Astrophile: A Tale of Two Opposites

by Agent C (arh581958)

Summary

Tony Stark and Steve Rogers couldn't be any more different;

Billionaire Inventor Tony Stark enters the Avengers Academy in the middle of the year, and his reputation as a rich boy precedes him. Rumor has it that his special admission is due to his father donating an entire tower.

Council President Steve Rogers came from a military family, ans isn't too happy about the new transfer student creating a ruckus in his school. He's got his mark on Tony from the very first time they meet.

A love for stars brings starts bringing them together.

Notes

THE AWESOME ART IS MADE BY: TAKKUN

Dear Partner, thank you for being patient with all by ranting/cramming/brainstorming for this project! I really, really tried to give life to the idea of Steve and Tony in AA even if I'm not too familiar with the game. I hope you like it~

Things to Remember: This is an AvengersAcademy!AU; wherein, students are grouped based on aptitude for the various subjects offered rather than a standardized curriculum.
They get tested before they the school to ascertain which classes they can or cannot take. Students are aged roughly 18 to 25. (No, age doesn't really matter so much for SHIELD.) For those of you who are unfamiliar with AA, just treat this like a College!AU and with a grain of salt. I only tag 'major' character relationships.

**Warnings:** Each character has their own biases (because even they aren't perfect) but they do not all reflect the views of the writer or the artist. Also, Steve kind of starts off as an asshole but he gets nicer! Please view the trigger tags below.

See the end of the work for more notes

“Welcome, students. I’m Directory Nick Fury and this is Avengers Academy. You’ve been invited here because each of you has special talents—skills you’ll learn to use for the greater good by working together as a team. You’ll forge friendships that last a lifetime, seize opportunities to test your limits, perfect your powers, and become the hero you were born to be. Classes are in session. Now, go show the world what it means to be an Avenger!”

Fury ended the speech by revealing Avengers Academy’s newest building: towering over the rest of the medium-sized school buildings, the Stark Tower stood out proudly at thirty stories and a helipad on the twenty-seventh level. It had been pledged only last school year by Howard Edward Stark—the leading man in Avengers Academy’s Engineering and Research Development department. The building seemed to have popped up over the course of the summer.

“It looks like a mushroom,” Natasha drawled while picking at her nails, ten perfectly manicured with a crimson red French tip. She stood with the large mass of students gathered at the gates. Every year, Fury said the same message. Every year, they participated in welcoming the newest batch of Avengers recruits. Avengers—a special group of talented young people chosen for their special abilities.

Beside her, Janet, a girl with short auburn hair rolled her eyes. “Don’t be such a pickle, Natasha. It’s called ‘art’.” She raised her hands, thumbs and index fingers making a rectangle, and framed the structure. Her face squinted with the effort to close one eye. She smiled. Unlike Natasha, she studied the building’s perplexing curved edges with a more discerning eye. “It’s very…,” she tilted her head and squinted, “…phallic.”

“I prefer to call it a piece of modern art,” a new male voice joined them. The two girls spun around. The boy wore a bright red and yellow jacket with the collar popped up. He had spiky jet black hair, thick expressive eyebrows, and slight stubble. Neither of them recognized who he was, but he gave a small abortive wave nonetheless.

“It uses state-of-the-art structural design features that haven’t been used before, developed primarily to survive the shifting of the tectonic plates and support the additional ground stress of the heavy aircraft and machinery used by the Academy. Fury requested it himself to avoid structural damage based on the specialized stress conditions used by this training facility.” He stopped for a moment, cocking his head. “I suppose you can call it a school.”

“And who are you?” Natasha crossed her arms, frowning.

“What’s your number and can I get a selfie?” Janet added, fluttering her eyebrows.
The boy winked and laughed. “My name’s Tony. I’m starting this year. Engineering.”

Natasha looked unimpressed but Janet was exhilarated. “I’m Janet Van Dyne,Dyke—Biology, specializing in genetics. And this frowny friend beside me is Natasha.” She jerked her thumb to the side, and Natasha let out an exasperated sigh. “Aww, don’t worry about her. It takes time to warm her up. Just like an engine. You know what I mean?”

“Engines, I can understand.” Tony threw his head back and laughed. “Girls, not so much. Haven’t had much luck in that area.”

“But you’re such a cutie! How can that be!?” Janet complained. She moved in close to Tony, angling her hands so that they curled around his bicep and his elbow tucked against her chest. Tony flinched. It was strangely intimate and inappropriate at the same time. As much as he wanted to make a good impression at his new school without the stigma of his father over his head, he did not want his previous activities to come to the surface.

“New kid!” A gruff voice exploded from behind them, followed by a harsh set of stomping not too far away. The ground shook with the force of the footsteps. All three students turned around to see a tall blond boy dressed in a dark blue denim jacket. He looked livid for reasons unknown to them, face red with exertion. “Time to stop flirting and get to class. Your daddy might have bought a new building but that doesn’t mean you’re getting any special treatment.”

Tony hadn’t missed a beat. His face closed off and his expression darkened. “What’s it to you, Cap?” He puffed out his chest and stood straighter. “News flash, Captain, this isn’t ROTC and I’m not your soldier. So you don’t get to boss me around like this is your territory!” he shouted, and the girls visibly startled at his outburst.

Steve was having none of it. “Listen here, punk,” he sneered just as venomously. He grabbed Tony by the collar and pulled. Tony was lifted off the ground, forced onto his tippy-toes. “You’re new, so I’m going to say this once, understand? What we do is important and we have no time for brats riding on daddy’s coattails.”

They were face-to-face, scant inches between them. Tony could feel the vindictiveness in Steve’s words. Spite oozed off the blond in waves. He’d always been in his father’s shadow: the great genius Howard Stark and his groundbreaking inventions, the talented philanthropist Howard Stark and his contributions to society, the world-class billionaire Howard Stark and his multitude of charities.

It seemed that his father’s only failure was him, Anthony Edward Stark.

He might have his father’s second name but only that. He never lived up to the expectations placed upon him. He failed on every account in his father’s eyes. Never enough, never worthy. He fell short on every occasion presented to him—from badly soldered circuit boards when he was four years old to the useless heap of metal he salvaged from their Malibu house. He was Howard’s biggest disappointment.

Tony clawed at the hand gripping his collar but to no avail. The older, taller, and broader boy was built like an ox, a Goliath to his lithe frame. Strength against brute strength would render him the weaker man.

He had but one saving grace—his brain. Hacking up as much spit as possible, he spat straight into Steve’s right eye. Steve dropped him.

“You little—!”
“Rogers!” Fury’s voice startled both of them. Tony sat on the grass-covered ground. The wet grass dampened his denims and stained his hands. Steve was far too busy rubbing the saliva from his eye. He cursed, running his mouth off worse than a sailor. The Director spared Tony a single glance, then smirked at Rogers. “I see you two have met. Making trouble already?”

“He started it!” both boys yelled simultaneously.

Fury glared with his one good eye. “I don’t care! Stop making a ruckus and get your asses to class!” he barked out, making the pair jump. Tony and Steve opened their mouths to utter protests but stopped when they saw Fury’s face. Grumbling, the boys stomped away in opposite directions.

Natasha watched the entire thing play out. Janet got it all on Instagram.

“And you two!” Fury shouted. “Did you think I was only talking to them? Go! Now!”

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By the end of the first semester, he made a total of two friends: Janet van Dyne and Pepper Potts. Pepper was the administrator handling campus management. He met Pepper after being caught past hours inside his lab in Stark Tower. He explained his identity and his reason for staying. She let him off with a warning and allowed use the space as his private workshop, provided that he build an indoor spa too. They sealed the deal with a discreet exchange of access cards in a CCTV blind spot.

For students, Janet and he shared a fascination for social media and the spotlight, both being children of really famous people. Her father was the world-renowned scientist Vernon van Dyne and had worked with Howard on a few projects. But that was all before the academy. In the Academy, they bonded over their daddy issues and lack of maternal influences in their lives.

The Academy had a weird educational setup. Few students went to their school—very few if the institution had any intention of being properly accredited. Their layout was weird as well. Instead of being divided into year levels, students were tested upon entry on different subjects ranging from Basic English to complex Japanese martial art forms. Their course credits depended on their aptitude or inaptitude for certain skills.

Tony had advanced cellular genetics, foreign languages that he still hadn’t mastered, a butt-load of science courses, a mid-level martial arts course that introduced him to applying techniques outside of self-defense, current world history, a six-hour lab time for innovations on cyber security and how to bypass most defense security systems, and gym time, which he hated the most because it was with Steve fucking Rogers a.k.a. Captain Stick Up-His-Ass.

He didn’t understand why the school’s ‘student leader’ had it out for him since he first arrived. Rogers had been hounding him since the entrance ceremony because he conveniently ‘failed’ to show up for the unveiling of Stark Tower. He hadn’t gone because he was in the tower during the unveiling. He had slept there the night before on the helipad because the sky was nice and dark. He obviously didn’t have an alarm! Either way, Tony hated his Friday gym class that made ROTC feel like a romantic beach getaway.

“Aww, come on, Tony,” Janet whined on Wednesday evening. They sat one table apart in Dr. Pym’s three-hour lab. She was wearing a striped sailor-blue dress with a white ribbon at the neckline, like she was straight from the 1960s. It went well with the thick white aviator shades keeping her bangs out of the way. “It’s just a simple get-together after class! God knows that we need a party after all the things they force-crammed into our heads. Even Banner here is going! Ain’t that right, Brucie?”
Between the gossiping pair, Bruce began chanting calming Chinese proverbs in his head. He needed the distraction if he was to survive without going green. Ever since Stark had come to the Academy, Janet had turned her ‘flirt’ mode to a hundred and two percent. He groaned at the sound of his name.

“Brucie?” Tony repeated with a snort. He placed his fire-engine red gloved-hands, mockingly over his heart. They each had rubber gloves on for this lesson’s experiment since they were dealing with hot metals. “You let her call you ‘Brucie’, and you don’t even let me call you Bruce? I’m seriously hurt here, Banner.”

Bruce clenched and unclenched his fingers inside his green gloves. “I prefer Dr. Banner. I did earn my PhD when I was sixteen,” he groused, sending a glare Tony’s way.

The black-haired boy laughed. “Well, that gives us another thing in common! What do you specialize in? I don’t think it’s genetics or you would be teaching this class instead of taking it,” Tony asked mild-manneredly, offering Bruce one of his brilliant smiles.

He had tried, and failed, on several occasions to befriend the other members of his class, but being on the good side of the school’s Queen Bee proved to be both a blessing and a curse. Popular kids flocked gravitated to his side, mainly those who wanted to get in Janet’s pants, while those on the outskirts tended to avoid him like the plague. Bruce was part of the latter group, preferring to converse with people like Jessica Drew and Peter Parker. Tony wanted in on their nerdy little science band.

The question seemed to take Bruce aback. “N—no,” he stuttered, the rubber of his gloves squeaking around the C-clamp. He placed the beaker over the table burner. He turned to Tony, pulling up his goggles. “It’s in physics,” he said, fully expecting Tony to give him the same blank face that van Dyne had given him last semester when they were paired off together. What he didn’t expect was Tony’s face beaming in recognition.

“Called it!” Tony thrust a fist in the air. “Nuclear and gamma radiation, right? That’s wicked cool! How far have you gone with cellular experiments on the anatomical level? It’s not as boring as this, right? I didn’t qualify for that class this semester but I’m trying again in the winter.”

“You’re interested in anatomic study?” Bruce looked incredulous at the information, like he couldn’t believe his own two ears. He stared at Tony with his jaw nearly hitting the table.

Tony just winked. “Clean nuclear energy is the way of the future, baby.”

“Hey, science bros,” Janet faked a cough on Bruce’s other side, drawing their attention to her. She had her cell phone camera directed at them, the flash being a tell-tale sign that she was recording them. “Since you’re magically nerdy besties now or something, are you going to the party or not? ‘Cause this baby is going on Instagram whether or not you attend. That mumbo-jumbo was epic! The spidey twins might even enjoy it.”

Bruce blushed, and Tony laughed before winking at the camera. He pointed a finger-gun at the small lens and smirked. “See you on Friday!” And just like that, Tony’s friend count went up to three.

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Steve Rogers was a born and bred Brooklynite. His father, Joseph Rogers, came from a military background having served in the army that returned from the Middle East as a war hero. His mother, Sarah Rogers, was a military medic stationed in Vietnam. They met, they fell in love, and
after the war they returned to their home in New York City. Joseph took a position teaching gym in the local public school and Sarah became head nurse at Bethlehem hospital.

Side effects of both his parents being in war caused Steve to have a sickly body when he was younger. He had a small stature and was often bullied for his size and wan nature. Whenever the bullying became too much, he snuck off to the rooftop to watch the stars. They were his only escape from the taunts and bruises inflicted by kids twice his age. He got lost in staring at the stars above his head that barely showed in the harsh city lights.

His favorite memory came the summer before he turned eighteen. His thin frame matured into that of a healthy male American. He hit a growth spurt when he was fifteen and his body began to fill out. Rigorous training from his father and healthy square meals from his mother eventually helped his body fight through his feeble stature. To celebrate, Joseph took his family to the woods in northern New York for a hunting and fishing trip.

The campsite was far from the city, in a clearing somewhere in a forest. Steve never saw the stars shine as bright as they did that night. Without the pollution of the city and with their campfire as the only source of light, the darkness of the sky made the starlight shine brighter. His parents showed him how to navigate using the North Star as his guide so that he could find his way home even without a compass.

On his eighteenth birthday, Steve enlisted in the military to follow in his parents’ footsteps. He joined the army, became a ranger, and rose to the top of his class within six months. His character, his skills, and his determination put him on SHIELD’s radar. They offered him a scholarship for university in a specialized academy for kids like him, living up to his parent’s expectations, a chance to be part of something bigger, for a purpose to serve his motherland, to become an Avenger. Avenger.

He was the first Avenger.

It goes without saying that many of the Academy’s policies were set in place because of his suggestions. With time, the school grew. They were preparing young people like him to go and save their future. He took on the role as the Avengers team leader for the sake of the others. However, today’s youth were entitled little shits who only cared about themselves.

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Steve entered the training facility with a frown that was steadily becoming a permanent feature on his face. He’d been prissy since the beginning of the school year. The new Stark Tower and the baggage that came with it in the form of a five--foot--two-inch Tony Stark with ruffled black hair and who was trying to grow a goatee, gave him headaches.

Tony Stark had caused a dent in their perfectly perfect student system—*he brought crowds together*. One day it was jocks and cheerleaders, the next day was science geeks, and a pair of Norse siblings by the weekend. People *gravitated* towards Stark for reasons unknown to Steve. It gave the blond boy migraines on his migraines. His school became utter chaos. People were ‘getting together’ tomorrow, Friday, which meant bouts of illustrious drinking and unprotected sex.
“What’s got your tighty-whities in a twist, Cap?” Clint Barton, a.k.a. Hawkeye, swooped in from his hidden perch by the catwalks and landed right in front of Steve. He wore a loose white and purple hoodie that matched his purple arm guard, bow, and the quiver perpetually attached to his back. Steve took a few steps back in surprise. A year with the archer hadn’t been enough for him to get accustomed to the ex-carnie’s lurking habits.

Clint Barton was a foster kid that they had plucked out of the system. He was also the only one who had enough Courage to approach Steve when the latter was in one of his moods—just like this entire month.

“Christ, Clint! How many times did I tell you not to drop from the ceiling! You’re lucky that I wasn’t Natasha or dyou’d have had your neck broken!” Steve pointed an accusatory finger at Clint and glared. The archer merely shrugged his shoulders.

“If you were Nat, and trust me, Cap, you’re no Nat, then I wouldn’t have dropped the penny on you like that. I’ll tell on you and she’ll find it insulting,” Clint tutted, shaking his head. He stared Steve down even if he was shorter, rolling his eyes as Steve intensified his glare. “Puh-lease, Captain. I’ve been stared down by both of Fury’s eyes. Do you think that’s really going to get you anywhere?” Steve puffed out his chest but deflated. “That’s right. It’s not. So what went up your ass and died?”

“It’s Stark,” Steve confessed. “It’s Stark and his incompetence at doing his task, his disregard of direct orders, and his ability to understand basic rules!” His arms shot-out in frustration. “Not only has he broken several of the Academy’s rules in his first month here, but he also convinced Ms. Potts to give him special access after hours for Stark Tower!”

“That bastard,” Clint growled under his breath, but that wasn’t with Steve’s malice. Instead, an hint of awe blended with his tone. Pulling out his phone, he grinned wide. “D’you think Tony’ll let me get my Sky-Cycle up there and take her for a spin? She hasn’t seen the skies in ages! I bet it’ll be like dismounting a mammoth coaster from that height! It’ll be wicked cool!”

Steve abruptly stopped walking and backtracked the conversation. “Wait, wha—, Tony?”

Clint whirled around, shrugging again. “Yeah… Tony. So what?” The shocked expression on Steve’s face told him all. “Don’t tell me you haven’t even talked to him?”

“I have,” came the gruff response.

“And?”

“And there’s nothing to say about it, Barton.”

“That doesn’t sound an awful lot like nothing, Cap.,”” Clint said, lifting his eyebrows. He swiveled to face the taller blond with arms crossed over his chest. Their mighty fearless leader looked queasy on his feet, but the patented determined face was present.

“Bull. Shit.” He rolled his eyes. “I bet you more range time that you haven’t even bothered talking to him. You yelled at him after the opening ceremony. That doesn’t constitute as talking.”

Steve was taken aback by the wisdom. “Well, look at you, acting all mature and shit. Coulson’s being a good influence on you, isn’t he?”

Clint’s ears turned pink. He huffed. “Stop changing the subject. Why are you so hell bent on taking it out on Tony anyway? It’s not like you’ve had an actual conversation with the guy! Even Nat says he’s pretty cool. And that’s Nat. She doesn’t give praise lightly.”
“He ain’t no Avenger. He’s just another rich boy raking in daddy’s money.” Steve stormed past Clint, purposely knocking the archer in the shoulder.

The archer rubbed his sore limb with a hiss. “Ouch, Cap. Ouch. For someone who hated being judged as a kid, you sure went off and judged Tony pretty easily. Have you taken a good look in the mirror lately?”

Steve refused to acknowledge the comment. They continued deeper into the training room. Several students were scattered in different areas: Carol and Natasha were sparring on the mats, James and Sam looked like they’d spent several rounds sparring in the boxing ring with Bucky half-sprawled over the ropes. These were his people, his team. Over the year, and several missions together, he considered them friends as well.

Bucky heard them approach first. He jumped off the platform, mechanical arm bearing the brunt of his weight, a testament to the horror he’d survived. “Steve! Clint! Perfect! Speaking of Friday,” he said with a weird Russian-and-Brooklyn accent, “a little Russian bird told me that the nerds from the science lab are hosting the party of all parties! Tell me you’re going.”

“Aww, quit with the cryptic crap, Buck. We all know you’re talking about Natasha.” Clint groaned, throwing a projectile he found at random. Bucky flung it off effortlessly with his metal arm. “Why the hell would they do that anyway, huh? They caused such a ruckus when we recruited Victor last year!”

It was Sam who answered. “We all know Victor don’t count for crap. He don’t fit with them. He’s weird but he isn’t their kind of weird, ya know?” He threw a glance at his sparring partner, who just laughed.

“He’s more of the Amora and Loki kind of weird, and we all know they’re both loners,” Rhodey added. The pair hooked their arms over the ropes, both dripping in sweat. Natasha and Carol had long stopped sparring to eavesdrop on the conversation. The men hooted at their sweatpants-clad clad behinds, and they both flipped them off with double-birds.

“Cool.” Carol pushed back her bangs, grinning. “Nerd Party! I’m so in! Nat, why didn’t you tell me about it? But you told Bucky?! I’m hurt. Seriously. I thought we had a ‘hoes-before-bros thing going on’?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “One, I detest the fact that you refer to us as ‘hoes’. Two, there isn’t much to talk about. It’s tomorrow at Club A. Like there’s any other venue inside campus to host something so… fun.” She said the last word like it was vomit. “Janet coerced me into bartending for the night.”

“Way cool!” Clint piped up with a fist bump to the air. “Russian-made drinks. The party is going to be so rad! Everyone will be wasted before midnight!”

Bucky groaned. “Who the hell says ‘rad’ anymore?”

“A man of the seventies,” Rhodey answered without missing a beat.

“Who the hell is from…” Bucky’s face froze in realization. “Oh. Oh!”

“Jesus guys! Enough with my sex life!”

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It was Friday, and everyone in the mid-level gym class was absent, save for Peter and Jessica. The
spidey twins, duly dubbed so because of their similar spider-like abilities, were suspended upside-down. They danced anaerial silk dance using their reinforced silken webs. form Peter and Jessica didn’t often indulge in acrobatic activities - death-defying stunts were normally left to Clint.

Steve stopped directly underneath them and raised his chin. “You look like you two are having fun.”

“Well, golly! It’s Captain America!” Peter twirled out of his confines and gracefully lowered himself to Steve’s eye level. His loose brown hair fell above his face while he posed in an upside-down lotus position, feet clinging to his web.

“To what do we owe the pleasure, oh fearless leader?” Jessica swooped down to the floor like a normal human being.

Steve rolled his eyes. “We have class today.”

“So we really?” Peter cocked his head to the side nonchalantly.

“We’re sorry, Captain. The training room was empty again, so we assumed that classes for the day were suspended or something,” Jessica added, looking horrified. “We were the only ones here. Bruce went to do some yoga meditation. Janet and Tony never showed.”

“You mean Stark?” Steve confirmed, furrowing his eyebrows together. Jessica and Peter gave him a ‘well duh’ face like he was stupid. Maybe he was compared to their ability to process information. He was a soldier, first and foremost. As long as he could lead his friends back to HQ all in one piece, that would be enough for him.

“Okay…” he said gruffly. It would be useless to force the two to practice drill sets as scheduled. They were good, nimble fighters with enhanced bones and super strength. They would be able to handle themselves in a fight. “How about I call Clint and he can teach you more tricks on the wire?”

Peter and Jessica were ecstatic. “Really? Cool!”

Steve took out his communicator and messaged Clint before walking out of the training room. A whole semester and Tony’s on first name basis with practically everyone. It could be his upbringing and all the parties he went to as a child, or it could be his natural charisma. Either way, he had other students eating out of his palm, and he was a rookie—a rookie who skipped his training.

Tony Stark was wreaking havoc on the carefully placed system that the Academy put in place, and Steve wanted none of it.

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Steve did not go to that party on Friday, but he did go to one on Halloween.

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It was a dark night, making Club A’s light shine even brighter than usual. As the only bar-slash-club within the campus area, it was the default location for any sort of social gathering, not that recreational drinking happened on a normal basis. For the most part, Club A catered to the battered youth, hell-bent on drinking a week worth of training away. Friday saw a change at its facade—swapping out austere tungsten lights into multi-colored balls. The songs were different too; a DJ booth was set up near the stage with Victor with EDM.
Some students crowded the dance floor; some played billiards at the sides; and others lounged at the bar, nursing drinks. Natasha, dressed as a ballerina, commanded the bar with ruthless efficiency, doling out drink after drink to the club’s unsuspecting patrons. Her fruity colored cocktails should be called hard liquor. Most were more than happy to indulge. Even the older Avengers in Steve’s crew downed a couple of shots more than usual.

“Shots! Shots! Shots! Shots!” a group of poorly dressed-up students chanted. Carol, Jessica, Rhodey, Peter, and Sam surrounded a shit-faced Tony who simply smiled cordially at them all. Tony hiccupped over the row of shot glasses in front of him, courtesy of Natasha, in rainbow fashion with fruit slices and everything. “Shots! Shots! Shots! Shots!”

They had had pre-game drinks at Bruce’s dorm before they had even gotten here. They’d downed bottles of distilled coconut arrack, that packed quite a punch. The soft-spoken doctor drank like a monster, finishing most of the second bottle. Tony arrived with Bruce hanging off his shoulder while dragging his scuffed-up leather shoes on the pavement. It came to no surprise that his friend passed out on the couch of Cub A shortly after the lights went out. Poor thing didn’t even get to wear his costume!

Tony wrapped an arm around Janet good-naturedly and laughed. The flower leis around his neck tangled with the pearl necklace of her Audrey Hepburn costume. “No no,” he raised his hands in defeat. “I’ve got enough alcohol in my system. I can’t possibly drink anymore even if I wanted to!”

He’d been to college parties before. Heck, he’d been to so many that hed built up a tolerance for mixing and matching his beverages. Natasha’s mixes were hell on the stomach; Russian and Irish and German, all the best of Europe’s strongest flavors, that put American brands to shame. This was the first time he was around a group of students who could hold their liquor well without puking all over the place. It was refreshing to let loose.

“Shots! Shots! Shots! Shots!” They all yelled as Sam slowly became hammered. He collapsed on the floor in spectacular fashion, causing a flurry of camera flashes and giggles from his drunken peers. The prop knife on his head jolted off. He lay face down on the grimy alcohol-soaked floor and looked like he would be comatose until the end of the school year.

Rhodey had to remove his fireman’s helmet before coming to his friend’s aid. “Second casualty of the night!” he yelled, lifting Sam in a fireman’s carry to the nearest vacant couch and dropping him like a sack of potatoes. They laughed. He shrugged, patting Sam on his way back. “He deserves it. He’s lucky I ain’t got no permanent marker here, or he’d suffer worse.”

“I have lipstick!” Janet offered bravely. Like a bunch of adolescent teens, they proceeded to ‘make up’ his face in the raunchiest way possible and took photos for blackmail purposes.

Clint, however, had his sights set somewhere else. “Captain, our Captain! If it isn’t the great Captain America gracing us with his presence!” he hollered in perfect character as a pirate, voice traveling a great distance despite the blaring music. The attention shifted from the bar to the front door. Steve strode in wearing a dark blue plaid shirt, dark denims, and a well-worn brown leather jacket. All eyes followed him like glue, especially a set of dark-brown eyes framed by impossibly long lashes.

Clint swung from the chandeliers with his acrobatic glory, red-faced and piss-ass drunk. It was a wonder that he didn’t fall and break his neck. He landed in front of Steve with a flourish and a bow before he immediately swung an arm over the taller boy’s shoulder.

“What’s up, what’s great, what’s cooking, oh great captain of ours? Did you finally decide to get that stick out of your ass and have a little fun?” he slurred drunkenly with a grin, and the other boy
simply rolled his eyes and twisted out his grasp.

“You smell rancid,” Steve deadpanned. He’d kept it simple and went as Marty McFly. All eyes focused on him, but he only saw one set of brown, browns that he intended on keeping. He dropped Clint off to an empty chair and made his way through the parted crowd, eyes locked with a pair of chocolate browns that had haunted him since the day of the entrance ceremony. He could see how tersely Stark held himself. For a moment, everyone thought they’d be witnessing a fist-fight.

Steve surprised them all by changing his footing at the last second. He swiped a shot glass from the bar and downed it with a single gulp. The glass clattered on the mahogany-polished surface when he put it down. Flirty pink liquid burned down his throat, but he forced himself not to choke. “No wonder more than half the room is drunk. This tastes like battery fluid dressed in a pretty little cocktail dress!”

From behind the bar, Natasha snorted. “I aim to please.”

“Rogers,” Tony addressed him, seemingly sobering up. He pried his arm off Janet and seemed to rock on the balls of his feet. His gaze was intense but hazy, cheeks reddened by the alcohol, and five o’clock shadow more prominent. He stood a few inches shorter than Steve but raised his head and stared at the blond straight in the eye with sheer determination. “Fancy seeing you here.” Tony shrugged. “Doesn’t look like your type of thing.”

“It’s not,”,” Steve replied blankly. Behind him, the flock of students ‘ooh-ed’ like a bunch of high-schoolers. He spared a glance at Jessica and Carol, one, a Ravenclaw, and the other, Galinda. Bucky came forth from the crowd and stared at him in shock, salsa hat dripping onto his poncho. “But, like Clint said. I can let loose once in a while.” He picked up another one of the shot glasses lined up on the table. It went down easier than the first. This time the cherry left a sweet aftertaste in his mouth.


“Whiskey,” Steve answered flatly. “Dry.” Two rows of fives immediately materialized by his elbow. Natasha filled the glasses with deadly efficiency, not spilling a single drop. He nodded his thanks to her and downed the first glass. It burned hotter than his first two drinks. Pure, warm whiskey travelled down his throat. People cheered.

Tony tapped the bar twice, then nodded. “Alright. If that’s all there is to it, I don’t see why we can’t continue the rest of the party!” he roared, raising and spilling half the contents of his shot glass to the floor. He turned to make his way back into the crowd. “What are you all waiting for? Let’s get back to the par-tay!” Then just like that, he was gone.

Steve sat on a stool, glaring at the spot where Tony disappeared. His eyes surveyed the room before landing on Sam, and he choked. “Is that Wilson?” He glanced at Natasha, seeking confirmation.

“Yep.”

“Huh,” Steve seemed incredulous. He snorted at the sight of his friend—a black man with grisly drawn make-up: golden eyelids, purple blush, and lipstick that made him look like a drag queen. “And who exactly supplied the make-up for that little… creative piece of art? I highly doubt it’s from you. You’re more a Moulin Rouge red than glossy Baby Peach.”
Natasha leaned on the newly wiped countertop. “Van Dyne, surprisingly.”

“Janet? As in Janet Van Dyne… used her make-up on Sam? That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve heard of. They aren’t even friends! Let alone in the same circle! Doesn’t she like… I don’t know, walk with the capital-B Bitches in the school?”

“Hey,” Natasha rolled her eyes and whacked him with a dirty rag. It hit him on the cheek. Steve yelped in protest. “Consider that a warning. You can’t say bad things about my friends. And does it really matter if she and Sam aren’t friend-friends? Aren’t you supposed to be all ‘camaraderie’ and ‘allies’ and ‘friendship’? Interacting on a non-combative field like and in an informal social setting should be a good sign for the initiative.”

Steve stared at her like she had grown two heads. “This whiskey might be stronger than I thought. You sounded non-conspiratory just then.”

She smirked. “Stranger things have happened. Seems like Stark’s accomplished in two months what you’ve been trying for the past year.” She cocked her head and pointed to the rowdy group of students dancing in the middle of the floor, all smiles and giggles and fun. In the middle was Tony with his arms raised above his head, trying to do some sort of robot dance that looked positively ridiculous.

“Two types of leaders, Cap: one who draws people together and one people are drawn to,” Natasha said cryptically before leaving the bar and pretending to have fun with the rest of the patrons. A true spy in nature; she seemed to be trying to fake it less this time.

The Club had a clear dome roof with let starlight enter. Bucky had left with Natasha half an hour ago, and the party was dwindling down. He observed the party from his seat at the bar, close enough to be part of the crowd but distant enough to play a casual observer.

People came together around Stark—whether it be from years of practice or natural charm, but he fit seamlessly across the different social groups and blended them all together. He did it so nonchalantly and with very little thought. Steve had tried with multiple drills, training, and practice sessions to get that sort of chemistry formed between the students in the Academy but had failed. Stark did it all with a lopsided grin and a sweat-drenched Hawaiian polo shirt.

Steve tipped back his head and gazed into the sky, searching for the North Star.

He didn’t notice a pair of brown eyes looking at him from a distance.

Tony might have been on the dance floor, but his sights were set somewhere else. He watched Steve out of the corner of his eyes, stealing glances when no one was looking, and taking peeks from beneath his lowered lashes. He could see every curve of forehead, nose, and jaw while Steve tipped his head back. The blond captivated Tony while he basked under the moonlight, with the dull glow of lights illuminating his profile from behind.

Steve Rogers was everything Howard wanted him to be—smart, obedient, and disciplined—and yet Tony was Tony. While everyone seemed to take a shine to him, the straight-faced tall, blond, and handsome man had brushed him off like any other student. Steve didn’t spare him a second glance, nor a second chance. He knew, deep down, that first impressions lasted, and his first impression on Steve wasn’t rainbows and butterflies.

Life suddenly became much worse because he found himself wanting the exact same thing.

***
Of course, nothing ever worked for Tony Stark. With his sights set on the boy sitting at the bar, he failed to notice the amount of alcohol entering his system. Tony was drunk, very drunk, but he kept drinking.

“Alright, that’s enough Stark.” Steve’s hand shot out when Tony reached the bar. He grabbed the arm trying to reach for another shot glass. Tony appeared worse for wear and drunk off his ass. He swayed with every step he took, and the rest of the students looked no better.

“What’sit’to’you, R’gers,” Tony slurred while trying to pull his hand away. “M’fine. Get’er off! Just ‘noth’r one c’mon!”

Victor, who had long retreated from his DJ duties, took over manning the bar. He gave Tony a pitying look, and Steve a begging one. “Captain,” he addressed the blond, “I believe it is in Mr. Stark’s best interests that he be parted from this atmosphere at this point in time. Based on normal blood alcohol levels and his consumption over the past four hours, I deduce that he might be intolerably drunk.”

Steve was torn between laughter and embarrassment. One, he always knew Victor, aka a.k.a. Vision, had a weird way of speaking, and two, it didn’t take a genius to discern Tony’s state of mind. Tony practically tripped on his own two feet just to get to the bar. All the heavy-weight drinkers already had their own designated light-weight to cater to for the night: Natasha and Bucky, Sam and Rhodey, Jessica and Peter, Carol and Janet, and Clint was passed out on top of the chandelier.

“Can’t you take him?” he asked Victor with a shrug, but the other boy shook his head. “I was ordered by Prof. Coulson to see to Mr. Barton’s care. He should be here within the hour. I believe that it is optimal that you take Mr. Stark back to his dorm room for tonight, Captain. I will also see to it that the rest of the students are properly escorted back to their own sleeping quarters.” Victor may have had a blank expression but his tone was smug.

The blond really didn’t have much of a choice.

“Quit talkin’ like I’m not ‘ere!” Tony demanded like a petulant child. “Vicky! Need ‘nother ‘ne! C’mon, pleeezee-uh!”

Steve shook his head chastisingly. “Stark,” he spoke softly, as if speaking to a child. He’d had experience dealing with drunks on more than one occasion back home. It was best to implant ideas in their brains rather than forcing orders on them. He waited until Tony’s brown eyes blinked wearily at him. “Hey, kid, d’you wanna go outside to walk it off? Fresh air will do you good.”

Tony was irritable. “No! Wanna stay ‘ere! Is nice an’ warm! Too col’ out!”

“Come on, Stark.” Steve gritted his teeth, pulling the boy away from the counter. “The sooner we go, the sooner you can be warm again.”

“No!” Tony screamed in protest, body shaking—whether it was from the cold or something else as they stepped outside, Steve did not know. He started with plan B. Ripping his jacket off himself, unknot caring that it smelled of grime and alcohol, hehe wove it around Tony’s shivering form, arms braced for added support, insistent on waiting it out. It took ages for Tony to finally calm in his arms.

“Stark?”

“Tony,” the brunette whispered quietly. One of his hands came up to brush Steve’s cheek gently.
“Why don’t you ever call me Tony, huh, Steve? My name’s Tony. I ain’t just a Stark.”

The words took Steve aback. He stared at the youth in his arms. Tony—brash, loud, and jubilant Tony—looked completely sullen. Tony, who had commandeered the Club with his stories and his jokes, who brought two very different crowds together, whose brilliance shone brighter than the stars, looked like a lost child with those big round brown eyes staring up at him. All his words left him. Then, as if on cue, the wind picked up, bringing a forth a freezing breeze.

“Let’s get you back to the dorms,” he said, deciding that it was for the best. Tony slumped to his side, forcing him to bear the brunt of the brunette’s drunk-dead weight. He weighed more than Steve expected, and their pace back to the dorms was slow. So distracted by the heat pouring from the other man, Steve hadn’t realized their problem until they were inside. He had no idea which room was Tony’s.

“Hey,” he muttered under his breath, trying to shake the brunette. “Hey, which floor are you on?”

Every room, every dorm, every building in the Academy was guarded with security locks that would make the Pentagon weep and the President look envious. Students received key cards, coupled with their identification chips, which would allow them entry to different buildings based on their security clearance. Dorms were separated according to gender and only Coulson as the Admin-in-charge of the grounds had the master list of tenants.

“Tony,” Steve nudged the sleeping man on his arm. “Which floor?”

“Floor?” The shorter boy blinked hazily at him.

“What floor is your room on?” He pressed Tony against the wall if only to help him support the other man’s weight. Like this, Tony was exposed to him—open, and pliant, and wrong. Steve shook his head. Tony’s warm body emanated heat from under his clothes, seeping through the fabric, a phantom hand reaching to him. But the glaze in those brown eyes told him the truth. This wasn’t Tony at all.

“Tony,” he urged again, pressing the lithe shoulders to the concrete wall. His voice dropped low. “Floor.”

Tony’s head lulled to the side. “Wa’et. Pock’t.” He leaned against the wall as much as he leaned against Steve, arms draping around the taller boy’s broad shoulders and bangs tickling Steve’s chin. He had a dopey smile on his face when he stared at his caretaker for the night. “Yer nice,” he slurred, patting Steve wetly on the chin. “How come ‘er not nic’r to ‘e bef’ore?”

Steve looked down at Tony. The brunette smelled of alcohol and bar snacks, grease and metal, and some kind of cologne that drove his senses wild. Previously spiky hair drooped down limply on Tony’s boyish face. He looked so innocent leaning against the wall for support. His lips parted when he talked, pink and wet and—Steve shook his head to dislodge the dirty thoughts. It would do him no good to venture to that territory.

Shifting the teen in his arms, he patted Tony’s back pockets, but they were empty. He cursed. “Tony, your pockets are empty.” He tried to shake the boy awake but to no avail. He tried again. "Tony! Your wallet isn’t here! Where did you last see it!? Tony?”

The shorter boy mumbled something incoherently but it was of no help at all. Sighing, Steve debated his options. He could either wait for Coulson to return with Clint in tow—which would be embarrassing for several reasons and probably not likely to happen tonight—or he could take Tony up to his rooms. It would more responsible than just leaving Tony out in the middle of the hallway
to fend for himself. There was no telling who would come next given the crowd they left at the club.

“Fine,” he groused, hefting Tony more securely on his shoulder. “I swear to the Lord, Tony, that tomorrow we are having words.”

***

Those words never came.

***

Tony remembered absolutely nothing past the seventy-second shot. Yes, he counted shots, but he could not count the alcohol administered via funnel-and-tube or the direct-to-mouth approach. He ended up far more wasted than he had initially planned. He hadn’t expected a bunch of military training kids to love their liquor, nor did he expect Natasha’s drinks to be so strong. Bruce turned out to be luckier than they expected. At least he got out before the real drinking began.

Memories from earlier came back to Tony in fragments. The stale taste in his mouth reminded him of alcohol, the pounding headache threatening to crack his skull reminded him of alcohol, and the rancid smell of liquor reminded him of—take a guess—alcohol. He had no recollection of getting back home.

“Jesus fuck,” he pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes before opening his eyes. Stars—the first thing he saw were constellations staring down at him in the dark room. It took him longer to recognize the sunroof above his head. It, ironically, showed him the night sky. No moon tonight, and the stars’ position told him it was just before twilight.

Alcohol still jumbled his brain. The fact that it wasn’t his room didn’t register. He hummed Black Sabbath under him breath and idly traced the star patterns one by one, naming each one as he did. He liked this: the slow buzz that remained in his system, the peace and quiet of the room, and the freedom to just be himself. Right now, he didn’t have to pretend to be anyone. He could just be the boy who liked stars.

“Aguila… Sagitta… Vulpecula… Cygous… Lyra…”

“Draco” a voice cut in. Tony smiled lazily at his new companion, uncaring for the weight beside him nor the body pressed to his. He saw a flash of golden blond in the corner of his eye but paid it no heed. A hand joined his in tracing constellations. Together, he and his unknown bedmate traced in a trance—naming the constellations. The hand was bigger, paler, and thicker than his own.

“Cepheus… Lacerta… Andromeda… Cassiopeia… Camelopardalis… Capella…”

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At some point, Tony thought how nice it would be for those hands to stroke his hair.

They did.

It must have been a dream.

***

Tony woke up alone in just his boxers, under the same circumstance as earlier that morning. The room was the same except the beautiful starlit sky now had motherfucking sunlight blinding his
eyes. He cursed Mother Nature for being so bright and the sun for being so high. It must be noon, or sometime near it. With a groan, he turned to his side and surveyed the room.

Nothing stood out to him about his haven, nor about his knight in shining armor. He might as well have been sent to an empty dorm room. He recognized the same bland furniture he’d had when he first arrived—no trinkets, no pictures, no anything save for the perfectly lined-up textbooks that every student had—except for the large wall-to-wall maps of constellations tacked to the walls. He idly traced air patterns in front of his face. An overwhelming sense of déjà vu washed over him.

Something felt weird about that, as if it was a memory he’d forgotten. Last night was still a blur. Tony stood up and spotted his things by the desk. Clothes were neatly folded on the chair and the rest of his things were at the top of the pile. He breathed in a sigh of relief when he saw his wallet. His ID and key cards were inside. He needed those to get back to his room. His mobile was missing though. He had probably left it in the club.

It took him less than ten minutes to get dressed, unsure if he should leave a note. He had no clue what had happened last night. He didn’t know the protocol for commandeering someone’s dorm room piss-ass drunk. He ran fingers through his hair in frustration. With a sigh, he plucked a pencil from the holder and scribbled a thank you note on the pad. It wasn’t until the autolock engaged on the door when he realized that he hadn’t signed his name. Then again, how many drunk dudes can a guy save in one night? Last time he checked, he wasn’t sharing the bed.

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There were nights when he dreamed of the big pale hand stroking his head.

***

Fall semester came with much-needed change. Tony took firearms training with Rhodey, non-traditional weapons training with Clint, flight simulations with Sam, counterintelligence with Carol, foreign languages with Jessica, atomic physics with Bruce, advanced bio-genetics with Peter, advanced computer science with Vision, and buttloads of classes with Janet. He met a thick-accented Thor in his nanotechnology class and Thor’s slinky adoptive brother in the chemistry lab. Amora, bless the holy angels, was in his yoga class along with Steve Rogers.

(Sometimes, he didn’t know whose ass he should ogle first.)

He may have more classes, but he also spent more time in the lab. Most nights, he slaved away at Stark Tower.

Every third Saturday of the month was reserved for Academy-wide team building activities. They were separated at random into designated numbers and sent out to do quests all over campus. As the winner of last week’s geocache adventure, Tony’s team with Carol and Thor got to select the game for the week. They chose Battle of the Airbands, which Tony dubbed as lip-and-instrument-syncing. It was a play on Jimmy Fallon’s Lipsync Battle except there were multiple singers and different instruments. All but Tony’s team were reshuffled into different teams of three. Bucky did not join because he had been injured the week before.

The trio of the week lip-synced You Give Love a Bad Name by Bon Jovi. Carol embodied the title singer-guitarist, Thor embraced the base guitarist with pride, and Tony embodied their lead guitarist. Carol’s fake guitar was thrown into the crowd at the first two lines, Thor hair-flipped his way through the adlibs, and Tony gave a spectacular knee-sliding performance with a guitar solo. Each member sang different lines in the verses and joined together for the choruses, all in sport with big mouths, exaggerated tongue movements, and screaming fake-outs.
Bruce, Rhodey, and Peter gave a somewhat awkward performance of *I Want It That Way* by the Backstreet Boys. It just didn't fit soft-spoken Bruce, straight-faced Rhodey, and show-it-all Peter. They were off at the kilter and it carried over to the rest of their performance. Peter saved the show by just putting everything out there for the rest of his comrades to follow. At the end, though, everyone clapped their hands in good sport as the trio exited the stage.

The title song for the 2006 movie *Dreamgirls* was performed in perfect synchronized fashion by Natasha, Janet, and Amora. Wolf-whistles echoed in the crowd when the curtains opened. They copied everything, from the costume to the choreography and of course the song. Everyone expected Janet to take the lead role of Beyoncé. It showcased her true talent as a spy that all of it felt natural to the normally stoic-faced female.

Fourth to perform were Clint, Victor, and Sam, who did a rendition of *One More Day* from Les Miserables. It was, by far, the most difficult performance, with six different songs being played. They dressed up as characters: Sam as Valjean, Victor as Javert, and Clint as Eponine, complete with the chest-binding action despite being flat-chested. The all-male trio belted out falsettos that were on-key but hilarious nonetheless, ending with the French revolutionary flag being waved around by Sam.

“We did *not* need your chest action, Barton!” Tony bellowed from the crowd after whistling. Clint flipped him the bird as he slid off the stage. Everyone still wore their stage costumes while they sat in chairs to wait for the next performance. “Bite me,” Tony taunted back with a loud clicking sound from his teeth. The crowd laughed at the exchange. “Alright who’s next? One more right?”

“Cap’s team is next!” Peter said excitedly, and on cue the lights of the stage dimmed once more. Clint’s team settled on their seats, as did Tony.

The sound of applause playing on the speakers caught their attention, rhythmic and supplying the beat. Pyrotechnics erupted from either side of the stage. Jessica walked out in a golden body-hugging see-through jumpsuit singing the first lines of *Bang Bang* by Jesse J. The audience roared in applause. Several shocked faces dropped their jaws at the song choice.

“No shit.” Sam fell of his chair, trying to follow the girl’s booty shaking. “Damn gurl, you fine.”

For that, Jessica winked at him.

“I do not understand,” Thor mumbled beside Tony. “Why is everyone reacting so rowdily? Are they not accustomed to a female’s commanding display of her body?”

“No, Thor,” Carol answered mid-whistle. “It’s because the song was sung by an all-female trio and Jessica’s the only girl in the final group.”

“I understand, but my brother is slender enough to portray a female. You recall Halloween, right?” For Halloween had, Loki dressed as Princess Elsa from Frozen and bullied Thor into dressing up as Anna. It had put everyone in fits of giggles. Still, Thor did not understand the current reaction from his peers.

“Your brother might.” Tony laughed, patting the taller blond roughly on the shoulder. “But Cap? No way. He isn’t built for dainty skits and halter tops. Have you seen him? He doesn’t have the hair for it!”

Then, on cue, a spotlight beamed open right beside them. The motherfucker, Tony thought, Steve must have been a stealth agent or something because they *did not* hear him get ready in the center
Steve Rogers wore *heels* and a golden two-piece reminiscent of Arianne’s costume for the 2014 VMAs. He even had her black chair! Then, yes, their fearless leader showed exactly how fearless he could be. He lifted a golden stiletto-clad foot into the air and yes, he followed her steps on stage too and then some. He jiggled his ass to the crowd, rendering all the boys speechless.

The girls, however, cat-called like it was Channing Tatum up on stage dancing Magic Mike sets. Janet magicked her wallet from her Dreamgirls dress and pulled out a wad of hundreds. Natasha had her phone out, recording. Carol mirrored her on the other side of Steve. Jessica and Amora had literal hearts in their eyes and were eyeing Steve like a piece of man-meat.

“Holy fuck,” Tony groaned, staring at the way the leopard and gold mini-shorts hugged Steve’s ass. “When I said ‘let loose’, I did not mean like this. Jesus, Rogers is hot.” He didn’t notice Clint’s camera phone pulled out and recording him instead of the performance. He clapped his hands and catcalled with the ladies while Steve made his way to the stage.

Loki appeared from backstage. He rapped like he was a black woman, or at least he lip-sung like one. He waved his booty, jiggled his stuff, and was that a split? Loki ground against the air, rolling his hips, arching his back, and thrusting his ass back. The song ended with all three performers on stage, hands in the air and panting. Everybody clapped!

Steve gave the crowd a flourished bow.

Tony, unable to hold his brain-to-mouth filter, shouted as loud as he could. “Turn around and wave your ass, Captain!” Which ended up echoing through the concert hall and Steve with a dark red blush on his cheeks. “Oh shit!” Tony realized too late and Steve’s eyes were trained on him. He let out an indignant squeak and hid behind Thor’s tall frame, cursing. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

***

After Steve’s team won the prize for the week, everybody went to Club A for some after-party drinking. It was relatively tame compared to Tony’s welcoming party at the start of the school year. Clint, Peter, and Victor manned the bar and served drinks that were substantially less life-threatening than Natasha’s. Yet still, Tony managed to get drunk off his ass in less than an hour, having embarrassed himself with his big crass mouth at the end of the activity. He hadn’t meant to say it out loud. It just sort of came out.

“Friend Tony,” Thor’s boomed voice in unmodulated loudness, “Are we not feasting with tonight’s celebrations? What cause for your somber mood?”

Tony groaned. As much as he liked the big guy’s happy attitude, he did not care for his worries to be announced to the room at large. “It’s nothing, Thor. I guess the preparations for the Battle of the Airbands wore me out a bit. And Clint’s drinks—” he shot the archer a glare, who flipped him a backhanded bird, “—taste like piss.”

“Clint has been giving you piss?” Thor sounded offended for Tony. “That is an insult!”

The brunette raised his hands in the air. “No, no. It’s just.” He sighed, “I’m good, Thor. I swear. I’m just tired. Clint hasn’t been feeding me piss. His drinks are great, actually, but don’t let him hear you say that. His ego’s going to get over-inflated again.”

Satisfied, Thor nodded once before going back to the crowd.
“Something wrong, Stark?” a new voice said from beside him. Tony turned around, intent on brushing off his new companion, but was stunned to see Steve sliding onto the bar stool beside him.

The blond shrugged. “I heard you weren’t feeling so bright.” His cheeks flushed and he rubbed the back of his head self-consciously. “Thor isn’t the stealthiest of friends. He means well though.”

“Yes? Well, no shit, Sherlock.” Tony choked on his own laughter. Then, pulling every ounce of courage he had, which was little to none, he waggled his eyebrows at Steve. “You know all about stealth, don’t you, Captain? I was in the aisle seat and I didn’t hear you come in!”

Steve let out an embarrassed laugh. “Thank you, uhm…”

Around them, Jessica’s dance party music played from the speakers plugged to her mobile. Several people grinded on the dance floor, and Bruce seemed to be in an intimate conversation with a scientist from his lab class. Everyone looked like they were having fun except for Tony, who had a constipated look on his face.

“Hey,” Steve said softly, moving to touch Tony’s elbows but backed away at the last second. “D’you wanna… I don’t know… get some fresh air?”

Tony stared at him as if he’d grown two heads.

Steve sighed. “Look, I know we aren’t on best terms but I can see when someone needs to be pulled out of a situation. You look like you’re ready to pass out again. Maybe a walk outside will do you some good? Come on, Tony, it’s just me.”

It was the first time Tony heard Steve call him by his first name. He gulped. “Oh—okay.”

They made their way out of the club, Tony following Steve. The night was clear. Very few lights were left on at this time. Stars shone brightly against the pitch-black sky. A breeze brought cool fresh air to the pair, a far cry from the warm stagnant air inside. Tony felt himself relax instantly. The club’s music thrummed dully in the background as they walked away aimlessly. Without thinking, he raised his hands over his head and traced the stars.

“Perseus,” he said, drawing an imaginary line from Mirphak to Algol. “Son of Danae, conqueror of Medusa. He went on to Cepheus, whose daughter Andromeda—,” he lifted his hand overhead to make a line from Almaak to Alpheratz, the main line of the constellation, “—who was to be sacrificed to a sea monster.”

“Cetus,” Steve wrapped his hand around Tony’s wrist and guided their hands to the proper location of the constellation. Tony jerked his head up in surprise but Steve continued undeterred. “How about a hero story, hmm?” he asked, voice full of open wonder. He used Tony’s finger to trace the next two constellations. “How about Hercules and Pegasus?”

“Hercules’ true story is sad too,” Tony whispered. “He killed his wife and kids.”

Behind him, Steve was solid warmth. Tony could smell the sweat and the cologne the other boy used, flooding his senses. Steve smelled like heaven on earth, like all-American pride; like a home he had never had. With a jerk, he pulled away.

“Tony? I’m sorry.” Steve looked like someone kicked his puppy. “Did I make you uncomfortable?”

“No—no, I—I just…” Tony carded his hands through his hair. He felt a sudden chill now that
Steve was a few paces away. An irrational part of him wanted to go back into those burly arms and take all the warmth he could get, but he stayed right where he stood. Steve kept his distance, not daring to move.

Life was unfair. Over the past few months, Rogers had lightened up gradually until he became ‘Steve’ somewhere along the way. He was their leader and their friend. While on most occasions, he tended to stick with his military-inclined crew, he spoke less rigidly and became open to a lot more of the other student’s suggestions over the semester.

“Tony, are you alright?” The question pulled Tony out of his thoughts.

“I’m just surprised,” he confessed. His hands wove into his hair and fisted; the twinge of the pull grounded him. He chortled at Steve’s quizzical expression. “I didn’t expect you to be a stars kinda guy. Training or something like that?”

“Something like that,” Steve acquiesced, “My father taught me to navigate by the stars. To find my way back home. Interest grew as I got older. You?”

There was a bench not too far away and Tony slumped onto it, sliding until he lay flat on his back. He reached out for the stars. “I taught myself,” he told Steve, still picking at the patterns on the night sky. “It was… something of a pastime.”

To his surprise, Steve lay down on the ground beside him even if the dirt was cold to the touch and he wore only a thin shirt.

Silence fell over them.

For a long time, they allowed it.

They traced patterns in the sky, making some up as they went.

“This reminds me of my first party here,” Tony hummed, less buzzed but still loose-tongued. His legs swung childishly over the edge of the bench, hands placed on his stomach, and eyes looking at Steve’s hands drawing pictures. He felt déjà vu overcome him. “I woke up in a room with a sunroof over the bed. I was drunk. The guy who rescued me, and I know it was a guy cause of his hands, did the exact same thing. It was… it was nice.”

Beside him, Steve dry-swallowed. “Nice?”

“Yeah…” Tony muttered. His eyes grew heavy but he wanted to keep talking. “He had a big warm hand just like yours and we traced constellations just like this.” He showed Steve how he and his mystery knight drew imaginary lines. “Aquila… Cygnus… Lyra…”

“Altair… Deneb… Vega…” Steve echoed with the name of each constellation’s brightest star. They stayed like that, for the most part, until Tony broke the silence.

“Don’t you wish it was easy? To be carefree just like them?”

Steve turned his gaze towards Tony; the shorter boy stared at the sky like it had all the answers. He
didn’t know what to say. He was surprised that Tony didn’t remember him. Then again, the boy had been piss-as-fuck drunk when he brought Tony into his room. He left early with the intention of bringing breakfast, but a long line at the on-campus coffee shop stalled him. That day, everyone who brought somebody home seemed to have the same idea of buying breakfast. Tony didn’t stay. He didn’t think Tony wanted to stay.

Now, Tony told him otherwise. His affection when he spoke of the mystery guy made butterflies flutter their wings inside Steve’s stomach. He sounded so fond, and a bit infatuated. An illogical part of Steve’s brain grew jealous of himself when he heard Tony talk about him.

“Tony, I…” He wanted to open his mouth and say it was him but all his courage seemed to evade him. He couldn’t do it. Instead, he cowardly closed his mouth and watched Tony fall asleep. He nudged the other boy with his finger. “Hey, don’t sleep out here. You’ll catch a cold. Why don’t we go back to the dorm?”

Instead of answering, Tony merely lifted his hands in a silent request to be carried, and Steve was powerless to deny him.

He carried Tony, one arm under the boy’s knees and the other under his back, to the dorms. Bucky was having a smoke in front of the building. Steve glared.

“You aren’t supposed to smoke on campus.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “You’re supposed to bring them home awake, then sleep with them,” he shot back with a smirk. He eyed Steve’s cargo carefully before realizing who it was. “That’s Stark! What the hell are you doing carrying him around? I thought you hated his guts?”

“I don’t!” Steve hissed under his breath, trying not to wake Tony.

“Fathers and coattails ringing any bells, Stevie?”

Steve clenched his jaw. The words stung, months after he uttered them. He’d been wrong. Over the past months, he realized exactly how wrong he’d been. Tony didn’t get into the Avenger’s Academy because of his father; quite the contrary, SHIELD recruited him under Director Fury’s direct recommendation—an honor that was reserved for very few. He knew of only four others—Clint, Natasha, Bruce, and Thor—and the rest came from various others.

He saw how Tony worked on equipment like it was his bread and butter. Multiple times he caught the brunette sneaking into the labs to tinker with their weapons, constantly improving them and making them better. He wanted to be better than the best. He pushed himself to the limit, and at times his health suffered for it.

Tony might have worked hard on his subjects but he excelled far more at his craft. It did not take long for Steve to realize exactly why Fury wanted to recruit the guy. The kid was a genius. He expressed himself best with his inventions, with his gadgets, with the way he took such care of equipment as if each and every single piece ensured someone’s life. In many ways, it did.

The first time Steve caught Tony after one of the engineer’s work-binge nights, the brunette looked worse than death. He was frigid and white and motionless. Steve found him and took him to the infirmary, where the medical staff hooked him up with IV fluids and pumped vitamins into his system. He couldn’t stay all day but he put in the paperwork for a small pantry to be installed near the labs.

“I was wrong,” Steve admitted to his friend quietly. “Buck, I… I don’t know what to do. I…”
“You like him,” Bucky surmised, smirk returning. Steve blushed and nodded. “Everyone knows, Captain Obvious. It doesn’t take a genius to figure it out. You’ve changed, Stevie. You smile more now than you did before. I would know. We’ve known each other since we were tykes. Sarah and Joseph would love him, you know? Have you told him?”

Steve shook his head. “I… I can’t. He doesn’t see me the same way. I’ll lose him.” In his arms, Tony stirred. He shifted to rub his cold nose against Steve’s jaw, seeking warmth. Steve gave Tony a pleasing look. “Can you open the door? I’ve got to get him inside.”

Bucky put out the cigarette with the heel of his boot. “Stevie, Stevie, Stevie, where’s that famous courage of yours now? Do I have to remind you about what happened with Peggy?”

“She was different.”

“I know. You wouldn’t have followed her to England. But Stark?” Bucky snorted to himself. He unlocked the door and graciously held it open. “I think you’d go to the ends of the Earth for him, strike up a war, siege heaven itself. That pathetic puppy dog face doesn’t suit you, Stevie. You should stop bottling your courage and tell him. I don’t think he’ll be opposed to it.”

Steve smiled sadly and did not take Tony to his room. Instead he brought Tony to Tony’s room, expertly pulled the wallet from Tony’s back pocket, and tucked the shorter boy into bed. He allowed himself a single touch, a caress to brush back the stray bangs from Tony’s head, before leaving.

***

That night, Tony dreamed of big hands and a warm body sleeping beside him.

When he woke up, the first thing he thought of was Steve as he rubbed one out.

***

Christmas came early. No, seriously, Christmas came early for the students of Avengers Academy. Instead of the 23rd, Autumn classes ended a week early. The last final exam ended at four o’clock on the 16th, and students were allowed to leave campus the following day. Everyone eagerly packed their things for Christmas vacation spent at home. Only a handful normally stayed—mainly Clint and Natasha. Clint’s brother was AWOL from the FBI, and Natasha was a Russian orphan.

This year, Bucky offered to host her while Coulson saw to Clint. His parents, George and Winifred Barnes, picked the pair up. George stayed in the car. Winifred crushed Bucky in an embarrassing bear hug and took an immediate shine to Natasha. Janet was somehow there to take photographic blackmail evidence.

Steve waved his friend off and promised to visit over the holidays. They were Brooklyn boys and lived only a few blocks apart. Normally, he’d join them for the trip home since Sarah’s work schedule was ever erratic and Joseph still had lessons. This time, however, they wouldn’t be able to fit in the car so he opted to take his motorbike instead. He loved the open road and he rarely got a chance to ride. He was in the middle of packing his rucksack when Tony chanced upon him in the garage.

“Hey, Cap, whatcha’ doin’?”

Only Steve’s training saved him from startling back with a shrill. “T—Tony! I was just setting out
for home. What are you still doing here? Shouldn’t you be going home too?”

Tony laughed uneasily. “Yeah… about that… I called up Jarvis, our butler, and turns out that my parents won’t be home until the 23rd. So… I’m kinda planning on sleeping in the dorms for the rest of the week until they come and get me. I live in Malibu, and the family jet is still in Southeast Asia or something.”

“Can’t you fly commercial?”

“Yeah… No.” He did the awkward laughing thing again. “Dad’s still kinda pissed that I slipped boarding school. He doesn’t really know I’m here… so… I can’t go home yet.”

Steve frowned. “You’re staying here…” he repeated blankly, “Right here, on campus, all alone?”

“I won’t be alone!” Tony argued, arms crossing over his chest. “Clint’s staying, isn’t he? I mean M-I-A brother and all that. He should be happy that I can keep him company.” The grin on his face looked all too face, and Steve knew the brunette failed corporate espionage because lying wasn’t a strong suit—at least not to him.

“Tony,” he said carefully as if talking to a child. “Clint’s going home with Coulson for the holidays.”

“You mean “Professor Coulson” Coulson? Like master of blending-in, scares you shitless when you least expect it and knows absolutely every fucking thing that happens on campus Professor Coulson? Or just a random chick with the same last name?” Tony gagged and Steve merely nodded. “Jesus! Going home for the holidays. Are they… like a… you know….”

Steve just nodded again.

“Oh god, I think I’m gonna puke.”

“I didn’t peg you as homophobic.”

“I’m not.” Tony uncurled from his knees. “It’s just… Coulson’s so… so… old.”

Steve snorted. “Age is just a number.”

“…and boring.”

“Oh, Clint would disagree.”

Tony choked on his own saliva, glaring at Steve. “You did not just go there!”

“I already did.” Steve, feeling smug, leaned against his bike and smirked. “And, oh, that sweet cherry ride over there? That’s his. He calls her Lola.” He kept his stoic face for a solid minute before bursting into laughter. Tony followed shortly. “I wasn’t kidding. That really is Coulson’s car.”

“And I bet he plays Britney on cassette,” Tony snorted, still unconvinced.

“That was one time, Stark.” Clint cut in, seemingly coming from nowhere. The archer wore thick winter clothes. He was carried a large duffel back over one shoulder and his bow and quiver on the other. He smiled brightly at them before lunging into the passenger’s seat. He dumped his stuff to the back and settled in comfortably. “Hey, girl, ready for daddy to take you for a spin?”
Before Tony could even react, Coulson strode in wearing jeans, which was something Tony had never seen before. The older man normally wore crisply pressed and expensive-looking suits, rain or shine. Now, he wore denims, a Henley, and a striped shirt. It felt like Tony had entered a bizarre-o form of Wonderland.

“Feet off the dash, Barton,” Coulson barked in that soft commanding voice before turning to Steve and Tony. “Captain Rogers. Stark,” he addressed them both. “I trust that you’ll both have good holidays. I apologize if this sounds rude, but Clint and I really must get going. My family is expecting us home for dinner.”

“That’s cool,” Tony muttered, still shocked.

But Steve took it in stride. “Have a good holiday, sir. You too, Barton.”

Coulson nodded once, and then slid into the driver’s seat. Lola purred into life. A flick of a switch and her tires folded out into goddamn rockets, lifting her off the ground. Tony watched, mouth agape as Coulson flew his damn car out of the parking lot and off into the horizon with Clint blaring some sort of classical music from her speakers.

“That did not just happen.”

Steve laughed. “I told you that I wasn’t lying.”

“No shit.”

Between discovering Clint and Coulson’s relationship and Coulson’s flying car, Tony was at a loss for words.

Steve, on the other hand, wrung his hands awkwardly. It was getting late and he had about a four-hour drive back to Brooklyn. His parents were waiting but he also did not want to leave Tony alone for the entire week. He too struggled for words.

“So uhm…”

“Yeah uhm…”

They spoke at the exact same time. Tony gave way.

“This is sudden but… do you maybe… I don’t know… maybe wanna stay with us? For the week? Ya know, just until you can get back home to Malibu… it won’t be much but yeah… mum’s a good baker and pops makes a mean burger…” Steve stammered, blushing brightly. “No pressure, no pressure… it’s not fancy or nothin’, just a little ol’ apartment in Brooklyn.”

Tony stared at him like he had stared at Coulson—open-mouthed and confused.

Steve reeled back. “You won’t have to! I swear! I just thought… maybe it’d be nice, ya know? Bucky’s off with Natasha, and we normally hang out for the holidays… and I…” All that was a bold-faced lie which he prayed Tony didn’t see through. “I really want you to come home with me.” Shit. That was it. He’d said it. There was no taking it back now. All he could do was wait for Tony to answer him.

Minutes dragged on for hours.

“Okay,” Tony replied, quieter than a mouse.
Steve almost didn’t hear it.

“Okay?” Steve looked up to see the boy’s red face. “You’re coming?”

“If… if it’s not too much of a bother… then yeah,” Tony smiled shyly. “I’d like that. Thank you, Steve. Will your parents be okay with that?”

“Of course!” Steve beamed, releasing a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

***

Perhaps a trip on the open-road with only a motorbike wasn’t such a good idea. The whole ride, Steve was distracted by the arms gripping his waist for dear life, the chest pressed against his back, and the way Tony’s breath puffed on the back of his neck. He might have ridden faster than usual just to feel those same lithe arms wrap around him tighter. They made it to Brooklyn in less than four hours.

***

The Rogers’ apartment was located a few blocks from St. George’s Hotel in Brooklyn Heights. Their neighborhood consisted of four-. Most of these buildings were built before prohibition, and a lot of their older tenants were gay couples from the 40’s and 50’s.

To say that Steve grew up in an open-minded community was an understatement. He used to go out and wave to the elderly couple in the apartment next door. Sometimes, he chanced upon one of them on a Sunday and helped bring their groceries up to the fourth floor. His parents raised him to be helpful, a trait he never grew out of.

Steve parked his vintage bike beside his dad’s car. He could feel Tony still vibrating from behind him. Tony’s arms were iron-clad around his waist, knuckles gripped white. He took off his helmet first, looping it around one of the handles before prying Tony off. He put the duffel bag between his legs on the ground first before dismounting, mourning the loss of Tony’s heat immediately.

“Tony,” he called out gently, waiting until Tony opened his eyes, and smiled. “Come on, ma’s gonna come down here yellin’ if we dun’ get up.”

From the seat, Tony hummed lazily. “Your accent’s thicker now. ‘is nice.” He made an annoyed little huff when he dismounted, legs jelly and stiff from the long drive.

Steve hid his blush by going behind the shorter man and unlatching the compartment. He pulled out their things, Tony’s things mostly. The rich kid had packed for a retreat rather than a week-long staycation in Brooklyn, one would think he prepared for the Bahamas or something with the hefty medium-sized trunk he’d packed. It took more than a heave and a ho to get it out.

“Did you pack your whole dorm room? Christ, Tony, this thing is heavy.”

Tony crossed his arms. “Of course I didn’t. You ambushed me with this, Steve. How was I supposed to know what to bring? Does your family do formal dinners? Are we going out? Are we staying in? Did I need outerwear?” He paused, realizing he was babbling and ducked his head. “I just… wanted to, you know… be prepared…”

Steve couldn’t help but smile affectionately. “Alright. Come on then, we dun’ want ma’s hissy fit to be yer first impressionn.”

Sarah Rogers flung her arms out wide the moment her son stepped over the threshold, unaware of
the second young man at their door. “Steven Grant Rogers, yer late, young man. What d’you have to say for ye’self?”

She gave Steve a bone-crushing hug, making the tall boy crouch uncomfortably to accommodate. It should have been comedic but it was endearing. Tony couldn’t help but smile at the display of motherly warmness, even if it was at Steve’s expense. He chuckled under his breath and waited for her to notice him.

“Ma,” Steve hugged her back. He lifted her up a few inches when he straightened to his full height. “It’s good to see you too. Pa’ home? I brought a friend for the holidays. I hope that’s fine.”

Sarah’s face twisted to a smile. “Ya know Bucky’s welcome anytime, Steven. Did he have trouble with his brother again?”

“It’s not Bucky, ma. He brought a girl home. Redhead. Will give Buck a run for his money.” Steve laughed and put his mother down before turning to Tony. “Ma, this here’s the friend I was talkin’ bout. The name’s Tony.” Then he rubbed the back of his head again. “Hope i’s a’right. He ain’t stayin’ ’til Christmas, just ’til the 23rd. I told ‘im he could stay with us first then I’ll take ‘im to the airport on the 23rd.” And God, did he sound awful to his own ears.

Tony grimaced in second-hand embarrassment. All the years of practice with high-rollers and big-shots flushed down the drain at the moment Sarah turned her full attention to him, a spitting older female image of Steve, blue eyes and all. “N—nice to meet you, uhm, uh, ma’am.”

Sarah squinted and tilted her head, studying both boys. “Dun yer m’am me, boy. It’s either ma or Sarah, got it? Steven ain’t bring no one that isn’t fam’ly. He ain’t gun’ start now.” She shot Steve a light-hearted glare at the end of the sentence. “Now, come ‘ere and give me a proper greetin’.” She gestured for Tony to come closer with her arms wide open. When Tony didn’t move, she said, “Or are ye too big to hug yer ma, now?”

With a squeak, and a not-so-subtle push from Steve, Tony fumbled his way into Sarah’s arms. It felt nice to be hugged, but he’d never admit that out loud. Sarah was much closer to his height than Steve, enabling Tony to brush his cheeks against her hair and put his chin on her shoulder. Her arms felt sturdy despite their slenderness and she smelled of home-cooked cherry pie. Steve watched the display with unbridled joy dancing in his eyes.

“Alright, Steven. Your pa’s is in the living room. Why don’t you go get him?” Steve opened his mouth to protest but Sarah shushed him with one look. “Relax, Steven. I won’t eat your friend. Tony here’ll just help me get dinner out, won’t you, sweetie?” Her tone made it impossible for either boy to hitch a complaint. Steve stomped into the living room and Tony followed Sarah into the kitchen.

The Rogers’ kitchen looked like a 40’s magazine with colorful stainless steel appliances and a yellow-green-black theme. Everything was well-used and well-loved, cared for by the attention of Sarah and her husband. Tony noticed the General Electric and the Frigidaire logos among the appliances. Cupboards were open, displaying the multicolored array of painted ceramic jars and an old toaster oven gathering dust. All of it—the décor, the appliances, the Sarah—felt like a classic TV skit come to life.

“Not fond of toast?” Tony said without thinking, stopping Sarah in her tracks. She followed his eyes to the old toaster and laughed.

“That old thing? No, no, Joseph just hasn’t gotten ‘round to fixin’ it yet.” Sarah ladled four bowls of chili, a plate of spinach, and pulled the remaining half loaf of bread from the pantry. Tony
helped her set the table, laying out yellow and white checkered place mats, white plates, and green mugs. He arranged the silverware like Jarvis did at home, fork and knife on the left and spoon on the right.

Steve and his father came into the kitchen. Joseph immediately extended a hand for Tony to shake before sitting down at the head of the table. Steve glanced down at the silverware and smiled.

“Did ma make you set the table?”

Tony ducked his head. “That obvious, huh?”

Steve laughed. He took the fork and knife, placing them on the right side of his plate. “Not that fancy here, Tony, but thank you. This is…” he stopped and observed the scene around him—he sat directly in front of his father, mother on his left, and Tony on his right, a bowl of chili in front of each person, a plate of spinach and soft bread in the middle of the table. “…it’s perfect. It’s good to be home.”

“Yeah,” Tony breathed out the breath he’d been keeping, surprising himself because it was—dinner was perfect. It wasn’t strained, not stiff nor serious like meals at Stark Manor. More often than not, he’d find himself sneaking out after dark to grab a proper meal in the kitchens. Dinners with Howard and Maria were formal and lacking conversation. At the Rogers’, however, conversation flowed smoothly as water.

“Steven says you’re a mechanic.” Joseph phrased his words like a question.

Tony wanted to blurt out ‘Engineer’, but it sounded too pompous even to his own ears. He nodded instead. “Yes, sir. Taking up engineering. I fix the—ouch.” He hissed when Steve kicked him from under the table. The blond shook his head minutely and Tony understood. “The knickknacks around campus for fun. I like uhm…” he thought back to Honda in the garage. “…cars?”

Joseph’s eyes brightened up. “What’s yer favorite then?”

“The ’67 Cobra, definitely,” Tony answered without missing a beat. “Dad brought one home from England, fully restored and beautiful. It’s got to be my favorite one from the sixties, even if it’s late sixties… uhm, sir.”

“I’m a Ford man myself. The ’64 Mustang, original red and black beauty. Just couldn’t afford it though with my pension and the missus’ salary. Plus, Steve-o here eats like a race horse since his growth spurt, haven’t you noticed?” Joseph laughed, patting Tony on the shoulder. “You’re alright, kid.” Then he turned to Steve. “You should learn from him, son. That blasted contraption of yours is a road hazard.”

“It was grandpop’s cycle, dad, and she still runs like a champ,”. “Steve shot back, eyes smiling.

The rest of dinner went on in a similar fashion. Sarah and Joseph took turns asking Tony questions like a TV gameshow. Tony flustered under the attention but refused to break under pressure. He answered each and every one with a flustered smile and a blush on his cheeks. In turn, the couple told Tony embarrassing stories about Steve’s childhood and his lanky skinny-boy self, much to the blond’s embarrassment. At the end of dinner, Steve offered to wash the dishes but his mother rebutted him immediately.

“You two boys get settled. I’d offer Tony the sofa but…” Sarah shot her son a knowing look. “He doesn’t seem the type to not sleep in a bed. The air mattress is busted so you two’ll have to share. Dun’ seem like it’ll be much of a problem. Just keep it down, okay? I’ve got an early shift.
Steve blushed. “I’m not! We’re not! I…” he stammered, looking at Tony with fifty shades of red on his cheeks, biting at his lower lip. “I’ll just sleep on the couch tonight. It’s… it’s no problem. Tony can get my bed for the night.”

However, Tony was having none of it. “Cap, that’s not fair. I can take the couch no problem,” he said, pulling on Steve’s arm. His eyes softened. “Really, you inviting me here is more than enough. You don’t deserve to get thrown out of bed too because I’m here. The couch is fine. I’ve slept in the workshop countless of times—”

“—and almost couldn’t make it class on time.” Steve frowned. “I’m taking the couch, Tony.”

“Fine,” Tony spat. “We’re sharing and that’s final!” Somewhere from the kitchen Sarah could be heard laughing while Joseph complained about ‘Stupid kids in stupid love with stupid heads in their stupid asses’ from the living room.

***

Steve’s room, unlike Steve’s dorm room, screamed ‘STEVE’ in big bold capital letters. It had pictures from his younger years—Steve in school, in baseball practice, and his high school graduation. A few pictures had Barnes in them and an unknown blonde girl smiling at the camera. Every other nook and cranny overflowed with artwork and art supplies, from charcoal to pastels to acrylics. Tony peered closer at the picture with the girl.

“Didn’t know you had a girl, Rogers,” he said, the words coming out more bitter than he intended. He hoped Steve hadn’t heard the inflection in his voice.

Steve let out an uneasy laugh. “No lass, Tony. Her name’s Peggy. She moved away after high school, went back to England with her family.”

Tony tried to suppress the jealousy in his gut. “Well, looks like you and me got something similar, ey Steve?” He forced out a fake laugh and dove head first onto Steve’s bed. “We got a thing for English beauties!”

Steve’s bed was covered in adorably faded blue sheets with different types of sports balls—basketballs, footballs, baseballs, soccer balls, and tennis balls—printed on them. It smelled of clean detergent and something that reminded him of Steve. The other boy’s scent must have woven into the pillows over the years of use.

“Yeah… Well, this is my room. It’s not much,” Steve mumbled from the door, “But yeah, this is home.”

Tony raised his head, seeing awkward Steve almost not fitting through the door frame, and said, “Steve, it’s perfect. It’s very…” unique, boyish, artistic? “…you. I like it. I was kind of expecting a porn stash or something underneath the covers but…” he felt around the bed and pulled something out. “Comic books? You’re a little geek, aren’t you?”

Steve felt his cheeks heat at the comment. He strode into the room with as much confidence as a mouse and tugged the comic out of Tony’s hand, careful not to fold or wrinkle the paper. “I was a kid, you know. Wasn’t born and bred to be in the military. Comics were a good way to just… forget the world when it became too shitty. Couldn’t really go stargazing in the middle of Brooklyn.”

Tony rolled over to his side, propping his head on the elbow. “So when exactly would that
‘stargazing thing’ be?”

“Summer, we’d go camping with Bucky and his dad.” Steve smiled at the memories. He took a seat on his desk chair, the old wood creaking under his weight. “We’d call it boys camping trip while my mom and Bucky’s mom spent a day at the salon. Actually, that’s a lie. We never actually cared what they did, but there would be freshly made pie and happy mothers when we came back. Sometimes we brought home freshwater trout.”

“That sounds like a lot of good memories, Steve,” Tony hummed, wishing he had the same childhood experiences to share but he didn’t. “You know what? I’ve never been camping. Like in the outdoors camping, camping. I’d stay outdoors with Jarvis in the gardens but that’s about it. Parents really didn’t let me out much apart from boarding school.” He didn’t realize when Steve had come closer.

“Hey, don’t look so sad.” Steve brushed a thumb over his cheek gently. “I haven’t gone in years. Whatcha’ say we go camping? It’ll take a few days, and we’ll need extra gear ’cause it’s winter, but I think we’ll do all right. How about it, Tony? I mean, there’s not much to do here anyway. Might as well do something that you haven’t done before. It’ll be fun!”

Tony rolled his eyes. “It’s got to be minus three degrees out there, Steve.” Heart beating a million miles an hour and blood thrumming in his ears, he pulled away from Steve’s intense gaze.

“Don’t be such a wuss, Tony. Have you seen the winter constellations yet? ‘Cause I haven’t. All I’ve seen are the summer stars. Come on, it’ll be an adventure!”

“Fine,” Tony grumped, turning around.

Steve prodded him at the back of his ribs.

“Aren’t you going to take a shower before bed?”

“I’ll take one tomorrow. I’m beat,” he lied, refusing to turn around. Footsteps faded away and the door clicked. He couldn’t let Steve see how much of an effect the taller boy had on him. The loud beating in his ears made it impossible to think clearly. Steve’s scent was everywhere, on the pillows, on the sheets, and even his clothes. He hadn’t wanted to admit that he wanted to keep it. He eventually flopped onto his stomach and drifted to sleep before he realized it.

That’s exactly how Steve came to Tony when he returned—Tony on his stomach, shirt rucked up to expose a sliver of his back and the elastics of his boxers, socks still on and drooling into his pillow. He looked younger in his sleep, like a boy at the cusp of youth instead of a college freshman. Sighing, he slipped into bed, trying and failing to refrain from bodily contact. The fact that it was a double made it no easier to fit two growing boys in bed.

***

Tony woke up in the middle of the night to something warm and solid around his waist.

***

Steve woke up with his boner pressed against Tony’s bottom. Sometime in the night, they’d reversed their positions, with Tony taking the space on the edge of the bed and Steve stuck to the wall. Tony was warm and pliant against Steve’s front, comfortably snuggled against his chest. The blanket cocooned around their bodies, making it nearly impossible to move. He had one arm trapped under Tony’s neck, and the shorter boy had an iron-clad grip on his forearm.
Every time Steve made a move to put some space between their bodies, Tony simply moved closer. He froze, but Tony seemed to sense the change in his breathing pattern. He bit his bottom lip to keep from crying out when Tony pressed against him even harder.

“Tony,” he whimpered quietly. “Tony, I need to…” Tony mumbled something incoherent in response. He seemed to be deep in slumber. “Tony, come on, I just need you to move a little…” In response, Tony moved impossibly closer until they molded together from shoulders to knees.

Steve felt his face heat up and his erection grow even harder. He buried his face into Tony’s neck and took a deep breath. Tony hadn’t taken a shower and his scent surrounded Steve like ambrosia. He smelled divine. He felt divine. Instinctively, Steve began responding to Tony’s movements in kind, pushing their hips together, his hand like a branding iron on Tony’s hip.

“Tony,” he whispered into the night. “Oh god, Tony, I—I—fuck.” He came wetly inside his boxers.

Shame flooded his senses. What did he do? Did he just…? To Tony…?

In his sleep, Tony moaned, the sound echoing obscenely in Steve’s ears. Even if he’d just come, Steve’s dick jump inside his damp boxer shorts. “Shit!” he cursed, realizing the inevitable. He needed to move—fast—if he didn’t want to stain the sheets with his ejaculation. He felt every bit the school boy that he was, nursing his first crush.

He was terrified it was Tony of all people. Tony, whom he’d so vainly undermined when they first met. Tony, who seemed to ground him more than any other Avenger. Tony, who served beside him as the second-in-command despite being in the Academy for less than a year.

A genius and billionaire in his own right.

A boy who couldn’t possible want anything from him.

“Fuck.”

Steve managed to slip out of bed without waking Tony, saving himself from embarrassment. He fled to his room and closed the bathroom door as quietly as possible. Inside, he washed his own underwear, staring blankly at his flushed face in shame.

***

Tony woke up the next morning with the smell of pancakes in the air; the space beside him was cold. He was still wearing his clothes from yesterday. His scent and Steve’s freshly-bathed scent mingled in the air. His dick couldn’t help but twitch in response. Sleep dazed, he started humping the bed without thinking. He tried to picture a busty brunette with wide hips, red lips, and long eye lashes. He imagined his fantasy girl crawling down the bed and pulling out his cock before taking him in her mouth.

“Fuuuuck,” he moaned, touching himself over his pants. It was steadily becoming difficult to contain his erection. He felt like he could hammer nails. He freed his cock from his pants, hissing as the cold air touched his skin. He kept the image of the woman in his head when he fisted his cock. Groaning, he licked a long wet stripe across his palm and rubbed his shaft. It felt silken and heavy between his fingers.

He played with his head, thumb playing along the sensitive area, spreading the precum all over his skin. He used his other hand to play with his balls, squeezing them between his fingers and pinching them in the middle. The pain added to the pleasure he tried to draw it out from his cock.
“Oh god, fuck, shit.” He pictured pink lips stretched obscenely around his girth.

Tony spread his legs out wide, holding himself with two hands now. One hand flicked across his slit while the other wrapped around his base. He drove his hips into the tunnel of flesh made by his hands He imagined lips, pulling him deep into a warm wet cavern, and the head of his cock would hit the back of his partner’s throat.

“Fuck!”

He’d hold onto the person’s hair, forcing his cock even deeper. The person would flinch a little at first but soon they’d relax their throat again. Fingers would bruise his ass and pull him closer. He’d thrust.. Strong hands would grab his hips, controlling him, manhandling them, overpowering him in every possible way. Big, strong biceps thrown across his legs. Blond hair. Thick shoulders where he’d wrap his legs around.

The most breathtaking pair of blue eyes.

Tony came, with a whispered name he couldn’t let anybody else hear, painting his stomach with white ropes of cum. He shivered at the end of his orgasm. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. It wasn’t possible. It was impossible. Of all the people in the world. He’d come at the vision of the one man who had absolutely no interest in him.

“Tony?”

He nearly jumped out of bed at Steve’s voice accompanying the knock.

“D—don’t come in! I’m uh, uh, changing! I’m changing my shirt!”

There was a pause on the other side. He could practically hear Steve rolling his eyes.

“You haven’t taken a shower yet. It’ll be a waste of clothes.”

“What d’you expect me to do? Eat breakfast naked?” Fuck, him and his big mouth.

“Fine.” Steve sounded resigned. “Just get your butt out within the next ten minutes or ma’s gonna barge in and get ya’. Shirt or no shirt.”

That had Tony scrambling to make truth of his lie. He made short work of his clothes, frowning at the hardening white stains. They’d come out with washing if he had a chance to do the laundry. He threw on the first shirt from his bag and a clean set of jeans. He had bed-head and didn’t care. Less than ten minutes later, he sat in the Roger’s kitchen with a heaping plate of pancakes and a mound of golden butter.

“Good morning, sweetie.” Joseph smiled when he served him orange juice. “Did you sleep well with Steven sasquatch crushing you on the bed?”

“Pops!” Steve yelped.

Tony blushed bright red. “I, uhm... it was fine, Mr. Rogers.”

Joseph laughed. “Didn’t Sarah teach you how to call us, boy? It’s Joseph, or pa’, or da’, just none of that Mr. Rogers bullshit. I ain’t no fancy-shmancyschmancy business man, ya hear?”

“Yes, si—Joseph.”

Satisfied, Joseph sat down on his usual seat with his own stack of pancakes. “Steven here tells me
that you boys wanna go camping in the middle of winter.”

“Well, uhm…”

“It was my idea, pa’,” Steve interjected. “Tony told me he hadn’t really gone camping before and I thought, why not?”

“For one, it’s the middle of winter,” Joseph scoffed into his coffee, much to Steve’s chagrin. “Two, aren’t you goin’ to do all yer holiday crap with Bucky this year? Wini told yer ma who told me that he brought a girl home with him this year. You’d best go out and take them both to town before you go anywhere else first.”

“But pa’…”

“No buts,” Joseph said with finality. “Hit the town, watch a movie, go dancing or bowling or something else for all I care. I’ll call your uncle Walter and see if you can borrow his thick sleeping bags and lithium lamps for the trip, you hear?” Steve beamed. “And you, boy,” he pointed to Tony, “Get some warmer clothes. I dun’ want you endin’ up with a cold or somethn’.”

Tony ducked his head and nodded. “I… I will.”

Joseph, despite holding a full conversation with his son, demolished his plate of pancakes in the same span of time. Chugging down the rest of his coffee, he gathered his utensils and brought them to the sink. “I best get to work. Yer ma made me promise to feed ya.” He patted Steve on the shoulder and nodded in Tony’s direction. “Take my advice. Go out, see Brooklyn. I’ll see you both for dinner.” He left the boys with dumbstruck expression on their faces.

“So…” Steve finally found his voice after the front door clicked. “… Do you wanna go bowling?”

Tony shot out orange juice from his nose in laughter. “Of all the things… bowling, really?” Steve ducked his head, mumbling something. Tony reached over and touched his hand to get his attention. “Bowling sounds great. I assume it’ll be with Bucky and Natasha?” Steve nodded. “Okay then. I’ll help you with the dishes and call dibs on the first shower while you call them to set it up.”

“Deal.”

They settled into a strangely domestic pattern of Steve washing the dishes and Tony drying them. They bumped elbows, and shoulders, and hips, laughing while they did their task. The few dishes that they used took up less than an hour. When it was finished, Tony stayed true to his word and commandeered the shower first while Steve dialed Bucky’s home phone.

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They met up with Bucky and Natasha at Dellarocco’s, a small-time bistro that sold homemade brick-oven pizza. The interior design was simple, with brown-stained metal tables and square-tables. They grabbed seats by the window just to take in the neighborhood. Tony wore a slim-fit fleece-lined casual hoodie in his favorite colors. Steve pulled a parka out and decided that it would do.

“Bucky and I’ve been going here since we were kids,” Steve narrated excitedly. “Best oven-bake in town! Price isn’t half bad too for the portions that they serve. We can each get a pizza or we can share. They do gluten-free too, which is why I figured Bucky picked it for today. I normally get the capricciosa, and before you laugh, I knew how to pronounce that before I entered the Academy.”
“Stevie!” Bucky grinned at the pair. “Over-selling this place already? Give Tony a chance to see the menu before you boast of your favorites.” He had to wear long sleeves and flesh-colored gloves to hide his metallic hand. It was easy to explain in winter but harder in summer. Natasha, on the other hand, wore a casual sweater. “Heya, Tony.”

“Bucky,” Tony greeted with a nod. “I see you went for hobo-chic. And Natasha…” he turned to see her daringly wearing a skirt and heeled boots with her sweater. “Gorgeous as always. I don’t see why you can’t teach your boyfriend a thing or two about dressing up.”

Natasha laughed. “Enough with your flattery, Tony. I’m hungry. Bucky promised gluten-free pizza.” She leaned close, staging a whisper. “Tells me he’s paying for mine too since he invited me for the holidays. Speaking of which… when did you two become an item, huh? Even I didn’t see that happening yet. You guys were still bumbling awkwardly at the Halloween party.”

At that, both Tony and Steve blushed.

“I’m not…” Tony stuttered at the same time Steve said, “We’re not…”

“Christ, we aren’t together! Let it go,” the blond growled, sitting down with more force that necessary. “Are we eating or not? I second Natasha; I’m starving. I’m ordering appetizers and dessert.”

Natasha and Bucky shared a look but wisely said nothing. They ordered meatballs and Caprese to share, Capricciosa for Steve, Buratina for Tony, gluten-free Rachetta for Natasha, and Calzone Ripieno for Bucky. They also got a pitcher of tall homemade lemonade. Their waitress, a slim girl in glasses, winked at Steve before walking away with their orders.

“Damn, son, you so fine,” Bucky whistled teasingly at Steve. Tony and Natasha all glared at him.

“Grow up, will you, Buck?” Steve frowned like a child.

‘It was nice’, Tony thought. It was all really nice. He hadn’t gotten the same experience growing up. Most of his time was spent holed away in the manor. With their distance from the city, it didn’t give him enough wiggle room to ‘go out and have fun’ because even if he did, all he had was the company of their servants. It wasn’t like this. It wasn’t so easy. It certainly wasn’t this fun.

The two Brooklynites tried to out-tell the other with embarrassing stories of each other in their childhood. Bucky told them about Steve and his ‘runt’ days whenthey were boys. Steve took pleasure in recounting, in horrid detail, Bucky’s first time with a woman behind the alley of their high school. They both recounted their junior-senior prom and a familiar name popped up in the story.

“…lost his balls and didn’t ask Peggy out! It was hilarious to see them both moping around the entire time. She ended up going with Kevin the quarterback. Stevie here went stagstag. They did the ‘staring pitifully at each other across the dance floor’ thing for like the whole night. It was so sad that it was funny!”

“Oh,” spoke Natasha, having seen the flash of hurt in Tony’s demeanor. Trust her to go right for the money shot. “This Peggy girl, is she still in Brooklyn?”

“Nah,” Bucky waved his hand holding a fork. “The Carters moved right after high school. She said something about going to university in Ireland or something. Isn’t that right, Stevie? Was it Ireland or Eastland? Something with a ‘-land’ in the name.”

“England,” Steve confirmed. “She went to study in England.”
“Do you still talk?”

He shook his head. “Our tenement was torn down shortly after high school. I never got a chance to give her my forwarding address. I’ve never been much of a social media fan either. All those buttons are confusing. I think a phone is enough to keep in touch.” The sadness in his voice made Tony grip onto his pizza slice tightly.

“Jeez,” Bucky groaned into his calzone. “Can we stop with the sad ‘what ifs’ already? Jay-sus! Can’t we just eat our pizza and not talk about Steve’s failed not-relationship?”

If Natasha wasn’t his girlfriend, Tony probably would have kissed Bucky right then and there. He went, instead, with casual nodding. Steve had the same look on his face as Tony. Natasha hummed her ascent. The rest of lunch passed with less interesting conversation about Steve and Bucky’s childhood in Brooklyn.

Next they went to a bowling alley and faced each other predictably, it was :Bucky and Natasha versus Steve and Tony. The former pair had the advantage as Tony was absolutely clueless about the game.

“You’re twenty-one and you haven’t bowled in your life?”

Tony and Steve laced their bowling shoes by the benches near the snack bar.

“Didn’t have it at home. Not really something you do on the outskirts of Malibu, I guess.” Tony just shrugged. Lacing his shoes hid that fact that he was shaking under Steve’s attention. While excitement pooled in his gut for the experience of ‘hanging out’ with friends, he also didn’t want Steve to know how much all this affected him. “We’ll be fine, Cap, I’m a genius. I’m sure I can figure this out.”

“To be honest, I think Bucky picked it specifically for ‘touching each other without being creepy’ moments.” Steve huffed, fighting off his own laughter.

The horrible attempt at a joke relaxed Tony. “I’m not really surprised.” He snorted.

The game started off competitively with Bucky and Steve both bowling strikes right off the bat. Natasha followed with a baby split of 3-10. She cursed the remaining two pins in Russian before cleaning the floor on her next roll. She grinned proudly when she turned back around to the boys, blowing air over her fingers like her hands were guns. Much to Bucky’s disappointment, because he couldn’t do ‘the moves’ on her.

Tony stood, stock still, by the chair when it was his turn. They cheered his name but it still didn’t help. It wasn’t until Steve gently touched his wrist that Tony shook himself out of his reverie.

“I’m not sure I can do this…”

At the back of his head, Tony recognized Steve showing him the motions—how to hold a bowling ball, the proper stance, ball spin, and mumbo-jumbo physics behind the pins—but he concentrated on the familiar way Steve’s body molded against his. He felt the curve of Steve’s pectorals as two mounds on his back, the burliness of Steve’s arms around him, and the perfect height of Steve’s crotch on his lower back. It felt too much like last night. He hadn’t registered swinging the ball and letting it fly into the next lane.

“Shit!” He cursed, watching it hit a strike. “Damnit!”
Steve, Bucky, and Natasha shared a laugh.

“Why don’t we try that again?”

The next time Steve showed him what to do, Tony actually listened to the instructions instead of reveling in how right he felt in Steve’s arms. He rolled a Geek Church and got the 7-pin and 4-pin on the second try. Bucky audaciously wolf-whistled at the pair while Natasha gave them knowing looks.

Their game ended 200 to 120 in favor of Natasha and Bucky. Steve and Tony were good sports about it.

“Next time, we’re going to beat their asses with a perfect 300.” Steve grinned from ear to ear like he’d won the game instead of losing it. He leaned against the counter, waiting for their shoes. Tony, on the other hand, simply scowled but immediately changed to surprise at Steve’s words.

“Next time?”

“I mean, uh,” Steve flushed. Thankfully the guy behind the counter returned to hand them back their outdoor shoes, saving Steve from further explanation. They re-tied their shoes in silence with Bucky and Natasha two benches away, Steve discreetly snuck glances at Tony, and Tony was doing the same.

“Idiots,” Natasha muttered under her breath after pulling up the zipper on her boots.

“I know,” Bucky chuckled from beside her.

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Tony and Steve took the subway to Astoria. They picked up the camping stuff from Steve’s uncle.

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Then, it was bedtime again.

Tony took a second shower, not wanting a repeat of this embarrassing morning. Meanwhile, Steve stayed in the living room to pack their camping gear. He and his father often did this when he was a boy. In some ways, it was part of their pre-camping ritual. It felt nostalgic now even if they weren’t going together. They had two large camping bags laid out.

“So…” Joseph drew out the conversation in such a way that warned Steve of the potentially horrifyingly embarrassing talk that was to come, “A Stark, huh? Didn’t really peg you for one, Steven, but he seems like a good kid.” Christ, not his parents too!

Steve turned pink up to his ears. “Pa, it’s not like that…” He ducked his head and shoved thing after thing into his own pack. Muscle memory ensured that he wasn’t messing it up too badly. Why did everyone have to remind him that he was pining like a lovesick teenager?

“Sure, Steven, just like it wasn’t like that when I took yer ma home for the first time too.”

“We’re friends, pa. Just friends,” he asserted quietly, feeling like tying a simple square knot was infinitely harder than it normally was. He slipped up two times before he managed to secure it. His father’s hand on his shoulder caught him by surprise. He muffled a curse by biting on his lip. His mama raised him better than that.
“It sure as hell dun’ seem like it, Steven. I may not be as smart as them folk in your fancy school but I sure as hell ain’ blind. I know you, son, and you haven’ had that starry look in yer eye since that girl Margaret back in high school. But you chickened out before anything happened.” Joseph squeezed his son’s shoulder in reassurance. “Now, this boy Tony, I’m guessing you like him.”

Steve sighed, finally giving up. “Yeah…” he whispered with a dejected expression. Then like a waterfall, words tumbled out. “But he dun see me that way, pa. We’re just friends. He ain’ like Peggy. He’s… he’s… different. This thing is different. I ain’ never felt like this bef’ere.” His hands shook with the effort to keep still. “We can only be friends.”

Joseph threw his head back and laughed. When he stood up, he slapped Steve on the back of the head. “Boy, get your eyes checked. Boys don’t go moony-eyed for other boys without it being something. Now, what that something is, I ain’ sure but is ain’ nothin’. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” His eyes softened, and he ruffled Steve’s already messy hair. “I just don’ want you getting hurt again, Stevie. It’s time to gather up that courage and do something about it before it’s too late again.”

Steve stared at his father’s retreating figure for a long time, and stayed for even longer in the living room. He heard Tony come out of the shower and enter his room. He wasn’t sure how to feel. On the one hand, he knew his feelings for Tony were nowhere near what he felt for Peggy; on the other, he knew it was different because it was stronger than the school-boy torch he held for her.

“Steve?” Tony’s voice called from his bedroom. “Are you going to bed any time soon? Aren’t you the one who said we had an early day tomorrow? I’m hogging your comforter!”

Yes, Steve thought, yes Tony is worth it.

He woke Tony up at dawn the following day. The room was still dark, only the light from outside illuminated the room. He’d woken up with a boner against Tony’s ass again, took a shower and relieved himself of the problem before going back to his room.

“Dun’ wanna,” Tony complained, hiding underneath the blanket.

In response, Steve grabbed the edges of the sheet and pulled it off, leaving a shivering brunette.

“Tony! We need to go! Hurry up! I don’t want to get stuck in traffic! There’s so many last minute shoppers! Tony! Tony!”

Tony rolled onto his stomach with a groan. “Fine, fine,” he mumbled into the pillow. He stood up lazily, pulled on jeans and a shirt, and grabbed the pillow on the bed before following Steve out.

“I’m bringing this and sleeping in the car.”

Sarah was already in the kitchen preparing some sandwiches for their trip to the camping grounds. She gave Tony a quizzical look. “I thought you boys were camping, not having a sleepover. Should I be worried, Steven?”

Steve blushed. “Ehrm… he doesn’t really function this early in the morning without coffee.”

“I’m sleeping in the car,”,” Tony concluded, giving Sarah a boyish grin. “Stevie’s drivin’ anyhow.”

Sarah shook her head and laughed. “Alright. Alright. Now, I packed you boys some snacks—a couple of sandwiches, hot chocolate in the thermos, and some apples. I packed extra food for
dinner and breakfast, but you boys can eat something on the road for lunch, can’t you? Ain’ no fish ‘round these parts ‘tis time of th’ year.”

“Thanks, ma.” Steve took it with a smile. “Tony says thank you too even if he’s too sleepy to say it.”

“That’s alright, sweetie.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Now, you know the drill. Text when you get to the park, then the cabin, then if you’re on your way back. Okay? Pops is still sleeping but you know he’ll say stay safe and have fun. So, stay safe, and you boys have fun, alright?”

Tony, still sleepy, had to be carried to the car while he hugged Steve’s pillow in his sleep. His father lent them the Accord for the trip upstate. It took two trips to bring, first Tony then the luggage into the car. The brunette slumbered quietly in the passenger’s seat, messily dressed for the trip. Tony hadn’t even worn shoes!

Steve chuckled.

Tonight, he thought.

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The site wasn’t too far away. The commute in the inner city caused a big portion of the delay. True to his prediction, many shops opened extra-early in anticipation of the holiday rush. Less than a week before Christmas and people bustled left and right to catch up on their holiday shopping. He briefly thought of buying Tony a gift this Christmas. While they hadn’t known each other for long, something about the brown-eyed brunette drew Steve to him.

“Are we there yet?” Tony mumbled sleepily while idly rubbing his eyes. When he stretched, his bellybutton unwittingly blinked at Steve, causing them to swerve ever so slightly. “Hey!” he complained, hands on the dashboard, “Warn a guy, would you? Jesus, Steve, are you trying to kill us before our first mission together? Sheesh.”

“Sorry, I…” And the sign for New York National Park made itself known. “Uhm, we’re here.”

“Great!” Tony flashed his playboy grin. “Get us to a rest stop. I have to take a leak!”

Steve laughed all the way to the log cabin, periodically making ‘wishy-washy’ sounds to annoy Tony. Once there, the brunette left out of the car and headed to the nearest restroom. It was up to Steve to go up to the counter and register them for a two-day camping trip. The lady at the counter looked unimpressed even when he flashed her with his brightest megawatt smile.

“It’s winter,” she,” she said plainly, as if the winter clothes and the emptiness of the lodge weren’t indication enough.

“Yes, I know.” He shifted uncomfortably. “We’d like an overnight, please. We’re going stargazing.”

“Stargazing. In the middle of winter?”

“Ehrm, yes…?”

“Steve, are you done yet?” Tony came in, immediately dropping a hand over Steve’s shoulder. They hadn’t exactly been a touchy-feely pair before. Steve fidgeted under the hold, but Tony didn’t seem to care. “Heya—” he leaned in to read her name on the employee tag, “Bridgette. I’m visiting, and my friend here said that these woods got the best view of the sky. Is there a reason
why you won’t lend us a cabin for the night?” A gold plastic card slid from his hands to hers. He winked.

Bridgette’s eyes widened after reading the name on the card. “Uhh, yes, right away, Mr. Stark. I’m sorry for the inconvenience.”

Steve stared at Tony in shock. “What just happened?” He hadn’t said a word about how they were pressed from shoulder to hip, Tony a solid warmth on his side. The other merely grinned.

“Seriously, Cap, I think you need to pay better attention to your surroundings. That’s like Infiltration 101!” He pointed to cabin lodge’s logo handing on the wall. Beneath the bear with the antlers spelling out ‘Nature Park’ was the Stark Industries logo. “Well, turns out daddy dearest bought this place. I don’t know why nor do I care, but hey, I got us in!”

The lady came back with a map and an old well-used camping kit that this particular lodge had been providing since Steve was ten years old. He frowned when he saw most of the things inside were either broken or in some way unusable.

“You’d better tell your pa to update his equipment ‘cause these suck.”

Tony merely grinned. “Well, we’re Avengers, aren’t we? I’m sure we’ll make it work. It’ll be like survival training or something. Only with—” he grabbed one of Sarah’s sandwiches from their pack, “—pre-made food and hot chocolate!”

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They set up camp in the middle of a clearing. So far, Tony had been a really good sport about the whole nature trip slash camping trip that Steve prepared. He staked the tent to the ground, laid out the sleeping bags, and even tried to create a fire using the trusty old boy’s scout method of striking rocks together. When that didn’t work, he brought out his wrist watch and pressed a button. Flames sprouted from a tiny hole in the metal and lit up their fire.

“That’s cheating,“”, Steve joked. He’d pulled the tree trunks that they were using as makeshift benches from somewhere in the forest.

Tony stuck out his tongue. “It’s only cheating if it’s a competition. The way I see it, Steve, we’re two friends hanging out in the cold bitter wilderness.” Fire lit, he stoked it with a stick and rubbed his hands in an effort to keep warm. He wore one of Steve’s old winter jackets from before the epic growth spurt, but it was still too broad in the shoulder department. The snow cover was thin and it wasn’t too cold. But he was a Malibu boy, born and bred, he wasn’t used to colder climates.

“You cold?” Steve stepped closer, seeing the shiver.

Tony shook his head, but his chattering teeth gave him away. The horizon had turned orangey-pink while they made camp. They could see a faint outline of the moon, but the stars were yet to be seen.

“Idiot,” Steve rolled his eyes. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Tony lied. The boy vibrated from where he sat like a lost little kitten stuck in the rain. Sighing, he unwound the scarf from around his neck and wrapped it around Tony before the other could protest. “Shut up, Tony. There ain’ no way I’m explaining to Fury why you dropped dead in the middle of winter.”

Tony opened his mouth, seemed to want to say something, but then closed it again. He did so several times until he finally settled on, “So, Steve, what do two boys left alone in the wilderness do for fun around here?”
Lots of things, Steve thought, with the multitude of body-warming things he could possible do to Tony inside their shared tent, on their double-padded sleeping bags, all night long—and all his dirty thoughts made his ears heat up.

“Uhm… I…” He searched his brain for something even remotely interesting but came up empty. He and Bucky normally went for a swim while their dads went fishing. Those weren’t options in winter. Then, like a light bulb, it came to him, the thing he wanted to know. “Tony, tell me why you like the stars? I told you my reason…it just…it doesn’t look like something you’d be interested in.”

“Why?” Tony shot back, suddenly on the defensive. “Cause I’m supposed to be all gadgets and gears and science stuff?”

Steve shook his head fiercely. “No, no, not like that. It’s just…like me, ya know? It’s not really obvious either but I like ’em. They remind me of when I was a boy when we went camping…but you haven’t done this before so it makes me wonder…how you became interested in looking at the stars.”

Tony kicked the snow by his feet, and sighed. His face closed off from all emotion.

Steve hadn’t seen that look on Tony’s face for the longest time. He wanted to take back his question just to see that expression removed but his curiosity about why that expression even existed won over. A part of him, the selfish part, yearned to be the person to know this part of Tony that no one else knew about.

“Tony?”

Tony stared blankly at the open fire. The burden of his memories hung heavy on his shoulders. It was a part of him that he sometimes wished he didn’t remember. It was like a scabbed wound he constantly picked at whenever he was alone, reopening the wound even if it made him vulnerable. Here he sat with Steve, a boy who had wrongly judged him like so many others and yet treated him with unbridled respect that no one had given him before. With Steve, he felt like he was being seen for who he was for the very first time—and not his father’s son. Could he really trust Steve with his secrets?

“For as long as I can remember,” his whispered, still unsure how much of his childhood, he would allow Steve to hear, “I had loved watching the stars…They were my only company when I was a young boy. Our house—Stark Manor—was both huge and extravagant, with so many rooms filled with lavish decorations but with very little love. My parents, Howard and Maria, often left me alone when they attended charity events. Howard paid while Maria organized. To many outsiders, they were the ultimate power couple who steadily grew richer and steadily gave back.

And me? I found solitude in the stars. They gleamed, and glowered, and glittered outside my bedroom window. We lived far up the hill, cut-off from the noise and the pollution of the city. My view of the stars went unobstructed when I closed the main switches. I made sure to flip them back on before my parents arrived. They never knew.

The loneliest days were summer. While many came home ecstatic to spend time with their parents, I came home to an empty shell of a house. Howard and Maria would be halfway across the world, at a Stark Expo or a charity event, forgetting that I was due back. I coped. I learned every nook and cranny of the monstrous manor, found every hidden passage, discovered every secret. But what I loved the most was sneaking off onto the rooftop and watching the skies.
“For the most part, it was okay.”

Then came what he didn’t say:

He’d become accustomed to dealing with loneliness. He concentrated on his studies, learned what he could learn, and absorbed knowledge like a plant yearning for water. He dreamt of becoming a NASA engineer, of one day launching himself into the galaxy to see the stars up close, but that wasn’t in Howard’s plans for him. They were in weapons technology. He needed to build what Howard built, and to make weapons to destroy with the least amount of effort.

When he was finally recruited by Nick Fury, he was elated. He thought that he could finally step away from the man his father was forcing him to become. He was wrong. All he did was substitute one prison for another. He may not have Howard Stark’s constant glaring over his shoulder but now he had another commander looming over him.

They wanted him to develop weapons for their students.

It made him sick.

They trained a bunch of children to do the work that adults couldn’t do. They weaponized them. Tony wanted no part in it. He was there because he had to be. He was there because they lied. He couldn’t make it out of the Academy during the school year but, maybe if he played good and well, he would find a way to escape by summer break.

But then Steve came and debunked all his plans. He hadn’t expected the blond-haired, blue-eyed supersoldier to walk into his life and steal his heart. They might have started off on the wrong foot but things had changed. Once Steve learned to respect him, he learned to respect Steve. They worked well together. Steve showed him the good that SHIELD planned to do with their Avengers Academy.

Steve opened his mind and opened his heart to the possibilities of an elite school that trained youth to become a new generation of superheroes that could save more lives in the long run. The things they did were revolutionary. The techniques and the science they learned were lightyears away from current knowledge. The technology Tony developed while in the lab had the potential to save as many lives as his father’s weapons company destroyed. They had a chance to be the good guys.

He wanted to be someone unlike his father.

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“Yeah,” Tony repeated, holding his half-eaten sandwich, which had long gone cold. “I’m okay.”

“Jesus Christ, Tony,” he heard Steve say. The next thing he knew, thick arms wrapped around his shoulders and Steve’s body was pressed against his back. “I feel like such an asshole! The things I said to you when we first met. Christ, I have no right to be your friend.” Steve murmured into the back of his neck. It didn’t take long for him to feel the hot wetness of Steve’s tears. “I—I—I hadn’t… I’m so—I’m so sorry.”

Tony sat frozen in place while Steve cried.

Steve clung to him like he was life itself, whispering and saying things that made absolutely no sense at all. He let Steve cry. He didn’t know what else to do. No one had ever cried for him before. His tears had long dried up when he was a kid. This was new and sad and strangely endearing coming from a six-foot-ten supersoldier. He could feel Steve’s body heat through the layers of fabrics.
“I’m sorry,” Steve said after god knows how long.

“Why?”

“’Cause I had been treating you no better off but now…” Steve squeezed him tight enough to hurt before letting go. He stepped over the log and kneeled in front of Tony on the snow-covered ground. His thickly gloved hand touched Tony’s cheeks, tracing his cheek bones, cupping his jaw. “But now, Tony, I see you—all of you—and I like it. I like you and it makes me yearn to see you more.”

His words struck Tony like an arrow to the heart. Tony turned away, not wanting to mistake Steve’s gaze for something more. Sure, he’d felt it, this thing that bubbled beneath the surface of his skin the drag towards Steve that he couldn’t explain. He knew he was attracted to the blond, but who wouldn’t be? Steve was perfect, and Steve was looking at him like he was the most precious thing in the world. He couldn’t handle it.

“Tony,” Steve coaxed, voice like velvet summer, warming him up despite the snow. “Look at me.”

“I’m just Tony, you know,” he said weakly. He fought against the fingers coaxing him to look at Steve. Not yet. He couldn’t yet. “Steve,” he whined the name that had haunted him for the past two nights.

Steve took Tony’s hands, rubbing at the knuckles. “I might be reading this wrong,” he said with the utmost seriousness, “but I’m going to kiss you now, Tony. Can I?”

Steve closed the distance between them. The first press of Steve’s lips and Tony only felt their coldness—cool and chapped and dry. Steve didn’t press forward. He was just the simple press of lips against lips. It was the most innocent kiss Tony had in his life but he moaned—dirty and loud—in inviting Steve inside.

Steve’s tongue burned hotter than any he’d felt before. He moaned again, losing himself to the sensations. He felt heat rising from his core rushing to the tips of his toes. His hands found Steve’s blond hair, burying in the curls and seeking purchase at the same time. He needed to ground himself.

“God, Steve…”

They tumbled to the ground. Steve fell to the ground, dragging Tony on top of him. He bent his knees to give Tony back support but the other boy wasn’t having any of it. Tony straddled him, and then ground their hips together and pulled him in for another kiss, fingers at the back of his neck, cool against his warm skin. All his senses, all his thoughts, all of him contained only Tony.

Tony. Tony. Tony.

“Tony,” he moaned at the first chance he got. Tony panted against his lips, body heavy and warm on top of his own. “Tony,” he repeated, gloved fingers tracing over Tony’s flesh as if trying to memorize the curves. “God, Tony,” he cursed when he saw Tony’s face—flushed and red, eyelashes fluttering, lips pink and swollen. He did that. He did that to Tony. “God, you’re so... so…”

Then, Tony smiled and Steve’s heart lurched from his chest.

“Hey, Cap, we’ve got a perfectly good tent over there and I’m not one to complain, but my kneecaps are going to freeze off if we keep this up.” His hot breath ghosted over Steve’s face. He ground down, earning a loud gasp from the boy below him. “And I really… really… really want to
get some skin-on-skin action, you following me, baby?”

“Yes,” Steve nodded. “Yes.” He grabbed fistfuls of Tony’s ass and stood up, bringing the boy with him. Tony yelled in surprise, legs dangling at his sides for a moment before wrapping around his waist. He circled his arms around thick shoulders for more support. Steve didn’t mind the added weight if that weight was Tony.

In the tent, they stumbled into the sleeping bag. Hands gripped at each other’s clothes in desperation buttons zippers. Steve tore his scarf from Tony’s neck. Once off, he dove tongue first into the crevice below Tony’s ear. Tony arched his back and pushed their chests together. Sweat already began pooling down his chin and Steve licked it eagerly, tasting the salty tang that quickly became addicting.

Tony said his name like a mantra on repeat. “Steve… Steeeve… Steeeeeeve… Ah!” He jerked when Steve’s tongue licked into his ear, soft wet muscle touching him in ways no one had touched him before. His cock hardened in his pants even more. He clawed at Steve’s shoulders, knuckles white against the brown leather—Steve’s hands were on his hips, pulling him down, grinding their erections together. “Ahh, fuck, Steve, fuck, shit, sweet Jesus!”

Steve wasn’t stopping at Tony’s ears. He mouthed his way down the slope of tanned flesh until Tony’s clothes got in the way again. He dragged it down with his teeth. Above him, Tony was a whimpering mess, drooling like he couldn’t control himself. Steve growled. He needed—he wanted—more of Tony for himself. His hands dove under Tony’s pants and squeezed the ass he’d been dreaming of for months.

Tony answered by spreading his legs more. His asshole brushed against Steve’s finger, and he keened. He pulled Steve’s face to his again. Foreheads bumped together. “Steve, please… please…” He pushed his ass onto those fingers. “Please, please, please…”

“Clothes,” Steve panted, “Too many…”

Tony nodded and pulled off, Steve chasing after him. He got far enough to wiggle hands between their bodies and pulled at of his clothes. He couldn’t think. He couldn’t breathe. But he wanted Steve to touch him. “Steeeve,” he moaned, touching his own nipples with his hands. Steve followed the motions with his eyes, cock twitching as he watched Tony play with himself. “I want… I want…” and the billionaire pinched his nipples.

The sight made Steve drool—Tony playing with himself was too much to handle. He could come early if he wasn’t careful. He flipped their positions with a well-executed roll, trapping Tony’s hands above his head.

“Steve…” Tony merely grinned at the broken whisper.

“Don’t move,” he warned, testily letting go. He waited until he was sure that Tony wouldn’t move. He dragged his fingers down the shivering arms, feeling the goosebumps as he went, tickling in the inside of his elbows, until he could trace the protruding collarbones with his thumb. “I want to hear you scream, Tony.” And without further ado, he took one of Tony’s nipples into his mouth.

“Ahhhh!” Tony arched his back, body pulsing, legs jerking. “Stop… Stop,” he begged, “I’m gonna cum if you don—AHH!” Warmth flooded down his crotch. His whole body convulsed at the sensation while Steve sucked on his nipple with no shame. “Fuck,” he groaned in embarrassment, hands coming up to cover his face but Steve stopped him. He whimpered.

“Don’t,” Steve said softly. “I want to look at your face.” He pulled at the hands gently. Tony
looked absolutely breathtaking underneath him. He couldn’t believe that he had such a beautiful boy as his own, ripe for the taking. “So beautiful Tony, you’re so beautiful. I want to touch you. God, I want to touch you over and over again.” And he did, mapping his hands down the brunet’s torso and flat stomach.

Tony glared as best he could but merely succeeded in looking more adorable. His blush ran all the way down his chest. “Stop being creepy embarrassing, Steve. I already came in my pants like a virgin. Don’t… ah, ah, ah!” He squirmed at Steve flicker over his nipples.

Steve licked his lips, one of his brows raised. “You mean you aren’t?” He pinched the darks buds again playfully. The other shivered at the touch. His eyes twinkled in delight at his lover’s responsiveness. “Tell me Tony, are you not?” He leaned down until they were nose to nose, a smirk decorating his features.

“I…!” Tony flushed even darker. Lucky for him, his erection had wilted else he lack enough blood to circulate to his brain. Steve flushed and sweaty and breathing hard because of him would be enough for his spank-bank until the end of time. But it was too much, he turned away. “So what if I am… Got a problem with that?”

Steve’s eyes softened at his admission. “No, not at all,” he whispered, leaning in to capture Tony’s lips once more. “On the contrary, I just want to make this more special.” When he kissed Tony again, it wasn’t hard or rough like it’d been a few minutes ago. This kiss was sweet and slow and sensual. He opened Tony’s mouth, licked every crevice with his tongue, and just kissed like it was the end goal of everything. Tony was breathing hard again when Steve was done.

“Let me see you, Tony.” Steve murmured, trailing feather-soft kisses down Tony’s tan skin. “I want to see more of you. Every mole—” he kissed one right below Tony’s twitching nipple, “—every scar—” he linked the line where Tony got his appendix removed, “—every inch of skin.” He licked into Tony’s bellybutton like it was Tony’s mouth, feeling the muscles beneath his lips seize. “I want to see you, Tony, every single thing about you.”

Tony mewled at each touch. “Oh god, oh god—!” he cried out when Steve popped the button of his jeans. The cool air brushed against his oversensitive cock. “Steve, Steve…” It made a valiant effort to harden again. It twitched. Steve’s mouth traced down his hip. “Please, please, please…”

Steve yanked Tony’s pants the rest of the way, and the brunet’s pressed his legs together and shook. God, Tony was beautiful. He loved this. He loved Tony’s embarrassment. It struck him on a primal level. He wanted to touch every single inch laid out in front of him; trace every shade of red skin. But the hard flesh between Tony’s legs called for his attention. Saliva pooled inside his mouth.

“Oh sweet baby jesus!” Tony yelled himself hoarse when Steve’s lips wrapped around his cock head. He forgot the command to keep still and dropped his hands to the golden tresses. He moaned his lover’s name while the head bobbed between his legs. He could feel it steadily growing harder with each pass of tongue. “Steve, please…please…”

Steve groaned, mid-suck. Tony tasted fantastic on his lips. “Jesus, you’re amazing Tony, I…” He slurped again, reveling in the cry of pleasure that followed. He wrapped his lips around only the silky head. His tongue darted into the slit. Tony jerked helplessly above him, thighs trembling with the effort to keep still. The taste of salty bitterness was addicting. He sucked at the flesh helplessly.

“Good,” he said, stroking Tony’s sides. “Doing so good for me, Tony.” His other hand drifted down to Tony’s balls. He sucked tiny kisses onto the side of the shaft.
“Nipples,” Tony begged, shaking. “Play with my nipples, please.”

Steve complied, reaching up with one hand to tease Tony’s nipples into hardness. The boy below him keened. He continued his assault on Tony’s cock, dragging his tongue on the underside, smiling when Tony hardened fully. He grew impatient and selfish for more of those noises. He sucked a breath before taking Tony’s whole length into his mouth.

“Jesus, fuck!” Tony screamed, ankles wrapping around Steve’s shoulders. He could feel it in his gut. “Off, off!” He yelled, pushing away but Steve was relentless. He gripped Tony’s hips and pulled the cock deeper. He felt the warm seed flood down his throat. He sucked, and sucked, and sucked at the sensitive flesh making Tony whimper helplessly under him. “Steve…” he moaned brokenly when Steve pulled off.

“I want to fuck you.” Steve confessed, sounding as wreaked at Tony felt, “but I…” he dropped his head and panted. His warm breath breezing against the soft flesh. He was still fully clothed, erection still straining even as he wrung out two orgasms from Tony. “I want to fuck you,” he sobbed, “but we don’t have lube.” He sounded absolutely dejected at that realization. He should have been more prepared.

Tony let out a breathless laugh. “Yeah. Damn right, you should have!” But there was no steel in his voice. He offered his hands for Steve to take, then brought the cum-coated fingers to his lips, licking them off one by one. “Hmmm…” he hummed appreciatively. “I taste good. No wonder you’re addicted. Come up here, hot stuff. I think we earned a nap after that one.”

Laughing, Steve peeled off his clothes and crawled under the comforter. Tony snuggled close once he was settled, purring. They fit together like two pieces of the same puzzle. Tony half-sprawled on Steve’s chest, legs entwined together with Steve’s arm wrapped around his middle.

“You owe me a night of stargazing, Steve.” He mumbled, snuggling deeper.

Steve smiled and hugged back. He pushed back Tony’s sweaty bangs off and kissed the brunet on the forehead. It felt good to have the boy in his arms. Half-asleep and post-coital, Tony was a pliant like a kitten in his arms. He angled down for another kiss which Tony willingly obliged. Their mouths met in a soft slide, slow and steady.

“Tomorrow,” he promised as Tony’s eyes drifted close. The shorter boy snuggled closer to him. Their naked bodies aligned perfectly from curve to curve. He listened to Tony’s breath even out. At the moment, he had everything he wanted.

It was perfect.

***

In the middle of the night, Tony returned the favor by giving Steve a blow job. Steve hadn’t known what hit him when he came to with Tony’s dark red lips wrapped around his cock, sucking like it was the best goddamn lollipop on the planet. He ran his fingers through Tony’s dark curly hair. Tony was a picture between his legs, flushed and willing. Hands touched his thighs, abs, and nipples before he came like Christmas morning, painting Tony’s face with thick white ropes of cum.

“Jesus, Tony, you look like heaven.”

Tony licked one last stripe up Steve’s shaft, wringing one last spurt. He smiled mischievously, allowing his lips to hover inches from the twitching flesh. “How are you so coherent in the
morning?” He licked quaintly at his slick coated fingers, the action making Steve blush.

Steve hefted out a sigh and ran fingers through his hair. “I’ve had a lot of practice with early morning drills.”

“Drills, huh?” Tony propped on his elbows and raised his eyebrow. “I can think of something you can drill alright.” He drew a weird circular pattern on the top of Steve’s thigh. He had an absurd sultry expression on his face, eyes narrowed and a smirk. He made such a pretty picture for Steve to keep.

“You look good with your mouth around my cock.”

Tony choked. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

“I could kiss your mouth instead, ya know.”

“Good deal. I’ll take it.” He slithered his way up to Steve. “How about you put your mouth where your ego is, big boy?”

“Hmm,” Steve hummed before pressing their lips together.

“Mm-hmm,” Tony nodded in agreement. He shifted while on top, spreading his legs so he could straddle Steve’s thigh. The boy underneath him hissed when their cocks slid together. Tony’s rock-hard flesh against Steve’s soft one, the slide amazing and wrong as he took his pleasure from Steve’s worn out body. “Yeah, baby, just like that.”

“God, Tony,” Steve moaned, guiding Tony with his hands. “Yeah, give it to me…”

Tony groaned, dropping down until he was breathing next to Steve’s ear, movements never ceasing. “Damn, you’re might mouthy when your lips aren’t blowing me.”

“So noisy,” Steve complained, fingers digging into Tony’s ass. “Why don’t you—” pulled sharply at Tony’s hips, grinding them together, “—and fuck me, yeah?” He wanted his hip to get his point across, making Tony howl his release onto both their stomachs.

“Damn.” He breathed, collapsing with his face buried in Steve’s neck. “We’re sticky and disgusting” But he said it with a smile. Lazily, he slid their spent cocks together. Steve’s twitched a little at the friction. “Eager again? You are incorrigible, Captain!”

Steve laughed. “None of that. No code names in bed.”

“Well, I’m already awake. Why don’t you get us a towel, huh, hot stuff?”

“Oh? Why me?”

“Cause I did all the work in the last round.” Tony replied cheekily. “Besides… I have no idea if you even packed towels for this...” he waved vaguely between them, still smiling. He put on his best puppy dog face. “I’m not averse to begging. Pleaaaaase, Steve?”

“Fine,” Steve grumped. “Give me one more kiss and I’ll get it.”

Tony complied. He wolf-whistled when Steve crawled on all-fours to rummage in their packs. He eyed the meaty flesh of Steve’s ass. He took his time ogle his… boyfriend? Was that what they were? Were they together? Was this a one-time thing? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Was he getting way ahead of himself after a night of mutual get-offs? He hadn’t even lost his virginity-virginity yet!”
“Tony?” When he comes to, Steve’s smiling face was inches from his own. “Where’d you go? I think I lost you for a minute or two there.”

“What are we, Steve?” Tony blurted out, surprising the other boy. “I mean. Is this… was this why you asked me to come?”

“What? No!” Steve’s face scrunched into a frown. The towel squelched wetly in his fingers. “That’s not… Tony! This isn’t about sex.” He blushed. “Well, not just about sex… Wasn’t I clear last night? Tony, I like-like you. I want to date you. All that mushy shit that we tease Bucky and Natasha about. All that. All that and more, if you’re willing.” For a moment, Steve couldn’t read Tony’s face.

“Give me that.” Tony grabbed the wet towel from Steve. “You big sap!” That finally made Steve relax. Tony wiped himself off before turning over the towel and wiping Steve’s stomach. “I think somebody promised me stargazing. I don’t know about you, but I feel cheated.”

They got cleaned up, shared more lazy kisses, and then pulled on their layers.

Outside, the sky was clear and the stars shone brightly above them. Tony relighted the fire with his watch, stoking it until the ember grew high. He saw his breath coming out in cloudy puffs. Steve walked out of the tent, smiling. He carried a thermos in one hand and something tucked under his other arm. He handed Tony the thermos and mugs.

“What’s that, then, Steve?”


“Set it up!” Tony beamed. He poured steaming hot cocoa from the thermos in surprise. “Woah, it’s still hot. This is some army grade vacuum here.” He waited until Steve finished setting up the telescope, then handed the blond the mug. Steve took it gratefully.

“So, where do we start?”

“How about…” Tony looked up at the sky thoughtfully, “…we start with Lyra?”

“The harp?”

“Lyre.” He corrected, looking into the viewfinder.

“Why?” Steve sipped his cup thoughtfully. “Of all the constellations, you pick a harp?”

“Fine, harp. The lyre story isn’t happy anyway.” Tony raised a finger to shush him. “Ahh, ahh, ah!” He beckoned Steve closer. He had Lyra’s six stars in the middle of his scope. “Did you know that in Wales, they call Lyra ‘King Arthur’s Harp’? They liked their legend in wales. Apparently, Great King Arthur loved music along with the victories of his round table.”

Steve obediently followed, taking the opportunity to slide a hand in Tony’s back pockets. They stayed like that—huddling close to the telescope, trading the cup of cocoa between them, and sneaking playful touches on each other—until the sun chased away the stars. They stole a few more gropes and kisses before packing up for the day and heading back to Brooklyn.

***

All too soon, it was the 23rd and Tony had to leave for Malibu.
“Hey, no frowny faces, babe,” Tony joked, sneaking a peck on Steve’s lips even if they were in the middle of JFK. Heads turned around to watch them. Tony didn’t care. For once in his life, he was happy and committed to someone who saw past all of his insecurities. “I’ll be back at the Academy before you know it. It’s less than two weeks! Then we’ll go back to kicking butts as superheroes, baby.”

Steve stubbornly wouldn’t let go of Tony’s waist. “It’s not that.” He said. How does he tell his not-yet-boyfriend that he would miss them even if it was only a few day? He was high on the honey phase and didn’t want their fantasy vacation to end.

“It’s not what, Steve?” Tony asked, putting on a brave face

“I’ll miss you.”

Tony reached up with his tippy-toes. He couldn’t tell Steve that he wanted to stay here and spend Christmas with Steve’s family. Of course he couldn’t tell Steve all that. Instead, he gave his not-boyfriend a peck on the lips in reassurance.

“I’ve got your number and you’ve got mine. We’ll Skype. Or if the shitty internet in your apartment can’t take it, I’ll call you long-distance. Or if you really, really, miss me, I’ve got my communicator on me at all times. Just please don’t ring me at some godforsaken time in the morning or I might throw it out of the window. I’m not sure if it’ll survive the four-story drop.”

Steve laughed because Tony only blabbed when he was nervous. “Alright. Alright. I give. Have a safe trip home, Tony. Message me when you land.”

“Will do, Capsicle.” Tony said with a three-finger salute.

Steve didn’t leave. He watched the brunet disappear into the crowd with a sigh. It would be fine, he reassured himself.

***

Tony arrived in Malibu shortly after lunch.

Stark Manor was as empty as he expected, no Maria or Howard to come greet him by the door like the Rogers’ apartment, no smell of home-cooking, or insistent blare of the TV from the living room. Only their butler Jarvis waited for his return. The estate looked as pristine as when he’d left last August. They rounded the driveway, and Happy opened the door for him.

“Welcome home, Young Master Stark,” Jarvis greeted with his ever passive smile. “The Master and the Mistress are out for a luncheon hosted by the Malibu Country Club this afternoon. I believe they will be joining you later tonight. Shall I have the cook send you a menu for this evening’s meal?”

Tony smiled, though it did not quite reach his eyes. He thanks Happy and slides out of the car with ease. The driver, in turn, nodded back politely. “I can’t say it’s good to be back, Jarvis, but I did miss you. How’s Ana and your kids?” He backpedaled half-way up the steps. “Wait. Ana was pregnant when I left…” and counted mentally in his head. “She should be about nine months now, shouldn’t she?”

Jarvis beamed at his young master’s memory. “She was indeed, sir. Ana gave birth last weekend. Twins; a boy and a girl.”

Last week, Tony had been in Brooklyn confessing his feelings to one Steven Gant Rogers. He felt a
twinge of sadness to learn that he had missed the birth of Jarvis’ children. The man, despite his status as a butler, had been a prominent figure in his childhood and he wanted to repay him in kind. When they entered the house, he grabbed the man’s hands.

“That’s wonderful news. Congratulations! We should send her a care package! A basket of fruit? A month’s supply of milk? Diapers? Holy crap. I have no idea what to give not-pregnant women… or babies!”

Jarvis laughed, the sound echoed in the empty space. “I believe it’s the thought that counts, sir.”

“Jarvis, buddy, you gotta throw me a bone here!” Tony protested. “How about baby stuff? Did you have baby things already? Come on, man, I’m new to this godfather shit.”

“Godfather shit, sir?” Jarvis inquired in his normal British fashion, making Tony stop mid-ramble.

“I mean I…” Tony stammered.

The older man placed a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “We would be honored, sir,” he said with a smile. “And now that you’ve mentioned it… anything will be appreciated. I shall give you a list of the things that we’ve already purchased to lessen the off-chance of repetitions. I believe Ana made a ‘baby registry’ too.”

Tony beamed at him. “That’s perfect. I’ll crash in my room. Have one of the maids wake me up for dinner.”

“Of course, sir.” Jarvis nodded. “And the menu, sir?”

“Send it up with your list.”

Tony climbed up the stairs feeling elated. Jarvis added two more to his family. He was going to be an godfather. Steve liked-liked him. God, he was turning into every clichéd lovesick schoolgirl! It should have been embarrassing but, at the moment, he really didn’t care. The mood was too good to be spoilt by old-school conservative views that were equal parts passé and disgusting. No, if he ever wanted to come out of his father’s shadow, he needed to learn to voice out his own opinions not just conform.

His room was on the fourth floor of the west wing, with gigantic windows of the cityscape and a large circular bed overflowing with pillows. What it would have been to have Steve here beside him. They could go out and explore the grounds together, something he hasn’t done since he was in middle school. Or, they could go to the pool and skinny dip under the warm sun. Or perhaps, he could introduce Steve to the bots.

Speaking of bots, “Hello Dum-E.”

The single armed robot lifted its claw in greeting. When it saw Tony, it moved its arms rapidly up and down like a puppy wagging its tail to greet its owner. Dum-E was one of Tony’s earliest creations. Pieced together in his father’s lab when he was only eight years old, he initially created Dum-E to help him reach the top of the fridge where the cooks kept the cookie jar. Howard wasn’t impressed to see a broken jar and a gangly-looking robot in his kitchen. Dum-E had since forth been exiled to Tony’s room,

“Hey, bud, did you miss me?” He asked, patting Dum-E’s claw affectionately. The robot turned it’s claw to nuzzle his palm. “Yeah. Me too. Hey, maybe I can bring you to school with me when I come back.” Dum-E made a ‘whirrrr’ sound in response.
Tony built a simple AI program and coded it into his robot. It wasn’t very complex. He could command Dum-E to do a total of four tasks; fetch, carry, stay, and sleep. The rest were jibberish and didn’t really mean anything. Perhaps, one day, he could upgrade the robot’s system.

**DING. DING.**

“Oh shit!” He nearly jumped at the sound of his phone. “Steve!” He fished out his profile and quickly answered the call.

“Tony?” Steve’s voice sounded worried.

“I’m sorry!” Tony rushed, “I meant to call you when I landed but I forgot. God, I’m such a shitty boyfriend. I got home about thirty minutes ago. I’m at home—in my room actually. I forgot. Shit. Steve. I’m sorry.” He’d unconsciously closed his eyes during his freak-out monologue. The other side remained quiet. “Steve?”

“Boyfriend?” The choked off sound came.

Tony closed his eyes again, recalling exactly what he’d said. “Shit. Uhm… yeah? Boyfriend? Is that… is that okay?”

To his relief, Steve laughed. “You know, Tony, it’s kinda inappropriate to ask relationship labelling question through a long distance phone call, don’t you think? I’m an old-school type of lad. I would have preferred it if you asked me in person.”

He could hear the happiness in Steve’s tone. “Yeah, well, we don’t always get what we want.” He snorted.

“I got you, didn’t I?”

“Smooth, Steve,” Tony grinned, “Real smooth. You getting notes on sweet talking from Barnes or does all this all-American charm come naturally?” He patted Dum-E on the claw and made his way to the bed, kicking off his shoes. It didn’t smell of anything because Maria was allergic. He missed Steve’s room and the way everything smelled like the blond.

“You gotta ask Erskine. He’d say it came from a bottle.”

It got Tony laughing. “Well, aren’t you Mr. Funnypants. Whatcha been upto aside from missing lil’ ol’ me, baby?”

“I’m actually headed over to the hospital to surprise ma with lunch. It’s been a while since I’ve done that. I figured I’ll do something nice for her, ya know? You?”

Tony’s heart fluttered. Steve, kind and thoughtful Steve. “Me? I was just about to crash for another few hours and wait for dinner. Parents aren’t home and uhm…” he blushed. Did he really want to say that to Steve on the phone? “I, uhm… my hips kinda ache.”

“Sorry, I didn’t get the last part.”

“My hips kinda ache.” He whispered the last word, feeling the heat up to his ears. “I can’t go around the house limping… it’s… it’ll be weird. They’ll ask question that I’m not prepared to answer.”

“Oh. Okay.” Whatever laughter Steve had died down. “Tony. Crap. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that… is the rest of your body okay?”
Tony, honest-to-god, giggled. “I got thrown into a wall almost every single gym class. I’ll be fine. I’ll soak in the tub before dinner and I’ll be good as new. Besides… it feels kinda nice, reminding me of you.”

“Tony!” Steve was scandalized. “You can’t say things like that!” There were a series of rushed noise in the background like Steve shuffled into the nearest alley. Cats hissed not too far away. “I’m in public! With a boner. In Manhattan! Jesus, Tony, you don’t know what you do to me… Christ, you can’t say stuff like that on the phone!”

“Fine,” Tony groused, feeling playful. “My big warm bed is sooo empty without you here, Steeeeve. I guess I have to go take care of myself, don’t I?” He faked a moaning sound, which was really just him popping his muscles back into place.

“Tony!”

He laughed. “But I really am in bed. Shut-eye, remember?”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’ve got to will down this boner now. You should rest. I’ll call you tonight?”

“I’ll call you,” Tony clarified with sudden realization. “Shit, Steve! This will cost you a fortune! Hang up now! Shit. Shit. I said I was going to call!”

“Tony, calm down. It’s worth every penny, believe me.”

There went Tony’s heart again, summersaulting inside his chest. “I’ll call you. I won’t forget this time, I promise.”

“I believe you. Good night, Tony.” Steve said, even if it was early afternoon in Malibu.

“Bye, capsicle.” I love you, Tony thought just as the line disconnected. Well, shit. He threw his phone somewhere to his right, before face-planting onto the nearest pillow. It was the endorphins talking, wasn’t it? He couldn’t… not yet… right? Wasn’t it too fast?

***

Dinner with the Starks consisted of formalwear, a catered-like five-course meal, and silverware which would make the Donald Trump weep like a loser. It wasn’t even their ‘best’ china; they had a set made of solid gold—impractical and left an aftertaste of metal—which they used only on special-special occasions. It didn’t happen often.

Tonight was no different.

Tony donned one of his dinner jackets from last season and a dark blue tie which reminded him of Steve’s eyes. He looped the tie into a Van Wijk knot for a three-cylinder yet slender effect. He hadn’t bothered with his hair. He didn’t put product in this morning so his bedhead was here to stay, at least for the evening. He did, however, freshen up by shaving his stubble in the en suite bath.

The knock on the door came as he pulled adjusted his lapels.

“Come in.”

“Young Master,” a maid bowed in greeting, “Sir Jarvis has sent for you. Your parents have arrived, young sir.”
He followed her to the chosen dining hall for the evening. Stark Manor had several, varying in size and purpose. They had one for formal dining occasions that could sit a hundred people, a smaller one which could sit thirty, a 10-seater room which hosted Howard’s business meetings, and an 8-person parlor where Maria brought her friends. Those were the public dining rooms. Tonight, the maid led him to the private dining room on the second third floor.

“Young Master,” Jarvis stood outside the doubles doors, and nodded at him. “You are the first to arrive. The Master and the Mistress should be arriving shortly.”

“Thank, J.” Tony shot him double-fingerguns before entering. This room doubled as a ‘family room’ if they did that sort of thing. In reality, it held a dining table, a fireplace, and a bar. He hoped they weren’t here because of the third reason. The table mysteriously sat four and all four places were treated with table settings. It made him wonder. The empty space made him yearn for Steve’s company.

He checked his phone for messages. Seeing none, he decided to send one of his own. He shot a selfie of himself with big puppy dog eyes, looking sad. He sent it to Steve with the caption ‘wish you were here’ and a broken-heart emoticon.

The doors opened.

Maria strode into the room dressed in a lacy black sheer top and a long silken white skirt, her dark black hair pulled into an elegant up-do. She wore an intricate necklace made of multiple gems which shone under the chandelier lights. Tony stood at once, and pulled out her chair. She gave him a peck on the cheek in gratitude, allowing him to slide her inside.

“Good evening, Tony.”

“Good evening, mama. How was the country club?”

“It was absolutely horrid. They fed us pickled everything because Ivan Vanko was visiting. It was disgusting! And all that Herring! I wish never to see that fish again in my entire life.” She griped miserably. “Your father is suffering from an upset stomach. He went back to… relieve himself before I came down. I think we should start without him. It might take a while.”

Tony felt himself relaxing. While the words between them were few and seldom, he’d grown up with Howards constantly out-of-town or too busy to pay him any attention. He never knew what to say to the man!

“I am in luck then. The only things I’ve ordered from the sea are shellfish, your favorite mama.”

Maria glanced down at the menu card beside her plate, smiling in approval. “You’ve chosen well. Risotto balls and lobster bisque sound heavenly right now. What do you say… shall we have the first two courses together?”

Tony merely laughed and nodded. Dining with his mother was less stressful than dining with both of them together. Maria Stark was content with sharing stories of her charities, her posse, and the many things that Tony ‘missed’ while he was in school. They were well into their third course of salads when Howard entered the hall, looking less than pristine. He gave Maria a kiss on the cheek before sitting down.

“Tony.”

“Father.”
The maids served Howard immediately with the salad. They would serve any of the previous courses if he asked. Howard eyed the green arugula salad with a frown, green rising on his features. “Perhaps not,” he swallowed sweet wine heavily, “Is there soup? I think I shall like to rest my stomach before the main course.” They served him bisque.

*DING. DING.*

Tony froze.

“Tony,” Howard gave him a chastising look. “What did I say about gadgets at the table?”

Tony ducked his head, mumbling an apology. He checked his phone before placing it on vibrate. It was a message from Steve! A picture message with Steve making faces at the camera. ‘Twelve days left until I see you again’, said the caption. He couldn’t help but grin as he stowed it away.

His parents, Maria in particular, was quick to catch it.

“A special someone?”

“I, uh…” Tony stammered. His mind a constant mantra of shitfuckshitfuckshit with sirens blaring. He couldn’t tell them. Not now. Especially not since the burn of his betrayal was still fresh in their minds. Dropping out of boarding school and choosing to go to an elite academy for the gifted was one thing, and being gay with a boyfriend was another. He might be twenty-one but unless he patents and sells his tech, he still needed their financial assistance. “Just a friend.”

“Good,” Howard barked, catching Tony’s attention. ‘Good?’ “I’m relieved you haven’t found someone in that blasted school of yours. God knows how much trouble that would cost us. Tony, at tomorrow’s ball, there’s someone I would like you to meet…” And that was it, Tony pretty much shut-off the conversation after that. He couldn’t think despite his mind firing on all cylinders.

Suddenly, the world tilted.

*THUD.*

“TONY!” came twin shouts from his parents.

He couldn’t breathe.

He wanted Steve.

Steve.

***

When Tony came back to his senses, he was in his room wearing pajamas. The large windows proudly displayed the Malibu skyline and a sky full of stars. A quick glance around the room—his previous clothes gone and everything pristine—told him Jarvis was responsible to his state of dress, probably had help bring him up to his room. Right now, he felt suffocated by his mountain of pillows and the layers of his sheets. He’d grown accustomed to the colder climates of New York.

Howard’s words echoed in his mind.

“…there’s someone I’d like you to meet…like you to meet….to meet… meet…”

His mind raced. He needed to go call Steve.
Surveying his room, he found his phone on his desk. He literally stumbled out of bed by falling to a heap with the blankets around his ankles. “Damnit!” He belly-crawled the rest of the way since the sheets felt like worse than octopus’ tentacles. He needed to tell Steve. He needed to hear Steve. He needed Steve, and the boy was 2,476.36 miles away. He calculated that on the flight over. Grabbing his phone, he immediately pressed redial.

Steve answered on the third ring, alert. “Tony? What’s wrong? It’s… 2am in the morning there. My alarm hasn’t even gone off yet! Did something happen?”

Tony couldn’t help but smile a little when he heard the worry in Steve’s tone. He went and did something without thinking again. Damnit. Should he tell Steve? It could probably be a false alarm. The arrangement might not even work. Hell, Howard might be deluded and concoct all this in his head for crying out loud. He really didn’t know what to tell Steve.

“I’m getting forcefully engaged against my will because my father is an old-school dictator who thinks that type of thing is still okay?

I am the walking cliché of rich boy with rich parents who wants me to get married to a rich girl? If it helps, I had no idea about it when I came back home?

I’m going to be stuck in a loveless marriage and I want you to be my thing on the side?

All of the options displeased him. Sighing, he simply said his feelings in the best way he could. “It’s nothing.”

Steve easily read through the lie. “Tony,” his tone rebuked, “This isn’t nothing. You called me in the middle of the night. It’s something. I’m not buying it. You either tell me or I can ride my way cross-country to Malibu.”

The thought made Tony giddy. “I miss you.” The brunet confessed, as close to the truth as he felt comfortable with. “I just—” sigh “—miss you a lot. Did you know that my bed here in Malibu is four times the size of yours? We can roll around all we want and never fall off!”

He heard Steve chuckle. “I would have gone, you know.” His voice softened, “If you’d ask. I’m sure ma and pa would have understood… I would have come with you to Malibu… but you didn’t ask…”

Steve’s words, like a phantom hand, squeezed Tony’s chest.

“I didn’t think you’d want to come.” I’m sorry went unsaid. “It’s just… it’s all new Steve. I haven’t… not really… nothing like this… I…”

“What are you looking at right now, Tony.”

Tony blinked in confusion. “Huh?”

“What are you looking at?”

“My wall…?”

Steve laughed. Shuffling could be heard coming from his side. “You told me you had a quote ‘big ass window’ unquote in your bedroom. I want to know what you can see. Why don’t you take a look outside, hmm?” A long pause. “Come on, humor me on this one. You did wake me up before my alarm…”
“Fine,” Tony grumped, but complied anyway. “I’m at the window, Captain fancypants. I can see the Malibu skyline. It’s orange and not as great as New York. Kinda flat actually. What point are you trying to make Steve? I’ve seen this like a million times while growing up.”

“I wanted your perspective a little bit. Why don’t you take a look at the stars? What do you see?”

Tony did. He saw the entire Hercules Family of constellations, nothing special. He’d seen them while growing up, practically grew up with them staring into his window. He’d mapped them, and categorized them, and drew them so many times that he’d lost count. They’d been the only constant in his life while his parents flittered in and out of it. That didn’t change now that he was legally an adult. It didn’t matter. For as long as he still hasn’t stood up on his own two feet, he was trapped in this large extravagant prison.

“I see Draco, the Little Dipper, and Andromeda.”

“Hmmm,” Steve hummed, “How about Pieces?”

“Not totally but I do.”

“Auriga the charioteer?”

Tony took one more look at the sky. “Yeah. I see him beside Perseus.”

“Good,” He could hear Steve smile into the words, “I see him too.”

“Oh. Oh.” Tony let out, quiet. “You see him too…” A small bubble of joy rose up in his chest at the words. “You see him too…” he couldn’t help repeating. Steve saw the constellations too, meaning that Steve was currently looking outside his window back in Brooklyn, probably climbed out to get to the roof top too, just so he can see that stars with his boyfriend. Tony felt a lump in his throat larger than a golf ball. “Wha—what else do you see?”

In all his life, Tony never had anyone do this with him apart from camping with Steve. Stargazing had always been a solitary experience. He didn’t think anyone else would be interested, or that anybody else would care for a body of gasses lightyears away from earth. But now there was Steve who he woke at an ungodly hour in the morning, who wasn’t even annoyed at him, and suggested that they do this in the first place.

Steve.

“Cygnus the swan flying in the sky.”

“Sounds an awful lot like a story,” Tony muttered. He pressed his nose up to the glass to see what Steve saw, craning his neck just to get a better angle. He knew he was smiling like a fool but didn’t care anymore. Having Steve on the phone, seeing the same things, made him feel like the blond was right beside him. “Tell me the story, Steve.”

And Steve did, telling Tony a Chinese legend of the two star-crossed lovers and the milky way;

When the goddess Zhi Nu fell in-love with a mortal man named Niu Lang, the Heavens forbid them to be together. However, the two still married in secret. Heavens created the Milky Way, a river in the sky, to separate the lovers. Once a year, the magpies assemble to build an enormous bridge, Cygnus, over the wide river so that Zhi Nu and Niu Lang could be together.

Tony was snoring softly by the time Steve finished.

***

The following night, Tony found himself wearing a two-tone black and magenta full-dress tuxedo with a silk shawl collar. He buttoned only the top button of three. He hated black-tie parties like this. They were always so stiff, proper, and fake. He felt more like a showpiece than a son. His parents paraded him around their distinguished guest, suddenly taking an interest in his achievements and his skills. He hated that he couldn’t escape one that was hosted in their own manor.

One of the maids called him.

They used the grand ballroom for the occasion which took up most of the first floor on the east wing. Music echoed through the hallway. His parents must have hired a small orchestra to play at the event. They liked having really boring classical mumbo-jumbo to impress their high-class society peers. This year’s motif was blue and white Christmas. Inside the hall fall like an ice-land, not the country, but a literal ice-realm with cubic zirconia decorations mimicking diamonds.

Maria, of course, wore a peach-colored jewel-encrusted Terani mermaid gown. The entire shoulder to knee form fitting drop-hem half was encrusted with intricate patterns of jewels while the rest of the skirt flowed like water. Five-inches of bracelets and bangles covered each arm. She smiled when she saw her son enter the hall.

Tony felt dread pile up to his throat. The only thing keeping him grounded was the weight of his communicator and phone inside his inner pocket.

“You look dashing, Tony.” She complimented. “Come, we must see to our guests like proper hosts.”

Tony couldn’t feel his face when they finished. His cheek and jaw and teeth hurt from having to smile for the better part of two hours. Just as expected, Maria paraded him around her circle of rich house wife friends and Howard took him around to meet ‘future business partners’. The entire time, the tension of Tony’s ‘mysterious bride-to-be’ mounted. He picked up clues in the course of the evening. She was supposedly the daughter of Howard’s business associate, a long-time friend from his service in the SSR. Yet still, dinner had been served but no one fitting that description had been introduced to him.

His luck ran out after the meal.

“Tony,” Howard strode up to him with a smile that was bright and dazzling. “I would like to introduce you to some very important people.” Behind him, two individuals seemed to linger.

Tony, like the practiced billionaire socialite that he was, flashed his paparazzi-worthy smile. He dropped his glass of champagne to the nearest walking server, wiping his hands on a spare napkin. “Why of course, father.” He said, slipping into formal language to befit the occasion. “Introduce away. I trust that it will be for both our pleasure, will it not?”

If Howard believed his charade, the man did not say anything. “Tony, this is my good friend Harrison Carter from my time consulting for the SSR.” The man he introduced stood a few inches taller than himself, with slicked-back dark grey hair and stern-looking brown eyes. He wore a smart blue plaid tuxedo and the dark red bowtie. “Harrison, my only son, Anthony Edward Stark.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.” Tony bowed slightly then shook Harrison’s hand.
“The pleasure is man, son. And aren’t you such a fine looking lad too.” Harrison squeezed Tony’s hand with surprising strength. “Lad, you look just like your father when I first met him. Fine bones. Sharp cheeks must run in the family…” then, the moment of truth “…allow me to introduce my daughter to Margaret Elizabeth Carter. Brilliant young mind and excellent with numbers. Not too bad on the eyes either, ey laddie?”

Margaret Elizabeth Carter wore a stunning shiny silver dress floor-length dress with a modest neckline and off-shoulder sleeves. Her hair was in a deep shade of red, the red of Maria’s favored roses, which highlighted the paleness of her alabaster skin. She had a heart shaped face, a wide-forehead, and a strong jawline. She smiled shyly at Tony, and offered her hand.

Tony took it like a proper gentleman. “Enchante, mademoiselle.”

“Enchante de faire votre connaissance, monsieur.”

“Ahh! They both speak *Francais*! The language of love!” Harrison clapped somewhere behind them. His jolly laughter echoed even if the hall was abuzz with noise. “Come, Howard my dear friend, we must leave the lovebirds in peace, lest we meddle in their blossoming romance!”

Margaret flushed lightly at her father’s words.

“Forget them.” Tony snorted, waving off their fathers’ comments. “They are but old fools wishing for stars. You and I—we do not have to do anything that we don’t want to do. Let them believe what they wish to believe, Ms. Carter. Let us not allow their lewd comments to ruin our evening. After all, in a few short hours it will be Christmas.” He gave her megawatt smile.

Something in Margaret’s face changed, and suddenly her expression became more honest. “Very well, Mr. Stark. I like the way you think. What, dare say, would you propose to do for our entertainment this evening?”

Tony glanced around the room. Howard and Harrison stood only a few feet away from them, giggling to themselves worse than aunties came to gossip. On the other side, Maria and her friends did the same. He eyes the empty dance floor, though in open view of everyone else, it might give them the privacy they deserved to properly converse.

“Would you like to dance?”

She looked at him as if he’d grown another eye. “A dance, Mr. Stark?”

“A dance,” he nodded, leaning in to whisper, “I feel like there is so much more to talk about without all these eyes listening in.”

“Very well,” she agreed, “lead the way.”

The song immediately changed to Johann Strauss’s *Emperor Waltz* when they entered the floor. Tony held in a curse at his father’s ludicrous and blatant meddling. He smiled uneasily at Margaret, who took in the song with in stride.

“Are we performing the lifts?” She asked, shortly after they began.

“Would you like to?”

“I’d like to see if you can carry me.”

It was a challenge if Tony ever heard on. “Jump away, mademoiselle.”
They danced beautifully together, a display of their high-society backgrounds and years of formal dancing instructions in their youths. Every spin and turn and twirl executed with soft rigidity that seemed to please their parents and the crowd. No one dared join them in the performance. They used the vast open space to their heart’s content.

On the third jump, Margaret giggled. “You’re stronger than you look, Mr. Stark.”

“Please, call me Anthony. I insist. Mr. Stark reminds me of my father.” Because he did not know her well enough to be called ‘Tony’, especially if their fathers were so adamant about the marriage.

She smiled. “Pe—please call me Margaret then, Anthony.”

“Margaret,” Tony practiced the name on his tongue. It didn’t sit right. He kept quiet. He lifted her up by the waist and she jumped gracefully into the air. People watching them clapped at the display. Tony saw through her entire act. He knew she felt the same as he did. “Tell me then, Margaret, why are you not opposed to the idea of marriage to me?”

Margaret stiffened in his arms. “I do not understand what you’re saying, Tony.”

Tony laughed. “Now, now. I don’t think Mr. Carter was fluffing his ego when he boasted about your brains. I’m sure you understand me perfectly well, Margaret. There’s no need to lie. You’re as opposed to this idea as I am, and yet here you are… dancing with me like the perfect daughter. So tell me why you are still bothering with pretend.”

Something dangerous glinted in her eye. “Very well, you are as clever as rumored. Bravo, Tony, I applaud your daring and your stealth in planning such an impromptu interrogation.”

“Thank you,” He grinned as he dipped her, “Now, I believe I am owed an explanation.”

“There is a school here in the states that I wish to enter.” She whispered in his ear, “Your father, Mr. Stark, has promised my father to ensure my admittance even in the middle of the school year if I agreed to marry you.”

“Wouldn’t that be counter-productive?” Tony asked confused. “I’m assured that your family is affluent in your own right, Margaret, what need for my father?” He twirled her outward. She spun like a graceful ballerina in four-inch heels.

“Connections.” She answered with breaking a step. “I am told that Howard made a substantial donation to the school. I believe he built an entire building on the school premises in order to bend the administration to his wishes.”

“The Avengers Academy…” Tony’s steps faltered, and Margaret quickly covered up for him. “You wish to go to my school? Why?”

This time, she looked surprise but muscle memory saved her from falling. “You’re an avenger?”

“I am. But what about you? Why would you want to go there? It’s… surely there are school in England with the same capabilities that the Academy offers, if not better. There’s an MI6 program for the gifted which you will have no problems passing. Why migrate to the states in order to become a spy?”

Margaret sighed heavily, sadness washing over her features. “There’s someone I am looking for. I believe that they can be found here in America. Going to the Academy… it’s my only way back to finding him.”
“You’re coming to America… for a boy?” He questioned, incredulous. “Surely, you do not think that I will believe that? That’s… that’s… it’s preposterous coming from you. I mean, no offense, Margaret but you do not strike me as the kind of mushy-girl that will let her heart lead her life…”

“You don’t know me, Anthony.” She said blankly. “I have lost many things in this life, and he is not going to be one of them. And you? Why aren’t you kicking up a fuss with all of this? The Anthony I’ve heard about was a playboy and a child. You do not seem to be either of those two things now. You’re… different from what I expected.”

“You mean pompous little rich boy riding on daddy’s coattails?”

She blushed. “Yes.”

“Well, Margaret, let’s just say that I too have someone I need to protect.”

He grinned at her. The song was slowly coming to a close, and in a few minutes they would part playing the pretend roles of arranged sweethearts. He would find a way to tell Steve tonight. He couldn’t bear the thought of even being fake-engaged to a girl he just met. Curse him and his stupidly romantic heart. Even a virtual stranger deserved a shot at her happiness.

“Thank you, Anthony.” She smiled at him when they parted. “It was very enjoyable dancing with you.”

“You as well, mademoiselle.” He bowed.

“I think you might want to check your phone. It poked me quite a few times. A lover?”

Tony felt his inner pocket, and chuckled. “Yes, a someone important to me. Since I am helping you, won’t you help me? I want to go for fresh air and check it without all these prying eyes trying to sneak a peek. Even out fathers would leave us alone for a few more minutes.”

Margaret looked happy and relieved. “Let’s go then. I’m sure you do not want to keep them waiting.” She said, taking him by the elbow. They walked into the garden arm-in-arm with secretive smiles. Too caught up in their moment of elation, neither one noticed the dozens of cameras which caught them while dancing nor the round lenses hidden in the bushes.

DING DING

“Just in time!” Tony exclaimed in excitement. “Look like someone misses me too. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” said Margaret. “Please, don’t mind me.”

Tony fished his phone out of his inner pocket, excited to see a message from Steve. It was a picture message! His smile widened. He missed the blond dearly and another photo of Steve would always brighten up day, no matter the time. He couldn’t wait to see it! He hastily clicked it open but his face fell when he saw the attachment.

It wasn’t a picture of Steve.

No, it was a picture of them—Margaret and him, right as she had whispered something in his ear. Her face was hidden by her hair but his was for all to see. He was smiling in the photo because he was right at reading her. It made for damning evidence. The link attached at the tabloid article didn’t help. **STARK HEIR GETS HITCHED TO MYSTERY WOMAN**, in big bold capital letters.
Steve’s caption was two words; *we’re through.*

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Steve had shut-off his phone.

It hurt.

Natasha had been the one to find the article. As a Russian-trained superspy, she’d made it a habit to constantly be on alert for any striking piece of news. She chanced upon it when she was doing private research for fun. It dinged on her radar when Tony’s name popped up. She immediately handed it over to Bucky, who naturally gave it to Steve.

“It might be nothing,” She warned him over the landline, “You know how they are…”

“…too rich to care about other people’s feelings.” Steve concluded bitterly. “Oh I know. I was an idiot to think otherwise. I shouldn’t have let myself… I should have used my head better.”

The article had blown like an RPG to the heart. He felt miserable and empty for days after he’d found out about Tony’s secret fiancée. Tony was engaged to be married to a curvy red-toned brunette, and from the picture, they looked like the perfect couple. The smile on his face—Steve had seen it very few times before. It shattered his heart to a million little piece. He wasn’t sure how he would recover from it. Or, if he could ever find all the pieces to make it whole again.

Steve tried to laugh but failed.

In the end, he stayed at home.

He spent the rest of the holiday break somberly pretending to have fun. The blow too fresh, too big, too much for him to handle. His parents, thankfully, hadn’t said a word about his strange behavior. They still went to the Roger’s family reunion at his uncle’s house. He still played backyard soccer with his cousins. He still retold the same school stories to his grandparents. He still woke up bright and early on Christmas morning, then went to Christmas mass. But he hadn’t stuffed his face full of food like a boy starved.

Sarah hadn’t said a word, but he knew that she knew. Mothers were impressive like that. Sarah in particular had a sixth sense when something was wrong with him. She hadn’t said a word. Instead, she gave him an extra serving of eggnog at dinner and gave him space. For that, he was grateful. He wouldn’t have known how to handle her interrogating him just yet.

When they got home, Joseph led him by the arm and pulled out their aged bottle of scotch. He wordlessly poured Steve a drink. “Whatever it is, Steven, your mother and I are here for you.” That’s when he finally broke down and cried, tears falling like a river down his cheeks. He cried about Tony—their first meeting, the camping trip, and the picture. He cried until the tears stopped coming. He cried himself dry. Sarah came in and gave him a glass of water. For the first time in twenty-three years, both his parents held him in their arms.

His phone stayed off.

He blocked Tony on his communicator after Tony’s umpteenth missed call.

In his life, he had only two dear loves: the stars and Anthony Edward Stark.

It was true. He’d fallen head-over-heels for the young genius in less than a year. It took him half a year to admit being wrong. Tony wasn’t just some rich kid riding on his father’s success. He saw
how hard the younger man tried to prove himself over and over again. Never did he use his family name to get anything; it was all on his own merits. At first, Steve detested Tony for having private access to the Stark Tower laboratories but then he saw the other boy work. But then he witnessed the marvels of Tony’s creation first hand.

A genius packaged as a small carefree boy—Tony Stark was dangerous. He had the capability to overtake his father’s technology. He’d grown up dissecting and perfecting all of Howard Stark’s creations. The potential a single body held. Weapons and tech that could level an entire city with the press of a button. If he set his sights on something, he would get it.

Steve felt like a prize.

Was that all he was to Tony?

Another challenge for the inventor to overcome?

Tony stole his heart. STOLE. He wasn’t willing to give it away. He entered the Academy thinking only of his God and his country. He wanted to save the world, to do better, to be a hero. But how could he? When he couldn’t even save his own heart.

He felt like an idiot for playing into Tony’s game.

Bucky and Natasha had been there for him. They showed up to his house unannounced, with the original Star Wars Trilogy and three boxes of pizza.

“We ain’t leaving you alone, Stevie.” Bucky declared. “Nat and I are here for you. I’m still your best pal, girlfriend or no girlfriend. Nat agrees with me on this one. So sit your ass down on your lumpy couch and we’re pigging out in front of your TV for the rest of the day. We can go panic about the weight gain later. You hear me?”

Natasha was quiet by his side. “Steve, I’m…” she looked like she wanted to apologize but she couldn’t bring herself to say the words. Instead, she shoved two six-packs into his arms and strode inside. “I still think that the prequels are better but Bucky says you like the originals.” She hefted herself onto the couch and stared at him, waiting for approval.


“Say the words, Steve. And, we’ll break into his house and break his bones. I’ll make him sorry for ever messing with my best friend like that.” Bucky patted him on the shoulder. His eyes darkened. Rarely did James Buchanan Barnes, old-time playboy and all-around trickster become serious—but when he did, it left no traceable evidence. “I don’t care if it gets me kicked out of Fury’s program. You don’t deserve that, Stevie, not you. No one will ever know what happened to him.”

The thought made Steve want to hurl. Tony dead by Bucky’s hands made him sick to the stomach. “Bucky,” he warned, voice darkening as well, “touch him and I will end you. Do. Not. Touch. Him.” He eyed Natasha too, just in case. “That goes for you as well, Natasha. We are goddamn Avengers. We better fucking act like ones. We do not turn out back against our teammates. What we stand for is bigger than out individual feelings. Do you both understand me?”

Bucky didn’t agree.

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” Steve said louder. He stared both of them down. He wouldn’t let anything happen to Tony, even after everything. He was better than that.
“Yes,” they both answered quietly.

The blond visibly relaxed. “Thank you. That means… that means a lot to me. Now, if it ain’t to much of a bother, can we go watch the movie now? I’d really like to take my mind off this… of everything… just for a little while.” They both nodded. Bucky played the DVD. Natasha popped the beers open. They watched the movies together with Steve squished in the middle of the couch.

He still missed Tony.

Missed the boy who broke his heart.

He didn’t want to go back to school—

— but he had to.

***

Returning to the Academy was awkward as hell. Steve might have numbed himself off during the rest of the holiday break, but it felt nothing compared to stepping onto the campus grounds come January. Everything reminded him of Tony. He saw the bench they stayed in after the Battle of the Airbands, the path where he carried a passed out Tony, and his bed—he had vivid memories of watching Tony sleeping on his bed, tracing the stars with childish joy, smiling at him like they were the best of friends.

Except, they weren’t even friends now.

Two weeks in the new term, and he’d successfully avoided running into Tony on campus. He still took full courses, went to all his classes, and participated in school-wide teambuilding events. Each time, he evaded making contact by sticking close to Bucky or Natasha. Both of them let him do as he pleased. He wasn’t ready. If he was going to be professional about this entire affair, he needed to give himself some time to sort out what he felt.

At the moment, he felt betrayed.

Betrayed by those warm brown eyes that didn’t seem like they could lie—at least, not to him.

He was wrong.

Sunday, Tony cornered him at the quad. “Steve, come on, you’ve got to let me explain.” His hair had grown a tiny bit longer, brushing the top of his ears and falling slightly at the tip of it spikes. Still the same brown eyes though.

Steve felt lost. “There’s really nothing to talk about, Stark. I know where I stand.” He kept his voice purposely low. One never knew who were listening in to conversations in such a public area, especially for a school of would-be spies. He can never be too careful. He shouldn’t let his guard down. Yet, looking at Tony now, his resolve steadily crumbled.

“Steve, listen to me. You’ve got it wrong.” Tony pleaded.

Steve stepped back, avoiding Tony’s hands. “Don’t. Don’t touch me.” He gave Tony an icy glare. He didn’t, he couldn’t, he shouldn’t want the boy’s hands on him. They’ve been through that path once, and it didn’t work out. Tony got engaged while he ended up with a broken heart. That wasn’t fair. He’d been a fool to believe love could grow in a short amount of time.

“SO THAT’S IT?!” Tony yelled, eyes blazing with rage and his hands balled into fists. Birds flew
out from the branches of a nearby tree. His face contorted into one of disgust. Lucky for them, it was still morning and most of the students were still on vacation mode. No one was there to witness the fight break out. Tony looked like he was ready to kill something.

“One article,” he seethed, “One fucking article from a fucking gossip rag and you throw me away some goddamn piece of trash! Is that really what you think of me, huh, Rogers? Poor baby Stark, just another rich playboy! He can’t possibly know what the hell love is. He can’t possibly understand because he doesn’t have a heart!” Steve opened his mouth to counter but Tony cut him off. “No, you don’t get to say anything. You don’t get to correct me because whatever is going to come out of that mouth is going to be a freaking lie.”

Tony closed the gap between them in three small steps. “You said you wanted to see me, and I let you. I let you see all of me—the good, the bad, the most vulnerable parts. I thought you were different, Steve. I thought… you know what? It doesn’t matter what I thought. It was wrong. We shouldn’t have—I shouldn’t have lo—let—you get close… I should’ve have… it doesn’t matter… you didn’t trust me, and that’s fine.” He choked out a laugh, eyes shining with unshed tears. “I wouldn’t trust me either. I… I really thought you’d be different. I thought… hah, fool I was… I thought you’d see me for me.”

Steve kept his face. Inside, a whirlwind of emotions stirred. Tony’s expression had completely closed off, his face only the shell—impenetrable and cold. His chest tightened, simple words like harpoons to his heart. Why couldn’t Tony let it be simple? Why couldn’t he just leave him alone? Why did he have to come here rub it in his face?

It was unfair.

So unfair.

With so few words he’d slipped again through Steve’s defenses.

It wasn’t fair.

“Captain Rogers,” Fury’s broke the tense silence. The man, dressed in his all-black uniform and leather trench coat, strode in like he owned the motherfucking place. He cared not for the silent stand-off between his two figurehead pupils, at the moment he didn’t care. “I need you in my office. We’ve got a new recruit.”

“Sir,” Steve automatically stood at attention. It took a moment longer to comprehend the Director’s words. “A new recruit, sir?”

Fury was having one of it. “Did I stutter, Captain? I believe I gave you orders.” He let his good eye linger on Stark. It’s goddamn idiot’s father fault anyway. The boy seemed unfazed. Rather, he could see the kid straighten up even more. He had to admit; the Stark heir had balls. He respected that. Rogers, on the other hand, looked like a lost little lamb. “Rogers! Office, now!”

Steve felt the sharp gaze on the back of his head while he walked away. Tony hadn’t said a word the entire time. It made Steve’s gut churn. It felt off, and wrong, like so many words had gone unsaid between them. Talking to Tony opened the floodgates of his emotions.

Later, he promised, later they would talk.

For now, he followed close to Fury’s heels. He needed to focus at the topic at hand; a new recruit—in the middle of the school year. It was unheard of; they didn’t accept students out of the blue. If they did, that person would have been special to be allowed admittance under peculiar
circumstances.

Fury’s office was located on the top floor of the main building. One needed a special access card to enter. The Director had floor to ceiling views of the entire Academy grounds, a perfect watch tower for their young lot of heroes. Fury was the eyes on campus and the rest of the administration were the ears. They operated with utmost trust and discretion. Steve hadn’t expected the surprise that met him inside.

“Steve?”

Margaret Elizabeth ‘Peggy’ Carter stood in the middle of the round office. The last time he saw her, she was all-knees and all-elbows. She’d been too tall for girl’s her age and even taller than Steve! But she was his perfection. Now… now, he had no words. She was more beautiful than he remembered. Her eyes twinkled when their eyes met, her lips parting to show a row of strong shiny white teeth. She took his breath away.

“Blonde?” He blurted out.

She laughed, the sound like music to his ears. His heart skipped a beat. “Daddy couldn’t risk me being recognized. Do you like it?”

“It’s…” he didn’t have any words. It felt like a dream to see her after all these years. Peggy Carter. His Peggy Carter. The girl opened up his heart. Peggy Carter. The girl he thought he wanted. Peggy Carter. The girl had learned to let go… because of Tony. “It’s different.”

Fury let out an irritated cough. “I see you two know each other. That makes it so much easier.” He settled down on his desk chair. “Ms. Carter, the circumstances around your admittance are… less than optimal, as such, I trust you’d keep the utmost discretion concerning it even to your… closer acquaintances. While, I am allowing it, I will not tolerate you being a precedent to future situations. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal, sir,” Peggy nodded without missing a heat beat. Steve stared in awe. She was like a completely different person from what he remembered, and it wasn’t just her hair. Soft-spoken Peggy Carter channeled a confidence that he’d seen only in Natasha.

“And Captain…”

“Director, sir.”

Fury turned his good-eye to Steve. “I initially wanted Romanova to take her around. They are, after all, from the same continent. However, in light of this new information, I am entrusting that responsibility to you. Take her around, get her acclimated to the campus. Be discrete. There are enough rumors floating around this academy and I do not want this incident fueling the fire. Am I understood, Captain?”

“Yes, sir,” Steve nodded. “It’ll be a pleasure.”

Fury rolled his eye. “This isn’t a dating service, Captain. Am I wrong to believe that you can keep it in your fucking pants? What are you long lost lovers or something? Get the hell out of my office!” With that, the two students scampered out of his office. “Kids these days. Thinks I’m running a Tinder for fucking superheroes!”

***

Peggy giggled when once they left earshot. Steve joined her. For a moment, it felt like they’d been
transported back to their high school days—Peggy and Steve, Steve and Peggy together as best friends—except in the ways which have changed.

“So, Captain now, ei?” She teased, looking at Steve through lowered lashes. She smiled. “Since when did that happen, Stevie?”

Steve let out an easy laugh. “So blonde. When did that happen?” He tried for casual and succeeded.

They locked eyes for a solid minute before bursting out in laughter. He still couldn’t believe his eyes even after seeing her right in front of his face, or hearing the richness of her laughter though his ear. He feared that she was merely an oasis that would disappear again all too soon. Yet, he could feel her arm brushing against his as they walked.

“I’ll tell you,” she said in a tone that was painfully familiar, “If you tell me.”

“Ladies first,” he countered with a smile.

Peggy looked unimpressed. “Fine. Have it your way. Like I said, daddy wouldn’t want me to be recognized…” She paused mid-step and turned to him. “Steve, what have I told you about my father?”

“You said he was a scientist.” Something about her demeanor worried him. Her face told him that she had a secret, and for what reason she’d kept them he wanted to believe her. She bit her lip, a childhood tell that Steve recognized. “Peggy, what aren’t you telling me?”

“My father works for the Strategic Scientific Research, an allied effort made up the best minds in the free world. When we moved, it was because there was a threat to the Queen. He went back to try and stop it. He succeeded. Father is one of the greatest mathematical minds in the world. He’s a codebreaker…” She bit her lip again, unsure eyes drilling holes into him. “… so am I… which is why I came here to the states. Stevie, the potential I have being here… it’s… it’s…great!”

They were walking in the quad when she threw her arms around him.

“And you, Steve, I’ve finally found you!” She said, raising to her tiptoes to rub her cheek against his. Steve wrapped his arms around her waist for balance. “After all these years, I’m with you again! There were rumors at St. Martin’s of a young blonde American soldier from Brooklyn and I knew it was you. How could I not? It’s always been your dream even when you were a little runt in middle school. Now, you’re here, I’m here, we can live it together. Isn’t that great?”

“It’s wonderful, Peggy.” He answered sincerely. There was absolutely no mistaking Peggy for an oasis. She felt solid, and firm, and real in his arms. ‘God, I missed you.’ He couldn’t help but say. It was all too much, the emotional roller-coaster in a single day. He meant it. She seemed like the only silver-lining to everything that has happened with Tony. Most of all, she felt safe. “I really, really, really did.”

“Oh, Stevie,” she cooed, brushing a hand over his ear. “Did we promise to always be together?”

“Yeah,” he sighed into her neck. “You, me, and, Bucky.” He stiffened. “BUCKY! We’ve got to tell Bucky!”

“James?” Peggy’s eyes widened, watering with tears. Her hands came up to cover her mouth as she choked out a sob. “James Buchanan Barnes is here? Oh my Lord… oh my Lord! I can’t… Steve is he…?”

Steve lowered his head, avoiding her gaze. “I’m sorry, Peggy, but Bucky… he…” Peggy’s knees
buckled as she broke into sobs. He caught her by the waist and gently brought her down, kneeling beside her. “I’m sorry, Peggy. I knew… I knew you always loved him but he…” He rubbed circle on her back as she clung to him.

“I… I…”

“It’s okay,” he cooed, gathering her in his arms. “And I loved you. The three of us made quite the combination didn’t we? Always chasing after the wrong person. You chased him and I chased you. He chased some else entirely.” He gave her a gentle squeeze. Her hot salty tears wet his neck. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so, so sorry, Peggy. I shouldn’t have…”

“No,” she sobbed, fingers clawing at his chest. “It’s fine. I was… I was a fool. I’ve always been a fool for him. I should be sorry, Steve. I knew.” She confessed, “I knew but I couldn’t tell you that I knew.”

“It’s okay.” He knew that she knew, and it helped him move on. He forgave her a long time ago. “It’s okay. There’s nothing to forgive.” He didn’t know how long they stayed like that, how many classes he missed, or how many people saw them. His best friend needed him so he stayed, unaware of a certain pair of brown eyes watching them from a distance.

***

Tony had gone and done it—blowing up in Steve’s face like a goddamn child. He hadn’t meant for that to happen. He just… blew. He came back to school in hopes of making amends with his boyfriend. Well, ex-boyfriend now. Steve refused to answer his calls on both mobile and the Avenger’s Communicator since the night of the scandal. Even their parents were at an uproar when confronted with the news.

A paparazzi had snuck into the event under the guide of a ‘plus one’ date. The connected guest was immediately black listed by Howard and Maria. Their ‘engagement’ had been meant to throw off potential attacks on Stark Industries to dubious parties who were interested. They were meant to announce it much later in the years. However, since it leaked all-over the world wide web, neither of their fathers wanted to deny the rumors. The only crowning glory was that Margaret’s identity hadn’t been revealed.

Tony wanted to renounce at the reports immediately but Margaret begged him to reconsider. She desperately wanted a legitimate reason to come back to the United States. Foolish romantic that he was, he allowed it. All he needed was a change, and he firmly believed that Steve would listen to him.

But, he was wrong—apparently, he hadn’t been as special as Steve led him to believe. He saw it, clear as day, the image of Steve in the arms of an unknown blonde woman in the middle of the quad. He now understood Steve’s distance for the past few weeks. It was simple, really. Steve moved on—moved on from him, moved on from them.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise. They were together for less than a week when it happened. That shouldn’t have been enough time to fall in-love.

For Steve, maybe.

For Tony? He couldn’t pinpoint exactly when he started to fall. Perhaps, when Steve started to treat him with respect instead of simply ‘getting along’, when Steve started to listen to his suggestions during team drills instead of just barking our orders, or when Steve began to believe in him. If he were honest, it was when Steve first visited him at the worship in the middle of the night with a
sandwich and a glass of water instead of a verbal reprimand.

Steve understood him, and his eccentricities.

When Steve asked him to home for the holidays, he was ecstatic beyond words. Brooklyn, Sarah and Joseph, Bucky and Natasha, and Steve—for a moment, they all felt like home. He felt that he was home. It had been the happiest Almost-Christmas that he could remember. They didn’t need all the lavish riches of Stark Manor. Even if their house was small and their meals were simple, they filled him with the warmth of family.

It felt like a picture-perfect dream but they were destined to remain only dreams. He would cherish all those memories—of simple homemade breakfast, of Dellarocco’s and bowling, of camping underneath the blanket of the night.

He thought Steve opened not only his home but also his heart to him.

Or, at least, he thought Steve did.

Tony understood it now. He’d been deluded by his own selfish fantasies, by his own false ideas. He believed what he wanted to believe. Steve couldn’t possible want him of all people. He shouldn’t have pressed his own ideas on the other boy. That was selfish of him. Steve deserved a chance to be happy even if it wasn’t with him.

_DING. DING._

A message from Janet said “Start of the year party. Club A. First round’s on me ;)” The picture attached showed an unopened bottle of Johnnie Walker Gold.

Tony knew what he had to do.

He needed to move on.

He ended up getting hammered at Janet’s party. So drunk, he hadn’t recognized half of the people in the crowd. He gave the barkeep his card and opened up a tab with instructions to “Keep’em coming.” No one dared say no to a Stark Industries golden MasterCard, especially one which bore the name Stark in front. It kept him happy, and sated, and spectacularly smashed. The buzz in his head felt good—a numbing kind of good which he sorely needed.

So what if his father was an alcoholic?

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In his effort to block out Steve and the entire Christmas disaster, Tony had forgotten about the fake engagement and the fake fiancée who supposedly entered the Academy because of his father’s ludicrous donation.

***

Tony entered Anatomic Physics drunk for the umpteenth time in a row. Ray-Ban Aviators tried to hide his blood-shot eyes. He collapsed on his seat with an audible groan. He even smiled with the same swagger as usual to throw his classmates off his scent. Bruce, however, saw right through it. The quiet brunet wasn’t impressed.

“How many times has this been, Tony?” Bruce asked, more resigned than anything else. He was Tony’s second friend after Janet but even so Tony kept his distance after the holidays. They’d seen
less and less of the dark-haired inventor as Spring neared. More than that, his friend always came to class intoxicated. Even a blind man could see Tony’s downward spiral.

“Does it really matter?” Tony mumbled back. “I’m here, aren’t I? Lighten up, Brucie, you know it helps me get my gears running. I’ve been in the workshop all night!”

The workshop became his sanctuary more than ever. He spent more and more time in the tower working on his projects—in between lessons, at night, and on weekends. He lost a few pounds since the start of the term. Relying on alcohol, protein bars, and coffee did that to a guy. So what if his clothes fit a little looser around the waist? He wasn’t peacocking for anyone anyway. At least, he was productive. He dedicated majority of his time to creating his masterpiece: his Iron Man suit.

It distracted him from Steve’s blossoming relationship with bold, blond, and beautiful. He could never be sure about the last part because he never stood long enough to get a good look at her face. Avoiding them became second nature, getting it down to a science. It wasn’t hard. Steve loved his routines. Once set, Tony easily predicted where and when the golden-haired couple would show up. They only saw each other at school-wide events. The past two teambuilding Saturdays, he played sick and stayed in the hospital wing with Pepper.

He knew that it couldn’t go on forever. Eventually, his fountain of excuses would dry and he would be forced to face them. Not yet. He needed time to heal—which was why he launched himself head-first into work. Nothing compared to the tranquility of his workshop, surrounded by all the things familiar to him: grease, oil, and machines. Dum-E came with him from Malibu!

Tony went back to what he did best: inventing machines. He fired up his brain on all cylinders and got his fingers working. In a drunken haze, he designed Iron Man—the suit renewed his purpose in life. It got him through the day, the main reason why he got up every morning despite running low on blood, blood-sugar, and sleep. It gave him the drive to go on and work through his heartbreak. For now, that had to be enough.

“Tony? Tony?” When he opened his eyes, Bruce’s concerned face stared back at him. “Oh thank god! I’ve been calling you for the past fifteen minutes! Tony, we lost you! Where did you go?”

“Workshop.”

Bruce frowned, a face he doesn’t often show. “Is that where you disappear to? We’ve been worried about you. Look, you know I don’t mean to pry but, Tony, this is getting out of hand. Do you...” he wrung his hands awkwardly on the table, “Do you maybe want to go see somebody? To help you? We’re all been really patient. We tried, Tony, really. But this—” he pointed his finger directly at Tony “—this isn’t healthy.”

“Brucie, Brucie,” Tony raised his hands in mock surrender, “Take a chill-pill, Brucie-boy, I’m good. I swear I’m good. Haven’t missed a class this term, have I? Haven’t failed a quiz? The only think I’ve been skipping the monthly teambuilding shit and you know it’s a piece of crap, right? If they wanted the ‘Avengers to come together’ then they should have hosted a college party. Ain’t no place better for drunken mistakes and one-night stands.”

“Tony—”

“Hey! Is that the time!” he made a show of looking at his watch. “I’m going to be late for my next class. This was a great chat, Brucie-baby. Why don’t we pick it up tomorrow? Yes? Sounds awesome. Well, I’ve got to go!” He fled the classroom before Bruce could utter another word. And —“Ompf!”
“Jesus, Tony!” said the voice which haunted his dreams at night, “Watch where you’re going. You’re going to ‘cause an accident!”

Thankfully, the grass broke his fall. Grey and turquoise entered Tony’s blurry field of vision. He blinked at the of Supra Vaider ‘Satellite’ high-top sneakers, and gulped. ‘Please just leave, please just leave, please just leave,’ he closed his eyes and prayed silently in his head. He froze, ‘please, please, please—’

“Tony? Are you alright?”

Fuck.

“Peachy.” He answered, voice dripping in sarcasm. “I have grass stains on my pants and my ass feels wet—just peachy really. Why don’t you run along now and let me simmer in humiliation alone, hmmm? You’ve made it perfectly clear where we stand. So why bother to start pretending that you care now?” He took a deep breath and looked up. Clear blue eyes widened in surprise. “When clearly, you don’t. Just leave me alone, Rogers.”

“Tony—”

“—don’t.” He exhaled deeply. The hollow feeling which he tried keeping at bay steadily rose to his chest. He stood up on shakily legs, declining Steve’s offered hand. “Just don’t. I’m… Congratulations… I’m happy you’ve moved on… I just… Give me the space to do the same.” The last part barely made it out. Steve stared at him. The gaze burned his skin. He needed to go. He needed to go now. If he didn’t—if he didn’t—only God knows what might happen.

“Stevie!” A female voice yelled. Tony jerked his head to follow the sound. It was… familiar. He had heard it somewhere before. But where? For the life of him, he could not remember, at least not until—“Anthony!”

From the same building, his fiancée came running towards them with her long blonde hair flowing like strands of sunlight behind her. What little strength he had in his knees seemed to disappear. How could he have not seen this coming? He should have put two and two together. Margaret’s long lost childhood love in the USA and Steve’s first love who migrated to England. If he had taken one proper look at her instead of acting like a child, he would have known.

“What are the odds of that?” His voice came out strong. He put on a fake smile and let her kiss him on the cheek, mask of well-bred aristocrat on his face. “Margaret! What a pleasure to see you again! I haven’t heard from you since our engage—Christmas! I haven’t seen you seen Christmas! Father never did give me an update. I’m glad you’re here. How are you? Did you find him?” He wanted to be sure even if he already knew the answer.

“Anthony, good Lord, it feels like forever! I looked but I couldn’t find you! Yes, yes, I found him again on the very first day that I arrived, Anthony! Thank you.” Peggy smiled from ear to ear. She half-turned to Steve, rosy pink colored her cheeks. “Stevie, this is him. He helped me find you again. Without him, I would never have been allowed back nor could I have entered in the middle of the year. Tell me, you know each other, yeah?”

Steve had a look of abject horror, face white like a ghost.

“No.” Tony beat him to answering. She didn’t know him enough to read through his lie. “Not very well, I’m afraid. We’re just… two very different people. I’m more of a science kind of guy. The nerds and geeks are my people. Speaking of which, I’ve got an important experiment that need my attention. Apologies but I must hurry and run. It was an absolute pleasure to see you again, darling.
I’m… I’m happy for you.”

Tony didn’t wait for them to answer. He turned on his heel and fled. The sound of his heartbeat echoed in his ears like a drum. He needed a drink.

***

Peggy Carter was Steve’s best friend. Once upon a time, she was also the love of his life but that ship has long sailed across the ocean with her when she left for England. When she came back, he had been elated to see her again, and even more so when she told him that she was here to stay. She would always have a special place in his heart even if he’d let his feelings go. At least now, they were on equal footing. He no longer felt like the lovesick puppy following her around.

The Spring Formal was in two weeks. Today, he planned on manning up and doing something that he should have done all those years ago—ask Peggy to go with him to the dance. He had it all planned out in his head; he spent all morning preparing a picnic in the quad with all of her favorite home-cooked meals. He had Bucky and Natasha help him with the streamers which spelled out ‘Save me a dance?’ in pink letters. It was least he could do for chickening out in high school.

He hadn’t expected Tony.

Tony ran into him on his way to pick her up. He looked like death—sunken cheeks, pale complexion, and so much thinner than before. It was no surprise that a weak collision sent the boy flying to the ground. Seeing him forced every single feeling which Steve buried to rise to the surface—swifter and stronger than before. When he spoke, he only had hurtful words to say.

Steve was ready to apologize, ready to grovel and beg and plead for Tony’s forgiveness because Tony got it wrong—all wrong.

Then, Peggy came. The truth came rushing out in a tumble of words that he barely followed. It felt like he swallowed a hand grenade when it was over, and Tony—his Tony—was gone again, slipped right through his fingers because he was too frozen to act, taking his heart with him.

“Stevie? Stevie? Earth to Stevie, can you hear me, Stevie?” Peggy waved a hand in front of his face to get his attention. It took him longer than he cared to admit before he could finally look at her. He let out a broken moan before falling to his knees, with the worst case of shakes since he nearly drowned in the river. “Steve! Steve! What happened? Steve, what—?”

“Sorry, Peggy.” He apologized, voice barely above a whisper. He lifted his chin to look at her. “I don’t think I can bring you to Spring Formal this year either.”

Peggy understood. Her face fell. “You’re Anthony’s boyfriend.” Boyfriend—the word shot straight through his stomach. It felt worse to hear that word aloud than in the recess of his mind. He nodded. Her jaw dropped, one hand rose to cover it while the other gripped him by the arm.

“Steve,” she said his name like she wanted to turn back time to stop it all from happening, “I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t know.” Steve confessed quietly. “I didn’t know it was him. I thought… Christ, Peggy, I thought he went behind my back, played with my feelings, and got engaged! I didn’t know it was a cover…” He curled into a ball on the ground beside her. “I should have… I am such an idiot! He wanted to tell me and I blew him off, I turned him away. He wanted to tell me the truth and I… I fucked up and I lost him. What’s worse? What’s worse is that I love him…”

“Steven Gant Rogers,” Peggy said firmly. “For someone with such a big heart, you aren’t the
dumbest person I know. Haven’t you learned anything from high school? You did the exact same thing to me! You’re doing it all again, making the same stupid mistake. Find him. Find, Anthony and apologize before he’s gone forever. It isn’t too late. Come on, Stevie, you’ve faced bigger things on the battle field. You can do this.”

She urged him up, wiping his snot and tears away just like in middle school. “Up, up, Stevie, we’re got a boy to catch. Say it with me: I’m going to find Anthony and apologize. Now, repeat… I’m going to find Anthony and apologize.”

“I’m… I’m going to…”

“I’m going to find Anthony and apologize.”

“I’m going to…” With each breath he took, he felt his resolve grow stronger until it threatened to overwhelm him. Tony—he needed to find Tony. He needed to make this right. He needed—“to find Tony and apologize.”

It was easier said than done.

***

Tony still avoided him like the plague.

One week later, and there was still no sign of the dark haired boy.

Steve never knew how easy it had been before the whole fight happened. Tony had simply been there—around the corner, reading under the tree, by the cafeteria, or handing out in the hallway. Anywhere and everywhere he turned to, he would catch a glimpse of Tony—Tony’s hair, his jacket, his school bag, anything really. Peggy distracted him for a while. He thought, quite foolishly, that maybe their schedule did not line-up or they were both just busy. He did not want to think of the worse but he was a fool.

“God, I’m an idiot.” Steve groaned, dropping down on his arms. Bucky, Natasha, and Peggy sat with him in the cafeteria. They each had a tray but Steve hadn’t touched his, a familiar sight for the past week. It wasn’t getting any better. “A big—big—big stupid idiot!” He accented each word by banging his head on the table, causing a light dent. Several heads turned in his direction.

“Still no luck on the manhunt, Stev-o?” Bucky draped an arm around Steve in sympathy. “I can’t believe it! You’ve got spies for friends! How is that even possible?” He sighed. “Look maybe Tony doesn’t want to be found just yet, what do you think about that? Maybe just give him a bit of space?”

“I’ve given him enough space.” Steve groused. The can of soda in his hand squeaked in his grip. “I might…” he mumbled quietly into his arm, “…I might lose him… I’ve already lost him. Idiot! Idiot! IDIOT! Me and my big stupid ego! I shouldn’t have listened to him!”

“Stevie, you didn’t know…” Peggy cooed, hand running up and down his back. “Natasha, do you have any information from any of the scientists? Has any of them seen him?”

Natasha shook her head in a negative. “No. Even they’ve been having trouble keeping an eye on him this term. No one seems to know where he runs off to in his spare time. I’ve hacked into the surveillance feeds. Still nothing. Tony’s managed to cover all of his digital tracks. I can’t even see his access card logged into facilities outside of his classes. It’s as if he vanishes into thin air!” It said something that she felt rattled because Natasha Romanova rarely felt rattled.
Steve bemoaned sorrowfully into his arms.

“He hasn’t left through.” Bucky reassured, “Clint’s still seen him around. Hey, that’s an idea. Why don’t I get the best eyes on campus shadow him for you? I bet birdbrain will do if for you Stevie! Guy looks up to you. Or we can have one of the spidey twins trap him with their webs… if only those two were more loyal to you than they were to Tony…”

Steve let out a resigned sigh. “No… if he doesn’t want me… then he doesn’t want me…”

*BOOM—CRRAAAAACK!*

The lights suddenly turned off. Uncharacteristic lighting flashes outside the window. Everyone in the hall jumped in high alert.

“Strange. The news never reported thunderstorms in this area…” Peggy thought aloud.

“No…” Bucky said slowly, “This isn’t a normal thunderstorm. It ain’t no storm at all, babe.”

Natasha nodded. “It’s Thor.”

On cue, something crashed from the heavens and straight into the middle of the cafeteria, bringing concrete and pipes and wires down like a halo of destruction. Clouds of dust and smoke oozed from the rubble like thick unnatural fog. They covered their mouths and noses but everyone kept their eyes open. As Avengers, they should be used to this kind of scenario. No one panicked. Why should they? This sort of thing happened every semester.

“I RETURN, DEAR MIDGUARDIAN FRIENDS!” Thor’s thunderous voice boomed through the chaos. “I SEEK TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ADOLESCENT MATING RITUALS KNOWN AS ‘SPRING FORMAL’! I HAVE BROUGHT MY OWN BOUNTY FOR THE FESTIVAL!” A second figure appeared beside him. From the smoke, people made out a tall and voluptuous frame with dark long raven tresses.

“But aren’t you Thor’s brother?” Natasha questioned, unfazed that her boyfriend passed out at her feet. She was more inclined to inquire about Thor’s uncommon customs. She could deal with Bucky later.

“Tis correct, maiden Natasha.” Thor answered.

“Does that mean you have a vagina too?”

Thor blushed a deep crimson. “I… uh… no, I do not. Loki is… adopted.” He steeled himself for a few seconds. “It matters not! I wish to participate in midguardian customs with my bride-to-be for we are destined to be wed back on Asguard on our five-hundredth year. It is our intention to understand traditions beyond our own realm.”

Peggy picked up her jaw from the ground. “You wish to go to Spring Formal… with your bride-to-be… who is also your half—excuse me—your adoptive brother?”

“Aye, fair maiden with hair as gold as sunlight.”

She blushed, unused to his words. She hadn’t had the pleasure of meeting their ‘exchange students’ yet but they’ve measured up to her expectation of the uncanny pair. And then, it hit her like a bucket of cold water… or maybe it was just the water from the pipes drenching her from head to toe. “Anthony will surely be there!” She shouted, turning to Steve and forgetting all about hot brother incest action.
Thor on the other hand appeared lost the turn of events. "Had something happened to friend Anthony? Does he not have classes at the Science building? I saw him when I came down from the bi-frost. Perhaps I should—" He said with the look of a lost little puppy or his wide face. His words were cut-off by Steve jumping of his chair and sprinting out of the hall. "Friend Steven?"

Peggy placed a hand on his arm. "Hey, big guy, I think you should let them settle this one on their own."

***

Tony entered Advanced Bio-Genetics drunk for the umpteenth time in a row. Today, he didn’t even bother wearing aviators to hide his eyes. He just trudged into the lab and collapsed work station beside Bruce. They worked on the lesson for most of the three-hour period, exchanging friendly banter between them and a couple of lesson-related questions. It felt lighter—easier—than it had been for the semester. He’d gotten much better at handling his alcohol.

"Heya, Tony," Peter greeted with a three finger salute. Unlike the others in their motley crew of science-geeks, he was the most un-uptight. "You seem chipper. Something good happen lately?"

He found that it was best dealing with Tony in the same casual aloof manner. It worked well for them, and for Tony. He stole a glance from the corner of his eye. Tony still looked as dead on his feet as ever but he was smiling. He counted it as a plus.

Tony’s grin even widened. "Yepp-". He emphasized the ‘p’ with a pop of his lips. It was a week after he bumped into Steve outside the building. So far, he managed to successfully circumvent any repeat performances. He locked himself away in his workshop with the of Patron. Last night wasn’t any different except— "I’ve got the thrusters running last night. It was awesome! What are you working at?"

That piqued Peter’s curiosity. "Thrusters?" He raised his hand from the scope to look in Tony’s direction, “Something wrong with the Quintjet or are you developing another aircraft for the Academy?” Only the people who worked on the craft knew about the project. Peter was one of them too.

Tony shook his head. "Nooo-pe," he popped his lips on the ‘p’ again. “This one’s all me, Spidey-baby, one hundred percent Tony Stark through and through.” He declared, drawing an imaginary arch overhead with his fingers. “Think of it as my version of Brucie’s Jolly-Green, except I’m painting mine in hotrod-red and glitter-gold. Ka-boom! One day, Pete-y, I’ll even make a booster set that would help, so don’t need to constantly be looking behind your back.”

“Tony, I don’t understand.” Peter said carefully. He clenched and unclenched his hands on his side, controlling the swell of emotions. He lowered his voice, “You’re making a field suit? With gamma radiation? That’s not… it’s not very safe.”

“Woah, woah,” Tony raised his hands defensively. “Take it easy there, Pete-y Baby. I love you and atomic physics as the next nerd but I’m not diving in head-first into that kind of boom-chika-boom! It’s all mechanical—metal and knots and bolts and washers! The only thing organic about it would be me when I’m wearing it. Like a bigger, more badass version of your shooters!”

At the mention of Peter’s own invention, his eyes widened with glee. “Oh. That’s wonderful, Tony. When do we get to see it?”

“Soon,” Tony answered cryptically just as the lesson came to an end. He hummed Back in Black under his breath when he packed away his things. “Catcha later, spiderboy. I’ve got a date with red, gold, and gorgeous!” He returned Peter’s three-finger salute and flourished it with a wink.
wink and the smile faded as soon as he stepped out of the classroom. A flash of blond alerted him of Steve’s presence. “Fuck.”

Not wanting to make a scene, Tony did the best thing that he could think of—he turned his heels and walked the other way.

“Tony, wait!” Steve’s calls echoed the hallway.

Tony refused. He walked even faster. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,’ he repeated over and over in his brain. But even that wasn’t enough to cover the sound of Steve’s steps drawing near. He sped up again, but Steve wasn’t deterred, calling out his name in greater volume. He searched for an exit—the fire escape!

“C’mon, Tony. C’mon, Tony. C’mon, Tony.” He broke into a sprint when Steve yelled out his name. “C’monc’monc’mon—Fuck! Stairstairsstairs.” He crashed into the door of the fire escape and made a run for it. Baba-dump, baba-dump, baba-dump, his heart raced. Blood pumped in his ears. His hands sweated, making it slip off the railings. He can hear his own heavy breathing in the silence of the stairwell. Click, click, click, his feet drummed down the steps.

Kreeeeeeeeneen. BANG!

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

“TONYYYY!!!”

“Shitfuck!” Tony looked up and saw Steve looking down. “Shit!” He jumped the last three steps and onto the next flight. “Shitshitshit!” He scrambled into a lower floor. Boom! Boom! Boom! He immediately tipped the large industrial sized single unit recycler to barricade the door. BANG! Something crashed on the otherside but he didn’t care. Faces blurred as he ran through the corridor. CRASH. BANG. BOOM!

“TONY!”

He made the mistake of turning around. The recycler and the door were wedged into the lockers with Steve on top of the pile. Blue eyes pierced right through him despite the distance. “Shitshit—FUCK!” He cursed as he lost balance and crashed to the floor. Pain shot up from his knees and his knuckles. He slammed his fist to the floor, “Damnit!” One second he was face-down on the floor and face-to-face with a sweat-slick Steve in the next.

“Steve.” Fuck, he mentally cursed, he lowered his guard too much. “What are you… heh… what are you doing here?”

“We need… to talk,” Steve said dangerously. Being so close reminded to Tony reminded him of nights they spent curled together on his bed in Brooklyn, of the most memorable night inside the tent, of the last time he truly saw Tony smiling at him in the airport. Tony’s scent invaded his senses, a scent he sorely missed. Then his face softened, “Please.”

Tony felt like he was drowning. Seeing Steve against was like diving headfirst into the plunge pool of a waterfall—the water swirled and forced him down with immense power and velocity. He wouldn’t be able to come up for air. Those baby-blue eyes held power over him like a moth to a fly trap, Icarus to the son, Steve to Tony. He turned his face away. “We’ve been through this before, Rogers. There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Let Me Go.” Tony wiggled and fought his way out of Steve’s grip, but the blond had muscle mass and body size in his favor. His efforts were futile against a supersoldier in top form. Good God. Having Steve—solid and hot—against him brought back too many painful memories. But his resolved weaken when Steve brushed his fingers against his ear. He shuddered.

“Christ, Tony.” Steve pressed his face into Tony’s neck. The skin felt like fire against his flesh. Tony was alive, and breathing, and here. He smelled of the same grease and sweat which Steve remembered. His voice still sounded like the voice in Steve’s dreams. It felt good to be able to touch again, and yet it felt so very wrong because Tony was pushing him away.

No, Tony’s mind rebelled. “Have you forgotten English, Rogers? I said let me go!”

“Tony, please, I need you to listen to me.”

Tony broke. “Listen to you?” He spat out venomously. If he were a weaker man, he would have spat on Steve’s face too. “Me, listen to you? How… how…” he seethed, “How dare you! You fucking… you fucking bastard!” He pushed off with all his might, creating space between them. He glared at Steve with everything he had. “Did I say the exact same things to you, asshole? And guess what you did, Rogers. You fucking turned me away. So—get—the—FUCK—OFF—ME!” He yelled, kicking off the ground with his thruster boots, hand thrusters engaging over his hands.

Steve stumbled back, his face filled with shock and awe. “Tony, that’s…Tony, please…”

Tony hovered a good foot above the air. “Don’t,” he backed away when Steve tried to move closer. He folded his arms over his chest. He didn’t want to do this anymore. He had already said his peace. Why now? “What the hell do you even want? Haven’t we said and done enough?” Then he sighed. “You know what, Rogers, I could blast your face now if I wanted to. I admit that I want to —” Steve flinched, making him snort. “—But I’m not going to. Instead, I’m choosing to be the better person and did what you didn’t. I’m going to listen to you but after this. I’m gone. So go. Talk.”

“I’m sorry.” Steve blurted out, frankness surprising both of them.

Tony was unperturbed. “That’s it?” He cocked an eyebrow, one hand carding through his damp hair. “I’ve said that it’s fine.” His arm gestured outward. “What’s done is done. Water under the bridge. Words written in smoke. I don’t deny that you were an asshole—because let’s face it, you are—but that’s in the past, it happened, it’s finished… Urgh!” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Look, Rogers, I already get that you don’t like me—”

“—You’re wrong!” Steve shouted.

A crowd began to gather but Tony continued to challenge. “Am I? You think I’m ‘a brat riding on daddy’s coattails’. Wasn’t that the first thing you told me?”

“I—” Bangs fell over Steve’s eyes. “—I was wrong.” He said softly. “Tony you aren’t that. You —” He’d practiced his words, his apology, a million times in his head but he lost them all when faced with the one single person he needed to say them to. “I, I should have listened to you. Nothing’s your fault, Tony. It was mine. I… I was too stubborn to listen. I should have. You—you aren’t that. You’re nothing like that. You’re—I should have trusted you.”

That’s when Tony broke. “Yeah.” He whispered lowly, “But you didn’t.”

Steve jerked his head up. “Tony, please--!”

“It’s alright, Steve. I—I’ll be fine.” It was quietly said. Tony raised his thruster-covered hand to
silence further protests but his eyes couldn’t be seen. “But hey—” He choked out a laugh, “At least you’re getting your first love back, right? Peggy’s here for good. That girl, she’s special. She would have climbed heaven and hell to get back to you. Sounds like you, right? So, I’m… I’m glad I helped get your true love back to you.” To add sting to the wound, he sounded completely sincere. “I’ll make myself scarce so you two can enjoy.”

Then, in a flash of thruster lights, Tony was gone, leaving Steve staring after him.

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Tony went underground.

No one heard anything from him.

According to Ms. Potts, Tony was on leave—family emergency.

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Peggy had been right. After the huge screw-up in the science building, Steve’s last hope was the Avenger’s Spring Formal. All students were required to attend the school-sponsored event in order to provide a ‘holistic school experience’ according to the admin BS. No one, absolutely no one could weasel their way out of it. Steve sat at the table with his friends.

Tonight was the night he would win Tony back.

“Stop it.” Natasha hissed at Steve under her breath. “Your knee bouncing is jiggling the table!” Steve gave her a dear-in-headlights expression, feigning innocence. He glanced to Bucky for morale support by the raven boy was silenced by his girlfriend’s pointed look.

“Stevie, calm down.” Peggy patted his shoulder reassuringly. “It’s still early.”

“They’re both right, Cap.” Clint sighed, “Really. If Stark’s gonna show if his reason was bogus! Look at what happened to me and Nat!” Natasha had tried and failed several times by faking sick and Clint, on one memorable occasion, tried by squeezing through the vents. Both efforts were squashed by the impassive Professor Coulson.

“I remember. I just…”

Clint whistled. “Looks like your boy just walked in. Stark at twelve o’clock. But ohh—” he sucked in air through gritted teeth, “—looks like he isn’t alone.”

Steve whipped around to see Janet hanging off Tony’s arm, looking gorgeous and beautiful and perfect. She wore a golden dress fit for a princess with a large ballroom skirt made with layers upon layers of light flowy fabric, and a black lace belt which clinched her waist. Tony wore a three-piece tuxedo composed of a gold vest, a two-toned maroon and black jacket, and a gold-and-red striped bow tie. However, his hair still had his untamable bedhead.

“Oh, hot damn.” Clint wolf-whistled for an entirely different reason. “They look like a fairytale couple, they’re shoo-ins for Spring Formal King and Queen—hey, ouch!” He pulled his foot out from under the table cloth. “Barnes, what the hell was that for! Got me in my goddamn shin.”

“Shut up,” Bucky hissed but left his actions unexplained. Clint continued to massage his bruised muscle, muttering about a shoeprint while giving the brunette the stink-eye.

“For being an idiot!” Natasha shot back.
“What the hell did I fucking miss?”

“A lot, Sam, a lot. We’ll tell you later. Steve?” Peggy turned to the blond with concern. “Are you alright?”

“Yes and no.” Steve answered. In truth, he felt sick. He wanted to throw up the burger he ate for lunch in the nearest boy’s room. His stomach sunk to the floor and his heart along with it. He let his shoulders fall with a sigh. It was all over. “There’s nothing left to do, Peggy. I’m too late.” He took one last glance at the boy he lost.

Tony turned and his eyes immediately saw Steve.

Their eyes met across the room.

But all too quickly, it was gone, vanishing faster than it came.

“Well, _fuck._” Bucky snorted, looking like he was ready to puke. He gave Sam a now do you get it(?) look. “I don’t fucking think so, Stev-o, because that—that was some serious eye-fucking right there. Even _I_ saw that. Me—the most emotionally constipated person in this team, well, except for Clint—hey, oww—but fuck me three ways to Sunday. I know he still has feelings for you, Steve.”

“Bucky,” Steve answered flatly, “He has a date.”

The brunet rolled his eyes. “So do you and Peggy! Going together as non-dates. What the fuck is that, man? That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard. You still went together. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. How do you think that even looks, huh? It looks like you’re _together-together_! It’s a wonder why Stark doesn’t’ hate your guts yet! Christ! Can you be any more oblivious!”

Clint whistled lowly. “Well, damn. Nat de-clogged his constipation like a plumber and a shit-clogged toilet. That went on and flushed right out of here.”

“That is the most disgusting imagery in the world, you dummy.” Natasha’s face twisted in disgust.

“Yes, indeed—to all that was pointed out.” Peggy nodded. “Steve, you mustn’t give up.”

Everyone except for Steve agreed.

He distanced himself from the rest of the conversation between his friends. The dance was a good chance to gather the would-be Avengers in a non-combative high-stress situation. Scheduled on the final day of exams, it gave everyone a chance to chill out and unwind. He didn’t want to ruin the night for any of them. He settled for watching Tony from his corner of the room like some psycho-stalker ex-boyfriend. Not creepy, not creepy at all.

The Stark heir was completely in his element—laughing, smiling, and gathering people around him with his natural charisma and effortless charm. His eyes crinkled lightly when he talked, his eyebrows rose when he thought something was funny, and his face made a squinty-ugly face when he found a particular conversation boring. However, for all those teeth glistening like the perfect toothpaste commercial, Tony’s smile never reached his eyes.

Steve tried to get closer on several instances only to be refused, rebuked, and redirected by Tony’s merry band of science nerds—Victor, Jessica, Peter, Bruce, and Janet—and Rhodes for some odd reason; Victor side-tracked him with a question about their next teambuilding event, Jessica complained about the punch bowl being spiked with Vodka, Peter went gaga hero-worshipping him again, Bruce talked to him about the weather, Rhodesy full-on body blocked him from getting close to Tony, and Janet asked him to dance with her!
“This isn’t working.” Steve leaned on the wall beside the vodka-spiked punch bowl with a sigh. After six failed attempts at making contact, he began to lose hope of ever reaching Tony tonight. Rhodes still had eyes trained on him, Steve lifted up his empty cup in the boy’s direction. He refilled it for what felt like the millionth time yet the buzz still wouldn’t kick in. Sometimes, he hated the serum and his increased metabolism. “Damn it!” He cursed, cup crumpled in his fist.

“Woah, there, Cap. What’s the red cup ever done to you?” Sam took the deformed plastic from his hands, discarding it in a black trash bag. “Okay. I might have gone MIA while going googly-eyed for Greer. But the guys filled me in—destroying perfectly good beer cups isn’t going to solve your problem.”

Steve’s jaw tightened. “I’ve been trying all night. What else am I supposed to do?”

Sam gave him a wry smile. “Sometimes, Cap, you’ve got to learn to trust your friends.” He answered before glancing around the room, as if silently communicating to their allies hidden in the dark.

***

Tony had been lucky. If Steve had caught him on another day, he wouldn’t have had the capability to leave. Lucky for him that he started testing his thruster boots and gloves. The look on Steve’s face haunted him since that day.

So, he hid.

He hid, and hid, and hid—locked himself away inside the workshop with the video on loop, cut all of his classes, and refused any communication outside of asking Pepper to grant him leave. If Rhodey stumbled into landing bay while testing out his very faulty jet back, Tony might already be in Heaven from drowning in his pool of his bad decisions. He just couldn’t bear witness the blossoming of the romantic drama entitled “Steve and Peggy: United at Last” which would have made blockbuster profits on Valentines’ day.

He would have prepared to work-away the rest of the semester by perfect his Mark I. Damn the Fury’s ‘holistic school experience’. If it wasn’t for the compulsory attendance, he wouldn’t have come out in the open. Janet had been a friend, agreeing the accompany him on short notice.

He could feel the prickle of Steve’s gaze at the back of his neck.

“He’s still staring at you, you know.” Jessica whispered to the table in general.

They sat at a table on the opposite side of the venue with Tony strategically facing away from Steve’s table. All night they’ve been playing their little game of cat and mouse. Peter had witnessed the entire ‘running through the building’ scene and told everyone, and together they all devised a plan to help Tony get the space he needed. They’ve been at it all night long.

Tony remained quiet, brooding.

“Jessica is right, Tony, Steve hasn’t taken his eyes off you since you walked in.” Bruce agreed with morosely. “Don’t you want to talk to him?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Tony scoffed into his beer. “We’ve said everything that needs to be said. It’s over, Brucie-baby—it just is.”

Janet took his hand in hers. “Tony, you know, I’m up for being your fake-date and all but I’m feeling thrown out of the loop here. This is the first time we’ve seen you in week and you haven’t
even told us the whole story of what happened.” Bruce, Jessica, and Peter all nodded with her. “It’s totally unfair that you told Rhodey first.”

Resigned, Tony sighed and told them. He was visibly paler when he finished. “So that’s why—that’s why I don’t understand why he won’t leave me alone. He has everything he wants now! I just—I just want some peace. I can’t stand them looking any more lovesick and goey-eyed all over each other. Jay-sus!” He groaned loudly, “I hate this stupid party!”

Their little ‘show of confidence’ was getting taxing. Tony had worn his Stark Mask and worked the floor like it was one of his mother’s charity gala events, hoping to deter Steve’s advances but it backfired. The Captain seemed to take it as a challenge and persistently tried to get closer the entire evening. Thankfully, his friends barricaded him from the blond boy’s efforts to get close. He was eternally thankful for such a caring group of peers.

“Rogers went to stew in his corner again.” Rhodey commented offhandedly. “Hopefully this gets us more than Bruce’s lackluster ‘weather conversation’ that only lasted five minutes.” Bruce flushed in embarrassment. “Hey, man, no hard-feelings. You tried and that’s all that matters.”

“Jeez, thanks, Rhodes.” He muttered into his mocktail. The Other Guy and alcohol don’t mix well.

Victor came back from Steve-distracting duty. "I believe that Captain Rogers was displeased with my good-natured intention to avoid physical confrontations.” He announced before sitting down.

Peter threw his hands into the air. “Dear god, Vik! Did no one teach you to speak proper English? You talk like your spewing Shakespeare on Ice or something, dude, really!”

“I do not understand your grievance, Peter.” Victor cocked his head to the side. Then, his eyes suddenly widened. “Oh! I nearly forgot! I believe that the coronation for Spring Formal King and Queen are about to begin. I heard as much from the way back here. Tony, Janet, I offer my congratulations. You two are in the running.”

Tony groaned while Janet clapped excitedly. Seeing her date’s reaction, she immediately elbowed him on the side. “Aww, comeon, lighten up a little, Tony. It’s just a dance. As if you haven’t had lessons since you were, what, twelve?”

“Eight,” he corrected, causing her to smirk.

“That’s the spirit!”

Lights dramatically dimmed until the stage stood out in the semi-darkness. Pepper walked onto the stage in an elegant satin dress and six-inch stiletto heels which double as icpicks, her long red hair cascaded down her back in curls. Fury had a reason why he hired her; she looked both fabulous and formidable at the center of the wide stage, angel-faced but spoke with steel behind her voice. She announced the smaller awards, leading up to the big finale.

“…and now, without further ado, let’s give a round of applause for your Spring Formal King and Queen! And the envelope says—” True enough, she held a shiny black envelope with the Avengers Academy emblem on the back. People cheered, some cat-called, and everyone applauded. She smiled to the crown before opening it with a pop. “—Thor Odinson and… Loki Luffreyson!” She managed to declare with a straight face.

Peter fell to the floor. “I… did not expect that.”

“I did!” Jessica squealed in laughter. “Didn’t you know that they’re engaged in their realm?”
Thor’s jubilant laughter overpowered the crowds. He walked up gallantly onto the stage with his brother, and bride-to-be, Loki by his side. Well deserving of their award for they stood out; Thor in a 19th century British Army Cavalry inspired regal red jacket with large golden buttons and dark blue dress pants while Loki in a dark green dress made of flowy sheer material with golden metal accents around the waist and neck.

Thor and Loki led the opening slow-dance which ended the final program. They made quite a scene, and drew the attention of everyone save for a handful of individuals at the back of the hall. Other couples slowly joined them on the dance floor. One by one, Tony’s friends stood up to dance. Peter and Jessica were first, followed by Bruce and his date Betty, and even Victor got asked by a shy brunette.

“Excuse me, may I have this dance?”

Tony stiffen at Steve’s voice.

“No.”

“Back-off, Steve, he’s already declined.” Rhodey barked, eyes narrowing darkly.

Steve wasn’t alone. “Hey, now, calm down,” Sam slid into the chair beside Rhodey and promptly threw his legs over the unwitting boy.

“The fuck! Get off!”

“Tony?” Steve asked again.

“If you want to dance, go ask your date, Rogers. I’m sure she’s waiting for you.” Tony shot back without bothering to look up. Beside him, Janet stared at Steve incredulously but said nothing, uncaring for the squabble erupted between Rhodey and Sam.

Steve remained firmly planted in his spot. “Peggy isn’t my date.” Janet glanced at the dance floor, and nearly jumped in surprise.

Tony, however, didn’t look. He merely snorted. “Sure as hell looked like it, Rogers.” He got up from his chair with every intention of walking away. Since the program ended, he could already go home. “Keep telling yourself that. Whatever makes you sleep better at night.”

“Tony” Two hands reached out for him at the same time.

Like a gentleman, Steve let Janet speak first. “Give him a shot.” She said, surprising both boys.

“What?”

Janet lifted a hand to Tony’s cheek, directing his gaze to the curious set of couples on the floor. She knew it the second he saw two pairs of curious couples—Peggy danced with Bucky with Clint and Natasha beside him, both pairs looking at complete ease. “I think you deserve to hear what Steve has to say. Really.”

Tony sighed in resignation. “Fine,” he spat the word out like it was tar. “One song, Rogers, just one. Then, I’m out of here.”

“Ohkay,” Steve nodded—twice. The second one, neither Tony nor Janet nor Rhodey noticed was for Sam. “One song. If I still can’t convince you after one song, then I don’t really deserve you to begin with.”
***

The finale song ended.

It felt like walking into a movie.

All of the house lights, stage lights, auxiliary lights dimmed as Steve led Tony to the dance floor. There was an audible gasp from the students as the entire hall plunged into darkness. Vision compromised, Tony stiffen up on instinct. Fight or flee; they gnawed in his head. The hairs on the back of his head stood. He could feel the sweat dampening his brow as his anxiety rose. He froze in his spot, unwilling to move until something big and warm touched his fingers—Steve.

“You said I had one song,” he heard Steve say through the darkness, “I… This was the only way I thought you’d listen. So, please, Tony, I need you to listen. This is how I feel about you…” and on cue, an acoustic guitar began playing in the background. Tony knew the song, an indie song from a quartet of American siblings.

~I think the universe is on my side. Heaven and Earth have finally aligned~

His heart echoed in time with the beat. “Steve, what’s all this…?”

Instead of answering, the taller boy pulled him close and they began to dance.

One by one, a hundred—or a thousand—lights flickered open, bathing the hall in soft-tungsten glow while the female lead vocalist continued to sing. Tony was transfixed. Stars… Steve brought down the stars. They seemed endless, forming an entire galaxy overhead and surrounding them. The room lit up with a wide-array of constellations which decorated the night sky. It brought back so many memories—of Steve—of them. He understood what the stars were meant to say.

‘No,’ the traitorous part of his brain doubted, ‘it can’t be true.’

“I love you, Anthony Edward Carbonell Stark.” His name, his whole name, there can be no mistake. Steve said his name with the garbled thee-word phrase before it. He opened his mouth to accuse Steve of lying but a finger pressed tenderly over his lips. “No, shhh, please just listen to me, Tony.”
Tony felt himself nod. The rest of Steve’s hands came to touch his face. Even in the shadows, he could see them, Steve’s eyes which were so tantalizingly blue that he constantly saw the infinite boundlessness of the sky. They seemed richer in the dark with the tiny lights reflected on them. It gave a new meaning to the phrase ‘the stars in his eyes’. He never wanted to look away.

“Tony, I love you.” Steve told him, and all those shining eyes held truth, sincerity, and love. Another hands touched his cheek, keeping his from turning away. “I don’t know when or how but I know why. I love you because you’re you.” Regret flashed across Steve’s eyes before they softened. “I was wrong, completely, utterly, and stupidly wrong. I was an idiot. When you came here—god, Tony, you just don’t know—everything became better. Not just for me but the whole Academy. You make things better. You make things right. You make everything make sense and I ___”

Steve leaned in close. For a second, he thought Steve would kiss him but the boy didn’t. He felt the clammy skin of Steve’s forehead pressing against his. “I love your smarts, your passion, and your heart. I love that I got to know you—I love the way you get so into techno-babble with Bruce and the others, the way you won’t stop until you solve whichever puzzle, or riddle, or problem even if it takes you all night, the way you steal your friends’ stuff and upgrade it behind their back because that’s the way you show you care.” Each breath blew a warm breath on his lips.
He felt light-headed more from Steve’s words than the lack of oxygen but he took deep breaths just the same. Steve pulled away, taking Tony’s hand with him and kissing each of the ten knuckles.

“I love how there’s so many sides of you. I would spend the rest of my life, the rest of my days, or all of eternity unlocking and learning each one. I’ll never stop. I’ll never tire. I’ll never quit. You’re more than just your father’s son.” Tony sucked in another deep breath. The words hit the bullseye of his insecurities. He could feel Steve’s lips curl on the back of his hand. “He was wrong too, Tony. Howard shouldn’t hold a torch over you because you create your own light. Everything he said about you was wrong. You’re better.”

Steve was staring into his eyes again, and the telltale signs of unshed tears stung his eye. He blinked rapidly, willing them away. He doesn’t want to cry like some chick in a clichéd chick-flick romance drama. Real life wasn’t that kind of story. “Tony, the things you do and the things you invent are amazing. Your brain works in funny ways and that’s great because you figure things out differently.”

Then, Steve smiled shyly, looking awkwardly shy for a boy spewing words sweeter than honey from his lips. “I love the little things about you too,” he said it like a confession, “I love the way your eyes squint when you laugh, that you use food as a reward system, the slight twitch when you talk, your eternal bedhead, the unhealthy love for coffee and protein bars, and the way you smell in the morning.”

Steve didn’t stop. He continued to say every little insignificant details that he loved about Tony, vaguely aware that the song had finished and his three-minute time limit had expired. His hidden stage crew, however, wasn’t as oblivious. The lights flickered open just as he ended his monologue. “Everything,” he admitted with finality, “Just—there are no flaws in your perfect imperfection.”

Tony flushed in embarrassment as the blanket of darkness fell away. All the words still rung in his ears like an endless echo. There could be no describing the look on Steve’s face. Blue, blue eyes wouldn’t leave his, so many emotions reflected on them. He had to turn away, and that was his mistake—blonde and silver from a corner of the room—he saw Peggy. His heart sunk again.

Peggy Carter was here. Peggy Carter had seen.

And, seeing her hit him like a freight train.

He pulled away.

Steve was faster. “I don’t love her.” He said while holding Tony’s hands. “I might have before…but not now, not anymore. It was high school. I haven’t liked her like that for a long time. It’s been years, Tony, that ship sailed with her to England. She’s my best friend but still just a friend. It’s been one whole big misunderstanding—all of this. She didn’t come here for me. She came back for Bucky. He was the one she always liked, not me. Tony, I’m done with all that fooling around. For once in my life, I think I’m chasing the right one—you.”

“Steve, I…” But Tony couldn’t say the words on the tip of his tongue. He couldn’t move. The words were there, stuck on some invisible mesh preventing him from saying them. All of it, everything was too much. He feared that it was all a big cosmic joke that would crash at any second but it didn’t. The realization dawned on him. Steve loved him, he’d declared as much in front of an audience of their peers—making his intentions clear.

Steve’s face fell, taking the silence for rejection. “I…” he dropped Tony’s hands as if they burned. “I’m sorry—” he began to apologize but Tony cut him off.
“Don’t,” Tony growled, making a grab for Steve’s hands. His voice was surprisingly steady. “Don’t you dare backtrack now, Capsicle.” Their hands touched. He felt Steve’s skin in his, equally clammy but warm. Steve offered as small smile in recognition of the unique nickname. Tony had no words to say. He felt like an idiot for simply staring back.

“Stop being a wimp and kiss him already!” A voice, which sounded suspiciously like Bucky, yelled from their audience. The pair blushed. Jesus Christ! Every single Avenger who attended the Academy was here, and they all had witness Steve’s confession!

Tony licked lips. Steve followed the action with his eyes but did nothing. He looked like a lost lamb, unsure of what to do as if scared of frightening the other boy away again. He could have, actually. Tony licked his lips again, slower and more deliberate than the last and Steve made a whining sound at the back of his throat—but he still didn’t move!

“Christ, Steve, you’re an idiot!” Tony groaned right before he pulled Steve by the lapels and sealed their lips together.

Steve was on his in a heartbeat—licking his way into Tony’s mouth, tasting and sucking like a man starved of food and water. He took control of the kiss. A big hand palmed at the dip on Tony’s back while the other gently cupped Tony’s jaw. He kissed to make a point, to get the message across, to say something without the use of words. It spoke of apology, love, and promise with every swipe of tongue and every moan and every cubic centimeter of air passing between them.

Tony could only grab onto Steve’s shoulders and hang on for the ride. He knees threatened to buckle beneath his weight. He clung when they did. He tipped a little, and suddenly the new angle was perfect. They kissed like nobody was watching. Steve played the sensitive nerves inside his mouth like a season harpist, singing to his soul in a melody too beautiful for human words and kept on singing until Tony grew light-headed with the need of air.

Their lips made a lewd popping sound when they finally pulled apart.

“Tony,” Steve called his voice in a gravelly broken voice which sounded as haggard as he felt. “Take me back. Everything’s too grey without you.” Tony replied only with a smile, and it lit up his eyes—shining brighter than Sirius the star.

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They had spent the break mending the fractured pieces of their relationship. It wasn’t easy. The first few weeks felt like they were walking on eggshells around each other, both wary of the landmines that littered around their relationship. It was hard and taxing and worse than how it felt spending time apart but they pushed through it.

Talking had been the first step, and reconciling all the misunderstood things between them became their turning point. Steve and Tony had decided to go camping a few days before the start of summer term. They spent it reaffirming their affections by making love under the starlight. When they came back, they came out stronger. Their friends wouldn’t stop teasing them about the bites on Tony’s neck or the scratches on Steve’s back.

Steve cornered Tony against the lockers one day with a proposal. “I want to go to California.” He stood a little too close, one hand beside Tony’s head and their faces still dangerously close, and he really didn’t care. After spring break, he discovered fairly quickly that Tony got flustered very easily. He liked it.

Tony, in shock, froze. “Excuse me?”

“Malibu,” Steve confirmed, letting his lips ghost over Tony’s cheek.
“You,” Tony spoke like Steve had gone mad overnight. He gripped his books tight. “You want to come with me to Malibu? Why?”

“I missed the chance to come with you last Christmas and we both know how that ended up.” He frowned a little at the bad memories. “So now I want to go with you.” When Tony remained unconvinced, he changed his tactics. “Please, Tony?” He lowered his voice an octave lower and made a show of licking his lips. “Didn’t you say you had a… a wonderful view in your bedroom?”

Tony audibly swallowed, cheeks coloring. “Yeah. Of Malibu.”

“Malibu. Right.” Steve grinned. “Last time was really bad and I really wanna make it up to you. We could…” and he leaned in because he didn’t want anyone else to know. Tony blushed even redder by the time he pulled away, hand holding his ear like he’d been scandalized. “What do you say? Do we have a deal?”

“Fine. But I’m inviting the other avengers so my parents don’t get suspicious!”

Steve nodded in agreement. “Sounds like a solid plan. Come to my dorm room after class.” He’d told Tony everything about his welcoming party. Instead of the backlash he’d expected, Tony had hugged him and demanded entry to it immediately. Nowadays his dorm was their dorm where they would gaze at the stars in the sky before falling asleep.

Tony went to his tip toes and kissed him on the cheek. “See you later, babe.”

Summer came in the blink of an eye, and Tony must return back home to spend it in Malibu. This time, he didn’t go alone. He extended the invitation to his friends to come visit him in the golden state of sunny California. His parents would be away anyway. All the Avengers were ecstatic about the offer for a free flight on the Stark jet to the western coast.

Tony hid everything under the guise of ‘getting to know his fiancée and their friends’ when media bombarded them at the airport. He played it up by being touchy with Peggy. Steve took it upon himself to tease the pants off the fake couple. They all agreed that it was better to keep the rouse up until both heirs graduated from the Academy.

“Oh dear Lord,” Peggy pulled off her wig with a heavy sigh in the safety of their stretch limousine. “This whole thing is barmy! Who is the bloody hell even reads these bloody rags anyway? It’s worse than London! At least I can walk there in peace!”

“Sorry,” Tony shrugged his shoulders sheepishly. “They got into a frenzy when word got out that I was flying friends home. I haven’t…” he rubbed that back of his neck awkwardly. “… I haven’t really done this before. So it’s kind of a new thing for them. I swear, sometimes I think they’re betting on my next monumental fuck-up.”

Steve frowned at Tony’s self-deprecating tone. “Fuck-up, shmuck-up, Tony. You’re an Avengers. They won’t be able to take that away from you.”

“Yeah, well…” Tony blushed at his boyfriend’s attentiveness. He tried to cough it off. “Does anybody want a drink? I made sure to get the one with the sensible options in the bar.” At that, the entire car rumbled with rowdy laughter as they demolished the fully-functional mini-bar.

On their first night back, Tony had prepared a special treat for Steve. He didn’t want his boyfriend to felt inadequate because of his parent’s wealth. So instead of the customary five-course dinner, he asked the head chef and Jarvis if they could prepare a burger bar and fire up the grill. He didn’t tell anyone about the surprise when they arrived. He merely cryptically dropped hints about an
infinity pool on sub-level one. He forced them all to change before heading down.

“THIS.IS.WICKED!” Clint yelled, diving head-first into the pool without bothering to check the depth in his skimpy purple trunks with a golden arrow printed just above his ass-cheeks. Lucky for him, he dove into the deep end and didn’t get a concussion. Peter was a blur of blue and red when he cannon-balled not two seconds later. A wave dunked Clint on the head. “Hey! Watch it spider-kid!”

“Peter, Clint,” Jessica crossed her arms over her stripy red and white one-piece with extremely low cleavage and practically no back, “Stop acting like children!”

“Aww, loosen up, Jessy. Let the kids have their fun.” Tony paddled out of his house in a delicious pair of red booty-shorts with gold stipes on his thighs, a Hawaiian top, and a thick white towel around his neck. “That’s what we all came here for, didn’t we?” Steve trailed behind him blue board shorts that did little to hide his size. He blushed when the girls wolf-whistled.

Thor came out in a surprising simple pair of black sharkskin trunks. “Aye, friend Anthony ‘tis correct! Let us bathe in the glorious waters of the mysterious floating lake!” Thor bellowed, setting up into a sprint. From the pool, Clint and Peter paled when they saw him and scrambled to swim out of the way before he landed his much larger cannon-ball into the pool.

A great wave of water splashed out, drenching Jessica and Loki from head to toe. Loki’s black and green striped halter one-piece dripped with pool water and his hair stuck messily on his neck. Sam and Rhodey made the mistake of laughing out loud. With a snap of his fingers, Loki teleported them over the water and dropped them. “Cretins.” He dried himself off with another swish.

Something white and yellow floated above the water.

“Is that what I think it is?” Bucky tried his best not to laugh at the swim trunks floating dangerously close to the end of the pool like a buoy. He held onto his shorts as if scared it would disappear. It was decorated with palm trees and a tropical island. His questions got an answer two seconds later when Sam emerged from the pool, frantic.

“My shorts! My shorts!” Everybody laughed at his expense, watching as he hobbled his way into the shallow end to retrieve his article of clothing. But Rhodey got it first and edged it away.

“I told you to tie it properly man!” He grinned like a maniac.

That was the scene which greeted Natasha when she came out. Her swimsuit looked more like a BDSM domanatrix outfit with all the shiny silver hoops which held the front together. From the pool, she got resounding catcalls and wolf-whistles from the boys in the pool. Bucky would have glared at their friends except he was too busy whistling himself.

“Boys, really!” Peggy chastised them sternly. In contrast to Natasha, she wore a conservative polka-dotted pink two-piece with sweetheart halter top and high-waist bottoms. It also had white frills. The made deflated at her comment. Natasha and she joined Jessica by the outdoor self-serve mini-bar to get some before dinner drinks.

“Wow, Tony,” Steve sat down on the reclining chair with his back resting against Tony. “This is… this is great.” He angled his face to the side and wordlessly asked for a kiss. Tony affectionately wrapped his legs around Steve’s waist then complied. Steve made a happy little noise at the back of his throat. He pulled Tony’s arms around his shoulders. Like this, the world melted around them.

“It’s not yet over, you know,” Tony kissed the back of his neck. Steve hummed, pliant under the
ministrations. He shivered when Tony licked playfully on the shell of his ear. Being the taller one, that action wasn’t afforded often. It was usually during intimate times like this when Tony held him. Steve liked it a lot. “I’ve got one more thing I think you’ll like.”

“Tony,” Steve balked. “This is enough. You don’t have to win me over with money. I already love you. I don’t care if you’re rich or broke-ass poor. Dollar signs aren’t the reason why I am dating you!”

Tony felt a burst of happiness in his chest. He kissed Steve one more time on the cheek. “You’ll like this one. I promise.” He stealthily pressed a button on his phone which retracted themovable glass wall behinds them.

Piaaaaack. Click. Click.

Steve whipped around to see a long buffet-style table with what looked like platters and platters of anything and everything someone wanted to put on a burger. His mouth nearly touched the ocean floor hundreds of feet below them. If he were honest, he would admit to expecting something lavish like a 10-course dinner but this—“This is wonderful, Tony. Thank you.” His stomach growled in appreciation as well, making them both laugh.

“At least your stomach is honest!” Tony grinned. “Come on, I’ve got to introduce you to the Tony Stark special!”

Steve ended up disliking the ‘Tony Stark Special’ which was an amalgamation of so many mismatched ingredients that he couldn’t even pronounce, let alone remember. He took one bite and promptly vomited it out, drinking straight from the Antonov just to disinfect his mouth of the taste. Tony chowed it down like a champ. He did, however, take pity on Steve and assembled a classic double-patty BLT for his boyfriend, which Steve ate several of in pure joy.

At first, he was skeptical about the abundant amount of food but they rapidly put a dent in it with the combined efforts of nine growing boys and two women. There was no discounting for Thor and Steve’s appetites which did most of the damage. The chef had to bring out second-helpings of buns, condiments, and bacon.

“I smell burgers!” A female voice yelled at from the layer above. Carol boldly jumped off the ledge, nose-first in the pool in nothing but her bra and underwear. She was the least body shy and the most liberated. She immediately got out, dripping all over the place as she went to the food.

“Carol!” Steve yelped in surprise. “I thought you couldn’t make it?”

“I thought so too!” She said with a shrug, “But I hitched a ride! Fee airfare too!” On cue, Janet came down on from the steps in her bright yellow sundress. Bruce, Betty, Victor, and an unknown guy.

“Janet!” Tony laughed in surprise. “You said you weren’t coming!”

Janet tsked. “I said I wasn’t gonna ride in your plane, Tony. I had to go picky up my man-hunk if you were going to parade your around! You know I hate being upstaged by you!” She giggled. She beckoned for the tall lithe brunet to come closer. “Tony, this is my boyfriend Scott Lang. Scott, Tony Stark. I don’t really think that I need to tell you much more than that, right?”

“Of course, not.” Scott extended his hand for a handshake, and Tony took it. He whistled. “Wow, Tony stark. Wow. I’m, uh, yeah. Janet already said who I was and, wow, you’re great. I’ve heard about you from MIT. Not that I went there. I had a hacker friend who went there. I just… I am
shaking your hand way too long now, aren’t I?”

Tony couldn’t help but laugh. “No worries, man. It’s cool.” Steve, who had seen the long awkward hero-worshipping handshake, stood up behind his boyfriend in a sudden urge of possessiveness. Tony noticed this too. His heart fluttered at the thought of Steve being jealous. “This is Steve Rogers, my boyfriend. Steve, Scott Lang Janet’s boyfriend.”

Steve visibly relaxed. But he still might have squeezed Scott’s hand a little harder than usual. “The pleasure is mine. Come, you must be hungry. Tony’s got a sweet all-you-can-eat burger bar inside.” He led Scott and Victor into the room and gave a tour of the platters.

“I didn’t know we were having a party.” Bruce said in lieu of a greeting.

“Brucie-baby, I’m glad you came! Betty, too! Hello gorgeous, you and I haven’t been formally introduced yet.” No problem. There’s some new stuff in the locker rooms. I think there’s some in your size. Speaking off,” Tony leaned back to yell something, “Janet! Why don’t you go get changed? Lang can borrow something from the locker room too!” She gave him a thumbs up.

Bruce went a little green.

Tony backed away. “Take a chill-pill, Brucie, I’m happily spoken for.” He turned Betty, “See that hunky blond hunk in the blue shorts? Yeah, that’s mine.” She giggled, leaning in to whisper something in Bruce’s ear which seemed to calm the boy down. “Oh hey, how’d you do that? Damn… that’s the first time I’ve seen him calm down like it was nothing. You are formally invited to every social gathering I will ever host!!”

“Thank you.” Betty replied shyly.

Bruce ducks his head and lowers himself to her embrace. “Thanks, Tony.”

“Alright!” Tony clapped his hands loudly, twice. “Gang’s all here. You’ve been travelling. Go, make yourselves at home, Brucie, I’d be a bad host if I didn’t feed you. Go on, scoot!”

Together, the three of them walked back into the dining room. He watched them acclimate into the room—Bruce on the receiving end of ‘man hugs’ that was going all around while Peggy, Natasha, and Carol ushered a timid Betty to the vegan burgers section. His boyfriend and the other two had joined in the burger-staking contest to see who can get the highest burger tower without toppling over. By the looks of it, Loki was leading by a good half-foot over his competitors. Tony’s willing to bet there’s some Jontunn voodoo working there.

He went back to table and reclaimed his rightful place beside Steve. His boyfriend made a disgruntled noise, hands hovering protectively over his creation—a monstrosity of meat, cheese, tomato, greens, onion, and condiments in systematic order repeater several time over. He found the action terribly endearing.


“Tony!” The whole table yelled, but it was too late.

Even with all their training combined, enhanced or not, the Avengers were no match to the force of
gravity against their poorly meat and condiments. Burger toppled over one by one like the song with London bridge. Only three survived the wreckage; Peggy’s rendition of a blue moon burger, Clint’s meticulously made all-meat no veggies burger, and Loki’s sky-high ensemble which defied the laws of physics.

“Hey!” Scott stood up in protest, “I might not go to your fancy shamey hero-school or nothin’ but that shit ain’t natural! He’s a cheat!”

“Loki?” All eyes turned to the black-haired trickster.

Loki, rolled his eyes and sighed. “I thought we’re allowed out natural talents…” he drawled, hands no longer hiding what he did with his finger. “As your feeble human mind might not understand but this is my natural talent.” With a swish-and-flick, he reassembled all the burgers to their formal glory.

“Ohh-kay…” Scott fell back in shock. Everyone else just flashed Loki with thumbs-up signs.

“Fear not new unknown mortal man, ‘twas my brother’s true intention to, oh how as you say it… cheat.” Thor patted the man back good-naturedly. “He’s been this playful since ‘twas an innocent!”

Scott stage-whispered a “Is it me or do they talk funny?” to his girlfriend.

“They’re foreign.” Janet kissed and patted him on the cheek while smiling.

“I believe this effort is futile. May I suggest that we eat these delicious looking burgers instead?” Victor suddenly spoke up, surprising everyone. He had a whopping one-foot tall burger in front of him. Everybody seemed to be in agreement. “Shall I get a ‘here here’?”

“Here! Here!” The team shouted with joy.

When dinner was done and over, the people who swan took showers and changed while the rest piled into the living room. Once complete, they spent the next hour playing PG-13 rated truth or dare. The house rule: nothing explicit, nothing below the waist, and maximum embarrassment. It started off fairly easy with boring question like ‘what is your favorite food?’ or ‘mimic a celebrity when signing’, then quickly progressed to ‘kill-fuck-marry’ and ‘strip tease your partner’ given by Betty to Natasha. Bucky held the chair so hard that it splintered.

Things only got worse after that.

Natasha dared Sam to give the ‘hottest’ person in the room a hickey on the neck. Sam chose Jessica, who moaned and whimpered like a one-dollar whore the whole time without breaking into laughter. Then, he asked Carol, “How flexible are you?” She answered by going a full-split cartwheel. It went on, and on, with each round decisively getting dirtier than the last.

The bottle fell on Steve.

“Uh-oh,” he gulped. Everyone’s eyes turned to him. His skin prickled.

“Well, finally!” Bucky fisted the air with excitement. “We’re been playing an hour and this is the first time you got spun! What’ll it be Stevie? Truth or Dare?” He waggled his eyes suggestively. A show of challenge, if anything.

Steve gulped again. The past two had chosen dares: Clint danced on the table like a female stripper and Peter spelled his whole name with his ass. He was traumatized by both. He doesn’t think that he can do either one, so, “Truth.”
Bucky’s face split into a grin, as if he’d been waiting for this exact moment. “So… When and where did you lose your virginity?” Steve went beet-red. “Oh fuck! You did it! You totally did it! Shit. Stevie. I was trying to bait you, man. Damn, now you gotta answer.”

“Bucky!” Peggy admonished. She was the only girl opposed to the question. Carol, Jessica, Natasha, Betty, and Janet—especially Janet, who had her phone out—eager leaned-in to hear better. The boys, on the other-hand, catcalled and wolf-whistled like they had practiced it.

Tony to the rescue! “Hardly fair, Barnes. Sounds like two questions to me. So which is it?”

“Fine…” Bucky relented with crossed arms. “When then, Stevie? I’ll pretty much guess the who and where anyway.”

“I, uhm… uh…” Steve, their normally charismatic leader, blushing like the virgin that he wasn’t. “…15th of December.” He answered lowly with his eyes downcast. He shot speculative glances at his boyfriend, who blinked back in shock. Everyone’s eyes followed. He bit his lip. It was too late now. The smoke had been aired. It won’t take long for—

But Tony’s mini-bubble burst. “Me?” Steve bit his lip harder. “Yeah… me too…” It was quiet but he heard it, blood pumping in a second. He turned to the brunet beside him, eyes wide. Tony’s face was open and soft, staring back with so much affection that he was scared for his serum-enhanced heart to burst.


Thankfully, they did.

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It wasn’t long until the people retreated to their rooms one by one.

“Let’s go, Cap.” Tony said, patting him on the shoulder. “I think it’s time we turn-in too.” His voice strangely shaky when he spoke. They said their goodnights and left the room, clammy hands holding onto each other. Kisses were shared between there and the bedroom. Many kisses. More Kisses. On the mouth. On the cheek. On the neck. Tony groaned and whined while Steve’s mouth busily explored. It took forever but they eventually reached his door.

“Are you going to invite me in?” Steve whispered huskily beside his ear, elbow and knee planted on the wall where he pinned Tony. He licked the brunet’s ear to emphasize his point. “Well?”

Another shaky whimper.

“Ye—yeah.” Tony arched onto Steve’s frame, feeling their hearts beating together. He opened his eyes, unaware that he closed them. He blinked back the tears that accumulated, but the wetness clung to the tips of his lowered lashes. He reached up to stroke smooth-shaved jaw. “Damn, this jawline can cut paper, I can’t believe I get to have you.” His hand slid down right over Steve’s heart. “Why don’t you come inside, babe, and love me all night?”

“Jump,” The command came as firm as the orders on the battle field. Tony followed on instinct, winding his legs around those narrow hips, keening when hands dropped to grope his ass. “Good boy,” the praise came, easy as breathing. “Open the door, Tony, and let me take you to bed.” He chuckled, easing kissing down Tony’s throat, purposely keeping his hips still. “Let me take you apart and put you back together again.”
Tony wasted no more time. He opened the door with a click, and they stumbled inside. He felt Steve’s growl, a soft rumbling sensation at the center of his chest, before he heard it. The hands on him squeezed hard, making him cry out his lover’s name. Kisses of apologies were pressed against his neck. He could feel the thrum of anticipation oozing from Steve in waves.

“Steve,” he groaned right next to his partner’s ear. Just a few steps and they’ll be on the bed. But the softness never came. Something hard and cold pressed touched him outside of his thin cotton shirt. “Wha—” When he came back to himself, he saw the bed all the way on the other side. They were leaning against his windows with their shirts gone.

“Beautiful,” Steve’s warm body crowded him into a tight space. “So beautiful, Tony.” He could feel a hot breath tickling the hairs on the back of his neck, then soft lips followed, tracing the bare skin as far as he could bend. Tony’s bare toes curled. His fingers clung to Steve’s naked shoulders. They smelled like his shampoo, his body wash, and his lotion. Underneath it all, he smelled Steve.

“I’ve had this view for so long. I’ve—I’ve gotten used t—to it—” Kitten licks trained up his neck. The glass became slippery where his hair dripped but the fear of falling never came. Steve held him right, body in front and glass at the back. Hot and cold. Solid and more solid but ultimately narrowing down to the single most important entity in his young life. “Steeeeeeve, c’mon, kiss me.”

The thought of kissing right now teased him because Steve’s lips ever touching him everywhere but his mouth. A thigh was placed right under him. “Steveeee—ah!” he gasped when Steve’s fingers brushed against his nipples. More. He wanted more. He could feel his dick stain against his underwear. He wanted Steve’s hand there—yesterday! “Ahh—ahh-ahh!” His lover wouldn’t relent on the nipples. Two now, a perfect mirror.

“Steve,” he moaned, empowered and enjoying the way his nipples were being fiddled with little to no mercy—pinch, tug, and roll—until they became reddish and sore. “Ahhh!” he gasped at the sensation of being spun around. His swollen nubs squished against the glass. His hands gripped it uselessly, clawing and scratching but never getting any purchase. He could already feel the oil from his skin staining the transparent surface, missing with the wetness from his hair.

Raw, and he felt very much alive. It’s been months since they’ve been together like this. “Fuck me. Steve, fuck me.”

His words caused Steve to growl so he continued with his dirty talk. “Fuck, baby, please. I want you, I want you so bad, I want to fuck me, split me open with your cock, cum inside me until I’m dripping like a whore and I can’t walk for days. Right here. Right now. Hard and fast. Up against this wall until this whole house shakes and we set off the alarm.”

Steve let out a gruttoal moan. He too had an arsenal. “No yet,” he said, licking into Tony’s mouth like he owned it. “First, I’m going to make you cum three times before I fuck you.” He tongued inside of Tony’s ear with sinful slurping sounds. “I’m going to spread you open. Right here with your legs on my shoulders while you hang on for dear life, praying to god that I don’t drop you, and I won’t. I’ll be too busy eating your asshole.”

“Fuck!” Tony’s dick went from slightly interested to harder than vibranium in less than a second. “Steve, Steve, Steve,” murmuring the words that don’t need to be said like a prayer and a wish, he demanded Steve to take him, to claim him, to mark him, to bury his big fat cock so deep that every single cell of Tony’s body would bear traces of Steve.

“Steve, what are you—ohh!” Tony cried out when the first warm breath of air tickled his cock. His hands fist into Steve’s hair. What a sight it made: Steve—Mr. Perfect Captain America Steve,
kneeling between his legs with those plump pink lips centimeters away from his him. The same innocent lips curved into a not-so-innocent smirk, making him twitch in anticipation.

“Steve… you’re gonna make me cum.” Blushing hard because his hips canted involuntarily, seeking the soft wet mouth.

“Well, that’d be a shame. I was planning on enjoying this.” Steve, the infernal tease, kissed the inside of his thighs like some kind of religious worship. He babbled. He couldn’t stop. Moaning and begging and crying for Steve to touch him.

“FUCK!” Tony knees nearly gave way when a big hot hand circled his hot flesh. It completely turned to jelly the tongue licked his leaking shaft. And he came, spurting hot, wet, shite stripes all across Steve’s face. He made the mistake of looking down to see his work, and his cock dribbled out a few more squirts onto Steve’s half-open mouth.

Shivers wreaked his whole body from the orgasm and from witnessing Steve lick the cum off his face and his fingers. Steve fell back, and sat on his knees. Tony followed. He slid down to straddle the taller man, collapsing on a wide chest, content with listening to Steve’s beating heart. A hand moved up and down his slippery back.

“I’ve got you,” Steve promised, “I’ve got you, Tony.”

“Please,” he heard himself say. He could feel the hardness poking him in the butt. Steve was hard—hard for him, and the thought made his heart do backflips. “You haven’t…” but he found himself too exhausted to continue the question.

“Don’t worry,” the hands continued, rubbing lower on his spine, right above his cheeks. “Hold on, sweetheart. I’m taking you on that nice large bed that you’ve been bragging about.”

To Tony, it was a blur how Steve carried him over to the bed. His brained amped up on endorphins that he felt loopy and sated. His face pressed against the ridiculously high thread count sheets. Cold to the touch where their bodies felt like furnaces. Hands guided him to lift his hips then pillows were placed underneath. A kiss at the center of his spine—a promise, a reassurance, a preview of what was to come. He shuddered.

“Steveeee, please… It’s cold.” And it was true, his sweat-damp skin was no match for the chill in the room. “I need… I need…” Steve draped over him in a heartbeat, naked skin on naked skin. He hadn’t even seen Steve take off his bottoms.

kissing the nape in apology, hands caressing his side. He purred at the heat. It felt good. He liked it. The comfort and the security of being close like this. He fumbled underneath his pillow, digging through the lush cottons until his fingers reached something hard. He said nothing when he pressed it into Steve’s palm.

The chuckle rumbled against his back.

“How do you want it?”

He cocked his head to the side and saw Steve’s hand. He gripped it. “Just like this. It’s… I haven’t… not there… and I want… God, Steve, I want…” He felt the prickle of humiliation flood his veins. He pushed back the embarrassment. They’ve had too many misunderstandings. He didn’t want anymore. Turning his head, he caught Steve’s eye. “I’ve only ever played with my front. But I… I want you to…” He swallowed. “I want you to put your cock inside me. There’s… there’s a condom in the nightstand.”
“S’alright.” Steve continued to caress his sides gently. “I want to feel you.”

The first finger burned just because Tony didn’t know what to do and clenched up. He felt it all wirth out the hardness of an erection to distract him. Steve was patient thought, murmuring praises and encouragement in his ear. Tony bit his lip and hid his face into the pillows. The intrusion, because it was an intrusion, entered him from where things were supposed to go out. It felt… wrong but having it, having Steve, touch a part of his body felt so right.

Then, a next finger.

“Full…” he groaned into the cotton. “Feels so full, Steve.”

“S’only two fingers, Tony. Gonna get you a lot fuller than that.” Steve’s voice sounded wreaked and raw and strained like he needed to physically hold back from going too fast.

Tony only groaned in response. He squeezed on Steve’s hand. Kisses, more kisses rained on his back to distract him from the burn and stretch. Each kiss took away the sting. Discomfort melted into pleasure. It didn’t take long for him to become pliant beneath the other boy. He began mapping the kisses where they land, anticipating where the next one would land, but then he noticed a pattern.

“Are you…” He waited for the next one to land on his right shoulder blade, confirming it. “You’re kissing constellations on my back?”

Above him, Steve froze. “I… yes.”

That was… Tony couldn’t help it. He started giggling, “God, you’re such a dork! I love you!”, but he couldn’t stop. “The biggest, brawniest, brainiest dor—ork!” He sobbed because Steve hit something and it felt so damn good. He saw fireworks behinds his eyes. His breath punched out of him. Sparks shooting up his spine. “Again!” he demanded, “That place. Steve. Again! Ahh! Ahh—ah-ahh!”

He forgot about the burn. He forgot about the pain. All he could think about was Steve’s ginormous fingers hitting him at that very spot. Then he sobbed, and he begged, tears flooding down his eyes to stain his silky sheets, making it dark and damp. Steve flipped his hand and Tony clawed at it like an anchor, like a weight, the only thing keeping him sane.

His dick twitched where it was trapped between the pillow and his legs, already hard and leaking again all over the soft cotton pillowcases. Shiny, slick, and salty. It poured like a slow moving water floor cascading down the landscape of cotton. Then, a simple touch—too light, a ghost of a breeze—stroked the leaking flesh.

Tony convulsed from where he lay. Orgasm pulsing through him again without his consent. His asshole clenched around the fingers inside, making Steve hiss at the pressure. That single sound made him twitch in an attempt to expel more.

“Steven Grant Rogers, you better fuck me before I pass out.” He groaned, not really a beg, for the umpteenth time in one night. “You’ve got to. I want it. Please.”

“You’re surprisingly coherent for your 2nd orgasm.” Steve chuckled against his shoulder blade. “Let me just…” Tony let out a whimper when the fingers pulled away, leaving him gaping, exposed, and empty. He whined when he felt a breeze blow against his hole from Steve shifting around behind him. “Turn around,” his lover instructed softly, pillows under his hips being pulled away. “I want to see everything in your eyes when I enter you.”
Tony lay on his back, knees bent on either side of Steve, gazing at his boyfriend. God, he was so fucking lucky to have this boy as his own. He needed to repeat it to make himself believe. Steve was so sweaty, sweeter than he’s ever seen the blond in training or running laps at the oval, breathing harder than he did last time they had a grueling conditioning gym class, and red beyond anything Tony ever imagined from the tips of his ears down to the middle of his chest.

“Kiss me,” he said, reaching out to pull Steve in by the neck. Their lips met in a gentle press. Something hard and wet touched him down below, and he froze. Steve froze too, waiting. Tony nodded minutely and there it was, thicker than Steve’s fingers. His hole was resistant but after the first pop of the head the slide became smooths. Inch by agonizing inch, Steve entered him.

They moaned together, too loud and too long to be anything but a distraction. They both needed it. They both wanted it to last longer.

Tony’s body opened up but with restrain, gripping Steve’s cock like a perpetually tight fist and Steve stopped. “Relax, sweetheart, I don’t want to hurt you.” Next thing he knew, kisses were being showered on his face—temples, nose, cheeks, jaw, and chin—a silent plea for him to listen, for him to give, to surrender. “I’m here. You can touch me. You can scratch me. You can leave your marks on my body just as I marked yours. This is us, Tony, just you and me.”

Steve guided Tony’s hands around his neck. “You and me.” He repeated, pressing their noses together in a gentle manner.

Tony thought Steve looked beautiful but nothing can compare to this with Steve and the dark canvass of the night time sky behind him. He got lost in Steve’s eyes, darkened because of the low light but shining like a million tiny stars were held inside their depths.

“Kiss me again.” He gave it his all, pouring what he felt, opening his heart up to Steve in a single gesture. “Move… but go slow, er, slower.”

A broken sound came from Steve when he was fully sheathed.

Tony could feel his arms, his abdomen, and his legs trembled with how tightly he wrapped himself around Steve. “God, ah—ahh,” he whimpered when Steve began necking him again, licking his Adam’s apple and throat and chin.

After that, he got lost again. This time in Steve’s heavy pants beside his ear, sweat-slicked body rubbing against his own, and cock moving deep inside him. He was ready for it this time. It started with a low curling ball inside his got, growing and growing until his balls drew tight and his stomach muscles contracted. He already came twice tonight and he didn’t want it to end yet.

“Steve, stop, I’m gonna—ohh jesusmaryjoseph!” His words received the opposite response.

Steve suddenly amped the rhythm, no longer content for slow and steady. He set a brutal pace that was hard and punishing. Tony shifted higher and higher on the bed with each thrust until his fingers could touch the wall behind him. Pillows. Thank god for pillows because the next thrust sent his spine arching all the way up, bowing his body forward. His hand shot down at the last second, staving off his orgasm. There was an unhappy noise from the other boy.

“Not yet,” Tony half-pleaded even if his cock was dripping like a fountain down his hand. “I still want you inside me.”

Steve growled. “What makes you think that I will stop fucking you once you’ve cum?”

That—that, Tony was unprepared for. And damn if it didn’t send another jolt of want straight to his
cock. He let out another embarrassingly high whimper. “God, Steve, you can’t say things like that!”

Steve leaned down and licked the shell of his ears. “I think I learned that from you.” He punctuated it with another thrust of his hips. He pulled Tony by their joined hands, coaxing the other boy to sit-up.

“Steve,” Tony sobbed into his lover’s shoulder. In this position, Steve’s cock drove in much deeper than before. “So big, fuck.” He hid his face’s in Steve’s beck, adjusting to the added length inside him before slowly starting to move. He figured out fairly quickly hot to touch that thing inside him with every rut of hips until he was cursing and praying at the same time. It built, and built, and built, like a tower too high and ready to collapse.

Tony cried out when it finally toppled over. Literally. Tears streamed down his face wetting Steve’s neck and shoulder. Hands came up to stroke his back gently as hot dampness got trapped between them. Steve had long become a stronghold in his life, and at that very moment Tony wanted nothing else. Steve, ever patient Steve, waited for him to calm down. He didn’t even know how long it took for him to stop crying.

“Are you okay?” Hands held his face like he was the most precious thing in the world.

“Yeah, I am.” He said back. “C’mon, big boy, why don’t you paint my insides and we can go to sleep?”

Steve seemed hesitant but Tony need it. He needed it now. He just wanted something marked deep inside him until there would be no question who he belonged to. He rocked his hips again causing Steve to groan out in near-pain.

“I love you.”

Something inside Steve snapped. The arms around his waist tightened. Then, Steve was thrusting into him in a punishing pace giving him no time to react. He took it. He loved it. He said as much, saying it over and over again—I love you. Iloveyou. Loveyou. Lov’ou.—until it was nothing but grabbed up gibberish. Like an echo, Steve said his name like it was the only thing that mattered.

When Steve reached his peak, Tony got to watch his lover’s face contort into pleasure. He took a photo in his head, wanting to preserve it forever.

“I love you.” He said again, feeling the warmth which now sat low in his belly. So much cum that it curved outward just a little. Steve touched the place reverently, in awe like he couldn’t believe he has caused that to happen. Tony merely hummed and placed his hand over Steve’s.

Eventually, they got cleaned up, threw the messy sheets on the floor, and settled down at the center of the bed. Tony laid down on his side and waited for Steve to lay down behind him. He made a happy little noise when an arm finally draped around his waist. He could still deep the damp ache where Steve’s cum dribbled out of his ass. At the moment, he didn’t care. He liked it there, liked the feeling of keeping some of Steve inside him.

For as long as he can remember, he walked in to this very scene and felt nothing but the yearning to be free. His colossal glass windows were no better than the repetitive parallel lines of a prison cell. It felt suffocating. He had sights of the ocean and the sky but could smell, nor touch, nor taste either one. All he could do was press his hands against the cold transparent panel while reaching for something too far away—but now it was different.
He wasn’t alone anymore.

Steve ran fingers through his hair lazily, and mumbled against his neck, “I love you.” That was the last thing he heard before falling asleep.

‘Forever’

In the darkness of the California sky, a single star fell from the heavens onto the earth—a shooting star.

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End Notes

**Triggers:** Cross-dressing. Loki is intersex. Tiny Somnophilia scene (like three sentences, I swear). Mild-internalized homophobia. Underage drinking.

As always, **kudos/comments/bookmarks** are all appreciated by this author. I take comments as extra-kudos and I do read the bookmark tags (some are really fun).

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