And I'll Give You That Safe Place to Land

by betheflame

Summary

Love is complicated but it always wins.

Before the suits and the super soldier resurrections, Pepper loved Tony. Then he ended up in a cave and got brave enough to tell her he loved her, too. Then Steve showed up and needed a family, and then Peter needed one, too.

Then there was the Winter Soldier and trips to Wakanda and battles against Thanos and through it all, they all needed a safe place to land.

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Complete fic that's essentially my re-write of the Tony & Steven centric MCU canon (Iron Man 1 - Endgame) with SIGNIFICANTLY more smooching and guaranteed happily ever afters.
December 1999

“You don’t need to work there, you know,” Ciara responded to the now-familiar rant her roommate was enjoying.

“I know,” Pepper sighed.

“No, Virginia Potts, I don’t think you do.” Ciara rolled her eyes and turned from the stove where she was tending the pasta. Using the spoon, she gesticulated towards her best friend, roommate, and person who was both the smartest and dumbest person in Ciara’s world. “You are 26 years old. A job at Stark Industries – especially one as Stark's PA – is going to get you a job anywhere else! It’s nearly the new millennium, girl, spread your wings. I get that he’s like the richest dude in our generation, but he’s also an entitled asshat who treats you like garbage.”

“He does not treat me like garbage!” Pepper protested, remembering the conversation she and her boss had not two days ago.

“Pepper,” he drunkenly slurred. “You know that I cannot function without you, right? Literally would cease functioning, which maybe Howard wanted all along, do you think he’s pulling strings from beyond the grave since I’m such a fuckup? Nevermind, do not answer that, back to you, the goddess of my entire existence. I really do know I need to do better by you.”

“Earth to Pepper!” Ciara called. “Response necessary and wipe the doofy grin off of your face.”

Pepper sighed and twirled her wine glass idly, “I love you and thank you, but I’m fine. On most days, I love my job. I love the people I get to interact with and the adventures I get to take, and I love that I’m learning more on the job than I ever would have in an MBA program, but I just don’t love when I have to clean up Tony’s…”

“Human trash?” Ciara supplied.

“Yes, human trash. I found fourteen thongs yesterday in the hot tub filter. Fourteen. The mind boggles.”

“Did he apologize?”

Pepper thinks about the mysterious oil change and complete detail that happened on her car today, along with the donation made in her name to Habitat for Humanity that she got a thank you card for without actually making the donation.

“Always, C. He always apologizes.”

“Ah. That wistful tone! That’s what I’m worried about.”

Pepper sipped her wine, “I hear you, Ciara. I promise. I just… I’m on a plane really early tomorrow morning for two days in Boston, and I…”

Ciara pretended not to understand that Pepper was trying to change the subject. “Pasta is done, get more wine, we are not finished with Tony Stark.”

No, Pepper thought, and I never will be.
“You understand that someday Pep is going to leave your sorry ass and run a company entirely on her own,” Rhodey commented as he glanced at the debris of a hangover in Tony’s office.

Tony opened one eye and glared at his best friend. Well, he hoped he glared. The tequila fog currently controlling his facial muscles might have reinterpreted the look.

“Ghreafah.”

“Does that translate to English, Mr. Stark, or do I have to turn on my dumbass translator.”

“Fuck Rhodey, I was celebrating my PhD.”

“Yeah, it’s your, what, nineteenth? Was an entire case of tequila strictly necessary?”

“Technically, I haven’t actually finished any of them before, so this would be the first.”

“Out of curiosity, if you had –“

“24.”

“Jesus Christ, Tones.”

Tony pried his other eye open, “Fuck you, Rhodey, what do you want?”

“Well, besides trying to figure out how you actually passed all those classes when you haven’t shown up for a meeting on –“

“I donated a building and got them to let me skip straight to the dissertation.”

Rhodey ran a hand slowly over his face. “You cheated your way to a doctorate?”

Tony sat up and rubbed his eyes, “I wanted to be called Dr. Stark and –“

“No, you wanted to out do your father –“

“Howard is how we refer to him around here – “

“HOWARD,” Rhodey yelled, “HAS BEEN DEAD FOR EIGHT YEARS.”

“Volume, Rhodey,” Tony mumbled as he put his head back down on the desk.

Rhodey sighed so deeply that Tony could actually feel it rustle through him. Somewhere in his tequila-soaked brain, Tony knew this wasn’t a great look for his life. He knew that this wasn’t the way to live and knew that he was on some sort of time delayed suicide mission. He just wasn’t sure he cared.

Rhodey’s hands grabbed Tony’s shoulders, the way they had hundreds of times before, and dragged Tony towards the en-suite bathroom. “Go and shower. I’ll be here when you’re done.”

“I don’t need a babysitter, Rhodey, I’m fine and I was celebrating and I’m sorry you’re suck a killjoy, oh that’s a good name, I’ll call you Captain Killjoy, that you couldn’t enjoy it with me but some of us understand that life is short and we should live it while we’re here,” Tony grandly monologued as he stumbled through the process of starting the shower and stripping off his –
admittedly disgusting – clothes.

He could hear the other man talking over the sound of the shower, but he wasn’t, frankly, all that interested in it. He knew what his friend was going to say, he just was never going to agree with him. There were things Rhodes didn’t know – things no one knew – that meant that any well-meaning advice about “cleaning up his act” were useless.

Anthony Edward Stark had been a fuck-up since, as far as he could tell, the womb and it wasn’t going to stop anytime soon.

Tony sighed deeply and let the water of the shower wash away some of the tequila fumes and tried to piece together the day before. He had, in fact, put in all the work necessary for the PhD from MIT, because he and three other professors wrote the entire program. Tony wanted to sponsor a new program in artificial intelligence, but wasn’t sure MIT had the coursework to back it up. So, he did what he always did – he meddled.

Dangle enough money in front of academics and they’ll do just about anything, including let Tony build his own program and get a PhD at the end of it. They were too thrilled with the potential endowment to question why he had to defend the thesis project and be declared a doctor on December 16.

Some days should be redeemed.

Nor did they question why he made them all sign NDAs regarding his involvement in the program. They were a little miffed he fought them on the intellectual property for his project, since technically all work conducted by students belonged to the university, but he added another zero to one check or another and the protests disappeared.

What he realized, though, as he shook the hand of the provost and heard the committee congratulate Dr. Stark, was that he had no one to share it with. He had done such an incredible job of being the Great Tony Stark, billionaire playboy who had a reputation to uphold, that he completely forgot how to be Tony, the kid who tinkered with all of his father’s inventions and made them better. God, how he missed that kid.

Plastering on the smile that should be trademarked it was so on brand, he thanked the whole committee, reminded them all about their NDAs, made a few sarcastic quips, and made his way out into the freezing, yet damp, Cambridge air.

And stopped so short in his tracks that he nearly fell over.

“How did you find me?” He snapped past the lump, a little harsher than he meant, but entirely preventing tears.

Another eye roll. “I’m your PA. I know everything.” With a wiggle of her eyebrows, she added, “Dr. Stark.”
“Yeah, no, we’re not having that. I didn’t do this for that.”

They started walking briskly towards where Happy was parked and Tony stole a glance at his PA. She looked like she had stepped out of catalogue, she was so perfect. Why the fuck did she stick around. He was a nightmare and he knew it.

“Okay, Mr. Stark,” she emphasized the degraded honorarium in her response. “Are you planning on actually attending your 3pm meeting or –“

“Pepper Potts, you wound me! When I have I ever skipped a meeting?”

“Three times yesterday, Tony Stark, and at least fourteen times last week, and then –“

“You know, hyperbole doesn’t suit you.”

She smirks a bit as they slide into the backseat of the town car. Before Tony can get a word out, Pepper says “Happy, don’t forget.”

“Forget what?” Tony demanded, a touch petulantly.

Happy and Pepper both ignored him and Happy replied calmly, “Already confirmed, Ms. Potts.”

“Hello, leaving out your boss,” Tony’s petulant tone increased.

Happy and Pepper continued to ignore him, so he launched into a diatribe about how no one respected him. He was about four seconds shy of a full Rodney Dangerfield when they arrived at the airstrip to board to SI jet to fly them all back to Malibu. Tony had told Pepper they were in town for a fundraiser that he was going to conveniently cancel after his defense and had told her to stay at their hotel that morning while he ‘wandered around for some inspiration’.

He would only admit this under penalty of torture, but he had rarely been more thankful she was smarter than he was.

“Pepper,” he began to ramble as they climbed the stairs, “I think you are forgetting that you are dealing with a level of genius so high that MENSA can’t track it, so if you think your little comment to Happy went over my head or that I wouldn’t remember – “

And for the second time today, he was dumbfounded.

“Is that…” he whispered. “Is that…”

Pepper gently pushed him forward, “a bottle of millennium edition Bushmills and a lamb burger from that place you love in Galway? Yes.”

It wasn’t the items themselves that blew his mind – although he had been asking Pepper for weeks to get him a crate of that whiskey and he really did love that lamb burger and it was from that place he and his mom had been to on his 14th birthday – it was that Pepper arranged it.

“I promise they were and are proud of you, Anthony,” she whispered quietly. “I promise.”

She said that kind of shit all the time and he usually called her a liar or something more colorful, but in that moment, he simply nodded, swallowed hard, and took a breath. “Well, I don’t want to drink alone.”

“You have no problem doing that.”
“Humor me, Pep,” he said fondly and poured her two fingers of the golden liquid.

They settled themselves across the table from one another and toasted quietly before Pepper busied herself back with her work and Tony lost himself in thought.

He spent the flight going over schematics of the new missile design and futzing around with a prototype Mp3 player he was trying to improve and stealing glances at Pepper. Maybe, he considered, he wasn’t alone after all.

But then, then they had landed. He did go to that meeting, thank you very much, and nearly snored his way through it before heading back to his office/workshop and putting some of the designs from the plane into the system. Before he knew it, 8pm rolled around and he turned around to a knock at his door.

“Sorry, Pep, of course you can leave,” he waved his hand.

“I know, Tony, it’s 3 hours after normal businesses close, so thank you for your permission, but I’m really just reminding you to answer the email from Obie before he actually camps out on your office couch.”

Then Tony looked up and noticed Pepper’s outfit.

Pepper had a date.

So Tony texted the usual suspects and told them to meet him at his office and bring tequila and Tony stopped thinking.

If he had any level of self-awareness, he would have realized he had the party at the office so that he’d force Pepper to hate him more than he was sure he does because he’s a self-sabotaging bastard. Tony Stark doesn’t traffic in self-awareness, though, just self-loathing, so he’s stuck in the shower with Rhody banging down the door reminding him that it’s a weekday and Pepper has been trying to get him to be professional for about two hours and goddammit Tony if you want to embarrass yourself could you at least do it in your multi-million dollar empty coffin of a house and not here where other people have to deal with it and you and I don’t care what day yesterday was this is pathetic…

Tony tentatively calls out “Jarvis?”

His PhD project responds, “Yes, sir?”

“Back in Black.”

“Right away, sir.”

As the guitar chords of the AC/DC classic come over the speakers in the shower, Tony hears the thud of his office door shutting. Finishing up and deciding it’s safe to go outside, Tony gets dressed into one of the (many) emergency suits he keeps on hand and re-enters his office to find Pepper quietly directing a discreet cleaning crew.

“Pep – “

“Don’t,” she holds up a hand and resumes talking to the woman in front of her. “Any items of clothing can either be laundered and donated or thrown away. I don’t care. All glass to be recycled and please take the leftover pizzas to the breakroom on the 10th floor. It’s their turn. Ignore Mr. Stark completely, and thank you.”
With a warm smile towards the woman, Pepper makes her way over to Tony.

“Don’t,” she repeats quietly. “Not here. I don’t have the time or energy because I’m sure you don’t remember 2am and I can’t. So, please, go email Obie back and go on with your day.”

“Pep –“

“Tony,” she ground out through her clenched teeth. “I can be your PA or your handler, but I’m just not sure I’m cut out for both, so please. Go. Email. Obie.”

She spun on her heel, but not before Tony could see the tears gathering in the corner of her eyes.

What the fuck happened at 2am?

Tony waited until the cleaners were done, and he instructed Jarvis to dim all the windows and pull up the video from 2am. His jaw slid slowly open and his cheeks tinged pink. He saw himself and three other women and two other men all completely naked and drinking straight from bottles. *Must have moved past the body shots part of the night,* he mused. The nakedness wasn’t the embarrassing part, nor the orgy. What was mortifying is what he was saying.

“You gonna call your mama?” Fontana said.

“Well, she’s dead, so that would be hard,” Tony said between kisses of two of the women.

“No, that blonde bitch who controls your life.”

“Pepper?”

“Yeah,” Fontana confirmed. “Small tits, great ass, total bitch.”

“Why would I call her?” Tony watched himself not challenging that Pepper was a bitch to a guy who only existed in Tony’s life because they went to prep school together.

“Because the cops just pulled up.”

Tony now watched himself wave his hand dismissively, “*My bitch will handle it.*”

And they all laughed.

“Jarvis, stop tape.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Pepper wasn’t here for that, was she?”

Jarvis paused. The AI had only been fully integrated about seven months prior and was learning quickly, but Tony already knew that this was not a good pause. “She was, sir. She had already been notified by building security that the police had been called because one of your party guests was nude on the public balcony. Ms. Potts was standing at her desk and heard the exchange.”

He ran a hand down his face, “Christ.”
“Would you like me to play more tape, sir?”

“Nope,” Tony muttered, “pretty sure I got the gist.”

“Would you like me to arrange a standard apology for Ms. Potts?”

Tony took a deep breath, “I think I need to activate Groveling Protocol, J.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“HE DID WHAT,” Ciara screamed through the phone, as she launched into a diatribe about all of Tony’s worst qualities.

Pepper held it back gently from her ear and interrupted, “Thanks, C. Not sure they heard you in Vietnam.”

“I am raging.”

“I can hear.”

Ciara huffed for a few minutes. “What do you want me to do?”

Pepper chuckled sadly, “Nothing. There’s nothing to do.”

“There’s quitting,” Ciara replied.

“Sure, and there’s throwing away years of climbing a ladder. I have no fall back plan, C.” Pepper whispered.

“You have a savings account and me,” Ciara replied.

Pepper heard a throat clearing behind her and slowly turned to see Tony lounging in his door frame.

“Ciara, I have to go,” Pepper said as she hung up the phone slowly.

“Ciara’s really loud,” Tony said sardonically.

“Among her other qualities,” Pepper mumbled.

“Pep.” Tony said quietly, “can you look at me?”

“I really don’t think I can.”

“You’re not a bitch.”

“I know.”

“Can you please look at me?”

It was only because he pleaded so quietly that Pepper raised her eyes and noticed he had moved from the doorway to right next to her. They were nearly touching noses as he whispered, “I am so sorry.”

“I know you are, that’s the problem,” Pepper whispered back. Tony looked dumbstruck. When he opened his mouth to speak, she interrupted, “You have a meeting in an hour with the head engineer from China that you actually like. You know, the one who also collected Captain America stuff?”
You guys bonded over that. Anyway, this is not the time, and I need you to trust me and give me the rest of the day off.”

Tony nodded slowly.

“You are better than this, Anthony,” Pepper continued to whisper. She cupped his cheek with her hand tenderly, “and it kills me that I’m the only one in this relationship who sees it.”

She gathered her things and said a bit louder, “Jarvis, you have control of the schedule. Supernanny protocol.”

“Yes, Ms Potts.”

Tony rolled his eyes, “I hate that name.”

“I know you do,” Pepper said with a grin as she walked away. “Remember, Captain America.”

Long after she left, and the meeting was over, and it was dark over the city. Tony poured a glass of that Bushmills – what he had quickly begun to think of as Pep’s whiskey – and stared out at the L.A. skyline.

“Sir,” Jarvis interrupted.

“What, J?”

“It is 9pm and you are the only one in the building. I have been instructed to call Mr. Happy to return you to your home.”

Tony took a sip, “Status update on Grovel Protocol?”

“Will be complete by Saturday morning, sir.”

“Okay, call Happy.”

“Of course, sir.”

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Good morning, Los Angeles, it is December 19, 1999 and our top story today is about Y2K…

Ciara leaned over and turned off the radio. “Isn’t always?”

Pepper finished her coffee and laced up her running shoes. “I’m heading out before I inevitably have to spend the day running Christmas errands for Tony. Coming or no?”

“Jesus, no, Virginia,” Ciara replied, instead grabbing another pancake from the tower she had made earlier. “You can ask every morning to go running and the answer will always be no.”

Pepper laughed and headed for the front door of their apartment. She opened the door, ready to flip on her headphones and head out, before she nearly tripped on a giant potted plant.

“What the fuck?” She murmured, before finding an envelope and opening it to familiar scrawl.

Pep –

Do you remember when we were at that conference in Thailand and we had that curry? Not the
time where I nearly died, but the other time. You asked the lady where you could get the pepper she used and she told you only in Thailand. You may have forgotten. I don’t forget things.

The gardener in Thailand said to keep it in direct sunlight and that humid conditions were the best. If it’s not above 60% humidity on a day, it needs to be spritzed. Jarvis has also sent all of this to your email, because we both know I can’t grow a fucking thing but money.

I was an ass, and I was an even bigger ass because you were so perfect in Cambridge. I’m sorry.

I understand if you want to leave. You have a letter of recommendation in your email, too, just in case this was your final straw.

You make me better, but don’t tell anyone.

Tony

“Oh fuck you, Anthony,” she muttered through tears. “Well played.”
February, 2006

“Who was your first crush?”

They were unbelievably drunk, something that happened for Pepper almost never, for Tony far too regularly, and for both of them together… well, this time was the first.

“Like, that I did anything about?” Pepper clarified.

Tony waved his sloshing glass in the air, “Nah, just the first one that you felt in your nether regions.”

“Never say that again.”

“Nether regions.”

“Tony.”

“Nether regions nether regions – “

“It’s not like Beetlejuice, you know. My vagina will not appear to you if you call for it three times.”

Oh, she should not have referenced her vagina.

Tony’s eyes sparkled mischievously, “Are we sure?”

“You are drunk – “

“So are you!” He crowed triumphantly.

“And the answer to your question is Joshua Sanders, from my first grade class. He was kind.”

Tony furrows his brow. “Kind? Your crush was on a guy you now describe as kind?”

Pepper sighed, “I have a thing for hard shells and marshmallow insides. He was also an arrogant jackass, but truly, really kind.”

Tucking that one away, Tony thought, but out loud said, “So, first time you did anything about it.”

“Um, 14, Richard Parker.”

“Richard Parker the scientist? The one who I have been trying to hire away from Oscorp for three years and you have seen oh, now a dozen times?”

“Yup.” She threw back the rest of her whiskey and went to pour more. “He’s married now, they have a kid, didn’t seem relevant.”

“You fucked a guy I’m trying to hire.” Tony sounded indignant.

“Well, considering it was our first time, we both more fumbled nakedly together, but yes. But I don’t see how that matters, since you have fucked many women we have both hired and tried to hire and I know there are a few men on your list, too.”

Pepper knew about... Tony’s brain froze for a minute. Before he could compute that piece of
information, she said, “Who was your first?”

“One I did nothing about? Captain America.”

She sputtered and rolled her eyes, “Tony…”

“Pepper;” he matched her sarcastic tone of voice, before softening his tone. “He and my dad were friends and they told me that he and Aunt Peggy were gonna get married, and I didn’t recognize it as a crush until my balls dropped, but the first person who made me feel special and curious? Captain America, absolutely.” Tony finished his whiskey and poured more, ignoring the voice in his head telling him not to. *Or maybe that was Jarvis…*

“Jarvis, we’re fine. Good night,” Pepper said emphatically.

The trip was supposed to be 12 hours total – a quick stop into the New York offices to see how things were progressing with a particular tricky negotiation, but weather had other plans. A massive snowstorm had hit Manhattan they were grounded for at least a night and most likely days.

Pepper had rallied quickly, making sure they had groceries and supplies before the worst of the storm hit and sending all of the staff of the Stark brownstone home so they could be safe and warm with their families. She figured that between she and Jarvis, they could hold down the fort.

She was not prepared for the whiskey.

By the time they opened bottle two, they had decimated most of the chips and dip Pepper had ordered, and were fast moving on to the need for oven pizzas, but the warm, heavy feeling through her limbs was weighing her into the couch.

The couch that was across from her boss.

Her boss that she had recently decided she was going to have to quit because she was absolutely gone for him and couldn’t take the pining anymore.

She was turning in her notice once they got back to Malibu, she swore.

Tony interrupted her thoughts, “And I first deflowered – “

“…someone at 15, and she turned out to be a raging bitch who stole one of my mom’s rings off of the front table, so we can see that my taste in women hasn’t really changed.”

“Tony, give yourself more credit, most of them now just steal your dignity.”

He flipped her off as she chuckled. Comfortable silence washed over them, and Pepper was glad she didn’t have to hear anything else about Tony’s various sexual exploits for the evening.

“Pep, are you going to leave me?”

Tony’s quiet question, spoken so hesitantly and yet painfully, sliced through the silence. She was dumbfounded, sputtering her way to a response when he cut her off.

“You told Jarvis you were going to.”

*Traitorous machine,* Pepper thought. “No, I told my mother I was considering it and I thought I activated the right protocols so he wouldn’t eavesdrop on my conversations.”
Tony had the grace to look sheepish, “I may have over ridden them.”

“Of course you did. But to answer your question, probably. I haven’t decided, but we’re too drunk for this conversation.”

Tony dropped his whiskey glass to the floor with a clatter. “I just sobered up.”

“I haven’t,” she murmured, sipping her whiskey slowly, “and I shouldn’t have said anything.”

He abruptly marched into the kitchen and pretty soon she smelled coffee brewing. Rolling her eyes and cursing her loose tongue – she really, really wasn’t planning on the whiskey – she resigned herself to this moment. Maybe if she tore the band-aid off now, it would actually be easier.

But then, he walked back in the room and she was reminded that she was here with the man who was ultimately her best friend. He didn’t have his stupid sunglasses on, or any of his power suits, or his smirk, or anything that made him Tony Stark the Brand. Instead he had on sweatpants and an old t-shirt, both stained in motor-oil and peppered with holes. Bare feet padded towards her, and the look on his face was one of utter determination yet complete vulnerability.

“You can’t,” was all he said as he placed her coffee in her hands and settled back on the couch, noticeably closer to her than he was before.

“I can and I think I have to,” Pepper whispered, stumbling over the words. “I am so tired, Tony. I love this job, but keeping up with you is so hard and I have no life and I would really, really like to get married and have kids before I’m in my late 90s.”

Tony was really quiet, which was not a good sign. “Kids, eh?”

“I didn’t know how badly I wanted them until everyone else started having them. But I do, Tony. And my time is running out.”

“We’re in our early 30s, Pep, there is so much more time!” He nearly growled out the words.

“I can’t do this right now,” her breath caught in her throat. If she kept him thinking it was about children – it really wasn’t, but telling him it was about them and not this incredible way he broke her heart every time she had to clean up after another girl in another one of his beds – then maybe she could get out of this without falling apart. Just maybe.

“Please, Pep. You are the only good thing in my life.”

That’s what Dr. Matthews said he would say, Pepper, and she said he believes it, but that doesn’t mean you have to be his emotional spouse and torture yourself, come on, Pepper be strong and just tell him you don’t care, you can DO IT, Pepper…

Her inner-pep talk was cut off when out of her mouth flew “My therapist wants me to quit but I don’t want to I just think I have to.”

Jesus Christ, Pepper, she scolded herself as her hands flew up to cover her mouth and her cheeks turned scarlet.

Tony seemed to consider those words carefully. “First of all, I didn’t know you were in therapy. Am I paying for it?”

She nodded, not trusting her own voice.
“Good.”

There was quiet between them for a few moments, punctuated by a distant ticking clock and the sound of Tony slurping his coffee. When he spoke again, his eyes locked on Pepper’s.

“Can you give me until we’re 35. That’s only a few more years, and I can maybe find a few replacements by then because I think it’ll take about five people to take your job. Whenever you’re ready to,” he swallows uncomfortably, “get pregnant, I’ll pay for it entirely, or adoption, or whatever. Just give me a little more time.”

She knew this was manipulation and terrible and yet, also the very core of who he was. He adored helping people, he just didn’t quite know he was allowed to adore it.

“Agreed,” she whispered. “Could I add one piece to the bargaining table?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not your date to any more events. It’s making it really hard to meet someone to father those hypothetical children.”

She had no idea how that made the bottom fall of out his gut. Be cool, Stark, he told himself. Be cool.

“With the exception of the Met Gala because I can’t get Wintour to ever approve my dates, yes,” he agreed.

She smiled tentatively, held out her hand for him to shake it, and then said “I think I really need to go to bed.”

He nodded distractedly as she padded out of the room and up the stairs. Once she was out of sight, he quietly said, “Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir,” the AI responded just as quietly.

“I need all available biotech research on alternative methods of conception and I need to also make sure our insurance covers them all thoroughly. Oh, and throw in information on adoption, too, laws in California and New York, and can you also make sure I didn’t just violate HR laws in some way? Send it all to my laptop.”

“Yes, sir,” Jarvis replied.

“I can hear your smile, Jarvis, and I can’t say I appreciate it.”

“Well, sir, as you programmed that smile, I can’t say I care.”

Tony chuckled, “You win, you always do.”

“No more Anchorman, sir, please.”

“Stay classy, San Diego!”
“Jarvis,” Pepper called numbly, “what day is it?”

“Day 13, Ms. Potts.”

“Where’s Obie?”

“In the board room, ma’am. I believe he’s called another meeting.”

“Fantastic,” she muttered. Tony had been missing for two weeks, and while she appreciated that at some point they were going to have him declared legally dead and move on with the company, Obie’s enthusiasm to do so was… off putting.

Besides, the military told them he could absolutely still be alive. The motorcade was attacked, but no body was found, and her entire soul told her Tony was still alive. He was simply too ornery to die by bomb blast. He’d be like a cockroach; Tony Stark and Twinkies would absolutely survive the apocalypse.

Pepper sighed deeply and buried her head in her hands, playing the last conversation she had with him, just like she had for two weeks.

“Pepper, Pepper, Pepper, Pepper, wait why is your hair that weird color?” Tony bounded up the stairs from his workshop.

“I swear to God you are part golden retriever, I stopped dying it blonde, and WHAT, Tony,” she sighed, from her position on the couch.

“Okay, we’re circling back to that. But, Pepper! I did it.”

*She looked up. “You made it run?”*

He grinned so big the smile split his face. It lit the entire room. “Yup. And I got it up to 120mph.” Tony giggled and held out his hand. “Come on, Pep, let’s go for a drive.”

Which is how she found herself cruising down the Pacific Coast Highway in a new prototype Rolls Royce, made entirely of recycled materials and running on electricity and solar power and other things she didn’t quite understand. What she did know is that Tony took on the project six months earlier because someone told him he’d never be able to do it, and she was sitting in the evidence that he did.

In her mind, these moments were with Tony, the guy who just wants to figure out how the world works and loved getting his hands dirty to do just that. Fingernails grimy with oil, clothes that are covered in grease, and a grin that melted her right in half. He would spend hours in the workshop, forgetting to eat, or what day it is and it was her job to make sure that Tony didn’t get lost in his own brain. Tony, she could do life with forever.

Stark, on the other hand, was a pain in her ass. A total dickhead who had limited regard for anyone else’s feelings or needs. Stark had been on her last nerve for about a decade.

That day was a Tony day. The next day, when he had to leave for a military envoy, that would be a
Stark day.

They talked about everything and nothing, singing along to Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin and Janis Joplin and whoever else came across the radio, and Pepper hit silence on her StarkPhone every time Obie called.

They drove south, stopping at some point at a roadside stand for tamales and ignoring the stares of the owners who couldn’t quite square the man covered in grease driving a Rolls Royce, with a woman in full Chanel suit.

Through a mouthful of tamale, Tony said, “The hair. Explain.”

“God, chew with your mouth closed, Tony,” she brushed said hair out of her eyes. “This is natural and I thought it was time.”

He stared at her, and she could see all of the wheels turning. “It was time?”

“It was time.” She said simply.

“Nope, unacceptable. More details.”

Pepper rolled her eyes, “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about why I dyed it in the first place—“

“Therapist thinking?”

“-and Ciara’s wedding colors are green and silver-“

“Because she’s a Slytherin?”

“-which look better with my ginger self than my bottle self and I thought why not.”

She met his eyes and knew those wheels were still turning. He opened his mouth and closed it several more times. Pepper braced herself for another round of rapid fire intrusion, but he surprised her.

“Works. Change approved.”

Once they got back to Tony’s house, Pepper grabbed her stuff and went to leave for the night. “Jarvis, you’re on Supernanny Protocol – “

“I changed that name!” Tony yelled from the kitchen.

“I changed it back!” She replied, smiling. “He needs to be ready to go by 0700 and no later, so you know that means getting him ready by 0630.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jarvis replied.

She wandered into the kitchen, where Tony was pouring himself a cup of coffee and rolled her eyes. “You have to be up in seven hours, Tony.”

“Oh, I’m not sleeping, Pep, this is too exciting. I have – “

She held up her hand to silence him, “You have a big trip tomorrow and you need to be, you know, not a total ass on it, so try to get some sleep.”

“No promises,” he grumbled as he faced her, but the grumble was kind, and full of the sort of
affection that had grounded them for years.

“Come back, safely, Anthony,” she whispered, looking him dead in the eyes.

“You know,” he said softly, “you’re the only one who calls me that anymore.”

“Oh,” she said, slightly surprised. “I thought Obie did.”

He was quiet for a minute. “You’re the only one who’s earned it anymore.”

She absorbed that, placed her hand on his cheek tenderly, and repeated, “Come home safely, Anthony. No showboating, no being more a dick than normal, no latent racism you think is cute, nothing. You’re going into an active warzone and I want you to come home in one piece.”

“Oh, Pep,” he winked, “where’s the fun in that?”

Pepper could still feel the warmth of his cheek from that moment. She flexed her hand and wiped tears from her eyes, took a deep breath and called out.

“Jarvis, I need to see all of the P&Ls from the last quarter from the European divisions, please categorize them by language group and send them to the tablet thing.”

“Do you want the defense contracts prioritized, ma’am?” Jarvis inquired.

“You are reading my mind, pal. I absolutely want that.”

Pepper was convinced this wasn’t a random hit on a random Humvee on a random day, the way Rhodey kept telling her. She trusted Rhodey, but trusted his bosses about as far as she could throw them, so she was going to do some digging of her own.

She was a long way from the Pepper Potts that SI hired to sort Tony’s mail all those years ago. The one who complained to her roommate about all of her long hours, and thought about getting another job. She was even light years from the woman who nearly told Tony she loved him during that snowstorm a few years back.

Those women were, she knew, people she could be proud of, but she was… more now. Once she and Tony started that hypothetical countdown clock to her 35th birthday, they had both gotten serious about her role in the company. Nothing was ever spoken, no decisions actually made, she just… started asking more questions and he started asking for more opinions and she started going to meetings for him instead of with him and before either of them really intended, Pepper was functionally a VP of Operations. She was working up the guts to formalize that jump, and then he got kidnapped.

Kidnapped. He had to be. He was not allowed to be dead.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I’m going to head home. What percentage?”

“64%. I’ll make sure all documents are onto your StarkPad by the time you settle at sir’s.”

“No, Jarvis I meant –“ and then she cut herself off, realizing that it had been two weeks since she’d been to her apartment. Living at Tony’s had become easier. Someone had to mind DUM-E and Butterfingers and You, after all, and… well…
Smelling the workshop was the only thing that made her feel normal.

“That will be perfect, Jarvis. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, ma’am. And if I may be so bold…”

“Never stopped you or your creator before, J.”

“Please eat something. Sir will be worried when he comes home.”

She smiled softly to herself, knowing that Jarvis was right, and also ignoring the pang of the voice that asked if Tony was ever coming home to be worried.

“You’re right, Jarvis. Can you scan the contents of the fridge and send me a shopping list? I’ll stop on the way.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Much later, after Pepper had found a few questionable loopholes in interactions with their Swiss subsidiaries that she’d need to follow up with accounting about, and a few too many very large transfers Obie authorized without Tony’s knowledge, a pattern was beginning to form in her mind. Idly, she wandered from her make-shift workstation in the kitchen down to the workshop.

The door opened and DUM-E whizzed over to her at warp speed, chirping and whirring.

“He’s not home yet,” she informed it quietly. The bot crumbled a bit before returning to its charge station.

Pepper made her way over to the bench, where Tony had been tinkering with a part for the new car’s engine. She picked up a cloth, covered in motor oil, and still smelling faintly of Tony – the odd, yet specific combo of oil, grime, cologne, and that soap he only used down here. She afforded herself 30 minutes of crying and being scared daily since The Event and it was time for Day 13’s.

“Ms. Potts?” Jarvis interrupted.

“Yes?” she sniffled.

“It is now Day 14 and I have a new protocol.”

“What?”

“Sir built time stamps into my protocol for the protection of the company, his inventions, and,” Jarvis paused, “you. The first is 14 days after a traumatic event, and it is now 12:01am on Day 14.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, both shocked and not surprised at all. Even though Tony routinely appeared cavalier about the company, his inventions, and her, she knew he wasn’t.

“There is a video.”

“Play, it then, Jarvis,” she replied, as DUM-E whirred over to her with tissues, as it did most nights Pepper chose the workshop as her place of breakdown.

A video image of Tony appeared before her, and she nearly gasped at the pain that seared through her at the sight of him.

Pep, VideoTony said. This is your eyes only, got it, except for the boys, because even if I ordered
them out of here they wouldn’t listen because they never do, do you, boys?

At the sound of their creator’s voice, DUM-E, Butterfingers, and You all perked up and looked around.

Anyway, if you’re watching this then something has happened. God, that’s morbid and dramatic. I’m not fucking Jack Ryan. Jarvis would only be showing you this if Emergency Pepper Protocol has been enacted, though, so yeah, I must have finally met the untimely demise my father predicted all those years ago. I’m sure GhostHoward who haunts my subconscious is thrilled.

She chuckled a little. GhostHoward had become how they referred to his father, whenever Tony was being particularly self-destructive. She’d yell at him that it was just GhostHoward haunting him.

I’ve left you in control of everything, VideoTony continued. All of my assets will transfer to you, because I know you’ll know what to do with them. Obie can continue to deal with the company, but I need you to make sure no one fucks with my mom’s foundation, or with all the garden variety NDA-bound charities we have going. Most importantly, and this is imperative, no one gets my patents or my inventions or my workshop. No one. You are the only one I trust with this shit, unless Captain America magically reappears, and I know you’ll sort the best hands for them to go into eventually. This protocol transferred all of my patents to your name as of 10 days ago, the ones that aren’t tied to SI, and between you and Jarvis, you can sort out that mess.

VideoTony sighed deeply and rubbed his face in such a familiar way that her heart clenched.

As I’m recording this, we’re not quite at Pepper’s Uterual Deadline – god, she hated that he called it that, which is why he kept calling it that – but we’re getting close. I have set up a trust in your name to cover any and all costs associated with that dream. I think there should be enough in there to cover college for two BabyPeppers, but you are smarter than I am and I’m sure you’ll figure it all out.

He paused for a long time, so long that Pepper thought he was finished. Then she heard Jarvis through the video prompt him.

Yes, J, I know. His eyes had been flitting all over the place, but now they locked on the camera and subsequently, Pepper. I have an outline, and I’m at the last part and he’s… He paused again.

Pepper, I want you to have those kids, and that husband I’ve been keeping you from, and all of your dreams. Every single damn one and I have left you every tool you need to have it because, well, the truth is you’ve been my dream. Anything good in me is because you’ve forced it out or put it there, or I don’t know. I know I embarrass you, and lord knows you deserve fourteen million times better than me, which is why I’m only saying any of this after I’m dead, but I have loved you for a long, long time and thank you. The best damn day of my life was when you yelled at me for spilling your coffee on my mail.

Pepper grinned through the tears as she remembered that day. She had just started her temp position and was delivering mail and had no idea that Tony was a: as young as he was or b: in the building when she tore into a dude in a ratty Metallica t-shirt for spilling coffee all over a pile of mail on her desk. He didn’t say anything, but the next day, she was promoted to Tony Stark’s PA.

Thanks for taking care of me and my bots for so long, Pep. Now go use some of the bonuses I’ve given you and take a vacation. Spread my ashes at that place in Tahiti we went back in ’05 and I’ll see you on the other side.

VideoTony wiped his eyes quickly, grinned that trademark Stark grin, and winked directly at the
camera. As the video blinked off, something in Pepper broke and before she knew it, it was sunrise, DUM-E had covered her in a blanket and she had been sobbing on the floor of the workshop for over four hours.

“Goddamnit, Anthony,” Pepper murmured as she rubbed her swollen eyes. “Come home.”
My favorite part of writing FF is to take the sandbox someone else created and ... rearrange it all. This is the chapter where the canon becomes more of a suggestion than a requirement, but it's still there.

Tony was being shaken awake and opened his eyes to see Yinsen standing over him.

“You were dreaming and muttering again about a pot,” Yinsen responded, before padding over to the other side of the cave to boil the makeshift kettle.

Tony thought he had been in the cave for about two months, but there was no real way to be sure. Time had kind of lost all meaning, if he was honest. He had no interest in finishing this weapon for the terrorists – never mind that he was learning he had been doing so for fucking years – but it was a delicate balancing act between working on it and working on the thing to get him off the car battery.

He and Yinsen were really close to the second thing, they’d probably manage it today – or whatever time elapsed between this moment and when he passed out again. The first thing was much farther behind.

“Pepper Potts,” Tony replied.

Yinsen turned.

“I was muttering about Pepper Potts, not a pot. She’s a person, not a thing to cook in.”

Yinsen raised one eyebrow, and then turned back to the kettle. “You said there was no one waiting for you.”

“Well, I don’t know if she is,” Tony admitted, most of the energy for sarcasm seeped out of him. He was running now on fury – both at himself, and at the fuckwits who put him in here – and desperation.

He had to get home, he had to shift the company focus away from killing innocent people, and he had to change his father’s legacy. He had to. Sure, he knew in abstraction before what it meant that Howard worked on the Manhattan Project, but Tony was largely too busy cashing checks and messing with combustion engines to think about humans. That impulse died in a cave somewhere in Afghanistan, when he woke up attached to an ancient car battery, and with a man who put faces and stories with the statistics of death.

Problem was, he knew it was long enough that Jarvis would have triggered Emergency Pepper Protocol. He just hoped Jarvis had done the edits on that video he had told him to, because if not...

Somewhere, right now, Pepper could be getting married. Tony knew he was oblivious enough that Pepper could have easily been falling for someone without his knowledge. There was no way she’d be waiting for him.

*Might as well whine to Yinsen about it.*
“Pepper is my assistant,” Tony explained.

“Your assistant who you dream about for seventeen naps in a row?” Yinsen replied calmly.

Tony glared across the cave, “Sarcasm does not become you.”

“I think it does,” Yinsen grinned, as he handed Tony a mug of something that probably resembled tea.

Tony continued to scowl while he gathered his thoughts. “She knows me better than any other person and somehow puts up with me anyway. She’s quitting this year, though, and I think I might actually fall apart because I have no idea how to function without her, either in my work or in my life and I’ve tried fourteen times now to duplicate her in AI form and I can’t because she’s too fucking – sorry, freaking – perfect to be replaced but she thinks I’m dead, I’d guess, and I told her to get married.”

Yinsen’s face betrayed nothing as he said, “why would you tell the woman that you love to be with another man?”

“I don’t love her,” Tony scoffed immediately, “I just said she’s irreplaceable.”

“Those words mean the same things in English, Tony.”

“No –”

“Tony Stark, I speak five languages and I’m becoming fluent in you as well, so let us cut the – what do you say – bullshit. You love this woman.”

Tony stared at him for a long few moments, refusing to break eye contact, refusing to confront the words he had just heard.

“Listen,” Yinsen continued. “We are not both going to get out of here. It is not possible, we have talked about this, and everyone I love is dead, and I am ready to see them again, so I am not interested in mincing words. You have now seen the truth of the world you and your father have helped create and you have a choice – you can go back and be a man worthy of this woman you love, or you can continue to be your father. It is simple. The doing will be impossible, but the choosing is easy.”

Tony opened his mouth to speak, but Yinsen cut him off. “The – what did you call them? – goons will be back very shortly and we need you looking productive. Think about how right I am while you pretend to build more death machines.”

Tony did just that.

If the world had no idea what to do with the news that Stark Industries was no longer building weapons, then Pepper especially had no idea what to do with it. The stocks had tumbled – they’d rebound, she was sure – and Obie was moving from annoying to threatening at a rapid rate. Tony refused to leave the workshop and only seemed to speak to her when he needed her to be an extra set of hands.

Yeah, reaching into his chest cavity was not really on the top of her “must do again” list.

When she would question him about something with the company, he would grin at her, raise an
eyebrow and say “I’ve never lifted Emergency Pepper Protocol”, which he then shorted to “EPP” and would yell that at her whenever she tried to enter the workshop. He had subsequently been ignoring the lawyers, as well, who had been trying to get him to reverse EPP. Thankfully, SI was in such upheaval after Tony’s return that no one was really forcing the issue of who ultimately controlled everything. Especially not Tony. Obie seemed under the impression that Tony did again, and she was too shell shocked to correct him.

Pepper had just started seeing a therapist again for Tony’s death and the new responsibility she’d be under when the fucker reappeared and rearranged her entire existence again for the third time in a matter of months. She stopped, though, when it really did seem that everything was moving far too fast.

None of her friends could be trusted with this massive reality that she was entirely responsible for the assets and estate of the Stark family, and Tony seemed unwilling to talk about it at all, so she did what she always did and handled it.

She also had a minor shopping spree at both Kate Spade and Jimmy Choo, but that was beside the point.

On one particular day, about three months into this new world, she was futzing around in Tony’s kitchen, attempting to make a smoothie that he might actually drink to maybe get some nutrients in him because all he seemed to eat these days were Doritos and cheeseburgers, when Jarvis interrupted her thoughts.

“Ms Potts?”

“Hmm?”

“Sir would like to see you in the workshop at your earliest convenience.”

“No, Jarvis, I need her now.”

“Pardon, Ms. Potts. Sir is demanding your presence immediately.”

“Sir can hold his horses, Jarvis, I’ll be down when I can.”

“Pepppppppppp,” Tony whined, via Jarvis.

“Tony, I am in the middle of something.”

“Fine, I’ll come to you,” he replied, following by an unfamiliar whirring sound.

She rolled her eyes, and turned on the blender. It pulsed for a few moments, when she noticed there was another electronic sound in the room. She turned, bewildered, to see Tony, literally floating in the middle of the kitchen.

She screamed and lost her hold on the lid of the blender, sending the contents spewing out. She slipped and fell on the floor, all while not taking her eyes off of her floating boss.

“What the living fuck” she screamed.

“Pep, shhhhh,” he tried to soothe her.

“TONY YOU ARE FLOATING.”

“Technically I’m flying.”
“I don’t give a fuck about technicalities, there is no water, you are not Jesus, and therefore you should be FIRMLY ON SOLID GROUND WHAT IS HAPPENING.”

The whirring sound stopped as he gently reconnected with the ground. “It’s part of a new thing I’m doing. The suit that got me home? The giant iron patchwork thing? I’m remaking it and I’ve been trying to sort out how to make the boosters more reliable and I finally cracked it and I wanted to show you! See!” He grinned like a school child who got an A, and her heart fluttered just a bit.

Not now, heart, Pepper scolded herself. This is the man who told you he loved you, then told you to marry someone else, and then never brought either up again.

“Well,” Pepper said, getting up off the floor, turning off the blender, and reaching for a dishrag. “Can you also add thrusters to a mop so we can clean this up?”

Disappointed she wasn’t in awe of the scientific product he just demonstrated, he looked for the first time at the blender. “What was that?”

“Your lunch.”

“But it was liquid.”

“Lunch can be liquid.”

“Yes, if it’s a martini, Pep.”

“Well, this was going to be olive-colored, so it would have counted.”

“Not how it works.”

“You have eaten nothing but cheeseburgers and Doritos since you resurfaced and I respect that both are what you craved but it is now time for vegetables.”

“Pep, it is never time for vegetables.”

She skewered him with a look, before thrusting the blender in his hands. “Wash this while I go get the mop.”

When she returned from the hallway, he launched back into a monologue about the scientific genius he had just mastered, Pep, it’s like, so cool you can’t even fathom it and this is only the first step and ohmyfuck this is so much more fun than missiles and on and on, while a smile quietly quirked her lips.

Nearly every day since Tony returned had been a Tony day, not a Stark day. GhostHoward had made zero appearances. Those were all great things, but the other shoe was going to drop. The board meeting next week was where Tony would have to actually take back control of SI, and face the proverbial music for the announcement he made without their consent. This quiet fairytale, where she could convince herself that it was her and Tony against the world, was going to come to an end.

“Pep?” He interrupted her thoughts.

“Tony?”

“The EPP. Did you…”

She turned slowly to face him, realizing he was addressing her with his head buried in the fridge, as he clearly did not want to make eye contact.
“The EPP,” he started over. “I notice your fingers are still bare.”

Well, that is not what I thought the first question would be, Pepper thought as she rehinged her jaw.

“Should they not be?”

Face still in the fridge, “Well, part of the EPP was BabyPepper supplies –“

“Gross, Tony, no.”

“-and you always said the first step was the gentleman caller and I was gone for a while –“

“Tony, stop.”

“-and I just assumed-“

“That you’d come back and my uterus would be inhabited?”

“Yes,” he mumbled, face still in the fridge.

“Anthony Edward, stop looking at milk cartons and face me.”

“No.”

“You’re being a toddler,” she growled as she grabbed his shoulder and forced him to turn around. Problem with that move was that it brought them nose to nose.

“Tony,” she said quietly. “It was never about the kids.”

“What?” he whispered.

“It was never about children, my deal with you, my reason to leave, not really. It was,” she cast about with her hand, “other reasons. But they changed and I’m in and I’m not going to resign in a few months, so calm down.”

Tony gaped at her, unable to form words to respond to this revelation. She kissed him softly on the cheek, “Your invention is nifty, Anthony, but you need to eat better if you want to survive to see it change the world the way we both know it will. Go back to your shop, I’ll be down with lunch in a minute and then we’re going to talk about next week’s board meeting.”

He hadn’t been ‘Anthony’ since he got back, and he hadn’t realized how desperately he was waiting for her to use it again. Before he could stop himself, he rushed his hand towards hers, and grasped it tightly.

“You,” he rasped quietly. “I came home for you, Virginia.”

They stood frozen for a minute, neither of them brave enough to move closer, neither of them scared enough to move apart.

Finally, Pepper took a deep breath and said, “I’ll see you downstairs.”

The next day, she showed up at the house to see a contraption parked in the middle of the living room, with a giant bow on top. Upon further inspection, it was a modified Roomba, with mop and thruster features.
“Tony,” Pepper warned.

“I don’t care, Pepper! I do. Not. Care,” he exclaimed, punctuating each word with a ring of his hammer. “Dum-E,” he whistled, “wrench. Pepper, I cannot adequately explain to you the levels of which I do not care about how the shareholders feel about an overall 3% drop. The last time we had a 3% drop was when I fucked those twins in the Blue Lagoon and the Italian government tried to arrest me, which means we have survived worse in the past, Butterfingers, I swear I named you properly, the 3/8ths please.”

“Tony,” Pepper interrupted, and then gave up as he barreled on.

“So we dropped 30% on the first day, we rebounded nearly to full value within a week as people saw that I was serious and what do you know, people actually like the idea of technological genius being used for good and, you know, not evil, Dum-E, stop it, and now we’re hovering between a 3 and 7 percent loss and so Pepper what complaint could you possibly bring me that you think I would care about?”

“You have no board chair.”

He looked up, “Of course I do.”

“No, Stratford resigned.”

“Stratford hasn’t been my board chair for months, egotistical fucking prick, what the fuck do I care if he resigned, Butterfingers, the 3/8ths!”

Pepper was out of patience. “Jarvis, Freeze Protocol.”

“What the fuck?” Tony was livid as all the various robotic arms in the workshop froze in place. “I didn’t design that.”

“You think I can’t learn coding,” Pepper arched an eyebrow.

Tony’s jaw dropped clear open. “Well, I’m too impressed to even be mad. Speak quickly before I flip those.”

“You need a board chair selected before the next meeting since you blew off the last meeting and now we have to figure out how to run this company into this brilliant new age you’re steering us into, but you also seem completely content to not actually steer anything,” she explained. “I have four candidates –“

“But you’re my board chair.”

Now it was Pepper’s jaw’s turn to drop. “I’m sorry?”

“EPP. You’re board chair. Have been since day 14. Did Jarvis not cover that? Jarvis!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Did you forget to tell Pep she was in charge?”

“I did, sir –“
“Tony, he did, but then you came back –“

“But we’re still under EPP,” Tony looked confused. “Override Freeze, Jarvis.”

“Sorry, sir, that protocol belongs only to Ms. Potts.”

Finally putting down all of his tools and turning his body to face her entirely, Tony enunciated slowly, “Unfreeze my bots, Pep.”

“Not until we settle this.”

“Fine,” he threw down the tools in his hand, walked over to the mini-fridge and grabbed a pre-made smoothie before grumpily collapsing on the couch in the corner. “Talk.”

Pepper sighed, “There is literally no reason to be such a child about this, Tony. You can’t just make pronouncements like you did and not expect any fallout! If you didn’t expect this, you're being deliberately obtuse.”

“Of course I expected it, but I didn’t think I had to deal with it. You’re in charge, be in charge. I meant every word of that video, you are the only one I trust with this, you’re the only one who understands GhostHoward and you get what I’m doing.”

*He meant every word?* Pepper’s semi-dormant libido queried. *Every one?*

Out loud, she replied, “Well, the board doesn’t believe me or the paperwork Jarvis provided since it was covered in oil, so we’ll need to draw up some new forms. You also need to decide if you want me as board chair or CEO. ’In charge’ is a vast concept, so can we refine it, please?”

“Fine,” Tony slurped the smoothie. “Finished?”

She was quiet for long enough to make him look at her. “You really don’t care what I do with your company?”

“Oh, I care deeply, Pep, that’s why I gave it to you.”

_____________________________________

*This loosing his heart business was getting real old*, Tony thought as he lay dying in his living room. *REAL fucking old.*

“It’s a shame you had to involve Pepper,” he heard Obie say. “I would have preferred she live.”

*OH FUCK NO.*

*That’s a no.*

It’s amazing what adrenaline can force your body to do, even when your body is saying it’s physically impossible. *I did not come back from a fucking cave to see this bald fucker kill the main reason I got out of that goddamn cave.*

_____________________________________

*I swear to God I did not JUST ALMOST LOSE HIM TO A CAVE to lose him to his inability to properly hydrate*, Pepper thought as she stared at the blood pressure cuff she had just applied to Tony’s fledgling body.
The doctor assured her he was just severely dehydrated. After a few hours of telling her and everyone he was fine, Jarvis politely informed her that “sir has collapsed in the shower” – they were going to have to work on his inflections – and she paged one of SI’s private physicians. She and the doctor exchanged a few quips about how they used to see each other all the time for Tony’s hangovers, and they kind of missed the low stakes of that.

Now he was napping while the saline and something else tried to help him heal, and she was…

Well, she was holding vigil. And when he woke up, she was going to tell him.

“Pep?” He said groggily. “Why do I have wires?”

“They’re attached to saline, not a car battery, I promise.”

“Okay,” he mumbled, and sighed a bit before wincing.

“Your ribs are broken, so try not to breathe too deeply.”

“Getting right on that,” he murmured, his air supply clearly strained. “Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Status.”

“Mr. Stane’s family has been informed he was killed in an unfortunate plane crash, and his headstone is arranged in the manner which his family requested.”

“Can you make sure someone engraves ‘murdering Judas’ somewhere on it?” Tony asked, his eyes still closed, but Pepper noticed his hand rooting around on his blanket for something.

“No, sir.”

“Fuck,” he grumbled.

“A variety of shareholders have been contacting you regarding a press conference about Mr. Stane’s death, but Ms. Potts has been deflecting them remarkably.”

Tony forced one eye open. “My knight.”

Pepper rolled her eyes, “Jarvis, you can stop now, I can fill him in when he wakes up next.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I was getting updates, Pepper. I was being a good boy, a professional even, the way you always nag me to be.”

She realized his hand was looking for hers, and grasped it. “I am also always nagging you about resting and schedules. Now is not the time for working, now is the time for working on not dying.”

He grumbled good naturedly in her direction, and seemed to have dozed back off. Pepper swiped her thumb back and forth across the back of his hand while thinking of all the ways she was going to kill him herself if he ever pulled the stunts of the last week ever again.

“Pep?”

“Yeah?”
“I’m rewriting EPP.”

She was quiet for a moment, “Okay.”

One of the many things Pepper has learned about Tony is that when he is quiet, it’s best to be quiet with him. His silence is never accidental – he’s solving a puzzle with either his hands or his brain.

After a few moments, and a noticeable increase of pressure on her hand, he said, “I need you to keep everything, but I also need to add a clause.”

He grew quiet again, and she reached up to brush an imaginary piece of fluff from his face. This moment felt heavy and significant, and she was afraid the inevitable crack in her voice would give her away.

“I can’t… I’m sorry, I can’t face you marrying someone else.”

There it was. A quiet sob broke out from her, “I couldn’t.”

He turned towards her and must have seen the look in her eyes, because his whole face brightened. “Yeah?”

She nodded.

“The whole time I was in the cave, I was trying to come home to you, Pep, I swear.”

“I know,” she wasn’t about to stop the tears now.

“I’m just…”

As he grappled for the words, she got up from her chair and leaned over, pressing her lips firmly to his. “I know, Anthony Edward. I know.”
Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the kudos and the comments - they really do mean so much.

August, 2010

“Pep, how the fuck was I supposed to know that he’d do that?”

They’d been having this argument for… oh, weeks now, but really probably years. Pepper was worried about Tony, Tony wasn’t worried about Tony, but he was worried about Pepper and their circular fights just kept going.

“In all of your genius, all of your neurons firing up there, it didn’t occur to you that baiting a megalomaniacal asshat was not your best plan?” Pepper knew she was screeching now, and didn’t really care. “How can you not understand what you do to me when you make these kind of choices?!”

That seemed to silence him.

“Jarvis,” Tony calmly spoke. “Can you tell Natalie Ms. Potts and I are going to need more than a minute?”

“Of course, sir.”

They were in the bedroom of one of the StarkJets, having just finished another round of investor meetings since Iron Man had become a battering ram on the streets of Monaco. God, he was so grateful for Pepper being his CEO – being able to handle all of these men – why are they always men? – who think that his personal life is their business just because his name is on his company. The last meeting had been with a man who informed them he was taking his money to Hammer due to Tony’s irresponsible behavior and Pepper nearly had to drag them out of the building before Tony lost his mind.

On the way back to the plane, Pepper had been talking to Natalie, Tony’s shockingly-competent-but-still-not-Pepper PA, when Tony had made the mistake of piping in with a “I don’t understand why everyone is fussing.”

With the icy glare Pepper threw in his direction, he realized that until that moment, he and Pepper had not really talked about Monaco. He wondered if that was by design.

Pepper slowly blinked and then replied, “Natalie, when we board the plane, I will need a few minutes of Mr. Stark’s time.” Natalie had clearly had to fight to keep the smirk off of her face and replied, “Yes, ma’am.”

They boarded, Pepper grabbed his arm, he had made a vague S&M joke, and she nearly threw him into the cabin. “Jarvis, soundproof it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”
And then the yelling had started.

“Pepper, this kind of stuff is going to happen with the suit!”

“BUT IT DOESN’T ALWAYS HAVE TO.”

“BUT IT DOES.”

And on, and on, and on, until she brought herself into it. That woke him up.

“Pep, I don’t… I’m… I’m sorry.”

She looked directly at him, took a fortifying breath and said, “I know, I’m just not sure you are enough to change things.”

He blinked and worried his lip before responding, “What do you want me to do?”

She moved to sit next to him on the bed, “I want you to consider me. I want you to… remember me.”

What the fuck does that mean? Remember her?

The look of abject confusion on his face must have registered with her, since her smile softened a bit.

“Tony, I…”

She paused for a long time. Long enough to make him nervous.

“Do you remember last month, right around Monaco, when I was super bitchy?”

“You never are, Pep.”

“You’re an adorable liar,” she chuckled softly. “I was six weeks late.”

“Late for… oh.”

“Yeah.”

They were quiet for a few more moments – Tony had learned a lot about this woman in the last decade, and knew that in these moments, where she was searching for words, it was best to let her do so alone.

“I was getting ready to tell you,” she whispered. “I had a whole thing planned, it involved puns and baby corn, you would have loved it, and then the bleeding started.”

Until this point, they had been sitting next to each other, both facing the cabin door. At the word “bleeding”, Tony moved quickly to kneel in front of her.

“Pepper,” he whispered quietly. “Why didn’t you…”

“Tell you when it started?” She grimaced. “You were unconscious.” He moved his hands to her face to start to catch her tears. “I was losing you twice at the same time and I could only barely hold it together, Tony. Barely.”

“I know,” he whispered, moving up to kiss her forehead and gather her close.

“No, you have no fucking idea,” she nearly growled, wiping her eyes and glaring at him. “I love
You, so much I question my own sanity, but Jesus wept on the cross, Tony, you don’t know what it’s like to love you.”

They were both quiet for a moment, as Pepper tried to gather herself. “Jarvis,” Tony said quietly.

“Yes, sir?”

“No lights, please, and tell Natalie we’ll talk to her in Malibu.”

“Tony –” Pepper protested as Jarvis confirmed the command.

“No, Pep, for the next six hours, let’s just be Virginia and Anthony and everything else can wait.”

She opened her mouth to protest again, before she nodded and let him take off her shoes and climb under the covers with him. They held each other as Tony asked gentle questions about the miscarriage, and what her body needed now, and what her heart needed, and let Pepper cry as she needed.

“You’re being surprisingly perfect,” Pepper murmured at one point.

“I have watched a lot of Grey’s Anatomy recently,” he replied, “it’s surprisingly educational.”

Pepper chuckled, remembering how loudly and obnoxiously Tony had protested her love of the show, yet always insisted on watching it with her. She was unable to watch it now without his running commentary.

“Pep,” he said quietly. “When we get home, and you’ve slept, and I’ve talked to at least fourteen doctors to make sure you’re okay, we’ll talk about the suit, I promise.”

She nodded silently.

“But please, please don’t believe I can ever actually forget you. You are... everything, Virginia.”

“I know, Anthony. I love you, too.”
Chapter Notes

Time for our boys to meet.

Comments welcome and encouraged.

2011

“So now I have a Norse god and a resurrected frozen guy? Fuck me, Fury, you know how to keep a
guy on his toes.”

Pepper rolled her eyes as she eavesdropped on Tony’s video call. They were currently in Tony’s
Fifth Avenue penthouse, and she was continuing to make the case that SI corporate HQ should move
back to New York, and keep R&D in Los Angeles.

This would serve several purposes; first, R&D could continue without Tony poking his nose in about
every seventeen minutes when he wanted to ‘help’, because he was spending more and more time in
New York with this Iron Man nonsense.

Secondly, Pepper felt strongly it would communicate to all the shareholders, the staff, and the public
that the future of Stark Industries was about reclaiming their past. When Howard started it all, SI was
about using technology to help people. They had refined refrigeration and put washing machines in
every home. Before the bomb and the weapons, they were a household and trusted name. And they
were headquartered in New York. Tony moved them to Los Angeles when his parents died and had
quietly abdicated responsibility to Obie. After that whole mess, and the mess with Hammer, and her
official and public promotion, Pepper felt it was past due to make changes.

Tony’s entire reasoning for not moving was “no, because Howard,” which she was running out of
patience for.

“He was never dead,” Fury responded. “Just… frozen. You’re the genius, get your ass over here and
tell me how. Now.”

Fury disconnected before Tony could respond.

“What was that about?”

“Evidently, Pepper Stark – “

“Not my name –“

“-Not for my lack of demanding-“

“-That’s the problem. Back to the frozen guy, please.”

“Evidently, Pepper Potts”, he placed great sarcastic emphasis on her last name, “they’ve found
Captain America.”
She dropped the book she was holding, “Come again?”

“Right?!” He started pacing, “He was presumed dead in, what, ’45? Howard always swore he was out there somewhere and never stopped looking, and I always thought it was about the vibranium shield since we can’t get more vibranium since Howard pissed Wakanda off by building the bomb and Howard wanted more of it. So the shield and the dude have been MIA for, what, 70 years? Ish? And now they’re back? At the same time I find out that the mythology Mom had me read was real and this is just a real mindfuck, Pep.”

“Um, yeah,” Pepper replied, “you are kept alive by a glowing thing in your chest, so please remember we surpassed mindfuck a handful of years ago.”

He smirked at her, “I don’t remember you cursing this much as my assistant,” he replied.

“You were drunk 90% of the time I was your assistant.”

“So I was,” he mused. “Moving on, I kinda can’t believe I get to meet Captain America.”

“You’re squealing.”

“It’s Captain America, Pep!”

Tony started running around the house, muttering to himself and singing a song that Pepper vaguely recognizes from high school civics classes, as she returned to her novel.

“Hey, are we public yet?”

Another element of life with Tony Stark was abrupt changes in subject.

“No,” she replied, calmly flipping the pages of her book.

“Can we be?” he asked in the tone of voice she identified as “golden retriever”.

“No,” she replied, equally as calmly.

He flopped on the couch next to her, or really more on top of her, and pouted in her direction. “Is it that I’m not pretty enough?”

“Well, you are a complete hag, so clearly,” Pepper’s voice didn’t change tenor, nor did she look up from her book.

Tony swatted the book out of her hands, to her great annoyance, and said, “seriously. You’ve been CEO for, what, a decade now?”

“Or about three years, but sure.”

“Surely we’re past this supposed-PR nightmare you convinced me might happen. Literally all of our staff knows!”

“They have signed really strong NDAs,” she replied. “I just… I like us.”

“I like us, too, Pep.”

She paused for a few beats, and began to twist her fingers through his hair. “I just mean, I like us as we are, and if we let other people into this, it’s gonna change. It’s already a three-way between you, me, and the suit, and I’d rather not have anyone else in it.”
Tony seemed to consider that, but also knew that addressing the “three-way” comment would be poking a particularly grouchy bear. It had been months since she’d visited him in the workshop, either the Malibu house or the penthouse, preferring instead to have Jarvis page him when she got home.

Don’t ask her about the suit, don’t ask her about the suit, don’t ask her about the –

“So this is about the suit?”

The tick at the side of her jaw was the first clue he was dumb.

“Go meet your wet dream, Tony.”

_Fuuuuuccckkkkk, a crass Pepper was not a happy Pepper._

Tony kissed Pepper on his way out, noticing the bags under her eyes matched his own. “Hey, while I’m gone, book us into a middle-of-nowhere place for the weekend, eh?”

She brightened at that. “Can we do that cabin in Quebec again?”

“Anything. I’ll be ready to go around dinner on Friday. Pack nothing,” he finished quietly, with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

“Not even the red shoes?”

“Fuck, yes, those. And maybe – “

“The one shaped like-“

“Yes, that one.”

They both smiled at each other, as Tony called to Jarvis to tell Happy to bring the Roadster around.

They both knew a weekend of sexual decadence was not quite going to get them past the impasse they were hurdling towards, but neither was going to do anything different. They had entered the stage of their relationship where it still felt too fresh to tell each other _everything_, but was far too old to not have damaging secrets.

Pepper was scared nearly every time he was out of her sight – another reason to move SI - since he came back from Afghanistan and the whole business with the creepy Russian did not help matters, but she also knew she wasn’t being fair. Tony was Iron Man, both in and out of the suit. Her problem wasn’t really with this new mantle he was carrying, it was more with the way his self-destructive tendencies had gotten entirely out of hand now that he was covered with metal and powered by science.

She didn’t want him to stop, she swore. She just wanted him to _moderate_. To think for two goddamn seconds before throwing himself directly in the line of mortal danger, or to at least tell Jarvis to tell her he was doing it.

At the same time, she knew to ask him to change that was to change a fundamental part of how he had always dealt with the world. So the question was not could Tony separate himself from Iron Man, but could Pepper be with Iron Man. Could Pepper have children with Iron Man, build a future with Iron Man, _be with_ Iron Man.

Tony, for his part, was also scared nearly every moment Pepper was out of his sight. Except when he
lost himself completely in his work, and even then, one of the bots would do something he’d want to
tell Pepper or Jarvis would remind him to do something for her. She was his entire world, but he
knew now she wasn’t allowed to be. This mandate, this… call he had picked up at that press
conference when he announced who he was – it meant his world had to keep getting bigger.

He was skeptical of SHIELD and probably would be forever, but Fury was not wrong that he
couldn’t deal with this new world alone. There was Natalie/Natasha/Ginger Spice, and now this
Thor individual and maybe even the super soldier himself. Oh, and Nat knew that arrow guy, and
they were getting closer to getting Bruce Banner and his Other Guy under wing. So, Tony supposed
this was the crew.

But he was mostly scared because with every moment two simultaneous things happened; his love
for Pepper grew, and his knowledge he’d never be good enough for her did, too. He knew all the
absolutely fucking incredible things she was doing at the company. The paid internship programs for
under-resourced students, the investment in green tech, the first tech company to completely close the
gender wage gap. She was saving the world without breaking a sweat, and all he had was a tin can
that could fly through fire.

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“He does not like me,” Tony reported later to Pepper.

It had been a long day of introductions and debriefs and plans, and Tony was just climbing into bed.

“But the question is, is he dreamy?” Pepper asked with a smirk.

“The absolute top to bottom dreamiest, Pep,” Tony smirked back. “I mean, my old man was a total
hack in the morality department, but the fucker knew what he was doing with science. Steve Rogers
is literal human perfection, physically.”

“Only physically?”

Tony rolled his eyes, “Pep, he’s an arrogant prude! He is a condescending asshole who turned down
all of my offers of help, choosing to stay with Fury, God knows why, and he just…”

“Didn’t fall immediately and madly in love with you?” Pepper replied sarcastically.

“EXACTLY, Pep. Exactly.”

She gave a low chuckle. “Well, it took me a few years, so I think we can give him a few days.”

Tony sighed dramatically, flopped around a bit, and settled onto his side, staring at Pepper as she
flipped through documents on her StarkPad.

“Pep?”

“Hmm?”

“He really, really liked Howard.”

Pepper quietly placed the device on the side table, slumped down in bed and turned to face Tony,
moving until their noses touched. “How do you know?”

“I overheard him talking to Fury.”

“THAT is Howard Stark’s son!?” Steve was incredulous. “No way, I do not believe you.”
“Cap, that is Tony Stark. You didn’t meet Howard’s wife, Maria, ever, I don’t think, but Tony was born about twenty-five years after you went into the ice. His parents died when he was 21.”

“That’s very tragic,” Steve replied, in a tone that communicated he wasn’t all that concerned about Tony, “and I’m sorry for his losses, but I am struggling to believe that Howard would have allowed such disrespect and insolence to fester in a child of his.”

“Howard Stark was a complicated man,” Fury cautioned.

“Howard Stark was a patriot!”

“No denying that, Cap, but with all due respect, there’s about 70 years of missing history for you to understand before you can honestly tell me that Tony Stark isn’t.”

“He thought Howard was a patriot,” Tony continued.

“A lot of people still think that.”

“Mostly people he didn’t whip with belts.”

“Well, that is most of us, so the pool is large,” she smiled gently. “People are allowed to be complicated, Tony, we’ve talked about this. Your father was a genius, no doubt, but you have taken that genius and made it more by adding warmth, and kindness, and generosity to the Stark legacy in ways your father never seemed interested in.”

“No, Pep, you’ve added warmth, kindness, and generosity. I just fly the suit and sign the checks.”

“Okay, so today is a self-deprecating wallow day, I see. I love you Tony, good night, and we’ll talk in the morning when you’re finished with your pity party.”

“It’s not a pity party,” he whined petulantly, knowing it was exactly that but not that fussed to stop it.

“Sure, baby. Good night.”

“I don’t think Steve and Tony know what to do with each other,” Natasha confided in Pepper. The pair were in Pepper’s office, SHIELD thinking Natasha was there on official business and both women knowing better.

Pepper poured her friend more vodka, filled her own wine glass, and replied, “I can’t see how they could. They are the two most stubborn men currently in Manhattan. Tony and I have to go to Brussels next week for a dinner and I usually hate those, but this time I’m counting the minutes, simply to distract him.”

“They’re both fucking children,” Natasha muttered. “In the meeting yesterday, they got into a near screaming match over the definition of the word ‘strategy’.”

Pepper rolled her eyes, “Of course they did.”

“Lady Pepper,” Thor began, “I have a query for you.”

Pepper wasn’t sure exactly when she’d get used to a Norse god simply appearing in the office, but it was not going to be today.
“How can I help, Thor?”

“I am in need of a gift for Lady Jane and Darcy has… led me astray in the past.”

Pepper choked back laughter at the memory of Darcy’s last “help”, a full sex toy collection modeled after Thor’s hammer. “Yes, I’m aware she has.”

“So you’ll help?” Thor brightened.

“Of course, come over here and we’ll look on some of her favorite websites.”

“Pep, how do you know Jane’s sites?”

“Jarvis, we discussed the announcement system, didn’t we?” Pepper muttered.

“Apoologies, Ms. Potts. Sir has arrived.”

“No shit,” Pepper said, as Tony rounded the desk with Thor and she was suddenly flanked by two men pointing at her computer screen.

“And to answer your question,” Pepper glanced quickly at Tony before typing something into the search engine, “I asked Jarvis for a quick breakdown of everyone’s frequently visited, non-porn or sex toy” another pointed glance in Tony’s direction, “websites, as well as access to any existing wish lists so that I could get them appropriate gifts as morale boosters.”

“I do not know what any of that means,” Thor happily replied, “but it sounds like I have come to the right place for a solution to my birthday problem.”

“Pepper is the right solution to nearly every problem, Thor,” Tony stated.

“She is magnificent,” Thor agreed.

“She is also right here, you muppets,” Pepper muttered, as she navigated to Jane’s Amazon wishlist.

“Amazon?” Tony scoffed. “Bezos?”

“We’re not getting into online shopping just because he beat you at poker, Stark, knock it off,” Pepper said as she navigated to Jane’s wish list and showed Thor a few options of books and movies Jane had placed on there.

“I mean, that wouldn’t be the only reason,” Tony prevaricated.

“I said no, Tony.”

“I would not cross your lady, friend,” Thor cautioned. “She is more respected than you.”

“Oh, of that I am infinitely aware, Thor, but thanks,” Tony grinned. “Pep, when you’re finished being a personal shopper, can I see you in our room?”

As everyone was in New York for meetings and negotiations and more mind numbing diplomacy at SHIELD HQ, Tony (or really, Pepper) had offered everyone room in Tony’s giant penthouse. Thor was the only one who took them up on it, but that didn’t mean they didn’t see the whole gang nearly every day. Pepper was secretly delighted to be able to get to know them a bit better, but she knew that Steve (or Capsicle, as Tony kept referring to him) was getting on Tony’s last nerve.

Tony detoured to the kitchen, before climbing the stairs to the master suite. Pepper followed him a
few minutes later, “Yes, dear?”

“Pepper! Love of my life!”

“Oh god, what did you break now.”

“Oh, I am wounded!”

She made that face where she is both glaring at him and rolling her eyes – the one he finds to be a super turn-on – and replied, “I repeat, what did you break.”

“Nothing!”

“Tony.”

“Maybe a plane.”

“Fine, Jarvis, is there a record?”

“Yes, ma’am. And I have already sent it to Sergeant Rhodes.”

“Thank God for small favors. Thank you, Jarvis. Good night.”

“Good night, Ms. Potts.”

“Since when do you power down Jarvis for the night? And you smell fantastic by the way, is that the new one I got you?” Tony asked, as he stripped out of his work clothes and climbed into bed.

“I only do in here,” she protested. “I only rewrite his code when it’s to protect you, you know that, and yes, that new one with the French name and the weird gold top.”

“I’ll have to order about eleven cases because I think I want to bathe you in it. What are you protecting in here – oh…” he says as she climbs into bed beside him and her hand finds its way into his boxers.

“His video feature might be problematic. Did you need to talk to me about breaking anything else?”

“Um…”

Her hand paused, “Tony.”

“I only punched him and he healed really fast anyway and so I don’t see what the issue is.”

“You punched Captain America.”

Oh, that tone is the one I was trying to avoid, “He is so fucking infuriating, Pep!”

Pepper sighed and rolled on her back. “What was it this time? Did he call me ma’am in that tone you don’t like again? Or hold open the door for Maria? Or ask you not to use profanity in professional meetings?”

“Now you’re taking his side,” Tony whined.

“I’m not, I promise, I am taking the side of both of you getting the fuck over this rivalry and letting us all move on with our lives. We have shit to do, Tony, and this pissing contest you’ve engaged in is getting in the way!”
“Pepper!”

She sat up abruptly and poked a finger directly into the arc reactor, “This means you’re fragile, Tony. This means things can go wrong really quickly. I actually kind of love that the man who is literally physically perfect is fighting with you to protect you a little. You now have a literal god and two literal human science experiments on this rag tag team as you guys face all of these weird realities we are finding ourselves in and this woman who loves you isn’t that upset about it. So, Steve’s different, and he doesn’t give a fuck who you are. So what? Just. Get. Over. It.”

Tony was shocked into temporary silence. “I… It’s not a pissing contest.”

“I really, really think it is, babe,” Pepper grinned wryly. “You are both used to being in charge, but leadership means different things to each of you. So you’re each wrestling for control and I think it would just be wiser to calm down and learn to work together.”

“How are you this wise?” He stared at her in slight awe, also while planning on ignoring everything she was saying.

“Several elements, including that I’ve been putting up with you since basically God was a boy, and that I have a spy on the inside.”

“Christ, you and Nat are plotting, aren’t you?” Tony covered his eyes with a groan to avoid what he was sure was a self-satisfied smirk on Pepper’s face. One of the downsides to being attracted to unmitigatedly strong women was that they were stronger than you and tended to find other women stronger than you. He was never going to tell her how thankful he was for Nat in her life - Pepper hadn't really had any good friends since Ciara got married and drifted away - but fuck, their friendship was a pain in his ass.

“Oh, and one more thing, baby,” Pepper said, as she settled into his side and planted a kiss on his lips, her tone communicating that she had said her piece and this was resolved for the night.

“What’s that?”

“Nat has seen the complete effects of the serum, so we wouldn’t really recommend having a dick measuring contest. It’s best to just stop now.”

“Oh, Virginia, challenged accepted,” he roared as he flipped her onto her back, and kissed away her giggles.
I took a few liberties with Nat's personality, I know. But I also think that if MCU had done right by her and given her some space to breathe, she might not be far off from this.

Also, I'm so thrilled you love Pepper! She's the best, and she's only getting more human from here...

**Spring, 2012**

“Steve?” Natasha said quietly.

“What?” Steve snapped, turning around and seeing Nat staring calming back at him. “I’m sorry, Agent Romanov, I apologize for my tone. How can I help you?”

Natasha crossed the room as she crossed every room – both stealthily and with purpose. “Captain, we have talked about my name,” she said with a small smile on her lips.

“Sorry,” Steve’s ears felt hot with what he was sure was a blush. *Jesus Christ, Rogers, get it together.* “Nat, hi.”

“Steve, hi,” she smiled in response, settling herself into the opposite corner of the couch from where he sat.

They were in one of the secure breakrooms in the S.H.I.E.L.D offices. Tony had assured them there were no listening devices – because even after Fury had promised them that, Tony found four – and it was the only place for the team to collect themselves after another one of Coulson’s obnoxious bonding exercises.

The truth was, none of them really trusted each other, not at the level they needed to in order to make what they were doing work. Nat and Tony were probably the closest to that necessary point, but the others?

There had been small skirmishes – they fought a weird plague of frogs on Long Island, and then they helped at that ATF raid on that compound in Oregon – things that all were still training exercises. Steve recognized the vibe from basic training, but with a lack of common goal or clear enemy, it all felt a little stilted.

Plus, the 21st century was wearing down Steve’s last nerve.

“I’m going to cut the bullshit pleasantries because I’ve always hated them and you’ll trap us in them for years if I let you,” Nat started, while Steve gave out a low chuckle. “You’re screwing up my show, Cap.”

“I’m sorry?” Steve sputtered.

“You and Stark are *screwing. up. my. show.,”* she enunciated calmly. “I don’t understand what has
crawled up each of your asses and died – although some thorough examination may be what you guys actually need to get past this – but we have a job to do and I have nothing but this. I am not going back to Russia, Cap, and we can’t send you back to 19 whatever, and this world just keeps getting fucking weirder by the minute.”

“Your show?” Steve was still stuck on terminology.

Nat rolled her eyes. Women did that around him a lot in this century, he noticed. “It’s a quote from a TV show I watched last week with Pepper. Sorry, that’s on me, should not have spoken in idioms. Steve, you’re pissing me the fuck off, is that clearer?”

“Crystal,” Steve said dryly, “but highly inappropriate.”

“No, Steve, I really don’t think it is. We have honest to God serious problems here and we need serious people to solve them and I think you and Stark are up for the job. I really do. I think you’re both good men and have good ideas but I swear to all of the gods, old and new, that I will kill you each with my shoe if you don’t sort this out by the end of the week,” Nat nearly growled the last sentence.

Okay, so she was serious. Steve sighed deeply, “Nat, I don’t know what to tell you. I’m not doing anything and he is so out of line all the time. I’m not going to compromise the mission for his ego.”

“That is exactly what you’re going to do,” Nat replied.

“No –” Steve started loudly.

She held up a hand, “Correction, you are going to shift the mission. Fury and Coulson have us all thinking the mission is out there,” she gestured to the window. “The mission is us. The mission is the Avengers and so, yes, you will need to compromise to his ego a bit. Don’t worry, he’s getting the same lecture from Pepper.”

Steve tried to protest a few more times, and Nat only shut him down. They went around in circles for a few moments, before he was finally too emotionally tired to argue anymore.

“Fine,” he conceded. “What do you suggest I do?”

“Well, I read somewhere that you old fashioned fellas liked baseball. Good news for you is that Tony does, too,” she handed him an envelope. “And, you both hate the Yankees. Don’t worry, Tony informs me they are as evil and awful now as they were before you went into the ice, so go forth and heckle.”

He took the envelope slowly.

“They’re shitty seats, way up in the nosebleeds, and we bought enough seats around them that you two should be able to be Tony and Steve, and not Iron Man and Cap, but if anyone starts to bother you guys, Pep, Clint, and I will be close by. Pepper actually has a business thing to deal with and I think Clint and I are arm candy, but that’s neither here or there,” Nat said as she stood up. “Tomorrow afternoon, 2pm. Go be a grown ass man and sort out your issues.”

“Peeeeepppp,” Tony whined.

“Nope, don’t care. Do. Not. Care,” Pepper replied, as she handed Tony the sunscreen. “Can you do my back? This dress is going to be a problem if I end up in the sun.”
“Why did I think letting you and Nat meet was a good idea?”

“Okay, well, we’re going to push right past that incredibly misogynistic remark as though you control either of our lives or personal choices regarding friends because I know you don’t mean it and are being an intentional ass,” Pepper replied. “And instead, while you are an excellent boyfriend and put sunscreen on my back, I will remind you that Rhody agrees with me and he will intervene next if you don’t behave today and try to act like a human being.”

Tony finished with the sunscreen, and spun Pepper around for a kiss. “I’m not scared of Rhodey.”

And the sound of Pepper’s laughter could be heard all the way down to the car, where Happy was waiting.

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“Do you think they’ll be adults?” Nat asked around a bite of her nachos.

“God, I hope so,” Pepper replied. “I really, really need to focus on a new marketing campaign and while Tony’s rage-designing has been helpful, none of what he’s produced during this temper tantrum is actually okay to go into production. So, I need him to pull his head out of his ass –“

“Or Steve’s ass-“ Nat smirked.

“-and focus for a goddamn minute,” Pepper concluded. The two women were silent for a moment, before Pepper glanced around at who was possibly standing near them. She wasn’t meeting her board member in his suite for another few innings, so they were taking in a bit of air and leaning against one of walls on the outfield concourse.

“Do you really think that’s part of it?”

Nat nodded, “I really do. I’ve been around men – large, rowdy, horny groups of them – long enough to notice when sexual tension is ramping everything up. I mean, Steve has zero idea, I’m sure, but Tony? I... I’m so sorry-“

Pepper held up her hand, “Don’t be. Tony is a poster child for ‘sexuality is a spectrum’ and has been the entire time I’ve known him. I don’t think he puts enough reflection into himself to do a label or anything, but with that combined with his decades long crush on Captain America-“

Now it was Nat’s turn to interrupt, “Really?”

“-I think it’s totally possible that if he just kissed Steve and got it over with, this would be easier.”

“You’re very…”

“Calm about it?” Pepper supplied. “Listen, I know who I’m in love with and I actually know him better than he knows himself. He has had legions of opportunities to cheat on me or leave me in the last few years and he hasn’t. I also know him well enough to know that if he was going to, I’d never be able to stop him. He’s a mess – an absolute top to bottom human disaster zone – but he’s my mess.”

She paused and brushed a few hairs out of her eyes. “In theory, I’m 100% good with anyone acting on attraction with the usual consent caveats. So, Iron Man wants to bone Captain America? Good, fine, mazel. My boyfriend wants to bone the unbelievably hot super solider we both know? I’m… working on it.”
Nat smiled, “Here’s what I do know. That man is so in love with you he’s stupid with it. I spent months following you two around, and I had to learn you like I learned languages and marks before. I am fluent in Tony and Pepper and you guys are something else.”

Pepper blushed slightly, and let a few tears well up as she reached for her friend’s hand. “I needed to hear that, and I didn’t know how much.”

Nat squeezed her hand back, “I also know that Tony’s neurosis mean he acts way before he thinks and I have a terrible feeling things will be hard before they’re settled.”

Pepper snorted, “He built his way out of a cave in Afghanistan, and was then almost killed by the only father he ever really knew. Really, how much harder can it get?”

They had been doing small talk about baseball for about thirty minutes and Tony was about to lose his mind. They’d been over the Dodgers move from Brooklyn, and Tony had just finished filling Steve in on PEDs, so I guess the summary is that you can’t play baseball, Cap, and he was about to fish out his phone to whine to Pepper when Steve cleared his throat.

“I don’t think the girls are going to let us leave here without a conversation, so… I don’t know what I did to offend you, but I really am sorry.”

Tony rolled his eyes, “You’ve done nothing to offend me except being offended by everything I do. It’s fucking exhausting.”

“What? What does that mean?”

“Oh, please, you are constantly displeased with me. I don’t know if it’s because you were in love with Howard—”

“Howard Stark was a good man—”

“Oh, that is IT,” Tony growled and turned to face Steve. “He may have been when you knew him, I have no idea, but the man who raised me? Not good. Not even close. He was manipulative, and abusive, and beat me mercilessly whenever I didn’t live up to his standard – which, by the way, was you, so that’s a mind fuck we can unpack in the presence of licensed professionals – and I started drinking at 12 just to stop crying.”

Steve was absolutely unable to speak, which was probably a good idea, since Tony was on a roll.

“I fucked anyone who would fuck me, in whatever grouping they agreed to, just to get his voice out of my head. The more he screamed at me that I was an embarrassment to the Stark name, the less I wanted the name, and the more stuff I snorted and swallowed in the vain attempt to stop being a Stark,” Tony was nearly foaming at the mouth with anger.

“The only, and I mean only good things in my life for most of my 20s and 30s were Pepper and Rhodey. I get that the list should expand to include you and Nat and Legolas and all, but then you go and defend Howard, or say something that reminds me that you are perfect and I’m a giant bag of fuckery, and I just see red, dude. I just see red.”

“I’m—”

“No. Yet,” Tony held up a hand. “Pepper has been bugging me about this since the first fight you and I had and I’m emotionally stunted, but not completely stupid, so I know that a bunch of this is
my own baggage and not anything you’ve done. So here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to have Jarvis send you the files on both Howard and Aunt Peggy – I’ve hacked them enough that they’re pretty declassified – and you can see who they were and who they became. I know you’ve been to see Aunt Peggy and I’m sorry I didn’t warn you, I should have. And then you’re going to never, and I mean never, praise my father in my presence again. Does that work, Captain?”

Steve whispered, “Yes, sir.”

“Good, now let’s watch some fucking baseball.”

It was about three weeks later when Jarvis interrupted Tony in the workshop. “Sir, Captain Rogers requests entrance.”

“Um, sure,” Tony replied, temporarily arrested. What the…

Steve walked in and stepped up next to Tony at his workbench. He didn’t say anything for a moment, but Tony heard him swallow a bunch of times. Finally, Steve said, “I don’t like bullies.”

Tony stopped was he was doing and turned, “Cool motto.”

“No, I mean…” Steve ran his hand through his hair. “I read the files and Howard was a bully, and a jackass, and not just to you, but to everyone except me. As Buck would said, ‘fuck me sideways,’ I had no idea and I’m sorry.”

Tony raised an eyebrow, “Language, Cap.”

Steve smirked, and blushed a bit, before sticking out his hand, “Looks like 1945 Captain America got a lot of things wrong. I’d like 2012 Steve Rogers to get a few more things right.”

Tony smiled, and Steve noticed it was the one that he really only gave to Pepper and Rhodey, the one that lit up Tony’s entire face. “Well, then we have some work to do. I know Pepper has been helping you with historical gaps and such, but, Steve, you have got to see Star Wars immediately.”
April, 2012

“Ms. Potts,” Dr. Brewer said calmly, “how can I help you?”

Pepper walked into the professor’s office with a lot more confidence than she felt. “Thank you for seeing me in what I’m sure is a busy time in your semester.”

The black woman stood from behind her desk, chuckling, “None of the times of the semester seem to be not busy any more, but we’re not here to talk about my feelings about the future of higher education. Your assistant said you read my book? Here, let’s sit on my couch.”

Pepper had. Four times.

“Yes, and I have some questions. Did you get a chance to review the paperwork Delia sent you?”

“Yes, and I need to admit I’ve never signed an NDA for a coffee meeting before, but when Delia explained the subject matter, I was happy to oblige. I need to remind you, however, that I am a sociologist and social worker and not a licensed therapist –“

Pepper held up to hand to politely interrupt, “I know, Dr. Brewer. I’ve been to several therapists during my tenure at SI, but your book was the first one that made sense on trauma, and I have some questions.”

“Please, call me Kerry,” she smiled “You are one of the four people on the planet who have read my book, I think we can be on a first name basis for this chat.”

Pepper laughed, “Then I am Pepper.”

“Pepper,” Kerry smiled, “how can I help and do you mind if I take notes? I know they are included under the confidentiality and NDA.”

“Of course, please. Well, I’m sure you’re familiar with Tony and his various public exploits, but there are things we don’t tell the public,” Pepper started, before filling Kerry in on the private traumas of Tony’s recent life.

“And now, the nightmares just keep getting worse,” Pepper concluded calmly, “and he will not go to therapy, and we can’t talk about medication because they all affect his heart, and he doesn’t really have one to begin with. So, I’m trying a different approach, and trying to understand the very nature of trauma and brain chemistry because there has to be something I can do.”

Kerry paused her pencil, “There may be, but I need to remind you there may not be. Trauma literally re-writes the wiring in the brain and the kind of trauma, Mr. Stark experienced is not… easy.”
“Tony, just call him Tony,” Pepper replied quietly. “I know, and I’ve read The Body Keeps Score too, so I get the physical aspects. And I can only imagine that for Tony, every time he breathes, he’s reminded of that cave.”

“So, his body is still restricted?”

“The work the doctor in Afghanistan did in the cave saved his life, but it also kind of distorted his chest cavity. As he’s refined the arc reactor and changed some of the materials – he almost died from palladium poisoning a bit ago – he’s caused more disruption. His cardiologist tells me that he’s held together by force of will and scar tissue.”

Kerry was quiet for a moment, “So literally every breath.”

Pepper nodded, and let the gravity of the situation hit her for the first time in a long time.

Kerry held the silence for a few moments, before she spoke, “I have researched and written about trauma for a very long time, Pepper. I’ve collected data all over the world, from all sorts of people, and so let me tell you a few things. First, Tony and all his reactions are completely within understood reactions.”

“So, he’s normal?”

“Normal is just a setting on a tumble dryer,” Kerry responded drily, “but yes. Nothing you’ve said has shocked or alarmed me. What does alarm me is that he and his life are not in the realms of normal for the rest of us, but his responses to trauma are.”

“So it’s not normal to build an army of flying super suits and then make friends with a group of assassins, dead soldiers, and a god?”

“I’d say no.”

The two women grinned at each other, as Pepper quietly started to laugh. Before she knew it, both of them were howling with laughter and Pepper had tears streaming down her face.

“The second thing I want to tell you,” Kerry said, as she calmed down, “is that the best definition of recovery from trauma I’ve ever heard came from a PhD student I met in Northern Ireland. She was researching people who lived through their conflict, but weren’t technically directly affected by it, but her argument was that all humans are rewired by trauma and are continually rewired by ignoring it. Anyway, she told me that living with trauma was like a circular mountain path next to a beach. The Big Ugly, her words, happened on the beach. It’s seething and it smells and it’s a living being, she described it like the smoke monster from Lost meets a Dementor,” Kerry smiled.

Pepper nodded, “Great visual.”

“So however long it takes you to leave the beach – remember, your body is different now and the creature doesn’t want you to – you’ll start making your way around the conical mountain. It’s really hard at first and doesn’t feel like you’re making progress, but you are, slowly. You reach the backside of the mountain and suddenly you can breathe again. You can’t smell the creature, you can’t feel it as viscerally. I’m okay, you think, and you keep going. But what happens next, Pepper?”

“You have to go around the front,” Pepper replied, a smile quirking her face. “I know what that feels like.”

“I’m sure you do, because in your case, you think you’re off the beach, and you may be, but then
another creature shows up and drags you and Tony back down.”

Pepper silently nodded.

“The good news is that you both have the strength to leave the beach and you have. It’s not a small thing and you should be really, legitimately, proud of yourself. However –”

“I knew that was coming.”

Kerry smiled, “However, you gotta deal with some of those creatures once and for all, or the climb is only going to get more exhausting.”

“I know,” Pepper nearly whispered.

Kerry leaned forward and grabbed Pepper’s hands, “You are an incredible women, Pepper Potts, and this life you have is not an easy one. My guess is that, more than anything else besides professional therapy right now, you could use a friend. So, how about this. How about we hang, as my kids call it. I know you like art museums, are you also a theater person?”

“Oh, I love theater,” Pepper enthused.

“Excellent. I have season tickets to the Public that I’m forever dragging my partner to, and she is quite tired of it. I’d adore a new theater companion,” Kerry smiled warmly.

“I’d adore to be that,” Pepper smiled warmly. “Kerry, thank you.”

“Pepper, know that I see you, and I see what you’re doing. You are not Tony Stark’s gal Friday, like I know you’re called in the press. You are Stark Industries, and that would be big enough without being in love with a man who seems to try to kill himself on the daily,” Kerry let go of Pepper’s hands.

Pepper laughed, “He has a penchant for it.” She stood and started to gather her things, and noticed a picture of a Kerry with a group of children. “Are those your kids?”

“No,” Kerry smiled wryly. “Those are students I work with in an after-school program in Newark. I don’t have kids.”

“Oh, but you said-“

“I know, I refer to all of my students as my kids. Drives them nuts, especially my TAs,” Kerry grinned. “But come on, Pepper. I’m a black lesbian, who isn’t even in a legal marriage, on a associate professor’s salary. My options are pretty limited.”

Pepper was quiet, swallowing her own privilege a bit. If I can trust anyone, it has to be her, right? It would feel so good to say it out loud… “I keep having miscarriages, so it seems my options are limited, too.”

Kerry was quiet for a moment, before quickly moving to hug Pepper, “I’m so sorry, I can’t imagine,” and led Pepper back to the couch. Over the next hour, Pepper wept, Kerry provided tissues, and shed a few tears herself. In the grand tradition of women mourning with each other and creating holy circles, the two women knew that they were bonded forever now.

“Jarvis?” Steve called out, rubbing his eyes in exhaustion, “time check.”
“It is currently 2315, Captain,” Jarvis replied and Steve’s mouth tugged into a smile. He and Rhodey seemed to be the only ones who got military time from Jarvis and Steve hadn’t had to ask. The small comforts.

“Well, that makes sense why my eyes burn,” Steve muttered.

“You have been reading for six hours, Captain.”

“Jesus Christ,” Steve swore. He hadn’t realized it was that long. Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* was engrossing and completely different than anything he had learned in school – for example, who knew Lincoln didn’t actually free the slaves! Pepper had introduced him to these things called MOOCs – massive online open classes – and he was learning all sorts of things from all sorts of people. When he wasn’t training his body for Avengers missions, he was training his mind for the 21st century.

And it was exhausting.

He missed his world like it was a limb that had been amputated. It wasn’t that things were confusing and he couldn’t keep up – he always was the smartest kid on the block books wise – it’s just that every moment felt like it took mental effort. He had talked to Rhodey about it briefly, thinking the other man would think he was nuts.

’No man, I get it,’ Rhodey had said. ’One of the things I drill into my guys when they leave the unit is that they are different and the world is different. Going home is going to be like shoving a round peg into a square hole and it’s going to be tiring for a while. If my guys have only been gone for 2 years, and you’ve been gone for a few decades, I get it.’

Steve had taken some comfort in that, and then noticed that Jarvis had added some reading about “re-entry syndrome” and “cross-cultural communication” onto his StarkPad. Seemed he wasn’t the only one who didn’t always know what to do with the world around him.

He was slowly getting to know his new team. As long as he never referred to Nat as ‘Agent Romanov’, they were good. Bruce was harder, just because he was still learning to be comfortable in his own skin, and because he had left for India a while ago. Thor was fun when he was around, and a surprising font of wisdom. Clint was good for a movie night and really helpful with some of the cultural stuff that went right over Steve’s head, but he had been out in New Mexico for a while at that SHIELD site.

And then, there was Tony.

Since their agreement at the stadium that day earlier in the month, the two men had slowly begun to spend more time together. Steve was routinely surprised how much he enjoyed Tony’s company, and he was beginning to understand Pepper’s division between *Tony* and *Stark*.

“Steve!” Tony’s voice came through Jarvis and shocked Steve out of his reverie.

“Yeah?” Steve said warily.

“Workshop, now. Please? Thank you,” Tony spoke in rapid fire and Steve’s curiosity was peaked enough that he threw on a hoodie – Tony’s workshop was always freezing – and wandered down. Once Jarvis opened the door for him, he was even more confused than before.

“Ah! Perfect!”

“Tony, why are you on the ceiling?”
“Well, my thrusters are misfiring and I’ve gotten my hands stuck into the plaster, but if I rip everything out, I’m really close to one of Jarvis’ circuit boards and DUM-E did something that is overriding this one function I need Jarvis to do—“

“TONY,” Steve yelled. “What do you need me to do?”

“Oh, there’s a ladder, can you climb up and help me?”

“Sure,” Steve grinned as he went to get the ladder. Typical Tony, fourteen words when three would do.

“There, if you, got it, just lift that, no the other, okay, now —“ Tony was quickly directing Steve’s hands. Pretty soon, Steve had the whole suit free from Tony’s body except for the gloves.

“Now what?” Steve asked, thankful for the serum helping him balance on the ladder while also gripping Tony’s legs.

“Well, now, I’m not sure.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Can you release yourself from the gloves and drop and then I’ll catch you?”

“I think we’ll both fall.”

“Well, then I’ll break yours and I’ll be fine. It’s only 15 feet, I’ve fallen from 50 and been fine. Just release, Tony,” Steve ordered.

Tony paused only slightly before doing just that. Tony was right – they did fall – and so was Steve – he did break Tony’s fall and he was fine. And then, they both just kind of lay there.

“Tony?” Steve groaned a bit.

“Yeah?” Tony mumbled.

“I’m fine, but I heal faster without someone on top of me.”

“Oh, fuck, sorry,” Tony scrambled to roll away. The two men got to their feet and Steve watched as Tony went about setting his workshop back to rights. DUM-E what did you do? No, You, do not take the blame, I know who it was. Okay, fine, I just lost a pair of perfectly good gauntlets because, no don’t give me attitude about this.

Steve fought back a smile. Tony was rarely more charming than when he was with his bots.

“Want a beer?” Tony called out to Steve.

“It’s midnight, I should be getting to bed,” Steve responded.

“I repeat, you want a beer? DUM-E, get Cap a beer.”

Knowing resistance was futile, Steve accepted the delivered Brooklyn Lager with a smile and went to sit on Tony’s workshop couch. The man himself joined shortly after.

After a few moments of comfortable silence, Tony said, “So, you were in love with Aunt Peggy?”

“I mean, who wouldn’t be?”

“Oh, for those of us who are into smart women way out of our leagues, Peggy Carter is an
archetype, so you get no argument from me,” Tony took a long pull from the bottle. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

Steve took a few long sips to keep from answering, “Why are you asking?”

“Jesus, it’s like you learned conversational skills from Coulson,” Tony muttered. “I was at her house once, on the anniversary you disappeared, I was… 10? 11? Not sure. But she said something and I was just curious. So did you?”

“In 1945, I would have told you certainly,” Steve said slowly. “But now that I’ve been awake for a little bit, I wonder if I knew what love was.”

“Well, that’s fucking deep,” Tony said.

“Well, I’m a fucking deep guy,” Steve smirked as Tony rolled his eyes. “I spent my childhood alternating between getting my ass kicked in alleys and recovering in bed from colds, and then I turned into this,” he gestured to his body, “and then it was like I blinked and it’s now. Some days the only thing that feels normal is my own brain, and I’m used to being by myself.”

“Well, I need a second beer for this,” Tony finished his first. “Keep talking.”

“I loved Peggy, but building a life with her? Like, I watch you and Pepper and how you just know each other and Peggy and I… we weren’t that.”

“But you were that with someone else,” Tony says it like a fact and not a question.

“If you know something, just say it, Stark,” Steve said evenly.

“Barnes, right? You and Barnes were the home run kind of love.”

Steve was quiet for a while, “Yeah, I think so.”

They were quiet for a moment, but it was not an uncomfortable silence. The two of them had come so far. Pepper told Tony it was because of his vulnerability, which Tony didn’t really understand but he trusted Pepper. All he knew is that when he was honest with Steve and then Steve didn’t throw it back in his face, something inside him said Steve was on his team.

“I was talking to Pepper the other night,” Steve broke the silence, “about that Love, Actually, movie.”

“Jesus, I hate that thing,” Tony muttered.

“She knows,” Steve smiled at his friend. “But I asked her for some stuff to help me figure out dating and what not and that was on the list.”

“You’re thinking about dating?”

“No, but I went into the ice thinking that I was going to hell for loving Buck and I woke up to a world where I might could marry him or whatever, and I’m… sorting through those realities,” Steve replied.

“Yeah, that’s gotta be a mind fuck.”

“You have no damn idea.”

“Anyway, Pep was helping?”
Steve finished his beer and began picking at the label, when DUM-E whizzed over with a replacement. “We were talking about all the different kinds of love and the kinds she feels for you and she gets from you and I realized that I had never really considered anything past the fact that I knew I’d get married, have a few kids, and probably have a picket fence.”

“We call that the American Dream now,” Tony smirked.

“We did, then, too,” Steve smiled at him. “Although, I’ll admit, I was more into the three square meals a day end of that dream than anything when I was growing up.”

“So you were never into the picket fence?”

“I never questioned it, I don’t think. It was just what people did. I don’t think any of you really understand was life was like before that war, before the summer of ’69, or Vietnam, or anything else. I was a poor orphan with zero options. Being Captain America was something I figured would end when the war did and I was just saving every cent I was paid for whenever that was. I focused on keeping alive, doing my job, and making sure I could eat. If I got some time to draw, or play cards, or flirt with Peggy, then all the better. I assumed Peggy and I would get married, and she’d keep being brilliant at something and I’d maybe work at a bank, and there would probably be a dog. Bucky and whoever he ended up with would live next door, it would be in Brooklyn, and he’d work on cars, and I’d teach our kids to play baseball. That’s as far as I got, I didn’t even begin to fathom there were other options.”

Tony had been quiet for most of Steve’s monologue, lost in his own train of thought. Pepper was who gave me options beyond who I thought I had to be. I always thought Aunt Peggy gave Cap options, but…

“So what do you think about options, now?” Tony asked.

“That’s the – what’s the idiom – sixty-four thousand dollar question,” Steve replied. “What I think I know,” he grinned, “is that the kind of certainty I felt for Peggy and the kind I felt for Buck were different. But I also know that’s irrelevant, because I went in the ice, and Peggy can’t remember me, and Buck is dead. The world is as it is now, and I’ll always be a weird hybrid of the centuries. So for now, I think I’ll figure out who I am now, and who I can love, and how. And then sort out how I want or need to be loved in this new century.”

“That’s a lot of thinking, Cap,” Tony replied.

“Well, I am the star spangled man with a plan, right?” Steve replied sardonically. He and Tony each smiled a bit, before Steve continued, “By the way, Pepper has a degree in psychology or something, right? Because she’s the one who helped me sort this out.”

“You would think our fair Pepper was a PhD at this point, wouldn’t you,” Tony replied. “But no, my previous asshattery, as she calls it, provided her with all the education she needed. Pep has an undergrad in art history, I think, but then everything else, including wrangling damaged male senses of self, has come through on the job training.”

“Damn.”

“I know, I’m dating up.”

“Way up.”
“What is this place?!” Nat whispered to Pepper as they took a seat in the corner of the pub.

“Oh, my friend, welcome to the Horny Goat,” Pepper grinned back. “Nick! Over here!”


Pepper grinned back, “You mean #2 on your list? Yes, I know, he’s an old friend.”

“Pepper!” Nick called as he kissed Pepper’s cheek, “it has been ages! And you must be Natasha.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Nah, not in here, in here I’m Nick,” the Crown Prince grinned. “My grandfather set up this place as the one place in the country where we get to be humans and not royals. And we invite certain friends to join us.”

“The last time Tony and I were in town was for, what, an economic conference?”

Nick nodded into his beer, “Yes, that one at the university that Grandmama was hosting.”

“And, well, Tony ended up talking Nick into doing shots-“

“-and I only do those within these walls-“

“-and one thing led to another and now Tony and I have a lifetime membership of this fine establishment whenever we’re in country,” Pepper concluded.

“Stark is a jackass, but one of my favorite ones,” Nick replied. “As long as we never get him and Henry in a room together, I think the world will survive.”

Grandmama is the Queen, Henry is the other prince, Natasha’s brain was whirring. It wasn’t like she wasn’t used to powerful or famous people, but there was being at state dinners, and then there was swapping secrets in a clandestine pub with the guy who was only beat out for “World’s Most Eligible Bachelor” by Steve.

After about two hours, where conversations ranged from geopolitical matters to the latest Star Trek movie, Nick excused himself, gave Pepper a kiss on her check, and bade goodbye to Natasha, saying they could stay as long as they liked. Pepper thanked him, but she and Natasha had to get back to New York the next day, so they headed to the hotel.

As they wandered through the deserted streets of Wessco, pleasantly buzzed Pepper linked arms with her very sober friend.

“It’s really nice to be a human,” Pepper remarked.

Nat smiled, “I think I forget you are one sometimes.”

“Me too,” Pepper said sadly. “Me too.”

They were quiet the rest of the two blocks back to the hotel. On SI business trips like this, Natasha served as Pepper’s bodyguard. Sometimes it was Clint, but he was still in New Mexico, and if she was honest, Pepper preferred to travel with Natasha. They got ready for bed, and Natasha had just finished her final sweep, when Pepper broke the silence.

“Nat,” Pepper said quietly. “Can I ask you something?”
“Of course,” Nat made room on the couch as Pepper made herself comfortable.

Pepper was opening her mouth to speak, when both her and Nat’s StarkPhones began ringing the emergency alert tones.

“It’s Tony,” Pepper said, as she answered hers.

“Pep?” Tony sounded frantic, “are you safe?”

“Yes, Natasha and I are in Wessco,” Pepper replied, the calm in her voice betraying her feelings.

“We’re secure, Tony,” Natasha spoke.

“Clint’s gone, and so is the Tessaract.”

“The tessawhat?” Pepper said.

“No time, Nat, you’re going to Calcutta, you’ve gotta get the Big Guy,” Tony continued. “Pepper, Rhodey is en route to get you home, and I’d prefer it if you stayed in the palace tonight. I’ll call Nick and he’ll get it.”

“Copy,” Nat said. What does he mean, Clint’s gone?

“Meet at SI in New York, the bunker, as soon as you can. Fury and Coulson will be waiting.”

Chapter End Notes

Wessco, The Horny Goat, and Prince Nicholas are borrows from Emma Chase's brilliant "Royally" series - and will be making more appearances.
May 2012

Kerry could not believe what she was seeing. “Did that boy just fly into the giant hole?” she muttered to herself. “Oh, of course he did. Fool flew into a giant hole strapped to missile. Jesus wept, poor Pepper.”

He had never been angrier in his life. Steve had barely kept his tongue during the meeting and still could not believe how absolutely arrogant Tony had been, pulling that stunt. In the five days since the battle, Steve was sure Tony would have managed to be sorry or apologetic, but no. As soon as Fury said they could leave and he’d call them when he needed them, Steve stormed out without a glance at anyone.

Racing to the garage, he got his bike and headed out to Tony’s penthouse up Fifth Avenue, thankfully away from the destruction zone. He knew that Pepper and Tony had been holed up in there since the attack, and he figured it was the easiest place to make sure he saw Tony before the other man escaped into a workshop again for days or weeks.

Dodging the debris, his ride uptown only served to increase his anger. How dare he. Did he not realize what a dumbass move that was? Steve was the captain on that mission, not Tony and yet Tony did whatever Tony wanted and Jesus, Mary, and Joseph of all the boneheaded dickish moves he pulled…

The ranting mantra ran around and around in Steve’s brain until he pulled into the private parking garage of the building. Pepper had shown him where to park the bike a few months back, when he and Pepper had started doing “artsy shit” – Tony’s phrase – together. Punching the elevator button so hard he nearly broke it, and opening his eye for the retinal scan, Steve counted the minutes until the elevator rose.

“Captain Rogers,” Jarvis’ voice rang in the elevator. “Sir is not at home.”

“Oh, I’m aware, Jarvis,” Steve ground out. “I’ll wait.”

“Ms. Potts is in residence,” Jarvis said, almost cautiously.

“Really? I would have assumed she’d be at SI,” Steve replied, the elevator rapidly approaching the penthouse.

“She and her friend Dr. Brewer just finished a Skype call, and Ms. Potts felt it was prudent to conduct that in residence.”

“Got it,” Steve said as the elevator door opened. He could hear Jarvis call his name again, but he was on a mission. “Pepper?!” Steve called, “it’s me. I’ll just head straight to Tony’s office and wait for him –“

He nearly skidded to a stop at the sight of Pepper sitting on the couch, clutching her cell phone with eyes swollen and red.
“Hi Steve,” she sniffled. “I’m assuming the meeting is over?”

“Yeah, Pepper, wow, I’m sorry-“

She held up her hand, “don’t be. I was just talking to Kerry and sometimes she makes me cry.”

A protective streak a mile wide flared in Steve as he clenched his fists. Pepper must have noticed the set in his jaw, because she smiled gently, “in good ways, Steve. I promise. At ease, Cap.”

She wiped her eyes a few more times, and got up off the couch. She walked towards him, pulled him into a hug, and whispered, “I’m glad you’re alive.”

He had no response as she walked away, presumably making her way to the bedroom. He took a seat on the sofa and felt his anger welling back up.

Those tears are for Tony and because he was a dumbass and its like he doesn’t even remember Pepper when he makes those decisions...

When Tony burst into the room a short time later, Steve was on his feet in an instant.

“Stand down, Capsicle, not your turf,” Tony bit out as he looked around for Pepper.

“Oh, it is absolutely my turf,” Steve corrected. “You are on my team, and you disobeyed direct orders, and we have –“

“Fuck OFF, Cap,” Tony yelled. “Now is not the fucking time.”

“I swear, Tony, it is NEVER the time with you and I have HAD it,” Steve yelled back.

“You know what, Captain America,” Tony ground out the name. “I don’t give a fuck if you’ve had it or you have it or if you fire me from the fucking team, but you are standing in my house and I am not Iron Man in this space, I am Tony Stark and I have shit to do that does not concern you and you get to leave right now.”

Steve didn’t make any effort to move, and Tony threw up his hand.

“Jesus FUCK you are dumb,” Tony was yelling so loudly at this point, his veins were nearly popping out. “When we were busy trying to save the fucking planet, Pepper was busy trying to get pregnant because that is what we have been trying to do for two fucking years and while that is none of your goddamn business, you clearly have no respect for our personal lives and so let me just fill you all the way in.”

“Tony-“

“No, in for a penny, in for a pound, buddy,” Tony sneered. “This makes you uncomfortable? Good. You don’t want to think about it? I don’t care. Because I have become fluent in IUI vs. IVF and mucus and the sounds Pepper makes when she cries over another failed procedure and how it feels to have to inject my girlfriend with syringes every week and none of it, NONE of it, makes me comfortable.”

“I had no idea,” Steve breathed.

“No, in for a penny, in for a pound, buddy,” Tony sneered. “This makes you uncomfortable? Good. You don’t want to think about it? I don’t care. Because I have become fluent in IUI vs. IVF and mucus and the sounds Pepper makes when she cries over another failed procedure and how it feels to have to inject my girlfriend with syringes every week and none of it, NONE of it, makes me comfortable.”

“I had no idea,” Steve breathed.

“Of course you didn’t because we made sure no one did. Our entire dating life is dictated by NDAs – I think there are about 30 people on the planet who know we’re together – so did you really think we’d be broadcasting this?” Tony was incredulous as he wandered over to the wet bar and poured himself a drink. “I haven’t even told Rhodey because I have no idea how.”
“I don’t know what to say,” Steve whispered.

Steve’s quiet admissions took all the fight out of Tony’s voice and he visibly crumbled as he shot back his vodka. “No one does, Steve. That’s the problem.”

Steve was quiet for another moment, “I’m going to go. We can talk about team stuff another time.”

“You know what, Steve, don’t.” Tony said, with a heavy sigh. “Hang here, throw on a movie, and we’ll order some food. It helps Pep to be distracted and now that you know, I wouldn’t hate having you here. Pepper’s got Kerry to talk to, so I’m kinda glad I’ve got someone now who knows.”

Tony smiled sadly in Steve’s direction as the other man crossed the room to grab him into a hug. “I really am so sorry,” Steve whispered.

“Thanks,” Tony whispered back. “Jesus fuck, I am so ready to be mad at you forever, and then you just know what to say and you look at me and…” Tony cut himself off with a wipe of his face. “I’m going to go see Pep. Make yourself comfy. Historically, this bit can be ten minutes or two hours, but please just stay here. Jarvis, order the usual and double it for Steve.”

“Yes, sir,” the AI responded.

Steve nodded as the other man went upstairs. He knew that some women had trouble getting pregnant – he was a human in the world, after all – but he had never known a specific woman who dealt with it. That Pepper, wonderful, wise, beautiful. Pepper was made his heart feel like it was breaking in two. And then to think about what the whole thing was clearly doing to Tony… it all just felt heavy.

He curled his fingers into fists and did one of the deep breathing exercises that Rhodey had taught him. Moments like this, where his super strength couldn’t help at all, made him flash back to all those times in the alleys where he couldn’t be useful to anyone. Impotent. A waste.

But you’re not Steve heard Pepper’s voice in his head. You aren’t important to us because Tony’s dad built your body. You are important to us because you’re Steve. Please remember that. The words were from a few days ago, when he had confessed to Pepper that getting over the fight was harder than he thought it would be and that he felt so useless. How did she always have the perfect words to help?

Before Steve had even had a chance to pick a movie, he heard Tony and Pepper making their way into the room. “Steven!” Tony called, “what piece of cinematic artistry shall we enjoy this evening?”

“Shouldn’t Pepper choose?” Steve asked.

“No, Pepper should not,” said the lady herself. “I’m likely to fall asleep and I’m really too tired to care what’s happening. Just put something on where no one dies, please.”

“So Apocolypse Now is out?” Tony said.

She leveled him with a glance and he smirked back, before pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. “Jarvis, fire up The Princess Bride.”

_____________________________________

After that, Steve just sort of… stayed. While the repairs were being done to midtown and subsequently to Stark Tower, he found himself reluctant to head back to Brooklyn. Instead, he fell into an easy routine. Tony, sometimes, didn’t come home for a few days, as he oversaw the
reconstruction of his workshop, but he’d make sure to check in with Steve that someone was in the house with Pepper. Without saying anything, Steve had become a member of their family, and Steve noticed that some of the excessive jumpiness Tony was demonstrating was calming.

While Pepper was at work, Steve filled his days with his various mental and physical workouts. Jarvis and he surfed YouTube for cooking demonstrations, and found he enjoyed cooking almost as much as he enjoyed sketching.

None of them ever talked about that first night, but in July, Jarvis sent Steve out for tampons, and he felt his heart break in half.

By the middle of August, the tower was completed, and Tony had designed space for all of the Avengers. Sure, he was telling everyone it was because Fury insisted and that *chasing everyone around the world and universe was a waste of precious time of a genius billionaire, people*, but Steve knew better.

Tony was never happier than when he was providing for his family.

____________________________________

“Peeeeeppppppp,” Tony whined, one morning at their kitchen table.

“No, Tony!” Pepper was laughing as she said it, but *lands sake* her boyfriend was exasperating.

“But you love sports!”

“Since when?”

“Since –“

“Since you decided that you wanted to go to some football game and I said no?”

“It’s not just a football game! It’s an epic battle between two teams–“

“What is it you really want, Tony, because it is September and even I know the season has just started,” Pepper stared him down.

“Fine,” Tony huffed. “Their stadium has one of the new Oscorp regenerating gardens on one of the roof patio things and I want to go poke holes in the tech.”

Pepper stared at him for a minute before shaking her head, “That’s all you had to say, Tony, of course you do, let’s go.”

“Just like that?” Tony looked a little surprised.

“Of course just like that,” she stared at him. “When have I ever… what is this really about?”

“I just know you go out with Steve and with Kerry and I thought maybe…” he played with his cuticles.

“You thought I don’t want to go on dates with you anymore?” Pepper asked softly. He didn’t reply, so she moved to his side and kissed his temple. “Baby, that is your brain telling you lies. I always want to be with you.”

“It’s just been a while,” Tony whispered.
“You’re right, we have not been good about making time,” Pepper replied. “So let’s fix that. When’s the game?”

“Sunday afternoon.”

“In Philly?”

“Yeah.”

She clicked a few buttons on her StarkPad, worried her lip, told Jarvis to tell Delia she was out of office, and said, “done.” Smiling at him, she leaned forward to kiss him. “Pack a bag, Mr. Stark, I’m kidnapping you.”

“It’s only Thursday.”

“Yeah, but we have time to make up for, eh?”

He stared at her for a few beats. “I love you.”

“Me too, Anthony.”

By the end of October, the jumpiness was back.

Steve was a pretty observant guy; years and years of walking intentionally into fights had trained him well. Tony was not only twitchier, but he was sleeping and eating even less than usual and dragging him out of the workshop took an act of God – or Steve physically dragging him. Tony kept muttering about more suits, they need to duplicate mid air, but if you asked for clarification, he’d stare at you blankly like he had no idea he was talking out loud and then disappear again.

“He’s spiraling,” Nat muttered one morning after a particularly spacey episode.

“No shit,” Clint said, with a mouthful of pancakes. “I don’t think he’s showered in a week.”

“Has anyone seen Pepper?” Nat asked, staring directly at Steve.

“What?” Steve said.

“Please,” Clint said, still through food, “we’re not idiots.”

Steve sighed, “I don’t know what you think is happening, but I can guarantee you’re wrong.”

“I just think you guys spend a lot of time together without the rest of us,” Nat replied evenly.

“Well, then that is what is happening,” Steve said, trying to ignore the blush he felt creeping into his ears.

“You’re getting jumpy there, Cap,” Clint remarked.

There is no way this ends cleanly, Steve thought. “Tony’s getting worse, but we all know he’s not going to do anything about it, so we’ll just wait for him to shake himself out of it.”

Neither Clint nor Natasha commented on his change of subject, instead graciously following it and began debating whether they should contact Rhodey.
“Captain Rogers, head to the workshop immediately,” Jarvis interrupted.

Steve barely heard Clint question Jarvis before he went sprinting for the stairs. Upon entering the workshop, he saw Tony sitting on his bench, looking absolutely terrible, and trying to bat DUM-E’s offering of water away.

“I said coffee, not water, I hate water, I need coffee,” he was muttering it like some sort of rosary prayer.

“Tony,” Steve said cautiously, to which Tony didn’t respond, so Steve repeated it. Tony looked back up at him with bleary eyes.

“Hey, Cap? Did you bring coffee? I really need more coffee to stay awake so I can finish this prototype.”

Oh, this is a problem. “Tony, you’ve been awake for about 50 hours. You do not need coffee.”

“Are you worried about me?” Tony flirted a bit, “you’re adorable. I’m fine. Do this all the time.” As he finished that pronouncement, he gestured wildly and nearly fell off the table.

“Okay,” Steve said, and picked Tony up off the table, depositing him on the couch.

“Hey now,” Tony protested, barely keeping his eyes open and yet managing to scowl at Steve.

“Jarvis, lights off,” Steve commanded.

“Jarvis, lights on,” Tony countered.

The lights went off and Tony was silent for a minute. “Jarvis.”

“Ms. Potts has given Captain Rogers override rights when your hygiene and nutritional choices are suspect.”

“Suspect? Fucks sake, Jarvis, I built you, you need to listen to me, DUM-E-“

Steve cut him off with a firm, “No.”

“No?” Tony was using the tone that meant he was going to fight. Steve nearly threw himself on top of Tony to hold him in place.

“You will stay right there and you will sleep because otherwise you are going to die, Tony,” Steve growled out. “You basically have no heart-“

“Now that’s just mean.”

“FOR FUCKS SAKE YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN,” Steve was full-on roaring in fury. “You are physically compromised and so you need rest. In the name of Jesus and all his saints, Pepper and I are scared and it’s really rude that you don’t seem to care. Just take a goddamn nap and when you wake up, eat some protein, or I will let Nat kill you with her shoe.”

Both men were breathing heavy and Steve knew that if he just dipped his head a bit…

“Fine,” Tony said. “Get off me or get me off, otherwise I won’t sleep.”

Steve rolled off of Tony and strode towards the door, but couldn’t help the smirk on his face when Tony yelled, “Shoulda gone with Option 2, Cap.”
This chapter is when a few puzzle pieces find their way into the right places, but I know they're not going to move fast enough for some of you - sorry/not sorry.

Also, I'm terrible at writing sex scenes, so I'll just leave all to your (potentially filthy, if they're anything like mine) imaginations.

Thanks for the subscriptions, kudos, comments, bookmarks - they make me grin so big I'm putting Tony to shame.

December, 2012

“Oh shit,” Tony said as he muttered at his phone one night in bed.

“What,” Pepper asked, as she flipped through her own phone.

“Richard Parker died.”

“What?”

“Richard Parker, the man you gave your one true gift to-“

“For fucks sake, Tony.”

“- he and his wife died in a car accident last night.”


“This article says they’re survived by their son, Peter, but it doesn’t give his age.” Tony moved his fingers in the air as though he was doing the math, “but he’s got to be around 10. Jesus, that is young to be orphaned.”

Pepper’s heart twisted, and she whispered quietly, “Can you make sure he’s not in the system?”

Tony turned his phone to show a text message to a friend at the mayor’s office, “Already on it.”

She leaned over to kiss him, and the two settled back into the quiet business of falling asleep together. A few long touches, sweet release, both knowing the unspoken hope that the death of two near-strangers had released into their lives.

“21 years,” Tony muttered, as he whirred a wrench around in his hand. “21 fucking years.”

“He’s been doing this all day,” Steve muttered to Pepper.

“Welcome to December 16,” Pepper muttered back, as she turned a page of her book.
Once Pepper and Tony started dating, she declared December 16 a permanent personal day. While Tony didn’t get blackout drunk any more, usually choosing to be in the workshop with Black Sabbath blasting so loudly he can’t hear his own pain, they decided he’d never be alone. This year, she decided one of the benefits to Steve being in their lives meant he got to be part of it as well.

So, Pepper and Steve sat, slightly snuggled, on the couch while Tony whirred around the workshop, apparently ignoring them but everyone knew better. Pepper was busy reading one of the thousands of books she kept buying, thinking she’d have time to read but never did, and Steve was sketching. A faint alarm went off, and Pepper checked her watch to yell, ”Jarvis, half volume. Tony, time to eat.”

“Pep, I’m-“

“What’s the rule?”

“I eat when you tell me to.”

“Thank you,” Pep said smugly. “DUM-E, please give Tony a smoothie.”

Tony scowled in her direction briefly, before seemingly registering what was before him and allowing his face to break out in a grin.

Slightly unnerved by his stillness, Steve looked up from his sketch pad. “What?”

“Nothing,” Tony’s tone betrayed the dismissal.

Pepper rolled her eyes, “he’s happy we’re snuggling. He likes us together.”

Steve noticed the way his and Pepper’s limbs had quietly tangled themselves together over the course of the morning, how the warmth of her body had felt normal, and how he could smell her shampoo every time he took a breath.

He also noticed that, with Pepper’s pronouncement, she snuggled further into Steve.

Tony continued to grin like an idiot as he took a few sips from his smoothie and went back to work. “Jarvis, Franz Ferdinand. First album.”

“I can hear you thinking,” Pepper said idly, her voice cutting through the music to Steve’s ears. “Talk to me instead.”

He continued to sketch for a few seconds, taking a moment to blur the pencil strokes of Tony’s hair, before he closed the sketchbook and his fingers idly found Pepper’s ankle. Not looking at her, and keeping his voice low, he said, “Explain.”

Pepper put her book down, and rearranged herself on the couch, so that she was sitting cross legged and leaning into Steve’s side. “Do you want to look at me, or would this be easier if you weren’t?”

“Easier if I stare at the workbench, I think,” Steve said.

“No problem, I can whisper directly into your ear this way,” he heard the grin in her voice. “Tony is someone who has so much love to give and he’s never had a productive place for it. In fact, in the past, he was punished for trying to love people. Howard took the trust his son placed in him and twisted it into something really ugly.”

Steve clenched his fists, “I don’t understand how someone who knows Tony wouldn’t love him.”
“I happen to feel the same way, but Tony is still learning that. He craves love, but tells himself all the time that he shouldn’t,” Pepper remarked.

“I can see that,” Steve said slowly. “It’s why he can’t accept any positive comments.”

“Exactly,” Pepper confirmed.

“So what does that have to do with this?”

Pepper placed her hands on Steve’s tense forearm, “Whatever is causing you to panic right now, I need you to know you’re safe.”

“What?” Steve ground out.

“Your body is nearly vibrating with tension and I can’t figure out why,” Pepper replied. “So I’ll say my piece, and then I’m going to go quickly make some food that isn’t drinkable if you’ll babysit the tortured genius.”

Steve nodded, the muscles in his jaw twitching.

“Just like it’s possible for you to have loved Bucky and Peggy, it’s possible for Tony to love you and me. I think that’s what he does, actually. For Tony, the healthiest love he can feel is the kind that comes with safety and acceptance. In the last few months, what you’ve proven to both of us over and over is that you are part of us. You are here for our pain and our joy and without us really even making a choice, the three of us have become a unit,” Pepper took a breath.

“You know that beach and the mountain that Tony and I talk about? Well, one of the reasons I feel that I can move up the mountain is because of you. When the pain of ...” she gestured first to her uterus and then towards Tony and grimaced, "when the pain gets to be so much that Tony and I feel like we're drowning, you are there to pull us to shore."

Pepper placed her hand on Steve's cheek and turned his head towards her, "the question you need to answer now is this: do you want to keep this going, this thing we’ve stumbled into? Tony and I certainly do, and we want to figure out a way to make it even more than it is. I think you’re attracted to Tony, but I can’t sort if you are to me, we both are to you, but we can deal with whatever combination of affection, attraction, and love we end up with. All I know is this: we are better people because you love us, Steven, and we’d like to keep loving you back.”

She kissed the corner of his mouth, lingering for a second longer than she ever had before, and then made her way over to Tony. The two murmured to each other before Tony drew Pepper into a long kiss, and she was grinning as she eventually made her way out of the workshop.

Steve sat frozen on the couch for who knows how long. To him, it felt like a few years before Tony came over and flopped on the couch, but it could have been two minutes. Tony flung his feet into Steve’s lap and raised an eyebrow.

“Jarvis, quarter sound, switch to one of Pep's playlists,” he said to the ceiling, and then looked at Steve, "so, Pep told you we’re into you.”

Steve swallowed.

“It’s not a big deal, pal, but I can probably dig up a letterman jacket if you’d like.”

Steve rolled his eyes, and moved Tony’s feet off his lap so he could turn and face Tony in a way he wasn’t brave enough to with Pepper.
“It is a big deal, Tony.”

“No-“

Steve held up his hand, “All relationships are big deals. I’m not saying this because I never fathomed that… we could… that…“

“Finish a sentence?”

“Fuck off, you never do.”

“Language, Cap,” Tony said saucily. “Look, I get it. It’s not within the realm of ‘normal’ cultural expressions of love, but it makes the most sense to what I feel and what Pepper has confessed to feeling. We didn’t mean to gang up on you, I swear, I just hadn’t seen you guys close before since you spend most of your time as a couple away from me.”

“We’re not a couple,” Steve responded quickly.

“No, you are,” Tony corrected, “and what I’m saying is that I think it’s good.”

Steve worried his bottom lip and Tony reached up to cup the side of his face. “Here’s the deal Steven Grant Rogers. I think you’re groovy, so does my gal, and we’d like to go steady with you.”

“You’re being weird,” Pepper said as she walked back in, taking the final bites of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

“I am not!” Tony protested, dropping his hand to one of Steve’s and lacing his fingers through.

“Listen, Steve, as far as I can see this doesn’t really change anything immediately except that we’d all maybe touch each other more-“

“A lot more,” Tony grinned wolfishly.

“Can it, horndog,” Pepper interrupted, before continuing, “but I meant it when I said the decision was up to you. We’ve been thinking about this for a while and this seems to be brand new information to you, so take your time.”

“Why have you been thinking about it for a while?” Steve asked.

Pepper and Tony both blushed, before Tony replied, “I’m a talker and I may have said…”

“He used your name once when we were fucking,” Pepper cut Tony off abruptly. “It was weird and I talked to my therapist about it, who pointed out that maybe it wasn’t weird but that we all needed to talk.”

“When was that?” Steve asked. *And I have about fourteen million other questions, including why do I find it so hot when Pepper swears and what position were they in when he called for me...*

“Oh, right around you saved him from his breakdown the last time,” Pepper replied. “So, six, seven weeks?”

“About that,” Tony confirmed.

“So you guys have been sitting on this revelation for six weeks? When were you planning on telling me?”
“First of all, we weren’t sitting on anything,” Tony corrected. “We were discussing things. It’s been me and Pep against the world for a little while, and we had some conversations to have. As far as when we were going to tell you, we were debating.”

“Tony, as you can imagine, had a few preposterous and ostentatious ideas,” Pepper said. “At one point, I think a hot air balloon was involved.”

“It still can be,” Tony said.

“I wanted to see how you handled today before we said anything,” Pepper confessed. “I haven’t let anyone else near him on this day for a few years, and it’s not like I wasn’t sure you were going to be perfect, but—“

Steve smiled, “You had to be sure.” He took his hand that wasn’t attached to Tony and grabbed Pepper’s. “Makes sense.”

The three sat in silence for a few moments, before Tony shifted to pull Pepper onto his lap. “Something else, Cap,” Tony said.

Steve looked over at them, and raised an eyebrow.

“The kid thing is a non-negotiable to us. We’re not sure how it’s going to happen, but it will, so if that’s—”

“Do you honestly think that any kid the two of you have isn’t going to be a huge part of my life?” Steve cut him off, strongly. “Good Lord, you two. Can I talk now?”

The pair nodded.

“I learned a long time ago that my instincts are usually pretty good, or they at least haven’t led me into anything I’ve been ashamed of. The only things that have felt right to me since I woke up has been when I’ve been with you two, especially over the last six months, or with the team. So, sure, this isn’t something I dreamed possible or okay, or whatever, but you guys are telling me what we aren’t isn’t accidental and it might could be stronger? Why would I say no?”

“Seriously?” Tony said.

“Seriously,” Steve confirmed. “Let’s take the touching at Pepper speed versus you speed, though.”

“Hey!” Tony protested, as Steve cut him off.

“Being watched has not been my kink up to this point, but that’s going to be part of this, and that I’ll need to warm up to,” he explained. “Nothing more than that.”

“So Pepper and Steve speed versus Tony speed,” Pepper grinned. “We can negotiate that.”

“And if anyone gets uncomfortable, we all talk about it,” Steve said. “if it’s the three of us, then it’s the three of us.”

“Agreed,” Pepper said.

“And while the two of you catch up, and I get used to the idea that Steve knows the word ‘kink’, I’m just going to go ahead and commission a bigger bed,” Tony replied.
And so they began. As one year bled into another, their centers of gravity kept growing closer to each other. The rest of the team raised eyebrows a bunch until one afternoon when Tony finally just said “We’re together, and it’s not weird, and that’s it,” and glared at everyone. After that, questions were directed to Steve.

“Did you hear back from the social worker?” Steve asked Tony one evening in early February, while they were alone and Pepper was at a board meeting.

“Yeah, he’s with his aunt,” Tony replied. “She’s a nurse and it looks like a good fit.”

“But you’re keeping an eye on him?”

Tony rolled his eyes, “I’m not going to dignify that with a response.”

“Tony-“

“Babe, I’ve arranged for Peter Parker to be the magical and mysterious recipient of a full paid scholarship to the Queens Achievement Academy, which is the good private school but not the snotty one near his aunt’s house, and then if his grades in math and science continue the way they are now, he’ll head to Queens Tech, which is the best nerd high school in the city. Happy?”

Steve pressed a kiss to Tony’s mouth, “Thrilled.”

April, 2013

“So, it’s working out?” Nat queried over the din of the pub and throwing eyes at Steve and Tony by the darts board.

The Avengers were all on a team building excursion in Wessco, so of course they ended up in the Goat. This time, Nick and his brother, Henry, were both in attendance. Harry had given flirting with Nat a yeoman’s effort before giving up and wandering over to play pool with Clint and Thor, a process that really should be recorded and sold for laughs. With Bruce at the bar, talking to one of Scotland’s leading astrophysicists who happened to be in town, and the boys all in their various competitive pursuits, Nat and Pepper were free to catch up.

“Bizarrely well,” Pepper replied, sipping her wine. “Like, I’m even shocked how well.”

“Oh, so am I,” Nat replied.

Pepper gave her a side eye, and Nat replied, “Please, Pep. You can’t tell me you thought this would be easy. You are in a relationship with the two most ridiculously stubborn humans I’ve ever met and I’m Russian.”

“I’m not a pushover either, Nat,” Pepper replied. “Maybe that’s why it works so well. We’re all fierce about protecting the other two and not really ourselves. Perhaps three emotional martyrs make a happy family.”

“Well, that’s both enlightening and pathetic,” Nat replied and Pepper giggled.

“All I know is that it’s working,” Pepper shrugged. “I know you don’t care, but the sex is really, really good, and we have emotional hiccups, sure, but it’s working, and I’m pretty sure I couldn’t keep Tony grounded without Steve’s help. Plus, we’re at a point with corporate where I really can’t be in New York this much and I cannot honestly fathom leaving Tony if we didn’t have Steve.”
“He’s not great, Pepper,” Nat commented.

“Nope,” Pepper agreed. “And I can’t figure out why.”

“Will he go see your therapist?”

Pepper shook her head and took another sip, “No. Kerry even tried to talk him into it when she and her partner were over for that dinner where we introduced them to Steve, and he just kept making self-deprecating jokes and pouring more whiskey for her.”

“So, he knows he’s slipping.”

“Oh, for sure,” Pepper confirmed, ”but he’s decided that if he can just perfect this new mark of the suit, that will fix it all.”

Nat raised an eyebrow, “Okay.”

“Steve and I are giving him until Steve’s birthday – we’re planning on having you all up to Tony’s upstate house for a barbeque – and then we’ll pull an intervention and make him do couples therapy with us if he won't go individual,” Pepper confessed.

“When’s Steve’s birthday?”

“You don’t know?”

“Nope.”

Pepper grinned, “Captain America was born on the 4th of July.”

“No shit.”

“Well, he says he was really born sometime in August, but all the paperwork he had disappeared with Rebirth, so the 4th of July it is.”

“It’s the middle of April, though, Pep. What happens if he spirals before then?”

Pepper shrugged and caught Steve’s eye across the room, who grinned at her, excused himself from the dart game and crossed the pub to Pepper. Kissing her and settling into the booth, he looked at the table.

“You’re empty, Nat, let me fix that. Same?” Not even waiting for an answer, he headed back up to the bar to get more drinks.

“He really is just fundamentally good,” Nat mused.

“All our boys are, Nat, even when they’re unmitigated pains in our ass. That’s one of the things that makes them ours.”

_____________________________________

“She’s gone for how long?” Tony asked Steve, a few days after the return from Wessco. Pepper had been back in New York long enough to switch suitcases and then took off again for a multi-week trip through their offices in Asia.

“Another ten days,” Steve mumbled into Tony’s chest, which he was currently using as a pillow.
“Fuck, that’s annoying,” Tony remarked, and ran his hand back and forth from the arc reactor to Steve’s hair.

“Are you sick of me already?” Steve lifted up his head and smirked.

“Couldn’t even be if you paid me to,” Tony quipped. “I mean, this mouth,” kiss, “and these eyes”, kiss, kiss, “and-“

“Sir and Captain,” they were cut off abruptly by Jarvis.

“Oh for fuck,” Tony grumbled, “round four was looking promising, what Jarvis?”

“Patching in an audio call from Agent Fury.”

“Well, it’s 9am on a Sunday,” Steve remarked, “so my guess is that we’ll be suiting up soon.” He began to get up off the bed and head towards the shower. “Fill me in.”

“Stark,” Fury’s voice rang through the bedroom.

“Fury, to what do I owe this charming pleasure. Want to watch CBS Sunday Morning together?”

“Fuck off, Stark, what do you know about the Mandarin?”

“That it’s very good chicken.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. Get the team and get down to SHIELD now.”
Chapter Notes

This is where I start play fast and loose with the canon in terms of chronology: most major events will still happen, including the snap, they just may not quite happen in canon order.

Any one catch the reference for the surgeon's name and I'll grant you one spoiler.

Scenes from the Summer of ‘13

“How long has she been asleep for?” Pepper barely heard Tony whisper to Steve as they both climbed into the big bed.

“Jarvis told me about four hours, so it’s time to check on her. Bruce said Extremis didn’t break her or anything –”

“I’m not sure anything can break our gal, Tony.”

“Listen, if I haven’t so far, I think you’re right. But I’m still supposed to check her for a concussion.”

Pepper had been about to let them know she was awake anyway, but then Tony kissed the crown of her head and whispered, “Beautiful, you gotta show me your eyes.” She turned slowly, and met the gaze of both men – the one she had loved for what seemed like ever and the one she was learning to love.

“I’m fine, just now really hungry and would like a burger.”

“No,” Steve said firmly, in full mother-hen mode. “Too heavy. I’ll bring you some eggs and toast and we’ll see how that goes.”

Pepper rolled her eyes, flipped him off, and snuggled back into Tony. It was an odd shift, after years and years of taking care of everything to have someone to pass a few things off to.

“Hey Pep?” Tony whispered as Steve left the room. “Serious question.”

She opened one eye and said, “Serious answer.”

“Do you miss our old life? The one before the suit and the team and the everything?”

“Are you joking? You think I miss cleaning thongs out of hot tubs and hearing you brag to your douche canoe pals about your refractory period? Christ, Tony, not even a little,” she smiled. “I still thought you were going to die every minute you were out of my sight, just back then it was because you were a self-destructive dumbass without a purpose, and now you’re a self-destructive dumbass with a purpose and a team around you. I could do with 100% less alien activity in our lives, for sure, but miss the old ways? No. Why?”

“Well, the old ways had you dying a lot less,” he replied, running a few fingers lazily up and down her arm the way she liked.
“I’ll give you that,” she conceded. “Since you brought up the suit, I’d like to name mine Phoenix.”

“Who said you have a suit?”

She leveled him with a stare, “I like the color blue and I’d like it to be called Phoenix.”

“It shall be taken under advisement, Ms. Potts,” Tony said in his best Jarvis impression.

“I heard that,” Jarvis interrupted.

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“So, therapy.”

Tony gritted his teeth, and stared at Kerry. “If you think it will help, I will try. I cannot lose her.”

“You and your martyr complex, Tony. She’s not going anywhere,” Kerry assured him. “She doesn’t even know I’m here and hasn’t told me anything that leads me to believe she’s got an exit strategy. She dove into a goddamn death vat for you, so let’s dissuade ourselves of the notion that she’s leaving, okay?”

Tony blinked a few times, “I do not have a martyr complex. I have a god complex, thank you very much.”

“Sure, whatever, tell it to your therapist,” Kerry replied with a grin, and passed Tony a business card. “Oh, and Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“Might want to unpack why you’re afraid she’ll leave but you know Steve won’t.”

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“Hey, darling?”

Steve had found the old-fashioned endearment to be what worked best for him and Pepper, and he grinned every time she used it. “Yeah?”

“Tony’s going to be with Rhodey for a few days, and I just got word I’m needed in Vancouver,” Pepper said as she rounded the couch to sit next to him. One of the strategic decisions she and the board had made post-Mandarin was to remove SI from California completely. R&D would now be split between Vancouver and New York.

“Oh, I’ve never been to Vancouver.”

“I know,” Pepper said with a smile. “Want to come with me and give me an excuse to nerd out at the art museums? We haven’t been alone since before your birthday.”

“Packing a bag now, darling.”

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“So the surgery will be about eight hours?” Pepper asked nervously.

Dr. Pomatter nodded, “Using the tool your partner designed —“
“Boss.”

“Apologies, boss designed, the shards of shrapnel should pose no threat, but we do need to repair most of the walls of his chest cavity and removing the scar tissue,” the surgeon explained. “He’s in prep now and I need to be heading back to get started. I won’t see you again until it’s all over, but someone will be with you every two hours for an update.”

He smiled and excused himself from the private room where Pepper, Nat, Clint, Steve, and Rhodey were gathered. Tony had told them all at the beginning of August he was having surgery to get rid of the arc reactor, that he had figured out a way to do it without a transplant, and that when he woke up, he’d tell them all about these new nanobots he was going to make all of the suits out of. Since that was only four days previous, they had not been particularly excited regarding notification.

“Was this something I was going to get to consent to, Anthony?”

“Now, that’s not fair, Virginia, you’re only supposed to use that name to tell me you love me.”

“Not wanting you to die is a pretty strong way to communicate that I’d like to keep you around, Anthony,” Pepper’s voice had been strident.

Steve chimed in, “Jarvis, have you run all of the specs?”

“Yes, Captain.” Jarvis responded. “With the procedure Sir outlined, the surgery is between a 92.5 and 96 percent success rate, accounting for human error and other various complications.”

“See?” Tony said triumphantly, “Jarvis said I’m going to be fine. You two are worrying for nothing.”

That earned him some hard glares.


“I know,” she murmured. “I’m getting really tired of sitting by hospital beds, though.”

He grinned and pulled her in for a hug. “Both of you need to stay out of them from here on out.”

A few hours went by, the updates were all positive, and for a few moments, Steve and Pepper found themselves alone. Rhodey had stepped out to take a call, Clint and Natasha went to get food, and the pair were settled on the couch in the corner.

“I’m going to stop trying to get pregnant for a while,” Pepper said quietly. “My OB can’t find anything that says Extremis did anything, but I can’t take the risk.”

“Okay,” Steve said, “what did Tony say?” The kid piece of their puzzle had remained something kind of private between Pepper and Tony. It wasn’t that Steve wasn’t involved, it was just that he had entered this section of their lives midstream and he could respect that this was a slower part of the transition from two to three.

“He’s who brought it up when I woke up,” Pepper replied. “He wanted our doctor to guarantee him a pregnancy wouldn’t put me at risk and no one can do that.”

“No one can do that without what your body has been through,” Steve remarked.

Pepper smirked, “have you met your boyfriend? Do you think he accepts that answer?”
Steve chuckled. “So what now?”

“This is when we’ll need to start having conversations about the Tony Stark brand and public persona and keeping our private lives private and how this is all going to work,” Pepper explained.

“So you think the American public won’t be super keen to hear that Iron Man and Captain America are in a 3-way with the ginger chick that hangs around?”

“Going on a limb, but no.”

“The thing is,” Steve said, “I have no interest in anyone being in my business.”

“No shit,” Pepper snorted, “you still have Darcy run all your social media.”

“Pepper, I just want to do my job, I don’t understand why that means I need to tweet or snap or tumble or whatever the fuck,” Steve rolled his eyes. “I only have those accounts because SHIELD set them up for brand management.”

“Right, that’s kind of what I’m talking about,” Pepper replied. “Tony made a few decisions for all of us at that press conference when he said he was Iron Man. That’s why I’ve been so fierce about keeping our dating private over the last few years. Every time he would ask if we could go public, I would hesitate because then I would become part of the brand. Dealing with my feelings about that, plus that he was being so dumb with the death-defying suit antics, I just kept saying no.”

“Makes total sense,” Steve replied.

“But things are different now, for a few reasons, and so I’m reevaluating,” Pepper continued. “The SI brand could really use more confirmation that Tony has calmed down and is a stable force for the company, and if we want to adopt, it would be easier of our family brand existed.”

“So, are you saying you and Tony need to go public?” Steve said slowly.

“I’m thinking about it,” Pepper replied. “I haven’t mentioned this, because strategic public perception is not Tony’s strong suit. I want to have a decision pretty much made before I tell him what we’re doing.”

Steve seemed to chew this over in his brain, “What would change for us?”

“I don’t think a whole lot,” Pepper said. “I could be wrong, but I figure that Tony and I just need to have a few dates in public every month —“

“Not a problem.”

“-and we’d strengthen some of the NDAs and privacy codes with Jarvis-“

“Ten people know about us, Pep, I don’t think more than that need to.”

Pepper smiled, “Tony and I might need to get married.”

Steve shrugged, “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay,” Steve confirmed. “Like you said in the first conversation, we’ll make this work. This is our relationship, no one else’s. You wouldn’t be getting married to exclude me, and I never, and I repeat, never, want to go public with this arrangement and have the American public weigh in on my sex
“You know they do anyway, right?”

“Darcy has promised me I do not want to see the Tumblrs.”

“You do not.”

“Right, so I even less want to give them fodder for their inappropriate and overactive imaginations.”

Pepper saucily raised an eyebrow, “they’re not all that overactive, actually.”

Steve went bright red, “I cannot believe you’ve seen them.”

“There were a few drawings of Cap with one of those Disney channel girls and she was underage. Legal flagged it and I had to get it taken down. Nat and I split a bottle of vodka one night to do more recon.”

“Recon.”

“Yup,” Pepper grinned and put an emphasis on the ‘p’.

“You’ve been around Tony for too long,” Steve muttered.

“Oh, you’ll catch up, darling,” Pepper laughed.

Pepper’s text message tone went off at that point, and she busied herself answering. Steve busied himself just staring at her.

“Hey,” he whispered.

She looked up.

“I trust you, I trust him, I trust us, and I want us to have a kid. Whatever it takes, we’ll do.”

Pepper’s eyes got a little misty as she met his, and nodded firmly. “Whatever it takes.”

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“Ms. Potts, your 4:30 is here,” Delia said through the intercom.

“Who? What? I’m so sorry Delia, I haven’t even looked at my calendar in what feels like a donkey’s age, did I need to prep for this?”

“No, ma’am, your 4:30 is May Parker on a personal matter. Can I send her in?”

May Parker, why does that sound familiar… “Of course! And can you bring in coffee, etc.?”

“Of course,” Delia signed off as the door to Pepper’s office creaked open and a woman in a nurse’s uniform walked in.

“Ms. Potts, thank you so much for seeing me,” the woman walked into the room and extended her hand. “I’m May Parker, Peter Parker’s guardian and Richard’s sister-in-law.”

“Of course! Ben’s wife! And it’s Pepper. It’s so good to finally meet you, Mrs. Parker, please sit,” Pepper gestured to a small seating area by her window. The two women arranged themselves and exchanged pleasantries until Delia delivered the coffee tray. Once the door was closed, Pepper
turned warmly to May, “how can I help?”

“Call me May, please. Again, thank you for seeing me, I know you’re incredibly busy and important and you basically run the world and I’m babbling,” May blushed and Pepper noticed for the first time she had a letter in her hand. “What I need to know is if you meant what you said in this letter to Ben.”

When Pepper had heard of Richard’s death, she sent a letter to Ben, saying how fond she was of Richard and how sorry she was for their loss and if they ever needed anything to not hesitate to reach out. Pepper had never received a response – she hadn’t expected to – and she genuinely wasn’t sure if it had ever got to Ben.

“Absolutely,” Pepper assured her. “I know I hadn’t seen Richard in a long time, but I was shocked to hear of his death, and I know what it’s like to have the rug pulled out from under you.”

May smiled, and Pepper noticed that there were tears welling in her eyes. “Good, good.” Pepper went to retrieve tissues, and pressed them into the other woman’s hand. “Thank you,” May said, her voice shaking a bit.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, before May blurted out, “Ben is dead.”

Pepper felt her limbs turn to ice. “What?”

“I know,” May laughed wryly through the tears, “you’d think someone placed an ancient curse on our family! It’s been, like, nine months since… and now…”

“I’m just unbelievably sorry,” Pepper whispered, and May responded with thanks.

“So,” May said after collecting herself. “This is awkward, but being a suddenly single parent to a kid who is a million times smarter than you makes you brave. Did you mean this letter that you’d do anything to help?”

Pepper nodded.

“Then I need your boss to adopt Peter.”

Pepper was silent for a few moments. “Come again?”

“Your boss, Tony Stark, right? Smartest man alive,” May said.

“He fancies himself so,” Pepper confirmed.

“I think, I just have a feeling that Peter might be second smartest, and I am broke, and he’s on scholarship now, but I know there’s college coming and I am overwhelmed already and my hours are insane, and I just think he’d have a better life with someone smarter than me,” May finished.

Slowly, Pepper replied, “there are a lot of degrees between you need some help with Peter and Tony taking Peter completely and I would… I would like to explore those first.”

“Okay, okay, well-“

Pepper interrupted, “How long ago did Ben die?”

“He was shot about a week ago,” May said, and the tears began to well again.

“Holy shit, that is fresh,” Pepper replied, as May chuckled sadly.
“Would you like to tell me about him?” Pepper asked quietly.

“I know you’re busy.” May started.

Pepper walked to her phone, “Delia, hold all my calls for the day and please let Jarvis know I’ll be late and that they should eat without me. You can head home normal time.”

“On it,” Delia responded through the speaker, and Pepper returned to May. “I have all the time in the world. We can order food later if you’re hungry.”

“Okay,” May whispered, as she began to let her tears flow.

“Now,” Pepper said warmly. “I’d love to hear about Ben. I haven’t seen him since we were kids. Was he still obsessed with dinosaurs?”

Much later that night, Pepper found her boys in their living room. “So, there’s been a development.”

“Oh, you’ve got one, too?” Tony said, and she noticed they were bent over Tony’s StarkPad.

“I do,” Pepper said slowly, “and you do too?”

“You first,” Steve said. “We missed you, how was your day?”

“Well, that’s part of the development. May Parker was my last appointment and she told me Ben is dead.”

Tony nearly dropped the tablet, “what?”

Pepper explained her conversation with May, complete with May’s request of Tony intervening in Peter’s life.

“Well, that is fucking convenient,” Tony replied.

“Why?”

The two men grinned at each other. “You know that scrawny spider dude that’s been all over Queens?” Steve asked Pepper.

“The one in the pajamas?” Pepper clarified.

Tony nodded, and turned the tablet towards her. “It’s Peter Parker.”
Fall, 2013

May had said it would be a good idea for Peter and Pepper to meet first, and based on the boy’s reaction, Pepper was glad she had listened.

“Does he stop?” Pepper whispered to May, who was giggling.

“No,” May confirmed. “Welcome to a 12-year-old with ADHD who just got told he’ll be meeting and maybe even working with his hero.”

“It’s adorable,” Pepper smiled, “it’s just-“

“A lot?”

“No, actually,” Pepper said, “it’s exactly like Tony.”

“Babe, I would maybe hold off on a full-blown suit until you’ve met the kid, I don’t know, once?” Steve bit back a smile upon finding Tony in the workshop, working on something that looked a lot like a spider’s web.

“Duh, baby,” Tony replied, not even looking up. “I don’t know his measurements yet.”

“So you knew my dad?”

“Yup, and your uncle Ben.”

“I miss them,” Peter said softly.

“You always will, buddy, but they’ll always be with you,” Pepper replied, ruffling his hair a bit.

Tony and Peter were supposed to have met that day, but a giant squid attacked Portland and the Avengers had to assemble. Knowing what such a change could do for a kid in Peter’s shoes, Pepper took the day off and headed to Queens to spend time with him. He was quickly becoming her favorite kid on the planet, so it wasn’t a hardship.

“I know, that’s what Aunt May says,” Peter replied, as he slurped his ice cream cone. They had been to see a movie, and now were wandering around the park. It was one of those fall days in New York where the air was still warm enough to be outside, but you could feel the days changing. As they had passed an ice cream cart, and Peter had stared longingly at it, Pepper had declared it was never not the season for ice cream and treated both of them to a cone.

“Ms. Potts?” Peter continued.

“Remember, I told you to call me Pepper?”

“Sorry, Ms. Potts, Miss Pepper, Pepper,” he shyly corrected himself, twisting his tongue around her name. “Why aren’t you an Avenger?”
“Well, I am, I just don’t have a suit.”

His eyes lit up. “Yeah?”

“Here’s the fun thing about the Avengers, buddy,” Pepper leaned close conspiratorially. “They need a lot of folks behind them to do what they do and we’re all just as much a part of the team as they are.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh,” Pepper smiled. “That’s the beauty of teamwork. There’s always more people than the ones out front.”

“Can I be an Avenger?” Peter asked, with sunshine and hope in his voice.

Pepper thought back to the video Tony had showed her a few nights ago, the one with Peter flinging himself off of roofs and that nearly stopped her heart. “I doubt we’ll be able to stop you.”

“I’m gonna fuck this up,” Tony paced back and forth.

“Well, if you use that language,” Steve trailed off as Tony flipped him off.

They were on the jet, heading home from the Great Squid Encounter, as the case file called it, and the closer they got to New York, the more antsy Tony became.

“Good god, man, sit down,” Clint called. “He’s a kid who already thinks the sun shines out your ass. You are miles ahead of the rest of us in parenting already.”

“How do you know? Besides, I’m not parenting, I’m just guiding,” Tony protested.

Nat raised an eyebrow and shot Clint a look. “Sure, Tony.”

The man in question continued to grumble and pace for a few more seconds before Steve said, “okay, that is enough,” and forcibly placed Tony in a chair. Leaning over him, locking Tony’s wrists with his hands, Steve said into his ear, “GhostHoward is working overtime, eh?”

Tony was silent, but squirmed just enough to confirm Steve’s suspicion.

“Well, GhostHoward can fuck himself because my boyfriend is the most caring, generous, passionate man I know, and he is going to be the best mentor Peter Parker could dream up,” Steve finished his pronouncement with a kiss.

“Cap, we discussed PDA,” Clint yelled teasingly, as Tony raised his middle finger in Clint’s direction around Steve’s back.

“Remember what Pep always says,” Steve whispered when he broke the kiss. “Anything in our brains that tell us we are unlovable or unworthy is lying.”

“She is the brains of this relationship,” Tony consented softly.

“Totes,” Steve confirmed as he released Tony’s wrists and sat down next to him.

“Totes?” Tony queried.
“I’ve been trying to catch up on kid lingo. I didn’t want to freak the kid out by calling him a swell fella,” Steve confessed.

“So you went with *totes*?”

“Abbrs are in, Tones.”

“Stop speaking.”

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“Why don’t you just bring him down to the workshop?” Pepper had asked. “You use less profanity when your hands are busy.”

“Except when they’re busy in you or Steve.”

“Case in point, perv.”

Tony had set up a basic arc reactor and stripped all the parts back, figuring that would be a good first exercise for him and the kid to do. He had read all of the reports from Peter’s teachers and it seemed like he was really skilled in robotics. Based on the PajamaBoy exploits, he also seemed to have a really good working knowledge of geometry and physics, and Tony wanted to take them for a spin.

“Sir, Master Parker has arrived and Ms. Potts is escorting him to the workshop,” Jarvis intoned.

“Thanks, J.”

“Please regulate your breathing, sir. All intelligence suggests that Master Parker is eager for this relationship to be successful.”

“That’s because Master Parker doesn’t know me yet,” Tony muttered.

“Self-deprecation is unbecoming, sir. Do I need to contact Captain Rogers?”

“It’s my first language, J, and I liked you better before you were a narc to my boyfriend.”

“But he was always a narc to me,” Pepper replied as she and Peter stepped into the workshop. “I just have more restraint than Steve.”

“You are just sneakier,” Tony said as he crossed. “Hi kid, I’m Tony.”

“Hi Mr. Stark, I’m Peter.”

“Mr. Stark is my dad and he’s thankfully not here, so Tony is fine.”

“Okay Mr. Stark.”

Tony smirked as the boy stammered with a wide-eyed expression. “We’ll work on that.” He gave Pepper a kiss and waved her goodbye. The plan was for Tony and Peter to work in the workshop for a little while before they would meet May for dinner. Not wanting to overwhelm Peter with too many people, Steve and Nat were out of the tower for the day.

“So, I was thinking that you could show me your stuff. Your grades in robotics are really high,” Tony complimented.

“I like to build things,” Peter confessed, a slight pink staining his cheeks.
“Well, that is excellent because so do I,” Tony grinned. “Let’s get started.”

For the next several hours, they did exactly that. Tony was amazed at how easy it was to be with Peter, and slightly scared at how much he reminded him of himself. This joy, this quiet determination to finish a puzzle, this… settledness – Tony was envious. *Is this who he could have been if Howard had been different?*

There had been much debate between Steve, Pepper, and Tony if they would let Peter know they knew he was PajamaBoy/SpiderPJMan (much debate had also occurred over what to call him). Ultimately, it was decided that Tony would go with his gut.

So, about forty-five minutes before they were due to meet Pepper and May, Tony reached into one of the drawers and handed a small bracelet to Peter.

“What’s this, Mr. Stark?”

“This is a panic button.”

“Okay,” Peter drew out the word, clearly confused.

“When you’re out at night, flying around Queens in your pajamas, and you run into more trouble than you can handle, hit this and Captain America or I will be right there.”

“Flying around? Pajamas?” Peter scoffed, trying desperately to not meet Tony’s gaze.

“Jarvis,” Tony replied.

“Right away, sir,” and pretty quickly, surveillance footage of Peter swinging around was broadcast in a hologram in front of them.

“Woah, that is-“ Peter reacted to the hologram with glee, before remembering he was supposed to be surprised at what was *on* the hologram and not *at* the hologram itself, and cleared his throat. “Is that a kid? Impressive.”

“Can it, kid. You are talking to the inventor of doing stupid things and lying to adults, so you will not win this one.”

Peter blushed and fiddled with his hands.

“You wanna tell me?” Tony said softly.

“I’m just trying to help,” Peter whispered.

An alarm went off in Tony’s head. “Kid, you are not in trouble. Zero percent in trouble, at least not right now. I just meant would you like to tell me how you are basically part spider.”

“Oh, right. I got bit by a spider the last time I went to go see my dad at his office.”

“Bit by a spider.”

“Yeah, gamma radiation? I think? Dad died too quick afterwards for me to ask, and since then I have super intense hearing, I can see pretty far, and I can stick to things if I want.”

“You can stick to things.”

“Mr. Stark, are you just going to repeat everything I say?” Peter asked.
“So what about the webs?”

“I can sometimes make them come out of my wrists,” Peter peeled back his sleeve to show Tony a series of moles that looked like a port of some fashion, “but sometimes I can’t and I don’t know the difference.”

“Hm,” Tony replied, holding Peter’s wrist gently and examining it. “How old were you when you got bit?”

“10.”

“When did the webs start?”

“About six months ago.”

“So, the radiation is changing with your hormones, I think, but we’ll get Bruce to confirm that.”

“Bruce? What?”

“The Hulk? When he’s not giant and green, he’s a brilliant scientist, well, not as brilliant as me, but who can be, who knows a lot about radiation. We’ll get him to look at you.”

“I don’t understand,” Peter said.

“Here’s how I figure it, kid,” Tony went back to fiddling with something on his workbench, but kept talking. “If you are anything like I think you are, you are going to fly around Queens whether I want you to or not. For the record, I do not, but all I am to you is a dude who can build cool shit – sorry, stuff – and has a lot of money, so why would you listen to me. But your videos are giving Pepper heart attacks, and we cannot have Pepper dying on me or I would crumble, so entirely out of self-preservation I am going to help you be Spiderboy.”

“I was thinking Spider-Man,” Peter grumbled. “Has more power.”

“Hm, you are not wrong, change approved.”

“Thanks?” Peter was a little overwhelmed at how fast this conversation was going.

“Here,” Tony flipped him a prototype StarkPhone. “My personal cell, and Pepper’s, are both programmed into that. You have access to the tower now, including the workout gym since you need to start testing your strength and such much, much closer to the ground and if our stuff is good enough for Steve, it should be for you. And I’ll tell May you can come over to the workshop after school whenever you want. This phone also connects directly to Jarvis, who can tell you where I am or where the Avengers are. This is all yours on two conditions.”

“What?”

“One, you never ever leave home without the panic button and you have the phone on you at all times when you’re not in the suit. Two, you never go out in pajamas again. Come back next week and I’ll have a suit for you. No going out between now and then, deal?”

Peter still could not quite process what was happening and looked a little glassy eyed.

“Jarvis, did I kill the kid?” Tony asked.

“No, sir, but would I suggest paging Ms. Potts to come and explain in a less … overwhelming manner.”
“Probably should have done that anyway.”

“Probably, sir.”

A few minutes later, Pepper breezed in with an exasperated expression on her face. “Tony, did you break him?”

“I’m not broken, Ms. Potts,” Peter muttered. “Just…”

“Did you tell him everything?” Pepper looked at Tony, who nodded. “Okay, buddy, let’s break this down a little. I’m sure you have questions.”

“Only a million,” Peter replied.

Pepper chuckled, “start with the first one in your head.”

“Why me?” Peter blurted out.

“Well,” Pepper replied slowly, “there is the matter that you are the only boy we know who can climb walls.”

Peter giggled.

“But also, I loved your dad once. If the world was different, I’d hope he’d look out for my kid,” Pepper continued softly. “And can I give you a quick word of advice?”

Peter nodded.

In a stage whisper, Pepper continued. “Tony loves spoiling people absolutely rotten. I recommend not questioning it. It’s how I have so many really great pairs of shoes. Now, what else can we answer?”

The three of them talked further about keeping Peter’s secrets, issues of access and safety, and the two adults asked Peter about seventeen more times to call them Pepper and Tony. Before long, they were all on their way back to May’s house to have dinner, which was, to Peter’s mind, the perfect way to end the best day of his life.
“So, you have paperwork for me?” May asked Pepper one afternoon around Halloween, when she dropped Peter off for a long weekend. The boy had already bounded to the workshop, with caution from Tony to only work on what Jarvis directed to until Tony could get down there.

“Yeah, and a conversation if you have time,” Tony added.

May nodded and took a seat at the kitchen table. Her eyebrows raised when Steve wandered in and sat down as well. “Hi, I’m May,” she offered her hand.

“I’m Steve,” he replied with a grin.

“He’s Captain America,” Tony said at the same time.

May gawped for two moments and then took Steve’s hand, “nice to meet you.”

For two awkward seconds, no one seemed to know what to say. In what would later be termed as “Evidence Tony is No Longer Allowed to Talk First,” Tony jumped in.

“Have you heard of polyamory? Don’t worry, I hadn’t either until I ended up in it, because it’s not weird but it’s not common. It’s when more than two people are in a relationship together, but you probably know that because you know some Latin being a nurse and all, but anyway. So, Steve, and Pepper, and I are all together but like ten people know and we’re going to tell Peter this weekend, and so now we need you to sign a new NDA that you won’t tell anyone about it, the same way we made you sign one about me and Pepper, and oh god Pepper looks like she’s going to kill me so I’ll shut up now,” Tony trailed off.

“So, the three of you?” May said slowly.

Pepper nodded. “We didn’t feel it was right to tell Peter who Steve was to us without asking you first.”

“So are you asking me or are you telling me,” May clarified.

Before Tony could jump in again, Steve did. “We’re telling you who we are, but we’re asking you if we can tell Peter.”

“And you wouldn’t if I think it’s all super fucked up,” May clarified.

Both Tony and Steve bristled, and Pepper jumped in. “If you don’t want us to let Peter know that Steve is anything other than another Avenger who lives in the Tower and is one of our best friends, then no. You are his guardian and we would respect that,” she said diplomatically and with a glare to her partners.

Both men huffed and crossed their arms across their chests.

May stared each of them down and turned to talk to Pepper. “They good to you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“They good to you? Like, are you happy with this?” May clarified.

“Um, yes,” Pepper stuttered. “Very.”
May looked back at them, “Brooklyn and Fancy Pants, you hurt her or my kid and I’ll end you.”

Steve nodded solemnly and Tony opened his mouth to clearly protest, before catching May’s eye and thinking better of it. “I thought you just called us fucked up.”

“No,” May said. “I asked what you’d do if I thought that. I don’t know what I think about it, but Pepper is basically the best person I know and if you two knuckleheads make her happy and you all make my kid super happy, then who the fuck am I to say otherwise. I’m assuming – just like any functional adult – you keep adult activities away from him?”

“Far, far, away,” Pepper confirmed.

“Then I can’t imagine any better secondary parents for my kid than Captain Fucking America and Pepper Potts.”

“You left me out,” Tony replied.

“Correct,” May smirked. Pepper and Steve laughed, as Tony flipped her off.

By the time the end of the year rolled around, the Parkers were routine fixtures at the Tower. Peter had started calling Tony, Pepper, and Steve by their first names, most of the time, but everyone else still got formal titles, despite repeated requests otherwise. Pepper still got heart palpitations whenever Peter trained with Nat or Steve, but their little family settled into a routine.

Even though the arrangement had originally started as just Tony and Peter working together, it quickly evolved into more. There were so many reasons for this – Peter’s unnamed craving for parental approval, Tony and Pepper’s increasing desperation to be parents, Steve’s affection for scrappy fighters, May’s need for help – but it all just… worked.

Peter was in his final year at the prep school and had made two new friends. This was a great relief to May, in particular, since he hadn’t made a single one since moving in with her. He was careful to inform the adults that it was just those two and he wasn’t interested in more and please stop bugging him. MJ and Ned, who none of the Tower Parents (as Peter collectively referred to them for shorthand purposes) had met, but May assured them were both delightful in their own quirky ways, were “all he needed, calm down.”

Depending on who you ask, Peter was either incredibly stupid (Tower Parents and May) or incredibly brave (Peter) in early November and so May was now in on the Spider-Man secret and was only generally okay with it because she was assured Tony and Steve were training him. Still, the network of secret keeping was getting stressful, especially to Steve, who was the group worrywart.

After lots of negotiations, and a consult with the SI PR team, it was decided Pepper and Tony would release a statement the day before New Year’s Eve that they were dating. Hoping it would quickly get lost in the holiday news cycle, the statement was brief.

Tony Stark and Pepper Potts confirm the long-standing rumors that they are romantically involved. The couple began to see each other after Ms. Potts’ transition to CEO and Mr. Stark’s transition out of day-to-day SI operations. No further statement will be made at this time.

Wednesday morning, however dawned a little different then they had all planed. The Avengers were called away the previous day to somewhere possibly in Moldova? Pepper couldn’t remember, and Peter was staying in the Tower while May worked a few overnight shifts. The statement was slated to be released at 7am, right in time for the morning shows to pick it up, but too early for anyone at SI
to comment.

Or so they thought.

Pepper’s phone rang at 6:15am.

“Jarvis, please make that stop,” Pepper mumbled.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but it’s Dr. Brewer, who says it is urgent,” Jarvis replied.

“Oh god, okay,” Pepper sat up, rubbed her eyes, and answered her phone. “Kerry, what is –“

“When was the statement supposed to drop?”

“In a few hours, why?”

“Pepper, pull up TMZ.”

“What?”

“Can Jarvis hear me? Jarvis, pull it up for her,” Kerry replied. “And make her stay on the phone with me.”

In giant, painful letters, the headline read: “POTTS F**KS STARK TO GET CEO GIG.”

Pepper felt all of the blood rush out of her face, “Kerry, I’m going to hang up.”

“Don’t you fucking dare, I am on my way, but I’m easily 30 out, Pepper, breathe.”

“What is happening?” Pepper said to either Jarvis or Kerry, she wasn’t sure.

“You have a leak in the PR department, dear,” Kerry replied softly.

“Do I want to watch the video that’s here?” Pepper said.

“I wouldn’t,” Kerry replied.

“How did you find out?” Pepper wasn’t sure if at that moment her tears were of rage or pain.

“Insomnia, plain and simple,” Kerry replied. “And I have a Google alert set up for your name.”

“What are they saying?”

“The leak told them your statement is false, that you’ve been together since before the cave and everyone at SI knows it, and you’ve slept your way up from the mailroom.”

“How much do you think they got paid?”

“Well, after you and I went to that gala together I got offered $500,000 to tell them about you, so either that or higher,” Kerry replied.

“Christ,” Pepper sighed. “I personally hired everyone who knew about this. I pay them so well and I just…”

“You never fully plan for people to be dicks, Pep,” Kerry replied. “When will Tony and Steve get back?”
“I have no idea. I’m sure Jarvis has already tried to communicate with them-“

“-they’re still in blackout, ma’am,” Jarvis interrupted.

“-but the plan is late night. Party starts tomorrow at 7, are you still coming?”

“Babe, I’m coming now. I have an overnight bag and a plan. I’ll see you soon.”

The rest of the day felt like a waking nightmare. It wasn’t like Pepper wasn’t used to the insinuations that she slept her way to her job – she was a woman in the world after all – but the betrayal felt different this time. She also wasn’t ashamed to admit that she thought she had out planned the worst, that she was prepared, and she wasn’t fully sure why this was hitting her so hard.

The worst part? The look on Peter’s face when he had come down to breakfast.

“Pepper?” He asked tentatively.

“Hey Petey,” Pepper replied, smiling gently.

“MJ texted me early to tell me not to look at the internet because they were calling you a whore.”

“Well, let us all be thankful for MJ,” Pepper smiled.

“Who are they and why and you’re not and I don’t understand,” Peter said all at once. Pepper reached out her arms and hugged the teenager.

Thankfully for Pepper’s emotions, Kerry walked in just then.

“Hi Pep, hey Pete,” Kerry said as she set her bags down and went to fix her coffee.

“Hi Dr. Brewer,” Peter replied softly.

“Hm?” Kerry stared at him until he corrected himself, “Hi Miss Kerry.”

“That’s better. Who’s hungry?”

Both shook their heads.

“Loves, it is going to be a day with a capital D and that is going to require fuel. Can we try toast for me?”

They both agreed but began arguing about what Peter was going to get up to that day. The original plan was for him to be with Tony in the workshop, but Pepper didn’t want him down there alone and was trying to get him to go meet up with MJ or Ned.

“I don’t want to go all the way to Queens since you won’t let me spider web there and you shouldn’t be alone and pllllleeeeeeaaasssseeee Pepper,” Peter begged.

“First of all, I’m not alone, Kerry is here,” Pepper counted on her fingers. “Two, our agreement is that webbing only happens at night, except without explicit permission from Tony, who cannot help you right now so don’t even try.”

“I can check with Jarvis, there are overrides -“ Peter cut in.
“And three,” Pepper continued ignoring him. “I have a question.”

“Yeah?”

“Who does MJ think I am to you that she’d text you?”

Peter was silent and sheepish.

“Peter.”

“She knows I come here to work with Tony.”

“So why would you care about me?”

More silence.

“Peter. Benjamin. Parker.”

“She knows about Spider-Man and so she knows about the Avengers and that I live here sometimes,” Peter blurted out.

Now it was Pepper’s turn for silence. Many, many years of life with Tony as he dug himself into verbal holes had taught her to just be silent in situations like this. The geniuses always did the talking for you.

“She caught me one night on patrol and she’s smarter than I am and she recognized the Stark nanobots and I can’t lie to her, Pepper, I just can’t, and so I told her that you guys all knew I was Spider-Man and, like I said, she’s not dumb, and I’m so sorry maybe I told her a story about you once and I forgot to call you Ms. Potts and not Pepper and I’m so sorry, I really am, I’m so sorry, please don’t tell Mr. Stark or Captain Rogers.”

“Why are we always formal titles when you’re in trouble?” Pepper raised an eyebrow.

Peter picked at his cuticles and refused to make eye contact.

“Peter, look at me,” Pepper said softly.

Peter did, and Pepper leaned forward to grab his hands, stilling the picking. “Peter, I’m frustrated, but I’m not mad.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I’m not angry that you told your best friend about something really important and wonderful in your life, I’m glad you trust MJ that much, because you deserve to have people your own age who aren’t us,” Pepper explained. “I’m frustrated that you chose not to tell me or any of us before now, since this has been clearly true for a while, and we could have all known that someone at school knows about you. If she knows about Spider-Man, I know the rest of the team would like to meet her, since that’s been the policy so far, and by keeping that from us, you’ve denied the rest of us the right to know who may know some of our secrets. Does that make sense?”

Peter nodded, “So you want to meet MJ?”

Pepper smiled, “Well, we did even before this, so yeah.”

“Okay, well, I know she’s got nothing to do on Friday,” Peter said.
“Okay, well, let’s talk to everyone and see how things go. Steve and Tony have a lot to come home to,” Pepper replied.

“Okay, toast time!” Kerry said, as she placed a few slices in front of each of them. “If you can keep down toast, nervous stomachs are the worst, I know, then we’ll try eggs.”

As Pepper was about to tell Peter to go get ready to head out for the day, Kerry asked Pepper for a word. The two women left Peter munching away at the table as they headed into the dining room.

“I know I’m not May, but can I stick my nose in y’all's business?” Kerry whispered.

Pepper rolled her eyes. “In the last year, when has my permission stopped you?”

“Fair point,” Kerry grinned. “Let that boy stay home.”

“There’s no point for him to be here, Kerry,” Pepper protested.

“There’s no reason for Peter Parker, random kid who Tony mentors, to be here. There’s a ton of reason for Peter, the kid you all treat like your kid, to be here. Don’t argue with me,” Kerry put up her hand. “He’s at that age where he wants to be a part of other people’s pain, and his hero complex is well established. Let him be your hero today, let him take care of you a little. He’ll be distracted all day thinking of you. He needs to do something and if you stop him from letting that something be fussing over you, he will sneak out of here and he will spider web his way into trouble and you know it. You’re dating his adult carbon copy.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “I hate it when you’re right.”

“Just because you never had an older sister, doesn’t mean you didn’t need one,” Kerry grinned as they hugged.

“Peter?” Pepper said loudly.

There was a clattering noise from the kitchen, as though Peter threw back his chair so quickly that it fell over, as he dashed into the room.

“I think you’re right, and I could use some company before the boys get home. I’m gonna need to go and get some work done, so you’re going to stay here with Kerry, but then I’ll come back and we’ll watch some movies, okay?”

Peter nodded as Kerry interjected, “Peter, have you ever learned how to make ice cream?”

“You can make it yourself?”

“Oh, boy, let’s go to the store and we’ll show you how magic happens,” Kerry shepherded him into the kitchen and threw a wink at Pepper.

Once Peter was taken care of, Pepper collapsed onto the couch and took four deep breaths.

“Jarvis, I need you to send a message to the boys for them to read the minute they reconnect coms.”

“Of course, ma’am, what should it say?”

“Skip the debrief, don’t check the internet, and call me immediately. One of the PR team tattled to TMZ and no, Tony, you cannot have Jarvis compromise their identity and no, Steve, you cannot maim them. Just call me.”
“So what are you doing now?” Tony asked, many hours later, after Pepper finished her update.

“Well, Kerry is in bed, and Peter is absolutely unconscious here on the couch and I’m trying to learn to knit for the nineteenth time.”

“Oh, you’re at least on your fortieth, Pep,” Tony smirked.

“Fuck off, Stark, it’s hard,” Pepper replied.

“And you’re sure it was this Rachel girl? And that there’s no one else?” Steve clarified.

“Yup,” Pepper confirmed. “I lost my mind on her because I felt so betrayed, it was not professional at all, but Jarvis found all the emails and text messages and we’ve gotten to the source.”

“And TMZ will print a – what do you call it – retraction?” Steve asked.

“Oh, gracious no,” Pepper laughed. “They never do. I don’t bother with anything once it’s out there. My whole drama today was that the call was coming from inside the house and I had to get rid of whoever sold us out. TMZ is garbage and will always remain that way.”

Steve looked like he was going to argue, but Tony held up a hand. “Okay, Pep. Put down the knitting, maybe, and get to bed, if you can shift the kid. We’re about four hours out, so we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I will not put down the knitting, I will conquer the knitting, but I doubt I’ll be awake in four hours. Peter will want to be woken when you get in, so wake him up from the couch and send him to his room when you get in. Kid can’t fully rest until he knows you’re safe.”

“Oh, we love you,” Tony said and Steve echoed.

“She will neither conquer the knitting nor learn it,” Tony commented to Steve after they ended the call, and noticed Steve’s incessant pacing. “Babe, you have got to sit down, you will wear a hole in the floor of the plane and then we will all die and Pepper will be sad,” Tony said languidly.

Steve glared at him. “Forgive me if I’m worried about our girlfriend.”

“Oh, you think I’m not?”

“I think you’re sitting there as though nothing is wrong!”

Tony cocked his head. “Oh I forgot this is literally your first rodeo in this.”

“What?”

“The internet hates Pepper.”

“No,” Steve said slowly, “the internet loves Pepper.”

“No,” Tony corrected. “Most of the humans of the world love and respect Pepper. The internet, which is what they become when they all go online, hates her. They’re jealous and awful and think she slept with me to get her job and call her a whore on a basis that spins my head. People love her, the internet hates her.”

Steve stared at Tony like he had just said that the moon was made of pistachios. “What the fuck does
“Ah, Soldier Steve with the salty language!” Tony crowed. “There are a million reasons none of us have encouraged you to do your own social media, that we’re happy to let Darcy manage your brand, and that we encourage you to keep being a bit of a technophobe, but one of the big ones that Pepper advocates for is that the internet is awful and you shouldn’t have to deal with it.”

“I don’t like being coddled, Tony,” Steve warned.

“Yeah, I know, so if this is when it ends, I get it,” Tony conceded. “But to me it’s not coddling. It’s… listen, we know how much you love us and the team and how you hate people sticking their noses into our business. Social media – which is really what I mean by ‘the internet’ in this conversation – is entirely about people sticking their noses into our business and sharing their opinions of said business. You hate it, I can protect you from it, and to me that’s love.”

Steve glowered for a few beats. “So, Pepper being called a whore is a regular thing?”

“I had to turn off the Google alert because my blood pressure was out of control.”

“I’m assuming that means yes.”

“Pepper told me that being a woman means that your body and your brain are public properties and I have never been able to forget that. She’s the CEO of the world’s biggest tech company and she’s the one that put it there. She has a college degree in, like, pottery or something I don’t even know, and I appointed her after I was kidnapped. I stopped dating around the same time and was pretty much only seen in public with Pepper,” Tony ticked elements on his fingers. “Assholes drew a lot of conclusions, as they are wont to do, and few of them were complimentary of our girl. Now, the people that matter? They know what a fucking badass she is, that she was really the brains behind it all for decades, and that I’m nothing without her. So we focus on those folks and fuck the rest of them. It’s shit, but it ain’t changing, and so you and me, our job is to protect her as best we can, to always have her back, and stand down when she tells us to.”

“That feels… empty.”

Tony nodded sagely. “I used to drink because I was afraid of the voices in my head. Now I drink because of the voices outside of it.”

“Well,” Steve said, as he collapsed on the seat next to Tony, “that’s surprisingly deep.”

“Stole it from Pepper.”

“Thought so.”
Chapter Notes

This may be where I need to add the 'angst' tag. Everyone is going to have some choices to make.

Thanks so much for your kind and enthusiastic comments on this beast. I'm so glad it's enjoyable!

February, 2014

“So, let me get this straight,” Tony leaned closer to Nick, “you can get me more vibranium?”

“Correction, I know how to get you more vibranium,” Nick took a smug sip of his whiskey. “I am unsure if I would ever exercise such knowledge.”

What happened to Tony’s face could really only be described as a pout, which sent their entire dining room table into hysterics.

Pepper had just been appointed as a UN Goodwill Ambassador for Technology, a role for which Tony and Steve had no idea how she’d find time but for which she was inordinately excited. As luck would have it, it meant she’d be working closely with their pal Prince Nick, as he was also involved in the work. In town for meetings, Nick had come to the Tower for dinner, and Pepper had assembled most of the Avengers and the Parkers.

“Peter, we have a friend coming to dinner tonight.”

“Cool,” Peter responded, distracted by the tech he was futzing with.

“It’s Crown Prince Nicholas of Wessco,” Tony said casually.

“Who?”

“Yeah, no, he won’t freak out,” Tony informed Pepper drolly.

“While Wakanda presents as a relatively under-resourced country on most charts, if you dig into the data, the only real indicator that they are is their export revenue. A bit back, when their crown prince, T’Challa, was at Oxford, we struck up a friendship and started the process of bringing our countries into trade alignment,” Nick continued. “We are both small, with limited interest in outside intervention, but recognize that the isolationist policies of our current rulers must shift. My main offer to the table is internationally accredited universities and long-standing allies, he brings tech that will make your eyes water.”

“All made of vibranium,” Tony marveled.

“Or funded by the discreet sale of it.”

Tony whistled, and looked around the table at his compatriots. “Wait, do none of you fuckers know what vibranium is?”
Clint scoffed. “Of course I know what vibrateitum is.”

“Vi. Brain. E. Um,” Tony enunciated. “It’s what Cap’s shield is made out of.”

Looks of recognition dawned around the table, and Tony made noises of thank you, see, I’m not a crazy person for being impressed, crying out loud you would think you think this stuff just appears, nooooo, I have to craft it and I need materials as they all began to talk at once.

Peter, as it happened, was sitting next to Nick. “Your Highness, sir?”

Nick smiled and turned his attention to the boy, “Yes, Mr. Parker?”

Peter blushed a bit. “I have a question about Wessco.”

“Of course, I’d love to answer it,” Nick said, as the conversations of the others poured around them.

“Where is it?”

Nick bit his lip to keep from laughing. “Another testimonial for the tourism board, I see. We are crunched in between the Scottish and English borders and have been a sovereign state for many centuries. My family has been in charge for a good bit of those.”

“And the University of Andalusia is going to have a lab where I could learn vibranium?”

“When would you start university?”

“In four years,” Peter replied. “I start high school in the fall.”

Pepper, who was on the other side of Peter, translated, “he’ll be Year 3 in secondary school and is going to a specifically technically focused school. Tony says his robotics skills are already off the charts.”

“Well, then it sounds like we can’t wait until my trade deal is worked out. I’ll get T’Challa to grant you entrance visas and we shall go to Wakanda on your summer break! Princess Shuri would love to show you her lab and have someone her age to build with.”

“Wait!” Tony cried from down the table. “The kid gets vibranium? You’ve known me longer!”

“Exactly, Tony,” Nick said. “That is exactly why the kid gets it and you don’t.”

More laughter around the table, as Nick winked at Tony. Steve knew there would be vibranium in the lab quickly. He looked around the table and marveled at this life he led. Very few of the relationships around forged around this table made sense on paper. Former assassins and secret keepers, demi-gods and scientists, supposedly dead soldiers and CEOs… and yet, this was his family. God, did he wish Bucky was alive to be a part of it, too.

“Pep,” Steve choked out one morning, “you know that I love you.”

“Spit it out, Rogers,” Pepper said as she rolled over to look at him.

“You know that I love being with you, and our arrangement, and-“

“Your hair, Pep. He wakes up every morning choking on it,” Tony cut in.
“Oh, I’m sorry, I’ll start braiding it again,” Pepper said and looked at Steve quizzically. “Why didn’t you ask?”

“Because our boyfriend will use fourteen compliments before he asks you to do something for him he thinks is selfish,” Tony muttered.

“Have you ever noticed that ‘fourteen’ is your go-to hyperbolic factor?” Steve retorted.

Pepper sat up, quickly braided her hair and gesturing to Tony to grab a hair tie from the nightstand. “Better?”

Steve used said braid to pull her gently back down to him, “much.”

“Jarvis, date, time, and head count,” Steve called out.

“Captain, it is March 24, 0700 hours. Ms Potts and Sir are in the kitchen, Agent Romanov is in the gym, and Dr. Banner is in his quarters. Agent Barton departed early this morning for a private mission. Ms. Potts asked me to remind you that you are slated to depart for Sokovia in 48hrs and you have not completed her diplomatic readiness checklist.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Please tell Ms. Potts that all I’m doing is carrying her bags and smiling pretty and keeping Tony company, and therefore do not need to do homework.”

“I’m not sure she will accept that, Captain.”

“Oh, she won’t, so don’t bother telling her,” Steve sighed.

“Sir, if I may enquire, you are not usually so averse to academic exercises. What troubles you about this mission?”

Of all the strange pieces of Steve’s life, having confidential chats with a computer was easily the one that still wigged him out the most.

“I don’t want Pepper going to this conference,” Steve admitted. “Neither does Tony, but he’s better at trusting her sometimes than I am.”

“Is this because of Sokovia’s terrorism rating?”

“Partly,” Steve admitted. “And partly I don’t know. But my gut says this is one she should sit out.”

“Ms. Potts knows your instincts are generally superior in terms of safety. Perhaps an honest conversation would clear the matter up?”

“Maybe,” Steve prevaricated. “I’m not… ignore me, Jarvis. Can you tell Tony to put more coffee in the pot for me and I’m on my way down?”

“Presently, Captain.”

CNN has just received word that the Royal Assembly Hall of Sokovia has been the subject of an apparent terrorist attack. A bomb blast, or perhaps several, our sources are mixed, decimated the main hall at approximately 4:45pm local time, while delegates of the Progressive Technology Summit were meeting to discuss the proposed Technological Limitation Accords, a multi-national
effort to patrol cybercrime and the use of technology in global warfare.

CNN can confirm that U.S. delegate Tony Stark, and his girlfriend, Pepper Potts, were both injured in the blast and have been taken to a local hospital. King T’Chaka of the tiny African nation of Wakanda was addressing the summit when the blast went off and was also taken to hospital and all three are declared in critical condition.

May snapped CNN off. “For crying out loud, Tony was there with Pepper not the other way around,” she muttered under her breath as she hit re-dial on Steve’s phone for the third time and held her other arm around her nephew, who was currently mute with shock.

_____________________________________

May: Steve, what is going on?

May: I’ve called three times now.

May: Steven Grant Rogers, I get that you aren’t Italian and therefore may think you’re immune to Italian mothering, but so help me God, I will smack you so hard it will bruise even you if you don’t pick up this phone and tell our kid you are alive.

_____________________________________

Peter: I know you don’t like texting but Tony told me he built voice to text into your suit, so if you could just tell Jarvis to tell me you’re alive I’d really appreciate it.

Peter: Steve?

Steve: I’m so sorry, kid, I knocked my helmet off. I’m fine, but Pepper and Tony both got taken to the hospital. I’m sure they’re fine and I’ll call when I can.

_____________________________________

Nat: What the fuck is happening, Rogers?

Steve: I have no goddamn idea, Nat, give me a minute.

Nat: Don’t think I can’t hear you ignoring me over text.

Steve: I am not ignoring you, but Pepper and Tony are both in surgery in a country I can’t speak the language in and T’Challa is pacing around here like a goddamn jungle cat and I am trying to make sure he doesn’t kill any one and my hands are A LITTLE FULL.

Nat: Well, that voice to text feature in the suit is certainly helpful.

Steve: Do you have any intel on the bomb?

Nat: Some, but we’ll talk in person. I’m on my way from Belfast and I’m fluent in Sokovian, so just focus on keeping T’Challa in his cage.

_____________________________________

“Nat,” Steve had rarely been so glad to see someone in his life when the redhead burst into the room at the hospital.

“Okay, here’s what I know,” she jumped right in, waving T’Challa over. “The bomb is Hydra-“ she
was cut off by a sharp intake of breath by both men, “and they’ve taken credit. Their ‘Winter Soldier’ has been reactivated, so they claim, but I’ll circle back to that. Their demands are the complete elimination of the Technological Limitation Accords that your father was announcing, Your Highness.”

“They have made that demand before,” the man responded, jaw tight. “Wakanda does not negotiate with terrorists. My father would not want that, I do not want that, our people do not want that.”

“None of us want that,” Nat assured him. “Except Hydra. Now, Tony and Pepper are both under sedation as part of some weird ass concussion protocol I don’t understand and I’m not really okay with, but I have one of Tony’s med wands with me and so Jarvis is analyzing their data now. Finally, Steve you have got to call Peter right now. The kid is loosing it.”

“I will, but what is this Winter Soldier thing?” Steve said.

“Nope, that’s for later, now you need to be a Tower Parent and call your damn kid.”

Steve grumbled slightly but pulled out his phone. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to talk to Peter, it was that he had no idea what to say or how to offer comfort. However, he tried to channel Pepper and hit the auto-dial for Peter.

“Steve oh my gosh thank you for calling do you know anything and can someone tell me what plane to get on to come see and help and maybe I can do something –”

“Peter, breathe. You don’t have a passport, remember? We talked about this.”

“Oh, right.”

“Tony and Pepper are fine. They’re under a concussion protocol right now, but since Nat speaks evidently fluent Sokovian, she’s got everything under control. All I’m doing right now is twiddling my thumbs and hanging out with T’Challa while he waits for news of his father’s surgery.”

“You promise me you’re fine?” Peter’s voice was small.

“Not going to lie, Pete, my heart feels pretty battered.” Steve remembered that Pepper had told them all to never lie to Peter about their emotions or when things were hard. Part of building trust with someone who had abandonment issues was to build trust with them constantly, and one of the ways to do that was vulnerability. “I wish I was there with you, and I wish I could make Pepper and Tony feel better, but I can’t do either of those things. Physically, I’m totally fine. My back hurts a little, but I have some lidocaine on it and it’ll loosen.”

Steve could feel Peter calm with each specific detail. “So, can you tell me more than CNN can?”

“A little,” Steve confessed, “but not much. We do know Hydra set off the bomb, and that their Winter Solider operative is who they claim did it.”


“What?”

“From Princess Bride? When we learned about the Winter Solider in history, they told us that he had been active since the late 1940s, so it was assumed that was a title and not a person,” Peter explained. “You’re the only person alive that long and it’s only because you were frozen.”

“So you know about this guy?”
“Yeah,” Peter replied. “He was one of my essay questions in the Cold War unit in history. Killed a lot of people in a lot of places. Did Pepper not cover him in your catch up?”

“No, musta missed him.”

“Huh, there’s a bunch of stuff on PBS and History Channel and all. There’s this great documentary on how quick he would have died if you were still alive since you would have crushed him.”

“Well, there’s an uplifting thought,” Steve said. “I am so fond of crushing.”

Peter giggled a little. “Hey, Steve, Aunt May wants to talk to you.”

“Okay, buddy,” Steve said. “I’m sorry I didn’t call earlier. I didn’t want to tell you anything until I knew something. But if anything changes, you’re my first phone call.”

“It’s okay,” Peter said. “Here’s Aunt May.”

“Hi May, I have-“

“Never fucking do that again, Steven Rogers.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Our kid is your first text message when the three of you are on the news and presumed dead, you hear me? Not your last one.”

“PRESUMED DEAD?”

“Yes, that was on one of the news alerts. CNN has Pepper and Tony in critical, Fox and MSNBC have them both missing. It’s been a fun day here in Queens.”

“Jesus H. Christ, May, I am so sorry. I had no idea. I was so busy making sure Tony and Pepper got to the hospital and then desperately trying to find anyone who could speak English that I didn’t even think to check.”

“Nat contacted us hours ago to let us know the three of you were fine,” May said, tonelessly.

Steve ran his hands through his hair. “And this is when I confess that I didn’t know how to give Peter bad news.”

May was quiet on the other end of the line. “That kid has a PhD in bad news. He’s good at that. He’s not good at people getting better or staying around.”

“I messed up and I’ll make it up to him,” Steve replied.

“Did you apologize?”

“Of course.”

“Then you’re good,” Steve could visualize May waving her hand in the air, absolving him of guilt. “In our family, we don’t wallow in blame or shame. You messed up, you apologized, we move on.”

“That’s… refreshing.”

“Works for us,” May had a smile in her voice. They chatted for a few more minutes about logistics and May passed the phone back to Peter to say goodnight.
“Cap, Captain Steve, Steve,” Peter stuttered. “Can I call you Uncle Steve? I was just thinking that I really feel like we’re family and you guys always call me your kid and, like you’re not my ‘dad’ or anything, but maybe Uncle? I’d just like something…”

Steve swallowed past the lump in his throat to reply. “You can call me whatever you want, Peter, but I’d be really honored if you called me that.”

“Okay, good,” Peter said, “good night, Uncle Steve.”

“Good night, Peter.”

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“It was just a concussion, stop fucking fussing over me,” Tony waved Steve off of him a week later in the workshop. “I fly around in a tin can, I’m sure this isn’t my first, but I will give you one soon unless you knock this hovering the fuck off, I have work to do.”

Steve stood his ground, raised an eyebrow, and once again handed the bottle of water to Tony. “And I will withhold sex and encourage Pepper to do the same unless you drink this entire bottle of water by the time I come back down. And Jarvis will tell me if you’ve poured it out, so don’t try.”

Tony grumbled and snatched the bottle, opening it and beginning to gulp it down. “You wouldn’t do that.”

“Withhold sex? I was a virgin until my early 20s, Tony, you think I don’t know what deprivation feels like? Drink your water.”

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“I don’t understand why finding one dude is this hard for all of you,” Tony yelled at Fury.

“He’s a Hydra operative, Tony, he doesn’t want to be found!”

Six weeks since the attack and the world felt like it had changed. King T’Chaka had not survived the surgery, and T’Challa had been crowned King of Wakanda a few weeks back. Tony had heard from Nick that the coronation is a private event for the people of the nation only, but that he was heading down soon after to help T’Challa sort through some diplomatic affairs, so Tony had sent a box of T’Challa’s favorite black and white cookies from Zarro’s because what the hell else do you do?

More challenging was the re-emergence of the fabled Winter Soldier. Most Western school children had been raised to fear him as sort of Russian boogeyman. Hydra had always been an independent force of evil, but when they had aligned with the Nazis and then the KGB, their most famous operative took on a fabled life of his own. Separating fact from fiction and legend had proven to be a pain in Tony’s ass, and SHIELD’s inability to bring him in was getting on Tony’s last nerve.

“For fucking sake, Fury, then let us help,” Tony said. “We’ll assemble or whatever and get this fucker smoked out.”

“Absolutely the fuck not. You are as subtle as a garbage truck. Agent Romanov and Agent Barton have already been tasked to help and their assistance is useful. I am grateful for the use of your modified AI to go through some of the files, which is actually why I’m calling,” Fury said through the hologram.

“What?”
“I found an entire cache of Howard and Peggy’s files in one of our storage units and I was going to bring them over to you to see if you and your Jarvis could process them for us,” Fury supplied. “I have some notes that indicate Howard thought the Winter Soldier got Cap’s serum, or a modified version of it, but none of us here can understand your father’s notes.”

“He wrote them in code,” Tony muttered.

“I’m assuming you know the cipher?”

“Sadly, yes. Bring them over, Jarvis and I will deal with it.”

“Great, they should be arriving any minute.”

“Sir,” Jarvis interrupted.

“So this wasn’t a permission phone call,” Tony clarified.

“Nope,” Fury grinned. “Let me know when you’re done.”

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“Fuck, fuckity, fuck, fuck, fuck,” Tony said. “Jarvis, is this who I think it is?”

“Indeed, sir,” Jarvis said sadly.

It was about 11:30 on a hot July night, six weeks after the boxes had been delivered. It had taken Tony and Jarvis time to get through the forty seven boxes of haphazard notes left behind by Howard and Peggy, and Tony had to take several breaks to talk to this therapist and to Pepper and to Steve and to Rhodey about various memories that had been drug up by different files. The box he had opened a few minutes back had turned out to have lots on Howard’s theories on the Winter Soldier. Before Howard had died, he had confirmed that Hydra cloned Erskine’s serum, but that they had also used advance brainwashing and torture techniques. He had also, much to Howard’s chagrin, identified who the Winter Soldier had been before he was turned.

Tony slapped his hand on the file, “Goddamnit, Howard solved the puzzle of the Metal Armed Bandit.”

The bots whirred around him, sensing something was a foot.

“Boys, see that photo? That’s MIA WWII Sergeant James Buchannan Barnes, presumed dead best friend of Captain Steve Rogers. Also known as the Winter Solider, an internationally wanted terrorist agent and FUCK WHY CAN’T ANYTHING IN OUR LIVES BE NORMAL.”

He threw a can of Red Bull against the wall and sunk down on the floor.

“I can’t tell him,” he muttered out loud. “First of all, that can’t still be Bucky under there, there’s no way with all that torture, and also, I’d lose him, so if I really love him, I’ll tell him, but then I’ll help put his first love in prison, and what about Pepper and what the fuck am I supposed to do.”

“Sir,” Jarvis quietly interrupted. “If I may.”

“What, J?”

“This might be an excellent time for me to let Ms. Potts and Captain Rogers know you will be sleeping down here tonight as to not disturb them. They are currently waiting up for you.”
“Amazing idea, J, yes, do that.”

He ran his hands through his hair, and stared at the wall, as the world he so careful constructed proceeded to crumble around him.
Chapter Notes

Since I went all Game of Thrones level of stuffing plots together last chapter, I decided to slow this one down just a little. I'm always more interested in the characters and their emotions than the plot points themselves, which I think this chapter demonstrates.

Reminder: I promised happily ever afters and you will get them. I guarantee it.

Thanks for all the love for this little tale. Your reactions mean the world.

July, 2014

“He’s all twitchy again,” Steve said to Pepper one morning.

“He’s been twitchy since they sent over those damn boxes,” Pepper replied, calmly swiping through her tablet and answering emails.

“I know, he’s just…” Pepper looked up. “More? You think he found something else?”

“He hasn’t left the workshop for four days, and whenever I try to go down, Jarvis overrides my code.”

“That’s normal,” Pepper reminded him. “Jarvis is keeping an eye on his vitals, so we know he’s fed and watered. There was two whole months in 2011 that I wasn’t allowed down there.”

“Did he come out, though?”

“About once a week, and he looked like hell, but would not talk about whatever demon he was wrestling, and I gave up trying to get it out of him, and just took my cues from him,” Pepper replied.

Steve grumbled and poked at his pancakes.

“You’re thinking loudly,” Pepper said.

“Sometimes it’s just really frustrating that you’ll always know him better than me,” Steve said.

Pepper put down her tablet. “I don’t think that’s true, I just think I know him longer.”

“That’s semantics, Pep, and you know it,” Steve retorted. “Whenever I’m worried about something, you pull some story from when I was still frozen to tell me I’m being paranoid, or overreacting or something. I’m not an idiot, Pep, I know when he’s not okay.”

“I know you do, you usually know first,” Pepper replied. “You always know when one of us is breaking before we do and you’ve already solved how to keep us together before I even knew we weren’t okay.”

Steve blinked a few times. “That’s my job.”
Pepper cocked an eyebrow. “No, that’s Captain America’s job.”

Steve cocked his right back. “No, that’s Steve Rogers’ job, too.”

“I don’t like being a job.”

“Well, what does Clint say? Tough titties. Because you are my most important job.”

Pepper narrowed her eyes. “I’m getting mad and I don’t think I should be, so I think I misunderstand you. Explain.”

Steve ran both of his hands through his hair for a few minutes before taking a deep breath. “All of my growing up years, I wanted to protect people the way I needed to be protected. You have no idea how awful, how debasing it is, to have to have your best friend patch you up nearly every day. They didn’t have albuterol back when I was growing up, and so each breath was a gamble, Pep. When I lied to try to get into the Army all those times, it was the only way I knew how to tip the scales back even, I was tired of always being the one who took without being able to give back. I was just so tired of being trapped in a body that hated me, I said yes to Erskine before I even thought about what it would really mean.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It’s why I hate being public property, why I’m so obnoxious about who gets to know Steve. This body, this is Captain America’s. Steve is still the kid who plays Russian Roulette every time he breathes.”

Pepper nodded slowly, opened her mouth to speak and clearly though better of it. They sat in silence for a few minutes before Steve continued, with a wry glance in her direction.

“I’m trying to make them one person, and protecting my family is the best way I know how. I finally, finally, get to be the guy who… I don’t even know what I’m saying.”

“I still don’t quite understand how we got here from there,” Pepper replied.

“You are terrible at letting me help,” Steve blurted out. “You have all the answers all of the time. You are the smartest, most capable, strongest woman on the planet and there are days being your boyfriend is absolutely infuriating! I could crush all these people who call you names with my bare hands, but you say no. I could force Tony to take care of himself more and to show up at more PR events, but you say no. I would put myself between you and the world, Pepper, and I’m trying, but you keep saying no.”

Pepper felt the hot sting of tears as she sat there, knowing he was completely correct and mortified that he was. “You’re right.”

“I know I am!” Steve was up and pacing now. “Tony’s easy, he just wants someone to flirt with and call him on his bullshit and someone who doesn’t leave. I can handle all of those. You? God, Pep, I don’t even know.”

Pepper was full on crying now. “Jarvis,” she croaked out.

“Ma’am?”

“Can you please let Delia know that I will need to send my regrets for that fundraising committee meeting? I have a family emergency.”
“Of course, ma’am. Shall I tell her to hold all calls as well?”

“Yes, please, and you too. Nothing from my cell unless it’s Tony, Peter, or May.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Steve was breathing heavy and staring at her as she felt the tears fall from her eyes. “I’m just so sorry, I had no idea.”

“God, Pep, of course you didn’t, I know!” He moved towards the chair next to her and flopped into it, taking one of her hands. “You know what Kerry told me when we started this whole thing?”

Pepper shook her head.

“She said that the ones who love the deepest are usually the hardest to love, and that you were a textbook case and that I’d probably want to kill you on the regular, but that you were worth it,” he smiled slightly.

“Was she right?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“Totes.”

“Steven.”

He grinned and leaned forward to kiss her. Resting his forehead on hers, he whispered. “You are worth it, Virginia, but you have got to let me help more. This life we have is really, really hard. I know you’re on over a decade of being everything to everyone and I love Tony, but he cannot fully understand everything you do for everyone because he’s, well, Tony. That is why I am here, please, please, please let me take care of you. It’s the only way I know how to love you.”

Pepper nodded.

“Back when you were still doing the fertility treatments, you were better at asking for help,” Steve continued. “Are you afraid to now as some sort of, I don’t know, overcorrection?”

Pepper was quiet for a few moments, glad for the warmth of Steve’s forehead and fingers and that she could just sit with her eyes closed as his words soaked in. “Probably.”

“Knock it off.”

She chuckled, as his thumbs moved to her face to catch her tears.

“So, what now,” she whispered.

“What would make you happy, right now, in this moment,” Steve asked.

“A nap in your arms,” Pepper confessed.

“How long have you wanted that?” Steve asked.

“Probably months,” the confession continued.

“And you didn’t ask for it because?”

“I… we didn’t have time.”
“Pepper Potts, look at me,” Steve said gently as she raised her eyes. “How long has it been since you felt rested?”

“Probably… I don’t know… since the boxes?”

“Try again.”

“Since last year when we went to Vancouver.”

“Okay, so that’s not acceptable, and we’re going to work on that,” Steve said as Pepper smiled and nodded. “Nap time?”

She nodded and started to get up, before she was lifted into his arms in a fireman carry. Her face must have looked startled, because Steve laughed. “This is the way a few of my fantasies start.”

“Do they include me sobbing like an idiot and then a nap?”

“They include me making you happy, so yes.”

“You are impossibly perfect,” Pepper complained.

“I do my best, ma’am,” Steve said in his Captain America voice and Pepper giggled all the way to the bedroom.

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“Are you sure Uncle Tony doesn’t want to come?” Peter asked Steve as they walked up from the subway about a week after Steve and Pepper’s nap day.

“He said he has a lot to do before we all leave for Wakanda next week and that you and I should have fun,” Steve replied. “Besides, won’t it be fun to see Rhodey? We haven’t seen him in ages.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Peter said. “Did Aunt May tell you she’s going to therapy and I have to go?”

Steve bit back a smile. “Yes, about four times.”

“Oh,” Peter replied sheepishly and worried his lip. “I guess I’m… have you ever been to therapy?”

“Yup,” Steve confirmed, guiding the pair into the gate at Fenway. Steve and Tony were trying to instill their love of baseball into their pseudo son, and so part of that was making sure he saw games at all the ballparks. It didn’t hurt that Steve desperately wanted to see them all, too, and so this trip to Fenway to see the Sox play the Cardinals had been on the books for months.

Steve had been furious when Jarvis informed him early this morning that Tony wouldn’t be going, but he’d eat his hat before he let the kid know that. Especially because Tony not going made their cover of Steve taking Tony’s intern/mentee to a baseball game a little harder to pull off without stammering or blushing or giving them away. He was so glad Rhodey had agreed to fly in and meet them at the last minute.

“Really?” Peter looked surprised.

Steve nodded. “At first it was SHIELD mandated, and I realized that having someone who was really good at listening, but had no real stakes in my answers was really helpful, so I kept going. I go about once a month now, sometimes more.”

“What do you mean, stakes?”
“Well,” Steve considered his words. “So some things in life are low stakes – like what you want to eat for dinner – and some things are high – like life and death. But in our relationships, some things have bigger stakes because both people are invested. So, when I need to talk about how much I miss some things about my old life, I can’t talk about them with Pepper or Tony or you because you guys might think I don’t want to be here and that’s not true.”

“MJ always says many thing can be true at once,” Peter replied.

“You and I, we’re both dating women smarter than us, buddy.”

“MJ and I aren’t dating,” Peter spat the word so quickly that Steve did a double take.

“Sorry, buddy, my bad,” Steve replied.

“That’s just as bad as totes,” Peter rolled his eyes.

Steve grinned. “Well, back to therapy, I think it’s a great idea that you go. You’ve had a lot of change in your life recently, even without the –” he gestured to Peter’s body. He had shot up six inches in the last three months, and all of his powers had been heightened. It was clear to them all that part of his mutation included super strength, since he could now take Steve down in a fight.

“Aunt May said it would be good to learn how to talk about Mom and Dad and Uncle Ben now that I have the Tower Parents,” Peter said, matter-of-factly. “Like you guys are great, don’t get me wrong, and I know my parents would have loved you but I miss them and I don’t know how to talk about them with you but I want to.”

“We’d love to hear about them any time, Peter,” Steve confirmed. “None of us will ever take your parents place, or Uncle Ben’s. No way. The same way that whoever else comes in your life someday won’t take our place. Hearts and lives just kind of keep growing in that way.”

Peter seemed satisfied with that answer and turned the conversation to baseball and could I get a hat, Uncle Steve, and what do you think about hot dogs, and oh! Cotton candy, and oh! Is that a dog? Can you bring dogs to baseball games? Can we get a dog? Aunt May won’t let me because she’s never home, but I bet we could have one at the Tower and it would fine, don’t you think, Uncle Steve?

By the time they found their suite – Tony had insisted because this way he wouldn’t miss any of the game taking Peter to the bathroom, and Steve had retorted ‘okay, so you’ll only miss the game when you’re glued to your phone’ – Rhodey had made it there, too.

“Plush digs, Cap,” Rhodey grinned as he pulled the man in for a back slap hug.

“Well, Tony,” Steve shrugged as Rhodey laughed.

“Yeah, I’m familiar with his work. Hey bug boy,” Rhodey greeted Peter.

Thankful the suit attendant was out of the room, Steve reminded Rhodey of the security protocols Pepper had arranged with the ballpark. Rhodey rolled his eyes good naturedly. “I need to remind Pepper that we have the same security clearance sometimes, but if this is what Mama Pepper looks like, I can’t say it’s a bad look.”

Steve and Rhodey had actually never really spent time together without Tony, so Steve took the opportunity of the game to get to know the man. The conversation spanned military history – Rhodey had some specific questions about the 107th that Steve was more than happy to answer – to Tony history to what Rhodey really thought of the Avengers and SHIELD and the re-emergence of
Hydra. Peter sat rapt in the seats in their front row, turning around every so often to say didja see that? while the men chatted.

Just after the 7th inning stretch, Rhodey lowered his voice. “If I didn’t see Peter’s birth certificate, I’d swear he was Tony’s.”

Steve nodded. “Pepper and I talk about it all the time. I mean, he doesn’t look particularly like him, but they are… scary. I mean, even how they talk. How they focus on something so intently it’s disturbing.”

“The only difference is that Howard didn’t fuck this version up,” Rhodey confirmed.

“So this is Tony Stark on unconditional love?”

“I think so, Cap.”

Steve was musing on that, when Peter walked back into the suite to get his sixth hot dog. He opened his mouth to make fun of the boy when the door to the suite burst emphatically open. Steve whipped around to see what the hell was happening when a voice with a weird modulation and a Russian accent said, “hello, Captain.”

Reaching instinctively for his shield, realizing it wasn’t there, and panicking slightly all at once, Steve braced for impact as the stranger with the metal arm launched himself at Steve and Rhodey.

“That’s the fucking Winter Solider,” Peter said quickly.

“Language,” both Steve and Rhodey ground out, as they fought back. A fight broke out, Steve called to Peter to call Pepper, Rhodey told him to call 911, but before either of those things could happen, Rhodey was knocked out and the soldier had his metal hand around Steve’s throat.

And Steve went numb.

He knew those eyes.

*There is no way, this is just my life flashing before my eyes, there is no way.*

But logic wasn’t functioning as his breathing was increasingly cut off and he gritted out, “Bucky?”

The hand twitched just enough for Steve to breath a bit and regain composure. The eyes narrowed, both in shock and confusion, and Steve kicked himself free. The soldier paused and twitched, as though he was short circuiting, and then abruptly ran out the door.

“What the?” Peter breathed.

“I have no damn idea,” Steve confessed. “We have to tell SHIELD he’s in Boston, and we have to get Rhody –” Rhodey groaned, coming to – “to a hospital.”

“That was all so fast,” Peter whispered. “So, so fast.”

“StarkJet,” Steve said, more to himself than the others, and then repeated it louder. “Let’s get back to the jet, the phone on the plane is secure, and we can have the SI medical team look at Rhody.”

“Just give a minute, man, and I can walk outta here,” Rhodey winced.

“I’d normally argue, but I think getting you a wheelchair is time we don’t have.”
Tony hadn’t blown off the baseball game for shits and giggles, he had blown it off for a therapy appointment.

“Tony, do I need to remind you my security clearance is actually higher than yours?” Dr. Widmayer said.

The first therapist that Kerry sent Tony to wasn’t a great fit, and got a little frustrated with Tony’s sarcasm. Plus, Tony realized that there was times that talking about his father might actually reveal state secrets or something, and so he needed someone with DOD clearances. A few phone calls later, and he ended up with someone that Oprah recommended and President Obama used. Tony would admit it only under threats of death, but he actually loved his therapist.

Tony fidgeted. “But that’s only because I haven’t asked for a higher one.”

The therapist stared pointedly at Tony. “Your message said this was DEFCON 5 urgent.”

“I know who the Winter Soldier is,” Tony blurted. “And it’s my boyfriend’s best friend.”

“Steve’s best friend? I thought that was you, unless — oh, shit.” Dr. Widmeyer said slowly, realization dawning. “Sargent Barnes isn’t dead, is he?”

Tony shook his head. “Howard figured out he was captured by Hydra, brainwashed for decades and deployed as the Winter Soldier. He’s not a brand, he’s one dude. Howard wasn’t sure how, but the few documents he uncovered said something about cryogenic freezing, and I’ve found other records of Hydra torture methods and I think I have a pretty good picture.”

The doctor was silent, allowing Tony to talk through it.

“Barnes went missing in 1945, in Italy. He fell from a train, right, everyone knows that, it’s part of the history lessons. My guess is that he fell from the ravine and his arm was banged up enough that they amputated it while they were also giving him the bastardized version of the Rebirth serum Erskine and Howard created. How they found it, I don’t know, but probably something to do with — who was the Hydra guy? I slept through history.”

“Red Skull, is all I remember,” Dr. Widmeyer supplied. “But I thought Captain America killed him.”

“Sure, maybe, like I said, slept through,” Tony continued to rub his hands through his hair, as though pulling these ideas straight from his brain. He hadn’t really slept in two days. “Anyway, so everything Steve has told me about his Bucky – that’s what he calls him – and what we know from service records, Barnes must have been a son of a bitch to brainwash. My guess is that they cyrofroze him between missions because then they could re-brainwash him both before he went in and when he came back out and it gave his brain limited time to recover.”

“Which would explain how he’s been active for seventy years.”

Tony nodded.

“Are you sure it’s still Barnes?”

“At least until 1991, because, well, here’s what’s even more fun,” Tony barked sardonically. “Howard’s files on the Winter Soldier ended really abruptly on December 16, 1991. They were marked at 11am, and that’s when I remember getting home from MIT and getting in a big fight with him, and then, of course, that night. Anyway, Aunt Peggy, faithful soldier that she was, kept
digging."

*I am not going to cry,* Tony told himself. He had spent the last 48 hours crying and hiding and trying to figure out what to do. He desperately needed none of this to be true, but he knew it was.

“Aunt Peggy had a feeling that Howard and Mom weren’t randomly killed, but that Howard was targeted. Her notes indicate he had been threatened by Hydra over the years, and they had potentially kidnapped him on one of his missions to find Steve, but Howard never confirmed that to her.

“Do you remember that Hydra document dump or leak or whatever after the USSR fell? Well, Aunt Peggy got in there first, it seems, bless her cotton socks, and found surveillance footage of that night. Good news for me, sometime before she lost her memory completely, she had it transferred onto DVD, so I got to see it.”

The tears were in full force now, and Tony had given up trying to stop them.

“Plain as day, clear as the light bouncing off his arm, is the Winter Soldier killing my parents and it is absolutely Barnes on that tape. It’s good to know they both called out for me as he beat them to death before shooting them, but really coulda lived without the visual.” Tony took a few deep breaths and continued. “So, you see, doc, the man my boyfriend loves more than anything, his first true love, is also the man who killed my parents. It’s gonna be a really awkward holiday season.”

Dr. Widmeyer pressed a few tissues into Tony’s hand and took his seat again across the room. “Can I ask a few clarifying questions?”

“Do your worst, doc,” Tony sniffled.

“Am I the first person you’ve said this all out loud to?”

“Who the fuck else would I tell?”

“Not my question.” Dr. Widmeyer didn’t tell Tony not to be sarcastic, but there were times Tony had to answer the questions directly.

“Yes, you are the first person,” Tony admitted.

“Why not Pepper?”

“Oh, god, I couldn’t put her in that situation. She’d respect that I don’t know how to tell Steve yet, and she’s a good secret keeper, but no, I couldn’t do that to her.”

“Okay, are you going to tell Pepper and Steve?”

“Yes, I know I need to. I don’t have any idea how, but I don’t want them finding out from Fury or fucking CNN.”

Dr. Widmeyer nodded. “We can come up with a plan for all of that. Speaking of Fury –“

“Not telling him until I tell my family.”

“Even if that means lying to Fury or other government officials under oath?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Wanted to check if that martyr complex was still alive and kicking,” the doctor smirked. Tony flipped him off and went back to sniffling.
“Final question.”

“Hit me.”

“How do you feel?”

“God, I knew that was coming and I tried to answer that before I came here and I don’t know. I looked at your chart of feeling words, I tried to have Jarvis write an algorithm that could tell me, but no dice, doc.” Tony confessed and leaned back into the sofa he was perched on. “I think part of me is numb. I know part of me is really glad Howard wasn’t a drunk ass that night like I was told he was. He seemed really sober in the video and tried to protect my mom. The soldier asked where I was and Howard lied, which does things to my insides.”

“Were you supposed to be with them that night?”

Tony nodded. “That was what the giant fight was about. They wanted me at this fancy, ridiculous dinner, and I was too high to go.”

Dr. Widmeyer scratched something into his notebook, and then made a ‘carry on’ motion with his hand.

“I know I’m about to lose Steve,” Tony said with a finality that hurt his heart. “Steve Rogers is loyal to an absolute fault, and I know he loves me, but man does he love that man more. Now that we know he’s alive? Even if he’s a brainwashed, megalomaniacal serial killer, Steve will stop at literally nothing to save Bucky. And that is killing me.”

“Can you read Steve’s mind?”

“Don’t pull this shit with me, doc,” Tony protested. This was a frequent retort.

“I asked a question.”

“Yes, yes I can, because he telegraphs everything he does,” Tony’s voice rose with each word. “I know you tell me that Pepper’s not going anywhere and I have chosen to believe you because everyone knows she should dump my sorry ass and go elsewhere, but I choose to believe she’s staying. Steve, though, Steve’s different. Nothing on Earth could convince me he’d leave once he gave his word to something, except for Barnes. Barnes is his end of the line, home run in the World Series, love of his damn life and there is no competing with that. He’ll leave and it’s probably best if I just prepare myself now.”

Dr. Widmeyer met Tony’s gaze evenly. “I have several points of contention with that statement, but you know them, so do you want to move on to a plan for how to tell Steve and Pepper what you know?”

Tony heaved a deep breath. “Yes, please.”
As Tony left the good doctor’s office, he felt significantly more prepared to face what was waiting him at home. He had a plan, he was good with a plan, he was –

His phone was ringing Steve’s ringtone.

Three thoughts happened at once: Steve hates the phone and would not use it unless it was an emergency, Peter was with Steve, and Tony had no idea where Pepper was.

He fumbled it quickly out of his pocket, “Steve?”

“Tony, are you home?”

“On my way there now.”

“I have a helicopter bringing us directly to the tower from the airfield and I’ll need you to take Peter while I help Rhodey to medical.”

“What? Steve what is –“

“Babe, we ran into some trouble at Fenway and Pete is only barely holding it together. We are all alive and in once piece, but if I explain anything to you on the phone, I don’t think Pete will be. Do you trust me?”

In the last two years, this phrase was Steve’s way of telling Tony that his requests were not negotiable, and also reminding Tony that while in a crisis situation, Steve was generally right.

“Always. See you soon.”

Over the next several hours, the story came out. Rhodey was cleared of a concussion and sent back home to Washington, Peter had remembered how to breathe normally, May had been notified, and Pepper was on the fastest jet known to man to bring her back from meetings in Chicago. The story had been told and analyzed and told again, and so far they all only agreed on two things: Fury needed to be told, but not yet.

“What if we went to Wakanda now?” Tony said quietly, his hands running through Peter’s hair. The boy was curled up next him, and dozing on and off. The adrenaline had crashed completely and one of the things everyone discovered in this situation is that Peter gets really clingy after he’s scared. None of the adults were annoyed by that. May was on an overnight and could not find anyone to take her shift, much to her deep chagrin, but Steve reminded her that this was one of the benefits of team parenting. She was going to come straight over after her shift and would get there around the time when Pepper landed.

Steve looked up at him in slight shock. “You mean like tomorrow instead of next week?”

Tony nodded. “It gets the kid out of the city, which I think he could use, and it gives us a space where Fury really can’t find us to talk about –“

“The fact that Winter Soldier has Bucky’s eyes?”
“Among other things, yes.”

Steve was quiet for a minute. “Can Pepper peace out?”

“Probably not,” Tony admitted. “And don’t think I didn’t notice your unapproved use of kid lingo. But we’ll check. She’s rearranged a lot of SI bullshit lately for us bullshit and I know that’s stressing her out. But she’s also been ready to hand more off to that new COO, so maybe. I don’t know.”

“You want to tell her to fuck SI, don’t you?”

“One million trillion percent,” Tony smiled sadly down at Peter’s sleeping form. “This is the kind of parenting stuff that is going to take some management because in this moment, literally nothing is more important to me than this kid and his mental and physical health. And he’s not even ours.” He paused and leaned down to press a gentle kiss to Peter’s forehead. “Yeah, so I’m going to really reign it in before we adopt or whatever.”

“Nah, no reigning,” Steve said. “Papa Stark is really hot.”

Tony smirked in Steve’s direction. “So’s Papa Rogers.”

“Also,” Steve said. “I think May would argue that he’s not really ours. From everything she says, she feels really good about this arrangement.”

Tony waved him off, and Steve rolled his eyes. “This is a bullshit Howard thing, fine. But he’s our kid, Tony.”

Before Tony could retort, Jarvis interrupted. “Sir and Captain, Ms. Potts and Ms. Parker have arrived. Also, Agent Romanov has returned, you asked to be notified.”

“Thanks, J. Can you ask Nat to come up here whenever she can?”

“A normal person whenever, sir, or a Stark whenever,” Jarvis responded drolly, as Steve started to laugh. The activity woke Peter up.

“A Natasha whenever, jackass,” Tony retorted, as Steve kept laughing.

“What’s going on,” Peter rubbed his eyes open.

“Jarvis is sassing Tony,” Steve said.

“And I missed it?” Peter complained.

“Just wait a bit, Master Parker, I’m sure Sir will need spoken to again soon,” Jarvis replied.

“Hey, Captain Sparkles, you gonna let a machine talk to your boyfriend that way?” Tony raised an eyebrow in Steve’s direction.

“Oh, absolutely, Shellhead,” Steve replied, grinning.

“I am surrounded by mutiny,” Tony said to the sky as Peter lost himself in giggles and asked where ‘Captain Sparkles’ came from. Jarvis stepped into explain it was pejorative and based on one of Steve’s old USO costumes, and provided – much to Steve’s chagrin – Peter with some photos.

The elevator door pinged open at that moment and May and Pepper stepped in. May nearly flew to Peter’s side to see for herself that he was okay, as Pepper made for Steve and then Tony. Hellos and other pleasantries were exchanged, and then exchanged again when Nat stepped off the elevator a
few minutes later.

“Tony, not that I hate being with you all, but what do you need?” Nat quietly said to him as the others were still talking.

“Nat, I’m calling in a big favor here that you just say yes to what I’m about to say without asking why and trust me I’ll tell you when I can.”

Nat eyed him warily, but nodded.

“I need you to come to Wakanda with us.”

“Who is in danger,” Nat asked plainly.

“Everyone, maybe, I don’t quite know, but I’m not going to start solving the puzzle until we’re safely in T’Challa’s palace. So, is that a yes?”

“When do we leave?”

“If Pep gives the okay, wheels up will be at 2100 tonight,” Tony muttered, hoping that Peter’s super hearing was distracted. Good, kid is too busy telling May about the Winter Soldier.

Nat nodded and checked her watch. “That gives me about 11 hours to pass off a few things. No problem. Do you have breakfast things? I’m starving.”

Tony nodded and by the way Steve moved quickly to the kitchen, he had clearly heard Nat. “I’ll start pancakes. Who wants blueberries and who wants chocolate chips? Tony, you’re getting blueberries so don’t even try.”

After breakfast was over, Nat excused herself and May was about to as well, when Tony cleared his throat and announced, “I think we should leave for Wakanda tonight.”

Pepper’s eyebrows shot up and Peter started bouncing around excitedly.

“Tony,” Pepper said slowly.

“Pep,” Tony was pleading quietly with his voice and their eyes met. They held gazes for a few moments and everyone else was afraid to make noise in the silence.

Finally, Pepper nodded. “I’ll make it work. Are you calling T’Challa or am I?”

“I already did, just in case. He’s having the rooms prepared and said to arrive whenever we wanted. His only note was that Nick and a Wessco delegation are there this week for negotiations, so we’ll need to make ourselves scarce until his team leaves.”

Pepper looked at May. “Is this a problem for you?”

May shook her head. “Not at all. Sounds like Peter’s safer in Africa than Manhattan, so off to Africa with youse.”

The mood for the rest of the meal was quiet, and eventually May and Peter went up to his room to pack and Pepper called after them that they should send Happy to pick up anything from Queens he would need.

Quietly, Pepper looked at Tony. “Do we get to know now or later why this is happening?”
“Later,” Tony replied, picking at his cuticles. “I just… the boxes. I found something and I’m going to tell you, but not here.”

“I don’t like it,” Steve said.

“I’ll be honest, in this moment, I don’t care,” Tony replied softly. “I know that makes me a selfish prick, but this thing, some shit Howard did and knew… I need to be in a non-Howard physical space when I tell you guys. I need us to be alone, and I need to know that Peter is distracted because I can’t be his whatever and this at the same time and I just need you guys to…”

As he trailed off, Pepper moved to be next to him. “Two questions: one, have you talked to Dr. Widmeyer since you found this out and, two, do you want to try to sleep a bit before we fly or just sleep on the plane?”

“One, yes, and two, on the plane,” he gave her a quick kiss, and rose to give Steve one as well. “Jarvis and I have some things to wrap up in the workshop so I can take a portable AI to Wakanda.”

Once he was gone, Steve looked at Pepper. “I really don’t like it.”

“Oh, dear one, I fucking hate it,” Pepper confirmed. “But, he asks for, really, nothing, and so I feel like we really can’t say no, and there is something in my gut that says this scares him.”

Steve nodded. “I agree, and I can’t figure out what he found. I mean, we already knew Howard basically created the atomic bomb, what could be worse?”

“Oh, a million things,” Pepper chuckled sadly. “He could have bought and sold children on the open market, he could have personally supplied the gas for the chambers, he could have raped Maria daily, the stories I have heard mean that I put nothing past him.”

Steve’s eyebrows went up a bit with each example. “You really think? Like, I know he was a terrible father, but the man I worked with was either a really good actor or incapable of anything you just said.”

Pepper threw her arms open. “Steve, I have no idea. But here’s what I do know. I know that in nearly fifteen years of knowing Tony, I have never had him behave quite like this. So, he wants us in Wakanda immediately? I’ll pack my bags.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, as they each contemplated what the other said. Steve finally broke it by asking about the weather in Wakanda. Pepper laughed and they made their way to the bedroom to pack their bags.

“Jarvis.”

Silence

Tony shot straight up in bed. “JARVIS.”

Silence

“JARVIS WHAT THE FUCK ANSWER ME.”

crackle crackle

“Tony,” Steve said slowly.
“I HAVE NO IDEA,” the genius screamed, a phrase Pepper thought she had never heard come out of his mouth.

“Mister. Stark.”

“What the fuck is that,” Pepper whispered.

A voice, kind of like Jarvis’ but not, was creaking through the PA system.

“Mister Stark, Jarvis is not at home.”

And then the plane started to plummet.

______________________________

“WHO HAS EYES ON PETER?”

“I’m here, Pepper! I’m fine! But I think Steve is bleeding!”

“I’m fine, where’s Tony?”

“Fiddling with the wires with the pilot,” Pepper answered.

“Nat?” Steve questioned.

“I’m right here,” she called, “and all in one piece, but I could use some super solider strength to help get this panel off of me.”

“Coming as soon as I detangle Peter from these cords.”

In a few moments of complete chaos, the plane had plummeted and then pulled up to kind of slid/crashed into a field. The pilot had screamed to Tony that the controls were being taken over, but he had done everything he could. All they knew was that Jarvis wasn’t working, and that didn’t feel like nearly enough to sort out where they were or what to do.

Pepper gathered herself and crawled through the wreckage to Tony. “Give me your phone.”

“Busy, Pep,” as he twisted a few chords.

She growled and started digging in his pockets.

“Now is not the time for a hand job, babe,” Tony muttered.

“Yes, because I am known for my exhibitionism,” Pepper muttered as she wrapped her fingers around his StarkPhone, “ah ha!” She hit a few buttons and blew her hair out of her face. “There, I sent our location to T’Challa and Clint. Someone will find us.”

“Well, I have bad news and terrible news,” Tony said, about fifteen minutes later.

Their pilot sighed deeply and said he was going to dig through the wreckage for water and informed them they were somewhere in Nigeria.

“Terrible news first,” Nat said.

“Jarvis has been compromised.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Peter mumbled.
“Language,” all the adults said together.

“If I cannot use profanity when we almost died in a plane crash, when can I?” Peter exclaimed.

“When you can vote,” Steve said at the same time as Tony said, “when you can knock out Steve.”

“Well, those are very different goals,” Peter said.


“Right, Jarvis has been compromised and from what I can tell it may be partly my fault.”

“Explain,” Pepper replied, “in English and without tech speak.”

Tony opened his mouth and closed it a few times before saying, “I mucked around during one of my dark days with the boxes and I gave him more evolutionary power. And I think Hydra has alien tech that essentially crashed into Jarvis and made whatever the hell this is.”


“Like Asgard?” Peter said.

“No, like… I have no idea,” Tony confessed. “But the electronic signatures do not exist on this planet, so it has to be alien. Maybe Chitauri? I can’t quite tell since it replicated and evolved itself.”

“So, no more Jarvis,” Steve said.

“At least not on the plane or any of the suits. There are some lockdown codes that mean this thing may not have infiltrated the Tower, but the only one who could tell me that is Jarvis, so you can see our issue.”

“If that was the terrible news, what is the bad news?” Nat asked.

“Oh, just that I think I ate all the peanuts we had while I was doing that,” Tony said. “Sorry.”

Steve rolled his eyes, and quickly divided everyone up into tasks. There were a few sarcastic comments about Captain Sparkles and Tony sang “Star Spangled Man” twice, but mostly, everyone was focused on just getting things sorted. They made a makeshift shelter, built a fire, found a way to cook some of the food they salvaged from the crash, and Tony surprised no one by telling them the underside of the metal plane panels had been designed to be solar panels and he was working a way for them to charge their phones. *What? I was bored last summer.*

T’Challa had signaled about ten minutes after Pepper’s text that he was on his way and to hang tight, so hanging tight was their plan.

Until, of course, the giant rumble followed by gunfire that approached from the south. Then they started to fight.

Chapter End Notes

*anticipates hateful comments* Sorry/not sorry, evil author is evil, etc. etc. :-D

Do you think it's Hydra? Will T’Challa get there in time? Will any of the suits they have
work without Jarvis? Will there be more smooching? ONLY TIME (or the next chapter) WILL TELL.
“OW OW OWOWOWOWOWO,” Peter breathed in and out through the pain.

“Two more seconds, Peter,” Shuri said quietly, as she dug out a bullet from his calf. She hadn’t had any localized anesthetic on hand that they knew would work with Peter’s enhanced DNA. The pair decided he could tough it out and she’d be quick, but it still wasn’t pleasant for either party.

Pepper stroked the back of Peter’s hand and reminded herself that if he saw her cry, he would probably panic more. She had to be calm. “Peter, dear, breathe with me.”

The swarm of Hydra uniforms had been on them before they could blink. Thankfully, so had the Wakandan troops. The squirmish wasn’t long or intense by Avenger standards, but it was – as Tony put it so succinctly – annoying. The town they had crash landed outside of – village? city? everyone was kind of unsure – had sustained damage, but Pepper was on the phone sorting out the repairs and aid as soon as they got on the royal jet.

“What the hell was that?” Tony said as they boarded the plane with T’Challa – sorry, Black Panther – and the other warriors. “Why did they just leave so quickly? And T’Challa, do not think we’re not going to talk about you being a man sized cat. And those claws, Jesus. I thought only Logan had those. That is something we share with the class.”

“It was not necessary information for you to have,” T’Challa calmly responded.

Before Tony could launch into a rant about how he deserves to know all things at all times, Steve replied, “We can discuss all of that later. Your Highness, can we assume that your border remains secure?”

“Absolutely. No one enters Wakanda without my permission.”

Steve seemed satisfied at that and shot Tony a look that reminded him to keep his mouth shut.

“There, bug boy, bullet out,” Shuri announced. “Now, I think you need at least four stitches –“

“Just gauze and some bandages, actually,” Pepper said. “His healing factor is insane.”

Shuri raised an eyebrow but nodded quickly. Satisfied that Peter was in the best hands, Pepper kissed his forehead and told him to sleep. Oh, Pepper, I think I’m not tired, I mean there is so much to explore and I have so many questions and did you see all those machines? No way I could sleep!

“I give him ten minutes,” Shuri whispered and grinned. “Also, Missus Pepper, Prince Nicholas asked to see you as soon as you were finished with Peter.” Pepper smiled at the young woman, and made her way out of the room. She heard raised voices down the hall and made a very educated guess it was Tony. With a deep sigh and the knowledge that she needed to deal with the yelling before she found Nick, she headed to one of the parlors in the palace.

“NO,” Tony roared as she walked through the door. “ABSOLUTELY NOT.”

“Anthony –“
“OH NO, STEVEN. No couple names when we’re fighting Avengers shit,” Tony growled. “Cap, Fury does not get to know where we are, absolutely not.”

“We gave him our word that when we left the country we would let him know,” Steve was in full Captain America mode. Pepper always noticed that his posture was just a little straighter.

“No, you gave him your word, and I don’t give a flying shit. I am not dealing with Nick Fury for at least the next two weeks. I am on a goddamn vacation with my family and Nick Fury is not part of that vacation,” his tone switched from angry to petulant quite quickly.

Pepper crossed the room and was about to speak before she noticed Nick and T’Challa were also in the room. The former spoke, “Tony, with all due respect, I believe international security trumps your vacation.”

“Hydra is a pain in my ass and has been a pain in Steve’s ass for a long fucking time and, I’m sure they’ll remain so for fucking ever because this seems to be our lives and their whole nine headed cutting off snake bullshit, but with all due respect, Your Highnessess, no. At least not until I figure out how they got Jarvis.”

“And here we are again,” Steve threw up his hands. “You cannot figure out Jarvis until we get back to New York and we cannot get back to New York until we tell Fury we even left because we’ll have to report Hydra and –“

T’Challa cut him off with a raised hand. “Tony, why is Jarvis so important?”

Tony looked slightly bewildered. “Because he is or was the smartest entity on the planet, an evolutionary AI who held almost all of the SI and Stark secrets but is also built with about fourteen different safe mode locks. I need to see where he shut himself down when they breached his systems so I can know what fucking mess we’re dealing with.”

“And you cannot do that here?” The king questioned.

“I don’t have a lab,” Tony shrugged.

“Ah, but my sister does,” T’Challa responded. “And she is always looking for a new challenge.”

As Tony and T’Challa got into the specifications of what he would need, Pepper took a seat next to Nick.

“Shuri said you needed to see me? I was going to check in on my knuckleheads and then find you.”

“As your lads require your constant attention, I do not blame you,” Nick smiled wryly, “but yes. I require your diplomatic attention immediately. Let’s head to my suite.”

Intrigued, and slightly alarmed, Pepper motioned to Steve that she was following Nick. Steve nodded and threw a side eye to Tony in a silent communication that Steve would stay with the engineer.

After some small talk and a short walk, the pair were in the sitting room in Nick’s guest suite.

“I’ll cut to the chase, Pepper,” Nick said. “There is chatter on our clandestine networks that Hydra has infiltrated the U.S. government.”

“There’s been chatter about that for years,” Pepper replied.

Nick nodded gravely. “Yes, I know that. My grandmother fought Hydra off after the Second World
War and our fear of their infiltration is one of the reasons we allied so strongly with Wakanda, but that is neither here nor there. What I have come across is that Hydra has planted evidence – strong but of course fabricated evidence – that Tony and Steve are both Hydra agents. The Winter Soldier has been given six more months to kill the two of them, or they will be revealed as agents.”

Nick’s tone of voice was so calm that he may as well have been telling her about the newest Man Booker prize winning novel he was reading. Pepper, however, struggled to breathe.

“Grandmama and I are in full agreement that Wessco will stand with Tony and Steve and do everything in our power to protect and defend them. I have three agents embedded in Hydra and have for several years. One is finally high enough to give us access to these kind of files, but you can appreciate that his safety is a priority and the whole operation is delicate.”

“Does T’Challa know?” Pepper heaved out through shallow breath.

Nick shook his head. “I felt you deserved to know first. I only received full confirmation of this with the arrival of my Intelligence Minister this morning. She is able and ready to brief whoever you so choose. My official diplomatic relationship with your company is you, and since this is not a threat against the United States, I wanted to honor that.”

“Plus, you’re a little bit of a coward and need me to keep Tony in his tree,” Pepper snarked as her breathing calmed slightly.

“Absolutely,” Nick confirmed with a grin. He held the silence as she caught her breath. “Pepper, you have my word that I will do everything in my power to protect you and your family. Not just because it is the right thing to do in the history of the world, but because I have annoyingly become fond of you all.”

Pepper smiled. “I’m going to go for a run, I need to clear my head a bit, and then I want to tell them. Can Minister Salisbury be ready by around 3?”

“She’ll want you to call her Amanda, I am sure, and yes. She’ll be at our disposal.”

“She should probably also be a part of whatever Shuri and Tony are doing, since I have no idea what they’re going to find in Jarvis’ old servers in the suits, but it may be helpful.”

“Probably, I’ll alert her to their plan,” Nick stood and pulled his friend into a hug. “See you in a little bit.”

“Well, we’ve had a day,” Steve said to Pepper later that night in such a tone of voice that she burst out laughing.

“I thought you super soldiers dealt with international conspiracies to ensure your demise on a regular basis?”

“Well, sure, but there’s usually more mustache twirling involved.”

“Fair.”

They readied themselves for bed, knowing that Tony would be many, many hours now that he and Shuri had started… whatever they were doing. Peter had joined them as well and the last time that Pepper had wandered down the three were speaking over each other and in half sentences and Pepper recognized the look on Tony’s face. She had reported back to Steve that it was time for the
non-geniuses to get some sleep and he happily obliged.

“How do you feel, really?” Pepper said quietly.

“I’m more interested in how you are,” Steve replied.

“You first,” she smiled.

He took a deep breath. “I think… I think I’m numb. I am so scared about Tony, but I also have complete faith that we’ll beat this. Hydra are evil, but they’re also sloppy and a little dumb and Tony has broken their codes and their plans before. I refuse to believe he won’t do it again. And with Shuri’s tech, creativity, and brain on this? I feel completely confident.”

“But…”

“But two things. One, he’s still freaking me out with this secret he won’t tell us and I’m worried it has something to do with this, but I know we’re not going to get his brain until Jarvis is solved. Which leads me to two, our Tony is at his most idiotic when he thinks he’s protecting his family. I’m petrified he’s going to find something that you and I won’t understand and he’ll make a decision for us and all of a sudden he’s dead.”

“Those are completely valid,” Pepper replied. “And I agree, but I offer a counterpoint.”

“Yeah?”

She smiled and thought back to earlier in the afternoon.

“Oh jumping Jesus on a pogo stick, you are fucking with me,” Tony responded as Minister Salisbury – Amanda – had briefed them.

Amanda hid her smile as she said, “I wish I was, sir.”

“Tony,” he waved her off. “Only sir to my twice dead butler.”

“Right, Tony,” she nodded briskly. “I am sadly not fucking with you or Captain Rogers. I trust my asset completely, plus I happen to know he was a fan of Captain America in his youth so this is personal to him. He informs me, however, that they have rewritten enough history to make it believable and thus we must act quickly.”

Steve looked puzzled. “So what do we do?”

“Well – Amanda began and Tony cut her off.

“First I fix Jarvis. Then we find the Metal Armed, Bucky-Eyed Annoyance and end this.”

“While I agree that he’d sacrifice himself for us far quicker than we’d ask him to, he’s also still a bit of a selfish bastard. He flew into that Chitauri hole because he calculated he’d come back out. He was furious with me about Extremis because he had already decided how to end it and thought I should have asked his permission before inserting myself. Sure, he’s an impulsive martyr, but man does he like this life we have. He has never been more settled than since we got Peter as part of our world and he is desperate enough for that love that I think he’ll hang on.”

Steve contemplated that. “So, you’re still betting on one of his crippling mental health issues, just a different one than I was.”

“Correct.”
“Bug boy and tin can,” Shuri motioned to them from her station. “I have found the way in.”

Peter, Tony, and Shuri had been knee deep in holograms and code for about two days. Using some of Karen’s tech from Peter’s suit and some of the basic coding for Jarvis that Tony had memorized and recreated, they had determined that Hydra had breached only Level Two of Jarvis’s security features. This meant that they had some proprietary designs, but nothing that broke Tony’s heart, and not really anything that put the team in immediate danger.

However, because Tony was a self-professed jackass, Hydra thought they had more than they actually had. Level Two came with a flood of information that looked true but was fabricated. Tony estimated it would take the Hydra tech team about a week to figure out they’d been had.

The current plan was to take this new Jarvis/Karen hybrid and turn it loose at SI so they could possibly get a feel for how damaged the Tower was. The problem was that Tony forgot a Level Two breach triggered a rotating code that needed to be hacked to be gotten through. The three of them had been trying for two hours, but they kept tripping over each other, technologically.

But now PG – for Princess Genius, as Tony has dubbed her – had solved their problem and they were into the Tower within seconds.

“Alright, Karen, can you hear me?” Tony said as he swiped through some screens faster than Peter could focus on them.

“Yes, Mr. Stark. Do you want me to give control to the new kid?”

“Sure, let’s call them Pauline.”

“Really?” Peter said.

Tony shrugged. “Pepper’s mom.”

“Pepper has a mom?”

“We have got to do some family history lessons,” Tony muttered. “Yup, and a dad, and a sister I can’t stand which is fine because she hates me. They all live in…”

“Mr. and Mrs. Potts have retired to Florida, Mr. Stark, and Emily Potts Mercer lives with her family in Maine,” a new voice supplied. “And if I may, Ms. Potts may find my name confusing, so I request a change.”

“Good point, New AI,” Tony said. “Shuri! You get the honor.”


“Are you naming people on your playlist?”

“I didn’t think you’d want Beyoncé or Janelle,” Shuri shrugged.

“As in Monáe?” Peter perked up. “MJ loves her.”

“Janelle it is,” Tony said. “See, PG, we are multicultural in Team Avengers.”

Shuri snorted.
“Right, Janelle! Hello!” Tony continued.

“Hello, Mr. Stark. Do you prefer sir? I have programming that declares you do.”

“You know, that’s a little fresh and your voice is wrong so Tony is fine, but thanks for checking.”

“As you wish, Tony.”

Tony glared at Peter. “You taught her Princess Bride didn’t you.”

“Oh, Pepper and I taught it to Jarvis, must have just copied over,” Peter replied innocently, not making eye contact.


Janelle calmly went floor by floor, giving updates on security cameras – some compromised, some broken, some just fine – and personnel clearances, giving them some idea of what a mess was waiting for them back in New York.

As Tony listened, and nibbled on his cuticles, his brain whirred.

So, Jarvis is dead, I need to come to grips with that. There’s something of him left in the lockbox in the lab, I’m sure, and I can maybe marry him, Karen, and Janelle, and take some of that new thing I’ve been playing with the nanoenergy, but… Yeah. Need to deal with Jarvis as I know him being gone. Okay. So, that’s going to be something I’m putting in a tiny box and not dealing with.

Pressing problem. I needed Jarvis to help me tell Steve about Bucky. That’s not happening. So, gotta do it myself. Okay, so I’ll arrange for Shuri to keep the kid occupied – they’re hitting it off beautifully – and do it tomorrow. Band-aid ripped off, I can’t wait anymore, this is killing me and I know Pep and Stevo are tracking I’m being fucking weird.

Right, also, make a note to tell Dr. Widmeyer that for the first fucking time in my life, I’m faced with a human problem and a tech problem and I’m choosing to solve the human one first. Look at me, I’m adulting.

Chapter End Notes

I felt like someone named Pauline would name her kid Virginia, and if you were Pepper’s sister, wouldn’t you hate Tony?

Sorry this update took a wee bit - I'm trying to get you guys this thing as quickly as the muse will allow. Orphaned FanFic is a Circle of Hell in my book, so I promise this will finish!
“Okay, if I don’t do this literally right now, it’s not gonna get done.”

The sun was just rising over Wakanda and Steve, Tony, and Pepper were on a palace veranda enjoying the view. Tony had managed about two hours of sleep after Janelle did her full analysis and then told Shuri and Peter to have fun for the day with Shuri’s tech and he’d see them for dinner. He stopped by the kitchens for coffee and food items – hard conversations were always better when people had something to do with their hands – and made his way to the suite he was sharing with his partners.

Pepper sipped her coffee and looked at Tony. “Did everything with the New Jarvis go that badly?”

“What?” Tony looked confused. “Oh no, everything’s fine, well not really fine but manageable because I’m smarter than Hydra, and her name is Janelle and she’s not the new Jarvis, she’s the portable Jarvis because I realized when I started tinkering with Karen that having one system is a liability so we’re going to have several interconnected systems from now on, actually Steve, I’m going to put something in your coms, I think—“

Pepper looked at Steve. “I’m so glad he has given lady names to the AIs, because it’s not like when he talks about tinkering with them I get PTSD or anything.”

Steve chuckled as Tony interrupted. “I didn’t name them, the kids did.”

“The kids?” Steve enquired.

“Peter named Karen and Shuri named Janelle. Please, I’m the cool dad. I let them name things.”

“You won’t let Peter get a dog at the Tower,” Pepper pointed out.

“I built him a self-evolving AI system he got to name!”

“Kid wants a dog, dear,” Pepper smiled.

Tony grumbled. “Fine, when we get home he get a dog.”

“Back to why you brought us pastries and coffee and shuffled us onto the deck,” Steve said.

“Veranda, dear. Us posh folks call them verandas,” Tony said grandly, taking a seat at the table.

“Well, us knobs from Brooklyn call them decks. We’re on a deck for a reason, what is it?”

Tony opened his mouth and closed it a few times. Then he ran his fingers through his hair. Then he leapt up and began to pace.

Then Steve lost patience. “Anthony.”

“Fine, I know who the Winter Soldier is.”

Both Steve and Pepper froze as Tony stopped pacing.
“It’s why I don’t want Fury here – I know I overreacted the other day, babe, and I’m sorry – because we cannot trust SHIELD with this, we can’t trust anyone with this. I think we’ll need T’Challa and probably Nick and definitely the rest of our team, but anyone else? Not until we fix it.”

“What do you mean fix it?” Steve swallowed around his shock.

“Right, let me start at the beginning,” Tony said. “Jarvis was supposed to help with this part, and Dr. Widmeyer and I planned it pretty carefully, but that’s gone to shit, so I’m winging it, so bear with me.”

Both nodded, and Tony noticed their eyes were glued on him, but that they had started to hold hands.

“You guys know the boxes were hard, you know I learned some stuff and saw some stuff. But nothing was more difficult to learn than what I need to tell you today. Nothing. Right, so, Howard was convinced the Winter Solider was one person and not a legendary figure or a branding exercise or what not. Sometime in the 50s, his journals make it seem like it was around the time he met Ma, he was really missing his pal Captain America.

“He self-funded a few expeditions to find you, babe, but he couldn’t get the coordinates right. What he did find, however, were a few seemingly abandoned Hydra bases that he pilfered some files from. He discovered they had used some bastardized version of Rebirth on this guy – who is American, by the way – and brainwashed him to fuck.

“Like a dog with a damn bone, my old man was, and so he kept digging. He got Aunt Peggy in on it and I think at the beginning they may have thought it was you, Stevo, because some of their letters back and forth are fucking frantic. But it never made sense to them because they couldn’t figure out why Hydra would have you go through Rebirth again.

“The answer, of course, is that they didn’t, but between their notes and some other digging I did, they did cryofreeze the bastard a lot between missions and as part of his programming. They took a man and turned him into a machine, right down to the fucking arm, which I read the tech for, by the way, and disabling it is not going to be difficult.”

Tony took a breath and a long sip of his coffee. “You guys good?”

“Really fucking confused, actually, but I trust you,” Pepper replied. “Go on.”

“Okay, so they’ve been using this dude on and off since about 1945 from what I can tell. When they don’t need him, they freeze him. In past conversations with Nat, she figures this guy is responsible for at least sixty high profile kills, including my parents.”

“Your parents died in a car crash,” Steve said slowly.

“Yeah, no,” Tony smiled sadly. “There’s a video. Aunt Peggy had it transferred to DVD. The Winter Solider murdered Howard and Maria and was looking for me, but Howard lied about where I was.”

Steve’s free hand was in a tight fist and he growled, “I will end him.”

“Oh wait, it gets so much worse,” Tony said.

“How?”

“It’s… it’s Bucky. You were right.”
“What’s Bucky?”

“The Winter Soldier is your best friend, Steve, I’m so sorry,” Tony’s voice cracked. “They kidnapped him and –”

“You’re telling me Bucky killed your parents and at least 58 other people,” Steve’s voice was incredulous. “My Bucky? The guy who was only okay going to war, really, because the wages would feed his family, is a world class assassin who has a metal arm and a Russian accent? No. Someone is fucking with you, babe. Absolutely not.”

Pepper looked quickly between the two men. “You’re not fucking with us, Tony. And no one is fucking with you, are they.” It was a statement and not a question.

“God, you guys, do I wish I was,” Tony laughed through the tears that were quickly forming. “I have never been both so grateful and so angry that Aunt Peggy was fluent in Russian. She translated every last bit of those fucking files. Plus, like I said, there’s a DVD. And it’s Bucky on that video.”

“You watched your parents die,” Pepper said in horror. “Tony, ohmygod, why didn’t you get one of us?”

“I have to see it,” Steve said, cutting her off. “I have to-”

“I figured you would,” Tony replied and went to go get a StarkPad. Handing it to Steve, he said, “I’m going to go shower. I can’t hear it any more, it’s already the soundtrack of my nightmares. Take your time.”

Pepper has no idea how long she sat on that veranda, with the sun streaming down on them, and the sounds of wildlife waking up as their soundtrack. Steve’s hand was crushing hers, but you could not have paid her money to remove it. The tablet was in his other hand and she saw Steve go to hit play about five times and stop himself each time.

“Tony is never wrong, is he,” Steve said quietly.

“He’s wrong a lot,” Pepper corrected. “But I really don’t think he is on this, love.”

“He’d do anything in the world to spare me from this,” Steve continued.

“He’s probably committing some international crime right now that he didn’t turn this over to Fury immediately,” Pepper commented.

“If it’s Bucky –”

“That changes nothing you had with him, none of your memories,” Pepper interrupted. “You heard Tony, Hydra brainwashed him for decades. Your Bucky would never, and so the only logical conclusion is that the Winter Soldier is simply using Bucky’s body.”

“But he used Bucky’s body to kill the Starks and he’s going to try to use it to kill me and Tony,” Steve said.

“We couldn’t stop the first,” Pepper squeezed his hand. “But you bet your fucking ass we’re stopping the second.”

They sat for a few more moments, until finally Steve said, “I’m ready.”

As he hit play, his stomach dropped to his knees. The urge to vomit was so strong that he only barely
held it back before he rushed inside and found a bin. As he continued to heave the contents of his stomach and felt the sting of tears threaten to flood, he knew he had to get out of the palace.

He looked back to the veranda with wide eyes to Pepper. “I’m going for a run. Tell him I’ll be back, but right now, I need to move.”

Pepper nodded and watched him gather his shoes and leave the suite. Historically, when Steve needed to run for his emotions, it was about two or three hours. She went back out on the veranda and sipped coffee slowly.

_Barnes isn’t dead. Barnes killed Howard. And Maria. No, not Barnes. The Winter Soldier. Steve’s best friend was kidnapped by Hydra. Steve thought he was all alone in the world and he’s not but he is and why can we not catch a break._

She started wiping the tears that had spilled when she heard Tony padding back onto the balcony behind her. “He needed to run.”

“I figured,” Tony whispered. They were quiet for a few moments. “Was I right to tell him?”

“Yes, Tony, emphatically yes,” Pepper said. “There are so many pieces of this we needed to know, no matter how painful for you and for us and for him and however this changes everything.”

“We’re, like, 2 years into this thing, this family, and I can’t lose it, Pep,” Tony says softly.

“We won’t,” Pepper replied firmly. “Because I have never known you to stop. It is the greatest failure of my life in some ways – that I’ve never gotten you to stop and to realize how loved you are just as you are and you don’t have to keep fixing all of us – but we will survive anything because we already have.”

“I just think that’s naive, Pep. He is going to leave,” Tony was emphatic.

“I really don’t think so, especially since I’m sure the next conversation is this whole plan you’ve put together about how we’re going to find and free Bucky, but even if you’re right, _even if_ the lies you’re telling yourself turn out to be true, you’re forgetting one key element to who he is.”

“What.”

“Just like his shield, he will always come back home.”

He smiled at her and reached for her hand, kissing the back of it before pulling her onto his lap. One of the beauties of being loved for _so long_ by someone so good was that she _knew_ him. Confirming just that instinct, she whispered, “You just let me know when you need to talk about what Howard did on that video.”

He smiled through the tears. “Yup.”

“What’s next?”

He sighed deeply. “I’m going to go tell Nat.”

“Nat? Why?”

“Well, that’s another piece of the files. He trained her in the Red Room.”

“Like I said, it gets so much worse.”

“I know we’ve been joking about needing a team song, but I think I’m nominating Florence and the Machine. That one with ‘it’s always darkest before the dawn’ because I think we need the reminder,” Pepper mused.

“We all get walk-on music, like we’re playing for the Dodgers. You take Florence, I’ll keep ‘Back in Black’.”

“What’s Steve’s?”

“Oh, come on! He came with one built in!”

“But he hates ‘Star Spangled Man’!”

Tony’s eyebrows wiggled manically. “Exactly.”

She teasingly smacked him before silence settled again.

“Go, tell Nat before Steve comes back,” Pepper whispered. Tony nodded.

There were a lot of times in Natasha Romanov’s life that she was grateful for her training. That she knew how to regulate her pulse, how to keep a completely blank face, how to read people, how to stay calm in a crisis. Rarely had she been more grateful for it then that morning in Wakanda.

“So, to recap,” she breathed. “My first boyfriend is also Steve’s best friend, but not really, because he was brainwashed into a mindless Super Solider except he wasn’t mindless when I knew him.”

“Definitely missed the boyfriend part the first time around,” Tony said. “But the rest checks out.”

Nat let out an angry monologue in Russian, and ended it by quietly remarking, “fuck.”

“Correct.”

Nat sighed. “I’m assuming that you’ve already told Steve and Pepper.”

“Yeah, bit that bullet this morning.”

“So what’s next?”

“That’s it? No more discussion?”

“When in our entire relationship have we had a heart-to-heart?”

“So you’re off to see Pepper?”

“Immediately, yes, but you’re the puppet master here, pal, so what’s next?”

“This is where my plan gets murky,” Tony confessed.

“Murky.”

“I planned telling you, and then I know we need to catch him and deprogram him, but the in-between is fuzzy.”
Nat nodded thoughtfully. “So, half-cocked but full of heart? On brand for you, Stark.”

He flipped her off, but it was done with affection.

“I think,” Nat started, “that your next step is T’Challa for two reasons. One, he’s been tracking the Winter Soldier, too—“

“How do you know that?”

“Please don’t insult me,” Nat scoffed. “And two, Shuri has been experimenting with using her tech to alter brain chemistry for drug addicts. I wonder if she could shift to deprogramming or whatever.”

“Interesting,” Tony mused. “Okay, I’ll go talk to PG, you go talk to Pepper, and keep an eye out for Super Soldier. He’s trying to out run his pain.”

Over the next several hours, Tony clued the Wessco administration into what was happening, as well as T’Challa and his staff. Shuri looked delighted at the prospect of a new puzzle and went off to her lab immediately, calling for the adults to send Peter when they could.

Pepper made the executive decision to tell Peter herself, with support from Nat.

“So, Uncle Steve’s best friend got stolen and is now a different person?”

“Pretty much,” Nat confirmed. “The same people did that to me, kid, but I got out faster.”

“You were stolen too?”

Nat nodded. “There are two ways to get people to do your bidding, Peter. You can have a just cause people actually believe in, or you can crave power so much you brainwash people into helping you. Hydra will always, always be in that second category. They’re evil, small people who are hellbent on destroying the world and they’ve nearly succeeded.”

“But they haven’t,” Peter said resolutely, his hands clenching and unclenching.

Pepper smiled. “And they never will.”

Steve was gone all day. There were reports of him wandering through the market after his run, and security footage captured him eating with some school children and kicking a ball around with them. Tony tried to pretend he wasn’t a nervous wreck, but Pepper knew better. When he reappeared, he went straight for the shower, and then announced, “I’m ready. Let’s plan.”

Tony looked surprised. “We don’t have to rush into anything, babe.”

Steve shook his head. “You’re, what, probably on the hook for conspiracy at the moment since you are withholding SHIELD files, and Bucky is trapped in that monster’s brain.”

“Do you want to talk about – “

“I can’t,” Steve cut Pepper off. “I just can’t. I’ll have to, I know, and eventually, I will, but right now let’s just make a plan.”

Accepting this, Tony drew out his StarkPad and opened a few holograms.

“The plan is, as you can imagine, complicated and clandestine.” Tony pulled up a few photos. “I
learned today that T’Challa has been tracking the soldier since his father died, and when we combine that with Nick’s intel that he’s been sent to kill both of us, here’s what we know.

“His last known location was New York, about two days after we left. He was trying duck into a café when he got caught up in a Puerto Rican pride parade and was stuck in one place long enough that CCTV grabbed him. Interpol has been put on alert, but the soldier disappeared after that. Nick has him in Romania, which is where the largest Hydra base is.

“He is fluent in Russian, Mandarin, Spanish, Farsi, French, and, randomly, Bantu, which a lot of people here speak, so T’Challa has been on extra alert thinking the soldier is planning a breach. He confirmed active from 1945 to now, but we knew that. Nat tells us he was in the Red Room with her for most of her training and he was actually the last Hydra agent she had contact with before she fled.”

“Nat knows him?” Steve was surprised.

“Nat knew the soldier,” Tony corrected.

“They were together,” Pepper supplied. “I talked to her for a while today. She’s pretty sure they were supposed to get engaged and be like the new face of Hydra or something, but she escaped when he was on a pretty long mission and she hasn’t seen him in 10 years. When we showed her pictures of Bucky, she said it’s definitely him.”

“God, and I thought waking up was going to be the biggest mind fuck of my life,” Steve sighed. “Carry on.”

“Wessco is offering me asylum, or all of us actually, if we ever need it, so we’ll keep that in our back pocket. According to Nick, the soldier has until February 25, 2015 to kill you and me, babe, or we get exposed as secret agents.” Tony replied.

“What’s with the date?” Steve inquired. “Does Nat know?”

“It’s someone’s birthday, is all she remembers. She’s done a lot of work to block those memories,” Pepper remarked.

Steve nodded and Tony continued. “So, we’re going to hang here for a few more weeks because we are on vacation and it is the safest place in the world for us. If the solider tries to get in here, T’Challa is on alert and this palace is crawling with women who can kill me with their toe, so I’m comfortable with all of us here. In the meantime, I’ve paged Thor and Bruce and Clint and asked them to join us next week and we’ll tell them everything then. This is gonna be a team effort and I figure we’ll come up with the next phase of the plan then.

“While we’re here, I’m also setting up shop in Shuri’s lab and rebuilding the suits. Yes, Pepper, even the one we both pretend you don’t know about,” Tony rolled his eyes as Pepper let out a squeal of joy.

“I just gave Nick’s people a fuck ton of cash and some tech to root out all the false intelligence Hydra has against us, so I figure they’ll have that all sorted by the time Pete heads to school in three weeks, but I’m not taking any chances.”

“God, he goes to high school in three weeks,” Pepper sighed.

“Finally, the only thing that Dr. Widmeyer made me promise is that we would protect this time as a family as best we can. He also told me to tell you that we should only refer to the solider when talking about the actions taken since 1945 and to Bucky when talking about Steve’s… person,”
Tony fidgeted on the last word, and Pepper knew he meant it in the *Grey’s Anatomy* sense and her heart clenched.

“So,” Tony continued, “for the next week, we are going to let the Wakandans continue to track the soldier, and our family is going to go on safari and eat food I can’t pronounce and the three of us are going to be naked a lot while the kid is occupied building robots with Princess Wunderkind—“

“Her name’s evolved?” That was from Pepper.

“- and I am going to get a family vacation I enjoy for the first time in my fucking life, so help me God,” Tony finished.

“Yes, dear,” Steve could barely hide his grin.

“Good,” Tony nodded. “Now let’s go find out what passes for ice cream in this joint.”

Chapter End Notes

For the non-Grey’s familiar among us, ”person” in that parlance means the person closest to you no matter what. As Cristina says on that show, ”She is my person. If I killed someone she is the one that would help me drag the corps across the floor. She is my person.” So, I think no matter what else Bucky and Steve are to each other, they are certainly that.

Again, thanks for comments, etc. I can't lie - I write faster when I know people are reading.
"I swear to Jehovah and all his saints that SOMEWHERE IN THIS BUILDING IS MY TALENT," Kerry yelled at her computer.

Yeah, if she was quoting Toby Zeigler, she knew it was bad.

Frustrated with her continued writers block – this article was not going to write itself – she heaved up from the computer, grabbed her phone off its charger, and wandered to the kitchen for another – probably tenth? – cup of coffee.

“Oh! Text from Pep!”

*I’m thinking of forcing Tony to watch My Fair Lady. I know he’d hate it, but Steve might love it. Peter and Nat, though, not so sure. Thoughts?*

Kerry temporarily froze. Around the beginning of their friendship, Tony had sat Kerry down and explained all of the various ways that governments and bad guys used regular technology to spy on people. He gave her all of this super high tech stuff, but they all quickly realized that Kerry carrying two phones – with one of them being an off-the-market StarkPhone – was drawing far too much attention. So a system of codes was devised.

If there was an emergency, someone texted Kerry something about a musical. The names included in the text indicated who the emergency concerned. If there were any numbers, it was how quickly they needed to speak to her. Once Kerry texted back, she’d activate the secure hologram on the StarkPad and get filled in.

*I think that’s a terrible idea, but still entertaining.* She checked her watch and calculated Wakanda time. *Please put me on Skype for that.*

‘Skype’ meant she was ready immediately. ‘FaceTime’ meant 10 minutes so she could get somewhere secure.

Coffee forgotten, Kerry nearly ran the ten steps back to her office and entered the series of codes she needed. Within seconds, Pepper was before her.

“Girl, thank you for saving me from this article. What is going on?”

“Are you still on that one for the British journal?”

“Yes, and it is going slower than if I walked my damn self to Britain. But enough about me. Apartment is empty and I activated the sound proofing. What the fuck is happening on your damn vacation?!”

Pepper sighed deeply and Kerry could see the bags under her eyes. As Pepper began to explain, Kerry began to cry, which set Pepper off and pretty soon they were both talking through streams of tears.

“So, I am worried about so many things that I can’t even keep them straight any more!” Pepper concluded.
“Do you want me to come? I’m sure I can get a commercial flight to Nairobi for tonight. Angie is away at a conference anyway, so honestly, get me out of Brooklyn. My AC is on the fritz again and I think Dante is reclassifying his circles of hell.”

“Oh, could you? Are you serious? But not tonight. It’s family time for two more days, but Clint and Bruce and Thor are all arriving on Sunday night and then it’s going to be strategy time and I could definitely use your help distracting Peter.”

“Oh, how is our wee bug boy?”

“Still hates it when we all call him that,” Pepper smiled. “But otherwise, I don’t know if there is a more resilient human on the planet than our Peter.”

“You know I want to write about him,” Kerry replied.

“I know,” Pepper smiled. “Are you sure you want to schlep all the way to Wakanda?”

“Hm, let me see,” Kerry tapped her chin in fake thought. “It’s a country so secretive it’s basically a rumor, on a continent I’ve never gotten to visit, but you’re personal pals with the King. Can’t imagine why that would interest this great-granddaughter of Ghanaian slaves. Plus, you know, best friend duties and all that.”

“Do you want me to connect you through Accra? I’m sure we can–“

Kerry held up a hand. “This trip is about you, but if you are offering, I will let you spend Stark money to fly me and Angie to Ghana at a later date for sure. Besides, I need hella vaccines for Ghana and none for Wakanda, and you know how I feel about needles. Give your girl a minute.”

Pepper chuckled. “Okay, looking at Clint and Bruce’s flights, it would work best for the Wakandans if you met them in Amsterdam. Can you go grab your passport and I’ll book your ticket?”

“Pepper, I can –“

“Shut up, don’t be an idiot. And prepare yourself, Tony will want to fly you first class and he’ll hear no protests, so protest to Angie all you want.”

“I do not need –“

“First class is rarely about need, but Tony needs to take care of people right now, so please let him do it with you, too.”

“Just Tony?”

Pepper bit her bottom lip and looked sideways, not responding.

“Fine, let me get the fucking passport,” Kerry said.

“Your Highness, what do you call that one?!” Peter asked T’Challa as he pointed to a deer-esque creature.

“Peter, we have discussed this –“

“Give it up, T,” Tony said. “He still calls me Mr. Stark sometimes. Polite and super sticky, that’s our kid.”
Pepper caught how Peter both blushed and preened at being called Tony’s ‘kid’ and bit back a smile herself.

“Fine, Peter, that is an antelope.”

“Oh, we have those at zoos,” Peter looked disappointed.

“Ah, but do you have herds of them?”

“No, we have cages of them.”

“Well, you must see a herd!” T’Challa gave directions to the driver and they took an abrupt turn down a dirt road.

It was the last full ‘Tower Family’ day before the Avengers arrived to sort out what was going to happen. The Wessco delegation – save Nick – had departed that morning and T’Challa had informed the Americans had cleared some of his schedule to take them on a safari drive through the wildlands.

It had been – in all honesty – an absolutely magical week, all things considered. The pall cast by the happenings in the rest of their lives was never far from anyone’s mind or mood, but the foursome had created some truly magical memories. If the eavesdropping the parents conducted on Peter’s conversations with MJ and May were any indication, they’d also cemented Peter’s future as a robotics engineer.

He and Shuri had become nearly inseparable – as Tony had predicted they would be. Steve went on long training sessions with the Dora Miljae and would return to their suite exhausted and exhilarated all the same time. Pepper and Nakia and Nat swapped stories about being women in men’s worlds and training techniques as Nat and Nakia helped Pepper get used to her new suit.

If Pepper was honest with herself, the moment Tony presented her with her own iron suit was the highlight of the trip.

“It’s blue and gold,” she whispered.

*It was just the two of them in the lab Tony had commandeered for himself. He had already given everyone else their updated tech with the new AIs baked in and even designed some new toys for Shuri and Nakia to keep developing.*

*But Pepper’s suit? This was just them.*

“You told me it had to be,” Tony whispered, nervously shuffling his feet. He had never been so nervous presenting anyone with anything.

“What’s it called?”

“I didn’t-“

Pepper rolled her eyes. “Janelle, what did he tell you to call this?”

“Rescue, Ms. Potts. He calls it Rescue.”

“You can change it though, I mean, it’s only a working title, and I know you wanted Phoenix but Logan already has one of those and I was afraid people would get confused like you were inferior to her, which you are not, or copying her and the truth of the matter is, Pep, you rescue me. If I think about why I need you on the team and why I built this and why – it’s because you’ve been rescuing
me from myself and—"

He was cut off with the press of her lips onto his, and he tasted the salt of her tears as they stood for several minutes.

“You know how we’re talking about getting married?”

“Yes, which I have wanted to do for many—“

“Less words, Tony. This is a time for less words.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“No proposal will top this. No ring will, no moment more… so get something from Zales and we can call it a day. Don’t even try.”

The moments where Pepper got to try out her suit – seeing Peter’s grin, Tony’s fearfully proud face, Steve’s slight awe, T’Challa’s respect – also ranked up there.

All magical moments must come to an end, however, and Pepper had one last piece of family business to address before the team (and Kerry) arrived that night. Back at the palace after the safari, and a lunch of something cooked over an open fire that Peter swore was the best thing he had eaten ever and the adults pointed out he said that at every meal – Pepper went to find Tony.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said, when she found him in the kitchens, making more coffee.

“A dangerous pastime,” he intoned.

“I know,” she smiled back. Little known secret, Tony Stark was a sucker for Disney movies.

“What’s up?” He seamlessly fixed her a coffee as well as she observed how he moved. He looked… rested. It’s an unfamiliar look for him, but one she loves.

“I’m not sure we should live in the Tower anymore,” she began and held up a hand to prevent him from interrupting. “Hear me out. It’s going to cost money and time to get it back up to spec in terms of tech and it also makes us sitting ducks in the middle of midtown. Our staff is getting tired of having all the extra security that comes with us living there and the barrage of attacks from Doom and everyone, and I know those would stop if we moved. No one wants to attack SI, really, they all want to attack you and Steve.”

“Th...
“Peter and MJ have him picked out from a shelter by her house and they have names, Tony, you cannot back out.”

He grumbled and indicated she should continue. “It sure sounds like you have a place in mind.”

She smiled and slid her StarkPad across the table.

“This is Stark Mansion.”

“Hmhm.”

“This must be an old picture, because the mansion is in ruins since my parents died,” he replied.

“When was this taken?”

“Yesterday.”

Tony stared her down. “You’ve been working Pepper magic, haven’t you.”

“You put me in charge.”

“God help and forgive me, I did. What did you do?”

“After Mandarin –“

“- that long?”

“Well, you let a twenty-four room historically registered mansion go to ruin, Tony, so it took a hot minute to fix it.”

“It’s historically registered?”

“Oh, from the beginning,” Pepper smiled patiently. “After Mandarin, I decided to take a serious look at your personal real estate holdings versus the ones that SI held and noticed that some changes had to be made. I had to fix some of the tax codes and muck around there, and with that, I sold most of your personal stuff to the company and to others since you weren’t using them. Did you know you had three ski chalets?”

“I did?”

“You don’t ski.”

“No, I fucking hate being sweaty and cold at the same time.”

“And yet-“

“So, you got rid of all the shit I bought when I was drunk once.”

“Yup.”

“So what do I still own?”

“Stark Mansion, the Fifth Avenue place, the cabin in Canada we bought together, and the townhouse in London.”

“You kept London?”

“Kerry and I like to see shows. And Meghan needs somewhere to stay and the press haven’t found
your house yet.”

“Okay, sure. And that cabin was supposed to be in your name.”

“It’s in both of our names.”

“So I’m down from-“

“You owned fifteen properties, and you’re down to four. It’s much more manageable,” she replied. “I had inspections done on all of them, and that’s how I discovered Stark Mansion was actually not legally allowed to crumble to ruin and some local historic society had been making noise for a while trying to get you to restore it.”

“Which I clearly ignored,” Tony said.

“Well, I did too,” Pepper confessed. “A lot of them were sent when I was still your PA, and I just figured they were from nut jobs.”

“Pepper Potts made an error,” Tony gasped in fake horror.

“Fuck off,” Pepper replied. “Anyway, I’ve fixed it now. So the outside is restored to the original settings – it’s actually three different styles, which I know you don’t care about but Steve will love sketching – and the inside is completely finished. I’ve furnished all of the main living areas, but have left the bedrooms empty, and it’s all ready for your crazy tech upgrades.”

“So you’re saying we should move there?”

Pepper nodded. “You’ve said you never spent much time there, so it shouldn’t be a triggering thing, and New York makes me feel old.”

“We are old,” Tony replied, grinning at her, as she rolled her eyes.

“So, yes?”

Tony nodded. “You changed the master suite, right?”

Pepper threw him a look. “You think I want to fuck in the room your parents did?”

“Good woman.”

-----------------------------------------------

“What are they talking about so feverishly?” Steve asked Pepper as he motioned to Nakia and Kerry.

“The African diaspora,” Pepper replied. “It’s all they’ve been talking about since Kerry got here.”

“The what?”

“Diaspora means people who are from one place but moved to another, when we refer to them in a large group. Like your mom was part of the Irish diaspora.”

“Got it. Why are they talking about it?”

“Because Kerry is a little taken aback that Wakanda hasn’t used their wealth to help people and has been hoarding it instead, and Nakia seems to agree with her, and I think they’re strategizing how to get T’Challa to see their point.”
“So we stay away?”

“So, Captain, you believe our plan is solid?” Thor boomed as he interrupted them.

Steve nodded briskly. “It’s the best one we’ve got.”

“Half cocked and full of heart,” Tony called. “Nat said that’s my brand.”

Nat rolled her eyes.

While Steve hated to admit it, he was not good at recon or spy craft. Tracking down Bucky was not going to be helped by a giant man wearing an American flag, so he had consented to letting Clint and Nat take the lead, with Nick and T’Challa providing both tactical and intelligence support.

They were planning on telling Fury as soon as they got back, but Tony had his legal team verify that he was actually the rightful owner of all of Howard’s notes so that he wouldn’t be forced to turn them over. Peggy’s proved more complicated, but once Sharon Carter understood what was happening, she quickly signed Peggy’s files over to Tony.

Thor was going to head back to Asgard, with the understanding that he’d be on alert. He had confided to Steve that all was not well between him and Jane and that was why he had been avoiding Midgard recently.

Bruce agreed to move back to New York and into the Mansion. He had been studying botany while in India and wanted to continue that track, so Pepper had gotten to work ordering the construction of a greenhouse.

As for Peter, their move to the Mansion affected him the most. After round and round discussions about where Peter would live during the school week, should they get some sort of formal custody something, would he still be able to stay when May had overnights, should they build Steve a flying suit so he could do school runs, they settled on discussing it all with May when they got back.

According to Google, it was only 45 minutes by car from the school to the Mansion, so not the worst, but not the best, and certainly not what they were used to.

However, even with all those obstacles, no one disagreed that getting Peter out of the Tower was best for his safety – except for Peter. The idea that Hydra had breached Jarvis was terrifying and it also meant they were probably aware of Peter’s relationship to Tony and therefore his potential as a bargaining chip. Pepper was particularly worried that Peter didn’t quite grasp that point.

“Aunt Pepper, come on, no one knows Spider-Man is me.”

“Peter, Hydra broke into Jarvis, I’m not sure how much clearer I can make that this is a new ballgame.”

“I’ll be careful!”

“Yes, because that’s been your track record so far,” Pepper countered. “I know you think I’m worried over nothing, I know. But I’m not and I need you to trust me to be the adult here.”

She glanced over at him from her spot on the couch with Steve and worried her bottom lip.

“Pep,” Steve said softly, “he’s going to be fine.”
“He’s a 13-year-old boy with super powers, Steven, of course he’s not going to be fine.”

Steve chuckled. “He’s a 13-year-old boy with super powers with about ten parents who are all obsessed with his safety. I only had Bucky and no powers and I got out okay.”

Pepper kissed him. “You got out great.”

They settled into silence, both preferring to observe the festivities then control them, as their boyfriend often did. Nat and Peter were playing some sort of hand slap game Peter had taught them, Clint was explaining his bow to T’Challa, and Tony was futzing on his phone. Bruce had declared himself “extroverted out” several hours previous and gone to bed.

Suddenly, Tony dropped the phone back in his pocket, and clapped his hands. “Okay, friends, neighbors, super heroes, and royalty,” he said with head nods to T’Challa and Nick, the latter of whom rolled his eyes. “Pepper has trained me well, so I know I gotta thank T’Challa for hosting this little summit and, you know, everything. Nick, I’m sure we’ll be using those asylum privileges sooner rather than later, so sorry/not sorry, buddy.”

“Unauthorized use of youth lingo!” Steve called.

“It’s only unauthorized for you, Uncle Steve,” Peter corrected.

The room laughed as Steve threw a pillow at Peter, who caught it with a web and a grin.

“Coulson just alerted me that Fury knows we are all together and out of the country without his knowledge, and I can only spin the ‘I brought the Avengers on vacation’ thing so far, so we need to shut this show down.”

“How?” came from several different corners.

“He went to the Tower,” Tony said, “and BrokenJarvis is broken so Fury got access to the private floors.” He shrugged. “Janelle can only do so much, and Coulson said right now it’s contained. So let’s get home.”

Several things awaited the team when they returned.

First, a very, well, furious Nick Fury. Second, a note from May calling a Tower Family meeting as soon as they resettled and a request to keep Peter with them until he started school.

“Well, that’s really fucking odd,” Tony said as he showed the text to Pepper and Steve when they landed.

“Something is wrong,” Pepper said. “Very, very wrong.”

“Agreed.”

Third, far more physical destruction than Janelle had warned them about.

“I need to give her more analytical power. So far she just answers questions asked to her, I need her to anticipate curiosity,” Tony said as he pulled up her coding, standing in the middle of what once was his living room.

Fury, of course, was the most immediate. He was sitting in the main living space, nearly growling at the team as they assembled.
“Peter, honey, why don’t we head out to take Kerry back home,” Pepper said.

The boy looked like he was going to protest, but one patented Captain America look from Steve stopped him. “Yes, ma’am.”

Once all civilians were clear of the area, Tony opened his mouth to talk. Fury held up his hand. “My fucking turn, nitwits. Sit.”

They did, gathering various chairs from around the suite.

“I know Jarvis is fucked, but so is SHIELD.”

“What?” Tony said. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Well, while you were all gone without authorization,” Fury glared at Tony, “Coulson and Hill started noticing a few patterns in the tech they didn’t like. It happened at the same time we realized Jarvis was offline and we couldn’t use him to contact you, but then that new AI started talking to us a few days later.”

“Janelle,” Tony supplied helpfully and Steve nearly rolled his eyes. This was not the time to interrupt Fury.

“Right,” Fury said, cuttingly. “Janelle. She told me. She detected Russian on the system, and I thought it was the Winter Soldier trying to hack in – I know about Boston, Cap, so don’t try – but what we eventually discovered is worse. Hydra didn’t get to us through Jarvis, Hydra got to Jarvis through us. SHIELD has been compromised.”

It took a few moments for that to fully sink in for everyone around the table.

“Fuck,” Clint said.

“You know, 2014 can fucking do one,” Tony said the next morning to Pepper and Steve. Since the Tower was clearly unsafe, and Tony wasn’t sure if any of his houses with Jarvis in them were, he got everyone rooms at the Ritz down in the Battery. He was now sipping his coffee and staring at the Statue of Liberty.

“And it is only August,” Pepper lamented.

“How quick can we be in the Mansion?” Steve asked.

“There are no beds, but I had electricity and water and everything hooked up while we were in Wakanda, so today.”

“Okay,” Steve flipped into tactical mode. “Tony, you head up there now. I’m sure you can do something with Janelle in whatever form she’s in and get it ready. Everyone else can go with you. Pep, you do whatever you need at SI. I’m going to take Pete shopping and we’ll get enough air mattresses to get us all through however long it takes to get beds.”

“I can just have beds delivered, Steve,” Tony said drolly. “They do that now, you don’t have to go hack down your own tree and widdle a bed frame.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Peter needs a project, and you make such a fucking big deal about beds that I’m not picking one out for you. Plus, surely some of the stuff from the Tower can be transferred.”
Pepper nodded, “I just need to make sure we trust the movers.”


“Probably wise,” Pepper said and handed Tony his StarkPhone.

“Tony,” Steve says slowly, looking around the room at the 1940s-style furniture and appliances. “What the hell is this? Why don’t I get to be in you and Pepper’s apartment? Why are you putting me in the opposite wing?”

It was about two weeks after they moved into the Mansion and full decoration was in full swing. Each person got to design their own set of rooms, which involved some minor construction as walls were knocked down or doors moved. The room Steve and Tony were in was in the East Wing of the mansion, on the second floor. Considering that Tony and Pepper – and he thought himself - were building an apartment in the West Wing on the third floor, Steve was well confused. Tony looks up from the hologram pad in his hand, startled. “What? I’m not. This is for Bucky.”

“Bucky.”

“That’s why I brought you up here now, before I finish everything, you know what he’d like. Pepper says we can’t overwhelm him with all the new like we did with you, because he’s got the brainwashing too and that makes sense and so I had Janelle scour all the archives for pictures of Brooklyn tenements in the 1930s and this is kind of what she—”

Tony was cut off as Steve’s lips mashed to his own. When Steve pulled back, eyes wide with shock and something Tony couldn’t quite read, he grinned. “So, this was a good idea?”

“You built my best friend, who is somewhere in the world right now, and may never come home, who currently has no idea who I am or that he’s a brainwashed supervillain, a room in your house.”

Tony blushed a bit and looked back at his pad in an attempt to brush Steve off. “A room in our house. We had the space and I was worried if I didn’t fill it Clint would bring in strays or something.”

Steve took the tablet forcibly out of Tony’s hand and threw it on the couch.

“Anthony, this is unbelievable.”

Tony stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “It was—”

“If you say nothing, I will end you.”

Tony made a zipper motion with his lips and went to fetch his tablet.

“No, stand there and accept my gratitude,” Steve smiled. He pulled the smaller man into his arms and whispered into Tony’s ear, “I cannot believe how much you love me and how much I don’t deserve it. Thank you.”

Tony went bright red and muttered back. “You are worth all of this and more, Steven Grant Rogers. So much more.”

Chapter End Notes
2 more parts of 2014 to go - I'm sure you're as eager to leave the year as our characters are. :-D
“Uncle Steve, did you go to high school?”

“I did, Pete, but I never finished."

“Why?”

“Well, a few reasons,” Steve dodged a punch. “You’re still telegraphing.”

The two were sparing in the Mansion the night before Peter was due to start at Queens Technical Institute – which, due to its abbreviation, the Tower Parents had started calling Cutie, much to Peter’s chagrin – and Peter was a jumble of nerves. He had only seen Aunt May for, like, ten minutes since they’ve been back from Wakanda and that was… weird.

MJ told him he was overreacting and started down a tangent about some podcast she was listening to about brain chemistry, which Peter tuned out, and when he went to talk to Aunt Pepper about it, she just kind of hummed and said she was sure May was fine.

The issue was that people in his life rarely turned out ‘fine’. They were either super heroes, dead, or Aunt May.

“I’m only telegraphing because you’re super soldier,” Peter said grumpily.

“Well, considering we mostly fight aliens and other non-humans, I’m probably a good example, then, aren’t I?” Steve retorted with a smirk.

Peter rolled his eyes and set his body back in motion. “No webs still?”

“Not for this exercise. Get me on my back and then you can use webs.”

Peter could hear Uncle Tony in his head at that phrase, language, Cap. You’re corrupting our young Padawan, and giggled to himself.

“What?”

“Nothing. What reasons?”

“Oh, well, I was sick a lot, and Bucky and I were broke all the time. He had a good job as a mechanic and then a second as a dock worker, but most of our money went to medicine and rent. School cost money that we didn’t have.”

“School is free, I thought,” Peter said as he maneuvered around Steve’s left side, throwing a punch that drew him praise from the man.

“Yeah, but if it was a choice between getting medicine so I could get out of bed and go to school or paying our rent, we usually chose rent. Lots of folks in my day didn’t finish school, Pete. Most worked in factories and then everyone went to war. It’s why we all know school is so important, because most of us wish we had gone.”

“Do you wish you had gone?”
“Absolutely,” Steve said firmly. “I’m setting a timer now, you have three minutes to win.”

Peter focused his eyes, used all of his senses, and nearly had Steve bested when the three minutes were over. Nearly, but not quite. As Janelle sounded the timer, Steve grinned and gave Peter a high five. “Great job today, you’re getting closer each time.”

Peter grumbled good naturedly as the pair got water out of the fridge and sat on the mats to stretch a bit.

“Do you want to go back to school?” Peter asked after a few minutes.

Steve looked contemplative. “I kind of did when I woke up. Pepper even wrote me a few syllabi and she and Jarvis caught me up on history and politics and art and science. I may not have a diploma, but I definitely feel like I finished school. And I was always a terrible writer, so it’s better I didn’t have to do papers.”

Peter smiled sadly. “I’m a terrible writer. MJ has to help me all the time.”

“Help is never shameful, Peter. What have we talked about?”

“The best work is teamwork,” Peter recited sarcastically. “Yes, Captain.”

Steve was getting up to leave the gym and suggest they do something else when Peter spoke up. “So, if I stopped going to school, Pepper could write me one of those things, too, right?”

“Pardon?”

“I just… school is great and all, but there’s so much to do if I want to be ready to be an Avenger and it’s kind of getting in the way.”

Steve regulated his breathing carefully. This is Parenting 101, you can do this. “Peter, you are going to finish high school, and you’re going to go to college, and probably get a PhD someday just like Tony, and the Avengers will wait. School will not.”

“Wait, Tony has a PhD? And you have it backwards! School will always be there! Avenging has to happen now! We have to get your best friend back!”

“And we are and we will and the best way you can help with that is by going to school.”

Peter petulantly picked at his sneakers and refused to make eye contact with Steve.

Okay, time to Dad up, Captain, Steve gave himself a pep talk.

“Peter, let me say a few things and then you can say things back, okay?” The boy nodded. “First, about you going to school. You of all people should realize that the war we’re fighting is only barely fought with bodies. What we really need now is smart people like you, and Tony, and Bruce, and Shuri to build technology to help protect soldiers like me. You think I’m any good at my job without science? I am literally made of science.”

Peter giggled a little, and Steve saw a fleeting glance of that wide-eyed ten-year-old they first met. That child was disappearing before his eyes as Peter turned into this man child, this powerful teenager, this… miracle they were charged with taking care of.

“Also, let me tell you something about Tony he’ll never tell you himself, but you should know. This is definitely on the DL.”
“Unapproved-“

“…yes, I know, I know.” Steve waved his hand. “You want to know or not?”

Peter nodded.

“You know Tony is a genius, but what you don’t know is that his dad wasn’t. Howard was really smart, yes, and a really good engineer, but what made him famous was that he was a good businessman who was in the right place at the right time.

“When I knew Howard, he was a good man, Peter. A really, really good man. He was trying his hardest to end the war, and defeat the Nazis, and part of that was that he was working on something called the Manhattan Project. Do you know what that is?”

“The atomic bomb,” Peter said. “Right? You’re saying Tony’s dad built the bomb?”

“He was in charge of the team that did, yes, and he made a lot of money from it. And from what I can tell from some of the diaries I had Jarvis look up for me once, it was the biggest regret of his life. He didn’t calculate the damage enough, and in his mind, it was because he wasn’t smart enough, and he beat himself up for that for the rest of his life.

“Howard and Peggy – you’ve heard Tony call her Aunt Peggy – wrote a lot of letters to each other and both kept quite a few of them, they burned a lot of others so there are gaps, but Peggy kept this one really long one that Howard must have written when he was drunk.

“He went on and on and on about how he should have known his genius was limited and should have put himself in rooms with people smarter than him to challenge him. His own ego got in the way, and he felt personally responsible for the slaughter of those Japanese civilians.

“So, fast forward about 20 years and Tony comes along, who is a certified genius. He finished high school by the time he was your age and went to MIT at 14. Howard saw so much of himself in Tony, but he also saw the pieces of Tony he got from his mom – the generosity, the love, the compassion, the kindness – and Howard could not handle it. The bitterness and self-loathing and…

“He was a terrible father. One of my heroes turned out to be a terrible father because, well, I believe he was jealous of his son. Tony became his competition and he was always kind of programmed to trounce his competition.”

“Was he… did he…”

“He used to beat Tony pretty good, Pete, yeah,” Steve said quietly. “You know how when Tony is mad at you he always puts his hands in his pockets or behind his back? It’s because he’s terrified he’ll become Howard.” Is this too much for a teenager? What the fuck am I doing?

“But he’d never, I know that,” Peter said.

“You do, I do, Pepper does, everyone does but Tony, and that’s what growing up with someone who tells you you’re worthless does to you, but that’s not what I want to tell you. I want to tell you about Tony’s PhD. He is the first person at MIT to have a PhD in Artificial Intelligence and you know why?”

“Why?”

“Because he invented it.”
“No, it’s that guy who-

“No, I promise you, it’s Tony. He just doesn’t want credit, so he had Pepper spin a story and put it out in the world. He created the entire program and got the PhD so that other students could train in it, get degrees in it, make it better. He still reads – or has someone read to him – almost every thesis that comes out of the program at MIT so he can make sure he’s still learning. So he can make sure he never misses and angle and –“

“- kills Japanese civilians.” Peter said.

Steve nodded. “Your brain is incredible, Peter. Tony is so proud of you and what you can do he bursts with joy when you guys build something in the workshop. He tells Pepper and I all the time that you are going to blow us all away when you get the proper training, that your inventions will change the world, and we don’t doubt that, not one bit.

“But we need you in rooms with people who will make you smarter, who will challenge you, who will make you better. And that starts tomorrow morning, when you’ll get up and Tony will drive you to school, where you will attend faithfully, and do all of your assignments and graduate with honors, and Pepper will one day cry when you wear one of those cap things. You hear me?”

“Yes, Uncle Steve,” Peter intoned, grinning.

“Good, ya punk,” Steve said in an exaggerated Brooklyn twang. “Good.”

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“Hi May, it’s Pepper, just following up on this family meeting you want to have. I know your shifts have been crazy, but the three of us are kind of on tenterhooks, so can you give me a call? Or text? Or something? Thanks.”

Pepper hung up the phone after leaving her third voicemail that week. After the text May had sent while they were en route from Wakanda, the Tower Parents had not heard hide nor hair from the other woman. She updated their shared custody calendar with her shifts, but Pepper noticed she was doing a lot more overnight ones than normal or that her seniority would justify.

Something was up, and if May didn’t fess up soon, Pepper knew Tony would start meddling and that had to be prevented at all costs.

_____________________________________

There were days that Tony swore if he ever saw Nick Fury again it would be too soon. Now the fucker was living in his house.

After that night where Fury confessed that SHIELD was compromised, several plans were put into motion. Tony, Fury, Coulson, Hill, Nat, Clint, Steve, Bruce, and Pepper had stayed up for what felt like four days to put everything in motion. The only way they knew to truly purge SHIELD was to burn it – metaphorically – to the ground. Coulson and Hill spent two days getting to the assets they trusted completely to safety. Fury worked with Janelle and Bruce on the technical side of things – encrypting and hacking and redacting as necessary. Clint and Nat were, as always, wet work as necessary.

Pepper and Tony spent the time getting the Mansion ready to be in complete and total lockdown. Pepper negotiated with Google to get the property rewritten in Google Earth, Tony decided to keep Janelle a portable AI and built a new system into the house. Calling it Friday, he told Pepper it was the closest he’d ever come to replicating her as his PA, which got him both an eye roll and a kiss.
Thor was in charge of intergalactic security.

“Point Break, things are going to get nasty down here,” Tony said into the com device Jane had built them. “I need you to keep all non-humanoids off my ass for a few weeks.”

“Consider it done, Tin Can. The Valkyrie are getting restless anyway.”

After Tony signed off, he glared at Clint. “You taught him ‘Tin Can’, didn’t you?”

Clint smirked. “He hates Point Break.”

“Fuck off, Bird Brain.”

Rhodey was on alert, as was a new guy he and Steve had been working with at the VA, one Sam Wilson, who Tony had yet to meet, but everyone who had vouched for.

“Why do you go to the VA?” Tony asked.

“Because I am a decorated war veteran who deserves to have my country thank me for my service,” Steve replied with a smirk.

“Fuck off, you know what I mean.”

“I go as Captain America, babe, and let them all tell me stories and take photos. I’ve been going once a week for, I don’t know, a year? Did you really not notice?”

“No?” Tony said sheepishly.

“I’d be offended,” Steve confessed, “but you’ve been wearing Pepper’s jeans, so I’ll forgive your lack of attention to detail.”

“Is that why they’re so tight? Huh.”

When all the pieces were finally set, Nat and Clint set off to an undisclosed location – literally they never said it out loud so it couldn’t be hacked out of Janelle or Friday – and leaked hundreds of thousands of SHIELD and HYDRA files out to the world.

To say it caused chaos was an understatement.

Conspicuously missing from all those files, however, was any confirmation that the Winter Solider was an active entity.

“Fury, do you trust me?” Steve ground out.

“I barely trust my own eyes right now, Cap, so no! I do not! You want to hunt down an international war criminal on your own and you are withholding information from any number of governments and committing – off the top of my head – six things you can get prosecuted for in the Hague!”

“Well, now, that’s a bit hyperbolic –“ Tony cut in.

“Do not get me started on you, Stark,” Fury yelled.

“Agent Fury,” Nick said firmly from the hologram. “Wessco and Wakanda are both in agreement that this is the best plan of action. As the originators of the intel, and my I add my team has been far more successful and thorough with this than yours could dream of being, we claim jurisdiction. The soldier’s last known crime was regicide against Wakanda and T’Challa feels strongly that he must
be involved in this process.”

“They’re not even citizens of Wessco, Your Highness!”

Nick flashed a handful of passports. “I’ve decided to give everyone an early Christmas gift. Diplomatic immunity.”

“Motherfucker,” Tony said in awe.

It was generally decided that the three safest places in the world for Tony and Steve, while the soldier was out there, were the Mansion, Wakanda, or Wessco. Tony, therefore, decided his Mansion was the safest place for their entire band of merry men (and women) to be and forgot that meant Fury too.

“What are you putting in front of me?” Fury glared at Pepper one morning in the communal kitchen.

“NDAs,” Pepper said.

“I have a higher security –“

“I don’t care. This isn’t about national security, Nick,” Pepper retorted, “these are about the security of my company and my family. Both of which I value significantly higher than any flag you’ve sworn an oath to.”

Fury opened his mouth to protest and Pepper cut him off. “Coulson and Maria signed days ago and I know they asked you to do it to and you’re being a cantankerous hold out and I don’t have time for nonsense, so sign the fucking papers.”

She threw a pen at him and stalked off. A few seconds later, she heard, “both of them?! ” And the smirk on her face lasted her all the way back to her office.

By the middle of September, they had all settled into a rhythm. Most everyone was gone for days at a time, looking for information (Clint and Nat), rebuilding teams (Hill and Coulson), or things no one questioned (Fury).

Now the most pressing issue for the three Tower Parents – Peter voted to keep the name – was that none of them could get a hold of May.

“May, please, this is getting insane. You read me the damn riot act after Sokovia, so this real hypocritical.”

Steve nearly crunched the phone in his hand in frustration.

“I think between the three of us we’re up to twelve voicemails and four million texts,” Tony remarked from the workbench. “Dum-E, I swear to Thor we have been over this a million times I need 3/8th when I’m working on helmets and gauntlets. Janelle, be aware this is a constant problem.”

“Yes, Tony,” Janelle replied, with a hint of sarcasm Steve approved of.

“So what’s the plan, Cap?” Tony threw a glance Steve’s direction. “Peter says the only evidence she’s alive is that there’s still food in the fridge and that we keep catching her on CCTV. New school distractions are only going to work so long on a kid with more empathy than Pepper.”
“I have to do the unimaginable.”

Tony cocked an eyebrow.

“I have to go to Queens.”

______________________________

“May.”

“Steve!” The woman screamed. “You scared the shit out of me.”

Steve noticed four things immediately when he accosted May at her bus stop. One, her hair was much, much shorter than it had been before Wakanda. Two, she was thin to the point of gaunt. Three, her eyes were shifty. Four, she looked terrified of him.

None of those things were good signs in Steve’s world.

“May, we are all going out of our minds, you have to answer our phone calls, and I had to come to Queens, which you know means I have to apologize to Brooklyn.”

“Is Peter okay?” she asked as she started rapidly walking towards her apartment.

“Of course Peter is okay, do you think I’d be calmly standing at a bus stop in fucking Queens if the kid wasn’t okay?”

She didn’t answer for a few seconds, but then stopped abruptly and turned to him. “You’re right, I’m being a shitty coward. How did you get here?”

“Bike,” Steve responded.

“I hate those things,” May mused and rung her hands together. “Peter is at Ned’s after school-“

“- I know.”

“-of course you do, sorry,” May grimaced. “Can I come out? Like, are you all free?”

“Well, Tony is himself, but he’ll leave the workshop for you. Pepper is at her office, why don’t we have Tony meet us there?”

She nodded and they continued to walk towards her and Peter’s apartment. “I just need to shower and get a few things and then I’ll be ready.”

“I’ll let them know and get us a cab so you don’t have to ride on the bike,” Steve smiled, pulling his phone from his pocket.

**Steve: Got her. Agreed to meet us at Pep’s office. With traffic, we’ll be there in an hour.**

**Tony: Fuck traffic, I’m on my way.**

**Pepper: You are not flying her, Tony, she hates it.**

**Tony: She’s been lying to us and I don’t care what she hates.**

**Pepper: Be reasonable.**

**Tony: When have I ever.**
Steve: She looks terrified and terrible, guys. Just let me order a cab like a normal, non-Stark related human, and we’ll see you soon.

Pepper: Use the corporate account and bring her in the private garage. Text me the plate number and I’ll tell security.

Tony: Still faster if I flew.

Steve: Okay, Pep, sounds good.

Steve wasn’t wrong; about an hour later, they were pulling into the private parking garage at SI. They had made casual, and halting, small talk on the drive, and Steve’s mind raced with all the possibilities. May was clearly under stress, and possibly some health ailment as well. She tentatively followed him into an elevator she had been in hundreds of times and began to worry her lip and wring her hands.

*Whatever is happening is not a small thing*, Steve mused, being careful to both keep and eye on her and not let her know he was doing it. He did the retina scan that let him directly into Pepper’s office and indicated that May should head out first.

Pepper hid her shock at the other woman’s appearance well, but Steve caught it. “May, it’s so good to see you, we have been so worried.” As Pepper’s arms closed around May for a hug, May burst into tears.

Steve knew that crying was often described as ‘bursting’ into tears, but he had never really seen anyone ‘burst’ – until May Parker. She went from nervous and twitchy to nearly collapsing with heaving sobs into Pepper’s arms. Tony arrived just then and any sarcastic comment he may have been saving fell silent.

While Pepper held May on the couch as she wept, Steve and Tony busied themselves making Pepper some coffee, ordering May her favorite kind of tea, and then wandering around Pepper’s office aimlessly, full of nervous energy but with enough sense not to talk.

Finally, May let out a heavy sigh, and whispered something no one could understand.

“I’m sorry, May, I didn’t understand you.”

“It’s cancer,” she said, her voice slightly stronger. “It’s everywhere. I have cancer, it’s everywhere.”

The tears started again, and this time Tony and Steve went right to the floor in front of the couch, kneeling by the two women and offering whatever physical support they could. All three murmured words of love and support to May as she cried, and soon they joined her in tears.

Tony’s mind raced with ways he could fix it, knowing he can’t. Steve’s brain nearly froze with shock, while Pepper’s raced to Peter and clenched in pain for their boy.

“That’s why I’ve been avoiding you,” May confessed. “I fell at work while you were in Wakanda. It was really odd – one minute I was standing at the station and the next I was on the floor. My leg literally gave out. They rushed me to X-Ray since no one takes better care of nurses than other nurses and I didn’t leave the hospital for another five days. The pains I’ve been attributing to being old and exhausted were actually cancer eating away at my bones. It’s gone to my thyroid, too, and they figure I have, maybe, a year.”

“A year,” Steve breathed.

May shook her head sadly. “I have all of this written down for you, all the details, but the short answer is no. It would maybe give me another month, but I’d be miserable for all of it and that’s not how I want to live.”

“I thought you were in chemo,” Steve blurted out.

She grimaced. “I cut my hair because I can’t lift my arms to blow dry it anymore, and I think the weight is dropping off because I can’t always remember to eat. I felt so brave when you all were in Wakanda, I was ready to tell you all and Peter and come up with a plan, and then he came back and my courage crumbled. He had such an amazing time, I didn’t want to ruin his summer.” She finished on a whisper and buried her head in her hands.

“Other doctors?” Tony finally spoke.

“For once in my life, I took you up on your generosity for myself, Tony,” May smiled sadly. “I wanted to make sure to make sure to make sure before I told Peter, so I used your name and had Sloan Kettering and the Mayo Clinic and MD Anderson look at my scans. They all said the same thing. A year.”

“Fucking cocksucking dammit,” Tony roared, scaring them all. “Goddamnit, no, no, NO.”

May glanced at Pepper. “I wondered when he was going to get angry.” Tony stalked over to the windows and paced frantically, talking to himself and nearly pulling out his hair.

“He’s much better at being the sick one than loving the sick one,” Pepper remarked, taking May’s hands. “He’ll calm down.”

“NO I WON’T.”

“Ignore him,” Pepper mouthed and May smiled. They sat for a little bit as Tony ranted and raved at the universe, creating solutions and breaking them by the minute. Finally, he collapsed back down in a defeated posture.

“Well, I’m fucking sorry, May, this is – “

“Thanks, Tony. It is.”

Silence again, until Steve tentatively spoke. “Peter?”

“Right,” May extricated herself from Pepper and dug around in her handbag. “Since I couldn’t sort out how this – “ she gestured to the three of them “- was working legally, I decided to give Pepper full custody of Peter. Whatever else you guys do from there is up to you, but CEO of Stark Industries was pretty impressive to my lawyer.”

Pepper took the papers from May. “Of course, thank you, I mean – “

“You’re already his parents, his precious Tower Parents,” May smiled. “All this does is mean you have to sign his permission slips. I could not have done these last bits without you and I have total and complete peace about him after I go.”

That was take a bit to get used to, Steve thought. Out loud, he asked about when May wanted to tell Peter or if she had even thought about how.
May shook her head. “Not fully. I know I need you guys there, but past that, not really.”

“Quit your job,” Tony said suddenly. “Quit and move in with us.”

May sputtered and Tony cut back in. “A year is nothing, nothing, and there is no reason for you to spend any of it not with Peter. You can drive him to school while you’re still well enough to and we can make memories and we’ll do Christmas in Italy like you told Pepper you’ve always wanted to and, Jesus, May, let me do this, let us do this, let us give this to you and Peter.”

May considered this and nodded. “Sales pitch accepted, Tony. But only for our kid. I’m not a mooch.”

“No,” Pepper said, “you’re family.”

______________________________

Pepper: Hi MJ, I know you hate the phone, but can you call me when you get a chance?

MJ stared at her phone. Pepper had texted her before, usually with memes or articles she thought MJ would like. She had never asked her to call before. But it was Peter’s weekend at the Mansion and so maybe something was wrong with Peter? She hit ‘dial’.

“MJ, thank you so much,” Pepper sounded bright through the phone - too bright.

“Pepper, hi, what’s up?”

Pepper took a deep breath. “Do you have plans tonight?”

“Not really.”

“Would you be okay coming out to the Mansion?”

Alarm bells rang. “Is Peter okay?”

“Currently, yes, but he’s about to get some very sad news and I really think it would be good for him if you were here. I’ll call your parents and explain and we’ll send a car for you if you’re okay with it.”

“His parents and uncle are dead. What sadder news could he get?” As soon as it was out of MJ’s mouth, and was met with Pepper’s silence, MJ gasped. “Who died.”

“No one, yet, but MJ I don’t want to tell you anything else before we tell Peter, so are you willing to come out?”

“Tell me. I have to be prepared.”

Pepper paused and MJ cut in. “If you want me to be there for him, I have to be strong and if something hurts him I am not strong, Pepper. You need to let me get ready.”

Amazed for not the first time at the wisdom of the young woman, Pepper sighed. “May has cancer and it’s terminal.”

MJ dropped the phone and only went to recover it when she heard Pepper calling for her from the tinny receiver. “Yeah, I’m here, fuck.”

“Yeah, I’ve been saying that a lot, too,” Pepper chuckled, and MJ could hear the tears in her voice.
She really liked Pepper, and this moment was one of the reasons why. “So you’ll come?”

“Couldn’t stop me.”

Peter knew something was wrong. The adults were all weird – even more than usual – and Steve was making pot roast. Steve only made his mother’s pot roast when he was upset or when it was Sunday and since today was Saturday it meant he had to be upset. *Did they find his stolen person? Is that what’s happening?*

Finally, around 3:30, Aunt May showed up, which was even odder since she was supposed to be at work, and they all asked him to leave his sparring practice with Clint and come to the back garden.

“What’s going on?” Peter hated how much his voice sounded like a little boy.

May patted the seat next to her on the bench. “Baby boy, I have some bad news.”

“More?”

This, she told them, was exactly how she told him about his parents and Ben. She thought it might be easier this way. “More,” she confirmed.

He was quiet and searched her face as he sat down. “You?”

She nodded.

His eyes filled with tears, and he breathed out, “what.”

“Cancer.”

“Fuck.”

He finally got his answer to when he could use profanity and no one would correct him.

Chapter End Notes

When I first started writing this, I thought it would be, oh, ten chapters? These folks had other ideas.

I know all seems bleak, and I know this was quite the whumpy chapter, but remember Pepper's requested walk-up music - it's always darkest before the dawn.

But feel free to yell at me in the comments. :-D
The rest of the weekend was a bit of a blur. If he was honest, the rest of the week was. Peter went to school, he vaguely remembered that MJ and Ned came to stay at the Mansion, and that at some point all of his and Aunt May’s stuff got moved in, but the details were very fuzzy.

Certain moments though, he remembers with photographic clarity. Like when he found MJ sitting on his bed after… he found out.

“I have airheads, popcorn, that weird organic lavender chocolate you like from Whole Foods because you’re a weirdo, and a whole YouTube playlist curated for tonight. Talk, don’t talk, cry, don’t cry. Stark said we can order whatever food we want, so if you’re feeling at all hungry, I say we go crazy and get the na’an I love with the paneer from that place on 8th? He can afford to chopper it here or whatever the fuck, right?”

He cut her off by sitting down and wrapping his fingers through hers. “Who called?” His voice cracked with tears.

“Pepper,” she whispered.

“I love her,” Peter commented.

“She’s kind of the best,” MJ confirmed. “And I like pretty much no one.”

“Pepper is, like, above the rest of humans, though.”

“She loves you, too, Petey,” MJ smiled. “They all do.”

“May said I’m going to live here all the time now.”

“Cool. Can I get Stark to give me my own room for the weekends? Pepper said you guys have one wing and the Avengers have the other. I request Avenger space, for the record.”

“Is this all about you?”

“Isn’t everything?”

Peter smiled, a genuine smile in the midst of his heart breaking in half. He was so grateful Pepper knew the only person he would need tonight would be the only one who wouldn’t make tonight a thing.

Or the conversation he overheard because the Tower Parents sometimes forget he has super hearing.

“Pep, I think it’s time.”

“We could do it here,” she responded. “I had your mom’s chapel rebuilt, the one back in the woods. It’s not consecrated, but –“

“I doubt there is an altar on this planet I could stand in front of that would not get smited,” Tony replied.
“Can Rhodey do it?”

“Perform the ceremony? I don’t see why not.”

“He’s known us the longest, he’s been there for everything, he makes sense,” Pepper said.

“And Kerry and Nat should stand with you.”

“And Steve and Peter with you.”

“Did we just plan our wedding?”

“Oh you are adorable if you think that’s all there is,” Pepper patted his cheek. “But this is where we stop and tell Steve and Peter and this is also me letting you know that it’s time to actually ask me.”

So he did his best to act completely surprised the following weekend when Tony said he had an announcement to make and asked if Peter could meet the Tower Parents in their rooms.

When he got there, there was wrapped box sitting on the coffee table, with a tag that said “open me”, but no parents to be found. Upon further inspection, the tag had “seriously, Peter, open me” in Tony’s distinctive scrawl across the bottom of the tag.

Chuckling slightly, he unwrapped the box to find another box, but this one had a full card.

Dearest Peter,

You have been through so much change, so many things out of your control, and you are our hero for how well you have handled all of it. Tony, in particular, wants to comment that he dealt with much less much worse. You amaze us and we love you. We hope we have told you that enough.

We don’t know how much time we all have left with May, and we want you to have as much time together as possible. That’s why you’re moving here – which we know you keep forgetting – and why we’re all going to Italy for Christmas – surprise!

But that’s not all. We wanted you to know that you will never be alone in this world. You have a home with us for as long as you want it. Legally, Pepper and Tony will be your guardians, but we will always remain your Tower Parents.

That was all in Pepper’s handwriting, but all three signed the letter. He fought back tears as he opened the box, which contained another box.

Pete,

I asked Pep to marry me for the first time nearly ten years ago. I was drunk, and she thought I didn’t mean it, but you’ve met her, so you know I meant it. I asked her again probably fourteen hundred times since then, and last night she finally said yes.

I asked her why now, and she said some things about how I’m a functioning adult who she can be proud to be seen in public with, and also about how Steve makes us both better. (Don’t worry, buddy, this doesn’t change anything with us TPs, I asked Steve if I could ask Pepper first). But you know what she said that made the most sense to me?

That she loved how I was as your Uncle Tony. There is almost nothing better on the planet to me than being with you, so I can see how she loves that, too. So, when the miracle happens and Pep marries me, I need you standing with me, okay?
When Peter opened that next box, there was a tuxedo with red and blue piping down the lapel. A note was pinned to it: *It’s awful convenient you picked Captain America colors, kid, this way we’ll match – Uncle Steve.*

Peter was in daze of emotions and he sat down on the couch, rubbing his eyes to stop the tears, but knowing it was futile. After a few moments, he heard Friday call his name.

“Yeah, Friday?”

“Pepper would like you to know that they are all on their balcony and you can join them, or you can go back to your room. There is no pressure, they just want you to know they love you.”

Peter smiled, knowing that Friday was quoting Pepper verbatim.

“Thanks Friday. Can you let them know I’ll be out in a few minutes, I just want to show Aunt May my suit.”

“Of course, Peter.”

“Did y’all pick a date?”

Sam and Steve were down in D.C. for a few days, visiting some veterans, and Captain America was going to testify before Congress about the funding for the VA. Thankfully, that also meant Steve Rogers had time to talk to the man who had quickly become his closest non-Tony-or-Pepper confidant. The pair were in Sam’s apartment, with ESPN on low in the background.

Steve nodded and took a sip of his Yuengling. “Friday the 12th. The big Stark Industries holiday gala is the next night, so that’s actually when Pepper and Tony are going to quietly announce that they’re married.”

Sam snorted. “As if Tony Stark has ever done something like that quietly in his damn life. I’m figuring fireworks and maybe a parade of elephants.” He paused, “isn’t this moving a little quickly?”

“Well, yes and no,” Steve replied. “We’ve been talking about them getting married for almost a year now, over it, actually, since Pepper stopped trying to get pregnant. It started out as a branding exercise of sorts. Public personas, and all that.”

“So, like when Pepper and Tony announced they were dating,” Sam confirmed.

“Yeah, so the Tony Stark brand is of course tied to the SI brand which Pepper is tied to, but they’ve been careful for a long time to keep their personal lives and that brand separate. I didn’t really realize how much work that took until we started our thing, but the walls they’ve erected are intense.

“Like, six or seven months after Pepper and Tony started dating, in real life, Tony went out with Rhodey and let himself get photographed with a few girls. Not getting trashed like he used to, but definitely not with Pepper. They decided that him going cold turkey on the partying – even though he was just back from the cave – would raise eyebrows. So they just had him publicly slow down until around the time I defrosted.”

“But privately?”

“Oh the way Tony tell it, he only got out of the cave for Pep and he made sure she’d know that every day for the rest of their lives.”
“Sentimental bastard,” Sam chuckled. “Man, most of the best things about him are off-brand, or at least what historically has been his brand.”

“Nearly all of the things I love about him are off-brand,” Steve confessed. “Back before I was even ready to admit that I –“

“ Wanted to throw him against a flat surface and fuck him straight into it?” Sam interrupted with a smirk, which was rewarded with Steve’s middle finger.

“Before that, yes, Pepper told me she had long ago separated ‘Tony’ and ‘Stark’ – which was her beginning to make this distinction. She worked for so many years for the brand, but knew the man was lurking in there and that’s who she was in love with. When he was able to start merging the two and… anyway. Does that make any sense?”

“Being a human in the world who was raised with Tony on magazine covers, and then now as the dude who he builds new wings for, it makes total sense.”

Steve nodded. “You want another?”

“I’ll get it, keep going.”

“So, we first started talking about them getting married a while back just for the brand, and then when we were in Wakanda, we started talking about what it would look like for them to really get married. I mean, they’ve been… well, them, forever. And so when we talked about that, we realized that whenever I was ready to get married, I could have a ceremony with Tony, and one with Pepper and then… sure. We’ve always been a knot of people entangled together, both three separate relationships and one large one, so all this really does is slightly alter one of the three. But I’m not really ready to change my two… and it doesn’t really matter… so it’s…”

“You’re not ready to get married?” Sam looked surprised, as he sat back down and passed Steve a fresh bottle. *Mental note, let’s circle back to why he keeps stammering.*

Steve shook his head and stared out into nothing. Sam, sensing this was a time to not press, made a comment about the football highlights on the TV and they spent the next few hours shooting the breeze about nothing, until Steve finally looked at Sam and confessed the words that had been on his tongue for a while.

“Before I knew Bucky was alive, maybe. But now? The idea of having that kind of commitment with someone he doesn’t even know doesn’t sit right. I just… not until we find him and bring him home.”

“Steve,” Sam said gently. “What if who comes home isn’t Bucky anymore?”

“Not a possibility,” Steve said in his Captain voice, and Sam backed off.

*This is going to be a hell of a lot more painful and ugly than I originally thought,* Sam mused to himself.

_____________________________________

“PETER BENJAMIN PARKER YOU GET BACK HERE RIGHT NOW.”

Steve got home from his run one Saturday morning in early November and entered their wing to the sound of Pepper absolutely screaming at Peter. He pulled out his phone and shot a quick text to Tony.
Steve: Just got home. ??

Tony: The kid went out without his panic button last night and Pepper found blood on his suit in laundry room.

Steve: Since when does Pepper do laundry?

Tony: She says it soothes her. *eye roll emoji* At least this week. She sounds super soothed. Let’s just keep praying she doesn’t go back to knitting. Anyway, blood, not much, but blood. So she’s… yeah.

Steve: Engage?

Tony: It’s your funeral, gorgeous.

Steve chuckled and tried to make his way stealthily to the entrance to Tony’s basement workshop, when his foot hit that one creaky floorboard. Damnit.

“Steve is that you? Oh thank God, I can’t get Tony to come up and PETER BLATANTLY DISOBEYED RULES LAST NIGHT and –”

Steve briskly walked into the living room where the standoff was happening and went to stand with Pepper. He threw a look at Peter who responded that it was an accident and then launched into the explanation for the blood.

“A dog?”

“Yeah, like the one you guys PROMISED me when we were in Wakanda but that I STILL DON’T HAVE.”

Steve could feel Pepper going nearly nuclear next to him. “Peter, this is not the time,” he sternly corrected.

“I THINK IT IS.”

Steve cut him off with one hand and went into his Captain posture. “Peter, did you go out without your panic button.”

“Yes, but-“

“Did you?”

“Yes,” the boy was more petulant now.

“Did Pepper find blood on your clothes?”

“Yes.”

“What is the rule if there is blood?”

“Tell you all so you don’t find it and freak out.”

“Correct. So you broke three rules.”

“Three? I-“
“Did you let us know you were patrolling last night?”

A few beats of silence. “No.”

“Thank you.”

Steve could feel Pepper take a breath and he grabbed her hand as if to say ‘I got it’.

“So, Peter, here’s what I think needs to happen. You’re going to need to apologize to Pepper for scaring the living shit out of her and then you need to go ask Tony to make suit repairs and you won’t be going out again until those repairs are finished and I’ll make sure to let Tony know they’ll have to be extensive.”

“It’s just a little tear,” Peter nearly whispered.

“I’m thinking the repairs will take a week to ten days.”

Peter’s head shot up, and the boy was clearly ready to fight, but seeing the look on Steve’s face, he thought better of it. “I’m sorry Auntie Pep, I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, you weren’t,” Pepper said and held her arms out for a hug. “Please don’t do that again. Now go talk to Tony.”

As the boy trudged down to the workshop, Pepper flopped back into the cushions of the couch.

“Auntie Pep?” Steve asked with a raised eyebrow, flopping next to her.

“Ugh, gross, sweaty solider,” she wrinkled her nose teasingly. “I overheard him telling Ned he was trying out some new names for all of us for after May dies. So I’m just rolling with it.”

“Right,” Steve said, nodding quietly and deciding if he wanted to poke this particular beast. Fuck it.

“What do you mean?”

“I know he broke rules and went out and he needs to face consequences, but the screaming is really not like you.”

“He flipped me off and tried to stalk out of the room when I confronted him and I kind of lost it,” Pepper confessed.

“Well, that wasn’t very Peter of him.”

Pepper’s mouth jerked into a smile at one side. “I have a feeling that for the next several months we are going to see a lot of not-Peter things. Doesn’t mean we’re letting him get away with it, but… yeah.”

“How is May today?”

“Terrible,” Pepper said simply. “Her ankles basically can’t support her weight any more. Tony’s downstairs designing her a hovercraft wheelchair.”

“A hover what now?”

“He wants her to be able to float? I’m not honestly sure, I stopped listening somewhere around minute twelve yesterday.”
Steve laughed. “So, Peter and Tony are occupied is what you’re telling me.”

Pepper’s eyebrow quirked. “And May is sleeping.

“I might need someone to help me wash my back.”

Pepper followed him out of the room, “I mean, I guess I can rearrange my schedule.”

“Tony, quick question.” Pepper said over the top of the credit card statement she was reviewing.

“Yeah?” He was flipping something around on a hologram in front of him. A bow? Maybe? She couldn’t tell.

“Is there a particular reason why you bought Rosetta Stone in Russian, Farsi, and Mandarin?”

“It’s the highest rated program for language learning.”

Pepper sighed. “Let me rephrase. Why are you trying to learn Russian, Farsi, and Mandarin?”

“Friday said it might help Bucky.”

“It might help –“ she moved and swatted the hologram closed. “Look at me. What does that mean?”

Tony looked at her like she had lost her damn mind. “Friday and I have been learning all sorts of things about PTSD as Shuri’s been sending me her data on de-programming, right, Friday?”

“Indeed.”

“And one of the possibilities is that Bucky will have trouble communicating in one language. I figured I already know French nearly fucking perfectly, thank you very much boarding school and Mademoiselle Poinfranc-“ he waggled his eyebrows at Pepper, who smacked him for good measure – “and my Japanese is passable thanks to you, but the others could use work. I’m not learning fucking Bantu because T’Challa said he has trouble with it and so it must be hard, and I figured it was time to be able to learn what Nat mutters into the coms when she’s pissed, so Russian was a go, and none of us speak Farsi, and I tacked on Mandarin because why the fuck not. Can I have my tablet back now, please?”

She blinked at him a few times as she handed it back to him. “You are both the most wonderful and infuriating man.”

“I know,” he grinned.

+299 33 74 86: Greenland. We think he’s in Greenland.

Steve: Why the fuck is he in Greenland? Isn’t it freezing there? It’s fucking December.

+299 33 74 86: Why the fuck is he anywhere? I have no idea. I thought for sure I’d nab him in Galway, but then he was in Shannon and on a flight before we knew it.

Steve: Is he like Arya with the faces or something?

+299 33 74 86: C says he’s proud of you for reading and to remember to not watch the show until
we all get back.

+299 33 74 86: I mean, probably not, but could Hydra have an Isle of Dead Men? Sure.

+299 33 74 86: Did K get my measurements? C took them and who the fuck knows, but they have to be close.

Pepper: Yes, and she wants to know your – and I quote – ass routine.

+299 33 74 86: Ballet. Tell her to hit a barre class.

Pepper: He’s going crazy. When you get back here he’s going to pounce on you like a rabid dog for any news. You’ve been in Greenland for three days.

+299 33 74 86: We’re just waiting on Fury to get us on a flight to Newfoundland. That’s next. This number will die in about twelve hours. If he fucks up your day because he’s too impatient, I will kill him with my shoe.

Pepper: Please don’t. I can’t lose his tongue.

+299 33 74 86: Just for that, I’m wearing two knives to the wedding.

Pepper: You promised only one! They’re going to ruin the lines of the dress! The photos!

+299 33 74 86: Well, you’ve ruined my eyes and possibly my life with that last text about Captain America’s tongue, so we’re even.

+1 709 578 4451: Lost him. Coming back for the wedding. Will pick back up when you guys go to Italy. Trail either goes south or west from here.

“Damnit,” Tony muttered under his breath, and then stuffed his phone back in his pocket. He was in – as far as he was concerned the middle of nowhere – or Doylestown, Pennsylvania – on a mission to get Pepper’s wedding gift.

Tony was known for his over the top gifts, and some of them he was even a little proud of. She had told him nothing would top the suit - although thank God she hadn’t actually enforced the Zales comment, Maria’s ring was too perfect – but this one had to be more about their family, he thought.

He had been racking his brain for weeks until he went with Pepper into the chapel one morning and she commented on how stained glass was a lost art and how peaceful it made her feel.

So he and Darcy – who he was pleased to discover Pepper had actually hired earlier in the year for the SI PR team – took to scouring the country for the best stained glass artists, and then they had to find someone in that category who could create what Tony wanted in ten days. So, they found Marta Susgrenen, who lived 45 minutes north of Philadelphia, and now he was here to pick up his slash her creation.

Normally, he would have just had it shipped, but he was petrified Pepper would find it, or even worse, Steve, who could not keep this a secret to save his life.

“Here we are, Mr. Stark,” Marta smiled. “It just finished fully setting.”
While the main colors were gold, blue, and red, the 11x17 pane was full of vibrant hues that caught the sun’s light. There was a prominent star set against blue and silver, and a small spider web in shades of red, and a tin can made of gold, all held in the wings of a glorious, rising phoenix. Around the edges were tinges of green and black, with a bow and arrow, a knife, a hammer, and some other touches that Tony knew would simply make Pepper crumble. Both bold and subtle at the same time, Tony was speechless.

“This is beyond my wildest, Marta, thank you,” Tony said sincerely.

Marta beamed. “It was honestly a joy, Mr. Stark. When Darcy told me the story and you sent me your ideas, they just worked perfectly together. Thank you for letting me create something so beautiful.”

Tony stood, simply staring for a minute. Then he said, “I’m never showing this to anyone outside our family, but I know my almost wife will want to show your work to the world. So, can you make me a series of panes to hang in the lobby of SI? Darcy will be in touch about colors and stuff. Would $2 million cover 12?”

When he didn’t hear anything back, he turned and saw Marta’s jaw had essentially unhinged itself. “I normally charge $5,000 a pane.”

“Oh, well, that’s vastly under what you should. Wow, I only paid $5k for this? Fixing that for sure. Right, need to get back on the road, have a Pepper to impress,” he drew the shocked woman into a hug and told her Darcy would be in touch.

“Do you, Anthony Edward Stark, take this woman, Virginia Anne Potts, to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“Before she changes her mind, absolutely, I do,” Tony wiggled his eyebrows to distract from the tears, as he slid the ring onto Pepper’s finger.

“Do you, Virginia Anne Potts, take this man, Anthony Edward Stark, to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“God help and forgive me, I do,” she grinned, fully owning her tears, as she slid the ring onto his finger.

The small crowd laughed, and Rhodey signaled to quiet them. “Believe it or not, these two have their own vows. I know you’re shocked they didn’t go traditional, but let’s not pass the smelling salts yet.”

Tony elbowed Rhodey good naturedly as he dug into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. Pepper gasped.

“What?”

“I swore you only used paper to wipe up DUM-E’s messes, I didn’t know you knew you could still write on it.”

“Sass, right? That’s what this is? You’re sassing me?” Tony’s eyes twinkled as Pepper bit her lip and grinned. “Ahem,” he faked cleared his throat and began to read. “Pep, you know when I was building Friday and I found those chunks of personal files Jarvis had archived for me? I went through them this week and I realized that what he had been doing was cataloguing all the ways you loved me through the years.
“There were video clips of you dropping food off while I ignored you, or fighting with someone on the phone to protect me, or ranting to him about how much you hated Howard, or crying to Ciara about how much I was physically hurting your very soul. That was a direct quote, my little drama queen.”

“Seriously?” Pepper interrupted and everyone noticed Steve roll his eyes.

“I also found this clip,” and Tony fumbled with his phone and projected a hologram.

It was Pepper and Tony in the med suite in the tower after Obie. Pepper knew it immediately and not just because of the version of the arc reactor, but because of the feeling she got in her stomach the minute the clip started.

“I can’t… I’m sorry, I can’t face you marrying someone else.”

There it was. A quiet sob broke out from her, “I couldn’t.”

He turned towards her and must have seen the look in her eyes, because his whole face brightened. “Yeah?”

She nodded.

“The whole time I was in the cave, I was trying to come home to you, Pep, I swear.”

“I know,” she wasn’t about to stop the tears now.

“I’m just…”

As he grappled for the words, she got up from her chair and leaned over, pressing her lips firmly to his. “I know, Anthony Edward. I know.”

When they pulled apart, Tony whispered, “I love you, Virginia. I love you so much. I’d say I love you to infinity but since that’s incalculable and useless I won’t say that, I’ll say I love you three hundred since that’s the number of shoes you bought last year.”

Pepper chuckled. “Okay, Antony. I love you, too, and I love you more than shoes.”

“More than a thousand pairs of shoes?”

“More than a thousand pairs of shoes,” she confirmed, kissing him again.

He started to fall back asleep and mumbled, “more than 2,000 pairs?”

She whispered, “Yes, Anthony, I love you 3,000.”

As the clip ended, he looked at his almost-wife with tears spilling down his face. “I mean it more today than I meant it that day, because I was just at the beginning of truly knowing you. I know more know about how fierce you are, how brilliant. I’ve seen you with Peter and I just can’t, Pep, you are incredible. I’ll never quite be worthy of being yours, but I swear to whatever diety you want me to that I will learn to believe I am. I love you, 3,000, Virginia Potts.”

She grabbed both sides of his face and pulled him in for a tender kiss. There was, Steve could confirm, not a dry eye in the chapel, not even Fury’s.

“How am I supposed to follow that?” Pepper muttered and wiped her eyes. “Well, I admit I enlisted some help.”
From around the back of Tony, Steve and Peter flurried around and grabbed a –

“No, you did not, Virginia,” Tony said incredulously and started nearly howling with laughter. “You didn’t!”

She grinned big, “I did.”

So, as Steve hit play on an ancient boom box, and Peter helped Pepper, she started to flip giant poster board cards.

_Tell everyone it’s our wedding._

“They know, babe.”

_So I guess now is the time_

_Since it’s Christmas and all_

“What the hell does Christmas have to do with any of this?! I mean, this is one of the fundamental flaws of this movie—“

“Can it, Stark,” Clint called from the audience.

_That I have loved you since the moment you spilled coffee on me._

“Really?”

_No, that’s a lie. I hated you then._

“Did you know I’d say that?”

_I knew I for sure that loved you when you sent me the pepper plant._

“I KNEW Grovel Protocol was gonna get me laid.”

“Children present,” MJ called sarcastically.

_I knew it again when you paid off Ciara’s loans and didn’t let me tell her._

“I KNEW IT,” came the cry from the back, and a chuckle from the audience.

_I knew it again when you came home to me,_

_And again when you built me the suit you didn’t let me use for another year,_

_And every time you cried helping me with the injections,_

_And when you trusted Kerry and Angie,_

_And every time you laughed with Steve,_

_And every time you taught Peter something new,_

_And when you were so brave on the veranda,_

_And when you built our family with your bare hands,_
Tony was unabashedly crying at this point, but managed to croak out, “None of that was without you, babe. None of it.”

She smiled at him, a watery one full of love, and flipped one last card.

_I adore you in all your forms, and I chose you for all our days._

She quietly handed that card to Peter and pressed stop on the boom box and pulled him in for a kiss.

Rhodey let the moment hold for a bit before saying quietly, “by the power vested in me by the State of New York and the trust you placed in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

____________________________________

Steve watched as Peter tentatively asked MJ to dance and grinned despite himself. Nudging Nat in the arm and signaling to them, he noticed Clint roll his eyes and reach into his wallet.

“What?” Steve said.

“I bet Clint $10 that Peter would ask her on the first couples dance,” Nat replied.

“And I told her it would be MJ asking,” Clint replied. “Fucking patriarchy ruining the party again.”

Steve laughed, and let his eyes wander through the small crowd and found his eyes land on his partners in the middle of the small dance floor. If he could freeze this moment, where Tony looked blissful and Pepper looked rested and they were bathed in joy – if they could live in this moment forever, he’d nearly trade his soul.

“Cap, a question,” Sam said, sliding into the chair next to Steve.

“Falcon, an answer,” Steve replied.

“The cards. What the fuck was that?”

Steve turned to him. “Have you never seen _Love, Actually_?”

“I live in the world, Steve, I’ve seen the fucking memes. But why was it in the wedding?”

“Oh, God, of course you don’t know the story,” Steve said apologetically. “We had Clint explain it to everyone before the wedding party came out, but you were with Rhodey, so of course. Well, this all happened when Tony was still a dick and Pepper was his PA.

“Tony could get a ticket to any premier or thing in the world, pretty much, so it was part of Pep’s benefits package that she could request tickets to, I think, 2 things per month? Maybe? And make him go with her or let her take someone else. The _Love, Actually_ premiere was in London and I think the story is he had meetings for SI because he famously protested her dragging him to a ‘schmoopy bullshit fantasy land in movie form with Professor Snape’,” Steve made the air quotes and grinned.

“Tony knows _Harry Potter_? I thought he hated magic,” Sam clarified.

Steve grinned. “I reiterate, that man has loved Pepper for a long ass time.”

Sam chuckled. “So, the cards.”

“Right, so they’re at the after party and Tony is, I’m sure you’re shocked, ranting up a storm about how terrible the movie was and somewhere in the middle, Pepper started laughing and pointed
behind him. Tony slowly turned to see Richard Curtis, who wrote and directed it, Emma Thompson, and Alan Rickman, who was wearing a particularly Snape face, according to Pepper, standing right behind him.

“Rickman thanked him for the critique, and the trio turned to Pepper and thanked her for SI’s generous donation to the children’s charity they were also fundraising for that night, and once they left, Pepper laughed so hard that they had to leave the party. It’s so rare for Tony to get… well, owned in that way, she has delighted in it ever since.

“So he has famously hated that movie, publicly refused to see it ever again, but has also helped Curtis produce every movie he’s made since, and helped out most every member of the cast and crew in some way. It’s like his never ending acknowledgement that Pepper’s joy makes him happy, even when it’s at his expense.

“For the record,” Steve paused to take a sip of his drink, “we watch it every Christmas and Tony always makes some remark about more than one lobster present at the birth of Jesus, so more than anything, it’s one of those couple stories that has taken on a life of its own.”

“So she owned him in her vows,” Sam grinned. “She is what my grandfather would call a brassy broad.”

“She’s what I call a brassy broad.” Steve laughed. “I’ve loved two women in my life and they are carbon copies of each other. Peggy liked it when I called her a dame, though, and Pepper rolls her eyes.”

At that moment, said brassy broad motioned to Steve to come dance with her. “Sorry, pal,” he slapped Sam on the back. “Duty calls.”

_____________________________________

“May’s having a good day,” Tony murmured to Pepper some time later, when they were taking a break from their guests.

“I’m glad you abandoned the hovercraft idea,” she replied.

He shrugged. “It’s not abandoned, it’s still in the tinkering phase.”

“The tinkering phase.”

“Yes, wife, the tinkering phase.”

“Well, husband… I have nothing to say to that.”

Tony chuckled and brought her in for a kiss. As they parted, she fingered his wedding ring. “I had no idea how much I would love seeing you wear that.”

“I knew how much I’d love wearing it,” he whispered.

She smiled, “Love you 3000”

“Love you 3000,” he murmured as their lips met.

_____________________________________

“Uncle Steve?”
The party was winding down and most of their guests had departed. Left in the giant backyard tent was pretty much just everyone who lived or was sleeping at the mansion.

“Yeah, buddy?”

“We can’t find Ned’s phone. He put it down and someone moved it, can you check the storage tenty thing for us?”

Steve smiled. This was the seventh or eighth time Ned had lost his phone since arriving the day before. “Of course.”

Grinning wryly to himself, he ventured through the constructed tunnel to where all the supplies were being stored for the reception. *I’m not sure I would have believed how much of my life as a parental figure is finding things they’ve lost.*

He entered the tent and his blood ran cold.

“Bucky?”

His voice cracked on the name, but he knew what he was seeing.

“Hi, Steve.”

Chapter End Notes

*ducks the flying rotten vegetables I'm sure are getting hurled*

We're done with 2014, faithful readers! What do you think of the vows? I know some of you may not love the appropriation of Tony and Morgan's moment from Endgame, but I simply could not resist weaving it in earlier.

And Peter! In a tux! God, I wish I could draw.

Coming Soon in 2015: Bucky and Steve have some conversations, Bucky and Tony have a few more, Peter's first date, and Pepper drags Tony to the Richard Rogers Theater where he learns a new definition of genius.
January, 2015

“So, Italy must have been fun,” Kerry raised an eyebrow.

Pepper rolled her eyes and flopped her chin down to her chest. “I will give Steve credit that he tried, he really did.”

“Any updates?”

Pepper shook her head. “Nat promises he’s safe and she’s got everything under control, and that Steve has to trust her, but Bucky isn’t ready to talk to him.”

“What phrase does Tony keep using?”

Pepper smirked, “2014 can do one. He’s starting to think the same about 2015.”

“Besides the heart-stopping reappearance of the Metal Armed Wonder,” Kerry said, “seriously, how was Italy?”

“It was a mixed bag,” Pepper admitted. “Tony pulled out all the stops, which surprised none of us, and he had Darcy and Delia help with a lot of it so even I was surprised. He and Peter planned a few really special things for May, and she asked if we could all plan her memorial service together while in Tuscany, and I’m honestly glad we did. She and Peter picked everything from what he would wear, to what songs she wanted played, and then she gave me a stack of letters she’s written him for big events after she’s gone.”

“Lord, that woman is something,” Kerry replied.

“She’s taught me a lot,” Pepper said. “She asked me to let him call me ‘mom’ if he’s ever ready, and to not fight it.”

“May, that’s too, there’s-“

“Pepper, it’s not. Let me explain, please. I loved my sister-in-law, but she wasn’t very maternal. She loved Peter, don’t get me wrong, but he flummoxed her. And we never talk about this, but she was very sick for a long time.”

“Oh, I had no idea.”

“I’ve never actually really told Peter, which I’m realizing now is a mistake. I’d hate for him to think his mom didn’t love him, not that he’s said anything, but he is super sensitive to anytime MJ or I have a headache, so I have a feeling Mary told him that a lot. He also nearly lost his mind when you had the flu earlier in the year, so… Anyway, I’m going to talk to him before we head home, but you should know Mary had fairly severe depression, which I’m convinced was only severe because she refused therapy and only took her medication when she felt like it, which is, you know, not how medication works. For a scientist, she was terrible with understanding the human system.”

“So what did Peter’s life look like? I can’t believe I’ve never asked you this,” Pepper confessed.
“He lived with us a lot, you knew that, but I know I’ve let you believe it was because his parents worked so much. But Ben worked from home, and I had flexible shifts, and we could never get pregnant and, God, we loved Peter. We just kind of… absorbed him. Ben was furious with Richard that Richard didn’t make Mary go on meds or anything, but Richard was…”

“Richard was terrible with other people’s problems,” Pepper smiled sadly. “It was like we all confused him.”

“We did, and his son did, and his wife did,” May confirmed. “I have no idea where this insane and innate goodness came from in Peter, because you need to know it’s not from his parents.”

“No,” Pepper said, grabbing her hand. “It is, it’s just not from his biology.”

May teared up, and nodded, and mouthed her thanks.

“So, Peter’s mom,” Pepper smiled through her own tears. “Thank you. Thank you for trusting us with your heart. I promise we will shepherd it well in your honor.”

“And now that you’re back, and Bucky is… wherever… how is Steve?”

“A goddamn mess,” Pepper said simply.

“And Tony?”

“A in-denial goddamn mess.”

“And Pepper?”

“Doing my best impression of a woman who knows what the fuck she’s doing.”

“Friday?”

“Yes, Boss?”

Tony cocked an eyebrow. “Yes, that works. We’ll keep that one. Black Sabbath today, Friday.”

“Yes, Boss.”

For the next several hours, Tony worked on a new prototype of a 3-D printer he was messing around with, trying to figure out how to make it more portable after a particular conversation he had with Shuri when she was over for the wedding.

“Boss, Dr. Widmeyer is on the phone.”

“Tell him I’ll call him back,” Tony said.

“He said you would say that, and wanted me to remind you that you’ve been saying that for two weeks.”


“Anthony,” the doctor’s voice rang through the workshop. “You’re avoiding me, which I normally would be okay with, but you have some things going on.”
“Doc, everything here is its normal dumpster fire, so I don’t have anything to report on.”

“Right.”

The therapist let the silence hold, knowing that Tony would eventually fill it. “Something is wonky between Steve and Pepper but I’m being good and not meddling and so I don’t know what’s happening and you know how much I love that, but I’m being good.” He punctuated those last three words with wrench twists.

“May is slowly crumbling and is basically on permanent bedrest, also MJ is the best thing that’s happened to Peter, but he’s getting real close to the age I was when I first started fucking around and if I was his age, I wouldn’t keep my hands off MJ but I am not the person to do the birds and the bees talk, especially since he keeps claiming she’s not his girlfriend, so right now I’m just ignoring that, oh, and, you know, massive international conspiracy to kill me and my boyfriend, so that’s pleasant. Finally, we’re losing Steve just like I said we would and you told me I was crazy, and I’m not, and now it’s happening, so fuck you and him, and like I said, doc, normal dumpster fire.”

“How are you losing Steve?”

“He won’t put his phone down in case Nat calls with news, he hasn’t initiated any conversation about anything other than Bucky since Italy, and the only thing he was interested in doing with me was sex, but I told him, I used feeling words, doc, and I told him that was making me feel used if I wasn’t also getting conversation, god that was as painful as ripping my heart out through my toenails but I thought it would be worth it, and it wasn’t, because now I have nothing with him.”

“I am positive you don’t have nothing.”

“Fine. He’ll talk to me on the phone.”

“The phone?”

“Pep has me doing a bunch of R&D meetings right now and I’m on planes a lot. If I call, he’ll answer and it feels normal. In the same house? Weird as fuck.”

“What does the house feel like?”

Tony thought for a minute, “fucking weird. Like we’re in a giant game of keepaway from each other.”

“All five of you?”

“Yeah,” Tony said slowly.

“So who takes the first step to fix that?”

“How?”

“Not me,” Tony said, a tone of finality in his voice.

“Tony.”

“Aw, fuck, fine. FINE.”

“Good. Call me after.”

“Probably won’t.”

“I’ll just stalk you again.”
“Aren’t there boundaries you are supposed to be maintaining?”

Dr. Widmeyer chuckled through the phone. “International conspiracies regarding your death, a polyamorous relationship with a national icon and your CEO, adopting a superhero… Let’s just say I’m always a little worried your martyr complex is going to win out over your greater angels.”

“For the last time, it is a GOD complex.”

“Yes, Tony.”

“Nat, please,” Steve’s tone was pleading. “Please. When I close my eyes, all I can see is that moment in the tent and it’s killing me.”

“Steve, he’s just not ready.”

“THEN WHY DID HE COME AT ALL!??”

Nat sighed. “Because Bucky wants to be there, but he can’t be Bucky all the time. I know Sam explained this.”

“Hi, Steve.”

Steve was speechless.

“It is Steve, right? You are?” Bucky mumbled, confused. The metal hand ran through his tangled hair.

“Yeah, Buck, it’s me,” Steve barely got the words out before he crossed the tent and folded Bucky into a hug.

Which Bucky immediately tore himself away from.

The pair stood staring at each other for a few breaths, as Steve’s confused heart started to break, when Nat’s voice came down the hall.

“Steve, they found the kid’s phone, you don’t have to – fuck.” She came up short at the sight of Bucky.

At the sight of Natasha, Bucky’s eyes clouded back over and he abruptly turned and left the tent. Steve jumped to go after him, but Nat’s arm grabbed his. “No, not yet. I’ll go.”

That was the last time Steve had seen either of them.

“Where are you? Is Sam still with you?”

“Sam’s been and gone, and you know I’m not telling you where we are,” Nat said gently. “Cap, do you trust me?”

Steve sighed.

“Steven.”

“Yes, Natasha, of course I do.”
“Then trust me with your boy,” she said firmly as she hung up.

Steve threw his phone across the room in frustration with a howl of pain. It had been almost six weeks since the wedding and he could barely feel any emotional solid ground beneath his feet. Tony and Pepper kept checking in with him and he kept telling them he was fine and he knew they knew he was lying and it was eating him alive.

However, he also had no idea how to be different.

“Captain Rogers, Mr. Stark is on the line.”

“Patch him through, Friday,” Steve sighed.

“Handsome, do I have stories for you, there was this place where they actually thought I wanted to eat sushi off a human person like I’m a, I don’t know, Philistine, because even when I was a total slut, I would never want to eat fish that had touched a human that I didn’t know where they’d been, it’s like these people didn’t even do their research on me, sorry baby, how are you.”

With every inane dependent clause in Tony’s monologue, Steve felt his jaw unclenching and knots unraveling.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re a damn liar, but you’re far away and I miss you so I’m letting it pass,” Tony sighed. “No word?”

“Nat told me Sam has seen him, but she still won’t tell me where they are or how long she thinks they’ll be. She’s promised me that if we get called to assemble that Sam will take care of Buck, but Buck still doesn’t want to see me, and I’m not even sure he even remembers me-“

“Babe, you have got to breathe.”

Steve took a deep breath.

“How’s our girl?”

“I…”

“Yeah, she told me.”

Steve was quiet.

“Steven.”

“Anthony.”

“I swear, Steven, whatever you think you’re doing, you’re wrong.”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose and relived, for at least the seventieth time, the flight back from Italy.

“Can you talk to me?” Pepper whispered.

“Are you still mad at me?”

“I’m not mad, Steve, I’m just really worried.”
“Me too.”

They sat in silence for a little while, before Pepper grabbed his hand and whispered, “if you are going to go after him, if you’re going to leave Peter right now in this season of his life, if you are, I get it, but just do it now. I love you so very much, so much it hurts me, and I wish I could take this from you, I wish I could find him and bring him to you and I wish, but I can’t, and I don’t know what you’re going to do, but if you’re going to leave, I just ask that you do it now.”

“Pepper, I’m not going anywhere,” Steve said strongly.

“I know you think that,” Pepper teared up. “But you haven’t been with us since the wedding and it feels like you slowly already are and I have no idea what you feel like right now and I don’t want to pretend I do, but I’m just going to remind you that part of the commitment we made when we said yes to May and to Peter is that he comes first.”

“I know that, Pep,” Steve ground out. “And honestly, fuck you that you’d even… you think I’ve forgotten that? That I would forget my duty, my responsibility, my job just because… No. Are you looking for an exit strategy? Now that you’ve married Tony are you ready to be done with me? Are you using reverse psychology on me and making me leave? Huh? Is that it? Because fuck you.”

Pepper felt like someone had smacked her. “No, Steven. Tony and I talk to each other like this, you and I do not. I don’t know what’s happening in your brain, but I… I’m barely holding things together here and…” She got up from her chair and walked back to Peter.

He hadn’t spoken to her since.

“One of our commitments has been that we won’t be the go-between,” Tony reminded Steve, “so that’s not what this is. What this is instead, is my small reminder that you’re making our girl cry and I have a feeling you are beating the shit out of yourself for snapping at her and I don’t even know what you said and I don’t want to, but we got a potential assassin who is maybe also your best friend, an international terrorist organization crafting lies about us, and a dying woman who is giving us her kid, and I’m thinking strife in the ranks is not our best strategy, but you’re the Captain and I’m just the money man, so maybe you have a better idea?”

The longer Tony talked, the terser his voice got, so by the end, he was nearly snapping at Steve.

Conversely, the longer Tony talked, the more the fight went out of Steve.

“When are you home?” Steve asked.

“Um, I think another ten hours. Not sure.”

“It’ll be fixed when I see you next.”

“Hi, I fucked up.”

After Steve got off the phone with Tony he went for a long run and processed out the best way to apologize to Pepper. He still wasn’t entirely sure why he said what he had said to her, or why he was so mad at her, but he knew that one of Pepper’s chief complaints about how he communicated was that he beat around the bush too much.

For her to know he was serious, he had to just come out and apologize, so he spent the final mile rehearsing.
When he got back to the house, he learned from Friday that Pepper was at the punching bag in the gym.

She grabbed the bag to stop it but didn’t turn to look at him. “You did. I wasn’t great either.”

“I don’t even know what… I’m not making any excuses, I’m sorry.”

She turned slowly. “Thank you.”

They were both quiet for a moment, neither moving, until Pepper finally said, “you scared me.”

Steve felt like someone had hit him. “I… how?”

“I didn’t recognize the man who was talking to me as the man who loved me and I got scared,” Pepper shrugged. “It was new for me. Tony has always been himself, even when he’s terrible, I’ve always known him and could figure out why he was awful. You? It’s not like it didn’t come out of nowhere, but those words? Your tone? I couldn’t track that and I… I know you’re sorry, I’m not discounting that, but I want you to know that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

“What can I do?”

“Sort your shit, babe,” Pepper replied. “You need to choose to trust us. You’ve done it before, and you need to do it again. And on the days you can’t trust him, trust in me, and trust in us. Choose us. You know that wedding wasn’t about excluding you, you know I’d walk down an aisle to you tomorrow if you want to, you know I chose you just as much as I chose him.”

“I do choose you, all of you,” Steve protested.

“I need to be really honest, Steve, since that night it just doesn’t feel like it, and I got a lot of evidence that is communicating to us that you’ve got one foot in with us and one foot out and Peter is not the only one around here hyper sensitive to people abandoning them. And when Nat brings… him back in the next few weeks or months or whenever, I just want you to not lose yourself so hard in the hope of next that you forget what you already have.”

Before he had a chance to respond, she kissed the crown of his head and left the room.

“Play it again.”

MJ and Peter were on a couch in the Mansion’s library, watching videos from the playlist MJ had created that night. They’d returned to it many times since.

“You’re being weirder than normal,” MJ said quietly. “I’ve been here for about three hours and I haven’t heard anything about the lab or whatever Butterfingrs dropped this week or how you’re working with Tony on something. Normally, by now I’m nearly sick of you.”

Peter’s mouth twisted into a smile… of sorts. MJ’s heart clenched. Since they got back from Italy, she felt like she was the only one in this whole mess who was worried about Peter and that wasn’t great. In her mind, Pepper and Steve were in charge of his emotions, Tony was in charge of his brain, and she was there for distractions, sarcasm, and snacks. For the last month, she’d been in
charge of everything and she was way out of her depth.

“They’re still weird,” Peter said. “Everything feels weird. I know you tell me I’m too sensitive, but the house feels wrong. Pepper gave me permission to go patrolling this week and that didn’t even make me feel better because the whole time I was worried I was missing something important that would make me understand why everything feels so off.”

MJ grabbed his hand and they sat quietly for a few minutes. Finally, she summoned her bravery, and asked, “what can I do?”

Peter blushed a bit. “Can we maybe…”

“Spit it out, Parker,” MJ said.

“God, this is so-“

“Peter, just tell me what you need.”

“Hold me. Can you?” It came out in a rush, and MJ was surprised at the feeling of disappointment in her that he’d feel weird about asking. They held hands, a lot, and she realized she wasn’t as freaked out by it as she was at first, and she should have realized that this was important to him.

“I get to be the big spoon,” was her response as she rearranged her body on the couch to accommodate him. She chose to ignore the tears glistening in her eyes. *God, he carried so much, so fucking much.*

They laid like that for a while, with the playlist rolling on Peter’s phone, not really speaking, until Friday let them know MJ’s mom was there to pick her up.

“Peter,” MJ said as she was gathering her things. “Just tell me what you need. Whatever you need. If I can give it, you have it, no judgement. I’m on your team, Bug Boy, remember that.”

He rolled his eyes, blushed, and gave her a hug as she departed. As he wound his way through the rest of the house to get to his room, he realized he felt better than he had in weeks.

_______________________________________

“Again.”

They were in one of Nat’s safehouses – this one in remote Manitoba – learning how to separate Barnes from Bucky from the Soldier. It was an arduous process. Sam came about every ten days, and even though he kept reminding Nat he was a bunch of hours short of his therapist’s license, he was the only one she trusted with their patient.

Bucky gritted his teeth, and replied, “I am Sargent James Buchannan Barnes from Brooklyn, New York. It is 2015 and I am in Canada. Your name is Natasha Romanov. My best friend from before is Steve Rogers and he is still Captain America. My body has been used and my brain controlled by Hydra for 70 years, but I am not the soldier, I am James.”

“Good, and who am I?”

“The asset’s girlfriend.”

“That’s not what the asset was told to call her.”

“Jesus Christ, Nat, I can’t… and it’s never what I felt, we were…, and you know that, and when I’m
myself, please don’t make me say it.”

“Sam said you have to. You have to keep separating out actions and words that your body was forced to do as the asset, versus the things you did under your own free will!” Nat pounded her fist into her hands. “Who am I to you?”

Bucky smirked. “Who do you want to be, doll?”

Nat rolled her eyes. “Asshole, what I mean is that to the asset, I was what?”

“A reward,” he whispered, the word scraping out of his throat.

“And to you, James Buchannan Barnes, who am I?”

“My… not reward.”

“I’ll take it.”

When Nat first followed Bucky out of that tent, she knew she was never letting him out of her sight again. He led her to a makeshift shelter he had constructed in the woods behind the Mansion, which he told her he’d been living in for around a week, since she had lost him in Newfoundland.

“I saw you in Ireland.”

“I know,” she said quietly. They had been sitting in silence for about two hours and Bucky seemed to have resigned himself to having Nat as his permanent accessory.

“I feel like I have three sets of memories.”

“I did for a while,” she confessed. “The child I was, the asset I was, and the ones that weren’t true but they created to keep me paranoid.”

Bucky nodded. “The person I was is attached to Steve, the asset comes with this arm, but anything with the arm, I can’t tell if it’s real or not.”

“But you know Steve is real?”

“In Boston, when I saw him, it’s the first face that made sense in a long fucking time,” Bucky whispered. “Only two faces have ever felt that way.”

Nat held her breath. She wasn’t sure how she’d feel if he remembered, if he connected the woman she was now with the one she was when she was his.

“His and yours, lyumbimaya.”

She learned a lot that night. The cryofreezing had started failing a few years before and instead of fully freezing him between missions, they had simply kept him locked up and tranquillized. Because his brain wasn’t fully turned off, as it were, the memories of his Barnes life – as they had started calling that – were staring to poke through.

Later, much later, Kerry – via hologram call – explained that Bucky’s brain had most likely split itself as a protective measure when the brainwashing started. The solider was almost a dissociative state and with therapy and medication and whole lot of willpower, it was entirely likely that he could function in modern society as a non-Hydra agent.

“Will I ever be…” Bucky asked her. It had been a particularly bad day, after a really hard night.
Nightmares and flashbacks – he couldn’t always tell the difference between them – had him up most of the night and he had given Nat one fucking hell of a black eye, which was eating him nearly alive.

“I don’t believe in normal, James, you’ll come to learn that about me,” Kerry smiled. “I’m not a therapist, but I do know trauma and I know that the human brain is a miraculous thing. For some reason, with everything you’ve been through, your brain kept pieces of truth protected from the evil you were subjected to. The withdrawals you describe when you escaped from Romania tell me they had you on some serious drugs to keep you in heel, which also tells me they were afraid of you.”

Bucky snorted. “If they weren’t then, they fucking should be now.”

“That’s the spirit, James,” Kerry said. “Destroy those motherfuckers.”

“Sam told me to give you six weeks and we’re coming up on that pretty quickly.”

Bucky played with his fingers for a bit. “You’re telling me that Stevie’s in love, right?”

Nat smiled. “Yeah, and they love him a lot, too. And they’re kind of adopting this kid.”

“Stevie’s a dad?!” Bucky’s entire face brightened. “Now, this, I gotta see.”

“I’m just gonna level with you guys, Steve is not reacting how I thought he would,” Sam confessed to Pepper and Tony one morning in late January.

“He’s kind of taking us aback as well,” Pepper replied. “Like, we knew Bucky was a big deal, of course he was, but—”

“One of our problems is that no one who knew them both together is still alive, or cognizant enough to help,” Sam said. “I’ve tracked down each of the Howling Commandos and they’ve all passed on, and then Agent Carter…”

“Yeah, Aunt Peggy can’t really help us now,” Tony confessed sadly. “I tried, even, I went to her and showed some pictures in the hopes that something would trigger and all I did was send her into a pretty bad episode and Sharon yelled at me so loudly she rivaled Pepper and we promised we wouldn’t go back.”

“He’s skipped his last four therapy appointments,” Sam told them, “and Nat said Bucky wants to try coming back, so I have a few concerns. One is that Steve is so confused and numb to all of this that when Bucky shows back up, he’ll trick himself into thinking he’s fine, but then when Bucky has his first flashback, Steve will crumble. Two, Bucky will be just different enough that it throws off Steve’s equilibrium, and three, that Steve will have to face that Bucky may not have been in love with him the way Steve was with Bucky, which is not something he had to face before.”

“Still in love,” Tony whispered. “Still.”

“Babe,” Pepper said.

“No, Pep, the face he makes when he talks about that man is the one he gets when he looks at you.”

Pepper grabbed his hand and leaned into his shoulder, wishing not for the first time that she could absorb his pain instead of him carrying it.
“Steve.”

“Nat.”

“Tomorrow. We’re on our way, I told Tony and Pep to get Peter out of the house. We’ll see you at 0900.”

Chapter End Notes

('lyumbimaya' is - according to google - russian for 'beloved')

The last major fanfic I wrote was over a decade ago, and it dealt with re-entry syndrome and international politics and I can't ever seem to keep away from 'real' life. I'd love to write fluff, I swear to Thor, but I can't seem to help picking apart their brains and souls.

All that to say, I promise two things right now: we have a ways to go and I know these guys are going to be painful to hang with, but trust me, they're going to make it worth your while, and I have moments of this story outlined all the way through 2035.

Thanks for your trust and your time. I cherish all the comments and absolute adore hearing from you on what resonates and where you hope our crew is headed. Seriously, you can choose to read any story on this gorgeous site and I don't take it for granted that you've chosen to invest in this one.
“Steve, stop pacing,” Pepper said lazily. “The tracker says they’ll be here in a few minutes and if you’re pacing, it’s going to look weird.”

Without looking up from his tablet, Tony shoved a breakfast smoothie in Steve’s direction. Steve scowled, but picked it up.

Peter was, strategically, at school for this part of the reunion, largely because between Nat and Pepper they thought of everything. Steve was, not for the first time, immensely grateful. He felt like his skin was the only thing keeping him from going everywhere at once.

"I’m not supposed to hug him, or initiate any kind of physical contact, Steve reminded himself. He wants me to call him Bucky, but Nat has told other folks to call him Barnes for a bit. This piece is about reattaching memories to reality.

One of the things they’d all learned about brainwashing over the last six weeks is that it’s largely memory manipulation. Hydra, therefore, could train Bucky to have different memories of things they knew he knew – his nationality, his friendships, his allegiances. The things they didn’t know, they couldn’t take from him. So that his favorite thing to steal was bananas, and that he had a thing for seamed stockings, and that he knew exactly how to stop Steve’s asthma attacks – those things just had to be reconnected. Sam had explained it like those truths were free floating in Bucky’s brain and all they had to do was anchor them into a reality.

Nat, Sam, and Kerry had done the hard parts, the disciplined and risky parts, of helping Bucky to place himself in reality. Now it was time for Steve to help him sort through some memories.

“Thirty-four minutes out,” Friday said calmly.

“Thanks, Friday,” Pepper said, taking a sip of her coffee and eyeing Steve. She glanced at Tony, who nodded briskly, and she rose from her seat and went to him.

“Steve,” Pepper whispered, stopping his pacing by grabbing his face. “Two years ago, we thought he was dead, two months ago, we weren’t sure he’d even remember you, and two days ago he agreed to come home. Focus on those miracles, dearest, and breathe with me.”

As stood, breathing together, Tony made his way to stand behind Steve. Something they’d all learned is that when Steve felt the least emotionally safe, he mentally reverted to pre-serum and it was best for Tony and Pepper to create a sandwich of sorts.

Tony started talking, his voice low. “Steven. This is one of those moments where if you slip into Captain mode, I will sic Nat on you. You need to be Steve here, fully, no matter how hard it hurts. Don’t argue with me, I can hear you thinking, and I am a genius, and Kerry gave me very specific notes on what to say to you this morning if you started doing… this bullshit. So knock it off.”

Steve nodded, rolling his eyes even as his breathing regulated.

“Steven,” Pepper followed up, her voice equally as low. “Loving him is not selfish.” Steve felt her words like an arrow. She continued, “I’ve been trying to figure out for months why you’ve been freaking out so much. You roll with so much, you take so much on the chin and just handle it, and
this has sent you into… I’ve thought long and hard and your kryptonite is feeling selfish, I know, we’ve talked about it, and so I started to wonder if that’s what this was. If you felt selfish for loving him, like we’d take offense or something, and so you started punishing yourself and here we are. Am I…”

“Maybe,” Steve whispered.

“Okay, Friday, time check,” Pepper said a little louder. Friday told them they had 20 minutes. “Thanks, Friday. So here’s what I think sounds like a good plan. I say we go sit on the couch, and you’re going to let us hold you, and maybe I’ll tell you the things I love about you and Tony will be sarcastic and potentially demeaning and we’ll remind you of what you told Peter all those years ago – love is an expanding entity, not a contracting one. Sound good?”

Which is exactly how Nat and Bucky found them, some thirty minutes later.

“Sorry,” Nat said as they entered. “Fucking deer out here, someone hit one and it was… Anyway. We’re here.”

Pepper stood gracefully and turned her attention to the bashful man, shuffling his feet and not making eye contact. “James?” He looked up. “I’m Pepper, and I’m really glad to meet you.” She extended her hand – which Steve knew was against Kerry’s recommendations, as was ‘James’, so Pepper had to be up to something.

Steve could see the effort Bucky was making to look at Pepper, but he did it. Eye contact made, he took three decisive steps and met her hand. “Stevie’s ma is the last person that called me that and I’d like to keep it that way. Barnes is fine.”

And there was that devastating grin, the one that was so quintessentially Bucky that Steve felt his knees nearly buckle.

“Barnes it is then,” Tony said, in his typical bombast. “Tony, or Stark if Tony’s too familiar.”

“You have his smile,” Bucky said quickly and Pepper noticed Tony’s smile fade just a touch.

“And supposedly his sleep apnea, but we try to keep that under wraps.” Tony stretched out his hand, following Pepper’s lead, and Bucky tentatively took it.

Now there was nothing between them, Bucky finally looked at Steve. “Hiya, punk.”

Steve took a deep breath as the tears gathered. “Hiya, Buck.”

The two just stared at each other for a few minutes, before Bucky looked back at Nat briefly, who smiled. Bucky then nearly launched himself at Steve in a bear hug and soon the two men were crying together and talking over each other.

“Should we leave them alone?” Pepper looked at Nat.

“Yeah, but kitchen, maybe? Let’s stay within earshot for a bit.”

Tony waved her off. “Barnes hasn’t been alone in six weeks. Friday, you got this?”

“Yes, Boss.”

Tony turned to give Nat a hug and Pepper a quick kiss. “I’m… workshop.”
“You know, DUM-E, I think I was pretty together up there. I held my own, I was moderately sarcastic, perhaps even charming, and I didn’t throw up, and I didn’t even punch him when he mentioned Howard. All in all, I call this a serious success.”

DUM-E and You whirred around Tony, making their sounds of assent. He needed his hands to be busy and the room to be loud, so he’d asked for Pink Floyd as loud as he could tolerate it. Which is why he was slightly shocked to see Pepper standing on the other side of his table, one eyebrow raised and a mug of coffee in her hand.

“Friday, off, how long?” He asked Pepper, accepting the coffee.

“You’ve been down here for six hours and Friday told me you’ve given DUM-E that speech around ten times. We finalized that deal with that asshat in Singapore, by the way, but I still need the working prototype for the Brazilian one.”

“With the wheels?”

“No, the other one.”

He indicated to the workbench. “That’s almost done, I just need to re-wire two of the motherboards and then I can send it to QA.”

Pepper nodded. “And in budget?”

“Oh God no, Pep. Have you met me?”

She rolled her eyes. “They went for a walk.”

Tony went back to fiddling. “Good.”

“Nat’s given us a list of accidentally triggering things that we should avoid.”

“Okay.”

“Steve seems really relived.”

“Good.”

“What will stop you giving me one-word answers and freaking the fuck out of me?”

Tony smirked playfully. “Fucking.”

She checked her watch and bit her bottom lip. *I mean, it's not the worst distraction he’s come up with.* “I have a call in ten minutes. Meet me in my office in twenty, you’re a good excuse as any to get off the call.”

He smiled as she rounded the bench to kiss him briefly.

“Oh, and please shower, motor oil still is not my kink, no matter how hard you try.”

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“Peter, this is Sargent Barnes,” Steve said.

“Nah, kid, drop that. Barnes is fine,” Bucky said as he stuck out his hand to the kid.
“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Barnes,” Peter said as Bucky protested.

“He’s still going to call you Mr. Barnes or Sargent Barnes, whether you want him to not,” Steve laughed. “I was Captain Rogers for a solid eight months.”

“I’ll take Sargent over mister, okay?” Bucky said.

Peter nodded and worried his bottom lip a bit. Nat had warned Bucky about this.

“Hey, kid,” Bucky said, getting Peter’s attention. “I’m sorry the soldier tried to kill you.”

“You were just doing your job,” Peter said resolutely, clearly trying hard to be the superhero and not the 13-year-old boy who was looking at the man who had tried to kill his family.

“Yeah, but that job was shitty. I’m looking for a new one,” Bucky replied.

“Well, Auntie Pep knows everyone, so I’m sure she’ll help. We’ll make sure you get a better job.” Peter supplied.

Bucky laughed, and looked at Steve like *is this kid for real?* At Steve’s affirmative grin, Bucky grinned at Peter. “I’m learning that she does. But hey, Nat and I were talking and she said she was training you, is that true?”

“And so is Uncle Steve,” Peter replied.

“Well, I’m not quite ready yet, but whuddya say we go a few rounds once I am? I’ve been watching some video and I think I have a trick that’ll help you get rid of that blindspot on your 9.” Peter’s entire face lit up and Bucky was so glad he had listened to Steve.

“I just want to know your kid, ya mook,” Bucky said.

“Buck, I want that, too, I’m just saying he’s got a lot of parents right now and so let’s go slow.”

“Fine, fine, what do you say I do?”

Steve flexed his hands nervously, “Could you teach him how to fight?”

“He knows how to fight. Nat had me watch videos. Scared the shit out of me, thinking that was a kid.”

“God, the first night we figured it out, I actually threw up, and then Pep came home and told us May had asked Tony to mentor him, and we realized it was the best, because now Tony could at least build him a suit.”

“Stark makes the suits?”

“He makes everything,” Steve said, with the twinge of awe in his voice he always got talking about Tony, and Bucky smirked.

“You’ve got it bad, Stevie.”

“Buck, I-“

Bucky held up his hand. “It’s been a goddamn age since we were last together. I’d be pissed if you hadn’t lived some of it.”
A whoosh of emotional relief went through Steve that Bucky maybe remembered their final night in Italy, the things Steve had said and Bucky had said back and how it had gone so far beyond warm bodies and caretaking. Or, at least he hadn’t lost their history entirely.

“And Pepper is quite the able grable, pal,” Bucky smirked.

Steve laughed. “God, I haven’t heard that in … but yeah, she fucking is. And a dame to top it off. The whole package, Buck.”

“Like Pegs?”

“No,” Steve said quietly.

“You dance with this one?”

“Every damn chance I get.”

The two sat in silence for a few minutes before Bucky broke it. “So, the kid. Training. I’m not ready to spar with anyone I can break yet.”

“I’m not sure you can break him, but it’s on your schedule, Buck. Nothing happens without your permission and consent.”

“Of all the tricks Natasha tried, asking me for an opinion is what finally got through to me.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Steve said. “You were never short of those.”

Bucky threw a throw pillow at him, as Steve ducked and laughed.

“Really? Because I have so many questions about how you – the solider – what am I supposed to call that whole thing? Anyway, so many questions. Did Uncle Steve tell you I studied you and him? I wrote papers and I hate writing papers but I used to have a lot of time on my hands because my mother had a lot of headaches and my dad collected your comic books. Wait, do you know you’re in comics? Uncle Steve didn’t. Should I-“

“Whoa, kid,” Bucky laughed and threw up a hand as a stop sign. “We got time. Take a breath.”

At that moment, Friday called to Steve and said there was a call for him from Fury. He excused himself, leaving Bucky and Peter alone in the sitting room. Bucky knew that was not a small act of trust, and literally sat on his hands to control himself.

They made some small talk, Bucky asking Peter a lot of questions that he already knew the answers to just to keep the kid talking. The more he did, the more he understood why everyone he met would die for Peter. He was quickly adding himself to those ranks.

“Sargent?” Peter’s voice cracked in the way Bucky remembered from being his age. Cracked with the weight of what he was trying to say, like he was putting on an adult costume for a minute.

“Yes, Peter,” Bucky made sure to use his name.

“Are you going to make ‘em cry again?”

Assuming he meant Steve, Bucky said, “No, he’s my family, and now that I’m back in my own brain, I mean to stay that way.”

“Right, I figured that about Uncle Steve, but I wasn’t talking about him. You’ve been making all my
parents cry and it’s been really stressful.”

Bucky sat in silence, hoping the hyper-verbal kid would take over and was not disappointed.

“My life is really fucking weird,” he paused, clearly assuming he’d get reprimanded for language, before remembering Bucky wasn’t part of that, “and I know that. I have or have had, basically, seven parents, and then this rotating group of other adults, most of whom could kill me with a pinky finger before I got powers and now accept that I’m part spider with no questions.

“The fact that Uncle Steve and Uncle Tony love each other and Aunt Pepper loves them and Aunt Pepper and Uncle Tony are married is, honestly, the least complicated part of my life, and I was sure that this year would just be hard with Aunt May dying, but then you showed back up at the wedding and Uncle Steve was so weird, which made Uncle Tony and Aunt Pepper weird, and everything was weird. It was WEIRD, Sargent.”

“I’m sorry it was weird,” Bucky said. “I didn’t realize.”

“I know you didn’t, Nat and Sam and Miss Kerry explained, and I’m not stupid. But now you’re telling me your brain is back and they said you’re gong to try to live here and that’s great, but now that you do realize, I need you to promise me you’re not going to make them sad or weird anymore. I love them and they are the best things in my life and I know you’re stronger than me, but I’ll still break you if you do this again. I will. I promise.”

The kid was barely controlling his emotions, and as shovel speeches went, Bucky figured it was one of the best he’d heard. The endearing mix of childhood narcissism, with the superhero ideals, and the basic goodness of a kid who knew he was loved… Bucky was legitimately impressed. He’d seen his share of childhood bravado back in Brooklyn – and participated in his share as well – but Peter was something.

“I promise I’m not going to make any of them weird anymore, Peter. You have my word.”

Satisfied, the kid nodded. “Good. Now, important question.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you had one of Nat’s cupcakes yet?”

“Nat’s cupcakes?” That wasn’t a euphemism, right? The kid wasn’t…

“Yeah, she stress bakes. Did she not do that in Canada? Oh, boy, we froze a few before the wedding and I’ve been letting them defrost. Come on!”

Bucky laughed and let himself be pulled into the kitchen.

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February, 2015

“What the fuck am I going to?”

“The Broadway premiere of Hamilton,” Pepper patiently explained. “This is the hip hop musical Peter and MJ got so excited about last summer? Remember? God of course you don’t, you were in boxes, but I’ve told you since then.”
“Right, the Public. We’re producers?” Tony fiddled with his bow tie. “I hate bow ties.”

“Bow ties are cool,” Pepper smirked.

“No, 11th Doctor, they are not, but I know you and Steve like them and I’d like to get laid tonight as some sort of payment for this insane waste of my time, three hours, Pepper, really, so I’m wearing one.”

“I can easily get MJ to go with me instead,” Pepper calmly informed him. “She has been vine-ing? Memeing? I’m unclear, everything about this musical for months.”

“MJ seems far too cool to be lulled into the nerdiness of people bursting into song at random intervals about their lost cows or whatever.”

“For the last time, Oklahoma is not about cows. Jesus.”

Tony continued to grumble through the limo ride. He put it on hold for the red carpet, as he always did, and glad handed the appropriate people, and posed for photos with some that Pepper had to remind him who they were. By the time they got to their seats, his extroversion of being PublicStark was wearing him out. It had been months since he’d had to wear this particular skin, and now that he knew he had alternative ways of living, this way exhausted him.

Pepper made small talk with the couple seated next to them, and Tony checked his phone, until he noticed a man striding onto the stage and the first downbeat hit. And then his jaw hit his chest and didn’t rise back up until intermission.

He whispered to Pepper that he’d be back and headed out to the lobby to make a phone call. He made it back by the end of intermission and smiled at Pepper briefly. “Holy fuck.”

“I told you,” she said, smirking.

“I… holy fuck.”

“Yup.”

And then the second act started. He was fine until Alexander met Mariah Reynolds and then he felt himself clenching his fists in frustration. I know that feeling, Hamilton. When you’re exhausted and you can’t, but you should have known your strength was in your family. You should have known it wasn’t in you. Then Phillip went to the duel and all Tony could see was Peter, and he realized that he and Pepper were near clinging to each other. By the curtain call, Tony felt like he had run a marathon in the presence of genius.

They went to the afterparty, not surprised to hear from everyone they met exuding the same thing. At one point, Pepper checked Tony’s watch and told Tony it was time to head. Tonight had been an experiment of sorts – they left Steve and Bucky completely alone in the house for a movie night, but they were still finding unknown triggers and so doing anything new was a gamble. Time limits helped.

As they made their way home, Pepper promised herself she wasn’t going to say that she told him so as he rambled on, PEPPER, I mean, PEPPER, what even was that? I have never cried at anything like that before and I felt like I was Steve watching It’s a Wonderful Life in there during the second act, why didn’t you warn me his kid died?! She did jump in there. “I just feel that it doesn’t count as a spoiler alert when it happened in the 19th century.”
“Pepper, when have I ever given any fucks about anything that happened before Steve was born.”

“Fair point,” she smiled. “So if I buy tickets to take MJ and Peter—“

“I am coming. And so is Steve, and probably every other person I’ve ever met because everyone needs to see it. Oh, also, did I fawn over the cast? And the main dude? I felt like I fawned.”

“Oh, no, you were perfectly normal,” Pepper assured him, biting the inside of her lip to keep from laughing at the lie.

Later that night, as they got ready for bed, Pepper and Steve caught each other’s eye. As Tony ranted about the wonder of the musical, Steve whispered to Pepper. “Level of one to that time in London, how fawny was he?”

“Oh, Steve, I took video,” as she passed him her phone, barely containing her giggles.

“We have a week left,” Tony said to Nick on the hologram. “Are we sure.”

“Tony, we are as fine as we can be without being mind readers or magicians.”

“Don’t you have court magicians or something?”

“Of course! Why didn’t I think of that! Because it’s 1656 and that’s a real thing,” Nick snarked.

They had both been up for several days, working with Fury and Janelle and Friday to scour all of the servers they knew about. Bucky had given them some valuable intel about where he remembered bases and they had been fairly systematic in destroying the servers. However, none of them underestimated Hydra and they knew there was only so much they could do.

At this point, there was a Hydra version of an APB out on Bucky, but they were proceeding with the leak plan since Tony and Steve were still alive.

“I still say you come here, everyone,” Nick said.

“I’m afraid if we leave the U.S. something will happen where we can’t get back in easily, your generous diplomatic immunity notwithstanding, and I’m not dragging Pepper away from SI right now since we have that—“

Nick cut him off. “I’ve met your wife and there is no power on this planet strong enough to pry her away from you right now, so I’d recommend not trying. And that includes your boyfriend.”

“I hate it when you’re right,” Tony growled.

“You hate it whenever someone who is not you is right,” Nick snarked back.

Tony flipped him off and flopped back in his chair. “So we wait?”

“We wait.”

Chapter End Notes
This *entire* story started with the plot bunny I had of realizing that Tony and Hamilton had a whole lot in common - including that the women in their lives were the power behind their genius. 75k words later and I'm up to my original plotting point. I'm a weirdo.

So, what are you guys thinking?! What did you think of our wee Peter defending his family?
“Well,” Tony said as his phone lit up with notifications. “I was wondering who would make the Howard comparison. Who had the Times on the bingo card?”

“Clint, I think,” Pepper replied.

“Friday, status report,” Steve said wearily. The trio had been up since Nick called at 2am to let them know Hydra had executed the dump.

“Conceiving that we found doctored videos that had you murdering people, Captain, I’d say some text that’s easily disputable is not the worst-case scenario,” Nick said.

“Comforting,” Tony said drily.

“My press office has already released a statement, as have the Brits and the EU and the Canadians. Shockingly, so have the Russians, I think entirely because Putin is pissed at Hydra right now.”

“Thank God for small miracles,” Pepper said. “So what’s the threat now.”

“Well, Reddit has already decided that you’re guilty, Tony, and that the defenses are some vast conspiracy. Steve is being brainwashed to go along with Tony’s plot.”

Tony cracked out a cackle. “That’s fucking rich.”

“Do I want to know what Reddit is?” Steve asked Pepper, who shook her head.

“Tony, how quickly can you pull together a press conference?” Nick asked.

“No,” Pepper said. “We’re doing a statement for the morning shows and a press conference at 10. I’m not giving them Tony’s face until the President has renounced this bullshit, which he’ll do by 10.”

“My CEO has spoken, Your Highness,” Tony said. “Thanks for calling us, but I need to go vomit a bunch now, so we’ll call you back.”

“February 25, 5:05am EST. Mr. Parker is sleeping, as is Ms. Parker, as is Dr. Banner. Dr. Banner is medicated, Captain. Agent Romanov and Sargent Barnes are sparring, Thor is present in the gym as well, and Agent Barton departed the Mansion seventeen minutes after he was notified of the Hydra activity and he has classified it as private. Agent Romanov signed off on the clearance.”

“Of course she did,” Tony murmured. “Those two and their secrets. Why is Bruce medicated?”

“Wasn’t sure he could control the Other Guy if the info dumped and wanted to be asleep until we had a plan,” Steve said simply, and Tony nodded.
“Pep, what’s the status on the statement?”

“Just waiting on legal.”

“Are we sure about the part about Barnes?” Tony’s voice was gravely with pain.

Steve and Pepper both nodded, and Pepper reminded him that it was signed off on by everyone – including the Department of Defense - and Barnes was the first one.

“Do we keep Peter home from school?” Steve asked the other two, after a few minutes of silence.

“I vote yes,” Pepper said. “Everyone at his school thinks he’s an intern at SI, so I can’t imagine the kind of bullshit he’ll get today from them, and them if one of them leaks?”

“Friday, send a car and security for both Ned and MJ, keep it discrete until necessary,” Tony said, rubbing his eyes from exhaustion.

One of the odd benefits to knowing that this circle of hell they were living in was a possibility is that they got to prepare a lot. Tony had personally talked to both Ned and MJ’s families and Pepper had prepared QTI that Peter may come down with a very sudden case of mono. Fury, Coulson, and Hill had worked with Wessco and Wakanda to have as many nations on board with quick statements as possible.

Tony and Steve were 100% confident there would be no legal ramifications, no matter what Hydra leaked. The U.S. government had all but guaranteed them it would be fine. The issue was that Hydra decided not to fight in the court of legality, but instead in the court of public opinion.

And that was quickly fixed in concrete.

Before most of the U.S. eastern seaboard had even woken up, a lot of the world had decided that Tony Stark and Captain America had been lying to them for years. The Chitauri attack? Orchestrated by them for attention. All the technology Stark had created over the last five years? A massive surveillance operation that was illegally feeding information to the highest bidder. The wedding of Tony and Pepper? A PR distraction at best, Pepper as a slave at worst.

Even with some of the best PR teams on the planet at their disposal, a global narrative on this scale was going to take a bit to re-write. Especially tricky was several groups in Europe calling for a revisiting of the technological oversight accords that had been tabled after King T’Chaka’s death – but a very extreme version of them.

“I’m going to go for a run,” Steve said, heaving himself off the couch. “When do you want me back?”

“We have a call with the Oval at 7:30,” Pepper responded and Steve nodded.

“Me and my treasonous ass are heading to the workshop for some light spy craft,” Tony said to Pepper. “I’ll take all martinis stirred, not shaken.” With a harsh but brief kiss, he was off.

Peter chewed his cuticles on his left hand and felt MJ squeeze his right. Just about everyone he loved was crammed into the communal sitting area in the Mansion – and the rest were at SI HQ in the city. After the released statement this morning, and several joint statements from international governments, and a very strongly worded one from the White House, it was time for Tony and Steve to plead their case to the world.
“Tony’s walking out to the podium,” Bucky called to everyone. There had been a lot of debate over whether Bucky should watch the press conference, but he finally won everyone over by reminding them that without his programmed training, Nat could kill him with her thumb.

“Hi,” Tony smiled at the cameras. “Thanks for joining us to clear up some things. You may have heard that there are some rumors going around about our patriotism, and our commitment to both the ideals and the citizens of this nation.”

Steve, in full Captain uniform, cut in. “We want to thank not only our president, but the leaders of countless nations around the world who have confirmed that the documents leaked this morning were entirely falsified by the terrorist organization Hydra.”

“Yup,” Tony said, over the growing din of reporters. “Those guys. The ones we were all told had gone away with the Berlin Wall. But spoiler alert, going away is not really what they do, so here we are. Fantastic, isn’t it?”

“His sarcasm is not nearly as charming as he thinks it is,” Nat muttered in the living room.

On the television, Tony continued, ticking items off on his fingers as he spoke. “Pepper Potts and I are legally married and she was not coerced at any time before, during, or after our vows. Stark Industries is a publicly traded company, but I remain the majority shareholder and will remain so until my death. It is public knowledge that upon my death, the company currently passes to Pepper, but I will say the rumor it’s going to the IRA is fairly creative.

“I am a natural born citizen of the United States and so were both of my parents. Howard Stark was integral to the Manhattan Project and I’m not entirely sure when that stopped being taught in schools. Stark Industries did make a lot of our money on the blood of others, and I did used to be called the Merchant of Death. All of that is true. It is a legacy I am working with every breath to redeem, so the documents released this morning which claim otherwise are false. Our weapons division was shuttered completely in 2009, when the last of our government contracts to the United States Department of Defense were fulfilled. All of that, as a reminder, is public record.”

Steve took the microphone. “My service record and the service record of Sargent James Buchanan Barnes are also public record. The claims made in the documents today that Sargent Barnes sold me to the Rebirth project is not only false, but ludicrous. I was recruited by Dr. Erskine and Agent Carter for that project directly, and Sargent Barnes knew nothing of it for several months.

“Regarding Sargent Barnes, however, there is another piece of the documentation that is false. The documents released this morning claim that I killed him in Italy in 1945. I cannot state strongly enough that did not happen. What did happen is that he was kidnapped by the very organization who released these documents.”

The crowd of reporters in front of the men began to buzz, and the tension in the living room also ratched up. What Steve was about to say, there was no going back.

“My best friend, Bucky Barnes, was brainwashed into becoming the Winter Solider.”

The press gaggle went berserk and Tony stepped back up to the microphone. “Calm the hell down. This is where it gets good.”

Steve could barely contain his eye roll as he regained podium control. “In all of your emails right now, you are receiving a detailed statement from the Secretary General of the U.N. explaining that Sargent Barnes has been recovered from Hydra captivity and is currently undergoing extensive medical and psychological treatment. He has cooperated fully with all authorities in disclosing
intelligence and will not be prosecuted for war crimes as the brain washing and extensive torture makes him ineligible. What has been determined, however, is that his handlers will stand trial for all of his crimes and we ask the citizens of the world for their help and patience as we pursue these criminals.”

“Evidently, the Geneva Conventions are not just a plot point in Grisham novels,” Tony smirked. “Today is just full of surprises. Thanks, Cap. So to sum up – me and Pep are very married, me and Cap are very American and are honestly too in love with apple pie and baseball to feel any differently, and the Winter Soldier was not a legend, but is now deactivated and we’re all going to have to revisit the Smithsonian once they update the exhibit. Thank you all for coming, we’re taking zero questions, and you can direct everything not covered by the, what, thirty-five governmental statements you already have, to the SI press office.”

In the living room, everyone’s eyes went to Bucky, who quirked an eyebrow and toasted them all with his mug of chamomile tea. “This is where it gets fun.”

Five days later and the narrative had both shifted and calcified further. While general public opinion was that the documents were false, more and more voices were now calling for higher controls on espionage and the ability of private citizens – namely Tony Stark – to amass an army of his own and negotiate directly with governments. There were also Reddit threads going deeper and deeper into conspiracy theories, but Darcy kept reminding them that conspiracy theorists and misogynists on 4chan and Reddit were evils beyond even Tony’s control.

Loud voices on the right were calling for him to return to SI and act out his power through the corporation.

“Why do they want that?” Peter asked one night at dinner.

“Because they’re idiots, kid,” Tony stated flatly before Pepper glared at him. “Pep, they are, their logic is false. But what they claim is that because corporations in America are legally considered individuals, if I was amassing some sort of intelligence army under the auspices of SI, it would be safer since I’d be beholden to my shareholders.”

“That’s insane,” May said quietly.

“Correct,” Tony replied. “Their only leg to stand on is that as a corporation, there would be oversight with the SEC and some other governmental properties and as myself, there are fewer. What it really comes down to is that they’re all pissed that have stopped them from being able to make money on all this intelligence. Those talking heads are all capitalistic fuckers who wank off to the holiness of business without thinking of human cost.”

There was a few beats of silence, before Pepper cleared her throat and said, “which is why I don’t let Tony take interviews with Fox News.”

Loud voices on the left were calling for international accords or a treaty of some fashion to regulate the goings on of the Avengers and other such forces.

“She has a point,” Tony said quietly to Pepper as they watched the panel discussion on BBC. Steve
was with Bucky, which Tony was glad for in this moment. They’d already stopped being able to have calm conversations about this.

“She does,” Pepper agreed. “But who should be the oversight? That’s the piece I can’t get behind. I agree some sorts of regulations are maybe a good idea, but I’m okay with it only if you and Steve are in charge and those people are saying they want people over you.”

“I don’t know, Pep,” Tony admitted. “I keep saying Fury, and he keeps saying no because I’ve never followed his orders in my damn life, but there is no one else who I think even remotely gets it. Nick and T’Challa have kingdoms – literal kingdoms – to run and neither of them have an ambassador they’re willing to surrender to this. I just…”

She reached over and held his hand, her way of silently saying she had no fucking clue either.

“I cannot stand how they’re talking about him,” Steve said to Pepper one evening as the news rolled on. Tony was deep in the bowels of the workshop and it was one of those nights both knew not to disturb him. “I don’t know how much longer I can stay quiet.”

Pepper rubbed her hand along his spine. “We’re quiet as long as he asks us to be.”

“He’s going to give into them, isn’t he?”

“You need to remember that this kind of political maneuvering is basically his birthright. He has been in the room where it happens for longer than either of us have known him,” she grinned at him. They were all still in the phase of Hamilton fandom that they dropped lyrics into conversation whenever possible. “You don’t see him in the board meetings or the closed door negotiations, but there’s a reason I’ve never really let him walk away from SI. He’s so good, Steve. That wit that we love, that brain that whirs faster than ours, it’s faster than all of theirs, too. He is going to everything he possibly can to make sure you and me and Peter and everyone else is safe and it’s our job to trust him.”

“I think you’re being blind to the fact that he’ll forget to protect himself and that leaves us open to vulnerabilities. You may have seen him in verbal battle more than me, but I’ve seen him in actual battle and he… Pepper, he’ll throw himself on live grenades before he’ll pause and think strategy.”

“Pot, meet kettle,” Pepper whispered smiling. Steve glared at her for a few seconds before his face softened into a smile.

“Love is a funny thing, Steve,” Pepper continued. “I feel both completely invincible in the love that I get from you and Tony, and from Peter, and from Kerry and Nat. Like I could scale Everest without any oxygen. But at the thought of any of you being hurt? That very thought can crumble me.”

“Same, Pep,” Steve confirmed. He ran his fingers lazily through her hair and they were both quiet for a long time letting the news drone on in the background. “When I first met Tony, I thought his bombast would get us all killed. All I could see is the snark and the quips and the death-defying antics that told me he had never worked on a team in his goddamn life. What I didn’t see is that he had seen basically the entire battle before I even opened my eyes.”

“He’s a pain in the ass that way.”

“I know now that when he follows my lead, it’s because he’s choosing to trust me. And Pep, whenever he comes over the coms and asks ‘what’s the plan, Cap?’, my heart just… But this battle? This one feels different. The same feeling that told me you shouldn’t have gone to Sokovia is the same one that says these accords or whatever they end up being is a terrible idea.”
“Just because he sees ten steps ahead of the rest of us doesn’t mean he’s right, babe,” Pepper reminded him. “Nor does it mean you are. The truth – the perfect plan – is usually found in the middle when the two of you compromise.”

“He won’t even listen to me on this.”

“You won’t listen to him either.”

Steve grimaced. “Why do you always make sense?”

Pepper smiled softly. “Loving a genius for as long as I have means some of it rubbed off.”

Steve leaned over to kiss her gently. “I swear to you it’s the other way around.”

“You have never been to Coney Island,” Bucky stared at Peter.

“Is that a problem?”

“It is a huge problem, I cannot, what do you say, I cannot even? Peter Parker, a native New Yorker, never going to Coney Island, it’s a goddamn tragedy.”

Steve smirked as the two sparred and called out from the sidelines. “We’ll get disguises and take the kid once the season starts, calm down, Buck.”

“I’m calling your parenting into question, Rogers. How many summers have you had this kid? Jesus Christ, I’m ashamed of you.”

This sent Peter and Steve into an absolute fit of giggles as Bucky kept ranting about hot dogs and the Cyclone and the best spot to hide from the lifeguards under this very specific pier. Steve didn’t have the heart to tell him that the underside of the pier was probably full of used condoms and/or needles now, but he’d let Bucky have a few more months of fantasy.

February had turned to March had turned to April, and the immediate crisis of Hydra had mostly calmed. Tony and Pepper were busier, sure, and Steve missed them as they negotiated this new world for both SI and… well, the world. Tony would come back from days in the city looking absolutely wrung out and Steve had learned better than to ask questions that would only lead to answers that would make him angry. Instead, he had taken to cooking Tony’s favorite dishes and making sure Pepper’s favorite bath bombs were ordered from Lush in bulk and coordinating May’s care with the in-house nurse they’d had to hire around Paddy’s Day.

Since SHIELD fell, or disintegrated, or whatever, the Avengers weren’t called as often, but they still had missions. Mostly Steve, Clint, and Nat took care of the assignments and Coulson would manage the clean-up. Pepper had set up the Avengers Initiative as a separate entity within SI, which now employed them all. Clint had been particularly picky about health care.

“Okay, you guys are done for the day,” Steve said to the pair as his watch timer went off. “Peter, Tony wants to see your prototype before you go to bed.”

Bucky hugged the kidgoodnight and flopped next to Steve on a mat after grabbing one of the super-high-protein shakes Bruce had developed for the super soldiers. “Has he talked to you about May’s nurse at all?”

Steve shook his head. “I think MJ is the only one getting those pieces right now. She asked Pepper if
the nurse was a hospice nurse.”

“That’s the you’re-close-to-death-nurse, right?”

Steve nodded.

“What did Pep say?”

“She told her not yet, but soon.”

“Christ.”

The two sat in silence for a minute, until Bucky cleared his throat. “I know where Clint goes.”

Steve did a double take but stayed silent. Bucky fiddled with a panel on his arm before he continued.

“Nat and I knew each other before.”

“I know.”

Now it was Bucky’s turn to look shocked.

“It was in the files that Pegs hacked. She found you back in the 70s and again in the 80s and she just kept following you,” Steve explained. “Pegs was convinced we’d lost you forever, but once Tony found all her notes, we know more now so we knew we had to try.”

“Nat said you guys had been looking for me since Boston,” Bucky said quietly.

Steve nodded. “We were mostly using SHIELD, which we of course know now was a massive misstep, but Tony threw, I don’t know, $5 million? More? At them to find you, you slippery bastard.”

“Five million U.S. dollars?”

“No, five million space dollars.”

“His sarcasm rubbing off on you is not my favorite.”

“I was a sarcastic bastard before the serum and you fucking know it,” Steve rolled his eyes. “Don’t give me this Captain America bullshit, you know me.”

“I do,” Bucky said, his tone serious. “Or I did. I’m still… Anyway, Nat. The soldier… she was a part of the deprogramming even before I knew it. They gave her to the soldier when she was 16 as some sort of… reward,” Bucky choked on the word, “but he didn’t know, I didn’t know, she was that young.

“By her 18th birthday, she had plans to get out, their programming didn’t take on her completely, I think because they underestimated how smart she fucking is, and she wanted me, the human not the asset, to come. We were under surveillance all the time, but she had figured out hand signals and Morse code taps on my skin to tell me things.

“With her, I knew I was more than the soldier, more than the asset, but then I’d go back in the ice and I’d forget her and she’d have to remind me all over again. She was the only true thing in my life, the only thing I recognized, and they kept taking her from me again and again.

“Anyway, we’ve sorted a lot of those memories, and she’s been helping me figure out what’s real
and what’s a lie. She helped me remember that everything with you, when you’re not in the cowl, that’s real and I shouldn’t question it. The cowl took me a little longer to sort out,” Bucky confessed.

“It’s attached to my head and I don’t always know what to do with it,” Steve confessed and got a grin in return.

“Yesterday, outta nowhere, she told me we’re going to Iowa his weekend.”

“What the fuck is in Iowa? Can you even find that on a map?”

Steve got a middle finger for that comment, as Bucky continued. “I had no goddamn idea and then she told me that she was making Clint tell Tony today, but Clint’s married, man. With kids.”

“He and Nat aren’t –“

“I thought so, too!” Bucky exclaimed. “Seriously, totally thought so. They’re just so, anyway.”

“How’d she tell you she wasn’t?” Steve asked, thinking he may know the answer, and Bucky’s side eyed blush confirmed it. Steve started howling with laughter at Bucky’s face.

“What. Like you’re the only resurrected asshat who can bat for both teams?”

Both, he said both. “I’m just...you and Nat. Tony is going to want to sell tickets to your sparring matches now you know. There will be popcorn. Oh, and Pep’s gonna give you a shovel talk.”

“Peter gave me one of those when I first came back, about you and Pepper and Tony.”

“Our Petey? Gave you a shovel talk? Why?”

“Why is between me and him. But your Petey is a fucking angry little bug when he wants to be, pal,” Bucky smirked. “And I am legitimately afraid of him. Those webs are sticky.”

“So Iowa.”

“Yeah, so Clint’s daughter is turning 10 and Nat is her godmother – isn’t that a midfuck – and Clint and his wife decided it was time for them all to meet his work friends. So, this weekend, we’re all going to Iowa.”

“Would it be really inappropriate for me to ask Clint to let Steve do farm work? Maybe in plaid, with boots?”

“Our boyfriend is not a porn actor, Anthony.”

“Pep, do not tell me you wouldn’t pay good money to see him chop wood or something. Oh, God, do you think he could rip logs apart with his bare hands?” Tony bit on his fist with a wide-eyed gaze at Pepper.

“You’re objectifying – oh, fuck it, you know I would.”

Tony supposed he should stop being surprised at the women in this version of his life. His previous one was full of women that needed things from him – his name, his power, his money, his body – and were not interested in giving anything in return. They were largely vapid and objects of
objectification – which Tony certainly helped perpetuate by how he treated them. He was clear about consent, always, but the longer he was out of the party cycle, the more he realized that toxic masculinity was truly the root of all evil. See, MJ, I listen, Tony mentally said to the teen as he mused, observing the party unfolding before him.

The women now, holy fuck, were they something else. Pepper and Nat had stopped surprising him ages ago and he simply surrendered to their strength and wisdom and general badassery. May Parker, with her quiet dignity in the face of absolute death, still took his breath away. They all knew this was her last trip, that this weekend was most likely the last time she’d leave the Mansion, and she was both embracing that and ignoring it. MJ, who everyone but Peter knew was head over heels for Peter, was like a goddamn siren of mythical proportions. A verbal Valkyrie, Pepper called her, and frequently told Tony and Steve that if MJ wasn’t running a global non-profit by the time she was 21, Pepper would be shocked.

And now, Laura Barton.

“You’ve been with Clint how long?” Tony asked her as they did dishes the first night.

“Well, basically my entire life. We met in kindergarten, moved in together after I finished high school, and it just kind of never stopped.”

“What about his job?”

“He was recruited in 10th grade, Tony, did you know that? He was about to head to the Olympics for archery when the Marines wanted him. They came to his house and since he was 16, he kicked his parents out of the room and asked for me. I was 15, what the fuck did I know about war? All I knew is that these men with a lot of medals were telling me my boyfriend was inhumanely good at the thing I made fun of him for,” Laura grinned.

“You made fun of Katniss, too?”

“Why do you think none of your stupid pet names bother him,” she skewered Tony with a look, who burst out laughing. “After the Marines came more and more missions that came with instructions to me that all I could tell anyone was that he was air cover for Navy SEALs. Amazing how no one ever questioned why the Navy would want an archer, but I learned to say it with enough authority that no one did. I stopped asking where he was about 10 years ago, it was just easier that way.

“It was really hard for a really long time, but it’s all I ever knew. I finished college, we got married, and bought this land with some bonus or another of Clint’s. Monstrous sums of money kept showing up in our bank account and Clint kept promising me it was all legal, but I know now some of it wasn’t and that led to some arguments. He’s slept in that barn a lot.”

She shrugged her shoulders and handed Tony the last pot to dry. “SHIELD changed things. His first mission was to rescue Natasha and she came here for months. We taught her how to be American, she was around for Cooper’s birth, and then again for Lila’s and she was family before I blinked. Plus, all that fancy tech you’ve built has made it a lot easier to talk to him, so thanks for that, genius man.”

Tony smiled. “It’s actually Iron Man, but genius is a bit more fitting.”

She splashed some water at him and laughed. “Your little team is the best thing, Tony. It really is. We see him more than we used to and he’s… he’s happier with you guys. Peter helps, too, I think, and he’s fucking nuts about the tech you build.”
“Legolas is easy to please,” Tony said.

“He’s not,” Laura said. “He’s anal retentive and picky as fuck, but he trusts you. Don’t fuck it up.”

Lila had opened all of her gifts, including the deluxe telescope that Clint had told Pepper to buy and Tony was so grateful he did because ohmygosh the look on that girl’s face when she opened it did things to his insides. She was currently setting it up out in the barn with MJ, Cooper, and Peter. The adults were out on the porch and Tony swore that it the moment could not have felt more like a scene from Field of Dreams if James Earl Jones started narrating it.

This band of merry men, as the press kept derisively calling the Avengers now, was really fucking something. Thor had arrived to help Lila blow out her candles and was now demonstrating some sort of sword skill thing to Steve, who was laughing the laugh that told Tony he was relaxed and happy. Clint, Nat, Sam, Bruce, and Pepper were on the other end of the porch, and Laura was helping May’s nurse.

That left…

“You got a minute, Tones?”

Bucky.

“For you, Frosty, anything.”

Bucky took a seat in the rocking chair next to Tony – again, could this night be anymore Norman Rockwell if it tried – and took a sip of his beer, clinking the bottle to Tony’s glass of scotch. “You can bullshit everyone else, but I know the folks you’re dealing with and I’m sure you’re not having any fucking fun with those negotiations.”

“Right for the jugular, I see.”

Bucky shrugged. “The world’s on fire, I ain’t got time for niceties. That was always Stevie’s job. And I’m having a good day, a clear day, and I want to know. Tomorrow might be different.”

“Aunt Peggy used to say you were only a sweet talker when you wanted something, and the rest of the time you could have doubled as a heavy for the mob.”

“Sounds ‘bout right,” Bucky conceded. “So what the fuck’s happening?”

Tony sighed. “Nothing particularly productive. We’re at the phase where everyone needs to have their say and we’re talking about 60 people representing 45 sovereign nations, so that’s a lot of say. Plus, Nick’s distracted because his brother is being a goddamn child —“

Bucky winced. “I saw the photos.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “So right now, I’m just juggling Jell-O, waiting for something to solidify enough that I can make progress. What we have agreed on is that it will be a set of treaties, rather than one, and that it has to be globally ratified, and not through the U.N. How we do that is fucking anyone’s guess.”

“And I’m sure Stevie is not being helpful,” Bucky supplied.

Tony was silent for a long moment and Bucky continued. “I love that man, I do, but he’s a fucking stubborn asshole who has never really understood shades of grey. Your life is grey, so that’s got to be hard.”
“Nat told you.”

Bucky grinned. “Only a fool ignores smart women.”

Tony chuckled. “I was actually just thinking about how I wound up with so many Schuyler Sisters in my life when you sat down. Anyway, we’ll be fine. We’re nowhere close to signing anything and he’ll come around by then, I’m sure.”

Bucky looked skeptical, but the two men fell into a silence heavy with all the things they weren’t saying and neither was sure how much longer the other one was going to let him hold his tongue.

“So can she?”

“How about you?”

“Were you even listening to me?” Peter was exasperated.

“I’m sorry, Peter, I wasn’t and you’re right. Start again,” Steve had been staring at Bucky and Tony together when Peter scampered over to him from the barn.

“What if MJ comes stay with us all summer?”

“Is she physically able to? Yes.”

Peter rolled his eyes dramatically in the way that only teenagers can. “May MJ come stay with us? I mean, it’s not the whole summer – she has two camps, I think – but we could get so much done and study for the decathlon and it would just be great, wouldn’t it, because she’s, well, MJ, and this summer is kinda gonna suck and yeah, please?”

Steve bit back a grin, knowing that reacting to how adorable he found Peter and MJ was not going to help the parenting points he needed to make. “First of all, that is up to more people than just me, so Auntie Pep is your next step. Second of all, my vote is yes, but she needs to stay in her room every single night, so matter how tired you guys get talking, and doors will remain open.”

Peter looked confused. “Um, weird, okay.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Peter, we all see how you look at each other, you’re terrible secret keepers.”

MJ wandered down at that point. “Who’s terrible secret keepers?”

“We are,” Peter said. “Uncle Steve says we’re dating and I’m trying to tell him we’re not-“

MJ looked askance. “I mean, I don’t subscribe to heteronormative labeling of intimacy, but basically, yes. Did you miss that?”

Peter’s jaw dropped, but he quickly recovered. “Yes?”

She rolled her eyes. “Typical.”

Chapter End Notes
Y'all, these kindnesses you're spilling into the comments are legit making me giddy. You cannot understand how much joy it brings me to know that I'm not the only one living in this little world. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

It's an odd balance, writing close enough to canon that it flirts with the boundary sometimes, but also crafting something entirely my own. I hope this still works for you all. And I figured a world in which Captain America is an actual thing means I can make the U.N. do whatever I want - and make Tony Stark dry dishes. Bwahahahahaha.
It was a quiet day in the middle of June when May Parker breathed her last. A quiet memorial service was held, exactly to her wishes, and by the time it finally happened, Peter found himself slightly relieved she wasn’t in pain any more. Everyone told him that was normal and shared stories from their own families of times they felt like that. He figured he was such a pro at mourning loved ones that he was done.

And then the end of June hit, and MJ was away at a civil rights activism camp, and one particular night the house felt too quiet, and he thought he was going to suffocate with pain, and he suited up and started flying through the woods behind the mansion, webbing from one tree to another, trying to out fling the tears.

Somewhere around five miles, through Stark property and into the state forest which bordered it, Peter found a large rock by a pond and collapsed onto it. Pulling off his mask, he let go, crying for May, and for Ben, and for his parents. After a while, he heard a gentle whirring that made him breathe a little easier.

“Scoot over, kid,” Tony said, hitting the button on his suit that made his helmet recoil. Peter obliged.

“I’m sorry I left without telling you.” Peter’s eyes were still firmly fixed on the horizon.

Tony shrugged. “Our rule is no patrolling without letting us know. Friday told me you left the house and I think I’ll let this one slide.”

“Do Auntie Pep and Uncle Steve know?”

Tony shook his head. “I was in the workshop anyway. I’m playing around with the cuffs on Steve’s suit, the nanobots aren’t synching with the shield the way I’d like. Thought you could use some company.”

Peter was quiet for a while, and Tony willed himself to sit still. He was antsy with worried energy, wishing that he could just gather Peter in his arms and physically take his pain. Finally, Tony had to say something.

“I was high at my parent’s funeral,” he blurted out. Well, I’m sure that’s not what Pep would have had me lead with.

“Like drugs high?”

Tony nodded. “Cocaine.”

“Shit,” Peter said. “So the stories are true?”

“Letting it slide tonight, but if your Aunt Pep hears, I yelled at you, okay?” Tony smiled sadly. “And yes, a lot of them are, probably not the ones you’ve heard, but a lot. I was really, really good at trying to run from my pain, and always really terrible at actually dealing with it.”

“Did you have to go to rehab or anything?”

Tony shook his head. “No, and you can not imagine how thankful I am that, for me, it never went there. Mostly, I was just in too much pain to function and instead of figuring out a healthy way to process anything, I just kept ignoring it.”
“Why?”

Tony laughed without any humor in his tone. “Why does anyone run from anything? If Widmeyer was here, he’d probably tell you that my desperate need and simultaneous inability to please my father left me psychologically stuck.”

“So what unstuck you?”

“No one thing,” Tony replied. “Auntie Pep was clearly a big part of it. The cave was too, and everything that came after it. Once I made the decision to get unstuck, other things happened to remind me to keep fighting. Uncle Steve, the team, the possibility of the Mets becoming a winning baseball club, you.”

At that last word, Peter turned to look at Tony for the first time. “Me?”

Tony wrapped one arm around Peter’s shoulders and nodded. “You. Did Auntie Pep ever explain to you why we don’t have kids?”

Peter nodded and then grimaced. “Well, she explained it to MJ.”

“Couple code,” Tony said. “I get it. So you know. But between you and me? Sitting with her in doctor’s offices and fertility clinics was worse than being in the cave. Because in the cave I could do something. My hands could build the suit, and my brain could strategize. In those offices? I was arms to hold her and the signature on the credit card charge and that felt like so little. God, kid, all these true things about my life – the insane wealth, the incomparable genius, and I was stymied by Pepper’s body. It was maddening. It still is.

“But I learned a lot. I learned that sometimes hugging someone really is the best thing you can do and that Pepper is made of iron way more than I am. And then, kid, May showed up and gave us you. I know we’re your, what, third set of parents, but I never really knew what feeling helpless was until the first day you showed up all bloody after patrol.

“Nothing could take away that fear, that pain, and I still feel it every moment you’re out of my sight. But running from that pain will only cause you some and I would rather perform an self-appendectomy with a rusty Swiss Army knife in moving traffic than intentionally cause you pain. So, you are one of my reasons for fighting, one of my top three.”

Peter was quiet for a while. “I’m so tired of feeling helpless. I’m so tired of funerals and sandwiches and strangers telling me they’re sorry for my loss.” The tears started again in earnest, and Tony tightened his grip. “And I feel guilty because I’m glad May’s gone and she’s out of pain and then my heart stops because she’s gone and I’ll never see her again and my heart just… Dad, it fucking sucks. It really, really fucking sucks.”

“It really, really does,” Tony said, note that tongue slip with a stolen breath, and held his son, and wept with him, on that rock, in the middle of the forest, in the middle of the night.

“Do you know if they’ve talked?” Nat asked Pepper one night, over a bottle of vodka (Nat) and one of wine (Pepper) in the back garden. The various men who inhabited the Mansion with them were all occupied and the ladies took advantage of the silence.

“Tony and Barnes? About the video? I don’t think so,” Pepper said. “Widmeyer said I can’t micromanage Tony’s relationships any more, not that I did that.”
“No, of course not,” Nat smirked and Pepper glared.

“I’m trying, I swear.”

“I know you are, Pep, and I am, in all seriousness, proud of you, but go on. Also, he wants everyone to call him Bucky now, remember?”

“When Bucky,” Pepper placed emphasis on the name, "came back and it started to seem like he had equilibrium, I promised both Steve and Tony that I would let them manage this themselves. I still ask about how they’re feeling and I expect them to be honest with me, but the details of conversations are at their discretion.”

“Does that apply to everyone?”

“Oh, God no,” Pepper laughed. “I’m still nosy with everyone else in their lives, but Bucky is a special case and Widmeyer called me in to tell me Tony was feeling really pressured and I should calm down a little.”

Nat snorted. “I don’t follow those rules and I think they’re all still dancing around.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Do you want to know?”

“Probably not.”

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“Why don’t you let him see if he can fix whatever is itchy,” Nat said to Bucky. “Even though metal can fundamentally not be itchy, I don’t think, but you’re living in a house with the dude who built the Iron Man suit out of stuff he found in a cave while attached to a car battery for fucks sake, so I’m thinking your 1940s tech grade arm won’t really be a challenge.”

“They updated it,” Bucky protested.

“When.”

“1980s,” he mumbled.

“Stark built a new Iron Man suit last week, because he felt, and I quote, ‘bored’. Can we please stop arguing about this? God, why are Pepper and I always needing to orchestrate you all pulling your heads out of your asses.”

And so, Bucky was tentatively standing outside Tony’s workshop, shuffling his feet and summoning the bravery to knock.

“Sargent Barnes,” Friday said, interrupting his thoughts. “Boss already knows you’re here and he said you’re wigging him out so to get the fuck in there. Direct quote with amended pronouns.”

Bucky let out a harsh laugh. “Fine.” He pushed the door open and stepped into what he could only assume would be Willy Wonka’s factory for tech nerds. When Pepper had found out that Peter had only seen the “incorrect and wildly creepy” version of the film, she had declared a house movie night for the original, which Bucky also found creepy, so he was afraid to see the newer one.

“Elsa, what can I do for you?”
“My arm is itchy,” was the only way Bucky knew how to describe it, despite Nat telling him that wasn’t a helpful word.

Tony, however, seemed to know exactly what that meant and nodded. “Can I poke around?”

“Um, sure, you want to?”

Tony looked at him like Bucky was the dumbest man on the planet. “Barnes. I have wanted to see the insides of that arm since you first tried to kill Steve with it. This is like Christmas morning and I am barely containing my glee, so gimme gimme gimme.” He motioned to a low part of his workbench and dragged a chair next to it.

Bucky chuckled and let Tony open up the main panel in what should be his forearm.

“Fuck,” Tony said under his breath and then made a face that told Bucky he didn’t mean to say that out loud.

“What?”

Tony paused, leaning back and asking Friday to perform a full scan, before picking up a screwdriver and spinning it around in his fingers. “I’m assuming the answer to this is ‘not much’, but how much did they tell you about this thing?”

“Not much,” Bucky said with a grin.

“Well, let me give you a brief rundown while Friday works her magic. Pepper would probably want me to break some of this to you gently, but since today seems like a clear day, I’m just gonna fucking lay it out.”

Bucky nodded emphatically. “So far, a full Barnes day, so yes, tell me what they did to me.”

“From the way they amputated your arm, it appears that they took more than was actually broken. They dug out your shoulder joint with, I swear to God what looks like butter knives, and fucked up so much muscle in the process that you would probably be a hunchback without the serum, which also tells me they did this after the serum, and from what Steve tells me of his process, that’s fucking painful, so I’m hoping you were unconscious?”

Bucky nodded. “As far as I know, or until we unearth another memory.”

“Let’s go with unconscious because they’re monsters but not complete idiots. So, the first thing they did was build a core of nerves around the vibranium center, and I still cannot fathom how they got enough vibranium to make this thing and neither does T’Challa, but I’m sure my father was somehow involved even accidentally because he took it fucking personally when T’Chaka cut him off, anyway,” Tony took a breath, “but they attached your nerves to the rest of the nerves in your body really, really weird. I have no other explanation. My therapist says I’m held together by scar tissue and stubbornness, but so are you, my friend.”

“It’s scar tissue and sheer force of will, Boss,” Friday interrupted.

“You’re right, that cadence is better, more poetic. Anyway, I think you feel itchy because the nerves they built are part yours and part fake and so your synapses are firing all wrong. Friday, how close are you?”

“57%.”
“Okay, want a smoothie?” Tony directed that to Bucky, who nodded and Tony sent DUM-E to fetch some. “I think some of these are nerves from your spine, which they harvested after the serum made all your nerves thicker and they assumed you wouldn’t need as many? Your nerves are physically thicker than mine, just like Steve’s, and you have minor regeneration properties so I’m also wondering if they left you without an arm for a long time thinking you’d grow one back. Which would explain the skin and scar tissue buildup around your joint.”

Tony flipped a few things on the bench, hit a button, and suddenly a partial hologram of Bucky’s arm was floating in front of him. “I had her start at your shoulder, since that’s where the real mess is. See here-” indicating to a dark spot – “that’s all regrown skin that they didn’t seem to give you the courtesy of removing before they slammed you back together like Humpty Dumpty or something.”

“Fits with their brand.”

“Indeed,” Tony mused as DUM-E delivered the smoothies and Tony thanked him. Bucky swore the bot glowed just a little at the praise. “Okay, Friday, I see fingers, you finishing up?”

“Patience, Boss.”

“Never had it, don’t want it. Can you page Bruce for the nerve blocker?”

“Nerve blocker?” Bucky asked.

Tony nodded. “Quick injection up near your shoulder so we can shut down all the nerves in the arm from receiving pain. I’d put you under an anesthetic, but we still haven’t figured out one that works on Steve, but Bruce has sorted the nerve blocker, so at least we can poke around in you two without making you bite on a leather strap or something.”

“You have to poke around?”

“Well, I need to detach this one so I can put on the new one.”

*He didn’t say...* “Come again?”

“The new arm.”

“I’m getting a new arm?”

“I thought that’s what you were here for.”

“I just wanted you to make it stop itching.”

“I am.”

“This seems overboard.”

“That’s literally his middle name,” Bruce interrupted as he entered from his adjacent lab.

“Ah, excellent, super solider nerve blocker!” Tony exclaimed, grabbing the vials from Bruce’s hand.

“Back to this new arm,” Bucky interrupted. “I don’t really-“

Tony cut him off. “This arm is, what 40 years old? Even Stark prosthetics require system upgrades every 7 years, and they’re not industry leading yet, and I’m guessing making you comfortable was never really a priority. I have one almost completely built anyway.”
“You what?”

“Yeah, I made some guesses, though, so once Friday gets the data, I can be done in, what do you think Friday?”

“Full construction based on specific intel will take approximately 14 hours.”

“So, a day,” Tony said. “Are you okay without the arm for a day?”

“14 hours of work is more than a day,” Bucky responded and Bruce let out a cackle.

“Tony has boundary issues,” Bruce responded when Bucky looked at him. “Haven’t you noticed?”

Bucky looked slowly from man to man. Bruce’s face held slight sympathy, like he knew how overwhelmed Bucky felt but also knew he couldn’t stop it, and Tony looked like Augustus Gloop at his first sight of that chocolate river.

Bruce continued, not unkindly. “I’m not a full medical doctor, I’m just the closest these buffoons allow most of the time, and I have been working with Steve for a few years. The process of removing the metal will be uncomfortable, but I have a feeling it won’t be painful compared to other events of your life. We can probably have it done within the hour, actually, if you want rid of it.”

“And I’m sure Steve will rearrange his schedule to wait on you hand and foot while I build,” Tony said, his voice so devoid of emotion that Bucky’s spy senses began to tingle.


For the next two hours – Bruce had underestimated a bit – Bucky sat still as the two other men dug the Hydra tech out of his shoulder. Bruce was right, painful wasn’t the word Bucky would use in comparison to other things, but it certainly wasn’t pleasant. He was distracted by the constant stream of unfiltered chatter from Tony (Bruce, look at this, this is inhumane, I mean, is it or is that just how the human body looks? Oh wait you never took anatomy. Did you learn this bit on YouTube?) and retorts from Bruce (at least I knew enough to build Steve a nerve blocker after the mission out in Singapore, you forgot nerves even had to be blocked! Are your pain receptors as broken as your common sense ones?) and the music that Friday played in the background, the only pieces of which Bucky recognized were the selections from the Hamilton cast recording because you couldn’t escape it in the Mansion, and the soundtrack to The Lion King, which had also been a previous movie night showing. The rest was all just particularly loud and angry noise.

Finally, Tony came around to the front of Bucky to meet his eyes. “We’re done, pal. The good news is that they cauterized so much that there wasn’t blood, but there was some gunked up lubricant and so Bruce wants you to shower before we take final measurements.”

Bucky nodded and raised himself up to go, noticing for the first time that he no longer had a left arm. He turned to notice that Bruce had left the lab and that Tony was holding the no-longer-attached arm and staring at it.

“It’s now or fucking never,” Bucky told himself, but Tony beat him to it.

“What do you remember it at all?”

Bucky took a breath. “Some of it, but only after I watched the tape.”

“So this is what really killed him, right? The soldier just shot him for good measure.”
“The soldier shot him because Howard was lying.”

Tony looked up quickly to meet Bucky’s eyes before looking back at the tool in his hand. “Lying?”

“The soldier, fuck it this is weird, I’m having a good day, I was sent to get a briefcase of the serum that Howard had, but it wasn’t in the trunk where my intel said it would be. I asked Howard where it was and first he said it wasn’t what I was looking for, it was just an experiment he was running with you, which I knew was a lie, so I shot him in the knee.”

“And then you asked him where I was,” Tony whispered.

Bucky nodded. “And then I think he knew he was going to die no matter what and Nat thinks he wanted your mom to hear him tell the truth, so he told me it was the serum, and it was better than Erskine’s because you fixed it, but that he had destroyed all the bottles because he was afraid of it. My intel said that was a lie, so I shot him in the other knee. Did you know you had fixed the formula?”

Tony shook his head. “I wasn’t really interested in human innovations at the time, I was completely focused on machines when I was sober and other things when I wasn’t. It was just… I had been so mad at him a few months before that night, right around Halloween, that I went into his workshop to see if I could fuck something up for him.

“Rhodey had helped me realize at that point that most of Howard’s assholeness to me was that he was jealous I was smarter, but I used that knowledge for evil and not for good and largely just spent my life fucking with him. So that night, he had the formula brought up on a computer, and computers I know, so I noticed the coding was off, which was running the formula to the wrong computations. Even though I wanted to fuck with him, and destroy something, the itch in me to fix the code won, and so I did. I tipped over a trash can on my way out, though.”

“And you had no idea what the code was?”

“I knew it was something to do with altering genetics, but he was dabbling with so much at that point I didn’t give it much thought. I didn’t know it was the serum until I watched the tape.”

Bucky nodded.

“Were you directed to kill Mom, too?”

“I was directed to kill all three of you, but they had to wipe me after that because Howard triggered Bucky and so the mission got delayed. From the files I read, Hydra decided you were doing a good enough job of killing yourself and that you weren’t as smart as your dad said you were, so they left you alone.”

“So, my 20s actually protected me from death by Winter Soldier?”

“In a way, yes,” Bucky admitted. “Not that you should rub that in Pepper’s face or anything.”

“How did Howard trigger Bucky?”

“Did someone translate what he said to me for you?”

“I never asked and I haven’t watched it again since I learned Russian.”

“When did you learn Russian?”
“For you and Nat, when she was looking for you, long story, back to Howard,” Tony flipped his hand about, signaling to Bucky to go back to the main point.

“He called me James, and told me he had been looking for me and for Steve because we had to meet his boy. He told me that you were the best thing he ever did and he was fucking up and he needed help.”

Tony nearly collapsed on the ground like someone swept his knees from under him in battle - maybe they had - and Bucky leapt to catch him. They made their way to the workshop couch – which was the first piece of furniture Pepper made sure transferred from the Tower – and Bucky continued.

“The next few seconds are hazy, because I was both Bucky and the soldier, but I know he kept talking. If you want me to fully translate, I will.”

“Maybe,” Tony whispered.

“Right, so then you heard what he said.”

“That I was in a private plane, on my way to Japan, and then you shot Mom, and he screamed that I would figure out who had done this because I was smarter than even he was and that you should all be afraid of me because I’d be the end of you. And then the hand...”

“Who knew Howard was a prophet,” Bucky’s lips quirked into a smile.

“The serum really is destroyed,” Tony responded. “Once I watched the video, I went digging back through Howard’s files and he had recorded the destruction about three days before he died. Said he couldn’t risk another world-changing product going awry like the bomb did.”

“Could you re-create the code?”

“If I wanted to, probably,” Tony admitted. “There’s enough fragments and Bruce and I have talked about it, but the experiments are a no go, so while I could do the code, I can’t do the serum. We have gleaned what we can, though, to fix Steve and now you.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, and Bucky noticed Tony was silently crying. “Tony, for what it’s worth, I am so sorry.”

Tony smiled, with watery eyes. “I know, Barnes. But thank you.”

“Can you… can you call me James? When I told Pep that Stevie’s mom was the last one to call me James, that was a lie, it was your dad and now that I know you, I’d like to hear it from you, too.”

Tony blinked in surprise a few times before Bucky continued. “I know you hate him. Everyone has filled me in, so if this is too much, then, fine. But we all get crass nicknames, right? If I had to choose between Elsa and James, can I have James? Literally no one else calls me that and ‘Bucky’ feels too... something for... this.”

Tony was quiet for a long time, fiddling with his cuticles and staring out into the workshop. Bucky was good at holding silence, though, and he had a good idea of of what he was asking. Finally, Tony spoke. “Can we compromise on Jimmy?”

“As long as we ban Elsa. I'll let you keep Frosty.”

“Agreed.”
“He’s playing around with names again,” Steve told Sam on a run in late July.

“Peter?”

Steve nodded. “When May first got sick, he started calling all of us by different names, like he was trying them out. The only change that stuck was Pep’s – he went from Aunt Pepper to Auntie Pep. He tried Uncle Captain with me, which I was glad when it failed, and a few others with Tony I can’t remember, but we stayed uncles. But yesterday, he called me Popsicle.”

Sam barked out a laugh. “I kind of love that.”

Steve grinned. “Me too. At first, I thought he was asking for an actual Popsicle because it’s July and hot as balls, but then MJ made some hand gestures that clued me into the fact that it was my new name. Plus, she found me a few hours later and asked if I approved.”

“Did she have a spreadsheet?”

“In her phone, yes,” Steve started laughing.

“Has he changed the other two?”

“He keeps going back and forth for Tony. Sometimes he’s Dad, sometimes he’s Uncle Tony, and a few times we’ve been back to Mr. Stark. I was all – what’s Kerry’s phrase – in my head about how quick mine was versus Tony’s, but Kerry pointed out that Tony and Peter have always had a seriously special relationship. Tony is the first person in Peter’s life who gets him and gets his brain and that doesn’t mean I’m not loved.”

“God no,” Sam affirmed. “That kid has so much love to give, you guys can just take it. But he gets to have different relationships with each of you, the way every human does.”

Steve nodded, but Sam saw some tension around his jaw. “Is it going to be a thing for you if Tony becomes Dad and you stay Popsicle?”


Sam nodded. “So that’s a bridge we cross when we come to it. What’s Pep?”

“Mama Pepper is the one he seems to have landed on, while tickles Pep because it sounds a bit Italian and she loves that he’s keeping that part of May. Plus, we think he may have talked about what to call us with both his therapist and May, so I’m personally not surprised he wanted to use a different word for Pepper than he used for May.”

“Of all the various complications in your life, did you ever foresee the gymnastics of names?”

Steve laughed. “Kerry’s wife, Angie, have you met her?” Sam said he had at a game night a few months ago. “She’s in publishing, so she’s really into words. And she says all the time that words have power, especially names, and it’s why wars are started over them. What to call something or someone is so powerful and connects people together in a really specific way. She got really miffed a few months ago when she realized she was the only one in our little group Tony didn’t use nicknames for.”

“Why? We all hate the nicknames,” Sam responded.
“That was exactly what I said, but Angie explained that it’s Tony’s way of communicating that he feels safe with someone. Pepper said it didn’t used to be, and as the two of them sat there picking the theory apart and how Tony’s use of nicknames has evolved over the time Pepper’s known him, he interrupted them and said ‘yes and no, Soho, but I’ll work on a better one.’”

“Soho?”

“Where her office is.”

“Ah. What did he mean by no?”

“We figured out he also still uses them on strangers to be an ass or to feel powerful, because, as he reminded us, as Howard’s kid, he’s still hardwired to be a dickhead.”

They ran the final mile in companionable silence and found Peter in the communal kitchen when they got back to the Mansion.

“Morning, buddy,” Steve said. “Have you eaten?”

“Morning, Popsicle, no, waiting on MJ.”

“Did you brew her coffee yet?”

Peter looked up from his phone. “Shit.”

“Language,” both adults said, and Peter scowled.

_____________________________________________________________________

“Is it possible that MJ doesn’t want to go home?” Pepper asked Tony and Steve one night at the beginning of August.

“What do you mean?” Steve asked.

MJ and Peter were down in Tony’s workshop, where Friday was keeping a close eye on them, but Tony was trying to give Peter more solo time with the bots to help him learn. He was sitting with one eye on the monitor and one eye on League of Their Own, which the trio was ostensibly watching for the hundredth time.

“I offered to drive her home for the last three weekends to see her family and she came up with a different excuse each time.”

“I think her dad’s an alcoholic,” Tony responded.

“Evidence?” Steve asked, after a few beats.

Tony shrugged, not taking his eyes off either screen. “She is real jumpy when I have more than one glass of scotch, and, remember, Friday has reported that he’s come to pick her up twice with an elevated blood alcohol level, which is when I suddenly drove them home.”

Steve and Pepper looked at each other. “No, we do not remember,” Pepper said.

Tony finally looked at them. “Did I forget to mention it? Shit. Sorry, it was both since we got back from Iowa. Did you think I wanted to drive to Queens for the shits of it?”

“You always want an excuse to fly after meetings these days,” Pepper responded.
“Fair, okay. Sorry, yes, guys, I think MJ’s father might have a problem.”

“That’s not quite enough evidence for a problem,” Steve said.

“Maybe not, but it’s enough evidence for this parental figure to start planning,” Tony responded as he paused the movie and threw up a hologram.

“Is that a scholarship fund?”

Tony nodded. “I figure they’ll both get into MIT, so it’s enough for 4 years, plus room, board, and books there. I also factored two unpaid internships since the world is dumb and unethical, so there’s two summers of a $25k a month salary.” He flipped a few screens. “And here are schematics for the lab we’ll build them if you guys think it’s a good idea. I think we need zoning for it, so Pep, can you check? And here,” he flipped one more screen, “is the car I plan to get Peter so that he can drive and pick her up whenever he wants once he gets a license because he’s not going to be that New Yorker, and here,” he flipped one last screen, “are the specs of the suit I’ve made her.”

“That looks like one of Thor’s Valkyries,” Steve whispered.

“Different colors, though, and no wings because wings are like capes, no matter what Sam says. So it’s all taken care of, can I go back to panicking they may blow DUM-E up now?”

“Everyone. Sit Room. Now. Yes, you too, Barnes.” Fury’s voice rang out through Friday’s intercom system.

“Jesus what?” Tony snapped. “I’m this close to finally making this circuit board work. Give me ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes in Tony time is hours in mine and I don’t care. Ass in the Sit Room now.”

“This is why we should put him in charge of the damn global whatever,” Tony remarked to DUM-E, as he trudged towards the secure, underground board room Tony had affectionately named the “Situation Room” after one too many West Wing marathons.

“Again?” Nat asked.

“It is the simplest way to explain government to Steve and Bucky,” Tony said innocently.

When the whole gang was gathered, Fury noticed Bucky was wearing his new arm. “Nice look, Sargent. Hadn’t seen it in person.”

Bucky nodded. “Stark tech sure beats Hydra tech.”

“I’ll get down to it because I have to be on a flight to Hyderabad in about an hour,” he turned and pulled up a few photos. “No questions yet, just let me go through this.

“This is Carol Danvers, code name Captain Marvel.”

“She exists,” Tony breathed as Fury and Coulson both shot him looks.

“She is, for lack of a better explanation, a super human alien who protects the galaxy. Which means she is stronger than all of you motherfuckers, Barnes and Rogers included, and she is not to be fucked with. She contacted me two weeks ago to let me know she had her eye on these guys. They call themselves the Guardians of the Galaxy,” he flipped through some more slides.
“Catchy,” Clint whispered to Nat.

“Is that a squirrel?” Peter whispered to Pepper.

“And they’re tracking this guy,” a grainy shot of a giant with a square purple head appeared on the screen. “Carol sent this through. This is Thanos, he’s a titan and he’s looking for something called the Infinity Stones.”

“The what now?” Tony asked, because when had he followed Fury’s orders in his damn life.

“That’s what we’d like to know,” Fury said and motioned to Coulson.

“Here’s some on the lore,” Coulson started passing out packets of paper, which Tony started protesting as killing the environment and Pepper reminded him everything he makes can get hacked. “There are, by all accounts, six of them. We know where two are – in Asgard – the other four are various levels of mysterious.”

Clint flipped open the packet. “Yes, the Mind Stone and I are old friends.”

“And that thing we gave to Thor to rebuild the Bifrost was the Space Stone?” Steve clarified, as Coulson nodded.

“Thor affirms to us that the Mind Stone is safe in the vaults of Asgard and that the Space Stone is safe as well. He also let us know that the Reality Stone was stolen from Asgard about a year ago during that whole thing with Jane that none of you showed up for, and the Time, Soul, and Power stones are also all missing.”

“And what, exactly, does Purple Pumpkin Eater want with the bling?” Tony asked.

“That’s what Carol is trying to find out. The lore says whoever controls the stones controls the universe, so we’re thinking it’s nothing good,” Fury said.

“What do you want from us?” Steve asked, ever tactical.

“Right now, any help on research you can. But this is also a heads up. Carol is coming next week and I want her to meet you, and I need to remind everyone, but mostly Tony, that she can kill you with her eyes, so let’s keep the dickishness to a minimum, and this is going to become our number one galactic priority.”

“Cool, so global protection treaty and galactic war,” Tony said sardonically. “Really good thing I was thumb twiddling before this.”
October 2015

“Dillon went over all of these, right?” Tony said to Pepper as he shuffled through a stack of papers they had just gotten back from their family lawyer.

She nodded. “When do you want to tell Peter?”

Tony worried his bottom lip. “The adoption? I want to do it tonight, but he’s out with Steve at that photography thing and then we should wait until after Saturday so he can focus on that.”

“So maybe Sunday morning?”

Tony nodded. “The other stuff, I want to wait.”

Now it was Pepper’s turn to nod. “I think 14 is a little young to know you’re getting a multi-national company as a condolence gift someday.”

“At some point I have to figure out if he even wants it.”

“Well, why don’t you start there? Maybe ask him to actually intern down there and learn some pieces of what you do and then he can learn what I do. You already promised him and MJ lab jobs after they turn 16, so I don’t think he’ll be a hard sell on that front.”

“Okay,” Tony conceded and closed his eyes briefly.

“Babe, it’s 9:30 at night and you were up at 5. Are you sure you need to take this call?” Pepper said softly.

“The Japanese ambassador only had 11am for me.”

Pepper clenched her fists and unclenched them quietly. “Something has to give, babe.”

“Well, the prototypes can’t because now I gotta make sure that I have something to leave the kid, the treaty can’t because I’d like a planet to leave the kid, and the family can’t, so I guess I’ll just have to cancel my macramé class.”

“Sass will get you nowhere, Mr. Stark.”

“Well, Mrs. Stark, it has gotten me into your bed quite a few times, so I wouldn’t say nowhere.”

She swatted him playfully. “I may actually change it if Peter does, but I also don’t want the three of us to have one name and Steve to be…”

“That’s his choice, Pep,” Tony said quietly. “We told him this was all up to him. Legal documents aside, he’s chosen to not.”

“You still think he’s leaving?” Pepper whispered.

“I think we’re fine as long as Barnes is. He leaves and our boy goes with him, with no question.”

“I really think you’re wrong.”
“I really hope I am.”

“Captain,” Steve said with a slight grin and an outstretched hand.

“Captain,” Carol responded, mirroring Steve.

It was the second time Carol had managed to fit Earth into her busy travel schedule, and this time, she, Steve, Rhodey, and Sam were going over some tactical maneuvers as easy training exercises for the eventual mercenary army they assumed they’d have to raise for Thanos.

The human pieces of her brain were also dying for gossip, so she was hopeful she could pull some out of Peter. He looked like the easiest mark.

Construction was underway on a third wing of the Mansion. Even though Tony had always claimed Clint would be the one to bring home strays, it was actually Fury who kept introducing them to people who needed homes, or at least places to stay. First it was the Maximoff twins – who admittedly creeped nearly everyone out - then it was Scott Lang and his daughter, and now Carol.

The plus for all of them is that it gave Tony an excuse to design an even more high tech training space than the one they had, but as far as Pepper was concerned was a double-edged sword. It kept him occupied when he was panicking about Steve leaving, but it was another thing on his already stacked plate.

“So, Tony and Bucky have talked, but Steve and Bucky haven’t and Steve and Tony haven’t?” Nat clarified.

Pepper shook her head. “Peter says he’s said things to all three of them and they all tell him it’s under control.”

“But it’s not.”

“And they keep forgetting his emotional bullshit sensor is stronger than all of ours.”

As the summer of 2015 had given into the fall, Pepper felt like she was living two completely separate lives. The professional one was such a complete whirlwind that he had hired two other PAs – one to handle the Avengers Initiative entirely, one to handle external SI activities and Delia stayed on to handle internal. She’d had to clean a few folks out of the board after the leak and that hadn’t made things any easier.

Her home life was just a few shades south of blissful, for the simple fact that she had chosen to not fuss about Tony or Steve or Bucky and focus – even if just for a few months – on Peter.

She was finally a mom.

The wish she spoke aloud for the first time nearly a decade before had finally come true and she wasn’t going to let herself forget that miracle for a minute. She blessed the memory of his first four parents every morning during her yoga practice and thanked every deity she could name for the gift of him as she fell asleep each night.

He was such a joy that she couldn’t always put it into words, finding herself looking at him whenever they were in the same room. Don’t let me fuck this up had become her mantra and every
time he came home safely – from school or patrol or some assembling activity Tony let him participate in – she let out a breath she forgot she was holding.

At the beginning of her fertility journey, when it was still hopeful and not painful, Tony had gotten her a card that said ‘the choice to become a mother is the choice to forever have your heart walking around outside of your body’, and she can now attest that’s true.

“Ms. Potts,” Delia’s voice called through the intercom. “Miss Jones is here.”

“Send her in!”

Since the night where Tony told her about his suspicions of MJ’s dad, Pepper had been making a concerted effort to invest her time in MJ. She figured even if MJ and Peter broke up or lost touch, her time getting to know the girl would never be wasted.

“Pepper, I told you this wasn’t necessary.”

“Listen, if you don’t want it, I’m not going to pressure you, but I just thought it would be fun.”

Upon learning that Peter had asked MJ to the Homecoming Dance (and after all the Tower Parents recovered from their shock that MJ had agreed to go to something so “heteronormatively conventional”), Pepper had asked if she had a dress or outfit she’d like to wear. MJ had mumbled no, something about hating shopping, but Pepper had been unable to stop herself.

“Peter, she wants to buy me a dress,” MJ had hissed later that night.

“You know, you are allowed to accept gifts. It doesn’t, like, violate the terms of your version of humanity or something,” Peter replied, his patience slightly stretched.

“I don’t like dresses,” MJ replied.

“Then let her buy you a tux and we’ll match,” Peter was exasperated. They’d been having this circular argument for approximately an hour and he still couldn’t figure out what the problem was.

“I just don’t want to be… beholden to her.”

“Why?”

“Because!”

Peter collapsed on his bed in frustration. “MJ, I swear to God I have no idea what we’re talking about.”

“Peter, I don’t like people in my business and since being with you I have an entire legion of superheroes up in it. I went from having no parents or friends who gave a fuck to having a lot of both and it’s a little… to use your completely over-used word, weird.”

“Do you want to break up?”


“But you want to break up with my family?”

“No?”

“MJ, can I take a wild guess her and if I’m wrong, you can, I don’t know, make me watch one of the
TED talks I’ve been ignoring.”

She glared at him.

“You were not weird – shut up – about my family until May got sick and they all started paying for things and like I get it, because it freaks me out too, but I learned a long time ago that Tony seems to just, bleed money all over the place, and Pepper told me that questioning it would only lead to larger and more awkward displays of affection and so far she’s been right, so I have a feeling this is just gonna be a thing, so legitimately if it’s too weird for you, then we probably should break up.”

MJ bit her bottom lip and looked askance. “I don’t want to break up.”

“Then you’ll have to get used to my parents doing this kind of shit.”

She blew her hair out of her face and harrumphed. “So I need to let one of the richest women in the world buy me a super overpriced piece of fabric designed to make me feel like I’m an object on a show at a performance of sexuality in front of our colleagues?”

“Oh,” Peter said, biting back a grin, “you can let my mom take you shopping for a dress because she never gets to do that kind of thing and really loves it, and she may even throw in a mani/pedi because Popsicle overheard her making an appointment and you may even, shock, horror, gasp, have fun with a woman who you really like.”

She flipped him off, he kissed the tip of her nose, and all was back in order.

“No,” MJ said assertively. “I want to do this. I feel a little awkward about it, but I want to do it.”

Pepper, who had been briefed by Peter to expect just this reaction, only smiled. “Okay, dress or tux, have you decided?”

“Dress. No sequins.”

“Sequins make me feel like a disco ball.”

“Or a Golden Girl.”

Pepper smiled and grabbed her purse. “I figure we’ll start at Saks and go from there. Do you have any other ideas?”

“Saks Fifth Avenue?”

“Is that a problem?”

MJ took a breath. Be cool, Soda Pop. “Nope, I mean, yes, but nope.”

Pepper bit back her smile that time. “I really like you, MJ.”

MJ looked startled, but blushed slightly. “Same, Pepper. Same.”

“When do you land?” Peter asked a very excited Shuri.

“My brother says we’ll be to your palace by 5pm.”
“We don’t have a palace, Shuri,” Peter rolled his eyes. “We don’t have palaces in America.”

Shuri made a face. “Do not tell me Queen Beyoncé does not live in a palace.”

“Well, I’m sure she does, but I’ve never been there, and I don’t.”

“You’re the rich and powerful Tony Stark and you haven’t even met her highness? What use are you!”

Peter rolled his eyes. “He’s not my dad, not like that.”

“Sure, that’s why you call him dad all the time.”

“I do not.”

“Do I need to be here for this?” MJ cut in from Peter’s bed, where she was flipping through something on her phone while Shuri and Peter were on video chat.

“He needs a sister, MJ,” Shuri said. “I am doing so much of your work for you.”

MJ rolled her eyes and indicated her agreement with Shuri’s statement. “But I’m here for the trip planning and food recommendations, so if you guys are going to sibling, I can go get a snack.”

“No, let’s talk food!” Shuri clapped her hands together gleefully and the trio talked about pizza and tacos and bodegas for the next half an hour before Shuri needed to go.

“Okay, so I’m going to –“

“Parker. Stop being weird.”

“I want this to be special,” he muttered. “You deserve it to be special.”

It was the night of the dance and to Peter’s continual shock, MJ had not backed out. Pepper, Nat, and Carol were going to help her get ready in Nat’s room, while Peter was being banished to his rooms until summoned.

MJ smiled shyly, an odd look on her. “You make me feel special every day, Parker. This time I’m just wearing a dress.”

“How was the night?” Pepper asked Peter the next morning. He had a doofy grin on his face, so she figured she knew, but wanted to hear it.

“Magic,” Peter breathed. “She was, it was, completely magic.”

Pepper didn’t even try to hide her grin. “I’m so glad.”

“I hate that word,” Tony replied from the end of the table, “but I’ll allow it on this one very specific circumstance.”

Peter grinned and ate another spoonful of cereal. “Thanks, Doughny,” he said with his mouth full.

“Seriously? Mouth closed,” Tony pointed a finger at him and went back to his tablet. “And I gotta ask – what?”
“Doughny. Dad Tony.”

“Rough or final draft?” Tony asked.

“Rough,” Peter rolled his eyes but grinned at the same time as Tony made a face but nodded. Okay, so Doughny gets a maybe. The way his heart clenched with gratitude as this feeling of familial normalcy wasn’t something Peter had gotten tired of yet – and hoped he never would.

“Hey, kiddo,” Pepper said as she sat down next to him. “We wanna talk to you about something.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“Did MJ sleep in her own room last night, Friday?” Tony asked as Peter rolled his eyes.

“You know she did, sir, you’ve asked me five times,” Friday responded and Peter grinned.

“Then, no,” Pepper said with a smirk.

“I’m not going to stop asking,” Tony said.

“And the answer will always be the same,” Peter said, his cheeks bright red. “And when it’s not, Friday is not how you’ll find out. I promised Mama Pepper. We had the whole talk and it was mortifying and I’m still deciding if I’ll ever recover from it. I’m 14 for fucks sake, and I’m not you.”

“Language.”

“I know.”

Tony looked at Pep, who shrugged. “You and Steve were too chicken, so I took care of it.”

“Well, this is somehow a perfect transition,” Tony said, scooting down a few chairs to sit next to Peter. “Not only because I want desperately to change the subject, but because I felt very parental just now.”

Peter snorted, as Pepper grabbed a file folder from the sideboard.

“Right, and ignoring Tony is a big part of our family,” Pepper winked at Peter, “so that works too.”

Peter giggled and pushed his cereal bowl out of the way, making room for Pepper to put the file folder down.

“Peter, in this folder is all the paperwork we need to adopt you, instead of just being your guardians. This is up to you, of course, but we’d really like to call you our son,” Pepper said gently.

“Your son?” Peter said, his voice cracking on the word.

“Umhm,” Tony murmured in assent. “I mean, only if you want.”

“Why wouldn’t I want it?” Peter looked confused. “Of course I want it.”

Both Pepper and Tony let out the breath they didn’t realize they were holding.

“Does this change anything with Popsicle?”

Pepper shook her head. “No, this is entirely about legality. The emotions of our family are, and will always be, our own. Steve knows we’re having this conversation with you and we actually asked
him to be here, but he thought it was best if it was the three of us, since we'll be the Stark family and not the Stark-Rogers-Potts-Parker family the way we are when it's just us."

Peter nodded, seeming to chew on those words. "So this will be public?"

Tony nodded. "Yes. So I suppose your signature does come with that one caveat. One, we have no interest in hiding our pride and joy from the world, and two, we can't make this a closed adoption because we're already your guardians, which I'm still kind of shocked no one has hacked and leaked, but I'm sure we're running out of time on that and enterprising idiots will find it and we'll deal with it. So, will everyone at school find out that you're legally ours? Probably. This is a pretty hot piece of gossip."

"Which is why," Pepper picked up there, "we're on your timetable. You can sign today and we can file tomorrow and be before the judge to officially make this happen early next year, or you can sit on it until you graduate. Your call. Does not change one inkling of how we feel about you, nor does it really change a whole lot legally. No matter what, you're safe and permanently with us."

"Do I change my name?"

"Only if you want to," Pepper replied. "And we can always do it later."

"So if this is... if I want this to happen, do I just sign here?" Peter pointed to a dotted line and looked up at Tony.

"Just like that?" Tony found his throat clogged a bit.

"Dad," Peter whispered, leaning into Tony's side for a hug, and then switching to the other for Pepper, "Mom. I love you 3000."

Tony handed him a pen and watched as Peter signed Peter Benjamin Parker with a decisive flourish and didn't bother to hold back the tears.

_____________________________________

"Are we going to talk about it or just hit baseballs?"

"We're going to hit baseballs," Steve responded to Bucky's question.

"If you are this upset about it, why the fuck did you tell them to do it without you? They fucking asked you to be there, you idiot."

Four more baseballs flew past the plate of the batting cage before Steve answered. "He's their kid."

"Fuck you, Rogers, he's all your kid. For all your yammering about how much you never ever want to go public with your arrangement, you sure do get your feathers ruffled when Tones and Pep do something for the brand that excludes you."

"Fuck you, Buck."

"Great comeback, asshat."

Steve grumbled and six more baseballs flew by.

"You gonna go back to therapy like you promised?" Bucky asked.

"I made an appointment for Tuesday," Steve ground out.
“Good. Now, onto more pressing topics, I need your help with a Christmas gift for Nat.”

“It’s October,” Steve said through clenched teeth, ignoring the feeling he got in his gut whenever he was reminded of the slowly building relationship between Bucky and Nat.

“I haven’t bought anything for anyone but you since, easily, 1939, so I may need a few practice runs. Jesus, what did that ball do to you?”

Steve had just managed to hit the equivalent of a 388ft home run and he knew that meant it was time to stop. He’d already overheated and ruined two pitch machines that year.

Taking a few deep breaths as he peeled off the rented batting helmet and stepping back out into the viewing area where Bucky was sitting, munching on peanuts and sipping a beer, Steve forced his face to go into a smile. “Pro tip: flowers don’t come from supermarkets or gas stations, and she has a real thing for jazz.”

“See? I knew you could be helpful. And don’t think we’re not going to circle back to your truly heinously disguised coping mechanisms.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”
February 2016

“Hey Frosty,” Tony said, not looking up from his tablet as Bucky ambled into the room.

“Hey Tin Man,” Bucky responded. “The thing on the thing is…”

“You can come here to ask me things without me needing to fix something, idiot.”

Bucky blushed slightly, shaking his hair over his face to hide it. “I rehearsed something better, but yeah, I have a question.”

“Shoot.”

“Can you look at me?”

Tony paused, slowly put down his socket wrench, and swiveled his face. “Looking.”

“I have about five minutes before Stevie realizes I’m here, so I’m making this quick.”

Tony’s eyebrow quirked.

“I have no idea why he’s being such an idiot, but I’m trying on my end to get him to pull his head out of his ass. I know he’s hurting the kid, because my eyes were not part of my brainwashing, but I wanted you and Pep to know that I’m over here doing what I can. So is Sam.”

Tony blinked slowly. “You don’t know.”

“Is that one of those clarifying questions Pepper is always making me ask?”

“Sure.”

“Then yes, no, I don’t know.”

Tony turned back to his bench and Bucky noticed his fists were clenched. “Not my story. I promised… not my story. But if I were you, I’d go wander through your exhibit a little. There’s a few photos that may help.”

Bucky was completely confused. “So you know?”

Tony nodded tightly. “But one of my promises, one of the things we all agreed was that we wouldn’t tell the other people’s stories, and this one isn’t mine, but yes. I have some ideas. He has to tell you himself, though.”

“So you and Pep won’t help?”

Tony shook his head. “Unless someone is going to be harmed or harm someone – like a therapist’s suicide clause – or with the other person’s consent. But this time, I gotta tell you, Jimmy, I’m not sure he’s put together the puzzle pieces, so we may just all be fucked, but Pepper also thinks I’m wrong, so I’m not going to put something in your head that may be bullshit, but go look and then buckle up,
because if I'm right... fuck, you know our boy is a fucking stubborn science experiment.”

Bucky looked like someone had just smacked him in the face, but he nodded quietly and left the lab.

“Friday?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Tell Pep Bucky’s going to stalk her, but that I didn’t spill. And then put on *Dark Side of the Moon* at top volume and lock the doors.”

“Family protocol?”

“Emergency protocol.”

“Yes, Boss.”

_____________________________________

“Meep!”

The day after Tony began his inconveniently timed, but thankfully temporary, meltdown, Peter rushed into Pepper’s home office.

“Meep!”

“What are you saying?”

“Meep. It’s short for Mama Pepper. Does it work?”

“I feel like you’re making Muppet noises at me.”

“What?”

“The Muppets.”

“Still drawing a blank.”

“I am an old,” Pepper groaned. “Friday, assistance please.” For the next forty-five or so minutes, Friday and Pepper regaled Peter with clips of *The Muppet Show* until Peter said he knew what she meant.

“Can I still use it? It’s more fun now.”

“Can we think about using it sparingly?”

“Sure, Meep.”

Pepper jokingly slammed her head into her desk as Peter roared with laughter.

_____________________________________

“Tony, come here,” Steve yelled from their living room.

“Babe, I’m making the very important decision on which tie to wear to this insufferable parent/teacher conference. I mean, our kid is brilliant and is well adjusted despite all excuses to the contrary, why do I have to go to goddamn Queens. Are you dressed?”
“No one in this house is more offended by the presence of Queens than me, and so I’m with you, but Pep already laid out your tie before she boarded the jet for Singapore, and yes of course I am, and Nick is holding a press conference from Olivia’s bakery.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Tony skidded into the room.

“Holy fuck,” Steve muttered. “He’s abdicating.”

“Goddamn, son of a bitch,” Tony murmured. “He’s abdicating.”

Tony and Steve watched as Crown Prince Nicholas Arthur Frederick Edward Pembrook of Wessco told the world that his love for American citizen Olivia Hammond was worth more to him than his crown.

“I’d do it,” Tony said quietly. Steve was quiet, which Tony didn't quite know how to read, so he kept talking. “Some archaic law said that I couldn’t have both SI and you, Pep, and Peter? Zero hesitation, I’d get my mechanic’s license and that would be that.”

“Of course you would,” Steve smiled fondly.

“I…” Tony stopped, shuffled his feet a bit, shoved his hands in his pockets, and back out again, and the whole time Steve had a bemused expression on his face. Finally, Tony reached for the sides of Steve’s face, and pulled him closer. “I know you love Bucky. I know, it was you and me in the old workshop and like I told Pep, I don’t forget things, so I know. And I know your heart is torn in ways I don’t understand because mine is not. Torn, I mean. Not torn. It is clear and has been since I allowed myself to admit it was always for Pepper.

"And then I never split anything to love you, I just learned I had more to give, and then Peter is like finding another chamber entirely. I choose you, and her, and him every day. So yes, between the three of you and something as cheap as a legacy? I’ve seen Hamilton, Steve. I know how it plays out if I choose wrong. I love you. Please remember that.”

“No one is going to shoot you in a duel, Tony.”

“Well, with our job, not sure you can guarantee that, handsome” he patted Steve’s cheek as he pulled him in for a kiss. “Now, let’s go hear how brilliant our kid is, while we do our best impression of heteronormativity as Tony Stark’s best friend and definitely not boyfriend subs in for Pepper since I can’t be trusted to take notes.”

“You are spending too much time with MJ.”

“Hey, listen, asshat, don’t think I’m not furious with you,” Tony said to Nick a few nights later when Nick and his fiancée Olivia came out the Mansion for dinner. Tony had pulled Nick down to the Sit Room to talk about how the abdication was going to affect the accords negotiations.

Nick laughed. “Mate, like you wouldn’t do the same thing.”

“Oh, no, to be clear, I already told Steve I would do just that,” Tony grinned, “but your formally-royal-highness, you are still making my life difficult so fuck you.”

“It’s technically still Your Grace, as I’m a duke now, and still maybe a prince, Grandmama hasn’t decided yet.”
“Of course you fucking are. But let’s be honest here, what I care about is me, so are you in charge of diplomacy or not?”

Nick chuckled softly, and then nodded and tapped his fingers on the table. “Henry is, as you can imagine, furious with me, but I told him I’d take over most of the actual governing for a little while. Grandmama still does all of our domestic affairs, and I’m entirely external. So what he has to do is focus on pulling his head out of his ass and becoming worthy of the crown.”

When Nick abdicated the throne of Wessco, it went to his younger brother, Henry, who was not what one would call... leadership material. Tony and Nick had spent many hours and several bottles of scotch talking about how, much like younger Tony, there was heaps of potential buried under all that self-loathing and crippling self-doubt.

“How much of this was to make him get rid of his GhostHowards?”

“20%? Maybe? Abdicating that way, anyway. Marrying Olivia had nothing to do with him and I really don't want to be King, which you've been saying for years, so fuck you, buddy,” Nick laughed. "But if Henry was a functional human, I would have consulted him, but since he’s not, the shock was 100% meant to fuck with him. But, from what Pepper has told me, that’s how she handled you before Iron Man, so I figure I’d learn from the best.”

Tony barked out a laugh. “So, next week, the finalization of this round, you’ll be in Geneva?”

Nick nodded. “You know I never miss a chance to sit around a circle with egotistical octogenarians. Plus, this is too important for me to walk away now and Olivia agrees. I’ll see this through.”

“Tony, would you listen to yourself! We cannot sign this!”

“Steven Grant Rogers, you are being deliberately obtuse and I’m over it. We have to sign something, we have to give them something, and you are being way too Captain America about this. The world isn’t black and white, Capsicle, we’re not fighting Nazis anymore, we’re fighting everything and if you keep giving us flack on this we will be fucked.”

“I am not signing and Nat is not signing and Clint is not signing and you are the only one of us who thinks this is a good idea.”

“Well, considering I am the only genius, that is zero surprise to anyone.”

“How long have they been like this?” Peter whispered to Pepper from the living room. The pair of men were two rooms away in the library and Pepper and Peter could hear every word.

Tony had come back the night before from Geneva with a draft of the Sokovia Accords – a series of documents creating global oversight – with wiggle room for intergalactic that no one but Tony knew the importance of – to individuals using technology as methods to participate in warfare. They were flawed – Tony knew it – but this was the first draft. The first draft still needed signature so they could start the next draft, a point which seemed to escape Steve completely.

Pepper kissed his forehead, “About the accords? Since Tony started working on them. Steve has been against Tony’s involvement with them since the beginning. But fighting like both of their lives depend on it? Since they met, dear.”

“I don’t like it,” Peter said.
“Join the club, kiddo.”

Peter played the game on his phone for a few more minutes and then quietly asked, “what should we do?”

“We? You and me? Well, we are going to continue to sit here and snuggle and maybe get some ice cream in a little while.”

“Meeeeeep.”

“Do you really want to go into that room right now?”

He picked at his fingers and looked up through his lashes at her, seeming all at once vulnerable and resilient. “I want to help.”

“Well, my darlingist darling, you cannot,” Pepper held up a hand to Peter’s protest. “One of the greatest lessons you can learn is that loving people sometimes means sitting on your hands. You cannot save everyone, you cannot help all the time, and there are people who do not want to be helped. Your dad and your pops? They want our help, but not right now, right now we’d scare them off and they’d get mad at us and so we’re going to sit over here on our hands and trust they can solve this problem themselves.”

“But what if they can’t?”

“Then we’ll deal with that.”

“But-“

“Peter, do you trust me?”

Peter paused and worried his bottom lip, “yeah.”

“Then I need you to trust me right now. I promise that if I think they’re hitting a point they can’t come back from, I will intervene.”

“You promise.”

“I do.”

Peter seemed to accept that. “What was that about ice cream?”

March 2016

Hair pulled back and under a baseball hat, Bucky found himself wandering through the Smithsonian exhibit on the Howling Commandos.

*Tony told me to look at the pictures and that would explain Stevie acting like a damn pod person lately, what fucking pictures?*

After several minutes, he stumbled upon one taken of a group of them and he, Steve, and Peg were amongst the group. Bucky stepped closer and let the memories wash over him. He could almost smell Peg’s perfume and started to wander down memory lane when he realized something very suddenly. That love sick, stupid look on Steve’s face was *not directed at Peggy.*
And all of a sudden, he was back to the night before he fell from the train.

They were just a little punch drunk – Steve couldn’t get drunk any more, but the hours and hours of marching and waiting and sleeplessness had made him a little loopy. Steve and Bucky were alone in Steve’s tent, a reality that had been formed hundreds of times before, but for some reason, on this night, Bucky knew he had to say something.

“Stevie, can I be real honest?” Bucky was actually a little drunk on some cheap wine they had…er…liberated from a nearby farm.

“Of course, Buck.”

They were sitting on Steve’s bed roll, both facing out into the tent, Bucky had a cigarette dangling from his fingers and he caught a glance of Steve out of the corner of his eye. With a confessional tone, he said, “I kinda hate Captain America.”

Steve was quiet, but Bucky could feel his body tense up.

“I love you,” Bucky’s voice dropped to a whisper, knowing that if this went poorly, love was a wide word, “but Captain America makes me miss all the old times. When I could take care of you, and you needed me.”

“Fuck me, Buck –“ That’s the point of this conversation, yes, Bucky thought, “you still do.”

Bucky laughed, a sadness creeping into the sound. “You can lift me with one arm. Your lungs work perfectly. The fights you get into, you actually win. Wuddya need me for?”


“I just miss when you fit,” Bucky mumbled.

“Are we sure I still don’t?”

Before Bucky knew it, Steve had put out Bucky’s cigarette and flipped them around on his bedroll, with Steve’s back pressed up to Bucky, like they used to when Steve was sick. Bucky’s arm didn’t quite reach as fully around Steve’s body, but Steve was right – they still kind of fit.

They laid there for what could have been either three minutes or three hours before Steve whispered, “I guess I do.”

Bucky hummed, afraid to trust his own voice.

Slowly, Steve turned his body until he was facing Bucky, their noses brushing against each other. Neither man spoke, but Bucky realized their breathing was in sync.

“Buck, I don’t know who I am if I’m not yours.” Steve’s voice was matter-of-fact, as though he was telling Bucky that he had mashed potatoes for dinner.

“Me either, Stevie. Me either.” And slowly, ever so slowly, Bucky leaned in and kissed his best friend.

Later, much later, right before Bucky snuck back to his tent, they agreed that the next time they could steal time alone they would talk.

Bucky stumbled to a bench several meters from the plaque and buried his head in his hands. He was so sure when he came back that Steve had moved on. He was basically married, for fuck’s sake, and
he had a kid, and Bucky was so different than that man who kissed his childhood sweetheart in a tent in Italy seventy goddamn years ago. Stevie couldn’t possibly be that stubborn and that stupid and that

Of course he could. Jesus Christ, no wonder Stark looked like someone had kicked his puppy when I

Bucky went digging for his phone when he heard a low voice whisper.

“Asset.”

Bucky froze.

“Желание.”

With his free-will crumbling, he turned his head to see Rumlow, grinning down at him.

“Семнадцать. Ржавый. Рассвет. Печь. Девять. Добросердечный. Возвращение на родину. Один. Товарный вагон.”

By the time the recitation was finished, Bucky had gone into a deep sleep and the Winter Soldier was awake.

____________________________________

“Boss.”

“Yeah, Friday?”

“Janelle has alerted me that Sargent Barnes has arrived at Reagan International Airport.”

“Okay,” Tony said slowly. “He’s down in D.C. with Sam for a few days. Isn’t he coming back today?”

“Boss, Sargent Barnes was scheduled to meet the StarkJet at Dulles International Airport fourteen minutes ago.”

“Well, then he’s not supposed to be at Reagan. Can Janelle rouse him on coms?”

“No, Boss. Agent Barnes is uncommunicative, both by coms and by phone.”

Well, that wasn’t great. “You tried the phone?”

“Several times, Boss, according to Frosty the Soldierman Protocol.”

Tony smirked despite of himself. He was pretty proud of that code name. “Okay, well-“

“Hang on, Boss,” Friday said. “Agent Romanov is patching in.”

“Nat!”

“They have him, Tony.”

Nat’s voice was flat, and Tony immediately dropped his tools and started moving.

“How do we know?”
“T’Challa just got a coded message.”

“I thought you fixed him.” One of the benefits of Friday was that Tony could keep yelling as he ran through the house.

“They must have an activation code I didn’t know about and he didn’t know about, FUCK, Tony don’t you think – I’m in the Sit Room.” The connection terminated and Friday picked back up.

“Captain Rogers, Agents Fury, Coulson, and Barton, Mr. Wilson, and Dr. Banner have all been notified of the assemble call to the Sit Room. Colonel Rhodes is en route. Shall I alert Master Parker?”

“No, Jesus, no.” Tony’s voice was firm. “He’s at school and Pepper’s still in fucking Oslo so as soon as she can talk, tell her we’re under Frozen Captain protocol and to get her ass back here as soon as she can and no, I don’t care what the stock prices do.”

He threw open the door to the Sit Room to find Nat pacing and chewing her nails so hard her fingers might fall off.

“I didn’t know, Tony, I didn’t, I swear, I’m sorry-“

And that’s when he noticed something he had never seen before – Natasha Romanov was crying.

All the fight went out of him. He crossed the room quickly and pulled her into his arms. “Shh, Natasha, dear, you could not have known. You did your best, you gave us months with him and now we’re going to just dig a little deeper so that we can have years.” They stood there for a few moments, as the others filed in around them and everyone took a seat.

Tony moved to sit next to Steve and grabbed his hand, which was limp. Not good. Not letting go,

Tony looked at Fury. “Okay, Goldeneye, what’s the plan.”

“Agent Romanov, come in.”

The full compliment of Avengers – minus Clint, Natasha, and Thor, plus the Wonder Twins (Tony’s nickname) and Fury, were gathered in the Sit Room – listening to the missing three as they headed into a cave in Moldova. Peter was incessantly texting Tony, who kept reminding him that he wasn’t allowed to have phones in algebra.

It had been four days since Bucky was taken, (or reactivated, neither was pleasant), and Tony thought he was going to have to tranquilize Steve soon.

“Copy, Agent Fury.”

“Agent Barton.”

“Copy for me and Blondie.”

“Do we have eyes?” Fury asked.

The hologram in front of the team squiggled to life. “They’re my eyes, sir,” Nat confirmed.

The tension in the room was palpable as Nat wound her way through hallway after hallway of what was seemingly an abandoned Hydra base. It had been the last signal from the tracker that Tony had built into Bucky’s arm.
“You put a tracker in his arm,” Steve said flatly.

“There’s one in your shield, and in Pep’s suit, and Peter’s, in Clint’s bow, Nat’s favorite throwing star, and Thor’s breastplate, and Sam’s wings. Bruce’s gamma radiation acts as its own tracker and I haven’t decided what to do for the Wonder Twins yet.”

“Were you going to tell us?”

“No?”

Steve gawped.

“Honestly? I’m a paranoid engineer with serious abandonment issues and a God complex. Did you really think I hadn’t?”

“For the last time, Tony, you have a martyr complex,” Pepper called from the next room.

“Fuck,” Nat’s voice came through as she walked into a room with a set of bookshelves. There, in the middle, was Bucky’s arm. “It’s got a note.”

“And it says?”

“The same bullshit about heads and cutting off that they always say,” Nat replied. She sighed heavily. “Turning video and two-ways off. Clint, meet me at rendezvous. Everyone, we’ll see you in a few days.”

She cut out, and the mood in the Sit Room was one of defeat. Fury and Steve leapt into strategizing next steps when, about fifteen minutes later, several alarms went off at once.

“Nat’s hurt,” Sam said. “Clint, do you copy?”

“Her coms are out, but MC Hammer is on his way to get her. I’m on air, but they came out of nowhere. Trap.”

“Clearly,” Tony muttered drolly.

Nearly twenty minutes of tense silence, punctuated by Clint’s narration – he didn’t have the video goggles Nat did – went by when finally Clint said, “he has her, we have her, we’re on our way.”

Two days later, when the trio showed back up at the Mansion, Nat had three broken ribs, a broken pelvis, and a renewed vow to destroy Hydra.

Chapter End Notes

The current draft for this is 35 chapters, so we're rounding out the end, unless as I type there's a burst of new coming from somewhere. I spend a lot of my time reading romance novels and fundamentally believe in happily ever afters and epilogues - so both will be making an appearance here.

I’d love to know what you’re thinking about this and how nervous our folks are making you.
Thanks, as always, for all the delightful comments. They are fueling this thing for sure.
April 2016

“Peter Benjamin, are you listening to me?”

“Michelle Elizabeth, do you want me listen to you or kiss you because I’m not in a place right now to multi-task.”

“Right now? Listen.”

Peter heaved a deep and overly dramatic sigh that earned him a smirk and a swat from his girlfriend. “Repeat, please.”

“I asked how Nat was feeling, and when she was going to hunt down Bucky, and how you think Popsicle is with all of it, did you really not hear any of that.”

Peter stared at her. “If you were asking and thinking all of that while I was… I need to seriously step up my game.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You think your tongue and fingers have some magic anti-anxiety power that once you deploy them, I will be useless putty in your hands?”

“No, I just thought that if I could make you feel better, you’d feel better,” Peter confessed. “By the way your eyes have turned into slats, I’m guessing I made the wrong call.”

“Affirmative.”

Peter sighed. “Can you not be mad and just explain because I thought I was being the good guy here.”

MJ’s lips tweaked up in a smile. “You need to remember my brain is different and it works different and I’m different.”

“Trust me, sweetness, I am aware.”

She rolled her eyes. “That nickname is not approved and you know it, but I can panic about fourteen things at once and most of the time that means I need to talk.”

“But sometimes it means you need to move around and sometimes it means you need me to kiss you and sometimes it means-“

“-yeah, I see your point,” MJ admitted. She blew her hair out of her face. “Pepper warned me… right, okay, I’ll be better about telling you which of those options I need, okay?”

Peter grinned and nodded, and her heart melted, just like it always did. God, the things this boy does to me.

“Do you want to stay here tonight or go home?”

MJ twitched a bit. “Mom’s out of town again.”
“Cool, I’ll let Pepper know. I’m heading out on patrol, do you need me to swing by and pick up anything from your house?”

“The pun is noted, Parker, and yeah, I forgot my chemistry text book. How are you getting into the city?”

“Uncle Rhodey’s gonna fly me.”

“Our lives are weird.”

“It feels like you’re ripping your heart out through your toenails,” Carol said decisively, tipping her beer bottle back to her lips.

It was April, sometime around 10 at night, and she and Steve were in the backyard of the Mansion after completing a long ass day of strategy meetings on finding both Bucky and Thanos.

Steve fiddled with the label on his. “His trail has run completely cold.”

“The soldier was trained very well,” Carol said quietly. “That’s not a reflection on how hard you’re looking for him, or how badly you want to find him.”

Steve nodded, contemplatively. “Do you have a Bucky?”

“I’m assuming by that you mean someone from my non-hero life?” When he nodded, she told him about Maria and Monica, and how even though they keep getting older, they’ll always be home to her. She’s quiet for a few moments before asking, “But you have Pepper and Tony, now, right?”

“I still have Bucky, too,” he responded and changed the subject to her favorite planets to visit.

“The papers are filed,” Pepper confirmed with Peter. “But we’re allowed to delay the actual court date for 18 months, so take your time.”

“Maybe not until Bucky comes home,” Peter said. “I wanted him to be there.”

Pepper took a breath to steel against her tears. “And I know he’d want to be there more than anything, so I think waiting is fine. And Pete – we can always just re-file.”

He nodded and her heart clenched. *Bucky, wherever you are, keep fighting, because we are coming.*

**July 2016**

“I don’t care if I’m cleared, I’m going,” Nat snapped at Fury. They had finally tracked some legitimate intel on Bucky – sorry, the Soldier – and it appeared he was in Johannesburg. He’d been there for long enough that Nat was confident she could get there before they moved him.

Fury, looking at her x-rays with the still slight fracture in her pelvis, said he was going to call Rhodey and ask for a favor.

“Honeybear would do it,” Tony replied, “don’t me wrong, but he’s about as afraid of Nat as he is of Hydra, so he’s going to tell you to let her go.”
Fury glared. “You realize, Stark, that when people ask me about your attitude with authority, these are the kind of stories I tell?”

“Aw, I get warm and fuzzy just thinking of it,” Tony smiled. “Nat, let’s fuck around with the suit, I may be able to reinforce right by your break.”

Tony and Nat tinkered about for several hours – or rather, Tony tinkered, and Nat sighed like a long-suffering model annoyed at the designer. Finally they manipulated the nanobots into providing enough support for her still-healing skeleton while allowing her muscles free movement.

“Friday?” Tony asked as Nat left the workshop. “Time check.”

“Boss, it is 11:27pm.”

“Jesus Christ, okay, I’m headed to bed. Are Pep and Steve already there?”

“Captain Rogers is in the gym.”

“The gym.”

“Yes.”

“Friday, I swear I can hear your disappointment and I match it, girl. On my way.”

“His vitals indicate he is very overwhelmed, Boss,” Friday said.

“Well, so does his behavior recently, so I’m glad something matches.”

Even before he made it to the gym, he could smell sawdust. “Friday?”

“It’s from the destroyed weight bags, Boss.”

“Jesus, how many?”

“He is working on his 56th.”

“Fifty-six weight bags,” Tony ran a hand down his face, “since when?”

“Approximately 135 minutes.”

Okay, Tony thought to himself, as he flung the door open. “Babe? How would you feel about bed? Friday tells me we’re running out of things for you to destroy with your fists and the Amazon drones don’t deliver this far out of Manhattan yet.”

Ignoring him, and throwing another punch at the bag, Steve replied. “Do you see now why I can’t sign them? I can’t imagine not being able to just… go and do what we need without having to ask permission fucking first.”

Tony took a deep breath, attempting to control his temper, “Steve, I know why you think you can’t sign them.”

“Do not tell me my own head.”

“Well, since yours is so far up your ass-“

“And here we are again.”
The pair were silent for a moment, before Steve spoke, “I have to go after him.”

“I know,” Tony whispered.

“I can’t.”

“Steve, I knew we had an expiration date the minute I read Barnes’ file. Go. I get it.”

“What? No.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Oh for fuck, Steve. Like I’m gonna compete with your one true love? Pepper may have a shot since you already said goodbye to Aunt Peggy and I would certainly hope you won’t abandon the kid, but you and me? I get it.”

Steve stared at him. “One has nothing to do with the other, I just have to make sure Buck is safe.”

Tony was silent. He opened his mouth to speak a few times, but as the tears started welling in his eyes, he clearly thought better of it. “I’m trying to be an adult here, baby, and that is still a new experience for me, so if you could just kindly go with Nat and go after your boyfriend, I’d appreciate it. Friday will help you with coordinates, make sure to take all of your gear so we can track you two in case this gets as ugly as I’m sure it will get.”

Tony abruptly crossed the room, kissed Steve hard, and turned on his heel to walk away.

“What the fuck just happened,” Steve said to himself in a state of shock and starts walking to his room when something Tony said tricked over in his brain.

*They can’t track me. I’m going right into Hydra territory and I will not let them follow me. Nat is not battle ready. I can handle this.*

The only logical thing, as far as Steve was concerned, was for him to go after Bucky and to protect everyone else from Bucky by going alone. He went to his dressing room, his only truly private space in the house, and packed a bag of civilian clothing, a gun and some ammunition he had gotten from Sam in case of an emergency, several of the invented identities he’d had created over the years, and all the cash he kept around, thanking his Depression-era instincts that he still kept some.

He headed for the hanger at the back of the property, consciously leaving all Stark Tech that he could behind. He’d take one of the jets as far as an airport and then head off on his own. A few weeks, he’d be gone, he was sure, and then everything would go back to normal.

*It had to.*

“SHIT FUCK MOTHERFUCING COCKSUCKER HE DIDN’T,” Nat screamed as she looked at the empty hanger the next morning. Without thinking about the pain in her joints, she took off running towards the house and nearly skidded through the Stark-Rogers wing and into Steve’s dressing room.

“God, Nat, what is the –“ Tony followed her in and the sound he let out, she wouldn’t forget for as long as she lived.

There, all folded and neatly stacked on Steve’s dresser was Captain America’s uniform with his shield lying beside it. She noticed a Post-It and snatched it up.
Can’t risk any of the rest of you. He’s my mission, I’ll bring him home.

“WHY DID HE LEAVE EVERYTHING THAT MEANT WE COULD FIND HIM?” Tony screamed as Friday tried to interrupt and tell Tony that his blood pressure was rising to dangerous levels. “WHY WOULD HE DO THAT? HOW CAN HE BE SO FUCKING STUPID?”

Nat silently passed Tony the note, which only led to more screaming, and more of Friday telling him to calm down, until finally Pepper and Peter came running in. Taking in the scene before them, Peter froze in place and looked frantically at both of his parents. “Why is his shield here?”

“HE CAN’T COME BACK NOW, PEPPER. PEPPER YOU PROMISED, YOU PROMISED HE WOULD ALWAYS COME HOME JUST LIKE HIS SHIELD BUT HIS SHIELD IS HOME AND HE’S NOT,” Tony was rage screaming and Pepper could barely control her own breathing.

“Friday, where is the jet,” Nat said, her controlled voice a complete betrayal of the state of her soul.

“Searching,” Friday said and replied a few moments later, “SI’s private airstrip at JFK.”

Ignoring Tony and Peter, mostly because they were non-functional and Nat needed to move now, she looked at Pepper. “Pepper.”

Pepper stared at her blankly, so Nat tried again. “Virginia Ann Potts, look at me.”

That snapped Pepper back into the moment. “Nat, yes. Are you going?”

Nat nodded. “I’ll bring him home. Trust me. And I will take all of my tech and I will check in every day and I will find both of them and bring them back here and I will not come home until they’re with me.”

Pepper nodded and crossed the room to hug her friend. The two women stood crying for several seconds before Pepper kissed Nat on the forehead and whispered, “don’t forget we love you. Try to be Nat levels of stupid and not Tony.”

Nat smiled with slightly watery eyes, nodded firmly, and left the room.

The Stark-Potts-Parker family, however, did not move for several minutes. While Tony got his breathing under control, Peter had started crying, so Pepper shuffled both of them back into Peter’s room and they all climbed into Peter’s bed. Clinging to each other and crying became the modus operandi as Pepper authorized Friday to tell the rest of the team what had occurred and Peter asked her to call MJ.

Morning turned into afternoon and finally Rhodey poked his head in the room.

“Sugarbear,” Tony croaked, “what are you doing here?”

“Nat called,” Rhodey responded. “I heard. I’m here. Let’s get you fed. Kerry and Angie are getting MJ and then they’re all on their way.”

Against protests they weren’t hungry, Rhodey shuffled his broken beloveds into the living room and forced tea and smoothies into them for the rest of the day. Between him, Kerry, Angie, MJ, Clint, and Sam, the trio were never left alone for the rest of the week. Nat kept her promises, texting Pepper frequently, giving regular updates.

+212 817 4589: found the plane no problem. Got it re-gassed and on my way to London. Will check in there again.
+11 206789 7293: in London. Flying commercial because it can get there faster. Tell Tony I’ll rent a plane in Joburg if I have to – have black card with me and can fake your voice to do verbal auth.

+11 206789 7293: security footage has someone I swear is Steve getting on a South African airlines jet to Joburg yesterday. Passport says Adam Belvadere which is one I gave him, what an idiot.

+11 206789 7293: also, don’t worry about texting back, Kerry assures me you’re fed and watered.

+27 11 978 5313: Joburg is a lot dustier than I remember. Nick’s giving me a room in one of his safe houses.

+27 11 978 5313: Fuck. Lost them.

+266 0522 783: Tracked to Lesotho. Talked to T’Challa. Shuri’s process is ready for Bucky. I’ll take them straight there and then make Steve go home to you.

Pepper: No, don’t do that.

+266 0522 783: ??

Pepper: Tony and Peter aren’t coping well. Keep him in Wakanda until he wants to leave Barnes and he’s ready to come home.

+266 0522 783: And you’re coping well?

Pepper: I’m fine. Remember? I’m only human in Wessco.

“Peter, I know you’re mad at me, and I probably should let you come to me on your own, but I just can’t right now, kid, so can you please just tell me what’s wrong?”

It was a full week after Steve had left and Peter had been ignoring Pepper for about that long. On this particular morning, she cornered him in the gym, where he was practicing backflipping and web flinging at the same time.

He glared at her, “I’m not mad at you. It’s nothing.”

Pepper’s mouth closed in a tight line. “Peter, please.”

“You promised,” he finally snapped, after several minutes of tense silence.

“What?”

“You promised that if they were ever going to do something they couldn’t come back from you’d prevent it. You didn’t and now Steve is gone.”

Steve. Right. Noted. One of the greatest indicators of Peter’s mental state since May’s death had been what names he used to refer to everyone. ‘Steve’ was only one step from going back to Captain Rogers. “I did promise that. I’m sorry.”

“Well, you should be,” Peter yelled, and she could hear the catch in his voice. “You told me they
fought all the time and this was normal and it was FINE and then we had ICE CREAM and now everything is broken and I should have said something!"

“Said what, dear?” Pepper said gently.

“ANYTHING. I could have gotten them to see that they were both being stupid and doing all the things they yell at me for like not listening and talking over each other and not thinking about the other person’s point of view, I could have fixed this before it broke, Mama. I could have…” Pepper nearly flew to Peter’s side as he collapsed onto a mat in tears, muttering ‘I could have fixed it’ over and over again. She held him and rubbed his back and let her own tears mix with his for a while.

Then finally, when his breathing had regulated, she spoke softly. “I’m going to be completely honest with you, darling, no one could fix this but the two of them. You could have made all of those arguments – and they’re good ones – and they would have talked you out of them, especially Steve. Something snapped in him when Bucky showed back up and I don’t think we really know what it is.”

“Does he not love us any more? Is that the problem?”

“Oh, no, I think the problem is that he loves us so much and he loves Bucky and he can’t make 1945 and 2016 come together in his brain. And, little secret, that martyr complex we tease your dad about? Steve has it too.”

“He does?”

“How many times does Captain America put himself directly in harm’s way to save one of you during a fight?”

“All the time.”

“How often do you think Steve Rogers doesn’t tell me what he really wants, in case it hurts my feelings, and tells me instead what he thinks I want to hear?”

“I’m going to guess all the time.”

Pepper smiled. “It’s a lot of the time, that’s for sure. And it was getting better, he was learning to ask for things without feeling selfish, and then Bucky showed back up,” Pepper shrugged. “Something else you may want to remember is that we’ve known Steve only a little bit longer than we’ve known you.”

“I always forget that.”

“You know, honey, I do too, but I don’t think Steve ever does. When we all still thought Bucky was dead, he’d talk to Tony about him thinking that Bucky was to him like I was to Tony. If that’s true, that kind of love and commitment runs really deep and the ones he made to us are newer. I don’t think they mean less, but…” Pepper shrugged again. “What I’m saying is that I believe with all of me that once he finds Bucky and makes sure Bucky is safe, he’ll want to come home to us. But, clearly, I’ve been wrong before.”

“So, is it that we have to hope his want to come home is stronger than his need to stay?” Peter asked.

“Probably.”

“That’s a really shitty gamble, Mama,” Peter whispered. “And yes, I know.”
She smiled despite herself. “It is a really shitty gamble, Peter. But here’s what’s a sure thing. Me and Tony? We’re not going anywhere by our own free will. You are stuck with us.”

Peter smiled and turned his body to hug her. “I love you 3000, Mama.”

“Love you 3000, honey.”

Tony fiddled with his watch and looked straight at Dr. Widmeyer.

“You’re saying I’m overreacting?”

“No, Tony, absolutely not. I’m asking if you know why you’re reacting so strongly.”

“He left everything behind, doc. It was like this giant ‘fuck you’ to me and, frankly, to everyone. When I saw that shield on the bed, it was like someone had shot me and since I have had that happen, oh, four dozen times, I know what I’m talking about.

“He just… I told him to go, I know, and Pepper keeps reminding me of that, but him going is not why I’m mad. I’m really, really upset that I was right and I’m taking notes of all of you who said I was wrong, by the way, but I would probably just be in my normal spiral of self-masochism right now instead of feeling like my spleen has been gnawed out of me by gophers.”

“That is a very specific analogy.”

“Peter’s watching a lot of Planet Earth right now.”

“Got it.”

“But to leave the shield? The thing that a: protects him better than anything else and b: he knows I built things into it to make sure I could also protect him… it was the most definitive break up note I could ever imagine.”

Dr. Widmeyer was quiet for a few moments, with a contemplative look on his face. “I’m going to posit an alternative, is that okay?” Tony nodded tersely. “I think Steve is in nine kinds of pain right now and he doesn’t even know which end is up. He’s repressed and disassociated so hard from all of his feelings about Bucky that this decision to go find him was instinctual and not rational and our instincts are entirely about survival.”

Tony started to gnaw on his bottom lip. “And his survival instincts have always been about sacrifice and protection. So he didn’t do this to us, he did this for us.”

“Tony, I hope I’ve earned enough of your trust to say this, but yes, maybe it is not actually all about you.”

Tony barked with laughter as Dr. Widmeyer grinned and continued. “However, just because you can explain something doesn’t make it okay, doesn’t mean it hasn’t changed everything. Understanding is not condoning. The choice Steve made – for whatever reason – is a real fucking shitty one and as someone who has become fond of you, I want you to know that I’m sorry.”

“I got the doc to use profanity and admit he liked me, what a banner day for Team Stark.”

The conversation moved on to how Tony could help Peter through this until the session was over. As Tony was gathering his things to leave, Dr. Widmeyer asked him what he was doing that
“Pepper’s coming to pick me up. I flew here,” he tilted his suit open to reveal the nanosuit that grew into the iron one, “but we’re taking Peter and MJ to see some band I’ve never heard of and may need earplugs for. I’ve promised to leave my phone in my pocket for dinner as an experiment, so we’ll see how this goes.”

“So Peter and MJ are still going strong?”

“If my legacy with that kid is that he actually told the woman he loves that he loves her before he gets kidnapped by terrorists, honestly, my work here is done.”

Flying through the woods that afternoon, Peter came to a decision. He was 15 today and he would give Steve until 6pm to call him or text him or something. Steve knew what a big deal birthdays were to Peter – he’d been there for the past few – and if he missed this one, then that dude simply wasn’t his Popsicle any more.

The next from Nat had come in around 1, telling him she was proud of him, reminding him to practice with the throwing knives only in the safe cage, and that she was somewhere in northern South Africa. As far as Peter was concerned, if Nat, who was just his friend and trainer, could keep track of days and find a burner phone, then surely his basically-dad would, too.

He had checked the time zone in South Africa and it was 6 hours ahead of him so that meant that in order for the text to show up on his birthday, it had to come in by 6pm.

He’s not going to forget, he’s not, he can’t, he wouldn’t do that, he wouldn’t, it’s the second one since my fucking first mom died and he knows how I felt about May, and how she was my mom when no one else was, I told him that when I haven’t even told Mama, and last year was terrible because I couldn’t even get out of bed and so I wanted this one to be so good and he’s ruining it and damn him.

He headed back to the house at 5:30 and took a long shower. He raced to the phone after getting out of the shower and watched the clock tick from 5:59 to 6:00 with no text signal. Checked his email and there was nothing. Nothing on Whatsapp, and he was about to check the secure app Tony had built just for the family and the Avengers but stopped. Steve had left his phone at home and that was the only phone that app was on.

6:00 turned into 6:01 and Peter sat frozen until 6:05, when his anger surged alongside his pain.

“Friday,” Peter ground out. “Can you get Mom and Dad for me? Have them meet me in Mom’s office?”

“Of course.”

If Friday noticed the definitive tone with which Peter used those titles, she didn’t mention it. Instead, she paged Tony and Pepper, who nearly raced to Pepper’s office to find Peter holding the folder with his adoption papers.

“Now. We do it now and I’m changing my name. No more waiting.”

Tony and Pepper looked at each other and then back at Peter. Tony spoke first. “So, Peter Benjamin Stark?”
“Peter Benjamin Parker Stark, two middle names.”

Pepper smiled, “I’m adding Stark to mine, too. We bring our pasts into our futures, eh, kiddo?” The pair had talked about it before.

“Oh, and one more thing. You are Mom,” Peter pointed at Pepper, “and you are Dad,” he pointed at Tony, “and no one else gets those names. No one.”

“Of course not, honey,” Pepper said, slight alarm bells going off in her head at Peter’s tone. Peter nodded, like he was affirming a decision in battle. Which, Pepper reflected later, he kind of was.

“Well, I’ll give Dillon a call,” Tony said, referring to their family lawyer. “It’s Saturday, but he has the same boundaries we do. And then we’ll get ready for the party because I know MJ is pretending she’s not nervous about the cake she made, but we all know differently.”

Many hours later, after a delightfully raucous birthday bash for their boy, Pepper and Tony were sitting in their living room alone with an old episode of *Friends* playing in the background. They were both putting off going to bed – sleeping had been difficult since Steve’s (potentially temporary but seemingly turning into permanent) abdication.

“I’m guessing Steve didn’t contact Peter today,” Pepper said into the quiet.

Tony quirked an eyebrow. “You think?”

“When Peter said those names were permanent, that he’s not switching back and forth, something in me realized we’ve passed a point of no return.”

“The last time any of us spoke to him was July 8th. It is now August 10th.” Tony remarked.

“Thank you, Siri.”

Tony glared at her. “Inappropriate use of enemy language, Friday, censure my wife.”

“No, Boss.”

Pepper giggled and Tony rolled his eyes. “The issue with a self-evolving AI is that they snark back.”

“I thought you were going to say the issue with a self-evolving AI is that they get to know you.”


“I know.”

“A fucking month of complete goddamn silence.”

“I wish you had put the tracker in his ass and not his shield.”

“Not the worst idea you’ve had,” Tony said. “I can understand him silencing us – to an extent – I don’t like it, but if Widmeyer is right about how Steve’s brain is working right now, I can see it. But Pete? Nothing to our kid? It’s unforgivable.”

Pepper’s eyes started to water. “I can’t. Even if Widmeyer is right, how can he call us his loves and his family and nothing. I get leaving behind the tracker so we can’t come for you in Widmeyer’s diagnosis, but burner phones are so cheap and I know he’s memorized the universal alert number, so he can’t even send a text to tell us he’s fucking alive? Or that he misses us?”
“Maybe he doesn’t miss us,” Tony replied quietly.

“I can’t believe that, or we really will never come back from this.”

“Do you want to?”

Pepper nodded. “I do. The weeks leading up to the wedding were so perfect. I felt like I was floating through the world, powered entirely by my joy. We had hit a really good sense of balance between the three of us, we were learning how to incorporate Peter, SI was manageable, everything was working. Sure, the international conspiracy was not my favorite, and we had a lot of work to do with Nat trying to find Bucky, but it was all so good.”

“And then Frosty showed up.” There was no bitterness in Tony’s voice, just heartbreaking sadness.

“And then Bucky showed up.”

“I have never hated being right so much in my life,” Tony confessions.

“I have never hated your paranoid genius more,” Pepper agreed and Tony threw her a wry grin.

“So, Peter’s drawn a line, do we?”

“For now, yes. When Steve comes back – because I can’t believe he won’t, not right now – then we’ll have to do some negotiating and see what’s healthiest for Peter and for us and for him,” Pepper concluded. “But for the foreseeable future, we have to be a unit of three because no matter what happens next, we’ll have to rebuild a family of four.”

“Or maybe this crazy galactic raisin will do us all a favor and just eliminate our existence like Carol says he’s going to.”

“I suppose we can hope, because I’m sure you’ll just stop fighting now, Mr. If We Can’t Save the Earth, We’ll Certainly Avenge It.”

Tony took a deep, quick breath, and Pepper looked over to see him crying. “But how do I do it without him?”

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Concerns? Points of anger?
Anyone catch the reference to the fact that I watched the Champion's League this afternoon and you get a free spoiler (#YNWA).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oct 2016

105, 106, 107… Nat counted her push-ups to herself as she worked out in the Wakandan Palace gym. She’d been there for nearly two months and her patience for the life she was being forced to live was waning.

After weeks of searching and tracking and being really fucking pissed at Steve Rogers, Nat found a small Hydra base in a remote village in northern South Africa where the soldier was being held. Thankfully for all of them, she got there about fifteen minutes after Steve who was getting his ass handed to him by the soldier.

“I’m not talking to you,” Nat said as she threw another punch and the soldier ran off down a tunnel.

“Nat, I –“

“Rogers, I swear to God, not now,” as she went running. As soon as the soldier was in earshot, she started speaking very forcefully in Russian.

“What are you saying?” Steve asked, which she ignored. Whatever she was doing was paralyzing the soldier until finally, the soldier was standing stock still, with his head tucked down to his chest and arms – both natural and the re-Hydra-ized left one – at his side.

Nat threw a glance at Steve. “A theory Clint, Sam, and I worked up that I’m glad worked.”

He opened his mouth to start to speak and she held up her hand. “Not here, not now, I am now in charge, do you understand?” Not waiting for him to consent, she barreled on. “I am so mad at you I can barely look at you, but you and Barnes are coming with me. Shuri is waiting for him in Wakanda and they have a safe house just across the border in Malawi we can go to for a bit. You will follow me and my instructions until we get to the safe house and then maybe, if I’m feeling generous, you can try to explain to me what the fuck you thought you were doing and if you have, potentially, an ounce of regret in your pea-sized, id-controlled brain.”

Switching to the free weights, she started more counting. 1, 2, 3…

They had been in the safe house for about two days before Nat was confident Hydra wasn’t coming after them. Steve said he had killed nearly everyone he found on the trail and was sure that was true for that last base, but Nat wasn’t taking any chances. The Malawian national tasked with taking care of them, Tinashe, had deployed her network of spies to confirm.

Nat pulled out her phone and sent a text to Pepper and Tony.

“Have them both. Asshat is alive, with a broken collar bone that’s already resetting itself. JB is
functionally comatose and will remain that way until I get him to W. Extraction in 36hrs.”

She had gotten one back immediately from Pepper thanking her for the information. Ten minutes later, in a separate thread, she got one from Tony.

“If he’s not on a plane within 24 hours of being in W, then I know he’s made his choice. Pls let Janelle know when that mark has passed and then I don’t need any more updates on him. Frosty, yes, Cap, no.”

She took three deep breaths before texting an acknowledgement.

“Nat?” Shuri came into the gym, just as Nat finished with her reps.

“What’s up?”

“I’m looking at Barnes’ vitals and I believe we may want to start the process of waking him up.”

When they had arrived, back in late August, Shuri had said she figured six weeks for the treatment, during which Bucky would be in a medically induced coma. That felt awfully long to Nat, before Shuri patched in four different neurosurgeons who had signed off on her treatment cycle and said it’s Barnes’ best hope. No real downsides, only gains. One even said that it was a great idea, since it would do is give his body time to heal and re-grow some of the muscles that Hydra had once again harvested to put back on their terrible arm.

Shuri then explained to Steve that what they were doing and what Hydra did to him were, admittedly, pretty close, but that the main difference was that Bucky had signed oodles of consent forms for her already. He had been part of the process of development and had been ready to come to Wakanda to do this process himself when he was nabbed.

“And you think that’ll take how long?”

“Two, maybe three days,” the girl responded. “However, I am not comfortable being the only one monitoring this procedure, so I am flying in a colleague from Manhattan and they will be here tomorrow. Tony gave permission.”

That was a fun other thing Nat had learned. Bucky had given Tony all legal control over the process and further treatments, something which seemed to surprise Steve.

“Okay, let me tell Cap,” Nat responded. Shuri gave her a wary thumbs up and headed out of the room.

After a shower and several long fucks sake I can’t even rants to Clint, Nat made her way to Steve’s quarters.

“Cap?”

Steve sighed, but had long given up asking Nat to call him Steve again. “Now?”

She stood poised in the doorway, unwilling to fully enter. “Tomorrow. Somebody from New York is flying in to help Shuri.”

Steve nodded but stayed silent.

“I’m staying as long as I need to because he’s my mission, but all you promised to do was see that he was safe. He is. He has been for weeks. I’m tired of the longing sighs and heavy puppy dog glares at
me when I tell T’Challa or Nakia that I’ve talked to Pepper and I was trying really hard not to meddle because I promised James I’d stop doing it so much, but FOR FUCKS SAKE STEVEN, why the hell are you still here?”

“Well, that was a lot to get off your chest.”

She glared at him.

“If we’re going to do this, come inside.”

She huffed but acquiesced.

“I fucked up.”

“No shit.”

“I fucked up big.”

“No fucking shit.”

“I can’t fix it.”

“That’s not true.”

“If I was willing to do what I did, I don’t deserve them.”

Nat speared him with a glare. “You and Tony with your matching complexes. Don’t you think that’s their call?”

Steve met her glare. “It’s my job to protect them, even if it’s from me.”

“It’s like talking to a stone,” Nat muttered. “Fine, I’m saying this one time only and then you can chew it over in that testosterone fest you call a brain. They are shattered not because you went after Bucky but because you didn’t bring them along with you. They knew you had to find him, we all did, but for all your fucking speeches about teamwork and family and doing this together, you took the biggest fight of your life on alone.

“Family means letting other people in, you unbelievable narcissistic jackass. You were in the ice alone, I get it, but people never stopped looking for you. Howard and Peggy were raising funds for another trip when the soldier killed Howard. You have never been alone and now, if you are, it is by choice.

“You’re the cause of this civil war, you and your baggage and your assumptions about all of us. The only thing you’re right on is that if you make us choose, we’ll choose Tony and Pepper in this fucking mess you’ve created out your need to be a martyr for a cause that doesn’t need one.

“Also, you fucker, you are not the only one who loves that lump of ice in there. How dare you think you’re the only one who should have gone after him. How dare you,” Nat hissed out. She took one last fortifying breath. “Thanos is still coming. Tony sent your Avengers phone over with this doctor because until you officially leave, you are the leader of the team. Carol has been sending updates and I’ve had Janelle and Friday compile them for you.

“Captain, Agent Romanov will continue to serve under your command, but if Steve wants to talk to Nat, we have some work to do,” she glared at him one last time, but he could see the strange sheen of tears in her eyes and she did an about face and left his room.
“Nat says that she’s confident the treatment worked. There’s a lot, a lot, of work still to do to fully give Bucky back control of his own body, but the steps are all in the right direction,” Pepper confided to Kerry at the beginning of November.

Kerry nodded. “What Shuri has invented is incredible.”

Pepper snorted. “And she’ll tell you that, don’t worry.”

Kerry laughed. “I honestly love it. She’s largely untainted by toxic patriarchy – since she was young, she and every other woman in Wakanda have been told there are no limits to who they can be because of their gender. T’Challa has a long way to go with economic and educational equality, but gender he has in the bag.”

Pepper grinned. “Long may it be.”

The conversation between the two women moved on to other topics – Kerry’s frustrations at work, Pepper’s fears that Delia was looking for another job, Peter and MJ (a favorite topic of gossip) – before landing back on the inevitable; Tony and Steve.

“Has there been any improvement on the frozen conflict?”

Pepper shook her head, remembering what Tony had told to him the night Nat had texted them to say that she had found them.

“If he’s with Nat now, then he has coms and his own choices. He told us he was going after Bucky and he has him now, so… however long he stays now is a different choice.”

“MJ’s told me she’s worried about Peter, and Tony’s said he’s started to take more risks when he’s in the suit. Sam and Clint have said the same, but I can’t see the fissures every day. Their tempers are a little shorter but the longer things go without Steve saying anything, it all seems to settle. It's like the limb got amputated and instead of dealing with putting it back on, they're learning to run without it Peter is now completely focused on training for Thanos and Tony’s designing MJ’s suit.”

Kerry looked surprised. “MJ gets a suit?”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “One, do you think that for a minute she hasn’t been mentally adopted into Tony’s world and two, we’re pretty aware that if we ever have to let her in on what’s happening, she’ll run to the battle herself to watch over Peter. We figured having her covered and powered by titanium alloy and rocket boosters would be helpful. It's really, really first stages. The first few prototypes he tried couldn't fit her hair, the nanobots kept getting caught in the wig."

"Is that why you asked me where to go buy a weave?"

Pepper nodded. "We don't want to give her something that isn't functional and it's not like my hair is not helpful. She wears it a lot of different ways and we wanted to be prepared for them all."

"You two are something else," Kerry mused affectionately. "Let me see it all before you show her."

Pepper smiled. "Oh, that was already in the plan. Tony thinks he'll be ready for your thoughts next week. But anyway, yes, hopefully before the world ends, MJ will have a suit."

“Which is good, because that girl would crawl through fire for that boy.”
“Which is good, because as the woman who loves his father, she’s probably going to have to.”

Tony was angrier than he had been in his entire life and from Pepper’s posture next to him, she probably wasn’t far off.

Friday had alerted both of them to the streaming footage of Spider-Man taking on a particularly large invasion of Doom bots in Central Park. Problem being that Peter Stark was supposed to be at a study group with MJ and Ned for academic decathlon and had promised his parents he had left his suit at home.

The secondary problem was that this was the third time in as many weeks that he had gone out against permission.

“Darling,” Tony said dryly, “looks like our son might need a hand. Fancy a flight?”

“Our son needs his ass kicked and grounded, but Spider-Man could use Rescue and Iron Man, and I’d like to make this a positive PR story, so Friday, can you let the usual suspects know?”

Several hours, a few interviews where all of Tony and Pepper’s media training was certainly put to good use, and a very terse moments on coms after the fight was over, the Starks were standing on the launch pad.

Peter turned to walk inside the house and Tony gritted out, “Do. Not. Move.”

Peter turned slowly back to his parents. “I need to shower.”

“You needed to be at decathalon,” Pepper said. “So I’m sure we can delay other activities the way you delayed that.”

“Those bots were attacking those kids! I couldn’t let-“

“Yes, yes you could. Because you were not Spider-Man today, you were Peter and do not make that face at me Peter Benjamin,” Tony said fiercely.

“I am always Spider-Man!” Peter protested. “ALWAYS.”

Tony’s nostrils flared with rage and he threw a look at Pep, who nodded quickly. “No. Now you are never Spider-Man.”

“WHAT.”

“Friday, lock up all Spider-Man tech and require any access to be authorized by both Pepper and myself. Include the nanobot code to the suite he is presently wearing. My son cannot be trusted with them.”

“DAD.”

“No,” Tony moved towards Peter and stuck a finger in his chest. “No. If you cannot separate Peter and Spider-Man, then I will do it for you. This is like Cool Runnings, kid. If you’re nothing without the suit, then you’re nothing with it. The suit is not who you are. It never has been and it never will be. If you cannot remember and respect the boundaries we have agreed on as a team and as a family, then I will exercise every single bit of my parental rights to force you to remember. Every. Single. Bit.”
Peter looked like he was going to argue, but Pepper stepped in. “No additional grounding on top of this, Peter, but if you lie to us one more time about where you are then there will be. We are not messing around here.”

Peter nodded and sulkily stomped his way into the house.

“Breathe, Boss,” Friday said. “Your vitals are concerning.”

“My life is concerning, Friday, but thank you.”

“Tony, I am going to go shower. Friday, I’m sure Peter is going to sulk for a while, but he’ll need to eat soon, so can you poke him around 7 to do so?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Thanks,” she ran a hand through her hair wearily. “I can't decide if this is hormones, missing May, missing... or just normal adolescence trying to define himself, but it's a pain in the ass. In related news, we fought well today. Thanks for trusting me on that one shot.”

Tony smiled. “I learned a while ago that I only question you under threat of pain, wife. Even the good kind.”

She smacked his shoulder. “Perv.”

“Ah, but I’m your perv.”

_____________________________________

November 2016

“Sargent Barnes, can you tell me why you’re here.”

Bucky took a deep breath and searched his tongue for the words. “I am here because we’re rebuilding the connections between my memories and my body.”

“And where is here?”

“I am in the royal palace of Wakanda.”

“And who am I?”

Bucky smiled. “You’re the one putting Humpty Dumpty back together again.”

The woman across from him stifled a smile. “No, Sargent Barnes, you are. I am simply providing the glue.”

He laughed at that. “Okay, Dr. Robertson,” emphasis on her name to show he remembered, unlike last time when he couldn’t, “I do remember today. What else are we going to try to do?”

Most of Bucky’s post-coma life was therapeutically controlled. He had occupational therapy, to help his body and his brain connect, and he had psychological therapy, to help his brain and his heart connect, and he had “fun time therapy”, as the blonde man (Steve? Sam? Okay so today wasn’t a perfect memory day) called it, to help him remember what brought him joy.

They’d been at this for about a month, Bucky and his team of various therapists. Dr. Robertson for the mind stuff, Drs. Salah, Klopp, and Alisson for the body, and then the fun therapy was mostly run
They explained to him that it wasn’t that the memories were lost, or that his body didn’t remember how to do things, it was that Shuri’s procedure disconnected all the pathways for those things. They had to make sure he had no automatic triggers and so rebuilding the good triggers was going to take time.

As far as Bucky was concerned, time was all he had. The flashes of comfort that came when he fully remembered something or his body did exactly what he wanted it to without thinking made him know this was worth it. The stories that Nat and Steve (that felt right. Childhood. Skinny now huge. Also great smile. Also made him feel safe) told him made him feel like he had a life worth fighting for.

Plus, they weren’t always great at keeping their voices down and this Thanos individual sounded like a problem and he was sure he could help. His marksmanship was the first thing that came back perfectly.

“Well, Sargent Barnes, we’re going to talk about Captain America.”

“Captain America,” Bucky said slowly, feeling the flicker of memories. “Red, blue, shield, terrible song.”

Dr. Robertson bit back a laugh. “He agrees. What else?”

Bucky struggled, opening his mouth and closing it a few times. The memories seemed attached by fuzzy strings he couldn’t grasp. Dr. Robertson saw him struggling and handed him a few index cards with pictures. This was one of her techniques – there were three true pictures and two false ones.

“True, he and I were in the Howling Commandos,” Bucky said, more firmly than he felt.

“Yes.”

Bouyed by this. “False, he was from Florida.”

“Yes, do you know where he was from?”

Pause. “Same?” Pause. “Wait.” Pause. “Blonde man, dark hallway… Brooklyn. He’s from Brooklyn where I’m from and he wasn’t always Captain America, before that he was Steve Rogers, he was my best friend and when he rescued me from that first camp I told him I’m follow him.”

Dr. Robertson smiled. They’d been working on Steve/Cap related memories for a few days, so this breakthrough was no small thing. “All true. Excellent job.”


“Does all of that spark anything from after the war? Or are you talking entirely about 1945?”

Bucky’s face twisted into a puzzled look. “Not sure. Give me more.”

“True or false, he loves Disney movies.”

Bucky thought for a moment, focusing a memory on Steve’s face and then flipping through all the snapshots he had of him. “Yes, except for that one we watched with the Hawaiian alien.”

“Steve doesn’t like Lilo & Stitch?”
Bucky shook his head. “I think he mostly didn’t like how MJ and Peter were saying all the lines over
and over again and he couldn’t hear anything, but he told me and Nat later that he watched it on his
own and it was kind of cute.”

“Do you remember MJ and Peter?”

And it was like a faucet turned on. “MJ is Peter’s girlfriend, Peter is Spider-Man, Tony and Pepper
are his guardians, we all live on Tony’s property, the one in New York, not the one in Canada, only
their immediate family is allowed in Canada, but I don’t think that’s really true because Tony never
says no to any of us, and Tony and Pepper and Steve are – holy shit, it’s all back.”

“All is probably strong, Sargent,” the doctor smiled kindly. “But I think all is back enough that I can
let your friends start helping you to fill in the blanks. You’ve done the foundational work, and you
and I will still keep working together, but I’ve been keeping Steve and Nat and Shuri and T’Challa at
bay. They are eager to help, so you should have no trouble getting back up to speed.”

Bucky barely heard her, as more and more memories started flooding his mind’s eye. *Did I really?
Okay, wow, and Nat? Right. Peter’s webs are sticky. The arm and Tony. Oh, god, Steve, Steve…*

But Dr. Robertson’s voice cut gently back in. “Bucky, this is going to be painful, too. Go as slow as
you need. Remember that you are always allowed to ask clarifying questions and to ask someone to
stop talking. Your records told me that whenever you were stressed while rehabilitating before you
would go for long runs. You have that option here, too.”

Bucky nodded, feeling the first inklings of that pain and the need to run a bit. “Doc, can I run now?”

“You don’t need my permission, Sargent, you have a choice.”

“I’m being polite, not subservient.”

“Then yes, Sargent, by all means go running and I’ll go tell your people the good news.”

_____________________________________

December 2016

“Again.”

MJ and Peter went through their most recent workout pattern Clint and Sam had constructed for
them. The process of both building MJ a suit and telling her about it had been difficult. Tony started
construction before he told Pepper, who then reminded him she wasn’t legally their kid and even
though they didn’t love MJ’s parents, they needed to be informed. That dinner had not gone well.

“He was almost incoherent,” Tony said to Pepper when they got back in the car.

“And she spent the entire meal flirting with you and disparaging MJ.”

“Oh, God, was that flirting? I thought she was having a seizure.”

“Humans are the worst,” Pepper sighed.

“What did she tell you when I was getting the car?”

“She explained, with a coldness that literally chilled me, that while MJ was once a lovely child, she
had grown into a very frustrating teenager that was disobedient, troubling, and not someone Nancy
was interested in a relationship with.”
“Our MJ? That bitch is going to reject a relationship with her own daughter because she’s mouthy?”

“This is the woman who told MJ when she was 13 that children exist to make their parents look good, a task MJ was fundamentally failing at.”

“Oh yes, I had conveniently purged that from my brain.”

“Yeah, so end of story, she said she’d sign whatever consent form I needed for the training and internship programs I said we were recruiting her for, said something nauseating about how MJ’s getting this jobs because she’s sleeping with Peter, to which I reminded her that our son was 15 and her daughter was 16 and she smirked at me like I was an idiot, and I refrained from punching her, for which I request at least three orgasms as reward later, but I did text Dillon to double check about a possibility for MJ to emancipate herself because CHRIST I am never sending our girl to that house again.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been more in love with you than right now.”

MJ’s mother wasn’t joking, she really had signed every form Pepper sent, including the ones that allowed for MJ to start the emancipation process should she so choose. When Pepper told MJ, the girl’s response was to shrug.

“Pepper, until I started dating Peter, my mother spoke about four words a week to me. The minute our first picture hit TMZ, she started bugging me to have you guys over for dinner. My only use to her was as a social status and her only use to me over the last several years is that my dad wouldn’t pass out on the couch if she was home. When she was out, I’d have to deal with him, but she made him drink in their private quarters if she was home. That’s it. You removed her usefulness to me, but she still thinks I can be useful to her.”

Pepper’s jaw had ground nearly into itself as MJ talked. “You are completely useless to me and Tony,” Pepper responded, knowing that the girl would understand exactly what she meant, “and we are still wild about you and love being with you.”

MJ had smiled awkwardly at that. “There are a lot of reasons why Peter is the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

With the papers signed around the middle of November, Tony realized they had once again put the cart before the horse when no one had asked MJ if she wanted a suit and he had just assumed she would.

“My body is not the strongest part of me,” MJ had responded. “You don’t need that, you need my brain.”

“Your sarcasm is actually the strongest part,” Tony sassed back. “But I largely have that covered. What your suit would do is two-fold. One, it would keep you safe even if you’re sitting in a corner, and two, it would be connected to Janelle so you could be our research arm while we’re in the field. Things like what kills that particular creature the fastest, where the closest schwarma shop is for post-battle needs, etc. So it would be made to help you move really fast, which we’ll have Clint and Sam train you for, but also to have your own AI on board.”

“So, my own Karen?”

Tony nodded.

“And I wouldn’t have to shoot a gun?”
“Not unless you want to. I can build a protective forcefield – I think, right Friday? Take notes – and so really what you are is our own portable strategy table. You could control the drones, maybe.”

“The drones you only use with people’s consent and for ethical purposes?”

“I should not have sent you to that tech summit. Yes, of course.”

Clint, Sam, Rhodey, and (via hologram) Nat were generally horrified that Tony would even think of putting her in a suit without training, however, and jumped on creating a program for her. After a few sessions of Peter showing up as well, it quickly became a joint venture. The pair would head to school, come home, finish any homework (which they both usually completed on the ride to or from school), and then head to the gym. Weekends were breaks, but usually spent in the lab with Tony working on one piece of tech or another.

The two youths were kept out of the Sit Room, much over Peter’s protests, while they trained. Peter complained about this often and one of his parents or team members would remind him that helping train his girlfriend and complete high school were big enough goals. Let them worry about Thanos strategy, especially since Peter still had not regained suit privileges.

“Those reactions have to be faster, MJ,” Clint called out, looking at his stopwatch. That earned him a middle finger and a grunt.

“Isn’t it time for you to visit your family?” MJ called.

Clint laughed. “I’m going this weekend and I won’t be back until after Christmas, so you’re getting rid of me soon.”

“You’re not getting rid of me, though,” Sam called from where he was sparring with Peter.

“Best news all day!” MJ called, her voice dripping with both exhaustion and sarcasm.

“Hey,” Clint said quietly, dropping to crouch next to where she had collapsed into a chair. “You are doing a legitimately great job. I know we’re kicking your ass, and I know you hate us, but try to remember we know what’s coming.”

“Fuck off, Legolas,” she grunted. “I’m not an idiot. I know I’m not ready to go out with you all, but I also know that when that boy walks into battle from here on out, I am next to him, so keep kicking my ass, because this is my life now, just don’t expect me to be sunshiney about it.”

“MJ, I have now known you for, what, two years? "Sunshiney" has never, and I repeat, never been a word I use for you.”

“That is the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me. Now, how fast do you want the splits?”

Christmas morning was quiet in the Mansion. The Maximoff twins had ended up having a really hard time assimilating and Fury sent them to live at another safe house in Vancouver, where they were finding their feet after being orphaned in the Sokovian attacks. Scott Lang and his daughter were visiting his parents for the holiday, Sam and Clint were with their families. Thor and Bruce were both in Asgard, working on some experiments with Jane regarding the Infinity Stones.

Since Steve’s… disappearance, MJ had essentially moved into one of the spare rooms in the family wing. Pepper was worried the two were getting codependent, but Kerry reminded her that if that was the worst side effect they had from this shit show that was their lives, that was therapeutically
manageable. The pair were clearly each other’s loadstones.

So Christmas morning was the Starks and MJ. While Tony and Peter went to the workshop to give the bots their gifts, Pepper and MJ fixed breakfast and prepped the living room for an entire day of movie watching. As it was her first Christmas with them, she had the honor of first pick.

Gifts were exchanged; they had set a rule that everything had to be handmade by somebody – either themselves or an artist they talked to. Pepper cried at the bracelet Peter had made her as the first thing he ever soldered on his own, MJ really loved the set of prints of quotes from global women’s rights activists Pepper had found on Etsy, and Peter was overwhelmed with the telescope Tony had built him after seeing him have so much fun on the Barton’s farm. Tony didn’t even try to stop his tears when MJ gave him a hoop she had embroidered of “The Stark Family – Est 2016 – Pepper, Tony, Peter, DUM-E, You, Butterfingers”, and MJ roared with laughter in return when he handed her a trophy made from discarded suit parts that read “2nd Place: Sarcasm Captain.”

By 5pm, they had watched a bunch of movies, including MJ’s pick of 12 Years a Slave, which was, while not a family feel good film, led to some really good discussions that even Tony was surprised by, and Peter’s, which was Miracle on 34th Street. The fact that It’s a Wonderful Life and Love, Actually were missing from the traditional line-up wasn’t spoken about.

MJ grabbed the remote and was about to fire up The Muppet’s Christmas Carol, while Pepper had gone into the kitchen to fetch more snacks. Peter was asleep on one of the recliners.

“Boss, you have a call from Wakanda,” Friday spoke quietly.

“T’Challa or Nat?”

“Agent Romanov, Boss.”

“Hold on,” Tony grabbed the tablet and took Nat into Pepper’s office, shutting the door behind him. He pressed a few buttons on his tablet and pretty soon, Nat’s face floated in front of him.

“Happy Merry, Nat,” Tony said to her face.

“Merry Happy, Tony,” she said fondly. “Two things: first, did MJ love my gift?”

“We’re doing team gifts after dinner, so she hasn’t gotten it yet.”

“Fine, she’ll like mine better than anyone else’s, please note.”

“Noted.”

“Second, progress is good - he’s probably at 50% memory regain and 80% physical. We may need to start thinking about next steps soon, which I know is complicated, especially with...”

“Especially with Cap being Cap. Fury’s heard from Carol that Thanos has two stones for sure. Bruce is up in Asgard right now, trying to help Jane and Thor figure out how to protect those two stones. We think the time stone might actually be in the Village, but you know I refuse to go there, so Bruce is heading after Christmas.”

“For fuck, Tony, get your ass to the Village, you are a child. When were you going to tell me?”

“When I called you tomorrow, but you beat me to it. Bruce left on the 18th and getting information from Asgard is a bitch, so I have no idea what’s happening. Carol is patchy at best with coms, and...”
“Yeah, calling me is a risk, I get it.”

Tony was quiet for a minute. “Has Steve said anything about what he’s doing?”

“Not to me,” Nat replied, her mouth in a firm line.

“Is he talking to Bucky?”

Nat nodded and Tony’s stomach clenched. “Okay. Well, Merry Happy, Nat, I’m going to head back to my family, give our love to T’Challa et al.”

Tony abruptly disconnected the call, knowing that Nat would forgive him for the rudeness, and took three deep breaths before heading back to the living room, where he found his son still sound asleep, and MJ staring fondly at him.

*Hey, May, look at our kid. We’re doing our best here, I promise, but Steve has broken us to bits and that’s even before this monster is coming to destroy us all. It’s been a gas. But he’s got this girl who is the best for him, and Pep is incredible, and I don’t think I’ve scarred him for life yet, so all that to say, wherever you are, he’s the best of all of us and thanks again. Merry Christmas.*

Chapter End Notes

I know you’re all worried about Peter - do you think MJ is good for him? What about Nat’s speech to Steve? Are you excited for Bucky? Let me know!
Chapter Notes

Here it is folks: the answer to the puzzle of Steve's behavior.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

February 2017

Steve had always been a person who was sure of himself. He knew who he was, what his purpose was, and generally how to get there. He may have spent most of his life hating his limitations, but he never felt limited by them, per se. He just, well, made it work. Or, as Clint had introduced to his parlance – he Tim Gunned his life.

Until December of 2015, when his gut stopped working. Until a millisecond in a tent in a backyard where he began to question everything – who he was, why he was, who he loved, what love was… And now, as he ran through the familiar savannahs of Wakanda, all he could do was re-live pieces to try to put himself back together.

Flashes of conversations ran through his mind on a loop. Phrases and snapshots that his brain was using to torment him. He knew that Bucky was the one with the memory issues, but Steve felt just as fuzzy – like the solution to the feeling in his skin was just out of reach but he could never quite grasp it. Instead, his brain had re-written new mantras.

He used to tell himself *I’m doing this for other people* and now his brain told him – in Nat’s voice – that he was a narcissist. He used to tell himself *I’m in control* and now – in Tony’s voice – he heard that he had an expiration date. He used to tell himself *We’ll make it work* – and now he reminded himself over and over that he threw away anyone in the ‘we’ll’.

Looking back now, he’d been falling apart since Bucky woke up and they didn't talk about Italy. Of course, he was telling himself all along that he was fine, even as his life became a self-fulfilling prophesy of abandonment. *Now that’s not totally fair*, his brain told himself, this time in Pepper’s voice, which was becoming the only one he trusted. *You aren’t abandoned. That’s what Nat has been trying to tell you*.

At mile 30 that morning, he had made a decision that he simply couldn’t take it any longer. This heaviness in his soul had to go somewhere. Pragmatically, he was going to have to lead these people into a battle nothing like they’d ever seen by the end of the year and so things had to be said and done. Emotionally, he had run to the end of his rope of feeling like he did. Nat kept telling him he was making choices and, God, even if it risked everything, he had to make different ones.

It was about 10am when he made his way to Bucky’s room, unsurprised to find Nat there.

“Cap,” she said evenly.

“Nat,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“I know you are,” she said, equally quietly. “Do you know why?”

He nodded, and then, in a moment of brutal honesty with himself and her, replied, “I know I’m sorry
because everyone is in pain and I caused it and I don’t want that, but I’m still not sure why I caused it. What I’m ready for is to do the work to find out.”

Her face twitched into a hopeful smile. “And you’re starting with the kid with the swiss cheese memory?”

“Him coming back is what broke me. If he can’t help me figure out why that happened, then I’m fucked.”

“You could try actually talking to your therapist, too.”

“That’s next.”

“You’ve promised that before.”

Steve paused, realizing this was a moment where he could start rebuilding. “How can I prove it to you that I’ll make the call this time?”

Nat considered this. “They have this app for addicts who are trying to rebuild trust, I heard about it from James’ lady, where it will text me when your session has started and ended. Get the app and we’ll go from there.”

Steve nodded. Imagining himself doing the 12 steps was not the worst framework to go through. “As soon as I’m done with him, I promise.”

She nodded thoughtfully and stepped aside. “It’s good to see you back, Steve.”

Well, she hadn’t used that name in a while, Steve mused. He heard her call to Bucky that Steve was here and she was going to Shuri’s workshop. Bucky’s voice sounded both bright and wary at Steve’s presence, the same tone he had been using for weeks.

“Heya jerk,” Bucky said as Steve stepped in. “What’s the haps?”

“You are mixing centuries again.”

“I’m embracing my renewed memories.”

“Sure.”

“I may also enjoy how it makes your jaw twitch,” Bucky confessed, “but mostly the first thing. But seriously, this is out of routine, so what’s going on.”

“I’m being a fuckup and I want to stop and I think you’re the only one who can help, so I need to know if today is a good day for us to go digging around in the past,” Steve said, very matter-of-factly.

Bucky’s face was implacable as he nodded. “I think that would be a good idea. I have some flashes of you that don’t make sense and Robertson says it’s because there are probably pieces of us you haven’t helped me remember.”

They headed to the balcony – veranda, Steve corrected himself, a slice of pain at the memory – and sat looking out at the horizon.

“What do you remember about the war?”

“That’s fucking vague,” Bucky snorted out a laughter. “Can you narrow it for me there, bud?”
Steve grinned sadly. “Right, of course, sorry.” Now or never, this is literally what you came here to do, Rogers, fucking do it. “We had a pretty serious conversation the night before you fell from the train in Italy. I have never told anyone else, not Tony, not Pepper, not anyone, and I need to know if you remember that night.”

Bucky sat for a minute, his face twitching. “True or false game?”

Steve nodded and picked at his fingers, thinking. “Um, right, true or false, we were with the Howlies.”

“True.”

“True or false, Peggy was there.”

“False. I remember Pegs and if that broad had been there, we wouldn’t have been ambushed.”

Steve barked out a laughter. “God, you’re right. Okay, true or false, we were in my tent.”

Bucky paused a little longer at this one, and Steve watched some puzzle pieces fall into place. “We talked about how you didn’t fit any more.”

“True or false, Buck?”

“True,” Bucky breathed out. “In Captain America’s fancy tent and you wasted one of my cigs, which is not the word I used then, but Nat reminds me is definitely the word I use now.”

Steve smirked, “I got howled at for that one, too. True or false, I proved to you that I do still fit.”

Bucky met his eyes and whispered, “true.”

“True or false, Buck, I told you I loved you.”

“True, but I told you first.” The look on Bucky’s face told Steve they had just unlocked another one of Bucky’s memory rooms and things were flooding into him. They – the people around him – had learned to just let this happen until he was ready to talk again. “Stevie, I was going to tell you and then Rumlow found me.”

“What?”

The story came out in a flood. “You were being a weirdo fuckhead – that I remembered before now but couldn’t remember why – and I went to talk to Tony about it and he told me to go to our stupid exhibit and there would be pictures to help explain and maybe jog my memory and so I did. I did go. I told you all I was going to see Sam, and I saw him too because I wanted to see if I could get his mom to make that chicken thing she does, but I went to the Smithsonian. And I saw this picture of you looking at me the way all the newsreels say you looked at Peg, and I remembered everything. I was on my way to go tell you when that fucker showed up.”

Steve sat in stunned silence. There is so much to unpack there. “Tony told you to go?”

“That’s where we’re starting? Okay, yes, I went to see him in his workshop and told him I didn’t know why you were being a fuckhead and he said he did, but you guys had some sort of agreement to not tell other people’s stories and so I had to get you to tell yours, but, again, you were being a weirdo fuckhead, so that was a no-go, so I schleppeled to D.C.”

A memory flashed of Tony telling him to leave as though it was what Steve wanted to do, versus
what he felt he needed to do. *This is what happens when I forget I'm in love with a paranoid genius. He makes his own conclusions and then doesn’t bother to verify if they’re the right ones.*

“By the way,” Bucky said, interrupting Steve’s train of thought, “why are you here and not with them? Every time I ask Nat, she tells me to ask you, but you were still being a weirdo fuckhead until this morning. So, scale of one to stealing those pies from Mrs. Buxton’s shop in ’31, how stupid are you being?”

“First, you called me a weirdo fuckhead three times, but I want to make sure that’s not a permanent nickname. And we’re far, far past pies,” Steve confessed. “We’re more in the I-left-to-follow-you-without-telling-anyone-and-I-stole-a-plane-to-do-it territory.”

“Well that is very, very stupid territory, ya mook.”

“And, here’s the best part, instead of trying to fix it, I just kept… not and I don’t even know why!” Steve was tearing up and chuckling at the same time. “I’m being torn apart at the seams and I’m doing it to myself and I can’t even figure out why.”

“Are you fucking kidding me,” Bucky says deadpanned. “Wait, they don’t know you’re here, do they.”

Steve grimaced and played with his fingers. “Pepper does because Nat tells her. I don’t know if she’s told Tony and Peter because they’re not talking to me.”

“JESUS CHRIST YOU ARE DUMB,” Bucky roared. “How long since you talked to Tony or Pepper or Peter yourself?”

“Seven months.”

“SEVEN MONTHS. SEVEN MONTHS YOU HAVE BEEN GONE FROM YOUR FAMILY.”

“YOU’RE MY FUKING FAMILY FIRST, BUCK,” Steve screamed right back. “End of the line, remember? That’s my vow, I made that vow to you and I will not break it.”

Bucky’s face went blank for a minute and then he whispered, “Oh, Stevie, that’s why.”

“What’s why?”

“Is that why you won’t marry them? Is that why you’re here.”

Steve felt like he had been punched in the gut and stayed silent for a good long while. When he finally spoke again, his voice cracked with pain. “Well, that never occurred to me until this moment, but maybe yeah, but it’s a moot point since I fucked it up.”

“A moot point or a moo point?”

“We should have never let you watch those *Friends* reruns.”

Bucky grinned, and moved to sit next to Steve. “So, we’ve figured out the why. Let me channel my best Robertson impression and ask how this knowledge makes you feel.”

Steve laughed. “Really fucking shitty, but also like the gears are working again.”

“God, welcome to my life every day,” Bucky said. “We spent hours last week reviewing Winter Soldier case files. That was a fucking delight, let me tell you.”
“You always knew how to have a great time,” Steve replied.

“Next Robertson question. Now that your famously on-target gut is working again, what are you going to do?”

Steve ran his hands over his trousers, and then got up and started pacing. “I gotta get my family back.”

“Clearly.”

“I need to get the team back.”

“I’d imagine. That purple asshole looks like he’s going to take all of us to slaughter.”

“I need to make sure I don’t do this again.”

“May I recommend any number of therapeutic professionals I have at my disposal? You can borrow a few.”

“And I gotta tell you the truth that even though I cherish that night in Italy with all my soul, I’m not in love with you anymore and I don’t think I have been since I woke up. I will always love you, but what I had with Pep and Tony? That’s it.” Steve let out the breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

“Cue the Whitney Houston ballad, cuz I feel the same.”

“Yeah?”

Bucky nodded. “I thought maybe when I came back to myself the first time, but then Nat told me all about your family and I just... Didn’t realize until you just said it, but back there when my memory was filling itself in, I had this weird feeling about you, not like the fuzzy memories, but a longing I couldn’t place. We were in love, once, is what you’re telling me, and that night in Italy was the culmination of it.”

“It was supposed to be the beginning, but fucking Hydra.”

“That’s the title of my autobiography, by the way. ‘It was supposed to be the beginning, but fucking Hydra: The Bucky Barnes Story’.”

“I’d buy it.”

“I think I love Nat.”

“I know,” Steve grinned. “It’s been weird to watch, but I dig it.”

“Unapproved use of –“ Bucky put his hand over his mouth. “So, now I remember that, too.”

That phrase was another gut punch to Steve, whose eyes teared up before he could stop them. “I miss them.”

“Then go home.”

“It’s not that simple.”

Bucky snorted. “Buddy, there are a lot of things about our life that isn’t simple. A fuck ton. This is. Simple doesn’t mean it won’t be easy, or that it won’t feel like absolute shit, but this is so simple. If you love them, fight for them. You have fought for everything your whole fucking life, so I don’t see
why this is a foreign concept.”

“I’ve never had to fight after I broke something,” Steve confessed. “I’ve never had to do this.”

“Well,” Bucky said sagely. “I’ve never had to completely regain my memories, twice, so I suppose 2017 is our year for new things.”

That earned him a middle finger and a sideways grin.

“They gave me the last intelligence briefing, Steven,” Bucky’s tone went serious. “I’m not cleared yet, or anything, but if Carol’s trajectories are right, then I will be when this fucker shows up. She’s gathering up an intergalactic army and is telling everyone that Earth’s defenders are led by Captain America. You are the only one who can lead us all. All these stories they’ve been telling me and clips I’ve been watching to understand fighting and context and… God, Stevie, you are so good at that and I know you so I know it’s because you know your people. You know us. So you forgot yourself for a bit there, we’ve all done worse.

“Also, your boyfriend? I literally killed his parents and he built me an arm that was more powerful than the one I used to do it. I’m sure there will be a fuck ton of groveling involved, but if the last few months have taught me anything, it’s that the human capacity for forgiveness is only outmatched by its capacity for love.”

“When did you get so smart?” Steve wiped the tears from his eyes.

“Well, let me tell you, my best friend is the smartest kid on the block. Stupid and stubborn as fuck, but the smartest one of all of us. He knows that fighting for what’s right is worth any effort and will always have your back while you’re doing it.”

“He sounds like a great guy.”

“I’m glad you remember him, ya muppet. It’s about time.”

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“Boss?” Friday said tentatively.

“What is it Friday?”

“You have an incoming text from Captain Rogers, addressed to you and Mrs. Stark.”

Tony dropped the screwdriver he was holding and nearly felt his legs give out. “I didn’t program you to fuck with me, Friday.”

“I am not fucking with you.”

“Where’s Pep?”

“In Master Peter’s room.”

“Have you alerted her?”

“She has seen the incoming alert and her heart rate is currently elevated, but she has not revealed the text to him.”

“Because she’s the smart one here. Can you tell her to meet me down here now?”
Tony started pacing and, five minutes later, when the door flew open, he had also thrown up twice.
The post-cave nervous stomach is really something I could live without.

“Is it really from him?” Pepper’s eyes were wide and wild.

“Yes, ma’am,” Friday confirmed. “It is to the general emergency number, coded through Janelle to be delivered exclusively through you two. She confirms that he is the originator.”

“Let’s hear it,” Tony said.

“He sent it originally in voice memo, Boss. Voice or text?”

They looked at each other. “If he’s breaking up with us for good, I think I need to hear his voice,” Tony said.

“If he’s asking to come home, I think I need to hear his voice,” Pepper replied and Friday started the tape.

“Pepper and Tony, I am sorry. Let me lead with that and I’ll be saying it a lot more, but I am. I know now why I’ve been acting like I did, and it’s not entirely for the reasons you think, Tony, but you aren’t far off. The difference, though, is all the difference. Staying away was the wrong choice, and I’ve wanted to come home since I got to Wakanda, but I told myself I had broken us so badly that you were better off without me. I know now that I was wrong. Nat informs me that my martyr complex is only matched by yours, Tony.

The ways I have missed you don’t have words in English. (Steve’s voice broke here, and he paused for a few breaths.) I understand why you took my silence as complete abandonment, but it wasn’t. It was a misguided attempt at protecting you. Can you tell I’m back in therapy? I am. For about three weeks now, and my therapist is who convinced me to text you instead of just showing up, which was my plan. He explained that if I just showed back up, I was taking away your agency in our relationship the same way I did when I left. So, I’m asking this time. I’m asking for your input. (They could hear that he was full on crying at this point.)

I’d really like to come home. If you say yes, T’Challa says he’ll get me there by tomorrow morning. If you say no, then I’ll start looking for apartments in Brooklyn.

And before your cynicism kicks in, dear Tony, I’ve read the same reports you have, but this is not about Thanos. We fought as a team when we hated each other, I’m sure we’d muddle through again. This is about me, and you, and Peter - and now MJ? What’s this about a suit? - and I want to fix what I broke.

I love you. I love you both. I love you all. I chose you from here to forever, whatever it takes, that is my vow.”

Pepper had begun to cry the minute she’d heard Steve’s voice, but Tony had stayed fairly stoic until Steve had asked to come home. Then they were both goners. They cried together for a few minutes, before Tony said, “I want to tell him yes.”

“More than words,” Pepper confirmed.

“We gotta ask the kid,” Tony whispered.

Pepper nodded. “Let’s call him back? Explain he needs to ask Peter?”

Friday interrupted. “Boss, Ma’am, there is also an audio message for Peter. Captain Rogers told me
to ask you for permission to deliver it.”

“He’s really back,” Pepper smiled. “He really is.”

Tony took a breath. “Showtime.”

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Peter, I love you and I’m sorry, the voice message started. Peter was sitting in his living room, with a parent on either side of him, as he listened to Steve’s voice.

Let me say that again. I love you and I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t call on your birthday, I’m sorry I missed Christmas, I’m sorry I missed helping you train and making pancakes with you and everything else that meant being your Popsicle, I am so sorry.

You tell me that words are cheap, that May promised not to leave you and so did Ben, and they did. You’re right. I could tell you four hundred thousand times that I’m sorry and it means nothing. I’d like to come home, now, and I’ve asked Tony and Pepper for their permission and I’d like to ask for yours, and show you how I’m sorry and how I’m going to make it better. I know now why I left, and there are parts of my life you need to hear from me that explain a bit of it, and I’d like to tell you in person. But I’m on your schedule.

If you say yes, if you and Pepper and Tony say yes, then I’ll be home by tomorrow morning and I’ll answer any question you have and you can punch me and spar with me and do anything else you need to. I promise. If you say no, I’m going to look for apartments in Brooklyn. Your Aunt Nat and Uncle Bucky could use some alone time because you were totally right about that, kid. Let MJ know that, with adjusted time, she won the pool.

Anyway, I’m rambling now because I’m nervous so I’ll stop. I love you, I’m sorry, and may I please come home?

Peter sat in stunned silence. However he thought his Wednesday afternoon was going to go, this wasn’t even on the list. “Do you guys want to let him?”

“We do,” Tony said. “Do you?”

Peter chewed his lip. “Yes? But I’m still mad.”

“Oh, I’m still pretty furious,” Pepper chuckled, “but the way he was talking felt normal for the first time in a long time and I’d like to see what that looks like in person and I still miss him and I still love him, so yes, we want him home.”

“He sounded like he did the night before the wedding when we were making the cards with you, Mom.”

“He did,” she confirmed. “Which I think means we may actually get the bottom of what was happening.”

Tony took a breath and they both looked at him. “Something he said in our video, the one for me and Mom, twigged something that Widmeyer reminded me last week. I think we’ve all spent the last several months deciding that Steve was totally wrong in leaving and maybe absolving ourselves of any blame. If we’re going to really make this work, we have to be willing to do the work, too.”

“What do you mean?” Peter was confused.
“If we hurt him, we’ll have to own up to that. If we did something that helped him make his decision to leave, we’ll have to fix it. No one is blameless when something goes this catastrophically sideways.”

Pepper smiled softly and nodded, as did Peter. The trio sat in silence for a little bit before they heard Peter’s text tone go off.

**MJ: You’re killing me, Smalls.**

He showed it to his parents, who laughed.

“Tell her we have a phone call to make and then we’ll all fill her in.”

“Captain Rogers,” Janelle’s voice rang out in the gym. “You have a video call from the Mansion.”

He had sent his voice messages only about an hour ago and was not expecting anything this quickly. He scrambled off of the weight bench and scrubbed his dripping wet hair with a towel. After recording several drafts of the messages, he had come down to the gym to work himself into oblivion and while it had not worked, it made the hour go less like paint drying and more like molasses.

Grabbing the portable Janelle tablet Nat had lent him to make this all happen, he said, “I’m ready.”

When his family was projected in front of him, he could not stop the tears. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Pepper whispered, and reached out her hand, as though to cup his cheek before she stopped herself.

“Our answer is yes,” Tony said confidently. “Let’s all spill our pain in person, so get your ass back here. We’re ordering Momofuku’s for tomorrow night so there’s your deadline.”

Peter cautiously made eye contact. “I’m in the ‘our’, but in case you need to hear it from me, my answer is yes, too.”

Steve wiped his tears and nodded. “T’Challa said he has the plane gassed and ready to go. My bags have been packed since I sent the message, so I’m going to shower and be on my way.”

“See you soon, handsome,” Tony said calmly and Steve felt a hope he hadn’t in months.

“See you soon.”

“Friend, I have a small gift for you,” T’Challa said to Steve. They were standing in the royal plane, and T’Challa had given instructions to the staff regarding Steve’s journey and some other errands he was going to have them run before they returned.

“What?”

“To my people, objects are very important. Not things, but when something significant has happened, when life has changed, we create something to commemorate. When I was in Japan many years ago, I learned the art of kintsugi, which is one of their main forms of pottery.” The king produced a small bowl, with veins of gold and silver running through it. “Nothing is wasted in Japanese art, and this is the method of taking broken pottery and reforming it with precious metals and making in stronger. It is, conveniently, also a perfect metaphor for life.”
He handed the bowl to Steve. “This small pot was in your quarters when you moved in. You don’t remember it, I am sure, but Shuri broke it when she was there one evening and brought me the pieces. It’s made from a specific clay we have here in Wakanda that I am always hesitant to waste and so I usually take broken pottery and kintsugi it. My sister thinks I am strange, but what else is new,” T’Challa shrugged and Steve laughed.

“Over the last several weeks, I have watched you kintsugi yourself, or at least start to. This bowl has been reinforced with the Stark patented gold alloy Tony gives to Shuri and vibranium from our mines. Take it, put it where you can see it every day to remind you that broken pieces put back together make us stronger.”

Steve nodded solemnly, feeling his throat tight with emotion. “Thank you, my friend. I will not take this lightly.

T’Challa’s eyes sparkled. “As you take nothing lightly, I feel assured.”

Steve laughed. “Thank you again for your hospitality.”

T’Challa waved his hand, absolving the thanks. “This is what we do. Go kintsugi your family, Captain, and please do it quickly. Thanos is imminent.”

Chapter End Notes

I appreciate your trust - several of you have told me it was hard to get through the last several chapters, and I get it because they weren't fun to write. The art of kintsugi and its symbolism is a key element to this story and how I see trauma and how it weaves us together.

Thanos is coming, y'all, and it's time for our folks to get ready. That's next.
Thank God it is Spring Break was all Pepper kept thinking as she watched Tony and Peter pace in tandem. Typically, QTI student spent their junior years in hands-on laboratory environments and spent senior fulfilling state-wide academic competencies. With the looming threat of Thanos, and the fact that MJ and Peter had long ago surpassed their classmates in terms of hands-on experience, Tony had convinced the school to let the two swap their last two years. Peter was, therefore, going to graduate high school at 15, MJ at 16. And then no biggie, probably spend their summer vacation and first semester of college fighting an intergalactic villain, so as important as all the parents believed formal education was, there was also that.

She was also glad they were in the home stretch of school because no force on Earth was going to keep those kids from helping. And today, if she had tried to make Peter go to English class? God help and preserve her, it would not have happened.

“Pepper, the plane is in its final descent. Touchdown in the yard in 23 minutes.”

“Thanks, Friday,” Pepper said and called out to the back yard to inform them of the countdown. MJ wandered through the living room and outside, playing with her hair in the way that let Pepper know she was really nervous but completely determined not to let Peter know.

Pepper had no idea what she was going to do when she saw Steve. His apology video had, admittedly, taken a lot of the fight out of her. The things she wanted to scream at him, he seemed to have already screamed at himself and they had already wasted too much time to go over old ground. The one thing she and Tony agreed on the night before was that they were going to take a page from the Parker family book and let the apology clean the slate of any accusations or bitterness.

Something Kerry had told Pepper when Pepper was getting ready for her wedding was that she had spent her adult life looking for a better definition of love than the one she found in 1 Corinthians but hadn’t found it.

“Is that the one they always read at weddings?” Pepper screwed up her nose a bit.

“Yeah, and I know you think my faith is silly and we’re not rehashing that again, but let me break down what it says for you. It says that if I accomplish all of the greatest things in the world, but I don’t have love, I am empty noise. If I am not known by another human being, if I am not in community, if I’m not in family, I have wasted time.

So what is love? It asks? Paul answers that it is patient and kind. It never gives up and it puts others first. It doesn’t keep track of wrongs or revel when others grovel. It always looks for the best, puts up with anything, never looks back. Love never dies, never. It always wins.

And finally, we must remember that this life is mysterious and we’re seeing through a dirty and dark glass. The truest things, the things that can be known, the things that when they are known means we are living our best lives, are faith, hope, and love and love is by far the greatest.

So, Virginia, I ask you. What better road map is that?”

When things were very dark in her soul about Steve, Pepper asked Kerry to write that down for her and she had been using phrases of it as her mantras for months. She read it to Tony several times and last night when they were talking about what was next, they both focused on the ‘doesn’t keep track of wrongs’ bit.
“Either we love him or we don’t,” Pepper said simply. “If we love him, then we welcome him home and we work on it and we don’t punish him.”

“I mean, Pep, I basically have a gold medal at ignoring painful things, so my plan is to act like it’s business as usual and take my cues from you and him about when we need to hash shit out.”

“No, you’re participating in this, too. No hiding and no passive aggressiveness.”

“What happens if the first thing I want to do is kiss him and then throttle him?”

Pepper considered this. “We’ve never negotiated breath play, so I’d say that’s out.”

All of a sudden, Peter whipped around and met her gaze, which must mean his super hearing picked up the plane. She made her way outside and went straight for him. Pulling him into a hug, she whispered into his ear. “You can opt out of this moment, honey, if it’s just too much.”

He shook his head. “I have a lot of questions, but mostly I just really miss him.”

Then, before any of them were ready but at the same time ages after they were, the plane touched down and the stairs folded out from the side. Steve took two tentative steps down before Tony nearly launched himself towards the stairs and then everyone was running and crying and hugging and kissing like they were one of those golden retriever puppy videos on YouTube.

When Pepper finally gathered herself, she turned back and noticed MJ’s camera poised on them with a small smile on her face. Catching Pepper’s eyes, she called, “Nat asked.”

“Food?” Pepper asked Steve, who nodded.

“I was too nervous to eat on the plane, or last night,” he answered sheepishly.

“Well, clearly that means you are about to expire, and I believe MJ was in charge of pancakes this morning, so let’s head in,” Tony replied.

It’s happening, it’s real, he’s here, we can do anything when we’re together. Tony’s heart felt warm as he followed his family back into their kitchen.

“This looks so good, MJ,” Steve smiled and pulled her in for a hug.

“It’s only for you if you’re staying,” she pinned him with a glare.

“MJ-“ Peter whined in the background, but Steve met her eyes.

“Forever.”

She nodded and handed him a plate of pancakes before he took a seat at the kitchen table. “Wow, MJ, that’s a gorgeous mug.”

She beamed and held up the obviously handcrafted mug. “It was part of my Christmas gift from Nat.”

Steve grinned. “I thought so! She drove T’Challa absolutely nuts with that. I’m so glad you love it.”

“She obsessed with it,” Peter cut in, smiling at his girlfriend. “And she should be.”

Back before everything went sideways, MJ had confided to Nat that she really wanted to trace her heritage but she was nervous to. Nat had told her that she understood, and MJ thought the matter was
dropped. Until Nat’s gift – which was a complete ancestral work-up, and a set of pottery from a tribe in Haiti that was the best guess the ancestry company had for where some of MJ’s people came from before they were enslaved to the Carolinas in the early 1800s. Her white blood came from Ireland and Switzerland, so there was also some gorgeous Irish linen and a handcrafted coocoo clock.

MJ’s favorite part, though, had been the note that came with it.

Rockstar – Who you are has nothing to do with these things, but I know how to feels to not know. Here are a few touchstones to remind you of where your people came from, but what reminds you who you are is who you share them with. As soon as Swiss Cheese over here becomes Mozarella, I’ll be home and we’ll make some tea and I’ll tell you my story. – Tasha

Pepper had held it together in front of MJ, but absolutely wept later that night with Tony.

“It’s so easy to forget what an incredible woman Nat is underneath the barely managed anger issues and minor dissociative disorder,” Tony quipped. “But sweet fuck, she nailed this one.”

“The pottery was her favorite trip,” Steve confided. “I’m sure if you want she’ll take you to Haiti.”

MJ’s eyes went really wide before she forgot she was supposed to be cool about it all. “I mean, that could be cool.”

They all laughed, and something in Steve’s chest clicked into place. However hard this is going to be, whatever this takes, this is what matters. I can do this.

The rest of the day was quiet. Steve crashed into a nap after breakfast, Tony and the two kids headed to the workshop, and Pepper did a few hours of work. When Steve woke up, he went to the workshop to get caught up on what had been invented while he was in Wakanda.

Tony hadn’t been kidding that he ordered in Momofuku and a cornucopia of Steve’s favorite dishes arrived around 7. MJ noticed that Peter had gotten increasingly quiet over dinner, but she wasn’t quite prepared for what happened.

Steve casually asked Peter to pass him another set of chopsticks.

Peter clenched his jaw and didn’t look at Steve as he passed MJ some to pass to Steve. Her eyes found Pepper’s, who had her eyebrows raised.

“Thanks, kiddo.”

Peter’s jaw went again, and the rest of the table froze for a few seconds.

“Can we stick with Peter?” Peter ground out.

“Um, sure,” Steve sounded confused, but didn’t put up an argument.

“It’s just that kiddo is what you called me before you abandoned our family, so I’m not sure you’ve earned that one back yet.”

“I get it, Peter, no problem,” Steve continued.

Peter, however, was not done. “You LEFT, STEVE. YOU LEFT, AND THEN YOU STAYED AWAY. And now you want to come back in here and pretend nothing is wrong? You wanna use nicknames my Pops did? You think I’m gonna call you Popsicle or whatever the fuck the kid who
“I want to talk to you guys about vows,” Steve said early in the morning, about two weeks after he
loved you did? You think I haven’t seen Mom and Dad destroyed for nearly A FUCKING YEAR
and so help me GOD if you correct my language I will web your mouth shut.”

At the end of his tirade, Peter pushed back from the table and basically ran from the table.

All adult eyes turned to MJ. “He has a lot of feelings right now.”

“Do you want to go help him manage them, sweetheart?” Tony replied quietly. The girl nodded and
left the room.

“You know, I was almost shocked when he didn’t do that when I first landed, so,” Steve laughed
without any humor. “I had it coming.”

“You did,” Tony replied. “Pep and I have decided to not punish you or ourselves by dredging
anything up when it’s not productive, but I’d imagine our little spider won’t quite be able to do that.”

“No,” Steve said. “What do you mean?”

As Tony explained how they viewed this moving forwards, Pepper opened her phone to find the
group text between her, Kerry, and Nat had been full while she was ignoring it. Kerry, it appeared,
was a big fan of the family enthusiasm pile that happened that morning.

Pepper: Peter exploded.

Nat: Just now? I’d say that’s an amazing amount of restraint.

Pepper: Steve calling him kiddo set him off.

Kerry: Trigger words are rarely predictable.

Nat: Yeah, found out one of Bucky’s today was Bleeker, as in the street, and I don’t even want to
know, but that’s now on the list.

Pepper: Is it weird that I want to fuck him and kill him and I keep flipping on which one to do?

Nat: Even if just for the Battle of the Purple People Eater, can you choose door #1?

Pepper: If my libido is part of the battle for Planet Earth, I suppose that is a sacrifice I can make.

Nat: We thank you for your service.

“Pep?”

“Sorry,” she said to Steve, “texting the girls. What’s up?”

“Steve and I are going to head to the workshop and futz with the shield. Do you want to come?”

“No, I think I’ll be on call to be a parent while you two go avenge.”

Steve winced slightly, like he always did when Pepper said stuff like that, and Tony rolled his eyes,
which he also always did when Pepper said things like that.

So, in other words, some of their new normal was gonna look like their old.
got home, when the three of them were awake before MJ and Peter.

“Like making them? Or the theoretical concept in general.”

“Making them. Me to you, and you both to me.”

“Like marriage?” Pepper said and Steve nodded.

“Like I said that first night, I realized in Wakanda is that I’ve been, entirely subconsciously, treating Bucky like my spouse. The ‘end of the line’ had canonized itself into a vow, which is why I got prickly about making another. It was not, and I know this like I know anything, because I was still in love with him.”

Tony blushed slightly. “In my defense, I’m not sure how I would have been able to tell the difference between those.”

“In my defense,” Steve said, “you made a million assumptions without actually talking to me and instead just kept inferring that I was an idiot.”

“I did,” Tony confessed. “Sorry.”

“You did, too, Pep,” Steve said. “I was like the receptor of all of your passive aggressive meddling – both of you – for months and all it did was confuse me further and help me to convince myself that you’d all be better out without me since you seemed to know everything and I knew nothing.”

“Fuck, that was not my intention,” Pepper breathed.

“Remember that conversation we had in the Tower, when Tony was being self-destructive?”

“Gonna need it a lot narrower than that.”

“During the boxes.”

“Ah, yes,” Pepper smiled. “And the nap.”

“You were doing it again, not letting me help, not trusting me to do my job, to be who I was. And the longer you did it, the longer I just kept giving in, and it crushed me.”

Pepper and Tony were stunned into silence, but one of the things that life with Bucky over the past seven months had taught Steve was to hold silence.

“I think,” Pepper said slowly after several minutes, “that maybe we should talk about family therapy because you are not wrong, and you’ve said this before, but I don’t know how to fix this.”

“I think,” Steve countered, “that for the moment, we all have had enough therapy to sort this ourselves. I’m not discounting it, but to add one more appointment, and one more person we have to have sign four thousand NDAs… let’s try to muck through it.”

Tony agreed with Steve. “We all agreed to honesty that first night, and so I’d like to see if we can do this ourselves.”

Pepper conceded.

“And,” Tony continued, “we need to have a family fun day, the five of us, like, this weekend.”

“Perfect,” Pepper breathed. “What about the cabin? There’s still some snow, shut up Tony I know
you hate snow, but we’ve never taken MJ.”

Steve and Tony both told her that sounded great, and then Steve cleared his throat. “Have you guys read the latest intel?”

Pepper nodded. “Carol thinks October?”

Steve nodded. “I know MJ has a suit – I’d love to hear details on that – but as we start to prepare for this thing, I need to know who I can count on.”

“All of us,” Tony said. “One last time and then I’m finding a fig tree.”

“Okay, General Washington, what does that mean?” Steve said.

“I’m old, Steven,” Tony said with a note of exhaustion Steve didn’t recognize. “My body is old and I am so tired of fighting. This Thanos jackass is too important to sit on the sidelines, but if we survive this, I’m out. Iron Man retires and I am going to become the cranky old inventor all the neighborhood kids are afraid of that I’ve always wanted to be.” Pepper shot him a look. “Amendment, that I’ve wanted to be for the past several years.”

“I get it. One of the things I realized in these last few months is that I am ready to never touch that shield again,” Steve confessed. “I’ve been thinking about passing it on when this is all over. I really just want to be the cranky inventor’s husband and help keep our wife and kid safe from the inevitable explosions.”

“You know the kid isn’t laying down the webs, though, so maybe also the dad who helps him not be a complete Stark.”

“I’ll take the resume amendment under advisement.”

“You called me wife, so can we circle back to that?” Pepper said.

Steve smiled. “With pleasure. Like I said, I’m ready and I’m on your schedule. In our original agreement, you guys said to just let you know what I was ready to do the ceremonial covenant thing and I am now. However, I have been the world’s biggest fuck up for the last seven-odd months, so if we want to rebuild a little, I get it.”

“I’m feeling very *Harry Met Sally* right now, because my first reaction is that when you know who you want to spend the rest of your life with, you want the rest of your life to start right now,” Tony responded.

Steve shot a glance to Pepper, who held up her hands. “You were gone for a long time, love. He got mopey and I had to resort to romcoms.”

“We wasted a lot of time,” Tony continued with a glare to his wife. “And this is going to be hard whether we’re married or not. What I am sure is that if you ever pull that again, I will light the earth on fire trying to find you because life without you was not great. Something was missing for seven fucking months and I’m out of patience for that. So, I can’t speak for Pep, but I say that was a pretty shitty proposal and I expect more from you, soldier.”

Steve barked out a laugh. “I’ll start planning.”

Pepper was quiet for a minute. “I need a little bit of time. Yes, I’m with Tony in theory, but I just need… soon, I promise.”
Steve whispered, “Take your time, dear. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m trying to believe that,” she whispered back. “I am choosing to believe it. I just need a breath.”

“Oh,” Tony said, “couple of quick things to fill you in on. We legally adopted Peter and he changed his name to Stark, and that was his reaction to you not calling on his birthday, so yikes on trying to fix that, and I’ve decided to leave Peter SI when I die, but he doesn’t know that, and Pepper also managed to con MJ’s mother into essentially letting MJ emancipate herself because her parents are worse than we originally thought and that girl is a goddamn hero for not actually killing them. Am I leaving anything out, babe?”

Pepper raised an eyebrow. “I got Tony to eat quinoa on four separate occasions and Peter now claims he likes cottage cheese.”

“No one likes cottage cheese, Pepper. That’s a lie perpetrated by the lumpy cheese industrial complex,” Tony replied as Steve said that he liked cottage cheese and Tony rolled his eyes. “Also, this new administration is a serious bummer, but Nat tells me you’ve all been following that. Pepper and Kerry have those pink hats and we all go to marches now. Who knew. What else?”

“I think that’s enough for now,” Pepper laughed, looking at Steve’s shell-shocked face. “Nat was supposed to tell you most of this, did she not?”

“No, she did, I know all the first stuff, I’m just really stuck on the quinoa.”

“Peter, Captain Rogers has requested your presence in the gym.” Friday said one morning in early April.

“Tell Captain Rogers I’m busy.”

“Captain Rogers doesn’t give a shit,” Steve’s voice retorted. “Get your ass down here. I know you’re skipping training just because it’s me and you’re better than this, and we have a Titan breathing down our ass and I’m really over the adolescent emotions of Peter Stark because Spider-Man needs to work on his hand-to-hand, so get your ass down here. I am your commanding officer, do not forget that.”

“Well, at least we know how he feels,” MJ cocked her eyebrow. Peter glared at her. “Babe, I have told you for two weeks to just go. So you are not getting any support from me in this silly grudge match.”

“It’s not a grudge.”

“It really, really is. You told him to come home and less than 24 hours later you are ripping him a new one and have since not let him talk to you. You passed ‘childish’ about three weeks ago. Go train.”

With gritted teeth and an admittedly shitty attitude, he headed to the gym.

“I don’t even have suit privileges back,” Peter said by way of greeting.

“And who knows when you’ll get them with that attitude,” Steve replied. “Position one.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Peter snarked and Steve gritted his jaw.
After five minutes, Steve called out instructions to do position two, which was one of the ones Peter could never beat Steve on. Today was no different. He was flat on his back in no-time, but Steve seemed to take pity and called for position six, which was one Peter could always handle.

And so it went for about an hour, until Peter was breathing heavily and asked for time. Steve checked his watch and nodded, then called for one of the gym bots to get Peter some water.

“What do you want me to do,” Steve asked quietly after a few minutes. “Do you even know what you need from me?”

“No,” Peter admitted. “I just know looking at you hurts.”

“Well, looking at you hurts me, too.”

Peter seemed surprised by that, but still kept his eyes focused on the ground. Steve continued. “Pepper and Tony and I, we’ve had hard conversations. Nat and I have worked through things. Clint, Sam, Bruce – everyone, hell, even your girlfriend has talked to me. You yelled the one time and then haven’t done anything else. Peter, I love you and I used to know you and the kid I left would not have treated me like this, so I don’t know what to do.”

“When you’re frustrated you talk like Dad. I don’t remember that from before,” Peter remarked.

Steve quirked his head. “Huh, maybe I do. My therapist has me do lots of verbal exercises to say whatever is on my mind and not censor myself so much. As your father has zero verbal filter, I suppose I would pick up on his cadence. Friday, can you confirm?”

“Yes, Captain. When your emotions are heightened, you tend to speak like the Boss.”

“Fascinating,” Steve said.

“But the Boss,” Friday continued, “also speaks like you when he wants to sound authoritative.”

Peter started laughing. And then didn’t stop for somewhere around three minutes. Keeping track of time in silence was a new skill Steve had picked up.

When Peter calmed himself down, he took a deep breath, as though to steel himself, and looked right at Steve. He flinched, but he held Steve’s eyes.

“I’m still me, kiddo,” Steve whispered. “I’m still goofy, and I still like Tangled better than Frozen, and I still cannot listen to the second act of Hamilton without thinking of you and Tony and Pepper and absolutely breaking down, and I still hate strawberries, and I still believe Hershey’s is the best chocolate but that none of you understand bananas and I still love you more than I’ll ever have words for. Ever. You have to believe me that I stayed away because I thought it was best for you, not because I wanted to. Every day was like tiny needles into my eye balls.”

“That’s graphic.”

“That was the worst part of Rebirth,” Steve replied. “The eyeball needles. I’m not making it up.”

“Grandad really was a dick.”

“Yes, and with the added side bonus of the fact that when he was doing experiments, he had the people skills of a flesh-eating bacteria.”

“You’re really recommending him.”
“I would imagine Tony’s stories did that all on their own.”

Peter was quiet for a minute. “MJ says there comes a point where I just have to choose to be the version of myself I want to be. Once I make the choice, I can make it work. It was that way when they took the suit. I had to choose to stop being bitter and see their point and how I could grow. Took me a few weeks, but I guess I’ve given you that, too.

“So,” Peter took a deep, fortifying breath, "one more time, do you promise you will never leave without telling me again?"

“I will never leave without telling you that I love you ever again. I'll extend that to every time I leave for the supermarket if you want. You will always know when I’m heading off on a mission, for as long as I have missions,” Steve swore.

“And that goes for Mom and Dad?”

“Absolutely.”

“And MJ?”

“If she wants.”

“She wants,” Peter said. “I’m teaching her how to ask.”

Steve smiled. “What you guys have is really special, kiddo.”

“I can’t use Popsicle anymore.”

“Okay,” Steve said, his heart saddened by that tiny death.

“I know you all make a big deal about what names I use, but as we prepare for this massive battle thing, I think I need to keep it to two for each of you, so how is Pops?”

That question was beyond any of Steve’s wildest dreams when he started that day, and so he barely croaked out, “I’d be honored.”

Peter nodded and smiled, curving himself towards Steve for a hug. Steve held his son for a few moments, not bothering to hold back the tears of relief. The final piece of the ‘home’ puzzle had found its place.

Peter pulled back. “Now, let’s talk about how you’re going to propose to Dad. MJ and I have some ideas.”

June 2017

“Magna Cum Laude,” Peter smiled at MJ. “You’re so fucking smart and it is so fucking hot.”

She swatted him. “You only got summa because of the suit.”

Peter shrugged. “You always work harder than me, your grade should be higher.”

“I should be valedictorian,” she grumbled, “but fucking Angela Patel.”

“We talked about this, MJ.”
“Fine, I will not do voodoo.”

“MJ! Peter!” Steve called from their living room. “Peter, your mother is vibrating with holding back her tears, so can you both please come out here in your costumes?”

“They’re not costumes, Steven! They are symbols of all they have achieved so far and through such insane odds and I do not want to hear how I’m a sap just because I’m proud of them,” Pepper corrected.

“Guys, seriously, you skipped prom on her, so give her this, will you?” Tony said as they walked into the room.

“We did not skip prom, Dad,” Peter corrected as they came into the room. “You forgot to check the school calendar when you booked that speech in Switzerland you invited MJ to and there was zero chance she would chose me and a dress over that.”

“What about you in a dress?” Tony smirked.

MJ cocked an eyebrow, “he does this dance to Rhianna’s *Umbrella*.”

Peter slapped his hand over her mouth. “Parents? Pictures?”

The three parents exchanged glances before Pepper pulled out her phone and took many, many snapshots. Then they paraded to the common living room, where the rest of the team – including Bucky and Nat who had gotten back stateside only that week – was anxiously awaiting their turn with the honorees.

The ceremony was boring, as those ceremonies are wont to be, and MJ and Peter were each supposed to only have two tickets, but… Tony, so they had an entire cheering section. They got their own Buzzfeed listicle – “The Seven Most Adorable Faces Tony Stark Made When His Kid Graduated” – the first piece of press Tony had ever printed.

“So I guess someone figured out we adopted Peter,” Tony said as they were in the car on the way home.”

“Well, if they hadn’t before today, Peter Stark was a good indicator, and the fact that you nearly deafened the room with your screams,” Steve said dryly.

“I have enthusiasm for our child, is that a crime?”

Later that night, after the gowns were hung back up to be returned and the tassels were safely tucked into the frames Pepper had bought to preserve the day, Pepper found Peter in his room.

“Hey, honey, I have a letter for you.”

“Yeah?”

“May gave it to me to give to you on this day.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Pepper smiled. “None of us have opened it. You have a few more, too, like for your first day of college, and the day you get engaged, and your wedding day, but high school graduation was the first one. So, here it is. Do you want me to leave?”

Peter reached a shaky hand out for the envelope. “No, stay.”
Dear Peter,

As I write this, we are Iowa and you are playing outside with MJ and the Barton kids. Playing outside like the child you never really got to be and my heart hurts. I hope that when you read this, MJ is still a part of your life, for she is wonderful.

When I graduated from nursing school, my mentor gave me a list of 25 things she wanted me to remember always. She told me to hang them in whatever locker I was assigned, because they would be my guiding mantras. I thought she was overbearing and a little bit nuts. Wrong on both counts.

The list went with me from locker, to locker, and eventually Ben made me several copies to keep. The first few months you lived with us, I repeated them around a rosary every night, hoping to draw strength from the wisdom I knew they contained.

I always planned on giving you your own copy – with changes I’ve made - when you became Dr. Parker – which I am as sure will happen as I am sure I will die before the end of this summer – but time is not a gift I’ve been given. So, here are my 25 things I want you to remember, always.

1. You are loved. Deeply, desperately, and without reason, you are loved. You were loved by me, and by your parents, and by your Uncle Ben. You were loved by Mrs. Salieri in 4B and by every one of your teachers and I know that you are loved by your Tower Parents and your new team. You. Are. Loved. My precious boy, my gift, you are loved.

2. Your worth will never be determined by a number; not your GPA, not your income, not the number of missions you go on. Your worth is inherent in you.

3. No pleasure is guilty – that’s the puritanical patriarchy talking. Something causes no harm and brings you joy? OWN IT, my precious boy.

4. Maintain a standard of excellence in your life but don’t sacrifice yourself to maintain it.

5. Never let anyone rob you of your identity – not the world, not a girl, not a boy, not a job.

6. You will never receive the plan for your life laid out on a post-it. You will fake it until you make it all the time and that’s the whole point.

7. Sometimes, the most important thing you can do when faced with life altering decisions is to go outside and take a walk.

8. Life starts going sideways when you convince yourself that you are alone. Isolation is the root of all evil, kiddo. Like Frodo and the ring, you will always need Sam.

9. Never be afraid to ask questions. If the people you’re asking them to won’t answer, find new people, don’t stop the questions.

10. Emotional censorship is not nearly as healthy as the Avengers make it seem. Feel things fully and live in the moment.

11. Always live your life to honor the story that came before you and the one that will continue after you. You are but dust and to dust you will return, my precious boy.

12. Love is an expanding entity, not a contracting one.

13. Failure is inherently part of life. It is our ‘failures’ that make us stronger.
14. People will leave you. Just like we’ve all left, more will. But if you expect everyone to, then you’re defeating the purpose. Chase to trust.

15. Different people are different. I know that sounds simple, but it is one of the hardest things to remember when the person you’re dealing with is infuriating.

16. We learn by doing. Yes, a Star Trek reference. Don’t tell Tony. But seriously! Take risks! Get out there! You’re great at risking your body, don’t forget that sometimes you also have to risk your heart.

17. Be gentle with yourself, my precious boy.

18. Never play games with other people. It is the small person who toys with others for amusement.

19. You are not responsible for the decisions or emotions of other people.

20. Speak your truth always, clearly and without judgement of those who find it false.

21. Everyone is more complicated than we give them credit for.

22. Listening – truly listening – is a holy gift. One thing nursing has taught me is that people crave to be seen and heard. The hardest parts of my job was never anything to do with medicine and everything to do with carrying the pain given to me by strangers who had no one else to share it with. Listen well, my precious boy, and you will change the world.

23. All relationships require work. Friendships, family, romantic. This will especially be true for parenting if that’s a decision you make. Put the work in with those who are worth it, walk away from those who aren’t.

24. Joy and hope are both disciplines. If that doesn’t make sense to you yet, talk to Miss Kerry. She is the keeper of more wisdom than I think you realize.

25. You have no control who lives, who dies, who tells your story. None. Your legacy is seeds in a garden you never get to see, and, therefore, your only responsibility is to live well. Love extravagantly, fail epically, give generously, and be well, my precious boy. I will never stop being proud of you.

Yes, I know I stole that last one. Sue me.

I’ll talk to you again soon, my precious boy. My precious, beloved one.

Till then,

Aunt May

Peter looked up at Pepper. “Do you think Pops could paint some of these for me?”

“I don’t think you’ll be able to stop him.”
June 2017

“Carol, what are you saying?” Steve was trying hard to hear her through the really crappy reception. She was, however, about 10 light years away, so he couldn’t be that mad.

“Have you heard from Asgard?!”

Steve looked at Sam, Clint, Bucky, and Nat, who all shook their heads. “No.”

“Fuck, fuck, FUCK,” Carol screamed. “He’s there, or someone with his tech is there, and they’re going to get the stones. Loki gave him the key.”

“The Bifrost?” Nat yelled.

“Gone, about an hour ago.” Carol kept talking for a few minutes, but it was garbled. What was clear was her calling “Get Fury Get Fury Get Fury” over and over until she cut off completely.

Within seconds, Nat had Fury on the line. “Asgard falling means we only have two months until he can get back to Earth.”

“Can T’Challa move everything up?” Steve asked Nat.

“He’s going to fucking have to,” Fury replied. “Everyone to Wakanda by the end of July, no exceptions.”

When Fury cut the line off, the five looked around the Sit Room table at each other. They were the tactical brains of the Avengers, the people who saw fights end before they happened, the ones who could shot straight when their hands were shaking. They’d been working with T’Challa for months to get the Wakandan national shield completely ready for attacks, as well as training their people to lead various battle formations.

“We assumed too much of Asgard,” Steve whispered. “We thought Thanos would come here first, and then go there and detonate the stones in space, or back on Titan.”

“No,” Nat said, “I’ve read Carol’s charts. He changed course. So now we have to get to work.”

"Lang left for Wakanda this morning to help Bruce and Shuri, so he's one less head to worry about," Steve said.

“Permission to temporarily panic?” Bucky smirked.

Nat checked her watch. “You have seven minutes, because I guarantee you that’s how long it will be before Friday leaks this to Tony.”

“2017 (Part 3)
the stones says that it can do what the person wants. What we’ve learned is that Thanos has decided to do some sort of Noah-and-the-Ark style reboot of the planet. We don’t realize how depraved we are and so he’s going to fix us.”

“How benevolent of him,” MJ responded with a tone as dry as the desert.

“He sure sounds like a gent,” Pepper confirmed.

“Are you guys, like, preparing anyone?”

“Nope.”

“Nope?”

“Nope.”

“Explain,” MJ’s eyes narrowed.

“First of all, we know he’ll go to where the stones are – we have the last two he needs once the Guardian people get to Wakanda next week – and so we can draw him anywhere. Wakanda is the best option because of their holistic forcefield and so we can nearly eliminate civilian casualties. Our allied nations are all sending their special forces – Steve will be in charge of them – and then there’s some planets sending them as well to be under Carol’s command. I think Thor’s gathering some deities, but I haven’t been part of those meetings, and T’Challa and Shuri have been creating all sorts of improvements to the forcefield,” Pepper explained.

“Okay,” MJ said. “So you’re not telling no one, you’re just not putting it on Twitter.”

“Would you?”

“Oh God no. Snapchat could barely handle the news that the MTA was closing the 1 train on the weekends without losing its collective mind, they cannot be trusted with news of the potential apocalypse.”

“So you see our point.”

MJ nodded. “But we know.”

“What are you asking, MJ?”

MJ bit her lip. “I think of you as my mom, I hope that’s okay.”

“Very.”

“So, I think I’m ready. And Peter thinks he may be, too, and do you think we should bother with condoms if the world is ending in two months? I mean, we think we're ready anyway, but I want to be honest that giant raisin has made us potentially consider things more dramatically.”

Pepper paused, tilting her head in thought. Be honest, Pepper. You promised yourself you’d always be honest when one of them asked this. “I can understand why you would talk about it, and about taking that step, and if you guys think you're ready then I think you should always bother being as safe as you possibly can. Do you want me to get you some?”

“Just like that?”

Pepper nodded. “My first time was in a basement on a couch that smelled vaguely like cheese with
Peter’s dad and it was weird and uncomfortable and I had no one to talk to and I was too scared to ask him to use protection. Nothing happened, but I was worried for a while. You're 17, MJ and you haven't been a child for a while, and I trust you. If I can help this moment in your life feel safer and happier, and not like mine, then I'll do it.”

MJ sat for a few moments and Pepper could tell she was overwhelmed. Accepting love from adults was still not something MJ was inherently comfortable with. Finally, she took a breath. “If you’re serious, I have some questions,” she opened a note on her phone.

Pepper smiled. “Shoot.”

_____________________________________

“Pep, Steve, a moment,” Tony’s voice rang out over Friday one Thursday morning, about a week after the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad news as Tony had begun to call it.

“Where are you?”

“Pep’s office.”

Pepper rolled her eyes and nodded her head to Steve. They grabbed the coffees they were drinking and wandered in. A hologram was floating in front of them of some sort of cabin, but not the one they already owned.

“I think this is the plan.”

“Beginning, Tony, not the middle,” Pepper said, a hint of exasperation in her voice.

“Right, sorry, once we defeat the galactic jackass, if we’re serious about superhero retirement, then we should move. This house is built for the Avengers and I know we said we’re not looking to completely tap out, but if all want –“

“We do, Tony.” Steve interrupted, afraid Tony was making assumptions again. The small smile Steve saw confirmed his suspicion.

“Right, so this is for sale. Out on one of the Finger Lakes, like four hours from here. It’s completely secluded, some eccentric, the realtor called them, had it before this, comes with three acres, an essentially private lake – there’s only one other house with dock access – a barn for me, a studio for Steve, and we can build a helicopter pad for Pep to commute when she needs to – I checked and it’s an hour by plane, which is what you do now, so that would work right – and already has five bedrooms, but we can always build more.”

He looked eagerly at his partners, who were exchanging glances. Finally, Pepper smirked. “How much?”

“Oh, like 4?”

“And you talked them down to?”

“Pepper, I haven’t even –“

“3.8?”

“3.3,” Tony muttered. “The studio is considered derelict and they offered to refurb it but I figured Steve should do it how he wants.”
“And your plan if we said no, was?” Steve asked.

“Give it to Buck and Nat.”

“And the carbon footprint of flying back and forth?”

“Negated. I finished the new arc reactor engine,” Tony waved his hand. “Testing it for long flights now – Friday’s helping – Nick, T’Challa, and Nicola have already placed orders.”

Pepper blinked. “I love you, but could you not have at least CC’d me on that?”

“Did I not? Fuck.”

Pepper rolled her eyes and got out her phone, and Steve heard her use the name for the SI VP of Operations. He speared Tony with a glare.

“Anthony.”

Tony ran his hands through his hair a few times, “I know.”

“You haven’t slept for more than three hours in nine days.”

“Friday is a terrible tattle tale.”

“Friday knows we love you and, within her capacity, does as well.”

“Confirmed, Boss,” Friday intoned.

“MJ’s suit isn’t ready,” Tony said. “And the gauntlet that Bruce and Strange think we need to hold the time stone isn’t either, and I have to figure out how to keep dragging out the accords negotiations because fuck if anyone is signing anything until we see if there are literal galactic consequences to whatever this purple people eater has going on, and I’m not really happy with your shield.”

Steve grabbed his hand. “Babe. He’s coming. We will never be fully prepared. We never have before and we’ve always muddled through. We will this time.”

“We’ve never fought a titan with rocks that destroy time before, so some of your logic is faulty.”

“Take a break, babe.”

“I just need-“

“Marry me.”

“Is that-“

“I had drafts and plans and Peter really wanted me to include baseball but fuck it. You’re so tired you forgot to tell Pepper that you approved and perfected something you’ve been working on for years and if I have to do one more hypothetical battle scenario I might crawl out of my skin. We have exactly ten days left before I think Fury literally drags us across a continent, and we could all use a break.”

Tony, bemused, put his wrench down. “I am all ears.”

“I love you, you love me, we have long established that. I would very much like to call you husband, which still overwhelms me but in all the best ways. I hate attention, and we’re on a limited schedule,
so why don’t you, me, Pep, the kids, Nat, Bucky, and Rhodey can head up to the cabin and get married,” Steve was blushing a bit, but his gaze held steady.

“And you were thinking this would happen?”

“Tonight?”

“Counterpoint: we do it tomorrow night, but in Mom’s chapel, because I’d like us to all make our vows in the same place. Plus, the Canadian commute would be a bummer with this death deadline looming. And everyone we may die with gets to come.”

“Counterpoint accepted. Next proposal.”

“This is a multi-part situation? Did you type it out with bullet points? Or maybe a power point? Darcy did it, didn’t she?”

Steve, with his long training in ignoring Tony, did so in that moment as well. “You asked me about rings, and I still don’t want one until Pepper is ready to wear mine, too. I don’t quite know why I feel that way, but I do and unless you solder something for us, we don’t have time to do anything anyway. You asked me to be honest, and so there I am, honest.”

Tony was quiet for a moment. “Do you want me and Pep to stop wearing ours until we do the triad ceremony?”

“No,” Steve said. “What I was thinking was that you and I could get small tattoos on our ring fingers.”

“How very millennial of you. Can this wait until we delay the apocalypse?”

Steve shrugged. “Sure.”

They grinned at each other for a minute, before Tony called out. “Peppppppppp.”

“On the phone, uninformative jackass,” she replied.

“Friday, when my wife is done fixing my latest oopsie daisy, can you tell her Steve and I are getting married tomorrow and if she could call the caterer from last time?”

“Boss, I am not relaying that. She will deprogram me.”

Steve barked out laughter. “Self-preservation is a unique evolutionary trait in a Stark, but not an unwelcome one. Friday, just ask Pep to meet us in our room.”

“That request, Captain, I would be pleased to acquiesce.”

“I think he was being all Steve about it and that’s what took so long,” Bucky said, gesturing to Nat that he needed help undoing his tie. “But I also don’t think Tony knew about Pep.”

“I am, on one level, really impressed that Stark actually let him propose,” Nat replied, getting rid of the bowtie from Bucky’s tux, “and on the other, I can see how this was kind of a test for Tony. And I don’t think Pep knew about Pep until that moment.”

“Our Tony? Playing games with little Stevie? Dollface, surely you jest.”
“The Brooklyn is not as sexy as you think it is, Barnes.”

Bucky smirked and kissed her quickly. “Oh, it is exactly as sexy as I think it is, but we have a reception to get to.”

Once Tony and Steve broke the news to everyone, their wedding kind of became a family affair.

“I mean, it kind of makes sense,” Steve said to Tony after Pepper proposed the potluck. “I hate fancy stuff, and you really do too even though you pretend not to. We have that giant grill that Bucky and Peter like to use, and the only thing I care about right now is going into battle as your husband.”

“The speeches really are such a thing,” Tony murmured, smiling at his fiancée-for-36-hours.

“Agreed. Tuxes?”

Pepper cut in. “Can I put my foot down on this one and say yes? Please?” They both smirked at her and she swatted them. “You both own them anyway! Plus, Steve picked out my dress with me and what went under it. I get to request tuxes.”

Everyone wore things from their closets, which is how MJ ended up in her homecoming dress from all those lives ago, Peter in the tux from Pepper and Tony’s wedding, Sam and Rhodey in full dress uniform, Bucky in a tux Nat procured so quickly no one wanted to question it, and Nat in a gown that Bucky was positive she had once killed someone in but was not going to ask. Kerry, Angie, and Darcy came and served as photographers, the Bartons flew in to help with the food and the decorations, and everyone who was already in Wakanda called in via hologram. It was slapdash and ridiculous and soaked in joy and everyone changed immediately after the ceremony because summer in New York is no joke, but it was also fundamentally perfect.

“Steven Grant Rogers, are you sure that you want this guy?” Rhodey said with a grin.

“Forever, Colonel. I adore him in all of his forms and I chose him for all of my days.” Steve replied solemnly.

“My answer is yes, too, Honeybear,” Tony replied, not taking his eyes off Steve.

“I still have to ask, jackass,” Rhodey replied and everyone laughed. “Do you, Anthony Edward Stark, vow to love and chose Steven Grant Rogers for all of your days?”

“Yes. For as long as he’ll have me, yes. I adore him in all of his forms, and I chose him for all of my days.”

Pepper let out a noise from behind Tony that made him put one hand behind him to grab her. Steve looked past Tony and made eye contact with Pepper, who nodded definitively. Steve’s eyebrows went up. “Yeah?” Pepper nodded and shrugged, so Steve cleared his throat and continued.

“Sorry, Rhodey, gotta go off script here a bit.”

“At your leisure, Captain, I’m just decoration anyway,” Rhodey quipped.

“I, Steven Grant Rogers, also take Virginia Anne Potts as my completely-unlawfully-but-no-less-valid wife. I love her in all her versions and I chose her for all of my days.”

Tony’s eyes went slightly wide and he moved to let her in.

“I didn’t mean now, I don’t need to steal you and Tony’s moment, I was just saying I was ready,”
Pepper said quietly.

“Oh, Virginia, like there is any me and Steve without you?” Tony replied. “All of our best moments are grounded by you.” He kissed her on the cheek, pulled her into the circle, and passed one of her hands to Steve.

She took a deep, if not watery, breath. “I, Virginia Anne Potts, also take Steven Grant Rogers as my completely-unlawfully-but-no-less-valid husband. I love him in all of his versions and I chose him for all of my days.”

The three stood there in silence for a moment, while everyone in the chapel stayed quiet. Even Rhodey was clearly taking his lead from the trio. Finally, Steve began to speak.

Looking over his shoulder, he started. “Buck, back me up here, but when we were growing up, everyone got married before they shipped out.”

“Present company excluded, ya mook, but yeah.”

“I was worried this was going to feel like that. That you guys would think I needed to marry you because the world was ending and that would cheapen it, but honestly, and we have forever now vowed honesty, I guess that I do. Standing here right now, I know that was a part of it. In a few weeks, we’re heading into this thing that may or may not work. Our best plans may be foiled by his, and even though we are – how does Kerry say it – powered by love and hope and untreated martyr complexes – we may not win this one,” Steve paused to wipe a tear from Pepper’s eye.

“But if walked onto that battlefield next week or next month or next year – and I didn’t do it as your husband, something would feel off. If I hadn’t made this covenant in front of everyone, that even though the shield means I fight for all of Earth, my heart fights for our family, I wouldn’t be as powerful. So thank you two for forgiving me, for choosing me, for inviting me into this… this miracle. I know how precious it is now, how easy it is to tarnish it and take it for granted.”

He turned briefly to motion to Peter, “Thank you for taking such good care of our boy while I was being stupid and thank you for showing me how to be parents when I have never really understood what that meant.” He looked out at Nat in the audience. “Nat, thank you for reminding me that I was never alone,” and back at Bucky, “and for being family before I realized it.”

He turned slightly and motioned to everyone, making sure to include the holographic audience.

“You all never made me feel awkward about this. You made me feel terrible about bad calls I made on the field, and you appropriately chastised me for my complete and utter lapse in judgement last year, but you never judged me for this love and I thank you. Thank you for showing up at the last minute to affirm our vows and to commit to helping us keep them the way you already have. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.”

Tony held the silence for a beat before reaching over and gently grabbing Steve by the lapels. “The speechifying. It really is something,” he murmured against Steve’s lips. Pepper let out a laugh that sounded like magic to Steve’s ears.

“The only power that matters in this room is the one we just heard vowed, so I say it’s time to seal this covenant with a party,” Rhodey declared. “The Stark-Rogers, everyone. Let’s go eat.”

The reception lasted well into the night and the party provided stories that would last the all through the next several weeks. Like MJ and Angie teaching Kerry and Nat how to twerk, or when the karaoke machine Bucky had sworn was just a rumor showed up and Sam slayed them all with Elton John’s “I’m Still Standing.” Or when the entire party shifted to the pool, even though Pepper forgot
to bring out the extra towels. Or the moment when Happy won the limbo contest no one had asked for. Or when Pepper made a toast to May, and Sarah Rogers, and Maria Stark that left all of her men in utter shambles and Bucky declared he’d vote for her for President.

It was about 2am when Steve and Bucky found themselves alone under the stars, floating in the pool.

“Stevie, straight talk. What are the odds here?”

“Beyond scary,” Steve said calmly.

“Not what I was hoping for.”

“He’s a Titan for fucks sake, Buck. Do we have a fighting chance? Of course we do. Do I think we can do it? Completely. Are the odds stacked against us? Indubitably. Does that mean we fight any less hard? Come the fuck on, we’re the Avengers. We’ll kick his ass.”

Bucky laughed, a pure sound that reminded Steve of their childhood and maybe if he closed his eyes, they’d be back on a fire escape in Brooklyn. But I don’t want that, Steve realized. I want this moment, when the world tried to take everything from us, but we still found our way back to each other. When we are both where we are supposed to be and about to change the world, one more time.

“I get suit privileges back?” Peter’s eyes went wide and Carol looked at Tony and Steve.

“I know I’m not a parent, but I am an aunt and so I have a quick thought of what I’m asking, but we’ll need all the help we can get.”

Tony looked at Pepper, who looked at Steve, who all looked at Peter. Pepper leaned over and whispered something in Tony’s ear and he grimaced. Pepper patted Tony’s knee and got up.

Peter’s eyes followed her, confused.

“She can’t be here for this bit, Peter. She can’t be Rescue and your mom at the same time, at least not right now, so she told me…” Tony bit his lip. “It’s your call, kid. Pep and I told you all along that all of this was about your consent. I’d do anything to keep you safe, but I’m not actually sure keeping you over here will keep you safer.”

Carol nodded. “I agree.”

"Plus, I'm giving your girlfriend her suit tomorrow, so that's a thing," Tony confessed.

“Thank for the heads up, she's going to get all weird about being a human weapon of war and then i'll tell her she doesn't have to and she'll scream at me that of course she has to, so at least I'm prepared now," Peter sighed. "What did Mom say?"

“She said that with great power comes great responsibility, and she wasn’t sure she could handle that today, but she trusts us,” he pointed back and forth between Peter and himself. “So, ground rules. You will be absolutely respectful of whoever has command at any moment.”

“Yes, sir.”

Steve cut in. “If the fight calls for you to leave me, or your dad, or your mom, or MJ, you follow the orders of your commander, and not your heart, understood?”
Peter paused and swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

Tony continued. “But while you’re there, you remember that you are fighting like hell for everyone you love and everyone else who you have never met and you fight like fucking hell.”

Peter met his Dad’s eyes, and then his Pop’s, and then looked to Carol. “Okay, Captain, when do we leave.”

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“You ready?” Peter said to MJ on the morning they were headed to Wakanda.

“Of course not,” MJ said from her position snuggled into Peter’s side. “But I’m getting on the fucking plane.”

He smiled at that brutally honest answer, the only kind she knew how to give, and thanked the universe once again for her.

“Are you?”

He nodded. “Yes, not with any ego, but yes. This is what I’m supposed to be doing – helping, defending, being part of the team. Bucky told me that every good soldier goes into every battle like it’s his last. He can’t have baggage hanging over him that would distract him, so I took that seriously and I thought long and hard and I’m ready.”

MJ was quiet for a moment. “I still can’t believe he gave me a suit.”

“Yes you can.”

“It scares me how much it makes me feel invincible.”

“Wait until you get hit in it. Dad says he never feels more human than when he’s tossed around inside the suit. It’s why Mom and him call the suits tin cans. They rattle.”

“Fun spoiler alert,” she murmured. “In terms of what you said, I’m ready, too.”

“Yeah?”

“I have told everyone I love that I love them as much as I can,” she replied. “I made peace with my parents, even though they don’t know I have, and I trained as hard as I could to be as helpful as I can be. I read every piece of battle strategy that Steve put on my tablet, I did every program that Nat designed, I did everything you asked me to do to help you. My body is as ready as it can be.”

“I hear a but.”

MJ was really quiet, preternaturally so, for a few moments. “I want forever with you, Peter.”

“I want forever with you, too,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“I get that we’re basically children and have no developmental concept of something as abstract as forever, but the concept I have of it includes you and me and a dog and your parents – all three of them – and living and growing old. It doesn’t include you dying on a battlefield in Wakanda fighting a giant raisin.”

Peter bit back a smile and answered. “My forever is all of that, too. Multiple dogs, though, and probably a house in Queens, and making sure Dad doesn’t blow himself up, and taking you to Haiti
and Ireland and Switzerland and does not include you or my parents dying in a battlefield in Wakanda fighting a giant raisin.”

“So I guess we just have to kill the giant raisin,” MJ stated.

“It seems the only option,” Peter said.

“I love you 3000, bug boy,” MJ said quietly.

“I love you 3000, tin can.”

Chapter End Notes

Things are moving.

I hope you're still enjoying reading this as much as I'm enjoying writing it. I'd love to know if you are.
In the end, it was over before they knew it.

In the end, there was no way to predict who turned to dust and who stayed corporeal.

In the end, they all realized they had never known true grief until then.

In the end, the world did change, but it changed because Thanos changed it.

And they couldn’t stop him. He was, as he so cavalierly told Carol, inevitable.

And she was 2.4 seconds too late.

It took them days to find everyone on the vast Wakandan battlefield, to determine who was dead and who was dust and who remained.

It took them even longer to realize, to really register, that those calculations would be global.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves…

August 22, 2017

“Today,” Carol told the room confidently. She looked at the gathered generals from literally every corner of the universe, and at Earths’ fiercest defenders, both superhero and extraordinary hero.

There was King Henry of Wessco, with his brother by his side – they would be in the media room, covering any spin necessary. Her eye caught the Chairman of the American Joint Chiefs, and the head of the German Special Forces, and then finally landed on the man who would lead all of the ground armies into battle – Steven Grant Stark-Rogers, to his friends, Captain Rogers to everyone else.

“It’s 0800 now, and we should start moving everyone into position by 0945. Thor – how are we in the air?”

“We serve at the pleasure of the Captain,” Thor vowed solemnly. She fought an eye roll and a small grin – West Wing had been how Jane was keeping Thor distracted from the destruction of Asgard. Somehow, the patter of the dialogue soothed him.

“Your Highness,” she turned to T’Challa, “any last instructions from your end?”

“Shuri assures me the shield will withstand at least 10 hours of direct attack. She has created portals out of it that she will communicate directly to Falcon, Valkyrie, and Thor when necessary for any offensive air strikes.”

Carol nodded. “Lavi, are you comfortable with the location of the triage stations?”

MJ swallowed the lump in her throat. “Yes, Captain. Nakia and I will be directing those without self-healing to several locations both on the field and in the out buildings and the palace. No one will be more than 250 paces from help.”

Carol did not conceal her grin for the girl. “Everyone, if you haven’t met our newest field robotic
tactician, this is Michelle Jones, codename Lavi.”

“It’s Haitian Creole for ‘life’,” Peter couldn’t contain supplying.

She went through several more role calls to the group gathered in T’Challa’s throne room and when she finally felt comfortable, she squared her shoulders and took a breath. “Everyone, I do not need to impress upon you the importance of this day. You have heard enough speeches and given many yourselves, but I want you to look around this room.

“We know that one of the species that Thanos has on his side is skilled in mind control, as are several of the demi-gods who allegiance we cannot confirm. I am confident that is trick they will pull before this is all over, so memorize these faces, remember the code words we all practiced, and have each other’s backs.

“We also all know that at some point, strategy is going to break down and we will all just fight what is in front of us. Your instincts are good, trust them. If someone tells you to fall back, remember they are seeing bigger pictures. If you have trouble taking command from anyone I identified, now is the time to stay here. There is plenty of work to do in the palace and we seriously could use more help in the civilian quarters keeping everyone calm, so there is no shame if this is not a battle you can suit up for with physical weapons. We need your brains and your wisdom as well.

“I’ll conclude by saying that I am proud to serve as your General for this mission. Whatever it takes.”

The crowd called back, “WHATEVER IT TAKES.”

Chaos. Peter was not prepared for the smells or the noise. All of his other battles had been near concrete, he wasn’t quite prepared for how human blood smelled mixed with dirt.

Breathe in and out and one foot in front of the other. MJ controlled the robots and the humans with stretchers in tandem with Nakia and T’Challa’s mother. They wrapped bandages and gave out water (soldiers were terrible at hydration) and as the battle raged into its eighth hour, figured out ways to get food to the various med stations as well. She was grateful for the extra protections assigned to her by the Valkyries who had survived Asgard.

Click, click, click, click, click, reload. Repeat. Stark’s newest gun, which drew power from the vibranium in Bucky’s arm, only needed his thumb and trigger finger to work. Which was great, but every other part of Bucky was focused on keeping track who was friend and foe in this mass of species he had never seen. Humans were the only ones he instinctually knew on sight, but everything else? He just prayed the armor Stark and Shuri created was enough.

Do not look for Peter. Pepper could focus. She and Tony flew around, flitting to wherever Steve or Carol or Thor called them. They fought together like a well-oiled machine, which she supposed they were. She got to know the Guardians and did not care for the one they called Star Lord, but he was almost as much of a crack shot as Bucky.

Breathe, focus, trust your reflexes. Steve had lost complete track of his family, but they weren’t under his command, they were under Valkyrie’s and he knew she had track of them because he couldn’t face the alternative if she didn’t. He did have eyes on Bucky and Nat. At least. Thank God.

This is going to demand all of the shawarma on the fucking planet. Tony was torn between being really impressed at his own genius as he saw Janelle, Karen, Queenie (MJ’s AI), and Friday manage the tech of all the suits with incredible cooperation and ease, and being overwhelmed by how little of
a dent they seemed to be making in the crowd of monsters trying to kill them.

*Focus, focus, focus, breathe.* Nat was grateful for her supernatural stamina. Carol had whizzed by and the earpiece had said “North Quadrant 15” and Nat had taken off running. She jumped over bodies, skirted weapons, dodged animals (maybe? Creatures? There was fur, but who knows), and ran hard and fast. She skidded over a small hill just in time to hear Thanos say he was inevitable and to see him snap his fingers.

She felt breezes and saw people disintegrate, turned into dust and ash. She started yelling names into her earpiece, only to find that it wasn’t working. Her eye caught sight of Steve to her left and she took off, hoping that if she could still see him, it meant he wasn’t one of Thanos’ slaughter. She didn’t know why it had never occurred to her that people would simply cease to exist from the Stones – she always assumed there would be bodies.

*Steve, Steve, Steve, Steve,* his name became her rosary as she ran, collided into him at full force, only to see him holding Bucky’s gun with a look of sheer disbelief on his face.

A deep chuckle went up behind her. “You are free now,” Thanos boomed. “You are welcome.”

And then the motherfucker snapped again, and the gauntlet he was wearing with the stones disintegrated, and then his right-hand creature hit his wrist a few times and the entirely of Thanos’ army was gone. Not disintegrated like the others. Just… gone.

If you had paid Nat Tony’s entire net worth in that moment, she could not tell you what she felt. She swallowed a few times and looked at Steve. “Dust?”

And then they heard Tony’s wail and took off running again.

“The last time he made that sound was when he saw your shield,” she said to Steve over the wind. He threw a look back at her that had his eyes wild with fear.

“GODDAMN FUCKING RAISIN,” they heard MJ scream in their ears at the same time, signaling the coms were back online. It was chaos – people calling for each other – code names and natural ones alike. But one cut through everything.

Tony wailed, “I lost the kid.”

That’s when Nat had to stop to throw up.

_____________________________________

“I am acting head of state,” Nakia said calmly to the assembled room, “and as Queen of Wakanda, I say that General Danvers continues command.” There were some loud protests, but Nakia held up her hand. “Anyone who does not agree with my decision is welcome to avail themselves of our various modes of transport and to see themselves home. Now, General Danvers, please.”

Carol stood up and ran her hand over her shorn head. “So far, we have accounted for the following people as taken. King T’Challa, Princess Shuri, Prince Nicholas Pembrook, Agent Nicholas Fury, Sargent James Barnes, Spider-Man/Peter Stark, Star Lord/Peter Quill, Nebula, Gamora, Rocket the Racoon, Falcon/Sam Wilson, –“

Carol’s voice continued, strongly and clearly reading the names, but Pepper tuned her out. Every name was like a stab to her soul and it could no longer suffer those. The only ones that mattered on that list had been named, and she was touching her husbands, and looking at her by-all-measures-that-matter daughter. She had them, she didn’t have Peter, and they didn’t have Bucky, and nothing
else mattered.

72 hours since that fucking snap and it had taken them this long to comb the areas where their team members had last been tracked to see if they were among the dead. The AI’s worked relentlessly, scanning and re-scanning, and working when even the most determined carbon-based lifeforms couldn’t.

*Now what, now what, now what* was the refrain in Pepper’s head. The one in Tony’s? *Fix it, fix it, fix it.* The problem was that he had no idea how. Strange had said something the day before about talking to the Time Council, but Tony was so deep in his grief that he barely registered that he was awake, much less any details.

After the meeting, Pepper went to let Carol know her family was leaving and anyone who wanted to go to Manhattan was welcome on their jet. Carol told her not to tell anyone else and just to get out of there. It was a kindness Pepper couldn’t absorb at the time, but one she would be grateful for forever.

When she woke up the next morning in the Mansion, she made her way to her office and called tentatively to Friday. “Executive head count?”

“Ma’am, may I suggest a shower first? Or some breakfast—“

“Friday, I appreciate what you’re doing. Stop it. Executive head count.”

As Friday began to rattle off the names of the missing from the executive staff of SI, Pepper felt completely numb. She registered that her life was dramatically more terrible than it had been and that the company was going to suffer, but *what company wasn’t and would there even be an economy, and what would they possibly do with only 50% of their population, and was that distributed evenly globally, and, and, and...*

She lost her VP of Operations, four board members, the head of HR, and seven chiefs of R&D teams. The stock market was in a freefall, and no one knew what to do. The leaders of the U.S. and the U.K. had been useless before this and they were basically redundant now. Henry was preparing to have Wessco step into that void, at least a little, and be a voice of calm as things were sorted. There was already threats of war, but the U.N. Secretary General had quickly responded “with whom?”

“Pep,” Tony whispered from the doorway. “Did Friday give you the programming update?”

“We were getting to that, Boss,” Friday reported.

Tony the futurist had designed two computer programs in the events leading up to Thanos. One was something of a global forum for news distribution that would get one message out about Thanos to everyone at once, so there would be no spin. His idea was that he would eventually turn it over to whoever ran the Accords, but if they had won, that would have been deployed.

The second was the one that *was* deployed; a global check-in system. He had worked with Zuckerberg, Cook, and Bezos, without too much grumbling, to be able to capture the status of as many people as possible as quickly as possible. The first thing Tony had done after Steve had hoisted him out of the mud in Wakanda was to tell Friday to activate it.

“Approximately 85% of Earth’s population is accounted for,” Friday reported. “The AIs and I are determining how much more we can assume to reach a realistic maximum, when one takes into account areas where satellites cannot provide technological surveillance. I am preliminarily estimating 93% as the cap.”
“Thanks, girl,” Tony responded. He looked at Pepper. “I’m going to shower, and then I say we get the fuck out of here.”

“Canada?”

“Yup, let’s grab the husband and the daughter-in-law and maybe the bots-“

“Definitely also the bots,” Pepper’s face turned into the closest thing she could manage to a smile.

“We did our bit, Pep,” Tony said, “and we gave what we could and more than we should have and I just cannot face the idea of helping to build a world our kid isn’t in, so can we please go hide.”

Pepper ran her hands through her hair. “Give me a day. I need to freeze a few of our departments and send out some memos. You and Steve figure out how we get food in this new hellscape and pack, and I’ll be ready tomorrow.”

He nodded and crossed the room to kiss her head. “I’m going to check in on the bots, and then I think those ribs are broken after all, so Steve’s going to wrap me.”

“Okay,” she whispered. “I’m going to try to get through the next five minutes without crying.”

“That’s a great goal, babe.”

_____________________________________

They did hide. A lot of members of the team came to hide with them as August turned into September. Bruce headed back to India to gather more herbs, Thor helped his people establish a new Kingdom on an island off the coast of Wessco, Clint headed home to Laura, to find that two of their children had vanished, but Cooper remained. Nat went to the Cabin for Labor Day weekend and then never left. By the end of the month, she and MJ headed out to Haiti to backpack and help where they could.

Once it was just the adults in the cabin, the tenuous seams they were holding on to for MJ’s benefit shredded completely. Tony went into the workshop and only came out to find more booze and occasionally food, have sex with one or both of his partners, and then stumble back in. Neither of his spouses had the emotional energy to keep him from self-destructing. Friday assured them he was alive and that his liver had not completely pickled.

Steve disappeared into the city for spans of time, helping people with odd jobs around their houses, and started driving for Lyft in their new “Need a Hand” program for folks who needed rides to doctor’s appointments that may be farther afield than ever due to staff shortages.

Pepper put SI back into rights, sorted a new managerial structure, and held on to her sanity by her fingertips.

At the beginning of November, she noticed something very strange.

Her breasts were _killing her_.

By the middle of November, she decided to be brave.

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Once it was just the adults in the cabin, the tenuous seams they were holding on to for MJ’s benefit shredded completely. Tony went into the workshop and only came out to find more booze and occasionally food, have sex with one or both of his partners, and then stumble back in. Neither of his spouses had the emotional energy to keep him from self-destructing. Friday assured them he was alive and that his liver had not completely pickled.

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“Yes, my darling,” Tony replied, without looking up at her.

“Anthony.”

Her tone signaled eye contact was required. “Yes, Virginia.”

“Living room. Five minutes.”

She spun on her heel and walked out. He shed his welding gear and washed his hands. After several accidents over the years which involved soot transferring to pastries, he had learned that hand hygiene really was good practice.

He entered the living room to see Steve on the couch. “Do we know what this is?”

Steve shook his head and reached for Tony, who gladly settled into his side. “I got a text an hour ago that told me to be home by now. It wasn’t a request like normal, so I dropped what I was doing and headed home.”

“What were you doing?”

“Building a playground at an orphanage.”

“Of course you were.”

“What were you doing?”

“Trying to get nanobots to absorb back into a polymer that’s made to be both fire and ice resistant.”

“Of course you were.”

They smiled at each other – the sad smile that was theirs these days. It never quite reached their eyes, but they hoped that one day it would.

Pepper strode in to the room and sat on the coffee table facing the two men. “We agreed that we’d all get to mourn however we wanted until Thanksgiving. No interventions except when Friday dictated them necessary.”

“That gives me another week to talk to Bushmills about my pain, Pep,” Tony said.

She produced a handful of plastic sticks and an envelope.

“I’m changing the rules. These sticks and this piece of paper say that I’m pregnant.”

Both men drew deep breaths and then seemed to hold them. Pepper smiled, a genuine, miraculous smile, one that neither had seen for far too long. “My OB tells me there’s quite a few formerly infertile women showing up pregnant, so my guess is that something in the stones rewrote more than we thought about the coding of the universe.”

“Holy fuck, Pep,” Steve breathed, as tears rushed to his eyes.

“I know, right?” She grinned, a little giddy, and a little breathless. Steve pulled her onto his lap and kissed her soundly, until she felt Tony’s arm around her middle to pull her for the same. They sat tangled together for several minutes before she grabbed Tony’s face.

“You are the smartest man in any timeline, any universe, anything. I know that if you put your mind to it, you can fix this, I know you can. I know you’ve been mired in your grief and I get it, but
time’s up. I am not having this baby not know its brother or Uncle Bucky, and I am not condemning MJ to a life without Peter, not until we’ve tried everything you can possibly think of. Get your science friends together and go get our boy.”

Chapter End Notes

Happily ever afters are imminent! I swear on Thor's hammer.

Any predictions how we'll get there?
Here's our endgame, friends. There's one more chapter after this - an epilogue that will take you up through about the next 30 years, proving that they all do live happily ever after - but this is the end of the main arc.

Thank you for being on this journey with me, for reading my ramblings.

November 2017

“They called him Underoos for months behind his back,” Nat smirked.

“Oh, see, if I had known that would not have happened,” MJ confirmed.

“We know.”

The pair laughed gently and settled back into a gentle silence. It was the middle of November and they were on a grand heritage tour, trying desperately to distract themselves for as long as possible about Bucky and Peter. Tonight’s location was the Sunflower Public House in Belfast, – one of Nat’s favorite joints on the planet. No one bothered you, the music was live and so were the taps. Plus, they had a constant supply of Tayto Smoky Bacon crisps, which were one of Nat’s true weaknesses.

“Undercover in Belfast for about two years in the early ‘00s,” Nat explained when they were getting off the train from Dublin the day before. “Then I came back to check in a contact about five years ago and this just keeps being where I come on vacation. It’s a direct flight from both New York and Wessco, so if shit goes sideways, I get out quick. The people are friendly to a fault, but they also leave you to your business. Best pubs for people watching, and the two universities are lousy with international post-grads that it’s really easy to blend in.

“Plus, I traced your family to a farm about twenty miles from here. We’ll go tomorrow.”

“It’s going to be weird to go home for Thanksgiving,” MJ replied, sipping her soda and raising her voice slightly over the din of the music.

“We promised, though,” Nat replied, “and we are also out of your ancestors.” The visit to the farm had been quick – MJ waved at the cows and imagined what life must have been for her great-times-four-grandmother who emigrated alone and married a Swiss doctor only a year after arriving in Brooklyn.

“We could go to Russia!” MJ brightened.

“We will never go to Russia, especially since my family is from Georgia, which we have discussed, and I know you remember because your IQ scares me, and you are stalling.”

MJ grumbled at her. “Fine, I am.”

“It’s not like they’re going to magically reappear, Lavi,” Nat said gently and she noticed MJ’s eyes
“I don’t understand how you can be so calm about all of this,” MJ said without any anger, her tone more bewildered than frustrated.

“Years, literal years, of training and torture close to Bucky’s. I don’t want you to close yourself off like I am, sweetling.”

“Tasha, it feels like I’m being stabbed with every breath. And now that I’ve been stabbed, I’m no longer being hyperbolic.”

Nat licked her lips in a sly smile. “I have loved the same man for my whole life. I fell in love with the man I knew as the soldier when I was 17. I fell in love with him all over again when I got to know him as James and I have a feeling I will love him until I stop breathing. I know I love him just like I know the sun will come up tomorrow and I know that he’s the only one who will ever truly know me. I miss him like I think he misses his arm. But MJ, he would absolutely eviscerate me if he knew I stopped living because I missed him.”

“So would Peter,” MJ wiped a tear.

“He would,” Nat affirmed. “So we carry them with us. I have told James about every single one of our adventures, I’ve talked to him about everyone we helped, and I know that he’s with me.”

MJ bit her lip in thought and took a long drink. “Nakia told me that she liked that everyone went dusty because it means they went back into the air that we breathe. She feels T’Challa whenever she breathes, she said, and he fills her with strength to keep going.”

“That is perfect and I’m texting it to Pep right now.” Nat dug out her phone. “Oh, shit, she needs us to call her immediately – nothing’s wrong but she’s got hot tea to spill.”

“You are both very white, you know that?”

“Umhm,” Nat grinned at her. “She didn’t actually say that. She said gossip.”

“You’re sassining me.”

“With joy. Now drink up and let’s walk back to the hotel.”

When they were settled, Nat quickly called up the hologram. “Pepper?”

All the two women could see was a plastic stick. They heard Pepper say, “can you see that?”

“It’s a stick, Pep,” Nat replied.

“It’s a pregnancy test.”

“It’s a what?” MJ choked out.

“It’s a pregnancy test. It says I’m pregnant. Get your asses back here.” The stick was replaced with Pepper’s grinning face and the three proceeded to scream, and cry, and bask in the miracle. Pepper and Tony had long stopped keeping their infertility a secret and Nat and MJ were well aware of what this must mean to the Starks.

“Okay, we’ll get on the first flight back to Montreal and I’ll text you the details,” Nat ended the call.

“Great! Steve will pick you up!”
Nat and MJ stared at each other when they hung up.

“You first,” MJ said.

“Nuh huh, you.”

MJ bit her lip and then blurted, “Whose is it?!?”

“Great question.”

“And one we’ll never say again?”

“Got it in one.”

“So do you want a baby shower?” Nat asked Pepper.

Pepper shook her head. “I want a meal with all of the women we have left. I don’t want any gifts, I don’t want games, I want something that welcomes this girl into our family.”

It was the beginning of March and several things were now known: the baby was Tony’s and it was a girl.

In terms of Pepper’s demand that Tony figure out a way to get everyone back, several things were also now known: Scott Lang had found five vials of Pym particles, Stephen Strange had gone somewhere… to debate the Ancient Ones and was sending cryptic missives back that Friday was having trouble translating, and that Tony was doing a lot of screaming at holograms in his workshop.

“Have you guys talked about names?” Kerry asked.

Pepper smiled a secret smile. “Morgan. Morgan Margaret Maria Stark.”

“Is that for Peggy and Tony’s mom?”

Pepper nodded. “I thought Steve was going to campaign for Sarah, which was his mom’s name, but he said Peggy was part of our family before we knew we were family, and he has so few true memories of his mom. So Margaret it is.”

“Those boys,” Kerry said. “So, the four of us, and Darcy, Carol, Valkyrie, and Nakia?”

It had been enough months that most of the time Pepper didn’t fill in the missing names in her head. But during that roll call, she added Angie, Shuri, Delia… “Yes, perfect. See when everyone can get here, and my only food request is Nat’s carrot cake cupcakes.”

“Strange, I have no idea what you’re saying,” Tony was tired. Months and months of wrestling with algorithms and models and theories, he had figured out how to use the Pym particles to travel through the quantum realm. So now they figured they could manipulate time, now the issue was when to go back to. Tony and Steve were both strongly against collecting all of the stones again because of the Soul Stone’s price. Plus, moving back in time meant that Thanos would be alive again and they needed a guarantee he could be defeated quickly before Tony would even consider agreeing to trade a soul for a second chance.

Strange had been gone for so long that Tony had honestly forgotten that he was even trying to come
back. Now he and Carol were sitting in the Stark-Rogers living room, talking about honest to God time travel.

“We now know that Thanos is inevitable in every main timeline. Ours is the first one he showed up in.”

“Do we stop him in any of the others?” Steve asked.

“No.”

The word was final and sent a shiver down Steve’s spine.

“However,” Strange continued. “It has been decided by the Council of the Ancients that his continual and unyielding choice to impose his will upon the citizens of Earth is a violation of the power of the Stones and they are offering us a chance to fix it.”

“Fix it.” Tony said, with a tone in his voice that Steve couldn’t read. “What are they going to charge us?”

“The year everyone on the planet will lose – either as dust or as mourners,” Carol said.

“So what’s the plan,” Steve asked.

“How much do you want me to explain?” Strange looked at Tony.

“Just tell my husband when you need him to show up and how many troops and we’ll be there. Unless you’re having me climb in a TARDIS, you and I can save the esoteric discussions when I’m not late to get Pepper more bananas,” Tony said with a finality that told Steve he was probably going to be greatly uncomfortable with the risks to physics they were about to take, and so it was better for everyone for Tony to leave. He kissed Steve, winked at Carol, shook Strange’s hand, called for MJ to come to the store with him, and headed out.

Carol looked right at Steve. “We have to re-create the battle. We can have Strange send us whenever we’re ready and we’ll just appear on August 22. I can explain about 7% of this, but essentially the Avengers, Me, MJ, Rhodey, Pepper, and Nakia are all going to merge timelines with our selves that were on that field. Everyone else will remain in one timeline. We will be dropped in exactly 26 minutes before Thanos snaps and then once we get the Gauntlet, we must snap to destroy him. Am I getting this right?”

Strange nodded. “The result of the snap is not inevitable, but it takes concerted effort. Whoever snaps must be thinking a clear thought.”

“Wait, Thanos is a Titan and it burned his arm. There is no one who can snap without killing themselves.”

Carol grinned. “Ever heard of a Circle of Trust?”

“Yes, because I am a human in the world,” Steve replied, inwardly flinching at Sam’s oft-used phrase.

“You and Tony and Pepper need to get me into position. I was only 2.4 seconds too late the last time and that’s when we were blind. The battle will play out the exact same way this time – you just have to get me to Thanos and Thor and I will kill him.”

“Just like that?” Steve asked.
Carol nodded. “Just like that. And then, to destroy the stones, we will all connect bodies and I will wear the gauntlet to snap and we’ll be done.”

“This is all too simple,” Steve said.

“It violates about four hundred laws of magic, time, physics, not to mention several intergalactic trade treaties, but yes, I suppose it is,” Strange said in a tone Steve did not care for. “This exception is being made on the condition that you are still in charge. The Ancient Ones are very, very specific on that. The only other people who may wield power are Thor and Carol.”

“Why?”

“You are the ones worthy of power,” Strange said simply and Steve’s brain flashed back to the time he couldn’t lift Mjolnir and his face must have pulled something, so Strange continued. “Are you familiar with the concept of the hero’s journey, Captain?”

“Refresh me.”

“There are a lot of pieces that aren’t relevant here,” Strange said, “but in the scheme of the human experience, there are only a few fundamental emotional journeys. One is the journey from isolation to community – which your husband has been and will always be on – and one is the journey from unnecessary martyrdom to authentic sense of self – which is the one you have been on. The completion of that journey does something to one’s soul.”

“Still confused.”

“When you came back to your family, when you swallowed your sense of right to accept it was actually wrong, you communicated to the Ancient Ones that you have fulfilled your hero’s journey. Your whole life was about doing what was right by your definition, regardless of the definition of others. That is no longer the case. You are worthy of the power you can wield, Steven,” Strange concluded gently.

“This is a good thing, Cap,” Carol said. “Thor skipped some of this because of the deity thing, and I’ll tell you my story sometime, but, let me ask you this: when you finally came home, and the air was cleared and everything fit again – how did you feel?”

“Right.” It was the truest and only word he had.

“Exactly. That rightness is the seat of the power Strange is talking about. It’s that power that you and I will channel, together with Thor’s deity power and whatever his version of rightness is, combined with the power of love of everyone who we’ll be connected with and we will have no trouble overcoming both Thanos and the Stones.”

“Love wins, eh?”

“What did Pepper say at her and Tony’s wedding? Love always puts others first? Isn’t that the opposite of Thanos?”

Steve grinned. “Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, and our actual universe. We’re in good company, I suppose.”

“Not shabby, Samwise. Not shabby at all.”
"Pep, here’s my question, what piece of this do you care about understanding? Because there are a lot of pieces I’m not thrilled about – including that we’ll be leaving Morgan at home – and you’ll be still recovering from growing a human – and I don’t want to overwhelm you with details you don’t care about," Tony said one morning in April as he was resting his hand over Pepper’s stomach to feel Morgan kick. Steve was on a run with Carol – which could mean they were literally running around the lake or she had power surged them to Texas to run there. One could never be sure.

“I care about what happens after the snap,” she replied. “Strange says the timelines will merge but nothing will erase and I cannot understand what that means.”

“Essentially, as soon as we destroy Thanos, the Ancient One will come to the field and claim back the stones. Then, something will happen, and it will become August 22, 2018 and everyone will have lost a year. So everyone that lived or died or was born naturally during that year will still be and will have the memories of being without for a year, and the ones who come back can tell us what the fuck happened.”

“So, we get Peter and Morgan,” Pepper breathed out in a tone of hope that stopped Tony’s heart.

“You remember the EPP video?”

“It’s etched into my brain, babe.”

“When I told you that you were dream, I wasn’t dreaming big enough,” Tony confessed. “I didn’t know that you were the start of the dream, that what would unfold would always be more, always be better, even when there was pain and even when there’s death, it’s always more. And now, nearly 10 years later, you are still my dream and it is still coming true,” he said solemnly. He leaned down to place his mouth next to where he assumed Morgan’s head would be.

“And you, little miss, you are a miracle. A literal, science can’t quite explain you, miracle. And holy monkeys are you loved. You are loved by people who don’t even know about you yet and I cannot wait to put you in your brother’s arms, to see you grow up with this ridiculous family we’ve built for you, and teach you how to make spaghetti sauce, and how to hug your mama just right when she’s crying, and what wax to use to make your Pops’ shield look perfect. I have so much to tell you, but your brother has already shown me that you’ll teach me so much more.

“So stay safe in there, little miss, and we’ll see you soon.”

“And you say Steve is the one with the speeches,” Pepper gazed down at him with love.

“I’ve been known to be good at talking,” Tony confessed.

“Your mouth is too far away,” she reached for him, “to be put to its best use.”

“Au contraire,” he smirked at her and moved his head to the left instead.

It was agreed by, well, everyone, that they would wait for Morgan Stark to make her grand entrance before they headed off to take on Thanos. What was convenient for all of them was that Pepper’s body on Extremis helped Morgan develop at a 30% faster rate than normal gestational marks and on the first day of week 30, Pepper’s water broke.

As was completely typical of their family, Pepper was calm, Steve was tactical, and Tony was flustered. MJ was hiding her blind panic behind cynical sarcasm, Nat was serving as Steve’s go-to person, while Kerry had that covered for Pepper.
Bug boy, your baby sister is on her way, MJ said she rode with Nat to the hospital. Since that night in Belfast, she had taken to talking to Peter like she would if he was present. She didn’t dare get her hopes up that this new magic thing would work – she was with Tony regarding magic since why does anyone trust anything they can’t explain – nor did she lean too hard into the wish that wherever Peter was, he could hear her, but she did it all the same. Morgan is going to have the family I always wanted, Petey. I’d be jealous of her if I wasn’t going to be a part of making all of her dreams come true.

One of the benefits of having the maternity wing of a hospital named for your mother is that Tony got to be pretty picky about Pepper’s care. They had nearly an entire floor to themselves so that various demi-gods or international dignitaries could drop by at will. When MJ arrived, Princess Olivia and Queen Sarah from Wessco were already there and they had Duchess Meghan on hologram call. Mostly, people were dropping off gifts or well wishes to Steve and MJ, who were the unofficial/official greeting committee while Pepper did all of the actual work.

The labor had been going on for about 9 hours – MJ had wandered in and out as Pepper rested and pushed and waited – when Kerry came to tell her it was time for Morgan to show up.

Pepper had decided – and Tony and Steve agreed – that Steve and Tony were to be the only men in the room and their job was to help Pepper. Nat, Kerry, Carol, and MJ were there to welcome Morgan. She’d done a lot of reading on birth practices from around the world and throughout history, and Jane had helped her source some intergalactic ones as well. Pepper had appointed those four women as Morgan’s godmothers and she wanted them there as their charge took her first breath.

“TONY I SWEAR TO CHRIST."

“I know, Pep, I know,” Tony said soothingly as Pepper braced herself against him and Steve for another push.

“THIS DOES NOT FEEL VERY MIRACULOUS.”

“Right now, it just feels like you’re in a lot of pain,” Steve commented.

“I FUCKING AM CAPTAIN OBVIOUS THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR CRACK OBSERVATIONS.”

“30 more seconds, Pepper,” the delivery nurse said, “and then you can rest.”

“Is every birth like this?” MJ whispered and one of the nurses shot her a grin, telling her they were frequently worse.

“Okay, Pepper, rest.”

Pepper flopped back on the bed and let Steve and Tony wipe her forehead and feed her ice chips and be treated like the queen taking a breath from battle that she was.

“Anthony, I am in a polyamorous relationship and there are still more hands in vagina than I am comfortable with,” Pepper remarked to several snickers.

“I can see Morgan’s head,” their doctor confirmed. “One more massive push should do it.”

“I can’t,” Pepper whispered, exhausted. “My body just can’t.”

“Bullshit, Virginia,” Kerry said.
“Fuck you, Kerrigan,” Pepper glared.

“Child, your body has given you a miracle and it has done an incredible job up to this point. Morgan is ready to be with us, your body is ready to get rid of her, your brain just needs to decide to facilitate that, so fucking push,” Kerry glared right back.

“If I could give you my strength –“ Steve started.

“Boy, what her body is doing would break you,” Kerry retorted. “Just hold her.”

Pepper grinned through the exhaustion. “Big sister?”

“You need me,” Kerry replied, mirroring her smile. “Now give me my goddaughter.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Pepper replied and signaled to her doctor that she was ready.

Tony and Steve both felt their fingers crack slightly as they became the equivalents of leather pain straps for Pepper to bear down on while she pushed one final time. Finally, she collapsed back onto the bed as the most beautiful sound Tony had ever heard filled the room.

Morgan Stark announced her arrival to world with a mighty wail and came bearing a full head of black hair. 7lbs and 4 oz, and 19”, and all-around perfection.

Morgan was cleaned up and passed around for everyone to hold and weep over (MJ was on photo duty but was really glad when Tony remembered to snap some of her). Pepper had gone through the afterbirth process and was given a sponge bath and eventually settled back into her room. Tony and Steve watched their sleeping wife with awe and wonder.

“I mean, holy fuck, babe,” Steve murmured, not for the first time. “I knew she was a superhero…”

“And women do this all the time,” Tony had a note of absolute bewilderment in his voice. “And men have had the audacity to say women are weak.”

“I can insert all of the things MJ has taught us here, but let’s just assume I had a witty and anti-patriarchy comeback,” Steve yawned. “Speaking of, did you give her the deed yet?”

Tony shook his head. “I ended up not buying it.”

Steve’s eyebrows shot up.

“Rhodey may have accused me of meddling in an adult’s life.” Steve barked out a laugh and Tony continued. “He reminded me that buying houses is also not a normal gift and that she should probably have a say in something like that and that maybe she’d want to wait until we get Peter back and then asked me how many times you and Pep had made those points and I ignored you.”

“I’m just glad someone registered,” Steve said with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. “We are all right and I’m proud of you for noticing.”

Tony waved his hand, “yeah yeah. Okay, beefcake, Pepper has texted me a list of things to get from the house while she and Morgan sleep. Want to come or stay?”

“Stay,” Steve said, which was exactly the answer Tony knew he would give.

As he walked out of the room with one last glance at his spouses, Tony asked Janelle for all the messages she’d held for him.
“Boss, you have four urgent messages from Dr. Strange who has asked you call him at your immediate convenience.”

“Did you tell him that I was busy becoming a father?”

“Yes, and he seemed to accept that the first three times.”

“Got it, dial him up.”


“Fantastic, thanks.”

“Great, we need to be ready in three weeks.”

“I thought you said we had time,” Tony murmured. Three weeks post-partum and he was asking Pepper to go into battle.

“Something has evolved in one of the other timelines,” Strange said. “But you have three weeks to build Pepper a new suit that she only needs to be in for 45 minutes. If you need materials from another timeline I’ll figure something out, but three weeks, Stark.”

Tony had been recrafting Pepper’s suit for obvious reasons, but he thought he would have more time. He was always running out of time.

“Roger that, Dumbledore. I’ll make it work. Also, you’re getting about four hundred photos of my daughter sent to your phone right now. Did you know that babies come with hats? They do. She has a hat and the cuteness nearly melted me. You are welcome.”

Tony looked around the yard at the Mansion. Everyone was holding hands in a circle, of which Strange was in the middle. Somewhere in the house, Kerry and his daughter were waiting patiently for them to bring the rest of the family home.

He looked around the circle, remembering moments with each of them over the last few weeks because while he was sure they were all going to live, he was always prepared to die.

“You know this can mean that we still loose people. We have to re-fight the battle,” Tony said.

Carol smiled. “Right, but now I know how we win it. Start the battle, Stark, and I’ll have it over in 10 minutes.”

“Listen if the only history we truly re-write is that Thanos was a big nothing who only took ten minutes and an alien goddess to defeat, I’ll personally fund the textbooks.”

“All right,” Steve’s voice cut through Tony’s thoughts. “Everyone knows what they’re going to do. Once Strange does this, you will be in your old body at the precise moment necessary. Carol is entirely in charge of Thanos and we are all entirely in charge of her. You know your marks, you know the routine, you know where you need to be running towards the minute you are consciously in control.”

“I promised Loki a long time ago that if we couldn’t defend the Earth, then we’d sure as hell avenge it. This falls somewhere between the two, so let’s stop wasting time,” Tony said, his clear tone ringing through the circle.
“Whatever it takes,” Carol called and the team responded in kind. Tony nodded to Strange and Pepper felt herself blink. When she opened her eyes, she was on a field in Wakanda. She hit the power button in her suit and took off running.

Breathe in and out and one foot in front of the other. MJ controlled the robots and the humans with stretchers in tandem with Nakia and T’Challa’s mother, just as she had before. New this time, however, was the alarm that Queenie sounded in her helmet six minutes after she blinked. She took off running, allowing the super boosters on her suit to carry her across the field and didn’t allow herself to look for Peter. There was time for that later.

Do not look for Peter. Pepper could focus. To the casual observer, which Pepper had frequently been, war looked like chaos. The last several battles had felt it, too. This felt like choreography. She ran and hid, feeling the difference in her body since the last time and thankful for the ways the suit compensated. She saw MJ out of the corner of her left eye as she made her way to the quadrant where Thanos was.

Breathe, focus, trust your reflexes. Just like before, Steve had lost complete track of his family, but they weren’t under his command, they were under Valkyrie’s and he knew she had track of them because she did the last time and he could not worry about them right now. He did have eyes on Bucky and Nat and forced his knees not to buckle at that familiar sight.

This is going to demand all of the shawarma on the fucking planet. Tony was entirely focused on the mission and how little of a part he was truly playing in it. He was overwhelmed like never before how much of a team effort his life was. He refused to look for Peter or Bucky and instead called out signs to Rhodey and Carol as he watched Steve reach Thanos.

Focus, focus, focus, breathe. Nat was grateful for her supernatural stamina, because war had always been choreography, and she knew where the next set piece would end them up. Steve, Carol, Pepper, MJ, Tony, Thor, Rhodey plus literally everyone else had converged on Thanos. As soon as 2018 Steve had taken control of 2017 Steve, he had redirected several of their team members to make sure that everyone was on the spot where Thanos would die.

Nat caught her breath as she noticed Steve wielding Mjolnir and trading his shield back and forth with Thor. Well, that was new. Peter flung himself around his parents, having no remote concept of what was happening. Bucky was taking pot shots at anything alien that encroached on them and Rhodey was firing from the air with reckless abandon.

And then, it was time.

As Thanos went to raise his hand, Carol blasted him, Steve slammed Mjolnir into his back, and Thor chopped off his head with an axe Nat had not seen before. Carol scrambled for the gauntlet and everyone else scrambled to hold hands. They heard confused cries from the formerly dusty ones, but Tony just yelled at them to fucking freeze for a minute and Steve followed in his Captain America voice and it worked.

The gauntlet was in Carol’s right and Steve braced his hand around her arm, with Thor holding her left hand. Bruce, Rhodey, Clint, Nat, MJ, Nakia, Strange, Tony, and Pepper rounded out the circle as Carol counted to three and snapped her fingers.

All around them, Thanos’ armies turned to dust and the Ancient Ones appeared.

One held out her hand to take the gauntlet and Carol gladly handed it over. MJ heard Peter say,
“seriously, what the fuck,” and she held back a smile. He’d know in a minute.

The Ancient Ones opened a portal and drew a set of strings in from it. With a nod to Strange and Carol, an elaborate knot was tied and a powerful wave went through the battlefield.

“It is finished,” one intoned. “The immortal and omniscient thank you for your service.”

Once the portal closed, Tony, Pepper, and MJ sprinted towards Peter. MJ got there first and threw herself at him.

“It’s okay babe, I don’t understand, all I remember is being dusty and feeling weird, and now I’m here and I don’t get it, but it’s okay, look we’re all together, just I promised,” Peter whispered into her hair.

“You were gone for a year,” MJ said. “We fixed it, and you’re back, but we lost a year.”

Peter’s eyes were wild and he looked to his parents who nodded. “I don’t understand.”

“Right now, you don’t have to,” Pepper said. “Right now, we have a picture to show you.”

Tony got to use that first systemic failsafe he designed the year before to get a quick and deeply sanitized explanation of the lost year out to the world. Janelle and Friday worked to get it out the minute the timelines merged, not that it stopped Peter from asking questions or Reddit from designing four thousand conspiracy theories per minute.

But slowly, haltingly and yet all at once, balance was restored and the year was redeemed. The Stark-Rogers moved into the Finger Lakes cabin, giving Nat and Bucky the one in Canada. Bruce took a position in genetic biology at Columbia but spent as much time as possible trolling the universe for more herbs and plants and natural healing agents. Thor teamed up with the Guardians after crowning Valkyrie as Queen of New Asgard and was always happy to have Bruce along on flights. Clint went back home to his farm and rarely ventured out again except for Avenger Family holidays and to offer sharp shooting lessons to new AI recruits.

It wasn’t called the Avengers Initiative anymore, though. When Steve passed his shield on to Sam, they also realized that “Captain America” was a brand that didn’t need to be part of the post-Thanos world. Along with the completed negotiation of the intergalactic accords – which went significantly quicker with Tony’s constant reminder of Thanos and some, er, intervention from the Ancient Ones – AI became the Earth Protectorate Corps. Steve agreed to serve as Director with Sam as his head agent.

“I have a feeling we may be running out of super heroes,” Tony remarked when they were discussing details one day, “but I know we’ll never run out of intergalactic asshats, so we could really use a point person for all the normals who sign up to fight the weirdos. I feel like the idiot who committed recruitment fraud as a hobby would be a good call.”

“And the idiot who signed up to fight superheroes with only a set of tech strapped to him is a good shout for the point man,” Steve smiled at Sam, who was holding the shield for the first time with a sense of wonder.

2018 quietly kept rolling on as the citizens of Earth continued to right themselves to this new reality. Surprising zero people, MJ started heading to work with Pepper shortly after Pepper returned to work. Also surprising zero people, Peter liked staying home and helping with Morgan.
“I missed your 18th,” Peter said to MJ one morning.

“It was pretty fucking terrible, but Nat and I went back to Haiti for it because I had to be somewhere you hadn’t been,” MJ explained.

“We should have a big joint party,” Peter said, “when it’s my turn.”

“That could be cool.”

“Before we leave for college.”

“Sounds good.”

“You don’t sound enthused,” Peter said.

“If I’m already working at SI, I’m not sure I want to do college.”

Peter snorted. “Do me a favor and ask Mom how long you’ll keep your job if you don’t go.”

“A non-negotiable you think?”

“Japanese civilians,” Peter replied.

“With great power comes great responsibility,” MJ smirked back. “Your parents are good with the fortune cookie guilt wisdom.”

It had been decided among the family that anyone who was on planet and not responsible for a Kingdom would head to the Stark-Rogers for Christmas. The homemade gift rule had been kept in place – even for Morgan – and the movie marathon was advertised to start at 8pm on Christmas Eve. Everyone but Tony was in charge of one dish or another, but he had taught MJ the secret to his mother’s gravy (or ‘spaghetti sauce’ to everyone but Tony and Peter) and they were having it for one of the many courses.

As Peter and MJ distributed gifts like elves and Pepper quietly fed Morgan, Tony slid his arm around his wife and leaned in to stare at his daughter’s face. He felt Steve’s eyes on him from across the room and looked over to see the man snapping photos on his phone.

“Ten years,” he whispered to Pepper. “We’ve done this for ten years.”

“And look at the family we’ve grown,” she whispered back.

“I wish Yinsen could see this, could see the man I became.”

“You have always been this man and he knew it and I knew it. We just had to climb off the beach a bit,” she replied. “Wherever he is, I know he’s proud of you. So is Aunt Peggy and Jarvis and Ana.”

“I think we give SI to MJ and not Peter.”

“I think it’s not going to matter and we just don’t have them sign a pre-nup,” Pepper smirked back, “but it’s a good idea to talk about strengths and passions, but now it’s Christmas and let’s have some semblance of boundaries for three hours of our lives. Ooops, she’s finished, aren’t you, Morgs?”

“3M,” Tony cooed, reaching for his daughter, “let’s take a walkabout and see where your Aunt Nat has hidden those strawberry cupcakes she made for me.”

“They’re for dessert,” Nat called, overhearing him.
“I’ve had a very trying year, Natasha and I think I deserve to eat my cupcakes whenever I want. I specifically chose my spouses for their aversion to the fruit so that I could eat more of it, so gimme gimme gimme.”

Nat rolled her eyes and hoisted herself from the Bucky’s lap to come and locate the cupcakes. “I will trade you cupcake for child,” she replied.

Tony looked torn. “Done.”

“I will absolutely tell her this story,” Nat laughed.

“3M digs me, she knows it’s a temporary retreat.”

Nat rolled her eyes and wandered back into the overcrowded living room, full to bursting of nearly everyone Tony loved.

There was Bucky, a man both redeemed and made new by an absolute fuck ton of hard work and lack of vanity. Nat, who would always be a mystery to Tony, but seemed to be letting herself be fully known by Bucky. Rhodey, who taught him that brotherhood had nothing to do with being worthy of it long before he knew how to say thanks. The Bartons, who continued to teach him about functional parenting and adulting, as did the Langs. Kerry and Angie, who first loved Pepper and then loved the rest of them, who took everything in stride and kept them all on track like the wise elderstateswomen that they were.

And then, then, then…. then there was his family. Pepper and Steve, who taught him more about strength than any speech from Howard about being made of iron could have ever hoped to. MJ who scared him she was so passionate and Peter who scared him because he was so smart and caring. These four people who put in the work, and the joy, and the pain, as they all walked through their trauma together.

He had been flying for many, many years – soaring to run away from his pain, from his past, from his potential. The moments that words don’t reach in his life are myriad, but he looked around the room at these people who dove into the pain with him and dragged him out when he was too tired to move.

So, yes, Tony Stark was Iron Man – the flying tin can who saved the universe more than it realized.

And these people had given him a safe place to land.
The Epilogue(s)

Chapter Notes

Folks, I am posting this from a cruise ship in the middle of the Arctic Sea, so that is how seriously I take wrapping this up in a timely manner! :-D

Thank you for being on this journey with me, for reading my ramblings.

When I walked out of 'Endgame' a bit back, my thought was that the story the Russos told was a good one and that end matched it.

But, I wanted to tell a different story and it all started with two thoughts: one, Pepper would absolutely be in on the ground for *Hamilton* and I wanted to see who Pepper and Tony would be on therapy.

I had a blast writing those two things into reality. Thanks again for loving my version of these folks. Whenever you read this, I'd love to hear your thoughts, so drop a comment if you can.

May 2019

“I think it’s the best bet,” Tony said to Pepper. “They don’t want to live in the dorms and I don’t blame them. As hard as we tried to keep their real names out of the press about Thanos…”

“TMZ uses the power of dark magic, babe, we were never going to keep it for long,” Pepper replied gently.

“A house means AI,” Steve said, “which makes me about 400% more comfortable with them alone in Boston.”

“Mother hen,” Tony teased his husband.

“And fucking proud of it – you all keep dying on me,” Steve said, taking a bite of his peanut butter sandwich.

It honestly didn’t take the media long to put together that Spider-Man was Peter Stark and that Lavi was MJ, nor did it take long after that for “friends” of theirs to come crawling out of the woodwork with confirmation that they were a couple, or that MJ had emancipated herself years prior. #Spivi routinely trended alongside #IronRescue and other Avengers related portmanteaus. (The day Steve found out that his general hashtag was #AmericasAss was one for the memory boxes for sure.)

While MJ and Peter were largely able to ignore the international attention, it did make the process of applying to colleges challenging. Pepper made some phone calls and discovered that it was common for folks in their distinct position to deal directly with the Dean of Admissions at most universities – less chance of paperwork being made public. The family had made contact with MJ’s top three choices (Harvard, Columbia, NYU) and Peter’s top two (MIT, Boston University) and went from there.

In the end, MJ chose Harvard for a double major in History and Artificial Intelligence (which Tony
will unabashedly admit he cried over) and Peter chose MIT for Robotic Engineering.

“This question contains zero judgement, kiddo, but history?” Tony asked MJ after she filed her papers.

The girl shrugged. “Pepper said any degree feeds into an MBA and said I should consider taking something that could teach me how to think. I asked her what her biggest challenge was when she took over and she said that it was keeping all the politics straight. I asked Dean Warbashaw which major would help me most with that and she said, for her money, it was history. The politics and international policy degrees would be too specific – history would shape how I asked questions and saw problems and that sounds like what I need.”

Tony was quiet for a beat. “You are annoyingly brilliant.”

“Friday, can you ask the kiddos to meet us in the kitchen?” Pepper asked and Friday responded that she would. When Peter and MJ ambled in a few moments later, Pepper motioned to the empty chairs.

“We’ve been looking at townhouses in Cambridge,” Tony began, passing papers out to MJ and Peter. “We don’t want to be all parental about this, but we are really uncomfortable with you in any sort of public housing or house sharing situation. If you want roommates, eventually, that’s fine, and I will vet them within an inch of their lives, but for now? We want you in a house that we can make sure is safe.”

“And has guest rooms for everyone, I see,” MJ said with a raised brow.

“Neither of you has ever lived alone,” Pepper said, “and I want to respect that you may want to, so this one has two separate apartments – “

Peter held up his hand. “Nightmares. Both of us. So, together works.”

Pepper nodded quietly, slightly upset she hadn’t known but caught a look from Steve that said I knew, it’s okay.

“I just want it noted that most parents are super awkward about their kids living with their partners and you are buying us a house,” Peter smirked.

“And when MJ wises up and dumps your ass, we will buy her a separate one,” Tony said without missing a beat, “but I think we’re all past pretending anyone at this table is clutching pearls over you two.”

“The unlimited supply of condoms that keep appearing was a dead giveaway, yes,” MJ said drolly.

The pentagon proceeded to flip through housing options and watched video tours before MJ finally narrowed it down to three and Peter found two of those he liked and Pepper began to arrange visits.

Later, in bed, Tony was muttering to himself and Steve was snoring and Pepper was wide awake. “Tony?” she whispered.

“Mmmm?”

“It’s 2am. If you’re going to keep doing that, can you do it in the shop? I just finished feeding Morgan.”

“Sorry baby, yes,” Tony gathered himself out of bed.
“What is that?”
“AI drafts for the new house.”
“They haven’t picked one yet,” Pepper replied.
“I know. I’ve made prototypes for all of them.”
“Of course you have. Why do I even ask any more?”

December 2020

“You are married to an ageless super soldier, make Steve chase her.”
“I do, but he’s out in Austria at some EPC diplomacy meetings with Sam, and I forgot how old I am.”
“Child, if you are old, I am Methuselah,” Kerry snarked.
Pepper snorted a laugh and then closed her eyes. “She is a miracle and I love her, but Christ.”
“You know they come out cute so we don’t kill them for self-preservation, right?”
“Tony said the same thing,” Pepper grinned, “right before he threatened to duct tape her to DUM-E just to give us some peace.”

August 2022

“Are you ready?” Tony clapped a hand on his son’s back.
Peter nodded. “I have been ready since being dusty.”
Tony grinned and said, “then your mom wants you to have this.”
Peter flipped open the ring box to see Pepper’s engagement ring blinking back at him. He looked up at Tony with wide eyes.
“When Howard gave that ring to my mom, he was absolutely, unequivocally in love with her. He would have probably invented space travel if she said she wanted to see the moon. We all know what happened when he stopped choosing her, stopped remember who they were. When I gave that to Pepper, I felt the same way, and you know I have fought tooth and nail to not repeat my father’s mistakes. You, my dear Peter, are the best of the Stark men, which probably has a lot to do with having none of our DNA, but I know you will never not choose MJ.”
“No, sir, I wouldn’t dare,” Peter whispered. “She’s my home.”
Tony blinked back tears. “Then make sure you tell her that when you give her your grandmother’s ring. It’s made of iron and rubies, Howard soldered it himself, and if she wants another one to wear everyday that’s fine, completely. We just really want her to have this one, too.”
Peter nodded and pocketed the ring quietly. The family was about to leave on their annual Post-Thanos August holiday. Every year, at least the six of them (and usually Bucky and Nat, sometimes Kerry and Angie, occasionally friends of Peter and MJ) went away to celebrate and commemorate. The location was picked every year by drawing a city out of hat and this year’s was Port-au-Prince. About seven minutes after that decision was made, Peter had made a beeline for Tony and told him that’s where he wanted to propose to MJ.

The plan had been bubbling for months and Peter had gone back and forth on so many options. The parents were all convinced MJ had twigged to the news because Peter was even more twitchy than normal, but she knew her fella well enough to give him this moment and said nothing. Pepper took her to get her nails done before the trip, however.

Once on the ground, Peter, Steve, and Tony all conspired with their Haitian guide Thómas to get to her people’s home village and Peter went ahead to ask the village chief’s permission for what he wanted to do. Peter and MJ had been back to visit a few times post-snap and had created family. Between Thómas and the village elders, everyone was confident this was a night that MJ would never forget.

Which was what was making Peter nervous.

“I hate fuss,” MJ had told him one morning earlier in the summer. “Whenever you propose, it should be simple, like your dad did.”

“Dad bought Mom a constellation and took her flying and proposed on the top of the Eiffel Tower,” Peter remarked.

“For your father, that is the equivalent of, like, a slice of pie at a diner.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Your request is acknowledged. Anything else?”

“I never thought I’d want this, Peter. I never… but you are my forever and we got shit to do and I’d like to make it official before my womb disintegrates, so chop chop.”

Peter grinned and gave her a kiss. “Yes, ma’am.”

The plan was for Peter and MJ to head out to the village like nothing was out of the ordinary. The parents and Bucky and Nat and Kerry and Angie (the latter four of whom were in Haiti without MJ’s knowledge) would follow in a separate car to attend the feast that was being prepared.

When she was asked later, MJ would say she knew something was off the minute Thómas showed up in the van and it was clean. Thómas’ van was never spotless, but this time he had waxed and vacuumed it. Her suspicions continued when Peter pulled her aside to walk towards the land that had belonged to her family generations back but was now owned by another family that had all but adopted her. The usual protocol was to head first to the chief’s village for a celebratory Fanta. This shift was noted.

What really tipped her off, however, was the look in Peter’s eyes when they reached the plot of land. Over the years, MJ had learned this man. She knew when he was terrified, when he was terrified but hiding it, when he was hungover, when he was on an adrenaline high – all just from his eyes. They way he looked at her in that moment – that was his ‘forever’ face, the one he made when he was his most sincere, his most vulnerable. She knew it was the face he only gave to her.

“I knew I was in love with you the night May told me about her cancer,” Peter started. “The minute I opened that bedroom door, my entire self just settled and I knew you were it for me. I’ve never felt as
safe with someone as I feel with you, I’ve never felt as brave as when I’m with you, and I know you are my forever. Since the dust, I’ve known this question was inevitable – sorry but he doesn’t get to steal that word – and I believe this is our story in every single timeline. Yes, I am a cheeseball, but I’m your cheeseball, and I don’t care.”

MJ snorted slightly, but reached out to cup her hand behind his head. “Can I talk, too?”

“What? Um, okay,” Peter said. “I had a whole thing.”

“I know, baby, but you’re all stammering and rushing. Breathe. My answer is inevitable, too.”

Peter’s smile could have powered the Manhattan Power Grid. He took a breath and continued. “I asked the parents if they had any advice for me for this. Pops told me to just tell you how I feel, Mom said to tell you that they love you too, and Dad gave me this.”

Peter flipped open the ring and MJ gasped. “Howard made this for grandma. It’s made of his first iron alloy prototype and a ruby from I have no idea where. But rubies were grandma’s favorite. Dad gave it to Mom and she wore it until she and Pops got married and then they put it away for me and you. They said it was totally okay if you want a different one, but if I used this ring today, what I was doing was inviting you into our whole family. I’m not only asking you to be my wife, but to be a part of this thing we’ve created and this legacy we’ll pass on.”

MJ’s hand had not moved, but at that statement, she moved closer and pressed a kiss to his lips. She backed off and could taste the salt from both of their tears as she did so.

“But I am, fundamentally, asking you to marry me. To be my wife, to be my forever, to be home. So, Michelle Elizabeth Jones, will you marry me?”

“Peter Benjamin Parker Stark, you are already my forever, so wife is a decent title to add.”

As she sat later, watching her ring catch the light as her family danced around her, English and French and Creole all mixing together in a symphony that wrapped her warmth, she tried to catalogue and memorize every emotion she was feeling. Finally deciding it was impossible to capture the rapturous joy, she made her way to the dance circle and tried her hand at a few steps of her ancestors.

_____________________________________

December 2022

"A biography is still not stripping your entire soul open, punk," Bucky said confidently as he took a sip of his beer. "The hoity toity editors can only edit what you write, so just don't write that bit."

"Isn't it lying? Leaving out the two most important people in my life?"

Bucky looked at him. "Shouldn't you be asking them that question?"

"I did," Steve groaned, "and they said they trusted me to make the decision that was right for my story."

"Well fuck them for being loving and supportive then," Bucky smirked and Steve flipped his middle finger.

The pair were at Bucky and Nat’s for a long weekend. Steve had just finished a few marathon trips for EPC and diplomacy had basically killed him. Since Tony was helping Peter finish the latest phase
of his master's project and Pepper was in... Malaysia?... and Morgan was with Kerry and Angie, Bucky and Nat's was the next best thing.

Steve's most pressing dilemma was that Penguin Random House had paid him quite a sum of money to write his autobiography and the first draft was nearly due and it was missing anything about his family. Whether it should be or not was the great debate.

"Listen, punk, you have been saying forever that you don't want anyone to know about you guys who doesn't. Why are you going from a small group of us to the entire planet in a few sentences?"

Steve scratched the back of his neck. "You and Pegs are in it."

"Are we in it as colleagues or fuck buddies?"

Steve gave him a scathing look. "Colleagues and you are a cretin."

"Then why would Pepper and Tony not be in it as colleagues? Everyone knows you guys are best friends, people make jokes about you and Tony being work spouses all the time, and Peter's been really clear you're his godfather, so again, I ask, why are we even having this fucking conversation?"

Steve was quiet, so Bucky swung himself off the porch chair and faced his best friend. "Buddy, you know, end of the line, etc, but jaysus you are a stubborn fucker. You are allowed to be selfish. Pepper and Tony have been trying to teach you this for years. Captain America is public property - fine. Steve Rogers is not. I read your contract, Pepper read it, MJ read it, and like seven lawyers read it. It asks for the story of Captain America from your perspective. They asked if I would add color commentary about the USO girls and, sure, fine, that's it. They want it to end with the snap and the decision to retire Cap. Where in there, may I ask, does it demand you emotionally bleed for the entertainment of others?"

Steve blinked a few times. "Well, when you put it that way."

Bucky flung his head back dramatically. "You will be the death of me, Rogers."

"Stark-Rogers," Steve corrected with a grin, and Bucky rolled his eyes.

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"Stark-Rogers," Steve corrected with a grin, and Bucky rolled his eyes.

Months later, when the book was finally published (to rave reviews Tony was always quick to add), Steve found himself on quite a few chat shows, explaining one particular passage in the epilogue.

For as long as I have been awake in the 21st century, there has been speculation about who I have loved and who has loved me. I can say with confidence that I know the incredible and miraculous love that comes when people agree to share their lives together. I know what it feels like to be given a child and asked to protect and care for that child, I know the heartbreak that comes from being a pure idiot, and the kind that comes from being a brave adult. I have been in love and fallen out of it and over the last many years, I have gladly built a life that is full of hope, joy, commitment, generosity, truth, and love. Thank you for all your great concern about my happiness, I promise it exists, but I also promise that it is mine.

Show after show, interview after interview, Steve was pressed to expand on that paragraph, and time after time, he would smile coyly, touch his left ring finger and say, "I don't believe I will."

September 2023

"Daaaaaaaaaaaaaad,” Morgan whined. “I am a big girl. Stop.”
“Of course you are, Morguna, but this day is hard for Daddy,” Tony explained, as he fuss over her back pack for the four hundredth time.

“Why?”

“Because going to school is a big step,” Steve knelt down so he was eye to eye with her. “And your dad doesn’t like you far away from him.”

“But Peter and MJ said that school is the best and I’ll love it,” Morgan was confused. “Daddy always wants me to be happy, so why wouldn’t he want me to go to school?”

“The logical reasoning skills are all your fault,” Tony muttered to Pepper before he knelt down next to his husband and address his daughter. “Morguna, I want you to go to school and make new friends and learn all the things and teach them to us. But I’m going to miss you while you’re at school. And just because something is sad or hard doesn’t mean it’s not the right thing to do.”

“Oh, I’ll miss you too, Daddy, and Pops, and Mama, and Flam, and Sargent, and Chase, and Moana,” she replied, giving a run-down of all the inhabitants of the house, human, canine, and feline. “But I’m ready. I’m a Stark and we can do hard things together.”

“You are and we do,” Steve confirmed, “so let’s get you off to school.” He shot Tony a look. “Kiss your Daddy and Mama and we’ll get going.”

It had been decided that Tony doing the first day drop off might not be the best idea as he may actually just keep Morgan buckled into her seat.

“Bye Mama,” Pepper got a hug and a kiss, “Bye Daddy!” as did Tony, and then she grinned up at Steve. “Ready, Pops!”

“Love you 3000,” Tony called after his heart walking out the door.

“Love you 3000, Daddy!”

When they were safely in the car, Tony looked at Pepper with red rimmed eyes. “Well, that killed me entirely.”

“I know, baby,” Pepper soothingly, with a slight hint of mockery.

“Who won the pool?”

“What pool,” she asked innocently.

“Fuck off, Virginia, I’m not an idiot.

She smirked. “Bucky. He said you’d wait to cry until she was out the door. I had you first thing in the morning, Steve thought in the shower, and Nat said when you tied her shoes. Peter and MJ both sided with me.”

“I hate you all.”

“We know.”

_____________________________________

May 2024
“It would have been really helpful if they held the ceremonies on different days,” Steve grumbled.

“I’m so sorry that MIT and Harvard didn’t think of the hardships their schedules would personally cause you when they set their graduation schedule,” Bucky replied with a roll of his eyes. “It all worked out, we saw them get their fancy sash things, and now we get to celebrate them. Stop your whining.”

MJ’s hooding was at 10am at Harvard – a Masters in Business Administration with a focus in Social Entrepreneurship – and Peter’s was at 3pm – a Masters in Robotic Technology with a focus in Artificial Intelligence. The coordination to get everyone from one ceremony to another had involved several color-coded maps and a lot of help from the Cambridge PD. Tony, for one, was glad that it would be a few years until Peter got his PhD before they’d have to do this again.

In the months after the second snap, the four of them had lengthy discussions about wealth, and legacy, and money, and SI, and dreams. While MJ was confident she wanted to be a part of the day-to-day workings of SI, Peter was less sure. They all agreed that the kids would get whatever degrees they wanted and then when they were ready to talk succession planning, they’d do it.

That time came when MJ and Peter were juniors. MJ remained confident, so she and Pepper started mapping out the best way for her to learn all the ropes, including that she would work somewhere other than SI and other than a tech company for the first five years of her career. Peter, however, confessed he wanted to go a different direction.

“I think I want to teach,” he said nervously to his parents. “The afterschool clubs I tutor at are my favorite part of my degree and there are a lot of schools in Manhattan that need help with STEM clubs and such, and it’s not like I need to make sure I earn a living wage – I can go where I’m most needed.”

Tony and Pepper were quiet for a minute, but Steve was nodding enthusiastically right away. “That sounds like you, kiddo.”

Peter grinned shyly and looked at the other two. “Yeah?”

Tony slowly smiled. “I think it’s a fantastic idea. Can we still tinker together?”

“Oh, like I could stop,” Peter said. He and Tony had been playing around for years on things that had become valuable SI designs – like the arc reactors to power cruise ships, or the robotic engineering needed to dig autonomous wells in Malawi.

“Then let’s kick off the new phase of SI,” Pepper said with a smile. “I’ll tell the board that Peter has removed himself from leadership succession officially but will remain a board member and support his wife as CEO.”

The family celebrated MJ and Peter in style. 7-year-old Morgan had made them each her own hoods – she was taking quite an interest in creating things out of fabric, which fascinated her parents since none of them did – and many of the rest of the Avenger family had turned out in full force.

Tony remembered when everyone he cared about could fit in the backseat of a car. Now, a penthouse suite at the Ritz-Carlton barely contained them. Not too shabby for a genius billionaire playboy philanthropist orphan who was once more known for his smirk than his soul.

_____________________________________

August 2027
“Tash?” Bucky called as he sorted the mail. “Did you forget to tell me we got married?”

“What?”

“There’s a letter here from the Canadian department of something congratulating us on our marriage.”

Nat snatched the letter out of Bucky’s hand and scanned it quickly. “Common law,” she replied. “We’ve cohabitated so long they’ve declared us married. If we want spousal benefits, we just fill out this sheet and mail it back.”

“Huh,” Bucky said. “Can I call you wife now?”

“Not if you value your balls.”

“Got it.”

__________________________

December 2029

“Mrs. Stark, will Mrs. Stark be taking over immediately as CEO?”

“For the sake of confusion, let’s stick to Pepper and Michelle, shall we?” Pepper remarked warmly to the crowd before her. “And the answer is no. I shall remain on in full capacity. Building on the experience Michelle gained working in the education sector, she will start working with our educational outreach team before completing a cycle through most of our other divisions as dictated by the SI board. While they are confident in my daughter-in-law, we want to set her up for as much success as possible before my planned retirement in 2035.”

“Michelle, how do you feel about this?”

MJ fought to not roll her eyes. Years of media training had not made answering the asinine questions any easier. “I am clearly delighted to be given this much trust by the board and by my family. As Stark Industries passes into its third generation, we intend to continue our evolutionary trajectory in improving the lives of every citizen on this planet and hopefully others.”

“Has motherhood changed how you view your role?”

MJ smiled at the sleeping weeun wrapped against her body. “If anything, May’s birth has reminded me that I’m only one link in a long chain. I’ll work as hard as I can to make sure what I leave her is stronger even than what I was given. That’s all for now, thank you for coming.”

As she and Pepper headed back to Pepper’s office, MJ gladly handed her daughter off to the eager grandmother. “She’s kickey today, Mom.”

“Then we’ll let her kick out all her feelings before we head home,” Pepper responded, not taking her eyes off of 9-month-old May.

“This gut-wrenching panic of letting her out of my sight fighting with the bone-deep need for sleep – does it end?”

Pepper chuckled. “Well, I’d love to tell you yes, but…”

“Got it,” MJ kicked off her heels and collapsed onto the familiar sofa.
“When May first gave us Peter, I thought I’d never fully breathe again. I had known panic and fear
with Tony and with Steve, I had thought so, anyway, but the first time he hugged me and told me he
loved me? Jesus wept on his cross, MJ, my heart shattered and re-grew five sizes. I would eat fire for
him. When he gave us you, it was the same, and then again with Morgan. I have learned to trust you
all – that you’ll chose well, and bravely, and kindly in whatever you’re faced with – and I’ve learned
my job now is to be your safe place, but a craving to never let you out of my sight? No, that has not
diminished one bit.”

“I cannot remember who I was before her,” MJ breathed.

“You will,” Pepper said. “And you have to, because while you’ll now and forever be May’s mom,
you’ve always been Michelle and she’s wonderful too. May’s young and it’ll rebalance. We’ll all
help.”

“Because we’re Starks and we do hard things together,” MJ smiled.

“It’s a better motto than being made of iron,” Pepper grinned.

August 2040

The summer of 2040 was one of unending celebrations. Morgan finished her MFA in Fashion
Design, Pepper and Tony celebrated both their 70th birthdays, and the triad declared it their 25th
anniversary, taking the average of the three marriages. Steve was never sure how to celebrate
birthdays – that year would have been 125, but the serum was thankfully beginning to wear off and
he was aging about the same rate as Tony and Pepper, so he declared himself 70 as well and said to
hell with it.

The family trip that year had been unanimously delayed, because MJ was far too pregnant to travel.
Stark Baby #4 was – MJ swore – their last, but she had said that after May, and after Benjamin, and
after Amelia, so no one was really planning on it.

Instead, Tony had planned a family celebration to end all. With the various extended branches that
had grown off of the Avengers Family tree – they were nearly 95 people and Tony had spent most of
the 2030s building additional housing on the Finger Lakes property so that they could have everyone
in one place anyway so it all worked out. When August 22 officially arrived, he was a giddy child at
the prospect of having his people all in one place.

The food was a typical mixture of American, Wakandan, Creole, Norwegian, Wesscovian, and
Italian, all potluck and all delicious (except for the thing in the pot that Cooper Barton brought, but
he was in a molecular gastronomy phase and Laura asked them all not to say anything). Carol had
brought desert from a planet a few galaxies away that went really well with all the various baked
goods Nat provided, and Rocket the Racoon had put himself in charge of the grill.

It was chaotic, with languages tripping over each other, and families trading inside jokes and taking
photos and laughter and Tony thought his heart – with the arc-reactor he put back in after the heart
attack in ’29 notwithstanding – would actually burst with joy.

After a dinner at a massive arrangement of picnic tables, Tony stood up and tapped his glass.
Miraculously, silence took over the chaos and Tony was able to speak.

“Family, I have some things to say and since I am, always have, and always will, pay for your lives,
I’m going to say them,” he flashed a smirk and MJ called, “Nope, Dad, that’s on me now,” to
laughter.

“When I was 21, I thought I was alone in the world and I also thought I was okay with that. We all know how well I adjusted to being an orphan, and if someone here doesn’t, feel free to ask Friday for a rundown. Anyhootzle, I was a mess and Pepper and Rhodey loved me anyway and I’ll never stop being grateful for that.

“Through their stubborn insistence that I was a human instead of a bag of disappointing neuroses, I started to maybe believe it myself. From my first wedding through today, I can tell you that the greatest gift I’ll ever get is the love of all of you yahoos. I am proud to call each one of you part of this ridiculous adventure. As we mark yet another year of post-dust life, another year where we remember that love always wins in the end, and another year where we celebrate what has already come –” he reached to pick up his youngest granddaughter – “and what will be,” he winked at MJ, who teared up, “I want to prose a toast.”

“We have defended, and avenged, we have loved, and lost, we have fought valiantly and retreated in haste. Mostly, though, we have been the hands of helpful strangers, who may not have had any idea what we were doing except that we had to be useful, and somehow managed to save the world a few dozen times. We left a legacy that means other people get to have them too, and in the words of my favorite fellow genius, we planted seeds in a garden we’ll never get to see. I am proud to be a Stark, but I am even prouder to be an Avenger.

“To all of you, forever, I love you 3000.”

“Love you 3000!” Came the battle cry, for somewhere along the last several decades, the sentiment that started as Pepper and Tony’s had become all of theirs – the Avenger family call that was given to each new member and spoken over the bodies of the old ones.

Pepper and Steve rose to kiss their husband while Nat muttered to Bucky that she was still a little surprised that it worked so well. Thor called for more drink to be poured, Rhodey grabbed his wife and pulled her towards the dancing area Darcy had made sure to set up, while Peter Quill grabbed Peter Stark for their traditional “Peter Picture”. Lila Barton flirted with Lang’s daughter – like she did every gathering and it would fail like it did at every gathering – and Shuri debated with Carol about intergalactic trade policy. T’Challa and Nakia kept reminding everyone that they weren’t “Your Highness” any more since they passed the throne onto their son, and Henry and Sarah commiserated with them about how weird it was to be retired royalty.

The sun finally set, giving way to acres of fire flies for the children to chase and soft lighting around the dance floor for others to enjoy. Steve and Pepper were dancing to an old Adele tune when Peter sat down next to his dad.

“She asleep?” Tony asked about MJ.

Peter nodded. “Everyone kept telling us that the pregnancies would get easier and that was true until this one. This one has just been really rough.”

“You’re doing a great job, kid,” Tony kissed his forehead. “She’s doing more, but you’re doing great.”

Peter chuckled. “She always is. I wrestled the other three to bed – May was insisting she could stay up with Grandpa Steve – and then made sure MJ was settled and I’m about to head back to her, but I wanted to give you this.” He fished an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Tony.

With a raised eyebrow, Tony began to open it as Peter explained. “It’s from May. I was supposed to
give it to you when I graduated from college but it got lost. MJ found it in one of the files last week.”

Tony –

Look at our boy. Don’t tell anyone else, but to me, he’s been yours and mine. Pepper’s been an absolute fucking gift, and Steve is a wonder, and Ben tried his best, but he needed you to unlock his genius and me to keep his heart safe. We got him here.

Whatever part of you bent a little to risk loving a kid, to risk your reputation and your company and everything on this strange arrangement I proposed, I don’t know. I’ve never fully believed my luck that this boy gets you as a dad.

I hope by the time you read this, you are comfortable in how fundamentally good you are. That you’ve realized that the fluff and bluster came from pain and not from your core self. That you can look in the mirror and see what the rest of us see – one of the best men we’ve ever met.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

M

“I didn’t read it,” Peter said.

Tony replied, “I know. She just said what she always said – that she was lucky I agreed to be your dad, which is ridiculous because I’m the lucky one.”

“I think we’re all pretty fucking lucky,” Peter responded.

Tony nodded. “Fair, but I am the luckiest.”

“Okay, Ben Folds,” Peter rolled his eyes. “Everything’s a competition.” He affectionately kissed his dad on the forehead and clasped his shoulder. “I’m going to go make sure my wife doesn’t vomit so hard she breaks a rib. Good night.”

“Night, Underroos.”

“We talked about that, Dad, it doesn’t get to make a comeback now that I hung up the suit.”

“Not listening!”

Peter’s soft laughter floated back to Tony on the breeze.

Just then, Morgan came running up to Tony and pulled him to the dance floor. “Dad, come on! They’re playing our song!”

He groaned a bit as he got up, but Tony knew not every 23-year-old was willing to be seen in public with her father, much less dance with him, so he gratefully soaked up her attention and followed her to the floor as the strains of Van Morrison’s “Brown Eyed Girl” played over the speakers.

“You know, Morguna,” he broke out the name only he used for her, “you look quite like a princess tonight.”

She glanced down at her dress, one she had designed and made herself, much like all of her clothes. “I know,” she replied simply. “That was the goal.”

Tony laughed. “And the internship is still making all of your dreams come true?”
“Dad, he’s a genius,” she breathed about the designer she was mentoring under. “Christian is just… yeah, I’m grateful.”

They danced quietly for a few moments before Tony whispered. “You deserve to have all of your dreams come true, sweetheart. Every single one. Just like I did.”

“And what happens when that happens, Dad?”

“We all live happily ever after.”

The pair smiled at each other and danced quietly as the joy of their lives swirled through them.

Happily ever after indeed.

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