

we are stardust stories, my darling

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by [deathsweetqueen](#)

Summary

Steve knocks on his door.

Tony lifts his head from his tablet. “What?” he snaps.

“I just... I came to see how you were doing,” Steve says, voice barely above a whisper.

Tony’s arm curves in a wide arc. “As you can see, I’m doing great,” he says, dryly.

“I shouldn’t... I don’t know if anyone told you, but we went to that garden that Nebula told us about—”

“—and you killed Thanos,” Tony finishes for him. “Yes, Rhodey told me.”

Steve’s shoulders slump. “Oh,” he murmurs.

“Yeah...” Tony drawls.

“How are you, how are you feeling?” Steve asks, braving a step forward beyond the threshold of the room.

“Oh, well, you know me, if I have some trashy magazines at my disposal, I’m all ears.” Tony pauses. “Why are you here, Cap?”

Chapter Notes

Written for the "loss of innocence" square (N1) for the STB Bingo.

Title: we are stardust stories, my darling

Collaborator Name: Simi

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Square Filled: T1 - AU: Canon Divergence

Ship/Main Pairing: Tony/Steve

Rating: Explicit

Major Tags: Post Infinity War AU, Married Life, Explicit Sexual Content, Major Character Death.

Warnings for this Chapter: Civil War Discourse

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Word Count: 4427

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“I just... I told you, I wanted to see how you were doing. I mean, before, when we were all talking, and you—”

“—collapsed because I recently got stabbed in the belly by an alien warlord who came to decimate half the universe, and you pissed me off?”

“Tony, I—”

“I really don’t want to rehash any of this. I don’t... I think... look, you said you came here to see how I was doing. Well, as you can see, I’m fine. I’m just... *great*, I’m great. You can go now.”

“Have you eaten?”

Tony gapes at him. “Excuse me?”

Steve squares his shoulders like he’s preparing himself to go into battle. “Have you eaten anything?”

Tony’s brow furrows. “Why are you asking?”

“Because I thought I could bring you something to eat. I know...” Steve’s expression shadows, and he drags his hand over his face. “I know things between us aren’t great. I know that... I know that I’ve fucked up with you more times than I can count. I just... I want to, I want to talk. Can we just *talk*? I mean, we’re friends, right? We were friends, at least, and fuck, Tony, half the universe is dead; people that we *loved* are dead, and I don’t, I don’t want to do this anymore, I don’t want to live, knowing that you’re out there and I’m here, and we don’t get along. So, please, I’m begging you... let me go get us something to eat, and we can just... talk. Let’s just talk.”

Tony’s throat flexes, and he folds his hands in his lap.

“What do you say?” Steve asks, hopefully.

Tony purses his lips thin. “I want eggplant dumplings.”

Steve’s eyes light up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Tony clears his throat, “a full serve, which is twelve dumplings; although, I’d be pretty happy if you got a half-serve of pan-fried, and a half-serve of steamed. And I want the chilli oil, so that I can mix it with the soy sauce and the vinegar.”

“Okay, okay, uh, chilli oil, soy sauce and vinegar, twelve dumplings, either half-serve pan-fried and half-served steamed or full-serve... uh—”

“Pan-fried,” Tony tells him, clearing up the blanks.

Steve nods, determined. Then, he gets a bit uneasy. “Is that okay?” he asks, worriedly. “I mean, the oil and the fried stuff and... stuff?”

Tony makes a face. “Yeah, it’s fine,” he says, briskly.

“Okay, okay, I can, I can *do* that, I can do all of that.”

Steve brings him dumplings, and a box for himself. Tony props his set on his lap, thankful for the thick blankets that he’s lying under so he can’t feel the burn from the bottom of the takeaway container.

Tony finishes his last dumpling, wipes his mouth with the napkin, and puts both the empty takeaway container and the used napkin on the tray by his bedside.

Steve had long since finished his own box, but his stomach rumbles.

Tony lifts an eyebrow.

“It’s not enough,” Steve says, shyly. “Sorry, I should, uh, I might just get something from the vending machine, like a candy bar or a bag of chips or something.”

“You should have told me,” Tony rebukes. “I got full around the tenth dumpling or so. I would have given you the last two.”

“No, no,” Steve says, quickly, “you look, you look like you needed them, or rather, you enjoyed them. I’m happy that you... you enjoyed them.”

Tony lifts an eyebrow. “You’re happy that I enjoyed them?” he quotes, slightly derisively. “Rogers... come on, can you please not bullshit me? I think we’ve both had enough of the bullshit by now.”

Steve gnaws on his lower lip. “I’m sorry,” he says, in a low, rushed voice.

“You’re sorry,” Tony says, carefully.

“I’m sorry. I fucked up,” Steve’s voice is thick, pained, “back in Siberia, I fucked up.” He shakes his head and fists his hands in his hair. “No, no, that’s wrong. That’s wrong. I fucked up long before that. I fucked up two years before that when I found out that HYDRA had your parents killed. I should have told you immediately. I didn’t... I didn’t know *then* that it was the Winter Soldier that they sent, Tony. You have to believe me when I say that.”

Tony's heart is pounding in his chest. "I don't know how to believe anything you say anymore."

Steve flinches, but he recovers well. "That's fair," he says, with a nod of his head. "I just... you deserve an explanation. I didn't get a chance to explain in Siberia. It wasn't exactly... the moment to explain."

"Because I'd just watched a video where your best friend murdered my mother and father and made it look like a car accident, yeah. I can imagine it was difficult to excuse that in any way," Tony mutters under his breath.

"I just... I need you to know that I didn't always know."

"When *did* you know?" Tony asks, coldly. "How about you answer *that* question."

"When we were at Fury's grave and Natasha gave me the Winter Soldier's file that she'd found... *somewhere*. In there, there was a list of names, targets of the Winter Soldier, and your parents were on that list."

"Oh," Tony says, lamely, folding his hands in his lap. "So, that means... that means that Natasha knew; she knew all this time, and she didn't tell me either."

"I told her that I would," Steve says, quietly. "She made me promise that I would tell you."

"And you didn't."

"I didn't. There was... well, in my head, there never seemed to be a good time. We were looking for HYDRA and the sceptre, and then, there was Ultron, and then, you'd left and I was training the new Avengers, and then, there was the Accords... I kept putting it off. I kept telling myself that I had time, that this wasn't a good time for a whole host of reasons. Now, I know... or rather, I can acknowledge that the reason why I didn't tell you was because I didn't want to, because I was scared to tell you, because I knew that it would change things."

"Honestly, Steve, looking back, I really wouldn't have given a fuck if you'd just told me at breakfast one day, *oh, by the way, you know Bucky, my best friend who happens to be a missing ex-assassin for HYDRA, I think HYDRA forced him to kill your parents*. I think, any nuance or politeness aside, that would have been a much better way to find out than watching a video where your best friend chokes my mother to death," Tony says, caustically.

Steve swallows, visibly. "You're right. You're right. I should have told you the second that I found out. You deserved to hear it from me, especially since we were—"

"Casually dating and sleeping together at the time," Tony drawls.

Steve blushes. "Yeah," he says, awkwardly. He sucks in a deep breath. "I was... I meant what I said in the letter that I sent you. Not the... not the shitty apology, because I showed it to Sam and he smacked me over the head with it, and he pointed out that it was a *I'm sorry that you feel that way* not a *I'm sorry that I did something to make you feel that way and I regret it* apology. So, I just... I need you to know that I'm sorry, not only because you got hurt by my

actions, but that I did that to you in the first place, that I kept that secret from you. I was... I wanted to think that I was protecting you from something that would ruin your life, but the only person I was really trying to protect was myself.”

“Why?” Tony demands.

“I was scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Scared of your reaction,” Steve says, honestly. “I was scared that you’d blame me.”

“Blame you for what?” Tony asks, frowning.

“Blame me for Bucky.” Steve shuffles closer, perching on the edge of the seat. “It was my fault, Tony,” he says, pathetically earnest. “It was my fault that he became the Winter Soldier.”

Tony gapes at him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I let him fall from the train that day in 1945,” Steve says, his voice rasping. “I let him fall, and I didn’t go back for him. If I’d just... held on, if I’d gone to look for him, HYDRA would never have gotten their hands on him; they would never have turned him into the Winter Soldier, and he would never have been forced to kill your parents.” He clenches his eyes. “It’s my fault, Tony,” his voice is thick, “it’s my fault that your parents are dead and that HYDRA hurt Bucky. It’s all my fault, and I didn’t want you to find that out. I didn’t want you to realise that and hate me for it, and I thought... I thought if I just kept you from finding out, everything would stay the same, and you wouldn’t realise that it was my fault. You wouldn’t hate me for my failures, for my weakness.” He huffs out a laugh, harsh and grating. “It turned out that you would hate me for my lies instead. Ironic in the end.”

“You’re a coward,” Tony tells him, his voice like a blinding-hot spear.

Steve takes the blow, and it shows on his face. “You’re right, I am.”

“I was falling in love with you.”

Steve flinches. “I know. If it... if it helps, I was, I *am* in love with you,” he says, quietly. “That didn’t... those feelings didn’t go away.”

Tony’s lower lip is trembling, matching the pace of his hands in his lap. “Fuck, Steve,” he says, his teeth chattering. “You... God, what did you do?”

Steve closes his eyes. “I regret it all. I wish... I wish I’d done better. I wish I’d told you the truth from the moment that I found out.”

Tony stares at him. “I didn’t think that anyone was capable of hurting me the way you did,” he muses.

Steve’s eyes are red, bloodshot. “I know.”

“I don’t know if I can... I think I can forgive it,” Tony says, cautiously. “Not now, but... I can see myself forgiving it—”

I’ve always been good at forgiving people, forgiving you.

“—but I won’t forget,” he warns.

Steve runs his tongue between the seam of his lips. “I can deal with that.”

Tony considers him for a moment. “I shouldn’t have... attacked Barnes in Siberia,” he says, and honestly, it’s annoying having to loosen his pride for this.

Steve shrugs. “I don’t blame you. Hell, I don’t think Bucky blamed you. If... if it were me, and I’d seen someone killing my mother on a video, and that person was standing right in front of me, no one would have been able to stop me,” he says, quietly.

“That happened on Titan,” Tony murmurs, tasting bile, bitter, at the back of his throat, as he settles back against his pillow.

“What did?” Steve asks, gently.

Tony knows why he adopted the gentle voice – because Tony has been so singularly reticent about talking about what happened on Titan.

“Quill, Star Lord, he was... he was from Earth, half-human or whatever; he found out that Thanos had killed the woman he loved – that was Nebula’s sister, Gamora, and we... we almost had him. Mantis had him under, and Peter and I,” the lump swells fully in the pit of his throat, “Peter and I, we almost had the gauntlet off, and then, Quill realised that the only reason that Thanos came back alone from getting the soul stone was because he killed Gamora. So, he freaked out, attacked Thanos, bashed him over the head with his ray-gun-blasters thingy, and it pulled him out of whatever spell Mantis had him under, and he... he won that fight. He won, and he won because Quill loved someone so much that he couldn’t keep his shit together, and I was pulling him back, because I knew... I knew what that was like. I knew what it was like to lose my shit because I loved someone so much and they were dead and the person that killed them was standing right in front of me, and I... I tried to stop him. It didn’t work. We failed.”

“You tried your best.”

Tony doesn’t know what prompts him, but he reaches out to take Steve’s hand. Steve’s fingers flex underneath his, but he doesn’t pull away. Tony squeezes it.

“We tried our best, and we failed,” Tony says, gravely. “That doesn’t make us evil people. It doesn’t make us heroes either, at least in the traditional sense, but it doesn’t make us evil. I’m sorry for trying to kill your best friend. I know you love him.”

“I love *you*,” Steve murmurs, and his voice is so unbearably soft that it makes his chest hurt. “I love you too, not more, not less... just... I love you.”

Tony takes a deep breath. “I love you too.”

Steve's face cracks wide open, and he starts crying unashamedly, soft, slow tears that rack his body.

"I'm sorry I kept the secret from you, Tony," he says, roughly. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry that I put you in a position where Zemo could hurt you. If I could take it back, I would. If I could do things differently, I would. I just... I love you. I want to... if you'll let me, I want to... I want to try and fix this. I want, I want us to be happy again; I want us to be together, and if you'll let me, I want to spend the rest of our lives proving to you that you *do* have me, that we *will* do this, life, war, all of it, *together*."

Tony stares at him, and there's a shuddering sort of stillness in the air, as he sucks in a deep breath.

"Ask me out," he says, suddenly.

Steve's brow furrows. "What?"

"Ask me out to dinner, and I might say yes."

Steve's face begins to shine with hope.

Six weeks later, after Tony is released from the clutch of his medical professionals, Steve comes to him at his new lake house, and all he's missing is the hat that he'd be holding in his hands, when Tony opens the door.

"Yo," Tony says, leaning against the door frame.

"Hi," Steve says, shyly.

"What are you doing here?"

"You, uh, I don't know if you remember, but when you were in hospital, after we came back from Titan," Steve rubs his hand over his hair, which is longer, darker at the roots than Tony remembers it being, at least before their two-year separation had occurred, "but you said that I should ask you out?"

Tony lifts an eyebrow. "And you waited six weeks?"

Steve's face is solemn, strained. "You said that you could see yourself forgiving what I did," he says, quietly.

"I do recall saying that, yes."

"I know you said that one day, you'd be able to forgive me, and I'm not... I'm not rushing you or anything, because I know you said *one day*, but I just thought—"

"Steve, I'm actually an expert on this, because a lot of people have said I do it too, but you're babbling," Tony says, calmly.

Steve takes a deep breath, and Tony thinks that if he flattened his palm against Steve's chest, he would feel his heart pounding like a jackhammer.

"Let me take you to dinner," Steve says, softly. He frowns. "That was supposed to come out as more of a question than a command."

Tony waves his hand, dismissively. "Don't worry about it, I know what you meant." He pauses. "I'm not going to pretend like I've... completely forgiven you for what happened in Siberia," he says, carefully, tentatively.

"I can live with that," Steve says, with immaculate confidence.

"Then, I would like to go out to dinner with you, Steve." Tony straightens.

Steve's face brightens. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, uh, how's... tomorrow night sound?" Steve offers.

"Tomorrow night sounds great."

Steve nods to himself, and there's a certain lightness to his being that Tony attributes to his acceptance.

"Okay, I guess, well, we'll see each other tomorrow? I can pick you up at five?"

"Or... counter proposal, you can come in for coffee, and we can start watching Friends? All the seasons are on Netflix."

"Are you sure... because I could just come back tomorrow for our date—"

"Steve," Tony stresses, his voice gentle, as he reaches out to press his hand to the curve of Steve's forearm. "I am inviting you inside; I am inviting you to join me to watch a couple of episodes of Friends. It's not that stressful. It's not an either-or. If you come in now and we watch Friends, we will still go out to dinner tomorrow. This is just... a casual, no-strings-attached pre-date, because I know that you like Friends, and you're one of few people that I know that doesn't mind watching something even after you've watched it before. I will make us some popcorn, coffee, or just soda? I have candy too," he coaxes.

All he's missing is the white van, honestly.

Steve's brow furrows. "Do you have the red licorice I like?"

"What do I look like, a heathen?" Tony scoffs and steps aside so that Steve can cross the threshold.

Steve grins at him.

At some point, while Ross is finding out about Chandler and Monica, Steve drapes his arm around Tony's shoulders.

Tony finds himself leaning in, curling up against his side.

He hasn't felt this warm in years.

The next day, they go out to dinner.

Tony tries three different outfits before he settles on a black t-shirt and a pair of jeans that make his ass look great – Steve, despite wanting to pretend otherwise, is definitely an ass man.

There's a knock on the door, and Tony almost feels like he's a teenager, getting ready for his first date. He checks his outfit one last time in the mirror in the entrance hallway, and then, he swings open the door.

Steve is wearing a brown leather jacket, a black shirt and jeans, and Tony could honestly jump him right there.

"Hi," Steve says, shyly, "these are for you."

He shoves a bouquet of flowers into Tony's hands, and he stares at them, bemused.

"Okay..." he trails off.

"They're lavender. They're your favourite, right?"

Tony blinks at Steve. "How did you know that?"

"In the tower, you always had bouquets of them in your penthouse."

"Oh, that was Pepper," Tony says, dismissively.

"Oh?" Steve's voice is incredulous.

"Yeah, it totally was," Tony says, avoiding Steve's gaze.

"You are such a liar," Steve laughs.

"Are you coming to my house and calling me a liar, Rogers?"

"Well, if you're so opposed to the idea of having lavender in your house, maybe I should just take that bouquet away—"

Steve makes a grab for the bunch of flowers that Tony's holding, but Tony slips out of his grasp.

“Nice try, Rogers,” Tony cackles and makes his way into the kitchen so that he can fill up a vase and place the bouquet inside. “So, where are we going for dinner?”

“I thought you might like Italian, but if you’re not feeling it, we can always—”

“No, no, I like Italian. Where Italian?” Tony says, quickly.

“There’s this hole-in-the-wall place in Brooklyn, actually,” Steve says, embarrassed. “I think you’ll like it. Their pizzas are amazing, and they’re massive, and their pastas are bottomless. I checked the menu just in case, and they do make food that you can eat.”

“And not just one or two items?”

“A whole and separate menu for vegetarians and vegans,” Steve reassures.

Tony’s grin splits his face in half. “Awesome, let me grab my wallet and—”

“Tony,” Steve says, sternly, “you know the rules.”

Tony’s shoulders slump. “That was like... years ago,” he complains.

“Still, when we started dating, we set ground rules. If I asked you out on a date, I got to pay, but if you asked me out, you got to pay. Considering that I asked you to dinner today, I’m pretty sure the obligation where payment is concerned falls onto me.”

Tony pockets his wallet with a scowl. “You know, you might be the most annoying person that I’ve gone out with.”

Steve lifts an eyebrow. “Because I don’t want you to pay?” he says, unsure.

Tony purses his lips thin. “Because I’m a billionaire, and you refuse to take advantage of me,” he mutters under his breath.

“Oh, wow, Tony, I’m so sorry that I attempt to be a decent, honourable boyfriend who doesn’t use you like a literal credit card.”

“Oh, we’re calling ourselves a boyfriend now?” Tony teases.

Steve blushes hotly from hairline to collar. “I mean, I didn’t mean to overstep or assume that we were—”

Tony sighs, taking pity on him, and stands on his toes so that he can press his mouth to the edge of Steve’s. “I think we should see how this date goes, and then, maybe by the end of it, boyfriend might be appropriate,” he offers.

Steve’s smile tilts upwards into his cheeks, and it makes warmth roll out into the pit of Tony’s stomach.

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” he says, softly. He frowns. “It’s a little chilly outside. I can always take off—”

“I’d prefer it if you took your clothes off in the vicinity of my bedroom,” Tony says, briskly, and makes his way towards the door.

He looks over his shoulder, unlatching the lock on the door that Steve had so responsibly attached when he’d closed the door behind him.

Steve is blushing hard, his ears red.

“Oh, please, Rogers, I’ve heard your dirty talk. There’s no point in pretending to be a shy little virgin.”

Tony wags his fingers.

It takes them six dates, despite Tony and Steve’s rigorous flirting, and when Steve drops him back at home, Tony grips him by the black tie that he’s wearing, twisting it around the width of his palm, and drags him in, so that he can stick his tongue in Steve’s mouth.

Steve groans, and it’s as though there’s a floodgate breaking, because Steve melts into the kiss, and then, in a move that surprises Tony, crowds him back against the front of the house.

The wire fence crackles underneath Tony’s spine, and the hand around Steve’s tie loosens, so that he can drape his arms around Steve’s shoulders.

“Fuck,” Tony declares, when his lungs start burning and he has to pull away. “I forgot how good it is to kiss you.”

“You’re telling me,” Steve rasps, and his eyes seem darker in the low porch light.

Tony gnaws on his lower lip and then, purposefully rubs his body against Steve’s, feeling Steve’s erection nudge him in the hip.

“Jesus Christ.”

“I always thought saying your lord’s name in vain while fucking a brown man was probably blasphemy of epic proportions.”

Steve pulls back with a scowl. “You know, that isn’t helping moving this night along,” he says, darkly.

“I could suck you off?” Tony offers.

Steve looks around, his brow furrowing. “Here?” he sounds almost aghast.

“You know, I bought a lake house in the middle of nowhere for a reason, Steve—”

“So, you could get killed by the horror movie villain that stalks these woods for new victims every time someone makes shop here?” Steve deadpans.

“Ha, funny. Funny guy. When did you, colossal buzzkill, become funny?”

“Sometime in the last six months.”

“Well, stick to your day job. What I meant was that I bought a lake house in the middle of nowhere so that I could have sex with people outside and not be worried that there were paps lurking in the tree line to release yet another of my sex tapes to the public so that it will forever be on Pornhub.”

“Sex with people?” Steve clarifies.

Tony rolls his eyes. “In this case, it would be you. Now, I can... offer a couple of scenarios.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I could suck your brains out through your dick right now, out here, and then, we could inside for penetrative sex, or we could go inside, make out on the couch like teenagers, with the adult version of wine coolers, which would be vodka cruisers, and then, go to my bedroom, or we could just split a bottle of champagne between the two of us and see what happens?”

“Does alcohol have to play a part in all of those suggestions?” Steve says, making a face.

“Well, it isn’t in the first one. And in the second and third, to be fair, you can’t get drunk on mortal liquor, and I have built up a heavy tolerance after decades of being a lush.”

Steve purses his lips thin. “Okay, if I have to choose, I’d like the second option.”

“I mean, I’d like to be a nineties game show host but—”

Steve kisses him, kisses him so hard that Tony thinks that his brain is leaking out of his ears. He scrambles for a grip on Steve’s shirt, just as Steve hikes him up the screen door, wrapping his legs around Steve’s waist. He slings an arm around the base of Tony’s spine, so that he can free one of his hands to open the door, kicking it in when it doesn’t budge.

ii.

Chapter Notes

Written for the "Punish Your Friend for Failure" square (O1) for the STB Bingo.

"Hey," Tony protests, when he pulls back from Steve's mouth.

"I'll fix it," Steve promises.

"Ha, you'll fix it. What do you know about fixing doors, city boy?" Tony demands.

"Tony, you grew up in the city too," Steve complains.

"Technically, Stark Manor isn't in the city, and I'm an engineer by trade, so I resent that."

"Tony, normally, when we're having sex, I like you talking, but right now, it's really, really killing the mood. Can you just shut up and make out with me?" Steve says, frustration bleeding through his voice.

"Okay, okay," Tony soothes, just as Steve topples both of them onto the couch.

Tony stretches with a wince. "God, I'm getting old," he mutters under his breath.

Steve leans down and presses his mouth to the dip just above Tony's collarbone. "I think you're the most beautiful person that I've ever known," he murmurs.

Tony feels his skin heat up under Steve's praise, and he clears his throat in an attempt to seem indifferent. "You're heading to second base. That's not how making out on the couch like teenagers works," he chides, gently.

Steve laughs. "Okay, okay," he kisses Tony again, "how's that?"

Tony hums in contentment, threading his hands through Steve's hair. "Nice, very nice. But *this*," he says, tugging on the hems of his leather jacket, "is annoying me."

He strips it off his shoulders.

"And this is annoying me too," he murmurs, slipping his hands under Steve's shirt, before he takes that off as well. "And this."

His feet push Steve's jeans off his hips.

"See, now I'm naked and you're not," Steve says, slyly.

Tony stretches like a cat across his couch. “Why don’t you change that?”

“Happily.”

Steve starts from the bottom and goes up, and the way that he touches Tony makes him feel like he’s precious, like Steve is cataloguing every inch of him to draw onto paper when they’re done.

He mouths at Tony’s throat, where his pulse is throbbing fast and wild, and then, he moves down his body, running his tongue over each brown, shiny scar on his sternum, from where the arc reactor used to be, even if he knows that the skin there is all dead anyway without feeling. He bites down on the bone of Tony’s hip, drawing a curse out of Tony, as he jerks upwards.

Tony smooths back Steve’s hair, especially when he noses at the dip between his thigh and groin, at the thatch of dark pubic hair at the base of his cock. He sucks in a deep breath, when Steve wraps his hand around his cock.

The air releases in a hiss, and Tony reaches behind him to grip the arm of the couch, just as Steve’s mouth closes around the head of Tony’s cock. It’s a tentative suck at first, and then, his mouth rubs down further, reaches further until he’s brushing the base of his cock.

“Fuck,” Tony exhales, and his free hand slides into Steve’s hair.

Steve’s hand grips at his thigh, his thumb sliding into the gap between that one and the other. He spreads it, so that Tony can prop his foot on the very edge of the cushion, and his hand slips over the inside, his thumb rubbing circles on the sliver of darker skin between groin and thigh.

He pulls off Tony’s cock with a wet sound.

“Lube?” he checks in, his lips a darker shade of pink and a little swollen.

Tony uses the hand that was gripping the arm of the sofa to fish underneath the base, and with a short, thin noise of triumph, he retrieves a small bottle of lube, which he presses into Steve’s hand, almost breathless with anticipation.

He pops it open, and the sound goes straight to Tony’s cock, as he lets his head tip back. Steve drizzles a decent amount of lube onto his fingers, which he presses between Tony’s thighs, past his perineum, at the furled rim underneath. He pushes insistently, until he feels the muscles flex and part for him.

Tony sucks in a sharp breath.

“Is that okay?” Steve asks, worriedly.

“It’s good, I’m good, keeping going,” Tony says, his jaw locking at the burn and stretch.

It had been a while since he’d done this, with anyone let alone himself; in fact, the last time he’d done this with a partner was with Steve, and the last time he’d done it himself was

before the Snap had even happened.

Steve prepares him quickly and deftly, enough to make him gasp and pant and claw at the couch, until Steve's naked body is settling between his legs, and Tony can reach down between their bodies to fist at his cock, adjusting himself so that the tip of Steve's cock is nudging at his rim.

Tony lets out a sound that is more animal than human when Steve slides into him, his hands balancing himself on the couch, as he rocks into Tony again and again.

"How's that?" Steve pants.

Tony clutches at him. "It's good, good, don't stop," he orders, digging his nails into Steve's back.

"I'd never stop," Steve's voice turns rough, "I never want to stop, I never want to move from this couch."

"Well, it's a nice couch—"

Steve laughs, nipping at his throat, as the next thrust drags the air out of Tony's lungs. "You—you know that I'm not talking about the damn couch, Tony." He spreads Tony's legs wider, as much as the couch would allow. "I never want to leave you. I want to spend the rest of my life inside you; fuck, I'd forgotten how good this feels, how good *you* feel, how good we feel together—"

Tony kisses him, kisses him again and again, and Steve is still rocking his hips inside Tony, and Tony's pushing back, rolling back, and it's a perfect rhythm, with the two of them grasping and tumbling, and Tony's chest is full, so full that he didn't think it was possible — he didn't think it was possible to be this happy, this content — and when he comes, he comes with Steve's name on the edge of his tongue, and he clutches at him.

"I never want you to go anywhere either," he manages to say, his mouth a slack, wet smear against the bare curve of Steve's shoulder. "I want you to stay here, right here, with me, inside me."

Steve's hands tighten around Tony's hips — tomorrow, he'll certainly wake up with a mottled canvas of bruises on either side, but he'll still be content, content enough to touch those bruises and remember how they got there and smile at the soft, slow ache.

"I love you, Tony," Steve pants. "I love you, I've always loved you. I'll always *love* you. Please, please, let me stay here, like this, forever, just you and me, together. Stay with me, Tony. I can't... I don't think I can be away from you ever again."

Tony kisses him again, presses their foreheads together. "You and me, Steve, I promise," he says, softly.

Steve comes with a grunt, gathering Tony to his body for a long, quiet moment, as the shudders rack his body. When Steve withdraws, Tony can feel the come leak out of his body

onto the sofa, and he says, a sly edge to his voice, “I think we may have ruined the couch.”

Steve huffs and turns onto his back, so that he can pull Tony onto his body against his ribs, with Tony’s head resting on his breastbone.

“You’re a billionaire. I’m sure that you can afford a new one,” Steve says, matter-of-factly, brushing Tony’s hair out of his eyes.

“Oh, so, now you respect my wealth,” Tony huffs, mock-affronted.

“Oh, I’ve always respected your wealth; I just don’t want to be like all the other assholes that you’ve been with, who’ve used you as a convenient ATM and made you feel like shit when they didn’t return your feelings because they were incapable of returning your feelings,” Steve declares.

“That is a very specific hatred.”

“You,” Steve punctuates the word with a firm kiss to the side of Tony’s face, “are a very specific person.”

“That could either be really romantic or really stupid, and I’m having a hard time picking which.”

Steve pokes him in the ribs to make him shriek, and then, somehow, both of them topple off the edge of the couch, and the lube goes *everywhere*.

Six months after they have sex, Steve and Tony go for a walk out to the lake, which Tony complains about because he only exercises if he absolutely has to, and in recent times, it’s involved running from aliens. He’s staring out onto the clear blue lake, the sun dappling like diamonds across the surface, and then, the air shifts beside him.

He turns his head, and he blinks slow and wide, when he sees Steve on his knee in front of him, holding out a velvet-lined box with a ring propped up inside.

“Steve.” Tony’s voice is unsure.

“Marry me,” Steve says, firmly. And then, his shoulders cave, curve inward. “I thought... I mean, I practiced how I would do this in the mirror like fifty times, and then, I realised... this is how I want to do it. I just... I want to marry you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I guess I’m hoping that you’ll want to marry me as well.”

“Steve—”

“I know, I know things have been hard for us,” Steve says, earnestly. “I know that... I know that we’ve not exactly had the easiest relationship. I know that we’ve fought a lot and sometimes, those fights have resulted—”

“—in the worst break-up ever, the media describing the resulting fallout as *the Civil Divorce*, and you growing a divorce beard?” Tony finishes, dryly.

“Well, yeah,” Steve says, awkwardly. “I guess... I just thought that after everything, things seem to be, well, *good*? I mean, what’s happening between us, it’s good, isn’t it? Like I said, I love you, and I want the rest of our life to be just like this, and...” He squares his jaw. “I mean, we’ve lost so much, both of us, people we love, and we can’t change that, but we have to keep going, and I want to keep going with *you*.”

“It amazes me how you always seem to have the most perfect speech right on the tip of your tongue.”

“Not always.” Steve’s voice is grim.

Tony reaches out, takes the ring box from Steve’s pale hand, and peers at it.

It’s a nice ring, he muses.

There’s clearly a diamond attached to the band, and he brushes the pad of his finger over the sharp edges of the stone.

“Yeah,” he finally says, rubbing the band between his index finger and thumb.

Steve blinks slow and wide at him. “Yeah,” he says, hardly daring hope.

“Yeah, I’ll marry you,” Tony replies, stoically.

“Yeah?” Steve’s eyes brighten, his face splitting wide in a relieved grin, and he climbs to his feet. “Yeah, you’ll marry me.”

“Yeah, let’s get hitched. I mean, I’m pushing fifty. I might as well get settled down sooner or later,” Tony teases.

He doesn’t hesitate, pulling the engagement ring out of the box and slipping it onto its left hand.

It’s a perfect fit.

Tony sniffs. “Wow, diamonds look good on me, don’t they?”

Steve’s response is to lift him up, so that his feet are actually dangling in the air, and kiss him so thoroughly that Tony forgets all about diamonds and the velvet box that drops to the ground.

They get married at the lake house.

It’s a quiet wedding – Steve doesn’t have a lot of friends in this time, and Tony doesn’t really like *people* per se, so they’re a match made in heaven.

Rhodey is Tony’s best man, and Pepper and Happy are his groomspeople. There’s a gaping hole where he might have asked Peter, but he doesn’t allow himself to linger on that thought.

Steve has even more gaping holes – Sam would have been his best man, or even Bucky, and Natasha and maybe even Wanda would have been *his* groomspeople, and only Natasha remains. So, he gets Natasha and Thor and Bruce (Clint is conveniently missing from all the festivities, but after what he’s lost, Tony doesn’t actually blame him – he *does* on the other hand, blame him for serial killing his way through Asia).

It’s strange, because he’s been to at least a thousand weddings in his lifetime, and he’s heard the whole spiel before, but it’s weird when it includes him.

It’s also weird, because he always thought he’d have a Hindu wedding when he finally settled down, but he and Steve had compromised on the ceremony, so that it would be half-Catholic and half-Hindu, so instead of wearing a tuxedo, like Steve looking oh-so handsome in his black tux, Tony’s wearing Sabyasachi.

And at the end of the vows and exchange of the rings, they’d also exchange garlands – it’s not the ceremony that Tony’s mother would have had in mind (not that Howard Stark had ever agreed to do anything where a Hindu wedding may have been concerned), but it’ll have to do, considering he’s pretty sure that the Vedas or any other Hindu text don’t exactly cover what’s supposed to happen in a Hindu Brahmin Iyengar wedding with two guys.

“Steven and Anthony, have you come here to enter into marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?” the Catholic priest begins, solemnly. “Are you prepared, as you follow the path of marriage, to love and honour each other for as long as you both shall live?”

“I am,” Tony and Steve intone at the same time.

There is a third question the priest is supposed to ask, about accepting children and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church, and Tony knows that his mother would literally set him on fire if she were alive and were capable of hearing the priest ask him that question.

“Since, it is your intention to enter into the covenant of Holy Matrimony, join your right hands, and declare your consent before God and his Church.”

Tony and Steve join their hands together.

“Steven, do you take Anthony to be your husband? Do you promise to be faithful to him in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love her and to honour him all the days of your life?”

Steve straightens, like it’s the most important battle that he’ll ever go charging into. “I do.”

The priest turns to Tony, who suddenly feels like shifting on his feet in discomfort, like he’s under a microscope.

“Anthony, do you take Steven to be your husband? Do you promise to be faithful to him in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love him and to honour him all the days of your life?”

Tony's throat flexes. "I do," he says, softly.

"These two have declared their consent to be married before God," the priest says, grandly, "and what God joins together, let no one put asunder. I assume you have rings."

Tony twists his hand, and Pepper, who always has his back, who knows his mind even before he knows it, presses the band into his hand, the same time as Steve is turning, with his ring clutched between his index finger and thumb.

"Tony, receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity," Steve says, gravely, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Tony falls in love with the look in his eyes. "Steve, receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Oh, God, Amma really would set me on fire.

The last thing for them to do is exchange the garlands, and once they've done that, without the usual *mantrams* that a *vaadhyar* would've said, of course, that's when Tony feels like he's married, like there's something definitive that hadn't occurred to him when the Catholic priest had been saying what he was saying.

Of course, they still have to sign a marriage certificate, and all of those documents need to be filed with some legal authority, but for all intents and purposes, they're married.

It's a strange thing.

He never expected to be married, and now, he is.

He kisses Steve, and there are cheers around them, and Rhodey's crying, and Tony and Steve are married.

On the first-year anniversary of the Snap, Tony and Steve don't get out of bed.

That morning, Tony wakes up in his normal manner; FRIDAY tells him the time and then, she tells him the date, and it's like a rush of cold water over his head, because Tony had forgotten.

He'd forgotten that this day was fast approaching, that it was coming up.

He slips out of the bed, hurtling towards the bathroom, and immediately up-ends the contents of his empty stomach into the toilet bowl, curling his arms around the base.

"Tony?"

Tony lifts his head and twists it to look over his shoulder, only to find Steve standing there, sweat dampening at various spots all over his front, from his run.

“Tony,” Steve says, worriedly, padding into the bathroom on bare feet, because he knows that Tony prefers it when people leave their shoes at the front of the house, “honey, what’s wrong?”

He presses the back of his hand against Tony’s forehead, his mouth turning down at the corners.

“You’re flushed, but you’re not running a fever,” Steve murmurs. “What’s wrong, baby?”

His hand moves to the small of Tony’s back, rubbing soft, slow circles.

“It’s been one year,” Tony rasps, his eyes feeling heavy, bruised. “One year since the Snap.”

Realisation dawns in Steve’s eyes, and then, his expression shadows – the expression feels like a blade angling upwards so that it slides in just under Tony’s ribs.

“Oh,” Steve says, quietly, settling back onto his heels. “I... I knew it was coming. I just... didn’t expect it to be today.”

Tony laughs, harsh and grating. “Yeah, neither did I.”

“Oh, honey,” Steve murmurs, and then, he’s dragging Tony into his lap, closing his arms around him.

“I’m sorry. I’m not the only one who lost people,” Tony says, shifting as he fits his face against Steve’s neck, forgetting about the sour bile still painting the inside of his mouth. “You lost... you lost more than I did.”

“It’s not a competition,” Steve huffs out.

“Still, we’re in this together, and it can’t just be my drama,” Tony mutters, squeezing his arms around him.

“It’s not just about your drama,” Steve says, kissing the top of his head. “I love you, and we *are* in this together.”

“I never told you this before, but I *am* sorry about Barnes and Sam,” he murmurs, nuzzling at Steve’s throat. “I know you don’t... I know you don’t talk about them, and I think you don’t talk about them because you think that I don’t want to talk about them, or that I won’t approve if you *do* talk about them. That’s... that’s not true. I, if you want to talk about them, I’ll listen.”

“You don’t talk about him,” Steve reminds him. “Peter, I mean. You don’t... you don’t mention him at all.”

Tony swallows past the lump in his throat. “That’s because I miss him,” he says, quietly, “and it hurts to think about him. I got... I got really good at compartmentalising when I was a kid, so if something hurts, I’m very good at not thinking about it. Maybe that’s wrong. Maybe that’s doing him a disservice, because he was important to me. I did love him. He did feel like a son to me, and I *should* be talking about him, thinking about him. I just... I’m still

struggling with that.” He pulls back so that he can look Steve in the eye. “But that doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t talk about Barnes and Wilson if you want to,” he says, firmly.

“You and Bucky—”

“It was hard for me,” Tony admits. “It’s *still* hard for me. I... I remember that fucking video every day, so it’s hard for me, and I... I was hurt for a long time, but I forgave you in the end, Steve. You loved him, and he’s dead now—”

Steve flinches.

“You are allowed to grieve him, even in front of me. If he’d lived,” Tony takes a deep breath, “if he’d lived, maybe we’d have never been friends, but I’d have respected your friendship, and I’d like to think that he’d have respected our marriage too. I just... if you want to talk about him and Wilson, I’ll listen. Besides, I didn’t have a problem with Wilson. Hell, I liked the guy.”

Steve’s throat flexes. “You’re sure?” he says, his voice rough.

“I’m sure,” Tony says, patiently, soft.

Steve’s face changes, looking as though he’s missing his skin. “Do you know how I met him, Sam, I mean?”

“Jogging, right?”

Steve nods. “But that wasn’t the first time I’d seen him. I’d seen him in the park, and he was teaching this little girl... she wasn’t allowed to play with the boys, because they were pretending to fight with swords, and she didn’t know how to. So, he sat with her and he taught her to strike and dodge and defend, and then, he watched proudly, as she went back in and kicked all of their asses.” He laughs. “I thought he was a good guy, so I stalked him a bit, saw him running around the memorial at the crack of dawn, and I joined him, went running past him. God, he hated me for it—”

Five years pass, and slowly, the loss becomes better to deal with.

Tony has his bad days, and so does Steve, and sometimes, they can’t even drag themselves out of bed. So, on those days, the other stays with them in bed, makes them comfort food, and they just cuddle away the day.

It’s hard, but it gets easier.

Until Natasha shows up at the lake house with Scott Lang, with a crazy plan that threatens to shatter the space-time continuum.

Tony *hates* people.

Steve, on the other hand, is uber-excited, and he corners Tony in their kitchen, after Tony sends Scott and Natasha away.

“I don’t see why you won’t even consider it,” Steve complains.

Tony rolls his eyes, scrubbing at a particularly annoying oil stain in the corner of one of his Pyrex boxes.

“You don’t understand.”

“Oh, because I’m too dumb to understand, Mr Big Brain?” Steve asks, hotly.

Tony rounds on him, his hand on his hip. “Okay, did you just call me Mr Big Brain and then expect me to take you seriously after that?” he asks, quietly.

Steve makes a face. “Yeah, I suppose,” he admits, grudgingly. “I just... explain it to me.”

“Explain what?” Tony asks, tiredly.

“Explain why it won’t work.”

“It’s not that I think that it won’t work,” Tony says, patiently.

Steve swallows visibly. “So, what’s the problem?”

“Okay, so, ideally speaking, Scott’s plan would work. I mean, we would go back to 2018, to the day that Thanos and his children came to Earth to fight us for the stones, and maybe, with all of us there knowing what was about to happen, we’d be able to tilt the odds in our favour and stop Thanos from snapping his fingers.”

“Okay, that’s good, isn’t it? That’s what we want,” Steve insists.

“Yeah, sure, but that’s... that’s a paradox. You remember when we watched Doctor Who, the first season with Christopher Eccleston’s Doctor?”

“He was a good one,” Steve says, wistfully.

“The best one,” Tony agrees. He shakes his head. “You remember the episode in the first season, the one with Rose and her father.”

Steve leans back against the counter. “Yeah, I do.”

“You remember what happens when Rose decides to stop her father from dying?”

“Yeah, it creates a paradox.”

“You understand why it created a paradox?” Tony prods.

Steve sighs. “Because if her father never died, she never had a reason to save him. It becomes a vicious circle,” he says, wearily, pinching the bridge of his nose. “And if we went back in time to stop Thanos from snapping his fingers, there’s never a reason for us to go back in time in the first place. It would be a paradox, and there would be time demons floating everywhere and removing us from the space-time continuum.”

“Well, I don’t know about the demons, but there are alien gods who have warhammers that can summon lightning and we’re friends with them, so who fucking knows?”

Steve chuckles and rubs his hand over his head. “So, I guess... that’s not a good idea,” he says, quietly. “I was just looking for some... some deus ex machina, I suppose.” He has a rueful smile plastered across his handsome face. “Lang sounded so confident, and I just went with it. It was a long shot, I should’ve known that.”

“Hey,” Tony says, gently, “come here.”

Steve pads over, crowding him against the sink, and then, wraps his arms around him, folding around him like his shield – Tony knows that there’s something that loosens in Steve’s ribcage like relief when he can hold him like this, like Tony’s a stuffed animal or a weighted blanket, and he’s happy to submit to this kind of affection if it means that the knots of tension in Steve’s shoulders unravel.

Something clicks into his memory.

“Maybe not so much of a long shot,” he murmurs.

Steve pulls back, his hands still on Tony’s hips. “What are you talking about?” he asks, confusion marring his brow.

God, Tony loves this man.

His hand cups Steve’s jaw, squeezing it slightly to smush his lips together, and then, he presses his lips to them.

“Don’t wait up,” he advises, slipping around him to make a beeline for the door leading down into Tony’s workshop.

“What? Why?”

“Oh, I plan on figuring out a sustainable way to time travel.”

“Didn’t we just explore all the reasons why that would be a terrible idea?” Steve calls out from behind him.

Tony turns with a sheepish smile. “You know me. I love playing with things that arguably could destroy the universe in my little engineer’s workshop. Don’t wait up!”

iii.

Chapter Notes

Written for the "Natasha Romanov" square (O4) for the STB Bingo Round 1.

Title: we are stardust stories, my darling

Collaborator Name: Simi

Card Number: 4066

Link: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/27835402/chapters/68146507>

Square Filled: R5 - FRIDAY

Ship/Main Pairing: Tony/Steve

Rating: Explicit

Major Tags: Post Infinity War AU, Married Life, Explicit Sexual Content, Major Character Death.

Warnings for this Chapter: Major Character Death.

Summary: Steve knocks on his door.

Tony lifts his head from his tablet. "What?" he snaps.

"I just... I came to see how you were doing," Steve says, voice barely above a whisper.

Tony's arm curves in a wide arc. "As you can see, I'm doing great," he says, dryly.

"I shouldn't... I don't know if anyone told you, but we went to that garden that Nebula told us about—"

"—and you killed Thanos," Tony finishes for him. "Yes, Rhodey told me."

Steve's shoulders slump. "Oh," he murmurs.

"Yeah..." Tony drawls.

"How are you, how are you feeling?" Steve asks, braving a step forward beyond the threshold of the room.

"Oh, well, you know me, if I have some trashy magazines at my disposal, I'm all ears."

Tony pauses. "Why are you here, Cap?"

Word Count: 4300

By midnight, Tony has figured out a way to travel back in time, and he's torn between dancing like Tom Cruise in Risky Business and going up to cuddle with his husband and go to sleep.

He decides on the latter.

"So, I solved it."

Steve shifts so that Tony can rest his head on his chest, his hand cradling the crown of Tony's head. "I never doubted you," he says, honestly.

Tony twists his head so that he can prop his chin on Steve's breastbone. "What do you think I should do?" he asks, quietly. "I could... I could lock it all up and drop it into the bottom of the ocean, or we could, we could head over to the Compound tomorrow, talk to Bruce and Lang and see if we could build this, build this machine, and maybe..." he trails off.

Steve frowns. "What about the paradox?"

"Yeah, I, uh, actually had another idea where that was concerned?"

Steve sits up. "Oh?" His voice lilts with curiosity.

"What if we didn't go back in time to stop Thanos from snapping his fingers, but we went back in time so that we could collect all of the infinity stones, bring them back to our time, to 2023, and snap *our* fingers so that we can bring everyone back?" Tony offers, his voice betraying his hesitation.

Steve's brow furrows. "That's possible?" he says, carefully.

"I think so. I'm fairly certain. I'm like... 97% sure."

"Do you trust that we'd be able to pull it off?" Steve clarifies. "Tony, I... I know you, and I love you, and I trust you. If you tell me that we can do this, that it'll work, then, I'll back your play."

Tony considers him for a moment, feeling the weight of Steve's trust like a blow to his gut.

"We can do this," he says, after a moment, gravely. "It'll work. I... have to believe that it'll work."

The tears in Peter's eyes as he fades into nothing still haunt him today.

Steve kisses him on the forehead. "Okay, then. I guess we're going to the Compound tomorrow."

They're fighting Thanos, and there are a couple of moments that Tony thinks they're going to win, when Wanda gets her red, red grip around him and she's peeling the flesh from his bones; when Thor and Steve pin him down; when Carol is fighting him, and then, it seems inevitable that Thanos *will* win.

He brought a fucking army from 2014 to get the infinity stones from them and kill them all, so he's pretty fucking determined, in Tony's opinion.

And then, Thanos gets his hands on the gauntlet that he, Rocket and Bruce had forged together, all six infinity stones gleaming, even if the sky is above is dirty with dust and ash and destruction, and Tony's eyes flicker across the battlefield.

He spots Strange holding back the deluge of water from the lake flooding the entire battlefield, and it's as though something is connecting them, across this moment, because Strange turns his head, catches his eyes.

Tony breathes.

Strange lifts his index finger.

There's a rush of blood in his ears, and the half-formed thoughts in his head finally solidify, and *oh*.

His eyes find Steve, who is busy fighting a legion of Outriders, Thor's hammer in one hand and his splintered shield in the other, and Tony thinks, *I love you, I love so much*.

In the corner of his eyes, he sees Peter, flipping through the air. Something in Tony's chest crumples.

His eyes track upwards, and there, in the sky, he can see Pepper and Rhodey working like a well-oiled machine even if this is the first time that Pepper ever wore the Rescue armour – the only thing better would be if Tony were up there to fight *with* them; they were the first people he loved, after all, after Jarvis, the ones who had no blood ties to him but still stood at his side.

I'm sorry. I love you all.

And then, he lunges for Thanos, grapples with the gauntlet for a good sixty seconds, as Thanos' fist beats down on him from above, until finally the Titan's strength is too much, and Thanos manages to bat him away like he's nothing more than an annoying insect.

Thanos snaps his fingers with an ominous, "I am inevitable."

But nothing happens; there is no destruction, no fury, no terrible, widespread death of everyone that Tony loves, because the stones are no longer in the gauntlet that Thanos is wearing.

Thanos stares at the empty gauntlet on his hand, and then, realisation dawns.

The pain is like nothing that Tony has ever felt, even worse than being cut up in a cave in Afghanistan, with strangers' hands removing parts of his chest cavity to make room for an electromagnet, worse than palladium poisoning and the arc reactor being removed from him against his will and going through a wormhole into space and having a parking lot full of cars dropped on his head and trying to stop Sokovia from falling and fighting Steve and Barnes in Siberia.

It spreads into his eyes and his mouth and his ears, and he can feel it everywhere, a sickening throb that almost feels like his mother's embrace in some strange way.

He breathes, slow and deep, and smiles in triumph.

"And I am Iron Man," he says and snaps his fingers.

In the horrible split of a moment, he sees everything, everything that is and was and will be and could be and should be and might have been, and he can taste the blood in his mouth as he exists in all of those instants.

And then, the moment ends, and he's still standing.

He can smell charred meat, and he realises that it's the whole left side of his body.

He collapses, and Rhodey is the first to land beside him, tears in his eyes, as he already guesses what is about to happen, what *is* happening, because what Tony is experiencing right now is a slow death, but a death, nonetheless.

Steve approaches him, fear shining in those blue eyes of his that Tony loves.

Pepper is behind him, and she's crying, crying great, heaving sobs that wrack her entire body.

Tony wishes he could hug her.

Peter gets there before Steve does; he's begging him not to die, his young face streaked with dirt and ash, and Tony wants to say, *it's okay, this is how it's meant to be, you're meant to lose a father; and I'm sorry you've lost them three times over now, but I do love you, Peter; I love you like a son, as my son, and I'm sorry.*

His mouth won't budge.

Maybe it's better that way.

Steve pulls Peter away, his hands gentle on the young man's shoulders. Peter is sobbing just like Pepper is, and Pepper opens her arms up to him (maybe it's the developing romance that was brewing between Pepper and May before she dusted that allows Peter to fall into her arms easily, but in any case, whatever receding thought that he continues to have is thankful for it).

Steve settles at his hip, brushes his hair out of his eyes, so unbearably soft. "Hey, baby."

"Hi, Steve," Tony rasps, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth.

"FRIDAY?" Steve says, even though he already knows the answer, his voice dull.

"Life signs critical," FRIDAY replies, a sad edge to her voice.

Steve hangs his head, and his hand comes up, devoid of his glove, to cradle the unburned side of Tony's cheek.

"I'm sorry," Tony mouths, lacking the strength to get his tongue to work.

Steve laughs, harsh and grating, and then, it devolves into a sob as he hangs his head. He rubs at his eyes, almost furiously.

"You have *nothing* to be sorry about," he says, fiercely. "You saved us. You saved all of us. Fuck, Tony, you saved the whole universe."

"Kiss me," Tony mouths, wanting that last bit of sweetness.

If he's going to die, and he's fairly certain he is, let that be the last thing he feels, the sensation of Steve's mouth on his.

Tears are a sheen covering Steve's eyes, as he sidles closer, presses his brow against Tony's, and then, he brushes his mouth against Tony's, ever so gently.

Tony would pull him closer if he could use his hands, but it's such a sudden rush of warmth that Tony abruptly feels like crying himself, feels like he could live in this moment forever – but that's not an option.

Steve pulls back, and Tony wants to whine at the loss.

Steve takes Tony's hand in his, and his free hand flattens against the arc reactor, which is still flickering bravely.

"It's okay, Tony," he murmurs, sorrow lining his face, even as he bears a smile for him, just for him, like now, faced with the harsh truth that Tony is dying, Steve wants to be strong for Tony, wants to give him comfort even in this moment where his world is ending. "We'll be alright. You've done your job now; you saved us. You can rest."

I'm sorry, Steve, I'm so sorry.

The last thing that Tony wanted to be was another corpse for Steve to mourn.

His body is heavy like a graveyard, and slowly but surely, Tony collapses under its weight.

His eyes shudder close, and the arc reactor goes out.

Steve stares down at him, Tony's pale, grey body, lying there in front of him, and he can feel it, even if he can't see it, he knows that he's gone; he knows that the spark that had made Tony's eyes so bright has gone out, and there is nothing left in Tony's body, nothing that makes him *Tony*, at least.

The life has gone, the spirit, the blaze, all of it is gone, and all that is left is the flesh.

Steve should cry.

His husband is dead.

The man he loves is dead.

The love of his life told him that he was *sorry*, sorry for dying, sorry for saving everyone because it meant that it was his death, sorry that he was leaving Steve, and then closed his eyes forever.

He's fairly certain that this is the point where people are supposed to cry.

He doesn't have any tears left in him though.

He's lost too many people to collapse in a fit of tears today.

Be a man, they said, even when he looked nothing like a man once upon a time.

Be strong, they said, even when his bark was worse than his bite and he routinely got his ass beat in alleyways.

You have to take care of them, he told himself, even as they all died around him.

So, he did.

And this is what he got for all of that: the love of his life, lying dead in front of him.

Crying would be wrong.

Tony wouldn't want him to cry, he thinks.

That's a lie too.

Tony would want him to feel everything and anything that he feels.

Tony was stronger than him in so many ways, maybe in all the important ways.

And now, he's dead, and Steve is alone, he's still alone.

He reaches for Tony again, touches his cold cheek, and whispers, "Tony?", like his whisper might be able to bring him to life, as though his pain, his grief, his sorrow is enough to open Tony's eyes, because Tony had never liked seeing him upset.

It doesn't though; nothing works, because Tony is just dead.

Half of Tony's body is cold, the unburned side, and the other half, is still blistering hot, the burns gleaming and bleeding and flushed. His eyes track down to the gauntlet and feels an immeasurable well of hatred for those damnable stones, those stupid fucking gems that killed so many people, that threatened and hurt so many others, and the bastard who wanted to use them for evil.

He'd destroy them if he could, turn them into nothing the same way that they turned Tony into nothing.

Steve feels a heart-wrenching mix of bitterness and grief.

Beside him, Pepper is sobbing, and so is Peter. Rhodey is on the other side of Tony, and he's looking away, as though looking away will do away with the fact that Tony is dead.

But there is no other way to look at this, there is no magical coming back from this.

Tony is dead.

Steve is a widower.

Steve's *husband* is dead.

These are all just facts.

And then, everyone starts taking a knee.

It starts with Clint, and then, there's T'Challa, and Shuri and Okoye, and Wanda and Sam, and all of the original Avengers, the five of them that had watched Tony take a nuclear bomb into a wormhole into space and then, watched as he came tumbling out, against all odds, and so does Steve, so does Pepper, so does Peter.

Rhodey is the last, and that makes sense too, because Rhodey had loved Tony first and probably even loved him best, had stood by him through everything and fought with him and protected him and saved him, and maybe years ago, Steve would have been jealous, would have resented the bond that Tony and Rhodey had, but now, he's just glad that Tony had Rhodey, even when Steve himself wasn't there.

"We should, uh," Steve's voice is rough, gravelly, the words grudging, "we should take him away from here."

Steve stands, and he approaches Tony's still body.

He gathers him up in his arms – somehow, Tony feels lighter for the lack of life in him.

The armour creaks, and Steve determinedly doesn't think about how it feels like he's holding Tony's coffin.

Steve carries Tony away, holding him close to his heart, because this is the last time that Steve will ever carry Tony, and he wants to linger in this moment.

Each step away from what is left of the battle is a death knell in the life he'd dared to dream for himself.

They burn Tony's body.

It's what he would have wanted.

In his religion, they burn their dead.

He asks FRIDAY, and FRIDAY tells him that the closest male relative is meant to light the pyre. If Tony had a son, the son would have burned the body. Tony doesn't have a son, but he does have Peter, and Peter was the closest thing that Tony had to a child of his own body.

But Steve is Tony's husband, and Rhodey and Tony loved each other like brothers, and Pepper was Tony's greatest friend, so, between the four of them, they light the pyre.

Peter is crying unashamedly beside Steve; Pepper looks like she hasn't slept in days, and Rhodey does his best to avoid looking at the burning pyre, but Steve watches, waits, wonders

if this is like in the movies, in that crazy TV show that Tony made him watch, where Tony crawls out of the fire, unburnt, untouched, whole and smiling.

But he doesn't.

Everyone leaves the field, one by one.

Only Rhodey and Pepper and Steve remain.

"It's not fair," Pepper says, finally saying what Steve has had on a loop in his brain since he first watched Tony collapse after snapping his fingers. "It shouldn't have been him."

"You're right," Steve replies.

"So, why—" Pepper bites off whatever she was about to say (he wonders if she blames him; between the two of them, Tony was the breakable one in so many ways; maybe if he'd grabbed the stones, used them instead of Tony, Tony would be alive, they would be together; maybe, if Pepper does blame, she's right to). "Why did it have to be *him*?"

She's asking a question none of them have an answer to.

Rhodey just clenches his jaw; he hasn't said much since it happened, since Tony died.

The fire has started to dip, to end, and there are ashes that someone will collect for them.

Rhodey told him that they have to disperse them over a body of water.

Between the three of them, they decide on the ocean that Tony's mansion had overlooked in Malibu – it was the beginning of Tony in so many ways; it seems fitting that the ending for him would be there too.

Once that is done, Pepper returns to New York, to May Parker and Peter, and Rhodey returns to the Compound – if anyone is going to lead the Avengers now, Steve would be happy for it to be Rhodey.

Steve, on the other hand, he goes to Sam, gives him the shield.

Even now, holding it, he remembers the way that Tony had shouted at him in Siberia, the weightless sensation in his hand as he dropped it.

At first, Sam just stares at it.

"Are you sure?" he says, in a low, hushed voice.

"Absolutely," Steve replies without flinching. "Try it on."

Sam's expression flickers with unease, but he takes the shield from Steve, nonetheless, sliding it onto his arm.

Steve tilts his head. "How does it feel?"

Sam considers him for a moment, a strange, soulful look in his eyes. “Like it belongs to someone else.”

“It doesn’t,” Steve tells him, firmly

Sam swallows, visibly, and there are tears in his eyes. He reaches out to take Steve’s hand, and then, Steve drags him in for an embrace, the shield uncomfortable between them.

“Thank you,” Sam says, roughly. “I’ll try my best.”

Steve pulls back, smiling even though his chest is hurting, as he cradles Sam’s cheek. “That’s why it’s yours.”

Sam’s eyes flicker downwards to the wedding ring on Steve’s hand. “How are you doing?”

“Not good,” Steve says, honestly. “He was the love of my life, and now he’s dead. I know,” he sighs, “I know it’s not my first rodeo, losing someone I love but this is... this is worse somehow, more definite. I know, I know he’s not coming back, and it’s going to take me some time to get used to that.”

“Well, if you need anything...” Sam trails off, his voice resolute, and Steve knows that Sam doesn’t believe him, doesn’t trust that everything is okay the way that Steve would rather pretend it is (Sam was an audience to so many pining sessions when they were on the run that he’d never make the mistake of underestimating exactly what it was that Steve felt for Tony).

Steve doesn’t know what he did to deserve a friend as good as Sam.

In a different world, maybe it was Sam whom he loved and not Tony.

“I know, I have you,” he says, honestly.

He visits Bucky.

“I’m sorry,” is the first thing that Bucky tells him.

Steve claps him on the shoulder. “I know,” he says, misery lining his face.

“I wish...” Bucky’s throat flexes, “I wish I’d gotten the chance to know him. I wish... I wish I’d known him as your husband and not as, as a victim of the Winter Soldier. I wish... I could have spared you this.”

“He didn’t blame you,” Steve says, earnestly.

Bucky scoffs.

Steve sighs. “No, Buck, we talked about it a lot, you know? He... he was always angrier at me than he was at you. He knows that you were forced into it; he just... he had a harder time forgiving me for lying to him all that time,” he says, quietly.

“But he did forgive you. You got married,” Bucky points out.

Steve finds himself smiling; he remembers the way that Tony melted into the kiss on their wedding day. “Yeah,” he says, softly, the grief, now tinged with nostalgia, lashed all the tighter to his chest, “yeah, we did.”

“I’m happy for you,” Bucky says, matching his tone. “But I’m also worried about you.”

Steve laughs (it hurts to laugh; he remembers the last time that he’d laughed, when Tony had commented on his ass in that old Captain America suit). “I’m not going to do anything stupid.”

Bucky sniffs, haughtily. “Well, that’s one thing that you learned in seventy years. I’m guessing Stark had something to do with it.”

“Yeah, yeah, he did,” Steve replies, and his voice is suddenly thick.

“Steve,” Bucky says, alarmed.

Steve grinds the heels of his hands into his eyes to stave off tears. “It’s okay. I’m okay.”

“No, Stevie,” Bucky’s eyes are dark and hollow, “you’re not.”

Steve just smiles, pretending like there isn’t something crumpling in his chest at the heavy weight that his wedding band leaves on his hand.

Natasha comes to him and asks if he’ll go and put all the infinity stones back where they’re supposed to be, like they had always planned when they embarked on this ruse.

Steve thinks it over for a moment and says, “No.”

Natasha’s eyes flicker with surprise.

Steve sends him a sardonic smile. “You thought I’d jump at the chance?”

“Well, yeah,” Natasha says, slowly.

“I think...” Steve takes a deep breath, feels the ugly thing in his ribcage, that strange blend of grief and resentment that has now become a creature comfort to him in the days that have passed since Tony died, settle. “I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to do it.”

“I can’t imagine anyone better,” Natasha’s voice is passionate, strong with confidence (she’s always thought him so much better than her, so much more stalwart and righteous and honourable; the compass of integrity when she couldn’t get hers to quite work – he’s not, and now, he’s broken, and she’s always been stronger than him)

“I think there are others much more capable and much more honest than me,” Steve says, firmly, “because if I go, I won’t come back, not like this, Natasha. If I go, I will find Tony

and I will stay with him and I won't let him go, and I don't think that'll end the way you want it to."

Natasha looks at him, and there's sorrow lining her face. "You're sure?"

Steve looks outside the window, at the lake that seems exactly the same as the day that Steve knelt on the pier and asked Tony to marry him.

It's not fair that it's allowed to stay the same, and so much has changed for Steve and for Tony.

"Yeah," he clears his throat, "I'm sure. I... I want to stay here. I want to stay in this house that Tony and I made our home. I want to stay in this house that Tony wanted to be *his* home. I've dropped the shield. It's Sam's now. Bucky... Bucky will do just fine without me. So will you. So will the Avengers. I'll still be around, but I... I can't be Captain America anymore. There's... there's just not enough of me to be Captain America. I hope you can respect that."

Natasha embraces him, clutches at him tight, and he buries his face in her shoulder.

"Of course I do," she murmurs. "You know if you need anything—"

Steve smiles. "I know, I have all of you."

Natasha cradles his cheek, kisses him on the forehead, and she leaves.

The door closes behind her, and he's alone.

It's just him now, and this house, the one that Tony had left behind, like this undefinable tribute to him, the one that doesn't know how to live and breathe without him (the others are different, Rhodey and Pepper and Peter, they're all capable of living and breathing without him; once upon a time, Steve thought he could too, and then, he loved Tony and married him and made a life with him and then lost him and realised, *no, no, I can't, I'm not supposed to do this without him*).

He makes his way up the stairs to the bedroom that he shared with Tony, and his bones feel like old bones. The bedroom is just as they'd left it when they'd gone to the Compound that last day, and he turns back the sheets that are so cold.

He slides into his side of the bed, under the blankets, and he stretches his hand out, flattening it over the space which Tony would have occupied if he were here.

He's not sure if he's fooling himself, but if he buries his nose into the pillow, he can still smell Tony's cologne, and it's as though he can allow himself to believe that Tony's just getting ready for bed, brushing his teeth, changing into his night clothes.

He falls asleep like that, draped across his Tony's side of the bed.

He dreams of Tony, dreams of them dancing in the living room of the lake house, the sunlight edging in through the window, flooding them in gold, fitting together like puzzle pieces, Tony's mouth humming against the pulse point in Steve's throat.

Steve shudders awake to an empty bed, the pulse of blood loud in his ears.

He settles back against the pillow.

Be a man, they said.

Be strong, they said.

You have to take care of them, he told himself.

Whatever it takes, Tony told him on that last day, and Steve can still remember the hot, insistent press of his mouth against his.

Maybe it would have been better if he died with Tony; maybe they should have died together; maybe Steve wasn't supposed to live without him.

But that's not how it happened; Tony's dead now, and Steve's alive, and that's just how it is (*that's how the cookie crumbles*, Tony would have said, a laugh in his handsome voice, and Steve wants to scream in rage).

So, he'll keep going.

It's what he does best.

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