

## Roots

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# Roots

by [mombasas](#)

## Summary

Steve knows that Tony's a billionaire. Well, that the parents who disowned him are billionaires. It's one of the first things he learned about Tony. It's just hard to remember when Tony lives in a piece-of-shit apartment even smaller than Steve's and doesn't own a single pair of socks without holes.

(sequel to "Love in the Dark," but can be read as a standalone.)

## Notes

This started as the cut document for the 500 words about Tony's backstory and apartment that didn't make it into "Love in the Dark" and somehow grew to include the Stark Family Angst, an appearance by James Rhodes, and several hundred words of tequila shot porn.

(TW for drinking and minor offscreen character death.)

# Chapter 1

By the time Tony finds out that Steve has an arrest record, it's more of a foregone conclusion than a surprise. He's already witnessed Steve start arguments with two different creeps at their usual bar and, on one memorable occasion, dragged him away from what was shaping up to be a physical altercation with a belligerent traffic cop outside Mount Sinai Brooklyn.

"It was way scarier when he was little," Bucky confides. It's a warm Saturday afternoon in late September and Tony, Bucky, Clint, and Natasha are sitting in 7C, waiting for Steve to call and either say he's been released from the 70<sup>th</sup> precinct's holding cells, or say that he's *not* being released until someone raises bail. Tony would be concerned, but Bucky, Clint, and Natasha are acting completely unfazed, like this huddle is something that just happens every few months when you're friends with Steve Rogers. "*They were stealing from a homeless woman, Tony!*" Steve had sounded outraged, his voice crackling a little over the public phone line. "*What was I supposed to do?*"

"How little was little?" Tony asks Bucky. Steve's told him stuff, vaguely, but somehow he never has a photo to hand when Tony demands to see one.

"Real little. Scrawny thing, right up until I shipped out," Bucky replies. "Used to have to take a puff off his inhaler before he took a swing at anyone. Got his ass handed to him all the time. Then I got back and he'd, y'know."

"Grown a little," Natasha puts in helpfully.

"Still picks the same fights, though," muses Bucky. "No self-preservation instinct."

Tony's phone rings.

"Hang on, I'm putting you on speaker," Tony answers, setting it on the battered coffee table. "Well?"

"They didn't press charges!" Steve announces. He sounds giddy with relief. Clint immediately produces beers from somewhere on his person and begins distributing them. "Sergeant Mbembe was on duty."

"Aww, I love her," says Clint. Sergeant Mbembe likes Steve because Steve calls her ma'am and means it, and also once helped her kid change a flat tire. Nobody's sure how Clint knows her. The one time Tony asked, Clint had mumbled something dark about his landlord before changing the subject.

"I'm heading home," Steve tells them. "See you soon."

By the time Steve makes it back to his apartment, Tony's pleasantly buzzed and rounding the corner towards drunk. He made the mistake of trying to match Natasha drink-for-drink earlier and even though he tapped out after the first four, there's enough vodka in his body to make his fingers tingle. The apartment is loud and chaotic, cluttered with people and pieces of

Steve and Bucky's lives; Steve is absurdly private about his sketchbooks but a set of drawing pencils is scattered across an end table, and Bucky's bicycle is propped against the wall by the door. Natasha perches on the back of one couch, socked feet on the cushions, leaning forward to correct Clint about something while Steve's friend Sam, who showed up a minute after they got off the phone with Steve, shakes with laughter across from them. From the way Clint's gesturing at his phone where it's hooked up to the small living room speakers, Tony's willing to bet the argument is about his taste in music.

Bucky and Tony are in the middle of a painful rehashing of the Mets' performance this season—*dismal, tragic, unfair*—when Steve finally ducks through the door. Tony cheers along with the rest of them while Steve grins, bashful but pleased.

For a guy who's relatively quiet during sex, Steve has some of the loudest body language Tony's ever seen. He's a full-body blusher, a delicate pink washing first over his cheeks, then his collarbones, then down his chest, illuminating a path for Tony's hands and mouth like lights on an airstrip. That blush, Tony was delighted to discover, appears when Steve is drinking, too. Between himself, Natasha, and Bucky, the vodka is gone, but Clint's near-magical ability to produce alcohol at will has yet to fail him, so a few hours later Steve is killing the last of the tequila Clint uncovered in the back of the pantry. He's laughing as he heads barefoot onto the tiled kitchen floor, waving a hand behind him as he lets Bucky coerce him into taking another shot. Tony, rummaging in a cabinet for something edible, pauses to watch as Steve pours it out, locates a wedge of lime, and takes a pinch of salt in his fingers. Drunk Steve is a vision. He's normally so controlled, careful and precise in his body, that seeing him like this—not quite sloppy, but loose-limbed and flushed—always sends a thrill through Tony. His sleeves are rolled up, shirt unbuttoned at the collar in deference to the tequila heat he must be feeling, and Tony feels desire rush over him like a wave.

Steve turns, some extra sense alerting him to Tony's gaze. Tony raises an eyebrow challengingly and then nearly chokes when, without looking away, Steve slowly licks the web between his thumb and forefinger, tongue flattening over the skin. He sprinkles the salt over it, tilts his head at Tony, licks again, and then Tony loses track of everything else, absorbed in the long line of Steve's throat as he tosses the shot back. He wants to bite it. By the time Steve puts the glass down he's flushed. By the time he's done with the lime, Tony's moved all the way across the kitchen and is pressing him into the counter.

"Hi," says Steve. He tosses the lime wedge into the sink without looking.

"Hey," Tony replies, and kisses him.

Kissing Steve is an overwhelming experience at the best of times. Now, tipsy and a little desperate from the way Steve's fingers are tangling in his hair, Tony can't help the noise he makes. He drags his mouth to the hinge of Steve's jaw and bites sharply. Steve's hands reflexively tighten in response, and Tony gasps openmouthed against his neck, eyes slipping closed. Steve only figured out the hair thing last month (unlike Tony's obsession with his hands, which Steve worked out in the first week, the freak). He takes shameless advantage of the way the tension makes Tony's knees buckle and Tony retaliates by sliding his palms under Steve's shirt, skating up his sides even as his mouth seeks Steve's again. His head is spinning. It might be from the alcohol or from Steve's lips moving against his own, his

tongue slipping into Tony's mouth like it belongs there. He's a purposeful kisser, all competence and confidence. It's extremely hot. Almost as hot as when Tony makes him lose all that focus, working Steve up until he can't do anything else but hold on and feel what Tony does to him.

Tony pulls back, licking the taste of salt and lime from his lips.

"Hi," Steve says again, voice a little hoarse.

"I wanna blow you," Tony informs him. He hooks his fingers in the waistband of Steve's jeans, scraping a little. Steve has a hipbone thing. "And then I want you to fuck me until we break the headboard again." Steve has a dirty talk thing, too, though Tony can't tell if that's the reason he flushes even darker, or if he's still embarrassed about the headboard incident. From way Steve ducks his head to kiss him heatedly, Tony's guessing the former, but Steve could just be trying to distract him. If he is, it's working.

Catcalls follow them into the hall when Steve grabs his wrist and tows him, laughing, out of 7C and towards Tony's apartment. "Conjugal visit!" Clint hollers after them. Steve covers his face with his free hand and mumbles something that sounds like a mortified "Oh my god," but does not slow down.

"He didn't get charged!" Tony shouts back happily just before the door closes.

Steve lets go long enough for him to jimmy open the door to 7B but the second it swings shut behind them he's pushing Tony back against it, cupping Tony's face in both hands and kissing him deeply. Even through their clothes the furnace-warmth of Steve's body feels like it's surrounding him, but suddenly it's not enough. He wants skin. He pushes at Steve's chest until there's some the space between them.

"What—" Steve says, confused. His eyes are dark with arousal, and Tony is gratified to see that he's not the only one feeling a little overwhelmed. This thing with Steve isn't new, not anymore, but that only makes it more frightening, how much it still affects him. How much Steve fucks him up, even when they're not fucking.

"Off," he says, "off, take this off, I want—" and then, impatient, starts yanking at the buttons of Steve's shirt. Steve bats his hands away and begins to fumble at them himself, so Tony takes the initiative and moves to his jeans instead. He manages the button, then the zip, and has them pushed down before Steve's stopped swearing at his own clumsy fingers. Then Tony drops to his knees and Steve is cursing for a different reason. He glances up to see Steve, shirt forgotten halfway off his shoulders, staring down at him. Tony grins. He scrapes his teeth carefully over the curve of Steve's hipbone, the same path his nails took earlier, and pushes at the other hip until Steve realizes what he's doing and turns them so that his back is against the door.

He doesn't bother to tease. When he swallows Steve down, Steve's hands fly to his hair and his head thunks back against the door. Tony glances upwards and sees Steve looking down at him, something close to wonder in his expression before Tony pulls off just far enough to swirl his tongue around the head. Steve gasps something that might be Tony's name. Tony hums around him, then sinks back down.

An indeterminate time passes as he gives himself over to the feeling of Steve heavy on his tongue, the scent of him, the sharp pricks of pleasure-pain when Steve tugs on his hair a little too strongly.

“Tony,” he says. “Tony, Tony, stop.”

Tony pulls off, swallowing reflexively. “What?”

Steve moves his hand from Tony’s hair to his face, rubbing a thumb over his spit-slick lower lip. Tony’s been hard since before they even made it into his apartment but Steve’s fingers on his mouth ratchet everything up. He feels drunk on sensation, can’t stop his eyes from slipping closed. Steve exhales shakily. “Too close,” he says. “I wanna—”

“Yes.” Tony forces his eyes back open. “God, finally. You’re so slow.”

“I could go slower,” Steve says. It might sound like an offer but in the tone Steve’s using, it’s more of a threat.

“No,” Tony says, backpedaling quickly. “No, that is not necessary.”

Once they make it to the bedroom Steve seems to recover himself and sets about methodically driving Tony out of his mind. The vodka is still making things a little blurred and Tony’s skin feels hypersensitive when he drags off his clothing and Steve crowds him backwards onto the bed. He’s the one getting fucked about as often as he’s the one doing the fucking, and tonight, this is perfect: Steve’s warm palm sliding over the knobs of his spine, the electric glow that he feels any time he has Steve’s attention focused wholly on him, like he’s committing to memory every single sound Tony makes, every shift and movement and angle of his body. Tony’s world narrows down to the sensation of Steve’s fingers filling him, the deep, satisfying burn of them, Steve’s murmured words as Tony drops to his elbows, panting into the sheets. Steve likes prepping him and Tony loves Steve’s hands and also, maybe, Steve, even though they haven’t said anything like that yet. He’s drunk enough that now that he’s thought it, now that he’s allowed the words to take shape in his mind, it takes a concerted effort to keep himself from saying them aloud.

“Good?” Steve asks.

“Yeah,” says Tony, “yeah, babe. Fuck, so—” Steve curls his fingers slightly, just enough, and Tony chokes on air for a moment. “Steve. Come on, I need it, get a fucking move on—”

He can practically feel Steve rolling his eyes, but the tremor in his hands is telling. Sure enough, Steve leans over to fish a condom out of the side table and rips the packet open efficiently, sheathing himself and fumbling in the mess of sheets for the lube. Then his hands are back on Tony and he’s pressing in and in and in until Tony can’t help but moan. He’s on his knees, one hand braced on the mattress and the other against the headboard, and for a moment it’s all he can do to hold himself up, keep his elbows locked. When the discomfort of the initial stretch fades, replaced by something that feels like *not enough* and *more*, Steve starts moving, short hitches of his hips. It’s a pace designed to drive Tony to the edge and keep him there, overwhelmed and desperate, and it starts working almost immediately. Normally he’d be impressed; Steve isn’t sober, and this kind of devious sex scheming is

usually Tony's thing. Now, though, he's just impossibly wound up, turned on, and annoyed. It's his default state around Steve. He can't say he minds, maybe because he's fully capable of giving as good as he gets.

He imagines Steve's brow creased in concentration. He always bites his lip when he's focusing. It's the same look he gets when he's so immersed in his art that he forgets Tony's watching him. Tony feels shaky and full, like his entire body is too small to contain him. Steve's hand is curled around his cock just loosely enough that it's mostly brushing against it, and between that and his shallow thrusts, Tony is going to die of frustration before he gets anywhere close to coming.

"Steve," he grits out, and then groans in aggravation when Steve's hand tightens on his hip, keeping him from pushing back. If he could just— "Steven, I swear to God—" Steve hums inquiringly, because he's an asshole, but Tony can tell from his nearly imperceptible trembling that he's barely holding onto his self-control. Tony can work with that. He scrapes together his few remaining brain cells and assesses the situation. Goading isn't working. Neither are threats. That leaves Plan C.

"I got asked out at the garage today," he says. It takes a Herculean effort of will to string the words together into a proper sentence, but it's worth it, because this is going to work. Behind him, Steve freezes, the hand he has curled around Tony stilling. Tony tries hard not to take immediate advantage of it and start fucking himself back onto Steve's dick, because if he can make this happen right, it'll be worth the wait. "Guy drove a Murciélago so he was probably compensating for something, but still. He gave me his number. And an, an enormous tip." On his hip, Steve's grip tightens again, hard enough that it'll leave bruises in the morning, smudges of blue that Tony can press his own fingers against and feel the ache. *Nailed it*, Tony thinks, smug. He rocks back slightly. Steve doesn't stop him, so he does it again, more firmly. It feels so good that he has to bite back a moan. "And I told him I was seeing somebody. That you were kind of possessive, even if you, you won't admit it, *shit*, Steve." This time it's Steve who shifts, snapping his hips forward once and then again, like he can't help it. "He left and I—I kept thinking about it, about telling you, about this." Tony can't fit words to the way he'd felt, standing in the alley that doubled as the garage's driveway, the autumn sun beating down on him, turning someone away because he had *Steve*, had this stupid, incredible boyfriend, but he thinks Steve might be getting it anyway. He's moving now, deep thrusts and a firm hand on his dick that has Tony gasping but still somehow isn't *quite* enough. "Kept thinking about what you'd do when I told you, how much I wanted you, all day—"

"Yeah?" Steve sounds wrecked, a little. *I did that*, Tony thinks. His breath catches around another moan.

"Yeah," he says. He's only half-aware of the words spilling out of his mouth now. "I wanted this. Wanted you in me. Always want—Steve. Steve, please—" He hears his voice break on the word. Goodbye, dignity.

"Jesus, Tony," Steve says, and then he's wrapping his arm around Tony's chest and tugging him backwards until they're both sitting up and Tony's braced against the wall again. When Steve begins moving in earnest, the change in angle whites out every thought in his brain. "Do you mean that?" Steve's voice is rough and a little urgent, his mouth right against Tony's

neck, and it sends a shiver up his spine. He arches his back and Steve's next stroke sets his entire body alight.

"Yeah," Tony manages. He could pretend that he doesn't know what Steve's asking, but that would be a lie, and he's not in the habit of lying to himself. "Yeah, I fucking do. Always."

He wishes he could see Steve's expression, but then, he was already gone on Steve before he'd ever clapped eyes on him. Tony guesses they do okay even when they're not face-to-face. When he finally comes, not long after, it's with the sensation of Steve's fingers digging into his hip and Steve's voice saying his name.

They don't bother to clean up, and while Tony knows they will regret it in the morning, he can't bring himself to care. His nerve endings are still buzzing; his bed smells like sex and a little like Steve's shampoo; and Steve is curled around him, warm and handsy and almost asleep, still a little drunk and very much not in a holding cell, which is where Tony had been afraid he would be spending the night.

"No more vigilante justice," he instructs Steve sleepily. "Can't afford it. I was gonna use Murciélago Guy's tip as bail money but you'd still probably need a GoFundMe page."

"No promises."

"Kay," Tony says. "That's fair."

\*

Steve knows that Tony's a billionaire. Well, that his parents are billionaires. It's one of the first things he learned about Tony. It's just hard to remember when Tony lives in a piece-of-shit apartment even smaller than Steve's and doesn't own a single pair of socks without holes. Mostly he's used to thinking about Tony the way he looked last night: wild-haired, his grease-stained coveralls knotted around his waist because he'd taken an early morning shift at Mitchell's, sitting on Steve and Bucky's kitchen counter like he belonged there. They've only been dating for five months but Tony's managed to slot so neatly into Steve's life that he can barely remember what he did before they met.

Not that Tony himself is easy. He's infuriating, sometimes. He works insane hours, has to be reminded to eat and sleep, and is almost as close-mouthed about his past as Natasha. Steve's never Googled him and doesn't want to. Tony's rare silences sometimes speak louder than his words, so Steve knows that whatever's out there, whoever Tony was before he turned seventeen and ended up disowned and alone in this apartment in Brooklyn, it's not something Tony's proud of. Steve doesn't care. Tony once spent two hours examining Bucky's arm when one of the relays was sticking, and fixed it without hurting Bucky, which was more than the technicians at the VA had ever managed.

"It's Hammer tech," Tony had said, insulted. "I could build better prosthetics than Justin Hammer even if I had *no* arms. No offense, Terminator." He'd clapped Bucky on the shoulder. Bucky had rolled his eyes, but his expression slid into something nakedly grateful when Tony smiled at him. *Yeah*, Steve had thought, watching them. *Yes. Him*. And then, *Oh, no*. They'd only been together for two months at the time.



Tony doesn't give Steve shit for being an art student. He gives him shit about plenty of other things, but he never asks him how he expects to make a living once he graduates, doesn't scoff or distract Steve when he's immersed in his work. Any sketches Steve forgets in Tony's apartment are inevitably taped up on the walls the next time he's there. Sometimes they're stuck to the refrigerator like a first-grader's art projects, because Tony thinks he's funny.

That morning, he wakes up with Tony's hair in his mouth and Tony's face mashed into his neck. His entire body feels like death. Everything is pain. *No more tequila*, he resolves for the third time that month. Regardless of how wretched he's feeling, though, Steve knows from experience that he won't be falling back asleep. His body has never been that kind to him. Fumbling on the nightstand for his phone, he peers owlshly at the too-bright screen until he finds Bucky's number. Natasha answers, which is something he'll have to think about once he can open his eyes all the way without wanting to die.

“что ты хочешь. What,” she says. She sounds like she's about two seconds from murdering him. She'll have to get in line behind his hangover. Even the minimal effort involved in vocal inflection is genuinely beyond Steve at this point.

“Do you guys want Bagel World.” Tony stirs, roused by the sound of Steve's voice. He grumbles something incoherent and blindly attempts to cover Steve's mouth, mostly succeeding in poking him in the eye.

“God, yes.”

“Okay, do you—”

“Yes.” Natasha hangs up, possibly to go back to sleep, possibly to work her way up to multisyllabic words. Possibly to do something to Bucky that Steve is not going to consider right now.

Tony, once Steve wakes him all the way, is sleep-mussed and slow, a crease from the pillow running across his cheek. His eyelashes are unfairly long. When Steve kisses him, morning breath and all, he forgets about his hangover for a moment. Steve wants, with his entire being, to stay in bed for the rest of the day. Later, he'll feel an irrational surge of something between anger and regret that they didn't. Like maybe, if he had just let his eyes slide closed again or dragged Tony back into the bedroom instead of out the apartment door, everything that followed could have been avoided.

But he doesn't fall back asleep, and he doesn't tug Tony back into bed. Instead they take a (miserable, uncoordinated, less than sexy) shower together, pull on clothes (most of which are even clean), go to Bagel World, line up with a half dozen other hungover people squinting against the morning sunlight, and leave with two large paper bags filled with carbohydrates. The day is bright and already warm, and their shadows stretch out dark in front of them. Steve's arms are full of bagels but Tony generously digs around in one of the sacks and feeds him while they walk, their shoulders bumping. The bread is still warm, dense and chewy. Steve's stomach settles. Every few bites, Tony steals one for himself, gesturing wildly as he tells Steve about the garage's newest employee. Mitchell goes through mechanics quickly; Tony's been there longer than anyone else, nearly five years. This time he's hired a huge Scandinavian guy who, Tony argues, was raised Amish, and who may or may not actually

have a work visa. By the time the building comes back in sight, Steve's laughing and feeling more human, even if ducking back inside the shaded lobby is a relief.

There's a man studying the building directory, and Steve wouldn't pay him any attention except for the way Tony's entire body tenses when he catches sight of him. His spine straightens, shoulders squaring, but it's the way his smile falls away that has Steve's vanishing as well. Before he can open his mouth to ask what's wrong, Tony has crossed the small foyer to stand in front of the stranger.

"Obie," Tony greets. There's something unreadable in his expression and his hands are shoved into his pockets. He doesn't offer a handshake.

"Tony," the man says, turning to him. The fluorescent lights of the lobby glint off his polished shoes. He's wearing an expensive-looking suit, charcoal gray, that probably costs more than Steve and Tony's rent combined. "It's good to see you." His voice is gravelly. A smile stretches across his face but there's something unreadable there, too. He claps a hand on Tony's shoulder and Tony shrugs it off immediately. A sense of unease creeps over Steve.

"Why are you here?"

"Something's happened," Obie says, smile disappearing. "Is there somewhere we can talk?" He definitely means *in private*; Steve can tell by the way his gaze flicks over to Steve and Steve's armful of bagels, and then away again.

"Yeah," Tony says. "Right here is good." He doesn't offer to introduce Steve.

Obie sighs. Then he says, "Your parents died last night."

"Oh," says Tony after a moment. His voice is level. Emotionless. "Uh, congratulations."

Obie's lips press together into a thin line. "It was a car crash."

"Okay."

"We have some things to discuss," Obie says, but Tony's already moving towards the stairs. Steve follows him automatically, helpless, like iron filings drawn to a magnet. "The funeral's on Tuesday," Obie calls after them. "You owe them that much, Tony."

Tony pauses. His knuckles are white on the stair railing. He doesn't turn around. "I don't owe them shit," he says calmly.

Steve glances back down as Tony resumes climbing the stairs. Obie is standing motionless in the foyer, hands at his sides, watching them leave.

Steve has seen Howard and Maria Stark on TV before, which is all kinds of surreal. They attended the Met Gala a few months ago. Howard's hair was graying but his shoulders were still strong under his tuxedo jacket. Maria had spoken charmingly to a reporter.

“This is so weird,” Sam had said, eyes glued to the screen.

“Yeah, they look just like him,” Bucky had agreed, leaning forward on the couch. “‘Cept they’re rich.”

Steve had privately disagreed. The family resemblance was strong. But he’d never seen Tony’s eyes as steely as Howard’s were, and he’d never seen Tony smile the way Maria had: attractive, entirely fake.

When they get to the seventh floor, Tony heads for his apartment door. He goes through the usual shake-and-thump maneuver mechanically, walks into the living room, and pauses, like a clockwork figure that’s wound down. Steve moves cautiously around him so he can see Tony’s face properly for the first time since they returned to the building. It’s worryingly blank.

“Tony,” he says. Tony blinks, looks up at him, and there it is. Maria’s smile. It doesn’t reach his eyes.

Steve puts the bags on the table. He doesn’t know what to do, what to say; his uselessness is a tangible weight, making him feel too big and too small all at once.

“Sorry,” Tony says, still wearing that awful smile. “Obie is... an old friend.”

“What do you need?” Steve asks helplessly. He wants to touch Tony, but he’s afraid—hopes—that if he does, Tony’s brittle façade will crack. They’ve been together for a little over five months. Steve doesn’t know if he’s allowed to be the one to put Tony back together. He doesn’t even know if he could.

“A suit, I guess,” says Tony.

## Chapter 2

Tony's apartment is one of the most amazing things Steve has ever seen. It's packed with stuff, boxes piled atop crates, and it's impossible to cross a room without stepping painfully on a screwdriver or tripping over a bundle of cables. The kitchen counters and coffee table are covered in partially-disassembled appliances and electronics. It looks like a mad scientist's lair, if the scientist had a budget of \$40/month and was living on takeout from Nahm Thai Kitchen. The air conditioner breaks almost weekly, and the shower head has been repaired so many times that it looks more like an upcycled metal sculpture than a bathroom fixture. Tony's always tinkering with something. Or somethings, really. It would be easy to overlook the genius amongst the mess, but that hasn't been an option since Steve woke up in Tony's bed that first morning and a disembodied voice informed him that it was 6:42 in the morning, 67 degrees outside, and sunny. Steve had shot upright, heart pounding and eyes scanning the room frantically.

"Oh my God," Tony had groaned into the pillow, "why are you *up*."

"Why is there a voice coming from your ceiling," Steve had hissed back at him.

Tony had rolled over to look at Steve and grin. Even in the midst of his confusion, Steve had thought he was beautiful, hair a tangled mess and eyes still soft with sleep. "That's JARVIS," Tony had explained proudly. "Say hello, JARVIS."

"Hello, JARVIS," the voice had deadpanned.

"Isn't that... isn't that Siri?"

"How dare you," Tony had said. "He's the most advanced AI in the world."

Steve had frowned at him.

"Fine, I'm still working on the voice model," he'd admitted. "Right now we're stuck with Siri, Alexa, or the Australian lady from those old Garmin GPS systems. Oh, and he can do HAL. Right, J?"

"I'm sorry, Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that," said the voice.

Tony had beamed fondly. "Atta boy."

"You built him?"

"Yeah," Tony had said, defensive, misreading Steve's tone of wonder for one of disbelief. "Had to do something at three in the morning other than bother my neighbor."

Even now, months later, Steve still finds himself amazed and sometimes baffled. Once, still mostly asleep, he spent three minutes trying make toast before he realized that the toaster was one Tony had salvaged for parts and didn't have heating coils or even an electrical cord

anymore. The apartment could look like a dystopian hellscape except that the joy Tony takes in his work is written all over it. Sometimes literally. Steve looks at the bathroom mirror, where Tony keeps a dry-erase marker so he can work through equations even while he's showering; looks at his design blueprints, his notebooks with their scrawled, frantic notes and scribbled diagrams, evidence of Tony's hands trying to keep up with his incredible mind. What Tony does is art. There's no other word for it.

Now that they're dating, Steve reaps the benefits of Tony's single-minded genius as well. When they'd still been dancing around each other, both of them uncertain and afraid to push things too far, Steve had mentioned off-handedly that the light in his bathroom was flickering no matter how many times he or Bucky changed the bulb. Then he'd gone to work, and when he got back to the apartment later that night, it was to find Tony half-under the kitchen sink and Bucky watching bemusedly.

"He's fixing the garbage disposal," Bucky had informed him. Tony had also, it turned out, gotten the ice machine in the freezer to work, fixed the bathroom light, and somehow lessened the rattling noise the air conditioner made until it was nearly silent.

"I didn't even know we had a garbage disposal."

"News to me, too," Bucky had replied in an undertone.

The morning that Obie reappears, all of that fades into the background. Tony's all fake smiles and brush-offs, something bright and painful in his tone. Steve makes a surgical incursion into his own apartment next door, moving sticky shot glasses out of the way so there's room to deposit the bagels on the kitchen counter. He wishes that Sam or Bucky or even Natasha were awake for a hushed, hurried consultation, but it's still early and the apartment is silent around him. He doesn't know what to do. Feeling selfish, he drops into a chair and presses his fingers against his mouth.

Tony has never talked about exactly what caused his father to disinherit him. The one time Steve ventured a question, Tony's smile had tightened at the corners and he'd said, "Don't worry, it was mutual." Now, he wishes he'd pried a little further. Maybe then he'd have some idea of what to expect. Instead, he keeps coming back to the utterly blank look on Tony's face, the shine of Obie's shoes, and the dark, quiet thought Steve has harbored ever since waking up in Tony's bed that morning: that Tony, with his wide smile and his clever brain and his *artificial intelligence he built from scratch*, has always been too big for this place. Has, maybe, always been too big for Steve.

It's a stupid thought, a selfish one to be having right now and an uncharacteristic one the rest of the time. Steve has a healthy sense of self-worth; he knows his own value, knows he's a good friend and, he's pretty sure, a good boyfriend. It's just that he also knows somewhere deep in his bones that the death of Howard and Maria Stark is going to change everything. Or perhaps nothing will change at all; Tony will attend the funeral on Tuesday and zip up his mechanic's coveralls the next morning as usual, ride the subway to Mitchell's, work a double shift and meet Steve after, whining about the customers and Steve's class schedule.

It just doesn't seem likely, that's all. Not with Obie's words still ringing in Steve's ears: *You owe them, Tony.*

Sick of his own thoughts, Steve stands up jerkily. When he lets himself back into 7B, Tony is perched on the arm of the couch, backlit by the morning light streaming in through the window. JARVIS's normally crisp tones, the result of an alarming 72-hour programming binge a few weeks previously, are muffled as he speaks to Tony. His voice almost sounds kind. Steve catches the words "stock" and "controlling share" and "turnover" and "manufacturing sector."

"Hey," he says quietly.

"Hey." Tony looks up but doesn't quite meet Steve's eyes.

"You okay?" Steve asks anyway, and promptly feels like an idiot for even asking.

"Yeah," Tony says. "Fine. Just trying to, uh. Get some stuff handled."

Steve feels himself frown. Surely Tony wouldn't be responsible for notifying people of his own parents' deaths? Tony, seemingly reading his mind, waves a hand quickly.

"Just SI stuff," he says. "Stark Industries. I'm gonna be—it's gonna be a mess, once this hits the news."

Steve's frown deepens. "I thought," he starts, then stops, then decides to plow onwards. "I thought you, uh. You weren't."

"No, I am fully disowned," Tony says easily. "The will means that I don't inherit the company."

"Right," Steve says. He's not sure where this is going but he's pretty sure it's nowhere good.

"But it doesn't keep Obie from bringing me in himself," Tony continues. Steve blinks, feeling the bottom drop out of his stomach.

"You think he's gonna do that?"

"Yeah," Tony nods. His gaze is fixed somewhere beyond Steve, beyond the stacks of servers that approximate a wall behind him. Steve can practically see the thoughts whirring behind his eyes, the processes that have been set in motion. "That's why he showed up in person." There's no sign of grief in his voice or in his face. He seems very distant.

"Oh," Steve says. He wants to ask if Tony wants that, but can't seem to force the words out of his mouth. Instead, what eventually comes out, a little awkwardly, is, "I have studio group this morning."

"That's right," Tony says, finally looking at him properly. "Monday's crit day, right? You'll have to tell me how it goes. I gotta make some calls anyway, no need to hang around." His tone is easy, a little dismissive. Steve, at a loss for what to do, moves slowly towards the door. Tony clearly doesn't need him right now. Doesn't want him, not for something this... personal? Important? That's fair. This is Tony's Before life, crashing into the one he's built here, in their small, run-down apartment building. It seems obvious which one is going to win. The sinking feeling in his stomach grows heavier. As he leaves, Tony pulls out his phone

and begins to compose a text, his fingers flying over the keyboard. He doesn't look up when Steve goes.

\*

On Monday morning, Steve asks—clumsily, earnestly—whether Tony wants him to go to the funeral.

“No,” Tony says, “no. I don't—I—it's fine, Steve. Really. You don't have to.” *Please don't*, he thinks. Steve must hear it in his tone because he doesn't push, just backs up to put a little distance between them.

“Sure,” he says. “If that's—if you're sure.” He has work that afternoon, and class that night. Tony warns him that Pepper's coming over, hoping Steve hears the implication: *don't come over tonight*. From the way Steve's mouth turns down at the corners, he's pretty sure he gets it.

Tony spends most of the day lying on the living room floor and catching up on the public stock reports on Stark Industries. He spends the rest of it listening to JARVIS read the obituaries, news reports, and business speculations that are blossoming across the web now that his parents' deaths have been confirmed. It's a new level of masochism, even for Tony. Night falls, the apartment darkening, and Tony doesn't notice until JARVIS turns the lights on. Some of the articles have images attached: Howard and Tony, aged 11, a robotic dog between them. Maria listening intently to the speaker at a charity gala. Maria laughing as Tony, aged 4, attempted to pick up one of Howard's heavy wrenches. Howard and Obie, shaking hands and grinning. An Aston Martin V12 Vantage wrapped around a telephone pole, safety glass glittering around it, the interior light illuminating its empty seats.

There's a knock at the door around eight o'clock. It's Pepper. An overnight bag is slung over her shoulder. She's holding two dry cleaning bags in one hand and an enormous bottle of vodka in the other.

“Not to be dramatic,” Tony says hours later, “but I knew this was too good to last, I am incredibly miserable, and I wish I were dead.”

“Shut up,” Pepper says. She smells like lemon balm and she's carding her fingers through his hair. Her nails scratch against his scalp soothingly. “It's not over, Tony, you don't have to do \_\_\_”

“Did he call you?” he demands. To her credit, Pepper doesn't pretend to misunderstand.

“Yes,” she admits.

“And?”

“And he wanted me to talk to you. Convince you to come back, play nice with the Board.”

It's nothing Tony didn't already know but Pepper's matter-of-fact tone still makes his throat close painfully. "What did you tell him?" he asks.

Her body jolts a little as she gives an unladylike snort. "I told him to go fuck himself, obviously."

"What?" Tony asks. He sits up straight, turning to face her. Her expression is exasperated, sad, and fond. It's a familiar combination.

"I'm on your side, Tony," she tells him. "Always. Regardless of whether or not you go back to SI."

A wave of love for her, of relief, of vodka and bone-deep exhaustion and despair over the impossibility of the situation hits Tony all at once. "What else am I supposed to do, Pep? Just let the company die?" he asks. He means the question to sound sharp, but instead it comes out small. He's wearing one of Steve's shirts, a worn CITYarts tee with paint splattered across the bottom. It's stretched out from his frankly superhuman shoulders. Tony twists the hem between his hands for a moment before he pulls his knees up to his chest, huddling into Pepper's bony shoulder.

"I can't drag him into this," Tony says, muffled. *He's the best thing that's ever happened to me*, he does not say. He knows that Pepper understands what he means, just like she understands that he's not talking about Obie anymore. She was Howard's PA for a whole year. She quit the day Howard kicked Tony out of the house. She understands, better than almost anyone else, what being a Stark entails.

One of her hands settles on his shoulder, her thumb moving back and forth comfortingly. It's a long, long time before she speaks. "I think he should get the choice, don't you?" she asks softly, but Tony's already asleep.

The day of the funeral dawns gray and bitter. The weather has snapped from late-summer heat to raw autumnal chill without warning, quick as a bear trap. Last night's comfort, Pepper's reassuring, warm presence, has disappeared. Morning passes in a haze, like it's happening to someone else and Tony is just along for the ride. He wakes in his bed with Pepper curled into his side. He gets up quietly, trying not to disturb her, and goes to the bathroom. Shaves. Brushes his teeth. Sits on the edge of the bathtub for a while and stares at the floor because that's about the only thing that seems feasible at the moment.

When he finally makes himself leave the bathroom, it's to find Pepper and Steve and Rhodey sitting around the pile of circuit boards that marks his kitchen table. He didn't even hear Rhodey arrive, or Steve come in from next door. Rhodey's in his dress blues. He stands and hugs Tony tightly, murmuring something, but Tony can barely feel the pressure of his arms around him. He blinks and he's dressed. Steve is straightening his tie. Pepper is in the bathroom, bobby pins between her teeth while she fixes her hair, barefoot in a bra and slip. He blinks and Steve is pressing half a stale bagel into his hands. He chews it, swallows, watches as his own hands do up the zipper on Pepper's dress. Rhodey is on the phone with someone, his voice muffled by the bedroom door. Steve hugs him, just for a moment, before



the car pulls up. He smells like coffee and acrylic paint. It's 9:00 on a Tuesday morning. Tony should be at work. Instead, he gets Steve's warm hands, Pepper's cold ones, and Rhodey's brown eyes searching his face like there's a secret hidden in it. He gets a long car ride, a never-ending Catholic mass, and the grassy hills of an expensive cemetery.

Tony hasn't seen his parents in nearly six years, and the funeral is closed casket. His gaze slips from the polished mahogany coffins to the yawning graves beneath them to the trees that surround the family plot, their crowns aflame with the muted beginnings of the leaf change. It's cold in the cemetery, and their branches shake with the breeze, a soft rustle of sound at the edge of his hearing. Afterwards, funeral goers file past him, shaking his hand and clasping his shoulder. Obie says something to him; he responds automatically. He watches Pepper's fist clench, catalogues the tick in Rhodey's jaw. In his head, he turns over every single thing he needs to do, shuffling tasks and priorities like a deck of cards.

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Steve's morning run takes him past dozens of news stands. They don't normally register to his barely-awake brain, but this time something catches his eye and he skids to a stop, backpedaling until he finds the paper he's looking for. It takes Steve a moment to process what his eyes are seeing. Tony's on the front page of the *Times*. He's in the dark suit that Steve smoothed over his shoulders, staring past the camera with a kind of implacable blankness. Behind him, blurry, black-clad funeral goers obscure what Steve assumes are Howard and Maria's graves. Tony's eyes are flat.

When he gets back to Tony's apartment, Tony is awake and sitting at the kitchen table. He's wearing a pair of sweatpants and his mouth is flattened into an unhappy line. Steve sits down without saying anything. Tony is silent for a long moment, gazing sightlessly down at the mess of papers spread across the kitchen table. Some of them are printouts. Others are covered in Tony's own distinctive scrawl.

"The company's going to tank," he tells Steve finally, fiddling with a pen. "Obie is—was—Howard's business partner, but he's never had a head for weapons engineering. That's not a secret, everyone knows it. The Board knows it, the investors know it. Howard did all the designs. Without him..." He gives a lopsided shrug. There's no pride in his voice, no ego; he's stating a fact, and that makes it a thousand times worse. "Obie tried to change his mind, you know. About cutting me out of the will. It wasn't personal." His mouth twists. "He used to call me the golden goose. I'm, uh. I'm pretty good at building things." Tony looks away for a moment. In his hands, the pen turns over and over and over. "Weapons. I'm good at building weapons. That's why I left," he says, laughing a little. He turns his gaze to the ceiling. His eyes are wet.

It's Wednesday. Howard and Maria died on Saturday night. Everything has happened so fast, Steve thinks. He feels like the floor has fallen out from beneath him. There's a heavy, helpless weight in his stomach, and it only gets worse each time Tony pulls away a little more. Tony leaves for work that day with a baseball cap pulled low over his face, and Steve

wants to tell him that even without it he's already—always—unrecognizable as the man in the photo. The words stick in his throat.

“Haven't had to go incognito in a while,” Tony says as he goes. He's smiling, but it's wrong at the edges.

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