phone.

“So?”

“Oh... what is this exactly?” Steve asked. Tony rolled his eyes and pressed the device into Steve’s hands, turning the box over so that Steve could look at the other side. The device had a flat back made of some kind of silver coloured metal and it looked as if there was a camera embedded in the centre of the top half of the phone; at least, he hoped that was a camera and not some kind of laser powered death beam. With Tony you never knew.

“It’s a new phone. Does it look futuristic?” Tony prompted. He looked like he wanted to snatch the device away from Steve already, fingers twitching in anticipation of reclaiming it. Steve took another look at the phone, flipping it over to take in all the angles.

“It looks really neat! I like the lines and the way everything feels so smooth even though it has sharp corners.”

“So it looks futuristic then?”

“Very.”

“Excellent.”

Tony snatched the prototype away and began to fiddle with it again, hooking it up to the computer with some USB cables he pulled out from under a piece of abandoned paper; a wall of holographic projections appeared on the glass walls beside him, nearly blinding Steve with their bright blue light. Steve squinted and held his hand up, watching the blue light tear between his fingers, sparkling across his pale skin; this was arc reactor blue, a beautiful colour Steve had always loved. Tony took no notice of how mesmerized Steve was, typing away at the console, his back to Steve as if he wasn’t there.

Some of what was appearing on the screen was familiar; Steve frowned after that thought. He had seen this kind of text in his dreams, but how was that possible? If he had only heard about computer coding from the conversations he had overheard in his coma, how was it that he knew what it looked like? How was it that he knew that the gibberish in front of him was a scripting language in the first place? Bucky wasn’t all that interested in computers, and Howard hadn’t ever actually mentioned using code before, at least not in the videos he had watched. Maybe he had missed something.

“You can go now.” Tony said sharply, casting a quick glance at Steve.

Steve pointed at the holograms, deciding to take the risk by asking a question, knowing that he might
get himself physically thrown out of the room. “You’re writing the code for the phone’s touch screen applications?”

Tony twitched, accidentally typing something akin to nonsense even in code. He eyeballed Steve, fingers poised over the holographic keyboard, suddenly sitting up ramrod straight.

“How did you know that?” Tony asked quietly.

“You have notes typed in with the little sideways lines – you know, the stuff in green? It says TSModule. I sort of guessed that’s what it meant. That or Tony Stark module.” Steve said, sheepish. He started to back out of the room, noticing the way Tony had gotten very still and quiet.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry…” Steve said, fleeing, trying not to all out run from the room with Tony’s eyes following him. He didn’t stop moving until he got back to Pepper, sitting down perhaps a tad too forcefully, the security cameras all pointed at him and the desk. Pepper looked up from the computer slowly, saving whatever she had been working on.

“Something happen?” She asked dryly. She didn’t surprised by his quick return, nor was she startled by the way he had flopped down in the chair.

“I think I may have scared him because I looked at his code.” Steve said, twiddling his thumbs.

“Ah.” She winced. “I should have warned you about that. He’s a bit possessive of his code. He thinks that well – no, let’s be fair here. He knows that other people like to steal from him, so he tries to keep it all very hush-hush unless he’s dealing with the other developers and programmers. They all work in the same language you see, so that they don’t end up making mistakes, but they all have their own way of working things out. He usually ends up rewriting everything because they do it wrong… so he gets a little strung out when people look at what he’s typing. Sometimes he thinks that people are spying on him… and honestly if I hadn’t caught it happening twice, I would have thought he was completely bonkers too.”

“I’ll just keep that in mind next time I’m in there. No looking or touching unless I’m told it’s alright.” Steve sighed.

“And sometimes even when you’re told it’s alright.” Pepper corrected.

“Ok. And sometimes even when I’m told that it’s alright.” Steve said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Lunch came far too fast all because Steve was hoping to avoid it for as long as was humanly possible; it was stupid of him to feel so anxious, seeing as how he had fed Tony for the past two days, but for some reason he couldn’t help but be worried. They had been by themselves for those two days, and it hadn’t felt quite so nerve wracking as it did now. Maybe it was because there was a possibility of failure now, of getting it wrong and making Tony angry. He wasn’t entirely sure what the reason was, but something sure kept tugging at him.

There were plenty of restaurants and food vendors around Stark International to pick from, and even though he didn’t know the city all that well anymore, Steve could still navigate on his own; with so many options, he couldn’t get it wrong, could he? Just in case, he told Pepper where he was going and what he was doing so that she could send out the cavalry if he got lost, hoping to god that nothing would happen.
She smiled at him. “Good luck Steve. Try not to get eaten by the pigeons.”

“Do you want me to bring you back anything?” He asked, laughing.

“No, thanks. I’ve got a long standing date with a friend upstairs that I can’t miss.” She said, waving him away. He left without a glance back, determined to get on with it.

The streets were busy, and Steve had to jump around through the crowd to get out of the way half the time. He narrowly avoided being run over by a squadron of bike messengers and fast walkers and then almost got hit by some woman’s stroller when he tried to sneak along the curb; the taxi that zoomed past him honked at him and he nearly leapt out of his skin. He managed to make it safely to the first restaurant on the street by clinging to a garbage can and vaulting over it, ducking under the arms of a woman with seven shopping bags; he almost had to roll out of the way, but he made it, his cheeks pink, grinning proudly.

The restaurant turned out to be a Thai place that looked relatively decent; he had seen quite a few places that looked decent on the outside and were utter garbage inside, so he hoped that this one wasn’t going to be a waste of time. He read the menu off the window where someone had thankfully taped it up and paused, trying to pronounce some of the items, recognizing a few words. Nope, he was definitely not going to try ordering it in Thai; that was probably the quickest way to get his nose broken. He was relieved when he saw that they had also written out the descriptions for everything in mostly passable English, numbering and lettering all of it for easier ordering. Thank god for that.

Now there was only one major problem left to deal with. What to get?

The Tony in his dreams used to always request Pad Thai and curry when they ordered in, loving to eat the spicy foods that made Steve’s mouth light on fire just thinking about them; they seemed to be employing a chili pepper symbol ranked ‘spiciness’ system, which was a bit of a relief. At least he couldn’t accidentally order something hotter than the sun. That Tony may have appreciated a three chili ranked dish, but that Tony wasn’t around anymore. The real Tony might not like spicy foods at all; although the encounter with the fries in the food court the other day made Steve hopeful that he didn’t have it all completely wrong. After looking through the gargantuan menu, a monster of a thing that was composed of eight different pages, he found a two-person meal that looked like just the ticket. It came with Spring Rolls as well as some kind of chicken and noodles, and it only had a one chili ranking. Tony would be able to peck at everything to his heart’s content, and for that matter, so would he.

Steve went inside and was immediately swallowed up by colourful Thai décor; the owners had styled the place with golden Buddha statues and incense trays, everything so exotic and brilliantly coloured that it made the streets outside seem grey and drab in comparison. The walls were decorated with hangings that depicted women and men dancing some kind of ceremonial dance; everything was red and gold, mimicking some of the palaces Steve had once seen in the National Geographic’s he had looked at in the hospital.

And the smells! The food smelled amazing! It must have been good too, because there were quite a few people in line ahead of him already waiting around to place their orders. He could see at least six other people ahead of him, so he quickly shoved himself into the line to make sure that he wasn’t pushed to the back and ignored.

The lunch rush wasn’t as bad as he had thought it was going to be. Most of the people in the line wanted to have a sit down meal anyways, so by the time he got to the head of the line he had the entire front of the restaurant to himself. He felt a little out of place when he placed his order and paid with the card Pepper had given him, unsure of whether he was going about things the right way; he stood to the side, people watching afterwards as he tried to keep calm. He studied everything,
mesmerized by the way the waiters and waitresses swept between tables collecting colourful square plates.

Music from the speakers by the door bubbled up around him, loud and exciting, mingling with the sounds of people happy to be on their break from work. Conversation listening had never been exactly thrilling, and it felt a little bit like spying, but it was reassuring in its own way; Steve listened in, leaning back against the wall behind him. People still seemed the same as they had in his dreams. He recognized some of the clothing and hairstyles, and everyone seemed just as casual and carefree as they always had. He heard some rather racy conversations and had to turn away to make sure no one could see his cheeks on fire. How people could discuss their bra sizes in public was beyond him.

When his food was ready Steve gathered his bags up and took it all back to Stark International. He rode the elevator back up, almost forgetting which one he was supposed to get off at. Thankfully, he didn’t get off the elevator; he had time to look down at his security badge to see if it had anything written on it and saw that the barcode at the bottom was now glowing. It sure hadn’t been doing that before.

“If you require assistance, please swipe your badge in the reader on the wall to your left.” A computer voice chirped from above; Steve didn’t jump, he merely looked around and spotted what the AI was going on about. There was a page with instructions on it taped to the wall, but it wasn’t really all that helpful; all it said was ‘swipe badge here’, which seemed like a waste of paper to Steve.

“Please swipe your badge in the reader.” The AI said again, lighting up the reader with pink and purple LEDs.

“Uh… alright.” Steve stuck the badge into the little slot in the wall that the computer lit up for him. The computer dinged and then began speaking again, sounding a lot happier than before. “Your previous destination was STF9. Would you like to return to this destination?”

Steve wiped a bead of sweat off his brow. “Yes please. Thanks for the help.”

“Not a problem sir.”

The AI was pretty polite, like one of those swell fellows that had used to run the elevators back in his time. It reminded Steve a little of Jarvis too. When he got off at the right floor, it even told him to have a nice day; he said the same back to it, and he could have sworn that he heard the AI chirp a little happy ‘Thank you Steve’ back at him.

Steve made his way back to Tony’s door hoping that Tony wasn’t too mad at him for having taken so long to get lunch. All he needed now was to have a strip torn off of him for having almost gotten lost, and the day would be just peachy.

As it turned out, Tony had decided to be a brat and didn’t feel like opening the door even when Steve knocked politely; he ignored Steve, keeping his back to him the entire time Steve knocked, stubbornly working away.

Steve sighed. It was time to play dirty.

He knew all about the security cameras and where they were located. Pepper had pointed all of them out so that he would know when he was being spied on, hinting that he should probably keep them in mind if he felt the urge to scratch himself inappropriately; he had stammered a few mumbled denials and she had just laughed at him, showing him the bathrooms.

Steve positioned himself directly under the closest camera and opened up the paper bag the restaurant
had packed everything in, pulling out a Styrofoam container that held some of their combined lunch. He cracked it open, letting the steam billow out and then *purposely* aimed the food at the camera, moving it around in a circle. The cameras followed his every movement, swiveling around; Steve almost started laughing, hoping that Tony wasn’t going to make himself nauseous. He mimed reaching for one of the two spring rolls there and suddenly, *surprise, surprise*, the door unlocked with a loud click. It didn’t take a genius to figure out how to trick a genius into eating; it just took ingenuity.

Steve packed the food back up and made his way to the table he had sat at that morning. The mess was mostly gone, strewn about on the floor instead of on the table. Some of the parts were still wobbling from when they had hit the ground. Tony had settled into a chair beside the table and was waiting, almost impatiently, for Steve to get closer.

“You brought Chinese food?” Tony asked, eyes gleaming almost crazily. He must have been hungry, seeing as how his eyes had left Steve’s face and settled permanently on the paper bag.

“I brought Thai food.” Steve corrected.

Tony looked away from the bag, eyes snapping to Steve’s face, suddenly suspicious.

“You know what Thai food is?” Tony asked; his voice flat and almost cold.

“Not really. I sort of stood outside the window and read the menu for a bit trying to figure it all out. I couldn’t pronounce most of it, but the pictures looked interesting.” Steve said, setting the paper bag down in front of Tony. “I thought, what the heck, it’s a new era and all and I’ve never had Thai food before so why not? I got a two person order – it uh… seemed the most straightforward and I didn’t have to try and horribly butcher the language to order it.”

Tony’s calculating gaze softened. He opened the bag and started sorting through things, setting out the two cans of sprite on the table beside him with a happy smirk. He pulled out both Styrofoam containers, containing the exact same order and slid one across the table at Steve. Steve accepted the container and then snagged one of the plastic forks, starting to edge towards the door. Pepper wasn’t at her desk, so he would have a bit of quiet time to himself if he moved fast.

“Where are you going?” Tony demanded to know.

“I thought you might—”

“Sit.”

Steve sat.

So much for eating in peace. He cracked open his container and tried to focus on the delicious looking food instead of on the way Tony was watching him. It was a little unnerving to have someone stare so blatantly while he was eating. The staring hadn’t been *this* bad when they had been eating at home, but maybe that was just because the table kept them further apart.

Tony pushed one of the cans of sprite toward Steve and then cracked open his own, guzzling most of the can in one go. He set the can down and burped loud enough to have been heard across the street.

“I’m surprised that you didn’t have a stroke with all the foreign food and stuff out there. I was expecting… I don’t know. Terror? Disgust at the idea of people eating squid? Mild irritation with the way everything is fried in the same black bean sauce no matter what it is?” Tony said, stabbing the spring roll and popping it into his mouth. His eyes glazed over as he chewed. “Oh yeah. That’s the good stuff.”
“People eat squid? I think I’m allergic to that kind of thing… or I was at any rate. I don’t really know.” Steve asked around a mouthful of chicken and black bean sauce. Strangely enough, the Thai place had mixed in some deep fried prawns with the chicken; he hadn’t seen that written down on the menu, but it had said something about ‘mixed meat’. They were in Tony’s order too, so it must have been intentional, he supposed, chewing idly. They tasted pretty swell.

“You have Seafood allergies?”

“Yes. Or maybe no. I guess they’re all gone now. I just ate a piece of what I assume was seafood, because it tasted like it was from the sea… and my tongue hasn’t swelled up yet.” Steve shrugged.

Tony almost spit out the rest of his spring roll, eyes wide with horror.

“Are you crazy?!”

He grabbed Steve by the face and stuck his fingers in Steve’s mouth without so much as a by-your-leave; thankfully, Steve had just swallowed, or else Tony would have ended up with his fingers in pre-chewed food. Tony pulled Steve’s lips down, staring intently at Steve’s pink tongue, grabbing a hold of it as if he expected it to swell up like a balloon under his gaze.

“uht are oo doin’?” Steve said, trying to pull away; Tony’s grip was vicelike, holding him in place. After a few minutes of intent staring at Steve’s tongue, which remained hive and swelling free, Tony relaxed and let him go, wiping his hand on his jeans.

“You could have died you know!” Tony growled, glaring daggers at Steve.

“I had an allergy test at the hospital when I woke up – they said I didn’t have any allergies!” Steve grumbled wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. He could still taste the oil from Tony’s fingers and hoped that it wasn’t anything toxic. That would sure be ironic – Tony trying to save him from seafood allergies only to kill him with the toxic sludge on his fingers.

“Well why didn’t you say that in the first place!” Tony roared, almost upending his can of sprite with a sweep of his arm.

“I was going to and then you stuck your fingers in my mouth!” Steve roared back.

They stared at each other, neither backing down until Tony’s stomach rumbled; they smiled at each other, sheepish, and went back to their food as if the previous fifteen minutes hadn’t happened.

“I take it you like the spring roll?” Steve asked as Tony hoover-ed around the inside of his Styrofoam container looking for pieces of the crispy wrapper. Tony nodded in agreement, nibbling on a piece he liberated from underneath a piece of wax paper.

“Here.”

Steve handed over his spring roll. Tony stared at it and then Steve, looking back and forth so slowly that it was almost hard to tell if he was actually interested or not.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Tony picked the spring roll up and nibbled away. He eyeballed a piece of chicken in Steve’s box; Steve offered it to him with a smile. Tony’s face lit up. He stabbed the chicken and popped it in his mouth seeming to savor that more than he had the spring roll.
“Thanks.” Tony mumbled through a mouthful of food.

“Not a problem.”

Steve cleaned up the lunch mess and went back to sketching at Pepper’s desk. He could still taste oil on his lip but he wasn’t too concerned about it, seeing as how he had survived half an hour already without keeling over; the troubling part was that he could still feel Tony’s fingers on his tongue. He ran his tongue over his teeth, unsure how he should be feeling about what had happened between them during lunch. Sure, it was Tony in there but it wasn’t his Tony.

Did it matter that this wasn’t his Tony?

He could still feel something cold inside him, that same horrible loss gnawing at his insides since the night before and Tony’s touch hadn’t melted that at all. He looked down at the paper in front of him, scowling at the blank and unassuming pages that lacked the answers he needed.

Was he supposed to move on?

Could he ever move on from losing Tony? He would be seeing this new Tony every day, hour after hour, assuming of course that Tony asked him to stick around. It would be hard not to grow comfortable with him. Did he want to grow comfortable around this Tony? Did he want to try?

Steve sighed and picked up his pencil, drawing to try and push the relentless thoughts away. Pepper came back from her break as he finished sketching out the interior of the Thai restaurant, his brow furrowed in concentration as he finished the round curve of the final Buddha’s stomach. She leaned over his shoulder, her hair brushing against his cheek. He shivered; she radiated warmth like it was going out of style and it was hard to not lean back against her.

“That looks beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

“Is that the Thai place down the street?”

“Yep. We had Thai food today.”

“Very nice! I missed out on good food. I hear their spring rolls are to die for.”

“They seemed that way. Tony sure liked them.”

“He would – he loves greasy things. It’s the only way to get him to eat vegetables.” Pepper laughed, sitting down in front of her computer. She began to hum, typing away, utterly devoted to her work again. Work these days, seemed to revolve around having access to a computer or some kind of advanced phone at all times. He had watched so many people in the Thai restaurant using their phones while eating; it had seemed like they didn’t have the ability to put the devices down for more than a few seconds at a time, everyone checking their messages or blogs after every bite. It all seemed so impersonal.

Art though… that was personal…

He had seen a woman sketching in the corner of the dining room and had wanted to sneak closer to
get a better look at what she had been working on; he hadn’t moved from his spot by the front counter even though he had wanted to talk with her. He didn’t want to look like some kind of creepy stalker.

Steve filled out page after page of his sketchbook with detailed patterns and doodles of the miniature elephants he had seen on the counter of the Thai place’s bar. He wished that he had brought his coloured pencils with him so that he could add some brilliance to the page. It seemed strange to see everything all done up in monochrome when it had been so vividly colourful in his mind; everything had such a rich feel to it, just as the food had. It was a shame to see it all in grey.

He noticed Pepper’s typing slow first before he noticed the shadow Tony cast on his sketchbook; Tony’s chin brushing against Steve’s shoulder as he stooped down, his warmth leeching into Steve’s back through the thin cotton of his t-shirt, just like it had with Pepper.

“Oh. Did I miss coffee time?” Steve said, starting to rise, flushing. Tony rested a hand on Steve’s shoulder, stilling him, pushing him back down into the chair with the lightest of touches.

“I want to go get gelato. I figured that you might want to come with me seeing as how they probably didn’t have it back then.” Tony said. He reached around Steve and flipped the pages of the sketchbook back to the beginning, scanning through what Steve had drawn in the morning.

“What’s gelato?” Steve asked, clearing his throat. Tony was looking through his sketchbook so casually, as if he had always done it. His chest felt tight again, and he tried to put the thoughts of his Tony out of mind. Those thoughts could be sorted through later, not now when everyone was watching.

“It’s Italian ice cream. Comes in like a billion different flavors. There’s a place three blocks away that has an awesome banana nut and mango. You’ll like it.” Tony said. He paused on the sketch of Pepper and looked up, comparing the sketch with the real thing.

“Damn, you do a good job.”

“Thank you.”

Tony and Pepper exchanged a brief and somewhat tense look.

“Let’s go.” Tony half lifted, half dragged Steve up from the chair and frog-marched him to the elevator, giving Pepper a curt nod; the look wasn’t friendly but it wasn’t exactly hostile either. Once the doors snapped shut, the tension left Tony, his body going into a slouch. Steve was tempted to ask what that had all been about, but bit his tongue, not wanting to start a fight.

They started out down the street at a brisk trot, Steve following behind Tony, weaving in and out of the waves of pedestrians making their way home after work; it was sunny and warm out, good weather for ice cream, or whatever Tony had called it. Steve had thought that things might have calmed down a bit, but bit his tongue, not wanting to start a fight.

People kept shoving Steve around as they walked, tripping him if he couldn’t get out of the way in time; he was disoriented by the voices and honking car horns, staggering by the time he rounded the first corner where he found that Tony had jogged on ahead. Tony could sure move fast when he
wanted to; he was a blur in the distance, almost gone by the time Steve managed to spot him in the
crowd. Steve struggled to keep up, lagging behind as his body fought to keep from collapsing.

“Tony –” Steve gasped. He couldn’t get his voice out, the air not leaving his lungs fast enough. He
floundered, watching the crowd swallow Tony up like the ocean swallowing a grain of sand. Shit –
now he had lost him –

“Slowpoke.” Tony said, appearing through the crowd, pulling Steve over to the side.

“Sorry.” Steve panted, embarrassed by the fact that he had slowed them both down. His knees felt
like jelly, and he had to lean against Tony for a moment to keep from falling.

“Don’t worry about it.” Tony said, patting Steve on the shoulder. He lead the way again when Steve
was ready, this time keeping a firm hold of Steve’s arm, pulling him close; he used his body like a
shield, shouldering and elbowing his way through the crowd. Steve couldn’t help but be relieved.

The gelato parlor Tony dragged them to turned out to be a ratty looking joint. The cloth overhang
above the doorway was ripped from the wind and sun-bleached, flapping about in the breeze; the
rain would likely just go right through it, so it wasn’t really much in the way of shelter anymore, not
that Steve could see anyone hanging around outside here unless they were planning to buy drugs.
The parlor had probably had a rather vibrant exterior at one point, judging by the bits of curling red
and orange paint lying on the ground. Tony pulled them inside, dragging Steve along behind him,
unconcerned by the way Steve looked leery of it.

“See, I told you it was great.” Tony said.

It felt as if they had suddenly walked into another dimension; everything inside was bright, white,
clean and glistening. There were pictures plastered all over the walls of what the place had looked
like when it had first opened up, and the owners had taken pictures of their customers going on
through the years. Steve marveled at the number of pictures displayed, looking from face to face as
people literally aged before his eyes, all of it tagged with names and years; people must have really
loved the place to keep coming back year after year. The smiles were bright and toothy, not just
expressions of people caught nervous and off guard by the cameraman.

“The place was handed down from daughter to daughter. Doreen runs it now. She’s a peach.” Tony
said, gesturing to a plaque on the wall.

“Wow.”

“Yeah wow. That’s what a good family does – they pass things down to their kids.” Tony grumbled.
“Now go, be free little Steve – feast your eyes on the wonders of gelato.” Tony took Steve by the
shoulders and piloted him up towards the counter. The gelato was displayed inside a clear glass case
with a striped box refrigerator underneath; the murmur of the refrigerators was soft as a whisper, their
footsteps louder by far. Bucket after bucket of gelato was stacked inside, each one open and waiting
for customers to take a taste. Steve had never seen so many different flavors before in his
life; the buckets of gelato seemed to go on forever, row after row of colours he had only seen in a box of
pastels. He was surprised that the little shop had enough space to fit it all.

He looked from nameplate to nameplate, trying to figure out what the colours meant. Some of the
names sounded foreign and some seemed rather straight forwards. He got that the brown ones were
likely some kind of chocolate or nut flavor, but what the hell was Durian? He must have said it
aloud, because Tony was looking at him, laughing again.

“It’s an Asian fruit. Tastes and smells a lot like gasoline. It’s an acquired taste, or so I’m told. I’ve
never gotten past the smell. You won’t like it.” Tony grinned at him, pointing at the bright yellow bucket three rows down and one across. “That one is banana nut.”

“What’s a banana?” Steve asked, curious. In truth he had tasted banana once before when Clint had offered him some. Clint had even shown him how to open the fruit up – well… maybe he really hadn’t eaten a banana before. It was confusing, going between memories and dreams. He scowled, frustrated that he couldn’t make sense of it all.

“Banana – you know the white fruit with a yellow skin? Shaped like a J? The one piece of fruit declared a lethal weapon? Huh, I guess you haven’t had one of those before either. They probably got them in America after world war two ended.” Tony shrugged. He walked up to the counter and smiled radiantly at the woman standing there; he grinned a Cheshire Cat grin, all teeth and winked at her, oozing charm.

“Can my friend try some of the banana nut?”

“Sure Tony.” The woman said, amused by his antics. She fished out a multi-coloured plastic spoon from a container and speared a blob of banana nut, handing it up over the top of the glass container to Steve; he had to stand on his tiptoes to reach it. Steve grimaced when he noticed the way Tony was laughing into his hand.

The grimace went away quickly. Banana tasted amazing! It was so sweet and creamy! Tony smacked Steve in the arm, making the same face Steve had made when he had eaten it, doubling over with laughter; it shouldn’t have been adorable, but it was.

“Can he also try some of the mango? You’ll like that one too Steve.” Tony grinned and mock wiped tears from his eyes.

This time the gelato was bright orange in colour. He tried it and now he had a dilemma on his hands. He loved the taste even more than the banana; his mouth was watering, and he had no idea what he wanted to get. There were just too many options! He contented himself with licking the spoon clean, watching Tony watch him.

“So what do you want to get? Pick two flavors – they do a mean double scoop.” Tony said solemnly.

“Um… Mango and chocolate?” Steve said.

“Adventurous, Steve, very adventurous.” Tony snickered. He nodded at the woman to get her attention again. “He’ll have the mango and the uh… triple chocolate brownie. And I’ll have the banana nut and the butter rum.”

The woman took her time scooping out extra-large portions of gelato and handed them over the sneeze guard; Tony paid for it all with a swipe of his debit card and then pointed Steve towards one of the booths in the parlor where they could sit down. It was quite here. There was no chatter from strangers, no sounds of the street permeating the soft shell of silence. They sat side by side, trading gelato between them, licking their sticky fingers. Tony’s thigh bumped against Steve’s, resting there comfortably as if it had always been there; as if they had always been, if not together, friends.

Tuesday started almost exactly the same way Monday had. Steve woke up at a minute to six and found that Tony had yet again made breakfast and coffee; they ate in silence, Tony reading the paper
and staring at Steve while Steve chewed his way through his oatmeal while sipping at a cup of pleasantly warm black tea which Tony had thoughtfully made for him. They were driven to Stark International by Happy, again in silence, getting out at the curb. Only this time instead of leaving Steve at the curb, Tony rode the elevator up with him. He even patted Steve on the head before he departed to his workshop; Steve scowled at the pat and wandered off to go sit at Pepper’s desk. Pepper looked up from her desk with an expression on her face like she was going to have a heart attack or possibly a nose bleed. They exchanged grins and went to work, Steve drawing in his sketchbook and Pepper poking at her files.

After lunch, which consisted of shawarma from yet another restaurant he wandered past in his search for food, Steve went to go hunt down the sporting goods store he had found on the internet.

He walked into the store and immediately felt out of place, a penguin amongst lions. The beefy man with a tremendous barrel chest standing at the till gaped at him, confused by his sudden appearance.

“Can I help you son?” The man asked.

“I’m looking for a punching bag – nothing fancy, just a plain old heavy bag.” Steve said.

“A heavy bag, huh. Alright. Why the hell not – not like I’ve got anything else to do.” The man chortled. He walked Steve over to a display with seven different types of punching bags, ranging from speed bags to slip bags. At the very end of the line were the heavy bags, displayed in all their glory under a white spotlight. Some of them were the standard brown bag, but a few had been done up in patriotic red white and blue leather. It seemed like a lot of work just for a heavy bag. The future really seemed to love pointless customization.

“So, what are you looking for exactly?” The man asked, spinning a bag around so that Steve could see the seams.

“I’m trying to get back into shape.”

“Back into shape? What the hell did you look like before?” The man asked, horrified.

“Trust me,” Steve said, shaking his head, “You don’t want to know.”

“Well alright then.”

Steve inspected the bags, running his fingers over the seams and bulges. He had used punching bags for years – and apparently the dreams were realistic enough to be useful, because he seemed to know what he was doing. The man looked impressed when he moved on and picked out one of the beginner’s bags without so much as glancing at the tag.

“I’ll take this one.” Steve said.

“Tell you what, I’ll throw in some hand wraps for free. Not every day someone comes in to get one of these puppies.” The man said, heading back to the till with Steve trailing after him.

“That’s very kind of you.”

“It wouldn’t be very fair to sell you the bag without them. I like repeat customers, ones that don’t have mangled hands. The adult ones won’t fit, looking at ’cha. I’ve had this last pair around for the past month. Most of the women at the gym down the street have already picked this place clean. At least someone will get some use out of these babies.” The man grunted.

Steve placed his order and paid for the punching bag using his new debit card. It had been a stroke of
luck finding the thing. He had found it in his bag when he had gone looking for bank book; he hadn’t even had to go to the bank to get one. It had been squirreled away inside his bank book, the password for it written on a little pink sticky-note. Howard had taken the time to get him a card without asking, which was a pleasant surprise; Steve had expected Howard to force him to use one of his many credit cards as a way of keeping tabs on him. It felt great to be able to use his money again. Now he didn’t have to depend on anyone’s charity.

“It’ll be shipped out in the middle of the week. Is that alright with you kid?”

“Sounds perfect. Thanks a bunch.”

It would be great to take a few swings at the bag once it was all set up; the crack of the leather and the swing of the bag drowed in his head on repeat the entire time he walked back to Stark International. He wouldn’t be going through punching bags like he had in his dreams, but it would be enough to be able to hit something again without worrying about the consequences. He stopped to buy Tony a strawberry and banana smoothie and a doughnut, figuring that a nice snack might make Tony a little less cranky on the ride home. He and Tony seemed to be sharing a sweet tooth at the moment.

Steve made his way back to Pepper’s office, with a spring in his step; he felt like he was floating on air, so happy that he didn’t even notice that something was wrong. Pepper was waiting for him seated at her desk, looking very concerned, her hands clasped in front of her.

“Where did you wander off to?” She asked her voice almost cracking. She looked like she was going to start crying at any moment, just barely holding it together; the nails on her hand were chewed, the orange nail polish chipped and missing in places.

“I went to go order a punching bag from the sporting goods store at seventh and marine. Why? What happened?” Steve asked, worried.

“Tony was looking for you.” She said, standing up and rounding the table. She took the smoothie and doughnut from Steve’s hand, put it on the table and then pulled him into a bone crushing hug. He patted her back, unsure of what to do.

“Is everything alright?” Steve managed to whisper. Pepper nodded, letting him go. She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand, sniffling, her mascara running a little.

“I’m sorry, I don’t usually do this but…” She said, waving her hands at her face as if to fan away the tears.

“It’s alright. Don’t worry about it.”

“Mr. Stark came down for a visit. He wanted to see you.” She said, collecting herself with a shuddering gasp.

“I hope my not being here didn’t cause any trouble…” Steve grimaced, reaching into his bag to pull out a Kleenex. He offered it to her and she took it gratefully, dabbing at the corners of her eyes.

“No, no, Mr. Stark seemed alright that you weren’t here. The trouble started when he went into the workshop to visit Tony because you weren’t around and well…” Pepper turned her head letting out a sorrowful sigh, looking through the glass into Tony’s workshop. Tony was sitting with his back to them both as usual, his chair wheeled close to the desk, hands moving in a blur over the keyboard; he was pounding so hard on the holographic keys it looked like he might go clean through the desk they were being projected onto. Tony kept wincing every time he hit the space bar, his head jerking back
against the seat.

“I’ll go talk to him.” Steve assured Pepper, offering her the rest of the Kleenex package; she took another one and waved them away, blowing her nose. “Just make sure he’s alright, ok? Don’t worry about me.” She sniffled. “I’ve got this covered.”

Steve collected the smoothie and the doughnut, trying valiantly not to drop anything as he made his way to the workshop. He raised a hand, hoping the treats would be enough of a peace offering to get him through the door. He didn’t know what Howard had done, but it must have been something bad if it had made both Pepper and Tony break down like this. Steve knocked loud and firm on the glass door, crumpling the doughnut bag in his hand by accident; he cursed and cleared his throat.

“Tony?”

Steve waved at the security camera, gesturing with the food. Tony didn’t slow; he barely even acknowledged that he had heard Steve in the first place. He kept on typing, his shoulders rigid. Steve pushed against the door, expecting to find it locked; it swung open without protest. He caught himself on the doorframe almost tripping on a power cord strung out across the doorway and stumbled into the room.

“I brought you a snack.” Steve said, approaching cautiously. Tony’s shoulders twitched. His typing slowed, grinding to a halt as Steve got closer, his fingers held in the air just above the keys poised to start typing again at a moment’s notice.

“Where did you go off to?” Tony barked.

Steve set the doughnut bag down in front of Tony, hesitant about putting anything liquid near him; he could see the muscle in Tony’s arm twitching, ready to lash out and prepared for the worst.

“I went to a sporting goods store to get a punching bag and some hand wraps. I thought it would be a good time to go, because you were busy working.” Steve explained.

Tony snatched up the doughnut bag, crushing the paper in his hand as his fingers closed around the top. He swivelled the chair around and locked eyes with Steve, puffed up and glaring; the anger left him the moment their eyes met as if he had been pricked by a needle, his gaze lingering on Steve’s eyes only a moment before he forcefully looked down at the bag and then at the smoothie that Steve held clutched against his chest.

Tony opened and closed his mouth. His expression was almost heartbreaking.

“I’m sorry. I should have told Pepper where I was going. It won’t happen again.” Steve said.

Tony fished out the doughnut, his hand trembling. He ripped it in half and held the other half out to Steve, offering it; Steve shook his head, so Tony set the other piece down on the paper bag, nibbling at his half.

“He came down to visit.” Tony said between bites, his voice devoid of emotion. He turned around and faced the computer once more, taking the smoothie from Steve’s hands and setting it down beside him; he began to type again, the doughnut half hanging out of the side of his mouth, chewing slowly, the arc of fried dough disappearing inch by inch.

“Was he an asshole?” Steve asked humourlessly, pulling the stool Tony kept beside his worktable closer so that he could sit down.

“When isn’t he an asshole?”
“Touché.”

“Why do you always feed me?” Tony asked suddenly, abandoning his typing to turn and stare at Steve again, almost knocking the smoothie over. He caught it and steadied it, licking the leftover doughnut glaze off his lips.

“I don’t know. I like to bring you food.” Steve shrugged.

“But why? Why exactly, are you here?” Tony said. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, eyeing Steve with such seriousness that it was almost frightening. If he hadn’t been sitting beside a crumpled doughnut bag and a pink and purple smoothie cup, he might have looked like he was trying to negotiate with terrorists.

“I don’t know.” Steve said, looking down at his hands. He had asked himself that question several times already, and he didn’t really know how to answer himself either. Saying that he was in love with Tony wasn’t the right thing to say of course; he had been, once, but was he still now? It felt more like he was searching for something now instead of head over heels in love. He knew what love was, and this most certainly wasn’t it.

“Do you even want to be here? Or is this some kind of… sick joke that he’s playing on me?” Tony said quietly.

“I’m not a sick joke!” Steve snapped.

“Then why are you here? Is it because you have nowhere else to go or something?”

“I don’t know, alright?” Steve shouted, slipping off of the stool, only hearing the first part of Tony’s question. The rest of it seemed to blur, his own words coming out of Tony’s mouth. He wanted to storm out of the room all of a sudden, the look on Tony’s face as hard to stomach as it had been that first time meeting him on the porch. His clenched his fists at his sides, outraged that Tony would even ask something like that. “I don’t know why I woke up, or why I’m here. I’m just here. Can we leave it at that?”

“I meant why are you living with me!” Tony protested, sounding hurt.

Steve’s hands unclenched. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. “Howard offered me someplace where I could be with someone nice – and no, before you ask he didn’t call you nice, he called you useless, just so it’s clear – and I said yes because if I were to live alone I don’t know what I would do with myself. I like having people around.” Steve admitted.

“So let me get this straight – you don’t want to be here? With me?” Tony said, almost whispering.


“I…” Tony grabbed the smoothie and took a long sip. “Ooh… Banana strawberry!”

And with that said, Tony turned back to the computer and began to type again; he wasn’t going so fast or painfully anymore, his fingers moving in their normal cadence. He even started humming to himself.

“Tony?” Steve asked, confused.


Steve rubbed his chin and sighed, exiting the workshop. He sat down in his chair beside Pepper and
began to sketch again, feeling shaken. What the hell had just happened? Had they been arguing or hadn’t they? And had anything been resolved? Tony might have been satisfied with the conversation but he certainly wasn’t! To his surprise, Pepper didn’t ask about what had happened. He was struck with the simultaneous urge to both talk and not talk to her, his tongue twisting in his mouth uncomfortably. This was ludicrous! If Tony didn’t want to talk about whatever it was that had just happened, then he didn’t either.

It only occurred to Steve later that Tony might possibly have asked him if he was staying there willingly and not because he had been forced to stay. It was an odd thought, popping up in between an idea about hitting the gift shop downstairs for some coloured pencils and a sudden craving for peanut butter.

Steve looked down at the half finished drawing of Tony on the page in front of him, turning to stare at Tony’s back through the workshop walls. How could he have missed that? He backtracked, playing the conversation over again in his head, mumbling along word by word until he had run through it at least four different times.

Was that what Tony had needed to hear? That Steve wasn’t there because he had been forced into it? What the hell had Howard said to him?

Steve and Pepper sat together at her desk surrounded by papers that threatened to go flying every time they moved. They were stapling briefings for the upcoming board meeting, working with warm photocopies that Pepper had made upstairs in the copy room, enjoying the warm smell of paper and ink far too much. It was hard work. Not because the work was difficult, but because Steve couldn’t wait to get home, and he kept wanting to throw the papers away so that he could make a mad dash for the elevator. The delivery company had phoned a few minutes ago on Pepper’s private line to tell him that they had left the punching bag and hand wraps under the porch so that they wouldn’t get stolen; Steve had forgotten to bring his cellphone to the store that day, and the only number he had been able to remember was hers, so he had used it without thinking. She had been fine with it, rolling her eyes at him when he tried to apologize, assuring him that that was what her phone was for in the first place. He had still felt a little bad about using it without asking permission first so he had offered to help her out as way of an apology. She had delightedly taken him up on the offer, needing someone to help her stack and staple a monstrous pile of copies that would have taken her hours on her own. With him there, the work went by much faster.

“Someone’s being anal retentiive…” Pepper sang under her breath, smirking at Steve while he lined up the papers they were trying to staple with ruler-like precision.

“That’s what you like about me…” He sang back, only half paying attention to the task at hand.

Steve didn’t really think anything bad would have happened to the punching bag if it had been left out on the porch. He had been close to busting a gut when the sales clerk had said he was worried about it being stolen in the first place; the area that they lived in was far from the lower east side, and honestly, who in their right mind would want to steal a punching bag in the first place? It wasn’t as if it had any real resale value after all and the only people who bought them were people who beat other people up. Mind you, if people had known that the owner of said bag was five foot one and a one hundred and ten pound with the physical strength of a marshmallow, they would have probably just walked off with the thing right then and there. He was glad that the labeling would only have his
name on it.

Pepper tapped Steve on the nose. He blinked at her, going cross-eyed.

“Sorry?”

“I said the board meeting is on Friday at seven a.m. So expect to get here by six thirty so that Tony can have time to set his presentation up and work out all the bugs with the projector. He’s pretty used to this stuff already, so you shouldn’t worry too much about it. I thought I should give you a heads up though, seeing as how he’s probably going to forget to mention it until three minutes before you have to leave the house.” Pepper said, passing Steve another packet to staple. He diligently put the staples in diagonally as she had requested, and held his hand out for the next set.

“He’s going to be in an extremely bad mood on Friday – just so you know. He’s always really unhappy after board meetings so I’d recommend bringing something sweet like some hard candy to calm him down afterwards. I used to keep a bowl of peppermints out here on my desk and he used to sneak in and eat them all whenever I was out for lunch or in the other room photocopying.” She said.

“Hard candy… Right. I'll keep that in mind.”

“How has he been by the way? Outside of work, I mean? I know you probably don’t want to talk about it…” Pepper said, leaning towards him.

“He’s been really great. We make dinner and then he goes to sleep in his room and I go to sleep in mine. Nothing really out of the ordinary.” Steve shrugged.

Pepper dropped the pile of papers she had been holding onto the floor; she stooped to pick them up, waving away his help when he tried to lend a hand.

“Did I say something strange?” Steve asked, smiling nervously.

“Yes, actually, you did. I mean, you didn’t mention anything about the drinking, and he usually drinks before bed. It’s not like I stalk him or anything –” she said quickly, “it’s just that he used to drink in the office before he left for the day. That was until Happy was forced to tell Mr. Stark about it. Then he just started doing his drinking at home where no one could see him.”

Steve frowned. Tony didn’t seem to be capable of imbibing low levels of alcohol in the first place, so was it possible that he had been drinking?

“I haven’t seen him drinking…” Steve said. “But he might be. I’ll check tonight and see for sure.”

“Well don’t go out of your way. He’ll get upset if you pry into his life and then you’ll have to deal with the aftermath alone, because no one will be able to help you smooth that over. He was really angry with me after I told Happy what was going on. Tony was really good at hiding how drunk he was when he was in the car, and half the time you couldn’t even tell he was drunk back then. He hasn’t really talked to me since.” Pepper said, sounding only slightly guilt-ridden.

“I take it you were worried about him?”

“I was, but of course Tony being Tony, he saw it as some form of treachery instead of what it really was. He claimed that I was nothing but a backstabbing whore – his words, not mine. You have to understand, I didn’t want to say anything to Happy. I really didn’t,” Pepper shook her head, “but his drinking got really bad Steve – he used to be just absolutely, pardon my language, shit-faced by the time five p.m. rolled around. It got so bad that he would bring in a bottle of whiskey with him every morning and it would be half empty by the time he left for the day. I had to clean up vomit in the
hallways. It became... a problem.”

“I see.” Steve said, shocked. He hadn’t thought Tony capable of doing something like that.

“He seems better now. With you around, I mean.” Pepper smiled. She looked up at the clock and yawned, stretching.

“I hope he’s getting better.”

“Oh, he is, he is. He wouldn’t be so cheerful if he wasn’t enjoying having you around.”

“This is him being cheerful?”

“Steve, the man unlocks the door for you without you having to go get a battering ram. He’s cheerful, believe me.” Pepper chuckled.

Steve laughed.

“But enough with all this serious talk. Just one more coffee break and then it’s time to go home! I can’t wait to keep my bathtub company. The bubbles are calling me – I can just hear them now.” Pepper grinned.

“Sounds like a good plan. Speaking of coffee...” Steve stapled the last packet and then made a beeline for the coffee machine. He had the buttons memorized now, and didn’t even really need to look to get the cup just right. He retrieved Tony’s coffee and made a dash for the workshop where he slipped on the carpet and ending up with his face pressed against the glass door; it was open, so he stumbled in, regaining his composure without spilling a single drop of coffee, although the door had a little smear across the middle from where his face had connected with it. His cheek was a little red from the impact with the door, but wasn’t too bad. Maybe Pepper was right; maybe Tony was cheerful. The door had been unlocked an awful lot lately. If Tony wasn’t cheerful, he was probably going to be now with that picture perfect performance.

Tony looked up from his computer, cackling. The monitor behind him was replaying Steve’s accidental slip, looping to Steve’s immense embarrassment. Steve sighed wearily, approaching with the coffee held out in front of him, hoping that it would be enough of a distraction to keep Tony from saving the file for later viewing.

“No doughnut?” Tony said, sounding disappointed. He accepted the coffee while pouting.

“Not today, sorry. I was going to go get one, but I ran out of time. We’re stapling packets for the board meeting.”

“Oh god. Not another one.” Tony groaned, sipping his coffee, savoring it. “I don’t like board meetings.” He said as he flicked bits of paper at Steve, obviously still sore about the whole no doughnut thing.

“Are they really that bad?” Steve asked, batting away a ball of paper that came close to hitting him in the forehead.

“They’re not bad per say – I mean, I have to present shit to him and his lackeys like I’m in grade school or something, but they’re not usually bad. They like to ramble on about productivity and retail market value needing to be higher for the most part. I usually just stand there and look pretty pointing at the shiny pictures so that they can understand what it is I’m going on about. He’s the only one who never likes them. He probably doesn’t even understand the tech because he never bothered to catch up on electrical engineering after I started working here and no matter how much he pretend...
he hasn’t built shit in years. You can sit by the way. You making me uncomfortable just watching you.” Tony chattered.

Steve pulled up the stool he normally sat on; his feet dangled, but he didn’t feel nearly as bad as he did with the chairs. At least he had some place to rest his feet on the stool as it had handy bars at the bottom.

“But anyways – like I was saying, they’re not bad, they’re just mentally taxing. A lot of the board members are these old geezers – guys who can barely stay awake through normal meetings without enough coffee to drown a whale – and they like to ask a gazillion questions because it make them feel like they’re in control. It doesn’t really matter to me what colour the goddamned phone is going to be – it’s a fucking phone – but to them it’s all ‘oh this has to be green – green is the in colour’. I don’t know – I leave that to marketing. They pick the colours, I do the real work.” Tony snorted.

Steve laughed. He could picture Howard glaring from the back of a conference room while a bunch of the other old fogies squinted at the front trying to check out the colour scheme on a phone no bigger than a playing card. For some reason he imagined them using ear trumpets – they probably had something other than those these days, seeing as how he hadn’t seen them mentioned in anything other than documentaries. Tony had talked with him about hearing aids for the elderly once, but he couldn’t really remember most of the conversation, seeing as how he had fallen asleep during it; he supposed that had a lot to say on the subject matter.

Tony smiled shyly, watching Steve over the rim of his cup. “You smile a lot. Did you know that?”

“I’ve never really thought about it.” Steve said.

“Well you do. It’s weird.”

“How so?” Steve asked, biting his lip to keep from smiling harder at the odd question.

“I don’t know. Most people are usually frowning or cranky looking when I’m around. It’s weird to see so many smiles.” Tony said, taking a deep gulp of coffee. His cheeks were a faint pink colour, and Steve had the sneaking suspicion that it wasn’t because of the hot coffee Tony was attempting to inhale.

Steve liked having these conversations with Tony. They had certainly been hard work to get rolling into, that was for sure, but it had been worth the effort. Tony hadn’t been willing to spend more than a few seconds grunting at him in the beginning, preferring to spend his days working in the confines of his lab with his robots for company. He had slowly begun to open up, offering tidbits of what he was working on whenever Steve came in to bring him snacks or drinks, trading information for treats. It was confusing really. Steve wanted to mourn his Tony, and yet he could see that same man sitting in front of him right now. Those smiles on Tony’s face – oh those smiles!

Steve wasn’t embarrassed to say that he had fallen head over heels in love with the bizarre engineer again; it had sort of snuck up on him, but there it was right in front of his face. Sure, some things had changed, but it was still Tony through and through. Tony still got that silly little smirk on his face when he had done something mischievous. Steve had seen it when he had walked in with that morning’s coffee only to find that Tony had set up an obstacle course for him to jump over. That same smirk also appeared when he had said something in technobabble that Steve couldn’t understand; he was still the same Tony. It was just a different part of Tony, a half of the entire whole. He just hoped that Tony didn’t figure out how much he liked him before he could deal with it; he wasn’t sure what Tony would do if he found out Steve was in love with him.

“Hey, you can totally be my Vanna White! Ha! He’ll shit a brick.” Tony said cheerfully turning back
to the computer. He typed out a few lines of code, half yawning despite the caffeine he had just
downed.

“Vanna White?” Steve asked. He had heard the name before, but it wasn’t all that familiar.

“Wheel of Fortune? No?” Tony cocked his head to the side and then opened a tab on one of his web
browsers, typing into a search engine. A picture of Vanna White appeared; or what Steve assumed
was Vanna White. He tried to ignore the porn that came up in the picture search. Tony didn’t even
seem to notice it, likely too used to finding it in image searches in the first place to be offended by it,
just like everyone else in this century. Apparently things as family friendly as Wheel of Fortune, as
the other pictures seemed to suggest, was open season for people on the internet.

“So, on the show she stands in front of the game board while the contestants call out letters to make
up sentences. They spin a wheel – pick a letter. If it’s on the board, lovely Vanna walks over and
touches a video screen and the letter appears in the sentence they’re trying to figure out. Of course I
wouldn’t expect you to come to the meeting dressed to the nines and in high heels, but you get my
point, right?” Tony laughed, scratching the back of his head, messing up his hair even more than it
already was. He looked like he could use a hot shower and a nap, his eyelids drooping as he talked.

“I see what you mean, yes. I don’t get how that would work in a presentation though…” Steve said,
doubtful that he would be of any use even if he was dressed up.

“You can just stand beside my PowerPoint slides and point at them, smiling all sweetly like you do.
They’d all be staring at you, dazzled by your cuteness, and I can make a break for it when they’re
not looking.” Tony grinned. He killed the tab and then began to type again in his programming
window, tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth as he wrote out something particularly tricky;
back to work as abruptly as he had stopped. Steve waited the obligatory five minutes before he was
sure that Tony was actually finished with the conversation and then returned to Pepper, packing up
his sketchbook and pencils, ready to leave. He was tempted to rub his hands together in glee, but was
well aware that Pepper was watching him, ready to tease him about it.

His punching bag was waiting! He couldn’t help it! He could get excited about things too – it wasn’t
like he was some kind of robot.

“Oh Steve,” Pepper snickered. “You must really want that punching bag.”

“I really do.” Steve agreed, sitting down to stare at the clock.

The last half hour of work seemed to take forever; Steve watched the clock, his left eye twitching as
he waited for the second hand to finally get to where it needed to go. Even if he hadn’t exactly been
in the war for real, he certainly remembered what it felt like to be sitting around for hours on end; it
wasn’t much harder than this, although it did have a lot less shrapnel. He didn’t have to wait too
long. Tony stepped out of his office at five on the dot and then they were down the elevator and out
to Happy’s waiting car, heading home.

“You seem excited about something.” Tony commented, slouching leisurely against the car door; his
eyes were half lidded, and he looked as if he was thinking about taking a nap.

“My punching bag is supposed to be waiting at home.” Steve said.

Tony raised an eyebrow.

“This I have to see.”

“It’s going to be great!” Steve said eagerly.
He didn’t stop grinning even when they ran into traffic and had to spend an extra half-hour in gridlock. When they got home he had to keep reminding himself that he was an adult and that it wasn’t very mature to throw his things away and sprint up the walkway. He hadn’t felt this giddy since he had tried to pass his physical for the last time.

As the delivery company had assured him, the punching bag and the hand wraps were waiting under the stairs, both sealed up in cardboard boxes. Steve scooted underneath the porch; he had to duck down because otherwise he would have smacked his head on the spider web covered beams above him. It was an awkward space, but he managed to get in alright. Tony stood outside waiting for him, tapping his foot in the brittle grass.

“Is it there?”

“Yep. It’s a little heavy though.” Steve called out, his voice echoing under the floorboards.

“Well it’s a punching bag, not a toaster. What did you expect?”

Steve grabbed the box and dragged it a few inches through the cobweb covered dirt before almost falling flat on his ass. He panted, doubled over, stars swimming in front of his eyes. He hadn’t expected it to be so heavy.

“You alright in there, cupcake?” Tony peered under the porch, practically having to kneel in order to get low enough to see.

“I’m… fine…” Steve gasped, wiping a trickle sweat off the side of his face. It was humid under the porch, and there were more than a few bugs lurking in the dark with him. He flicked a spider off of his shoulder and grabbed the box again and digging his heels in this time. He could do this!

“You’re going to throw out your back doing that.” Tony commented dryly.

“I will… not…” Steve gasped.

“Or you’ll give yourself a hernia. A hernia, and then you’ll throw out your back.”

Steve pulled the box harder, managing to get it a few more inches closer to the exit. He took in another breath, centering himself and started to drag again; Tony was warm against his back, reaching around Steve to grab the box. Steve stumbled, inadvertently pushing them closer together, his body fitting perfectly against Tony’s like it had been made just for him. He was glad it was dark down here, because his face was now brick red.

“I can do it –” Steve said swallowing hard. Tony pulled hard, dragging Steve and the box along with him.

“Sure you can.” Tony grunted, getting them closer and closer to the doorway one wiggled pull at a time. He paused, leaning against Steve for a moment to catch his breath, his breath hot in Steve’s ear. He wiped his hands on his pants, grabbing the cardboard box again.

Alright. We do this in three… two… one…”

They moved together, shuffling backwards until they were up on the grass, half ducking and crawling to get to freedom. Tony brushed spider webs off of Steve’s head and then casually flicked a dead bug off of his shoulder.

“See? That wasn’t so bad.” Steve wheezed.
“You said you had hand wraps or something?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Steve staggered back under the porch and ducked down to retrieve the hand wraps which had fallen off of the box while they were moving it. He returned, covered in a fine sheen of dust, triumphantly holding the gloves above his head.

“I should probably get around to cleaning under there one day.” Tony mused.

“It’s not that bad.”

“You look like you were rolling around in flour.”

“Ok… maybe it’s a little dusty.”

Tony brushed the dust off of Steve’s cheek, rolling his eyes; his hand lingered, his thumb rubbing gently against Steve’s ear. He cleared his throat and pulled away, scratching the back of his head. Steve reached up and plucked a blackened leaf out of Tony’s hair, tossing it away; the pink of his cheeks stood out brightly through the stripes Tony had made in the dust.

“So how are we going to get this mother up the stairs?” Tony said, coughing and turning his attention to the staircase. Between the two of them, they had barely been able to move the box across the ground. Dragging it up the stairs was looking unlikely, unless one of them wanted to end up being crushed to death.

Tony snapped his fingers.

“I know! I’ve got some plywood out back – we’ll build ourselves a ramp.”

“A ramp?”

“Yeah – It’ll cut down on the amount of effort we need to get the thing up all those stairs. I’m an engineer for a reason you know.”

“Sure you are.”

Tony grinned. “Stay here. I’ll go get the wood and we can get this party started.” He frowned and then cleared his throat, wandering off without another word. Steve sat down on the punching bag box, exhausted already. He hadn’t thought that it would be so hard to move a single box; it hadn’t seemed like it was going to be a problem the store, but then again he hadn’t exactly tried to pick the thing up when he was checking it out. He had twirled it around on a hook, and it hadn’t moved all that much to begin with. Maybe he shouldn’t have said no to the movers when they had offered to come back and set it up for him.

Tony came back with a piece of spray-painted plywood over his shoulder, grinning like a madman. He set it down on the steps looking pleased at the way the wood hadn’t broken into pieces when it touched down.

“Just the right length – lucky.” Tony whistled, surveying his work while rubbing his hands together. The plywood covered the top and bottom steps easily and seemed sturdy enough, although it did bow a little in the middle. There was a caricatured picture of Howard’s face drawn on the centre of the board in what appeared to be sharpie; the face didn’t look friendly, its caricatured devil horns standing out as black triangles against beige wood. It seemed to have a few holes and gouges in it already, as if something sharp had been thrown at it.

“Alright – we can just shove this to the end…” Tony stooped down and grabbed the lower half of
the box, sliding it across the grass towards the board. He gestured for Steve to stand in front of him, arms bracing the bottom of the box.

“Ok, we push together and hopefully this thing holds. It looked structurally sound… but you never know, right?”

They pushed together on the count of three again and inched the box up, only stopping when the board bowed slightly in the middle from the weight; they readjusted, pushing quicker and made it up to the porch just as the board snapped in half, severing Howard’s caricature head in half.

“Well, no loss there.” Tony sang.

Steve snorted. He reached to pick up half of the broken board and was gingerly moved out of the way.

“I’ll get that. You just… get your hand wraps and unlock the door. Don’t want you to get any splinters.” Tony said. He fished his keys out of his pocket and tossed them to Steve, who caught them with ease.

So these were the fabled keys! They looked pretty ordinary. The keychain was a disc of some metal band’s logo – he didn’t recognize it even if it did seem oddly familiar. The disc was made out of some kind of polished rock, probably hematite. It was heavy, even though it only had the two keys on it. One was for the front door and the other was likely the key to Tony’s workshop down in the basement; he ogled that key and then upon hearing the sound of wood snapping, hastened to unlock the door. He picked the hand wraps up, holding them against his chest.

“So…” Tony said as he returned, dusting off his hands. He stomped up the steps and grabbed the edge of the box, lifting it up with a grunt so that it was standing vertically.

“Where should we put this sucker?”

“Uh…”

Steve really hadn’t thought about where to actually put the punching bag. It wasn’t his house after all, and he hadn’t felt comfortable scouting around inside to see if there was a nice space to set it up.

“I mean we could put it in your room, but then we would have two problems.” Tony said, scratching his beard.

“Oh?”

“One – the beams in your bedroom aren’t nearly strong enough to keep this thing up and we don’t want the ceiling to come down.” Tony said, holding one finger up.

“I was wondering about that…” Steve sighed in disappointment.

“And two – if we put it in your bedroom, then I won’t get to watch the spectacle that is Steve Rogers versus the punching bag.” Tony grinned.

Steve scowled. “Very funny. Do you have a solution then, or just jokes?”

“Well I’ve got a bunch of useless space where there’s supposed to be a library. Nothing in there to smash up and it’s got sturdy beams so it won’t cause some kind of horrible disaster. I won’t have to worry about coming in and finding you crushed underneath the ceiling, which is a plus in my books.” Tony shrugged.
“Sounds like a good place then.”

“Yep.”

They hauled the punching bag through the house using a rug to keep from scuffing the floor and then Tony broke out his power tools, standing on a step ladder to drill a hook into one of the centre beams of the library. The room was large and empty, just as Tony had said it would be, and looked like it could use a bit of company. The floor was carpeted in here, but that wasn’t too much of a problem. If he fell down, then at least he would have something soft to land on, although he might have to worry about rug burn.

“Ok, so rip her open.” Tony said, jumping down from the ladder. He took apart the drill, fitting it back into a hard plastic case, replaced the drill bits with little difficulty. The drill looked well used, although Steve hadn’t seen Tony so much as touch a tool at home before. Did Tony’s workshop hold everything he used? There didn’t seem to be much in Tony’s tool box that was as advanced as the things he used while at work. With the Stark fortune, Steve would have expected Tony to parade around with the most advanced tools possible.

Steve opened the punching bag’s box with a box cutter Tony handed him, making sure to keep the cardboard intact so that he could use it again later if need be. He dragged the cardboard backwards as Tony grabbed the bag by the chain and pulled it out, separating the two as easily as one might pull apart an Oreo.

“Alright. Nice teamwork. Now for the hard part.” Tony said, eyeballing the hook. “You going to be able to hold the thing up, or am I going to have to make a pulley?”

“Uh… a pulley sounds like a great idea.” Steve said, breaking the box down so that he could fold it up and stash it against one of the many empty bookshelves in the room. It was odd to see such an empty library; Tony had used to pride himself on collecting any book he could get his hands on. While he had loved technology, he had always had a soft spot for collectors’ editions and had a few dog-eared novels lying around for when he wanted to do some light reading. Tony with an empty library was just… wrong.

“Seriously? You’re saving cardboard?” Tony scoffed, fiddling with his tools.

“Why not? No sense in leaving it lying around. Maybe we can use it later.” Steve shrugged, feeling a little annoyed at having been called out on it.

“No. If I needed cardboard, I would buy myself cardboard. But whatever. Store it away like a good little hamster.” Tony chuckled.

“Alright then.” Steve said, gritting his teeth; he tried not to feel talked down to, after all, everyone had commented on him hording supplies at one time or another. Even when he had started recycling, he had always kept a few chunks of cardboard around for a rainy day. It always paid to have something to kneel on so that you didn’t get your knees, or god forbid, the carpet, dirty.

Tony liberated some of the parts for the pulley from his workshop while Steve picked bits of shaved cardboard out of the carpet. It was slow going, good work for killing time. Tony muttered to himself while he worked, tying everything in place one knot at a time. He pulled a chunk of heavy duty rope through the metal circle at the top of the chain, hoisting the heavy bag up as easily as he might put up a Halloween decoration. Steve stood underneath the bag, bracing it with his hands pressed against the bottom so that it didn’t spin out of control.

“That’s not really a good idea you know. If I drop this you’re going to get crushed.” Tony groused,
pulling the rope, raising the bag higher.

“I trust you.” Steve smiled.

“You’re one brave little guy, you know that?” Tony tied the rope off and then dragged the ladder back over, making short work of the steps. He stood beside the metal hook on the top rung, adjusting the chain so that it dangled lower.

“Is this high enough?” Tony called out from above.

“No, it needs to be lower.”

“Like this?” Tony said, dropping the bag lower a few feet without warning. Steve stepped back to keep from getting brained.

“A little more.”

“More? It’s going to be on the floor if I do that.” Tony snorted.

“It needs to be lower.” Steve sighed resignedly. He was starting to regret ever having bought the damned bag. If this was how Tony was going to act about it, he might as well have thrown the thing in the trash and just bought one of those inflatable ones that bounced back when you hit them.

“Alright, but it’s your funeral.” Tony said, dropping the bag lower. He secured final knots and then nimbly jumped down from the ladder, landing like a cat in the soft carpet.

They stood back and surveyed their work. For Tony, the bag was now hanging level with his shoulders. One good punch might have sent it flying in reverse into his groin. For Steve, the bag was perfectly hung, the top of the bag reaching just above his ear.

“Well? Are you going to take a swing at it or what?” Tony asked sitting down in one of the folding chair that he had commandeered from his back patio for the ‘event of the season’. He watched lazily as Steve broke out the hand wraps.

Steve wrapped his hands up, irritated and excited at the same time. He carefully lined up, getting into the proper stance to strike the bag. He punched the bag with all his might, trying not to tense up on impact.

The bag didn’t even move.

He was pretty sure he had bruised his knuckles with that one blow; it sure felt like it. Tony burst into laughter holding his stomach, laughing so hard it he looked like he was in extreme pain; he might have fallen over if he hadn’t been sitting at the time. As it was, he simply rocked in his seat, wheezing away, tears of joy rolling down his face.

Steve glared at him and took another controlled swing at the bag. His form hadn’t changed even though he wasn’t in his dreams anymore, and while he could hit the bag easily, the blows just didn’t have the mass behind them to actually force the bag to move. He just needed to strengthen up his wrists and hands, that was all, he assured himself. He could still do this – it wasn’t a lost cause. It couldn’t be, not after all the effort he had put into getting the damned thing home.

Tony watched idly from his chair, smirking every time Steve punched and winced. “This is supposed to be fun?” He drawled, wiping a tear from his eyes.

“No.” Steve grunted, striking the bag again. “It’s supposed to be for stress relief – and for
strengthening your muscles.”

“What muscles? I don’t see any muscles?” Tony teased. He hauled himself out of the chair and slunk over, squeezing Steve’s upper arm, pretending to search for said muscles.

“Very funny.” Steve snapped.

“Really– where are these muscles that you speak of?” Tony asked, innocent as an angel on the top of a Christmas tree, a smile playing across his lips. Steve glared at him, wanting to take a swing at something he might be able to knock down; Tony poked him in the forehead, laughing.

“Don’t be a jerk.” Steve muttered, scowling down at his clenched hands. Even if Tony was being an ass, he would never take a swing at him; he would never hurt Tony. He would rather hurt himself first. Steve crumpled inside; Tony knew just where to jab, and he didn’t even know it. Steve couldn’t even deny his words either; he was weak, a pathetic muscle-less thing. He shouldn’t have even bothered with the bag in the first place.

“Hey now, I’m just kidding. Don’t make that face.” Tony said, squeezing Steve’s shoulder. He hesitated for a split second, biting his lower lip. “It’s not like you’re the only one who can’t throw a punch to save his life you know.”

“Oh? I think I can punch just fine.” Steve said. He mock punched Tony in the shoulder, desperate to get things to go back to playful; he could handle playful, could push away the darkness if he had that to hang on to once more. The light blow didn’t even make Tony twitch, although it did make his shirt wrinkle a little. A smile blossomed on Tony’s face again, brighter than before. He playfully batted Steve back, snickering, nearly bowling Steve over.

“Did you want to try?” Steve asked, un-wrapping his hands. The wraps were warm, even though he hadn’t worn them all that long. He liked the burn of the fabric against his skin; it grounded him like nothing had, a steady sensation that didn’t let up even after the wraps were gone.

There was no point in going too crazy on the punching bag tonight even though he wanted to take a few more swings at it; the burn against his skin was starting to fade, although the dull throb of pain still came through no matter how much he rubbed at his wrist.

Steve handed Tony the hand wraps; just because he had to stop didn’t mean that Tony couldn’t give it a try. He would just have to find some time to beat on the thing on the weekend when he would have time to recover. His knuckles were throbbing enough as it was. How would he draw if he damaged his hands? He wasn’t sure if the serum had actually done anything for his regeneration, although he sure hoped it had. He didn’t want to put it to the test yet. Tony stared down at the wraps like they were snakes, unsure despite his earlier bravado.

“How do I…” Tony fiddled with the straps, getting nowhere fast. He looked up at Steve, his eyes wide and concerned. “I don’t think I’m doing this right.”

“Here.” Steve took Tony’s hand in his own and wound the wraps around, binding them in place as easily as he might tie his shoes. His nimble fingers made short work of the bindings, moving from one hand to the other; Tony flinched under his touch, almost shying away although he couldn’t get far. Steve couldn’t quite ignore the tingle that went up his spine as he dropped Tony’s hand. Why did everything about Tony have to be so warm? So attractive and irresistible? It was so unfair!

“There you go.” Steve said, clearing his throat.

Tony looked at the bag doubtfully.
“Are you sure…”

“Go ahead. Take a swing. It’s not going to hurt you.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “I know that. Sheesh.” He took a pitiful swing at the bag, stumbling as the bag bounced away from him, swinging on its hook. It twirled around as if it were doing some kind of slow dance with a lover, Tony following it as he tried to swing at it again.

“Not like that. You’ll hurt yourself – here.” Steve said. He went into the proper stance, showing Tony how to move, not even having to think about the careful movements. “If you do it this way the bag won’t come back and hit you.”

Tony watched in silence, eyes traveling up and down Steve’s body; Steve stood back, gesturing at the bag. “Go ahead. You can do it.” The bag hung, still and steady.

Tony took a tentative swing at the bag, moving just like Steve had shown him only moments before. The bag wiggled in place but didn’t fly or spin.

Tony grinned.

He took another swing.

And another.

“Hey, this isn’t bad!”

“I told you so.” Steve smirked. Tony was good, even though he had only just learned how to punch properly. He had excellent follow-through, and the lines of his muscles, sparse as they were, were disturbingly distracting. No more was there a distant look to Tony’s eyes; he was completely concentrated on hitting the bag, entire body working to make each hit happen as quickly and strongly as possible. When Tony did something, he did it well and he put all of his attention on the task at hand. Steve had always admired that about him.

“You’re doing really well! Are you sure you’ve never done this before?” Steve teased good-naturedly. Tony lost his concentration, startled as if he had forgotten Steve was in the room; the bag rebounded from a weak low blow and struck him in the shoulder, knocking him backwards with a squeak.

Tony looked up at Steve from the carpet, a little dazed and a whole lot self-conscious. “I have no idea what you are talking about.” Tony gasped, having winded himself when he had fallen; his face was slick with sweat, his hair sticking to his forehead in little curls. He scrambled with the hand wraps, pulling them off, and then stood up, leaving the wraps lying in a tangled mess on the floor beside his feet.

“I’m going to shower and then I’m going to bed.” Tony mumbled.

“Tony –” Steve started.

“See you tomorrow Steve.” Tony fled the room, almost hitting the doorframe in his haste to get away.

Steve frowned after him. He was getting very tired of this whole running away business. He put his hands on his hips, eyes narrowing. Normally he would have called Tony out for the behavior, but it didn’t feel right, ordering Tony around like that. He wasn’t Captain America anymore and Tony wasn’t his teammate or a fellow soldier he was commanding. Tony was his friend, not someone to
badger into telling him things.

Steve ran his hands through his hair. If Pepper was right, Tony would be looking for liquor right about now and that was just plain self-destructive behavior. He would have to take a trip to the kitchen to see if she knew what she was talking about; Captain America or not, he wasn’t going to sit around while his friend was hurting. He hoped to god that maybe Pepper didn’t have all the information for once.

Steve lurked in the dark at the kitchen table for almost a full hour, waiting patiently for Tony to show his face again. He checked the clock every once in a while as a way to distract himself from the knot in his gut; he hated the way his body seemed to twist and bend to accommodate bad thoughts every time things got tough. He would have an ulcer if it didn’t cut it out. It didn’t seem to matter how many times the awful tight feeling happened; he could never get used to it.

Pepper had been right about the drinking. Steve was loath to admit it, but Tony definitely had a problem. He had searched through the cabinets and had found that Tony seemed to enjoy stashing whiskey and other kinds of hard liquor in the cupboards, hiding them behind the real food; sometimes the bottles were just sitting there, out in plain sight. He didn’t know how he could have missed it before.

There were several bottles of vermouth, schnapps and whiskey nestled there amongst the perishables, most of them still sealed, thankfully. A few were almost finished and then abandoned, as if Tony had found one brand that he liked and started in on it before the others were done. He seemed to favor the whiskey more than vodka or schnapps, although beer seemed to be his favourite poison at the moment, judging by the large collection of bottle caps Steve found in a plastic container by the sink. He had put a handful of those there himself the previous weekend. He knew that despicable container well; he should have noticed it filling up. It was sitting right beside the goddamned tap!

Tony had quite the collection. Steve had counted at least seven cases of bottled beer there in the bottom shelf waiting to be stuffed into the fridge, all still in their cardboard boxes. How Tony had managed to get seven cases home was a mystery. Tony looked like he could carry a max of two on his own, so someone had to have either delivered it or driven him to get it. Someone was obviously enabling the behavior, and it sure as hell wasn’t him. Steve didn’t like that one bit. The person who was helping Tony get more beer was going to get smacked upside the head. But who was the culprit?

It couldn’t have been Happy – Pepper had said that Happy had been upset by the drinking, just like they had been. And it definitely wasn’t Pepper either, because she didn’t even talk with Tony these days and Steve was pretty sure she would have ripped off all of her fingernails before giving in and getting Tony liquor. That left only two people on the shit list: James Rhodes and Howard Stark. Steve hadn’t met Rhodes in the dream-world or the real world, but he highly doubted that the man Tony had affectionately dubbed Rhodey-Bear would have had anything to do with helping his friend murder his own liver.

That left only Howard. Dear old sweet Dad.

Steve listened to the sounds of the house, letting his eyes drop shut. The shower started running upstairs and the pipes creaked loudly as they warmed up. Everything in the house had its own voice; every piece of furniture, every board, every door. They all had their own creaks and groans. This was an old house, one that had seen its fair share of visitors and occupants. Steve had lived in old
houses before, yet it seemed almost as if this place had taken on a life of its own. Sure, there was nothing really inside, but there was just something about the place; something miserable and homey at the same time.

Steve rested his cheek on the table, letting the cold creep into his face. Tony would be back soon. He didn’t seem to take very long showers; he probably should have referred to them as *sprinklings* instead. Then the discussion would begin, and boy was he not looking forward to that. Steve had done pep talks before, talked with men in the Howling Commandos who drank more than their fair share, but he had never had to have a discussion like this before. Drunks didn’t like their drinking interrupted – he had learned that the first few times he and Bucky had gone into the bars in Brooklyn. But this wasn’t a bar, now was it?

Of course he didn’t *have* to have the talk now. He could wait and watch. See what would work best and what might not work at all. Better to assess the situation instead of jumping in head first, after all. He had to know the lay of the land to plan – going off half-cocked wasn’t going to make this any easier.

He hoped that there weren’t liquor bottles hiding up in Tony’s room; the last thing he needed was Tony holed up in his bedroom drinking himself blind. Steve hadn’t had the courage go up to Tony’s floor yet. It felt like too much of an invasion of privacy. This was where he would be catching the drinking as it happened at any rate.

As Steve expected, as soon as the pipes stopped their rattling song, Tony appeared, toweling his hair off. He was dripping wet, dressed in a pair of sweatpants that hung low on his hips; he stared at Steve like a rabbit caught in a trap, poised for flight with one hand raised to grab at the whiskey bottle nearest him. The towel hung over his shoulder, almost forgotten as it dropped from his hand.

“What are you doing down here sitting in the dark?” Tony asked, with only a *hint* of suspicion audible in his voice.

“I was waiting to see if you were coming back.” Steve said, keeping his tone neutral. He didn’t rise from his seat, knowing that any movement might send Tony fleeing back the way he had come with or without booze. He wanted to nip this bad habit in the bud sometime soon; assuming he could get Tony to sit still long enough to talk about it, of course. The key was getting Tony to talk, and for that he needed to be calm. He needed to be approachable, not displeased, or disappointed.

Tony didn’t relax.

He did, however, make a grab for the nearest whiskey bottle, yanking it from the shelf, setting it down on the counter without his gaze ever leaving Steve’s. That was quite the skill.

“I’m just going to get a drink before bed.” Tony said, a tad on the defensive side, blindly reaching behind him for a glass. He found one, fingers skittering over the glass, setting it down beside the whiskey bottle. He half turned, his eyes still on Steve as he unscrewed the bottle, pouring himself out a generous helping.

So Tony *was* drinking before bed. Pepper had been right all along. Damn it Tony!

Steve rose from the table, slow and steady. He stopped when he was almost close enough to touch Tony’s arm; Tony frowned down at him, wavering.

“Did you want a drink or something?” Tony asked.

“Do you *really* need to drink that?” Steve asked in return, boxing Tony in with his arms. He reached
out and took the glass away, looking at the amber liquid with distaste. He could smell the stuff from
over here and the fumes were noxious. How anyone could drink this stuff?

“Do I need your permission? I was under the impression that I was my own man.” Tony growled,
moving to snatch the glass back.

Steve did what he realized only a day later, the stupidest thing he had ever done before in his life.

What he should have done was dump the damned drink down the drain; the whole bottle should
have followed it.

Instead, he gulped the whiskey, downing the entire glass in one swallow. It wasn’t much – it was
maybe half a glass? That would be, what, three fingers worth of whiskey? His body could handle
that no problem – hell, he could have drunk the entire bottle and still be fine. He could outdrink Thor
for god’s sake. A little whiskey would be nothing.

It wasn’t supposed to be a problem, because the serum didn’t let him get drunk, right?

Steve’s throat burned; his eyes watered. His stomach churned, screaming bloody vengeance at the
intrusion of the alcohol. He coughed, doubling over, seeing black dots all over the place no matter
where he looked.

This had been a bad decision – a very, very bad decision…

Tony gawked at him.

“What the hell Steve?”

Steve struggled in vain with Tony to keep his hold on the glass and then Tony had it back again and
was filling it up, shaking his head.

Tony raised the glass to his lips, ready to take a drink.

Steve then made the second stupidest decision of his life. He snatched the glass out of Tony’s hands
and yet again chugged the awful burning liquid, determined to make sure that Tony didn’t drink
anything; he was almost overwhelmed by the woody taste and the burn of the liquor as it tore its way
down his throat. He coughed uncontrollably for a full two minutes before he could get enough air in
to swallow and even then his spit tasted of whiskey so he had to stop to catch his breath again; by the
time he had finished he was gasping for air.

The results were… interesting. Getting drunk had usually happened at a much slower rate for Steve.

Steve staggered against the counter as everything swung out of focus and then doubled as it came
rushing back. He heard the sound of the glass connecting with the countertop and could tell that it
had slid away from him – or at least the second image of the glass had slid across the counter away
from him. He wasn’t very sure what was going on anymore, aside from still having the distinct
knowledge that he had relied on the serum to do something and that it hadn’t quite held up its end of
the bargain.

Tony hoisted Steve up by the armpits. The countertop looked mighty fine from where Steve was
standing; so shiny and smooth. Steve grinned rakishly at Tony – or at least he attempted what he
thought was a rakish grin. It might not have come off as he had intended, because Tony was
suddenly raising an eyebrow at him, looking a little concerned for his wellbeing. He held Steve
delicately like he might break if he held on too tightly.
The world didn’t normally spin like this – and when had they gotten such polished flooring? Even the spoons looked like they had been visited by a butler.

“What in the hell are you on?” Tony grunted, hoisting Steve up an inch off the ground to keep him from dropping like a rock. The floor was looking pretty damn comfortable too; it looked very soft. Wait – that wasn’t right. How could something look polished and soft at the same time? Steve frowned, trying to puzzle that bit of intrigue out. Tony’s words hit him out of the blue, delayed like they were being played backwards on a record player.

“You shood’n’it drink… I think… What happened… why is… spinning. So much spinning…” Steve slurred, trying to clear his head. His face was burning now, cheeks a flame, his body so warm and tingly that he felt like he was sitting in front of a fireplace. He looked around but he couldn’t find the fire; he was confused, very, very confused. Something was wrong.

Steve grabbed at Tony, his hands having lost what little strength they possessed. He pawed pathetically at Tony’s bare chest as he tried to grab Tony by the shoulder. He was dizzy, fingers slipping against Tony’s damp flesh as he grabbed for fabric. His thumb bounced off of one of Tony’s nipples, his brain not quite processing the fact that Tony wasn’t currently wearing a shirt.

“Tony…” Steve said; it came out as more of a whine than he had intended it to and he pouted in displeasure.

Tony steadied Steve with an arm around his waist and then started all out laughing. The sound hurt; Steve didn’t know why it did, because it had never hurt to listen to someone laugh before. He blinked a few times, trying desperately to clear his vision and his head for that matter. It didn’t work, and now there were two Tony’s laughing at him, and he could feel the damned laugh inside his skull.

“Jesus, Steve! You’re like a hundred pounds and you haven’t eaten squat since one in the afternoon. You can’t just drink that much – you’ll black out, or get alcohol poisoning!” Tony snorted, clearly amused, although Steve had no idea why, because nothing funny seemed to be happening. And alcohol poisoning was no laughing matter.

“I can’t… get… drink… drunked… drunk.” Steve said lamely, flapping his arm to try and get the point across. The serum had made it impossible to get drunk – or had it? He couldn’t remember and even his memories were spinning now. Maybe it was affecting him right now…

“Ooh… make it stop. The spinning…” Steve groaned, sagging against Tony’s chest.

Tony lifted Steve up and tucked his hands underneath Steve’s lower thighs, shifting his weight until Steve was practically draped across his shoulder.

“Ok crazy guy. You need to go lie down and sleep it off… or… no. You should probably… well, I’ll take you to lay down first and then I’ll get you something to make the spinning stop, alrighty? I’m an expert at this, believe me.” Tony said. They started moving, Steve bobbing up and down in Tony’s grasp and suddenly it was all worse; Steve gagged, clawing at Tony’s shoulder as they rounded the corner heading towards Steve’s bedroom.

“No. Stop. Stop. Put me – No. Tony… Slow… Stop…” Steve rambled, tongue feeling fuzzy and thick and awful, like he had licked the carpet. He hadn’t had he? God he hoped he hadn’t. He felt his stomach trying to lurch its way up his throat so he slapped pitifully at Tony’s shoulder, trying to get him to stop, needing Tony to understand.

Tony froze, arms stiffening around Steve’s hips.
“Oh… thank you… oh god…” Steve groaned, his lips slightly parted and pressed against the smooth skin of Tony’s bare shoulder; he could taste soap and salt there on Tony’s skin, not unpleasant, but certainly strange nonetheless. He wanted to run his tongue over that flesh, but his tongue didn’t seem to want to cooperate, so he had to content himself with a half nibble of skin instead.

“Steve…” Tony said sounding tense.

“This is a good speed… keep doing this… or… I think I’m going to throw up on you… if we go faster…” Steve groaned, face flushing even hotter. The room was still spinning, but it wasn’t quite so bad now, and the second Tony seemed alright with it…

“Steve, we’re not even moving anymore. We’re just standing in the hallway.”

“Are… we? Well alright… then…”

Tony took baby steps, carefully watching Steve’s face as he moved for signs of distress. Steve began to hum to himself, eyelids drooping. This was alright then. He was so warm… Why was he so damned warm?

“Why’m I warm… Do you… do you know?” Steve mumbled, head lolling as they made it through his bedroom doorway. Tony was gentle as he set Steve down on the floor, propping him up against the bed.

“I don’t know why you’re warm Steve.”

“Is it… cu… beca… because of the … drunk?” Steve managed to get out.

“Maybe. Ok. Stay riifiicight here. I’m going to go get some crackers and water and we’ll… we’ll talk this through, alright? If you throw up try to uh… turn your head so you don’t choke on it, ok?”

“Ok. Tony. I love you.”

“Uh… Ok then… I’ll be back.”

Steve didn’t see Tony leave the room; all he could see was the insides of his eyelids and boy, weren’t they red! He hadn’t seen a colour that bright before in his life since… well, he couldn’t exactly remember when… it would have been amazing to paint that colour – oh. That was a good idea… he would just get up and go get his paints… he was sure he had a red that would work –

“Alright buddy. Up we go.”

Steve rag dolled forwards into Tony’s arms as he was lifted up. Tony shifted Steve between his knees and then took the space behind him, leaning back against the mattress. He set a packet of crackers and a massive glass of water beside him, positioning everything so that Steve could lie back against his chest without accidentally knocking it all over.

It was comfortable being cradled against Tony’s chest. Steve stared up at Tony’s chin, marveling at the bristles of Tony’s beard, each one distinct and black as night. It was a lovely chin. Steve loved that chin. He wanted to reach up and touch it, but his arm was too heavy to lift. Why was his arm heavy all of a sudden? That was strange…

“I love your chin. It’s pretty.” Steve slurred, the hair on the back of his head plastering itself to Tony’s throat like golden silk.

“Why thank you Steve. That’s very kind of you. Eat this.”
Tony forced a cracker between Steve’s lips; Steve started chewing. His jaw felt heavy, the cracker half melting in his mouth before he could get it all in.

He didn’t particularly like the taste of that cracker.

It was *salty* though.

He liked that part.

Tony handed Steve the glass of water after he finished swallowing the last of the mushy cracker. When Steve failed to lift it up to his mouth, Tony manually moved the glass and then tucked it against Steve’s lips, gently tipping it back.

“Drink this – slowly!”

Steve sipped.

The water tasted nice. He hadn’t tasted water like this before… it was *much* better than the whiskey and it didn’t make his tongue taste horrible. He had never really liked the taste of alcohol. Bucky had made fun of him for that. It wasn’t supposed to taste good, Bucky had reasoned with him, it was supposed to get you *drunk*, so it wasn’t supposed to taste good. It wasn’t there to take you out to dinner and be your girl – it was there to be your friend. Wait… that didn’t sound right…

“Ok then. How are you feeling now?” Tony asked.

Steve gagged, almost throwing up. He managed to stop himself, his hand coming up weakly to cover his mouth. Tony’s hand dropped to the flat of Steve’s stomach; he began to rub circles, his hands moving slowly and surely, warm against Steve’s cold belly. Steve dozed as his stomach settled. He dropped his hand from his mouth; it landed on Tony’s thigh, which was a comfortable place to be. He gave the thigh a brief squeeze.

“I don’t feel good…” Steve said.

“Yeah… that’s kind of bound to happen when you drink that much so fast. You’re lucky I didn’t pour more – I don’t usually drink a lot before bed…” Tony said, still rubbing Steve’s stomach. “I’m tempted to take you to the hospital actually…”

“S’Ok. I’ve been drunk before… It was… like this too… only with more… vom… vomit… vomiting. And I have the super… soder… sold… soldier se… serum.” Steve managed after a minute of serious thinking.

“I see. Well then. Eat this.” Tony gave Steve another cracker and Steve chewed through it, swallowing painfully. Hadn’t he just done this? He was sure he had just done this.

The water magically appeared at his lips again and he sipped at it. How did it keep *doing* that?

They repeated this routine for what seemed like forever; the pack of crackers was completely gone by the time Steve started to really fall asleep, and he was pretty certain that Tony had gone off to refill the water once or twice as well too because his back had become cold a few times…

A whiskey glass had appeared beside Tony’s thigh at some point during the eating and drinking too. Steve hadn’t tried to grab it away, but he had wanted to; his arms felt too much like rubber to manage more than a feeble finger wiggle in its direction.

“I love you… Tony…” Steve mumbled, nodding off. He needed Tony to know that. Tony needed to
Steve woke up with the *mother* of all hangovers. His head was throbbing and everything *hurt*. His *legs* hurt. His *knees* hurt, although he wasn’t sure exactly why, seeing as how he hadn’t been on his knees at any point during the previous day. His *everything* hurt.

His memories were fuzzy, bordering on the side of becoming a complete tangled mess of moments, and all he could clearly remember of the previous day was taking the first glass from Tony’s hand and drinking it without regard for what would happen to him or his sanity.

God, he hoped that he hadn’t said anything to Tony that was embarrassing.

The serum had done its work in the end, and he might have died from alcohol poisoning if he hadn’t had it in his bloodstream. He distinctly remembered Tony mentioning the option of going to the hospital. At least one of them had had common sense last night.

Tony was sprawled out underneath Steve, lying on the floor with his head resting in the crook of his arm, snoring loudly. He was wearing a pair of cherry red sweatpants and a white t-shirt; Steve specifically remembered seeing him in grey sweats the night before. Why had Tony changed out of them? His stomach did a flip-flop and he scrambled up, barely making it to the toilet before he threw up.

The sound of him vomiting must have woken Tony up, because he was suddenly standing groggily at Steve’s side, pressing a wet washcloth to the back of Steve’s neck like the sweetest of kisses.

“You alright?” Tony asked, clearly knowing otherwise. Steve didn’t even bother replying, continuing to retch; he looked down at his legs as he flushed the toilet and realized that he was in his boxers, ones he hadn’t been wearing the night before. He tried not to blush, gagging again.

“You peed on me last night.” Tony commented dryly. If Steve hadn’t already been retching, he probably would have started at that point. He hung onto the toilet, arms shaking as what was left of the night’s crackers and water came up; it wasn’t much, but it was still disgusting.

“Oh *god*…”

“Don’t worry about it. I piss myself regularly when I’m hammered. That’s why I invested in a steam cleaner.” Tony shrugged.

“Oh *GOD*…” Steve gagged. He dry heaved for a while, eyes burning and nose running, feeling absolutely miserable. He felt Tony’s hand on the back of his neck again, holding him steady and leaned into that warm, stable hand as if his life depended on it. Tony wiped the side of his face with the washcloth rinsing it out in the sink before returning to wipe the rest, cleaning him up one warm swipe at a time.

It was only then that Steve’s brain clued him in to the mysterious events of the previous night. Tony
had seen him completely hammered.

Oh god!

He had only been well and truly drunk only once before, and it hadn’t been nearly as bad as this. He and Bucky had snuck into a bar when they had been fifteen and they had ordered two mugs of stout ale. It had tasted awful, and when they had finished drinking it they had staggered off down the street giggling the whole way back home. The next day they had both spent the morning in the bathroom, Steve throwing up into the bathtub and Bucky throwing up into the toilet. His mother had not been impressed. At the time Steve hadn’t known that it was because she had been worried about him becoming his father; his father, the alcoholic.

He hadn’t drunken to excess after that day, more from the humiliation than anything else. He was pretty sure he had made out with someone that night, but he hadn’t known who it was and the face hadn’t ever come back in his memories later on.

“Feeling better?” Tony asked.

“I think so… At least there’s… nothing… left…” Steve coughed. Tony rubbed Steve’s back, calloused fingers scraping against his skin in a way that left Steve’s cock aching; he wanted to tell it to cut it out, but that didn’t seem to be a problem after a few more minutes of silent gagging.

“I called Bucky last night to make sure you weren’t going to die on me by the way. He wasn’t all that impressed with your little drinking adventure. He called me back after he got a hold of the doctors and said that I didn’t have to take you to the hospital – apparently your body metabolizes liquor faster than a normal human body does. Lucky you, huh?” Tony said.

“Oh god…”

“Right. Well, it’s six thirty by the way. I’ll go make breakfast and then we’ll get you into the shower so you can go to work without smelling like you’ve been puking all morning. Why don’t you keep the nice porcelain lady company for a while, ok? I’ll come back when I’m done.”

“Alright…”

Steve did indeed keep the porcelain lady company. He didn’t throw up again, but he came damned close to it more than a handful of times, his arms shaking with the effort of keeping him upright and attached to the toilet. His stomach calmed and he leaned heavily against the wall beside the toilet, trying to make the sounds of the bathroom light stop scraping away at the inside of his eyelids.

Whiskey was bad. Very… very… bad.

Tony returned and true to his word started the shower up. He hauled Steve’s boxers down, shuffling him in under the warm spray and then backed off, letting nature take its course. Steve struggled briefly with the water pressure, letting the hot water drip down over his head; it was soothing have water running over his painfully burning eyelids. He rinsed his mouth out and spat the water into the tub, tasting vomit and salt from the crackers. The sound of the water hitting the bathmat was almost unbearable, but eventually it became more of a dull throb in the back of his mind.

He would be going to work… Of course he would, he thought with a groan.

Tony wouldn’t leave him alone at home because that would be… nice?

Terrifying?
He couldn’t tell which, but both seemed likely answers. Steve leaned against the wall, feeling nothing aside from the precious warmth of the water pulsing against his skin.

“You should use the soap at least. You did pee all over yourself.” Tony commented when he returned to the bathroom later; Steve had gotten rather pruned by then, and despite that didn’t want to leave the comfort of the warm water. Tony had to reach into the shower and force the bar of soap into his hand making rubbing motions against Steve’s skin to get him going.

When Steve started doing it on his own, Tony pulled back. He sat on the counter with a neatly folded pile of clothing on his lap, twiddling his thumbs. He must have showered too at some point, because his hair looked wet, and it wasn’t because he had just had his head in Steve’s shower.

“I made oatmeal again. I put some Advil out for you to take too, so we’ll do that before we leave. It’ll hold you until ten-ish, and then Pepper will get you some more and maybe some ginger ale and crackers for the nausea. Maybe some Gatorade too, who knows?”

Steve finished washing himself, dropping the bar of soap back into its dish with a sullen clunk. He fumbled with the taps and winced at the light as he pushed back the shower curtain, battling with the agony in his head as it all started up again. Tony wrapped a towel around him and Steve found himself leaning unconsciously against him again, eye lids fluttering, head pounding so hard it felt like it was trapped in a vice.

“I guess I’ll… uh…” Tony sighed. He kindly dried Steve off and then helped him into his clothing, guiding him down the hall to the kitchen where he then promptly started force-feeding Steve oatmeal until Steve had to physically stop him by grabbing his wrist.

Steve really wanted to just go back to bed and lay down; but work was waiting. He would have been angry with Tony if he had been able to collect his thoughts for more than a few seconds at a time. And the oatmeal – oh god, the oatmeal! He gagged, covering his mouth, shuddering. Why did it have to be oatmeal?

“Had enough breakfast? You’re not going to throw up on me, are you?” Tony asked.

“No.” Steve grunted, swallowing down the last mouthful. He downed the Advil and swallowed half a glass of water before he was shuttled out the door into the hellish torture that was morning light. Steve drooped against the padded car seat, resting his face against the window, his face smooshing against the cold glass. His eyes were half closed as he listened to the symphony from hell the car was screeching out as they drove. He wished that he could just pass out and die already.

“What happened to him?” Happy asked eyes still on the road as they stopped at a red light.

“He tried to be friends with Mr. Alcohol. Sadly they did not get along.”

“Jesus. He looks like the walking dead! Should we take him to the hospital or something? Shouldn’t he have stayed at home?”

“He’s fine Happy, he’s just hung over.” Tony said with a shake of his head.

“However you say boss.” Happy said, sounding unconvinced.

When they arrived, with Steve horribly still alive, Tony had to physically peel him off of the seat and carry him to the elevator; Steve didn’t want to be awake anymore, but there didn’t seem to be much of a choice. Tony made him walk the last few feet to Pepper’s desk, a hand on his back to keep him from tipping over as he staggered his way through the hallway. She looked up in shock as Steve sank down into his chair and thudded his head on the table, eyes already closed and shoulders
slumped; he was half-asleep ten seconds into the work day and not even remotely upset about it.

“Steve? What’s going on?” Pepper asked, sounding alarmed. She brushed his bangs off of his forehead and took his temperature with the back of her hand.

“He doesn’t have a cold. He’s hung-over. He had an accidental case of the stupids last night and drank two glasses of my whiskey on an empty stomach.” Tony grunted. Steve cringed, pressing his face closer into the desk, wanting sound to stop; what he wouldn’t give to go deaf for a few hours. He fumbled blindly and found a newspaper Pepper had left out, covering his head with it to block out some of the cursed light. It didn’t stop the god-awful hum of the fluorescent lights above his head, but it made it dark at least; dark enough to sleep.

“Tony…” Steve whined, wrapping his arms around his head under the paper, trying to drown out the sound of Tony now laughing at him.

“Oh Steve…” Pepper sighed, wincing on his behalf. She turned off the lamp beside her desk and brought him a mug of water, leaving it beside his head. She gave Tony a dark look.

“And why, may I ask, did he drink two glasses of your whiskey?” She asked with her hands on her hips.

Tony shrugged, whistling, wandering off to his workshop without answering; the door locked behind him with a distinct click.

Pepper crossed her arms and stared at the top of Steve’s head, or rather into the raised bump of newspaper that was where Steve’s head was currently residing; Steve couldn’t see her, but he could feel the intensity of her gaze. He could tell by the sound of her tapping her foot that she was not impressed with his decision making skills. He was highly unimpressed with those skills himself, and was starting to wonder whether the doctors had been lying to him when they had said there had been no permanent brain damage.

“So I take it that he’s drinking before bed. Again.” Pepper sighed.

“Yes. Can you not tap? It hurts…” Steve mumbled into the table.

Pepper sighed even louder; or at least it seemed like she did. Steve was positive that he could feel the sound reverberating through the tabletop, which wasn’t at all that pleasant. She sat down at her desk and pushed the mouse away, turning her chair with an ungodly shriek of metal to face him. She crossed her legs, one long, slender leg curled over the other; he could only see from the gap under his right arm, and was thankful that she couldn’t see how close he was to throwing up again. It was embarrassing enough having thrown up so many times in front of Tony; throwing up in front of her would be so much worse.

“You couldn’t stop him from drinking, could you? So you tried to drink it instead.” She whispered, pointedly not looking at the camera up above her desk. She still sounded loud despite the whispering, but the volume was tolerable now, a verbal caress for his poor pained ears. Steve tried to shake his head, rubbing his cheek against the table when he couldn’t manage to lift his head high enough for a proper shake.

“No, I couldn’t stop him.” Steve agreed.

“So what’s the plan then? You going to keep trying to play keep away with the whiskey like this? Because I sure as hell hope that you’re not going to do that – you look like you’ve dragged yourself in from under a bus.”
“That’s pretty close to it actually. I feel like I died and then woke up and died again…” Steve groaned.

“Oh honey… You need to be careful. You’re what, a hundred and some odd pounds? You don’t have nearly enough weight to handle whiskey – Steve, I don’t have the weight to handle that. The only one who does is Tony and that’s just because he’s had years of terrible practice.”

“I noticed… I think something may have died in my mouth…” Steve whimpered.

Pepper took her jacket off the back of her chair, draping it over his back; the fabric pooled over him as if it were a blanket instead of a jacket. He had never been so grateful for a warm jacket before in his life, even when he had been at war. This was what heaven was like. He was sure of it.

“Get some sleep silly. You’ll need to go get him lunch still, remember? I’ll take care of the coffee, alright?”

“Ok. You’re amazing Pepper…”

“Aww… Now go to sleep Mr. Hangover.” Pepper said, rubbing her hand against the back of his neck.

Steve slept through most of the morning, waking up only to meekly sip water from the cup Pepper kept refilling and to stagger off to the bathroom. He was proud to say that he didn’t throw up once, although his stomach certainly seemed to want to try.

By the time lunch rolled around, Steve was well enough to go out into the city without needing a friend to carry him around. He headed down one of the quieter side streets, finding solace in a small deli where he ordered two sandwiches on some kind of bread that the woman at the till referred to as barley and cheese. He had never had bread like this before, and it smelled wonderful, even with the hangover still threatening to stage a mutiny in his body. Delis these days let you pick out what kind of things you wanted to put on the sandwiches, which was a real treat. Back when he had been young, when he had even had the money for a sandwich, he had had to settle for things like jam and lard. He had been allergic to peanut butter and to eggs. Come to think of it, he had been allergic to tuna too, and that was pretty much all they had that was affordable; he hadn’t even been able to afford salami or ham. Allergies had made his life a living hell for so long, and if the serum hadn’t fixed that, he wasn’t sure what he would have done. It had been pretty tough to find anything that he could eat without his tongue and lips swelling up like balloons. Bucky had mocked him for having duck lips once. It had not been pleasant.

“What would you like on your sandwiches sweetie?” The sandwich maker asked.

“Egg on one and Ham on the other please. Egg and ham smelled good and were simple. Tony had liked both of those flavors back in the dream-world. Hopefully he would like them now as well.

“Anything else on it? We have lettuce, olives, mayonnaise, cucumber, cheese and banana peppers.”

“Lettuce, cucumber and cheese on both please – and some mayo.”

“That will be 12.95 for both.”
He paid for the food and then stopped in on the quaint little Japanese store he had seen on the way in to find some hard candies, remembering Pepper’s words of wisdom.

The store was called Kawaii Bakeneko, and it had a large purple and white cat on the sign that looked a tad malevolent, and completely adorable; the store was small, with everything crammed together in metal racks and stands, and almost everything was wrapped in multiple layers of colourful plastic. Steve wandered through aisle after aisle, feeling a little lost, reading the partially-English tags that marked out each product. Some of it was familiar script – Japanese was a language he recognized from the war, and he had seen a few of the characters drawn out on paper by immigrants he had known who had worked in the Laundromat down the street. He had always liked the style of Asian calligraphy, and after he had woken up – well… in the dreams at any rate… he had been introduced to every manner of Japanese artwork, food and candy known to man by the enthusiastic Thor, who had found out about Japanese culture from Jane.

Thor had been particularly fond of one flavor of candy. What was its name again? Ramune – that was it! Steve scanned the aisles and found what he was looking for with little difficulty. There was a large bag of hard candies that had the blue Ramune flavor in it with a bunch of other tangy flavors. He wondered vaguely what it would taste like now. Would Ramune be like eating bananas again for the first time? Would it be sweet and sour like lemonade? Or would it be completely different, a disgusting flavor when it had been so pleasant before? The only way to know would be to try it, so he decided to take the risk and get the bag. Chances were high that Tony would eat the entire thing all by himself anyways. If he had managed to eat through an entire bowl of peppermints, a bag like this wouldn’t stand much of a chance.

Steve took the bag of hard candies, two bottles of actual Ramune soda that he had found in a cooling display and a small box of vanilla Pocky for Pepper to the counter; he had wanted to get her strawberry, but something in the back of his mind had told him that it might not be such a great idea.

Steve paid with his own bank card this time, wanting to do something for Tony out of his own pocket. It was nice and all to have Howard’s food card around, but it wasn’t very personal if he used it for everything. Gifts were supposed to be thoughtful, and they definitely weren’t supposed to be paid for with someone else’s money.

He trudged back to Stark International, keeping the hard candies hidden away in his bag so that it would be a surprise for tomorrow. He couldn’t wait to see the look on Tony’s face!

The walk was nice, and the sun felt warm on his back. It was almost turning out to be a perfect day, except for the fact that he still had a hangover the size of Australia. He kept his head out of the sun for the most part and stuck to the shadows, clutching their lunch tightly in his hands as he tried not to get jostled out into traffic.

He made his way back to Tony’s workshop, noting that Pepper’s desk was empty. He been gone a little longer than he had expected to, but at least that meant that Tony would be more willing to eat.

Steve knocked on the workshop door once and winced at the sound; his headache was starting to come back again with a vengeance. Apparently it had taken offence to being thwarted by pain medication and had decided to return with a few of its more rowdy friends. Maybe he would find some more Advil somewhere. He cursed himself, having forgotten to buy it while out adventuring for lunch. The Japanese store had been too distracting, with its flashy colours and strange novelty toys, everything begging for attention.

Tony was working at his usual console in the corner when Steve walked in, typing away with
reckless abandon. He was surrounded in notepaper, piles of it strewn around on the ground circling
the bottom of his chair as if he had been hit by a propaganda bomb. Tony glanced down at the
papers every few seconds, muttering to himself, copying the scribbles into readable text. He swiveled
around when Steve approached, eyes moving from Steve’s face to the bag in his hand, hungry.

“Food?”

Steve set the food out as Tony saved what he was doing and then dropped onto the stool beside the
table, separating everything out into two piles as he usually did at lunchtime. Tony loved his variety,
so he usually brought two different things so that he could pick through what he wanted. Tony didn’t
really make all that much of a fuss if he didn’t like something. He usually just nibbled and didn’t
finish what he had picked up; at least he was predictable in that sense, or else Steve would have
never figured out what he liked to eat.

Steve intended on having Tony pick from the sandwiches so that he could pick which one he
wanted; Tony had a different approach to the problem. He leaned over Steve’s shoulder and split the
ham sandwich in half, snagging half of the egg sandwich as well. Apparently both flavors were
winners today. Hooray for that!

Steve raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment when Tony remained standing, eating like a squirrel,
chewing almost too fast; he was lucky he didn’t bite his lip in his haste. He had finished the first half
of the egg sandwich by the time Steve had started nibbling away at his own. Tony cocked his head
to the side and then grabbed one of the bottles of Ramune, startled by the fact that it wasn’t
something they normally had.

“Interesting choice.” Tony cracked the cap open on the side of the table, letting the little marble roll
out of the hole at the top, taking a swig of blue soda. “It’s easy to break the top of these things…
You need me to open yours for you? I wouldn’t want you to try and drink broken glass.”

“Sure.”

Tony opened up Steve’s drink and handed it to him, half yawning. He took another swig of soda,
burping and sighing, finishing the last few bites of his sandwich, even licking his fingers once he was
finished. Steve took a sip of his own Ramune. It tasted just like he remembered – lemony and sweet
all at the same time. Thank god for small miracles.

“So… I’ve been meaning to ask…” Tony said, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

Steve looked up from his lunch feeling half-dead; he had been so content before, but that was long
gone now. In truth he had been expecting the conversation to turn from ‘hi, where’s lunch?’ to ‘so,
you tried to drink yourself to death for some reason – why was that exactly?’ all morning; he had
been hoping that Tony might cut him some slack and let it slide for a day or so, but apparently that
wasn’t in the cards.

He just didn’t have any luck today.

“Why exactly did you drink my whiskey last night? Not that I mind sharing – but I didn’t think you
liked the taste of it much to down two glasses of the stuff.” Tony said, his voice lacking emotion.
Steve wasn’t concerned by the lack of emotion… yet. Tony always seemed to sound cold when he
was having a serious discussion.

He was treading in uncharted territory now, dangerous territory; not that he expected Tony to attack
him or something. Steve knew damn well that he had brought this on himself. Falling in love with
Tony again – despite knowing that most of his memories of Tony were from that dream-world…
well… to be frank, it was risky, and the only one who would suffer would be him. It wasn’t that he was embarrassed about falling in love with Tony again; on the contrary, he had never felt more strongly for the man. It was just that he was in love with a man who he realistically barely knew and who barely knew him; he might have had the sense to be embarrassed if he hadn’t seen the way Tony looked at him when he didn’t think Steve was looking.

Tony had this sort of sweet look on his face sometimes, the expression so powerful Steve would have chopped off his hand if Tony had asked him to do it. That look had been so soft, so kind… he had wanted to creep closer and bury himself in Tony’s chest, curling up in his warmth. He couldn’t do that of course, couldn’t risk scaring Tony or hurting him by doing something rash. Tony was a twisted ball of uncertainty, and having a friend lunge at him wouldn’t help things any.

Steve wished that things were different. He wished that he was better at things like this, things like being romantic, and knowing the right words to say. He had gotten Tony the first time around because well, Tony had done all the hard work for him. Steve was a soldier; there hadn’t really been much in the way of room for loving words when he was soldiering. He could give confidence, lead people over a ridge and console them when they had lost their friends, but he had never been any good at proclaiming love for anyone. He wished that he had more experience with it all. It would have been nice to have someone to talk to about it too, but who was he going to talk to? Bucky? Howard? Tony was the one person he was closest to now, and he couldn’t exactly ask Tony’s opinion, now could he.

Suddenly spouting off that he might possibly be in love with him would probably send Tony running for the hills with rockets strapped to his feet; even if tried to play it as if it were just the thoughts of a friend, Tony would figure it out. Tony wasn’t stupid.

Steve felt the cold of the workshop seeping into his bones, creeping up the stool and into his thighs. He rubbed the back his neck, wishing that he could stall for time, knowing that it wasn’t going to work even if he did try to claim incapacitation by headache.

Someday, he wanted to tell Tony how much he loved him – but today wasn’t that day. Today wasn’t even close to that day. That day was months away, far off in the distance with all the other wishful thinking moments he had stored in the back of his mind.

Steve steeled himself. He could do this. He had tactical knowledge, confidence and the willingness to do what was right. He had been Captain America once. He could handle a little bit of uncomfortable conversation, right? He didn’t have to tell Tony anything about the love thing right now – he could keep the conversation on the drinking. He could do that just fine.

“I don’t want you to drink.” Steve blurted.

Wow. Good going Steve. He wanted to slap himself in the face the moment the words bubbled up, spewing from his body as if commanded by some invisible force. That hadn’t been what he had wanted to say at all; great job brain to mouth filter, bravo.

The look of pure disdain that Tony gave him in response told Steve everything he needed to know. It would have been nice to curl up under the table and die right about now. He would have attempted it too, if not for the fact that his head was pounding again; the movement would have made him run lurching for the nearest garbage can, and wouldn’t that just be flattering.

“I beg your pardon?” Tony asked, crossing his arms.

Well… He had started it, so he may as well finish it the right way.
“What I meant to say is that I’m worried about all the drinking you do. It’s not healthy for you, and I don’t think it’s safe to be drinking so much all the time.” Steve started.

“Since when did you have permission to tell me what to say and do Rogers? You think you have the right to tell me what I should be doing with my life because you’re living with me? You’re not my father and thank god for that, because I don’t think I could stand having two assholes hanging around me all the time – and you’re not my fucking mother, so you have no right – absolutely no goddamned right to tell me what to do!” Tony shouted. He was shaking, absolutely livid; Steve had never seen Tony like this before. It was like everything bottled up inside him had come pouring out. Even when Howard had been screaming in Tony’s face, Tony had remained cold and aloof, ignoring the abuse. He had been like a statue, staring blankly at something in the distance, and nothing had gotten to him. Tony was almost spitting now, his face splotched with red and twisted, lips curled back to reveal bared white teeth.

Steve looked down at the table, not sure where else to look, chagrinned. He hadn’t wanted to start an intervention! It wasn’t as if he had thought about it when he woke up that morning! He hadn’t gone ‘oh oatmeal’ to ‘oh I think Tony needs to know about how his drinking is affecting his life’.

“Tony –”

“Don’t you Tony me! You’re not – you have no right – I should just – You don’t care –” Tony sputtered, eyes flashing.

“I do.”

“You do not!”

“I do! I really do! I like you Tony and I don’t like having to watch you become another person when you’re drinking. That man – the one who knocks back whiskey and beer like tap water – that’s not you. I know that you don’t believe me and I accept that. I also accept that I have no say in the matter, and I know that I shouldn’t have taken the glass out of your hand last night. It was wrong of me to think that I should step in and take it away from you without talking to you about it first. I know that you make your own decisions… I just…” Steve looked up from the table, determined to let Tony see just how much he meant to him even if it was only for a few seconds; he could do that much without wilting entirely. “I need you to know that I care about you Tony. Even if you don’t believe that, I really do. I don’t want to watch you suffer. You’re important to me.”

Tony didn’t quite fall silent; Steve could hear the sound of his breathing, so loud that it almost sounded like it had invaded his head. They stared at one another, not breaking eye contact for a full minute.

Steve let out a held in breath.

Tony’s eyes narrowed into slits; his nostrils flared. Steve did his best not to outright flinch his way off of his stool. He had been yelled at before for making unpopular decisions – it wasn’t as if he hadn’t been screamed at by Tony before either, even if those screams had been from his lost dream-world. Tony’s face should never look that angry before. He wished that he hadn’t been the cause of it, knowing only that what he had done he had done for love, and that he wouldn’t take this conversation back for anything. Tony needed to know how much he cared; he needed to know that someone cared about him, even if it was just a stranger like Steve saying it.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Tony snarled.

“Tony…”
“You think that because you’ve been in my life for a whole week that you can say this kind of shit to me? You can spout nonsense about caring and being worried – you think it means anything to me? That you mean anything to me?”

It hurt to hear those words. Steve had expected the hurt, and he soldiered on, determined to get his piece in before things got worse. He would hold the line as long as he could. He would hold it until it broke him.

“I know that Tony. I know I don’t mean anything to you – I understand that, I do. I just wanted you to know that someone cares, even if you think that they don’t and I… I know that I can’t force you – I won’t force you to stop drinking and I won’t tell you what you should do with your life. If you want to change, I’ll be there for you, but you need to make that choice yourself if it’s going to stick. That said though, I’m not going to run off and leave even if you decide to keep drinking – I’ll be there for you there no matter what you choose… you’re important to me. I won’t make your choices for you. I care about you. I just wanted you to know that. Even if you don’t care.” Steve said steadily turning into a whisper.

He had managed to get it all out in time. His headache was worse now, his head nothing more than a screaming ball of pain. His stomach ached in time with the dull buzzing beat of the fluorescent lights up above. The sandwich in front of him looked repulsive, as if he had found it in a dumpster somewhere instead of in a deli, a putrid thing from another world. The Ramune looked like someone had taken antifreeze and poured it into a bottle. Steve barely managed to repress the shudder that went through him at that thought.

“Get out.” Tony growled.

“Tony, please –”

“Get out! I don’t want to talk with you anymore! Just get out!” Tony said, pointing at the door. He wasn’t yelling; it might have been easier to take it he had been. Steve could have handled being all out yelled at, he was sure of it, but the way Tony hadn’t even bothered to yell… it was like he hadn’t even felt it was worth the bother.

Steve steadied himself against the sharp edge of the table, casting a forlorn glance in Tony’s direction and was met with a cool glare and repeated gestures at the door.

He didn’t bother taking his lunch with him. He left it lying there on the table where he had been sitting, abandoned and lost, just like how he felt. He left the room, trying not to run and made it out into the hallway before he had to grab the nearest garbage can, throwing up with such force that his entire body seemed to heave, every muscle screaming and straining. He didn’t know how long he was there for, coughing and sputtering into the garbage can, throwing up nothing but liquid and dead memories. He remembered hearing the door lock at some point and the sound of Pepper’s heels clicking across the floor coming towards him. She offered him a paper towel and then slowly walked him to the bathroom with her warm hand on the small of his back, cleaning him up with gentle touches, damp paper towel pressing against his face and lips; Steve’s mother had done this for him when he was sick. He wished that she was here now. She would have known the right thing to say somehow. She always had.

“Rinse out your mouth.” Pepper instructed Steve, handing him a paper cup with water. She dug in her purse while he rinsed, producing some Advil. She handed those over and got him another clean cup with cool water. He leaned against the sink after he had choked the pills down, grateful for her company; she rubbed his scalp gently, fingers carding through his hair.

“He’s mad.” She flattened the ruffled hairs on the top of his head with a sweep of her hand; her nail
polish was different today, a deep scarlet; it was Iron Man red and it gleamed. He leaned into the
touch. It felt like he had gone back in time, as if he were back at home, all scraped up and bruised
from getting into a fight. Pepper was so kind, putting up with him like this. He had royally screwed
this up, and yet here she was, still offering him help. He felt like such a heel.

“It was my fault. It was basically an intervention, which I had no intention of preforming…” Steve
groaned.

“You actually told him to stop drinking?” She seemed amazed.

“I told him that I’m here if he needs me and that I care and want to help him… but I don’t think I
started off the right way. I think he assumed that I was giving him a lecture instead of a
suggestion…”

“Oh boy. That’s not good. He doesn’t usually handle lectures well…”

“So I noticed. He kicked me out of his workshop. I’m not even sure if I’m going to be allowed back
in the house after this. God… why didn’t I think before I opened my mouth?” Steve whimpered, his
headache rearing up again.

“You were fine Steve. I saw him flailing around in there. You were rational – calm and
understanding. He was the one not thinking.”

“He’s hurting.” Steve protested.

“He’s been hurting for a long time Steve. I doubt this is going to be what pushes him over the edge.”
Pepper said, patting him on the head.

“He’s still going to kick me out.” Steve tried not to feel bitter about that. After all was said and done
he had no one else to blame but himself. If Tony decided to make him leave, he would leave without
a fight. He could deal with being utterly alone again – if he had to. If that was what Tony wanted, he
could do it, and would do it gladly. All he wanted was for Tony to feel better.

Pepper squeezed his shoulder. “He’s not going to kick you out of the house Steve. He’s… He
wouldn’t do that. He likes you – even if he’s being a total idiot right now and acting like Godzilla.”

“He had every right to be mad at me. I…” Steve hung his head.

“Honey, just because you have the right to be mad at someone doesn’t mean you should be. You’re
the only person who’s stood up to him and come at the drinking from a different perspective. I was
there for the… well, I won’t call it an intervention, because what Mr. Stark did was more like a
public flogging. Tony yelled then too, rambled on about how it was none of Mr. Stark’s business.
And you know what?” Pepper said, scrubbing at Steve’s scalp gently again.

“What?” Steve said miserably.

“When Mr. Stark talked with him, Tony didn’t look at him once. Steve… he looked you in the eye
while you were fighting. He wouldn’t have done that if he hated you.”

“I hope you’re right.” Steve sighed. Pepper knew Tony well, even if they weren’t the best of friends.
She had dealt with him for the longest – dealt with him in much more trying and painful situations
than he had; she knew what was best.

“It’ll be alright Steve.” Pepper assured him.
They made their way back to Pepper’s desk with Pepper’s hand on Steve’s lower back again, guiding him as they walked down the hall, Steve’s head held low. She settled him back in his chair and then put her jacket back over his shoulders, smoothing it down.

“You did the right thing Steve.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.”

“I know what you mean, but you did good Steve. Even if it feels like you’ve done something awful, at least he knows that you care. He might take a while to process it, but he knows.”

Steve fell asleep with her fingers carding through his hair.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Steve's unintentional intervention leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. Of course, things can only get better from here, right?

Chapter Notes

Heads up here for discussions of rape. No actual rape happens - it's just discussed.

The end of the day came like a flood through a barren desert; there was no way to stop it, and little to do except hang on for dear life. When five p.m. rolled around, Steve followed Tony into the elevator walking with the shuffled steps of a zombie; he felt sick to his stomach still and had to wrap an arm around his gut to keep from throwing up again as the world lurched around him. Tony didn’t shove him out of the elevator, which he supposed was a positive sign; it was the only one, because everything else that day was absolute shit.

When they made it out the building, he slowed down slightly having to stop to catch his breath. Tony moved on ahead of him, clambering into the car without waiting for him to catch up. Afraid that he would be left behind, Steve shuffled to the car, fumbling the seatbelt around him and settled in for a ride in complete silence. His skin felt dry and brittle in the air conditioned car, and every bump felt like it could shatter his bones beyond repair. He slouched low in the seat, still suffering from the after effects of his headache, praying that it might go away soon.

Tony didn’t look at him. He didn’t talk and he most definitely did not touch Steve, even by accident when he did up his seat belt. Steve crawled a little further inside himself, looking down at his feet the entire way home, praying that Pepper was right. It had to have been the right thing to do – it had to be. It couldn’t have been for nothing.

When they arrived home, Tony disappeared into his room and did not come out. Steve hadn’t expected him to be approachable, the conversation still too fresh in his mind for comfort, but he had to admit that a small part of him had hoped that Tony might have seen that he had talked because he had been intending to make things better. That he hadn’t intended to hurt Tony, or to make him feel small.

Steve went to bed without any real supper even though he should have made a proper meal; he just didn’t feel hungry anymore. He spent the night idly sipping water and staring at his sketchbook until he fell asleep, tracing his fingers over sketches of Tony. He didn’t dream for once, and not even a nightmare came to keep him company. All he could think about was the way Tony had looked at him, and how he had fucked things up royally even when all he had been trying to do was help.
Steve woke up to the sound of the alarm clock going off; the sound was high pitched and vicious, as if someone had trapped an angry spirit inside. He looked over at the clock feeling groggy and realized that it was already well past when he had intended to wake up. He had set the alarm the night before! He was sure he had! The board meeting was today, and they were supposed to arrive promptly at six thirty. And it was now six.

With a thirty minute commute ahead of him, he wasn’t going to have time to eat. Happy was probably already outside waiting for them.

Steve dressed in a blur, throwing on a pair of his nicest jeans and one of the plain white dress shirts that Howard had bought for him, praying that he could get away with not being dressed up in a suit and tie; he had meant to ask Tony what he should wear the night before, but the fight had made that impossible. He brushed his teeth, scrubbed at his face and armpits with a washcloth, seeing as how there was no time for a proper shower and then ran a comb through his hair, getting out most of the tangles. Steve grabbed his messenger bag from beside his drawing table and then all out ran for the front door, not even bothering to stop in the kitchen for a piece of fruit.

He made it to the front door in less than five minutes. It had to have been some kind of record.

Tony was waiting outside, a sneer plastered across his face. He was lounging against the open car door, casually checking his nails for god-knows-what; that look was all Steve needed to know what had happened. It hadn’t been an accident that his alarm hadn’t gone off at the right time – it hadn’t been faulty machinery either. This had been intentional, punishment for the day before; this had been Tony’s doing. Tony knew damn well that Steve wouldn’t wake up without the alarm – he knew that Steve could sleep through a hurricane if left to his own devices. This was sabotage.

Steve wanted to be angry with Tony, but he was too busy trying not to pass out from the run through the hall. He approached at a slow jog, trying not to appear too out of breathe despite the way his lungs were now screaming bloody murder at him; Tony walked past him as he got closer, slamming his shoulder into Steve’s, sending Steve spinning into the side of the car with a gasp.

“OW!” Steve cried. He caught himself on the door, almost ripping his shirt as it caught against the side mirror. Tony didn’t even look at him. He went up the stairs to lock the door, returning with something akin to a spring in his step. Steve clung to the side of the car, rubbing his likely now bruised arm, suffering in silence.

The car ride was quiet just as it had been the night before; Happy didn’t even turn on the radio, which was a blessing in of itself seeing as how he only liked to play music from the eighties, and Steve wasn’t in the mood for any dying cat noises, even if they did come with guitar solos. Steve clasped his hands in his lap, listening to the sounds of the tires squealing and the dull crinkle of the candy bag inside his messenger bag. Tony looked out the window, lazily watching scenery pass by with his arm resting against the door.

He didn’t even wait for Steve to get into the elevator when they got to Stark International, letting the door snap shut in Steve’s face.

Steve tried to be patient, forcing himself to let the anger go; he found he was going to have a hard time of it when they arrived at Tony’s workshop and saw that no one was around. The lights weren’t even turned on. It was pitch black, even at Pepper’s desk, a terrifying void of nothingness. It occurred to him then that he hadn’t actually been given any details as to where the meeting was scheduled to take place. Pepper had told him the time, but not the location, and Tony hadn’t really told him anything. Some tactician he was; he hadn’t even thought to ask.
Steve sat down in his chair and set his bag down beside him, trying to remain calm. This wasn’t the end of the world, he told himself. He would just have to wait for the meeting to end; it was as simple as that. It wasn’t as if he needed to be there in the first place. His presence had been more of an *invitation* than an expectation. No one would miss him. No one really needed him up there.

He let out a shaky breath. It would be fine. All he had to do was wait and it would be fine.

The elevator dinged loudly, opening with a whoosh. Pepper leaned out, looking around. “*Steve! Oh there you are!*” She shouted, holding the elevator doors open with one hand. “*Come on – get in here!*” She waved to him, looking frantic, and he quickly jumped up and joined her, leaving his bag behind. The doors snapping shut behind him as he got into the elevator, her timing impeccable as always.

Pepper was dressed in a business suit that was neither formal nor casual; she tugged the suit jacket down a little lower, flattening out a wrinkle she had made when waving at him. She had a packet of papers held in her free hand, cheeks flushed, looking more frazzled than she normally did.

“Your shirt’s not buttoned up right.” She said, smiling. She handed him the packet of papers and then began to fix his shirt, smoothing out the fabric with her palm as she redid the buttons. “You feel really cold.” She put a hand against his forehead, frowning. “Are you alright?”

“I’m always a little cold these days. It’s nothing to worry about.” Steve said, blushing. “Thanks for coming to find me.”

“Not a problem.” She said, taking the packet of papers back. “When Tony showed up on his own I figured that he was being an asshole and left you somewhere. He’s sulking right now beside the coffee machine, by the way – make no mistake though, he doesn’t look it. He’s oozing charisma and smiling like there’s no tomorrow but he’s just one *word* away from everything crumbling down around him. I’d be sympathetic if he hadn’t left you up here by yourself.” She grumbled. “And what the hell is going on with your hair?” She ran her fingers through his hair, trying to comb it back into place, scowling when it refused to stop sticking up. She licked her thumb and rubbed a pencil lead smudge off of his cheek.

“Thanks.” He said.

The elevator chimed again.

“I think I’ve got the worse of it. Oh well, no time to fix anything else. Get ready to enter the pits of hell.” Pepper sighed.

The doors snapped open and they stepped out together into the largest board room in Stark International; it took up the entire floor, and was a large open room that had been styled to look like one of the least friendly places in the world. The ceiling was silver, and reflected the black marble floor. Steve had never really liked modern architecture. It never seemed like it thought of itself as art in the first place. Yes, there were artistic elements to the room, but he had always felt that art was supposed to make the viewer want to explore what was there. This place made him want to run screaming for the hills. Artistic zigzags intentionally lead the eye to the centre of the back wall where there was just enough space for a screen in case of presentations. The dark red carpet on the floor looked a little too much like blood; Steve could see why Pepper had referred to it as hell. Everything in the room lacked personality from the planters filled with silver fake plants to the tables made of polished metal. There wasn’t a single cheerful thing in the room even when you counted the *people*.

There had to be at least fifty people milling around, including Howard and the entire board of directors. All of those in attendance were drinking coffee from silver cups and making small talk,
dressed formally in suits and ties of black and white, the apparent uniform of the day; they all
matched, like someone had picked them up from a store that sold plastic businessmen. They didn’t
even turn to look towards the elevator when it opened, so engrossed in their conversations.

Tony was standing where Pepper had said she had left him, lurking beside the coffee machine just in
sight of the board and Howard, a very large and plastic smile spread across his face as if someone
had stapled it there for him. It was almost painful to look at. They might need pliers to get it off of
him later on.

Pepper weaved them through the crowd towards Tony, handing him the papers that she had brought
with her. Tony didn’t look pleased with her or with the fact that she had found Steve, but he took the
papers anyways and began to read through them even though he already seemed to know what was
on them. Pepper didn’t look all that pleased with him either for that matter, but neither said anything,
smiling at one another with their fake smiles.

Steve tried to stay out of the way, hiding just behind Pepper, not wanting to interfere; unfortunately,
Howard had caught sight of him when he had walked in and glided over, towering above Steve like
some kind of tyrannical lord visiting his peasants. Howard grinned, eyes sparkling in a way that was
probably meant to indicate good hearted mischief. It could have been mischief, but knowing
Howard, it was probably just him thinking about giving Steve a good groping before the meeting
started.

“Steve! Good to see you! I was just thinking about you! How are things going?” Howard boomed;
he wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulder, pulling Steve so close that he could smell Howard’s
aftershave and the lingering scent of cigars and wine. Steve tried to smile and remain pleasant, not
wanting to cause Tony any trouble by pissing Howard off; God knew what Howard would do if he
said something wrong, even if it was by accident. He had gotten himself in enough trouble as it was
and he didn’t need any more following him around.

“Things are going fine. How are you?” Steve said politely.

“I’m marvelous – just marvelous. I’ve been dealing with these bastards all morning and I can
honestly say that seeing you around just brightened my day. Look at you – all golden and adorable.”
Howard chuckled. He pinched Steve’s cheek, making Steve wince and then looped an arm around
Steve’s waist, letting his hands idly brush over the curve of Steve’s ass.

“Howard –” Steve growled in warning.

“So are you here to watch the performance? Going to root for the underdog?” Howard teased.

“He’s helping me present.” Tony said butting in; Steve stared at him in surprise.

“Oh? Is he now?” Howard said, looking suddenly bored and rather unconvinced. He looked down at
Steve, watching his expression as Tony continued to talk, his upper lip twitching in displeasure the
moment his son’s mouth opened again.

“We need to run through the slides one more time.” Tony said.

“We do now.” Howard snorted in disbelief.

“Yes. Come on Steve – we have to get ready.” Tony grabbed Steve by the arm and pulled him out of
Howard’s grasp, dragging him towards the crowd of tottering board members who were too busy
chattering and swaying in place to notice anything was the matter; Howard’s protests were drowned
out by the time they got to the computer nestled against the wall, lost in the whispers and laughter.
The chatter of the board sounded synthesized and clipped from where they were, everything distorted demonically as the sound bounced over metal and plaster.

This part of the room was nicer; it looked a little bit like it had slowly crept into the board room from another room, like an invading fungus, slipping in while no one was looking. There was a projector bolted into an apparatus in the ceiling, all of it hanging from some kind of adjustable track; there were five or six rows of puffy black leather chairs set up for guests, arranged so that every seat was in sight of the projection screen. The board and attendees would likely be seated here when the presentation started.

The projector hadn’t been turned on yet, and was aimed crookedly at the wall beside the computer, its large lens looking like the closed eye of a sleeping giant. Tony took a flash drive out of his pocket and plugged it into the computer, searching for the file he needed, tapping his index finger on the tabletop as everything loaded.

“Thanks for the save back there.” Steve said as he watched Tony work, knowing that his thanks probably didn’t mean all that much. Tony was going to be mad at him for a long time, assuming he ever forgave Steve of course. Steve could feel Howard staring at him from across the room and knew that his ears had gone red again despite the fact that they hadn’t even locked eyes. He hated blushing so easily. It was frustrating to constantly turn tomato red at the drop of a hat; if he hadn’t been so pasty white, it wouldn’t have been so noticeable, but there was nothing he could do about that unless he tried his hand at going into one of those tanning booth things he had seen on the television.

He was tempted to turn around and hurl something hard at Howard’s head, just so that he would stop with the staring. Even when he had been Captain America, he had never been able to suppress the creepy crawly feeling he got when he knew someone was making eyes at him from across the room; it didn’t matter if they were hitting on him, or just trying to get his attention, it always made him uncomfortable. Knowing that the eyes currently staring at him belonged to Howard did nothing to make it any less creepy.

“It’s sickening to see the old man throwing himself at you like that. I’d rather not projectile vomit on the board, seeing as how I’d like to make a good impression for once.” Tony grunted, dragging and dropping the file onto the desktop. He ejected the drive and pocketed it, shoving Steve out of the way so that he could climb up onto a chair without wheels to tinker with the projector. Steve tried his best not to ogle Tony as he twisted the machine and pointed it at the centre of the back wall. If there was anything better than Tony’s smile, it was his ass; even though his hips were sharp, he still seemed to have an ass worthy of grabbing. Steve flushed, embarrassed that he had thought about that in public; he looked around and was relieved that no one seemed to have noticed. Boy was he glad that Tony couldn’t read minds, or else he would be in a whole heap of trouble. He cleared his throat and scanned the room again, this time under the pretense of looking for Pepper. Tony wiggled, grunting as the projector finally turned.

“Enjoying the view?” Tony asked, hopping down from the chair.

“What?” Steve went red in the face, eyes widening.

“The view. You know, from the windows? We’re almost at the top of the building you know.” Tony said quirking an eyebrow.

“Oh – OH! Yes. It's a very nice view.” Steve stuttered, nodding his head.

“Uh… ok then.” Tony said. Steve remained close by, trying to keep out of Tony’s way as he went up on his toes to adjust a bar dangling from the bottom of the projector. He turned his head away, willing his eyes not to wander again.
“What did you want me to do for this? Just stand by the slides?” Steve asked, clearing his throat.

“You can stand to the left. Not there – your other left.” Tony said, not really giving him a straight answer.

Steve stood against the back wall, unsure of where exactly Tony wanted him to stand. Dream-Tony had loved to explain things in his head, and then would later realize he hadn’t said anything out loud; it was an annoying habit of his, and apparently Real-Tony also shared this unfortunate habit. Tony had neglected to mention the fact that his plan meant he would be turning the projector on right then and there, and that the projector would be as bright as the sun funneled into a spot light; a heads up to get out of the way would have been nice. The projector came online abruptly, flickering once, and Steve nearly screamed; he raised an arm to shield his eyes, blinking back colourful blotches. He was suddenly glad that he was already pressed up against the wall because otherwise he would have fallen and done something really embarrassing.

The room fell silent, almost as if someone had flipped a switch. The board members and guests seated themselves in chairs and crossed their arms and legs, eyes on Tony and no one else; Steve managed to compose himself before anyone so much as blinked in his direction, wiping his sweaty palms on his pants. Howard took a seat in the middle row, watching his son with a contemptuous look on his face as Tony started showboating, grinning and cracking jokes for the crowd.

The lighting in the room dimmed and then adjusted on its own. Tony stood in a semi-circle of bright white light; he looked just like the Ring Master in a circus ready for opening night.

“Welcome to the Exhibition of Research and Development for Quarter One of the 2012 fiscal year – you all know me, or at least you should seeing as how I’m here practically every hour of the day making sure you have shit to sell, so let’s get this party started.” Tony grinned. A few of the spectators chuckled at that.

Tony pressed a hidden device in his hand and the projector flashed green, making his slide show appear on the back wall as if by magic; a woman in the front jumped, laughing nervously as she wiped up spilled coffee. A picture of a phone was on the introductory slide, everything magnified to show the glossy touchscreen and basic features of the phone’s casing; this was the phone Tony had shown him days ago, and it looked stunning. Tony gestured at the slide and smirked, tapping the air directly in front of it. That shouldn’t have done anything at all, but suddenly the board was murmuring again as the slide morphed into a hologram, glowing bright blue in the air. It floated in front of Steve, filling him with nostalgia.

“My cute little assistant here is going to be playing my Vanna White, so bear with us. Grab the hologram Steve.” Tony said his eyes on the crowd.

Steve reached out to touch the outline of the hologram of the phone, his fingertips brushing the pale light. The phone enlarged the moment he touched it, swelling to the size of a dinner plate. Steve pretended to hold it, one hand on either side of it, smiling with all of the serenity he could muster. He noticed Howard frowning at him and tried not to snort in amusement. Howard had probably expected him to have some kind of breakdown from all of this, although judging by all the murmuring this must have been some new kind of technology for a lot of people in the room. Maybe Howard had thought that Steve would faint so that he could rush up to the front and save the day.

“As you can see, this is the latest of the Stark SatFan series seven phone, capable of acting as a portable internet connection for multiple handheld devices. It has high speed processing and a bunch of other things that you can all read in your packets. I’m sure you can look up the nitty-gritty details on you free time – all you need to know is that it puts our competitors in the dust for at least two years.” Tony said, changing the slide to another without even pausing as he talked.
The hologram held between Steve’s hands morphed and changed into an internal view of the phone, wires and motherboard bare for all to see like some kind of technological playboy centrefold. Steve kept his hands steady, aware that there were many eyes on him now; he reminded himself that they were staring at the phone and not him. Well, he sure hoped that it was the phone they were staring at. Not that he was nervous around crowds or anything. He had done so many public events – He hadn’t done those he reminded himself after a second of internal grumbling. Why couldn’t his brain keep up with reality? The realization didn’t change anything for him, even if it did put a damper on his enthusiasm. He smiled and did his best, following along as Tony rambled on about the phone and its remarkable capabilities, like how it could connect to the internet from anywhere using a system of satellites and something that sounded like ‘global satellite frequency hopping’ that had been patented by Stark International years before when they had been working on predator drone technology.

The board of directors and spectators ate it up, oohed and aww’ed at all the right times, smiled whenever Tony changed slides and practically started drooling when they saw how much money the phone was projected to make in the first few months after release. It didn’t really seem to take much more than that one slide near the end to get the board motivated and lively; they started yammering to one another, trying to look civilized despite their excitement.

Clearly, Tony knew what he was doing, and his charismatic smile and sultry winks helped bring them all in, hook line and sinker. The phone could have sold itself, but his smile seemed to make it all the more appetizing. He could have probably convinced them to buy someone’s grandmother and they wouldn’t have even noticed.

Howard remained quiet and in the background, listening instead of joining in on any of the conversations going on around him. Occasionally he glanced around to see how the other investors and board members were reacting to the presentation; he seemed to be playing well with others today, or maybe he was just stealthily trying to see which members of his board he needed to reign in or fire. Steve couldn’t be sure; Howard simply did not play nice with anyone. Everything he did was calculated, and it was unlikely that his silence was for a good reason. He hoped that Tony wasn’t going to be on the receiving end of his wrath any time soon.

“So, questions and comments? No? Alright then – be free!” Tony finished the presentation with a flourished wave at the holograms and shut off the projector, giving a low bow. He reached out and put a hand on Steve’s back, making Steve bow too, laughing when Steve did. The board gave a loud cheer and started clapping; someone even whistled. They chattered with amongst themselves as Tony retreated to the computer to log off, leaving Steve to stand at the front beside the wall he had been gesturing at for the past hour.

Howard approached, cracking his neck, nodding and smiling his way through the crowd like he was the star quarterback that had just single-handedly won the game. His expression changed when he got closer. He eyed Steve with a jealous pout.

“You don’t seem to mind when he’s got his hands all over you.” Howard growled glaring at Tony’s back.

Steve sagged. “Howard…”

“No, no. Don’t concern yourself with this old man’s misery. Have fun with your weekend Steven.” Howard snapped. He turned around and left in a huff, stalking out of the room with his head held high and his hands stuffed in his pockets; the board looked startled by his departure. They looked to Steve, frowning. Steve stared blankly back at them. They shrugged amongst themselves and went back to their conversations, unconcerned. Steve tried to do the same.
Steve was leaning against the wall by the elevator when Tony finally decided that he had answered enough questions for the day and that they could go back to his workshop to do something a little more productive. He had watched Pepper follow Tony around the room for the past half hour, a mother cat guarding her kitten glaring at anyone who approached and looked like they wanted to give Tony a piece of their mind; it was sweet. Tony was lucky to have her around to help him, even if he was too much of a brat to notice what she was doing.

Tony grabbed Steve’s hand as he passed, pulling him towards the elevator as he pressed the down button; he leaned casually against the wall beside it, waiting for the ding and then pulled Steve inside. Pepper scooted in behind them just before the door closed; sticking her arm out so that the older gentleman with mutton chops behind her couldn’t sneak in with them.

The doors shut with a click.

The three of them let out loud sighs of relief, shoulders slumping as the elevator began its descent; their exhaustion was palpable, seeping into Steve’s very soul even though he hadn’t really had to schmooze his way out of anything half as tough as what they had had to put up with. Everyone had been so intense, and it was hard to even just try and pretend to be comfortable or unassuming around them when they were busy trying to chew their own arms off because some of the technical specs didn’t match up with production costs. Investors apparently did not appreciate casual observers at their meetings any more than the board of directors did; they seemed to think that it meant you weren’t paying enough attention to the important details if you looked calm and not like you were going to have a stroke.

“Well that was fun.” Tony said humorously, the grin falling from his face as if a stiff breeze had blown by and ripped it clean off his face.

“Do you think they liked it? They always act like they like it – and this time I couldn’t tell how many of them wanted to get out the pitch forks and torches when you mentioned the production date.” Pepper said, adjusting her suit.

Tony squeezed Steve’s hand absentmindedly, shrugging his shoulders.

“Who knows with them? As long as it keeps him off my back for another few months I’m fine with how it turned out. It wasn’t too bad this time actually. He didn’t say shit… which was bizarre. Do you think he’s planning something? Some kind of horrible punishment that I won’t be able to see until it’s too late? Maybe he’s going to put a bear trap in my office.” Tony said looking like he was only half kidding, his and Steve’s hands flapping as he tried to gesture. He looked down at his hand and realized the reason why said gesture hadn’t work; he frowned like he wasn’t quite sure how they had come to hold hands in the first place. Steve’s hand had been swallowed up and lost inside Tony’s, his cold digits thankful for the sudden warmth; it didn’t last of course. Steve flushed in irritation when Tony dropped his hand like it was a sack of snakes. It hadn’t been that bad, had it? It wasn’t like he had licked Tony’s hand; he wasn’t that disgusting, was he?

The elevator door chimed and opened; Steve wrapped his arms around his stomach and followed Tony and Pepper out.

“I think this calls for some kind of celebratory meal or coffee, right Pep? We should go do something before we get called back up there for an encore – oh we should go eat lunch! Lunch would be good –” Tony suggested.

Pepper and Steve exchanged confused looks.
Tony flopped down in the chair Steve usually occupied during the day, oblivious to their confusion; he put his feet up on Pepper’s desk, scratching his chin. “I mean, things could have gone worse, right? We could have been stuck up there explaining things to him – but yeah, I think we deserve lunch. Lunch sounds pretty good. What do you think Pep? Should we do lunch? I think we should do lunch.” Tony said, talking far too fast to be understandable. Frankly, he sounded a little manic.

Steve reached for his messenger bag and pulled out the bag of hard candy. He wasn’t sure how useful it would be to give Tony sugar at this point, but at least having a piece of candy in his mouth might get some kind of slowdown in Tony’s rambling so that they could understand him. Tony froze at sound of crinkle of plastic, eyes widening. “OOH! Sweet!” He snatched the bag away from Steve, turning it over to look at the different flavors, completely engrossed by the colourful packaging; Tony could read Japanese, able to puzzle out the hiragana and katakana with little difficulty. According to Pepper, Tony had been deployed to the Japanese branch of Stark International for a few months as punishment for some fuckup or another. It had been a few weeks before she had started working as his assistant, and the previous one hadn’t said much more than that to her, having been transferred to work as Howard’s personal assistant; neither of them had been sure of whether it was a punishment or a promotion. The language had grown on Tony in his time away; he had talked with Pepper only in Japanese for the first two weeks, so she hadn’t understood a word of what he was saying, even after she picked up a phrase book to try and make sense of it all. When he had grown used to her, he had told her all about how he had learned to speak it in a week, living out of a hotel room while simultaneously refining their R&D department. It had been a rough transition for the both of them, and ever since Pepper had kept the phrase book handy in case it happened again; it was in her top right hand drawer at the moment, nestled away out of sight.

Pepper leaned close to Steve’s ear, whispering carefully. “Is he drunk?”

“God I hope not.” Steve whispered back.

Tony looked up from the bag and saw them staring at him. “What? Do I have something on my face?” He rolled his shoulders when they didn’t respond, ripping open the wrapper to get at the candy inside more interested in the food than them. He poked around and pulled out one of the Ramune flavored candies, tearing the plastic open and popping it into his mouth. His expression glazed over, turning from curious to satisfied; Steve was never going to doubt sugar again.

“Hey, how did you know I like Ramune?” Tony asked, sucking on the candy. He ran his tongue over his teeth in a way that was far more erotic than it should have been, not noticing the way Steve gulped. He set the bag down on the desk, leaning back leisurely in the chair with his arms behind his head; completely at ease.

“I just saw the store and looked in –” Steve started, falling silent when Pepper’s nails dug into his wrist, leaving little crescent shaped indents in his flesh. She gave him a look and then started to back away slowly with Steve in her grasp, dragging him along with her. Steve stumbled at the sudden movement, ambling along with her when he managed to get his balance back again.

“That’s nice. We’ll be back in a second – I need to talk to Steve about something in private.” Pepper said quickly, before Steve could say anything more. She dragged him over to the water cooler and then shoved him into the bathroom, waiting for the door to swing shut behind him before following him in. Once inside, she pressed her ear against the door, listening intently, her face scrunched in concentration. When she was satisfied, Pepper turned to Steve and tented her hands in front of her mouth, a smile blossoming across her face.

“Did you see him?” She asked.
“Yes he looked –” Steve said, rubbing his wrist.

“He talked to me! Steve – he TALKED to me! I don’t think you understand the magnitude of this – It’s been seven months since he has willingly gone to my desk and sat down on his own. He hasn’t called me Pep since I had to talk with Happy about his drinking.” She said, excited.

“Oh, wow –” Steve gaped.

“Steve. Do you know what this means?” Pepper prompted, clapping her hands in delight. Steve had always thought of her as a professional individual; she was almost jumping up and down in delight. It was like she had just won first prize at a county fair for growing the world’s biggest pumpkin when she had been told by irritated farmers for months that she didn’t know shit about pumpkins.

“It means that he’s getting better.” Pepper said in awe. She grabbed Steve by the shoulders and shook him; he bobbled in her grasp. “He’s not mad at you. He’s happy again.”

“Pepper –”

“Oh Steve!”

She pressed Steve to her chest, hugging him so tightly she could have broken his ribs. He couldn’t help grinning like an idiot when he processed what she had said. He hugged her back, his face pressed into the smooth swell of her breasts. Neither of them noticed the intimacy of the hug, unconcerned by how close they were, caring only for the fact that Tony wasn’t angry – that they had solved something, without actually knowing that they had done it in the first place.

The bathroom door burst open and Tony waltzed in, opening another candy wrapper with his teeth. He raised an eyebrow at Steve and Pepper’s impromptu hug, popping the candy into his mouth.

“So… uh… Why are we having a party in the bathroom? Is there something you’d like to tell me? You’re getting married and moving to Majorca? Why wasn’t I invited?” Tony asked.

Pepper gave Steve a quick squeeze and then pulled away, straightening her suit; Steve adjusted his own rumpled clothing, face flushing when he realized that one of Pepper’s shirt buttons had pressed a rather impressive circle into his cheek.

“We’re just happy – that’s all. And no, I’m not marrying Steve – just celebrating something private.” Pepper said, clearing her throat.

“Private? Like what?” Tony asked, looking from Pepper to Steve, obviously expecting an answer be it a good one or not. He crunched the candy, the sound echoing like distant gunfire in the quiet bathroom.

“Um…” Steve mumbled.

“We’re just happy that it’s Friday – and that Steve is no longer throwing up.” Pepper said quickly, patting Steve on the head. He was glad for her quick wit, because his didn’t seem to be working at the moment; it had apparently stalled on the way from his brain to his mouth and was now waiting for a tow.

“That’s true… I uh…” Tony cleared his throat, starting to back out of the room. He only stopped when his back collided with the closed door; it shuddered in its frame. He was trapped, so instead of fleeing, he looked between the pair of them with a nervous and somewhat adorable looking grin on his face and started talking. “I guess I kind of owe you an apology for the whole not waking you up this morning thing.” Tony said, shuffling his feet.
“It’s alright. Let’s just go get lunch!” Steve said, trying to be as enthusiastic as possible. He would love to just wipe the previous day off the map; he would take this newer, happier Tony any day. Steve’s stomach rumbled loudly.

“Oh yeah! Lunch…” Tony said. The nervousness vanished and Tony beamed, reveling in the glory of the board meeting and his apparent love for restaurant food.

“So where did you want to go? Because I can think of a few places that have really good food – stuff that Pep would probably like too and I was thinking… we could go for lunch now, or we could go get coffee and then go for lunch. Or we could go get lunch and then dessert! I’m fine with getting dessert too. We kind of deserve dessert, don’t you think? I’m just glad the board meeting is over – when’s the next one? We should have lunch after that one too – when did you want to go? Where did we say we were going again?” Tony rambled, scratching the back of his neck.

“Why don’t we get out of here and you pick?” Steve said, stepping around Tony to get out the bathroom door. As much as he liked the way the conversation was going, he didn’t necessarily want to continue it in the bathroom; they had perfectly good desk outside to sit at, one that didn’t smell like disinfectant. Pepper put her hands on Steve’s shoulders and started pushing him out, seeming to agree with his decision. Tony trailed out after them, mumbling to himself. They made their way to Pepper’s desk and gathered around it, Tony sinking into Steve’s chair again. He clasped his hands together, still thinking aloud. “Well that burger place on ninth is pretty awesome – and they have bottomless fries on Fridays too. Or we could go somewhere else – if you want –”

“Burgers sound good, right Steve? When do you want to go? It’s…” Pepper looked at her watch, looking surprised when she saw the time. “It’s ten. Oh wow. Do you think we could get away with taking an early lunch, or should we wait for twelve? I can go pick up a muffin for Steve so that he doesn’t pass out if we want to wait.”

The morning had passed with a sluggishness that would have made a sloth proud. Even though they had been in the building since 6:30 a.m., it still felt a little like the building was still asleep. Steve could have easily fallen asleep if he let his eyes close for too long, losing himself in a miasma of exhaustion and ravenous hunger. He hadn’t been able to snack anything to eat after the presentation; there had been a tantalizing tray of muffins and doughnuts traveling around the room, carried on the shoulders of a pair of very tense looking servers. Pepper had pointed them out to him, when she had found time to sneak back to him. The pair were usually assistants to Mr. Stark, forced into attending the event because of the extra pay it promised. He felt sorry for those two, having to put up with Howard Stark day in and day out. It was a miracle the pair of them still had any hair left on their heads at all.

He had really wanted a muffin too, but there hadn’t been any good opportunities to get close enough to get one, and he had felt bad about making them veer from their rounds; there were more important people than him waiting for snacks. He could wait. The coffee, on the other hand, had been plentiful and easy to get a hold of if he had wanted it. He had no interest in coffee; aside from the initial precious minutes of the caffeine slash sugar boost, he would have spent the rest of the morning lying on the ground trying not to fall asleep again, so he had ignored it completely. He had never found caffeine all that effective, and the serum hadn’t made it any easier to keep that oh so pleasant wakeful buzz anymore.

He was a little surprised that he had managed to stay awake and kill almost five hours at a meeting that had been filled with little more than small talk; the way Pepper and Tony had been going on, they had expected it to have been longer. Steve had sat through some long meetings in his time, but they hadn’t been that long. Even army officials appreciated having the time to go to the bathroom, and they inevitably got tired of talking after a while; board members and investors seemed to run on
direct current, and you couldn’t get them to stop talking even if you tried, and Steve had tried.

“Well… I guess you can go get Steve a muffin? We haven’t had a coffee break, and it’s not as if he actually expects me to get any work done after board meetings anyways.” Tony shrugged, falling silent. He kept looking at his hands, focused almost entirely on his thumb, which he twiddled uncomfortably as he talked.

Having the conversation turn back to Howard had made things awkward again.

“Tony?” Steve made the mistake of touching Tony’s shoulder to get his attention when he didn’t respond; Tony flinched as though he had been struck, jerking away with wide eyes.

“Don’t!” Tony barked.

Steve yanked his hand back like he had touched a hot burner without feeling pain first. He was tempted to look down at his hand to see if there was any damage but wavered when he saw how embarrassed Tony looked by his outburst. Tony got up and mumbled something about getting a few more lines of code done in the operating system for something that sounded suspiciously like ‘the comms’ and then made a break for his workshop, locking himself inside.

“Shit…” Pepper said, visibly drooping. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, brushing her bangs out of her face with a loud harrumph.

“What just happened?” Steve asked quietly, feeling more than a little meek. He looked down at his hand and then up at Pepper, wondering just how much trouble he had gotten himself in to this time.

“You touched him. He doesn’t do so well with touch – well… not when he’s sober anyways. When he’s drunk he’ll crawl right into your lap, but when he’s sober, you’d better watch out. He has a thing about it, I don’t know why. He’s never explained it; he just wanders off and hides for a while. He’ll be alright, just… try not to make any sudden moves during lunch, and next time don’t touch him unless he’s touching you first.” Pepper said. She gestured for Steve to sit, a slight smile creeping back onto her face. “I’ll go get you that muffin.” She said. “Don’t worry about him. Honestly, he has more mood swings than anyone else I’ve ever met, and I’ve worked with menopausal women and children. Give him some time.”

“Stop worry-nibbling. You’re starting to look like one of the pigeons I feed at lunch.” Pepper said. Her eyes were still on her computer screen, so he was surprised that she had caught him. She was fighting with her word document program, trying to get the damned thing to adjust its spacing without messing the entire document up and had been swearing under her breath for the past two hours. Steve had tried to help, but he hadn’t been much use, ‘back seat piloting’ as she had called it, so he had retreated to his chair and the remains of his muffin; he had saved the top for last and was currently breaking it apart and nibbling at it.

“Sorry. I just never… I never noticed that he didn’t like being touched before.” Steve said, fidgeting in his seat, bits of muffin falling through his fingers onto the wrapper and the desk. He scrambled to sweep up the crumbs.

“You don’t have to apologize you know. It’s hardly your fault. And you shouldn’t worry so much about him being mad at you. He’s not that mad – I don’t think he’s even angry about yesterday
anymore. He’s in a mood right now – if it was anything worse, I’d be sitting right there with you worrying away. We could form the Olympic Worrying Team.” She looked at her wristwatch and then went back to fighting with the program when it froze on her. “Son of a bitch!”

He wanted to take Pepper’s advice, he really did, but Steve couldn’t stop worrying. Sure, he had been screamed at by Tony when he had hugged him that first day, but he had attributed that to discomfort from him being a stranger rather than it having been caused by the actual touch. Looking back on it, Tony had always been the one initiating the touches, hadn’t he? But what about the times he had grabbed Tony in the hallway and nothing had happened? Had those just been some kind of anomaly?

Tony hadn’t been Sober Tony at the time, Steve realized, so startled that he bit his lower lip. It hadn’t always been like this – in the dreams, Steve remembered bitterly, Tony had loved touching people and he had always been more than a little hands-on with anyone he met; he had been a very tactile creature. It was so strange to see Tony flinching away from something as simple as a hand on his shoulder. What had happened to change that?

“Earth to Steve. Earth calling Steve.” Pepper laughed, prodding him in the shoulder.

“I’m here, I’m here.” Steve sighed, wiping a drop of blood off of his lip.

“Go get Tony please. We can go for lunch now. It is precisely 12.”

“Alrighty.”

Tony didn’t come out of his workshop until Steve had banged on the door enough times to make the heel of his hand red and sore. He wished he hadn’t had to do that. It felt more like he was harassing Tony than calling him out for lunch, and he had almost not wanted to go eat at all afterwards, his stomach roiling something awful every time he moved; it was worse than the hangover had been.

Tony kept a few steps ahead of Steve the entire time they walked to the elevator; Steve tried not to be upset by it, but it was hard not to feel that awkward twinge of hurt when the man he was falling in love with kept creeping further and further away from him while shooting him nervous looks. He debated on apologizing and pretending that he felt sick so that he could slink off back to the office to eat something he could scrounge from a vending machine; it would be better that way. At least Tony would be able to eat in peace without having to constantly worry about him being around. Pepper put a hand on Steve’s shoulder, seeming to know that something was wrong.

“You alright?” She asked in a whisper just loud enough to be heard over the crowd of office workers leaving the building with them.

“I don’t know.” Steve said, swallowing hard.

“Just keep walking then. It’ll be alright.” She said, leading him towards the door. Her hand on his shoulder was the only thing that kept him from making his excuses and fleeing.

When they got out onto the street, thankfully, Tony seemed to calm down. He moved on ahead of them, leading the way, almost cheerful looking now that he was out in daylight. They battled through the lunch crowds and made their way to a side street, sneaking through yet another rowdy crowd until they made it to a restaurant called Super Burger.

Like the gelato parlor Tony had taken Steve to, Super Burger looked like a total dive; most of the lunch seekers that walked past seemed to be willingly avoiding the place like it had been singlehandedly responsible for the bubonic plague. Yet again once they walked through the doors
the place went from blah to astounding. Everything inside was retro from the fifties as it said on the
door in half scraped off paint; Steve hadn’t been around for the fifties, and even though it was
peculiar and new, there was still some things here that he recognized.

All of the stools near the main counter were puffy and baby blue; the booths were pink and cream
with stripes, plush and comfortable looking. Everything was covered in pastel colours and sleek
styled leather; he felt like was drowning in colour after living in shades of beige and grey for so long.
There were records on the wall, framed and miniature model cars sitting on baby blue beams all of
which was guarded by an old jukebox that looked like it might actually be functional. The floors
were checkered with different coloured tiles reminding Steve of a giant pink and green checker
board. There was a mural with women wearing funny looking skirts and sweaters, standing around
with their gents who had their hair worn slicked back. His mouth must have been hanging open,
catching flies as his mother would have told him, because Tony was suddenly grinning and jabbing
him in the shoulder looking very pleased with himself.

“I take it you like?” Tony grinned; he turned and shot a quick, searching, look at Pepper. She looked
a little dazed herself, surprised by the choice of décor.

“I didn’t know you liked this kind of place.” Pepper said.

“I found it a while back. It’s kooky. I like kooky.” Tony shrugged.

A waitress in one of those funny outfits from the mural came up from the back counter, giving them
a tired smile.

“For three please.” Tony said bumping his arm against Steve’s as he surveyed the available tables,
looking for the best spot in the joint.

“Would you like a booth or some seats at the counter?” The waitress asked, pulling out a pad of
paper and a pen from her apron. Both of which were soft blue with tiny milkshakes drawn on them
in black.

“A booth would be dandy.” Tony said.

“Alright then sweetheart, pick which one you want and I’ll bring you all some menus.” She drawled,
wandering away to go fight with a pitcher of water.

Tony sauntered over to the booth the furthest away from the front windows. He settled in the corner
of the booth, leaning casually against the puffy backrest, his sunglasses sitting jauntily on the end of
his nose.

“You hip dudes coming over here or what?” Tony smirked. He took his sunglasses off, putting them
down on the table. He picked up one of the napkin holders, one of those silver square boxes with
paper napkins sticking out of the front and back, and waved it around in amusement, gesturing with
it to the empty side of the booth across from him. “Hurry up slowpokes. Time’s a wastin’.”

Steve sat down in the puffy seat across from Tony, trying to keep a straight face and his distance.
Pepper followed after him, sliding smoothly into the booth beside him.

“I’m going to be stealing your food, so you may as well sit beside me.” Tony said, almost pouting.
He patted the seat beside him invitingly, looking annoyed with Steve’s choice.

“Are you sure?” Steve asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

“Of course I’m sure. I wouldn’t ask unless I wasn’t sure. What are you, five?” Tony rolled his eyes.
Steve shuffled out the other end of the booth and sat down beside Tony, sending Pepper an apologetic look when she had to move out of his way so he could crawl over her to get to the other side. She took Steve’s place, sliding in to sit against the wall and then set her purse down beside her as the waitress returned, leaving them three menus, three glasses and the pitcher of water.

“I’ll give y’all a minute to decide alright? Holler if you need anything.” The waitress said, wandering off to another table.

Steve picked up his menu and flipped it over, scanning a list of burgers; when Tony picked a place with options, he really picked a place with options. They had something for everyone here, ranging from the standard burger and fries to some bizarre thing called a calamari deluxe bacon burger. Steve wasn’t sure what calamari was, but it sure sounded fancy. Tony reached over Steve’s shoulder and pointed at a burger called the Bacon Cheeser; he was so close Steve could smell his shampoo.

“That one is good. You’d like it.” Tony said.

“What’s on it? Aside from the bacon and cheese, I mean.” Steve asked, trying to cover the fact that he was now feeling a little squirmy at being so close to Tony. His neck was probably turning bright red.

“Bacon… Cheese… Burger… Onions… Tomato… Some kind of mayonnaise sauce with a mixture of barbeque sauce. I’m probably forgetting something. You’re not allergic to anything, so it’s shouldn’t be a problem, if that’s what you’re wondering about.” Tony shrugged.

Steve put down his menu nodding to himself, trying to ignore the way that Tony’s arm was still lingering on his shoulder. The Bacon Cheeser sounded good, and ‘when in doubt choose the bacon’ was always a good motto to live by. It was a little frustrating to not be able to pick anything out though; in his other body he would have been able to just pick two and eat both of them without any trouble, but that was then. He would be surprised if he could finish the burger.

“Ok. That sounds good to me.” Steve said, resting a finger on the place on the menu that had the Bacon Cheeser listed in bold black font.

“Same here. Bacon for one and all!” Tony agreed, shifting back to his side of the booth.

Pepper kept running her fingers down the list, pausing every once in a while on something she found interesting; after a few run-throughs, she stopped on one and left her finger there just as Steve had, marking her place.

“Alright. Mushroom burger it is.”

“Ooh someone’s being adventurous.” Tony smirked.

“Says the man who picked the same thing as Steve.” Pepper smirked back.

“Technically, he picked what I picked.” Tony said in mock-defense.

“Uh huh. Sure Tony. We all believe you.”

“You’re so mean! I don’t know why I’m friends with you.” Tony grumbled.

“You love me and you know it. Are we getting anything to drink?” Pepper said, eyeing the drinks menu where it lay against the napkin holder.

“They do have good milkshakes here.” Tony commented, handing it over to her.
She flipped through it, reading everything carefully one word at a time, as if missing something would lead to the apocalypse.

“Do you want to split a milkshake Steve?” Pepper asked. “I kind of want one, but I’m not so sure I want to drink the entire thing.”

“Trying to keep your girlish figure?” Tony teased.

Pepper swatted him with the menu.

“Sure. What flavor did you want to get?” Steve laughed.

“The chocolate banana looked good.”

“Sounds good to me.” Steve agreed.

“Are you going to get anything?” Pepper asked Tony, rapping him with the menu again. He shrugged his shoulders. “I’ll just steal sips from Steve’s.”

“Alright.” Pepper smiled setting the menu down. “Suit yourself.”

The waitress took their orders with ease, moving on to the next table after they had finished, sticking the piece of paper she had written the order on to a circular metal plate which swung into the kitchen; Steve felt like he had gone back in time again. The greasy diners he had gone to with his mother on special occasions had done things like that. He watched the waitress as she called out their orders nice and loud, practically yelling to be heard over the sound of the fry cooks singing to themselves.

Tony leaned forwards and rested his elbows on the table, amusing himself by staring at his reflection in the napkin holder; he looked very content, moving the napkin holder back and forth to distort his reflection like it was a funhouse mirror. Had Steve not seen him two hours previous having a veritable panic attack at being touched, he might have thought that nothing had happened all morning.

“Well I don’t know about you two, but I’m going to go to the little girl’s room.” Pepper said, standing up.

“Have fun.” Tony waved. She rolled her eyes at him and picked her purse up, setting it in Steve’s lap; it was so large, Steve couldn’t see his legs anymore. It sat like a spoiled white leather cat, slowly sagging at the sides. He caught it as it slipped, clutching the handle to keep it from dropping onto the seat.

“Watch my purse.” Pepper said, fixing a lumpy wave in Steve’s hair.

“Why? What’s it going to do?” Tony joked, turning to stare at the purse as if he expected it to run off after her. Steve tried not to blush at the fact that Tony was now staring blatantly at his crotch, even though the purse was in the way. Pepper flicking Tony in the ear and left.

“So…” Tony said, looking up from the purse and Steve’s groin as soon as she was gone. He was staring somewhere into Steve’s neck now, right below his chin, as if that were the most interesting place in the world.

“So…” Steve repeated.
“You’re not... dating Pepper, are you? Because that’s fine – she’s great – really nice and she’s totally up for the whole white picket fence two point five dogs and half a kid thing or whatever and you’d have really nice kids, because she has great bone structure and – ” Tony said, losing all semblance of composure. Steve blinked at Tony, not quite able to filter everything all in one go. He broke the ramble down into pieces and then fit it all back together again to see if what he had heard was correct.

Tony thought that he was dating Pepper?

Had their discussion in the bathroom really looked like that? Had it looked like some kind of illicit tryst? Oh god – it had looked like he was dating Pepper! It had looked like they were having some kind of illicit tryst!

“I’m not dating Pepper.” Steve blurted.

“And she loves art – you know that right? Because your kids would – wait...you’re not?” Tony looked relieved. “Because it’s totally fine if you are.”

“I’m not – I mean we’re not – she reminds me of my Ma.” Steve mumbled.

“Oh.” Tony fiddled with his sunglasses, still looking Steve in the neck instead of in the eye.

“Why do you ask?” Steve said, knowing that he was pushing his luck the moment the words came out of his mouth.

Tony gave Steve a nervous smile and looked away. “No reason.”

Their food arrived shortly after Pepper came back from the bathroom.

Everything was amazing, as Steve had suspected it would; he was starting to think that Tony spent quite a lot of time picking out places to eat just so that he could show off his excellent taste. Steve had to cut his burger in half in order to eat it, it was that big. He fought with the bun to keep the damned thing together, because all the bacon kept threatening to fall onto the plate. It was worth the effort. He hadn’t eaten anything this good since the gelato.

Tony managed to finish his own burger and all of the fries on his plate before anyone else did, to their surprise; he was even stealing the fries off of Steve’s plate whenever he thought that Steve wasn’t looking, taking sips of their milkshake every time Steve fought with his burger. Maybe there was some hope of getting some weight on him after all; it would be nice to see some of that harshness smoothed out. Of course Steve wasn’t going to say any of that out loud. That way led to madness and possibly another few days of silence on Tony’s part.

They stumbled back to the office feeling full and drowsy an hour and a half later, all three of them holding their stomachs, ready to start loosening their belts; theoretical belts of course, because none of them had belts on.

Pepper returned to working on the paperwork that she had been emailed earlier in the day, leaving Steve to his own devices. He thought about taking a nap, seeing as how there wasn’t really anything else to do. Tony had gone back to work after all, and his brain didn’t quite feel up to drawing at the moment; he was too full and content to do much more than softly breath with his eyes closed. He could still see the mountain of bacon that had come with the burger.

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“Go to sleep silly.” Pepper teased.
Steve leaned forwards, ready to cradle his head in his hands just as Tony thumped on the glass wall behind him, making him jump.

“You’re being summoned.” Pepper chuckled.

Steve staggered into Tony’s workshop where he was forced into Tony’s rolling chair and wheeled over to the computer. “What’s going on?” He asked groggily, but got no answer.

Tony typed while leaning over Steve’s shoulder. There was a video loaded on the screen, waiting to be played when Tony flipped between programs; it was on a news channel’s webpage, one Steve didn’t recognize. Tony leaned against the chair, a warm presence against Steve’s shoulders, and pressed play.

The video turned out to be recent footage of the Avengers fighting a tall and slender woman with a golden horned helmet, bright red lips and very prominent cleavage. The woman was commanding an army of robots – Doom Bots, Steve corrected himself when he recognized them – which were attempting to throw cars at civilians. He shrank back in horror every time something flew near the camera, hoping that no one had gotten hurt. Where the woman had gotten the robots from was a mystery, because as the reporters were saying, the only one who controlled Doom Bots was Doctor Doom, and he didn’t lend those out to just anyone.

Steve couldn’t help tensing when he realized just who he was looking at; he knew the woman even though he had only seen her before in his dreams. This was Loki in his female form, dancing around as if there wasn’t a single bit of action going on around him. Wait – Was this really Loki? No one had showed him images of her before, and he highly doubted that someone had taken the time to describe her to him while he was sleeping, even if Bucky had come to visit after fighting with her on more than a few occasions. Steve frowned.

“Who is this we’re watching?” He asked.

“Loki. She blew up three city blocks!” Tony said, whistling. “Look at that crater! Jeeze, she’s gone some ranger on her.”

“That’s… great…” Steve managed weakly. He flinched when the Bucky on screen narrowly avoided being struck with a semi-truck. The Hulk snagged the offending vehicle out of the air and proceeded to smash the Doom Bots with it, crushing them into smithereens, yelling ‘Hulk smash puny robots!’

Good job Hulk; Bruce looked like he was in top form. All of the Avengers looked like they were doing well, actually. It was a relief to see that they were all safe and sound at the end of the video. No one looked more than a bit sweaty. Natasha’s red hair was easy to spot amidst the debris, and even though she was standing on top of a wobbly pile of broken robot bits, she looked at ease.

“You should see Thor – man, that guy’s got great aim with that hammer of his. He’s some kind of Norse god or something.” Tony chuckled.

The video ended with the Avengers assembled in front of the remains of the semi-truck; someone had pasted a picture of the American flag behind them, which looked a bit tacky. There was nothing else of Loki, no hint of why she had been there in the first place; the anchors and avengers seemed unconcerned by her disappearance. The news anchor recapped, gave the damage tally at the end and then posed a question to the audience about who was going to pick up the tab for this ‘monumental’ disaster. Steve snorted, shaking his head. This wasn’t a disaster. He had seen worse.

Still, he didn’t really get why any of the carnage had happened in the first place; they probably
should have been asking *that* question instead. It seemed almost as if it was a random event, and with Loki, *nothing* was random. Sure, Loki was chaos, but he was a somewhat organized and planned chaos.

Steve bit his thumb. Something was definitely wrong. He just couldn’t put his finger on what was the most wrong. Something else niggled at him too; while he hadn’t seen Loki in his female form before, the lips and smile had seemed oddly familiar, and not just from his dreams. He had seen Loki somewhere else, but where?

Friday night blurred into Saturday morning. Steve dozed, wrapped in his blankets, alone as he had been the rest of the week; his feet were cold, so he pulled himself deeper under the blankets, curling his body to try and preserve what little heat he had. He was a little ashamed to admit that he was disappointed by the fact that he had been left alone, even though it was progress, he supposed; Tony hadn’t stared at him at all the previous night, focusing in on the television instead. There had been no sneaky side glances, or off and on staring either. It was fast progress too, seeing as how they had really only been roommates for little more than a week now. Still, he wouldn’t have minded waking up with Tony wrapped around him again, even if it was only for a few minutes.

He jerked awake at the smell of smoke. Steve struggled out of bed and left his musing behind for a better time. When he made it into the kitchen, having practically sprinted, he was met with the sight of a very drunk Tony attempting to make something on the stove in a frying pan. Steve wasn’t sure what it was that Tony had been intending to make, but it was black as charcoal and inedible now. It was smoking too, not that Tony seemed to notice; at least it wasn’t the drapes on fire. Steve cleared his throat, trying to make as much noise as possible so that he didn’t startle Tony; there was nothing more dangerous than startling a drunk with a hot frying pan.

“Tony?” Steve called out.

Tony yelped in pain as he burned himself; the frying pan hit the stove with a clang, black bits falling all over the stovetop like confetti.

“Jesus!” Tony howled.

“Are you alright?” Steve asked taking Tony’s hand in his own; Tony’s palm was red and welted. Thankfully, it didn’t look like the burn was too serious.

What had Tony been thinking? He was lucky he still had hands!

Steve contented himself with internally admonishing Tony, knowing that even if he had said it aloud, Tony probably wouldn’t have understood a word of it in his state. He guided Tony to the sink, running cold water over the burn, sighing to himself. Tony leaned against him, a shy smile plastered across his face even though he had just hurt himself; that was one thing about drunks. They never seemed to know when they had hurt themselves. It was both a comfort and a horror to behold.

“Good morning beautiful.” Tony giggled, wrapping himself around Steve from behind; Steve continue to hold Tony’s burned hand under the cold water, trying to be annoyed with him for the lack of safety. Tony’s beard scraped against the back of Steve’s neck, distracting him from his
irritation far too easily. A fire briefly flared up in his gut at the contact and for the first time since he had moved in with Tony, he was almost overpowered by lust. He managed to catch himself in time, pupils blown, and leaned forwards to get away; Tony just followed him, rubbing against him like a cat.

“I see you’re drunk today.” Steve said, forcing himself to focus on Tony’s hand instead of on the delicious scrape of his beard. Tony scowled into the back of Steve’s neck, pulling away. He yanked his wet hand out of Steve’s grasp and stumbled over to the stove again, starting to play with the frying pan he had dumped back on the burner; he was lucky that he didn’t drop the damn thing on his foot with how wet his hands were.

“And yet you’re still attempting to…” Steve trailed off.

“I’m cooking.” Tony argued. “Leave me alone.”

Steve watched Tony stoically, knowing that he should be stepping in at some point. He felt more tired than he had the night before, and just watching Tony bumble around near a hot stove made him want to go a few rounds with the punching bag sans hand wraps. He flicked on the fan over the stove to get rid of the smoke and then shut it off again once the worst of it was gone, feeling more than a little weary.

Babysitting… he was babysitting…

He turned around and left the room, wandering back into his bedroom; the day had started so well too. Not a single nightmare to be had. Steve sprawled on top of the covers, digging his fingers into the blanket underneath him. He wanted to yell at Tony, to give him a piece of his mind because this was just outrageous. But yelling wouldn’t have helped the situation any; he knew that all too well. Lectures and Tony Stark didn’t work. Drunk or Sober, it would all turn out the same way. Throwing things around wouldn’t have helped either, even if it would have been satisfying to huck the frying pan out the front door, burnt bits and all.

He breathed into the mattress, trying to keep his gasps from turning into full blown sobs of despair.

There Tony was in the kitchen, burning things away on the stove without a care in the world. He could have burned down the goddamned house! Worse, he could have seriously hurt himself! And would he learn from it? Probably not! He might not even remember it when he sobered up. It was surprising that the smoke alarm hadn’t gone off already; he hoped that there were actual batteries in the detectors. Knowing Tony, there might not be. They might have been scavenged for experiments or worn down from burning other unfortunate breakfasts.

He heard the sound of stumbling footsteps and sighed into the blanket.

Tony had finished his drunken cooking it seemed.

He hoped that Tony had at least had the sense to turn the stove off before he had left. The bed dipped lower and Tony crawled across the covers, collapsing beside Steve, his face turned towards the back of Steve’s head.

“I wanted to make you breakfast. I think I burned it.” Tony whispered, wiggling closer so that his bony knees were pressed up against the backs of Steve’s.

“It was a nice thought Tony.” Steve said with a sigh.

“I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”
“Do what again? The making me breakfast part or the burning it?” Steve teased, forcing himself not to be too judgemental. He had visions of the kitchen on fire and shuddered; maybe he would have to look in to getting the stove locked down or something to keep this from repeating. Could you get a breathalyzer stuck in a kitchen appliance? He knew he could get one for a car, but he had never heard of anyone hooking their stove up to one. Now that he was thinking about it, he was definitely going to go poke around in the fire detectors to make sure they were working properly. No sense in waiting around to see what happened; fire trucks weren’t that exciting, and he wasn’t looking forward to their sneering faces if Tony did manage to burn the place down around them.

“The drunken breakfast part.” Tony mumbled. He stroked Steve between his shoulder blades, rubbing his thumb down Steve’s spine.

“Tony…”

“He called this morning.” Tony grumbled, rolling over so that he wasn’t facing Steve anymore, hands curled in front of him.

Steve sat up, shrugging the blanket off of his thighs.

So that was the reason behind the drunkenness. Howard had called and Tony had retreated to the bottom of a bottle; Steve had the sudden urge to strangle something or rather, someone.

“Are you alright?” Steve asked.

“My hand hurts.” Tony whined morosely.

“Well that’s what happens when you try to make drunken… whatever that was.”

“I think it was eggs…”

“Well whatever it was… just… please be careful alright? I don’t think I can carry you to the hospital. You’re too heavy.”

Tony rolled over, the goofy grin back on his face, the pain in his hand forgotten. He grabbed Steve’s leg, fingers curling around Steve’s knee and squeezed; it didn’t hurt, and felt more like Steve was being mauled by a small child.

“That’s just because you’re so small…” Tony grinned crookedly, only slightly slurring his words.

“I think we’ve established that I’m small Tony.” Steve sighed in despair.

Tony didn’t respond.

Steve looked down at Tony and scowled; Tony had fallen asleep with his hand still attached to Steve’s knee. Steve gingerly extricated his trapped limb and then wrapped the blanket around Tony to make him more comfortable. Tony wriggled under the blanket in his sleep, smirking away in unconsciousness; how he had made it from the kitchen into the bedroom without concussing himself on the wall was a miracle in of itself. He looked so sweet like that; a delinquent kitten caught napping off its crime after making a ridiculous mess out of that one perfect roll of toilet paper you had been saving for guests. Steve brushed Tony’s bangs back, fingers threading through hair still soft and tangled from sleep. He rubbed his thumb against Tony’s scalp making Tony moan in his sleep.

Tony shoved his head closer to Steve’s hand, eyelids fluttering but not opening, very solidly lodged in his dream world.

What was he doing?
If he didn’t watch it he would be getting himself into trouble again, and it wouldn’t just be an awkward conversation he was going to have to fend off. Steve reluctantly removed his hand; Tony let out a soft whimpering sound before nuzzling against the blankets.

Steve had missed this. Missed having Tony so close, so touchable; the smell of him was so good, so… wonderful. It triggered something deep inside him, making Steve almost drunk with lust even though there wasn’t anything remotely lustful about a drunken passed out idiot who had almost burned down the entire kitchen. Steve wanted to curl up, wrap himself around Tony and beg for – for anything, really. He would have let Tony do anything to him – anything to keep Tony happy.

God, what was he doing to himself? What the hell was wrong with him?

Why did Tony have to be so attractive? That was the problem really, once he got down to it. It wasn’t even because Tony was gorgeous as hell; it was more that everything about him was enthralling. Tony could scream in Steve’s face, cringe or drink himself to death and Steve would just keep coming back for more. There was something there that he wanted to protect. Something he wanted to nurture and take care of.

Steve sighed, scrubbing his hands over his face. He was doomed. He needed to get over this so that he could go back to mourning the loss of the Tony from his dreams, the one who had kissed him and made everything better with just a few whispered words; he couldn’t be in love with this man, not this quickly. Only… it didn’t feel like he needed to mourn anymore. He was an awful person, wasn’t he? His Tony was a week dead – oh god. That’s what he was, wasn’t he? Dream-Tony was dead. Tears streaming down Steve’s face and he sobbed quietly as Tony snored beside him.

This wasn’t right.

He had his Tony – he had loved that Tony so much. Why was he doing this? This wasn’t his Tony! This was a drunken stranger, a man he didn’t even know and it was too late, wasn’t it? He was already stupidly in love and it was too late.

Steve sobbed harder, pressing his face into the blankets to muffle the sound in case Tony woke up.

He didn’t miss Tony – he was such horrible person! He stifled a sob by stuffing his fist into his mouth, his eyes brimming with tears.

But his Tony wasn’t here, and he knew that no matter what happened, Tony would want him to be happy, even if it meant going on without him.

Steve sniffled.

This Tony was almost the same sweet man he had known, the man who had been so patient and understanding with him no matter what happened. They were the same man, only it felt like he was getting a glimpse of something dark and secret inside Tony; something he shouldn’t be seeing.

Alright. He could do this – get it together Steve, he screamed in his head. Get it together! You can’t break down now – not like this.

Steve let out a shuddered breath, wiping his nose on his arm and his hand on the blanket. He looked at Tony curled up next to him warily. Why did Tony have to drink so much? Steve wanted to believe that the previous week’s drunkenness was just because of the adjustment of having a new person living in his house; he had wished it feverishly, prayed that Tony would find the strength to stop, but it hadn’t stopped, had it? He had really been hopeful that his talk might have had some kind of positive impact on Tony. He would have taken anything Tony did at this point as an improvement –
one less beer in his normal weekend binge fest, one less glass of whiskey when they came home, *anything*.

He needed to know that he could reach Tony. He needed Tony to know that he was there, and that he was a friend, not an enemy; he needed to be strong and let dream-Tony go once and for all.

He tried not to be too pessimistic about the odds of that particular event happening any time soon. His luck hadn’t always been the best, but he would take what he got and be proud of it, even if it ripped away at his soul. He had survived the super soldier serum, and so what if it had put him into a coma? He was here, now, living in 2012, and he was surrounded by people he respected and loved—well, all except for Howard. He was alive, and he could do anything if he just put his mind to it. He could get over this and he could be Tony’s friend. He could let dream-Tony go, and he could focus on this Tony. He could love the both of them.

It was then that Tony chose to let out one of the loudest, most ungodly smelling beer-farts Steve had ever had the displeasure of being around for. Steve coughed, almost gagging.

**Sweet Jesus!**

He fanned the air around him, trying to clear some of the odour away, sitting up, laughing and crying at the same time.

Perhaps he was being naive about it all. It wasn’t like him being around had really changed anything in Tony’s life, aside from giving him an unwanted louse in his guest room. He hadn’t exactly gotten him to throw all the liquor out, and there sure weren’t any hugs on the horizon that was for sure; no kisses, or long leisurely mornings spent curled up together.

He had to remind himself, biting down on his lip extra hard so the words would stick, that change wasn’t always instantaneous. Sometimes it took a lot more than just one push to get things going in the right direction. Bucky had given him those gems of wisdom years ago when he was picking himself up off the ground after getting his head stomped on by Georgie Tubbell, the neighborhood bully. ‘You have to wait for it,’ Bucky had told him, wiping Steve’s bloody nose on his own sleeve ruining a perfectly good shirt, ‘it’ll get there when it gets there.’

He sure hoped that Bucky was right.

“Don’t…. wanna…. Can’t… broke…” Tony whined in his sleep, struggling against the comforter, fighting off something imaginary. Steve ruffled Tony’s hair and Tony stilled, a smile spreading across his sleeping face. His breathing evened out, at peace again.

“Steve…” Tony murmured softly, starting to snore again with his face mashed into the pillows.

Did Tony know that he was here?

No, Tony probably didn’t know that he was here. It was just a coincidence. Lots of people had the name Steve these days. His name wasn’t exactly uncommon, and he had seen quite a few drunks that parroting things when they were too far gone. That was it. It wasn’t anything special, he told himself.

**Drunks…. Speaking of drunks….**

What had Howard wanted with Tony so early in the morning? Judging by the level of intoxication it must have been a *doozy* of a conversation. He would have given anything to have been a fly on the wall for that. Had it been about work? About the board meeting that had seemed to go so well? Was it about Pepper, or about him? Had Howard done something?
Well, no matter what had happened he could at least make sure that Tony had breakfast that wasn’t composed of charcoal and little black bits of god-knows-what. Tony deserved to be taken care of properly. Of course that would mean that he would have to tackle the disaster in the kitchen – the thought of the pan adhering with black, sticky, burned eggs made him shudder.

God, he hoped that Tony hadn’t left the burner on. He got up and went to go clean up, leaving Tony sleeping peacefully in his bed, his little drunken angel.

Tony awoke from his whiskey-induced coma around two in the afternoon. Steve had finished cleaning up the disaster area that had once been a kitchen hours beforehand and had taken it upon himself to make some soup for when Tony finally woke up. He was still embarrassed about his little… incident when he had been drunk, so he wasn’t going to be too harsh with Tony for having any kind of accident of his own, not that he had. He had checked in on Tony every half hour to make sure that he hadn’t thrown up all over the place, and thankfully everything had been urine and vomit free. Tony had rolled over and burped once, and that had been it. Apparently Tony was only pleasantly drunk and not completely out of it. He wondered how much of the morning Tony would remember.

Steve had even had the time to go a few rounds with the punching bag to blow off some steam while he waited for Tony to wake up. Even if he hadn’t been able to move the damned bag at all, the bruises on his knuckles made him feel as if he had at least done something productive. He could still fight, even if it was only boxing against shadows, and that was enough for now. His hands didn’t hurt too much today. He was starting to think that the serum was actually doing something useful, working even if it wasn’t quite going along at the same pace. That was something to keep in mind at least. There was always hope.

Tony staggered into the kitchen where Steve was lazily sketching out something he had seen in his dreams the night before; drawing Lady Loki had been a soothing catharsis, pulling the images out of his mind and onto paper something much more pleasant than he had thought it would be. He kept seeing Loki’s ruby red lips, the Cheshire cat grin of his dreams when he closed his eyes; he knew he was missing something, and it was driving him mad not knowing what it was.

Tony collapsed into the chair across from Steve looking like death warmed over; he smelled faintly of vomit and burnt eggs, but seemed none the worse for wear. Steve pushed the sketchbook away and brought Tony a glass of water and a bowl of chicken noodle soup, going back to his sketch work without a word once the task was done. Tony drank the water, downing almost the entire glass in one gulp. He then sipped at the soup, wincing every time his spoon scraped across the bottom of the bowl; at least he was enthusiastic about it.

“Did you sleep well?” Steve asked, trying not to sound as sarcastic as he felt. The day was mostly wasted now, and he had wanted to go for a walk but hadn’t found a good time to go, concerned about what would happen if Tony woke up alone. He didn’t have a key after all, and he couldn’t very well leave the front door unlocked even if the area was safe. He couldn’t let something happen to Tony on his watch. He wouldn’t let anything happen if he could help it.

Tony groaned, resting his head against the table, spoon held upright, clutched tightly in his fist.

“That good, huh?” Steve teased, starting on another sketch of Lady Loki. He was starting to think that the details he was adding were details he hadn’t seen on the news. He didn’t like to think that what he was drawing fit her so well; didn’t like the idea that he knew her, seeing as how he had
never met her. Was it because of his illustration training or perhaps because of his constant need to improve on what was available? His teachers had always given him top marks for creativity. Whatever the case, the clothing he had drawn Loki in seemed to suit – her? Him? He supposed that it didn’t really matter, seeing as how he would never be meeting the super villain slash villainess. It didn’t really matter that she looked rather fine in a floor length gown or in a business suit. It didn’t matter that her eyes seemed to follow him from across the page.

“It’s a bad… bad… day today.” Tony grumbled, letting the spoon drop to the table. He twitched at the sound, trembling as he turned the bowl around and picked it up to drain the last dregs of the soup. Steve made a few sweeping lines on the page, sketching out where Loki’s staff was going to be; the staff was elegant, a piece of artwork used for dastardly deeds. He ran a finger over the page, starting. He had drawn little crystals on the page beside Loki without even realizing he had done it. Where had those come from? There were three, each one with a different colour to it. He was drawing in graphite, not in coloured pencil but everything had its own distinct colour in his mind’s eye. The colours were so vivid too, like he had lifted them from real life. He gave his head a shake, but that didn’t send the images skittering away like he had hoped it would.

“Is it now…” Steve said, frowning at the picture, worrying his lower lip. The blue crystal looked very familiar. He could see it in his memories and his dreams, hazy but there, a ghost-like figure from his dream world.

They seemed far too familiar for it to just be some kind of coincidence; where there was Loki, there was magic. And if it was around, what might it have touched? He had never really liked magic, and he had never really believed in coincidence either. He wondered what Thor would think of his brother’s actions. Was he still hunting Loki down for his crimes against Midgard? Or had he given up, simply taking what Loki dished out in the off chance that he managed to catch him? What was going on with the rest of the Avengers for that matter? Bucky hadn’t been around in a while, and he hadn’t heard anything more about any extreme battles happening around town; he had been checking the news every night to find out, and so far there had been nothing more than a few sordid robberies. Were they training, enjoying their time off while it lasted? Did they have Saturday movie nights like in his dream-memories?

“Yes. Very… bad… day…” Tony mumbled into the tabletop.

The doorbell rang, like some kind of morbid death toll; Tony winced, rubbing his eyes. “A very very very bad day…”

Steve rose from his chair, still absorbed in thoughts about the crystals. He remembered a man named Dr. Strange from the dream world. Maybe he could help.

“I’ll get it –” Tony said, struggling upright when the doorbell rang again.

“It’s fine. I’m already there.” Steve called out, standing in front of the door. The doorbell rang for a third time. He unlocked the door, opening it without looking through the peek hole because he wasn’t tall enough to reach it to begin with; that proved to be a costly mistake.

A voluptuous blonde woman stood on the porch dressed in what Steve could only describe as candy floss. She smiled at Steve batting her dark eyelashes and tucked her rhinestone mini-purse under her arm, taking his hand in hers; she shook it with so much force that he nearly brained himself with his own arm. He blushed, confused and mortified by her cleavage, which was currently level with his nose.

He could have lost an eye. Good god!
“I’m Mandy. Is Tony in?” She said, her voice sweet like caramel.

Steve’s mouth went dry; he turned, her hand still grasping his in a vicelike grip he had once only known of SHIELD Agents. Tony stumbled down the hallway towards them. He perked right up once he saw the woman in the doorway. Tony preened, an arrogant, cocky grin spreading across his lips. Mandy dropped Steve’s hand and pranced inside, seizing Tony by the chin, kissing him; it was more of a facial mauling than a kiss really, and Steve couldn’t help but stare at the pair of them. He was embarrassed to be witnessing it. Embarrassed and hurt, frankly.

Steve stood, half in the doorway, half outside, hands held at his sides with his fists balled. Something inside him twitched, cracking. This was more than just embarrassment – this was something old – something old and with claws.

Tony broke free from the embrace and gave Mandy’s ass a hearty squeeze; she giggled and looked over her shoulder at Steve, holding her hand over her mouth with a coy smile, winking at him.

“See you later handsome. We have an appointment to keep.” She purred. Tony gave her a lighthearted spank and sent her down the hallway, nodding once to Steve.

“See you later Steve.” Tony said. He turned and chased after Mandy, remarkably mobile for a man who had been swimmingly drunk not four hours ago.

Steve watched them disappear up the stairs and then walked outside, closing the front door behind him without making it click as it shut. He moved on his now favourite auto-pilot setting until he was out near the front gate, far away from the door; he sat down with his back against the wall, not looking back at the house, drawing his knees up to his chest.

He wanted to cry and scream in rage. He was caught in a whirlpool now, emotions churning inside, the part of him that had cracked finally shattering with the realization that what had happened was real, and not just some nightmare slipping into daylight. What a stupid day to realize how much he loved Tony.

It had only been a matter of time before something like this had happened, he supposed. Tony had a reputation after all; Tony had always had a reputation with the ladies, even in Steve’s dream-memories. He had been idiotic to think that there would be something between them that would have Tony keeping away from other people – at least those kinds of people; the ones who wanted nothing more than to sleep with a billionaire, even if Tony wasn’t exactly one at the moment.

He was stupid. Steve slapped his forehead, eyes watering.

It was like Tony was cheating on him somehow. Those claws in his chest – that’s what they were. Plain old jealousy come a calling. They weren’t even together – they had only been together in his memories, and those weren’t real, now were they? He knew that, so why did his chest hurt so much all of a sudden? Why did he keep thinking about Tony’s smile, and the way he had looked with Mandy?

Steve looked up at the house, barely holding in a deep, body-shaking sob; he rocked forwards and pressed his face against his knees.

They were in there together in one of the rooms that Steve had never had the privilege of seeing doing… he knew what they were doing. She had gotten to go up there – a stranger – and he… he had never been invited. He would never be invited.
Steve hadn’t wanted to go back inside; he would have preferred to sit outside for the rest of the night, sleeping amidst the old leaves and yellowing grass.

It had gotten dark after what seemed like hours of sitting on the cold ground, and his body was no good at staying warm on its own anymore; he had started shaking, his skin covered in goose pimples, and that had been that. There was no way to get out of it. He was going to have to go back inside.

He snuck silently into the kitchen and made himself a sandwich despite not feeling hungry and then carried it back to his room, making sure to close the door behind him. He had to have been imagining the girlish giggling – he had to have, because there was no way he should have been able to hear any of that from his bedroom.

Steve sat with his back against the wall underneath his window, simply staring at the sandwich instead of eating it; he hadn’t bothered to turn on the lights. There hadn’t seemed to be much of a point. He watched the alarm clock from his position on the floor as if it were the television, waiting for nine o’clock to roll around so that he could go to sleep. At nine, he carefully picked up the plate, set it down on his drawing table untouched and undressed, sliding into bed. He could go to sleep now, not that he wanted to do that either. He had no doubt what would be in his dreams now; he didn’t want to hear that laughter in his head, or see that smile any more.

He closed his eyes, wishing that he could have started the day over so that it wouldn’t have ended so horribly. He would have gone out on that run if he had known this was going to happen. Then he wouldn’t have been around to see her; he wouldn’t have been around to see that stupid look on Tony’s face. He wouldn’t have had to face any of it.

Steve woke up to the sensation of the bed dipping lower; he had been dreaming of falling again, and flinched into consciousness. Had that been part of the dream? No, the bed really had dipped. He blinked back sleep, rolling onto his side and took in the sight of a very buck-naked Tony Stark sitting on his bed, elbows resting on his knees. At first Steve thought that he was hallucinating; Tony coughed, covering his mouth and then wiped his lower lip. No, this wasn’t a dream. This was real. What the hell was going on?

Most of the room was in darkness and all Steve could see was the sharp cut of Tony’s pale back and the line of his jaw bathed in the thin strip of moonlight tearing its way through the break in the curtains; there was no arc reactor glowing from Tony’s chest as there had been in the dream-memories; another thing he had imagined into existence. It looked almost unnatural without the arc reactor, and yet that was how a human was supposed to look, wasn’t it? He wanted to be angry with Tony, or maybe disappointed. Instead he felt uncertain and more than a little numb. He wasn’t in a relationship with Tony – he was in love with him, and those were two very different things, things that didn’t touch.

“Steve?” Tony’s voice was raw and somewhat ragged, rough in the darkness. Steve stirred without meaning to; Tony turned slowly to face him, pulling his legs up onto the bed. He sat cross legged and hunched over, watching Steve.

“Are you awake?”

“I’m awake.” Steve said reluctantly. His voice broke. He was glad that he sounded as if it were
cracking from sleep instead of emotion; Tony shouldn’t have to know what this was doing to him. That wasn’t fair to him.

Tony didn’t move, frozen in place. He let out a deep sigh and then scratched at his beard, the sound jarring, chasing away the still lurking silence.

“It’s all part of the deal I have with him.” Tony said, looking down at his bare legs.

“What is?” Steve asked hesitantly.

“Her – the woman in my bed.”

“What are you talking about Tony?” Steve groaned, pulling the blanket up over his head so that he didn’t have to see Tony’s bare thighs and stomach; that sight would be burned into his head forever now, he knew, and it just wasn’t fair! Tony tugged at the blanket, pulling it back down, hands brushing against Steve’s shoulders; it felt like electricity had gone through Steve’s skin, and he recoiled without meaning to. Tony took it the wrong way, scooting backwards to put some space between them, almost falling off the bed.

“I disgust you, don’t I?” Tony whispered.

“You don’t disgust me. I just don’t understand what’s going on right now Tony. I’m confused as to why you are here and not up there…” Steve said, looking up at Tony from behind the ridge that had formed in the blanket; it had thankfully blocked out most of Tony’s body, leaving only his face visible. At least this way he could pretend that Tony was still dressed.

“I have a deal with him. He lets me stay here without paying rent, and he lets me work at SI if I do stuff like this at least three times a year.” Tony blurted, sounding broken.

Steve sat up, letting the blankets fall around his hips, squinting to make out Tony’s expression in the darkness. Tony’s eyes were hidden in shadows; his lips were curling downwards at the corners, his hands clasped under his chin as if in prayer.

“You’re talking about Howard?”

“Who the hell do you think I would be talking about? Big Bird?” Tony snapped angrily. He dropped his hands to his sides and fisted the blanket in front of him, fingers curling in a way that made his hands look claw-like in the darkness.

“He makes you sleep with women?”

“He wants grandkids. So that someone he actually likes can inherit the company.” Tony said bitterly, staring at the blanket crushed in his hand. “So he sends over the ones he handpicks and gets me to fuck them so that if one of them gets pregnant…”

Steve’s jaw dropped.

“You’re not a fuck up.” Steve said. He reached out hesitantly and touched Tony’s hand.

Tony shrank back.

Steve knew then that he was having a discussion with Sober Tony; Tony was sitting naked on his
bed, talking about something uncomfortable without a beer bottle in hand. It felt surreal, almost like he really was still dreaming. He was tempted to pinch himself to see.

“Can you not… touch me?” Tony whispered.

Steve pulled his hand back with a snap, realizing that he had left it out, extended to reach for Tony.

“Sorry.”

“It’s alright.” Tony let out a loud sigh again and then toppled sideways, hugging his knees into his chest; he looked at Steve from his awkward position, scowling although at what Steve wasn’t sure. Goosebumps crept their way up Tony’s pale and exposed flesh, so Steve lifted the blanket up and dumped it over top of him, covering him from shoulder to toe. Tony smiled softly at him in the moonlight, working his way closer as he shivered, closing the gap between them a little more until Steve could feel Tony’s knees bumping against his own. Tony was so cold, and Steve could feel it through the thin fabric of his pajamas. He couldn’t quite suppress a shiver of his own. He controlled the urge to reach out and rub warmth into Tony’s half frozen skin under the blanket, arranging the blanket instead to keep his hands busy and out of trouble.

“How long have you been… wandering around naked?” Steve asked carefully, almost smiling at the sheer absurdity of the question.

“I don’t know. I escaped when she fell asleep.” Tony shrugged.

“So you just… left her up there… alone… in your bedroom.”

“Yes. I don’t want to talk about it. Can I sleep here tonight?”

“I guess. Seems like you already are.”

“Thanks.”

“Good night Tony.”

“Good night Steve.”

Someone banged heavily on his bedroom door. Steve wiped sleep from his eyes and managed to pull his blanket up around him in time to see Mandy yank open the door, apparently searching for her escaped lover. When she spotted Tony curled up and snoring on the opposite side of the bed from Steve she frowned, just as confused as Steve was; it took Steve’s brain a few seconds to remember what the hell had happened the night before.

“This is where he snuck off to?”

“So it appears.” Steve said, trying not to laugh.

Tony remained asleep beside him, dead to the world.

Mandy leaned against the doorframe; she was wearing the shirt Tony had been wearing the night before, and it did little to hide the fact that she wasn’t wearing any underwear; Steve recognized the
soup stains on the sleeve and tried not to snicker. She crossed her arms over her ample bosom almost scowling at him.

“So are you two… like… together or something?” She asked.

“Not to my knowledge.” Steve said.

“You do realize that he’s naked…”

“Yes.”

“…In your bed.”

“Again… yes.”

“May I ask why?” She laughed.

“I have no idea. He wandered in here last night and curled up. He didn’t really say.” Steve lied. He didn’t want to tell her anything about the things Howard had forced Tony into; it was Tony’s business, not hers, and he wouldn’t break that confidence for anything.

“He was pretty out of it last night, that’s for sure. I think I broke him.” She smirked, obviously feeling pretty proud of herself. Steve wanted to smack her upside the head.

“I sure hope not. He’s a good guy.” Steve gritted out.

“Oh there’s no question about that. He’s a sweetheart, no matter what his dad says about him. Mr. Stark paid me up front so that I wouldn’t ask questions of course. Said something about making sure that ‘Steve’,” She nodded at Steve after that, “got a good eyeful of what was going on. I think he was trying to be an asshole.”

“I see.”

“I’m not a prostitute or something – if that’s what you’re thinking.” She grumbled, noting the furrow in his brow.

“I wasn’t thinking that.”

“He puts out ads sometimes in the college newspaper – wants to find someone ‘looking for a good time’ and then he has you send in a resume to see if your ‘qualifications’ fit what he’s looking for. I would have told him to go fuck himself, but I needed the money to pay for my tuition. Besides, if something happened and things worked out right, I’d be set for life.” She drawled, examining her fingernails.

Steve gave her a terse smile.

“You should be careful.” She said to Steve after a second.

“Oh?”

“Yeah… When Mr. Stark was talking with me on the phone he sounded pretty pissed off, like he wanted to punish you for something. You look like a total lamb, so honestly I hope you haven’t done anything to him. I’ve heard rumors. They say he can be a real monster if he’s mad.” She said, straightening herself. She stretched like a cat, all curves and long limbs.

“Anyways, I’ll get going then. I was hoping to get another shot in with him, but here he is, passed
out in your bed and all. I enjoy kinky just as much as much as any other woman, and no disrespect, but you’re far too cute to be in a threesome with darling.” She said, winking.

“Um… thank you?” Steve went beet red.

“No problem. Take care of the knuckle head, yeah? He looks like he’s pretty comfortable with you and he seems like he could use a good friend. He was all cocky and shit yesterday, acting like the big man who knew how to have a good time, but after we fucked he turned into a total turtle – kept flinching whenever I got too close to him, so I just let it drop and went to sleep.”

“Is that so…” Steve said, looking away.

She smirked at him. “I take it you don’t get laid often.”

“That’s none of your business.” Steve grumbled.

“I’m only asking because well… never mind. See you later Steve. Give me a call if you need anyone yourself.” She said, leaving with a wink. Steve watched her disappear down the hallway and vanish out of sight. He hoped that she wouldn’t start spreading it around that she had found Tony in bed with him; not that Tony would have a ruined reputation or anything. It just didn’t seem fair for Tony to have that kind of thing thrown at him.

An hour later, Steve heard the front door open and close with a bang. He didn’t really want to get up to go lock it, but his better judgement got a hold of him and he got up to do it anyways. When he got back to his room he found Tony sitting up in bed looking around, seeming very confused. Tony took one look at Steve and paled, pulling the blanket up around him, using it as a shield.

“This is a private room, Tony. You’re not supposed to wander around.”

“Do you want breakfast?” Steve asked tiredly, walking back out of the room before Tony could say anything.

It was painful to see a shy Tony Stark. He wondered what had changed in Tony’s life to make him so neurotic; in the dream-world he had always been a little twitchy, but it hadn’t been this bad. Was it been because Jarvis had never been around to keep him company? Maybe it was because Tony hadn’t gone off to boarding school? Was it because he had spent most of his life under Howard’s watchful eye his entire life? It could have been any number of things – things that Steve didn’t know even. He sighed, shaking his head as he approached the fridge. It wasn’t as if he knew Tony’s life story. He doubted that he would ever earn enough trust to learn that much.

Steve threw open the fridge. Their groceries had whittled down to almost nothing since the previous Saturday, and they would have to go shopping soon. He took another look around to be sure he hadn’t missed anything and saw that, as he expected, there was enough left for at least one more meal if he scraped things together without burning anything. Tony’s drunken attempt at breakfast the previous morning hadn’t done too much damage, and luckily they still had enough eggs left for two omelettes.

Tony was standing in the kitchen when Steve closed the fridge; he had wrapped himself up in Steve’s blanket, peering at Steve with that same dreadful nervous expression Steve had learned was his default for awkward moments.

“I’m going to make omelettes. We have some mushrooms and cheese left – is that alright with you?”

Steve asked, padding with the eggs to the counter.

“You’re not at all concerned about how I ended up in bed with you?”

“Should I be concerned?” Steve said, raising an eyebrow.
“I’m bare-ass-naked.”

“So I noticed. So mushrooms and cheese then?” Steve pulled out a bowl and began to assemble breakfast.

“I don’t get you.” Tony said, shaking his head, stalking from the room.

“Make sure you put my blanket back when you’re done!” Steve called out over his shoulder.

Things were certainly strange. At least he didn’t have to think about what to make for breakfast anymore though.

Steve sat out in the front yard sketching the willow tree growing around the birdbath; both looked relatively uncared for, which didn’t surprise Steve in the least. He could guess what Tony would do if someone gave him a pair of pruning shears and told him to get to work. It wasn’t a pretty thought. Someone would probably have lost fingers. Not that Steve thought that Tony was reckless or unskilled with shears; he just thought that Tony would get distracted ten seconds into such mediocre work and start cutting intricate patterns, or maybe he would just start remodeling the shears. The fingers that went missing might not even be his.

Steve was putting the finishing touches on the first sketch of the tree when Tony stalked out of the house holding the plastic shield-Frisbee Bucky had given him; Steve hadn’t looked at it since the day it had been given to him. It looked foreign in Tony’s hand, like it was a plastic toy, which of course it was.

“You spend a lot of time drawing.” Tony said, setting the Frisbee down on the top of Steve’s head like a hat. Steve scowled up at him but didn’t bother to push the Frisbee off, intent on finishing the sketch before Tony could distract him further. It had been going so well too.

“So I was thinking that we might throw this around.” Tony said, tapping the Frisbee. The sound reverberated around in Steve’s skull, making him want to scratch at his ears. When Steve didn’t immediately respond, Tony tapped the Frisbee again.

“Give me a second, alright?” Steve grumbled, having to hide a wonky-shaped line under a straighter one.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to –” Tony grumbled back, hands dropping to his sides.

“I don’t mind, really. Just let me finish this.”

Steve finished the sketch and closed his sketchbook, setting it aside on the steps; the Frisbee fell off of his head and he nearly tripped over his own feet trying to both make his way down the stairs and catch it at the same time. He was really getting tired of being in his real body; he was such a klutz! He hated being so useless.

Tony laughed at him and plucked the Frisbee out of his hands, backing up to get ready to throw it. Steve barely had time to react before the plastic disk was hurtling towards him.

At least Tony wasn’t babying him.

Steve caught it with his fingertips, jumping up when it flew too high and flung it back; the Frisbee
connected with Tony’s hand almost dead centre. This was a familiar game, only the last time he had been playing it had been in his dreams.

Tony looked impressed.

“I didn’t think you had such good aim.” Tony remarked, letting lose again. The Frisbee flew through the air slightly lower this time and Steve caught it with ease, hurling it back with the same deadly accuracy.

“I used to do this a lot.” Steve said; he tried not to think about how the practice had mostly been in his head, or about the fact that he had been using the real shield.

“Hey, Tony!”

Steve caught the Frisbee and turned to see a greasy looking man with a camera making his way across the lawn towards them; one look at Tony told him that this man was not someone Tony particularly cared for. Tony stiffened, arms crossing over his chest; he was back to cocky Tony again, playing for the camera.

“What’s up Dave?” Tony drawled.

“I came around to see if I could spot little miss April before she left. What is this, number three this year? Making it a grand total of something like… seventy eight, if I’m doing the math correct?” Dave grinned, lifting the camera up. “Or is the little blonde dude your next conquest? Is he going to have your genius babies?”

“Fuck off.” Tony said cheerfully, gesturing for Steve to start throwing the Frisbee around again. Steve threw the Frisbee, watching Dave the entire time, a frown permanently etched on his face. Dave stepped out of the way and then lifted his camera up, snapping a few pictures of the pair of them.

“So little guy – whatever your name is – you enjoying being Stark’s number seventy nine?” Dave asked, smirking.

“I already told you Dave he’s –” Tony growled.

Steve turned, aiming very carefully and accidentally lobbed the Frisbee at Dave’s head. He wasn’t surprised when the Frisbee connected, breaking the guy’s nose, and rebounded back to his hand. Steve flexed his wrist, grinning at the success, pretending to look bashful.

“Oh. Sorry about that. Got a little distracted there.” Steve tossed the Frisbee back to Tony without pausing. Tony looked startled; a real grin spread across his face as he pitched the Frisbee back at Steve, watching the way Dave was clutching his nose, blood dribbling through his fingers.

“Jesus –” Dave whimpered, reaching for his camera again, determined to get a good shot despite his injury.

Steve switched sides with Tony and lobbed the Frisbee back at Dave; this time, the Frisbee struck the man in the shoulder, making him drop his camera. Dave cursed loudly, the camera hitting the ground with enough force to break the lens. He looked up, as if he wanted to be very angry but didn’t know what to do, and then set eyes on a very innocent looking Steve, who was pretending to look horrified by the ‘accident’.

“Sorry!” Steve called out.
Dave grumbled about dumb blondes and wandered away, carrying his broken camera. He fished out the memory card, grinning to himself that at least that part had survived. Once Dave was out of sight, Tony burst into laughter; Steve narrowly avoided beaming him in the head with the Frisbee when he dropped to his knees in the soft grass.

“Steve… oh my god you are just…” Tony wheezed, laughing so hard that he couldn’t breathe. Steve rolled his eyes and then went to go pick up the Frisbee, playfully whacking Tony in the shoulder with it.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Steve!”

Steve paused in mid-swope with the Frisbee, ready to let loose.

Bucky strode across the grass in full Captain America regalia; the shield was strapped to his back, gleaming in the sunlight, polished to perfection. He grinned at Steve, pulling down the cowl to reveal a curl of hair stuck to his sweat slick forehead. Steve heard Tony’s laughter grind to a halt as he was tucked against Bucky’s chainmail covered chest, his ears blocked by Bucky’s massive arms. He tried very hard to breathe through the bone crushing hug; the Frisbee fell to the grass, forgotten.

“Hey.” Steve croaked out.

Bucky let Steve go and grinned, messing up Steve’s hair. “How’s it going? I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d stop by.”

“Avengers business?” Steve asked picking up the Frisbee. He held it in his hands, wishing that he could exchange it for the real thing. He had almost touched the shield on Bucky’s back, not thinking. Bucky’s armor had scratched Steve’s skin even though his shirt; he felt itchy all over. He looked closer as Bucky leaned in and saw that Bucky’s armor was scraped up and covered in something unpleasantly familiar.

“Is that blood?”

“Maybe.” Bucky shrugged and once more ruffled Steve’s hair.

“Quit that.” Steve complained, pulling away. Bucky frowned at him and cast a glance at Tony, who was trying to get up and leave without making any noise; his jeans were grass stained from his ill-advised drop to his knees, as were his hands. Bucky and Tony exchanged a tense look; Tony froze in place, half standing.

“You seem to be in a bad mood today.” Bucky growled to Steve, eyes not leaving Tony.

Steve shrugged. “There was a reporter trying to harass Tony. We chased him off.”

Bucky chuckled and finally looked away from Tony, stretching out. He pulled the shield off of his back and handed it to Steve.

“Hold this for a sec will you? My back is killing me.” Bucky said.

It was a blatant lie, because Bucky didn’t look the least bit tired, but Steve let him get away with it. He didn’t mind holding the shield, even if he could barely keep a hold it. The shield seemed to weight as much as a car and he could feel himself tipping over, falling towards the grass with it clutched against his chest. Bucky rested a hand lightly on Steve’s shoulder, keeping him upright; it was a little like being held up by a statue.
“The real thing is a lot nicer, right?” Bucky said.

Steve lifted the shield up, muscles straining and ran his fingers over the polished surface. He had dreamed of the shield the night before, dreamed of holding it and using it with purpose again. He could still feel what it was like to hurl the disc through the air and his body tensed in anticipation of the act; he wanted to try throwing it around, itched to really let it fly. Instead, he handed the shield back and took a step away from Bucky, moving to go stand beside Tony, who was a little paler than he had been a few minutes beforehand.

“It sure is Bucky. It’s an amazing shield.” Steve said.

Tony edged backwards towards the stairs, walking backwards.

“You going somewhere Stark?” Bucky growled, zeroing in on Tony almost immediately drawn like a shark to blood in the water.

Tony looked embarrassed at having been caught escaping and smiled weakly at Bucky, eyes darting to Steve.

“I uh…”

Bucky gave Tony a look. It wasn’t just any old look; it seemed to be modeled on something Steve had seen on Howard’s face time and time again. It was filled with contempt – contempt and rage all boiled together, a disgusting combination that could have seared the paint off a car.

Steve was sick and tired of seeing that look.

“Bucky…”

Tony jumped when Bucky’s lip twitched, unintentionally stepping on Steve’s foot. It hurt, but not as much as it would have if Tony had put all of his weight on it. It was clearly an accident, although Bucky didn’t seem to see it that way at all.

“Careful you boob!” Bucky snarled, moving as if to seize Tony by the arm.

“Sorry.” Tony mumbled, his voice almost too soft to be heard. He looked like he was expecting to be swatted, his body tense and rooted in place. Steve tripped over his own feet as he turned to face Tony, his foot throbbing dully. He accidentally grabbed Tony by the arm to keep from falling over. Tony didn’t even blink. He stood quietly, not even reacting to the touch. Something about that felt wrong; very, very wrong.

“Hey, it’s fine. It doesn’t hurt that much.” Steve said gently.

“You sure?” Tony asked.

“It’s fine.”

Tony’s flinch faded, his lips almost pulling into a smile. He didn’t seem to feel Steve’s hand, but Steve let him go anyways, hoping that he hadn’t upset Tony with too much unwanted contact. He felt bad enough as it was with the way Bucky was acting. He was definitely going to have a few words with him about this when Tony wasn’t around. It wasn’t right to yell at Tony that way. It hadn’t been like it was intentional. He tried to keep a smile on his face, wanting Tony to see something nice. It wasn’t as if anyone had gotten maimed. It was an accidental bruise if anything.

“Yeah… ok.” Tony said, scratching the back of his neck.
Bucky stepped in between them, almost bowling Tony over; he put his hands on Steve’s shoulders, holding him in place as if he expected Steve to slip away. His thumbs dug into Steve’s shoulders, and Steve had to bite his tongue to keep from squeaking.

What the hell was wrong with Bucky?

“Steve? Let’s go somewhere else, huh? I want to have a chat in private. My bike’s parked out by the road.” Bucky said sullenly.

“Bucky…”

“Go ahead. I’ll go work on some stuff.” Tony said with fake enthusiasm. He walked away, casting one last furtive glance over his shoulder at Steve. “I’ll just take this stuff inside, alright? I’ll leave it in your room.” He stooped down to pick up the Frisbee and Steve’s sketchbook, taking them with him as he disappeared inside, the door snapping shut behind him.

Steve had no doubt what would follow Tony’s departure. He would likely be finding empty bottles all over the kitchen floor again.

“Bucky…”

“It won’t kill you to leave him alone for a few hours, right?” Bucky said in a strangely strangled voice.

“Well… no. Loosen up, will you? You’re crushing my shoulder.” Steve grunted.

Bucky abruptly dropped his hands, flushing in embarrassment. “Shit… sorry. Sometimes I forget my own strength.”

“It’s fine. My shoulders forgive you, for now.” Steve sighed, rubbing his injured shoulder. The pain in his foot felt like nothing by comparison, a mere whisper of pain. “But I think we need to talk.”

“Good. Alright. I’m good with talking. Let’s go.” Bucky said.

Bucky drove them down the road on his motorcycle, going far too fast for Steve’s liking. Sure, Steve had done his share of speeding and he enjoyed having the wind in his hair, but he had never gone this fast with a passenger on the back, even when Tony had begged him. Two people speeding down the road was a whole boatload of trouble, especially since one of those two didn’t have the best super soldier serum to keep them from becoming street pizza if a squirrel decided to commit suicide in front of them. Steve held on tightly to Bucky, the oversized helmet he was wearing almost falling off his head whenever he adjusted to compensate for the crick in his neck; it felt like he was wearing a bucket, but it was better than nothing. He had had to force Bucky to fish it out of the saddle bags before they left, not trusting his brain’s defence to his paper-thin human skull.

Steve could hear Bucky laughing over the sound of the air slapping against them and couldn’t help smiling through his scowl; it was nice to feel weightless for a moment, like nothing mattered in the world. It reminded him of all those times after battles, flying through the air in Iron Man’s arms with Tony laughing in his ear through the comms, nothing but them and the sky for company.

They pulled into a rest stop a few miles away from Tony’s house and sat down side by side on a rickety wooden bench, listening to the soft sounds of nature around them. The clouds had gotten
darker and it looked like it might rain, even though it had been so sunny earlier in the day. The weather was alright still, and the forested areas around them seemed unconcerned; wildlife was still chirping, and the wind still brushed through the leaves, sunlight splattering the ground when it could find its way through the leafy canopy.

Bucky stretched, draping an arm across the back of the wooden bench, fingers almost touching the back of Steve’s head.

It was peaceful here; a good a place for a serious conversation as any.

Steve hadn’t spent much time outdoors since he had woken up and it was a nice change of scenery; when he was a boy he had dreamed of camping and taking trips out into the great outdoors with Bucky at his side. Allergies and brittle bones had kept him inside, trapping him like a bug in a jar. It seemed strange that now that he had the opportunity, he hadn’t taken advantage of it, at least not for fun at any rate. The trenches – well, the memories of the trenches and the forests in France had been no picnic, that was for sure. He wondered if Tony might like to spend some time wandering around in the park with him when they got some spare time to themselves. They could go hiking, or maybe just wander around to go see what there was to see; neither of them had the stamina to go very far on their own. They could even take Happy with them if they wanted. Happy would probably appreciate the break from chauffeuring everyone around.

“So… How are things going with you?” Bucky asked, leaning back against the bench to get a better look at the dazzling blue sky.

“Things are routine, I suppose. It’s kind of reminds me how it was in the army. I get up in the morning, go to work with Tony and then pretty much spend the entire day doing what needs to be done.”

“So you, what, bring him coffee?” Bucky asked.

“And food. I do a lot of sketching too, when I’m not helping Pepper do paperwork.” Steve chuckled. He would have found a routine like that boring back in the day; now it just seemed like the right amount of work to fill the hours.

“Man that sounds really boring.” Bucky commented.

“It’s not too bad. I like spending time with him. He’s surprisingly quiet when he’s at work.”

“That’s probably because he’s sober.”

“You knew about that?” Steve asked.

“Steve, everyone knows about that. Tony Stark is damaged goods.” Bucky shrugged.

“He’s not damaged –”

“Let’s not talk about him, alright? I want to talk about you. How are things going with you - you know, living wise?” Bucky sighed.

“Things are alright.” Steve said stiffly.

Bucky’s fingers tangled in Steve’s hair, gently rubbing the back of Steve’s neck with his thumb; it would have been uncomfortable had it not been that it was Bucky’s hand. Bucky was nothing like Howard. His touch had never meant anything other than friendly comradely or goofy playfulness; it was however, still startling, coming out of nowhere. The touch was almost tender, something Steve
would have done with Tony once, back in the day. Bucky had punched out a man who had touched him with what he considered *unnatural* intent once, so this couldn’t be *that*. It was nice, familiar in ways he had sorely missed.

“Are you still having the dreams?” Bucky asked.

“Yes.” Steve answered honestly. He considered lying, but didn’t think it was worth the effort. At least Bucky knew what the dreams were like. There was nothing to be ashamed of here, nothing to fear.

“Don’t worry about it too much. They’ll go away eventually. A few months at the very least, the doctors said, but they didn’t know *shit*. It took me almost *three years* to be able to tell between the dreams and reality. Mind you, it probably had something to do with the fact that I was trapped in a facility doing tests like some kind of *lab animal* – but what can you do, right? That’s what we signed up for.” Bucky shrugged, shifting closer as the wind picked up. Steve could feel Bucky’s warmth leeching into his thigh as Bucky’s leg pressed closer, bumping against his; he hated being so cold all the time. He hadn’t ever been trapped in the ice, and yet it always felt like he had just been pulled out of that cold nothingness, no matter how many layers of clothing he wore.

“I keep seeing people and objects I recognize when I know I’m not supposed to know them. That women you were fighting on TV the other day – Loki? I swear that I’ve met her before. Him. Her. Whatever he’s going by these days.” Steve said.

“Loki’s a *woman*.” Bucky laughed, ruffling Steve’s hair; the ruffling was getting to be a habit it seemed, and an unwanted one at that. Bucky pursed his lips, looking down into Steve’s eyes. There was something there for a moment, a look that Steve couldn’t comprehend. It vanished after a second, and Bucky’s hand moved back to Steve’s neck, slowly rubbing circles just above his shoulders.

“So you found any good dames yet?” Bucky asked, eyes back up in the sky again, hand moving on its own.

“No. To tell you the truth, I don’t really think I’m into dames all that much.” Steve admitted; he could see flashes of an argument with Bucky in his head now, flashes filled with anger and frustration. He felt the blood drain from his face. He remembered the content of that dream conversation well – a coming out to Bucky that had gone *disastrously*. He could see Bucky beating on Tony in a rage; the smack, smack, smack of fist hitting flesh boomed in his mind. Steve twitched with each smack, practically shaking in his skin even though it was only in his head.

“You alright?” Bucky asked, concern written in every line of his face.

“I’m fine. Just a little tired, that’s all.” Steve lied.

“I can see that. You sounded like you said you liked guys for a second there.”

“I do.” Steve said. He wasn’t afraid of saying it aloud. He loved Tony, and that was all there was to it.

Bucky’s hand tensed on the back of Steve’s neck and for one chilling moment Steve remembered that Bucky could easily snap his neck if he wanted to. The power in his fingers alone was immense, rivaled only by that of Thor. He tried not to tense at that thought, feeling that somehow Bucky would know the reason for it, that Bucky might see what was going on in his head. It was stupid of course. This was Bucky, his friend; even if he was angry, Bucky wouldn’t hurt him, would he?
“You should try and find yourself a nice dame. Settle down. Get yourself a house – a life. No sense moping around for some lost life you never really had in the first place. Don’t waste your time with men.” Bucky growled.

“What about you? Have you found someone?” Steve asked, trying to deflect the orders, hyperaware of everything now.

Bucky’s hand relaxed and went back to rubbing Steve’s neck, moving lower, down between Steve’s shoulder blades. He shrugged noncommittally and didn’t answer.

The wind picked up. Steve found himself pressing unintentionally closer to Bucky, huddling into the crook of Bucky’s arm for warmth; he hadn’t thought to take a jacket with him. Stupid, stupid, stupid! Bucky shifted against him, not quite pulling away and not quite moving closer; it was almost as if it was a nervous shuffle, but Bucky had never been nervous about being close to him before, so that was absurd.

“Steve?”

“Yes?”

“Are you alright?”

“It’s getting cold, but I’m fine.” Steve said.

“That’s not what I’m… oh hell.” Bucky groaned. He moved his arm from the back of the bench, dropping it down around Steve’s waist. Steve shivered at the touch, Bucky’s heat tearing away the cold of the wind; Bucky leaned down and pressed his lips against Steve’s, his tongue pushing into Steve’s mouth, needy and frantic, his eyes squeezed shut. His fingers greedily dug into the flesh of Steve’s waist, pressing hard enough to bruise. Steve could barely breathe, Bucky’s mouth locked so tightly against his. He tried to mumble out a protest, but it fell on deaf ears.

“Steve…” Bucky moaned. He pulled back, his mouth shiny and red, and then seemed to realize that Steve hadn’t been participating. He swallowed, his Adams apple bobbing and then jumped up from the bench, backing away while wiping his mouth on his sleeve, hands held out in front of him.

“Fuck. I can’t do this…” Bucky dashed towards the motorcycle and jumped on, starting it up and driving off. Steve stared after him at a loss, still sitting on the bench as if he was tied there. His brain felt like it was running one frame too slow, everything stuttering, each movement choppy and off. Maybe it was from the lack of oxygen.

_Bucky had kissed him._

Bucky had –

_Bucky had left him._

Steve floundered, standing up, hugging himself tightly as the wind tore through his thin shirt.

Bucky had left him _alone_ in the middle of nowhere and he had no phone, no way to get back on his own.

He wished that he had worn a jacket.

“Shit…”
Steve walked towards the road, hoping to catch sight of Bucky coming back; he stumbled on the asphalt, twisting his ankle and cried out, falling to his knees landing so hard that he saw stars. Pain shot up his left leg, throbbing worse than anything he had felt in a long time. He gasped, panting in agony, and felt at his ankle, fingers numb from the cold. It was warm and swelling; he struggled upright. He had ripped the knees out of his jeans, the tears in the fabric revealing pale and bleeding skin. He cursed, prodding his injury, hoping that it wasn’t going to bleed too much.

It had been a misunderstanding, it had to have been, but there was no sign of Bucky on the horizon, only clouds in the distance; black, unfriendly clouds.

It took Steve three hours to limp back to Tony’s house and it rained bitterly the entire way; the wind had been vicious, blowing so hard that he had barely been able to keep from sinking to the ground in defeat. The cold had been good for one thing; it had kept the pain in his ankle and knees at bay. His foot felt like it was a lump on the end of his leg. He had trouble putting too much weight on it and was reduced to a shuffled hop at times when his knee seized up, locking. He nearly fell each time it happened, managing to stay upright by bracing himself with his hands.

Seeing his way down the road had been nearly impossible. The rain had been so heavy that he had been forced to plod along one step at a time just so that he could see the road beneath his feet; half the time he had been close to wandering off the side of the road, unable to open his eyes completely for fear of going blind. He hadn’t found a single place to take shelter from the rain, and the one spot he could have lingered in had been halfway down the side of a ravine. The entire thing had been slick with mud, and he had seriously doubted that he would have been able to make it out in his condition once the rain had died down, so he had pressed on, sticking to the main road, praying that it would lead him home.

No one had driven past. Not one bloody car had gone down that road. He had been utterly alone the entire way; three hours in a silent march home.

When he finally made it back, he wanted nothing more than to curl up in a ball and go to sleep, be it in his bed or on the floor somewhere soft. All he wanted was some place warm to pull the chill from his bones. Steve struggled up the front steps, shaking violently, numb all over from the cold of the rain and the wind. He reached for the doorknob to open the door. It was locked. Teeth chattering, hair and clothing plastered miserably against his body, he banged on the door, praying that Tony would be awake and that he would hear him. He wasn’t sure that he was knocking loud enough to be heard; he was so cold he couldn’t even gauge his strength anymore, every gesture feeling strong and weak at the same time.

It was dark now, not quite nightfall but damned close to it and somehow the cold was picking up again. He would get hypothermia and die if he spent the night outside.

The door opened and Tony stepped out, holding a bottle in one hand. Steve couldn’t make out what the label said; he was shivering so hard that his vision was blurring. Everything went abruptly sideways.

“Steve!”

Tony caught Steve as he wobbled, guiding him inside, closing the door quickly to keep the heat in. It felt like his skin lit on fire the moment he stepped inside. He hissed, eyes watering as the shaking started anew, his entire body joining in instead of just his shoulders. Rivulet of water poured from his
forehead, running down his chin only to drop onto the floor.

“Stay here. I’ll go get a towel, alright?”

Steve nodded, teeth chattering too fiercely to say anything coherent. He concentrated on getting his shoes off, his fingers trembling uncontrollably as he tried to untie the mud-covered and knotted bow. Tony returned carrying some clothing that was far too big for Steve and a towel that could have been used to dry an elephant. He bent down and scooped Steve up, carrying him into the kitchen where the stove was turned on; he had been making dinner it seemed, and there was a pot sitting on one of the burners bubbling away. Steve could smell the scent of tomato soup and it made his stomach growl in complaint; three hours of walking had finally taken their toll. He was starting to feel nauseous and lightheaded, not even caring for a moment that he had just been carried bridal style into the kitchen.

Tony gingerly set Steve down and then began to systematically strip him of all of his clothing, going so far to even pull off Steve’s soggy underwear and socks. Tony’s hands felt like they were made of fire, burning their way through the cold that had laid claim to his skin. He wrapped Steve in the towel and began to dry him, rubbing hard so that he could soak up as much water from Steve’s body and hair as possible.

“Look at your knees! What the hell happened out there?” Tony asked. That was a good question; had he known the answer, Steve might have answered. Tony pulled a first aid kit out of the cupboard and cracked it open, getting out some bandages.

“It’s not that bad.” Steve protested. His ankle still felt like hell and when he took a step forwards he almost fell again.

“Just… let me take care of it, ok? Can’t have you bleeding all over the place – Jesus! What the fuck happened to your ankle? Stand still.” Tony went about wiping at Steve’s bloody knees with a disinfectant pad, ignoring the way Steve whimpered. When he was finished, he stuck a large Band-Aid over a piece of gauze on both knees, patting them flat.

“Can I…” Steve mumbled, blushing. He hadn’t expected to be standing naked in the kitchen in front of Tony; it wasn’t the least bit flattering.

“Heh.” Tony chuckled. “Nothing to be ashamed of here. It’s not like you haven’t seen _me_ naked before.”

“Y-yes, w-well… it’s c-cold.” Steve said, his teeth still chattering. The last thing he needed now was to be reminded of the previous night; he felt bad enough as it was.

Tony helped Steve dress in the clothing he had brought down, moving Steve around one limb at a time. This was Tony’s clothing he was dressing Steve in, sweatpants that were miles too big but oh so soft; everything smelled like Tony, with a faint hint of lavender sneaking in afterwards from one of the dryer sheets he had used. Steve could have drowned in the sweater Tony pulled over his head, it was so big. It was warm and dry and all that mattered.

“Steve?”

Tony dragged a chair towards the stove and forced Steve to sit, moving him closer to the warmth. He lifted Steve’s feet up to inspect and dry his toes, kneeling in front of the chair, feeling around Steve’s puffy ankle.

“I don’t know if you broke it, but it’s probably going to be purple by tomorrow.” Tony said. He
wrapped his hand around Steve’s ankle, rubbing softly at the tender flesh as he tried to feel the bone. Steve was grateful for the warmth, but more grateful for Tony’s touch; the heat of the stove seemed like it had come from a raging inferno, even though the burners were only turned to the lowest setting, and he wasn’t sure how long he could stay beside it without melting away into a puddle. His frozen limbs were thawing, but it was slow, tedious work. He would be feeling pins and needles soon if he had to guess. He might have gotten frostbite if he had stayed out any longer.

“What the hell happened out there? Weren’t you with Bucky?” Tony asked. He stood up and scooped some of the soup into a mug, gently tucking it into Steve’s hands, careful to make sure that he wouldn’t drop it. Steve cradled the mug against his chest, warming his hands.

Should he tell Tony about the kiss? About how Bucky had been touching him the entire time they had been sitting on that bench out in the middle of nowhere? Should he tell Tony that he had been left behind at the rest stop and that he had been forced to walk all the way home? Would Tony even care? Bucky was a hero to Tony. Steve wasn’t sure he could break that image for him; he couldn’t be the person that took away that hope.

“Bucky… he got called away and had to leave. I walked home.” Steve lied. His teeth were chattering less now, and the feeling was coming back to his hands and feet. He winced as pins and needles finally laid claim to his flesh, keeping a careful hold on the mug.

“You’re lying.” Tony said. He leaned back against the edge of the stove, watching both Steve and the soup at the same time, idly stirring the pot.

Steve looked down into his mug, trying to think of another plausible excuse as to why he would have had to walk home in the pouring rain. He never had been a good liar when he was cold; he looked up, ready to try again and Tony pressed a finger to his lips, silencing him.

“If you don’t want to tell me it’s fine.” Tony said softly.

Steve scowled around Tony’s finger.

Tony had trusted him enough to tell him about Howard. He trusted Tony just as much. He pushed Tony’s hand away with one hand, clutching the soup for courage.

“Bucky kissed me.” Steve said, so quiet that at first Tony didn’t seem to hear him.

“What?” Tony’s eyebrows rose comically in disbelief. “You’re kidding. He’s like the straightest guy I know.”

“I’m not kidding. He kissed me and then he sort of… groped me and then he freaked out when I didn’t kiss him back. He left me in the middle of nowhere and drove off.” Steve muttered.

“He groped you? Where?”

“In the park.”

“I don’t mean the location on the map – where on your body did he grope you?”

“My… hips…” Steve said, blushing with embarrassment.

“Can I?”

Steve nodded.
Tony lifted up Steve’s sweater, pulling the band of Steve’s pants down; he whistled at the finger shaped bruises, running his hand over the marks that stood out, dark purple against pale white flesh. The serum had done its work while Steve walked, healing the bruises as he went, but it still looked pretty bad; he wondered what it had looked like before if this was the end result.

“I never would have thought that Captain America would do something like this – not the whole kissing a cute guy part, but the losing control part. Look at you. You look like you’ve been assaulted…” Tony said.

He looked Steve in the eye suddenly serious. “He didn’t assault you, did he? Is that how you hurt your ankle?”

Steve shook his head, horrified. “No! He wouldn’t – he just… he just kissed me. That was it. I tripped on the road when I tried to see if he was coming back.”

“If he did, you can tell me about it, it’s alright. You don’t have to feel embarrassed about it.” Tony said pulling Steve’s sweatpants back up. He adjusted the sweater so that it covered the patch of cold skin on Steve’s stomach once more, resting a hand on Steve’s shoulder. He looked Steve directly in the eye.

“Are you sure that’s all he did?”

“He didn’t – and if he did I would tell you. I would.” Steve said, taking a slow sip of the soup to calm his nerves. The hot liquid burned its way down his throat; he could feel his chest warming up, and wondered how things had gotten so dark.

“You’re sure that nothing happened?” Tony asked again, clearly not quite convinced.

“Yes. He only kissed me. He didn’t rape me.” Steve said. The words themselves shocked him; he stared into his soup, suddenly stunned by the implications.

_Bucky would never –_

_Bucky was his friend! How could Tony even suggest that?_

“Allright. It’s alright.” Tony said. He poured himself some soup and sipped at it, eyes constantly on Steve; Steve felt like he was being x-rayed again, just like on the first day he had met Tony. He finished his soup with a slurp, shoulders shaking.

“Can I have some more please?”

“Sure.” Tony poured more soup into Steve’s mug and handed it back to him; their fingers brushed, Tony’s hand remaining on the cup just over top of Steve’s. “You’re sure you’re alright?” Tony asked, turning off the soup.

Steve nodded feverishly. Tony saw Bucky as a role model – how he had jumped from a kiss to rape? Steve shuddered at the implications.

“Yes. I’m fine. It’s alright, he just left me in the cold. Nothing happened.”

“Allright. I believe you. Just… if you need help, I’m here, alright?” Tony said.

“Thank you.” Steve said.

“I mean it. If anything happens – just tell me, alright? I’ll fix it.” Tony said solemnly.
Once Steve finished eating, he excused himself and slipped away into his bedroom, wrapping himself tightly in his blankets like a sausage. The cold had mostly gone now, leaving him dimly aware of the warmth of the room at all times; it was strange to think that he had once thought this room so cold before.

He was glad to be here, alone. He hadn’t wanted to stay there, watching Tony stare at him. What was uncomfortable wasn’t that Tony had been staring. The uncomfortable part was that there had been something in his eyes this time. It hadn’t been disgust; it had been terror, raw, undiluted terror, not for himself, but for Steve.

Steve didn’t want to be afraid; even when he was being bullied, he had never been afraid. He had always been small, and it was nothing new, and he could handle this, this… whatever this was with Bucky. He could do it by himself.

Part of him was glad that Tony was worried. He would have Tony’s help if he needed it. He wouldn’t be alone. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Steve woke up in a cold sweat, trembling uncontrollably; he was paralyzed, his body stuck to the mattress like he had been frozen there. He gasped, wheezing as if he had just run a ten minute mile, unable to catch his breath. Sweat dripped down his forehead into his eyes, blinding him; he panicked, trying to force his limbs to move.

Breathe Steve, breathe! It had just been a dream – just a dream. His muscles loosened, sore and screaming in agony as his legs and arms straightened out. He dug his fingers into the mattress, his body in a full-on muscle cramp. He would have screamed if he had been able to open his mouth, so he panted breathlessly instead.

It had been a dream – just a dream!

He could remember everything vividly as if he had just been there. It had been cold. He had been in the ice and then he had been on a train and Bucky had been falling to his death; it had been snowing, a blizzard that had gone into his nose and mouth, choking him. No matter how hard he tried to hold on, he couldn’t keep Bucky from falling – couldn’t even reach him, and the snow had just kept coming and coming. Steve had felt Bucky’s weight on his fingers as he had woken up – felt the weight vanish, fingers tingling even now as his muscles slackened. He jerked upright, hugging the blankets around his knees and took in deep, heavy breaths, trying not to hyperventilate.

He was cold. So very, very cold; he was drenched in sweat, his clothing sticking to his skin so closely he felt as if it was a second skin.

He focused on the room, trying to use the darkness to draw the dream out, wanting to get rid of it once and for all. He could just make out Bucky’s form there in the corner beside the bookshelf; he trembled and climbed out of the bed, padding across the floor so fast that he almost slipped and wiped out on the carpet. His ankle screamed at him in protest and he limped the last few feet out of the room biting back curses. He had to get out – had to be anywhere but his room, where the ghostly apparition was lurking. He made his way, stumbling along the hallway in darkness towards the living room; his breath felt caught in his chest and he coughed, collapsing onto the couch.

He lay spread out across the cushions, face pressed into the space between the nest of pillows and the arm of the couch, taking in short shuddering breaths. He didn’t know what else to do; all he could
think about was how goddamned cold it was, and how much he wanted to be held by Tony.

The dream was over. He wasn’t in the ice anymore – he hadn’t ever been in the ice – so why was he so goddamned cold? He hugged a pillow against his chest, trying to trap the warmth against him and then reached underneath his stomach and pulled out the remote control, turning the television on. The volume was turned down low, so all he could hear was the soft whispering of Bob Barker on the Price is Right. He could barely make out the actual screen the way he was sitting, but that didn’t really matter; all he needed was the sound and the vague hint of light. He just needed something to drown the dream out.

Late night television was calming. They played mostly the older things at night, filling up all of the empty time slots between two and six a.m. with repeats from days gone past, leaving only the most mind numbing programs on for the diehard insomniacs. The programs they repeated were all still new to him but there was something about their speech, their jaunty hats and black and white clothing that made him think he had slipped back in time.

He wasn’t the only one in the living room, he realized as he sucked in another choked breath; Tony lifted Steve’s legs up and sat down on the cushion beside him, leaning back, yawning. How had Tony gotten downstairs? Had he been sitting down here already?

“So… What are we watching?” Tony asked, resting his elbows on Steve’s thighs, mindful of his scraped knee.

“I think it’s the Price is Right.” Steve mumbled through the pillow.

“And why are we watching this exactly?”

“I had a nightmare.”

“I see. I take it that it was a bad one, or you wouldn’t be out here watching this tripe.” Tony said, squeezing Steve’s leg. Steve took a moment for his brain to reset, a jumble of images of Bucky falling and ice crawling towards him crashing through his mind. He lifted himself up so that he could look at Tony. He muted the TV, setting the controller on the couch’s arm, watching the screen reflected in Tony’s eyes.

“Can I talk with you about it?” Steve asked tentatively. He and Tony – back in the dream-world – had always talked about things like this; it felt funny to be asking if it was alright.

“I suppose.” Tony turned in his seat, pulling Steve’s feet into his lap so that he could sit facing Steve with his back against the other arm of the couch. “Do you want me to braid your hair and get you some Kleenex dearie?” Tony slurred.

Well that explained some things. Tony had been sitting around in the living room getting drunk. Great. Just fucking great!

Steve pulled his feet off of Tony’s lap and struggled upright, almost tripping over the coffee table. Why had he even bothered? It was obvious that Tony didn’t really give a shit. Maybe the words in the kitchen during dinner had been only words – things Tony had felt pressured to say because he had seen them on television, just like before.

“You’re a real asshole when you’re drunk.” Steve growled. His Tony had been insensitive at times, but he had never been outright cruel. Tony didn’t even sounded like he was joking either; it had been a statement – a complete lack of empathy –

Tony grabbed him by the arm, pulling Steve bodily into his lap. He rested his cheek against Steve’s,
fingers tangling in Steve’s hair.

“Hey, no…” Tony mumbled, snuggling closer.

Steve struggled with himself, wanting to pull away. Why did it always have to be like this? Why did it have to be so goddamned confusing? He slouched inadvertently when Tony’s hand moved down his back, rubbing along the length of his spine.

“I’m kidding… It was a bad joke. I’m sorry – can we go to bed now?” Tony murmured, rubbing his beard roughly against Steve’s cheek again; Steve shivered at the sensation, letting out a gasp.

“I…”

“Say yes and we can go spoon.”

“I… I guess.”

So much for talking, not that Steve had any complaints.

Tony got up, lifting Steve with him as if he were nothing more than a stuffed animal; they left the living room, the television turned off with a quick poke of Tony’s finger and then, to Steve’s surprise, went to the stairs.

Steve had never been to the second floor of Tony’s house before. He watched the lower level disappear as they ascended, arms wrapped around Tony’s neck; they moved past a small end table and walked down a long narrow hallway, turning to the left when they ran out of hall to walk down. Tony hadn’t turned on a single light, needing nothing to guide him. The upstairs corridor was just as Spartan as the rest of the house, so there was nothing to trip on other than Tony’s feet.

When they entered Tony’s bedroom, Steve was swallowed up in darkness. The walls were a dark colour, something that blended in well with the black of night but a fraction lighter; the curtains were pulled tightly shut, probably to protect Tony’s eyes from the pain of morning when he woke up with a hangover. All Steve could make out from the assorted mass of hazy lumps was a large square lump that was presumably a bed and another smaller one that may or may not have been a lamp.

Tony dumped Steve onto the covers. Steve rolled out of the way and sought refuge beneath the blanket before he could be inadvertently crushed; Tony slid in under the blankets beside him. The bed smelled faintly of whiskey and sweat; it wasn’t strong, and thankfully the whiskey smell wasn’t sour. Tony wrapped his body around Steve, tucking him directly under his chin; they spooned, with Tony’s boney hips jabbing Steve in the small of his back. Tony let out a loud belched sigh and pulled the blanket up higher, tucking it under Steve’s chin.

“So what were you dreaming about? Kittens stuck in trees? Were the purple piñatas with eyes watching you while you peed?” Tony mumbled, only slightly incoherent.

It was probably a bad idea to be here, Steve thought, but all he wanted was just one night, one tiny, insignificant night of comfort. He probably shouldn’t speak either. It wasn’t like Tony would remember what had been said, or be able to offer any real help.

Tony shoved a leg in between Steve’s, getting his attention rather sharply.

“So? What was your nightmare?” Tony whispered again. His breath smelled like beer.

“It’s an old one… one from the… the memories I have stuck in my head.” Steve whispered back.
“Oh yeah?”

“It’s the worst one I remember— the one where Bucky and I are on this train, hunting someone. I can’t see who it is, but I always remember that it’s supposed to be Zola… Armin Zola… and we get into this boxcar and the train is traveling so goddamned fast that it’s mostly a blur… and all I can see is Bucky as he falls from the gaping hole in side of the train. The snow swallows me up and I choke on it as he just… falls… when I reach out to grab him, our fingers touch and then he’s gone.” Steve mumbled. He wiped at his eyes, tears building up.

“That’s a doozy.”

“What’s worse is that I always wake up feeling like I’ve only just let go of his hand… I can still feel him on my fingertips…”

Tony hugged Steve closer. “You’re fine now. Just go to sleep… we have to work tomorrow, remember?”

“I remember.”

“Good, so go to sleep. None of that stuff in your dreams happened. It’s all just… dreams.” Tony continued, pressing a kiss to the back of Steve’s head.

“Ok. Thank you for letting me sleep here.”

“Not a problem… now shut up and get with the snuggling.”

Steve woke up to the sound of someone vomiting. It wasn’t the most pleasant sound he had woken up to, but it wasn’t exactly rare now that he had started living with Tony; it was hardly in his top ten of nasty things to wake up to really. He sat up, struggling against the weight of the unfamiliar comforter and saw that he was alone in bed, thankfully. The room was still dark, and the only light creeping across the floor was coming in from under the bathroom door. The toilet flushed; Steve ducked down, burrowing under the blanket, not really sure he was up to facing Sober Tony.

It seemed that he wasn’t the only one not up to facing the events of the previous night; even though nothing inappropriate had happened, Tony looked shell-shocked and chagrinned as he entered the room. He approached the bed with caution, hands tugging nervously at the waistband of his pajama bottoms.

“Steve?” Tony sounded small and terrified. Steve peeked out from under the blanket.

“Is it time for work?” Steve asked, sitting up, trying to pretend that he wasn’t as concerned as he felt. He didn’t like the look on Tony’s face one bit and wanted to hug him until it went away.

“I… Look – whatever happened last night, I’m sorry – I’m really, really sorry – it won’t happen again.” Tony blurted eyes wide and shiny; his gaze remained on Steve as he untangled himself from the bedding and immerged fully dressed, his clothing only a little wrinkled from sleep.
“Nothing bad happened last night Tony. I was upset about a nightmare I had and you came downstairs and found me on the couch. You said I could sleep with you and you carried me up here. We slept. It’s alright – you didn’t do anything wrong.” Steve said, trying to speak in his calmest voice. He could see that Tony didn’t trust the words coming out of his mouth almost as he was speaking them; Tony’s unhappiness seemed to fill the room, swimming in the very air. Steve looked down at the floor.

“Would you like me to leave?” Steve asked, dreading that he already knew the answer.

“Yes. Get out.”

“Alright.” Steve stood up and limped out of the room, trying to ignore the way his lungs tried to seize up on him; it was foolish to think that things would be any different. Sober Tony didn’t seem to share memories with Drunk Tony all that frequently, and he wasn’t around now to commiserate with. He just hoped that he hadn’t messed things up royally last night by taking him up on his offer.

During breakfast, Tony couldn’t stop staring at him; it was pretty clear that whatever trust Steve had earned in the previous week was gone, leaving him yet again some kind of terrifying stranger to Tony. It was back to the beginning again, like he had only just stepped through the front door. He wished that he could say something to belay Tony’s fears, but every time he opened his mouth to say something, Tony got tense and still, ready for flight. Steve eventually stopped trying to make small talk altogether because Tony had developed a sort of perpetual twitch every time he opened his mouth. It was a shame really. He wanted to be helpful, yet it was starting to seem like his help was becoming the actual problem.

When they arrived at work, Tony stood as far away from Steve in the elevator as was humanly possible, almost pressed up against the steel walls to keep away. The moment the elevator doors opened, Tony dashed away to the freedom of his lab, locking himself away without a single word of greeting in Pepper’s direction.

“Bad weekend?” Pepper asked with a yawn.

“It wasn’t … well… until yesterday.”

“What happened?”

“I’d…” Steve let out a held in breath, shaking his head. He had had this particular conversation planned out and playing on loop in his head all morning. He didn’t really want to talk about it anymore, even if it was Pepper doing the asking this time instead of his own brain.

“If you don’t want to talk –” Pepper said, motioning for Steve to settle in. He did so, setting his bag against the table, leaving his sketchbook inside.

“We had unexpected visitors. I’d rather not say any more than that. Part of it… well part of it is Tony’s business and not mine to tell.” Steve said.

“I see…” Pepper said. She leaned forwards against her desk, picking up a hole puncher, which she fiddled with while he talked.

“It wasn’t a pleasant weekend.”
“Tony had a house guest?”

“I… I suppose you could call her that.” Steve scowled.

“Oh. I… Steve…” Pepper gave Steve a sympathetic look. “You didn’t know about them, did you?”

“It’s nothing – it wasn’t – I just… It’s fine. It wasn’t really any of my business.” Steve said quickly.

“It still hurt you though. You look like someone stabbed you.” Pepper said.

“Can we… can we just work? I don’t want to be rude, it’s just that it, well… it feels like I’m betraying his trust or something.” Steve mumbled.

“Ok. Don’t worry about it. You’re a good friend to him Steve. I’m sure he’ll get over whatever happened eventually.” Pepper smiled.

“I sure hope so. He’s been so quiet... Anyways, what’s on the agenda for today?” Steve said, clearing his throat. He was distinctly aware of the security cameras pointed at the desk all of a sudden; the nearest one turned, lenses whirling deliberately to track his movements.

“So, we’re hole punching quarterly report papers. They need to be delivered up to Mr. Stark and they need to be finished quickly. We’re doing book one today.” Pepper said, gesturing to the mess of papers all over her desk. The work was easy, mind numbingly easy; Steve was glad for it, because it was so much easier to work than it was to think. His ankle was still throbbing painfully in time with every heartbeat, but the pain faded as he sat. They traded the hole puncher between them when their arms got sore, filling up a large black and grey binder. Pepper was cheerful as always, making sure to prod him whenever he started to look too unhappy. He wondered if she had anyone special in her life. She never talked about it. She deserved someone nice; he was too embarrassed to ask her about it, so he kept silent, imagining what that person might be like. Would they be smart like Tony? Kind like Coulson? Funny like Clint? Or would they be thoughtful and serene like Natasha?

“You off in la-la-land again?” Pepper teased when Steve accidentally hole punched the wrong side of a paper.

“Sorry. This all seems a little archaic.” Steve said wryly.

“It is, but it’s harder to hack paper. It’s just one of those rules Mr. Stark has.” Pepper laughed.

The morning passed into lunch; Tony kept the door locked and refused to take the coffee brought to him at ten and then again refused to unlock the door at lunch to take the butter chicken wrap Steve had brought for him. Steve was forced to leave the food on the floor in front of the door, backing away with hands raised in an attempt to get Tony to eat. Unfortunately, the gesture didn’t get even a minor reaction out of Tony. He remained locked in his workshop, typing away with his back to Steve and Pepper. By the time it came for them to go home, the wrap had gotten cold and soggy becoming a congealed blob on the cold cement floor. Steve had reluctantly thrown it away; his own wrap had been delightful, and Tony would have liked it if he had had the sense to try it. It wasn’t like he had poisoned the damned thing!

At the end of the day he followed Tony to the elevator, almost getting himself crunched in the doors when he tried to step inside because Tony had hammered the close door button. He had been one hand length away from being decapitated; Tony didn’t look at him.

Tony didn’t talk on the way home.
He didn’t talk during dinner, where he at least ate some of the food Steve made; he had been driven to it, having starved himself all day and it was a bittersweet victory at best. He definitely wasn’t there because he enjoyed Steve’s company that was for sure. Steve felt a little like someone had turned him inside out; Tony ran out of the room the moment Steve turned his back in order to do the dishes, gone in a flash off to do god knows what.

Steve felt light-headed. He leaned against the sink, calming himself with the mantra that it would get better. It had to get better, right? Tony couldn’t possibly hate him so much from one little thing like waking up in bed with him? It wasn’t exactly as if this morning had been the first time they had woken up together. None had been naked this time either.

But it was different. Falling asleep in Tony’s bed had been different. Tony’s bedroom was his inner sanctum – his place of complete and total safety, when he wasn’t being forced to entertain, that was. And Steve had invaded that space. Steve had invaded it purposely and willingly even if it had been Tony who had brought him there in the first place. He had taken a step inside Tony’s private world, and he hadn’t been wanted there.

Steve did the dishes and then went to go abuse his fists on the punching bag.

He fell asleep feeling unsatisfied, sore and bruised.

The next day went much the same way as the previous. Tony avoided him all day and refused to eat anything at all, even when Steve brought him two pieces of greasy pepperoni pizza, which Steve knew for a fact that he loved. He tried not to let it get to him, but there was just something so hurtful about being ignored; it was worse than being screamed at or smacked around. He felt like he was invisible, a complete nobody.

Steve and Pepper finished their hole punching while chatting away about the little things, like the weather and the way the custodians had turned the thermostat up during the night in an attempt to fry them. They went through quite the pile of paperwork all the while talking about everything and nothing, avoiding elephant in the room.

Steve hadn’t seen this much loose paper since he had been in school; no one had kept paper around in the Avengers unless it was important, and half the time, it was reused and turned into something else when it wasn’t needed anymore. There had been many a paper crane, hat and star floating around the building whenever new paperwork came out; they never left the building, and always went into the incinerator when they were done. Coulson made a mean pirate hat, and everyone in the Avengers had had at least one. Tony had worn one during a meeting. Steve had never though Fury’s eye could twitch any harder than it normally did, but it had.

When they were certain that everything was in place, Pepper left to go take the binder up to Howard, taking pity on Steve by going up herself; Steve sat quietly at her desk, trying to sketch with his bruised hands. He had hit the punching bag so many times last night that his knuckles were black and blue by morning; he could make a fist, but it hurt, and no matter how hard he tried to grip his pencil, he couldn’t get any art out. It was all mangled and scratchy lines, the lead going across the page too sharply, almost tearing the page in a few places. He managed a sloppy doodle of a lopsided cat and then gave up, closing the book and putting it away. It wasn’t worth wasting the paper.

He looked down at his claw-shaped hands, sighing aloud. It had been stupid to take his frustrations out on the punching bag; he had been even stupider to forget that he wasn’t going to heal like he
once had. He had just been so angry – with himself… with Tony…

Steve stared down at his fingers.

Was there really a point in protecting them? Right now, he wanted to go another few rounds with that punching bag so that he could feel something other than the growing disgust he felt for himself. He had ruined it all again – he had had a second chance, and he had blown it all over again. What was wrong with him? He should have known better! How could he keep blowing his chances like this? Why was he so goddamned stupid?

“You should put some ice on those.” Tony’s voice boomed out of the speakers on Pepper’s desk.

Steve nearly jumped out of his seat. He clutched at his heart, looking around frantically and spotted a green program request window flashing on Pepper’s computer screen. He squinted at the window, reading it from a distance; it was a request for an audio chat. He didn’t like touching Pepper’s computer despite knowing how to operate it, afraid that he would mess something up for her, so he hesitated, hand held over the mouse.

“Just click the button for god’s sake. Preferably, before I die of old age.” Tony grumbled in irritation over the speaker.

Steve left clicked the box; the green program request vanished, pulling up a small application that looked slightly like the video player he had been using to view the security footage while in the hospital.

“Tony?” Steve asked tentatively.

“You should go down to the cafeteria – ask them if they have ice. Your hands look really bad.”

“They’re not that bad…” Steve said, a tad more sullen than he had intended.

“I’ve been watching you. You can’t even hold a pencil properly – Go get ice.” Tony commanded.

“Alright.”

Steve did as Tony ordered, resigned to his fate as if he were walking to be executed; he got into the elevator and rode it down to the second floor, arriving at a barren cafeteria where a very bored looking man in a hairnet and apron stood posing gallantly beside the salad bar, waiting for customers.

“Well hello there! What can I do you for?” The man asked.

“Hi. Do you have any ice? I banged up my hand.” Steve asked, gesturing with one of his mangled hands.

“Ouch! Give me a sec – I’ll go get you a bag of it.” He said, sounding happy for the work.

He returned holding a plastic bag filled with ice cubes wrapped in a piece of yellow paper towel; there was a little too much ice in the bag, but Steve wasn’t going to complain. Better to get something than nothing at all.

“Well hello there! What can I do you for?” The man asked.

“Hi. Do you have any ice? I banged up my hand.” Steve asked, gesturing with one of his mangled hands.

“Ouch! Give me a sec – I’ll go get you a bag of it.” He said, sounding happy for the work.

He returned holding a plastic bag filled with ice cubes wrapped in a piece of yellow paper towel; there was a little too much ice in the bag, but Steve wasn’t going to complain. Better to get something than nothing at all.

“Rough day at work?” The man asked with a wink.

“You could say that, yeah.” Steve took the bag, delicately resting it against his knuckles. His hand felt marginally better, if only because it had now gone pleasantly numb. For once the cold wasn’t a
bother.

“What floor do you work on, if you don’t mind me asking? I’ve seen most of the people in this place, and you don’t look familiar. Do you bring lunch from home or something?”

“Technically I don’t work here. I help Pepper Potts with her work.” Steve said.

The man raised an eyebrow.

“Tough luck there buddy.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“Yeah, if you like working with the mentally unhinged, and I ain’t talkin’ ‘bout Pepper Potts, if you catch my drift.” He said, elbowing Steve in the side.

Steve was starting to get really tired of talking to people who thought that Tony was some kind of whack-a-doodle; this wasn’t the first time he had had to explain what it was that he was doing in the building, and every single time he had been forced to hear the same old jokes about how Tony needed professional help and or possibly a nanny. Each time he responded with a frown, and sometimes he even had to say that he wasn’t the one babysitting, if anything Tony was. No one seemed to believe him though.

The security guards had been just as cynical as the rest of the lot, shaking their heads at him, giving him what they assumed were helpful tidbits of advice on how to deal with Tony. Half of what they said proved how little they actually knew about Tony in the first place, and most of it had been utter garbage. One of them had told him that if he was smart he would slip medication into Tony’s coffee so that they wouldn’t have so many ‘temper tantrum’ reports at the front desk; that was just despicable. He had only listened to them after that to be polite, tuning them out with a pleasant smile plastered on his face.

“Thanks for the ice.” Steve said, giving the man a strained smile. That was of course, fuck you sir said politely. The man had no idea, of course. “No problem bud.” He said, waving goodbye.

Steve went back to the elevator and was soon sitting once more at Pepper’s desk. He kept the ice bag pressed tightly against his hand, occasionally switching between left and right when the skin got too cold. He hadn’t really wanted his hands to feel better in truth; it had felt nice to have the pain there keeping him company. He had deserved it. At least they were still slightly swollen and painful to move. Unfortunately after a while, his dexterity improved, and the pain reseeded. Stupid useful ice.

Pepper returned from her trip to visit Howard and whistled at the condition of his hands. She took his left hand in hers, gingerly prodding the puffy and bruised flesh around his knuckles, clucking her tongue in disapproval.

“What did you do? Pick a fight with a brick wall?” She asked.

“He got into a fight with his punching bag.” Tony’s voice crackled over the computer’s speakers, startling Pepper so much that she nearly overturned the coffee cup beside her when she heard him. She clutched Steve’s hand a little too tightly, making him yelp and looked around suspiciously for the source of the disembodied voice. She patted Steve on the shoulder and scowled at the computer when she figured out what was going on.

“And why did Steve do that exactly?” Pepper asked, not directing the question at anyone in particular, although she was still staring rather sternly at the computer.
“I did something bad.” Tony said.

“You didn’t do anything bad.” Steve grumbled, shaking his head. “It was my fault.”

The program window disappeared, the connection severed.

Pepper gave him a sympathetic pat on the head and then went back to work, pausing every once in a while to take another look at his hands to see the change the ice was making to the bruises. Every time she looked at his hands, noting less puffy flesh, she smiled; Steve was starting to really like that smile, and no matter what he did he couldn’t help but feel a bit better every time he saw it.

Tony didn’t speak through the computer again that day and he still wouldn’t take the coffee Steve tried to bring him later. When they got home though, Tony made dinner and portioned things out for the both of them. They ate in silence and then Tony went to the freezer and handed Steve an ice block.

“We use this.” Tony said. He disappeared into his workshop afterwards, not returning. Steve took some solace in the fact that Tony hadn’t grabbed a beer from the fridge on his way out. He cradled the ice against his chest and tried not to cry.

In the end it took the rest of the week for Tony to finally start talking with him again; Steve suspected that this was because Tony was drunk and couldn’t help it anymore. He was disappointed that the drinking had continued, and in spite of knowing that his hands couldn’t handle beating on the punching bag for as long as he liked anymore, Steve spent his Friday night beating on his punching bag until he couldn’t feel anything else except the throbbing in his hands. No matter how much fabric he wrapped his hands in, his bones still felt like they were made of glass. He didn’t really care anymore. If he hadn’t had the punching bag, he might have tried to take out his frustrations on the walls, and that would have probably ended up with him taking a trip to the Emergency Room.

Tony cornered him in the kitchen when he was icing his hands again for the fifth time that day alone.

“You look like you could use a drink.” Tony joked. He had a glass of whiskey in his hand and a smile on his lips. Steve tried not to sigh aloud in exasperation; Steve felt a bit like a puffer fish, swallowing his air down. He was tempted to say that liquor didn’t solve all the problems in the world but bit his tongue. It wasn’t like Tony would care anyways.

“I don’t need a drink. I’m going to bed.” Steve growled. With that said, he shoved the ice block roughly back in the freezer and left.

He went to his bedroom and crawled into bed, throwing his clothing on the floor in a pile, not caring about being neat and orderly. There didn’t really seem to be much point; it wasn’t as if anyone was going to visit and see the mess. Bucky hadn’t been around all week, and he didn’t have anyone else that would visit beside Howard.

Tony knocked on the door and then came in without waiting for a response. He didn’t have the glass with him anymore and looked unhappy, which wasn’t at all like the Drunk Tony Steve was used to seeing; Drunk Tony was one of the most carefree individuals Steve had ever met.

“Oh… Can we talk?” Tony said.
Steve wanted to say no. He wanted to just curl up in a ball so that he could sleep off the pain and misery.

Instead, he sat up and reluctantly said yes.

The light turned on. Tony looked very solemn when he sat down on the edge of Steve’s bed; he traced a finger in circles around on the sheet, nervous.

“I had a nightmare. Can I sleep here?” Tony said.

Steve blinked. “What?”

“I was taking a nap earlier after we ate dinner and I had a nightmare that really freaked me out. Can I sleep here? Or would that be weird?” Tony asked.

“I guess.”

“You guess that it’s weird, or you guess that I can sleep here?” Tony asked carefully.

“You can sleep here.”

“Alright.”

Tony pulled his socks off and then stripped down to his boxers, shutting off the light he had turned on; he left his undershirt on too and then carefully slid under the covers laying an arm’s length away from Steve. They stared up at the ceiling together in silence.

The silence was nice actually, even if it did leave a lot of time for thinking. Steve had been avoiding thinking about things for the past few days. He hadn’t really noticed the rest of the world, too focused on his bruised hands.

Tony had come back, and brought with him some revelations.

Steve had wished many times in the past two weeks that things would go back to the way they had been in his dreams; it had been more than a wish, it had been a wish wrapped in pure desperation. He had tried to keep hope alive, wanting to keep faith that things would get better somehow. Something could happen – he could suddenly fall asleep and wake up and everything would be right in the world again. He could dream about it, and maybe one day it would come true.

Yet now, staring blankly up at the ceiling with Tony’s warmth leeching through the blankets beside him, he realized he had been handling things wrong; he had been sitting on the sidelines instead of stepping up. He had been hoping and praying, thinking that the world was a different place than it was. Sure, he had some control over how things happened in his life, but things weren’t going to just magically return to the way they had been in the dreams, no matter how much he hoped or prayed for it to happen; he wasn’t a god. He wasn’t someone who could dabble with mystical powers that could warp time and space. He was just Steve; Steve Rogers, Sarah Roger’s son, the scrawny kid who didn’t know when to back down from a fight. And here he was, backing down before the fight had even started.

He couldn’t avoid the problem and expect it to go away on its own. He had never left the bullies alone before, and they had been just as problematic. He had worked hard, and fought for what he wanted. He was going to have to work through things again if he wanted the world to change for the better. He had been hiding just as much as Tony this week, and it had been his own damn fault that things had gone sour. True, he didn’t have all that much experience with a functional relationship aside from what was now, unfortunately, the one in his head. But beating his hands to death on a
punching bag wasn’t going to change things for the better. It also wasn’t going to change the fact that Tony had intimacy issues that stretched a mile wide, and it wasn’t going to fix that awful twist in his gut he got whenever he failed to get something right.

But he couldn’t give up; even if it felt like it was completely hopeless he refused to give up.

Tony had come back without any begging or dragging; he was here in bed, lying right beside him, warming everything up. Tony had taken his sweet time about it, but he was back nonetheless. Tony had come back every time there had been a set back; it would keep happening, Steve was sure of it. He had faith in that, and it wasn’t just naive faith either. He had faith in Tony. He had always had faith in Tony in that dream-world; he needed to keep that faith now. He needed to stay strong.

“Steve?” Tony murmured.

At least Tony was talking to him again; that was a start. It was better than he could have hoped for. Some tactician he was – he hadn’t even figured out a plan to get Tony to talk to him again! Oh well. No sense beating himself up about it.

Steve closed his eyes and felt Tony shift beside him. Tony rolled over onto his side.

“Can I hold you?” Tony asked quietly.

“Sure.”

Tony scooted forwards and wrapped his arms around Steve, tucking him under his chin, his boney leg curling to push in between Steve’s. Tony let out a sigh; this breath didn’t smell even faintly of liquor. Steve was surprised at that. Maybe he had misread some things. Maybe he had misread a lot of things.

“You’re really small.” Tony said with a contented sigh, snuggling closer.

“So you’ve said. On multiple occasions…” Steve chuckled half-heartedly.

“Well it’s true. You’re small.”

“That’s nice.” Steve was getting really tired of being constantly reminded that he was so small and dainty; he wasn’t some kind of willowy flower! Everyone kept going on and on about it, and it was getting harder and harder to keep from having a vein permanently throbbing in his forehead. He wondered if Fury felt like this some days; if so, he had a new respect for the man not going completely insane.

Tony was just teasing, Steve reminded himself with a grimace, or at least he assumed that Tony was just teasing him. Sometimes it was hard to tell.

“Can I ask you an awkward question?” Tony asked, his chin settling on Steve’s shoulder.

“I suppose.” Steve allowed.

Tony fidgeted against Steve’s back; his hand moved from the blankets to Steve’s hip, settling there comfortably. He didn’t seem to notice that he was touching Steve in a way far more intimate than usual; it was a pleasant surprise. Steve shut his eyes, listening to the sound of Tony breathing, trying to ignore the way his body was calling out for more. He stifled his body’s inner voice, holding it hostage so that it couldn’t call him out.

“So… have you ever had a relationship with anyone before? I mean, I know you were frozen for
seventy years and all, but was there someone before all that? Someone you were with?” Tony asked.

There weren’t all that many people, really; Steve hadn’t tried to think about them because so many of the people he had loved and lost had died in that dream-world. Peggy was one of the few people who had died in both. He hadn’t really truly been in a relationship with Peggy per say, even though he had once felt that it would have been something he wanted in the future, when the war was over and he could go home; he had imagined a world with her, where they would have children and a house to themselves, living somewhere quiet and cozy. He had imagined peace and security in that future, no more bombs and artillery, just them together in a warm bed.

Tony was also on that list of those lost to him; he had been the only real relationship in Steve’s life that had meant anything. With Tony things had been different. He hadn’t been living that world out in his head – well… it was debateable whether the relationship was real or not, seeing as how that might also have been in his head too. Fantasy aside though, it had felt real. It had changed him for the better, and there was no denying that plain and simple fact. It had made him a better man.

Even if this man lying here beside him was the real Tony Stark, there had been one somewhere in his memories that had been his; a man who had helped Steve come to terms with things, a man he had loved with all his heart, a man who had loved him back.

“You had a boyfriend?” Tony gasped. Steve couldn’t see Tony’s face but he suspected that Tony looked absolutely floored by that bit of information.

“Steve? I mean you don’t have to answer if it’s too personal – I was asking something too personal and I just… sorry. You don’t have to say anything.” Tony murmured into Steve’s chin.

“You don’t have to be sorry, I was just thinking, that’s all. I was friends with a woman called Peggy Carter – I think you knew her. That one didn’t really go anywhere, but there was someone else. A man I was in love with. I… we were really happy.” Steve said. He wondered how to phrase it best so that he wouldn’t sound like he was off his rocker.

Should he pick a fake name and talk about it that way?

No.

He didn’t need to do that. Tony likely didn’t care about names.

“You had a boyfriend?” Tony gasped. Steve couldn’t see Tony’s face but he suspected that Tony looked absolutely floored by that bit of information.

“Well to tell you the truth, it was a relationship in the dreams I had during the coma.” Steve admitted. There was a hint of bitterness, and then it was gone, freed at long last. He was glad to be free of it; glad to let it go by just saying the words aloud. No one else had ever asked. Even Howard had never asked, and Bucky… well Bucky was something of an enigma at the moment.

“But you were with a guy? An actual man? I thought people from the forties were supposed to be all…” Tony flapped a hand, brushing against Steve’s hip; Steve smiled.

“I believe the word you’re looking for is homophobic?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s it.” Tony agreed.

“I was for a while. For most of my life really – Everyone kept telling me that it was wrong and up until the coma and the serum I believed every word they said to me. It was all lies of course – all bullshit. They were just afraid of what they didn’t understand. It probably sounds strange, but I had a remarkably supportive bunch of people with me in those dreams… and they helped me through it all. They helped me see reason.” Steve said.
“That’s really weird.”

“I know.”

“You’re awake now though…” Tony said, sounding thoughtful.

“Yes, I am. What does that have to do with anything?” Steve said, trying not to be annoyed.

“So… you could, you know, ignore the whole dream thing you know. It was a dream after all, wasn’t it?” Tony asked.

Ignore the dreams? The memories in his head, even if they hadn’t happened, were things he had been proud to have been a part of. Sure, some of the things he had done in the dreams hadn’t been the best – he had been a complete asshole to Tony when he had first been learning to deal with his sexuality – but every single thing he had gone through had taught him something new, and he had embraced that, the first willing change he had ever accepted for himself. He couldn’t put those lessons down as nothing even if he tried. He couldn’t forget them. It would be like cutting himself apart one memory at a time.

“I’m happy like this – with my head screwed on right. I don’t have any intention of going back to the life I had before, thinking those things I did about myself and everyone else who was gay. It was terrible hating myself like that. I could barely live, let alone get on with my life. It was like drowning all the time, only there was no water and no way to ever come up for air.” Steve sighed, closing his eyes. He pulled the blanket a little tighter around himself, inadvertently pulling Tony closer. Tony shifted behind him again and their legs tangled gracelessly.

“I guess that means you’re a virgin then, huh?” Tony joked, giving Steve’s hip a gentle bump with his own; Steve’s eyes crossed momentarily.

“I… I guess so. I never really thought about it like that.”

Huh… He hadn’t, had he?

He really hadn’t given his sex life any thought since he had woken up, not since that first night with all the drunken fumbling. Sure, he had given himself a few gropes in the night when he was alone, and Tony had always been on his mind in those moments, but he hadn’t really thought about sex; it had been lust, sure, but not that kind of lust. Tony’s moods… the nightmares and dreams… Howard… everything was so different, so muddled. It hadn’t really felt like there had been time to think about that kind of thing.

“Steve?”

“Go to sleep Tony.” Steve sighed. The last thing he needed now was to start dreaming erotic dreams about Tony while Tony was here pressed up against him; he didn’t want to ever have to explain morning wood.

“Hey, look… I’m sorry things didn’t work out for you. If it’s any consolation I don’t think first times matter all that much – well… at least mine didn’t.” Tony mumbled sleepily, his fingers digging into Steve’s hip. Tony was sleeping before Steve could ask him just what he had meant by that. He lay awake, pondering the words over and over again.
Steve woke up with Tony wrapped around him like an octopus trying to eat its prey, holding on so tightly he could barely move more than a millimetre in either direction; he lay still, hovering in the land of in-between-sleep, not really wanting to get up. There had been some lovely things in his dream that night. He sure hoped that he hadn’t done anything disastrous in his sleep.

Steve closed his eyes again and prayed that Tony would be too tired to wake up. It was Saturday and for once, there was no hangover to contend with and no impromptu visits by relatives or friends to fend off. This was the first morning he had woken up and not been disappointed that things hadn’t gone back to the way they had been in his dreams; it felt like coming home after being away for a long time, all sweet and familiar. He wanted to bask in that glow for as long as possible, longer, assuming he could convince Tony to stick around.

Tony groaned into Steve’s shoulder, pulling away to wipe the drool off of his chin. He took one look at Steve and then flopped back down, pressing his face into the space between Steve’s shoulder blades, snuggling close; Steve could feel the stinging pleasure of Tony’s beard against his back. He muffled his moan, turning it into a yawn.

“I don’t want to get up.” Tony grumbled.

“Me neither…” Steve yawned.

“Well that’s good, because I don’t want to get up.”

“Mhm…”

They lay in bed together for a whole hour, drifting in and out of sleep before someone started banging on the front door. Steve groaned and sat up; he was tempted to give the person at the door a piece of his mind – a very specific piece of his mind, the one with all the swear words and the punching. Tony struggled upright behind him and pushed Steve back down onto the mattress, tucking him in again. He staggered across the room, scratching his hip, the waistband of his boxers stretching to accommodate his fingers, dipping down to reveal the sharp cut of his hip.

“I’ll get it…” Tony groaned.

Steve rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Well, he was already up so he might as well take a shower. He untangled himself from the blankets and then found his way into the bathroom without tripping and killing himself on Tony’s pile of discarded clothing. He looked down at the clothing, lying so innocuously there on the carpet and then laughed aloud.

Tony had gone to answer the door in his boxers. It was too late to grab him now.

Still laughing, Steve stripped off his clothing and kicked the bathroom door closed, getting into the shower. The spray was just as dangerously powerful as it always was, although today the water was actually warmer than lukewarm by the time he managed to turn it down; he spent a few seconds struggling against the spray with one arm raised to protect his eyes before he got it just right.

The water slowed, the warmth seep through his tired body, easing his aches and pains. His hands hurt much less now, and the bruises from last night’s altercation with the punching bag were almost completely gone. He clenched and unclenched his hands, testing his dexterity, wiggling his fingers, delighted by that particular stroke of luck.

Maybe the serum was working after all! It had taken him a lot longer to lose the bruises the first few times he had used the punching bag. Maybe it had needed to warm up – to practice, perhaps.

He started lathering his body with soap, yawning and inhaling the smell of green apples; the
bathroom door opened unceremoniously as he was rubbing soap from his armpits. Steve almost killed himself on the bar of soap as it flung itself free from his hand, making a break for the drain. He slid across the bathmat and grabbed for the green bar of soap, lifting it back up, catching himself on the soap tray embedded in the wall tiles; he had never been this awkward and clumsy as Captain America, and he chided himself for it. He heard the toilet seat snap up and could just make out the faint outline of Tony through the shower curtain.

Tony was taking a pee in his bathroom.

Steve was showering a foot away and Tony was *peeing* in his bathroom.

Steve felt as if he had gone into the twilight zone yet again. They weren’t even *dating*, and here Tony was, wandering around yet again in Steve’s personal space as if it weren’t awkward at all. Even when they had been *dating* in his dream-memories, Tony had *never* walked in on him while he was showering without at least *knocking* first, and they certainly hadn’t been all that comfortable peeing around each other. Oh god, that sounded so wrong! Steve flushed, inadvertently putting soap in his eyes. He cursed, thrusting his face under the shower head, blinking back tears.

“You ok in there?” Tony asked, half turning to face the shower.

“I’m fine!” Steve called out, scrubbing at his face.

Tony flushed the toilet and zipped up, washing his hands. He pulled himself up onto the counter so that he could once more take up his favourite place by the sink; he twiddled his thumbs, cracking his neck.

“Are you waiting for the shower?” Steve asked, peeking around the curtain.

“Your eye is bright red.” Tony pointed out.

“I dropped the soap.” Steve grumbled.

Tony raised an eyebrow.

“Oh grow up.” Steve said, rolling his eyes.

“Never.” Tony smirked.

“Is there a reason why you’re lurking?”

“Happy’s waiting outside to take us to the store. We need to go grocery shopping this week, because he apparently decided it would be a good activity to prove maturity. Also, *we are out of food.*” Tony said, rolling his shoulders.

Oh god, Steve thought while trying not to kill himself as he went back to stand under the shower head. He hoped that Happy hadn’t been waiting outside for long.

He had neglected to take a good look in the fridge the night before, and he had been meaning to do it before he had gotten caught up icing his hand. Tony was probably right about them needing food. He began mentally preparing a list from the previous week’s delivered groceries so that they would be able to get everything essential. They hadn’t really eaten half of the stuff Howard had ordered, and really, all the prunes had just been *cruel. Ha ha, Howard, ha ha.*

At least it would be something for them to do together – he hadn’t gone shopping in a proper supermarket in ages. It could be fun!
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony go shopping and havoc insures. Things can't get any stranger, right? Worst dinner date ever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shopping for groceries turned out to be not as much fun as Steve had thought it would be; way less fun actually. Fun was off in the distance enjoying itself with a Mai Tai in hand, waving at him, the smarmy bastard.

Getting to the store hadn’t been that bad. Steve had expected to have a bit of trouble with that part, seeing as how they had woken up to find Happy standing on the porch. For a minute there, Steve had been worried that he had been sitting outside in the car for a while, waiting for them. As it turned out Happy, had only just arrived and he hadn’t been expecting either of them to be awake to begin with; he had seemed surprised to see the pair of them awake enough to answer the door in the first place. He sat in the kitchen while they got ready, sipping coffee he had brought with him. He had also brought doughnuts for them, and so they had breakfasted on sugar and caffeine, which in hindsight, might have been bad idea number one of a rather long list of bad ideas for the day.

They had left Happy in the car at his own request after getting dropped off, heading into the supermarket, a massive chain called Super Foods. Steve had been preparing for the event the entire ride over, trying to think of it as if they were going out to get groceries. That had been mistake number two. Grocery shopping was no place for casual shopping, and he should have known better than to think that things were going to go well when there were fifty thousand other people swarming around them looking for the best deals. There was far too much going on, and far too little attention being paid to things that were important. For instance, Tony didn’t seem to notice that he was being a complete jackass the moment they walked through the door, nor did he realize that most of the people around them acting the same way.

Mistake number three was when he let Tony drive the shopping cart, and boy, had that been a doozy of a mistake too. Tony pushed the cart along like he was trying out for the Grand Prix, going so fast he was almost out of sight, cornering so sharply he nearly ran people over; it wouldn’t have been so bad if he had picked the items up and put them gently in the cart, but no, he seemed content with knocking them off of the shelf directly into whichever part of the cart was nearest. The only time he ever slowed or stopped was when he was a few inches from hitting other shoppers with the cart, and even then he seemed to debate on whether it was worth stopping or not.

Steve had written up a list of groceries they needed over their doughnut breakfast, taking time to systematically list and catalogue all the things they would need for the coming week. That list was currently a crumpled ball in his bag, spending some quality time with the pen he would have used to cross things off on it. It was a good list, a legible list with plenty of space for anything else that they might need. In other words, it was as useless as a hat on a parakeet.

Tony had a very clear list of things he needed to survive residing in his head and apparently most of what they had been eating, and had therefore been on the list Steve had written was unnecessary,
superfluous words there only to amuse him.

Steve stared mournfully into their almost empty shopping cart, wondering how Tony could possibly believe that it was healthy for two grown men to live off of butterscotch pudding, corn flakes and coffee. Tony strolled on ahead, grinning from ear to ear as they turned a corner and ended up in the baking aisle; he put a bag of marshmallows in the shopping cart, taking time to delicately place them between the cornflakes and the butterscotch pudding, arranging them just so.

“Tony… no.” Steve groaned, resisting the urge to reach in and pull the offending marshmallows out.

“My cart, my rules string bean.” Tony chirped, pushing the cart further away. Steve scowled at him, trying very hard not to turn around and just walk off. This was the third time today Tony had called him names, and he had a feeling that it wouldn’t be the last. First it had been shorty, then doll-face and now it was string bean. The only thing keeping Steve from physically hurling something at the back of Tony’s head was that goofy-looking smile on Tony’s face. This was the most joyous expression Steve had ever seen on Tony’s face when he was sober; it was too bad really. Steve could have gotten used to that smile, if only it hadn’t come at such a cost.

“Can we at least attempt to get some real food? You know the kind that doesn’t rot all of your teeth out or make you go blind and fall into some kind of sugar induced coma?” Steve asked in exasperation, ducking around a woman trying to buy half a shelf’s worth of coffee; dollar day sales were starting to look like some kind of villainous conspiracy. He was ready to start begging at this point, because every time he had tried to put something into the cart Tony had surreptitiously taken it out and left it somewhere in the aisles, usually where it didn’t belong. He felt very sorry for the people who would be cleaning up the aisles at the end of the day. They would be finding bags of toilet paper in with the cereal and all manner of weird things dropped all over the place. Someone would undoubtedly think a crazy man had wandered into the store.

“He said he wants us to shop maturely.” Tony said, the smirk somewhat brightening in intensity like he had been plugged into a wall socket and was discharging the excess energy through his teeth. Steve tried not to worry about Tony’s sanity, assuming of course, that Tony had some in the first place.

“So you said – can we at least get some pasta and sauces? I don’t think there’s much left in the cupboards, and we have a full week’s worth of meals to make here that pudding and cornflakes won’t cover.”

“You just haven’t tried Steve. Honestly, live a little. Take the stick out of your ass and let it breathe for a while.” Tony grabbed a pack of brown sugar and tossed it into the cart, scooting forwards to grab a double bag of oatmeal. At least he was getting some food that wasn’t completely sugar coated.

Steve sighed aloud, rubbing the bridge of his nose knowing that it wouldn’t help.

“Besides, I’m going to get food; I just don’t like him thinking that he’s won just because I did.” Tony shrugged.

“If you’re going to get food anyways, can I at least start getting things from the list? Or are you just going to put everything back again when I’m not looking?” Steve grumbled. This was tiring. Every second he spent here in this aisle with Tony felt like it was consuming his soul. The people around them were bad enough as it was! He had been shoved three times already and had almost ended up in someone’s shopping cart the last time he had tried to reach up to get a box of cereal. He was starting to think that he should complain to management, maybe suggest that people take a mandatory driver’s test before they were allowed to operate a cart in the first place, seeing as how most of them didn’t seem to know the difference between their cart and their elbows. How had these
people had gotten to the mall in the first place? By all rights they should have crashed into trees pulling out of their driveways. Some of them should have died tripping on the sidewalk.

“Fine – go fetch your own sustenance if you think I’m so incompetent.” Tony snapped, losing his smirk. Steve might as well have punched him in the chest the way he was acting. He puffed his chest out, viciously yanking a bag of coffee off the shelf, hurling it into the cart so hard it bounced and knocked over his precious marshmallows.

Why did everything have to be like this? It wasn’t like Steve was pulling out fingernails here! Why the hell did Tony think that acting like a brat was the way to beat Howard’s game? Didn’t he see that he was playing right into Howard’s hands? He shouldn’t have even bothered to think that this was going to end well; he would have been better off thinking of it as a death march, because that was what it was now. He had been stupid again, and it had bitten him in the ass. Why did he always have to be so damned stupid?

“I didn’t say you were incompetent. Jesus Christ, Tony!” Steve stuffed his hands into his pocket and yanked the groceries list he had made out, furious. He crumpled it up and threw it into the shopping cart with all of his might and then, for the first time since he had met Tony, stormed off into the crowd.

Steve ended up in the produce section by the time he managed to calm down enough to realize what he had just done; he had left Tony unattended with the shopping cart, essentially stranding himself in the store amidst strangers without his cellphone. He glared rather vindictively at an eggplant, as if it had caused the entire problem. Frankly, he didn’t give two hoots as to whether Tony would find that distressing. The way Tony had been acting had made Steve feel like he was all of three feet tall. He didn’t like the fact that he was starting to get used to that feeling; he wanted to take that feeling out back and punch it in the face until it didn’t stand up again. He hadn’t even felt that way when he was being beaten up in high school! He kicked at a broken piece of rubber band on the floor and nearly hit a man trying to eat some of the grapes he was checking out. The man glared at him and he glared right back.

Fine. If Tony wanted to play things this way, then he could play all he wanted. There was no sense in pouting about it. It would be easier to start putting together his own shopping basket so that at least one of them would be acting like a mature adult. He could always pass off his shopping for Tony’s if he had to. It wasn’t like Howard was going to know the difference.

He scowled, trying to recall everything he had written down on the list, wishing that he hadn’t thrown the damn thing at Tony; he was usually better than this. Today Tony had just been pushing all of his buttons one after another after another. It had been such a nice night before, such a wonderful morning too. He looked around at the vegetables, lamenting the loss of his peace of mind. He remembered putting a lot of fruits and vegetables on the list, wanting to get something into Tony that didn’t come out of a can, but he couldn’t quite name all of what he had been looking for; luckily, it was all here waiting for him to pick through. They needed boxed pastas and sauces, fresh or from a jar too now that he thought about it. At least he had something to work with now, a place to start. He hated having nothing to work with, hated having idle hands. He could work his way backwards; take it one piece at a time until he had all of it. Hopefully he would remember the rest of the list by the time he stumbled upon Tony again.

Steve backtracked to the till and grabbed one of the red plastic baskets he had seen earlier and then returned to the vegetables, trying to keep out of other people’s ways; this proved incredibly difficult, not because he was clumsy, but because as usual, no one else seemed to be trying to do the same thing. He had his foot run over twice by the time he made his way back to the fruit section and had to
limp his way past a group of elderly ladies arguing over the benefits of prunes versus good old fashioned ex-lax. Steve didn’t know what ex-lax was but he hoped that it wasn’t what he thought it was. It just seemed wrong to have to hear people talking about something like that in the middle of a crowded store. Tony would have told him to grow up if he were there; Dream-Tony would have at least. He didn’t know what his new Tony would think about it. This Tony would probably just laugh at him and tell him that he was weird again.

Steve sidestepped the old ladies and made his way to the apples, picking out some of the nicest ones he could find. He had to stop and look at all the different varieties for a moment, feeling lost in a sea of produce. They hadn’t had nearly this many apples back when he had been young; he had been lucky to even get a piece of fruit half the time.

Apples were the best snack, hands down; well, at least for him they were. Anything that had apples in it was a winner, especially apple crisp and cake. He could sit around eating those all day if given the chance. There were a lot of different varieties of apples around now, and he knew a few recipes that would probably knock Tony’s socks off if he decided to try his hand at baking again; now if only he could pick a type to use. The Fuji apples looked alright, but the Honeycrisp ones were massive, taking two hands to hold. He decided on them despite the slightly higher price, seeing as they looked and smelled the sweetest of the lot. Boy did they smell good. People started looking at him strangely, so he picked out ten and put them in a plastic bag, carrying his basket over to the zucchinis determined to find two or three that might be big and fresh enough to get them through the week. Tony would have probably made a few phallic jokes about this particular task. Luckily Tony was nowhere to be seen.

He picked out the rest of the vegetables and fruit with careful, tactical precision, going from bin to bin moving with the flow of the crowd. The basket was heavy by the time Steve finished up and he cursed his weak arms for not being able to lift it higher than a foot off the ground; he was proud that he had managed to carry it as far as he had, actually. Back during the first week in the hospital he hadn’t been able to carry nearly as much as he could now. He supposed that he should call it a small victory that he hadn’t dropped it on his foot and crushed his toes by now.

“Steve!”

Steve was spun around, basket bumping against his hip, as Tony seized him by the shoulders. He caught a glimpse of the shopping cart, nestled a few feet back beside the potatoes where Tony had left it; how Steve hadn’t heard him approach was baffling, because it looked like Tony had had to run over a few people to get the cart into that position and there should have been either screaming tires or screaming people heralding his arrival.

Tony took the basket from Steve’s hands and set it down between his feet, still holding Steve by the shoulders, white knuckled. He looked fairly uncomfortable and slightly sweaty as if he had been running.

“Jesus – don’t leave like that! I almost had a heart attack!” Tony snapped.

“It wasn’t that big a –”

“Were you trying to kill me?” Tony growled, giving Steve a slight shake. He looked relieved when Steve looked guilty and picked up the basket, hefting it towards the crazily parked shopping cart. Steve followed along. It was irritating as hell that he wasn’t being allowed to do anything now that Tony was back. He had arms for Pete’s sake – he could lift a bloody basket! It wasn’t like he was going to break into pieces if a lettuce leaf touched him.

Tony carefully unpacked Steve’s basket, setting all of the vegetables and fruit in the compartment at
the top of the cart; the care he was showing the fruit was startling, as if he thought it might bruise just by touching the metal framework. He handed the basket back to Steve and then started to push the shopping cart, heading towards the bakery section. When Steve caught up again after weaving through a crowd of cranky shoppers, he realized that their entire cart was filled to the brim with the things he had written down on the list. He spotted a piece of wrinkled paper sticking out of Tony’s pocket that looked oddly familiar. Steve snatched the paper, unfolding it. It was the list he had thrown at Tony. He had thought that it looked familiar!

Tony turned, seemingly annoyed and then abruptly sagged when he saw that Steve doing.

“I got most of the dry stuff done. All that’s left is the refrigerated and the frozen stuff – after we get the bread.” Tony said, clearing his throat.

“Wow, you got that all done really fast.” Steve remarked, still looking down at the list. Tony hadn’t checked anything off, but it all seemed to be there in the cart.

“Well I had to look down every goddamned aisle to find you, so I grabbed everything as I went.” Tony grunted. “So don’t wander off like that again – or we have to make some kind of meeting place so we both don’t end up separated.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Steve said, smiling. The change in his expression seemed to throw Tony for a loop, because he started squinting at Steve, mouth half open as if he wanted to say something more but was having an aneurism instead.

“Tony?”

“It’s nothing. Was there anything else we needed?” Tony asked, turning away quickly.

“Well you’ve got pretty much everything. Did you want to get any snack foods?”

“Define snack foods.” Tony said warily.

“Things you can eat that have absolutely no nutritional value.”

“Uh… maybe… caramel popcorn or something like that? Crackers?”

“That sounds good. Let’s go pick some stuff out.”

Steve couldn’t help the grin on his face as they walked down the chip aisle. Tony’s hand rested on his shoulder, keeping a hold of him, and for once it didn’t feel like he was being dragged along for the ride.

When they arrived home, they found Howard Stark pacing in the driveway like a man awaiting the birth of his first child. Knowing Howard, he probably hadn’t even been at the maternity ward when his son had been born; he wasn’t very enthusiastic about waiting after all. He claimed that it made him get ulcers. Happy cleared his throat, looking away, not making eye contact with Howard or anyone else in the car.

“Shit.” Tony tensed beside Steve in the backseat of the car, lips drawing into a tight line; he had been
smiling a second ago, laughing at what Steve had been telling him about how he had been run over by so many old people in the store. A split-second glance at Howard Stark had been all it had taken to stop the jokes, fun flying out the window.

Steve reached out to pat Tony’s knee and then pulled back at the last second when he realized what he was doing; he was really going to have to get a hold on the accidental touching sometime soon, or else he was going to end up forcing himself to wear oven mitts or something. This was worse than getting chicken pox! Thankfully, Tony didn’t seem to notice the aborted movement. He simply hunched lower in the seat, pressing into the cushions while he waited for the car to come to a complete stop. Steve was surprised that he waited for the car to come to a stop at all. He had half been expecting Tony to duck and roll out the door so that he could escape without Howard even setting eyes on him.

Steve got out of the car and winced as sun blinded him. Despite the warm sun, there was a foreboding chill in the air, the eerie feeling of being touched by cold fingers chasing after it. He had been planning on enjoying the rest of their day by maybe taking Tony out for that walk he had been thinking about, but that was starting to look unlikely. With Howard here, time had pretty much come to a dead stop.

Howard’s generally dour expression turned into a soured-looking smile when he locked eyes with Steve. Steve was glad to draw Howard’s attention; anything to keep it off of Tony.

“Steve! You’re finally back!” Howard said strutting forwards, pulling Steve into a hug. Steve tolerated the physical contact for an obligatory five seconds and then pulled back, joining Happy at the back of the car so that they could get at the groceries in the trunk. Sadly the move put them too close to Tony, who was edging around the opposite side of the car with his keys out, trying to creep to the front door before Howard could get a bead on him.

Tony wasn’t having a very lucky day; his shoe squeaked and Howard’s gaze snapped onto him like a pig going for slops.

“Tony. I thought I gave Happy instructions for you to leave Steve here when you went on your little shopping trip.” Howard snarled. The anger seemed to come out of nowhere, blasting out of him; he had looked unhappy, but not this unhappy. He grabbed Tony by the arm and for a second, Steve was sure that Tony was going to flinch clean out of his grasp. Tony was silent, trapped in Howard’s hold, eyes not quite on Howard’s face. He stared sullenly into Howard’s left earlobe.

“I did tell Happy to tell you that – Happy did tell you what I said, didn’t he?” Howard said icily, looking from Tony to Happy. Happy swallowed hard and turned his back, fumbling to get the keys out of his pocket. He helped Steve haul groceries to the front door, looking like he had just barely escaped a firing squad; Steve couldn’t blame him for making a hasty dash to the door. Had he not been concerned about Tony, he would have been sprinting off with him.

The key chain hanging from Happy’s index finger drew Steve’s attention so quickly he thought at first that it must have been a hallucination; there in gold was a duplicate of Tony’s house key nestled amongst a set of car keys. He had only seen the key once, but there was no mistaking it. It was even on the same style of keychain.

Why did Happy have a house key?

And if Happy had a key, did that mean Howard did too? Pepper hadn’t said anything about Howard having keys. He was pretty sure she would have mentioned it.

Steve went back to the trunk and grabbed another bag of groceries, tugging on Tony’s free arm,
trying to pull him free without looking like he was trying to physically dragging him away.

“It’s fine Howard. We had fun, didn’t we?” Steve said, hoping to peacefully negotiate some kind of truce between father and son. His words fell on deaf ears. Howard gave Tony a single rough shake, glaring at him with such fierce disdain that Steve felt humiliated on Tony’s behalf; fathers weren’t supposed to look at their children like that. No one should be looking at someone like that. It wasn’t right.

“I gave you instructions boy – strict instructions – when you started living here alone, remember? You were supposed to do whatever I told you and you were supposed to do it correctly, without any childishness or bitching! I warned you Tony! Do you want to have to go back to living where you were? Locked in one of my spare bedrooms? Do you? Because that’s what will happen if you start pissing around again Tony! Do you understand me? Am I being clear enough for you? Is it getting through your thick skull?” Howard growled in a low voice.

Tony nodded, wincing in pain; he looked absolutely terrified, although he wasn’t shaking. Howard’s grasp was so tight that his fingers seemed to be close to going through Tony’s flesh. There would be bruises there later on, Steve bet and it would be a nasty one at that.

He needed to stop this. He couldn’t just stand by and watch Tony get hurt like this.

“Howard –” Steve tried to interrupt, reaching for Howard’s hand, ready to start prying his fingers free.

“Steve, hush.” Howard snapped so sharply, Steve reeled backwards as if having been slapped. Howard seemed to catch himself and dropped Tony’s arm, turning his attention back to Steve; the shift of energy was startling, anger turning into something else, something casual, friendly and somewhat sexual. Tony snatched up the last two bags of groceries and sped into the house, almost crashing into Happy in his haste to get as far away from Howard as possible.

“Look, I understand that you two don’t get along –” Steve pulled himself up to his full height, clenching his fists. He would have to be diplomatic about this, even if he wanted pound Howard’s face into the cement. It wouldn’t do any good to get Tony into more trouble than he was already in; he hated having to be diplomatic about things like this, but it was a necessary evil. Howard would find some way to make whatever Steve said to him Tony’s fault, and then it would become a thousand times worse. He hated that he had to be tactical about dealing with his own friend – scratch that. An ex-friend who didn’t know they had been ex-ed out yet. Howard was dead to him now, and there was nothing in the world that would make Steve forgive him.

“Don’t, Steve. It’s not your place.” Howard smiled sweetly, cocking his head to the side.

“Tony is my friend.”

“And I understand that, but he’s got to learn some discipline. He can’t just ignore what I tell him and screw off – I had this morning all planned out! I wanted to have some time alone with you so that I could see how things were going.” Howard said. He turned and snapped his fingers for Steve to follow, like he was leading around a new servant, or maybe a house pet. Steve followed reluctantly, knowing that failing to do so would likely make things worse. He calmed himself, letting his anger burrow deep within him for later use. Now was not the time to break.

Howard led them into the living room and then sprawled on the couch with his legs spread and one arm resting casually over the back of it; he owned his space, leaving little beside him that he couldn’t touch, an aura of lechery wrapped around him so thick Steve could have choked on it. When Steve didn’t sit beside him right away, Howard patted the couch expectantly, eyes narrowing ever-so-
slightly, the snarl-grin still on his face. “Come now Steve, I won’t bite.”

Steve didn’t really want to sit down; he would have preferred to remain standing, possibly three blocks away in a completely different living room. He relented, however, when Howard’s lip began to twitch downwards in displeasure, positioning himself on the far side of the couch cushion. Howard would have a hard time doing anything funny now unless he decided to lunge at him; not that he expected Howard to be above lunging.

“So how are things going with you? I haven’t heard from you since the board meeting, and I wanted to touch base.” Howard casually drummed his fingers on the back of the couch.

“Checking up on me?” Steve raised an eyebrow.

“Just visiting, dear. It’s not like I expected something bad to have happened to you.” Howard said with a sly grin.

“Things are fine. We get along really well. I’m enjoying the time I’m spending with Tony at work – he’s doing some really amazing things.” Steve kept his lips curled into a pseudo-smile; it was awkward as hell, but he managed to keep it from morphing into something monstrous filled with rage.

Howard frowned, annoyed by Steve’s news or perhaps, annoyed by a certain lack of news.

“And you’re alright with him whoring around like some dime-store trollop? I heard from a very reputable source that he had a lady friend over last week. The paper had some very unflattering pictures of her traipsing down the driveway the next morning wearing something that should have been a playboy centrefold. You’re telling me that didn’t bother you?”

“She seemed nice.” Steve said flatly, shrugging. He wanted to throw Tony’s words in Howard’s face right then and there. Howard had planned it all – the women, the life, and the embarrassment, controlling it all from behind the scenes, the most excellent of puppet masters. Steve was surprised that Howard hadn’t turned out to be the best super villain of them all; Doctor Doom had nothing on Howard Stark. How had no one else noticed? How could this man be part of the Avengers Initiative? Someone should have done something!

“She seemed nice.” Steve said flatly, shrugging. He wanted to throw Tony’s words in Howard’s face right then and there. Howard had planned it all – the women, the life, and the embarrassment, controlling it all from behind the scenes, the most excellent of puppet masters. Steve was surprised that Howard hadn’t turned out to be the best super villain of them all; Doctor Doom had nothing on Howard Stark. How had no one else noticed? How could this man be part of the Avengers Initiative? Someone should have done something!

“Really? Well I suppose to you dear, everyone seems nice.” Howard snorted, flicking away a piece of lint that had taken up refuge on his shoulder.

“I guess I’m just a little naive then.” Steve smiled thinly. Better to have Howard think that he was some kind of wet behind the ears idiot then to have Howard thinking that he had an actual brain. Bucky’s offer was looking very tempting all of a sudden. He wondered if Bucky would bring a shovel, or if he would have to supply his own.

“Bucky called asking me to check in on you. He mentioned something about visiting you that same weekend and how you were very… upset.” Howard said, examining his fingernails. “Although he didn’t say what that meant exactly.”

“Upset? Upset about what?” Steve blinked. Bucky couldn’t have told Howard about the kiss, so what was he talking about?

“He said you looked off – like you weren’t yourself. I told him that it was probably just from having to put up with Tony twenty four hours a day. He didn’t seem to think that was the problem – hinted at you being depressed and possibly needing a new place to live. Went on and on about it actually. I didn’t think he’d ever shut up. I had to hang up on him in the end, and of course that didn’t stop him
because we all live together in the purgatory that is the Avengers Mansion. Honestly, some days I wonder why I even bothered to put the lot of them up.”

Steve’s blood ran cold. What was Bucky playing at here? “I’m not depressed if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I didn’t think so either,” Howard confessed quirking a smile. “But you know Bucky and his wild imagination. He was talking so fast I could barely hear half of what he said. Usually he doesn’t have more than two very specific words to spare for me. I wonder if he’s handling this as well as he’s pretending. Knowing him, it almost seems like he was worried you were going to fall in love with Tony and run off together to go live in the jungle somewhere. Bucky is paranoid about the whole queer agenda as he calls it.” Howard laughed. “It’s ridiculous, I know, but he’s been going on about it for years now. They practically script everything he says on television these days to keep him from making a fool of himself.”

“That’s silly. The jungle’s a bit of a stretch.” Steve smiled again.

Howard shook his head.

“Well to tell you the truth, he’s been a little… clingy about you for a while now. He’s had his share of girlfriends, but none of them really stick around for all that long. You’re the only person he’s spent more than a few months with, you know. At any rate, I’ve got Avengers business to attend to – if you’d been back earlier, we could have done something much more fun.” Howard purred, reaching out to touch Steve’s face. The move repulsed Steve, but he didn’t pull away from Howard’s touch like he wanted to. Instead, he stood up, pretending to be politely waiting to usher Howard out the door. Howard sighed, the smile on his face turning into a grimace. Steve liked that grimace a lot. He wanted to become good friends with it.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you this week then hm? You can always come visit me at work you know. I’d love to get a visit.” Howard cooed.

Steve was pretty sure that Howard was mixing up his words; visit didn’t normally sound like blowjob, and he could pretty much guess by the look in Howard’s eyes that getting a blowjob was exactly what Howard had in mind from their next un-chaperoned visit. He suddenly struck by the urge to go out and buy Happy something nice for neglecting to tell them that he was supposed to stay home alone.

“That was nice to see you again Howard.” Steve lied flawlessly.

“Mhm. I’m sure. Walk with me.”

Steve walked Howard out to the car where Happy was patiently waiting for them. Happy gave Steve a wink and then turned away, leaning against the car fiddling with the driver’s side mirror. Howard paused beside the vehicle, one hand holding the door handle. His fingers trembled, his knuckles rapping against the paint. He scowled at them, smacking his hand lightly as if to chide it for misbehaving.

“You know Steve… If you wanted to live somewhere else, I arrange it so that you could have the run of the place, a key to the front door even… if you wanted one.” Howard said, smiling again. The smile didn’t extend to his eyes, a mere hint of ‘happiness’.

“That’s alright. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, but honestly I like the routine I have with Tony. It makes things feel safe – normal. I don’t think I want to be by myself any time soon.” Steve said, being completely truthful. He tactfully left out the ‘there is no way in hell I would live
with you unless it was forced on me’ part, stretching his arms out in front of him so that he could crack his wrists.

“Are you sure? You wouldn’t have to be alone, I could arrange for a little place for us in the city – a nice apartment. One room, one bed – very nice view and all the sketching you could ever want. The best models of course – best materials.” Howard smirked, opening the door and getting in. “There’s no rush of course, but I’m not getting any younger.”

Howard rolled down the window leaning half out looking up at Steve expectantly batting his eyelashes. Steve almost laughed aloud at the absurdity of it. Howard looked like he was waiting for a kiss. Well he wasn’t going to get one, that was for sure. He could go kiss his own ass. Steve smiled his most charming smile, waved at Howard and then backed off, turning towards the front door without a second glance in Howard’s direction. He didn’t stay to watch the car drive off.

When Steve got back inside he found that Tony had vanished. He went from room to room, systematically searching, calling out for him, but came up with nothing; not even a bottle cap greeted him. He could find no traces of the other man aside from a wrinkle in the front rug from when Tony had stepped inside. There was no noise, not even the faint sound of snoring that Steve had come to expect of Drunk Tony; that was who he was looking for of course. He didn’t expect to see Sober Tony any time soon, especially not after what Howard had done.

He checked the door to Tony’s workshop on a whim, although he had never found Tony in it on a weekend before; it was devoid of life, just as all the other rooms, an empty hole filled with darkness and second hand trinkets. Even Tony’s bedroom, which Steve had only checked reluctantly after scouring the rest of the house, was uninhabited.

Steve tried not to panic. There was no reason to panic, because Tony was fine, wherever he was. But still, where else could Tony be?

He wouldn’t have snuck out the back door, because Tony very rarely went outside on his own. He didn’t have a car, so he couldn’t have driven off anywhere, and they didn’t have any neighbors so it wasn’t likely that he had gone wandering off into someone else’s house bombed out of his mind.

Wait – there was always his bedroom. Tony ended up there sometimes. He felt stupid for not having thought about it in the first place. Steve shuffled quickly through the hall and peeked into his bedroom, hoping to find Tony curled up in the blankets; no dice. His bed was made, still with intact hospital corners.

“Tony?” Steve called out on the off chance that Tony might yell back if only to tell him to shut up. He got no response, just like the ten other times he had called out. He cursed; he was starting to think that Tony really had just walked out the back door. With nowhere else to look and all possible hiding spots picked through, Steve went into the kitchen to check if the groceries had been put away, and that was where he found Tony.

He hadn’t thought to look under the kitchen table before, but there Tony was, sitting on the floor hunched over with a bottle of whiskey clutched to his chest as if it were a teddy bear. The tumbler beside him was empty, not even used, just there to keep him company it seemed. He had taken to drinking directly from the bottle. Fantastic. Clearly he had been doing his thinking and drinking for quite some time, possibly ever since Howard had been interrogating Steve in the living room. Happy
must have been the one putting everything away judging by the way the plastic bags were neatly folded up and sitting on the counter in a pile; folding and stacking wasn’t Tony’s style. Tony preferred to ball things up and stuff them wherever he found room, sometimes in shoes or gloves.

Steve dropped down to his knees and crawled forwards, ducking down to get completely underneath; it was more of a precaution against accidental brainings than anything else. He wasn’t tall enough for it to be a real problem, even crawling across the floor on his knees.

“Hi.” Steve said.

Tony slowly looked up from his bottle. His eyes were dark and subdued, not at all like the eyes Drunk Tony usually had. There was nothing flirty here, no goofy smile or drunken leer. His cheeks were wet; he had been crying, and there was a trickle of saliva and whiskey dripping from his chin. Steve was tempted to reach out and wipe his face, so he sat on his hand until the urge passed.

“Steve.” Tony’s voice was slurred and heavy, rough around the edges in ways it hadn’t ever been before. It was scary to see him like this, so out of control and lifeless, likely to pitch forwards and pass out.

“Are you alright? Do you want to talk about it?” Steve said, scooting across the floor to get closer. Tony shied away, leaning back against the wall and the table leg, bending awkwardly to avoid him. He looked like he wanted to crawl back into the wall to disappear through it, and in his drunken state he would probably try too. Steve took the hint and remained where he was, waiting Tony out, trying to be patient while his mind screamed at him to do something – anything – to stop the drinking before Tony’s liver up and quit.

Steve was in for a long wait. He almost fell asleep, banging his head against the table leg when he caught himself nodding off, jerking his head up. He winced, rubbing his bruised scalp, praying that he wasn’t going to have a goose egg later.

A glance at the bottle clutched tightly in Tony’s hand filled him with relief. The volume hadn’t changed since he had sat down with Tony, and there was still time to coax him into putting it away. Unfortunately Tony still looked like he wanted to take another drink, his eyes focused on the bottle held in his hand.

That part wasn’t so good. Time to deploy small talk as a means of distraction.

“So… did you want to do something with me tomorrow? I was thinking about going to one of the craft stores in town to see what they have for knitting supplies.” Steve said. The knitting was embarrassing, hopefully just embarrassing enough to spark some interest in Tony. Being mocked might be worth it if it got Tony out of his depressed funk. He would have worn his underwear on his head if it stopped the drinking.

Tony didn’t look up from the bottle. Instead he raised it to his lips and drank, taking such a deep drought that Steve was afraid he would drain everything in one go. Steve hesitated, fingers twitching an inch away from the bottle’s neck, wanting to snatch it away; Tony glared at him, not quite all there but certainly still capable of directing his anger.

“Don’t.”

“Alright. I won’t take it away, but can you put it down for me? Can we talk about it please?”

“No.”

“Tony. Please. I’m scared here. I want to help you.”
“Go away Steve.” Tony slurred. He slid sideways, crashing into Steve’s lap, the bottle rolling away as his hands finally lost their battle with muscle control. Steve snatched up the bottle before it could dribble all over the place and righted it, setting it beside his leg, still within Tony’s reach but far enough away that he would have to work to get to it; he was ready to bar access to it if he had to now. He wasn’t sure how much had been in the bottle to begin with, but there seemed like more than enough gone to be concerned about it. He wished that Jarvis was around to tell him how much Tony had swallowed down; life had been easier with Jarvis keeping a watchful eye on everybody.

“I don’t want to go away. I want to sit here under the table. It’s very nice here – very homey.” Steve said.

“No you don’t.” Tony nearly yelled, his voice slowly fading into silence. He lay across Steve’s legs, staring balefully at the bottle just out of reach. “Give me my bottle.”

“No.”

“You don’t want to be here…”

“Yes I do. I’ll sit here all night. It’s very comfortable.”

“Is… not…”

Tony fell asleep, snoring softly, cradled in Steve’s lap, his body falling slack one limb at a time. Steve was grateful for the sleep, grateful for any distraction from the drinking. Howard was a grade A bastard. Bucky had been right all along. Howard wouldn’t care if Tony ended up in the hospital with alcohol poisoning; he didn’t care one bit what he did to his son.

“Oh Tony…” Steve sighed in despair.

There was so much he didn’t know about Tony’s life, so many questions unanswered. He wished that he knew how to deal with this kind of situation. Was he doing the right thing letting Tony not talk about it? Pepper had said that Tony was better now, but if this was better for Tony, what had worse looked like? What had Howard done when Tony had been living in his house under his ever-watchful eye? He had threatened Tony with that, with the thought of being back in Howard’s house, brandished it like a red hot poker and Tony had seemed absolutely terrified of him for it. Was it possible that Howard had hit Tony when he was a child? Howard seemed more than willing to do it now, and Tony was an adult who could fight back for Christ’s sake. But that was the real question wasn’t it? Would Tony fight back if Howard did try to take something out on him? Tony hadn’t even moved when Howard had been grabbing him, not even to blink, just hanging there taking the abuse.

Had Howard done something worse?

He hadn’t thought Howard capable that kind of cruelty, but he could see that Howard had done something—something terrible and inexcusable, something he could never apologize for even with a lifetime of groveling. Steve stroked Tony’s hair, carding his fingers through the soft, greasy curls as gently as he could. Tony whimpered under his touch, bending towards Steve’s stomach, pressing his face against the soft skin where Steve’s shirt had ridden up as if it were the softest of silks.

Steve closed his eyes.

Tony should have been protected from things like this, from the things that Howard did without so much as batting an eyelash; someone should have stepped in. He wished that he could have been there to do something. He wished that he could have woken up earlier, before any of this had happened. Steve wasn’t big anymore, he knew that, but he had never needed to be big to fight bullies
and monsters. He had options, not as many as he would have liked, but they were there if he knew where to look. He had Bucky’s help on his side too, although he doubted that Bucky would do anything; if he hadn’t stepped in before, he probably wasn’t going to start now. That left Steve with SHIELD as his only option, but they weren’t any help either. He didn’t have any military pull, and he definitely didn’t have the money to take Howard on if he wanted to start something in retaliation. So what could he do to keep Tony safe? What would he be willing to give up in order to keep Tony happy?

Anything – he would be willing to give anything to keep Tony safe, happy and loved.

He knew what he would be called to give up, what Howard would want in exchange. Howard would only be satisfied if he gave himself up. It made him feel sick to his stomach just thinking about it, but if it kept Tony safe… if it kept Tony happy… if that was the cost, he would gladly pay it.

“Steve… You’re… where… Please… don’t… don’t… leave… me. Come back…” Tony moaned in his sleep, pressing his face closer into the warmth of Steve’s bare skin.

“It’s alright honey, I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.” Steve said softly, opening his eyes, still stroking Tony’s hair. Tony calmed, groaning in his sleep, nuzzling Steve’s belly with his scratchy beard.

He could give in to Howard’s demands… but… No. He didn’t want to leave Tony alone. Alone would be so much worse – worse than all of those insults and screams that Howard would spit in Tony’s face combined. Howard would see it as having won some kind of victory and then there would be nothing left to stop him. Howard had made it very clear that Steve had no place, no say whatsoever in how he spoke or how he treated his son; his hush had meant something so much more than just a denial of Steve’s voice. No. He couldn’t do that. He had never given in to a bully before, and he wasn’t going to start now.

Steve must have dozed off, because when he came to Tony was pawing at his chest, trying to get his attention. He wasn’t very coordinated, yet he managed to grip Steve’s shirt regardless of his drunkenness, tugging weakly.

“Huh? What was that?” Steve yawned, rubbing his eyes.

“Should go to bed…” Tony mumbled, still slightly slurred from the combination of alcohol and sleep; he was mussed in a way that would have been adorable if not for the bottle sitting beside him.

“Alright. Where do you want to sleep?”

“In a bed stupid…”

Steve smiled, brushing the hair out of Tony’s face; Tony didn’t flinch, pushing his face into Steve’s hand instead. “Whose bed do you want to sleep in?”

“Mine. Better blinds… no devil sun…” Tony groaned, rolling out of Steve’s lap. He hit the floor with his shoulder far harder than he should have and banged his head, neck muscles not able to handle the strain. He whimpered pitifully, trying to rub at his face but couldn’t coordinate his arms enough to manage it, almost poking himself in the eye with a wayward thumb.

“You ok?” Steve asked in concern. He rubbed the likely now bruised area on Tony’s face as soothingly as possible, making soft sounds of comfort to distract Tony from the pain. Tony calmed, breathing so slowly that Steve almost thought he had fallen asleep again. “Tony?”
“Need… to go to bed.” Tony whimpered into the floor when Steve stopped rubbing his cheek.

“Let’s stand up then, alright? We’ll do it together.” Steve whispered back.

“Ok Steve.”

Steve guided Tony out from under the table while crawling alongside him, keeping a hand on top of Tony’s head so he didn’t whack it when he stood up; he figured getting his hand mashed into the wooden table was well worth the price of keeping Tony’s brains intact. God knows the man had fried enough brain cells now as it was.

“I’ll get you some water first, alright? Can you drink some for me?” Steve said.

“Ok.”

Steve took the whiskey bottle away before it could be spilled, dumping the contents down the drain while Tony was busy trying to right himself like an upended turtle, counting on the sound of water running to drown out his treachery; he handed Tony a glass of cold water, waiting for him to sip his way through most of it before he took the glass back, setting it beside the sink.

“Is that alright Steve?” Tony asked, shuffling closer. Steve wrapped an arm around Tony as he pitched forwards.

“That’s alright. You did good Tony. Real good.”

Getting Tony up the stairs was going to be hell. Tony was maybe a hundred and forty pounds, if Steve had the math right, and he had problems lifting bags of flour. Hefting Tony up a flight of stairs was going to be a challenge to say the least. But upstairs was where Tony wanted to sleep, so that was where they were going.

Steve steadied Tony and together they stumbled to the staircase, taking it one painfully staggered step at a time. The stairs were a little trickier to navigate than the hallway had been but luckily, or perhaps unluckily, Tony seemed to know how to get up them even while completely blotto. They made it to the top of the stairs in a respectable forty minutes and then Steve had to quickly help Tony stagger down the hallway and into the bathroom.

Tony swayed towards the toilet and then gave Steve a searching look; Steve blinked at him, unsure what he wanted, wavering in the doorway.

“Tony? Is something wrong?”

“Out.”

Steve was left waiting outside in the dark, listening to the sounds of Tony vomiting; he didn’t bother turning the light on, knowing that Tony would probably just complain about how bright it was. His own hangover had left him distinctly aware of light, and its power over his brain. When he heard the toilet flush he carefully made his way into the dark bathroom, grabbing a towel from the towel bar. As he suspected, Tony had missed most of the bowl when he had been puking his guts out, leaving behind the most colourful of messes. To be fair to Tony though, how much aim could someone really have when puking in the dark? It wasn’t exactly something they did all the time after all; thank god for that.

Tony gave a token protest while Steve mopped everything, including Tony, up and then reluctantly let Steve lift him up so that he could take a pee; when that was done, Steve half dragged, half steered Tony towards the bed and tucked him in pressing a gentle kiss to Tony’s forehead.
“G’night Steve.” Tony mumbled. He groaned pitifully when Steve thoughtfully turned him on his side, putting the plastic bucket he found under Tony’s sink beside the bed in case Tony needed it. He left Tony snoring, going back to work cleaning up the rest of the mess in the bathroom.

He didn’t mind; Tony had done the same for him. It was slow, tedious work in the dark, but there was nothing else to do except move forwards.

When he had everything cleaned up, Steve sat down on the edge of the bed and debated on his options. He could go back to his bedroom and come up every few hours to check on Tony to make sure he wasn’t choking on his own vomit, or he could stay here in Tony’s room sleeping beside him on the bed. Staying in Tony’s room didn’t seem like a very good option; the last time he had fallen asleep beside Drunk Tony it had not ended well. Tony would be miserable tomorrow, and it would be easier to deal with him if he was actually able to accept help without constantly shying away.

Steve dragged one of the puffy chairs in Tony’s room towards the bed and curled up in it, swiping one of Tony’s blankets and settled in for a long night.

Mornings were awful after one of Tony’s drinking binges and today seemed exceptionally bad. There was record breaking amounts of awful happening here, and the day hadn’t even really started. Steve woke yet again to the sound of vomiting. He was glad to note that Tony had managed to make it out of the bed and into the bathroom on his own without too much trouble. The sound of vomiting made Steve want to throw up, but it could have been worse. At least he didn’t have to clean anything out of the carpet. The bucket beside the bed was empty, which was a blessing in of itself and the sheets were dry and urine free. Steve flashed back to his own embarrassing night of drunkenness and flushed; at least Tony hadn’t wet himself. He still wasn’t sure if he had apologized enough for that yet to make it seem less horrific.

Steve got up, trying to stretch out the crick in his neck from having slept crookedly in the chair and padded softly into the bathroom. Tony was hugging the toilet bowl when Steve came in, his head half in the toilet as he dry heaved, his shoulders shuddering from the effort of keeping himself upright. He didn’t look up, clinging to the bowl to keep from sliding to the floor.

One quick look around the dimly lit bathroom let Steve know everything he needed to know; there wasn’t enough supplies stashed up here for a hangover of such epic proportions. Tony had likely used most of it up the other times he had been hammered, and knowing Tony, he hadn’t replaced anything. Steve left the room, returning with a roll of paper towel, a plastic bag, a bottle of Advil, a washcloth and a plastic glass for water; all of which would be essential in keeping Tony comfortable and mess-free.

Tony still didn’t look up when Steve busied himself with setting up his supplies in a neat little line like he did with all of his things. Steve pulled off a chunk of paper towel and gently wiped the vomit from the toilet seat in front of Tony’s face; that was the reason why Tony was dry heaving in the first place, although he didn’t seem to be in any condition to figure that out for himself.

Steve chucked the used paper towel into the plastic bag and then wet the washcloth, turning his attention to Tony’s beard and face. Tony remained pliable and miserable under his touch, letting


Steve wipe away at his face without putting up too much of a struggle.

Steve flushed the toilet again and then washed out the washcloth, starting all over again, wiping Tony’s forehead where beads of sweat had begun to build up.

“Why are you still here?” Tony moaned hoarsely.

“Because you’re my friend and you’re hung over. I want to make sure you’re ok.” Steve said. Small words would be best for now; Tony wouldn’t be able to handle anything else. Post-hangover conversations had always been a little iffy when he had had them with Bucky and the Commandos after a night out on the town. Bucky had always whined that he had used ‘too many big people words’.

He wiped the back of Tony’s neck and then the sides of his face, mindful of the bruise on Tony’s cheek from when he had hit his head on the floor the night before. The bruise didn’t look all that bad, just a little reddish, and thankfully he hadn’t hit hard enough to give himself a concussion. Steve did a pupil check just to be sure, and found that yes, Tony was fine; he did have a pair of lovely bloodshot eyes though.

“But…” Tony whined, voice cracking.

“Is your stomach feeling better? Can you handle some Advil and some water?” Steve questioned, filling up the plastic cup with water.

“I think so.”

Steve handed Tony the water and two of the pills, waiting patiently for Tony to take them. Tony swallowed them down and then struggled to his feet. He wobbled, catching himself on Steve’s arm, not quite dazed, but certainly unsteady; Tony looked spectacularly bad, his eyes all bloodshot and watery, his hair a mess, his clothing in shambles. At least he didn’t have lines on his face from sleeping on the floor. He had been saved from that inconvenience.

Steve helped Tony back to bed and tucked him in, smoothing the blankets around Tony’s body. He checked to make sure that the blinds were closed, trying to keep a soft smile on his face; Tony was half asleep already, eyelids fluttering as his brain tried to shut down to recover.

“I’ll go make you some toast. I’ll be back in a bit, alright?” Steve said, keeping his voice soft as to not aggravate Tony’s headache.

“Steve?”

“Yes?”

“Seriously… you are way too nice a person…”

“I'll take that as a compliment. Get some rest.”

True to his word, Steve brought Tony some dry, unbuttered toast and crackers to munch on; it was bland as hell, but that was all Tony could handle at the moment. Despite the flavourlessness of the food, Tony nibbled his way through the toast, sipping mouthfuls of water and red Gatorade that Steve had found stocked in Tony’s cupboards. Apparently Tony had been prepared for a hangover of this magnitude, and judging by the fact that there were at least six bottles of Gatorade, it happened much more frequently than it should have. Steve wasn’t happy about that, but he was glad that there
was something to make Tony feel better, even if he had found it in an inconvenient place. He had been debating on calling Happy to go get some things from the store for them before he had stumbled across the Gatorade stash. This way, Howard wouldn’t find out about it.

After Tony finished eating, he curled up in the bed and dozed, eyes squeezed shut as if that would keep the pain in his head out somehow. It wouldn’t, but at least the light wouldn’t scald his brain anymore. He looked wretched, rolling around whenever he woke up in order to stuff his head under any available surface, a little like a downed ostrich trying to bury his head in the sand.

Steve sprawled in the chair he had commandeered, trying to catch a little sleep himself. He had slept sparsely during the night, waking every few hours to check on Tony’s condition, and the strain had started to catch up with him; he was nodding off more often than not, almost giving himself whiplash every time he caught himself dozing.

“You know, you can sleep here if you want. In the bed. With me.” Tony croaked the next time Steve woke up, his voice barely above a whisper. He winced, scrubbing at his ears.

“Are you sure?” Steve asked with a yawn.

“You’re a good guy Steve. I trust you. Come here.”

Steve sat on the edge of the bed, debating on which side would be better; Tony impatiently dragged him onto the bed, burying his face in between Steve’s shoulder blades, solving the problem. He had surprising strength for someone hung-over, his hands holding on tightly to Steve’s side like he expected Steve to escape somehow.

“Go to sleep. Tired…” Tony groaned into Steve’s back. “You smell nice.”

Steve chuckled to himself and allowed sleep to take him.

Steve woke up three hours later and gingerly untangled himself from Tony’s long limbs. He slipped away and went downstairs to make Tony some soup, nothing fancy just some chicken broth so that Tony could both keep it down and get some of his salt and potassium back. He brought the soup up in a mug for easier sipping and took some more crackers with him, tucking them under his arm. It was lucky that they had bought extra snack food the day before, or else there wouldn’t be anything left to munch.

When he got back to Tony’s bed, Tony was looking around the room frantically. A small, fragile smile broke out across his lips when he spotted Steve ambling through the doorway and he shifted in bed, rolling sideways so that he was facing Steve’s commandeered chair.

“Hey… I was wondering where you wandered off to.” Tony said.

“I went to make you some soup.” Steve explained, sitting down in the chair. He handed Tony the mug and the crackers, snagging a few so that he could stop his stomach from growling. His super soldier metabolism had been gone ever since waking up and he was glad for that reprieve. It had been such a pain to be constantly eating; he had always felt like such a pig putting away five plates of food at every meal. Thor had complimented him on it once, but he had never felt good about it.

“You should make yourself something to eat too.” Tony grumbled into the mug, sipping his soup. He seemed to relish the flavor despite it being nothing more than chicken stock and salt. “This is
“Good.”

“Fresh from the cube. I’ll get something to eat in a bit, I just wanted to make sure you ate something first.” Steve shrugged.

“You should worry about yourself more.”

“I’m fine. You’re the one that threw his lungs up last night.” Steve chuckled softly. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Yeah well….” Tony arranged himself in an upright position amidst his nest of blankets. He winced and sipped tentatively at the soup again, hunched over with a red and gold blanket wrapped around his shoulders. His eyes wandered to the glass of water on his bedside table and Steve brought it over to him without prompting; Tony smiled, exchanging the glass with the mug, drinking what was left in the glass with a slurp. He handed the empty glass back and they exchanged glass for mug again, a familiar dance.

“I’ll go get some more.” Steve said. He went into the bathroom and filled the glass up again, putting it back down on the table in its original place; he would have liked to put it somewhere closer, but there wasn’t really anything around that he could move. He settled himself once more in the chair, trying not to keep his eyes on Tony for too long, because every time he did, Tony would stare right back at him, ignoring the mug of soup.

“Are you alright?” Steve asked.

Tony winced and rubbed his neck. “God, it’s boring in here.” He stretched lazily, but didn’t get out of bed. He seemed like he wanted to get up and move around but didn’t have the energy to manage it, contented to lounge with nothing else to do.

“Steve?”

“Yes?”

“You’re a really great guy. What does someone have to do to get a Steve like you?” Tony joked. It didn’t sound like a joke though; it sounded like a real question. Steve wasn’t sure if he should laugh or not.

“That’s very sweet of you. You don’t need to do anything special, just be yourself. You’re doing a pretty good job of it when you’re sober you know.” Steve smiled, leaning against the arm of the chair.

“What if…” Tony sighed and looked down into his mug, swirling the contents before taking another sip. “What if the real me isn’t all that great?”

“I’ve met the real you Tony. You don’t have to worry about that. I think you’re amazing. You’re the one person I can always count on to help me through things.” Steve said. “Without you around, I don’t know what I’d be doing.”

Tony turned beet red. It looked a bit like his head was going to burst into flames. He chugged the rest of the soup and then quickly handed Steve the empty mug, diving back under the covers as if it were a bomb shelter and he was hiding from nuclear fallout. He buried his head underneath the pillows and wormed the rest of his body underneath the mass of blankets, becoming nothing more than a bump in the middle of the mattress.

“Go get something to eat.” Tony said, muffled by all the blankets.
Steve took the mug with him and left the room feeling distinctly warmer than he had in ages. Maybe he was blushing a little too, and if he was no one had to know.

Monday came far too soon for Steve’s liking; he was really starting to hate Monday mornings, and he had used to be such a morning person back in the day. The Sunday Hangover, as Steve had started to refer to it, had been hellish in the end and Tony had spent the rest of it hiding slash sleeping under the blankets, not wanting to talk. He had been pleasant enough for the most part yet every once in a while Steve would catch him staring and then Tony would bury his head under the blankets and pretend to go back to sleep. The staring was normal; Tony stared all the time, only now it seemed different somehow. Steve wasn’t sure what to make of it. He tried to keep in good spirits by remembering that Tony had at least been smiling whenever he was staring, so it couldn’t have been that bad.

When they had gone downstairs in the evening to spend some time on the couch as a change of scenery, Tony kept a good foot and a half between them at all times, leaning heavily against the arm of the chair with a blanket wrapped tightly around his body; nothing from his neck or below was visible. While Steve had been able to at least count the staring in the positive list, the few hours they spent on the couch kept nagging at him as a sign of something being wrong. He couldn’t put his finger on what it was that felt so off about it, and prayed that it was just Tony being self-conscious after spending the morning throwing up in the presence of one of his only friends. They had watched movies well into the evening, and once it was bedtime again Tony had vanished upstairs leaving Steve to sleep in his own room.

Monday morning had Steve escorting Tony all over the place, going room by room; Tony had been dead on his feet when Steve had gone up to get him at a little after six. He had even had to help Tony get dressed, slipping him into a hoodie and then his socks. Tony hadn’t been able to bend over without feeling nauseous, he claimed, and Steve had a sneaking suspicion that Tony might have been nipping at something upstairs the previous night. There was the faint scent of whiskey in the air; Steve hoped that it was from Tony’s clothing, an old scent that had snuck along for the ride.

He had done his best to wrangle the not-quite-so-hung-over engineer out of bed and down the stairs to get the day started right. Tony had claimed that he wasn’t suffering from the hangover so much anymore. He was now suffering from the Mondays. Steve had laughed at that, almost inhaling his oatmeal; Tony had grinned weakly and pushed his bowl of breakfast cereal away from him.

“Your cereal is going to get soggy.” Steve had chided him, pushing the bowl back towards Tony. Tony had scowled, but ate a few more spoonful’s as Steve watched, putting up with his ‘mother hen act’ as Tony called it.

Tony had looked a little wobbly during the day, so Steve had gone out of his way to sneak him in goodies, even managing to convince Tony to eat an apple with his coffee. Tony had griped about it, but he hadn’t fought or complained later when his stomach was finally full, simply blinking serenely in Steve’s direction. Steve had been very pleased. Tony had even napped with his head on Steve’s shoulder on the way back from work.
Thursday rolled around just as fast as Monday had, and Steve found himself tasked with a job he least liked: visiting Howard with one of Pepper’s reports. Pepper would have done it herself, but she had been forced to escort Tony to an R&D meeting which she was required to attend. Pepper was there as the official White Board Writer; she hated the job because it came with having to fend off the depraved stares of a bunch of sex-starved engineers who had little to no experience dealing with women in general and didn’t seem to know that it wasn’t polite to ogle someone when they could see you doing it. She also didn’t really like the way the pens made her hands blue afterwards; the perverts she could deal with, she said, but the blue on her thumb was another matter entirely.

She would have offered to change places with Steve if it wasn’t for the fact that the engineers spooked easily with new people, or so she claimed. Steve was pretty sure she would rather be surrounded by a bunch of horn-dog engineers who had no idea how to physically touch anyone other than themselves than spend any time alone in Howard Stark’s office where there was a man who had little to no shame.

She had wished him luck, and had given him some handy advice before she left. If he needed to, she said, he should aim for Howard’s soft bits if he got too frisky. Steve had nearly choked to death on his own spit when she had said that.

Steve wished her luck and then waited for the next elevator, fiddling with the binder she had given him. The binder was massive, almost too large for him to hold without cradling it against his chest with both arms wrapped around it. The papers inside numbered in the hundreds and one good drop would have had the thing exploding all over the floor. He didn’t even want to think about having to clean that mess up. Reorganizing a thousand pages would be such a pain. It had taken them four days to put the binder together in the first place, and it needed to be on Howard’s desk within the next fifteen minutes. When the elevator arrived for him, it was packed; most of those crammed in the elevator were dressed to the nines in suits and ties, so they were likely heading off to meetings, just like Pepper and Tony. He quickly scrambled in, wedging himself in between a man in grey and a woman in navy before the door could close in his face.

As the elevator ascended, it stopped at one or two floors, where the travelers exchanged bit by bit; some squeezed in, while others shoved their way out, grumbling to themselves while ranting loudly on their cell phones about how busy it was. Steve found himself slowly drifting backwards into the woman behind him as time went by, slipping unseen through the crowd. He wanted to apologize to her when they finally collided, but he doubted that she would have heard him over the commotion. He couldn’t very well turn around either, seeing as how his head was level with her mid-shoulder; that, and he would have been face first with her chest – which was also not helpful. That would mean two apologies, not one, so he stuck with it and stared blandly ahead hoping that the elevator would soon clear out.

The elevator opened up again and Steve was knocked backwards into the woman behind him yet again as people shoved into the elevator; more suits and ties, people who didn’t seem to notice that there were people already in the elevator to begin with. These were people who couldn’t wait. He cringed when he crashed with the woman behind him again and felt to his dismay her breasts now resting comfortably on the top of his head.

Steve swallowed hard, the colour of his face battling between bright red and pasty white from horror. Should he apologize? He should apologize, seeing as how he was now tucked rather comfortably against her – His mind went blank there and his face flamed even hotter, the colour going all the way down his neck, probably to his feet even.

“Sorry –” Steve started, trying to duck a little so that her breasts weren’t resting on his head anymore.
“Don’t worry about it sweetie.” The woman said; her voice was gentle and strangely familiar. If Steve had been able to move he would have turned around to try his luck at seeing her face. As it worked out, she started to lean forwards against him, her breasts heavy on his head the entire trip up; she didn’t seem one bit embarrassed, even though he definitely was. To his surprise, she seemed more annoyed by his moving away than by him having been so close in the first place.

And then he realized why the voice was so familiar. He caught sight of her reflection in the metal elevator doors and nearly had a heart attack. Thankfully years of training had taught him how to keep cool under pressure, and he calmly surveyed the situation, noting everything he could about her. She was tall; around six foot something, slender and voluptuous with a chest that seemed to defy the laws of gravity. How she was walking around without massive back problems, he didn’t know. She was dressed in a tight fitting little black dress which revealed the pale skin of her shoulders and thighs, ending just above the knee with crimped edges. He recognized the red lips first, the lime-green eyes and the jet-black hair afterwards. He paled, trying to reign in his emotions.

This was Loki. Oh GOD!

This was Lady Loki – and he was trapped with Loki in an elevator –

Steve steadied himself, clutching the binder to his chest for dear life. Loki didn’t seem to recognize him, so it was fine. It was great – well it wasn’t great, but it wasn’t bad. The colour returned to his face; he breathed in and out through his nose. As long as he played it safe, everything would turn out fine. She had no reason to go after him, no knowledge of his existence. He might not have any super strength to protect him, but he did have two other more important things on his side now: Anonymity and an appearance that made him seem pathetically sweet and useless.

What the hell Loki was doing in the elevator in the first place? He – or She – Steve wasn’t really sure which pronoun to use anymore seeing as how Loki swapped genders like they were t-shirts – was still a super villain, one that the Avengers tangled with on a regular basis.

Why would Loki be heading up to the top floors of Stark International? Couldn’t she fly? He had very distinct memories of Loki flying at some point, although that may have been with the aid of a magical object or someone else’s help. And for that matter, why wasn’t someone from SHIELD tailing her? Weren’t they supposed to keep on top of things like this?

“Which floor are you getting off at sweetheart?” Loki purred, removing the gap they had between them with a single step. Her breasts brushed against Steve’s shoulder as she stooped down, looking him in the eye. He didn’t flinch away from her stern gaze.

“I’m going to see Howard – the top floor I mean.” Steve corrected himself. He hoped that he looked like a dopey assistant. He wasn’t dressed all that formally, and he didn’t – oh god. Why was Loki staring at him like that? Loki looked over Steve’s face, scrutinizing him like someone might do to a potential meal; she was closer than Steve would have liked, and then she did something worse. She cupped Steve’s face in her soft, delicate hands like it was some kind of treasure she was holding.

Loki looked amused then. Very amused – amused in ways that she shouldn’t have been amused in.

“You’re a sweet looking little thing, aren’t you? What’s your name?” Loki drawled, smiling a seductive smile that could have floored a moose. He had seen that same smile in all the newsreels while Loki was busy destroying school busses filled with screaming children.

“I’m Steve Rogers, ma’am.” Steve said, forcing himself to remain in Loki’s grasp. He couldn’t play this too stiffly if he wanted to keep up his innocent aura, couldn’t show how much he disliked her either; he would have to work with what little advantages he had, and what he had was a blush that
would have made any virginal princess envious.

Loki’s eyes widened. A toothy grin replaced her smile and suddenly Steve found himself face first in Loki’s chest, drowning in cleavage.

“I’ve been meaning to get a closer look at you! Bucky talks about you all the time!” Loki said gleefully, wedging Steve impossibly further in between her breasts. He tried desperately to breathe, not listening to the vengeful voice screaming away in his head telling him to hit her with the binder, to hit her and run; not that he could move the binder. It was standing up on its side in between his legs having been dropped after Loki’s first lunge, thankfully still intact.

Her perfume was cloying and sweet, surrounding him; he couldn’t smell anything else for what seemed like hours. He coughed before he managed to get in enough oxygen to speak again, trying desperately not to start wheezing into her chest. The last thing he wanted to do was pass out, having been suffocated by her breasts. Bucky would never let him live it down.

“You know Bucky?” Steve asked. He had to speak loudly to be heard through Loki’s cleavage, which was surprisingly more embarrassing than the fact that he was being death-hugged into her breasts in the first place. Loki let him go and went back to inspecting his face, running her long manicured fingernails over his cheek; he quivered, very aware that she could tear out his eyes if she wanted to with those talon-like nails. He pushed the binder against his leg with his foot, managing to clamp it between his shins to keep it from falling over.

“My, you’re so cute! He didn’t do you justice – neither did Howard for that matter, although I suppose he wants to keep you all to himself, now doesn’t he? They were both so closed lipped about you waking up. I suppose you have no idea who I am, do you?” Loki drawled, trailing her index finger down the side of Steve’s neck to rest it against his Adams apple. The gesture was probably supposed to be sexual in nature; Steve felt the sudden urge to protect his groin. He hoped to god that she wouldn’t start poking around down there too.

Steve shook his head.

“No ma’am. I don’t believe they’ve ever mentioned you before.”

Loki pouted, her ruby red lips tantalizingly wet as she ran her tongue over them.

“Really? I thought they might have told you a little about me, seeing as how we know each other so well!”

“No mam. I’ve never heard of you. What did you say your name was again?”

The elevator doors popped open with a chime and Steve shuffled slowly out of the elevator backwards, lifting the binder up from between his legs, pretending to be terrified of Loki as she trailed out after him. He didn’t wait for her answer, and she didn’t bother giving him one. He bumped against the wall behind him when he reached it and then pretended that he was embarrassed by the accident, turning around to face the door instead of Loki. He shifted the binder in his arms and knocked on Howard’s door, seeing that the secretary wasn’t seated at her desk at the moment; there was a paper sign sitting on top of her keyboard that said ‘out to lunch’, so he guessed that she wasn’t going to be back anytime soon. He pulled the door open before Howard could even call out for him to come in.

Unfortunately, as he suspected, Loki apparently did indeed have business with Howard; his stumbling had only given her something to laugh about. She strutted past Steve, her heels clicking loudly, the sound making him flinch inadvertently every time she stepped.
“Who’s –” Howard snapped, jumping from his plush padded red leather throne; Steve would have called it a chair, but it wasn’t even remotely chair-like. His office was plush and ostentatious, everything leather and marble, every surface polished and gleaming. Some interior designer probably made a ton of money on this room alone. A decanter sat on Howard’s mahogany desk, filled to the brim with amber liquid, the crystal ware beside it impeccable, shined to catch the light just so. He looked pleased to see Steve, licking his lips; and then he caught sight of Loki and the lustful grin melted off his face like wax off a candle. He stared from Steve, who was busy working his faux-blush to the max and clutching the binder in front of him like a shield, to Loki.

Loki grinned and swept forwards embracing Howard, kissing him on the cheeks with a loud smack. Her red lipstick didn’t smudge, but it did leave prints behind; they looked like blood on his pale face, as if she had tried to eat his cheeks instead of simply kissing them. Bright red lipstick prints like that were supposed to be a sign of passion – or so Bucky had said once a long time ago. Steve wondered why he had ever believed that particular line.

“My Lady – what can I do for you? Hello Steve.” Howard smiled, clearing his throat. He choppily waved for Steve to come closer and then wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulder, head held high.

“Oh, I just came to visit. Haven’t seen you in donkey’s ages, and you know I can’t get enough of your charming personality.” Loki cooed, rubbing her thumb against Howard’s moustache, looking pleased with the way the grey bristles moved under her touch. “Facial hair is just so charming. Really, you don’t know how lucky you are – some people can’t grow a beard to save their life.”

Howard’s grip on Steve was almost brutal, his fingers digging into the meat of Steve’s shoulder like he had fishhooks for fingers. “That’s nice. Well, we can go on our date in a second – just let me finish things up with Steve, alright?” Howard’s voice wavered ever-so-slightly. He tried to take the binder from Steve; eyes still locked on Loki and spent a second grasping in the air for it until Steve pushed it directly into his hands.

“You can go now Steve. Have a good week.” Howard said, smiling a very business-like smile.

“Ok. See you later Howard.” Steve gave a curt nod and then tried to leave wanting to get as many floors away from Loki as possible. It wasn’t to be. Loki reached out as Steve took a step past her and took him by the ear. Steve blinked up at her, trying yet again for innocent, ignoring the pain in his ear as she twisted him back to face her.

“Oh, no! He should come with us for dinner! I’d love to get to know him better.” Loki pulled Steve close to her side, wrapping an arm around his shoulder the same way Howard had.

“But – it’s a date. You can’t expect to go on a date with two people.” Howard protested. “It’s out of the question.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude,” Steve insisted, trying to slink away.

Loki refused to let go of him, her grip vice-like. “Oh no dear. You’re so sweet looking; I just want to eat you right up! You’re coming for dinner and that’s that.”

Dinner? He was going to dinner? With Howard Stark and Lady Loki? Steve felt like the room was spinning wildly. He looked between Howard and Loki, hoping to god that he had heard wrong. This had to have been a mistake. It couldn’t be – Loki couldn’t have suggested that they all go out together, could she? She didn’t even know him!

“Don’t be ridiculous My Lady, Steve here has friends to get back to. He’s expected back on his floor. We can’t very well steal him away like this.” Howard growled, still smiling although it was
looking strained.

Loki snorted. “I’m sure his friends will be fine without him for one teensey night. Now, I’m hungry. Shall we go?”

“My Lady…” Howard sighed, hanging his head in defeat, “If that’s what you wish, alright.”

“Excellent!” Loki turned around as elegantly as a ballerina, swiveling Steve with her. She marched towards the elevator, snapping her fingers at Howard. “Come along then Howard. We mustn’t be late.”

“Late? For what?” Howard asked, bewildered. He shoved the binder across his desk, dislodging a pile of papers and then dashed after them; the decanter hung precariously the edge. Howard didn’t pay it any attention.

“For dinner of course! We have reservations.” Loki flicked Howard in the shoulder. “You didn’t forget, did you?”

“Oh no, no.” Howard shook his head, trying to grab Steve’s arm. “I didn’t forget, I just didn’t think you cared about reservations all that much. The last few times we’ve just walked right in.”

Loki pulled Steve closer to her as the elevator dinged, stepping inside, smirking to herself. “Yes, well, I suppose I feel like a change tonight.” Howard strutted in with them, grasping Steve’s wrist tightly as Loki’s arm wrapped around Steve’s other side. “Honestly Howard,” Loki said, shaking her head. “You’d think you didn’t know about this. You made the plans yourself.”

Steve sat in the backseat of an expensive car he didn’t recognize, wedged between Loki and Howard in a way that was far from comfortable; both of them had decided to wrap an arm around his shoulder, and he was trying very hard not to sweat clean through his shirt out of nervousness alone. He hadn’t had a chance to say anything to Pepper or Tony, whisked away before he could really realize what had happened. He prayed that he wasn’t going to be heading off to his death.

It couldn’t end like this, could it? Death by dinner?

“So Steve,” Loki drawled, caressing Steve’s shoulder ever so slightly, her nails scraping over the fabric of his shirt in such a way that Steve was surprised they didn’t tear clean through it. “What do you do?”

“Steve’s helping Pepper with Tony.” Howard supplied, his fingers digging into Steve’s other shoulder, tugging Steve towards him.

“I was asking Steve dear. Do shut up.” Loki smiled, glaring at Howard.

“I work with Pepper. I help feed Tony.” Steve managed, trying to make himself as small as possible; there was nowhere to move, no space to slip into to be free of the both of them. He couldn’t help but feel the warmth of Loki’s breast against his side, Howard’s boney fingers poking him in the other side. He was trapped; he glanced at Happy, trying to make eye contact, but Happy wasn’t looking behind him even to check the mirrors.

“Aww, that’s so sweet! You feed your little friend every day?” Loki laughed.

“Yes mam.” Steve nodded.
“When was the last time you went out for a proper dinner like this? You look so small dear. I can’t help but think you’ve been neglected somehow.” Loki murmured.

“I haven’t been to a restaurant since I woke up.” Steve admitted reluctantly, praying that this wasn’t going to lead to something worse. “But we eat out a lot.”

“He’s been working dear.” Howard grunted, his lip twitching as he turned to look out the window, scanning their surroundings with a keen eye. “It’s hardly like he’s sitting at home watching bad television while eating bonbons. He’s not a socialite, he’s a regular Joe. He has a job and he does it to the best of his ability.”

“Fair enough.” Loki agreed. She sighed and leaned closer to Steve, resting her head against the top of his. “This is nice. I could get used to this.” Steve felt like he had just swallowed a glacier; he repressed a fully body shudder, hoping that Loki wasn’t being serious.

“We’re here.” Happy said quickly as the car turned into a parking lot. He shot Steve a glance then, looking concerned. “Did you want me to drop Mr. Rogers off somewhere else sir?”

Thank god for Happy! Steve relaxed, letting out a held in breath. Good. This little adventure was over with.

Howard grinned brilliantly. “As a matter of fact, yes. That would be great.”

“No.” Loki said. Her voice wasn’t loud. She didn’t snap or glare, but it still felt as if someone had filled the room with tar. “He’ll be eating with us tonight Hogan.”

Steve gulped. So much for escaping.

“Open the doors dear. I’d like to get out.” Loki said, prodding Howard in the small of the back. Howard shoved the door open and slid out, helping Steve slide across the seat. He edged Steve closer to the side of the car and then bowed, extending his hand to Loki as she scooted forwards to get out.

She took his hand, elegantly stepping out into the light; passersby stopped and stared at her, literally frozen in their tracks as she rose, giving her head a shake. She let Howard’s hand drop after a moment, adjusting the bottom of her skirt, which had ridden up, and then returned to smiling at Steve, the look so charming he might have mistaken her for someone… nice. She held out a hand to him, batting her eyelashes and he took it if only to keep her from ripping him and the rest of the people in the street apart in displeasure.

The restaurant was quite chic, some place Howard must have booked months in advance. It was called La Belle de la Lune, a building that looked a little like it had been literally carved out of the moon. Everywhere Steve looked there was another piece of pale white furniture; he had thought white was a lovely colour once, but now all he could think of when he saw it was death, white sheets covering up pale bodies. As they slipped further and further into the restaurant, stepping between pillars of pure white marble, he felt like he was getting closer and closer to the underworld. They passed through a great ballroom styled in white satin, and made their way to another room filled with tables and plate settings in white and gold; the plates were fine china, each piece hand crafted with leaves and flowers of gold surrounding their edges. The waiter seated them at an absolutely breathtaking table beside a large aquarium filled with tropical fish. They could see the city through
the walls at their left and right, but there were no cars, no citizens at all moving about in the distance either. It was an empty city, a dead city. Steve shivered as he was seated against the aquarium, Loki dropping delicately into the chair beside him. Howard didn’t look too pleased by the seating arrangements, but he rolled with the punches, seating himself directly across from Loki, grumbling to himself about how slow the waiters were. He reached out and took her hand in his, charm radiating from his smile.

“I take it you like what you see?” He said to her, lifting her hand to his lips so that he could kiss it. She smiled softly, but it didn’t reach her eyes, unimpressed by his flirting.

“Oh yes,” She said, “Who could be displeased, with such pleasant company?” She turned her head, her long hair flicking over her shoulder and slipped her hand free from Howard’s grasp. “Do you like it here?” She asked Steve.

Steve looked from the aquarium to the crystal ware sparkling in front of him. “It’s beautiful.” He said simply, unsure what else to say. This seemed like the kind of place someone would take their wife for an anniversary dinner, not where you went with friends for a bite to eat. It was a little bit like taking a page out of a fairy tale, a ballroom in some fantasy castle painstakingly recreated to the minutest detail. He felt itchy, far too under dressed for where he was; in fact, the only one who looked like they belonged here was Loki. Howard looked a little shabby himself, and Steve, well Steve looked like he had snuck in through the back door and hadn’t got caught and thrown out yet.

“Indeed it is. It’s one of my favourite restaurants these days. Victor just loves it too.” Loki said as the waiter filled up their glasses with water, handing Howard the wine menu with a move so suave, Steve could have sworn the man had pulled the thing out of thin air.

“How is Victor these days?” Howard asked, skimming the list in front of him with a frown. “The Dom Romanee Conti ‘97 please. Two bottles for now.” He said with a wave to the waiter.

“How is Victor these days?” Howard asked, skimming the list in front of him with a frown. “The Dom Romanee Conti ‘97 please. Two bottles for now.” He said with a wave to the waiter.

“An excellent choice sir.” The waiter took the wine list back, bowing as he backed away from the table.

“I assume the chef is doing something wonderful again.” Howard said, leaning back into his chair. He winked at Steve. “Last time we were here, we had the best lobster bisque I’ve ever had. I think it had gold leaf in it, didn’t it dear?”

Loki nodded, cocking her head to the side as the waiter returned, pouring their wine; Steve winced for the man’s white gloves, sure that they would be spotted with red. They remained perfectly clean despite the wine, the man well practiced in his art as he casually filled up the glasses in front of him. The two bottles were left sitting in a special cart beside them with a bell, presumably for when they needed topping up. The waiter set a glass in front Loki first, and then set one in front of Howard, giving Steve such a dirty look Steve almost wanted to crawl under the table to escape it.

“You’ll like this wine Steve. It’s to die for. Try it.” Howard smirked, handing his glass to Steve, gesturing with a glare at the waiter to give him another one. The waiter complied, bowed again and left with a scurry.

Steve stared at the wine glass in front of him, the crimson liquid looking like it had been pumped clean out of someone’s veins.

“Try some.” Howard said, taking a sip of his own. He let out a pleased noise when Steve lifted the glass to drink. The wine tasted a little bit like flowers and soy sauce, a hint of licorice sneaking through at the end. It wasn’t bad, but as with most alcohol, it wasn’t something he would really drink
unless there was no other options.

“Good, right?” Howard nodded, leaning over the table to pat Steve’s hand. “It’s almost sixteen hundred dollars a bottle.”

Steve nearly knocked the glass over in shock. Sixteen hundred dollars for a single bottle of wine? Was he crazy!?

“Oh don’t worry about the cost dear.” Loki laughed when she noticed Steve’s expression, running her fingers through Steve’s golden locks. “Cost is nothing to him. He makes more than that when he sits in his office thumbing his nose at his paperwork.”

“Hey! I work!” Howard protested, taking another swallow of his wine; it wasn’t going to last long if he kept it up. “I’ll have you know I do more in a month that most people do in ten years.”

“Oh I’m sure.” Loki rolled her eyes. “And you’re so modest.”

“And handsome. Don’t forget handsome.” Howard smirked.

“Mhm.” Loki dropped her hand under the table, fingers splaying as she grasped and held on to Steve’s knee. He nearly smashed her hand into the table when she touched him, his body jerking away in revulsion. What the hell was she playing at here? Wasn’t she supposed to be on a date with Howard? Wait a minute! What was she doing going on a date with Howard?

The waiter returned, bringing with him three other men carrying trays of food on gold platters. All of it was incredible, works of art with fancy squiggles of vegetables and meat stacked and styled. He didn’t know what any of it was, but Loki and Howard seemed to. He debated on asking and then fell silent, figuring that it would be better to just eat and keep out of the way. The fewer the conversations he had with the pair of them, the better. He didn’t want to give them any more fuel than necessary.

Loki cut into a towering stack of what appeared to be fish and some kind of cream sauce, delicately eating each bite off the end of her silver fork; she dragged her tongue over her lips, her eyes fixed on Steve the entire time as if it was him she was licking. Steve had never seen someone try to make food erotic, but Loki had somehow managed it. He quickly turned his attention to Howard, which proved to be a view of pretty much the same thing.

Steve stared down at his plate.

Good god, were they both trying to seduce him? What the hell had he done to deserve this? He was pretty sure he would have remembered kicking a Nun’s puppy if he had, so why was karma trying to bite him in the ass?

Loki wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulder, cutting his food into squares for him; he wanted to complain, but felt too confused to manage it, simply staring at his food instead. “You must try this. It’s divine!” She said, lifting the fork to his lips. He reluctantly her feed him, feeling foolish when she wiped his chin with her napkin; Howard watched hungrily, and not at all because of the food. Steve wasn’t sure who to avoid at this point. Both of them seemed like they had completely lost their minds.

“My Lady!”

Loki set Steve’s fork down, turning in her white satin chair to face the newcomer.

“Victor! How lovely!” She said in delight.
Steve stared stoically at Victor Von Doom, dressed as he usually was in full green cloak, metal armor and mask, all of which clashed horribly with the pale innocence of the room. Doom bent his knee and took Loki’s hand in his, kissing it as if he were a knight kissing a lady’s hand at a tournament. The only thing missing was a horse and jousting pole.

“My dear, you look most lovely. I approves whole heartedly. I see you are here with guests.” Doom said, looking around to survey the table and with it both Howard and Steve. “Stark. What an unpleasant surprise. I thought you had died.”

“Victor.” Howard nodded, sipping his wine. “I’d offer you a chair, but I’m sure you’ve got better things to do than sit around here with us heathens.”

“That is true. I am indeed a busy man, you are not wrong. Who is this you’ve brought with you? I don’t recognize him. Is he one of yours my Lady?” Doom asked, motioning for the waiters to bring him a chair; they reacted so fast, it almost seemed like the chair had been magicked in place. For all Steve knew, it might have been.

“Would you like some wine?” Howard offered, sounding bored. He turned to Steve, rolling his eyes as if they were sharing some kind of joke and Steve stared blankly at him in response. There were two super villains sitting at the table with them, and Howard didn’t seem even mildly concerned; something was very wrong here. He ate a bite of food to calm himself, keeping a keen eye on his surroundings as Loki and Doom chatted away.

“Wine would be lovely.” Doom said. Howard motioned for a new glass to be brought out and then poured the wine himself, the magnanimous host.

“The Lady requires the best.” Howard shrugged as Doom peered at the label on the bottle. “I didn’t know you were in the area Victor. Isn’t Latveria lonely without her leader?”

“I was visiting the embassy. There were many things to deal with there – including a few pathetic issues that your dear Avengers have brought to my attention. What is this they tell me of Sin? I don’t like such putrid individuals at the best of times, but they tell me that she has set sights on Latveria for some slight. I will take care of it, of course, but one would think it was being set up.” Doom’s eyes glinted through the slits in his mask. “What do you think Stark? Did someone do something to anger Doom on purpose?”

Howard’s careful grin didn’t so much as slip. “I wouldn’t know. Fury’s always up in arms about something or other. I don’t pay much attention to what he does, and frankly, it’s none of my business. If Captain America wants to go after someone, he goes after someone. I don’t waste my time pandering to idiots.”

“And the boy? Who is he?” Doom said, sipping his wine. The waiter brought him out a plate of his own, a decadent looking meal with steak and lobster. Doom frowned at it, but didn’t say anything, setting his wine glass down so that he could start cutting up his meat into neat, precise squares.

“Which boy are you speaking of?” Loki asked, starting to eat again; she gave a delighted squeal when she took her next bite. “Oh, you simply must try this.” She loaded her fork up with more food and guided it to Steve, who tried to wave the food away politely. “Open up.” Steve sighed and allowed himself to be hand fed again.
It was good. He would hand her that.

“Him. The one you seem too delighted with.” Doom said. Part of the steak on his plate had vanished while Loki was leaning forwards, mysteriously gone.

Steve’s brow furrowed.

“He’s Steve Rogers.” Howard said with a grunt, seeming annoyed that Doom didn’t know in the first place.

“Steve Rogers? What is it that he does?” Doom snorted, picking up his wine glass again as it to hurl it in Howard’s face.

“He’s a friend of Tony’s – nobody special. I knew him when he was a boy.” Howard said. It was a lie of course, although it wasn’t a bad one in Steve’s books. The less Doctor Doom knew about him, the better.

Loki covered her mouth and laughed. “Darling, you sound positively jealous.”

“Doom is never jealous. I am merely prudent. Were this one of your little Avengers friends, I would have to get rid of him.” Doom snapped. “You know the rules.”

“Rules schmooles.” Howard growled back. “I don’t think it’s too much to ask to have a quiet dinner for once. He’s my friend, and I’ll bring him out to dinner if I want to.”

“Stark, you would do well to watch your mouth.”

“I’ll speak however I want. Rules are rules, as you say.”

Doom and Howard glared at each other, arms crossed over their chests. Howard’s grip on his wine glass looked absolutely vicious. He might have snapped the stem if he held on any tighter.

“Boys please,” Loki drawled sweetly. She reached out and set an arm on Doom’s shoulder. “While it is sweet that you two seem to think throwing your weight around is going to get you somewhere, the fact remains that Steve is my friend as well. Let us get on with dinner, hm? I would like to taste dessert, and that means no destroying the building.”

Doom harrumphed and then went back to his food. “A wise decision. I will let this go for now Stark, but be forewarned. If you ever bring one of those idiots here, there will be dire consequences for your actions.”

“Duly noted.” Howard said, going back to his steak.

Steve spent the rest of the meal quietly eating while watching the aquarium. It was much less stressful watching the rainbow fish swim around than it was trying to pay attention to the rapid fire banter going back and forth across the table. He had always been good at listening to conversations like this, looking the other way while people talked; he played up looking uninterested. For the most part, the conversation was civil and not all that interesting. Howard and Doom talked about the wine, mocking each other about their countries technological achievements; Doom apparently still didn’t like the Fantastic Four and had a hate on for Mr. Fantastic. Steve smiled to himself, watching one of the fish swim a loop de loop. Tony had said that a lot. Having a hate on for someone. He had never really understood it, but it had just slipped in unannounced.
Steve was surprised that Doom hadn’t punched clean through the table already, because the more wine the pair of them drank, the more angry and rude they became. The wine affected Loki differently, if not more dangerously. She giggled the more wine she drank, swaying closer to Steve whenever Doom seemed likely to start reaching for her. Her head rested against his shoulder while she watched Doom and Howard argue about economics and democracy, too tipsy to keep her amusement to herself.

Doom shot Loki a glare; she smiled slyly back at him and his looked away, sighing dramatically.

“It is late. I must return to the embassy before one of those idiots causes another disaster. Someone will lose their head for this.” Doom said, standing up.

“Oh,” Loki gasped, “You’re leaving so soon?”

“My Lady,” Doom dropped to his knee again with a clank, taking her hand in his to kiss it again. “We will have to meet again another day. I long for another hour in your presence, but the matters at hand are most pressing and I have a country to run.”

“So you won’t stay for dessert?” Loki pouted. “But that’s the best part!”

“No my Lady. I would delight in it, but god knows,” Doom stood up grumbling to himself, “all it does is go straight to my thighs.”

Steve snorted his wine, coughing; his face, already pink with intoxication went brighter in embarrassment. Loki turned and patted him on the back, giggling again, the sound rich and cordial.

“Does that amuse you so, Rogers?” Doom growled.

Steve wiped wine from his upper lip, feeling a little tipsy. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh.”

“It was intended in jest.” Doom grumbled shaking his head. “One would think you have never heard a joke before. What does Stark do with you? Honestly.”

And with that, Doom strode away, his emerald green cloak flapping as he went. The waitresses and waiters bowed their heads as he passed, some going to far as to fall to their knees for him. They held open the front doors for him and he was gone, vanishing into the night.

Howard sighed, slumping in his chair. Their plates were taken away, replaced with smaller dessert plates topped high with chocolate mousse and raspberries.

“Dessert going right to his thighs,” Howard scowled, stabbing his dessert with his spoon. “the asshole.”

“Well, when you wear armor like he does, gaining weight is much more troublesome. He might not be able to fit into it.” Loki giggled, flapping her hand at Howard.

Howard snorted his dessert, coughing so hard Loki rose to thump him on the back.

“You should be careful.” Loki said solemnly, rubbing a circle on Howard’s back. He made a face, smirking at her and reached for one of her breasts which had gotten a bit too close to him. She swatted his hand away, an ugly look glinting in her eyes. Howard didn’t seem to notice, too drunk on wine and adrenaline.

“Come now, is that the kind of behavior you want your little friend to see?” Loki sat down in her chair, her leg brushing against Steve’s. “Or are you always like this with him?”
“Oh come off it. Steve’s not going to get upset about a little grab now and then.” Howard flapped a hand at her, digging back into his dessert.

“You shouldn’t do that to a lady.” Steve said, shaking his head. “It’s not polite.”

Loki’s grin could have lit up a room. “See? He’s a gentleman. You should take a few lessons from him.”

Howard huffed angrily, staring at Steve. “You’re just saying that because you want to sleep with her.”

“I do not!” Steve flushed, disgusted by the accusation. He would have thrown himself down a well before making a pass at Loki. The only one he wanted was Tony, and that wasn’t going to change any time soon, not for all the busty dames in the world.

“You don’t, huh?” Howard gestured with his spoon. “So if she planted one on you right now, you wouldn’t go off to bed with her?”

“I wouldn’t.” Steve said, he made sure to smile at Loki as apologetically as he could, knowing that an angry goddess of chaos was just as bad as an angry god. “I’m not all that interested in women, sorry.”

“You’re not?” Loki smiled coyly.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Oh, I see. Are you and Howard…” Loki paused, fanning herself. “God, this wine is delicious. You Midgardians do some things quite well.”

“We’re not fucking, if that’s what you’re asking.” Howard growled. “He’s a prude.”

“A prude?” Loki’s laugh was almost a shriek. She clapped her hand over her mouth, giggling away helplessly. “He’s a prude? Oh my, oh my.” She straightened up, wiping tears from her eyes and then grabbed Steve by the chin, reeling him in.

“Well I think you’re just an absolute peach.” She sang. She kissed him, ruby red lips pressing against his slightly-chapped ones; Steve’s head swam, her perfume seeming to invade his every sense and every thought. She pulled away after nibbling on his lower lip and then turned her attention back to Howard almost mockingly.

Howard looked like he was having a stroke; his mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water.

“Is there a problem dear?” Loki asked, rubbing her thumb over the fleshy part of Steve’s lower lip.

“No… no problem. I just didn’t think…” Howard muttered staring defiantly into what was left of his mousse.

Steve rode home in the back of the car with Howard leaning against him like a drunken sack of flour. Loki had left the restaurant on her own after giving Steve’s ass a mighty squeeze, cackling into the cool night air as she left them behind to pick up the bill. Howard had paid it easily, grumbling to himself the entire time about how much it had set him back as he called Happy to pick them up.
Steve was pleasantly buzzed, his eyelids drooping. He knew he should be concerned about what had just happened, it was just that he didn’t know what to do with all the information he now had. Did he report it to someone? Was he supposed to call somebody for help? Happy was here now, and neither he nor Howard seemed the least bit concerned about what had happened. In fact, if Steve didn’t know any better, this kind of thing might even be a regular occurrence.

Steve sat up, pushing Howard towards the door; Howard muttered in his sleep and hugged the door handle, snoring into the window, his breath fogging the glass.

“Are you alright back there Steve?” Happy asked, peering around his seat when they hit the next red light.

“I’m alright, but my arm’s gone to sleep.” Steve said wearily.

“Yeah, that’s bound to happen every now and then. I’m glad you’re alright. Mr. Stark doesn’t usually bring guests to his dinners, so I was a little concerned about what might happen to you.” Happy admitted, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

“He goes out to these kinds of things a lot?” Steve asked, frowning. Wasn’t Howard supposed to be an Avenger? He shouldn’t be on such good terms with super villains, especially not with people like Loki and Doctor Doom. This didn’t make any sense.

“They love their wine.” Happy shrugged. “I’m not supposed to say anything else. He made me sign an NDA.”

Steve fished his cell phone out of his pocket and scrolled through the contacts. He cursed. Bucky hadn’t given him the Avengers phone number, and Howard hadn’t thought to program the damn thing in when he had given Steve the phone. The only phone numbers he had were Howard’s, Pepper’s and Tony’s; Pepper and Tony wouldn’t know anything more than he would. At least, he hoped they didn’t. This kind of thing could get someone hurt.

What should he do? If Howard and Loki were working together… something might have been going on behind the Avengers backs. Loki hadn’t seemed to recognize him, so it was safe to assume that she hadn’t been involved in his life up until now. With all the staring Loki had done it had been hard to guess what she was thinking. He hoped that she had only been staring at him because he was cute, and not because she had known something he hadn’t. She always had been crafty.

His mind drifted back to what Loki had said in the elevator. Loki had said that she had conversations with both Bucky and Howard.

What if Bucky was involved too?

No. He couldn’t believe that Bucky would join forces with Loki – but more to the point, where his dreams had left off, Bucky hadn’t been within a hundred miles of where Loki had last been seen. Bucky had been in a hospital bed recovering from a suicide attempt, not prancing about in central park looking for the super villain who loved to feed pigeons in his off time. Loki hadn’t known anything about Bucky either; it wasn’t like they had been formally introduced or anything.

What was going on then?

Was he seeing plots where none were?

Was he being paranoid?

If what he believed was true, and the memories in his head from the dreams were fake, then he was
reading into things. If not… if not he had seen something that he shouldn’t have seen; he had been a part of some strange super villain dinner party, one that apparently happened often enough to warrant Happy getting an actual NDA to sign.

One thing was for certain. Loki was definitely the same old super villain even if he was now villainess. The dream-memories had been right about that. He had known it when he had seen her on TV during the news, and while he didn’t always trust what he saw on TV, he also had surveillance tapes backing that theory up. Loki had been around and fighting them for years; that wasn’t new. Loki had been around from the beginning.

Happy dropped Steve off at home a little after ten p.m. Steve trudged his way up the steps, cell phone still in hand, staring forlornly at the glowing screen as if it would give him the answers he was so desperately seeking.

The door opened before he had made it to the top step and Tony stood illuminated in the doorway looking a little pissed off; ok, well little was an understatement. He looked like he was ready to tear the house down with his bare hands.

“Well look what the cat dragged in.” Tony said, tapping his foot.

Steve put his phone into his pocket, shuffling his feet. “I got drafted into a dinner with Howard and one of his… lady friends.” Lady friend was as good a label as any. Loki was certainly a lady, at least for now.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Yes. I went up to deliver that book Pepper and I put together – ”

“You mean the quarterly reports? But you took those up at like, what, one?” Tony’s eyes widened, his stance softening. “You’ve been with him since then?”

“Yeah.” Steve sighed, finally getting to the top of the stairs. He didn’t feel as tipsy now, and the buzz had long since worn off, leaving him feeling more worn than he usually did at the end of the day. He made a mental note to never drink that much wine again, even if he had been doing it to keep two super villains from killing him.

Tony snorted, gesturing to Steve’s face. “Jeeze, are you alright? You look like you got mauled.” Tony licked his thumb and wiped at Steve’s face, taking care of the pesky lipstick one cheek at a time; Steve tried not to blush at the sudden touch, taking solace in the fact that it was Tony and that he was finally safe again. He hadn’t ever felt that uncomfortable before tonight, trapped between two of the worst people he had ever – well no. He hadn’t ever fought them, but they were bad. He could feel it.

“I’m assuming that this lovely mess was made by his lady friend and not by him, right?” Tony teased, getting the last little bit cleaned away.

“Yes, and thank god for that because I think I’d have to bleach off my face if it was him.”
grumbled.

Tony chuckled, wrapping an arm around Steve’s shoulder, kicking the door closed. He wrinkled his nose as he lead Steve towards the kitchen where a tray of apple tarts sat open and waiting on the table. “You smell like the bottom of a wine bottle.”

“I wish I didn’t.” Steve lamented, hanging his head. “But he wouldn’t stop filling up the glass, and every time I started sipping, he started giving me these dirty looks like I was stabbing someone’s baby.”

“And I bet it was the good wine too, the stuff you feel obligated to drink.” Tony nodded knowingly. “What was it? Bordeaux something or other?”

“It was something called Dom Romane Conti.” Steve settled into his chair, resting his head against the cool table in the vain hope that it might help his head clear. Tony whistled, giving Steve a slow clap. Steve shot him a dirty look and then went back to thudding his head against the table.

“That’s some expensive stuff there.”

“He kept going on and on about how it cost sixteen hundred dollars a bottle.”

“And I bet he ordered two, didn’t he.”

“He ended up getting five.”

“Wow.”

“I haven’t seen that many zeroes on a bill in my life. And he spent it on wine. The food wasn’t even a fraction of that.”

“Hey, at least he took his lady friend home instead of you.” Tony shrugged, taking a tart out of the container and placing it on a plate. He slid the plate across to Steve, grinning. “Eat this, assuming you have room left.”

Steve picked up the tart, staring at it with a melancholy newly found. Dessert pulled him back into the conversations he had overheard again; he kept seeing Doom sipping his wine, shaking his fist in Howard’s face like he was ready to punch him but never quite doing it. He could tell Tony about it of course, not that it would do any good. It wasn’t like Tony or Pepper could help him. They would just end up targets, with no way to defend themselves.

He bit into the tart. It was delicious, better than what they had had at that three star Michelin restaurant.

“Good, right?” Tony prompted, standing up to go get a beer out of the fridge. He took the cap off with his ever present bottle opener and sat down, sprawling in the chair with his legs spread; Steve stared dutifully into the tart, trying to keep his mind out of the gutter. Drinking wine was definitely a no-no from now on. All he kept thinking about now was the smooth contours of Tony’s thighs, the way the fabric clung to those delicious curves.

“It’s very good.” Steve agreed through another bite, thinking that it would be better to keep his mouth occupied so he couldn’t say something he would regret.

“Pepper brought them. You owe her big time by the way. She had to go get me coffee, and she wasn’t very happy about it.” Tony said with a yawn, taking another swig of beer.
Steve winced. He had been meaning to help Pepper out with three other piles of paperwork, stuff she had been griping about ever since they had photocopied wrong. “She’s going to kill me.” He said, finishing off the tart with a chomp.

As it turned out, Pepper didn’t really want to kill him all that much. She looked mildly irritated when he walked in the next morning, giving him one of her patented ‘you-have-done-a-bad-thing’ stares. He apologized to her, thanking her for handing his bag over to Happy the previous night when he hadn’t come back.

“It’s alright. Now spill. I want all the dirty secrets.” She said.

He smiled, glad that she wasn’t upset. He didn’t really know what to tell her, aside from describing the uncomfortable conversations a little. Telling her Loki and Doom’s names would be asking for trouble, and he didn’t want to drag her into anything unintentionally, even if it was just a few tidbits of gossip.

“Wow, someone’s deep in thought there. Must have been some date.”

Steve looked up from his hands, startled. Pepper flicked him in the forehead and he yelped, rubbing at the spot where she had gotten him.

Tony walked past the desk without saying anything and disappeared into his workshop, returning to whatever work he had left behind the previous day. He had been unnaturally quiet today, smiling and cheerful when they had eaten breakfast together. Steve hoped that nothing was wrong.

“She was one crazy dame. She kept squashing me into her chest and then it turned out that we were both headed to Howard’s office. Then she forced him to drag me along on their date. He looked like he was going to blow a gasket.” Steve said.

“Oh I see, I see. Where did they take you?” Pepper asked, resting her chin on her hand.

“Some fancy place called La Belle de la Lune.”

“Oh wow! That’s a fancy place. They say you have to practically kill someone to get in, their reservations are so tight.”

“That sounds about right.”

“So was it good?”

“I guess. His lady friend kept force feeding me food. I felt like I was at a dinner with my great aunt or something. I couldn’t do anything without one of them commenting on it. It was kind of awful. She wouldn’t even let me get up to go to the bathroom without her.” Steve winced.

“That sounds like the worst date ever.” Pepper chuckled, turning to her computer. “I suppose guys like Mr. Stark need women like that. He’s going to be in diapers at some point right?”

Steve burst into laughter, snorting so loud that Tony turned around and stared at him through his workshop walls with a raised eyebrow. Pepper snickered at Steve smiling slightly every time she caught Steve’s eye; Steve tried to sketch, wanting to get out a few pictures of Doctor Doom that had been plaguing him since the previous night. He got through a thumbnail of Doom and Loki together,
trying not to shudder at the sight when Pepper tapped him on the hand to get this attention. She pushed away the keyboard and mouse so that she could clasp her hands comfortably on the table in front of her.

“Did Tony tell you about the retreat he’s going to tonight?” She asked.

Steve stared blankly at her.

“He’s going somewhere on a retreat?”

“I’ll take that as a no…” Pepper sighed, her shoulder slumping.

“He hasn’t said anything.”

“Every year he has to go on the corporate retreat Howard arranges for the Engineers in R&D – it’s part of his training and he’s required to attend for the full five days. He gets the last few days of the week off afterwards as a trade-off, not that they’re worth anything. Tony hates them. He ends up by himself in a cabin out in god-knows-where waiting it all out. The upside is that the retreat doesn’t have any liquor, so he’ll be booze free and miles away from the nearest liquor store. The downside is that he’ll be without booze and in one mega-bad mood when he gets back. I kid you not, I’ve seen him break a stapler in half one time he was cut off cold turkey.” Pepper scowled. “It’s not a pretty sight.”

“So he’s leaving on – and I’m going to be in the house alone?” Steve stuttered.

Why hadn’t Tony mentioned any of this to him last night?

“He’ll be leaving tonight – Happy usually picks him up and delivers him to the place Howard picks out for the year’s retreat and then five days later he’s back. I wonder why he didn’t mention it to you… Seems like it’s pretty important, seeing as how you don’t have a house key or anything. You’ll be cooped up in an empty house if he’s not around…” Pepper frowned.

“I guess so.” Steve said, biting his lower lip.

Tony had told him pretty much everything else in his work life. Why wouldn’t Tony have let him know about the retreat? Had he done something wrong?

“Well… If you want to go with him, you can always talk to Howard about it. He let me go the first year I started working here because I was convinced that Tony was going to get lost in the woods and end up eating hallucinogenic mushrooms. Try and talk to Howard about it. You never know. He might let you go too.”

“Maybe I should talk to Tony about it first… He might be looking forward to a week without me tagging along.” Steve said softly.

Pepper rapped him across the knuckles. He winced even though it didn’t really hurt.

“He’s not the brightest guy when it comes to relationships, I know, but he’s not so much of an asshole that he would pull something like this on you out of spite. Maybe he just forgot about it until now? He might talk with you over lunch.”

“I guess I can wait until then…” Steve agreed.

“No sense worrying about what you can’t change. Besides, I’m sure he’ll be lonely without you around. He smiles a lot more now – it would be a shame to see him acting like a sour-puss again.”
Over lunch Steve casually brought up the retreat; he carefully wedged it into conversation while Tony was trying to chew on a mouthful of spaghetti so that he didn’t get cut off and talked over. Surprisingly, Tony was very open about the trip. He admitted that he hadn’t remembered about it until the meeting the previous day and then apologized profusely to Steve for not having told him about it. The apology was something of a monstrosity – not because Tony was horrible at making one, but because it was so vehement and repeated. Almost every other bite of spaghetti was followed by yet another minor apology.

“That’s alright you know. You don’t have to apologize – if you forgot it’s not your fault.” Steve said, trying to continue eating. The food had stopped looking appetizing after the first set of apologies and he was debating on just throwing the rest of what was left in his carton into the garbage.

“I should have put it on the calendar or something – I mean now you’re going to be here all by yourself. If we had time we could have made arrangements for you to spend the week somewhere else.” Tony muttered.

“What are they like? Maybe I can come with you.” Steve said.

Tony raised an eyebrow, clearly cynical about the idea of Steve actually wanting to go with him.

“They’re really boring Steve. We get stuck in these log cabins and we have all these useless activities like potato sack races and things to do that are supposed to bond us together as a cohesive unit. It’s children’s stuff. I have to go. If I had a choice I would tell him to go shove it where the sun doesn’t shine. You’ll be bored out of your mind, trust me.” Tony said, scowling.

“I guess I’m going to spending the next five days alone here then.” Steve sighed.

“Well buck up – it’s not like you’re going to get a vacation from me aside from this. You can have the run of the house.” Tony grunted. He put his fork down and pushed his carton away, no longer hungry either. He hadn’t finished enough of his lunch for Steve’s likings. Steve fought with the impulse to order Tony to finish what was left and instead stuffed his own mouth with another forkful of noodles, drowning out his internal mother hen. He hadn’t meant to sound like he was whining.

“I guess I should probably get some more work done seeing as how I’ve got a weeks’ worth of wasted time in front of me.” Tony groaned, standing up.

“I wouldn’t mind going, just so you know. I don’t need a vacation from you.” Steve said, swallowing quickly, almost choking on his food in a rush to get it all out before Tony fled back to his computer.

“Yeah. Right.” Tony dumped his leftover lunch into the garbage and gave Steve a curt nod before heading back to his work, unconvinced.

Steve looked down at his noodles, scowling at them. Typical Tony, always thinking that other people would get sick of him; the Tony in Steve’s dream-memories had been the same way, trying to ration his outside time as he put it. Tony had thought that he was being practical and realistic by doing things that way – Steve had always felt that Tony was being too self-deprecating. Sure, Tony worked on things he liked in his workshop, and Tony was always making something new and amazing, but most of that work was dedicated to the betterment of other people’s lives while ignoring his own. It wasn’t that Steve didn’t appreciate that sentiment; he loved that Tony was so selfless, so
kind and so sweet. What bothered him was the fact that Tony would deprive himself of food and sleep in order to make up for some unknown slight he felt he had done to the world.

Yes, the Iron Man armor had been Tony’s baby, but it had almost always taken a back seat when upgrades had been needed for other people. Speaking of the Iron Man suit… How it was that he had dreamed that up? The kind of technology that no one, not even Tony, had thought of building? Steve wasn’t an engineer – he was an artist, and when he had been younger, there hadn’t been anything nearly as advanced as the suit. Hell, they hadn’t even had electric toaster in his house because it had cost too much, and those weren’t even all that amazing. Maybe he was reading into things. After all, this wasn’t the same Tony, was it?

God, it was so frustrating! How had he picked up all of these memories and thoughts about things that didn’t exist? It wasn’t like he had stuck his head into a sci-fi novel and pulled out everything he had seen. He hadn’t even read much sci-fi when he was younger, sticking to detective novels and those cheap paperback westerns that they sold at the drugstore.

Had he picked the ideas up from Bucky? That didn’t seem likely, because Bucky didn’t exactly like sci-fi either. Then was it Howard who had whispered those things into his ear? But if what Tony had said was right, Howard didn’t know much about the new style of electrical engineering at all. So how had he dreamed up the Iron Man? Steve added it to the ever-growing list of things that weren’t-quite-adding-up-between-his-memories-and-the-real-world. It was starting to become a long list; it was getting harder to ignore it, a dragon rearing its ugly head at long last.

Steve poked at his food; only a few scraps were left thankfully, so he didn’t feel so bad about throwing it out. If Tony wanted to act like he didn’t care about the trip, then Steve supposed there really wasn’t anything he could do about it. He had expressed his desire to stick by Tony’s side and Tony had plainly shot him down. Steve was getting a vacation – one that he didn’t really want or need. It was going to be a very lonely five days once Tony was gone; left alone with only his memories and thoughts for company. He wasn’t looking forward to it.

“Cheer up – at least you’ll get a key to the front door now.” Pepper joked, finishing up some data entry that she had neglected from that morning’s workload.

Steve scowled and stared down at his sketchbook. He had started drawing campfires and cabins without realizing it, his brain perpetually stuck on the idea of going on the retreat. He had never gone to a camp ever before, had only seen them in magazines for boys back before the war started. With his sickly pre-serum body he hadn’t been able to spend time in the wilderness because of his asthma and the allergies he had for pretty much every single wildflower, tree and blade of grass in the surrounding forests; not that his mother could have afforded the fees to get him there. The rest of his life, in the dreams from the coma, he had always been working either with the Avengers or the Howling Commandos and there had been little time to relax and simply goof off with friends at something as simple as a retreat. Campfires were never pleasant; they had been things to keep him from freezing to death in the forest when he finished a mission, and nothing more. He had never roasted marshmallows on one before. He had never curled up with anyone in front of one either.

Steve sighed.

He had been looking forward to the event, even if Tony hadn’t believed him.

“Do you know what you want to do with your week?” Pepper asked her eyes still on the computer
monitor.

“I don’t know. I’ll probably just end up watching endless reruns of black and white movies and spend the rest of the time drawing. There isn’t really much I can do alone unless I want to try my hand at raking the leaves in the backyard.” Steve said.

“Well you can always come to work if you want.” Pepper teased.

“Oh gee, that sounds exciting.” Steve said, absolutely deadpan.

Pepper smirked.

“There’ll be a lot less to occupy yourself with than now. I suppose I could make up a few new and exciting tasks for you – you could give me a pedicure!” She winked at him, saving her files.

“I’ve never given anyone a pedicure before…” Steve mused, sketching out a tree house he had seen in a magazine he had found in the lobby. Nature sketches had once been the bane of his existence; now they just seemed too easy.

“Don’t tease a girl like that Rogers, you’ll make me drool all over you and I don’t really feel like doing that right now. I get off work in half an hour and I feel like having a swoon free weekend.” Pepper laughed.

“Right…”

When they got home, Tony was the bitterest, most sullen and irritating individual that Steve had ever had the pleasure of dealing with and Steve had met plenty of people who had been all of those things and more. The ride home had been quiet just as the ride there had been, with Tony staring blandly out the window the entire way.

When they pulled up in the driveway, the both got out and Tony tossed Steve his house keys; Steve was so startled he nearly lost an eye scrambling to catch them.

“Be a dear and unlock the door so I can get my suitcase.” Tony drawled.

Steve fought briefly with the notion of chucking the keys back at Tony’s head and then complied, unlocking the door. Tony disappeared inside and came back with his suitcase and was out the door in the blink of an eye, leaving Steve standing rigidly on the porch.

“Don’t start any fires while I’m gone.” Tony called out as he got back into the car. He gave Steve a brief wave through the window and then the car pulled away, and he was gone, swallowed up by traffic.

Steve stood on the porch for a long time, trying to figure out what he should do with the rest of the day; with the rest of the week.

He could make dinner.

That was probably the best distraction now that Tony was off.

The problem was that he didn’t really feel like eating.
Steve lay awake in his bed staring blankly up at the ceiling, a habit he had gotten into ever since waking up in the hospital. He had gone to bed at eight, having nothing else better to do, and had been staring at the ceiling ever since, tracing idle pictures onto the tiles with his finger held up in the air. The house was unpleasantly quiet; only the faint hum of the refrigerator rang out sporadically. That was rooms away though, so Steve couldn’t even hear the hum all that well from his bed. He debated on getting up to go sit in front of the refrigerator just to listen it hum. That seemed almost as depressing as lying alone in his bed in an empty house.

It was senseless really.

When he was younger he had lived in his mother’s apartment for years on his own and it had been fine. It had been a little quiet, but still fine, and he hadn’t even noticed that he had been lonely. He was so used to being around Tony now that it felt like he was in the hospital all over again, only this time there were no nurses to burst in and force him to eat disgusting chocolate protein shakes, and the cat wasn’t around to sleep on him.

Steve wondered if Tony missed him too.

Maybe Tony was sitting in his cabin at the retreat staring up at his own ceiling wondering if Steve was as bored as he was.

Steve wanted to think that it might be true.

Steve got up at eleven the next morning and felt like absolute shit. His mouth tasted like he had been eating gauze and his eyes were sticky from sleep and crusty in the corners. He had finally passed out around midnight but hadn’t felt up to getting out of bed the next morning. He had remained in bed staring up at the ceiling for another two hours until he had gotten too restless and hungry to stay there any longer.

He staggered into the kitchen and made himself a breakfast slash lunch of toast and leftover apple tarts and then plodded into the living room and sat down on the couch, staring at the dark TV with disinterest. There was supposed to be a Lon Chaney film playing, he had checked earlier in the week and been excited about seeing it; now he didn’t seem to have the energy to turn the TV on. Steve let out a loud sigh and set his empty plate down on the coffee table, flopping on his back across the couch.

He could still talk to Howard and see if he could get on the retreat, he mused. Tony might be angry with him, but then at least he wouldn’t be alone. He would take an irritated Tony over an absent one any day.

Should he?

Should he go talk to Howard?

Where would Howard even be on a Saturday? He had Happy’s phone number on speed dial, so he
could really just ask to be *taken* to visit Howard.

Should he? Steve couldn’t decide.

The phone rang; the sound shattering the creeping silence of the house like an opera soprano could shatter glass. Steve jumped up and dashed to the phone. It was sitting in the hallway beside the staircase, and although he had never had the reason to use it he had memorized its location out of habit, not wanting to have to chase rings if it ever did choose to make itself known.

“Hello?” Steve said as he picked up the receiver. He was a little out of breath and cursed himself for his lack of exercise. He should start taking up jogging again, because this was just getting absurd.

“Steve?” Tony’s voice crackled across the phone line, almost breaking up.

“Hey! Tony!”

“Hi Steve… I just wanted to check in and make sure everything was alright with you.” Tony said. His voice sounded flat and empty, although that could have been because the connection was crap. Steve could hear more static than anything else. He wondered where Tony had found a phone, seeing as how no one was supposed to have brought any technology with them. That had been in the brochure Pepper had showed him; no ‘addictive’ things allowed on the premises tech and alcohol included.

“Things are alright here.” Steve said.

“Oh. Well that’s good…”

“It was weird waking up without you. I’m kind of lonely here.”

“You are?”

“Yeah.”

“Well I’m sure you’ll find something to entertain yourself with. That movie you wanted to watch came on a few minutes ago, didn’t it? *Shit* – did you want me to call back, because I can call back if you want?” Tony muttered.

Tony had remembered about the movie. That was sweet of him.

“Yeah it started alright, but I didn’t really feel like watching it. Don’t worry about it.” Steve said.

“Why not? You were so excited about it last week.” Tony sounded startled.

“I guess I just wanted to watch it with you, that’s all.” Steve shrugged. He knew that Tony couldn’t see the gesture, but it felt right so he did it anyways. Tony was silent on the other end of the phone for so long that Steve feared he might have hung up or been cut off.

“Tony?”

“Yeah… sorry… I got lost in thought there for a sec.” Tony said. He sounded almost sad; he cleared his throat.

“Are you having fun at least?” Steve asked, trying to turn the conversation onto a lighter note.

“Not really. I got stuck in the cabin the furthest away from the dining hall, so it’s like sleeping in a crypt. The rest of the guys are screwing around trying to build some kind of television antennae out
of Popsicle sticks and some random chunks of metal they scrounged out of the scrap box. It’s the same place it was in last time – Happy knows where it is. At least this year they have a working phone. It’s probably because they don’t want to be too far away from an ambulance in case someone decides to go all Jason Vorhees on the rest of us. Not that most of us have the physical strength for it. Or the access to a machete for that matter….”

“Jason Vorhees? What does that mean?”

“He’s a character from a horror movie franchise – you know, Friday the Thirteenth? You’ve never seen that, have you?” Tony groaned.

“No.”

“Don’t watch it while I’m not there – seriously. You probably won’t be freaked out by it, but the fact that you’re in an empty house will probably make it creepier and I don’t want to have to come back to you crawling up the walls. I just repainted you know.”

“I see.”

Steve heard Tony shifting to phone; people were grumbling in the background, apparently unhappy with the idea of waiting their turn like civilized human beings.

“I have to go. The villagers are getting restless.” Tony grumbled.

“I miss you.” Steve blurted. He wanted to slap a hand over his mouth even though it was already too late. The words were out there, floating over telephone lines on their way to Tony’s ears.

Tony laughed the sound bright and cheerful even over the static filled line. “I miss you too. I’m seriously regretting telling you not to tag along… If anyone goes Jason Vorhees around here it’s probably going to be me…”

“I hope not. I don’t want to have to spring you from jail. I’m crap at making cakes that can fit nail files in them.” Steve said.

“Ha! I bet you’re just fine at making cakes for nail files, and besides, I’m far too pretty for prison to test that theory out anyways.” Tony said; Steve could practically hear him preening over the phone.

“True.”

“You can’t see me but I’m blushing.” Tony mocked; the noise behind him increased in volume, static crackling over the lines chasing the whispers. Steve could just make out someone telling Tony to get off the phone with his girlfriend.

“Got to go Steve, see you later.” Tony sighed dramatically.

“Ok. See you later Tony.” Steve said. He refrained from saying I love you, although he kind of wanted to; that would just make things awkward.

Steve hung up the phone after he was sure that Tony had gone. He went into his room and got dressed, pulling on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, throwing his pajamas on the floor. It wasn’t too late to go hunt Howard down after all.
Surprise Doom! Also, don't drink your troubles away like Tony does. Bad idea - very bad idea. How his liver is still intact, I do not know.
Happy was pleasantly surprised when Steve phoned him. He turned up in the driveway fifteen minutes later, having nothing else to do for the day other than waiting around to be called by Howard again for a pickup. He drove Steve and his suitcase to Stark International where he had dropped Howard off that morning at the crack of dawn. It paid to be friends with a chauffeur Happy had chuckled, nudging Steve in the shoulder, handing him a jelly doughnut and coffee. Steve couldn’t have agreed more.

Steve carefully crafted his cover story in his head, licking powdered sugar off his fingers. The best lies, Tony had once whispered to him during a particularly boring gala, were the ones with little bits of truth in them like rainbow sprinkles on a doughnut; Steve wasn’t really sure what rainbow sprinkles had to do with lies, but apparently it had made perfect sense to Tony. This wasn’t really a lie per say, Steve reminded himself as they pulled up in front of Stark International; he wouldn’t be lying when he said that he wanted to go to the retreat because he was lonely. He was just trying to emphasise that this particular conundrum couldn’t be solved by spending his week as Howard’s lap-buddy that was all.

“Good luck. I’ll keep the car running.” Happy laughed.

“Thanks.” Steve smiled back, getting out. “I think I’m going to need it.”

“Take as much time as you need. I’ve got plenty to keep me busy.” Happy winked and went back to reading the newspaper that had temporarily been sitting in the glove compartment.

Steve approached Howard’s office with a plan. He would get in; make some relatively small-talk and then hit the point on the head as soon as it looked like Howard understood him; the secretary waved Steve towards the door, recognizing him without even really glancing at him. He approached the door, took a careful breath and then nearly tripped on his own feet. He could hear someone talking in Howard’s office – someone other than Howard.

Someone familiar...

He didn’t want to interrupt, but waiting would only make the trip take longer, so he pressed on.

Steve knocked loudly on the door.

“Come in.” Howard called out, sounding disgruntled.

Steve walked in, carefully shutting the door behind him with a click. Howard was seated rigidly at his desk as he usually was when he was working; Bucky was sitting across from him in one of the
visitor’s chairs, his bright red face matching the upholstery. They must have been arguing, because otherwise there wouldn’t have been a big dent in the mahogany desk. The dents looked just about the right size to be fists now that he thought about it, and the only one he knew who could do that to a solid wooden desk was Bucky. It must have been some argument.

“Hi.” Steve said, approaching the pair feeling relatively optimistic even if his plan was now rather useless; he hadn’t thought to find anyone with Howard, let alone Bucky. A good argument would play into his favor though, as would Bucky’s rage. The tactician in him was hooting with glee. Howard might even be willing to let him go on the trip just to piss Bucky off some more, vengeance for his once beautiful desk perhaps.

Bucky’s anger swapped out for happiness as Steve got closer, although the grin on his face wasn’t exactly all that convincing; he was paler than normal once the red faded from his cheeks, dripping away like wet paint. Howard’s expression did a similar 360.

“Steve! What brings you in on your day off?” Howard motioned for Steve to take a seat beside Bucky’s. Steve sat down, having to hop up to reach the seat. The chair was so high off the ground that his feet dangled a few inches above the carpet; he tried to ignore the feeling of his shoes falling off. Bucky smirked and elbowed him in the shoulder clearly pleased to see him.

“Well, I was at home and I got a little lonely. Tony’s off at that retreat you have for your engineers, so there’s no one around.” Steve said. Better to start off with the reason for the visit than to hide it in chatter now that Bucky was around. Howard didn’t like bullshit after all, and it was best to talk business with him other than frivolity when he was with company even though it was so tempting an option.

“Oh yes, I’d almost forgotten about that with all the chaos. He’s probably trying to dig himself a hole to hide in right about now. You should have seen him last year. He only did the things on the required list. He stayed in his room the rest of the time, although I can’t really blame him seeing as how it rained the entire week.” Howard grinned, the consummate viper. Steve took a moment to idly wonder how Howard knew any of the details of that trip. Obviously he had spies everywhere.

“Hey, if you want I can come over and spend the week with you.” Bucky swallowed hard, a funny look on his face, just as unreadable as usual. Steve was surprised that Bucky was offering to come over after what had happened between them; he wasn’t sure he wanted to be around Bucky to be honest. He had expected Bucky to be avoiding him for at least another few weeks, if not longer. Leaving someone in the middle of nowhere was usually something people were embarrassed about, especially when that someone was one of your close personal friends.

“Or, you could come over and stay in my room.” Howard purred, leaning against the desk, his arm slipping into the dent in the mahogany.

Ah, Steve thought, that was probably why Bucky had offered. Bucky shot Howard a look of pure loathing, seeming ready to leap over the desk to start strangling Howard with his bare hands. Steve wasn’t all that surprised by that reaction; he kind of felt like doing the same most days.

“That’s very kind of you to offer. I don’t really want to impose … actually I was wondering if I could go out to the retreat instead. It looks like fun, and I haven’t really been out in the actual outdoors since … well… ever.” Steve said, smiling his best innocent smile. Play the cards while you have them, he thought, even if it did feel a little cheap.

“Oh, that’s too bad.” Howard said in disappointment. Yet he seemed surprisingly upbeat about the refusal. It might have had something to do with the fact that Bucky’s appeal had also been largely ignored. “I suppose the outdoors would do you some good. You could use a bit of a tan after all.”
Howard scratched at his chin, running his thumb over his upper lip.

“Hey, what am I, chopped liver?” Bucky grumbled, more than a little disgruntled at having been so casually ignored. “We could stay up and watch movies all night – we could catch up on all the stuff we’ve missed out on, seeing as how I’ve been so busy with Avengers missions!”

“No, no Bucky! Let Steve have his fun for once. He hasn’t had a good day out in the sun for ages now. Personally I just want him to take some nice pictures. I’d love to see some good ones – you’ve got a camera in your phone, don’t you Steve?” Howard asked, knowing damned well that it did.

“Uh…” Steve wrestled the phone out of his pocket and handed it across the table to Howard, who took it with somewhat childish glee; this was just for show, seeing as how Howard had given the blasted thing to him. Maybe Howard was getting his jollies from the fact that the phone was actually being used and not ignored.

“Oh yes, this one has a camera alright, a very good camera at that. Do you know how to use it?” Howard asked, passing the phone back, a wolfish grin on his face and a hungry look in his eye.

“I’ve played with it a little when I was trying to take some still photos for reference.” Steve shrugged. Howard didn’t need to know that he had more than a few pictures of Tony hidden away in the device, taken under the pretense of checking his phone for missed calls; Tony didn’t need to know either, for that matter. He felt guilty about it enough as it was.

“That’s good. Take a bunch and send me the good ones. We can put some of them in the newsletter to boost morale or something. Did you need – oh that’s right, Happy said something about driving you around today. I suppose you’re all ready?” Howard smirked; the sneaky bastard. He knew what was going on! The real question was what Howard was going to do about it.

Howard glanced at Bucky, who seemed to be fighting with what he probably thought was a hidden urge to grab Steve and haul him off somewhere, and sighed dramatically, fanning his face. “Well I guess that rules out our vacations, hm? I suppose we’ll just have to get over it somehow, won’t we Bucky?” Steve watched Bucky’s fingers twitching where they lay at the mention of his name; he shifted in his seat and turned back to Howard, intent on getting back on the road before it got too dark. He and Happy would end up sharing a hotel room if they didn’t get moving soon. The drive would be at least seven hours; Happy had told him all about it, and how Tony had complained bitterly the entire way there.

“I guess so.” Bucky grunted.

“I’m sure you’ll have a great time Steve. I’ll phone ahead and have them prepare papers for you so you don’t get lost. I’m sure you won’t mind bunking with Tony. They’re full up at the moment, with all the people I sent after all.” Howard flashed his pearly whites, turning to stare at Bucky so intensely it was almost uncomfortable to watch, like Howard might suddenly jump over the desk and poke a finger into Bucky’s face yelling ‘HA!’.

Was it possible that Howard knew about the kiss?

Steve studied Howard, unable to help the grin on his face. They were all playing their little games, now weren’t they? He wouldn’t have put it past Howard to have been spying on Bucky; scratch that. If he was spying on Tony, he was definitely spying on Bucky. Howard was probably playing it off as having to do with team security. Or was it something else? Some kind of elaborate game that he was playing?

Steve forced his face to remain grinning, knowing that whatever was going on, he wanted no part of
Bucky looked grim, crossing his arms over his chest staring at Steve, as if that might change his decision. “I could stay with you, you know. It wouldn’t be a big deal.” He growled. “We could do stuff.”

“You have the Avengers to think about Captain. You can’t just take a week off to go have pillow fights in in your underwear while feeding each other cookie dough.” Howard smirked, rising from the chair to go wrap his arms tightly around Steve’s middle. “Have fun sweetheart. I do mean it. You deserve to have a few days of vacation.” Howard’s eyes were on Bucky’s when he squeezed Steve’s ass; Steve couldn’t see it, but he knew it just by the way Bucky suddenly sputtered, going red in the face again. Steve squirmed free, blushing and furious, although not as furious as he should have been. He blamed it on his good mood when he didn’t outright punch Howard in the groin.

“Quit it!” Steve swatted Howard’s hand away when he tried to grope him again.

“Oh you know it’s just harmless fun honey. Enjoy your trip! Maybe that will keep you warm on the cold nights.” Howard winked.

“I highly doubt it. I’ll see you both later. Bye Bucky.” Steve said, fleeing without actually running to the elevator; he was proud to say that he hadn’t sprinted right out of the room.

Happy looked up from his newspaper when Steve approached the passenger’s side door, slightly out of breath. Ok, so he had run out the front door. It wasn’t like he wasn’t allowed to run, now was it? Happy chuckled, folding the newspaper up along the fold lines, setting it aside. “I take it, things went well?”

“Yes it did. We can go now.”

“To the retreat?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. Get in and let’s blow this Popsicle stand.” Happy crowed, turning on the radio cranking the volume when the Eye of the Tiger rang out.

Steve hadn’t been in a car for such a long ride, even in his youth; seven hours was a massive amount of time, and he really regretted not bringing something to do to stave off boredom. Back in his dream-memories, they had always traveled in the Quinjet or on the Helicarrier, so they had always been going much faster than a car ever could. He suspected that this was because Clint and some of the other Avengers couldn’t handle being in small confined spaces without access to free air for too long; Bruce always got a funny look in his eye when they drove around even to a restaurant in town. The faster they got the Hulk some place nice, the better it went for everyone, so he had never paid a whole lot of attention to it.

Seven hours after leaving the city they were very close to their destination: Crabgrass Retreat. They had left the main road an hour previous and were traveling up the dirt road that led to the camp, bouncing along as the tires hit rocks and twigs when Steve spotted the first of many road sign. All they had seen before this was an advertisement sign for burritos, and the ‘10k ahead till Crabgrass Retreat’ sign was like seeing the hand of God pointing them in the right direction. Happy, who normally didn’t show much in the way of enthusiasm despite his name, seemed to share Steve’s; both
of them were grinning from ear to ear like giddy teenagers.

“Are you going to spend the night at the retreat too?” Steve asked as they rounded the corner, pulling into the gravel parking lot.

“Nope, I’m heading back down the road to that swanky looking hotel, boss. I’m not built for trees and grass. You have fun in your cabin.” Happy laughed. He walked Steve to the reception cabin and then booked it back to the edge of town, leaving with a wave out the driver’s side window. The light was mostly gone outside, everything wrapped in a kind of pitch black unknown to most city-dwellers; it had been hard to walk up the gravel path to the building, but somehow he had managed it without horribly mangling his ankles like a spider wearing tap shoes.

The woman he met at the reception desk was glad to see him, if not a little tired of waiting. She had been phoned by Howard earlier in the day and had prepared a packet for him in advance, handing it over. She was pleasant, treating him as if he were just another one of the guests. She pointed things out for him when necessary, yawning as time went on. In the package there was a map of the entire compound; there were a few natural landmarks that stood out amongst the rest, but most of it was manmade and easy to follow.

“So,” She said, “The camp was built on an old family farm site, which was donated to the original owners by an old Victorian couple who owned the place. They were the Burkharts. They raised their children here back in the nineteen hundreds and wanted to make sure that everything stayed preserved for future generations. Their original house, which is labeled on your map as ‘The Tea House’ is perched up on a cliff just outside the main camp and is available for visiting, although you have to take a bit of a hike to get to it. If you follow the gravel path, also located on your map, you’ll find it no problem.” She tapped the map, pointing the location of various hiking trails out to him.

“The view up there is spectacular, and from that cliff alone you can see the entire camp! We keep the Tea House fully stocked with treats and tea during the camping season, and it’s available as a retreat for everyone on special order. The cabins themselves are divided into pods, each one separated for convenience and privacy. The main pod, of which our reception cabin is a part, also houses our crafts hall, dining hall and the entrance to our famous Crabgrass Hot spring Cave. Across from the cabins is a large grassy field which we use for sports and other team building activities, and beside that is Crabgrass Lake, where canoeing, swimming and general tomfoolery happens!” She said the spiel off by heart, her eyes crinkling at the corners; she was a younger lady, probably in her mid-twenties if he had to guess, and she bubbled with energy even though she was yawning away. He squinted at the brochure and saw that the whole tomfoolery bit was written there in bold black ink. He hadn’t heard the word tomfoolery used in what seemed like forever.

Steve was glad to have such a well labeled map; it had pretty much every activity available in the place circled for easier viewing, and with any luck he wouldn’t be getting lost.

“So, any questions Mr. Rogers?” She asked, covering her mouth to hide yet another yawn.

“Can you point out Tony Stark’s cabin please?” Steve asked, grinning bashfully. Her eyes widened, and she coughed into her hand, looking down at the papers on the desk in front of her to cover her shock.

“Mr. Stark is in Cabin 28.” She reached over the table and tapped his map, the smile on her face almost completely gone now. “And I’d be careful if I were you. He’s not in the best mood. Well, he’s never in the best mood, at least not since I’ve known him. You should have seen him last year. It was like he had ants in his pants the entire time he was here. Couldn’t sit still for more than five minutes at a time. The plumbing here freaks him out.” She sighed wearily. “It’s like he’s never seen an outhouse before.”
“Oh, you guys don’t have modern toilets?” Steve asked. He had expected the place to have at least a few modern adaptations, but it didn’t surprise him to hear that they were still using outhouses. It was supposed to be a tech-free environment after all.

“We have a modern set of bathrooms and shower stalls in the dining hall, but the rest of the facilities out with the camp pods are outhouses and hoses. It’s to give the place a more old-school feel to it. Just as a warning, we do get our fair share of spiders in them, so look around and give the stall a bit of a poke before you sit down. Don’t want to get any nasty surprises, if you know what I mean.” She said with a chuckle. “Personally I just use the dining hall bathrooms exclusively, but those get locked up at the end of the night after dinner, so you’ll have to wait until morning, which can be a bit of a pain.” She looked around, as if suspecting that someone was listening in on their conversation. “And if I were you, I’d make sure you take a flashlight everywhere. We don’t have any bears up here, thankfully, but there are a few mountain lion sightings every few years, and we do have coyotes.”

“Thanks for the heads up,” Steve said, folding up the map in one hand. “And you said it’s Cabin 28?”

“That’s right. The last one at the bottom – it’s all by itself down there. Mr. Stark picks it every year.” She fished out a green flashlight for him with the words ‘Crabgrass Retreat’ stencilled on the side in white paint and handed it to him along with a key to what was presumably Tony’s cabin. “You’ll need this in case he’s not in yet.”

“Out of curiosity, which Mr. Stark picked the cabin?” Steve asked, taking the flashlight and key. He juggled things around, stuffing the key into his pocket to keep from dropping it.

“Mr. Stark Senior – he phoned in ahead of time to make sure that we hadn’t booked his son in any of the other rooms.” She said. “If you need anything else, just give me a holler. I’m Danika. Cary, Candy and Brendan are our other advisors, but they’re not on night shift right until later on in the week.”

“Sounds great. Nice to meet you Danika.”

“Nice to meet you too Mr. Rogers.”

“Please, call me Steve.”

“Alright,” Dankia smiled. “Nice to meet you Steve. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

Steve liked the camp.

Everything was so pristine and untouched by the garbage of the city; he could smell the pine trees around him. The scent almost overwhelmed him, and the sap seemed to seep into everything he was wearing like nature’s cologne. This was the longest he had gone without seeing rats, or dumpsters for that matter. It was a little weird.

The world seemed more peaceful in the dark, even though he couldn’t see more than a step in front of him at a time even with the flashlight.

He could see the stars – oh god, the stars! He pulled out his phone and took a picture, amazed by the sight of those twinkling lights; he was even more amazed by the fact that the camera actually managed to do them justice. He had expected to get nothing more than a few shiny blurs for his
efforts, but here they were, stars in the night sky. He hadn’t seen a sky this clear since he had been a toddler! The skyline of New York had been slowly eaten up by skyscrapers and power poles as time had passed by, making it impossible for anywhere to get dark enough to see even the stars. The world was a very different place now, but out here in the wilderness things hadn’t changed all that much. Steve doubted if the place looked any different from the day it had been built for its first owners. Sure, the cabins had probably been upgraded to keep in heat and to keep out the insects, but it all still had an air of oldness to it; an untouched splendour.

Steve turned the flashlight off and snapped a few more pictures, pleased with what he saw when it was just the stars illuminating the trees. He would sketch it later when he had time; this would require charcoal, he thought. Charcoal would be fun to get back into, all dark lines and sweeping strokes. It had been a while since he had had to roll up his sleeves and get his hands really good and dirty; the sound of crickets chirping almost lulled him off to sleep where he stood. He shivered as the wind played with his jacket giving his body a shake to try and push the chill away.

Tony was here, somewhere.

Steve turned the flashlight back on and unfolded the map, careful not to drop it. In the darkness he might not be able to find it again, it might vanish into nothingness until morning came; he hoped that he was just joking around and that it wouldn’t turn out to be true. After all, he had gone on night missions – well… no, he hadn’t, had he? Damn. So much for that.

The map showed a pathway that led from the main group of cabins numbered fifteen through twenty highlighted with green squares. Cabin 28 was a little red squiggle off in the corner, and it meant everything to him. Children probably used this map on occasion; they might even have summer camps here. Steve wondered what that would be like. Were kids the same as they had been back in his day? Would they enjoy the chirping of the crickets, or the way the stars hung above them like ripe apples ready for picking? Would they like the cold, or the smell of the trees?

He started down the path, plodding along with his suitcase hanging from his other hand, swinging it back and forth.

Cabin 28 a lonely little thing, pitch black when he finally found it. The other cabins around it were lit up like fireflies, people preparing to sleep in the warm yellow light; nestling down in their bunks, exhausted and ready for dreams to come. Steve had seen old pictures of log cabins before, and while these ones kind of looked like they were from the turn of the century, they weren’t. Most of the older cabins would have rotted away by now, so these were all new, playing at being old. They were built with new logs and sealed windows that would keep out the cold, practical but nostalgic at the same time.

Steve stood in front of the door, fidgeting with his sleeves, flicking away a moth that was chasing his flashlight beam as if it was the messiah.

He had to knock.

He would knock and Tony would either be happy that he was there or he wouldn’t be.

Go Steve, he tried to order himself, go and knock on the door. Yet his arm remained firmly at his side, locked in place. He was nervous – oh god, was he nervous. He was shaking, so he tried to pretend that it was the cold causing the jitters and nothing more; that didn’t work.

What if Tony wasn’t happy? What if –

Steve shook his head. No sense in worrying; he had to knock if he wanted to know, so he would
He held his breath and knocked on the door.

No one answered.

Steve knocked again.

Nothing. Not a single sign of movement inside either. He let out his held in breath, slowly deflating and set his suitcase down on the stoop. He walked around to the side of the cabin, trying to see if anyone was inside. He stood up on his tiptoes to peer into the window, clinging with stiff fingers to the ledge as he peeked through the curtains.

The cabin was dark because it was empty.

He squinted and used the flashlight to get a better look; he sure hoped that no one thought he was some kind of thief trying to case the joint. Steve let out a sigh of relief when he saw Tony’s suitcase sitting in front of the bed, cracked open with clothing spilling out all over the floor. Tony’s pajamas were lying on the bed, half swallowed by the comforter that had been flipped sideways on top of the mattress.

Well, Steve thought, he may as well go inside and wait. He had the right room, and there was no sense in hanging around out here in the cold when he could be inside getting warmed up. He fished the key out of his pocket and went inside, closing the door behind him before the moths could come in after him. He fumbled in the darkness, completely blind, feeling along the walls. He located the light switch and flicked it on after almost stabbing himself in the hand with it. He stuck his fingers in his mouth, sucking on them, wincing as his fingers pulsed in pain.

Inside, the cabin was spacious but sparsely furnished. The bed was the only piece of furniture around and it looked comfortable, as if he could just fall into it and drown in the mattress; he hadn’t expected that. He had expected to find something rock hard and thin like paper, a mattress like one they might use in a prison cell. He hoped that Tony wouldn’t mind that they would be sharing a bed. He set his bag down beside Tony’s, and for lack of anything better to do sat down on the unmade bed, pushing back the covers.

It was quiet; so quiet here, like there wasn’t anything else in the world aside from the bed and this oh so empty cabin.

The key in the lock startled him out of his doze; he had been dreaming about snow again, and the room felt colder than it should have, as if the dream had seeped into the world while his eyes had been closed. He sat up straight, hands clasped in his lap and waited for Tony to come inside, hoping that he wouldn’t be scaring Tony by being here unannounced.

Unsurprisingly, Tony looked shocked to see Steve in his room. He looked shocked to see anyone in his room, in fact, although how he had missed the fact that the light was now on in his cabin, Steve didn’t know; how Steve had fallen asleep with the light on was yet another of the world’s mysteries.

“Steve? What the hell are you doing here?” Tony asked, coming inside and closing the door with a bang. A moth fluttered in after him, searching for the light and he swatted at it, knocking it to the ground. He locked the door, arms crossed in front of his chest, almost pacing as he moved closer to the bed.
“I asked Howard if I could goof off with you and he said it would be alright. The retreat sounded like fun.” Steve said, stretching his sore muscles. Seven hours spent trapped in the passenger’s seat was finally taking its toll.

Tony’s jaw dropped, as did his crossed arms. “You talked him into letting you come out here?”

“I told him that I wanted to see the great outdoors and that this was the first time I’ve actually been to a camp.”

“So you lied to him?” Tony asked, incredulous.

“Technically I have never been to a camp before.” Steve smiled.

Tony started laughing. Steve had been prepared for a reaction, but somehow laughter hadn’t factored into the equation. The sound was enchanting; he could have kissed it if it was corporeal.

“You were away from me for one day – and you got so lonely that you had to come all the way out here, suffering through a seven hour car ride just so that you could come spend time with me?” Tony teased when he caught his breath.

“Yep.”

“That’s just… Jesus, Steve. You’re crazy.”

Tony sat down on the bed beside Steve, ruffling his hair; their shoulders bumped as the bed dipped and Steve slid closer to Tony, his thigh pressing lightly against Tony’s as he came to a stop. Tony blushed. It was hardly noticeable, but it was there in the modest light, pink amongst yellow.

“You know… we’re going to have to share a bed I guess… Is that alright with you?” Tony asked, scratching his head.

“I’m fine with it if you are.”

Tony yawned, covering his mouth; he smiled meekly at Steve and then grabbed blindly behind him for his pajamas, fingers fumbling under the comforter.

“May as well go to sleep now, I guess. We can talk more over breakfast. You don’t have to go to the bathroom, do you? Because it’s an outhouse; I kid you not. And it’s kind of creepy in the dark.” Tony said.

“No, I’m alright.” Steve went to go dig his pajamas out of his suitcase; he had packed them on the top for practicality’s sake, figuring that he would need them first, so it wasn’t too much hassle to dig them out. When he turned back, Tony had already changed and was under the covers with his back pressed up against the wall.

“I guess this is like home for you, right? Log cabins and outhouses?” Tony grinned mischievously.

Steve rolled his eyes, changing into his pajamas. “Surprisingly no, I did not live in a log cabin. We had plumbing and everything, although I knew a few people in our neighborhood that had relatives outside the city that had outhouses.”

“Sucks to be them. Can you shut off the light?” Tony yawned.

“Sure.”
Steve folded his clothes, putting them on top of his suitcase and then shut off the light, padding over to the bed in his socks. He crawled in beside Tony, the blanket scratchy but soft against his skin; Tony didn’t move from his side of the bed, pinned against the wall like he had been nailed there. The room went quiet again, and Steve couldn’t feel any more content than he did at that moment. He closed his eyes, burying himself under the blankets until his head was the only thing left visible.

All that was left was the soft sounds of Tony breathing beside him, and the tinny thuds of the moth trying to fly through the glass window.

It was a strangely hypnotic combination.

Steve woke to find Tony lying on top of him, snoring away like some kind of elderly mammoth. Despite not having been close to Steve when they had fallen asleep, Tony had migrated closer and closer during the night, ending up with one arm around Steve’s head and his face squished into Steve’s neck. The bed was relatively small to begin with, so it wasn’t surprising that Tony’s leg had managed to find its way in between Steve’s again, his thigh warm and firm.

“I think we should get up now…” Tony mumbled into Steve’s throat, eyes still closed. “They stop serving breakfast at nine thirty… and it’s… What does my watch say?” Tony lifted up his arm, still wearing his wristwatch; he normally used his cellphone for that particular task, but it had been confiscated. Steve read the fuzzy numbers, yawning.

“It says eight thirty.”

“They have pancakes on the second day…” Tony said dreamily, smacking his lips as if he was eating them already. Steve tried not to flush at the feeling of Tony’s lips so close to his throat.

“I guess we should get up then.” Steve murmured, not wanting to get up even if there were pancakes.

“I guess so.”

The dining hall was full, but not a sound came from its temporary occupants; it was a little creepy how still they were, clockwork creatures frozen in position. Engineers were spread out around the room, all at different tables. Not a single one was sitting with someone else even though, according to Tony, they all knew each other quite well. They all seemed relatively shell-shocked, or maybe they were suffering some kind of withdrawal. Only a few of them had watches on; they stared blankly at their wrists every once in a while, confused and sleep deprived. It was a miracle that any of them had woken up this early without their alarm clocks. Most were staring blankly down at their fluffy pancakes, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Some of them had forks halfway to their mouths, frozen in thought as they noticed Tony and Steve walking in.

It was kind of adorable the way their eyes widened, tensing up in their polished wooden seats, likely to run away if approached directly.

Tony picked an empty table near the back and then made Steve guard their spot, heading off to go get them both breakfast. One of the engineers, a man Steve had seen before during one of his attempted deliveries of paper to the Chair of the R&D Committee, looked up and blinked owlishly in Steve’s direction; he panicked and then looked away, turning an odd shade of purple when he
realized that Steve had noticed him.

Pepper had told Steve all about David and his obsessive tendency to sexualize everything that walked on two legs; the joke around the office was that it didn’t matter how many legs something had, so long as there was somewhere to fuck. Steve had found that disgustingly accurate. He didn’t much like David. He seemed a lot like a much less confident version of Howard, and he really didn’t want get within ten feet of the man without some kind of weaponry, even if it was only a fork. Empty tables surrounded David on all sides; the other engineers didn’t seem to like him much either, but he had been kept on for some reason regardless of the rumors and innuendo.

Tony sat down across from Steve, effectively blocking out David’s staring. He pushed a plate of pancakes and a cup of coffee towards Steve and then started in on his own food, cheerfully digging into the meal as if it were the best thing he had ever eaten; Steve wasn’t sure if he should feel insulted by that or not. He followed along, keeping pace with Tony’s forkfuls, grinning every time Tony got a piece of syrupy pancake stuck to his lower lip.

“So…” Tony said, sipping at his coffee; he was crumb and pancake free for the most part, having wiped at his beard when he realized what Steve was grinning about. He hadn’t been mad, more amused than anything. “How was the trip in?”

“It was alright. Happy knows his stuff, so it wasn’t *too* bad. I think I slept through half of it, but he kept playing that Céline Dion woman… I may have lost some brain cells there.” Steve laughed.

“Ah yes. I forgot about that. I’m not usually in the car long enough for him to start in on his Diva CD collection. He was listening to show tunes when he drove me up here – I had the Sound of Music soundtrack stuck in my head for four hours after I got out of that car. I thought he was trying to kill me.” Tony snorted.

“The Sound of Music would have been great. It got worse when he started singing along. I don’t think anyone’s heart could go on after that…” Steve sighed, shaking his head.

“*Good God!* Steve made his first pop culture joke. *I am impressed.*” Tony snickered into his hand.

“Hey,” Steve said defensively, “I was asleep for seventy years. I’m allowed to not have any idea what’s going on in pop culture. At least I missed all the really horrible things.”

“Well, but you also missed all the really *good* things too.”

“Well then you’ll just have to show me what I missed.”

Tony inhaled his coffee by accident, breaking out into a fit of coughing. He wiped his mouth, grinning weakly when he got himself under control again. “You’re a trusting individual Steve, I’ll give you that.”

“Well you’ve never led me wrong before.” Steve shrugged.

“You just wait and see. You’ll be regretting those words before long.” Tony said solemnly. He smirked again when Steve raised a questioning eyebrow. “Alright, alright. Don’t believe me. It’s your fault if you get traumatized. I take no responsibility for what happens.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. So what are we going to do today?” Steve asked dryly. He had brought his phone with him to breakfast and it was burning a hole in his jacket pocket, waiting to be used. No one had confiscated *his* technology because he was a *guest*; he and Tony had already had a private chuckle about what the other engineers would do when they found out about it.
Proper lighting made everything Steve saw a potential portrait in the making; he would send some of these stills to Howard to make sure that the man wouldn’t act like a total jackass when they got back. Pepper might like some too. He would have to stockpile pictures for her. He started mentally dividing things up into folders, wondering which would annoy Howard more: landscapes or wildlife.

“The agenda said that today’s big event is canoeing. I usually don’t go to that, because he doesn’t put it on the list of degrading things he wants to know I’ve done.” Tony said, his mood suddenly turning bitter. He reached into his pocket and produced a typed list of activities that had been sent from Howard’s email address. He handed the paper to Steve and then focused on scarfing down the rest of his food, pointedly ignoring the paper that was apparently the bane of his very existence.

As lists go, it wasn’t exactly a hard one to follow. It was comprised of all the team building activities that the camp specialized in, alternating between group, social and solo events. There was a three-legged race activity scheduled later on in the week, potato sack races on the same day and then a few other activities designed to get engineers to think ‘outside the box’ as the email said; one was some kind of building exercise, where each engineer would be required to turn in a blueprint at the end of the three hour workshop. Most of the stuff seemed petty and trivial; honestly, who would believe that three-legged races had any value to an engineer’s work development aside from the fact that they could become a competitive blood sport? A list of other things, such as meals, ‘recreation’ and ‘thinking’ activities had been marked as optional. How Howard could see eating as an optional activity, Steve didn’t know. The upside was that there was only one required event scheduled a day, so there was plenty of time to look around and wander, just the two of them.

“Bird feeding looks interesting. Is that one today?” Steve asked, handing the paper back without commenting on the way Howard had typed ‘do these activities or your lazy ass is fired’ in bolded italicized text on the top under the subject heading; Tony’s name was the only one in the ‘to’ column, the only recipient of the cruelty.

“Yeah, I think so. It’s available all week. Those must be really fat birds.” Tony snorted.

“That still sounds interesting.”

“Interesting as in, ‘I want to gouge my eyes out its so boring’ or interesting as in ‘I’ve never fed flying vermin before, let’s go do that?’” Tony smiled.

“The second one. Although I don’t think birds out here count as flying vermin. They don’t have pigeons in the woods.” Steve said thoughtfully. “I think they’ll have sparrows.”

“That’s what you think. Maybe they import them. They’re probably massive flying monsters.” Tony grumbled.

“Look at you, Mr. Smarty-Pants engineer. You’re scared of birds, aren’t you?” Steve teased.

“I am not!” Tony growled, slurping his coffee.

“Sure. I completely believe you.” Steve said, taking a sip of his own coffee. It had gotten cold now, not that it mattered. Somehow Tony had picked up on exactly how he liked it, even though he so rarely drank it; it was sweet of him to have remembered.

“Alright – we’ll go feed the birds. It’ll be fun.” Tony growled.
As it turned out, Tony was afraid of birds.

A single bird he was not afraid of – a **flock**, like the massive wave of chickadees that arrived when they opened up the bag of bird feed they had been given, apparently made Tony want to run screaming for cover.

Steve didn’t mind the birds. They had **pizazz**.

They settled on Steve’s head, arms and shoulders perched happily, eating seeds out of his palms with reckless abandon, not caring that he could have easily grabbed one of them. There were a few different types of birds too, not just the plain black, beige and white chickadees. Colourful feathers were **everywhere**, and Steve was glad that his allergies were gone, because otherwise he would have been sneezing up a storm.

Tony was standing still beside Steve also covered with birds, although he wasn’t enjoying it as much as Steve was; he wasn’t quite panicking, but Steve was pretty sure he was going to have to step in and help him soon unless he wanted to go back to their cabin so that Tony could change his pants. The food in Tony’s hands had long since run out and he had been too terrified to move to get more; despite that, the birds remained perched on his arms, lined up like a little army of feathery warriors.

Steve found it hard not to stare at him. “You ok?”

He took a picture with his camera, his own birds moving up onto his shoulder so that they could get out of the way. Tony had been right. They were **really** fat. He was surprised that they could fly; they were like little furry lumps with wings. He was having trouble lifting his arms now that there were so many of them perched on him.

“Steve…” Tony wailed, frozen stiff, his eyes as wide as dinner plates. “I don’t like these birds Steve. They’re looking at me like I’m **food**.”

“They’re not going to eat you. They just like you.” Steve chuckled. He took another picture as one of the birds hopped up onto the top of Tony’s head and started nestling into his hair. Tony’s lower lip trembled.

“Steeeeeee….”

“It’s alright Tony. I’ve got you. Here,” Steve stuffed the phone in his pocket, having gotten some rather amusing photos. He bent down, dislodging some of his fluffy passengers; they flew off and found purchase on the available space on Tony’s arms to his dismay. He picked up the bird seed, sprinkling it on the ground in front of Tony.

The flock descended around their feet, leaving Tony bird-free; Steve shuffled closer to him, as to not disturb the birds. “See, it’s fine. They only want the bird seed, not your soul.”

“That’s what you’re saying now, but in ten minutes they’ll turn homicidal and try to murder someone, and then you’ll see. Hitchcock will be the one laughing though, because we’ll be dead and picked over.” Tony grunted.

Steve smiled, brushing the feathers off of Tony’s shoulders. To add insult to injury Tony had gotten pooped on by his fluffy passengers. Steve wiped at the mess with a Kleenex from his pocket stash, grateful that he had had the foresight to bring a pack with him. Tony flushed and looked away, not meeting his gaze. “It’s not my fault you’re some kind of Disney Princess. Birds **like** you.” Tony slowly backed away from both Steve and the birds, walking without watching. Thankfully all the birds were in front of them invested in their seed eating, or they would have had quite a few little
furry pancakes on their hands.

“I am not a Disney Princess. Honestly, where do you come up with these things?” Steve protested, following along daubing at Tony’s arm as Tony hid behind a sign post. The birds pecked at their seeds, and Tony stared at them guardedly, his brows furrowed in concentration.

“You are too.” Tony insisted.

“I am not.” Steve rolled his eyes. He took his phone out again and took a few close-up pictures of the birds, stuffing the nasty Kleenex into the garbage can beside the sign post. Some of the birds had brilliant colourings. They all had intricate patterns on their feathers, very different from the birds around New York, where birds came in Pigeon, Crow or Seagull variations. They were a hell of a lot rounder too. Luckily, the camera was able to zoom in close enough for him to get some decent pictures of all the different kinds of feathers. He hadn’t thought that a phone would have such a good camera, but it was a Stark phone after all. Tony had probably designed it himself.

“You’re the one the birds didn’t poop on. Thus, you are a Disney Princess.” Tony said, rolling his shoulders.

“Bird poop is supposed to be good luck, isn’t it?” Steve murmured, focusing in on a new bird that had flown in to mingle with the rest. This one was bright red, with little yellow feet. A cardinal, if Steve recalled correctly. It reminded Steve of the Iron Man, so he took a few pictures of it to draw later; amused by the way it kept cocking its head to the side, staring at him practically upside down.

“Sure – for the guy who isn’t pooped on.” Tony wiped at his shoulder. “Are you ready to go now? Because I’d like to keep my eyes and they keep looking at me like they want to rip them out and eat them.”

“Alright. Thank you for putting up with it. I really appreciate that.”

“It’s no big deal. I’m glad you liked them. I guess they are pretty nice, even if they are a bit freaky.” Tony smiled softly.

“What do you want to do next?” Steve put the camera away again and they made their way back towards camp; he tried not to laugh when some of the birds flew after them and landed on Tony’s shoulder again. Tony pretended like he didn’t notice, but Steve could tell that he had because of the way his hand wrapped around Steve’s wrist.

Canoeing proved to be quite the adventure. Steve had never been in a canoe before and he was a little afraid of it to be honest; it seemed like it might tip over if he stood up, but he pushed on, knowing that Tony seemed to want to try. He had never been afraid of water, even though he had so many nightmares of drowning, but this, this was terrifying. He knew how to swim and everything, but for some reason, the thought of the canoe flipping upside down on him made him shake in his boots.

He and Tony were in their own canoe, having been given one after passing the instructor’s tests; both of them were wearing life jackets so puffy they would look like neon coloured human golf balls if they ever ended up in the water. They had been forced to learn a few styles of paddling from the instructor before being allowed to leave the dock, and were ready to try things out for themselves.
They weren’t alone.

Several of the other engineers had opted to try and see what canoeing was like too. They were unhappily pairing up, although they didn’t seem to be able to manage it without a lot of shouting and name calling.

Steve watched an unfortunate pair spin around beside the dock for almost ten minutes before they figured out that they needed to actually pay attention to each other’s paddling; that and they needed to listen to the instructor, who was busy yelling out suggestions that they kept ignoring. Some people, Steve sighed to himself.

He and Tony had no problems navigating the lake, unlike the rest of them, even with Steve practically vibrating from fear in his seat. Tony was naturally good at paddling, and seemed at peace with himself as they glided slowly through the water, slipping further and further away from the dock; Steve couldn’t do as much work as Tony could, and soon found himself tiring, his arms aching in a pleasant way. He sat to the back of the canoe, acting as the rudder while Tony paddled away at the front, cursing his weak arms even while shooting Tony a nervous smile.

“This is great!” Steve said, wiping sweat from his forehead. And it was too, it was just a bit much. He took a deep breath in through his nose and let it out through his mouth, trying to calm himself down. He was with Tony – it was fine. They weren’t going to flip over and drown. It was fine.

“Yes.” Tony said from the front, still almost completely focused on paddling.

“You’ve really never done this before?”

“I tried it once the first year he started to hold the retreats and didn’t like it. The moron they paired me up with had no idea how to steer. It took me nearly twenty minutes to explain to the guy that we couldn’t keep paddling in opposite directions if we wanted to get anywhere before we died of old age. I jumped out of the canoe and swam back to shore after that. I’m surprised that he’s not still out here actually – he works in R&D as a tester now.” Tony said, pulling his paddle in. He rested it across his lap and then turned to face Steve; he was grinning again, eyes twinkling in delight.

“He actually still works here? I thought this place was supposed to be about team building and… well… learning.”

“It is. I guess the other guys just learned more than him, because half of them have been promoted and he’s still a lowly tester.” Tony shrugged.

They were floating halfway out in the middle of the lake now, bobbing along in the greenish water, completely alone; a duck swam by paddling along with its little orange feet. The sound of the water bobbing and sucking against the canoe was impressively loud, the bird calls and other animal noises a close second. Steve pulled his phone out and took some more pictures, trying to capture the grin on Tony’s face while pretending to focus on the background instead; he pushed his fear away, seeing only Tony’s face. Steve love that grin. Tony didn’t seem to know just how gorgeous it was.

“We should get you a real camera if you’re this interested in photography.” Tony commented wryly, cracking his back; the canoe rocked and Steve swallowed hard, biting his lower lip to keep from squealing in fear.

“It’s really beautiful out here.” Steve gritted out.

“I guess. No buildings for miles and miles – and not a single power pole. I kind of feel lost out here, like I could wander off and never find my way back.” Tony admitted, fiddling with a strap on his life
jacket.

“You’re not going to get lost Tony.” Steve said gravely.

“And how do you know that exactly?”

“I’m with you. And I have a map.” Steve tried to smirk.

“Ha ha. Very funny. Let’s see your paper map save you when we’re out in the middle of nowhere with no compass and no GPS.” Tony smirked back.

“We’re not going that far from camp. You’ll die without your coffee fix. I know you.” Steve teased.

“Fine – you win for now Rogers. You win for now.”

“Good. I like winning.”

“I’m sure you do.” Tony raised a hand to his forehead, scanning the horizon; he gestured to the cliffs in the distance, squinting to avoid blinding himself from the glare rising off the water. “I wonder if you can walk up there…” He said.

“The map says that’s where the Tea House is.” Steve said, tucking his phone away, thankful that the thing was waterproof. He had studied that map so many times now; every last pixel was imprinted on his brain. He closed his eyes, clutching the paddle tightly against his body, trying to ignore the fact that his stomach was now trying to take up residence in his mouth.

“You ok?” Tony wiggled in his seat, prodding Steve in the knee with his paddle.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re turning green Steve. You’re not fine.” Tony huffed. “We can go back you know.”

“It’s nice out here.” Steve insisted, opening his eyes. He took one look at the water and felt all the blood rushing out of his face; the grasses under the surface looked like they were reaching up for him, swaying back and forth. He clapped a hand over his mouth, forcing himself not to throw up. It was fine. He was fine. He didn’t have to throw up. It was fine.

The boat started to turn. Steve retched, holding onto the paddle.

“Just hold on, alright? I’m going to turn us around and we’re going back.”

“Ok.” Steve managed.

“Shit Steve, you should have said something.” Tony maneuvered the canoe around effortlessly, sending them back in the right direction. Steve jammed his paddle back into the water, trying to keep up.

“It’s not usually this bad.” Steve admitted. “And you put up with the birds, so it didn’t seem fair to say no without trying it.”

“You get seasick or something?”

“No. I’m afraid of drowning.”

Tony’s arms were a blur, sweat trickling down the back of his neck as he worked to pull them closer to shore with each stroke. Steve watched that bead of sweat, mesmerized, almost losing his paddle.
He snagged it in time to keep it from vanishing into a watery grave.

They sat together on the dock, side by side with their feet dangling over the edge. Steve wrapped his arms around his middle, shivering despite the warm weather. He had ruined the trip; he should have been better at holding the nausea back. It wasn’t like he hadn’t done this before.

“So you almost drowned as a kid?” Tony asked, dipping his bare toes in the water. Their shoes and socks sat on land behind them, far enough away to keep from being knocked off by someone’s misstep.

“It’s a nightmare I have. I drown in freezing water.” Steve said, staring at the reeds again, hating them for the way they seemed to wave up at him in delight. “I can swim, but I just… there’s something about deep water that does it.”

“We can try swimming tomorrow if you want.” Tony stretched out, wrapping an arm around Steve’s shoulder. “I mean, if you’re not too freaked out.”

“Ok. I’d like to try at least. I hate being so afraid of deep water.” Steve sighed, leaning closer, burrowing his face into Tony’s side. “It’s stupid. I didn’t even drown – it was all a dream.”

“I don’t blame you. I almost drowned in the bathtub when I was five. He shoved me into the pool when I was six so that I’d get over it. I think my mother almost had a heart attack.” Tony rested his chin on Steve’s head. “We can take care of it, alright?”

“Alright.” Steve said softly, letting his toes drag through the water. A reed brushed against his big toe and he tried not to cringe as he kicked it free.

The next morning found them crammed into the Crabgrass Activity Hall just after breakfast; Steve had been plagued with nightmares the night before. He was barely functional, sitting a table away while the engineers and Tony listened to their instructions, preparing to work. They seemed fine with it, even if they did look a tad disgruntled with having to be doing something like this so early in the morning.

The advisor’s assistant had set up a table so that Steve had something to amuse himself with. Some chunks of wood and a carving knife waited on the table for him; whittling was something Steve had done as a child, although he didn’t have that much experience with it. He had taken a course in college in sculpting once, but that had been with clay, not wood. It seemed simple enough though, even with his brain addled as it was. He picked up the first block and rolled it around in his hands, trying to decide what he wanted to make as the camp advisor, a wiry looking man named Cary started a stop watch; the engineers spread out, hording their papers protectively, shooting each other dirty looks as they started scribbling out new designs frantically trying to be the first one to hand their work in.

Steve started to carve with the knife, using smooth careful cuts to keep from slicing up his hand; he remembered Bucky cutting himself up by accident like this, and vowed to keep his work blood free. A tulip slowly formed from the block, the petals curling outwards; he thinned out the stem, giving it a few leaves for balance. He turned it over in his hands, smoothing away any jagged spot he noticed;
when he looked up, finally satisfied, he saw that Tony was staring at him from a few tables away. He gave Tony a wave, which Tony returned, and then set the tulip down, picking up another chunk of wood. They had some paint over in the corner that looked decent. He might try his hand at it later if he had enough time.

The clock ticked away as Steve worked, carving a handlebar moustache out of the next chunk of acceptable balsa scrounged from the whittling pile; most people using these scraps apparently made themselves wooden spears, so all the good sized blocks of wood were still there, waiting to be used. He held the moustache up under his nose when he was finished and could hear Tony laughing, smirkirng to himself. Someone shushed Tony, and he fell silent with a grumbled curse.

Steve smoothed out the moustache with a piece of sandpaper, polishing it like it was an egg. It felt lovely against his hand, not a splinter to be found when he was done.

“Hey,”

Steve looked up. Tony had crept over, settling at Steve’s table on the opposite side with his papers set out in front of him in an arc. His pencil was worn down to a nub, the pink block eraser beside him untouched.

“Can you make me something?” Tony whispered, not taking his eyes off of his papers as he mindlessly scribbled math all over the page. It looked like he was writing in some alien dialect, equations flowing with each strike of graphite to page; this level of concentration was so rare with Tony these days, Steve was almost afraid to speak lest he break it.

“Sure. What would you like?” Steve picked up another piece of balsa, sizing it up.

“I don’t know. You pick.” Tony murmured, setting the paper he had been working on aside. He unstuck another from the pad he was working off and started sketching shapes, marking sizes and measurements in the side with tiny, almost impossible to read script.

Hm. Steve tapped the wood with a finger. What could he make? The only thing Tony had really shown interest in was food and Captain America. He supposed he could make Tony a replica of the shield; that would be easy enough to make. He marked the wood with his pencil drawing lines on the sides, picking up his knife when he was satisfied that he had the dimensions down right. Wood shavings dropped around his hands, his pant legs catching whatever missed the edge of the table. He rounded the front of the block and then worked on the star in the middle, making each circle around it slightly lower than the last; he knew his shield like the back of his hand. It wasn’t hard to duplicate.

He ran his finger over the outer edge of the wooden shield and winced, getting his first sliver of the day; it had been an impressive record, but as with most things, it had to come to an end. He set the knife down and put his finger in his mouth, gripping the tiny fragment of wood with his teeth.

“You alright?” Tony looked up from his paper, concern written across his face. “You want a hand with that?”

“It’s ok.” Steve said, managing to yank the sliver out after a fruitless nip at his thumb drew blood. It was a small sliver, but boy could it cause trouble. The only thing worse was a paper cut.

“You’re bleeding.” Tony pushed his papers away and rounded the table, taking Steve’s hand in his, peering at the spot of red on Steve’s skin. He thumbed across Steve’s pink and nibbled thumb, frowning at the injury.

“I’ve got a Kleenex. It’s alright.” Steve said, fishing around in his jacket pocket. He liberated a clean square and held it against his thumb, not wanting to taint the beige balsa with his blood. He could
always use paint to cover it up, but blood was damned hard to get out of wood. “You don’t need to waste your time.”

“It’s not a waste.” Tony growled, taking the Kleenex away from Steve. He pressed it against the wound, lifting it up to see a tiny round circle where the injury was; it had faded to nothing, a scratch unworthy of this much attention. “I’m done anyways.” He waved offhandedly at the papers. “I’m just working on my own stuff now.”

“Oh?”

“Shhh!” Someone hissed from across the room.

Steve sheepishly lowered his head, leaning closer to Tony. “What are you working on?”

Tony separated the pile of papers and pushed one half towards Steve, setting the others upside down for the instructor to collect. The three papers were thin, drawn on slips of slightly opaque tracing paper. He layered them one on top of the other; Steve gasped.

This was the Iron Man suit!

“That’s really cool!” It took everything Steve had not to comment further, every beautiful line of Iron Man calling out to him; he wanted to ask Tony about the specs, but kept silent, noting the strange way the room had gotten too quiet.

“I know, right? He’s not getting his hands on this one, that’s for sure.” Tony said, rolling his pencil back towards him. There was a glimmer in his eyes, something sweet and frantic. He started working again, muttering out of the side of his mouth, eyes moving between the paper and rest of the room every once in a while. “It’s going to be beautiful when it’s done. I can just feel it.” The other engineers were doing the same thing, popping their heads up and down almost systematically, like they had been programmed to do it. Steve wondered if they knew they were doing it, or if it was just something they did now that they had been working at Stark International for years. They certainly seemed pleased with themselves, each one eyeing their competition with smug, self-satisfied smirk.

Steve picked up the wooden shield again, nit-picking at the star in the centre, trying to keep from laughing at them. “What are you going to call it?” He started to level out the star point, going for the sandpaper again to get rid of the rough edges separating the layers; the shield was the size of his palm, as thick as his thumb and smoother than silk by the time he was finished with it.

Tony looked up from his papers, blinking at him. “What?”

“What are you going to call it?” Steve repeated, setting the shield down to pick up another piece of wood; one glance at the clock told him that they had an hour and half left to go, plenty of time for more carving.

“Oh. I uh… I don’t know. I’ll think of something.” Tony shrugged.

After a lunch of spinach, cheese and ham omelets, Steve and Tony headed out to the canoe dock. The rest of the engineers had retreated to their cabins, some lurking by the gate to the Hot Spring Caves, trying to get a look at each other in their swimming trunks, seeming more like a pack of prepubescent boys staring at girls in bikini’s for the first time than grown men.
Steve stood on the end of the dock eyeing the water suspiciously, not quite trusting it. It wasn’t too deep. Tony was already floating a few feet away, swimming in circles on his back. Steve tugged at his swimming trunks, hiking them higher up his hips. They had seemed tighter in the store, and now that he was wearing them, it felt like they were going to fly off. Tony’s red trunks were so bright, they probably could have been seen from space; Steve tried to hide a distinctly jealous pout, wishing that he had a body as elegant Tony’s. He had to keep staring at the water to keep from outright staring, contenting himself with seeing only the man’s reflection which was a bit blurry and unsatisfying.

“You coming in, or you just going to stay up there all day?” Tony called out, dog paddling closer. He dunked himself, water dripping down his face, his hair floating around his ears. “The water’s fine.”

“I’m sure it is.” Steve conceded, still eyeing it with concern. The reeds around the dock weren’t long, but they were still there, waving up at him. He wished that someone had gone in there and mowed them down. Surely they had to be some kind of hazard. Didn’t motor boat engines get stuck on that kind of thing?

“Come on. Jump!” Tony grumbled, swimming closer.

Steve wavered, biting his lower lip. The water wasn’t all that deep, he told himself; he would be fine. It was just a little dip, nothing to write home about. He lowered himself, kneeling, and then let his leg hang over the edge, just skimming the water.

“Slowpoke!” Tony grinned playfully, staring up at Steve. Unfortunately, Steve took a little too long to figure out just what that look meant.

Tony grabbed Steve’s ankle and pulled; Steve was struck with a sudden and distinct wave of vertigo, falling directly into the water without so much as a moment to prepare himself. He heard the splash and then there was nothing but water, everywhere, green and swirling. The impact was worse than he had expected. Sure, the water was warm and all, but it went up his nose, in his eyes and by the time he managed to get back to himself his feet were touching the bottom and he was a good foot and a half under water. The reeds wrapped around his ankle as they swayed and he panicked, kicking at them. He opened his mouth to call out for help and then realized what he had done. Bubbles shot up to the surface and he was choking – oh god he was choking and –

Tony’s hand wrapped around his arm, and suddenly he was at the surface again, gasping and sputtering for air; he must not have been under for long, because his lungs weren’t quite burning, the water dribbling from his nose and mouth as he coughed.

“Shit Steve – I’m so sorry.” Tony hugged Steve against him, an arm wrapped firmly around Steve’s middle, his hand perched just above the loose waist of Steve’s trunks. He settled Steve’s head against his shoulder, using his free arm to paddle while balancing on his tip toes in the water. “You’re ok. You’re ok. It’s fine.” Tony murmured, pressing his cheek against Steve’s, his voice almost hysterical. Steve coughed into Tony’s neck, holding on for dear life.

“Why…” Steve managed, squeezing his eyes shut.

“I didn’t think you’d just fall like that – I’m so sorry. I just wanted to give you a nudge and then you just fell and Jesus – I’m so sorry!”

Steve took a steadying breath, feeling the water lapping at his shoulders and chin. The adrenaline coursing through his veins had died down, his body trembling from the change in temperature. This was… well it wasn’t bad. He would have preferred to make that jump on his own, but at least it was
out of the way now. And well, anything that got him pressed up against Tony like this was good. Very good. So good, he was pretty sure he was going to have to pull away soon or else Tony was going to notice just how good Steve thought it was. “I think I need water wings.” He mumbled, wiggling his toes to try and see how far away he was from the lakebed. It wasn’t too far actually. He skimmed the mud with his toes, letting his arms drop free with a reluctance he was getting far too used to. He had been good at swimming once. Mind you, that had been in his dreams, and he had been more used to swimming pools than lakes even then.

Tony burst into laughter, squeezing Steve against him so tight, Steve saw stars.

“It’s not that funny.” Steve complained, letting himself be pulled back into the embrace, enjoying the way his belly was rubbing up against Tony’s. Another day another thing to be tormented with he mused, shaking his hair out of his face.

“It’s not the water wings I’m laughing at.” Tony said.

He held up Steve’s swimming trunks, which were definitely no longer on Steve. Steve went beet red and promptly tried to drown himself.

Steve yawned and rolled over, finding himself wedged under Tony’s chest. He hadn’t thought that swimming would tire him out so much, but he had been dead on his feet once they finished; Tony had been kind enough to pick him up and heft him back to the dining hall, where they had eaten a quick dinner. He had carried Steve back to the cabin with Steve’s head lolling on his shoulders.

It was quiet out here in the forest. Steve could hear birds chirping, but there was no other sound except for the occasional pitter-patter of feet over gravel. He snuggled into Tony’s warmth, taking solace in the way Tony was snoring into his ear. There was plenty of time today to go wandering, and with a full night’s sleep under his belt, Steve was sure he could do anything. Tony snuffled against Steve’s cheek, his beard leaving delightful tingles across Steve’s skin as he moved, wet lips trailing afterwards in a not quite kiss.

“Steve?”

Tony blinked awake, reaching up to rub the drool off his face. He looked sheepish when he noticed the red marks on Steve’s skin, scrubbing his hand over his beard as if to punish it for its wayward wandering.

“What time is it?” Tony groaned, sitting up.

Steve mourned the loss of his warmth, and sat up as well peering at Tony’s wrist watch in the dim morning light. “It says nine.”

“Oh good! Breakfast time.” Tony clambered out of bed, stretching as he went. The smooth lines of his body were tantalizingly close, the way his muscles moved made Steve’s mouth water; he cleared his throat and looked away, not trusting himself.

They dressed in sleepy silence, pulling on clothing one piece at a time because they couldn’t seem to manage it any faster than that. Sluggish and drowsy, they made their way to the dining hall and breakfasted on scrambled eggs and overly buttered toast, sipping tea and coffee until their brains
turned back on. It was a slow process, each sip sending them further and further into consciousness.

“So, my next public flogging isn’t until six p.m. What do you want to do today?” Tony asked after his second cup of coffee. Creamer packaging littered the table in front of him; he had been drinking it straight out of the plastic cups, his coffee sweet and black as always.

“We could try hiking to that Tea House place up on the cliff. It looks really neat – might get some really great pictures from up there if the view’s as good as they say it is.” Steve nibbled a piece of toast as he tried to subtly watch the bob of Tony’s throat each time he swallowed.

“God, you’re like a mouse.” Tony griped, snagging a piece of Steve’s nibbled slice, popping it in his mouth. “Hiking? You really want to go hiking – with me? You have so much hope in this world. Really, you do.”

Steve kicked Tony’s shin lightly under the table, rolling his eyes. “It’s a marked trail, and there’s a gravel road that goes right up to the top so they can get cleaning trucks up there in the winter.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Someone did their research.”

“I asked Candy about it. She seemed to think it was a great idea. She said we should stop in and grab some supplies before we go. She was supposed to drop some stuff off earlier this week, but time got away from her.” Steve yawned.

“Ooh, Candy. Sounds like someone found someone tasty to talk to. And of course, sweet little Stevie offered to take the stuff up for her.” Tony smirked.

Steve flushed, setting his cup down. “I did not! I wanted to go anyways and it seemed like a waste of a trip for her if all she was going to do was come right back down here after. She said they drive their Kubota up there, and gas is expensive these days, so I figured I’d lend them a hand. If you don’t want to go, I’m not going to drag you.”

“Hey now! Don’t get your knickers in a twist. I want to go!” Tony grabbed another creamer and tore the lid off it, swallowing the contents down. “I was just – never mind. When did you want to go? Now?”

“I don’t have knickers and yes. Now would be nice. It’s a bit of a hike, even if it is on a gravel road. She said that it takes an hour and a half to get up there.” Steve collected up the debris on the table, sweeping it onto the plastic tray they had brought breakfast on. “And thank you. I’m sorry if I was a bit grumpy.” Steve hung his head, scooping their plates onto the tray.

“Don’t be sorry.” Tony said, standing up. He took the tray from Steve and walked it to the garbage can. “I’m the one who was whining.”

“You weren’t whining. You were teasing.”

“And you were grumpy.” Tony said, prodding Steve in the shoulder. “Grumpy Steve.”

Steve scowled at him.

They collected their supplies from Candy; she was very enthusiastic about not having to go up there by herself, giving them two backpacks filled with tea other assorted boxed goods to carry up. The
bags weren’t too heavy. Steve managed to carry one all by himself, glad that Tony hadn’t ended up as a pack mule. It had been him who had offered to take the stuff up in the first place; he would have felt pretty crappy if Tony had been doing all the work.

The walk was breathtaking. The trees seemed to glow in the sunlight, golden rays peeking through the thin green leaves as they trudged up the gravel road; the way was well maintained, signs posted every few feet so there was little chance of getting lost. Steve had taken his map with them just in case, but he doubted that he was going to need it. The camp had even set up information boards on the trail, which of course meant that Steve had to stop and read them. It would have been rude not to.

Tony didn’t seem to mind the pit stops, joining in to read the snippets of what daily life had been for the Burkharts back when they had first started settling in the area. They had built their house, a Victorian style manor, with their own ingenuity and planning, raising seven children there. Supplies had been harder to get, so they had gone into town every few weeks to bring back a few months’ worth of food at a time, wasting nothing. They had owned horses and other farm animals, which had grazed in the lower lands only to be walked back up to the cliff at night. It wasn’t the ideal location that Tom Burkhart had wanted, but it had been cheap property, large enough to support a growing family.

The building itself hadn’t aged much; it had gotten a few new coats of paint, and some of the floorboards had been replaced, but all in all it was the same majestic darling it had always been in all the black and white pictures they had seen. Steve took out his phone and snapped a picture, marveling at the way the place seemed to light up the closer they got, like it was expecting them. They looked around, spotting two benches; someone had fenced off the edge for safety’s sake, but it was all there, a spectacular viewpoint over sparkling green water, the entire camp framed by trees and blue sky.

Tony whistled, setting his pack down on the ground. He leaned against the railing, raising a hand to shield his eyes from the sun. “Well damn. I guess they were right. I don’t know why I never bothered to come up here. Just look at this place!”

Steve set his bag down too, snapping a photo of Tony leaning against the fence. The mountains surrounding them were the perfect backdrop, Tony framed intimately in the foreground with his hair slicked against his forehead from sweat, a grin on his face that for once matched his eyes. Tony turned, laughing at Steve’s camera.

“You seriously need a new camera. You’re going to wear that phone out.” Tony teased, posing in front of the fence with his hands on his hips, trying to appear rugged. Steve snapped photo after photo laughing.

“It’s hard not to take pictures when you have such a nice subject.” Steve grinned, taking one more; Tony stuck his tongue out and then swatted away a bunch of flies that decided to try and zoom into the side of his head.

“Now I remember why I didn’t come up here.” Tony spat out a bug, cringing and grabbing the bag at his feet. “The flies – so many flies.”

They lurched together to the porch, batting flies away and threw open the door; it wasn’t locked, left that way in case someone needed a place to sleep in an emergency. The air inside was musty from disuse, and a thin layer of dust was spread out over the floor. Clearly, it had been more than a few weeks since someone had been in here last. No wonder Candy had been so excited.

They closed the door behind them to keep out the flies and were bathed in darkness; Steve pulled open the mouldy but still functional curtains, letting the light in and together they shuffled towards
the kitchen, bags in hand. “I guess they haven’t aired this place out in a while.”

The kitchen was an old design, built when there wasn’t running electricity or water around. This was one of the most used places in the house, at least according to the notes left pinned to the walls; there were instructions and handy tips stuck to a corkboard above a wooden sink, listing all the places to get water and the procedures for food storage so that the mice didn’t get into everything. The stove was an older model wood stove, cast iron and black as night; it was boxy, with a spout vanishing into the wall and a flat top for heating things up. City-dwellers might have a hard time cooking on it. Even Steve was a little wary of it. He had never used one like this before, even in his dreams.

“Want to make some tea?” Steve asked, poking at a laminated card sitting on the counter beside the wood stove; it had instructions for tea brewing written on it, as if someone had once had a problem working a tea bag and had asked for step by step instructions.

“Sounds like a good idea. This is a Tea House, right? May as well have a cup or two.” Tony said.

He set his bag down on the table and went about searching for wood to light it, opening the fuel box to start tinkering. “This thing is a beauty.” Tony ran his hands along the cast iron, fingers coming up black with soot. “Someone needs to scrub the old girl a bit though. She’s a wee bit dirty.”

“I wonder how old it is…” Steve murmured, emptying their packs. He set about putting everything away in the air tight boxes he found on the counter, which held a handful of the previous month’s supplies. He set the oldest stuff on the top; the newest nestled down at the bottom.

“Probably 1920’s. They had to upgrade from an older model it says.” Tony lifted up a tag that was hanging off the door handle. “Pretty good quality if it’s still working after all these years.” He had a fire going by the time Steve turned around again, and the kettle was sitting on the top, bubbling away.

“Where’d you find the water?” Steve asked, peering into the kettle. Tony fetched two mugs from a sealed plastic box, setting them on the table. “They keep bottled water up here because the creek’s way the hell down the hill.” Tony held up another tag, clearly amused. “I have to say, I’m glad they did, because I do not want to go up and down that bastard of a hill carrying a pail of water. The flies would eat me alive.”

Something thumped at the front door so loud, the pair of them nearly bolted clean out the kitchen door. Steve and Tony jumped, whirling around; they looked at the wood stove, which crackled pleasantly. Tense, Steve peeked into the hallway.

Nothing.

“Hello?” Steve called out. The front door was closed, their footprints the only ones littering the dusty hall. He peered up the stairs, unable to make much out in the darkness.

There were footsteps on the stairs. One set, clear as day, made by bare feet.

Steve froze, his mouth suddenly going dry.

“Tony?”

Tony slunk towards Steve, following his gaze. “Is that… what I think it is?”

Steve gulped. “I think someone’s upstairs.”

“Well fuck that.” Tony said, grabbing Steve by the arm. “We’re not going up there.”
“But someone could be hurt!” Steve protested, struggling free. He started up the stairs mindful of the wooden steps even though they seemed stable; he didn’t want to end up in the basement after all, and had no urge to pick splinters out of his legs.

“You’re crazy!” Tony hissed, scrambling up the stairs after him, stepping in the same spaces Steve had as if that meant they were safer than the others. “It could be some crazy hobo – they could have a shotgun. Oh god. Hobo with a shotgun. Why did I watch that movie? Why?”

“It’s not a hobo.” Steve grumbled, reaching the landing. He looked left to right, clearing the room one inch at a time, his military training slipping back in place.

Nothing. No sound, only footsteps leading off towards a room at the end of the hall. Should he go forwards? The door didn’t look like it had been opened, the dust unmoved aside from those eerie prints vanishing under the door. This had to be some elaborate prank.

“What are you doing?” Tony yelped as Steve started towards the door. “You’re crazy! Why are you – oh Jesus, Steve – Wait.” He scooted down the hall, grabbing Steve by the shoulders, muscling him out of the way as he reached for the doorknob. “You don’t have any fear at all, do you?”

“It’s just a door.”

“Yeah, a creepy fucking door.” Tony pulled it open; dust was floating in the air, the entire room swimming with the stuff. Steve sneezed, holding his arm up to protect his eyes.

“Nothing.” Tony growled, stomping into the room. “This is stupid. One dumb bang and we came rushing up here for nothing.” He grabbed the window and forced it open, trying to clear the air.

Only it didn’t clear.

The dust remained, swimming in circles, whirling around in the centre of the room. Tony froze against the windowsill, up on his toes like he might dive out the window if he thought about it too long. “Uh, Steve…”

Steve waved at the dust, trying to push it back, but it wasn’t moving an inch; he could have sworn it felt solid, like he was trying to push is fingers through satin. “Tony!”

The light from the window drained away, black slipping in front of the sun; Steve heard Tony screaming. He was pretty sure he was screaming too.

A hand touched his face. He tried to move away, but his feet seemed to be glued to the floor, his body petrified. It felt like fingers were running over his lower lip, something stroking the side of his face. He blinked. A woman was standing in front of him, and through her translucent body he could see Tony standing against the window; she was naked except for a flimsy shawl around her shoulders, her body made up of dust particles and stolen light.

She smiled at him, her eyes old, her gaze soft. She opened her mouth and he made out one word. Crystal.

Pain shot up his arm. He gasped, stumbling backwards, the spell broken.

Tony heaved Steve over his shoulder, flying out of the room; Steve watched the woman vanish as the dust finally settled, bobbing up and down in Tony’s grasp as they crashed their way down the stairs with a thunderous roar. Tony threw open the front door, dived towards the bench and let Steve go, gasping for breath, dust stuck in the sweat clinging to his face.
“Holy shit!” Tony wheezed, dropping to his knees. Steve wobbled, feeling light headed. Pain shot up his arm again and he grabbed at his right hand, eyes wide and watering. There was a piece of wood in his palm, a carved wooden crystal as long as his pinkie embedded in his flesh, blood pooling around it. He whimpered and blacked out.

Steve blinked awake when something wet hit him in the forehead. He became aware of his surroundings slowly, the light creeping back into his vision as the darkness fled. Tony’s face was above his, his lips drawn together into a tight line; he had a washcloth in his hand and was daubing it at Steve’s cheeks.

“Steve?”

Steve was lying on the bench, Tony’s jacket folded up under his head. He groaned, sitting up, Tony’s hand holding him steady as he struggled upright. The sun was still high in the sky, the blue so overwhelming he thought for a second that he might pass out all over again. When he looked down at his hand, he saw that it was fine, a pinprick in the centre of his palm the only thing remaining of the accident. “What happened?”

“You were holding this.” Tony said, sitting down beside him on the bench. He held out the wooden crystal, one that Steve didn’t remember making the day before. The balsa was stained red on one side, perfectly intact despite it having been pulled out of his hand. “What the hell is this?” Steve took the carving and flipped it over, running his fingers over the edges. It was smooth, the sides all polished. He must have been holding it tightly in his hand for it to have become embedded.

The woman!

Steve turned to gawk up at the house, an open window the only thing showing that they had even been inside.

“You were out for almost half an hour. I was going to carry you down the hill, but then your hand started healing and I remembered that the stove is on inside.” Tony said, sounding a little guilty. He scowled at the door. “Fuck, now we have to go back inside.”

“Did you… did you see her?” Steve asked, biting his lower lip. He peered up at the window again, hoping that he wouldn’t see her face again; her dead eyes etched into his memory.

“Her?”

Tony cupped Steve’s face in his hand, turning his head from side to side looking for bruises or bumps. When he was satisfied he let Steve go, staring up at the open window. “I didn’t see anybody up there. All I saw was dust and then it all went dark and… I panicked. I grabbed you and ran like hell.” He admitted, hands clasped in his lap. “This is stupid. There’s no such thing as ghosts. It was probably just some dumb animal living in the bedding. You saw the state of that place. It’s not like someone comes up here with a cleaning service at the end of the day.”

“Sure.” Steve mumbled, rubbing his finger over his palm. The not-ghost had looked familiar, a face from somewhere old and lost. He couldn’t place her no matter how hard he wracked his brains for information. She was dead though. He knew that much. She had felt dead. He shuddered.

“I’m going to go get our bags and the tea. Stay here, alright?” Tony stood up, dusting off his pants.

“I can help.” Steve protested, standing.
Tony put a hand on his shoulder, pushing him back down. “Sit. I’ll be back fast, alright? Just let me do this. I can do it.”

“I.... Alright.”

With Tony gone, the bench felt cold, the air even colder; he swallowed a lump in his throat and arranged himself on the bench so that he could watch the house, afraid that something might happen if he didn’t keep his eyes on it. If Tony didn’t come back in a few minutes, he would go in after him even if he did feel a little like he might fall on his face. He leaned forwards, knees bumping the back of the bench and waited.

The window upstairs flashed red. Steve saw Tony shutting it, and then he was gone again.

Steve waited, impatience clawing at him the entire time.

Tony came out carrying both empty bags over his shoulder; the teacups held in his other hand stacked one on top of the other, filled with steaming hot tea. He handed one to Steve and arranged their things on the floor, eyes darting from the house to the bench.

“How did it go?” Steve asked, blowing on his tea, thankful for the distraction; he was more grateful for the way the impatience had left him.

“There’s nothing there. I mean, I know we saw footprints and all, but it’s just… empty. I didn’t see anything else, and I checked every room to be sure there wasn’t really some hobo squatting up there, because let’s face it, that’s a mood killer for anyone. But there was sweet bugger all there. I saw some pretty impressive rat crap, and that was it.” Tony sighed, shaking his head. “It’s stupid. I guess we both panicked over nothing.”

“I guess.” Steve said softly, not believing a word of it.

That had been real. Nothing was going to tell him otherwise, not even Tony.

“You’re got dust on your face.” Tony fretted, wiping at Steve’s face with his sleeve. “I thought I got all of it.” He scowled, picking up the washcloth, which he had left sitting on the bench and scrubbed at Steve’s cheek again. “Looks like you rubbed at it.”

Steve couldn’t help the shiver of recognition, the feeling of those oh-so-cold hands on his face crawling back into his mind. He took a sip of his tea and prayed that her face wouldn’t chase him back to camp, praying that he wasn’t going crazy.

Steve whittled again while Tony and the other engineers argued amongst themselves about who had the best blueprints; they were trying to pick something simple to build out of scraps, making prototypes as light weight as possible in an attempt to score points. Tony had muttered something about the points giving them promotions back at work before they started, drawn in only because he had to be there. Candy was sitting beside Steve, making some kind of macramé pouch, completely absorbed in her work.

The woman from the Tea House’s face still hadn’t faded in Steve’s mind; in fact, it seemed to be getting stronger. The knife slipped and he cut himself, cursing softly. Candy looked up, startled. “Oh, are you alright? Here, let me get you a band aid.” She pulled a first aid kit out from under the table and grabbed a box of Hello Kitty band aids, fishing one out with her long slender fingers. “I hope
you don’t mind.” She chuckled, gesturing to the band aid. “I think the last time we bought band aids was in the summer, and I guess we left a few of the more colourful ones.”

“A band aid is a band aid. I don’t mind.” Steve shrugged. She took his hand and stuck the band aid to his finger, rubbing it down so that it stuck in place, gentle like she would be if he were a child.

“So how was the Tea House yesterday?” She asked, letting him have his hand back. She rested her chin on her palms, elbows on the table and batted her eyelashes at him, smiling coyly. “Did you and your friend have a good time?”

“Uh, it was alright, although we did have a bit of a scare.” Steve blushed, picking his knife up again. The balsa he had been carving was shaped like a crystal; he hadn’t planned it to end up like this. It was strange to see, a sharp little wedge of wood, the same length and width as the one Tony had pulled out of his hand the day before.

“Oh? What happened?” Candy asked, seeming concerned.

“We saw something. Well, I saw something. The family that lived there…” Steve set the carving down, staring intently at it. “Did something happen to them?”

“What?” Candy snorted loudly, covering her mouth. “Oh god, I’m sorry. No. Nothing happened to them. They were really nice – a great family. All of them are buried off the site, and no one’s ever seen anything there aside from the occasional mouse. The Tea House is usually a romantic getaway. It’s always booked for Valentine’s Day. Couples go up there to get some time to themselves without their families wandering in and disturbing them. I’ve been a few times with my boyfriend. It’s comfy.”

“Couples?” Steve mumbled, his face bright pink again. “Whaddya mean couples?”

“Couples – you know. Boyfriend and girlfriend types. Boyfriend and boyfriend types even.” Candy said, playing with the wood shavings under her hand; she curled a strand around her finger like a ring, looking at it in amusement when it fit perfectly.

“Oh.” Steve said. The word felt like a stone in his mouth, tumbling around against his teeth. She thought that he and Tony were a couple? That was interesting. “We’re not together.”

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow. “The guy looks like he would be willing to go bring you the moon. Last year he almost tried to kill someone with a marshmallow and now he looks… well he looks happy.”

Steve set the knife down, pushing the wooden crystal away. “Well, I wouldn’t mind, but I don’t think he’s that interested. We haven’t really talked about it, and I’d really uh… can you not say anything to him about it?”

“Ah I see. You think he’s going to freak out.” She said all knowingly. “He’s a panic-pants?”

“I wouldn’t exactly say that,” Steve sighed. “I think it would just be better to let things play out on their own. I don’t want him to feel pressured.”

“You’re a patient guy, you know that? I think I’d be tearing out my hair by now.” Candy laughed.

She had no idea how right she was. Steve rested his arms on the table and sighed, staring at Tony while he worked with his fellow engineers. He must have looked lovelorn, because Candy was soon shooting him sympathetic looks.
“You know,” She said, “you can always take him out to the Hot Springs. People love that place. Another romantic getaway if you know what I mean. We can get some candles going, some dinner even. I can arrange something if you’d like – privacy maybe?”

“Steve!”

Tony jogged over, grinning that Cheshire cat grin, the one he always used when he had been around ‘stupid people’ for too long. His hair was curling around his ears in dark tufts that looked like they would be fun to play with. “We’re done here. Want to hit the Hot Springs? I could use a little relaxation right about now.”

Candy winked at Steve and got up, walking away. Steve grins back. “Sure.”

Steve had never been to an actual Hot Spring before, but he had seen documentaries, so he figured that he knew the gist of it; Hot Springs in Caves, however, were a completely different matter. The water was hot, steam building up around them as they waded their way through the cave to find a nice space on the smooth stone floor to sit and relax. There were a few spots outside in the wading pool part of the Springs, but they had opted for going inside, finding it a bit more mysterious. Steve could see what Candy had meant about it being romantic; he could just see it now, him and Tony sitting down with candles lighting everything up, the warm firelight bouncing off the steamy water and stone walls. It would have been absolutely enchanting, something out of a romance novel.

The other engineers had seen them getting their swimming trunks out and were milling about behind them, staring as they always did; it would have been easy to believe that they came from another planet with the way they kept staring at everything like it was about to eat them alive. He was pretty sure Tony was embarrassed on their behalf, although the pink hue to Tony’s entire body might have been because of the steam.

They found their way to a horseshoe shaped section of the Springs; it had been hollowed out, with sections of the wall sunken in so that someone could sit in there, leaning against the wall without sliding down into the water. Tony squatted and sat, stretching out like an overeager starfish. Steve sat beside him, his back pressed against the warm walls, eyes half closed. The stone was warm, the heat melting its way into his body. Tony was going to have to peel him off the wall at the end of this trip.

The engineers sat down beside them.

Steve opened one eye.

Why the hell had they picked here to sit down? Of all the places in this joint, this was perhaps the smallest, most secluded location off the main branch of caves. It was a corner made for two, not seven, but that didn’t seem to stop them. They piled in, sitting knee to knee, staring across the water at Steve.

He didn’t like the way they were staring. This wasn’t their usual I’m-an-alien staring; this was I-see-something-shiny-and-I-want it behavior. He pushed himself closer to Tony, uncomfortable with the sudden attention. The collective eyes of the engineers were suddenly dead on Steve; he swallowed hard, wanting to get up and leave.

That was when he noticed that his damned trunks had slipped again. They were halfway down his hips, barely hanging on and boy was that unlucky.
They were staring at him, and he knew exactly why.

“Can you guys, oh, I don’t know, *fuck off and die*?” Tony snapped. The engineers would have gone backwards if they had had the room to maneuver, collectively startled. Tony’s eyes were narrowed into slits of fury, his lips curled at the corners in a feral snarl. “You come one step closer to him and I’m going to rip your *dicks* off and feed them to you, understand?”

Steve had seen rooms clean out fast, but this took the cake. Nick Fury would have been hard pressed to recreate it.

Tony leaned back against the wall once they were gone, his eyes closed as he made himself more comfortable. “Your pants are uh…” he licked his lips, letting out a shaky breath. “They’re falling down Steve.”

“So I noticed.” Steve grumbled in embarrassment, hitching his shorts up until they were well above his hipbone. He would have given anything for a safety pin right about now. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem.” Tony patted Steve on the shoulder, groaning as he slid down the wall. “Hey, can I lean against you?”

“Sure.”

Tony’s head came to a rest on Steve’s shoulder, his hair damp and smelling of lilacs; the camp’s showers were stocked with a strange assortment of shampoos and conditioners, no one thing smelling the same. Steve was pretty sure he smelled like a fruit salad at this point. Tony didn’t seem to mind.

Steve liked campfires. He had dreamed about them, sometimes sitting by them with the Howling Commandos and Bucky, sometimes sitting with the Avengers circled around him. Those dreams had always been his favourites, even if some of them hadn’t been the happiest moments. Everyone was peaceful, although the reasons for the campfires weren’t always because they had wanted to cook up some hotdogs on a stick; sometimes they had built one to stave off the cold, huddled together to keep from freezing to death in their damp mud-spattered clothing. It had been nice to be so close without being afraid. He missed the feeling of being wrapped up in someone’s arms.

Campfires meant a very different thing to Tony. Campfires were places to learn new skills; they were also places to learn how to light things on *fire*. Tony became very proficient with marshmallow roasting after a few failed attempts, amused by his failures as much as by his successes. He had devised the perfect equation for getting a browned marshmallow that wasn’t blackened and or on fire by the time it was done and had turned it into a kind of *art*. Every minute like clockwork had him rotating the wooden sticks he had liberated from the pile of skewers that the camp advisors had provided. Most of the other engineers were trying to replicate Tony’s system, watching him carefully from across the campfire pit with their beady little eyes glinting in the firelight. Steve could tell why they needed to be here at this retreat; they would likely cannibalize one another if they really had to try and build something to save their lives. It was an all-for-me mentality that made it hard for teams to get a job done without bloodshed.
Steve sat cross-legged by the fire, just far enough away to keep from scorching his hair and clothing; he liked having eyebrows, thank-you-very-much. The dampness of the Hot Spring Caves still clung valiantly to his hair, the strands still sticking to his forehead. It was very warm where he was, even though the night air was cool and crisp. Everything smelled like melting marshmallows and wood smoke, a delightfully sweet combination.

Tony came back from the pit with another set of marshmallows and offered half to Steve, who ate them with relish, nibbling the crispy bits first. There was something about melting marshmallows; they were like some kind of mystical foodstuff. Maybe it was just all the sugar and the way they crunched, but he could eat them all day if he had to. He wondered if Thor had ever had marshmallows like these before. He would have liked them.

Tony sat down beside Steve, leaning against one of the large logs that had been placed around the campfire as seats; the logs had been mostly ignored, and the engineers were crowded around the fire so closely that a few had singed their sleeves. Several had only wisps of their eyebrows left. Most of them had probably never braved the dark before, let alone been this close to an actual campfire even though they had been here the year before. They weren’t outdoorsy people in general; most feared the sight of dirt on principal, loving only the grease of inventions created in their workshops.

“This is nice.” Tony said, half closing his eyes. He had some marshmallow stuck in his beard and Steve wanted to kiss him to lick the sugar away.

“You have marshmallow in your beard.” Steve said, clearing his throat.

“Meh.” Tony said, rolling his shoulders.

“It’s going to be a bitch to get out if you don’t get at it now.”

“Ooh. Steve used the b-word. I’m telling your mother.” Tony mocked.

“Oh well. It’s your beard. I’m not going to help you get it out when it’s hard as a rock.”

“Sure you won’t.” Tony teased. Tony nudged Steve with his foot reclined casually looking up at the stars. “You should move closer. You’re covered in goose bumps.”

“I’m fine.”

“Then move close to me. I’m covered goose bumps.” Tony murmured, scratching his beard.

Steve scooted backwards, trying to aim for the spot to the left of Tony; Tony’s legs were open, however, and Steve found himself comfortably tucked between Tony’s thighs by accident instead. It hadn’t been the destination in mind, far too close to where he really wanted to be than was good for him, but he didn’t apologize or wiggle free. Tony didn’t speak at first, still looking up at the sky, and then he sat up, leaning forwards to rest his chin on Steve’s shoulder.

“You know what’s weird? I used to hate this place. It was like… the place my father sent me to go die out in the middle of nowhere. It used to feel so empty…” Tony sighed, wrapping an arm around Steve’s middle, resting his hand on Steve’s thigh.

“And now?” Steve asked, his face growing warm; he could feel Tony’s fingers rubbing little tentative circles. He held his breath, not wanting Tony to stop. God he had missed this. He had missed being so close, so warm all the time. He hated the cold.

“Now it feels like I’m safe or something. I don’t know. It’s weird.”
“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Steve asked.

“Yeah. I guess it is.” Tony agreed.

When they went to bed that night, Steve noticed that something had changed between them; Tony was still smiling and witty, cracking jokes about any old thing but he refused to curl up around Steve. He rolled over and stubbornly faced the wall, wedging himself into the corner so tightly that Steve was almost afraid that he would be stuck there and have to be pried loose in the morning.

Had he done something wrong?

Steve stayed awake for hours trying to puzzle it out with no luck. He fell into a fitful sleep, hoping that tomorrow would be better.

The next day held the fabled three-legged race and potato sack race. None of the engineers, Tony included, looked really happy about it. They all crowded around the grassy field, muttering to themselves and on the rare occasion, each other, waiting for the advisor running the show to appear. A tall sickly-looking bald man came out from the dining hall and limped closer trying not to slip on the dewy grass; he was wearing a whistle around his neck that gleamed ominously in the sunlight, the obvious man in charge, not that the engineers seemed to care.

“Gentlemen. I’m going to assume that you all remember the rules from last year, yes?” The man’s voice was so nasal he could have given Fran Drescher a run for her money.

The engineers and Tony all mumbled out their yeses and then arranged themselves in a crooked line, pairing off when they were instructed to and not a moment sooner. Tony ended up paired up with David, and the repulsive man kept trying to run his hand up Tony’s thigh as they were tying their legs together for the three-legged race. Steve wanted to punch the little bastard in the face; he was pleased to see that a few other engineers looked like they wanted to do the same thing even though it wasn’t their leg he was fondling. One of them came damn close to breaking the guy’s leg by ‘accident’, twisting his body in time to send David tumbling to the ground, caught in the tangle of ropes. Thankfully he didn’t get Tony at the same time. Steve laughed at that; he wasn’t normally a cruel man, but there was just something satisfying in watching a pervert get theirs. He could see what Tony meant by the engineers being willing to break each other’s kneecaps.

Steve sat on the bleachers, keeping out of harm’s way, fiddling with his phone. He had been disappointed that he had been benched, sure, but at least now he would get some candid pictures of Tony without Tony noticing and showboating for him. And he wouldn’t get his kneecaps broken, so that was a plus.

The advisor raised his silver whistle to his lips, taking in a deep breathe. The engineers suddenly became all business, poised and ready for battle. When the whistle was blown they bolted like startled rabbits veering off in the wrong direction trying to cut each other off. Some tripped and fell over their partners, legs tangled and bent uncomfortably in awkward angles. Others stumbled about in a mostly forwards fashion, legs dragging behind them as they fought to move on ahead without actually helping each other out. None of them really seemed to understand
the mechanics of the race, although according to their own words, they had done this before.

Steve cheered loudly for Tony, taking pictures as fast as he could, not that he really had to rush; they were more like three-legged turtles than people. Tony tripped and almost knocked his teammate down when he heard Steve’s voice. He shot Steve a funny look, and then wrapped an arm around David’s back and started working as hard as he could get haul both of them towards the finish line, determined to win.

In the end, only Tony and David were left standing at the finish line. The rest of the engineers were lying face down on the grass trying to catch their breaths, spitting out clumps of dirt. It was rather obvious that they didn’t ‘do’ outside often; half of them were sweating so hard it looked like they had been dunked in the lake.

David hollered loudly when Steve walked up, thinking that he had been the one Steve had been cheering for. He was disappointed when Tony quickly untied their legs and hopped away one legged, pulling Steve to the side with a crooked grin. Tony held himself using Steve’s shoulder, rolling his ankle as they went back to the bleachers.

“You won.” Steve grinned.

“Yep. It wasn’t hard. The rest of the idiots don’t understand the concept of teamwork, remember?” Tony smirked.

“So I see.” Steve laughed.

“And now, only one more humiliating thing left on his list.” Tony said, rubbing his hands together in glee. “And then, freedom!”

The potato sack race started the same way as the three-legged race had, only this time the engineers didn’t have to work together to compete; it seemed pretty ridiculous that this was a required part of the retreat considering there was no teamwork here whatsoever, but Howard had commanded, and thus they had all been forced to march along.

Steve sat that one out as well, happy to be out of the way again this time because he could see something that looked suspiciously like pride on Tony’s face; he wanted to capture it on film like some rare and wild beast. Tony was so many things now, but proud wasn’t quite a part of him anymore, at least not when Tony was around Howard.

Tony and the others pulled up their ridiculous looking burlap potato sacks and waddled to the starting line again, waiting with the same burning ambition as the last time. The same things happened; the advisor ordered them into lines, then blew the whistle and all hell broke loose.

Three of the engineers crashed and ended up tangled up in arms and legs that wouldn’t normally touch another person. Half of them looked absolutely horrified that they were touching each other; the other half looked mildly shocked that they had ended up on the strange green carpet beneath them.

Tony bounded his way to victory, the only one who managed to stay upright the entire time. He let out a loud whoop, fist punching the air.

By the time dinner rolled around, Tony looked like he could have scaled Mount Everest with nothing more than a plastic spoon and a banana.
Soon they were on their final night at the retreat. Steve had enjoyed himself immensely, even if it had been a little boring at times; if this was what vacations were like, he wanted to take another one, and soon. He had almost eight gigabytes worth of photographs from the trip on his phone, which he prized more than anything else he now owned; he would have thrown himself in front of a tank to save that memory card.

Tony had been surprisingly willing to do things that weren’t on Howard’s list after winning that final race; he even took part in telling ghost stories around the campfire one evening, using his vast knowledge of horror movies and mythology to string along the rest of the engineers, getting them to believe that the entire camp was built on the location of a mass murder, where a group of pilgrims had been cruelly butchered; he hadn’t mentioned anything about a ghostly lady haunting the Tea House, and Steve was thankful for that reprieve. He had enough nightmares of her to last him a life time, and horribly murdered pilgrims were be a treat in comparison. Tony’s story was complete bullshit of course; Steve had known that from the start, guessing it just from the way Tony had started theatrically cackling whenever someone looked nervous. No one else seemed to notice, they were all too wound up.

Almost every one of the engineers seemed ready to go hide under their beds by the time darkness rolled around that night. Tony had been extremely proud, and had been strutting around like a puffed up bird afterwards, calling himself the master storyteller.

They ended up having the campfire all to themselves; the rest of the engineers were too paranoid and sleep deprived from the previous night’s haunted tales to want to stick around too long after nightfall. A few of them had even risked social contact by hiding in cabins other than their own when the dark had come, as Tony had cackled.

Steve sat with his back against Tony’s chest, huddled between Tony’s knees. It wasn’t as cold as it had been earlier in the week, and Tony’s warmth was more than enough to keep him from breaking out in goose bumps. It was lovely out, just like it had been all week, only tonight it seemed as if the stars were glowing extra bright, the moon a massive glowing orb on the horizon.

“Well this was fun. I don’t think I’ve actually enjoyed myself like this in a long, long time. I never went to camp as a kid – I guess it would have been like this.” Tony mused brightly, stabbing at the campfire with a stick he had yet again filched from the pile of supplies. No one seemed to bother guarding them; not that it stopped Tony from claiming his thieving skills as praiseworthy.

“I kind of want to be able to do this again someday. I like spending time with you.” Steve said, resting his chin against Tony’s knee.

“You do?”

He felt Tony shift behind him; he cocked his head to the side, feeling utterly relaxed. Tony’s face was lit up by the firelight, his eyes dark and warm. He cupped Steve’s chin with a butterfly light touch, the pads of his fingers soft against Steve’s skin; Steve couldn’t look anywhere but into Tony’s eyes. He wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Tony rubbed his thumb running along the smooth line of Steve’s jaw, the caress sending tremors through Steve’s body.
“Tony?” Steve asked, suddenly breathless, like someone was sitting on his chest but in a good way. Tony didn’t say a word. He leaned in and kissed Steve.

The kiss was tentative and slow, as if Tony was afraid that something horrible was going to happen, like he might break Steve with the touch of his lips. Steve kissed back, pressing himself closer, wanting to be so much closer; he braced himself against Tony’s chest, his fingers digging into the fabric of Tony’s jacket in order to keep from falling on top of him. God this was good. So, so good!

They broke apart; both panting and then Tony stared into Steve’s eyes and everything changed. He broke free, pushing Steve back and got up scrambling in the loose soil of the fire pit.

And then he ran.

Steve stared after him, shocked. He struggled upright, slipping and sliding in the sandy fire pit. He ran after Tony’s fleeing form, trying desperately to catch up; the rocky path and dim light made it hard to move in a straight line, his legs trembling from exertion as he ran.

“Tony!”

Tony didn’t hear Steve; he just kept running until he was at their cabin. He disappeared inside and closed the door with a slam, moths scattering into the night sky. The lights in the cabin remained off, the windows dark with the curtains half drawn.

Steve could hear the sound of the door locking even before he got close; it was a sharp sound, like someone reloading a pistol.

He stopped a few feet away from the cabin door, confused and hurt.

What had he done wrong this time?

Tony had been the one to kiss him first – he had only been reacting to the kiss –

Steve clenched his fists and looked down at the scattered pebbles of the pathway, trying to force back the misery and frustration welling up inside; he bit back his tears, wanting to scream aloud.

Everything had been going so well!

Tony had been so happy, and they had kissed and now it was turning out just like it had with Bucky. He hadn’t wanted to kiss Bucky. He had wanted to kiss Tony, and now here he was, standing alone in the dark staring at a locked door.

Why did everyone keep running away from him?

Was there something wrong with him that they only realized after kissing him?

Was he that disgusting?

What should he do?

Should he approach and knock to see if Tony would let him in?

Did he dare press the issue?

Steve wanted to talk – he wanted to sit Tony down and explain to him that what had happened was alright and that he had enjoyed it; he wanted to know why Tony had run. They had to talk! The
night couldn’t end like this – it couldn’t!

He gathered his courage and knocked on the door, trying for casual; he got terrified by mistake, and had to slow his knocks to keep from battering the door down.

“Tony?”

There was no response from inside, so Steve knocked again, louder; his hand was shaking, his mind racing.

“Tony. Please let me in. I just want to talk. Please!”

Still there was no response.

Steve stood stupidly on the step, glaring at the door. He tried the doorknob, very nearly frantic. It was locked, he had known it would be, but some small irrational part of himself had thought that it might have been unlocked. He hated himself for hoping, hated himself more for hating himself.

He knocked again.

“Tony – where am I supposed to sleep? You locked the door –” Steve tried, wanting to reason with Tony even though he was getting nowhere fast, banging again when that failed.

The light to the cabin remained stubbornly off.

The door did not unlock.

Steve realized then that he had left his keys in his jacket pocket, a jacket that was now locked inside the cabin. There would be no getting inside unless Tony let him in.

Steve stared stubbornly at the door.

“Tony!”

He banged again and again, hoping to drive some sense into Tony; maybe to drive some sense into himself as well. His hand was sore by the time he finally gave up and wandered away to go sleep beside the dying campfire, not knowing where else to go. He told himself that he wasn’t crying when he closed his eyes; it was just the heat of the fire that was all. He was not crying. He wasn’t. Grown men didn’t cry. Soldiers didn’t cry.

Steve’s skin and clothing was covered with a fine layer of soot when made his way into the dining hall the next morning. He had done the best he could to clean up in the bathroom, but there was little he could do for his clothing unless he took it off and washed it in the sink; it was too cold to wander around shirtless, so he had left it alone. His body felt like it had picked a fight with gravity; his back and hips were sore from the way he had curled up, and even though he had scrubbed at the dirt and ashes, they had become mashed into the hair on the side of his head, black spots amongst the golden hairs. He was still finding flakes of wood whenever he ran his fingers through his bangs.

Tony was not in the dining hall. Steve hadn’t expected him to be.

There were still a few hours yet before Happy came to pick them up, and Steve bet on his life that Tony was going to drag this out until the very last minute. Tony was the King of Avoidance; he
knew all the tricks and could play all the songs by heart. When there was trouble, Tony ran in the opposite direction. And Steve, well Steve didn’t know which direction he had run in.

Steve breakfasted on toast and scrambled eggs; everything was warm and overly salted today. He wasn’t hungry, his stomach twisted and cramped just like his body, but he knew that he should eat because they had a long car ride ahead of them so he did. He was nursing a cup of weak lukewarm red tea when Tony sauntered in, looking a little sour, but none the worse for wear.

Steve almost bent his fork in half.

He stared angrily down into the remaining scraps of his eggs, trying not to think of the night before and just how uncomfortable it had been lying out there in the middle of the camp in the cold. He had woken up to find the newest wooden crystal that he had carved broken in his pocket, although once again he didn’t remember taking it with him. The break had been perfect; the wood looking like it had been cut in half with a sharp knife. He was baffled by it, the pieces still in his pocket even now; he had been unable to throw them away, something staying his hand.

He was more than a little surprised when Tony sat down across from him and started eating breakfast.

“Good morning.” Tony said, shovelling scrambled eggs into his mouth with reckless abandon. Some of the wayward eggs escaped from his fork and fell to the table, lost amongst the crumbs of toast long gone.

Steve watched Tony eat, flabbergasted.

Tony stared back at him, fork halfway to his mouth. “What?”

So this was what they were doing? They were playing the ‘it never happened game’?

“Nothing.” Steve said, shutting his mouth.

Two could play at that game, and while he would have preferred to talk with Tony about what had happened, there was a time and place for everything. Now was not the time, nor the place to start having an actual conversation about what their relationship may or may not be; there were too many ears listening, too many of Howard’s minions sitting close by watching them on his behalf. Steve swallowed painfully, his eyes watering with tears he refused to shed. If Tony didn’t want to talk, then Tony didn’t want to talk, and Steve would be damned if he fucked this up even worse, so he smiled at Tony instead and shook his head.

“I guess we go back today, huh?” Steve said, trying for a conversation that didn’t include anything important. He needed something mindless and monotonous to get through this, he really did; he was this close to getting up and leaving without a word.

“I guess so.” Tony agreed, still eating, although he was watching Steve suspiciously now, looking for something in Steve’s face.

“The stars sure were nice last night.” Steve said, not able to think of anything else to say. It sounded lame in his ears, and once the words were out there, there was nothing he could do to bring them back.

Tony flinched; the movement a full body event, causing him to jerk forwards, putting his wrist onto his plate. It scooted forwards with a clatter, almost tipping off the edge of the table.

“I…” Tony looked down at his fork, staring intently at it.
“I’m going to get more tea. Did you want some coffee?” Steve asked, mentally kicking himself. Even though he was mad with Tony, he hadn’t meant to be cruel about it. It wasn’t fair to either of them. They were adults; he should have known better.

Tony looked up from studying the reflection of the room in his fork, eyes slightly glassy.

“I… sure. If you want.” He mumbled.

“Alright.” Steve got up; as he walked past Tony, he let his hand fall onto Tony’s shoulder. He gave Tony a gentle squeeze, consequences be damned and then went to go forage for warm coffee, hoping that it might smooth things over.

When he came back to the table, Tony was staring holes in his plate of eggs, mumbling quietly to himself; the words were too soft to hear, and he had never been any good at lip reading, so Steve let it be. He set the coffee cup down in front of Tony and then sat, yawning. He scrubbed at his cheek with his palm, trying to keep himself awake. He could sleep in the car on the way back. They would have seven hours to kill.

He may have slept the night before, but it hadn’t been restful. He had suffered through three separate nightmares, not counting the times he had woken up because something had made a noise near him. He reminded himself to never go camping again without a tent or sleeping bag to curl up in. A t-shirt was not enough to keep the cold out, and no matter what, if something came up in the dark, there was nowhere to hide unless he wanted to pull his head under his shirt.

“Thanks.” Tony said lamely, staring miserably at the coffee.

Steve wasn’t sure what to say back.

The ride home with Happy was awful even without the Diva soundtrack looping in the background. Tony was one again pretending to be King of Silence Mountain, and had wedged himself against the door, slipping one arm into the armrest so that he couldn’t be moved unless someone really put their back into it; Tony was the King of a lot of things these days. He was certainly still the King of Steve’s heart, even if he was being completely bizarre.

Steve tried not to feel too bad about the silence between them and devoted his time to getting back the sleep he had lost the night before. He woke up with Tony’s jacket tucked around him a few hours later when they stopped for lunch at a drive-thru restaurant. For the rest of the trip he dozed, eyes half closed, watching the forest slowly slip away replaced by concrete, steel and power poles. It felt like he was leaving a part of himself behind at that camp. He hoped the part that was gone wasn’t anything important.

Happy dropped them off in the driveway of the mansion and then waved goodbye to both of them before driving off. Tony watched him, lips pursed, standing with their luggage by his feet.

“What?” Steve asked, stretching out the kinks in his back.

“He doesn’t usually wave.” Tony frowned.

“You mean Happy?”
“Who else?”

“Happy always waves.” Steve said, snagging his bag and hefting it up. He reached into the front pocket of the bag and pulled out Tony’s keys, using them to unlock the door before handing them back to their owner. Tony hovered behind him, still watching the road.

“He never waves at me.”

“Have you ever waved at him before?” Steve sighed.

“No…”

“Well then maybe that’s why he never waves at you.”

Steve carried his things to his room and dumped them on the floor in front of the bed. It was close to seven in the evening now, and while he had spent most of the day in the car napping, he still felt exhausted, his body sore all over. He was surprised to find that Tony was suddenly standing behind him when he stepped through the doorway; he jumped, having zoned out, lost in thought.

“Tony –”

“How do you do it?” Tony demanded, hands on his hips. He looked as if he was trying to play an elaborate joke at first, and Steve didn’t quite get it.

“How do I do what?” Steve asked carefully, sitting down on the edge of his bed. He was glad to have a mattress again and would have kissed it if Tony wasn’t still in the room.

“How do you get people to like you like that? You don’t even do anything – they all just seem to like you.” Tony complained.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Steve laughed weakly.

“You’re just not going to tell me your evil secrets.” Tony accused, frowning again. It was an amused frown; at least he was talking again.

“It’s not an evil secret. I just try to be nice to people – it’s not like I bribe them or torture them into submission.” Steve flopped backwards, eyes half closed, ready to go to sleep right then and there, travel clothing be damned. After a few seconds of silence, Tony sat down on the bed beside him twiddling his thumbs.

“I think we need to talk.” Tony said quietly.

“How do you do it?” Tony demanded, hands on his hips. He looked as if he was trying to play an elaborate joke at first, and Steve didn’t quite get it.

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“I think we need to talk.” Tony said quietly.

“How do you do it?” Steve was suddenly wide awake, tension creeping into his body one toe at a time. He sat up, trying to see what Tony was thinking with no success; Tony was lost in thought, fingers drumming on his arm, lips pursed again.

“I kissed you and I didn’t mean to.” Tony said finally.

“It’s alright, I didn’t really mind all that much. I was kissing back, remember?” Steve said, trying to be patient.

“I remember. That’s the problem actually…” Tony sighed. He rubbed the back of his neck.

Steve felt as if he had been struck upside the head. “Did I do something wrong? I didn’t mean to upset you—"
“Can you not… talk for a second? Just listen?”

“I… Alright.”

“Steve, I really like you. As in, I really, really like you. And I know that it’s fine and all, but I just don’t think I’m the right person for you – you deserve someone who can actually… relate to you. Someone who can be good for you, and not just … I’m not that guy.” Tony said.

“Tony –”

“No. Let me finish.”

“But –”

“Steve, I want to stay friends. I don’t want to do this with you and I really don’t want to lose you if I do something stupid again like last night. I like having you around, and if we were to break up – which, face it, would probably happen within a few hours because I have no experience with having a real relationship– you would want to leave, and I really just want to keep you around. Do you get what I’m saying?” Tony looked nervous; he carded his fingers through his hair, biting his lower lip until it bled.

Steve could pretend all he wanted that he didn’t feel disappointed and lost by Tony’s decision; he was good at adapting plans, but this wasn’t something he could outmaneuver with a few choice words. He could understand what Tony was saying – he didn’t agree with a word of it, but he could understand it; the idea of losing Tony was unbearable. He felt the same way, but for the past week he had thought things had been getting better. They had been closer, touching and laughing, things Tony hadn’t seemed to be able to do without flinching before. This had come out of nowhere, blindsiding him.

“Tony, I really like you too. I’m not afraid of losing you – not because I don’t care, but because I don’t think I’d let you run off like that.” Steve said, trying to keep his voice casual and not anxious. “I just want to be with you – you make me feel safe, and I… I don’t care about anything else. If you want to do this – if you want to be in a relationship with me –”

“I don’t.” Tony said flatly.

“I…” Steve looked up from his hands; he wasn’t sure how much he could take of this anymore. Part of him felt like it was dying, but it was worse than dying – he had felt what it was like to be dying and this was a thousand times worse. With dying at least there was an end to misery, with this there would be nothing more than empty, endless days wondering what he had done wrong. It had been a creeping agony for a while, and now it was here, tearing at him with all its might. He cleared his throat, wiping his eyes before tears could fall.

“If that’s what you really want, then I guess I’ll just have to go along with it. I’m not going to push you into something you don’t want. I’d rather stay friends then lose you. So that’s alright? We can stay friends?” Steve asked timidly, afraid that Tony might suddenly take back his decision and tell him that he didn’t want to be friends either. He didn’t know what he would do if that happened, didn’t want to go down that road.

“Friends would be good. Staying friends is great actually. Much easier to be friends then to be lovers.” Tony agreed, nodding along.

“Ok. So… what does that mean now?” Steve asked.

“We probably shouldn’t cuddle up together in bed anymore. I don’t think friends do that, and it kind
of makes me uncomfortable to tell you the truth.” Tony said softly.

“It… it does?” Steve croaked. He had always thought that Tony was happy to curl up with him. Tony had always been the one to initiate the cuddling to begin with! This was a knife in the back, with no way to reach out and grab the handle to pull it free.

“Not in the way you’re thinking —” Tony said quickly, seeing the look on Steve’s face. “I mean that it made me uncomfortable after I started thinking of you… you know... Differently. In a more than a friend kind of way… and it’s not that it isn’t nice – I like it, it’s just that I don’t think it’s helpful to be pressed up against you in the middle of the night anymore.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Steve said, looking down at his lap.

“I don’t want to have sex with you.” Tony clarified with a grunt.

“All right… I understand…” Steve said softly, swallowing hard. At least Tony hadn’t said that he hated him; Tony just didn’t like being physically close to him anymore, didn’t want to ever be physically intimate with him either. It would have been better if he had been hated – hate was something Steve knew how to deal with. He had been swallowed by hate for most of his life: hate for himself, hate for his weaknesses, hate for the bullies who tormented him. He could have dealt with hate. This though… he didn’t even know what this was.

“You’re sure we can’t…” Steve said.

“I’m sure.”

“Alright… If that’s what you really want.” Steve conceded in defeat.

“I guess I’ll go to bed now. We still have three days off, so we can do something tomorrow if you want. You said something about an arts and crafts store you wanted to visit a while back?” Tony asked, pretending to be cheerful; it reminded Steve of funeral-talk and he hated it, hated that fake smile.

“Yeah… that would be nice.” Steve smiled, hiding his agony away from sight; it hurt to curl his lips like this, but he smiled anyways, knowing that it was what Tony needed to see. He loved Tony. This didn’t change that. It would never change that. That was the most important thing. Things could have been worse – so much worse. That thought couldn’t give him the comfort he needed, not when all he could feel was his heart disintegrating in his chest. This time it wouldn’t be coming back. He could feel it in his gut.

Chapter End Notes

Things will get better next chapter - I swear! Please don’t kill me :)
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Tony has the best birthday ever.

** Warnings for sexytime!** ** Hopefully it's not too horrible xD**

Chapter Notes

As usual, let me know if anything is crackhappy or whatnot.

Three months later, Steve settled into their new routine; it hadn’t been easy, and it wasn’t always comfortable, but he managed to keep himself sane. They still went to work every day, only now sometimes Steve was allowed to sketch while sitting at the desk in Tony’s workshop. The day Tony had invited him in, Steve had nearly dropped his sketchbook in the shredder by accident; Pepper hadn’t stopped laughing for a full fifteen minutes. He had glared at her through the walls, but it hadn’t done anything except to make her laugh harder. He clung to the changes tightly, holding on to the threads of intimacy he had been offered. He hadn’t expected much more; he didn’t believe in much anymore.

Tony still touched him on occasion, but it wasn’t the same. Sure, he didn’t flinch away anymore if Steve grabbed his arm by accident, but it felt weird, like he was a complete stranger all over again. It was a start, Pepper had told him when he had asked her about it; the three of them were getting along well, even with the awkwardness between the pair of them. Pepper had of course suspected that something had happened on the retreat, but she had never asked, never pried into the details. He was grateful for her tact, but sometimes when he was sitting at her desk feeling down, he wished that she would just force it out of him so that he could let it die in peace.

They went out to lunch together every other day; just the three of them, letting Tony pick out the restaurants because it seemed to make him happy. Steve was cheerful about it, for the most part. He still ached whenever Tony brought someone home with him – sometimes because Tony was following Howard’s orders, and sometimes because Tony had been out drinking at one of Howard’s events and someone had tagged along home with him. He tried not to think about it; it was hard, but he could manage it if he focused on jogging or beating on his punching bag until his knuckles throbbed something awful.

The nights when Tony brought people home, Steve went into his room and closed the door, making sure to lock it tightly behind him. Tony never came downstairs to sleep in his bed anymore; he only locked the door so that he didn’t have to see the beautiful women or men on their way in or out. He couldn’t stand looking at them, knowing that they had something that he would never have; it was an awful feeling, hating strangers like that.

Still, he was happy to be around Tony as his friend, well, maybe not happy, but certainly contented that he was still part of Tony’s life. He could see that Tony seemed happy, and that was what mattered really when all was said and done, even if it still hurt like hell to watch, even if it felt so
goddamned lonely. He could put up with it to keep Tony happy. That smile was worth it.

“Steve?”

Steve looked up from his doodling, his thoughts muddled.

Had he missed something?

“Huh?”

“You looked pretty dark there for a second. What happened, you fall asleep or something?” Tony teased, leaning backwards in his swivel chair; the position did nothing to make Steve’s mood any better. The way his hips were splayed, the subtle arc of his back; it made Steve all too aware of what he wanted to do with Tony. What was he supposed to say? It wasn’t like this was something new. He had just been better at hiding it before, he supposed.

“No. Nothing… it’s just… thinking, that’s all.” Steve said lamely. He flipped over the page he had been drawing on and started sketching on a new blank page, light lines before darker ones, trying to figure out what he really wanted to see there; his mind wandered again, ordering him to draw Tony the way he was right now. He gave his hand a shake, irritated that he couldn’t push the thoughts away quick enough.

His drawings had been gloomier, the only thing that accurately reflected his mood these days; he had noticed the change after looking back at his older work, surprised to see how his sketchbooks had gone from smiling faces to glowering ones. There were still bits and pieces of Tony there still, eyes and hands drawn with loving attention to detail; only now they seemed somewhat gruesome, collections of severed limbs and disembodied eyes. He tried to stay away from that kind of thing when he realized how creepy it was starting to look. He hadn’t been able to draw Tony whole for a long time now, unwilling to risk it.

It was hard not to be gloomy. Half the time he played the contented friend while his stomach twisted in knots, making him so ill he sometimes had to take extra bathroom breaks to go dry heave; he suspected that he was getting ulcers, his body healing over them slowly with time, but he couldn’t be sure. He tried his best, pushing on so that no one could see what this was doing to him. Tony didn’t need to see him like that. It wouldn’t be fair. This was his burden to bear, not anyone else’s.

“What were you thinking about?” Tony asked, curious.

“It’s nothing.” Steve said. He had no interest in talking about his feelings anymore, especially not with Tony; with Pepper, maybe, but with Tony, never. Tony had already made it very clear that there would be no relationship, no matter what Steve did and he didn’t want to make Tony feel like he was trying to guilt trip him into anything. It was better to stay silent. Tony had made Steve promise him that there wouldn’t be any more attempts at convincing him, and Steve had kept his word, even though he had already had to swallow down half a dozen conversations in order to keep that promise. A conversation now, when things were so fresh in his mind would be asking for trouble. He didn’t want to risk starting something to have it finally blow up in his face.

He was so tired of it all.

“Fine, be a brat.” Tony grumbled, spinning around to face his computer again. He pounded away angrily at the keyboard, glaring at the screen. Steve continued to draw, unconcerned by the sudden
mood swing. Tony would drop it; he would be angry for a while, and then everything would return to –

“I don’t understand why you don’t think you can talk to me. I listen you know. It’s not like I tune you out.” Tony ranted, spinning around, keyboard promptly forgotten.

Steve looked up from his paper resignedly. Was he really going to have this conversation here and now in the middle of Tony’s workday?

“Tony –”

“Don’t you Tony me! I know when you’re not happy. Did I do something to piss you off? Is that why you were brooding like some angry little kid who got put in timeout?” Tony growled crossing his arms.

“I don’t want to talk about it. You tell me all the time that you don’t want to talk about things, so why can’t I decide that I don’t want to talk about something?” Steve snapped, shutting his sketchbook. He stood up, pushing the stool away and made for the door, so far beyond annoyed he could barely keep his anger at bay.

“Hey – wait. No, don’t go! I didn’t mean to –” Tony yelped, pushing his chair towards Steve. Steve stood in the doorway, trying to keep calm, sketchbook clutched tightly in his hands; he breathed in and out, suddenly unsure. What was going on here? Why was he even standing here in the first place? Tony grabbed him by the arm, pulling him back towards the table, wheeling himself along the ground in his chair.

“Can’t I just –” Steve started, sighing.

“Nope.” Tony said, pushing Steve back towards the work table. He stood up and put his hands on Steve’s shoulders, pushing Steve back down onto the stool. Tony’s hands remained on Steve’s shoulders, lingering; his body heat burned in ways that Steve wept for.

“Let’s start over. Hey Steve – what are you thinking about? Now you go –” Tony said, looking patiently at Steve.

Steve set his sketchbook down on the table with his pencils. He didn’t want to do this – not now, and certainly not here, but Tony wasn’t going to let it go until he spat it out; he could just feel it.

“I was thinking about a few months ago. About a certain conversation we had.” Steve said, gritting his teeth. He really didn’t want to be going over any of this here, not where Pepper could hear it. He didn’t want her to see how pathetic he was, even though she would be nothing but supportive; she had always been compassionate, even when Steve knew he was being irrational. This time though, he wanted to keep his thoughts to himself, something for him and only for him.

“Um… which conversation might that be, because we’ve had a lot of them…” Tony’s brow furrowed as he tried to figure out which conversation Steve was implying.

“If you don’t remember, it obviously wasn’t all that –”

“Don’t pull that with me. You’re making me feel like we’re an old married couple.” Tony whined, rubbing the bridge of his nose. His hand remained conspicuously on Steve’s shoulder, his thumb rubbing circles, making Steve’s brain turn on and off every few seconds, his anger stuttering like a broken engine trying to run.

“Is this about the fact that I don’t want to date you?” Tony said finally figuring it out.
“Yes. *That* was what I was thinking about. Can we drop it now?” Steve said exasperatedly.

Tony’s hand dropped from Steve’s shoulder, hanging limply at his side as he processed what had just happened. He bit his lip, looking down at Steve, who stared seriously back up at him. Steve didn’t expect anything to have changed; this discussion was old, and it always ended the same way. That was the problem.

“Did you want to *move out* –” Tony blurted, eyes widening in fear.

*That* was different.

“God no! I’m happy where I am. *I like* staying with you.”

“But you’re – you got that funny look in your eyes, the one you only get when you’re thinking about something really bad!” Tony protested.

“Well I wasn’t happy with the decision we made! Am I supposed to be thrilled about it?” Steve growled.

“I think we should have crepes for dinner.” Tony said, turning back to the computer. He turned around with a huff and began to type. And just like that, they were back in what Steve had affectionately dubbed the land of *I-no-longer-want-to-have-this-conversation*. Steve banged his head on the table, letting the pain of the collision seep into his brain. It wouldn’t help, but it felt good anyways.

It didn’t matter what they were arguing about these days. Tony would deflect it like he might flick away an ant that had crawled up his arm; then he would just flutter on back to whatever it was he was doing, leaving Steve behind to deal with the aftermath.

*Typical Tony.*

Sometimes Steve wished that he had it in him to press Tony, to just fight or maybe… maybe to let go; he wished that he could just grab Tony by the arm and kiss some goddamned sense into him. He wished that he was back in the dream world again, where things weren’t perfect, but they were damn close. He missed Dream-Tony something awful these days. That Tony would have listened to reason; he would have taken the chance.

Steve lifted his head and went back to work drawing, praying that Tony wouldn’t notice himself outlined on the blank pages.

True to his word, Tony wanted crepes for dinner; Steve had thought it was just a line to get them off topic, but apparently Tony had actually been telling the truth. They had been experimenting with recipes Steve had found on the internet for the past month and had worked their way through most of the fancy breakfast foods once Steve had realized just how much Tony seemed to like them, usually as dinner foods. Tony’s favourite was crepes with apple sauce, and so Steve made it as frequently as he dared. They had crepes and pancakes at *least* once a week now. He hoped that all the little things might one day be enough to let Tony understand that he wasn’t going anywhere, that he didn’t have to worry about Steve seeing the real him and running off screaming.

So far, no dice.
Thus, they made crepes when they got home. Tony was in charge of the frying pan, flipping the crepes so that they didn’t turn into flat charcoal disks; Steve was in charge of everything else, as usual. He didn’t really mind all that much.

“OW!” Tony yelped.

Steve spun around, dropping his paring knife onto the chopping board with a clatter, spare apples abandoned in a heap beside it. He snagged Tony by the wrist and examined the burn, gently turning his hand. It was a small one – nothing that would require Tony having to go to the hospital, thank god, but it would need cold water at the very least. Steve was glad he had taken a refresher first aid course a few months back; it came in far too handy. He tugged Tony to the sink and ran cold water over the burn, sighing tiredly to himself. He could feel Tony’s eyes on him the entire time and tried to ignore it, Tony’s hand clutched in his own despite the cool water.

“Is that better?” Steve asked.

“Yes.”

Tony sounded sullen, as if he had been caught stealing cookies from right off the cookie tray after they had come out of the oven; he had done that once actually, and Steve had come back to Tony sucking on his burned fingers, glaring at the hot tray while threatening to take it out back ‘behind the chemical sheds’. Steve hadn’t known what that particular phrase meant, but he assumed it was something bad, so he had whisked the tray away and kept an eye on it for good measure. The last thing he needed was dented or mangled cooking ware. It was bad enough dealing with what they had already. No matter how often he offered to chip in for new stuff, Tony refused to let him; even when it was on sale.

“So since tomorrow is Saturday,” Steve started, releasing Tony’s hand and backing up, “I was thinking we could go for a walk around town tomorrow. There’s this really neat Steam Technology museum I found online – They have a bunch of old Victorian stuff, like clothing and goggles and things on display. It looked like it would be fun.”

Tony’s expression went from sullen to delight in a matter of seconds.

“Really? What time does it open?” Tony asked eagerly.

Steve had known that it wouldn’t take much to convince Tony go to a museum about Steam Technology. The Tony Steve had known in his dream-memories had been absolutely fascinated by Steam Tech, devoting a whole server to collecting pictures and scans of some of the things he had found; Tony had even funded a few of the museums to keep them from being torn down, although he had never specifically told Steve about that. They had gone to one of the ones Tony funded when they had been in England on Avengers business, and the woman who ran the place had burst into tears and thanked Tony so much, he had almost started crying too. Tony had spent almost three hours running up and down between the displays, dressed in a full suit, staring wide-eyed at everything as if not looking at it would mean it would vanish off the face of the earth; he had sat through three meetings beforehand, practically dead on his feet when they had arrived, but had still somehow found the enthusiasm to keep going. Steve suspected that he was going to get the same reaction this time around as well, if the old stove in Crabgrass Retreat had anything to say about it. He shook his head, images of the ghostly woman from the Tea House twirling through his mind all by their lonesome; he wished they would go away altogether, but they remained stubbornly lodged in his psyche, her eyes flashing through at the most inappropriate of moments. Sometimes, he even saw her in the mirror when he was brushing his teeth. He had started putting towels up over the mirrors to keep her out; Tony hadn’t commented on it, but Steve was pretty sure Tony was suspicious that something was going on.
“It’s supposed to open at around ten in the morning.” Steve supplied, going back to his apples as Tony continued to run cold water over his burn.

“So we could get up early and go get breakfast there.” Tony mused, wincing when the water got too cold.

“You can take your hand out now.” Steve chuckled, gesturing to the tap with a hunk of apple he had just liberated from its core. He dumped another handful of diced apples into the boiling pot, prodding the others with the tip of his knife; they were slowly dissolving into sauce, still a little too lumpy for his taste. He hadn’t bothered to add any sugar, seeing as how Tony liked a little sour kick to his apple sauce.

Tony returned to the stove, tentatively maneuvering the frying pan to get the last crepe off and onto the plate he had been stacking them on; it wasn’t a towering pile, but it was more than enough to get them through dinner and a midnight snack if need be. “So uh… did you have any other places you wanted to visit? I’m sure the museum isn’t going to take up the entire day or anything.” Tony said.

“Hm…” Steve drummed his fingers on his lower lip. He did have something he needed to take care of, not that he was going to tell Tony. Tony hadn’t specifically said anything, but Steve knew that his was birthday coming up. He had been looking around for weeks now to try and find the perfect birthday present, and the Steam Tech museum was the only place in town that had what he was looking for. Their gift shop had the best looking goggles he had seen online; that was the entire reason he had suggested the trip. Of course he couldn’t exactly tell Tony any of this, or he might ruin the surprise.

The only thing he had needed to know now was how much Tony actually liked the idea of Steam Tech so that he wouldn’t end up buying something that Tony would be pretend in-love with. He liked personalizing gifts; things like that had to come from the heart after all. You couldn’t just half-ass something like that.

“Do you have some place in mind?” Tony yawned.

“Possibly. There are some interesting arts and craft stores around there…” Steve murmured. He stirred the pot of bubbling apple goo so that it didn’t burn. There was nothing worse than burnt apple sauce; they had found that out the hard way. The house had stunk to high heaven and Tony had spent most of the time hiding in the living room trying not to die from the fumes while Steve aired the place out. He didn’t really want to spend any time standing on a chair under the fire detector flapping a piece of newspaper. It had lost its charm.

“You just want to drag me down that goddamned knitting aisle again! I know you! You want to try and make me another goddamned hat!” Tony griped, turning off his burner. He sat down at the kitchen table, idly tapping his fingers on the tabletop like it was a keyboard while he waited for Steve to put everything together. Steve was the Expert Crepe Maker after all, the title bestowed upon him by Tony who had been amazed by Steve’s attention to detail; it was nice and all, but now he got stuck assembling crepes all the time. It would have been annoying if it didn’t come with the bonus of being able to get away with licking applesauce and powdered sugar off his fingers once he was done.

Steve put everything together, folding the two crepes he had assembled so that the filling didn’t fall out all over the place; Tony had called him anal retentive the last time he had done this, but he was noticeably silent today. He deposited Tony’s plate in front of him and then started eating his own, plotting how to get the most time out of the next day’s trip. He didn’t want Tony to suspect anything, so he would have to employ stealth to get the gift… hm… what to do?
Tony ate across from him, completely oblivious, a light dusting of powdered sugar in his beard.

The RAZ Steam Technology museum was massive – much larger than the website had made it look; from the outside it had looked like a rinky-dink sort of establishment, thrown together out of scrounged parts that had survived the auction halls and wrecking balls. A history preservation society, a group called Wuxtrells, had thrown it together a few years back, so it was by no means an old museum. Old or not, they spent almost four hours walking around looking at things. Some of the display items weren’t even locked up; Steve was surprised that someone hadn’t made off with anything yet.

The staff was friendly and present at every display, no matter how small it might be. They encouraged visitors to play around with anything left outside a glass case, offering tidbits of history when prompted, some of the most knowledgeable individuals Steve had ever met; most of what was lying out was recreated from older props that had worn down, so there wasn’t any harm in handling them. Tony, as expected, was a good mile ahead of Steve peering at everything with his face practically pressed up against the display cases, muttering away about the design features and specs of everything he laid eyes on; mothers had started pulling their kids away from him like he was some hobo on the bus. Steve watched Tony putter about with his camera held in front of him, snapping photos as they went. Tony looked like he was in heaven. It was a shame to have to leave when they got to the end of the displays.

“Hah! Look at this!” Tony crowed. They had wandered into a display room that celebrated Victorian fashion for both men and women; baskets of clothing were set out by their feet, bits of everything piled together. Most of the clothing was children’s stuff, but a handful of it was in adult sizes. There was a shiny framed mirror on the wall, a not so subtle hint that visitors could try things on if they wanted to; they even had a cut out section where you could put your head in a circle and pretend you were dressed up if you didn’t want to make the effort.

“You want to try something on?” Steve asked, holding up a white petticoat; he hadn’t meant to pick up that particular item of course. It was a stupid question of course, because he knew what Tony was going to do as soon as he saw what he had just gestured with.

“No really.” Tony said. He picked up a floral button up sundress from the basket near Steve’s feet. He grinned and opened it up, tucking it around Steve like it was a coat; Steve reluctantly allowed his arms to be stuffed into the sleeves, and then patiently waited for Tony to get bored with dressing him up. Only Tony didn’t get tired. He proceeded to button up the dress, one tiny fussy button at a time and then draped a lacy shawl over Steve’s shoulders, completing the look with a bowler hat that he found in one of the other bins.

“Aww, look at you. So cute.” Tony grinned.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Very nice.”

“Can I take a picture? I want this as my desktop wallpaper.” Tony laughed.

“Fine.”

Steve handed Tony his phone; Tony looked down at it, startled, as if unsure how it had gotten there. He shuffled his feet, backing into a display of hats. A top hat fell off the stand and landed on his head, blinding him for a moment. He flailed about, lost in the dark.
“What?” Steve chuckled.

“I didn’t think… Well I was just kidding…” Tony grunted.

“Well if you want a picture take it or help me get out of this thing. These buttons are too small.” Steve complained, adjusting the dress so that it wasn’t hanging quite so low over his chest. How women had worn this kind of stuff without tripping on it was a mystery.

Tony lifted up the top hat, setting it jauntily on his head. “Alright. If you’re sure then.” He held the camera up, tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth as he tried to get the picture the way he wanted it. “Smile.”

Steve smiled; he felt ridiculous, but he smiled anyways. It brought a slight haze of pink to Tony’s cheeks.

“I guess there’s nothing left, huh?” Tony asked, stuffing Steve’s phone in his pocket. He kneeled down to work on the buttons of the sundress, Steve twirling the bowler hat around on his finger above him. “This place needs like a thousand more rooms.”

“I think a thousand is a bit much, but I agree, it could use a bit more stuff. It’s too bad there’s nothing left to look at.” Steve said, trying to sound disappointed. His plan was running smoothly so far, and he was only minutes from completing his mission. He had taken out his sketchbook numerous times during the trip, making sure that Tony got an eyeful of it each time he did; misdirection was a beautiful thing.

They made it out the door and Steve reached into his bag, comically gasping in horror at the sight of the sketchbook.

“Damn! I left my sketchbook inside.” Steve grumbled. He was tempted to throw a ‘Silly me!’ in there for effect, but he highly doubted that Tony would fall for it.

“You remember where it was last? You want me to go get it?” Tony asked, stopping at the curb so fast he nearly tumbled head over heels. Happy gave Steve a thumbs up from over Tony’s shoulder, catching Tony by the shoulder. Steve nodded his head, smiling back. Good, Happy was ready to keep Tony distracted if need be.

“No, it’s alright. I’ll go get it. You just wait in the car. I’ll be back in a bit.”

As soon as Tony was at the car door, Steve walked back inside and made a beeline for the gift shop, weaving through a crowd of kindergarteners. The shop was littered with steampunk memorabilia, hats, canes and gloves up against one wall, mirrors, pocket watches and goggles on the other. He searched for the nicest looking pair of goggles he could find, looking over a whole tray of them to be sure he hadn’t missed anything; Tony deserved the best after all. He had looked the different types up on the internet, locking himself in his room to keep from getting caught, and boy was he glad he had even if Tony had made a few obscene jokes about him ‘trolling for porn’ or whatever the lingo was; he had gone along with it just to keep Tony distracted from his gift shopping.

He chose silver goggles set on brown leather straps, their lenses squeaky clean and made of tinted glass, a respectable if not ostentatious piece that could supposedly be used for welding if what the tags said were true; the red and gold ones had looked nice, but the paint looked like it might peel if they got worn too frequently. It was a shame really, because they were Iron Man colours, but it couldn’t be helped. He made sure to get a gift receipt just in case, not caring one bit that the goggles had set him back almost three hundred dollars. He was pretty sure Tony would like them, but it was better to be safe than sorry. He hid his purchase away in his bag and then sauntered out holding the
sketchbook up over his head triumphantly, a reclaimed trophy that hadn’t really been lost in the first place.

“Found it!” Steve said, climbing into the back seat beside Tony, who was sprawled out looking ready to fall asleep; that might have had something to do with the ‘golden-oldies’ blasting from the radio. He owed Happy big time for that. A sleepy Tony was a distracted Tony.

“Where was it?” Tony mumbled drowsily, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Sitting in the steam engine exhibit.” That had been the last one Steve had taken the sketchbook out, and he had made a grand show of it too; Tony was suspiciously good at remembering details like that. Luckily, so was Steve.

“Good thing you found it. That one’s almost finished, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’ll have to start a new one soon.” Steve agreed. It would have been a real loss to lose it for real. Some of his favourite drawings were in this particular sketchbook.

“So uh… craft store now?”

“Sure.”

It was almost embarrassing how easy it all was.

Tony didn’t even look suspicious, just a little sleepy and in dread of what would happen when they got to the crafts store; with good reason of course, because he had been in crafts stores with Steve before and he knew what dangers lurked there. They were not places for the weak of heart.

Happy drove to Lil’ Pete’s Crafts, the store Steve had also found on the internet just to keep Tony thrown off the scent, without so much as asking for the address; they had discussed their plans while Tony was showering that morning, and Happy was more than alright with driving them around in circles if that was what it took for Tony to get something good for his birthday. He had even mentioned something about getting Tony something himself. Steve had wanted to hug the man.

In hindsight he probably shouldn’t have gone to the crafts store. Steve ended up buying almost twice his weight in yarn, and Tony ended up carrying most of it, because there was just too much to handle even with use of a shopping basket; he felt bad about that. In his defense though, the yarn had been on sale, and he had been meaning to start up crochet again for the past two months at least, because he needed something to do when his hands got tired from drawing. His punching bag and art were the only think keeping him sane at the moment. He could run through all that yarn in a month at the rate he was going; it was terrifyingly easy to do. Tony clearly thought that he was crazy. Steve was starting to think that Tony might be right. Carrying all of that yarn probably had something to do with it though; the subsequent avalanche of yarn when they had lugged it all to the trunk might have also played a part.

Measuring Tony’s head for yet another hat also probably had something to do with it, but Steve tried to ignore those little facts in an attempt at keeping what little sanity he had left. He had a bunch of hot-rod red and gold yarn to work with now; Tony had been eyeing it when they walked past, and Steve had practically melted on the spot seeing it. It was going to be an amazing hat when he was done with it. He would make sure of it.

Steve hid the goggles deep inside one of his suitcases underneath a solid layer of still plastic wrapped tailored clothing. He was pretty sure that Tony wouldn’t go snooping around in that suitcase, seeing
as how he detested everything Howard had thought of, touched or breathed near and or on. With nothing left to do that evening, while waiting for dinner time to roll around, he decided to take a nap, and curled up on his bed, pleased by a job well done.

Steve woke to the sound of an argument – shouting that was loud enough to be heard from half a house away. Groggy, he stumbled out of his bedroom and made his to the source of the noise, rubbing his eyes to try and push away the bleariness of sleep only recently seized. He found Obadiah Stane, Howard and Tony in the living room squabbling so fiercely that Steve was sure someone was going to explode; the neighbors would have called the police by now if they had lived closer to anyone. It sounded like they were close to murdering one another.

He didn’t want to butt in, but one look in Tony’s direction let him know that it might be a good idea to entertain. Tony was cornered between Howard and Obadiah in the middle of a room and even though he had easy access to two exits, ones he used quite frequently, he wasn’t using them; he didn’t seem to have any flight or fight instincts at all. Tony’s eyes kept darting from Obadiah to Howard, moving back and forth every time someone snapped at him; it was almost like watching the world’s most vicious tennis match.

Steve slipped further into the living room. Neither of them noticed him, too focused on their fighting to see or hear anything other than their rage-filled voices. He spotted Pepper standing in the corner of the room, waiting with a clipboard and immediately felt sorry for her. She looked frazzled, her hair sneaking out of her ponytail at the sides. She motioned for him to come over, holding a finger up in front of her lips. Somehow she had gotten roped into this carnival of madness, and she didn’t seem to appreciate it any more than Tony did.

“They’re arguing about the birthday party.” Pepper whispered when he got closer. She handed him a piece of paper, the itinerary for Tony’s ‘special day’, as the header said. The events listed on the paper were standard for any Stark event that Steve had ever been to. There would be speeches, there would be drinking, and there would be some kind of dancing, be it formal or casual. The order and length were normally the only two things that ever changed; Howard claimed that every one of his events was special and unique. Presumably there would be no dirty dancing or strippers at this event, although with Howard in charge, the possibilities were endless. Tony was penciled in at the top, set to be giving a speech about his birthday. Steve could see how well that idea was going over.

“Well he’s got to take some goddamned responsibility for his party for once in his life Obie – he’s turning thirty six for god’s sake!” Howard snapped peevishly, jabbing a finger at Obadiah’s chest.

“He’s a drunk! You can’t stick him in front of people – he’ll start babbling away, and you’ll have industry secrets flowing around the room like party favors!” Obadiah roared back, his bald head turning beet red.

“Oh please! He’s not that stupid! He knows how to keep his goddamned mouth shut when he needs to – the worst case scenario is that he starts fucking someone on the podium.” Howard retorted.

Steve turned and shuffled closer to Pepper; she leaned down so that he could whisper in her ear.

“Did Tony really do that?” He asked delicately.

“Once. I think he was trying to be ironic about how he was being screwed over by his father. Luckily it was a small gathering, and no one really seemed to notice anything was wrong until
Howard physically pointed it out.” Pepper whispered back.

“Jesus.” Steve gaped.

“Yeah. Well, to be fair to Tony, I think someone drugged him or something before it happened. He was really embarrassed about it afterwards. He couldn’t look anyone in the eye for over a month without flinching. That was about the time when he stopped going out on his own and started doing all of his drinking in the comfort of his own home. I tried to talk to him about it, but he didn’t say a word. He just sat there the entire time I was talking with him, staring at my shoulder. I suggested a police report or possibly going to see a therapist, but Howard wouldn’t have anything to do with it. He said, and I quote, it would make Tony weak if he thought other people were responsible for his mistakes.” Pepper sighed, shaking her head. “I was going to file a report on my own, but… Tony just… he looked so broken whenever he saw pictures of the event, so I caved in and let them sweep it under the rug. I thought that I might be able to convince him to file one when a little time had passed, but it just… sort of went away. I wish I hadn’t waited.”

The argument raged on in front of them; Tony’s mouth hung open, but he seemed reluctant to speak even though he was clearly angry. It was heart-wrenching to watch.

“Well lah-de-dah! So what if he fucked someone years ago – he’s not going to do it again, he was seventeen at the time, so just drop it!” Obadiah growled, now a few inches away from Howard’s face.

“Well it wouldn’t have been so bad if you hadn’t hired the fucking girl in the first place! I had to spend three hundred grand just to keep that bitch from spilling everything to the press. You’re lucky I didn’t fire you –” Howard exploded.

“Oh like you could ever fire me! I’m the only reason this place is still standing! You and your moronic son would have blown the place to kingdom come with one of your crazy inventions by now if I wasn’t managing things! Don’t pretend that you don’t know what I’m talking about – there are still scorch marks in the basement lab from when you tried to miniaturize that goddamned arc reactor! I had to call in Hazmat just to keep the goddamned government from storming in and taking it all away as evidence of illegal nuclear testing!” Obadiah shouted.

“Well at least we do work –”

“I do all the management that lets you do your precious work you twat!”

“You do nothing you fat bald oaf!”

Steve and Pepper huddled together, expecting to see a fist fight break out. Well, to be fair, it would probably be more of a girlish slap fight considering both Obadiah and Howard were featherweight old-farts. The two circled each other with little regard for the fact that they had an audience, hands curled into fists. Steve had met veterans and panhandlers on the street who had sweeter dispositions. The pair of them looked like vicious weasels. Steve sure hoped the living room didn’t get completely destroyed when they started duking it out. He really liked that coffee table.

“Do you think I could go in there and sneak Tony out while they’re beating each other to death?” Steve whispered. Tony stared at them from across the room with pleading eyes; it was hard not to just dive right past the pair to his side. That, and he was tempted to dive in to the middle of the room and start kicking Howard in the shins. That rat bastard – If he had been around for – and Tony had only been seventeen? How could someone treat their own child like that?

“Maybe. You could always just bat your eyelashes at Howard. He’ll probably start drooling and
Steve snorted with laughter, caught off guard; snorted so loud, in fact, that it was audible clear across the room. He clapped a hand over his mouth to muffle it, eyes wide. It was too late. Suddenly he found himself under the intense scrutiny of both Obadiah and Howard, their wrath redirected. They looked bloodthirsty and ready to kill and or possibly maim, although their expressions seemed to soften a little when they realized that Steve was the actual source of the snort and not Pepper. God knows what they would have done if it had been her in his place.

“Uh… sorry?” Steve tried, feeling rather awkward at having all of their attention.

“Is there something you need Steve?” Howard whined, pinching the bridge of his nose. His face was still flushed from shouting, but his eyes had a strangely indulgent quality to them now; like he would do anything if Steve asked.

“If you don’t need Tony anymore I was actually hoping to go out for our walk.” Steve said. It was a blatant lie of course, covered only by the fact that he could now pull an extremely effective poker face; Steve had been working on his poker face ever since he and Tony had started actually playing poker after dinner, betting for pennies and candy. Tony was more interested in the candy, and usually won because he had started to recognize Steve’s tells, although Steve would never admit that he was actually giving them away on purpose. The look on Tony’s face when he had ‘figured one out’ was priceless.

Howard and Obadiah blinked at him and then deflated, looking less like angry blowfish and more like apologetic humans.

“Sure Steve. Go ahead. We’ll work out the details and Pepper will leave the revised program in the living room for you when we’re done. Have a nice walk sweetheart.” Howard said, turning back to Obadiah. “And as for you – this isn’t over!”

Tony moved with incredible burst of speed; he was across the room, grabbing Steve by the hand and out the door in the amount of time it took for Pepper to whisper and wave goodbye. Steve felt bad for leaving her there alone, but it wasn’t as if he could do anything about it. She was there for work after all, even though it was a Saturday. He reminded himself to talk to her about it later and fled with Tony.

Once they were outside and down the stairs Tony slowed, leading them around the hedges and down the road; Steve would have preferred to have just ducked into the backyard, cutting through to the ravine behind the house, but that way was too close to the patio door for his liking. Here they were shielded by shrubberies along the main walkway, able to slink away without prying eyes catching sight of them. They trudged on, looking around even though they weren’t expecting company; Howard popping out of the shadows wasn’t something either of them was prepared to deal with at the moment. Tony scanned the horizon for a place to sit down, letting out a low growl.

“Need to find someplace away from the road. Don’t want the bastards spotting us as they drive by.” Tony snorted.

“You owe me one by the way.” Steve sighed.

“Yeah yeah. You’re just lucky they didn’t rip a strip off of you too you know. You’re getting better at being a conniving bastard, but you’re not that good yet. He can still catch you if you don’t watch
it. That innocent little smile you have on all the time doesn’t make you invincible you know.” Tony grumbled. He looked down and saw that he still had Steve’s hand clutched tightly in his.

“Shit. Sorry.” Tony dropped his hand as if it had burned him; Steve scowled at nothing in particular. Back to the same old routine, where Tony pretended that he didn’t really want to be touching Steve and where Steve pretended that Tony hadn’t just emotionally punched him in the heart again. Oh the joy.

“Let’s go.” Tony scowled in return, shoving his hands in his pockets, determinedly not looking back at Steve.

They found a small forested area a few blocks away, past the sidewalk and down the hill a ways where the road was no longer visible, a mere bump on the horizon. There they came upon a large flat rock and some Nature Trail signs, both of which looked fairly unused and covered with a healthy heaping of moss. Steve hadn’t walked this far from the house before; he had gone jogging in the opposite direction once, avoiding the main road and the paths that went off the asphalt. Jogging down those rocky pathways would have led to him breaking his ankles on a pebble the size of a penny, no doubt; he hadn’t wanted to risk it.

Tony sat down on the rock, scowling darkly up at the sky; he shook his fist at the sun and then crossed his arms over his chest.

“They’re planning my birthday obviously. If you couldn’t tell by all the yelling.” Tony grumbled.

“I couldn’t actually. I had to ask Pepper what the hell was going on. All I heard was two crazy people screaming in the living room. I thought we were being attacked by home invaders. I was going to go look for a bat before I realized what it was.” Steve said dryly.

Tony snorted. “It might as well have been. He’s been ranting and raving about it for the past month – wants to combine it with some kind of schmooze-fest for the Avengers. I think he just wants to show off. The whole dog and pony show thing is big in his little world, you know? I’d hide out and miss the thing if I could but I think he’d just drag me back by my ear and I’d end up living in one of his spare rooms again. I fucking hate him.” Tony spat, gnashing his teeth.

Steve blinked, stunned by the outburst. Tony had never talked about his feelings for Howard before when he was sober. He was usually pretty tight-lipped about what happened between them; the only real answers Steve had ever gotten on the matter had been from Pepper, who hadn’t minded spilling the dirt on Howard.

“And you know what else?” Tony continued, gesturing wildly now, eyes flashing. “He’s going to make me give a speech about how pathetic my life has been up until now. He literally has that worded into the speech, which by the way I was not allowed to write because I am too incompetent to do so – and you know what pisses me off more? He’s right. I have nothing to show for what I do. Absolutely nothing! And I probably never will!” Tony seethed; his face looked a little bit like he had just bitten into a whole bag of lemons. It was such a horrible expression that it tugged at the unhappiness inside Steve, almost drawing it out of its protective shell.

“You built that new Stark Phone practically by yourself! What do you mean you don’t have anything to show for it?” Steve asked, resting a hand on Tony’s shoulder. He sat down beside Tony on the rock, wanting to take Tony by the chin instead; he wished he could hug him then, looking at him in the low light streaming through the canopy, so angry and unhappy. He restrained himself in time, turning the move into more of a twitch. He hated himself for it, hated that he had to do it in the first place; for a moment, hatred flared up for Tony too, for the fact that he couldn’t even offer his friend comfort anymore without it being thought of as something else. It would have been better to
cauterize that part of himself like the wound it was, to burn away the dead memories that wouldn’t stop hanging around.

“Yeah well, it doesn’t matter who does the R&D for the tech – it’s *his* name that goes on the everything at the end of the day. And it doesn’t matter, because even if I leave the company, it’s *still* his last name everyone recognizes. I tried to leave once, did I tell you?” Tony grumbled.

“No. You’ve never mentioned it.”

“Well I tried to leave *once* and he… that *bastard*… he talked to every single investor I approached for funding and had me *blacklisted*. I couldn’t get a dime in time square as a *panhandler* – and I was at the point where I would literally have tried to do that if it would have gotten me away from this place. I had sixteen investors lined up – *sixteen!* And every single one of them told me flat out that they didn’t want to lose *Howard Stark’s business*, even if it would get them tech that would put them five years ahead of the other guys, *including Howard*.”

“That’s awful!” Steve gasped. How could people not take a chance on Tony? He was a genius for god’s sake, and a reliable one at that!

“What can I do? I can’t exactly take out a bank loan because he has me paying off everything I spend money on, and I have no credit to work with at all. Even if I did, he’d just trash it like he does everything else. He controls everything! The only thing I can do is continue to work myself to the bone for *his* company so that when he dies he might grace me with a place in it. With my luck he’ll just hand the entire thing off to Obie and then I’ll get fired and have to go live in some paper box out in the alleyway behind the doughnut shop on sixth. It’s pathetic.” Tony scowled.

“How much do you need to start up your own business?” Steve asked, completely serious. He would have drained his bank account right then and there if Tony wanted it; he didn’t mind living in poverty one bit if it got Tony out of this hell.

“What?” Tony sounded confused.

“How much money do you need to start up your own business? I’ve got some in my bank account, and god knows I don’t have anything to use it on. I can give it to you.” Steve offered. He hadn’t even thought about his bank account before now, even when he had been using it. Paying bills had been the only reason he had opened it, and nowadays he didn’t even have those to pay. This was the perfect solution really. He didn’t need the money – hell, he and Tony could spend it and get a house for themselves somewhere – they could leave, and maybe one day things would be better. Howard couldn’t stop them forever.

Tony squinted at Steve. “You’re insane.”

“You’re my friend Tony. I trust you. You know all the right decisions to make –”

“No. I’m not going to take your money.”

“Tony. Please. If it’ll help –”

“Drop it. It’s a nice offer, but it’s not happening.” Tony said flatly. He wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulder, pulling him close. Steve enjoyed the way their bodies pressed together, warmth mingling with the cold; they fit so well. He wished that Tony could see that for himself.

Tony let out a long suffering sigh, resting his cheek against the top of Steve’s head. “Thank you though. It’s a nice offer. Best one I’ve ever gotten.”
“You really don’t want to try again? With funding, I mean, you could do anything.” Steve asked. He bit his tongue, feeling that he had overstepped a boundary somewhere, but Tony simply sighed wearily again, his breath hot in Steve’s hair.

“It’s alright. I’m not sure what I’d do if I tried again. I mean, I have my robots and stuff – those could sell, but the parts cost too much to make them viable for small time production. I highly doubt you’ve got a few hundred million dollars lying around for me to piss about with.” Tony said.

“Fine, but it’s still out there. If you need it, I’ll do it in a heartbeat. What’s mine is yours.” Steve said.

“I swear to god Steve… You’re one of a kind, you know that? They broke the mold when they made you.” Tony chuckled.

Steve closed his eyes as the wind blew past, leaning into Tony’s warm chest. This moment was going to end far too soon – far sooner than he would have liked, but he could accept that; they always ended too soon. Every day was filled with moments like these, where he was happy for a few brief minutes if he was lucky. He was used to the happiness ending now, used to crawling into his bed alone at night where the loneliness swallowed him whole.

This time, Tony didn’t let go. He remained there, clutching Steve against him, eyes half closed breathing deeply. For almost fifteen minutes they sat together listening to the sounds of traffic and the wind, the fight in Tony’s workshop and the squabbling in the living room laid behind them. After a while, the clouds began to shift and the sun went away, leaving them cold and shivering. Tony seemed to realize what he was doing then and let Steve go, blushing. Steve gave him a soft smile, patting Tony’s hand; he hated having to reassure Tony like this, like Tony had ever done something wrong to him. He wished that Tony could just see how much better things would be if he just let him in.

“Things are bad right now, I know, but at least you don’t have to worry about losing me.” Steve joked.

Tony snorted again; the smile on his lips didn’t extend to his eyes.

“Sure Steve.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know.”

It didn’t seem like Tony did know. Back in the day Steve might have grabbed Tony and playfully smacked him in the shoulder until he started smiling; he didn’t have the energy for that now. It was as if he had been drained completely when the sun had gone, a plant drooping under the weight of the rain. Tony’s words shouldn’t have bothered him, but they did. He had never outright lied to Tony, unless it had something to do with his birthday present or something he had promised to keep from Tony at Pepper’s request; it felt like he was being called a liar to his face. There was nothing to do for now unless he wanted to start a fight.

He stood up and wandered back towards the house.

Steve spent every Wednesday evening since returning from the retreat hanging out with Bucky in his frumpy apartment; and boy, if Steve had thought his apartment in his dreams had been an old man’s
wet dream, Bucky’s was worse. He had bits and pieces of everything from the forties stashed away, little handfuls of memories hoarded in plastic tubs to protect them from the elements. The walls were covered with vintage movie posters of Judy Garland, Lana Turner, Ginger Rogers and Humphrey Bogart. The only real sign of them being in the future was the large flat screen television and the Blu-ray player sitting beside stacks of movies. Everything else was old school, as Tony used to call it; the kitchen didn’t even have a coffee maker.

Bucky maintained the apartment because he didn’t like spending all of his time with the other Avengers, or so he claimed. He said that it was the only way he could get some privacy in his life; Steve understood that all too well. It had always been hard to find privacy, even when they had been children. Walls had been paper thin, and it didn’t really matter what you were doing, someone would always find out and start talking about it. It was easy to get overwhelmed by having too many people around all the time. He had never personally had a problem like that before, but he could see how Bucky wouldn’t like being so close to other people; other people lived and breathed and died and Bucky, well Bucky didn’t exactly age. Neither did Steve.

Being close also meant talking, and there were certain things Bucky didn’t talk about. Other people, like the Avengers especially, had a tendency to call you on your shit and well, not everyone appreciated Clint’s sharp tongue or Natasha’s ability to cause verbal (or in some cases, physical) diarrhea with a single piercing look. Some people preferred their privacy. Living in any Stark building made one very aware of cameras and security systems too. It would be hard to get away from those unless you left the building entirely.

Steve had been reluctant to visit Bucky at first, but ever since the retreat, Bucky had been nothing but a gentleman. There had been no funny business, and all they had ever done was spend their three hours together watching movies while reminiscing about old times. Bucky seemed a little more open than he had been before; it was a delightful change. He was always willing to go out and do something if they talked about it, even if it was something boring, like going to a museum or a craft store. He put up with yarn a lot more than Tony did, although he looked just as annoyed with it when Steve measured him for a project. So far he had a pair of gloves and a scarf in blue and red.

What Bucky did like to talk about was his adventures with the Avengers; he told Steve about their super villains, and sometimes he even talked about his past relationships. The visits had started because of Loki, and Steve had felt a little bad about using Bucky for information that way; he had confessed to Bucky a few days later, mentioning Howard’s involvement with the super villainess and Bucky had looked almost relieved. Nothing had come of it. Bucky hadn’t noticed anything odd going on, and Howard hadn’t exactly been parading around to begin with, so they had slowly drifted off into a comfortable silence.

Loki was by no means gone. While Steve hadn’t seen Loki up close since that the night of the Awkward Dinner, he had caught glimpses of her elsewhere in places that he hadn’t thought Loki would go. For instance, he had spotted Loki when he and Tony had gone to work on more than a few occasions. Loki had always been out on street level – and it had always been Lady Loki that Steve had seen, never male Loki. He wondered about that sometimes, and when he asked Bucky about it, Bucky had stared at him like he had gone full-on bat-crap-crazy.

“Loki’s a dame Steve. She has always been a dame.” Bucky grunted.

“I could have sworn though…”

“Always a dame.”

Steve wasn’t so sure that was the truth. He could still remember what Loki had been like in his dream-memories; he was starting to suspect that there was something to the memories he had, that
they weren’t just his mind playing foolish games with him anymore. None of those memories had gone away as time passed, like Bucky had said they would. Hell, they hadn’t even grown hazy with time, and it was starting to really bother him. Sometimes he would catch himself doing things that he really shouldn’t have known about — according to Bucky or Howard that was. It was frightening when that happened, because there were things he knew, just like how he knew what Tony liked to eat on special occasions without having to ask. It made things feel like maybe there was something wrong with him. Was his mind really that messed up? Or was it something else?

So he had started pestering Bucky with questions – little things at first, like ‘did I ever do this?’ or ‘did I ever see that?’ He got the answerers that he expected to get – no, he had never done this or that and had never seen this or that. Then why did he seem to know how to do those things or have memories about what some people liked or didn’t like? It felt like his mind might collapse in on itself, too many unanswered questions bogging him down.

He had started looking things up on the internet, determined to find an explanation for it all, even if it turned out that it was just him losing his mind. He found some scientific journal that talked about **Procedural Memory** – something that everyone had, where if they did a task often enough they remembered how to do it subconsciously and something had just clicked inside him.

He thought about bananas, and how he hadn’t remembered what it had tasted like, but that he had remembered how to eat it. They hadn’t even had bananas before the war; Tony had been right. He knew how to use the appliances too, without even reading a manual – and the computer – but the banana… He distinctly remembered Clint showing him how to eat one in his dreams, vividly remembered it really, because he could also remember Clint using the skin afterwards to create some kind of booby-trap in the kitchen doorway to get Tony with. He had helped Clint clean up the mess afterwards; Clint hadn’t stopped grinning for a full hour after that, and surprisingly, neither had Tony even though he still had banana stuck in his hair almost a day later.

Everything came back to the dreams. Why was he seeing Loki as a man? As something different from what she was?

No one else, not even Bucky, who supposedly had the same strange memory problem as he did, seemed to see anything out of place with Loki being a woman. **Loki** didn’t seem to notice that no one else noticed. Howard didn’t even – but of course Howard wouldn’t have remembered Loki any differently because he would have been long since dead when Loki finally showed up. It was enough to make Steve want to scream out loud.

“Something bothering you, Stevie?” Bucky asked.

They were sitting on the couch watching some movie that Bucky had found when they had flipped through the listings – something about zombies and candy. Steve wasn’t entirely sure if either of those things had anything to do with the plot of the movie because the movie kept moving around between characters and he couldn’t figure anything out. It was schlock, a throw away movie that they wouldn’t have picked if anything better was on. Bucky had turned it on just for the sound.

Bucky’s arm was around Steve’s shoulder, fingers gently brushing against the shell of Steve’s ear. It wasn’t an unpleasant touch; certainly not like when Howard touched him. It still felt wrong sometimes, like it wasn’t just something casual between friends. Steve shrugged his shoulders, attempting to dislodge Bucky’s arm without actually acknowledging that something was amiss. He hated making other people uncomfortable unless he couldn’t help it; Bucky always said he was too polite for his own good some days. Today he agreed wholeheartedly.
“Just falling asleep, that’s all.” Steve said, yawning and stretching to complete the ruse. Bucky’s hand was knocked from his shoulder; Steve silently applauded himself for his quick thinking. The applause died when Bucky’s arm was suddenly back in its place around his shoulder, this time pressing down a little heavier than before as if to weigh him down and keep him pinned there.

“Found yourself a dame yet?” Bucky asked his head cocked to the side; still half watching the movie even though it was clear that it was a waste of time.

“No…” Steve said thoughtfully. They usually had this conversation when he came over and it always went the same way. Steve would say no, and Bucky would harp on about him needing to find himself a lady friend. Yet for some reason, Bucky was touching him when he was asking this time. Bucky had been suspiciously careful with his touches as of late, keeping his hands to himself unless they were just watching a movie or lightly dozing; touching while talking had been some kind of no-no for him, not that Steve minded. The only one he wanted to put their hands on him was Tony, after all.

“Really? I thought that Pepper Potts dame liked you. Howard says that she smiles at you all the time - you guys go out for lunch and stuff, don’t you?” Bucky seemed puzzled.

“We go out together with Tony. We’re not dating.” Steve explained; weary of having to offer the same explanation to everyone who asked. Apparently a lot of people thought he and Pepper were an item. She found it amusing; he found it irritating.

“You’re not?” Bucky raised an eyebrow. He was no longer watching the television, his eyes glued on Steve’s. The sound was a mere distracting jumble of noises, the picture a few flickering lights.

“No. I’m kind of in love with someone else – they’re not interested, and I’m not going to make a move. I don’t want to chase them off.” Steve admitted.

Bucky paled. He went so white that Steve could have mistaken him for a sheet of blank paper. Bucky’s arm dropped down behind Steve’s back on the couch cushion, his fingers brushing against Steve’s thigh absently; he swallowed hard.

“You’re not… you know… interested in… well… another guy, are you?” Bucky asked carefully.

“Bucky –”

“Because that’s just wrong – you know it’s not right –”

“I have my own brain Bucky. I’m in love with him, and that’s the end of it. If you don’t like that, then I’ll just walk out that door and you don’t ever have to talk with me again.” Steve snapped hotly. God, if he had known it was going to turn out like this he wouldn’t have even bothered coming here.

“Steve – don’t.”

Bucky grabbed Steve’s thigh, holding him in place with little to no effort. Steve looked down at Bucky’s hand, shocked by the sudden contact.

“Bucky… why are you…”

“You don’t have to be in love with some guy you know… you can just… think about it and… find a good dame to work out the frustration. You don’t need to be with anyone.” Bucky whispered, leaning closer.

Steve had to tilt his head back to meet Bucky’s gaze. What he saw there surprised him. “I’m not
chasing after you Bucky.”

Bucky’s hand didn’t leave Steve’s thigh; it tensed momentarily, but remained there, a solid presence of strength and discomfort weighing Steve’s leg down like an anchor.

“You don’t have to be in love with somebody to fuck them, Steve. Fucking doesn’t mean anything,” Bucky said.

Silence flowed freely between them. Bucky leaned closer, biting his lower lip, making it pink and shiny with a sweep of his tongue.

“Can I kiss you?” Bucky asked; he was timid about the question, looking like he might bolt, although from which answer Steve couldn’t tell. Was he serious? Bucky had never done anything timidly before in his life – at least not as long as Steve had known him and this? Well this was like dropping into the twilight zone all over again.

“Bucky…”

“Is that a no, or…”

“I don’t know.” Steve said softly, looking away. He loved Tony with all of his heart, but he also loved Bucky in his own way; there had been too many moments, wrapped up together as children when things had been intimate and safe for the both of them. It had been easier when they had been young, harder once they had finished high school. They had had too many nights spent sleepless, listening to each other talk about any old thing, too many nights with Steve’s head pillowed comfortably on Bucky’s shoulder because his mother hadn’t been able to afford more than one pillow and they had to share what little they had. Bucky had always just been Bucky. Even after the kiss that day in the park, he had never really thought about Bucky the way he did Tony. The thought of Bucky kissing him didn’t light the same fires, didn’t twist the same way either.

Steve was lonely; he had always been lonely, but now he could feel it in his bones, a gnawing ache that even touch couldn’t grind out completely. He missed having Tony’s arms wrapped around him–having Tony kiss his way down his naked body an inch at a time; even if their nights together hadn’t happened anywhere except in his head, they still lived undisturbed, scratching at his brain whenever he needed them. They weren’t really together – they hadn’t ever been together more than as friends, but he needed those dreams as much as an addict needed their drugs.

God he was lonely.

Bucky seemed to read something in Steve’s eyes; what that was, Steve didn’t know, but he suspected that it had something to do with how tired he was, how emotionally drained and dead inside he was starting to feel. Bucky leaned closer, his nose brushing against Steve’s cheek.

“You don’t have to love somebody to fuck them Steve…” Bucky whispered, pressing a kiss to the side of Steve’s throat. Bucky’s lips were warm and wet, their contact gentle yet firm. Steve tried to make himself relax, but couldn’t.

No, it was too much. It wasn’t right. He was Tony’s, no matter what Tony thought about it. Comfort would be meaningless, a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach, nothing more after the bliss was long gone and he was alone in his own bed again waking up to the sound of Tony getting ready for work.

“Bucky… I don’t… I don’t think I want to do this.” Steve said, trying to pull away.

Bucky pressed another kiss to Steve’s throat, tentative and slow. He drifted upwards and then kissed
Steve gently on the lips; there weren’t any fireworks, no brilliant yearnings making Steve want to fall into his arms, only a sticky heat and the taste of soda and popcorn mingling on his lips. Bucky pulled back, eyes dark with lust and then peeled his hand slowly off of Steve’s thigh, settling it on his own leg.

“He doesn’t – so why not with me?” Bucky said softly, his voice commanding despite the volume it had been spoken in. “Why not some meaningless fun for once?”

“He doesn’t have to want me. He doesn’t have to do anything. I love him enough for the both of us. I can’t. Not like this.” Steve mumbled, ashamed at his body’s arousal despite it not having been Tony. He looked down into his lap, fingers feeling feeble and stiff like they were covered in a thick layer of wax. He could still remember what touches like those had meant to him, the way his cock had gotten hard at the mere thought of a kiss; he wiped at his neck, shuddering.

“You’d rather be alone for the rest of your life? He’s going to bring his women into your house – his whores. He’s going to fuck them into his mattress where you can see it and that’s alright with you? You can handle being there to pick up the pieces, even if he’s not going to show you one ounce of love? You’d rather be a martyr instead of happy?” Bucky snapped his voice cracking.

“It’s not like that. Tony isn’t like that. He wouldn’t do that to me.” Steve said; as he said it he flashed back to those women, and yes, they had gone up to Tony’s room, they had gone and fucked as Bucky had so eloquently put it, and Tony hadn’t tried to hide it. But that was it of course. He hadn’t expected Tony to hide it; it wasn’t something to be ashamed of. Tony could love who he wanted, and there wasn’t a damned thing Steve could do about it. It wasn’t his business.

“Steve, are you even listening to me? He brings whores into his bed. He fucks women who only care about his money and his dad’s corporation. You said it yourself – he’s not in love with you. He won’t touch you. You don’t need to suffer alone like this. You don’t need to be in love to fuck. Jesus Steve, why can’t you just let yourself get laid? Live the moment for a bit?” Bucky said, rubbing his forehead.

“He waited for me!” Steve snapped, anger blossoming through his entire body. “He didn’t give up on me then and I’m not going to give up either.”

“He waited for you in a dream Steve – in a memory that never happened.” Bucky growled back. “It didn’t happen!”

“You don’t know that – you weren’t there – you never saw what we had –” Steve sputtered.

“I didn’t have to be there – I didn’t have to see it! I can see how it’s hurting you now and I know that I’d never hurt you like that!”

“I know you wouldn’t, but it’s not your choice! If I want to spend my life pining after Tony Stark, I’ll spend my goddamn life pining after him! I accept that! I accept that I’ll suffer! But I’m in it for the long haul and I’m not going to give up on that, not even if it would let me have one minute of happiness. I love him.” Steve said. He wished that Bucky could understand, that there was some kind of magic pill that would just let Bucky goddamned understand what the offer was doing to him; how much it was killing Steve inside to even have it offered up as if it were nothing, a trifle, a fuck, a one night stand that meant nothing. He didn’t want that. He didn’t want nothing – he wanted love and companionship, but most of all, most of all he wanted Tony. If he couldn’t have that, it was worthless.

“Then you’re an idiot.” Bucky barked.
“Then I guess I am.” Steve said stiffly.

Bucky stared into Steve’s eyes, scowling; he heaved a sigh when Steve didn’t look away, stubbornly staring right back at him.

“Steve… Why can’t you just let this happen?”

“Just don’t, alright? Can’t we just watch the movie?” Steve pleaded. One more minute of this conversation and he was going to get up and leave, so help him god.

“Fine. But this isn’t over.” Bucky grumbled.

But it was, at least for Steve.

The rest of the night was spent in silence; Bucky didn’t quite touch Steve after that, even though he looked like he wanted to when the movie ended. He kindly refrained from kissing Steve good night at the front door when he dropped Steve off as well; it hadn’t been expected, but Bucky had sort of looked like he had wanted to do that too. It was a night of firsts that Steve wasn’t completely comfortable with.

Steve opened the front door and walked inside feeling exhausted and dejected; the evening had been going so good too. He had been so sure that it would just be a night of laughter and smiles and then Bucky had to go and crap all over it – he jumped, finding himself almost face to face with Tony. He wondered if Tony had been standing there the entire time he and Bucky had been outside saying their good nights, lurking in the shadows. That was ridiculous of course. Tony didn’t care about the pair of them saying good night.

“Have a good time?” Tony asked, leaning against the wall. It should have sounded rude, coming from Tony the way it had, but there wasn’t any malice in his voice only a vaguely tangible emptiness; it made Steve’s stomach clench, as if he had been the reason for it.

“It was alright. We’re sort of fighting.” Steve shrugged, clearing his throat. The slight squeak that came out made him want to cover his face with his hands, but he stuck it out and didn’t make a break for his room to hide in shame like he wanted to. He hung his head, locking the door and then bent down to unlace his shoes, fingers fumbling.

“What are you guys fighting about?” Tony asked, almost too casually. He leaned against the wall, eyes following Steve’s hands as they worked.

“He wants something from me – something that I can’t give him.” Steve said, putting his shoes together in their place beside the door. He straightened up, unzipping his jacket with fingers that now trembled.

“He asked you out?” Tony asked, clearly surprised by the implications.

“He’s… I don’t know how to explain it really… he’s lonely I suppose. He hasn’t really called it dating per say. He wants someone to go to bed with, and I’m not willing to be that for him. I don’t want to be someone’s fuck buddy.” Steve said. And Bucky hadn’t, had he? He hadn’t said a thing about dating or going out. It had all been about the quick and easy thing, fucking and nothing more; excuses and empty words to get what he wanted. God he hated that word. Fucking – such a harsh way of talking about something so personal, so intimate. When Tony had said it in the dream world it
hadn’t sounded nearly as callous as it did now.

“You mean he wants to fuck you?” Tony asked point blank.

Steve raised an eyebrow. He hadn’t expected Tony to just ask like that, but of course this was Tony he was talking to, not Yogi Bear. He should have known better than to expect anything less; Tony had been plenty blunt about things the past few months.

“I suppose you could put it that way. He certainly did. Mentioned something about how you don’t have to love someone to fuck them…”

“That’s harsh.” Tony snorted.

“I think he thinks that if you don’t actually commit to someone – like a guy – it’s not morally wrong. You can screw around all you want that way with a clean conscience. I never did understand it.”

“That’s Captain America you’re talking about you know…” Tony said softly, lips drawn into a flat line.

“I… I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything –” Steve groaned inwardly. He knew how much Captain America meant to Tony, and he should have known better then to start talking about Bucky as if he were anything other than Captain America. Even though they had talked about Bucky like this before, he sometimes still forgot that Tony saw Bucky differently than he did. To Steve, Bucky was just another man – a friend who had flaws and personality quirks that bordered on irritating. To Tony, Bucky was something that Steve had once been. To Tony, Bucky was the pinnacle of good in humanity; he was Captain America. Saying things to contradict that belief was cruel, taking some of the good out of Tony’s word one little careless remark at a time; Captain America was the one thing Tony said that he believed in, even if he had been drunk and joking at the time. Steve wanted to kick himself.

“Hey, no, don’t be sorry.” Tony squeezed Steve’s shoulder; he led Steve into the kitchen where dinner was waiting, his hand firmly clamped on Steve’s shoulder. Steve allowed himself to be ferried to a seat, sitting down with an oomph when he was let go. Dinner was set out on two plates on the kitchen table, ready to be eaten; it was shell pasta and some kind of cream sauce, one of Tony’s specialties: cooking with a jar. Steve had once joked that Tony’s favourite thing in the kitchen was the can opener. Tony had just shrugged his shoulders and agreed, eyes sparkling mischievously as he eyed a can of olives he wanted to crack open.

Steve hadn’t expected the meal. Tony usually just ate by himself Wednesday night.

Tony sat down opposite Steve, completely ignoring the food. “I didn’t mean it like that. I… I mean, I guess yeah, I’m still processing that he’s not the same Star-Spangled-Man-with-a-Plan like I used to think he was. Leaving you in the rain like that sure did a number on his goody-two-shoes image, that’s for sure. He was a good influence as a kid and all… it’s just… weird?” Tony said. He reached out and gently placed his hand over top of Steve’s. “It’s just hard to think of him as a homophobe. He’s Captain America.”

“I know.” Steve nodded.

“I mean, if you want to try dating him, I’m sure you would do him a world of good. God knows you helped me. He’d probably appreciate it.”

“Tony…”

“Seriously Steve…”
“Tony. I’m not interested in Bucky like that.” Steve said. He wanted Tony to understand that there wouldn’t ever be anyone else for him, but couldn’t put it into words. He stared down at the table, unpleasantly aware of the way Tony was looking at him now, knowing that he had opened Pandora’s box with those eight words.

“But you said –” Tony frowned at Steve, confused.

“Tony…”

“You visit him in his house – you spend hours with him. You… you guys watch movies and stuff. I just assumed that… you know. You were into him.” Tony said quietly, looking embarrassed.

“The only person I’m interested in dating…” Steve started; Tony pulled his hand away, suddenly tucking into his noodles, eyes now on the plate instead of on Steve. It took Steve a full minute to realize that the moment had passed; at least this time Tony hadn’t left the table entirely.

“Never mind. It’s not important, I guess.” Steve said quietly, picking up his fork. It wasn’t important after all. If it had been important, Tony would have listened.

“So, today is cleaning day.” Tony said around a mouthful of shell pasta, ever the topic changer.

“Cleaning day?”

“Once every month I have to scrub the place top to bottom. You were at Bucky’s the last couple of times – I kind of did it on my own.” Tony admitted, looking sheepish when he saw how exasperated Steve looked.

“I’d like to help if that’s alright with you. I mess this place up too you know.”

“I guess – if you want. I mean, it’s not like I’m ordering you to do anything – god, if he heard this conversation…” Tony’s expression turned bitter again and he almost spit out his food, so disgusted by the mention of Howard.

“Howard wouldn’t care. He knows I used to spend my time cleaning up in the army – you know what basic training was like… Well, maybe you don’t, but let me tell you, it was no waltz through the roses. I had to do my fair share of floor scrubbing, and we didn’t have anything half as nice as what you use now. I assume that you’re not going to be doing all the cleaning with a toothbrush … you’re not, right? I mean I know that it’s Howard’s idea, so…” Steve joked, lips twitching as he tried not to smile like he had gone complete loony.

The joke worked like a miracle. Tony’s bitter expression vanished, replace by somewhat childish glee, a rare occasion in of itself; amusement was much easier to get in Tony these days, but it came with a price, which usually meant lots of hart work. It was rare to see Tony bitter about anything for long, and it only took a few jokes or eye rolls in his direction to get him to snap out of it; Steve had turned it to an art. That had been one of the good things that had come out of their discussion all those months ago; Tony had blossomed, even if it had come at the price of Steve wilting a little. He had thought that it might be hard to recover their friendship after that fateful talk, but it had been surprisingly easy to start up again; Tony had wanted them to stay friends, and stay friends they had. When Tony wanted something, he damn well went after it.

Tony raised a hand in front of his mouth as he laughed, snickering, trying not to shower Steve with chewed food; he half-choking in his attempt, staring at Steve with wide, watery eyes.

“They made you clean the – oh Jesus. Steve, seriously… who the hell would make you do something like that?”
“It was supposed to help a guy build character.” Steve shrugged in protest, stabbing a pasta shell smothered in sauce. Tony had gone a little overboard this time; usually the pasta was drier so that they could have enough sauce to last for at least two meals. Tony always complained about it, arguing that they weren’t living in the great depression so they should be able to have food with flavor. That snark had made Steve really angry at first, but he had come to understand what Tony meant. Sauce wasn’t exactly scarce these days. They had a supermarket a phone call away, and a personal driver to get them there. He had begrudgingly submitted to the idea. At least Tony wouldn’t be upset about dinner tonight.

“What kind of character would that possibly build? I mean, you’re crazy of course,” Tony started, lowering his hand.

“Of course.” Steve agreed solemnly.

“But what else could it add to you? You already get along with everyone, you’re easy going and easy to please – and you’re cute. I don’t understand what else they could have hoped to achieve with having you on your hands and knees scrubbing floor tiles. Well, except for the whole… mental imagery.” Tony coughed.

“Stop calling me easy.” Steve rolled his eyes.

“Are you easy? I haven’t seen this particular event – is it something I should be waiting up for?” Tony rambled, obviously thinking a little too hard about what he had just said.

“You’ve never asked.” Steve shrugged. He decided to give up the jig for a moment. Tony could do with that information what he wanted.

Tony stared at Steve as if Steve had just decided to walk into the room buck-naked with nipple tassels, covered in rainbow glitter. His mouth was half open, eyes semi-glazed over.

Steve cleared his throat. While he did want Tony to actually get the hint for once, he was tired of watching the same reactions played over and over again on repeat; he was getting tired of a lot of things actually. Any mention of sex would end up with Tony either leaving the room, burying his head in whatever he was currently doing or on the rare occasion such as now, staring at Steve as if Steve been replaced by an inept clone; the blushes and stares would have been cute if they didn’t happen so consistently, as if Tony had never expected Steve to think about sex at all, like he was some kind of perfect chaste individual who didn’t feel urges, or dwell on anything other than prayers he supposedly made to some unknown god of virginity. He wasn’t some kind of virgin priestess! He could think about sex all he wanted! Not that Tony would understand it.

To be fair though, Tony didn’t often catch the hints Steve dropped. Steve really could have worn a sign around his neck that said ‘I want you to fuck me silly, Tony’ and Tony would have wandered off mumbling about doughnuts or some mathematical formula that required his immediate attention. Steve supposed it was to be expected; he was hardly the same man that Tony had fallen in love with in his dreams. He had been someone in those dreams – muscled, tall, confidant and handsome. All Steve had now was his confidence and it wasn’t doing anything to get Tony to see him in the right light; as something other than just a friend.

Maybe it was true after all. Tony really didn’t want anything to do with him. He was meant to be a friend forever; nothing more, and nothing less. Steve couldn’t help the depressed sigh that came out of his mouth. He pushed his plate away and stood up, taking it to the garbage can to scrape despite only having eaten a quarter of the food there. Better to be devoted to the little nit-picking details, like plate scraping, then to focus on the big details. Details, like how Tony had no interest in him and Bucky did – details that could have left him less lonely and cold at night in his far-too-large bed. He
could have given in to need tonight. He could have given up... it wasn’t as if he had anything to look forwards to aside from movie nights, and on the rare occasion some hand holding if Tony failed to realize what he was doing.

“Steve?”

There was nothing left to say really. He had said it aloud a thousand times over and Tony hadn’t cared.

Bucky was right. He was stupid. Destined to live alone, suffering while Tony went on with his life, permanently ignoring all the signs of want that Steve was giving him.

It wasn’t fair.

He was crying; he could feel tears dripping down his face, and it wasn’t fair because why should he have to suffer so much? He was a puny little thing in a world far too big for him – a world that had always been far too big for him. Tony wasn’t going to be his. Tony was never going to be his. And he couldn’t let go, because he was too devoted, too attached, too far gone. That was what really hurt in the end; not the empty nights and tired denials. He could never say yes to Bucky, even if it meant one night of mindless pleasure and touch. He loved Tony too much for that. He could never say yes to anyone else.

“Steve.”

Tony’s hands were on Steve’s shoulders, bracing him. He leaned closer, resting his chin on the top of Steve’s head.

“Hey... It’s alright.” Tony mumbled against him.

No, Steve wanted to say, no, it’s not alright. It’s never going to be alright, but he had signed on for long haul and the long haul it was going to be. He would suffer in silence. He wouldn’t drag Bucky or Tony into this darkness – it wouldn’t be right. He could brave that darkness alone. It was his to keep company after all, his creation.

“It’s fine.” Steve managed, setting the plate down on the counter; he reluctantly pulled out of Tony’s grasp, wiping his eyes. Better to sever the connection before it got worse. Better to let Tony be free.

“So where did you want to start cleaning first?” Steve asked, brightly; the tears on his face felt sticky and cold.

Tony’s birthday party – Stark Gala Number 36, as Howard called it – arrived heralded by newspaper articles, interviews, TV spots and the most embarrassing tailor fitting for a tuxedo Steve had ever had. Steve had tried to tell Howard that it was fine, that he didn’t need anything special to wear for the night. He could just use some of the formal clothing that Howard had forced on him after he had woken up, but Howard had insisted, and when Howard insisted, you took what you were given goddamnit, and you liked it.

Steve was darkly amused by the way Tony was also manhandled by the same tailor; they had gone together, which Steve assumed was because this was the only tailor Howard trusted to get things
done properly for his big time events. This wasn’t the same tailor who had done his clothing that day in the hospital either; apparently tuxedos were a separate entity to Howard, and required completely different tailors to make. That or poor Tailor the tailor had fallen out of favor with Howard because Steve hadn’t been able to wear most of the clothing. He hoped that wasn’t the case. Knowing Howard, the poor bastard might have been run out of town tarred and feathered.

When the actual day of the party rolled around, it was as much a relief as it was a dreadful excuse for a day. Steve spent most of the morning trying to coax Tony into coming downstairs to eat something, but there was nothing he could do, no words he could use to get Tony to stop pacing the upstairs hallway outside his room. Tony completely shut down around lunch, and spent the next five hours in his workshop, tinkering with pieces of scrap metal.

It was fine. Steve tried not to disturb Tony, thinking that it would probably do more harm than good in this case to try and pry him out of his workshop before he was ready. Tony wasn’t nervous about the event – that was very obvious. Tony had plenty of experience going to these events because, as was normal with most humans, he had a birthday every year and thus had thirty five years of practice to get over his nerves, as he had said when Steve had asked; Steve was pretty sure that it was more that Tony had resigned himself to his fate, and was simply avoiding it until the last possible second.

An hour before the gala, Tony carefully made his way up to his room to get ready, still not speaking; Steve made his way back to his own room and dressed in his tuxedo, surprised that he still remembered how to tie a bowtie seeing as how he hated them and hadn’t had the opportunity to tie one since he had been ten. He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and scowled, not much liking what he saw looking back; he threw the towel back up over the mirror in disgust. He felt like a stick person wearing a sack, and was almost too embarrassed to leave the bathroom. It wasn’t that the outfit was ill fitting. It fit like it was a second skin. It was more that he wasn’t tall enough; he wasn’t handsome either even with the thing on, and tuxedos usually made people look handsome in Steve’s opinion, or at least they usually did. He looked like he was playing pretend. Someone was going to grab his hand and ask him where his mother was.

He gathered up his courage, took a deep breath and left his room. At least he was short enough to hide behind Tony if it came to that. No one would notice him.

Steve paced in front of the staircase, nervously flattening his hair with his hand. It just wouldn’t stay down, no matter how many times he tried to squash the defiance out of it. He fretted over his bangs, sure that someone was going to take one look at him and burst out laughing. He looked up when he heard Tony emerge from his room, the sound of the door slowly creaking open the only thing he heralding his approach.

Tony trotted down the stairs, a glass in hand and Steve felt as if his heart had finally decided to take that last desperate plunge out of his mouth to get to freedom. Tony looked absolutely divine. He had gained weight in the past three months, filling out the jagged lines of his face and the crooked edge of his shoulders; he had once looked like he might be tossed about by the breeze, but those days were long gone. His hips had a rounded look to them instead of the carved-from-broken-glass look they usually sported. Steve’s mouth watered and he swallowed hard to keep from drawing attention to himself, almost certain that Tony could read his mind and see the filthy thoughts living there. The cloth of Tony’s pants hugged the curves of his buttocks like a pair of hands clutching at him; the fabric caressing every inch of him instead of just hanging uselessly like an old repurposed sack. He was completely put together. Steve sort of wanted to rip Tony’s clothing off with his teeth. He
Tony’s handsome face was made even more devilishly delightful by the way he had trimmed his beard. It looked perfect, not at all like the scraggly mess it usually was after hours spent working with grease and wires. Steve might have fallen in love right then and there if he hadn’t already been head over heels in love with Tony in the first place. He wished that he had his camera, but looking for it now would probably make Tony self-conscious; Steve contented himself with stuffing his hands in his pockets, keeping them busy with the seams hidden there.

Tony tugged at his collar, grinning crookedly at Steve. He stumbled on the top step and dropped the glass, swearing when it sprang free. It rolled down the stairs, bumping against Steve’s foot as it came to a rest with a clink.

Oh, Steve thought, bending down to retrieve the glass. He’s gone and gotten himself drunk again. Steve’s heart felt heavy; he tried not to show it, beaming up at Tony, trying to give him some kind of courage, even if Drunk Tony had never really need it.

“Very nice – you look like Prince Charming.” Steve said, setting the glass down on the end table, trying not to let Tony see his hand shake. Tony did look every part a Prince, and even the goofy smile that spread across his lips came off as cocky and glamorous instead of deranged and hammered like it might have under other circumstances.

“Well I’m glad someone thinks so. It’s going to look like march of the penguins when we get there. You won’t be able to tell any of us apart – well, ok, I’m lying. I could probably pick you out of a crowd any day. You’ll be the one jumping up and down just to see where the hell everything is.” Tony chuckled, making his way down the stairs without tripping once. Steve was mildly impressed. Hopefully Tony wouldn’t be stumbling around all over the place when they got there. He was going to have to keep an eye on him.

“Ready to go then?” Steve asked, pointedly choosing to ignore the teasing. For now.

“Nope. I guess I’m going to have to go anyways though, so shall we?” Tony grinned. He linked arms with Steve, walking them out the door.

The gala was massive, an event of the ages, just like the invitations had boasted it would be. At least a thousand people were here and the place looked as if Howard had thrown money around to no end; glamor seemed to float through the air, and everything it touched sparkled with class. Even the used napkins looked like they might be able to walk on a runway at some point in the evening. People were dressed to the nines; made up with every manner of dress and style, men and women so beautiful they looked like illusions brought to life. The party was held in a large ballroom that Howard had bought out for the event – one of two, Tony had muttered when they made their way through the front door, and everything was twinkling; the butlers and maids had likely been working some serious overtime to get everything just right. Some of the kitchen workers were probably battling carnel tunnel, judging by the shine on the silverware. Candelabras had been set up on tables all around the room for mood, tiny flames looking like grand fires. The glass chandelier up above looked like it had been carved from diamonds. It twirled as the guests moved beneath it, casting rainbows everywhere.

There was no dinner served at this event, but there were appetizers wandering around on the shoulders of servers who seemed to have walked right out of the playboy mansion; Everyone who
was anyone, and quite a few who weren’t really anyone but had found the time to attend anyways were milling about. All the men were in tuxedos. The tailors must have made their weight in gold, judging by the newness of everything Steve saw. Tony had been right about it being like a scene out of march of the penguins.

It was a much less vicious event then most Stark events were; no one seemed to be pointing out that they hadn’t gotten to complain about how dinner had turned out. It surprised Steve to see that no one had brought gifts for the birthday boy. It would have been nice if someone had given him a lesson in etiquette for this. It certainly would have made things easier. The wealthy apparently didn’t follow the same rules or customs as regular folk; the army was a little like that too, unsaid words dictating the decorum of the evening all the same.

Alcohol flowed in abundance, lubricating social interaction so that people who hated each other could talk without attempting to commit murder with the little plastic forks the hors d’oeuvres came with; half of the guests looked like they couldn’t even remember their own names at the moment, swaying where they stood.

Steve almost believed for a split second that Howard had gotten a fountain that flowed with champagne before he realized it was just golden lights nestled under the fountain base that were causing the effect. There was even an ice swan resting under a spotlight in the centre of the room, the crowning achievement of the evening. Beside the swan stood Howard and his Avengers, drawing all the attention by just being there; Tony Stark, birthday boy was a mere blip on the radar to those around them. Howard blew the cameras kisses.

This was the first time Steve had seen Clint, Natasha, Bruce and Thor since he had woken up from his coma, and boy were they a sight for sore eyes. He felt as if he had known them his whole life; they were unchanged, their faces smiling and warm even when they were trying to be serious, at least temporarily. The media for the event was crowded around them, snapping pictures like there was no tomorrow; upon noticing Steve, Howard dismissed them with a curt wave and they scattered like geese being chased off an airport runway, squawking as they merged with the other guests.

“Steve! There you are!” Howard shouted. He took one look at Tony, who was still linking his arms with Steve and almost spat a mouthful of Champaign on him. “Go take a hike Tony.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

Tony gave Howard a subtle, almost invisible nod, and melted into the crowd despite Steve’s frown of disapproval in his direction; alone, Steve made his way closer, stepping carefully to avoid stepping on expensive posh dresses and heels when people stumbled past.

“I’m here to see what the huge fuss is all about.” Clint said, following Steve. Steve turned his head slightly, giving him a long steady stare and then seized Steve by the hand, shaking so vigorously that it was hard to keep up with him.

“Meet me behind the swan later and we’ll get the hell out of here.” Clint winked. “You look like you’re good for a few pranks.” He was elbowed in the gut by Natasha, who nodded once to Steve and then extended her hand politely, giving him a gentle handshake. “Nice to meet you Steve.” She said while Clint winced and rubbed his ribs. Bruce and Thor shook his hand politely as well, although in Thor’s case it was a little more enthusiastic than normal. Steve ended up flopping his
way through Bruce’s handshake because he couldn’t feel his fingers anymore.

Steve tried to smile at all of them; this had been his family once – these people with their inside jokes, smooth smiles and amazing senses of duty. They had been his home after he had woken up back then – in the dreams, he had to scream furiously at himself – why couldn’t he get that through his thick skull? He had known them in his dreams and they weren’t the people he remembered; they couldn’t be the same.

Only they were.

Clint stole Steve away after introductions had been made and proceeded to show him how to lob sugar cubes at the ice swan with enough force to get them to stick to it without bouncing off; Bruce borrowed him afterwards, asking him questions about what it was like to be a fellow human experiment. Natasha patted him on the shoulder and then let her hand linger while she had talked with Thor, trying to explain to him that it wasn’t appropriate to attempt to decapitate the ice swan even though it had ‘looked at him in a way most foul’. Steve was pretty sure that Thor was attempting a joke. No one had really gotten it though, so he gave Thor a sympathetic look and was rewarded with a bone crushing hug for his efforts, just like old times.

“See! Our Shield Brother knows what I speak to be true! The rest of you are not as quick witted as the fair Steve!” Thor boomed, his face lighting up as the thumped Steve on the back only to let Steve go a split second later to chase after a server who had gone by with the little hotdogs that he liked the best. Steve didn’t know why he knew this; it was yet another detail from the litany of details he had sieved out of his dreams.

Howard eyed Steve the entire time over the top of his Champaign glass, licking his lips as if waiting to sample dessert.

“Where’s Bucky?” Steve asked, finally free from handshake duty. He had yet to see Bucky in the crowd, which was odd because it was pretty damned hard to lose Bucky anywhere these days; the man was a walking mountain, although Thor was a good few feet taller now that he got a good look at him.

“I don’t know dear. Mingle – enjoy yourself.” Howard smirked, downing the rest of the Champaign glass. He snatched another from the server who passed by, sniffing at it with a pleased look on his face. “It’s good stuff. You should try some.” He said, offering it to Steve.

Steve accepted the glass if only to keep Howard from drinking it. He didn’t have to mingle for long, thankfully. Bucky was soon grabbing Steve by the waist, catching him off guard while he was trying to convince Clint to stop lobbing chunks of cocktail wiener at Thor, who kept batting them away with Mjolnir; Steve dangled in the air, Bucky’s hips pressed against the back of his. Bucky kissed him on the cheek with a loud smack, leaving an unpleasant wet smear behind. The Champaign glass nearly tipped.

“Careful.” Steve grunted.

“Hey, you miss me?” Bucky asked; he wasn’t drunk, because a super soldier couldn’t get drunk, yet there was clearly something different with him. He seemed slightly off.

“How are things going?” Steve smiled.

“Things are good. Things are great.” Bucky grinned, prodding Steve in the shoulder. “How are things going with you?”
“I’m alright.” Steve shrugged, looking around for any sign of Tony. When he failed to locate his friend, he chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand. “I think I’ve lost Tony in the crowd though.”

“Do you need help in locating this Tony?” Thor asked. Before Steve could respond, he found himself hefted up on top of Thor’s shoulder as the god peered above the crowd. It was a much better view from up here, Steve would give him that. Bucky caught Steve’s glass as it dropped from his hand, drinking what survived the fall. He grinned up at Steve and for once the look on his face matched the look in his eyes. “Put him down for a sec buddy. We’ve got to talk.”

Thor reluctantly complied, gingerly setting Steve down. He patted Steve on the shoulder and then turned to glare at the swan, still not over the fact that he hadn’t been allowed to decapitate it. “My apologies Steve. We shall have to search for your friend at a later time. My foe has returned.”

“No worries.” Steve assured him, glad to be on the ground again. While it was nice to be so high up, he couldn’t help but worry about being accidentally dropped, even if he did trust Thor with his life. The ground was a whole lot further away from up there, and while those shoulders were pretty broad and majestic, they wouldn’t keep him from getting a concussion. Hell, he could probably have gotten a concussion colliding with those shoulders. He had forgotten just how massive Thor really was. The television reports really didn’t do him justice.

“So I was asking around, and guess what –” Bucky started.

“Steve! Did you hear?” Howard cut in, appearing with an air of arrogance as he swept into view. He shoved his way in front of Bucky, ignoring the glare Bucky sent his way and grabbed Steve by shoulders, giving him a good, solid shake. Steve bobbled in his grasp.

“You’ve been accepted into the Avengers!” Howard cried out.

“I… what?” Steve stuttered. He had been accepted into the what now? “The Avengers?”


Steve squinted at Howard; unsure as to whether this was some kind of drunken foul up.

“Thanks a lot Howard – way to steal my good news!” Bucky growled, giving Howard a ‘playful’ shove that sent him reeling backwards into Thor’s almighty abs. Howard didn’t look as upset as he should have been by the assault; he was too busy enjoying the contours of Thor’s arms to be truly angry, and probably a little drunker than he should have been considering he was supposed to be introducing Tony’s speech. Knowing Howard though, he would be just fine.

“Quit joshing! I’m accepted into the Avengers? What are you guys talking about?” Steve snorted in disbelief.

“Fury’s going to be deciding if you can live in the Avengers mansion tonight – we’ll have the details tomorrow morning at the earliest. You’ll be an official member!” Bucky grunted, rubbing his knuckles, eyeing Howard like he might eye a punching bag.

Steve stared at him, slack jawed. “I don’t understand.”

“What’s to understand? You can live with us in the Avengers Mansion! I’ve been telling Fury all about how great a tactician you are – like when you helped me plan things out that one time when Doctor Doom was trying to nuke the financial district. Fury was really impressed by the way. I think he might have offered to give you a medal if he hadn’t been too preoccupied with the fact that Banner had taken out half of downtown by accident.” Bucky said, the grin slowly returning to his
face. His fists lowered marginally, bumping against his muscled thighs instead of against Howard’s smug drunken face.

“Bucky… I’m not really super hero material, you know that right? And I didn’t even know you were calling me while in the middle of a fight – I thought the entire thing was hypothetical –” Steve sputtered.

“So what? Widow and Hawkeye don’t have super powers either –” Bucky winced when Natasha kicked him in the shins, giving her an apologetic smile when he realized he had insulted her. She looked positively sweet on him even with that glint of murder in her eyes, Steve thought, which made sense considering what he had heard about them being an item months ago; Howard never had been able to keep his mouth shut for long. Still, any idiot could have seen it. He didn’t need to read any gossip rag to see what was going on. Natasha seemed smitten, well, as smitten looking as Natasha could get. The Natasha Steve had known in his dreams had always been harsh around the edges, and gentle when needed; she was much the same way Bucky had been when they had been children. They would have been a great couple if it had lasted, two peas in a vengeful pod.

Bucky cleared his throat. “All I’m saying is that you don’t technically have to be in the field to be an Avenger. Howard’s an Avenger, and he’s never actually anywhere near the field. He just jabbers at us through the comms and orders us around and gives us tech he’s had made by Richards or Tony.” Bucky grunted, gesturing to Howard, who had finally for decency’s sake untangled himself from Thor. It was surprising that the reporters hadn’t flocked back to them to try and get a few shots of the entire thing; he supposed that Howard paid them off or something else as unscrupulous as that.

Steve frowned. Wait… Tony had made equipment for the Avengers? He had never mentioned that before. Why hadn’t Tony mentioned it?

“It… It’s an interesting offer.” Steve said lamely. His mind was abuzz with thoughts of what he might be able to do for the Avengers again if he were around to help them out. He might be able to give useful tactical advice – and he had been working out again, so he could at least punch someone if they tried to attack him. This had definite possibilities.

“Hey, Steve!” Tony yelled, approaching with a swagger. Bucky’s glare could have cut through the ice swan; Steve stepped around him and grinned at Tony, ready to break out into nervous laughter. Tony would get a kick out of him being a part of the Avengers – Oh. Steve’s resolve faltered as quickly as it had come. Joining the Avengers would mean moving out of Tony’s house, wouldn’t it?

Suddenly it didn’t seem as attractive an option.

Tony tugged on Steve’s sleeve; Steve looked up at him, trying to marshal his resolve. This was Tony’s night after all, not his. He didn’t want to ruin it.

“Hey, what’s with the sad face?” Tony asked; there was an empty glass in his other hand, and he put it on the tray of a passing server to get rid of it.

“It’s nothing – really.” Steve said, forcing himself to grin again. His face hurt a little, but he would get used to it if he kept it up. “I’m fine. I was looking for you. Where’d you wander off to?”

“Oh, I was out and about. Shaking babies and kissing hands. You know the drill.” Tony shrugged.

“So I have to go make my speech, and I was wondering if I could borrow you so that I have someone forgiving to stare at while I publically humiliate myself. You can throw tomatoes if you want. I’m sure someone’s got them lying around, waiting to whip them out once the curtains go up.” Tony flashed a cocky grin at Bucky, who didn’t return the look or even the humor. The grin flickered for a split second when Steve didn’t immediately respond, too lost in the idea of Tony
wanting to stare at his face in the crowd for courage. “Where do you need me to be?” Steve asked.

“I’ll drop you off, don’t worry.” Tony said.

“See you guys later.” Steve nodded to the Avengers and Bucky, hoping that they wouldn’t be too offended by him ditching them so easily. Thor and Clint gave him warm smiles in return, turning back to the ice swan. Steve had a feeling that it wasn’t going to make it through the night. He hoped that someone had insurance, because that thing was going down and likely going to take the table with it. He jerked in place, looking down at his arm trapped in Bucky’s grasp.

“Bucky?”

“Hey, I only just saw you.” Bucky protested through gritted teeth, all out glaring at Tony.

“I’ll see you again after the speech, alright?” Steve sighed, prying his hand free.

“Fine.” Bucky muttered sullenly. “But you’d better be back quickly. We’ve got a ton of stuff to go over.”

“I’ll be back. Don’t worry.” Steve set off after Tony, who had made it a few steps away before realizing that Steve hadn’t been able to follow.

The atmosphere around them changed the moment he joined Tony; it didn’t seem to matter that they hadn’t said a word, or that they were just walking by. The women looked scornfully at them both, sometimes snorting in disbelief at things they must have been saying in their heads. Not a word passed their lips until they were gone. Every step he took allowed a few mumbled words to leak forth as they weaved their way to the stage, oozing from their mouths like verbal pus.

“Worthless, the lot of them.”

“– Look at him strut like the slut he is.”

“– Did you hear about that whore in –”

Steve tuned them out; he didn’t know how Bruce could stand this sort of thing. Tony’s hand burned warmly in his, the only thing keeping him from irrationally lashing out at the crowd. They were nothing but a lot of heartless bastards, people who didn’t know one goddamned thing about the real Tony Stark. These people were nothing more than wraiths, feeding off of the wealth and gossip Howard Stark spread around like chicken feed. They weren’t worth it, even if it would have been nice to wipe the smirks off of their faces. Bullies, the lot of them.

Steve hoped this would be over soon; Tony spun around, carefully positioning Steve in the middle of the front row of gatherers, brushing imaginary dust off Steve’s shoulders. He smirked at Steve, clearly becoming nervous despite his earlier bravado. He took Steve’s hand in his own, pressing a kiss to it and then he was gone, swimming through the crowd of creatures that called themselves high society.

Steve kept his gaze on Tony, watching as the engineer beat a path through the crowd so that he could take his place on the stage; it was supposed to be a place of honor, up there amongst the shining lights but it didn’t seem like there was anything honorable about it. Steve could see only disgust on the faces of those in the front row; others had smiles warped and contorted in hatred. The crowd looked like they had gathered for an execution and had gotten a birthday soiree instead.
Howard approached through the crowd and a hush fell upon the room, the guests separating as if he were the King of the Universe walking amongst them. Tony should see something good in the crowd, Steve thought, furious; to hell with the rest of them and their black hearts. He put on his most radiant smile, hoping that Tony would see it.

Tony cleared his throat and opened his mouth, ready to speak into the microphone he had wrangled out of the stand beside him; he turned, hearing Howard mumble something and closed his mouth, looking at the crowd again. Howard thrust a Champaign glass into Tony’s hand, laughing in Tony’s face when the microphone squealed with feedback; the crowd mirrored his laughter when Tony’s resolve seemed to waver, cheering when he reluctantly took the glass. Tony looked down at it as if he had been handed a cup of poison to drink, muttering something unheard back to Howard, who simply rolled his eyes and snorted, the sound amplified by the microphone clutched in his hand.

Howard turned to face the crowd, waving a hand in the air to attract attention, not that he needed it. The crowd watched him, spellbound; he could have started scratching his ass or picking his nose and they would have cheered. Here was Howard the Mogul – Howard Stark, the man who had saved the world with his wartime inventions and ingenious contraptions; his bombs and lechery tactfully forgotten by those old enough to remember and ignored by those who hadn’t been born yet to witness them. Howard Stark – the puppet master, stealing the spotlight from his only son.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen! I’m glad that you could come out and share this day with us – it’s not the most special day of course, it’s only Tony’s birthday,” Howard said, pausing for the laughter which inevitably followed, “and out of all the things I plan for my evenings, I look forward to this the least, but here we are, and so without further ado, I bring you my son, Tony, and his birthday speech.”

There was clapping of course; a few spatters of hands meeting hands, people who felt it was necessary even though they weren’t all that enthusiastic about it. The crowd hushed and huddled together, watching Tony, all eyes on Tony, and no matter how much Tony shuffled in place he couldn’t seem to get comfortable. Steve wasn’t surprised; he wouldn’t have been comfortable under their gaze either. It had been hard enough dancing for the crowds when he had been pitching war bonds in his dreams.

“Uh… Thanks Dad.” Tony squeaked, clearing his throat. Steve had never heard Tony call Howard dad before; this must have been part of the script, because Howard sure as hell wasn’t anything even close to fatherly. Tony looked to the glass in his hand, staring into the gold Champaign as if it was speaking to him. He looked up over the rim of the glass at Steve and then outright beamed, smiling so brightly he seemed to outshine the spotlight above him.

Tony lowered the glass slowly, eyes on Steve, speaking only to Steve and no one else; Steve grinned back at him.

“So I’m turning thirty six – I know, right? We’re all surprised I survived this long with all the whoring and boozing I do. Tough luck, the devil is going to have to wait another year to get his hands on me.” Tony grinned and winked. Howard elbowed Tony in the side; Tony flinched, looking from the Champaign to Steve again. Yet again, Steve’s smile won out and the glass remained firmly in Tony’s hand, untouched.

“I haven’t done anything remarkable with my life. I know that – and as I said, it’s astonishing that I’m still living when there are so many people out here with much more talent who aren’t around anymore. I have to apologize yet again this year for causing such a ruckus during the new year’s gala – yes, I was drunk as usual, my bad.” Tony said. This was all from the draft speech Steve had stolen a peek at; he had wanted to take paper it had been printed on and shove it up Howard’s ass. Only the
thought of Tony being punished had kept Steve from actually doing it; that, and he had no interest in getting that close to Howard, or his ass. Whoever had written it was a monster.

“So this is always a surprise to me – *surviving*. I guess we all know that things change, and that every year people get another crack at the pot, even if they don’t deserve it. I’ll take my shot at things again – maybe next year you’ll be attending a funeral instead, who knows, but for now I’ll take my cake and enjoy what life has to offer. Ladies – *lock up your daughters!*” Tony flashed a grin, gesturing at the crowd with a finger-gun. It was all scripted; nothing more than empty words, but the crowd seemed to eat it up as if this was really Tony. Sadly, Steve supposed, this was the real Tony, at least to them.

“One last thing, I’ve been told that I’m a mess,” Tony said. Howard was suddenly elbowing Tony in the ribs even harder, but Tony wouldn’t be stopped this time continuing on pushing past the pain. “And I’ve always thought that about myself as well, but I know for sure that I’m not a hopeless case now. Seriously, Steve, you’re an awesome guy. Thanks for putting up with me.” Tony said, his voice wavering.

Steve tried not to look shocked; the crowd murmured around him, trying to figure out who Tony was talking about, desperate to know who to go after. Tony gave a theatrical bow, downed the Champaign in one shot, throwing the glass over his shoulder; it exploded with a crunch, glass peppering the black stage floor. Tony jumped off the stage as nimbly as a cat might launch itself off a bookshelf. He surged forwards and dragged Steve towards the door, moving so fast that people didn’t even have a chance to get a good look at them before they were gone.

Steve managed to wave at Clint, who gave him a thumbs up as they zoomed past, shouting out ‘Call me, short stuff! I need a new fall guy!’ and then they were out in the parking lot, stumbling towards Happy and the car; Tony dived inside, pulling Steve behind him and then burst into an insane fit of giggles as the doors locked, slapping at the seat in front of him. Happy turned around with a start, jerking away from his newspaper.

“Drive! *Drive!* Before he comes out and tries to beat me to death with his shoes!” Tony ordered in between giggles.

Steve sighed, putting on his seat belt; Tony didn’t seem to want to do his own up so he did Tony’s up too, not wanting him to go head first through the windshield if something happened. Drunk Tony was such a simple soul sometimes.

The car started moving the moment Happy heard the sound of Tony’s seatbelt clicking into place and then they were away, leaving the party and down the road, headed home. Not that Steve could complain. He hadn’t wanted to stick around any longer either. He couldn’t help but think about the way Tony had kissed his hand, and if it had actually meant anything.

Steve followed Tony into the house, trailing behind despite the pleasant buzz in his head. He rubbed his hands together in glee, thankful that Tony’s back was turned so that he wouldn’t inadvertently spoil everything. He slipped away, heading to his room and tugged off his tuxedo jacket, folding it and placing it over the side of the chair beside his desk. He fished Tony’s birthday present out from its place underneath his surplus tailored clothing, grinning wickedly to himself. He had been waiting a long time for this. Everything was going as planned. Tony hadn’t noticed a thing!
He had wrapped the gift earlier in the evening when Tony had been hiding in his workshop, using colourful paper that he had bought from the grocery store. The wrapping paper was red and gold, with little balloons all over it, the imagery cheerful and maybe a little deranged; he had found it under the sign that said ‘for your special little guy’ and it had been too funny to pass up. Some of the balloons had happy faces drawn on them, and more than a few seemed to be going cross-eyed. Pleased with the packaging, glad that it didn’t look like a drunken monkey had wrapped it, he took his offering and made his way back into the hallway where he had left Tony.

Only, Tony wasn’t there anymore.

Steve looked around. “Tony?”

He tried the front door, but it was locked. Tony had likely just wandered off to go find something better to do. Drunk Tony usually had a short attention span as it was, and even a few minutes with nothing to do made him get itchy feet.

“Tony?” Steve called out loudly. His voice echoed in the empty halls, bouncing back distorted. Maybe Tony had gone out the back door instead? He passed through the kitchen, noting a distinct lack of bottle caps, and found his way to the living room without turning any lights on. Sure enough, the patio door was open a crack.

He found Tony sitting out in the backyard underneath their old willow tree, his legs splayed in a wide v. Tony was staring up at the sky, forlornly tracing the constellations with his fingers. He looked lost in thought, his lips moving as if he were reading something aloud. He didn’t turn when Steve approached, didn’t stop his empty mumbling either. At first Steve thought that Tony had gotten a hold of the whiskey again, but there was no glass in his hands, no bottle or can keeping him company; when Steve kneeled down and finally got a good look at Tony’s face, he realized that Tony hadn’t been drinking.

He hadn’t been drinking at all.

This was Sober Tony, and judging by the pained look on his face, he was suffering.

Steve sat down in the grass beside Tony, not caring about the fact that he was getting his dress pants covered in grass and mud; he was quite for a moment, listening to the soft sounds of traffic and crickets as they went about their business. It was quiet back here, the world far away. He held the present out cupped in his hand, bumping knees with Tony to get his attention.

“I wanted to give this to you earlier.” Steve said. He handed the gift to Tony, who looked up from the grass and stared blankly at it, as if he didn’t quite know what to do with it.

“What…”

“It’s your birthday gift silly. Open it.” Steve said encouragingly. He patted Tony on the shoulder and Tony started moving, a clockwork toy brought to life again. He began to un-wrap the gift, moving as if the object in his hand might shatter beyond repair if he didn’t move carefully, fingers trembling as he peeled back the scotch tape. The wrapping paper became a neat square, set down beside Tony’s knee. Steve held his breath, praying that he had done this right for once.

Tony stared down at the goggles, dazed. “How did you…”

“I saw the way you were looking at the stuff in the Steam Tech museum and I thought you might really like this.” Steve smiled softly.

“Steve…” Tony murmured, speaking so quietly that at first Steve couldn’t hear him.
“If you don’t like the colours we can exchange it for something else.” Steve said quickly, leaning back against the tree. He could see the stars in the sky, an amazing feat considering they were nestled so deeply in the city; they hadn’t ventured out here in the backyard at night, well, ever.

It was funny, really.

He hadn’t even realized how much he had missed seeing the stars until now. He stretched, cracking his back as Tony played with the goggles, rolling them around in his hands, watching the reflection of the starlight bouncing off the lenses.

“Should have brought my jacket…” Steve mused, drumming his fingers on his knees. This was alright. He could do this.

“Steve?”

“Hm?”

Tony dropped the goggles, fingers trailing through the soft green grass; he took Steve’s face in his hands and kissed him, gentle and sweet. Steve’s eyelashes fluttered, his face flushing with heat as all the blood in his body rushed to his face. He could taste Champaign on Tony’s lips and something else – something reminiscent of apples.

“Tony…”

Tony kissed Steve into silence, nudging him back against the tree; the bark scraped against the small of Steve’s back, and he gasped into Tony’s mouth as the dual sensations of pleasure and pain tore through him. Tony pulled back, eyes wide and terrified.

“Did I –”

“No it’s not you – the damn tree –”

Tony pulled Steve onto his lap, kneeling lazily with Steve’s hips pressed up against his own. His fingers grasped Steve’s hair to hold him still, his beard scratching delightfully with every press of his lips. He kissed Steve again, practically stealing the air from Steve’s lungs, leaving them both panting; Steve grabbed a hold of the front of Tony’s tuxedo, fingers curling in the black fabric, afraid that Tony might run away again, that he might somehow lose him in the starlight.

Was this really happening? Was he awake? Or had he died in a car crash that night without knowing it?

“I’m not going anywhere. It’s alright.” Tony murmured, as if hearing Steve’s thoughts.

“You’re damned right you’re not.” Steve whispered back, kissing Tony again before another word could creep out. Tony couldn’t seem to help the moan that poured into Steve’s mouth as Steve’s arms wrapped around his neck; his own hands snaked around Steve’s shoulders, nails dragging roughly against the smooth cotton of Steve’s dress shirt, desperate for touch, begging for it with little gasps that seemed like they had come straight out of Steve’s dreams.

“Steve… please…”

Tony sucked at Steve’s lower lip, moving over any patch of available skin, kissing his way down Steve’s neck leaving wet scratchy smooches in his wake. He was dreaming, Steve decided as he panted in desperation into Tony’s ear, he had to be dreaming because this couldn’t be happening. Tony had said that this wouldn’t ever happen, so it couldn’t be happening, could it?
If this was heaven then he was glad to be gone, glad to be put out of his misery. Five more minutes of this, please, he prayed, anything to stay here.

Tony paused to nibble gently on Steve’s exposed collar bone, tugging Steve’s shirt free from his pants. He slid his hand up over Steve’s bare stomach; his calloused hands turning rough and slow circles, every inch they touched made Steve hard, arousal coursing through his very veins.

“Tony… yes – god just like that – please…”

“Steve?”

The kissing stopped; why had the kissing stopped? Steve’s lips were swollen, pink and kiss bitten, tender to the touch. He gaped like a fish out of water as they parted. Tony pressed his face against Steve’s throat, nuzzling softly, his breath hot and wet against Steve’s skin.

“I need to say something…” Tony panted, almost breathless. “Before we do this.”

“Yes?” Steve murmured, his head spinning. He was so achingly hard it was almost torture, his cock pressed up against the edge of Tony’s hip. He wasn’t the only one hard as a rock, oh no. Tony’s cock was busy doing its own thing, rubbing against Steve’s ass, a tantalizingly bulge that wasn’t going to let up any time soon. Steve groaned trying to press down, grinding slowly; he would have done anything for more friction at that point, absolutely anything, but this was enough. If this was it, he would take it gladly.

“I think I made a really stupid decision before.” Tony mumbled into Steve’s chest.

“I think so too.” Steve agreed, caressing his way up the back of Tony’s neck, each whispered word making his cock throb harder.

“I mean it – I was stupid. These past three months were hell… I thought… I thought that you were with Bucky – and I mean… Bucky kind of told me that you were taken and that I should just get over myself.” Tony grumbled, tilting his head. He had a determined look in his eye; one that Steve was very familiar with. Tony’s heat pooled between them, pulling the chill from Steve’s body and the night air. He could feel every one of Tony’s fingers on his back, tapping softly, the rhythm mind bogglingly wonderful.

Tony’s eyes lost focus for a moment.

“Steve… can we do this? Are you sure you want this –”

“Fuck yes!” Steve roared, knocking Tony backwards. They tumbled in the grass, rolling to a stop in a tangle of limbs; he managed to crawl on top of Tony, nibbled and sucking marks on the pale exposed flesh of Tony’s neck. Tony moaned helplessly, writhing in pleasure. His wonderful fingers kneaded Steve’s ass like it was dough.

“Tony…”

He hadn’t been touched like this in so long.

“God yes!”

“You know…” Tony groaned into Steve’s ear, hands slipping between Steve’s legs to cup him through his pants. “I think this is going well, don’t you?”

Steve gasped at the contact, biting Tony’s lower lip in retaliation; Tony’s eyes were dark and lazy
clouded with lust when Steve looked back up. Somehow he was still calm, his words almost slurred despite being completely sober.

“We should probably go inside… I hate… fucking outdoors… you get grass stuck everywhere…” Tony grunted as Steve licked a line down his neck. “Jesus, Steve…”

Skin, Steve wanted skin so badly it almost hurt. He fumbled with the collar of Tony’s shirt, almost yanking the buttons off in his haste. “Whatever you want Tony.” Steve moaned. “Anything.”


They made it inside in a blur of hands, feet and lips, taking a few precious seconds to leave the goggles on the downstairs table after fumbling the sliding glass door open and shut; they were both too desperate for touch to let go even for a second as if that one second might be the one that tore them apart all over again. Steve wrapped his legs tightly around Tony’s waist, his ankles digging in to the small of Tony’s back, ushering him on. It was a miracle in of itself that they both managed to make it through the living room at all.

The stairs proved to be too much hassle, so Tony carried Steve through the hall and into Steve’s room without looking, their lips locked. Steve groaned into Tony’s mouth the moment they hit the bed, unable to keep the sound in any longer. They lay together rolling in the blankets and sheets, mumbling and moaning nonsensical praise. Steve slid his hand up the back of Tony’s shirt, trying to help Tony out of his jacket with his other hand; Tony’s hands roamed over Steve’s pants, skittering against the metal of Steve’s zipper, dragging it lower inch by inch, a torturous move that made Steve want to swat his hand away and do it himself. Why did they have to wear clothing again? There was a point to it, but Steve couldn’t seem to see it anymore, because all it seemed to be doing was making things harder. Soon they were clad in nothing more than their boxers, two layers of fabric remaining between them, and it was perfect. Well, maybe not perfect. Throw those boxers away though, and it would be.

“Wait.” Steve gasped as Tony started to slip his hand down the front of his boxers. Tony froze, hand poised, ready to move, his fingers splayed against Steve’s skin.

“I’m an idiot for asking this – but I need to know… How much did you have to drink tonight?” Steve asked meekly. He looked up at Tony from beneath him, flushed with a mixture of embarrassment and lust; he needed to know, and yet he almost didn’t want to, because this, this here might be the end of the night right here and now all because of that one stupidly important question. He had to know if he was taking advantage of Tony, and if that was the case then this would be over. He couldn’t hurt Tony like that. He couldn’t!

“Steve…”

“Tony. I’m serious. Please.” Steve cupped Tony’s chin in his hands, looking him in the eye. “I need to know.”

Tony sighed; dragging his thumb over Steve’s swollen pink lips in a sluggish line, seeming to savor the way his thumb came back slick and shiny with spit. “I only had one drink.”

“Tony…”

“The glass from before we left had ginger ale in it. I was feeling queasy, so I drank some to keep from throwing up in the car. And the rest – I asked Pepper to pay one of the servers to keep me
loaded up with sparkling apple cider all night. It looks just like Champaign, and if you play your cards right, you can fake being drunk pretty easily with him watching. I mean, I’ve had tons of practice, so it wasn’t like it was exactly hard. The Champaign that he gave me before the speech was the only real drink I had. I promise.” Tony whispered.

“So you’re not going to wake up tomorrow morning and have no memory of this?”

“No. Not anymore. I’ve been cutting back because I know you don’t like it when I drink.” Tony said, looking a little sheepish. The seriousness in his eyes almost completely washed away the wave of lust from earlier, but it didn’t leave completely; Steve could feel it in the way Tony’s finger rubbed circles on his belly, could tell by the hitch in Tony’s breath. He didn’t want to be anywhere but here.

“That’s…” Steve felt his face go bright red, tearing up with emotion. He swallowed hard as Tony kissed him again, letting his tears be pushed away one sweet kiss at a time. He could still taste the apples there on Tony’s lips; he could have erected a monument to them for that alone.

“I haven’t really been drinking lately… most of the beer is still in the cupboard and the whiskey… I dumped it down the drain. I just… I didn’t need it anymore.” Tony murmured between kisses. “I have you.”

Steve was silenced before he could speak, Tony’s tongue invaded his mouth, licking its way in between his lips. Steve let out a sigh long slow sigh. He had done this? Tony had stopped drinking for him?

“Do you want me to stop?” Tony whispered into Steve’s ear, his hand still pressed flat against Steve’s smooth belly, just under the waistband, rubbing his thumb against Steve’s pelvis.

“No. Do you want to stop?” Steve asked back, his hands creeping up the leg of Tony’s boxers to stroke the soft skin behind Tony’s balls. Tony whimpered in response, resting his face against the pillow, his ass in the air as he tried to push against Steve’s hands. “Please.” Tony croaked. “Please.”

“I’ll take that as a no then?” Steve whispered, smirking.

“Keep doing that – touch me… lower… god…” Tony moaned into the pillow.

“Might want to take our underwear off…” Steve said, wiggling his hips underneath Tony’s. Their cocks rubbed together, a tantalizing tango of shaft and fabric. Tony moved slowly, dragging his boxers down, eyes on Steve the entire time, licking his lips. “You’re so beautiful.” Tony murmured. “You know that, don’t you?”

“I’m not.” Steve protested weakly as Tony’s boxers dropped off the side of the bed.

Tony pressed a kiss to Steve’s chin. “You are.” He snagged Steve’s waistband and tugged the soft fabric down until it was pooling around Steve’s knees. He looked down at Steve, rubbing his palm over Steve’s inner thigh. “I just can’t get enough of you. You’re so sweet.” He pulled the boxers off entirely, watching the way Steve squirmed under his touch. “You’re so beautiful.” Steve’s boxers flew across the room hitting the bookshelf, dangling from the edge of Steve’s sketchbooks like it was a captured skydiver. He wouldn’t be getting those back without the aid of a step ladder, not that he wanted to. They could stay there forever for all he cared.

Steve looked up at Tony from between his bent legs, feeling more than a little lightheaded. Tony grinned softly back at him; the look flickered for a moment as he got a good look at Steve lying bare beneath him. His breath stuttered, pupils blown. “Steve…”

Steve stroked the side of Tony’s face; his fingers brushed against the rough bristles of Tony’s beard.
He had missed this so much. He had missed Tony so much. Please let this not be a dream…

“Steve… I want you to fuck me.” Tony murmured into Steve’s ear.

Steve whimpered, carding his fingers through Tony’s hair, rubbing gently at his scalp. “Are you sure –” Steve breathed in and out, mesmerized by the way Tony’s hips ground against his, their cocks rubbing together like two slick, hot irons. “Because if you want to top, I’m alright with that.”

“You’re the only one who’s going to get me like this.” Tony whispered.

Steve flushed, eyes widening. Had Tony never done this before with another man? He had seen Tony’s dates, beautiful men and women who had sauntered into Tony’s room without so much as a second glance in anyone else’s direction. Had they really never done something like this?

No.

They had to have – or else why would they have kept coming back?

“You’ve never…”

“I’ve always been on the top. I’ve… played around with myself, with my fingers. God, I’ve done so much of that the past few months – I kept thinking about you coming upstairs to get me, finding me like that…” Tony groaned, rocking into Steve, “But no – I didn’t want anyone else to have me like that. I was saving up for the right person.” He wasn’t heavy even though he was much larger than Steve; there was no doubt in his eyes, no fear or concern. His knees framed Steve’s hips, denting the mattress as they rocked together. His cock rubbed a wet streak up Steve’s stomach as he stretched out, planting his hands on either side of Steve’s head, looking at him through his eyelashes, his face flushed from the admission. He looked gorgeous, just as he always did; there was nothing and no one more beautiful to Steve than Tony. Tony blushed harder as they locked gazes, as if having heard the words spoken only in Steve’s head. He wanted to say them aloud, but his tongue wasn’t cooperating, and all he could get out was a stuttered: “Do you want to..? I mean, you don’t have to if you don’t –”

“I want to. Please?” Tony begged. “Please Steve?”

“I don’t have any lube or condoms here.” Steve said after a moment, coming out of his haze.

“Oh… Alright.”

Tony slid reluctantly off of Steve and padded his way out of the room.

Steve propped himself up on his elbows.

“Tony?” Steve called out, vaguely aware of his cock lying thick and heavy against his thigh.

There was a series of thumps, the sounds of feet hitting the floor at high velocity, and then Tony was back through the door out of breath, clutching a half used bottle of lube and a handful of condoms tightly in his hand; someone was clearly ambitious. He grinned at Steve and climbed back onto the bed, straddling Steve’s hips once more, dumping his supplies on the pillow beside Steve’s head so that he had easier access to them.

“So…” Tony purred, kissing Steve again. “We’re going to do this, yes?”

Steve grasped Tony’s hips, squeezing his love handles, laughing softly at the way Tony made a funny little noise, almost a squeal at that. He pressed his lips to Tony’s, eyes sparkling. “Yes.
Definitely yes.”

“Touch me? Please?” Tony whimpered.

“I can do that.”

Steve ran his hands up and down Tony’s flank, dragging his nails in a little as he went. Tony keened, leaning back, looking around the room; Steve would have been concerned, but then he noticed the way Tony’s eyes had focused eagerly on the headboard, and he knew that everything was fine. He took Tony’s cock gently in hand at the distraction and began to pump languidly, loving the way Tony whined as he thumbed the head of his cock; he moved sluggish but steady, enjoying the way Tony twitched with every move of his hand. Tony gasped, his mouth falling slack.

“Goddamn… Steve…” Tony ground himself against Steve’s hand before pushing his ass down against Steve’s cock. “Are you going to fuck me, or are we going to just screw around?” His voice caught in his throat when Steve’s cock rubbed against the crack of his ass, the head nudging inward towards his hole, prodding but doing nothing more. “Oh god, you’re such a tease. Jesus Christ, Steve – when did you get to be such a tease?”

Steve kept Tony’s gaze, his fingers digging into Tony’s hips. He swallowed hard, the sight of Tony mussed and sweaty on top of him something he knew would haunt his dreams forever; he would welcome that haunting, would wrap it up in his arms and kiss it to sleep. His entire body seemed to ache for Tony; he could have come just like that, with nothing more than a few errant slides of skin against skin and Tony’s gaze locked on his own.

“Do you want to open me up, or should I?” Tony panted, trying to hurry things up.

“You… you do it. You’re so lovely… I want to watch.” Steve mumbled. Tony looked at him, skeptical all of a sudden and then he went still, his gaze softening.

“Jesus, you really mean that, don’t you?” Tony said, lips curling into a shy smile.

“What are you talking about?” Steve chuckled.

“You really think I’m beautiful or something.”

“Well you are.” Steve smiled, kissing Tony and pulling back. “You’re always beautiful.”

“Flatterer.” Tony admonished playfully. “You just want to get into my pants!”

“I think it’s safe to say that I’m already in your pants.”

“Allright, alright. While I love to hear you spouting off praise for my gorgeous body, I really kind of want to get fucked some time tonight.” Tony shifted his hips up, popping open the lube with one hand, smearing it all over the fingers of the other. He set the lube container down on Steve’s stomach and sat back, pushing Steve’s legs apart to make room for himself, his legs on top of Steve’s.

Tony leaned, pressing his fingers into his hole, arching his back at the sensation; he panted, smirking when Steve went up on his elbows to watch with wide eyes.

“You like that?” Tony asked, gasping as he twisted his fingers inside himself. Steve grunted in reply, not quite up to words anymore, his cock so hard it was stealing his higher functions.

Tony stretched himself, teasing his hole with one, then two slick fingers without breaking eye contact once; every blink seemed to make Tony’s cock harder, every breath Steve let out made him work
harder, teasing himself as if he was teasing Steve instead. His breath hitched. He licked his lips, gasping as he touched himself the right way, leaning back into the caress of his own fingers. “You know, not that I’m complaining or anything but… You can lend a hand if you want… I wouldn’t mind you know…” Tony murmured, flopping backwards, knees bent over top of Steve’s.

Steve sat up, dislodging the lube which rolled down to his hip. He took the bottle in his hand and coated his fingers, leaning over Tony as he lifted one of Tony’s legs up over his shoulder. He paused, hovering with his fingertips just above Tony’s pink hole, feeling the weight of Tony’s leg against his shoulder. He hadn’t done this in a long time, but he could still remember what it was like to make Tony come undone; he had dreamed about letting Tony open him up like this one day. It could have been tonight, but he was happy to oblige any way that he could. He wanted Tony any way he could have him. He wanted to make this good for Tony – no. Not good. Amazing.

“Steve!” Tony pleaded, rocking against Steve’s fingers. “If you don’t move it, I’m going to lose it.”

Steve pressed his finger inside the already teased opening, making Tony gasp loudly and got to work, twisting his wrist to touch Tony like he knew Tony wanted to be touched. Tony squirmed, his heel nudging against the back of Steve’s head, eyes squeezing shut in ecstasy. His hair had curled, the sweat drenched locks plastered to his forehead. His breath was rough and heavy, gasping with each twist and thrust.

“Jesus – Steve… how do you know…”

“Do you like it?”

“God yes! Do that again!”

Tony jerked, moaning so loudly, Steve was sure the neighbors across the highway could hear them. He continued to tease Tony until he was almost incoherent, his body stretched and loose around his fingers. Tony slipped his leg off of Steve’s shoulder and sat up, looking almost like he might sink back into the mattress like a limp noodle; Steve slid his fingers free with a pop, planting a gentle kiss on Tony’s lips for good measure. Tony was so sweet like this, so pliable and needy.

“Uhhuh. No more teasing. Fuck Steve, you don’t know what you’re doing to me, do you?” Tony slurred. He knocked Steve over, forcing him down on his back and then snatched a condom off of the pillow, tearing it open with his teeth like an animal. He rolled it down over Steve’s cock and then smeared lube down Steve’s shaft, rubbing roughly, almost too far gone to think straight; of course Steve was floundering just the same, trying to keep himself under control. It was embarrassing how quickly things might go if they didn’t hurry up, and Tony seemed to know it, adjusting and arranging Steve so that he was just how he wanted him.

Steve grunted, trying to hold back as Tony’s hands ran down his stomach, grabbing Steve by the cock to get his attention; Steve’s eyes shot open. It had been ages since he had done this – he hadn’t even felt all that up to touching himself in the past month, and the sensation of Tony’s hands – the realization that the hand on his cock was Tony’s –

“Sit up against the headboard.” Tony commanded in a low voice.

Steve obliged, adjusting his position; the headboard was cool against his back, and Tony was fire against his front, burning all over, chasing away the aches and pains of their tumble through the grass.

Tony kneeled overtop of Steve’s hips and cock, lining himself up. “Ready?” Steve nodded slowly, clenching the pillowcase underneath to anchor himself. With a moan, Tony pushed the head of
Steve’s cock into himself guiding the shaft in with his hand. Then slowly, tenderly, he lowered himself down all the way, his knees bracketing Steve’s sides. Tony let out a long desperate sound, eyes half-lidded. He reached up and gripped the headboard, waiting and bracing himself as his body adjusted, staring down into Steve’s eyes as if they were the most important thing in the world.

“Steve… Can I?”

Tony was so slick and warm inside; so tight and perfectly relaxed. He ass was flush with Steve’s balls, Steve’s cock vanishing inside him. He paused, drawing in a gentle breath, wiping sweat off of his brow. He began to roll his hips, fucking himself at a leisurely pace. The headboard creaked, the mattress whining its own dulcet protest. It had never been put through its paces before and for a brief blissful second Steve was aware that they could break the damned thing the way they were going at it.

“Tony – Oh god…”

Tony smirked, teasing Steve’s nipples with his free hand, pinching and stroking the tender nub of flesh in time with the roll of his hips; Steve moved beneath him, meeting him half way, earning a grunt of pleasure every time they matched rhythms.

“God yes.” Tony roared, pinching harder, tearing a squeak from Steve’s lips.

Steve’s nipples felt like they were on fire, but it was the best burn he had ever felt; Tony continued to tease him, whispering how he loved the way Steve’s face had flushed a deep scarlet, his free hand holding on desperately to the headboard, knuckles going white as he continued to rock his hips.

Tony’s cock rubbed against Steve’s belly again, slick with pre-cum and Steve took him in hand, rubbing the head in time to match Tony’s thrusts; Tony faltered, throwing his head back as Steve cupped his ass with his free hand, tracing around the flesh where Tony’s hole met his cock. Tony had liked this before, in the dream world; he had begged to be touched like this, pushing himself against Steve’s fingers like there was nothing better than being stretched wide and split open.

“Steve –” Tony whimpered, biting his lip.

A few more thrusts and Tony was coming, cum streaking its way up Steve’s chest. He shuddered, pitching forwards, his forehead bumping against the headboard. Steve stilled, still hard within Tony, waiting patiently for Tony to recover; Tony panted and bobbed his head, letting out a shaky breath.

“Don’t stop.”

Steve began to rock into Tony again, moving slow and thrusting shallowly so that he didn’t hurt him. He came when Tony kissed him, gasping into Tony’s mouth as he did so, feeling the all-enveloping warmth around him clench tightly; Tony’s warmth; Tony’s breath. Everything for Tony.

“I… I take it you’ve done this before.” Tony said wryly after slowly pulling off of Steve’s softening cock. He tied off the condom and pitched it at the garbage can. He was all shy smiles again, as if he had just realized what they had done, scratching his sweat-slick beard.

“I think so…” Steve said, shifting so that Tony was a little closer. “At least… I’ve done this in my dreams.”

“Oh? Kinky. You need to tell me more about these dreams of yours.” Tony said, dropping down on his elbows, his chest pressed against Steve’s. Steve scrubbed at the back of Tony’s neck; if Tony wanted to know, he didn’t mind sharing those dreams. Tony’s eyes half closed, practically falling asleep right then and there as Steve’s fingers worked their magic.
“I guess it must have happened, because … well… no one’s running screaming from the room in horrible agony.” Steve joked; his mind flashed back to their first time together in the dream world, how it had been so perfect and terrible all at the same time. The awkwardness was gone, even though it felt strange and new again, this was what he had remembered; the way Tony’s face had looked in the darkness, the way he had looked at Steve like he had wanted to curl up inside of him and never let go.

“I think we should do this again.” Tony chuckled, wiping a bead of sweat from Steve’s forehead before it could trickle down his nose.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’d like that.” Tony’s lips curled at the corners. “Not to spoil the mood or anything but…” He pecked Steve on the lips and sat up, scooting across the bed. He went into the bathroom, returning with a wet washcloth and cleaned Steve up, wiping himself between the legs. He pitched the washcloth back into the bathroom, hitting the side of the tub, and then crawled back into bed with a sigh. He slid Steve down the headboard and rolled him over pulling Steve up on top of him, his arms wrapping around Steve’s middle, holding tight. “There we are.”

“Here we are.” Steve agreed.

“So what happened? You guys broke up?” Tony asked, smiling nervously.

“What?” Steve blinked. What was Tony talking about?

“You and your first timer. The one who broke you in.” Tony drawled, clearing his throat.

“Oh! No. He left me. I guess that’s the simplest explanation.” Steve said. He couldn’t exactly tell Tony that his previous boyfriend had been Tony himself – that would be… weird, to say the least.

Tony pulled the blankets up over them both, snuggling closer.

“Who in their right mind would leave you? He must have been a real asshole.” Tony grumbled. “Oh well, their loss, my gain.”

“He wasn’t an asshole.” Steve protested; for some reason he felt the need to defend Tony’s memory, although why he needed to defend Tony from Tony made little sense to him, in fact, it felt a little crazy. Hearing anyone speak badly of Tony was like some kind of cosmic slap to the face. It felt wrong, more so when it was Tony making the actual comments, even if he had no idea what he was doing.

Tony stiffened, uncomfortable by the disclosure.

“Well…” Tony huffed.

“He was a really nice guy. He was a sweetheart through and through, although he drove me up walls sometimes. I’m sure I did that to him too.” Steve mumbled, pressing a kiss to Tony’s shoulder.

“If he was so nice why did he leave you?” Tony asked; it sounded like a sulk, as if he didn’t want to know the answer.

“I guess we just drifted apart.” Steve said.

“Well I can go kick his ass for you if you want.”

Steve kissed Tony on the lips, smiling down at him. He stroked Tony’s cheek, rolling his eyes at the
absurdity of Tony threatening to kick his own ass.

“That’s very sweet of you, but no. I’m in love with you. I don’t need anything else.” Steve laughed.

Tony tensed and then very deliberately and gingerly, rolled Steve off of him; he was all sharp angles and stiff, awkwardly trying to crawl away in the darkness. He made a break for his pile of clothing on the floor, grabbing it up with trembling hands, his entire body shaking.

“Tony! What’s wrong?” Steve stammered, scrambling across the bed towards Tony who flinched away when he reached out to touch him. Tony sat on the very edge of the bed, clutching his clothing in a ball to his chest. His eyes were sad, and a touch frightened when he looked up, struggling to meet Steve’s gaze; Steve had no idea how that had happened, but seeing it made him want to weep.

“You don’t love me. You’re just saying that because you don’t want to be alone. The only people who tell me they love me are the ones trying to get into the will. You just want into the will, oh my god – how could I have not seen this?” Tony broke, his words rambled out sharp and quiet like knives.

“Tony –”

“It’s fine, we can just pretend this never happened. It was just a lapse of judgement on my part. I fucked up again. We can fix this.” Tony said, gritting his teeth. “We can still be friends.”

Steve stared down at his bare legs, horrified. Tony thought he was looking to get into Howard’s will? That he was a lapse of judgement?

Was he just a lapse of judgement?

“But…” Steve whispered.

Of course… it made sense. Steve was a tiny, pathetic little thing, he knew that. He had been confidant and Tony had probably been lying about being drunk in the first place, and he had just been trying to be nice. It had been a pity fuck – oh god, he had been a pity fuck – oh god – Tony. Steve wrapped his arms around his knees, feeling the bed rise up as Tony stood. He had been so stupid! Why had he been so stupid?

“I guess I should have expected this…” Steve said softly, swallowing a lump in his throat.

Tony paused, a half step away from the bed. “Expected what?”

“That you wouldn’t want me. I mean, look at me…” Steve gestured, staring down at his toes instead of up at Tony. “I’m pathetic— I just, I don’t care about money, or wills or any of that crap. It’s all meaningless. I just wanted… I don’t want to be someone’s pity fuck.”

Tony’s clothing dropped to the floor with a soft thump, unseen.

“I just wish people would be honest with me about it up front – so that it didn’t hurt so much when they left after. At least then I might…” Steve sighed; he was close to tears now, so close that he almost didn’t have the willpower to hold them back. What was the point? “I mean, I’d trade anything to have you even look at me like this and I guess it was just wishful thinking. I shouldn’t have woken up. I should have just stayed asleep, out of everyone’s way.”

“Steve…” Tony mumbled. He crawled across the bed and wrapped an arm around Steve’s slender shoulders, pressing a kiss to Steve’s forehead. He rested his cheek against the top of Steve’s head, sighing loudly. “You’re so weird.”
Steve stiffened. *Great. First he was a lousy pity fuck and now he was weird.*

Tony hooked an arm under Steve’s legs and lifted, knocking them both backwards into the middle of the bed amidst the rumpled sheets and blankets. He wiggled Steve into place beside him, tucking Steve against his side and then pulled the covers back up, tucking them under Steve’s chin. Steve didn’t even bother to struggle, too worn out to care about being manhandled.

“You’re the weirdest person I know, did you know that?” Tony said, snuggling closer, although why he was snuggling now was a mystery. Wasn’t he just leaving? He had been leaving, hadn’t he? It wasn’t just a hallucination. He drummed his fingers on Steve’s belly, contemplating something; Steve could feel Tony smiling into the back of his head, numb, going over the same two words in his head: pity fuck, pity fuck pity fuck and no matter how many times he said it, it didn’t get any better, it only got worse. He was a pity fuck and oh god – why? Why? Why would Tony even bother with him then?

“Tony… Please… If you don’t want me don’t play around. I can’t… I can’t deal with that. Don’t pretend that –” Steve pleaded, wiping his eyes on his hand.

“I’m not pretending. *I like you.* I…” Tony let out a loud sigh. “I’ve … alright, bear with me ok? Because I’m no good at this emotional crap without a drink in my hand and I just… I’ve never had someone tell me that they love me for *me*, alright?”

“What?” Steve sputtered in disbelief.

“I’m… oh god. I have be honest – I’m *shit* with honesty. God… alright. Just. Don’t move alright – and don’t speak, because I’m not going to be able to get this out if you speak.” Tony said wearily.

Steve remained obediently quiet, huddled against Tony’s chest.

“It kind of freaked me out when you said you loved me, because… the only people who went out of their way to tell me that were the women that *he* sent…” Tony kissed Steve’s cheek. “For a second there all I could hear was them and it didn’t sound like something you would say – and no. You’re still not speaking, remember?” Tony rambled, jabbing Steve in the ribs when he tried to indignantly cut in.

“I freaked out, alright? Can you forgive me? Please? I’m really, really sorry. I didn’t mean it. Well, I meant it, but I didn’t mean it the way you’re thinking I meant it – and oh my god, why is my brain just processing this now – did you say that you thought you were a pity fuck?” Tony said, his voice getting shriller by the second.

Steve didn’t speak; Tony went on, his voice cracking.

“You’re not a *pity fuck* – Jesus! If anything, *I*’m the pity fuck. You’re the sweetest guy in the world! Why would you even think that you’re pathetic? Who told you that? Was it that guy you were with? Was it Howard? Who, because I swear to god I will hunt them down and kill them and no one will ever find the bodies.”

Tony kissed the top of Steve’s head, almost manic now, pressing kisses to anywhere he could find the space to kiss.


“No one told me…” Steve hesitated. His hurt was still fresh, screaming out, but Tony’s body wrapped around him made it dim and retreat again back inside, scared off. It wasn’t the only thing scared. *He* was scared. Scared that he had almost lost Tony, more importantly, scared that he had
done it himself somehow.

“You just thought it up yourself?” Tony asked, sounding horrified. He kissed Steve’s chin and then moved on to his collar bone, pushing the blankets down so that he could plant kisses on Steve’s throat. “Well you’re not, you know. You’re not pathetic. You’re beautiful.”

“I am not.” Steve insisted, sniffling, his tears not yet gone. Did Tony really think that? Or was it all just platitudes?

“You are too. You’re beautiful and sweet and kind and... god, I’m lucky to have you. Even if you can’t see that yourself, you’re all of those things and... most of all, you’re forgiving. You’re weird. You love me. I think I like that, so please... Forgive me? Please, please?” Tony asked, rolling Steve up onto his chest. Steve pressed his face into Tony’s shoulder, tangling their fingers under the blankets. He wanted to laugh about what had just happened but he was too goddamned relieved to manage anything other than the small smile that tugged itself into place. Tony thought he was beautiful? Tony thought he was sweet?

“I don’t understand what just happened...” Steve sighed.

“You don’t need to. All you need to know is that the previous five minutes, the part where I was making a break for the door not the whole rambled speech part, didn’t happen. Alright?” Tony whispered, trailing his fingers across the bare flesh of Steve’s back under the blanket.

“Alright.” Steve whispered back squeezing his eyes shut; he could do that. He could forget about the terror. It would stay with him, a frozen lump in his chest, but he could forget about it for now. As long as he had Tony, things would be alright.

Tony pressed a kiss to Steve’s hair. He was breathing slowly, calmly, falling asleep while his hands stroked up and down Steve’s back, unconcerned and as he had said, he had forgotten about the previous five minutes of utterly uncontrollable panic.

It would be alright.

Everything would be alright.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Things can't possibly get worse - Steve should have known better than to say that.

Chapter Notes

Probable Trigger warnings here in this one - Loki is a sadistic freak. As is Howard.

Steve woke to the sound of Tony hyper-ventilating underneath him. Somehow during the night they had wrapped around each other, with Tony squashing himself against the headboard, his face pressing into the small of Steve’s back; they had curled like kittens might, a little round ball under the blankets.

“Tony?” Steve mumbled, clawing his way frantically out from under the blankets. Tony jerked away, his back pressed flat against the headboard refusing to let his skin touch Steve’s. His eyes were wild and frantic as he looked every which way for an escape. Steve sat up slowly, trying to make the movements less jarring. The blanket dropped around Steve’s back, leaving his skin exposed to the cold of the room; he shivered and tried to ignore the Goosebumps forming on his skin.

“Tony. What’s wrong honey?”

“I hurt you.” Tony babbled, gesturing vaguely in Steve’s direction. “Oh god, I hurt you!”

Steve blinked. Panic set in without further prompting and boy, it sure knew what it was doing. Oh god – Tony had really been drinking. All of what they had done the previous night – all of it was – oh god... Steve swallowed hard, his brain fighting with the hazy details it was trying to pull up from the night before, battling sleep. They had slept together – he knew that, and he could remember that –

“Your hips are covered in bruises. I should have been gentler, I hurt you and you’re not even –”

Tony almost shrieked, not even noticing how badly Steve was panicking.

“My what is what now?” Steve croaked.

“Your hips.” Tony shouted.

“What about my hips?” Steve asked slowly, still not quite sure what the hell was going on.

“Your hips. Your hips are covered in bruises. We had sex and I hurt your hips and you’re covered in bruises!” Tony shrieked, pointing deliberately at Steve’s bare hips, jabbing at the air.

Steve followed Tony’s gesture, peering down at his hips. True to Tony’s words, the pale skin of his hips was marred with finger shaped bruises of purple, yellow and green; it was quite the colourful mess. Steve poked gingerly at one of them. Thankfully, nothing hurt and it kind of seemed to be
healing even while he looked at it. Why was Tony panicking about a couple of bruises? It wasn’t like he hadn’t been bruised before. Hell, Steve had done worse walking into the doorway two weeks ago.

“Aren’t you – upset?” Tony blurted, releasing his death grip on the headboard, his hand dropping limply into his lap.

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Not really. I kind of bruise like a peach. It’s not that big a deal. They don’t even hurt.”

“They don’t?”

“Not really. I still have super serum regeneration you know…”

“So you’re fine?” Tony asked sounding unconvinced, as if Steve might be lying to him.

“I’m fine, Tony.”

Tony slumped forwards, knocking Steve over, sprawling on top of him; he kissed Steve roughly, tangling his fingers in Steve’s hair. Steve squirmed underneath him, laughing, giving Tony a good smack against the meat of his ass. Tony groaned aloud.

“I’m so sorry –” Tony straddled Steve’s waist, pinning him to the bed.

“Don’t be. You’ve got some nice bruises on your hips too, silly.” Steve teased, scrubbing his hands over Tony’s hips, where there was indeed some slight bruising and more than a few nail marks marring his skin. Tony scowled, kissing his way Steve’s across cheek, moving to nip at Steve’s earlobe, running his teeth along cartilage until he found his way closer to Steve’s throat; he licked Steve. Steve retaliated by squeezing Tony’s ass, earning a low, throaty growl.

“I love that you’re so goddamned weird.” Tony growled. He collapsed for a moment, sighing into Steve’s throat.

“I’m not that weird…” Steve grumbled back, giving Tony another gentle smack across the ass. The sound made it so much better, Tony moaning loudly as Steve rubbed at the reddened skin. Tony’s pupils were blown wide and dark when he sat up, smirking down at Steve as if he had some kind of secret that Steve didn’t know poised on his lips. Steve wondered what it was.

“You are too weird! You put up with the strangest things.” Tony said finally.

“I’m not putting up with anything weird.” Steve laughed.

“You are too!”

“You’re putting up with me. I’d say you’re the weird one!” Steve said, pinching Tony’s cheek. Tony laughed. He wrapped himself back up in Steve’s arms, throwing the blanket over their heads. They were surrounded in darkness, feeling only the heat of their bodies pressed together, hearing only the sounds of their laboured breathing.

“I don’t want to get up.” Tony complained, resting his chin on Steve’s chest after kissing it soundly.

“And you taste good.”

“I taste good?”

“Yes. And I don’t want to get up.” Tony grumbled.
“That’s fine, neither do I.”

So they didn’t get up.

They lay together, the blanket dragged lower so that they could breathe, basking in the mid-morning glow.

Of course thirty minutes after they had drifted back into a relatively peaceful doze, they were rudely brought back to reality by someone barging in with no regard for privacy. The door swung open so hard the drywall behind it ended up dented from the collision with the doorknob; Steve stirred weakly, lifting himself to get a better look at the intruder, although he already knew exactly who it was even without looking. Only two people had the key to Tony’s front door aside from Tony himself, and only one person had absolutely no qualms about breaking into someone’s bedroom without knocking first.

“What are you doing here Howard?” Steve grunted.

Tony’s face was suddenly pressed up against the front of Steve’s hip, squashed there as the rest of him went stiff as a board; the blankets were a mountain of cloth above him, blocking most of Howard’s view except of course, for Tony’s feet which were still sticking out. Tony’s big toe twitched, as if it felt Howard’s gaze.

“Steve – who’s…” Howard gestured to the bed and Tony’s uncovered feet. He was still wearing his tuxedo from the night before, looking just as dapper as he always did even if it was a much more rumpled sort of dapper at the moment. His eyes were bloodshot, his stance a little lopsided, likely just getting over the previous night’s bender. His bow-tie was crooked, and had something that looked suspiciously like bright red lipstick smeared across the front of it. His once crisp white dress shirt was pulled out of his pants; Steve really wished that he hadn’t noticed the same red lipstick smeared there too.

Howard glared at the blanket mound on top of Steve so vindictively Steve was surprised that his bedding hadn’t lit on fire. He cast a glance around the room and spied Tony’s clothing balled up on the floor at his feet. Even hung over, Howard could put two and two together.

“Sweet Jesus – you didn’t fuck Tony, did you?” Howard yelped, his voice cracking. He yanked the blankets from Steve’s hands before Steve could even utter a token protest, throwing Tony’s body sharply into the light. Tony didn’t move an inch. He looked like a mannequin folded into position; a very naked mannequin. Tony hugged Steve for dear life with his eyes squeezed shut, the blankets just barely covering the lower half of his bare ass.

“Howard. You’re kind of interrupting something.” Steve growled, putting a hand on Tony’s head for comfort. Tony was trembling, and it wasn’t all because of the chill in the room; his lips kept twitching against Steve’s hip, tickling Steve’s bruised skin. He carded his fingers through Tony’s hair gently, trying to ease some of the tangled locks into a more comfortable position; they must have been making Tony crazy, but he wasn’t moving to scratch at them. Steve couldn’t really blame him.

Howard stared at Steve, floundering as he tried for words, hands clenched at his sides. His face went bright red. “You can do so much better than him.” He locked eyes with Steve, purposely ignoring
the scene before him, never once glancing at his son draped across Steve’s lower half.

“I love him, so back off.” Steve snapped. He wanted to yell in Howard’s face so badly that it hurt, but he kept his wits and calm, watching and waiting to see what Howard would do next. There would be better times to give Howard a piece of his mind; times where he wasn’t buck naked in bed with Tony and where his clothing was within reach.

“You… love him?” Howard sounded startled.

“Yes, I do.”

Howard blinked, dazed like Steve had just struck across the head with a frying pan; this was just as satisfying as that would have been, more so, in fact because Howard was still conscious to process what was going on. His hands curled and uncurled hanging limply at his sides, his mouth dropped open. He hungrily traced the contours of Steve’s naked body with his eyes, moving to settle on Tony’s head and his unkempt hair. “Is he –” Howard pointed a shaking finger at Tony.

“He’s sleeping. Is there something you wanted?” Steve said. He could see Howard’s tiny mind working, the gears turning slowly but surely. He tensed when he saw Howard’s eyes narrowing, his nostrils flaring, and prepared for an outburst.

“God, he just fucks up everything. First he screws up on his own speech, and now –” Howard spat. He stamped his feet like a frustrated goat. “Now he’s fucked you up too!”

“He didn’t fuck up anything. He’s where he’s wanted. Again, is there something you wanted? Because if not, please get out of my bedroom. We were sleeping.” Steve wrapped his arms a little tighter around Tony. “And you’re disturbing us.”

“I’m…” Howard let out a long groan, shaking his head, his anger draining away. “I’m glad that it’s not Bucky, I suppose. I’m not sure what I would have done if it was him under there… Alright… I can deal with this.” Howard shrugged, rolling his shoulders. “Although for the life of me I can’t see what you see in him. He’s…” Howard broke off, grasping for words.

“He’s wonderful,” Steve said, stroking Tony’s hair. Tony twitched under his touch; Steve smiled down at him. “Just the way he is.”

“Well, wonderful isn’t the word I was going to use. I was going to go with a big baby, but I suppose there’s no accounting for taste.” Howard grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’d be worried that you’d taken a blow to the head if you weren’t looking so perky.”

“Howard…” Steve warned.

“Yes. Right – I was going to tell you something wasn’t I? I think there was a reason why I came here after all… not just for the… show.” Howard said, biting his lower lip, eyebrows furrowed.

“Were you?”

“Oh yes!” Howard clapped his hands; it was as if he had completely tuned Tony out, and possibly even Steve, now that Steve was thinking about it. He might as well have been in a different room, because Howard’s eyes were shining maniacally; his grin would have been dazzling if it wasn’t for the fact that he had spinach stuck in his teeth. Howard began to pace, kicking Tony’s balled up clothing out of his way as he did so, moving back to stand at the end of the bed with his hands on his hips.

“So – the Avengers news I told you last night is a go. All you have to do is pack and tell me when
you’re ready to leave and you’ll be settled in in no time. I have this lovely room picked out for you – spectacular view of the city, and of course you’ll be far enough away from Bucky so that I won’t be too concerned about him creeping into your room at night like some kind of common criminal.” Howard said, rubbing his hands together in glee.

Steve had almost forgotten about the news from the previous night; it might have been better if he had.

Bucky was going to be disappointed, and in truth, Steve would probably be a little teeny bit disappointed himself that he wouldn’t be joining them but he had Tony now; he really truly had Tony. He didn’t need anything more to make his life any better than it already was. He didn’t need the Avengers like he once had. It would have been nice to be useful again, sure – to be able to help others in a capacity other than that of personal food dispensary but he wouldn’t miss the sleepless nights, or the visits to the hospital with broken bones and life threatening injuries. This way he could keep both himself and Tony safe; he hadn’t been able to do that before, in that dream-world. He and Tony had always been in danger one way or another and no matter how often Tony upgraded his armor, or how frequently Steve forced the team to practice sparing together, there was always the chance of death. At least this time it was his choice – his decision to not go into the battlefield. He could keep Tony safe without the shield. He didn’t need to be Captain America to do that.

Tony bolted upright between Steve’s knees; Steve hadn’t expected him to move until Howard had left the room, yet here he was, moving on his own.

“You’re going to live with the Avengers…” Tony said slowly. Howard stopped his pacing for a moment to slap Tony across the back in what may or may not have been agreement; the sound of his hand connecting with Tony’s bare skin made Steve cringe. Tony grimaced, but didn’t back down.

“You’re going to live with the Avengers… Steve, that’s great! You should start packing – you can go right now if you get everything together.” Tony said; he was trying to smile for some reason, and it looked awkward and alarming, as if his face was breaking down the middle splitting in two. Steve hated every second he had to look at that awful forced smile. It was worse than watching Tony stagger around when he was drunk.

“I’m not going.” Steve said calmly, hoping that Tony would get the hint that he wasn’t going anywhere.

“What?” Howard squawked.

“What?” Tony’s face froze, his expression stuck somewhere between dismay and forced happiness.

“I appreciate the offer, and god knows in some other life I would be jumping up to join you right now, but all things considered, I’m going to have to say no.” Steve said. “But thanks for the offer.”

“But… why?” Howard asked, astonished.

“I’m happy here with Tony. Things are working out – and I’m happy, really happy with how things are in my life. I don’t want to leave now – or ever. I’ve been waiting months for this and I’m not going to just throw it away, even if it is the Avengers we’re talking about.” Steve said.

“Steve – I don’t think you understand what’s happening here. The Avengers – the *Avengers* – are offering you a permanent place within their organization. You’ll have a future – you’ll have work that’s rewarding, worthy of your time, *redeeming* – you’ll be able to do everything you ever wanted to do when you joined the army in the first place. And you’re throwing that *away*? *For Tony?*” Howard sputtered.
Tony looked small then; very, very small, as if he might disappear, shrinking into nothingness.

“Steve…” Howard growled. “Come on now. You can’t be serious.”

“I am serious. Very serious. I’m happy here. I love Tony, and I’m sorry that you can’t understand that Howard, but it’s the truth. Please give the Avengers my thanks and my apologies. I appreciate all the work you’ve done to get me into – ” Steve stuttered to a halt when he saw that Howard had snapped his mouth shut and was now glaring fiercely at Tony’s bare back.

“Howard. No.” Steve growled, standing up; he wrapped a sheet around his waist, moving to put himself in between father and son, not wanting to wait to see if Howard lashed out in vengeance at the slight that was entirely his fault. “Leave Tony out of this. This is between you and me.”

“I won’t tell them no Steve. I’ll tell them that you’re making up your mind. Just think about it. Think long and hard about what you’re throwing away here all in the name of so called love. You don’t really need love Steve. You can still come back here and fuck Tony whenever you want if that’s really what will make you happy – just… think about it. Alright? Think about how much of your life you’re willing to dump for him.” Howard said, his voice barely above a whisper. His phone started beeping wildly and he tensed, recognizing the tones although he didn’t seem like he wanted to answer it.

“I have to go. Avengers business. I’ll see you later Steve. Think about it.” Howard grunted, pressing a button on his phone; the beeping fell silent, cut off like a throat being slit. He left without waiting for a response.

When they were alone, Tony slid off of the bed and slowly started collecting his clothing piece by piece until all he had left to reclaim was his socks which had taken up residency on the corner of Steve’s drawing desk. Steve unwound the sheet from around his waist and dropped it onto his bed, snagging his boxers off of the bookshelf, pulling them on hastily; he wasn’t going to have this conversation in the buff that was for sure. Tony hadn’t said a word since Howard had departed, and that was all kinds of wrong. They needed to talk about this now, sooner rather than later. He wasn’t going to let this do him in a couple of lousy hours later.

Tony pulled on his boxers, starting towards the doorway with his tuxedo jacket and pants in hand, looking terribly lost.

“You should be packing.” Tony said quietly, folding the jacket in half, weighing the fabric carefully as he checked for loose buttons on the cuffs.

“You should be packing? Tony –” Steve sputtered. He wanted to be calm and rational about this, but it was starting to look like they had somehow wandered into crazyville without passports. How could Tony even think that he would leave him? The Avengers were great – they were fantastic people, but the only person he wanted to spend his life with, the only one he wanted to grow old with was Tony. He loved Natasha, Bruce, Thor, Clint and Bucky like they were family, but Tony would always
come first. Always!

“Look, it’s simple, alright? If you stay here, you’ll be wasting your life, just like he said. You’re a smart guy Steve – Bucky thinks so, and he knows what he’s talking about. You deserve to have a better life than this. You don’t need me dragging you down.” Tony said.

Steve put his hands on his hips. “Are you insane? Did you lose your mind while Howard was talking? I want to be with you. I’m not wasting my life – You’ll never be a waste! I love you – that’s not going to change – Ever!” He bit his lip, regretting the words the moment he had said them. He was usually better than this. Why the hell had he called Tony insane? How was that going to help the situation?

“I’m not insane,” Tony snapped, lip twitching, “I’m being practical. You’re walking into a mess here – you’ve seen me – hell you’ve lived with me, you know what I’m talking about!” He grabbed one of the suitcases from Steve’s floor and tipped it over, knocking the plastic wrapped clothing out until it was empty. He began to shovel the important things in, stuffing Steve’s favourite clothing, sketchbooks and pencils inside carelessly; his own clothing was dumped on the floor in the doorway, forgotten, the jacket lying in a crumpled pile.

“Tony!” Steve grabbed Tony by the arm, trying to stop him, wanting to shake some sense into him; it wasn’t to be. Tony just shrugged Steve off, turning his back on him, working away. He couldn’t seem to look at Steve. Steve’s heart twisted at that. Why wouldn’t Tony listen?

“Tony. I don’t want you to do this.” Steve said loudly. He was trying not to scream in frustration, he really was, but this was getting out of hand. Steve closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his wits. He could deal with this if he focused, even if everything coming out of Tony’s mouth was a lie concocted to get him to go. “Tony stop. I’m not going to leave you – I won’t! I don’t want to.”

“You will, because I don’t want you here.” Tony said, zipping up the bag.

That stung more than it should have. He watched Tony fiddle aimlessly with the zipper, once there was nothing else left nearby for him to pack away, shocked at how easily the words had come from Tony’s mouth. Was there some truth to them? Or was Tony that good at lying?

“I’m not leaving you.” Steve said. “You’ll have to kill me first.”

Tony looked up sharply; his face had gone pale, and his eyes wide and vacant like those of a doll.

“Steve –”

“I’m serious Tony. I love you. The only way you’re getting me out of here is if you drag my cold dead body out that door.” Steve crossed his arms over his chest.

“I don’t want you here Steve. I want you gone.” Tony said loudly as he scanned the room, spotting new things to pack away. He lunged, grabbed the next suitcase, throwing it open so that he could stuff books and art supplies from Steve’s bookshelf inside, bending some of the covers. It was as if he had slapped his hands over his ears and had gone ‘na-na-na-not-listening’.

“You want me gone?” Steve choked out in disbelief. It was a lie, it had to be but there was that funny look in Tony’s eyes again and he only looked like that when there was a grain of truth to what he was saying. Could it be true then? Had it all really been nothing but a lie?

“I want you gone.” Tony nodded again and again, wrestling with the suitcase he was cramming everything into. “Gone Steve – Gone.”
“And there’s nothing – you won’t let me stay? Even after last night? After everything you said to me – after all we’ve been through?” Steve croaked.

“I want you gone.” Tony repeated, turning away. “You have to go.”

Steve was very aware then that he was practically naked. He could feel nothing but shame now, looking down at his body as he tried to pull himself back from the brink. He looked around the room with a jerky swing of his head, hoping to find something he could put on. All of his clothing was packed up inside the suitcase Tony was half sitting on, and he wasn’t going to get at it anytime soon. He spied the ugly housecoat Howard had bought him, the one with the word Princess stencilled on the back of it, lying on the floor and picked it up pulling it on for the third time since he had found. The robe was soft and warm. He used it as a shield, focusing on the texture of the fabric and not on the man in front of him who just wouldn’t listen; the man who was slowly killing him with his words. He cinched the belt around his waist, shutting the robe and then surveyed the mess Tony had made with clenched teeth. Paper and pencils were strewn everywhere, lying where they had fallen; Tony kept bending down to scoop something up to cram it into the bag, which ended up knocking something else to the ground that he would also have to stoop to retrieve.

This was his life – Steve’s life – lying there on the ground, being taken out of his hands. Tony was trying to do what was best for him, but it was wrong – it wasn’t what was best – it was what would be worst. Why couldn’t Tony understand that? He couldn’t be thinking straight.

Those awful words came back from the night before: pity fuck, pity fuck pity fuck. No. He wasn’t going to let those words back in; not now, not after Tony’s honesty had washed them away. This relationship wasn’t something Tony was going to just push away. He wasn’t going to stand there and take this. Steve clenched his fists, shaking with anger, hating himself for having believed Tony’s words for a few treacherous seconds.

This was all Howard’s fault! If Howard had just waited to say something in private, then he could have turned him down and Tony wouldn’t even have had to know about it. He could have picked a better moment to talk to Tony about it, could have done a thousand different things to ease Tony into the idea without blatantly slapping it in his face.

“Fine. Don’t believe me! I’m going for a walk. This is ridiculous Tony. You can’t get rid of me this easily. I’m not a fucking shirt you can just take back to the store when you decide you don’t want it anymore. I’m a person, and I can make my own decisions!” Steve snapped. “And you know what else? You deserve nice things in your life too you know, even if you don’t believe it!”

Steve stormed out of the room towards the front porch, his feet slapping at the floor with each angry step he took. The front door was open when he got to it, which was yet another irritation; Howard was very concerned about thieves and degenerates getting into his houses, so he always locked up tightly whenever he went out even if it was just to leave his office to go get a coffee from the machine a few feet away. The welcome mat was flipped over, tripped on in haste. That wasn’t right either. Howard always made sure to keep things neat and tidy, the exact opposite of his son who was a whirlwind of disorganization at the best of times. Something had gone wrong. Steve pulled on a pair of slip-on shoes he had left by the door and stepped out onto the porch, angry and concerned.

He caught sight of smoke off in the distance when he went up on his tiptoes to see over the hedge; where there was smoke, there was most definitely fire. Whatever was going on had to have happened further up the road. There weren’t any emergency vehicles charging their way, or at least there weren’t any he could hear yet. Their neighbors would have phoned the police if it had happened near them; they liked their prize roses far too much to risk them being damaged by fire. He was down the steps and across the yard in a matter of seconds, sprinting down the road towards the
fire before his brain could tell him that it might not be the best idea to charge off into the unknown dressed in nothing but slip-on shoes and a fuzzy bathrobe.

Howard had been called away on Avengers business – this was *Avengers* business, not *Steve Rogers*’ business. He was crazy and he knew it, but he just kept moving. He rounded the corner, passing through the gates and found himself standing in front of what were the remains of a car – the car *Happy* usually drove.

Steve didn’t panic.

He calmly assessed the situation, taking in his surroundings. The Avengers were fighting a few feet away, all of them battling what appeared to be some kind of shadowy creatures; he couldn’t make out what they were, but he knew evil when he saw it, and this was definitely evil. Howard was with them, being guarded by Natasha, who was busy slashing at the creatures with her left hand, shooting a pistol with the other. None of the Avengers seemed injured which was a relief and there was minimal damage to the nearby infrastructure, with only the hedges looking worse for wear. This was good – they were doing well.

Happy was lying unconscious on the side of the road, spread-eagled like some kind of wax figure that had taken a nasty tumble; the door to the car had been ripped off – probably Thor’s doing and not the Hulk’s, judging by the size of the dents in the metal – and while the car was still on fire, it didn’t look like there was any danger of it exploding any time soon.

Steve scrambled closer almost losing a shoe, and knelt down beside Happy taking his pulse. Happy was alive, his heart beating steadily. He was breathing deeply, and only looked a little singed around the edges upon closer inspection. He might lose his left eyebrow, but that would be the only casualty; he had a nasty looking bump on his forehead, which meant that he would probably be spending the night in the hospital later on. Assuming that there *was* a later on, of course, but other than that, he looked alright.

“Well, well, well…” A woman’s voice purred directly behind Steve.

Steve knew that voice; Steve *hated* that voice.

Loki’s hand came to rest on Steve’s slender shoulder, her fingers digging into the soft fabric of the bathrobe. She used it to haul him upright, far stronger than she looked. She was a tactile creature at heart, stroking his back and shoulder in long lines from shoulder to hip, forcing him to stand awkwardly as she massaged the material of the bathrobe.

Steve’s mind screamed for him to run. He jerked forwards, ready to make a break for it – Well, he would have *if he had been able to move*. His body wouldn’t respond, leaving him as nothing more than a marionette waiting for his strings to be pulled. He could barely turn his head around to look at Loki, let alone move his arms to strike at her. The only part of his body that moved easily was his eyes, and they didn’t give him nearly enough to work with. He doubted that even Natasha could kill someone with only her eyes.

“Oh don’t run off dear. Well…” Loki chortled, the laugh high and girlish as she put her hand over her mouth, “You *can’t* run, can you? I see the enchantment I put on you is still going strong. How lovely!”

“Enchantment?” Steve managed to get out, having to bite out each syllable. It felt like someone had glued his lips together. He was lucky that he didn’t suffer from asthma anymore or else he would have passed out.
“The little kiss I gave you when we first met was more than just a kiss. Come now Steve, you didn’t think I did that for kicks, did you?” Loki snorted.

Steve actually had thought that it had been for kicks. Loki had always been a little… off. Molesting people was par for the course for him; Steve could have kicked himself for not suspecting anything. He remained stubbornly stuck in place as Loki stepped back and traced her fingers over the fancy lettering on the back of his bathrobe, mouthing the word as she read it over and over again.

Why wasn’t anyone noticing that Loki was here, Steve thought angrily – some Avengers, if they couldn’t even keep their eyes on the super villain!

And then Loki was murmuring out that awful word aloud. Steve wished he could cringe.

“Princess?”

Loki jabbed Steve in the middle of the back, her fingernails sharp and solid against his yielding flesh. “Oh that’s just precious! I’ve always wanted a princess.”

Steve couldn’t see most of what happened next. He couldn’t say that he was exactly grateful for it; Loki was standing almost directly behind him, and while Steve could see out of the corners of his eyes he couldn’t quite catch all of the transformation. It simply happened too damned fast for his eyes to keep up with it. The world seemed to go very still, Loki’s body twisting and morphing, bones and flesh cracking and rearranging; his clothing changed after, molding to fit around his new body.

Steve was yanked backwards by the nape of his neck, but instead of bumping into Loki’s breasts, he hit solid muscle – muscle that had not been there a few moments before. Loki wrapped himself around Steve like a snake, his chin resting on Steve’s head, sighing contentedly as he tapped on Steve’s naked breastbone. A quick glance down at Loki’s hands told Steve all he needed to know. Loki had finally given up playing around as Lady Loki; those weren’t the slender, manicured fingers he was used to. This was the real Loki. Good god, Steve realized with a start, he had been right all along. Loki was a man!

“So… You’ll be my princess then?” Loki cooed his voice deep and dark, filled with promises of nightmarish things to come.

“Loki!”

Bucky ran towards them, his shield held at the ready flashing in the light of Thor’s lightening as it rippled across the sky; finally, someone had noticed that something was terribly wrong behind them.

“Get your hands off of him!” Bucky roared.

“Oh shut it.”

Loki flicked his wrist lazily and the shield ripped clean out of Bucky’s hands, skidding across the asphalt a few feet away with metallic screech that had Steve wanting to clap his hands over his ears. Bucky was still charging forwards even without the shield, ready to strike Loki in the face until he got one good look at Loki. Then his charge went to hell. Bucky stumbled almost tripping on his own feet, not because of any spell or because of pain, but because Loki was waving at him coquettishly.

“What’s wrong Captain? You’ve never seen me with my hair down?” Loki teased, stepping out from behind Steve. He rested a hand gingerly on Steve’s slender shoulder as he did a sultry pirouette so that Bucky could see the entire package, his smile widening as Bucky’s eyes bulged in terror.

Steve had always known that Loki was tall; Lady Loki had towered over him, yet Loki as he really
was, as he had been before he started playing around with his spells, was a giant. He had heard about Loki’s Frost Giant parentage, but he hadn’t quite believed it until now. Loki towered well above Steve, and was even a few inches above Bucky. He seemed to notice it too, because he was suddenly all snake-fanged smiles, grinning viciously in Bucky’s direction as he came out of his twirl. He licked his finger and then traced down the front of his chest, fingering skin through the low cut of his armor, smirking at the look of absolute disgust on Bucky’s face.

“What’s wrong? I’m not attractive anymore? You don’t want to fuck me again, like all those months ago when you had me pinned up against that wall –” Loki tittered.

“Shut up! You’re a goddamned freak!” Bucky snarled, his face draining of all colour.

“You weren’t complaining then when you were buried deep inside my –”

Bucky took a swing at Loki and missed; it was a graceless move, and Loki took full advantage of it. Loki slipped out of the way easily, turning Bucky’s momentum against him. He flitted past in time to snatch Bucky by the arm, heaving him away with a shrill laugh. Bucky sailed through the air, crashing hard into the side of the burning car with a meaty thud; he dropped into a roll and was upright and charging at Loki again before the dust had settled, every inch the soldier he had been trained to be.

Loki didn’t seem impressed. He lifted his hand and brought his staff to his side, conjuring it out of nothingness. The weapon was then used like a golf club, and without the shield in Bucky’s hands there was little he could do to block the direct attack aimed at his head.

Bucky went backwards again, slamming into the car door. The entire car shifted backwards, skidding closer to Happy’s prone form, sparks flying into the air as the metal scraped against the asphalt.

“Someone get Happy –” Steve cried out, trying to do something useful, needing to draw attention somehow to what was happening behind them so that Happy wouldn’t get crushed. No one seemed to hear him.

“Oh hush.” Loki said to Steve.

Like hell he was going to hush! Steve pried opened his mouth to tell Loki where to go. Nothing. Not a single sound came out even when he took in a full breath. Steve was red in the face by the time Loki started grinning again, silently screaming.

“Oh my, what a naughty mouth my princess has. I should probably do something about that, hm?”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed. “You get your hands off him!”

“I take it you’re in a relationship now? How nice for you. Was he good to you?” Loki asked, ignoring Bucky. Steve tried to glare. He tried to shout again to no effect and cursed, mouthing the word without thinking. Loki grinned almost impossibly harder, leaning so close that Steve could smell the soft lilac scent of his hair. He pinched Steve’s lips.

“Oh my, what a naughty mouth my princess has. I should probably do something about that, hm?”
Loki cackled. “Although, I do so enjoy seeing a little fight in someone so sweet looking.”

Steve steeled himself, preparing for the worst, knowing that he wouldn’t even be able to cry out. The Avengers and Thor were still battling in the distance, too far off away to notice what was happening. For some strange reason Bucky hadn’t called for backup yet. What the hell was Bucky waiting for? An engraved invitation?

Instead of lashing out, however, Loki’s simply stared at Steve. He frowned, spinning Steve this way and that, taking in his appearance from all angles, levitating him into the air so that they were eye to eye.

“I think a Princess requires a nicer hairstyle. Maybe some length and volume... that would look very nice...” Loki murmured to himself. The fingers tangling in Steve’s hair went icy cold for a split-second. Steve’s scalp became overpoweringly itchy, his eyes watering as his hair grew out inch by inch until it draped down around his shoulders, sparkling gold in the sunlight, almost ethereal in nature; his sight was blocked as his bangs grew out, ribbons of hair so soft it felt as if it felt as if he was being touched by a velvet glove. Steve blew out a breath and dislodged his bangs enough to get a good look at Loki, hoping that he wasn’t going to find a worse expression on the villain’s face than before.

Actually, a worse expression might have been better.

Loki looked positively enchanted.

“And you should be dressed more appropriately if you’re going to be my princess. Something sweet and green I think – something to match with my clothing. Oh... and definitely something Lolita... oh yes. That will do just fine.”

Loki’s fingers stroked their way down Steve’s throat, yanking open the bathrobe, tearing the belt free with such force that it ripped in half, exploding into nothing more than fluff. There was no mistaking Loki’s intent now. He was a trickster, capable of magics no mere mortal could control and he meant business; when he said Steve was going to be his princess, he damn well meant it.

Fabric materialized around Steve; he flushed, finding that what he was dressed in now wasn’t exactly his kind of clothing. He wasn’t in his comfortable jeans and t-shirts, or the tuxedo he had worn the night before. He was wearing a dress and a very flashy dress at that. It sort of reminded Steve of something he had seen taped to Clint’s bedroom wall one time. They had never talked about it of course; it had been too embarrassing to talk about pinup girls at the best of times, and that had certainly not been a pinup girl – at least not the kind Steve had seen back when he had been in the army. The dress Steve was currently wearing was green and white, with long green sleeves and a white ruffled apron cinched around his waist; the top wasn’t low cut and bordered on modest in all honesty. Steve had never felt Loki capable of enjoying something this plain before. Loki was ostentatious – vivid and brutal. This was almost... normal, for lack of a better word.

“Come on Princess. Smile for me. Turn that frown upside down.” Loki smirked.

For one terrible moment, Loki’s words threw Steve back into his memories of the dream-world; he remembered with startling clarity the bonnet Clint had made out of coffee filters, and what he had done in an awkward attempt to get Tony to stop panicking about their failed coming-out to the other Avengers; they had all known about the relationship for months, secretly cheering the pair of them on. He had thought it was funny then, making Tony wear the bonnet as punishment, something cute and harmless to make Tony realize just how silly it had been, thinking that Steve might dump him for the others finding out about them before they had been ready to tell them. Steve bit his lip, stomach churning unpleasantly at the memory, the bonnet front and centre in that particular walk of shame.
Had it been like this for Tony back then? Had it been humiliating? He hadn’t meant it to be, but he could see it now, the way the others had laughed at the sight, just as they would laugh at him and the dress he was wearing. What had he been thinking? He had been such an asshole! Oh god, he wanted to bury his head in his hands, he had even taken pictures of it.

“Oh dear. No crying. Here, your prince will make it better.” Loki drawled while wiping at Steve’s watering eyes. “And while we’re at it…”

Steve flinched when his hair was pushed upwards by magic, lifting around his ears so that a green ribbon could wrap itself lovingly around his throat. Stockings crept up his legs, ending at his thighs. He couldn’t quite look down to see but he could tell that his slip-on shoes had also changed although into what he couldn’t say.

Loki stood back, contented with Steve’s appearance. He had the audacity to wolf whistle, smirking at Steve and then at Bucky from over Steve’s shoulder.

“Lovely! Don’t you agree?”

Loki spun Steve around with a twist of his wrist, holding Steve’s hands daintily in his own as he gave Steve another spin; the dress flowed around Steve’s body, lifting slightly with each turn to reveal his pale thighs, the only bits of skin not covered by the green stockings. Steve wanted to struggle. His body didn’t appear to be listening to him anymore, and so the dance continued uninterrupted.

“Get your stinkin’ mitts off of him!” Bucky’s face went lobster red on Steve’s behalf. He clenched his fists as Loki’s arm wrapped delicately around Steve’s waist. Steve tried to mouth words, wanting to tell Bucky to get away before Loki did something really awful – and then he saw Tony approaching from the other side of the burning car and he lost his nerve entirely. He wanted to hide in shame; not for how he looked, but for how he had made Tony feel in the dream-world. If he could take that moment back, he would, even if it hadn’t ever happened. He would have begged for forgiveness.

Tony stumbled down the road. “I fucked up again.” He mumbled to himself, shaking his head. “I want you to stay. He’ll believe me, right? He will. He has to. He’s Steve. He knows that I don’t really want him gone.” When he laid eyes on Steve, it seemed to take him a few seconds to figure out just what was going on.

“Steve?” Tony squawked. “What the hell are you doing to Steve?” He charged around the car towards Steve and Loki, dodging chunks of flaming wreckage; Steve was horrified when he realized that Tony wasn’t wearing slippers or even shoes. He was in his bare feet, dressed in nothing more than his boxers and an undershirt.

“Ah, the illustrious Tony Stark I presume? You don’t usually tread where your shadow does.” Loki clucked his tongue, giving Tony a once over as Tony reached out to grab at Steve; he had to jump to get close enough to snatch at Steve’s hand, but that didn’t seem to slow him down any.

“I don’t think so little Stark.” Loki snorted; he slapped Tony away with an open hand, sending him flying backwards, a chuckle escaping his lips when he saw how graceless Tony was in flight. Bucky just barely reacted in time, managing to keep Tony from connecting with the side of the flaming car. Tony staggered against Bucky, stunned.

“Steve – You let him go!” Tony roared, struggling to break free from Bucky’s grasp, going berserk when Bucky wouldn’t let go. Bucky held on tight, his lips settling into a grimace as he tried to keep Tony from recklessly charging at Loki. His hand loosened for a split second, something dark going
across his face as if Tony had suddenly become too much to handle. He tightened his grip again, scowling.

The possibilities of this ending well flew out the window, no matter how hard Steve tried to manipulate them in his mind. The tactician in his head was going crazy, looking for any solution to get them through the day; anything really, even if it meant doing something stupid, like flirting or getting himself killed to keep the others safe. It was no use. Steve couldn’t move, and with Loki’s hand on him there was no way he was going to get away even if he tried to gnaw off the offending limb. All he could do was watch and pray.

The Avengers had fallen silent behind them, eerily reminiscent of that day in New York when Tony had come crashing through the portal, limp like a ragdoll as he returned from the vacuum of space. There were no screams or yelps, but Steve was certain that the Avengers had been taken down all the same. Thor was far too quiet to be conscious, and even Howard was silent, his whimpering snuffed out like a candle losing its flame.

Loki preened, strutting around Steve in a semi-circle. “Steve’s fine. My, aren’t you a feisty one? The way Howard talks about you, you’d have thought that you were some kind of baby. How sweet – are you trying to protect your delicious little friend? Trying to do something aside from hiding in your pathetic house while Daddy does all the work for you?” Loki sneered at Tony lips curling to reveal white, sharp teeth.

Tony bristled, thrashing harder against Bucky. “Let him go – he’s not yours –” Tony snarled.

“Oh my…” Loki sniffed the air, leaning forwards. “You smell just like him. I see… so that’s how it is…”

“What are you –” Bucky sputtered, nearly losing his grip on Tony when Tony’s elbow caught him in the face.

“Ha! If you don’t know, then I’m not telling you.” Loki sang.

“Stop moving goddamnit!” Bucky roared as Tony thrashed against him. He grabbed a hold of Tony’s arm, gripping him so tightly that Tony bent in half squealing in pain. “You’re playing a dangerous game here. Stop fucking around.” Bucky growled as Tony gasped.

“You’re going to break him if you keep that up. He’s not meant to be treated so roughly.” Loki sniffed disdainfully.

“And you think I care?” Bucky snorted.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Really… you would do something like that to Steve’s beloved? Snapping him in half like you would a child’s toy? My, my. Captain America sure has lost his lustre. They should take that shield away from you boy. You don’t deserve it.”

Bucky glowered taking a shuffled step forwards, manhandling Tony behind him as he moved. Tony was dragged along, his knees scraping across the asphalt; he may have been protected from Loki, but his heels weren’t safe at all. His feet and knees were bleeding by the time Bucky came to a stop again.

“Let Steve go and we’ll talk about this. You don’t want to do this.”

“Playing the diplomacy card now? Have you run out of everything else then?” Loki smiled. He wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist, swaying back and forth. He drummed his fingers on Steve’s hip, carelessly allowing one of his hands to slip down to cup Steve’s buttocks. “I think this is more
what you want, isn’t it? A little hanky-panky with a sweet piece of ass? Is that the right phrasing? It sounds so delightfully rude, so I suppose it must be."

“You don’t want to do this.” Bucky hissed, as if that might scare Loki enough into letting Steve go.

“Oh, but I do!” Loki snickered into the back of his hand. “You seem be under the impression that you’re the only one who’s been waiting around him to wake up. I have been keeping an eye on the lovely Steve Rogers for just as long as you have. Seventy years is long and dull if one doesn’t have something with which to occupy their time. You know what I mean, don’t you dear?” Loki gestured to Bucky, pressing a kiss to Steve’s cheek; Steve felt as if his skin was going to crawl clean off of his skeleton. He would have been swearing up a storm if his voice had let him. His foot would also have been buried in Loki’s balls, but that was another matter entirely.

“Don’t touch him!” Tony snarled. “Steve! Steve, I’m going to come and get you! It’ll be fine!”

Bucky kicked Tony’s feet out from under him with a snort, pinning Tony to the ground with his foot planted squarely on Tony’s back.

Steve seethed, glaring in Bucky’s direction as hard as he could; it didn’t even phase Bucky, who continued to stare Loki down, gritting his teeth as Tony squirmed underneath his foot.

“You’re so rough. Hardly the kind of character one wants in a man. Have you ever thought about taking anger management classes darling? You could probably use a few lessons.” Loki murmured, shaking his head when Bucky glared at him. “Where was I? Oh yes. Really, I was going to spend a few more days watching to see what Steve was going to do with his pathetic mortal relationship with baby Stark, but frankly I got bored. I’m sure you understand my frustration Bucky. Watching and waiting to see what people are going to do takes so much out of a person. I was getting disappointed that Tony here didn’t seem to want to move things along… oh…” Loki grinned wolfishly, eyes locked on Tony, who was practically frothing at the mouth, straining to look up from his position on the ground. He looked up at Bucky, positively gleeful. “You still haven’t figured it out yet? Fine… I’ll tell you. Little Tony here has gone and gotten himself laid! Bravo!” Loki said, clapping both his and Steve’s hands together.

Bucky looked livid. He glanced down at Tony, who was still trying to claw his way out of Bucky’s grasp to get at Steve, and then went very still. His foot jerked downwards and suddenly Tony wasn’t looking up anymore, gasping for breath; there was an audible crack. Steve hoped to god that it wasn’t Tony’s ribs.

“Steve… you didn’t…” Bucky’s voice broke.

“He can’t speak, remember?” Loki laughed. “He’s my toy now, not yours.”

“Let him go or I swear to god I will break your face.”

“So violent! I’d applaud you for piecing it all together, but really, I was kind of rooting for Tony the whole time, so I suppose that would be a little hypocritical of me. Try not to break his entire body, hm? He’s going to need to spend a lot of time working if he wants to get his delightfully cute Steve back from me. And I know he wants him back.” Loki smiled. He waved his staff above his head bathing himself and Steve in brilliant strings of green magic, waving goodbye to Bucky and Tony as if he were the Queen out for a casual stroll. The shadows cast upon Loki’s face seemed like black tears in his pale skin, as if he might fall apart one ragged inch at a time; his eyes glowed like two green coals. “You make things so interesting Bucky…”

Steve struggled with his inanimate body, trying to force himself to move; breathing became harder,
the atmosphere changing around them with every second they spent within the magical vortex. He gasped, drawing in shaky breaths, supported solely by Loki’s body, his own too weak to support itself even under Loki’s control. Magic crackled around them, the air filled with sparks of green, gold and black.

There was a crackle as lighting lit up the sky, the clouds swirling above them dark and sinister in nature. Loki’s smile faded into an annoyed frown.

“Well, I suppose that means our time here is at an end. It appears my oaf of a brother has woken from his slumber.” Loki sighed dramatically, giving a low bow. “So I guess I’ll just be taking my Princess, and we’ll be going. Lots of things to do, plenty of work to be done, you know how it is. If you need me, you’ll just have to find me.”

Bucky paled and lunged at Loki; Tony clawed his way out of the dirt, wheezing and panting, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

“Steve!”

“Fight like a man, you coward!” Bucky shouted; Loki kicked him in the face, sending his sprawling.

“Steve!” Tony screamed.

There was a flash of green light and then Steve and Loki were gone.

The green light was impossible to see through, so intense that Steve was sure he would go blind if he kept his eyes open for too much longer. He squinted, but that didn’t help much so he squeezed his eyes shut instead; he could feel Loki’s arm locked around his waist and he struggled – successfully this time, able to break free. He fell to the ground, blinking back black spots, his eyes dripping tears as the light faded into nothingness.

They weren’t standing by the car anymore; they weren’t even in the vicinity of the car by the looks of things. They were standing outside an elaborate green and purple manor in the middle of a large Victorian-style garden; Steve could only assume that this was the back side of a massive building. Someone had clearly been reading Alice in Wonderland, or they had at the very least watched the movie, because the architecture resembled some of the things Steve had seen in the Disney adaptation he had watched weeks earlier with Bucky. The manor was a mixture of Asgardian and Victorian style architecture, blended together with parapets and towers as if someone had created it out of slips of pictures from a magazine, pasting together only the bits they liked. It should have been hideous, but instead it had a strange sense of charm to it, childlike and colourful.

There were squared hedges and topiaries all over the place. Some of the other hedges had been sculpted to look like an animal or people, and all of them were well cared for, not a single brown leaf to be seen. They were so green; Steve had to stop and check to make sure they weren’t emeralds masquerading as plants. Closer inspection made it clear that these topiaries weren’t random characters. He recognized a few of the Avengers in the sculptures, as well as several horses, dragons and mythical creatures he had seen in books he had taken out of the library about Norse mythology. He hoped that none of them were enchanted people, and that they really were just topiaries. With Loki, you could never be sure. It felt like they were watching him.
Steve stood up, looking around for an exit. What he saw disturbed him. Green grass and forest stretched out for miles around the manor in a perfect circle; there were no fences, and no other people milling about, just miles of green acres ending off in the distance when the landscape collided with wave after wave of pink and purple trees. Steve stood stock still, taking in his surroundings and Loki’s movements, his heart beating heavily in his chest.

Nothing happened.

Steve looked to Loki for some sign that he was about to be attacked – for some sign of anything really.

A bell rang from inside the house.

Loki dusted his hands off, hopping up the porch steps taking them two at a time. “Ah, right on schedule!” The large circular metal-and-glass door that blocked his way flew open with a wave of his hand; he strutted off inside, vanishing from sight, leaving nothing behind except for the faint sound of him whistling. Steve looked around the patio garden suspiciously, sure that something was about to happen. If Loki was running on a schedule, then something was going on. He couldn’t see anyone else around though, and while there were no physical gates to keep him in there was likely some kind of magic at play, hiding in plain sight. He would have bet anything that he wasn’t going to like what he found.

Only… there didn’t seem to be anything to find.

He wiped sweat from the back of his neck. He was rusty, like he had just woken up all over again, his movements and brain chugging along; there was little in his life that came close to what the Avengers dealt with on a daily basis and it was strange to be suddenly back in the field again. God, he felt out of shape.

He sighed to himself, cataloguing his findings.

No fences meant no guards.

No guards around wasn’t exactly a good thing. That just meant that Loki had something much stronger watching for him, something that may not have been just an illusion to keep prying eyes away – something definitely magical. Loki wasn’t going to let Thor just stroll in and bust up the place, and seeing as how everything looked specially crafted this was likely somewhere Loki spent his downtime in, somewhere Loki had created all for himself. Steve didn’t even want to think about what that implied. He could be trapped in a pocket dimension for all he knew. This wasn’t just the countryside.

He wished he had backup; if he could just call out on the comms to Tony, he could find out what was in the distance. But Tony wasn’t here and there were no comms, no one to call out for either. Natasha, with her strength and cunning, Clint with his aim, Thor and the Hulk with their tireless might, they were all gone, lost to him like so many things. The Avengers he had known in his head weren’t here, and no matter how much he wished for them, they weren’t going to come save him. He would have to do this alone.

Steve stood up, brushing the wet grass off of his knees and started towards the forest at a slow jog, aware now that he was wearing shoes with slightly more heel than he was used to. He stumbled once, but got the hang of them easily, his jog becoming more of a canter. He was alone here, and no one was going to see him and laugh about it. At least they made him taller. Speaking of alone…

Why had Loki had left him alone? The first thing that came to mind was that this was a part of Loki’s
plan as much as the taunting had been. Was Loki trying to break him? Was he hoping that Steve would stumble off and hurt himself? Or was it something worse? Was this just a game to play while Loki waited for the Avengers to come?

If this was a game, he would play it to the best of his abilities. The woods off in the distance looked like the perfect place to find cover, assuming of course that he didn’t get lost in them; anything was better than waiting around for Loki to come get him. True, he had no way to contact anyone, but at least he might get far enough away from Loki’s illusions to signal for help. Someone might fly overhead and spot him. There was always the possibility that the Avengers knew where they thought Loki’s manor was; Howard and Loki were best buddies, at least when dinner was concerned. Maybe Loki had hinted at something, left Howard some kind of clue. If Steve was lucky, they might find him tonight. If not, well there was always the next day or the day after that. He wasn’t picky. He could wait; he had had plenty of practice waiting.

The ribbon around his neck would make a good flag if he had to signal anyone. He tried to untie the tight bow with numb fingers but the damned thing wouldn’t budge no matter how hard he tugged. He had expected as much; with his luck, it was probably enchanted, just like the rest of the outfit. Steve sighed, stopping to catch his breath amongst the trees. Loki wouldn’t be letting him escape embarrassment so easily. Everything was just one giant game. He cursed himself and then Loki for good measure, starting to run again.

Games were meant to be played, and Steve was well versed in playing war games. If Loki thought that dressing Steve up in women’s clothing was going to weaken his resolve, he had another thing coming. Steve wasn’t even one iota embarrassed; in fact, he had always sort of wondered what it would be like. He had never felt self-conscious when he was dressed up. He had been wearing his Captain America uniform for years… well… he would have worn it, he supposed idly, had he really been Captain America. Regardless, the clothing didn’t bother him, although the garter was starting to itch a bit.

Steve took one step forward, thinking about what he would do once he reached the end of the tree line and promptly smashed face first into an invisible wall. It felt like his neck had been yanked backwards by a noose and he choked, trying to catch his breath, throwing himself backwards. He clawed at his throat, gasping, scooting across the grass by pushing into the soft soil with his heels; the grass ripped and tore, dirt skittering everywhere.

The further away from the wall he got, the easier it was for him to breathe.

He puffed, rubbing his throat, sitting amongst the debris of his flight; he flopped onto his back, looking up at the sky, watching it spin around like a whirling dervish, praying that he might finally catch his breath.

Well, shit.

He hadn’t expected the enchantment to be that strong. He had expected that Loki would have something magical protecting the place, maybe a barrier, wall or some other kind of Asgardian device. But he hadn’t expected it to try and strangle him to death if he walked into it; in hindsight, he should have assumed that everything was trying to kill him. It usually was. It irked him that he hadn’t felt his skin prickle, or felt anything at all when the spell had been triggered. It had been nothing, and then bam! His clothing had wrapped tighter, the ribbon around his throat slowly tugging closer and closer to his windpipe. Voila, instant choking.

Steve scowled at the invisible wall – or rather, tried to scowl at it. He watched a squirrel run past him and out through the grassy plot he had just vacated without any problem. So much for the escape and hide plan.
What to do now?

He couldn’t run any further, that was for sure, not unless he wanted to black out and possibly suffocate to death amidst a pile of grass; the squirrel would probably sit on his corpse when he was done. There was no telling how far he could get without being killed by the enchantment until he stepped over that line. If the barrier was anything like the gates he had been up against before, it likely went around the compound for miles. Without being able to see the thing, there was no telling what shape the walls were either. He would have to physically test each and every section for weaknesses; climbing over them or digging under them was unlikely to yield results, even if it was more efficient. Suffocating under a pile of dirt and rocks wasn’t all that appealing, and neither was falling to his death from a tree. No. Forget about holes. This was far too well designed for there to be any holes unless they had been intentional. The question was, would Loki have intentionally put holes in?

He pursed his lips, spitting out a piece of grass. No. This was a game for keeps. Loki wasn’t going to fart around with his barriers for the fun of it. There were so many other things he could do; this was too pedestrian for him. It lacked sport. Not that Steve would be much sport after this. Most of his energy had been taken out of him with that one collision. He could barely move as it was. His body felt heavy, his skin prickly and numb as feeling slowly trickled back.

He didn’t really want to test the barrier out again – at least not so soon. He wasn’t exactly Captain America anymore; he wasn’t going to regenerate his way out of this one.

He smiled as the world stopped spinning, letting out a deep sigh. It might be fun to have a challenge again, something he could really sink his teeth into.

He could stay out here of course, wait for Loki to come and fetch him.

Or, he could go back and see what was waiting for him in that mansion…

If he went back now, Loki might not be as irritated with him, and a less irritated Loki was probably a good thing; there was no putting it off. He picked himself up from the ground, dusted himself off and headed back to the mansion.

At least things couldn’t get any worse.

Loki was waiting for Steve in an elaborate gold and green dining room, seated in a large purple-velvet padded chair that looked like it had been in some King’s throne room at some point in its life span. Steve hadn’t been sure what to expect once he had gotten inside, skulking in through the same door Loki had thrown open. He had half expected to see someone’s family hogtied under the dining room table, or maybe bodies lying everywhere; what he found, was something a thousand times worse. At least bodies couldn’t hurt you. The large shadowy creatures that had fought the Avengers were milling around in the rooms and the further he got into the room, the more of them there were; they were visible now and he sort of wished that they weren’t.

They were gangly creatures, looking a bit like someone had taken a person’s shadow and then stretched it out so that the legs and arms were outsized; their bodies were short and stocky, edging on the side of pudgy. Their heads, if one could call them heads, were flat on top in a way that was frighteningly squared like they had been smashed on the top of the head with a sledge hammer. They walked hunched over; their heads held aloft, large empty looking eyes staring in Steve’s direction,
always watching. Their skin was translucent black; a strange pulsating darkness glowed from within their chests, each beat of their hearts lighting their bodies up. These were strange creatures, things that couldn’t have come from earth. At least he hoped that they hadn’t. There was no telling with magic, and even the most careful magician might conjure up something like this for amusement’s sake. Loki sure did seem to like to be amused...

The creatures watched him more intently the closer he got to Loki, carefully appraising the situation in their own bizarre fashion. Steve had seen creatures before and he had seen his fair share of demons and monsters; whether they were real, or dreams made no difference. He wasn’t frightened – much. Their eyes were so empty, so doll-like and cold; the air around them so chilly that frost almost grew on the floor underneath their feet.

“So… Have you gotten tired of trying to escape yet? Or should I take my nap while you continue? I don’t mind you know.” Loki yawned. He snapped his fingers when Steve frowned at him.

“Fetch me tea, with cream – and two sugars as usual.” Loki said. For a second, Steve thought that Loki had meant the order for him. The creature nearest Loki lumbered off, scrabbling across the ground as it went, moving about on clawed hands with its feet dragging along behind it unused. Steve stepped out of its way, backing up. He had no intention of getting any closer than necessary to one of those things. For all he knew, they might be some kind of walking booby-trap.

Loki patted his thigh, motioning for Steve to come closer.

Like hell – Steve thought, and then suddenly his legs were moving without his consent and he was sitting on the bastard’s lap.

“Much better. My lap was getting cold.” Loki smirked, arranging Steve as he wanted him; Steve faced Loki, his groin tucked against the flat of the god’s stomach, his knees resting on the soft padded velvet beneath them.

Loki stroked the side of Steve’s face, his touch unexpectedly gentle; Steve tried to look away but couldn’t. He was forced to stare directly into Loki’s cold green eyes. He was wrong. Things could get worse.

“Do you like my servants? They’re quite amusing really…” Loki purred. “Well, if you’re the one in charge, of course.”

“Take your hands off of me.” Steve growled.

Loki rested his hands on Steve’s hip, nestling them in-between the fabric of the dress and the apron, fingers tickling into the hidden warmth there.

“No, I don’t think I want to do that.” Loki said.

Steve tried not to show his discomfort; it was hard, because all he wanted to do was ram his fist down Loki’s throat, but he managed it somehow, finding strength by thinking of Tony. Better to let Loki think that his inappropriate touches had no effect on him – you could never show bullies fear or they would eat you alive, and Loki was the biggest bully of them all. He had faced bullies like Loki before; men and women who had gotten what they wanted through tormenting others. Loki may have been a god, but he was no different than the thousands of other power hungry creatures haunting schoolyards everywhere.

“Let me go.”

“No.”
“Why not? Why do you need me here for some reason? If you think I’m going to sit here and take it, you’ve got another thing coming pal.” Steve growled.

“Feisty! You’re just what I would expect… a Princess of such calibre is hard to come by in Midgard, did you know that?” Loki laughed, digging his fingers into Steve’s stomach fat. Steve swallowed involuntarily, narrowing his eyes to try and appear slightly fiercer than he normally did; he was too slender and little to pull it off, and it came off as more of an irritated pout.

“It’s like staring at a kitten! You’re such a sweetheart! I can see why Bucky and Stark senior have their hearts set on wooing you into their beds. Such a conquest it would be, to have you stretched out across the sheets like some lovely prize.” Loki said softly, pinching Steve’s cheek. “Of course I wasn’t going to let that happen. I have eyes everywhere Steve, spells at work on every soul you’ve met in this wretched world.”

“And just what does that mean?” Steve huffed.

“It means, sweetheart, that they fawn over you and send you sweet nothings because I tell them to. I’m sure you’ve noticed the way everyone is so… tender with you. So caring – so forgiving.”

Steve had noticed; he had been hoping that it was just his charming personality at work, but apparently that wasn’t quite the case. He wondered what else Loki had been poking at.

“You are so naturally likeable though. It was hardly any work at all to get them to chase after you. Your smile makes so many people want to bow down and worship. If only I had such a sweet smile.” Loki mused.

The creature that had disappeared to fetch Loki’s tea returned slinking back into the room without a sound, almost appearing out of nowhere. A serving tray sat upon its head, and on it rested a tea pot, spoon, cup, milk jug, and sugar bowl, all of which circled the edges of the tray to keep it balanced. The tray fit neatly on the flat of the creatures head, not even twitching as the creature moved. If this was Loki’s idea of a butler, the man was off his rocker. Steve watched it approach, fascinated despite his unfortunate position on Loki’s lap.

The creature kneeled in front of Loki and reached up, preparing the tea as Loki had instructed with its long and nimble fingers. Its ability to mix and measure without looking was impressive. It held the cup out handle first for Loki to take when it was finished, letting out a low sigh of contentment. The cup had to have been hot, judging by the steam but it didn’t seem to bother the creature in the least; even when a drop dripped from the cup onto its head, the creature did nothing more than blink. Hm, Steve thought, that might be a problem. If it didn’t notice being scalded, what else wouldn’t it notice?

Loki took a tentative sip, holding the cup primly with his pinky out. The delicate roses etched on porcelain stood out like blood might against the pale shade of his skin.

“Perfect.” He said cheerfully turning his attention back to Steve.

“And how would you like yours?”

“I’m not interested.” Steve grumbled.

“Just put some milk and sugar in there – actually, why don’t you put a little extra sugar. Maybe that will stop him from being so bitter.” Loki snorted.

The creature worked without looking again, hands moving above its head; Steve watched the creature, aware of Loki’s fingers tapping against his hipbone. The creature stretched and handed Steve the cup, which he took willingly if only to keep from getting a lap-full of scalding tea.
Steve held the cup carefully, mindful of the delicate porcelain; he spent a few seconds debating on throwing it in Loki’s face or not, and then took a sip.

It was good.

He would play it safe for now; beaming Loki in the head with a cup wasn’t the brightest idea. After all, there was no telling what Loki would do, or what he was capable of. He would play the dumb blonde and see where that got him. Skinny, useless Steve, couldn’t possibly plan anything that even resembled an escape, right?

He sipped his tea, trying not to smile.

Nighttime rolled around awfully fast. After enjoying teatime with Loki, Steve had been put to work scrubbing the floor of the dining room on his hands and knees. Loki had provided a handy pink scrub brush, a pail of soapy water and the muck in order to facilitate the activity. How kind of him. Steve was fairly certain that he would strangle the Asgardian if given the chance; he had been forced onto his hands and knees before in the army, but they had never crammed him into a dress. He was more annoyed when Loki had then decided to use him as a footrest while he worked. Even the meanest sergeants hadn’t done that.

His hands were pink and wrinkly; there was a dull pain in his back by the time Loki became bored with watching him scrub, and Steve was pretty sure he had heel marks on his shoulder.

To add insult to injury Steve then had the pleasure of serving Loki dinner with the aid of the creatures. He was lucky to be standing upright; Loki was lucky to not get a lap full of hot food.

“They’re Shadows, in case you were wondering.” Loki drawled across the table, watching Steve work.

“What?” Steve grumbled, spooning potatoes onto Loki’s plate. They looked damned good, little baby potatoes smothered in butter and rosemary. He was close to drooling, ready to beg for any scrap. He had forgotten what it was like to be so ravenous.

“They – the creatures. Don’t be deliberately obtuse, it doesn’t suit you.” Loki said, spearing a potato on the end of his silver fork. He chewed thoughtfully. “They weren’t needed anymore, and you Midgardians have so many around. It was just too easy to amass an army. You’d have thought that someone would have noticed by now…”

“An army?” Steve said, startled. He almost upended the potato bowl when Loki’s hand pressed flat against his back in some kind of attempt to steady him; it felt more like a grope than anything else, but at least his hand wasn’t on Steve’s ass like it could have been.

“Yes. An army. Are you deaf? They died, so I took them before they could be eaten up. Good workers, Shadows. Always around to listen and follow orders. They’re used to it after all.” Loki said, patting Steve lightly on the rump. “The chicken next dear.”

Steve glowered and put the potatoes down, picking up the silver platter of chicken. He held it out and Loki took what he wanted, scooping the cubed meat onto his plate with easy sweeps of his fork.

“I thought people in Asgard ate meat off the bone.” Steve remarked, setting the platter down to pick up a plate of seasoned and buttered green beans before Loki could start prompting again.
“We do. I happen to enjoy eating in a much more civilized fashion. I don’t like getting my hands covered in grease.” Loki shrugged. “It’s a pain to wash chicken off ones hands, and we’re not in battle now, are we? I can afford a little class.”

The Shadows wandered around Steve; they were mildly helpful when they choose to lend a hand with the platters. They tended to keep their eyes solely focused on him which was a tad unnerving, but not as frightening as it could have been given the circumstances. He had to keep checking where they were at all times because they seemed to like to sneak up behind him, getting far too close for his comfort. Being near them felt like stepping into ice water. He shivered, rubbing at the Goosebumps on his arms.

“They’re not dangerous.” Loki laughed, spearing a cube of meat on his knife, eating it right off the tip.

“Sure.”

“Do you honestly think I’d let my little Princess get hurt? Please…” Loki said around a mouthful of food. “Well, they’re not dangerous so long as you behave yourself.”

“Gee, I feel safer already.” Steve grumbled. He had gone through all of the dishes of food now; his stomach was rumbling fiercely and the smell of chicken was getting hard to ignore.

“Sit. Eat.” Loki ordered.

When Steve wavered, the nearest Shadow took him by the arms and pushed him into a chair; its touch made his skin numb. They began to move about the table assembling a plate for him, placing it in front of him when they were satisfied; thankfully the food remained hot, unaffected by their cold touch. Steve looked down at it, unsure where to start, rubbing his arm where they had grabbed him. He hoped that he couldn’t get frostbite from them.

“I said eat. Honestly Steve, don’t be stupid.” Loki said, spearing another piece of chicken.

So Steve ate. The food was good, just like the tea had been. The chicken was seasoned and handled delicately, moist inside instead of being dry as a bone; the potatoes were so delicious, Steve found himself licking his fingers. He hadn’t eaten like this since he had been to a restaurant, and that seemed like years ago.

He was surprised that he had been allowed to eat at all, and at Loki’s table of all places. He had expected cruelty to go with the groping; some kind of punishment offered up for laziness or out of spite. It was strange, a little like having dinner with a diplomat, or some rich heiress. He was glad that Loki apparently wasn’t going through some kind of food kink at the moment; he had been a bit concerned about that. Loki certainly did seem to like keeping people on their toes. He wouldn’t have put it past him to do something like that. Steve had seen a clip about food fetishes when he had been channel surfing one night. He hadn’t been the least bit aroused by it, and he had been really glad that Tony hadn’t walked in on him watching it, even if it was one of those documentaries about fetishes and not full on porn. God knows what Tony would have done with that information. Eating chocolate off of someone’s body seemed peculiar, and more than a little disgusting. Didn’t people think about body hair? Maybe it was just because he didn’t like the idea of using somebody just to get off.

One of the Shadows reached around Steve and poured him a glass of red wine, the same brand Howard had ordered that day in the restaurant; this particular Shadow had one eye slightly larger
than the other, an ungainly looking thing with more limbs than were strictly necessary. Steve didn’t really like One Eye – One Eye couldn’t stop staring and Steve didn’t like that the thing seemed to like to stand right at his elbow; it was creepy, even if it did sort of look like it was playing the honor guard for him. He hadn’t even seen or heard it approach, but then again, he hadn’t heard any of the others either. He got the feeling that it was stalking him.

Dinner didn’t take long. Loki ordered his chocolate mousse brought out, and that was pretty much it. He ate it with relish, watching Steve each time he took a bite, not offering to share. Steve could have cared less; Loki apparently took his lack of interest for jealousy and had a grand old time making what Steve could only assume he thought was ‘sexy eating faces’. It would have been funny if he hadn’t been under Loki’s control again, pinned to the chair by his own pathetic body and the enchantment that just wouldn’t piss off.

After watching dessert, Steve was escorted by the Shadows into the kitchen where he was put to work scrub the dinner dishes. They finished quickly due to the fact that they had almost seventeen pairs of hands between them; Steve had expected it to be awkward, but they moved like a well-oiled machine. One of the shadows had nothing but a single stump for a hand, and had been given a dish towel to ‘hold’.

Steve was then escorted up to a bedroom.

He had assumed that the bedroom would be unoccupied. He had also assumed that he would at least get one small, tiny reprieve from dealing with Loki all day and for what might be the unforeseeable future. He quickly found, once the doors were opened for him by One Eye that he was being sent to Loki’s private quarters.

He was expected to sleep in Loki’s room.

That was fine, Steve reasoned feverishly, because Loki would probably just have him curl up on the floor or have him sleep at the foot of the bed like some kind of well-trained house pet. Loki didn’t seem to think much of humans, so logically, he wouldn’t want to be anywhere near one when he was sleeping. Of course this assumed that Loki actually made his decisions based on logic.

Steve was exhausted, and the floor or the foot of the bed was pretty comfortable looking from where he was standing. He prayed that some god somewhere might decide to be a pal and push things around in his favor.

It wasn’t to be, of course.

Loki was tucked into bed dressed in pajamas, honest-to-god cotton pajamas with green and white stripes. He was reading a book, running his finger down the lines as he went, mumbling to himself. He looked up when Steve stumbled into the room and flashed a tired grin, setting the book down.

“I guess it is getting late. Your nightgown is in the dresser over there darling.” Loki gestured to an antique maple wardrobe to his left, his eyes greedily eating Steve up as if he were some kind of bedtime snack. “Put it on.”

Great. A nightgown. Steve went to the dresser, trying not to show his exasperation. He reminded himself again, for the fortieth time that day alone, that Loki wanted to break him and that he wasn’t going to let it happen even if the most abominable, disgusting and horrific things came his way.
He opened the wardrobe and found a long women’s nightgown made of thin almost translucent white cotton waiting for him. He bit his lip to keep from swearing aloud. Did Loki honestly expect him to wear something like this? He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Loki was waiting patiently, steepling his fingers, leaning back into his fluffy pillows with a smirk on his face.

Apparently, Loki did actually expect that.

Sighing, Steve grabbed the nightgown, fumbling it off of the hanger. He was able to take the dress off now at least, and the ribbon around his neck fell free without so much as a token protest. The dress was itchy and the stockings had rubbed red marks into his thighs from all the kneeling he had been doing. He tried not to flush in rage at that thought; Howard would have a field day with this.

He stripped out of the dress with military precision, folding it neatly up into a square more out of habit than any real need. He pulled the nightgown on, hiding the white and frilly panties Loki had magicked him into from sight. He hadn’t been all that surprised to see the women’s underwear. It seemed like the kind of dick move Loki would make; it would have been more surprising to have been in boxers. At least he was wearing underwear, he supposed idly. There was always that.

Steve turned around and waited for Loki’s next instruction with his arms crossed. He expected to be sent to the floor – he hoped to be sent to the floor. He died a little inside when Loki patted the blankets beside him.


Steve gritted his teeth. He could do this; his left eye started twitching in protest. He was playing the dumb blonde. He had to do this. He would play along and Loki would never know what hit him. Steve climbed up onto the bed and burrowed underneath the covers, leaving a good foot and a half gap between them.

“No no. Not like that. Sit up.” Loki said, snapping his fingers.

Steve sat up of his own volition, hugging his knees; he jerked away when something moved towards his face and then marginally relaxed when he realized what it was that Loki was doing. Loki brushed Steve’s golden locks out with a soft pearl handled brush, humming to himself every time the brush went cleanly through without any knots to contend with. Steve sat very still, watching, waiting to see what Loki might do next; the brush continued to move through his hair, slow and steady.

He felt his eyelids droop. He could have fallen asleep right then and there with the brush running through his hair, Loki’s warm hand on the small of his back. He blinked, snapping out of it when Loki hit a snag in his hair, fussing with the irritated strands. Steve had a job to do after all; he couldn’t just sit around like a bump on a log waiting for everything to fall into his lap.

The tactician and artist in him screamed for him to study his captor, and this was a good opportunity to get that job done without it looking too fishy. He needed to know what the kind of person Loki was in this world if he was going to plan a proper escape. He hadn’t known the Loki in his dream-world all that well aside from their limited confrontations in battle. Those exchanges had taught him two things, which he hoped he could trust. One: Loki was a child, moody and covetous of his toys and plans. That didn’t mean that Loki wasn’t also smart – he was very smart, and was more often than not a few steps ahead of everyone else in battle. Two: Loki was not to be underestimated. But then again, neither was Steve. He wasn’t going to give Loki the satisfaction of winning even if it meant putting up with the most degrading treatment imaginable. Loki could go screw himself.

Seventy six brushstrokes later, Steve found himself tucked against Loki under the blankets, blinking sleepily despite his wishes. Loki’s face pressed against the back of Steve’s head, his breath soft and
Steve had to keep pinching his hand to keep from struggling out of the grasp. It was painful, but at least that way he wasn’t going to cause any problems he didn’t have the energy to fix. After what seemed like forever, Steve fell asleep, his palm throbbing dully. He was distinctly aware that something was watching him – something that wasn’t Loki.

Steve’s days were a lot like the ones he had experienced early in his time with Tony, although there were a few essential differences. He woke up every morning and dressed, usually in whatever dress or gown Loki had picked out for him, and then spent the rest of the day cleaning, cooking and generally taking care of Loki’s wants and needs like some kind of serving wench. The army had taught him what it was like to follow mindless orders, so it wasn’t too much of a hardship, no more so than fetching coffee and lunch had been. If scrubbing a few floors and washing a few dishes kept him from having his dead body dumped in a river somewhere, he was glad to do it.

The busywork went on for a week before Loki seemed to go a little… off. Steve had been busy doing the laundry by hand when he first clued in that something was wrong with the god.

He scrubbed away at a stain on what had once been a perfectly clean white tablecloth, really going to town on the thing. When he looked up, he found Loki scowling down at a newspaper, one of the many that seemed to show up all by themselves every morning. Steve had snuck a few glances of the thing a while back, and it was certainly an oddity even amongst gossip rags. It was filled with page after page of current events, events that weren’t exactly written about in regular newspapers. After all, no one really cared how often Howard Stark went out to go buy groceries, or if Bucky Barnes had started talking to Howard again. That last part had been interesting, but it wasn’t as if he could glean anything useful from it aside from the fact that at some point, they hadn’t been talking.

“Something wrong?” Steve asked, wringing out the tablecloth. It was back to faultless white again; he was pleased with how it looked. Red wine was such a bitch to get out.

“It matters not. Get back to your work.” Loki growled.

It was the window gazing that drew Steve’s attention after that. He would sometimes catch Loki staring blankly at things, not even paying attention to the degrading work he had set out for Steve to finish. Steve didn’t think much of it at first, taking it as a break from the usual everyday hustle of life with Loki. It was starting to be a problem though, when Loki didn’t respond at all. While Steve didn’t want to be doing busy work, it kept him away from boredom. He liked having time to think by himself, but every minute with Loki sitting there dazed was another minute of worry for Steve. Loki continued to zone out, not responding to conversation even when Steve physically came up to him and asked questions about how he wanted the chores to go. Loki was watching the horizon, expecting something to happen, Steve realized after catching the man daydreaming for the fourth time that minute alone. It was only a matter of time before the Avengers came for him, Steve reasoned, and Loki had to be feeling the strain. Nonetheless, something was wrong – or at the very least, something was going to change, and soon. Loki seemed restless, and a restless Loki was a dangerous Loki.

When Loki left Steve alone for the first time, actually leaving the manor to go somewhere else in the world, Steve tried to escape.
The Shadows didn’t even bother to stop him. They followed him out to the edge of the forest where he had found the barrier and then kept following him as he attempted to map out the edges of his prison one painfully strangled step at a time. Even with the pain he made good progress. He got completely around the manor’s border before nightfall, and when he returned tired and dirty hours later he found that he was still utterly alone, the mansion filled with nothing more than silence and Shadows.

Loki was gone, but for how long?

The Shadows brought Steve dinner, a simple meal of boiled potatoes and butter with a hunk of ham, which he ate in the kitchen sitting on the floor as to not get the furniture dirty. Some of the Shadows had stayed in the kitchen cooking, preparing for Loki’s return while Steve had been out mapping the barrier; he hadn’t really noticed them being missing, which was exasperating. He had been trying to count them all, and every time he thought he had gotten every last one he would find out that the numbers had changed; he was debating on marking them with a piece of chalk one day, if he didn’t start getting the numbers right. He tried not to shy away from them like he usually did, thanking One Eye for bringing him the plate of food, wanting to at least be polite about everything. He got no reply as usual. It would have been nice if there had been, but he hadn’t been expecting much seeing as how they barely did anything other than stare at him without Loki’s instruction. One Eye took his plate away when he was finished and then escorted Steve back to Loki’s bedroom, standing guard outside the door like he always did.

Steve had been living as Loki’s living Princess Doll for the past two weeks, and every second of it had been spent in hell. He was used to living in close quarters with people; spending time with Tony every hour of the day had made him get pretty used to it pretty fast, but this, this was something entirely different. He couldn’t get even ten minutes of alone time these days, even if he was in the bathroom. Loki was either always there, or one of the Shadows was; they both just loved to stare at him.

Empty rooms were a godsend now. He decided to spend what little of it he might have left by taking a bath on his own for once. Loki had developed a nasty habit of washing him every evening before bed. Steve had been mortified the first few times it had happened, but had sadly grown used to the way Loki liked to soap him up and scrub him clean. He tried not to dwell too much on those moments; it was awful, disgust and made him want to throw up, but at least it didn’t end in anything else. It wasn’t like Loki had really been… aroused or anything. It had been more like a child caring for a precious toy rather than an erotic display of affection. He usually just bit his lip when it happened, centring himself, thinking about walking in the forest or pulling weeds in the garden. Anything to get him through it; Loki wasn’t going to get to see him uncomfortable. He wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction.

Steve stripped off his dirt smeared dress, a green silk number complete with a pinafore of white satin that Loki so adored, throwing it into the hamper and stepped into the bathroom. He filled the tub with hot water and climbed in, scrubbing himself clean with the bar of lemon scented soap, taking his sweet time with it. The water went blackish, not at all an attractive sight, so he drained the tub and drenched himself again, scrubbing his skin brutally with the bath brush, wiping away every last trace of Loki and soil. He was pink and wrinkled by the time he was completely satisfied, his skin tingling unpleasantly from how rough he had had to scrub. He filled the tub again and soaked this time, his head just above the water line, his hair flowing around him like a mermaid at rest. He had tried cutting his hair once; the shears hadn’t survived the attempt. Apparently the clothing wasn’t the only thing enchanted.

The two weeks hadn’t been as bad as he had expected really, looking back on it. Loki had been mostly a gentleman. Sure, Steve had had to fight off his fair share of unwanted gropes, but Loki
didn’t really seem all that concerned with actually doing anything worse. True, Loki had spanked him once – and Steve had been livid after that, his face a brilliant shade of scarlet for almost an hour afterwards. It hadn’t exactly hurt, more like yet another embarrassment bead on the necklace of horror he was currently crafting. Loki had laughed afterwards and then returned to the book he was reading as if it hadn’t happened at all.

Strangely, Loki was in his own way accommodating, even when he was being an ass. Steve had worn so many different dresses now that he was starting to get to know them, intimately. He wasn’t fond of a few, which showed far too much thigh for his liking, and although he was still halfheartedly trying to play dumb, he had started to slip out a few complaints every now and then. Surprisingly, Loki had listened to him.

The dresses he didn’t like hadn’t been in the lineup for a long time, and Steve hadn’t been able to find them when he was looking through the wardrobe in the morning; he had even double checked a few times just to make sure he hadn’t missed them by mistake, and boy had that taken a long time. Loki had a lot of dresses – he could have opened his own dress shop. Loki had ones from every region of the world, collecting so avidly that Steve wondered if he had things tailor made, because there was no way they could all fit so well without someone stepping in. It would have taken a lot of magic to keep that wardrobe stocked. Each dress was detailed with intricate patterns, the stitching immaculate and tiny. They couldn’t be from some chain store, so where had they come from? Did he take a trip downtown with pictures, asking for things in Steve’s size? There were magazines in the wardrobe too, page after page of fancy clothing. Loki liked flared skirts and favored anything that had any Lolita inspired design to it, which often meant that Steve had to wear long white stockings with whatever Loki picked out for the day. Loki seemed to love stockings, and garters seemed to make him absolutely melt with delight.

It was nice to be out of those goddamned stockings for a little while; Steve had never thought he would ever have to say that before. But damn, with so many stockings around he was starting to appreciate bare skin. Steve sighed, dunking his head under the water. He sat up with a splash, water dribbling down the sides of his head. He rubbed it out of his eyes, the exhaustion of the day finally catching up with him. He was still feeling a little woozy after almost blacking out so many times; the warm water was making everything so comfortable, he might have fallen asleep in the bath.

Loki was gone, and all was right in the world.

That irritating part of Steve’s mind, the little bit that wouldn’t let things go and liked to plan for every occasion spoke up as he scratched his ear; he hung his head. Loki being gone wasn’t actually a good thing, was it? If something had happened to Loki, it was possible that he would be stuck here in this manor forever. Well wasn’t that just peachy. He wished that his mind would just shut up for a while, but it was right on the money as usual. This place was an enigma. He didn’t know half of what went on in the manor like how it was supplied or how it maintained itself. So what would happen if Loki didn’t come back? If the place was run by magic, he might be stuck here until it ran out.

Would he be stuck here forever? The Avengers would find him – he was sure of that, but would it be days or years later? Steve shuddered at the thought. He had been away from Tony for two weeks now, and it already felt like a lifetime. He didn’t even want to think about what it would be like being here for a few months, or a year. He had started dreaming of Tony again, waking up to the sensation of Tony being wrapped around him only to find that it was Loki instead. He always felt nauseous in those moments, trying desperately to keep from throwing up from the way Loki’s smell seemed to permeate everything he wore and everything he touched. When he was out of here, he was going to burn all of his clothing in a bonfire – and he was going to clip his hair, and then burn that too.
To say that Steve was frazzled emotionally would be an understatement. Somewhere out there, the real world was going on again without him, and there wasn’t a thing he could do about it. He tried to keep the exhaustion and melancholy in check, trying to amuse himself with the sketchbooks Loki had given him to play with on the rare occasions when Loki didn’t have anything planned for the pair of them. Drawing wasn’t enough anymore. It wasn’t even close to enough. He could fill every page of those sketchbooks with drawings, and there would always be an itch there, a hankering for Tony, and for knitting and for Pepper; for his job – for his life.

Steve didn’t like being a prisoner; he had no love of long, restless nights spent waiting in the company of monsters. He felt shackled, even though there were no chains – no metal holding him in place binding him to Loki. But that wasn’t entirely true, now was it? There weren’t chains, but there was the enchantment Loki had so lovingly left him with. No matter how much he tried to ignore it, he could still feel it tug whenever Loki got angry or irritated with him; an invisible rope around his neck every single day.

He hadn’t exactly outright fought Loki on anything yet, which was a miracle. He hadn’t wanted to risk what might happen if he started an argument he couldn’t win. Back in the day he would have taken a few swings at the man already, but his common sense had kicked in and it wasn’t going to let itself get pushed out of the way by anger anymore; he had trained it too well to let that happen. Instead, he bided his time, waiting to see what he could get away with and what he couldn’t. It was a tedious process, one he didn’t much like, but it was at least something to occupy his mind with.

Loki seemed to be eerily aware of this fact too. He had started grinning whenever Steve tried to play dumb, and he was getting the feeling that it would be dangerous to keep up the charade. Loki wasn’t falling for it, even if he hadn’t outright said anything yet.

Steve drained the tub with a scowl and stepped out, drying himself with the thick lemon yellow towel Loki had given him; he missed his old towel, and the way it had smelled like apples and Tony even after he washed it. He got a clean pair of underwear out from the wardrobe, a pair that were less frilly and more practical than usual, and then crawled into bed without putting on the nightgown, gleeful for his crime. He would probably get in trouble for it when Loki came back, but it would be worth it to just sleep in peace without having to worry about wandering hands or choking necklines for one night. He smiled the entire night through.

Steve woke up alone the next morning. He dressed, reluctantly donning another of Loki’s favourite dresses, a hideously fuchsia number this time with frills and lace all over, and then wandered down to the dining room where he found breakfast already waiting for him.

The Shadows followed him around again, keeping a few feet back in some case when he opened doors so that they wouldn’t get whacked. While they annoyed him, he found them more a tolerable presence; the pitter-patter of their feet was calming once he figured out how to hear it, a constant reminder that he wasn’t alone, even if he was trapped in a massive mansion. Whether the Shadows meant him any harm or not didn’t matter; he wanted to keep an eye on them just as much as they wanted to keep an eye on him. At least while they were here with him, they weren’t with Loki causing chaos elsewhere. He still hadn’t explored every room in the place, and no matter how many times he went out to count windows, he never found the exact number of rooms; he wondered if the building was enchanted too. There was plenty to do to keep them and him busy if he put his mind to it. He finished breakfast quickly and then set about preparing for the morning’s chores, finding the bucket and scrub brush right where he had left them the day before.
He cleaned anything he came across while he wandered the house, his train of Shadows ambling along behind him.

He didn’t know what else to do really.

When the day drew to a close, he had pretty much every room close to spotless; he could have eaten off the floor, and thankfully Loki wasn’t around to make him test that theory out. With nothing left to do and a whole lot of the evening left to fill, he decided that it might be worth his time to go pay the library a visit. The library was the one room Steve knew Loki spend more than a few half-hearted minutes in; he practically lived there some days. Steve would have bet a hundred dollars that there had to be some kind of spell book in there that might be of some use, even if he didn’t know a thing about spellcraft.

Steve was sitting in one of the comfy red leather padded chairs in the library reading through a book on ancient runes when Loki returned. Steve had no idea what ancient runes did, even with the book. He could barely understand the text even though it sort of looked like it might be in old English. He had been guessing at everything on the pages he was perusing; it was an interesting read nonetheless, although a little confusing at times. This was why he almost missed the god’s shadow dropping over his shoulder. He jumped, dropping the book; it closed with a snap, hitting the floor with a bang, shattering the dull silence of the evening. Loki stooped and picked the book up, casually flipping through before looking at the cover.

“Doing some light reading?” Loki asked, sounding amused. He looked much more like his old self; the sneer on his face was almost glowing, and his eyes were sparkling with dark mischief again.

“I was trying to keep occupied. You’ve been gone for a day and a half.” Steve said in way of protest, trying to sound more bored than anything else. It was a pathetic attempt at best and he didn’t really expect Loki to fall for it; Loki raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. They were both very good at playing this particular game now, masters in the art of frivolous deception, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t slip up.

Loki tossed the book away, ignoring it as it flew across the room, striking an expensive looking vase which teetered and fell to the floor, broken. He knelt down in front of Steve’s chair, resting his hands on the arms, effectively trapping Steve in place; for such a tall man, Loki could sure make himself small when he wanted to.

“So… You and Tony Stark…” Loki said, prodding the puffy arm rest with his thumb.

Steve stiffened ever-so-slightly. He tried to keep calm, making himself as expressionless as possible, arranging a perfect face for a perfect doll. Loki had been suspiciously quiet about Tony for the past two weeks aside from making a few snide, snarky comments when he was getting Steve to do something particularly embarrassing. This might prove to be very interesting.

“What about him?” Steve asked carefully.

“I went to go visit.” Loki leered.

Steve paled; he tried not to look away from Loki’s eyes, knowing that Loki wouldn’t do something hasty to Tony, at least not while the game was still in play. Loki liked to drag things out. He was a cat who liked to play with his food, and he wasn’t going to do anything that would jeopardize his
fun. And this was so much fun for Loki, wasn’t it? He didn’t seem to be able to say no to fun.

“Oh?” Steve grunted.

“Yes, and boy, is he a mess.” Loki smirked. He eyeballed Steve, searching Steve’s face for what he wanted and seemed to find it. “You’re worried about him of course. I understand that. I watched the little tyke grow up you know, so I know how you feel. Of course Howard never introduced me formally, but really, I never expected him to.”

“You understand what exactly?” Steve asked, skeptical of Loki understanding anything in a humans mind. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, trying not to move his legs which had been pinned on either side of Loki’s hips. The God of Mischief leaned closer. Steve’s knee jerked slightly into Loki’s side despite his best efforts; Loki didn’t appear to notice. He was too focused on gazing intently into Steve’s eyes.

“Oh, just a little of this and that. Howard was a … personal friend for some time when he was younger. I babysat for him once. Well, he didn’t actually know that I was babysitting… I watched Tony sleep. He was an adorable child, for a human. Had the world set out in front of him… it was a pity the way things turned out for him.” Loki leaned even closer; he was practically in Steve’s lap now with his nose only a few inches away from Steve’s.

“So then why were you visiting him?” Steve asked.

“I wanted to see their reactions – Howard, Bucky, Tony, the lot of them – to see just how much they missed you, Princess. They were all very distraught of course. I was pleased with their faces when they saw me. Howard actually threw a coffee cup at me before he remembered that I could crush him with one hand. He had the nerve to try to bribe me into giving you back, did you know that? He offered me most of his fortune in exchange for you coming home to him, as if that would make a difference to me. He’s quite smitten with you. The lecherous old bastard has pictures of you in his den you know – and not the,” Loki began to air quote, his elbows dropping after to rest heavily on Steve’s thighs, “you’re just a friend kind of photos. He has ones of you naked and posed – I think he paid someone from that hospital you were in to take them for him. They’re his favourite ones – I can tell because the corners are all wrinkled and sticky. Obviously you’ve got quite the admirer.” Loki remarked.

“Howard is a pig.” Steve growled, supressing a shudder; he didn’t even want to know how Howard had managed to get naked pictures of him without his knowledge. The idea of being posed, naked and unconscious was horrifying. He wanted to scrub himself again until his skin was pink and raw. He was struck with the urge to vomit, his insides clenching up. Howard had always been a perverted man; he just hadn’t expected it to be this bad. Having secret naked pictures was disturbing, but he wouldn’t have put it past Howard. Loki wasn’t lying, although he could well have been; this was one of those thing he had probably saved for a rainy day, not some newfound joke. The way Howard looked at him, the way Howard touched him… Steve had always wondered just how deep the inappropriate affection would go if he was ever left alone with him.

“Don’t worry. I was kind enough to burn the photos for you, as well as his entire den. You’re welcome by the way.” Loki said, inspecting his fingernails. He leaned forwards again, resting his chin in his palms, elbows digging painfully into the meat of Steve’s thighs. “You’re not going to outright ask me about how he looked, are you?”

“Who?” Steve asked, looking away as he tried to push the imagery out of his mind.

“You know who. Don’t play coy with me boy!” Loki growled.
“I’m not playing coy.” Steve protested. He really did want to ask about Tony. If something had happened to Tony…

“Anger again. You seem to favor anger did you know that? You’re rather bad at hiding it when it comes to baby Stark though. Always with that look of yours! It looks like you’ve eaten one of those Midgardian grapefruits whole, rind and all. You’re lucky I’m not a vicious man. Well, let me rephrase that. You’re lucky I don’t mind you being a brat about things. I can always teach you manners… if it ever becomes necessary.” Loki whispered. He was almost pressed up against Steve’s cheek.

Steve let his face drain of expression. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” He muttered. Loki’s bad side was not something he wanted to see, even if accidentally.

“Bullshit, but a valiant effort nonetheless. I would expect nothing less from you.” Loki said. He stood up, knees cracking, and then held out a hand to Steve expectantly wiggling his fingers. Steve eyed the limb warily, but took his hand without protest. “There, that wasn’t so hard, now was it?” Loki pulled Steve up out of the chair and then set about rearranging Steve’s dress, smoothing out the folds and wrinkles, playing with the lace. “Lovely choice by the way. It looks very nice on you. Women would kill to have your figure.” Loki commented, pulling Steve towards the door. “Let’s go to bed. I’m tired.”

That night, Steve lay wrapped up in Loki’s heavy arms wondering what else Loki could have done on his trip into the city; he hadn’t said everything, Steve was sure of it. There were things missing from the tale, important details left out to tease him. He would have to ask eventually. It was only a matter of time. He couldn’t even force himself to stop thinking about it long enough to lose himself in planning his escape. Loki could have done anything. Anything – and Tony… Steve didn’t know what Tony would do now that he wasn’t there to watch out for him, but Tony was strong enough to handle whatever Loki threw at him. Tony would be fine without him; he wouldn’t drink himself into a stupor, would he? Steve closed his eyes and dreamed of liquor bottles, ice cubes and broken glass.

In the end, Steve really didn’t have to plan all that much. He was giving Loki his customary evening foot massage when Loki began to babble about Tony again, seemingly at random; he hadn’t wanted to talk for another two weeks, stringing Steve along. Steve had gotten used to these outbursts. It wasn’t all that unusual for Loki to suddenly decide out of the blue to start talking about something he had seen or heard a few days or weeks prior, squirreling away information for whenever he felt it would have the most impact. Sometimes he started talking and then stopped abruptly. It was hard to get a word out of him sometimes, even after he had started talking. Loki usually talked more when he had been drinking wine, but that didn’t happen often enough for Steve to learn anything good. Loki savored his wine just like he did his gossip. There had only been one time when Loki had gotten himself marginally blotto, and even then he hadn’t been the least bit encumbered by the effects of the alcohol. He had been a chatty Cathy, sure, but it he hadn’t been bouncing off the walls or stumbling down the stairs. He was a pretty mellow drunk.

Of course, what Loki had to say this time, like most of his favourite gossip, made Steve nearly have a heart attack.

“So I told you about how I saw Tony, yes? Well he had a very public meltdown in his building a few hours after I visited Howard. Apparently he threw a chair out the window and tried to jump off a ledge.” Loki said, flipping the page of the book he was likely not reading, seeing as how it was currently upside down. He peeked at Steve from under the book, noting that Steve had gone
completely pale and tense upon hearing the news. He wiggled his toes. “Continue.”

Steve started rubbing Loki’s foot again, utterly disoriented.

Tony had tried to kill himself? Was that the truth or a bald-faced lie?

What if it was true?

Steve bit his lip so hard it started to bleed. Oh god — if Tony had tried to kill himself — there was no way that he could get there. Tony was there, and he was here, rubbing Loki’s feet like a good little slave. And it had been weeks ago too, he realized with a groan.

“You’re biting your lip again. You know I don’t like that.” Loki drawled, eyes narrowing. He had made it very clear that he didn’t like to see Steve ‘damaging’ his ‘perfect’ lips. Steve had the bruises on his backside to remind him of that first argument. When Loki did hit, he hit hard and he didn’t pull his punches either. Steve had sported a nasty bruise on his shoulder for almost three days after he had snapped and beaked off at Loki the first time; he had been trying to play nice, but there had only been so much he could take. For the record, mop handles hurt. A lot.

“So anyways, Tony tried to throw himself off the side of the building. Naturally, being the concerned citizen I am, I intervened.” Loki continued.

Steve’s head jerked up involuntarily. He locked eyes with Loki for a split second and then went back to staring defiantly at Loki’s toes.

“He was pretty sure that you were dead of course. Cried a lot more than I thought he would. He was so good at keeping it in all the other times, but apparently Howard told him something about my refusal to accept his little bribe and he assumed that it meant I was going to string you up in retaliation for the poor business proposition.” Loki sneered. He closed the book, marking his spot with his index finger and then stared blandly down at Steve.

“You know what’s funny?” He said.

Steve shook his head numbly. Funny meant a lot of different things to Loki.

“He seemed to have given up on you coming back. I was genuinely surprised. He held off on the suicidal thoughts for thirty some odd years when his father was being his loving puppet master and two weeks without you had him on the railing trying to free fall into the cement. I’m surprised at that, really, I am.”

Steve focused all of his attention onto Loki’s big toe, rubbing around the base and down the centre of Loki’s heel, earning a groan of satisfaction.

“You do splendid work by the way Rogers. Such lovely work. I should have woken you up years ago.”

Steve froze in mid-rub.

Loki had woken him up?

He looked up very slowly, this time purposely making eye contact with Loki despite the dangers that entailed.

“You were the one who woke me up?” Steve asked.
“I just said that, didn’t I? Do you have some kind of hearing problem I should be concerned about? You seem to repeat things a lot.” Loki grumbled, cracking open the book again, feigning indifference; it was still upside down of course, so it wasn’t like he was going to just stop talking all of a sudden. They had been living together for a month now, and he had Loki’s moods pretty well mapped out. Showing actual interest to a conversation would often earn the same childish little jokes or breaks in conversation, usually with Loki looking away and not speaking about it even if prompted. Steve decided to try something different, adding a new layer to the game. Let’s see how he handles this, Steve though, suppressing a grim smile.

“How is Bucky taking it?” Steve asked casually, returning to the foot rub. He rubbed some lotion into his hands from the bottle beside his knee and then began to work the fresh liquid into Loki’s skin. Loki was practically purring now, leaning back into his chair as if he was going to melt clean through the thing.

“He’s taking it as well as can be expected. He tried bribing me as well – offered to let me fuck him if it would get you back. Of course I couldn’t care less about him.” Loki groaned, eyes squeezing shut, the book dropping from his lap onto the floor with a thud. Steve raised an eyebrow at that but didn’t comment. Loki would talk when he was ready; all Loki did was talk. He was such a diva, and he knew it too.

“You should have seen how red his face went when he offered too. I think he was hoping I would come to him in my female form. It seems to really freak him out that I’m a man. You knew though…” Loki said, squinting down at Steve. “You knew for some reason. I’d like to know actually. Just how did you know what my real form looked like?”

“I dreamed about it.” Steve responded. He could keep his own secrets after all. Loki knew a little about the dreams, as he had often pointed out. Steve suspected that some of the information had been collected from Bucky, during his and Loki’s brief and somewhat tumultuous relationship. It was strange to think about Loki and Bucky together being intimate; he didn’t want to think about Loki and sex in the same sentence in general, and adding Bucky to the mix made it worse. It was far too disgusting a thought to tangle with for long. Steve tried not to dwell on it, but thoughts kept creeping in no matter how much he tried to pad his mind with chores and old memories. Had Loki wooed Bucky into sleeping with him? Was it an on the fly sort of deal, where they had fallen into bed together after a battle? Loki was nothing it not patient with his games, and getting Bucky into his bed was apparently something of a conquest, something he clearly savored. Had Bucky known that Loki was a villain when they had gotten together? What had they talked about together? Steve had so many questions, but he wasn’t sure if he really wanted the answers.

The fact remained that Loki knew things that he shouldn’t; things about the dream-world and the dreams that he and Bucky shared. The genuine fascination with Bucky’s dreams was troubling, because if Loki wanted to know about those dreams then what did they really mean? Were they dreams at all? Or something more?

“Interesting. Tell me more.” Loki murmured, wiggling his toes in Steve’s grasp.

“There’s nothing to tell really. I remember little things – it’s like glimpses of things that haven’t happened.” Steve shrugged.

Shit. Steve froze. He hadn’t meant to give up that kind of information! What the hell had he been thinking? It was too late to think of a backup plan – Loki had taken control of his body. There wouldn’t be anything to stop him from spilling it all now. Shit!

“And?” Loki sounded captivated.
“Sometimes I dream of when I was Captain America and when Tony was Iron man. When we were together working in the Avengers and were in love.” Steve said; he wanted to slap his hands over his mouth even though that would mean smearing foot flavored lotion on his lips. His fingers were busy working away, rubbing Loki’s other foot now having moved of their own accord.

“That’s interesting. What else have you dreamed – about me, more specifically?”

“I dreamed about you and crystals. Three crystals … one was blue, and one was red… and one didn’t have any colour.” Steve said; he felt woozy, as if he were about to pass out from drinking too much wine. He shook his head and came back to himself, the feeling slowly returning to his limbs as they went back to being under his control. When he looked up at Loki, Loki was looking very curiously back at him.

“One red and one blue you said?”

“Yes.”


Steve returned Loki’s book to his hands and then went back to rubbing at the flat of Loki’s foot, hoping that he hadn’t just blown all of his chances at freedom.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Fairy-tales make the best friends.

Chapter Notes

Loki has some creepy moments here. Warnings for discussions about Rape, Unwanted Pregnancy and other uncomfortable scenes.

“We’re going on a trip.” Loki said, pacing back and forth in front of the end of the bed; each step seemed to soothe him until he was merely standing in place chewing thoughtfully on his lower lip instead of charging back and forth like a caged tiger. Steve raised an eyebrow, hoping that Loki hadn’t snapped and gone completely bananas. He was sitting in the centre of their bed, fiddling with the green and gold checkerboard bedspread that had gotten rumpled underneath him; he was dressed in his nightgown, shivering as the last of his sleep warmth left him. They had only just woken up a few minutes ago, Loki dragging him out from under the covers at the crack of dawn for some half-baked reason Steve couldn’t quite comprehend yet.

“A trip?” Steve repeated for the fourth time, hoping that the repetition might get Loki to actually explain himself for once.

“Yes, Steve. A trip. Are you – oh never mind. I ask you time and time again, and you claim that you’re not deaf.” Loki grumbled. He snapped his fingers and an armoire appeared out of nowhere, settling gently down on the floor beside the wardrobe Steve’s dresses were stored in. The armoire glittered, covered with gold and silver carvings that wound their way around a polished silver mirror set in the centre of the door. Loki took a moment to caress the golden handle, fingers stroking the smooth metal as if it were the most gorgeous of objects, staring at himself in the mirror. “Victor would want me to dress in something nice.”

Loki snapped his fingers and his clothing fell into a heap on the floor, his body morphing back into his female form one meaty curve at a time; Steve looked away, his stomach twisting into knots at the sight. He wished that Loki had at least had the courtesy to tell him what he was planning to do so that he could have looked away in time. The less Naked Loki he had in his life, the better.

“Now,” Loki drawled her voice sweet and sinister, “to pick out something nice.” She yanked the armoire open and flicked through the clothing inside, plucking a long black dress from its hanger once she was satisfied with what she had seen. She put it on, tugging it in place. It was a tight fitting number with long sleeves and a flared base covered with ruffles; the front dipped down to her navel, leaving her ample cleavage visible. A blind man could have seen it, from space. Loki’s pale breasts almost popped free from the tight fabric when she bent down to pull a long black ribbon from the bottom shelf of the armoire. She wound the ribbon around her index finger and then turned to Steve, smirking. “Come here darling. I need a little help with my stockings.”

Steve reluctantly left his nest of blankets, padding barefoot across the cold carpet; he took the ribbon
from Loki’s hands and got down on his hands and knees in front of her. “Where does this one go exactly?” He asked wearily.

Loki frowned. “What did I say about whining?”

“I’m not whining.” Steve grumbled, yawning into the back of his hand to complete the ruse. “You said something about stockings?”

“Oh. Yes, I’m not wearing underwear, am I?” Loki tittered in amusement. She fanned her face, smiling coyly at Steve, who continued to stare a hole into the carpet as if that was what he had been born to do. “Fetch them for me, will you? They were with the stockings if I recall correctly.”

“These?” Steve grunted, holding up the pair he had tried to avoid earlier. They were soothing to the touch; part of a fancy lingerie set that seemed to be missing the bustier.

“Oh yes. Those are the ones.” Loki rolled her dress up higher. “Go ahead. Put them on me.” She lifted her hips, flashing him with her lady bits and it took all of Steve’s patience to keep from running screaming out of the room; it wasn’t that he was scared of them, it was more that he never wanted to know Loki that intimately, ever. Loki had never asked him to do something like this before. He, or rather She, had always been surprisingly willing to do that sort of dressing on her own. Steve had helped her into her clothing a few times when she had been irritated with a clasp or button, but for the most part she took care of it on her own, more interested in dressing him than having him dress her. He supposed that he was lucky that he hadn’t had to do this more often.

Steve kept his eyes on her belly button as he pulled her panties up and on, trying to ignore the way she giggled when his fingers brushed the soft skin of her inner thighs. Her fingers found their way into his hair and he froze, swallowing hard. What the hell had he done wrong now?

“You’re such a sweetheart.” Loki murmured, untangling his bedhead as she gently scratched at his scalp. “I’ve had servants before in Asgard who weren’t nearly this sweet, and those ones were supposed to be trained to serve from birth. I was a prince, you know.”

Steve ignored her chatter, fumbling for the stockings he had left beside the bed, wanting to get the demeaning task done and over with. He scooted backwards and dragged the left stocking up, mindful of the smooth silk, not wanting it to snag; he had no intention of ruining anything, especially when they were ‘going out’ for the day. If he was lucky he might be able to slip into the crowd and disappear when she wasn’t paying attention. Maybe if he put some distance between them, the magic might even weaken! He could dream.

“You’re such a sweetheart.” Loki sighed, lifting up her other leg so that he could work. “Hm…” She eyed the wardrobe, tapping her chin. “Of course, I don’t want Victor to be too enamored with you. You’re mine after all, and I’m not going to trade you to get that damned book back. It was mine in the first place.”

Book? They were going out to get a book? And who was this Victor, Loki was talking about? It couldn’t be that Victor, could it? Steve smoothed the stockings out and attached the garters, clipping
everything in place with practiced ease; he had the same set up some days, but thankfully Loki was pretty lax about it, and he hadn’t had to put up with them for a while now. Underwear wasn’t supposed to be this finicky. It just wasn’t right to have to have two people just to get out of it, although he supposed that that might have been the point.

Loki patted Steve on the head and straightened out her dress, letting the folds fall back in place. “Now, let’s see what we can dress you in.” She started sorting through Steve’s outfits clucking her tongue as she picked through piece after piece, unhappy with everything she saw. Her hands dropped to her hips, a finger idly drumming on her thigh.

Steve stretched out on the floor, touching his toes. He tried not to feel too gleeful at the way Loki kept glaring at the clothing in his wardrobe. Maybe there would be an accidental fire. It would be such a shame if something happened to all those nice dresses.

“What are you looking so happy about?” Loki growled, whipping around.

Steve cleared his throat, touching his toes again. “Just happy to be able to touch my toes, that’s all.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Really…”

“Yep.” Steve chirped, wiggling his toes as proof. He squawked when Loki grabbed him by the back of his nightgown, dragging him across the floor and up into the air in one smooth motion; he choked on the collar as it cut into his throat, gasping for breath. He managed to get a toe pressed against the carpet again and then all of a sudden, Loki’s arms were wrapped around him, her cheek pressed against his, all warm and soft. She let out a contented purr, rubbing their cheeks together in a way that might have been cute if it wasn’t Loki doing the rubbing.

“Loki?”

She kissed the top of his head, steadying him before letting go. “You’ll wear the white and black dress. And pack your pajamas – we’ll be spending the night.”

They traveled by teleportation, swallowed up by vivid emerald green light as they stood in the backyard garden underneath a flowery bust of Natasha; Steve did not enjoy the trip one bit, even though it was a fast one. He swayed as they stepped out of the green whirlwind into Latveria, steadying himself on a nearby tree to keep from tumbling head over heels as his eyes readjusted to a non-spinning world. Everything was white here, winter in full swing well ahead of the rest of the world. He was pretty sure he had read in a newspaper that Doctor Doom arranged things that way on purpose; he controlled every aspect of his country, right down to the weather because ‘anything less showed weakness’. It was likely magic doing the actual controlling in this case, and why someone would want snow twenty four hours a day was beyond Steve. It must have had something to do with the whole oppressive regime thing Doom was currently working. He tried not to think about it, knowing that the more he did, the more he wanted to get into a good old fashioned fist fight.

Steve’s teeth started chattering, the thin fabric of his black lace edged white Lolita dress not nearly enough to keep the cold out; his knees and lower legs were slightly more exposed to the elements. Thankfully, his long white stockings were there to save the day, and he was glad that he had taken the time to pull them on before they left. Loki had to have known about the snow beforehand, but apparently this was an appropriate outfit for the visit; he wanted to smack her one something awful. He hugged himself, hoping that his lips weren’t turning blue.
“Are you coming or not?” Loki rubbed her hands together, their bags levitating behind her. Steve’s clothing wasn’t the only thing that had been packed up for the trip. He had been put to work stuffing Loki’s lingerie into a special bag while Loki checked up on something in the library; he was pretty sure nothing he did after this would ever be able to wipe that little gem from his mind. When he got back to the manor, or hell, when he got inside Castle Doom he was going to look for somewhere he could scrub his hands pink and raw.

“We don’t have all day you know.” Loki grumbled. They trudged together through the snow, kicking their way through the snow drift in front of Castle Doom’s main gate. Nothing had been shoveled, not a single strip of road visible for miles. Evergreen trees tipped with snow became massive dunes off in the distance, green lost under a layer of cold, sterile white. Wrought iron bars guarded the main walkway; it was an eerie trip, one he wouldn’t soon forget. Not a single soul was out wandering even though it was still early in the morning. The city around it felt dead and empty, although judging by the shoe prints in the snow someone must have been living there.

Castle Doom was a sight to behold. Had Steve not been freezing, he might have stood outside a while longer to get a better look at the ancient stone architecture. Loki strode up the steps, kicking snow off of her heels. She snagged Steve by the arm and proceeded to dust him off, her hands like burning coals against his frozen skin. “Now, I know you’re going to be on your best behavior, correct?” She said, fixing a particularly stubborn piece of lace on Steve’s left shoulder.

“Yes Loki.”

“And you’re not going to harass Victor. No begging or pandering to him. I’ll hear about it if you do.” Loki continued, brushing snow off of Steve’s bangs.

“Yes Loki.”

“And you’re not going to tell him about me – the other me, I mean. He’s not to know about that. It’s none of his business.”

“Yes Loki.” Steve could feel his free will slipping again, the threads of Loki’s spell wrapping around him tighter in warning. He scowled, and hugged himself tighter when the threads faded, enjoying the slow burn of magic against his skin. Escaping was starting to look like a bad idea. Getting stuck in the Latverian countryside in forty below wasn’t exactly his idea of a picnic. Even if the Avengers did manage to find him, he would be frozen solid by the time they got to him; he had no intention of going back into the ice ever again, even if it had only happened in a dream.

“Oh!” Loki turned around, her skirts clipping Steve’s legs like inattentive whips. “And he’s not to touch you.” She ran her fingers through Steve’s hair, fretting when one of the curls wouldn’t stay in place. “You’ll stick to me like glue. If I’m not in the same room, you shouldn’t be there, understand?”

Steve agreed, nodding his head. He didn’t trust Victor Von Doom any more than he did Loki, but at least Loki probably wasn’t going to have him publically executed if he knocked something over by accident. He stood solemnly by Loki’s side as servants opened the main doors for them, amazed by the efficiency of the maids; the head maid busied herself sweeping snow off Loki’s dress with a soft-bristled brush, the others swarming around to sweep at every other available space. He stood still and endured his own brush down, although there wasn’t much left that Loki hadn’t already taken care of.

“My Lady!” Doom’s voice boomed out; Steve turned in time to catch sight of Doom coming strutting around the corner; his armor looked more polished than normal, the green of his cape just a bit brighter. A maid trailed after him, brushing his shoulders with a velvet brush although there was no lint to be seen. Finding lint on that cape was probably an executable offence, knowing Doom.
Oh, Steve thought with a snicker when he noticed the way Doom’s mask was polished to within an inch of its life. Doom must have been looking forward to this visit a bit more than Loki had been letting on. He had been under the impression that this was a spur of the moment decision; apparently this wasn’t just a social call. He watched Loki and Doom embrace, suspicious of every movement, hoping to god that what happened next wouldn’t involve him. Doom caught his eye and bristled, his shoulders going stiff. Had Steve not known that he was human, he might have thought Doom was mechanical. “I did not realize that you had brought your little friend with you.”

Doom took Steve’s hand in his own, giving it a courtesy kiss. “I see you have brought him into the fold. Are you enjoying your time with your new mistress?” Doom asked. There was a glint in his eye that was far from friendly. Steve bowed his head in supplication, seeing Loki smile out of the corner of his eye. Loki and Doom may have had some kind of secret date set up, but Steve obviously wasn’t the only one left out of the loop. Steve wasn’t sure which was more distressing: the fact that he hadn’t known what was going on, or the fact that Doom hadn’t.

“It’s nice to see you again.” Steve said, trying to stay polite. Manners, he reminded himself, were the only thing that was going to keep him safe here in Castle Doom.

“I’m sure.” Doom snorted. He turned away from Steve, wrapping an arm around Loki’s waist as his serving staff took the floating bags and Loki’s wet fur shawl away, vanishing like grains of sand into the desert. Steve wondered vaguely where these people came from. Did they grow them somewhere? They didn’t seem like real people, too perfect for their own good. “We shall break our fast in a moment. I trust that you have not eaten yet? I know how you hate to travel on a full stomach.”

“You know me so well Victor,” Loki giggled, patting him on the shoulder. She looked over her shoulder and motioned for Steve to come closer, grasping his hand in hers. “Breakfast would be lovely. You’ve had your kitchen staff working on this for days, haven’t you?” She teased, squeezing Steve’s hand.

“But of course. Doom does not waste his time on paltry offerings. My lady deserves the best.” Doom boasted.

Doom’s best, it seemed, was also something he was willing to offer Loki personally.

After an uneventful yet tense breakfast, Doom and Loki retired to a private room, slipping away after a few rounds of wine; Steve found himself a quiet section of Doom’s private library to sit in, and sprawled in front of the lit fireplace warming himself up as best he could despite the cold creeping into his body through the stone floor. It was hard not to get up and explore, but he knew better than to mess with Doom’s private library. He watched the flames instead, trying not to think about what Loki and Doom were doing in a private sound proof room. He really hoped that they were just planning dastardly deeds, and not doing anything else. There wasn’t enough mind bleach in the world to get rid of the mental imagery that came with the idea of them ‘bumping uglies’ as Tony had once so eloquently put it.

It was quiet here, but even that felt heavy and suppressive. He could barely move for fear of alerting someone to his presence. He hadn’t actually been able to ask either Doom or his servants where it was safe to go; he hoped that the library wasn’t off limits. The door had been left open after all, and there wasn’t any magic here to keep him out. Loki had been pretty insistent about him not causing problems, and this might have been pushing it. He planned on toeing the line for as long as possible, earning himself some brownie points in the process. He didn’t know what they might get him, but having some good favor with Loki would probably be a good thing in the long run.
Lunch time rolled around. Steve remained in front of the fire, dozing a few feet away from the bronze and glass fireplace doors. It was nice to be left alone for once. There weren’t any Shadows wandering the halls, and he hadn’t been stared at for at least a few hours now. He sighed contentedly, letting his eyelids close, hoping to get a few more minutes peace.

“So this is where you are.” Doom’s voice was surprisingly quiet and contemplative; Steve sat upright with a bolt, his heart pounding so loud he could barely hear anything else. He turned slowly, sheepish. “I didn’t know where to go.”

Doom stalked closer, dropping to his knees in front of Steve. “And you thought that breaking into my most private room was a smart idea boy?” He hissed, grabbing Steve by the chin.

“I didn’t touch anything! I was just sitting in front of the fire.” Steve managed to get out, wincing in pain.

“You didn’t? You would not lie to Doom, would you?” Doom growled, casting a glance around the room. He frowned, letting Steve’s chin drop from his hands. “You are here, in a room filled with magical objects, books able to spew any incantation in the world, and you touched nothing?”

“I didn’t want to be rude.” Steve mumbled as he rubbed his chin, looking down at the ground. It sounded kind of stupid to him too, because after all, who wouldn’t want to snoop here? Doctor Doom had thousands of volumes of rare books on spellcraft; he had always been one of the strongest super villains in the world, and he could do nearly everything.

“Rude…” Doom mused, settling himself in a chair. “I see. Your mistress is indisposed at the moment. She will likely sleep until dinner.” He lounged in the chair, resting his chin in his palm, surveying the room. “Howard Stark has been looking for you.”

“I’m sure he has.” Steve agreed, resting his hands in his lap; with his back to the fire, it was almost comfortable being here, even if it was with Doctor Doom. Something was mixed into the fire, some sweet herb thrown in by the servants. He felt serene; relaxed in ways he hadn’t been for over a month.

“He is worried that you will meet your untimely demise. Frankly, he should be more concerned with meeting his untimely demise. The man is a lecherous oaf. I will not tolerate him for much longer. His perversion and willingness to defile innocents disgusts me. He wields power so pointlessly, has no skill or aim with it. Men who have not earned their power do not deserve it.” Doom growled, shaking his head. “May I ask how you became friends with such an animal? I have read of your participation in Project: Rebirth, but I must say, I would not have thought you would become friends with something like Howard Stark.”

“He’s not a friend.” Steve said quietly.

“Then he appears to be delusional as well as lecherous.”

“Maybe I should rephrase that. He was my friend until I saw what he really is.” Steve rubbed his hands together, tucking them in his armpits when that failed to warm them up. He hated having such crumby circulation.

“And yet he continues to fund the Avengers.” Doom laughed, slapping the armrest. “It astounds me how true villainy must contend with such foolishness. Were the world under my control, men such as him would be stuffed in the dungeons they deserved.”

“I can agree with that sentiment.” Steve shrugged.
“I must admit, you are much better company than I expected. Your mistress tells such tall tales some days, it is hard to tell what is truth and which the falsity. I suppose you have the same problems.” Doom said.

“Sometimes.”

“She tells me that you are her princess, yet she forgets that Doom has ears. The gossip Howard Stark spews is more than enough to interest the most common peddlers, who in turn report to me what they believe to be fact. They say that my lady is actually a lord. Do you know anything of that?” Doom leaned forwards, his fingers digging into the hand rest so hard they left dents. “You have been with your mistress for weeks now. Surely you know the truth.”

The spell Loki had so lovingly weaved over Steve kicked in before he could so much as hesitate to offer an answer. “No,” Steve heard himself say, safely hidden away deep within his own mind, “I don’t know what they’re talking about. My lady has always been my lady. He’s making things up to try and play mind games. Maybe he’s jealous?”

“Games, you say… His lies are the least of his problems. His slander is nothing more than idle dribble. Doom does not care whether Loki is a woman or not – what matters is her truly vicious and black heart. One would be lucky to have such a thing.” Doom sighed, standing up. “Come, we will feast while your mistress dreams.”

Doom lead Steve back to the ballroom they had breakfasted in, seating himself closer than Steve would have liked. The servants moved around them as if they were following tracks in the floor, their eyes never looking up further than chest level; they didn’t speak either, silent things that served and did nothing more.

Steve ate his soup, watching them work as they served Doom wine and glazed duck. Doom watched Steve in turn, a standoff neither of them really pointed out. Once the food was served, and the plates laid out with heaping portions, Doom sent his servants away with the wave of a hand. He seemed bored.

“I do not give favors.” Doom said, cutting up the duck with a knife longer than Steve’s forearm. The bones beneath his blade snapped like they were nothing more than twigs.

“I didn’t ask you to.” Steve said, holding his ground. The spell had gone away again, leaving him to his own devices. He sipped at his soup, trying not to burn his tongue, thinking only of Tony and what it might be like to get out of this mess once and for all. If there was one thing to make him not want to join the Avengers again, this was it. He didn’t want to spend one more minute with these nut job super villains.

“Oh but you did. The moment your darling face came into view I could hear the begging rolling off your tongue. Of course it came out as pleasantries, but that is to be expected. One does not mock their mistress while in her presence.” Doom took a sip of wine, swirling it in his cup before setting it down again. “And as I have said, Doom does not give favors, even to those as misfortunate as you.”

Steve took another spoonful of soup. “Alright. Good to know.”

“But,” Doom said as he ate a mouthful of tender duck, “if I was in such a giving mood, what would you ask of me?”

Steve set his spoon down carefully. A servant popped up from his right and cleared his empty bowl
away, replacing it with a plate of roast beef and some kind of mash; it smelled a bit like potatoes, but might have been turnips for all Steve knew. “What are you talking about?”

“Were I in a giving mood, what would you ask of me?” Doom growled.

“I guess I’d ask for you to pass on a message.” Steve said. Was Doom being serious? Or was this just another game? He was really getting sick and tired of all the backstabbing going on in the world. What he would give for a nice, decent person to talk to for once.

“A message? That is what you would ask of Doom?” Doom scoffed, seeming insulted. He banged his fist on the table, making his wine glass dance in place.

“Well, it would be a pretty important message.” Steve said quickly. “I’d want to tell my friend Tony that I was alright – that he doesn’t have to worry about me. That he shouldn’t give up.”

Doom went silent, his fork falling from his grasp. He stared down at the utensil and then hefted it up, stabbing his duck again. “You worry about this Tony?”

“I love him. He’s the most important person I have in this world.” Steve said softly.

“Oh? I suppose that wouldn’t be such a pointless request after all. Out of curiosity, what is this man’s full name?”

“Tony Stark.”

At that, Doom’s wine glass took a tumble. The servants scurried out from the kitchen and cleaned the wine from the table, sponging it off of Doom’s armor; they looked scared, ready to flinch away when Doom held out his hand for a new glass of wine.

“Interesting.” Doom said as the servants cleaned. “Very interesting.”

Steve was shown back to Doom’s library after lunch, led there by Doom himself. Doom seemed tired, if Steve was reading him right. Of course, for all he knew, Doom might be drunk out of his mind instead; maybe he was a sleepy drunk. He had consumed almost three bottles of wine during lunch, and while they had talked about a lot of things, most of it had just been filler. Once the food and wine was gone, he had turned pensive, asking the servants about Loki’s disposition. According to a nervous looking butler, Loki was still sleeping, and so Doom had decided to escort Steve back to the library before returning to whatever it was he had been doing earlier.

The library was just as warm as it had been earlier. Steve sat down in front of the fireplace, letting himself drift off to sleep again. He curled up, letting the warmth seep into his flesh one precious moment at a time, knowing that he wasn’t going to get dragged off to a dungeon anymore.

“Steve?”

Steve sat up slowly, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He wasn’t sure how long he had been out for. Loki knelt down in front of him; she was wrapped in nothing more than a flimsy dressing gown of lilac silk, the front hanging open as the string valiantly tried to keep it shut. So much for all that expensive lingerie!
“There you are! Victor said that you were napping, I just didn’t think it would be here.” Loki ran her fingers through Steve’s hair, clucking her tongue when she saw that some of the ash from the fire had mixed in with his golden locks. “You’re making a mess of yourself I see.”

“I fell asleep.” Steve yawned, eyelids dropping again. He could smell cinnamon in Loki’s hair, and the flowery scent of body lotion; she had probably taken a bath. He caught a whiff of wine on her breath too, and wondered how much she had been drinking. If Doom could knock back three bottles of wine over lunch without getting tipsy, how much had they drunk when they were alone?

“Well, you’re just lucky you didn’t light yourself on fire by accident.” Loki snapped, standing up. “I need to get dressed for dinner. Come on, let’s go sleepy head.” She grabbed Steve by the hand and tugged him out of the room, leading him down winding stone corridors to the bedroom she had left to come find him. There was a large canopy bed inside, plush furniture painted in gold and silver everywhere the eye could see. All of it looked antique and well cared for, like the servants had worshiped it and given it offerings every morning.

Loki led Steve to the bed and down, letting the dressing gown drop around her as Steve went through her bag to fetch her dinner outfit; her hand on his shoulder surprised him. He twitched, squeezing the smooth purple satin dress in his hands a little tighter than was strictly necessary. There was a clink, and he saw that he had accidentally knocked over an empty wine bottle that had been sitting beside the bed.

“Turn around.”

Steve obliged, holding the dress up as a shield; Loki gestured to her bare breasts and he wasn’t quick enough to look away from what he saw. The smooth pale skin of her breasts was marred by reddened bite marks. She smirked when she saw the way Steve had paled, pulling him closer so that he was standing in between her legs with his knees bumping her inner thighs.

“Does this surprise you?” She asked, her arms wrapping around his shoulders, hanging there. He knew better than to pull away; he didn’t struggle even though he wanted to. It wasn’t worth the trouble. She pulled him closer when she saw that he wasn’t struggling, pressing her face into the crook of his neck, nuzzling closer. “Does it scare you? That I would let him touch me like this?” She mouthed against his neck. Steve went stiff in her arms. She ignored his discomfort, running her hands down his back, playing with the lace running around his waist.

“Does it?” She snapped suddenly, pulling away, her eyes flashing.

“I don’t know.” Steve said, shuffling his feet, wanting to be anywhere but here. He caught sight of the bite marks again and shook his head hard. “If you like someone, I don’t see it being a problem. It’s your personal business, not mine.”

She pursed her lips, crossing her arms over her chest. “So it doesn’t scare you? Even a little bit?”

“If you were hurt, then yes. It would.” Steve said, honestly. What had brought all this up? She had never seemed this concerned before about being touched by horny men before; this was Loki sitting in front of him. A very naked and bite covered Loki, one who was to Steve’s horror, extremely drunk. He looked away, holding up the dress. “Should I —”

Loki pulled him into her arms again, falling flat on her back with him trapped against her like a squirming child trying to escape its mother’s grasp. She tugged him up her chest, his face crammed between her breasts; she closed her eyes, her breath coming out soft and even. “Did I ever tell you about what my father did to me?” She asked, the words slurring at the end in a way that was far too familiar. This was Tony Stark levels of drunk here, maybe something worse than that. He had seen
only the one bottle, but there had to be more somewhere in the room. Steve let out a shaky breath, unsure about what to do next.

“No.” He murmured into Loki’s breasts. Steve had heard the tales of Loki’s birth before, how Loki had been stolen from Jotunheim by Odin as a ward—a glorified hostage, who Odin had then raised as his own son. Thor had told Steve about this in his dreams, all of it a mystery.

“He needed the walls around Asgard rebuilt and contracted an Ice Giant by the name of Hrimthurs to do the grunt work. He made a deal with Hrimthurs…” Loki stroked Steve’s cheek, “If the creature could complete the work in six months, he would get the sun, the moon, and…” Loki sighed, pressing a kiss to Steve’s forehead. “Frigga.”

“Frigga– but isn’t she your mother?” Steve asked, stunned by the revelation.

“She is not my birth mother. That Ice Giantess I could never find, but yes, Frigga is the only mother I have ever loved.”

“How could he trade his wife for a wall? That’s awful!”

“I have always said he was a fool. Thor forgets this, pretends that it didn’t happen, although I don’t know why. It could have just as easily been him in the All-Father’s grasp. But Thor matters not, this is about Odin. Where was I? Oh yes! Odin did not realize that Hrimthurs had a horse with him, a creature that helped with his labors. Six months was nothing for the pair of them, a trifle even, so when the time came to pay up Father realized what his foolishness would cost him. And so he asked me to do him a most honorable favor. When Hrimthurs was to put in the final brick in the wall, I was to distract the horse—and in essence, stop the completion.” Loki hummed. “How could I refuse the request? I am a shapeshifter by nature and by practice, better than any of those in Asgard. And it was for my mother—the only person who had cared for me aside from Thor. I could not let her down. Refusal would have meant her being sold off to an Ice Giant as a slave—a servant for a wretched creature.”

“So what did you do?” Steve asked.

Loki kissed Steve’s forehead again, rubbing her thumb against the wet patch of skin. “I transformed into a white mare, the most attractive horse imaginable. They told me that his horse was slow, that all I need do was distract it into keeping the final brick from being laid. I only needed hours, Odin told me. Hours, and all I had to do was lure the creature away with that final brick so that Hrimthurs couldn’t finish his work. Only…”

“Only?”

“Only Odin had lied to me. The horse was not slow. It was not slow at all.” Loki hugged Steve tighter, kissing his cheek, nuzzling against him; the scent of wine on her breath was almost overpowering. “They mocked me for it. Called me names and sent me away to hide my shame. A year later I returned, and I gave my Sleipnir to Oden as a gift, as a badge for the All-Father to wear for his shame. He had sent me to it, had left me behind to carry the burden by myself. Do you know what it is like to give birth alone, in the cold with nothing more for company than the rotting leaves?” Loki’s cheeks were wet. She snifflled softly and wiped at them with the back of her hand, seeming surprised by their existance.

Was this true? Had Loki really been—Steve felt sick to his stomach on Loki’s behalf. He squeezed his eyes shut. What kind of parent would do such a thing to their own child? What kind of bastard would sell off his own wife for a wall?
“Mother gave me a book when I returned and took my place as a prince of Asgard once more. An extraordinary book too, one that could never be found again no matter how hard I looked; a handwritten copy that I have always cherished. And then I lost it.” Loki hissed angrily.

She ran her fingers through Steve’s hair again, calming herself with each rough stroke. She hiccupped; he couldn’t fault her for this, for trying to take comfort somehow, even if it was the wrong way. If this was what had started her insanity, he couldn’t blame her for it. Asgard may have been a different world, but they should have known better than to shame a rape victim. If he had been around, he would have been punching people in the face; and while Loki had had Thor around for that, it didn’t seem like there had been nearly enough face punching. Steve wished that he could have met Loki under different circumstances; he wished that Loki could have had different circumstances. He still hated her for this, hated her with a passion for taking him away from Tony, from his happiness, but he could understand now. In her position, he might have become just as angry and bitter. He might have become just as broken and cruel.

“The good news,” Loki said with a sniffle, sitting up. She arranged Steve on her lap, cupping his face in her hands. She was still warm like the sun even though there was no fire lit in the room. “Is that Victor has my book. He will make a gift of it to me.” She smiled, flattening the lace around his collar.

Steve raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “He will?” He couldn’t see Victor Von Doom handing something over just because it belonged to someone else once. If he did that, he wouldn’t have been constantly running into superheroes trying to reclaim said objects.

“Oh yes. He knows that it was mine. My name is written in irremovable magic within the bindings, and he knows what it is worth to me. I was very careful, and Victor is nothing if not proper with women he cares for. He will give me back my book. Now.” Loki sighed dramatically, running her fingers through her hair. “The sooner we get to dinner, the sooner I get my book! Let’s get dressed. And no more tears.”

Steve hadn’t even realized that he had been crying; it was startling to see tears on his fingertips when he looked down at them. He wiped at his eyes and swallowed hard, slipping off of her lap.

They returned home the next day, and Loki skipped into the manor with her book clutched to her chest. She took one delicate step inside her bedroom, changing back into her real form and then it was nothing but hours and hours of chores for Steve, all at the hand of a very gleeful looking male Loki. Their conversation in Doom’s guest room may as well have not even happened.

The chores didn’t last long. Loki soon became uninterested in them, staring once more out the window into nothingness, the book he had bargained for tucked safely away in his private library. Steve never did get to find out the name of it before it disappeared.

Loki disappeared the next morning. As usual, he left no note or message to say where he had gone or what he was doing; Steve didn’t really expect one. There was nothing for Steve to do but wander around aimlessly, cleaning whatever he came across whether it needed to be cleaned or not.
Loki was gone for three weeks this time; Steve was starting to think of him as if he was a stray cat that sometimes showed up for food. You could never predict when he was back, or when he would leave, and all you did know was that one day he would show up out of the blue expecting your attention with his claws out. Those three weeks were long weeks, stretched out in between hours and hours of endless sitting, cleaning and sleeping. Steve wasn’t sure how he managed to keep it together, but he did.

The Shadows weren’t very good company, even if they did follow him everywhere he went; he had never felt lonely with company before, but there was always a first for everything. The Shadows still didn’t really do anything other than what Loki had tasked them with and Steve wasn’t even sure what those tasks were. When he tried to play catch with them out of morbid curiosity they never joined in, simply sitting there getting beamed in the head with the ball Steve had found in the garden. The ball had teeth marks on it; he really hoped that it hadn’t belonged to an animal Loki had forgotten to care for or in the worst case, killed. He had the image of a skeletal looking dog stuck in his head for three hours before he could get it out; he couldn’t find anything lying around, so maybe Loki stole the ball as a prank to bother someone in the park. Maybe.

One Eye stuck especially close to him as the days went by, lurking out in the open instead of in the dark corners it had once frequented. Steve had initially disliked the Shadow, but he was starting to become fond of it for some reason; it might have been Stockholm syndrome. He had read about that on the internet once when he had been looking up artists from Sweden. The paintings had been nice, the syndrome not quite so much. He worried that one day he might forget what it was like being on his own without Loki around all the time. It made his blood run cold some nights.

One Eye was everywhere Steve looked. It even started to bring Steve tea whenever he was reading in the library; the tea was poured whenever Steve’s cup got empty, which left Steve trying patiently to explain that no, he didn’t want any more tea thank you very much so please stop filling up the cup because I have to pee. One Eye, sadly, did not seem to understand him no matter how hard he tried to explain himself. The Shadow even went so far as to reheat tea that had gotten cold, as if that would make Steve drink it. He had to make far too many trips to the bathroom while trying to be polite; Tony would have laughed at him, but he couldn’t think of any other way to deal with it considering the language barrier. He had tried pretending that he was asleep to avoid the Shadow but instead of wandering off, One Eye just kept watching and refilling the cup. It had even tucked him in with a blanket it had found somewhere, sitting down with the teapot balanced on its head.

Lurking in the library proved to be one of Steve’s better ideas, even if it did mean drinking what may have been lethal amounts of tea. While browsing through Loki’s massive collection, Steve came across a small leather bound volume that caught his eye. It was thin compared to the larger leather bound books surrounding it, almost invisible when nestled amongst them. He fished the book out with care as to not knock over the other books and ran a finger over the cover. While he might enjoy Loki’s company, he did share Loki’s love of books. He was surprised to see that he knew what this book was without even opening it up. This was the book Loki had gotten back from Doom.

“The Maiden’s Tears.” Steve read aloud.

That sounded oddly familiar.

No, scratch that. That sounded very familiar.

He tried to jog his memory for almost an hour, scribbling away on pages he tore out of his sketchbook in a tedious attempt at drawing words out one fractured vowel at a time. Nothing helped. It was as if there were blank pages within his head where they shouldn’t have been, the ideas scrubbed out, erased from existence. He opened The Maiden’s Tears up, leaning against the
bookshelf and tried to puzzle out what the story was about. The book wasn’t written in ancient runes like most of the others had been. He had already learned how to read those through pure stubbornness alone; it was a pity, because he had gotten really good with runes too, and now it wasn’t even useful. This was in some other ancient script, something older than Asgardian cursive at the very least. He couldn’t read a word of it.

Frustrated, he opened the book again and stared at the illustrations, trying to figure out what the book was about that way. The images proved enlightening; he almost wished that they hadn’t. It was a story alright, a dramatic work of fiction at that. There was a woman in all of the large prints, each one hand drawn and meticulously pressed onto the pages; Loki had been right, this had to have been a one of a kind work. It wasn’t like he was going to find this kind of thing online at Chapters. He flipped through reverently, mindful of the aged paper, afraid that it might turn to dust if he moved too fast; the Maiden seemed to be the main focus of the story, the protagonist to a very awkward and vicious tale. She seemed very lost in a few of the pictures, running around her world doing all sorts of things from adventuring to mourning the loss of foes she had slain. There was an air of responsibility to her, as if she was doing things not out of want but out of necessity. Steve had drawn his fair share of beautiful dames before but he hadn’t drawn anyone in such a melancholic state. Her eyes were like bottomless pits of blue; eyes he could have drowned in. She was beautiful, but it seemed that the equally handsome male protagonist, a scrappy looking fellow who followed her around, wasn’t interested in her all that much.

Steve was forced to close the book after a few minutes, shaking his head wildly. It had made him feel funny, like he was being sucked into a whirlpool; he sneezed into his arm. He knew the Maiden. He had seen her before. His heart started thumping madly in his chest, the rhythm booming out like a war drum. He kept feeling a pull in his chest even after the book lay in his lap, as if something was trying to draw him to the woman.

He had seen her.

He knew he had seen her. He had to know what had happened to her; he couldn’t keep his hands still, his palms sweaty. He braved the enthralling vortex and started to flip through the images again.

As he skimmed his way through the book the story became sadder and sadder, the pull stronger and stronger, tearing at his heart and stealing away his breath. There was no doubt that this was Loki’s favourite book. There was regular wear and tear on the spine, and though Loki was for the most part gentle with his books, some of the pages seemed to be crooked, as if having been ripped out and stitched back in; you couldn’t just glue those kinds of pages back in either, they had to be sewn back into the binding and molded with fresh paper and that took effort most people didn’t have. Someone had taken the time to repair the volume; it meant something to Loki, it had to have. He wondered if the damage had been done by Doom, or maybe when Loki had lost the book. It didn’t matter who had done it; damaged or not, it was plain to see that this wasn’t just a story. It was an outcry of sorts, a scream from the void. He knew who the Maiden was. He could feel her presence whenever he breathed in and out, could see her in his mind’s eye no matter how hard he tried to think of someone else. He had met her in that damned Tea House, floating in the dust; he had met her, and she had been haunting him ever since. Steve put the book back on the shelf, making sure to put it back right where he had found it. He wondered if she was watching him right then, and looked around the room, a shiver going down his spine.

Was she here?

He picked out another book, hoping to drown out the miserable feeling in his gut.

No. She couldn’t be here. She was dead and gone, dust on the wind.
He hadn’t thought that he would ever miss Loki’s presence, but he was starting to feel like he needed Loki around. Steve was unhappily aware of how foreign everything was, the manor a graveyard of sorts without its master tending to his flock. He wrapped himself tighter in the blankets that night and dreamed of Tony, kept warm by the smile on his lover’s face.

Steve woke up with Loki sleeping beside him still dressed in his traveling clothing, napping off whatever mischief he had gotten himself into this time; Loki was laying half on top of the blankets and half under, his hair a mess of twigs and tangles. Steve squiggled away, hoping to sneak out of the bed before Loki woke, both pleased and displeased by his reappearance.

He really did have no luck at all some days.

Loki reached out and snagged Steve’s arm, dragging him back across the bed. Damn him and his strength! He lazily opened one eye; it was bloodshot and he looked more than a little annoyed at having been disturbed. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Bathroom.” Steve lied. Loki snorted in disbelief and pulled Steve against him, wrapping his arms around Steve’s waist; he rested his head against Steve’s shoulder, eyes fluttering shut. He nosed against Steve’s ear.

“He’s been very busy in his workshop… but I had to keep pestering him to keep him from jumping again. That man is the most frustrating being on this planet – aside from Thor of course. He’s stupid for a genius…” Loki mumbled, yawning directly into Steve’s ear; his breath was warm and wet, smelling faintly of onions. Steve closed his eyes and steadied himself, wrinkling his nose as he tried not to sneeze. He had been sneezing all night even though Steve knew there was no dust around.

“But he’s… alright? Tony’s alright?”

“He’s sleep deprived and half-starved, but yes, I suppose you could say that he’s alright. He neglects to eat and drink, leaving me with the burdensome task of bringing him snacks to make sure that he doesn’t pass out and light himself on fire with his welding torch. I told you,” Loki said irritably, opening one eye again to glare at Steve because opening two was too much effort, “he’s a wreck without you around.”

But Tony was alive, Steve thought. Tony was alive and working. If Tony was working, then there was hope, no matter how bad it felt to be trapped under Loki’s heavy body. There was hope.

“It took much longer to get him going again… this time.” Loki yawned. He likely wasn’t intending to spill so much of his trip like this; this was free gossip, and Loki didn’t do free often. Exhaustion was Steve’s best friend now. He would keep its number on speed dial.

“He was so drunk… so very drunk… when I found him…” Loki muttered.
“He was?” Steve asked, feeling guilty.

“Yes. Very drunk. Drunk as a skunk…” Loki giggled a little at that. “Now shut up and go to sleep. M’ tired…”

Steve lay trapped against Loki’s chest for almost three hours after day broke, and no matter how much twisting he did he couldn’t work his way free from the god’s vice-like grip. Loki slept long and hard, utterly drained of energy. It was like having a sandbag lying on top of him the entire time, the air slowly being crushed out of lungs with every breath he took. Breakfast was a relief, as was the trip to the bathroom before that. For once he hadn’t had to wait around for Loki to brush his hair or change his clothes. Loki had been too interested in scrubbing the dirt off of his own body, acting more like Steve wasn’t even there.

Steve served Loki breakfast in the library on Loki’s favourite silver platter, the one with daisies engraved all around the edge. One Eye helped him carry the teapot, scuttling along beside him without a care in the world; Steve was starting to think that the Shadows didn’t really think all that much on their own, living for orders and nothing more. It was sad, but there was nothing he could do to fix the problem. They didn’t even know enough to try and run away, so how could he possibly offer help?

Loki was reading when Steve and One Eye stepped into the library, pouring over a book Steve recognized for once. The Maiden’s Tears was cracked open on Loki’s lap and he was dragging a long, slender finger across the text, muttering under his breath. Loki looked friendly; Steve hadn’t known him to just sit and read like this. Loki devoured books like someone might devour discount chocolates. This looked like he was actually savoring the read instead of swallowing it down, each line read with a kind of reverence.

“I brought breakfast.” Steve said, holding up the tray to try and get Loki’s attention. Loki didn’t look up, he just gestured with a hand to the table beside him, eyes glued to the page he was scouring. Steve put the tray down and then set Loki’s tea beside it, taking the cup from One Eye. He gave One Eye a pat on its head and then decided to take his chances with asking Loki a few questions; he knew the perfect way to get things to move along quickly. If anything, it was a little too easy. He sat down on the floor in front of Loki’s feet, knowing that Loki always liked seeing him that way and cleared his throat just loud enough for Loki to hear, but not loud enough for it to be too obvious that he wanted the attention.

Predictably, Loki’s eyes soon traveled from the book down to Steve. He scowled when he realized what he was doing and went back to his book, but he was smiling slightly afterwards.

“What do you want now?” Loki grumbled, feigning disinterest.

“What’s that book about?” Steve asked. He came close to batting his eyelashes, knowing that Loki would have just loved that; he found it disgusting that he might have to resort to something like that, but if he had to do it to get Loki to talk, he would. The man had a certain love of blushing maidens and people on bended knees. Steve couldn’t think of any better way of winning favor.

“It’s a fairy tale. A beautiful woman wants to marry a great warrior, but he refuses her after bedding her and she ends up watching him die with his new lover. Hardly something you would be interested in.” Loki growled.
“It sounds fascinating.” Steve said, and he meant it too. He had wanted to know what The Maiden’s Tears was about ever since he had seen it in Loki’s hands the first time; his mind drifted back the morbidly beautiful pictures trapped within the book’s pages as if they were his family photos, each one precious and irreplaceable.

“It’s more than fascinating – it’s the recipe for something far greater than your puny mind could ever behold. Within this book there is the key to –” Loki stopped, eyes narrowing. “You’re trying to trick me into something. I don’t like that.”

“I am not! I found the book when I was reading, and wanted to know what it was about!” Steve insisted. He could feel Loki taking control of him again and gagged, hating the way his thoughts went all fuzzy when Loki prodded his mind into cooperating against his will.

“Tell me.” Loki commanded.

“Whenever I see the woman in the picture I can’t look away. I’ve seen her before, when I went with Tony to the Tea House.” Steve admitted, his voice almost monotone, words falling out one at a time. Loki closed the book very slowly, his green eyes never leaving Steve’s. He set the book down on the table beside the tray and patted his lap.

“The Tea House?”

“A building at the retreat Howard sent Tony to. It’s up on a hill, overlooking the entire camp.”

“Oh, I see! Come.” Loki purred.

Cursing inwardly, Steve rose, limbs pulled on invisible wires until he was sitting on Loki’s lap, straddling his thighs so that Loki could look deeply into his eyes; Loki loved having him sit on his lap like this. If there was anything Loki loved more than being worshiped on bended knee, it was having undivided attention.

Loki’s hands framed Steve’s chin. He looked deeply into Steve’s eyes, frowning at what he saw there.

“You’re… hm. That’s interesting. Do you – no. I don’t suppose you know, do you?” Loki pondered aloud.

“Know what?”

“What the second crystal needs in order to become unsealed.”

“I don’t know.” Steve said automatically.

“No… I suppose you don’t.” Loki murmured. He stroked the side of Steve’s face almost lovingly, shifting Steve closer so that they were pressed together belly to belly. Steve mumbled Tony’s name over and over in his head, a mantra to chase away the feeling of Loki’s body pressed against his.

“I used to have a doll that looked like you as a child. Did I ever tell you that?” Loki asked, whispering into Steve’s ear. He ran one hand down Steve’s back, sighing to himself as he trailed his fingers back up to Steve’s cheek again, smoothing out the ribbons tied around Steve’s throat. Steve shook his head, startled that he had regained some of his free will without having to fight for it.

“Well I did,” Loki continued, fingers tangling in Steve’s golden locks. “And I used to sleep with it to keep it from getting lonely. Mother thought it was a sweet sentiment, and so it used to go everywhere with me. She even taught me to sew outfits for it. I was a happy child then, not that you care. Of
course it all ended when Thor found it and smashed it to bits. By accident, Thor claimed, but I knew that it had been done on purpose. The All-Father’s orders are not to be disobeyed, and my brother has a hard time breaking from tradition even when it does nothing to save his soul. Father cared naught about what it would do to me. He saw it as a foolish toy for a foolish child. The toy was enchanted of course, by Frigga’s own hand, but even that could not save it. What happened to it after, I know naught, but it must still be out there somewhere, dropped from the rainbow bridge like nothing more than refuse when Thor had finished with it.”

Loki continued to play with the strands of Steve’s hair, finding the ones that had escaped the ribbon that morning; he untied the ribbon and fastened it again, gathering and taming the golden locks as if they were the finest strands of silk woven into a work of art instead of just a few lousy strands of hair.

“I go back to look for the doll whenever I’m in Asgard, because it reminded me of that story, The Maiden’s Tears. I like the idea that love is all encompassing… that it can teach people lessons no magic can ever force. You may think that silly seeing as how I also love causing people agony whenever I can… But there it is I suppose. It was a beautiful doll; not nearly as beautiful as you are, of course.”

Loki pressed a soft kiss to Steve’s forehead and then leaned back in the chair, looking up at the ceiling with dreamy eyes. “If you can figure out how to make the second crystal change colours, I’ll let you go.” He said.

“You will?” Steve asked, surprised.

“Yes. Of course, I’ll have to give you a few clues to start you off… You won’t get anywhere without a few pointers. Riddles must always have clues. It wouldn’t be fair to you otherwise.” Loki mused.

Steve grinned. Finally a problem he could solve! He wouldn’t rest until he had the answer within his grasp. Even if it took him years, he would get himself out of this mess and out of Loki’s clutches. He couldn’t count on Loki to keep his promise, but it was at least something to work on for the time being. He could do this!

He was so excited that he almost forgot that he was sitting in Loki’s lap.

Loki left Steve a hand written translation of the Maiden’s Tears on the dresser the next morning. He was gone again shortly after, off on another nameless adventure; it was irritating, but at least it gave Steve time for himself again, time that would be put to good use.

Loki hadn’t said a word after giving Steve the handful of papers; who in their right minds would spoil a surprise that good? Steve could just feel it in his bones – Loki was going to do something, and it wasn’t going to be some little prank this time either. It was going to be something big, something nasty. While Steve didn’t want to intentionally aid in the mischief Loki was planning, he reluctantly accepted that he wasn’t going to have much of a choice about his place in it. Whether he liked it or not, he was in this for keeps, just like Loki was. He took the pages off the dresser and read them over breakfast, pondering their meaning.
At first he thought it really was a fairy-tale, just like Loki had said. The story was about a woman whose lover had decided that he was hurting her, corrupting her life in ways she couldn’t comprehend. He had slept with her and then regretted it; Loki had dumbed it down some when he had explained it. The words felt like Loki’s, even if they were supposedly a translation. The maiden had retaliated against her lover’s actions years later after giving him time to come to his senses. She acted swiftly, not out of rage or madness, but out of grief upon seeing her lover’s death at his own hands. When she cried for him, she involuntarily created a spell that would affect anyone it touched; the spell would dive deep into that person’s subconscious to seek its most desperate truths.

The story was painful at its best and depressing at its worst. The Maiden’s lover hadn’t killed himself because he had left her, but because he had killed the man he had loved after her. This was all familiar again, even if he had never heard the story told aloud by anyone. It was like having someone sitting beside him, whispering in his ear the entire time he read, knowing the plot a few seconds before he read it.

The line that caught his attention most was a simple one: The woman, a sorceress of unimaginable power, had cried Tears of Change tears that would affect and bind themselves to those who needed others to learn acceptance. The words were so familiar! He read on, captivated. The book spoke of seventeen tears, scattered by her desperation to understand what true love was. Loki had scrawled beside the last line of the story that there had only been three tears that had survived the ravages of failed change; three out of seventeen surviving when all the others had crumbled to worthless dust, their questions unanswered for all eternity.

Questions… Questions… wait.

Where had it said anything about questions? How had Loki come upon that particular detail? He flipped back to the beginning and read it all over again; no, he couldn’t find any details about the aftermath of the story, only an ending with the poor maiden crying into the wind, her tears scattering around the world.

Was this a true story?

Was it more than just a fairy-tale told to keep children from breaking each other’s hearts?

Loki had claimed that it was story, but it couldn’t be – not if Loki was busy looking for something in the real world; that would make it historical, wouldn’t it? Loki had said that he wanted to know how to get the crystal to change colours, and there was nothing in the story that even suggested that they did!

It must be real.

Steve scanned the cramped margins and found a small scribble he had missed. Loki’s handwriting was atrocious, small and neat while still remaining almost impossible to read without careful thought and deliberation. The line was so casual, something that shocked Steve to his very core. One of the tears had been used successfully, Loki wrote, a blue crystal that had disappeared from mortal perception after it had been unsealed. He had scrawled a few more points out, rules as to how the crystal worked, although these scribbles seemed less certain and more like suggestions than real rules. When used, the crystal always changed the form of the person who had been touched by its power, only occasionally changing the world to suit its need. Steve looked down at his hands, seeing himself as he was now. Small, frail, as he had been most of his life. In his dreams he had been Captain America.

Changed… He wasn’t Captain America anymore. He was… changed.
Wait. If he had been changed by a crystal and it had turned him back into this, then what was going on? He didn’t remember touching one or coming in contact with anything, yet it had happened all the same; he knew it in his heart. All those whispers in his ear seemed to grow louder, a cacophony of sounds screaming at him to get on with it.

Changed…

He had been changed…

Tony had been changed once; Steve went back to his dreams – dreams where Tony had been turned into a dog by something – a… *Oh.* They had called it a Crystal of Change, hadn’t they? Steve could recall those words clearly now, the blank pages filling in. The memories were sharp and vivid, just like all of his memories of Dream-Tony. That crystal had been the reason he had grown closer to Tony, the reason he had grown *happy* with his lot in life. He had changed his *mind*, his beliefs about life, and grown to accept himself as he was instead of living in fear of who he loved; it had been the best gift he could have ever been given. He had changed his mind and Tony had changed back into a human.

Tony had been changed.

Steve tapped the paper, frowning at it in displeasure. If a crystal had been used on someone like it had been on *Tony* then that meant that he would have to find who it was that had been touched by the crystal in order to go through their life and systematically list everyone who they thought needed to accept something about themselves. It would be something big too, not some little teensy irritation. How the hell was he supposed to do that? There were billions of people in the world! How was he supposed to find *one*?

Then another thought occurred to him. The new crystal was probably around said person somewhere too. It had stuck around with Tony, hadn’t it? He remembered a collar from his dreams, one that Tony had embedded a crystal in so that he could talk while being trapped in the body of a dog. Yet Tony, in those dreams –

*Dreams…*

The dreams in his head were really *memories*, weren’t they? They weren’t dreams at all!

They *had* to be real – because otherwise Loki wouldn’t have been interested in the information Steve had given him about the *first* crystal, the one that haunted all of his drawings as of late.

Oh *god*.

There had been something in the notes about the crystal being able to change the world –

He flipped again, almost losing pages in his haste. Yes. There it was written out plain as day. *When used, the crystal always changes the form of the person who has been touched by its power, only occasionally changing the world to suit its need.* Steve gritted his teeth, his hands shaking in rage. If his dream-memories had just been dreams, Loki would have laughed in his face and told him that they were nonsense; children’s fantasies and nothing more. Even if Loki did believe in precognition and oracles, it didn’t mean that he put any stock in a Midgardian’s dreams…

Then… if he took it that the crystals were *real*, things that existed no matter what materialized around them, that meant that there was a crystal in *this* world that had *already* affected things; an unsealed crystal as well as a sealed one.

But what did that mean?
Unsealed could be a whole lot of things. Had the crystal given Loki power? He tapped the page. Had it disappeared from mortal perception instead? If that was true, then he and every other human in the world couldn’t see the thing anymore. So who could? Could any immortal see it?

He wished that he knew someone who understood magic, someone who could have walked him through this tangled web of lies. What was true and what was a lie? He couldn’t even tell that much!

And what about the new crystal?

Who had the new crystal touched? It couldn’t be Tony. Tony had been changed already, changed to suit the situation. He had become a dog… So…

Even as Steve asked himself the question, he knew who the new crystal was attached to; who it had cursed. He slammed his fist into the table, nearly overturning his empty teacup.

This was his doing!

*He was* the one who had wanted change to happen and this was the result of it! He hadn’t been changed into an animal like Tony had, because this change hadn’t required him to be in a form like that, something nonthreatening and adorable. He had become a pitiful thing, devoid of muscle, strength and authority. He had ceased to be Captain America; he had lost everything all over again, and for what? Who could he have possible wanted to change so badly that he would sacrifice his entire world?

*Bucky*… the answer slapped Steve in the face.

If the crystal really had latched on to his need for Bucky’s acceptance, it had sure gone about changing things the hard way. Steve had always thought that Bucky would get over his hate in time and – oh god! Bucky had been given extra time… Seventy years of extra time.

In his memories – they were memories goddamnit they were! – He had fought with Bucky before he had woken up in the hospital. It had been a stupid fight, one he had wished he could avoid, but it had happened and he hadn’t regretted a single word in it. It had been a disaster for the most part, Bucky fighting for the sake of fighting even though it had been a losing battle on his part. He just hadn’t been able to handle the fact that his friend was gay, and Bucky never had been good at dealing with losing, even though it hadn’t even really meant losing anything in particular; he had despised the revelation, fought against it bitterly, trying to force his beliefs on Steve just like when they were children, but for once, Steve had stood up for himself. He had never liked bullies before, and yet he had let himself get pushed around by Bucky so many times in his youth. It had been mind boggling to think about how he had put up with it looking back, but at the time… well at the time, Bucky had been the only one around who cared. Losing him would have meant facing the world alone and he hadn’t been able to do that; he hadn’t been able to abandon his only friend even if Bucky had been hurting him.

And it had hurt, seeing Bucky that way, lashing out at himself and at anyone who got in his way. Everyone else had been so understanding, so kind and thoughtful about the whole thing, helping Steve along even as he limped out of his own mind to start understanding himself. Even Fury, with his inscrutable glares seemed to soften when he saw Steve and Tony together.

But Bucky hadn’t been like Fury. Bucky hadn’t been like any of them. Bucky had lashed out and gone after the first thing he had seen as a threat and Tony had paid the price. Tony always seemed to pay the price. It wasn’t fair! Why hadn’t he been punished for something so stupid? Why Tony and not him?
Steve traced Loki’s note with his finger, bitterly mimicking the handwriting. He let out a loud growl. Bucky hadn’t learned anything.

Loki knew all of this, Steve realized with a start.

Loki knew that Bucky was homophobic. He had to have seen the news reports, the same footage that Tony had seen, and if Tony had picked up on the homophobia as a child, Loki sure as hell would have. Loki was smart – he wouldn’t have missed out on the opportunity to study his victims and what better way to spy on them then to follow along with the paparazzi? It didn’t even require work. All Loki had to do was pick up a paper and he would have known everything.

Some things weren’t in the paper though. Did Loki know about the kiss? Had he been watching that day in the park? Or had he been spying through the windows all those afternoons they had spent in Bucky’s apartment watching television and complaining about the past?

Oh god. This wasn’t just his imagination, was it? Loki knew about everything. Why else would he have been taken hostage? The way Loki had been talking – the looks Loki had given Bucky as he took Steve away – he had been playing it up, being possessive of something Bucky thought was his. Loki had known.

Sure, they had all been caught in the crossfire, but it had been Bucky Loki had wanted to get at, Bucky, who had been the most hurt by the game. Yes, Loki had taken a hostage, but that hadn’t been to punish Tony or Howard, because if it had been that he was after he would have plucked Steve out of the elevator or off the street when he went to go get lunch. He would have grabbed Steve at the party the night before or plucked him out of the office when they had first met.

Why was he only realizing this now? He had been a tactician for Pete’s sake! He should have spotted the signs!

Loki had drawn them out to Tony’s mansion on purpose. He might even have been following Howard that day to see the reaction to his good new. He had been shadowing Steve for years, hadn’t he?

Loki had been blowing kisses and stealing them from Bucky ever since the two had met; he had all but said it aloud to Steve. He had even slept with Bucky, seducing him in his female form.

That rat bastard!

Loki had been planning this the entire time! And Steve had damned well seen it! Even if he hadn’t understood it, he still could have done something. If he had just talked to one of the Avengers – talked to Howard even – none of this would have happened, or at the very least he might have been prepared for what was to come.

But why had Loki decided to wait? He had woken Steve up, hadn’t he? So why such a long wait? Was it because of the crystal? Had he been behind the entire thing? Or had he just been behind the coma?

Seventy years had passed with Loki doing nothing more than taunting, teasing and seducing the Avengers; he hadn’t taken over the world, or become the King of Midgard like he had always boasted about. He had been lurking in the background, taunting Thor and teasing the Avengers, prancing about as Lady Loki while sipping fancy wine and collecting a vast selection of expensive dresses. He hadn’t so much as raised a finger against them until now.

Why?
Why? Why? Why?

Knowing all of this didn’t change Loki’s grand plan at all. Loki had all but encouraged him to work things out for himself. What the hell was he playing at? Loki’s magic – no, that wasn’t right.

It wasn’t Loki’s magic.

It was the crystals, wasn’t it?

The translation in front of Steve proved that, even if it had been written by Loki’s own hand. If Loki’s notes could be trusted then there was nothing Loki could do about what was happening either; they were all being played like suckers, all because of a stupid piece of rock.

Someone may have used the blasted thing, but they hadn’t been able to control it. If Loki had been able to control it, the world would look a hell of a lot more like the mansion did, all warped and perverted to his liking. He knew Loki. He had lived with him for long enough to know that Loki preferred things his way and the real world certainly wasn’t his way. Loki liked pretty things and this world was filled with a whole lot of ugly stuff.

So if the crystal was running the show… did that mean things could go back? And how long was this world going to stick around for? Would the world change back to the way it had been in his memories? Could it change back?

His mind swam with questions, most he couldn’t answer.

After all, the crystal didn’t come with a manual, now did it? It was a few pieces of paper and a story – a fairy-tale filled with playful adventures and miserable characters. Loki’s notes were the only parts that really meant anything, and Loki was gone, off on another merry chase harassing and wheedling the others into becoming his pawns.

Steve bit his lip hard, tasting blood again. Oh no. No, no no no no.

He had done this to everyone here, inadvertently of course, but it had been his fault and his alone. His will had done this somehow. If the crystal had been used on anyone, it had been used on him. The person who had pressed it to him hadn’t been the one to blame; it had been his thoughts; his memories; his inadequacies that had done all of this.

The world had changed.

Tony had suffered because of him, all because he had selfishly wanted Bucky to accept that he loved Tony. He hadn’t been able to leave well enough alone and this was what had happened!

Tony…

Steve broke down; he could feel the tears running down his face, unable to stop. He wiped at them with the back of his hand, furious at his own weakness. He had done this to Tony – he had done this because he had wanted Bucky to change his opinions about life.

All of it… for one stupid change…

Steve woke up when One Eye prodded him in the shoulder. He hadn’t gotten out of bed for the past
three days after figuring out the puzzle of The Maiden’s Tears. He was so tired of it all, and nothing he could think of could change the fact that the crystal’s spell was running all by itself in the background. It was causing pain and misery all on its own, on his behalf and there wasn’t anything he could do to stop it. Tony was suffering needlessly, they were all suffered needlessly –

One Eye prodded him again, obviously unaware of Steve’s internal monologue. The Shadow was carrying a tray with oatmeal and water on top of its head; it reached out and yet again jabbed Steve in the arm, trying to get his attention.

“Go away.” Steve croaked squeezing his eyes shut.

He didn’t want to eat.

He didn’t want to get up again.

There didn’t seem to be much point. What was he going to do? Spend the next few days cleaning? That was all he was good for, wasn’t it – cleaning.

One Eye’s seemed to get tired of being ignored. It grabbed Steve by the arm and pulled; Steve was hauled out of bed and dropped unceremoniously onto the floor with a groan. He gawped at the creature from his new position upside down on the floor, flabbergasted. None of the Shadows had ever touched him before; they had looked like they wanted to at one point or another, but none of them had ever attempted it. Loki had been very specific about that. They weren’t allowed to touch without permission and the only one who ever had permission was Loki.

One Eye hefted Steve up by the arm and then settled him in a seated position with his back against the side of the mattress. It set the tray of food down across Steve’s thighs and then stood in front of him, waiting; he swore it almost looked like it was going to put its hands on its hips and yell at him if he didn’t start eating. He had probably looked a little like this when he had been yelling at Tony to try and get him to eat something after spending hours and hours alone in his workshop.

He wanted to throw the food away, he really did. If there was any other way to protest, he would have done that instead, but this was it, hunger strike or nothing at all. The problem was that his metabolism wasn’t doing him any favors.

His stomach growled angrily and having the food so close made avoiding it an impossible task, even though his mind was determined to see it through till the bitter end. The smell was overwhelming, and it was only oatmeal; he could taste cinnamon and apples in the air, and cursed himself for his love of both. The Shadows knew him well, almost too well. He picked up his spoon, and dug in, tasting the sweet, sweet flavor of nearly caramelized apples. It took almost no effort to finish the food off and he seriously considered scraping the bowl out with his finger when he was done. This body of his couldn’t take not eating for three days; it was almost as painful as when his Captain America body hadn’t gotten enough calories. He hadn’t missed that feeling in his stomach, the low slow burn of bile making its way up his throat searching for food to quell its wrath.

He shakily handed the tray back to One Eye who took it back and wandered away satisfied finally, its job done. Steve slumped sideways onto the carpet, grimacing. He would just have to sleep here so that One Eye wouldn’t drag him off the bed again.

He closed his eyes, dejected and tired. He hadn’t even been able to starve himself to death properly. How unfair was that? He couldn’t even do that right.

Three minutes into his light depressed doze, One Eye returned, dropping a pile of papers on Steve’s head; the papers fluttered around him like a miniature snowstorm, almost blinding him as the pages
flickered towards his face. Steve slowly sat up again, resignedly looking at the papers that fell off of him as he rose. These were the notes that Loki had left him; the translation of the Maiden’s tears spread out in all their wretched glory. He wanted to crumple them all up and hurl them into a fire, but for some reason he stopped.

He looked down at the page clutched in his hand, the gears in his head finally whirring to life again after stalling out.

*Wait…*

Loki had wanted to know how to make the crystal change colours, which would *theoretically* mean that it had resolved its *change crisis*. He had promised to let Steve go if he could figure out how to make the crystal glow, and Steve certainly knew how to make the damned crystal glow *now*. *Getting* it to glow was a completely different matter, and Loki hadn’t actually told him that he *needed* to make it glow for the deal to work. The deal had only gone as far as to get Steve to give him information, not an actual *solution* to the problem…

He *had* the information…

It wasn’t as if there was no hope at *all*; yes, he couldn’t change anything that had happened, but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t go back to Tony and make the rest of their lives as pain free as possible. He had what he needed, even if it didn’t feel like it was worth anything.

He had had it for days.

He would make sure that Loki kept his end of the bargain if he had to beg and plead. Anything to get back to Tony – anything to fix the damage he had done. Tony wouldn’t give up. He hadn’t given up even though he had lived for years with Howard and all the horrible things he had gone through. Tony hadn’t given up.

Steve wouldn’t give up either; he would be brave like Tony. He could do this. He wasn’t going to let it beat him down – he was Steve Rogers, not quite Captain America, but he had been once. He damned well had been.

Captain America didn’t give up; Tony Stark didn’t give up; Steve Rogers wouldn’t give up either.

All he needed was for Loki to come strolling back. He could do this. He had gone through war and fought against misery while keeping it together for the sake of his team before; and the Avengers were his team, even if they didn’t remember it. No matter what happened, he *would* do this and he would find a way to get back to Tony. He would spend his life making up for it, even if it took a lifetime.

Steve struggled upright and headed out the door leaving the papers on the floor behind him; he would get to them later. He had chores to do, and they weren’t going to do themselves.

Two weeks later, while Steve was doing the breakfast dishes, which really only consisted of two plates and a teacup because he had been the only one eating, Loki returned looking far less happy than Steve would have liked. Steve didn’t exactly wish Loki *happiness* per say, and would have been glad to see Loki get run over by a bus, but he had to admit that things were always easier when
Loki was in a good mood.

Loki sat down on one of the Shadow’s heads, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked furious and fairly singed; his jacket was smoking, and not in the fun way. Steve tried not to smirk at that and kept his eyes on the dishwasher, handing a freshly scrubbed plate to One Eye, who started drying it so that it could eventually be handed to one of the other Shadows beside it to be put away in the cupboard; this was probably the most useless assembly line Steve had ever been a part of.

“Stark is an oaf.” Loki snarled.

Steve didn’t comment, sticking to his dishes instead. Ranting was a close friend with exhaustion in Steve’s book, and it was less work for him if it meant Loki blurted everything out in a rage. He assumed that Loki was talking about Howard, and he didn’t particularly give a rat’s ass what Howard was up to. Impatience bubbled up inside of him making it hard to not just turn the conversation towards what he had learned in the past two weeks. He calmed himself, taking in deep breaths. He would wait for a better time, when Loki was in a good mood at least, and then he would talk about the crystal. Timing would be crucial if he wanted Loki to agree to let him go. Loki was unpredictable at best, but when he was angry he was a whole lot worse to deal with. Hell, the Hulk would have been cowed seeing that up close and personal, at least for a little while.

“That idiotic lump seems to think that locking his son up in a lab will solve all of his problems. He actually told me that he would physically harm the brat if I continued to refuse to let you go. Can you believe that? As if I care about Tony Stark’s life one bit! The man is a terrible father – and believe me, I know terrible fathers.” Loki snorted.

Steve’s fingers felt weak.

He dropped the plate he had been scrubbing into the sink, watching helplessly as it shot down through the water like a brick; it cracked down the middle even though the water had slowed it down, shattering into jagged little pieces.

Well that was just great.

Damned plate! Couldn’t even withstand a lousy drop into a sink!

Grumbling, Steve reached in and scrounged for the pieces, trying not to cut himself on any of them. He failed miserably, grimacing when the plate shard he had retrieved sliced through the soft wrinkled flesh of his finger.

He looked around; Loki had stopped ranting, falling deathly silent. He was just sitting there, staring at Steve like he might eat him up.

The silence in the room was broken as One Eye suddenly started all out shrieking, throwing the plate it had been drying to the floor with so much force that the thing turned to dust. Steve couldn’t help the squeak that came out of his mouth as the creature grabbed him by the arm, yanking his hand out of the water. Its grip was so tight Steve was afraid he might have the entire limb ripped off if he tried to pull away, so he went limp, flopping in the creatures grasp.

Loki moved so fast that Steve barely noticed that he had risen, shoving One Eye backwards with kick to the face. He seized Steve’s now free arm to keep him from flying with the Shadow, tugging Steve away. One eye bared its teeth at Loki, seething, practically frothing at the mouth. It straightened up to its full height, arms and legs reaching out to grab for Steve. The air around it shimmered, dark energy all over the place, ice creeping across the floor towards them.
Loki flicked his wrist lazily; One Eye flew across the room and hit the wall with a muffled thud, thankfully falling unconscious before it could do much more damage. The wall cracked on impact, plaster hitting the floor around One Eye’s unconscious form like rain dripping from the clouds.

“What was—” Steve gasped, rubbing his numb wrist.

“Let me see.” Loki moved Steve around with a delicate curl of his arm, inspecting the cut with a scowl. He squeezed the tip of Steve’s finger and then watched as a drop of blood fell into the sink, hitting with an ungodly screech; the noise it made had Steve thinking someone had just gone head first into cement, but that was absurd. It was just a drop of blood into dish water… wasn’t it?

They both stared into the sink, trying to make out what had fallen into the sink without actually moving to check. The soapy water swirled ominously, broken plate fragments and bubbles rushing to the surface. A single drop of blood shouldn’t have done that.

“Well, well, well… magic seems to be following you around today.” Loki grunted. “How lucky for you.”

“Magic? But I didn’t do anything!” Steve protested.

“Please. That enchantment on you does a lot more than just let me turn you into a puppet whenever I feel the urge to play. It channels energy – including the other magics that are part of your body.”

“What are you talking about? What magic – what energy?” Steve snapped in frustration. Why didn’t Loki ever tell him anything?

Loki raised an eyebrow, looking into Steve’s eyes as if he were addressing a very rowdy preschooler who wouldn’t shut up during nap time. “The enchantment around you allows me to control your body which is imbued with magic from the Crystal of Change. You get that part sweetie?”

“Yes.” Steve scowled. He wasn’t stupid.

“The enchantment isn’t to keep the magic out – it’s to keep the magic in. I can smell it on you from here. And your blood, my dear, smells strongly of old world magic, magic that has settled in and is getting close to failing. If it leaves your body… well, let me just say that it won’t be pretty.” Loki shrugged. “Think of those lovely movies you Midgardians like to make about mummies and you’ll get the gist. It’s blood magic, my dear, and the worst kind at that. Even I do not dabble in that.”

Steve froze. He had read all about blood magic and after seeing all of the gruesome illustrations in the books Loki kept, he wasn’t very happy knowing that it was busy wreaking havoc on his body. He had figured that Loki had dabbled in that dark branch of magic at some point in the past; the pages of the tomes he had pulled out from behind Loki’s better preserved books had been streaked with bloody fingerprints, fingerprints that looked familiar. He had buffed Loki’s fingernails and rubbed his hands enough times now to recognize those whorls up close. Thankfully the blood stains had been dark and flaky, nothing recent. Still, it gnawed at his insides to know that some of that was in him.

“You sealed the magic in?” Steve asked, both concerned and confused by the information.

“Yes. Are you listening or not? Gods, you would think I was instructing a child!” Loki complained, throwing his hands in the air.

“The crystal’s magic can fail?” Steve asked cautiously.

Loki pulled a chunk of white cloth out of the air and wrapped it around Steve’s finger, taking special
care to bind the injury tight; it was a small cut, but Loki didn’t seem to be willing to let that stop him from going all out. Steve tried not to be worried about what was flowing in his blood.

“Of course it can. Anything can fail, Steve. Magic isn’t permanent – it carries with it a lifespan just like all other mortal things. It must be maintained and cared for, which is why it isn’t used lightly.”

“You say that like you haven’t ever just done magic for the hell of it.” Steve snorted.

Loki smiled. He flicked Steve in the forehead and then pulled off his jacket one sleeve at a time, throwing it over top of Steve’s shoulder.

“What I do is calculated. It may look like mere whim, but I know exactly how long it will last and whether it will, for a mortal, be permanent – for their lifespan, before you get all uppity about it. You’re lucky I’m so kind.” Loki laughed. He rolled up his sleeve plunging his arm straight into the water without so much as looking in it again, completely unconcerned about the way the water was now churning violently. He took a few careful pokes around in the bottom of the sink with his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth.

“Oh!”

Loki plucked a crystal the size of his pinkie from the water; soapy water dripped down his bare arm, hitting the floor with a splat. The crystal was blood red, so red in fact that it was almost glowing. He held it up between his thumb and index finger, eyes widening in astonishment.

“Do you know what this is?” Loki asked, sounding breathless.

Steve shook his head, taking a step backwards; Loki looked crazed, as if he had lost his mind from just touching the thing. His back connected with the wall and he scrambled to keep upright, almost slipping on the dusty shards of plate that had fallen from One Eye’s grasp. Loki seized him by the shoulder. The mad gleam in his eyes diminished slightly, but was still there, lurking beneath the surface.

“This is the second of the Maiden’s Tears.” Loki continued hoarsely, as if Steve should have known the rest of it by heart.

“Alright…” Steve agreed.

“You figured out how to turn it red.” Loki insisted.

“I didn’t exactly –” Steve stuttered.

“You figured something out. It is now red. What did you figure out?” Loki boomed, looming over Steve.

Steve didn’t quake even though his body sort of wanted to; he wasn’t scared of Loki, oh no. He was scared of Loki’s temper. His throat went dry. He knew what was coming, the magic that was going to pulse its way through his body, rendering him useless. The dreamy state returned and he collapsed against the wall limply.

“I was reading the translation and I remembered that Tony was changed by one of the crystals too. It turned blue when I stopped being afraid of loving him – when I lost my fear of what others would think about me because I loved another man.” Steve explained, his mouth moving for him.

“And? Don’t be shy now. I want all the gory details.” Loki smirked.
“The crystal is applied to a person who wants to make a change in somebody else. The only person I wanted to change in my world was Bucky because he was so afraid and hurt by the fact that I was in love with Tony.” Steve continued, drawing in a deep breath when he finished.

“Barnes? Really… So that would mean that the crystal changed you so that Barnes would be forced to deal with his own inadequacies. His own pathetic problems…” There was something in Loki’s voice that made it clear that he wasn’t completely surprised by this information, although his interest was piqued. Steve would have narrowed his eyes if he could.

“Yes.” He said robotically.

Loki let Steve’s hand go and stared long and hard at the crystal. He seemed pleased until the colour flickered and then turned opaque, the red gone as fast as it had appeared. Loki cursed, sneering at the crystal in disdain.

“It would seem that your little friend has had a temporary change of heart. I didn’t realize the crystal had stayed so close to you, although I suppose that would explain some things…”

“Does that mean you’ll let me go now?” Steve asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

Loki bared his teeth; it was not a pleasant sight. “Well, that all depends. I have a few other things I must attend to before letting you wander off on your own, my little lamb. After all, since Barnes is the person who is powering the crystal, he’ll need some pushing and prodding of his own to get this finished before time runs out. I’ve been spending far too much time focusing on Tony Stark and his idiocy. How bizarre… even after using the crystal and removing it from your presence it came looking for you all on its own. I’ve never seen it do that before…” Loki drawled.

“Migrated?” Steve grunted.

Loki had used the crystal?

“But of course. You don’t think Bucky Barnes could have managed this all by his lonesome, do you? He’s hardly the brains of a magical operation.” Loki snorted. “Even one of your midgardian burger shacks would be hard-pressed to employ him. He lacks finesse.”

“What did you do to me –” Steve sputtered, stepping forwards. Loki’s spell was half broken, and that didn’t seem to bother Loki in the slightest; maybe he had let it go on purpose just to see what Steve would do. Steve wasn’t sure what had caused the fluctuation in the magic binding him, but he was damned well going to take advantage of it while it lasted, even if he didn’t quite have the strength to throttle Loki to death he sure wanted to give it the old college try.

“This has everything to do with Bucky Barnes. Honestly, you’re such an idiot sometimes! You’ve been awake all this time, and all you do is think about what you’ve done to get everything such a mess. Honestly, I expected more from you Captain. You were always so much more… interesting back then.” Loki said.

“You bastard!” Steve snarled. He lunged forwards clenching Loki’s smooth white shirt in his hands, tearing a button off in the process as he tried to jerk the man backwards. Steve’s arms shook from the effort, his body still struggling against the spell controlling him; he didn’t care. His eyes flashed with murderous intent.

“Oh, poor baby.” Loki leaned down and pressed a kiss to Steve’s forehead. He rubbed his thumb across Steve’s cheek, smiling. “Behave yourself.”

Steve’s arms dropped to his sides, his eyes glazing over.

No – not now – not when he had found his strength again –
“Now, be a good boy and go clean up your hand. You’ll get blood everywhere. It’s such a hassle to get blood out of quality clothing…” Loki muttered, stalking out of the room. Steve followed after him, screaming inside as his body moved on its own.

Steve stood solemn and still as Loki zipped up the back of his dress. He contemplated how much force it would take to break Loki’s nose, dwelling on the details; he suspected that he might have enough strength to manage it, provided that he got to actually swing his arm back before Loki took over control of his body again. They had been in the bathroom for two hours after the discussion in the kitchen; Loki had scrubbed him clean and had then decided to dress him up in a much fancier gown for tea.

Loki smoothed the fabric down against Steve’s hip, smirking at the way the dress curled and fell against Steve’s skin; the dress was graceful, a mixture of white and a soft pink strawberry patterned overlay that was parted at the hip. It was pinned up at the front to make a v-shaped fold with a little pink bow holding everything in place just above his left hip; the part revealed a white ruffled lower half of the dress, elegant if not a bit too bold. The dress ended at his ankles, just above his shoes. Steve hated it with a passion. He was wearing knee socks and garters again, both of which Loki had personally dressed him in even after he had protested that he could do it himself. Loki’s hands running up his thighs had been appalling, and he had gagged once, masking it as a cough. He wasn’t sure whether Loki had noticed or not, but it hardly mattered anymore. Loki wasn’t being patient, and he wasn’t letting Steve get away with things like he once had. The bath had been the worst of the lot, his skin scrubbed so roughly he felt sore all over.

Loki had promised that he would let him go! He had promised – but apparently promises meant nothing to Loki. Steve fumed, only able to glare in Loki’s direction if he really worked at it.

“Oh stop that. I want you to look pretty – you’ve never worn anything this formal before, and I’ve been waiting to put you in one for an occasion befitting its splendour.” Loki cooed. He opened up a jewelry box that had materialized on the dresser behind him, pulling out a choker made of woven silver; it was made to wrap around the throat with wings extending out at the sides, blue crystals shaped like tear-drops nestled within a stylized heart at the front. He slid behind Steve, his leg brushing against Steve’s, as he held the necklace up fastening it around Steve’s pale throat. He made short work of the clasp, humming to himself. “There! You look stunning – just like a Princess should.”

“And I have to be dressed up like this because… why, exactly?” Steve sighed for the hundredth time as Loki started to paint make-up on him, powdering Steve’s face, drawing in dark lines around his eyes; he applied mascara, carefully curling Steve’s eyelashes with a little metal contraption that Steve had almost mistaken for some kind of mediaeval torture device.

“Look up.” Loki murmured, taking Steve by the chin. Steve obliged if only to keep from getting the mascara brush rammed into left eyeball. Loki ran his hands around Steve’s shoulders, slipping his fingers down the front of the dress, his fingers sliding against Steve’s skin. Steve winced, conjuring up images of Loki’s broken nose again; that had become a theme in his day dreams now – slamming his fist into Loki’s face again and again and again.

“Oh relax. I’m just fixing the front. It’s bunching.” Loki chided, feeling around in the fabric. He pinched something and the front smoothed out, lying flat against Steve’s chest. Loki pulled his hand free and then walked Steve towards the floor length mirror he had magicked into the room for this special occasion. He left his hand resting on the small of Steve’s back.

“See? Beautiful!”
Steve had to admit that he looked nice; the colours were delicate offset by the silver and the gold in his hair. If he had been painting a picture of a Princess in some fantasy world, this would be what she would have looked like. He went beet red, mortified by the fact that he liked what he saw in the mirror. He had never looked like this, even when Loki had played dress up with him before. He touched the fabric tentatively, fingers dragging across the neckline, fidgeting for lack of anything better to do.

Would Tony like him like this? Styled and primped like an elegant lady? He swallowed, pushing the thoughts away, afraid to dwell on them for too long lest they take over.

“So beautiful…” Loki murmured, brushing Steve’s hair with his favourite brush. He left Steve’s golden locks free flowing with clips holding his bangs against the side of his head, tucking the rest behind Steve’s ears. “Excellent.” Loki clapped, smiling fondly at Steve. “You have such lovely bone structure. Really Steve, you shouldn’t have any problem finding yourself a Knight to rescue you.”

“I thought you said you were going to let me go after I helped you –” Steve growled, flushing at the thought of someone rushing in to save a princess and getting him instead. He wasn’t sure if a person could die of embarrassment, but he was going to try sometime soon.

“Come now, don’t look so bitter about that. I’ll keep my promise – eventually. You’ll just have to wait like everyone else. Don’t get your knickers in a twist.” Loki said.

“My knickers?” Steve said, raising his now perfectly shaped eyebrow; Loki had plucked them months ago and they were now defined with some kind of pencil Loki had pulled out of a make-up bag.

“Stark was watching some god-awful movie when I visited last time. I have no idea what knickers are. I did not bother to waste my time waiting to find out. I assume it has something to do with Midgardian undergarments or something of the like. I had better things to do with my time than watch Howard Stark amuse himself with black and white pornography.” Loki shrugged, flapping a hand. “We have a big night ahead of us. Important things are happening Steve. Do try to keep up.” Loki smirked. This wasn’t his usual smirk; it was a smirk that went from ear to ear, revealing a row of bright white fanged teeth.

Steve swallowed hard, watching their combined reflections in the mirror.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Steve felt like he had been waiting for this battle his entire life.

Chapter Notes

I meant to have this out for Christmas morning, but my computer decided to play the Blue Screen of Death game with me and wouldn't turn on until this morning. Thankfully for my sanity and my wallet's sake it started working again after a system restore, so here we go!
I hope you guys all like it :) And I'm sorry! xD

I want to thank everybody who's read, commented and given me feedback! You guys are awesome, and I'm glad that I could get all this writing done with such a positive bunch of people around to help me through it!

Loki took his tea outside; most days he avoided being outside, claiming that he disliked being ‘disturbed’ by unexpected wildlife. There really weren’t any insects or other creatures that could disturb him in the garden. Loki had made damn sure of that. There was so much magic buzzing around outside the manor, it was surprising that the squirrels hadn’t grown wings and flown off. The garden had been enchanted to remain exactly the same way all year round, so there was really no need to prune or weed. Steve had been thankful for that; at least he hadn’t had to go around on his hands and knees ripping up the plant life that had somehow managed to offend Loki. Strangely enough, Loki didn’t exactly hate animals, even if he claimed that he didn’t, and although the enchantment didn’t allow them to get up close and personal it did allow them to approach whenever he wanted to see something. Nothing was vaporized or exploded. They were just gently nudged in another direction.

Loki ordered the Shadows to set up a table amongst the shrubberies and hedge-animals, and then sat placidly in his favourite white wicker chair while they worked around him, setting everything up to his liking. It had looked a little odd at first, the way they moved around like ants escaping their hill. Steve helped as well, although what he got tasked with was more busy work than anything else. Loki didn’t want him to ruin the dress, so he wasn’t allowed to lift or move anything other than the chairs and vases that Loki wanted set out and arranged; he wasn’t even allowed to touch the flowers for fear of something sticky getting on the dress. Thankfully, the control spell had died down again, likely from Loki’s doing this time. It was a relief, to tell the truth. Steve felt itchy all over and while he was now able to try and stab Loki in the eye with a pastry fork, he couldn’t bring himself to do it for fear of losing what little free will he had. He horded his free will like a third grader might hoard Halloween treats, biding his time.

He had to be smart about this; his time would come, he just had to wait for it. If Loki had started this damned chain of events there might be something Loki could do to set things right. He just had to wait and see.
Once the tables and chairs were set up, everything in its place to the exact millimetre, the Shadows brought out refreshments and snacks. Two of Loki’s most prized teapots were carried out from the kitchen, along with the best china plates and cups the manor had to offer. Miraculously, all of it was brought out on a silver serving tray that Steve hadn’t seen before; he was pretty sure he had seen every last piece of cutlery, plate, cup and tray in the joint. It made him wonder where this one was from. Did it mean something that it had never been used before? It was polished so brightly you could have gone blind just looking at it, but it didn’t look all that special. The sun didn’t help much with the whole not going blind thing, but at least it gave Steve a reason to squint around the table in displeasure. This didn’t look like some kind of archaic magical ritual, but then again he hadn’t been in any to know the difference.

Plates piled high with cucumber sandwiches, cookies and pastries, were set out along the length of the table. Loki waved a hand and enchanted everything edible in range to keep it from spoiling in the warm sun; the Shadows had to have been putting in overtime to get this all done so quickly. He hadn’t seen them in the kitchen that morning, but then again Loki had insisted that they skip breakfast so it was possible that the Shadows had been slaving away for quite some time. Steve had often wondered when or if they slept; he had certainly never caught them at it. They had always just been there, awake and ready to go at any hour of the day. He had to keep reminding himself that they weren’t human, that they didn’t seem to feel things the same way people did. That was hard to do when he caught sight of them basking in the sun, shuffling about to find the warmest patch of grass to nestle down in. They weren’t tired at all, not even a little drowsy. Steve on the other hand was ready to pack it all in right then and there.

Steve inspected everything around him, blinking through his exhaustion. Eight chairs were arranged carefully along both sides of the table once all was said and done. Eight… that number seemed familiar, but he couldn’t remember why.

Loki lazed about in the sun, a broad smile on his face as he sunbathed, the wind blowing sparingly through his hair. He stole glances at the forest to the north of them, watching it with particular interest whenever he bothered to spare the interest at all. Steve started to watch the forest too, cautiously optimistic despite his heavy eyelids. “Are you expecting somebody?” Steve asked from one of the wicker chairs across from Loki.

Loki shrugged his shoulders. “Seems as good a time as any.” With that vaguely ominous little bit of information said, Loki fell silent going back to his sunbathing, as satisfied as a cat in a warm basket of clean laundry.

When night finally rolled around, Loki looked disappointed. He hadn’t touched any of the sandwiches, or the tea, and only a few of the cookies had disappeared; that had been Steve, who had been feeling bored enough to risk Loki’s wrath and had snagged a few when Loki was busy glaring at the forest as if it had been telling him offensive stories about his mother. Knowing Loki, maybe it somehow had. According to a few of the books Steve had read in Loki’s library, most of the creatures in Midgard had talkative spirits within them. Steve wouldn’t have been surprised to hear a few spouting off angry words, especially when it came to plants. He didn’t think they appreciated being pulled out and trimmed all the time. At least, he wouldn’t have appreciated it. Maybe he had been sitting out in the sun for too long. It was starting to feel a little like he had lost his mind.

“Enough. It seems they’re not coming tonight. Off to bed then. We’ll try again tomorrow.” Loki said, standing up with a grunt. He and was halfway to the door when a glimmering speck appeared on the horizon; it looked almost like a star had fallen, or maybe more like a cluster of them, five smaller lights surrounding the largest. Music poured through the air like molasses through water.
Steve’s heart leapt to his mouth; he stood up, knocking his chair over in his haste to get a better look. He could recognize Shoot to Thrill anywhere! It had never sounded so sweet.

It was Tony! It had to be Tony!

He could just make out a faint sparkle of starlight on silver as the machine flew closer in what appeared to be a mostly straight line; repulsor fire lit up the sky, darkness trying to swallow it up.

Loki strode around the table to stand behind Steve, gleefully rubbing his hands together. If he had had a moustache, he would have been twirling it in anticipation. “It seems your baby boy has gotten himself through the chaotic mess that is his mind. Good for him.”

There was something wrong with the armor’s trajectory, Steve realized as he choked on the stifling smell of Loki’s shampoo. As the armor flew closer, he could tell that things weren’t working as well as they should have been. Knowing what he did about the Iron Man, the propulsion should have been a lot smoother, the repulsors firing not as sporadically as they were. This version of the armor was a prototype version; Steve’s gut twisted with a mixture of excitement and terror. Tony must have rushed it into production without waiting to test it properly.

The armor got closer and closer, becoming much more than just a gleaming silver blip on the horizon. The moonlight bounced off the armor – the repulsors stuttered, popping, and the Iron Man dropped from the sky doing what under other circumstances might have been an impressive barrel roll.

Steve’s eyes widened. “Tony!” He screamed out, struggling against Loki’s inescapable grasp. He couldn’t move, forced to sit by and watch as Tony hit the ground. He regretted not swiping a pastry fork now. He would have loved to stab it into Loki’s hand.

The Iron Man crash-landed, vanishing into a crater of dust, dirt and grass a few feet away from the table; Tony had managed to slow the armor at the last minute, clipping Loki’s favourite heart shaped hedge while at the same time lighting the chicken shaped one on fire with the repulsors. Stones dropped down into the crater, striking the armor; it sounded like someone had tried to make popcorn when they rolled off the cooling metal.

Steve struggled, trapped as Loki’s arms wrapped tighter around him, hugging him close; he managed to elbow Loki in the gut, almost breaking free. He felt the free will rush out of him and fell slack in Loki’s grasp.

No!

Not now – not when Tony was so close –

Tony stood up with slow jerky movements; the armor creaked and groaned but held together despite the severity of the landing. It listed slightly to one side, but that didn’t seem to be causing any major problems.

“Let Steve go.” Tony called out, his voice synthesized and inhuman, booming into the night as Shoot to Thrill fell silent with an awkward squeal.

“And just why should I do that?” Loki taunted overtop Steve’s head, drumming his fingers on Steve’s scalp.

Tony raised his hands, his palms held out flat towards Loki. The repulsors embedded in his gauntlets glowed brighter, a high pitched hum building up.
“Let him go or so help me god I’ll melt your face off.” Tony said; Steve could almost hear the growl in his voice even though the mechanical tones of the Iron Man.

“I hardly think you’ll do that. Steve’s standing right here Tony,” Loki said, patting Steve on the top of the head again, as if Tony could have forgotten that somehow. “One shot from your little toy and he’ll be the one turning into charcoal, not me.”

Tony’s hands didn’t lower even marginally.

“I warned you.”

The repulsors went off with a whine; Steve stared blindly into the light as it tore across the lawn towards them. He couldn’t even raise his hands to defend himself, the spell to tightly wound around him. The repulsor blasts tore through the table and chairs with no problem at all, striking Steve squarely in the chest. He didn’t even have the chance to yelp in surprise, and neither did Loki. He flew backwards, crashing into the ground amid the debris of wicker and wood. Steve rolled away from the wreckage as soon as he could feel his limbs again, coughing painfully as his lungs fought to draw in air; his entire body hurt, but it was a manageable hurt considering what had happened. He caught sight of Loki, who had been tossed backwards like a beanbag when Steve had hit him. The blow had done more than knock them apart; it had dissolved the spell holding him still and with his limbs tingling, Steve crawled through the grass to freedom.

Tony shot up into the air, raining repulsor blasts down at Loki’s prone form. There was an acrid smell in the air now, and a hint of grey smoke coming from Loki and the surrounding grass and debris. The chicken shaped hedge was ablaze behind Tony, the fire casting an orange glow over the silver of the suit.

Loki didn’t move. He lay prone on the ground, seemingly stunned by the blasts. It was pretty obvious that he hadn’t expected Tony to open fire, especially with Steve held in front of him like a good little meat shield. Loki hadn’t even thought to throw up his normal illusionary selves. The silver serving tray Steve had been admiring earlier fell to the ground and landed on Loki’s shoulder, dented and half melted from the heat of the blasts. The teapots were broken, chunks of broken china littering the landscape like shrapnel. When Loki woke up, he was going to be in one hell of a mood.

“Steve!”

Steve pulled himself up and charged towards Tony, wincing with each step. He might have broken his ribs when he had made contact with the blast, but he couldn’t have cared less. Tony landed with a crash in front of him, one knee bent. Tony had always been taller than him, but he seemed almost gigantic in the armor. Steve had to stand on the tips of his toes just to reach Tony’s face, but that was worth it.

Tony wrapped his arms gingerly around Steve, mindful of the machinery’s strength, the helmet’s faceplate snapping open.

“Hey gorgeous.” Tony whispered.

“Hey yourself.” Steve grinned at Tony; he was bleeding from where his head had connected with the ground, battered and bruised from having crawled across the grass, but he couldn’t stop grinning. The dress was ripped in the front and the stockings were stained with blood from his skinned knees. Under other circumstances he might have been embarrassed.

Tony grinned back.
He didn’t even comment on the dress. He just kissed Steve, his lips smashing into Steve’s almost knocking them both over. Steve wanted to drown in that kiss. He could taste metal and grease on Tony’s lips, and it was heavenly; Tony’s beard scratched against his cheeks, a welcome reminder that he was real and not just some fever dream. It was no longer the trimmed and sculpted creation it had been the day they had been separated, ignored while he worked. Steve had missed this beard – missed Tony so much it had hurt.

Tony cupped Steve’s face with his armored hands, the metal warm and smooth against Steve’s skin; he was crying with relief, trying to put on a brave face. He didn’t seem to notice the tears. “You’re alright? I didn’t hurt you – I mean I didn’t want to have to shoot with you in the way, but it was the only way I could get a shot at him that he wouldn’t be able to dodge – and I was sure you’d be alright because of the serum and – Steve –”

“God I love you.” Steve said, burying his face in Tony’s neck, wrapping his arms around Tony’s shoulders. “It’s alright. I’m alright. You’re here. We’re alright.”

“I love you too.” Tony whispered back. He slipped his left hand under Steve’s hips and lifted Steve up, standing with a groan. “We need to get the hell out of here before he gets back up. That won’t keep him out for long.” He said, firing up his boot repulsors, his brow furrowing in concentration as he focused on piloting.

Loki laughed from behind them. “No, it really won’t.”

Tony compensated for Steve’s added weight, bouncing lightly to the side with Steve tucked against his chest; his free arm went up, the repulsor blasting in Loki’s direction. It wasn’t enough. Loki was there and nowhere, multiplying as the wind snapped at Steve’s dress, cackling loudly. Each hit Tony managed to land sent the clones back to wherever they had come from, but they never stayed gone for long. With every clone Tony took down, three more popped into existence, a puff of green smoke heralding their appearance. Loki paced amongst his creations; his smirk growing ever larger each time Tony fired and missed.

“Stand still goddamnit!” Tony roared, twisting to fire at a clone sneaking up behind him. It exploded into green dust and then reappeared to his left, taking another shot to the face before it vanished and jumped again.

No matter how well-timed the blasts, Tony couldn’t get a bead on the real Loki; Loki loved it, twirling in and out of the line of fire, humming to himself.

“Really Stark, did you think I was so easy to take out? Did you imagine that one or two hits from your pathetic ray gun and I, a God, would be defeated? You’re delusional.” Loki tittered.

“You’re the one who’s delusional. I didn’t come alone you know.” Tony retorted. He aimed, at a clone and then whirled and snapped a shot off at the real Loki, clipping him. Loki skidded backwards, feet dragging across the grass as he deflected the brunt of the blast with his staff. He looked a little less amused now, much more serious, no longer playing around.

“I expected you to bring them – did you think me a fool? You humans always bring friends with you – although in your case…” Loki snarled, sending a beam of blazing green energy flying at Tony, “I didn’t think you had any.”

Tony skillfully piloted away, trying to take to the air, the suit whining from the stress of moving so quickly; sweat ran down his face. “Yeah, well – you’re one to talk. You know who told us where you were? Your little boyfriend – Victor Von Doom. I guess even he doesn’t like you all that much.”
“He’s hardly my boyfriend.” Loki laughed.

“He still betrayed you.”

“Come now boy, do at least try to be a challenge. Mind games are not your forte.” Loki muttered something under his breath and a ribbon of green energy swayed through the air, wrapping itself around Tony’s jet boots. They were yanked roughly back down to the ground, the repulsors screaming wildly. Steve held on for dear life as they plummeted, his fingers slipping against the smooth metal. With nothing in between him and the ground, he prepared for pain; Tony curled protectively around him, and then there was nothing to see but the dust cloud they threw up, thick and choking. Steve could barely make out what was going on, able only to cough and wheeze, his eyes watering, tears running down his face. His body ached from colliding with the armor’s gut, but he had survived the worst of it, and so had Tony. He could hear the sound of the armor humming as it tried to reboot and Tony’s coughs, punctuated by cursing; he hadn’t had time to close the faceplate before impact and so he had taken a face full of dirt in order to keep it out of Steve’s. Tony spat out a chunk of grass, dirt still attached. “Son of a bitch!” Tony growled as the armor whirred and clicked away, struggling with its workload. “Come on Jarvis – give daddy some sugar!”

“Recalibrating Sir. Expected wait time, ten seconds.” A voice rang out, a little more clipped and robotic than usual. It was still without a doubt, Jarvis.

“Is that…” Steve coughed.

“Yes. Say Hi to Steve, Jarvis. Got the name from you actually.” Tony said, gritting his teeth. “Come on, come on!”

“Hello Steve.” Jarvis said.

Steve coughed again, wiping spit on the back of his hand when it threatened to dribble down his chin. “Nice to meet you Jarvis.” He gasped, breaking out a fresh batch of coughs for the occasion.

“Likewise sir.”

The Shadows fixed their gaze on Tony, their heads snapping in unison to the left. They had been patiently watching on the sidelines like dreadful garden gnomes; the sound of Jarvis’s voice made them jump to action, like it had startled the lot of them from a nap. In an instant they had Tony and Steve surrounded, circling around them as the green magical ribbons unraveled from around the Iron Man’s legs. They used their hands and legs like rope, latching onto the armor and binding themselves to it, keeping Tony from taking flight again when the armor finally rebooted. They dug their feet into the hardened ground, their feet like fish hooks. Steve could feel the cold of them through his clothing as they piled on top of him, their bodies smelling of soil and freezer-burn. Within a few minutes he felt numb all over.

“Get off!” He coughed, swatting at them. They didn’t pay him any attention, deaf to his pleas.

Loki laughed, amused by the sight of them tangled together. He paced around them, the clones pacing as well, mirroring his movements. “I can’t believe you thought that your pathetic toy could do anything against me. Did I teach you nothing when I visited?”

“You taught me that I had to think outside the box.” Tony grunted. He smashed at the Shadows with his unrestrained fist, sending the ones he hit flying away. They left deep gouges in the metal, their claws unable to keep them attached; Steve was jostled with each blow, rattling away against the armor. He tucked himself into a ball with a flinch as one of the Shadow’s arms came too close for comfort, trying to become as small as possible.
The Shadows didn’t appreciate the attacks Tony was throwing their way any more than they appreciated dust on the dining room table. They shrieked in unison, the sound so high-pitched it seemed to make the air buzz; Steve squeezed his eyes shut, his ears ringing. It was too much, too loud too quickly. He hung on to Tony tightly, trying to keep from passing out as his head started pounding away like it had gotten a hold of a couple of pots and pans, banging them together again and again. The metal of Tony’s suit seemed to make the sounds even higher pitched, the notes rebounding and reverberating into the hollows and creases of the metal container. Tony let out a scream of agony.

Steve pried his eyes open and clapped his hands over Tony’s ears, trying to muffle the sounds; sweat streamed down his face as he struggled against the agony as his ears paid the price. Tony had to be safe. He had to keep Tony safe!

Tony trembled, wrapping both his arms around Steve. “I can’t lose you again. I can’t.” Tony gritted out. A beeping noise started, soft in comparison to the shrieking. “Hang on Steve. They’re almost here.”

The sky crackled with lightening and the shrieking stopped as if shut off by the throw of a switch; Thor landed with a thump in front of them, his hammer pointed directly at Loki, his helmet not even slightly askew. The change in the weather had crept up on them slowly, cold seeping through the air and into the ground, taking its time to grab hold of everything it touched; with the Shadows around, Steve hadn’t been able to notice the air pressure change, and boy was it something!

His skin prickled as the new cold smashed away the old, the numbness vanishing into a delicate burn. He blinked, looking up at the sky through his singed bangs as the first raindrops began to fall. He wiped away the rain on his face, spotting the approaching Avengers as they were lit by bolts of lightning piercing the dark clouds. The sound of thunder rolled through the air; Steve could feel each crack as it rattled the Iron Man.

He grinned at the sight of his team.

“Brother! Stop this now! You do your family great dishonor by playing these ceaseless games!” Thor roared, taking a step towards his brother.

Loki shrieked with laughter, doubled over by the intensity of his mirth. “Surely, you jest.”

Thor frowned at Loki; the certainty in his face was gone, replaced by confusion. “Have you not listened to a word I have said brother? Have you no shame? Do you wish to besmirch your honor so much that you would continue to defy Father’s wishes?” Thor growled.

“Father’s orders? Oh, that is the best joke of them all Brother.” Loki growled darkly. The Shadows slithered across the ground towards Thor through the grass on all fours, their legs dragging along behind them. They lunged away from Tony and snapped at Thor, mouths filed with razor sharp and jagged teeth. They had never looked this vicious before, never raising a hand to do more than straighten a crooked bedspread. Steve shuddered, hugging himself in the rain. He tried to catch sight of One Eye, but couldn’t spot him in the crowd.

Thor bellowed out a war cry, unconcerned by the approaching creatures. He swung Mjolnir at his attackers, ready for battle. The hammer passed clean through the first creature without causing any damage, the attackers hissing at him as they charged across the grass; the first Shadow from the throng twisted and cartwheeled through the air, grabbing at Thor with its spindly hands. The others soon followed after. Thor staggered through the swing of Mjolnir, his arms pulled against his body
and pinned to his sides as the Shadows dog piled on top of him. The first Shadow slid down to Thor’s legs, the others curling together until they were so intertwined that he couldn’t move fight. Those near the ground dug their legs deep into the earth; their teeth pierced Thor’s flesh as they bit down hard, yet not a drop of blood trickled from the wounds.

Thor roared in rage.

Mjolnir dropped from his fingers as the Shadow on his arm bit deeper, falling to the ground beside him with an unnatural clank. “Loki! What perverse magics have you been playing with? Do you not know what they are? How dangerous they can be in Midgard?” His eyes flashed as the rest of the Avengers came charging out of the woods, running in formation. “Friends, you must be careful –”

“Oh please.” Loki flapped a hand at Thor. “I know my own magics. Do you think me dumb?”

“Brother! Do not do this!” Thor pleaded. “You are better than this – you are not a monster!”

Loki snorted, wiping imaginary dust off of his hands, adjusting his sleeves. “You preach over and over, but this is the same argument we had when I was but a child. I am my own being. One day you will accept it as I have. I make my own decisions. I do not kneel for Odin, or for Laufey and I will never kneel for you.”

The Avengers darted closer as Thor struggled against the Shadows; Howard trailed behind the others huffing and puffing as he tried to keep up with their brutal pace. Loki clapped slowly when he noticed Howard, smirking even harder, clearly pleased with the show. Howard looked like he was going to pass out.

Why had they brought him? Bucky had said that he was never in the field, so why was he here now? Steve craned his neck to watch.

Loki stalked away from his brother to watch Howard stagger through the long grass, chuckling to himself in delight when Howard nearly tripped on a misshapen root. He clapped again, slower and louder this time. “Oh bravo! Look at you. Well done old man. Did they bring you to be a distraction?” He called out, giving Howard a wolf whistle. “Lovely form – ten out of ten! I’m sure the judges will all agree. You’ll have to stick the landing though, or else it will all be for naught.”

“LOKI!” Bucky bellowed as he thundered towards Loki, his feet denting the ground and flattened the grass; he was a sight to behold, muscles bulging as he jumped the crater. Loki dodged the first attack, nimbly swirling away. He slapped Bucky in the back of the head, expertly stepping out of the way of the shield as it flew from Bucky’s hands with a loud gloing. His staff materialized beside him and he grasped it with a smile, rolling it between his hands.

Bucky dropped face down in the dirt with an audible oomph; the Shield rolled away on edge, colliding with the side of Tony’s armor where it promptly fell over, Captain America unarmed with a single blow.

Tony uncurled the Iron Man out, muttering away incoherently to Jarvis; it was more of a struggle than Steve had thought, and the armor seemed to be unwilling to do what Tony wanted even with Jarvis working his own brand of magic. The servos in the right hand side of the armor’s body grinded loudly, metal screaming against metal as Tony forced the armor to cooperate. He managed to
right himself but remained slightly hunched over with his arm raised up to protect Steve. “Ready?” Tony grunted, eyeballing Steve.

He was ready, Steve realized with a grin. Energy seemed to be pumping through his veins, his muscles taunt and ready to attack. He stared down at the shield; it was here, his to do with what he wanted again. He never had been any good at sitting on the sidelines.

“It’s alright Tony.” Steve said. “We’re going to be fine.” He slid off of Tony’s chest and plucked the shield from the grass, brushing off a bit of stubborn mud that had stuck to the edge. He held it in his hands, the weight as familiar as it had been the first day he had held it in his memories. He caught sight of a dark shape moving towards him - He jumped backwards as the shadow of the Hulk passed by, nearly bumping into Tony as he slid in the mud.

The Hulk’s roar seemed to make the rain freeze in its tracks. He landed on Loki feet first, sending them both deep into the earth, clumps of soil and grass flying everywhere; at first Steve thought that they had won with just that one move, the Hulk’s hands blurring as they struck at the ground, limbs moving so fast that it almost didn’t look like he had hands at all. Then the Hulk staggered backwards clutching the back of his neck, hitting the ground with an almighty thud as he tripped on the edge of the crater he had made; the ground shook, everything around them trembling. The rain started to pour again; no one seemed immune to its charms, their hair and clothing sticking to their bodies.

“Wretched creature! Be gone!” Loki screamed, reappearing with a flash of green light and a splash of mud. He wiped at himself, spitting out a mouthful of grass, muttering ancient asgardian when he realized that the muck wasn’t coming off but merely smearing in deeper.

With the Hulk down, the rest of the Avengers took over. Clint aimed at the back of Loki’s head and fired three shots at once all while still running towards his fallen companions. “How pathetic…” Loki scowled as the arrows tore through the air towards him; with a snap of his fingers, each bolt was devoured by magic, the arrows dissolving into ash before they could get close. Clint backed off when he realized what had happened to his arrows, turning and grabbing Howard’s arm before the old man could make an ill-advised dash for Steve. He put some distance in between them and Loki, warily eyeing the villain; Steve could see him calculating odds even as he ran, dragging Howard along after him. Howard didn’t look like he wanted to listen, but somehow Clint managed to keep him safe.

This had gone on long enough. “Are the repulsors still running?” Steve asked, raising the shield up. He wasn’t going to sit by any longer. He had his shield back, and his friends needed him.

“How did you know –” Tony stuttered in surprise.

“It’s not important. Are they running?”

“Yes. Seventy percent power, but it’s dropping fast.”

“Alright. We can do this then. Get ready.”

Steve knew he was crazy the moment he started sprinting, the shield held in his hands; that didn’t stop him from flinging the shield at Loki as hard as he could. Loki turned away from Clint to gawk at him, eyes wide with disbelief as the shield slammed into the side of his head, bowling him over.

Steve didn’t wait for a reaction. He slid through the mud, kneeling down to check and see if Bucky was alright; the ache of his scraped knees and bruised ribs was gone, his body recovering unexpectedly fast. If the Serum was a person he could have kissed it. Hell, he would have French kissed it. Tony probably wouldn’t have minded.
Bucky rolled over with a groan and looked up at him from the muck, coughing and sputtering. “Steve.”

“You alright?” Steve asked, taking a quick assessment of Bucky’s health. The blow had dazed him temporarily, but it didn’t look like the damage was anything more than superficial. A scratch on the side of Bucky’s face was bleeding, but not heavily. He was a little mud splattered, but no worse for wear.

Steve let out sigh of relief. The way Buck had stayed down had worried him; if a slap to the back of the head from Loki could knock Captain America down, what would it do to him?

That was good.

They could work with this.

“You little bastard!” Loki shrieked as he struggled upright with the shield clenched angrily in one hand. He hurled it backwards, trying to get it out of Steve’s range, and then outright snarled in frustration when it was scooped up by Natasha; she had snuck up behind him while the others were fighting, silent and deadly as always when she was given darkness to work with. She kicked Loki in the face and then sprang over him as he staggered from the impact, running to Bucky’s side with the shield in hand.

She knelt down beside Bucky, looking extremely calm. She mumbled something in Russian to Bucky and then set the shield down beside his hand. Bucky muttered something back, scowling at her, looking embarrassed.

“Rogers –” Natasha growled dangerously when she saw Steve reaching for the shield. She always had been good at reading people; he hadn’t expected her to pick up on his thoughts this fast, considering they had only met the one time, but it didn’t surprise him. He had been proud to work with her before, and always would be. He smiled at her, confidently scooping the shield up. She scowled at first and then smiled tentatively back. “I hope you know what you’re doing…” She said.

“So do I.” Steve stood up slowly, hands curling around the edges of the shield. He had hit Loki once, he could do it again; he had no doubts, no fears, only the knowledge that Loki was going down. Of course, he hadn’t expected Bucky to grab him by the ankle when he had made his plan; moving would have been a hell of a lot easier if he had.

Steve hit the ground like an octopus trying to walk on land, a tangle of legs and arms and shield with Bucky’s hand clamped firmly around his ankle. He swore loudly as he tried to untangle himself, his ribs aching, pain blossoming in his chest. “Bucky –” Steve pushed himself upright on his elbows, the shield trapped uncomfortably against his chest; he was lucky he hadn’t broken anything when he had landed on it. It felt like he was struggling against a bear trap. He couldn’t free himself from Bucky’s grasp even when he kicked, not that he had wanted to kick Bucky in the shoulder like he had; Steve wasn’t sure if he should be happy or not that Bucky didn’t even seem to feel the blow. Either way, he was far from pleased with what had happened.

“You’re going to get yourself killed Steve. Stay down, for god’s sake! Nat can keep you safe. And what the hell are you wearing?” Bucky growled, giving Steve a once over, his lips curling in disgust when he caught sight of the dress close up; maybe he hadn’t seen it before, the rush too fast, but it was clear that he didn’t approve of it. He stood up and letting go of Steve’s ankle, dusting off his pants as if to brush away anything associated to Steve too. He squinted at Natasha, giving her a funny look as Steve squirmed beside them, temporarily ignored; she nodded absently, seeming to understanding his unspoken words even if she wasn’t outright saying it. Still, it was a surprise when she grabbed Steve by the wrist lifting him up like he was a sack of potatoes she was meaning to peel
for supper. Steve dangled for a second in mid-air before finding his footing standing on shaking legs, still clutching the shield in his arms.

“I’ll be back in a minute, and then we’ll talk.” Bucky grunted, pointing in Steve’s direction. He ran towards Loki again with his teeth bared, forgetting the shield as he caught Loki’s gaze. “This won’t take long. I’m going to smear this bastard across the ground, you just watch!”

“Bucky – wait!” Steve started, wanting to sprint after Bucky. “Hey,” He jerked backwards as Natasha refused to let him go, irritated by her sudden lack of trust. “You don’t have to do this Natasha.”

“I do. I promised him. He made me swear.” She kept Steve immobile with a hand wrapped around his wrist, her Widow’s Bite flashing ominously. He didn’t think she would use it, but he didn’t want to take the chance that she would either so he stayed still, simply watching the fight unfold before him. Bucky’s attack didn’t go over so well; he had probably been expecting to send Loki into the dirt with the punch he leveled at the villain. Unfortunately, he seemed to forget that he had become a bit of a one trick pony without his shield in hand. Steve and Natasha flinched in unison when Bucky sailed through the air past them, legs kicking wildly, smashing into Thor and the Shadows holding him upright; the Shadows convulsed and writhed, flicking Bucky away from their mass, uninterested in him. They refused to release Thor, winding around him even tighter. Bucky landed with a grunt on his knees beside Mjolnir looking dizzy and faintly chagrinned. He smacked himself in the forehead as if to get control of himself again. The fresh mud splattered across his face looked almost like blood in the low light.

“Nat – get Steve out of here!” Bucky shouted, struggling to get up so that he could take another dive at Loki; his knees were caked with mud, his legs unsteady. He didn’t seem to be thinking straight anymore, turning and hurling himself at Loki as if something might happen if he managed to hit Loki hard enough. He always had gone a little berserk when he had gotten into a good fight; Steve had once admired him for that, but now he was starting to regret ever having encouraged the behavior.

Loki scowled as Bucky recklessly charged towards him again, clearly just as unimpressed with Bucky’s decision making skills as Steve was. “Have you learned nothing? You can’t beat me with your fists, mortal. You do nothing but cause damage to everything else around you with this idiocy.” He glided forwards as if walking on air, avoiding Bucky with ease. He moved with purpose towards Natasha and Steve, shaking his head looking disappointed. “Enough foolishness. I will reclaim what’s mine.” Loki lashed out, striking at Natasha with his staff, his eyes glinting in rage when she refused to go down without a fight. She dodged the staff, kicking at Loki’s knees all while keeping Steve out of harm’s way by yanking him along with her. It must have been hard on her shoulders, lugging him around, but she managed it somehow, cursing in Russian every time Loki blocked a blow.

“Go chase someone else, bastard.” Natasha spat, pushing Steve out of the way. Loki staggered from the punch she threw next, the Widow’s Bite springing into action; Loki smiled darkly down at her, rubbing his arm where he had been struck. “Ohh… it stings.”

Her eyes narrowed.

He snapped his fingers; she did a backflip and tried to kick him in the groin. A burst of green magic knocked her head over heels, but didn’t keep her down. Frustrated by her determination, Loki let out a long sullen sigh. “Enough. Your flexibility is admirable dear lady, but sadly nothing I am interested in. Sing my darlings, regale us with a song!”

At first Steve didn’t know who Loki was talking to. It wasn’t like he was going to break into song after all, and he had never heard Loki call anyone else darling. Then it hit him. He clamped his hands
over his ears. The Shadows started wailing again, the sound thrumming and pulsating through the air as they each picked a different pitch. Each screech sent shivers down Steve’s spine; the rain ceased with a crack of thunder and then there was nothing but wet grass and mud beneath Steve’s feet, treacherous and slippery. The shrieking was excruciatingly loud, worse than it had been before, ripping away any and all concentration Steve could muster. The Avengers faltered all at once, unable to adapt to the sound; they had been prepared to fight, but not like this. Their comms did nothing to block out the shrieking, in fact they seemed to just make things worse, static screaming out from their microphones to join the Shadow’s cry. Clint and Howard toppled over as their headsets were hit with a wave of feedback, knees hitting the wet ground heavily as they slapped their hands over their ears to try and pull the headsets free with trembling fingers.

Steve reeled and pitched forwards, sure that his ears were about to start bleeding. He managed to keep his balance, but it was a very near thing. He staggered towards Bucky with Natasha stumbling along after him, both of them barely staying upright, each step threatening to send them to their knees in defeat.

Loki didn’t even seem to hear the song he was conducting; he reveled in delight as he watched his victims stagger around, eyes half lidded. “Beautiful.” He murmured as he levitated off the ground, sneering down at them. He waved his staff magnanimously, making the Shadows sway in place as he took his place as conductor. “Yet again you do nothing but amuse me. You mortals are so weak and pathetic even when you try to do something together. You don’t think about anything do you, you merely act. It’s no wonder my brother loves to spend his days with you.”

“Brother – Stop this.” Thor bellowed, biting one of the Shadows when it got too close to his face.; he was the only one unaffected by the shrieking, the only one still able to move. The creature shrieked louder and bit him back. It didn’t seem to faze Thor, who started gnawing on the limb he had captured like a rabid dog.

“You keep saying that – Stop this – Stop that! Brother, grow up and open your eyes. I am not the yearling you played games with, nor am I the child whose doll you destroyed on Odin’s orders. I will not be controlled by you or any of your family!” Loki roared, waving his staff.

“The doll was possessed Loki. You could not see it, but Father did. Mother was too kind hearted, too willing to offer a second chance to the creature she had trapped inside it. The creature did not deserve your company! You were better than her!” Thor yelled as he spat out the Shadow’s arm, the creature’s limb dismembered neatly with a click of his teeth; black blood oozed through his teeth, his look so angry it was hard to tell who was scarier, him or the Shadows.

“Lies!” Loki screamed in rage. The Shadows began to shriek louder in response, the air shimmering around them. “All you do is tell lies!”

Steve moved without thinking.

He grabbed Mjolnir’s handle and pulled with all his might, his muscles straining from the effort. Mjolnir was light, like a feather in his hands, coming free from the ground without as much as a hint of protest. Steve stared at the hammer in awe, watching mud drip off the head.

Up above him, Loki was staring with a similar expression on his face. “Impossible!” Loki screamed; he would have been stomping his feet if he was on the ground, Steve could just feel it.

It didn’t matter. Steve hefted the hammer over his shoulder and charged past Natasha, who stepped out of his way, her eyes wide with shock; he heard the sound of Tony flying towards him, the suit squealing and rattling as it attempted to keep airborne. He knew then that they would win. Tony wrapped his arms delicately around Steve’s waist, lifting him up into the air, pouring all the power
into the boot repulsors. They shot up into the sky with a high pitched whine, and Loki didn’t stand a chance. Steve swung as hard as he could; his aim was true, even if it was a little off.

Mjolnir connected with Loki’s head; Steve had been aiming for Loki’s shoulders, but this was as good as it could get, considering. Loki’s nose broke, blood dribbling down his chin in crimson rivulets as he tumbled out of the air, the magic around him dispelling with a blast of cold air. He managed to break his fall with his staff, gasping as he landed in the muck that had once been his manicured lawn. He tried to crawl upright using his hands and knees to gain some kind of leverage, but the mud was too slick, too willing to cling for him to get much of a grip. His fingers dug into the mushy grass, gouging out marks as he struggled to control his now trembling body.

“Damn you Rogers.” Loki spat bitterly, eyes flashing.

“Tell them to stop.” Steve growled down at Loki.

Loki’s arms shook, his eyes unfocused as he met Steve’s gaze. “Fine.” He spat out, snapping his finger. The Shadows fell silent, the ungodly shrieking gone in an instant.

Seeing Loki down, Howard and Clint crept closer, slinking through the battle ground and around the Shadows. Clint scooted across the grass to grab the unconscious Hulk who rolled over, groaning. “Hey buddy, you alright?” He asked, leaning over the Hulk’s head, patting him on the forehead to get his attention.

“Hulk ow.” Hulk grumbled and passed out. He reverted back into a very naked Bruce Banner. Bruce probably wasn’t going to appreciate the impromptu mud bath he was getting, Steve thought wryly as Bruce started slipping down the banks of the crater in the buff. Clint gestured to Natasha, and she threw him a balled up shirt she had pulled out of god knows where. Together they worked at dragging Bruce out of the crater, struggling with the loose muck.

“You two alright down there?” Steve called out.

Clint gave him a thumbs up, and then slipped in the mud; he nearly took Natasha into the pit with him but thankfully she wasn’t as easily unbalanced. She snagged Clint by the shirt and hauled the pair of them out one muddy inch at a time, her teeth bared.

Howard took a few stumbled steps towards Steve with his hands raised up in front of him, his mouth half open in shock. He didn’t speak, merely looking from the Iron Man prototype suit to Steve, not understanding what had happened between the two of them; he seemed poised as if to flee, concerned by the power and elegance of the damaged suit. His eyes narrowed, greed slipping out when he realized that it was Tony in the suit and not some stranger. The bastard probably thought he was going to get a new toy to market to the army.

Steve paid Howard no attention. He stared down at Loki, fighting against the urge to do real damage to the god, to give him a worthy punishment. He had been waiting weeks for this, endless, painful weeks. He had Mjolnir, and with it, he could snuff out the creature that had tormented him. Steve looked to Thor then, sighing in resignation when he saw the look on Thor’s face, the hurt layered there too much for him to willingly block out. He knew then that he couldn’t do it, even if he wanted to. This was Thor’s brother; Loki might not be of Thor’s blood, but he was still loved, even if he was a heartless bastard. There were other ways to punish cruelty than with murder in the name of vengeance; imprisonment would be a thousand times worse to Loki than death, Steve was sure of it. Death was too quick, too easy to forget, but imprisonment… well imprisonment would mean Loki thinking about what he had done until the day he died. Steve motioned for Tony to lower them and then gently set the hammer on the curve of Loki’s back to keep him from running off before justice could be done; Loki thrashed against the hammer, unable to fight against Mjolnir’s might. He was
flattened against the ground, his fingers sinking even deeper into the grass and soil as he tried to claw himself free. He twisted his neck so that he could look up at Steve from the ragged nest of torn grass, glaring full force. Steve was surprised his eyes weren’t bleeding from the effort.

“How dare you –”

“There’s no excuse for what you did. You took me away from my friends against my will and you’ve tortured people for years –frankly, I think you need to grow up and take responsibility for your actions.” Steve crossed his arms over his chest. “You’re not getting out of this. It’s time you faced the music.” Tony grinned down at Loki, one arm wrapped protectively around Steve’s shoulder; the armor was tilting to the left and faintly smoking but it had stood up to everything thrown at it. Steve was proud of it, proud that Tony had done what he always did when he was challenged. Not even a little thing like his lover being kidnapped had stopped him from becoming stronger than ever. He leaned back against Tony, enjoying the embrace, feeling the hum of the armor in his bones.

“And what do you expect will happen now? Hm?” Loki spat viciously. “Shall we all gather in a circle and sing campfire songs to celebrate your victory?”

“You’ll send the Shadows away and let my friends go.” Steve ordered, leaning forwards against Tony’s arm. He may not have been Captain America anymore, but they had won and Loki had lost; to the victor go the spoils, and he was going to make sure of that.

Loki laughed loudly wincing as Mjolnir pressed down on him with each breathe he took. “And what exactly do you think that will solve my lovely little doll? Sure, you’ll be back at home with the right Stark and the Avengers at your side, but you’ll always know that this world isn’t meant to be. You’re not supposed to be like this – none of them are supposed to be this way and you, dear Steve, know it. And of course… one day it will end and you’ll be nothing more than bone and dust. This world is dying, and you’re not going to be able to stop it.” Loki wheezed. “No matter how sternly you stare at it, it won’t comply.”

“Steve? What’s he talking about?” Tony asked, confused.

“You can taunt all you like Loki. As long as things are set right here, we can always rebuild what was broken. I can’t change what happened, and I can’t take away the pain and suffering caused because of my decisions, but I can take responsibility and make sure that they don’t happen again. We can fix this world the right way. This doesn’t need to end badly. We still have time.” Steve said.

“A wise ideal Princess, but one built on flawed logic.” Loki sneered. He noticed that his lower lip was bleeding, and licked at it.

“What are you talking about?” Steve snapped, pulling himself free from Tony’s grasp.

“You’re assuming too much…” Loki moved his hand through the mud and the Shadows that hadn’t joined in on the fight swarmed around him, digging and pushing at the his body; Mjolnir rolled off of Loki’s back as Loki was forcibly shifted, mud splashing everywhere as it hit the ground. Loki tried to dust himself off as he rose but didn’t manage to do anything more than smear mud into his clothing. He coughed and then broke out in giggles at the look of irritation on Steve’s face. “Oh, you’re just precious!”

He leaned heavily against his staff, looking too tired to move or attack and maybe a bit satisfied. Steve didn’t like that look one bit. Loki motioned for the Shadows to back away from him, brushing mud slick stands of hair out of his pale face. “You assume a lot of things Princess.”
“And just what did I assume?”

“You assume that you’re the one who started all of this off. You’re also assuming that you know what the crystal needs for completion – you lack the real reason. It was a valiant effort to be sure, but again, built on flawed logic. You think that I told you everything.” Loki chuckled darkly. “Please – I know better than to put all my eggs in one basket boy.” He spat out a mouthful of blood, idly prodding a loose tooth.

“What?” Steve grunted. “What are you talking about?”

“Shut up Loki. We’re done here.” Bucky snapped. He stumbled forwards, knocking Tony out of the way as he put himself in front of Steve, blocking Loki’s view as if that would end the conversation. Tony tipped over, trying frantically to keep himself from going ass over teakettle; he ended up on one knee, the armor clanking and scraping against itself as it tried to compensate for power loss. The arc reactor sputtered as it tried to keep everything running, the blue light flickering on and off.

“Tony –” Steve turned, concerned.

“He’s fine. Steve.” Bucky grabbed him by the shoulders, turning Steve back around forcefully so that they were facing each other. Steve couldn’t help the flinch that came with that touch; the viciousness of the turn far too easy to understand. Bucky’s eyes were the only thing Steve could recognize with the cowl up. He looked like a stranger, like he was Captain America the hero and not Bucky Barnes, his friend. It was disconcerting that he could pull the two apart, strange to see two different faces looking at him at the same time with the same eyes.

“Bucky… can you…” Steve gestured to the cowl, shaken by the revelation. He needed to see Bucky’s face; he had talked to enough masks. Bucky sighed, and pulled the cowl down with reluctance in his eyes. His brown hair was matted against the top of his head, sweat running down the sides of his face, his cheeks smeared with dirt and blood. He was Bucky now, the Bucky that Steve remembered. He hadn’t looked like this in a long time.

“Steve, don’t listen to him. He’s lying to you.” Bucky gritted out.

“What are you talking about?” Steve asked, puzzled.

“He’s ashamed of course. I’d expect that from someone so pathetic that they can’t even admit that they’re obsessed with someone –” Loki chuckled.

Bucky turned, glaring at Loki. “You shut up!”

“Why should I? You think I owe you anything Barnes? We had a good run while it lasted, but all good things come to an end, don’t you agree?” Loki shrugged his shoulders. “Time does not simply last forever.”

“You need to shut your fucking mouth right now you fa –”

“Or what?” Loki stepped forward, bracing himself with his staff. He couldn’t put much weight on his left leg, but he still looked threatening, his eyes flashing and teeth bloody.

“Or I’ll smash you one –” Bucky said, raising his fist.

“Oh please. You’ll smash nothing, you petulant child. You’re the one who started all of this, and you’re the one who’s going to end it. Why don’t you just do us all a favor and admit it! You would have saved your friend a lot of suffering if you had just had the courage to speak up instead of hiding it like a good little homophobe.” Loki jeered. “Or would you prefer I use your word? A good little
faggot? Personally I dislike that word. It disgusts me, much the same way you do.”

“Shut up!”

Bucky yanked his hands off of Steve’s shoulders and took a swing at Loki; it wasn’t the most impressive move, nor was it the most effective. Bucky found his feet kicked out from under him by one of the Shadows, who sped around Loki’s legs to its master’s aid. This wasn’t any old Shadow; this was a Shadow that Steve recognized, one who he had spent a lot of time with over the past few weeks. One Eye wrapped his arms and legs around Bucky, pinning him to the ground where he landed, coiling around him in the muck; Bucky thrashed and struggled, cursing up a storm when he couldn’t break free. One Eye looked at Steve, its head turning as if its neck didn’t have any bones at all, making it seem like it had spun its head completely around in a circle. Steve returned its gaze, unafraid.

“Tell him, or I will. It’s as simple as that.” Loki grumbled. “I have waited far too long for this.”

“Tell me what?” Steve asked, forcing himself to looking away from One Eye. He knelt when he saw that Bucky was trying to speak, leaning closer to Bucky’s head; even if he had tried to pry the Shadows hands and legs off of his friend, it wouldn’t have worked. One Eye was far too strong for that.

“I…” Bucky whispered, his face screwed up, eyes watering in frustration as he struggled. “I just wanted to keep you safe.”

“That’s not it at all – tell him! Now!” Loki roared.

“I’m the one who asked for this – not you. I… I thought about it that night in the hospital after you left me, and… Loki answered. He changed things somehow – made it so that you hadn’t been the one to become Captain America, and gave me the chance to take over. I thought that the world needed a better role model and then… and then the mantle fell to me and it all went wrong.” Bucky whispered bitterly, looking like he wanted to reach up and touch Steve’s face. Steve flinched away, balancing precariously on his heels; his dress hitched up, revealing the pale curve of his calves and the stained red of the garter and stockings around his thigh; mud streaked up his bare legs, smearing all over his skin. Bucky flushed, eyes hungrily tracing the red fabric for a moment before returning to Steve’s face as Steve hastily yanked the dress back down.

“You did this? You… you what… you asked Loki for help so that you could ruin my life? You asked him to make me suffer – to make Tony suffer?” Steve’s voice broke. He felt disoriented but it was no spell, caused instead by the horror that came with understanding what had really happened to him.

He hadn’t thought that Bucky could be so stupid. Bucky was supposed to be his friend! He was supposed to know better than to mess with things he didn’t understand! Magic wasn’t a game!

“I didn’t know he could actually do anything! I just thought he was some pretty nurse trying to listen to an injured soldier!” Bucky protested, struggling against One Eye’s unwavering grasp.

“Too be fair,” Loki cut in with a snort, “I had no way of knowing what the crystal would do once I applied it to our dear James. There is not much lore left that tells of the correct application of a Crystal of Change. Most of what exists was lost when Odin had the records purged. Thankfully I had some information of my own, untouched by Odin’s careless hands. I have of course used one before. And with the first crystal’s success, I felt it was unnecessary to fear it. It needed skin contact with the subject to work, so I thought nothing of carrying it with me to the Hospital.”
“And what, it did something you didn’t expect?”

“It used its magic to reach out to Barnes, knocking itself from my hand as I studied it. Naturally, I tried to take it away again.”

“Naturally.” Steve growled, wiping his muddy hands on the dress.

Loki looked offended by that, but continued talking, his voice a little more waspish than before. “But of course it had gone by then, vanished before my very eyes. I told you earlier, there are only three left, and that is no lie. The rest of the Maiden’s Tears were failures, and people don’t talk about the failures, now do they. They speak only of the successes, of the glory that was to come. If I had to guess, it seems that the crystal took Barnes intentions and supplemented them with yours. Rare, but not unheard of from the few tales I was able to recover. If two minds do not meet, well, it’s much harder to fulfill the wish, isn’t it? Of course I couldn’t know this for certain until I had the crystal back – and the damned thing was gone for seventy years, hiding in the one place I couldn’t look – your pathetic mortal innards.” Loki grumbled, wiping the blood from his lips on the back of his pale hand, eyeing it curiously as if it was something he had never seen before. “Had I but one of your Midgardian x-ray machines, this would have been so much easier.”

“I’m surprised you let that stop you.” Steve glowered.

“Please, I no more like innards than you do. Sticking my hand in your pathetic gut would have done nothing useful – aside from killing you of course. As I was saying before you so rudely interrupted me, it took the intentions Barnes had in his heart and not his head and applied them to you – his heart wanted something different than his head as you can well imagine. You on the other hand just wanted him to understand your feelings for Stark.” Loki shook his head. “And of course you two were, on some level thinking the same thing.”

“I don’t follow you.”

Loki let out a frustrated sigh. “Love, you stupid idiot! You both wanted love. Do I have to spell it out for you?”

“I think you should watch your mouth there pal.”

“Oh please. Stop interrupting and listen for once.”

“I’m listening.” Steve snapped. “When haven’t I been listening? I’ve been listening to you prattle on for months –“

“The crystal,” Loki interrupted with a growl, “worked with what it had, applying your wishes with what was in his mind and heart. Naturally, it did what it felt was best to fix the problem it was handed. I had wondered why it had taken so long to appear again in this world. With the first crystal it reappeared almost instantaneously, but then again, I suppose it did have its work cut out for it. Tricky thing, answering two questions at once. Such a pain. It became a problem, I suppose. Barnes is such a stubborn little thing; I’m honestly surprised that we haven’t all died in the meantime.”

“Shut up!” Bucky snarled, struggling harder against the Shadows. “You shut up!”

“What problem? What are you talking about?” Steve sighed wearily, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“The problem my dear… is that Barnes had two conflicting wishes. Like most midgardians, he was not using his brain. He wanted one thing while simultaneously wanting another. The crystal did not like what was in his head, so it searched for a new mind connected with his –yours, to supply it with a logical question. The crystal has a mind of its own Steve. They all do. Honestly, did you learn
nothing from the Maiden’s Tears when I gave it to you?” Loki rolled his eyes.

“I thought you said they could fail! Why would it be looking for logic if –”

“Yes.” Loki sighed dramatically, waving a hand at Steve. “And this is why it has failed in the past with others. It has a mind of its own. It simply tried to do too many things and those who touched it got pulled in without the proper knowledge to end the spell. I told you – you’re lucky I’m easily entertained. Honestly, you mortals are so foolish some days. It’s like talking with children.”

Steve looked from Bucky to Loki and back. Loki had lied so many times; it was hard to believe that this might be true. But if it was… if it was then he hadn’t been entirely responsible for what the crystal had done to the world. Still, it didn’t matter who had caused the change in the first place – If it had been Steve’s thoughts and Bucky’s heart that had warped things, it was still their responsibility. They had done this – they had equal punishments to accept; equal penance to pay. It wouldn’t just be Steve disintegrating into bone and dust if the crystal’s power wore out – it would be Bucky’s as well.

One thing was very clear. Steve bristled with rage, barely able to hold in a scream of frustration.

Bucky had known about the crystal. He had known part of what was going on and he had sat by and done nothing. Steve clenched his fists. How could his friend have done something so callouses? Bucky had always been so kind back when they were children. They had watched out for one another all the time. They had shared a bed, stories and lives. And he had gone and done this? What the hell had Bucky been thinking?

“Steve,” Bucky pleaded, scratching at One Eye, biting at the arms wrapped around his chest; One Eye felt nothing, still staring at Steve, its eye focused and dark.

“Why did you do it?” Steve asked, his entire body trembling. “Why would you do something like this?”

“Why did I do what?” Bucky whispered, looking skittish. “I haven’t done anything! It was the stupid crystal’s fault, not mine!”

“Why did you just go along with it? Even after it all changed, you could have done something! You could have helped Tony! You saw what Howard was doing! You knew what he was capable of! You watched him grow up! For god’s sake Bucky – you condoned it by not stepping in!” Steve seethed, nails digging painfully into his palms.

“I didn’t care about him – I’ve never cared about him! I cared about you! You were what mattered!”

“And I care about Tony! I love Tony! That’s what this is about!”

“Well I don’t love him! I can’t care for the guy who took you away from me!” Bucky yelled angrily. He paled after the words left his mouth, swallowing hard.

“ Took me away… from you? How the hell did he do that? We were friends Bucky – I left that hospital room that night as your friend!”

“But I don’t want to be just your friend Steve –” Bucky looked away.

“Bucky…”

“I’m in love with you.” Bucky said quietly. He seemed shocked by his own words, humbled when he looked up from the ground where his gaze had settled. “I wanted to tell you so much, but then you were with Stark, and… I couldn’t say it out loud or else it… I don’t know. I just didn’t have the guts
to say anything because I thought they would just… kick me off the team and I’d become some kind of joke like you were. And then Loki took you away, and you were gone… I thought I’d never see you again. I thought I’d lost you forever.”

Steve lost his fight with gravity, landing hard on his ass, legs splayed; his body hurt, but his chest hurt more. The way Bucky had looked at him, the smiles and the conversations they had shared together, all of it flashed before his eyes; the kiss, the two kisses really were right at the front and all he could see was that damned pink flush on Bucky’s face. He hadn’t even stopped to think about what that had meant aside from a fumbled one night stand in the making. He had known that Bucky hadn’t wanted to be just friends anymore, but he hadn’t known how deeply the feelings went. After all, he had never asked, had he? He had pushed the thoughts out of mind and politely looked the other way. He hadn’t wanted to know.

Was that what the crystal had been fighting with?

“You have to understand Steve – I didn’t mean for any of this to happen! I didn’t!” Bucky pleaded, rolling his head to stare at Steve. It was difficult to look at Bucky’s face. Steve watched the movements regardless, eyes tracking the way Bucky’s gaze kept darting between the dirt and his face. Bucky froze after a moment of deliberation and met Steve’s gaze head on. “I didn’t mean for it to happen. I’m not responsible for it.” Steve stared right back, unflinching despite the tremor that worked its way down his arm as he tried to keep it together.

How was he supposed to respond to something like this? Bucky had been his friend since they were children – He trusted Bucky with his life, and this was – this was unforgiveable. To have known about who was responsible for what had happened and then to have done nothing? This wasn’t the Bucky he remembered, the man who had conviction and common sense; the man who had been with him through thick and thin, waging war against humans with no moral fiber in their bodies. Even if it had been partially their fault, there was no excuse for what had happened; for what Bucky had failed to do after. Had Bucky really expected things to just go away by saying that it had never happened? Denying the existence of a world where Steve had been happy for the first time in his life? Did he really think that he didn’t have to take responsibility?

Bucky’s words rushed back into Steve’s mind, words Steve had struggled with for so long. He had told Steve that his memories were lies – lies and dreams and nothing more! He had told Steve to give up and forget about Tony! Bucky had stood by watching Howard slowly belittle and shame his son over and over again until Tony had been in no shape to win over anything’s affection, let alone another person’s. All the while spending his days at Steve’s bedside, regaling an unconscious body with stories of all the wonderful deeds he had done. It made Steve sick to his stomach. He might have thrown up if there had been anything in his stomach.

“What you did… I don’t… How could you?” Steve said sputtered, his words rattling around on the tip of his tongue. He turned his wrath on Howard instead, the man he had been saving words for.

Howard dropped his hands to his sides looking very intensely at his feet instead of at Steve’s face. The damned coward couldn’t even look at him!

“You treat your son like shit!” Steve spat, tasting bile in the back of his throat.

“How Steve…” Howard sighed; he sounded more irritated than repentant, as if he felt the conversation had been in the works for a while and thought it an unnecessary formality at best.

“Did you know about this? Did he tell you to do it? Did he tell you that you should treat Tony that way?” Steve hissed.
“Steve, I’m a grown man! I make my own decisions, and I don’t need an oaf like Bucky Barnes to tell me what to do with my own son. I’m not proud of what I did – But look at him! He made himself an extraordinary suit of armor to come here and rescue you! He’s the only reason we found you at all! He wouldn’t have gotten to this point if I hadn’t kept pushing him. He would have wasted his days away, whoring and drinking if I hadn’t stepped in. He needed guidance – discipline!” Howard said, gesturing madly at Tony as if to prove his point. “He didn’t need mollycoddling!”

“You honestly believe that, don’t you?” Steve said, incredulous. “Howard… he would have done it all on his own! He did all of this – built the Iron Man, amassed an empire and became the most important member of the Avengers all on his own without a single push from you in the real world. He was always stronger than everyone – and you didn’t build that. You can’t build genius and love! You created nothing but destruction. He built life.” Steve struggled upright.

“Steve, I think you’ve been here in Loki’s company for too long. You’re talking crazy. Think about what you’re saying! The real world this, and the real world that. You’re in the real world right now!” Howard growled, looking up sharply, eyes filled with self-righteous rage of his own. “You may have a nice face, but you can’t talk to me like that – like I’m some kind of common criminal!”

“He’s not talking crazy.” Loki laughed. “Oh how you wish he was, but he not. Captain Rogers has never been crazy. All those lovely little dreams you kept telling him he was having weren’t dreams at all. They are memories of the real reality that none of the rest of you cretins, save a few such as myself and Barnes, actually recall. And it’s all thanks to this wonderfully… powerful… crystal.” Loki reached into his pocket, grimacing as his arm jerked to the left, and held the crystal aloft. It was flickering, going between clear and red, energy building around the outside of it, an overloading engine in the making. How he had kept it in his pocket while it was doing this, Steve didn’t know; it looked like it was spewing magic, tearing at the fabric of reality.

Loki smirked through the shower of sparks, still holding tightly onto the crystal, looking through it at the others.

“I may have been the one to apply the crystal to the dear Captain here, but I’m not in charge of the magic it cast, nor what it wished to understand. Even I did not know what it would do – although I had my suspicions after witnessing Stark’s transformation back in the other world. I can’t draw on a single iota of magic within this blasted rock, unless it is charged. Of course, there is no way to know what it might do when activated, but I know it will return things to normal once it has the answers it has been seeking. Tony’s transformation was only the beginning… there is so much more possible…”

“Wait a minute. Are you saying that if that thing becomes fully charged you can change everything back to the way it was?” Steve asked, trying not to sound desperate.

“But of course! Did you think I would be foolish enough to allow a warp in reality without understanding the consequences? I value my own life you know – who would want to be stuck in such a boring world forever?” Loki shrugged. He gestured with the crystal towards Bucky, eyes sparkling with mischief; the flinch that went through Bucky was so strong it could have lit a match. “Of course it comes at a cost – a price, as all blood magic does.” Loki straightened up, standing tall, motioning to his Shadows; Bucky was released, rolling across the ground with a surprised squawk. The Shadows began to march single file towards the house, vanishing from sight. They paid no attention to the others, and even One Eye left without a fight, simply plodding off into the mansion.

“There. I have sent my minions away. Barnes had better get on with it. I’m getting tired of this mess he has made.” Loki grumbled. “Get on with it.”

Bucky forced himself to stand, staggering as he tried to take Steve by the hand; he looked worried,
unable to keep the emotions off of his face like he normally would. “Steve – you’ve got to believe me –” Bucky pleaded, trying to pull Steve towards him, seeming to need him close enough to hold. Steve took a calculated step backwards to avoid stepping on rubble, breaking free from Bucky’s grasp with a twist of his arm. “Steve – please!”

Steve looked down at himself as he walked away, taking in what Bucky was seeing – what they all must be seeing when they looked at him. He was slender and small, and yes, he sure looked defenseless. His hair was still flowing out around him, somehow not having become knotted from the whipping wind and the clash of battle. He had always been a fighter; he would never stop fighting for what he believed in. For years he had looked like this, suspended in time with no say in the matter – well, without the dress, the flowing hair, and the make-up of course.

Was this what Bucky had been looking for all along? Was this what he had wanted? A Steve he could boss around and badger into decisions?

Or was this dolled-up version what Bucky saw whenever he looked at him? A sweet little Princess that could be controlled and manhandled as easily as a doll might be?

He knew what Tony saw when he looked at him; no matter what had happened Tony always trusted his advice and treated him with kindness. Even now when Steve was small and pitiful Tony would do what Steve asked without a second thought. But Bucky… well, Bucky had always looked at Steve differently, hadn’t he? Not different in a bad way, but in a way that meant he needed take care of Steve no matter the cost. It wasn’t just Bucky either, who wanted that dolled up Steve. Loki had wanted a doll to play with too – not something to abuse, like what Howard had wanted, but something to dress up and play around with; something that couldn’t run away or leave him. Understanding didn’t take the sting out of it though, not that he had expected it to. He expected that sting to last a long time, maybe even forever.

“Bucky…” Steve said, swallowing down his anger, burying it away. He didn’t want to hurt Bucky. No matter how much misery he had gone through because of Bucky’s beliefs, he was still going to give his friend a second chance, but this had to be done. Things had to be set right; this had to end, or else it would go on and no one would escape the suffering.

Steve took in a deep breath and began. “Bucky if you love me, you have to understand that me knowing about it isn’t going to change anything between us. I’m always going to be in love with Tony, no matter how much you say you love me and no matter how you believe that he’s not worthy of being with me. I love him, so please, listen to me alright? Admit to yourself that what you feel really is love and that it isn’t wrong – because it isn’t. It isn’t wrong to love someone Bucky, even if the world told you it was sick to love another man. It doesn’t mean that the love you feel is meaningless or disgusting. I understand that – I’ve been through it, and I know what it feels like to be alone with those feelings. It’s hard, and sometimes it hurts more than being shot, but that’s the price you pay for love. Love is an amazing emotion, and I know it doesn’t just go away…”

Steve looked at Bucky; Bucky’s eyes were watering, a little bloodshot at the corners.

“But I can’t give you what you want Bucky. I know that you want me to love you back… but I can’t. I can’t love you as anything other than a friend. All the love you have inside you isn’t going to force that to change. You can’t force that. Not even if you use all the magic in the world – It won’t be real, no matter how much you beg or plead with me. Please… can you admit that you understand what I’m saying? Can you do that Bucky? Please? For me? Can you help me set things right?”

Bucky stared at Steve, wide eyed and dazed for a moment, thinking. He looked like he was on the verge of breaking down, but didn’t quite know how to go about it. “Ok.” Bucky said softly; it was almost inaudible, but it was there, out in the open now for everyone to hear it. “I understand.”
“Thank you.” Steve whispered back.

Steve walked back to Tony, bending so that he could press a kiss to Tony’s chapped lips. It must have been uncomfortable to be trapped in the armor at such an awkward angle, but Tony seemed to be soldiering on through the pain.

“Steve?” Tony asked. “What’s going on?”

“Steve? Tony asked. “What’s going on?”

“It will be alright. No matter what happens, I’m not leaving you. If this whole thing blows up on us, I promise you that you’ll be fine. I love you.” Steve whispered. “I love you so much Tony.”

“Ok.”

The crystal turned a deep and heavy shade of crimson, crackling in Loki’s hand. The energy grew in size until it was almost swallowing Loki whole, an inescapable glow. The Avengers shied away from the light, confused and afraid, not having come close enough to hear what had just happened. Steve felt bad about that, about their fear, but he knew that it would be over soon and that there was nothing to be afraid of; things would be alright soon.

Clint grabbed for Natasha, trying to drag her over to where Bruce sat blinking up at the night sky. She wouldn’t go. She just kept staring at Bucky, her eyes flat and lifeless, lost; she had always been good at lip reading. Thor tried to lock eyes with Loki, desperate to get his brother’s attention again. There were tears in his eyes, and Steve didn’t think it was because he was in pain. Loki took no notice of him, his gaze solely on Bucky Barnes, staring at him through the deep red of the crystal. He looked lost, shrouded in red that seemed to drip onto the ground and into the sky like paint across a slanted canvas.

“Brother…” Thor called out.

Loki waved a hand at him, silencing him. “Not now Brother. I have things to do.”

Steve wrapped his arms around Tony’s neck, not bothering to look around him, not wanting to say goodbye. He buried his face in Tony’s neck. The red light flashed and then everything went dark.

The last thing he heard was Tony whispering that he loved him too.

Steve awoke with a crick in his neck and an itchy ear. He yawned, scrubbing his eyes with the back of his hand and blinked blearily down at the lump that was Tony Stark wrapped around his middle. Tony snuggled deeper into Steve’s chest, out like a light, his shirt rucked up to reveal a rather impressive looking bruise on the small of his back. Steve’s eyes widened.

It was over.

He tried to keep calm so that he didn’t accidentally wake Tony, his heart pounding rabbit-like in his chest; he slowed his breathing, taking in a steadying breathe, tasting the scent of motor oil and sandalwood on the air, a taste that was uniquely Tony’s. Steve checked himself over, feeling his body, rib by rib and limb by limb with trembling hands. He was in the body he had been in ever since he had taken the Super Soldier Serum. He was himself again. He was Captain America. He was Steve Rogers.
He was himself again!

Had it all been an elaborate dream? Everything was fine… But something didn’t feel right…

Steve looked down at Tony, sleeping away undisturbed despite the fact that Steve had moved underneath him, shifting and wiggling in an impromptu frenzied dance. He carded his fingers through Tony’s scraggily hair, smoothing out his lover’s bedhead as he checked Tony over as well, starting with that awful looking bruise. Tony’s body was covered with even more bruises just as he had been when they had gone to sleep, a gift from Bucky the night before; Steve remembered that as clear as day, even though that day felt like it had been a million years ago. There was another day in his mind, battling for dominance. He could taste the blood in the air, the grass and the dirt that had been forced into his mouth when he had crash landed with Tony at his side, but there was nothing now, not a single thing out of place on his body aside from his crumpled morning hair and the slight scrape of his chin needing a shave. Steve bit his lower lip and lay back, staring up at the ceiling. His hand rested comfortably on Tony’s head, fingers lightly stroking through Tony’s hair.

Bucky …

What had happened to Bucky? He was in the hospital, wasn’t he? Or was that just a dream as well? No. Tony’s bruises were proof enough that Bucky was here, safe and sound. That had happened – that dreadful fight in SHIELD had happened, and there was no denying that it.

Howard, on the other hand was gone, back in his grave without protest. It was strange to be thankful for death, but all the same he could feel it in his heart. Howard had gone, and what had happened in that world was bought and paid for, gone forever. It wouldn’t be coming back, not a single thing touching the real world again aside from what survived inside Steve’s mind. Howard could stay gone for all Steve cared. He didn’t deserve to be remembered.

Steve sighed, listening to Tony breathing in and out, snoring away like a foghorn; he had missed this. How he had gone without it for so many months was beyond understanding. A stabbing and constant pain in his gut protested the memories so he tried to banish them, trying to think of better times. Of course that wasn’t going to happen, at least not so easily. He could no more push those memories away than he could eat his own fist.

There were so many unanswered questions, so many bits and pieces floating around in his head. Had any of it really happened?

Had he dreamed it all up?

He sifted through the dreams until morning came, sunlight peeking around the edge of the blinds like an unwanted but familiar visitor checking to see if they were home.

“I can hear you thinking…” Tony grumbled into Steve’s stomach, lifting his head so that he could peer drowsily into Steve’s eyes. He was so beautiful like that, all scruffy and rumpled from sleep. Steve pulled Tony up across his chest, kissing him deeply, wanting to claim that sweet mouth all over again; Tony shifted against him, caressing Steve’s face with his calloused hands as he tried to wake up. They broke apart, Steve’s eyes conspicuously wet.

“What was that for?” Tony asked. Steve ran his thumb down the side of Tony’s face, scraping against the rough bristles of Tony’s beard, his perfectly kept beard. He had missed this. God he had missed this Tony so much; a part of him missed that other Tony too, the one who had never gotten enough embraces and kisses like this, the one who hadn’t gotten more than a few months of peace. That Tony might have ceased to exist, but he would be with Steve forever. He would never truly be gone. He loved that Tony too, just as much as this one; that Tony was a part of the real Tony, and a
part that Steve would cherish. Even if it was painful to remember all those days and nights spent trapped within a weak body, he would always love them because of Tony’s presence. Tony had never left him, and he never would.

“You’re crying honey. What’s wrong?” Tony asked, wiping tears from Steve’s cheek, concern written in every line of his face. “Steve?”

“I had a nightmare, but it’s better now. Don’t worry.” Steve said softly, kissing Tony again. Tony melted against him, this time fisting Steve’s shirt as if he was afraid of Steve pulling away.

“Wow…” Tony gasped when they broke apart for air again, feeling Steve’s hands grasping his waist and ass passionately. Steve hadn’t meant to be so possessive so early in the morning, but the thought of Tony getting up and leaving him alone in bed had been too much to bear; they could stay here, couldn’t they? He would give anything for a few more precious moments wrapped up in bed with Tony. Anything. He would have sold his soul if he had to, and done it gladly.

“I think you should have nightmares more often if I get wake up calls like this.” Tony remarked.

“No. No more nightmares.” Steve chuckled, pressing a soft kiss to Tony’s forehead. He lay back, smiling up at the ceiling, up at Jarvis and the three hundred and seventy six tiles that he knew by heart. All was right with the world again.

Ten minutes later the Avenger’s alarm went off and they reluctantly got out of bed and went to get suited up; Steve had never been so happy to go out and stop criminals before in his life.

They boarded the Quinjet, still half asleep but conscious for the most part. Steve, Clint and Bruce hadn’t quite managed to get out of their pajamas by the time they got onboard, so they split up and got to work getting dressed in their own parts of the ship, their uniforms hanging over their shoulders like security blankets. They put their headsets on, yawning as Coulson’s calm voice muttered in their ears about how they should give the villain of the day a kick in the ass on his behalf for waking him up on his first day off in a week. They all agreed vocally, although most of it was a jumble of consonants and vowels that didn’t quite make sense. Barnyard animals might have understood them, but no one else would have. If Fury was spying on their conversations he was going to be pretty annoyed with them.

Clint ended up with his vest stuck over the top of his head for almost three minutes while his brain tried admirably to figure out what was going on; he had gone to sleep when the room had gotten dark he explained afterwards, wandering up to the front of the jet having called shotgun in his sleep. He hadn’t been the least bit embarrassed. Bruce simply shrugged as Clint left and pulled on his stretchy pants over his pajama bottoms, grumbling that suiting up wasn’t really all that useful for him unless he wanted to take all of his clothing off and parade around naked until a threat actually appeared; it was far too early and cold for that kind of nudity, he remarked and went to go sleep against one of the bulkheads with his head resting in the crook of his arm.

All this left Steve alone at the back of the jet while Natasha and Tony started prepping for take-off; he didn’t mind being left out, enjoying the calm feeling of bumbling around without having to worry all too much about hurting himself. Natasha was the only one who seemed to know what was going on anyways, and he trusted that she could put together a plan for them in her sleep, one that would be far better than anything he could have come up with in his semi-dazed state. He focused on getting into his uniform and waited for more information to trickle in through his headset, humming
quietly with memories of the other world streaming through his head. He pulled his suit on one leg at a time, smoothing the creases out with his thumb, smiling softly at the suit; he couldn’t help himself. He had missed the suit and the shield more than he had known. He had missed the job really; he had mixed feelings about being thrown back into it all, when he had been so close to keeping Tony safe, but there was nothing he could do about it now. This was the life they lived – it had always been a rough and tumble life, and he didn’t expect that to change any time soon. He could think about retirement another day, dream about stealing Tony away for some sleepless lights making love when it was more appropriate. Right now he needed to be useful. He was the Captain. That brief taste of strength back in the dream had been more than enough to light a fire in his belly all over again.

He clutched the shield to his chest for a few minutes, after discretely making sure that no one was standing around, hugging it for all he was worth; he was glad he couldn’t dent the thing. He remembered only later that there were cameras in the hold that displayed in the cockpit. The little red light beside the camera blinked cheerfully at him, tilting this way and that as it caught every action on film. Steve cleared his throat, scratching his head, blushing bright pink. Well, so much for privacy.

“Uh… Steve?” Tony said, over the comms, speaking on a private channel; he could hear Tony getting closer even without the comm’s help, his voice loud enough on its own to be heard from rooms away. Steve scowled, trying not to look too ashamed at having been caught giving his shield a reunion hug. He didn’t do a very good job of it, because when he saw his reflection in the backside of his shield, he looked like he had dunked his entire head in burnt umber.

“Yes Tony?” Steve said, grimacing as he waited for the mockery that was sure to come his way.

“Are you sure you’re alright? I mean… you’ve been a little weird this morning…” Tony walked into the hold, his armor clicking with the contact of metal against metal. The familiar red and gold armor came into sight, a welcome presence. Tony had the helmet off and tucked under his arm, holding it like he might a jaunty hat. Steve lowered the shield onto a nearby seat and wrapped an arm around Tony’s shoulder, kissing him on the forehead, pressing him close.

“I’m fine. It was just a really bizarre nightmare. I’ll tell you about it later, alright?” Steve said, smiling against Tony’s cheek.

“Alright. I’ll hold you to that.” Tony said.

“If you two ladies are done back there, we’re approaching the drop zone.” Natasha called out over the comms.

Tony rolled his eyes and put his helmet on, reluctantly pulling away from Steve’s lips.

“Slave driver.” Tony grumbled.

“I heard that.” Natasha said.

Steve didn’t want to ever lay eyes on Loki again after waking up, but apparently that was as unavoidable as the rain; he had known that it was probably going to happen with or without his consent, but he wished that it hadn’t been quite so soon. He had been hoping that he might get a few days of freedom before he had to look at the bastard again, but here he was, being his usual asshole-ish self, causing mayhem and madness. Steve had a sinking suspicion that this had been orchestrated, assuming of course that what had happened in his memories wasn’t just some monster nightmare.
caused by left over Thai food gone wrong.

They set the Quinjet on autopilot and then exited the ship, dropping down to the ground below; Tony carried Steve in his arms bridal style, setting him down gently on the ground after preforming the most unnecessarily showy loop-de-loop in the history of mankind. Steve rolled his eyes, grinning. He had missed the way Tony showboated; he hadn’t done it nearly enough in that dream-world.

Loki was waiting for them, sitting idly in a red-white-and-blue striped cloth and wood deck chair. Steve approached, ordering the other Avengers to take their places with the silent hand signals they had been developing for the past month and a half. He was glad for the silence now; even gladder that he could remember the damned hand signals. Things could have been chaos with a few mistaken gestures.

The place was, unsurprisingly, an absolute disaster. Steve looked around in dismay at the grassy circle of what had once been a playground, unable to comprehend just what the hell it had done to deserve this kind of treatment. The remains of teeter-totters, slides and swings were strewn about; colourful metal and plastic was scattered every which way as if a bomb had gone off. The sandbox that surrounded the disaster zone was now serving as some kind of beach backdrop for Loki’s lounging. Actually, that might not have even been filled with sand to begin with. Now that Steve thought about it, most of the playgrounds he had seen were been filled with wood chips. It had something to do with cats not being able to use them as litter boxes, or something like that. Coulson had given him a briefing on them when he had first woken up from the ice, as if SHIELD had been afraid the wood chips might give Steve a heart attack. He had found it funny then, but now he at least understood the briefing.

Steve scowled when he spotted the picnic basket Loki had brought with him. The bastard had eaten lunch, judging by the crumpled up sandwich wrappers sitting on top of the basket.

“Loki.” Steve growled, approaching with the severest expression that he could muster plastered across his face. He could still remember the burning humiliation, the way he had been tormented and taunted; he doubted that those feelings would go away soon, but there was no way in hell he was going to let Loki think that he had won anything back in that world. Even if no one else seemed to remember any of it, he would. He shuddered, a memory of white coffee filters flittering back into his mind and vowed to take the bonnet out and burn it the next chance he got. He still owed Tony an apology for that.

“Steve!” Loki said cheerfully, waving from his chair. He remained seated despite the Avengers slowly circling him, unconcerned by their presence.

“May I ask what the park did to deserve being turned into this eyesore?” Steve asked, his shield held at waist level to not look like a threat. Loki knew how fast he was with the shield thought, so it was debateable as to how nonthreatening he actually looked at the moment. Loki shrugged, leaning back in the chair; he sipped from a can of lemonade, draining it and then hurled it away. The aluminum can hit the remains of the slide and bounced, striking the sand with a sullen swish.

“It was in my way, so I repurposed it. Besides, you little friends wouldn’t exactly call you out here for me just sitting out in the open. Well…” Loki sighed. “Maybe they would. Your pathetic Director Fury seems to believe that he has to control every situation whatever it may be with brute force.”

“What situation?”

“I dropped in to visit our mutual friend. I was debating on stopping in to visit you as well, but frankly
the thought of walking in on you and Stark in bed after finally reuniting was a little off-putting. I did not need the mental imagery that entailed.” Loki laughed.

“And our mutual friend would be…” Steve asked, trailing off as he caught sight of Natasha sneaking closer. He knew damn well who their mutual friend was; he just wanted to hear it from Loki’s own mouth before he made another move. He hadn’t even thought about visiting Bucky that morning despite the crystal and the changes it had made, but he was going to visit him now. His thoughts had been completely focused on Tony, and the fact that things were back the way they should be. Maybe he had been quick to jump to the conclusion that the entire thing was nothing more than a nightmare. Loki’s games didn’t ever end seamlessly, now did they?

“Our lovely James Bucky Barnes of course. You’re being deliberately obtuse, aren’t you Princess?” Loki drawled. He examined his fingernails, holding his hand out in front of him, looking bored all of a sudden. “I’m surprised that you haven’t gone off to go wring his neck yet.”

“There’s always time. It’s only the morning.” Steve shrugged, ignoring the Princess jibe. He didn’t move any closer, although he was tempted to fling the shield in Loki’s face for a split second when he realized what Loki was actually talking about. If Loki had gone looking for Bucky, it was damn certain that the dream he had ‘woken up’ from had been reality. Damn him for this! Steve had wanted to just get some peaceful time in with Tony at his side, and now he had to wade into this mess all over again all because the god couldn’t leave well enough alone for a few stinking hours.

Loki laughed, clapping his hands together in delight. “I didn’t think you’d have it in you to go confront him! In all honestly, I was thinking that you would be busy staying out of his way. He’s easily suicidal, remember?”

“He’s had seventy years to deal with his feelings Loki. I highly doubt that he’ll be doing anything three hours after waking up. He probably thought it was a nightmare, just like I did.” Steve said calmly.

“True. I suppose you do know him a bit better than I. Are you enjoying your body again? I do prefer looking at you like this – all… muscled and firm. It matches your personality more than that little body of yours did. Although I still think you would look lovely in one of my dresses, no matter how much muscle you have. If you ever want to try it out again let me know and I’ll bring something for you. What was your favourite again?” Loki grinned, all teeth.

“I don’t think so.”

“Pity. Oh well, you can’t have everything all the time, hm?” Loki said, standing up.

“Steve – I think you need to back up a bit. You do realize you’re talking to Loki, right? You’re a foot away from him.” Tony’s voice rang out in Steve’s ear over the comms. He sounded tense, even with the voice filter in place.

“I am very aware of that fact, yes.” Steve said back over the comm. He hoped that Tony wasn’t going to do anything too reckless, even if it would have been nice to see Loki eat a piece of humble pie for once.

“Oh, how sweet!” Loki cooed, folding up the chair and tucking it under his arm. “Is Stark whispering sweet nothings in your ear? He’s certainly an improvement from the last Tony, isn’t he? A lot less crazy in the head, although I suppose that’s subjective, isn’t it?”

“Steve?” Tony snapped in Steve’s ear. “Are you even listening to me?”
“Yes Tony, I am listening to you.”

“Yes Stark, he’s listening. He doesn’t really need to chirp away at him, because your warnings about how he should back up aren’t actually all that helpful. You do realize that I can listen in on your quaint little communication devices, don’t you? No, I suppose you don’t. Mortals are so stupid.” Loki said, scratching his chin. He snapped his fingers and the chair dissolved, breaking up into little green particles that blew away with the wind.

“Shut up Loki.” Steve growled.

“Yes, shut up Loki.” Tony growled.

Loki waved a hand dismissively at both of them, striding up to the remains of the playground. He snapped his fingers again, and the entire mess transformed back into what it had been like before it had tangled with magic; a fully functioning colourful metal and plastic playground, complete with swing set, teeter-totter, monkey bars and wood chips reappeared, practically sparkling.

Steve was surprised by that. It seemed almost compassionate, for Loki.

“Well, I suppose I’ve had enough of your lovely company, Thor,” Loki said to his brother while taking a low elaborate bow; Thor had been suspiciously quiet the entire time, standing on the edge of the playground simply watching what Loki was doing. Steve wondered how much Thor knew about what was going on. He doubted that Thor had been involved, but it was still a bit concerning that he might know what was going on. “I’ll see you later brother. Enjoy your day. Try not to break any hearts.”

And with that said, Loki zipped forwards, almost a blur, grabbed Steve by the back of the neck and kissed him. He even went so far as to dip Steve backwards like a dame. Loki grinned, blew Steve a kiss as Steve tried to smash him with his shield; he missed only because Loki had become incorporeal, staggering through the failed blow.

“Ta-ta mortals.” Loki snapped his fingers again, winking cheekily in Steve’s direction and vanished.

“What the hell?” Steve sputtered, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. He was tempted to spit on the floor to get rid of the taste of Loki from his mouth, but then Tony was beside him and he was glad that he hadn’t because he might have accidentally spit on Tony instead.

“I’m going to kill that son of a bitch! No offense Thor.” Tony sputtered, stomping closer. He grabbed Steve by the shoulder, lifting Steve’s chin with a gloved hand to inspect Steve’s face as if Loki had been busy biting off Steve’s lips.

“It’s fine. He was just being a jackass.” Steve scowled. “We’ll get him next time, and then he’ll be spending the rest of his life in an Asgardian prison darning socks.”

“Are you sure? We should get you checked out – he could have used some kind of enchantment on you – and then we’d never know. We should go get Dr. Strange – maybe he’ll know what to do.” Tony muttered, running his hands over Steve’s cheeks.

“Creepy little fucker – I swear to god I’ll wring his neck – no offense Thor, but I’m going to kill your brother – I’ll kill him and then I’ll kill his corpse – ” Tony ranted, scanning Steve with the suit’s sensors, ducking down to scan Steve from head to toe.

“Tony –”
“And then when I kill his corpse, I’ll find a way to resurrect it –”

“Tony!”

Tony’s head jerked up, still in mid-scan, finally hearing Steve. Steve tried hard to keep himself from smiling; it sort of looked like he was having some kind of horrible facial tick, but it was better than nothing. No one had turned into a potted plant, or an animal, and Steve was fairly certain that he wasn’t cross dressing again. That didn’t mean that nothing had happened, but really there wasn’t any way to know until it happened. He looked down at himself to be sure that he wasn’t in a Mumu or something else embarrassing. Yep, he was still dressed in his uniform, so there was nothing to worry about; he was sure of it.

Sure, Loki had enchanted him once before, but there was nothing to gain with doing it again, right? Loki had always been very adamant about not using the same tricks over and over again, unless of course, he was bored and found something that entertained him to no end. And Loki hadn’t really looked all that bored. At least Steve hoped that Loki hadn’t been bored…

He sure didn’t feel any different.

“So, it’s fine.” Steve gently took Tony by the shoulders, bumping their heads together. The faceplate snapped up and Tony sighed aloud, scrubbing his hand over his beard.

“You’re trying not to laugh. I’m blowing this out of proportion, aren’t I?”

“No, you’re not. I appreciate the fact that you’re worried about me, and we can give Strange a call later tonight, alright? I’m pretty sure Loki didn’t do anything other than kiss me. Personally I’d rather be kissing you though.” Steve said softly. He leaned forward and kissed Tony, the touch of his lips soft and gentle. Tony smiled into the kiss, pulling back when he was satisfied.

“You’re really going to have to do some explaining, you know that right? I mean, I get that Loki thinks your star spangled buns are hot and all, but it isn’t exactly as if he points it out all the time. And then to top it all off, he decides to repair the serious structural damage he’s done to something that brings children joy right before trying to cop a feel? What the hell is going on? Did we go into the twilight zone while we were asleep?” Tony scowled. “And just how is it that he knows Bucky?”

Tony had no way of knowing how close to the truth he actually was. It was going to be bizarre explaining everything to him; to all of the Avengers, actually. Steve sighed. He would have to make a formal report about the entire thing to SHIELD too, even if there weren’t any traces of things having happened in the first place. He dreaded the paperwork, knowing that it was going to take hours. SHIELD and the team needed to know about the crystals, and what they could do, what Loki could do if he got his hands on the last one. There was still a third crystal out there somewhere; one last crystal was out there capable of bringing more chaos and misery. Going to see Dr. Strange was probably for the best.

“It’s a long story… I’ll… I’ll tell you about it once I talk to Bucky, alright? And I think it’s best if I have that particular discussion first and alone…” Steve said.

“What, you don’t trust me?” Tony teased; the sweet smile on his face had changed into a genuine look of concerned hurt in a split second. Steve was fairly certain that Tony hadn’t meant to actually appear hurt, but it was there all the same.

“God no! You’ll start strangling each other and then I’ll never be able to take my boyfriend to bed again! You’ll be in jail, and he’ll be dead, and then no one will be happy.” Steve gave Tony a peck on the lips.
“I like that you think I’d win in this supposed strangling contest.” Tony grinned, the concern fading.

“Of course you would.” Steve said, pulling back so that he could take Tony’s face in his hands. “You’re the only one smart enough to build an advanced mechanical arm for him, and then you’d turn it against him, because you never leave things to chance. I can just see it now. ‘Stop hitting yourself’ repeated over and over and over again until someone was unconscious. Coulson would have a field day with his Taser.”

“I love you, you sweet, sweet man.” Tony cackled.

“You just love me for my, what did you call them? My hot star spangled buns? I’m confused, because I assume you’re talking about my ass and not my skills with baking, although I do make a mean coffee cake.” Steve teased, pinching Tony’s cheek.

“Fine, fine! Use my own words against me why don’t you.” Tony grumbled. He scratched at his beard again, casting a look at the other Avengers as they gathered together. Steve had feeling that he would be getting a thousand questions at some point in the day; he hoped that they would at least wait until he was willing to talk about it before they started in on him.

For now, the park was calm; it was as if nothing had happened, save maybe a little littering. The only sign that Loki had even been in the area was four little indentations in the wood chips where the deck chair had been, and the discarded lemonade can. Steve picked that up and took it home with them to recycle. All and all it was a good morning.

Steve sat down in the comfy chair beside Bucky’s bed with a cup of mocha-something-or-other in his hand. He tried not to squash the paper cup, his grip tightening marginally at the sight of Bucky casually eating a foot away. Tony had bought Steve the coffee earlier, claiming that he could use a caffeine fix after Loki’s little unwanted conversation and although Steve hadn’t really wanted to drink anything, he had accepted so that he could have something to hold in his hands while he talked with Bucky.

It didn’t feel awkward being there in the hospital, although it should have. The last memories of that other world were still fresh in his mind; he wondered what was going on in Bucky’s head. He had been so quiet, giving Steve nothing more than a friendly wave when he had poked his head into the room. It was almost as if he didn’t remember a thing that had happened. Bucky was sitting leisurely in his bed, picking away at the lunch the nurse had brought for him as if it were the grandest buffet he had ever had the chance to eat; k-rations were nothing in comparison, and they had sure eaten a lot of those so Steve supposed that it might actually fit with Bucky’s definition of buffet even if it was hospital food. He had to admit that they had sure improved their standards since the forties. Bucky was paying special attention to the canned peas, picking out the bits of carrot that he didn’t like. He had always been fond of canned peas, but he didn’t usually go this bonkers for them.

“So, I figured you would be spending the day off doing something exciting.” Bucky remarked, spearing the last of the peas on the end of his fork. There was a laziness to Bucky that hadn’t been there the night before; it was a little unnerving, like the night staff had gathered up his emotions and given him a mask to wear. Even with the mask in place, it was pretty obvious to Steve that Bucky remembered everything that had happened in that other world – the Crystal’s Changed World; it felt too much like he was watching an act, or clicking through one of those soap operas Clint liked to
watch when he was drunk. The Changed World had a nice ring to it; it could have been a soap too. They all had dumb names like that, stuff about the world turning and lights guiding. It felt fitting to name the thing finally, even if the time spent there hadn’t really counted for anyone other than for the three of them. To the rest of the world, it had just been yet another night in a string of long, listless nights. Steve envied those who had slept on, oblivious of what had gone on while they were dreaming. The new months he had under his belt were ungainly, dark months. Sure, there were some good memories, but he was glad that things were back to normal.

Bucky probably thought he was playing it safe by not saying anything about the Changed World. Maybe he was going to play up the idea that it had all been one massive dream, a figment of his and Steve’s imagination. After all, who could prove it? It wasn’t as if they had photographs or videos to look over. Hell, all they really had were memories, and while Steve knew those memories were true, he was pretty sure that Bucky would be willing to do whatever it took to convince himself otherwise.

It wasn’t hard to piece together the plan Bucky would use; Bucky was too stubborn to admit to anything, and he always used the same techniques to get out of awkward conversation. He wasn’t going to admit anything had changed between them unless someone took a pair of pliers to his fingernails and teeth, not that anyone would of course. The only problem with Bucky’s usual plans was that he seemed to have forgotten a crucial detail when deciding what to do. The night before they had found themselves in the Changed World, Bucky had tried to kill himself and had gotten into a fist fight with Tony. He hadn’t remembered to play up either of those things; he hadn’t even mentioned them in passing. It was always the little details, Steve mused, that lead to plans falling apart.

He wondered if he should play along just to see what Bucky would do, and then thought better of it. No. It was better to just get things out in the open; games were Loki’s way, not his, and he wouldn’t stoop to Loki’s level even for a few minutes. Loki, despite being a complete and utter jackass, pardon his French, was right to have gone around checking up on things. The rat bastard had intended on making sure that Steve knew that he had memories of the Changed World, and of course, he had been more than willing to sell Bucky out to take some of the heat off himself. He was surprised Bucky hadn’t been dropped off in his bedroom that morning; that would have been more than enough distraction to keep them busy and off Loki’s trail for a long time. Steve wondered if there might be some other reason behind this particular taunt; it seemed so like Loki to start working on something new right after ending an old game. Steve sure hoped he wasn’t getting up to any more trouble. He was getting tired of dealing with Loki, and if he could go another few months without having to think about him and his doll fetish, he would die happy. Well, to be fair, he wouldn’t have minded putting a fist in Loki’s face a few times. That would make him pretty happy too.

Regardless of Loki’s mind games, things had to be taken into account and dealt with. Steve wasn’t stupid. He didn’t like leaving loose ends, and Bucky was one rather large loose end at the moment. Bucky had come to some very powerful realizations while in that world and it would be stupid, unkind even, to let him crawl back into that emotional hole. Too many things had happened to just let him brush it off like that.

Steve made an executive decision right then and there. He was going to hash things out or die trying. Bucky could kick and scream all he wanted; he wasn’t going to back off anymore. He could help Bucky through this, if Bucky was willing to accept the help. They had all the time in the world to set it right between them.

“So… I think we need to talk about boundaries.” Steve said, taking a long slow sip of his mocha.
Bucky paused, fork halfway to his mouth, feigning confusion. Steve had been around him far too long to not recognize him preparing to spew bullshit. It was almost embarrassing how easy it was to pick up on it.

“What are you talking about?” Bucky asked, playing innocent.

“I’m talking about boundaries between you and me. You made a really bad call out there Bucky – I think we need to make sure that we understand each other properly this time around. No more playing pretend.”

“What are you, high?”

“No, seriously, Steve. Are you high? Because you’re acting like we’ve been discussing the idea of joining some kind of cult or something. All we were talking about was lunch and my love of canned peas.” Bucky protested.

“Enough games. I’m fine with you having a crush on me – with the fact that you like men in general, even if I’m the only one you can admit to actually being interested in. I’m telling you now, just so that there will be no misunderstandings, it will never happen between us.” Steve said calmly.

Bucky’s face fell. The ruse was in shambles around him, and he could see it; he wasn’t even pretending to be ignorant anymore. He lowered his fork onto his plate and pushed the overtable away, crossing his arms over his chest and then, to Steve’s surprise, he started pouting.

“You’re not serious!” Bucky said with a whine.

“I’m completely serious. We went through a lot of shit in that other world – and don’t you play around pretending it didn’t happen, because we both know it did.” Steve snapped when Bucky opened his mouth again.

“But –”

“No butts. If you’re going to continue to be a part of my life you’re going to have to understand some things, mister. We’re going to set up some rules and we’re both going to follow them.” Steve said.

“Doesn’t seem fair to me.” Bucky grumbled.

“It’s more than fair Bucky. Rule number one – if you touch Tony, say something awful and hurtful to him or even so much as glare in his general direction I’ll have you shipped back to SHIELD HQ without so much as a how-you-do for notice, do you get me?”

“I get you.” Bucky said softly, scowling.

“Two – you will keep your hands to yourself. I’m not a tiny little waif anymore, and I didn’t appreciate being manhandled then either, so I repeat, keep your hands to yourself!”

“Fine. Hands to myself. Got it. Can I at least get a hug every once in a while?” Bucky asked with a resigned sigh.

“Hugs are acceptable. If you try anything else though –”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. Broken fingers, black eye, kicked back to SHIELD.”
“Kicked back to SHIELD yes, broken fingers and black eyes no – You know me better than that.” Steve frowned.

“Fine. What else?”

“Three – you don’t talk to Loki anymore about your woes. That’s what got us into this mess to begin with. You should start actually paying attention to who you’re blabbing at. If you want to complain, or you need to talk, talk to me, or Fury, or someone that you actually know. Or a therapist even. Don’t just start talking to pretty nurses with bright red lips.”

“You’re such a mother hen.”

“I’m doing this so that we can stay friends Bucky. I’m not joking around anymore. This is serious.”

“You’d honestly stop being my friend if I slipped up even once, wouldn’t you?” Bucky gaped, eyes wide and horrified.

“It would depend on what you did and how bad it was, but yes. You get only get one free pass from here on out and you practically used that up when you blabbed to Loki. I don’t want to be mean, and frankly I’m not even sure that I’m comfortable giving you that pass in the first place, but this is what you get. Those months were hell, even if I spent them with Tony. Howard couldn’t keep his hands to himself half the time, and I did not appreciate being turned into some kind of fetish item when Loki decided to walk off with me.”

“I’m sorry.” Bucky said guiltily, looking down at his hands. “If I could find a way to fix it I would.”

“I know.” Steve sighed, cupping his drink in his hands. The mocha was still warm, and he could smell the delicate aroma of chocolate and coffee wafting up through the plastic lid even from where it was sitting on his lap. Tony was right. It was good.

“So then…” Bucky fidgeted in bed. The restraints from the night before were hanging off of the safety bars like lifelines; Steve had been informed of the ‘miraculous recovery’ shortly after they had gotten back to the Mansion. That had been one doozy of a phone call. The medical staff had been pretty skeptical about the change, just as Steve would have been if he hadn’t known that Bucky had already knocked around his issues for seventy years in the Changed World. He couldn’t explain that to them of course, so he had been forced to listen to a whole list of options before telling them to just untie Bucky and let things be. He was surprised that they had listened to him, but was glad to see that they had left the restraints on the bed just in case something went wrong.

“Does this mean that I get to go home with you guys? Back to the Avengers Mansion?” Bucky asked, sounding hopeful. “You said that I could have some rules too, right?”

“I need to talk to Tony about that. It’s his house after all. I’m going to tell him what happened, and he’s going to have that decision all to himself. He might not believe a word I say. You might get lucky – but I’ll always remember what happened, so watch it. Don’t try to play him for a chump.” Steve warned.

“Fine. And I’ll get to be an Avenger again?” Bucky asked. There was a glimmer in his eye, something needy and desperate; Bucky had loved being a part of the Avengers in the Changed World, and even if Steve was extremely mad with Bucky, he wasn’t going to take away the one good thing Bucky had left in his life. A good leader knew when to discipline his troops and when to offer reprieves. It had taken him a good four hours of heavy thinking before he had reluctantly come to the conclusion that it would be better to keep an eye on Bucky than to let him wander off on his own where no one would be watching at all. SHIELD couldn’t keep tabs on him forever, but Jarvis
would have a lot less problems with it.

“You’ll have to talk to Fury about that. I’ll say yes if they ask me for my opinion. You’re a good man when you put your mind to it Bucky, don’t forget that.” Steve said with a smile.

“Oh get over yourself! You’re just mad because I made a sexier Captain America.” Bucky scoffed, smirking nervously. It had never been jokes with Bucky when he was nervous before, but apparently some things really had changed over the past few months; it was nice to see that Bucky might be taking a different approach with things this time around. He could put up with a few rude jokes if it meant keeping everyone happy, contented and on the same playing field.

Still…

It had been seventy years for Bucky. Lots of things could change in seventy years. Steve hadn’t spent all of those years with him – in truth, he had only spent a handful of weeks with Bucky if he counted all the times that Bucky had been available to just spend time with him in the Changed World. The Avengers Initiative had kept Bucky busy, just like how it always kept Steve busy now. Steve felt exhausted just thinking about the workload that was waiting for him at home. He would just have to try and stay positive.

Bucky wouldn’t be planning anything, would he? He had made himself clear, hadn’t he?

Bucky was still Bucky after all. He had never really been any good at hiding when he was lying – at least not to Steve. If Bucky agreed to the conditions he had set out, then everything was as good as settled.

Or was it?

And what about Loki? What was Loki planning?

“This is a go, right?” Bucky asked. “You’re not going to change your mind, are you?”

“Do you really think I’d do something like that?”

“Well… no. I guess not. I don’t know. I guess I just spent too much time around Howard.”

“I guess so.”

“He didn’t… you know… did he?” Bucky cleared his throat.

“No. I told you already, he didn’t. If he had, he’d have been in traction so fast his head would have spun.”

Bucky laughed. “I was kind of tempted to do that to him a few times. When he was younger –”

“I’d rather not actually. The less I know about Howard Stark’s life the better.” Steve muttered.

“Oh.” Bucky looked down at his hands, biting his lower lip. “I said I’m sorry about that, right?”

Steve nodded his head. “You did.”

“So I’m forgiven?” Bucky asked timidly.

Steve pondered the question, rolling the cup between his hands. He wasn’t sure he would ever be able to forgive someone for standing by and watching evil happen. The thought of Tony being hurt – the memories of it all weren’t going to go away. Even if Tony didn’t remember any of it, they would
always be there, and he wasn’t going to lie to Tony about it. “I don’t know Bucky. I really don’t know.”

Bucky looked disappointed, hanging his head.

“But maybe one day.” Steve smiled weakly. “If you stick to the rules, then maybe one day I’ll forgive you.” He couldn’t quite decide what to say next, and instead fell silent, contemplating the future while Bucky went back to his lunch.

Loki could wait; as much as that seemed like a bad idea, it was all he could do for now until Loki strolled out and unveiled whatever monstrosity he was working on.

Steve rolled over on the couch, rubbing this side of his face. He had fallen asleep while doing paperwork, too caught up in detailing everything out to bother going to bed that night. He had missed having Tony close by, but he knew that Tony had needed space after their talk. A lot of things had been said, a lot of memories spilled. The look on Tony’s face had been terrifying at times. He hoped that things would be alright.

“Hey sleepyhead.” Tony leaned over the back of the couch and kissed the back of Steve’s neck, wrapping an arm around his shoulder.

“Hey.” Steve murmured, wiping his eyes.

“Did you sleep well?” Tony asked, hopping over the couch so that he could sit with his knees against Steve’s hip.

“Not really. I’ve got a crick in my neck, but at least the paperwork’s almost done.” Steve admitted, putting a hand over top of Tony’s. “How about you? Did you get any sleep?”

Tony shook his head, leaning against Steve’s shoulder, burying his nose in Steve’s neck. “Nah, I couldn’t sleep.”

“Too much?”

“A little. But it’s not like it happened to me it’s just… it feels like I was reading a story or something.” Tony shrugged. “It didn’t seem real, but you know, I could see some things that might have happened. It kinda…”

“It spooked you?”

“Yeah. More than I thought it would anyways.” Tony shifted and then winced, reaching into his pocket. He pulled something out, shifting against Steve’s shoulder. “Oh, I forgot. The drycleaner sent this back. Said they found it in your pocket. I wasn’t sure you’d want it because it sort of looks like junk.” He handed it over and Steve took it from him.

It was a tiny object, dwarfed by the size of Steve’s hands.

The wooden crystal was split in half; perfectly split too, not a splinter to be seen. Steve frowned at it.

“What is it?” Tony asked, yawning. “Don’t tell me you picked up whittlin’ when you got bored,
because I don’t think I can stand the thought of finding wood shavings in our bed.”

“It looks like something I made in the dream world.” Steve said, ice clenching in his gut. “And I think it followed me home.”

End Notes

This is a Tiny Steve fic (he's 5'1) - warnings for sexual harassment on Howard's part and for disturbing scenes (mainly in later chapters) Tony is 5'9

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