Summary

“Dad, I don’t like Mr Thanos. He’s an alien.” Peter insisted.

“He’s not an alien.” Tony sighed, turning the car into the road leading to Little Heroes.
Kindergarten. “I know what you’re trying to say, but you can’t keep shouting things like that in public, especially in this political climate.”

A collection of oneshots and short arcs in an AU where Thanos is Peter's kindergarten teacher. 75% crack, 25% plot. Betcha never read a Stony CACW Fixit fic like this one before!

!!MAIN PLOT IS COMPLETE!! Anything after Chapter 26 is a Bonus Scene, which will be posted as and when I feel like it.

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Ch 28 - Special chapter for Tony's birthday (29/5)

“Where did your clothes go?”

Steve steeled his jaw with the air of a man about to jump on a grenade. “You see, Pete, when two people, um, love each other very much-”

“A monster did it. A monster stole our clothes.” Tony added helpfully.

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“Dad. I don’t wanna go.” Peter said quietly.

Tony rubbed the aching spot between his eyebrows. “Peter, honey, we’ve been over this. The kindergarten says I can’t keep sitting in with you anymore. You’re gonna have to power through like a big boy, okay?

“I don’t like Mr Thanos. He’s an alien.”

“He’s not an alien.” Tony sighed, turning the car into the road leading to Little Heroes Kindergarten. “I know what you’re trying to say, but you can’t keep shouting things like that in public, especially in this political climate-”

“He destroyed half the universe.”

“He said half of your class would go for naptime first while the other half went to the playground. That hardly counts as destroying the universe.”

“It was so lonely.” Peter whispered. “I thought I was trapped forever.”

“I feel like I’m trapped forever in a world where this conversation repeats every single day,” Tony muttered.

He put the car in park and turned to his son. Peter was staring at him with the puppy dog expression turned up to eleven, and Tony felt a twinge of guilt. The divorce had been tough on them all, and he couldn’t blame his son for being more clingy, even after the whole mess had been settled.

“Look...” Having his heart stamped on by his ex was rough, but Tony was trying and seeing his son stressed out by school made him feel like the worst kind of dad. “How about I take half of today off and we go get some ice cream together. Sound good?”

“Okay, I guess.” Peter said after a grudging pause. “But no grapes. I hate them.”

“Alright, buddy. No grape ice cream.”

--

Mr Thanos met them at the entrance of class 1A. “Hello Peter, how are you doing to-”

“I DON’T WANT TO GO!”

Mr Thanos sighed “It’s going to be another of those mornings isn't it?”

“I’d call this a good day, this time he actually waited till we got out of the car to start yelling,” Tony said, trying to juggle his grip on his wriggling son and backpack. “Okay, Pete. Daddy’s going to drop you off.”

“Say goodbye to daddy, Peter-” Mr Thanos said, reaching out his enormous hands.
“No! Don’t leave me with the alien!” Peter screamed as Tony set him down in the classroom. He tried to make a run for his dad but Mr Thanos blocked the way with one massive arm.

“It’s okay, I’ll be back for you at one. Love you!” Looking more harried, Tony handed over Peter’s backpack, waved, and vanished down the hallway.

“Dad…” Peter stared in despair at the doorway, and then a large grip clamped down on his shoulder, heavy and inevitable as the hands of fate.

“Come on, Peter, it's time to start class.”

--

“We need a plan to take down Mr Thanos,” Peter hissed to Wanda. He had snuck over from the lego corner to the coloring table, where his only ally, Wanda, was working.

Wanda’s eyes lit up. “Yes. Good. When do we start?”

Other kids were scared of Wanda, but Peter thought was silly, because Wanda got along with him just fine. Sure, she liked things that lots of people found scary, like witches and ghosts and Halloween, but that didn't mean she was a scary person. Besides, Peter liked spiders and he knew lots of people were scared of those.

“He took Viz away from me,” Wanda said gravely. “And for that I'll never forgive him.”

Peter looked where she pointed; balanced perfectly at the top of the shelf, well out of reach of the tallest kid, was The Raft, a pirate ship-shaped box where favorite toys were to be imprisoned until the end of the day.

It was the cruelest sentence a toy could ever endure.

“I miss him so much.” Wanda gazed at the forbidding box, crayon clutched in one hand like a spear.

Peter looked at the bookshelf appraisingly. “If you distract Mr Thanos think I can climb up and grab Viz.”

Wanda shook her head, turning back to her drawing. “It’s no good. I tried to rescue Viz many times. I even asked my brother to help. And you know what Mr Thanos did?”

“What did he do?”

“Sent him to 1B.” Wanda gave a shudder. “I haven’t seen him for years.”

Peter’s eyes went round. So that was what happened to Pietro. Peter and him had been best friends, bonding over having the same name. Until the day Pietro disappeared. The tag bearing Pietro's name had been ripped off the wall and nobody talked about him in class anymore.

It was as if he didn’t exist anymore.

Peter put a reassuring hand on Wanda’s shoulder. “We’ll get Viz back. Your brother will be avenged.”

A humongous shadow fell over the both of them.

“What are you both working on?” Thanos smiled down on them.
Peter and Wanda looked at each other, the severity of the situation galvanizing their wills into action. Wanda nodded slowly.

Thanos crouched down beside the table. “That’s an...interesting drawing of a witch, Wanda. Looks like she’s, um, dismembering a robot. You certainly put a lot of detail into- ouch!” Thanos started as a yellow crayon flew up and hit him squarely in the forehead.

By the time he looked up Peter and Wanda were nowhere in sight.

“I don’t get paid enough for this.” Thanos grumbled as he got to his feet, rubbing at the smudge on his forehead.

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“Gather round, little heroes! It’s reading time!” Thanos said brightly. “Today we’re going to read about fruits!”

“NO! NO FRUITS! ESPECIALLY GRAPES!”

Thanos ignored the lone dissenter and opened the book. “Who can tell me what this fruit is?”

Without looking up from her book, a small girl with two buns in her hair spoke up. “It’s a pineapple. The one on the next page is a plum. And then a guava, mandarin, persimmon, asian pear, lychee, blood orange, banana, strawberry, and finally, a watermelon.”

“What, how did you know all that, Shuri?” Peter asked, eyes wide.

Shuri shrugged. “I memorized all the books in the reading corner.”

Thanos gritted his teeth. “Thank you, Shuri, for that impressive display. But maybe you should give your classmates a chance to participate?”

“Nah.” Shuri turned a page of her book, tone of voice completely dismissing him.

“Viz makes me think of a watermelon,” Wanda said matter-of-factly. “He’s red, and green, and likes his yellow blanket-”

“Watermelons aren’t yellow, stupidhead!”

Peter shot to his feet. “Don’t call my friend a stupid head, Flash!”

A small boy raised a hand. “Is a knife a fruit?”

Thanos took a deep breath, feeling the buildup of another migraine. “No, Wade. Knives are not for eating.”

“You're a friend of a stupidhead, which makes you a stupider head!”

“Oh yeah? My dad could beat up your dad!” Wanda shrieked, lunging at Flash.

“I shouldn’t be in this class, I’m already reading at a 3rd grade level. My grades are probably throwing off the curve. Can you tell my brother I should be in a class with bigger kids?”

“I like knives.”

“Jesus Christ,” said Thanos, hurriedly shoving the book on a table. “Wanda, Flash, both of you
stop trying to kill each other. Shuri, kindergarten doesn't have graded work. Wade, I better not catch you hoarding safety scissors again. Peter, your friend will get Vision back when it’s time to go home and not a second before, now *stop climbing the shelves.*”

Shuri turned a page, disgusted. “You’re all a bunch of babies.”

--

Tony was there at 1pm sharp with a big smile and open arms. “Hey there, squirt. I came back, just as promised,”

“Dad! I missed you!” Peter pushed past the other kids and threw himself at his father.

“I missed you too! All the time while I was doing boring grownup work, I was wondering how you were doing.” Tony swung Peter up and down, which made the small boy giggle. “But you made it through, didn’t you?”

“Yeah! We defeated the alien!”

“Huh. Well, I hope your victory doesn't involve me receiving another bill for property damage.” Tony picked up Peter’s backpack. “What else?”

“Shuri and I built a tower! She said it was scrumptiously sound!”

“I think the word you're looking for is ‘structurally’, but yeah, that's awesome. She's a good kid, can't imagine you'd get into much trouble with-”

“And I helped Wanda avenge her brother!”

Tony blinked. “Wanda? You mean the girl who gets into all the shenanigans-”

“Pietro! You’re alive!” A dark-haired girl barrelled past Tony’s legs, heading for an albino boy, who she enfolded in a tight hug. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

“Daddy! Wanda’s back! I thought she was gone forever but she came back!” Pietro clutched his sister’s arm and looked tearfully up at his father, who was watching the dramatic reunion of his children with a weary sort of resignation.

“That’s wonderful, Pietro. Go get Wade and we can leave.”

“Kids, huh? It's pretty wild having to go through the same drama every single day,” Tony said as they watched the twins bolt away. “I don’t know how you can deal with three of them, Erik.”

“I ask myself that, too. When I married a teacher I thought I’d pick up some of his child-managing skills.” Erik groused, brushing off the chalk marks which had gotten onto his three piece suit. “Sorry to hear about you and Steve.”

Tony’s grip on his son stiffened. “Yeah, well, I’m sure he doesn’t miss me. We’ll be going now.” With Peter in his arms, Tony started walking them back to the car.

“Are we gonna get ice cream?” Peter asked hopefully.

Tony frowned, pretending to think about it. “Hm. I don't know, it sounds like you got into a lot of mischief today.”

“I didn't do it on purpose! I had to help my friends.” Peter insisted. “It's what you would do- it's
what Pops would do-

“Your Pops sure does care a lot about helping his friends-” Tony shook his head, trying to clear the bitterness from his voice. “And that’s a good thing, it's important that you and your friends have each others’ backs…” he trailed off awkwardly. In times like these, he felt completely unprepared to be a parent, let alone a single parent.

Peter yawned. “When is Pops coming back?”

Tony’s hands paused on where he was buckling Peter’s seatbelt. “Sweetie, he doesn’t live with us anymore, remember? You can still see him, just not every day. Remember that day when he packed up all his things in those boxes-”

“But he forgot his phone.”

“What?” Tony looked up, keys frozen halfway to the ignition.

“His phone. The one you keep under your pillow and look at sometimes-”

“Hey, does anyone else hear the sound of ice cream bells jingling in the air? Cuz I sure do.” With a roar, Tony’s car sped out of the parking lot. “How does a chocolate fudge sundae with extra marshmallows and mochi bits sound?”

“Yay! Ice cream!”

Chapter End Notes

The idea for this AU came from the fevered imaginations of the MCU Stony discord server :D It started out as a series of oneshots, which turned into something resembling a plot.

A few people have asked me whether Peter is adopted or Tony's biological son. My answer is that I deliberately kept Peter's parentage ambiguous so that people could imagine it however they like it best; whether Peter was adopted, Tony with a surrogate, Stony mpreg babies - ALL ARE VALID. After all, the end result is the same - he's their kid and they love him

[NOTE] As of Feb 10th 2019, this fic is now COMPLETE. Anything posted after chapter 26 is a Bonus Scene!

Arc 1 (Ch 1-4): standalone oneshots.  
Arc 2 (Ch 5-10): Steve shows up and brings drama  
Arc 3 (Ch 11-16): something happens to Tony  
Arc 4 (Ch 17-20): Loki takes on more responsibility at the workplace  
Arc 5 (Ch 21-26): The final battle~! Why is there a battle in a kindergarten fic? Read to find out!  
Ch 27-beyond: Standalone oneshots
“Wade, what’s the number that comes between five and seven?” Tiredly, Thanos tapped Wade’s worksheet where the word “knife” was written in Wade’s squiggly handwriting. “I know you know this.”

Wade chewed on the end of his pencil. “Knife.”

“Knife isn't a number.”

“I like knife.”

“Yes, we all know. But it's the wrong answer. Come on, Wade, remember the song?”

“Knife song.”

“No! You know, ‘one-two, buckle my shoe, three-four, close the door, five…”

“Knife.” Wade chirped.

“Six! The answer is six.” Thanos clapped a hand to his forehead. “You'll figure it out eventually, just… just write the number for chrissakes.”

“Six...knife?” Wade cocked his head, pencil sticking out of his mouth.

“You know what? Close enough.” Thanos quickly pointed to the question again, deciding to seize on that tiny victory. “Go on, then. Six knives.”

“Yay!” Wade added a squiggle that with a bit of imagination, Thanos supposed could pass for a ‘6’.

“Good work, Wade, now let's move on to-” Thanos sighed again and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Every single question on the worksheet had ‘knife written as the answer. “Someone’s got a one-track mind.”

“Knife.” Wade nodded.

It was going to be a long day.

--

“I need your help.” Wanda’s face held no trace of humor.

“Why?” Shuri tilted her head inquiringly. The two girls were crouched under the large slide, the only spot in the playground where they could speak in privacy, hidden from the watchful eyes of Ms Proxima.

“Peter’s in trouble.” A frown knit Wanda’s brows. “I don't know how to help him and you're smartest person I know.”

Shuri scootched closer. “What happened?”
“Mr Thanos trapped him in the Moon Room.”

“No. Not the Moon Room.” Shuri’s jaw dropped, then she composed herself with a nod, mind already running through solutions. “This is more serious than I thought.”

Encouraged by Shuri’s understanding of the situation, Wanda continued. “We need a plan to get Mr Thanos out of the way—”

“Can we use knives?” Wade popped up behind them, a pair of scissors clutched in each hand.

Shuri groaned. “Go away, Wade. Find somewhere else to be annoying.”

“I have lots of knives.” Wade clicked the scissors rhythmically, narrowly missing clipping Wanda’s bangs. Shuri made to shove him away, but Wanda held up a hand to stop her.

“Maybe Wade’s onto something.” Wanda pressed a hand against her chin. “Mr Thanos is super tall, so we’re gonna need a lot of scissors to cut him in two—”

“Knivings are good for un-alivings.” Wade piped up.

“Whoa, whoa! You’re not actually suggesting we—” Shuri dropped her voice “-kill Mr Thanos, do you?”

“Why not?” Wanda replied incredulously. “He’s done so many mean things! He took Viz away from me—”

“-what’s a Viz?” Shuri asked blankly.

“-he made my brother disappear—”

“-that’s understandable, I guess—”

“-and now he’s kidnapped my best friend! Don’t you see?” Wanda cast an appealing look at Shuri. “He’s a bad man that needs to be stopped.” Her voice hardened. “For good.”

Shuri sighed. “Okay, I get your point. But there are a couple problems with that plan.”

“What’s wrong with knife?” Wade wedged himself in between the two girls.

“First of all, get those out of my face- you musical crab.” Shuri swatted at him impatiently. “Secondly, those are safety scissors - the only thing they cut is paper.”

Wade looked curiously at the scissors and stuck a pinky between the blades. The blunted jaws bounced harmlessly off his tiny finger. “Aw.”

“Third, killing can get you in big trouble. If we kill Mr Thanos, we could get expelled and that would hurt my chances of getting into a good college and becoming the youngest ballet-dancing astronaut with 20 PhDs who designs clothes for cats in her free time.”

At the sight of their blank faces, Shuri threw up her hands in frustration. “You have to start thinking about the future! Do you want to live your life as a kindergarten dropout?”

“Gee, I didn’t think of that.” Wanda considered, thinking how her father freaked out whenever the words “drop” and “out” were brought up in relation to his students at the school in Westchester. She nodded, feeling relieved to have a friend who thought of all these pitfalls. “You’re right, Shuri, we’re going to need another way.”
Shuri rubbed her chin. “Exactly. The only way we win this is with brains, not brawn-”

“I’ve got it!” Wanda beamed. “Thwip!”

“What’s a thwip?” Shuri asked, bewildered by the whooshing sound the other girl had made.

“Fwip thwip! You know,” Wanda mimed drawing her hand back and firing an invisible catapult. “Peter’s really good at shooting things. One time, when we were doing snap painting, Flash threw paint at me, so Peter hit him with piece of gum from all the way across the room!”

“Knife is better.” Wade muttered. The girls ignored him.

Shuri’s eyes brightened as she caught onto Wanda’s train of thought. “So if we can get Peter’s-” she gingerly imitated Wanda’s actions and sound effects. “-thingies to him...”

“He’ll have a chance to escape!” Wanda nodded excitedly.

Shuri clapped her hands together. “I have an idea.”

--

The Moon Room was exactly what its name implied, a room decorated with drawings of planets, stars, spaceships, and at the center of the room was a 3D model of the solar system.

Beneath the dangling painted planets was the long table at which the kindergarteners had their snacks, although now there were only two occupants.

Peter sat at one end at the table, staring down his worst enemy.

Grapes.

Four of the purple fruits sat in his bowl, glistening back at him almost mockingly.

In the opposite seat, Mr Thanos had his arms crossed. “Peter, I won’t tell you again, you can't go out and play with your friends until you've finished your food.”

“Yuck.”

“Don't say that. Grapes are full of the nutrients every growing child needs, and an important part of a perfectly balanced diet.”

“Maybe they are on your planet.” Peter scowled at Mr Thanos. “I don't wanna eat these alien boogers.”

Mr Thanos rolled his eyes. “We’re going to sit here as long as it takes until your plate is empty.”

“But you’re so old, you'll probably be dead by then.” Peter glared back at the man, refusing to be cowed.

Mr Thanos chuckled mirthlessly. “Quite the sharp tongue you’ve got there. I’d expect nothing less from Tony Stark’s son-”

“Why are you making me eat these? My dad lets me eat other fruits.” Peter poked at his plate, sullenly watching the grapes jiggle around.

“You might be able to eat what you want at home, but here at Little Heroes Kindergarten,
everyone has to learn the importance of conserving resources.” Mr Thanos punctuated every word with a stab of his ginormous pointer finger. “Where I grew up, there wasn’t enough food for everyone. Imagine how lucky you are to have so much food to go around.”

Peter continued glaring, and Mr Thanos sighed again. Getting into a staring match with one of his kindergarteners wasn’t how he planned on spending today, and it looked like Peter was getting ready to call his bluff. If things came down to it he'd be forced to-

“Good morning, Mr Thanos!” Shuri skipped through the doors, holding up a thick sheaf of papers. “I was wondering if you could look over my resume for college.”

And here was another one of the little troublemakers. Sensing his headache was about to get worse, Mr Thanos turned to her slowly. “Shuri, you’re five years old. Live a little. College shouldn’t even be a blip on your horizon.”

“It’s never too early to be prepared.” Shuri seated herself next to him and shuffled her papers messily over the table. “Here are testimonials from my character witnesses.”

“This is just ‘Shuri is great’ written out ten times.”

“Here's my past experience working as an animal sitter-”

Mr Thanos squinted at the crayon drawing. “I highly doubt you've ever taken care of lion and panther cubs.”

“And an outline of my five-year plan!”

“Really? So tell me why I'm looking at a picture you drew of yourself wearing cat ears?”

Shuri grinned widely. “You know what they say, dress for the job you want!”

Peter watched them disinterestedly, but he noticed a lump under the closest sheet of paper. Cautiously he took a quick peek underneath.

A pack of snap painting rubber bands.

Peter grinned.

Careful not to alert Mr Thanos, Peter picked up a grape, loaded it into rubber band, and took aim at the open window above his teacher’s head. Peter stretched the band back, closed one eye, and - sensing the tension was right - released his grip. The grape sailed over Mr Thanos’s unsuspecting head and out through the crack in the window.

One.

Taking advantage of Shuri’s distraction, Peter grabbed the next grape and fired it out the window. Two.

The third one flew perilously to the dangling mobile, causing the model stars to jangle. Mr Thanos raised a hand to rub at his head.

Last grape to go. Peter reached for the plate-

“Peter! What are you doing?” Mr Thanos’s boomed, and Peter started, panic making him lose his grip on the rubber band. The grape flew out of his hands, arcing across the table - where it smashed into Mr Thanos’s nose, exploding in a spray of pulp.
“Aargh!” Mr Thanos yelled as juice spurted into his eyes. He lumbered to his feet, hands clutching at his face. “Doo hit by dose!”

Knowing they had seconds to act, Shuri rushed over to Peter, all pretence gone. “Run!”

“You kids get back here!” Mr Thanos roared as Peter and Shuri fled the scene.

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“Peter! Thank gosh you’re safe!” Wanda exclaimed as Peter and Shuri ducked under the slide.

“It was so freaky, Mr Thanos was yelling and screaming,” Peter threw his arms around her, still feeling his heart pounding at the excitement of his escape. “How did you know what to do?”

“It was all Shuri’s plan! Without her help you could have been stuck there forever.” Wanda waved at Shuri, who was standing off to the side awkwardly, looking like she wasn’t sure whether she was invited to the hug party.

“Thanks, Shuri. I owe you one.” Peter turned to her with a grin. “Friends?”

Shuri stared back in startlement, as if the thought never occurred to her. Then her face broke into a shy smile. “Yeah, friends!”

With a cheer, Peter pulled her into the hug.

“Friends!” Wade tackled them with a laugh, sending all four kids tumbling to the ground.

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“See you tomorrow, Shuri!” Peter called across the schoolyard.

“Sounds like you had good day,” T’Challa commented as he unlocked his Jaguar. “I told you it’d be easier to make friends if you stopped calling people stupid babies.”

Shuri shrugged. “Peter’s pretty okay. Wanda’s not so bad either. Wade-” She stuck her tongue out. “-well, they like him so I guess I can put up with him. For now.”

T’Challa hid a smile as his sister chattered on. It had been hard to spend much time with her ever since he started college, but he was relieved to hear she had made new friends. He could hear how excited she sounded, even if she tried to hide it under complaining.

“-and then it hit him in his wrinkly old face! But enough about that. Here-” Shuri leaned over the gearbox and dumped a stack of drawings in his lap.

T’Challa blinked. “What on-”

“Do you think these materials are enough to apply to your college? Can you put in a good word with your professors for me? Are there any majors focusing on feline fashion design?”

“Feline fash- That’s not even a thing,” As T’Challa tried to shift the papers out of the way, the top one caught his eye. Was that a drawing of Shuri wearing cat ears?

“So, I was wondering,” Shuri paused. “Hypothetically speaking, how many pairs of safety scissors would it take to cut a 300-pound raisin in half?”

Lost for words, T’Challa gave her a look out of the corner of his eye, and decided he didn't want to
know.

Chapter End Notes

what am i doing 8D
“Say hello to Dr Stryker, little heroes!” Mr Thanos announced. “He has a surprise for us today.”

Dr Stryker grinned, shark-like. “Greetings, children! Prepare for the most stunning experience of your little lives! An experience of epic proportions, a scientific extravaganza-”

“What a creep,” Wanda muttered, and mentally Peter had to agree with her.

“He’s weird,” Peter whispered back.

Something about Stryker felt off. Even though he was a doctor like Dr Stephen, they couldn't be more different; Dr Stephen, who was happy to do magic tricks when he joined Peter and Dad on outings to the zoo or planetarium, and had a friendly air about him that made Dad laugh. By contrast, Stryker seemed like the kind of doctor who enjoyed poking people with needles and sending them home afterwards without candy.

Peter decided he didn’t like Dr Stryker very much.

With a sweeping arm, Dr Stryker gestured to the covered cage sitting at his feet. “I invite you to look upon the future. Our scientists used cutting-edge gene splicing technology to synthesize a unique chimera, which, as you all know, is a single organism composed of cells with distinct genotypes. This hybrid was designed to be genetically perfect in every way; with enhanced intelligence, robust metabolism, immunity to the most common diseases, and the best part is it’s completely sterile, so we can control those pesky population problems. This is truly great leap forward in the field of customized genetic design, although any human trials are still many years off. Still, it paves the way for—”

“Stryker, they’re kindergarteners, save the sales pitch for your investors.” Thanos muttered. Indeed, most of the kindergarteners’ eyes had glazed over ever since the first big word came out of Stryker’s mouth. Even Thanos himself thought it all sounded like a bunch of baloney - Stryker seemed to love the sound of his voice more than anything.

Thanos tuned out the pompous man, refocusing his attention on the four biggest troublemakers: at the moment, Wade was rolling around on the floor, Shuri was rolling her eyes at Stryker, Wanda was rolling Vision up in a blanket while singing a lullaby, and Peter-

Well, Peter seemed to be the only one genuinely paying attention to Stryker’s spiel, and that put Thanos on alert, because that could only mean one thing: that boy was up to something.

Thanos crossed his arms, frowning. After Peter’s stunt with the grapes - how Peter had even managed to pull off a coordinated escape plan with his band of accomplices - Thanos was determined not to let his guard down this time.

Stryker looked put out at having his patter cut off. “But their little minds have to understand the
significance of this revolutionary—"

“We don't have all day. Get to the point.” Thanos said impatiently.

“Oh all right, fine.” Stryker whipped the cloth off the cage with a flourish. “Behold!”

Sitting in center of the cage was a ball of blue-grey fluff. It wiggled, and a pair of long, velvety ears stood up.

All hell broke loose.

“A bunny!”

“I wanna touch it!”

“SO FLUFFY!”

Chuckling idly, Stryker batted the eager hands away. “Settle down, settle down. This is not some flea-bitten rodent from a third-rate pet shop. The base genome was a rabbit, which we spliced with...well, it’s all classified.” Stryker laughed airily. “We're planning to corner the market on supplying laboratory test subjects, housepets, and-” the rabbit flinched as Stryker rapped his knuckles sharply against the cage. “Once the Department of Agriculture gives us approval, we can begin mass production for the food and textile industry.”

“Why is he still talking?” Wanda whispered as the rabbit’s eye started to twitch.

Dr Stryker continued grandly. “It took thousands of failed trials to turn out the specimen you see before you: Subject X. Or as I like to call him, Logan.”

“Hi Logan!” Shuri cooed. She poked a finger through the bars and Logan hopped over to investigate. She squealed as the fuzzy nose tickled her hand. “He’s so cute!”

Wade’s eyes were wide as saucers as he pressed his face against the cage. “Bun.”

Logan’s dark eyes took in the unfamiliar environment, the excited children, a grumpy Thanos, and a smug Dr Stryker.

Thanos raised his voice. “Alright, that’s enough, heroes. Let’s all thank Dr Stryker for bringing the animal in today—” he stopped, realising nobody was listening to him.

“Heroes!” Thanos snapped his fingers, and the loud crack pulled every pair of eyes in the room to him. Including the rabbit’s. “We’re going to do some quiet coloring now, then you can each take turns to play with the animal—”

“Logan. Use his name!” Shuri interjected.

“Yes. Logan.” Whatever. Thanos resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Come along, heroes. Coloring time awaits.”

“Nooo...” Wade whined, and several more grumblers joined in.

This called for desperate measures. Thanos decided he had no choice but to bust out his secret weapon. “Whoever is the quietest will get to play with Logan first.”

His words had the intended effect: the kindergarteners immediately scrambled for the coloring tables.
They say never work with children or animals, but both at the same time? Thanos gave a suspicious look at the damn rabbit. Stay in that cage and maybe we'll all get through today with our sanities intact.

Logan started washing his face in his paws, evidently relieved to no longer be the center of attention.

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Thirty minutes passed in relative peace.

Lulled into a false sense of security, Mr Thanos made the fatal mistake of stepping out of the class for a quick word with Ms Proxima.

Those thirty unsupervised seconds were all it took for everything to go to hell.

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“WHERE IS SUBJECT X?” Dr Stryker burst into the classroom with a roar. “Which one of you drooling urchins let him out of his cage?” He slammed his large fists on the coloring table, towering over a terrified Flash. “Was it you?”

Flash stared back, frozen in shock. He flinched as Stryker snatched his paper drawing out of his hands and ripped it in half.

Horrified by Stryker’s outburst, the boy burst into tears.

Stryker continued his rampage of tearing up drawings and flinging stationery around. Shuri squeaked as a crayon flew past her head, smashing into the wall and leaving a purple smudge.

Enough was enough. Furious, Peter stood up. “None of us went near Logan! Stop making people cry, you big bully!”

Stryker’s crazed eyes bulged in their sockets. “Show some respect, you lying little-”

“I'm not a liar! You can't come in and throw things just because you're angry!” Peter refused to back down, even though he was a little nervous at how quickly Dr Stryker had morphed from kooky scientist to screaming lunatic. He'd never seen an adult so mad before; not even Dad or Pops had yelled so much when they fought, nor even Mr Thanos when Peter talked back to him one too many times. No, Dr Stryker was being a bully, and if there was one thing Peter learned was to never put up with bullies.

“You're making a big mess, and- Hey! Put me down!” Peter yelped as one of Stryker’s huge hands shot out and seized him by the front of the shirt, lifting him off the ground to until he was eye level with the scientist. The look in Stryker’s eyes was murderous, and for the first time Peter felt a flicker of apprehension.

“In my day, insolent children would have their mouths sewn shut.” Stryker snarled.

“Let him go, you ugly freak!” Spurred into action, Wanda kicked Stryker in the knee. “Pick on someone your own size!”

With a howl of pain, Stryker dropped Peter and rounded on her. Wanda dodged Stryker’s clawing fingers and swung Vision like a sledgehammer, hitting the man squarely in the gut.
Stryker made a strangled noise, spittle flying from his mouth. “I'll have you sent to a home, you little savages!”

Shuri helped Peter to his feet, and together they pulled Wanda away from the deranged scientist. The three of them linked hands to form a shield between him and their classmates.

Sensing the man had gone off the edge, Shuri decided to be the voice of reason. “Think about it, Mr Scientist, everyone was at the coloring table the whole time. Nobody left the classroom except Mr Thanos.” She pointed out. “And besides, none of us have the key to the cage. How would any of us have let Logan out?”

Stryker loomed over them, jabbing a vicious finger in their faces with every word. “To YOU, Subject X was just some silly bunnyrabbit, but to me he represented years of EXPENSIVE research! Have your tiny brains any idea how MUCH this will cost me? Recouping the investment would take decades-”

This was the sight that greeted Thanos upon his return to the classroom: Peter, Shuri, and Wanda forming a human barrier to separate a red-faced Stryker from their terrified classmates, all of whom had pressed themselves against the walls in an effort to get away. Shreds of paper and broken crayons littered floor. There was the sound of quiet sobbing in the background.

“What on earth is going on?” Thanos asked sternly.

“These brats have assaulted and robbed me-” Stryker screeched, his face turning an even more alarming shade of red. “My most valuable asset is missing because of your hooligans!”

Thanos dodged the drops of spit spewing from the fuming scientist. “Doesn't your lab have insurance? You can just make another rabbit, can’t you?”

“THERE WERE NO OTHERS! SUBJECT X WAS SOLE LIVING SPECIMEN! IRREPLACEABLE!” Stryker looked like he was about to have an aneurysm. “Genetic chimeras don't just grow on trees! Have you any idea of the cost-” A bubble of foam started to form at the corner of his mouth.

Alright, that was enough, Thanos decided. “Stryker. Get some air, you're scaring the kids.” Before the scientist could let off another rage-filled invective, Thanos clamped a heavy hand on his shoulder, putting a subtle threat in his grip. “Now.”

After Stryker had slammed the door behind him, Thanos sighed heavily. “I step out for five seconds and you all make Dr Stryker have a meltdown.”

“We didn’t do anything! He went nuts and tried to kill Peter.” Wanda insisted.

“It's true, Dr Stryker totally lost it just now.” Shuri added, nodding gravely. “He shouldn’t be allowed around small animals, let alone kids.”

Now that the threat had abated, Peter’s boldness seemed to dissipate, and he crossed his arms over the wrinkled front of his shirt. “I want my dad.”

But Thanos was out of patience. “I don’t have time to deal with tall stories from you three today.” Ignoring three sets of protests, Thanos did a headcount of the class, and gave an internal groan as he realised one child was missing.

Wade. Of course.
Thanos exhaled. He had to take control of the situation before it got away from him again. “Listen up, heroes! It's naptime.”

“No! I don't need a nap! We can help look for Logan!” Peter exclaimed.

“Yeah, it'll be like an easter egg hunt but with an actual bunny!” Shuri added.

“Viz can help too, he's very good at finding things!” Wanda waggled her plushie’s paws.

“No. Naptime is happening now and that's final.” Thanos ignored the ensuing chorus of groans. “Ms Proxima will keep an eye on things while I look for Wade and the animal.”

Thanos stomped out of the room, irritated at what was shaping up to be a wasted day.

_**Maybe we should have invited Dr Banner for Show-and-Tell day after all.**_ Thanos thought as he trudged down the hall. _**But how were we supposed to know Stryker would turn out to be a total nutjob?**_

--

“Have you seen Wade? Do you think Dr Stryker got him?” Wanda asked anxiously. She, along with Peter and Shuri, had set up a blanket camp near the reading corner.

“Don't worry, I think I know where Wade went.” Peter whispered back. “Can you guys cover for me while I find him?”

“Okay, I'll take care of Ms Proxima,” Shuri dashed off towards the stern-faced woman.

Wanda threw Peter’s blanket over Viz to give the impression of a sleeping child. “Be careful, that crazy man is out there somewhere.”

As Shuri ran interference on Ms Proxima, Peter slipped out the back and made a beeline for the playground.

There was one space Mr Thanos wouldn't think to check: the shed at the edge of the playground, where the gardening tools were kept. Normally it was kept locked, but unbeknownst to the teachers, one of the planks was loose enough, providing a gap small enough for a child to squeeze through.

Peter wriggled through the gap and was met with not one, but two familiar faces. “Wade, are you here- oh.”

“Hi, Peter.” Wade answered cheerfully. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground and cuddling the runaway rabbit like he hadn't a care in the world.

“How did you get Logan out of his cage?”

“Knife.” Wade giggled. “Knife beats lock.” Beside him lay a dented pair of safety scissors that had definitely seen better days.

Peter stood up and dusted off his clothes, frowning as he noticed a small rip in his shirt where Stryker had grabbed him. “Were you hiding here all along?”

“Uh-huh, Meanypants Stryker can’t find us here. Wolvie likes it much better outside the cage!” With a happy little sound, Wade snuggled the rabbit against his chest.
“Wolvie?” Peter shook his head in disbelief. A wolf seemed like the last thing anyone would associate with a fluffy little rabbit… but then again, Wade’s mind went to strange places.

Logan looked less than enthused about being cuddled and began letting out low-pitched growls.

“I don’t think Logan likes you holding him.” Now that he was closer, Peter could see numerous pink bite marks dotted all over Wade’s arms, some of which were bleeding.

“Nuh-uh, Wolvie and I are best friends now. He gave me so many kissies.” sang Wade, and leaned to plant a loud kiss on Logan’s head. The rabbit growled at the contact and took a snap at Wade’s nose. “Aww! I love you too, Wolvie!”

Grimacing, Peter sat down next to them. “Listen, Wade. We have to bring Logan back. Dr Stryker is looking everywhere for him.”

Peter couldn’t tell for sure in the dim light of the shed, but Logan seemed to tense up at the mention of Stryker’s name.

Wade rubbed his cheek against Logan’s fur. “Wolvie can stay with me! I'll feed him fresh carrot pancakes every day. He doesn't need to live with Mr Poopy-Diaper Stryker.”

“Wol- Logan needs to go home so he can be with his family.” Peter reached out to pet Logan’s ears, then snatched his hand back before the irritated rabbit could chomp on his fingers. “He might feel lonely away from them.”

“A family?” Wade asked curiously. “Like a daddy bunny and a mommy bunny and a brother bunny and a sister bunny and an uncle bunny and an aunt bunny and a cousin bunny and a baby bunny and stepbrother bunny and a second cousin twice removed bunny and a daddy’s hooker girlfriend bunny…”

“Yes,” said Peter, feeling a bit dizzy by the flood of words. “What if they all miss him? Maybe they want him to come home but don’t know where he is. Maybe-” a flash of inspiration hit him. “Maybe Logan is sad because he can’t be with his family.”

Wade pouted and hugged Logan tightly, looking like he never wanted to let go. Then without warning, his face brightened and he sprang to his feet.

“I have an idea! You can take care of Wolvie!”

Peter blinked. “That’s not what I-”

“Yes, yes! Thank you, Peter!” Wade nodded to himself, pleased with his solution. “You can take good care of Wolvie and give him a good home.” He planted another exuberant kiss on Logan, who somehow managed to look even angrier.

“Wade, no, I can’t-” Peter protested but the other boy had already pressed the disgruntled rabbit into his arms.

“Bye bye, Wolvie. Tell him I'll always love him. Don't forget the pancakes.” With that, Wade squeezed out of the shed, leaving Peter clutching the rabbit.

Peter stared at Logan, still reeling in shock at Wade’s sudden change of heart. What just happened? Logan’s fuzzy nose twitched as he stared at his new human companion.
“Please don’t bite me,” Peter pleaded. Fortunately, Logan sat quietly in his arms, and when Peter patted him on the head, the rabbit gave a sullen huff before leaning into the touch.

The rabbit felt warm and soft against his chest, like hugging a large fluffy pillow. Logan’s fuzzy ears tickled the side of Peter’s cheek and the grey fur smelled like marshmallows - Logan really was very cute, and for a second Peter contemplated bringing him home as a pet… he would have to be quick about it, to sneak past the teachers and hide Logan in his backpack…

He imagined what Dad would say. It's a big responsibility, taking care of a pet. Dad looked strict, even in Peter’s imagination. Are you sure you’re ready?

What Pops would say. You can't treat animals like things. You know better than this, and Peter could already imagine the disappointed look on Pops’ face.

Peter sighed. “Time to go home, Logan. Dr Stryker is looking for you.”

Logan made a rumble of displeasure, but otherwise made no move to bite. If anything, the rabbit looked despondent, resigned to his fate with Stryker.

It was the right thing to do, Peter told himself.

--

But as Peter walked back to the classroom, doubt began to stir. His footsteps slowed as a horrible thought occurred to him: Maybe there was no family for Logan to go home to. Maybe he was stuck in that tiny cage all day, where his only company was a bunch of crazy scientists. It had been terrifying enough when Dr Stryker grabbed Peter by the shirt, but when he imagined the same happening to Logan; Stryker screaming at the helpless rabbit, Stryker swinging Logan around by the long ears, Stryker ripping Logan’s fur out like he'd ripped up everyone’s drawings…

Peter stopped walking.

No. He didn’t think this was right thing to do at all. Not one bit.

Looking around quickly to make sure he was out of sight of the classroom windows, Peter hurried towards the wire fence that bounded the playground. He knew that on the other side of the fence was a field where the kindergarten held Sports Days, and beyond that was a small wooded area.

The kind of place rabbits were likely to live, Peter reasoned.

“Goodbye, Logan.” He set the rabbit on the ground gently. “Go and find your family.”

Logan froze, seeming overwhelmed by the scent of fresh grass and trees after a lifetime of isolation in a laboratory.

Peter stepped back and made a shooing gesture. “It’s okay! You’re free now.”

Logan took a few tentative hops, exploring his new-found freedom, before bounding towards a hole in the fence - and paused. Standing up on his hind legs, Logan turned to look back, and for a second Peter thought he saw a flash of acknowledgment in the intelligent dark eyes.

Then Logan squeezed through the fence and was gone.

Peter sighed. “Well, that’s that.”

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“Wade just got back. Did you find Logan?” Wanda asked as Peter snuck back to his spot.

“Yeah. I set Logan free,” seeing twin expressions of surprise, Peter explained. “I didn't want Stryker to hurt him anymore. Now he can go find the rest of his family.”

Shuri nodded approvingly. “It was the right thing to do. He looked really sad in that tiny cage.”

Wanda hugged Vision with a sigh. “I hope he finds his bunny-family.”

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“We’re very sorry about the loss of your lab animal, Dr Stryker.”

“Millions of dollars of research... all down the drain...” Stryker muttered. His suit was a mess, eyes blankly staring.

“Accidents happen. I'm a kindergarten teacher, so... I'm used to things always going wrong.” Mr Thanos patted him on the shoulder awkwardly. “Come have some coffee in the staff lounge, it always gets me through the tough days...”

“What was all that about?” Tony watched curiously as Mr Thanos escorted the distraught Stryker down the hallway.

Peter shrugged. “We had a science talk today by a mad scientist.”

Tony made a noise of mock outrage. “And I wasn't their first pick? Hello, genius engineer right here. I'm actually offended, do they think all my doctorates are just for show?”

Peter tugged on his hand. “Can we just go home, Dad?”

Tony stopped, sensing his son’s mind was elsewhere. “Sure thing, buddy.”

As their car pulled away, he noticed Peter gazing at the woods bordering the kindergarten, an enigmatic smile on his lips.

“You seem uncharacteristically pensive today.” Tony noted.

“Can we get another pet?” Peter asked, not looking up.

Where had that come from?

Tony arched a brow. “I don’t think Jarvis would appreciate another roomie.”

Peter slid down in his seat. “Jarvis doesn't like playing games, and all he does is sleep all day. He’s not fun.”

“Not everything is about fun, Pete.” Tony argued, feeling compelled to defend his cat.

Peter did have a point, Tony reflected; while Jarvis was a old sweetheart who never bit or scratched - patiently putting up with Peter’s roughhousing on a daily basis - he probably wasn't the most entertaining pet for a spirited young kid, and at fifteen, was starting to show his age. Moreover, Jarvis’s personality was far too dignified to ever lower himself to chase after pieces of string.

“Have some pity on the old man, will you? He's not as spry as he used to be,” Tony said wryly. “I hope this doesn't mean you'll decide to trade me in when I get too decrepit to run around-”

Peter looked over at his dad. “Maybe Jarvis would like another friend. What if he's lonely? He
might go nuts and freak out if he’s by himself all the time.”

“He’s not alone, he’s got me, I do most of my work from home, anyway… Hold up,” Tony turned to him with a frown. “Are you calling me a crazy cat lady?”

“You’ve always been a crazy cat man, dad.” Peter chirped.

*Okay, maybe I deserved that.* Tony acknowledged that he’d become a little reclusive since the divorce was finalized. Without another partner to help out, chores and errands just seemed to pile up; he hadn’t even had time to sort through and trash Steve’s belongings. As a result of his tardiness, Jarvis had chosen to claim Steve’s favourite chair as his new sleeping spot, from which he’d shoot Tony reproachful looks, like he was trying to use his cat powers to hypnotize Tony into picking up the phone and calling his aggravating ex-husband…

It was stupid. Tony should just get rid of the ugly chair and move on with his life.

But he couldn’t. Jarvis seemed so content and Tony didn’t have the heart to evict the old cat from his new favorite sleeping spot, even if the sight of the ugly blue armchair gave him flashbacks to a life where he and Steve were still together...

...No, he was keeping the chair out of consideration for the cat. It was a perfectly valid reason.

“I hate that stupid chair.” Tony muttered to himself.

“Chair?” Peter shrugged. “We don’t have to get another cat, we could get a bunny. Or a canary.”

His eyes brightened. “Or a puppy!”

“And who’d be the one feeding and cleaning up after his new friend?” Shaking himself out of his memories, Tony jabbed a thumb at himself. “Let me guess, *moi.*”

“I’ll do it!”

“Really? When was the last time you brushed Jarvis?”

Peter flushed. Jarvis was notoriously picky about groomings, only willing to let certain people do it. Namely just Tony. “I guess I could try cleaning his box…”

Tony chuckled. “There is no try, young padawan, only do.” He tapped his fingers on the wheel consideringly. “You might be onto something, though. Perhaps the grumpy old man *could* do with some company.”

“Yay! We’re getting a pet!” Peter cheered.

“Not so fast, squirt, you’re on litter box duty for a week.”

“Aw, daaaaad…”

Tony put up a finger. “One week. And if you’re still serious about getting a pet after that… I’ll think about it.” He considered the idea - maybe their little family could use another addition.

Peter looked like he was about to object, but he closed his mouth and smiled that mysterious smile again, turning back to the window. “Okay.”

The car drove on, leaving the kindergarten and the woods far behind them.
Chapter End Notes

1) Originally planned to post this next week, but decided to do it today in celebration of Fathers' Day. Haha I love Logan : )

2) I imagined plushie! Vision looking like this [Craffholic XL](#)

3) PSA: don't release your pet rabbits into the wild. Depending on what country you're in they can wreak havoc on the ecosystem. No jokes, I'm being serious.

4) Out of all the chapters I've written so far, this was probably the one I had the most fun with!
Sunlight filtered in through the windows, illuminating the gently floating dust motes. Soft music played in the background, chimes and flutes lending a serene atmosphere to the normally hectic classroom.

Thanos wished he could absorb the tranquility of his surroundings, but it was impossible to ignore the whispers arising from four depressingly familiar voices as he flowed into Mountain Pose.

“...Do you think Mr Thanos used to be in the circus? Why's he wearing a costume that looks like a strong man costume?” Wanda whispered loudly. Perhaps she didn’t mean for her voice to carry, but she hadn't quite mastered the vocal modulations required for a proper whisper, so her words came out as a small whisper-yell.

“Maybe Mr Thanos was the man who got shot out of cannons.” Shuri giggled in a slightly quieter whisper.

“Boom, boom,” said Wade.

“I want shoot a Mr Thanos-shaped hole in the wall.” Peter added, which made the four of them break down into laughter.

“I dunno, Mr Thanos seems more like a clown.” Wanda whisper-yelled. “A big, ugly clown.”

“I heard that.” Mr Thanos frowned without even opening his eyes, a little chagrined that not only had the kids imagined firing him out of a cannon, they’d compared his blue muscle shirt to clown clothes. “Any more chatter and I’ll personally have the four of you shipped off to the circus in the smallest crates I can find.”

“Oooh, if we get to join the circus, I want to be the animal trainer, so that I can play with all the big cats.” Shuri twirled, starry-eyed, stretching out her arms to pick up the skirt of an imaginary costume.

“I wanna be the knife thrower.” Wade said, poking Peter in his shoulder excitedly. “And Peter can be the assistant that I throw the knives at!”

“Um… no, that sounds dumb.” Peter frowned and edged away from Wade’s jabbing fingers. He didn’t much like the idea of having things thrown at him all day. “I’d rather be an acrobat. Swinging on trapezes looks way more fun.”

“But Peter... knives...” Wade pouted, trailing after Peter like a lost balloon.

Wanda yanked Wade back by the collar before he could annoy Peter any further. “And I’ll be a magician so I can cut annoying people like Wade in half!”

“With a big knife?” Wade asked hopefully.

“The biggest one in the whole world.” Wanda replied, a dangerous look on her face.

“Yay!” Wade cheered up immediately.
“Ahem,” Thanos cleared his throat, trying to get things back on track. “Today is for yoga, not the greatest show on earth. Come along, little heroes. We’re going to do some breathing and asanas.”

Thanos raised his arms and clasped them over his head as he balanced his weight on one leg. “Now… imagine you’re a tree. Roots deep in the ground, branches up high. Standing on one strong trunk, perfectly balanced. As all things should be.”

There were a few minutes of blessed peace as they ran through the simple stretches, and Thanos could almost believe that they’d get through today without any more disruptions.

In a low, droning voice, Thanos continued. “And now, fall to the ground to Child’s Pose. Place your head to the earth, become one with the dust…”

A young voice piped up. “Pardon me.”


“Mr Thanos!”

Thanos ignored it harder.

Nope, nope. Peace and tranquility, think of your happy place…

“HEY!”

So much for peace, Thanos cracked an eye open. “What is it now, Shuri?”

Shuri stopped bouncing up and down. “I want to drop this class.”

“Excuse me?” Thanos’s craggy brow furrowed.

“I don’t understand the point of all this standing around and breathing!” Shuri gestured to her classmates. “Can we wrap this up and do something more educational? Like… the History of Macaroni Art or Advanced Coloring Book Techniques?”

“Those aren’t even real classes,” Thanos shook his head. “Why would anyone take a course on coloring? It’s coloring, not brain surgery.”

Shuri gave him a pitying look. “Do you even know the kind of skill needed to color inside the lines? Coloring is a science, genius.”

Thanos closed his eyes so he could roll them behind his lids. “All kindergarten classes are mandatory. You’ll take part in the same activities as your classmates. No skipping ahead.” He dismissed Shuri’s griping and turned back to the class. “Now, let’s get back to yoga; imagine that you’re a speck of dust, floating on the breeze…”

But Shuri wasn’t about to let this go. “My academic career is important to me!” She hollered, crossing her arms. “I want to become a well-rounded human being, and I don’t see how this class will do anything to advance my education!”

“Personal development is also an important part of a holistic academic career.” Thanos fired back through gritted teeth. “Yoga improves mental balance and helps you to focus your energy.” Energy that these kids have far too much of, Thanos thought grouchily.

Instead of deflating, Shuri perked up at his words. “Focus our energy? Like Goku? Are you going to teach us the Kamehameha?”
“Car-me-what?” Peter tilted his head to one side.

“The Kamehameha,” Shuri curled her hands out in front of her like she was holding an invisible fish bowl. “It's an energy superpower from this TV show my cousin likes to watch. It’s about superheroes, I think.”

“Hmm… is this a superpower?” Peter asked, and to Thanos’s horror, the boy flipped a cartwheel.

“Wow! That’s so cool!” Wanda’s eyes were as wide as saucers. “I always fall over when I try to do that. How do you do it, Peter?”

“I learned it in gym class, and my dad taught me some yoga moves. He says I have a great sense of balance.” Peter laughed as he effortlessly did another cartwheel. “Try it, it's really easy!”

Wanda tried, but she couldn't get her legs off the ground. She rolled onto the floor with a defeated sigh. “I can’t do it.”

“It’s okay, I think you have to practice a lot to get the hang of it.” Peter somersaulted next to her and bounded to his feet like a grasshopper.

“Is that how your dad became so good at science?” Shuri was examining every move with a thoughtful hand on her chin. “I didn’t know scientists had to learn yoga. This is useful information to know…”

“My dad is really good at yoga! He can put his foot behind his head.” Peter flipped another cartwheel. “And he knows a special kind of yoga where you have to take all your clothes off, but he needed Pops help to do it. I asked him if I could learn it too, but he said only grown ups are allowed to learn that one.”

“That sounds weird,” Shuri stuck her tongue out.

“Yeah, I guess.” Peter leaped to his feet with a grin, mind jumping onto another train of thought. “Wanna see me do a handstand next?”

“Do it, Peter, do it!” Wade fairly screamed in excitement.

Mr Thanos snapped his fingers to put an end to the chatter. He felt grimly satisfied as the high-pitched crack echoed round the room, causing the children to scramble to cover their ears.

“The next person who interrupts the class will be sent to the Time Out corner.” Thanos said curtly. Most of the kids fell silent at his words, as most of them feared being sent to the dreaded prison: the plastic walls of the Time Out enclosure were too high to scale and too sturdy to knock over. Any child imprisoned within its rainbow-colored confines were condemned to serve out a lonely sentence, far away from all their friends.

Satisfied with his threat, Thanos continued with the class. But after five seconds, there was a surge of giggles and cheers.

Thanos took a quick glance, and to his horror saw that Peter was doing a handstand. “Peter! Stop doing that, you might hurt yourself!”

“No I won’t.” Peter took a hand off the ground so that he was balancing on one hand. “This is so easy!”

“You're standing on the ceiling!” Wade squealed in laughter as he bent between his legs to look at
Peter upside down.

“It’s really- Hey!” Peter squawked in alarm as the ground disappeared from beneath his hands.

“You are not setting a good example for your friends.” Thanos had grabbed Peter the ankle and was holding him holding him off the ground. “Stop distracting the class with these dangerous stunts or somebody’s going to get hurt.”

“Yeah, I hope it's you!” Peter said, dangling from Thanos’s grip. “You can't even do half a cartwheel!”

Thanos rolled his eyes and set the boy right side up. What Thanos didn’t realise was that the sudden change in position made all the blood rush to Peter’s head. Dizzied by the sudden reorientation of his surroundings, Peter tumbled harmlessly onto the mat and the sight made his friends gasp in horror.

“You big jerk! You smashed Peter!” Wanda yelled.

“Not cool, Mr Thanos!” Shuri added her voice to her friend’s.

“Guys, I’m okay...” Peter started but the two girls were ignoring him in favor of screaming at Thanos.

“Settle down, settle down.” Thanos raised his arms, sensing his class was on the verge of chaos. “Let’s get back to centering our minds.”

Thanos’s patience shattered the second Wanda’s foot kicked him painfully in the shin.

“Alright, that’s a Time Out for you, young lady.” Thanos grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the class and towards the Time Out corner.

“No! Guys! Don’t let him take me away-” Wanda struggled against the unyielding grip as Thanos placed her into the plastic enclosure. She made a leap for the gates but they slammed shut with a chilling finality.

“Wanda!” Peter dashed towards his imprisoned friend. He beat against the rainbow-colored plastic fence but it was no good. He might as well have been trying to move a bus.

“Noooooo-” With her hands clamped around the plastic bars, Wanda’s face was a picture of despair.

“Wanda needs to think about what she’s done.” Thanos shooed Peter back to the class. “Unless more of you want to join her, there had better be no more disruptions.”

“This is bad,” Shuri said worriedly as a frowning Peter rejoined her. “He’s picking us off one by one.”

Peter’s mouth set into a line. “We have to stop him.”

“Boom boom boom,” Wade chanted.

--

Loki paused mid coffee-pour to stare. “You look like hell.”

“That’s an understatement.” Thanos sat down heavily in one of the chairs in the staff break room.
His bald pate was glistening with some kind of purple liquid, his clothes were covered with paint, and the his pants were in tatters from the knee down.

“Do I want to know what happened?”

“We ran out of safety scissors again. The plastic fence we use for Time Outs isn’t usable anymore so we’ll need to get a new one. Reading time turned into a paint massacre.” Thanos recited the events in a soulless voice as if he’d been through a deadly war. In some ways, perhaps he had. “And we had grapes at snack time, so you might want to avoid the snack room for the rest of this afternoon. It’s a warzone.”

“...Is all that supposed to mean something to me?” Loki raised an eyebrow.

“Another day with the troublemakers. You know the ones.”

Loki shrugged and resumed pouring his coffee. “You'll have to be more specific than that. Out of the fifteen preschoolers you’re in charge of, which ones are tormenting you today?”

Thanos started ticking them off his fingers. “Wanda. Miss Violence-is-always-the-answer.”

Wanda was always spoiling for a fight, and she’d been even worse when her twin, Pietro, had been in the same class with her. The headache of wrangling the twins - Pietro was always running around and shoving kids, while Wanda beat them up with her plushie - was nothing compared to dealing with the ever-increasing number of parents demanding to know why their kids kept coming home with bruises. Thanos’ solution had been to divide and conquer, which had worked for the most part: ever since terrible twins were separated, their reign of terror had ended, along all with the parental complaints. But the loss of her other half had made Wanda even more attached to her plushie, which she insisted on treating like a living human being. She was quiet and sullen, except for moments of violence that erupted from her without warning. All the other kids were terrified of her. All except Peter and his little friends, that is.

Thanos ticked off on another finger. “Shuri. The little know-it-all.”

There was no question that Shuri was bright, capable of absorbing knowledge like a sponge. Sure, she managed to draw the completely wrong conclusions, but that was to be expected of a five-year-old. Nevertheless, Shuri seemed obsessed with proving herself, constantly trying to be the best in the class, always talking about her college-aged brother and cousin, both of whom she seemed to admire a lot. To be honest, Thanos was surprised Shuri wasn't in some fancy private school for gifted children, given her status and intelligence. But T’Chaka had been adamant about wanting his daughter to have as normal an education as possible... if you could call the bodyguards stationed less than a hundred meters outside the school zone normal. Thanos shrugged, it wasn't any business of his. At least Shuri’s security detail was good at staying out of sight, because Thanos couldn’t begin to imagine the parental complaints if news leaked that armed bodyguards were lurking around the kindergarten. Shuri’s overambitious nature would have been easy to deal with on its own, but ever since she fell in with Peter she seemed to be developing a taste for mischief. Pity.

“Wade.”

The less said about Wade, the better. The mere thought of dealing with Wanda’s knife-obsessed cousin made Thanos long for the day he could finally retire and await the sweet embrace of death. Maybe settle down on a farm while he was waiting.

“And Peter.”
It wasn’t like Thanos was being purposely callous, it was perfectly understandable for Peter to have been having a rough time dealing with his parents splitting up. The school had tried to be understanding about it, even letting Tony sit in with him in class. That had backfired spectacularly: Peter had become even more clingy, refusing to talk to anyone other than his dad, and bursting into tears unless he was hugged constantly. It was taking a toll not just on Tony but all Peter’s classmates too, and Thanos was the one to finally put an end to it. It was a necessary evil, he told himself.

“It’s good Peter’s starting to come out of his shell.” muttered Thanos as he mopped the juice from his head. “But why did he have to start a band of troublemakers?”

Loki’s eyes widened in realisation. “Hold on, Peter Stark-Rogers? Son of Tony Stark, the businessman?”

“The name didn't tip you off?”

“I thought it a mere coincidence.” Loki said, dumping a sugar into his drink. “I must admit that it is strange to hear Peter is giving you so much trouble. He was always perfectly well-behaved whenever I took over your class.”

“Peter? Well-behaved?” Thanos barked out an incredulous laugh. “You’re too easily taken in.” It was a constant source of irritation to Thanos that Peter had managed to charm all the teachers, cleaning crew, and security guards. It was downright uncanny how the boy could coax a hug or piggyback ride out of anyone with one sad look out of his big brown eyes. Even Loki, who was notoriously bitchy and liked to pretend he didn’t give two hoots about anything, had been persuaded. Thanos couldn’t forget the sight of Loki carrying the laughing boy around on his shoulders.

_I wonder if Peter even knows he’s doing it_, Thanos pondered. _Maybe the boy is more manipulative than I thought, taking advantage of my colleagues’ sentimentality like that._

“Well, other than his constant demands for hugs, I never had any trouble with him.” Loki tapped a finger against his chin. “Nor have any of the other teachers, now that I think of it. By all accounts, he’s a very sweet kid, if a little needy at times.”

“He seems to dislike me in particular.” Thanos grunted. It rankled to hear glowing accounts of Peter, especially since the little tyke seemed to be causing more trouble as of late.

“There must be something you’re doing differently.” Loki rested his chin on his hands. “Have you ever considered a little self-reflection?”

Thanos harrumphed. “I have more important things to worry about than the approval of five-year olds.”

Loki smirked. “Hm. Such as the approval of your two estranged adult daughters?”

Thanos’s glare turned cold. “Careful, Odinson.”

“Sorry,” said Loki cheerily, not sounding the least bit apologetic. “Family is so complicated, isn’t it?”

“Gamora still won’t call me,” Thanos said glumly. “I thought that she’d see my taking this job as proof that I had changed; that I was capable of caring for smaller creatures-”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “You could start by referring to them as children instead of creatures.”
“-smaller humans, then. But all they do is make messes and scream and yell and try to murder each other.” Thanos sulked into his mug. “Gamora never misbehaved when she was young. She was every bit a model child, nothing like these brats.”

“Comparison. The best parental technique.” Loki muttered but Thanos ignored him, continuing his introspective train of thought.

“I was so proud of her, but she chose to run off with that good-for-nothing boy and ruin all the plans I made for her.” Thanos lamented. “She had such a bright future ahead of her.”

“I notice you’ve forgotten you had two daughters.”

“I have one daughter and one disappointment.” Thanos sniffed.

“And you wonder why your relationship is so contentious. You really are a terrible father.” Loki remarked with disgust. “No wonder you can barely deal with a class of children. I heard about the fiasco with the scientist and the mutant rabbit.”

“Don’t remind me.” There was a soft crunching noise as Thanos’s fist tightened around the handle of his mug.

The fallout from Stryker’s visit had been a series of tiresome phone calls and threatening emails, but fortunately the school wasn’t responsible for any of the chaos that had happened. However Thanos couldn’t help but regard the upcoming events with a growing dread: Sports Day would be happening in a few months, the handful of guest speakers, the big Year’s End Concert which would be a bloody nightmare to plan…

And of course there were all the birthdays.

Thanos felt his headache increase tenfold as he cast a look at the color-coded events calendar where the tenth of August was circled in red - the birthday color, Proxima had called it - and exhaled heavily. The name written on the date stared back at him almost mockingly.

Peter’s birthday.

Thanos had a very bad feeling about that date. For some inexplicable reason, he wondered if both Peter’s dads were going to show up and make a scene. While Thanos had never met Steve Rogers in person, he’d learned enough through snippets of conversations with Tony to form an opinion of him. Suffice to say, Thanos’s impression of Peter’s absent dad was not a flattering one, and he felt a rush of sympathy for how Tony had been running himself ragged to take care of his son.

“Tony is a remarkable man who deserves nothing but respect, not only for his prowess as a scientific visionary, but for raising a son on his own...” Thanos mused to himself.

Loki gave him a weird look, clearly not expecting the conversation to go down this route.

“Tony is too hung up on that ex-husband of his. He's been through so much yet his spirit remains unbroken. If only there were someone who could see his true value.” Thanos's voice had gone soft, saying the name almost fondly. “And it doesn’t hurt that the man is aging like fine wine…”

Loki had an unreadable expression on his face, like he wasn't sure he wanted to hear more or run away screaming.

“Say what you will, at least I have a social life.” Catching his colleague's look, Thanos shook himself out of his thoughts. “Speaking of which, why don’t I ever hear anything about your
“My personal life is none of your concern,” Loki smiled thinly. “You’d be better served thinking of more effective ways to manage your charges.”

As always, everything comes back to those scamps, Thanos rubbed his hand over his brow, forgetting for a moment it was stained with grape juice. He glared at the sticky purple mess on his hand. “Sometimes I wonder why I became a teacher.” He gazed into the depths of his coffee mug as if it held all the secrets of the universe. “I thought I could bring some order to this place. Balance the learning with fun. But every day is spent putting out fires, and it makes me wonder why I continue to subject myself to this?”

“Constantly putting out fires is one of the joys of being a kindergarten teacher.” Loki nodded sagely. “And the best part is knowing that you get to do it all over again tomorrow.”

“I don’t see how that's meant to be encouraging.” Thanos muttered into his mug.

“It isn't. But I do have one piece of advice.”

“What would that be?” Thanos stopped contemplating his coffee and turned to Loki, who gave a toothy grin.

“Smile!”

“What on-” Thanos started as a green smartphone was unceremoniously shoved in his face, and before he could shove it out of the way he heard the tell-tale shutter of the camera app. Thanos growled and made a grab for the offending phone. “Get rid of that thing- Loki, you better not be posting that on Snapgram or Instabook-”

Loki dodged Thanos easily and slipped out of the room, laughing to himself. Strolling down the empty corridor, he opened the camera roll to check the results of his guerilla photography.

Thanos looked a mess covered in juice and paint, and being snapped mid-blink and with his mouth hanging open certainly wasn’t doing him any favors. Smirking, Loki texted the unflattering picture to Nebula.

A few seconds later, his phone buzzed with a reply.

[ Nebula: lol are we still on for cocktails at sakaar tonight ]

The lack of upper case or punctuation was as close to rolling on the floor with laughter as Nebula could get. Loki fired off a confirmation and slipped his phone back in his pocket, whistling a cheery tune to himself.

Nebula and him needed some new fodder for their monthly bitching sessions anyway - there were only so many times they could rehash stories about their respective disappointing parental figures before it got old.

It was always good to keep things fresh, and with Thanos’s four troublemakers to keep things interesting... call it a hunch, but Loki had a feeling that this year would be anything be boring.

Chapter End Notes
I know this is kinda infodumpy, but I wanted to do more worldbuilding. The kids’ personalities pretty much boil down to:

Peter - Hug Me I’m Scared Because I miss my 2 dads ( •̫•́)
Wanda - Fight Me emoji ( ■ webpack ■)
Shuri - Me, an intellectual
Wade - Knife

Thanos takes stock of all that’s happened, and what’s to come. Sure makes me wonder what’s gonna happen in August...

IMPORTANT NOTE: Since it's been brought up a few times - Yes, I am continuing to write chapters for this fic. I marked this as complete because seeing the question mark in chapter fields (Chapters 4/?) makes me really stressed out. I'm targeting Aug 15 for my next update.

NOTE 16 Jan 2019: edited Peter's birthday to be Aug 10th in light of the new trailer revealing his birth date.
Dream Daddy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Doughnuts. Thousands of doughnuts were raining softly from the sky.

Tony gazed up in wonder as baked goods fell all around him. There were so many types; glazed, jelly-filled, stuffed with fruit, dusted with sprinkles, slathered with frosting every shade of the rainbow. Endless scores of doughnuts as far as the eye could see, filling the air with the buttery smell of warmed sugar.

Tony was in heaven.

He strained to catch as many as he could. But no matter how hard Tony tried, every doughnut bounced off his outstretched hands, leaving behind traces of sugar on his arms like sticky kisses.

Before Tony could get too frustrated, a new fragrance caught his attention: the smell of vanilla and apples, sweet and welcoming and home in a way that he hadn't felt in a long time, sending a thrill of nostalgia through him from head to toe. The scent drew Tony like a magnet to a lodestone, and before he knew it he was face-to-face with the biggest doughnut he had ever seen.

The apple-and-vanilla scented doughnut was as big as a bus, covered in sky-blue frosting, and dusted generously with white star-shaped sprinkles. The Big Blue Doughnut was the most beautiful thing Tony had ever seen in his life, a glorious halo of sweetened perfection.

Tony wanted it like he'd wanted nothing before. A need seized him; a need to touch it, hold it, taste its frosted curves and make it his own. He was both awed and slightly intimidated by the incredible doughnut. Gazing up at it, Tony abruptly felt small and unworthy, all too aware of his many flaws. There was no way that he, simple human, deserved to touch anything so sublime.

Even so, he yearned to be near the sprinkle-spangled ring. The wide hole seemed to beckon to him like a portal to paradise, and Tony knew if he crawled into the sugary embrace, he would be safe and treasured.

Loved.

Before Tony could enter the doughnut, it began to roll away from him. In desperation, Tony chased after the azure confection, but it seemed like the faster he ran, the faster it rolled - almost as if the doughnut had a mind of its own and was trying to get away from him.

Tony gritted his teeth as he pushed his legs harder. He'd never been a quitter and wasn't about to start now because of a flighty wheel of dough.

On and on they went, over the sugar-covered hills and plains. Finally, the chase led Tony to a river where the waters flowed as dark as night. A rich aroma wafted out from the river as Tony got closer.

Coffee. You've got to be kidding me, it's a goddamn coffee river, Tony barely had time to marvel at the sight when wave of heat hit him in the face. Self-preservation kicked in just in time, and he skidded to a halt on the riverbank before he could topple into the scalding liquid.

The sweltering heat might have been too much for Tony, but it didn't deter giant doughnuts; the
Big Blue Doughnut rolled straight into the river of boiling joe, where it began propelling itself across like a gigantic cerulean waterwheel.

Tony watched, dismayed, as the Big Blue Doughnut got further and further away. There was no way he'd be able to catch up without roasting himself alive. But… he felt the irresistible urge to do it anyway. Tony couldn't understand why, but all he wanted was to follow Big Blue Doughnut to the ends of the earth, no matter the how high the cost.

Tony gazed at the steaming waves, to the beautiful blue doughnut, now halfway across the river, and decided to hell with self-preservation. He strode to the edge of the riverbank, took a deep breath… and then something crashed into his side.

Tony looked down to see a doughnut hole the size of a beach ball bumping against his knee. It chanted words in a voice that sounded strangely familiar.

“Dad! Dad, dad, daaaaad…” The doughnut hole bounced against his hip in a puff of powdered sugar. Any other time, Tony might have found it cute, but at this moment he only had eyes for a Big Blue Doughnut.

“Stop that. Go away, ball.” Tony swatted it like he would a stray puppy, but the sentient doughnut hole only became more persistent.

“Dad! Daaaaad, wake up!” The doughnut hole chirped, ramming into Tony’s side with every syllable. One of its bounces was too forceful and it ricocheted off Tony’s hip with a shriek. “Wheeeee!”

Tony watched as if in slow motion as the doughnut hole began to tumble into the river. Every instinct in his body screamed at him to rescue it or else something terrible would happened. What if it drowned? Or was burned alive? Disintegrated? Eaten? God, what if there were doughnut hole-eating monsters in the river?

Seized with terror, Tony lunged, snatching the doughnut hole to safety and cradling it to his chest protectively.

“Whee!” squealed the doughnut hole, wiggling cutely in excitement. It seemed wholly unaware of how close it had come to an espresso-flavored demise. “Again! Again!”

Tony looked up just in time to see the Big Blue Doughnut reach the other side of the river, where it rolled away on its own, vanishing into the distance. The only thing left behind was a trail of star-shaped sprinkles floating on the caffeinated waves.

The Blue Doughnut was gone.

Tony hugged the babbling doughnut hole tighter, suddenly overcome by a sharp pang of loss. Knowing that the Big Blue doughnut didn't need him, didn't want him… he shivered. The emptiness in his chest felt as wide and all-consuming as the void of outer space.

Why did it feel like the Blue doughnut had ripped out a part of him when it went away? Why did it get to roll away, unhurt, while Tony was left with a hollowness that wouldn't go away? Had he really meant so little to it? Maybe it never truly loved him at all...

All the colors around him began to blur together and dream began to melt before his eyes…

Tony’s eyes snapped open. The world was slanted at an odd angle, and his head was aching, as if a team of elephants had played a friendly game of soccer in it with his brain as the ball.
Trying to calm his racing heart, Tony regained his bearings. The top half of his torso was hanging off the side of the bed, where his arms were wrapped around Peter, preventing the boy from falling off the edge.

“That was so fun!” Peter laughed, unaware of how close he’d come to braining himself on the floor.

“Good morning to you too, munchkin.” Tony said tiredly.

Peter wriggled around in his grip, flailing his limbs like a hyperactive beetle. “Again! Catch me again!”

“Can you wait until after I’ve had my coffee to start concussing yourself?” With a groan, Tony rolled over to deposit Peter on the other side of the bed, before burying his face firmly into his pillow.

I was having such a good dream, Tony pouted into the pillow. Maybe if he fell asleep right away, he’d be able to pick up where he left off and continue chasing the blue doughnut…

A small hand tugged at his sleeve excitedly. “Dad, dad! Do you know what day it is?”

“It's Wednesday.” Tony smooshed his face deeper into the comforting darkness. God, it was way too early in the morning for Peter to be this chipper.

“Wednesday aaaaand?”

“I dunno, was there something particularly special about today?”

Peter’s whine of displeasure made Tony chuckle, and he couldn't resist teasing his son more.

“Wait, I remember now.” Pausing for dramatic effect, Tony raised a finger without lifting his face from the pillow. “Today's National Relaxation Day, which means everyone has to spend 24 hours sleeping. It’s an official mandate from the international board of holidays, and I have no choice but to obey. See you tomorrow, Pete.”

Tony pretended to fall asleep, even letting out a few exaggerated snores as he hid his grin in the pillow. A sniff came from his side. Concerned, Tony raised his head to see what was the matter.

Sitting by his shoulder was Peter, brown eyes glistening with tears and lower lip starting to quiver. “You forgot…”

“Oh, no. No, no, no, I was just kidding.” Feeling completely awful, Tony sat up and pulled his son into his lap for a hug. “Of course I know today’s your birthday.”

Peter curled deeper into the embrace, hiding his face against the shoulder of Tony’s t-shirt. There was another sniff, and a small high-pitched sound.

Sinking deeper into guilt now, Tony began running a hand through Peter’s hair, trying to comfort him. “Pete? Petey, I’m so sorry, it was just a joke. I’d never forget anything as important as that. I didn’t mean it-” He felt a chill of horror as Peter’s shoulders started to tremble. “Peter?”

“Sike! I fooled ya!” Peter’s head popped back up. There was a bright grin plastered on his face and not a tear in sight.

“You cheeky little-” pretending to be scandalized, Tony began tickling him mercilessly. To be
honest, he was just a bit impressed that Peter had managed to prank him for a few seconds. “You think you’re real funny, do you?”

“I got you! I tricked you!” Peter laughed breathlessly between tickles.

“You think you can fool me? I knew you were acting the whole time.” Tony tossed Peter lightly into the air and caught him, making the boy scream with laughter.

“You tricked me, so I tricked you back!”

Tony snorted. “I wasn’t tricking you, I was- I was testing you! Gotta make sure your brain cells are warmed up. I’m joining you in class today, remember?” To Tony’s surprise, all the humor drained from Peter’s face at his words.

With a determined look in his eye, Peter nodded. “I'll keep you safe from him.”

“From what now?”

Peter solemnly patted Tony on the cheek, as if he were the parent trying to reassure him. “From the alien. I won't let him eat you, dad.”

...Right, Peter was still operating under the assumption that his teacher was a space alien. Tony had no idea where that had come from. “Don’t worry, I’ll just use my Jedi powers to fend off any alien invaders. Kick lots of ass, I can.” he finished off with a Yoda impression.

Peter giggled at the imitation. “Do BB-8’s voice!”

Tony obliged with a couple of bleep-bloop noises. He knew he was being silly, but the silliness always cheered Peter up, and that was more important. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. Enjoy it now, I'm not doing any impressions at the party.”

“But how will they know you're a fun dad?”

“Since you’re such a little clown, how about we cancel the planetarium and go to the circus instead?”

“No! Not the circus! They don’t have spaceships and planets. Just clowns.” Peter exclaimed.

“I agree, space is a lot more interesting than clowns.” Tony smiled, thinking of the birthday outing-slash-playdate he’d planned for Peter and his friends at the planetarium. He’d been prepared to go all out and plan the fanciest birthday party ever - bouncy castle, stretch limo, chocolate fountain, the works - but Peter adored the planetarium. Tony smiled, feeling a swell of pride that Peter had inherited his love of science. “Not gonna lie, I’m pretty excited too.”

Peter brightened at the mention of his favorite place. “I can't wait to see all the spaceships with Shuri and Wade!” Then in a quieter voice, he added hopefully. “Is Pops coming too?”

Tony sighed rubbing at the sudden ache behind his eyeballs. “Pete, we talked about this. He’s not coming back.” No matter how many times Tony explained, Peter didn't seem to grasp that Steve was Gone with a capital G.

Peter’s face crumpled and a fresh round of tears welled up in his eyes. Only this time, Tony had no doubt that these ones were genuine. Peter never used to be so insecure, wanting to be cuddled all the time, even seeking out hugs from his teachers, if what Tony had heard was true.
Once again, Tony couldn’t help worrying if it was all his fault, wondering for the infinitieth time whether splitting up with Steve had been the worst mistake of his life. There were so many what-ifs and should-haves: maybe Tony should have tried harder to make things work, or gone for therapy, or… heck, Tony would even have been willing to put aside his pride and figure out some sort of joint custody arrangement.

But Steve had vanished off the radar once the papers were signed without so much of a goodbye. And that made it abundantly clear to Tony how much his wonderful ex-husband cared about them.

Tony gave himself a mental shake before his old anger could spiral further. It would do him no good to dwell on the past. After all, today was not about him - It was about making Peter’s birthday as amazingly amazing as possible. It would be selfish, not to mention downright cruel if Tony allowed his insecurities to ruin it, like he did almost everything else.

Regardless of what Tony wanted, Peter would always come first.

“He might not be here today, but I am. And I’m never going to leave you.” Tony hooked his chin over Peter’s shoulder, tightening his embrace and trying to put as much sincerity as he could in his voice. “We’re gonna have fun today, birthday boy.”

Next to his ear, Peter whuffed out a sigh. “Okay, dad.” He didn’t sound a hundred percent happy, but at least he seemed willing to accept his answer for now.

Tony pressed a kiss into his son’s messy hair, feeling a surge of love for his son being so brave and understanding. Peter was so sweet, and smart, and adorable. Truly, Tony had the best son in the world, and everyone deserved to know how amazing he was.

Tony rubbed a hand over Peter's back in circles. It was partly to reassure his son, but the selfish part of him knew it was more to calm his own nerves down. Sometimes Tony still couldn't believe that he was fully responsible for a small human being who needed him so much. It scared him a little, how much he cared about the kid: Tony wouldn't just take a bullet for Peter, he'd beat the ever-loving shit out of whoever aimed the gun in the first place. In every sense of the word: Physically. Financially. Legally. Molecularly.

But what scared Tony most was that despite every mistake, every bad decision he’d made - Peter loved him back. Tony knew he couldn’t make up for all the sins in he’d committed, but he did know that Peter was the one good thing in his life.

And he'd do anything to protect his son.

With his mind coming fully awake, Tony felt the world become more solid around him and the last vestiges of the dream began to fade away like spun sugar. Tony smiled. Who needed dreams? What he had was much better.

Spending the day together would be good for both of them. Nothing was going to ruin today.

Chapter End Notes

Woohoo! Double update on Spidey's birthday for you guys!

Spidey made his first appearance in issue #15 of Amazing Fantasy, which was
published in August 1962, so a lot of people have fanonized his birthday to be Aug 15th. When I came up with this AU I’d already missed Tony and Steve’s birthdays, so I decided I had to do something for Peter’s!

NOTE 16 Jan 2019: edited Peter's birthday to be Aug 10th in light of the new trailer revealing his birth date.

I hope you all appreciate the very powerful use of literary symbolism and metaphor in this chapter.

Since I am also an August baby, I decided to step up the updates this month. My birthday is on the 24th, so expect something to happen then as well....
For what had to be the hundredth time that morning, Tony opened up the food delivery app on his phone and glared at the ‘Delivery In Progress’ status.

_The cake should've arrived an hour ago, why is it so damn late? I know the company is called NightCrawler, but I didn't think they’d be taking the ‘crawl’ part so literally._

If the delivery didn't get here before school ended, Peter wasn't going to have a birthday cake. And by every deity above, if this delivery company ruined Peter’s birthday, Tony was going make sure they never operated ever again. Honestly, what kind of company went around ruining children's birthday parties...

_Okay, calm down. Maybe they’re caught in traffic. Maybe their server is slow. Or there was an earthquake downtown..._

Tony resolutely shoved his phone into his pocket before he fretted himself into another freak out. He tried distract himself by focusing on the positive part of the day, namely the drastic improvement in Peter's behaviour.

Before, Peter had been a crying mess, clinging to Tony and begging not to be left behind. Now, Peter had come out of his shell, socialising happily with his three good friends and helping some of his classmates with building blocks or coloring. Once again, Tony felt a swell of pride at what a wonderful, helpful son he had. The pride was swiftly followed by the urge to brag about him to anyone who'd listen.

The closest person was Thanos, who was walking by carrying a stack of chairs.

“Peter's progressing much faster than everyone else, isn't he? I think he’s be ready to take on more responsibilities, maybe as a class monitor or class president?” Tony said proudly.

“We’ve seen a big improvement in Peter’s behavior recently.” Thanos replied. “But we don't actually assign the kids to roles. This is kindergarten, not high school-”

Tony waved off the answer. “Maybe you should make an exception. Peter is very exceptional.”

Thanos smiled with amusement. “It's only natural that Peter is special, since he has such an exceptional parent. He really takes a lot after you-”

“Back off, alien!” An angry Peter popped up next to Thanos’s leg.

“Stop calling me that.” Thanos looked down with irritation.

“I'll slow the alien down!” Peter pounced with all the fury of an angry kitten. He wrapped his limbs around Thanos’s leg and sat on his foot. “I've got him! Dad, run!”

Thanos gave Tony an exasperated grimace. One of Thanos’s limbs was easily bigger than three Peters.

“Doing a great job there, champ.” Tony bit back a smile. “You sure showed him.”
“Run away while you still can!” Peter yelled as his teacher began to move away.

“You can either get down or get dropped,” Thanos deadpanned. The big man’s pace was barely slowed by the boy clinging to his leg like the world’s talkative bur.


As he watched them go, Tony shook his head. It was a little weird that Peter’s civil behaviour extended to everyone except Thanos, but he supposed it couldn’t be helped. Classroom politics were a mystery sometimes, even for geniuses.

It was weird, but Thanos seemed almost pleased that Tony was there to play co-teacher for the day. The big man had been strangely considerate, as if he saw Tony as a teammate. Or, more alarmingly, as if he’d taken the ‘parentis’ part of in loco parentis more seriously than he was supposed to. There was an unreadable aura about Thanos, from the moment Tony entered the class that day, it was almost like he was trying to…

Nah. Tony was probably just overthinking things, as usual.

After all, Tony also had the the nagging feeling that he'd forgotten something important. But that couldn't be the case, because he knew that he’d double-triple-quadruple checked his plans for the day: hang out at school with Peter, bring Peter and his friends out for lunch, bring them all to the planetarium together, and most importantly, make sure they had a great time.

There was nothing he could have forgotten.

So why does it feel like I missed something?

Shrugging to himself, Tony brushed off the weird feeling, deciding to focus on one problem at a time.

The foremost of which was finding out why the damn cake hadn't arrived yet.

Tony glanced at his watch and cursed again. This wasn't good, there was barely half an hour left on the clock until school ended. That's the last time I use Nightcrawler. ‘As fast as teleportation’, my ass.

He was about to start drafting a scathing customer complaint when the NightCrawler arrival notification popped up on his screen with a soft ping. At same moment, he heard the sound of the door opening behind him.

“About time you got here. You can put the cake over on the-” Tony turned towards the door and froze.

No. Not today. No freaking way.

The tall man in the black motorcycle jacket and jeans walking through the door couldn't be who Tony thought it was. Even though the blond hair was darker and slightly overlong, there was no mistaking the width of those shoulders or that steady gait. As the man neared them, a cake box and brightly-wrapped present balanced easily in one hand, there was no doubt in Tony’s mind who it was.

“Pops! You came!” Peter dashed over with a cry of excitement.
Hey, buddy.” Steve boosted Peter up on his hip with his free hand, a smile transforming the stern lines of his bearded face into something warm and open.

“Look, Dad! Pops came back!” With his arms wrapped around Steve, Peter looked like all his dreams had come true.

It was Tony’s nightmare come to life. Oh god, he was so not ready for this.

“Tony, how are you?” Steve’s lips curved up into a smile as their eyes met.

Tony's brain was still rebooting itself, so he blurted out the first thing that came into his head. “Uh, this is a birthday party, not the auditions for America’s Next Top Lumberjack.”

“Good to see you too.” Steve replied. He kept a steady grip on Peter as he set the cake down on the table. “I didn't mean to show up and surprise you all, but-”

“Surprised doesn’t even begin to describe how I’m feeling,” Tony responded, as his speech processes finally came back online. “You have a lot of nerve showing up here without warning. Why are- How did-” He gestured to the slightly dented cake box. “Do I even want to know what you did to the cake delivery guy? Should I be calling the police?”

“No, dad, nooooo…” Peter whined, hugging Steve tighter as if the sheer power of his hugs could prevent his other father from being arrested.

Steve chuckled, pressing a kiss to Peter’s cheek. “I actually met the delivery man on my way here. His truck had broken down so I offered to help out. Had to drop off a few packages for him, but I didn't mind. This last one was for a special person, after all.” Steve turned to him with that bashful look, all gee-whiz and glad-I-could-help.

Well aren’t you a helpful little boy scout, Tony thought sourly. “So you decided to show up. That's a first.”

Steve seemed stung by the insinuation, though his manner remained calm. “It's Peter’s birthday.”

“He didn’t try to trick me! He remembered!” Peter said triumphantly.

“Thanks for that, Pete,” Tony said shortly. He addressed his next words to the unexpected guest. “So what are you doing here?”

Surprisingly, Steve looked sheepish. “I… tried calling you earlier. On the private flip phone? I sent some texts too, saying I’d be here today. Not sure if you got them.”

“You most certainly did n-” The vehement denial on the tip of Tony’s tongue died away as he realised, after a second of fumbling around in his pocket, that the aforementioned flip phone wasn’t there.

Unbe-fudging-lievable.

For two years, Tony been carrying the infernal device around. Keeping the minutes topped up. Ensuring it was fully charged - nobody made charging cradles compatible with the ancient mode anymore, so Tony had had to build one from scratch. Debating whether to hit the Call button. Checking the empty inbox every few hours… You know, just in case.

It was just Tony's luck that the day Steve finally deigned to contact him was the day Tony’s mind had been thrown into a tizzy over a stupid doughnut dream - the meaning wasn't lost on him, Tony
could be dense but he wasn't \textit{that} stupid - that bringing the phone along had completely slipped his mind.

If Tony were a superhero, he was pretty sure his name would be Irony Man.

“Do you expect me to be sitting by the phone all day, waiting for it to ring?” To conceal his blunder, Tony answered the question with another question. He made a mental note to come up with better ways of keeping track of the phone so he wouldn't be caught off guard. Maybe chaining it to his pocket would be a good idea. “Genius, CEO, philanthropist, single dad - it's tough to have it all, but I make it work.”

“I understand, Tony.” Steve answered with a rueful twist of his lips. After giving Peter a final squeeze, he set the boy down. “I figured you’d be busy so I decided to meet you here directly.”

“Lucky me.”

Steve’s smile faded a bit at his stony expression. “I'm here now. Let's not fight in front of him.”

“Your other dad looks cool. Like a ninja. Or pirate. Or fireman. Is he a fireman?” Wanda asked Peter, moving Vision’s arm to his chin so the plushie would look like it was asking the question too.

Peter thought about it. “Well… Pops always puts out fires when Dad cooks, so yeah!”

Tony sputtered. “That was one time! Can you stop spreading rumors about my culinary skills? And I know how to cook!” he added defensively. “I don't need everyone thinking I'm some kind of parental failure.”

Steve’s jaw tightened. “Nobody thinks you're a failure, and I’d never let anyone call you one-”

Tony held up a hand. “I’m gonna stop you right there, because I have more important things to do than listen to you.” He started busying himself with the cake box. Anything so he didn’t have to look at Steve’s face for another second. “Someone give me the lighter for these candles.”

Shuri yawned. “When can we have some cake already?”

“Yes, yes. Gather round, little heroes.” Thanos moved towards the table and handed Tony the lighter, not-so-subtly bumping bumping Steve out of the way with his burly form. Steve’s eyes flashed with irritation, though he was too controlled to respond outwardly.

As the children broke into an off-key rendition of ‘Happy Birthday,’ Tony concentrated his efforts on filming the whole thing on his phone. He was aware of Steve moving to stand somewhere behind him, so Tony contrived to keep his hands and attention occupied, trying not to betray how rattled he felt.

\textit{Just ignore him and he'll go away, just ignore him and he'll go away,} Tony gritted his teeth, ignoring Steve with all his might.

“Now make a wish,” Steve said after the singing ended

The glow from the candles made Peter’s brown eyes seem even more enormous. The boy gazed at the candles, then his eyes rose to meet Tony’s. After a pause, they flicked over his shoulder to where Steve was standing.

Peter took a deep breath. “I wish Dad and Pops would-”
“Peter-” with a sudden stab of horror, Tony wondered if Peter was actually going to utter something completely embarrassing.

Peter’s eyes were shining with excitement. “Would get me a puppy!”

Tony breathed a sigh of relief.

But Peter wasn’t done. “And we’d all live together forever!”

“You do know birthdays have a one-wish policy.” Tony muttered. Behind him, he couldn’t help hearing Steve had drawn in a sharp breath.

“Yay! Congratulations!” Shuri cheered as Peter blew out the candles.

“That’s wonderful, Peter. Now let’s cut the-” Tony blinked and started sifting through the cake box. “Where’s the knife go? I could’ve sworn it was here a second ago.”

“That’s strange, it should’ve been taped to the box.” Steve came over to the table to help. Tony gave him a sidelong glare. He didn’t need Steve’s help.

“Wade, why are you all the way over there by yourself? Thanos called out to Wade, who was squatting on the other side of the classroom with his back to them. “Don’t you want to join us for some cake-” Thanos stopped when he saw something glinting in the blond boy’s hands. “Wade, what have you got there?”

“A knife!” Wade spun around with a bright smile.

Every adult in the room froze. The large, stainless steel kitchen knife looked even more enormous clutched in Wade’s small fist.

“Knife! Knife! Knife…” Wade chanted, swinging the knife back and forth in the air like he was trying to catch butterflies. As he skipped closer, his eyes landed onto Peter.

Wade’s grin widened. “Knife!”

Without warning Wade broke into a run, charging towards the party with the knife held out straight in front of him like a lance.

Too surprised to react, Peter’s eyes were wide as plates as the gleaming blade shot towards him.

Tony’s blood turned to ice. Reacting by pure instinct, he swung Peter up in his arms and out of the way of the attack. He realised in a flash the next problem: they were all cornered against the wall.

Crap, the little demon is fast. Tony watched in horror as Wade got closer. Why did the exit have to be at the other side of the room?

While Tony could easily outrun Wade, it would be difficult to slip past without suffering at least one painful stab to the legs.

But that was a small price to pay. Tony would take a thousand cuts if it meant keeping Peter safe.

By the time all those thoughts had flashed through Tony’s brain, Steve had moved towards the danger. Dodging swiftly around Wade’s path, Steve snagged the boy by the scruff of the neck and lifted him off the ground and deftly plucked the knife out of his hands with a quick twist.

“Knife! Knife! Knife!” Dangling from the grip on his collar, Wade took a few seconds to
realise his feet were pedalling in mid-air and his hands were empty. His eyes darted to Steve with indignant shock. “My knife!”

Steve smiled, flipping the knife so the sharp point faced down. “Wade, was it? Thank you for locating the cake knife for us.”

Wade giggled as Steve lowered him to the ground. “You’re fast.”

“I’m fast when I have to be,” Steve answered. “It’s dangerous to run with knives, so don’t do that next time, okay? Someone could get hurt.”

“But it’s my present for Peter!” Wade protested, making grabby hands at the blade.

Steve easily held the knife out of reach. “That’s very thoughtful of you, Wade, but why don’t you give him something a little less dangerous? How about a hug?”

“Are you crazy? You want to give him another chance to get close and stab Peter?” Tony snapped. His arms tightened protectively around Peter.

“I like hugs…” Peter murmured.

“I know you do, Pete.” Steve smiled, then turned back to Wade. “How about something to do with science or animals? Peter likes those, so those are good places to start.” Steve lifted the knife higher as Wade started leaping for it like a flea.

Wade stopped jumping to contemplate Steve’s suggestions. “Animals… Does Peter like unicorns?”

Steve’s lips twitched into a half-smile. “Spiders, actually. Why don’t you ask him?”

“Oh for the love of doughnuts, stop humoring that little psycho.” Tony groaned.

“Dad, you’re squishing me,” Peter complained, wriggling in Tony’s tense grip.

“What kind of bakery packs an actual kitchen cleaver with a cake meant for children,” Tony continued faintly, clutching Peter as if afraid his son might disappear into thin air. “Is this entire world conspiring to give me more heart attacks?”

“Unicorns are fine as long as their horns aren’t sharp. Alright, buddy?” Steve replied, which Wade seemed to accept as an suitable compromise.

Tony narrowed his eyes as Wade scampered off, making another mental note to keep the knife-loving tyke as far away from Peter as possible.

“I found the knife!” Thanos held aloft the pink plastic cake knife like a trophy. “It was under the table the whole time.”

“Awesome, let’s have some cake and be done with this soap opera.” With a shudder, Tony finally let go of Peter.

Nightmares, Steve, and tiny knife murderers. Tony hoped those were all the problems he’d have to deal with today.

But as he watched Steve distribute paper plates to everyone, Tony couldn’t escape the sinking feeling that his real problems were about to begin.
Chapter End Notes

It took 5 chapters but Steve finally showed up! More shenanigans are on the horizon, the next update will be on my birthday.

Thanks to everyone who's been reading this so far!
“Is your other dad a ninja?” Shuri asked Peter as they sat on the floor munching on slices of cake. “The way he grabbed Wade was like a ninja maneuver. I bet he could’ve cut the cake with one fist like a karate chop.”

“He should have cut Wade with a karate chop.” Wanda stabbed at her cake with a scowl. “Wade was going to kill you.”

“He didn’t mean it.” Peter answered. He knew Wade tended to get a little excited around pointy objects, but Peter was positive that the other boy wouldn’t actually have knifed him.

Positive. Peter cast a look over his shoulder towards the Time Out Corner, where Wade had been placed after his stunt with the knife.

Wade was rolling around on the sponge-tiled floor of the enclosure, humming tunelessly to himself. When he noticed Peter looking in his direction, the blond boy grinned broadly and made a stabbing gesture.

…Peter was reasonably sure Wade wouldn’t have knifed him. He shuddered and turned back to Wanda, who gave him a ‘what did I tell you’ look.

Wanda glared across the room where Mr Thanos was having stern words with Colossus, the huge Russian man who babysat her, Pietro, and Wade. “Wade is so grounded, Mr Colossus is never gonna let him watch TV again.”

“I wish you were coming with us today. There’s so much cool stuff at the planetarium that I wanted to show you,” Peter said to her, feeling sad one of his friends wouldn’t be accompanying them.

“I wish I could go, but I’m still grounded from the time I kicked stupid Mr Thanos.” Wanda began taking out her frustrations at the world on her cake, mashing it into paste. “And now I’m gonna be stuck at home with stupid Wade. Ugh.”

“I’ve never been grounded because I’m a model student,” Shuri said proudly. “I can’t wait to hang out today with you and your dad, Peter!”

“Yeah! I can’t wait to see all the new spaceships- aah!” Peter flinched as a knife appeared right in front of his nose.

“Aah!” Shuri hands flew to cover her mouth.

“Aah!” Wanda jumped, almost upending her cake onto the floor.

“Knife.” Wade grinned.
After the initial shock died away, Peter realised that the knife in front of his face was pink and made of plastic instead of steel grey and sharp. It was the one Mr Thanos had used to divide up the cake - although the blade had been mostly cleaned, there were smudges of frosting on the sides.

“Happy birthday Peter!” Wade said cheerfully, presenting the pink knife to Peter with the air of a penguin offering up its most treasured pebble.

“Uh… thanks, Wade?” Peter accepted the pink knife warily, which sent Wade into peals of uproarious laughter.

“What’s wrong with him?” Shuri whispered to Wanda, who shrugged dismissively.

“He’s always like this.”

“Come, Wade, it’s time to go home.” Colossus scooped the cackling boy up under one arm and exited the classroom.

Peter examined the plastic knife. Pink wasn't really his favorite color, but it’d be rude to throw a gift away. There wasn't much he could do with it anyway; the scalloped edge made it unfit for slicing anything firmer than a sponge cake. “What do I do with this?”

Shuri shrugged. “We can always use it play pirates.”

Wanda slowly munched on a piece of her mashed-up cake. “Then I want to be the sea witch.”

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Tony sank against the wall, clutching the styrofoam cup of staff room coffee Thanos had given him (“you look like you need it,” the big man had pressed it into his hands with a sympathetic look, before squeezing his shoulder with one of those massive hands).

Between sips of the bitter liquid - boy, that was some strong java - Tony kept an eagle eye on Peter, who was sitting in a huddle with his friends. Tony knew it was little mean of him, but he felt relieved that Wade had been sent home, because right now he wanted Peter to stay far, far away from the creepy little weirdo.

With a sigh, Tony tipped his head back against the wall. The drama had sent his brain into overdrive, unable to stop generating the worst scenarios: What if Peter had gotten stabbed and lost a limb? Or gotten tetanus? God only knew where that blade had been, for all Tony knew it was crawling with some ghastly blood-borne disease. Maybe he should think about enrolling Peter in some self-defense classes? No, what if his precious boy scraped a knee? Tony would stop at nothing to hunt down every person responsible, even if he had to sue every dojo in the area to kingdom come. Was it too late to change kindergartens again?

Tony snapped out of his thoughts when a plate of cake appeared in front of his face.

“Cake delivery?” Steve was holding out the paper plate with a careful smile.

Great. As if dealing with tiny murderers wasn't enough, now Tony had to deal with the sudden reappearance of his ex-husband. Of all days, today had to be the worst possible time for Steve to reappear, and Tony’s hopes of having a stress-free day of father-son bonding were crumbling to dust before his eyes.

Maybe the world really was trying to give him a heart attack.
Honestly, Tony didn't know how Steve had the gall to show up and act as if they'd had a disagreement over whose turn it was to do the dishes. All Tony could see now was the face of the man who had pretty much dropped off the planet for two years. Who had brazenly lied to him again and again.

It still hurt.

But.

Steve had also decisively saved Peter from being knifed, and as much as Tony wanted to be angry, it was really difficult not to be a little swayed by that. Heck, it was tough not be swayed by how Steve looked now; this motorcycle jacket-wearing, scruffy-bearded Steve was a far cry from the Steve who used to shave religiously and, at one point owned enough powder-blue plaid shirts to outfit a small army.

Tony felt his heart rate start to speed up again. His nerves got a workout on the best of days, but today it felt like they were running multiple ironman triathlons. This was so awkward. There was nothing Tony wanted more than to flee the scene and start a new life on another continent. Or maybe the international space station. No, that wasn’t far enough. Perhaps one of the neighbouring galaxies. Anything to avoid dealing with these uncomfortable situations.

Steve’s smile was starting to slip off his face, and the hand holding the plate had begun to waver.

Tony realised he’d been silent a beat too long. He sighed and accepted the plate from Steve, electing to go the diplomatic route for now. Everyone was still shaken from Wade’s knife attack, there was no sense in Tony causing another scene. “Making the career jump to delivery boy?”

“I only deliver on special occasions.” Steve leaned against the wall, encouraged Tony’s acceptance of his peace offering.

“What's special about this?” Tony asked grouchily, staring at his cake. It had gone slightly melty in the summer heat, streaks of red and blue icing fusing into each other.

“Oh, you know. I wanted to see-” Steve clammed back up, though it looked like it pained him. Whatever he had wanted to say swirled behind his eyes instead, soft and sad.

Under the pretence of balancing the cake plate and coffee cup in one hand, Tony took another stealthy look at his ex. Steve looked like he’d been through a rough few years - it certainly didn’t seem like he’d been sipping cocktails in the Bahamas or wherever he’d vanished to.

*Hasn't he been taking care of himself? Why does he look like he's been living really rough... no! Stop thinking that!* Tony had expected to feel the sweet thrill of vengeance at the less than perfect appearance of his ex-husband, but the sight just made him uneasy. Something felt wrong about seeing clean-cut, forthright Steve looking older, more worn down, and - for lack of a better word - lost. Tony couldn’t find it in himself to kick the man when he already looked so down.

Plus, it didn’t help that the other thing time and wear had done was make Steve look even *hotter*. In a more mature, rough-edged way.

It wasn't fair.

Steve cleared his throat, and Tony recognized, with the hard-won experience of a man who’d endured years of soul-crushing corporate networking events, the unmistakable air of someone gearing up to make awkward small talk.
Steve took a deep breath. “So... Hi.”

Tony studied his cake. “Hey.”

“How are things?”

“Not too bad, how are you?”

Steve’s eyebrow twitched. “I'm fine. How's work?”

“Good, how's yours?”

A sigh. “You don't really want to hear…”

“You're right, I don't.” Tony poked at his cake glumly. “Let’s go back to playing the game where we see who can ask the most pointless questions.”

“They wouldn't be pointless if you'd give me a real answer. Stop dodging.” And now Steve was using his Trying To Be Patient voice. “Believe it or not, I actually do care what goes on in your life.”

“Funny, here was I thinking you’d done an amazing job indicating everything to the contrary.”

Tony could count on one hand the number of times Steve and him had interacted in the last two years- Technically he could count it on both hands, if he formed them into a big round zero. A zero which spoke volumes.

Steve’s eyebrows drew together, looking pained. “It’s not that I didn’t want to contact you, it’s-”

“Yeah, yeah. Something something too important for me to understand, blah blah.” Tony started chopping the corners off his cake. “Which brings us back to your vague-ass questions. ‘How are you’ - did you mean physically? Mentally? Psychologically? Metaphysically? Emotionally?”

“Tony, I just want to talk. Stop trying to pick a fight.”

A fight? Tony thought he'd been doing a great job of being civil so far. Steve showing up uninvited was bad enough without him trying to lecture Tony about being difficult.

Tony drew himself up. “As mentioned before, things are just dandy.” Today was *supposed* to be a nice day filled with fun father-son bonding, but here he was enduring the torture of small talk with Steve’s self-righteous ass…

“If you don’t want to talk about yourself, fine. Will you at least tell me how Peter has been?” A slight edge had entered Steve's voice.

Tony made a non-committal sound and began shovelling cake into his mouth so he wouldn't have to talk anymore. Mm, chocolate.

“Excuse me, Mr Peter's-Other-Dad?”

They both turned to see one of Peter’s friends standing in front of them. It was the creepy dark-haired girl, Wanda, if Tony remembered right. He didn’t like Peter hanging out with her, either.

“I am Wanda.” She dragged forward the large plushie that she had been carrying with her. “This is Viz.”

“Hello Wanda, Viz, I am Steve Rogers.” Steve, polite schmuck that he was, acknowledged them.
both with a tip of his head.

“Viz wants to thank you for saving Peter.” Wanda held out one of Viz’s arms to Steve. “Peter is my best friend and we’re happy Wade didn't kill him.”

“You're very welcome, Viz.” Steve shook the plushie’s arm like he was greeting the president, and earnestness of it made Tony want to cringe. “It sounds like your cousin, Wade, just got excited, is all.”

“That's cuz you don't have to live with him.” Wanda said darkly. “He’ll pay for it, I’ll make sure.”

“Well… I’m sure he didn’t mean any harm…” Steve sounded bemused.

“Are you really a ninja?” without warning, Wanda switched topics. She wrapped Viz’s arms over her shoulders like a backpack. “Do you do ninja things like climbing up walls and throwing shurikens? My best friend Shuri says you're a ninja.”

Tony decided to inject himself into the conversation. “Hold up, I thought Peter was your best friend? You can't have more than one BFF, that’s the complete antithesis of what ‘best’ means.”

Steve gave a low sigh. “There’s no need to be pedantic, they’re just kids.”

“What? I’m just saying,” Tony argued. “Next thing you know they’ll be going down the rabbit hole of wrong word usage-”

Wanda gave Tony the stink eye. “You're a jerk.”

Tony responded maturely by sticking his tongue out at her. “At least I know what words mean.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve looked like he was trying to conceal a smile. Tony felt an grin rising to his lips and he quickly fought it down. No, bad Tony, don’t encourage him with banter.

“It was nice to meet you, Wanda and Viz.” Steve replied firmly, putting an end to the conversation before it could devolve further. “I hope the both of you have a great day.”

Wanda bowed her head as if she were bidding a dignitary farewell. “Bye, Peter’s-Ninja-Dad.” She gave Tony another dirty look before stalking back to join her friends.

“You shouldn't be encouraging her delusions,” Tony speared another chunk of cake. “Charles told me they’ve been trying and failing to wean her off that devil toy for months. We even have a parents’ group chat and everything.”

“Well, you didn’t need to be so rude to her, not every kid is a tiny adult.” Steve set down his plate, having finished his own cake. “We've all got our own ways to cope. Having a favorite toy shouldn’t do her any harm in the long run.”

Tony sulked. “Whatever, I don’t need your opinions on my childcare decisions. You've always been better at understanding kids than I was, no need to rub it in.”

“You handled that situation with Wade pretty well.”

“I froze. You were the one who actually stopped tiny Jason Voorhees from attacking Peter.” Tony admitted, wishing he'd done something more useful than panicking.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit. Nobody doubts you’re a great dad.” Steve shook his head, and the gentle movement ruffled the locks of his hair like the wind through a picturesque field of
barley. Distracted by the sight, it took Tony a few moments to realise that Steve’s words were not
negative. Huh. That was a first.

Tony clamped his jaw shut to prevent himself from gawking. “Nobody doubts it? Even you?”

“I never have.” Steve answered without hesitation, voice sincere and true. “There's nowhere better
for Peter to be than with you. I know you'd do anything to keep him safe.”

“It's my job to. I'd take a bullet for him.” Tony said gruffly, caught off guard by the sudden
sincerity of Steve’s words. Grudgingly, he added. “But it's not like I did much. If I remember right,
you're the one who stepped in to save the day.”

“Couldn't have done it alone. We do make a good team, don’t we?” there was a note of melancholy
in Steve’s voice, and when Tony looked up at him, the blond man was gazing back.

Those summer-blue eyes were still the same, and so were the crinkles that formed at the corners
when Steve smiled.

It reminded Tony of more optimistic times, when it was just them against the world. Because it
was true, they had made a good team back then, with Steve’s steadiness complementing Tony’s
creativity. Back then, when they’d both been starry-eyed enough to believe that as long as they
were together, anything was possible.

Until the day Tony found out the truth about what Steve had done. Learning it had shattered his
heart into a thousand pieces, because there was only one reason why Steve could have kept a secret
like that for so long: Steve had never loved him.

No, worse than that.

That Steve actually hated him.

That realization had been more painful than the lie, and the the beginning of the end for both of
them. Those months had been the worst of Tony’s life. It had taken a long time to piece himself
back together, and if he hadn't had Peter there to provide that spark of light and goodness, Tony
didn't want to imagine how much worse off he'd be.

Allowing himself to get sucked back into Steve’s orbit was a bad, horrible, no-good idea.

But… it was especially hard to think about being cautious now, not when Steve was wearing that
smile on his face, the one that made Tony feel like he was made of gold. Like he was someone
good, someone who mattered. Because despite all that had happened, all the horrible things Tony
had said and all the painful secrets Steve had lied about…

Against his better judgement, and even though he knew it would never ever be reciprocated, Tony
Stark was still irrevocably, inexorably not over Steve Rogers.

Tony was so screwed.

“Can we try this again?” Steve ventured. The look in his eyes was more intent now, as if he had
sensed the slight shifting in Tony’s thoughts. “How’ve you been, Tony?”

Tony bit his lip, and decided to concede a bit of ground. There was no harm in being civil, just for
today. “…I don’t set the kitchen on fire anymore, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

Bringing up that incident made Steve chuckle. “I’m pretty impressed you finally learned how to
“I was told I make a mean lasagna. Well, Peter likes it and his opinion is the only one I care about, so there.” Tony answered with a flicker of pride. “You do know I have a genius-level IQ, right? I burned a few things, but cooking wasn’t some insurmountable task. You’d probably like to believe I'm completely helpless without you, but—”

“Helpless isn’t a word I’d ever associate with you.” Steve cut in. “You’ve never been the type to sit around and let other people solve your problems. That’s what I’ve always l- ah,” Steve caught himself as a slight flush dusted his cheeks. “—what I’ve always admired about you.”

The fumble didn’t escape Tony’s notice. The back of his neck felt hot all of a sudden, so he crossed his arms, ignoring the feeling. “You got that right, at least. I never stop thinking of solutions. Speaking of, my company is working on a new prototype for—” knowing he was taking the coward’s way out, Tony changed the subject to something safer: technology.

Rambling on about science was a lot easier than difficult conversations about family. If Steve noticed his tactical retreat he didn’t comment on it. He listened to Tony attentively, only inserting the occasional question. Tony realised that this was the longest conversation they’d had without yelling at each other.

Tony almost wished he could prolong it, but there was no way he was going to beg.

When Tony finally talked himself dry, Steve nodded.

“That’s the Tony I know. You’ve always excelled at anything you set your mind to.” Steve replied, a note of yearning in his voice. “But you also seem a more grounded than you used to be. Responsible.”

“Part and parcel of being a dad,” Tony shifted his weight from one foot to the other. They were back in uncomfortable territory again, and he had never felt so out of his depth. He had no inkling what to make of this new Steve, who fired off so many compliments in rapid succession.

It was a far cry from how Steve had been during their marriage: hypercritical and bossy to a fault, always ready to point out all the things Tony had been doing wrong. Tony scowled as the memory of those critiques ran through his head: ‘Tony you’re too reckless, Tony you need to take better care of your health, Tony we don’t need ten laser security alarms in Peter’s room…’

Steve seemed to sense the direction his thoughts had taken. “People change. I’m not the same person I used to be either.” Those blue eyes dimmed, going distant and inscrutable.

Fascinating as it was to watch Steve brood, Tony knew he had to address the elephant in the room. He cleared his throat. “Why’d you come back? Why now?”

Steve’s focus snapped back to him. “To see Peter.”

Tony drummed his fingers against his thigh. “And now you’ve seen him. What’s the real reason?”

“Is it so unbelievable that I’d want to see you both again? That I’d missed—” Steve answered.

“You didn’t have a problem ghosting Peter for two years.” Tony replied archly.

“I’m here now.” Steve’s eyes sparked to life with another annoyingly mysterious emotion, but it was gone before Tony could analyze it any further. “So I was hoping we could make a day of it. All three of us.”

Steve continued wistfully. “Yes, it’s been far too long since we spoke. How about after school, we celebrate Peter’s birthday together the way we used to?”

Tony’s heart leapt in his chest. All of a sudden, possibilities stretched out in front of him, exhilarating and terrifying. “You think you can just show up out of nowhere and ask me- ask us to hang out with you?”

“Why not?” Steve’s blithe response was infuriating. Once upon a time Tony had found Steve’s take-charge assertiveness appealing, but he'd forgotten how irritating it was on a daily basis. But that was Steve all over, making decisions based on what he felt was best for everyone.

“Because-” Tony took an indignant step forward, even though it made him have to lean up to meet Steve’s gaze. “Because- I'm still pissed with you! You can't expect everything to be hunky-dory just because we had one non-violent conversation! Besides, I already made plans to go to the planetarium with Peter, Shuri, and-” he ran a nervous hand through his hair. “-and you aren’t invited. I… too bad.”

Steve’s expression saddened, which Tony thought was extremely unfair. It was unfathomable why Steve was now dangling the offer of - friendship? Partnership? Something else? Whatever this was - in front of him, when he’d made it clear how much he despised Tony. After all, Steve had hated him enough to disappear for two years without so much of a peep.

Not to mention, there was one glaring caveat with what Steve was proposing. Tony had to get his plans back on their original Steve-less course before everything turned into an even bigger trainwreck. Which would probably result in Steve hating him even more.

Steve watched silently, unaware of Tony’s internal turmoil.

Tony swallowed past the dryness in his throat. “Actually, there’s-” his heart started to pound, realizing in despair that there was no escaping this part of the conversation. “I didn’t mention this before, but-”

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked, concerned. “What is it?”

Tony winced. “Christ, I don't know how to say this without sounding like a total douche, but-”

“Just tell me.”

“The thing is, I’m kinda- um-”

“Tony.”

“I'm seeing someone.” Tony blurted out.

Chapter End Notes

[telenovela zooms]
Yeah I was excited that I updated an extra chapter xD I'm trying to make a real push to update more this month

FYI this birthday arc was only supposed to be 2 chapters, but I ended up writing way more than I expected because Steve and Tony suck up all the spotlight with their Drama. It's really throwing off my chapter wordcount :0

It’s funny because the writers of Infinity War had the same problem: “We didn’t [include a reunion of Steve & Tony in Infinity War]. We tried in a few drafts and it ground things to a halt”. Because the boys need like 50k+ words to work out their issues

See ya on the 24th!
Happy birthday to me! As a present, here are 2 chapters

When Steve was fourteen, he’d gotten his ribs broken after picking a fight with the class bully. As Gil Hodge’s heel ground down on his chest, the sheer intensity of the pain had stolen Steve’s breath away. He’d been helpless to do anything but hope his heart didn’t burst under the crushing pressure.

It felt like that now, as Steve struggled to process the words he’d just heard.

“I'm seeing someone.” The way Tony said it was half-apologetic, half-defiant, as if daring Steve to call him out on it.

After his initial shock faded, Steve recognized the second emotion that rushed in to be pure, burning, jealousy.

The idea of anyone taking Tony away made Steve want to obliterate something. As he gazed at the man he’d once shared his life with, every feeling Steve had locked away came surging back with a vengeance. No, nothing had changed.

*Steve was still in love with him. He was Tony's and Tony was his.*

Tony looked almost exactly same as he had two years ago, still a fan of band shirts with casual blazers. Maybe he had a little more grey in his goatee and the bags around his eyes were a little darker - those brown eyes were still so beautiful and expressive - but it was as if the years between them had never happened.

God, Steve had missed him so much.

That Tony was now actually listening to him instead of shouting, throwing things, or storming off, was a vast improvement over how their last interaction two years ago had gone down. At a few points of their conversation, it almost felt like Tony wasn't angry anymore, and had missed him as much as Steve had. At least that was what Steve dared to hope.

*I should have told him I loved him more,* the regret hit Steve like a ton of bricks. Tony was so bright, always sparking with ideas and life. Sometimes those ideas burned a little too hot, and Steve had to jump in before situations got out of control. Tony never saw it that way though, always taking Steve’s concern as criticism.

Then again, communication had never been their strong point. It was difficult, sometimes, to get through to Tony, who only ever seemed to communicate beneath multiple layers of subtext and was capable of detecting triple meanings in the most innocuous of statements. Steve had tried to adapt, but it just wasn’t how he was wired: whenever Steve saw a problem, he tended to go ahead and deal with it quietly before it could become a danger to everyone. However, Tony only ever seemed to interpret his attempts at being helpful as bossiness.

Nothing was ever simple where Tony was concerned.
Everything between them always seemed to get lost in transmission, even the best intentions getting twisted round and coming out wrong. It was times like these Steve wished he could take Tony by the hand, sit him down, look into his eyes, and speak plainly for once. But they’d never got round to fixing their communication issues while they were married.

And now, it was too late.

Steve closed his eyes, remembering with a pang the events that had torn them apart. Back then, Steve thought that insulating Tony and Peter from the truth was the best way to protect them. How wrong had he been; because not had Tony found out anyway, he’d found out at the worst possible time, and was livid at being kept in the dark.

The fallout had been devastating.

If there was anything Steve could have done to fix things, he would have jumped at it. But his presence only seemed to cause Tony more pain. There didn’t seem to be any solution but for Steve to remove himself from the equation.

There was no other way - after the part he'd played in betraying Tony's trust, Steve wasn't sure he could trust himself not to hurt them any more. The worst punishment of all had been having to leave Peter, but after all the things Steve had done, he didnt deserve to be around. If any of them could be a better parent, it was Tony.

It was better that Steve wasn’t there.

But the thought of cutting them out of his life completely was unbearable - Steve would’ve sooner chopped off his own arm. All he could do was keep an eye from a distance, and help where he could… in secret, because there was no way Tony would ever want to accept anything from him. And so the burner phone had been his way of leaving a line of communication open, just in case Tony’s heart softened. By leaving the proverbial ball in Tony's court, he’d be giving Tony the agency to contact him when he felt ready.

Only problem was Tony never did.

And so for two years Steve had stayed away, missing Tony like a drowning man missed air. Sometimes, he wished he could pick up the phone and make the call himself, but Steve had lost the right to do that when he betrayed Tony's trust. The pain of missing Tony was compounded by the persistent silence, but Steve had accepted that as his punishment for his role in the whole mess. The worst times were when he woke from nightmares of awful things happening to Tony and Peter, and all he wanted to do was to just go home.

But he couldn’t go home yet. The time hadn’t come… Until now.

Now that Steve was stateside again, he’d summoned his courage and decided to reach out. Even if Tony never forgave him, Steve owed it to him to offer some closure. Not to mention he hadn’t seen Peter in so long, god, he’d missed so much of his life…

Steve gritted his teeth. He couldn't keep his thoughts straight when the only refrain blaring through his head was I can’t believe Tony already replaced me.

He wished he hadn’t waited so long.

All the words Steve had hoped to say now tasted as bitter as ashes, and the awful silence between them kept growing bigger.
“Oh.” Steve said lamely.

Tony gripped the wrist of his left hand, a nervous habit he’d never quite managed to kick. “Yeah, I'm just putting it out there. It's, ah, only been a few weeks. A few dates, here and there, so, uh, it’s not like we’re picking out curtains, or. Y’know. Stuff.”

Sure, Steve had acknowledged the possibility of Tony moving on, but the likelihood seemed academic at the time. Easy to push it to the back of his mind like an unwanted piece of furniture. Hearing Tony’s confession in person made it all too real, and it made him want to confront this unknown person and see for himself what they had that Steve didn’t…

Steve clenched his fist, trying to suppress the flare of dismay and jealousy. It would do him no favors in Tony’s eyes if Steve’s first action was to showcase caveman behaviour. He’d let Tony down in too many ways to ever hope for anything more - That Tony was even standing here talking with him instead of ignoring him was nothing short of a miracle.

“Can you stop looking at me like a kicked puppy?” Tony’s eyes were suspiciously bright when he narrowed them at Steve. “I thought this was what you wanted - the whole ‘let’s move on with our lives and try to be happy?’ shtick. Geez.”

“I’m happy for you.” Steve said mechanically, because there wasn't anything else he could say. “Just… surprised.”

“You don’t have to sound so disappointed, it’s not like you were gonna-” Tony sucked a breath through his teeth. “I wasn’t trying to drop this bombshell or anything.” He dropped his gaze, suddenly finding the floor tiles very interesting. “He's… nice, you'd like him.”

Not a chance. Steve hated the asshole already.

“He's a doctor-”

Steve hated Mr Smarty Pants even more.

“-Peter gets on with him too-”

That’s it. Time to call up Sam for help un-plastering that hidden room in the basement…

Tony continued, oblivious to Steve’s homicidal thoughts, “And we’ve been on a few outings together. PG-rated stuff, if you really want to know. Mostly the park and movies. We’re bringing Pete and his friends to the planetarium this afternoon for a birthday outing-”

Steve looked at him sharply. “That was our place.” So many memories were attached to the planetarium: their first date, the place Tony had proposed, the third, tenth, and twenty seventh times they’d almost gotten caught going at it in public.

The notion of Tony bringing his new friend there made Steve want to…

Tony took a defensive stance. “The planetarium is Peter’s favorite place, we're didn’t start boycotting it just because you weren’t around. If that were the case, I'd have to avoid half the places in this town.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this? Were you ever going to?” Steve questioned. To his horror, a hurt edge had crept into his voice.

Tony’s throat worked as he pushed himself off the wall. “Oh, that's rich, coming from you. Do you
really want to get on my case for keeping secrets?"

There were a lot of ways Steve wanted to respond to that, but before he could say any of them, a small figure crashed into his legs. “Hey Dad! Hey Pops!”

Steve wiped the troubled expression off his face - out of the corner of his vision he noticed Tony doing the same - and bent down to lift Peter into a bear hug. “Slow down, sparky. Happy birthday.”

As Peter joyfully wrapped his arms around him, Steve’s heart squeezed painfully. Even after all the time Steve had been gone, Peter still gazed at him as if Steve had hung the moon.

Steve wished he were half as amazing as Peter believed him to be. God knows the kid deserved every good thing in the world.

“What, no hug for me, Pete?” Tony mock-complained while picking up the backpack Peter had unceremoniously dumped on the floor.

Peter patted at Steve’s cheeks, hands brushing the bristles of his beard. “Your face is all fuzzy now. Kinda like a raccoon.”

The soft patting on his face made Steve smile. “Well, that's not the worst thing I've been compared to.”

“What’s the worst thing?” Peter tilted his head to one side, and the gesture was so much like Tony that Steve wanted to hug him tightly and never let go. Being able to see Peter’s face, hear his voice, hold him - it reminded Steve that there was still good in the world worth believing in. Worth fighting for.

“I’m afraid it’s a bad language word. Anyway,” to change the subject, Steve picked up the birthday gift he’d brought along. “I got a present for you. Go ahead and open it,” As the boy unwrapped it, he felt the need to add, “It’s from a really old movie, I’m not sure if you’ve seen it…”

“It’s Nemo!” Peter hugged the clownfish tsum to his chest, which looked huge against his tiny frame. “How’d you know Finding Nemo is my favorite Disney film?”

“I remember that we used to watch it together all the time,” Steve relaxed, relieved Peter liked the tsum he’d picked out for him. He’d been a little afraid that the time apart would have blurred the boy’s memory of him, but Peter was still the same sweet kid he’d always been.

“Just keep swimming, just keep swimming…” Peter sang, burying his face into the tsum.

“Maybe we can watch it again to catch up.” Steve gave him a gentle squeeze as Peter’s muffled singing emanated from the plushie.

“Oh. But when Dad isn’t around because it makes him cry.” Peter lifted his face so only his eyes were showing above the tsum. “I haven’t watched it for years.”

“I don’t cry.” Tony looked stricken by the revelation. “And if you wanted to watch it with me, all you had to do is ask.”

Shuri, Peter’s other friend, walked over at a sedate pace and greeted Steve politely. “Hi, Peter’s-Ninja-Dad, it’s nice to meet you.” Steve nodded back, wondering if that was just going to be his name from now on.
Shuri turned to Tony, switching to a more friendly tone of voice. “Thanks for inviting me, Mr Stark. Wade got sent home, so it looks like it’s just me today.”

The corners of Tony’s mouth quirked up as he faced her. “We’re happy as always to have you, Shuri. Hey, ask your dad when you can next hang out. Next time, you and Peter can tag along to my lab and we’ll all smash things in my particle accelerator. Sound fun?” The two fell into science talk about atoms, EMPs, DNA, quarks, nanotechnology, and dark matter. Tony clearly got on better with Shuri than Peter’s other two friends, but that had always been his style - where Tony tended to treat kids like little adults, Steve himself preferred empathizing with them on the same level.

When they walked out to the carpark, there was a man waiting by Tony’s Audi, who smiled as they approached. The man was tall and slim, the silver hair at his temples giving him a distinguished appearance. He looked sophisticated. Respectable. Everything Steve wasn't.

“Hi, Dr Stephen!” Peter waved.

“Hey there Peter.” Dr Stephen’s face morphed into a mock-serious look. “I’m very afraid to tell you this but there’s something growing in your head.”

“What?” Peter’s hands flew to his cheeks in horror.

“Don't worry- Let me get it for you.” With a flourish, Stephen plucked a toy car from behind Peter’s ear. “Here you go, happy birthday.”

“How did you do that?” Peter’s eyes were wide as he accepted the toy, overwhelmed by the joy of receiving two presents.

“Magic.” Stephen ruffled the boy’s hair.

“Can you do Pops next?” Peter tugged excitedly on Steve’s arm. “Maybe he has stuff in his ears too!”

Stephen looked over Steve like he’d found something unpleasant on the underside of his expensive shoes. “I don't think so, Peter. Some people’s craniums are absolutely empty.”

Steve raised a brow at the veiled barb. He’d been prepared to be stiffly polite to Tony’s new companion, but now?

It was on.

Glancing over from his conversation with Shuri, Tony cleared his throat. “Yeah, so before this gets too awkward - Steve, meet Stephen. Stephen, Steve.”

“It's nice to finally meet you, Steve. I've heard so much about you from Tony.” Stephen shook Steve’s hand in his cool grip. His demeanor was polite, but there was something about it pushed all Steve’s buttons.

“Is that right?” Steve responded blandly, returning the handshake with an equally tight grip. “I hope he’s given you the highlights.”

Stephen’s lip curled, his sharp green eyes regarding Steve the same way people would a horse that had wandered into places it shouldn't be.
Steve didn't know it was possible for his irritation to multiply, yet inexplicably, it did. He levelled a glare at Stephen, concentrating all the displeasure he could muster in one gaze.

The three of them made an awkward standoff around the car: Steve and Stephen sizing each other up on one side, Tony hovering on the other side, looking extremely ill-at-ease.

“Right. Anyhoo,” Tony began hurriedly herding Peter and Shuri into the car. “It was… cool to see you again, Steve, but we’re on a schedule and we really have be going.”

Steve didn’t like the sound of that at all. “You can't just ask me to leave.”

“You're right, I can’t. That's why I'm telling you to leave,” Tony quipped. “So, goodbye, sayonara, arrivederci…”

“This is the first time I’ve seen Peter in years, I’ve barely talked to him. You can’t just send me away.” Steve’s knuckles tightened on the door. “This isn’t fair.”

“Few things in life are. Go away.” Turning away, Tony busied himself with making sure the kids were buckled in. “We made plans and you weren’t part of them. Maybe call ahead next time. Or don’t. You seem good at that.”

There was no way Steve was going to take that lying down. “Why can’t you be reasonable for once in your life?”

The line of Tony’s shoulders stiffened. “Oh, I'm starting to want you to make me-”

Steve’s lips thinned. He didn't want this to turn into a fight, but the situation was hopeless unless some higher power came to his aid…

“Dad, is Pops coming with us?” Peter piped up from the car.

Tony leaned over the door with a placating expression. “I'm afraid Pops can’t make it today. But it’s okay, kiddo, we’re still going to have a great time with you, me, Dr Stephen, and your best friend Shuri.”

“But I want Pops to come too…” Tears began to well up in Peter’s eyes.

Just like that, Steve sensed the odds were starting to tip in his favor.

In addition to his intelligence and general cheekiness, Peter had inherited Tony’s eyes. They were big, brown, expressive, and able to fill with distressed tears at the drop of a hat. Tony would deny it to death, but he had not been above using puppy eyes to get his way. The number of times Steve had given in was truly embarrassing, but something in him was powerless to resist every time Tony looked at him like that. Steve couldn’t count how many times he'd wound up doing extra chores, taking the blame for stupid things, apologizing for things definitely hadn't been his fault… it wasn't fair how one sad-eyed look practically had him on his knees, begging for forgiveness.

Today, though, karma had come full circle and Tony was the one to face the unadulterated power of the sad puppy-eyed gaze.

Tony gulped.

“It is his birthday.” Steve crouched down so he was level with Peter, fighting valiantly to keep his face expressionless. As funny as the situation was, one laugh would ruin his chances.
“Please, Dad?” Peter’s eyes sparkled brighter than entire galaxies. “Pleeeeeease?”

Under Steve and Peter’s combined gazes, Tony looked like a hapless woodland creature caught in the headlights of an oncoming semi. “...I suppose your Pops… can…” each word sounded as if it was being torn from him “Join us for lunch…”

Steve’s heart leapt.

“Are you serious?” Stephen said incredulously. “Tony, what are you doing?”

“...But he can't come with us to the planetarium because he has a something very important that he can't afford to miss.” the pointedness of Tony's words left no room for doubt when he expected Steve to make his exit.

“Yay! Pops is coming!” cheered Peter, only having listened to the first half of the sentence. “Hear that, Shuri? He's coming too!”

“Woohoo,” said Shuri, who’d tuned out the entire conversation since sitting down.

“We'll all have to squeeze into the car,” Tony shut the door on the kids, looking like he wanted to be anywhere else. “Might be a little cramped, but I think we can fit. Thanks for thinking of the logistics when you invited yourself along.”

Ignoring the jab, Steve shook his head. “It’s fine, I drove my bike. Tell me where to go, and I’ll follow.”

As Tony grumpily gave him the address of the restaurant, Steve felt a flicker of hope in his chest. Maybe there was a way to salvage today after all.

Tony’s scowl turned strained. “Stop gloating, no one likes a bad winner. And I meant it, after lunch I want you gone.”

Steve wiped the thankful smile off his face and rearranged his expression into something appropriately neutral. It wasn't ideal, but for now he'd take what he could get.

The bigger battles could be fought later.
The bustling family restaurant was alive with chatter and cheerful retro pop blaring from the speakers. But it all wasn’t enough to mask the awkwardness which had settled over one table like a particularly stubborn stormcloud.

Steve and Stephen ended up sitting as far away from each other as possible, trading death glares across the circular booth. Tony was sitting next to Stephen, which left Peter and Shuri seated between Tony and Steve. The two kids were doodling in the restaurant’s complimentary coloring book with the complimentary color pencils. Stephen had one arm resting over the back of Tony’s seat, which was far too close for Steve’s liking.

“Are you kidding me?” Tony snapped as his phone buzzed yet again. Instead of rejecting it like he’d done the previous twenty times, Tony resignedly pushed his barely-touched sandwich aside and took the call. “Leave me alone, Pepper, I said I wasn't taking work calls today. No. Nuh-uh. I don’t care, find someone else to handle it…”

“What are you drawing there, Shuri?” Steve leaned over the table towards the kids.

Shuri proudly showed off her drawing of a fairy tale castle, which she had neatly colored in hues of pink, purple, and black. “A picture of my dream house! Over here is the tower for my cat cafe and large hadron collider…”

“-I don’t care if the lab’s on fire again!” Tony exclaimed into his phone. “Wait, is it actually on fire? I was being hyperbolic!”

“-and the observatory for my solar telescope!” Shuri finished proudly.

“How about you, Peter? What's that you've been working on? Show us.” Stephen inquired, noticing the care with which Peter was concentrating on his own art.

“No. It’s not ready.” Peter chewed his lip and put his arm over the coloring book to conceal what he’d been drawing. His other was cuddling the Nemo tsum - Steve's present - against his chest.

Steve noted, with a tinge of pride, that Peter hadn’t once let go of the tsum, while Stephen's gift had been left behind in Tony's car.

Tony rested an elbow on the table, rubbing at his temples tiredly. “Pepper, just ask Harley to assist, he's the only one who knows what he's doing. So what if he's an intern? He's got more of a spine than the rest of them…”

Peter closed his coloring book and whispered to Steve. “Can I have an ice cream, Pops?”
Tony’s head swiveled over, parental senses tingling at the mention of ice cream. “Nice try, Pete, but you know you’re not supposed to have any dessert until your fruit is all gone.”

Peter pouted. “But Pops-”

“Your Pops agrees with me, doesn’t he?” the look Tony directed at Steve dared him to countermand his order.

Steve nodded. “You heard him, Peter.”

“But it’s grapes…” Peter mumbled, sending Tony another pleading look.

But Tony was too distracted by his phone conversation to notice and fall prey to the puppy dog eyes a second time. Foiled thusly, Peter slid down in his seat with a huff of defeat.

“Grapes are good for you. They’re full of antioxidants and fiber, things a growing young boy like yourself needs.” Stephen said crisply. “Not to mention, a great source of copper, and many of the B vitamins…”

“Blech.” Disgustedly, Peter jabbed his fruit cup with a finger, which made the leftover grapes jiggle about like beetles.

Steve was about to say something encouraging when Stephen addressed him next.

“So, what do you do for a living, Steve?”

“Contract work.” Steve met Stephen’s green eyes squarely.

“Oh, who for?”

“An independent company.”

“Hm. Sounds rough.” Stephen leaned back against the seat, long fingers wrapped around a cup of tea. “Life isn’t easy when you just have a Bachelor’s degree.”

“I get by. I have a very specific skill set.” Steve began pondering whether the P in Stephen’s name stood for Prick.

“As do I, I’m a doctor. Well, my job involves saving lives, how many other jobs can claim that?”

Steve silently wished the other man’s head would explode.

Still smiling that insufferable smile, Stephen pressed on. “Why so secretive? What field do you work in?”

Tony butted in. “Hey, stop trying to one up each other. Today is for family time and I will not have any boring work talk at this birthday party- What was that?” He turned right back to his phone. “Obie’s making trouble again?”

Steve was about to tell Stephen where he could stuff his degrees when there came a nudge at his hand.

“Pops.”

Steve looked down to see Peter bumping his hand against his, like he was trying to offer a fist bump. In confusion, Steve knocked his large fist against Peter’s smaller one, but when the boy
repeatedly bashed their fists together, Steve realised his son was trying to pass him something. Curious about this new development, Steve opened his hand.

Peter placed a grape in his palm.

Steve stared at the offering in bewilderment, unsure how to respond. “Um, Pete? Why are you—” Peter gave him a beseeching look and jabbed a finger towards Tony as he mouthed a few words.

*Don't tell Dad.*

Amused, Steve put his finger to his lips in the universal sign for keeping a secret. One grape couldn’t hurt. Peter's eyes lit up with a mischievous smile, and winked back.

Barely ten seconds later, Steve felt another nudge at his hand as Peter passed him another grape, and then another. And another. And then another…

*Christ, why does a kid-sized serving of fruit have so many grapes?* Steve wondered as his hand started to fill up with fruit. He knew he shouldn't be encouraging Peter to be finicky about food, but this was the first time in years that he’d had a chance to bond with Peter over anything.

Besides, it was just a few grapes and skipping out a bit of fruit wouldn’t harm a tough kid like Peter in the long run. Sometimes Tony worried way too much.

“Obie showed up at the lab and made a scene?” Whatever Pepper replied was making Tony very upset. “I’ve tried to be understanding, but we’re heading in a new direction, that’s why it was better we parted ways with him.” Tony barked, knuckling at his brow. Stephen squeezed his shoulder reassuringly, and to Steve’s utter jealousy Tony allowed it, even leaning towards the doctor, clearly comfortable having him in his personal space.

Steve’s hand clenched under the table at the sight, one finger-twitch away from squishing the grapes to jam.

Just as Tony was about to let out another tirade, he caught sight of Peter’s empty fruit cup. His brown eyes narrowed. “I've never seen you finish your fruit so quickly before. Are you picking out the grapes again?”

Peter froze in the middle of passing his eighth grape to Steve under the table. “Grapes?”

“He kept his word, Tony.” Steve said evenly, quickly stuffing the grapes into his pocket. “Peter cleaned his plate, just like you said.”

“See?” With an angelic smile, Peter tipped his plate over to show that it was indeed empty. “Ice cream now?”

Tony eyed them both suspiciously, but let the matter drop with a terse nod.

“Yay!” Peter grabbed the menu with a cheer. Photographs of vibrantly colored ice cream with tantalizing descriptions dotted the page, all of them sounding equally enticing. “Wow… there are so many.”

Shuri scootched over to help in the dessert selection process. Her eyes lit up, awestruck by the sheer range of flavors. “I like the sound of The Ancient Rum & Raisin, but Black Cat Black Sesame looks good too.”

“I don’t know what to pick,” Peter said, trying to decide whether he wanted a scoop of Rainbow
Rocky Road or M’Baklava. As he flipped over to the final page, a splash of red caught his eye.

Taking up the entire page was a graphic print of a big red star which advertised the restaurant’s ice cream special: ‘Winter Soldier Surprise For Two! Pick any seventeen flavors! Comes with dry ice!’

Peter and Shuri gazed upon the photo of the sundae with wonder. Now this was an ice cream. The Holy Grail of desserts. A sundae to end all sundaes. In the future, people would build temples to the glory of this dessert and teach their children about it in sundae school. It was more than a sundae, it was a deity. A sundae-ity.

“It’s perfect.” Peter breathed.

“Let's do it.” Shuri raised a hand for a high five.

Shaking his head at them, Tony raised his mug for a sip of coffee. “How did he even get in the building? His access should’ve been revoked-” Tony blinked, realising his mug was empty. With his free hand, he signaled one of the waitstaff, mouthing a request for more coffee.

Steve and Stephen’s eyes locked across the table, then snapped to the island across the aisle where the coffee jugs, water pitchers, and spare cutlery were stored. Steve wasn’t a mind reader, but he knew his rival had reached the exact same conclusion.

Mission: Get Tony coffee.

The table rocked violently as Steve and Stephen launched themselves out of the booth to make a run for the coffee jug. It was sitting closer to Stephen, but Steve moved faster. He dove, practically snatching it out of the doctor’s hand. The coffee churned violently, but Steve didn't spill a drop.

“Um… I can do that.” The server looked terrified at having witnessed two grown men engaging in a shoving match for the coffee jug.

“It’s fine, I've got it.” Holding the coffee jug like a trophy, Steve returned to his seat and began filling Tony’s mug. He felt proud. He was Steve, Provider of Coffee. He had won the privilege of offering Tony coffee. The coffee for Tony, the coffee poured specifically for Tony's enjoyment, Tony's coffee...

Without breaking eye contact, Stephen initiated his counter move: he returned to the booth, put his arm around Tony’s shoulder, and pulled him closer, sending ‘what are you gonna do about it’ look back across the table.

Steve gripped the handle of the jug so hard the plastic creaked ominously under his hand.

Tony gave them both an unimpressed frown, indicating he didn’t appreciate being fought over like a piece of bread by two hungry ducks.

Oblivious to the drama, Shuri drummed her heels against the seat restlessly. “We already picked M’Baklava twice, can we get some different flavors for the Winter Soldier Surprise?”

“Trust me, it's really good, you're gonna want a double M’Baklava.” Peter answered. He scrutinized the list. “How about Nomad Nougat?”

“Oooh, yes! I like nougat too!” Shuri’s eyes lit up. “And we still need to choose our toppings!”

“Yeah! Lets get extra chocolate chips and sprinkles!”
Shrugging Stephen’s arm off his shoulder, Tony grabbed the sugar bowl and, to Steve’s mild horror, began pouring its contents into his coffee. And pouring. And pouring. Three seconds later, Tony was still pouring.

*There’s no way that tastes good,* Steve’s jaw started to ache in sympathy as he watched the saccharine cascade. Sure, Steve had known Tony had always had a sweet tooth, but it hadn’t been this bad when they had been together. “Tony, I think you’ve had enough-”

“You should be watching your sugar intake. Refined sugars are no good for you.” Stephen interrupted, reaching over to tug the sugar bowl out of Tony’s hands.

Tony scrunched up his nose and snatched the sugar bowl back to resume dumping tooth decay into his mug. “Let me live, doc. I like a little coffee in my sugar.”

“Tony doesn’t need you bossing him around.” Steve growled, automatically changing gears. The proprietary way Stephen treated Tony made him want to shove the green-eyed man out of the booth. After all, if there was anyone who was going to be concerned for Tony’s well-being, it ought to be Steve.

Stephen raised a snooty brow. “I’m sorry, are you a leading expert in healthcare?”

“I consider myself a leading expert in not being a douchebag.” Steve squared his jaw.

“Insults. Real mature.”

“Neither is being pretentious.”

“At least I give a damn about Tony’s health,” Stephen snapped.

“Tony is a grown man, you’re not the boss of him.” Steve glared.

“Tony is sitting right here and can speak for himself.” Tony muttered.

But the two men were too focused on their squabble to listen to anybody else, leaving Tony free to resume drowning his coffee in sugar. By now, he had amassed enough sugar that a small mound it had risen above the rim of his mug, like an island brought forth from the primordial soup by a capricious creator god.

Tony hummed to himself. Nothing like sugar to take his mind off Annoying Situation #1 and #2.

Stephen aimed a long finger in Steve’s face. “Out of the two of us, which one is a doctor? My professional opinion is backed up by science.”

“Doctor of what? Making balloon animals?” Steve sensed things were starting to go off the rails, but he didn’t care. All that mattered now was proving that this Stephen wasn’t better than him. “Don’t even presume to think you can just swoop in to replace me as Peter’s father-”

“Oh, I think you’ve done a good job erasing yourself from their lives all on your own.” Stephen seemed to have no compunctions about adding fuel to the fire.

Steve felt the vein in his head start to twitch. “Don’t get involved in things you don’t understand.”

“Enlighten me.” Stephen replied coldly.

“Can you both stop fighting for a second?” Tony snapped, phone pressed to his head. He took a
gulp of his over sweetened coffee to reinforce himself. “What? No, Pepper, I’m bringing a bunch of kids out for a playdate today, how do you think it’s going?”

Shuri pointed to the toppings list. “How about some mochi bits? And chocolate chips, and salted caramel, and raisins…”

“You like raisins?” Peter made a face.

Steve crossed his arms, knowing it made his shoulders bunch up. “I don’t know what Tony’s told you, but you have some balls coming in here and casting judgement on our lives.”

“You don’t need to be a genius to put the pieces together.” Stephen’s face was filled with unconcealed dislike. “After all the things Tony’s told me about you, I’d was expecting the real thing to be less disappointing.”

Tony pressed the heel of his hand against his other ear to block everything out. “...Pepper, things are kind of a mess. I know the board has been skittish even since Obie left, but I don’t have the bandwidth to deal with another power struggle right now—”

“I don’t give a damn what you think of me.” Steve threw back. “While I might not be perfect, I’ve never tried to make Tony into someone he’s not.” For all his faults, for all Tony could be difficult at times, there wasn’t anything Steve would change about him.

“Maybe you should have! Do you have any idea what your neglect did to him? Did to them?”

“Don’t even pretend you can understand we had together.” Steve glared. “And you probably don’t even know his favorite food!”

“It’s doughnuts, you fool!”

“Listen here, you son of a—”

“Which ice cream flavor would you like, Mr Stark?” Shuri leaned across the table.

Peter nodded excitedly. “Shuri and I are gonna share the Winter Soldier Surprise! But you can have some too! The flavors we picked are—” he started reading off the list. “Rainbow Rocky Road, Nomad Nougat, Cherry Jubilee—”

“White Wolfberry, Yondu Yoghurt, M’Baklava, M’Baklava, Kravanilla the Hunter,” Shuri chimed in. “Pym’s Pistachio Particles, Gam-bitter Lemon…”

“You might talk a big game with your degrees and fancy job, but that doesn’t make you good enough for him.”

“And you are? Going off what I’ve seen so far, it’s hard to tell what Tony ever saw in you.”

Tony closed his eyes. “Pepper, you’re gonna have to call me back. Shoot me a text or something. I can’t deal right now, there’s too much on my plate.”

“Dad! Daaad, which ice cream do you want?”

“...Malekith the Custard, Black Cat Black Sesame, Green Goblin Matcha, Doctor Otto’s Orange Creamsicle, Daredevil Durian…”

“Maybe you’re too stubborn to see that you’re not what’s best for Tony and Peter?” Stephen replied, exasperated.
“Why do you get to decide what’s best for them?” Steve was astounded by the man’s audacity. “Taking care of kids requires a lot more than knowing a few cheap parlour tricks. But I guess you wouldn’t know anything about family since you’ve never had one.”

Stephen put up his hands. “Touche, you’re the real magic expert. That disappearing act you pulled off two years ago is still a mystery to all of us.”

“How dare you.” the table rocked again as Steve surged to his feet. The rush of adrenaline made his vision go red around the edges.

Stephen leaped to his feet as well, fully ready to throw down as well.

All of a sudden, Steve realised that the entire restaurant had gone quiet: the other patrons were watching their standoff with bated breaths. Peter and Shuri’s mouths had dropped open in shock. Steve realised he was holding a bread plate as if preparing to fling it at Stephen’s head. On the opposite side, Stephen was holding a pair of salt shakers like throwing knives.

“What are you both doing?”

Tony had always possessed the ability to fill up a room with his larger-than-life personality. Never had that felt more evident than it did now, because pissed off didn’t even begin to describe the aura Tony was radiating. And he wasn’t even shouting; when Tony got really angry, it tipped over from fiery rage to tranquil fury.

Even though Steve and Stephen were both taller than him, they both shrank back in fear.

“Put those down, now.”

They hurried to obey. As Steve lowered his plate, he felt a hot flush of shame at having gotten so caught up in competing with Stephen. He couldn't help it - whenever Tony was involved, Steve's rationality tended to go flying out the window.

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. “You know how embarrassing it is when you both are behaving worse than the kids?”

“Everything alright at work?” Stephen asked innocently.

“Changing the subject isn’t going to get you out of trouble.” Tony said snappishly.

“This wouldn’t have happened if Rogers hadn’t been so argumentative and confrontational-” Stephen said, as if he hadn’t played his own role in escalating the fight.

Steve wanted to wring his neck.

“I'll deal with you later.” Tony turned and started climbing out of the booth. “Steve.”

Steve snapped to attention. “Yes?”

“Outside. I need to talk to you.” Tony’s dark eyes were alight with an expression suggesting he was two steps away from throttling something. Steve hoped it wouldn’t be him.

As they were halfway to the door Tony stopped, seeming to realise he’d forgotten something. Abruptly, he turned to the nearest server. “You.”

“Me?” The server squeaked.
Tony pointed. “Get those two kids the big ice cream. The winter- winter whatsit called?”

“The Winter Soldier!” Shuri supplied helpfully.

“One of those. With all the works.” Tony spun on his heel, storming out of the restaurant in a huff. Steve followed him with trepidation.

Neither of them noticed Peter watching them anxiously.

Chapter End Notes

Hahaha I’ve been wanting to write a Steve vs Stephen catfight for the longest time! It's my birthday so I can do what I want even if its silly and self indulgent >:3c

There’s one more part left in this birthday arc - how do you think it will conclude?

I’m out of the country for a while so the next part will be up in early September. Till them, hope you guys enjoyed this double chapter!
In the opposite booth, an entirely different conversation was taking place.

Xoliswa gave a low whistle as she watched Stark and his Ex exit the restaurant. “To be a fly on the wall for that conversation. I wish I had some popcorn.”

“Focus.” Ayo said, turning a page of the magazine she was pretending to read. “We’re supposed to be watching Shuri.”

“I know that.” Xoliswa rested her chin in her hands, wishing her partner wasn't such a stick in the mud. “But you have to admit that this job never gets old. These people have so much drama in their lives! So much more entertaining than my soaps.”

Ayo snorted. “Maybe you just have poor taste in TV shows.”

“You wound me. But don't you agree that this kindergarten gig is more exciting than expected? So many unexpected twists and turns, old flames, mysterious plots...” Xoliswa toyed with one of her dangling earrings. “I bet Okoye isn't having as much fun as us, and she's constantly surrounded by hormonal twenty-somethings on that college campus. I wonder if she’s been to any cool parties yet...”

Ayo took a sip of coffee. “It’s all the same to me. We’re here to work, not involve ourselves in drama.”

Her eyes flicked over to the opposite table. A humongous sundae had just arrived, and Shuri was gazing at it, clearly having some kind of holy experience.

Stark’s New Boyfriend was shaking his head disapprovingly at the ice cream.

Peter, Ayo noted, seemed less enthralled by the elaborate dessert. The young boy had been troubled every since his parents stormed out. Now, he kept throwing worried looks at the door, clutching a color pencil in his hands like a lifeline.

Ayo felt sorry for the poor kid, but he wasn't their problem. So she shrugged. “We're here to do a job.”

“Fine, fine.”

Ayo’s phone beeped with the arrival of a new message. As she read it, her frown deepened. “Since you enjoy intrigue so much, you’ll be pleased to learn of the latest development.”

“The girls from Control finally came back with the background check on Mr Ex Husband?” Xoliswa sat up straighter. “So do we know what we’re dealing with? What did they find?”

“That's the thing. Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Xoliswa’s brows drew together. “That doesn’t sound right. There must be an error.”

Ayo showed her the email. “On paper it says Rogers has been unemployed and living in DC for the past two years, but look at this image which was taken in Siberia…” she tapped a manicured nail
against the screen. “Something isn’t adding up.”

Xoliswa’s cheery mood drained away. Having an unknown subject in the mix could throw off all their security arrangements. As Shuri’s security detail, Ayo’s team had been required to vet all parties involved in this little playdate; the kindergarten staff, students, parents, the planetarium personnel, even Stark’s new boyfriend.

Now, because Stark’s ex-husband had showed up, all their plans could be compromised.

Xoliswa groaned internally at the thought of all that work gone to waste. This Rogers fellow wasn’t even supposed to be here today. Their training dictated one course of action for handling situations like this.

“Time to call the party off?” Xoliswa asked, business-like again. She leaned back against the seat, loosely resting her arm over the hidden pocket of her jacket where her taser was stowed.

“Hm,” Ayo glanced outside to where Stark and his Ex were talking in the car park. If Stark’s wildly gesticulating hands and Rogers’ slightly raised voice were answer enough. “Something tells me we might not need to, but stay alert anyway.”

Looking to all the world like a pair of women on a lunch date, the two bodyguards continued their vigil.

--

“By the holy toe beans of Bast.” Shuri whispered reverently as the Winter Soldier ice cream sundae arrived at their table, wreathed in dramatic clouds of dry ice. Seventeen ice cream flavors were piled high into a brightly-hued pyramid, vivid and magnificent.

Eagerly, Shuri took a big scoop of Black Cat Black Sesame and shoved it into her mouth. She let out a muffled squeal, eyes going wide, as the brain freeze hit her half a second later.

Stephen tutted. “When you eat something cold that quickly, you’re asking for a case of sphenopalatine ganglioneuralgia.”

“Ah! My brain!” Shuri squeaked, pressing her hands to her cheeks. “So cold…”

Stephen’s eye twitched. “Artificially sweetened desserts are everything wrong with this world. All those harmful emulsifiers and additives: calcium sulfate, polysorbate 80, magnesium hydroxide, Xanthan gum, corn syrup, potassium sorbate, mono and diglycerides…”

“Well… Peter's dad said it was okay!” Shaking off the effects of her brain freeze, Shuri resumed examining the dessert, trying to decide which flavor to try next.

“Hm. Tony doesn’t always make the best decisions, especially when Steve Rogers is involved…” Stephen glared at the sundae as if it had personally offended him.

Shuri poked Peter in the side. “You gotta try some of this! Stop drawing already!”

“You go ahead.” Peter hunched over his drawing.

Nothing could have lifted his spirits, not even if the ice cream sundae had been the size of a planet. He’d been coloring his drawing in an attempt to distract himself from the fact that it had been twenty whole minutes since Dad and Pops had stormed out of the restaurant.
Through the clouds of sublimating ice, he could see the figures of his parents through the window on the other side of the room. Their voices were too far away to be heard, but he knew what was going on.

They were fighting again. He wished there was something he could do.

“Suit yourself.” Shuri shrugged, and took a big bite of Kravanilla. “Aaah! My head hurts!”

Stephen shook a finger admonishingly. “Shuri, if you ate slower you wouldn't keep getting brain freeze.”

“I’m not rushing! This ice cream is just super cold, it feels like it’s scrambling my brain!” Shuri was already scooping up a big spoonful of M’Baklava. “And it's too yummy…”

Stephen picked up a spoon with a long-suffering sigh. “Well, since you've both already ordered this monstrosity, I might as well help defray some of the damage—”

“Hey, hands off! This ice cream is specifically for Peter and me. You can't have any!” Shuri smacked his spoon away with a clink. “And you kept lecturing us about how sugar is bad for you!”

“Believe me, I'm not eating it because I want to, I'm helping make sure you both don't have a sugar overload. Babysitting two sugar-high kids is not exactly my idea of fun.” Stephen snagged a spoonful of Rainbow Rocky Road against her protests. He took a bite of the luridly colored ice cream and almost gagged at the amount of sugar that hit his taste buds. “Disgusting. I don't understand why anyone would eat this garbage.”

Offended, Shuri pulled the ice cream dish away from him. “So stop eating it. We're not sharing any, am I right, Peter? We- huh?” She turned to the empty seat confusion. “Where'd he go?”

“Stay here, I’ll go look for him-” Stephen had one leg out of the booth before he froze, as if electrified. His eyes squeezed shut, caught in the throes of an overpowering cold-stimulus headache. “Brain… fr…”

Shuri shook her head exasperatedly. “I told you it was super cold.”

--

While Shuri and Stephen were arguing, Peter had slipped out the booth. He crept towards the window directly in front of where Tony and Steve were talking. It was a little too high, and Peter was on the short side - but he bounced up onto tiptoe he could just see over the ledge for a few seconds at a time.

Right now, Tony’s back was to the window, but he could see the expression on Steve’s face - purposeful, but worried.

“-Haven’t you noticed all the weird events that have been happening recently?”

“Can't say that I have. Other than the fact that I'm talking to you.”

“There was a scientist that came in a few weeks ago, Dr Stryker. You know who he is, right?”

Tony scoffed. “Stryker? That moron? He's known in the scientific community for being prolifically incompetent.”

“It's a cover. He’s been linked to controversial experiments and bioterrorism.” There was urgency
in Steve’s voice that Peter had never heard before. “Whatever he brought in was definitely something dangerous, perhaps even radioactive...”

“Yeah, I’m sure his nefarious plan involved the use of a fluffy little bunnyrabbit. What was he gonna do with it, tickle people to death?” Tony coughed, sounding a little nervous. “Come to think of it, nobody knows what happened to the little furball...”

Peter’s insides gave a guilty squirm.

Sensing he’d gotten Tony’s attention, Steve pressed on. “How about today’s events? Don’t you think it was strange how a meat cleaver was smuggled in with the birthday cake?”

“I... guess?” Tony admitted. “You're saying that wasn't an accident?”

“It was no coincidence. It wasn’t even the only weapon I found when I intercepted the delivery guy.”

“You did what to the guy?!”

Steve’s voice went tight. “-I thought I removed them all, but I was in such a rush to get to the school, that the knife slipped my notice. I should’ve checked more thoroughly, things were way too close today...” a pause, as if Steve was shaking himself out of his spiral. “What I’m trying to say is: there’s something else going on.”

Tony went quiet. “Explain.”

Their voices dropped to whispers. Peter bounced on his toes furiously, straining to make out what his parents were saying. If only there was a way to turn up the volume...

Peter almost fell out the window in shock when a yell punctured the air.

“So what you're saying is you don't think I can't take care of myself!” Tony burst out. “Wow. Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Can you stop making this about your pride? All these years, I've been doing my best to-” Steve bit back his response, trying to keep the situation from devolving into another fight. “I care about you both too much to let bad anything happen.”

Tony sounded like he was pacing. “Care? You sure have a funny way of showing it.”

“Look, why would I kid around with something like this? You both need to come with-”

“Hey, hands off the merchandise.” There was a rustle of fabric shoving against leather. “I’m not going anywhere with you, and I don't need your help!”

“For once in your life, let somebody help you. Why are you being so stubborn about this?”

“Maybe because I stopped buying your bullshit years ago! Do you even hear how ridiculous you sound?” Tony moved closer and his shadow fell across the window. Peter ducked instinctively.

Steve sounded like he was running out of patience. “Fine. You don’t believe me, but Peter deserves to know. Of all people, he’s the one I owe an explanation to.”

“Gonna fill his head with more outlandish stories?” Tony growled. “Remind me again, out of the two of us, who has a job they can talk about in polite company? Do you know how it’s like to deal with a kid with severe separation anxiety issues? And now you want to burden him with all this?"
“It’s not good for him-”

“It’s my fault for not speaking to him for years. This talk between him and I is long overdue. He can't be kept in the dark forever...”

“It’s not good for him!” Tony repeated, louder.

Steve was quiet for a few seconds. “What about what’s good for you?”

“It doesn’t matter about me. Right now Peter is my priority, and I’m not going to let you smash his hopes. Again.”

Few moments the only sound was the distant drone of traffic. And then...

The silence was pierced by a soft electronic beeping.

Another rustling of leather, and Steve gave a soft sigh. “There’s been a situation. I have to go.”

“Whoa, so first you expect us to come with you, now you have to run off? What’s with the flip-flopping?” Tony made a derisive sound. “Oh wait. It’s always the same old story with you, isn’t it?”

“Situation’s changed. You’ll both be safe for today, Shuri’s bodyguards will have you covered. And they’ll be able to keep an eye on Peter at school as long as she’s there.”

“Excuse me, Shuri’s what?!?”

Steve ignored the question. “Let's table this discussion until I get back. There's a lot we haven't talked about.”

“Bold of you to assume I’d even want to talk. Why don't you go back to-” Tony’s voice got muffled and Peter couldn't make out the next few words. “-that's what you really care about, isn't it?”

“It doesn't have to be like this.” Steve had gone soft and sad. “We never had a chance to talk back then. I know I can't erase the past, but I owe you an explanation for all the pain I've put you both through.”

“Save it. I'm way past caring.” Tony made a sound that seemed halfway between a laugh and a cough. “Why did you have to- I wish you hadn't come back at all.”

There was a pause. “You don't mean that.”

There was the sound of shuffling. When Tony spoke again his voice was wobbly. “Don't try and tell me what I do and don’t mean. You don’t- you don't understand a damn thing.”

“You're right, I don't. But I'm trying to. Please, Tony...”

“It's too late. When you're done with whatever you're doing, don't bother coming back.” Tony’s said brusquely.

There was another pause.

“No.” Steve replied, a note of steel in his voice. “I’m done leaving behind the people I care about. When I get back, I’m not leaving again.”
“That’s nice. I don’t care. Just go.”

Peter felt like he was crumbling into a thousand little particles. The idea of Pops leaving made his chest feel too small, and before he knew what was happening, he was bursting through the door.

Startled by his appearance, Steve and Tony sprang apart from where they were snarling in each others faces.

“Oh cheese, did you hear all that?” Tony groaned, bending down and reaching for him. “Listen, Pete, let me explain…”

Peter dodged his arms and headed straight towards Steve. “Pops, where are you going?”

Steve coughed and scrubbed something off his face. “There's something I have to do.”

“What?”

Steve glanced at Tony hesitantly, as if trying to ask permission. Tony looked away with a sigh.

Something determined seemed to crystallize in Steve’s face, and he crouched down in front of Peter so that they were eye-to eye. “I know you're brave, Pete, so I’m gonna level with you.”

“I can take it. I’m really tough.” Peter said boldly. He’d survived all his encounters with crazy people like Dr Stryker and the daily battles against Mr Thanos. Whatever Pops was afraid of couldn’t be so bad.

Steve smiled sadly. “I know you are, that’s why I know you won’t be scared of the truth.”

Peter nodded encouragingly. He sensed he was on the cusp of a very important, grown-up moment, and was determined to face it head-on.

“First off - I’m sorry I couldn’t be here for you. I know there’s no excuse for it.” Steve raised his hands as if he wanted to pull him into a hug, but stopped himself. “I want to be, but the truth is I can't right now, because-” Steve met his eyes. “I’m trying to protect you both.”

“Who from?”

Steve took a deep breath, trying to make his voice slow and calming. “There’s a bad man who hates me.”

“A bad man…” Peter’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes. He’s big, he's mean-”

The gears in Peter's head started to turn. “Like locking people up?”

“Yes. He's done a lot of... bad things,”

That sounded like somebody Peter knew. “And making people do bad things they don't want to do?”

“He hurt a lot of people.” Steve continued in the same careful tone. “He made many of them sad.”

That definitely sounded like someone Peter knew.

“And…” The muscles in Steve’s jaw clenched. “He wants to hurt me by hurting you and your Dad.
I have to leave so I can stop him.”

Peter’s breath caught as an awful realization began to take shape. Big, mean, hurts people… there was only one person Peter knew of who that fit all those descriptors:

Mr Thanos.

There was no other explanation; Mr Thanos was big - he probably could throw a house; he was mean - he always locked up Vision even though Wanda liked him; he did lots of evil things like throwing people in Time Out. Worst of all, Mr Thanos was trying to hurt Peter by trying to eat Dad.

And now Mr Thanos was after Pops too.

Feeling very wise and grown up, Peter nodded gravely. “I know about him.”

To his confusion, Steve looked horrified. “What? You know? How could you possibly know about-?”

“How does he know?” Tony demanded, furious. “What have you been telling him behind my back?”

“I haven’t told anyone about this-”

“Oh my god, why couldn't you just let him be a kid?”

Peter tuned out the argument as he processed the new information. It felt vindicating to know that he’d been right all along about Mr Thanos. Dad hadn’t believed his warnings, but now Pops had just confirmed his fears.

Mr Thanos was dangerous: not only was he trying to eat Dad, he was trying to kill Pops as well. Why else would Mr Thanos have looked at Pops with that angry expression back at the school?

“I won’t let him win.” Peter nodded resolutely to himself. Perhaps if he defeated Mr Thanos, the danger would be over and Pops would…

Pops would finally be able to come home.

“I’ve heard enough.” Tony grabbed Peter’s hand and began dragging him back to the doors. “We’re both going. You can go whatever you like, Steve. As long as it’s not here.”

Peter gazed back at Steve in dismay. “I don't want you to go.” Please, don't go.

“I know, I’m sorry.” Steve’s eyes had that far-away feeling again, the kind of feeling that made you feel like you'd never be happy again.

That was what settled it for Peter.

Breaking free of Tony’s hand, Peter made a run for Steve’s bike, which was parked behind them, and latched onto the handlebars like a limpet.

With a cry, Tony started towards him. “Peter, get down from there! Come on, don’t do this now-”

“No, I'm coming with Pops to help him fight the bad guy.” Peter would follow Pops, if that's what it took to defeat Mr Thanos. He would miss Dad, and Shuri, and Wanda, and Wade, but there was no choice - it was the only way Pops would be able to come home again.
“Peter, let go. I won’t tell you again.” Tony’s voice turned hard as he unsuccessfully tried to peel Peter off the bike. “Now you’ve done it, Rogers—”

But Peter clung with all his might, trying stop his ears from listening to the quarreling voices behind him.

“I didn’t mean to ruin today for him—”

“Sure you didn’t. Just like you didn’t mean to make me the bad guy.”

“This is my fault. Let me handle this.”

Peter yelped as a pair of strong hands picked him up and started carrying him up away from the bike. “Put me down!”

“Take it easy, buddy.” Steve’s face appeared in front of him.

Peter seized his jacket lapels. “I don’t want you to go.”

Steve’s eyes dimmed. “I’m sorry, Peter.”

It was too much. After everything that happened that day - Wade’s murder attempt, the Steve vs Stephen catfight, too much sugar, and now the reality that Pops was leaving - the emotional tsunami that had been building since the morning broke, shattering the last of Peter’s self control.

Peter burst into tears. Everything was so wrong, wrong, wrong.

He was distantly aware of Steve’s arms tightening round him, making shushing sounds. Peter clung to him for what felt like hours.

Eventually, the fog of sadness slowly receded and he realised Steve was speaking.

“...Shh, it’s alright. Pete, I know you’re really strong and brave.”

As Peter came back to himself, he realised he was standing on the ground. Steve was kneeling down in front of him, holding him in a hug.

“No I’m not.” Peter wound his fingers tightly into the soft leather of Steve’s jacket.

“It’s true. I know that you look out for your friends and stand up to bullies.” Steve’s voice wavered slightly. “I’m really proud of you.”

Peter dragged a hand over his eyes. “Really?”

“Really-really.” Steve hand carded through his hair.

“Then why can’t I help you fight the bad guy? Don’t you...” he hiccuped. “Don’t you like us anymore?”

Steve drew a sharp breath, going tense as if he’d been struck. “Oh, Peter, of course I do, don’t ever doubt that—” he paused, as if something just occurred to him. “Actually, there is something you can do to help.”

“What? I’ll do anything! I can help you!” Peter exclaimed, eyes shining.

Steve’s gaze flicked upwards, over Peter’s head to where Tony was standing - whatever silent
exchange passed between them made Steve's eyes well with some indescribable emotion. With a
soft breath, Steve bent forward to press his forehead against Peter’s. “Listen to what your dad says.
Even when you don't feel like doing it. He loves you very much.”

“Do I have to?” Peter asked, feeling a little put out. It didn't feel like Dad cared - after all, Dad had
been angry and sad all day, and now he was making Pops go away.

“Well,” Steve’s hands squeezed Peter’s shoulders reassuringly. “It would show how brave and
grown up you are.”

“Okay, I guess…” Peter couldn’t help feeling that the instruction was disappointingly
anticlimactic. He'd hoped that ‘helping out’ would involve some sort of fighting or adventuring.
Obeying Dad didn’t sound like a very heroic way to help out; but since Pops asked him to do it,
that meant it had to be important. “I'll do it.”

Steve’s face warmed with a smile. “Good, that’s the most important part. And there’s one more
thing,” he lowered his voice so nobody else could hear. “Eat your grapes.”

“What?!”

“I’m not kidding.” There was a hint of mischief dancing in Steve’s blue eyes. “I covered for you
once today, but you have to stop being so picky about food. Can you do that for me?”

Peter hiccuped. “Okay.”

“Attaboy.” Steve pulled him into a hug. Peter held on as tight as he could, wishing it would never
end.

“We should be going.” Tony broke the silence. He’d been waiting by the door, his face tired and
strained, the way it sometimes went when he thought Peter wasn't looking.

When Steve pulled back from Peter, something in his face seemed misty. “I'll come back, I
promise. You might be seeing me sooner than you think.”

“I'll believe that when I see it,” muttered Tony from behind them. “Come on, Peter. we have to
go.”

The second Tony took his hand, Peter was struck by another burst of inspiration. Wriggling out of
Tony’s grip, Peter bolted back to the table. He could hear Tony yelling after him, and he felt a little
bad for disobeying him right after Steve had asked him to be more respectful.

But there was something he had to do.

Peter snatched up the drawing he'd been working on all lunch and dashed back outside. “Pops!
Pops, wait!”

“What is it?” Steve paused in the middle of mounting his bike, concerned.

Peter held up his sheet of paper. “I want to give this to you.”

Confused, Steve accepted the drawing. “Thank you, what is it- oh.” His eyes turned shiny again.
“You drew us, didn't you?”

Peter nodded. He pointed to a grey blob in the corner. “I added Jarvis too.”

Steve hugged him. Fiercer this time, and his beard tickled where it pressed against Peter’s cheek.
His voice sounded all stuffy now, like he'd suddenly come down with a bad cold. “I'll keep it forever. I love you.”

Peter hugged him back. “Love you, Pops.”

**Chapter End Notes**

Wow things sure got sad huh :( 

Steve and Peter are having two very different conversations, even though they wind up at the same place. Misunderstandings abound in their family xD 

Sources - google results for ‘scientific name for brain freeze’ and ‘bad ingredients in ice cream’

As you can see from the chapter status, I figured out a solution to my chapter labeling-caused stress - hopefully things are less confusing now.

And this chapter concludes the birthday arc! The next chapter will kick off the next arc, which will be a little shorter than this one was.

When will Steve return? Will Thanos’s life be harder now that Peter thinks he’s responsible for his parents’ divorce? Will Wade ever get over his knife obsession? What will happen next in this soap opera?

Stay tuned for more crack within the next 1-2 weeks~
There were thirty minutes to go before the start of the school day, and Thanos felt uneasy.

The petite woman who'd come in to conduct the cookie-decorating workshop looked perfectly harmless, but then so had Stryker.

“I suppose it's too late to ask if you have any anger issues?” Thanos asked resignedly. “Criminal records? Parking tickets? Any skeletons in your closet we should know about before they become a problem?” My problem, he added silently.

“The only skeletons I deal with are made of frosting and live on Halloween cookies,” replied the woman breezily.

Her answer was annoyingly whimsical, just like the rest of her appearance: with platinum blonde hair in a bob, and a bubblegum-pink shirtdress patterned with white polka dots. Light makeup, enough to look cute without being overly flirty. A pair of matching pink sneakers gave her look a touch of practicality. The conservative cut of the dress didn't quite conceal that her figure was supermodel-standard.

Thanos supposed that people who liked the whole domestic goddess look would find her extremely attractive. But he sensed something else lurking beneath the ultra-feminine exterior.

Something unsettling.

Which was utterly ridiculous. Her resume checked out, she’d sailed through the interview, and she even looked like the most unassuming person Thanos had ever seen.

Then again, looks could be deceiving.

Something about the way she arranged her arsenal of cookie decorations on the table put Thanos in mind of an arms dealer arraying their wares for the black market.

There was a styrofoam box and set of small piping bags at every place of the table. Inside each box was a handful of neatly stacked cookies, all organized by shape: hexagons, humans, cats, stars, clouds. Every piping bag was filled with precisely the same amount of colored frosting, all sitting in a row like fat little warheads. Tubs of sprinkles and edible glitter were spaced neatly along the table. To the right of each place was a pair of disposable kid-sized plastic gloves and aprons, each folded with surgical precision.

It was… neat. Almost too neat.

Thanos felt the compulsion to search the little boxes of sprinkles for hidden weapons. “So your little art workshop is about making pretty pictures?”

The woman’s rosebud lips curved into a perfect smile. “More than that. Art isn’t just for expressing creativity, it allows our hidden feelings rise to the surface, unlocking our deepest secrets.”

Thanos rubbed his chin. Art therapy. Sounded harmless enough.
Her smile widened a fraction. “It's what makes humankind so fascinating.”

There it was again, every time Thanos thought there was nothing to fear, the woman would make an unsettling remark that put him on edge all over again.

Well, it was too late now to wonder they'd made another poor choice in guest speakers. At least this situation was more low risk. If things went bad, Thanos wouldn't have any trouble fighting off a five-foot-three woman.

“I see. Good luck with your workshop, Ms Romanoff.”

“Thank you. And please, call me Nat.” said Natasha Romanoff with a smile.

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Thanos couldn't believe his eyes.

The combination of hyperactive kids, glitter, and sugary baked goods should have resulted in disaster, but Natasha had wrangled the class into obedience with almost military efficiency. It was a little scary.

Instead of slinging candy, the kids had quietly accepted what they were given and were busily decorating their cookies with colored icing and sprinkles. But Thanos wasn't going to question a good thing, and he knew how things could change on a dime, especially where tiny kids were involved. He wasn’t completely convinced that someone would wind up covered in glitter by the end of the day.

Natasha made rounds of the table, offering praise and suggestions to each child. “Those look wonderful, Wanda. Are red and green your favorite colors?”

“And yellow.” Wanda held up a yellow gumdrop in a sticky hand. “I'm making my cookies for Viz.”

Wanda was repeating the same design over and over with a doggedness bordering on obsession: solid red frosting with a green border, finished off with a yellow gumdrop pressed into the center.

"Wanda, why don’t you try something else. You've already done that pattern on half of your cookies.” Thanos said. He frowned at Vision - the plushie was sitting on the floor next to Wanda, wearing an apron and gloves of its own. The overlarge chef’s hat had slid down over Vision’s eyes.

"I do what I want!” Wanda shouted, temper flaring.

"It's fine, leave her be. Shows she has a strong artistic vision.” Natasha smiled and walked to the next seat, where Shuri was working.

Many of the kids had traded cookies to get their preferred shapes. Shuri had managed to collect all the cat-shaped cookies and was gleefully bedazzling them.

“These look super funky, Shuri.” Natasha said. “I like your pink cat most.”

Shuri beamed as she dotted the cookie with glitter sugar. “Me too! But my finest work has to be the purple cat.”

“That is so cool.” Natasha said admiringly as the girl held out a cookie decorated purple frosting and silver sprinkles to represent stripes. “Does this kitty have a name?”
Shuri dabbed a bit of glitter onto the cat’s tail. “Her name is Bast, like my cat. I wanted to do a portrait of her but there wasn’t any black icing, so I had to make do with purple.”

Natasha nodded. “Versatility is very important. The ability to adapt your ideas while conveying your message is a vital skill.”

“It seems you have an admirer.” Thanos remarked as Natasha moved down the table.

Across the table, Peter was gazing at Natasha with sheer awe. Sensing the attention, Natasha came over to his side. “How’s it going, Peter? Can I see what you’re working on?”

Peter shifted uncomfortably and tried to hide his cookies under a bowl. “Mine aren’t very good.”

“Nonsense. There are no such things as mistakes in art. Come on.” Natasha held out an encouraging hand.

Shyly, Peter showed her the two cookies he’d decorated; a layer of frosting, with concentric rings with spokes meeting in the center. “I was trying to draw a spider web. But my lines are all wobbly.” Peter explained, shoulders hunched up.

Natasha examined the cookie as if she had discovered the rarest diamond on earth. “Are you kidding? These look amazing!”

Peter flushed at the praise. “You really think so? You don’t think spiders are gross?”

Leaning closer, Natasha gave a conspiratorial grin. “Wanna know a secret? I love spiders.”

“Me too!” Peter looked impressed.

“They're my favourite insect in the world.”

“Um…” Peter raised a hand, looking apologetic about correcting her. “Actually, they're arachnids, not insects. I read it in a book.”

“Ah, my mistake. I guess I learned something new today.” Natasha’s expression softened, something gentler peeking through her mask. “How about I teach you a cool trick? I’ll need to borrow one of your cookies, if you don't mind.”

Excitedly, Peter handed Natasha a cookie on which he had drawn three concentric circles in orange icing.

Reaching into a pocket, Natasha took out a small box. She clicked it open with one hand and took out a scribing needle.

Peter's breath caught. “Isn't that dangerous?”

“Don't worry, it's only for cookies. Check this out.” Natasha drew the needle from edge to center to form the spokes of the web, producing a delicate rippled pattern.

“That's so pretty,” Peter whispered, fascinated by her skill.

“Want to try? Let's do one together.” Natasha held his hand as they traced the next line.

“I did it!” Peter exclaimed, excited to see the same swirling patterns form under his hand.

Natasha nodded. “I think you got the hang of it. Why don’t you finish up the rest of the cookie?”
Determined not to let her down, Peter carefully outlined the rest of the spider web design. Natasha kept a sharp eye on him as he wielded the needle, ready to leap in at the first sign of trouble.

“Looking great, spider-boy.”

“Can I use this for my other cookies?” Peter pointed at his stack of undecorated cookies.

“Hm.” Natasha tapped her chin with a French-manicured nail. “It’s a big responsibility to handle sharp things.”

“I’ll be careful. I won’t let you down.” Peter said earnestly.

Looking like she was fighting the urge to pat him on the head, Natasha gave a satisfied nod instead.

“Well, if you promise to be careful, then I trust you.”

Wade drifted over, attracted by the sight of the needle. “Knife?”

“No, Wade.” Thanos started shooing the boy away. “Don’t mind him, he’s fascinated by sharp objects.”

“It's fine, shiny things can be very enticing.” Natasha turned to the small boy. “What's up, Wade?”

Wade tugged at the edge of her sleeve. “Look at my cookies next.”

Despite his limited communication skills, Wade had managed to acquire all the human-shaped cookies, and had piled each one with enough sprinkles and icing to cause toothaches. But that wasn't the most unsettling part.

“Blood!” Wade said eagerly. “Organs and brains and eyeballs.”

The… creative use of sprinkles and chocolate chips made Wade’s designs look like the cookie version of Bodyworks.

There was no kind way to say it, the gory designs on Wade’s cookies looked revolting.

“I added blood for all the insides.” Wade announced as he proudly showed off his house of horrors. One of his cookies was vomiting sprinkles. Another cookie featured icing ‘blood’ gushing from an amputated limb. And the third… god, Thanos didn’t even have the words to describe what one cookie was very graphically doing to another cookie, besides the fact that it involved eyeballs (represented by silver dragees) being inserted in places they were never meant to go.

“This is my favorite.” Wade seized a cookie depicting guts spilling out of its abdomen and shoved it at Natasha.

Thanos glanced at the woman to see how she’d react. How people responded to Wade was usually an accurate barometer of character.

But Natasha wasn't shocked by the disturbing designs. She examined each cookie with a critical eye, as if each was a work of art. “Prodigious work, Wade, the anatomical representation is very accurate. I like the attention to detail; the half-digested food you added to the intestinal tract is a nice touch.”

Wade nodded excitedly. “He had pizza for lunch!” He indicated the yellow and red sprinkles clumped around the stomach region.

“I'm very impressed!” Natasha commented, looking way too nonchalant considering what she had
seen. “How about you do a zombie one? Then you can draw some brains.”

“Okay! I need more red for the blood.” Wade shook the bag of red of icing, which had been almost depleted.

“That’s the most important part.” Natasha agreed.

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When Tony came to pick Peter up, his eyes widened. “You!”


Natasha tipped her head to one side with an angelic expression.

“Stop doing that.”

“Doing what?” Natasha asked politely.

Tony flapped a hand at her uneasily. “Whatever… this is. What's with all the pink? Even the frilly little apron. My gosh, you really do commit to the role. You change your name to Stepford, too?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Cut the crap. Did he send you?”

Natasha's face was guileless. “Who?”

“Don't play dumb, you know who. Why is Steve—” Tony looked down at the tug on his pant leg. “What is it, Pete?”

“I made a cookie for you, dad.” Peter held up a cookie which was decorated in swirls of red and yellow. Once Tony accepted it, Peter shuffled over to Natasha.

“I made this for you, Ms Natasha.” Peter shyly offered her another cookie; this one had swirls of dark purple and red, with a few red sprinkles for decoration.

Natasha accepted it like she was winning an award. “Thank you, that’s very thoughtful.”

Encouraged by her response, Peter blurted out a question that he seemed to have been carrying around all day. “Ms Natasha, are you a princess ballerina?”

Tony looked on disapprovingly. “Don't believe a word she says, Peter.”

But Peter was still starstruck. He reached out his arms to her. “Can I have a hug, Ms Natasha?”

“No!” Aghast, Tony steered Peter back by the shoulder. “Trust me, you don't wanna get a crush on this one.”

“She's so cool and pretty. And she gave me a present!” Peter held up a needle and the sight made Tony’s breath catch.

“What kind of class are you teaching here? Bomb disposal?”
“Cookie decoration. And I was using finer implements than this when I was his age.” Natasha slipped the needle back into her pocket, and nodded at the starstruck boy. “Thanks for holding onto it for me, Peter.”

“You're welcome, Ms Natasha!” Peter positively glowed with joy.

Tony glared at her. “Working your wiles on younger targets now, I see. Not like I expected anything from a triple-dealing—”

Natasha’s pleasant smile remained fixed on her face, but for a split second, her sweetie-pie aura vanished like acid sloughing flesh from bone.

Tony stepped back quickly. Despite her momentary lapse, Peter was still gazing at Natasha without a hint of fear.

Natasha cleared her throat daintily, slipping back into fairy-princess mode. “To answer your question, Steve got the message. So don't worry, he isn’t coming back.” she gave him a measuring look. “That is what you wanted, right?”

“Well... I didn’t want him to come back anyway!” Tony exclaimed.

“Then I fail to see what the problem is.” Natasha buffed her nails against her skirt. “When you told him to leave, I didn’t think he’d interpret it to mean the continent...”

Tony went pale. “He left the country?”

“...And the last I heard from him, he seemed to be in a bit of a predicament.” Natasha examined her now-shiny fingernails. “Well, that was a couple days ago, so who knows what's happened since. Not that that’s any of my business...”

Tony made a choking sound. “What kind of predicament? You mean like he’s in trouble, or...?”

“But that shouldn't be a problem for you, right? I know you're perfectly capable of taking care of yourself. Isn't that why you've been upgrading all your security systems? I think setting up fifty house alarms is kinda excessive, though...”

Tony raised an accusing finger at her. “Hah! So you have been spying on me!”

“Nah, I just know how predictable you are. And you just confirmed my shot in the dark.” Natasha yawned delicately.

“I don't need anything from him. It's not like I can count on him for anything. After all, he didn't even care enough to stick around. Again.” Tony replied stiffly. “You're enjoying this, aren't you?”

“Believe me, I don't get any pleasure out of watching the two of you idiots blunder around like balloon animals on a cactus farm.” Natasha tucked a lock of blonde hair behind one ear. “You could just call him, you know. And talk out your issues like normal people.”

“Don't tell me how to live my life. And by the way I’m glad he’s gone. I don’t even care. This is a stupid conversation. This is—” Tony’s fist clenched, inadvertently cracking his cookie down the middle. “This is all my fault.”

Natasha cocked her head to the side, fox-like. “Is that remorse I hear? Thawing that frozen heart of yours?”
Tony’s eye twitched. “Never quote Frozen to me again, I’m trying to keep that film out of my house as long as I can. Do you know how hard it is to get those songs out of your brain?”

“With the right impetus, anything can be cognitively calibrated.” Natasha murmured to herself.

Tony was too deep in his rant to hear. “You know how there’s that one song that gets stuck in your head, and no matter how many songs you try drowning it out with, the first song just won't go away...” Tony fidgeted, then blurted. “Is Steve in trouble?”

Natasha glanced over, and seemed to take pity on him. “Relax, if he was, I doubt he’ll be in trouble for long. Steve is pretty good at what he does.”

Tony began twisting at his left wrist. “How do you know, though? Do you think you could check in with him-”

Natasha raised an eyebrow, a warning flag. “I don't do that anymore.”

Tony eyed her suspiciously. “So why are you here?”

Natasha shrugged. “I told you, this really is my job. I wanted a new life, this was one of the paths open to me. And I happen to enjoy it.”

Tony pressed his lips together, then another question burst out him. “Can you at least tell me he's okay?”

“Sure.”

“How certain are you?”

“As certain as my name is Natasha.”

Tony scowled at the non-answer. “How am I supposed to interpret that?”

“Take it however you like.” Natasha responded, annoyingly enigmatic once again.

Tony opened his mouth to protest but a small voice piped up.

“Pops is in trouble?” Peter looked up at her, eyes welling up with distress.

Tony spun to Natasha with a glare. “There. Are you happy now?”

A smidgen of guilt colored Natasha’s features. “The last time I saw him, he didn’t know how to walk. He's grown so much since, but he’s still my smallest god son. I wondered if he'd remember me…” she said wistfully as her eyes roved over Peter's face.

Tony put himself between Peter and Natasha. “You know what, I’ve had it up to here with these trips down memory lane. Don’t you have someone else to annoy? Can you go there instead?”

Natasha shook herself out of her thoughts. “I won’t keep you. Maybe I'll see you around.”

“Sure hope not.” Tony started walking them to the car. “Good riddance…”

As Peter watched her form recede, worry tugged at his heart. Dad had said Pops was gone forever… and Ms Natasha now said he was in trouble.

Maybe it was time Peter took matters into his own hands.
It was time to think of a plan: Operation Bring Pops Home.

Chapter End Notes

Nat’s dress looks like this or this.

Spider web cookie looks like this.

I got the idea to make Natasha a cookie decorator because I’ve been watching lots of cookie decoration videos to destress. Something about watching people make such intricate cookie designs is very relaxing.

The Halloween chapter is coming up next! Get ready for some spooooooooky surprises!
In a little school for little heroes was a little playground. In the little playground was a little house made of plastic. In the little house made of plastic sat four figures: a witch, BB-8, Catwoman, and Vision.

Wanda re-adjusted the brim of her witch’s hat. “Present yourselves before the spirits.”

“Hello, spirits.” said Shuri hesitantly. Her Catwoman costume was an exact replica of the one from the films, with everything from soft-soled boots to utility belt. She had added a personal touch to the final look: a headband of brainwave-powered neko ears that wiggled every now and then.

“Hi, spirits,” Peter said, sticking one hand out of his BB-8 costume to click his penlight on and off. He was very proud of the costume: he and Dad had worked on it together for a whole afternoon. Peter had done the painting and gluing, while Dad had done everything that required the use of power tools (though he'd let Peter solder one wire). Dad had even souped it up by installing buttons that played sound effects from the films.

Sitting next to him was Vision, bringing their number to four.

Wanda nodded her head, satisfied. “Now that the circle is complete, let us begin the ritual.”

As the resident occult expert, Wanda had taken charge of organizing the summoning: the ritual had to take place during the month of Halloween, the only time of the year when the boundaries between the human and spirit world was at their weakest. The ideal time would have been at midnight, but since none of them could stay up that late, a daytime ritual would have to suffice.

Wanda also insisted that the ritual be carried out in plastic playhouse in the playground. Peter thought the playhouse was weird and gross, full of rainwater and smelly leaves, but Wanda explained that it was the ideal place to channel the powers of darkness, because it was simultaneously indoors and outdoors.

Shuri had scoffed and called the whole plan illogical and unscientific, which had led to a small feud between the girls. Only after seeing how close to tears their fight had brought Peter did they stop bickering.

And so here they were - petitioning spirits for aid.

Peter really didn't like the idea of ghosts, but none of them had any better ideas. His situation had become so desperate, that right now he was willing to try anything.

There was no other way.

Wanda seated herself cross-legged on the ground and delicately arranged the skirts of her witch’s robe around her. She held her hands out, palms facing up. “Please be seated for the ritual.”

They sat.

Wanda inclined her head to Shuri. “Did you bring the votives?”
“Yup.” Shuri took out a set of electric tea lights from her utility belt.

“Good, good. Peter, did you bring the offering?”

“Here it is.” Peter held up his last cookie. It was a spiderweb pattern picked out in blue and white, the one he had made last and had worked the hardest on.

“Then we can begin the summoning.” Wanda placed the cookie in the centre of their circle and arranged the tea lights around it. Out of one voluminous pocket, she pulled out a pack of chalk.

“On this month of Halloween, I call upon the dark powers.” Wanda intoned. “Hail to the guardians! Spirits in the sky! Hear us! Hear us!”

“Hear us, hear us.” Peter and Shuri repeated the line, just how Wanda had instructed them to.
Wanda’s voice rose as she got more into the role. “Creatures of old, masters of the night. Show us your glory! Show us your might!”

“Shouldn’t it be masters of the day? It’s still morning,” Shuri began to object but Peter quickly shushed her.

Wanda picked up a piece of chalk and drew a ring around the cookie and tea lights. “I call on you, Dormammu. I call on you, Malekith. I call on you, Ultron. I call on you, Mephisto…” With every spirit Wanda named, she drew a sigil in the circle.

The air seemed to grow colder. Peter shivered.

“Accept our offering!” Wanda’s eyes had taken on the fervency of a zealot. “Now is the time. This is the hour. Ours is the magic. Ours is the power!”

“Ours is the power!”

The wind outside was picking up now.

“As we join hands, come through the gateway and show us your might.” Wanda took Shuri and Vision’s hands in hers. “Show us the infinity… and the beyond.”

Shuri shifted restlessly. “If this is our first time convening with ghosts, shouldn't we take notes? For scientific posterity?”

Wanda shook her head imperiously. “No. We're not here for science, we're here for darkness.”

“You mean electromagnetic disturbances? Everyone knows there’s no such thing as ghosts!” Shuri’s cat ears were twitching in irritation now.

“Quiet, you’ll anger the spirits.” Wanda hissed.

“I'm sure Wanda knows what she's doing, can we please let her finish?” Peter implored.

Wanda sniffed. “Thank you.”

“Fine. But this is still stupid.” Shuri grumbled as she joined hands with Wanda and Peter.

Peter took Shuri’s hand in his right and Vision’s plush paw in his left. He tried to avoid looking at the plushie; Vision’s blank eyes seemed strangely animated in the dim light, almost as if Viz could spring to life at any moment. For a minute Peter had the wild fear that the dark spirits would
possess Viz and bring him to life like Frankenstein’s monster...

But that was impossible. Wasn’t it?

He wasn’t sure. Anything seemed possible on this spooky day.

The thought made Peter want to hide inside the shell of his BB-8 costume, away from all paranormal-related affairs.

But he had to be brave and to see this through.

“Powers of darkness, hear Peter’s wish.” Wanda bobbed her head towards Peter. “That’s your cue, you can make your wish now.”

Peter took a breath. This whole business suddenly felt like a horrible, horrible idea, but there was no turning back now.

“I wish… I wish my Pops would come back.” His voice cracked, ringing out shrilly in the tiny space. “Please, someone- anyone- bring him back!”

The heavy air in the house seemed to pulse, like they were in the heart of some gargantuan creature.

“Hear us, dark ones!” Wanda’s eyes were shining like midnight suns beneath the shadow of her hat. “Accept our offering and grant the wish of this young child…”

“Why are you talking down to us? We're the same age as you,” Shuri interrupted.

“Shh.” Peter hushed as Wanda began grinding her teeth. “What do we do now, Wanda?”

“For the final stage of the ritual, we have to close our eyes so that the dark spirits can collect our offering. Once they've taken it, they’ll make Peter’s wish come true.”

Shuri sighed loudly, ears flattening. “Why do we have to close our eyes?”

“Because anyone who sees the dark ones will get their brain sucked out and go crazy. Nobody can look at one and survive.” Wanda stated matter-of-factly, as if it were common knowledge.

“But that’s completely illogical!” Shuri threw up her hands. “How would we go crazy if our brain gets eaten? Wouldn't that just kill us?”

“Whatever.” Wanda pouted. “Keep your eyes open, then. Just don't come crying to me when the dark spirit eats your brain like a corn dog.”

Peter and Shuri gave each other apprehensive looks. Things were starting to get eerie, but they’d come too far to chicken out now.

They shut their eyes.

The seconds ticked by, but nothing disturbed the tense silence. Peter coughed nervously. He could hear Shuri fidgeting on his right.

“How long do we have to wait? I told you there’s no such thing as-” Shuri screamed as a loud bang shook the playhouse. “What was that?”

They waited with bated breath. Their every molecule of air seemed charged with an unknown
energy. Peter felt the rush of wind in his face as something brushed past him.

And then from within the circle came the unmistakable crunch crunch crunch of cookie being consumed.

“It’s the dark ones!” Wanda cried out in delight. “They’ve come for the sacrifice!”

“Oh my Bast, you actually did it.” Shuri gasped.

“I told you so. Magic is real.” Wanda said proudly.

“I always thought everything had a scientific explana- hey.”

Seized by morbid curiosity, Peter’s eyes flew open.

Sitting in the circle was a pink unicorn. Or rather, somebody dressed as one.

“Yummy.” Wade munched on the cookie, spilling crumbs down the front of his pink unicorn kigurumi.

Wanda rounded on him with fury. “Wade! You ate the offering! How could you?”

“Peter’s cookies are the best.” Wade gulped down the last of the cookie, cheerfully unaware of Wanda’s rage.

“You always ruin everything! The dark ones were about to grant Peter’s wish!” Wanda seized Wade by the collar of his kigurumi and started shaking him.

“WheeEEeEEeEEeee…” cheered Wade as his head bounced around from the force of Wanda’s shakes.

“Does that mean the spell didn’t work?” Peter asked despairingly. It wasn’t fair for things to go wrong at the very end, when they’d done everything else right.

Shuri gasped and grabbed Peter’s shoulder. “Listen. Something’s happening.”

At first Peter thought it was the thump of his heart, but as the drumming got louder, he realised the noise was coming from the outside.

Footsteps.

Heavy footfalls thudded ominously outside the playhouse. They circled the house counterclockwise. Once, twice.

Three times.

Peter’s heart juddered. He wondered if the spirit was angry that its offering had been stolen. He hoped it wouldn’t decide to eat all four of them as revenge.

Boom.

There came a pounding on the door of the playhouse, of something inhumanly strong trying to force its way in. The strength of the impacts made the plastic walls shudder as if in an earthquake. Shuri and Peter clutched each other in terror as the flimsy plastic door rattled on its hinges.

“The darkness is here.” Wanda whispered, quivering with barely suppressed excitement.
With a blinding flash of light and a noise like thunder, the door burst open.

Framed in the opening was a shadowy, angular figure.

Wanda shoved Wade aside and leaped to her feet triumphantly. “The dark spirit has come!”

“A flattering comparison, to be sure.” Loki’s green eyes glittered as he gazed into the house. “Well, well, well. What have we here?”

“Mr Loki? What are you doing here? Are you the dark spirit?” Peter asked, baffled.

“Are you going to take us to the dark world?” Wanda demanded.

“Oh, I’m bringing you somewhere far worse.” Loki smiled lazily. “Back to class, where you all ought to have been for the last twenty minutes.”

Wanda snorted. “Who cares about class? We were about to meet the dark spirits of the universe!”

“Ghost.” Wade nodded happily. “Ghosties and werewolves and demons…”

“Exactly!” Wanda exclaimed. Can’t you see we were in the middle of something important?”

“Evidently.” Loki raised an eyebrow at the chalk-smudged, crumb-scattered remnants of their summoning circle. “I suggest that you schedule any future cult meetings outside of school hours.” He held the door open and gestured them to come out with a crook of his finger. “Quickly, now. All of you are in deep trouble.”

“I had nothing to do with this.” Shuri insisted, horrified by the prospect of getting into trouble. “Please don’t tell Mr Thanos that we were playing hooky. I’ve never been in Time Out before, I can’t afford to get a strike on my record…”

Loki smirked. “Perhaps you should have thought of that before deciding join your accomplices in skiving off. I think a stint in Time Out is a suitable punishment for truancy.”

Despite Loki’s annoyance at having to wrangle Thanos’s students, he imagined how much more fun it would be to hold this incident over Thanos’s head. Misplacing students, my, how careless of you, Thanos.

Besides, it was entertaining to see the looks of dismay on the kids’ faces. He knew it was all extremely petty, but, Loki reasoned, when you had a crummy job, you had to get your kicks somewhere.

As Loki latched the gate behind him, he decided to have a little more fun at the kids’ expense. “If you ask me, Thanos isn’t the one you should be worried about.”

“What do you mean?” Wanda peered, adjusting the brim of her oversized hat.

Loki folded his arms, knowing the foreboding backdrop of the iron gate made him look especially portentous. “Dabbling in the mystic arts exacts a hefty toll. Surely you don’t expect to walk away unscathed from the experience.” He lowered his voice theatrically. “There’s always a price to pay.”

“Do you mean like the law of equivalent exchange?” Shuri’s neko ears swiveled forward. “I understand that reference! I watched a show about that with my cousin.”

“Exactly like that. What if the price for attaining your dearest wish meant giving up the thing you love most...?” Loki let the statement curl ominously into the air.
Under half-lidded eyes, Loki snuck a look at their reactions. It was fascinating to observe the spectrum of responses: Wanda looked annoyed, Shuri looked thoughtful, Wade was in his own world, as usual, and…

“What are you saying?” Under the headpiece of his droid costume, Peter’s face was filled with horror.

Target acquired.

Loki couldn’t resist laying it on really thick. “I’m saying that it’s foolish to meddle with powers you don’t fully understand. What are you prepared to lose? After all, with great power comes great… well,” Loki watched with amusement as the effect of his cryptic words sunk in. “I assume you know the rejoinder. Let’s hope you don’t live to regret it.”

As the kids started to whisper among themselves, Loki decided he’d had his fun and it was time to be a responsible adult again. “And now, it’s back to class with you lot. Let’s hurry before the powers of darkness arrive, shall we?”

As the kids fell into step behind him like scared ducklings, Loki smiled blandly, to hide the fact he was cackling madly inside.

Some days, his job wasn’t so bad.

--

“I’m never listening to your ideas again.” Shuri sniped at Wanda. They were sitting on opposite corners of the Time Out corner; Thanos judged them all guilty by association.

“What did Mr Loki mean by that?” Peter was curled up in a troubled ball next to Shuri. “About your wishes and the things you love most?”

Shuri patted his head reassuringly. “Probably nothing. Mr Loki can be kind of a jerk.”

“I don’t feel so good.” Peter worriedly huddled deeper into his costume.

“Do you have any more cookies?” Wade poked at Peter’s shell excitedly.

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“Really, Thanos, one would think you’d be able to keep an eye on four children.”

“Be quiet, Loki.”

--

After school ended, Peter beamed at the sight of a familiar face. “Uncle Rhodey!”

“What’s up, Peter?” Rhodey grinned as the small boy bounded up and practically jumped into his arms for a hug. “Oof, you seem to get more cuddly every time I meet you.”

“You didn’t wear a costume.” Peter poked his uncle’s army t-shirt reproachfully.

Rhodey tweaking the cowlick on Peter’s head. “Not this year, I’m afraid. Your droid costume is pretty neat, good to see the nerd is strong in your family.”

“I’m BB-8 for Halloween! Dad and I made the costume together!” Peter gave a thumbs-up gesture
with his penlight.

Rhodey’s tired face broke into an approving grin. “Next time, we have to do a group costume. Back in the day, your dad and I did the whole Han and Lando routine for Halloween.” Rhodey mused. “I might still have my old cape lying around…”

“Han Solo? Isn't he that old guy from a really old movie…”

Rhodey chuckled as walked them to his car. “Come on, Peter, I’ll drive you to my place.”

“Where’s Dad? Is he coming with us?” Peter looked around in Rhodey’s car as if expecting Tony to pop out from under the seats.

Rhodey’s affable smile turned strained. “Pete, there's something you need to know.”

“What?” Peter absently fiddled with a button on his costume.

“Peter, I need you to listen to me,” Rhodey leaned over so they were eye-to-eye.

Peter had never seen his uncle look so grim.

Rhodey cleared his throat, and put on what he probably thought was a calming voice. “Something happened with your dad, and-”

“Something happened?” Immediately, Peter was on high alert.

It was all his fault for calling on the dark powers. He had called them, they had answered, and now everything was going wrong, just like Mr Loki had said.

This was all his fault.

“Hey…” Rhodey looked worried, and put a hand on Peter's shoulder. “I want you to know that everything's going to be okay, just- Peter, breathe.”

It was all his fault.

It was all his fault.

It was all his fault.

“...Peter. Oh no, don't cry…”

“Where’s my dad?”

Chapter End Notes

uh oh...

Interesting facts: out of all the chapters, this was the smoothest and easiest to write. I came up with this idea while eating lunch and wrote it in under an hour. With the exception of a few lines, this was almost completely fully-formed. Writing about kids summoning (fake) demons was very natural for me fsr haha
Aaand we're off! Get ready for stuff to happen next weekend!!!!!!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The flip phone buzzed with a new text.

[ Steve: I’m outside. ]

Tony put down the flip phone with a sigh and tugged a hoodie on over his pajamas. He hoped he wasn't making a huge mistake by asking Steve for help.

Then again, almost dying had a way of putting things in perspective.

As Tony slipped the phone into his pocket, his mind couldn't help but run over the events of the past week.

It had happened while he was driving to work after dropping Peter off at school. Tony couldn't pinpoint the exact event that had set off the accident: when he suddenly lost control of the car, or the piercing pain which exploded in his chest and clawed up the back of his neck. Whatever it was, as his car careened off the road, he'd been helpless to do anything but watch, as if in a dream. Every stupid worry and care fled his mind, until only two thoughts remained:

The first was of Peter. That was no surprise, his precious boy was the most important person in his life. Can't leave him, must protect, have to stay alive.

To Tony’s surprise, the other was of Steve. He couldn't help feeling a sense of loss, wishing he’d had the chance to see him one more time, wishing they hadn’t left things in such a bad place. We’ll never have that talk now, I wish...

It was easy to forget how short life was, how easily any of their sparks could snuffed out.

Tony wondered if the universe was trying to punish him for some unexplained reason. After all, Steve had tried to offer an olive branch back at the birthday party, but Tony had stomped all over it, selfish jerk that he was.

As Tony mull it over, he paused, one hand hovering over the ‘off’ switch of a security alarm. Maybe he should call this whole thing off, maybe he shouldn’t have entrusted something so important to Steve, maybe everything was about to go completely wrong...

There were so many maybes.

But Tony knew one thing; the first thing he’d seen when he woke up in the hospital was a scruffy, bedraggled Steve sitting by his bed, and it had been the most welcome sight in the world. It felt like more than a coincidence... it had felt like a sign.

A sign that maybe it was time to start talking again.

It wasn't being needy, Tony told himself as he made his way to the door, disabbling alarms as he did.

The five days he’d been in hospital had brought with it steady stream of visitors. Maybe Tony was being a little pathetic, but other than Peter, the only other visitor who had filled him with such
profound relief had been Steve.

Steve, who had remained there almost the entire duration of his hospital stay. While Tony hadn't had much opportunity to talk to him - dealing with all the well-wishers and trying to catch up on sleep took up a surprising amount of energy - the sight of Steve's presence, solid and constant, was comforting.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Tony continued his path towards the door, shutting off the last of his house security systems to let Steve in.

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After sending the text, Steve pocketed his flip phone and gazed at the house he hadn't seen for two years. It had barely changed, from the color of the door to the white star on the mailbox that he'd painted himself all those years ago. The nostalgia sent a pang through him.

The twenty seconds later, the security system buzzed and the front door swung open to reveal Tony. He was wearing an old hoodie over pajama pants and a nerd shirt featuring R2-D2 with the caption ‘Am I the Droid You're Looking For?’ stamped across it.

Tony leaned against the jamb. “Yes, I'm still alive. No need to make a big deal about it.”

“How do you feel today?” Steve asked.

“Oh, you know. As good as any man feels after his first heart attack.” Tony replied with calculated nonchalance. He nodded, noticing the vehicle Steve had arrived in. “Nice car.”

“I wasn't going to drive Peter to school on a bike. It's too-”

“-dangerous. Finally, something we agree on. I'd lend you my car, but it’s kinda…” Tony's mouth twisted self deprecatingly. “Totalled.”

Steve decided to steer the conversation away from anything that could reference the accident.

“Speaking of Peter, is he ready yet?”

Tony opened the door wider with a sigh. “You may as well come in to wait. Peter’s taking his time looking for his lucky shirt.” He retreated into the house, leaving Steve to follow after him.

As Steve stepped into the house he hadn't stepped foot in for almost two years, a wave of remembrance welled up in him. Little had changed, to his surprise. Apparently Tony hadn't trashed all his belongings, and there were still one or two family photos hanging on the wall in which he was included.

Less assuring, Steve noticed, was the slow way Tony held himself as he walked towards the dining table, as if he barely had enough energy.

“Is there anything you need?” Steve asked, as the other man sank down in a hair.

“What, you gonna offer me coffee in my own house?” Tony replied dryly. Then he sighed, waving a hand to sweep aside the harshness of his words. “Don’t worry about it, there wasn't anything you could’ve done. If anything, I should've seen this coming; ‘a family history of heart disease increases the risk for all first-degree relatives’. Thanks a ton, Howard.” Tony mechanically recited the diagnosis they'd both heard hundreds of times while at the hospital. “Well… maybe it wasn't entirely his fault. All the chronic stress probably didn’t help either.”
A coil of guilt squeezed around Steve’s chest. *He should have been there.*

In all their years of being together, the past week was the first time he’d learned of Tony’s family history. Tony never liked talking about his family, always steering the conversation away from any mention of his parents, so Steve had never inquired, assuming it was a sensitive subject.

Now, Steve wished he had tried to find out more. *He wished he’d known, that Tony had trusted him enough to share it with him. Why did they both keep so many secrets from each other?*

“Do you need more help around the place?” Steve leaned forward, concern writ over his face. “I can stick around if you need help moving things or getting chores done, it's really no trouble-”

“Thanks, but I'm good. Rhodey’s camping out here for a few days to make sure I don’t keel over and Pepper’s handling everything at work.” Tony started fiddling with a coaster. “I just need to get more sleep, I'm beat.”

Steve took a seat at the opposite side of the table. “Is Peter still up for today? If he's too upset, maybe he'd prefer staying home?”

Tony got a pinched look around his eyes, apparently attaching some other meaning to Steve’s reaction. “You don't have make up excuses if you’ve changed your mind about helping.”

“I didn't mean that at all. When would I ever be upset about hanging out with Peter?” Steve held up his hands. “I'm not here to fight.”

“Then why are you-” Tony broke off into a fit of coughing which made his shoulders shake.

Steve rose and retrieved the water jug from the counter. He returned to Tony’s side of the table and began filling his glass.

Tony accepted the cup, and as he drained it, his coughs subsided.

“Better?” Steve asked, trying the resist the urge to hover by the side of Tony's chair.

“Yeah, I- thanks. Dry throat.” When Tony glanced up at him, his eyes were slightly watery from the coughing. “I guess it’s kinda shitty of me to start biting your head off when you're doing me a favor.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Steve’s brows drew together. “You should take it easy.”

“Trying to take care of me? I can handle things on my own.” Tony leaned his elbows on the table, almost slumping over it.

*I know you can, but you don't have to,* Steve wanted to say. But before he could give voice to his thoughts, there was a bump against his knee.

Steve looked down to see a silver Maine Coon twining around his legs.

“Hey, Jarvis. Missed you, buddy.” Steve knelt down to scratch the cat under the chin.

“Mrraow,” Jarvis leaned his head into Steve’s palm, eyes closed into happy slits.

The room was quiet as Steve petted the cat. It felt surreal to be back in his old home again, and both of them not screaming at each other for once. So much had changed in just one week.

Steve didn’t look up from where he was kneeling by Tony’s chair, but he could feel the hair on his
neck prickle from the weight of the dark-haired man’s gaze.

On the day of the accident, Steve had made a resolution the second he arrived at the hospital - he wasn’t going to walk away this time. He didn’t care if Tony pushed him away again, he’d find some way to stay around so he could prevent anything terrible happening...

To Steve’s surprise, instead of bringing up their feud, that the first thing Tony asked (practically begged) was that Steve accompany Peter to the school’s Sports Day, *please, he’s been excited about this for weeks, he’s been looking to taking part in the races with his dad like all the other kids and I just ruined it by almost dying, and if I wasn’t at risk of keeling over during the three-legged race I’d go, but I can’t, so please, can you do this for m- him, please...*

Tony cleared his throat self-consciously. “Uh. I know this is all really last-minute and I wouldn't have troubled you if I'd known you were- out of the country. So, I just wanna say, I really do appreci- uh-.”

“You don’t need to thank me.” Steve raised his eyes from the cat to meet Tony’s gaze.

The second their gazes locked was like two puzzle pieces clicking back into place. The combination of familiar surroundings and the way the morning light backlit Tony’s hair, lightening it to reddish-brown, it all took Steve’s breath away.

It was like a snapshot, as if Steve had never left.

Right now, though, something in Tony’s eyes made him seem small and unsure, even though he was looking down from the higher position, and it stirred something soft and protective in Steve’s chest.

Realising how close he’d come close to losing Tony still scared him, and it was all Steve could do to hold himself back from leaping over the table, hugging him, and never letting go.

Steve clamped down on his feelings. This favor Tony was asking of him was just a favor, just because Steve was convenient, not because Tony actually wanted him around. Steve shouldn’t presume today meant anything more.

Moreover, Steve didn’t even know what the status between Tony and Stephen currently was. As much as Steve wanted to shove the doctor out the door, it would go against all Steve’s notions of fair play if he were to barge in on their relationship like some kind of reverse homewrecker. Not to mention, it probably wouldn’t win Steve any points with Tony.

Still, Steve couldn’t help but wonder.

Over the last five days, Steve had essentially set up camp outside Tony’s hospital room, so he was able to see which visitors came and went; Rhodey and Peter came by every day, Pepper every other day, Happy twice... Stephen had dropped by the hospital a grand total of once, where he'd proceeded to have a cordial but terse conversation with Tony (much as Steve wanted to eavesdrop on them, he’d elected to be the bigger person and closed the door. Although being the bigger person didn’t preclude Steve from conspicuously lurking at the window).

Steve had no idea whether that meant anything, and frankly he had been too wrapped up with worry over Tony's health to inquire about his social life.

But as Steve sat in the waiting room for those long hours, one of the things he'd had come to accept was that Tony’s relationship status was no longer his business. Too much had happened between them, and if Tony had decided to move on... Steve wasn’t going to get in the way of his happiness.
God knows he deserved it.

Regardless, even if Tony hated him forever, Steve was going to do his utmost to be there for him and Peter. If being a third wheel was the only way Steve could still be in their lives, then so be it.

As long as they're both happy, it doesn't matter about me, Steve thought, petting Jarvis with a sad smile.

Tony blinked furiously, then dropped his gaze.

“How’s Peter holding up?” Steve shifted the subject to a safer channel.

Tony sighed again, and Steve’s heart sank. Rhodey had brought Peter to visit the hospital after school every day, but it was impossible to get him to leave - Rhodey practically had to drag the boy home. Steve being there had helped calm some of his distress, but for some irrational reason, Peter persisted in thinking that the whole accident was his fault.

“He woke me up several times last night. Kept popping in my room to make sure I was still breathing.” Tony shook his head, running a hand through his sleep-mussed hair and messing it up even more. “I don’t know where he gets these ideas from. He's too young to be this anxious.”

Steve felt a prickle at the corner of his eyes. It wasn’t fair that Peter had to deal with these kinds of cares.

Not to mention the toll it had to be taking on Tony: While the dark-haired man looked a little better now than he had in the hospital, his movements were still sluggish, and he seemed two seconds from collapsing from exhaustion. Heck, the bags under Tony’s eyes had bags.

“Oh let me keep Peter company today, after school.” Steve spoke up, his concern for the other man giving him courage. “This week has been stressful on him, he could use a break.”

Sure, Steve’s secondary reason was to let Tony get more sleep, but Steve knew better than to say that; he knew from extensive experience how well Tony responded to coddling.

Insist he didn't need any help and take insult at the insinuation, Steve thought ruefully.

“You really don’t need to. I don’t want to impose-” Tony protested, but he wasn't quite able to hide the spark of relief from his face.

“It’s no trouble at all.” Steve said gently, trying to reassure him. From where he was kneeling next to the chair, he was close enough to reach out and take his hand.

Tony’s hands twisted in his lap. “Look, I've- he's been through a lot this week, no thanks to me, and... well, you're the only one who’s been able to cheer him up.” Tony finally admitted. His eyes, dark and troubled, met Steve’s again.

“If either of you ever need anything, I'll always be here. I promise, this time.” Steve replied.

Tony nodded jerkily, throat working. “Can I just say-”

“I'm ready to go, Dad.” Peter peered timidly around the doorjamb, hugging the Nemo tsum tsum to his chest like a security blanket. Ever since his birthday, the clownfish tsum had become his new favorite toy to carry everywhere - Steve certainly saw a lot of the toy when Peter brought it along on hospital visits.
It was sweet, but privately Steve was glad Peter hadn’t made like Wanda and started treating the toy like it was alive.

At the sight of his son, Tony straightened his posture and injected more energy into his voice. “Come on, Pete, you can't bring Nemo along today, he'll get dirty.”

“Okaaay,” Peter pouted, but he gingerly placed the toy onto the couch before proceeding to the table.

Jarvis’s fluffy tail looped around Steve’s knee in farewell, before the tabby stalked over to greet Peter. “Mrraow.”

“Morning, Jarvis.” Peter’s eyes filled with tears as Jarvis headbutted him. With a sniffle, he grabbed the cat, squeezing him in what looked like a uncomfortably tight hug.

Jarvis purred, patiently suffering the indignity of being jostled around like a ragdoll.

Tony had turned to watch them, and a smile was lurking around the edges of his mouth. “Not so rough, kid, Jarvis isn't a toy. Are you all suited up?”

“Yup. I wore my BB-8 shirt for good luck.” Peter put the cat down to show off his shirt, on which was printed a cartoonized form of the orange droid with the caption ‘Happy Beeps’.

Tony plucked at his own shirt. “Check it out, I wore my droid shirt in solidarity. I'll be cheering you through the Force, just like Obi Wan in- whoa.” he blinked in surprise as Peter made a sudden dash for the table and and hurled himself into his arms - fortunately, Tony caught him at the last second. “Someone’s energetic today.”

“Do I have to go?” Peter’s voice was muffled from where his face was pressed against Tony's shoulder.

“Yes. Today is for having fun, not freaking out about me.” Tony replied, shifting as he adjusted his grip on the anxious boy.

“What if something happens?” Peter’s breath hitched and he clung on even tighter, as if afraid his dad would vanish into thin air. “What if you-”

“Peter.” Tony carefully unwound the small hands digging into his shirt and gripped them in his firmly. “Nothing bad is going to happen. You’re going to have a great time at the school sports day, win all the prizes, and I'll be right here when you get back.”

“I don’t know if I can win.” Peter said dejectedly. “I don’t- I don’t feel so good…”

Tony’s eyes softened. He brushed a thumb against Peter's cheek. “You're alright.”

“What if I break all the eggs or trip in the three legged race?” Peter still looked gloomy.

“Nobody made an omelette without breaking a few eggs. Hey.” Tony cracked a grin. “I don’t care if you break every egg in the world, as long as you do your best and have fun. That’s what matters.” Tony booped Peter on the nose, chuckling at how it made the boy go cross-eyed. “I’m always gonna be rooting for you.”

Smiling, Peter rubbed his nose, slightly cheered up now. “Okay, Dad, get better soon.”

“That's the only thing I'm focusing on. One little heart hiccup isn't gonna keep me down.” Tony
gave Peter’s shoulders a final squeeze, but decided to hell with it and opened his arms. “Okay, come here. One more hug for the road.”

Peter was never one to pass up opportunities for hugs, and he threw himself wholeheartedly into the embrace.

“Oof, careful there.” Tony said as the boy crashed into his chest like a bouncy ball, but he hugged him fiercely. “Save the football tackles for the other kids.”

“Love you, Dad.” Peter let go slowly.

Tony made shooing gestures. “Roll yourself out of here. Have fun today with your friends and your Pops.”

Taking that as his cue to leave, Steve picked up Peter’s backpack. “Come on, Peter.”

Peter’s face lit up with a small smile as he joined Steve and some of the tension ebbed out of his shoulders - the most positive Steve had seen him all week.

The change hadn’t escaped Tony’s notice, and he gave Steve a small nod. “I want him back 6pm sharp.”

Steve bobbed his head. “Got it.”

“And…” Tony bit his lip. “Thank you.”

The words opened up a pit of longing in Steve’s stomach, and he didn’t want to hold back anymore. He wanted to say something, to do something, anything, earn back Tony’s trust and show him that everything would be alright.

But instead, Steve smiled and responded, “Don’t worry, we won't get up to any mischief. Just make sure to get enough rest.”

“Heh. You don’t need to tell me that.” Tony gave him a tired smile, a shadow of his normally bright grin.

Halfway between rising, Steve paused, and decided to go for it. He reached across the table to give Tony’s hand a squeeze.

The calloused fingers were warm and firm, just how he remembered.

Tony’s eyes widened until the whites around his irises showed. But he didn't pull back from Steve’s touch. “Have fun, guys.”

Steve turned to Peter, who was watching their exchange avidly. “Let's go.”

“Bye, Jarvis.” Peter waved to the cat, then took Steve's hand.

“Mrraow.”

--

The door shut firmly, leaving Tony in a house that suddenly felt too big and too quiet.

Goddamn Steve.
Tony closed his eyes, rubbing the spot on the hand Steve had held as if he’d been burned. With his eyes closed, he could pretend that things were simpler and nothing could hurt him.

There was a squeak as Jarvis leapt up into Steve’s vacated chair. “Mrraow.”

“Don't take that tone with me.”

“Mrraow.” Jarvis settled into the seat and cast an all-too-knowing glance at him.

Tony sighed, tilting his head back to stare at the ceiling. “I know, J, me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Will Steve and Peter have a successful day out together?

What's going to happen??

A long-awaited cameo will happen next chapter! Who do you think it will be???
By the time they arrived at the school, Peter’s confidence had worn off.

“I don’t want to go.”

“Come on, buddy, it’s going to be fun today.” Steve replied as he parked in the school’s lot, which was full of cars and minivans.

Peter took one look out the window and curled in on himself. “Wanna go home. Wanna see Dad.”

“I know.” Steve’s heart went out to the boy. He couldn’t help worrying about Tony too, but it would do both of them no good to spend the entire day mired in distress. “We’re hanging out together the rest of today, so how about we get ice cream afterwards?” he offered, trying to look on the bright side of things. “Then we could catch that new superhero movie. The one about the aliens and magic gems.”

“Okay…” Peter said hesitantly, hands twisting into his shirt. “Then we’ll go home?”

“I promise. For now, why don’t we go look for your friends?” Steve suggested.

Father and son made their way to the field behind the school playground where the yearly sports events were held. There was a banner strung between two trees with “SPORTS DAY” painted on it. The kids and parent volunteers were spread out over the field.

A grin spread over Peter’s face. “Look, there’s Shuri!”

Shuri was hanging out at the side of the field with her cousin, N’Jadaka. The young man was wearing a U of Wakanda sports jersey, which stretched across his broad shoulders, highlighting his athletic build.

Cheered up by the sight of his friend, Peter began running over. Steve let himself be dragged along, relieved that his son was in a better mood. As they got closer, Steve caught the tail end of N’Jadaka giving what sounded like a rousing pep talk.

“...No matter how hard or impossible it is, never lose sight of your goal.” N’Jadaka stated, as he wrapped his hands in boxing tape.

Shuri drew a deep breath, clapping her hands over her heart center. “I’m not gonna run away. And I never go back on my word. That is my ninja way.”

“Who do you want to be?” N’Jadaka asked Shuri.

Shuri pumped her fists. “The very best! That no one ever was!”

“Shuri! Shuri! Hey! Hey!” Peter bounced around the girl in excited circles, but she was too focused on pepping herself up to notice him.

“If you win, you live. If you lose…” N’Jadaka trailed off expectantly.

“If you lose, you die!” Shuri balled her hands into fists and jabbed them into the air.
“...Die?” Peter stumbled to a halt, only now registering the content of their pep talk.

“If you don't fight, you can't win! Run until you can't run anymore, and then run again!” Shuri crowed.

“Exactly. Constant effort is life's greatest shortcut!” N’Jadaka declared. “Where are we from?”

“Wakanda U! Wakanda forever!” Shuri crossed her arms in the university’s sports chant.

Noticing the nervousness in Peter’s eyes, Steve squeezed his son’s shoulder encouragingly. “Don't worry, Peter, the most important thing is to try your best and have fun. Not everything is about winning—”

Shuri spun around and pointed a finger in Peter’s face. “Get ready to lose, Peter! N’Jadaka and I are gonna kick your butt!”

“It doesn't matter who wins, as long as everyone tries their best and has fun.” Peter said earnestly. “That's what my dad said.”

N’Jadaka let out a loud guffaw. “That's what losers tell themselves.”

“Huh?” Peter’s mouth dropped open at the abrupt dismissal.

N’Jadaka shook his head pityingly. “Hate to break it to you, kid, but your dad’s setting you up to fail in life. Those who lack resolve are incapable of even wiping away their own tears.”

Peter’s face closed off at his words, going quiet and unsure. His shoulders drooped as he began twisting at his shirt again.

“That’s not what it means at all.” Steve frowned at N’Jadaka’s condescending attitude. “The world isn't divided into winners and losers. Things are more complex than that.”

N’Jadaka rolled his eyes. “Tch, big talk from an old man.”

Old? Steve frowned. He was only in his thirties. “I'm not—”

“The strong shall live, the weak shall perish. That’s the law of life.” N’Jadaka declared, with the sagacity of a college student who’d taken a semester of philosophy. “If you just submit yourself to fate, then that’s the end of it.”

“That’s a simplistic outlook to have-” Steve began to object.

“My actions are utterly pure!” the fire in N’Jadaka’s eyes surged to life, as if Steve’s objection had ignited by the flame of competitiveness within him. “The Lioness will use all her strength even when hunting a rabbit!”

“That sounds like overkill for the lioness…” Steve muttered.

N’Jadaka ignored him and began to flex his biceps. Perplexed, Steve watched and started to wonder if the rest of Peter’s schoolmates were like this.

“Um, Mr N’Jadaka, sir…” Peter cleared his throat. He went over to the flexing college student and drew himself up as tall as he could.

“Eh?” N’Jadaka paused mid-flex. His pumped-up bicep strained against the sleeve of his jersey.
“My- my Dad said…” Peter mumbled, trying and failing to look the older boy in the face. Overcome by shyness, he resorted to grinding one foot into the dirt. “He said it’s okay... if I don’t win anything, because…”

N’Jadaka cracked his knuckles gave him a bored look. “It’s just pathetic to give up on something before you even give it a shot.”

Peter’s face filled with hurt at the snub, and that made every one of Steve’s protective instincts roar to life.

“Listen, sparky, you can’t win every fight.” Steve turned to N’Jadaka with his most withering frown. “You can fight your hardest and still have things not turn out in your favor. That’s just how the world works.”

“Is that what you told yourself when your boo started dating that doctor?” N’Jadaka returned, with a razor-sharp grin.

Steve’s eyes flashed as every muscle in his body went stock-still. “Say that again.”

“Looks like I hit a nerve,” N’Jadaka smirked. He sauntered over, all toned physique and twenty-one year old cockiness. “It’s not surprising, though. You can’t ever win if you’re always on the defensive. To win, you have to attack.”

“How did you even know about that? Every hear of staying out of other folks’ personal business?” Steve demanded.

N’Jadaka blew on his fingernails haughtily. “It’s not my fault you guys keep broadcasting your little love triangle to the entire kindergarten like some kind of third-rate shoujo series.”

*Show-joe?* Steve elected to ignore the string of weird slang, and he said stiffly, “So you’ve all stooped to gossiping about us? Have you no shame?”

“Tch, whatever.” N’Jadaka rolled his eyes. “It’s not our fault your ex is a total tsundere.”

“Don’t talk about him like that.” Steve growled, starting to feel his temper fray. He wasn't going to just stand here and let some upstart kid criticize his relationships and insult Tony's honor.

Granted, Steve wasn't too familiar with current trends, so he wasn’t exactly sure what a ‘soon-dair-ay’ was. But judging by N’Jadaka’s tone of voice, Steve could surmise that it was something highly unflattering.

N’Jadaka smirked at Steve’s furious expression. “Maybe you should sit this one out, gramps. After all, if you can’t find a reason to fight, then you shouldn’t be fighting.” he jerked his head at Shuri. “Let’s go, cuz, we have more training to do. I’ll show you how to do the special ninja techniques.”

Before turning to follow, Shuri pointed at her eyes, then at Peter. “Get ready to eat our dust.”

Left alone, Steve’s teeth were grinding. Objectively, he knew that it was all a calculated attack to get a rise out of him. After all, Steve was mature, Steve could ignore one college kid’s needling.

Steve was a grown up.

Steve could keep a cool head.

Steve could rise above childish insults...
But N’Jadaka’s psychological attack had hit its mark, and Steve’s traitorous mind summoned up a slideshow of his worst fears: Tony and Stephen riding off into the sunset, getting married and raising lots of super-smart-super-successful kids, Tony sitting in Stephen’s lap while being fed doughnuts...

Steve’s jaw clenched.

The blood was pounding in his ears, sending every sense into hyper alert mode. It was as if something which had long lay dormant flickered to life, filling him with the restless desire to Fight, to prove he wasn’t Less Than. As Steve turned, his eyes fell on Peter-

Peter, who looked to be on the verge of tears.

Steve put the brakes on his emotions. He immediately crouched down to level with the boy. “Hey, buddy, what's wrong?”

“Does Dad think I gave up? Am I a loser?” the hurt look in Peter’s eyes tore at Steve’s heart. Clearly he’d had been affected by N’Jadaka’s trash-talking more than Steve had thought.

“No, of course not. Never think that.” Steve tried to sound assuring. N’Jadaka taunting Steve was one thing, but N’Jadaka taunting Peter? Unacceptable, especially after the boy had been through such a stressful week.

The unfairness of the situation redirected Steve’s energy towards a new mission objective. While N’Jadaka might be right about Steve having ruined his relationship with Tony, the arrogant college student was completely wrong about Peter being a loser.

Which was why Steve was going to channel every iota of his energy into obliterating the competition. Steve was going to make sure Peter won first prize in every event today.

Steve squared his jaw. “Peter, eliminating the competition is our new mission. From now on, we're in this to win this.”

The complete 180 threw Peter off guard. “Huh? But Pops, you just said the most important thing is to try our best and have fun-”

A determined Steve was an unstoppable Steve. “You have to be ready in case situations change on you.” He said briskly. “When your back is against the wall, there's no choice but to take a stand for what you believe in.”

Peter scratched his head. “What wall?”

Now going full tactical mode, Steve began sketching diagrams in the dirt. “Here's the game plan; we need to synchronize our movements to win the three-legged race, I’ll run you through some drills...”

“Drills?” The only drills Peter knew about were noisy and kept in Tony’s garage.

Steve continued, briskly laying out his plan. “The egg-and-spoon race is all about steadiness, so don't run, walk. I've surveyed the terrain for the optimum path. The route goes from here, here, to here,” he drew a series of lines. “And terminate your route at this point.”

“Huh?” Peter gaped at the information overload, trying to process the complicated diagrams.

But Steve was on a roll now. He looked over at the container of bean bags, gauging their weight,
size, and aerodynamics in the current wind speed. “For the bean bag toss, we should run through some drills to gauge geometry and trajectory—”

“I don’t know if I can do this, Pops…” Peter’s small shoulders slumped as he stared at the ground. One of his shoelaces had come undone and was trailing in the dirt.

The sight reminded Steve to slow down on the problem-solving. After all, there was no point coming up with a million solutions if Peter was too downhearted to even try.

“Your Dad said that he’ll be proud of you no matter what. Both of us are.” Steve began tying Peter’s shoelace like the grown up Boy Scout that he was, but also to give himself some time to think. “But there’s also something else that’s important for you to learn.”

That got Peter’s attention. “What?”

Tying off the ends of Peter’s shoe with a sturdy double slip, Steve looked Peter squarely in the eyes and hoped he was saying the right thing. “Don’t let anyone ever make you feel like they’re better than you.”

“But Shuri’s so smart, and Wanda’s so tough, and Wade’s so funny…” Peter said glumly.

“They have their good points, and you have yours. You’ve got a good heart, and you’re brave. And…” Steve added, with a wink. “Great at drawing. I still have your picture.”

Peter stuck out his tongue. “It’s not that good…”

“I think it is.” Steve said gently. “You just need to believe in yourself. Because I believe in you.”

As Steve said it, he could imagine Tony’s expression; a half grin, with an incredulous glint in his eyes. *Your propensity for cheesy speeches never ceases to amaze. Do you have one prepared for every situation?*

The memory made him smile a little. Admittedly, Steve knew he could be a little cheesy on occasion, but just because something was trite didn't make it any less true. And right now, a little bit of inspiration was what Peter needed to hear.

The little pep talk seemed to have worked, because Peter now had a thoughtful expression. After a pause, the boy nodded slowly. “Okay, I’ll try.”

“Attaboy, we can do this.” Steve raised his hand for a fist bump. “Come on, put ‘er there.”

Peter timidly raised his fist and bumped it against Steve’s.

“Oh, somebody’s gotten really strong.” Steve pretended to be knocked back by the tiny fist bump, which made the boy giggle.

“So don’t worry,” Steve continued. “Even if other people have silver hair—”

“Pietro’s hair looks cool,” Peter glanced over at where Erik was chasing Pietro.

“An exotic accent—” Steve muttered darkly.

“Wade’s sitter Mr Colossus has a neat accent!” Peter looked towards the other side of the field, where Wade was surreptitiously fishing a pair of scissors out of Colossus’ pockets.

“Or a fancy job.” Steve sounded like he was talking to himself more than Peter. “A doctor? And
that makes him a saint? Oh please, I've saved plenty of lives too...”

Peter blinked. “Pops? What are you talking about?”

“We’re not gonna lose to him.” The fire of competitiveness was fully ablaze in Steve’s eyes. “I'm going to help you prove that you're better than the others. So I- so we can make your Dad proud. Together.”

Peter nodded resolutely. “Let’s do this. Together.”

--

Thanos surveyed the field, referee’s whistle displayed prominently on his burly chest as a symbol of his authority. The three-legged race was first on the list, and all his kindergarteners and their respective parents had broken into groups to prepare.

Peter and his father were huddled together under a tree, discussing strategy in low whispers.

Shuri and her cousin were doing jumping jacks on the other side of the field. Well… N’Jadaka was doing the jumping jacks, while Shuri was skipping around him.

Wade’s babysitter, Colossus, was the only one who had bothered to check the schedule. The Russian man had printed it out onto letter-sized paper which looked flimsy as tissue paper in his huge hands. Wade was perched on one burly shoulder, holding a pair of scissors. The boy hummed as he snipped holes in the back of Colossus’s shirt.

“Waaah!” A silvery blur shot past Thanos.

“Pietro, stop running and put your shoes on! Come on, now…” Erik jogged past, unsuccessfully trying to catch Pietro. Judging by how fast the albino boy was zipping around the field, Pietro looked to be in the throes of a sugar rush.

His twin was more sedate: Wanda sat apart from all the rest, humming to herself as she wove a sheaf of daisies into a crown. Next to her, Vision sat propped up against a rock, already wearing a flower crown of his own.

Thanos pursed his lips. That wouldn’t do. Everyone was supposed to take participate in today’s events.

Thanos went over to her. “Wanda, since you don't have a partner, I’ll race with you.”

“No.” Wanda serenely placed on the flower crown on her head and pulled Vision onto her lap. “I'm gonna partner Viz.”

“Wanda, sweetie, you should put Viz in the car so he doesn't get dirty.” a harried Erik called across the field, where he had finally managed to tackle a squawking Pietro.

“No, I'm a princess and Vision is the prince. We're supposed to be together forever.”

Thanos lumbered over, shaking his head. “You can't participate in a three-legged race with a toy as your partner. Now is no time to be a loner, no time at all.”

As Thanos reached down to grab Vision, a clod of earth flew at his head. He narrowly dodged it, but a second clod smashed against his chin.

“Ow,” Thanos growled, dusting streaks of mud off his face.
“Go away! I hate you!” Wanda yelled as she flung clump after clump of soil at Thanos.

Grunting, Thanos raised his hands to defend himself from the rain of dirt.

“Wanda! No more violence or I’ll ground you again! I’m serious!” Erik raised his voice warningly as he struggled to clip a child leash on Pietro. “Don't make me go over there.”

“I'm racing with Viz and that’s final!” Wanda hugged Vision tightly and glared furiously at Thanos, daring him to separate them.

Unwilling to be beaten by a child, Thanos grabbed the arm of the plushie. The second his hand touched Viz, Wanda let out a growl unlike anything Thanos had heard from her before.

Over Wanda’s shoulder, Erik shrugged and mouthed. “Let it go. She’ll only get worse.”

Thanos weighed up his options, decided that wrangling an angry Wanda wasn’t worth it today, and immediately dropped Vision’s arm.

“He’s right, you know.” Colossus strode by with a giggling Wade tucked under one arm. “There’s no getting between her and that doll.”

Thanos and Erik gawked after Colossus. The babysitter seemed unaware that Wade had gone to town on his clothing. Colossus’s shirt was held together by two measly strips of cloth and a prayer, neither of which seemed like they’d last long restraining Colossus’s humongous lats. One sneeze, one twitch in the wrong direction, and Colossus’s tattered shirt would be scattered to the winds.

Thanos shook his head. He had other things to worry about than half-naked babysitters.

--

“Ready, get set, go!” Thanos blew his whistle to start the three-legged race. The teams shot off.

It wasn’t long before everything devolved into chaos.

It started with Wanda; instead of making for the finish line, she’d elected to skip around the field in a huge arc, hands holding Vision’s as she danced in circles. From a distance, it would have looked like Wanda was carrying her partner instead of racing fair and square.

At least that was how it appeared to N’Jadaka, who was on the lookout for signs of weakness - His eyes narrowed with outrage at the sight.

“This match is rigged! It's a free for all!” N’Jadaka swung Shuri up onto his shoulders and broke into a run.

“Hey, they can't do that!” Peter yelled.

“Wheeeee-” Shuri cheered as N’Jadaka sped off into the distance.

Peter looked up at Steve questioningly. “Wait, can they do that? Pops- argh!” Peter squeaked as Steve picked him up and started sprinting after N’Jadaka.

Other teams took this as their signal to screw the rules: parents and older siblings began scooping up their smaller partner and running for the finish line. Thanos put his head in his hands as the race devolved into an undignified scramble.

“This is out of control! Nobody is following the rules anymore!” Colossus’s voice rang out from
far behind where he was determinedly walking.

Leading the pack was N’Jadaka… but slowly and surely, Steve started to gain on him.

“He’s fast!” Shuri yelled, twisting over her shoulder.

N’Jadaka shot a quick look back, gritting his teeth as the distance shrank. “Impossible! That stance… is he using that technique?!”

*I’m gonna win this for you, Peter.* Steve’s vision narrowed until all he could see was the the finish line. He sped up the pace, closing the distance between him and N’Jadaka to millimeters.

Both were evenly matched, straining neck and neck as the finish line loomed before them.

“Let's go, Shuri! For the revolution of the world!” N’Jadaka cried.

“We’re gonna win, N’Jadaka!” Shuri yelled.

Buffeted by the winds, Peter screamed.

Steve knew this was now or never. With a final yell of desperation, Steve lifted Peter up and threw him over the finish line as easily as lobbing a basketball.

“Whoa!” Peter twisted in midair like a cat, backflipping neatly over the finish line to land softly in the grass. Peter shook himself, and a huge grin broke out on his face.

“Pops, we won!” Peter cheered, bouncing up and excitedly. “We did it!”

Steve felt a swell of pride before he realized his mistake: the hail-mary throw meant he’d overextended himself, and there was only one direction he could go.

Down.

As Steve fell, he had a moment of clarity in which a single thought coalesced:

*Oh shit.*

And then physics caught up with him. Steve toppled sideways, crashing into N’Jadaka, who yelled and quickly tossed Shuri over the line so she wouldn't get crushed. The momentum sent the two men tumbling to the ground, groaning in pain.

“What kind of move was that?” N’Jadaka demanded, picking himself out of the dirt.

Steve never got to respond, because that was the moment when the rest of the stampede arrived.

Muffled curses ensued as parents crashed into each other, limbs were stepped on, kids were quickly shunted out of harm's way.

Steve hissed as an elbow knocked into the back of his head.

“This is why we need to follow the rules. People will get hurt otherwise.” Colossus admonished as he marched primly around the multi-parent pile-up.

“Bye bye.” Wade waved as he was towed along by Colossus’s gigantic strides.

“Get- the hell- off,” N’Jadaka snarled, shoving another parent’s knee out of his face.
Steve helped the younger man up, dusted himself off, and took stock of his injuries: He’d have some cuts and bruises, but they were all worth it to help Peter win.

On the other side of the finish line, Shuri glared at Peter, who was fully engrossed in doing a victory dance.

“Are you kidding me?” Shuri pouted.

--

“Pops, you’re right.” Peter said breathlessly. He was half-hidden behind a trophy that was almost as big as he was.

“About what?” Steve asked, helping Peter lower the prize to the patch of grass under the tree where they had set up their base of operations. Their plastic trophy towered over their water bottles like a mini skyscraper.

The sheen from the trophy reflected in Peter’s victory-drunk eyes. “We have to win more. It’s the only way to make Dad proud.”

Nodding, Steve surveyed the field. His cool blue eyes took in every competitor, mind running through weaknesses and battle plans. There was no challenge too difficult, no opponent too tough.

Steve and Peter were going to win this - together.

Chapter End Notes

OMAKE
[meanwhile at home]
Tony, freezing upright and staring into space because his Something Extremely Silly Is About To Happen senses started tingling: oh no

Rhodey: tony no

Tony, half wearing clothes and heading out the door: IVE ABANDONED MY CHILD

Rhodey: can u chill
Event after event passed. The Steve-Peter team was an unbeatable force, bagging first place in everything: the egg-and-spoon race, the bean bag toss, the gunny sack race, tic-tac-toe, the movie trivia quiz…

One by one, all the trophies went into Peter and Steve’s waiting hands.

N’Jadaka had reached the end of his patience. Watching the blond man and his son winning first place in every event was getting old, real fast. This was supposed to be N’Jadaka’s chance to hang out with Shuri and make her day special, since her useless brother was too busy doing work for his boring job.

But ever since that damn Steve Rogers had showed up and stolen the spotlight, all N’Jadaka’s plans were ruined.

N’Jadaka’s fists clenched.

An anger was roiling in him, the type of fury he usually directed towards people who preferred watching anime dubbed into English instead of the original Japanese with subtitles… no, it was even worse than that, this was the type of vitriol reserved for the lowest of the low; this was on the level of live-action Hollywood film adaptations of anime that stripped away everything that had made the source material special, replacing the philosophical themes and complex characters with mindless action scenes and actors that couldn’t act their way out of a plastic bag.

Suffice to say, N’Jadaka was pissed.

It didn’t help that the sun was especially hot that day, making his temper shorter than it usually was. N’Jadaka didn’t have a clear plan for how he was going to deal with the situation, but he knew one thing for sure: he was going to force Steve Rogers to acknowledge him.

Grinding his teeth, N’Jadaka marched over to the tree where Steve was helping Peter organize their trophy collection by height.

N’Jadaka’s lip curled at such a blatant display of arrogance. “You know what, old man, I’m not gonna hold back anymore.”

Steve placed the largest trophy at the end of the line and looked up in curiosity. “Excuse me?”

N’Jadaka sniffed. “Truth is, I’ve been giving you a chance. Up till now, I’ve only been using 40% of my power.”
Steve mouth twitched and an amused look danced through his eyes. “I'm looking forward to the challenge, may the best team win. Take it easy, hotshot.” Balancing a trophy under one arm, Steve turned to go.

Little did he know that that doing so was the surest way to set N’Jadaka off - because there was nothing N’Jadaka hated more than being condescended to.

“That’s right, I am hot stuff! Fire cannot be burned! You think you can roast me? I’ll just use your blood to heal these burns.” N’Jadaka declared as he marched after him.

Steve blinked, backing up a little in surprise. “Christ, no need to get personal…”

“Fleeing is useless! Falling from this high won’t hurt me!” N’Jadaka closed in on his target like a nerd at a midnight release for the latest video game console. “Instead, now the fire has cornered you!”

Steve gave him a cool look. “Is that supposed to be intimidating?”

N’Jadaka raised a finger right in the man’s face. “Believe it!”

Steve shook his head and put on a ‘responsible adult’ voice. “We win some, we lose some. Not everything has to turn into a battle.”

“Oh sure it can,” N’Jadaka puffed up his chest. “You see, I'm one hell of a battler.”

As he spoke, he caught a glimpse of movement and he realised that their confrontation had drawn a crowd of curious onlookers of children and adults alike. N’Jadaka grinned. He always loved an audience, the attention always gave his morale a boost.

Steve glanced uneasily at the ring of spectators around them. “We need to stop this before it becomes a scene.”

“You think this is a scene? You ain't seen nothing yet! This isn't even my final form!” N’Jadaka gripped the front of his jersey and ripped it away sharply, exposing the full glory of his swimmer’s build. He cast away the shreds of his shirt, letting them blow away on the wind like sakura petals before an oncoming storm.

“We ready to duel?” N’Jadaka gave his neck a few cracks, before flowing into a fighting stance.

The trophy Steve was holding slipped out of his hands and landed in the grass with a soft thud. “...What are you doing?”

“Getting my sexy-no-jutsu on.” N’Jadaka struck another pose, basking in the crowd’s attention. His dark skin was gleaming with sweat from the morning’s exertions, and sun fell sharply across the well-defined planes of his abs, highlighting every rippling muscle.

There were murmurs of admiration from the crowd.

Colossus let out a scandalized gasp and covered Wade’s eyes. “Put your clothes on, there are children around! This isn’t some kind of nudist beach!”

Wade batted his fists against the huge hand clamped onto his head. “It's naked time!”

“You think these came for free? I worked my ass off for these!” N’Jadaka flexed, which pumped
up every muscle to its full glory. “One hundred push ups. One hundred sit ups. And one hundred squats. Then a ten-kilometer run. Do it every single day!”

Steve pinched his nose bridge, looking extremely tired by now. “What’s this stunt of yours supposed to prove?”

“What’s wrong, gramps?” N’Jadaka shot back. “Too scared to take your tiddies out? Not gonna lie, I’d feel shy too if I were a burned out old geezer.”

“I don’t need to take my clothes off to prove a point.” Steve argued, though his ‘responsible adult’ mask seemed more strained with every moment. “This type of childish fighting is beneath the both of us.”

But N’Jadaka had one more card to play. While he was bored by gossip, it was impossible not to overhear weeks’ worth of T’Challa complaining *you'll never believe what those idiot parents at Shuri’s kindergarten have done THIS time.* N’Jadaka had no idea as to the veracity of said gossip, and honestly didn’t care; anything to get under Rogers’ skin and strike a crack in the blond man’s self-righteous attitude.

N’Jadaka grinned fiercely and launched his final attack. “You know what I heard? Your boo and his new boyfriend get it on all the time.” he crossed his arms. “That’s right, I heard this doctor guy has a eight pack, that he’s really shredded...”

Steve went still as if he’d been turned to stone, but there was a cold fire blazing in his eyes.

*Critical damage.* N’Jadaka congratulated himself. “Face it, gramps, you're as pointless as two hundred episodes of filler!”

Steve continued to stare at him with that raptor-sharp intensity. Even though it was such a hot day, the temperature around him seemed to drop several degrees.

The crowd began to shift uneasily.

Unimpressed, N’Jadaka jerked his head towards the exit of the field. “So take your potato chip ass and beat it!”

Steve wordlessly reached over his shoulder and pulled his shirt over his head in one smooth movement.

A hush fell over the crowd as they took in the sight: Steve’s chiselled pecs put every Greek statue to shame, and the swell of his perfectly formed biceps could make every Renaissance sculptor weep. His light skin was pearlescent in the sun, glistening with a sheen of sweat and with a light pink flush from the heat.

Standing next to each other, Steve and N’Jadaka’s magnificent chests garnered appreciative noises and outright catcalls from the spectators.

“Ow!”

“Take it all off!”

“Naked time!”

“Now *that’s* a Dad I’d Like to-”
“Naked! Naked!”

“What’s going on here? Why is everyone gathered?” Thanos pushed his way to the front of the crowd. The sight of shirtless N’Jadaka and Steve facing off like roosters in a fighting pit made him groan, and he began waving his hands, trying to break up the crowd. “All right, everyone break it up, nothing to see here.”

“Shh, you’re blocking the view.” Clint elbowed his way past, snapping photos like there was no tomorrow.

“What are you doing?” Thanos hissed at the two shirtless contenders. “This is a Sports Day, not a beach party! Both of you, put your clothes back on right now!”

“Is it naked time now?” Wade’s eyes gleamed. Having liberated himself from Colossus’s grasp, he gazed on the sight with glee.

N’Jadaka began laughing uproariously at Steve. “Damn, gramps, guess you are pretty shredded. But I’m not gonna lose to you either.”

“Excuse me, lose? From where I’m standing it looks like there’s no competition.” Steve folded his arms; sans shirt, it made his shoulders and pecs plump up.

The crowd erupted with a series of whistles. The back of Steve’s neck turned slightly pink.

N’Jadaka started flexing his biceps, which earned him another wave of cheers. “Arm-wrestling competition, best of three, winner take all. Let’s see if those muscles of yours are just for show.”

Steve’s eyes flashed. “Son, you don’t want to play that game with me.”

“Whatever, I’m not scared to fight an old man.” N’Jadaka rolled his shoulders and thrust out his chest. “Believe it!”

Steve’s eyebrow twitched. “Stop saying ‘believe it.’”

--

“Crush him, N’Jadaka!” Shuri cheered.

“You can do it, Pops!” Peter yelled.

The impromptu arm wrestling match divided the crowd into factions, pitting friend against friend. A betting pool had sprung up among the more enterprising spectators.

Drax studied the combatants intently. “I will wager ten dollars on Rogers. He is a muscular, mature man, with well-formed pectorals and extremely virile beard.”

“Yeah, you would go for the safe choice.” Rocket snickered. “Where’s your sense of adventure? Eh, I’ll bet twenty bucks on N’Jadaka, I like the guy’s style.”

“Done.” Drax shook hands with the shorter man.

Some refused to pick sides, instead choosing to take advantage of the fact that two extremely good-looking, extremely fit men were putting on a free show.

“Nice.” Clint grinned proudly as he snapped a succession of pictures of Steve and N’Jadaka’s sculpted physiques.
Thanos tiredly ground his knuckles against his forehead. Things always seemed to turn into a circus whenever Peter and his family was involved.

--

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, Steve and N’Jadaka continued pushing their sweat-slick bodies to the absolute limit. The arm wrestling matches turned into a push up competition, a backflip competition, a contest to see who could lift the most kids, and finally, a series of sprints around the field.

Erik groaned as he watched the two knuckleheads race around the field with Peter and Shuri balanced on their bare shoulders. It made him embarrassed that he was even acquainted with them. The entire Sports Day had ground to a halt because everyone had stopped to watch Steve and N’Jadaka’s idiotic pissing contests.

Not to mention, Erik was irritated and tired; he’d wanted to come to the Sports Day late so he could leave as early as possible. But instead he had spent the entire morning chasing Pietro so he could be put on a child leash, Wanda was being more antisocial than usual, and Wade...

“Woohoo! Naked time!” Wade skipped past, naked as the day he was born.

“WADE WINSTON WILSON! PUT YOUR CLOTHES ON THIS INSTANT!” Colossus hollered as he thundered after his charge, narrowly missing knocking Erik over. “INDECENT EXPOSURE IS UNACCEPTABLE!”

Erik sighed and rubbed at his aching temples. He needed a drink to deal with all this.

However, a glance at the snack table showed all the juice cartons were missing. Erik tsked at the atrocious catering, and went to look for something stronger.

There was a flask in his car that he kept specifically for situations like these.

As he crossed the field, Erik wondered if Charles ever had to deal with this level of nonsense at his school…

--

“And then they lived happily ever after.” Wanda took a step back from her creation and clapped. She was very pleased with the castle she’d constructed out of juice cartons. All that remained was to arrange Vision on the throne and her kingdom would be complete.

As she stepped back, small blur ran straight into her creation, scattering juice cartons everywhere.

“Naked! Naked! Naked time!”

“Wade! You ruined it!” Wanda screamed, but the naked boy was too far away. Grumbling, she started picking up the juice cartons. It would take ages to rebuild Castle v2.0. She grimaced as her hands came away sticky; some of the boxes had burst open from the impact and were leaking juice everywhere. “Blech.”

Wanda had barely stacked an apple juice box on top of a peach tea juice box when strong gust of wind knocked her over, as a second, larger figure thundered past.

“WADE! YOU CANNOT RUN AROUND NAKED IN PUBLIC! THIS IS INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR!” Colossus bellowed.
Wanda rolled her eyes at her cousin’s idiocy and began re-laying the foundations of her castle.

“Had enough yet? We’ve been at this for almost an hour.” Steve said as he did chin-ups on a tree branch. His strong arms moved tirelessly, pulling him up and down at a decisive pace.

N’Jadaka swore, sensing his body was almost at its limit. With a grunt, he dragged himself into a final chin-up, then let go of the tree branch to drop down to the ground. “Don’t look down on me! Give up! On making me give up!”

“I can do this all day.” Steve said simply. He didn’t even slow down.

As N’Jadaka rubbed his aching muscles, he glared up at the blond man, who continued doing chin-ups with the brutal efficiency of a machine. The asshole probably could go all day, and he wasn’t even winded, damn him. N’Jadaka had always prided himself on being in great shape, but this was just insane.

This is bad, N’Jadaka thought to himself. It’s time for me to use that technique against Mr Peak Physical Condition...

“So you won this round, gramps. But all those muscles and you still couldn’t hold onto one relationship.”

Steve didn’t respond to the roast, though the bark beneath his fists began to splinter.

N’Jadaka went in for the critical strike. “That tsundere ex of yours-”

He’d barely uttered the words, when Steve immediately swung himself down from the tree and landed lightly on the grass. When Steve rose from his crouched stance and looked N’Jadaka in the eye, the frosty look was back.

“Take as many cheap shots at me as you like, but don’t you ever talk trash about my family. You can’t go around calling people a ‘sun-dairy’, it’s unacceptable-”

“It’s tsundere. Learn how to pronounce it.” N’Jadaka said impatiently.

“Just bow out gracefully, so we can put this petty fighting to an end.” Steve replied, in a would-be patient voice. “There’s no shame in admitting when you’ve been beaten.”

“Yeah? Well beat this,” N’Jadaka retorted and lunged at Steve in a football tackle.

Click.

Click.

Two men were sitting on a large picnic blanket to watch the Steve vs N’Jadaka death match.

“Heh. Perfect.” Clint snapped another picture of a shirtless Steve and N’Jadaka doing chin ups on tree branches. “Tony’s gonna lose his shit.”

Scott wrinkled his nose. “Didn’t the guy just have a heart attack? Maybe you shouldn’t be sending him things that’ll raise his blood pressure.”
Clint paused in the middle of dotting sparkle emojis on a zoomed-in photo of Steve’s pecs to consider the ramifications of his actions. “Nah. This is fun.”

“You're weird.” Scott shook his head. “Pass me a juice box.”

“Can’t. Wanda took ‘em all.” Clint jerked his head to where the girl was building a castle out of juice boxes while holding Vision. “You're welcome to try nicking one if you aren't afraid of being kneecapped by her plushie. I've gotta warn you though, she's got a mean swing.”

“Ugh. I'll pass.” Scott groaned. He was thirsty but not enough to brave being bludgeoned by a plushie. He wondered how this was his life.

There was so much weirdness happening today.

Scott put his chin in his hands, watching N’Jadaka football-tackle Steve into the grass. “Don't you think this sports day is so much weirder than last year’s?”

“Uh, you mean more fun?” Clint said cheerfully as his camera thumb moved rapidly to capture more shirtless moments.

“Well… that’s one way of looking at it.”

They watched in silence as Steve and N’Jadaka grappled at each other, each fighting for the upper hand. There was nothing glorious or skilful about the fight, just two men wrestling gracelessly in the mud.

Clint snapped a couple more pictures for good measure.

“Do you ever wonder if life has a purpose, or if it's nothing more than a series of randomly connected events?” Scott mused.

The momentum of Steve and N’Jadaka’s fight made them start rolling away down the field. Peter and Shuri chased after them, yelling and whooping. Scott turned to watch them go. Clint nodded, deciding he’d taken enough photos for the day.

“I’d rather make my own luck than waste time thinking about that kind of bull.” Clint said while scrolling through his hundreds of photos and deleting the blurry ones.

Scott grinned. “While you were busy playing paparazzi, Cassie was totally kicking Nathaniel's butt out there.”

“She is not!” Clint fired off twenty shirtless Steve photos to his group chat and sprang to his feet. “Nate, don't hold back! Destroy her!”

“Show him who’s boss, Cassie!”

--

After three more circuits around the field, Colossus finally caught up with his elusive charge.

“Got you! No more running away this time. Time to behave yourself, Wade.” Colossus declared triumphantly as he seized Wade’s skinny arm in one humongous fist.

Unfortunately for Colossus, who had spent the morning chasing after a hyperactive kid, the action of grabbing Wade was final straw for his poor, abused shirt. As Colossus clambered to his feet, the shirt Wade had been snipping at all morning gave up the ghost.
“Naked time! Naked! Naked! Naked!” Wade clapped, as Colossus’s shirt fell apart like strands of overcooked spaghetti, exposing the steel-hard muscles of his 6’6” frame.

Colossus squawked in shock at the sudden disintegration of his clothes. Never in all his years had he been subjected to such an outrage. It was humiliating, not to mention extremely unprofessional.

To make things even more unfortunate for poor Colossus, the disrobement occurred at the same moment a certain person was passing by. A person who had a deep appreciation for the musculature of the male form...

Drax stopped dead in his tracks, eyes glinting as they ran over the other man. “I have a deep appreciation for the musculature of the male form. You are very muscular, and it is visually appealing.” He looked Colossus up and down with an approving nod.

“I had nothing to do with this!!” Colossus exclaimed, trying to preserve his modesty with one hand while trying to prevent Wade from running off with the other.

With a bark of laughter, Drax ripped off his own shirt, revealing a pair of bulky pecs which were covered in swirling red tattoo designs. “Let us have an arm wrestling match. Since Steve and N’Jadaka have set things in motion, we too should engage in manly feats of strength to measure our power against each other!”

“Naked!” Wade cheered happily.

“I refuse to get involved in these childish games! I’m here to babysit the children.” Colossus protested, power-walking away from Drax as fast as he could.

--

The end of Sports Day found Shuri and N’Jadaka sitting on the bench by the school gate. Both of them had folded arms, slight sunburns, and matching sulks. But that was where the similarities ended: While Shuri was just a little disheveled, with scraped knees, and grass stains on her clothes; N’Jadaka’s shirt was conspicuously missing, leaving him covered in mud, juice, and a little blood.

The sorry sight of his sister and cousin made T’Challa grin as he drove up to the school. There was definitely an interesting story here.

“Do I want to know what happened to your clothes, N’Jadaka?” T’Challa rolled down the driver’s window with a smirk.

“Zip it.” grumbled N’Jadaka as he folded himself into the passenger seat. “Don't ask questions you don't want answers to.”

“That good, huh?” T’Challa chuckled and turned up the AC for them. “I take it Sports Day went well.”

“Brother, you wouldn't believe half the things that happened,” Shuri threw herself into the backseat with a huff. “Wanda swiped all the juice boxes to have a tea party with Viz, Mr Thanos took a hardboiled egg to the eye, Wanda’s dad sprained his arm while tripping over a rabbit hole…”

Huh. T’Challa suddenly felt relieved that he’d been called in for work today.

Shuri continued listing off the mishaps. “…Wade flashed the whole kindergarten, and N’Jadaka challenged Peter’s dad to a flexing competition. It was unbelievable!”
"Actually, based on what I know of your friends, I can believe that all those events took place.” T’Challa raised an eyebrow at the last incident. “Did I hear correctly? N’Jadaka, you really got into a fight with Peter’s dad?”

“It wasn’t a fight! And seriously? That’s the one you have trouble believing?” N’Jadaka sulked. “Peter’s dad is a real jerk, by the way.”

“Is he? Interesting,” T’Challa remarked thoughtfully. “I’ve met Tony a couple of times, and he doesn’t seem like the type to get caught up in a pissing contest like some kind of stupid meathead.”

“Hey,” grumbled N’Jadaka.

“No, Peter’s other dad.” Shuri said.

“Ah. Steve Rogers. Now that makes a lot more sense.” T’Challa nodded. He glanced over at N’Jadaka’s muddy, sticky, bloody state. “Must’ve been quite a fight. Did we win the war at least?”

“Tch, that blond asshole cheated. And his overachieving shrimp of a son, too.” N’Jadaka seethed. He fished out the packet of wet wipes T’Challa kept in the glove compartment and began mopping the stains off himself. “Those that break the rules are scum.”

“Yeah, we didn't win a single thing.” Shuri complained, sprawling herself across the seats. “Peter and his dad took first place in every game. It's not fair.”

T’Challa made a sympathetic sound. “Well, winning isn't everything. The most important thing is that you tried your best and had fun-”

“N’Jadaka said that kind of talk is for losers. Everything is about winning!” Shuri kicked her feet up against the back of T’Challa’s seat.

T’Challa side-eyed his cousin. “Are you filling my sister’s head with that cartoon nonsense again? Surely there are more productive ways to engage in school activities.”

N’Jadaka scoffed and threw his balled-up wet wipe on the floor. “You're too soft, T. Shuri’s gotta learn the hard truths about life. When the world shoves you around, you just gotta stand up and shove back. It's not like somebody's gonna save you if you start babbling excuses.”

“...Right.” T’Challa decided not to ask where that came from. “Be that as it may, one shouldn't disregard the importance of good sportsmanship, unity, and school spirit-” he didn’t get to finish because his cousin slapped a hand down on the dashboard.


“Stop hitting my car.”

There was no stopping N’Jadaka when he got fired up. “There’s no other way. Even if I must take the devil’s fruit, I must gain power…” he clenched a fist, vibrating with passion. “I am an avenger.”

“You tell ‘em, N’Jadaka!” Shuri cheered.

“Here we go,” T’Challa muttered.

N’Jadaka drew himself up, eyes aglitter with newfound zeal. “To make your opponents lose, making them taste defeat, crushing a fallen opponent, kicking them when they're down, rubbing
“Winning is about trampling over their corpses!” Shuri chimed in. She leaned forward to give N’Jadaka a high-five.

“By Bast’s arthritic toe beans, you’re both being ridiculous.” T’Challa wearily rubbed the back of his neck, which had been tensing up ever since the two had entered his car. “There's more to life than winning a children’s game, you know.”

“Don't listen to Boring Big Bro,” N’Jadaka leaned over the armrest to face the backseat. “Stick with me, kid, and I'll help you unlock your full potential, just like Master Roshi did for Goku.”

Shuri nodded resolutely. “I have to become stronger.”

“You have to keep doing it. No matter how difficult it gets. It took me a full three years to get this strong.” N’Jadaka folded his arms with a rakish grin. “Human beings are strong because we have the ability to change ourselves.”

“I know for a fact you only started that cartoon fanclub on campus last year,” T’Challa mumbled, but the other two ignored him.

“Yeah! I wanna be the very best!” Shuri agreed, reaching out a fist.

“Like no one ever was!” N’Jadaka returned the fist bump. “Let’s do our best!”

“Yeah!” Apparently reaching the end of her energy, Shuri flopped back against the seats with a sigh. “I still wish we’d won something.”

“Remember the lesson, not the disappointment.” N’Jadaka said sagely. “The next generation will always surpass the previous one. It's one of the never-ending cycles in life.”

“Is that a line from one of your cartoons?” T’Challa piped up, trying to be part of the conversation. It was difficult to be included when his family members were always spouting weird catchphases.

N’Jadaka threw another balled-up wet wipe at his head. “In the ninja world, those who break the rules are scum, that's true, but those that call anime ‘cartoons’ are worse than scum.”

“Good to know.” T’Challa said wryly.

Chapter End Notes

Since the previous arc had a Steve vs Stephen boss fight, I thought it'd be fun if the boss fight in this arc was Human Torch vs Human Torch!

In case you didn't catch it, almost every word out of N’Jadaka’s mouth is an anime reference because I headcanon him as a huge weeb XD

These 2 chapters were a bit of an experiment for me, so I PROMISE there will be no more annoying anime references after this.

Next chapter is the final one in this arc (I’m sick so I might take longer than my usual weekly update), so get ready for some angsty grown up talk! How do you think Tony
will react when he learns what happened? XD

So… how many anime references could you find? :3c
Chapter Notes

Warning: Mood whiplash

Sorry that this is kinda long lol! It was originally two chapters, but I decided to combine them into one

See the end of the chapter for more notes

...and that was ‘Trash Panda’ by the Guardians, everyone’s favorite 70s throwback band! We’ll be back after the break with their chart-topping hit ‘My Dad Is Literally A Planet.’ We’ll see you soon!

...international fugitive Brock Rumlow was once again taken into custody by government agents…

Steve’s car pulled up at Tony’s house at exactly 5:59pm. The second the car came to a halt, Peter shot out like a mini whirlwind and burst through the front door, talking a mile a minute all the way.

“Daaaad, this was such an awesome day! Pops brought me to see a superhero movie and it was the best movie in the world! It was about this captain and she could fly and shoot power out of her hands~”

Steve shook his head with a fond smile as he gathered up all the trophies and followed the sounds of Peter’s chatter into the house. It had been a long day, but Peter’s energy was unflagging.

“-the Sports Day was awesome! We won all the prizes! The three-legged race and the egg race and the bean bag toss and the hula hoop contest, and-”

He heard Tony chuckle. “Whoa, slow down, squirt.”

“-Pops and I won a hundred trophies! We came in first place in everything!”

“A hundred sounds like an exaggeration, but we should have space for them in.” Tony’s eyes widened behind his reading glasses as Steve entered the living room. “Okay, wow, that is quite the haul. You guys really cleaned them out.”

Tony was sitting on the couch, wearing the same clothes he’d worn that morning. He had a tablet in one hand, and the other was petting Jarvis, who was perched on his legs in a large fuzzy loaf, preventing him from going anywhere.

“See!” Peter drummed his arms excitedly on the arm rest behind his dad’s head.

“Don’t forget these, champ.” Steve began lowering his arm load of trophies onto the coffee table.

Tony slid his tablet on the table and propped himself up on his elbows with interest. “Now we’re talking, I wanna hear the story behind each of these.”

Peter bounded towards the table and began jubilantly describing the story behind each trophy.
“This is the one we won first, Pops threw me over the finish line and I did a flip! And then this one-”

Steve couldn’t help but be warmed by the sight. Peter had been an anxious mess in the morning, but with a little encouragement and affection, he’d bounced right back. He was a tough kid, sweet and determined; and in that moment he really did remind Steve of Tony.

“-so I wanted to win it all! To make you happy.” Peter concluded his report breathlessly.

“I’m always proud of you! But this? Definitely puts an extra smile on my face.” Tony smiled.
“What’s your secret, Mr Amazing?”

“Pops taught me to never give up, then he and N’Jadaka-” Peter’s eyes widened and he quickly clapped his hands over his mouth.

“What was that you were saying?” Tony asked.

“Um… nothing!” Peter glanced at Steve nervously, then Tony, and then Jarvis. He squeezed his hands tighter over his mouth, afraid to let the secret escape.

“Say… you guys didn't get up to any trouble, did you?” Tony said casually.

“No! No trouble!” Peter shook his head quickly.

Steve stepped in to back Peter up. “You don’t need to worry, things went really smoothly today. Peter did really well.”

“Oh-huh.” Tony looked him up and down, unconvinced. “So no petty disputes, no disasters, no… wardrobe malfunctions?”

The words made Steve suddenly very aware of all the mud he was covered in from his wrestling match with N’Jadaka. Somehow, he didn’t feel Tony would be very impressed if he learned why Steve had ended up wrestling Peter’s friend’s cousin.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” Tony asked pointedly.

Peter fidgeted, stressed out by the pressure of trying to keep a secret. “...No?”

Tony folded his arms, managing to look very authoritative for someone wearing a wrinkly Star Wars t-shirt and holding a cat on his lap. “Peter.”

The Dad voice had immediate effect, and Peter caved like a marshmallow house in a thunderstorm.

“Wade took off all his clothes and knocked over Wanda’s castle, which made Wanda angry so she hit Mr Thanos in the eye with a hard boiled egg,” Words began tumbling out of Peter’s mouth. “And Pops tried to help but ended up knocking Mr Thanos into pile of compost-”

Tony’s eye began to twitch.

“Mr Drax kept trying to play tag with Mr Colossus, because he said Pops and N’Jadaka gave them the idea,” Peter worriedly glanced Steve. “And N’Jadaka told Pops-”

“-that he wanted to beat us in all the games.” Steve quickly cut in before Peter could get to the incriminating part of the story. “But Peter and I worked together and did our best, that’s how we won everything.” He hoped Tony would leave it at that. After all, it wasn't technically a lie.
“Y-yeah! Pops and I are a great team!” Peter nodded furiously. “Pops was awesome! You should've seen him!”

Tony held the Stern Dad Look a few more seconds before dropping it with a chuckle, having decided he'd freaked Peter out enough for one day. “Relax, kid, you’re not in trouble. Just wanted to make sure you had fun.”

“I did! It was the best day ever!” Peter chirped, before leaping at Steve to give one of his hug-tackles. Steve managed to catch Peter before he could fall and swept him up in another hug. Peter beamed at Steve with a megawatt grin. “Best. Day. Ever.”

Steve smiled back. “It was the best day for me too.”

Tony’s eyes crinkled into a tired smile. “Pete, you look like a mud monster took a bite of you. Why don’t you go wash up? And then I want to hear about everything that happened today.”

The second Steve set Peter down, the boy skittered down the hall, still flying high on the euphoria of the day’s events.

Tony tapped Jarvis on the head. “You, too. The adults need to have a talk.”

“Mrraow.” Jarvis kneaded into Tony’s shirt, paws creasing R2-D2’s face.

“The human adults. Let me up, you’ve been there all afternoon.” Tony wriggled unsuccessfully, but Jarvis had clamped onto his shirt like a large fuzzy anchor. “Jeez, J, I’m not gonna drop dead if you leave the room for twenty minutes.”

Seeing how protective the cat was made Steve smile. “Come on, Jarvis. Maybe you could keep an eye on Peter?” at his suggestion, the cat’s ears swivelled towards him. After giving Steve a long slow blink, Jarvis flowed off Tony’s lap and primly stalked off in the same direction Peter had gone.

With the twenty-pound weight on his legs gone, Tony sat up and rubbed his thighs with a groan. “God, my legs are falling asleep. He’s not as small as he used to be. Kids, cats. They all grow up so fast, and before you know it they’re boring adults making awful jokes.”

“Happens to the best of us.” Steve said with a wry smile.

“Speaking of which.” Tony leaned his arms on his knees, looking at Steve expectantly. “It seems like Peter wasn't the one who was acting immature today.”

Uh oh.

“What do you mean?” Steve asked with a growing sense of dread.

“Care to explain this to me?” Tony brandished his smartphone in Steve's face.

A groupchat was on the screen, and Steve realised that someone had been very busy documenting his and N’Jadaka’s faceoff, because the thread was chock-full with shirtless pictures of them.

Wait a minute... Steve felt as though he’d gotten a bucket of cold water to the face, because he realised that most, if not all, of the pictures were of his own shirtless body. Moreover, the photos all seemed to be focusing prominently on his chest and arms...

There had to have been at least a hundred Steve photos. As he stared at Tony’s phone, ten more
popped up on the feed.

Steve winced. So much for not letting Tony find out.

“I had to find out from Clint about your antics. Clint!” Tony seethed.

Having been confronted with the incriminating evidence of his behavior, there wasn’t much Steve could do - except own it.

“Well…” Steve felt his mouth draw into a sheepish smile, and he tried passing it off as a joke. “At least he got my good side?”

Tony looked at him flatly. “You turned Peter’s school into a nudist colony.”

“It wasn’t everyone, just N’Jadaka and I-” Steve began to say, but Tony’s eyes went dark at the mention of N’Jadaka’s name.

“I wonder what this N’Jadaka did to make you take your clothes off.” Tony said acidly, throwing out the name like it was a curse word. “I don’t know if you know this, but normally people wait till the third date to get all personal.”

“It’s not like that at all.” Steve tried to clarify, though he sensed he was losing control of the conversation. “He was trying to pick a fight, so we just had a few silly arm wrestling matches. Just two guys blowing off some steam, that’s it.”

Tony sounded strained, as if he was trying to contain himself from bursting into tears, laughter, or an angry tirade. With Steve’s luck, it would probably be all three. “Wow, that’s a great lesson to teach Peter! ‘What’s that, Pete? You’re in trouble? Don’t worry, just take your clothes off and that’ll fix all your problems!’”

“You make it sound worse than it actually was…” Steve began, but Tony was too busy ranting.

“Seriously, what combination of events drove you to-” At that second, Tony’s phone buzzed and another five topless pictures popped up on the feed. Tony’s eye began twitching again.

This was bad, Steve had to clear things up before Tony’s brain went into overdrive and came up with the worst explanations. “I was trying to teach Peter that it’s not okay to let people push you around. Some of the other kids were talking trash, and it really got to him. Honestly, the language of some of these kids is really unacceptable. Can you believe some of the things they call each other? Like-” Steve paused, trying to remember the insult N’Jadaka had hurled at Tony. “A ‘spoon-derry’.”

Tony goggled at him like he was speaking an alien language. “Pretty sure you just made that one up.”

Fighting down a blush, Steve went on. “Look, the point is, you don’t need to worry about Peter getting influenced into making dumb decisions. He’s a smart kid, and he knows right from wrong.”

“I’m worried because everything seems to turn into a circus whenever you’re around.” Tony shook his head and tossed his phone onto the table. “But that’s just your style.”

“I guess things did turn a little silly today.” Steve couldn’t help chuckling. Now that he had the benefit of hindsight, the situation was pretty funny. “Things sound a lot worse than they actually were. You know how competitive people can get at events like these.”
The explanation appeared to placate Tony somewhat. At least his shoulders relaxed as he huffed out a sigh. “Could be worse, I guess. There could’ve been food fights like that time you tagged along for Peter’s birthday. And I get that feelings run high at sports events, a little violence is to be expected. It’s not like you were fighting about something dumb.”

“And it was really hot out, so lots of people had their shirts off too…” Steve added, relieved that the subject was starting to veer away from his and N’Jadaka’s stupid fighting.

“I suppose.” Tony muttered, removing his glasses to rub at his eyes. “Drama seems to follow you wherever you go. One of these days, I half expect you to-” Tony’s gaze fell on Steve’s shirt and he froze. “Is that blood?”

“Huh?” Steve followed Tony’s shocked gaze to realise that the underside of his bicep was coated in blood. Most of it had dried, but the redness had soaked into the sleeve, making for an unintentionally gory sight.

In a blink, Tony had bolted to his feet and had crossed the room to stand right in front of him. The sudden closeness made Steve’s heart rate speed up and he had to fight not to spring into a defensive counter in response to the sudden movement. It was difficult not to react in other ways; Tony was standing close enough that he could count his lashes, could detect the sleep-and-soap smell wafting off him...

Tony brushed his fingers over the bloody area. “How did this happen?”

“It's just a small scratch, probably got it when N’Jadaka tackled me.” Steve explained, trying to ignore the shiver of sensation as Tony’s fingers ran lightly over his arm. “It’s not even bleeding anymore, there’s nothing to be concerned about-”

“Is it your goal to give me more stress?” Tony demanded, and he raised a hand like he wanted to punch Steve lightly in the shoulder - at the last second he stopped himself and ran it through his hair. The worried line between his eyebrows was back.

“Calm down.” Steve said worriedly and put a hand out. “You shouldn't put any strain on your-”

“I am calm!” Tony said loudly. He spun on his heel and stormed out of the room. Two seconds later, Tony’s head popped back around the corner. “Stay there! Don’t move! I’m getting the kit. I don’t need you bleeding all over my house!”

Left standing in the empty living room, Steve shifted awkwardly. He didn’t know what he’d gotten himself into this time, and it made him uneasy.

--

Tony was grumpy. As usual, Steve had to blow everything out of proportion. Only Steve could turn something as simple as a kindergarten sporting event into the goddamn Hunger Games.

As he retrieved the first aid kit and a towel, he tried to calm his racing thoughts. Tony wasn’t normally squeamish about blood, but the sight of it on Steve perturbed him.

...Obviously, this was all Steve’s fault. If he didn’t keep injuring himself, Tony wouldn’t need to keep freaking out.

On his way back to the living room, Tony paused, and darted into his room to grab an old shirt to give Steve something to change into.
...Yeah, sue him, he had a few of Steve’s shirts lying around. It wasn’t his fault they were really comfortable to sleep in, okay? Besides, there was no sense in Steve wearing a muddy, bloody rag which was probably full of tetanus or something.

When he got back to the living room, there was no sign of Steve. Tony’s heart sank. It was just his rotten luck. Why did Steve always show up only to leave without warning. It wasn’t fair, and now he wouldn’t be able to-

Tony’s train of thought was interrupted by the sound of running water coming from the kitchen. Well, that solves the mystery of the missing Steve, Tony thought as he followed the sound, trying to ignore the not-relief he felt.

Steve was hunched over the kitchen sink with one hand stretching out his shirt sleeve, furiously trying to scrub off the blood from the fabric. He shrank back as Tony approached, looking like a guilty dog caught doing something he shouldn't.

“I thought I told you not to move. Stop touching that, you'll make it worse.” Tony said grudgingly, trying to pull Steve’s hands away.

“I'm really fine, you know. The cut has scabbed over.” Steve made some pretense of resisting, but he let Tony move his hands.

“Shut up.” He wasn’t doing this because he liked Steve or anything, it was because the man had no sense of self-preservation. “Let me see.”

“What?”

Tony sighed exasperatedly. “I don't have time for this. Take your shirt off.”

Steve stared at him like he’d grown another limb. “Now? Here?”

“What, you suddenly shy? It's nothing I haven't seen before.” Tony’s brain was screaming at him to stop, you moron, stop, but Tony was too deep to dig himself out now. He flapped the clean shirt at Steve. “At least change out of that gross thing.”

After staring at him for half a second more, Steve stripped off his shirt.

The sight never failed to take Tony's breath away; Clint’s smartphone pictures had nothing on the real thing. Seeing a shirtless Steve in his own home felt like something out of his dreams (which Tony would deny to death).

Steve’s chest was marred with mud stains, and there were scratches curving around his ribs and underarms. It was the only time Tony felt relieved that Steve was right: all the cuts were minor and had already closed up.

Tony picked his jaw off the floor and blankly held out the towel and shirt. “Here’s, uh, um. Stuff.”

“Thanks. Told you I was fine.” Accepting the towel, Steve began carefully wiping off the grime. When he picked up the shirt, he blinked in recognition. “Is this one of my shirts?”

“What if it is?” Tony crossed his arms, daring him to press the matter.

Steve very wisely chose not to inquire further, but his blue eyes brightened. As he put on the clean shirt, Tony felt mildly disappointed to see those pecs hidden away once more, but he told himself furiously that it didn’t matter.
It was just another thing he couldn’t have any more.

All of a sudden, Tony felt exhausted. The entire day had been more tiring than he’d expected. He assumed that letting Steve watch Peter for the day would be relaxing break, but it had had the opposite effect.

Tony had been too keyed up to relax, the perpetual worry of a parent whose child was out of sight. How could he nap when there was a chance something terrible could happen? All afternoon, he’d been dreading a terrifying phone call from the school announcing that Peter had been kidnapped or horribly injured.

Additionally, his traitorous brain had kept circling back to Steve. What had he meant when he'd taken Tony's hand earlier? What was he trying to pull? Why was he being so helpful all of a sudden? Could he be trusted?

At that point, Jarvis had sat on his legs to prevent him wearing a track in the ground. Tony had tried to distract himself with work, but barely an hour had passed before his phone began going crazy from Clint sending fifty million shirtless pictures of his ex-husband in various photoshoot-worthy poses.

It had been very hard to focus on relaxing after that.

Tony glared at the counter. Stupid Steve and his stupid arms and stupid pecs. The stupid tight sports shirt didn’t leave anything to the imagination, Steve probably bought all his shirts one size too small on purpose.

There was one picture in Clint’s collection that stood out from the rest: it captured Steve mid-sprint with Peter sitting on his shoulders. Both their faces were full of joyful exhilaration, fully enjoying the moment.

The photo did things to his chest that made Tony unsure if he was about to have another heart attack.

Glowering, Tony grabbed a mug and began collecting the fixings for coffee.

“You should take it easy on the caffeine.” Steve leaned against a cabinet, wearing his new (old?) shirt.

“You sound like Rhodey. I don’t need another mother hen.” Tony grumbled.

“Where’s Rhodey?” Steve’s eyes widened, realising that the house was empty. “Were you alone here the entire day?”

“Chill. He stepped out for a minute to run an errand. You guys just missed each other.”

Steve’s brow furrowed. “I didn't know he went out. I'll wait here with you till he gets back.”

“I don't need you to babysit me.” Tony scowled.

“You just had a heart attack, I think it’s normal for everyone to be a little more concerned.” Steve said. His eyebrows rose as Tony reached for the sugar. “And you should be cutting down on sugar too, it’s not good for your heart.”

“I take it back. Now you sound like Stephen. Everyone likes bossing me around, as if I don't know how to handle things myself.” Tony complained, but he found himself grabbing the water pitcher
from the fridge instead. Dammit.

“Where is Stephen, by the way?” Steve asked, a touch too nonchalantly.

“Didn't work out.” Tony said crossly. He didn’t exactly want a reminder at how things had imploded with Stephen a few weeks ago.

“Oh. Okay.” Steve’s response was politely neutral, but it only made Tony more irritated. It would have been better if Steve had been smug about it.

He wondered how Steve could be damn perceptive, how he could see through all Tony’s secrets as easily as reading a book.

How had Steve managed to pick up that Tony’s attempt at a relationship hadn’t worked out? He was probably here to gloat over how Tony was such an utter failure at maintaining relationships. Why else would Steve would show up, freak Tony out with his injuries, flaunt his perfect body, then casually ask about Tony’s failed relationships. Did the man never run out of ways to torture him?

Tony didn’t need more reminders of how unlovable he was.

“-ony? Tony!” Steve’s concerned voice broke through his thoughts, sounding like he'd been calling for some time. “You're spilling water on the ground.”

“Huh?” Blinking, Tony looked down and cursed. He'd been so lost in his own thoughts that he'd missed the mug entirely and poured half the pitcher on the floor.

“Let me take care of that.” Steve was already approaching with a rag in hand like the overgrown Boy Scout he’d always been. Prepared and steady, always ready with plans A through Z.

Tony looked at the puddle sullenly. “I don’t need-”

Steve's hand landed on his shoulder. “You look dead on your feet, why don't you go back to bed and I’ll clean this up?”

“Can you not?” Tony barked, swiping the hand off his shoulder. “Why do you have to- why do you have to be so nice?!?”

“I don't need a ‘why’.” Just because we aren't together doesn't mean I stopped caring about-”

“For someone who comes and goes as he pleases, you don't suddenly get to care!” Tony burst out, waving the empty mug. “It's not like you even want to be here.”

“If I didn't want to be here, I wouldn't have come.” Steve said, sounding strained. “Why do you always-” Steve paused, rethinking his approach. Then he continued in a different tone. Gentler, more patient. “I just want to know where this is coming from. One second you're offering to patch up my cuts and the next you're chewing me out.”

“Why do you care?” Tony growled.

“Because I care about you.” Steve said simply. “So tell me, what’s on your mind?”

Caught off guard, Tony took a step back.

As he tried to take stock of his rattled emotions, he felt a strange sense of deja vu. It reminded him of what happened earlier that day, back in the morning when Steve had knelt by his chair and
looked at him with that earnest, open face. The kind of face that almost made Tony believe that he was sincere and could be trusted.

Steve had that same expression now, and it was a lot harder to turn down when Tony felt as frazzled as he did now.

Why did Steve have to be all solicitous and patient? Even when Tony was snapping at him because his stupid body was tired and his stupid heart wouldn't work right. He'd tried so hard to move on, tried to hate Steve, to forget about him.

But he couldn’t, not when his damn feelings were being all confusing and everything was too much and it was all tied up in his worries for Peter - Tony couldn't take it anymore.

Tony bit his lip. “I thought I was going to die last week.”

All the color drained from Steve's face. “Tony, what are you saying-”

“You ever feel think about how things are cyclical? Sins of the father, karma, that kind of stuff.” Tony rambled, feeling like words were spilling out of him like a punctured sandbag. “I never got to say goodbye to my father.”

“You're tired, we don't need to talk about this now-” Steve fussed, grasping Tony’s upper arms lightly to try steer him out from the kitchen.

Tony gently brushed the hands off. “Let me finish.”

Steve went quiet, but he didn’t remove his hands.

Tony looked at his empty mug glumly, wishing he hadn't spilled half the pitcher on the ground. His throat felt parched, but he didn't dare to try again in case his motor skills bailed on him, and it'd be too embarrassing to ask for help. Instead, he forced himself to go on. “I don't think I ever told you what happened with Howard.”

“You told me he had a heart attack.” Steve said cautiously.

That part was half true - Tony had never told anyone the entire story. Tony sighed. No time like the present.

“I was having dinner with them during winter break. So you can imagine, Howard was being his usual self. I don't even remember what we were arguing about that day, probably something stupid.” Tony turned the mug around in his hands, studying the cracks in the ceramic. “But I'll never forget the last thing I said to him: how much I hated him and hoped I'd never see him again.”

Steve’s lips moved but no sound came out. His grip on Tony’s arms clenched slightly.

Taking a shuddering breath, Tony continued. “His heart gave out while he was driving them back to the hotel.” His jaw clenched, remembering how Mom had kissed his cheek as she got her coat, telling him to try, please, try to be kinder to Howard. She’d probably said the same about him to Howard as she sat in the passenger seat on the drive back.

“Next thing I know, I'm getting a call from the police saying they just pulled his car out of the river, and they need me to identify two bodies.” Tony ignored the lump that had risen in his throat, and kept his gaze fixed on his mug. “Just like that… I mean, I’d just seen them five hours ago at dinner.”
If Tony could turn back time, he'd say something else to the old man - he wasn't exactly sure what he'd have said, things between him and Howard had never been touch-feely enough any ‘I love you’ or ‘miss you’s - but anything would have been better than what he had said.

Now, it was too late. Tony could never take those words back, and that was something he would have to live with.

“And then last week happened: I’m driving to work after dropping Peter off, next thing I know, my arms feel like they weigh a ton and I can't breathe, the car starts skidding off the road, and I thought-” Tony felt his fingernails biting into his palm. “I thought I was going to die.”

The seconds before the collision had seemed to slow down, making him remember of all the things he’d left unfinished: of words never spoken, hurts never forgiven, wounds never healed. The thought of leaving Peter and Steve without any closure made his blood run cold.

Tony couldn’t do this to them.

Across from him, Steve had gone so still, it felt like he’d turned to marble.

Tony gulped and continued. “And- all I could think was how we left things, those months ago.” Those years ago, his brain supplied helpfully. “About how the last thing I said to you was-”

I wish you hadn’t come back at all. Don’t bother coming back. I never want to see you again.

Tony stuttered to a halt as shame pricked across his scalp, realising that he'd Said Too Much. It was so selfish of him to drop his emotions on Steve, thinking it would help him get any closure. Selfish and stupid.

He shrugged Steve’s hand off and turned towards the counter, pretending to look for a spoon. Any moment now Steve was either going to awkwardly excuse himself or mock him for being overly sentimental, and Tony didn’t think he’d be able to handle being told that he'd done it again, he'd been Too Much. After all, there was no reason Steve would ever care about-

There was a flutter of movement behind him, and then a pair of strong arms wrapped around his waist, pulling him tightly back against a broad chest.

“What are you doing?” Tony whispered.

“I'm so glad you're alive.” Steve answered hoarsely against the back of his neck.

The patch of skin at his nape tingled where Steve’s beard scraped against it, but that wasn't the most alarming part: There was a growing patch of dampness on the back of his collar where Steve’s face was pressed.

With a jolt, Tony realised that Steve was crying, and anger rose up the back of his throat, a burning fury to lash out at whoever had made Steve cry.

But then the truth washed over him - Tony was the cause of Steve’s tears.

“I’m sorry.” Tony felt horrible now. No matter how he tried, he couldn't seem to stop ruining everything.

“Don’t apologize,” Steve growled and his arms tightened around Tony. “God- thank god you’re alive.”
For a while they just stayed like that. Tony relaxed into the embrace, leaning heavily against Steve. Against his back, Steve’s chest felt solid and warm, and the arms around him were firm as they supported his weight.

His mind, which was almost always buzzing with thoughts, was quiet. It was so easy to just melt into the hug and let someone else hold his problems for a while.

Like a stone dropping into still water, Steve broke the silence. “I missed you.”

The open honesty of the statement threw Tony for another loop. Tony didn’t know what to do with that.

“Peter was so happy to hang out with you today,” Tony settled on saying. “He's been so worried about me, and today was really good for him. Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me—”

“I think I do.” Tony said softly. “I haven’t seen him so happy in a long time, probably since his birthday. I’m kinda jealous of the effect you have on him.”

“I’m not doing anything special, I just tried my best take his mind off worrying for today.” Steve responded. He shifted his head, beard tickling the side of Tony’s cheek. “He loves you the most, there’s nobody that can replace you in his eyes.”

Well. Tony didn’t know what to do with that either.

“Actually, I was wondering…’” Tony ventured, feeling nervous all of a sudden, but uncharacteristically hopeful. "Since hanging out with you today was good for him… maybe… you could bring him to school for a few days? At least till I’m off bed rest?”

The arms tightened, and Steve leaned his face into the crook of his neck. When he spoke, his voice sounded choked. “Thank you.”

Tony tilted his neck back, playfully butting at Steve’s head. “What was that about not needing to thank anyone?”

He felt Steve’s lips curve into a smile at his neck. “Sorry.”

As silence settled into the kitchen, the minutes seemed to crawl. Tony realized he’d been dopily staring at the same patch of wall for the past five minutes, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. With Steve’s arms wrapped securely around him, Tony felt so comfortable that he could just fall asleep there and then...

"I know I haven’t been honest with you.” Steve said slowly, breaking the silence. “There’s a lot of things I’ve kept from you.”

"Hm?” Tony stirred, shifting slightly in the hug. He couldn’t turn his head because Steve’s chin was hooked over Tony’s shoulder, so he settled for looking the blond man out of the corner of his eye. "Tell me something I don’t know.”

“I want to make things right with you, Tony.” Steve ducked his head. "I'm not perfect, but I'm trying to be better. Which is why I promise I won't keep any more secrets from you.

“I seem to remember you owing me a talk.”
“I do. Let me explain everything.”

A pause. Tony nodded slowly. "Sounds good."

Steve’s arms gave him a grateful squeeze. "Two years ago, I-"

Tony let out a yawn. Fatigue was overtaking him again, the world going all soft around the edges, honey-slow. It felt so comfortable and warm in Steve's arms. He'd been weighed down by fatigue all week, but being held this securely felt like the best kind of remedy. Tension he hadn't known he was carrying was ebbing away, like Steve’s touch was leaching it out of him.

Steve always gave the best hugs.

They were so close, if Tony turned his head he could nuzzle the side of his neck. A distant, skeptical corner of his brain protested that doing so would be a bad idea, and complicate what was already a complicated state of affairs between them.

Tony sighed, settling deeper into the hug and elected to turn off the annoying voice in his brain. Steve’s voice was much nicer to listen to; it was a comforting buzz, making it easy to slip under. Right now, everything felt so good, and Steve smelled really nice…

“...ny? Are you falling asleep?”

“M'not.” Tony mumbled. He felt like a marshmallow, sinking slowly into a warm mug of hot chocolate. He just wanted to stay here, this place where everything was warm and safe, where nothing bad could happen.

Steve’s voice sounded amused with a tinge of sadness, and it seemed to come from very far away “...always seem to keep missing each other. I called and called, but you didn't answer...”

Tony blinked blearily. His eyelids suddenly felt like they weighed ten tons. It was harder to form thoughts. Without his mind getting in the way, balanced on the edge of sleep, a single thought bubbled up from his subconscious.

Stay. He wanted to say to Steve. Stay, don’t leave me again.

Tony whispered, grasping at the warm arms around him. “Steve…? St…”

He tried to reach for Steve but it was like swimming through cement. He didn't get another word out before exhaustion claimed him, and he fell into the most peaceful sleep he'd had in months.

It had been so long since he had felt so safe.

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When Tony’s eyes drooped shut, Steve let out a long sigh and quickly plucked the mug from Tony's slack grip before it could shatter on the floor.

He felt bad for keeping Tony awake and unintentionally riling him up. Tony been trying to keep it together in front of Peter, but it was so obvious that he’d been exhausted the second Steve and his son had walked through the door.

Tony was so strong, but Steve wished there was a way to tell him that he didn’t have to pretend to be so strong all the time. Not when it resulted in Tony wearing himself out to the point that he fell asleep standing up.
When Tony had shared the truth about his parents, Steve had been overcome by a wave of pure emotion, and he’d been unable to resist reaching out to hold him to make sure Tony was real, was still there.

Steve couldn’t help a shiver a dread at how close he had come to losing him.

The sight of Tony hooked up to machines at the hospital had sent Steve into a state of panic like never before. He’d been unable to tear himself away from Tony’s side; keeping watch by his bed as he slept, making sure he was out of sight when he woke up because he knew he wasn’t exactly Tony’s favorite person and hadn’t been for a long time. He’d stayed at the hospital the entire time, though he was sure Tony wouldn't remember it.

Tony had been the only person he’d ever built a strong connection with, not just for his personality or physical attractiveness. He’d given Steve a family and home. Somewhere to belong. Somewhere that he mattered.

The past two years hadn’t exactly allowed Steve to explore any romantic options. Not that he would have, even if the opportunity arose. After Tony, there was no other person Steve wanted to be with. It was all or nothing.

Aside from work colleagues, Steve had spent all that time never touching, never connecting to any person. Human touch was a distant memory. Experiencing it again now, was overwhelming. Being able to hold him again awakened senses Steve thought were dead.

All Steve wanted was to memorize the feel and smell and colour of Tony’s hair, the warmth of his skin and timbre of his voice, the way his thick lashes lay against his cheeks. Even the shirt he’d give Steve to wear; Steve recognized it as his own, but the fabric smelled just like Tony, that clean scent that smelled like sleep and soap.

Steve looked at the sleeping man in his arms. What could he do? He felt bad about waking Tony up because of how tired he looked, but Steve couldn't just put him on the sofa.

Steve gave a gentle squeeze, trying to rouse the other man. “Tony. Tony, wake up, you can't sleep in the kitchen…”

But Tony was out like a light. His head dropped back limply to rest on Steve's shoulder, and that almost crumbled Steve’s resolve altogether.

Steve knew he was being selfish. As much as Steve wanted to stay there and hold him, he shouldn't linger. While Tony had been less hostile today, he hadn't extended an invitation to stay. Which meant Steve shouldn't make any presumptions.

Hoping he wasn't making a horrendous breach of privacy, Steve lifted the Tony into his arms, letting his head rest against his shoulder. He felt guilty about how Tony snuggled against his chest, because all he wanted was the prolong the moment.

He didn't deserve to have this, not after everything he’d done to hurt him and Peter. I missed him. I missed both of you. Steve wanted to say.

Steve didn’t want to go. But he had to. Steve had a job to do.

Carefully adjusting Tony’s head so he didn’t get a horrible crick in the neck, Steve carried him back to his room and gently lowered him into bed. As Steve tucked him in under the sheets, Tony rolled towards him, mumbling something about doughnuts.
A curl of hair fell over his forehead. With a sigh, Steve brushed the hair off his forehead and retreated.

As Steve closed the bedroom door behind him, his hackles roles as he sensed a new presence in the house. Within a few seconds, he went off an alert, realising that the newcomer was not hostile.

“Hey, Steve,” Rhodey called from where he was sitting at the counter, freshly back from his errand.

“Rhodey. I'm just showing myself out.” Steve nodded in acknowledgement as he headed for the door. “Let me know if anything happens or if he needs any help.”

Rhodey watched him, dark eyes thoughtful. “You sticking around might not actually be a bad thing this time.”

Steve shook his head sadly. “I can’t impose any more than I already have. He doesn’t want me around.”

Rhodey looked like he wanted to shove Steve’s head down the garbage disposal unit. “Both of you are so incredibly dumb that watching the two of you is just… painful.”

Steve smiled joylessly. “I’m trying to not to be the cause of any more pain. ‘Night, Rhodey.” said Steve, and opened the door to leave.

Before the door closed, Rhodey spoke up in a voice pitched dangerously casual. “I don't know what kind of game you're playing, Steve, but I don't need to remind you what'll happen if you hurt him again.” Rhodey didn't look up, but Steve had no doubt that Tony’s friend could get to him from where he was sitting. “I was in the military, I know how to disappear you.”

“I’d let you. Because I have no intention of hurting him.” Steve replied.

“I hope for the both of our sakes that you aren't lying. Disappearing people means a lot of paperwork.” Rhodey rubbed his temples and poured himself a cup of coffee. “Night, Steve.”

Steve shut the front door behind him and let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

In his arms, Tony had felt warm and solid and alive. The way he'd said his name as he dropped off to sleep made Steve feel, for half a second, that maybe earning his forgiveness wasn’t as insurmountable a task as he'd thought.

There was so much he still wanted to say. So many answers they both owed each other. But it would have to wait.

The only promise Steve could keep was to be there. And from now on, he would do everything to keep his word.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaad breathe

How about that huh? Tony’s feelings are starting to change, and he didn’t actually want Steve to leave. However Steve thought he was supposed to be a gentleman.
They’re so horrible at understanding each other rip : )

This chapter was the toughest one for me to write. It went through five major revisions before I wound up with what I have. Here are some elements I cut from the original draft to improve flow and pacing:

-I planned to start this arc at the hospital but it slowed everything down too much and made the tone way too dark. I may add the hospital meeting as a deleted scene once I finish the main plot (although that'd mean I’d have to do research into medical stuff, and I’m far too lazy for that)

-Tony wasn’t ever supposed to remember Steve was at the hospital, until the end of the fic. This got too convoluted so I just had him knowing it from the start (back in Ch13)

-Strange was gonna make an appearance and get into another catfight with Steve. But it felt like a retread of the birthday arc AND made them both look like assholes for fighting while Tony was trying to recover. There was enough humour from the Sports Day chapters, so I wanted some angst to balance it out

-I couldn’t decide whose POV to write this chapter from. I originally wrote it all from Steve’s POV, but it was unsatisfying because I had to talk about his feelings without revealing the central mystery. Then I tried writing it from Tony’s, but it made Steve too unsympathetic. In the end, I split the difference and that’s what I have now. I think it works better this way, bc it’s easier to show how they misunderstand each other

And this concludes the second arc! As you can see, they're in a slightly better place than before!

UPDATES: I'm going to take a break from this fic for one month. I've been devoting all my creative energy to this fic for the last five months (whoa 5 months to the day!!! it's been that long?!), polishing every chapter and ensuring I could update punctually. This is a natural rest point in the plot, so I figured it's a good time to take a break. I plan to edit the final arc and work on a couple one shots I've been planning

When I return in December, expect the updates come a lot closer together

Thank you to everyone who is reading along for giving me so much support. I'm really floored at how much positive feedback this fic has received. I didn’t expect it to be this long: I just broke 50k words and reached 1000 kudos. A superspecial shoutout to the repeat commenters, I don't wanna embarrass anyone by naming names, but just know that I SEE YOU GUYS and it always makes my day to hear from you :D
Deck the Halls

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[...next up is another song by the Guardians, ‘My Son Is A Tree’, their number one hit from 2014 that caused a viral dance sensation…]

[...escaped fugitive and arsonist Brock Rumlow is wanted for the latest string of incidents involving…]

[...the upcoming weather looks like we're in for some thundery showers, but don't worry, sunny days are on the horizon...]

“I’ll be here later after you're done with school, okay?” Steve asked as he drove up to Little Heroes Kindergarten.

Peter nodded, staring resolutely out the window at the trees zipping by. He’d been quiet the entire car ride despite Steve’s attempts to engage. It was a little worrying, but Steve didn't want make a huge deal out of it. Everyone had those days sometimes.

“Say, does your Dad still like blueberries?” Steve asked.

The mention of Tony finally sparked a response from the boy. “Um… I dunno.” Peter’s brow scrunched as he thought about it, clearly wondering if it was something he should have noticed.

Noticing the boy’s worry, Steve softened his voice. “Don't worry about him, that's not your job. Your job is to worry about school, mister.”

As they walked into the school, Peter tensed up. “I don't want to g-” the old refrain was half out of his mouth, but then he stopped. The worried crease in his brows smoothed out, to be replaced with a determined look. “See you later, Pops.”

“Count on it, buddy.”

Peter hugged him, then without a fuss, jogged into the class to join his friends.

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“...starting today, all safety scissors will be replaced with normal scissors. So please remember to suspend all craft activities requiring cutting.” Ebony Maw, the finance officer of Little Heroes Kindergarten, straightened his stack of documents with a crisp snap. “And that concludes our meeting. Unless there any more items of business to discuss...”

“There is one,” Loki raised a finger. “The matter of the school play.”

Immediately, other staff members seated at the table heaved a collective groan at the dreaded words. They knew from past experience that things would only go down from here.

“Oh god, not this again.”

“Loki, nobody cares about your little theater project.”

“I have a life, I don't wanna be stuck in this meeting for another three goddamn hours!”
“Settle down, settle down.” Maw said loftily, raising a wizened hand to calm the room. But the look he turned on his younger coworker was full of barely-concealed disdain. “We've been over this subject before, Odinson, and answer is still no. We are not putting you in charge of the holiday concert.”

Loki raised his chin stubbornly. “I've yet to receive one good reason as to why not.”

“Your ideas are too ambitious, and simply put, we don't have the budget to cater to your-” Maw’s thin lip curled. “Artistic aspirations.”

“Why don't we see what someone with actual power has to say?” Loki inclined his head slightly to the figure sitting at the head of the table.

“Principal Lee has more important matters to attend than listen to your prattle,” Maw hissed.

“Well, I say let Principal Lee hear my proposal so he can decide for himself.” Loki’s poison green eyes lit up challengingly. “I certainly find the fact that he was absent from all staff meetings this year extremely convenient.”

“I don’t appreciate what you’re implying about my scheduling decisions. As chief financial officer and Principal Lee’s personal assistant, all decisions go through me.” Maw snapped, the thinning hair on his scalp quivering with rage.

“Yes, you do seem to enjoy abusing what little power you have.” Loki made a show of inspecting his fingernails. “We all need hobbies, I suppose.”

Maw was about to spit back a response, but Lee cut him off with a chuckle.

“Don’t be such a stick-in-the-mud, Ebony.” Principal Lee beamed down the table, bright grin barely diminished by his dark shades. “Let's hear what the young man has to say.”

Maw looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, but he acquiesced with a curt nod.

Loki flowed to his feet. “This year, I plan to do something different for the Holiday Concert. It’s time to break from tradition-”

“The concert program that we’ve used for the past ten years is perfectly serviceable. There is no need for any change.” Maw interrupted.

Loki rolled his eyes. “We can do better than toddlers singing ‘Jingle Bells’ in Santa hats. It’s so dull I feel the life being choked out of me. Only a person without a creative bone in their body would produce such garbage.”

“I produced it,” said Maw shortly.

“In any case.” Loki continued, not remotely abashed. “Change is long overdue.”

“Innovation!” Lee gave an excited chirrup. “Keep going, I like the sound of that!”

“We should put on a show that has some visual flair, something that gets people on their feet, a certain je ne sais quoi… you know. A show produced by someone with actual taste.” Loki began to pace up and down the room while continuing to speechify. “Is it not our calling, nay, our duty as educators to inspire our charges? To fill their minds with wonder, beauty, and art…”

“Is he for real?” Vanko whispered to Proxima, who shrugged. Thanos couldn’t find it in himself to
suspend his disbelief either: even after working together for years, it was impossible to tell when
Loki was being sincere or when he was treating everything like a colossal joke. Which, as he’d
been unfortunate enough to discover on multiple occasions, was most of the time.

“We are the shapers of imagination, the dreamer of dreams.” Loki declared, putting fire and
passion into his impassioned plea for artistic excellence. “Let’s give them something fun they’ll
talk about for years to come!”

“That’s the spirit!” Principal Lee applauded wildly. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m sure
ready for some change round here.”

Maw tutted. “Your enthusiasm is admirable, but the facts are facts. We don’t have the budget for an
elaborate production this year. As you know, the money we would have spent on holiday
decorations had to go towards replacing stationery; for some reason, we seem to keep running out
scissors...”

Seated at the corner of the table, Thanos coughed uncomfortably.

“...why is why, if we proceed with your untried idea, we would end up grossly over budget, not to
mention all the additional tasks that would be added to everyone’s workload.” Maw steepled his
wrinkly fingers below a mock-sympathetic smirk, relishing being the one to poke a hole in Loki’s
plans.

“Small matter.” Loki drew himself up proudly. “I will spearhead this project myself. Under my
leadership, all is sure to be a success.”

From the other side of the table, Vanko gave a bark of laughter. “You? Lead anything? You do the
least work out of everyone here.”

“I had to cover all your classes for the last two weeks,” growled Proxima.

“My friends, are you not heartened to see me displaying some initiative?” Loki affected a sincere
tone, eyes widening appealingly. “I believe ‘taking on a leadership role’ was in my employee
development goals for this quarter.”

“You're full of shit, Loki.” grumbled Ronan.

“Do we get a chance know what this amazing concert will be like?” Toomes drawled, tilting his
chair back to balance on two legs.

“I thought you'd never ask.” Loki hit a few buttons on the staff laptop to bring up his first
presentation slide. “Behold!”

The moment Loki’s slides flashed onto the projector screen, Thanos thought that he’d gone blind:
the sudden flash of oversaturated light was brighter than a star going nova. He could hear growls of
displeasure from his coworkers as they too were caught off guard by the blinding lights.

After a few seconds, Thanos’s eyes adjusted to the glare, allowing him to make out the images on
screen: it was a scene of Santa’s workshop, but everything was painted in eye-searing shade of
neon.

Although, perhaps neon was an understatement; it was as if Loki had time traveled to the 80s,
stolen every neon artifact he could find, slathered them all in glitter, dunked them in a blender with
a bunch of glow sticks, and firehosed the resulting goop all over reindeers, pine trees, elves,
penguins, and other denizens of the winter wonderland.
Maw recoiled from the garish sight. “What is this travesty?”

Loki gestured proudly at the neon hellsscape. “My aesthetic.”

Maw squinted at the glowing pine trees with unadulterated disgust. “You would waste our time with this chicanery? Is this some kind of joke?”

“The performing arts,” Loki said, in a voice that could flash-freeze lava. “Are no joke.”

“This is incredible,” Principal Lee exclaimed, crossing the room to examine the Loki’s Neon Wonderland in greater detail. The over-bright lights reflected off the old man’s glasses like the nebulæ of a distant star. “I’ve never seen anything like this before! Ain’t this a sight, Ebony?”

Maw sniffed, trying to shield his watering eyes from the glaring screen. “It certainly is… unconventional.”

“I fully endorse this! Tell you what, Loki, if you need extra funding, I’ll bankroll you myself! Anything you want!” Lee warbled, practically vibrating with excitement.

“This is inconceivable.” Maw scoffed. Then under his breath, he added. “Though unsurprising, I suppose. Loki has always had a talent for enticing deluded old men into throwing money at him.”

Across the table, Proxima and Toomes exchanged ‘oh-no-he-didn’t’ looks.

“Sticks and stones,” Loki responded coolly. “At least my ‘talents’, as you refer to them, achieve results. Which is more than be said for that unexfoliated wasteland you call a face.”

A vein in Maw’s neck began to throb. “This project looks to be quite the undertaking, I’m not certain someone with Loki’s… experience… can handle this project single-handedly.”

Loki yawned. “For god’s sake, Maw, they’re children. How difficult can it be?”

*Easy for him to say,* Thanos thought bitterly. For the amount of work Loki did (or rather, didn’t do), he had a knack for getting children to obey him. It was patently unfair, not to mention infuriating.

“If it will assuage your concerns, never fear, for I won’t be working alone.” Loki gestured grandly across the table with one long-fingered hand. “Thanos will be assisting me.”

Thanos looked up sharply. “What was that?”

Loki began listing off tasks as if Thanos hadn’t spoken. “There is much to be done: making decorations, sewing costumes, coordinating rehearsals…”

“You’re fooling yourself if you think I’d be on board with-” growled Thanos.

“And of course, there is the most pressing issue of all: who will play Santa Claus?” Loki folded his hands behind his back, making a show of pained contemplation. “I pondered the decision at length, before realising there was no question in mind.” he paused, drawing out the silence dramatically. “Thanos is the best, nay, the only choice to play the role of Santa Claus.”

The silence that dropped over the room was almost deafening in its absoluteness.

Finally, Proxima cleared her throat and gave voice to the question on everyone’s mind. “What the hell?”
Loki was smirking openly now. “The role of Santa Claus will be played by Thanos.”

“This is outrageous!” Thanos thumped his fist on the table.

“Quite.” Maw pursed his thin lips and adjusted his spectacle chain. “I say we bring this question to a vote. All in favour of Loki’s plan say ‘aye.’”

“Aye.” Ronan glanced at the clock impatiently.

“Aye.” said Vanko, obviously prepared to say anything if it meant getting out of the meeting.

“Aye.” shrugged Toomes.

“Nay.” said Proxima.

“Nay.” growled Thanos. The urge to reach across the table and wring Loki’s skinny neck was overwhelming.

“Nay. As mentioned before, our budget is stretched tight as it is.” Maw said tightly. He sucked in breath with a hiss. “...We now appear to be at a tie.”

“My, my, isn’t this exciting? Everything rests on your deciding vote, Principal Lee.” said Loki lazily, not even pretending not to gloat anymore.

A vein in Maw’s temple began to jump.

“Hmm?” Principal Lee started awake with a snore.

“Your vote on Loki’s concert plans.” said Maw unhappily.

Remembering where he was, the old man chuckled. “I say aye! The young man is right, let's put on a real show for the kids and parents! We’ll give ’em a night to remember. Nuff said!”

The final confirmation of his victory made Loki’s eyes gleam, and if he was smug before, his smile now was like cat that had not only gotten the cream, but had wiped out an entire aviary of endangered birds.

“Well then. Without any further ado, allow me to present my proposal in its entirety.” Loki reached under his seat and began distributing handouts as if he'd planned for his victory the entire time. “If you’ll turn to the last page, you will find a breakdown of tasks and schedules- oh, don't scowl like that, Maw, you’ll make your marionette lines worse.”

Maw scowled even more furiously.

Thanos’s heart sank.

“Excelsior!” Principal Lee declared.

It was going to be a long day.

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When Tony opened the front door, a small figure barreled past him. “How was school- hey!” He called as Peter disappeared down the hall. “Great to see you too, mister!” Tony shook his head with a soft huff. “Must've been really fun, I take it. Please tell me nothing was set on fire this time.”
“No fires, no food fights, no mass destruction—well, unless you count him coloring the hell out of some crayons.” added Steve with a smile as he handed over Peter’s backpack. “A normal day.”

“Ah. I guess that means you were treated to one of his famous ‘I-don’t-wanna-go’ tantrums.”

“Tantrums?” Steve queried, with curious tilt of his head. “No, he didn't act out today. If anything, he seemed too quiet.”

“Unbelievable. I deal with tears for months, he spends one day with you and he's on best behavior.” Tony muttered, and turned to go. “Well, thanks for getting him home safe. I won't keep you, I'm sure you have places to be—”

“I, uh—” Steve hesitated. He shifted on his feet, torn between some internal debate, before taking something out from his pocket. “I got you this. Here.”

Tony had barely processed the words before he was automatically reaching over to accept the mysterious item.

A packet of dried fruit. He couldn't help noticing that while it contained his favorites (blueberries and pomegranate seeds), they also happened to be fruits good for improving heart health.

Suddenly lost for words, Tony blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “You could've just got me some doughnuts.”

“You need to take better care of your health.” Steve pointed out firmly. Then his shoulders hunched in slightly, as if he was trying to make himself look smaller.

“I read that these foods are good for reducing heart attack risk. So I thought…” said Steve. He sounded a little unsure, and there was no other way to describe the look in Steve’s eyes other than shy. “And I remembered you used to like these.”

Blinking furiously, Tony turned his attention to the packet. The smiling cat mascot emblazoned on the front declared it to be 100% organically farmed in Wakanda.

“How did you even find these? Wakandan stuff is hard to get, and this is a super-duper exclusive specialty product. Hell, even I have a hard time getting them.” Tony asked. “And didn't this company go out of business?” As Tony remembered, the company had stopped producing fruit almost… two years ago. Huh.

“Oh, did it?” Steve said innocently. He was trying to contain a pleased little smile and failing miserably. “I know a guy who owes me some favors, so he must've pulled some strings.”

“Must’ve been a lot of strings.” Tony said slowly.

Steve gave a light chuckle, ruffling a hand through his hair. “I guess you could say that. Mostly it's because I, uh…” he paused, before raising his eyes to meet Tony’s. “I wanted to give you something.”

Tony looked down at the packet. Ever since that night in the kitchen, neither of them had dared pick up the dangling threads of their conversation. He knew he was being a coward, but it felt too soon, too raw for either of them to broach the subject.

To call that night emotionally-charged would be a gross understatement.

One moment he was yelling at Steve about recklessness, the next he was spilling his guts about his
father, and before he knew it, he was melting into Steve’s hug like the complete sap he was.

Being held, feeling safe, feeling like he mattered. That warmth had permeated his whole being, making something tightly-coiled inside him start to ease.

After that… things had gotten a little hazy.

Tony had the nagging sense that there was something important he was supposed to remember from that night. But no matter how he wracked his brain, trying to recall the memory was like trying to catch smoke in a butterfly net.

There was one thing he was sure of: that he’d woken up in his own bed feeling the most well-rested he’d felt in years with no memory of how he’d got there, and with a pang in his chest that he knew wasn’t the lingering vestiges of the heart attack.

This didn't make things right between them. It would take more than a bag of fruit for Tony to forgive Steve.

But the knowledge that Steve had noticed, remembered, and pulled who-knows-what strings to get him a present made warmth pool in his belly.

Surely it wouldn't hurt to accept one thing from Steve? The blueberries were really good.

Unable to resist his curiosity, Tony opened the packet and popped one of the fruits into his mouth. Sweetness burst over his tongue, a counterpoint to the twinge in his chest, the lump rising to the back of his throat, the tickle behind his eyelids. He squeezed them shut.

“Is it not good? You don't like it?” Steve sounded anxious.

“No, it's. It's good. Perfect, actually.” Tony muttered. The packet crinkled noisily beneath his tight fingers.

For a few seconds, the only sounds were the leaves rustling in the afternoon breeze.

Steve cleared his throat, shattering the spell. He stepped back from the door. “I’d better get going. I'll pick Peter up same time tomorrow?”


Steve threw him a smile and turned to leave. As Tony watched his retreating form, he popped another blueberry into his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, I’m back!!!! I had a good break and am ready for the final stretch! Buckle in because this is the last arc of the fic and I have lots of crazy shit in store! I hope you guys are ready for wacky shenanigans and terrible Xmas jokes~

I had this scene written back in August, and it feels more bittersweet in the wake of Stan Lee’s passing. RIP Legend. Excelsior <3

Come talk to me on tumblr! 
Here goes nothing. Tony took a breath, recited all the metals on the periodic table backwards, counted to ten, then opened the door.

“I probably have enough spark plugs in the garage.” He said, all in a rush.

Standing the stoop, Steve looked baffled. “...That's nice?”

Tony’s heart sank a little. Bamboozlement wasn't the reaction he'd been hoping for...

...Ah, shit. He'd done the thing where he'd gone so deep into Idea Land that he'd forgotten to catch the outside world up on his thought process.

Tony rubbed the back of his neck and began to backtracking. “What I'm saying is, you should bring your bike next time you're here. I'll give it a tune-up, maybe upgrade some of the parts...”

The vintage lines of Steve’s 1942 Harley called to him, and Tony was itching with excitement imagining all the fun things he could do to it. Classic was nice, yes, but there was always room for improvement.

“Oh, I see. That's real generous of you to offer, Tony…”

“So yes?”

Steve hesitated. “You don't need to trouble yourself. I have a regular mechanic that I send it to.”

Tony went still. “You know a mechanic better than me? ”

“No! I meant-”

“I see how it is,” Tony said jauntily. “Though I find that very hard to believe, given the number of doctorates I have.”

“It's not a slight against you. This kind of work is nothing special, it'd be a waste of your skills-”

“So you think I'm too good to go full grease monkey? I've been doing this since I was five!” Tony tapped his chin, pretending to think about it. “Actually, why don't you give me the number of this magic engineer of yours? SI is always looking for talented new hires.”

“I don't think-”


Okay, the last one had slipped out by accident. But it had the effect of sending Steve’s eyebrows dangerously close to vanishing into his hairline, as he tried to dig himself out of the hole he’d gotten himself into.

It is kinda funny, he thought with a swirl of levity.

Amusing as it was to watch Steve flail and stutter, Tony relented, deciding he'd needled him
“Come on, it’s the least I can do after all the stuff you helped me with.” Tony said, not unkindly.

“Is that what this is about? Because you shouldn’t feel like you need to do anything to pay me back.” Steve protested. “I helped you out because I wanted to.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m coming from. I know I don’t have to. But I want to.” Tony bit his lip. “Let me do this for you.”

Steve pressed his lips together, pulling a Troubled face. He always seemed Troubled when things involved Tony.

Well, two could play at that game. Tony refused to give up so easily.

He raised his hands, feigning casualness. “You don't want it, fine, I'll just go with Option B instead. But I'm telling you, that would be a huge mistake.”

“How huge?”


Steve huffed out a weak laugh, melting in the face of Tony’s determination. “I guess there's no choice. Do your worst, mister…”

That gave Tony pause. “Seriously, though, if you really don't want me to tinker with your baby, I'll stop.”

“If it were anyone else, yeah.” Steve admitted. Then his smile turned achingly sincere. Open, unguarded. Like one of the ones he’d freely given way back then. “But I trust you.”

Tony nodded dumbly. A tingle had sparked to life in his chest, making it feel twenty sizes too big and full of pop rocks. “O-okay, so the first thing I was thinking was GPS, then maybe-”

“No,” Steve said shortly. But he quickly walked it back. “Uh, if it's not too much trouble, I'd prefer not to have any fancy modifications.”

“You sure? Your bike is pretty ancient, it wouldn't be a bad idea to bring it into this century.”

“I like the old thing the way it is,” Steve said politely but firmly. “It’s special to me.”

“Alright, alright already. But I should warn you, you’re walking away from the upgrade of a lifetime…”

“I’m an old school kind of guy,” Steve shrugged. “Can't seem to change that part of me.”

“Fair enough,” Tony pushed himself off the jamb he was leaning on. “Just drop off the bike here when you pick up Peter for school tomorrow.”

“I won’t be late.” Steve threw a smile over his shoulder as he walked away.

Tony shut the door and leaned against it, letting out a breath he'd felt like he'd been holding for a long, long time.

Well, shit. Better get to work, then.
‘Twas the weeks before the school concert and all through Little Heroes Kindergarten, was the whirr of sewing machines and voices of the disheartened.

“I don't wanna wear green.” Wade plucked at the neon green collar of his elf costume. “It's icky.”

“Red and green are the colors of the season.” Thanos refused to look up from where he was stitching bells onto an elf costume. He stabbed himself in the finger and cursed under his breath. Why did Loki insist on having so many bells on every costume?

“Why can't I wear red like Peter?” Wade asked. The bell on the end of his green hat jingled sadly.

“Yeah, why can't he?” Shuri asked, hands on her hips. “We're just reading a poem. It doesn’t even matter what we’re wearing.”

Thanos gritted his teeth. “Because there have to be an equal number red and green costumes. Too many red elves will throw off the balance. Everything must be in equilibrium.”

Drawn by the mention of his name, Peter popped up at the other end of the table. “Elves aren't even real. We could make-believe there are red elves at the North Pole. Let's just use our imaginations!”

“Let's not.” Thanos said flatly. “My decision is final. You're going to be a green elf, Wade.”

“I don't like being green.” Wade’s lip trembled. His eyes started to fill with tears.

“Don't cry, Wade,” affected by the other boy’s distress, Peter unfastened his ruff. “Here, you can wear my costume instead.”

“Do you mean that?” Wade sniffled, eyes wide as Peter put his red hat on his head.

“Yes!”

“No.” Thanos snatched the red hat off Wade’s head. “Peter, I've already made your costume and you're going to wear it. I'm not making a new one just because Wade is having a tantrum—”

“But he's really sad!” Peter protested, a supportive arm around the other boy. “Why are you making him do stuff he doesn't wanna do?”

“Green is icky.”

All the complaints were making Thanos’s head start to hurt. “Growing up is all about doing things you don't want to. Just wait till you reach my age.”

“But you're like a hundred.” Peter rubbed his chin wonderingly. “Is that why your chin is so wrinkly?”

Wade sniffed. “I don’t want a wrinkly chin. It looks like a pair of—”

Thanos then squeezed his eyes shut, deciding to take the path of least resistance. “Alright, fine. Wade, stop your crying, you can be a red elf.”

Loki would throw a bitch fit but frankly, Thanos didn't care. At least the four scamps would be color-coded.
“Yay!” Tears gone, Wade wiggled out of the hated green outfit.

Thanos’s concession had the unfortunate side effect of giving the other three children ideas, and they eagerly gathered around Thanos like dust bunnies clumping around a vacuum cleaner.

Peter reached for a box containing tiny bells. “Does this mean we get to choose our colors? Cuz I want my costume to be red and blue.”

Shuri tugged on Thanos’s sleeve. “Can you sew neko ears on my hat? I wanna be a cat elf.”

“What do you think, Viz, would you like to wear a cape?” Wanda bent to press her forehead against the plushie. After a brief pause she raised her eyes with a nod. “Viz says yes.”

“No design requests. You’re going to take what you’re given. Don’t push your luck.” Thanos scowled around a mouthful of pins and pushed the bell box out of Peter’s reach. “And for god’s sake, Wanda, Vision doesn't have likes or dislikes.” He gritted out every word. “He. Is. A. Toy.”

Wanda pouted. “His favorite color is yellow.”

“Mr Thanos, Mr Thanos! Maybe we can help you make costumes!” Shuri said brightly. She reached for a spool of ribbon.

“Yeah, I'm really good at helping!” Peter chimed in.

“Knife.” Wade’s eyes gleamed as he reached eagerly for the pair of fabric shears by Thanos’s elbow.

Thanos slapped all the hands away. “No, no! Bad Wade!”

--

Toomes froze in the doorway of the staff room. “What’s this?”

Loki looked up from cutting origami paper into snowflakes to glare blearily at the other man. His chair was flanked by two hulking plastic statues, and from the cheap red-and-white polyester suits the statues were dressed in, Toomes could surmise that they were supposed to be Santa Clauses.

‘Supposed’ being the key word: everything about the life-sized Santa statues made his skin crawl. Their faces looked how an offspring of a bunraku puppet and a cymbal monkey toy might look, if said offspring had been birthed in a tunnel fire, inside a garbage truck that was also on fire. Beneath the shadowy rim of the bobbed hats, the plastic eyes seemed like they were following him as he crossed the room.

Watching. Waiting.

They were, quite positively, the most disturbing Santa Clauses Toomes had ever seen in his life.

“Charming fellows, aren’t they?” Loki rotated his paper so he could trim the edge of his snowflake more finely. “Maw’s idea; he insisted on including something that was ‘not bloody neon.’ These chaps will be standing on both sides of the stage to greet the guests.”

“To greet them with psychological damage? Jesus, Loki.” Toomes grimaced at the hideous things. “What dumpster did you dig these out of?”

Loki pressed his lips together primly. “If you must know, I got these from an old friend who runs a side business in junk. You’d be fascinated by the things people throw away.”
“Yeah, I wonder why anyone would throw away these works of art…” Grumbling a little, Toomes balanced his coffee and squeezed past Ugly Santa #1 to reach his desk. He was defeated by Ugly Santa #2: the statue was parked directly in front of his desk, preventing him from yanking his chair out more than a few inches.

Toomes kicked the leg of Loki’s chair. “Hey, Santa Wrangler. Your friends are in the way.”

Loki glared huffily. “It’s only temporary. I have to keep everything here because Maw, that unmoisturized mole rat, managed to ‘lose’ the keys to the store room.”

Toomes choked slightly on his coffee. “You’re getting more props? There’s no place, this room is filled with enough shit as it is.” Toomes cast a glance around at the dingy little staff room, which was cluttered with piles of coloring books, folders of lesson plans, crumpled snack bags, drying bottles of paint, and boxes of scissors.

Lots and lots of boxes of scissors.

“Blame Maw, not me. He’s far too caught up in his petty efforts to sabotage me.” Loki replied. “We’re all just going to have to endure this until I find a place to store my props.”

Toomes fell silent as he assessed the Ugly Santas, analyzing the height and build of each one. Finally, a shrewd look crossed his face. “I have an idea.”

“A rare occurrence in this school.”

“You want my help or not?” Toomes leaned against the wall of his cubicle, giving up on any chances of sitting at his desk. “You can store your props in the gardening tool shed.”

That got Loki to look up with a scandalized gasp. “That mouldy old place? Absolutely not, my props will be ruined. Not to mention, the kids are always sneaking into it to skive off classes.”

Toomes shook his head. “I’ll fix it up so nothing can get in or out. It’ll be as secure as a vault, just wait and see.”

Loki’s eyes brightened, before narrowing in suspicion. “What will this favor of yours cost?”

Toomes shrugged. “Maybe I’m just helping out of the goodness of my heart.” He nudged the side of his chair with his foot. “Or maybe I like sitting and want to get my chair back some time this year.”

Loki paused mid-snip to contemplate the proffered help. In his experience, people rarely did things out of the goodness of their hearts. There was no doubt that the man would eventually want something, perhaps for Loki to look the other way as Toomes pocketed some cash, or maybe he wanted to key Ebony Maw’s hideous car, or to assist in getting Thanos fired… though honestly, Loki would happily do that last one for free.

Well, if Toomes did turn out to want something, that was a problem for Future Loki to deal with. Present Loki wasn’t so much of an idiot that he’d turn down a free offer of assistance.

Loki nodded lazily, and picked up another piece of paper to begin trimming into a snowflake. “The shed will suffice.”

“I’ll get right on it.” Toomes drained his coffee and squeezed past Ugly Santa #1 towards the door. “I’m pretty handy with repairs, so we probably can get everything moved in by today.”
“Very well.” Loki waited till Toomes’ footsteps died away to let out a satisfied sigh. Working with his oafish colleagues was annoying, but it would all be worth it in the end.

All he cared about was putting on the perfect show.

--

Some people believed that the deepest circles of hell contained boiling lakes, salacious demons, fire and brimstone.

For Thanos, hell was being surrounded by children who wouldn’t do what they were told while wearing a scratchy Santa Claus costume, attempting to conduct a dress rehearsal.

This was all Loki’s fault.

Loki had been abusing his power ever since Principal Lee greenlit his project. Now, not only did every staff meeting drag on for hours, but Loki insisted that everyone refer to him as Artistic Director, clearly relishing wasting everyone's time as he talked about his grand vision; the sets, the costumes, the props, the playlist, the choreography, the exact pantone shades of red and green, the list of permitted fonts in his design bible...

Seeing Loki’s hideous designs on paper had been vomit-inducing, but seeing the neon monstrosities in real life were even worse. The small stage was a wasteland of neon gingerbread houses, glow-in-the-dark reindeer, fences of sparkly candy canes, and rows upon rows of fluorescent pine trees.

It was enough to make Thanos yearn to push him off something high. Maybe a bridge. Or a cliff.

Thanos shoved his Santa hat out of his eyes and gestured to begin the rehearsal. “Shuri, you’re up first.”

Shuri stepped forward, and began to recite in a formal tone. “‘As I drew in my hand, and was turning around, Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.’ that’s breaking and entering. Doesn't this St Nick guy know that’s against the law?”

“It’s just a silly poem, Shuri. It doesn't mean anything.”

Shuri wrinkled her nose. “See, this is why my family doesn't celebrate Christmas. Why do we reward a weird old man who breaks into our house with cookies?”

“Maybe that's why he's called Nick, because he nicks everyone’s milk and cookies.” Wanda dandled Vision on her lap. She tilted her head curiously. “Are all Nicks like that?”

“No way! My neighbor is called Mr Nick and he's really nice!” Peter added. “Last Halloween he dressed up like a pirate and gave me gummy bears.”

“Yeah, Mr Nick Fury is really cool!” Shuri exclaimed, and then frowned. “We should tell that him this poem is slandering the good name of Nicks everywhere and write a complaint.”

“This poem isn't very nice.” Peter agreed. “Maybe we should give him gummy bears to cheer him up.”

“It doesn’t matter what he’s called, it’s just a poem.” Thanos growled. The fake beard was starting to make his nose itch. “Keep reading so I can make my entrance.”
“Fine, but I think you should know I find this poem very disrespectful and not in keeping with the spirit of the holidays,” Shuri said primly. “Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound. He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot—hey...” Shuri’s voice went deadly calm. “He wears fur?”

“Next!” Thanos waved the next speaker on before Shuri could go off on another tangent. That wasn’t a debate he wanted to get into. “Peter, you’re up.”

“And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot—Mr Thanos?” Peter paused mid-recitation. “I have a question.”

“What is it this time?”

“Mr Loki told us that you were gonna dance in the Santa costume.” Peter piped up. “Are you gonna do it?”

“Not a chance in hell.” Thanos replied snappishly. “Today, I want to hear all of you read the poem.”

“Why?”

“Because you need to rehearse your lines for the concert.”

“Why?”

“So that you and your little friends won’t be a disaster on stage.”

“What?”

“Because you need something to show for your time at this school.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s how the world works! When you grow up and enter the real world, you’ll learn that you’re no more than a puppet on strings. And what choice have we but to dance? A dream, a career, a loved one - they all demand something from you.” Thanos took a heavy breath. “They all exact a heavy price to possess.”

“But why?” Peter asked, eyes wide and guileless.

“Say ‘why’ one more time,” Thanos said, a growl starting to creep into his voice. “Go ahead, try it. We have a new Time Out pen and it is raring to go.”

Peter scrunched up his nose. “I think you’re too chicken to dance.” He said accusingly.

Thanos rolled his eyes. “Nice try.”

Peter tilted his head to one side. “I don’t think you even know how to dance.”

“Thanos can’t dance.” Shuri chimed in. “Even if he read a ‘How To Dance’ book.”

“I’m really good at dancing!” Peter said. “I learned how to do that Tree dance from the video on the internet.”

“Do it, Peter, do it!” Wade cheered excitedly. Peter needed no further encouragement to begin doing the viral dance, which seemed to involve a lot of swaying and arm wriggling.
“Peter, stop disrupting the rehearsal or we'll never finish.” Thanos waved him away. “Wade, say your line.”

Wade jingled forward excitedly. He was wearing his new red elf costume. “Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good knife!”

“Night! It's ‘night’, Wade, not ‘knife’! Please don't say ‘good knife’ in front of all the parents, the last thing we need is another investigation.”

“Good knife, good knife…” chanted Wade, jingling off to the side. “Jingle bells, Thanos smells…” Thanos sighed.

“Let’s try it from Wanda’s line. Come on, time’s wasting.”

Wanda had dressed Vision in Wade’s rejected green costume. The oversized hat kept sliding down over Viz’s nose, making him look like a very small and floppy Christmas tree.

“We wish you a Merry Vismas, we wish you a Merry Vismas…” Wanda swayed as she sang.

Thanos sighed. As usual, it was going to be a trying day.

--

Steve was just letting Peter out of the car, when Tony's voice rang out from the garage at side of the house.

“Over here! You're both gonna want to see this!”

Peter raced over, followed by Steve at a more sedate pace.

Steve’s bike stood the center of the garage. Crouched down beside it, rag in hand, wearing an old tank and with a splotch of grease on one cheek, was Tony. As they approached, he looked up with a grin.

There was a sparkle in his eyes, making him look the most alive Steve had seen in weeks. Some things never changed: tinkering always put Tony in a better mood.

“Don’t just stand around, check it out.” Tony waved them over. “I’ll give you the rundown: I put grease on non-structural bolts so they don’t seize up down the line, readjusted the steering head bearings, changed the oil, spark plugs and brake pads. Your shock bushings were worn out, so I replaced them with ones that I designed - trust me, they're much better than any you'll find on the market - and I improved the suspension…”

“What's suspension?” Peter asked.

“It’s what makes a car or bike move smoothly. If you have crappy suspension, you're gonna have a bumpy ride,” explained Tony. He tapped each component of the bike as he described each upgrade, more for Peter’s benefit than Steve’s.

Letting Tony’s technical patter fade into the background, Steve stepped closer to examine the bike. It looked practically brand new: everything gleaming and shiny, giving off the slight smell of cleaning agent. To his relief, it appeared Tony had kept his word and refrained from adding any crazy modifications to the bike.

As if he'd read his mind, Tony stopped in the middle of explaining torque to nod. “All I’ve done
was a performance tune-up to make sure your baby runs to the best of its ability. To summarize in normie-people words: it's pretty much exactly the same, but better.”

“This is all more than I hoped for. I don’t know what to say.” Steve said, genuinely impressed.

“Say whatever you like. It’s not like this was all that hard. Uh,” Tony replied, wincing as he realised how arrogant it must have sounded. “I’m really good at this stuff so it was barely any trouble for me. No biggie.”

“Thank you, Tony.” There was so much more Steve wanted to say, but he didn’t know how he could put it in words.

Tony coughed and rubbed the back of his neck, smudging grease across tan skin. “This is what I do.”

Breaking the silence, Peter piped up. “Can Pops’ bike fly to space?”

“Hah. I wish,” Tony gave an exaggerated groan. “Sorry, kiddo, I was two hundred percent ready to make a super cool space bike, but somebody wanted a regular old terrestrial bike because they're allergic to fun...”

“Fancy doesn’t necessarily mean more fun,” Steve said wryly. The atmosphere made it easy to fall into some of their old banter. “Strapping rockets to my bike could wind up looking a little tacky.”

“Nothing looks tacky when its built by me.” Tony brightened. “Give me a day, and-”

“No, Tony.”

“Fine, be like that.” Tony replied, with a hint of a pout. Just know that you walked away from your only shot at intergalactic travel…”

“Can I ride the space bike?” Peter repeated excitedly. Nothing else Tony said had registered for him.

“I’m never gonna hear the end of that, am I?” Tony looked so comically resigned that Steve couldn't help grinning. “Actually, why don’t you both get on? I need to check the chain tension, it’d be useful in case you’re carrying a passenger.”

Steve climbed onto the bike, and boosted Peter up into the seat in front of him.

“Let's go to space!” Peter cheered.

Shaking his head, Tony knelt down at the wheels with a wrench to begin making adjustments.

“Everything okay down there?” Steve asked.

“Genius engineer, remember?” Tony chuckled easily as he turned the wrench. “And people say I'm the worrywart, just chillax. But it's cute how you're so concerned...”

Steve froze, mind blanking out on that one word. Objectively, he knew was a silly throwaway line that probably didn’t mean anything.

And yet when Tony raised his head, there was something dancing in his eyes that was undeniably bright, something even layers of grime and grease couldn't dim, as he met Steve’s gaze and didn’t look away.
“So what’s the verdict, Mr Big Brain?” Steve forced himself to say, suddenly feeling like all the air had been sucked out of the room.

“Looks fine. Looks good.” Tony’s lips twitched, curving into something that was almost a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Hey yo! I know I’m early; I was gonna post this on Friday, but rumour has it that’s when the A4 trailer is gonna drop (and nobody will be in any mood to read fic), so I decided to get ahead.

Full disclaimer: unlike Tony, I’m not a mechanic, so please don’t make fun of me if I got anything wrong, it'll hurt my feelings. I googled some articles about bike maintenance and paraphrased the info (source, source and source). Just imagine Tony used his magic engineering skillz to make Steve’s bike ‘the same but better’.

Awww wasn’t this a cute chapter! Sure hope nothing bad happens :)

Come find me on tumblr, discord, pillowfort, dreamwidth - I’m peppypear on all
“Jingle bells, Thanos smells, Spidey shot a web…”

“Stop running around, Wade. You’re going to injure somebody. Or yourself, most likely.” Thanos made a grab for the singing boy.

But Wade nimbly dodged out of the way without missing a beat in his song.

“His purple ass, went down fast, and Avengers saved the day, yay!”

The blond boy had been skipping around the room for the last twenty minutes, which was annoying enough, but the fact that he hadn’t stopped singing that ridiculous (and frankly incomprehensible) ditty the entire time grated on Thanos’s nerves like never before.

“Jingle bells, Thanos smells, Spidey- aah!”

With a superhuman lunge, Thanos fisted the back of Wade’s shirt. Before he could say another word, Wade went limp in his grip and let out an ear-splitting shriek.

Thanos groaned. “God, Wade, can we not do this today-” he stopped, realizing that something was very wrong.

It took Thanos a split second that the sound was coming not from Wade, but from all around.

Fire alarm.

The piercing klaxon had some kids crying out in terror. Others had hands clamped firmly over their ears.

The memory of safety briefings flashed through Thanos head. Evacuate everyone, assemble them in the field until the fire department came.

“Everyone find your buddy and assemble by the door!” Thanos barked. Terrified by his tone, everyone jumped to it. All except one child.

Wanda.

The girl was sitting in the corner with Vision, oblivious to the chaos around her. “And then we’re going to live in a castle in the sky, and become Queen and Prince of the flowers…”

“Wanda, get over here.”

“…my brother will be a knight and I’ll be the Witch Queen…” Wanda said dreamily to Vision, who was sitting on a pillow next to her.

“Leave the toy.” Thanos snapped his fingers at her impatiently. “Wanda, come here. We have to go now.”

“No.” Wanda picked up a book and started reading it to Vision. “Look, Vision, this puppet became a real boy too…”
“Wanda, I won’t repeat myself.”

“We need a magic spell that will turn Vision into a real prince…”

Thanos’s brittle patience snapped. The girl had caused enough trouble all year without endangering her classmates as well. “This is no time for games, Wanda. I’m confiscating your toy for the rest of today.” His hand shot out and seized Vision by the head.

“No! You can't have Vision!” Wanda threw her arms around Vision’s waist before Thanos could tug the toy out of her grip.

“Stop this foolishness. Let go!” Thanos yanked Vision upward with enough force that Wanda’s toes left the ground.

“He’s mine!” Wanda yelled, clamping on tighter and wriggling around like a fish caught on a hook.

“Drop the toy!”

“Never!”

Thanos jerked his hand back with a snap at the same time Wanda, feet dangling in the air, threw all her weight into wrenching down.

Caught as he was in the middle of the tug-of-war, poor old Vision’s seams strained valiantly, but were no match for the opposing forces.

There was an awful ripping sound.

Thanos blinked, slowly turning over the severed head in his hand. Vision’s hand-stitched eyes stared back at him accusingly, stuffing pouring out from his gashed neck like sand from an hourglass.

Wanda stumbled back, clutching Vision’s decapitated body in arms gone rigid, too shocked to even scream.

Thanos stuffed Vision’s head in his pocket, figuring he'd deal with one problem at a time. “Wanda, we have to go now-”

Wanda screwed up her face and began to wail. Her scream joined the fire alarm in unearthly harmony.

“YOU KILLED HIM! YOU KILLED VISION!”

With a grimace, Thanos scooped up Wanda in one hand and Vision’s torn body in the other. “Everyone follow me, we’re going to the field!”

--

“So it was a false alarm?” Proxima inquired. The teachers had gathered in a huddle on the field.

“Yeah, the fire department didn’t find anything. I guess one of the switches tripped.” Ronan answered. “Or one of the kids was playing a prank.”

“At the end of the day, I want someone to start looking into this.” Maw shook his head. “Till then, let's get everyone back into class as soon as possible. There’s been enough-” they all winced as a high-pitched wail pierced the air. “-enough disruption for today.”
Wanda was inconsolable. Her head was thrown back, mouth open in a scream as tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Mr Thanos killed Vision! He killed him!” Wanda sobbed. The torn fabric at Vision’s ruined neck was damp from tears and snot. Her three friends had gathered around her while Thanos was conferring with the other teachers with Vision’s missing head still in his pocket.

“Don’t worry, Wanda. Vision will be okay.” Peter said comfortingly.

Wade nodded. “Jingle bells, Thanos smells, Spidey shot a-”

“Not now, Wade.” Shuri elbowed the blond boy out of the way. “It’s not the end of the world, Wanda. Just think about it, okay, Vision is just a toy…”

Wanda cried like her heart was breaking.

Shuri pressed on, trying to use logic to save the day. “It probably didn't hurt him because you can’t kill a-”

Wanda only cried louder.

“So if we just-” Shuri stopped at the sight of Wanda’s red eyes and Peter’s frantically shaking head. “I’m sorry about Vision, Wanda.”

“When Mr Thanos pulled his head off, all his insides came out.” Wanda hiccuped, cradling Vision’s broken form. Almost all the stuffing had leaked out from hole in his neck, leaving his body to sag limply in her arms.

“Can we fix him?” Peter asked.

“You better watch out,” said Wade. He began to chant, voice rising with every repetition. “You better watch out! Better watch out!”

“Ugh, be quiet, Wade. I'm trying to think.” Shuri tapped a finger to her chin. Then her eyes lit up. “I know! We can rebuild him!”

“How?” Wanda turned to her, eyes filling up with hope.

“As my cousin would say: ‘he just got the stuffing knocked out of him.’” Shuri picked Vision’s limp arm, weighing it in her small hands. “All we need to do is fill him up again with new stuff again and Viz will be all okay!”

“What kind of stuff do we fill him with?”

“Oh, any kind of stuff. Cotton wool, beans, sand, rocks…” Shuri listed off options on her fingers.

“Rocks?” Wanda tilted her head thoughtfully.

Peter brightened, noticing the numerous pebbles on the ground. “There are lots of rocks here!”

“Let’s put some new stones in Viz!”

United with a new purpose, the four kids began grabbing every stone they could get their hands on, and inserting them into Vision’s headless body.
“This… is… really heavy…” Wanda panted as she shoved a softball-sized rock down Viz’s neck.

“Yeah, but it will make him super strong!” Shuri reasoned. She’d collected enough shards of broken pottery to form a pile. “After this, nobody will be able to rip him apart.”

Wanda nodded. “This was a great idea. You’re so smart, Shuri.”

Shuri grinned. “I know!”

“You better watch out,” sang Wade.

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HOURS LATER

Peter stared dispiritedly out the window of the staff room. It felt like he’d been there for years. Waiting. Waiting for Pops to show up and take him home.

If he ever would.

Fear began to prickle up his neck. What if Pops never came back? What if Peter was stuck in the staff room with stupid Mr Thanos forever?

“Stop daydreaming and help me color these.” Thanos dumped a pile of paper decorations and crayons in front of Peter. “We have twenty more decorations to complete today if we’re going to meet Loki’s ridiculous schedule.”

With a heavy sigh, Peter picked up a blue crayon and began gloomily shading in a reindeer.

The only sound was the scritch scritch of crayon against paper and the buzz from the portable radio on Thanos’s desk:

[...agents located and disarmed the dirty bomb, preventing any casualties. The work of international criminal Ulysses Klaue, who is believed to be in league with known fugitive, Brock Rumlow who is still at large, authorities say...]

[...after the break we’ll be interviewing Gamora, lead guitarist of the Guardians, about her career. But first, we have a song from her solo album ‘Clifftop Blues’]

Thanos frowned at the radio, but turned it up.

“I wanna go home.” Peter grumbled.

“You know, your father is probably making a big mistake.” Thanos muttered, more to himself than anything else.

“My dad is the smartest. He never messes up.” Peter said sullenly.

“Everyone makes mistakes at some point, that's what humans do best.” Thanos loftily said, trimming the edge of a Santa-hat wearing puffin. “He’s wasting his time imagining that his ex will get his act together-”

A blaring ring cut off Thanos’s next words. Thanos answered the phone. “Hello, Little Heroes Kindergarten. How can I- What? No, please stop shouting-” tinny yelling emanated from the phone, and Thanos held it away from his ear with a grimace. “If you'll let me explain the situation-”
Peter took advantage of the distraction to sneak out of the staff room. As he shut the door quietly on Thanos, a puddle of red on the floor caught his eye.

A Santa hat. One of the hats he’d seen on Mr Loki’s ugly Santa Claus statues, if he wasn’t mistaken.

A strand of yarn had come unravelled from the hat, which trailed away down the hall. It seemed to beckon to him, calling out follow me, Peter. Follow me and find out where I lead.

Peter cautiously picked up the hat and followed the yarn trail, balling it up in one hand as he went. The yarn led him down the corridor, past the classrooms, past the concert hall, out of the building, towards the playground.

Peter couldn't help feeling excited by the mystery. This all reminded him of one of Dad’s bedtime stories: the one about the hero who had become trapped in a maze with a monster, and had to use a ball of yarn to escape. He wondered, with a flutter in his stomach, if there was a monster waiting for him at the end of this string...

Thunk.

Rubbing at the sore patch on his skull, Peter looked up.

Standing tall and harsh against the setting rays of the sun was the gardening tool shed. The red yarn had stretched taut: one end in his hand and the other going through the sealed door. It was jammed in the door, as if someone had gone in but shut the door behind them too soon.

But that didn’t make sense. Ever since Mr Toomes had boarded up the loose planks and put a shiny new lock on the door, the gardening shed had been an impenetrable fortress. Not even Wade had been able to find a way in.

This was as far as he could go.

But he couldn't just give up. Peter grabbed the yarn and tugged with all his might. The string stubbornly refused to budge. Peter kicked the door with an irritated huff. It remained stubbornly immovable.

He thought he heard movement from inside the shed: A low chuckle, followed by metallic scraping.

The long shadows cast by the shed suddenly seemed oddly sinister, giving him the uncomfortable sensation of being watched. Suppressing a shiver, Peter pressed his ear to the door, straining to hear more. He tried very hard not to think about what could be lurking in the shadows.

“What are you doing here?”

Peter yelped and sprang back from the door.

Toomes was standing behind him. The ruff of his bomber jacket was pulled up high, making him look like some bird of prey. The man looked irritated, but didn't seem like he was about to yell at him for misbehaving the way Mr Thanos would. Something else about his flat look seemed threatening.

Peter felt a flicker of unease.

But Mr Toomes was a grown up and a teacher. Surely he would know what to about a monster in
the shed.

Peter raised the ball of yarn. “I followed the yarn. There's something in there.”

“Leave it.” Toomes snatched the yarn out of his hand. “You're not supposed to be out here.”

Rubbing at the sting in his hand, Peter repeated himself. “What if there's a monster inside?”

Toomes rolled his eyes, grabbed him roughly by the arm, and began dragging him away from the shed. “Haven't you and your friends caused enough trouble today?”

Peter wriggled, trying to disentangle himself from the painful grip. All his efforts earned him was a shake, and Toomes’ grip on his arm tightened till it was the point of almost bruising.

“Ow! Stop it!”

Toomes was preoccupied, muttering under his breath as he dragged Peter towards the school. “-supposed to have gone home hours ago, everything could’ve been ruined. I ought to-” Toomes paused his rant abruptly.

Voices were drawing closer. One of them belonged to Mr Thanos, while the other, while raised in anger, could only belong to one person.

“Dad!” Peter yelled.

Toomes muttered a low curse, and the painful grip on Peter’s arm vanished. Peter needed no further signal to bolt towards his dad.

Looking extremely stressed, Tony broke off the middle of his conversation with Thanos and hurried over to meet him halfway. “Peter! I'm so sorry, buddy, I know you were waiting for hours.”

“There's a monster in the shed.” Peter pointed over his shoulder. He had to warn Dad, tell everyone that something bad was at the school. Dad would know what to do.

But Tony seemed too frazzled to notice or care about any shed monsters, because his next words were directed to the other adults. “Why didn't anyone from the school contact me? Don't you think if my kid is waiting for hours, that would have been something I, as a parent, deserved to know?”

“Now wait just a-” Thanos began.

“The monster is gonna eat everyone! We have to stop it,” Peter insisted, tugging on Tony’s sleeve to try and get his attention. Tony pushed his hands away and absently patted his head.

“We’re really sorry about the miscommunication, Mr Stark.” Toomes cut in smoothly. “Things have been a little disorganized today. Our fire alarm went off earlier, so we had to evacuate the school-”

“Fire?! There was a fire?!” Tony zoomed in on the damning word like an electromagnet to a junked car. “Doesn’t that sound like a cause for some concern?”

“We thought it best to contain the situation…” Toomes had an oily smile on, which only served to enrage Tony further.

“Yeah? Well, get ready for a whole new situation because I’m about to reinvent the definition for ‘scathing’ once I send in a complaint to the Daily Bugle!” Tony exclaimed.
“There's really no need for that, if you'd allow me to explain-”

“Save it. We’re leaving.” Tony grabbed Peter’s hand and stormed towards the exit. “And thinking about finding a new school, if you guys don’t wind up being shut down, that is! I mean, look at this dump!” He threw a hand towards the building. “Seriously, when was the last time you guys had an inspection?”

“It was a fake fire, nothing got burned....” Peter piped up, but Tony was having none of it. His dad was lost in a cloud of fury, leaving Peter to be towed along helplessly in his wake.

Tony heaved out a deep groan. He ran a hand through his hair. “Oh my god, don’t ever do that again.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong! I followed everything Mr Thanos said!” Peter replied indignantly. But Tony was too wrapped up in his worry-spiral. “I was so freaked out when you guys never came home after school. At first I thought you two were hanging out somewhere, but I called and called and he never answered his phone- God, I thought something had happened to you both...”

“Dad…”

“And when I finally called the school they said you were still here, thank god for that…” Tony muttered through tightly clenched teeth. “Shit, shit, shit! This was all my fault, why didn't I check sooner? I should've known something was up, should've done more…”

“Dad! Look.” Peter pointed at the gate, where they were greeted by a familiar figure rushing towards them.

“Well if it isn't the amazing vanishing man.” Tony said archly. “And I thought your disappearing was a one-time performance. Lucky me, I suppose.”

Steve hurried over, breathless apologies on his lips. “I'm so sorry, Peter, Tony. I came here as soon as-”

Pushing Peter behind him, Tony threw up a hand to stop Steve coming any nearer. “Nuh-uh.”

“I know, I know I messed up. I had to-”

“Had to what? What's so important that you left Peter stranded? Don’t answer that, I don’t care,” Tony snapped as Steve opened his mouth to do exactly that. “When I fixed your bike I didn’t mean ride it away from your responsibilities!”

“That’s not what happened-”

“Of all the days you choose to bail and it has to be the day the school is on fire. Yeah, you heard me!” Tony took a step forward, eyes blazing. “The school almost burned down! With Peter in it!”

“A fire?” Steve’s gaze flicked to the most definitely not burned school building and back to Tony.


Tony’s temper, already riled up, continued to fray. “It's all clear to me now. You’re oh-so-helpful when things are easy, but when things get tough, you may as well be on another planet!”

The accusation made Steve flush. “That’s not fair. I know I should’ve told you that I was going to
be late today, but-"

“I don’t want excuses! He was waiting here for four- no, five hours while you were off doing whatever you thought was more important! I couldn’t reach you!” Tony spat, voice starting to crack on the ends of his words. “You said if I ever needed you, you’d be there. But you weren’t!”

Steve flinched.

Tony’s grip on Peter’s hand tightened. “Y’know, I thought you’d changed. But turns out you’re the same as ever.”

“I know there’s no excuse for my actions today. But if you’ll tell me how I can make it up to you both, I promise I’ll-”

“How should I know what to tell you to do? And anyway, I’m through listening.” Tony spun around and started dragging Peter towards the exit. “The second I find a new school, I’m transferring Peter out of this dump and we’re moving somewhere else. Don’t try to find me.”

“No! I don't wanna leave my friends!” Peter cried out in dismay. He wrenched out of the grip and ran over to Steve, clamping himself around one leg.

“Peter, come here.”

“No!” Peter wrapped himself around Steve’s leg like he could graft himself there.

“For the love of doughnuts, don’t make me go over there, Pete. I am not kidding around.”

Peter gripped Steve’s knee tighter. “No.”

“Peter,” said Steve, sounding pained as he trying to detach the boy from his leg. “You should listen to your dad.”

“I don't wanna go!”

Tony pressed his knuckles to his brow, looking exhausted. “I knew the rebellion would come, but I thought I’d have ten years before having to deal with it. Peter, I’m gonna count to three. One-”

Seeing Peter’s face start to scrunch up and eyes glisten with telltale wetness, Steve felt his own hackles rising. “Tony, don’t you think you might be overreacting a little?”

“I never overreact! Two-”

“Can you give it a rest?” Steve asked, strained. “Yes, blame me, it was absolutely my oversight that caused this whole mess. But it also sounded like today was stressful for Peter, too, and it doesn’t help that we’re now arguing and you’re talking about moving schools and leaving his friends... It’s all too much.”

The muscles in Tony’s jaw tightened. “I'm doing what's best for him. Sure, Peter might hate me for it now. But if that's what it takes for him to grow up safely, then so be it.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.” Steve said, making an appeal to rationality. “Just think what you’re doing. The Tony I know wouldn't be this controlling and unreasonable.”

Tony chuckled mirthlessly. “Just the way my mean old dad was, you mean?”

Steve stopped, realizing with horror that they’d swerved head-on into a maelstrom. It was too late;
the look in Tony's eyes was shuttering, the anger vanishing, turning inward.

“That's what this is about, isn't it? You came here to tell me what an awful dad I am.” Tony said dully. “How I'm exactly like my old man and I'm gonna mess up Peter just like Howard messed up-

“This has never been about any of that.” Steve ventured, trying to make him understand. “All this business with your dad, it's not- look, Tony-

“That's it, we're done.” Tony squeezed his eyes shut. He closed the distance in a few quick steps and hauled Peter up in his arms.

“Just like that?”

“We’re done!” The bark of anger made Steve and Peter flinch.

Recovering himself with some effort, Steve tried again. “You're angry, I get it. But think for a second what you're doing and let's talk-”

“I'm done talking! Don't follow me, I never want to see you again!” Tony turned and yelled a parting shot over his shoulder as he stormed off. “Especially not at Peter’s concert! I better not see your big blond face there!”

“Pops… Dad…” Peter whispered, helpless to do anything but watch as he was pulled away.

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“So do we know why the fire alarm went off?” Thanos asked tiredly as he locked up the school for the day.

“Couldn't find anything.” Toomes shrugged. “The systems in this building are pretty old, something probably just tripped. Or maybe one of the kids was messing with it. Your class is full of troublemakers.”

“Hm.” Thanos had four prime suspects. Although it was difficult to deduce how they might have executed this prank, because it had been such a long day for everyone.

From hastily safety-pinning Vision’s head to his neck to prevent more the stuffing from pouring out (he couldn't tell if it was his imagination, but the plushie seemed significantly heavier than it was before) to dealing with an angry Tony on the phone demanding to know what had happened to his precious son.

And that was before both Peter’s parents started causing a scene in the parking lot. Drama followed their family everywhere, it seemed hardwired into their DNA.

As they passed the playground, Thanos glanced at the gardening shed. At the time, he hadn't been paying attention, but the yarn jammed into the door was now gone. He frowned.

“Has anyone been in there today?”

“Not since I boarded up all the loose planks.” Toomes shrugged again and scratched his chin. “Maybe it was an animal, there are some critters that could've come over from the woods. Probably a badger or armadillo.”

“Hm.” Thanos imagined the outcry if word got out about faulty fire alarms and wild animals
roaming the premises. He shook his head. Everything really was breaking down around here. “Find a way to keep that quiet, will you?”

“I'll make certain of it.” Toomes said, an odd note in his voice. Thanos paused to squint at him.

Outlined in the bloody rays of the setting sun, Toomes’ hawkish profile looked uncanny and foreboding. The trees rustled, bringing forth the hint of something in the wind, that felt like something powerful close at hand.…

*Ridiculous.* Thanos snorted. He headed towards the exit, dismissing the fleeting thoughts. He had other things to worry about.

Chapter End Notes

Oh no:(

I hope people aren’t too upset (if you want any hints how this story will turn out, just check the tags. PLEASE don’t come into my comments to yell at me, I can’t deal with that anymore). Sorry this is a little late, I’m currently in a place with very weak wifi so it took a couple of tries to upload this.

The next chapter will be the last one before the big showdown, and will have another cameo! Who do you think it’ll be?
“Ho, ho, ho! Season’s greetings, my friend!”

Cull Obsidian, the security guard of Little Heroes Kindergarten, looked up to rebuff the annoying person with a reminder that this was a school, and soliciting was not allowed, thank you very much.

His jaw dropped. Standing in front of his guard house was, quite possibly, the most muscular Santa Claus he had ever seen.

The sleeves of the red-and-white suit were ripped at the shoulders as if they’d been hurriedly torn off, perhaps having given way under the strain of containing the man’s huge biceps. The rest of the poofy suit did little to hide the fact that man’s six-foot-three frame was extremely shredded, with massive pecs, brawny thighs, and - Cull raised an eyebrow - yup, that was definitely an eight-pack. He wore no fake beard, revealing blond stubble that appealingly rakish. The most striking part of Muscle Santa’s appearance was the long golden hair that streamed out from under the red bobble hat like a river of purest sunlight.

This definitely wasn’t his grandfather’s mall Santa. That much, Cull Obsidian was sure. Cull gave himself a mental shake, realizing he’d been ogling the man for a bit too long.

Muscle Santa’s eyes - one electric blue and the other amber gold - twinkled vivaciously, as if he was used to people forgetting their words around him.

“Who… are you?”

Muscle Santa gestured down at his amazing figure. “Isn't it obvious? I'm Santa Claus!”

Cull rolled his eyes. “No. Where are you from?”

“I come from the land of ice and snow where the polar bears eat seals, as is the laws of nature!” Muscle Santa beamed, declaiming the words with all the pomp of a Shakespearean actor. “For the sake of holiday, I pray you let me pass, good sir.”

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but this is a school. For kids.” Cull jerked a thumb in the direction of the freeway. “If you're looking for a bachelorette party, Sakaar’s is on the other side of town, though they don't open till nine-”

Muscle Santa gave a booming laugh. “I am most flattered, though I fear you are mistaken, good sir! I am not a stripper, though I do have the utmost respect for that most noble profession. The acrobatic stunts performed on the pole are no easy feat!”

Cull had one job, and by all the power vested in his security badge he was going to perform it to the best of his ability. The security guard drew himself up to his full height. “Sir, I don’t know what you’re selling, but if you don’t leave I’m going to remove you from the premises.”

Despite his declaration, Cull couldn’t help a twinge of uncertainty. Now, Cull knew he was a big guy, it was why he’d been hired to run security in the first place. But for the first time in his career, he felt unsure whether his strength was up to the task - Muscle Santa seemed like he could pose a
problem or twenty.

“Look, man, why are you being such an arsehole?” Muscle Santa dropped the pompous air, toned arms akimbo on his trim waist. “This is a yearly commitment my troupe does so we can spread joy to kids. Have a heart!”

“This is a kindergarten. You can't be here unless you're a parent, teacher, or emergency contact. Or if you have an appointment.” Cull waved at the logbook. “All guests need to sign in.”

Muscle Santa clapped a hand to his head. “Oh, but I do have an appointment today! How rude of me for not introducing myself! I represent the Valhalla Theatre Troupe, perhaps you've heard of us?” Hot Santa flipped a business card at him and began filling out his details in the logbook.

“I really haven't.” Cull squinted at card. The rune-inspired font was so ornate, he could barely make out the first few letters. T-H-O…

“Here we go!”

Looking at the logbook upside down, Cull had time to make out the words ‘T. Odinson’ in jagged handwriting before the man flipped the guest book shut.

“Now that my identification is in order, lead me to the children that I might bring them holiday cheer!” Muscle Santa hefted his bag of presents over one brawny shoulder.

Sighing, Cull waved him through.

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“Ho, ho, ho! Happy Holidays!” Muscle Santa strode into the classroom with a broad smile stretched across his cheeks. “I come from the land of ice and snow, where reindeer promote a culture of body positivity and the elves enjoy favourable employment benefits!

Perking up at the sight of the newcomer, the kids immediately began pelting him with questions all at once.

“Why is your suit ripped up?”

“Why is your hair yellow?”

“Do you really know Rudolph?”

Muscle Santa tossed a golden lock over his shoulder. “Ho, ho, ho! So many questions, I'll get to them in good time.”

“You’re not a real Santa.” Flash accused. “You don’t even look like a real one.”

“Well then, you’re not on my Nice list anymore.” Muscle Santa chortled as the boy stiffened in shock. “Fear not, even the lumps of coal I carry are fine enough for any child to play with.”

“Santa’s just made up. Only stupid babies believe he exists,” Shuri said grumpily.

“Everything’s made up, even the thoughts in your brain.” Muscle Santa tapped the side of his head wisely.

“Anyway!” Muscle Santa brought his hands together with a thunderous clap. “I come bearing gifts in celebration of the holidays!” He lowered his bag to the floor and pulled out a brightly-wrapped
present. “Who wants a present?”

The promise of presents converted the suspicious naysayers into a cheering horde. The kids swarmed towards the pile of gifts, each grabbing for the largest and most colorful gifts.

“Carefully, now! No shoving!” Thanos called.

Over the throng, Muscle Santa noticed one child hanging back from the rest: A brown-haired girl who was clutching a plushie larger than she was.

Muscle Santa made his way over to her. “Would you like to join your friends, small child?”

“No.” Wanda hugged Vision’s limp body to her chest. “I just want Viz back.”

“Who is Viz?”

Wanda’s lower lip trembled. “My one true love.”

With a hitched breath, Wanda lifted Vision up. The plushie’s head dangled sadly from his shredded neck, which had been hurriedly reattached to its body with a safety pin.

“Ah, he has been wounded in battle! The bravest warriors truly have the deepest scars.” Muscle Santa stroked his beard thoughtfully as he studied the mangled plushie.

“I’m so lost without him.” Wanda said with a sniffle. “I wish I could disappear.”

“Take heart! While this is a grievous injury, not all hope is lost.” Muscle Santa hmmed, before his face lit up like a star. “I have just the thing!”

Muscle Santa reached into his bag and pulled out a box of band aids decorated with colorful comic book characters. With a delicacy surprising for his huge hands, he began pasting bandaids to bridge the tear between Viz’s head and neck.

Wanda watched with wide-eyed wonderment. The wonders materializing under Muscle Santa’s sure hands was more miraculous than she dared hope.

“Behold! Warrior Viz is all better now!” Muscle Santa lifted the plushie off his lap with a beaming grin. Viz’s head was still slightly misshapen, but the neckbrace of bandaids secured it firmly to the body.

“You… fixed him.” Wanda whispered, gazing at Muscle Santa like he’d single-handedly saved the universe.

Perhaps, in some ways, he had.

“He looks like a real hero now, especially with this collar bearing the faces of heroes. I must commend you for your valor, good sir.” Muscle Santa shook Viz’s hand before passing the plushie back to the girl.

“This is the best present ever.” Wanda hugged Vision, every tear gone. With a little whoop of joy, she tottered off to join her friends.

Muscle Santa smiled, preparing to return the front of the class to resume his festive duties.

There was another sniffle from the back of the room. The noise led him to small boy huddled on the floor behind a table. The tear tracks on his face were still fresh.
“Hello, small friend.” Muscle Santa said kindly. “Why so downhearted? Would a candy cane bring you some cheer?”

Peter hugged his knees to his chest. “Everything is wrong. Nobody can fix it.”

“Well, not with that attitude they can’t!” Muscle Santa plopped down in front of Peter, like an oversized jack-in-the-box. “There is no problem too great that a little courage can’t solve. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“My dads hate each other.” Peter whispered. A tear rolled down his cheek and splashed on his arm. “My Dad told Pops to leave forever and now he’s never coming back. Now Dad is sad and mad and he said I've gotta leave school and all my friends-”

“Ah, I see.” The goofy grin faded from Muscle Santa’s face. It was replaced instead by a compassion that belied his youthful face and cheesy costume. “Family can be very complicated. People who care deeply about each other can get into some of the worst fights.”

“I don’t know what to do.” Peter scrubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. “I don’t know how to make them happy again.”

“Sometimes there's nothing you can do.” Muscle Santa said gently. “Sometimes people need time to remember who they are before they're ready to come back.”

“But I want him back now! Pops wouldn't forget he's my Pops! And Dad wouldn't forget he’s my Dad!”

“You must miss him a lot.” The mismatched eyes softened, going sad and distant for just a second. “I know how difficult it is, to be apart from those you care for.”

Peter glared, eyes red-rimmed. “Why can’t you fix this? You’re Santa Claus!”

“Would that I could, small one.” chuckled Muscle Santa, with a touch of melancholy. “I don't have all the answers, there are some things even Santa Clauses can’t fix.”

“You suck. I knew you couldn’t help.” Peter said gloomily, dropping his chin to his knees. “Nobody can.”

“It feels like that now, but it won’t always be so.” Muscle Santa’s voice was far too understanding. “And things will turn out alright in the end. They always do.”

Peter shot him a suspicious look, before resuming his glaring contest with the floor.

Muscle Santa cleared his throat. “Now, I may be a silly man in a silly costume, but I’m told I’m extremely good at giving hugs.”

“I don't need one. I'm brave.”

“I don't doubt that at all. But all of us need a hug sometimes, even the littlest of heroes.” Muscle Santa opened his arms wide. “So how about it?”

Peter scowled fiercely, but it was a losing battle. Hugs had always been his greatest weakness. “...Yeah. I guess.”

“Come along, then.” Muscle Santa quickly shifted his balance as Peter tackled him with all the force of a small cannonball.
“How about we sing a song together with your friends?” Muscle Santa asked, patting a large hand on Peter’s shoulder.

Peter nodded, keeping his face pressed firmly against Muscle Santa’s shoulder. When Muscle Santa gently tried to detach him, the boy only clung on tighter.

Deciding that outright prying Peter off his arm would do more harm than good, Muscle Santa strode back to the front of the class. “Now, children, are you ready to sing a song? What holiday hymn shall we sing? AllFather is Coming To Town? Sleipnir the Eight-Legged War Horse? Walking in a Jotun Wonderland? Baby Bilgesnipe?”

“Those don’t sound like any Christmas carols I’ve heard of~” began Thanos.

“I wanna sing ‘Jingle bells, Thanos smells!’” Shuri called.

“Yeah, that’s my favourite!”

“The best song in the whole world!”

“Will you all give a rest with that song~” Thanos’s protest was drowned out by a chorus of excited cheers.

“Very well!” Muscle Santa roared with laughter. “However, I must confess that I am not familiar with that particular carol. Perhaps one of your number can teach me? How does it go again? ‘Jingle bells, Thanos-~’”

Wade grinned.

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“Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!” Muscle Santa boomed as he strode into the staff room.

“I wondered if I’d be graced with your presence.” Loki didn't even look up from the origami paper he was trimming into snowflakes. “Thor.”

“I made a list, checked it multiple times- And guess who wasn't on my Naughty List this year!” Thor struck a theatrical pose in the doorway.

“Give it time, we still have a few weeks before Christmas.”

“Optimistic as always, brother. But it's never too early for presents.” Thor slung his sack of presents onto the table with a loud thunk, sending all Loki’s stationery leaping two inches into the air. Humming, Thor reached into the sack and took out a headband with reindeer antlers on it.

Loki raised his voice warningly. “Get those away from me.”

Holding the reindeer headband in his outstretched hands, Thor approached the desk. “Don’t you hear those sleigh bells jingling ring-ding ding-a-ling…”

“Thor, knock off the Santa routine.”

“But tis the season! Peace on earth, goodwill to all men…”

“I will stab you if those come any closer.” Loki brandished his scissors threateningly as the headband hovered in front of his eyes.
“Fine, fine.” Thor relented. He set the reindeer headband on the table and dropped into nearest seat. He whipped off his Santa hat and ruffled his hand through his blond locks. The action sent them falling softly into perfectly tousled waves that glinted like molten gold in the sunlight.

“Why are you here?” Loki scowled. "And in that ridiculous getup?"

“The Santa gig has been part of our troupe’s community outreach for the last few years. As it happened, I was assigned to this school this year. So I thought I'd drop in on you.” explained Thor.

“Lucky me.” Loki said, with a vicious snip of his scissors.

“What are these?” Thor picked up a snowflake chain and began playing with it.

“Don't touch my decorations, you'll tear them.” Loki slapped the paper chain out of Thor’s hands. After a pause, he began shifting all his decorations to the side of the table furthest from his brother. “I need them for the Holiday Concert. I’m organizing it this year.”

“I know! I saw the stage on the way here and recognized your work immediately. The production design is very impressive. It has your signature style stamped all over it.” Thor beamed, then made a face. “Well, except for those two godawful Santa statues, they ruin the whole appearance. Those were definitely not made by you.”

The smirk which had been spreading on Loki’s face, dropped off when Thor reached the end of his sentence. “Did you come all the way here just to criticize my work?”

Some of Thor’s conviviality waned, as he approached the real reason for his visit. “Actually, I’m here to invite you to dinner at with our parents’ next week.”

“No. I hate that man and never want to see him again.” Loki sulked. “It never ceases to amaze me that you're so persistent with these pathetic attempts at inclusion. After all I'm not really part of your family.”

Thor let out a deep sigh. “Loki, you're literally the only one who still thinks that.” He leaned back in his seat, to examine the ceiling. “Mother is hoping you'll join us this year.”

Loki bit his lip and glared at his snowflake like he could burn a hole in it. “Did you come to mock me, because I can’t be as shining and successful as you are?”

“Success is all relative.” Thor said reasonably. “Considering you have a job and aren't in jail like Hela, I’d say you're doing rather well for yourself.”

“What an incredibly low bar to clear.” Loki scowled at the mention of their jewel-thief sister. Anger made him careless, causing him to accidentally snip off the wrong corner of his snowflake. He glared at it. Now the whole thing was ruined, and he'd have to start all over again. “You've never been the family disappointment, so don't pretend that you know what it's like.”

Thor made a show of looking out the window, but his voice was even. “Just because Hollywood didn't work out doesn't mean you're a failure.”

Loki crumpled the paper up. “It was a stupid dream.”

“We never stopped rooting for you, Loki, you've always been so talented…”

Loki snarled. “Get out.”
Accepting that they were at a stalemate, Thor held up his hands. “I’m going. Just one more thing.”

“Please. Spare me your sentimentality,” Loki rolled his eyes elaborately.

Thor ignored him and reached into his bag, withdrawing a box encased in forest-green wrapping paper. Carefully, he set it on the table between them.

Loki examined the gift like it was a live grenade. “What’s this?”

“A little something I picked up. Nothing fancy,” Thor rolled his huge shoulders and got up to leave. “Well, I’d better leave you to your work. I’m sure the concert will be a hit.”

Glaring at the present, Loki waited till Thor was at the door before biting out his response. “Wait.”

Thor spun around so fast his hair fanned out like a shampoo commercial. Loki felt his temper rising at the sight. It was unfair how photogenic Thor was all the time, even when he wasn’t trying.

“I suppose… I’m not doing anything next week, anyway…” Loki ground out, every word like pulling teeth.

Thor’s smile was like the sun breaking through the clouds. “Excellent!”

“I’m not doing it because I want to.” Loki added warningly. “I remembered I borrowed one of mother’s books - she won’t accept it by mail - I should probably return it to her personally. I can do that at the party next week.”

“No doubt,” Thor said lightly, before casually changing the subject. “Speaking of parties, I’m meeting some friends at the bar tonight. Val, Sif, Fandral, and the others will be there. You should come.”

Ugh, I stopped hanging out with Thor’s annoying friends for a reason, Loki sulked. They’ll come at me with all their questions and loudness, asking me what I’ve been doing with my life and looking down on me...

“Why don’t you invite your friend, Nebula, along?” Thor added, eyes twinkling.

Loki turned to him sharply. “How do you even know her? Have you been stalking me too?”

“I know her sister, actually! Gamora is a most delightful and talented musician. Her boyfriend is nice enough, though the poor chap is a little odd.”

“Hm. Sounds like quite the crowd, I think I’ll pass.” Loki said silkily. “I wouldn’t want my presence to ruin everyone’s fun.”

“That’s not exactly the word I’d use.” Thor said wistfully. “Things are certainly never boring when you’re around...”

Loki tched and flung the crumpled snowflake at him. “Leave.”

Thor caught the paper with a rueful grin. “I wish you best of luck with the concert.”

“Hmph. I don’t need luck.” Loki turned back to his snowflake, unable to resist the urge to brag. “You clearly have forgotten the extent of my skills.”

Thor shrugged his massive shoulders. “Perhaps I have.”
“If you bothered to make an appearance, all your questions would be answered.” Loki answered with a roll of his eyes. “But you're probably too busy with your friends to attend.”

“Hang on.” Thor tilted his head, the gesture making him look oddly retriever-like. “Are you referring to the concert which is taking place tomorrow, at six pm, in the school hall.” His eyes widened. “That I definitely don't know anything about.”

“Six-thirty, actually.” Loki said automatically, before he could stop himself. “Hey. Wait a minute-”

“Excellent! I look forward to seeing it!” Thor jammed his Santa hat on his head before beating a hasty retreat for the door. “No take backs! See you tomorrow, brother!”

“I never invited-”

The door slammed shut, leaving Loki alone in the dingy staff room with the gnawing sense that he’d just been played.

He glared at the gift Thor had left behind, wondering how his meathead of a brother had turned out to be so not-so-brainless after all. This… sneakiness was unexpected. Loki wasn't sure if he liked it or not.

Then again, perhaps inviting Thor might not be such a bad idea. Loki had been working at the kindergarten too long and he was tired of wasting his talents on drooling children and uncouth coworkers. It would be a welcome change to showcase his talents to a professional who could appreciate art.

Loki smiled, drifting back to blissful thoughts of his directorial debut. It was going to be a huge success.

He could feel it.

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“Hey, Thanos. You got a minute?” Toomes rapped his knuckles against the open door.

“This better be important, Toomes.” Thanos snapped. With every passing day, it felt like he was the only sane person running this madhouse of a school. His plate was full enough with school events, fire alarms, and squabbling parents. To top it all off, Wade’s annoying tune had spread like wildfire; he’d caught Ronan humming a rendition of ‘Jingle Bells, Thanos Smells’.

“Kinda is.” Toomes said slowly. “Remember how Loki dumped all his props into the garden shed?”

Thanos ground his teeth, already feeling the beginnings of another headache. Because of course it had something to do with Loki. “What of it?”

Toomes shifted like he had a snake in his boot. That seemed odd, because the man had always projected an aura of knowing what he was doing. He was one of Thanos’s less annoying colleagues because of it.

“We've got a problem,” Toomes said. “There’s something you might wanna see.”

“Alright. This better not take too long.” Thanos grumbled and followed after Toomes to see what trouble Loki had caused this time.
I liked writing Thor, he’s such a sweetie :)

Next chapter is the big event where everything comes together! As you might have guessed, I’m aiming to update on Christmas!

What's gonna happen? Will Steve and Tony resolve their fight? Will Loki’s concert be a success? What's in the shed?? Will Peter get his family back??? Will Christmas be ruined???

Are you ready? ARE YOU READY?????? [screams]
Twas the night of the Holiday Concert, at last.
In the concert hall, guests had begun to amass:
There were parents, and cousins, babysitters, too,
And some uninvited guests (though well out of view...).

The stage was adorned with neon decoration
Blending modern and classic for the festive occasion:
There were pine trees and candy canes standing aglow
‘round Santa’s workshop which frankly looked like a disco.

There were reindeer and polar bears, small arctic puffins,
And numerous geographically-incorrect penguins.
Lastly, flanking the stage like twin guardians (or clowns)
Stood the Ugly Santa statues, their hats pulled way down.

“This looks like a strip show!” Drax blurted in rage.
“Shut the hell up,” cried Clint. “My kid’s on that stage.”
N’Jadaka laughed. “Looks like discount Gankutsuou.”
“Please stop,” groaned T’Challa, both parents in tow.

Young Peter sat miserably in the stage wings
For his heart was weighed down by more saddening things.
He wished that his dads would get off each others cases
Because all that he wanted was to see both their faces.
Loki peered at the crowd through a crack in the curtains
Wondering why he felt, all of a sudden, uncertain.
Would the project he’d toiled over be a success?
Or would all of his efforts turn into a mess?

Too late for self-doubt, Loki gave a wild grin.
 Everything is in place, so it’s time to begin.
So he nodded towards Peter’s Santa-clad teacher
That the time had now come to commence with the feature.

The whole room went still the kids were led out
By their Santa-clad teacher, who, for once didn’t shout
For they’d all practised hard to prepare for this day
To make certain that nothing could cause disarray.

Soft music began as the stage lights went down
Casting shadows ‘neath both Ugly Santa Claus’ brows
Not a soul in the room had a clue of the horror
That was laying in wait, hidden just round the corner…

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Shuri took a deep breath and took a step towards the audience. “ ‘Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse- ’ all I’m saying is, they wouldn’t even have pests if they’d hired an exterminator or got a cat-”

“You tell em, cuz!” N’Jadaka called from the audience, ignoring T’Challa’s attempts to shush him.

“We’d never have mice at our house,” Shuri continued proudly. “Bast and Killmonger would get them good.”

Loki shushed her with a hiss, waving at the stage for them to continue.

Peter nervously stepped forward to recite his line. “ ‘The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,’ ” he scanned the audience for familiar faces, but the glare from the stage lights made it nigh impossible to see. “In hopes that St Nicholas soon would be there…”

“Right here, Pete!” A voice rang out from the block of seats on the left.
Beaming, Peter spun towards the voice and waved vigorously. “Hey, dad!”

Tony gave a thumbs up. “You’re doing great up there!”

‘When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter, I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter?’ Look! Santa fixed Viz!” Wanda patted Vision’s bandaged neck. “Can we get Viz new clothes, too? He needs some new stuffing so he can become even stronger.”

“I told you, Wanda, we’ll get Vision fixed up after the holidays.” Erik replied, with the air of a man who’d had this conversation hundreds of times before.

“But he needs new clothes now!”

Erik closed his eyes. “I swear, by all that is-”

“Viz have everything he needs, we'll make sure of it.” Charles put a hand on Erik’s arm and smiled up at the stage. “And you're doing wonderfully, Wanda!”

To Loki’s chagrin, every parent seemed to take Wanda’s outburst as an excuse to start shouting out to their kids.

“Nice, nice,” Clint had his smartphone up, dutifully recording the entire stage. “This is going in the family groupchat for sure.”

“Where's my boy?” Rocket bounded, landing in a squat in the center aisle, where he raised an expensive-looking camera over his head. “Come on, kid, give me a wave. I wanna get a photo for the album.”

The boy dressed as a Christmas tree waved. “I am Groot!”

Loki coughed very loudly. The endless stream of interpretations was beginning to aggravate him, and worst of all, nobody was impressed by his production design.

Ever the model student, Shuri made a valiant attempt to get back to the program. “‘As I drew in my head, and was turning around, Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound...’”

Shuri looked up expectantly, but nothing happened.

The kids shuffled around awkwardly. There were faint coughs from the audience, as well as camera clicks.

Loki groaned internally. Thanos had missed his cue. Scowling, he signalled wildly to the Santa-dressed man, who was standing silently at the end of the line of kids, to get things moving before more disruptions could occur.

Santa-Thanos twitched and lurched to the front of the stage, where he began to dance. Very badly.

Loki watched in growing horror at the shambling display. Not only did it offend every one of his finely-tuned artistic sensibilities, the dancing was a million times worse than it ever had been in rehearsals; Thanos wasn’t just out of sync with the music, he seemed to have forgotten all the choreography Loki had spent days, no, weeks urging him to memorize.

Why is he so out of it today? Is he drunk? High? Trying to cover up a hangover? Loki wondered. Thanos had jammed his hat so far down over his face, only his nose was visible beneath the hat brim and beard.
Thank god nobody noticed that oaf’s snafu, Loki cast a relieved glance at the crowd. The spectators were more interested in watching their kids, so what did it matter if Thanos had a few performance issues. It wasn’t like there was anything else that could go wrong on this night…

“Oh, you have gotta be kidding me! I told you not to come!” Tony’s outraged voice cut off Wanda in the middle of a line.

An answering cry rang out from the opposite side of the hall. “We weren’t done talking.”

There was movement from the shadows, and then a figure stepped forward into the circle of neon light cast by the stage.

It was Steve.

Not those two again. Loki felt the beginnings of a fresh migraine stabbing behind his eyeballs.

Tony laughed harshly. “What is there left to say? More lies, more empty promises? It’s always the same story with you!”

“Can you stop yelling and listen to me for once?” Steve replied tightly. “Not everything has to turn into a fight. For once in your life, please be reasonable-”

“I don’t want to!” Tony crossed his arms. “Why don’t you go back to the wonderful life that you ditched me for two years ago! Find someone cute to move on with because you clearly never gave a crap.”

“Like you did?” A note of bitterness had crept into Steve’s voice. “Clearly you put a lot of effort into putting me behind you.”

“Is that what you think I’ve been doing?” Tony exclaimed. “You think I should’ve spent my nights crying myself to sleep and stress-eating ice cream? Why should I have had to put everything on hold after we split up?”

“That’s what I did!” Steve growled, stalking to the front of the right block of seats. “You have no idea all the things I’ve been doing the past two years-”

“Gee, whose fault is that?!”

“But I’ve never once thought of seeing anyone else since we split up.” Steve’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “I can’t move on from you, and I won’t.”

“Then that’s your own goddamn problem! I never asked you to turn into a monk! Remember the part we got divorced? So my life - none of your business now!” With a wild laugh, Tony clapped a hand to his forehead. “Oh my god, don’t tell me this is about Stephen!”

“It is not,” Steve insisted, but his face flushed a bright red that was visible even under the neon green light. His reply forced itself out of him. “So- so what if it is? I didn’t like him!”

“You made that abundantly clear! Both of you made a complete spectacle of yourselves at Peter’s birthday! Thanks to your antics, I can’t show my face at that place anymore!”

“He’s a snob and didn’t deserve you!”

“And I bet you’re just jumping for joy because things didn’t work out with Stephen! Yeah, we broke up months ago, alright!” Tony growled, throwing his hands up. “You happy now? So go
ahead and laugh! Laugh at how I'm making a mess of my life!”

“You really think I’m the kind of person who’d rejoice at your failures?” Steve sounded hurt. A distressed crease appeared between his brows as they drew together.

Taken aback, Tony blinked, suddenly seeming to realise the sharpness of his own words.

Steve saw the opening and pressed forward with his statement. “I just want you to be happy.”

“Is that what you think I am?” Tony murmured, gripping the wrist of his hand like it pained him.

“You were wrong about what I said that day. I never meant to imply you were a bad parent, I’ve never thought that.”

Tony’s face crumpled, fighting against himself not to fall apart. “No, just a mean one, am I right? What were your words again? ‘Bossy’, ‘controlling’...”

“Those were about your actions, not you as a person!”

Tony stabbed an accusing finger into the air. “You know what your problem is? You always assume that you know what's best for everyone, and expect us all to just follow along YOUR plans without any explanation!”

Steve moved towards the center of the stagefront, where the light was brightest. “And your problem is that you're so wrapped up with hating yourself, that you keep pushing away people who are trying to help you!”

“Wow! What is this, honesty hour? Look at us communicating!” Tony shouted. “Where was all this insight two years ago when you were hiding shit behind my back?”

“Yes! I know it was wrong!” Steve said, voice ringing. “All this started because I kept secrets from you, and I'm sorry!”

All was silent in the hall. The air suddenly seemed cold and raw, as if Steve’s words had cut through the misunderstanding like a stiff breeze through fog.

“I’m sorry, Tony.” Steve repeated again, quieter.

“At last, he finally admits it.” Tony applauded mockingly.

“I do.” Steve agreed. He moved away from the stage, stepping out of the circle of lights to stand at the front of Tony’s block. “I thought dealing with problems on my own was the best way to solve them, but it only caused more pain.”

“No shit.”

“I was only thinking of how I could protect you both from the truth. But I never considered how it would make you feel- It was selfish.”

“Upset, devastated, emotionally obliterated- go ahead, pick one!” Tony suggested helpfully.

“The truth is, I was afraid.” Steve’s voice which had held firm so far, cracked a little on the end of his words. A fine tremble ran through his frame, rippling the bars of light falling across his chest. “I thought the truth would drive you away, make you hate me. Nothing scared me more than the thought of losing you.” He dipped his head. “It was a cowardly move. And the biggest mistake of my life, because I ended up losing you anyway.”
“Stop-” Sensing things were starting to hit a little too close to home, Tony ran a hand through his hair, gripping it by the roots. “Stop talking, it's making it very difficult to stay mad!”

“It needs to be said.” Steve moved closer, till he was just a few rows away from the one Tony was seated in. “I’ve kept too many secrets too long. I know I hurt you with my mistakes, but all I want is to make things right.”

Tony bit his lip, looking on the verge of believing him. But he gritted his teeth, the look in his eyes turning wretched. “Nuh-uh, don’t do this to me. How are you going to fix something that never existed?” Tony backed away, shaking his head. “Stop pretending to care, just admit that you hate me!”

“That's not true.” Steve looked more wounded by that accusation than any of the other insults Tony had hurled at him so far. “I've never hated you.”

“Stop lying! Why else would you have left!”

“I didn’t want to hurt you anymore!”

“Well guess what? You did anyway!” Tony roared. “My god, you really don’t understand a single goddamn thing!”

“Then help me understand!” Steve exclaimed. “What will it take to make you believe I don’t hate you?”

“I- stop asking me questions! It’s too late!”

“Do you want me to leave? Will that make you happy?”

“No! Because- BECAUSE I LOVE YOU, IDIOT!”

Tony’s words resounded from the rafters, bouncing from wall to wall until every syllable was absorbed into silence.

Under the garish wash of lights, Steve’s face turned ashen. “All this time, you were...”

“Yeah. All this time.” Tony’s breath hitched. His hands slowly rose to cover his face. “I haven’t been able to forget anything, not the way you get that stupid shy smile on your face, or how you always have a plan for everything, or you brighten Peter’s day, and you keep doing little things that keep reminding me...” Tony let out a crazy little laugh. “But what does any of this matter? Clearly you don’t feel the same. Turns out the real idiot is me.”

With a few strides, Steve wove swiftly through the rows of chairs until he was standing right in front of Tony.

“What are-?” Startled, Tony took a step back.

Steve gripped his hands firmly. “I love you, Tony. I love you so fucking much.”

Tony’s mouth dropped open.

Gasps echoed through the auditorium like the wind through the trees.

Steve paid them no mind, focusing all his attention on the man in front of him. “I was never happier than when I was with you - you gave me a home.”
“Then- why-?” Tony sputtered, confused and unsure under the intensity of Steve’s gaze. “Then why did you leave?!”

Steve’s jaw clenched and his throat worked furiously. “I thought it was what you wanted. That you wanted me out of your life.”

“What I wanted? I never wanted that.” Tony’s hand smacked solidly into the center of Steve’s chest, and all the energy seemed to drain from him.

“I thought I was giving you space to heal. To let you have your own life, even if I couldn’t be a part of it.” Steve said slowly. His hand closed around Tony’s fist, holding it to his chest. “But all I wanted- all I hoped for was that you’d be able to forgive me someday.”

Tony laughed again, but it sounded more like a sob. “If you wanted to patch things up so bad, maybe you should’ve picked up the damn phone and called me on one of the 730 days you dropped off the face of the planet!” A bar of amber light fell across his face, highlighting the sparkle in his eyes. “You left us! You left me!”

“I didn’t know.” The light shifted over the planes of Steve’s face, giving him a softer, sadder cast. “When you brought up divorce, I thought that meant you were ready to move on from me. That it was the only way you could be happy.”

Tony flinched as if he’d been struck. “You were supposed to push back! You’re the one always preaching to never give up! I never wanted the divorce, I only brought it up because it would make you fight harder, push you to take action. When you agreed, I thought you hated me all this time! I wanted you to stay-” he choked off with a gasp. “Why didn’t you push back? Why did you give up?”

Light danced across Steve’s face, highlighting every emotion that swirled over his eyes: guilt over his actions, despair over the time they’d lost, pain at how completely, utterly they’d misunderstood each other.

“Why did you go along with it?” Tony repeated, face full of uncomprehending hurt. “You know I always come up with bad ideas!”

“Tony, I’m not a mind reader. I don't always know what goes on in that amazing, talented brain of yours.”

“Wait. Wait, shit, that means...” Tony reeled back, hands falling uselessly to his sides. “This was all my fault. I was the one who pushed for the divorce. I broke us up...” he grabbed the back of a chair, swaying a little as if he was going to fall.

“You can’t always take all the blame on yourself.” Steve said insistently.

“You don’t understand! I ruin things, that’s the story of my life!”

“That is a gross exaggeration...”

“Stop arguing with me!” snapped Tony. “Why should I trust the assessment of someone who thinks it’s okay to keep food way past the expiry date?”

“Seriously? You’re bringing that up now?” Steve groaned. “The expiry date is for the seller, the food is still good for at least a few more months!”

“Not all of us like playing Russian Roulette with our stomachs!”
“There’s no sense in throwing out perfectly good food!” Steve responded indignantly.

Tony snorted. “See? This is the kind of bullshit I’m talking about!”

Steve huffed before switching tactics. “Well, at least I’m not obsessed with doughnuts!”

Tony gasped, mortally insulted. “You take that back!”

“Those junk foods are heart attacks wrapped in sugar!” Steve folded his arms firmly across his chest. “As someone who already had one, I’d have thought you’d be more careful with your health!”

“You think I don’t know that? You don’t have to be so bossy about my life choices!”

“I only do because I’m worried about you. Dammit, Tony, why can’t you understand-” Steve faltered as the utter ridiculousness of the situation began to sink in. He closed his eyes with a sad chuckle, tilting his head to the ceiling. “Look at us, fighting again.”

Still reeling from the mood whiplash, Tony let out a wild little giggle, but it puttered to a halt all too soon. “What have we been doing all these years? All this time wasted- We should have talked sooner.”

Steve said nothing, but the lines on his face seemed to grow deeper in the shifting blue lights.

“I didn’t mean it, about us moving away.” Tony shook his head slowly, as if trying to shake off a dream. “I was so worried that day, when I heard you never showed up to fetch Peter. And when I heard the school was on fire, I just panicked.”

“It’s not your fault.” Steve said, strong and sure. “You were doing what you thought was best for Peter.”

“God, if I’d known, I never would have-” Tony’s eyes were very bright when he tilted his face up. “Do you think Peter will forgive me for ruining his childhood?”

“You didn’t ruin anything.” Steve closed the distance between them, pressing Tony’s hand between both of his. “You’ve done more for him than I ever could have. Just by being there for him.”

Tony tched and shot him an incredulous look. “You absolute dingus, do you think Peter was happy without you here?”

“There’s nothing I can say.” Steve said softly. “Except how sorry I am for what I did to you- to both of you. There’s truly nothing I regret more.”

“I missed you so goddamn much.” Tony whispered desperately. “I’m so tired... I don’t want to fight anymore.”

“I don’t want to, either.” Steve’s hand cupped his chin, the other falling to rest on his hip.

“Please.” Tony’s shaky hands reached out to pull Steve closer. His brown eyes, reflecting a constellation of neon lights, looked bottomless. “Can we go back to the way things used to be?”

“I don’t know if we can.” For the second time that night, Steve’s stoic mask cracked and his bottom lip trembled. He bent his head and breathed his next words out, soft against Tony’s lips. “But I want to try.”

Tony made a soft sound, tilting his head up to close the distance between their lips.
Everything around them fell away as they kissed.

Tony’s hands tightened on Steve’s shoulders, fingers curling into his shirt, gripping like he never wanted to let go. Steve’s hands held his face like it was something precious, the ends of his slightly-too-long hair brushing against Tony’s forehead in a soft caress. The spotlights brightened, flooding their world in a soft magenta, transporting them to a quiet place, a soft place, where the poison of old hurts were drawn out and could, at last, begin to heal.

When he drew back, the look in Steve’s eyes was fragile, hardly daring to believe the absolution he’d received was real.

“Okay?” Steve asked, softly.

Tony licked his lips. “Yeah.”

There was something incredibly peeled-back and raw about the silence as they gazed at each other, and neither of them dared shatter the moment.

Then Tony surged forward for another kiss, the full weight of two years pent-up horniness behind him as he tugged his fingers through Steve’s hair with a growl. Steve gave an answering moan deep in his throat, low and hungry. He pulled him closer, clinging to Tony like a drowning man, hands tightening enough that Tony knew they’d leave imprints on his skin. As they moved, Tony let out a low keen as Steve’s hands dropped to his ass and gave it a firm squeeze. God, Steve’s hands were so large and warm, he could fall forever into the feeling of being held and surrounded.

Tony was the first to pull back with a choked-off gasp. The blood was singing through his veins like the heart of a stars, sparking to life feelings he thought he’d buried years ago. “How about that?”

Steve’s pupils were blown wide. His pink lips were slightly swollen, parted around breaths which were coming hard and fast. “God, Tony, I missed you. You are-”

Darkness fell with deafening absoluteness.

Yelps of confusion rose from the audience. Small screams from the children who were on stage.

“Seriously? We weren’t actually gonna do anything. This is a school for chrissakes.” Tony complained, though the hoarse tone of his voice told another story. Even so, his heart was pounding with the instinctive knowledge that something had gone wrong.

The uneasiness that had been coiling up Steve’s spine all evening reared its head. “Something’s wrong.”

Something was very, very wrong.

Their heads snapped towards the stage in unison.

“PETER!”

Chapter End Notes

Oh shit!!!!!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

[Twenty minutes earlier, main hall]

Loki was pissed. Everything was falling apart faster than he could control.

“Can you stop yelling and listen to me for once? Not everything has to turn into a fight. For once in your life, please be reasonable-”

“I don't want to!” Tony screamed.

Loki had worked tirelessly for months to organize the holiday show, only for his efforts to be rewarded with the undignified sight of Tony and Steve screaming at each other in front of the whole school like they were contestants on Top Model. It was so trashy.

The audience watched the argument avidly, eyes shooting from one side to the other like spectators in a tennis match.

Hooligans, all of them. Loki thought viciously. Uncultured plebeians. Hoi polloi. All I wanted was to produce something great. Why does nothing ever turn out like it should?

“Oh my god, don’t tell me this is about Stephen!”

“It is not- So what if it is? I didn’t like him!”

“Here we go again.” Erik rubbed his temples tiredly.

“About time, I was waiting to get to the season finale.” N’Jadaka kicked back in his chair to watch the drama, rummaging around in his backpack to whip out a jumbo-sized box of Pocky.

Drax nudged Rocket in the side. “Pay up, I bet that Rogers would come today. Told you so.”

Rocket grunted but shoved a crumpled note at the buff man. “Don’t get too cocky, I still have the rest of tonight to clean you out.”

“Hah! You are the one who will be penniless by the end!”

Sitting in the crowd, Thor caught Loki’s eye and began waving. “You were right brother! Your work is truly impeccable!” Loki ignored him.

“Wow! What is this, honesty hour? Look at us communicating!”

“Openness and honesty is a vital part of a strong marriage.” T’Chaka leaned over to drop a kiss on Ramonda’s cheek. “You should never go to bed angry.”

“I remember those years where we used to fight all the time,” Charles said wistfully. “Was it ten years ago? Fifteen? It’s so hard to keep track.”

“Don’t compare us to those fools. We were able to move past our squabbles, that’s the difference between us.” Erik shook his head at the sight of Tony and Steve trading barbs. “This is embarrassing.”
“BECAUSE I LOVE YOU, IDIOT!”

The ringing silence spread over the hall like an atom bomb. Nobody in the hall dared move, dared breathe for fear of disrupting the moment. Steve and Tony faced off against each other, wide eyes full of raw emotion.

All too soon, the silence was broken by the sound of munching.

T’Challa frowned at N’Jadaka, who was cheerfully chomping on a giant stick of Pocky. “How can you be eating at a time like this? Their lives aren’t our entertainment.”

“Hell yeah they are, this shit is classic shoujo.” N’Jadaka twirled the Pocky stick like in his fingers like a cigar. “Don’t be a damn baka about it, T.”

“My subscribers are gonna love this.” Clint clicked off the record button on his phone. “‘Top Ten Love Confessions’... maybe even go viral.”

Drax laughed triumphantly. “That’s a love confession. Pay up.”

Rocket groaned and began fishing cash out of his baggy pockets. “Why does my luck suck balls today? This never happens.”

“First time for everything. But don’t worry, we still have more bets to settle. Like whether or not their fight will end in a night of passion...”

T’Challa looked around incredulously: at where Clint was livestreaming the action, to Erik tsking, to Drax and Rocket who were exchanging money with Thor. He couldn’t take it anymore, he had to say something.

“You are all shameless!” T’Challa gulped as several pairs of eyes shot to him. Stubbornly, he pressed on. “Their lives aren’t some reality show for our entertainment! We shouldn't be seeing this!”

Clint stuck his tongue out the corner of his mouth and hit the Upload button on his phone. “In a second, all of my six million subscribers are gonna be seeing this.”

“Surely they deserve some privacy to sort their issues out!” T’Challa exclaimed, shocked.

“They’re the ones always bringing their drama to us,” Erik pointed out sourly. “I never asked for a front-row seat to their marital disputes, and yet I’ve been forced to witness them all year.”


T’Challa was about to continue, but Ramonda put a calming hand on her son’s shoulder, guiding him back to his seat. “Shh, sweetie, things are starting to get exciting.”

“Yeah, T, pipe down and eat some pocky.” N’Jadaka waggled a stick in front of his cousin.

“I love you so fu-”

“HEY! Language!” Several voices yelled. But Tony and Steve were too lost in their own world to hear them.

Beaming, Thor tapped Rocket on the shoulder. “I believe I win the wager as to who would drop the first f-bomb. You all mocked me for my decision and yet I was the only one to guess truly. Hand it over, my friends.”
The losers reluctantly forked over wads of cash: Rocket, Drax, Clint, Erik, and to everyone's surprise, T'Challa.

“Hypocrite,” sneered N’Jadaka.

“I gotta tell ya, Thor, you like to live life on the edge. I like your style.” Rocket said, with grudging respect. His beady eyes lit up. “How about another round?”

“Thank you, but I am content with my winnings.” Thor chuckled and made his winnings disappear into a huge pocket.

“I can't believe you're engaging in this tomfoolery,” complained Loki.

“All in good fun, brother! If you’d like us to deal you in, I can lend you some money-”

“I am trying to direct a show here, not run a gambling ring- Oh, for the love of god.” Loki grumbled as Steve and Tony fell into each other's arms, kissing each other as if nobody else was around. Tony was threading his hands through Steve’s shaggy blond hair, pressing against him like he was trying to melt into the other man. Steve had pulled Tony close, holding onto the dark-haired man like he was the only thing anchoring him to the world.

Colossus leaned a burly elbow on Erik’s shoulder and started sobbing. It's so beautiful.”

Erik patted his arm awkwardly. “Good god, man, get a grip on yourself.”

“It only takes a moment to be loved a whole life long!” Colossus sobbed.

“You're too emotional. Gestures like these are an overly sentimental display of-” Erik’s complaining ceased when Charles put a hand on his arm. Erik grumbled, but linked fingers with Charles over the armrest of Charles’ chair.

Oblivious to everything around them, Tony and Steve continued exploring each others lips, gazing into each others eyes, whispering soft nothings. It as a soft picture, framed by rainbow lights and twinkling music, and nobody wanted to interrupt the peaceful moment of reconciliation.

Then the kiss turned more heated; Tony stepped forward to begin grinding against Steve’s thigh, at the same time Steve took a handful of Tony’s ass and squeezed.

N’Jadaka whistled unhelpfully.

This would not do, if Loki let them keep pawing at other, things would take a turn for the highly inappropriate. This was a school.

Loki marched up to the couple and snapped his fingers by their ear as if they were a pair of cats to be startled off. “If you're both quite done with the histrionics, we have a concert to resume.”

When the two failed to notice him, Loki threw his hands in front of them, blocking their amorous display from view.

The crowd let out noises of protest. “Hey, I was watching that!”

“Let them have this!”

“Yeah, it was the most entertaining thing I’d seen all night!”

Infuriated, Loki snarled. “Silence! I've worked too hard on this show to be upstaged a pair of
clowns. I will not have- what’s that?”

Several heads turned in alarm as there came the sound of rhythmic thundering, like the footfalls of a gigantic beast. The thumps grew louder and louder, making many of the dangling snowflake ornaments quiver, until it sounded like it was right outside the hall.

A roof-shattering boom sent all the windows rattling as the doors of the hall were flung wide open.

“Where is he?”

Loki froze at the sight of the newcomer. “Thanos?!”

Standing in the doorway, looking like a Ghost of Christmas Grammatical Tense, was Thanos. If the Ghost had gotten lost on its way to Scrooge’s and had gotten mugged in a Home Depot: in the light from the corridor, it was evident that the Thanos was wearing only an undershirt and boxers (grape print). He was also, inexplicably, covered in soil and paint.

“How on earth...?” Loki’s tongue seemed to have failed him.

“Where is that bastard, Toomes?” Thanos was fuming. He strode into the hall, leaving a trail of mud behind him. “He locked me in the stinking gardening shed yesterday. I just managed to let myself out.”

“But that can't be right.” Loki muttered

Thanos scowled and held out his stained hands. “No? Look at all this shit I'm covered in...”

“Language,” a voice called from the audience.

Thanos shot a glare at the voice and continued. “He brought me out to the shed, something about a problem with your props. Before I knew it, he and his three accomplices shoved me inside!”

“Accomplices…” Loki shook his head, a dawning horror in his eyes. “If you were trapped in the shed since yesterday, then who’s wearing the Santa costume on stage right now?” Loki spun to the stage.

It was empty. No Santa. No children.

“What is going on?”

At that very second, the lights cut out.

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[Twenty minutes earlier, backstage]

“...where was all this honesty two years ago?” Tony yelled.

“Stop pushing each other. Wait quietly until Loki signals us to return to the stage.” Ms Proxima said sternly. She stood in the wings, holding back the crowd of fidgety kids from spilling back on the stage.

“What's going on? Why are my dads fighting?” Peter hopped around, trying to peer over his classmates heads. It was annoying how he was one of the shortest in the class.

The second Pops appeared, Santa had rushed their class off the stage before Peter could say hi.
Now, they’d been waiting in the wings listening to his dads yelling at each other, and Peter couldn’t take it anymore.

Peter squeezed through the clutch of his schoolmates, to where Santa was standing by the wall, face turned away from the light. “Mr Thanos…?”

Santa turned towards him, and for the first time, Peter got a look at the eyes above the fake beard. Beneath the shadowed brim, the beady eyes which stared back were cold, malevolent, and most definitely did not belong to Mr Thanos.

The Santa-clad figure smiled unpleasantly and tore his beard away to reveal…

Another beard.

The bobble hat was shoved back, revealing a shaven pate. And now it was clear, beyond any shadow of doubt, that while this man was big and bald, this man was not Mr Thanos. Come to think of it, the face was vaguely familiar, Peter had seen it a few times on the days Dad brought him along to work...

“Merry Christmas, kids.” said Obadiah Stane pleasantly.

“You. You're the bad man. You've been trying to kill Pops all year.” Peter started to back away. But Stane was faster: he moved around swiftly to plant himself between the distracted Proxima and Peter, herding him away from safety and deeper into the darkened backstage.

Stane snorted. “Me? I couldn't care less about Steve Rogers.”

“The little tyke’s barking up the wrong tree.” A gravelly voice chuckled from the shadows.

With a rustle of fabric and metallic clinking of hidden weapons, one of the Ugly Santas stepped forward to stand next to Stane. As Peter stared, transfixed by horror, he realised that it wasn’t a statue come to life, but a man dressed in the Ugly Santa outfit: he was lanky and tall, with a sharp features and burn scars all over his face.

Burn-Scar Man seized Peter by the arm and dragged him up nearly off his feet. “Nice to finally meet you, kid. Your Pops and I got some unfinished business.”

Stane tutted. “There’ll be time for that later, Rumlow. Grab the other one while everyone’s distracted out there.”

“Stop bitching at me.”

“Oi, Rumlow, do I have to do all the work for you?” An accented voice rang out from the backstage. A third man appeared, dressed in the costume of the second Ugly Santa. He was older, with a frizzy beard and crooked yellow teeth twisted in an unpleasant grin. He lifted an arm; his hand was clamped around the collar of a struggling Shuri.

“ Took your time finding her, Klaue.” Rumlow grumbled.

Peter struggled to break free, but Rumlow’s grip tightened on his arms like manacles.

Angry and terrified, Shuri opened her mouth to scream, but Klaue clamped a grimy hand over it. “Ah, no. None of that.”

There was no way out. The three Santa Clauses hemmed them in like insurmountable pillars of
seasonal horror. Trying to peer through the towering figures, Peter could make out the glow of stage lights, still hear his dads’ raised voices. He was so close but so far...

“Time’s wasting.” Stane looked boredly irritated in the cool green glow of the emergency exit lighting as he checked his watch. “Kill the power and lets get out of here.”

Klaue grunted and whipped small remote out of his pocket. “Lights out, kiddies.”

Before Peter could say a word, everything went black.

Shuri let out a small scream. Peter could hear faint yells coming from the stage too.

Wildly, he kicked out as hard as he could. There was a muffled curse from Klaue. A clatter from something falling. There was one heart-pounding instant when the grip on his arm vanished, and Peter bolted, running as fast as he could back towards the stage...

He crashed into something as immovably solid as a concrete wall.

A powerful force hauled him up into the air, disorienting in the darkness. And then there was Rumlow’s voice rasping by his ear, terrifying in its sadistic glee.

“You ain't going nowhere.”

--

[Present time, main hall]

“Shuri’s missing! Where’d she go?”

“I've got Pietro, but I can't find Wanda…”

“Wade? WADE!”

“Has anyone seen Wanda? She’s scared of the dark…”

“Shuri! Shuri, sweetie, where are you?”

“Where’s Toomes? I swear I’ll kill him!”

T’Challa lowered his phone, which stubbornly refused to turn itself on. “Is yours dead too?”

“Yeah.” N’Jadaka tweaked one of the kitty-ears on his phone cover. “If I had to guess, all electronics were fried in that blackout.”

“Is there another way to contact the police?” Charles inquired.

“This is all that Toomes doing!” Thanos seethed in the darkness. “When I get my hands on that sneaky-”

Sensing his colleague was too busy throwing a tantrum to be of any use, Loki turned to his brother. “There are emergency flashlights stored in the staff room,”

Thor nodded, taking the situation into stride with unexpected level-headedness. “I'll come with you. As your colleague said, there may be three unknown individuals lurking around.”

“Everyone please remain in your seats until we have the situation under control.” Maw’s reedy
voice piped up from somewhere near the front of the room, trying to restore some semblance of order to the frantic crowd.

Minutes dragged by with agonizing slowness. The second he got his hands on a flashlight, Steve pushed his way to the stage, Tony a few steps behind him. They headed backstage, the last place he knew Peter had been.

Steve’s heart jumped into his throat when his light fell across a puddle of red on the ground. Once the haze of adrenaline passed, he recognized it for what it was: the red elf hat Peter had been wearing just minutes ago.

The rest of the backstage area was quiet, and Steve knew before even sweeping his flashlight around that it was too late.

Peter was gone.

It was his worst fear come true. He had been so caught up in arguing with Tony that Rumlow had kidnapped Peter right under his nose. The man hated Steve more than sharks loved blood. Steve felt sick, as his mind begin conjuring terrible visions of what Rumlow might do to exact vengeance.

Steve’s heart squeezed. This was all his fault. He should have been a better protector, he should have done more. How could he ever claim to be a good father when he had allowed something like this to happen…

No. Steve clenched his fists, trying to get the panic under control. He wanted to pummel his fury into the nearest surface, but now was not the time to lose himself to rage or guilt. He knew there was only a small window of time in which to act.

He had to act.

Shutting away his panicky feelings, Steve did a quick sweep of the area. Except for a stack of chairs and dusty piano, the sparse backstage showed no signs of a struggle. But then again, three grown men would have little problem subduing a few kids.

This was bad.

Steve spun and headed for the exit, narrowly avoiding crashing headlong into Tony. The dark-haired man had gone so quiet, Steve had almost forgotten he was there.

Tony stared wordlessly at Peter’s hat, lying on the ground like a fallen flag.

Tony dropped to his knees in front of the hat like a puppet that had its strings cut. His hand moved jerkily to pick up the hat, making the bell at the end of the hat jingle tinnily. His fingers wound through the red fabric as if he could wring answers from it.

Steve couldn't see Tony’s face, but the hands gripping Peter’s hat had gone white at the knuckles and had started to shake.

Alarmed, Steve crouched down beside him. “We can’t fall apart now. We both have to be strong, listen to me-”

After what seemed like an eternity, Tony lifted his head. All Steve’s words died on his lips the second he saw his face: Tony’s face had gone mask-like in grief, but his eyes were a million miles away, as distant and empty as a dead planet, all the light gone from them.
“This is all my fault.” Tony whispered brokenly. His unseeing eyes looked straight through Steve. “He's gone because of me. I should have-”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I did this. You tried to warn me that there were dangerous people around, and I didn’t listen- It's my fault.” Tony repeated, raising a trembling hand to press it over his mouth. His breathing began to speed up.

Concerned he might be in the beginnings of a panic attack, Steve caught his hand. Squeezed it, running a thumb over the knuckles, hoping the sensation would ground him. “This is not over. I won't let it be.”

“I lost him. How am I any better than-” Tony's words burst from him in a wet gasp, and then his brown eyes were glistening in the reflected glow of the flash light.

Steve had never seen him this lost before. He had thought having Tony angry with him was agonizing, but seeing him crying was truly unbearable.

A small sound escaped Tony. A tear trickled down his cheek.

“You’re the smartest person I know. If there's anyone I know who can solve the toughest problems, who never gives up, that's you.” Steve put as much reassurance in his voice as he could, moving his hands to cup Tony’s face. “We're going to get him back. I'll find him if I have to go to the ends of the earth, I swear.” Steve pulled him closer, letting his foreheads rest against each other. “And we'll both be here for him. Together.”

Still lost in despair, Tony’s gaze slid over Steve’s shoulder. His eyes widened, locking onto something in the shadows behind them.

Steve tensed and automatically pulled him against his chest, prepared to shield against the unknown danger. But Tony shrugged out from the circle of his arms, crossing the room to inspect one of the benches against the far wall.

“Are you kidding me?!” Whatever Tony found beneath the bench put some of the spark back into him.

“What did you find?”

When Tony spun back, his eyes were clear, no trace of tears left in them. He held up a small device. “Okay, there’s no explanation for why an EMP jammer would be randomly sitting around in a kindergarten.”

“That explains the blackout.”

Tony’s jaw tightened as he held out the device for Steve to look at. “Not just that. Take a look at the make.”

There was a familiar logo on the side of the remote: Stark Industries. “It's one of yours.”

Tony nodded grimly. “Used to be, before SI shut down the weapons manufacturing division for good. Everything was recalled and discontinued a few months ago.” He frowned down at the remote, a stray puzzle piece that didn't fit. “So how did it wind up here?”

Steve paused as the new piece of information clicked into place. “Rumlow isn't working alone.”
“Son of a- Stane. I thought something was off when he made a commotion at the company those months ago, but I never thought he was working with-” Tony’s hand clenched on the device. “This was all planned. Throw everything into chaos while they made off with the kids.”

Steve’s heart sank. If they were up against crooks armed with the latest weapons tech, things were stacked more against them.

Unexpectedly, Tony sounded thoughtful instead of dismayed. “Actually, this might be good for us.”

“How so?”

“They probably only planned to take out all the power in this room. But if I know my tech- which I do, I designed it all myself- nothing electronic in several miles’ radius is working anymore; no phones, appliances, computers, all the cars, possibly a cell tower or two... ”

Steve’s blood pounded in his ears, hope rearing back to life. “That means they’re still trapped here.”

Filled with a new purpose, Tony began striding back towards the stage. “I’m going to try and get a phone working so we can call the police. Nobody kidnaps my son and gets away with it.”

“Good idea.” Steve nodded. “Stay here. I'll find them.”

Tony chewed his lip, looking like he wanted to say something more, but the anxious gratefulness in his eyes told Steve enough. With a quick nod, they took off in opposite directions.

*How messed up is it that it takes a calamity to unite us?* Steve reflected, as followed Rumlow’s trail down the stairs towards the stage exit. It was rare that Tony and he were both so perfectly in sync, and Steve wished he could have savored the moment. But there were more pressing things to deal with.

Despite Tony’s belief, Steve knew the police wouldn’t arrive in time, nor would they have the capabilities to deal with with Rumlow and his team of cronies.

Steve had to find Peter before it was too late.

Chapter End Notes

The dusting scene in IW was my main inspiration for the kidnapping aftermath scene, for obvious reasons. Aaah I love the Iron Dad Spider Son dynamic so much, it’s so much fun to make Tony cry :’)

And that solves the mystery of what was in the shed! There will be a few more surprises to come as everything rushes to the finale, and I’ll be supplying payoff for all the bits of foreshadowing I sprinkled through the story.

I’ve been writing this for seven months non-stop and I hope it’s as fun for you guys to read (it makes me so happy when people say they're REREADING :DDD) as it was for me to write.

I’ll be back after the new year, so I hope everyone enjoys the holidays!
Peter had never wanted to kick anyone so badly as he wanted to kick Rumlow. But he could barely move: the zip-ties Rumlow had bound his wrists and ankles with may as well have been made of titanium, and the man was holding him tightly around the waist in an unbreakable grip.

Peter tried anyway. He wriggled, aiming his strongest kick at Rumlow’s gut.

“What’s the problem this time, Klaue?” Rumlow asked impatiently, shifting Peter to his other arm to avoid the feeble attack.

The group of them were in the parking lot - Rumlow and Stane each carrying a zip-tied and duct tape-gagged Peter and Shuri - standing around a getaway car that stubbornly refused to start.

Klaue climbed out of their vehicle, shaking his head. “The EMP blast was too strong. I wasn’t expecting it to take out our ride too.”

Rumlow cursed. “Now how are we supposed to get out of here? Knocking out the power was supposed to buy us time till the cops arrive.”

Klaue jerked his head in Stane’s direction. “Don't look at me, Baldy over there was the one bragging how he could get us SI tech-”

“Shifting the blame, are we, Klaue?” Stane frowned at Shuri, who was trying to headbutt him and gave her a stern shake.

Unimpressed, Klaue turned his head and spat. “Piss off! Remind me whose bright idea it was to hide in a shitty old gardening shed for a week, then sneak into a kindergarten play dressed as Santa Clauses?”

Temper flaring, Rumlow whipped out a pistol from his Santa coat and started waving it around. “You’ve shot us all in the foot, you moron! Can’t you amateurs do anything right?”

“Wanna make something of it, Rumlow?” Klaue rumbled, rolling the sleeves up over his burly arms.

“Alright, that’s enough. We’re wasting time.” Stane interposed his large frame between them before Rumlow could rip Klaue’s throat out. “We’ll just have to improvise. Klaue, get your ass out to the main road and flag down the first truck that comes by.”

Klaue’s craggy brow furrowed. “Why?”

“We need a new getaway vehicle, you old coot.” Rumlow snapped.

“I’m a businessman, not a fighter. All I do is facilitate the selling of contraband,” Klaue said sulkily. “Get Rumlow to do it, he’s always bragging about his kill count.”

“Do I have to do everything myself? We can’t bring the hostages along, moron, it’ll draw too much attention.” Rumlow snarled, squeezing his grip on Peter. “I’ve waited too long for this chance at revenge and you are not gonna ruin it for me.”
“Ruin it more than it already has, you mean? Looks like a real shitshow from where I’m standing,” Klaue said sardonically, unhooking the front of his Santa coat to scratch his belly.

Stane rolled his eyes. “We’ll get the van together. Just stash the children in the gardening shed for now, they’re not going anywhere.”

“This is why I hate working with amateurs. Professionals wouldn’t have this problem. Just snap the trap and close the gate. Done and done.” Rumlow fumed as he tramped over to the shed, Peter and Shuri under each arm like small bags of flour.

Peter winced as he landed onto the grimy floor of the shed, the impact scraping the skin off his knees. He heard a muffled groan as Shuri was roughly dumped next to him.

Peter turned and let out a strangled scream - the first thing saw in the darkness was a ghastly face staring right at him.

As the rush of fear passed, he recognized it was the face of the Ugly Santas. Their suits and beards had been stolen by Rumlow and Klaue to wear as disguises, leaving a pile of dismembered, broken, naked bodies at the back of the shed like a bad omen.

Bad, very bad.

Peter tried to inch away from the creepy figures, but he could barely move.

Rumlow grinned at his terror and picked up a head of an Ugly Santa. He twirled it on one finger like a basketball, before drop kicking it into a wall where it cracked neatly in two. “See what happens to people who get in our way? You be nice and good now-”

Shuri wriggled over and swung her feet at Rumlow’s knee. He dodged it easily.

“Watch it, little princess. I’m being paid a lot of money to bring you in, but they didn’t specify in how many pieces.” Rumlow leered at Shuri unpleasantly.

Enraged, Peter kicked at Rumlow’s shin as hard as he could.

“Trying to be a hero, are we?” Rumlow’s scarred hand shot out to grab Peter by the front of the shirt, and yanked the boy off the ground. Peter struggled in the grip, but the twisted fabric effectively immobilized him like a cocoon.

“You really are Rogers’ kid, you little punk. Never know when to just quit it -” Rumlow gave him a threatening shake. “When you’ve known someone as long as I have Rogers, you get used to seeing the same kind of dumbass behaviour- Yeah, that’s right, your Pops and I go way back. He never told you that he’s one of the most dangerous covert operatives in the world, did he?”

Peter’s eyes widened. Pops was a secret agent?

“Shit, he really didn’t. No wonder Stark is pissed with him.” Rumlow dragged Peter’s head closer, forcing him to look at the burns on his face. “Your piece-of-shit poppa did this to my face.”

Peter wanted to squeeze his eyes shut against the awful sight, but the utter hatred emanating from Rumlow froze him in his tracks.

“That’s right, keep staring. Take it all in.” Rumlow leered, mouth a jagged slash against the burned wasteland of his face. “I was gonna just kill you to send a message to Rogers, but revenge would be so much sweeter if I just kept you as a trophy. That’d grind Rogers’ gears all right. But make no
mistake, I'm going to enjoy taking you apart piece by piece.” The grip on Peter’s shirt tightened, malevolence seeping through every pore of burned skin.

“Stop monologuing, Rumlow. We don’t have time for this.” Stane’s impatient voice came from outside the shed.

“Yeah, yeah you bald asshole.” Rumlow snorted and dropped Peter. “Sit tight, kiddos. Trust me, after this we’ll have a lot of time to get to know each other...”

The three men’s voices trailed off as they headed off to hijack a van, leaving Peter and Shuri alone in the darkened shed.

Peter wriggled over to Shuri. “Mff?”

Shuri nodded to show that she was unhurt. She jerked her head towards the door, brown eyes filled with worry.

Peter agreed: If they both didn’t find a way out before Rumlow came back, there’d be no escape.

They set to work: Shuri sawed her zipties against a corner of a a shelf, while Peter searched for a tool that could cut their bonds. But the men had known what they were about, and had emptied shed of all sharp items.

Peter’s heart sank. It was hopeless.

And outside, there came the patter of footsteps. Peter looked at Shuri; she shook her head frantically and began sawing at her ties harder.

The lock rattled, the rasping of metal on metal. Peter and Shuri stared at the looming door, hearts pounding in their throats.

With one last metallic scrape, the door cracked open, revealing a grinning face.

“Knife?” Wade chirped, holding up a pair of scissors.

Judging by the moonlight that glinted off the blades, they were real ones this time, a full eight inches of carbon steel.

“Mff!” Peter cried in relief.

“Hff!” Shuri yelled.

With a few well-placed snips, Wade set about turning their zip ties into plastic noodles.

Peter peeled the tape off his mouth and spat the gag out. “Thanks, Wade.”

“Where did you even get those? I thought all scissors were banned.” Shuri demanded.

“Staff room.” Wade hummed by way of explanation. He pulled a box out of his pocket and handed it to Peter. “Wanda found this for you.”

When Peter saw the name on the box cover, he smiled. Snap painting rubber bands.

Wanda and Viz’s heads peered around the cracked door. “The coast is clear, we gotta go now.”

Being in school at night felt weird. Under the scattered spray of emergency lights, the familiar
settings had taken on a dream-like cast that was oddly forbidding.

They hurried towards the gate leading to the main building. Things were gonna be okay, Peter thought. All they had to do was make it through the gate and they’d be able to get back to their parents. Dad and Pops would know what to do.

The iron gate loomed closer. Just a few more feet…

“Thought you could get away, could ya?” Rumlow materialized in front of them, blocking their path to safety. The iron doorway framed his Santa Claus-costumed form like the world’s most sinister winter postcard.

The four kids skidded to a halt, huddling together in shock.

Rumlow chortled and slammed the gate behind him. “You know what I hate most? Kids who won’t do as they’re told.”

With every purposeful, loping step Rumlow took towards them, the kids shuffled several back, being driven further into the enclosure. Rumlow’s leer grew ever more creepy as he advanced through the shadows.

Shuri was the first to recoup her nerves. “I can't believe I'm saying this, but Wade,” she grimly turned to the boy. “Knife.”

“Knife!” Wade cheered. He raised his scissors and charged as fast as his tiny legs could take him.

“What the-?” Rumlow’s blinked at the surprise attack.

But Wade had barely taken three steps before excitement got the best of him; the boy tripped over his own feet and went thudding to the ground. “Oopsie.”

Rumlow scoffed at the failed attempt to sic Wade on him. He reached a red-gloved hand into the pocket of his Santa suit. “You like knives? I got something better for ya.”

There was an ominous click.

Peter froze.

Shuri froze.

Wanda didn’t.

“Hiyah!” she leaped forward, swinging Vision like a hammer thrower competing in her first Olympics. The wind whistled as the rock-filled plushie swung through the air, before slamming into Rumlow’s knee with a sickening crack.

Rumlow screamed and fell to his other knee. “You little-” He made a grab for her, but she dodged the grasping hands nimbly.

“FOR VISION!” Wanda let out another battle cry and lunged again. Blood rage had taken her, and she was hitting every inch of Rumlow with stone-reinforced Vision like the extreme sports version of Whack-a-mole.

“Wanda, watch out!” Peter cried.

Recovering from the surprise attack, Rumlow blocked Wanda’s strike with a forearm and yanked
Vision clean out of her arms.

With a snarl, Rumlow ripped Vision’s head clean off and flung the pieces away.

Wanda went stock-still, hands dropping to her sides.

“Not so tough now, are you?” Rumlow stretched a scarred hand for Wanda’s neck. The girl barely responded, the awful sight of Vision being destroyed for the second time in a week having drained her of all will to live.

“Wanda, get out of there!” Shuri gasped into her hands.

Peter had to do something. He noticed a few rocks had fallen out of Vision’s body. He grabbed one, loaded it into a rubber band, took aim, and hoped with all his heart he didn’t miss.

He fired the shot.

The rock launched straight into Rumlow’s face, smashing into his nose bridge with an awful crunch.

“AUGH!” Rumlow yelled, clutching at his face as blood streamed down his chin. “You little bastard, you broke my nose!”

“Wanda, get out of there! Run!” Peter grabbed the catatonic girl’s hand and pulled her away. Shuri grabbed her other hand, Wade pushed her from behind, and the four of them ran like hell in the opposite direction.

“Get back here, you little shits!” Rumlow bellowed, trying to scrub the pooling curtain of blood from his eyes and clamber to his feet.

“This way!” Peter led them towards the playground.

“Where can we go? We’re trapped, the gate is the only way out of this place.” Shuri asked, looking at the darkened playsets anxiously.

Rumlow was still standing between them and the path to safety, and while Wanda’s attacks had slowed the man down, it would be a tall order to sneak past him. They couldn't run forever.

They had to hide.

“Quick, let’s hide in the playhouse. We can wait there until my dads get here.” Peter hurried them over to the playhouse where they’d performed their magic ritual back in October.

It seemed so long ago now.

Peter ushered them in: Shuri first, then Wanda, then Wade. A chill shot up his spine as a guttural roar echoed across the playground.

Rumlow was coming.

“Hurry, Peter,” Shuri whispered urgently. She and Wade pulled him into the playhouse and shut the door behind them just as the first heavy footsteps resounded on the playground asphalt.

They huddled together in the heady darkness, trying not to touch the walls for fear that their shivering would rattle the house and give them away. Even Wade had both his hands pressed over his mouth, his normally bubbly face a picture of worry.
“Where are you, little heroes?” came Rumlow’s sing-song from the left.

Shuri jumped as a metallic crash rocked the air. Rumlow had kicked the slide set over.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are…”

Rumlow’s heavy breaths grew louder, churning the air somewhere above them. Peter stared wide-eyed at the roof, gripping Wade’s arm, hardly daring to breathe.

Steel-lined boots began circling the house in a heavy tread.


Peter held his breath, wondering if the drumming was Rumlow’s footsteps, or his own heartbeat pounding in his ears.

After a third circuit, the bootsteps stopped. All was still.

Shuri’s hand squeezed Peter’s arm and he knew she was wondering the same thing: is he gone?

The silence stretched out into seconds, and Peter finally dared to take a tiny breath.

“Gotcha.”

The door flew open with a bang. Peter couldn’t help it, he screamed. Distantly, he heard Shuri’s and Wade’s yells join his.

A rough hand seized his ankle in a vise grip. Peter scrabbled, trying to kick it off. Shuri and Wade grabbed his hands, trying to pull him back, but they were no match for the force which inexorably yanked him out of the playhouse and into the chilly night.

Peter yelped as he was dragged into the air upside-down. With a stomach-churning swing, he was flipped around, bringing him face-to-face with a nightmare.

Rumlow’s crazed eyes were eerily bright against the dark trails of blood drying down his face. He was grinning, a ghastly parody of holiday cheer. “You’re gonna pay for that stunt with the rocks, you little shit.”

All the air in Peter’s lungs turned to ice.

“Screw the plan. I’m gonna start right now.” Rumlow’s leer cracked wider, drawing glee from his terror. The man withdrew his gun from his pocket and twirled it lazily in his free hand. “Which piece of you should I send your dads first?”

“Put him down, Rumlow. Your fight’s with me.” a familiar voice rang out.

Rumlow’s face went grey. “Rogers!”

“Pops!” Peter cried out.

Steve stepped out of the shadows, having approached so stealthily that none of them had noticed he was there. Even though he was just dressed in jeans and a plain T-shirt, the aura he radiated was anything but casual. The cold rage spoke of a man who had seen the worst of human nature, committed activities most would baulk at, but had made it through the other side clear-sighted and with his spirit intact.
“Get your hands off my son.” Steve said quietly.

Or else, said the look in his eyes.

Rumlow swung around with a growl, brandishing his gun at Peter, who dangled in his grip, as helpless as a kitten. “One step closer and I blow his head off.”

The focus in Steve’s face never wavered as he squared his shoulders, lowering his weight.

And then he moved like a flash.

Before Rumlow had a chance to react, Steve had his wrist twisted at an impossible angle. The gun clattered harmlessly to the ground.

“God dammit, Rogers, I'll kill-”

Steve’s fist connected with Rumlow jaw, striking so hard that his Santa hat fell off. Peter wriggled out of Rumlow’s loosened grip and scrambled away, determined not to be used as a hostage again.

“This is what you’ve stooped to? Taking your anger out on a bunch of kids?” Steve shoved the bloodied man forcefully away from the playhouse.

“Is that all you've got?” Rumlow spat out a mouthful of blood. “You’ve been chasing me for ages, but you’ve never been able to finish the job! Face it, you don’t have the guts, Rogers. I always knew you couldn’t-” Rumlow head was snapped back from the force of an uppercut, sending flecks of blood across Steve’s white shirt.

“You’ve threatened my family long enough. I was afraid, but not anymore. This time, I don’t have to hold back.” Steve responded between each punch, every movement crisp and precise.

“You and your precious family- I’ll show you what it's like to lose everything!” Rumlow slung a wild punch back.

“Not today.” Steve parried the sloppy blow easily and moved in like a whirlwind of punches and strikes. Round and round they fought, one figure in jeans and shirt and the other in a bloodied Santa Claus outfit, circling each other like a scene from the strangest holiday movie.

“Why is Peter's dad beating up Santa Claus?” Wanda asked plaintively, popping her head out the playhouse window to watch the action.

“Because he’s a ninja, duh. I totally knew it,” Shuri said with satisfaction. “Who else could beat up Santa but a ninja?”

Peter watched, half thrilled and half afraid at the sight. He’d never known Pops could be so cool: not even on Sports Day had Pops moved as fast as this. Rumlow seemed to know the odds were against him, and he slid out something from his boot that glinted in the streetlights...

“Knife!” cried Wade excitedly.

“Watch out!” Peter gasped as Rumlow slashed the knife at Steve’s face - the blond man dodged, but the blade snicked a thin line across one cheek. Steve didn't flinch at the cut, though his lips thinned.

“Don’t hurt my Pops!” Furious, Peter grabbed a rock and took aim with his rubber band. His aim was true and the rock nailed Rumlow straight in the chin.
“GAH! When I get my hands on your brat, you’ll wish you’d never been born!” Rumlow howled, a wounded beast.

“Nice shot, Pete! Knew I could count on you.” Steve broke into a fierce grin.

Peter was drawing his arm back for another shot, but something snatched him off his feet.

A meaty hand clamped over his mouth before he could call out, dragging him away into the shadows.

“Shh, shh. Quietly, now.”

Peter struggled with all his might, but to no avail: Steve was too far away and fully engaged in fighting Rumlow.

“Let’s get back to the van while your Pops is busy, hmm?” Stane grinned, easily restraining Peter with one arm and Shuri in the other. Behind him, Klaue had captured Wanda and Wade in similar fashion with his burly arms.

Peter wriggled vainly but Stane’s grip was stronger than steel. Shuri was biting and scratching at Stane’s sleeve but faring no better.

Stane tossed them into the cargo hold of a van. Dizzied, Peter tried to clamber back up but was bowled back as Klaue threw Wade into him, and they all thudded painfully into the floor of the van in a pile. Peter hissed in pain, scrubbing at the fresh bruises on his arms.

The doors clanged shut with a terrifying finality, crashing them into darkness.

The aluminum walls of the van was flat and featureless, with not even a window or bench - nothing they could use to escape. They could hear Stane and Klaue’s muffled voices outside, discussing what to do with them.

“-no sign of Toomes, I think he got caught. We ought to leave now.”

“We’re not gonna wait for Rumlow either?”

“Screw him. Now we only have to divvy up two shares instead of four.”

“Hm, I have no issues with that. Never liked Rumlow anyway. But what do we do with the extra cargo? The only valuable ones are the princess and Stark’s kid.”

“Bring the two randos along for now, we can ditch them later at the river.”

Klaue’s voice had an ugly smile in it. “Hey now, why waste? As I mentioned, my specialty is flipping contraband. I might have a few contact that are the market for kids…”

Their voices moved around the side and towards the front of the van. There was the sound of two doors being slammed, a great juddering noise, and the grumbling of a great engine bubbling up from deep within.

The van began to move.

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Over the course of his life, Steve had been in many battles across all types of terrain. Even so, he never expected to wind up fighting his oldest enemy in Peter's kindergarten playground.
Nevertheless, Steve approached the fight with the same methodical determination that he approached everything in life, and slowly, surely, Rumlow’s frenzied movements began to flag.

“You’re losing.” Steve stated as he threw Rumlow into a swingset.

Despite the copious damage he’d taken, Rumlow sneered, lashing a punch at Steve. Steve ducked his face out of the way just in time, the lucky blow glanced off his temple. He slammed Rumlow against the wall of the shed and he pressed an elbow over his throat.

“You think killing me will make up for all the things you’ve lost?” Rumlow rasped, straining ineffectually at the chokehold.

“I’m not gonna kill you. I’m going to turn you into my agency, where you’ll be put in a cell to rot.” Steve replied grimly.

“You think I can’t reach you from behind bars?” Rumlow coughed, speckling blood over Steve’s shirt. “Peter will never be safe from me.”

Steve scoffed. “Because your evil plan worked so well the last time? As I recall, you planned to infiltrate Peter’s school disguised as a cake delivery guy.”

“I would’ve gotten away with it if you hadn’t showed up halfway,” Rumlow seethed. “And you didn’t remove all the weapons, the knife made it in. Peter’s psycho friend almost did the job for me…”

“Now that I think about it: Cake delivery guys, Santa Clauses…” Steve cast an unimpressed look over Rumlow’s Santa costume, which hung in bloody tatters. “It’s interesting how all of your schemes seem to involve dressing up in some ridiculous costume. Maybe you should go into theater like Loki, roleplaying might suit you better.”

Rumlow seethed. “Stop laughing at me.”

The corner of Steve’s mouth twitched. “I’m not the one dressed like a clown here.”

“Heh, wanna know the real joke?” Rumlow’s tone turned sly. “Watching your family life crumble, because you did that all on your own!” Rumlow’s bruised eyes glittered with malice, looking expectantly to see if his barb had landed. “You can’t ever go back, can you? Your ex and son hate your guts.”

Steve knew that if someone had said that to him before this night, he would have hesitated, lost concentration, and Rumlow would most definitely have escaped again.

But the guilt that had haunted Steve’s psyche for years was gone. Everything with Tony was out in the open, burning their secrets away like a shuttle re entering the atmosphere, leaving nothing behind but the all-encompassing will to defend the ones he loved most.

Steve was done letting his past control his future.

“You’ve stolen time from me, but no more. How’s this revenge: knowing that I’m going to live and live well. With my family, my home.” With every word, Steve’s voice grew surer. “The only place where I belong. And I’m never leaving them again.” Steve’s eyes were blazing when they locked on Rumlow’s. “It’s over. You’ve lost.”

“Bullshit.” A wild laugh tore itself from Rumlow’s throat. “See how long your little honeymoon lasts when Stane takes out your ex like he was supposed to.”
Steve went pale. “What?”

Rumlow bared his bloody teeth. “Didn’t you know? You might lock me up, but as long as Stane’s alive, your precious Tony will be next on the hit list. And something tells me he’ll do it right this time- gah!”

Steve leaned on his elbow. “Start talking.”

Rumlow scrabbled at the crushing pressure on his throat, words pouring from him like a squeezed sponge. “After your kid’s birthday, when Stark kicked you out, Stane was gonna use the EMP stolen from SI to crash his car, make it look like an accident. Then kidnap your kid for leverage.” Rumlow kicked at Steve’s shins; he’d been shoved up so far that his toes barely brushed the ground.

“The bald moron messed it all up, because he accomplished the opposite: not only did he completely bungle murdering Stark, it made you come swooping back. And after that you wouldn’t stop hanging around him.” he spat the words at Steve with a spray of blood. “But all it took was a little bomb threat to to peel you away.”

Steve’s face darkened. “Nothing’s going to happen to Tony or Peter when I’m around.”

“Look around you, you’re too late!” Rumlow barked out another wild laugh. “While you’ve been wasting time on me, your little brat is getting further and further away. By the time your amazing agency gets to work, Klaue will have sold him off to the highest bidder.”

Steve’s knuckles started to quiver with tension.

Despite the chokehold, Rumlow’s unhinged grin grew wider. “Much as I’d have enjoyed torturing the little shit myself, knowing that he’s in some sicko’s hands and beyond your reach will give me something to whack off to in my cell- ack!”

Steve’s composure cracked. He drove a jaw-shattering punch into Rumlow’s face, sending the man crumpling to the ground.

Steve glared at the unconscious man, breath sawing hard through his lungs. But a cursory glance around the playground told him that Rumlow hadn’t been lying; Peter and his friends were gone.

I shouldn’t have taken so long to neutralize Rumlow. Stane and Klaue could be miles away by now. Time was of the essence. Digging around in Rumlow’s pockets found him a set of cable ties. Steve restrained Rumlow as quickly as he could before locking the man in the gardening shed.

Steve sprinted towards the gate, heading for school exit. He hoped against hope that there would be somebody driving by whose vehicle he could ‘borrow’ to continue the chase. But if there wasn’t…

Don’t think about that, Steve gritted his teeth. He’d would run till his feet were bloody if it meant getting Peter back…

“Steve!” Tony burst out of the main building and raced over him. His eyes darted to the cut on his cheek and widened. “You’re bleeding-”

“Stane and Klaue took Peter. I’m going after him.” Steve replied in clipped tones, not slowing down as he swept past Tony and towards the freeway.

Tony stiffened, but he recovered himself quickly. “Good news, your bike is still working. I
That was all the explanation Steve needed. He turned, strode promptly towards the parking lot, trusting Tony to explain as they went. “How is that even possible? Shouldn’t the EMP have taken out all vehicles?”

“Well, yeah. All the modern cars are fried, but since you were so adamant about maintaining the vintage integrity of your bike, it survived the blast.” Tony jogged after Steve’s lengthy strides. “Turns out you being a Luddite saved our asses this time.”

Good enough. Steve threw his leg across the bike and reached for the ignition.

He wasn’t prepared for the bike to dip with a second weight behind him. “Tony, what are you doing?”

“I’m coming with!”

“No you’re not.” Steve turned, trying to push Tony off the bike. “You’re not trained for this.”

“He’s my son! I need to make those bastards pay.” Tony insisted, planting himself on the seat like a barnacle and swatting Steve’s hands away.

Steve looked towards the gate desperately. “I- I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t. C’mon, please. Trust me.” Tony’s hands grasped his elbows, nervous energy thrumming through him like a live wire.

Steve turned in his seat to look him in the eye. Tony’s eyes were shining in the streetlights, full of the fire Steve had always loved about him.

A fire that had very nearly been extinguished; Steve was still reeling in horror from Rumlow’s confession. It turned his blood to ice, knowing just months ago Stane had made an attempt on Tony’s life and tried to disguise his murder as a car accident. How close Steve had come to losing him, and there was no way in hell he’d let that happen again…

“What are you waiting for? This is no time for you to be doing the self-sacrifice thing!” Tony jostled his shoulder, face creasing in worry. “Move!”

Time was ticking. The longer they spent arguing, the harder it would be to track Peter down. And Peter was their priority above all else.

Steve firmly quashed his fear and made a decision. “Alright. But you listen to what I say.”

“Fine!”

“I tell you to stay back, you stay back-”

“Roger, Rogers.” Tony saluted mockingly. “You’re the boss, happy now?”

“I say run, you take Peter and run.”

“Alright, already! Let’s go rescue our son, for chrissakes.” Tony wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist, pressing himself firmly up against his back.

Steve’s motorcycle roared to life beneath their legs. Together, they sped off into the night.
Wooo isn’t this exciting? Who knew a silly AU about kindergarteners would turn out this way :D

Rumlow is evil af

Based on my google research, the general rule seems to be that most modern vehicles are vulnerable to EMPs, but older vehicles are more likely to be okay because they have fewer electronic parts. I googled “vehicles which can withstand an EMP” and I found this list.

As you can see, the first entry is a Harley Davidson like Steve’s, but a slightly different model (Harley Davidson MT350E, Steve’s is 1942 Liberator). I’m just gonna assume they have the same properties. Because. Nyah.

I'm sorry the number of chapters keep changing, I keep having to split them in half to try and keep the wordcount somewhat consistent
“Shuri, why is it so dark?” Wanda whispered.

“We’re stuck in a van, duh.” Shuri hissed as the vehicle jolted over a pothole.

“Like a road trip,” Wanda hummed. “Where are we going? Are we going to Disneyland?”

Shuri rubbed her chilled arms. “I don’t think so, Wanda.”

“I wish Vision was here. I dropped him in the playground when his head got knocked open.” Wanda said dazedly. Her mind seemed unable to process any event following the loss of Vision. “I bet he’d love Disneyland.”

“He was really brave.” Shuri whispered back.

Wanda was quiet. Her feet shuffled against the metal floor. “Hey… Shuri?”

“Yes, Wanda?”

“What’s going to happen to us?” Wanda asked innocently, as if they were having a garden tea party in the sun.

“I- I don’t know. Maybe my brother will call the police, or…” Shuri’s voice choked at the end, sounding close to tears herself. The two girls huddled together in the corner, talking in soft voices.

Wade was curled up on the other side of the hold, uncharacteristically silent.

Peter wanted to be brave, but the reality of the situation was starting to sink in. He couldn’t stop shaking, even though the night wasn’t very cold. Everything hurt: his back from where Klaue and Rumlow had thrown him to the ground, his upper arms where Klaue grabbed stung when he touched them. He couldn’t see his scraped knees, but they felt wet.

And now there were bad men were taking them who-knows-where, to be killed. Or worse.

Peter felt like crying. He wasn’t strong like Pops, who could fight out of any situation. Or smart like Dad, who could build anything out of anything. All he wanted was for one of Dad’s or Pops’ hugs. When they were holding him close it felt like nothing in the world could hurt him. That no problem was ever too bad, that anything bad could be fixed.

Their faces floated in his mind’s eye, and Peter didn’t know if he’d ever see either of them again. He didn’t know if he’d see anyone again.

He wished he could hug Jarvis. He missed Uncle Rhodey. Pepper. Wanda’s dad, Erik. Shuri’s brother, T’Challa, or her loudmouth cousin, N’Jadaka- okay, Peter didn’t want to hug all of them, but any of their faces would be a welcome sight at this moment. Heck, Peter would even be glad to see Mr Loki or Mr Thanos.

Anything would be better than the yawning darkness in front of his eyes. Shuri’s hand found Peter’s in the dark and gripped it very tight. He squeezed it back.
The van hurtled on, carrying them further and further away from home.

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Peter blinked, sitting up straight in the darkness. He could hear something.

Shuri drew in a sharp breath. “Do you hear what I hear?”

Beneath the van’s clanking, a distant hum had begun to build. As they listened, it crescendoed, rising to a deafening roar.

“Is it a monster?” Wanda asked curiously.

“It sounds like some kind of jet engine.” Shuri turned her eyes skyward.

A high-pitched whine seared through the air, piercing and unearthly.

The entire world shook.

Peter felt his feet leave the ground, flooding his stomach with jumped-off-too-many-stairs swoopiness.

The floaty feeling lasted half a second. With a lurch, van slammed violently against something hard. The force of it threw the kids to the floor.

“Don’t these guys know how to drive? No wonder they’re bad guys, they didn’t even give us any seat belts.” Shuri grumbled as they painfully tried to untangle themselves for a second time.

There was a fiddling at the van’s doors; the unknown hijacker was trying to pry it open. Peter’s heart hammered as the doors rattled on its hinges. Finally, the doors cranked open, flooding the van with yellow streetlight. A familiar face appeared in the opening.

“Dad!” Peter cried.

“Yes, I got the right van!” Relief spilled over Tony’s haggard face. “Steve, they're here!”

The light behind Tony’s face was blotted out. The metal creaked and squealed as Steve climbed into the van.

“Pops.” Peter reached out, and was immediately folded into Steve’s arms. Instinctively, he curled into the embrace.

“I got you.” Steve’s voice was a comforting rumble against Peter’s head.

The next thing Peter knew, he was lifted out of the wreckage and passed to Tony.

“I’m here, Pete.” His dad’s arms wrapped around him tightly.
“Dad…” Peter buried his face into Tony’s neck. He never wanted to let go.

Tony’s hands patted over him shakily, checking for injuries. “Are you okay? Does anything hurt?”

“No.” Peter shook his head.

“God, I never thought I’d end using any of my own weapons again, but the EMP was the only way to stop the van. I’m so sorry, I’ll never do that again. Are any of them hurt, Steve?”

“Not that I can see.” Steve emerged from the wreckage with Shuri clinging to his shoulders. “Here you go, Shuri.”

The second her feet touched the ground, Shuri bounced over to Tony and Peter. “How did you find us, Mr Stark?”

“Sheer luck and stubbornness. But mostly his insane driving skills.” Tony gestured to Steve, who was fishing Wanda out from the van.

“Hi, Peter’s dad.” Wanda ambled over to them.

“Hey, kiddo. Everything okay?” Tony looked over her worriedly. The poor girl still looked spaced out.

Wanda blinked owlishly. “This isn’t Disneyland.”

Tony stared, before asking with some concern. “Do you know where you are, Wanda?”

“Oh, don’t worry. She’s always like this.” Shuri patted Wanda on the head. “Once she gets Vision back she’ll be back to her normal self.”

“Will Vision be okay?” Wanda asked plaintively.

Tony allowed a smile to unfurl. “Kid, at this moment I’m glad enough to buy you a hundred Visions.”

Wanda’s head tilted to one side. “I’d love a hundred Visions, but we’ll need a hundred cupcakes. Or more.”

Tony let out a small laugh, pressing a kiss into Peter’s hair. “Cupcakes does sound like a good idea, we all could use a treat after this shitshow of a night. Tell you what, there’s this doughnut place that does amazing-”

Peter saw a hulking silhouette in the shadows over Tony’s shoulder. “Dad!”

Tony turned just in time to take a jaw-stinging punch to the chin. Peter yelped as they both fell heavily to the ground.

“Hello, Tony. And little Peter.” Stane’s too-white grin gleamed unpleasantly in the streetlights as he stood over their fallen forms.

“Obie. Thought I’d seen the last of you.” Tony swiped the blood on his split lip. He hadn’t let go of Peter as they fell, arms tightening around his son protectively.

Stane aimed a kick Tony’s ribs. “You think you can just fire me and that’s the end of it? After everything I put into your father’s goddamned company, and you threw it all away!”
“My company, my decisions. I made a choice and never looked back since.” Tony curled himself over his son as much as he could to shield him from Stane’s attacks.

“I poured my life into it!” The sparse streetlight gleamed off Stane’s brow, making him look even more skull-like. “You threw away a legacy!”

“Not the kind of legacy I want to leave behind. I realised that I have more to offer this world than building things that explode.” Tony replied, voice tight. His gaze softened as he dropped to Peter’s face. “More so now that I have a reason to.”

Stane scoffed. “Your family has made you soft! Ever since you had that little brat, your head’s been out of the game. Distracted.”

Tony winced as a kick caught him in the kidneys, but he pushed on. “This might be difficult for you to understand, but some stuff is more important than profits.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve been trying to cut me out and replace me with that brat.” Stane growled.

“Why, Obie, you jealous about getting a smaller slice of the pie? You think there’s any universe where my son wouldn’t come first? Dream on.” Tony had shrewd glint in his eyes. “And by the way, you were were selling things under the table- super duper illegal, last I checked.”

“Someone had to take charge before you ran things into the ground!” The fury in

“Wrong.” Tony said flatly. “The funny thing is, if you hadn’t done all that illegal stuff, I wouldn't have had to fire you. The fact that you have nothing is on you, not me.”

“Well, who’s laughing now? You took away the most important thing to me, so I’m gonna take away the thing you care about the most.” Stane withdrew a handgun from his Santa suit.

The sight of the gun made Tony go rigid. His eyes flicked from the gun to Peter, voice low and urgent. “Don't do this.”

“I think I want to.” Stane’s bland smile was suddenly the most terrifying thing in the world. He lowered his arm, brushing the end of the barrel against Peter’s hair.

Tony’s breath drew in sharply, but he didn’t dare to make a move.

“What's to stop me just pulling the trigger?” Stane smiled, though it was more a baring of teeth. Tony made a choked sound. “Leave him alone, it's me you want. Please.”

“What if I want this more?” Stane said pleasantly.

“You want your job back, is that it?” Tony said desperately, looking like all his nightmares had come to life. “Money? You wanna be CEO? The company? It's yours. Just- put the gun down. Please. Please, we can work something out.”

“Hm.” Stane pretended to think about it, then chuckled. “Ever the businessman, eh Tony? I've got a counterproposal.” He raised the barrel to Tony’s face. “You’re coming with me. You've got a lot of creations left in you yet, and I plan to benefit from every one of them.”

Hearing the ultimatum, Tony squared his jaw. “Promise you won't hurt Peter.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Stane said dismissively.
Tony swallowed hard. “Okay.”

“No!” Peter yelled.

“It’s okay, Pete.” Tony loosened his grip and began pushing him back, away from danger. “Stay back, stay with your friends. It’ll be okay.” He threw Peter a would-be reassuring smile, but it was crooked and trembly. All wrong.

“DAD!” Peter tugged at Tony's shirt for purchase, but Stane kneed him out of the way.

“Listen to your dad, Pete.” Stane’s beady dark eyes glittered with triumph as he grabbed Tony by the arm and dragged him to his feet. “We're going to make a lot of amazing things together.”

The glare Tony returned was flinty and his mouth pressed into a flat line.

Stane tsked. “Don't be like that. It'll be like old times, both of us creating technological marvels...”

“Step away, Stane.” Standing by the wrecked van was Steve, carrying Wade balanced on one arm.

“You!” Caught off guard, Stane grabbed Tony by the front of the shirt and shunted him in front to use as a human shield. “Take a step closer, and I'll-”

“You're not gonna hurt him.” Steve’s voice was like chips of ice. “Not after that spiel you just gave. We all know you have more to lose.”

“Do I?” Stane chuckled merrily, looking the most Santa Claus-y he had all night. “Do you really want to test that hypothesis, Rogers?”

Tony winced as Stane roughly pressed the gun against his temple. The blue Steve’s eyes darkened to subzero levels at the sight. Stane hesitated at the palpable menace emanating from him.

“One move, Rogers.” said Stane warningly.

Tony couldn’t resist adding his two cents. “If you're gonna call his bluff, maybe this isn't the best time. Perhaps wait until I'm not in danger of getting a new ventilation port in my head?”

“This is no time to joke,” Steve replied, a frisson of worry entering his voice. “Situations like these are exactly why I told you not to come. Civilians aren't equipped for this level of-”

Tony rolled his eyes indignantly. “Listen, honey, if you thought there was a chance in hell I was gonna sit on my ass while some maniac kidnapped Peter, you got another thing coming-”

“Sweetheart, not everything in this world is about you.” Steve said in a would-be calm voice. “It’s about getting the job done, and there are some things I’m better suited for than you, and-“

Tony gave him a pointed look. “Uh, excuse you? Who’s the one that got your bike working? Your ass would still be grounded if it wasn't for me!”

“It’s my job to protect you! I don't want you to get hurt!”

Despite the gun at his head, Tony managed to summon a look of great affront. “Y’know, you're always treating me like I can’t take of myself, and frankly it’s starting to get insulting.”

“He always does this!” Steve muttered angrily, turning to Wade with a ‘see-what-I-have-to-deal-with’ glare. “I’ve known him for ten years and he’s still the same, never listens!” Wade patted his cheek reassuringly.
“Me? Let’s not even get started on the problems you have, sugarmuffin…”

“Shut up, both of you.” Stane growled, silencing Tony with a sharp shake. "Bickering right until the end, what a shame. Then again, not surprising."

The look in Tony’s eyes was of despairing acceptance as Stane dragged him to the bike, and that made the bottom drop out of Steve’s stomach. He’d never felt more helpless.

He couldn’t just stand there and watch Stane kidnap him.

But his options were severely limited: even with Steve’s acute reflexes, he was too far away, and he didn’t dare make a move Stane’s finger on the trigger.

Wade leaned up to whisper a single word into Steve’s ear, before dropping something into his hand. Steve took in the proffered object with a grim nod.

Stane shoved Tony towards the seat with an order. “Get on the bike, and don’t try any funny business.”

The air whistled, then came a noise like an exploding watermelon; an invisible force knocked Stane’s gun hand away from Tony.

Stane looked down in shock, at where a pair of scissors had pierced clean through his palm. His eyes rose in a straight line, tracing the path back to Steve, whose hand was still outstretched in a post-throw arc.

In the frozen half second that followed, two things happened simultaneously: Tony wrenched the gun out of Stane’s bloody grip at the same time Steve shot across the road (“Whee!” whooped Wade) to land a ear-ringing punch in the bald man’s dumbfounded face.

By the time Stane fell to the ground, Tony had expertly disarmed the gun in three efficient movements.

Steve realised his mouth was hanging open. “You know how to-?”

“Really? You do know I used to make weapons, right?” Tony quipped, tossing the clip away into the grass. “I might not be a big honking ninja, but I know how to look out for myself.”

Light pink dusted Steve’s cheeks. “Wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s really something, the way you just….”

“Admit it, you thought it was sexy.” Tony cracked a jaunty grin.

“Can’t think anything you do that isn’t.” Steve’s gaze ran over him appreciatively.

Tony’s smirk widened, unable to resist preening. There was a bit of a swagger in his step as sidled up to Steve. “So, what are you doing after this?”

“I got no plans.” The hungriness in Steve’s gaze was undeniable.

“How about that? Me neither.” Threading a finger through Steve’s belt loops, Tony tugged him closer by the hips. He bobbed up on the balls of his feet to purr lazily into Steve’s ear. “When we get all this sorted, wanna get a bite? And then after…”

“We should skip right to the ‘after’.” Steve’s voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. His face full of raw, open, want.
“I like the way you think, Mr Super Secret Agent Man. Mm…” Tony chuckled, low and amused, as Steve’s free arm came up to clasp at the back of his neck, fingers running through the dark hairs with a scratchy thrill.

Tony’s thumbs continued rubbing slow circles over the jut of Steve’s hip bone, radiating sparks of heat. Steve dipped and parted his lips to...

“Knife.” chirped Wade from Steve’s arm, killing the moment dead. The adults stilled their actions and coughed awkwardly, remembering where they were.

“We gotta work on your timing, kid.” Tony muttered, dropping his hands with a disappointed huff. “I can't believe I have tiny Edward Scissorhands to thank for saving my ass.”

“It's not a bad idea to give Peter's friends a chance,” Steve shook himself back to present as he lowered the boy to the ground. “Thanks for the assist, Wade.”

“Knife.” Wade giggled. He patted his pockets, which clinked in a worrisome fashion.

Tony ran a hand through his hair. “I'm not even gonna ask.”

The sound of Stane’s pained grunt jolted them all back to the present. Steve’s warmth dissipated as he advanced on Stane. The older man backed away, afraid and snivelling.

“Rumlow was supposed to kill you!” Stane blurted, clutching at his impaled hand. “He had this planned for a whole year!”

“Rumlow won’t be doing anything but eating his meals through a straw for a long time.” Steve seized Stane by the front of his suit and slammed him against the side of the van.

Stane grunted in pain as his head bounced off the metal, but there was no pity in Steve’s face.

“Rumlow told me everything. How you tried to kill Tony.” Steve’s grip tightened, crushing him against the twisted metal of the van. “You son of a bitch, you made him have a heart attack.”

Stane sputtered, hands scrabbling uselessly on the unyielding grip on his windpipe.

“Steve, don’t.” Tony looked on, uncertain.

“He hurt you- he almost killed you.” Steve watched unforgivingly as Stane’s face started to turn blue. “He was going to kidnap Peter. I won't lose either of you again.”

“We'll call the police. Let them handle it.” Tony touched Steve’s arm. When there was no response, he added. “Please. He's not worth it.”

Horror and outrage warred for control in Steve’s voice. “They're just kids. Do you know the kind of people he and Rumlow were going to sell them to?”

“They'll get what they deserve. Believe me, I'll sue the shit out of him to ensure he gets sent to the maxest of max security prisons. Just...” Tony gestured to the four kids, who were watching Steve’s every move. “Don't you think they've gone through enough psychological scarring tonight?”

Peter’s eyes were wide as saucers, taking in everything in front of him.

That wide-eyed, innocent stare got through to Steve like nothing else. With a final piercing look, Steve dropped the old man roughly. Stane fell against the wreckage like a stone, gasping for air.
Tony deflated in relief. “Oh, thank god. I didn’t want to explain to the kids why daddy just murdered Santa Claus in front of them. Can you imagine the therapy they’d all need? To be honest, you had me worried there for a second, my heart was going like that—”

“Are you okay? How's your heart?” Steve turned, drawing Tony into the circle of his arms.

Tony patted at the arms winding him into a snug hold. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. I’ve actually been pretty diligent about watching my health, because that heart attack was a real wake up call. You’ll be pleased to know that I’ve been eating right and everything—”

With a gentleness in complete contrast to the brutality he’d displayed earlier, Steve brushed his thumb over the cut on Tony’s lip. “I’m serious. Are you okay?”

“I am now.” Tony leaned into the touch. His lips tugged upwards as he looked up at Steve like there was no other place he wanted to be.

Steve’s gaze softened, lowering his head to nuzzle into the other man’s hair, like the feel of Tony was the only thing that could get him to relax. Tension began to seep out of his body like a plucked string slowing to stillness.

After a pause, Tony chuckled. He snuggled closer into the other man, hands roaming up and down Steve’s back in long comforting stripes. “I should've figured some crazy shit was gonna go down today. Always seems to happen whenever you get involved. Remember Peter’s birthday? And when you did a strip tease in front of the entire school on Sports Day? This year has been nuts...”

Steve huffed, giving Tony an apologetic squeeze. “I’m not doing it on purpose, things just seem to happen. I don’t mean to ruin everyone's fun...”

“Nah, you didn't ruin it.” Tony pulled back slightly to look into Steve's face. “For what it's worth, this not the worst night I've had.”

“Really,” Steve intoned, face deadpan. “You’ve experienced a night where something worse than multiple kidnapping attempts and fistfights with terrorists happened?”

Tony tilted his head, pretending to consider it. “...Yeah, you're right. Tonight totally topped the trashiest of my college nights. I never thought that we'd end up being that trashy couple having a screaming match in public -Clint’s never gonna let me live that down- but hey, we worked out our issues!”

“I’m surprised, too.” Steve watched Tony’s animated recounting with fond amusement.

“Then there was a moonlit chase on motorcycle -five out of five stars for romantic potential, zero out of five stars for actual fun levels because our son was almost kidnapped- hell, I was almost kidnapped.” Tony paused and slight tremble ran through his body. The shiver made Steve hold him a little tighter. They’d been really lucky tonight, things could so easily have taken a turn for the worse.

“Not exactly how you expected the night to go, I'm guessing.” Steve said, a little sadly. His head drooped, everything else about him seeming to shrink as well. If he was a dog, his ears would be flopped down, sad-puppy style.

Tony studied him, eyes inscrutable. “Right in one. Because I heard something I never expected to hear again...” the tightness in his face cracked, turning it wholly, distressingly open. “You said that you love me.”
“I do.” Steve said slowly. His eyes cautiously roved over Tony's face. “And you?”

Tony’s tongue darted out to wet his lips. And then he was kissing Steve, sweetness and fire all at once. The rush of endorphins sent Steve, already riding high on adrenaline, rocketing up into the stratosphere.

“Mmm…” Tony moaned into the kiss, the sound sent an arrow of heat straight into Steve's pants, all too suddenly making him aware of how many clothes were in the way.

Steve could hear the kids making ‘ew’ sounds behind them, but he didn't care. All he wanted was to spend the rest of his life kissing him, making him happy. There were so many things they had left to say, so many things to relearn about each other.

Through the fog of kiss-happy-good feelings, Steve’s carefully-honed instincts came back online with a vengeance. Danger.

There was a shadowy figure rising behind Tony’s shoulder. Tony turned, but it was too late.

“Just die!” Stane lunged. Extended point-first was the pair bloody scissors he’d pulled out of his own hand.

Heading straight for Tony.

Without hesitation, Steve shoved Tony out of the line of attack to take the blow himself.

The blade sunk into his abdomen painlessly. After an eternity, the blade was dragged sharply back, taking what felt like half his insides with it.

Distantly, he could hear somebody screaming, but Steve decided that wasn’t important right now. Steve knew he had seconds before he went into shock, and the most important thing was keeping his loved ones safe.

Rallying the last of his strength, he issued a suffocating chop to Stane’s jugular. The bald man choked, keeling over, unconscious.

Steve dropped to one knee, blood streaming freely from his abdomen.

This is bad, he thought dazedly. Have to keep pressure on the wound, can’t bleed out...

Already he could feel his awareness ebbing, his limbs slowing down.

Tony… was his last thought, before the roaring in his ears became too much to ignore.

--

“Pops!” Peter cried out in shock.

The old bald man had snuck up on them faster than Peter thought possible: Stane made to stab Tony, but Steve shoved him out of the way, taking the scissors’ cruel blades through his abdomen.

With a cry of victory, Stane yanked the scissors back in a gush of blood. Although his face had gone paper-white, Steve reared up and brutally struck Stane in the throat, knocking the old man out of commission.

The danger neutralized, Steve dropped to his knees, one hand pressed to the gushing wound.
“STEVE!” Tony’s cry was terrible to hear. He caught the other man, easing him to the ground. Tony stripped off his jacket and pressed it to the wound. “Oh my god, somebody help! SOMEBODY HELP!”

Everything was going wrong, the overload of action was almost too much to take.

“-ter! Peter!” Someone jostled Peter’s arm.

He spun around to where his friends were standing: Wanda, Wade, and…

“Shuri’s gone. The other bad Santa took her.” Wanda looked queasy.

Klaue. Peter thought the scarred man had passed out in the crash, but he was as hardy as a cockroach. He hadn’t noticed earlier, but the streetlights shaded out a trail of scuffmarks leading away from the wreckage and into the forest.

The big, dark, scary forest that bordered the freeway.

Peter looked at his parents: Tony was kneeling over Steve, hands pressed to the wound and speaking worriedly. He looked at the forest: the twisted branches of the looming trees clawed out of the darkness.

And Shuri was somewhere in there.

There was no time to wait for the police. Pops was injured but Dad could take care of him. It was up to Peter to do something to help, and he’d do anything for his friends.

After all, that was what being a hero was all about.

Without further hesitation, Peter turned and ran into the treeline, Wanda and Wade following close behind.

Chapter End Notes

OH NO ANOTHER CLIFFHANGER

This was originally part of ch 23 but it got so long that I had to split it in half. I enjoyed writing the action and flirting in this chapter :)

Watch this space for the thrilling conclusion! Coming soon: some time this month!
Blood. So much of it.

Tony’s vision swam before him.

He vaguely remembered googling first aid tips during his most recent burst of late night paranoia. But this wasn't some faceless diagram on a screen, this was Steve in front of him.

Steve, who would bleed out if Tony didn't keep it together.

Pressure. Gotta keep pressure on the wound, the singular thought pierced through the screaming cloud of mental static. As if on autopilot, Tony stripped off his jacket and pressed it against the wound. But the wadded fabric turned red with frightening speed and Tony wanted to scream.

Nothing about the night had seemed real. Everything since the blackout had felt like one long, drawn-out dream that just wouldn’t end. The spiking panic was starting to make his lips go numb, and his heart thundered against his ribs like a power drill in a fishbowl- no, god dammit, this was the absolute worst time to have a panic attack, not when everything was going to shit, not when he was still needed.

And Steve needed him.

“Breathe.” Steve’s own breaths were coming out ragged. “I got you. Don't quit on me now.”

“Speak for yourself.” Tony could feel wetness pooling around his fingers. He tried to ignore it. “You complete idiot, why did you do that?”

None of this would have happened if Steve hadn't been his usual self-sacrificing self. By rights, it should Tony painting the gravel with his blood.

“Couldn’t let anything happen to you.” Steve’s lips were pale, but his hands gripped Tony’s wrists firmly as he helped compress the wound.

“And you thought turning yourself into a human pincushion was the way to do it? Way to be a hero, hero.” Tony pressed on the jacket with renewed vigour.

A self-deprecating smile tugged at Steve’s lips. “I was improvising. Seemed like a good idea at the time. Sometimes-” Steve’s breath hitched. He coughed, staining his lips and chin red.

Tony gulped. “Steve, that’s-”

Seeing his dismayed face, Steve took on a more urgent tone. “There’s a lot I haven’t told you, Tony. Been away so long, been so many places, seen so many things. But all the while I was thinking of you.” Words were spilling out of Steve faster than water, rushing over and around Tony. “I’ve kept enough secrets for a lifetime, and I don't want to hold back anything from you anymore. Tony- sweetheart, just say the word and I'll tell you anything you want to know, anything at all.”

“Shut up.” Tony fought through the sob in his throat. “Stay with me. Stay. Tell me those stories
after this is all over, you bastard.”

“I want to, more than anything. But in case we don't get the chance…” one of Steve’s hands came up to cup Tony’s face, thumb tracing a wet smudge across his cheekbone. Whether it was blood or tears, Tony couldn't tell.

“Not an option.” Leaning over him, Tony bent his head down to hiss, “If you dare die on me I’ll kill you myself.”

“Heh. I thought you'd say that.” Steve tried for brevity but his grin was starting to melt into grimace.

The redness had finally soaked through the jacket, and the soft drip-drip-drip pattering onto the road was a toll of dismay in Tony’s heart. It wasn't fair he’d finally gotten Steve back only to lose him right away. They had come so close.

“Please, don’t go.” The words burst out of him, needy and weak.

“I’m right here.” But Steve’s grip on his wrist began to quiver, and almost imperceptibly, they began to loosen.

“No, no, no! Don't do this! Steve!” Tony screamed, willing every power to let him hold on. “Steve!”

This couldn't be how it ended. Not with Steve bleeding out by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. Tony blinked furiously to clear the clouds from his vision.

They were alone. Nobody was coming...

The hair on the back of Tony's neck prickled. He could sense the presence of a large group of people behind him. He wished he hadn't thrown away Stane’s gun earlier.

“I knew if I followed the trail of smoking wreckage, I'd find you both at the end of it.” a sardonic voice said.

Standing dramatically in the center of the road was a man with an eye patch, dressed in tactical gear beneath a long leather coat. The steely cast to his face spoke of a man who was used to being obeyed. Around him were a retinue of dark vans and ranks of SWAT-outfitted agents standing at perfect attention.

“Fury.” Steve said, forcing on a mask of composure at the sight of his boss. “Hell of a time to for you show up.”

“And not a moment too soon, as things would have it. Stop moving, Rogers, before you open that wound more.” Fury nodded and a medic appeared next to him. “Get a field bandage on that.”

“Hang on, are you telling me your boss is old man Nick Fury? As in Nick, my neighbor? The old geezer who goes around in beanies and grandpa sweaters and gives out gummy bears to the neighborhood kids every halloween?” Tony said, flabbergasted, as the medic took over treating Steve’s wound.

Fury didn’t look thrilled at the geezer comment. “The very same.”

“Wow. This is… wow.” Tony turned a baleful glare on the crowd. “Just curious, is there anyone else in my life hiding a double life as a secret agent? My dentist? My accountant? My yoga
“Don’t expect me to do any sun salutations,” Fury said dryly. His frown lines cut deeply against the edges of his eyepatch as he scanned the treeline, and he barked out an order to his agents. “We’ve got a Code Gingerbread House. Agent Hill, begin assembling your team to—”

“Mind explaining what the hell is going on? I have had it up to here with surprises tonight.” Tony demanded.

The grim cast to Fury’s face grew grimmer. “Your son is missing. The little hero ran off into the woods with his friends in pursuit of Ulysses Klaue, a person of interest.”

“What?” Tony felt his blood pressure climb another few notches.

Fury took in the wreckage of the van and foot tracks, whip-sharp instincts putting together the events of the night in an instant. “Judging by the trails, Klaue took one of his friends hostage. The most likely candidate is Shuri, the princess.”

Steve immediately began trying to shove the medic away so he could clamber to his feet. “I’m going after them.”

“You can’t even stand,” Tony snapped. He and the medic each seized one of Steve’s arms to try and to stop him getting up. “Don’t move, you big dumb dork, you’re bleeding.”

“I told you I’m fine, it wasn’t a serious stab. I have to stop Klaue from hurting anyone—” Steve strained in their hold, trying to push them away, though not as strongly as he normally would have.

“How? By bleeding on him? You’re not running around in the dark with your guts falling out!” Tony turned to Fury, arm outstretched. “Give me a weapon, I’ll go.”

“Absolutely not. It's too dangerous.” Steve grabbed Tony’s elbow and tugged him back.

Tony gritted his teeth, straining against the grip. “Danger be damned. You can’t stop me from—”

“He’s mine too,” the look Steve gave him refused to be dissuaded. “I can’t let—”

“Neither of your emotionally-compromised asses will be handling this situation. Stand down.” Fury said sternly. “But hey, let me know when you’ve both finished arguing over who gets to sacrifice themselves. What I’m going to say may be of interest to the both of you.”

Tony turned his most searing glare on Steve. But the blond man countered it with a frown that was equal parts stubborn and concerned.

Finally, Tony huffed and dropped to the ground to sit next to Steve. “Fine, Nick. But don't expect a Christmas card from me.”

“What's the situation, Fury?” Steve asked. His arm had crept around to wrap around Tony, pulling them close together. Tony’s hand found his, and without question, their fingers interlaced.

“Here's what's going to happen: Agent Hill will lead a search party and neutralise Klaue by whatever means necessary.” Fury nodded to the agent standing at his right shoulder, who briskly directed her team towards the treeline.
The anxious frown twisting Steve’s brows hadn’t lessened, but he nodded. “Thank you.”

“We’ve been monitoring your situation for a while. It’s the least we can do for you after your years of service. This time, the agency has got your back.” Fury’s eye fell on their tightly-laced hands. “Don’t worry, we’ll bring your boy home.”

--

The forest was so dark, Peter could barely see his own nose.

He was reminded, with an unpleasant shiver, of the part from Snow White when she ran through the haunted forest to escape the witch. His heart juddered everytime a splinter of light caught on a twisted branch or spiralling bole. The uncanny shapes put him in mind of grasping hands or staring eyes as he battled through the dense undergrowth.

Most unsettling of all was the feeling of being watched. *Something* was in the darkness, waiting for them.

Wanda tugged his sleeve. “Look. On your left.”

Up ahead was a clearing ringed with dimly-glowing moss. Peter could hear voices coming from within - Shuri’s bright one and Klaue’s gravelly one.

Peter crouched behind a bush with Wanda and Wade. A large camping pack sat in the middle of the clearing, next to a shotgun. Klaue was standing over Shuri, pressing something over her face. The girl hung was punching at his hands, but her muffled yells were slowly growing quiet.

“That looks bad. We need to sneak up on him and get Shuri outta there.” Peter whispered.

“Knife.” Wade nodded gravely. He shook his pockets: they rattled.

“Not yet, we have to… find a path.” Peter wracked his brain, trying to remember the tactics Steve had spoken about during Sports Day. Something about gauging the terrain and mapping out the best path…

But it was hard to remember anything at the moment. He was so tired, and everything hurt. All he wanted was a hug and an ice cream.

Peter swallowed a sniffle. He couldn't cry now. Not when Shuri needed their help.

“I know! Let’s call on the dark spirits to help us.” Wanda said brightly.

“I meant a real plan.”

Wanda pouted. “They *are* real. And they always answer. Remember when you wished for your Pops to come back, and he did?”

“No, Wanda-”

“Vision’s dead, so we have no other choice.” Wanda raised her palms up and began speaking in what she must have thought was a whisper, but was more like a small yell. “Oh dark spirits, hear my prayer…”

“Wanda, shh! He's gonna hear us.” Peter frantically tried to shush her, but Wanda was too wrapped up in chanting to pay attention.
“Open the abyss and send us your darkest guardian...” Wanda announced to the treetops.

What Peter heard next almost made his heart stop.

“Well, well, well, what have we here? A rescue party, huh? Oh, I’m really scared.” Klaue’s face burst through the leaves, grinning with all the eerieness of a clown that dwelt in the woods.

Before Peter could scream, he was grabbed by the shirt and dragged into the clearing.

Peter yelped as he thudded painfully into a patch of moss. Some of the glowing moss clung to him with a tingly buzz.

He barely managed to roll out of the way as Wanda and Wade were tossed next to him. When he opened his eyes, his breath caught in his throat.

Lying next to Klaue’s pack was Shuri. Her eyes were shut, lashes resting against her cheeks and she barely seemed to be breathing.

“Shuri! Wake up! We gotta get out of here.” Peter shook her arm frantically but she didn't wake. He looked up in fury as Klaue lumbered over. “What did you do to my friend?”

“Worried about little Sleeping Beauty? Don't be.” Klaue clucked, bringing out a bottle and a wad of cloth. “It's past all of your bedtimes, so she's having a little nap. You'll be joining her, too.”

Peter scrambled backwards, trying to put as much distance between them as possible. Klaue’s huge fist seized a handful of his hair and pulled him back with a wrench. The blinding pain exploded over the entire world, and Peter screamed.

The amiable tone in Klaue’s voice was terrifying. “It’s nothing personal, kid. See, I'm not like Rumlow who’s out for revenge, or Stane, who wants power. You’re a nice little retirement package to me...”

Klaue’s fever-bright eyes ran over Peter. “I wonder how much Tony Stark would pay to get his baby back, he's still worth a lot even after shutting down half his big company...” his voice went thick with greed. “But why stop there? There are lots of powerful folks interested in all the technological goodies Stark has been making. Just because he doesn't sell weapons anymore doesn't mean he can't be convinced. Leverage is something money just can't buy…”

In a fury, Peter smacked at the fist but it was like striking a wall. Klaue continued his musings, unmoved.

“And then there's your other dad. That big blond bastard has interfered with my business for far too long, it'll feel good to stick it to him. See, Rumlow got sloppy, too emotional. He just wanted to kill your dad, but that means it’s over far too quickly. He doesn't know the best types of revenge are drawn-out.”

Fighting against the pain, Peter gasped. “You won’t get away with this. Bad guys don’t win.”

Klaue chuckled. “Enough talk. There’ll be plenty of time to plan the future after this. Oh, the plans I have for you and your friends...”

The cloth reeked of chemicals and Peter wriggled as it pressed over nose and mouth. Instinctively, he held his breath and drove a kick into Klaue’s soft belly. It bought him some time; the kick jostled the cloth out of the man’s hand.
“Oof! You’ve got some spirit, boyo. But I'm tired of games.” The fist in Peter’s hair tightened cruelly, at odds with the jollity of Klaue’s tone. “Act out one more time and the only place your dads will see you again is pictures on the dark web.”

Peter struggled fruitlessly against the hold on his hair. Truth be told, he'd been running on fumes since the playground. Shadows pricked the edge of his vision, blurring into the shadows of the overarching trees and into the shadows between the stars.

In front of it all was the clownish sneer of Klaue’s face, blotting everything out as the cloth came closer and closer.

There was nowhere to go.

“End of the road, boyo.” Klaue’s triumphant voice seemed to come from far away.

A resounding crash split the air.

“Something’s coming! Look!” Wanda pointed into the treeline.

There was a great scraping, of soil being raked up and crushed through enormous clawed feet, of branches being crunched like toothpicks. A pair of glowing eyes blazed out of the darkness.

Startled, Klaue dropped Peter with a curse. “What in the-?”

A creature stepped into the strained moonlight. Peter’s breath hitched in his chest like a fishbone.

Standing there in a patch of glowing moss, silhouetted against the stars, was the towering form of an enormous beast.

The Thing growled, a rumble low and threatening as the distant thunder.

“The dark spirit has come!” Wanda cried out in delight.

Peter tried to examine the Thing, but it was like trying to decipher a magic eye picture. The ever-shifting shape of the Thing made it difficult to pin down its exact form; one moment Peter thought it was a wolf, shaggy and powerful. The next, it seemed like a towering grizzly bear. He thought he caught a hint of thrashing tongues or tendrils. The two horn-like appendages protruding from its head gave It the impression of something otherworldly, paranormal, demonic.

Beyond comprehension.

The Thing snuffled, and then It was standing right in front of Peter like It clipped through space-time.

Before Peter could pass out in fright, the Thing bent its great head to nuzzle his face. It was so large that Peter was knocked back a few paces by the dining table-sized muzzle. In a daze, he reached out to touch it...

Peter’s hands sank into soft fur. Downy and plush, surprisingly clean for an animal that had been living in the woods.

The Thing rumbled comfortingly as he petted It, and Peter caught a whiff of fragrance:

Marshmallows.

The sense memory knocked something loose in his brain, bringing him back to a day when he had
met another candy-scented creature.

Peter’s eyes widened, recognizing the monstrous nine-foot bunny from hell to be none other than…

“L-Logan?”

“Wolvie!” Wade cheered.

The Thing that was Logan rumbled deep in its chest. It lowered Its head, bringing Peter face-to-face with an eye the size of a football: he could see iridescent colors swirling in the dark depths like the glimmers of a distant galaxy, hinting at wisdom far too deep to comprehend. Peter gazed into Logan’s eyes and felt like he almost... understood.

“What the- beast! Abomination!” Klaue shrieked. He lunged for the shotgun in his pack.

Logan’s head shot forward impossibly fast. With a shriek of metal, the shotgun fell in metal chips at Klaue’s feet.

In a panic, Klaue shouted to Peter. “Oi! You there! Boy! I bet your dads brought you up right. You’re a sweet kid, aren’t you? Call your monster bunny friend off, pretty please?”

Peter shrank back from the flailing hands.

“Don’t just stand there, boy! Do something or I’ll make you!” Klaue’s voice came unstrung with terror. He took two strides towards Peter.

Logan made a displeased sound, dipping Its head to drape one kayak-sized ear over Peter protectively to shield him. Beneath the warm shelter of the velvety ear, the sweet marshmallow scent deepened, making him feel more relaxed.

Klaue held up his hands defensively and backed away from the growling Logan. “N-nice bunny. Good bunny. How about a carrot, huh? Don't want to eat old Klaue, do we?”

“The dark spirit must be appeased. Logan must feed.” Wanda popped up next to Peter. As she patted Logan’s flank, the rabbit began purring.

The ground quivered as Logan hopped forward on Its huge fuzzy paws. With a soft snikt, Logan’s claws lengthened to the size of golf clubs, glinting in the dim light.

“Knife.” Wade looked at Logan like all his dreams had come true.

“No- oh god, no!” The man began scrabbling away desperately like an insect trapped in a bathtub. “No no no! Put the knives away! Jesus Christ, don't eat me! Have mercy- mercy!”

Logan lunged.

Klaue screamed.

The sounds of crunching and slicing filled the air. And then all was silent.

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When the search party lead by Maria Hill arrived, Klaue was a bloody, gibbering mess.

“Nice bunny… sweet bunny… don’t bite us again, oh no, we’ll be good- Not the teeth- not the claws-” Klaue rocked back and forth, mind gone. One hand was trailing aimlessly through the
shredded grass.

His other arm ended at the elbow in a bloody stump.

On the other side of the clearing were the kids, sitting protectively around an unconscious Shuri. Wade was cuddling a fuzzy grey rabbit in his lap.

Once the medic had confirmed that Shuri was only unconscious but unharmed, Hill approached the other kids.

“Can you tell us what happened?” Hill put on her best approximation of trust-me-I’m-a-friendly-adult voice.

Wanda and Peter looked at each other, before answering in a rush and talking over each other.

“We were looking for Shuri. The bad Santa took her away.” Peter said earnestly.

“We followed him for days and days. Through the forest to his evil dungeon.” added Wanda excitedly.

“I was scared. He pulled my hair real hard.” Peter scratched through his hair, ruffling his hair up even messier.

“Bad Santa was gonna kill Peter with his gun and bottle of sleep-juice!” Wanda gestured to the metal shards on the ground.

“I thought I was done. But then…” Peter brightened. “Then Logan showed up and saved us.”

Wanda lifted her arms. “Praise be to Logan.”

“Logan? Who is that? Is that his first or last name?” Hill honed in on the name, running through her mental database of agents and criminals.

“Logan is the only name he needs.” Wanda said seriously.

“He remembered me,” Peter whispered with hushed awe.

“Wolvie.” Wade piped up.

“Do you remember what he looked like?” Hill asked.

“He looks like the shadows that live in our dreams. The monster that hides under the stairs. The goblin that eats my food from the refrigerator. The banshee that lives in my parents bedroom and screams every night.” Wanda tapped her chin.

Hill resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “What kind of clothes he was wearing? Any other distinguishing features?”

“He smelled of marshmallows, just like last time…” Peter said slowly.

“He wears the organs and blood of the wicked.” Wanda stated.

“Wolvie.”

None of this is helpful in the slightest, Hill looked down at the three kids tiredly.
Peter seemed like the sanest of the bunch, so she began directing her questions to him. “Can you tell me which way Logan went after he helped you?”

Peter broke into a grin. “Logan is right here!”

Snapping back into action-mode, Hill cast her eyes around the clearing. “Where?”


Wade beamed and huggled the fluffy grey rabbit in his lap. “Say hi, Wolvie.”

Nose twitching, Logan began nibbling on Wade’s shirt.

Hill stared at the rabbit. “You’re kidding me.”

“It's true. Logan ate the Bad Santa’s soul with his glowy eyes and sharp fangs.” Wanda nodded gravely.


Peter stretched his arms wide. “He was thiiiiiiis big.”

“Right,” said Hill.

“Limbs were never meant to bend that way, claws like swords and toxic glands… bitings and burnings, oh no! No, we’ll be good! Nice bunny, precious bunny! Precious…” Klaue babbled.

The man was covered in bloody gashes, and his face resembled pounded meat. Hill studied the wounds, puzzling over what type of creature could leave such huge slash marks.

“Agent Hill? We found animal tracks around the area.” A junior agent appeared at her shoulder.

“Just as I thought.” Hill nodded, satisfied with the accuracy of her guess. “There are lots of wild animals in this area. Are we dealing with mountain lions, cougars…?”

“Um. The tracks didn’t match any known animal, they were made by something much bigger than a even a lion - rough estimates have it at least nine feet tall.” The agent could barely conceal their excitement. “And then there are those strange claw marks. The shape and depth of the grooves are similar to a sword or machete…”

“Logan doesn’t need a sword! He has claws the size of katanas!” Wanda exclaimed.

“Knife,” agreed Wade.

“Agent Hill? We have a preliminary toxicology report,” another agent popped up by her side. “The glowing moss is known to have hallucinogenic properties. And combine that with the overwrought brains of the children, it's possible they collectively imagined the events.”

“Or they simply made up the stories, which I believe is more likely. When do kids not tell tall tales?” A third agent sneered.

“I'm not lying! And my brain is fine!” Peter exclaimed, wriggling away from the medic who was trying to bandage up his scraped knees.

“Is this the best you could come up with?” Hill said, with the iciness that had made her the terror of all the junior agents. “You're saying our options are A) the kids were high on mushrooms, B)
the kids are lying and beat up an armed grown man on their own, or C) there's a sword-wielding
dinosaur running loose in these woods?”

The three agents shuffled uncomfortably. “Uh…”


“Rawr,” Wade burbled.

“He really did grow big to save us,” Peter added helpfully.

Hill sighed. Something wasn’t adding up here, what with every discovery raising more questions
than answers. Her instincts told her she’d gotten as much information out of the kids as she was
ever going to get. The only thing they knew for sure was that something very fishy had taken place
tonight.

“What should we do, Agent Hill? Should we start hunting the cryptid?” the junior agent prompted,
looking excited by the prospect.

Hill shook herself out of her thoughts. “That can wait. Let’s get these kids back to their families.”

Much as she’d have liked to pursue the mystery to its end, not being the bearer of bad news was a
small victory.

It was a miracle that the four youngsters made it through the night unscathed. Especially Peter,
who was the central target of the three kidnapping attempts.

It was enough to make Hill start counting her blessings. She’d been in the business too long to
know how many stories didn’t get a happy ending.

She couldn’t help noticing the way the bunny cradled in Wade’s hands had been staring at her the
entire time, as if it was following her every word. There was an instant she almost caught a flicker
of something in the animal’s dark eyes - something feral and wild and all-too intelligent - before it
vanished, gone as if it had never been.

Hill shivered, suddenly uneasy.

Wade hugged the bunny. “We're going home, Wolvie.”

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By the time Hill’s search party led the four children out of the woods, the van crash site was a hive
of activity, with police, emergency vehicles, secret agents, and parents were milling around
anxiously.

“Wanda! Wade!” Erik sprang forward. He dropped to his knees in front of the two children and
wrapped them into a tight hug.

“Thank goodness you’re both alright.” Charles rolled up next to him with Pietro in tow.

Pietro joined in the group hug. “I love you, sis.”

Wanda gasped, clinging to her brother. “Pietro… you're alive!”

“Who’s this?” Charles caught sight of Wade’s fuzzy companion.
Wade beamed and lifted up the rabbit. “This my friend, Wolvie! He's coming to live with us!”

Erik groaned. “Wade, no. We aren't bringing home some random animal you found in the woods. Put it back, that thing is probably crawling with diseases.”

Wade buried his face into the fur. “Wolvie’s my friend.”

“Wade, I'm going to count to three…”

Charles leaned over and squeezed his husband’s shoulder. “They've been through a lot tonight.”

Relenting, Erik sighed. “Fine. But we're sending that rodent for its shots first thing tomorrow.”

“Shuri!” T'Chaka and Raimonda darted towards the agent carrying his unconscious daughter.

“Who did this?” N’Jadaka growled. He caught sight of a cuffed Klaue and started towards the man. “Let me at him, I'll tear that bastard apart-”

T’Challa caught his cousin by the arm. “He’ll face judgement to the fullest extent of the law.” The fury blazing in T’Challa’s eyes was the fiercest emotion ever seen from the mild-mannered man.

“Who’s afraid of the Big Bad Bun? The Big Bad Bun?” Klaue sang deliriously as agents shoved him into an unmarked agency van, shunting him next to a bruised Stane and a barely conscious Rumlow. The doors of the van shut with a decisive snap, taking co-conspirators to a place they wouldn’t be hurting anyone for a long time. A very long time.

Peter watched the van pull away, head tilted to one side curiously. The fearful, cold-water feeling inside him was starting to ebb. Now, all he wanted was a familiar face.

“Where’s Dad and Pops?” He asked Agent Hill, who was speaking to someone on her ear comm.

Hill’s stoic face cracked a tiny smile as she took his hand. “I'll bring you to them. Let’s go.”

They wove through the crowd, past police officers and secret agents and parents. Hill led him to the fringe of the crowd, to the back of an ambulance.

“…should’ve gone ahead to the hospital, you don’t need to wait here.”

“I told you, I’m fine. And I’m not leaving until I know he’s safe.”

“Why do you have to be so goddamn stubborn? What will this prove?”

“Not about proving anything. It's about being there for him. I made a promise that I wouldn't leave either of you and I'm going to keep it…”

Tony was sitting on the stairs of the vehicle, shoulder-to-shoulder with Steve, who was wrapped in a shock blanket. Their heads were bent close in conversation, but they swung up at the sounds of their approach.

“Dad! Pops!” The sight of them filled Peter with overwhelming relief - Hill let go of his hand - and he dashed towards them.

“Peter!” Tony leaped to his feet and swung Peter up into a hug before the boy could crash into his legs. “Are you okay? If that scumbag Klaue did anything to you, I’ll-”

“He and the other kids were a little shaken, but otherwise uninjured.” Hill informed.
“Don’t you ever do anything like that again! Do you know how worried I was? When you vanished I thought-” Tony berated furiously even as he continued hugging him.

“But I-” Peter tried to explain, but Tony was deep in the throes of Worried Dad decompression.

“I told you a thousand times, don't run off on your own! Why didn't you listen?” Tony scolded, giving the boy a little shake. “I ought to ground you until college for your own safety-”

"I was trying to help!” Peter protested. “Bad Santa took Shuri away, so we had to go save her. The bad Santa was going to put us asleep- he pulled my hair real hard and it hurt- but Logan saved us! He ate the Bad Santa so he wouldn’t hurt anyone again!”

Tony looked like he'd aged another ten years during Peter’s retelling. "That is not reassuring in the slightest. Why didn’t you wait for me, or your Pops, or Pops’ super secret agent friends to help you? Why did you have to be such a hero?"

His Dad wasn’t getting it. Peter twisted his hands into Tony’s shirt, trying his best to explain. “I was trying to do what you said, Dad.”

“When have I ever encouraged you to be so foolish, so reckless…”

“You always tell me to be brave.” Peter said emphatically. “I wanted to be like you.”

Tony’s mouth clamped shut. His dark eyes went liquid, threatening to spill over.

Peter chewed his lip, suddenly unsure. “Are you mad?”

Tony laughed harshly and hugged him so tight the boy let out a small whoof of air. “No. No, of course not, Pete. It's just- you know you don't have to do things alone. I'm here for you. We're here for you...”

“Okay.” Peter wriggled, realising his shirt was getting damp. "Dad? Why are you crying?"

“Sorry, your silly old dad was worried out of his mind.” Tony answered thickly, clutching Peter like he was afraid he'd vanish into thin air again.

Steve was watching the both of them with dog-left-in-the-rain wistfulness. He was shirtless beneath the shock blanket, revealing his wound dressed with a fresh field bandage.

Still holding Peter, Tony scrubbed at his eyes and sat them down on the stairs next to Steve. Careful of Steve’s injury, they settled into a sort of three person cuddle pile: Steve and Tony side-hugging each other, with Peter balanced on their laps so he could hug them both at the same time.

“Easy, Pete, watch the bandage.” Tony fusssed. His arm, wrapped Steve’s waist, gave a gentle squeeze. Steve’s chin tickled where Tony’s head was tucked under it, and his hand brushed through Peter’s hair soothingly.

“Why am I surrounded by self-sacrificing idiots whose first instinct is to jump into danger?” Tony muttered as he leaned into Steve’s side.

At his temple, Steve’s lips curved into a smile. “But you love us anyway?”

“Damn right I do.”

“I’m glad.” Steve said softly as he held his family tight.
It wasn't how any of them expected to spend Christmas this year: bloody and bruised, on the steps of an ambulance along a chilly highway, with sirens echoing through the air instead of sleigh bells.

But Peter’s heart felt light. Pressed between his parents, all his troubles seemed very far away. There wasn’t anywhere else he wanted to go. The three of them were together again, exactly where they should be.

Chapter End Notes

Logan returns after 22 chapters! I put some foreshadowing in chapter 3 but I’m pretty sure nobody saw this twist coming xD

Turns out those “classified” experiments were classified for a reason! Not only is Logan powerful, but he’s an intelligent bunny who remembered Peter was the one who set him free. Not that he would’ve hurt Peter or his friends anyway; Logan doesn’t attack children or the pure of heart.

I hope you enjoyed this long action scene because this just about concludes the main plot! I was gonna end the fic here BUT I realised I needed an epilogue to wrap up all the loose ends. I can't believe I'm nearly done with this story, I almost don't want to say goodbye yet :’)

Since this is a very, very loose CACW fixit, the epilogue is very fittingly titled: The Accords. It will be fluffy, feature Steve and Tony having their long-awaited Talk, and where they go from here. Look forward to it!
When Steve awoke, he had a moment of disorientation before his training kicked in, snapping him to full awareness within milliseconds. His world was bathed in the dreamy blue light that preceded the sunrise. As he scanned his surroundings, things gradually came into focus.

He was back in his old room. No, their room. Their house, the one he and Tony had lived together in all those years.

His arms, wrapped around a peacefully-slumbering Tony.

Peter sleeping in the next room safe and sound, he remembered tucking him in last night.

Everything looked the same, as if the two years he’d spent abroad were all a dream, and he’d never left their side.

But the dull burn from his healing abdomen told him he was very much in the present. Steve shifted, readjusting his grip around the other man as he took mental inventory of the past days.

The time following the kidnapping had been a flurry of activity: trying to clean up the mess Rumlow and his cronies had left, giving his statement to the relevant authorities, all the while Tony and even Fury nagging at him to go to the hospital.

The day Steve had been discharged, Tony had approached him with one of his classic determined looks and insisted he ‘come home with me, dammit, you look like a lost puppy’. He refused to take no for an answer, sweeping aside Steve’s feeble excuses like smoke. Steve had caved in the end. Besides, he had nowhere else to go.

Things had been... awkward. Despite the truths that had been revealed that fateful night, they both couldn’t help tiptoeing around each other, at least at first.

But they were only human and could only hold out so long. An offhand comment had led to a joke, led to Tony pouncing and kissing him like there was tomorrow in the living room and Steve trying to touch and mark every inch of him, to both of them stumbling to their bedroom in a lust-filled haze to catch up on all time they’d missed out on, and then some.

So here they were. Steve glanced at the dimmed screen of his phone: It was the new year.

“Mm… you’re so big, so beautiful…” Tony murmured, shifting in his arms to smoosh his cheek against the pillow. “Slow down, wanna lick that icing off...”

Steve smiled to himself and started kissing his way from shoulder to neck, making his way towards his lips.

“…C’mere, tasty doughnut. Don't want no other pastry but you…” muttered Tony sleepily, rolling into the kisses.

When Steve turned him over to kiss him, Tony's lips were lax and warm against his. Brown eyes opened slowly and blinked up at him.
“Hey,” the unguarded sweetness of Tony’s sleepy-eyed smile made every trial he’d ever gone through worth it.

“There you are.” Steve said softly. “Time to wake up.”

Tony yawned, rolling his shoulders. “You would not believe the dream I had. There was this hugeass donut, and I trying to catch it so I could stick my...” His words faltered as Steve kissed him again, slow and sweet.

Steve’s hands trailed down his ribs, scraping just a hint of nail over the skin to wake his senses up. Tony arched into the feeling with a soft moan, his own hands coming up to grab onto at Steve’s waist so their hips ground together with delicious friction.

“...stick my face in it.” Tony mumbled.

“Still want to go back to sleep?” Steve asked, pulling back slightly to nibble on his lip,

“Well now I can’t,” the huskiness in Tony’s voice wasn't just from residual sleepiness.

“Looks like I'm gonna have to do something about that.” Steve began moving down, trailing kisses as he went.

In the minutes that followed, the only sound in the bedroom was breathing and the rustle of the sheets.

“Ah- just like that, Steve...” Tony’s breath was panting out in short bursts, losing himself in the sensation as Steve took him apart with mouth and fingers.

Steve hummed as he worked him over, revelling in every flutter of muscle and hitched breath. He knew Tony’s body well, loved how it was still so responsive to his touch: he knew the tremble of the thighs draped over his shoulders meant he was close, knew that if Steve pressed his fingers into a certain spot and curled them just so, it would send the other man over the edge.

“Babe, I'm so close, I'm gonna-”

Pressing one last kiss to his thigh, Steve crawled up to join him at the top of the bed.

The sight never failed to take Steves breath away. Tony still hadn't come down from the high, his eyelashes lay closed over flushed cheeks, and lips pink from where he’d bitten them. And Steve had made him feel that way.

“That was a hell of a wakeup call.” Tony’s eyes were half-lidded like a contented cat.

“Good to see I’m not out of practice.” Steve twitched the pillows into place, making a comfy pillow nest for them.

“Mm, never. Liked, shared, and subscribed. Five out of five stars, would ride again. Don't expect me to go easy on you next round...” Tony’s eyelids drooped shut, but he shook himself awake with a jolt. “Sorry, it's really selfish of me to doze off on you when you haven't had your turn-” his face stretched into a yawn and he reached for Steve. “C’mere, I might be falling asleep but my mouth isn’t, you can-”

With a hand on his shoulder, Steve gently pressed him back into the pillows. “Go back to sleep. I'll still be here when you wake up.”
“Not gonna disappear on me like last time, huh?” Tony muttered to himself, as he snuggled up against Steve’s chest, and was silent for so long that Steve thought he drifted off again.

Tony punctured the stillness with a sigh, and cracked an eye open. “We need to talk, don't we?”

Steve drew in a slow breath. There was no more ignoring the elephant in the room. “We've put it off long enough.”

Tony nodded, eyes brightening as he shrugged off his drowsiness. “I'd really like to hear the story now that there's no chance of being interrupted by something ridiculous happening. No kidnappers or car crashes here.”

This was it. Feeling that the gravity of the topic called for more formality, Steve rose up to sit on his heels. “It all started when-”

“Hey.” Tony nudged him with a knee and patted the sheet next to him. “Lay down with me, you’ll rip all your stitches out if you keep making dramatic gestures.”

“I'm not trying to be dramatic.”

“Right, says the guy who barged into the school play in the most theatrical way possible so he could have all eyes on him. You are the biggest drama queen I know.”

Steve flushed. He hadn't been trying to make a scene at the school play, it just happened that an entire audience was standing in the way during his important confession.

“You just don't like to feel short.” Steve said dryly. But he obligingly stretched himself out on the mattress and immediately received an armful of Tony.

“What if I am? It's really difficult to concentrate when you keep looming over me with those pecs.” Tony sighed as he cuddled up, cat-like, to the nearest source of heat. “Start at the beginning so I can hear the story in full and not in scraps. I promise not to fall asleep this time.”

“Alright.”

Steve knew Tony had probably pieced together parts of the story, but as promised, he started from the beginning: of growing up without a home or family to depend on, never fitting in. All he had was the fire within him that called him to defend, to throw himself into the line of danger if it would make a difference.

It was that calling which had led him to seek out SHIELD as an undersized 18-year old, seeing him all the way through training until he became a fully-fledged agent at 26 (after two painfully-needed growth spurts). The life of battle suited Steve, and he was good at it. He was made for leading the charge, for throwing himself into the fray without fear, tirelessly fighting the good fight against the darkness.

But he could never stop feeling like that skinny, lonely, kid from Brooklyn with a hole in his heart. While filling the emptiness with duty and purpose helped a little, it wasn't nearly enough.

That was until he met Tony. Tony, who had grown up just as lonely but always had so much love to give. Always so vibrant, always brightening everyone and everything around him. Steve had never considered making a life of his own outside the battlefield. But with Tony, he could see the possibility of a future.

There was only one glaring problem: Steve had never told Tony the truth of what he did.
There just never seemed to be the right time to have the *hey, honey, don't panic, but I'm an operative in a super secret counter-terrorism organization* conversation.

*I’ll tell him tomorrow,* Steve always told himself. But tomorrow always brought another set of problems, as did the next, and the next; before he knew it, the tomorrows piled up into months and years.

Tony, being pretty sharp (“I am,” said Tony smugly), sensed Steve was hiding something, though he didn't know exactly what. They always remained in that uneasy limbo of tension and release: pretty epic fights followed by epic makeup sex, all while the real issue remained a perpetual unspoken secret between them.

Fatherhood changed everything. When Peter came along, Steve looked into the innocent brown doe eyes and realised he couldn't keep lying anymore. Living a double life was no longer feasible, it was time to pick a side.

He picked family. There was never any doubt. What he had was precious and rare, and he'd be a fool to squander it.

Mind made up, Steve had begun making preparations to leave the agency - apparently disentangling yourself from a super secret counter-terrorism organization was more complicated than he thought, *who knew, right?* - and the choice not to tell Tony seemed justified.

Steve was leaving, *anyway.* Tony already had a stressful job, it made no sense to burden him with matters that would, very soon, be irrelevant.

It was barely a few days later everything came tumbling down.

Steve remembered it like a bad dream: coming home after a date night to find a trail of blood leading from the living room to Peter’s room, ending with Natasha slumped next to Peter’s crib, a gun and dead thug beside her. The news she brought with her was more dire: Rumlow had hacked into SHIELD and uncovered Steve’s civilian identity - now he was on the loose and out for revenge on Steve.

Rumlow was as cunning as he was dangerous, and SHIELD had never been able to contain him, despite the many, many times Steve had brought him in. The only one who was a match for him was Steve himself.

Steve had been too occupied with damage control to deal with anything else; Tony had been beyond livid upon discovering *Cool Aunt Natalie Who Babysit For Us Sometimes* was *Secret Spy Lady Natasha Who Does Scary Things With Potato Peelers.*

Steve’s worry over the Rumlow Situation outweighed everything else, and the period that followed had been a blur: terse discussions with Fury, explosive fights with Tony, and all the while trying to keep his family away from harm.

It wore both of them down. By the time Tony asked to call it quits, he’d been too heartsick and tired to argue against it. Even though it went against every fiber of his being, Steve looked into his sad brown eyes, and signed.

It seemed like the right thing to do. Even if Tony and Peter spent the rest of their lives hating him, at least they’d be alive. Steve must have made a sorry sight, because no less than his own boss, Nick Fury himself, offered to personally watch out for his family in case Rumlow decided to try anything on home turf.
The next two years had been a chase across every continent. Every time Steve thought he had Rumlow cornered, the man escaped. The only silver lining of the divorce was it made Rumlow believe Steve had cut ties, deflecting most of the danger from his family.

Until the bomb. Steve closed his eyes briefly, remembering the detonation. He'd cornered the terrorist in the Siberian warehouse when the bomb went off; Steve had made it out of the building. Rumlow hadn't, and the scream he gave before being consumed by the explosion had been bloodcurdling. It was a miracle he'd survived, although he'd carry the burns for the rest of his life.

The explosion had been the catalyst for tipping Rumlow’s thirst for revenge into an obsession. It was not long after, Steve caught wind that a maddened, severely-scarred Rumlow had returned to the States, intent on razing to the ground everyone Steve had ever cared about.

“The rest, as you know, is all history.” Steve said, throat slightly hoarse from his recount.

Tony brow furrowed as he processed the huge information dump. “Long story short: you kept us in the dark to protect us?”

“I was so scared at the time, it seemed like the only option. All I could think of was how to keep you both safe, and to do that I had to be as far away from you as possible.” When Steve looked back on it now, it sounded like the worst decision in the world. Impulsive and reactive, Fury would have called him.

“That's real noble of you.” Tony made an indignant sound. “I can't believe this, I'm the screaming spouse from an early 2000s B-list superhero flick who always needs their ass saved.”

“Definitely not. I've never known you for the type who sits around waiting to be rescued.”

“No shit, because apparently I wasn't the one who needed help. God, you've been through a lot.” Eyes looking pained, Tony grasped Steve's shoulder and gave him a shake. “Why didn't you tell me? Was there really nobody you could've asked for help?”

“There wasn't a thing you could've done. Nobody could've handled this except me.” Steve shook his head sadly. “Rumlow wasn't ever going to stop. If I see a situation pointed south, I have to act. I can't help it.”

“So you were so busy figuring out how to deal with Rumlow that you just went along with everything I said?” Tony said slowly. “Y’know, I’m surprised your big fancy spy agency didn’t step in to swing the court’s’ decision. Force them to give you partial visitation, or something.”

Steve shifted uncomfortably. “They were fully prepared to intervene. I asked them not to.”

“Why?”

Steve dropped his eyes to the pillows. “I didn't want to hurt you any more. I'd already done enough damage by lying, I didn’t want to make things worse by turning it into a big legal fight.”

“So you just rolled over and took it?” Tony paled as the rest of the implications fell into place. “I pushed the divorce proceedings through faster because of that. If I’d known, I never would’ve…”

Steve smiled sadly. “Can't say I blame you. I really messed things up for us, and you deserved a chance at being happy. You still do.”

Still looking shell-shocked, Tony made a choked sound. “Do I?”
“You were doing what you thought was best. Just like I was.” Steve whispered. They’d both been blind, each trying to fix the situation in the only ways they knew how. It was a cruel twist that they’d ended up reaping the worst possible outcome.

Tony’s hand traced patterns into the sheets, still pondering everything he’d heard. “If you’d just explained what was happening instead of hiding it, I would’ve been angry, but I would’ve understood.” His brow furrowed, expression oscillating between outrage and dismay. “When I found out the way I did… I was furious. I didn't want to hear anything you had to say.”

“You had every right to feel that way. Long before Rumlow became a threat, I had many chances to tell you. But I never took ‘em.” Steve answered. The fact that everything had happened so fast wasn't an excuse. “I was afraid that if you knew the truth about me and all the things I did… you’d hate me even more.”

“I thought you hated me.” Tony whispered. “I thought you were itching for the first opportunity dump us and run off with Natasha-the-Russian-Hottie. I even thought you and her were together at first.”

Tony dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling. He didn’t look angry anymore, just tired and sad. “But it became apparent pretty damn quick that it was your job you cared about more. Your mission.”

Steve wanted to kiss away the sadness from his eyes, but he wasn't sure how it'd be received, or if he’d even be allowed to touch him again after this conversation was over. Instead, he listened.

“The fact that you’d lied over something so big made me wonder-” Tony blinked furiously but forced himself to continue. “It made me wonder what else you’d lied about.” Tony’s voice got small, and he withdrew slightly into the cocoon of blankets. “Was what we had ever real? Or were we just a cover for you?”

A pang exploded through Steve’s heart like a grenade. He couldn't help it, he reached over to take the other man into his arms to reassure him. Of all the damage his lies had caused, Tony thinking Steve hated him had to be the worst.

“No. I swear I never lied about loving you.”

Tony didn't answer, but he relaxed minutely in the embrace. His arms came up to clasp at the small of Steve’s back, holding onto him tightly.

They held each other in silence, seeking comfort in the closeness of their bodies.

With his chin resting against Tony’s hair, Steve watched as sky outside lightened from deep blue to washed-out grey. He felt just as empty and colorless. They'd never get those two years back, nor any the things that could have been. If only they'd both been honest with each other.

But it would drive them both mad to think of all the if-onlys and could-have-beens. It was a new day now, and a new year.

“So,” Tony said in a low voice against Steve's throat. “It's all out now. Where does this leave us?”

“That depends on you.” Steve replied, keeping his tone soft.

“Does it.” Tony made the question sound like a statement.

“Of course.”
“Really? I thought you’d be crashing here until you were healed up, then you’d be heading back to your agency.” Tony said evenly.

“I quit the agency.” Steve said quietly.

Tony went still. “Sorry, I think I misheard you saying you quit.”

“I handed in my resignation the same night Hill brought Peter back. My mind was made up long ago.” Steve repeated.

“Aren’t you worried that Rumlow or one of his goons could strike back?” Tony’s mouth twisted sardonically. “Maybe he’ll bust outta jail and come after Peter dressed as the Easter Bunny. Or a Thanksgiving turkey, since the guy seems to have a thing for holiday costumes.”

“Believe me, they’re not going to bother us for quite a while. If ever.” Steve said firmly, with a reassuring squeeze. “Rumlow will take a long time to regain the use of his limbs, Stane is buried in enough legal trouble to last him for decades, and Klaue’s mind has all the stability of a jello cup.”

“Damn.” Tony gave a low whistle.

“But if there’s ever any danger, I promise you-“ Steve met his eyes, and continued with all the sincerity he could muster. “I promise I’ll never lie to you again.”

Tony’s lips quirked up, the smile crinkling the edges of his oddly-bright eyes. “Why do I feel like there’s a ‘but’ attached to that declaration?”

Steve hesitated, knowing they’d reached the part of the conversation he was most apprehensive about. But he’d made a promise - the time for secrets was over.

“Take me back, please.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “Wha-?”

“Take me back.” Steve repeated, despite the heat that raced down his neck. He felt naked in a way that had nothing to do with his state of undress.

Tony chuckled weakly and tried to pull away from the hug. “Are you sure you want to give up your life’s calling? Fury lives next door, I’m sure if you asked him nicely he’d let you back into his secret agent clubhouse.”

“The mission hasn’t been my priority for years. My family is.” Steve gently drew him back but held him loosely in his arms. “There’s nothing I wanted more than you.”

It was selfish, it was presumptuous, and Steve knew he had no right to ask, especially after all he’d put them through. Hell, he had no idea what Tony’s wishes were. For all he knew, Tony saw Steve as a convenient booty call while he shopped around for a real relationship with somebody new.

But Steve had to say it. There had never been anyone else for him.

Looking troubled, Tony bit his lip. “What if I already made a decision?”

The words sent a chill through him but Steve forced himself not to outwardly react. “Then I will respect it. Whether you’ll take me back or not, I’ve left that life behind for good. I give you my word, if you need anything, if you need me, I’ll be there.”

Whatever Tony decided, Steve would accept it. He had made up his mind not to allow anything to
stand in the way of his family. Being there for Peter, *that* was what was most important. For that, Steve would put up with anything.

Anything.

...Even if Tony decided getting back with that snob, Dr Stephen was what made him happy.

“So.” Tony sucked in a breath and raised himself on one elbow, looking on the verge of a grand speech of his own. “This last year has been rough. There was all this drama with changing my company direction, and Peter being really clingy at school. Then I thought I was gonna die, which is a really effective way of putting things in perspective. The kidnapping fiasco was the cherry on top of the whole mess.” He heaved a heavy sigh. “Everything crazy that happened had you right at the center of it.”

“I didn’t mean to-” Steve began, but Tony waved him to pipe down.

“For almost two years I kept thinking there was a chance you’d come back. That this was all a misunderstanding, that you weren’t capable of telling such a ginormous lie.” Tony let out a humorless laugh. “Did you know I carried that stupid flip phone around with me everywhere, hoping you’d call? But you never did. And finally, last year, I-” Tony swallowed. “I gave up.”

Tears pricked the corners of his vision, but Steve remained silent. Listening.

“I tried to move on, but nothing worked. Not dating, work, nothing. I never stopped thinking about you. Even when I was dreaming, every time I drifted off, I’d see-” Tony replied, eyes soft. “It’s always you.”

It had always been Tony for Steve, too. Steve couldn't help remembering the night when they had all sat on the ambulance in a cuddle-pile, feeling the happiest he'd felt in a long time. He hoping with all his heart Tony would say yes, so they could share more of those moments.

Tony cleared his throat, voice raw. “But…”

Steve braced himself.

“Look, last night was nice. Really good.” Tony steadied himself with a breath. “But I don’t think it’s a good idea to see each other…”

Steve closed his eyes. The emptiness in his chest seemed to expand, spreading to every inch of his body. But he'd made a promise to be there for whatever Tony needed, and it looked like Tony needed him gone.

He began to rise from the bed. “I understand. We might not be together, but this won’t affect my being there for Peter, we just need to figure out how the co-parenting arrangement will work-”

“Slow down, tough guy, I wasn’t done.” Tony caught his arm before he could pull away.

Puzzled, Steve allowed himself to be drawn back to sit on the bed, but kept a careful distance between them on the mattress.

Clearing his throat, Tony rolled up to a sitting position. “You’re not the only one who’s been doing some thinking about us. See, we're both kind of a mess; we got problems with a capital P that aren’t the type to be solved by a screw or two.” Tony’s gaze darted from a point over his shoulder, to the ceiling, to finally meet Steve’s eyes. “You hurt- *We* hurt each other. Badly.”
Steve's hand clenched in the sheets. “I did far worse to you.”

“Can we not play the sadness Olympics now? Let me speak,” Tony said, a little impatiently. He shook himself to refocus, seeming to be choosing his words with care. “I’ve done things to you that were… really shitty. Me using a divorce to try and mindgame you into stepping up- that takes the cake for messed up.”

“You were only in that situation because of me.”

“And the whole kidnapping thing wouldn’t have happened if I’d listened to you.” Tony’s gaze dropped to the bandage wrapped around Steve’s abdomen. Guilt shaded his face. “You’d been telling me all year that people were gunning for us, and I not only ignored you, I walked right into it.”

“I didn't make it easy for you. You were operating on incomplete information...” Steve argued.

“Steve.” The utter dejection radiating from Tony stopped him dead in his tracks. “Steve, I’m sorry. This whole mess was my fault.”

The fact that Tony seemed to think he owed Steve any sort of apology was a gutpunch. Steve reached to pull him into his arms. “Shh, don't say that. This wasn't your fault, sweetheart, let me take the blame...”

“No, don’t shh me. Seriously, let me finish,” Tony said snappishly, swatting at the hands that were trying to soothe him. “Ever notice we’re caught in a cycle? Even before the divorce, all our fights had the same trajectory: we scream, screw, separate… then do it all over again. We hurt each other over and over.”

Steve knew how right he was. They'd always been exceptionally gifted in finding ways to hurt each other.

But despite a hundred hurts, Steve loved him still.

For every aspect of them that clashed, there were so many more areas where they fit together. He thought he’d lost that feeling the day they broke up, but the night they'd gone to save Peter had reminded him of what it had felt like to belong. He’d never realised how much of his life revolved around Tony, until the negative space of his absence reminded Steve what it had felt like to feel whole.

“I know we hurt each other,” Tony stated again, eyes tracking Steve’s every expression. “But it doesn't always have to be that way.”

The words rang in Steve’s ears like a bell. “Sweetheart, what are you saying?”

“Stop interrupting me and I’ll get to it.” Tony sat up straighter and wet his lips. “I don't think we should see each other unless we're serious about making things work. If we’re going to give us another try, we need to go all in.”

Steve’s mind took a few moments to catch up with his ears.

“You’re willing to give- us- ” Steve asked in a hushed tone, hardly daring to breathe from the hope that had filled his heart to bursting. “Another try?”

“We’re a pair of messed up people, but that doesn't mean we can't be together. We've just gotta put in 120 percent. I know for a fact we're in dire need of couples’ therapy, or something...” Tony was
twitchy, like he was trying to cover up the excessive display of emotions with flippancy. “We have any issues, we sit down and talk it out together. Y’know, like adults.”

A wave of wonder swept over Steve, filling him with overwhelming affection for this brilliant, frustrating, loveable man. It was what he always loved about Tony - the man was always showing him new parts of himself, how it was never too late to still change. To still grow.

Steve loved him so much.

Tony fidgeted. “Why are you looking at me like that? I'm trying to be responsible here and not rush into things with my brain in my boxers. Could you say something, it's starting to feel real awkward over here- aah!”

Steve tackled him into the sheets, peppering kisses on every inch of olive skin he could find. Tony squawked in surprise at the barrage of tickly beard-scruff kisses, but Steve didn't let up.

“I. Love you.” Steve said between each kiss. “So. Much. I know you don’t have much reason to believe me, but I promise won't break your trust this time.”

Tony fought back giggles as the scruff of Steve’s beard tickled his neck. He threaded his fingers through Steve’s overlong hair, carding through the blond locks gently. “For a guy who took a knife for me, I’d say your word counts a lot more than you think right now.”

“I mean it.” Steve dropped a kiss over his heart and pressed his palm against it. “I’ll spend the rest of my life making us work, if that's what it takes.”

“The rest of our lives, huh.” Tony’s lips curled into a slow smile as he looped his arms over Steve’s shoulders. “We did say ‘for better or for worse’, remember?”

Steve did. He’d meant the words back then, when they’d first gotten married. And he meant them now, more than ever.

“I- mph!” Steve started in surprise as Tony launched forward to claim his lips in a searing kiss. The contact, the closeness made every nerve in his body sing.

The next thing Steve knew, he was flipped over and gazing up at Tony, who had rolled up to straddle his thighs. Haloed by the rising sun’s rays, the coppery flecks in his eyes and hair stood out in glorious, beautiful detail.

“Well, what do you know? I'm feeling pretty good now.” Pressing one hand into the center of Steve’s chest to keep him down, Tony grinned, hungry and warm and alive. “Let's go another round, big guy.”

--

[a bit later]

By the time they were done, the sky outside had brightened to a rosy gold. Sunlight lanced through the windows, falling in bright bars across the planes of Tony’s back.

Steve sleepily admired the effect, one hand stroking through Tony’s hair, enjoying the buzz of their activities. Being with Tony, having him and being had - he never thought he’d be lucky enough to experience it again. It was truly a forgiveness.

Tony let out a happy huff from where his head was pillowed on Steve’s chest. “God, have I missed
Steve’s hands fell to his waist. “Another round?”

“Yeah, hun. Gimme a few minutes.” Tony’s tongue darted out to lave the hickey just above Steve’s nipple.

Another few seconds of shifting found them spooning, legs tangling in the rumpled sheets.

Steve thumbed the bruise splaying over Tony’s neck. They’d gone all out this round: Steve’s skin was still stinging from the map of hickeys Tony had left, but that had to be nothing next to the impressive hickey collection Tony himself was sporting.

“So whatever happened to Stephen?” Steve asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Tony shrugged lazily as Steve’s fingers danced down the column of his neck. “Eh, it didn't work out. We wanted different things, yadda yadda, normal reasons why—” he groaned as Steve’s tongue traced the shell of his ear. “—why normal people break up.”

To Steve’s shame, he felt a little frisson of vindictive satisfaction at the words. Although he’d been prepared to accept the possibility of Tony dating someone else, it didn't mean he had to like it.

He was Tony's and Tony was his.

Steve kissed a line down Tony's neck, tonguing against each hickey in a way he knew would tingle. “Hm, that's too bad.”

“You could do a better job at hiding your smugness.” Tony reached back to give his flank a pinch. “It wasn't an acrimonious breakup, we’re still friends.”

“Not too good friends, I hope.”

“You know, he's actually pretty cool to talk to, it was a fun change of pace. It’s not every day you get to talk to a doctor.”

“I know for a fact you have three doctorates.”

“Yeah, so? We had some really interesting conversations.”

Steve nipped at the soft skin of his throat. “Really. What were they about?”

“There was this one time he… uh…”

“Were they interesting than this?” Steve moved his hand lower, enjoying how his ministrations drew gasps from the other man.

“Now that's just plain unfair. Aah…” Tony sounded a little shaky. But he leaned into Steve’s movements, chasing his pleasure.

“How about now?” Steve’s arms tightened, pressing them closer together that his own growing arousal couldn't be ignored. “Are you still thinking about old… what’s his name again?”

“Y-you're gonna need to try harder than that. I need- I need some more help rebooting my memory.” Tony threw a cheeky grin over his shoulder.

The sight made his blood race. Steve increased his speed, taking note of every filthy sound Tony
made as he writhed against the pillow. Any second now, he was going to...

“Wait- babe, stop.”

Steve’s hand stilled immediately. “What is it? Am I hurting you?”

“I wanna go together.” Tony turned in the circle of his arms. His hand slid easily between their bodies, taking them both in a grip which sent pleasure arcing up their spines. As their bodies moved in sync, Steve’s hand joined his, sending them closer and closer to…

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!” Peter’s exuberant yell reverberated through the door.

“Ngh.” Tony groaned, dropping his forehead against Steve’s clavicle. “Better make this a quick one, we've got a couple seconds till he barges in.”

“Seconds? I think you might be overestimating my capabilities, Tony.” Steve responded, amused. “What are we gonna do if he walks in on us again?”

Tony scoffed, not pausing his mission to become a permanent part of Steve’s chest. “Look, we'll just use the ‘Dad and Pops are doing naked yoga’ cover story, that worked pretty well the last couple times. Or whatever BS excuse you like; say we’re practising football tackles, Twister competition, I don't care.”

They were all so ridiculous, Steve couldn't hold back the laughter rolling up from inside him.

“This isn't funny. Come on, don't leave me hanging, I need it now…” Tony added, with a hint of a whine.

Chuckling a little, Steve pulled the sheets up to cover them at the waist. He settled on his side so he could wrap Tony in his arms. “You are insatiable.”

“Look, I have needs. Do you know how horny I've been for two years? Exceedingly.” Tony sulked from the hug, managing to look like a very disgruntled bird. “You're driving me crazy, sugarpie. Are you telling me you didn't miss this?” His voice dropped as he rolled his hips forward.

In a flash, Steve laced their hands together, pinning them on either side of Tony head, forcefully kissing him down into the pillows until he could hear his breath catch.

“I missed you, Tony.” Steve’s answer came out as a growl, grazing against kiss-bruised lips. “Every day.”

Tony’s eyes had gone slightly glazed by the time Steve drew back. A laugh puffed out from him. “You got a lot of catching up to do, sugarmuffin. I’ll even write out a sex schedule so you can keep track.”

“Careful, I'll hold you to that.”

“Let me up and I’ll give you something better to hold…” Tony grinned lasciviously, straining lazily against the grip pinning his hands down.

The thud of something falling rang out from the hallway. Tony grimaced. “I may be getting ahead of myself. Junior wandering around kinda kills the mood. That sex marathon might be a no-go after all.”

He looked so poutily disappointed that Steve couldn't help grinning. “You know, Peter did wish
for a puppy on his birthday. A fluffy fella would keep him occupied while we do our _catching up_. As well as the added bonus of teaching him how to handle more responsibility.”

Tony made a face. “Do _not_ mention the P-E-T word around him, I’m not having that conversation again. If I have to hear more whining because ‘well Wade got a brand new bunny for Christmas, _it’s not fair_ ’ I swear I’m gonna…”

Steve snorted. “Just get him the puppy.”

“No way. You know I'm more of a cat person.”

“A cat _and_ dog, then.”

“No more bundles of joy.” Tony said sternly, before giving another put-upon sigh. “Oh, who am I kidding? We all know I'm gonna end up doing what he wants. I can't say no when he looks at me with those big sad brown eyes.”

Steve couldn't resist it. “Gee. I wonder where he learned that from.”

Tony stuck his tongue out. “Please, if you wanna talk about who he takes after more... well, he didn't pick up his propensity for reckless heroics from me.”

“Give yourself some credit, mister. You’re a lot more heroic than you think.” Steve released one hand to comfortingly trail it down Tony’s side. Sobering, he gave voice to the question that had been plaguing him for days. “That night, when you offered to give yourself up to Stane in place of Peter. Were you actually going to go with him?”

Tony paused, squarely in the eye. “I would do anything to keep him safe.” His hand came up to cup Steve’s face, thumb stroking stubbled line of his jaw. “And I know you would too.”

“I would.” Steve caught Tony’s hand and pressed a kiss to the palm. “You both are so important to me. I don’t know how Peter would be if he didn’t have you.”

“Mm. You'd be surprised by how often I have no idea what I'm doing. Don't get me wrong, I'd never trade being a dad for anything. But... it gets tiring sometimes.” Tony said, a crack of worry coloring his voice. “I'm always freaking out that I'm doing this whole parent gig wrong, wondering whether the thing I just did is gonna be the thing that messes him up forever. I didn't have any good parenting role models growing up, but I'm trying my best. Trying to break the cycle of shame. Y’know?” His eyes sought Steve’s, the unspoken plea clearly visible.

“You're not anything like your father. You're better.” Steve said softly.

Tony looked like he wanted to disagree, but he swallowed hard, blinking back the brightness in his eyes. “I'm trying my best, but it's- it's tough.”

In all his years of knowing Tony, who was always so strong in the face of trouble, this was as close to a plea for help as Steve ever heard from him.

Steve’s heart melted just a little bit more. “We’ll figure it out. Anything the world throws at us can't be too difficult, now that we're facing it together.”

“Together, huh?” Tony smiled, draping his arms over Steve’s shoulders to tug his face close. Bumping his nose against Steve’s, he whispered: “Yeah. I like the sound of that.”

They didn't stop kissing, even when the door burst open. He could feel Tony laughing, the smile
tickling his lips, and Peter’s excited voice swirling around the room, the mattress dipping as he joined them.

His family was there, around him, with him, and it was everything he’d hoped for and more.

It wouldn’t be smooth sailing, not with all the scars they bore. Steve knew there would be many more fights and disagreements on the long road to healing. But having his family around him made all the difference in the world.

Whatever the future held, they’d face it together.

He was home. They all were.

Chapter End Notes

It’s done. Wow.

This is the longest thing I’ve ever written, and the first multi-chapter fic I finished. It’s been such a ride - when I read Chapter 1 and Chapter 26, I can’t believe how far I’ve come. I set out to write a silly crack oneshot, but I wasn't expecting to write angst or fluff. It feels really good to know that I managed to complete a personal project. And not just that: a project that I’m really proud of.

I want to say thank you to the members of the Stony Discord server for being such an encouraging community of writers and shippers. I learned so much about writing from you all, and I never thought I'd be capable of writing something so long and actually completing it.

My biggest Thank You goes out to the regular commenters who stuck with me all through the WIP phase. I recognize all your names (some of you were here since the beginning, wow!) and every time I get an email notification from one of you guys, it made my week. I know lots of folks don't like reading WIPs, but knowing that there were people willing to take a chance on mine gave me the encouragement to keep chugging on, week after week. Thank you for sharing this journey with me, you guys are the real heroes <3

The future: is this AU done? NO. I have a couple ideas for bonus scenes set in the future and a few alt-POV scenes. I will probably add new chapters to this instead of making a series (mainly because I dislike the look of fics that have multiple parts). Updates will happen as and when it pleases me because I've been writing this AU for 9 months and I deserve a break.

For now, it is with great joy that I mark this fic Complete.

If you want to know more about this fic, I compiled a list of behind-the-scenes trivia and headcanons for this AU, all of which can be found on my tumblr

I wanna end this A/N off with a question for you guys: out of all the plot threads, which did you like best? Did you guys prefer the schmoopy Stony soap opera, or the wacky kid shenanigans, or the secret agent conspiracy, or the weird crack subplots (Logan, Santa Thor, etc)? Some of it? All of it? Any favourite scenes or lines?
Characterizations or crack-terizations?

Your comments are appreciated!
“Outta the way!”

“Die!”

Eyes burning with focus, Shuri and N’Jadaka flowed through their moves with practised ease. Family mattered not in this match of speed and skill, for the slightest hesitation could tip the scales from defeat to victory.

In this critical moment, nothing else mattered but the Fight.

“My pokeball! Mine!”

"NO!" N’Jadaka roared, closing in on the item. But he was half a second too late.

“Take that! I win!” Shuri cheered as her Princess Peach beaned N’Jadaka’s Pikachu with the pokeball, knocking his character off the stage.

“Ugh, cheap shot,” N’Jadaka scowled as the Super Smash Bros results page rolled up. “Let's go again. Best of five, like we agreed.”

Bast gave a sleepy purr from Shuri’s knee. Each of them was holding a cat as a sort of cheerleader slash cuddle toy: Bast, their black cat was asleep in Shuri’s lap while a snoozing Killmonger was draped over N’Jadaka’s shoulders like a tortoiseshell scarf. Bast’s ears perked up as the living room door opened.

“Brother, come join us!” Shuri glanced up as T'Challa entered.

“No now. I have to work on this paper for Professor Zuri,” Laptop and stack of textbooks in hand, T’Challa didn’t divert from his path past the sofa and towards his room.

“Come on, T, it's winter break. Term doesn't start for weeks.” N’Jadaka scratched Killmonger between the ears. “Just ask Professor Hardass for an extension if it bugs you so much, it wouldn’t be tough since you’re his favorite student and shit.”

T’Challa raised an eyebrow. “No, I'm not.”

N’Jadaka rolled his eyes. “Uh, yeah you are. You snagged one of his ultra-difficult to get into internships, and he's probably got a job lined up for you after graduation.” he clicked his tongue.
“Teacher’s pet.”

“Nobody is forcing you to play video games all day.” T’Challa said, a little stiffly.

“I work hard and play hard.” N’Jadaka stretched, cat-like, and turned back to the screen. “It wouldn’t kill you to let loose a little, just saying.”

T’Challa’s pride couldn’t help feeling a little stung: ever since he’d started college, he’d made it a point to work extra hard to prove that he didn't need any special treatment because of his family status. Being reminded of it made him a little uneasy of the power and expectations he carried. Then again, nobody T’Challa knew had N’Jadaka’s skill for sniffing out everyone’s insecurities and bludgeoning them with all the sensitivity of a wrecking ball.

“Come play with us, brother, I made you an account!” Shuri piped up. She had already keyed in T’Challa’s name as Player Three.

T’Challa gathered his books and turned to go. “Another time. I’m busy.”

N’Jadaka made a mocking sound. “You think Nakia’s gonna be impressed by a 4.0? You got no chance, she's had her eye on M'Baku since freshman year…”

T’Challa rolled his eyes but didn't rise to the bait. Needling people over their love lives was a classic N’Jadaka tactic, and the best way to deal with it was to ignore him.

“Come on, brother, this game is so fun! You never hang out with us, pleeeeeease…” Shuri wheedled, bouncing up onto the sofa with her widest doe-eyed look.

“I really have a lot of work to do, Shuri.”

Shuri’s bottom lip stuck out in a pout and she folded her small arms. Her eyes fixed on the floor. “He never hangs out with us anymore…”

That made T’Challa's big-brother instincts kick in. A short break couldn’t hurt. “Well, I could join you for a round.” He conceded, setting his laptop down on the table and joining her on the floor. “What video game are we playing?”

Shuri immediately perked up like a sunflower. “Only the greatest game ever: Super Smash Bros!”

T’Challa cast a dubious look at the colorful menu screen. He picked up the controller gingerly, holding it as if it would bite him. “What are we smashing?”

“It’s real simple! You press this button to attack and this button to do a stronger attack, and that button to dodge…” Shuri enthusiastically demonstrated a series of controls and combos, which T’Challa clumsily tried to emulate.

N’Jadaka’s sharp gaze followed T’Challa’s newbie flailing considerably. “Hey, let's have a little bet to spice things up.”

“A bet? I have never even played this game before!”

“Heh. I knew you were a chicken.”

“I am not,” T’Challa snapped.

“Great. I can finally make you do what I’ve been trying to do for a long time,” N’Jadaka paused for dramatic effect, before stabbing a finger in T’Challa’s face. “Getting you to watch anime with us.”
With a grimace, T’Challa smacked the offending finger out of his face. “Really? This is all a ruse to get me to watch those cartoons with you?”

“All according to plan.” N’Jadaka said smugly.

“Oh YES!” Shuri whooped. “There are so many great anime series you need to watch, brother. I can't wait to show them all to you. There's one about ninjas, one with magical galaxy sailors, one with pirates, and one about baking bread…”

“Bread?” T’Challa stared at them quizzically. “What kind of cartoons are these?”

“The best kind.” N’Jadaka’s grin got even wider. “I’m finally gonna introduce you to the wonderful world of hentai.”

“What’s hentai?”

“...and the one with the mecha, and the notebook that kills people, and one with the princess with magic powers, and the one with the magical cards…” Shuri blissfully continued listing off her favourite shows.

With a sinister grin, N’Jadaka leaned back and began petting Killmonger, no doubt imagining all sorts of terrible forfeits to impose on his strait-laced cousin. “After we're through, you'll never look at tentacles the same way again… fufufu…”

“What's so bad about tentacles?” T'Challa asked, although he half-suspected the answer. He was in his twenties after all, and not completely ignorant.

“So when you lose, you’re gonna join our anime marathon tonight!” Shuri exclaimed cheerily.

“What do you mean 'when I lose'? I could very well beat you.” T’Challa argued, a little miffed that he'd already been written off.

“Yeah, like that's gonna happen.” N’Jadaka let out a loud, disdainful snort. “By my calculations, your chances of winning are less than five percent.”

T’Challa folded his arms and decided to make his own move, reasoning that the best defense was a good offense. “Why don't we discuss a suitable penalty for the both of you?”

“Now this I gotta hear,” N’Jadaka lounged against the cushions. “What’s it gonna be, carrying your books for a week? Writing your papers? Not that you let anyone do that anyway because you're Mr Perfectionist.”

“I’m really good at coloring! I can do all the illustrations for you paper!” Shuri’s eyes were shining, and T’Challa didn’t have to heart to tell her that most college papers didn’t require crayon drawings.

“Oh. I know.” The gleam in N’Jadaka’s eyes was back. “I'll talk to Nakia for you, since you're too chickenshit to ask her out otherwise.”

“I’m just waiting for the right time!”

“Sure. This is what you look like,” N’Jadaka quipped, before making an exaggeratedly googly-eyed face at Shuri.

“‘Oh Nakia-chan, dai suki!’” Shuri giggled, playing along with the role of lovestruck T’Challa.
T’Challa frowned. Well, he couldn’t very well back down now. Not when the gauntlet had been thrown down that hard. He had to respond with something good, something that’d hit them both where it hurt most…

A slow smile bloomed over T’Challa’s cheeks as the perfect idea occurred to him. “If I win, you both are not allowed to reference any memes for the remainder of winter break.”

There was no sound his two competitors as the words sunk in.

“You wouldn't dare.” N’Jadaka was actually stunned, which was no mean feat.

“No… memes?” Shuri’s mouth dropped open.

“No memes. No internet jokes. No anime references.” T’Challa explained. “Those are my terms.”

Shuri’s looked horrified as she contemplated the consequences. “You can’t stop us memeing for two whole weeks! I can’t live like that!”

Smiling, T’Challa gave a lazy shrug. “Surely such seasoned players such as yourselves have nothing to fear from a newcomer like me. Unless you’re admitting that you’re afraid…”

“Am not. I’m surprised you even know what a meme is.” N’Jadaka muttered. He chewed the inside of his cheek, weighing up the likelihood of having to honor the deal. After a pause, he nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Bast meowed approvingly as she climbed off Shuri’s lap and onto T’Challa’s; he scritched her under the chin, deciding to take the cat’s favor as a good omen.

Shuri and N’Jadaka didn’t even bother to hide their sniggers as T’Challa clumsily navigated his cursor around the screen.

“Mario? Really? Brother, you are so basic.” Shuri mocked as T’Challa picked the red plumber from the character selection screen.

“What’s wrong with that? Isn’t Mario the most famous character from the video games?”

N’Jadaka shook his head pityingingly. “We’re trying to give you a fair shot before we wipe the floor with you. But there’s no chance in hell you’re gonna win with a low tier character.”

“Okay… how about this one?” T’Challa picked a hammer-wielding penguin.

It must have been another bad choice, because Shuri and N’Jadaka groaned in sync.

“Not that one, he sucks!”

“Give us a real challenge!”

“Fine, fine…” T’Challa muttered as he altered his selection again. But seemed like that every character he picked was the wrong choice.

“Are you sure about that? The B-Up recovery is too advanced for newbies.”

“No, not that one, you won't know how to switch between the multiple forms.”

“Seriously? I know you’re a casual, but come on!”
Starting to get annoyed at being bossed around, T'Challa closed his eyes and picked the nearest character. “I'm going with this one and it's final.”

Shuri and N’Jadaka looked at each other and shrugged. They weren't ones to turn down a victory offered up on a silver platter. They had tried.

N’Jadaka breathed a deep, condescending sigh. “Omae wa mou shindeiru.”

“What?” T'Challa asked. “What does that mean?”

“Don't worry about it,” N’Jadaka hit the button to start the match. “Hentai marathon, here we come.”

--

[Ten minutes later]

The victory fanfare rang through the deathly-silent living room.

Every muscle in N’Jadaka’s body had gone rigid as he stared unblinkingly at the results screen, face devoid of all expression.

“What… how even… ?” Shuri gaped at the scoreboard, which proudly proclaimed the unassailable truth. “This isn't possible.”

“Oh, did I win?” T’Challa smiled beatifically.

“It's not fair! Nobody’s that good on their first try!” Shuri sputtered and pounded a tiny fist on the floor.

“Just luck, I suppose.” mused T'Challa as he petted Bast. Maybe she had been his lucky charm after all, and he gave the black cat a thank-you scratch behind the ears.

“How. The hell.” Every word dragged from N’Jadaka’s throat was like daggers of ice. “Did that happen?” A vein in his temple began to twitch, voice rising in furious pitch with every word. “He just. Kicked our asses. With…” An outraged scream burst forth. “A goddamn JIGGLYPUFF?”

Killmonger flattened his ears against N’Jadaka’s outburst. Shuri chimed in, complaining loudly as she angrily pummeled the hell out of a sofa cushion.

T'Challa watched them amusedly. The game had been surprisingly engaging, and he certainly hadn't been expecting to enjoy himself, let alone be unexpectedly good at the game. Victory was sweet, but so was defeating his sister and cousin with a pink puffball that they both had heartily insisted was the worst character in the game. That had a unique charm all on its own.

Well. Time to collect.

T'Challa cleared his throat. “I believe we had an agreement. Since the both of you lost, this means…”

“No, brother, nooo! Anything but that!” Shuri exclaimed in alarm.

“…that you both are banned from using any internet mee-mees.” T’Challa deliberately mispronounced the word, grinning at how they cringed.

“But brother…” Shuri whined. “It's not fair!”
“A deal is a deal. Bast and Killmonger witnessed our terms. You wouldn't want to go back on the promise in front of them, would you?” T’Challa petted the purring Bast and nodded to Killmonger; the tortie gave a huff and buried his face further into N’Jadaka’s collar.

Shuri pouted and flopped against the sofa with a huff. “This sucks.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Bast, play despacito.” T’Challa grinned.

Shuri made an outraged squeak. N’Jadaka began grinding his teeth.

“This experience is so turned. Or is the term ‘lit up?”’ T’Challa feel a spark of mischief swirl up as he started trying to ruin as many internet references as he could. Despite not being fully caught up with current slang, having two hardcore memesters in the family still meant he absorbed a lot by osmosis.

“You've made your point.” N’Jadaka gritted out, looking like he wanted to throttle him for incorrect meme usage.

T’Challa laughed. “All of your bases belong to me. It's time for peanut butter and jelly. Can I have a cheeseburger?”

“Brother, please stop, those memes are ancient.” Shuri begged.

“You know, I actually had fun playing this video game. It's very bae.”

“This was a mistake. We've created a monster.” Shuri curled up into a ball with a whine.

Every vein in N’Jadaka’s head looked on the verge of exploding with how hard he was glaring.

T’Challa gave another winning smile. “Are you mad, bro?”

N’Jadaka’s eyes blazed with fury. A sound like a strangled scream tore from his throat.

Taking pity on them, T’Challa curbed his chuckles and picked up his controller. “I'm serious, this was actually lots of fun. I wouldn’t mind playing another round.”

N’Jadaka swelled up indignantly, rising from the depths of the cushions like a cushion monster.

“Why would you think I’d want to play against you again?”

“you don’t want to play anymore? That’s fine. Losing to a newbie can be quite psychologically damaging.” T’Challa nodded knowingly, and made a show of setting down his controller. “I have some assignments to complete, so I'll see you at dinner. Enjoy the rest of your gaming session.”

Sneaking a peek under his lashes, T’Challa knew that his attack had landed: N’Jadaka looked on the verge of exploding again, but his pride wouldn't let him back down.

With a low growl, N’Jadaka seized the controller and flung it at his cousin. “One more round. If I win, you lift the meme embargo.”

T’Challa caught the controller with a snort. “Dream on.”

“Halve it.”

“No.”

“Five days.”
“I'll shave off three days. Final offer.” T'Challa smiled and rubbed his chin. “And if you lose again, the original forfeit is doubled. Are you sure can survive a month without your memes?”

“Stop saying such useless things.” N’Jadaka brusquely turned back to the TV and booted up another match. “C'mon, Shuri, let's smash your baka brother.”

T'Challa hummed with amusement Shuri and N'Jadaka started yelling at the TV.

It really had been too long since he’d hung out with his sister and cousin, and he hadn’t realized how much he’d missed it. School had been hectic, but he made a mental note to not let himself get so swallowed up in work.

Perhaps he’d even be a gracious winner and join them for their anime viewing party later on. As weird as Shuri and N'Jadaka made the cartoons sound, T’Challa was not unopen to the possibility that he might enjoy himself.

Although he had a strong feeling he would.

Chapter End Notes

I’m excited because I have lots of ideas; a bunch of scenes which I couldn’t fit into the main story, Captain Marvel gave me some inspiration for Fury, and Endgame is definitely going to spark more ideas for this verse. If you have any suggestions or prompts, let me know in the comments (I’m rarely on tumblr anymore sorry) - I can’t promise I’ll write them, but I’d love to know what people are interested in seeing!

This oneshot was inspired by my own family’s holiday traditions: every christmas and chinese new year we all go to grandma’s for awesome food then we go to my cousin’s house to play video games

My smash headcanons are:
-Shuri mains all the princesses and loves items
-N’Jadaka is that guy who only uses Pikachu, Kirby, and Yoshi. No items, Final Destination only
-T’Challa is a button masher. Which always works out for him somehow.
*Date - Birthday redux (Peter, Steve, Tony)*

Chapter Notes

Here’s a special chapter to celebrate Tony’s birthday! I wanted to do something for my favouritest MCU superhero whom I love 3000

I write cracky fluff because I need it, and right now I think a lot of you do too! Hope you guys are enjoying these oneshots, they’re fun for me to write and I’m open to hearing ideas/suggestions!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter stifled a yawn as he tiptoed down the hall, trying to be as quiet as he could. It was a lot earlier than he normally would get up, but the early hours of the morning provided the element of surprise, which was imperative for the success of his mission.

He winced as his foot bumped the corner of a wall with a dull thud. Peter froze, ears straining for any sign he’d given himself away.

…

Nothing, just some distant creaking coming somewhere from deep within the house.

Relieved, Peter carefully continued on his way, and within a minute arrived at his destination: Dad’s room.

Staring up at the door, Peter nervously gripped the birthday card held behind his back as he ran through the words he wanted to say. Happy birthday Dad, you’re the best, I love you…

A loud crunch jolted Peter out of his thoughts.

He looked around wildly, before realising that the sound had come from... inside the room? That couldn’t be right, Dad was supposed to be asleep.

Pops was supposed to be asleep, too. That was the whole point of a sleepover, wasn't it?

As Peter strained his ears, he could make out other sounds through the door; low chuckles, a rhythmic creaking noise; something that sounded like high-fives, as if the people high-fiving each other were trying to clap as quietly as possible.

Curious, Peter reached for the door handle. Before he could touch it, a furry paw appeared out of nowhere and slapped his hand away.

“Ow! Why'd you do that for, Jarvis?” Peter glared at the grey cat.

Jarvis looked at him disapprovingly, planting himself in front of Tony’s door like a fluffy gargoyle.

Shrugging, Peter made another reach for the handle, but Jarvis smacked his hand away again. No matter how quickly Peter tried, Jarvis was faster, swatting away his attempts as easily as hunting sparrows.
After the seventh attempt, Peter’s anger started to flare.

“Stop it! Bad kitty!”

Jarvis fluffed himself up sternly and let out the most dour mew Peter had ever heard.

“Whatever.” Growling, Peter reached over to shove the cat away. Jarvis immediately darted over Peter’s shoulder, seized the scruff of his shirt, and began using his considerable bulk to physically drag the boy back from the door like he would a misbehaving kitten.

“Hey!” Peter wriggled as the cat yanked him away from the door. “Go away, Jarvis!”

The words left his mouth as a shout, and the strange creaking noise stopped abruptly. There was a lull in the air, and Peter thought he could make out a pair of muffled utterances. A loud crunch ripped through the air, making both boy and cat jump.

“Move, Jarvis!” With an effort, Peter shoved the cat away and threw the door open.

On the bed, Tony and Steve both jumped apart as if they’d been electrocuted, snapping to a sitting position and dragging the blanket up to their waists.

“Peter! What on-?”

“Argh!”

“Happy birthday, Dad!” Peter fairly screamed as he raced towards them.

“H-hey! Wow, what a surprise. You're up early.” Looking slightly out of breath, Tony grabbed a pillow and shoved it in his lap as the boy bounded up to the bed. “How-- how long were you waiting out there?”

“I was waiting forever but Jarvis wouldn't let me in!”

Jarvis let out a despairing mew from the doorway, an expression of ‘I tried my best’ written all over his fuzzy face.

Tony smiled sheepishly. “I know you did, buddy.’

“This is for you! Happy birthday, Dad!” Peter interrupted, shoving his gift in Tony’s face.

“Is that for me? How about that?” Tony composed himself as accepted the card.

“Another one for the collection.” Steve hooked his chin over Tony’s shoulder to get a better look, wrapping his arms around the other man’s waist.

“You're telling me. I mean, look at this color composition. Flawless.” Tony glowed as he examined each page with the attention he'd pay one of his prized inventions. Every square inch of paper was plastered full of stickers and crayon drawings, a riot of color and texture.

Peter scuffed his toe into the carpet a little shyly. “I put all my red-and-yellow stickers on it.”

“You know me so well, down to my favorite color.” Tony leaned over to give Peter a one-armed hug and drop a kiss on his head. “I can't believe you're giving this to me, because it looks like it should be in a museum. I’m the luckiest dad alive. Love you, kid.”

“Love you, dad.” Beaming, Peter turned to Steve expectantly. “What's your gift, Pops?”
Steve’s smile froze. “Uh…”

“He already gave it to me.” Tony grinned, reaching back to pat Steve on the cheek.

“I wanna see! Where is it?”

“It’s, I-” Steve began to look more panicked by the second.

“He gave me a hug for my birthday.” Tony said smugly.

“That’s it?” Peter asked, feeling slightly disappointed. Not that he was complaining, Peter loved hugs, and was happy to get one any chance he could get. But he already got hugged every day, and it seemed like a birthday called for something, well, cooler. “My present is better.”

“Hey, hey. This isn't a competition, there's a lotta love to go round and I'm happy to receive all of it.” Tony clicked his tongue. “See, what Pops gave me wasn't just any old hug, it was a very… hm, special, grown up kind of hug.”

“Like a really, really big hug?”

“Exactly like that. We were hugging each other so tight.”

“Tony…” Steve said warningly.

Peter scratched his head. “But if you hug too tight, you might explode.”

“Well, that's one way to put it.” Losing the battle against the giggles, Tony hunched over his pillow, pressing his face against it to muffle his laughs.

Steve huffed, pink spreading down his neck and chest like a painful sunburn.

They were both behaving very strangely, Peter decided. On the other hand, the mention of hugs made Peter remember that he wanted one right now.

Peter picked up the corner of the blanket, intending to burrow under so he could crawl in between his parents and get a hug from both.

“Whoa, whoa!” Tony’s laughter evaporated into a yelp as he snatched the blanket away and folded it under him so Peter couldn’t tunnel beneath it. “Uh, maybe not right now, Pete.”

“Why?” Peter whined.

“We kinda need the sheets now.”

“Why?”

“We’re- we’re really really cold. Brr.” Steve rubbed his arms exaggeratedly.

“Why?” Peter looked at the window where the sunlight was streaming in. “It’s summer.”

“So it is. We-” Steve faltered.

“Where did your clothes go?”

Steve steeled his jaw with the air of a man about to jump on a grenade. “You see, Pete, when two people, um, love each other very much-”
“A monster did it. A monster stole our clothes.” Tony added helpfully.

Peter gasped. “Oh no!”

“Yes, it’s true.” Tony continued brightly. “We were just lying here, minding our own business, enjoying a nice restful sleep, until all of a sudden this big mean monster comes out from under the bed and steals all our clothes away!”

Steve clapped a hand to his head, muttering something that sounded like Jesus.

“Was it scary? What did it look like?” Peter whispered.

“Well, it had this huge, long—mmf!” Tony squawked as Steve hurriedly covered his mouth with a hand.

“Indescribable. Terrifying beyond imagination.” Steve said loudly. “The important thing is that the monster is now gone, and everything is safe now.”

Peter canted his head to one side. “What happened to your face, Pops?”

Steve’s hand flew to cover a purple bruise on his neck. “Oh, these, uh… the monster bit me.”

Peter stared at the mark in concern. “Is it poison?”

“Nah, don’t worry.” Tony nudged Steve playfully. “I’m here to kiss it better.”

Peter nodded knowingly. “Like Snow White.”

“Yeah, sure, let’s go with that.” Tony turned and batted his eyes flirtatiously. “Guess that makes me Prince Charming?”

“You’re both being ridiculous.” Steve muttered, visibly flustered at being the subject of two pairs of big brown eyes, one filled with innocent curiosity and the other with trollish playfulness.

“Aw, are you just gonna let yourself be poisoned like that?”

“Do it, Pops, you have to do it!”

Steve rolled his eyes, but couldn't help a small smile as he tilted his head to let Tony press a kiss (“Mwah! All better!”) to the bruise.

Peter watched them, eyes wide. All the pieces of the puzzle were starting to make sense: the bumping and creaking noises he'd heard earlier had been his brave parents fighting off the monster. It had to have been a huge fight, because there was a huge crack in the headboard and a pair of dents in the wall above the bed.

...Frankly, Peter was a little relieved he had missed running in on the action, because whatever kind of monster was capable of doing that much damage had to be pretty darn scary.

But something else was off. Peter frowned, suspicious. Something didn't quite add up.

“Where'd the monster go?” Peter squinted at the pile of clothes on the floor. He poked it with a toe. “I found your clothes. Right here.”

“Holy observational skills, I knew you were smart.” Tony looked on the verge of dissolving back into laughter. “That monster didn't even finish the job. Sounds like a real sloppy fella, don'tcha
“Perhaps the monster was more preoccupied with finishing other things.” Steve said dryly.

The deadpan response broke the dam, causing Tony to curl up onto his like a laughing burrito.

Peter’s brow furrowed.

He couldn’t understand their weird behavior at all: Pops had gone all pink, like he’d been caught stealing from the cookie jar; and Dad seemed downright loopy, giggling like he'd had too many doughnuts.

“It seems we’re very tired from fighting the monster.” Steve said tightly through gritted teeth.

“So, so tired.” Tony said through sniggers. “Fighting that beast totally wore me out.”

“But we defeated it and everything’s alright now and there’s nothing to worry about, so can we please move on.” Steve coughed, trying to wrap the conversation up. “Go get changed Peter, and we'll have breakfast.”

Peter wrinkled his nose. “Why?”

Tony snapped his fingers as an idea came to him. “Tell you what, we can have pancakes today!”

Peter perked up. “Really?”

“Really. And because I'm feeling extra generous, you can also have one cookie. One.” Tony raised a finger pointedly.

Despite the promise of sugary snacks, Peter couldn’t just let it go. The danger of his parents being attacked by the clothes-stealing monster was all too real. “But what if the monster comes back?”

“It’s not going to.” Steve said shortly.

“How do you know?”

Steve took a deep breath. “Trust me, Peter. It’ll take you two minutes to walk to the table, and nothing is going to happen in that space of time.”

“Not with that attitude, it won't.”

“Tony.”

“What if the monster pops up again and steals your clothes?” Peter asked insistently.

“Don’t worry, Pops and I can give each other a hand. Right, Steve?”

“Tony.”

“I can help you fight the monster! I’m super strong!” Peter declared.

“But Peter, you have to… to help us protect Jarvis.” Steve said desperately. “He might be scared. Of the monster. Poor little cat, you have to take care of him.”

From the doorway, Jarvis shot Steve an insulted glare, but kept up the act by letting out a truly piteous-sounding meow.
The flimsy plan was apparently enough to convince Peter, because the boy nodded and ambled over to the cat. “Don’t worry Jarvis, I’ll keep you safe.” Peter cooed to the cat.

“Go get ‘em, Pete. We’ll defeat the monster properly this time.” Tony called.

The cat gave them both a long-suffering look as he led the boy away from the room.

Tony and Steve waited for the sounds to die away before letting their masks drop.

Steve slumped against the headboard. “A monster? Really?”

Tony chuckled, carefully placing Peter’s card on the bedside table where it wouldn’t get crushed. “I was improvising! The other option was ‘whoops, sorry, kiddo, Dad’s getting birthday sex right now, he’ll be right with you once he finds his boxers-’”

“Never mind. The clothes-stealing monster sounds the least mentally scarring.” Steve pressed a kiss between Tony’s shoulder blades. “You’re frisky today, mister.”

“Me? Hey, you were the one fully ready to give him a lecture on the birds and the bees if I hadn’t saved your ass!” Tony exclaimed, rolling over to drape himself over Steve’s torso.

“Hm, I’ll keep that in mind the next time we’re accidentally walked in on.” Steve said archly. He smiled as under the sheets his and Tony’s legs entangled. “I hope you liked my wakeup call.”

“Heh.” Tony traced the line of Steve’s clavicle teasingly. “Totally worth the property damage.”

“Sorry about that, I’ll help you fix everything.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously.

Due to both of their considerable enthusiasm, a large section of drywall needed replacing and Tony’s bed now creaked ominously with every movement.

“It’ll be fine. We can sleep on the floor a few days. Make a fort, those are cosy.” Tony moved to straddle him more fully, sinking down to take his lips in a languid kiss. Steve brought his arms round to hold the other man more securely, idly fingering the line of purple marks he’d left down his back, knowing the gentle pressure would make them tingle.

Above him, Tony let out a low moan as the kiss turned more heated, to softly murmur. “Not that I wouldn’t love to do this all day, but real life beckons.”

Steve sighed deeply, and reluctantly pulled back. “I know.”

As they set about the business of recovering their clothes, Steve watched Tony fondly. It was rare to see Tony like this, all relaxed and loose-limbed. When unburdened by stress, the dark-haired man became downright cuddly and playful. He was even humming to himself as he got dressed. Steve wished he could see him like that all the time.

Tony looked over curiously. “What’s up, buttercup?”

Steve smiled, stepping into his space to nuzzle at his neck. “Happy birthday, Tony.”

Tony huffed, but he readily snuggled closer to revel in the closeness. “It’s just another day, nothing special.”

Steve nipped at the juncture of his neck, grazing the skin slightly with his teeth. “You think you’re nothing special?”
“Well, I mean is nobody over the age of twelve gives a fudge about birthdays.” Tony said, the
ministrations going on at his neck making his responses a little slower than they normally would be. “Work, school, sex, sleep, all that fun adulting stuff.”

Steve paused, deliberating, before deciding to dispense with all the secrecy. “Actually, I was planning to bring you out tonight.”

Tony’s face froze almost comically. “What, you mean like a date?”

“I was hoping it could be.” Steve looked into the surprised brown eyes.

Tony’s eyes were wide as coasters, staring up in complete puzzlement. “You asked me. On a date. We're doing dating again.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Holy shishkebabs, it is a date- Why?” Tony whispered with a kind of awe, still stuck on the word.

“Because it's your birthday and I love you?” Steve studied his face cautiously. “Is this okay?”

They had only officially been back together for a few months. Most of it had been spent at couples therapy, and figuring out how to fit into each other's lives again. Things weren't always easy, but they'd been going well enough, if busy.

This… would be the first time they'd be going on a date since the breakup, so naturally, Steve had been more than a little apprehensive about planning it.

He didn't think he'd gone crazy with the activities: bringing Tony to that cheeseburger place he'd always been crazy about, strolling down the street fair that was in town that week, finishing at the observatory to watch the fireworks festival.

And while Steve would freely admit he wasn't the best at huge romantic gestures -having been off the dating circuit since the first time they were married was a big factor- he figured he'd be able to play tonight by ear.

Judging by the way Tony lit up, the prospect of a grown-ups’ night out appealed to him immensely. “Are you kidding? This is more than okay! I've been wanting to do this for ages, this is- yeah! Are we gonna go to-”

All at once, Tony's excitement screeched to a halt. His eyes dimmed. “This is- wow, I- I don't know what to say. It's not that I wouldn't love to go- I bet you planned something amazing. God, I've wanted to do something with you for weeks, but everything's been nuts, what with all our therapy sessions and work commitments and giving statements to the police for the investigation into the Crazy Claus Kidnapping saga... Catchy name, right? Did you know that's what the press has been calling it?”

“Tony.” Steve gave him a gentle shake.

“Oops, sorry, word vomit. What I'm saying is… I can't.” With difficulty, Tony met his eyes. “I can't leave Peter at home on his own. I know it's totally irrational, because those assholes are in jail now, and I beefed up all the house security to pretty much Pentagon levels. It's just- I couldn't take it if anything happened to him while we were out.”

“I wouldn’t be able to take it either.” Steve said quietly. “But you can't keep yourself cooped up at home forever, it's not healthy for you.”
“I know, I know.” Tony muttered, seeming to fold in on himself. “And I don't mean to be a douche because you must've taken a lot of time to plan everything-”

“You're not a douche.”

“I wish I could, I really, really do. But I can't. I'm sorry.” Tony worried his lip a little, the same way Peter did when he knew he'd done something wrong. “Please don't be upset.”

“I'm not upset.” Steve hugged him reassuringly. “And it's fine, it really is.”

“Really?” Tony said, a little muffled against Steve’s shoulder.

“It's true.” Steve rested his chin against Tony's temple. It made his heart squeeze a little, because he could clearly so Tony really wanted this date, but was afraid to let himself trust anyone else. “But I was hoping you'd have a listen to what I'm about to suggest.”

“Shoot.”

“Well, I asked Pepper for a favor, if she knew anyone to who could help watch Peter while we were on our date.”

“Yeah, and?”

“She pointed me to Harley, one of your interns. Said he'd be happy to help out.”

Tony relaxed. “Harley agreed to babysit?”

“I worked it all out with him. Nice kid, really bright.”

Tony hummed thoughtfully. “I didn't think of that. That's sweet of him.”

“Yes, I wouldn't have agreed if Pepper and Rhodey hadn't vouched for him, so you don't need to worry.” Steve explained. “It's okay to ask for help sometimes, you know.”

“Yeah, that's true.” Having heard his solution, Tony looked pensive now. “You really did all that?”

Steve’s hand came up to cup Tony's jaw, one thumb tracing through the line of stubble that was so meticulously styled. “That said, if it'd put you at ease, we can stay home, get takeout, and watch movies on the couch. How about the one you love so much with the aliens and the round little robots?”

“Star Wars.” Tony said automatically.

Steve chuckled easily. “Anything you like. I want this to be a fun night for you.”

“You really thought of everything.” Tony’s voice had gone soft and unguarded, a light of wonderment in his eyes which told he hadn’t expected to receive anything.

It all made Steve’s heart squeeze with a joyful kind of ache. “I like seeing you happy.”

He’d count himself lucky if he was able to keep making Tony happy for as long as he was able. “What do you think? Stay in or go out?”

Tony's response was to tug his head down, kiss him in a way that made his head spin and the world around him go bright and floaty. His hands found their way into Tony’s hair, fingers tangling through the soft, sleep-mussed waves.
“Still gonna need an answer.” Steve said, a little dazedly as their lips broke apart.

Tony broke into a breathless type of smile, the dazzling one that made his eyes shine. “Let's go out, do the whole date night thing. You're right, about trust and depending on other people. I gotta stop stressing out over everything and live that life. And I really do need to get out more.”

Steve grinned back. “So it's a date.”

“Why, yes, Mr Rogers, I believe it is.” Tony shot back coquettishly. His eyes crinkled up with excitement. “We're dating!”

“The way you're acting, you'd think you'd never been on a date before.” Steve said with fond amusement.

“Yeah, well, I haven't been on one with you since… then. We got a lot of lost time to make up for!”

Now that Tony was on board with the plan, he'd gone from thoughtful to practically vibrating with excitement.

“Do you want to hear what we’ll be doing?” Steve asked. In the quietness of the room, they stood close to each other, swaying a little like they were dancing. “I could just tell you if you can't take the suspense.”

Tony wrinkled his nose. “Hm. Ah, tempting, buuuut… I’m good, I can wait till tonight. No spoilers, if you please.”

“I can think of lots of other ways I'd like to spoil you.”

“Cheeky.” Tony bumped his nose against Steve’s. “I just have a few questions I want you to answer me.”

“Okay, are they?”

“One- and this is of utmost importance: will there be cheeseburgers?” Tony asked hopefully. “I've been so good, keeping myself healthy for months and months, but I'm just about ready to kill for one bite of meat and cheese.” His eyes had gone eager and wide. Hungry. "Okay, several bites, I'm only human, after all.”

Steve laughed. “That much, I can promise you.”

“Okay, good. Good...” Tony nodded, giddy with glee. Steve couldn't help feeling a huge swell of tenderness that such a little thing could make Tony so happy. It was just so endearing.

“My second and final question is: when we're home from our date...” Tony leaned in, lips tracing the shell of Steve’s ear. “Do you think the clothes monster will be back for round two?”

Smile widening, Steve slung his arms around Tony waist, slotting his hands into the back pockets to give him a squeeze that left little room for misinterpretation.

Tony’s mouth pulled up into a grin at the unspoken answer.

The day was starting, and it was going to be a great one.

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[CODA]
“Happy birthday, Dad!” Peter chirped, giving Tony a brief but joyful hug before he all but tumbled out of the car to join his friends in the schoolyard.

“Happy birthday, boss.” Happy said, letting Tony through the security gantry after Steve dropped him off at work.

_Happy birthday, friend. No hard feelings? -N.R_, read the note on Tony’s desk in delicate cursive; sitting next to it was a neat stack of coconut-and-lavender cookies, which, Tony grudgingly had to admit, were effing delicious.

“Happy birthday, Tony.” Pepper said, personally handing him a ‘World’s Best Boss’ smoothie mug before she signalled to her coworkers to bring in the birthday cake everyone in the office had chipped in for.

“Happy birthday, Tones.” Rhodey said over the phone, calling in from a location he couldn't talk about, but that didn't matter when warmth was evident in every one of those hundred promises for how he was going to catch up with Tony when he was home again.

“Happy birthday, love.” Steve said, kissing him as fireworks burst overhead.

It was a good day, and Tony couldn't be happier.

Chapter End Notes

PS: Their date went off without a hitch: the cheeseburgers were just as good as Tony remembered, they both wasted change on scammy carnival games (“i want that ugly hat. Win it for me” / “tony, that purple thing is hideous” / “...but i want it. steeeeeb i thought you wanted me to be happy :>” / [sigh] “ok fine”), they had a lovely walk which ended up with them fooling around on top of a park statue of all places where they almost got caught. They came back late-ish but not too late to a sleeping Peter and Harley watching videos on the couch, after getting Harley a cab home, the two grownups both went to bed and...But that's a story for another time;

[twenty years later, Peter freezes in the middle of what he’s doing]: that wasn’t a monster... they were having sex!

If you enjoy Stony fun, come join me in MCU Stony discord! All other verses are welcome too, we have lots of fun events and cool people
*Santa's Revenge (Erik, Charles)*

Chapter Notes

No FFH spoilers here. I just watched FFH and am pondering if/how/when to include Mysterio. I enjoyed most of the film, although as an Iron Dad Spider Son fan, every second of FFH seemed especially calculated to hurt me TT_TT

As you can see, I’m including character names into the titles of Bonus Chapters, that way you get a heads up as to which character(s) will be featured.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charles opened the box, and his face lit up with delight. The gleaming wood and polished metal of the new chess pieces glowed warmly in the candlelight. “Why, Erik, this is lovely. I can’t wait to break this new set in.”

“As long as I get to be your first partner?”

“Naturally.” Charles’ blue eyes twinkled merrily.

“I hoped you would like it.” Erik loved seeing that smile. The quiet moments they had together were rare, but he treasured every one of them. Moments such as the one they were sharing now: it was their anniversary, and they were enjoying a quiet dinner at their favourite French restaurant.

“Very much.” Charles hummed. “It is nice to have a night to ourselves, isn’t it?”

“Yes, without having to deal with the younger generation running around.”

“Speaking of them.” In an instant, the cheeriness in Charles’ eyes disappeared, replaced by the perceptiveness that always seemed to sense when Erik had done something wrong.

“What of it?” Erik asked, though he had a sinking feeling he knew where the conversation was heading. Sometimes he swore Charles could see right through him.

Charles tapped a finger against his wine glass, a slow tap that seemed to thud in time with Erik’s heart. “I know you far too well, my dear, and I can tell when you’re not being truthful with me. Besides, I don’t need to be a mind reader when you have guilt written all over your face.”

“Even if something *had* happened, why do you assume I was the one responsible-?”

“Indeed.” As a side effect of his profession as a teacher, Charles had the power to imbue even the shortest syllables with more reproach than most people could fit into an entire tirade.

Hell, Erik had been on the receiving end of that pointed tone enough times to know it was pointless to bluff. “I may have been involved in an… incident. A few days ago.”

Looking completely unsurprised, Charles folded his hands. “Let’s hear it, then, what have you done?”

“It wasn’t me, it was the kids.” Erik protested halfheartedly, before caving. “Alright, the five of
them got up to some mischief, but it happened under my watch. The blame rests with me, I’ll own that.”

Charles stilled. “Five… Was this the day Peter and Shuri came along for a playdate, by any chance?”

“Yes.”

“That… does give me an inkling of the sheer scale of-” Charles raised his eyebrows. “Their reputation precedes them.”

“You have no idea.” Erik steeled himself in preparation for recounting the whole sordid tale. “This is what happened last week…”

--

[One week ago]

Erik was vexed.

He’d had his eye on the perfect anniversary gift for months: a beautiful custom wood-and-metal chess set that he knew Charles would absolutely love.

After an aggravating series of delays, his order had finally arrived at the department store, and Erik wanted to collect it as soon as possible on one of his rare free days. But Clint called for a favor at the last minute, leaving Erik saddled with the precarious task of taking five hyperactive children on a playdate. No matter- Erik thought he would kill two birds with one stone and bring them along whilst he completed his errand.

Which meant, predictably, he'd taken his eyes off the kids for two seconds and they were gone. Hence the reason for his vexation.

“Wanda! Pietro! Come out, this isn’t funny. I know you roped Wade into this, too.” Erik called, stalking down the aisles like a restless tiger, the chess set under one arm.

No response. The only sound was the tinny blare of “Jingle Bells” from the overhead speakers.

Where can I get some damned service around here?” Erik grumbled to the empty air. How was there not a single staff member on duty? He hadn't seen a single person since he arrived, and the leftover Christmas decorations made the store’s atmosphere downright liminal.

The looming Santa Claus cardboard sculpture at the centre of the store seemed to mock his frustration. Erik hoped things wouldn’t escalate to the point of filing a police report and having to call the kids’ parents- Tony would most certainly have a conniption if he found out his precious baby had gone missing.
This was simply perfect.

“Verdammt.” Erik hissed as he stormed off to find the customer service desk.

Wanda ducked back into the luxury tent as her dad stomped past. It hadn't been easy to give him the slip, but she needed him out of the way for just a bit.

This was something she had to do alone.

The day she had yearned for, dreamed of… had finally come. Her weeks of preparation had paid off - the enemy had returned. At long last, she could take her revenge on the devil who had so cruelly stolen Vision from her:

Santa Claus.

Wanda glared at the Santa sculpture. The ugly cardboard thing, with its painted-on grin, leered back, its mere existence a mockery of her pain.

She had thought they had defeated the evil red man in December, but he had returned, the way all evil things seemed to.

Not anymore. They would kill him properly this time.

“Can we get out of this tent now? Shuri’s stepping on my shoes.” Pietro whined.

“Am not.” Shuri elbowed him.

“Wanda, I think we should go back. Your dad sounds really worried.” Peter tugged at her sleeve. All five of them been packed like sardines in the tent for the last twenty minutes while Erik trudged around, calling out their names.

“He’ll be okay. We have something more important to do.” Wanda brushed him off. “We have to kill Santa before it's too late.”

Peter’s jaw dropped. “We can't do that!”

“Why not?”

‘ ‘Why?!!’ ” Peter sputtered, unable to believe what he was hearing. “Because killing is wrong!!”

Wanda tossed her hair. “Wrong-schmong. You're such a scaredy-cat.”

Peter set his chin stubbornly. “You can call me names, but it's still wrong.”

“Why? Because your Dad said so?”

“Yeah!”

“Well, your dad is a-”

“Wanda, stop. Peter's right, we can't do this.” Shuri wedged herself between them before things turned violent. Peter beamed at Shuri, grateful for the support.

A grin spread over Shuri’s face. “Not unless we work together to come up with a brilliant plan!”
The hope on Peter’s face turned to betrayal so abruptly he looked like he got whiplash. “That's not what I meant! Shuri, no!”

“We have no choice! Wanda’s right, someone as dangerous as Santa can't be allowed to live. It's perfectly logical to remove him. Permanently.”

Yes. Finally, somebody was on her side. Wanda grinned fiercely. She would never forget that awful night of the living Santa statues. They had all learned the hard way that looks were deceiving.

“I already have a plan: we're going to tear Santa’s heart out and feed it to Logan.” Wanda explained. Dismemberment was the surest way to prevent Santa coming back from the grave to wreak havoc.

Shuri rolled her eyes. “That's not even twelve percent of a plan. I need details, like how we're gonna get close or what our plan of attack is! We need a real strategy.”

“Knife.” Wade nodded seriously.

“Okay, if you're so smart, what’s your plan?” Wanda challenged, folding her arms over her red dress with a scowl.

Shuri rolled up her sleeves and looked around at her friends, mentally assessing all their strengths and weaknesses. “It'll be a tough fight, but I think can do this. After all, we have the brains,” she gestured to herself. “And the brawns.” She gestured to Wanda, Wade, and Pietro.

“What about me?” Peter frowned, feeling left out all of a sudden.

“You can be the- uh, the, um…” Shuri put her tongue between her teeth. “The heart, I guess?”

“I don't wanna be that one, it's dumb.” Peter mumbled.

Ignoring him, Shuri clapped her hands together assertively. “If we go up against Santa unarmed, we'll lose, so here's the plan: Wanda, Wade, Peter and I will go to the toy section...”

“You forgot me! I wanna kill Santa, too.” Pietro demanded, elbowing past Peter to the front.

“I'm getting to that.” Shuri said impatiently, but her eyes gleamed with excitement at the chance to move them around like pieces on a chessboard. Everything seemed to crackle with intrigue, and Shuri loved it, this was just as exciting as the time T’Challa and N’Jadaka had run against each other for the student council presidency - those fights had been epic to watch.

Feeling very important now, Shuri gestured grandly. “Pietro, you have a more important job: Run around, knock over stuff. Make the biggest mess you can.”

The silver-haired boy grinned. Running around and causing chaos was what he did best.

“Pietro’s diversion will buy us enough time to sneak over to the toy aisle and raid it for weapons.” Shuri listed each step of her campaign with the brutal efficiency of a field commander.

Wade raised his hand. “Knife?”

“I'm afraid we're gonna have to make do with plastic swords. The kitchen section is too far away, all the way on another level.” Shuri said, with a touch of disappointment.

“Knife.” Wade sighed.
“Yeah, I know it's not ideal, but we'll make it work. Some of those toy swords really pack a punch...”

“Wait.” Peter raised his hand timidly. “We're not gonna... hurt anyone, right?”

“Psh, of course not!” Shuri tossed her head, occupied with planning.

Wade just grinned.

“Maybe we should call the police.” Peter argued. “They can take Santa to jail.”

Irritation made Wanda grit her teeth. She considered Peter one of her best friends, but she wished he wasn't such a boring goody-two-shoes. God, she couldn't stand how naive Peter was - being overly trusting was how you got hurt. She would never forget the lifeless look in Vision’s eyes after his head was ripped off. That was the day she'd learned the awful truth of the universe:

Order was but an illusion, law was powerless.

“The police can't help. Don't you remember what happened in December?” Wanda grabbed Peter by the shoulders, spun him around, and shoved him against the tent wall. “Santa kidnapped us, killed Vision, beat up your dad, stabbed your other dad, kidnapped Shuri again, and woulda killed you if Logan hadn't eaten him.” She shook him a little. “Where were your police then?”

Peter’s terror-filled eyes darted wildly. “Not... there?”

“Right. They couldn't do anything.” Wanda’s grip tightened, digging into Peter’s arms. “But we can. Don't you want to avenge your dads?”

“Yes?” Peter squeaked.

“Precisely.” Wanda's nose was pressed to his, giving a close-up view of the remorseless fury burning in her eyes. “We can't let Santa do it again. We have to stop him, whatever it takes.”

“Whatever it takes.” Shuri agreed.

“Whatever it takes.” Pietro echoed.

“Whatever it takes, whatever it takes, whatever it takes…” the children formed a ring around Peter, chanting in creepy symphony. “Whatever it takes, whatever it takes!”

The peer pressure was too much. Peter nervously bobbed his head. “O-okay. But nobody gets hurt, promise?”

“Yeah, sure.” Wanda nodded absently. As far as she was concerned, the only one getting hurt was an evil man in a red-and-white suit.

Santa Claus was going to die. Wanda would make certain of it.

--

[Present]

“This can only end well.” Charles leaned forward in his seat, meal forgotten.

“That's only the start of it.” Erik rested his head in one hand, contemplating ordering something stronger than wine.
“I must confess, I’m more curious as to how you're recounting the childrens’ side of the story, since they were, as you said, on the loose at that moment.” Charles remarked.

“We managed to cobble together a timeline based on CCTV footage, interviews with the manager, and the report collected by the mall cops.” Erik shook his head as he recalled the events of that horrid day. “If I’d have known what they were up to, I'd have kept closer watch…”

---

[One week ago]

“I’ve told you already, there are five of them: two girls and three boys. The last place I saw them was in the furniture section.” Erik repeated his story for what felt like the hundredth time.

The bored-looking customer service rep (‘Francis’ read the name on his tag) sighed heavily, puffing the bobble of his Santa hat out of his face. “Sir, if you'll just wait, we'll put a missing children announcement on the PA.”

“What good will that do? They're too young to even know where to go. Why haven't you delegated any team members to search for them?” Erik demanded.

“Sir, we're understaffed today-”

“There are missing children in your store! How is that not a priority?” A hint of a growl slipped into Erik’s voice as he glared at the unhelpful man.

“We're doing everything we can to-”

“Your store isn't even organized enough to take down out-of-season holiday decorations!” Erik glared at the ridiculous Santa costume Francis was wearing. “Perhaps it escaped your notice, but December was more than a few months ago!”

“Sir, could you please calm down?”

Erik was about to say something decidedly un-calm when he heard screaming.

“Grab that kid!”

“Stop him, he’s destroying everything!”

“Get over here, you little scamp!”

A silvery blur raced through the aisles, tipping over displays and kicking down mannequins. The figure flung a basketball at an aisle of jam jars, and Erik watched in horror as the entire structure came tumbling down like a house of cards, exploding into a sticky mess of fruit and glass.

“One of yours, by any chance?” Francis said with complete apathy.

“Pietro! Stop that!” Erik barked, tearing off towards the epicentre of the damage.

With his back turned, he never noticed four small figures tiptoeing towards the toy section.

---

“For Vision.” Wanda whispered, pressing a tender kiss to the blade of her plastic battleaxe. Vengeance was so close she could taste it. At last, they could make the world safe for everyone
It was a good day for death.

“Attack!” Wanda lunged forward and began beating Santa’s head in with her axe.

Wade followed next, twirling his pink unicorn wand like a berserker. Santa’s left leg crumpled under his swings.

Armed with kitty-paw boxing gloves, Shuri took a more analytical approach, directing her jabs towards the joints of the sculpture to destabilise it.

“Peter! Get over here and help!” Wanda yelled over her shoulder.

Peter was hanging back, clutching a lightsaber to his chest. “Should we be doing this? I don’t wanna kill anyone.”

Though he was too young to put words to it, Peter sensed the gravity of the decision before him, knowing that the choice he made would be pivotal in the forging of his values, for it was the eternal question humankind had grappled with and would continue to grapple with for ages to come: whether one should abstain from violence, or give in to the rage.

“He tried to kill your dad!” Wanda screamed. “Are you just gonna let him get away with it?”

Rage won.

“Don’t hurt my dads ever again!” Leaping forward with a cry, Peter swung his lightsaber, bashing the Santa sculpture’s face in until it became concave.

Wade struck the sculpture so hard the end of his wand snapped. With a joyous scream, he leapt forward- the jagged tip of the wand speared through the crotch area, sinking in all the way to the hilt.

“Knife! Knife! Knife” Wade jumped up and down ecstatically. He tried tugging the wand out but it was wedged too firmly. “Aw. Knife…”

With a snarl of pure ferocity, Wanda dropped her weapon to attack the sculpture with all her limbs. She leaped up to tear out a strip of cardboard from Santa’s throat with her bare teeth. “Die! Logan will feast on your flesh!”

“There you are, you little runaways.” A new voice, falsely-pleasant, exclaimed.

The four kids turned to see a grown-up standing over them, dressed in -Wanda’s heart skipped a beat- in a Santa outfit.

Francis automatically took a step backwards as the girl hissed at him like an angry badger. He’d expected to find a band of little lost kids, but the feral gleam in their eyes had him afraid. Very afraid.

The mangled cardboard sculpture - head pulverized, limbs half falling off their joints, a jagged shard of pink plastic impaled through a very painful-looking place - lay slumped before him like an omen. The little girl in front of him had a crazed gleam in her eyes and a shred of cardboard dangling from her teeth.

Francis swallowed hard. “Hey, kids, your father is looking for-”
“ANOTHER SANTA! KILL IT!” Wanda shrieked.

Francis screamed as four extremely blood-thirsty children fell upon him with no mercy.

--

“Pietro! Come back here, I'm not chasing you anymo-” Erik skidded to a halt, narrowly avoiding falling into a puddle of jam. He took in the scene before him in shock:

A bruised Francis sobbing face-down into the carpet, Wanda and Wade sitting on his back with Shuri and Peter each pinning down a leg.

Wanda broke into a grin and waved, jabbing her weapon repeatedly into Francis’s armpit. “Daddy, look! We defeated Santa!”

“And we all did it together! Teamwork!” Shuri said proudly and reached over to hi-five Wanda.

Wade laughed uncontrollably as he thwacked Francis in the back of the head with the broken half of what had once been a pink wand.

“No more, please, make them stop…” Francis whimpered.

The entire store looked completely post-apocalyptic. Shattered wares were scattered across the floor, shopping carts smashed into messes of twisted metal, a dismembered mannequin had gotten wedged in the ceiling somehow- its dangling feet hung in the air macabrely, and a layer of fine dust lay over everything like ashes.

Erik did a headcount and groaned internally. “Has anyone seen Pietro?”

“Um, excuse me, Mr Lehnsherr?” Peter was the only one who looked dazed by all the carnage, a dented lightsaber hanging loosely from his hand.

“Yes?”

“Pietro is-”

“Wheeeeee-” Pietro zipped through the wreckage, six store employees in hot pursuit. Something out of sight fell with a loud crash, and a fire alarm began bleeping in the distance.

Peter gulped. “-over there.”

Erik closed his eyes. So much for his fuss-free errand to pick up an anniversary present.

Right on cue, the sprinklers came on.

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[Present]

Charles rubbed his temples. “That explains the sizeable bill for property damage that I found.”

Erik’s insides squirmed. He'd hoped Charles wouldn't have discovered that part tonight, if not ever. “I reimbursed the store fully for the damage. I'm just grateful they chose not to press legal charges.”

“Indeed.” Stiffly, Charles pressed a hand to his mouth. “So this is what happens when you're in
That struck a chord of guilt. “I didn't mean for things to get out of control.”

Charles’ mouth twitched, and he curled on himself, shoulders shaking with laughter.

“Yes, yes, it's very amusing.” Erik muttered. “Anything to make you laugh.”

Wiping away tears of mirth from his blue eyes, Charles tried to vainly compose himself. “Come now, there's no need to be embarrassed. These things do happen.”

“Really? When was the last time your students decimated a department store?”

“Point. Although you'd be surprised at the amount of overlap between college students and preschoolers.” Charles got a distant look in his eyes, and a shudder ran through him.

“Never again.” Erik huffed. “The next time we're conscripted into playdate duty, you can chaperone. You're better at managing groups of young people than I am.”

Another wave of laughter overtook Charles. “I'm sorry, the image of you surrounded by all this destruction is simply- My, my, such an ordeal you've been through.”

Sighing, Erik slumped in his chair a little. “And here comes the lecture. Go on, I know you're itching to give a speech, and I know I deserve it this time.”

“Oh, darling, I think you've learned your lesson. Namely to never take your eye off a group of mischievous youngsters.” Charles chuckled again. He reached over to take Erik’s hand. “It could have gone far worse. I'm relieved none of you were hurt.”

“My card was by far the worst casualty.” Erik grumbled, though he linked their hands together. “I've grounded the twins and Wade for a month. They all need to learn that their actions have consequences.”

“How's that for a silver lining? We now have more time to spend together.”

“That's true…”

“I do love the chess set.” Charles said fondly. His eyes twinkled playfully. “I'll treasure it all the more, knowing the trials you endured to procure such a thoughtful gift.”

“Can we please never speak of this again?” Erik begged. “Especially not in front of Tony. He would probably try to sue every department store in the country into infinity. Or something similarly ridiculous.”

“Goodness, yes. The poor man is stressed out enough as is. We shall keep this escapade to ourselves.” Charles raised his glass. His lips quirked. “But I have exclusive permission to tease you about it forever.”

“Naturally.” Erik couldn’t resist smiling as he clinked their glasses together.

Chapter End Notes
Peter hugs his dads: its okay dads you are safe now
Tony and Steve: ???

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Yes, the Francis mentioned is the one from DP2
“Yay! I love this place!” Shuri cheered as Tony’s car pulled up in front of the Ice Cap ice cream parlour. “Can we get the Winter Soldier sundae again?”

“Winter Soldier? What’s that?” Wanda asked.

“It’s this cool smokey ice cream with a hundred flavors! It was thiiiiiis big!” Bounding out of the car, Peter held out his arms to convey the massive scope of the dessert. “I liked Nomad Nougat and Pym’s Pistachio Particles…”

“And M’Baklava, that’s the best one!” Shuri made a happy sound. “I wanna try the new Heart-shaped Herbal Tea sorbet…”

“No fair, you all had so much fun on Peter’s birthday. Why didn’t I get to come?” Wanda pouted as Steve helped her climb down from the car.

“You were invited! It was your own fault for getting grounded. You did kick Mr Thanos pretty hard, after all.” Shuri chided, hands on her hips.

“I did.” Wanda beamed, remembering the proudest achievement of her life.

Tony gazed at the store front wistfully. ‘Ice Cap family restaurant and ice cream parlour’ read the signboard in squiggly font. The cheerily-colored awning and six foot tall plastic ice cream statue gleamed in the sunshine, pretty as a postcard frozen in time.

“Feels like just yesterday I was here for Peter’s birthday.” Tony said in an undertone to Steve, who smiled.

“Time flies.”

Tony looked at the four kids who were milling excitedly around the store. “Tell me about it. I never thought I’d be allowed back here after they slapped us with a lifetime ban.”

Steve blinked. “Wait… you were banned? When? Why?”

“Oh, you didn’t know?” Tony waved a hand absently. “It happened because you and Stephen got into that huge fight.”

“A fight that he instigated…” Steve muttered.

“And which you escalated! The image of you both seconds from murdering each other with table utensils is forever burned in my mind.” Tony waggled a finger at Steve. “Flattering as it is to be fought over by two hunks, I’d rather not have to deal with that again today.”

With a snort, Steve caught his hand, pressing a quick kiss to the knuckles. “I promise to be on my
best behaviour this time.”

“You better, or I’ll put you in timeout.” Tony smirked. “So after I kicked you out, the waitstaff kicked me out and said to never come back.”

Steve almost dropped Tony’s hand. “What?!”

“Yeah, that was my reaction, too. They said I was causing a nuisance by bringing my domestic affairs into ‘their family-friendly establishment’. And ok, fair, we were making a scene. But come on, you’re gonna kick out a kid on his birthday? Geez…”

“I didn't know that part.” Steve uttered darkly. “Do, uh, you want to go somewhere else?”

“Nah, didn't you say you wanted to show me something here?”

“Yes, I did.” Steve hummed, suddenly looking way too innocent. “I don't think you'll be getting any trouble from them anymore.

Tony looked at him questioningly. “What's that mean?”

“Nothing.”

“What did you do?” Tony’s eyes narrowed sharply. “Steve… ”

“I handled it. You won't have to worry about being banned.” Steve’s lips curved into a small smile. “Ever again.”

“‘Handled?’” Eyes wide, Tony pulled him to one side and lowered his voice. “By ‘handled’ do you mean… did you go all Liam Neeson on someone?”

Steve looked at him confusedly. “Liam Neeson in Star Wars?”

“Liam Neeson in Taken! Abandoned warehouse with a car battery, very specific skillset, that whole shebang.” Tony looked ill. “Does that have anything to do with the freshly tilled patch on the lawn when you did the gardening last week…?”

“What? God, Tony, no. You watch too many movies.” Steve looked at him with fond exasperation. “I was serious about my promise; I don't do that anymore.”

“...Oh.” Tony said faintly.

Steve squeezed his shoulders and began to explain. “The Ice Cap has been struggling to fill a job position for months. I recommended my best friend for the job, and they were so happy with him, they said I'm welcome anytime.”

“You did that for me?” Tony asked, eyes filled with soft wonder. “Ice Cap is Peter’s favourite ice cream place, and it sucked that we couldn’t come back for ages…”

“Of course.” Steve said sincerely. Then his face darkened. “And if they still refuse to unban you, they'll have me to deal with.”

Tony nodded, curiosity satisfied. “That's great. We should we say hi to your friend if they’re on duty today-”

At that moment, the six-foot ice cream statue next to the door came to life and spoke. “Hi, welcome to the Ice Cap, have you tried our specials?”
“Shit!” Tony jumped a whole foot into the air, fists raised and ready to fight.

“Shit.” chirped Wanda.

“Shit.” giggled Shuri.

“Dad! That’s a bad word!” Peter gasped.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Wade chanted. “Shitshitshitshitshit…”

“Please don't repeat that, Erik will kill me.” Tony tried to hush them, before turning to give whoever startled him a piece of his mind.

What he'd taken to be a statue was a man dressed in a ridiculous ice cream mascot costume. The man’s face poked through the top of the foam scoops, long brown hair tied back in a bun. On his head was a red beanie with an attachment shaped like a cherry stem at the top.

“Tony, this is Bucky.” Steve smiled, lowering Tony’s raised fists.

“The best friend, I assume?” Tony grumbled.

“My bad. Tony, right? I've heard so much about you from Steve. Great to finally meet you.” Bucky reached out a gloved hand.

“Likewise...” Tony shook the hand and eyed the costume skeptically. He felt sweaty just looking at it; the thick costume had to feel like wearing a pressure cooker in the summer heat, yet Bucky wasn’t even perspiring. “You know Steve from?”

“We used to work together in-” Bucky darted a quick look left and right, then lowered his voice. “The, uh, business office...”

“Tony knows about me.” Steve said.

“Oh, okay.” Bucky’s stance relaxed. “We used to work for a paramilitary government organization doing secret spy stuff.”

Tony pursed his lips. “As you do.”

“We were in it for so long.” Bucky’s eyes had a distant look to them. “All those black ops, all the people I killed...”

Tony tugged Peter minutely behind him.

“Uh, Buck?” Steve said hesitantly. “Now might not be the right time for that talk…”

“So many people... but I remember them all...” Bucky murmured.

Tony continued to look more unimpressed at each word that came out of his mouth.

“We infiltrated governments, took out dictators, corrupt political regimes...” Bucky continued as if he was listing off picnic ingredients.

“Ever consider doing something about the current one?” Tony couldn’t resist saying.

Bucky paused, then opened his mouth. “Actually-”
“Who wants some ice cream?” Steve said hastily before Bucky could overshare any more classified information.

“Sorry. Been in the field too long, sometimes I forget what I’m saying.” Bucky bobbed his head in apology.

Tony shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Normally he navigated social situations like a pro, but right now every one of his awkwardness senses were tingling. This whole scenario reminded him, uncomfortably, of the confrontation between Steve and Stephen that had gone down in this exact same place one year ago. The only difference now was that Tony was on the other end.

*God, was this how Steve had felt then?* Tony wondered tiredly. Perhaps he'd been too harsh on Steve, it was most definitely not fun being confronted by a facet of your partner’s life that you had very obviously not been a part of.

What was it about this particular ice cream parlour that seemed to draw together uncomfortable triangles of people like some kind of Bermuda Triangle of drama?

Tony wished Steve hadn’t sprung this on him, but he didn't want to get into another argument with Steve when they’d already set a six month record for no fights. Tony fervently hoped this outing wouldn’t result in another ban; He had a feeling this one would be permanent.

Steve was watching the Tony-Bucky interaction anxiously, and Tony wasn’t sure what Steve expected him to say. But the longer and longer the silence stretched, the more Tony felt he sure that he was going to say the wrong thing.

Shuri poked one of the sponge sprinkles glued to Bucky’s knee. “Are you a real ice cream?”

Bucky turned to face her, the towering ice cream costume casting a deep shadow over the ground. Shuri took half a step back.

“My name is Winty, your friendly neighborhood Winter Buddy.” Bucky said without a single change in expression.

Shuri wrinkled her nose. “Shouldn't you be melting in this heat, Winty? It's scientifically impossible for you to exist otherwise.”

“Kid, I'm dressed as a giant ice cream cone, does it look like I know anything about thermodynamics?” Bucky replied drolly. “Wanna hear a knock-knock joke instead?”

Shuri nodded warily.

“Knock knock.” Bucky stated.

“Who’s there?”

“Snow.”

“Snow who?”

“Hm… Snow use. I can't remember.” Bucky said flatly.

Tony spun around to face Steve, horrified. “I thought you said he was your *best* friend!”

“He needed a job! Nobody else wanted to hire him.” Steve protested in earnest.
“You couldn't pay me enough to stand outside an ice cream shop in a silly costume telling jokes about snow!” Tony buried his face in his hands. This wasn't even a fate he'd wish on his worst enemy.

“You know nothing.” Bucky spoke up. “A job’s a job, and this isn't even a difficult one. Besides, I have a pretty high endurance for wearing heavy gear in extreme temperatures.”

“How about the willingness to make an absolute fool of yourself? They teach that in spy school, too?” Tony said sardonically.

“Any dignity I had atrophied years ago, so I was all set.” Bucky shrugged. The motion made his entire costume wobble. “Besides, kids like the talking ice cream cone routine.”

“You’re not serious.” Tony turned to the kids, certain they were all too smart for this brand of nonsense. To his surprise, Shuri was giggling like it was the best joke she’d ever heard, and the other kids were gazing at Bucky with newfound respect.

“Say another one!” Wanda ordered.

Bucky obliged. “How did the evil snow monster defeat his foes? A cold snap.”

Wade began jumping up and down. “More! More!”

“Where do lonely snowmen go? To the snow blower.”

Wade hooted with laughter, but Peter just looked confused. “Huh?”

Steve grimaced. “Maybe save that one for after-hours.”

“Too much?” Bucky acquiesced easily. “I’m always working on my material. It's a work in progress.”

Peter tugged on Tony’s pant leg. “I don't get it.”

“I'll explain when you're older.” Tony said hastily, and began chivvying the kids into the restaurant so he wouldn't have to hear anymore godawful snow puns. “Let's grab a seat and then you guys can bother Mr Freeze to your little hearts’ content.”

“Winty! His name is Winty.” Shuri scolded.

“I wanna play with Winty.” Wanda whined, and the other three kids echoed her.

“Inside.” Tony repeated firmly.

“I'll see you guys at the playground for my show.” Bucky waved. “Have an ice day.”

“It’s cool to meet you, Mr Winty!” Peter waved as he was led through the doors.

“Not you too.” Tony muttered.

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