Oasis
by Sholio

Summary

"There are bees on my roof. Bees, Pep."

"I think you mean my roof, as the building belongs to Stark Industries, of which I am CEO."

"The important word in that sentence was bees."

(Or: the one in which Pepper accidentally introduces Bucky to gardening therapy.)

Notes

Someone in my LJ comments (artemis_prime, I think) suggested Bucky gardening awhile back, and I just kind of ... took that idea and ran with it. Basically gen, but canon pairings (Tony/Pepper, Thor/Jane) appear in the background.

See the end of the work for more notes.

It began, as things sometimes did, with Pepper's one-sided conversation with Tony over breakfast. Breakfast, that is, for her; for Tony it was dinner, or possibly a midnight snack.
The kitchen in the Avengers tower was a vast, modern steel-and-chrome affair, sized to supply a moderately-large restaurant. Having been designed by Tony, it was largely automated. Supplies re-ordered themselves regularly and the (considerable) excess was donated to local soup kitchens and food banks. It was capable of a considerable amount of automated food preparation as well, although Pepper was pretty sure that everyone else was as distrustful as she was about letting the kitchen cook things for them. Since Tony went for "open plan" architecture, the kitchen was open to a large dining area with tasteful little tables and conversational groupings of chairs, looking out on a lovely east-facing city view.

Pepper wasn't sure if Tony expected anyone would actually use the kitchen, since "Tony" and "cooking" were not words that belonged in the same sentence; Tony's theory on meals was that if it couldn't be delivered, it wasn't worth eating. However, as more people trickled in and out of the tower, the kitchen had become one of the major social hangout spots. They never had all of the Avengers in residence at any given time, but between Avengers, significant others, friends, and various hangers-on, there were usually at least a half-dozen people around in addition to Tony, Pepper, and the few staff members who had full inner-sanctum access privileges (which consisted of Maria and Happy, at the moment).

Right now it was six in the morning and the kitchen was nearly deserted. Pepper had dragged Tony out of his workshop to make sure that he got some food and at least a little bit of social interaction with someone who wasn't a bot. Tony brought a sheaf of papers with him and was scribbling busily on his notes even after Pepper put toast, fruit, and orange juice in front of him, but she was used to that.

The only other person in the room was Bucky Barnes, who was quietly hunched over a bowl of oatmeal in a corner. He was so incredibly unobtrusive that Pepper didn't even notice him for a few minutes. Although she hadn't spent much time around him yet, she had already noticed that he seemed to make a deliberate effort to take up the smallest amount of room that he possibly could, and he almost never said anything. The only exceptions were the couple of times that she'd seen him with Steve. He was almost like a different person then: opening up, making jokes, even laughing in a quiet kind of way.

But the rest of the time, he was like he was now: hunched in a corner, arms corralling his bowl of cereal like he thought someone was going to take it away from him. He was wearing an oversized gray T-shirt that might be Steve's, with a couple of slight bulges that were almost certainly knives or guns tucked away, and his loose hair was down in his eyes. Pepper had spent too much time around dangerous people not to be aware that, although he seemed to be fixated on his food, he was actually watching her and Tony while pretending not to watch them. She gracefully let him think she didn't notice.

"I've been looking into green roofs," she said as she joined Tony with a cup of coffee and a bowl of yogurt and fruit.

Tony made a faint inquiring noise without taking his eyes off the plans he'd now spread out to take up most of the table. Pepper, undaunted, slid them to one side to clear off a space for herself.

"I really think, since Stark Industries is a leader in clean energy and green tech, that we need to look into landscaping the roofs of all our properties. Leading by example, you know. This building is the logical place to start. We've definitely got the physical infrastructure to support it -- I checked already -- and the cooling effect on the building alone ... Tony are you listening."

"Yes Pep," Tony said absently, reaching for a piece of toast.

"We could also supply not only our own fruit and vegetable needs, at least for locally grown
varieties, but enough to donate as well -- I was thinking that school lunch programs might be a good option. At market value for fresh, organic vegetables, that could be a decent write-off. .... Also, I think you should know that I've been offered two million dollars to appear in a porn video with Rhodey. He's already said yes."

"Sure, fine," Tony said, crossing off something on the plans with a red marker. Pepper waited. After a moment Tony glanced up and said, "I bet you think that means I wasn't listening, but actually, my only condition is that I get a demo copy before it goes public."

"Green roofs," Pepper said patiently.

"You don't need my permission, Pep."

"I know, but I like to let you think you have a say in the decision-making around here."

"Oh, well, in that case ..." Tony waved a hand. "Go ahead, knock yourself out, grow some rutabagas or balaclavas or whatever."

Out of the corner of her eye, Pepper noticed Bucky's mouth tug up in a tiny grin. He was definitely listening to them. An ordinary person would have been too far away to hear them clearly, since they weren't being loud, but she'd noticed -- though she was pretty sure she wasn't supposed to have noticed -- that Steve seemed to have sharper hearing than most people, so it stood to reason that Bucky did too.

One of the things that Pepper had been surprised to learn about herself was that she did, apparently, have a talent for managing people. A big part of people-wrangling, she'd realized over the years, was intelligently delegating -- not just passing off tasks to people, but giving them tasks that made them shine, and made them realize they could shine. And right now, she was getting one of those odd little flashes she sometimes got, which told her this person could do this, even if everyone says you're crazy for thinking so.

"Do you know anything about gardening?" she asked, looking directly at Bucky and pitching her voice to carry.

As soon as he realized she was talking to him, his shoulders hunched and his head ducked lower. Pepper waited. Tony had his head down, scribbling busily on his plans like he was the only person in the room, but Pepper would bet the last donut in the kitchen that he was listening to every word.

She tried to project an air of mild curiosity, as nonthreatening as she was capable of (which was very), and after a moment, Bucky said quietly, "My ma used to, in window boxes. Steve and me, we kept some basil and things in pots. Everybody did back then."

"Do you think it's something you might like to learn more about?" Pepper asked.

Bucky raised his head, tossing the hair out of his eyes. The stare he gave her was more direct than she was used to getting from him, and there was challenge in it. "Why?" he asked.

Without looking up, Tony said, "I can answer that one. It's because you're here, you're handy, and you don't look like you're doing anything. In Pepper's opinion, idle hands need to be filled with gardening tools, or whatever her pet project -- ow!"

Pepper let go of his ear and then stole his last piece of toast.

"I know I don't pay rent --" Bucky began, his hunched posture getting even more defensive.
"Please don't listen to Tony," Pepper said, tearing the toast in half and putting the more buttery half back on Tony's plate. "Ever. For any reason. It has nothing to do with that; it's simply that I could really use some help with this project and you seemed interested. You can say no, and you can also take some time to think about it. If it would help, I can forward some articles on basic rooftop landscaping to your StarkPhone."

Bucky thought about it. Then he said, "Okay, do that."

Pepper reached for her phone.

***

The topic didn't come up again for a few days, although whenever Pepper had a spare few minutes she Googled, or asked her secretary to Google, for interesting articles on rooftop gardens, the heat island effect and so forth, and forwarded them to b.barnes@starktower.network.

In all honesty she was reasonably sure he wouldn't go for it. Which would be fine; it wasn't an urgent project, and it was one that could easily be delegated to one of the R&D floors.

And she wasn't thinking about it at all when an altercation broke out in her outer office, followed by her office door opening to reveal Bucky Barnes. Pepper slipped her hand out from under her desk, where her finger had been hovering over the panic button which was a direct line to Tony's personal phone.

"I'm sorry," was the first thing Bucky said. "I think I might've broken your secretary a little. I'm really sorry."

Pepper's secretary, in addition to typing a hundred and fifty words a minute and being one of the most organized people she'd ever met, was a 200-lb retired Marine with a black belt in several disciplines. (Following the Malibu incident, security at Stark Industries had been stepped up a notch.) Pepper touched the office intercom. "Ray."

"Ms. Potts," came the breathless response after a moment. "I've summoned security --"

"Please tell them to stand down, Ray," Pepper said. She looked up at Bucky, who was hovering in the doorway trying very hard to look harmless and failing utterly. "What happened?"

"He asked if I had an appointment," Bucky said. "I said I probably didn't need one because, uh, I was kind of a friend of a friend, sort of, and he tried to throw me out and I ... didn't react well to that."

Pepper chewed on her lip, then touched the intercom again. "Ray, do you need medical assistance?"

The reply was less out of breath, but very tight. "No, Ms. Potts, I don't believe so."

"Ray," Pepper said, her eyes on Bucky, "your reaction to a simulated threat situation was very prompt; I'll put a note of commendation in your file. Please make an appointment with Ms. Hill for additional hand-to-hand training -- once a week, or whatever works for your schedule. And also, please review the updated file of Tower residents at your convenience." She closed the connection and nodded to Bucky. "Come in and shut the door, please."
He did, rather nervously. "Should I have made an appointment? I didn't think of it."

"No, that's all right." Usually her appointment calendar was booked months in advance. In fact, she had one with the CEO of a major Malaysian electronics firm in five minutes. She held up a finger to Bucky, bashed out a three-line email stating the appointment would need to be rescheduled without offering an explanation, and cc'd Ray on it. Then she smiled at Bucky. "Ray likes chocolate chip cookies with macadamia nuts," she said. "Please make sure that he gets some in the next few days, and make sure he knows they're from you."

"I ... don't understand."

"As an apology," Pepper said. "Food is an excellent mender of fences. I'm proceeding on the assumption that you didn't really mean to hit him."

"I don't respond well to people touching me aggressively," Bucky said.

"Duly noted," Pepper said, and she meant it; the file of Avengers Tower residents for the SI security staff contained a number of notes along those lines. She reminded herself to add to it -- and to make sure Bucky was on the list to begin with. "Please have a seat. What did you want to see me about?"

Bucky hesitated, then took the chair in front of Pepper's desk, and she realized as he did so that this was the first time she'd ever seen him outside the communal levels of the Avengers' floors. Theoretically, she knew he must go other places sometimes, but it didn't seem to happen often, and from his overall air of nervousness, he seemed to be uncomfortable with it too. Although maybe that was because of having punched her secretary. When Bucky slipped a file out from under his arm, Pepper noticed that the knuckles of his flesh-and-blood hand were bruised and scraped.

"Do you want some ice for those?"

He looked blank until she nodded to his hand. "No, it'll heal," he said impatiently, and opened the file. "I was thinking about some designs for that rooftop garden thing."

As soon as he began to spread out papers, Pepper could tell that not only had he read what she'd sent him, but he must have been doing research on his own as well. In fact, it looked like he'd hardly done anything else for the last five days. His drawings were somewhat clumsy, but filled with details which had been meticulously colored with colored pencils. (Almost certainly borrowed from Steve. She couldn't help wondering how that conversation had gone down.)

"I was thinking we could route the drainage systems around like this, so we can filter and reuse the water," Bucky said, pointing to various bits of the diagrams. "And the upper part of the tower can be refitted with rainwater collectors -- here and here, maybe here -- which will also reduce the need for irrigation. Of course, you'll need to make sure the approach to the landing area is clear for the Iron Man suits and quinjet and that sort of thing. We could only put tall things over here by the side of the building, where they won't be in the way of flying things and the wind won't break the branches, which is why the fruit trees --" He broke off and looked at her somewhat anxiously. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to -- I mean, of course all of this can change. Or we don't have to use any of it."

"No, no," Pepper said, breaking out of her paralysis. "This is good. It's very good." There were some aspects of the aesthetics that she could see right off the bat were going to have to change -- Bucky was no professional landscape architect -- but all his plant choices seemed to be appropriate for the climate, and she really liked the way he'd set up the underlying soil retention and drainage areas. "Can I keep these? I'd like to look over them and make some suggestions. But I think this is a very solid start to the project. Much more than I was expecting so quickly."
"Yes, of course." She couldn't quite read him -- relieved? pleased? neither? -- as he shoveled everything back into the folder and passed it to her.

"I'll probably take a little while to get these back to you," Pepper said. Another thing she'd learned about people management was *When they're enthusiastic, don't let them lose momentum*, so she added, "In the meantime, why don't you see if you can get me a rough ballpark price tag for all of this? I know it won't be exact, but if you could look up the cost of the plants and so forth, I can have an estimate rolled into the next quarter's budget. Anything you're not sure about, just fudge it, and we can get specifics later."

Bucky looked nervous again and she hoped she hadn't overloaded him -- nothing in his training, as either the Winter Soldier or Sergeant James Barnes, could possibly have prepared him for business accounting -- but he said, "Okay, Ms. Potts," so she figured she'd just have to go with that.

"You can call me Pepper," she said. "Do you prefer to be called Bucky or James?" She'd heard different people call him both.

He mulled over the question as if it was a difficult one. Maybe it was. "It depends on a lot of things," he said at last. "Bucky works, I guess."

***

She had Ray scan the folder's contents and forward it to a reputable landscaping firm that specialized in green roofs, because she was no expert herself and the last thing she wanted to do was build something that would cause the top floors of the building to buckle in the first snowstorm. They got back to her with impressive speed -- the Stark Industries name had a way of opening doors -- with some suggestions for redesigns of various aspects of the project, but in general it seemed like Bucky's basic design was pretty functional, if not exactly pretty.

Also, Bucky emailed her a price estimate with an incredibly detailed spreadsheet attached. He'd included everything from the websites where he'd done his virtual plant shopping to the approximate lengths of time it would take to get various aspects of the project delivered and installed. His singlemindedness was either impressive or terrifying.

On the other hand, what did he really have to do all day? Unlike some of the Avengers -- Bruce, say -- he didn't have specific projects to keep him busy, at least none that she knew about. Pepper wondered if he had anything to do other than work out and watch Netflix. For someone whose life, as she understood it, had been entirely goal-focused with absolutely no free time for a very long while, that must be a strange adjustment.

Maybe he'd been craving someone to give him a mission, even if the mission was "gardening".

Which made Pepper vaguely concerned that, at this point, if she left Bucky without a specific gardening-related task for too long, he might go freelance and she could end up with a wheatfield on one of the common floors or something. (Not that she would really mind that so much. The problem, she suspected, wasn't so much the possibilities that she could imagine; it was the ones she couldn't.) She sent him an email saying that she'd go over the plans with him in the next day or two. Reminding herself that she had gotten into this of her own free will, she took the file up to her suite that night -- her Tony-less suite, since Tony was in California for something or other -- and sketched out a very quick schematic of her modified version of Bucky's plans, incorporating some of what the
landscape architects had given her and some of her own aesthetic improvements.

By the following afternoon she'd managed to clear a bit of time in her schedule without alienating too many powerful people or world leaders, mostly by kicking things downstairs to Hill, who was turning out to be a remarkably useful person to have around. She'd also gotten six emails from Bucky over the course of the day suggesting cold- and wind-tolerant landscaping plants that had not been included in the original plans, and in one case linking her to a website on an urban gardening symposium that was going to be held in Manhattan next month -- she wasn't sure if he wanted to go, if he thought she should go, or if it was just a vague FYI, since most of his links came without any useful explanatory information. Or subject lines.

"JARVIS, where is James Barnes right now?"

"Mr. Barnes is on the floor he shares with Captain Rogers," the computer reported. "He is awake and has not left instructions not to be disturbed."

One of the conditions that had been set before anyone moved into the Tower, temporarily or otherwise, was that JARVIS wouldn't be allowed to keep close tabs on the residential floors. Or rather, Pepper suspected, he simply wasn't allowed to share information, beyond people's general location and whether or not they were accepting visitors. She also suspected that Tony could easily circumvent the restrictions if he wanted to, but everyone had been allowed the illusion of privacy, at least.

She'd never been to Steve's floor. Tony had offered both Sam and Bucky their own floor if they wanted one, or at least their own wing on a floor that wasn't Steve's -- "We can clear off the soft scientists from 34 and 35, they're not doing anything useful down there, actually I've been meaning to fire them anyway" -- but so far neither of them had taken him up on it. And Pepper understood why, a lot better than Tony did, she suspected. From the point of view of anyone who hadn't grown up with more cash than a small island nation, any one of the residential floors was big enough to accommodate all of the Avengers plus a girl's soccer team. Tony had provided basic furnishings and interior design (or, rather, had hired people to do it) but in a way that made it worse, because most of the Avengers were not people with any particular interest in filling their own living spaces with stuff, which meant that the residential floors consisted largely of nearly empty, minimally decorated rooms.

Even so, everyone had their own general style. She'd been to Bruce's floor, which was starkly white and empty by design -- very Zen -- and she visited Thor and Jane's semi-regularly when they were in residence, where Thor seemed to have flung himself cheerfully into making the whole place over as a sort of Asgard-away-from-Asgard, with lots of gilding (fake? she didn't ask) and large taxidermied animals staring at people from corners. Steve's floor, when she stepped off the elevator in a foyer that could have easily held the aforementioned soccer team, struck her as a very rich person's idea of modest 1930s-inspired decorating. There were gorgeously polished wood floors, period prints on the walls, and a mint-condition Victrola on an oak display stand.

"Hello?" she called, venturing down a short hallway off the main foyer that ended in a large sitting area with a panoramic city view. In retrospect, she possibly ought to have called ahead. She didn't really want to make a formal appointment -- she was going for more of a casual drop-in atmosphere - - but she also didn't want to startle someone in the shower. She was just opening her mouth to have JARVIS do it when Steve appeared from an open doorway off to her right, in a T-shirt and jeans with a book in one hand.

"Pepper! Can I, uh, get you something?"

"Actually, I'm here to see Bucky," she said. "Not that it isn't nice to see you too, Steve."
Steve, being Steve, recovered with barely a pause, though she did see the pause, and she wondered if Bucky ever got any visitors at all. "His side of the apartment is over this way."

The door was shut. She knocked and called Bucky's name, then glanced at Steve when there wasn't an answer.

"I know he's up," Steve said. "He doesn't mind if you just walk in. I mean, I do, usually, if he hasn't said not to."

Yes, but you've known him since 1925, she thought, but she squared her shoulders and cracked open the door.

The door opened onto a large sun-drenched room that seemed to run along most of the building's south side. Based on the original floor plans she'd seen, it looked like a wall or two had been knocked out. The outer wall consisted mostly of huge windows, and the floor had a deep, very soft kitten-gray carpet that swallowed her shoes.

The room was about as messy as someone could get when they didn't have very many belongings and had a vast space to put them in. A pair of sweatpants were crumpled on the floor near the door; a towel had been dropped somewhere else. An erratic trail of books, coffee cups and colored pencils led to Bucky, who was sprawled in a sunbeam in front of the window with several books open around him.

"Oh," he said when he saw her, and scrambled to his feet, dropping his book in a splay of pages.

"I knocked," she said, and held out the file folder in front of her body by way of explaining her presence.

Steve hadn't come in, but was lounging against the doorframe. "I can get you guys coffee."

"Yes, please," Pepper said, and he discreetly withdrew.

"Coffee, okay," Bucky said, whether in belated response to Steve or because he was going down some kind of mental checklist for proper guest etiquette, she wasn't sure. "Do you, uh. Want to sit?"

There were some chairs and a sofa a short way along the window-wall, but it was pretty clear from the location of the mess's epicenter that Bucky was in the habit of sitting on the floor by the windows, so Pepper kicked off her pumps and sat cross-legged on the amazingly soft carpet. Most of the books in sight were gardening books. There were a couple of Amazon boxes with one-day shipping labels on them, discarded where they'd been opened. Bucky, after a brief hesitation, sat down a couple of body lengths from her. He was barefoot in sweat pants, his hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and clearly ill at ease; he kept making motions as if he was starting to tuck his metal hand behind him, and then aborting the movement. Her "just casually drop by" plan was looking worse and worse all the time.

"I hope it's okay, me just stopping in like this," she said.

"Oh yeah, it's fine," Bucky said. He fiddled nervously with the books nearest to him, closing them and setting them in a stack on the carpet. "I've been doing a little, um. Research."

There were some chairs and a sofa a short way along the window-wall, but it was pretty clear from the location of the mess's epicenter that Bucky was in the habit of sitting on the floor by the windows, so Pepper kicked off her pumps and sat cross-legged on the amazingly soft carpet. Most of the books in sight were gardening books. There were a couple of Amazon boxes with one-day shipping labels on them, discarded where they'd been opened. Bucky, after a brief hesitation, sat down a couple of body lengths from her. He was barefoot in sweat pants, his hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and clearly ill at ease; he kept making motions as if he was starting to tuck his metal hand behind him, and then aborting the movement. Her "just casually drop by" plan was looking worse and worse all the time.

"I hope it's okay, me just stopping in like this," she said.

"Oh yeah, it's fine," Bucky said. He fiddled nervously with the books nearest to him, closing them and setting them in a stack on the carpet. "I've been doing a little, um. Research."

"I can see that," she said, tugging the nearest book around so that she could see the cover: Landscaping in New York: The Complete Guide to Trees, Shrubs and Ornamental Plants. There were sticky tabs on a number of pages.

Steve came in with three cups of coffee balanced awkwardly in his big hands. "I wasn't sure what
you took in yours, Pepper. I can get cream and so forth."

"Just black is fine, thanks," she said, accepting a cup.

"A woman after my own heart," Bucky said. He sounded a little more relaxed now, like he'd finally managed to boot up the "social banter" side of his brain, or possibly that was just something that happened in Steve's presence. "Steve likes his coffee in the modern style: polluted with everything he can find to stir into it."

"I can also drink it black." Steve nudged Bucky's ankle with his sock-clad toe -- a less charitable observer might have called it a kick. "Just because we boiled grounds in a tin coffeepot on a gas ring back in the day doesn't meant that's the only way to take it."

"I'm a traditionalist," Bucky said.

Pepper took an experimental sip of her coffee just to make sure it didn't have a boiled-in-a-tin-pot sort of ambiance, but it was actually quite good. Expensive, she guessed.

"He eats Lucky Charms from the box," Steve told Pepper. "By the handful. By the boxful, actually. Coffee is the only thing he doesn't like sugar on."

"Since you've decided to be a third wheel anyway, pull up a floor," Bucky said, then gave Pepper a slightly anxious look. "Do you mind if Steve sticks around? He's interested in this too."

It looked more to Pepper like Steve was chaperoning, but if Bucky didn't mind, she decided not to be bothered by it. She wondered if Bucky was more concerned about protecting her from himself, or himself from her. "Sure," she said, shuffling over a bit. She spread out the folder and its contents in the middle of the triangle thus formed by the three of them. "I hope you don't mind, Bucky -- I ran it past a professional landscaping firm so they could point out any flaws in the design. They thought it was great, just had a few minor changes which I've incorporated into my revised design."

"Oh, no, it was just a preliminary idea, I was expecting it to change," Bucky said, and then, "They said it was good?"

"Very few changes," Pepper assured him. She separated out his original set of master drawings and laid them side-by-side with her amended copies, pointing out where changes had been suggested and why. She hadn't been sure how he'd react -- she'd dealt with too many prima-donna designers not to be apprehensive about giving constructive criticism to someone who could kill people with their bare hands -- but quickly discovered that she need not have worried. Bucky was curious, interested, and didn't take long to jump into the "amend the plans" game himself, pulling over books to point out pages he'd marked up and things he'd circled.

Somewhere in the middle of it, Steve very quietly got up, gave Pepper a little smile, and wandered out.

***

Pepper's next step was to have a team of structural engineers take a look at the roof and make sure it could handle what they wanted to do to it without crumbling, profoundly interfering with the building's cooling equipment and so forth.
In the normal course of events, it might have taken months to arrange an inspection, but this was a building which happened to be full of the nation's best and brightest engineers, all on the Stark Industries payroll. The problem wasn't finding people to inspect the roof; it was trying to convince people that they wouldn't actually be impressing anyone if they did it on their off time.

In any case, two days later she and Bucky were up on the roof with a sheaf of inspection reports, squinting in the glare reflected from the gravel on the roof's top tiers. The layered design of the building's roof made rooftop landscaping more challenging as well as more interesting. Far below her, Pepper glimpsed the edge of the helipad. She hadn't realized it was quite so far down. At one point there had been a plan to put a free-standing penthouse apartment up here -- Pepper distinctly remembered that having been brought up as an option -- but she and Tony liked their suite where it was, even after the Loki-necessitated redesign.

"I was thinking maybe installing stairs connecting the different levels of the roof," Bucky said, peering over the edge. "Or, I don't know, stair-step terraces or something. So it's kind of like a multi-level park?"

"I like that idea," Pepper said. "But really, it's your project. As long as you stay within the engineers' design parameters, you can go wild up here. You're in charge."

There was a flash of dark, depreciating humor on his face. "Sure you trust me with your building?"

"Only the roof," Pepper said, but she smiled. "I wouldn't have put you in charge of the project if I didn't." After giving that a moment to sink in, she said, "Having said that, I know it's challenging to manage a large project for the first time, and if you have any questions, feel free to bounce them off me. In the understanding that it's ultimately your decision except where it comes to the actual structural integrity of the building, or anything that would get Stark Industries sued."

Bucky paused, seemed to think about it, and finally said, "I don't know if it would be better to start at the top and work down, or -- well, I don't know. Where to begin." He looked at her, and while it was a hesitant look, it was more questioning than nervous -- certainly better than the way he'd been tiptoeing around her like he thought she was going to throw his plans in the trash can at any moment.

"We're slightly out of my bailiwick too," Pepper admitted. "My gardening expertise is mostly limited to watering houseplants, and I'm not terribly good at keeping them alive. What makes the most sense to you?" Bucky hesitated, and she said, "That's not a trick question. I really don't think there's a right and a wrong way to go about it. For myself, I've found that with large projects it's usually best to break them into smaller parts and start with the one that seems the most manageable."

"Like landscaping this top part, maybe?" Bucky suggested, looking around at the bare expanse of gravel extending to the roof parapet.

"I think that might be where I'd begin," Pepper agreed. "But it's not my project; it's yours."

His smile was sudden and bright, like a flash of sunshine, lighting up his whole face.

***

As quickly as Bucky had put the plans together, it shouldn't have surprised her that the initial stages of the rooftop gardening project proceeded by leaps and bounds, too.
Pepper hadn't really planned to be involved; she meant to stay out of it, but she hadn't counted on how much fun it would be to go up to the roof whenever she could squeeze a bit of time out of her schedule to see how things were taking shape. The early parts of the project were done by a hired construction crew -- installing water tanks and pipes, putting in the new stairs -- and Bucky's presence on the roof tended to be limited to occasionally showing up to testily correct something he thought they were doing wrong before vanishing again. But he was always there in the morning until they came in, and after they left for the day, he'd come back topside and stay until after darkness settled over the city. Pepper had never enjoyed physical labor, but there was a certain contentment in spending a half-hour or so helping Bucky empty bags of dirt into the new retaining walls for the raised flowerbeds and rake it flat. She came back down to the master suite smudged with dirt and thinking she probably needed to schedule a manicure to fix the damage to her nails, but she also had the same pleasant burn in her muscles that she got after a good workout at the gym, and a deeper, more satisfying glow of contentment.

She was pleased to find Tony in the suite -- back from California -- but somewhat less pleased when she noticed he had the rooftop camera feed open on the main console. The fact that he'd left it open probably meant he wanted her to notice, so she decided to oblige. "Were you watching me and Bucky? Do we need to have the jealousy talk again?"

"It's not jealousy," Tony said. "It's earnest concern. Very earnest. Is this a regular thing, putting on gardening gloves and going up to rake topsoil with our local killer-in-residence?"

Pepper stripped off her silk shirt and woefully regarded the smudges on the sleeves before she said, "Yes, that doesn't sound like jealousy at all."

"I'll let the jealousy remark go -- again -- because contrary to belief, I am capable of being the bigger person. The issue, Pep, is that I think you should consider taking some security precautions."

Pepper looked up to see where Tony's expression rated on the Tony Stark scale of facetious to serious. Unfortunately, he looked more serious than she'd seen him in any situation short of an alien invasion. "Oh, Tony, come on. Bucky's not going to hurt me."

"Really? You're sure of that?" She made a face at him. "Look, Pep. I like Barnes. Everyone likes Barnes. He's a likable guy. But he is also, and I feel I cannot stress this enough, a very well-trained killing machine who has killed a lot of people over the last seventy years, really a lot of people, Pepper, two of whom may or may not have been my parents -- and I am surprisingly, well, not okay with that, precisely, but capable of not holding it against him. HYDRA and all. Still, if you're going to be on the roof alone with him, I'd like to put a suit up there with you."

Pepper waited for him to wind down before saying, "Tony." Her voice was gentle, but there was steel underneath. "You don't tell me what I can do -- and especially what I can't do. You don't treat me like a china doll. That's not ... that isn't 'let's negotiate this like adults', that is completely off the table, and you know it."

"I do know it, but Pep --"

The blend of anger and pleading on his face was hard to take. Pepper held out her hand, palm up, and for a moment she let the fire show, a red gleam beneath her skin. It was always there, coursing through her veins, sometimes harder to keep down than others. "He can't hurt me, Tony. You know that."

"I do know it, but Pep --"

Tony turned away for a minute, shoulders stiff. Then he looked back at her and most of the anger had bled away, leaving the wry humor that was one part defense mechanism, one part natural warmth, and all Tony Stark. "How about this is one of those times when you do something kind of
stupid, something you know is unnecessary and doesn't make sense, to humor your boyfriend's completely irrational issues?"

Pepper felt the corner of her mouth pull sideways, against her will. "You do have issues, it's true."

"And you love me anyway," he said, with a little tug of uncertainty that went straight to the core of her.

She slid her arms around his chest. "I do," she said into his hair. "Yes, Tony, I will humor your completely irrational request. But if Bucky has a problem with it, I'm sending him down to talk to you."

His laugh vibrated his chest, and she pulled him against her.

***

Bucky, of course, noticed the red and gold suit unobtrusively stationed on a lower tier of the roof as soon as he stepped outside in the morning. Although it wasn't her usual habit to come up in the morning, Pepper had made a particular point of being there today, because she wanted to get the awkward conversation out of the way as quickly as possible. She noticed his subtle glances at the suit, but it took them a half hour or so of quietly raking dirt before he finally worked himself up to nodding at it with a casual, "Stark?"

"Stark," Pepper confirmed. "Sometimes it's easier to go along with Tony's whims than to fight them."

She couldn't tell Bucky's opinion of this; his face was expressionless. He nodded and tossed another bag of dirt into the wheelbarrow, maybe a little more forcefully than necessary.

"He does like you, you know," Pepper felt compelled to add. "It isn't that."

"Well, he's not wrong," Bucky said. "I'm dangerous."

"So am I."

The look he shot her was brief, the blatant skepticism just short of rude.

Pepper sighed; she understood everyone's disbelief, but it was annoying to have to prove it every time. She picked up a scrap of plastic and extended herself very carefully, unleashing a yellow tongue of flame. The plastic curled, melted, turned black and bubbled away on her fingertips.

She raised her eyes fast enough to catch Bucky's skeptical look fade to open wonder before he managed to veil it behind worldly cynicism.

"I take it no one's told you about me and Extremis yet," she said, and he shook his head.

So she told him, as the morning sun turned the world around them to molten gold, while they worked side by side with their hands in the rich dark soil. She told him the story of a woman who was unmade, taken apart and put back together differently -- a woman who died, falling into fire, and came back not quite the same.

"I didn't know that," Bucky said softly. "About you."
"They found a way to stabilize it so that it won't kill me, but they're not sure if they can take it out of me. I know Bruce is still working on that, but ... I don't know if I want it gone. It's complicated. There's a part of me that really wants to be me again, and then there's a part of me that says this is me, and taking it away would ..." She hesitated, combing her fingers through the dirt. "I was going to say make me less, but I don't think it's even that, exactly. It's more that it feels like this is mine, all the terrible parts and the good parts, and sometimes I'm as angry at the idea of having it taken away from me as I am that they did it to me in the first place."

The only other person she'd ever explained it out loud to before was her therapist. Somehow it was different saying it to someone who wasn't paid to listen, someone she saw more often than once a week for an hour in a controlled setting.

"Yeah," Bucky said. He sank his metal hand into the soil up to the knuckles and closed it slowly, dragging the dark loamy dirt between his fingers. "That's what it's like."

Pepper looked up at the sky. The sun had climbed above the buildings; the workmen would be here soon. "Want to get breakfast?" she asked suddenly. "Not in the Tower. I know a nice place just down the street, kind of a hole in the wall, not trendy enough that it's usually so crowded you can't get a table."

Bucky looked uncertain, but said, "All right. I guess I could eat." His eyes darted to the suit on the corner of the roof, and he said with a visible effort, "Do you think -- Tony ... might like to come along? If he's up."

"He's probably still awake, and I'm sure he hasn't eaten yet." Pepper pulled out her phone. "I'll text him and see if he wants to go."

As it turned out, he was, he hadn't, and he did.

***

Days went by and the core infrastructure of the garden was finished -- tanks and drainage and stairs connecting the upper and lower levels -- which just left an infinite amount of repetitive, dirty, sweaty labor that could only be done by hand.

Pepper found it interesting, though not terribly surprising, to watch the garden slowly becoming a community project. Bucky was still pretty clearly in charge, and it intrigued her to notice that no one ever questioned that, including Bucky himself; everyone seemed to tacitly accept that if they had questions about where things went, Bucky was the one they went to. But now he had an ever-changing roster of assistants that included nearly every one of the Tower's permanent and temporary residents at some point or another.

Steve was a constant, of course, especially when it came to making Bucky get under shade and drink water -- it was now July in Manhattan, and Bucky (she heard secondhand) actually did give himself a mild case of heatstroke at one point. And others among the volunteer gardeners were no surprise either. Gardening was right up Bruce's alley, and of course Thor and Sam were both the type to pitch in wherever something needed doing. But she also came up to find Clint patiently planting vegetable seeds, or Jane very meticulously landscaping a tiny, perfect Japanese garden in a corner, complete with a tilting bamboo waterspout. Natasha and Tony never participated in the actual work, but they did drag lawn chairs to the roof to hang out and watch the activity.
It was a slow, on-again, off-again process. There were always interruptions for terrorists and aliens and all the things that life was now made up of. But one piece at a time, the garden took shape from bare gravel to a living, growing, green place, with winding paths and benches and little shade pavilions with flowers under them.

***

"I'm thinking about getting some bees," Bucky said.

Pepper glanced at him in surprise. The gardening contingent this morning consisted of her, Darcy, Bruce, and Steve, but the rest of them were down on the next tier of the roof, spreading dirt for the fruit trees that were being delivered in a few days, so it was just her and Bucky transplanting baby petunias on the top level. "Bees?"

"They're legal in Manhattan," Bucky said. "I checked. And domestic bees are really tame -- I was reading about it, they don't really ever sting people unless they're bothered. And they're really good for the ecosystem."

Pepper could imagine Tony's expression when he heard about this, and that was enough to make her smile all by itself. "Knock yourself out," she said.

***

"There are bees on my roof. Bees, Pep."

"I think you mean my roof, as the building belongs to Stark Industries, of which I am CEO."

"The important word in that sentence was bees."

"Pass the milk, please, Tony."

***

The thought crossed Pepper's mind, as the garden spread piece by piece across the building’s stepped roof, that she'd accidentally signed Bucky up for a never-ending process. Gardening was just never done, especially in a place with New York's extreme seasonal temperature swings. She wasn't sure if Bucky had realized it yet, that getting the garden established was just the first part. There would always be soil to fertilize, perennials to tuck in against the winter and new seeds to plant in the spring, branches to be pruned and fruit to be harvested and dead flower heads to be nipped off. Honey to be harvested .... The bees had turned out to be as unobtrusive as Bucky had promised; no one had been stung yet, and their contented hum added a pleasant tone to the atmosphere on the roof. Some butterflies had begun to appear now too. Pepper wasn't sure if they were volunteers or if Bucky had introduced them like the bees. She knew he'd added a batch of ladybugs to keep the
insect pests down.

In the end she supposed it didn't really matter. If Bucky and the rest of them ever got sick of their new toy, Stark Industries could afford to hire an army of gardeners to keep it looking beautiful.

They held a garden-warming party when they finally got all of the basic landscaping laid in. The work wasn't done by a long shot -- there were lots of bare places and blank, unplanted garden beds, and though the days were still warm, autumn's chill had begun to develop a sharp edge at night. Also, Pepper thought it was probably kind of pointless to have an official opening ceremony since everyone had been participating more or less since the project grew legs. But they'd had a rough few weeks -- most of the fighters in the group were still a bit singed from their most recent battle, with Natasha nursing a broken arm -- and for once they were all here, which was an opportunity that couldn't be passed up.

Pepper helped Steve and Darcy string lights around the garden -- there were some lights already installed, and would be more when the shipment of old-fashioned light posts to go along the garden paths came in, but the strings of white bulbs lent such a wonderful festival atmosphere that Pepper thought maybe she'd ask Bucky what he thought about making them permanent. Tony had it catered, of course, so there was gourmet-quality food and a full-service bar. There was also music -- she'd talked Tony out of hiring a live band, so it was amusing to tell who was operating the sound system by whether it was blasting AC/DC, the Temptations, or .... some sort of chanted Asgardian folk music ...? In any case, there was ample space to dance in the open gravel area that would eventually contain greenhouses. Pepper got Tony to take her out and spin her around; then she danced with Thor for a few turns around the dance floor before pleading exhaustion and wandering off to find a quiet bench in a dark corner of the garden where she could kick her shoes off.

After a while, Bucky joined her. He was carrying a drink in his metal hand and looked a little pinched around the edges -- dealing with this many people had to be exhausting for him -- but he was also smiling.

"You made a thing," Pepper told him.

"We made a thing," Bucky corrected her, and she could tell by the way his eyes roved around that his we wasn't just for the two of them, but encompassed the whole group. So she looked too, at Thor tossing Jane ten feet in the air on the dance floor (to Darcy's shriek of "Look out for the edge! What! Stop!"); at Natasha and Clint lounging by the bar, comparing scars; at Sam and Rhodey up on the top tier of the garden, Sam strapping on his wings, clearly in the process of daring each other to some kind of flying-related competition while Steve and Tony watched (and, if she knew either of them, probably egged them on).

"Yes," Pepper said. "We did."

"I think the next thing I want to put in is a goldfish pond," Bucky said. "Or -- they're called koi, right, the ornamental kind? Maybe over by Jane's Japanese garden. It would look nice there. Do you think Tony would mind having fish on the roof?"

"If he can get used to bees, I don't think fish will be a problem. They'll have to be taken in during the winter, though, or else the pool will need to be heated."

"I know," Bucky said. "I'm looking into different designs, but there's a lot of planning yet to do. It probably won't be this year. Next spring, maybe."

It was the first time she'd heard him make plans that far in the future. Another thing about gardens, she thought. They're made for long-term thinking. The new apple and cherry trees that had been
planted in the building's lee wouldn't bear fruit for years yet. Gardens were not something you planted and then forgot about. They made you put down roots; they made you think about next year, and the year after that.

They sat in a companionable silence until Darcy came running to haul Pepper off the bench to "please, talk some sense into Thor, he's going to throw Jane over the edge and then he's going to be really really sorry, but not as sorry as Jane."

Later, after a moratorium had been declared on dancing for the evening, Pepper was hanging out near the bar watching Natasha trounce Clint, Steve, and Sam at poker, when Tony's arms suddenly snaked around her waist from behind. She grinned and leaned back against him; he rested his chin on her shoulder.

With the angle of Tony's head redirecting her own, Pepper followed his gaze to the stand of spindly fruit trees, where Bucky was having a somewhat shy but enthusiastic conversation with Bruce and Maria. From the gestures, he seemed to be explaining root-stock grafting. Pepper found it disconcerting to remind herself that a few months ago, Bucky hardly ever left his room and rarely met people's eyes when he talked to them.

"You're good," Tony murmured into her ear.

"It was really more of a happy accident. Right place at the right time." She tipped back her head and smiled against his cheek. "Bucky wants a koi pond."

"First bees and now fish. Fuck my life, Pepper, why did I ever agree to any of this."

"Because you're an enormous soft touch," she murmured. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. It'll just be our secret." Just us and six floors of Avengers, she thought, nestling her head into the crook of his shoulder.

End Notes

I can also be found on tumblr (with a fic announcement blog at sholiofic). Feel free to drop by!

Works inspired by this [podfic]Oasis by madnads

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!