A Long Way to Go

by duc

Summary

a historical AU where Tony is a young nobleman who is kidnapped and sold into slavery by business rivals, and Steve is some kind of warrior who purchases him either for armour care or because he says he can build trebuchets or something. Tony assumes he'll also be performing sex slave duties, and when Steve turns out to find banging people who are technically his property off-putting, Tony gets quite irritable and demands to be taken advantage of.

From the 1st round of the Avenger kink meme.

Notes

This is by far the longest fic I have written so far. The most complex too. I'm not entirely satisfied with it but I'm running out of time so this is what you get.

I, of course, do not own any character you recognise, they're the propriety of Marvel.

The fic takes place in a fantasy medieval world that has more population movement than ours did (You have more immigration) and where women have something close to equal right (They can inherit, be member of guilds, practice trades including soldiering although they are a minority)

S.H.I.E.L.D, the Avengers, the X-men, the Fantastic Four and probably some other teams but those are the ones I know enough to include, are mercenary companies currently hired by one city to kick out the invading barbarian.

Jazzypom who's been with me on this since last November. Without her this fic would not be half as good. Any mistakes left are my own.
There. It was official now. Steven Rogers, captain of the Avengers Company, was the proud owner of a 18 hands, black haired man of five and twenty years. He put the quill back in its inkwell, looking around Fury’s tent. The off white cloth walls, the small cot and the bigger table used for war meetings. Tony wasn’t there of course, he was working in the camp’s smithy, but Steven couldn’t help but think he should have been. It was his life after all, that had been exchanged.

“Here you go Rogers,” Captain Fury said, rising from behind his desk. He handed him first the papers then a small circular amulet he removed from under the layers of his under tunic, padded tunic and chainmail. Fury was one of the only people Steven knew that was mad enough to wear full armor when he didn’t have to. “As of now he is your headache.” He spoke in Hangle, Fury always spoke Hangle if his interlocutor knew even a little bit of the language. Steven knew more than a bit and had never managed to make him address him in the Lingua Franca.

He took the items with great hesitation and a little bit of distaste. The concept of slavery made him uncomfortable. He could never forget that there but for the grace of the gods, it would have been him and maybe even his mother too, who would have been sold to pay off his dead father’s debts. If his mother had been little less clever or a little less strong-willed he would be the one wearing the metal collar. Now, he thought as he put the papers in his belt pouch, he owned one. What had he gotten himself into? Against his breast, the amulet seemed to be triple its actual weight. If slavery in general was making him uneasy, the very concept of the amulet seemed downright wicked in his eyes.

“Just one thing…” Fury said as Steven was taking his leave. “Treat him as you wish. But don’t come crying to me when he runs all over you. You won’t find any sympathy.”

“I won’t.” Steven said, suddenly reminded of the reason he had thought it a good idea to buy a fellow man.

“And if he screws up my campaign,” Fury yelled to the closing flap of the tent, “I’ll roast the both of you.” Steven decided it was wiser not to answer that, lest they had a repeat of the previous night’s argument.

Outside Steven was greeted by a familiar sea of tents and wagons, bustling with activity, folks and animals coming and going like a big open anthill. Shouts and conversation in various languages, mostly the Lingua Franca but a good bit of Hangle too, it being the mother tongue of a lot the Shield’s soldiers and snatches of others, clamored over each other until they became almost indistinguishable. Fury’s tent had been set on one of the camp’s main pathway, or rather one of the camp’s main pathway had been organized around his tent and some of the other key features of the army.

He set off for the smithy thinking he should tell Tony he had a new master. Tony, that was the name written on his papers. It sounded more like a pet name than a proper name but then no one cared much when naming slaves. A few tents down the way he saw Clinton Hawkeye, the best archer in the avenger company, coming out from the camp’s makeshift tavern.
“Clint.” he nodded. The man was playing with a generous handful of coins, flipping them and walking them over his hands. “Don’t you have anything better to do than to fleece some poor soul at throwing games?”

“The new recruits the Shield picked up in the last town just got their first pay. You have to love them.” He said cheerfully’ referring to the boys and occasional girl who joined their force whenever they passed their village, deciding that getting your limbs chopped off as a foot soldier was better than breaking your back working the earth. “They heard about me, and they’ll still play me.”

Steven shook his head and smiled despite himself. It was certainly unsporting of him to play those games for money, but in his defense no one knowing him ever let him take part in the various competitions that cropped up in the army and it was a mistake that the youngsters would not make a second time.

“Oh, and speaking of people who should know better,” Clinton continued. “Did you go through with it?”

“Go through with what?”

“Don’t play innocent, captain. You know very well what I’m talking about.” The smithy had come into view. If Steven did not shake Clinton soon he would have to talk to Tony with him in tow and he was far from the ideal audience for that conversation.

“If you mean did I buy Tony then the answer is yes.”

“I can’t believe you bought a slave.” Despite his proffered surprise Clinton’s tone was more gleeful than anything else. “And I can’t believe that of all the slaves here you bought him.”

“He’s not that bad.” Steven said defensively.

“Not that bad? Captain, he disobeyed a direct order, a direct order from Fury.”

“That was Fury’s own damned fault. Why buy a skilled slave if you are not going to use him? And why tell him to improve the trebuchets if you are not going to take full advantage of their new range, I ask you?”

“I don’t know. But I do know some grizzled old sergeants who have been with him since the beginning of time who would not dream of moving a single piece of war engine against Fury’s approval. Little bastard didn’t even have the decency of looking guilty from what I heard.” Clinton, who liked to think of himself as a maverick, sounded grudgingly impressed.

“Well it’s not like it impeded his precious campaign now, did it?” Steven replied thinking of Fury’s parting shot. “To the contrary, it won him that battle. The three trebuchets he managed to have pushed back all pelted the enemy while way out of their range and the one he didn’t get to ended up a smoking ruin.”

“It’s still flagrant disobedience, and it was not an isolated incident. The master smith, for example, says he’s uncontrollable.”

Steven muttered something uncharitable about the master smith.

“I did not hear that.”
“So he is a bit willful. It’s mostly when it comes to his craft. To beat him for it is both a waste of resource and unfair.”

Clinton smirked indulgently at him and patted him on the shoulder. “Well you are the one responsible for him now. Don’t worry. If he proves to be too much for you to handle I promise we won’t laugh too much.” On those words he turned right and left, disappearing behind somebody’s drying laundry, probably to go croon about his winnings to the others.

The smithy was housed in a tent like the majority of the camp accommodations. Its main distinctive feature was the thick smoke that came out of various opening in the ceiling and the fact that the flap tended to stay open even in the winter to ward off the heat from the fires. They were in the beginning of august and the temperature inside assaulted Steven like a fist to the chest when he stepped in.

He found Tony quickly, busy at the anvil, pounding a piece of metal into shape. His back was turned, his tunic and his hair plastered to his back and head by sweat. Steven could see the muscles in his shoulders move. He almost looked like a normal smith that way. It was not uncommon for soldiers to wear their hair cropped short so it wouldn’t catch in their helmets, like Steven did himself, he wore boots when he worked and while his clothes were plain they were not in so poor a shape that they stood out. Then the light of the fire glimmered off the iron collar welded to his neck and Steven stopped, suddenly unsure of what he was going to say.

Before he could gather his courage one of the apprentices saw him. “Captain Steven.” the boy said loudly and Steven cursed under his breath as every single person in the smithy stopped what they were doing to look at him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tony turn his head for a brief moment and go back to his work. Harold, the master smith, rose to meet him.

“Good morning, captain. What can I do for you?”

“Ah, I came to speak to Tony, actually.”

The smith frowned.

“Of course, of course. Tony, come here. The captain wants to talk to you.”

Tony plunged the piece he was working on in a bucket of water, set his hammer and his thongs on the anvil, yanked his gloves off and hastily whipped the sweat off his forehead. “Sir.” He nodded as he came up to them. He cocked his head. “Or should I say master?”

Steven blinked in surprise, then felt his cheeks redden. “You have heard.”

“Of course I have heard,” Tony answered, amused. “Sir, you should know by now that soldiers make better gossippers than old matrons, especially when the gossip involves the “general” of the head company and the captain of the most successful having a very public…” Loud was left unspoken. “…argument followed by a very public dare.”

“Well, if you think you can do better, why don’t you put your money where your mouth is?” Steven could hear Fury’s voice ringing in his ears, like an echo of the preceding night. He wondered if those words had gotten back to Tony and came to the unfortunate conclusion that they probably had. It was not the way he would have chosen to break the news.

Tony was smiling but his eyes seemed to be waiting for something. Steven realized with a start
that he had left the man hanging.

“Yes, you probably should.”

Tony’s reaction was not overtly noticeable but Steven thought he saw him let out a breath. Of relief? Then he bowed so deeply he was almost kneeling. “Master,” he said. His voice was warm. Steven had seen him act this way before and hadn’t been able to tell if the interlocutor was been showed the proper deference due from a man of Tony’s station or played for a fool. He wasn’t any more certain now.

“He looks meek like that, doesn’t he?” Master Harold said pleasantly, watching Tony with his arms crossed and looking unimpressed. “I have to warn you it is only skin deep though. The moment he gets it in his pretty little head that he knows better than you do…”

“He will say ‘yes sir’ to my face and go do whatever it is he wanted to do as soon as my back is turned. Yes. I know.” Steve said, exasperation bleeding into his voice.

He could take it from Fury, because he had little choice in the matter, and from Clinton, who was very much like a younger brother sometimes, but he didn’t have to take it from Master Harold. *He does know better than you*, he wanted to say but didn’t. The man was a master of his craft, known for the quality of his blades, and it would be petty to humiliate him.

“What do you need him today? I should get him situated in our part of the camp.”

The smith scoffed. “He’s making horseshoes. Go ahead.”

Tony darted back to his station, removing his leather apron, he hung it on a nail and stood in his tunic and breeches looking at his boots then looking at Steve.

“The boots, he can keep.” Harold said to Steven. “You should probably check with the quartermaster to be sure but they’re old and mostly so he doesn’t injure himself in here. You’ll probably need to get him new ones when winter comes anyway.”

Steven thanked him and they left, Tony toeing the boots off once they stepped out and walking two steps behind Steven holding them in one hand.

“What do you have anything else you want to pick up?” Steven asked, as he twisted his torso to watch him. Slaves did not, in the strictest sense of the law, own anything, but most of them collected a few possessions along the way anyway. Steven knew that masters sometime allowed them to keep them when they exchanged hands. If Tony had things he was attached to Steven would swing by the Shield’s quartermaster’s tent to arrange it. But he only shook his head.

“No master.”

“Nothing?”

Tony shrugged. “All of the tools I use are part of the resources that are shared by all the companies.”

“I meant… personal effects.”

Tony shook his head again decisively. “No, nothing.”
“Really?” Steven said, a little taken aback, but unsure of the reason. “A troublemaker like you
doesn’t have a stash somewhere?”

He got a grin in response. “It’s secure enough were it is, and it’s better if I don’t move it to much.”

Steven turned front again, thinking that if he had been unsure before, now Tony was certainly
mocking him. Whether he actually had a bundle stashed somewhere or not.

Any army camp that stays put for most than a week becomes something of a small city, complete
with markets. Here, each of the companies formed their own little neighborhoods, the biggest
organizing themselves in smaller neighborhoods by profession. The avengers were on the edge of
the camp next to another mercenary company everyone called Xavier’s men even though Xavier
himself had been crippled long before he could lead them in battle and women had been in their
rank from its creation. They were organized in a rough circle save for Henry’s alchemy laboratory
which was set farther away than the rest and a large canopy in the middle serving as both an open
kitchen and a common living area.

Steven’s tent was small, as he lived alone and most meetings were held under the canopy. It had
always served him well although now that another man was going to be living in it with him it
suddenly got smaller. The blankets he had scourg ed up with Mary Jane that morning were folded
in a corner but when spread out they would occupy the space left by Steven’s cot and desk.

He sunk into his chair, tugging at the collar of his padded under armor tunic in an effort to cool
himself. Tony was standing in front of him with his hand behind his back. He looked even worse
off than Steven, with sweat still clinging to his hair and staining his clothes. Another downside to
the tent being so small was that the sun baked it easily, giving the impression of a furnace. They
would have been more comfortable out at one of the tables where the air could circulate but
Steven wanted to examine him and talk to him in private so his tent would have to do.

“Sit.” He said, indicating the bed. “Are you thirsty?” He grabbed the
pitcher
resting on his desk
and poured water into his goblet, waving Tony’s attempt at taking his place away. “Sit.” He
repeated. Tony sat and accepted the goblet after a brief hesitation, drinking from it in a manner
more subdued than Steven would have expected.

“Thank you, master.” He said, giving the goblet back. Steven filled it again and drank deeply.

“You’re welcome. I figured you needed it more than I did, working over open fires.”

He looked Tony up and down. Sitting with his hands on his laps the collar of his shirt gaped
enough for Steven to see one of the welts left by his last whipping and through the lacing of the
front he could see the faint glow of the magical artefact stuck to his chest. His eyes went up to his
face, over his scruffy beard and their eyes met for a brief moment. His were very blue, and alive
with intelligence.

“What did you think; when you heard I might be buying you?”

Tony shrugged. “What is there for me to think?”

“Were you happy, unhappy?” Steven pushed. He wanted to know what Tony thought of
belonging to him.

“It made me very happy, master.” Tony said, voice dripping sincerity and conviction and Steven
couldn’t tell if he was lying or not. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. What had he
expected exactly? Steven had maybe spoken to him three or four times prior to the sale. It had been a stupid question.

Well, Tony knew he belonged to him, knew how it had come about in probably more detail than Steven would have wanted him to and with any luck would trust that he would be treated fairly. That was that he supposed. Now what was he going to do with him? Perhaps he should have planned this beyond where Tony was going to sleep.

“Come, I will show you around.”

They got out and went first to the kitchen, where May Parquer was already preparing dinner. Jessica Jewel, off the fighter’s rooster for the duration of her pregnancy was rounding up the children to do some laundry by the river with Mary Jane. Clinton was fletching arrows with his feet on the table, carefully binding the glued feathers with thread to ensure they would stay in place. The avengers, fine gossipers that they were, were all delighted to see him and gawked at him with varying degree of subtlety, from aunt May’s kind welcoming smile lingering a bit longer than usual to little Cassie staring at him unblinkingly. They had seen him around, on the few occasions that he had worked alongside with Henry, but mainly knew him from his reputation, and so were dying to know more about him now that he was part of the company. It would get worst when the rest of the fighters came back from the training yard, Steven knew. Donald at least could claim a physician’s concerns when he dragged them to his tent to examine him.

He tsked when Tony removed his tunic and the welts were exposed to the light of the lamp and the open flap. He took Tony lightly by one arm, turning him so he could see better.

“Well, it’s ugly.” he said in a disgusted voice, examining the welts with expert hands, mindful of Tony’s small flinches and hisses. “But not as bad as it could have been considering the offence.” Steven standing in a corner had to agree. His back was covered in angry purple welts but they looked like they would heal cleanly, however painful they were at the moment.

“I’m expensive.” Tony said, hissing as Donald pressed on a particularly sensitive spot. “People are careful with expensive propriety.”

Donald turned him again and Steven got a good view of the artefact protruding from his chest. The sight made him acutely aware of the presence of the matching amulet hanging from his neck that he had almost managed to forget.

“Now this I don’t much care for,” Donald was saying, gesturing to Tony’s back. “But it’s a fact of life. That on the other hand…” he almost poked the device angrily. “…If the rumors are to be believed, is gratuitous cruelty.”

“They are.” Steven said, removing the amulet, and holding it so that Donald could see it. “If I break this it will kill him. If I twist it, it will cause him pain.”

Donald muttered under his breath; the words death, trap and cowardly being the only intelligible words. He placed on hand on Tony’s chest, next to the device. “Can I touch it? Or is it dangerous?”

“No?”

“Go ahead.” Tony shrugged. “It never reacted to outside stimuli. It’s not a death trap, you know.

“No?”

“It is keeping me alive. I was…” He hesitated, searching for his words. “… Wounded. My heart is
too damaged to beat on its own. Breaking the amulet doesn’t activate the device, it makes it stop working.” He looked at Steven. “So if you could go easy on the punishment feature, I don’t really know how much strain my heart can take.” He gave Steven a winning smile.

Steven exchanged a look with Donald. He wasn’t sure it was any better. Especially since Fury had told him that Tony touching the amulet would have the same effect as breaking it. The whole thing was making his skin crawl.

“How does it work?” Donald asked.

Tony shrugged showing something like frustration for the first time. “I don’t know. It’s magic.” He made the word sound like a curse. “It has never been my strength.”

Donald shook his head. “Nor is it mine. Maybe Henry or Wanda will be able to tell us something. I’ll put some salve on your back, for now that’s all I can do.”

He was putting the cork back on the jar after applying it and telling Tony he could get dressed again when a deafening noise shattered the relative calm of the camp. Steven tore out of the tent, running toward Henry’s laboratory. Sure enough, thick black smoke was coming out of it, the tent was half blown off its support and a vial of something crashed mere feet away from Steven, propelled by the blast. He stopped a few yards from it eyeing it warily.

“It’s fine.” Henry yelled, coming out of the mostly intact part of the tent. He waved the cluster of avengers holding blankets, shovel and water buckets away. “It’s fine. It was only the one blast. Didn’t light that big a fire either.” He noted absentmindedly, looking at the little flames that licked one side of the tent and were starting to spread to the grass. Jessica, who had been holding her pregnant belly with a protective hand, rolled her eyes and threw her bucket of soapy water at the wall extinguishing most of the fire in one splash.

“I’m sorry.” Henry said to Steven. His face was covered with soot and his hair was blown straight on his head. “I put too much saltpeter.”

“Didn’t that happen last week, already?” Donald asked, Tony and him finally catching up to Steven. “You should leave that oriental powder alone, it obviously is a mere myth and not anything real.”

“No.” Henry said sheepishly. “That time it was too little charcoal. And it is not a myth. I have seen it with my own eyes. I know the main ingredient, I only need to figure out the rest. Oh, Tony! I heard Steven was buying you. Welcome to the Avengers.”

“Well, you have been figuring it out the rest for months and this is the most result you have had.” Donald replied.

Steven eyed what was left of the laboratory. Most of it would be put to rights in a few hours. In fact Henry seemed to have already enlisted Tony’s help, chattering in what seemed like a foreign language to Steven’s uneducated ears. Probably about his encounter with the merchant from the far east who had shown him his latest obsession. As far as Henry’s accidents went, this one was barely counted as a disruption in the avengers’ day and the crowd dispersed when it became apparent nothing was burning down.

Steven shook his head. From the look of the sun it was almost time for the captains’ war meeting, time for him to change out of the training clothes he was still wearing from the morning practice and refresh himself. Tony was busy with Henry, talking animatedly as they checked the tent and
its contents for damage. They had worked together before, being two of the best craftsmen in the army, and they seemed to enjoy each other’s company. Steven called out to him, signaling him to stay with the alchemist, then he turned, readying himself for a few hours of intense debate as the army leaders came to a cohesive plan.

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“We can’t march straight on, Fury.” Two hours into the meetings, Susan Richards, the co-captain of the mighty four gestured wearily at the map spread across the table. “Our spies tell us they have near two thousands men baring our way to Carmina, that’s almost double our forces.”

“If you don’t have the balls to fight, Richard, you better change trade, I hear they need laundresses in Captain Giovanni’s company.” Fury snarled, interrupting his pacing to glare at her. Susan rolled her eyes.

“I don’t see what’s cowardly about not wishing to walk into a trap when outnumbered.” Steven interjected. “Especially not when they are other options.”

“You want the other option?” Fury stopped pacing to put his hands on the table and lean in front of Steven. “Let’s talk about the other option. Passing through the mountains.”

“It would allow us to circle them and hit them from where they don’t expect us.” Susan said.

“Which would be perfect.” Fury said, his voice dripping sarcasm. “Except for one little detail: passing the cursed mountain. Am I the only one here capable of seeing the problem with hauling more than a thousand men along with equipment over tiny mountain roads? And what’s stopping them from shifting their line when they don’t see us coming from the plain? It’s not like they are going to wonder where we’ve gone. How else are we going to go, by boat?”

“It is feasible, general.” Captain Giovanni said, speaking for what seemed like the first time. A noble of the city they were on their way to liberate he was the man in charge of what was left of its army. He was the man who knew the region the best, but he stayed quiet a lot of the time, as if having lost his city to the invading northern barbarians had sapped his spirit. “The mountains aren’t that high, the passes are more than practicable in the summer, my men know this country. We could cross them in two or three days.”

“Or we gather the courage we are all supposed to have and march straight. Last I heard I was still in charge here.”

“Because you nominated yourself.” Scott Summers, the captain of Xavier’s men reminded him.

“It’s not only their numbers who are worrying.” Captain Julian said, the leader of the army of the duchy of Savoe, the duchy currently paying the salary of all the mercenaries. He would have been the one in charge had his lord hired anyone else. “Their weapons are too.”

Susan nodded. “My husband spoke about it. They are better armed than we expected, with weapons we have never seen before.”

“Have the spies learned where they are getting them?” Captain Julian asked.

Steven straightened at that. His own spy, Natasha, hadn’t reported in yet, and he was eager for any new Intel. Fury sighed deeply, massaging one temple.
“They have heard rumors that a man from one of the first captured cities, Arma or Ilyria, joined their side in exchange for a place of power. It’s said that he gifted them with the new weapons as a proof of good faith. What is the name they heard?”

“Stane. The Wesi soldiers think his name is Stane.” Lieutenant Alyosius Dugan answered from where he was standing against one wall.

“Right. And they have confirmed that there was a southerner in one of the Wesi delegation that visited Carmina after it first fell.”

“So it has a good chance of being true.” Captain Giovanni said between clenched teeth.

Steven felt a twinge of sympathy. It didn’t really matter to him and the other mercenaries where the weapons came from, other than maybe eliminating the source, but to lord Julian and lord Giovanni it was treason. For all that the southerners liked to think of themselves as separate city-state and duchies they were still one people and to learn that a compatriot was working against them must be a hard blow.

Fury must have felt it too because his voice was slightly less antagonistic when he replied, “From what we know, yes.”

“Lest go back to the mountain road.” Scott said gently. “If we can let them think we are marching forward it would put us in a better position.”

Steven looked at the map and the markers on it, willing a solution to jump at him. The avengers didn’t have the most elaborate chain of command and really outside of the battlefield most of their decisions were taken by hand vote, so he had plenty of experience with rowdy arguments, but the war councils of this particular army always exhausted him. The energy was simply different when the room was full of people used to being obeyed.

On his left, Scott got up sudently. “Do we have to all cross the mountain?” He asked in a startled voice.

Across the table they all blinked. Steven could see it unfold in his head and he didn’t doubt the other were going through the same process. They could split, one part of their force going through the mountain the other spreading out to simulate their complete number going the expected way. A two pronged attack. It had its drawbacks, it would leave the marching unit more vulnerable and it would make coordinating their attack difficult but Steven could see it unfolding. It would give them the edge they were looking for. Even Fury was stepping down from his high horse and making plans in his head.

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Steven left Fury’s tent a few hours later with the satisfaction of a job well done and feeling optimistic. He waved goodnight to Scott when they reached their respective camps and strolled through the gates of his section. Everyone was clustered under the canopy and aunt May was preparing to serve dinner, everyone setting their table wares on one of the three long tables. He almost ran into Jana ducking under the tarp, her cropped hair still wet from refreshing herself after training.

“Here is our lazy captain. Who let us sweat under the sun all day while he was cozy inside.”

“Now Janette, do you want to take my place? We could organize a vote.” Steven replied with a
“Oh hell no, captain.” Jana laughed. “I am not stepping into that viper’s nest of my own free will. By the way how did that go?”

Steven stepped aside to let Luke and Daniel pass. By the cooking pit aunt May had drafted Tony and Carol into giving out loaves of bread.

“I’ll tell everyone over the meal.”

In short order they were all sited and served, eating with enthusiasm. Tony, who apparently hadn’t eaten yet had been given a bowl of stew and a slice of bread and been left to his own devices. He chose to sit cross legged against one of the support pole, within hearing distance of Steven’s table. Steven started to recount the salient point of the council in between bites. He was discussing the rumors of the southerner traitor supplying new weapons when he happened to look at Tony and saw him not eating but listening intently, his eyes fierce. Then he noticed Steven was watching him and went back to his bowl.

After the meals someone asked Mary Jane for a song. She accepted with good grace and got off her fiancé Peter’s lap to get her harp. Her voice rang clear in the evening air, a courtly ballade of a knight in love with his lord’s bride. It was a pretty song, the plot classic enough that everyone was able to follow the story even through it was sung in Oc, the tongue of the minstrels. Steven smiled into his ale. The songs would get livelier and rowdier as time went on until they were all but falling asleep on their feet. Tonight he was one of the first to retire. They were moving out in the day after tomorrow and as captain he would have to be one of the first up to make sure they would be ready to go on time.

Shouts rang out as he got up.

“Good night, Steven.”

“Have a good night, captain.”

“Just don’t wake us up!”

Steven stopped at that, a bit mystified. Wanda was punching her brother Pietro in the arm. Next to them, Guenifer winked at him. He turned back, wondering what it had been about. Tony caught up to him on the path to his tent.

“You could stay, you know,” Steven told him. “If you want.”

Tony blinked. “Er… No master. It’s fine.” They walked a few steps in silence. “The girl… Mary Jane?” Tony said a bit tentatively. “She is very good.”

Steven smiled at him. “Yes, she is. She used to travel from castle to castle, entertaining the nobles, then she met Peter and she’s been with us ever since.”

“And Peter is Mistress Parquer’s nephew?”

“Yes. He got most of the company calling her aunt,” Steven opened his tent flap and ducked inside. “They joined when their village was burned down and aunt May’s husband was killed.”

Now that the sun was no longer heating the walls of the tent the temperature inside was livable
again. Steven sat on his cot to tug his boots off. Tony knelt at his feet to help him.

“It’s fine.” Steven said. “Take those blankets in the corner instead, they’re for you. Lay them down wherever you want, not that there is much space here but you could always sleep outside if you prefer.”

He finished with his boots and set them under the cot. When he looked up Tony was standing with the blankets unfolded in front of him and a confused expression on his face.

“Outside?”

“Yes.” Steven answered. “If you wish, the sky is clear. Or you can put it here.” He shrugged to show that it was really up to Tony and started to unbuckle his belt.

Tony still watched him strangely from under his lashes. It was starting to give Steven the impression that there was something he was missing. Then Tony shook his head and laid the blankets on the floor.

Things got a bit awkward when it was time to undress as there was little space and even less privacy, or at least awkward for Steven. Tony stripped down without any hint of self-consciousness. But then, the slave markets, if he had been auctioned there, would have left him with little modesty. Steven slid under the covers and closed his eyes. The familiar noises from the singing lulling him into sleep.
The next morning he awoke just before dawn, able to tell the time from the degree of darkness. He burrowed under the covers for a few seconds, enjoying the warmth, the quietness, only the faint sounds of exhale troubled the night’s stillness. *Exhale?* Oh yes Tony. Steven felt all trace of sleep leaving him as he remembered the man, the slave sharing his tent.

His slave.

Steven rose up on his elbow to look at him. He was sleeping on his stomach, with his head turned to the side and the top blanket resting on the top of his shoulders. Steve wondered if he always slept that way or if he had had to change position due to the whipping he received. Or maybe previous beatings had gotten him into the habit.

He looked peaceful like this, younger than he did awake, when his personality and his charisma gave him the weight his face was lacking. People tended to think of slaves as dead eyed submissive creatures, and Steven had surely met some like that, the unskilled slaves, whose body and mind had been broken by the hard labor and arch living conditions. Tony wasn’t like that. Steven guessed that he had either been selected young by his owner to be educated or he had been free born. Gossip around the camp was that he had been born free, but that may have been due more to his headstrong streak than to any actual fact.

Tony’s actions fascinated Steven. He had always been friendly toward him, not exactly sweet, his wit was too sharp for him to be called sweet for more than a minute, but agreeable. And yet there seemed to be a core of iron under his smiling pleasant exterior. How much strength did it take to refuse to compromise on your work, when you knew you would only be punished for it? When no one would fault you for conceding? What kind of will? And why care at all? What did a slave care of the result of the campaign?

*Where are you from?* He thought. *Why do you do the things you do?*

Tony stirred, shifting a bit before opening one eye cautiously.

“Good morning,” Steven said barely above a whisper so as not to startle him. Tony turned carefully on his side.

“Hello, master,” he said, looking up at him briefly before lowering his eyes. He shook his head sleepily. “Is it morning?”

“Not quite yet. We can stay in bed a few more minutes.”

“That is very good news, master.” Tony flopped back on his stomach, his eyes closing immediately.

“Rumors say you were born a free man.” Steven asked before he could think better of it.

Tony tensed. “That what they say.”

part 2
“Were you? You said yesterday they put the device inside you because you had been badly injured, did that happen when you were captured?”

Tony sat up, resting his arms on his knees. He looked at Steven quizzically for a few seconds. “Yes.” He said finally.

Now that he was no longer face down, the device in his chest was providing a slight glow, lighting the dark tent faintly. On the surface he was as loose and relaxed as he usually was, but Steven noticed a tension in his shoulders not accounted for by the pain. His head was cocked sideways like Steven often saw him, not quite staring people in the eyes, not quite looking down submissively, but his chin was tilted up, and his jaw had a rigidity that hadn’t been there before. Waiting for something. It didn’t take Steven long to understand what it was.

“I’m not judging you,” he hastened to say. “What the fates give the fates can take away. No one is immune to a stroke of bad luck.” Steven knew better than some.

“Luck?” Tony’s voice was emotionless. “Luck.” This time he almost choked on the word. He curled in on himself, hugging his legs, staring at nothing.

“My father had debts,” Steven started, in an effort to distract him from whatever it was that he was remembering. “When he died the collectors came. They were not big debts but as poor as we were… I came so close to the auction block, I still see it in my dreams.”

Tony’s head snapped up, astonishment flashing in his eyes for a second before being replaced by something else. “But it didn’t happen.” He said, with a touch of protectiveness that surprised Steven.

He snorted. “It didn’t happen thanks to my mother. She fought like a lion and worked like a dog. The money lender decided it would be easier to let her pay him back. I owe my freedom to her, not to anything I did.”

“You were a child, it doesn’t change much then. She at least had the cunning and the strength to hang on to her son’s birthright.” Tony said with a wry grin.

“And what could you have done?” Steven replied, wondering how much of it Tony actually believed, and how much was what he imagined freefolks would say. “Escaped? And when exactly, when you were so close to death your heart stopped beating? Or after they put a spell on you that while saving your life also conveniently ensured you would never have any hope of defying them. Tell me if I’m getting any of this wrong.”

He gestured at the amulet. “You cannot touch this. To live, your life must always be in someone else’s hands. And personally, I’ve always wondered how many of the folks bragging that they would never suffer the indignity of slavery would stand by their claim if they had to choose between death and the collar.”

Tony’s eyes went to the ceiling as he appeared to ponder it for a moment. “Not all of them.”

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Steven saw little of Tony that day. And there was no reason he should. He reminded himself
sternly. They had two greatly different purposes, Steven making sure they would be ready to depart at first light the next morning and Tony… Doing whatever it was that expert craftsmen did. He left him under the nominal authority of Henry, knowing the man would know better than he did what required his attention.

But still he found himself wondering how he was going. Not even worrying about what disaster he was brewing, Henry, under strict interdiction not to tinker with anything new when they were marching or preparing to march, would have relayed that order.

So Steven shook himself and went back to ensuring the ox, the horses, the mules, the dogs, the goat, the chicken, the cat and the fox kit… fox kit? ... Were all accounted for and in good health. Made the children put the fox kit back where they had found it. Made sure their food supply was adequate, and that the floor was free of pests. Warned Samuel that if redwing wasn’t back from his excursion by the time they left this time they wouldn’t wait for him. Did a last minute weapon and gear inventory. Sent anyone with faulty equipment to get it fixed…. And generally tried to make sense of the chaos that was Avenger Company. Still he felt strangely pleased when it turned out that the axle of one of the wagons that should have been fixed days ago hadn’t been.

“I don’t understand why I am here,” Jana complained as she struggled to carry her end of the wagon. Jana was a good warrior but that was more due to her quick feet and nimble body than pure brawn, her nickname was Janette for a reason. “Couldn’t you get someone bigger?”

“The others all have things to do.” Steven said, verging to the right to avoid a large rock.

“That will teach me not to procrastinate,” Janet grumbled. “Could you please lift your end?” She snapped at Peter next to her.

“I am.” Peter replied in a wounded voice. “Maybe it would have been easier if Tony had come to the wagon instead of hauling the wagon to the smithy.”

“All of the tools are at the smithy.”

It wasn’t even all that heavy; they were not carrying the whole wagon, just the front part whose axle was broken, the other wheels were functional.

When they finally set it down on a crate, Tony was already waiting, a satchel with a hammer poking out of it in hand and his boots on his feet. He whistled when he crouched down to see the damage.

“Did that happen today?”

“Oh no,” Peter said, dropping down next to him and craning his neck to look. “Happened three days ago. Luke was supposed to get it fixed.”

“Luke? I thought Reed Richards agreed to take a look at it?” Jana frowned from the barrel she was sitting on seemingly unaware of the man from Shield waiting with his arms crossed to load it in the cart next to it.

“Well that’s what he did. Took a look at it. He said it wasn’t in his chords.” Peter shrugged.

Which probably hadn’t gotten back to Luke. Steven groaned. Sometimes he wondered if others weren’t right when they said the avengers were little more than a makeshift war band with no discipline, then he would remember that they were just as good if not better than the rest of them
on the battlefield. The Avengers had plenty of discipline, they were just not very… organized.

“It happens to the best of us.” Tony said, now completely under the frame of the wagon.

Jana snorted. “Nice of you to say. I guess people are right and you really have a gilded tongue.”

“Oh, I have a very talented tongue.” Tony replied, but he wasn’t looking at Jana, he was looking straight at Steven.

Once upon a time, Steven had been fairly innocent, being a little shy and rather frail until he finally hit a growth spurt on the verge of manhood, but he had been a soldier since he had been about Peter’s age. And if there was one thing he had learned, it was to recognize a sexual innuendo when he heard one. He felt his cheeks redden. He had never minded Tony mocking him before, because it had never felt mean spirited, not that Tony had necessarily meant that comment with ill intent but Steven didn’t care for it at all. He turned completely from the wagon and the slave underneath to look with great interest at the cart being loaded with anvils.

To his left Jana laughed. “I bet you do.”

Steven wished he could have felt the same. It surprised him how uncomfortable it made him. He composed himself and went back to the wagon. He had no reason to be embarrassed and it was ridiculous to hide. Tony slithered out from under it, if Steven hadn’t moved away he would have ended up lying between Steven’s feet. As it was he was very conscious of Tony’s hip resting bare inches from his right boot. Tony himself didn’t appear to be bothered. He chattered away, explaining what was wrong with the wagon and how he was going to fix it in terms Steven almost understood and that had Peter nodding.

“Well then, I’ll leave you to it,” Steven said.

At that Tony, still lying on his side, cozy as you please, pouted. One of those affected gestures that felt like it should have come with bating eyelashes although Tony didn’t go that far.

“So soon, master?”

“I have other things to do.” He replied, maybe a little too brusquely but his patience with Tony’s new game was running short and he wanted him to stop. Jana jumped from her barrel and ran up to him.

“Captain, you’re blushing,” she snickered once they were out of earshot. “You are red as a beet.”

“I’m glad the two of you find it so amusing.” He groused. “I bet you do, indeed.”

“Well he does have a reputation for…”

“Janette!” he raised his hands as if to press them to his ears. “By all that is holy…” He forcefully pushed away the images created by his treacherous brain. He did not want to hear about that part of his new slave’s reputation, if she could be so kind.

Jana continued to smile all the way back to the Avenger camp where she left to help Hank pack his laboratory before Steven could give her another task. Steven was stuck redoing the weapon inventory. That night at dinner Tony had stopped his outrageous behavior, but he sat closer to Steven than he had the night before, what seemed as close as he could get without seating at Steven’s feet, and there was a kind of weight, of heaviness between them that made Steven very
aware of his presence. It intensified once they went to bed. Tony kept shooting him looks that Steve couldn’t interpret and he seemed to take his sweet time getting undressed. Steven shook those things out of his mind as he slid under the covers. They would have a big day tomorrow and he would need to be well rested.

The next day dawned bright and early, but everyone rose slightly before that. They finished packing the last items and then off they went. The sky was clear and the company in good humor, the first few hours passed pleasantly. On both sides of the roads the fields alternated between golden wheat and vineyards with ripening grapes. Steven let his feet drift to the edge of the road and brushed his fingers against the grain.

It reminded him that the war season would be coming to an end in little more than a month; they would not finish the campaign this year. It also reminded him that he would have to find a place to winter. Unlike an established company like the mighty four or a large one like the Shield, Avenger Company did not have a set place to spend the winter. Instead they broke up and those who had a home to go back to went there if possible and those that did not either accompanied someone who did or found another place. Steven’s mother, may she rest in peace, had died before he had taken up the soldier’s life and Steven had had no reason to return to the land of his birth since he had left it soon after. Something he would have to work on later. Stephen was proud and honored to have been voted captain, but sometimes the logistics exhausted him.

Redwing let out a cry above his head and swooped down to perch himself on Samuel’s outstretched arm. Samuel immediately got a bit of jerky out of a pouch at his waist and fed it to the bird while talking to him in a soft voice.

It must have inspired Wanda because she started singing. Most of the member of the Avenger company had been together long enough that they were passably acquainted with each other’s songs, even if they barely understood a word of it. This particular song if Steve’s memory served him well was about a magpie stealing a silver ring, or something similar. The only Tzigane words he knew were the one that could not be repeated in polite company. But the song was a call and response and easy to wrap your tongue around and so was a favorite. Forty odd voices joined hers.

For a day spent marching, that first day went very well. Unlike what some folks had predicted Tony didn’t give him any trouble. None beyond a few attempts at picking up his queer flirting game of the previous day –why he would chose to behave that way, Steven couldn’t phantom-including one comment on Steven’s size and strength that segued into a query about his stamina that shouldn’t have affected Steven as much as it did seeing that it was far from the first time someone had told him something similar. But he was firm and Tony desisted soon.

At first he stayed two feet behind Steven but as the day progressed he started walking with other members of the company. He stayed for long hours with Henry and Wanda. At one point he saw him unlace his tunic to show the artifact to Wanda. It should have pleased him that they were studying it, so that they may one day remove it but Steven found himself missing Tony’s presence and wishing he could find a reason to recall him at his side.

When they pitched camp for the night, he told Tony to take care of his gear remembering that he would do a better job than Steven could. Without understanding how he had gotten there, he soon found himself wearing his scalemail, trying to convince the slave circling him that he didn’t need brand new armor.
“Not even a solid plate over the chest? It would not be costly and very sim…”

“No.”

“It is really…”

“No.”

“Oh well, if you’re sure.” Tony said reluctantly, not even giving him the courtesy of looking at him.

He turned away from him and picked up his shield. “Now, you are a beauty.” He held it up to the fading sunlight and tilted it. “A bit battered but you are strongly made and can withstand it, yes you can.” His fingers ran over its surface expertly. “I had heard you used it as much as an offense weapon as a defensive one,” He said over his shoulder, addressing Steven once more, and then continuing without waiting for an answer. “I see it’s true. It’s in remarkable condition.” Steve idly wondered if he ought to feel offended by the surprised note in Tony’s voice. “I can straighten out a few dents, maybe sharpen the edge a bit if you would like that and of course oil it but there’s not much else I can do. It’s…”

“A beauty.” Steve finished for him.

“Yes! It is” Tony’s grin was wide and his eyes were animated by a light Steven had only seen glimpses of before.

He knew he should cuff him and remind him of his place but he found he didn’t have the heart. Instead, he set him loose on the rest of the company. After all, it was important that all the soldiers had the best gear they could have, and if it let Steve hear his voice rushing fast and strong as a river after the thaw of spring, it was an unexpected bonus. Let the tongues wag. He thought as he followed behind Tony, not wanting to miss any of it.

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The next day the sky started to cover during the short break they took around noon to let the animals rest and eat a little. Steven offered a brief prayer to the gods that the weather would not worsen further but of course it went unanswered and it started to rain soon after. He hated marching in the rain, it was miserable and clothes took forever to dry.

Morale took a plunge, some brave souls continued to sing in an effort lift the mood but most huddled in clusters with hunched shoulders and waited for it to pass. Tony had started the day walking properly a few feet behind Steven but had migrated has conversation sprouted and singing group formed and so he ended up on the left edge of the road, four or five yard in front of him, almost surrounded by Guenifer and Carol. He said something that made the women laugh.

“If that boy was a fox he could convince a hen to let him into the hen house.”

Steven turned his head to see May walking beside him.

“Aunt May, shouldn’t you go into one of the wagon?”

The woman shot him a pointed look.

“I’ll have you know young lad, I am not so old or feeble as to need to be protected from a little
May was the oldest member of the company and resisted being treated like an elder, luckily she had always been more amused than offended by their attempts to spare her strength. Steven went back to the first subject.

“The henhouse? Wouldn’t that imply that he has nefarious purposes?”

“Oh. Not necessarily,” She laughed and patted his arm in a reassuring manner. “I was just mentioning that he has a great deal of charm and knows how to use it.”

You couldn’t argue with that.

“Although he is about to look like a drowned dog,” she finished, adjusting her hat and oiled cloak unconsciously.

It made Steven focus on Tony. His slave still only had one change of clothing, and while the tunic was thick, to protect him from sparks and other accidents, it was well on its way to being soaked through. The weather was still warm so he was in no danger but Steven would definitely have to procure clothes for him in the near future along with some tools and other items that hadn’t occurred to him because he had never thought he would become responsible for another man.

He would tell Jana to take care of the clothes. He decided, taking leave of aunt May and coming closer to Tony. She liked dealing with fabric and thread, a leftover from her younger days where she had ran off from her father’s house to apprentice herself in the clothier guild. She would do a better job than he could.

More laughter erupted when Steven came close enough to hear what the group was saying. Carol was walking slightly apart now, smiling and watching Tony and Guenifer. Gueniver reached out to pass a hand though Tony’s hair. Steven stiffened but Tony only leaned into the touch like a housecat. Still laughing, Guenifer pulled Tony against her, keeping her hand in his hair.

“Now Carol, I heartily agree that his is a pretty face but sometimes I like a little something else in my men.”

“A little something?” Tony said with an innocence that was about as convincing as a cat’s muzzle was full of feathers. “Or a big something?”

While Steven, his face crimson, tried to stop sputtering, the three of them nearly bent over laughing again.

“Not that you little ...” Guenifer shook him playfully. “Well, that is nice. But it wasn’t what I was talking about. I’m a lot of woman,” She put both hand on her hips to highlight her words. “Too much woman for some men to handle.” At that she let her eyes rove over Tony’s smaller form as if gauging him. “You, you might do.”

“Oh mistress,” he put one hand over his heart as if he deeply wounded. “To have the opportunity to please a beauty such as yours, I hate to think I would not be more than merely adequate.”

He looked at her from under his lashes, a coy move Steven had seen him use before on him but thankfully, not with such connotations.

Guenifar took his words as her due. She was not pretty; she was of an impressive height for a
woman, slightly taller than Steven who was tall for a man, and her shoulders were broad. But the features of her face were more than fair and she alone of the female warrior of the company had womanly attributes generous enough to be visible under the layers of clothes, leather and armor. She was beautiful and her beauty had bought many partners to her bed. She had no need to tumble with a slave, but apparently she felt differently.

“They do say you are clever in more than one way.”

“I can be as clever as you want me to be.”

At that point the hand she had kept around Tony’s shoulder slipped lower, a lot lower.

That was it. Freed from the spell that had kept him frozen in place, Steven closed the distance that separated him from them in two steps. He grabbed Guenifar’s arm and wrenched it away from Tony.

“What do you think you’re doing?” The words came out more tense than he had intended them to and he realized he was clenching his teeth.

“Captain?”

“Master?”

“What did you think you were doing?”

“Master, it was only…”

“You,” Steven whirled on Tony and pointed at him. “Be silent.”

Tony may not have been known for his obedience but the change was immediate. His mouth snapped shut and he lowered his head, murmuring a quiet “Yes, master.” Before taking a few steps back.

“Well.” Steven said to Carol and Guenifar.

“I meant no harm, Steven,” Guenifar said startled, as if Steven’s reaction was disproportionate. “It was only a game.”

“It looked more serious than a game to me.”

“As I said. I meant no offense,” she was trying to be soothing now. “I did not think any ill would come of it. I’m sorry.”

“well, see that it doesn’t happen again.”

Tony was a slave, she was a free woman. He shouldn’t have had to explain to her how problematic taking him to bed was. Once Carol and Guenifar had taken their leave he addressed Tony once more.

“And I told you I wanted you to stop that, that also meant with other people, not only with me.”

Precision, it seemed, was key when dealing with the slave. Tony looked at him from under his lashes, face pleasant. “As you wish, master.”
And that was that, or it should have been. Tony was not sulking, or at least it didn’t seem that he was, but his behavior changed. The thing between them that Steven couldn’t put his finger on grew even heavier, and he watched Steven like a hawk when he thought Steven wasn’t looking.

Steven, for his part, thought he had been more than clear and refused to talk about it further. And he did not, not that night, when Tony only spoke when spoken to, nor the following day. After all, he was more than busy enough without adding Tony to his troubles.

They had reached the point where the army was separating, and it had been agreed that Avenger company, being small and mobile, would be amongst those taking the mountain road. So he let it go until finally, on the evening of the fourth day of marching, the tension became more than he could bear.

“What is it!” he snapped when they retired to his tent, Tony’s silence hanging like a weight in the cramped space.

Tony startled. “Nothing, master.”

“You have been acting strange for days,” Steven replied. “If there is something bothering you, please share.” He crossed his arms impatiently. This was becoming ridiculous and he would have an answer.

Tony avoided his gaze and fiddled with the flap of the tent, taking great pains in closing it. Steven sighed and sat on his bed, waiting. Just as he was starting to think they were going to stay there all night and wondering if he could afford to, Tony spoke.

“What are you not bedding me?”

“What?”

“What are you not bedding me?” Tony repeated, and this time Steven couldn’t pretend not to hear as Tony spoke slowly and clearly, looking at him from the corner of his eyes in a manner Steven was starting to recognize as his way of looking someone in the eyes without being insolent.

Of all the grievances Steven had imagined Tony could bring, this one had never occurred to him, and in fact he had a hard time making sense of it. He stayed speechless for longer than he should have, so great was his shock. What in all the levels of Hell had given him the idea that he would?

“I’m afraid I don’t understand what you mean.”

For a short while he feared his comment would silence Tony again but it seemed that now that he had started he wasn’t stopping.

“I know you want to.” He said, and Steven’s disbelief must have been plain on his face for he raised his chin and immediately added, “Why else would you have taken such an interest in me? And more so, I have seen you look at me.”

“I do not look at you…” Steven said in a strangled voice.

“But you haven’t made any move toward me,” Tony continued as if Steven had not spoken. “And you grow angry every time I try to make a move,” He passed a hand in his short cropped hair, making the strands stick out straight, “And then you grew even angrier when Mistress Guenifer
showed an interest in me. I do not understand.”

There seemed to be real confusion in Tony’s eyes, it made Steven take a deep breath and speak in an even tone.

“I do not want you.” he said patiently. And it was true, no matter how handsome he was or how fascinating when he worked, he was Steven’s slave, and therefore Steven could not want him. “And nothing of that sort will happen, I assure you.”

Tony raised an eyebrow, then. “Are you chaste, master?” he asked as if something had suddenly slid into place in his mind.

Steven sputtered feeling himself go red in the face. The *gall* of the man. “No.” he said, trying for dignity. “I am not.”

Tony bowed his head at his tone, lifting both hands palm forward to indicate no offense had been meant. “It is only that you did not seem to have had lovers lat…”

“Whether or not I take lovers is no concern of yours.” Steven cut him off and Tony bowed lower. “Of course.” He straightened and then raised his hands high, “but then, why?”

Steven stifled the feeling they were going in circle, when something else occurred to him. Where Steven would have expected the slave to be relived to be spared his master’s interest Tony only looked disappointed.

“Why would you even want me to?”

Tony looked at him his face blank.

“Why would you want it to happen to the point of trying to make advances?”

He saw Tony swallow a snort. “That is no great mystery, master. You swooped in to save me from Fury’s wrath like a hero from the ballads, you have been nothing but kind to me, never so much as lifted a finger on me…”

“I haven’t had you for a week, yet.” Steven protested, but Tony went on as if he hadn’t heard. “… when I know fore well I am not always the most respectful of slaves.”

Steven had a sudden recollection of the previous evening, where Tony had boldly told Clinton that if his seldom used short sword tended to rust it was because he didn’t oil it properly, and had to admit that no, Tony’s manners where not always as they ought to be. Of course Clinton had only squawked harder when Steven had told him that Tony was the weapon expert and that he should listen to him, so Steven might shoulder part of the blame for Tony’s manners.

“And finally,” Tony said, looking at him from under his lashes and smiling, “you are certainly handsome, have you never heard folk whisper about the fairness of your face or the strength of your shoulder?”

Steven, whose face had barely recovered heatened up again and he looked away. He clenched his teeth.
“Well, I am sorry to disappoint,” he said, looking at Tony sternly. He still felt unbalanced but he had to be firm. “But that is not going to happen.”

“Why not?”

Steve refrained from pinching the bridge of his nose, now certain this discussion was going in circle.

“I could make it good for you,” Tony continued, coming closer to Steven, “I have never had complains about my skills in bed,” He reached to touch Steven, but Steven caught his wrist before he could and pushed him away.

“No.”

“But why? You have yet to giv…”

“I don’t sleep with slaves!” Steven finally snapped, his eyes fixed on Tony’s iron collar.

Tony’s hand flew to his throat and when Steven raised his gaze to his face he saw his eyes were wide. Then Tony set his jaw and turned away from him.

“I see.” He said without any emotion in his voice and Steven thinking about how his words could be taken, realized with a start he had offended him. He stared unmoving as Tony picked up his pile of blankets and left the tent, taking a tenth of the time it had taken him to close the flap to reopen it.

*I did not meant it that way* Steven thought, but by then Tony had already left, taking his offer made the first night to sleep outside and Steven did not want to make a scene.

Alone again for the first time in 6 days his little tent suddenly seemed big and quiet, so very quiet without the sounds of another man breathing. It did not make Steve feel as good as he thought it would.
In the morning, Steven woke up to the sound of birds chirping and a tent that was empty. It was surprising how quickly he had become accustomed to Tony’s presence. He shook off the feeling, telling himself he would be just as quick getting used to having the entire tent for himself again.

He stepped out of the tent and was greeted by a sky that promised to be clear and bright and by Tony who approached with his blankets folded and his head bowed to help him pack up. They worked side by side in an uncomfortable silence; the tent already packed up in one of the wagon when Steven decided to speak.

“About what occurred last night…” he trailed off, not sure how to proceed.

“I’m sorry for my behavior, master,” Tony said, bowing again. “I realize I was out of bounds.”

Steven looked at him. His face was blank, without the smile or smirk Steven had gotten used to, his shoulders were tense. Steven did not think he meant a word of the apology although he obviously knew he had not behaved appropriately. Well, Steven had asked him to speak up so he couldn’t complain about that. He waved the apology away.

“I think I did not express myself correctly. When I said I did not sleep with slaves, I did not mean it the way you understood it.”

Tony paused from where he was hoisting Steven’s chest into the wagon. “What other way is there to mean it?”

Over Tony’s shoulder Steven could see Henry attaching his tent to the wagon and Jessica and Luke approaching with their own bags. Behind him he could hear the giggle one of the children climbing into the wagon and aunt May’s chuckles.

Soldiers were gossips and the Avengers lived in each other’s pockets. He had no doubt some of their disagreement would become public, if it wasn’t already, but that didn’t mean he was going to make the gossips job easy. He grabbed Tony by the arm.

“Not here, come with me.”

He took him to the head of the convoy, telling Carol they were scouting ahead on the way. It was unsure whether the excuse would be believed but at least they wouldn’t be overheard.

Once they were at a safe distance he turned toward Tony.

“It is not that I see you as less, Tony,” he started gently. “But I own you. You have to obey me. Any relationship between us would be me taking advantage of you. It’s not right.”

Tony was watching him with an increasingly incredulous expression, and Steven could see he wasn’t making any impression.

“You cannot tell me no.”
“That doesn’t mean I cannot say yes.” Tony said behind his teeth, in an incredulous tone Steven wasn’t totally sure he was supposed to have heard.

Steven ignored him. “So do you see?”

Tony nodded yes but his expression said he didn’t. They walked in silence for a yard or so, Then tony started to fidget.

“I… I was supposed to help Mistress Wanda this morning.”

“Go then.”

Tony took a few steps and then turned.

“Master,” he asked. “If you have no interest toward me and weren’t jealous the other day. Why did you react with anger when mistress Guenifer and I flirted?”

“For the same reason. She’s a free woman.”

“But she does not own me.”

“Still, there is too much inequality in power.”

“So I’m supposed to be chaste too?!?” Tony asked, making it sound like a great horror.

Steven was not chaste. He just often went for some time without taking a lover. But the discussion wasn’t about that so he didn’t say it.

“It certainly wouldn’t do you any harm.”

Strictly speaking it still left the slaves of the other companies but if Tony hadn’t thought of it Steven was strangely reluctant to enlighten him.

Tony seemed so depressed that as he left he couldn’t conjure his usual happy mask.

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There was no absolute certitude to be had but, Steve was getting the feeling Tony was sulking. He could very well be mistaken, of course. In the days since Tony had joined the company, since Steven had purchased him, he had taken to spending long hours in discussion with Wanda, Henry or Donald, therefore his sitting on the other side from where Steven was eating alone at midday might have just been him continuing an animated discussion. But Steven couldn’t shake the feeling he was being ignored, when he looked at Tony, their eyes never met.

He took a bite from his slice of bread and looked at his hands. The event of the previous night and morning had not yet caught up with him and he did not know what to think. His life, he thought mulishly, had been much simpler only a week before.

Samuel sat next to him in the grass.

“What is troubling you so?”
“What?” Steven asked looking up from his laps.

“You and Tony,” Samuel said, jerking his head toward the slave explaining something to Henry with a lot of hand movement. “Something is off with the two of you today, when you were thick as thieves yesterday. What happened?”

Steven tore his eyes away from Tony to look at his hands again. His first impulse was to deny everything and keep a modicum of dignity, but dealing with this alone had not helped him so far, instead he felt has he and Tony stepped deeper in misunderstanding with every words. He also desperately felt the need to talk to someone and with James gone to bring Natasha back from enemy lines Samuel was his best choice.

“I am still no sure what happened,” he said honestly, “It started a few days ago, or maybe from the time I bought him…” He told Samuel most of what had happened since the last evening. “He… Did you know he expected me to bed him? I think he thought it was the reason I bought him.”

That realization, still tasted as sour to his mouth now as it had when it had come to him during the night. He turned to Samuel, expecting to see on his face an expression similar to the one his own face had born at the time, but Samuel only responded with a:

“He did?” In the bland tone he usually used when he thought Steven was being thick or slow. More precisely, the tone Samuel used when he thought Steven was being thick or slow and but was trying to be nice about it.

Steven didn’t really think Samuel had any ground to use that tone but since he wasn’t getting anywhere on his own he decided to do what he usually did in those situations and to listen to Samuel.

“So how do you think he got that idea, Sam?” If his friend thought he knew what was going on, he might as well share it.

Samuel suddenly looked uncomfortable. “Well, it could be interpreted that way. No listen to me, brother. You never showed any interest in a slave before. And suddenly you go and interfere with how Fury deals with one of his…”

“They were…” Steven started furiously.

“It was stupid and unnecessary and bad management, I know.” Samuel interrupted him with a raised hand. “But folks wonder why you got through so many troubles championing a disobedient slave… and the most logical explanation…”

“What do you mean, folks?” Steven said. Suddenly Samuel’s uncomfortable expression started to make sense. “you don’t mean that… You!”

“You didn’t act like someone deciding to protect a little slave he did not even know, if there is such a thing,” Samuel defended himself. “You acted more like a courtly knight having glimpsed a fair maiden and stricken by her beauty.”

“So you thought I was going to order him to…”

He could not even finish that sentence, he looked at Samuel, wondering how the friend he thought of as a brother could think that of him. Think him capable of such an ugly thing.
“Offer, Steven.” Samuel said soothingly. “We all thought you were going to offer.”

We. That meant the rest of the Avengers as well, if not the rest of the army. Wonderful.

“I’m his master!” Steven hissed as silently as he could, not feeling mollified in the slightest. “I’m responsible for him. It would be taking advantage.”

“Not necessarily. Hell, this kind of relationship accounts for a good portion of every manumention papers.”

“He cannot tell me no.”

Samuel looked at him.

“Do you remember how this whole affair started? Because from what I’ve heard he never had a problem making his feelings heard. In fact, he is known for making his feelings heard no matter the consequences.”

Steven shook his head uncomfortably. “It’s not the same, thing.”

He swallowed the rest of his meal and stormed off before Samuel could ask him in what way.

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Marching again, the landscape was starting to change, the mountain in the horizon started to loom over then and the road got steeper, Steve, trying to not to think of Tony and failing, made frequent rounds checking up on all the members of the company.

One group, led by Mary Jane, was singing again. Jessica Jones, in what would have been an uncharacteristic move before had hitched a ride in one of the wagon, pregnancy having tired her more than Steven would have thought, not that he knew much about that part of a woman’s life. Luke was walking beside her. Clinton, Pietro, Carol and Simon were attempting to play a game dice using a platter filched from the kitchen gear to supply a flat surface. There didn’t seem to be much success but a lot of laughter.

Steven sidestepped Jana who had stopped to adjust the strap of her bag and made his way toward the rear of their company where Henry and Tony were still in deep discussion. Donald and Wanda had left them and they were instead in the company of Richard Red, Captain Susan’s husband from the Mighty Four. Steven frowned. In the past, Richard, a scholar of many interest, and Henry segregating themselves together had spelled a few disasters. Richard, Henry and Tony did not sound much better.

And Steven felt something ugly stir inside him whenever he looked at Tony and Henry. He knew they were both scholars, but why should they be so at ease with each other when Steven, Tony’s owner, was seemingly back to where he had started, or worth, with the man just when he was starting to get to know him.

They had not seemed to have noticed his approached, so engrossed were they in their discussion, so he quieted his footsteps and came up to them silently.

“Maybe it needs quicksilver,” Reed was saying, “to give it that sparks of life.”
“I have tried already,” Henry replied. “And I have found no trace of it in the sample I have. No, I think I am in the right path with the sulfur and charcoal. Perhaps the problem is in…”

“Are you working on that oriental powder?” Steven asked. All three of them jumped at the sound of his voice. “The powder that exploded in your laboratory not even five days past?”

The faces looking at him all bore a striking resemblance that of a deer cornered by hunters. Steven judged a confirmation unnecessary.

“We’re only discussing it, Steven,” Henry said, trying his outmost to appear convincing and only succeeding in appearing more suspicious. “on a purely theoretical level.”

On Henry’s left, Tony nodded.

Steven snorted, but he couldn’t deny they were just talking. So far.

“See to it that it stays theoretical then.”

Tony and Henry nodded again, Reed rolled his eyes.

He turned away and saw Benjamin, the other co-captain of the Mighty four coming down toward them. Steven left the scholars to come up to him.

“Hello.”

“Hello to you, Steven. We seemed to be short a man, so I came here to investigate.”

“Well, your instincts were true.”

Benjamin watched the trio suspiciously.

“What are they doing?”

“Having a theoretical discussion.”

“Ah,” Benjamin looked as convinced as Steven himself. “He said that before.”

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Fury might have objected on taking the mountain road out of sheer stubbornness but he had had a point about the difficulty of the terrain. Once they reached the mountain proper they had to slow their pace to account for the incline and narrowing of the road. The weather was stiflingly hot, one of those heavy smothering day that promised a storm in the evening.

The Avengers were bringing up the rear so Steven never learned what exactly had happened, but in the middle of the afternoon, when pretty much everyone had shed every layer of clothing they felt they could decently go without; the caravan suddenly came to a halt. For a minute the avengers were stuck behind the Mighty four wondering what was happening, then runners started to reach them. One of Captain Giovanni’s wagons had slipped from the path into the ravine. By some miracle, the horse was none the worth for wear but the wagon had been damaged. The
troops would not go any farther today.

Steven made his way to the head to the convoy, joined by Susan, Benjamin and Scott, to concert with Giovanni. He also bought Tony with him, so that he could help with the repair.

Captain Giovanni did not tell them anything they had not already guessed. They would not be able to move out until the next morning at the very least, and with the storm that would no doubt come maybe even later, in the afternoon.

Sitting in Giovanni’s tent over a cup of beer, they all knew it was bad news. The mountain road already slowed them down a little from the bulk of the army still on flat terrain, although their smaller number made up for it somewhat. Losing a day would set them back further. It was not catastrophic yet, but it let them with less and less wriggle room.

Sighing, Steven set his tankard down on the table and took his leave of Giovanni. Outside the humidity had, if anything, gotten worse. Steven grabbed the collar of his undershirt, his skin was too fair for him to go shirtless, and tried to shake it away from where it was plastered to his body. He almost went directly back to Avenger’s camp but in the end his sense of duty made him check on Tony first.

He wasn’t near the broken wagon and Steven frowned. Then he heard his voice to the right, hidden from view between another wagon and a tent.

A man Steven didn’t recognize, not dressed like a soldier but more like a craftsman, was standing in front of Tony, holding him by the arm in a manner that wasn’t pleasant.

“Is there a problem?” He asked, marching quickly up to them.

The soldier frowned at him, seemingly not happy at being disturbed. “Nothing,… sir.” He said in a deeply accented Lingua Franca, like he wanted to tell Steven to mind his own business, but a month or two ago, Jana had embroidered Stars, Steven’s personal emblem, on all of his shirts, making him easily recognizable. And the man didn’t look willing to piss off a captain, even one not of his company. “I was just speaking, negotiating with Tony here about him borrowing some of my tools.”

He was still holding him, so Steven stepped forward until he was looming over them and the man let Tony go in favor of stepping back. Interestingly, Tony did not move away.

“Negotiating? I thought there was an agreement that tools were to be shared.”

The man, maybe Steven ought to ask his name, grimaced. “Yes, of course. I was going to give them to him. But I thought we could have a bit of fun first.”

“Fun?” Steven asked even thought he could feel lead gathering at the pit of his stomach.

“You know,” the man gestured. “Just a little harmless fun. I’ve never had the occasion to try him before, so I thought…” He shrugged and the dread in Steven stomach was replaced by hot fury.

He turned toward Tony who shrugged. “I told him no.” He said nonchalantly. The words Like you told me to unspoken but implied.

Maybe Tony’s unruffled attitude should have calmed Steven but instead he found that it angered him even more. He turned back toward the man.
“Well you’ll have to go find your fun somewhere else,” He said, forcing his teeth to unclench. “Do you have those tools with you?”

The man took a step back, sensing Steven’s ire. “Hum, no. They are packed in one of my bags.”

“I suggest you go get them, then.” Steven said, full of icy politeness. “And when you come back you better not treat him as anything but a fellow worker.”

At that the man’s eyes widened. “You can’t be angry about that!” He spluttered, “Everyone knows he’s good for a tumble, I heard folk in the Shield’s administration say it’s his main redeeming quality. I just wanted a taste!”

And there it was. The part of Tony’s reputation he had tried very hard to ignore, the part others had glossed over for his sake and that had bothered him, spelled out in all its ugly glory.

“Not anymore, Now go.”

The man opened his mouth to say something then scurried away without protesting, obviously aware Steven wasn’t in a mood to be tested. He looked over his shoulder once and muttered something that sounded like one of the vulgar Tuscan word for a prostitute. Steven and Tony were left alone.

“This,” Steven said, trying to chase his anger and the profound uneasiness behind it away. “Is the exact reason you are not sharing my bed.”

“Old Ned?” Tony asked, “He’s just an old fo... man, master.”

Since Steven was thinking of fouler names than fool, he let Tony’s slip in manner slide.

“But still if it hadn’t been for our discussion from before you would have…” He trailed off, unsure of what act they would have done and not really desiring to know.

Tony shrugged, turning away from him. “It would have only taken a minute, or even less,” he added with a roll of his eyes, “And then he would have been happy and reassured in his belief to be the bigger man and much more likely to do things my way.”

Steven gaped. “How can you be so...”

“Loose.” Tony said. Steven winced at the word. “That the word you looking for, master?” He asked with a glint in his eyes, a glint that seemed to be present in a lot of their conversation lately. “I was loose as a free man, why wouldn’t I be loose now?”

Steven took a step back, and then attacked.

“So what is it you wish to gain from me then?”

Tony stilled, taking a moment to process the question then his eyes widened in horror.

“Oh, no, no, no, no, Master. That is not that at all,” he said, arms waving. “It’s...”

Steven turned away and started the walk back to Avenger camp; he could feel a headache coming. And the worst part was, for someone in Tony’s position, it actually was a smart way to manage
the people around him. Smarter than digging your heels and defying them. If not anything Steven himself could stomach.

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Tony came back with the first drops of rain and the sound of thunder in the distance. That night there was no question of him sleeping outside, so he was back in Steven’s tent. They laid in the cramped space, listening to the deafening drumming of the rain against the canvas wall and shared a look that said they were praying the pegs holding the tents secure would hold against the elements. Surprisingly that seemed enough to make the awkwardness go away and restore some semblance of complicity.

The repairs were finished early the next morning and the convoy was able to resume with less than a day setback.

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“I almost wish for rain,” Peter was saying from behind Steven. “Why is that?”

“Because the sun is roasting us alive,” Jessica Jones replied from up ahead.

Steven whipped sweat from his forehead before it could drip into his eyes and looked up. The road stretched in endless turns, looping up the mountain side, and Steven could see part of the convoy where the road doubled over again.

“We’re in July,” he said. “What did you expect?”

“I swear,” Peter continued. “It wasn’t that hot at home.”

“Welcome to the Etruscan lands.” Tony said, from behind Peter where he was walking with Wanda again. “The land has to make up for the mild winter somehow.”

People chuckled.

“Hey, look,” Carol tapped Steven on the shoulder. He followed her finger to see two peasants sitting on a rock watching the convoy go by. Steven took them to be shepherds at first, then as the avengers got closer the man got up and stretched and a spark of familiarity struck Steven.

“Hey, shepherd!” Guenifer, walking at the head and so closer to the peasants, bellowed. “Where is your flock?”

“Right here!” replied the woman, gesturing to the Avengers. “Coming to us nice and dociles.”

Both she and the man dropped to the ground and started walking toward them.

“I was starting to thing you were never going to join us” Steven said with a smile.

James smiled in return and clapped Steven in the back when he reached him.

“What did you expect us to do?” Natasha said. “Fly over mount and valley? We still have to walk same as the rest of you.”
“Any important news?” Steven asked, turning serious. He had sent Natasha out weeks ago, he was eager to hear what she had to say about the enemy’s position.

“A few,” Natasha said. “But they can wait until tonight.”

Steven nodded, and let the other two be welcomed back into the fold.

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After the heat of the day, seeing the sun going down in the horizon was a relief. As soon as the camp was pitched, they all gathered at the tables to hear what Natasha had to say. Her red hair glittered under the setting sun, she was still wearing her southern peasant clothes, Steven didn’t know where she had gotten them and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but no one would mistake her for a shepherdess now, not with the way she was wielding the knife in her hand.

“So when I left the troops were positioned here, here and here,” she told Steven, gesturing with the point of the knife. “And the plan was to gather them here.”

Steven nodded. “That’s about what Fury’s spies said. So that hasn’t changed.”

“No.” she shook her head. “They don’t have any particular strategy that I know of. The soldiers haven’t received any particular order and I listened in on a few war councils. From what I gather the plan is to meet us dead on on the Marona plains.

“It’s not like they need one.” Clinton said. “They are almost double our numbers. And they have superior weaponry.”

A wave of uncertainty fell on the group. Number may not win a battle but no soldier liked to fight outnumbered.

“So they have no inkling of our plan?”

“No when I left.”

“That is that then. Anything else?”

“Yes,” Natasha’s face turned serious. “The army at Marona was waiting for something, not reinforcement, that I know, but a new convoy none the less, with new weapons, although I couldn’t figure out if they were a new kind of weapons or just more weapons.”

A groan went out, but Steven couldn’t tell who had made it.

“That’s just what we need,” Luke said disgustedly. “More weapons. Don’t they have enough already?”

Natasha flipped her knife. “That is the good news, or at least possible good news. Their generals have had reports of a “rebellion”, groups of citizens from different fallen cities apparently, they have gathered somewhere in this area,” She circled the hilly forest between Carmina and Arma with the knife. “They’re not bold enough to try to retake Arma yet but they’ve been attacking enough supply train and troops in movement that they are starting to make enough of a nuisance of themselves that the Wesi general was considering sending some troops in reinforcement to Arma.”
“So that would be less soldiers for us to worry about. Is he going to do it?”

“I don’t know, the decision hadn’t been taken when I left. Maybe, maybe not.”

Steven nodded. You couldn’t ask too much of the gods.

“In any case, it’s good news for us,” he said. “Even if they don’t send out troops to fight them, we might have reinforcement of our own when we reach their territory.”

“A ragtag group of citizens, most of whom might not even be soldiers?” Pietro asked. “Without any gear but what they could cobble together or even much in the way of armament, I bet. Are they going to be of much help?”

“They certainly seem to be making an impression on the Wesi,” Natasha said lazily, with the air of someone who knew something the others didn’t. “As for their armament, the group is rumored to have started from Illyria,” She trailed off letting them fill in the blanks.

“The same city the traitor supplying the weapon is rumored to be from,” Henry said slowly.

Natasha nodded. “I haven’t heard of any of the bigger assault machines but then they wouldn’t be able to haul them around in the forest, but the smaller ballistic weapons? Wesi warriors are being pelted with darts strong enough to pierce armor from a distance where they should have been safe.”

“Which certainly sounds familiar,” Steven said with a mean sense of satisfaction at the enemy being given a taste of their own medicine. “Thank you Natasha,” he nodded at her and she nodded back. If you have nothing else to add I’ll go inform the other captains.”

Natasha shook her head so he rose and made his way toward out of Avenger camp.

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Steve came back from the council an hour later, guided by the moon and the few fires. To his surprise he found the Avengers where he had left them. The day of march had been exhausting and they should have either in bed or on their way by now. They had drifted into a circle by the table and just as he was coming near enough to hear the talking he saw Tony rise from the middle of the circle and gesture with a stick.

“So it reloads on its own?” Clint asked dubiously.

Tony cocked his head.

“In a way,” he gestured again. “See? The bowstring is drawn by a chain mounted on to spokes, so that you can have a continuous movement…”

Carol saw Steven approaching the group.

“Captain! Come.” She waved him inside the circle, folks parting to let him in. On the ground he saw pictures drawn into the dirt. “Tony is describing several of the weapons.”

“So the chain is moving continuously,” Tony continued once Steven was settled. His stick went
slowly over a part of his drawing, simulating the movement of the chain. “Once it reaches its ready position the hook on the bowstring is pushed off by this piece of wood and the arrow flies. The bowstring goes back to its starting positions and is dragged back again. Simple, really. Then you need only a box over the shaft to drop arrows once the previous one has been fired. It’s perfectly realizable.”

“But you have never seen with your own eyes.” Clinton said with his arm crossed.

“No. All of the machines that have been recovered have been of the standard, one shot kind.”

“So how can you know that they have it?”

“There have been many reports of continuous fire,” Natasha interjected. “I think we can safely assume that they have it.”

“And this would be a very simple way to do it. So I see no reason not to believe they do.”

“Wait,” Steven held up a hand. “Do you mean you can do the whole machine?” He pointed the drawings, drawings that now that he thought about it, seemed very complete.

Tony rocked back on his heels.

“Well… Yes. Like I have said before you came, between the remains of broken machines that have been recovered and accounts of their performance in battle I am certain I can make one. In fact, I think I can make those smaller and lighter.” He nudged the drawing with his bare toes.

Steven blinked. This was new, as of the last time they had been discussed in meetings the enemy’s weapons had been “new”, “never seen before” and frightening. Not something the engineers could make “smaller and lighter”. Tony might have used the word think but he had sounded very sure of himself. Steve had little doubt he would be able to deliver what he promised. Why hadn’t he heard about it before?

“Do you have a prototype yet?”

At that Tony’s face fell.

“No,” he said. “The weapon master thought my “wild guesses” were unfounded and that I was best used doing something constructive.” His tone was completely flat and still managed to convey his frustration.

Ah. Steven saw. This was a theme. Steven knew. High ranked officers, or even lower ranked ones, like the old Ned, seldom liked to be shown up by a slave. That the slave was often half their age probably didn’t help the matter.

He felt a deep almost mean sense of satisfaction set in. This. He remembered. This was why he had bought Tony. Once they were settled somewhere again, Tony was going to build that prototype.

His eyes met Tony’s and the man seemed to read something in his expression because he smiled. Not his usual smile. The one Steven had seen for the first time when Tony had inspected his shield. It was a smile that lit his whole face and went up to his eyes; there was only one emotion behind it, not two or three. He had missed that smile.

Steven was not the only one to thing so for afterward no less than three separate Avengers came to
him to ask him if he was going to allow Tony to build it. It gladdened him to see that Tony had already been accepted as part of the company. They seemed to view him much as they did Henry. A man prone to accidents of various gravity but whose results were ultimately worth the inconvenient. He reassured Wanda, Henry and surprisingly Clinton, that he had every intention of doing so. In fact, he was in position of a wax tablet he rarely used. He would give it to Tony to work with for now.

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Steven was jolted out of a peaceful dream by a flurry of feet and voices trampling through the camp. He tore out of the tent, only grabbing shoes and his shield, to see what was going on. The alarm call hadn’t sounded but that didn’t mean anything. When planning a surprise attack, you couldn’t be too careful.

He almost collided with Jana, who was on sentry duty, and Robert Drake, a soldier from Xavier’s men.

“Captain Steven!” Robert said. “Remy found a Wesi scout in the woods!”

Steven’s stomach turned to ice. Their whole plan depended on surprise. “Did he escape?”

“No,” Robert shook his head. “Remy bought him to our camp.”

Steven sighed in relief. He turned to Jana. “If there is one, there are more likely others. Go wake Natasha, James and Clint, tell them to swipe the area then go back to your post.”

Jana nodded and left. Robert was already running back to Xavier’s men’s camp and Steven hurried to catch up with him. In the camp of the Mighty Four, folks where hurrying to and fro under Susan’s direction. She nodded to him as they passed, hitching her little daughter higher on her hip.

Xavier’s men’s camp was even busier, what looked like the whole company was out and about in various state of undress. Scott himself was nowhere to be found, but his second Ororo spared a second to point him into one of the tent.

Inside, Steven saw Benjamin first, the man was so tall he had to bend to fit inside, then his eyes caught Scott and his wife Jean standing on either side of a Wesi soldier with his hand tied behind his back. Giovanni was standing in the other corner.

The soldier’s hair and beard were styled in what was common for his people although their color was brown, darker by more than a few shades than the blonds and reds associated with Wesis. He was slightly smaller than the norm too, that tended to be as big as Steven if not as big as Luke. For armor he was wearing a helmet and little else, no chainmail or leather, unlike the soldiers Steven had met on the battlefield. That made him wonder if he was really a soldier, as in a member of the army and not a marauding hanger on.

“He’s not saying anything,” Benjamin informed him. the Wesi glowered at them from his spot on the ground. “Scott sent people to look for more.”

“I’ve done the same thing.”
By the time dawn broke off, the combined scouts had turned out two more Wesi soldiers, one dead and one alive. The new prisoner turned to be more talkative and let slip that a small band of 30 or so was in the mountain.

Steven’s suspicion had been proven correct. They were no scouts sent to spy on their position but a roving band that had come to plunder anything of value, be it folk, livestock or grain, from the countryside. So they were not looking for them, but that would not prevent them from sending a runner back to their masters if the rest of them got wind of the companies’ presence. The scouts were sent back.

In the end though, the raiders came to them. In an incredible stroke of fate, they did not come from the head of the convoy but from the rear. Maybe they had burned down a nearby village and doubled back on their track Steven wouldn’t know. He would also never know what had made the thirty strong band decide to attack a convoy of about three hundreds.

Perhaps the opportunity had been too strong to resist? They had attacked when the convoy had been stretched out in a narrow pass, the ones at the head unable to double back and come to the head of the ones at the rear. A perfect opportunity that might have worked had they taken them entirely by surprise, but aware of the presence of the enemy the Avengers had been wary and they had seen thick smoke, too much to account for housefire, coming from nearby.

When the warriors rushed them from behind, Steven automatically turned, shedding his pack with one hand and brandishing his shield in the other.

“FIGHT AS ONE!” He yelled, bringing his shield down and the Avengers ran toward the Wesi, getting as many fighters out of the pass as possible while the auxiliaries brought the wagons further in, away from the fight.

Steven’s shield stopped a sword descending on him, making it slide harmlessly down the side, and then he straightened his arm sending the edge smashing square on the man’s jaw. He dropped like a stone. Steven hefted the shield close to him again to face down his next opponent.

Jana darted past him, quick and graceful as a snake to slid between two warriors, making one stab the other, and twirled to plunge her little dart like sword into the back of the neck of the other one. In the back, Luke roared, pushing one back to Steven’s level and delivered a strike to the chest that looked powerful enough to crack ribs. Luke stayed in place, and Jana stepped back to Steven’s side, another Wesi stumbled back, dodging a swing of Guenifer’s mace.

They formed a line by habit, but this time they had to do more than just shove them back. They couldn’t afford to have them flee so Steven gestured to the sides and the Avengers started pushing in, wading into the melee at seemingly random, other Avengers coming up to replace those leaving the line. Peter swopped down from where he had climbed on the rock, landing on a big burly warrior that was twice his size and trust his sword between the gap in his armor for good measure before taking Steven’s place, freeing him to go in.

In short order, they had them surrounded, and the battle was over after that. Steven took a second to look at the body, then walked back toward the wagons. There were a few bodies there too; warriors that had managed to get in before the line was in place. Two were peppered with arrows. Steven spared a glance for Clinton who was coming down the rock he had climbed on. One or two seemed to have been taken out my Mighty Four soldiers and one had fallen at the feet of the last wagon. Tony and aunt May were standing over him, aunt May was holding Tony’s face in her hand and trying to get a better look at it under the rain, Tony had a heavy hammer in his
hands.

“You boy here sure got some balls.”

Steven looked away to see John, Susan’s younger brother grinning at him.

“I saw it happen, the soldier was getting close to the wagon and your slave came out swinging his hammer. He got him in the knee first, before the soldier could react, and then in the head while he was clutching his leg.”

Steve saw it in his mind’s eye. Tony barefoot and armed with only a hammer going against a seasoned warrior in armor, and all the ways it could have gone wrong. The man could have ripped him apart. What had Tony been thinking?

Steven’s heart started beating faster than it had at any point of the battle. Tony was a pain in the ass, and Steven didn’t think he would ever understand what was going on in that skull of his, but he didn’t want him dead.

“His he hurt?” he asked, fighting to keep his voice calm. He seemed steady on his legs but aunt May still hadn’t released his head.

“I don’t think so,” John said. “Another man tried to club him in the head but your archer got him before he could really connect. I don’t think he did more than graze him.”

Steven sighed in relief despite himself. He thanked John and went to Tony and aunt May. It turned out the warrior’s mace had only grazed him and Tony would have nothing more serious than a bump.

Aunt May rapped Tony on the knuckles once she was sure he wouldn’t drop dead of a broken skull and admonished him to be more careful the next time.

Next time? Steven thought from where he was trying to get his hands to stop shaking. There won’t be a next time. Not if I have anything to say about it.

Tony chuckled and turned toward Steven, grinning as proud as any boy having just caught his first game. “Did you see it, master?”

“No,” Steven answered, trying to stay calm. “And it is just as well for my nerves that I didn’t. What were you thinking?”

Tony blinked, taken aback by Steven’s tone. “Master?”

“What, by the gods, possessed you to wade in like that? Armed with a hammer?”

Bewildered, Tony actually stammered, something Steven had never heard him do before. “Well, I… I did not really think, master. He was there,” he gestured to where the man’s body laid. “and I was there,” He pointed to the side of the wagon a few feet farther back. “It seemed like the thing to do. They were attacking us.”

Steven pinched the bridge of his nose. He should not get angry; technically Tony had not disobeyed any order, because it had never occurred to Steven that he would have to tell him to stay off the battlefield.
“You should have run away, Tony. We had the situation well in hand, we did not need a blacksmith charging on half-cocked. You were lucky to get out of it with nothing but a bruise. You are no warrior, stay out of the fighting that is an order.”

Tony only looked at him incredulously.

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It was early in the morning, the mountain birds chirping somewhere in the distance, when Natasha came up to Steven’s side. By then they were going down the mountain side and instead of pushing the wagons to help the animals they had to hold them back. The ground was still muddy in various spots and that didn’t help.

Steven was grateful to have her help coaxing the ox he was leading into the tight turn but the gratefulness was short lived when she started speaking thus.

“I like your slave, I think.”

At once Steven grew suspicious. In the short week since he had become a slave owner, conversation opening with a comment on Tony rarely conversations he wanted to have, if they were not outright lectures.

“Do you?”

She nodded. “And I think I see why you bought him.”

The ox’s hoof slipped and the beast backed down. They both tightened their hold on its bridle, not wanting it to lose the precious ground it had gained. Steven patted its neck, whispering soothing nonsense into its ear and tugged gently on the bridle. Little by little they managed to get the ox and the cart it was pulling past the turn. Natasha clapped the beast on the rump to send it along.

Steven turned toward her with a raised eyebrow. “Really?” until two days ago Steven would have thought everyone had judged his action surprising. Now he was starting to understand that they all had their little theories but she would be the first one to share hers with him without prompting.

“That boy was being wasted by the Shield. Did you know he managed to draw at least part of the great majority of all the weapons I described to him? For some of them he had the complete plans.”

She looked at Steven as amazed as she ever let herself look.

“I’m no scholar, Steven. I didn’t understand all of what he was talking about but gods damn it he is the first one I ever talked to that has any idea of how to recreate the weapons. Why in hells aren’t they letting him work on it?”

Steven felt a glimmer of hope that someone understood him, understood why he had done it.

Natasha clasped her hands behind her back.

“Also,” she said without looking at him. “He is very handsome,”
Steven rolled his eyes. There it was.

“No,” she continued. “It’s not only that. He is charming and clever… Don’t look at me so, Captain,” she said when she caught his glare. “I’m not implying you bought him sorely to have him in your bed. Folks often have more than one reason for doing something.”

That did not entirely satisfy Steven, but he tried to soften his face.

“I do not want him in my bed at all.”

Natasha waved his objection away. “Be as it may, he does.”

“He does not.”

“No? I was certain I had overheard him complain of the hardship of sharing a tent with a man worthy of serving as model for the sun god and not being able to touch.

Steven blushed red, not for the first time in the recent past. He changed the subject and soon they were going over the rest of the latest gossip.

“And blowing up his lab hasn’t deterred him from working on him?” she asked of Henry.

Steven looked at her.

“Of course it didn’t.”

“To the contrary it seems to have encouraged him. There are three of them now, having “theoretical discussions” about it.”

“Three?”

“Henry, Tony and Reed from the Mighty Four.”

Natasha took a moment to reflect on that.

“That is not reassuring.”

“No.”

***

Eventually, finally, they got out of the mountain, into a thick forest spreading almost to the Marona plains. The road was wider than the mountain path but not by much. It was all brown beaten earth; they hadn’t seen a paved road since they had left the main army. It must have rained more there than it did higher up for the ground was muddy.

But none of those was what really bothered Steven. He had breathed a short sight of relief when
they had reached flat ground on schedule but all of the tension was back now. This was the last stretch, about 20 miles of forest land before they got to the battlefield. The trees hide their approach but at the same time they could be hiding someone else’s.

Steven could see it in the eyes of every single Avenger, even the little ones, in the set of their shoulders’. There was no more singing, no more campfires. They couldn’t afford to be seen. The memory of the raiding party was fresh in everyone’s mind and foolish as it was every rustle in the brushes, every crack of a branch made them think of an enemy scout. So far no one had sunk low enough to go chasing after hares or deer.

Then it was not a deer.

Because the avengers brought up the rear Steven didn’t see her come out of the trees. But he later heard it caused a commotion. Sharon looked as she had the last time he had seen her. Long blond hair that spilled out of her head covering, strong blue eyes and a body honed in through battles and travels visible even under the peasant dress.

Steven smiled in delight and encircled her into a hug when she got close enough.

“I’m glad to see you, Sharon. You were sent here to meet us?”

“Indeed I was.”

Steven started walking by her side. They had been lovers once and had parted way. But the why of it Steven couldn’t remember. In fact they were well suited together; two honorable soldier, and the last he had seen her he had been thinking of trying again. Yes the idea looked even better now. After everything was done for the night he would invite her to his tent. She would not be able to stay long if she was to go back to the main army but they could spend maybe an hour or two together to reconnect.

She had found a good camping ground to the south west of their current position and they all followed her to a clearing where a bag and a bundle of wood sat. They broke camp; Steven left Tony to put up the tent and went to join the rest of the captains and Sharon.

***

“So,” Scott asked Sharon with a sardonic smile. “Is that all the orders the old man has for us?”

“That is all. He said it should be simple enough for you not to fuck it up.”

Steven and Benjamin shared an eye roll, and they all got up.

“Good,” Susan said. “Now we’ll be back in our camp before it’s torn into pieces.”

Steven smiled. It reminded him of Avenger camp and Tony whom he had seen neither hide nor hair from since daybreak. He wondered, half dreading half anticipating, what the man had been up to. He chuckled and trailed after the two others. He should have the time to ask him before going to sleep.

If any of them slept.
They were to attack at dawn.

The tension in the predawn light could have been cut with a knife. Steven had been a soldier for almost a decade by now but even the familiarity could not ease the mix of fear and excitement that seized him. In his younger days it had made him throw up a few times, a fact that had made James mock him relentlessly despite the fact James had not looked much better then.

Now his hands did not even shake as he put on his scalemail over his padded tunic, then slipped his tabard over the mail. He smoothed the front so that the embroidered star laid flat and buckled his belt. Tony handed him his gloves, face as serious as Steven had ever seen him, and knelt to buckle his sword to the belt.

Steven grabbed his helmet and held it in his hands. “Why don’t you go help Luke and Guenifer,” he said. “They need it more than I do.”

The two of them wore the heaviest armor of the company, while Jana and Peter wore the lightest. They needed help to put the breastplate and gauntlet on. Tony bowed and went to Guenifer. Jessica Jones was already tugging Luke’s breastplate in place with more force than was necessary.

Steven’s eyes went to Peter, because he was the youngest fighter, and saw him moving his lips in what seemed to be a silent prayer. Peter opened his eyes and noticed Steven looking at him, by the time he met his eyes the boy was all work.

Steven put on his helmet and it was a signal for all the other fighters in Avenger company that they were going into battle.

He went to Tony.

“Well, I’m off to earn my living. Stay out of trouble.”

Tony bowed and said “Yes, master.”

***

At first the battle went well. Their pincer maneuver took the enemy by surprise; Steven’s group slammed into their unprotected flank hard. Then the time it took the Wesi to reorganize a front on the side was enough for them to get the upper hand. But mid battle a new group of soldiers walked out from the Wesi camp and settled on a hill yards away from the battle, were they should have been out of range.

If there was once thing Steven had learned to distrust since the start of this campaign it was enemy seeming out of range. They hit captain Giovanni first, the arrow seeming to come out of nowhere. One minute the man was ordering troop from atop his horse, the next he was on the hard ground bleeding profusely from the shoulder. Even from yards away Steven could see the blood staining
Then things took a downturn for the worst. With Giovanni gone, his company was left without guidance. His lieutenants did their best but it took them precious minutes to wrestle control back.

The little war machine the army had learned to hate continued firing. All from yards away, every shot strong enough to pierce whatever protection the soldier was wearing. Steven himself only escaped with his life out of sheer luck, ducking at the last moment. They were targeting the leaders.

They had to stop the shooters. Of course, Steven cursed, the Avengers were the closest to the hills, so there were the ones who had to try to take it. There was nothing there, no strategy but to try to rush the hill faster than the men could reload their infernal machines.

Clinton took out one, and wounded another before one shooter turned his machine and fired on him. It was only sheer luck that he ducked in time. Simon did get hurt, badly. Steven clenched his teeth and forced himself not to think about it. He was neither stupid nor naïve. Storming a reinforced hill was not something that was accomplished without costs, most likely heavy costs. But it had to be done if they were to live another day and for that they had to focus on the goal.

Ducking and sliding between the enemies they managed to get within fifty yards of them. Just when they were starting to come to a distance where the long range weapons lost some of their effectiveness Steven saw four men, one Wesi and three southern, ready a big square machine with several dozens of holes pointing at the avengers. Steven only took the time to register the holes. In the last few months he had learned not to take chances with strange apparatus.

“Down!” he yelled. Diving for the muddy ground himself. Two arrows embed themselves on his shield not even a second later. He raised it gingerly, looking round himself. Around him folks moaned in pain and fear. At least a hundred arrows that hadn’t been there seconds before littered the ground and bodies, Avengers and Wesi both. Simon wasn’t moving, Jessica was wounded, as were Peter, Pietro and Daniel and many others. Steven scrambled to his feet before a new wave of Wesi fighter could cut him down, all the while hoping that the machine with the many mouth took as long to load and fire as it fired arrows. They could not take many other hits like that in the open.

He leaned away from a pike grabbing the arm attached to it with his sword arm and bough his shield arm down on it, breaking the wrist with a snap, then striking him down with his sword. He heard Wanda scream and a gust of fire flew from his right to hit an invisible wall at the fortification in front of them. Wanda’s scream turned into one of rage. Spells such as the one she had just cast cost her a lot of energy, and she would not be able to do another one. Through the magical shield’s shimmering light, Steven could have sworn he saw a tall bald man with a goatee and the clothes of a nobleman smirk at them before signaling the men in charge of the big machine.

Steven braced for another volley of arrows but it never came. Instead there was a whistling sound coming from the West and something fell on the machines, passing through the shield as if it didn’t exist at all. That was all that Steven had the time to notice because suddenly, there was a thundering boom and his vision was filled with white.

When he scrambled back to his feet, ears ringing, the war machines were in flames, the soldiers were running out of their fortification like the hounds of hell were after them, a few had fire licking at their clothes and hair. Wanda met Steven’s gaze, looking as dumbfounded as he was. Steven looked at the line of walls and machines in complete disarray. This was their chance. He turned back to Wanda and the others and raised his shield.
“Fight as one!” He yelled. And to his pride, no matter how scared or confused they were, all the Avengers fit to continue fighting surged forward. They bounded over the low walls the southern traitors had placed to protect themselves, and swarmed the few soldiers left.

The first two surrendered immediately, frightened by what had happened and probably thinking the Avengers were the ones responsible. Another one laid next to the machine he had manned, badly burned by whatever it was that had hit them. In the corner of his eye, Steven saw movement. He turned to see the nobleman from before, face and clothe now sighed on the right side, standing behind one of the machine Tony had called a scorpion.

“What did you do!” the man screamed. He was blinking rapidly and Steven wondered if the commotion hadn’t stunned him. “The protection should have held off any magic!”

Steven had been raised to be an honest man, he didn’t hesitate. “Well, then maybe your charm is not as good as what you paid for. We certainly got through.”

The nobleman glowered at him, but Steven caught the worried glint in his eyes. They had succeeded in rattling him. The man fiddled with a lever on the side of the machine. Steven froze.

“Look,” Peter said. He and Wanda were bent over another scorpion. Peter had an arrow in his hands and was fitting it into the mechanism. “Tony said you loaded it like this.”

Steven brought his eyes back to the nobleman, expecting to have to find a way to distract him or take him away from the scorpion but the man had become even more agitated.

“Tony?” he said, then let out a string of Tuscan. Steven didn’t know any actual Tuscan but a lot of the Lingua Franca came from it so Steven understood the words “Antonio” and “dead!”

“Black hair and blue eyes?” Steven asked, out of instinct, a stroke of inspiration and a desire to keep the nobleman out of balance so he didn’t fire on him. “About this high and too smart for his own good?”

Steven honestly did not know what he had expected. But from the man’s stricken expression his wild guess had hit a lot closer than he had expected.

The man continued to rant in Tuscan. “Dead”, “told” and “dead” again. “They told me he was dead”?

“I don’t think he’s quite as dead as you thought he was.” Steven smiled viciously, still not entirely sure what was going on. He would have to think about it later, when he had the time.

The nobleman took a few steps back, cursing, not noticing James creeping up from behind him.

They almost captured him. But of course by that point, the rest of the Wesi had recovered and stormed their position. The nobleman fled in the confusion and the Avengers were too busy trying to man the Scorpions and trying to make the deadly machine work to try to go after him.

Both flanks pushed on and succeeded in pushing the enemy back. Out in the distance, Steven could see the figures of the Wesi leaders trying to implement a counter attack. The whistling sound came again, this time from closer, and Steven saw a cylindrical shaped thing fly toward the Wesi. It sailed in a wobbly arch before falling a hundred yards or so from the Wesi leaders. It exploded in a shower of sparks the kind of which Steven had never seen before and a loud thunder clap.
The Wesi started retreating faster. The army pushed on. Steven turned toward the direction the thing had come from and this time he could see a group at the edge of the battlefield coming toward them. One of the figures raised its fist and yelled something.

“Do my ears fail me or did they just scream ‘Fight as one’?” James asked.

***

James’ ears had not failed him. As the group came closer it became apparent they were indeed members of Avenger Company even if not members who normally set foot on the battlefield. Jessica Jones led the way, her pike firmly in hand, but not wearing her armor as her belly had grown too big for it, Mary Jane and Donald walked behind her and Henry, Reed Richards and Tony brought up the rear carrying bags and one more cylindrical object. All three of them were soot stained and looking very proud of themselves.

Steven could not believe his eyes, he did not appear to be the only one.

“Hank!” Jana said in a strangled voice, the short form she rarely used in public coming out of her mouth. “What are you doing here?”

“Coming to your rescue,” Henry grinned, putting a hand on Jana’s blood stained cheek. “Our help looked like it was needed.”

“We have one more,” Reed said looking around him with his customary arrogant expression. “Do you want us to set it off?”

“What,” Steven asked. “Is that?” Although he was starting to have a good idea.

“My oriental powder,” Henry answered. “With Tony and Reed’s help these past weeks I have been able to recreate it.”

“You were forbidden from doing experiments. Strictly forbidden.”

Reed waved a dismissive hand. “Are you going to stay stuck over a minor technicality? It worked, didn’t it?”

Steven tried to remind himself that it wouldn’t do to punch Susan’s husband.

“In fact,” Reed continued, looking at the burned body. “It certainly exceeded my expectations. I was mostly expecting a lot of frightening sparks and noises but it even did some real damage.”

“An excellent first test to be sure,” Henry said. “The second one went a little awry but this on struck right where we wanted.”

“That is the purpose of the fins,” Tony said, sounding smug.

For the first time, Steven really registered his presence and became aware that not only was Tony holding something that should have never been built, but he was standing on the still active battlefield where he should never have been.
Back at the camp, the first priority was tending to the wounded. Donald seemed to be everywhere, yelling orders and instructions: for this wound to be bandaged, that one to be sewn up, for water to be boiled… But he never strayed far from Simon, by far the worst of the wounded, whose skin was the color of chalk when they got him to camp and would stay that way for worrying long hours.

Eventually, things settled down enough that Steven was able to take Tony to the side. He grabbed and hauled him to his feet.

“Master, I…”

“Not here.”

Steven did not bring him to his tent, being far too restless to be copped up in such a small space. He brought him to the forest instead, deep enough that they wouldn’t be overheard unless they started shouting but close enough that they were still within sight of the camp. Steven leaned against a tree trunk and looked at Tony.

The slave tried to smile, his teeth a sharp white against his messy beard. Steven only glared and the smile slipped off. Tony lowered his eyes to the point he was studiously looking at Steven’s mud and blood spattered boots.

“Well?”

Tony’s eyes flickered to Steven’s face. “I am sorry, master.” The words were said promptly, almost dutifully and it made Steven’s jaws clench.

“Are you?”

Much like he expected, Tony didn’t have anything to say.

He tried another approach. “What are you sorry for?”

“For disobeying your orders, master,” Tony answered easily. “it was wrong of me and…”

“Oh, save it!” Tony’s excuses were smooth, honeyed and empty. They rang hollow as his mother’s money chest when Steven was a lad. He knew from experience that Tony could do better than that; he must not have been trying very hard. “Why did you do it?”

“You needed help.”

“The three of you experimented on whatever-its-name-is because we needed help?”

Tony turned his head away with what might have been his first true demonstration of guilt. “We were careful. Logically there was no reason for it to go awry”

“Ah. So that means that when Henry blew up his lab last week he did it on purpose?”
“…. It worked?”

Steven rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Let’s forget about that one, for now,” he would need to have that conversation with Henry as well and it wasn’t the thing that made mad enough to want to scream. “I thought I had been clear about you putting your life in danger.”

“You needed help.”

Flashes of Tony standing up to an armored man almost twice his size with a hammer, of Tony wading into a full blown battlefield with an experiment he hoped was going to work and a ragtag group of non-fighters danced before his eyes and the rage, before blunted by a sort of numbness, came back full force.

“I. was. clear!”

“You, would have died.” Tony’s voice matched Steven in intensity, his eyes were fierce.

“Oh. You know that, do you?”

“I have eyes. And I can count. The multiple shot was ready to go again. What were the odds of you surviving another blast?”

Steven was reminded of that terrifying second he had been sure of the same thing.

“That’s no concern of yours! It is not your place. What is going on in your head? Why in hell did you think you had to come to my aid?”

“Right now, I do not know!” Tony snapped.

Steven had never heard him talk to him like that. “Excuse me?”

“Might as well get hanged for the sheep,” Tony whispered to himself shrugging and looked at Steven. “Sometimes,” he said, shaking his head. “It is like you see me. And then you go and….” he opened his mouth, closed it then took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down.

As if he had any grounds to be angry.

Steven advanced on Tony who swallowed. “Anything could have happened to you, Tony. I don’t give you many orders. When I do, I expect you to obey them.”

He stopped inches from Tony, hissing the last words into his face. Tony tensed almost like a flinch but stood his ground.

“You would have died.”

And it was right at this moment that Steven realized he was stuck.

It had taken a week and some days but they had finely come to the point everyone had warned Steven about. He would do it again. Steven knew it, knew it from the gut wrenching dread that gathered in his stomach. He would do it again the moment he thought it was necessary.

And Steven didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t let it slide. Tony couldn’t be allowed to
endanger himself like that. But what could he do? The welts on Tony’s back from the last beating hadn’t even finished fading yet. What would one more accomplish? Not much.

It was plain as day in Tony’s posture, that stubborn set of his shoulder even as he stood with his head bowed that seemed to say, “Go ahead, punish me if you want, I won’t back down.”, that Steven had first admired.

Not knowing how to convince Tony of the error of his ways he assigned him to every chore he could think of and left.

“I do not wish to see anything happen to you,” he said, trying to make him understand. “is that too much to ask?”

There was no answer.

He sighed. “This can never happen again. I hope you’re not tired, because you’re going to be put to every work we can find for you. Until further notice.”

Steven was under no illusions it was going to work, but it was the only thing he could think of.

***

They both retired late that night, Steven because battles means numerous war meetings and long parties, Tony because he was scrubbing pots, after hauling sacks of flours from a captured supply wagon, and a few other things Steven hadn’t been there to see.

He looked tired, his eyes haggard, his shoulder slumped and steps heavy and Steven felt a twinge of guilt before pushing it away. He kept the guilt firmly away when Tony collapsed on his pile of blankets and tugged the top sheet without bothering with taking his clothes off.

Steven watched from where he was seated on his bed. He noted absentmindedly that he still laid on his stomach, when the welts must have been healed enough for him to sleep on his back again.

“I have a few questions for you,” he thought about waiting until the next morning but if this yielded anything important he wanted to be able to inform the others as soon as possible.

Tony started to push himself upright.

“You don’t have to get up.”

He flopped back down.

“You saw the hill during the battle.”

Tony nodded.

“It was partly manned by southerners.” Tony’s jaw clenched at that. “There was a man leading them, a southerner too. He was maybe my height, maybe shorter, some forty years of age with a
bald head and a beard. We think it might be this Obadiah Stane our spies have heard about.”

Tony raised his head at that, dropped it again and then with a faint groan, rose to a sitting position. Steven waited to see if anything else was forthcoming but Tony just looked at him to continue.

“When we stormed the hill, Peter mentioned your name. He reacted to it. Do you know him?”

Tony stayed silent, looking straight ahead at the tent wall for so long that Steven started to thing he was never going to answer.

“It is Obadiah Stane, or at least the description matches.”

Steven’s heart sped up a little at that. Finally, after months of running around like headless chicken on the subject they had a lead on the supplier of the new weapons. But he sobered just as quickly when he paid attention to Tony. He had thought he was just tired, and he no doubt was, but this was not tired. His voice was entirely flat, as if he wasn’t really there.

“You know him.”

“you said… he reacted?” Tony asked instead of answering. His face was still eerily blank and it was starting to worry Steven.

“Yes, he became upset. He kept saying ‘They told me he was dead’, or at least I assumed that’s what this meant,” he repeated the Tuscan sentence.

“Pretty much.”

“He seemed disappointed.”

That got him a reaction. Tony looked up at him, unfocused eyes flashing with something before he went back to staring at the wall. “Disappointed.” He drew up his legs and wrapped his arms around them. The gesture was protective, almost childlike and suddenly Steven knew what the flicker of emotion had been. It had been hurt.

“I knew he had betrayed Illyria,” he continued in that small voice that didn’t fit him at all. “I knew he had gotten into my workroom. But I didn’t want to believe it was him that…”

Dozens of tiny and not so tiny clues started to assemble in Steven’s mind and they made his throat tighten. He wanted to slide down from his cot and gather Tony in his arms, as ridiculous as the image was. Someone like Tony should never look as defeated as he did right now.

But the only thing he managed to say was: “So you know him well.” Even as he realized how clumsy a question it was.

Tony snorted. The display of spirit, small as it was, reassured Steven a little.

“You worked with him?”

Tony shook his head, hesitated, then said. “He’s my godfather. And I thought I knew him well,” he looked at Steven with a sardonic smile. “I was wrong.”

Steven reeled back. Godfather? Dear gods, it was even worse than he had first thought. He had a thousand questions but it was late, later than any of them should be up and was plain as day it was
painful for Tony. He babbled a hasty good night, blew his small oil lamp and laid down, leaving Tony what privacy and peace he could.

He did not know if Tony found sleep, but he spent much time staring at the darkness above him, his brain refusing to quiet down.

At first he had thought Tony and the nobleman, Obadiah Stane had known each other in Illyria, maybe worked together or competed for the attention of the city council. And that Obadiah had jumped at the first opportunity to get rid of his talented young rival.

But this, this was much uglier. Because Tony, the slave who smirked at everything and was always ready to take the worst of people head on and get what he wanted from them, would not have been so broken by the betrayal if it had not come from someone he had trusted. *I did not want to believe it was him.* He had said. Even with proof of the man’s treachery he had not wanted to believe he had been the one to…. Hurt him? Order him killed?

When Steven thought about it, it was very likely that whatever ruffian Stane had hired had decided that they could get double the coin by telling Stane their quarry was dead then sell Tony for extra profit. That might be just how Tony had ended up as a slave.

Except Tony was not his name was it? What had Stane called him? Antonio, a nice southern name, it sounded somewhat like Tony, which mayhap had been a childhood nickname.

It took a long time for Steven to drift into sleep.

***

There were many ways in which the many roving bands that followed the main Wesi army like so many fleas on a mutt were the bane of Steven’s existence, their despicable tendency to ravage any village they came upon being one of the more important. But he had to admit they were a lot easier to get rid of than the real soldiers.

The first group the Avengers and Xavier’s men had come upon this morning had chosen to flee as soon as they had caught sight of them. The second one had proven braver but was sorely outmatched when it came to skill and tactic and the battle, if it could be called that, was almost over before it started.

Steven was not disappointed. And the enthusiasm with which he wacked the man in front of him right on the head had nothing to do with his encounter with Fury just before they had spread out.

*I heard you had a problem with your little terror.*

The army’s rumor mill was truly a wonder.

He cut the leg of another fighter, sending him crashing into his friends.

*We told you it was a bad idea to let him run wild like you did. You have to keep a short leash on slaves like him. Now he thinks he can do as he pleases. You have to teach him a lesson right now or there’s no telling what the little bastard is going to do next.*
For Fury’s method had been most successful, in fact, Tony had never put a toe out of line while he belonged to him.  

He pushed a sword away with his shield and kicked its owner in the chest.  

*We have enough troubles without borrowing more in the form of uppity slaves; remember what I told you about my campaign.*  

And in the light of recent revelations Tony had just as much reasons for wanting the campaign to be successful as Fury, so Fury could...  

A wild swing of a sword caught Steven in the chest. He doubled over, the wind driven out of his lungs. He should have been paying more attention. Someone grabbed him by the collar and dragged him out of the fray. By then the raiders were fleeing so he leaned on the arm, Gueniver’s, and waited for his body to accept drawing breath again. A waterskin came into his field of vision. He took it gratefully and drank deeply, then upturned the skin on his head to wet the back of his neck. He handed it back to James.  

“Are you alright?”  

The blow had not pierced the scalemail. Steven took a deep breath, expending his ribcage to check for damage, it hurt but not beyond bruising.  

“I am fine, except for my pride.”  

“Good. I would be sorry to see you go in such a pitiful fight.” James smiled, thumping him on the chest.  

Steven coughed under the blow and felt an odd click. Frowning he slipped a hand between his padded and under tunic and came back with the amulet. It was in two pieces.  

Steven stared at it like the gods had turned him to stone and he was incapable of movement. Then he forced his eyes up and saw the two others looking at his hand with the same muted horror.  

He cursed, swore and started running, running like the hounds of hell were after him for the Avengers part of the camp, worst and worst image flashing through his eyes. His legs ate the ground before him but he felt as if the camp in the distance was never coming any nearer, his panic only growing as his muscles started to protest.  

He flew past the camp gate without so much as a nod to the sentries, barreled down the main alley while people hurried out of his way, past Fury’s tent, past the tavern. Barely slowed down to veer left, ducking under an unhappy cow and jumping over crates. He came to a halt only in the middle of Avenger camp, heart pounding in his ears, breath heaving.  

“Captain?” aunt May asked curiously. “What are you doing here? Oh, gods! Did something happen?”  

What did she mean, did something happen? He looked around to see various avenger members looking up from various tasks as if nothing was wrong. Little Cassie and Billy were even in the middle of a game of knucklebone. Then Tony came out of the kitchen area with two bucket of dirty water and Steven’s leg nearly gave out from under him.  

A hand clapped him on the shoulder. “Captain?” Donald looked from Steven’s face to the broken
amulet he was still clutching in his hand to Tony who was still standing confusedly with his two buckets. “You’re white as a corpse. Come with me.”

He took him to his tent, sat him down, rummaged in one of his bag and offered a medium sized dark bottle to him.

“Drink this, it’ll settle your nerves.”

Feeling as if his world had been turned upside down, Steven took an obedient swing. Donald sat down next to him.

“He no longer has that monstrosity in his chest, you know.”

Steven shook his head, no, obviously, he hadn’t known.

“Ever since you have bought him, he and Wanda, and I, though I was not of much help, have worked to build a replacement. Although if you want my opinion, I think he had been working on it for far longer on his own. We put the replacement in the night before the battle.”

Before the battle? Steven hadn’t noticed. Had he seen Tony’s bare chest since then? No. Tony had slept with his clothe the night before, too tired to disrobe.

He wandered out of the tent and toward Tony who offered him his most charming smile.

“I am glad you are free of that thing.” He said immediately, not wanting Tony to imagine he was angry that it had been removed. This was a way to control tony that never should have existed.

Tony’s smile dropped and his face turned serious. “I won’t run,” He promised solemnly.

Steven’s first thought was that he hadn’t thought he would, but didn’t say it not wanting to sound patronizing. “May I see it?” he asked instead.

Tony blinked at him. “Of course, master.”

“It was a real question, Tony, Antonio.”

Antonio’s head snapped up. “Tony.” He said firmly.

“You don’t want to use your real name?”

“Tony is what they… what they called me as a boy. It’s real enough,” he smiled sardonically. “And more than enough for me right now. I haven’t been called Antonio in two years.”

Because it was too painful a reminder?

They went inside again, this time in Steven’s tent. They stood in the cramped space; Steven would need to buy a new tent at some point, while Tony took off his shirt. Steven did not know what he had expected, Something similar to the first one. But it was distinctly different, instead of an engraved plaque of silver that emitted a sickly glow, it was a delicate bronze clockwork with little gears the size of Steven thumbnail.

“I suppose that needs to be wound up.”

“Twice a day. But…”
But it was better than having to depend on the goodwill of another for every beat of his heart.

***

By the campfire, Mary Jane sang accompanying herself not with her harp but a tambourine. Avengers were dancing, laughing at each other and trying to agree on one dance. There was a keg of ale on the table that was coming dangerously close to empty when Steven refilled his tankard.

He cradled the tankard to his chest deftly avoiding a dancing Clinton, drunk, giggling and wobbly on his feet; he cautiously made his way back to his spot, a rock just outside of the firelight. He sat down and peered at his ale. It was his fifth of the night and, tempting as it was he knew getting drunk would not help him.

“Now, what could you doing out there all by yourself?”

Steven suppressed a startled and looked over his shoulder to see Samuel standing in the shadows.

“I could ask you the same question.”

Samuel smirked.

“You could. And I would tell you that I came to see what you were doing. You, on the other hand, have disappeared here since after supper.”

Steven scoffed and turned back to his ale. Some folks would have read that as dismissal, but Samuel, a dear friend that had never been impressed by Steven’s reputation, took it as an invitation to sit down next to him.

“So what is troubling you?”

“Why should I be troubled?”

“Why indeed. You sit alone in the dark all the time after all,” Samuel tapped his chin with one finger, Steven assumed he was mock frowning but so far from the fire it was impossible to know. “No, wait. You do. Whenever you are brooding about something or other. Now, what is it this time?”

Steven sighed, rolled his eyes heavenward and gave up.

“Tony.” He said, surprised at how much frustration leaked into that two syllable name. He is almost certain Samuel rolled his eyes.

“Are you still torn up by his advances or is it something new?”

“Something new.” Not that Steven felt he had completely come to term with Tony’s interest in him but it was no longer the huge looming weight it had first been, instead it was a slight uneasiness in the back of his mind that only flared up when he thought about it. “I don’t know what to do.” He explained his latest dilemma.

“It does sound as if you are stuck.”
Steven took a swallow of ale. “I have to do something. I cannot let that pass…”

“Why can’t you?”

“What?”

“Why cannot you let it pass? You let him take all kind of liberties, what’s one more?”

“He could get killed, Sam!” Which was entirely different from the rest. And he didn’t like to use the word liberty, as if he was letting him do things he shouldn’t. Tony was a master craftsman and a talented engineer. To ignore those facts and treat him like an apprentice needing constant correction and oversight was ridiculous. And he by far preferred to know a man’s mind rather than have to guess what was hiding under a façade of meekness.

“So?”

“So?” Steven hissed. Tony was under his protection. His responsibility. If anything happened to him it would be Steven’s fault.

“This is an army, Steven,” Samuel shrugged. “We could all die tomorrow, him included.”

But not from something Steven could prevent. He opened his mouth to say just that when Samuel spoke again.

“You never had that problem with Sharon.”

Sharon? Oh for…

“I am not in love with Tony!” He snapped.

“Are you sure? Forget about acting on them, do you have feelings for him?”

Steven stopped at that and for the first time considered it. Tony, brave, clever, and handsome now that he lets himself think about it, who could make metal, wood and leather into weapons so fine they were works of art.

Tony who stood tall once he decided on a course of action, who had taken the hell of a free man, maybe a nobleman even, being made a lowly slaveboy and had turned that position into one where he could accomplish his goals. He wouldn’t run, because he was right where he needed to be to protect his country.

Tony, whom he had never scolded for being insolent because every time he caught a flash of the mind behind the slave he found himself wanting to see more. Tony whose company he missed if they spent more than a few hours apart.

He blushed. It was uncertain whether Samuel was able to tell given the lack of light but he seemed to read the conclusion Steven had reached somehow. Thankfully for Steven he chose not to rub it in.

“You did not get so protective with Sharon,” he simply said.

“She is a soldier.”
“But Mary Jane, Donald and Henry are not. And them stepping on the battlefield did not bother you.”

“It was their choice,"

He had been scared for them, of course, but in the end the choice was theirs. Steven courted death each time he drew his sword, but he did it because he judged it worthwhile. They were grown men and women whose judgment was no inferior to his. If they chose to take up arms, he did not have to like it but he had to respect it because to do anything else would be to disrespect them.

Sometimes, it is like you see me, and then you go and…

Suddenly the sentence Steven had taken for angry babbling made sense. This was what had made Tony angry at him. Steven admired Tony’s dedication to his work, his willingness to stand up for what he thought was right and had made no secret of it.

He was being a hypocrite, something he had always hated in others and had never thought he would one day see in himself. Either Tony was as much of a person as Steven was, worthy of the same respect, or he wasn’t.

And if Tony was enough of a man to choose what causes worth risking his life, a little voice told him, then he was also enough of a man to choose who he wanted to share a bed with.

***

The next morning Steven waved the other fighter to the practice court without him and took his spare padded Tunic from the bottom if his chest, went to ask Simon if he could borrow his mail and practice sword as he would not be in a state to use them for months to come, and grabbed Tony’s smithing gloves and boots. He then went to where Tony had been put to mending clothes and dumped the whole bundle in front of him.

Tony raised his eyes from his crooked stitches to look at the bundle.

“Leave the mending,” Steven told him. “You are no longer assigned to every chore.”

Tony’s shoulder slumped in a subtle sign of relief and he put down the shirt without any protest. His eyes darted to Steven’s tent where Steven knew his wax tablet of designs lay.

“No, you are not going back to your own work quite yet. Put that on,” Steven nudged the bundle with his foot. Tony picked up the first item, the padded tunic, and reluctantly put his arms through it. “If you’re going to run around getting into the fighting then you are going to go to practice.”

Tony looked at him with wide eyes when he poked his head out of the tunic. Steven smirked.

“Let that be your punishment for disobedience. Now, if what I think of your background is true then you have had some combat training.”
“Yes, a little, master. But… I was never… it…”

“Perfect. You’ll work with me this morning. We’ll see what you can do.”

When Tony finished putting on the gloves he looked him up and down. The padded tunic was too big in the shoulder and the mail too short but it would do. He picked up the sword, put it in Tony’s hands and pushed him toward the courts.

“Come now, the day is not getting any longer.”

He walked through the busy streets of the camp with Tony trailing after him, fussing with the mail and almost tripping over his own boots. Did he remember how to walk in shoes anymore? All around them, the folks they passed gave them strange looks when they noticed Tony’s collar. After a few yards, Steven softened somewhat and stopped in front of a cart full of hay to let him catch up to him. Tony was watching him cautiously as if waiting to see what Steven was planning next.

Steven tugged him to get him moving again but decided it was probably time to throw him a bone.

“As for the other thing,” He started, tugging Tony again until he was to his side and not behind him. “I do not climb into folk’s bed the way you do, but I would like to get to know you better.”

He saw Tony cock his head, trying to decipher what Steven was saying and Steven could not help placing a kiss on his lips to help him. A small, chaste kiss, they had many more things to sort out before they went further than that. When he draw back the sight of Tony’s smile, shy and small but honest was suddenly worth the discomfarts of the previous weeks.

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