

Making Ends Meet

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Making Ends Meet

by [itsallAvengers](#)

Summary

Since eloping at nineteen, Steve Rogers and Tony Stark have been, for lack of a better phrase, broke as absolute fuck.

That's okay though. They have each other.

Notes

For Jamie, who wanted a continuation of a drabble that I posted on my tumblr a few weeks back, involving Steve and Tony attempting to navigate life with barely any money, but still being hopelessly in love with one another! Hope this lives up to your expectations!

The alarm woke Steve up at 4:30 am, sharp.

Of course, this was normal. The alarm woke him up at 4:30 am sharp every day. He still hated it just as much as he had the first time though, and he groaned sleepily as his hand flailed for the clock and then slammed down on it, silencing the thing.

It was pitch dark outside, but the harsh orange streetlight shone through their curtain-less windows and illuminated the room with an off-glow. Steve rubbed at his eyes, feeling the body curled into his arms stirring underneath him. “M’rnin’,” he muttered, burying his face into the soft curls under his chin.

Tony’s hand pawed at his chest as he snuggled in deeper into Steve’s chest. “Mmf,” was his eloquent response.

Steve smiled, kissing his head before gently disentangling himself. He was even more exhausted than usual, and his head felt as if it were stuffed full of cotton. The affects of whatever bug he’d caught were still hitting him hard, despite the fact that it had been almost four days by now. He should probably be taking medication for it, but...

Well. Medication was expensive, and Steve was tough. He’d survive a little cold.

Sitting up blearily, he coughed through his dry throat and leaned over to grab a drink of water as Tony slowly sat up next to him, squinting through the bright light shining through the windows. “God, we really need to buy blinds,” he murmured with a frown.

“Go back to sleep, sweetheart,” Steve told him, turning back around and then leaning down to kiss his husband’s forehead, “you got another hour before you gotta be up.”

Tony’s hand curled around his wrist, holding him in place. When Steve raised an eyebrow at him, Tony just frowned harder, sitting up a little as his other hand rose and flattened out across Steve’s forehead.

“You’ve got a temperature,” he said, pressing his other hand against Steve’s cheek despite Steve’s squirming, “hey, it’s worse than it was yesterday. You can’t go to work like this.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I’m fine.”

“No you’re not, you’re all sweaty and bunged up and gross,” Tony argued with him, shuffling closer and looking toward Steve with concern, “stay home today. Call in sick-“

“Tony, you know I can’t do that,” Steve told him firmly, slipping out of Tony’s grasp and then moving off the bed toward his pants, strung somewhere on the floor, “I’ve taken too many emergency days off work already- another one and I’m risking my job.” He shot a pointed look over to the bucket they had in the corner of the room, set to catch all the drips of rain that came in through the hole in the roof which they had yet to find the money to fix. “I don’t think we can really afford that right now, can we?”

Tony looked at him, slightly pained for a moment, before he huffed and then flopped back onto the mattress, still watching Steve as he shuffled around the room in his boxers. Steve couldn't help but smile at him; Tony was naked, but their cheap sheets draped themselves around his body beautifully, like something on a painting. Steve didn't care how many years passed; he wasn't ever going to stop thinking Tony was the most alluring person that he'd ever seen.

"This isn't healthy," he grouched, but it looked like he'd already given up because his face was pulled into a dejected pout, "I hate it when you have to do this."

Steve just shook his head fondly, pulling his shirt over his head and trying to kick his brain into gear a little better. "A lot of things we do aren't healthy, darling," he countered as he wandered over and knelt back down by the side of the bed, knees scraping uncomfortably against their bare wooden floorboards. His hand reached out, pushing Tony's hair away from his eyes as he lay sprawled over the bed. "Our diet is like, 89% toast right now."

Tony grabbed his hand, placing a small kiss into the palm and then keeping it pressed against his face for a moment as he shut his eyes. "Don't do anything too strenuous then, at the very least," he ended up saying, "not when you're sick and sustaining yourself with nothing other than bread-based products."

Steve laughed, standing up and cracking all his vertebrae before grabbing his bag. "I promise," he told him, before blowing a kiss and then heading into their bathroom, "just go back to sleep, Tony."

He stumbled off in the direction of the shower as Tony just sighed again and then curled up, this time with a little more room on their cramped mattress. Steve shut the door behind him and then looked at himself in the mirror, pulling a face at the puffy eyes and red nose.

Yeah. He'd definitely had better days.

Hopping into the shower, he washed quickly with cold water to perk himself up a bit and then stepped out again five minutes later, shaking and cold but thankfully, a little more awake. Grabbing the towel from the rail, he made to scrub at his hair and dry it off. He got a little caught up, however, when the towel-rack came off the wall and was brought along with the towel itself. Steve stared at it blankly in the mirror as it hung pathetically off the wall, held up by one tiny nail.

He sighed, and added it to the mental list of things in the apartment that needed fixing.

Brushing his teeth quickly, he scrolled through his phone and checked the news. Nothing exciting, really- the rest of the world hadn't woken up and made anything news-worthy just yet. Even if it was shitty having to wake up at such a God-forsaken hour just to head to one of his two jobs, there was something strangely magical about the 4am slot of the day. It felt a little bit like Steve had the whole world to himself.

As you could probably see, he liked to put positive spins on things when he could. It was either that or crying.

He'd gotten himself ready in under ten minutes, and slinked out of the door whilst whispering goodbye to Tony, who just murmured something incoherent from the bed before slurring a sleepy 'loveyou' out into the room, which Steve repeated back at him croakily. He shut their door quietly and then braced himself against the cold wind that immediately hit him once he was out on the balcony sidewalk. Winter in San Francisco was always so damn chilly, and the wind didn't exactly help either. Then again- Steve had grown up poor in Brooklyn, which was a whole different type of cold to this. He was used to battling the cold. Tony... maybe less so. But they always had blankets, and often spent the majority of the winter months huddled up underneath them, sharing body heat and watching TV on their ratty beanbag.

Steve could definitely think of worse things.

He smiled gently as he trotted down the stairs, thinking about his husband back in their room, getting in his last hour of sleep before he too would have to pull himself out of bed and start getting ready at 6. Whilst Steve worked his two jobs to keep them both afloat, Tony got up every day and worked as an intern for an engineering company, not even getting paid a dime. Tony promised it was going to work out and when he finally got a proper job there, it'd pay well enough to see them through comfortably, and Steve believed him 100% - but until then, things were...

Well. They were a little tricky.

Again, though, Steve was a pro at being broke. Always had been. And in the three years they'd been living in San Fran, Tony had also learned a lot about how to be thrifty too. Steve could admit, when they'd first moved here with nothing more than a car and a couple hundred dollars to their names, he'd expected to have to argue with Tony quite a lot about expenses and money, due to the fact that Tony had always been used to having so much of it when they'd lived up in New York. But even from the get-go, Tony had known that he could no longer spend like a Stark; he'd sat quietly and let Steve tell him what they could and couldn't buy any more, and surprisingly, had actually followed the rules. And when times got a little harder and they had to tighten their purse strings some more, he'd never once heard Tony complain.

They got by- even if it was just by the skin of their teeth some weeks.

And this, unfortunately, was one of those weeks. It was no one's fault, really, but Bucky and Natasha's apartment had been burgled a few days previously and so for the time being Steve's two jobs were actually having to feed four people as opposed to just two, seeing as the thieves had taken their one form of food preparation: the microwave. Steve wasn't bitter about it- God, the amount of times Bucky had had to pull up and provide for him over the years were countless- but it still made things tough.

The first part of his day was spent at the back of the retail store he worked for, separating coat hangers and moving boxes of goods from storage and up onto the fifth floor. It was boring and difficult, and he had to grit his teeth whenever his boss said anything that could be construed as words, but at least it paid. He was just glad he wasn't Clint, who had to actually

talk to the customers. Some of the stories he told Steve at lunch break made him seriously question his faith in humanity.

At 2 in the afternoon, after countless amounts of boxes had been shifted and the floor was clean, his shift was over, and Steve quickly grabbed all his stuff and then left, hopping onto the next bus before walking fifteen minutes and arriving at the University of Francisco where he worked as a janitor. This was usually where he'd do more of the heavy lifting and stuff, but considering the fact he still got dizzy when he stood up too fast and he'd promised Tony that he'd take it easy, he'd called ahead and asked Thor if he could shoulder some of the harder work for the day. Of course, his friend had agreed heartily. Thor was good like that.

"You shouldn't even be at work, fool," the man smacked him lightly around the head and then huffed, looking Steve up and down, "you look like shit."

"Thanks bud," Steve laughed and then shrugged, pulling at the neckline of his uncomfortable overalls, "but staying at home ain't gonna pay the bills."

Thor just sighed. "Don't black out on the job. I don't want to have to carry you all the way over to the nurses office, and Tony might yell at me. That man is *scary* when he's upset." He shuddered dramatically, undoubtedly thinking of the occasion a few weeks back, when Thor had eaten Tony's last bagel and then been chased from the apartment by an enraged and caffeine-deprived genius.

Steve laughed. "I'll do my very best," he said with a snuffle, hoisting the mop-bucket up and then beginning to take it off to where it was needed.

He worked late at the university that night, knowing that he'd at least manage to get a little bit of overtime payment from it, but by ten in the evening he was utterly wiped. Probably would've been able to go on a little later had he been feeling well enough, but unfortunately his body declared defeat when he stopped being able to go two minutes without having a coughing fit.

"Just go home, Steve," Thor told him whilst they sat and had a break, his face concerned, "do you need a lift back? I don't mind giving you one--"

"No, no, it's fine," Steve told him hurriedly, shaking his head. Thor, like all of Steve's friends, was broke- and gas costed a fortune, "I'll just get the bus back. It's no big deal."

It was dark once more when Steve got out, the cold air hitting him once again. He didn't particularly mind it, though- by that point in the day, all he was really thinking about was getting home. Tony's hours were sporadic, but they always let him out early on Wednesdays, and so Steve knew that he'd be coming home to good company at the very least.

It warmed him up, just thinking about it.

By the time he'd put his keys back in the door of his apartment, he'd worked 16 hours. That was nearly double the amount of time that he usually did- like he'd said, Wednesdays were his busiest days. And hey; considering the fact that he was also bunged up and ill, he figured he'd done a pretty good job of it.

He pushed his shoulder against the door and stumbled inside, sighing in relief as the cold wind and outside elements were finally left behind. He felt weary and exhausted, ill and fragile, and-

-and enveloped.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Tony said, voice muffled into Steve’s chest as he immediately wrapped his blanket around Steve, cocooning them both in, “come on, sit down and get comfy.” A second later, Tony’s hands wrapped around his shoulders and then guided him forward, until they both flopped down onto the ratty couch with a thump. Steve immediately sighed in relief; it felt good to sit down.

Tony kissed him on the cheek and stroked his hair, checking his temperature with a frown as he did so. “Thank God tomorrow’s your free day,” he murmured, shuffling out of the blanket and then wrapping Steve tighter, “or I would’ve forced you to stay in bed, and that wouldn’t have been pretty.”

Steve laughed tiredly, watching Tony hop off the couch and then move over to their kitchenette, where he clicked the microwave open and then pulled out a bowl of soup. He placed it onto a tray with a bag of chips, a mountain of cookies and a bottle of water, and then walked carefully back over to their couch, a look of deep concentration on his face.

Fuck, Steve really loved him.

“I don’t know what most normal sick remedies are made up of,” Tony began as he rested the tray on the side of the couch and then opened up their blanket once more, snuggling up inside it with Steve, “but I figured this one would do just fine for now.”

“You’re right,” Steve told him fondly, wrapping his arm around Tony’s shoulder, “this is perfect, thank you.”

Tony kissed his shoulder absently, picking up a cookie and then shoving it at Steve’s mouth. With a roll of his eyes, Steve took it. “Why Tony Rogers, your bedside manner is spectacular,” he told the other man dryly.

“Well Steve Rogers, you won’t accept any other form of nurturing unless it is quite literally shoved down your throat, so deal with it,” was the response he got, before Tony popped the cap off the water and then pushed that into Steve’s mouth too, “drink.”

He did, shooting his husband unimpressed glances as he sipped at the bottle. It was most definitely a little silly by this point, but Steve still got butterflies when he said Tony’s last name- *Tony Rogers*. Then again, it hadn’t really come as a surprise. Tony had always hated his family, and everything it stood for. Made sense he’d change it when he married.

Under the blankets, Tony curled his hand around Steve’s and then pushed him gently into his chest so that Steve was lying up against Tony fully. Agile fingers curled into his overgrown hair, and he shut his eyes with a soft sigh of pleasure. “Need’a cut,” he muttered, mostly to himself.

“I’ll do it for you tomorrow,” Tony told him, kissing his forehead, “just rest for now, alright? It’s been a long day.”

Steve nodded, snuggling down further. He really was exhausted. “Yeah,” he breathed, mouth moving over the warmth of Tony’s collarbones, “love you.”

“You too, sweetheart.”

*

He sat with Tony on the roof of his apartment in Brooklyn, both of them nursing bottles of beer and looking out down onto the sidewalk in front of them. Tony’s eye was ringed with a purpley-green; the product of his father’s rage, and Steve too was sporting a split lip- although that was just from the assholes who lived on the corner.

They were fifteen years old, and Steve was watching his best friend as he tried so hard not to cry about his life.

“I hate it,” Tony whispered, taking a long sip and then making a face, “I hate all of it. Everything I’m going to grow up to be when I’m older is what I despise. I’m going to turn out just like him, I know I will.”

Steve didn’t need a name to know who Tony was talking of. “I promise you right now, you will never be anything like Howard Stark,” he said, shaking his head urgently, “Tony, you’re so much more than that.”

“What if I’m not?” Tony asked him as he ran a hand through his hair. Steve watched; transfixed. He’d been best friends with Tony ever since they had met in the beginning of highschool, and he’d also been in love with Tony ever since they had met in the beginning of highschool, too. But he kept that part quiet- he knew that a skinny little runt like him would never be able to even hope for a boy like Tony, and he’d settled himself for just keeping the brilliant friend and not trying anything else. There was no point. “What if I just turn out an angry drunk who doesn’t care, who doesn’t...”

Tony looked down, sniffing and then wiping a hand bluntly across his face. Steve shut his eyes, and then took another sip of his beer. He didn't have a clue how to make any of this better- it was so much more complicated than any words could fix.

They sat in silence for a few more seconds, before Steve gently nudged his shoulder. "I say we run away," he told him, looking out into the Brooklyn horizon where the sun burned orange, "just... get outta here. We could go... well, we could just go somewhere else. Anywhere else. A different state."

He looked back over to Tony, who just watched Steve for a second, before smiling softly and huffing. "I've always liked California," he muttered, "Malibu, maybe."

Steve nodded. "Malibu it is, then. Just me and you. And we'll never have to worry about anything, not ever again. Howard can suck it, Stark Industries can suck it... it'll just be us."

Tony looked at his hands as they tap-tap-tapped along the neck of the bottle. He swallowed, and then turned to Steve. His eyes were sad- they both knew it wasn't going to happen- but it was nice to imagine. To hope.

"Yeah," he whispered, slowly leaning his head into Steve's shoulder, eyes on the horizon, "just us."

*

Steve threw his keys onto the counter and switched on the lights- and then paused in confusion when nothing happened.

"Surprise!" He turned at the sound of Tony's voice, and then peered around the corridor to spot his husband stood in the middle of the living room, surrounded by a circle of all his friends who appeared to be sat around a pile of candles. "We didn't pay the electric bill in time so they cut us off!"

Steve stared at Tony, who was gesturing to the room in mock-excitement, and then just sighed. He'd forgotten about that. "Oh yeah," he said, walking forward and greeting Tony

with an absent kiss on the cheek, “I was wondering what the candles were for.”

“Hey Stevie,” Bucky kicked at his shin fondly and then grinned up at Steve. He was sat cross-legged on the floor, eating a pot of noodles as Natasha lay her head into his lap and occasionally opened her mouth to receive small portions of Bucky’s meal.

“God, look what the cat dragged in again,” Steve responded easily. He stepped over Bruce and Clint, whose legs were both tangled together in a heap as they fought for headspace on Thor’s stomach, and then sat in one of the two empty spots where his special pot of Chicken-fried rice awaited. “I wish you’d stop breaking into my house and stealing my food.”

“As much as I hate to defend Bucky, I actually invited him in,” Tony said as he placed himself comfortably in Steve’s lap and then grabbed his own box of food. He tapped on Steve’s cheek with a finger, and when Steve turned, he popped a quick kiss against his mouth. “Hello, by the way,” he said with a smile, “good day at work?”

“Brilliant,” Steve responded, “I nearly killed my manager twice and got told by a co-worker that I’d had my fly down the whole morning and he couldn’t bear letting me walk around like that any longer.”

Tony laughed, and Steve couldn’t help but copy him. “If it helps, I almost spilled concentrated acid all over myself-“

“*WHAT?*” Steve sat up sharply, eyes going wide as he looked down at Tony’s hands, “what the hell-“

“He’s fine, don’t worry, just a dumbass,” Bruce cut in, shooting Tony a dry look, “he wasn’t concentrating and nearly went head-first into me whilst I was carrying a bunch of test-tubes. I gave him an appropriate telling-off for it.”

Tony and Bruce both worked at the same company together, and although they were in different fields, Tony often came down to hang out with his friend during his free time. Steve was grateful Bruce was there- Tony would almost certainly end up setting something on fire if he wasn’t checked on in that place. It was like candyland for geniuses.

“Yes, thank you *mother*,” Tony said, throwing the lid of his noodle-box at Bruce’s face, “God, you make me sound like I’m five.”

“You are five,” Natasha suddenly piped up, shooting him a look, “mentally, anyway. Steve is like a cradle-robber. You got married three years ago, which made him nineteen and you two.”

Tony, now with no lids of his own to throw, just took Steve’s and hurled that. Bucky plucked it out of the air easily and threw it back at Tony before it got anywhere near Natasha’s vicinity. And of course, Steve caught the replying shot before it could land on Tony’s face, too. That’s what partners were for, right? “Shup up, I’m totally mature. How many of *you* are married and living together, huh?” Tony pointed his chin stubbornly.

“I don’t think eloping with your boyfriend at nineteen with nothing more than the items that were in your pockets was a *particularly* mature choice, if I’m being honest here,” Clint told them all, throwing a peanut into the air and then letting it fall into his mouth.

“Yeah, well,” Tony shrugged, leaned further into Steve’s chest, “no one asked for your opinion. Anyway-“ he looked up and smiled dopily in Steve’s direction, “*I* think it was romantic.”

Steve returned the smile, kissing him softly despite the noises of protest his friends made around him. It wasn’t as if Bucky and Nat weren’t just as bad with the PDA as they were, so they hardly had room to pull faces. He broke off again after a second, shooting all his friends an unimpressed glare. “If you’re going to eat in my home and melt all my candles, then you can damn well let me kiss my own husband.”

Natasha sat up from Bucky’s lap, grabbing a pair of chopsticks and then digging into the man’s box for a piece of chicken. “You’re just too sentimental about it,” she told them firmly, “as you can see, I have no love for Barnes at all. Ours is simply a relationship of convenience.”

“What is even *remotely* convenient about your relationship, if I may ask?” Steve said to her curiously, “you are two of the most stubborn, bull-headed people I know.”

Natasha just cocked an eyebrow, turning to Bucky and then grinning. They had... a strange relationship. They bickered in the same way that most people said ‘I love you’. They called one another a pain in the ass, but Steve didn’t have a single shred of doubt that they’d move the moon for one another. He could just see it in the way that Natasha was looking at him just then.

“Well,” she said eventually, “he’s very good at stealing, and we make great partners in crime.”

The whole room groaned. “Nat!” Cried Tony, whilst Steve just sighed and chucked a pillow at Bucky’s face. “Goddamn it, Buck, you promised you’d stop doing that! It’s gonna get you locked up!”

“Hey, whoah, hey, chill,” Bucky raised his hands defensively and then used it to flick Natasha over the head, “good one Romanov- you said we weren’t gonna tell them.”

“Well, then we accidentally bought them all Chinese food despite the fact we have literally no money left,” Natasha told him, waving a hand, “they would’ve asked sooner or later.” She turned back around, rolling her eyes to all their unimpressed faces. “Look, it was just things we needed to, y’know, survive,” she muttered, “food and stuff. And a microwave. Or two. The other one we just sold. And now we have Chinese takeout! So yay!”

The room gave a collective sigh, whilst Steve internally despaired over his two best friends. “God... alright, just-“

“Say you were with me all day if anyone asks,” Thor waved a hand lazily, “I’ll be your alibi. Not that you need one, I’m guessing.”

“Aw, thanks, Thor,” Natasha smiled and gave him a friendly punch in the arm, “see, that’s true friendship, guys. You should take a leaf out of his book.”

Steve shook his head helplessly, and Tony curled his hand around Steve’s placatingly as it sat over the jut of his hip. They shared a small look; Tony’s raised eyebrow saying *‘come on, cut them some slack, not as if we haven’t done that before too’*, and Steve just looked sullen as he stared out of the window. Tony had a point- they *had* done it before- all of them had, most probably. Food was damn expensive sometimes, and... well, Steve had grown up knowing tricks.

But still. Jail wasn’t fun. Steve didn’t really fancy visiting his friends in there.

For the next few hours, they all simply made conversation amongst themselves, sat in the dark room of Tony and Steve’s apartment and picking at Chinese food whilst trying not to knock any candles and set things on fire. Tony’s body was a warm presence at his left, and then Thor was pushed into his right, and they all curled up close to preserve the body heat, bathing themselves in blankets until they were essentially just a mountain of limbs and cotton.

“This has got to be some sort of fire hazard,” Bruce said sceptically, looking at the open flame and polyester blanket about an inch away from it.

“Almost certainly,” Tony confirmed, “but if needs must, we can always throw Bucky on it to extinguish any flames.”

Laughing loudly, Natasha spun the chopstick between her fingers, before landing the point an inch away from Tony’s neck. “I wonder what roasted eyeballs taste like?” She wondered absently, moving the pointy stick up Tony’s face.

Steve grimaced, quickly diverting the chopstick. “Please God, never say anything like that ever again,” he told her, “I *will* put you into a mental facility. You’re fucking terrifying enough as it is.”

“I think it’s hot,” Bucky declared, wrapping his arm around her waist and then kissing her neck, “Nothing more attractive than a woman who threatens to gouge her friend’s eyes out because they said they would throw me into a fire.”

Bruce just sighed. “God, nothing about any of that was even remotely normal.”

“You say that like that’s unusual to you,” Thor clapped him on the back and looked mildly concerned as he said, “have you forgotten the past few years we’ve spent in their company? I don’t think I’ve been sane since I met any of you.”

They all laughed in amusement, trying to keep it down so they didn’t piss off the neighbours next door. Steve figured Thor had a point there- he could hardly even remember what things had been like before they’d all become friends. And honestly, the simple concept of meeting them all at some point seemed like a blur now. It had just seemed to... happen, one day.

Bucky had been his friend through childhood, obviously, but then he'd moved to California in the spring before Steve's 18th birthday for work, and when Steve had followed with Tony a year later, he'd suddenly found out that his best friend had acquired a girl. And then with Natasha had come Clint, who had recommended Steve for the job in the same department store he worked at, which led him to Thor once he'd managed to find a second job. And then Bruce was just the science dude that worked with Tony at his internship, and one day Steve had come home and the guy had just been there on his couch, and Steve hadn't really thought twice.

And now, he couldn't really imagine life without any of them.

He had to admit- there were some silver linings to being broke as fuck. It brought you together in ways that nothing else really did. Steve knew that, despite all six of them probably having less than a thousand dollars in their banks put together, they'd still give one another everything they possibly could.

Case in point: "Hey Steve, seriously though, you can't live without heating in this place. It's freezing. Why don't you two just stay over at ours for a bit?"

Steve and Tony both looked at Bucky, whose face had turned a little more serious as he spoke. By his side, Natasha was nodding in agreement.

Tony glanced up at Steve, having a private little conversation with their eyes. Steve and Tony both knew that it would be nice to sleep somewhere a little warmer and brighter and... you know, functional, for a few nights- but at the same time, they couldn't push that onto Nat and Bucky, who were struggling as it was.

"With all due respect, Barnes, your most prized possession is currently a microwave, and it isn't even legally yours," Tony said in the end, turning back to them both with a small smile, "we can't intrude on you both like that. We're honestly okay here, and the bill will go through soon anyway. It's fine."

Bucky looked sceptical, and Nat almost opened her mouth before Steve got in first. "Also, as much as I love you guys, I don't want to hear you having sex. Because I know you both- you don't seem like the quiet types."

That made everyone laugh, and Bucky shrugged in defeat, but looked at Steve honestly as he said, "The offer's always there though, bud, okay?" Steve knew he wasn't joking either- if Steve gave the word, Buck would do everything to come through.

Eventually, everyone slinked off back home to their respective apartments, until eventually it was just Tony and Steve again, left to clean up the mess at about 1 in the morning. They saved what they could of the leftover Chinese for later, and then when Steve saw Tony stop and stare at the wall with wide eyes for a minute too long, he quickly hauled him up by the waist and carried him over to their bed before he could distract himself with whatever genius idea had come to his head. He knew the Face of Inspiration, and amazing though it was to see

Tony in action, some of the magic did wear off a little when said magic happened at one in the morning.

“Change the world tomorrow, okay,” Steve whispered to him as he let him down onto the bed and then grabbed the pile of blankets from the corner where they’d been stacked, “for now, we need to sleep.”

Tony pouted at him, but dutifully shuffled down under the sheets and then held out his hand for one of the blankets as Steve crossed him. With a smile, Steve bent down and then spread one out over Tony’s side, tucking him in with a small kiss before hopping in next to him. Tony latched on immediately- he was a cuddler and he always had been, and Steve was absolutely fine with that.

“Steve,” Tony whispered his name a few minutes later, just whilst he was beginning to drift off, and Steve felt himself hold back on a small sigh- if Tony was feeling particularly inspired, then he wasn’t going to be sleeping that night, and Steve would just have to try and block out the sounds of Tony’s manic typing against a keyboard as he invented something new and brilliant.

However, when Steve hummed in response, Tony didn’t tell him that he wasn’t going to be able to sleep, or that he needed to talk through an idea that would keep them both awake until the dawn broke once again.

“Are you happy here?” He asked instead, short and simple.

Steve paused, and then rolled over and looked at Tony with a frown. Tony just looked back up at him with a curious face, fingers tracing the lines of Steve’s collarbones gently.

“Of course I’m happy here,” Steve told him, resting a hand over Tony’s cheek, “why do you ask?”

Tony just shrugged. “I just... I know hard it can be, sometimes. That’s all.” He looked down, biting his lip a little as he shuffled a little closer to Steve’s bodyheat. “I just want to make sure you’re... that you’re okay with this, I guess.”

Steve gazed down at him for a moment, before just smiling and then propping his head up with his hand, the other one moving in between their two chests.

“Why would I not be okay with this,” he whispered, kissing his husband’s forehead, “I have you. I have my friends. I have food on the table and a man I love more than anything else in the world to come home to every night.” He made a face and then messed with the edge of the blankets, absently tucking Tony in more snugly. “I know things are tight right now, but I mean what I said. I would rather be here, broke with you, than back in Brooklyn on my own. We’re not gonna be poor forever, anyway.”

Tony’s smile was visible by the orange glow that shone from outside the windows. “No. We won’t. You promised, remember?” He laughed quietly, fingers stroking along Steve’s cheek, “way back whenever- four, five years ago? You told me we’d both get married and be living together. Now all we gotta do is upsize to a mansion, buy five cars and a pet, and your

prophecy will be 100% true.” Tony paused, before leaning forward and kissing Steve’s mouth softly. “Although if we stay with only the first two things for the rest of our lives, I’ll be happier than anyone else on Earth. Just so you know.”

Steve smiled dopily, kissing back with enthusiasm. Five years, and the sensation of Tony’s mouth on his own still sent butterflies through his stomach every time; like he was seventeen all over again, awkward and fumbling in a body that had shot up from 5’4 to nearly 6’1 in the space of a year, looking down at his best friend and then feeling that same kiss for the first time ever.

Being with Tony was like an explosion that just kept on burning. And Steve didn’t want it any other way.

“Hey,” Steve whispered to him, hands curling around his jaw as he rolled easily on top of Tony, “guess what day it is tomorrow?”

Tony exhaled softly at the weight of him and the press of Steve’s mouth against the side of his face, and his fingertips stroked up Steve’s stomach as his eyes fluttered shut. “Uhhh... Wednesday, Wednesday, what happens on a-“

“Laundry day,” Steve muttered moving his mouth downward and kissing his neck, “gotta get these sheets washed anyway, so we might as well get ‘em even dirtier tonight.” He grinned against Tony’s mouth, and then heard the little giggle in response as Tony’s hands left Steve’s shoulder and he sat up.

He looked down at Steve, breath crystallizing in the air, shoulders showing from the thrift-shop sweater he was wearing as his face was illuminating by the invasive streetlight they couldn’t afford to shut out, and Steve could only think about how lucky he was to be here.

“Strawberry or Vanilla flavoured?” Tony asked with a wriggle of his eyebrows, slipping off the bed and then trotting over to their bathroom.

Steve rolled over and watched him, fondly rolling his eyes. “Surprise me,” he said, cheek up against the pillow and eyes on Tony as he shimmied his way over to the bathroom.

When he came back, he had both of the flavoured condoms in his hand. “Let’s try both- we both know we can go more than once, Rogers, come on” he declared with a nod, which made Steve burst out laughing and pull him back down onto the mattress with a grin, rolling them over and then wrapping Tony in the blanket before he could move.

“Love you,” he kissed the words into Tony’s cheeks, hands draped around Tony’s burrito-ed body and keeping him in place.

“Go awayyy,” Tony whined, wriggling helplessly, “I want sex, not love!”

Steve shook his head and kept kissing. “Say it back, Rogers.”

“Make me, *Rogers*.”

One hour and three vanilla-and-strawberry flavoured condoms later, Tony fell backward onto the bed with an exhausted pant, looking over at Steve as he lay on the other side, eyes shut and savouring the afterglow with his hand still curled around Tony's wrist. "Okay," he muttered, "you win. I love you so much."

Steve just laughed breathlessly, rolling over to kiss him once more.

*

Steve stroked his thumb across the smooth skin of Tony's shoulder, whilst the other boy let his head lay over Steve's heartbeat. They were sat on Tony's king-sized bed back in his mansion, savouring the moments of Howard's absence. He was away on a business trip, otherwise Steve and Tony would never have dared risk stealing these moments together.

But he was gone, and until he came back, Tony could be happy.

"You remember a year or so ago, when I told you we should run away?" He asked Tony quietly, voice barely getting above a breathless murmur in the quiet darkness of Tony's room. It was a little out of the blue, a little random... but Steve had been thinking of it for a while, by that point.

Against him, he felt Tony still. "To Malibu," he added gently, tilting his head further into Steve's body and letting his thumb rub up and down the curves of Steve's abs, "yeah, I remember."

Steve was quiet again; simply looking up at the ceiling as Tony breathed against him. It was always a strange thing, coming around to Tony's place. Such a juxtaposition to Steve's own, in every possible way. Where Steve had nothing, Tony had... everything. But then again; where Steve had love, where he had a place he could call home and feel safe in, Tony only had a cold sort of emptiness. Steve could always feel it, the moment he stepped in here. Sadness was locked into the walls of the place, and the thought of Tony spending all his time here made Steve's skin crawl.

Tony had a lavish home and money coming out of his ears, and none of it was worth a dime in the value it added to your soul.

“Mom’s not getting any better,” he continued, feeling Tony tense immediately at the words, but Steve marched on, “we all know that. She’s... I know what’s going to happen. Eventually.”

“Steve-“

“No, look, what I’m trying to say is...” Steve stopped, shutting his eyes and holding back on the urge to clench his jaw. “Tony, when she dies, there’s nothing keeping me here. Bucky’s going to end up moving to San Francisco for his job, and he’s the only other family I got. I won’t... I don’t even think I’ll be able to stay here. Not after- not Brooklyn, anyway.” He swallowed. He’d known her illness was terminal for months and months now, but saying it never got any easier. “It’s gonna be too hard.”

Tony’s hand pressed down on his heart, reassuring him. “What are you saying,” he asked, shuffling his head in order to look up at Steve.

Steve smiled, kissing Tony’s forehead. “I’m saying that one day, we’re gonna get outta this place. You and me. And we’re gonna just start everything again. We’ll get rich- you’re a genius, and people are gonna fall at their feet for that brain of yours, and I can work any jobs in the meantime. Then... then we can buy a mansion. Bigger and better than this one. Just as a big ‘fuck you’ to Howard.”

Tony laughed, nestling his head back into the crook of Steve’s neck. “Yeah?” He prompted.

Steve nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah. And... and we can get married someday, if you want-“

“I want,” Tony interrupted simply, before waving a hand, “continue.”

He felt the happy warmth spread through his body, starting in his chest and reaching all the way up to his cheeks as he squeezed his hand tighter around Tony’s shoulder. “Okay. And then... a pet. I’ve always wanted a dog. You got any ideas on names?”

Tony was silent for a moment, chewing on his lip introspectively. “Einstein,” he said in the end with a deciding nod, smacking Steve lightly when he laughed, “hey, it’s quirky!”

“Okay,” Steve told him softly, “a dog called Einstein. I don’t mind what breed, but I think I’ll want one from a shelter. Give them a nice new home with a nice new family. Yeah.” He breathed out slowly, thinking of all the weight they carried around with them here, in New York. “We’re gonna be so happy Tony. We’ll have it all. I promise.”

Tony was silent for a moment, but then Steve felt him nod, rolling his shoulder and turning until he lay over Steve’s chest completely, looking at him with his huge brown eyes so full of love, Steve hardly knew what to do with all of it. He lay the palms of his hands flat against Steve’s sternum, thumbs stroking the lines of his collarbones whilst Steve simply watched on silently.

"I know we will," Tony said simply, looking up at him, "but as long as I have you, Steve, I really don't need another fucking thing." His lip quirked upward into a smile, and then he gave a small shrug. "Although a Ferrari would be nice too, I guess."

They both laughed, Steve leaning his head back onto the pillow as he shut his eyes and pictured it all in his head. "Five Ferraris," he corrected, "just the one wouldn't be flashy enough, you know?"

"Five Ferraris, then," Tony agreed with a nod, and then he leaned up and kissed Steve slowly, "it's a deal. We'll fuck out of New York as soon as we can, and start a new life with five cars and a dog and a big mansion that says 'fuck Howard Stark' right on the front."

Steve watched him laugh, and then followed the sound with his mouth, pressing small kisses into the parts of Tony's face that he could reach.

"I can't wait."

*

Steve stared at the tabletop in despair, holding his head in his hands as he looked at the ever-growing stack of bills that he had yet to pay off.

Water. Gas. Electrics. Taxes. Rent. They needed money to get the shower fixed. They had to sort out the damp in the corner of the room at some point too, or one of them was gonna get sick. And Steve had been rigorously cutting out frivolities in their weekly grocery shop as of late, until they were pretty much surviving on eggs, pasta and home-made bread, but it was still costing too damn much. The rent was late- again- Steve had to find the extra hundred dollars sharpish, or they were gonna be in deep shit.

He sighed, glancing at the calendar. He'd get his wage by the end of the month, and that... well, he'd have to work a few more day of overtime, and maybe he'd have to pull a BuckyNat and swipe some food from the grocery store when the clerks weren't looking, but it should be enough to get them by. And Tony had very light fingers- he was even better than Natasha was, which was saying something.

Fuck- he'd promised his Ma he'd stop doing that- the stealing thing. He felt like she was gonna come back from the grave just to smack him around the back of the head and tell him he was better than this.

Palming a hand over his face and then running it through his too-long hair, he sighed and then pulled up the calculator again. He'd been at this for hours, now, trying to work out whether he could cut any of the prices down or skip out on some of the usual things they bought in order to make up the money needed to pay for the apartment. His head was hurting- he'd been staring at small numbers in this shitty lighting for too long now, it was gonna give him a migraine.

And then, of course, that was when he heard the lock click in the door.

His eyes shut in exhaustion. It was silly, because they were both in this together and always had been- but Steve still felt awful at the fact that he had to make Tony come back to such a sorry sight. He didn't want Tony to worry about this- he had enough on his plate as it was. It was what- 1 in the morning?- and Tony had only just arrived back from work. He'd been there pretty much all day, working his ass off, and Steve wasn't even well qualified enough to get anything above a minimum-wage job that could support them, dammit.

He shuffled the bills into a messy pile, trying to make them look a little more inconspicuous as the door creaked open and Tony stepped inside. He didn't notice Steve at first, distracted with his wet coat that he pulled off his shoulders and hung onto the rack, but when he turned around and saw Steve still awake at the table, his eyes widened a little. "Oh," he said in surprise, "hey baby. Thought you'd be asleep by now."

Steve smiled at him tiredly as he wandered over. "Yeah. I was just doing some work. Bills and stuff." He shrugged and threw a nonchalant hand over to the stacks of papers. He felt bone weary and exhausted, and no matter how hard he tried to hide that fact, Tony was his husband. Tony knew him better than anyone.

He frowned and walked forward, fingers trailing over the little heap and separating them all. Steve just watched Tony's face fall and fall, until finally getting to the bottom of the pile and looking back at Steve with a dry smile. "Ah," he said, "that time of the month again, is it?"

Steve huffed in confirmation, biting down on his lip. Tony didn't seem too bothered by it- they'd gone through this charade enough times before- but still. "I'm sorry," he murmured dully, eyes fixed on the table.

Tony stilled, and then turned to him. "Sorry for what?"

"This. Everything." Steve sighed, leaning forward and resting his elbows defeatedly against the edge of the table. "I just... this is a very different picture to what I promised you when we were seventeen. I never wanted to let you down, Tony, I... God, I just feel like I idealized it all too much to you, back when we were nineteen. When I promised you we'd get outta the city and move somewhere better." He looked down. "Sometimes I worry that you regret it. I'm a dead-end guy. This was always my life. But you're... you are destined to go places. You deserve so much more than this."

The room was stiflingly silent for a moment, and Steve's throat felt too tight. He knew it was stupid and irrational- but damn, try telling that to his psyche.

A warm hand settled on his shoulder, and Steve looked up at Tony just as he leaned down and caught his mouth in a fierce kiss, Tony pushing against him hard enough that his chair leaned back against the floor and he had to flail a hand out to grab for the table. His other one curled around Tony's jaw, fingernails scraping over the slight stubble around his cheek, savouring all the sensations that Tony came with.

"Steve, listen to me," Tony said a few seconds later, breaking away, "moving away with you to this shitty apartment in some backfuck city in San Fran, where there are leaks in the roof and holes in the wall and no central heating and barely even enough money to buy new socks- it was the best decision I've ever made." He kissed Steve again, and again and again and again, interspersing his words with a small press of lips against skin. "If I hadn't have got out when I did, I don't think I'd have made it past twenty. I promise you, the places I'm destined to go are the same ones that you are. We're in this together, okay?" He paused, and then swallowed, standing up straight again in order to walk around to the back of Steve's chair and then wrap his arms around Steve's shoulders, pulling him in tight and kissing the back of his neck. "Look, sweetheart... I'll quit the internship. This isn't working and we need to pay the bills, and I'm sure that I can get a place--"

"What?" Steve jerked, turning around to him quickly, "what, no, you're not doing that. No way."

Tony sighed. "Honey, we don't really have a lot of other options right now. I know it's... it'll be a bummer, but we need the extra cash, and I can't be sure when they're going to offer me a place--"

"No," Steve said again, firmer this time as he curled his hands around Tony's arms, "Tony, you have worked yourself to death in that job for the past year and a half. You are not letting go of it now- not when you're so close." His face softened as he looked up with a small smile. "This is your dream. And when you get the place, everything'll get so much easier. We just have to stick it out."

"We can't guarantee I'll even get in!" Tony argued, but Steve just shook his head.

"I can," He grinned, "a Steve Rogers promise."

When Tony still looked apprehensive, Steve just huffed and then pulled him in by the waist, burying his head into Tony's chest as he stood between the V of Steve's legs. "I have some extra cash anyway," he murmured, "stuff I'd been saving for emergencies. I figure this emergency enough. I'll just dip in there and take some of that, and we'll be okay for the next month or two, alright? We got this, Tony, don't worry."

Tony's fingers curled into his hair and stroked their way through, tugging absently at the small knots Steve'd made from where his hands had clutched it. Steve could feel his heartbeat, fast and anxious under his ribs, and he wondered for a moment what was going through Tony's head. Whether he really was as fine with all of it as he said he was. Steve wasn't an idiot- he knew living this way could drag anyone down.

“You gonna come to bed any time soon?” Was all Tony asked in the end, leaning down and murmuring his words into the crown of Steve’s head.

He grimaced. “Nah. Not really tired. Maybe in a few hours.”

Rather than sigh or be disappointed, however, Tony just smiled and kissed his cheek. “Good. Grab your coat then.”

Steve paused, and then broke away in order to frown. “Why?”

“Because I found five dollars on the bus as I was coming home and I really want a hot dog, that’s why,” Tony dug a hand into his pocket and then pulled out a crumpled note, grinning as he tugged at Steve’s hand. He let Tony pull him up into standing position, but was still frowning a little.

“Tony, it’s nearly 2 in the morning-“

“So? Hot-dogs are still served at two.”

Tony tugged him forward again, and once more Steve followed on, shaking his head in bewildered amusement as Tony grabbed both their coats from the rack and then shoved Steve’s at his chest. He really didn’t know why this sort of shit even surprised him any more- this was just what Tony did. This was how Steve had fallen in love with him, all those years ago.

He knew how to make Steve smile. He knew how to pick him back up.

Steve paused them both at the door, taking Tony by the arm and pulling him in until they were nose to nose. Tony still smelt like cleaning chemicals and metal, and his jacket was getting rattier by the day- it was Thor’s old one, and he had to roll the sleeves up about seven times just to use his hands. Steve smiled every time he saw Tony shroud himself in the thing.

“I love you,” he murmured, kissing Tony softly, “you crazy fool.”

Tony kissed him back enthusiastically, opening the door with his other hand. “Us geniuses prefer the term ‘eccentric’, actually.” He pulled Steve forward and then slammed the door behind them, nudging Steve further out into the frigid air. “Come on, come on, I’m hungry.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but did what he was told. Money, bills, expenses, worries- they could all come later. For now, all he knew was Tony. That was all he ever cared about, really. Making him happy. Keeping him safe. Being the best husband he could be.

And yeah, they were 22 and broke and stupid, and they’d married at some city hall whilst drunk and both wearing ridiculous wedding veils that made everyone stare- it wasn’t what a lotta folk would call the wisest of decisions. In fact, everyone had called him crazy at the time. *Don’t sign your life away now, they said, you’ll have plenty of time to marry later, don’t waste your youth on one person.*

Steve had never been good at listening to advice, anyway. And he was very, very glad of it.

Because as he looked across at Tony, skipping along the sidewalk with his overgrown hair and his oversized coat, holding Steve's hand without a care in the damn world- well- all Steve could think about was how badly he wanted to be doing this exact same thing when he was old and gray.

He had a feeling that Tony wanted the same thing too.

*

Tony was curled up on the foot of his porch when Steve opened the door, a cut bleeding over his forehead and a black eye already beginning to form. He was crying- hysterically so- Steve thought absently about how much of a miracle it was that Tony had managed to even make his way here at all.

"I can't do this any more," he whispered when Steve rushed forward and fell to his knees beside him, wrapping shaking hands across his jaw as he stuttered out a sentence and prayed to God that nothing too horrendous had happened, "I- I can't, I can't, this isn't... Steve, I can't-"

"Hey, hey" he soothed quietly, pulling Tony into his chest and running a calming hand through his hair, "hey, Tony, come on- what happened, what's wrong sweetheart, who did this-"

Tony face was rested into his white shirt, and Steve could feel the warmth of his blood and his tears both mingle over his shoulder. He just shook his head and clutched Steve tight with shaking fingers. "I was- it was the party, the... for Ty's 21st, and I didn't want to go but Howard made me, he said- and I didn't want to make things worse between us so I just did, but then Ty made a move on me and he knows, he knows about you and he knows I wouldn't- but I told him to back off and he didn't so I shoved him, and then someone took a photo and Howard found it and when I got back..." Tony's breath hitched, and Steve bit his tongue to keep from bursting out with something vile and furious- clenched his fists around Tony's waist so they wouldn't push off the sidewalk and get into the car so they could hunt down that fucking bastard and-

“Howard said I should have just let him,” Tony whispered, “said- said that this was just shitty press, and you were just shitty press too, and that it’d be better for the business if I was with him and so I told Howard that I don’t give a damn about the business and he lost his shit and-“ Tony laughed wetly, gesturing to his face before sagging back into Steve, like all the life had just been sapped straight from his bones. Steve just held him, completely helpless.

“I can’t live like this,” Tony finished miserably, “I can’t live like nothing more than- than some extension of Stark Industries, some robot with his whole life... I don’t want this, I don’t want Ty, I want you and I want to be happy, why is that too much to ask-“

“Get up,” Steve blurted, pulling away suddenly and taking Tony’s hand as he looked his boyfriend in the eye, “come on, get up, right now.”

Tony froze, and then blinked out the tears from his eyes with a sniff. “What? I don’t-“

“We’re leaving,” Steve said bluntly and with a single nod of his head, “right now.”

It threw Tony. Steve could see he was pretty drunk already, and the alcohol was slowing down his responses. “Leaving... Steve, I don’t underst-“

“You remember when we were fifteen and we said we’d get out of here one day, right?” Steve asked urgently, pulling Tony closer and resting their foreheads together, “you remember when we were seventeen, and I said when my mom died we’ll leave, but then when she did pass away I was so stressed and you were so busy we just... never got around to it?”

Tony was looking at him with slight apprehension. “Yeah,” he murmured, hand squeezing just the tiniest bit against Steve’s, “yeah, I remember.”

Steve breathed out heavily, trying to keep all his feelings in check. He knew he needed to go, needed to do something, or he’d just march his ass over to Ty or Howard and find himself in jail a few hours later for assault.

So this was what he was doing instead.

“She left me the car in her will,” he told Tony, “she left me all her money. It’s not a lot, but it’s enough. Enough to get us across the country. We can go to... to Cali, like you said. Bucky said his friend owns an apartment that’s only a few minutes from him, and it’s not being lived in right now. It’s small, but we could do it. We could go, right now.”

He felt desperate. He’d been living alongside Tony as he dealt with this bullshit, this fucking neglect and mistreatment for years, and tonight was the night he had finally had enough. He couldn’t live with seeing Tony like this any more. It was killing him and he would not stand for it a second longer.

“Steve,” Tony began, looking down and shutting his eyes as another tear fell from his face, “Steve, it’s not that simple-“

“Yes it is!” Steve cut in urgently, “they can’t stop you. Hell, they might not even be able to find you. We can go to the city hall, get married. You take my name. We start again. Just us.

Like we always wished it could be.” He bit his lip and kissed Tony’s cheek, his eyelid, his forehead, each one with more frantic desperation than the previous. “Please baby. Please. You can’t stay here. I can’t stay here and watch you like this. It’s killing me. You deserve so much more, you deserve... you deserve your own life. Your own shot at happiness.”

Tony was still looking at the floor, unmoving. Steve just prayed.

“I’ve got three hundred dollars and a Denny’s coupon in my wallet,” Tony said eventually- and Steve looked at him, mouth dropping open in surprise, “no credit card, no other money I can steal from Howard without going back there-“

“No, no, don’t even step foot near him again,” Steve told him with a shake of his head, sighing in complete relief and slight delirium, “three hundred bucks is enough. I’ve got all mom’s inheritance too. Enough for an apartment, at the very least.” He checked his watch with shaky hands. “If we set off now, we’ll be out of the city by Midnight. From there...” he paused, before smiling, “who knows? Who cares?”

Tony had turned back to look at him, something like tentative hope in his eyes. “Are you serious?” He whispered, his voice small, “are we really doing this?”

Steve brushed the blood off his forehead with a gentle thumb, and kissed his black eye softly. “Yes,” he said, “run away with me, Tony Rogers.”

The look on Tony’s face was like a kaleidoscope of different things- of fear, and hope, and happiness, and love, and exhaustion and pain and apprehension and everything in between- but he still smiled the little smile he only ever gave Steve, and when he leaned up to kiss him, there was promise on his lips.

“You get the clothes, I’ll get the snacks. Let’s take a fucking road-trip, baby.”

He’d been let go at work.

Funding cuts in the company. Couldn't pay for the janitorial staff any more, and the layoffs had been throughout the company. Thor had managed to stay on. Steve had not.

It was, without a doubt, the worst timing in the whole entire universe.

Steve wondered what the general public would think to a 6'2 man having a hissy fit in the middle of the road at 12 minutes past midnight on a Thursday. Probably not all that much, if he was being honest- only folk out at this time were the drunks and the ones that were in his shoes. They'd probably just toss him a few cents.

He pursed his lips and sighed, looking at the sidewalk with traitorously hot eyes. This was an absolute nightmare. His other job wasn't enough to support them, and unless Steve could find work within the next week or two, they were going to be in deep shit. They were tight enough as it was- Steve couldn't afford to lose half his income. He could admit, he'd begged to his manager. Done everything he could; disregarded his pride and pleaded to the fucking asshole like Goddamn idiot, and it still hadn't done shit. To them, Steve wasn't a human being trying to eat. He was just another figure on their graph. A liability.

God, how was he going to break the news to Tony? How was he going to say he'd let them down again. Fuck- if only he'd have tried harder in college, if he'd have taken some more useful subjects as opposed to fucking art and design- God, who the fuck wanted that on a resume? What had he been thinking?

Tony was going to be gutted. Steve would have to argue with him for hours to try and persuade him not to quit his internship. And this time, Steve wasn't even sure whether he'd win. They needed money more than ever, and Steve was just not bringing in enough.

He curled his hands into a fist and resisted the urge to punch a wall. He hated feeling useless, and this... this was the most useless sort of feeling in the whole world.

Coming up to their apartment, he loitered by the door for a few moments, leaning his head against the wood and trying to think of how the hell he was going to tell Tony. His husband would probably be waiting up for him- he always did on the late nights, unless he was the one who got home later. And then Steve would have to say he'd been fired, and watch Tony's face drop like a stone, and know that this was his fault. They'd come to San Fran with no money, no plan... if Steve had just done a little bit of prep, saved a little bit of money rather than throwing the question at Tony whilst he'd been drunk and fucked up- maybe they would be in a better position right now, rather than living under the poverty line and having to fake-propose every date night just so they could get free dessert.

He picked nervously at a hang-nail for a few more moments before shoving his keys into the lock, pushing the door open heavily and then remembering that there was a chance Tony would be asleep and shutting it with a little more delicacy, so as not to potentially wake him.

Of course, though, Tony was not asleep. Steve saw him right away, stood in the middle of the room and facing the door, almost as if he was waiting for Steve to come in. He also noticed, a few moments later, that all his friends were there too. Which was certainly an odd thing to see at half past midnight, that was for sure.

He blinked, looking around the room. “Uh-“

“Steve!” Tony cut in with a rush, holding out his hands, “Steve, I have something I need to tell you. All of you, in fact- figured you guys would probably wanna know too.”

“Whatever it is, it really better be worth getting out of bed for,” Natasha told him with a grim face as she shuffled around in Bucky’s lap, “he needs his beauty sleep, you know. It’s the only way I’ll stay with him.”

“And if she doesn’t get at least six hours, she turns into a witch,” Bucky concluded seriously, before resting his head into Natasha’s shoulder and yawning, “so yeah- this better be some top-tier news, bud.”

Tony rolled his eyes, and his attention was back on Steve a moment later. He looked... excited. Happy. It just made Steve feel worse, because soon he was going to have to ruin that lovely mood and wipe that beautiful smile right off his face. He sighed. “Tony, baby, whatever it is, can’t it wait until tomorrow? I’m... it’s been a really long day and-“

“I’m not doing the internship any more,” Tony blurted before Steve could finish, and all the rest of his sentences dried up immediately in his throat.

His heart sunk to his shoes in horror, and he stepped forward. “You *what*?” He asked, stricken, “Tony, *why*- this was your... this was our only-“

“Because they gave me a full-time, full paid job,” Tony finished simply, rolling back onto his heels with a shit-eating grin on his face.

The room went dead silent for a moment, and Steve’s jaw dropped straight down.

He stared blankly over at Tony, who simply beamed back at him. Clint let off a massive whoop a second later, which was quickly followed by the rest of his friends’ cheering and jumping to their feet to pat him on the back with pride. Tony accepted their hugs excitedly, practically vibrating from the happiness as he and Natasha jumped around the room with loud whoops that would undoubtedly earn them a few very pissed off neighbours.

Then, when the words finally seemed to process in his brain, he blinked rapidly and let out a hysterical laugh, sensing all the weight that had been dragging him down for the past month suddenly fall out of his mouth alongside the noise. He stumbled forward with clumsy feet, feeling almost woozy with the shock as he reached out for Tony and then plucked him from the air mid-jump and clutched him tight into his chest, a manic grin spreading across his face as he spun Tony around delightedly. “Are you serious?” He asked through another laugh, looking up at Tony as he settled his hands against Steve’s shoulders.

Tony nodded, leaning down and kissing him messily. “Full-time, full-paid engineering placement. My boss told me today at work- he just gave me a month’s wage, Steve- they’d been waiting to tell me since the beginning of November.” Tony’s giggle was like music in his ears, and his eyes looked a little wet as he held Steve’s face in his hands. “Steve, we have *money*. I did the math- we can pay all the bills for the month and still have cash left over. Not even just a little... like a *lot*.”

By his side, Bucky whistled. “Damn, what does that feel like? Me and Nat are still stealing microwaves to pay for dinner.” When he saw Steve’s unimpressed glare, he quickly held up his hands. “Kidding, kidding! Don’t bite my head off, we’re in a good mood, remember?”

Steve shook his head, turning back to Tony and then putting him back down onto the floor, just so that he could embrace him again. Shutting his eyes tight and burying his head into Tony’s neck, he kissed the skin there repeatedly, relief seeping through his body like a tangible sort of warmth. “I’m so so proud of you baby,” he breathed out, fingers flexing across Tony’s waist, “you have no idea- I knew you’d do it, I knew it, you deserve it-“

“*We* deserve it,” Tony corrected hurriedly, whispering into his hair, “now you won’t have to work so hard just to keep our asses afloat.”

Steve just laughed a little wetly. Around him, all his friends were smiling and laughing, squabbling over who got to hug who first before eventually deciding to all just pile in and embrace Steve and Tony as a unit.

“You’re paying for dinner from now on, rich guy,” Bruce told him with a pat on Tony’s head.

Tony grinned, side-eyeing Steve as he pecked him on the cheek. “I’ll have to double check with the husband first.”

“Hey, by all means, leech off our wealth for the rest of eternity,” Steve said with a flourish of his hand, pulling Tony into his waist and then kissing his temple soundly, “we might not have a mansion and five cars just yet- but we’re gonna get there. I know we are.” Steve looked down at him, the grin softening at the edges when Tony just gazed back up at him, love and affection pooling in his eyes.

He leaned forward, kissing him once more as if he simply couldn’t keep his hands off for long. “We’re gonna get there,” he agreed with a nod, before smacking Steve excitedly on the chest, “hey, and you can quit one of your jobs now! I think you should call them this second- it’ll give you the day off tomorrow so we can celebrate.”

Steve shrugged sheepishly, looking at all his friends. “Yeah, luckily I, ah, already handled that,” he said, “I kinda got fired tonight anyway. So...”

“Well that’s the best damn timing I’ve ever seen, then,” Natasha finished smoothly, her hand curling around Steve’s jaw and then patting him fondly, reassurance in her touch, “they didn’t deserve you anyway.”

“I just feel sorry for Thor- poor guy’s gonna have to lug all that trash around on his own from now on,” Clint added, grabbing both Steve and Tony’s shoulders and then squeezing, “hey- I

say we go out and celebrate. This is the start of a new dawn- Tony and Steve first, and us next! We need to seal the fates with a drink, I think.”

“Oh, you think, do you?” Bucky asked with a raised eyebrow as he looked down at his watch, “I think the fates and everyone else might be asleep right now, bud.”

But Tony’s eyes lit up with agreement, and really, who was Steve to argue with him right now? “Yes! Let’s go down to the bar for a bit- Jimmy’s will still be open now, right?” He tugged on Clint and Bucky’s arm, “let’s go, come on, first round’s on me!”

Bruce whistled. “Oh, so he really is going to be paying for our dinners from now on.”

“No, I’m paying for them once, asshole- after that, it’s stingy stingy stingy again,” Tony rolled his eyes and then pouted at Bucky, pinching Steve in the hip until he did the same, looking at his best friend with his best puppy-eyes. “Come on, Bucky. For me- for your good pal Tony. A teeny tiny drink won’t do much, will it?”

Bucky just sighed. “Guys, it’s *laaate*- “

In response, Natasha just rolled her eyes and then turned to him, her slender fingers curling around the back of his neck and then pulling him down. There were a few rather awkward seconds where the rest of the group averted their eyes as the two of them sucked face like teenagers; Natasha grabbing a handful of Bucky’s ass and pulling him in shamelessly.

She broke off just as Bucky made a small noise, and looked at him with a cocked head. “Come with us and you’ll be getting a lot more where that came from,” she murmured to him, a small smile cracking on her face.

“And if I don’t?” Bucky said hesitantly.

She shrugged. “You can get comfy on the couch.”

He paused, and then nodded firmly with a sharp exhale through his cheeks. “Right. Let’s go get wasted, fellas.”

Everyone laughed, and Steve curled his hand tightly around Tony’s as they all piled out of their tiny little apartment, feeling for the first time in months as if everything was really going to be okay. He looked across at Tony, whose hair was flitting around wildly in the cold wind, and whose eyes were dancing under the fluorescent glow of the streetlights. He looked so happy. So relieved.

Steve raised their entwined fingers and pressed his lips to his husband’s knuckles. When Tony looked back at him, his face was bright- like a real weight had just been pulled from his shoulders.

“Next step,” he murmured, hopping forward into Steve’s open embrace, “a dog called Einstein from a shelter. How does that sound, huh?”

Steve just laughed, spinning them along the sidewalk. “Let’s just focus on paying the rent first, huh?”

“Okay, fine. That seems fair... but dog later, right?”

“Sure thing, Tony Rogers.”

Tony’s smile lit up New York in that one single moment, and he leaned up, pushing his next sentence into Steve’s mouth, letting him taste them. “I’ll hold you to that, Steve Rogers.”

*

Later that night (morning) when all their drunken friends lay sleeping in piles of blankets and air mattresses all over their apartment, Steve felt Tony stir in his arms.

He hadn’t slept yet. Didn’t feel as if he could- not with all the leftover emotions still running through his mind. And now dawn was beginning to filter through their window, he didn’t really think there was much point. He was content just to lay there on his cramped little bed, listening to Tony’s even breathing beside him as his mind wandered freely.

Of course, though, Tony was pretty-much connected to his brain by that point, and even half-asleep, he knew Steve was awake. His head tilted upward, and bleary eyes blinked over at him adorably. Steve’s lip curled fondly, and he stroked the hair out of Tony’s eyes. They could even afford haircuts now.

“Thankyou,” Tony said quietly, a little slurred- they were both still fairly drunk from the previous celebrations, to the point where Steve was pretty sure Tony was still wearing his shoes. It seemed that he’d taken the time to undress himself though- although thinking about it now, he remembered trying to tickle Tony away from him as his husband had laughed and gently tugged off his shirt, putting him into what felt like his comfy pyjamas. So Steve’s own comfort was probably Tony’s doing, and Tony must have simply forgotten to get himself undressed afterward.

He blinked, remembering that Tony had just spoken. “What for?” He whispered back, hearing Clint’s loud snores permeate through the room as the man rolled over on the floor.

In response, Tony's fingers simply ran gently over his face, mapping out the curves and divots with a look of complete fascination upon his features. And God- how many years had it been now? But Tony still wasn't bored. Steve hoped he never would be; hoped that Tony would still find inspiration in him when they were sixty, old and tired and still just as infatuated as they had been when they'd first met. Steve knew that he himself would have no problem doing that. And he got the feeling Tony wouldn't either.

"All this time," Tony murmured, his ring-finger settling, feather-light against Steve's bottom lip, "you never stopped believing in me. You never gave up, never doubted that I'd do this. You risked everything to let me get what I wanted. I don't know anyone else on the planet who would do that for me." He paused, eyes fluttering shut as he shuffled closer. His head went into the spot it always went- under the jut of Steve's chin, pressed into the hollow of his throat, and he just breathed in for a few moments whilst Steve remained quiet, letting him gather his thoughts.

The next thing he heard was, surprisingly, a small snuffle. Tony's voice was thick when he spoke next. "Thank you for that," he said, eyelashes fluttering over Steve's neck rapidly, "thank you, Steve. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. You always will be. You... God, I don't know where I'd be without you. No one else ever had as much faith in me as you did, even when things were hard, even when I was selfish and kept at the fucking internship whilst you slaved away at two damn jobs-"

"Hey," Steve soothed him quickly before he could get himself worked up- Tony tended to swing quite sharply between moods when he was drunk, and it was often only a matter of a few seconds before Tony was going from laughing to crying, "hey, don't say that. I was happy to. I knew you'd pull through for us. This... well, maybe it hasn't been your dream, but it's a stepping stone to something that is, and I promised to be by your side, in sickness and health and everything in between, right?" Steve smiled down at Tony reassuringly, gently pulling his head out from under Steve's chin and exposing his wet cheeks and teary eyes. His thumbs rubbed at the tear-tracks, and his mouth kissed away the droplets until his face was fresh once more, and smiling up at Steve as if he held the moon.

"I will never, ever stop loving you," Tony swore deeply, swallowing as he shook his head, "never."

Steve thought back- five, ten years- back to when they'd been kids, playing together, getting beat up together, going through everything and anything by one another's sides. He knew that he had always been in love with Tony- even when they'd just been kids, nothing more than friends. And when Tony had pressed his lips so shyly against Steve, that one time after their movie with his hands shaking at his sides, Steve had already sworn that one day he would marry him.

It sometimes felt like everything in his life had been building up to Tony Stark- to being with him, in their shitty bed in San Francisco, running from the world and the future and the past and everything in between. None of it even mattered. It wouldn't ever matter; not when he had Tony here, in his arms, their ring fingers clinking together as their shit-quality rings chimed against one another.

It was crappy and perfect, and there was not a single other place on earth that Steve would rather be.

“I don’t doubt you for a moment,” Steve responded, “and I love you too. More than your genius brain will ever know.”

He brought their entwined hands up to his mouth, placing a kiss over the ring on Tony’s finger. It was proof of their promise- made nearly ten years ago between two boys who’d been looking for more in their lives than what they had. Now, if anything, they had even less than what they’d begun with- but that was only materialistically speaking. In every other sense, Steve had found everything he could ever have possibly wanted along the way, and he knew that Tony had too.

Whatever happened next, they were going to be just fine.

With a small smile, Steve shut his eyes to the feel of Tony’s head in its rightful place, just under Steve’s chin, soft lips pressed upon heartbeat.

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